



Do You Believe in Cabeza de Vaca?

Do You Believe in Cabeza de Vaca?

Stories by
Gladys Swan

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*For Dagrún and Bob,
who go back a long way.*

Man, the past is a long and twisty road.

—Satchel Paige

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Do You Believe in Cabeza de Vaca?

Do You Believe in Cabeza de Vaca?

To tell the truth, I've always had trouble with history. When I was young, it was a mighty resistance to facts. My mind balked over dates of kings and lists of battles, refusing to take them in, and for a long time my sense of history was that of little islands of flavor, dimly floating in a sea of time that bobbed up and became the present. I do not remember when I became burdened with a sense of history. Perhaps it came the way age comes, gradually, with the sense of life lived, the augmenting and deed-drenched past. At some point one turns a knob and enters a doorway, as into a great secondhand shop cluttered with objects that have fallen through time to lie dust-covered and neglected for years or centuries, among which, browsing, one picks up this and that, detached from ownership and custom—oh quaint and curious; oh horror, oh horror—and wonders about their value. There are things that are never got rid of. And there in that debris and chaos are things forgotten that have a curious way of coming alive again, making amazing connections.

But this is a story, not history. So I'll begin with Ed. I met him at a party, and he soon established himself as one of those omnivores who grab books from the shelves because they're struck by a title and read themselves into odd corners, seized by irrepressible fits of enthusiasm, during which they quote long passages to anyone within hearing distance. You know the kind.

"So you're from New Mexico," he said. "Wonderful place.

My God, the culture. Indian, Mexican, with an influx of Eastern Europeans in the north; Italians, a few Welsh. I got interested in that part of the country about ten years back. Read everything I could lay my hands on. Oñate, Coronado. The Maxwell land grant. The Lincoln County wars. Kit Carson. Billy the Kid. Have you ever read the journal of Cabeza de Vaca?"

"I didn't know he wrote a journal."

"Fascinating thing. Absolutely fascinating." His eyes, I thought, had the hard, bright glint of the enthusiast of the esoteric. "You have to wonder if any of it's true, his going around healing the Indians, performing miracles. They thought he was—well, no telling what they thought. They treated him like a god."

"I'll have to read it," I said, moving toward a second gin and tonic. I didn't admit how little I knew about the region where I'd grown up. For at the time, I'd simply wanted to flee it. But I *had* heard of Cabeza de Vaca, and in the eighth grade I wondered why anybody would have a name that meant *head of a cow*. He was mixed up in my mind with Coronado, who had come north from Mexico looking for the Seven Cities of Cibola, with their promise of gold and other riches. He stood in line with various other conquistadors. You tend to remember the name of someone known as a conquistador.

In my eighth grade class we were all required to take a course in New Mexico history. I was new to that part of the country, having lived until then in the center of a flat, green little stretch of truck farms on the East Coast. My father had come west to take advantage of a business opportunity that proved to be a disaster—his own version of the search for the Seven Cities. Coronado, in case you don't know it, was killed by the Indians during one of his explorations. It was summer when we arrived, just before the end of World War II. They were having a drought in the area around the squalid little mining town we landed in, and the smell of sun-baked earth hung in the air, laced with the continual dry scraping of the cicadas in the trees. I wandered disconsolately along the stony wash in our neighborhood, waiting for school to start, longing for friends and something to do with myself; only to dis-

cover that nearly all those in my class had gone to school together since the first grade and stood in the comfortable ambience of shared mores and family connections and understood jokes. For the first time, my eastern accent sounded alien to my ears.

I sat behind Jane Frances Skillen, who stood out as the exemplar of a blessed and mysterious life. She wore mesh hose and tooled cowboy boots to school, and she had her own bank account. She was a short, plump, soft-spoken girl, with a pasty, lightly freckled face and dark hair, which she had a nice way of shaking back from her face. When she laughed, always very mannerly, her little round face dimpled near the chin. During history class someone usually passed her a note, and I wondered, as I handed it to her, what new and fortunate element was being introduced into her life. Whenever there was a community square dance, the high school boys clustered around her. Once when the box lunches we girls had brought were auctioned off, hers went for at least two dollars higher than anybody else's, and the boy she got to eat it with was a tall, rangy, good-looking kid, whose father ran the local newspaper and who ultimately would go off to Harvard. The rest of the time she stood at the center of a huddle of girls, who said things like, "Jane Frances, can you stay in town with me tonight? We can go to the show," or "Jane Frances, let's have a slumber party."

