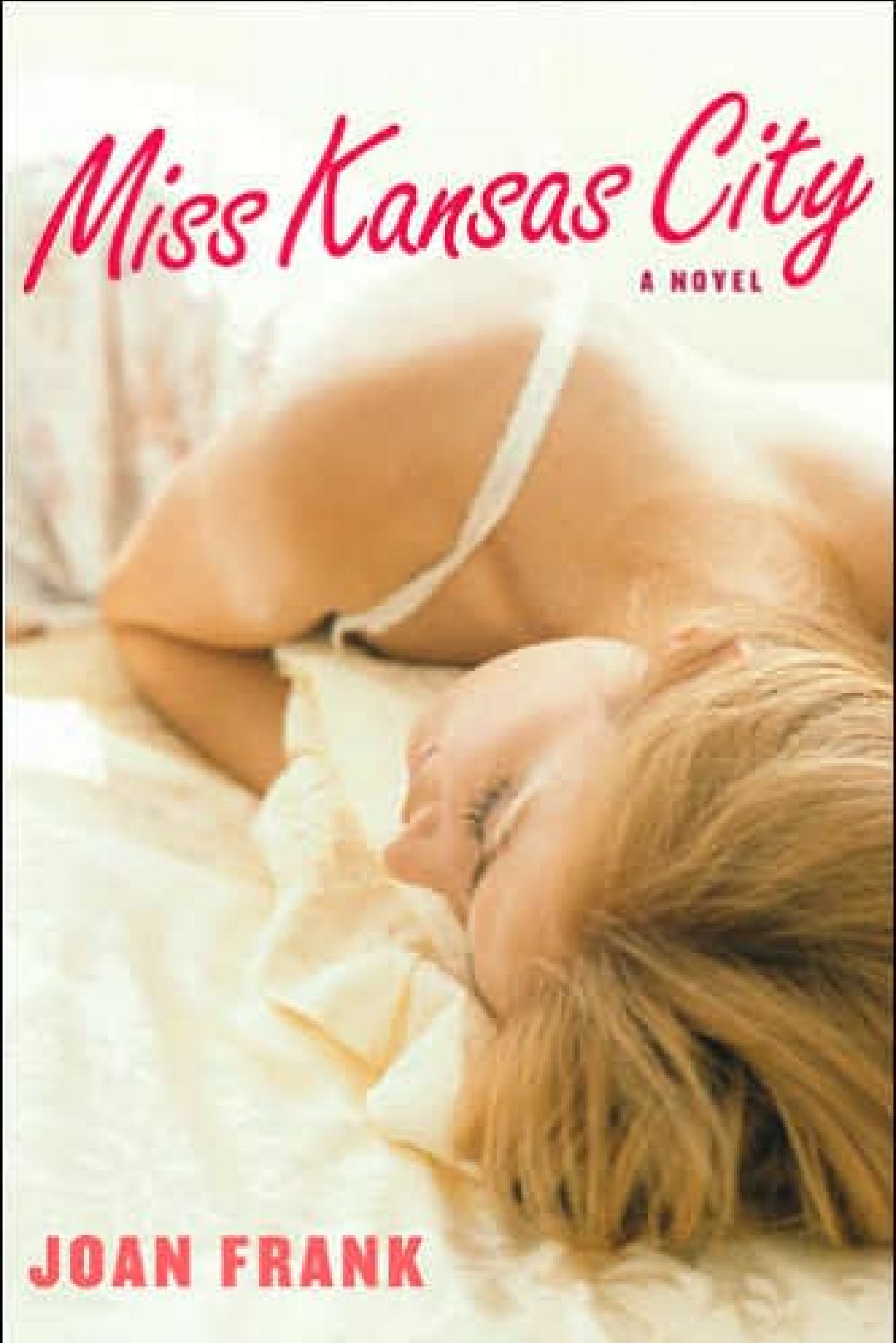
Miss Kansas City

A NOVEL



JOAN FRANK

Miss Kansas City

ALSO BY JOAN FRANK:

Boys Keep Being Born: Stories

Miss Kansas City

A Novel

Joan Frank

THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN PRESS
ANN ARBOR

In memory:

Marion Lippe
c. 1918–1961

Robert Frank
1920–1974

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People always said at first that Alex Blue looked like Alice in Wonderland. Not the Disney one, but the original, strange, big-headed-dolly Lewis Carroll one. It was her hair, many felt, but also a certain lack of affect, an Alice-like reserve. She hated the comparison. It made her sound simple, she thought, a wide-eyed dolt. The more careful observer—say, of Alex hanging her coat at the office, or wandering the bright fruit piles at the market—might suggest that by temperament and manner, she far more resembled a very young Lauren Bacall. She was tall, large-boned—not fat, though she tortured herself about her size. For this reason she wore black jeans overlapped by long, thick sweaters, and over them a heavy, dark wool coat, so you could hardly guess what sort of body might be moving under all those layers.

She had a flattish face, pale. A smooth, wide forehead. Beautiful skin, white and poreless with a faint gleam like good china—hair a conference of blond and pewter, falling dense and stiff down her back. It was the hair that prompted the Alice comparison, by strangers who first saw her. She couldn't bring herself to chop it, felt it both a shield and source of strength, like Samson's. But the Alice remarks set her jaws grinding. People never repeated the mistake

once they'd talked to her, though she was no less mysterious to them afterward. Alex was wretchedly shy, and to the unapprised, shyness is fairly indistinguishable from disdain. In truth, shyness and scorn operated together in Alex, like a pair of demented twins. The young men and women at the office risked scorching themselves if they sought to engage her in banter. Alex didn't do banter. *Beautiful day out there*, they'd chime, or *How was your weekend*. She'd look sideways at them with her smallish bluegreen eyes, lips pressed, Bacall nostrils flaring: equal parts irony, reproach, and pain. Confused, they would cease talking and go away.

Alex was an editor for Infinite Information, Incorporated, a firm that published software instruction manuals. Her language skills were keen, for she had read a great deal from the time she was small. She had a fine mind, and a family she despaired of—marshaled all her energies to flee (along with several stupid jobs) after college. She answered an ad in a Sunday *Chronicle* she'd bought in a bookstore. Drove out to interview, took the editing position in Sausalito. And while on surface these actions appeared decisive and vigorous, her energies in fact played tricks on Alex: sometimes they deserted her, and she could scarcely urge her big-boned body out of bed. She lived alone in a small town at the foot of the vineyard-covered mountains, two hours north of her office. She drove that distance every morning and evening without complaint, because—she told those who asked—she liked living far from the rush and noise of the seaside city where she earned her money, because the drive was pretty, and because she liked being able to think alone, hidden, in the car. Her apartment was on the town's square (much like a village square) above a yarn shop, and at night the heavy countrified quiet, the dark with its thick spray of stars, cool breath swooping down from the mountains with no obstruction from city lights or exhaust fumes, wrapped and consoled her. Alex's life could be called a pleasant one,

if the pronouncer of that judgment were looking briefly, from polite distance.

In truth, Alex's life contained a series of underground chambers: wandering them siphoned off the best portion of her thought, set her apart, and defined her look of lonely grief. Alex was twenty-seven, the year 1984. An ozone hole had been discovered, Africa was starving, stone-washed jeans the fashion.

A man named Gray claimed to love her.

Grayson Merritt was married. He was forty-two, tall, well-made. Silver had barely begun to fringe the red-gold hair that kept falling—though he combed it straight back—in boyish planks, like a man in a Thomas Hart Benton painting. His face was the sort seen in highbrow ads, framed by safari fatigues and good scotch, fireplaces and golden retrievers. Gray wore an expression of quiet knowing. He seemed not so much to arrive somewhere as to manifest, often understanding Alex's thoughts before she spoke them.

They had met in a shopping mall near Alex's job: a department store smelling of new fabric and colognes, a wide, wooden sale bin piled with cotton sweaters. Alex had a special love for these sweaters. They soothed her, became softer and more comforting the older they got. She was lifting one from the jumble to examine its label when a leather-gloved hand was pulled toward hers by the very sweater she had lifted, a sweater the color of chocolate dusted with cinnamon.

"It suits you," said the owner of the leather-gloved hand. Not hello. Not excuse me. Not I was holding this first if you don't mind. The voice had a muted, mealy smoothness—so quiet Alex thought at first she may have imagined it. She turned to find the owner of the voice and hand. And though she turned in a reflex of annoyance—what moony geek would she now have to dispatch?—once her eyes found his face, its startling red crown (brows and lashes to match),

the edges of her lips began to twitch in a wish to break out laughing. She forgot to be disdainful, and she forgot to be shy.

"You think?" The words issued from her as if she'd known him since she could walk.

"I think." He nodded, blinking once. Yes, my child. Affirmative.

She walked through the dressing room's swinging doors not looking back, clasping the chocolate and cinnamon sweater; once inside under surgical white lights, struggled out of her wool layers, her heartbeat a detained, shallow thrum. She looked in the mirror, saw a face hectic with dark patches of blood. Mutation, she thought, Frankenstein's bride. She turned from the mirror, lifted her hair from her sweatered shoulders (it *was* a good color). Pushed back through the swinging doors to seek the stranger's face. He had not moved, stood at the sale bin in his Burberry topcoat, looked at her.

"It's ideal," he said simply.

Alex felt her face open like a child's. She could not have told you a single fact about her own history just then, but in the same instant could have sworn (had anyone asked) she was being seen and somehow—in some buried, central place, for the first time she could remember—known.

"Can I buy it for you?" He offered as naturally as you'd hold open a door.

Absolutely not. She had recovered enough to recall basic protocol. But her chest squeezed at the offer; she thanked him, short of breath. Her breath was playing tricks, dashing away and back. She would remember how baffling it felt that day to have suddenly misplaced her breath, like a wallet or keys. She paid for the chocolate sweater, and as they left the store together—her gaze lowered, noting his expensive leather shoes, golden brown, supple and soft as ballet slippers—he wondered aloud whether she might at least consider finding some coffee with him. It was a clean, cool Saturday morning in early October, the kind of day that makes people step outside, turn their faces up,

open their arms: air snapping, sunlight clear and fragile, colors saturated. It smelled of fresh rain, everything rinsed, polished. Long streaks of light played off the storefront windows, the shining leaves of potted camellias along the walk; light kindled the baskets of begonias dripping orange and vanilla blossoms.

She would be pleased to have coffee.

Days weren't always crystalline in Marin. Once winter set in, cold fog could hunch over the bay for months, and a large part of Alex's time with Gray that winter felt suspended, muffled in thick mist. There was a pier down the street from her office where she walked at lunchtime, past the Best Mart supermarket, the real estate and esthetician offices, the marine supplies store, past the Wayfarer restaurant. She would stand for long intervals at the edge of the thick wooden planks. The pier jutted midway into the harbor, amid patient rows of anchored yachts, trawlers. They bobbed and clanged in the fog and currents, battened against winter. White gulls strutted the planks and circled above, crying their high-pitched *scree*. Alex thought there was nothing so lovely or sad as this sound. She also loved the sound of the metal lines hitting the masts while the vessels bobbed in place, a slow chiming that seemed to toll, as if it were urging better use of time. But Alex didn't know how to better use her time, besides to be twenty-seven, an émigré from the Southwest, working for a modest living and hopelessly in love with a man who could not leave his family.

Gray had founded a famous company, famous around the world but headquartered in San Francisco. He had started the original store

not far from his home. The business specialized in kitchen and dining tools and supplies—not just any tools, but a select concept of them. They were designed with extreme simplicity, which was meant to imply their owner's superior relationship to earthly life. The superior part was not stated, or advertised outright. Instead the discerning consumer could see it—was expected to feel it—in the heft and purity of the products, each outsized bowl, cup, shiny woks with their patented, heat-conducive surfaces, in the dense-weave linen, heavy silver, their nouveau-crude lines, subdued, organic colors. Sand, willow, periwinkle, wheat. Lately the inventory was expanding to carry olive oils, maple candy, a line of bee-pollen products. The store's catalog had gained notoriety, its language sonorous, calm. To buy from Scallion was not only to make a statement but to appear—and this was crucial—to care not at all about making statements. An anti-statement statement. The cookware and dining sets would age softly, like beloved leather.

Their prices were stratospheric.

The concept, Gray explained, was called "taught valuation." You paid for a thing once, very highly. Then you treasured it for life. If you had paid shockingly for it, you esteemed it more. The population of the area liked the idea of owning not just the best, but the artful best—by implication, the moral best. So the products' beauty, their longevity, their ability to age nobly and stand for a kind of low-key wisdom, would justify their eyepopping prices. Elegance serving integrity, in a stroke. It was, Gray concluded, a win-win event, a zen of economics.

"The language of our concept takes us there," Gray told Alex.

He had granted many interviews about Scallion's success, its business philosophy. (The name came to him, Gray told Alex, in a dream. It conveyed exactly the rogue mystique he wanted, its logo on catalog and storefronts now hailed across the country as a masterpiece of simplicity—the word in slanted script, the single onion lengthwise

beneath as an underscore.) The franchise stock, only recently offered, was performing miracles. Gray had written articles, appeared on talk shows. He was writing a book, *An Architecture of Essence: The Scallion Story*—had recently signed the publishing contract during a gleaming lunch at the Trident. The restaurant sat on its own pier stretched out over the water, a boxy building painted gray-blue (strangely plain outside, as though it housed a strip club). Local media caught the parties descending the wide wooden front stairs to leave, popping flashbulbs at them, calling questions in excited, man-to-man voices. (The parties paused to smile, but would not comment.) *People* magazine had picked it up, as had *Time:* "The Rebel Prince of Cookware," its cover said. Gray's name and face—its boyish soberness, at once modest and firm—seemed to show up everywhere that year.

Alex had listened to all this in silence. Gray was explaining in the same careful, thoughtful way he always did, the way he'd spoken when she'd met him: that slow, half-swallowed voice. Remarkable, she'd thought—the unswervingness of his ambition. To wake in the morning with such clarity. How would that feel? She tried to climb, exploratorily, inside Gray's certainty. You'd feel fresh and well. On track. Capable. No trace of the stomach-dropping dread that always suffused Alex when she woke. She had to push aside that dread every day, force herself up and into the role like a tired actor into costume, do what someone else wished her to do, for money. What was it Alex actually wished to do? She had yet no notion. And this vacancy, this void where a clear desire should be, shamed her. By contrast, Gray seemed a tower. Standing calm as the camera bulbs flashed, microphones thrust in his face. Quietly accepting. As if all this fanfare had never been his wish, but he would tolerate it, to help convey his purpose.

Yet something in Alex could not imagine that at his center, Gray really took all that marketing gabble seriously. *Taught valuation?* The

phrase rang like another term she'd heard somewhere that scraped at her, made her irritable: *learned helplessness.* Taught valuation. If you focused on it, it poofed away like dust. Alex wondered whether a man like Gray could not at heart know that beneath all those words, he was simply selling things. Of course, a hothouse climate for such words existed then, as baby boomers told themselves they could earn livings in colorful ways without becoming what they still believed they most loathed. *The Whole Earth Catalog* (its home office a few blocks from Alex's software building) was thriving, as were Amway, North Face, similar outfits. And by then Scallion—Jack Heath, its venture capitalist, lived most of the year in Costa Rica—by then the business had gained a reputation so swollen it might be excusable for anyone, not least its handsome founder, to be swept into the bosom of its propaganda.

Alex put the troubling issue aside to pull Gray toward her own bosom, which was white and silky and warm, rising and lowering subtly with her breathing. They lay that Saturday afternoon—early November, one month after the Saturday morning over the sweaters—in her four-poster bed above the yarn store, under three worn quilts, listening to the chirps of a lone bird in the oak tree behind the building. A square of window brimmed with backlit fog. The ceiling slanted like a loft's, its beams striated with smoky grains. Alex loved to look for pictures in those swirlings, and to smell and listen to Gray beside her. The room was a different room with him in it, just as her sense of herself was different: magnified, hushed. She kept one hand on his chest, to feel his voice as he spoke. (She had an idea that something of him osmosed into her this way, through her hand.) He had a clean, woody smell, his body like a tree. Hard and smooth, except for the soft red-blond down on his arms. Warming in that chilly room. Somehow she never minded her own body so much, while Gray aligned his own with it—he seemed to adore her body, though she knew her thighs were bigger than his, and a flatter stom-

ach would have been nice. His admiration astonished Alex in a slow-witted way—an idea too vast, too improbable for her to face directly: it would have been like staring into the sun. Her body seemed womanly when she was with him, fundamental in some way, and that seemed like enough.

"You are a tree, and I am—what," she said. They lay on their sides, facing each other.

"Venus," he said, regarding her steadily.

Morton Levi was director of print production. Alex had not first interviewed with Mort, however, but with nervous, bespectacled Letty Kaplan, his assistant. Mort had been "given" Letty like a bonus attachment, to monitor staff while he carefully mapped the progress, against stern deadlines, of the books their department made. The books—ugly paperback manuals—were birthed in litters like rodents, as the software constantly changed. They bore titles out of science fiction. Expocalc II, Centrack, SonicSpell. And her two bosses, Alex often thought, could themselves pass for spaceship captains in a spoofy sci-fi movie. They'd be wearing helmets too big for their heads, staring out the spacecraft's windshield at the asteroid hurtling toward them. Mort the meek, Letty the flummoxed.

But Mort was the greater puzzle, for he seemed not at all right for his work.

He was a small, thin fellow, olive-colored, with shiny, straight black hair combed neatly sideways from its part, a goatee and mustache almost feverishly well-trimmed, and huge, deep black-brown Italian eyes, solemn as a child's. Two darkish-brown shadows encircled them completely, like moonbows. His eyes seemed to own the whole rest of him. His body was proportioned—he dressed it in quiet

good taste—but so small and thin it looked like a scaled-down model of a man. Alex sometimes wondered if he'd been malnourished as a child. Mort had turned thirty-four that year, but looked younger. He had a habit of glancing around the room apologetically before he spoke, eyes moist, as if anticipating a violent objection before he'd uttered a word. Mort's voice was kind, a peacemaker's—the voice of a man who might gather people to pray. Maybe, Alex mused, Mort should have been a clergyman. But this was Sausalito in 1984, and every young adult with any intelligence styled himself a pirate or gypsy or artist, with a day job. Infinite Information, Inc. was Mort's.

Unlike most of his peers, he gave it his best.

"Thank you all for coming," he always began, clearing his throat a few times, standing before the assembled department at weekly meetings. The staff would exchange glances. Some rolled their eyes. Only Letty Kaplan beamed at Mort. Letty, like Mort, believed. Of everyone in the firm, including the president (a rotund, devilish-looking man named Barry Keach, who sometimes popped into these meetings unannounced to "keep people lively")—of them all, Mort and Letty alone appeared to take their jobs to heart. Took seriously all the jargon, language frantic with eagerness. The euphemisms were clear plastic bathtoys, bobbing about with frozen smiles. Horribly difficult tasks were *team challenges*. Hideous snarl-ups were *opportunities*. A pork-barreller like Barry was *leading with vision*. The full, fat textbook of denial. Alex and the others slumped lower and lower, listening to Mort's pep talks. Some of the staff thought Letty had a crush on Mort.

Mort would follow his thank-you opener with some positive stroke. "I want to give special praise to Kamala Schwarz this week," he'd say. "For her extra effort getting those Hyperwriter proofs to the printer's on a Friday night. Kamala, you really saved the day." He'd actually say this, smiling at her. Mort had a lovely smile, gentle and true. What was more, he seemed to mean it—expressions like *saved*

the day. Amid the embarrassed smatter of handclaps, Kamala—a willful, opinionated girl who'd decided at some point not to be named Roberta anymore but instead after a particular lotus that bloomed in darkened pools in another hemisphere—would smile, nod. Then Mort would show the group his flip-chart timelines, remind them what had to be done. He spent hours preparing these charts. As the staff left the building for home each night, if they chose to look through the window facing the street, they knew they would see Mort still hunched at his desk poring over schedules, revising, calibrating, his olive forehead propped with a slender hand. The staff had long ceased looking through the window. Nor did they bother anymore to wave goodnight. He would be too absorbed to glance up. Laughing, calling happily to one another, they'd burst through the big glass doors and scatter like schoolkids in different directions, swallowed almost at once into the dark blue light.

Gray had a wife, of course. Cynthia. And a small son, Ryder, on whom he pinned impossible, lavish hopes. Ryder had a pale little body, somber brown eyes, his father's red-gold hair. His face expressing pleasure was a box of jewels falling open. But the boy had already mastered an array of adult mannerisms, including contempt, despair, sarcasm. *Fine*, he would say when denied his way, face suddenly drained, brown shadows circling his eyes. He would whirl and march off to his room, a dignity so lonely it resembled a kind of kingly grief, baffling the adults in his court. How, please—Gray always shook his head, laughing, lamenting—how could you become *morally* wounded at the age of three?

Alex was a patient and canny listener. They usually lolled in bed, Gray on his back, eyes distant, as if reading a scroll on the ceiling; Alex propped on her side, watching, querying, memorizing. She coaxed from Gray, in long sessions of delicate, casual questioning, details she needed to piece together a portrait of the Merritt family. Gray never seemed to tire of talking about them. He chuckled over them, their habits, their actions and words, grew animated recounting trips and incidents. Occasionally his eyes misted; once or twice his throat closed with emotion. Alex could not explain to herself why she

prompted these sessions, during which she never, ever revealed to Gray the pain they gave her. She witnessed his love for Cynthia and Ryder, and felt both lost and included. She slightly belonged, because she belonged to his knowledge, if in a separate room. A ghost member. Sometimes Gray's heavy satisfaction reviewing aloud the warmth and fondness afforded him by his little crew, as he called them, felt to Alex as though she were being slapped. After he'd driven away she would trudge back up the dark stairwell, sit down on the still-tangled bedclothes—the room silent—and bury her face in her hands.

But she pressed on with questions. The Merritts lived in a two-story, wood-and-stone Tudor house, set in eucalyptus trees at the top of a winding road. They also owned a condominium in Aspen, a North Carolina beach cabin, four cars (one a vintage pickup truck Gray was restoring)—and a forty-two-foot yacht called *Astoria*, docked at Sausalito harbor. Ryder went to Montessori preschool. An au pair lived with them, an exchange student who looked after Ryder and the house. Cynthia Worthing Merritt was blond and beautiful, slender and tensile, Gray said. She'd been a dancer, modern and ballet. Now she served on the city ballet's board of directors, did charity work. Gray had courted her during the years she was still dancing. Hearing this the first time, Alex had felt a light, quick razor-slice to her belly. And from that incision leaked, like pouring sand, all the mischievous art of her interview that day. She saw it clearly: soft swing of geometrically crisp hair, sparkle of the gold bracelet over the slim wrist, ice-fire droplet of diamond against velvet earlobe. Nails clear, lacquered ovals. Tailored, lean, hipbones jutting. Like women in ads for Tiffany's, or Drambuie. Alex's own limbs suddenly loomed beneath her that day, trunk-thick, white, lumpy. An albino elephant. A rhinoceros in jeans. My God, her *feet*.

"Alex?" Gray had been chuckling about the difficulty of getting Janna, their young au pair, not to overcook the organic vegetables, until he noticed Alex's silence. "You okay?"

He lifted himself on an elbow, took her chin, tilted her face toward his.

It was unsolvable. Alex loved to eat. She kept a jar of Nutella like first aid, spooning up the chocolate spread in quick, secret strokes. Eating moderately was worlds harder than not eating at all. Food wasn't like cigarettes or heroin, where you could just stop forever by bearing down once—until the single, voluptuous temptation had passed. No. Every hour of every day brought temptation, a demon squatting in your ear, leering, whispering. That voice could make her get up out of a warm bed to go to her tiny kitchen, open the refrigerator door in the chaotic conviction that something would appear that had not been there minutes ago, when she'd last opened it. No matter if the little refrigerator and all her cupboards contained nothing but a can of tomato paste. She could pull on her jeans and pad downstairs (a windowless passageway, rubber latticework over wooden steps, dark coolness, cedary smell)—pop into any of the shops along the square, the cheese boutique, the bakery (its fragrance, its olive bread). The family-run Italian bistro, still charging 1950s prices. The tiny taqueria, its pork chile verde. The Mozart Café, specializing in soufflés and crêpes and Viennese pastries. In fact Alex seldom cooked, carting most of her dinners home in takeout boxes from the Best Mart's deli. One evening, as the sky bled from teal to ink, she'd sat at her little kitchen table, vicious with loneliness, and with her hands wolfed most of an entire roast chicken, washed back with a bottle of sherry—swigged straight from the grease-printed bottle, like any boxcar tramp.

But when you fell in love, Alex noticed, food took up less space in your head. Gray was food. His body and voice were food. And when she could actually sit down to eat with him, food was but a delightful extension of him, another form of lovemaking. When she was with him, everything went sliding around, roaring, as though her life were suddenly being lived on a ship's top deck in a storm. When she was

with him she didn't care what she ate, her heart susurrating confusedly. The only times she could remember food not mattering that way, were when she'd been ill. The shock was how brilliant food tasted when she ate it with Gray. Startlingly, ravishingly good, as if never tasted before, as if waiting to be discovered by both of them.

"Alex? Want to go down to the café now?"

She rubbed her forehead against his jaw. The scratchiness of his not-yet-surfaced beard roughed her skin pleasantly.

"Corn chowder?" she said.

"How about it." His tag line, accompanied by a gentle, Bogartian chin-chuck.

They could not eat out together often, of course. It hardly happened at all. They could not meet, make love, eat together often. It seemed to Alex the body of their love was more defined by the long absences, as though the pockets of transparent weeks formed a fat invisible wedge like an orange slice, fitted into the globe of them—completing the thing they became together. Gray was direct about it from the beginning.

"You know it will be difficult," he'd said, the first time they sat in the Mozart Café, after an afternoon in her four-poster—writhing, talking, dozing. (He'd dozed; she'd watched him.) They were having lattes and a little plate of yellow madeleines, fluffy, scented with lemon, vanilla. Gray was waiting for his bowl of chowder. He'd decided it was probably safe to be out together in daylight, as far north as they were. But nowhere, he had made clear, would they ever be completely safe. Gray knew many people. His face—that hair—prompted second looks from passersby, restaurant patrons, looks of *haven't I seen you somewhere.* And odds were they *had* seen him—a magazine, newspaper, television. Alex was rapidly learning to think like a vampire: avoid sunlight.

She had looked down into her cup when he'd said it, the sticky brown web of deflated foam draping the rim. Color rushed from her

collarbone (though she wore a turtleneck cable sweater that day, the usual black jeans). She was tempted to make a joke, but kept silent. What choice had she, she wondered, now that he'd chosen to officially warn her? Go back a step, erase the present? Un-love him the way you press the *undo* button on a computer keyboard? Forswear him because it was inconvenient? She nodded, looking at her cup.

"Difficult," she repeated.

"I am responsible to them. Ryder's only three." He'd ducked his head to peer at her from a lower angle, trying to find her gaze the way you'd search a house's shuttered windows. "I can't insist you withstand all this. The complication. The difficulty."

She'd nodded again, still too wretched to lift her eyes. She wished he'd stop. *It was known, it was known,* she wanted to say. Perhaps this sort of warning was required, to his thinking. He could never claim to have misled her.

Alex had lived a life comprised until then of reading, phoning her sister Madelyn, who lived with her airline pilot husband and baby in Phoenix, of sending gifts to baby William, going to a rare movie, watching television, eating too much. She had lived in the Bay Area one year. She had no real friends. The world was making no promises to become more sane or scrutable anytime soon. She would sometimes try to guess, driving the long drive home from work at night, what kinds of lives were being lived behind those thousands of lights studding the land that flowed outside, the motels, the ratty apartments, the splendid homes set deep in the black hills rolling north.

"I'll withstand it," she'd said then. She looked up at him without smiling.

The lobby of Infinite Information was an all-glass room with plum-colored carpet, an abstract wall tapestry resembling the cerebral bucklings of a walnut shell, a coffee table, three upholstered, plum-and-chrome chairs, a couple of human-sized ficuses in raku-glazed urns. To enter the departments beyond the glass room you had to sign in with the receptionist, a striking boy named Skip Manning. Skip handled the phone console, too, so his work was a multiarmed affair: a headset-wearing god in perpetual motion, greeting arrivals as he swiveled and reached, punching buttons. "Infinite Information, can I help you? Could you hold just one moment please—Infinite Information, please hold a moment—you are here to see? Do you have an appointment? Good, one moment, please—Infinite Information, please hold a moment, thank you—he's right across the hall over there, to your right. That's right. Thanks for holding: may I help you?" Skip had a megawatt face for greeting people: slightly pocked but chiseled, Greek nose and lips, chin like Superman's, and eyes that made people do double-takes. Skip's eyes were clear ultramarine, surrounded by dark, thick lashes. Absurd, Polynesian blue. Aware of their effect, they danced, teased. Above them, curly, dark hair in a teen-idol tumble. It seemed to Alex Skip could have worn a striped T-

shirt, a kerchief around his neck, straw boater pushed back, and doubled for a gondolier, or one of those Frenchmen straddling a backward chair in *Luncheon of the Boating Party*. Skip did not conceal the fact that he worked out daily. His voice was a nasal honk, his grin huge. Whoever had placed him at the front desk had been shrewd: Skip's merriment (where did it spring from?) seemed to leap at you like an ecstatic spaniel from across the room. The young women in the department flushed when he greeted them. Alex thought him harmless, if over the top. His gaze held a certain need, even while he teased you. As if he were sheepishly asking approval. *Is this real enough?* his eyes seemed to demand. *A credible persuasion?*

"Say hey, Alexandra," he would hail as she stepped inside each morning. Skip never tired of slingshotting his funny fanfares at anyone who entered, even while he juggled phones and visitors, employees embarrassed and pleased to be singled out. He made people laugh. (Most gratifying was to see Mort laugh, Mort so bitten and grave, black eyes inward, reviewing his burdens.) Some mornings Skip would salute Alex while speaking into his headset—snapped each hand to his forehead doubletime. Other days he'd thumbs-up at her, winking rapidfire. If he had guests standing around and phones buzzing, he'd simply nod at Alex as she passed—but even then his eyes flashed, a brief electrical charge shooting through them. Those eyes, thought Alex. How does he do that?

After a word or two to Skip, Alex said little to anyone. She'd hang her coat, lift and smooth her hair, take her place at her computer. In the editing room everyone sat before a terminal—two rows of cubicles, each the size of a phone kiosk—stared into their screens, moving cursors along, putting in commas, taking out apostrophes. The room hummed with the white noise of computer motors, keyboards clicketing, gossip in low tones. Letty Kaplan would move among the seated editors like a grade school teacher, papers hugged to her chest, smiling dreamily.

Letty.

Alex knew only a little. She hadn't wanted to know more. Letty was from Los Angeles. Her family had made its fortune in fertilizer, sent its children to good schools, Letty's degree from Occidental. She was one of those strange cases of people born old, going through childhood with the features of a crone. Her face would fit any turn-of-the-century daguerreotype, in high-collared, wasp-waisted, thousand-buttoned dress. She was frail and bony with wispy brown hair, a slightly beaked nose. She wore prim sweaters, long skirts in anemic colors, hose with flats on long feet. Letty's voice was what most dismayed her colleagues. It wobbled and wavered, an agony of indecision. She would commence a sentence, think better of it, stop midword, sputter and choke, pause, inhale, clear her throat, smile with glassy goodwill, regather her breath, struggle on. Listening to Letty was like watching an old lady trying to push a piano across a street. Alex had learned to jot shopping lists in her lap, clean her nails, recite all of Charles Dickens' titles to herself while waiting for Letty to finish a sentence, Letty the entire time ordering and patting her sheaf of papers. What those papers consisted of no one quite knew, but the top page was always visible: a list of the day's objectives, carefully written out by hand each morning. You could see the indentations exerted by the pen's pressure upon the smooth pillow of paper. Letty smiled blindly all about her, fond Anna to the Siam King's assembled children. She was not much older than the rest of the staff, perhaps thirty. Mort the oldest among them, at thirty-four. Who had hired Letty? Barry, presumably. What skills had Letty offered besides the doting, blinkered kindliness of a granny? No one knew. Whenever Letty glided near, Alex would often suddenly bend low, search for something in her purse or seek an invisible pen she had dropped. Blood gathered in her lowered temples while she waited hanging upside down, her reddening face curtained by a fall of thick hair, staring for deliberate, long minutes at the dusty carpet. The world of the

office was a bizarre given, whole and blatant in its eccentricity, bristling and comic, a movie set that bloomed open each day out of nothing and for no reason.

Correction, thought Alex, righting herself once Letty had passed, brushing hair from her face, feeling the blood drain from her cheeks. Of course there was a reason. Profit, the universal reason. The young people appeared every day, sat where they sat, typed or scribbled, not just because they themselves were paid—that was tiddlywinks; they were replaceable as window washers—but because someone, several someones, were making big money off the enterprise, somewhere. No one knew how much. But it must have been plenty, because whispers pricked the sluggish rooms like flashes of atmospheric lightning—bids by other companies, mergers, takeovers. Nothing had come of these, so far. Numbers were never discussed, never shown the young workers.

No one inquired. As long as paychecks appeared each Friday, the staff stayed on.

The walk to the Wayfarer from the office was a matter of two blocks, the water so close the street was damp with splashings, and everything smelled of brine. From lunchtime to evening the restaurant was packed with seething, beautiful types, their eyes casing the room. Most of them worked in luxuriant offices, so while not themselves wealthy they were steeped in wealth's languid assumptions, its vocabulary, its furniture. Proximity made them bold. Most secretly believed they would soon be spotted, swept up, kept nicely by the very wealth they worked for. Invigorated by this, they went to long lunches, drank, laughed, and flirted, a literal case of rafters ringing. The Wayfarer must have once been a boathouse, for it was capacious, built of that particular wood that ages so softly under years of ocean wind—all the buildings on the north coast looked this way—smoothing, slowly losing color and texture until it blended almost seamlessly with the gray fog.

Kamala was here to cheer up Mort. Somebody had to. Poor dude dragged in every day with a face like a condemned man's. Kamala might have worried that Mort knew something the rest of them did not, perhaps about the sale of Infinite Information to some larger corporate shark—no manager had yet spoken aloud of the possibility,

though the rumors swam, murky, menacing, beneath the goings-on. But after a year or so it had become clear to her: poor Mort was *made* this way. A lunch would help, she thought. An early Christmas lunch. The department would pick up the tab. Holiday gesture. Barry would see the point at once. And for comic relief? God knew they could all use some, what with those disgusting buyout rumors (though Kamala frankly adored gossip; tucked into it like a good steak, the bloodier the better). For laughs, Skip Manning, of course. She had found someone from Technical to sub for him at the front. They could put the phone lines on the recorded message for an extra hour if they had to. Kamala wanted people to be happy. She chanted a Buddhist prayer about all beings being happy everywhere, as often as she could. Kamala was part of the layout and design team, Creative its official title, supervised also by Mort and Letty. Creative designed the books' covers, titles flared across the fronts and spines in futuristic cartoon letters, Day-Glo colors suitable for *The Day the Earth Stood Still* and *Forbidden Planet*.

Their style was tongue in *chic,* Kamala liked to say.

Kamala's people were from Florida, but she lived in San Rafael now, roomed with two other women who worked in the city. They called her "Kally." (She did not encourage this diminutive among her coworkers.) Like many young women of her station at that time, Kamala considered herself a diamond in a jeweler's window. Waiting, serene, to be discovered by a good man with money, who would cherish her and give her babies and a fine house and a couple of platinum credit cards. Meantime she would take amusing jobs like this one. Kamala had a wiry frame, a brunette bob like Little Lulu's. Seated with her chattery friends at the Creative table, they made a festive array, like assorted condiments. The women giggled through workdays; now and then they were scolded mildly by Letty.

They were sitting together that way, at the long, white-clothed table Kamala had phoned ahead to reserve, when Alex walked in. In

the restaurant's din, eyes lifted automatically toward the light spilled each time the door opened, assessed the arrival head to toe in an instant, flicked away. Smells of sourdough garlic toast, clam-broth, butter and cream sauce and wine aroused her, but the noise was deafening. Alex's heart sank, knowing she'd have to scream to be heard for two hours. She loathed these lunches, their witless naivete—the idea that people who gave not one damn for each other might somehow, loitering at a table together, become recharged for the company cause, march off cheerful as the Seven Dwarfs, mining picks slung over their shoulders. Alcohol went a long way toward supporting that illusion, but Alex didn't drink. Kamala had spotted her, energetically waving her over. Alex tried to make the corners of her mouth go up. She wondered what Gray was doing, as she did every hour of every day.

"Where are the others?" Kamala jutted her lip, an exaggerated pout. "Nobody's coming to our party." Abruptly, she dropped the baby act. "Have you seen Mort yet?" She craned to gaze at the restaurant door. Mort was Kamala's project this week, Alex knew. Every week she announced a new theme, or beneficiary. In some ways, Alex thought, Kamala was already middle-aged. Officious, bustling, like the flustery woman in the Marx Brothers movies who always got goosed. Alex glanced around. The Wayfarer was decorated for Christmas in red and green bunting, every two or three scoops affixed with clusters of oversized sleighbells. Colored lights scalloped the ceiling. A little fir tree sat on the bar twirling slowly in an electric stand, winking with miniature lights and tinsel. The place did feel cozy on a dark, wet day—or would have if the noise weren't so bad. Somewhere behind the human roar a jazz saxophone crooned on the speaker system: Sonny Rollins, "Namely You," the smoky horn a swinging, wistful sweetness behind the voices.

Barry and his buxom girlfriend Trisha were among the last to push open the Wayfarer's wooden door. Barry held it open for her. Trisha

looked like Olive Oyl, with the crucial exception that she had enormous, zeppelin-sized breasts. Alex knew that Trisha was a walking wet dream for a certain group of men, and this always made something in her wither a little. Today Trisha wore platform heels, so that she towered over her lover. Barry, in sports jacket and trousers, looked pleased and stubby and diabolical, mustache and goatee moistened for the occasion. He also looked a bit toxic, damp and fleshy with constant food and drink, too little sleep. Perhaps Barry and Trisha had been going at it too many nights. Alex disliked thinking about it—Barry's wet lips at the center of their furry frame, like a grasping animal. Perhaps he resented the fatherly presiding expected of him at such events. His salary must have made it worthwhile, for Barry showed up at everything, even company softball games, stroking his beard, steering Trisha by the elbow. Trisha was pleasant enough—her voice unfortunate, loud and flat. But she didn't deplete anybody, held no grudges. Maybe they all owed her more than they knew, simply for keeping Barry off their backs. Barry appeared to revel in his boss role. It must have amused him, these appearances staged to reassure. Who could say what Barry had been, prior to this? He might have run cocaine, sold dictionaries door to door, guided rental cars from the wash to the parking stall. Maybe he'd prayed in a seminary cell. The seminary part was a stretch. No matter: the eighties asked few questions of your past. The past was dust, old newspapers. And everything up until today, was past.

"Hello, team." He smiled down at his seated employees, stroking the goatee. He leaned through them to lift a slice of sourdough from the basket at the table's center; once seated he began mashing thick pads of butter against it.

What a little circus we make, Alex thought. As if someone had plucked people from odd spots around the nation, teleported each to this table, the pearl gray light of this rainy afternoon. There was

Mort, dutiful, harrowed, a funerary attendant. Nervous Letty, lacing and unlacing her cold white fingers, swivelling to smile weakly all around. Kamala and her buddies cackling, banging their shoulders together. Barry and Trisha, squeezing hands and knees and God knew what else under the table as they spoke to the others. Skip grinning his mouthful of big straight white teeth, scanning the room in quick, discreet little expeditions. (His eyes more astounding at close hand, Alex thought.) Other staffers shifted in their chairs, impatient for the drinks which were just then being handed round. Bloody Mary, margarita, white wine, ale, their fumes comingling. Here came the work of it, then. Noise had to be made, proof you were involved. Fun was the grail, the glue of meaning. Naught else in America worth striving for, thought Alex grimly. She took a sip of water, and plunged rather desperately.

"Mort, did you know that Skip only moved here a few months ago, from Minneapolis?" Heat rushed to her head with this effort, flooded the rest of her in the stupid beat of silence at the table that followed.

Mort levered his head toward the young receptionist.

"Is that so? Well, hey, that's a great town. Love their downtown. S'posed to be a hot music scene. I've heard good things."

Skip cocked his head, smiled.

"Yeah? What bands do you like?" Skip had been receptionist for a fledgling publication called the *Utne Reader* before he left town. He, too, had been enamored of the city's music clubs.

And the two men were talking. Skip traded chairs with Letty so he and Mort wouldn't have to shout around her at each other. Letty loved facilitating harmony, and once reseated (making sure her drink and water glass came with her), she blinked and smiled at Trisha, on her left. Trisha smiled back. Alex breathed out: Mort was engaged. People could relax. Workers and managers turned to each other, broke into the purposeless natter that gives such gatherings shape,

rumbles them along like wobbling wagons—reasonable to the last, allowing people to retreat nimbly behind their private dreams, dawdling there until it's over.

"So Alex." Kamala leaned across the table, the intimate entitlement of a dowager.

"What's going on with *you*?"

Alex sometimes took refuge in a steam room after work, before the long drive home.

The steam room was part of a health club, some blocks away, called Santé. Alex never bothered with its other services: she paid her club dues for the steam. The locker room always smelled of shampoo and Noxzema, a clean, crushed-acorn scent. But the ambience was severe. Women in leotards and spandex pressed through in herds, to aerobics and yoga and step classes. (The commandment on the white message board in pink neon marker: *Have an AWESOME workout, ladies!*) The women wore haggard, fixed faces as they aimed hair-dryer guns at their heads, painted their eyes and lips in the whitely lit mirror. Sometimes their upper arms had queer hollows in them, where flesh should have been. The flesh that wanted to be there had been forbidden. The women were not eating. Not eating was a covenant, the first definition of themselves. Alex tried not to look at them. She had trained herself to ignore the concave stomachs, reedy legs, pitiless glances. All that mattered was getting inside the little room filled with hot clouds, white tiles wet and slick. There were two tiers where women could sit or recline, and Alex always stepped onto the higher bank (holding a towel loosely around herself) so she could

literally disappear into the hottest zone. It was quiet in there. Made her think of the Pyramids. (Had the bodies of Egyptian royals, laid out in deep crypts, known the same, impassive silence?) Every few minutes fresh steam would blast through several vents in the floor, making a *shaaaaaahhshhhhh,* sigh of a dragon. Sometimes another towel-wrapped woman would sit silently in the room, hardly visible—Alex might hear breathing or shifting about, or gulps from a plastic bottle of water. When she was lucky, no one was there. Nothing then but the whisper of floating mist. Drops of condensed steam hit the floor in erratic patterns: *Pit-pit. Plip.* Sometimes they hit Alex's nose or eyelid, a tender little insult striking her thoughts back to order. This body, this time, this place.

Shaaaaaahhshhhhh.

She would stare at the ceiling lights, soft gold spheres through white mist, swirls of airborne water-beads merging and lifting, turning like the vagaries of time itself. Only in that snug tiled room, in the steam, was there peace. All the inventions of men, all the harshness and striving, ambulance and police sirens, ghettoes and boardrooms, all the flip-charts and sharp pens and heavy notebooks existed elsewhere, detritus from an exploding star hurtled in all directions, while she was safe in this sealed-off bunker filled with hot cloud. She lay on her back, lifted her heavy, damp hair out behind her head, propped her legs up against the tiles.

It was nearly Christmas, and Alex was experiencing for the first time what it was to love a married man during holidays. Logic and reason were the first to be scuttled, as early dusks washed the lights and tinsel of the town, the twinkling storefronts, the colored bulbs twining the masts of the boats in the harbor. Alex had spoken furiously to herself, snapped shut the case (she had thought) with a clean, hard click. The deal would be simple, but strict. She could love him, but she must expect absolutely nothing in return except his occasional presence. No slightest quarter given sentiment nor (God help us) self-

pity, not one least stitch of woe. No scrapbooks, no tokens. Above absolutely all, no mooning. A clean, dry affair. Cerebral as they came except for the sex itself—composure she'd known herself capable of, composure she felt sure Gray had noted at the outset, and admired. She wouldn't endanger anything. She wouldn't be a nut.

The experience was teaching her differently.

On one hand, the caul of solitude held in its soft folds a delectable sadness. She could hug to herself the secret knowledge of this man—notorious, beautiful, gifted—whom she saw so rarely, yet whose presence gave every minute of her awareness a deep, subdivided dimension. As though everything she said and did in the day-to-day occurred on the surface of a parallel world, two hundred feet below. She knew the people at work felt it—her strange acuity, a kind of harkening, drawn wicklike from some unseen source. She knew they wondered. But her ferocious privateness—a force field—had taught them to avoid any but the most general questions. She almost enjoyed seeing her coworkers skitter across the hot surface of their own nosiness, drops of water on a griddle.

On the other hand, Alex had begun to sense—achingly—that perhaps time, and even Gray himself, were having a subtle last laugh on her. Though she had forbidden herself from the first to ask more of it, more was exactly what she seemed to long to ask. More, as in—there was no other way to frame it—what was to become of who they were together? Where could it go? Was this to be the sum of it, that she enter her thirties as a secret mistress until—hideously trite—until he tired of her?

Plip. Drops of warm water plunked from the ceiling, smacking her upturned cheek, her chin. *Plup*. The beaded air swirled, and sighed.

Gray came to her less often these days. He came on a weekday evening, or a late Saturday afternoon. (Sundays were for sailing, he'd explained, or working on his beloved boat.) He could never stay longer than an hour or two. Scallion required more of him during

holidays, what with sales, publicity; his family needed him for complex maneuvers of the season (Cynthia's parents were in town). Journalists always sought him. Gray appeared more nervous now about being seen with Alex. He worried about the yarn lady (who was also Alex's landlady), though Alex assured him Mrs. Heller kept a respectful distance. He'd even stopped allowing them to eat at the Mozart Café. "We give the game away. We look like lovers," he'd explained gently. It was true that swaths of people poured along the square now, shopping, dining, sightseeing. The public seemed far more public in those weeks before Christmas.

But despite her best resolutions Alex began, after a time, to feel like a convenience store. Quick stop, refreshment, bye-bye. In fact she couldn't even escort him outside to see him off. He didn't wish it. He wished to bound up the stairs, preferably in the dark, knock softly before letting himself in—Alex had entrusted a key to him early on, her eyes steady on his when she'd placed it in his hands. Afterward he would bound downstairs and away in the dark, alone and (he hoped) unremarked. His drive to and from her was long, yes: that would prove (she imagined he assumed this) the measure of his care. But a system of visits that had begun as exhilarating, even defiant, was coming to take on the shape of a trapped ritual. A kind of kinky, banned rite, like shooting up.

She didn't say these things, but they filtered through. Gray must have caught some atmospheric change, because he asked about it once or twice. *What are you thinking* was the form the question always took, when he sensed a barometric shift he couldn't easily read. Alex would spin careless, veiling explanations that were always partly true. Oh, what to get Maddie and the baby for Christmas, whether it was time to have her car serviced. These gave Gray openings to be useful, apply practical logic. He always leapt to it. Gray loved advising.

"What does Maddie most enjoy?" He'd commence his calm inquiry. If A, then how can B not follow? Alex would nod, recite her

parts like an obedient chorale as he led her, point by point, through his smoothly reasoned solutions. She was uneasy in these sessions, her concerns so small after all. Uneasy for the dishonesty of it, the red-herring exercises she nudged him through. But it was her only out, to keep him distracted from that porous part of her—a mushy portal that would collapse if pushed directly, like the fontanelle in a baby's skull. Behind it trembled her unprotected, anguished need.

It would repel him, and it shamed her.

She was touched by his patience. Touched by his willingness to put aside, for her sake, the business that pressed him. Financial statements, home repairs, attorneys, editors, sales managers. Ryder's preschool Christmas pageant (he was to portray a sprig of holly). Gray had still to pick up Cynthia's gift, a diamond pendant—three diamonds in a descending diagonal line, like Orion's belt: he'd seen it in the little jeweler's on Miller. (Alex knew the shop, hopelessly expensive. She had insisted he tell her about it, then wished very much she had not.) All these he put aside in order to grapple with the small, homely dilemmas of his glumfaced, overweight, twenty-seven-year-old lover who drove a rusting Buick, lived in a two-room apartment in a small vineyard town, and had almost no friends or habits besides reading.

The gift he'd brought last visit looked awfully booklike. She'd seen it at once when he walked in, partly covered by the raincoat over his arm, but she pretended not to have seen it. A heavy rectangular block wrapped in blood red candy-flake paper, silver ribbon. It was the last time he could see her before Christmas. She felt her face soften when he pulled the pretty package from under his coat as he began to make the motions of leaving. At the same time she felt a sort of glass needle enter her heart.

"Gray." She couldn't help shooting him a reproving frown, though she managed to stop from saying *You shouldn't have,* because that would have been false. He should have. She wanted him to. Yet

she felt embarrassed, and a wild rush of hurt. She felt like one of the children being fed early sandwiches in the kitchen and shunted off to bed before the grown-ups' party started.

"Shall I open it now?"

He smiled. "How about it."

He sat on the edge of the bed, buttoning a brown knit shirt that made his brown eyes richer—flecks of gold about the fathomless black pupils—hair a delicious copper tousle, bare legs hard and youthful, a runner's. She had not yet risen. She hoisted herself to sitting, tied the sheet around her chest like a toga and swung her legs to the floor, sat alongside him leg to leg. She held the red-foil block in her sheeted lap.

Then she remembered. "Wait. Let me get yours first."

She rose, toga trailing across the room, paced to the closet, feeling his amused eyes on her. Knelt and rummaged in the plastic basket that held her jumbled underwear. As she knelt her own warm scent billowed up, custardy-musk of her body with the scent of their sex from between her legs, like brine. She groped among the bra-backs, filigree of panties, fished up the gift. It resembled a giant wrapped toffee, a spheroid in blue and green tissue, twisted at two ends. She carried it back to him, held it forth with both hands.

He accepted it with suitable pomp, and she seated herself again alongside him.

"You first," she said, breathless from getting up.

Gray pulled at the blue-green tissue. (She loved watching his hands, lean, shapely, the red-blond down over their backs.) When the tissue crumpled off, he stared at the crystal compass in his palm. It was circular and heavy, thick like an old timepiece, face framed with a clean silver strip, encased in clear crystal. She'd found it at Gump's in the city, put aside a portion of several paychecks to buy it. She had thought about the problem of Christmas almost since she'd met him. He would already own everything, the best of everything. For some

reason—perhaps she'd dreamed it—she had remembered the compass in a Mary Poppins story which magically spirited Poppins and her two small charges to all points of the world. Alex had set out with that numinous, biscuit-shaped object in mind. The four directions gleamed on its white face in mother of pearl gothic letters, the little silver needle shivering and floating.

He blinked at it. "It's beautiful," he ventured.

"True north," she explained. Her heart beating hard, the accursed blush heating her neck and face. Suddenly the whole enterprise seemed absurd, ridiculous. *Idiot, flight of moron fancy. Why couldn't she have found something sane, something practical.* She swallowed.

"North," she said. The word came out gurgled.

Furiously she cleared her throat.

"The way north. So you can always find your way back to me."

Something happened in Gray's face; he looked quickly back down at the little crystal biscuit in his lap. His head bobbed once, as if hearing difficult news. When he lifted his face a different light covered his eyes, brisk, assuring. He took her chin in a never-you-mind way, kissed her.

"It's wonderful. Thank you," he said, kissed her again. She breathed relief. The heat in her face cooled.

"Now you," he instructed when they'd leaned apart. He nodded at the sparkling red box in her lap. His bare legs an eighteen-year-old's beside hers.

Alex felt for the seams of the wrapping, ran her finger under the folds. She hated tearing the brilliant paper. Its glittering candy-flake reflected light in a thousand facets. As the paper fell away she recognized the title.

Memoirs of Hadrian. Startled, she looked at him.

"You remembered."

She had mentioned the title but once. Years ago she'd gone to a bookstore reading, and when asked the inevitable "what are you read-

ing," the writer had named this book. A gifted, squat, lonely man, guarded and wistful, he'd confided to his listeners that Hadrian was one of those books you could not own too many copies of. She'd never got round to finding it. It astonished her how closely Gray heeded her words no matter how casually she uttered them; she reminded herself again to be careful what she said to him. This was a paperback edition, large and heavy, the cover a photograph, profile of a statue of the famed emperor—stone eyes void as if blinded by inwardness—from the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, the caption said. The book was larded with photographs: statuary, friezes, ancient coin faces. Alex peeped into the flyleaves, riffled them as if admiring the bulk of the thing. No inscription. She flipped to its back pages, opened, and sentences like flames leapt at her.

There are places where one has chosen to live, invisible abodes which one makes for oneself quite outside the current of time.

She skipped backward, pressed the book open at its middle.

To be right too soon is to be in the wrong. Had I been guilty of that base incredulity which keeps us from recognizing the grandeur of a man whom we know too well?

She turned to the earliest pages.

Thus from each art practiced in its time I derive a knowledge which compensates me in part for pleasures lost.

"My God," she murmured.

She looked again at him. "It's like an I Ching. An oracle. Gray, it's beautiful. It is filled with beauty."

"Like its owner," Gray said.

She sat gazing at him, wrapped in her sheet, scraps of sparkling ruby paper nesting the book in her lap, the lustrous curtain of her hair disheveled and heavy.

"Thank you," she said, and her voice broke. A spasm of hopelessness squeezed her, a tight yoke between the sweetness he afforded and a quick, knifelike sorrow. Her throat closed, her eyes ached with the

pressure of pending water. She put her bare white arms around his neck, pushed her forehead against his, as if to drill her way into his skull, disappear there. Squeezed shut her eyes, thought again of the last sentence she had read: *a knowledge which compensates me . . . for pleasures lost*.

Skip liked amusement. That was one of the first things Mort learned.

Even a silly little street fair like this one, in Fairfax. Skip liked wandering. Malls and midways, main streets, any distraction. (It occurred to Mort he himself must look to others like some glum secret agent, assigned to guard this spirited, black-haired star.) Skip insisted on trying his luck at all the sideshow games—tossing pennies into fishbowls, pitching baseballs at moving targets. He'd even won a plush toy, a chartreuse extraterrestrial with pointy head, black cape, and hood. He had presented the doll to Mort, who stuffed it into the oversized pocket of his raincoat. Skip loved junk food, despite his bodybuilding. Cotton candy, nachos with synthetic orange goo, chili dogs. All things cheap and bright caught Skip's eye, drew him as shiny pieces of foil draw a brazen bird. Food, toys, bric-a-brac, all of it pleased him; he called out in delight at each new specimen. He'd raved, for instance, over a book of old postcards in a shop they'd browsed on Fillmore—a collection of the dullest and ugliest hotels and roadside stops in America, mauve dining rooms, parking lots, roadsigns that were giant neon doughnuts. Mort had stood by patiently, waiting, as he had learned to, for the enchantment to find its next object. Skip loved lurid movies—my God, the films the kid had

seen. Every title, every revival in the Castro, the damp old art houses in the fog-bound avenues. Or television, late at night. He loved *Gone with the Wind*, *Meet Me in St. Louis;* he loved *Children of the Damned*, *The Blob*, *The Fly*. He made no distinctions. *I Love Lucy*, cartoons, Sherlock Holmes: loved them with the same mindless relish. ("Come to bed," Mort would shout, his sleep chopped up by the heartless laughtracks, the blue light flickering from the living room.) No end to Skip's appetite for corn, trash, plastic icons of any era—it surged forward, this appetite, new and genuine as a baby's laugh each time.

It made Mort feel old.

In truth it held infectiousness. With his looks, his laughter, Skip got to people. Cracked them open in spite of themselves. Maybe Skip himself would never get old.

"Mortie, know what'd be fun?" They were strolling past cider stands and crafts booths—earrings, bead necklaces, tie-dyed T-shirts, bongs, redwood boxes. Same stuff, year after year, Mort thought.

"Going to Vegas." Skip's eyes flicked sideways to test the effect of his words.

Mort scowled, looked away. "You must be nuts."

The rain had paused. People were venturing out again like cautious animals, filing onto the pavement in the cool wet air. A few dogs trotted, sniffing. The rain would pound for some minutes, then a hole in the clouds would open; sun raced over the drenched landscape, firing the diamonds strung in perfect evenness along branches (new red-brown growth like fine capillaries). Some stubborn leaves, wine-colored, still clung. In the wet breeze all the plants seemed to be shaking themselves off.

"But Vegas is just another carnival," Skip argued. "Like this one. The lights, the slots, the shows—"

"It would make me want to throw up." Mort hated hearing himself, dour, dried up. An old monk. But these were his feelings. What

could it serve to lie? "I went a couple of times, as a teenager. The oddest thing, I remember." Mort tried to pump a speculative brightness into his voice, as if he were a sociologist sparked by the sheer phenomenon. He hoped this tone hid the dread kneading his stomach. "The place is like an airport, no sense of day or night. No sense of time passing. Always the same, like a bus station. No windows in the casinos. The lights hurt your eyes. Banks and banks of them, clown-colors, nauseating. The noise never stops, noise of the slots—loopy music from each machine, over and over, to beckon you. Little organ riffs, like a jack-in-the-box. Old ladies sitting on stools with their cups of nickels, yanking the machines' arms. Cigarettes. Smoke like you wouldn't believe, Skipper." (Mort warmed to this: he knew Skip disliked smoke.) "Stinking up everything. The carpets stink like a hundred years of ashes, spilled beer. And the people! A zoo. Lost, Skip. The ruined and the lost," Mort said, shaking his head once more.

The men strolled. Skip looked at the dripping awnings, the organic produce, piles of dates, figs.

"Aw, Mortie. You just brought your sad old bad old attitude to it," he finally said. "Being Eeyore again. I'm here to remind you to lighten up, remember? Didn't we agree?"

He darted in front of Mort and began walking backward facing him, poking a teasing finger into Mort's chest, foisting his grinning face close, blinking rapidly, an exaggerated, film-idol close-up.

Mort ducked his head, glanced around to see if anyone had been watching. He didn't like physical contact between them in public. He pushed his hands deeper into his pockets, flinched away.

"Cut it out."

Skip let one side of his mouth droop, faking petulance as he fell back alongside. Perhaps to assert his displeasure he stopped at the next vending booth, which sold novelty salt-and-pepper cellars, shapes of dachshunds, fruit, pink-cheeked Hummel children.

"Hey!" he called. In a moment he was standing before the rows of figurines, questioning the jowly woman, bundled in sweaters, who sat on a stool stringing beads as she answered.

Mort paused.

The millionth pause.

It makes no sense, Mort thought, shifting from foot to foot. It makes no sense we be here. It makes no sense I be dating him. He's a kid, a fool, a *frivolo.*

Morton Levi was proud to have built, since arriving in Marin two years ago, what he considered a reasonable life, brick by brick. He rented two rooms (one his sculpting studio) in Fairfax, a house at the end of a gravel drive, stands of eucalyptus and birch, a comforting distance from the main road in town. His housemate, a bartender, was rarely home. Mort kept a quiet routine, applied himself to the management job at Infinite Information as ardently as he knew how. He hadn't counted on the chill that would set in once the good little life was in place. Missing was the ease he had hoped for, the sense of calm. On surface it was blameless. Close up it was a blank. He would come home to utter stillness. Just as he'd left it. Something about this, the inanimateness of his things—clock radio, book of Florentine sculpture, framed photo of his parents, clean laundry still stacked—all sitting exactly as he'd left them. Pillow fluffed, bedspread smoothed. The sight struck him with a stifling dismay, sometimes panic. This sameness was not a deepening sameness. It did not soothe. It was a flat, empty screen. Not at all what he had hoped for. Damned if he knew what he had hoped for. He did some yoga, he cooked, hiked, read. He sculpted in his studio, quietly, experimentally, pots and urns, sometimes rough little busts, torsos. He'd had one brief *liaise* (he preferred to call it that) with the Sausalito guy who cut his hair, a fellow of categorical tastes and habits. This food, that travel, these films—a long list of rules for living, nonnegotiable. The

haircutter had also been a little too ravingly swish. Mort was weary of the ravingly swish. It drained energy, depressed him. Soon he had been obliged to find someone else to cut his hair.

His life had seemed to stick, like a flung stone, against the dumb terrain he traversed every day. A mute thing, his life. Obdurate, inert as the items sitting in his rented room. He told himself a thousand times to be patient, trust that something would eventually happen, be shown to him—what this flat skipping-stone of a life was supposed to amount to. At least monks, he thought, had a hotline to God. They could phone anytime. That would make up, he thought, for all the other waiting.

He folded his arms, tightened them. The society around him exhorted him—shrieking, screen, page, airwave—to love. Some stickysweet, gloppy idea, bowl of pancake batter. Love, all you needed. Mort watched Skip entertain the old woman (dancing a pair of ceramic pigs around in the air with his hands, making them kiss). It wasn't so easy as a man got older. Especially, Christ help us, in the world of gay men, which asked first, last, and always *How do I look?* The idea of partnership still pulled: of course it did. When would it not? When he was dead. What the hell else was there, until you died? Even if you were Michelangelo. Hadn't it pushed Michelangelo around, too? The balance so elusive, Mort thought. He'd left New York vowing never to succumb again to the wrong balance, the dangerous kind. For he knew it was the wrong balance that lured him, time and again. And he was getting older.

"Mortie, let's eat. I'm starving. What about these, huh? Mortie?"

"Mort?" Skip was gesturing before his face, a semaphore signalman—toward the booth offering red beans and dirty rice, corn bread, buffalo wings, dark ale.

Mort looked at the boy, the pools of color in his cheeks. A Gainesborough. How old was he? Twenty-three?

"Of course. Let's eat, Skipper. That stuff looks fine. Get me what

you're having." He found his wallet, pressed a bill into the kid's hand, watched him bound off, maneuvering expertly into the crowd at the serving counter.

Mort had been the child no fifties parent could quite fathom: shy, diffident, thin. Loathed sports, wanted instead to watch the big liners and barges come and go at the harbor. (Once, as he'd stared at the sailors shuffling down the gangplank from a docked carrier, one had winked at him. He'd buried his head in the folds of his mother's coat, a terrible hot confusion flushing him.) His father, a sometime proofreader and full-time alcoholic, was gone much of the time; his mother Gianetta, a doughy, willful woman, kept watch on her sensitive boy. She told him proudly it was she who had chosen his name, from the label on the cardboard canister of salt in the kitchen. She'd thought it a fine, American-sounding name. (No one in the little group that came to card parties had offered to contradict her. All were too new to the country themselves. Perhaps, too, one chose one's battles with Gianetta.) Mort had never told anyone the source of his name. But the awareness returned whenever he glimpsed the blue cylindrical container in cupboards or on supermarket aisles, its smiling girl in the yellow dress sallying forth under her umbrella (her hair had changed a bit with advancing years, but little else)—the canister askew beneath an arm, blithely spilling salt behind her. His middle name, Andrea, meant strength. Gianetta believed the two names would combine, the American name cutting forward like a prow, the old world name pushing like a tug engine from behind.

Thank God they were gone now: his father dead of drink at forty-three, mother of simple weariness. Second-generation Jews, Civitavecchia. He missed them less with time. He missed his father only from those years before he'd turned ugly, years when he'd made them laugh. Eddie Levi was an entertainer then, wavy black hair, bold beaked nose. He'd push the hair straight up, prance around the room mimicking Danny Kaye, pretend to pull off his own thumb before his

little son's amazed eyes, find the missing thumb in his armpit. And Eddie could *wiggle his ears,* lift and lower them like fleshy oars, independent of his smiling head. Sundays, scores of relatives filled the Brooklyn apartment, Eddie at their center, blazing. Aunties, uncles—Mort never certain who was actually related—filing in and out all day for the card parties, the food. Gianetta, shaped like a gnocchi in white butcher's apron, running the kitchen. Round after round: bowls of nuts, crackers, antipasti, salamis, cheeses, and peppers. Then the lasagnas, chickens, later those white cookies—their almond perfume. The cakes, the fruit. Cigarettes, cigars, red wine, the men in suspenders squinting through smoke at the fanned cards, the coffee a black sludge of grounds climbing the cups' inside walls. Evenings they'd break for Ed Sullivan, laughing at the acrobats, the ventriloquist with his box that opened to Señor Wences. They adored Topo Gigio, the men slapping their legs when they laughed. The women sang with Giselle Mackenzie: *Que sera, sera.* Then they'd start up the food again, sandwiches, cake. Mort still couldn't understand how they'd afforded it. Gianetta was always cleaning, kerchief knotted at her forehead, bellowing *my floors, my carpet, my house.* Of course it was not a house, it was a worn apartment. Eddie seldom worked; what money there may have been went to booze. Mort now supposed it was the network, the ersatz family and friends who'd kept them afloat, probably even paid the rent, propped his mother up. Poor Gianetta, fiery and dominant until Eddie's death. Then she'd crumpled, survived him only by a year, obeying that mystifying signal in the brains of lifelong wives, telling them it is time to shut down. A mercy not having to worry them anymore. Well, worry his mother. His father had become so hateful as he sank into drink Mort had wanted to kill him. Too many afternoons coming home from school not knowing what he'd find, heart hammering in his chest until he could safely scamper past the couch where his father lay in his undershirt, smelling like sour yeast, holding his tumbler of whiskey in cola,

watching television. If Mort didn't move fast enough, the words began. "Worthless" was a favorite, as was "arty fairy." Then Gianetta would step in; the two would scream at each other while Mort fled. At the last Eddie was taken to the hospital unconscious, cirrhosis listed as the cause.

We're all the children of drunken fathers, a college friend had once declared. Never any money. Hard, for his father's generation—Mort was sorry now, in a generalized way. A queasiness still feathered his stomach, thinking about it. Men and women like his parents, thousands—he thought of them as great waves pressing toward Ellis Island, emptying forth there—dying out unnoticed, of illness or drink or violence. Or just used up. Mort knew something had not been answered for those hordes of pioneers, that great push they'd given, that trying. The ends they'd met, extinguished in silent waves like fireflies.

Sometimes on his drive to work Mort saw an old man selling cherries out of the trunk of his car, bending to arrange the cardboard flats. Something in the man's face and posture, his tenderness bending over his flats, was nearly unbearable. Sometimes Mort felt as if he were about to come apart from this sensation, though he never spoke of it. It happened more than he liked to admit. Recently he'd seen a handsome black child, about twelve, walking out of the Fairfax library with his mother. Mort passed them on the front steps, saw the topmost title in the stack of books carried by his mother, who looked tired and determined: *Your Father Was Just Like You.* Or the homeless guy stationed on the concrete abutment near the Best Mart, across from the office. The market chased him off periodically; he always showed up again. No teeth, apparently could not speak: just leaned toward you, imploring. When you gave him a quarter he shut his eyes twice very hard, to thank you. As you hurried on, he tried to mouth the sounds *God bless.* Gah bleh.

A response was missing, a reply to all this. It wasn't enough that

kids grew up, managed not to become louts. Whatever the children did could not repay their parents' ordeal. Nobody got the answer they needed, the answer they deserved. He'd asked himself repeatedly what form such a response might take. It was more than carving words on a tombstone (if you were given to that), more than erecting a lousy park bench in someone's name. If he let the fantasy play out, it might be something like the whole world stopping for a minute, the whole planet and heaven, too. Bowing to the dead, the crushed, declaring in some wordless interplanetary language *You were good. You were absolutely good.* Oh, people got obituaries, memorial services. But that stuff blew away with the papers. Mort knew, though he shunned religion, that it sounded religious, what he had in mind.

You did what you had to. You are beloved.

But of course no such message came. It was like a second shoe that never fell. Stuck to the ceiling, maybe. Or like the two notes that finished the old refrain: *Shave and a haircut, two bits.* Where were the *two bits* owed to the swarms of the living, the legions of dead? Shifting his weight from one leg to another, Mort thought of a butler holding a silver tray, bearing a crisp white card. *The favor of a reply is requested.*

He shook his head. A mercy not to have to worry anymore for Eddie, for Gianetta. Good though his salary was, it could never have stretched to support them if they'd both had to enter a home. He would have gone crazy trying to handle it. He also didn't like thinking of them reduced to infants, vacant, being fed, diapered.

He folded his arms, rubbed them; pressed cold fingertips into the palms of one hand, the other. Rapid, furrowed clouds the color of slate were moving in again; the temperature had dropped. Mort's eyes grazed the path between the craft booths. Someone watching from near to hand might have supposed the slender, short fellow with the straight dark hair, liquid black eyes, and goatee was trying hard to remember something.

When Mort was very young he'd sometimes amuse himself mak-

ing puppets out of scraps of newspaper and old socks. His father waved away this activity with disgust. "Pansy," he muttered, shuffling past. But his mother determined, black eyes flashing, she would take Mort to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. *Let's learn something,* she had puffed as she climbed with him up the broad flat steps. The boy loved the place instantly—all of it, but especially the sculptures, which he'd walked round and round, hardly breathing, and the Egyptian room. Mort moved through his youth as he had through the Met, never doubting the world was an enormous, majestic museum, operated by sensible rules that would eventually be made clear to him. Childhood had not, blessedly, delivered trauma. He'd played with the neighborhood kids, cowboys and Indians and war. He'd got pushed down and cried, probably pushed a kid or two himself, but this was too far back in the mists to remember. His first crush he did remember. Second grade, a slim child with white-blond hair named Mike Victory. Mort had thought it over for many days (and some nights): decided to offer the boy his best boulder-cleary marbles. They were dark, topaz gold. Their somber weight, the faint cool *chink* they made against each other in his palm, thrilled him. He studied his clearies one chilly morning—two boulders and a "baby." Much as he loved them, it didn't seem right to keep one back for himself, break up the group. He would give them all. He placed them in his pockets, set off for school. And when he spotted Mike standing by himself in the asphalt yard during recess, Mort had approached, offered his holy treasure to the boy. Mike had looked at the jewels, accepted them mutely into his hands, and wandered away. Mike Victory had never spoken to Mort before that day, and did not speak to him again—or even see him, that Mort could recall—thereafter.

Mort had been stupefied. He hadn't thought about what was supposed to happen after he gave Mike the jewels. Maybe he had envisioned the two of them going off with an arm over each other's shoulders, best friends forever. Even from this distance—nearly thirty

years—he could see himself standing alone in the playground after Mike walked away.

By the time Mort was thirteen, he was quietly aware of his difference. He'd begun collecting muscleman magazines from street-corner newsstands, and had already noticed other kinds of men's magazines, bearing a more urgent and direct message. He did his best, at the ratty little shops where they were sold, to appear not to notice these, sometimes managing to stash the dirty ones inside the cleaner ones for a quick, panicky perusal. When he was old enough to buy them he sought the most complex hiding place he could find, terrified his mother would find them. (He considered the squished place between the bottom of his mattress and the box springs, counting on the fact that his mother wouldn't turn the mattress but once a year, but grew agonized because he could not know what day she might choose. So he used the high shelf in his closet, wrapping the magazines in a pillowcase folded over several times, placing it under a pile of games, carefully messed to look like the thoughtless accrual of junk over time.) His father was oblivious with drink; his mother thought him shy, which was true. As he grew older, though he'd never considered his love for men an illness, nor undertaken (as he later read others had done) to erase his own nature—he opted for what he privately called a balancing act, tried to keep his nature quiet, not let it damn him. All would somehow be well, Mort thought, if he could just stay out of people's way. Slowly he made the acquaintance of a few boys like himself, had encounters; these helped him feel somewhat less freakish—but no less lonely. Boys found each other in abandoned places, grappled awkwardly, silently for furtive minutes, came apart, slunk away: no word or gesture of affection, no syllable of more than surface recognition when they met later in the halls at school. Not until NYU, when he shared an apartment (working as a hotel night clerk to pay his way) did he have his first affairs—if they could be called that, for they, too, were still more like quick, fitful

fusions—after which he'd revert again (no smarter, no better) to his solitary track. Loving men only seemed a predictable part of the lonely role assigned him. Mort felt, most of the time, like a boat that had maundered too long at sea. He had lost the function-memory for the easy social noises most people his age exchanged unthinkingly. He couldn't explain why, though his Sausalito job gave him authority, he often felt choked with shyness—more, a kind of shamed conspicuousness. He longed to throw this feeling off, step clear of it. Loneliness had seemed a fact of life since he could remember, like hair and eyes and breathing.

The confounding thing—the difference between loneliness and breathing—you could never stop trying to remedy it. Some instinct prodded, against his own exhaustion, insisting to him, daily, something was missing.

Or someone.

"Here we are, mate!"

Skip stood before him, two heavy-paper plates held forward like prizes. Fragrance of beans, chicken, Cajun spices.

"Hold these, okay? Hold these just a minute."

He handed the plates into Mort's two hands, whirled to go back for their beers. Mort watched the strapping form duck through the line. The boy's energy foamed. Questing the surface of the world for whatever it might be made to reveal. Unapologetic, scouring for pleasure. Questing for movement itself, sharklike.

Mort knew Skip counteracted his own glum nature. Harassed him into the world, forced him by reluctant, anguished turns to lighten up. To be near the boy, feel him was to feel carried out of himself—though offstage a certain sad, formless apparition glimmered, waiting.

It began to rain again. Softly at first, a curtain of wet gray. Then harder, more insistent, a rising, roaring chorus. Cold rushing down. Mort hunched his shoulders, squinted, dashed for the nearest awning with a steaming plate balanced in each hand.

"Who are your friends?"

Alex asked it as she reached for the cups, and the teakettle began its high screech. The sound became a demented keening if she did not snatch the kettle fast from the blue gas flames—sound of a woman's wailing.

Gray sat at the wooden table unperturbed by the sound, looking out the window. The length of him! Had to fold himself to fit into that corner, a daddy playing guest at a dollhouse tea party. Her kitchen surely among the world's smallest, a narrow rectangle. She leaned against the stove, holding her mug of tea in both hands. February, clear but very cold. The heating not good: a vented wall unit, only warm when you stood before it. Useless to complain to the yarn lady, who rented her the place. Mrs. Heller had owned the building since her husband's death, believed the wall unit a luxurious amenity. Alex had the oven on, door open, for extra warmth. Two windows, fogged and grimy, looked out on the black oak, a brittle old monster—deeply ridged, bearded, full of moss, bugs, abandoned birds' nests—obscured much of the parking lot behind it. Crows sat there this morning, arguing noisily. She was grateful for that tree.

Alex had wanted to ask, do you *have* any friends. The question had

occurred a week before, when she'd watched two cars zoom past her into the health club parking lot, driving much too fast. One chased the other, as if in anger. She had feared a traffic dispute, feared the drivers would next leap out and begin to throw punches. She had seen this once on Van Ness, in San Francisco. Two men had leapt from their vehicles, squared off in the middle of the busy street, fists cocked like pugilists in a ring.

But it turned out these two drivers were chums, cowboys disporting on horseback. She had pulled into an adjacent space to watch. The two men (both a little older than Gray) jumped from their vehicles and raced to the pool, where they swam laps in parallel lanes for an hour (she had walked to the chain-link fence to see), splashing furiously alongside each other, pausing to pant, joking, laughing.

Might Gray have a friend like that?

He looked out the window.

"Mostly people Cynthia knows." He waved a hand. "Ballet board, philanthropists. Society types. I don't much care for them. They're all right."

"What do you do with them? Do they visit you? Do you go see them?"

He kept his gaze out the window, shifting a little in the hard wooden chair.

"They come for dinner sometimes. Or we meet them somewhere, a nice restaurant. Some of them have kids about Ryder's age. When the kids come it's a big, chaotic scene."

"What goes on then? At the chaotic scenes?"

She was placing tea before him, black jasmine, clear, light amber. He took no sweetening. Woody fragrance of the flower, light gardenia sweetness floated up papery, delicate, into both their faces. Steam coiled on the surface began lifting off in spirals.

"A nice restaurant," she prompted.

They never have to ask the price of things. But in her experience,

people who never had to ask always made it their first order of business to find out.

His eyes followed the cup she set before him. A diner cup she'd found in a secondhand shop, shiny white, thick china, shaped like a little barrel cinched at the middle. He wrapped his long hands around it. Seeing those fair hands, their down of red-gold, she felt again a shiver of transgression, as though a royal family member had been spirited under cover to her kitchen. The light from the windows' dirty mist was silver, the black tree trunk scoring it in the background.

"You know. North Beach, Embarcadero. We drink, talk. Politics. Business. The men check up on each other. The women talk whatever they talk about. Food, the kids, charity stuff."

"What do you drink—typically now." Her voice took on the interviewer's teasing solemnity and she smiled at him, hoping he'd catch her light mischief.

"Oh, scotch. Glenlivet. That's usually it. Then a nice varietal, with dinner. Good cabs and zins. Sometimes a fumé."

He was somber, systematic. Missed her mischief entirely. Oh, well.

She kept her voice lilting.

"Do you like them, these friends?"

He looked at her, shifted again in the chair. Part of him didn't seem to be present this morning.

"They're all right. I like them when I see them. Cynthia enjoys them. Always seems pleased afterward. But when they've gone—"

He looked out the smeary glass panes again.

"It's as if I'd never known them."

He glanced hurriedly back at her. "Of course they're terrific friends, tremendous people," he said. "We're happy to have them."

The *we* stung her. She scooped up the sting and stuffed it away lightning quick, like one of those kids who leap from the sidelines to fetch stray tennis balls. The Merritts were a corporation, an entity.

He lifted his tea in both hands, breathed papery sweetness before placing his lips to the hot liquid's edge.

"Terrific people," he repeated, sipping cautiously, testing the liquid's heat.

"But do you have a special pal?" Alex persisted. She spoke softly. "A best friend type?" She thought again of the swimming cowboys.

He sipped.

"I used to play racquetball with Jack Heath, before he moved. I used to love that. We both did, I think. We were growing the business then. Jack was like a father. But he was older, of course, and not so—spry. Then he moved with his—partner—to Costa Rica. Jack's gay."

Gray was matter-of-fact.

"I mail him the financial statements. He sends me these crazy little gifts."

Shaking his head. *That codger Jack,* said the headshake. Alex saw in it a long habit of power, the weary, affectionate, forbearing pater absorbing his clan's silly wonts. *What'll that wily sonofabitch think of next.*

"A green bird with a long tail, painted on a slice of wood burl. I assume Jack's happy. Somewhat cloistered, I'd think."

Another sip.

He set the cup down, looked at her evenly. When he spoke, it was without irony.

"Who are *your* friends?" he asked.

Alex felt the burn rising from her neck, and she could only hold his eyes a moment before she had to look down.

"None, really," she said.

He waited.

"I've not really had time the past year. Moving, getting settled. The apartment, the job," she babbled.

"Maybe a few people at work, sometimes," she lied. Monstrous lie.

Gray cocked his head gently.

"My sister," she said.

"Why don't you just fly over, Allie? What's preventing it?"

Maddie's voice, sharp. Point-blank. Maddie's voice spoke her relationship to the universe, Alex remembered, staring at her crossed bare feet against the wall. The can-do of it. Straight to business, no second-guessing. Like her body, hard and athletic, more so after the baby. That manner was why, before she'd had Willie, Maddie was the hands-down champion of marketing directors for the airline (where, of course, she'd met Roy). But even after Willie, her quickness, her *verve* were there. All difficulties in Maddie's sight were reducible to a boundaried, finite thing—series of things—which you could simply squash like bugs, by taking action. How Alex envied this well-worked muscle of belief in Maddie; how fond it made her, also how tired and lonely—and old, although she, Alex, was indeed the kid sister. Maddie's problems would always be dispatchable. *Seven in one blow,* the children's story they'd read countless times. The little tailor smacks seven flies dead, so proud he fixes himself a nice piece of bread with jam to celebrate. Alex could still see the color illustration, thick white bread slice, dark purple jam. That picture always made her starved for bread and jam. Blackberry. Alex would actually read stories to Maddie when they were little. The stories seemed to hold a secret

message beneath the simple facts they told. Nothing so clumsy or obvious as a moral. She would read and reread them, stare at the illustrations—stare *into* them, trying to grasp their mysterious message. A shape you tried to identify, as if it lay beneath swirling water. When Alex read to her Maddie would half-listen before a mirror, trying to coax her own hair into a perfect ponytail at the makeshift vanity table. (Alex had loved hiding under the table's skirts.) She would interrupt Alex to ask her to tie a bow around the ponytail. If the bow wasn't tied exactly right (symmetrical, perky, shiny-side out) Maddie would get angry and stomp off, and Alex, sorry but unharmed, would go back to reading.

This morning Alex could hear in the background the happy tuneless song of a toddler, zigzaggy burbling, every few phrases nailed by a whoop or screech.

Alex lay on her bed, legs against the wall, crossed the same way she crossed them against the steam room's tile. It was April; sunlight floated through the open square of window (glass shutters cranked wide as they would go). Light so tender and clear it seemed distilled. It probed the dark apartment, diffusing before it reached Alex's bed. The phone receiver lay nested in her hair, by her ear.

"What's preventing my coming? Because I'm on a budget and depressed, and because you've got enough on your hands. Also I'd have to get time off."

She hadn't technically earned the time yet—you had to accrue it drop by drop, some mean, niggling prorating system. But neither had she thought how she'd use the days when she finally had them, if the company lasted that long. She wasn't one of those women to go off by herself in granny dress and hiking boots, to Bali or the Alps. Fussing with schedules, backpacks, worrying who was following you or eyeballing you or slipping the passport (expertly, that second) from your pocket, the wristwatch from your wrist. For what? So you could sit in cafés, stare at strangers, write in your journal? So on return you

could commence bailing, bucket by puny bucketful, the stunning credit card bill? No. Best to take off like that with another person, if you were going to do it. Someone who liked reading maps.

"Allie, don't be stupid. Talk to your boss. My treat for the flight. Roy's got the Philadelphia run for two weeks. We've got the spare room all made up. I could use some adult language around here. Willie's just starting to say words. Don't you want to hear him say Auntie Allie?"

"Auntie Allie'll be the first name he forgets once I'm out of the room."

"Whew, dear. You're on a big nasty. Man stuff? Bad?"

For a quick, teetering moment Alex was tempted. Her sister read her uncannily, to a degree. But Maddie was combustible: sympathetic, defensive of Alex, worried for her, irritated with her. To Maddie Alex was irresolute; her brooding sometimes made Maddie want to slap her, Alex knew—less from anger than a wish to snap her out of that soupy spell. And Maddie was married, straighter than straight. Though Roy was gone so much Maddie swore she liked it: it gave her time, she claimed, to get organized. Alex had always thought Roy dull, but a reasonable match for her sister: hearty, friendly, the high school quarterback now making glorious money with the airlines. He wanted to set his family up in something extravagant, a desert villa, but could only be there to search with his wife during his days off. They wanted to take their time searching, hold out for perfection. In the interim they camped in a pretty condo at the base of South Mountain. Maddie was full of all the old upright convictions, convinced anyone could make the world more comprehensible by cleaving to a sort of Andrew Carnegie fix. She might try her best to put an enlightened face on it (Maddie liked thinking of herself as hip), but Alex knew her sister would be sickened—something would close off in her forever—to learn that Alex was carrying on with a married man. And even if Alex were to risk leveling with her, it could never be by

phone. Willie's teakettle song would shortly change to a shriek, she knew, and Maddie's concentration would shatter as she turned to placate him. Maddie would promise to phone back, get sidetracked with the unspooling daisy-chain of the baby's needs, not remember till late that evening she was supposed to phone back—by then dropping with fatigue, swooning, sinking down—knowing Willie would wake early. Days, more days would pass. It might be a month before Maddie could finally call. And Alex would be left there at the other end of the phone, legs still propped against the wall, story still in her mouth.

It amused her now to be a bona fide relation, blood kin (though the phrase sounded hillbillyish) to a fifteen-month-old boy. It changed things. Even at a distance it made her feel less random, somehow. Fifteen months ago she had flown out to help Maddie the first two weeks of Willie's life. Everyone exhausted, no one sleeping. There are photos: Roy at the stove, eyelids dragging, unlit cigarette pasted to his lower lip as he warms a bottle in a saucepan. Maddie leaning back against the couch, eyes closed, nearly unconscious as the little monkey-boy, as they nicknamed him at first, nursed away (the tan, smooth mound of her breast). Alex holding the breadloaf-sized infant, tiny face grimacing in his receiving blanket. He had a thick shock of feathery black hair at first, given way since to a soft, light brown cap. Alex remembered creeping to his crib one morning when she heard him wail. Roy was back at work, Maddie still passed out. Alex hurried upstairs to gather him up—hot, dark pink, the muffled bellow, unbelievably small, black-haired, smelling of hot urine. Carefully she'd carried him to the changing table, held him gently in place while she cleaned and dried him (torso a single dark muscle, miniature belly heaving, blackened scab of clipped cord, swollen but perfect penis and testicles, skinny froglimbs lifting and waving vaguely, more silken than anything she'd ever felt, fresh-bread smelling, glowing with new, pumping blood, heavy-lidded eyes unfocused, dark blue). She'd slipped his bony, froglike ass and legs into a fresh diaper. The

very sound of him a terrible piquancy, his helpless need. And just out there, just outside that room—the world. Corruption she partook of every day, as an adult woman. The infant's purity, his tabula rasa–ness, contrasted with that corruption—at its *mercy*. Willie's goodness sat in a separate zone marked Baby, where a handful of heroic, underpaid people worked to help these hapless creatures survive, helped them learn to wrap their lovely, trusting minds around the inexcusable, the unthinkable. Eventually Willie would enter that corruption, navigate it. She wondered how anyone could find the conviction to bring a baby forth. She'd correct herself: nothing rational about it. People did it because other forces were flooding them, sweeping them away.

"Naw, Maddie. Nothing going on. Just generic boredom. I go to the steam room. The steam room's good." Alex smiled at her feet.

Maddie was unamused.

"All the more reason to come over. It's warm here. You won't need your steam room. We can take Willie to the pool, find some Mexican food."

"I'll think about it."

"Do you promise, Al?"

Alex shaded her eyes, though the daylight wasn't yet strong enough to let her make out the numbers on the phone without the bedside lamp. The wild mustard was coming out, a sudden blanket of brilliant yellow blossoms along the tips of weedy green stems, floating amid vines, across pastures. Farmers liked the weed for the nourishment it gave when it worked back into the earth, so they let the mustard grow. From a distance the tall stems blended into the grass, carpets of yellow in the spring light. The blooms only kept their brilliance for a week or two before the clean, vivid yellow began to fade, go brown, fall away. Too brief, too brief. She longed to go driving around, to see it with Gray. But of course this wasn't permissible. She'd not dared speak of it that way to him. She could jump into the

Buick, drive herself. She could bring *Hadrian,* which she was allotting herself in small doses. Find a nice spot, read a bit.

Thermos of tea, Hadrian, and me, she thought.

"I promise, Mad. I do promise."

Hadrian was not what she had bargained for.

Elegant, portentous—a funny squirt of non sequitur. Like a trick corsage that spritzed you in the eye.

Alex read it at lunch hour. Brought it today, the Monday after Maddie's snappish call, to the little park in Sausalito where the kids sailed up on swings, squealing, pushed by mothers, nannies. The park faced a quiet side street, a café, a hairdresser's, a hardware store. Next to the hardware store, the expensive health food store. A few chestnut trees, still young, threw a small amount of shade. If there was space on a bench, Alex used it. If (as often happened) a couple of vagrants had established themselves there, wizened and dark with exposure and dirt, smoking and mumbling and giving off a sharp urine-and-rot smell, Alex took an old sheet from the car trunk, spread it at respectful distance on the grass in the most shade she could find, checking first for dog droppings. She tossed her sack lunch there (apple, sandwich, yogurt, juice, two chocolate chip–macadamia nut cookies), rolled her coat for a pillow. It was warm lately, proper for May, air filled with sea-scent and haylike fragrance, new flowers, leaves. Bumblebees called on the earliest blooms, fat bodies so heavy the delicate new stalks, translucent in the sun, sagged and bounced violently when

their visitors alighted; the bees had to scramble to cling on. Chickadees sang over and over: *cheecheekew, cheecheekew, chee chee chee chee.* Up the hill where the residential districts began, a lawnmower whined. Alex lay on her side chewing the sandwich (turkey and avocado with Swiss, on wheat), propped against her coat-pillow on an elbow.

Hadrian was writing to his likely successor, Marcus Aurelius.

My Dear Mark.

Hadrian knows he is dying. *I begin to discern the profile of my death.* Not immediately. *I still retire each night with hope to see the morning.* But soon. *My margin of doubt is a matter of months, not years.* He wants to relate his life. Explain it, justify it. Beginning at the beginning. His grandfather reads the future in the stars, shakes eleven-year-old Hadrian from sleep one night to tell him he is destined to rule the world. The young man becomes a soldier, a politician (the statues show a handsome, stern, concentrating face, thick curls neatly trimmed). In time he is named emperor.

Very grand. What's funny, without meaning to be, is exactly that. Its grandness.

Gray wanted to read the book when she was finished. He'd made a point of asking. She meant to take a long time with it, hoping against odds Gray would forget. Because—ashamed of this—she didn't want him to read it. It was exactly the stuff he'd covet. Lofty, statesmanlike, large. Its bearing in words was like that of the statues in its photographs. *Visionary,* would be the term Gray would use. Thinking in centuries instead of minutes. Yet inside these qualities, Alex saw, lay wrapped the emperor's canny, even tender self-regard. A psychology woven intricately, vastly, watertight, airtight. It would bear out all Gray's ideas (he would exult) of what makes greatness. The rarest greatness, the public man who began in humble stations. Gray would feel confirmed: he was on the greatness track. He'd quote from the book in articles, lectures.

Why couldn't she want this for him? What was wrong with her?

Hadrian liked mixing up the qualities, she noticed. Finding hardness in gentleness, vice versa. Choosing privation over luxury. He sought difficulty, he claimed, to strengthen himself. Played tricks on his own psyche to make it agile.

Whatever I had I chose to have, obliging myself only to possess it totally, and to taste the experience to the full.

Hadrian went to wars. Lots of them. His men chopped other men to pulp. Much worse when necessary, slaughtered women, infants, elders. Burned rebellious cities to the ground. Animals, gladiators routinely killed for public sport. Part of the royal vision. Royal being worth infinitely more than non-royal. Royal knew better, saw farther. At least, the world thought so. Historians, pundits, fascinated by what makes great, great. Tried to isolate components, the way you'd take apart a clock. Lincoln, Edison, Einstein. Ford, Burbank.

Merritt.

Hadrian had to be stern and wise. Yield when he must, slay when there was no choice. Know when to fold, know when to hold 'em.

Greece was depending upon us to be her protector, since after all we say that we are her master. I promised myself to stand watch over the defenseless god.

Hadrian viewed women the way the bumblebee saw blooms. All kinds, married women, young slaves. He seemed to like boys best. Debauchery was refreshment due, like food and drink during a journey. One sublime boy, Antinous, stole Hadrian's heart at first sight, and the emperor kept him thereafter like Mary's lamb. The boy's likeness, on coins and statuary, was exquisite. Hadrian had a wife who'd lost her looks early, wore veils, lived in shadows. The women ran the kitchens and households, laughing, but they went quiet when he appeared. If they were especially pretty and had his favor, they borrowed money from him. He would have liked to find a soul in some of them.

A man who reads, reflects or plans belongs to his species rather than to his sex; in his best moments he rises even above the human. But my fair loves seemed to glory in thinking only as women: the mind, or perhaps the soul, that I search for was never more than a perfume.

Alex sighed, marked her place. A few thousand years of this, more or less. On face of it, valiant. A way of organizing the messy world, a measure of thunderous meanings. On the other it was delirium, monomania, serenely murderous. She looked up, shading her eyes, the heavy bees zigzagging in the clear, hot light. They bobbed as if attached to invisible wires, over daisies, zinnias, clover, early jasmine. They fed the trees, Japanese maples, sunlit lime green shoots and stems, early leaves. Sparrows busy in branches, hedges, swooping to the grass and away again, fighting in little dust clouds on the sidewalk, chirruping bursts of angry staccato.

"Ryder! Ryder, hey! Stop!"

Alex dropped her book, sat up, craned to find the voice shouting the name.

Half a block away, in front of the health food store, a blond girl raced across the street after a little boy. Cars had paused. No danger. But the blond girl screamed.

"Ryder, stop this minute!"

Alex stood, snatched her purse. She stepped to the sidewalk, walked in long strides toward the commotion (a just-perceptible hesitation in each stride, as if about to change her mind). Her chest began to thump close to the surface, slow, noisy, but she pushed ahead.

The blond girl had caught up with the child in front of the health food store, holding him hard by the forearm.

"No!" yelled the boy, twisting to free his arm. Alex stopped a few paces short of them in front of the hardware store (slung the long strap of her purse over one shoulder, a single, hurried movement). Cupped both hands to the sides of her face, peered into the display window: a plastic mannequin, brown humanoid with no face or hair,

jeans and western shirt, red kerchief at his neck. She studied the polished brass railroad lanterns, custom picnic baskets spilling matched check-cloth napkins, snap-on leather straps for wineglasses. Folding barbecue service tables, tongs, chef's aprons that said *Kiss the Cook*. By cautious turns she uncupped her hand a crack, peeped through.

The girl was bending over the child, scolding while he struggled to free his arm. She had a slight Scandinavian accent.

"And you must *never* run away from me like that again. You are listening? Is very dangerous, Ryder, you realize? Cars in the street—see them?"

She turned, flailed with a free arm, her angry face following it blindly. She held the boy's arm fast.

"Both ways. Could hit you, Ryder, the cars. You see? Janna must take care of you, understand?"

The little boy had the familiar red-blond hair, matching brows, lashes. He squinted at the sidewalk, examined the concrete, the two newspaper machines (the local real estate weekly, the *Chronicle*). He stared at cars, dogs, a cat on a leash, passersby in both directions.

His eyes lit briefly on Alex.

Immediately he turned a full smile upon her. The hair was a flag. But how much of Gray discernible in that little face? A long-ago version, maybe, without the crinkles at the eyes. What parts of the child's mother made themselves plain? The paleness, Alex guessed, a delicacy about the nose and mouth. When the boy smiled at her she felt not only discovered but *enlisted* in something she had not planned for—as if someone on a passing streetcar had caught her round the waist and lifted her bodily on board, carrying her off down the street. She had come to spy; now she was petitioned. To refuse to acknowledge the child would be cruel. (Later she decided the boy's smile had been a fresh way of ignoring his oppressor, changing the channel. Also, no doubt, a brilliant appeal: *Is it possible you might be able to see your way clear to saving me from this.*)

His caretaker noticed the boy's fixed, open greeting toward the strange woman in front of the store window, gave Alex a harried glance, half-apologetic, half-reproving.

Alex managed a sickly smile at them both. Then she turned hurriedly back to her window vigil (as if something behind that glass may have answered a lifelong search), sealing back the gap between her cupped hand and eye. She saw her breath, gold droplets on black glass.

The girl was tall as Alex, voluptuously beautiful. Hair white-blond, long, in shining sheets. They threw sunlight like polished metal. Pert nose, full lips, wide-set eyes, brows which seemed to inscribe the top curves of a heart over her features. Babyfat lingering. Little makeup. A scoop-necked T-shirt, horizontal red stripes; the shirt seemed to beg admiration for its plump cargo of breasts. Jeans—neither too new nor too washed out—hugged a generous heart-shaped ass, wide hips over long legs. She wore sandals with tiny heels. Her toenails were painted plum.

Alex, in her heavy jeans and sweater, black boots, became aware that her knees were trembling as she stood with her nose to the circle of mist at the window, her heart thudding in a slow, dumb way. The girl was almost a caricature. Playboy perfection. How could it be? Wasn't one perfect wife enough?

Steady, she thought. Steady.

The girl was a student, a child. One of millions. Au pair. Cared for the toddler, the home. Common, common in the world.

He was a man of the world, a mature man.

The world was filled with beautiful girls.

"Now we'll go get the ice cream. But you'll remember, Ryder? No running?"

Alex moved to another part of the window, conveying, she hoped, loyal interest in picnic and barbecue products. Uncupping her hand again, she peeked sideways.

Janna stood at full height above the boy. She had let go of his arm.

"Ryder?"

The boy kicked at something. Cars crawled in both directions, stopping at the light, continuing on, noonday sun glinting off their chrome. It was very warm. Across the street a screen door opened, fell shut, a bell tinkled. Siren in the distance. Smells of onion soup, the warm breeze.

Lunch hour almost over.

"*Ryder?*"

"Yeessss," he said at last.

Sustained, unhappy note, the most bored, defeated yes a yes could be. The life of a child, Alex thought, is one of waiting.

Janna took the boy's hand, led him with fierce purpose into the store. The back of the child's shiny, red-blond head made Alex's chest hurt. It was doing what it had to, that little head, moving under heavy guard toward the next imposed assignment. Hoping dully for the only thing it could hope for: the next, mitigating pleasure.

Stop it, she thought. The child is royalty. Son of a Rebel Prince, to be exact.

She turned from the window, began to walk back, staring down. No one would steal Hadrian, or the remnants of her lunch (though she wanted those cookies badly now).

And if they had, good luck to them.

Breathe.

Hmmaaaahh: the smell of it! Ocean, rocks, fish. Ancient smell. But the day was new. Scrubbed, shimmering drop from a dropper. Cold, yes, but Stinson was nearly always cold. Today at least, clear. Sun enough to keep them happy. Skip knew how to pick the day. How he knew these things, Mort couldn't guess. Weather forecasters were wrong half the time. But Skip had known.

The two men slammed the doors of Mort's station wagon, hoisted their packages, stalked through sand. The ocean seemed far from where they were setting out, a cobalt stretch, foam aproning its front. Skip's legs extended from his shorts white and muscled, Mort's white and thin. Sand the coloration of a sheepdog, damp, cool, unevenly piled, rough to their feet. It had been a long time since Mort had felt sand on his bare feet. He couldn't remember the last time. He watched Skip stride ahead of him, legs lifted high, sand so mashy and resistant it felt like wading. Skip's curls fluttered in the wind; his aloha shirt billowed and sucked against his chest. It was a day for kites, flags, dogs—all of these out in force along the wet sand in the distance, a dark brown slick at the water's edge. Box kites, ribboned kites, a conjoined set of pointy kites climbing and diving in winged

unison like jets. Dogs barking, delirious, long-haired red setters, blond and black labs, shepherds, huskies, sausage-shaped mongrels racing around each other, bounding off, miles of beach. People jogged and strolled, fuzzy reflections attached to their feet on the wet sand, hair and clothes peeled back in the wind. Others had set up little camps. One group had built a fire; traces of smoke in the salt air tantalized the nostrils. Voices, laughing, floated back. The horizon eggshell blue, beneath it the deeper blue of sea in the delicate sunlight, blue of Dutch paintings. A day for opening your arms to the whipped-clean horizon. Skip did. Dropped his bags in the sand, opened his arms. For a moment he looked like the Christ of the Andes. The waves made their ceaseless, meshing *raaaahhhh*—incessant gears, the slow, unthinking chewing-up of earth.

Wind snapped in their ears.

Skip turned to face Mort, arms still wide, as if to insist the whole setting had been unfurled that minute for their pleasure. As if to say *See? Can you ever have doubted?* His pale face scrinched in the raw light, grinning. He reminded Mort, despite his physique, of a little shirtless kid at the beach, unprotected, bashful, lit up. Happier than any grown-up could remember how to be.

"God!" Skip shouted over the wind, arms still extended as if he expected to lift off like another kite—walking backward, shirt flapping around his middle, grinning, fiendish. "Can you believe it?"

Nothing further to desire, Mort thought as he watched the boy. Not for one like him. All his life—anyone's life—might have been preparation for such a morning, to walk into a day like this one. Mort dreamed, remembering the line. *You were only waiting for this moment to arrive.*

They tramped to a spot not far from the water's edge, far enough that the flat reach of the waves would not submerge their things. They spread towels, folding chairs. Mort pulled bottles of juice and sandwiches from their zippered carriers, but Skip couldn't think

about food yet. He couldn't even sit, crazed by the snapping flag of the day. Like the dogs, he had to race. He stood fairly trembling, sniffing the air, checking both directions.

"Mortie, wanna run with me?"

"No, thanks. You go on. I'll be here."

Skip took off. Mort watched his pace, light, controlled, feet bottoms kicking up rhythmically behind him, brown-sanded soles. Skip had splendid feet, the feet of men in Renaissance paintings, generous, articulate. Graceful for their very largeness. Mort watched him run, the easy gait, straight torso, the noble, seeking head. Effortless. He could go for hours. Mort shook his head, his own thin hair flying about, watched until Skip's form had become a figure the size of a chess piece, trotting south into the wind. The unanswerable taunt, its perfection real before you. Graspable, smooth and fragrant (Skip smelled like sweat and soap). Ever-present, and no matter that we all knew better, eternal. *Puer aeternus.* The creature a Roman ruler would have favored—fought for.

Mort took out his book. It was a guidebook on Rodin he'd sent for, full of quotes from people who'd known and worked with the Inexhaustible Master, as he was called. Photographs of the old man himself, eyes like portals into an alternate sky—irises nearly transparent, on the verge of transcending matter right there in his bushy head. Photographs of his pieces. Fearless, furious, full steam, the Master, even when he was mocked. Mort wanted to shape a torso of Skip, but he was going cautiously, making preliminary sketches. Skip had no quarrel with the idea, already offered to sit for him. He had roved the studio his first visit there, curious, amused. (That visit was the first time Skip had spent the night. Mort worried about his housemate, but Gene never arrived home before three or four in the morning, slept until late afternoon; Skip could have been any friend, even a woman.) To Skip the clay work must have seemed quaint. A hobby, like ham radio. *You really do this?* had been his tone, as he held up the little

busts and bowls, saying, "This is nice," and "I like this one." Skip understood that a certain body of knowledge would have helped him respond intelligently to what he saw—a knowledge he did not possess. He would rely on his native charm not to appear foolish. Skip was well-accustomed to this. He was only twenty-four, and native charm had taken him far.

No one at work knew they were lovers. At least, Mort did not think anyone knew. If people at work did know, they were not acting that way. It wasn't that the Bay Area hadn't long been a haven: rainbow flags sailed from windows, rooftops wherever you looked. It was more that he didn't want, just now, to complicate his staff's perception. Poor Letty, how her innocent face would slide. Mort had made Skip promise on everything dear to him (Skip had drily suggested his own late parents, killed in a car crash in Minneapolis)—made him promise that he would not behave in any telling way toward Mort during work hours.

"Sleeping with your employees is like shitting where you eat," Mort had intoned.

"Oh, *please*," Skip had groaned, slamming a hand over his eyes in disbelief, as if when he opened them this impossible gaucherie might have proved imaginary.

"Mortie, you are a ghoul, you know that? Honestly, you are out of some time machine." But he had agreed, disgustedly, "if it'll shut you up about it." And kept his eyes averted, his smile and nod very quiet (if wry) whenever Mort passed through the big glass doors. Mort became even more severe at the office. The two never lunched. They were never seen riding in the car together. Mort knew the area was small: sooner than later the fact would be gathered. He'd deal with it then. Meantime, he insisted, this was simpler. They'd be the same fellows everyone believed them to be. (Had Alex Blue introduced them that day at the restaurant because she had a hunch? Probably not. Skip was the newest employee at the time. Alex was just trying to

jump-start small talk. Thoughtful of her. Still, Mort replayed the Christmas lunch in his mind many times, scouring it for indicators of anyone's suspicion.)

With no warning, from the ragtag groups wandering the water's edge, a white, slick body sprinted at him, bursting upon him before Mort woke to the fact that it was Skip's. The boy leaned over, propped his hands on his upper knees, panting, dripping. His arrival sprayed bits of sand and icy water.

"Ow! Don't! Take this. Here."

Mort put his book aside, thrust a towel at him. Skip seized it, laughing and panting; began rubbing hard at his legs and arms. More cold drops.

"Stop it! Move back!" Mort could see fields of white goosebumps up and down Skip's wet legs; wind made the water icier. Skip's cheeks held a roseate burn, his hair damp with seaspray. A gull cried above them, and a few feet away a couple of fat birds poked hopefully at the sand. Their beaks had a down-turned hook at the tips. One cried out in harsh annoyance at the other, and both flapped heavily off.

Skip spoke in gasps. "Mortie, it's—fantastic—out there—fantastic. I punched it—the last—hundred yards." Puffing, he cleared a space on a spread towel, sat caped with the towel Mort had handed him, wrapped his arms around the tops of his knees. Mort pulled out the food he'd repacked and they bit into submarine sandwiches, squinting at the glittering pageant of water, sand, animals, people. They were silent as they ate, companionably enough. It let Mort think.

When Skip was near, Mort had learned, the surface looked peaceable, but beneath ran a tension: Skip's restlessness. There had to be a next thing, and directly on its heels a next, and a next. Even after lovemaking, when both lay sweating and regaining breath for holy minutes, Mort always felt signals pulsing from Skip's curly head as he lay, hands clasped behind it, staring up. The boy needed action, any kind,

even mental leaps, whether or not they made sense. Anything but sitting still. Mort learned the nervous apprehension of a mother, the crowding sense that at any moment Skip could urge some new course on him, some project, and Mort would be forced again to sound like a stodge, a prude. He would not want to do those things, not in the least want to do them. Mort loved music, but hated the bars, clubs, displays. He didn't like going out, making rounds to places where the basslines jarred your bones and teeth, men screaming to be heard, manic to outdo one another. Hysteria in it. All Mort wanted was to read or rest, tinker with his clay, have some sort of mild, private outing, a picnic or hike, a movie. What Mort liked of course sounded old-womanish to Skip; he'd known it would from the beginning. Mort told himself this tension was the price of being with the boy. He tried to remind Skip they had agreed to compromise whenever they could. But the balance was always skewed by the boy's irrepressibility, puplike.

Only when Skip slept did this urgency pause. Miraculous minutes—hours on lucky occasions—when Mort could watch him sleeping. Listen to him breathe—long, shallow *hsshhh* of tidal waters. Mort would prop himself up very slowly, trace with his eyes—once or twice on a sketchpad—the brow, cheekbones, Greek nose and chin, full lips (lavender-rose) slightly parted. The extraordinary neck, strong and dense like the David's. Smooth white curve of shoulder, upper arms, proud ridges of ribs, mound of chest rising gently into two pectoral plains: the line of dark down commencing there, plunging to the dark curls of the pubic nest. Mort believed he understood how blasphemous the effort must have felt, to every artist who'd tried to copy such a vision. We were in thrall to it, mesmerized, pounded by it. Of course we were animals, but we were supposed to have one-upped the animals a notch. We'd made beauty a god—never strayed far, Mort mused, from the golden-calf crowd. Lately, though, what he noticed in himself, in others, didn't translate so sim-

ply. He kept trying to get at it. As if inside beauty were locked a virtue, a twinkling jewel. Secret of life, antidote to death. Yet the little jewel faded or fled too easily, as light in the eye fled forever at death. Mort had studied photographs of the dead, in museums, libraries. The confrontation in those stilled forms, lusterless eyes. The lack of answer to it.

Mort watched the melting staircase of the shallow waves.

Virtue was probably the wrong word. Beauty had no innate goodness. Too often, the reverse. Yet nothing, nothing could dissuade us from lunging after it like starved men, brandishing every weapon, every trap, every wile we could seize or invent, to make it stay.

We wanted to eat the jewel, Mort thought. Some tribes ate the hearts of their best heroes, their most beautiful virgins. Then the magic would live inside you, infuse you. Logical, if horrible. Mort tried to push away the image, the cascading bright, sticky red of fresh-spilled blood.

"Mortie, look at that kid over there. He's going to be a knockout when he grows up. You can already tell. See him?"

Mort looked where Skip was pointing. He saw a boy of seven or eight with the gold-tan skin of exotic parentage. Frothy hair, dark on the underside, blond above. Against this gold-tan coloration the child's eyes were jungle green, fringed by black lashes. Nose almost pug, lips dark. He marched in ballooning, lemon yellow surfer trunks along the wet sand, turned to watch his footprints dissolve, scampered toward shore when the waves broke, marched again, watched his wet footprints appear, dissolve. In this manner he made his way past the two men. A mist of low cloud had crept in above the water, penetrated feebly by the sun, so that the child cavorted against a lit fog of gray and silver.

He was the kind of child, Mort thought, who showed up in Sunday magazine ads. The kind meant to represent some midgemodge of wealth and simplicity and knowingness. Dressed in creams and ivories

like a slumming prince, lips pouty, wind-ruffed hair. Trained to look sullen and disaffected for the camera, long before any kid should know sullen and disaffected from the man in the moon. Staring at the boy, Mort felt a spreading heat of shame, partly for how he must appear by comparison. Skinny old geezer, Picasso's *Vieux Guitariste.*

Ice blue old man. Chocolate truffle child.

Of course Skip would notice this pretty baby. How often did he marvel at fauns like these? And of course (something tightened around Mort's skull) fauns were everywhere. People kept having beautiful babies. Coming at you fast, all directions. Conveyor belts of beauties, all colors, acres of cherubim tumbling toward you, piling up till you couldn't comprehend the mass of them, your head spun. Skip had not appeared to be unfaithful in their time together, but neither could Mort be certain; he did not ask the boy to account for every hour they were not together. They'd only known each other a few months. A blackness filtered around the sides of his eyes; dread squatted on his chest.

"Ah, you're just—caught up with—imagining—how soon you can get at the final product," Mort heard himself say. His voice thin, strained. The words hardly made sense; he hardly knew what he'd uttered. He'd lost sight of the sand-stomping urchin, could scarcely see the beach, his vision was so blackened, the image searing his brain of Skip ogling these lovely little gods-in-the-making. Beauty drifted unerringly toward beauty, god toward god—it only stood to reason. While he himself stood outside the fence, flesh sagging, smelling of liniment.

Skip turned to look at him in amazement. Mort kept his gaze seaward, though he saw nothing under the heat of Skip's incredulous stare. (The child had hopped on, guileless in play.) Skip shoved Mort's shoulder back, one rough shove, forced him to turn toward him, look at him. Mort half-turned, and looked into a face contorted with rage.

"What in hell are you saying to me? What are you fucking talking about?"

Skip yelled, but the wind carried most of it landward. His face twisted.

"Are you out of your mind? Can't I even say the most harmless stupid thing without you turning it into some sicko, paranoid trip? Man, you are one fucked-up animal, you know that?"

"Skip, it just seemed to me—"

"You know something? I don't care what it seemed to you. I don't have to listen to your sick, sad crap. You just managed to fuck over a beautiful day, Mort, you know that? And I don't want to be around you now that you've said your little fuck-over piece. I'm getting out of here."

Mort felt sick in his bowels. Skip's face was ugly, a reconfiguring he'd never seen before. Little prickles of adrenaline crawled inside Mort's hands. *I didn't mean this to happen. I didn't mean this to happen at all.* He wished with all his being he could undo what he'd said, grab the words out of the air, swallow them back down. The shining mosaic of the day seemed to have shrunk to a small hard ball that lay at the pit of his stomach. What remained were shadows at great distance, watery light, queasy, wavering forms.

"Skip, c'mon. Please. I'm sorry. Let's not—"

"I'll hitch home. You can stay here and think your fucked-up little thoughts."

"Skipper, please. Don't hitch, Skipper. It's not safe. I'll drive us. Please."

Mort scrambled up, head roaring, heart juddering as he gathered the blankets and the bags. Skip was stalking through the sand toward the faraway patchwork-gleam of parked cars, the single towel Mort had earlier handed him still slung capelike about his shoulders. He didn't turn around. And to Mort's frantic eyes (as he scooped towels and book, juice bottles and folding chairs into a chaotic mass in his

arms, stumbling forward, arms full, the weight of the load in the hateful resisting sand, feet sinking, pushing on, floundering, pushing on)—to Mort's eyes it seemed the arrangement of Skip's very spine, his retreating head and neck, pale legs and back, cast behind the boy a cold contempt, as if everything in his wake were turned to stone.

He's a sponge for information. Repeats sentences, words. Sometimes I just stare at him, wonder *Where did you get what you just said?* I mean, the other day. He told Cyn, 'Mommy? I need to *urinate*.'"

Alex murmured a half-conscious laugh. But the roaring in the truck cab drowned it, so she shouted her acknowledgment. "*Hah*."

Gray shouted, too. They sat side by side, the front seat of his '49 Dodge pickup. The percolator, he called it. A bulging, rattling relic, the sort you saw in photographs of dustbowl workers, piled with shabby bundles and upside-down rocking chairs. Bouncing and clattering as he guided it around the tight curves of the mountain road. They followed the pass cut into the hills between the Napa and Sonoma valleys, badly paved, baking in late June. Trees and brush overhung the road, the truck. Chestnut, oak, manzanita, so dry and dusty they were more dirty olive than green. The parched trees seemed to lean over the windshield, reproving. A cavalcade of big scolds. Well, Alex thought, the two of them must look pretty disreputable, couple of runaways, jangling and bumping along, hottest part of the day. Gray's old truck had never known air conditioning. He was restoring the thing by degrees. It still had the same faded, lacquered-ivory knob on the gearshift, color of an old man's teeth. She

knew he'd brought it today, this decrepit coffeepot of a car, to show off to her. As if she'd need persuading. She cared less about automobiles than it was possible to say—they were like any machine, a vexing necessity. But Gray's pleasure in the truck, boyish and unabashed, moved her. She envied his zealousness. It was a woman's wistful privilege to stand apart and watch the self-consciousness drain from men as they cheered or tinkered or ranted. It was like watching a sleeping child, twitching in its dreams.

She had seized on the fact of the truck to get them outdoors today. His radar must have prickled as they lay in her room this morning—the room still cool and dark, smelling of sleep, shuttered against the heat. He had looked hard at her.

"What are you thinking?"

Propping herself on an elbow, stroking his chest.

"It's so beautiful out there today. Let's go for a drive—can't we please? In your truck!" (She'd wanted to say "silly old truck," thought better.) As if swirling a bunch of long, airy scarves in his face, she let the idea run ahead with itself.

"On the country roads. Nobody's out there but a few old farmers. Wander around, come back in the afternoon? You could be home by evening."

She knew perfectly well it went against his rules. More, it was an incursion to say things like *you could be home*, to speak of his primary world, his alpha world, so familiarly. But she knew Gray was entertained by her playfulness, which happened seldom. Perhaps he felt bad that nearly all their existence together had been confined, like home detention. In this weather, this tableau of vineyards and hills, hiding away in a dark hutch did seem criminal.

"Well, now." His fond-sober face, brown eyes, copper hair over his forehead.

She had smiled, leaned down, pressed her mouth to his shoulder. A

tug of nausea wrung her lower belly then, a rusty, stale-blood taste in her mouth. She stopped moving, waited a beat. It would subside.

Now Gray shouted the happy narrative of his son's exploits as he swung the truck around each bend, arm-over-arm, movements almost violent. His long hands held the steering wheel, coated in yellowing lacquer, like a boat captain's. If you looked closely through the lacquer you saw the wheel was covered, like ancient bone, with masses of hairline cracks.

"He's crazy for tractors and trucks," Gray went on. "Corny, right? Calls out every time he sees one. Made us wait an hour while he walked all around a fire truck parked at the shopping center."

She could envision it. (Best not to tell Gray she'd actually seen Ryder in town. It would have broken the rule of her invisibility, called up a volley of anxious, situating questions.) She pictured the red-headed child in his sunsuit and sandals, marching around the shining vehicle, commanding his parents to wait while he memorized the massive machine, gadgetry, chrome. That glossy, candy-apple red. An old memory. Her visit to the firehouse. Shining red of a lollipop. All the kids received toy fire hats that day, exactly that red. But it had been a lollipop she'd craved; absurdly, she'd hoped the fire hats would be made of lollipop. Oral from the first, she thought. Made her hungry now. But she was always hungry now, and nothing ever tasted right when she finally ate.

They had climbed to the top of a rise, making a slow descent. Through openings in the brush they caught framed glimpses of the valley below, vast and hot, a gigantic quilt in patches of dried earth, grain-gold, parched green, haze tawny with dust motes. The air pushing through the cab, unmercifully hot. Alex's skin sucked to the seat, knit plastic that made crisscross indentations on the backs of her thighs. Her damp hair was tied back at her neck, strands stuck to her skin. Her shorts, loose bermudas, her cotton camisole blouse, sticking

to her. Gray's shirt, however, light blue with tiny pink stripes, was holding up well, the collar still crisp where it opened at his neck.

Had he been born this way?

"But then listen to this. We're walking back to the house yesterday, our afternoon walk. Along the way he picks up a little piece of a bush. Shows it to me. Very nice, I say. What is it? Because I know he's already attached some sort of meaning to it. This is how Ryder operates."

Gray smiled to himself as he drove.

Alex waited, watched the road. Sometime before Gray's last visit, she'd become aware that she had missed her period. Her heartbeat dulled in her own ears each time she searched the crotch of her panties when she used the toilet. Day after day the white panties stared back, obstinate. Where were the mild cramps, squeezing and shifting at the forefront of her womb, where the familiar, bitched-about, heralding stain? At first that stain had seemed something she could will if she only bore down hard enough. But each day the awareness tightened, and between Gray's last visit and this one she had quietly driven on her lunch hour to the clinic, obtained the blood test, and in two days received her phone call. She was four weeks pregnant.

"He looked at me and said, 'It's a bug.' Oh-*ho,* I told him. That's interesting, I said. The little branch he'd plucked was red and bushy, like bottlebrush. I was thinking he had decided it was a caterpillar. It looked like a caterpillar. But then he told me, 'Now we've got to get a knife, to *cut* it.' "

Gray took his eyes from the road a moment to peer at Alex. She looked at him, receptive. Then she looked back at the road, to remind him gently to do the same. Rutted, skinny turns, getting tighter. She prayed that anyone coming toward them would hug their side.

"I didn't much like the sound of that. I didn't say anything, of course. I asked him why. *Why* do you have to cut the bug, I asked him. Tried to sound nonchalant."

Gray paused again. Bumpetabumpeta. Comical if you thought about it, how the two of them must look from the rear. Couple of human dolls in sunglasses (one with a long pony tail), thrown around in perfect unison by this noisy pile of metal, to the left, the right.

"So you know what he answered? 'Because that's where the *emergency* is.' That's what Ryder said."

Gray looked at her again.

"His little face all screwed up. I'm still trying to figure it out. Cyn didn't seem too disturbed. She thinks it had to do with one of those medical shows—Janna must have been watching TV, though we've forbidden her to do that while he's up, and I had to remind her again. But do you think," Gray persisted, "that was it?"

He was taking care to include her. Seeking her thoughts on this brief, controlled, safe issue, a new episode from the alpha world. Alex sighed before she could help it, but it didn't matter—the noise of the truck's body hitting ruts and small rocks was that of an army tank.

"I think the TV show is probably exactly what happened," she yelled. She mimicked a pompous male voice as best she could in a shout. "*Nurse, I believe we're going to have to operate.* They're always saying stuff like that. Little kids absorb those words so powerfully."

She had visited the office, made her appointment. The two women behind the reception desk in their late thirties, Mother Hubbardy in sweaters, long skirts. They had looked at her with quiet faces; no morbidity. But part of their duty was to offer information, and part of that information was a chart that showed the size at four weeks. Series of pictures, stages, descriptions. At four weeks a heart was beating. Time and again Alex smashed her mind shut on this fact, banged it down like a piano keyboard lid, fast and hard as she could. But the image, a tiny clot, tinier than she could conceive, humming electric energy, heart of a tadpole—kept escaping the clamped dark.

It took her some minutes—how long, how long had it taken her?—to swim back up from these thoughts. Up through thickness

and shadow, to become aware that Gray had stopped talking. He was silent, and the truck seemed to be going very fast. Still she dreamed, idled. As the truck hurtled and bounced she turned casually, unthinkingly, to say something to him.

Gray was drained of color. His skin waxy, eyes wide, mouth hanging. A face of horror.

He maneuvered the wheel desperately, wrenching it this way and that, leaning in the directions he wrenched it, as they went faster still. The truck roared louder, the interior rattled. Alex's thoughts moved like a child's. *If she could ascertain what it was.* Gray the color of a corpse, face tight, bones sticking out as if by centrifugal force. Hurtling speed. She could not utter his name, not a sound, and her crawling mind, an inching worm, tried to grasp without speaking—he was beyond speaking—what had happened. She looked out the windshield, saw nothing but the same messy, dry, branch-strewn road pocked with potholes, littered with crackly branches, eucalyptus, mountain oak—more holes and debris than pavement—agonized, tight turns on a steep downhill. No movement of animal, not even a bird in the blasting heat. Going so fast. To the right, Alex knew, was a straight drop into boulders. No one, thank God, coming at them.

The truck had no seatbelts.

Alex braced herself with one hand against the dash. The other grasped the bottom of her seat. She looked forward, not out the side. The drop at the right. Her mind floated outside time, a queer suspension. No thoughts at all except *leaves, trees, window, road.*

After a time—and it was a space of time that she would never, in all the years to follow, be able to measure or even guess—they reached a leveling-out stretch, and in this portion, gradually, the road straightened, and in more time, the truck slowed. A gravelly space opened at the right. Gray nosed the old truck, sounding now like a limping garbage can, into it.

It trundled at last to a stop.

Gray slumped.

In the silence and heat and floating dust, he sat covered with sweat. The pale blue shirt clung to him, soaked through, ribbed with dust stripes. His head was bowed, hair clumped and dull. Gray himself seemed to be emitting a smell, sulphurous, like cabbage. His hands and arms lay trembling on his thighs. It was a long period before he raised his head to look at her, and when he did, he didn't at first seem to know who she was.

"The brakes," he said, his voice a rasp. "The brakes went out."

Letty brought herself close to the door (almost on tiptoe, as if not wishing to wake a sleeper), paused to admire the plastic nameplate.

Navy blue, white engraved print.

How neatly it sat in its mounted slot. Every department manager had a nameplate affixed this way. Letty thought it a grown-up touch. Testament of faith, responsibility. That the placards could slide out in an instant, fresh ones be ordered with a phone call—like the business cards and personalized notepads she also adored—Letty did not care to dwell on. *Morton A. Levi*. What did the "A" stand for? She'd have to find courage to ask. Old-style Times Roman, initial caps. Letty loved serif print, tiny balls at the curving tips, delicate overhangs, slim, firm little feet. Appropriate, she thought, for Print Production. Literary. After all, we were making books here! Let the spoilsports take their pains—wastefully—to claim that the products of Infinite Information were not real books, that they were ugly, written in hack-erese about bug-ridden, constantly morphing software; let them snipe that as soon as the product changed the volumes became obsolete junk. Letty's lips pressed into a tight line when she thought of these accusations—horrid insinuations posed by certain types, many of whom had now, thankfully, chosen to leave the company. (She would

not abide the buyout talk, rushed to stanch any conversation in which it began to bubble, her smile twisted, grieved, trembling as she'd redirect the chatterers to their tasks.) *ExpoCalc* and *SonicSpell* and all the others were printed books. They'd been assigned Library of Congress numbers; their language was English. They were part of a thrilling technological revolution. They were necessary to people—at least, some people. And language came in sentences, and sentences needed editing, and production had deadlines.

Me voilà, Letty thought, hugging her sheaf of papers.

She was still smiling as she knocked at the door, so softly it was nearly inaudible.

"Mort?"

Letty almost whispered at the seam of the door. Glad she'd worn the pigeon gray sweater-skirt ensemble, the black mary janes she liked to think of as ballet slippers. She cracked the door a quarter inch.

"May I come in?"

"Of course. C'mon in, Letty."

She opened the door wide enough to slip through, shutting it with two hands (tucking her papers under one arm) so it made no sound. Chilled air rushed around her: Mort kept his office cold, though summer in their little pocket of bay was already foggy and cold. Behind Letty the adjoining offices teemed with noise like a city newsroom, but once she'd closed his door Mort's office was leached of sound, a listening booth. You could hear only the slow tick of the wood-framed clock Mort kept on the wall—mockup of a ship's wheel—textured, lush ticking, a grandfather clock's. On each of the opposite walls hung two matted posters: one a study by Hippolyte Flandrin, *Jeune homme nu assis au bord de la mer* (title and artist printed in tiny white letters along the poster's right-hand edge). The image always startled Letty: a naked young man in glowing gold fleshtones, seated in profile at the edge of a rock. His smooth bottom perched on folds

of dark green cloth, knees drawn up, arms around his knees, forehead resting on his arms, eyes closed. Flanks and limbs full, buttocks slightly whiter, smoothest of all. A body at the precipice of adulthood, untried, unmarked, babyfat still coating it—an athlete's coalesced, hard form promised just beneath. Letty had practically memorized the smallish indentation where the youth's belly folded, the dark short curls, the rose of an ear sweetly formed against his head. If you came up close you could discern the thousands of tiny cracks in the paint of the boy's body, faithfully reproduced. This bothered Letty to see, because it appeared the young man's lovely body was about to disintegrate. Also, something about his closed eyes was sad. The other poster was Leonardo's familiar drawing, what Letty always called Man in the Wheel. Actually the man stood at the base of a circle. He faced the viewer, two arms held out at his sides as if directing traffic, two more arms slightly raised, two extra legs propped against the climbing inner line of the circle, as if he were propping himself inside a giant pipe. His genitals were hastily inscribed. Paragraphs of scribbled longhand appeared above and below the drawing, the paper a stained yellow of old parchment. The man had longish hair like a rock singer's. He looked angry, as if he might step down that minute from his pose and rush forward to punch you in the nose. Letty was never able to bring herself to ask Mort about the posters. It's true they didn't seem to have much to do with software manuals, but other employees pinned up whatever pleased them in their offices and cubicles—photos of dogs, cars, buxom starlets, posters of kittens dangling from a tree branch with the caption *Hang In There*. The only visual evidence of Mort's work was the shelf on the credenza by the door, two dozen Infinite Information manuals. They were lined up spines out, titles bleating neon, clamped between bookends: each bookend a small chunk of old jade carved into the square head of an Aztec god. Mort's desk faced the door at an angle between the postered walls. His roughed-out graphs spread in a neat

arc before him, computer to the side. He looked awful, as usual, Letty thought, his face more gaunt. Her own face rumpled in sympathy. She meant to show concern, and could not know she more resembled the faces illustrating emotions on children's television shows. *Letty Is Sad.*

Mort put down his pencils (several colors in the left hand, transferred to the right as need arose). A quicker observer would have seen the effort it cost to pull his mind from sequential levels: the papers, the screen, and some deeper, unnameable malaise. His face made the adjustment—a flitting shadow of airplane on a wheatfield below.

"What's up, Letty?" Brisk, attentive, micro-annoyed.

"Mort, I—how *are* you, Mort?"

Letty liked to inquire after her listener's well-being straightaway, to show it mattered first. She thought it only basic decency; waited with all the tremulous care in the world for the answer.

"I'm fine, Letty. What's up?" Silently, Mort inhaled through his nose.

"Mort, you don't—you're—not—looking well. Are you taking—is everything—" Letty blushed; her bony fingers pressed up and down the edges of the sheaf. She was conscious she choked in conversation; when it happened the blood filled her head. But her awareness was only large enough to recall it must trudge back to the beginning of the sentence, concentrate on trying to push it out successfully. With no clear memory of the sum of each day's gaffes, she was in the long run spared much anguish.

"Letty. I'm okay. I have some stuff at home I'm dealing with. Everything else is fine. What's going on?" Mort exhaled slowly as he spoke, giving a roundness and calm to his voice. He'd learned this somewhere, maybe taught himself. He couldn't remember.

"I'm just—checking—checking in," she stuttered.

Poor Letty. He couldn't think how she negotiated the world—never mind the world, how she got through a day. Barry had hired

her, handed her over like a housewarming present. Barry had no more idea what made a skillful assistant than he could sing opera. Too busy nestling his face between Trisha's breasts. Can you read and write, Barry had probably asked, by way of an interview. Remarkable enough that anyone could still read and write. Remarkable anyone could spell. Of course, that's what the damned software was supposed to fix. Mort had known when he was hired that products like Infinite Information's were nothing he'd care to use. The vision of the programmers was not—a way of life he held with. It seemed to reduce the world to a thin plastic surface on which flat, bendable plastic figurines were pasted, lifted off. Well, welcome—he had told himself often—to adulthood in the eighties. They pay you to do it, pay you well. The idea was to save as much of that pay as he could. If it wasn't going to last forever, as the rumormongers hinted, he'd at least have a nest egg.

"You know, we all care—about—you, Mort, and we—worry—you shouldn't be—stressing."

"Thank you, Letty. I'll be careful."

Letty blushed again. She tended to carry her affection before her like a tray of overfilled champagne glasses, balanced with all her concentration to keep it from toppling out at him. Respectful, always a little frightened. He was so terribly serious. Lately much more so, as if in pain. Possibly he had an ulcer: she suspected this. He worked too hard, of course. But when they sat down together each week in some unoccupied corner to synchronize schedules, he always addressed her with such courtesy and seriousness—she felt her awareness enlarge then into a kind of grace, gliding, regal. A glistening female swan. At those times especially, she felt like the mother—Mort was father of course—to a large, unruly, boisterous family. He trusted her to keep the children in clean clothes, the house tidy, something nourishing on the stove. Her whole being sighed with the pleasurable weight of this role. It made her feel tender toward him. She felt herself sitting taller

so as to better wear the mantle: the family's destiny was wrapped up in it.

"Mort, Alex—Alex Blue—wants a word with—wants to take—this Friday—a personal day," she gasped. "Should I—can—did you—want me to—send her in?"

"Sure, Letty. Send Alex in. And Letty? Thank you. Really. For your concern."

He pulled his face into a weak smile by lifting his forehead muscles, which immediately creased in rungs, like a ladder.

"Oh—Mort, you're—you're very welcome."

Letty flushed, stepped backward, almost banged into the door. She found the knob, let herself out backward, still beaming. What a piece of work, Mort thought, smiling until the door closed. He let his face fall. Museum docent. Tours of the dioramas. No, older, early century. Trays of tea, fussy cookies. Just needing that little cap, he thought. The bonnet thing with the frilly edges, tied under the chin.

He supposed he looked bad. Letty was trying to tell him. Not sleeping much, though he'd tried. He'd mended it up with Skip after the nightmare at the beach, but they'd gone a few more rounds since then. Skip seemed more annoyed, irritable—lately demanded *more space*. Mort swung his swivel chair to face the window behind him, the gray, misted sky. Folded his arms, palms in his armpits. More space. The term throbbed in his jaws; how he wished it could be excised from the language. Skip wouldn't bring Mort to his house on Mount Tam, where he rented a room. Too small, he said, for them to be comfortable; didn't want his three housemates in the way. Mort supposed Skip was ashamed of him. He dreaded the terrible chemistry he now whiffed: one lover on bended knee, begging the cool other. You never knew when something would set off the worst of it, the itch become an aggravated rash that spread little dots of blood. Worst, Mort could not stop the jealousy rearing up whenever Skip looked at a man or a boy, or when a man or boy looked at Skip; could not stop his own

mouth opening to say something caustic or sad, his stomach already clenched for the firestorm he knew would follow. Skip would explode, Mort would scramble to apologize, to smooth it over, wash after wash of panic sweeping him. The calm life he'd made, sane routines—dissolving now like tissue. Panic blanked the screen, and the sound obliterated most else in his head, sirens accelerating to shrieks. What if Skip left him? What if Skip left him?

Another knock sounded. Three quick raps.

Mort swung his chair forward, rolled his shoulders, rubbed the back of his neck.

This knock differed from Letty's indiscernible mouse-piss. Reserved, clear. A center of gravity in it. The notion threaded through his brain: maybe the way people knocked betrayed their identities, analyzable like DNA, or wine. How had Skip ever knocked on a door? He sighed.

The door opened. Alex stood in the frame.

"Hello, Mort. Okay to come in?"

Behind her and around her, newsroom noise, pulsing phones, shouts, someone racing, heavy-footed, to catch someone, the coffee machine's umpteenth batch gurgling through its fresh paper filter, forced laughter.

All of it sealed off as Alex pressed the door to.

Mort was standing. He smiled.

"Alex, how are you. Sit down."

He sat again as she placed herself in the chair opposite his desk. Alex interested him. Even had he not been told by Letty that Alex's work was first-rate, he could see—feel—something about her. Maybe just extra-bright, compared with the adolescents who made up this camp. He'd never asked himself why he should assume this about Alex; perhaps simply the light in the eyes. He'd had little enough exposure even to that. She kept herself apart from the sloppy, chummy revelry of the place. She did not join the daily harangues and jokes, the catty intramural lunches, the endless rounds of birthday cards, flowers, gifts, fat-laden food, the boosterism, the scheming. Didn't pal with Kamala or any of the others. Didn't pal.

"Alex, what can I do for you?"

The girl didn't look well. (No, she wasn't a girl, but the term came

reflexively, an old training of manners.) She wore her usual outfit, black jeans, thick pullover. Hair a fluffy cape. But she was unsteady. Something going on in her face, yellowish light; her eyes a strange color. Perhaps she was ill. She seemed embattled, as if forcing herself to look at him. At closer hand he grasped, with some startlement, that what had always appeared a kind of low-level fury was in fact near-paralyzing shyness.

She spoke with care.

"Mort, I wondered if I could take this Friday as a personal day. I've got—errands to take care of."

She thought Mort looked badly underfed and underslept, lines from the bridge of his nose tracing hollows under each of his eyes. A small man to begin with, dwarfed by the high-ceilinged, airy space. Freezing in here. She hoped he would not ask for particulars; she had no energy for it. Her stomach wringing. Always hungry, always nauseated. Though she had often admired Mort's posters, today the dark gold flesh of the *Jeune homme nu assis* made her dizzy. The green cloth the boy sat on made her think of a satin skirt in her late mother's closet which had smelled of mothballs, and this, too, made her stomach slide about.

"Alex, of course. That's fine. Take whatever time you need. I'm glad you came to ask. But Alex, do you feel all right? You don't seem well."

He admired the girl for keeping herself apart: secretly wished he could do the same. He was embarrassed by the pep-rally ethos of office life, its mindless doctrines. He understood why those doctrines were useful, but that hardly made them more honorable. He was embarrassed by business itself, if you dug to the bone of it. But a bachelor's in art history would hardly buy a latte at the Café Trieste. He did his best to play captain quietly, without being an asshole. He was paid well, and that was the moral bargain. What made it moral?

Why, that he produced. Gave what he'd contracted to give. What would have been immoral would be to skate, slack off. Funny, though: whenever he saw this remote, moody girl he could read in her eyes, instantly, the lie of all of it—worst, his own complicity in that lie. He felt then, somehow, responsible. For the whole pathetic charade. As if the whole of it had been his invention, his choice. As if he *relished* feeding all those progress charts to people like foul medicine, spoonful by spoonful. He felt whenever he glimpsed her that he wore a sign around his neck reading SELLOUT. On the other hand she, too, had chosen to take a job here. No one had marched her in at gunpoint. She hung her coat every day at nine, took her seat at the computer. She wasn't out strumming a lute on one of those grassy hillsides where the horses pasture. (Mort drove past Horse Hill each day, gazed at the peaceful beasts, brown and black, nosing the grass above the highway.) We all had to eat, even we who had meant to get our livings differently, somehow. *Temporary,* she probably told herself. Just as he did. Everything was temporary, and anything was possible because everything was temporary. The present most of all. None of us could see very far ahead in the first place. There was only this week, this month at the most. This bit of money, that dinner, this love, that disappointment. We couldn't see further than the fog at the end of the street. We all looked at each other and knew—most of us had no fucking idea what was going to happen, not even what was *supposed* to happen.

"Thank you, Mort; I'm okay. A little tired."

Alex colored a bit; under the fluorescent lights the blush took an orange caste. Her voice had always puzzled him. A sort of gravelly murmur, like someone who needed to clear her throat, a higher register than you'd expect from a face like that. (You expected a whiskey voice.) Eyes that seemed to read so shrewdly, still finding it difficult to meet his.

She was not well, that was clear.

"Alex, have you thought at all about taking a little vacation time? Get a breather from this place? A getaway of some sort?"

Alex lowered her eyes. She must look worse than she'd imagined. Well, he could do worse himself than to consider some time off. He looked awful. An olive-skinned Van Gogh. Someone needed to *feed* this man, make him some soup. She thought suddenly of Gray's corn chowder. Twinge of hunger-nausea. Where was he today? No word, no call since the day of the truck breakdown, a week now. She had dreamed of him last night, a dream in sepias and shadows. She was walking in a drugstore. Maybe that referred, ham-handedly, to the spermicide that had not worked. God knew she spent enough time in those emporia of American fussiness, wandering the overjammed, ugly aisles in a state of irritated guilt. Then the drugstore changed into a giant downhill luge run, a big concave plastic track. She found herself snugged behind Gray on the sled, arms tight around his middle as they sped downhill, flying around curves at terrifying speed, scenery blurring past—they would surely be killed. But there was nothing for it, riding along holding fast to him, hardly able to breathe or think for the speed of their sled's flight, unable to alter their course. When the sled finally slowed on level ground, she was able to make out a dark row of bystanders. People lined up by the track, differing heights, visages indistinct. Like an uneven row of trees, watching. Was Cynthia among them? Ryder? She had waked then, relieved, still rich with sleep. Her bladder had pressed her awake. She'd trudged, her head still full of bulky, moving forms, to the toilet. Not until she returned to the bed (sheets and blankets soft, molded, warm) did she remember, with sinking wonder, what dwelt in her. If only she could wake up with it gone, melted away like the sledding dream.

While she went about her workdays, Gray seemed so far removed—an entirely different substance from these whitely lit

offices where she was obliged to hang her life on a hook each morning, walk and gesture, make herself understood. A different country. If it weren't for the persistent squeeze and roll of her insides, she might even now begin to fancy she'd imagined Gray and everything that went with him, a dream vaporizing into low clouds above the sea.

"Thank you, Mort, but I don't think I've earned the vacation hours yet."

"Don't be silly. I'll put it through for you right now if you need the time. Just tell me when. It's not a robot factory we're running here." (Though in fact he knew it was, and loathed it; if he could put a dent in it by helping her, he would. Barry was oblivious, as long as output wasn't interrupted.) "I'll speak to Barry."

"*Not yet*—please?"

Her blurt, curbed by the hasty effort at politeness, startled them both. She colored.

"Not yet, Mort. But thanks, thank you. Really. I feel so—strongly, that I should save up the time for—"

She swallowed. "Something may come up when I—need to use it."

Like everyone else, she'd been mindful of the buyout rumors (grown louder these days, like an approaching bee swarm). Like everyone else, she'd ignored them. God knew she had enough else raking her attention. But if it came to that, she'd need any severance and vacation due her, till she found the next job. Otherwise she'd have to borrow from Maddie, something she would truly, desperately hate.

Mort was studying her.

"I understand, Alex. I feel the same. I suppose most people would."

She was unnerved, Mort thought, by the rumors. But he could offer no help to her there. Barry's smirking face, in manager meetings, had warned without words: *Don't ask*. Hardly reassuring. And

yet he, Mort, could not relay something as flimsy as innuendo. If it got out—oh, but he longed to drop this stiff minuet with her, though he couldn't think how to say "I don't know anything" without confirming there was, indeed, something that needed knowing.

He could try to make a different inroad. There was a line from an old folksong. *Lay down your weary tune, lay down.*

"We might agree on more than you imagine," he said.

Alex watched him. Mort couldn't be hitting on her. He was much too private for that; his bearing (like her own) telegraphed it. She could not envision a personal life for him, though sometimes she tried. Distasteful, even in imagination. Mort kissing? Embracing? A blank space opened, dark where a corresponding human—a lover should be. But this was the way we thought of odd-men-out, especially if we tried to imagine them taking lovers. Best not to know. Anyway, Mort would have more sense than to hit on an employee. Too ludicrous, anyway. She stood a good seven inches taller, must weigh twice what he did. They'd never spoken more than a few genial words. She forgot for a minute the twists in her stomach, the taste of rust in her mouth.

Mort rose, walked to the high, unshaded window facing the street. The air outside was misting; he could see the blue-gray wood of the Best Mart roof across the street, a few dirty-white gulls fastened along its edges. Behind that, low sky. Occasional human heads bobbed past the bottom of the window at street level. Some paused to peer in, frowning. Others made alert, sidelong faces at their reflections in the glass (women raised their brows as they do when applying makeup, as if feigning arid surprise). Most yanked their glances away and sped on.

"Have you flown much on airplanes, Alex?"

Mort's back was to her as he stared at the mist, hands behind him (like an old European statesman, she thought), one hand clasping the wrist of the other. How small he looked. Small and thin in his turtle-

neck sweater, knit trousers. There was an illness she'd read of in children, made them age fast-forward. Mort might have been that aged child. She listened to the clock's viscous tick.

"Of course I've flown, Mort. My sister's married to a pilot."

"And have you noticed, when you fly," Mort said without turning around, "that the plane can take off in the most miserable conditions—rainstorms, duststorms, snow?"

Alex had always despised being led in conversation. Her teachers had driven her to exasperation with it. She had fought back by finishing people's sentences, with ill-concealed impatience. It was hard to be angry with Mort, though. He seemed more lamb than leader. He'd always been kind to her, if distracted by some private hell of his own. Maybe he was cracking under strain. She listened, kept her face on him.

"Yes, Mort?"

"What gets me is when the plane takes off in the ugliest weather. Say a rainstorm, dark and cold. Driving rain. You can see the flooded ground fall away as the plane lifts."

She watched him, arms folded over her roiling midsection (she felt it making those inward, kneading motions that signaled the onset of a medley of growls).

The ship's-wheel clock marked its witless, slow measure. A drugged metronome.

Tock.

Tock.

She sucked in her belly.

Mort turned to face her, eager, hands rising.

"And as the plane lifts, something happens right outside the passenger window by your face. You watch yourself lifting above the weather."

She'd noticed what he described, of course, but with little more thought than *how nice*.

"You can see the line where this black mess of storm has been pounding along. The line of the thing so clear, like a tumor. Then up you go, right past it. Like in a glass elevator, only instead of a floor you're watching this gross black mess sink away, out of sight. And then you're above it. Sailing along in the clearest, purest blue. It almost has a gold rim. Purest blue on earth—well, off earth."

He brought his arms in front of him, clasping his wrist, skinny legs planted apart.

"It was always there, that blue. Just because we couldn't see it didn't mean it wasn't there. Still is. Are you tracking me?"

Alex stared up at him. Her own features lay still. *You poor deluded bastard. For God's sake don't get heartwarming on me. Don't make me have to accommodate Heartwarming, on top of everything else.*

"I'm just saying," Mort said.

She felt for an instant she herself might crack, a thing clenched in a pliers, burst to pieces.

But for some reason she never understood, the corners of her lips twitched a little, and she allowed him a tired, indulgent smile.

"It's my fault," she had whispered, watching Gray slumped there.

Steam could have issued from him. From all over him with a faint, long hiss, as it would from the cooked, corrugated heap of a smashed locomotive. He looked that finished, that used up.

"It was me who asked you. Asked you to drive us," she added, stupidly.

The truck stilled, a slain beast, light brown dust still drifting up from the gravel. She'd thought what must be passing through his mind. *Marin Business Baron Killed in Wreck with Young Woman*. The subhead. *Companion's Identification Pending*. A sub-subhead. *Autopsy Revealed Companion in Early Pregnancy, Further Tests Pending*. Like Ted Kennedy. Except they, she and Gray, would be dead. Or worse, they'd be injured, and he would have had to answer for all of it to his wife—if he could answer—from a hospital bed.

Maybe it would have been better to be killed.

"Don't be ridiculous," he said aloud, as if dismissing the same thought. He did not look up from his lap, or move. Voice flat, someone else's. Someone, again she thought it, who did not know her, who'd landed beside her like a piece of shrapnel, could hardly summon what it took to form words.

"It was me. My doing. I brought the truck up. Been working on it a year. Hadn't happened today, would have another day."

She knew this meant, *would have happened with my son in the truck, or my wife.* Or both together. She knew that such a scenario would have destroyed him, his sanity. A sin of mythic dimensions, beyond anything to do with her.

"Gray? Are you hurt?"

He lifted his head, stared at the dash.

"No," he said.

"What should we do?"

She felt a fool, a porcelain belle clutching hoopskirts, though she sat in the same shorts and blouse (how hopefully she had buttoned into them this morning!). Soaked with sweat, grimed by a fine layer of grit, salt and dust at the corners of her lips. She found the plastic water bottle (thank God she'd had the wits to bring it), held it to Gray's dirty lips, made him drink. Some of it dripped down his jaw. She had not endured what he had: his long awareness (how long?) of what he had just managed, with all the control he possessed, to elude. Aware too, as she was, that they might have been found out in the most horrible way. In her mind she saw all their private tendernesses shoved into the white light of public eyes. Each detail, a watercooler joke. It would have made rutting asses of them, like every such couple caught in headlights with their pants pulled down. Dumb, denuded, contemptible.

"Should we go for help?"

She watched his sweat-streaked chest. It hardly moved.

"Open the glove compartment."

He'd never talked to her like that. Silence and heat packed down around them. Outside a turkey buzzard whooped. Alex turned the lever; the ovoid lid fell open, released the choking smell of a fifty-year-old chassis, machine-oil, tobacco. Inside she saw a couple of wrenches, a greasy blue wipe rag, a creased map of California, and

(amazed by this) a pack of Lucky Strikes. She wondered a moment whether the pack was as old as the truck.

"Cigarettes," he commanded.

She began to hand over the pack, thought better, extracted one—pungency of the leaves summoning a quick holograph of her father, whose fingers had been nicotine-stained. She fumbled under the map, the blue rag, found a matchbook. The cover showed a sprightly boy's profile, googly eyes, upturned freckled nose, smiling, the caption *Draw Me*. She placed the stick between her lips, held a struck match to it (her white, plump hand shaking), puffed till it glowed at the tip, held it out to him between thumb and forefinger. His hand cupped it, thumb and fingertips, to his lips; he took a deep drag.

Exhaled. He sat, smoke flowing from the cupped hand resting against his thigh, from his nostrils. He stared out the dirt-streaked windshield. His hair was matted, she noticed. She would remember for years this view of him, take it from hidden storage many times when she was alone, examine it from every angle, try to see through it to something not quite formed: Gray sitting, smoking, staring into nothing from an interval that did not yet officially exist. Some images you longed to click open, the way you did icons on a computer screen. Click twice, the image on the screen trembled an instant and flooded apart: its elements sprang forth, arrayed one two three like acrobats landing cheerfully upright. Discrete ingredients, to solve the image's meaning. A man with a wife and son and entrenched reputation, whose mistress sits helpless beside him in a crippled vehicle that could have killed them, far from where he should be, from those he should be with.

Sitting, smoking.

It thrust something through her, cut away everything but the fact of them. That he would haul himself from the vehicle, leave her waiting in the locked truck (with the water bottle, else she'd surely have fainted). That he would walk to find a ride to a phone, hook the old

Dodge to a tow truck (the driver a stringy man, wrinkle-creased, did not appear to know who Gray was, nonetheless got a good long look at her). That they would drop her two blocks from her apartment. That Gray would make a curt nod, no word or gesture, sitting beside the sun-creased driver in the front seat as the tow truck lumbered off in the too-bright afternoon, the old Dodge hanging by the nose from behind like a giant carcass: None of these things were yet known, or even particularly foreseen by her at the time of his sitting there, smoking and staring in that stopped-still, floating moment.

She thought of that day now, Gray smoking, ruminating. The image strangely peaceful; seemed to stop time in a peaceful way. *Peaceable* might be the better word, she thought, staring up from the padded table in her blue-paper gown. The little room—crowded with banks of metal boxes, instrument panels, lights, wires—so cold. Why did they keep it so cold? Dr. Margolin smiled at her. Rather, his gray-blue eyes smiled above his surgical mask, reassuring her, and this helped, for she liked and trusted him. He moved about, preparing something, a shot, a syringe. Don't look. He had been doing this work, attending women, births and terminations, as they were called, a lifetime. Illnesses, complications. Things going right, going wrong. A lifetime. Nearing retirement, probably a grandfather. Too soon to ask. Mild, patient man. Balding, goatee. Twinkly Freud. Oh, to have a man like Dr. Margolin for a friend, confidante. Have him to dinner. His daily work—imagine it—precisely at the secret, molten center of human foolishness. The very seat of it, source of it. What's the term: theater of operations. In war, in medicine, same term, hah. What might the good doctor have seen; what might he be able to tell her? (So far he had only said, very gently: "Well, Alex, after this you must be more careful. We'll talk later about what you are using.") If she looked past her bare feet she saw a squarish machine in the corner with dials and

a gauge. Don't look. Some sort of tubing coming out of it, vacuum cleaner–type. Don't look. Look at the ceiling, white squares with little holes. The holes began to merge and swim. She had taken the two Valium they allowed—two because she was tall, a *big girl*, they'd said—promising the nurse she would not drive. The Valium important, important. Skip waiting in the lobby to drive her, good kid. Maybe they could eat something, after. She'd had no breakfast, following orders. The Valium helped. Comforted, dozy. Every reason to be hopeful. The room suddenly pleasant, banks of chrome instruments no matter, harsh lights no matter. Dreamy, shiny lights. Blurry silver halos, platinum halos all around. What an interesting room. What a kind nurse. Wasn't I supposed to say goodbye to somebody? Goodbye, goodbye. And apologize, wasn't it? Can't quite—where had she heard it—

You have to cut where the emergency is.

I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. She hardly felt the numbing shot the good doctor administered, with uttermost skill.

"Margolin. What a beautiful name," she murmured. The gray-blue eyes smiled again, moved on to their business.

"Like Stuart Little's girlfriend," she went on. Pretty bird. Margo. Marga. Margalo.

"Margalo. Stuart . . . sets out to . . . find her . . ." The doctor listened, went about his work, keeping a practiced eye on the drowsing young woman.

Skip moved his ass a little on the plastic seat. Pressed his thumbs together hard, moved them forward and back pressed together, a stalemated tango.

No way he could hide his surprise—shock, really—when Alex Blue approached him head-on that July morning. Week ago now. Came at him like a defensive tackle from the front door. Bearing forward, eyes locked on him. Her face seemed altered. Different, though he couldn't say how. Paler? Maybe it was only that he was seeing her close-up for the first time in months. Since the Christmas lunch, where he'd got started with Mort. God, but women were unpredictable. She had never more than murmured at him, smiled her pained little half-smile when he hailed her in the morning, winced, turned away as though he'd blown a dart into her neck. Yet all he'd ever done was what he always did, waving and calling *Alexandra! What do you know for sure?*

Still less had he been prepared for what she wanted of him.

"Skip." Face to face, that morning at the desk. Her voice held a tremor. Alex had an unexpected voice, grainy; it seemed to be coming out her nostrils. She breathed in. There was this—what would he call it—this freaky momentousness about her. Then it had suddenly hit

him. Oh, man, the buyout thing. That's what it was. She was going to fire him. She'd been elected, for some reason, to fire him. Here it comes. His head started to hum.

"Skip, I need to ask a favor of you. A special, secret favor."

He'd stared at her as if she'd dropped all her clothes right there on the lobby's smooth terra cotta tiles.

"Wha—well—uh, anything, of course, Alex. Anything you want." Jesus. She wasn't going to fire him. Relief fanned his head. He wasn't ready to fly. Not just yet.

They had walked to her car at noon. A cool, breezy day flocked with silver-backed clouds, sun winking through, high silver light over the harbor water. Bits of loose gravel crunched under their feet as they packed into the Buick. Did Mort see them leave together? Doubtful. Holed up all day. Preparing his sandwich at his desk, Skip knew. Wheat bread, almond butter. Kept the loaf and jar, the single knife in a drawer. Something Mort had read—told staff who asked politely—about a dose of almonds every day. At first the little ritual had struck Skip as funny, even dear when he'd glanced in Mort's door, seen him sitting at his desk carefully spreading the thick brown paste on a breadslice. After a while it wasn't funny, looked parsing and fusty, an old woman's tic.

And if Mort got testy about Skip lunching with Alex—lunching with anyone—well, he could sit on it. Mort was learning to stuff those impulses. Skip was seeing to that.

He leaned forward, stared at his knuckles.

Mort had intrigued him at the beginning, his sloe eyes, shy seriousness, his slim, olive-colored body. Most of all, what he knew. Mort had an art degree. Skip felt lifted by nearness to it, as a boat is lifted by rising water. As though he might absorb through his pores some of Mort's education, his quiet intelligence. But the more time they spent, the more the older man scraped at his nerves. Mort's sadness was beyond Skip to dissect, sadder in some ways than those pathetic old

queens back east. Mort was fussy, fearful. He dreaded action. And his jealousy. So retro.

Skip's face furrowed; he stared into the center of the waiting room.

Alex had driven them to the restaurant. *Funky,* he'd thought, glancing around the hideous interior of the Buick. Color of baby-shit. Cool, though, in its way. A bit fat-assed. The restaurant unremarkable, family-style, near the big shopping center. Clearly, Alex didn't want other staff finding them at the Wayfarer. This place was big as the Wayfarer, though, and just as packed, a comforting roar of Marin housewives (designer jeans, sweaters, jewelry, tan from machines, thin from diets, slightly toxic, the white-wine-lean-meat look). Overfed businessmen in dark suits, shaved so close their cheeks smarted pink, cheeks that sometimes bulged over the tops of their starched collars. Skip loved the restaurant smells, butter and toast and roasted meats, coffee, mingled colognes, clinking ice in glasses, silverware tapping china. He loved the intensity, seated people leaning toward one another. He wanted to blend with that, wanted people to see him blend. (He'd taught himself. Years of observation.) He took pleasure as he entered a restaurant, felt the faces flickering toward him like so many feathers brushing him lightly—faces doubling back to get an extra look at him, verify the astonishing color of those eyes. Took pleasure in the restrained spring of his step as he walked through a room. The waitress (who'd sized him up with a quick, approving smile) brought them giant spinach salads with bits of bacon and Gorgonzola and walnuts, vinaigrette. Miniature loaves of warmed, dark bread. (Molasses in it, he'd bet.) Iced raspberry tea with lemon. Alex was buying. Girl food, but tasty enough. The bacon saved it. He could have ordered something else but he'd wanted to set the poor chick at ease—she was so distraught and all. Besides, he was behind on his greens quota. Alex ate strangely. At first she seemed to wolf her food, then abruptly sat back and looked at the salad as if she'd chewed a cockroach. Again he noticed (he was not mistaken)

her coloration was eerie. Maybe she was sick. Likely not contagious. He said nothing. Better find out what the hell was going on.

"Alex, I'm glad to help, sure, any way I can. But what is it? And why me?"

She drew a breath, commenced a speech that, had Skip been older, he would have recognized as rehearsed.

"Because, Skip, you don't work in my department. You're not related to me. I like you fine, but for my purposes it's better we don't happen to be close friends. I don't really have"—she hesitated—"any close friends, and my family's imposs—I don't want family involved. My clinic's here, the one covered by the company plan. My home's two hours north. I'll be slightly drugged. They don't give you Valium unless you have a driver. You're neutral. You won't look at me with tragic eyes when we pass each other at work. You have your own interests, your own life."

She paused.

"Wouldn't that be the case? Wouldn't I be right, assuming those things about you?"

He nodded slowly, mystified.

"You also have the ability—I am choosing to believe you have the ability—to keep a personal secret just that, a secret. Forever. Can you do that?"

He looked at her in wonder. She was waiting—that strange yellow-green light. Everything seemed to depend on his answer.

Well: secrets? Hah. Behind his lovely eyes, an impulse to guffaw. *Secrets? How about the fact that I am sleeping with your boss, lady? Would that splash some ice water on your secrets game?* But there were other secrets, secrets never told, and while he was alive, never would be. His dead parents, for example, killed in a car crash. Pure fiction. Skip had no inkling who his parents were. He had been adopted by a man who owned a motorcycle shop (*Stan, Your Motorbike Man,* went the television jingle, showing Stan astride his shining black Harley, handlebar

mustache waxed into a smile, waving his helmet over his head in front of the store) and his wife, a middle school science teacher. The deal had been made outside formal adoption channels. Stan and Lucy had wanted to give their only natural daughter a sibling. His sister Fawn was a beautiful girl, combining in surprisingly happy result her parent's best features, evading Stan's chipmunk cheeks, Lucy's clownlike mouth and stick-out ears. Fawn had won the genetic jackpot: long body, supermodel's face, bottle-green eyes, porcelain skin, teasing lips, faintest sprinkle of freckles over a bud nose. Everyone adored her. Stan and Lucy addressed her, while she was growing up, as if she were a goddess. (Fawn was now an adult-film star in Los Angeles, but Skip had promised his sister never to tell their parents, now long divorced. They thought Fawn was an actress in cable television commercials, her husband an investment counselor. Fawn sent Skip money sometimes. Between gigs, he would go stay with her and her large, balding husband, who directed her in the films, many of them shot right there in their pastel ranch house.) Besides giving Fawn a brother, Stan and Lucy had wanted to "do something for the world" back then, take in an infant the world had spat out. They'd been nice enough parents. Leveled with him when he turned eighteen: his real father was unknown; his birth mother had slipped untraceably away.

It was certainly not a lie to hold Alex's gaze, and nod.

"I can keep secrets, Alex."

"And . . . you can drive."

Of course he could drive. He had the frog, his beloved green Ghia. Beat to shit, needed work. But it had got him out here. And he could drive anything with wheels. Sticks, automatics. Motorcycles not least.

"And you don't . . . tend to make . . . conventional moral judgments."

This was a mouthful. Plus she seemed about to faint. Poor woman was in trouble all right. Skip leaned toward her, his hands in his lap. He felt intimate, important. People might have thought him her wedding planner.

"Alex, hey. Please. I'm a child of hippies. I'm a dropout. I'm—" he caught himself before finishing, *gayer than a three-dollar bill.*

He found himself running through it all again—the spinach salad interview, the jostling, steak-fragrant restaurant filled with people that fresh, silvery day—while he waited for her now in the little reception room. He'd taken the afternoon off, as agreed, a pretext of dental work. It smelled a little dental in here, truthfully. Like plastic (children's toys piled in one corner), damp carpet (trampled in from the sprinkler outside), creamed coffee (the receptionist's), and that delicate, ever-present medical odor, like rubbing alcohol. The receptionist, a middle-aged woman with honey-tinted hair styled in a pageboy, eyed him. Maybe she thought he was the father. Of course she did. Wow, that was rich. He sat back, a leather-jacketed apparition, dark curls and long lashes, arms over the backs of the chairs on either side, one ankle propped broadly across the other blue-jeaned knee, propped foot jiggling.

Him, the father!

He could claim his share of—unusual setups. The two old queens, for instance, entomology professors who'd lived across town. Treating him like a favorite pet when he was a teenager. Loaned him their car, gave him money and gifts, mainly for the privilege of looking at him and being insulted by him—mainly. He'd ambled through their house (a grand old Victorian) whenever he chose, case after case filled with brilliant butterflies and moths, affixed in perfect rows with tiny labels. But he'd never been so close to anything like Alex's—situation, before. And while he felt proud that Alex considered him—uh, mature enough and all—to choose him as driver, the event itself—the *procedure,* as everyone here seemed to call it—confused him. They went in and got it out, was all he knew. He didn't want to think about details. He knew the procedure had an unprintable reputation, a buried, sinister aspect. Yet he also knew it happened every day. People couldn't always have the babies that got planted in them: the time

was wrong, the people were wrong. They had to do something about it, right? He remembered debate teams tossing it back and forth in high school. Kids wrote papers, gave speeches. But back then it was a big fuzzy homework item, another Important Issue you were assigned to think about, like the Preamble, or memorizing capitols. And neither he nor his adoptive family had any truck with religion. Religion was useless, like doilies on armchairs. He could see, however, the bizarre coincidence. A little creepy when you thought about it. That his birth mother, whoever she had been—some scared, shaken girl—could have exercised Alex's option.

Maybe it was illegal where she was living at the time, his birth mother. Or maybe she couldn't afford the . . . procedure. This thought set a pinch onto his lower stomach, the way it felt when he ate too much popcorn.

If his birth mother had done what Alex was doing, he'd not be sitting here this minute. Thinking these thoughts. Waiting to drive Alex. The chain of logic got you dizzy.

He uncrossed his legs, leaned forward, balanced his forearms on the tops of his thighs, hands in a loose clasp, stared at the shag carpet. A child of hippies. He liked saying this, because it always swept the table clear (for a moment) of stuffy, cluttery assumptions. No reason to flinch. Not the time to get squeamish. It was the poor lady who was having her insides—

"Mr. Manning? You are driving Ms. Blue today?"

The clinic door had opened; a nurse stood beside it, a brunette older than Alex but younger than the receptionist, wearing the white getup, holding Alex's arm with one hand, the door with the other. Calm and controlled, this nurse. Must have been through it many times. A sleepy Alex by the elbow. Alex smiled at him a little, like a drunk. She looked okay. Peaceful really. Peaceful or drunk, however you chose to look at it, and ready to sleep for days.

He didn't say anything to her while he drove.

He cranked back the seat a bit, so she could rest. He tucked his canvas bag within reach beside her feet, threw her purse into the back seat. He'd left his own car in the office lot. It occurred to him Mort might glimpse the car—any of the others might glimpse it, at day's end. But he'd find a story. Car broke down, minor. A lift to the dentist's, a ride back on the bus. Easy. In fact he would be taking the bus back, after dropping her today. It was pleasant, really, driving Alex's big goofy Buick through the baking afternoon—heat bearing down the further north they drove. Everything out there, everything he saw, hills, fields, color of straw. A single match would cover it in a breath with a sheet of flame, make charcoal of the northern half of the state. He could imagine it going up, one eye-scorching *whooff*. This idea teased him, like the impulse to drive off a cliff (a slight turn of the wrists, all it would take). Or at the edge of a high precipice, imagining the feeling of falling. He had the windows half-open; warm wind lifted the dozing woman's hair in separate, random strands.

He dreamed.

Something better had to come next. The reception job was fine for

what it was, the room in the house on Mount Tam (nearly buried under eucalyptus trees, yard littered with leaves) okay, not the best. Small, though for that reason the price was right. He kept a single mattress on the floor, a burlap-covered lamp from the flea market. Too small to have Mort or anyone visit, without embarrassment. This peeved him. The housemates agreeable enough, three gay men, older. Two worked in the city's downtown, a men's clothiers on Maiden Lane, the other a bank teller near Cow Hollow. Mostly at work or out with lovers, or in search of lovers, or locked in their rooms with lovers. The house policy, of not fucking the people you lived with, suited him; the usual problems, of keeping people from eating your ice cream, fighting for the bathroom in the morning, prevailed. He could always spend the night at Mort's, though Skip liked this less and less. House and grounds pretty enough, but Mort's fretfulness dogged him. Skip often felt he might burst there for want of air. Mort's dolefulness, his yearning—for what, what?—seemed to resonate like a bow drawn over a cello, one long, sustained, sorrowful note.

It was time for something to come next. You went from gig to gig, like in a parlor game where you followed a string from room to room. The string eventually took you to a room containing the thing you sought. That's what he had to assume, anyway. For all the crackle and spark he knew he gave off, he felt undercompensated. The Triple I gig now lacked its initial flavor, like gum chewed too long. Anyway it was about to come apart, or so he was always hearing—some bigger whale about to gulp it. He'd been urged to try modeling, by men who came onto him. Women, too. What he knew for sure (his favorite equalizer, that line) was that everything still lay before him, juicy and potent like bins of ripe fruit. He had only to choose. But he had to be smart when he chose, wary when he reached. It might be a con, a trap.

His passenger was not always sleeping but in a semi-doze, and about a third of the way along told him she was hungry. They

stopped at a diner in Petaluma, a shabby corner outside the center of town. Greasy, but she said that was exactly what she wanted. They sat at the counter, saw themselves in a mirror that ran the length of the opposite wall. (She avoided looking; he took long furtive turns at it.) Pitchers of syrup along the counter, purple-blue, topaz brown. Smells of malt and coffee, sticky-sweetness, butter, bacon grease. The place noisy, newspapers, voices, cash register *ching*ing. Full of the folks you find in diners in the middle of a workday, mothers and kids, oldsters, slackers. She ate like somebody who'd been let out of jail. Eggs, hash browns, toast, a couple of pancakes. Juice, coffee, glass of milk besides. She didn't bother to talk, except to mutter that things tasted good again. He paid—she was still woozy, and anyway they'd left her bag locked in the car.

When they resettled in the Buick (hot and musty, standing in full sun), she found her bag in the back seat, and held it in her lap. She dozed another hour or so—her filled stomach, the hum of the engine, the heat. He made good progress, passing from the freeway to the skinnier two-lane connecting the counties, past the fruit stands, their owners asleep under wide umbrellas. At the end of the hour, as he negotiated the final, bumpy stretch of tree-lined road, she told him she felt better. The drug was worn off and she was only tired, and not, it seemed, in pain. Almost there, she told him. She insisted on paying for the morning's meal. He protested, but not with particular force, and she had already pulled a twenty from her wallet and was opening his canvas bag by her feet, to poke it in. He was driving, not thinking. The trees had uprooted the pavement here and there, rough on the tires. The hot wind whirled through the car, and the noise of the wind, the engine hum and occasional cars that passed, made a bland roar. He should have been thinking. (He would upbraid himself about it later, talk himself down from it again.) He didn't see her until it happened. It happened in a second. She had shoved the twenty into his bag, then stared into the bag a moment before removing a maga-

zine. His copy of *Blueboy*. The cover—a flashbulbish, polaroidy light—showed a young man muscled like a bodybuilder wearing only skimpy underpants, leaning back against a plastic, pale green couch, staring directly, confrontively, at the camera. The young man's expression unsmiling, a kind of scornful dare. One hand was slipped under the waistband of his underpants, as if to begin to tug them down. The other hand lay lightly on the inside of a thigh. His thighs, hard and creamy, hung open.

Alex opened the magazine—she could not help it—to other pictures, more explicit. One small photo, dark and smeary as if copied too many times, showed an older man holding a younger man upside down by the open legs, as if the younger man were a wheelbarrow. The older man had entered him that way. You couldn't see the details, or the expression on either man's face. Both were in shadow. Even so, the whole looked fierce.

Skip nearly drove off the road when he glanced over at her.

"Alex. Alex."

She was still stoned, he thought. Her movements were slow. He was glad for that. She looked mildly at him, shutting the magazine.

Skip looked back toward the road, purpling. He wondered briefly whether he should slow down and pull over. But if he did that, they'd have to sit and stare each other.

"Alex." Not looking at her. A glance, then back at the road. "Maybe I should have told you."

Alex's head lay against the seat; her face, turned slightly toward him, was calm. Her irises were shot through from the side with sun, like a clear green sunlit pond.

Skip gripped the wheel. He felt his face sweating, smarting, as if the heat in the car weren't bad enough. It wasn't that he'd needed to conceal it. It just hadn't come up, so why bother? No need in the office, that year of his young life, to outright demonstrate. But the

magazine Alex had found in her hands was not exactly *Better Homes and Gardens.*

"Alex. I should have mentioned it earlier. I hope you aren't freaked out."

She thought slowly. She should have sensed it long ago, but she'd been too full of her own drama. And it didn't matter, of course. It might have mattered, might have given her a real stab, if she'd had a crush on him. In some alternate script a different Alex might indeed have conceived a crush on this cheerful, beautiful boy with ultramarine eyes. And if the positions gay men torqued themselves into looked like Hieronymus Bosch paintings—positions no one talked of in mixed company, though rights were made much of, and civil freedoms, mandates, marches—if seeing graphic photos made her feel helpless and sad, well, hetero intercourse was no less bizarre, splayed or squatty, no less baffling. What story did she tell herself, for example, about the man sunk bare-assed between her own heavy legs, during her hours with him? How lyrical would it look to a disinterested pair of eyes, standing, say, just back of the man's pumping, narrow buttocks? It would look like animals, of course. Donkeys or dogs. Even the exalted *Baghavad Gita,* feet tucked behind ears. Donkeys, dogs. She looked out the windshield, at the waves of heat in the afternoon.

"Skip, it's fine. Honestly, it's fine. Please don't worry. I just—hadn't realized."

"I know, Alex. And I'm sorry, I just never thought—"

"Please don't be sorry. There's nothing to be sorry for."

She slipped the magazine back into his bag and turned with exaggerated motion toward the window, making a show of interest in the scenery. Dusty, shimmering heat. Vineyards motionless, mountains shrunken. It was an ugly time of year in the valley, her least favorite. She felt first intimations of cramping in her groin. And she missed

Gray. Where, where was he? Even in the pitiless glare of day, what was true was no less true: that near him she went heavy with urgency, that her mouth against his shoulder felt to be what her mouth had attained its full life for. That the roaring rush of him inside her had nothing to do with making children, or making sandwiches or paying bills, or being good. The rushing roar was what was good. She was sorry, in a weary way, to have brought on this boy's embarrassment. He was helping her, after all. Not until a few days later, when her clarity was restored, would the thought waft up: *Skip was someone's Antinous.*

She said, in a way she hoped sounded offhand, "I hope you're not boiling to death. It's so bad up here, in high summer."

"Nah, it's okay. I'm fine." Skip's voice falsely hearty, though his purple color had ebbed. He was making himself think about immediates. The bus station, first thing. Jesus. Maybe he should never have agreed to this.

"Here it is, Skip. My stairwell, coming up on the right. Park anywhere here. Skip?"

She sighed, turned in her seat to look squarely at him.

"You've been so good, to do this. Do you want to come in first, have a cold drink? Then I'll take you to the bus—"

But here Alex stopped, for she was staring directly at what she first took to be a mirage. At the base of her stairwell, where it gave onto the street beside the closed yarn shop, sitting at the bottom step's black rubber matting, looking forlorn and angry and very hot—head in hands—was a tall woman in her early thirties, silver-blond hair yanked up into a makeshift knot.

Madelyn.

Morton Levi carried on alone, in the July weeks following his interview with Alex.

He took walks along Sir Francis Drake, peering into pubs, taquerias, shop windows. On weekends he wandered the consignment boutiques, secondhand stores—they smelled of mold—examined artifacts from his own childhood, storybooks. *The Little Engine That Could*. *No Children, No Pets* (sixty-one dollars!). *The Little House*. He remembered its images, how they'd frightened him as a child. Cheerful small house overtaken by the grimy city—frightened him even though he'd been reared in a big grimy city. School lunchpails, Lone Ranger, Howdy Doody, Peter Pan. A Magnavox radio like his late father's, big and bulky, grainy gold wood curved at the edges, a lit window where a slender red line moved over bandwidths. (Every Sunday Eddie had tuned it to the Texaco Metropolitan Opera Hour. The weeping strains of *Madama Butterfly* and *La Boheme* had filled the apartment, till young Mort had felt their beautiful sadness would burst his heart.) He touched an old Victrola, crude needle like a splinter still affixed at the end of the playing arm. He recognized a set of shining metal drinking tumblers in pure, shimmery colors like Italian ices, berry, emerald, butter, teal—these had been placed on the Levi

table each day; real glasses came out only for company. No one had given those shiny tumblers a thought back then, except little Mort had secretly believed their colors conferred a mood, glinting around their middles with stripes of light. You chose your color, he'd thought, according to how you felt that day. Now they were antiques. He smiled at the prices on the white tags.

He slipped onto a stool, before heading home some weeknights, to drink a beer at the no-name bar (its name on the sign in small, lowercase letters, virtually invisible, as if daring anyone to find it) where a man, or cassette tape, played jazz piano. He walked along the water opposite the bar, where you could see straight across the bay, the skyline of San Francisco unobstructed, a floating phantasm.

He bought a flat of flowering plants one Sunday, broke each compacted little cup of black soil from its egg-carton pocket, pressed the spindly roots into bare patches along the front of the house (listened to his own breathing, the mockingbird, crows shouting to each other; smelled the cakelike soil, the decomposing leaves). He chose hardy stuff. Azaleas, zinnias, marigolds. Once they were in he stood and stretched, dusted his hands, admired the bits of red, gold, dark pink, yellow.

He swam laps at the pool, College of Marin or Tam High, when he could make himself. Did he imagine it, or did men stare derisively at his thin, white body?

He lay on his bed weekend afternoons, watched the sun through the chestnut leaves out the window, motionless in bright heat. He read his little Rodin book.

The Master worked the profiles of his models from every angle, above and below, turned his model round and round, rotated the clay on a turntable so he'd see a new profile with each turn. *When, through the precise execution of profile views, you have entered the realm of truth, the expression seems to arise of its own accord.* That was the hair-raiser, the expression arising of its own accord. Mort studied the pho-

tographs of the robust little man: silver hair and beard bristling, energy sparking from all parts of him like static electricity. Going at his damp clay, hands a blur in some photos. Eerily, the sculpted heads and writhing bodies seemed aware they were being formed by the hands busy about them—conscious of coming into being.

One photograph Mort kept leafing back to. The Master posed beside his piece *The Hand of God*. An outsized pair of hands, poised and sensitive—Rodin's own, the description said—holding a chunk of rock. It is the moment, perhaps, before they will commence to shape creation. Rodin stands beside the piece draped in a wrinkled old smock, eyes translucent shards of ice. As if daring the camera to question him. As if posing this way is a quick, irritating necessity, a pause in a labor he must get back to straightaway, and which he absolutely intends should consume him.

It was given to some few, Mort saw, to be *about* something.

The message read like lightning in those eyes of ice.

He put down his book—Saturday, clouds in backlit patterns—went to his clay room. He called it his clay room, an enclosed porch, unheated, uncooled except by the natural shelter of stucco walls. He'd found several tables at the flea market—the same day Skip found that hideous burlap lamp, one of their last recent outings together. Mort frowned. They had squabbled again, over nothing. In fact it seemed Skip had picked the fight, chastised him for his sad-sackism. Mort couldn't very well protest the charge, though he'd thought he was trying hard to avoid a blow-up. Skip had made no gesture toward him since that day, not phoned or shown up. Lately he chose to look down, or away at someone else, when Mort passed his front desk station. This stung Mort so sharply he'd begun making a point of arriving well before hours and leaving late, ate at his desk so he wouldn't, if he were careful, have to see Skip at all—reflecting, with bitter amusement, that it had been he who'd first demanded they ignore each other at the office.

On the tables Mort had set his lumps of wet, cold clay, color of dirty cheese, thin cloth over them to keep them from drying out. The little lumps sat around like a scene from a horror film, aliens forming silently, taking human shapes. The room was coolish, smelled of earth, chalk. As he walked, his steps echoed. His throwing wheel sat patient and still—monument to his own inertia, he thought. He was less drawn to the wheel than to the busts, figures. His instructor used to scold him about trying to finish too soon, making his final cuts too early. Still, there was one finished head, clear-glazed, simple white, done years ago. An older, bald man looking into the distance, quizzical. Bushy browed, stubble-rimmed jaw. Generous nose and ears, lips set in thought. The man's gaze seemed lifted toward a distant idea. His expression shifted from different angles: now stoic, now dismayed. Mort had thought, for some reason, of Hans Christian Andersen when he'd shaped the face, though he'd not, until long after the piece was done, seen a likeness of the Danish writer. (Andersen, it turned out, had a crop of hair.) Mort was fond of the bald-man bust. It might qualify as his oldest friend. Some pieces felt like issue: they carried your blood type. Mort walked to the bald head, which he'd placed atop an empty bookcase so it could be taller than the unborn works, preside over them. He lay his hand on the smooth pate. It felt cool, fit his curled palm like a baseball.

Mort couldn't explain to himself why he'd said that stuff to Alex.

Flying above weather. He'd only thought of it, of telling her, while she stood there. Of course he'd mulled it briefly in his mind (which was just as often filled with monkey noises, endlessly repeated lyrics of old songs, counting off numbers). He'd never imagined he'd confess his little observation to anyone else. But the day she stood there in his office, awaiting his permission, so wan, so bravely private. Her distress, he guessed, had fired him, a chance to crack through his own reserve. She was so obviously sad. He'd wanted to pop her willy-nilly into a different awareness—himself too—

through a side door. Blurted the silly words. They must have sounded pedantic. Well then, they'd sounded pedantic. He'd shot blind, on a hunch. Maybe—it was a long shot—maybe she would say back to him, or even be thinking it: *Yes, I know. I know just what you mean.*

Mort sighed. He walked on, *calack, calack* of his shoe soles against concrete in the still afternoon. Approached a squarish, upright lump. Lifted its cloth: the beginning of Skip's torso, small scale. He'd wanted it (absurd) to be a luminous, breathing thing. Like the statuary he'd seen in photographs, a thing you knew had been crafted with all its maker's skill, to describe the beloved. Capacious chest, softening toward the belly. Fine, broad pectoral, thighs to mid-buttocks. Mort's eyes scanned the piece. Crude, but not a bad start. The work still prodded. But he didn't know when Skip would agree to sit again. Whether he'd show up again.

Mort was caught now in what he had promised himself in New York never to repeat, what he sometimes saw other men enmeshed in. He could spot the symptoms miles off. Hapless men with wrenched faces, being devastated from the inside. An old story, no less common for it. The beloved escaping, slipping away. More: the beloved turning upon his benefactor. Scoring, with claws, the underbelly of the older man's need.

Unmistakable. You were led in so subtly. And then it only *seemed* sudden when you found yourself trapped, on your knees, helping it along. You were despised, despicable, anything you said or did. You learned to walk on your knees.

No reversing that chemistry, once it took over.

He had left town to end it once, same gangrene, same Frankie-and-Johnnie shithole. A Cuban boy, young, very beautiful, Manolito. At first the name alone had enchanted Mort, music of coins jingled in the hand. His beauty like Skip's, if less well-nourished. Owned nothing but the rust-colored cotton shirt and synthetic pants he'd met Mort in. The bar, naturally, of a Chinese-Cuban restaurant. Through a series

of maneuvers, offering his exquisite body at each turn (Mort winced), proceeded to take over Mort's money, his apartment. His power over Mort: what he knew he could make happen between them. It was not quite so bad this time, at least. At least Mort had held onto his place, his bank account. But the emotional parallels were real.

He couldn't resign himself, finally, to being one of those wretches he'd watched. The ones who, no matter where on earth you set them down, proceeded to get into the same trouble. *Devised* the same trouble, that was the shocker, went to lengths to set it up, the same self-punishment. Performed the gesture over and over, like a wind-up doll. There had to be more to understand than that, more to be.

More to be about.

Mort walked back to his baldheaded friend, the calm, apprising eyes on an unseen future. He lay his hand again upon the smooth, round head.

When Skip had been given a cold glass of juice and, against his protests, another twenty dollars, and just before Maddie insisted on driving him in the Buick (also over his protests) to the bus station some blocks from the town, Alex handed Maddie her keys. She was very glad to see her, she told her sister—but Skip had driven her home because she was feeling not at all well; she needed badly now to sleep.

When Maddie returned to the apartment she found Alex curled under her quilts (heat notwithstanding), sleeping deeply. Maddie took a quick shower in cool water and stretched out on the futon Alex had set up for her, a three-section piece of thick, cotton-covered foam sewn together at two seams, unfolding into a single-sized bed. Alex had placed two clean sheets on it, and a light blanket. The futon was wonderfully comfortable, and the heat, the exertion of travel, made Maddie sleep at once.

She woke before her sister. Groped for her watch, on the floor in one of her sandals: nearly seven in the evening. Lifted her face to scan the four-poster. Alex was insensible, a quilt-covered lump. At the top of the lump, a tumble of hair. That hair, Maddie thought. A separate animal, sleeping, sprawled. The room smelled of sleep. She dressed

quietly, clipped her bobbed hair into a twist against her head, padded barefoot, noiseless, to the window. Maddie was lean and muscled, with very little breast tissue—lost what there had been, she'd admit, nursing Willie. She walked like a jock, Alex always teased her—like a basketball player. In fact Maddie was proud of her athletic form, as she liked to remind Alex, who hated all sports. She opened the slatted shutter an inch, cranked the windowpane wider (it made a laryngitic squeak). Surveyed the square below in the heat of dusk, a blue-gold hour, mountains outlined in scarlet, quiet, still. It stayed light late here in summer, as it did in the desert. The old pines and palms stood motionless in the blue light, air dropping heat slowly. Smells of star jasmine, lantana, of water spilling onto warm pavement.

A dog barked somewhere. Two Mexican vineyard workers, straw-hatted, rested on a bench, each holding a single can of beer.

What on earth, she wondered, was Alex doing here.

She'd made the case to her sister time and again, to move back to Phoenix. Her concern was for Alex, Maddie told herself—glossing over what she herself would gain: babysitter and companion, no orientation, all the tedious history, all the habits and quirks established, understood. Alex could get a sensible job. Could still edit if that's what she liked best, say at the *Arizona Republic*. She could meet someone, for God's sake. Someone worthy of her. Someone to keep her from drowning in her own moods. She was accomplishing nothing here but pining, thumb-twiddling. A decent man would change her sister's life. *If I could just find another Roy for her. But should it be a Roy like mine, who goes away so much?* Maddie was not inclined to own to Alex, or anyone else, that her present life was not ideal. That she did not love the unrelieved mode of herself and Willie roped together week in, week out like a couple of convicts. She loved Willie madly, of course. Would do anything for him, die for him. But Maddie, to her own surprise, had found she wanted to go back to work. She leaned against Alex's window, watching the stillness.

She missed the force of business, the clarity. Each day a crisp, clean page. *Going forward*. Maddie loved the term, how it swept away all dithering, all dross. She wanted to wear trim dark suits with padded shoulders again. She relished the air-conditioned rooms and hallways, clean and bare, click of low heels on polished floors, smells of morning cologne, coffee, fresh pastries arrayed in lush rows, orange and berry fillings shining like jewels. She loved passing out the data in perfectly uniform binders. Targeting, positioning. The very language bracing. In business you acted, you had effect. Maddie gazed through the shutters at the sleepy town square, and her hazel eyes saw not the drooping firs and palm trees and Mexican men sipping beer: instead she saw the wide, clear windows and long, gleaming table of a boardroom. Along that table, twenty faces watched hers with expectant eyes.

In time.

When Willie started school she could go back, Roy had promised. He wanted his son cared for by the boy's mother during formative years. None of this farm-the-kid-out crap for them. She'd agreed of course, glad he felt so strongly, glad they could afford it, glad to be close to Willie. But secretly she feared her mind was regressing, might revert to the singsong syllables of that little muppet Elmo before she could get herself back out there—onto the mean, cool playing field of executive officers. Business had no memory, granted no favors. You were only as good as what you offered that moment. Business didn't care whether you'd given birth to quintuplets the previous day—the previous hour. She feared that by the time Willie entered school she'd be standing gaga somewhere offstage piping the "Alphabet Song"—its cute, staccato *Ell-eh-meh-no-pee*.

Alex stirred. Maddie glanced at her. She could only see a piece of the girl's forehead. Paler than usual? One eyelid heavily shut. Should she place a hand to that forehead, check for fever? Clearly it had been wise to leave Willie with Roy for the weekend. A first. Let him expe-

rience his child one-on-one for a change. Let him know the reality of her days, the sticky kitchen, disastrous bathroom, the dragging hands of the clock. It had been wise to come, check on her sister. Something hadn't been right. She'd felt it for months, even before she'd phoned in April. Alex too proud, too private to let on. They had to be each other's mother as well as sister—she'd reminded Allie of this more than once. The fact that Alex wasn't well, already justification. Something was up. Or down. Maddie sank quietly into the brown canvas director's chair by the window, returning her gaze to the quilt-covered lump. Familiar, even soothing: this annoyed, proprietary affection for the big, coltish woman in the bed—the one who'd been the baby.

Kamala folded her arms as she settled her bottom, with a deft hop, onto Letty's desk.

She'd worn gypsy colors today. Fuchsia silk blouse, straight navy skirt, emerald scarf tied at her neck. She looked like an apache dancer, except apache dancers didn't generally keep a wad of tissue pressed to their noses. Kamala had a tissue habit, nostrils always pinkly inflamed, damp around the rims. Unknown allergies, she said.

Always on a different diet, too. Everyone remembered the period when Kamala spent hours in the office kitchen every day, carefully slicing raw fruit. Always being tested for whatever substance might be the culprit, but the doctors could never nail the stuff's identity. She begged female colleagues not to wear perfume to work as it made her feel faint; turned dramatically from conversations to sneeze madly—twelve, fourteen in a row—blaming scent, smoke, any irritant. (When Kamala sneezed it was as if a demon had overtaken her; her entire body jerked. HAHSH. HAHSH. People scattered every which way looking vexed, or hunkered more tightly over their papers.)

Her red nose always gave the impression she had just ceased weeping. But that was never true. Allergies or not, Kamala kept in bristling form. Gypsy colors gave energy, she explained. It was Friday after-

noon, a lax time, everyone at long lunch, the office filled with the abandoned air of Fridays. Light from the windows seemed to chide the clutter in the carpeted, paneled rooms. Nobody about except the two women. Alex had taken a personal day. Skip was off to the dentist. Mort holed up out of sight, as usual. The main production area, its two rows of cubicled computers, empty. Kamala, bored, had sought Letty at her desk (as she tended to do when she was bored), chatting on without particular object. Though it was still lunch hour, quiet and empty, Letty felt uneasy about it—Kamala perched on her desk like Marlene Dietrich. Mort, especially, did not like to see this. He could emerge at any time. Letty's face worked with anxiety: Mort or Barry might stroll in. She planned, as soon as any pause appeared in the flow of commentary from Kamala's mouth, to excuse herself. But Kamala flowed unimpeded, settled for the long, chewy duration, thin haunches flattened against the desk's wood, dabbing her nose with crumpled tissue as she picked her way through personalities, problems, Kamala's solutions.

Her talk alighted on Alex.

"A black cloud, that one. I mean what's the point? Needs to play. Just like Mort. Same problem, both of them. They don't understand *fun*. How to do fun."

She leaned toward her supervisor, lowered her voice.

"Probably why she's sick today. If we don't play enough, the body goes into decline, you know. It's all connected."

She nodded, crossed her legs, leaned back on both hands amid Letty's papers, one fist clutching its tissue wad.

"I've read up. The soul goes right along, you know. It's all connected." Kamala made a loop with her index finger, pointed down. "Right down the toilet. There was a man I read about, cured himself of a hopeless disease—hopeless, the doctors said—by watching movies that made him laugh. Do you know I would so much like to make French braids of that hair of hers. She's got amazing hair."

Kamala liked the word *amazing*.

"Don't you think she'd look better? Cleaner, show her face more." Kamala looked into the distance, as if doing a math problem in her head. "I wonder whether she'll let me braid it sometime."

Letty watched with a half-smile. Kamala was one of the chicks in her brood, and as a chick, fully expected to peep, scratch, run in circles—and of course take shelter under herself, Mamma Letty, if any threat presented. Letty's task, she told herself repeatedly, was to nurture. When Letty felt maternal, her stutter calmed.

"You haven't—tried—asking her?"

Kamala shrugged. "It's hard to talk to the divine Ms. Blue. A cool one, that girl. Sends out vibes. Whoa! Don't cross into *her* space." Kamala reared her head back to illustrate bouncing off Alex's invisible vibe-shield. She paused.

"Everyone needs space, of course. Essential to psychic wholeness. Deprived of it we go bonkers. Did you see the article in the *Chronicle* last Sunday, the experiment with monkeys?

Letty had settled her chin in an upturned hand, resigned to giving her attention to the findings of the *Chronicle* monkey experiment, when Barry came double-speed down the stairs. She noticed (thought about it later, with a certain appreciation) he was not looking at his feet or holding the rail. Yet his feet descended in a blur like the Roadrunner's in cartoons, coming to a graceless stop facing the two women. He looked windblown (though there was no breeze outside, a hot July day). Damper than usual. His eyes held a queer light as he stroked his beard.

Letty's heart gave a silent shriek. Without thinking she sprang to a stand alongside her desk, desperate to mark some physical division between herself and the piano-bar chanteuse beside her. But the chanteuse herself had hopped from her perch, and she, too, stood at attention.

Barry looked from one to the other of the women, tugging his beard. He seemed to have temporarily forgotten who they were.

"Where's Mort? Mort's in today, isn't he?"

The two women stared at him. Of course Mort was in. Barry moved a hand across the air between himself and them, as if to wipe steam from a window.

"I'll explain later. Is Mort there now?"

Without waiting for a reply he strode toward Mort's office, leaning forward, elbows working. Letty stood agog, watching him go. Kamala seemed to shake herself awake, excused herself with an excited murmur, raced after him.

In fifteen minutes she returned, breathless and (for the first time anyone could remember) tearful with the news which she recounted to the staff, who had by then wandered back from lunch. The air in the room seemed to have stopped. Barry had left the building with Mort and the other managers; they were meeting privately now.

"It's happened," were the words Kamala heard Barry say, before they cleared off.

Word had already hit Research and Development, Technical, Sales, and Accounting, each of which were similarly gathered that moment. A conglomerate to the south called Source-All had bid to purchase Infinite Information. This office, the Sausalito office, would close. Employees who wanted to stay with the newly fattened Source-All had to move to headquarters two hours south in Milpitas, a vast, treeless stretch in the middle, Kamala quoted Barry, of "absolute fucking nowhere." The area was flat, made up of warehouses, an occasional bar. Those who didn't wish to move south would be given two weeks' severance pay and laid off. The decision would be formally announced in a month.

Letty had sat down, so pale she was almost blue. It was Kamala who took up the role of spokesperson—but not, it appeared, with any intention to reassure the baby chicks. Rather, she was ready to curse the buyout gods on behalf of them all.

"My friends, they're making us walk the plank."

Kamala stood to address her colleagues. They stared at her, each other, at the floor, opening their mouths, shutting them. All the papers, the books. The charts and manuscripts and notes, all the corkboards crammed with memos, gummy coffeecups, sales graphs, drying daisies in half-evaporated water. Brass-plated plaques, scattered litter that made the place look like a war room—all of it now took on a comic flimsiness, like cut-out paper snowflakes taped to the windows of a grade school. Belief in the entity of the business—the dimensional Thing which had been their employer—became stuffing, pouring in a gush from its broken form. There was no one to appeal to. These moves were made by invisible consortiums that met in 104th-floor conference rooms in distant cities, rooms with spectacular views, filled with fresh flowers, attorneys, coffee. Business giveth: business taketh away. Kamala spoke with fine fury, chin jutting, nostrils darker red. Perhaps she imagined herself a firebrand. She shook her tissue at the group, a hard knowingness in her eyes. She'd seen this coming, for years. Known from the first.

"In other words, my friends, it's business as usual. This is the way they reward us." She waited for a rejoining outcry.

None came, as people drifted away. No one bothered to answer.

Alex told Maddie at once about Gray, but not about the abortion.

She'd had to do a quick reckoning when she woke, saw her sister sitting patiently by the window, in steel blue light of summer evening. Blue light outlined Maddie's hair, made it platinum, clipped up against her head in the familiar, brisk way. Even Maddie's hair, Alex mused, was pragmatic.

How much do I tell her?

You can't tell Maddie everything. Maddie *thinks* she should be told everything. Thinks—believes—she can handle it. But once you fell for that—and Maddie made it so easy, so *tempting* to fall for that—she could make you very, very sorry you did.

Maddie's learning of Gray was bad enough.

She leaned forward in the canvas chair, arms stretched long, dangling across each other over one crossed knee, attention so keen it looked satirical.

"Um: would you mind running that by me again?"

Alex was sitting up in bed, arms around her blanketed knees. Aware, weirdly, of the sanitary pad between her legs, something she hadn't worn since she began her menses as a girl. Proud and confused then, her mother abashed, handing her the box of pads: "You know

how to use these, don't you?" She had known, vaguely, what hygiene class had taught. It was Maddie who got her familiar with the strange routine, brusque, matter-of-fact. How wretched it would have been to stand helplessly while her mother pinned her into the contraption, which was after all a streamlined diaper held in place with some cross between a G-string and a garter. The pad felt blocky, like a small paperback book between her legs. *My God, what a crude solution*, she'd thought as a girl. *This was the best they could come up with?*

At least she felt no serious cramping now. Maddie brought her a glass of cold juice, placed it in her hand. Guava–passion fruit, the cold glass surface netted with condensed droplets of water. The drink tasted blissful, popsicle sweetness. Alex was touched to see her sister, touched by her quick nursing instinct—but it would have been better if Maddie had given some warning of this visit. Yet she well knew—had Maddie actually tried to set a date, Alex would have stalled her as long as she could. Maybe indefinitely. Maddie knew it too, of course.

She would not tell her sister Gray's name. She was patient and firm on that.

"Okay, once more. I love the man. He is married. There is no hope for it. Absolutely no future, no happy ever after. There was—a difficult incident—recently. I've not seen him for a while. I'm sorry, Mad. I know it isn't wise. It's the opposite of wise. But I will deal with it. I will. So please please *please* don't try to talk sense into me—at least not right now. I'm not so well right now."

Alex lay back against the propped pillows, straightened her legs under the bedclothes.

She did look paler than usual.

Maddie's face was a field of battle on which several factions squared off, twitching. Then something radiant overcame these, some inspiration. The battle lifted, replaced by a pained, beatific sympathy.

"Allie, sweetheart, what is it you were looking for?"

The tenderness in her sister's voice, grandly misconceived as it was, opened something in Alex's chest, perhaps a store of feeling from prior months: a pin pierced the dike, and Alex felt her eyes fill. *Oh, no.* She pinched them shut, squinched the water back.

"For God's sake, Mad." Rubbing hard with the back of her hand at the outside corner of each eye. "You can do better than that. You're supposed to scream and yell," Alex muttered. "We'll have to write you up; demerits for slacking."

Maddie rested her chin in the palms of both hands, droll, elbows on her knees.

"Am I so monstrous as that? Mistress of punishments?"

Alex, for an answer, raised her brows as she tilted her head back to take another sip of juice.

Maddie persisted. "I came to help, Allie. I knew you were in some humbug or other. What else would I show up for?"

Alex looked at her, attentive. *You tell me.*

Maddie saw her sister hadn't substantively changed in the last year and a half. Not that she had exactly expected her to.

"Okay, porcupine-girl. Let's get out of here awhile. I need air. And dinner. Yes to dinner, at least?

Alex smiled. Some things, thank God, they could still agree on.

As girls, they'd agreed well enough.

Perhaps it was odd, how rarely they'd fought. Alex had always been peaceable, self-contained. Maddie smiled out the window while Alex showered—the air deepening blue, the town square lighting up with storefront neon, glass limned by the silver of the rising moon. She could clearly remember teaching Allie to talk. They'd sat facing each other on the front porch—how small, how small the house, at the base of the desert mountains. Their father had paid ten thousand dollars for it, in 1951. They'd moved in, Joe and Lilian, just before Maddie was born. Maddie knew the house price because her father had told her once, but she can no longer remember when he'd told her, or why. Ten thousand must have been a lot then, on a teacher's salary. Brand-new wood, brand-new paint. You can see it in the photos, the old black-and-whites with scalloped edges (*Camelback Studios* stamped on the white backs). It looks barren in the photos, the oleanders and palms not grown yet. Maddie has kept all the photos she could find, carefully placed in fresh albums now. There you see them: Maddie in her Buster Brown haircut, plaid dress, Peter Pan collar. All knees. Standing alongside their seated father, on his lap fat baby Alex in nothing but a plain cloth diaper. Joe vital and manly, a few strands

of gray already visible. Barechested, Joe, pretending to scowl. Alex hilariously fleshy propped against their father's chest, cheeks spilling onto a Buddha belly, balloon navel. Baby legs like little hams. Everything so fresh and new, the wood, the paint, their baby skin, the light in their father's eyes, their mother's blood red lipstick, rich even in black and white. Roses the same color, that precise blood red, twined up the porch posts, vines their mother had loved. (How Lilian grieved when dust storms whipped the velvet blooms from their stems, banished them into the brown dustbowl of the town.)

The little girls had sat cross-legged opposite each other in the porch shade. Maddie would say the word; Allie tried her best to pronounce it. Yellow. *Lellow.* Spaghetti. *Basketti.* Hamburger. *Hangaber.* Allie listened and repeated: her wiry hair poofed out all over like a lion's mane. Their mother pinned it back from her face at each side with bobby pins, forcefully. Containing fierce with fierce. Little Alex *was* fierce. Maddie tried once to climb onto their father's lap, behind her baby sister already perched there. Allie's face pinched into a rictus of grief. *I sitting here! I sitting here!* Beseeching the assembled, the arbiters of children's lives, to right a terrible wrong. At once hasty movements were made, a busy chorus of cluckings rained upon them as Maddie felt herself lifted into the air, placed back down on an unoccupied pair of legs.

But the girls had camaraderie from the beginning, forced (as it always is) by the simple fact of nearness, the tiny bedroom. Routines known, delights agreed upon. They stood face to face on the teeter-totter unit of the swingset in the yard, swaying laterally, two parts of a sandwich a giant was coming to eat. They grouped marbles into families in shoebox houses with cut-out doors and windows, gave them elaborate lives. They stirred bowls of ice cream soup, tasting, making critical pronouncements. They sang to each other underwater at the municipal pool—"Jingle Bells" easiest to recognize. They rollerskated in circles on the big concrete slab out back while their

mother hung wash. Each pushed along on one skate of the pair. "Oh, Susannah." "Skip to My Lou." "Sparrow in the Treetop." The sounds made a flinging energy. *Flies in the buttermilk, shoo fly shoo! Skip to my lou my darr-linn.*

They were not equipped to pay attention to their mother's sadness, the way she sat on the toilet with a cigarette, eyes closed, smoke flowing up in a thin column from between her fingers. Sometimes she sat at the dining table the same way, an untouched plate of toast before her. Scarcely five feet, Lilian, once very pretty, later with cropped hair that sometimes mashed in on one side, huddled in oversized Pendleton shirts and baggy trousers and sunglasses, nodding at the girls on the merry-go-round or in the pool, the girls hollering *Watch me Momma, watch me.*

When Alex put on fresh clothes (how good the clean, dry cotton, good to have slept—a bit light-headed yet), the sisters walked to the square in the blue evening, a soft pulse of crickets in the air. Alex didn't want to visit the Mozart Café—told Maddie she'd tired of it. She led Maddie across the square into the old Italian place, Viviani's. Alex knew some of the waiters there (she had taken care never to bring Gray near them). Greetings were exchanged, introductions made.

A glass of red wine before Maddie. A glass of lemonade before Alex.

Maddie nodded at the sugary drink. "Still not given it up, I see."

"Given up what?"

"The teetotalling."

Alex waved a hand. "Simpler this way."

"Less painful."

"Simpler, Maddie."

Alex sipped, looking around the cool, dark room. Suitably dark, enough you could hardly see the bar on the other side. Smells of stale

liquor, tomato paste, old cheese. Red booths, plain walls, framed ink sketches of landscapes (cypress trees, peasant cottages) above each table. Empty chianti bottle for a candleholder, its round, labeled belly buried under multicolored, faded wax drippings. Alex noticed the dust on the hardened drippings. *A thousand ossified nights,* she thought. Little freestanding museums, pleasure recorded in these hardened extrusions, dusty red-green-blue sweatbeads of wax.

Alex longed to get to a phone. She would break the rule—unspoken, strict, hallowed rule—try to phone him. But there was no moment for it, unless she risked trying while Maddie was in the bathroom. Too risky. She'd have to wait two days, till Sunday when Maddie flew home. Unbearable. Aware it betrayed Maddie on some level to think this way, turning from her in the hour of her kindness—this wild impulse to race away, lose her sister.

The soundspeakers played Dean Martin. "Return to Me." *Hurry back, hurry back, solo tu, solo tu.* The earnest, boozy warbling made Alex smile a little. So world-weary, so wringing-wet. She pictured a sozzled mynah bird in a tuxedo.

But Maddie wasn't interested in savoring atmosphere. She leaned forward, one hand on the base of her wineglass. (Nails still professional, Alex noted. Tasteful ovals, clear polish. Manicures not a luxury, but a ground-level staple like bread, milk.)

She was gazing equably at Alex. Alex smiled back. Maddie's face reminded her of a teacher on the first day of school, addressing her scrubbed-bright class.

"Sweetie, we've got to figure out what you're doing."

Alex was polite.

"What I'm doing? Well, it's not fireworks, I grant you. But it's not entirely dull. I go to a health club, Maddie—for their steam room, mainly. You'd like it there."

She wished she could give Maddie a little taste of the steamy retreat. She'd not been there in so long. Not since—the blood test,

and everything that followed. She looked at her lap, aware of the bulky pad though it didn't show. Only occasionally, she had already decided, would she allow herself to wonder about it. Might there be a punishment waiting when she died, some eternal torture expressly designed for her? So be it, she thought, pressing her lips together. The life we'd have had on earth would have been worse. A life of food stamps, free-box clothes, mortification at checkout counters, of macaroni and cheese, helplessness, begging. She'd seen those young women, plenty of them. The coffin-sized box of *never enough* had broken their nails and their hearts, sometimes their minds.

And Gray, of course, would have become instant history.

Oh when, when could she see him?

"Alex, never mind the fucking steam room. I mean it can't keep doodling off into nowhere like this." Maddie's forefinger made a corkscrew motion, looping sideways above the table. Returned to take up the wineglass, sipped.

Alex felt her face prickle. *Here we go.*

"What the hell kind of pronouncement is that?"

"It's what I'm sensing, what I'm hearing from you. Really, what's this place doing for you, Allie? You don't have any friends."

Again, the famous indictment. Ever since grade school. *Makes friends easily*—or not. The *not* made you a psychopath in training. *She has no friends.* The words' sour boding upstaged their accuracy. Whom did she care for—whom did she know enough to care for, besides Gray? Not since Stephie Rifkin, in college, had there been someone she could talk to. But Stephie'd moved to Oregon, had a baby, then another; sent a card every Christmas. The people at the office were idiots. How complicated was that to understand?

What, anyway, did this idealized circle of friends look like? A Michelob commercial? Handsome faces, toasting one another in candlelight. Sharing some lilting, self-satisfied wavelength. *Tonight is kinda special.*

Alex shrugged. Impossible to defend a life that was less the taking of a stand, than an ad-hoc adaptation.

"I like it that way," was all she said.

"It's not *going* anywhere for you, Allie. And now there's this—this dead-end romance. Like some—" Maddie paused. "Like a symptom of a bigger problem, don't you think?"

Alex sighed. Rage would waste energy at this point, though rage would have been the customary choice.

"It's always so clear for you, isn't it, Mad. Just snap your fingers, decide, and presto, the path is clear, the map drawn."

Maddie struggled visibly to keep the annoyance out of her face.

"Sweetie, have you stopped to think this through? Narrowed it down at least, to what it is you actually want?"

How Alex dreaded these words, the accounting they demanded. She had known since she could talk that for some reason, though she was smart, she would never possess, never desire to possess what the words seemed to demand. Nothing in her resembled the savvy being, the smart shopper she supposed the world wanted, a Cinderella who was also valedictorian. One of those Marin types who looks like a model, gives impeccable dinners (and presumably, sex), tilts forward like a powersaw to slice her way through the task list so every piece falls into a perfect, fragrant, aligned stack: *graduate degree, marriage and children, distinguished career, natural beauty, wit, grace. Clink, clank, clunk*. Sentences that began *What are you going to do about* had made her stomach drop since seventh grade, when she'd had to give a Career Report. Even now, thinking the words *career report* sent a faint spasm through it.

"Maddie, may I ask what makes you the expert? How, exactly, did you get elected?"

Maddie kept her eyes steady, spoke calmly.

"I got what I wanted."

True. By comparison with her big sister, from all outward measure, Alex must seem barely toilet-trained.

And yet Gray had made her feel—he had used the word *magnificent*.

She swung out in anguish.

"Got it all, huh? Paid for in full, then? Just the way you wanted?"

Maddie flicked her eyes toward the bar. Signed the waiter, pointing to her empty glass.

Alex pressed.

"Supposing what you want isn't enough for me?" As soon as she spoke she heard the superiority in the suggestion; at once sought to modify it. "What if it isn't the *same* for me?"

Maddie's face warmed. Home and Family were pleasant spoils, but common. The knowledge flared along her nerves, a low, rippling voltage. She spoke with exaggerated patience.

"We are dealing here with what in the world it is that *would* be enough for you. What would be *right* for you. That you yourself would want. That is the problem, Allie. That's what we're trying to address."

Alex's nostrils flattened; she looked away as if to an audience at tableside.

"*Address.* What am I, the national debt?"

The waiter, a balding, bored young man, interrupted them.

"Ready to order, ladies?"

Both women looked up blindly, lowered their heads to stare at menus they did not see.

"Give us a few more minutes, please," Alex mumbled.

When Maddie became aware—only dimly, she was just eleven—of the sadness in their mother, it was almost the end anyway.

The vision is folded away most of the time now, stored like winter clothing. Smelling of mothballs.

In fact it had been mothballs their mother used to preserve winter things—things they'd never need in Arizona, but that Lilian had thought they might again one day, perhaps to fly home, poor creature, to New York. Mothball smell, intense camphor, synthetic. It fanned up in waves, camphor, mildew, the stale gardenia sweetness of their mother's Arpège, when the girls would rifle their parents' closet. Wrapping themselves in satiny skirts, cotton dresses with pockets. They tried on shoes—scents of leather, rank foot-sweat, mystery of the tamped-down darkness that went so far back. Clomping around, small feet lost in the shoes, wobbling on their mother's heels, laughing. One side of the closet his, one hers. Above the racks on each side, boxes stacked to the low ceiling. So hopelessly small, that closet, they could scarcely turn around in it. Like the house. Like everything, those years. But smallness hadn't fazed them. They were small themselves. It was a fine life, days clear and warm. No end of hamburgers, Oreos, of chocolate milk, Monopoly, Parcheesi. The sprinkler in the

front yard. Through its cold, loopy sprays of diamonds, its even-tempered *chick-chick-chick* they'd take running leaps clad in their underpants, shrieking, crossing back through. Over and over, till the poor lawn became a mushy pond. A black-and-white snap of Maddie from this period: eyes closed, arms raised to the benevolent sun, Donald Duck pattern on her elastic-waist panties, ribs pushing out along her bare chest, her little boy's chest at what, nine? Alex standing calmly on the sidewalk at three: friendly, unperturbed, dark red rubber swim cap with longish lobes tugged down, an aviator. Round belly shameless under the soaked swimsuit. Sturdy, forthright little legs. Those legs said *I'm here, and I'm fine.*

For their mother, of course, it had been hell. They couldn't have known it. Her loneliness, Joe's absences. Lilian knowing, the way women know, what he was doing. She'd had no friends because she never left the house, except to tote the little girls to the Frostee Freeze. (Three-year-old Alex, pointing: "Mommy, why is that lady fat?" Loudly, pointing arrow-straight; Lilian, murmuring in pain, bustled the girls out the door, curlicued vanilla cones in hand.) In the fifties, one woman told Maddie years later, "you just injected your grapefruit with vodka, and shut up." The girls raced through the house yelling, marauding, oblivious.

Maddie remembered the day they broke the planter-lamp. Kitsch now, but at the time it would have been admired; perhaps Lilian had specially loved it. Two brass bowlfuls of earth tumbled across the floor. The sisters hadn't meant to. They'd rounded a corner too fast on one of their stampedes, crashed into the bookcase; the lamp had pitched to the linoleum. Clumps of blackish earth scattered accusing, obscene, like feces or dark guts. Their mother stood looking silently at the mess. For a paralyzing moment both girls thought she would weep, or strike them. They stood gazing up at her, terrified. Then she told them, her voice breaking, *Just go away. Go on, go out and play.*

Maddie stared at the menu. To think you and your sister had peo-

pled a lonely woman's hell. Had actually run some of the swords through the box that encased her.

We should be closer, she thought, glancing at Alex over the top of the menu. Given the givens. She shook her head very slightly.

Alex saw the little headshake. This long we've lived, she thought, her eyes flicking back to the menu. This long, without variation.

Their father Joe, the magic man. A hundred feet tall, smelling of pipe tobacco, sweat, bourbon, deep-voiced god who owned a million record albums and a million books and went away for long periods (they never understood where), returning with presents. He was a teacher at Phoenix College. They could recite that much when asked, like their phone number and address. The rest was fog. Maddie remembered a day when they were very young, Joe gone awhile. The doorbell rang, and the little girls knew he was expected. They raced to the front door, with all their might together dragged it open. And there he was. Backlit all around by the scarlet of the dropping sun, squatting on the porch so he could greet them at eye level.

Grinning hazel eyes dancing and snapping, his arms stuffed with packages.

Hiya, Joe whispered.

They began shrieking. *Daddy, Daddy.* Leapt upon him, clung to him with all their strength. Packages dropped everywhere. The light of the late afternoon silver-yellow, the heat of wet dust, hose water, baked pavement. A thousand smells on their big father, the road, exhaust fumes, cigarettes, beer, sweat. The hair along his forearms salty with sweat.

If they could have opened him up, climbed in, zipped themselves inside, they'd have done it with no second thought.

He'd been to Mexico City. The gifts! Puppets in *folklorico* costume. Sombreros and skirts, saturated colors, emerald, ruby, turquoise. Maracas shining with lacquer, painted scenes of people and animals,

half-green half-red, the lacquer reflecting daylight in a thick white stripe. For their mother a silver conch belt, silver earrings set with jade, turquoise.

He'd picked their mother up under her arms and swung her round and round like a doll. The girls stopped shrieking to watch open-mouthed as their tiny mother's body flew out in a circle: her skirt, pink and black checks, ballooning out in the shape of a bell. Her legs showed bare almost up to her white cotton panties, her feet in white cotton socks and black wedgies, flying around in a circle, helpless. She laughed and blushed but a kind of strickenness was in her laugh, in the crinkles at her eyes. The girls watched. Maddie watched, and it made her afraid.

Their parents had met, her father once told her, in New York, when both were secretaries in the Army during the war. They'd come west when a job was offered him at the college. Maddie couldn't know more until long after they were dead, and she began writing some of his old colleagues. One kindly man wrote back: *In your place, I'd want to know.* Told her what he knew. She'd relayed all she learned to Allie as soon as she learned it: The women, many of them students. The private detective one husband hired. The college dean presenting their father with photographs taken by the detective, their father offering his resignation on the spot. Joe told Lilian everything, promised they would make a fresh start, drank more and more heavily. (Maddie dated Alex's quitting alcohol from the advent of Maddie's having given her this news, though Alex would never discuss it.) One woman, her voice cracked with age on the phone, told Maddie Joe had consumed most of a bottle of scotch during the hour or two he'd spent seeking her advice, while her husband, a good friend to Joe, had been away at work. And then Joe had tried to make a pass at her. The woman had made a show of laughing him off. But the incident grieved her, she told Maddie, grieved her for Lilian.

Joe had gone to find another job in another city when it happened.

Maddie had set up the ironing board in the living room. Labor Day. Eleven years old, pressing away at the blouses and shirts and skirts, piece by piece, listening to Buddy Holly on the radio. *Every day, it's getting closer, goin' faster than a roller coaster.* Her mother sleeping late, something rare. Maddie felt heroic; she disliked ironing. (She would send out clothes for pressing the rest of her life.) Every so often she'd tiptoe into her mother's room, lift a few more empty hangers from the snarl in the closet. Lilian seemed to sleep soundly, curled on her side, the room dark, still. Maddie tiptoed out with care.

She'd propped the front door open to the lovely day, Allie played on the grass in the yard, a warm September morning, school to start soon. Their father had commenced his new job in a different city; they would fly out to the home he would have ready for them at the end of the school term. The silver iron distorted Maddie's determined face in its reflection, a convex curve; the iron ticked and clicked, its tail the black-and-white striped cord following along. Maddie liked to wet her finger, touch the surface quickly, feel the hiss. She sprayed the clothing from a Windex bottle filled with water. Scent floated up clean and steamy, detergent-smelling. Piece after piece she picked from the wrinkled pile in the basket, made smooth with her silver tool. Her mother's sleeveless blouses, her own skirts, blouses. Lilian would be so pleased, would make an exaggerated O with her mouth in surprise, praise her. The cluster of freshly pressed pieces grew where she hung them, along the edge of the Formica table. Maybe their mother would take them to the Frostee Freeze.

It grew later, and later still. It was not usual for her mother to sleep so late. Maddie began to consider this at about the same time that she became aware of a small buzzing in her chest's center, almost imperceptible. A faraway motor, sound of a distant airplane. After a long time of trying to decide, postponing and considering and postponing, she tiptoed again into the bedroom. It was dark blue and green in

there, the closed-tight blinds sealing out the morning light. The room smelled of sheets, shoe leather, shadowy perfume, mothballs from the closet. Lilian still curled on her side the exact same way, eyes closed, motionless.

"Mom?"

Maddie spoke softly at first, into the gloom. Lilian did not stir.

"Momma?"

Maddie's heart began to rattle, the little buzz in her chest expanding louder, like an approaching plane. A quickening, tightening her chest.

"Mommy."

Maddie took hesitant steps to the foot of the bed. Her mother did not move. Maddie now noticed a peculiar color to her mother's face, a very faint blue cast which darkened just perceptibly at her lips. *Wrong*, the color. *Wrong*, the non-movement. Wrong, wrong—

"*Momma!*" Maddie touched her mother's arm, and the lifeless give of the cool flesh beneath it, the sag at the corner of the blue-tinged lips, told Maddie something she had no name for, her heart roaring now, mingling in a rush with the roar that overcame her ears. She turned and ran out of the room, through the living room where the iron still sat patiently clicking and ticking on the board, out the door, past five-year-old Allie sitting in the yard with some dolls and her Red Flyer wagon. *Something is wrong with Mom*, Maddie gasped as she raced past her sister, who looked up from her toys in stupid surprise. Maddie ran to the front door of the next-door neighbors—Mr. Castle, an old, thin man who lived with his ancient mother, tended a back garden, had thin pale hair and pale eyes that peered through wire spectacles. Pounded on the screen door, called into the living room—smelling of hot cereal—dimly, dimly saw furniture backlit by late light of morning; no one seemed there at first, *Mr. Castle! Mr. Castle!* heart screaming, brain roaring roaring, a great swarm of bees that covered her and closed her off, pain of no breath at the center of her

chest, no breath no breath. *Mr. Castle something's wrong with my mother*—Maurice Castle, poor old man (she would reflect often, later), his big loose pants fastened high with suspenders, smelling of cream of wheat and unguents, spectacles thick as biscuits, appeared, came fast at once with her, following right behind as she raced back, his old mother too, her silver-blue hair in its tight careful perm, apron still on, reading glasses banging against her chest on their pearl chain, three of them racing back across the yard, back past a bewildered Allie, and the two adults made Maddie wait in the hall while his old mother crept into the bedroom; Mr. Castle stationed himself in the doorway, between Maddie and whatever his mother would learn. The light in the hall polleny, slow watery whey, stillness of the rooms absolute, as if time itself held its breath—and at some unglimpsed signal from his mother (unglimpsed by Maddie but it made Mr. Castle start; much later she decided it must have been a meaningful headshake, gaping eyes), Maurice Castle turned to Maddie with a glassy face. He did not look at her but at a space above and behind her—to the end of her life she would remember it—as if to ask a question of some taller being standing just in back of her: *Can You possibly really want it this way,* his face said. He said nothing but in one quick movement put both his arms around Maddie, pulled her against his thin flat chest in its old-man shirt, thin cotton with its undershirt beneath, his faint soap smell, frail and frightened, and Maddie was no longer in her body but loose and floaty, the bees' bearing-down buzz turned to a faint hissing, like distant waves.

The rest of it blurred fast-forward. Allie was brought inside—and it was Allie, strangely, who remembered where the piece of paper was kept with the telephone number of their father written on it. Mr. Castle phoned Joe, and the two girls were shuttled to different playmates' homes on the street for the rest of the day, until their playmates' mothers learned that the girls' father had flown back and was arriving, and the girls were sent home to meet him just as he stepped out of

the taxi in front of the little house. (Their mother's body no longer in the bedroom, but neither girl would go near that room for the rest of their days in the house, days when the kitchen was filled with foreign food in foreign dishes the color of dreams, pale lime and salmon, gelatin salads with red and pink bits in them, potatoey goo.) The little girls pasted themselves to their father as the three lumbered through the front door like a single awkward animal. Joe sat heavily in the big armchair, where their dachshund had once had puppies. In the chair he took Maddie in one arm and Allie in the other, the two girls curled tightly into him like pups themselves. He said *Well girls, I guess all we can do is cry,* and then he began to cry a little, a few dry sobs.

They'd never seen their father cry before.

A heart attack in her sleep, he told Maddie and Allie that afternoon. The truth, learned thirteen years later when Joe died, and Maddie was twenty-four, was barbiturates from the medicine chest, prescribed for their six-foot-plus father, perhaps mixed with alcohol—that part never clear. Lilian not five feet, scarcely one hundred pounds. It took writing and phoning, after Joe died, to find out.

It is possible your mother only wanted some sleep, one friend said—the one who spoke of injecting grapefruit with vodka.

Allie didn't remember it as she, Maddie, did. Allie remembered little, a few details. Just as well. Who'd want it sealed in a five-year-old mind? But it made Maddie tired, carrying the scenes in her head. She'd no wish to pass them to anyone, to punish anyone with them—certainly not Roy, who had his own troubles, though he knew the story—not Alex, never Alex—least of all Willie. But she'd have so liked to be done with them, lay them away for good. That was, she reckoned, the unbidden door prize of adult life. You could never quite lay them away for good.

She missed Willie suddenly, a physical ache so powerful it amazed her: wanted to push her face (closing her eyes) against the silky bulk of his warm belly scented with baby powder, belly that pushed back

against her face like a beachball, hear his pealing gurgle and laugh, feel him pat her face with his puffy small palms. *Mumma*, he called her. *Mumma*. The first sound, she supposed, all along the whole span of us. The whole span of everything.

It didn't happen the way it was supposed to.

A joke on us all. A joke on me, Mort thought: the ways things turn out. He had so braced himself for the scene he was certain would take place. Hadn't he witnessed it between others, on the faces of others, a thousand times? Participated himself that many times? He'd braced for it. Maybe both of them had. So the end—rather perhaps, the way it clapped shut—took them both, truthfully, by surprise.

They were on their way to see the swans near the old rotunda. The Palace of Fine Arts, the Saturday following Barry's announcement. August now, the city cold, of course. Tourists stood in forlorn little clutches, hunched, pink-legged with cold on the fog-whipped street-corners, sun slivering through where it could, a silver-black wafer behind the fog. If they'd made it to the Rotunda they'd have found the lagoon dirty green, filmy things on the surface, but the swans and birds looked happy. The few benches facing the water already full: a Chinese woman scattering breadcrumbs, old men in Forty-Niners jackets, smoking and squinting, young Mexican and African and Asian nannies in tennis shoes, their charges staggering about, some on child leashes. Dogs made the rounds. Young mothers jogged, pushing sleek baby strollers before them.

The two men had begun their walk at Fort Mason. It was Skip who'd phoned Mort at home, late the previous night, Friday night, to suggest it. Mort had cautiously accepted, a terrible, sinking understanding in his temples and belly as he listened to the opaque, bright conviviality in Skip's voice. He'd had to clear his own throat two or three times to pitch his responses in a matching key. News of the sale was only hours old, but neither spoke of it. Mort had also taken care not to ask about Skip's long silence, or where he'd been keeping. The two would find some food, they agreed, watch the swans on the lagoon by the old pavilions.

They had not been together for a month.

Mort had driven across the bridge as if for the last time that morning, looking out the car windows in snatches. He'd always loved these views: brown cliffs rooted somewhere beneath the green sea, white triangles of sails, sometimes a long black freighter or fishing trawler just passing under the bridge as he'd cross it, dark chops of water spread evenly as goosebumps, slender band of sand along China Beach, spires of neighborhoods in the Sunset district fanning out behind: glinting, onion-domed parapet of the Russian Orthodox Church. Gulls wheeled in flocks, following the ferries, the fishing boats. Sometimes, to his delight, a squadron of pelicans crossed above as he made his way over the bridge. The sight thrilled him. Flapping slowly, heads steady (settled back on their necks, Churchillian, as if contemplating at great and private depth), they cruised in formation. Even their getting of food had dignity. He'd seen one or two dive for fish. Bold and clean, straight down, like bombers they'd suddenly fall from their positions in the sky.

To meet somewhere at a remove from their homes, was probably best, Mort knew. They'd agreed to park at the old cannery, on the water. Mort crept into the parking lot, saw Skip waiting in his Ghia. Ridiculous thing, dusty and scratched, some prior owner's bumper-

sticker still stuck there despite visible efforts to scratch it off, small black capital letters on faded paper, *Visualize Whirled Peas.* The slogan summed us well, Mort thought as he yanked the parking brake. People's lives and trajectories, boinging, banging. Ping-pong balls in an air-popper. His heart wheezed. He waved through the driver's side window, in a manner he desperately hoped looked casual. Skip emerged from his car with an unreadable face, camouflaged by a squint against the overcast glare. They stood together near the pilings that once protected the old cannery from battering by docked freighters: huge rubberized posts like big plugs, hung with long beards of wet green moss, barnacles. Against them the restless water sloshed and slapped, color of laundry water. A few sea lions lolled on the sagging remnants of a pier, where the cannery once loaded ships for transport. They were enormous, slick with water, rippling their blubbery forms around.

Skip kissed Mort quickly on the mouth as soon as they had turned from inspecting the sea lions and slapping water: a quick, furtive movement. It struck Mort to the heart that his guess about this meeting's purpose had been correct. He managed to turn his face toward their walk's direction, as if to spur their going. Skip fell in step beside him, and they set out toward the Marina, talking at first (a merciful blanket over the strangeness) about the fate of Infinite Information. A female voice from the office—Kamala's, it had to be—had left a phone message on the machine at Skip's house Friday night, with the news. When he'd returned from his long bus ride and listened to this message, it seemed uncannily timed, a clear signal. The reality of the news—its absurd option to move to Milpitas—only confirmed the thoughts he had been forming on the bus, watching the hills out the window. It was late by the time he played the message (prompted by a note on the dining table), his housemates nowhere in view. Skip had sat down at the dining table, pulled his black book from his satchel,

called Mort to set up their date, and then made several long-distance calls. (His housemates would later complain, in disgust, he'd never paid for them.)

"Had you known?" Skip's first question. Mort started; it took him a beat to understand that Skip meant the advent of the sale. As they walked, Mort told him the truth. None of the managers had known, not until the last minute when Barry had called their emergency meeting just after lunch—convening them, Mort now supposed, in some hasty idea of parting-shot generosity, a clubby, executive *oblige*. Or perhaps it was company policy; managers had to hear it from the president's mouth first. Though the media had not yet been alerted, Barry, no stranger to change, had already finalized his own arrangements. Headhunters had found him a position with ZyBex, producers of software for security systems, across the bay in Emeryville. Trisha had been offered an administrative post with the same company, as part of Barry's incentive package.

Skip snorted. They paced the waterfront, the walk that hemmed the long rectangle of grass. Cars tooled past the ornate old Marina homes, homes like frosted wedding cakes, chevrons, garlands, fleurs-de-lis carved into their trim. On the water side along the grass field, young men played soccer. They shouted and fell, sprinted, danced sideways to keep their feet around the ball. Orange and pink frisbees sailed back and forth; a half-dozen kites—boxes, whirling pinwheels—swayed high against the clouds. Dogs smiled widely, straining at leashes, lush coats riffling in the wind.

"So much for loyalty," Skip said. "So much for the gold watch, huh, Mortie? Where's the roast beef and champagne, the teary speeches? A few trophies at least?"

Mort looked at the ground as he paced, holding an elbow behind him. He didn't want to get caught up in sneering, gross as the merger and layoffs were. At this moment, less than a day later, he didn't give

a damn what became of the entire enterprise he had labored so hard for: its fortunes now impersonal to him as those of the low, gray clouds. He who'd stayed late each night, coordinating those ridiculous books. Books that looked and read like gibberish, obsolete as soon as they appeared; books that could only be called books by sheerest technicality. He cared less than nothing. How fast the organism adapts, he mused. One moment captain, the next, jettisoned. Emptied of the whole apparatus, not a thought for it. What would I have been, he wondered, in time of war?

It didn't matter. Nothing mattered now except *Please, please don't leave me.*

He kept his voice low.

"There's nothing to be gained by throwing shit at them, Skipper. Who would we throw it at, anyway? That's the funniest part. We'll never lay eyes on the guys who made those decisions—never know who they are. They may as well be gods sitting in the clouds, playing with thunderbolts. We're like those aboriginals making little offerings to the volcano. Racing every direction when the mountain rumbles."

"Maybe it was time for most of us to do something else," Skip said quietly as they paced on.

Mort heard the preface in this. He glanced at the boy who had been his lover. Skip kept his face forward. He looked well, skin taut and smooth, flushed pink under his black leather jacket against the cold fog. Mort breathed deeply as he could through his nose, tried to let the exhaled breath out his mouth, tried to remember his meditation. Scalp to heels, up and down. All the blood vessels, tissue, organs. Clean sweep out the top of the head, white light going out. Or was it white light going in, purple light going out? He tried to envision the little twirling, twinkling white balls, tiny spinning torch-fires purifying his trunk and limbs on the inside. Angel-corpuscles wheeling

through. Internal streetcleaners. But the balls of white fire seemed to slow to a near halt when they got to his chest. Too much density there, he thought. A bog, right about there. He spoke slowly.

"You are planning something, Skipper?"

Cars roared past in silver light, ocean-flavored wind boffed them. A group of men in ragged clothing and dreadlocks pounded a cluster of steel drums, a bossa nova *Claire de lune*, quite beautiful. Scrimmaging athletes—football, soccer—yelled at one another. "Here! Yeah! Yee-ha!"—tumbled into piles, laughing, thuds on the damp grass. The air smelled of hamburgers, garlic, marijuana, salty ocean. Skip looked out past the flanks of joggers, sailing frisbees, skaters, drummers, to the line of sea beyond, Alcatraz planted in its midst a surreal, pasted-on vision, an abandoned Greek city.

The men walked.

"I thought I'd give Las Vegas a try. Always wanted to, remember?"

Skip cast a shy glance at Mort. His face had colored in patches.

"They need service workers. I figure I could do any kind of job at first. I've got a friend there, offered to share his apartment while I get started." His friend was Gideon, a boy he'd met in a bar in Minneapolis, whose work in the gambling capitol seemed to involve numerous elements, only two of which could be discussed by phone: one was sales of long-distance phone cards, the other a business he'd casually described as a male escort service. Fawn was sending Skip money to get settled, as she always did when time came for it.

Mort felt the blow, a pop to the solar plexus. Was the Vegas friend already Skip's lover? From when? How long? But he had braced so hard for it, his reaction came almost before registering Skip's words. Surrounding noise had grown strangely loud. Cars revved past them as if a volume knob had been turned up; chrome and windshield glass and the overcast light itself flared in patches of silver flame, a carousel of sound and light, glaring. Outlines furred and sagged.

Mort began to speak; it was his turn.

"Yes. I remember. Well, it's coming on autumn. Weather should be better for you there," Mort heard himself say.

I sound like some kid's father.

The men kept walking, did not look at each other but occasionally out to sea, under and past the umber bridge, closer now. Mort's chest was squeezing, his heartbeat shallow. *Be with it. Be with it.* He thought of the George Harrison song from college days, played over and over on the portable in his room. Harrison's pinched and nasal voice matching that of the sitar, tabla thumping and echoing, a swallowing sound. *Try to realize it's all within yourself, no one else can make you change . . . And to see you're really only very small and life flows on within you and without you . . .*

"Mort—"

"It's okay," Mort said quickly. "It's probably better. I *know* it's better," he added.

For once, for once I will let it go before it lets me go. If only by a matter of seconds.

"But Mortie, don't you want—"

To his own surprise, something was tightening in Skip's head. He'd thought the break timely, the move to a new city perfectly shoehorned by the act-of-God of the office shutting down. Packing up and clearing off always gave him a rush, a welling anticipation that buoyed and thrilled him. But Mort's face and voice made another scene shimmer forward. *The babysitter. He is seven. He has done something wrong, broken something, said something bad, something terrible. She ignores him, a college girl, silent and cold as she moves about the kitchen fixing their sandwiches—Fawn flitting off to find Cleo the cat, write in her diary, Fawn never offending anyone, ever—it is deliberate, the sitter's silence, and her absence of response has panicked him. Why won't she scold him, remind him of the demarcations, the rules? A downward suck at his stomach, like he is falling and falling. "Don't you want to yell at me?" he had finally asked her, plaintive, bewildered.*

"Don't you want to—" He didn't know how else to say it. Yell at me?

Mort did not look at him.

"I knew the odds when we started, Skip. They were the worst, ridiculous. We don't even—we don't even look right together."

Mort thrust his hands deeper in his front pockets.

"You belong with someone big and built. Younger. Some buffed-out type. Someone sure of himself, who wants to bound around. I'm the one on the sand-kicking end. It never made sense."

Mort kept walking, looking down. The only moment the dynamic shifts, he reflected bitterly, is when you step out of the game. Then you get back that little surge of value—just for a moment. That's your moment, your little zenith. Exit, wounded in action. The audience stands, applauds the injured player as he's carted off on a stretcher.

Mort scanned the sea, somber Alcatraz, the grass pelt filled with Saturday people at play. The two men had stopped in the middle of the sidewalk. Joggers and tourists moved around them unfazed.

"Mortie." Skip longed to catch his eyes now. Though he agreed about the image the two of them made as a couple, he'd never have said it. The fact of Mort's declaring it himself, excising himself without a struggle, made Skip feel weightless, and a little sick. He would not have to defend, argue. He would not have to tell Mort how suffocated he'd felt by Mort's sadness, the Eeyore gloom that weighed, a martyrdom Mort insisted on as far as Skip could see. But this new queasiness made him suddenly want to go backward, pull familiar habits back up to his chin like a blanket. As if to cancel the whole idea of leaving, though he knew it was too late. He wanted it, that moment, both ways. All the affection Skip could find or manufacture he poured into saying Mort's name, all the imploring, teasing closeness he could muster.

"Aw, Mortie."

The sound cut Mort. It had been so long since he'd heard that note in that voice.

Mort found he was crying. *Oh, no. No.*

He turned, put a forearm over his eyes as if cinders had blown into them, talking now to the sidewalk.

"Skipper, I'm sorry, I—I—can't go ahead with this day. I'm really sorry, I've—got to go now. Listen, you'll do really well. I know you will. You'll do really well in Vegas, and—and with—whatever comes after. Goodbye, Skipper. All the best luck in the world. I'm really sorry. I've got to go." Backing up. *Go, get away, get out of here.*

Skip stood still. He hadn't wished—hadn't expected—to cancel the day. He tried to take Mort's arm. "But, Mortie—"

Mort pulled back from Skip's hand, its warmth, as if electric shock were in it—*get away, go go go*—and with that motion kept walking rapidly backward, one arm still over his forehead to shield his eyes, in the cold fog of the summer day.

"Please, Skipper. Please, go on now. Please keep walking."

Skip turned—slow, befuddled—and walked on. If a passerby had idly let her eyes fall upon the two men during those ten minutes, she would have first observed them walking together, one musclebound, a rock musician sort, the other smaller, older, goateed, European-looking. She'd have noticed them stop, speak in some confusion, faces glancing out to sea as if seeking a signal there. Then she would have seen the older man, the bearded one, convulse in his face. He threw an arm over his eyes and turned away, almost violently shaking off the young muscular one, who had put a staying hand to his arm. The older man was saying something sharply, looking frightened. At last the muscular boy turned, began to walk. The small, bearded man turned in the opposite direction. Hands in pockets, head bent, he began walking back the way the two had come.

Just before you enter the Waldo Tunnel (rainbows painted around both its openings), you pass what Alex called the waterfall of fog.

The freeway south is cut into the sides of steep cliffs, cliffs covered with eucalyptus and shaggy brush, sometimes purple and yellow wildflowers—the inner walls of a natural funnel where land gives onto sea. It is the passage spanned by the Golden Gate Bridge, drawing warm and cold air from inland and seaward, which together (Alex could never remember the chemistry) erupted in cascades of fog. The effect was most pronounced in summer. Approach the freeway tunnel through that last wall of rock, look up, and see it spilling from the ridgetops: improbable and operatic as an old movie, *Black Narcissus* with its Tibetan mists, or *Lost Horizon*. Swirling and brimming like smoke from dry ice, tumbling down the rockface through wildflowers, weeds: white weightless lava made of air and water, wind from the sea propelling it, whipping it into car windows cool and thick—even if, out the other side of the car, the vista of bay and city, turrets and towers, belt of mosaic bits catching light along the shoreline—all stretched in clear, full, glittering sun.

Alex loved the fog waterfall.

A magic curtain, preparing you for secrets to come. Stories on both sides of the tunnel, stories from that fist of land jutting into blue water, its placid city, Alexandrian profile surrounded by bays. Stories seeped in from all directions, from the industrial south, from the air and sea, from the migrating east, from the hot, yellow hills to the north whence she'd come. Interlacing, shifting and pulling invisibly together, ebbing apart. The waterfall was an announcing flag, emblem of surging lives. Human scatterings, human fortunes, perpetual movement without solution. She wanted Maddie to see, and at some level she already knew would be impossible, to understand.

She was driving her sister back to the airport.

Sunday morning, the road quiet. Both women limp with relief to anticipate release from one another, and relief made them guilty. Awarenesses shot through them, flushes of helpless affection twined with a constant, uneasy sense of having failed the other. Maddie lay back vacant against her seat. She'd spoken by phone the night before, Saturday night, to Willie, who'd babbled happily into the receiver, unfazed by her weekend absence. This pinched her, though it wasn't as if she had not been away from Willie before, she and Roy taking a weekend now and again, leaving the baby with Roy's mother—and she had spoken to Roy, who'd insisted he'd managed fine. Yet in his voice she'd heard his eagerness that she resume her post. Something in her curled away from that eagerness, some preemptive fatigue.

"Look!" Alex commanded. "At the right. See the fog waterfall?"

Maddie turned her head slightly without lifting it from the headrest, saw the tumble of what looked like thick, gray-white smoke plummeting from the high edge of the cliff, pouring over road and car as they approached the tunnel's maw. Some of the smoke, which was actually cold cloud, pushed through her partly open window straight into Maddie's face: she felt a cool, fierce rush, strangely dry. It seemed to disintegrate at the touch, a remnant from some invisible

world, its fleet, cool memory on the skin. A hot day, Maddie noticed, except just here, at this spot. Yes, that was interesting, but only mildly. Her sister got the craziest attachments.

"Different weather than what we just came from, isn't it?"

"Microclimate," Alex replied. She smiled as the car emerged again into day from the cave-dark tunnel, the panorama opening before them, city and bay, bridges, boats. Ocean wind, wisps of fog blew through the half-open windows, making Alex almost cheerful: closer at least to cheer than she could recently remember. A small sorrow sat at the base of her thinking, hard and irreducible, though she'd already packed it away under layers of necessity—sorrow connected with a kindly doctor, blurred white lights, a table upon which she'd lain. The landscape, the bayscape out the car windows, knew none of this. Landscape cares only for itself, singing as it combs its strumpet hair, indifferent to the catastrophes among the rocks at its feet. The wrinkled rows of waves marched across the sea's surface, miniature puffed white sails dotting it, silver light off the city skyline, famous pyramid, buildings and glass—imperturbable.

As soon as she dropped Maddie, she would go find Gray.

"You ever wish you lived in the city?" Maddie asked.

"Not really. I can visit anytime. The cold summers would be tough on me. And I like my parking easy."

Alex glanced at her sister with a half-grin. In fact she took secret pride in her luck finding parking in the city, where she ventured (rarely enough) for a concert or exhibit, or to eat some delicious *birria* in the Mission. She had an idea this luck stemmed from an ability she could summon, to wander with a kind of gentle attention. But this was not for elaborating to Maddie. She glanced again at the blond woman in crisply belted jeans, navy blue shirt—Maddie always managed to look so unfussily chic, so groomed—lying back emptied against her seat. Poor Maddie. Wanting so to fix her kid sister up, be mother. To fix everything.

I'll make it up to you, Alex promised silently.

It had been dark when the sisters came out of Viviani's Friday night. The darkness embraced them, warmth smelling of cut grass, frying steaks. Mariachi music oom-pahhed with strained gaiety from the taqueria across the square, mingled with slurred hoots and laughter of those spending their pay on drinks. Maddie was a little drunk; she hummed something Alex couldn't make out. Yes, she could: "More I Cannot Wish Ye." In the mildness and warmth of the night, walking single file on the paved path through the grass, Alex missed Gray—his lean body, thick voice, his sharp, clean, fresh-lumber smell—with terrible force. Missed his copper hair, the place at the back of his neck that had a peculiar baby softness. She would have to try to find him, to bring it—whatever "it" might now conceivably be—to some definitive turn. Aware that if she dwelt more than a few seconds on the idea, *definitive turn* could only mean *end*. Likely it was already long ended in his mind, from the day of the truck accident. Likely he assumed she had grasped this from his silence: that he had buried their—their what?—moved forward with his business, his family, his complex dealings. Her wish to push the matter into daylight, to claim (however weakly) some coauthorship—was dressed-up desperation, would force a vulgar, irrelevant drama. Even if she effected her little triumphant last word—and this image made her groan inside, image of a spitting Carmen waving scarves and knives around—what would it prove? What difference could it make?

She couldn't think that far.

None of this, of course, was for her sister to know, her sister who presently sat drained, silent, looking out the window as the car nosed on.

Maddie was intent, Alex knew, on recruiting her—wanted her help exhuming and reburying the family horror, over and over. Oh, you could be sorry as you wanted, for all of them. Their mashed-down mother, wrecked father—whose appetites, whose unap-

peasable loneliness made him fling himself around like a dog, drink till it killed him, thirteen years after their mother's death, both girls just entering the world. Maddie was twenty-four, Alex eighteen. Heart attack, baseball game. Neither daughter living at home. Alex despised the idea of strangers carrying her father's lifeless body out of the bleachers. It would have taken at least two people. Down those endless cement steps inside the big stadium, the cement corridors, the ambulance outside. Hated thinking of what must have been her father's slack, colorless face, hanging mouth, thinning salt-and-pepper hair askew in the wind. Were his eyes closed, and if not, had someone for God's sake had the decency to close them? Her hands clenched the steering wheel. She could see Joe's eyes, the full length of him, hear his voice, smell his smell as if he were beside her. His eyes hazel, leaf-shaped portals of green in brown irises, lit by intelligence, mischief, and when he had drunk a bit, by the distanced light of longing. As he'd aged (so fast, after Lilian's death), she'd noticed milky blue rims around his irises. It had frightened her, the slim band of milky blue. She had tried countless times not to think of the people in the stands. Their curiosity, titillation, a grown man's fully dressed, dangling body hauled down from the stadium bleachers, temporarily obstructing their views. It made her want to smash something.

She looked at the speedometer, took it down a few miles. Maddie was dozing.

After Lilian's death, the three lived as a little unit for a time. They'd moved to Sacramento, where Joe took his new job. Getting the girls into schools—Joe going to the administrators, explaining—the looks they'd got. Joe had remarried, both girls at once at odds with Beryl, a former student closer to his age. She looked like Jane Wyman, glamorous but tough, divorced four, five times before she'd hooked up with Joe. The girls had fled home fast as they could, Maddie to business college, then the full-time airline job, interrupted by marriage to Roy, who'd insisted they make a home near the airline's

hub in Phoenix. Allie to a university thirty miles south of Joe and Beryl, where she'd shared a small room in an apartment, worked for rent, tuition—babysitting, bottlewashing in the college labs. Joe sent her fifty dollars a month, which went a long way then, a single cash bill in an envelope. (She'd lost the money once, misplaced it somehow. Never told Joe, wretched.) After two years at the university she'd slipped quietly out, despite what she knew Joe's wishes to be.

He'd never reproached her. Not a word.

The odd jobs followed: salesclerking, waitressing, typing. A couple of boyfriends. During this period it became clear to Alex that she could never pass for wholesome. She had thought, for an experiment, she might try. Perhaps it would solve everything. She dated, wore a tiny pearl pendant on a delicate gold chain, cutoff jeans like the smiling young women in beer commercials. But not one of those nice boys, so called, had read *Being Geniuses Together.* Not one understood the importance of good bond paper or real butter, or the courtyard scene in *Turandot* where Calaf sings "Nessun Dorma." They said things like "Howdy" and "Sure thing"; spent entire Sundays in packed sports bars, screaming at the television: *Your fucking head's coming right off.*

Then, on a whim, she'd bought a Sunday *Chronicle* in a bookstore. Answered the ad.

The great umber towers of the bridge loomed briefly overhead as she drove, blurred past.

That ground too raked, the Joe and Lilian story. Though she knew it gripped her sister in a chokehold, she couldn't feel it anymore. Sometimes, random things struck. Plucked an invisible tine that sent a single, pitched vibration. She'd hear an old recording of "Embraceable You," remember Joe doing the two-step with her in the living room, her small bare feet securely planted on his big shoes. Or she'd look at the turquoise water of the pool at the gym on sunny days, see the crisscrossed shadows wavering underneath against aqua-painted

walls, smell the chlorine, frying burgers—see Joe taking each daughter in an arm as he moved about the shallow end of a hotel pool, the little girls yelping with excitement, moving along slowly in the water carried by their big, freckling father: his legs in a half-squat moving them forward, smooth motion like a parade float, the girls clinging to his shoulders, wavy lines of his arms under aqua water, clear Phoenix sun, scents of Coppertone, cigarettes, ice in drinks.

Only faintly did she remember the morning Maddie (face contorted) slammed out of the house racing past her for the Castles next door, gasping *something wrong with Mom*. She remembered nothing else of that day, just Maddie racing past her in the morning sunlight; it's even possible she imagined that, susceptible to Maddie's description. No memory of finding the piece of paper bearing their father's phone number, or of playing at the neighbors', as Maddie had told her so many times. Only later came the slow understanding that she'd never seen her mother alive after that.

Alex had tried to feel sad about Lilian. One Christmas after Joe married Beryl, she would have been eight, nine. She'd gotten herself situated in the easy chair in the living room, the suburban house they rented, no one else home. Watched the colored lights winking on the tree. Lilian would not have this Christmas, or any other one. She would never hear or see or smell or speak or eat again, or know what would become of any of them: Alex, Maddie, their father. She wouldn't know about Beryl. Lilian was part of some permanent darkness. Alex tried to imagine what this would feel like, but she couldn't feel anything. Lilian was in eternal darkness, the only fact there was. She wriggled down from the easy chair, wandered away.

All Alex now took from the saga of their parents had distilled—surprisingly fast—to a feeling of inevitability, uncomplicated by judgment. *Death came for you, no matter how you conducted yourself.* Death came if you panicked or were dignified, if you'd shone like a star or made a hash of it. The world didn't blink either way. Freeway

cars kept zooming in both directions after Lilian died, after Joe died, ever since. Never stopped or even slowed. And construction zones on vacant blocks continued to fill with heavy equipment and billowing dust, as hard buildings rose on what had been sleepy pasture, or rocky hills, or scrub brush.

Maddie had spoken first, when the two trudged up the stairwell after the bistro dinner Friday night, lit the lamp that made a dark orange light. The smell of trapped dust, of warmth, filled the apartment. Crickets *screek-screeked* through the open window. Across the square, snatches of mariachi music, laughter. Otherwise, silence. The silence of the country at night was somber and deep, a blackness which threatened to swallow up the stars.

Maddie was taking off her earrings as Alex moved about the room.

"It would be good if we lived nearer each other, Allie. If you came back."

Alex felt her reserves crumble. "Maddie, for the thousandth time, why? I mean I know you'd like to live closer and you know I love Willie and Roy and all—"

Alex did not in fact love Roy. She did not quite trust him. He was too hearty. But Roy had to be cited, as part of the formal package.

"How can you think it would be good for me to go back and live where all that horrible shit happened? Where everything you'd see reminded you? The house, the street, the mountains—"

She did not say *look how it's mauling you.*

"If we made our grown lives together there," Maddie paused carefully. She had taken many glasses of wine with dinner. Her skin bore a moist sheen; she spoke thickly, deliberately. "We'd beat that business. Conquer it. Turn it into something—you know. Make it—take its place."

"*Redeem* is the word you want," Alex snapped. She hated dealing with drinking people, even her own dear sister. Their moldy-bread smell, slowed reactions, revelations so laborious, easy tears.

"*Redeem* is the word you're after, Mad. And no, I don't agree. It only matters we do something for ourselves now, ourselves alone. I can't think about what happened to them anymore. I mean, I'm sorry. It's sad, sadder than anyone can say, and I'm truly sorry it happened, yes, but now it's done. You've got to put it away, Mad. Else it'll drive you crazy. It's arbitrary, there's no going back, and it's done."

Maddie sat heavily on Alex's bed.

Alex threw out an orator's arm, palm up.

"What makes our story the worst there is? What about people whose folks got gassed in the Nazi ovens? What about starving third-worlders, kids with cancer? Muggings and shootings every day? Why're we so special?"

Maddie looked up at her.

"Because it's ours."

She looked at the backs of her hands, cupped over her knees.

"Something to figure out," she murmured.

Alex paced, fists against her chin. "Mad, what more is there to understand? They were weak, they had appetites. She was weak, he was voracious. Lamb met lion. Lion ate lamb."

She stopped directly before Maddie.

"He killed her. Our father killed our mother. Let's just get it said. Truth's supposed to make us free. He killed her. Why don't we say what is true?"

Maddie looked up, her eyes glittering horror, a sickened half-smile.

"Don't," she said.

"Mad, you want this business to keep hacking you up all your life? Then keep carrying it around like this, keep stewing with it. But don't ask me to. Don't ask me to stew with you. We'll both turn moldy. Moldy and Smelly, Attorneys at Law," she added, a stock joke between them.

Maddie stared glassily at her knees. Alex pressed on, wild to crack open that glassy refusal.

"And you know what else? The older we get, the less interesting it is. To anybody. You thought about that? After a while *nobody gives a shit*, Maddie. It's interesting when kids are little, but that's because they're little. Innocent. There's all this—*potential* to consider. Tender destinies. It's very tragic, terrible, terrible. All the grown-ups fly apart trying to smooth it down. Because it happened on their watch, see. Then the kids grow up and get pimples and cellulite, humdrum lives—unremarkable, schlepping lives just like everybody else. By that point it's off the screen, Maddie. No one wants to know what you're *going through*. No one's going to ask for an interview. It's done. It's not—compelling anymore!"

Alex heaved a big exhale.

"We're not the only ones this happens to," she finished, tiredly.

"Maybe," Maddie whispered.

Fuck, Alex thought. Panic began to close around her throat, the want of air for those trapped with a weepy drunk. But this was her sister.

Maddie was looking at the floor, arms folded as if she were cold, though the room was stifling. Alex walked to the window, cranked both glass panes open wide as they would go. She breathed the unmoving night, turned back toward her sister, hands braced behind her against the sill.

She tried to make her voice brisk.

"Mad, what about a therapist?" Alex disliked everything about therapy—it put her in mind of types like Kamala Schwarz—but she wanted to make noises at her sister that sounded active. Normally, this would have been Maddie's tack.

Maddie didn't look up.

"I want to go back," she whispered.

Alex looked at her sharply.

She glanced around for the canvas director's chair, drew it to her sister's knees, sat. If someone could have gazed through the second-

floor window they'd have seen two silhouettes sitting knee to knee, hunched toward each other in the dark gold light of the bedtable lamp. Its light was the color of a nightlight once kept in the little girls' room, a plug-in whose plastic form took the shape of a child-cowboy in chaps and boots, waving his hat with one arm as he rode a bucking pony. How often the girls tried to stay awake in that light, telling jokes, announcing the shapes in the pink stucco walls next to their pillows—a frog, a necklace, a pumpkin—until the black outline of their giant father stood in the opened door, the hall light behind him dusky yellow. *Silencio,* he would say, his voice amused, stentorian. Joe was never mean. He enjoyed them. *Time to sleep.* He would appear because their mother had asked him to. The girls didn't listen to her, Lilian would have complained to him. Her own admonitions, she'd have sighed, never stuck.

Alex leaned forward.

"Maddie, look at me. Go back where, Mad?"

Maddie stared into the hole of air below her hands. "Back to them. Talk to them. Talk them into getting help. So it wouldn't have happened," she said, looking up.

She looked at Alex the way a dog might, beside an unearthed bone.

"Oh, Maddie. Oh, Maddie."

Alex felt her chest sink. Hemingway was right, she thought. Families do terrible things. But Hemingway didn't go far enough. It's their *job* to do terrible things. A fucking mandate.

God help the family that didn't get busy and stab its kids through the heart as early as possible.

She leaned close, rested her forehead against Maddie's, put her hands around the clasped hands of her sister, held the slender bundle as if it were a small creature—the night around them much too warm, warmer than anyone had wanted.

When Alex got back to Sausalito harbor the clouds had taken over.

And despite a visibly sunny East Bay (she could glimpse it as she drove, strip of shining metal flotsam along that shore, all the way back from the airport)—as she took the off-ramp to the inlet where the town nestled, it grew dark.

Unearthly cool. Sky pressed close: dense, massed dark of thunderheads smelling quickened and damp—creosote smell of pending rain.

She parked as near to the boats as she could, began to walk.

Alex felt lighter after saying goodbye to Maddie.

She had pulled to the curb in front of the airline—they'd agreed to make it brief. Amid the briny wind, the crying gulls, oily stink of diesel and exhaust, welter of shouts, honks, people emerging from cabs and buses struggling with luggage, babies and wailing children, cops blowing whistles urging sluggish traffic along—amid all this the sisters embraced. Alex felt Maddie's grip tighten around her, and she squeezed back. *Please let it be all right for her,* Alex thought. Alex spoke into the shampoo-smell of her sister's neat ear (grazing the hard bump of its pearl stud), over the roar of planes lifting and landing directly behind the buildings facing them.

"I'll call you in two days. I'll want a full report. Yes? Okay, Mad?"

Her sister's head nodded against her own, twice; at the same time Alex heard a small, choked inhale. She buried her nose against Maddie's smooth neck. How she wished she could leach it out, like venom. Familiar, shapeless—rude riddle of loss long forgotten by everyone else, the two of them still tumbling forward. After their father's service at the Unitarian Church—a friend had played "Sarabanda" on guitar—Maddie drove Allie to a hofbrau bar. Made excuses for their leaving to the righteous Beryl, puffy and indignant, who'd repaired back to the house to seat herself at a table of hors d'oeuvres with a circle of supporters. Beryl was furious at Joe for dying; it was inconvenient, rude, one more thoughtless offense added to a long list of them. Before leaving the girls watched their stepmother eating crackers and cheese, stuffing them in with two hands, fast as she could. And they saw something else neither would ever speak of, impossible to forget: a blank business envelope on the kitchen counter, gaping open: inside, stark against the white paper, a man's watch, and wedding ring.

Alex still remembered the hofbrau Maddie chose, warm and dark, the glass food cases, inviting smells, red lights on the slab of bleeding roast, potatoes gratin, puffy Kaiser rolls with poppy seeds. Joe had loved hofbrau food; perhaps it had hastened his undoing. Maddie threw dagger-warnings at every admiring male glance that followed the two young sisters from their entrance through the hofbrau door. Over glasses of resiny chablis they confessed that when news of Joe's death reached them each had briefly held the same thought: when both your makers disappear, shouldn't you disappear, too?

Maddie unclasped from their embrace after a minute, stalked toward the terminal, looked back only once as she carried her small case through the automatic glass doors. Her face tried for ironic pluck. *She looks about half her age,* Alex thought. Alex raised her arm, flat palm aloft, hoping Maddie would turn in time to see her still wav-

ing. Maddie's smile a brave effort, lips torqued at the corners. Alex kept her arm up, hand moving in the air even after Maddie slipped into the crowd. She should have shown her sister a better time, been more forthcoming, more generous. You never knew—never—when you'd see each other again. That was why goodbyes were so dreadful. Alex climbed back into the warm-plastic smell of the Buick, sat a moment.

But we are animals, geared to attend what's before us. By the time Alex walked toward the boats she felt floaty, almost bewildered with relief. How much simpler to be alone, she thought, pulling her jacket tight in the wind. Gulls eyed her from their perches, swooped past, crying out. Simpler to conduct the days (the strange, relentless days) without having to translate them to anyone.

At the same time, we were animals. We sought contact.

She faced the rows of gleaming boats tethered in neat lines, rising, clanging softly, swaying on the dark water.

Morton Andrea Levi struggled to consciousness that same Sunday morning, lead-heavy, sick to the bone. Poisoned. Done it himself.

His head: formaldehyde. Taste in his mouth: chemical waste. In fact he'd done his best to drink the nearest thing to lye, which happened to be gin. In the form of martinis. At the no-name bar.

Even blinking hurt.

Slits of light through the wooden blinds sliced his vision. The room smelled of sweat. A little indentation on the pillow by his mouth was sopped with cold drool. He pushed the pillow aside, struggled up from the bedclothes, waited for the dizziness to settle. His eyeballs ached, the sockets that held them ached. If he looked out the corner of one eye he could glimpse on the eyeball's surface a tiny flotsamy clot, pulsing with every heartbeat.

Saw his clothes in a vertical pile, pushed off where he'd stood.

No memory of getting home.

Go backward. Try to pick up the thread. Start with the driving.

He'd driven like a fiend out of the city after stumbling away from Skip.

Gunned it. Chest roaring, temples squeezing—not looking any-

more out the windows, his beloved ocean, boats, cliffs, and birds. Fuck the view, fuck the pelicans. Weather had turned severe as he neared Sausalito, a frowning, gunmetal color—and out of habit or instinct, who knew anymore, he'd swung the car automatically onto the exit toward the office, found himself creeping the main street into town, slowly remembering, in a gauze of shock, it was Saturday.

What was he doing here on a Saturday? The company'd been sold, and—Oh, yes. Skip was leaving. Skip had left him.

The no-name presented itself on the left. Near-invisible sign, lower case, unmarked door. Wouldn't know it was there if you hadn't already known, if someone hadn't shown it to you. (It had been Kamala Schwarz, oddly, who'd led him on a lunchtime tour of the town when he'd first started, yacking away as they walked, a theme park guide.) Without another thought Mort turned the car up a steep hill into the residential zone, to find parking. He yanked the brake, burst from the driver's side door like someone pursued, almost fell on the downhill bank of the gutter. In the frigid wind, which had picked up as thunderheads bore in (advancing in scored pouches like a swelling black brain)—he caught and straightened himself, hustled down the walk, knees bending deeply on the steep slope.

His knees trembled as he entered the bar.

In bed, remembering, Mort tried to sit up straighter: arrow through the temples.

Chad.

The bar had swallowed Mort, dark, soft, as he pressed shut the door. Smells of a bar in early afternoon, mustiness, alcohol, cigarettes, cleaning fluid. A jazz piano tape played quietly. How welcome the dark! Mort clambered onto a stool, and as his eyes adjusted saw two other beings perched along the L-shaped bar. One, he registered, had a crop of white-blond hair.

Bar. Named for the plank, he guessed, on which the glasses were

set. How long ago must it have started? Early. Fermented juice. Ritual so old, hallowed. Darkness, music. Talk not required. No words needed, except the name of your poison.

Gin.

Limpid as rain. Slim-stemmed glass a pedestal. Peaceful green olive a punctuation, dot over an *i*. Nonstop, superspeed ticket to Elsewhere. The Concorde of drinks, he told himself after two sips (olive-flavored gasoline). Long known to the wits, the martini. The heavies, the thinkers, the irony-battered. He'd always admired the drink's mystique—a loft to it, cosmopolitanism. Until of course your speech became slush, your step a stagger. But no one conjured that at the beginning. Beginnings were elegance itself. And beginning was all you needed. You seated yourself, sipped your drink: at once something began to numb along your wrists. A scratchy cheer, snaking numbness, and it became clear that the two or three people seated around you were astoundingly good people, themselves warmly aware of your own goodness. All of you lucky, smart. A pulsing specialness, without words. What a fine, hearty coincidence. Enjoying your perfect right—your civil right for God's sake, men had fought wars so you and your close friends here could do this—have drinks in sovereign peace. And the world, whatever you had left out there with it (shapes, shadows)—why, the world could go hang itself.

Chad. White-blond. Surfer? Sat a few stools away, and after a smiling nod or two, after the next couple of drinks, magically taking up the seat next to Mort's. Chad drank shots of tequila with beer chasers, scent of the cactus liquor strong under Mort's nostrils. Mort began to pay for both their rounds on his credit card. Piano floated from a hidden tape. Thelonious Monk. Somebody classic on sax, Coleman Hawkins. "Ruby, My Dear." Its theme like a sigh. Wry, gentle. Resigned to the complex rue of having brought oneself this far. *After all this,* the music said. Jazz belonged to people who'd dragged

themselves ashore after the ship had been bashed to splinters. *Lay down your weary tune.*

Mort sat up in bed, put his hands over his aching eyes, pressed them with cool fingertips. Groaned softly.

Young. Young as Skip. White-blond mustache, deeply tan. Gorgeous. T-shirt well-filled, faded jeans baby blue from a thousand washings, jeans of such buttery softness they threatened to fall apart across that perfect, small, hard ass. Thighs under the denim bulged taut. You wanted with all your will to lay your hand on one of those thighs. You wanted to let your hand keep moving.

Mort couldn't remember who'd spoken first. They'd traded the information. *Swapping résumés,* Skip used to call it with cheerful disgust. Chad's voice very low, a bit flat. But as the gin chilled and scorched Mort's veins (creeping skillfully through his heart, his organs), that voice struck him as mellow. Amber, like the tequila. Smiling at each other, that press of rapid discovery fueled by drink, that headlong *yes.* Words murmured behind Mort's spoken words while he looked into the light blue eyes, eyes which seemed amused, Mort thought, by some larger comprehension. As if Chad knew all about him, every last thing, though Mort had said nothing about Skip.

I'm a free agent, he'd thought. This is what free agents do. They mingle. Strike up acquaintance. He hated the words *cruise* and *pickup:* ugly, reductive words. Free agents lean into the moment, he thought. Obeying the gurus, being here now.

Present tense, man. The only way to fly.

The tape began "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes." The great Monk, ruminating, moseying. No one bothered the men. A veil of cigarette smoke draped the dark. Above the alcohol fumes Mort smelled the bartender's pastrami sandwich, its mayonnaise and mustard and onions and peppers, wrapped in butcher paper, sitting in two open, thick halves beside the rubber mat where drinks were poured. A wave

of hunger—he'd eaten little since morning. (Morning! Eons ago. Centuries.) The task of getting food, too complicated. Instead he slid the olive from the gin—it was stuffed with a sliver of onion. Pulled it from its toothpick with his lips, carefully chewed and swallowed, savoring the oniony brine. The clear liquid in its glass pedestal was fuel, of a kind. The olive was food.

Chad was a sailor. Crewed on different yachts, sometimes changing boats once they'd dropped anchor in Papeete or Honolulu, when politics among the crew (*sex,* Mort translated silently) got difficult. Bound to happen, Chad shrugged (eyelids heavy). After the long crossings, the Marquesas, Fiji, Sydney, you got edgy. You got burnt out.

That life explained Chad's rich, condensed tan, the white-blond hair, sun gold glints of cheek stubble, the creases carved around his eyes, whiter at their inmost center. Even the blue of his eyes looked bleached.

"Sweet and Lovely": Monk pounded the wistful theme, deliberately punching dissonant keys.

Mort pushed himself to standing: his stomach, the balancing gear in his ears slid around. *Semicircular canals:* words from grade school. He shuffled nude to the bathroom, saw his face in the mirror. Pale, riven. Splashed it with the coldest water he could get from the tap. Propped himself, both arms on the sink's edges, head bowed as if in prayer, waiting for the running tap water to turn cold, the first flow warm from summer-cooked pipes. He brushed his teeth, urinated sitting down, tucking his cock under the wooden seat. Head in both hands. Every move made a swooping, sinking spin behind his eyes, his stomach.

He couldn't remember getting to Chad's boat. Of course it hadn't been Chad's. It had belonged to someone Chad knew, maybe some-

one he was crewing for. Mort could not call up a single visual of getting there. They must have walked. He only remembered grappling, once aboard, with the tanned, hard body on a narrow lower bunk—a thin cushion beneath them, covered in orange plastic, rolled seams at the edges. By then the afternoon storm had passed, but residual currents bounced them in the dark, rocked the craft, and it was a wonder to Mort to hear the soft lapping, smell salt and fish while he held the blond youth's hard limbs, roved his mouth over skin whose salty brownness became, in the moonlight through the porthole, milky blue. He'd never made love on a boat before. In fact it was more a fight. A violence in Chad's movements, and this had confused Mort—not what he'd wanted yet no way to alter its course, had to fight back to stay with it, keep hold. Chad had mounted him so quickly Mort had no time to react, the way a man gets another's arm twisted up behind his back, pinned there. The two never spoke, but made only grunts and gasps. He could remember that everything below, inside the cabin, looked miniaturized. A little wooden-box house. All the surfaces, in lunar light from the porthole, the color of luminous ink.

Chad had smelled and tasted of salt, dirt, cocoa butter.

They had passed out in a tangle, and in first gray daylight—four A.M.? five?—Chad had roused him awake with a shove. The boat's owners would be showing up soon. Mort came to in a fright (crusts of dried fluids at the corners of his lips, rank taste): understood at once that the owners, whoever they were, did not know Chad had slept there, would not have permitted it. It occurred to him then that Chad probably lived this way, stealing beds where he could. Cadging meals, drinks, his hard brown body as currency in trade. Mort groped for his clothes, pain spearing his head. Stumbled across the galley behind the blur of Chad, blind with hangover, stiff with horror of confrontation. Some blithe couple, maybe a family, kids. All trooping here like Goldilocks this minute. Bringing their food cooler, the dog. Maybe

they would summon the cops, press charges. His mind careened, smacking back and forth against the images, a fly against mirrors. Who to phone if he got thrown in jail? Gene, his housemate, would be asleep. Skip? A caving in his chest: Skip was gone. He glanced back once at the orange cushions as he yanked himself up the companionway ladder, his stabbing head marking every step. What if they'd left a smell, he and Chad, a funk, maybe even a stain on those horrible plastic cushions?

On deck it was dark and cool. Harbor water, dirty and placid, licked the boats; chains creaked, metal lines clanged against bare masts. Smell of salt, cries of early gulls. No one yet out to witness. The two men leapt to the edge of the wooden pier (Mort's head crashed like symbols), walked without words to the street. When they reached it, Chad turned to him.

"Listen, man, I gotta go."

That was it. Not, thanks for the drinks. Not, I enjoyed it. Not, want to get together again sometime. No smile, no proffered hand. Instead Chad placed his hands inside both his ragged back pockets, which made him appear to be shrugging while holding his own buttocks. He didn't even bother to make up a story about someplace he had to be. Mort wondered who this person was, this bleached being whose features regarded him dully. Those features—so burnished yesterday, so knowing—blotchy with hangover, irritable, impatient to escape. Already Chad was mulling his next move, gigs to check out. Mort could see Chad regretted his choice of a few hours earlier, was openly repelled by him.

Mort looked at him in bewilderment.

"Yeah, okay," he mumbled.

Chad made no farewell. Turned and strode off. Mort's aching eyeballs tried to follow the retreating figure in the dawn light. Baby blue jeans, slightly bowlegged, faded black T-shirt. Uncombed white-blond hair, unruly shingles. In seconds Chad vanished.

Mort didn't remember finding his own car, or driving home.

And now he didn't move from the toilet, but shook his head slowly in his hands.

There was a disease afoot, making headlines. An infectious plague the news had been charting. Someone a year or two ago had dubbed it *acquired immune deficiency syndrome*. Mort tried to avoid the papers and television—they made him nervous, anxious—but you couldn't escape the gossip. Bitter controversies burned across the country like smudge-fires, Europe, Africa. Politicians wouldn't touch it. San Francisco bathhouse owners, gay rights leaders screamed at each other, at politicians. Doctors screamed at doctors. The media leery—huge embarrassment, a disease from anal fucking, homosexual disease. If they read that Michael what's-his-name had died of it (and few obituaries admitted anything outright, called it a long illness, or cancer)—then no matter Michael what's-his-name had been a brilliant choreographer, decorator, chef, actor, composer: the first thing people did was envision Michael what's-his-name getting reamed like a goat from the rear, bleating. But the talking heads were paying sharper attention recently, as straights, women, and babies began to die. Hearsay ricocheted: how you became infected. Unprotected sex? Sharing needles? Some thought it a government plot. Incubation could be long—you could look and feel fine for years. But onset signs were known. Swollen lymph nodes, red lesions. Night sweats. Later came pneumonia, or mysterious, consuming infections, organ failure. Blindness, dementia.

Lately it was bloodbanks. People transfused with contaminated blood began making headlines. Showing symptoms, dying. Grandmothers, housewives, kids.

No test yet. No vaccine. No cure in sight.

Mort looked at his penis, hanging obediently under the toilet seat. It looked raw, chapped. Tired.

He'd never dreamed of going to the bathhouses or sex clubs. He

couldn't bear the painted circus of the Castro, tourists ogling men holding hands, tongue kissing, acting out. It pained him to hear of fast-lane life, anonymous take-a-number sex, nights of blind fucking en masse. Scoring, glory-holing. Like aiming a gun in a shooting gallery. The lovelessness, the anonymity. Though he knew anonymity was exactly the point for those who sought it, he also knew it would have depressed him beyond endurance.

Yet he had to consider his own history, a concatenated thing. College fusions, quick and gone. Manolito, the beautiful Cuban. His haircutter, for Christ's sake, about whose past he knew nothing. And he and Skip had never bothered to use anything. He remembered hesitating early on, as the clothes came off and that beautiful mouth pulled him insistently down—he had paused a moment, held back, looked searchingly at the boy, the question implicit. Skip's eyes had read it, dismissed the question with a laugh, pulled him close again. "Nah! Don't be crazy." For Skip, they were both invulnerable. "We're in prime time, Mortie. We're the gods of our day!" His eyes had danced as he held Mort's face by both cheeks, giving them a taunting little pinch. "I mean, all those almond-butter sandwiches have got to be good for *some*thing."

Now Chad, who'd been God knew where, with God knew who. In the heat of moving toward the other, the idea of fumbling with a condom, a balloon-smelling rubber between you—rolling it on laboriously, carefully—passion skidded to an awkward halt, worrying about holes and leaks. Maddening, so what the hell.

He was looking at a lifetime of these. A lifetime of what-the-hells.

Mort pressed his hands against his eyes, snorted. So much for his little envisioned balls of white torchlight whirling along, his internal scrubbers.

What, what had he done.

Kamala found Letty at the Wayfarer, at nine in the morning Monday.

She'd noticed Letty's absence right away, though no one else had seemed to. The staff moved as if underwater, faces void. Many had given notice. They were packing their framed photos, coffee mugs, their posters of cats hanging from branches.

It felt like the striking of a stage set, shutting down of a government.

All the roles, rules, evaporated. The terms hyped so breathlessly in meetings—terms that made you feel the last bus for Sublimeville was pulling out of the station but you might just make it if you sprinted with all your strength—all that now lay about, flat as the fold-to-assemble cardboard boxes on the floor, trinkets spilling from them. Kamala's gaze fell unthinking on several stacks of crisp, cellophane-wrapped packs of lined yellow pads. Unopened. Clean legal pads, puffy with freshness. Awaiting the scribbled ideas, lines of words that would advance—would have advanced—the company to glory.

Lists. Letty Kaplan pressed her ballpoint against those pads so hard every morning it made indents on the paper beneath. Letty's lists led her forward like a parade master's baton. Oh, going forward. Only

forward. No sideways, no diagonals. Tarry, and the bus sped off without you.

"Where's Letty?" Kamala demanded of the zombies passing in both directions. No one knew.

"Who cares?" retorted one young woman.

"Wandered out," offered a kid in a denim jacket. "Here a few minutes ago. Looked weird. Sick, maybe."

Kamala banged out the glass doors, walked quickly in the soft salt air toward the pier. She glanced up and down the street, the harbor. A lovely morning, fragrant and still. Haze of Mediterranean blue, ocean-smelling, shot with early sun. Water so calm. Kamala swung a sharp left into the Wayfarer. The door wasn't locked, though she knew the restaurant was not yet officially open.

She spotted Letty across the room at one of the smaller tables, staring at a half-empty glass of white wine, her face wax-colored, pale rabbit eyes empty. From where she stood Kamala could also see Letty's narrow feet under the table, splayed. Ragdoll feet. Her shoulders fell so steeply forward they almost were not shoulders. It occurred to Kamala that Letty exactly resembled the woman in a painting Kamala had seen in coffee table books, *L'absinthe*. All Letty lacked was a little chimney-shaped hat to slump forward with her shoulders.

Kamala strode to the table. She eyed the half-drunk flute of wine.

"Breakfast of champions?"

Letty's eyes traveled upward a tired moment toward Kamala, fell back down.

Kamala seized a chair from another table, pulled it close: this made a high-pitched, scraping scream magnified in the empty room like Godzilla's besieged cry, echoing through the place. It roused no one. The restaurant was cold, fireplace dead. Windows had been opened for airing, light pearled in. The room smelled of ocean air, old coffee, ashes, bleaching cleanser mixed with charred meat from scrubbed

grills. The prep cooks could be heard in the back, laughing and chattering in high-speed Spanish as they chopped vegetables.

Kamala walked to the kitchen, buttonholed a worker, asked very politely and firmly in Spanish if he might find her some coffee, returned to seat herself beside her supervisor. Former supervisor. Letty regarded her dully.

Kamala sat up rod-straight.

"Letty, c'mon now. It's not the worst thing. There are plenty of worse things."

Letty said nothing. Her eyes flicked at Kamala, flicked away, hands in her lap.

Kamala clasped her own hands between her thighs for warmth. She forced a laugh.

"Honey, we always knew they were bastards. That's all. Conniving, greedy bastards. Businessmen!" Kamala spat the word. She leaned toward Letty, waggled her brows: "Sell their own mothers if the price were right."

Letty looked at her wineglass.

Kamala pressed her hands tighter between her thighs.

"God, it's freezing in here. Somebody ought to get the fire going."

She thought a moment.

"Any idea what you might like to try next, Let?"

Letty was silent. In the kitchen, pans clanged.

Kamala crossed her legs. She rested her head against a hand propped by an elbow on the cold table, keeping the other hand warm between her thighs.

"Letty, listen. You'll be fine. You'll get another job. We all will. I mean, what's a job? A bunch of stupid people telling you what to do for a while." At once Kamala regretted her word choice, for telling people what to do had been Letty's job, at least on paper. In reality, of course, she had walked around clutching her clipboarded lists to her chest, smiling anxiously. Letty must know how unsaleable she'd be.

Worse, her little office family had been whacked apart with a bat, like a piñata.

While Kamala spoke Letty did not meet her eyes, but pressed her lips tighter in a downward clamp. Kamala saw she was trying not to cry.

Kamala found one of Letty's lifeless hands, picked it up in both her own. It was ice-cold, bony, dry. She tried to revive it with a series of pats and squeezes as she talked.

"Hey now. There are a million jobs out there. And we're young, remember? Everything's in front of us, Letty. We're just ramblers, having adventures. Robin Hood types. Settling down's for later. Right now we get to hike in the forest. Like that guy in the song. In grade school?"

Kamal imitated a portly man's voice. She rocked side to side, raised an invisible stein.

"*I love to go a-wandering, along the mountain traaaack*—"

She peered at Letty's eyes. A netting of red veins crept around their whites.

Kamala tried another tack.

"This is only one more—how'd you say it. Charm on the charm bracelet. We're collecting, get it? We need more, lots more. We'll have the flashiest jewelry of everybody when the game's over!" Kamala held both hands to Letty's forearm, as if the forearm were a paddle and Kamala about to row.

Letty only bowed her head. Then she suddenly wailed.

"Who'd have me?"

Her sagging face buckled into a horrible grimace, broke into rich, spasmodic, bronchial sobs. Tears squeezed out.

Kamala pulled the sobbing woman into her arms, balanced her expertly against one shoulder while a free hand groped in her pocket for clean tissue. When Letty at last pulled back, tearslick, snuffling,

Kamala was already dabbing her face with the free hand, speaking quietly.

"It's okay, Letty. It's okay."

Kamala Schwarz had missed being beautiful. She had a bumpy nose, her eyes were too small; she had a boy's body, without breasts or hips. Her voice hurt people's ears. Clerks dove under the sales counter when they saw her making for them (lips set in a line), toting merchandise she considered defective. Ticketsellers dreaded the sight of her, for she would not go away without a refund if she'd decided the show was bad. Waiters and waitresses were driven nearly to shouting when she pulled out her calculator, took half an hour parsing the bill. Kamala sought comfort and justice at a precise pitch, and the world around her was made to pay sharply for its lacks.

But Kamala was good at this, at rescue, one on one.

The family had teased her. Little Roberta saved baby birds, spiders. Later she scampered over to defend the scapegoated kid in the recess yard. "You leave her alone!" she would bark at the provocateurs. Now she brought cups of coffee to the homeless, talked with them. Kamala glided in without fear, without guile, and (most remarkably) without thought of attention.

She repositioned Letty in her chair, arranging her like a crash dummy, smoothed and tidied her, pushed some fresh tissue into her hand. Letty hiccoughed, dabbed, kept hound-dog eyes on Kamala's.

"Letty, honey. We can search together. We'll shop for jobs as a team. I know what to do. I know all the tricks." She leaned closer, straightening Letty's maroon sweater, an unfortunate color that played up the red blotches patching her face.

Letty held tissue to her nose and eyes, hiccoughing. She watched while Kamala gestured excitedly.

"It's a confidence game, Letty! I've done this so many times. Nothing to it. Makes you stronger every time. Want to know the

secret? My brilliant, supersonic secret?" She paused, drew back a moment, looked about. Her eyes sparkled. She leaned toward Letty.

"Pretend to know everything."

She sat back, lifted her head.

"They believe you. People believe you. You hold your nose and jump. And then you just figure it out—whatever it is you're supposed to do—once you show up. You swim once you hit water."

She opened her arms.

"It's that easy. I swear to God."

Letty blew her nose, and the faintest smile twitched her mouth. It was like watching first pink daylight after a night of rainstorms, landscape still dripping.

Kamala took Letty's wet hands, tissue and all.

"You can come over to my place. We'll hit the ads, sign up with agencies. We'll have the big nets out there, trolling for us, sister." She lifted her chin, wagged her brows. "Oh yeah, baby. Trolling on our behalf."

Kamala began to sing again, bouncing in her seat: "*We are family . . . I got all my sisters with me . . .*"

She stopped. "Yeah? What do you say? Come tonight. This weekend. Spend the night. A slumber party. We can eat takeout, stay up late. Watch old movies. I'll do your hair. Okay, Letty? Say okay?"

Her eyes on Kamala's, Letty nodded slowly, the last little hiccoughs jangling her frame.

Its name, Alex remembered, was *Astoria*.

Gray had gotten carried away describing it. An old-glam name, she'd thought at the time, thirties movies, Harlow in white furs going to dinner, fancy hotels, rainy cityscapes. New York doormen smiling, tipping their hats. But that was carrying it in the wrong direction. Gray had explained he'd chosen the name because it connected earth and sky, star and flower. It seemed fitting for a fellow who'd made a fortune. *Astoria*. He'd described it, laughing, as expensive-looking. Sleek, dark wood, deeply polished.

But that description seemed to fit all the boats here.

Sunday afternoon. Sky lowered, darkened. Cold wind rushed from the open water. Alex stood scanning the expanse of bare masts, walked more slowly.

He took the yacht on little outings, he'd said. Mainly alone—no more with Cynthia and Ryder. They'd gone out to the Farallons once with another couple, but weather had turned rough; everybody stayed below, tossed about violently, became very sick, including the boy. When they'd finally come on deck to see the islands, they'd found a low series of barren, rounded rocks covered with birds and

guano. Then they'd had to endure the same Osterizer treatment back to Sausalito. Cynthia had been enraged—as only Cynthia could—implying him a fool who had risked his child. Told him she would not sail again, and she would certainly not permit the boy to sail. When Gray told Alex this, his face had hardened. Alex had said nothing, secretly feeling immediate sympathy for Cynthia. Alex had no wish to test the sea, any sea. Of course she saw its power over Gray, common among men. Holdover from childhood. Conquering heroes cleaved the horizon, spyglass in hand. And all the equipment, the lore. Competitions, races. She knew this would have been yet another on the long list of ways in which, had they lived as a couple, she'd have failed him.

There was a harbormaster's office somewhere around here. She could ask for directions. A chart they probably kept. Marked like a symphony hall—or a graveyard, she thought. Which owner, which berth. But why would they give information to strangers? Harbor personnel must double as security guards, protecting these expensive toys from strangers. And she was a stranger, she thought sadly. No, she must wander as though she were sightseeing. Alex walked on, wood below her feet smooth with weather; you could see the water between the slats. Piers jutted from the shoreside walk, lines of boats tethered along each side. Her eyes cast over the rows of floating craft. Masts knocked and sang. Cold, choppy water, gray-brown as old mop water. A few owners worked on deck, sanding or cleaning. Someone had a radio tuned to a baseball game. They glanced without interest at her.

No one stepped forward to demand her purpose here. She was a tourist, if the dark, whipping wind were no obstruction. Alex held her coat clamped against her chest in the cold with one arm; the other held her blanket of hair from her face (wind lifted it, pummeled it). She could stroll up each leg of the docks, try to locate the boats' names painted along the front left breast, or whatever the nautical

term was for the front left breast. Self-conscious, fanciful names. *Roughrider. South Sea Sapphire. Danielle's Folly.* Names conferred by wealthy drinkers, Alex thought. What largesse these people must know! *Good cabs and zins,* she recalled. *Glenlivet.*

The boats bobbed with big swashing motions in the restless weather, with the sound Alex loved, clangings of lines against masts, sound of the days she'd walked to the edge of the pier to listen. There had seemed to be a message in the soft, tuneless bells, aimless rhythm. You had to let go of waiting for a rhythm to fulfill itself, let the sounds fall around you. *Heed, heed,* went the bells.

She was ridiculous, coming here. But he had said Sundays. Sundays he sailed, or worked on the boat. But maybe, foolish girl, not every Sunday. And the weather was bad, the mast bells growing more agitated.

Then she saw them. Two heads.

On the same afternoon, at roughly the same hour, Mort showered a long time, scrubbed with soap and a rough loofah until he was pink.

Then he filled the bathtub, climbed in, lay back slowly.

He waited for the hot water to draw from his loosened pores what he had so deliberately ingested the night before. He watched his cock, floating innocent and mild from its dark bed. It looked like a modest sea creature in a rook of black kelp, minding its business. He pulled his face under a few times, listening to the water arrange itself around his ears. He came up, examined his thin limbs, examined the dark hairs drenched flat along his forearms, shins, the tops of his toes.

How skinny I am.

I am, he reminded himself. *This is.*

But this is not all. There is more.

Many sad themes jostled for play in the mental jukebox. "Crazy," Patsy Cline, an old favorite. God, no. Mort kicked the machine violently every time that one started. A different song. A mantra, maybe. But he could never concentrate long on *Om mani padme hum*. There was a poem from college—found in one of those musty little homemade journals that seemed left over from a prior generation, edges of the pages dark—open on a table at the library. He'd picked it up idly.

More, there is more, went one line. About pacing yourself. About the ocean kneeling before men, *toward our immensity.* Pretty grand stuff. But he'd liked that line about more. The line stuck in him, became a token he'd rummage for, a refrain.

If everything went to smash, there was more.

You got more chances. You hadn't necessarily blown your last shot.

He was thirty-four years old. Of course there was more.

Except, the question. The virus.

His stomach growled. Twisty, prolonged. A troll, cursing.

Mort rose from the water, unplugged the drain. As the water emptied (echoey *clong*ing sound) he rinsed in ice water. It almost burned. With his eyes squeezed shut he saw black, milling dots, swarming cells with white outlines, and for an instant he thought he might faint. He opened his eyes directly into the cold shower stream, once, twice. Gasped. Stepped from the tub shiny wet. Air warm against his skin, a floating sensation. In the mirror opposite, his face and body raw dark pink, hair slicked down, dark circles beneath his eyes. He looked like a drowned El Greco Christ. For an instant he searched his own eyes, lashes stuck together in pointy black bundles around his irises, star-points. Mort's mirror image met his eyes in sympathy. Sometimes he felt that he and the image alone knew the trap, the game they were caught in. A sort of endless theater run. You could never break character except just here in the bathroom mirror, meeting your own eyes. Only he and the image, alone together briefly, shared the knowledge. Traded the look, commiserated. *What can we do? Nothing, really, my friend. No way out—until, of course, the final out.*

If that *was* an out. Who really knew? No one was telling, if they did.

He dried, dressed, made strong coffee. Stared at the overcast day out the window, held the mug of black brew under his nose, breathing steam. Better it was cloudy, bright sun would have hurt. Stormy

toward the south, unusual. He set down the cup, found a loaf of wheat bread, pushed two slices into the toaster. While it warmed he busied himself searching for the phone book. With a gunshot clap the toast leapt from its spring-vault. Mort snatched a slice of hot bread, taking distracted bites, leafing through the yellow pages on the tile counter. He glanced around for a pen, found a red one, began circling. Paused. It was Sunday. He left the book open to its marked pages, near the phone.

Still chewing, he padded to the studio.

Entered quietly, shut the door behind him.

All silent, still. Figures sitting about, incubating. Moist chalk smell. Mort dusted his hands of toast crumbs, walked first to his old friend, caressed the venerable skull.

"Hey, old man." He pondered the dignified face.

Turned and strode to the torso he'd commenced, of Skip. Lifted away the cheesecloth drape which emitted a fresh clay breath, stared at the mute form. Neck, chest, groin to midthigh. Genitals an indistinct bulge. Stomach muscles softening. Broad hills of pectorals, declination of ribs. Arms cut just below the shoulder. Smooth suggestion of upper buttocks, almost pure muscle. Mort took the torso in both hands and raised it high, brought his hands down hard as he could, letting go. The clay, still moist, made a spludding sound as it hit the concrete floor, sticking where it struck in half-squished, doughy lumps. It looked like a small god, half-melted.

All grew still again.

The bald man's gaze did not alter.

The two heads, on consideration, were known to Alex.

One white-blonde, one the red of a new penny.

At very first, it wasn't anything. A couple, spooning in the hatch of a yacht. They must have been standing together halfway up the companionway ladder, entwined. *How nice,* registered the part of her that everyone registers, seeing a necking couple. Made you think of photos of Paris. Deathless romance. *How nice.* Or less charitably, if you were lonely, *yeah yeah yeah.* In that case you looked elsewhere quickly, hurried past.

But something made her gaze loop back once she'd seen them from a distance, and as she moved toward what she saw, the day around it became a dream. Dream of a dark afternoon. She moved forward over the wooden planks, sloshing of water beneath the slats, drone of a small biplane overhead—without awareness of sound or of willing movement, even as her heart seized inside her chest.

The two heads were locked in a deep, sinuous kiss.

She moved toward them. The heads wove together against the backdrop of black wood. One copper, one white-blond. As Alex drew nearer she saw the twined heads framed in the door of the boat's cabin. Sandwiched in the frame at the waist, a life-sized puppet show,

the kiss meant to be screened off, savored before the couple emerged into day.

No mistaking the plaits of straight white-blond, glinting like metal against the dark boat, the low clouds. Sending light signals.

She could see even from this far, moving steadily toward them as if drawn by a guidewire—the kiss urgent, probing, full of reluctance to let go. The red-gold head forged, the blond head pliant, following.

A kiss carried out from intimate history. It sought to push the limits of that history, to beg, promise, more, better.

She was being pulled toward them.

It made no sense. It made perfect, crisp sense. Here was another of those obstinate images to click open, another icon.

The locked-heads icon. What would tumble forth?

Her heart hammered so heavily she though she might black out. Her knees shook. When she stood on the dock facing the boat her voice came out quaking, thin and high, as if trying to speak on the inhale instead of the exhale.

"Gray."

The heads, the fastened mouths, cracked apart.

Janna gasped audibly at the specter suddenly above her, a large, pale, distraught figure with wide cheekbones, looming in rumpled black jacket and jeans, ropes of hair arching up in the wind. Medea.

"Oh!" Janna cried, as if bitten. Cleavage strained her T-shirt, draped by shining sheets of white silk hair. In a blink the girl disappeared below into the cabin's darkness.

What happened next seemed, in all the years Alex would think about it, to have something like stateliness, mathematical precision. Call, response.

"Alex."

Gray had pulled himself with both arms from the hatch and in a single, wide jump stood on the dock before her.

He wore a navy blue polo shirt, khakis, the trendy loafers without

socks that people called topsiders. The sight of his bare white ankles flowing into these shoes—the casual self-consciousness of it—made her stomach swirl. He looked at her, and for a minute she wondered whether she had the right man. She searched the eyes, the features: was this the face that had watched her, mute, tender as she moved about nude or clothed, propped alongside him, setting down his tea? The face that seemed to know things about her, things it seemed to specially please him she herself did not know, making her feel she moved in a kind of untutored grace? She thought of words he'd used, their wry, deadpan affection. *Well, now. How about it.*

Missing now, that face. Missing, those words. Instead, an alien. Wary, cool. A different man.

"Gray?"

Wind blowing harder, boats about them bobbing, clanging with greater force. You had to yell. No one on the pier, on deck, anywhere. Weather had chased people in, or below. A pullout leaf of the Sunday paper, advertising a Macy's lingerie sale, blew along the pier posts—flattened abruptly against one and stuck there, a headless torso in bra and panties pinned against the post's hard curve, corners shivering.

He stood about four feet in front of her. The *Astoria* behind him on his right, a craft called *Belvedere Belle* moored at the left. He made no gesture. The air between them bulged, full of needly static.

"Gray, where were you?" she asked. "What happened?"

He looked at her, drawing a long breath.

Spokesman, she recalled. Restating policy, declining official comment.

His voice strained, paternal.

"Alex, we were done after that day in the truck. It couldn't have gone on. You knew that. We both knew that."

The words put a pole-sized spear through her, yet in the witless dreamstate of adrenalin, she could grasp the wooden shaft through her chest and still speak.

"And this?" She gestured toward the boat, whose hatch door had quietly, mysteriously sealed shut. She looked back at him.

"This is okay? To go on?"

Her fingers tried to pull back the hair flying about her face. Hands numb, no blood. She had lost blood, other body products, in connection with the face before her. *In connection with*. A business letter. *In connection with the matter of termination*. Weeks of waiting, ordeal on the white-papered table. An age of waiting, collapsed to a shutter-snap. Yet the man staring at her wasn't the man she had waited for. This man was missing some vital light that would have identified him at once.

She took a step toward him.

"Gray?"

He stiffened. He seemed shorter, a little crooked, as if he'd pulled a back muscle.

"Alex. It was an interval. A lovely interval. I thought you understood." He talked carefully, soothingly. A cop to a child clutching a pistol.

"It needed to be over, Alex, after the day in the truck. It was time. There was nowhere left to take it. You knew that. I assumed you knew."

Give me the gun, little pardner. Nice and easy now.

Alex's heart flooded and sucked in furious, shallow hisses. She had known no such thing. She had *feared* it in her bones, dreaded it, but known—been given to know—nothing.

His cowardice stunned her. Cowardice, or laziness, or both. He had expected to slip from her days, her bed, her mind's faith the way you slipped soundlessly out the door of a tiresome party. She looked at the boat, its name in Gothic gold script along the teak-colored breast, rising, falling in seesaw motions.

The masts all over the harbor clanged frantically in the wind.

She looked at him.

"Nowhere to take it," she repeated slowly. "And your babysitter? Excuse me. *Au pair.*" It wrung her heart to speak this way. She waved a bloodless hand at the sealed hatch. Her voice shook.

"This is going somewhere? Part of the weekly wages? Your idea of foreign exchange?"

Alex hardly knew what she was saying. She had never spoken to him in such tones; knew sadly, behind the scrim of this cold, whipping day, she never would again.

There are questions any man on earth knows better than to answer. Gray said nothing. She saw his brows lift, his mouth twitch.

He was amused. His overflowing cup. Himself as the sought-after, fought-over.

It was more than she could bear. She hugged herself with cold and shaking arms. Looking him in the eye, she jerked the top of her head toward the boat.

"Isn't there a law against this?"

At this his amused face closed. His nice-cop voice went hard.

"If you try to interfere with my family or my business, I will have you prosecuted to the fullest extent. I will deny knowing you. I will sue you for stalking and defamation of character. I will cause your sanity to be questioned."

Things moved very swiftly after that. In two sudden, rapid strides—Alex was tall—she had reached him and her hands and head were flat, butting trowels. It took only a moment—the last thing he'd expected; he'd not been braced. For once her size worked for her. With all her weight she hurled into his elegant middle. An inch of softness still bound it, infuriating her more. Feeling that little ring of fat, once adorable to her, was now like watching a suitcase fall open to someone's fastidiously folded underwear: his careful, spoiled, heedless life. She shoved him off the dock.

He went in akimbo. Some of the flung water grazed her, a rain of cold waterpebbles showered the dock's wooden planks. Had he not

been standing between the boats he might have struck one of their hulls falling in, perhaps been killed. She only thought of that later.

"Fucking bastard!" she screamed when his head, smeared with soaked hair, popped up and stared at her, spitting and gasping. His hair pasted from the crown straight down into his eyes, scummed by filthy water, the shape of his head goofily flattened, like a ball someone had sat on.

She was trembling all over as she screamed (amid the wild clanging of masts) at the stupefied face, now spitting and puffing in the dirty ice water.

Her voice raw, scraping.

"Evil, immoral man! Liar, thief!" (*Thief of what? Babies? Souls? Never mind, it went with Liar.*) "Bastard! Asshole! Nothing that comes out of you deserves to live!"

She stood panting. She wanted to push him in twenty more times, fifty, a thousand. Wanted to scream *I killed your child* but bit it back: didn't want him to have that. He would have taken it over, used it somehow, twisted it to advance—somehow—the myth of himself.

Hadrian's egregious wound. Hadrian's folly.

He bobbed in freezing water, hair smashed over his flat head into his eyes, blinking at her, gasping. He was glancing about for a handhold out—must have feared to place his hands on the dock for fear she'd grind her boots on his fingers.

His ears stuck out between the plastered-down hair like handles.

A scream came from the deck of the *Astoria*. It was Janna, her hand over her mouth at the sight of the man in the water.

Other heads had popped out, peering cautiously from other decks.

Alex turned and ran.

A mop-up, from the look of it.

Regular work had been abandoned. Nothing Monday about it. Kamala had stalked off to find Letty. Barry'd disappeared—fine-tuning his severance package, they guessed. The staff moved about, murmuring. Some were packing. Others played card games on their computer screens. Quite a few had set up field command stations at phones, trying to line up work. No one bothered to conceal making appointments, setting up interviews.

Mort surveyed it from the doorway of his office. Zero gravity, he thought. A stranger could have walked in and known through his skin that the concern called Infinite Information was no longer. In fact, Barry had told him the new entity's name had already been coined. Infisource. How quick, Mort thought, how thorough the coup! An entire ecosystem razed, everybody a loose agent, molecules colliding. The props, the posters, books—once triumphal flagships, deadweight now. Many staff had disappeared, like Barry—whether to interviews or forever, no one knew. Skip was gone, Mort knew. The woman in Accounting had confirmed it. Collected his severance and driven off, avoiding goodbyes. Remaining employees wandered around like poisoned ants. None could escape the sense of having been conned,

though no law had been broken. They had labored like idiots for a construct—a cardboard city folded up and whisked away in the night, movements directed by a consortium, partners congratulating each other somewhere this minute over glasses of mineral water.

Mort found Alex sitting alone at her screen. She was staring at a page of editing, but the page didn't move. Hands in her lap.

He cleared his throat.

"Alex, would you have time to have some lunch with me? Like right now?"

She turned toward him. It struck him that she looked deadened. Whatever she'd taken time to accomplish Friday had done no good. Her face a slab. Of course, news of the buyout had probably clubbed her. And she was gone Friday—she would have learned of it only this morning. No one with half a mind wanted to move to Milpitas. Likely she was in shock.

She spoke slowly. As if she were having to fetch each word from various hiding spots, had to think very hard where she'd put them.

"Isn't it . . . a little . . . early?"

"Brunch, then. A drive."

She shrugged. She appeared doped, he thought. Her voice, too. She could certainly be on something.

"Whatever you say, Mort."

Important to get out of there. As they moved toward his car Mort saw Kamala Schwarz and Letty Kaplan walking back from the Wayfarer, early though it was, Letty being led along by her colleague like a camel. Oh, Lord. He'd not remembered to go find Letty, calm her down after the news. Poor old girl was probably comatose. Kamala had instantly spotted Mort, was waving at him energetically. This would never do. He nodded at the waving figure, bundled the vacant Alex into his car, blasted out of the lot. The women's forms grew tiny in the rearview.

He drove her to the 2 A.M. Club. Nobody'd look for them there. Dark, smelling of last night's beer, stale fry-fat. No one about, too early even for drinkers. The jukebox played Steve Miller to an empty room: "Children of the Future," a barreling bassline under the high, eerie theme, turning like a lighthouse beam.

They sat in a booth, the vinyl cool to their skin. A bartender appeared, stained dishtowel tied around his middle, drying his hands with another. He eyed them. Alex's eyelids sagged. Food had become a matter of indifference—her broad cheekbones protruded strangely, like luminous knobs. Mort insisted she eat. In a monotone she ordered a burger, coffee. Mort asked for a grilled-cheese sandwich. He was tempted to ask for a chocolate milk—still rocky from his gin-soaked escapade. But the bartender didn't seem the type who'd keep that around. Coffee, then.

They'd hardly spoken in the car. Neither had the heart to shout over the rushing air, the engine. Alex had rested her head against the seat, stared out the window. She watched the eucalyptus trees along the road, a receiving line bending in the wind, leaves loose and turning like long jade bells.

Mort looked at her after they'd chewed in silence a while.

"I don't guess you've made any plans yet? For after the merger?"

She shook her head, looked at her plate. The hamburger sat in its spongy bun, a stout little envoy, dauntless. Life carried on in customary ways. She lifted the pickle slice from the white-veined lettuce leaf alongside, held it up against the light issuing from the crack in the bar's door, shut one eye. Three tear-shaped seeds positioned around the center in a star pattern, translucent green. *Stained glass,* she and Mad used to call it.

She could never enlist Maddie now. She'd reaped her own predicted shit harvest; now she had to sit in it. She stared at the partly eaten sandwich.

It occurred to Mort as he watched her that her Friday "errands" may have borne some serious medical news for Alex. He asked as gently as he could.

"Alex, has something really bad—I mean, besides the buyout—are you very ill?"

She looked at him tiredly, softened a little by his strickenness.

"Not exactly." What was left to play footsie about?

"I've been dumped by a man."

Mort winced.

"Oh, Alex. I'm sorry. I'm sorry to hear that."

She regarded him from under heavy lids. He wasn't faking. But her weariness had come to rest in a stillness so profound it was a kind of void. No light, no sound. One of those sensory-deprivation tanks. Not unpleasant really. Until the memories sank their axe.

"My own stupidity," Alex said slowly. "He was married."

"Oh, God, Alex. What a nightmare for you." His brown-black eyes went darker. This touched her, but also pressed a faint wave of aftershock through her, for it confirmed the disaster level in an earth-bound way.

"I seem to have a knack," she murmured.

All she could think of, from the moment of slamming into her car (breath heaving from the run, terrified, imagining any moment a hand would clap down on her shoulder)—driving home at terrible speed, creeping into bed without undressing, twining bloodless hands together against her breastbone in the fetal curl, hearing the thin throb of her heart (the phone rang and rang; she dared not pick it up), crawling out and driving back to the office Monday, staring now at the bland surface of the hamburger bun—all she could see the whole time was the altered face she believed she had known. Hard, immutable, its message flat: *Forget what you believed you knew. You didn't know anything. Forget it because I have told you to.*

A removal, where the known face had been. As if a revolving door

had made a turn, deposited a different being there. Stiff, cool. Someone she could never have loved.

The jukebox careened on, its eerie anthem cantering.

Mort thought it time to clear a few decks.

"Would it help you to know I've just been dumped by a man, too?"

This did produce an effect. A puzzled light filtered through her features. He smiled harshly, pleased to get a reaction. For the first time since she'd known him Alex saw a slow blush tint his olive skin.

"Mort, I'm very sorry. I didn't know. Is there anything—can I—"

He waved her effort aside.

"I've had some practice at this. Thank you, though."

Her features reposed, more patient, perhaps.

"Alex, I—I've been thinking."

She waited. Behind him two men in leather vests and jeans entered the bar, the opening doors spearing blue-white light into the gloom. Both were tattooed neck to waist, elaborate paisley, blue-black, bruise-colored. Arms, chests, backs covered with tattooing, like shirts of skin. The men seated themselves on the red plastic stools at the bar, struck up aggressive greetings with the bartender. The darkness and beery damp of the place absorbed them without fuss.

The world is so full of a number of things, Alex thought.

Mort sought her eyes.

"I have some savings. Quite a bit, really. I've never stopped working since I left school. My folks have been dead a while; I have no one else to support. Saved a good pile."

Alex wondered why she'd let him bring her here. He was a harmless fellow, kind. She was sorry he'd been hurt—wondered, vaguely, who it was. But she had nothing left to say, and trying to listen was difficult. She could scarcely hold up her head. All she wanted was sleep. Consciousness, as far as she could determine, was more or less one constant rush of scalding pain.

Mort took a sip of coffee.

"Have you done much traveling, Alex? I mean, outside this country?"

Oh, please, she thought. Not the weather business again.

"No, Mort. I've never had the chance, or the money."

"Have you wanted to?"

She sighed—her chest sodden. "Sometimes. It always seemed too hard. Money, arrangements—"

She shrugged.

"I never wanted to do it alone."

Mort set down his cup.

"I've felt the same, Alex. But the wish to do it was always strong. Buried, but—tugging, for years now. You remember I studied art in school. I've only looked at slides all my life. Well, that and a few museums."

He frowned at his plate, thinking of Gianetta leading him up the broad concrete steps into the Met. *Let's learn something.*

He looked back up at her.

"But I always wanted to go. Dying to go. And now—"

He stopped, as if he'd forgotten words.

He's like the stem of a flower, she suddenly thought. Thin, but pliable. Sturdier than you'd first think.

Mort stumbled on. "It's just, I always supposed—going alone would look—I mean, anyone might argue that a team—"

She looked away, at the tattooed arms making animated noise at the bar.

"Mort, what if I told you I hope never to hear the word *team* again, except in sports newscasts."

He ducked his head, smiled sadly.

"Okay, fine." Yes, he'd talked that talk, made his charts, held his little meetings. A kind of sleepwalk he'd learned to function inside. But hadn't everyone? No choice. Maybe he'd been sleepwalking, but

he'd banked those paychecks every week. If the language had been a lie, the money was not.

He looked up.

"Alex, I don't have any friends either."

She lifted a brow. Apparently she wore her affliction like a sandwich board. Not that she gave a shit anymore.

"No, no," he shook his head, seeing his error. "I didn't mean it like that. What I mean is, we're both odd men—"

He thought better of the expression; considered *loners,* discarded that too.

"We're both unattached."

She didn't comment.

He told her about the Eurail passes he'd been investigating. For a set period you could board a train anytime; the pass extended to boats, buses. He'd called a bunch of agencies that morning, just to get an idea. He was thinking of starting in Amsterdam. KLM, the Dutch airline, had direct flights from San Francisco. Move through cities by train. Trains went everywhere, cheaply; ferries connected them over water.

He began naming cities, and while he named them, he thought of the art. In Amsterdam the Rijksmuseum, Van Gogh, Rembrandt. Paris, a billion museums, the Louvre, Rodin. Of course Florence. Of course Rome. Brussels, Berlin. London.

Madrid for the Prado. Oh, and Greece. Definitely Greece.

Alex thought, for no reason, of Hadrian. *I promised myself to stand watch over the defenseless god.*

Possibly Turkey, Mort was saying. Possibly Istanbul.

The names spun her mind and belly; the backs of her legs went watery as if she stood at the ledge of a skyscraper. Mort had already sent off for his passport.

A clutch of people pressed through the door, laughing, yelling. Lunchtime proper.

"I mean, what's to lose?" Mort said. "I might be dead soon. Nobody knows anything for sure—if they ever did."

He glanced away; she saw an unreadable bitterness. Abruptly he shook free of it. He reached to pat one of her cold hands. His own hands, she noticed, were small but finely made, grown into themselves, as people's faces do after a time.

"I'm going to tell you something, Alex. It's my experience that running away *works*. At least, for a while it does. And that's something real, to me. You know?"

She nodded, exhausted. It was a conclusion she had reached herself, never changed her mind about. If running away led only to different weirdness, at least it wasn't the old, stuck weirdness. Well, good for Mort. Happy trails to him. All she wanted was to lie down, to sleep. The last three days a bottomless hole. Mort's words, his zeal, all the names of cities he rattled off, ran together. She had no gear for assigning orderly meaning to the avalanche of words and pictures pouring over her head, a truckload of marbles.

"Mort, that sounds—great for you. Just right. It really does. You deserve a—a good time." Dazed, she'd almost said *a break today.*

Steve Miller wailed. The guitar fanned out.

Mort said nothing, his eyes fixed on her.

It was easy to remember the doctor's name.

Stuart Little's girlfriend, pretty bird he loved, went searching for. A low, cultured voice, was how Alex had always imagined her. Margalo.

The lovely bird was Margalo. And he was Dr. Margolin.

She'd had surprisingly little trouble getting the prescription by phone. Insomnia, she'd told them. Every ounce of lilting sanity she could siphon, she'd pumped into her voice. Amazing, how you could shape and mold your voice to sound like the very birthplace of maturity when you had to. She gazed around the apartment while she spoke to them, the wrecked bed, dusty surfaces. A locust *scrikk-scrikked* through the windowscreen. Nothing moved when you lived alone until you moved it yourself, the place a nest of collected habits. The advice nurse questioned her sharply before bringing the doctor to the phone. Did she think she needed counseling? Was she experiencing depression, psychological problems?

Oh, no, she cooed. Only the insomnia. Took a toll on her alertness during the day, you see, and she was a working girl with a long commute. Two hours each way, that's right. Sleepless nights starting to compromise her daytime safety—caught herself nodding at the

wheel, she murmured. It wasn't a lie exactly, the truth just trickier. She was so tired. Pain flickered at the edges of her eyes. Wanting only to crawl into dark, curl up. The nurse passed the phone to the kindly doc, who asked the same questions in an offhand, gentle way—same way he'd spoken to her when, in that harsh halo of light, she'd so sleepily admired him, grateful to him.

He prescribed Halcion. She didn't know how many he'd allotted till she went to the drugstore, a couple of blocks off the square. (The overbusy pharmacist hardly glanced at her, fluorescent ceiling lights on his bald spot.) Ten pills. Better than nothing. She paid, stepped into the glare of sun.

Around the village on all sides, hills of lush vines stretched hot, still. Alex never looked at them anymore. She looked at her feet, pale in flipflops on the sidewalk, lifted them over the seams between poured blocks of concrete. *Step on a crack.*

Things were what they were. There was no understandable reason she'd not been born in a jungle, squatting to feed a fire or pound roots into paste, a new baby strapped tightly to her back every year. Things were what they were. A scattershot fifty-two pick-up, cards landing where they happened to flutter. Clusters of cells swept along, swelling, fading, dying, soon replaced. Parents withered; babies throve, then they withered, and so on. Relentless. Unbeautiful, unless maybe you listened to Bach.

Sometimes—too often—even Bach couldn't get you out.

She used to think that everything stayed as it was. In high school, she'd gotten up early each morning to make the school bus. Joe would always have fresh coffee grounds ready in the little metal basket of the electric pot. He'd done it the night before, so all you had to do was plug in the pot. She'd held the thought quite clearly then: *I will always be sitting down to a bowl of popped wheat at six thirty in the morning, and Daddy will always have the fresh grounds ready in the basket the night before.*

Then it occurred to her that the life of the coffee grounds and popped wheat was a completely different life from when her mother had been alive. Her mother had made the coffee, toast, cereal, sat at the table in the morning amid the debris of plates, cigarette streaming, eyes closed. That had been the reality. The white cat with red eyes that she and Mad named Snowball, who'd died in the cool dirt under the oleanders; the little Boston terrier Frisky—Joe had named him—why couldn't she remember what happened to Frisky? She was sounding like Maddie now. Why did it matter?

What mattered was that while it was upon her, each life had seemed fixed, perpetual. As it did now if you could call it a life: struggling up from the bed to the car, the office to the car to the bed. Except now that life, too, was working loose.

Friday. One week since the—procedure. Five days since the nightmare at the harbor. She'd phoned in sick. Not that anyone there kept track at this point. She'd had a sufficient load of all of them for the time being; ignored her phone all week. She gripped her little drugstore bag, arms folded as she walked. The yarn lady looked up in surprise from behind her glass counter to see Alex pass the front window in the middle of a weekday morning: a skinny widow with dangling earrings, strings of flesh below her arms shaking like wattles as she knit. Mrs. Heller was observant, but (thank God or happenstance) never mentioned the tall man with the sleek red hair she'd spotted sprinting up Alex's stairwell. She waved now, curiosity stamped on her face. Alex lifted a wan hand. Morning already bearing down in full heat: silence but for the single locust *scrikk-scrikking*. Once inside she pulled the heavy drape over the window, tightened the blinds at the front door, locked it, drew a glass of water from the kitchen tap. Thought again, rummaged in the fridge for a bottle Maddie had left, yes, there it was, grateful for the feel of the cold glass neck in her palm. Poured a glass of white wine. Brought both glasses to the bedside. Stripped. Cool sheets, cool dark. Nice, long sleep. How many?

The directions said one per eight hours. She took two. Then she thought *albino elephant*, took another. She washed them back with the glass of wine.

I will be like Margalo, she thought, drifting down.

Mort was watering the flowers that Friday after work, when the phone rang.

The evening had cooled rapidly, as usual, thick sheaves of fog brimmed now over the edges of the furry green hills back of Mount Tam—but the day had burnt the plants. The hardiest had survived, zinnias, marigolds, lantana, but barely; they looked dusty and cooked. The rest were crisping. Even in the shade the ferns were curled, desiccated; impatiens wore brown streaks in their pink, white, and tangerine petals. He was making them gladder now, though. The hose water made a cooling, wet-leaves smell, a pretty, raining sound.

He stopped to paint his face with water from the hose.

It worried him about Alex calling in sick that morning, but he'd said nothing. Poor kid was overloaded. Too much at once. And there was nothing at the office, true enough, for her to miss. Kamala had made the announcement looking around significantly—*Alex called in sick today.* Her big eyes smug with skepticism, the irises floating in their circles of white like brown fried eggs. That doomsday relish! What purpose? Kamala wasn't a bad sort—apparently she'd taken Letty under her wing. But why did she so love snuffling up dirt? Like one of those fish that scooted over aquarium floors,

vacuuming. He shook his head. A Kamala in every office, he supposed. Driving people nuts, preening, concocting gossip, a kind of predatory glee.

Come to think of it, Kamala would make a mean queen.

The phone. He dropped the hose, let it run under the box hedge, scurried into the kitchen.

A woman's voice. His age, thereabouts. Behind her a baby's voice, singing. Obscure, rhythmic banging. Metal, a pot or pan? *Uhh muhh muhh muhh muhh.*

"Is this Morton Levi?"

"Speaking." His heart always constricted when someone pronounced his full name. Official business frightened him.

A small intake of air. The baby sang, banged.

"Mr. Levi, this Madelyn Etheridge. Alex Blue's sister? I'm—calling from Arizona?"

"Yes?" His heart tightened further.

"I'm terribly sorry to bother you at home. I got your number from your office, after you'd left for the day. I told the operator it was a—family emergency."

"Okay." He inflected the word at its second syllable, to hurry her: *And? And?*

"I wondered—may I call you Morton?"

"Mort. Please."

"Mort." She seemed to find the name distasteful, but would go with it under the circumstances. "I—um—don't know quite how to ask this of you. I've been trying to reach my sister by phone, and she's not answering, and it's been a few days now."

Mort's heart clenched tighter.

"Mrs. Etheridge—Madelyn—"

"Please, call me Maddie."

"Maddie." An odd sound in his mouth, familiarity he hadn't earned. "I saw Alex Monday. We went to an early lunch together. We,

ah, sort of played hookey from the office for a few hours. She was—very tired."

Did Madelyn know about Infinite Information coming apart? Better not get into it. Neither did he know whether to say anything about the married man dumping Alex. He decided against that, too.

"She was around this week," he said, not willing to add the word that followed in his own mind: *barely*. But then, that was true of everyone left in the offices now.

"Then today," he continued after an uncomfortable pause. "This morning early, she left a phone message. Calling in sick."

A small exhale. The background banging went quiet a moment.

"Thank heaven, that's something. Look, Mort, I know this may sound unnecessary but I'm—I've always had a certain sense about Alex, and I've just got—this awful feeling."

"Sure, of course. You're sisters." He didn't know what else to say. He stared at the white tile counter, the fat Marin phone book still open to the yellow pages, travel agencies he'd been polling, red ink all over the margins.

The banging began afresh, accompanied by a bellowed theme. *Mahh mahh mooo.*

"Mort, I wonder if I could possibly ask a huge favor. You went to lunch together; you must be on—good terms with my sister?"

"I admire her. She's unusual. Very smart."

"Yes. Yes." The voice in the receiver pondered this, as if a thought train had been erased.

The train remanifested.

"But I—would you be—if I were to reimburse you for gasoline, and time. Would you be willing to drive up to my sister's apartment, to see if she's okay? There is a yarn shop on the first floor, and the lady that runs that shop rents her the place. She'd have an extra key, I think, if you needed it. But I can't remember the shop's name, or I'd have called the yarn lady—I've racked and racked my brains—"

At this Maddie's voice seemed to suck in breathily, as though she were getting ready to sneeze. It took a moment for Mort to grasp that she'd begun to cry.

He was horrified.

"Mrs. Eth—Maddie, for heaven's sake. Please. I'll go, of course I'll go. Please, don't upset yourself—"

"I don't want to be an alarmist, you know, get the police involved yet or anything—my husband calls me an alarmist—" She spoke through sobs.

The word *police* sunk a cold needle in Mort's chest. Could his lunchtime talk with Alex have somehow sent her over the edge—freaked her beyond the rational? Did it make any sense for that to happen?

Did it have to make any sense?

"Maddie, you don't need to say another thing. I'll drive up there first thing in the morning. It's Saturday tomorrow. I'll drive up early, first thing, no matter what."

The baby in the background was addressing its mother brightly. *Mumma! Mumma? Mah mah mah mah—*

"Thank you," she breathed, wetly. "I'll give you my number for when you get there, to call me, if you don't mind. And I can give you directions to the place. I'd come over this minute myself, but I was just there a week ago, and my husband—"

She paused.

"Mort, I don't know how well you know my sister, but—"

"I know her enough to like and admire her. I hope—was hoping—*am* hoping, to, ah, know her better," he stammered, cursing silently. *She'll think I'm putting the moves on Alex*. For perhaps the only the time in his life, Mort wished he sounded more swish.

It mattered not at all. Maddie seemed to be reciting thoughts that had worn grooves in her mind.

She sighed. "See, it's only—Alex—sort of—falls into black holes sometimes."

As who among us does not, thought Mort grimly. As who among us, paying one rice-grain of attention, does not. He felt old.

"Of course," was all he said.

"I hope this won't be putting you to too much trouble," Maddie murmured.

Poor woman. It was nice Alex had a sibling who loved her, though he could already see how a loving sibling might compound complexity. Listening to Maddie gave him a sense of the shape Alex took in her sister's eyes. Perhaps, as an only child, he'd escaped more anguish than he knew, a hog-tying by thousands of tiny inscrutable ropes.

"Maddie, it's understood. No trouble at all, okay? Don't worry. I'll find her. And I'll call you when I get there. I promise to call. She'll be fine, okay?"

He had no certainty of this whatsoever. His hands were moist and his stomach fluttery.

"Okay?"

God, but the drive was long.

Why'd she chosen to live so far from work? Two hours. More, if there were traffic. Who'd want that every day? She'd claimed she liked it. Maybe the drive itself, he thought, had borne down on her—no. Not fair.

Still, it could be argued that a long drive alone every day—

Enough.

It was pretty, anyway.

He watched the landscape of the north unscroll, soft gold hills, stands of oaks. Fear rolled at the base of his stomach. He talked to himself. Landscape its own character. Eucalyptus gave way to scrubby oak before his eyes, hills gentler, plush surfaces like wheat.

It was also, however, hotter than hell, hotter every mile. His skin became sticky, though all the windows were open, wind hot and dry. He swallowed, coughed on grit. He scanned the round hills, parched yellow grain waving in dry wind, combed by an invisible hand. One match, and *foom*, he thought.

Don't think that.

He followed Maddie's directions. All the exits and signs appeared as she'd foretold, the fruit stands, hardware store, signs for small

wineries, little banners hanging. Oleanders in the driest parts, practically a desert for a stretch. Then pastures, long chicken sheds, cattle. Then it got verdant again. Eucalyptus returned, towering, alternated with oak along the narrow two-lane. Tea roses twined low white wooden fences.

The stillness of things.

Rows upon rows of vineyards, lines that followed the curves of the hills to the sky, like cornrowed, green hair from a distance. Up close, vines themselves bushy, shaggy. Topmost tendrils sticking out every which way, lime green at the top, evergreen below. If you looked carefully you saw the berries beneath: dusty jade or black, living roe cached under the wide leaves, partly hidden clusters. He slowed the car to examine them. Long strips of foil had been tied to tall stakes posted through the rows, meant, he guessed, to flash the birds away. The foil flags hung limp in the sun. It looked like pictures of Tuscany, but a Tuscany under heat siege, sky brown with haze, earth silent, airless.

Something desolate about it.

Mort was no country boy. Pretty country was admirable for outings, views from a window. If you painted plein air, you set up, worked from it. But stop too long and there it came, that stillness. Stillness that slipped a gloved hand around your throat, closing its grip. No motion, no air. He needed motion. Streets, good coffee, hubbub, strangers' faces streaming, converging. Movement, noise. Not for distraction, but support. Movement kicked up an air layer, kept life aloft, buffered. The sleepy town of Fairfax wasn't exactly throbbing, but Mort made it do. A bedroom, they called it. He liked the word *conurbation*. Perhaps he'd find his way into the city next. Except the city was . . . still full of Skip.

Focus.

His mind, the whole drive, muttered a coward's prayer. *Please. I can't face it.* Thank God Maddie hadn't smelled his fear on the phone.

He'd never been quick or brave. Never one to move smart in a jam, save the drowning kid, do CPR—none of that. Never been called to. Never wanted to be called.

Just stay out of people's way, and all would be well.

What if she were unstable, a psycho?

Stop it.

His thinking tossed. Dreams ruptured by spasms of fear, dissolved back to dreams.

Here at last, the town square. Handsome. Palms and olives lined the avenue leading in. Old-fashioned park at its center, gazebo, firs, magnolias, chestnuts. *Oh, God*—but nice flowers they've got here. Summer jasmine, fine idea, cheap and sturdy, enchanting fragrance—*how can I do this*—Inca lilies lovely, agapanthus like lavender starbursts. *What if the worst.* Scarlet geraniums indestructible, pungent already in late morning sun. *I'll just knock on the door, expect the best.* In the shade, pansies, petunias. Row of shops, eateries. Turn of the century. All it wanted was a brass band—

Please let it be nothing. Let it be fine.

Who exactly do you think you're petitioning?

He pulled the car into a space perpendicular to the square, turned off the engine, his heart hammering.

He sat a moment, the turned-off engine ticking.

He opened the door, forced himself from the sticky seat into the direct sun, which at once bore into his bare arm like burning paste. Air smelled of pine needles, dust, irrigation water. In the park's shade a young woman in a tie-died tank-top played with a baby on a blanket. Almost no one else about. No one on the street. Too hot.

He let out a big breath, walked. Looked carefully both ways to cross the street, though not a single car moved there. He spotted the number in brass above the dark open stairwell, just as Maddie had described it. Like a cave opening. The stairwell's bottom step just visible.

Move. Get up there, you gutless ninny.

She'll just answer the door, and that'll be that.

Get up there.

The stairwell gave instant relief, cool darkness. Small lightbulb at the top, sharp cedar smell. His steps on the rubber runner. Door a stained-red woodframe, thick glass pane divided by wood partitions into nine squares. Behind the panes, Venetian blinds, tightly closed.

No doorbell.

Dear God. He wanted to press both hands to his chest, press his heart back in. It rioted against his ribcage; he was panting.

Rapped softly on the glass pane. Softly, his own muffled voice.

"Alex? Hello?"

His voice reverberated back into his ears with his poor knocking heart, the sound absorbed by the wood in the doorway as if he'd spoken into a cup.

Absurd. As if trying to avoid waking someone!

He rapped again, too gingerly. His heart clattered.

He decided to try the knob. To his astonishment, it turned.

Very quietly, he stepped inside.

Dim at first. Too dim to see. Small utility shelves facing the door. Mildewy smell of old building, old carpet. As he advanced a step the smell became that of slept-in sheets, hair and skin and sleep breath, dust on the blinds.

It took a minute for his pupils to adjust, and as they did he became aware of the sound. Something moving, wrongly. Clomping, followed by a sort of heavy slither. Two clomps: slitherslither.

Sickening.

Mort was shaking head to foot. It took every fiber of his will to keep from racing back out into the open, white-hot day, through the woodframed door still ajar.

He stepped from the little square of front passageway into a larger room. And by then, even in its dimness, there was no denying what he saw.

He saw the back of a tall man, hunched over. Hunched and watching its own progress, the laborious effort of dragging a senseless female body by the feet, along the floor.

The woman was nude. The woman was Alex.

For a beat he thought he would faint.

The sight might have been laughable in another context. A tall, redheaded man, hunched, panting, struggling with great concentration to pull by the ankles his strange load—his oblivious, lugged load, a long, white, voluptuous nude.

Impossible not to be temporarily mesmerized by the abandon of the body's nakedness. Breasts lolled like liquid-filled sacks, wide, deep-rose areolas, rolling this way and that with each movement of the jerked torso. Plentiful legs, generous pubic bush—exactly matching, he couldn't help note, the pewter-blond mane now streaming out in all directions. Mort felt more amazed than abashed. He thought of Botticelli's Venus. He thought of Egon Schiele.

Alex's lovely white arms came bumping along last, dragging on either side of her head as if she were surrendering to a robber poised straight above her. Deadweight, he thought in wonder. She was clearly costing her murderer some effort.

It appeared Mort, too, might have to die. This man would of course wish to kill him next, as an unexpected witness.

He didn't want to die.

The thought registered in a stupid, dawning way. There was still very much he had actually hoped to do.

But Jesus Christ.

It was so *rude*, dragging her along like that. Like some discarded doll. Just who did this—zombie freak think he was?

Mort licked his lips. When he spoke, it sounded like gargling.

"What are you doing?"

The man jumped as if electrocuted, dropping Alex's bare white legs, which fell like two fenceposts *thunk thunk* on the wooden floor as he whirled to face Mort. His face the yellow-green of the seasick. Or the scared shitless. Red-gold hair fell in his eyes.

"She's not dead!" he said, panting, shoving his hair aside. His voice shook.

"What've you done to her?"

"Nothing! I didn't do anything, I swear, I swear to God! I came by to—drop—something off—and found her. But she's not dead, I tell you!"

Mort considered that he was probably not about to be murdered after all, scampered over to crouch beside the prone Alex. Her eyelids were lifted a sliver so that the bottom crescent of white showed; this sight frightened him more than blood might have, though no blood was visible. He pulled the topsheet from the bed—already halfway off, stretched across the floor—covered Alex to the chest with it. He put his forefinger and middle finger together, like a tongue depressor, to her neck—something he'd seen people do in movies. But it worked. He could feel it. Rhythmic pumping lifted the delicate skin beneath his fingers, quiet, insistent. Faint, but there. Soft, but regular, and there there there.

The redheaded man stood watching with the same dumb fright. Though he was a tall fellow, and (Mort could not help notice) extremely good-looking, he slumped.

Mort, still kneeling beside Alex's neck, looked up at the man.

"What in God's name have you done?"

"I swear to you, nothing. Nothing. I came to—leave something here—found her. She must have taken pills. There are pills by the bed. I was—I thought I should try to wake her up. I couldn't think what else—"

"You thought dragging her around would wake her up? I'm calling an ambulance." He began smacking Alex's cheeks, rubbing her hands as if to make them catch fire.

"Alex! It's Mort! Alex! Alex!"

Her head began to move, imperceptibly at first, as if willed through an invisible bog. Her eyelids twitched.

This seemed to frighten the man worse than anything.

"Listen. I've got to go. I can't be—I've got to go. I didn't do anything, and you've just got to believe that."

The man had wonderful hair, almost bronze-colored, shiny and straight; his features could have been a movie star's—Mort had not been insensible to it—except for the panic distorting them.

His face had altered now, grown tight and testy.

"Do you know," he finally asked, "who I am?"

Mort was rubbing Alex's hands, patting her cheeks. He paused to glance up at the man, incredulous.

"I don't care if you're Rudolph fucking Valentino."

He resumed patting and rubbing, shouting Alex's name.

When he next glanced up, the man was gone.

He got her set up in time, a mug of strong black tea, some crackers he'd found.

Once he'd determined her stomach was steady he made her some toast with a light application of marmalade—it was all there'd been in her fridge. After she'd dressed, if she were up to it, he said, he would take her to a real breakfast—or by that time, lunch.

Sturdy girl. She was heavily groggy, confused at first, but glad to see him.

She showed no dismay. That was the first thing he looked for. No sense of having tried, and failed, to end. Only confusion. She wondered sleepily how Mort had got in. (It hadn't yet occurred, in her slow waking, to ask him what she was doing nude on the floor, wrapped in a sheet.)

He promised to explain, but first she must wake up.

He fetched her terry robe from its hook on the back of the bathroom door (turning modestly away while she donned it). Once she'd ventured into the bathroom Mort raced to the bedside phone (beside it, the little drugstore vial of Halcion). Pulled a scrap of paper from his jeans pocket, dialed the number Maddie had provided, and while the running shower water made its noisy report, murmured hastily

into the receiver: all was well, she'd just had a hard sleep, she was washing up, he would phone later—now not a good time. He was taking Alex to lunch, he added, glad to be able to produce this touch of fleshy normalcy. Maddie began to weep with relief, and he was forced to cut her off, hanging up as he heard the bathroom doorlatch turn.

They sat a long time while she drank tea, devoured the toast. Mort had thrown open the window, and the warm day entered. She sat in the director's chair in clean jeans—blue jeans for once, not black, a gentling effect—and a white peasant blouse. He perched, at her insistence, on the bed—she'd had enough bed for a while, she said. Twenty-four hours, to be factual: she'd commenced her Sleeping Beauty act yesterday, Friday morning, after calling in sick. As they talked he studied her: hair tied back, skin pinked and moist from the shower. Eyes a bit glazed yet. He decided to hold off for the moment telling her about her morning's first visitor. Instead he told her about his affair with Skip.

He took it all the way to having dashed his own sculpture to crumbs, even sketched for her the awful encounter with Chad (leaving out details of the sex), which had acted like a coconut falling on his head. Alex listened without comment, but he saw consternation in her eyes, and behind that a spreading awareness, as though she were connecting dots. Then she told him, after a deep, dry sigh, about the entire year with Gray, ending with the encounter at the harbor. At this last, Mort could not help erupting into barks of laughter. He fell back on the bed laughing, as hysterical with relief for something to laugh at as for the superb image—the tall, self-important movie star splashing around "in the drink," as Mort put it.

Alex watched his hilarity first with suspicion, then uncertainty. At last a weak smile crept over her mouth.

He hadn't seen her full lips turn up since he'd known her.

"I'm sorry," he sighed, wiping his eyes. "It's just such a wonderful picture. But of course it wasn't a picture I had to participate in," he

said. He swiped the top of his hand under his nose, which had also gone watery from laughter. (She saw again how slender and smooth his hand was.) He sniffed a couple of times.

"You could just as easily laugh at me," he said. "Standing out there in front of Alcatraz and God and all those frisbee-tossing yuppies, crying like a baby."

Alex considered him gravely.

"Mort, I wouldn't do that," she said. "I wouldn't."

She confessed she had enlisted Skip as the driver the day of her procedure a week ago (it felt now like years); that she had only learned of Skip's—preference—then. Mort's face fell, and she was truly sorry she'd reopened the wound. At once she apologized. While she understood what had befallen him (*Skip was Mort's Antinous,* she thought sadly)—it was clear to her, she said, that Mort deserved far, far better. She knew that sounded like a hopeless cliché, but clichés, she reminded him, had roots in truth.

"Anyway, mine's surely the more ridiculous scenario," she muttered, lowering her eyes.

He smiled.

"It's not like we're in competition for that, my dear," he said. He thought it safe to venture the *my dear* by then. "But there is a chapter of yours you haven't heard yet."

Then Mort told her about surprising Gray that morning at his bizarre exertions. Alex changed color, set down her teacup and plate.

"His key," she said. "He let himself in with it. But why would he bother?"

Mort found the key where she told him to look, on the utility shelf in the entranceway, opposite the front door. He found something else beside it, which he toted back and handed her with the key. It was, he thought, a rather marvelous thing, a small crystal compass, the four directions embedded in abalone shell.

She went white.

"Alex?" He was kneeling at once beside her, his hand on her forearm. "You all right?"

She sat wordless.

"Alex?" His voice went a bit higher. *Please don't pass out on me again.*

She had closed her eyes.

"What is it, Alex? Take a breath. Big one."

Eyes still closed, she inhaled, chest rising under the gathered neck of the blouse.

When she opened them on the exhale, it seemed to him she was older.

"It's all right," she said at last. "A gift. He returned a gift."

She looked so bereft he didn't know what to say.

She held out the pretty talisman. "Will you take it?"

Mort hesitated. Why'd the creep bring it back, he wondered. To be scrupulous, maybe—strip himself of the least scrap of evidence. His wife would know his possessions, have them memorized. But why not toss it in a dumpster? Maybe he'd wanted to threaten Alex some more. Guy'd been worried, afraid. Or maybe he'd hoped to get in one last roll with her. Slimeball. Big-deal tycoon. He thought how the redheaded man had looked, hovered over Alex's unconscious form. Funny how handsomeness fled a man in the act of covering his own ass.

He took the crystal piece from her, stared at it. "What should I do with it?"

"I don't care. Hide it. Give it away."

Mort reseated himself on the bed, tucked the compass in his pocket. He'd worry about it later. Maybe she'd change her mind and want it back, though he rather doubted it from the look of things. Perhaps, later (the thought whisper-small) he might meet someone—the gift might have a second life.

She had recomposed herself with effort; asked him to finish describing the sequence of the morning.

"But why," she wondered at last, "was he dragging me around the way you say?"

Mort regarded her steadily.

"He didn't want your death on his hands."

Comprehension wound its way through her features. Coloring, she looked down.

Mort added, "It would have been traced to him. He was terrified."

She stared at her hands. Saw the afternoon of the truck, the settling dust, Gray with his cigarette, his drained face.

She looked back up at her deliverer: this shy-faced, boyish gnome with a goatee and black eyes watching her, hands clasped in his lap.

Had she planned to die?

"Mort, I don't know how to answer that. I remember wanting to sleep, as long and hard as possible. I never thought—not consciously anyhow—"

Now Mort looked down.

She tried again. "Wrecked as I've been, I never meant—consciously at least—"

There was no *reasoning* going on at the time, she wanted to say. There was only *let me fucking out of here.*

She bit her lip, at a loss.

"I wouldn't have the guts," she finally said.

"Never mind," Mort said. "I believe you. You don't need to talk about it again."

This startled her. "But why? Why do you believe me?"

His answer was all he had, but it was real.

"Because when you came to, you didn't seem—disappointed. You didn't act as though"—Mort sighed, made himself hold her gaze—"as though you felt doublecrossed."

She was examining him thoughtfully.

"Alex." Mort leaned forward suddenly, hands on his knees. "Come with me to Europe."

She turned her face slightly, as if she'd had trouble hearing.

His eyes were eager, clear. "I need someone to help navigate, a buddy. Like a spotter, you know? Someone to help figure out what we're doing. Keep us on track."

Us. We. She stared, openmouthed. He held up a hand.

"I know, I know. We don't know each other really, not yet. And travel, travel can be stressful. But I'm thinking, maybe as—oh, co-pilots, whatever you want to call it. I'm thinking we could do this, Alex."

He'd got the travel idea eating his toast last Sunday. Looking out to the afternoon trees, his brain slowly steaming clear—thinking about his nonlife, his pathetic clay lumps in the next room; Skip fleeing with such nervous alacrity—as though he, Mort, had worn a neat row of dynamite sticks strapped across his own chest.

He'd tried his best not to think of the ugly roll with Chad.

What he'd thought of instead was *More, there is more.* Had to be more. More as in, different. Better. Richer. Something to goddamn enjoy, for a change.

"I've got money. The job's over. We can always come back and get jobs again."

Mort was thinking fast. Pure practicality: one to watch the stuff while the other went for food or directions, to book a room, find a toilet. Someone to speak English with, admire the fucking Acropolis with. Someone to relieve him a little from the internal drone—from his Eeyoreness. No good to ask a man, for he knew no likely candidates. And even if he had, straight or gay, it could too easily go wrong. Fatal, to have embattled feelings for your traveling partner.

"Alex, listen. I'm very neat and clean. Very responsible. When I am not falling in love with the wrong person, I am completely sensible. I'd respect your privacy of course. We can take separate rooms, take time apart even. But it would be easier, simpler in so many ways. I'd be less likely to—I don't know—"

His head swung to either side.

"Less likely to be an idiot. Fall into a manhole. I need a break from being an idiot. Maybe you could use the same sort of—breather."

Alex blinked. She couldn't have been more dumbfounded if he had turned into a lowing cow in front of her.

"Mort—"

"Just think about it, Alex. That's all. That's all I ask." As he spoke, he was standing.

"Think about it, for starters, while we go get a real meal."

Kamala screamed when she saw them standing together in the parking lot. Letty put her hand over her mouth.

Alex had cut her hair, and Mort had shaved off his goatee.

She'd chopped it to just above her shoulders, where it bobbed with a paintbrush-thick bottom. It made her head look just as oversized, Kamala judged, but gave her a springier air. Alex also wore a straw hat with a wide cranberry ribbon fitted around the brim, from under which the paintbrush bob sprang willfully. Very Elvira Madigan, Kamala thought, a bit kooky, but charming. Mort's clean jaw (he'd kept the mustache) made him look like a twelve-year-old organ grinder. Kamala shook her head, dabbing her nose with a piece of tissue. A certain energy was released in the cutting of hair, she knew. Clean, launching energy, especially before travel. The two stood beside their duffels like a couple of patient refugees. Alex carried a canvas tote from which a fat trade paperback peeped, red on yellow: *Let's Go: Europe*.

Refugees in reverse, mused Kamala.

She would not hear of their taking an airport bus. She would absolutely drive them, no arguments. Letty was pleased to come along. "A witness," she murmured shyly, as though the occasion were

their wedding. Letty had her own news, which Kamala urged her to tell as the blue hatchback, heavy with people and luggage, clambered onto Highway 101.

Letty blushed under her beak nose and freckles. She blinked, cleared her throat.

"I'm joining the Peace Corps," she said.

Kamala could not resist seizing the stunned moment that followed. Commanding the travelers' astonished gazes in her rearview mirror by waving tissue at them, she exulted: "To West Africa! A social worker!"

In the back seat, Mort and Alex (hat in her lap) stared at Kamala in the rearview, then at Letty demure beside her in the front. Letty had half-turned to the side so she could watch Kamala attentively.

Mauritania. The inspiration had come when Letty saw a magazine ad, a picture of a young man surrounded by smiling African friends. He'd just helped them (the caption read) irrigate a field. She'd always had a secret wish to be of service—a purer kind of service. She was going through screening now, she told them, shots, orientations. They'd flown her to Philadelphia, shown her films. She liked the people. One thing pleased her which she hadn't told even Kamala: Peace Corps people were not so—glamorous, so slick, as the types in the tech offices. They were calmer, more ordinary. They didn't *jeer*. Letty looked wan, but tranquil. She would teach village women to read, teach sanitation, nutrition. She'd have a working partner when she was posted, so she wouldn't be alone. Alex wondered silently if Letty were tough enough to withstand the hardships, about which she herself could only guess. You never knew. The fragile could prove toughest of all in the right context.

And what, they asked from the back seat, might be Kamala's plan for Kamala? Ah, she smiled. A number of options.

Now it was Letty who couldn't resist. She twisted toward them in her seat.

"Kamala might open her own business," Letty said. "As a matchmaker."

Again Mort and Alex stared.

Kamala glanced at Letty with a flick of annoyance. That option, she noted, was one of several. But it was, yes, a front-burner candidate. The Bay Area was honeycombed with lonely people, she believed, waiting to be led to one another. Lonely people with money. An amazing opportunity. Everybody would win.

Mort and Alex should check back in with her (she nodded at them in the mirror) on their return. She'd be making waves, whatever happened.

Mort nodded back. On Kamala's making waves, he would depend.

When the car pulled up before the international terminal, all its doors opened at once like a circus act; passengers emerged simultaneously, unfolding into the cool sea-scented wind, the thrilling roar of planes lifting beyond the terminal. The women helped Mort wrestle out the duffels, exclaimed many traditional commands and good wishes, embraced the travelers tearfully. Kamala held Mort's face between her hands—an Italian mother, he thought. He tried not to wonder which of the hands on his cheeks was the one that always held the tissue. She searched his face, pained, momentous, as though she were mentally slipping him an invisible amulet. Like in a folk tale, he thought. *Take these magic jewels.*

Then Kamala took Alex's hands. The roar of the aircraft in the open sky made them have to yell.

"You still owe me a French-braiding session, dolly. Haircut or not."

Alex smiled in her measured way. "When we're back. And it'll grow."

Mort held Alex's straw hat until the goodbyes were done. He had to reach high to place it on her head, as they hoisted their loads.

Before she could leave, two tasks had summoned Alex. The first was a phone call.

"That's right. Taking the severance. My things will go in storage, Mort's house. Mrs. Heller told me to look her up again if I wanted the place back. Couple of months."

She had taken the long-corded phone over to the director's chair, but instead of sitting she stood by the window, the phone's body clamped in the crook of her arm. She watched the sparrows landing and fluttering in the sprinkler puddles as she wound the curly wire from the receiver around her palm.

"I'll stay with Mort when we come back, till I know what I'm going to do next. He has a big house—I'm leaving the car there—plenty of room. His other housemate's fine with that—hardly home most of the time."

"You're actually going to do this," said the voice in the receiver. "You're flying to Europe with a homosexual man you've never lived with, who is your former boss."

"Manager," Alex corrected. "And yes, former. He's a terribly good person, Maddie. You know that already." (Mort had, in determination to delouse himself of secrets whenever feasible, confessed

Maddie's emergency call. This had, predictably, both touched Alex and annoyed her.)

Maddie didn't respond.

"I've always wanted to go," Alex added. "They say fall's a fine time for it. And it's safer to have a partner, agreed?"

A small, sullen silence.

"He has gone out of his way for me, Mad. Way out of his way. To be a friend."

She didn't say *He may have saved my life.*

Of course she'd have waked up. Whether or not he'd smacked her cheeks and shouted, she'd have waked up. Still, he'd been *ready* to save her. Occasionally she wondered, wincing a little, whether Mort had looked up her crotch that miserable morning, when he found Gray dragging her about naked. Then she would remind herself that Mort loved men. That, and he was an artist. And such a shy animal. Something out of the far past about him. A kind of *will* to gallantry, even if he didn't always get it right. This last quality was what made her fond.

Once more, Maddie was silent.

"So what is it?" Alex demanded. "Why aren't you happy for me?"

A beat. "I'm happy for you."

"No. Something's off. I wish you could come too, Mad. Is that it?"

Maddie sighed. "Yeah. More or less."

"We'll go together next time. And there *will* be a next time."

Alex had no real sense of this, but for jollity's sake cobbled the words. She liked the idea anyway, easily forgetting the sisters' capacity to drive each other to exasperation in the space of half an hour.

"I'll know what I'm doing next time, Mad. Where to go, what to see. And Willie will be older, so you can take some time off from him without—"

"Freaking," Maddie put in. She sounded tired.

"Maddie, what is it? What's going on?"

There was a small, contemplative pause.

"Roy fell in love with a stewardess. I mean, flight attendant. At least, he believes he did."

Alex stood still, then fell into the director's chair.

"Fuck."

"Apparently, she was a former Miss Kansas City."

Alex's heart began to hurt. Impossible to keep the picture from forming: buxom leggy creature in a tight swimsuit, long-stemmed roses, eyes brimming, long lashes.

"The shit. The shit. He was never worthy of you, Mad. I always knew it. I'd like to come over there and kill him right now."

Another sigh. "Not necessary. We're going to work through it."

Alex stood again. As she did the phone's body fell from her lap to the floor, a rattly *ka-clang*.

"You're what?"

"What I said. Working through it."

Alex bent to grasp the fallen phone; the effort made her breath expel.

"But how do you do that?" She straightened back up. "Working through it? Wouldn't that be like going swimming with the rats in a sewer?"

"We're going to counseling, Allie. He wants to put it back together. I've got Willie to consider, remember? I don't want my little boy ping-ponging between parents if I can help it. One of those kids who learns the days of the week by Daddy's visits?"

"But it's practically that way already, with Roy's schedule! And a billion kids have to live with split households, though I grant you it's not ideal."

Alex was casting frantically about. She began to walk back and forth, the phone's body tucked under one arm, the other placing a hand to the back of her neck.

"The shit! The shit!"

"Alex, calm down. I'm dealing with it. We're dealing with it. He's changing his schedule. There's stuff we can do. It might even make us better people, in the long run."

Horseshit, thought Alex, but said nothing. It wasn't until several hours later she took account of what had been missing from the conversation: Maddie had not wept. She'd been quiet, composed. Some shocks worked in reverse, it seemed. Lifted you into alpine air, clarity that had till then eluded you.

"What about you, Maddie? Putting Willie aside for a minute, though I know you won't—can't. Is Roy what you want? It's your one and only life, Mad."

After Joe died, the phrase had become a slogan between them, a caveat.

"Alex, this is very hard to explain, and I know it's hard for you to see. But there is a great—decency in Roy. At the core of him. That is what—gets to me. Compels me."

"Could've fooled me," Alex muttered. She remembered no particular displays of decency, except maybe when he sterilized bottles after Willie was born. Still, it probably wasn't fair to vilify him. Roy was a man like a million others, genial, unconscious. He had a job that made money. He had married her sister, fathered Willie. He wouldn't murder anyone in his lifetime, probably, but he would be a fool now and again.

"You're not getting religious on me, are you, Mad?"

"No, no. But it's there. The decency's there. You might understand better, Allie—down the road someday."

Preserve me, Alex thought. Most of the time Maddie avoided hackneyed tag lines like *when you're older.* It actually did not slam Alex until some minutes after she'd hung up the phone, mindlessly sorting piles of belongings into boxes on the bed, when of a sudden she stopped. She was holding *Memoirs of Hadrian* in her hands.

She sat heavily on the bed with it.

But of course. She'd been Miss Kansas City.

She, Alex, herself.

She had never hesitated to place her pumping heart into Gray's keeping. It had surpassed religion, the power of her conviction. How long would it have taken her to wake from the spell, unprovoked? Years? Did everyone take a turn at it, she wondered—being Miss Kansas City? Dewy-eyed, breathless with your own importance, your hallowed mission, ignorant as dirt. Alex could see a linked chain of paper-doll women, all the same person in the same pose, a long line of them back to the beginning of time. Arms on hips, an infinite train of Betty Grables peeking coyly back over their shoulders.

She placed the book on her knee, fluttered the pages. He'd not inscribed it, which had puzzled her when she'd checked the first time. Now she understood. No evidence.

She stared at the profile on the cover. When she thought of Gray now it hurt like a freshly stitched incision. Laughter or sneezing was followed quickly by a breathtaking stab. But just here, the real confusion: if she looked at it steadily, through a reversed telescope's eye, she knew that some small piece of her would always hold in mind the time with him—all of it—as justified.

No, not even that. Just—mysteriously necessary.

Miss Kansas City.

Maddie had never said one word on the phone about the obvious parallel. Had she even thought of it? Don't be a fool, Alex told herself. Of course her sister would have thought of it.

All this came to her after she'd hung up.

"Maddie, listen. When I come back I'm not even putting my bags down. I'm flying straight to you and Willie. Swooping in, before anything else. So you have to—you have to hold it together for a couple of months. Are you reading me? Severe clear?"

A pilot's term: immaculate, open sky.

Maddie laughed. Tiredly, but she did laugh.

"Severe clear. We'll be okay. Go and enjoy it, Allie. September's the best time for it, I hear."

After a moment she added, "You know, Daddy, Lilian—would have been—thrilled."

Alex had already considered this.

"I know it, sweetheart. I know they would."

"Write me postcards from every single place, okay?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"And Alex?"

"Yes, Mad?"

A pause.

"Remember everything."

One more errand to perform.

In the car, she rolled a window down for air, rubbed the dirty glass with the heel of her palm. The sign over the store loomed like a pop-up target. And there it stood off the woodsy street, a longtime denizen. *Scallion*. Italicized print in the trademark green script, slender green onion as underscoring. It looked smaller, quieter than she'd imagined. But this was only one of identical hundreds. As she allowed this thought a roomy parking space opened exactly to her right, beside the store. She nosed at once into the miracle space, heart thudding, sat for a minute after she turned off the engine. *I'm a customer, an impulse-browser.* She scrabbled inside her purse, found a quarter for the meter.

Once in the open door, young salesgirls, faces creamy, smiled at her. The store was high-ceilinged, all wood. A trove of smells: pungent fresh linen, pepper, garlic from a demonstration in some unseen corner, cinnamon and clove from the barrel of potpourri on the floor by the cashier's counter. Alex walked slowly, swiveling her head. There along the rows of shelves sat the renowned cookware with its patented surfaces, here tables set in blue, willow, bowls of lemons, dried flower arrangements at their centers. A sign in green script hung

from two slender chains above the register: *Gifts That Sustain*. She saw sparkling stemware, casseroles, stock pots. Breadmaking machines, pasta makers. The tools were showcased like jewelry in open-faced boxes: ladles, graters, knives catching light. None of it a surprise. Olive oils in dozens of flavors, maple extract, chocolate syrups, pancake mix, seasonings. Neatly aligned, uniform in straw-colored wrap, bannered by the notorious green logo. Handsome, tasteful, but nothing to drop your jaw. It wasn't so much the things themselves, she reminded herself, as the *idea* of the things.

The garlic and cinnamon would smell that way year-round, she thought.

"This store was the first," she heard a young woman's voice declare, over the tinkle of the electric waterfall by the door. Alex turned to find the voice. One of the salesclerks, to a child who'd asked. The child murmured a second question, and the cheery sales-voice rang out again:

"Grayson Merritt? You mean Mr. Merritt, who founded Scallion? Oh, no. He's not with the store anymore. But he's a very wealthy man today." (Proud of the knowledge entrusted her.)

"The house where he lived? Just past this store. That way." She turned, gestured to the west side of the building.

"This store was the first. When he began."

The young girl's voice, polite. "Is he still alive?"

"Oh, yes." The salesclerk laughed merrily. "They've just sold the house, actually."

Alex stood before a small display of kitchen calendars. Different bouquets each month. Sunflowers in pails, day lilies, blazing umber chrysanthemums. Maddie would like it, more flowers than she'd get in the desert. They were marked down for clearance, two dollars.

Alex moved to the cashier counter, paid for a calendar, watched the young salesclerk who had spoken, her profile dark against the brilliant blue daylight from the open doors. The salesclerk was telling the

mother of the child, standing beside her, where she, the clerk, was about to enter college: an expensive, Ivy League school. The mother knew someone at the same campus. They were pleased to have this in common. Alex saw solicitude in the salesclerk's face.

"But is he good," Alex heard her own mouth say. It wasn't a question. She almost wanted to look around for who'd actually said it.

The clerk, who had been dreamily tidying the counter after the woman and daughter left, looked up, startled.

"I'm sorry?"

"Mr. Merritt. The owner—former owner. What kind of person is he. I mean—do you know." Again, more statement than question.

Heat filled her cheeks, forehead. She had invented a stubborn little teasing game, the words some inexplicable part of it—teasing this poor girl, the other clerks who had gathered to stare at her. Smells of potpourri, thick, cloying.

"Why—why he's a *very* good man," stammered the girl, alarm climbing into her eyes.

"Do you know him?" Alex asked. Curious only, said her smile.

The salesgirl's nostrils quivered.

"Mr. Merritt is a family man. He does—he does tons of things for the community; he gives *lots* of money to charity," the girl said, with reproach in the *lots*. She had met Mr. Merritt once. He had toured the original store while in town on the business of selling his house. Mr. Merritt had been a model of sincerity, warmth. *Courtly* was the word she would have used, remembering that day. He'd even commented on the green silk blouse she had worn for the occasion, in keeping with the color of the store's logo. She had chosen it deliberately, knowing the famous man would arrive. He had paused before her, standing closer to her than this insolent lady stood right now.

"It suits you," he had said, looking straight into her eyes. The salesgirl had felt something flood a place behind her ribs. She guarded the memory, and though she'd told no one, she still thought about it.

Each time she did, something caught in her chest, a small, thrilling updraft. She had felt specially understood—more, found out—when Mr. Merritt gazed at her. He had pierced to her center and laid her open in one deft, mesmeric stroke, though it had scarcely lasted a second.

"Yes, of course," Alex murmured. Stepping backward toward the open door. The afternoon air tinged with pine, with crushed leaves of late summer.

"Yes, of course," she said again.

"Thank you. See you. See you again," she piped witlessly, as though someone had just elbowed her to remember her manners. The gathered saleswomen of Scallion did not answer, facing her in a loose half-circle, watching.

Alex stepped outside, blinked in the sun. Redwoods. Drone of late-summer bees in daisies, redwing blackbirds' quizzical warble. Licorice smell of wild anise, nets of it along the roadside. Standing there, she remembered his house. She had only to look up, the western side. There it was. Dark redwood, series of low, rectangular layers. A terraced cake, Frank Lloyd Wrightish. Mesh drape covered the outside of the house; perhaps it was being fumigated. Scaffolded while the structure beneath was renewed, made fresh for next owners. Through the mesh she could make out the windows. Inside them, over years, life. Child, meals, carpeting, toys, phones, music, scotch, coffee, Christmas morning. The shower running. The rumpled double bed.

The babysitter.

She could have walked around the house, up the street to see another side.

But the view from here, for the moment, was enough.

It came to Mort while the two stood in the boarding line.

The loudspeakers blared their indecipherable bulletins; bodies swept past dangling cameras, luggage, babies on hips, shouting children. Everyone harried, pacing, looking about. Anxious, alert. Mass transit. Life could resume after the connections were made, travel completed, destination reached.

Each, meantime, could only concentrate on getting there.

You had to become your own response, Mort was thinking. Enact it. What you chose to be about, while you were about it.

No other shoe was ever going to fall.

As soon as a test became available for the deadly virus—very soon, he had heard, there would be a test, perhaps when they returned—he had made up his mind to offer himself to it. It would be better to know. He still kept, secreted away like one of his old boulder clearies, a notion of meeting someone. And for that, you'd have to know.

Someone—would it ever be possible?—who'd enclose him, make him laugh.

But first, to do this now. While he could.

He shifted his weight in the boarding line. Alex stood ahead of him

in her straw boater, cranberry ribbon down her back, looking about. Almost time. KLM flight crew appeared, like actors taking places on a stage. They were young, handsome, many blond, uniforms bright red trimmed with gold. They looked calm, worldly. Mort wondered how many languages they spoke. At this thought his heart squeezed, a great, gasping thrill.

Instead of laying a tune down, you could just as well seize one up. Play like mad.

Whatever came next, they'd be glad for this part of it. How could they not? A good story later told, at very least. Admirable or not. *Here's how it was, how we were.*

"Ladies and gentlemen," came the mildly accented voice on the speaker.

Alex turned to look at him, eyes alight. No words required. She turned forward in line again quickly, to be ready. She resembled a Manet, a Morisot, in jeans.

It came to him then, standing there. She would remove the hat without thinking whenever they entered planes, ferries, trains. She would forget to grab it up from the seat or table or rack where it lay, in the fuss of getting ready to debark.

Somehow he already knew it would be up to him, every single time, to remember to retrieve the hat for her. He would be the one to hand her pretty hat to her, again and again, wherever they arrived.