"I'll have to call my mother," she would say without looking different or pleased.

To my mind, she was set apart in some enviable fashion because she rode the school bus home. This was to a ranch somewhere in the Gila valley, which suggested a rough and adventurous life, though she went regularly to the Methodist church and was active in Girl Scouts, and her mother belonged to Eastern Star and the Ladies' Auxiliary and the Sorosis.

I mention these things because, as I stood on the edge of the circle, catching the echoes of a social life I stumblingly tried to enter, the history of New Mexico was simply the occasion where I could sit behind Jane Frances Skillen and dream of being somewhere else.

* * *

So I read the journal of Cabeza de Vaca. One of the first things I learned from the introduction was how he got his name. It seems that back in thirteenth-century Spain, when the Christians were fighting the Muslims and were about to be slaughtered in a certain battle, a shepherd boy showed the Christians a secret pass through the mountains, by means of which they were able to take the enemy by surprise. The entrance to the pass he marked with a cow's skull, and the grateful King of Navarre rewarded the shepherd with nobility and a change of name: Cabeza de Vaca.

The name, however, had stayed with me from the time I read it in the eighth grade, mainly because of its oddity—a small fact not linked to anything else, and with only the shadow of a human being standing behind it. A curious thing with facts, the way some of them stick, out of a certain perversity that has nothing to do with their importance. And so a nameless shepherd enters History, conquering anonymity and ultimately other people and then . . . but that comes later. For now, let us say simply that it was a bloodthirsty line. Or perhaps given the role of Conquistador, the ideal of the conqueror, you have bestowed upon you an opportunity of killing without self-doubt: a time-honored practice of putting whole populations to the sword in the name of holy purpose and the hope of booty. Cabeza de Vaca's grandfather had subdued the Canary Islands, in at least one instance hanging, drowning, and pulling apart by horses all the males over fifteen, and while slaying the native chief, converted him to Christianity as he died.

Discovery and conquest I accepted quite casually back then—the word *conquistador* suggested an office, an entitlement, something kings hired you out for as routinely as the folks who chopped cabbages. In class I gave my attention to what really mattered: who would be asked to Jane Frances Skillen's birthday party. For I saw her one morning with a little packet of small white envelopes with names neatly printed on the front. These she handed round at the end of the period, before the beginning of study hall, while I watched from

behind my book, neglecting for some minutes to read about the Indians being eliminated from history by assorted conquerors of the New World. It never occurred to me then that its inhabitants probably looked upon such names as Balboa, Cortez, Ponce de Leon, and Columbus, indeed the whole kit and caboodle, as a dubious blessing, even if their bearers did introduce the horse.

When Cabeza de Vaca came from Spain to Florida, I learned later, it was with an expedition bent on doing as well as Cortez had done in Mexico. Cortez had been, in the eyes of some, an upstart, deserving discipline, yet also an enviable model. But the coast of Florida, ripe for plundering, won their attention. The real story of Cabeza de Vaca begins, though, with a lamentable decision by the leader, Narvaez, to separate from the ships and go by horseback to meet them at a sheltered bay somewhere down the coast. They never found the ships. Cabeza de Vaca, being a clearheaded and practical youth, had argued against the plan from the first, much good did it do him. Now they found themselves in a strange, swampy land; plagued by mosquitoes, red bugs, and flies as large as bumblebees as well as half a dozen other varieties, all bloodthirsty; warred upon by Indians; and attacked by malaria.

All those years I had no idea even of the origin of Cabeza de Vaca's name. It failed to occur to me even that I could ask a question about it. Not that the book or Mrs. Pederson, who taught eighth grade vocabulary and spelling and girls' P.E. as well as New Mexico history, could have enlightened me. Not at a time when the name of Jane Frances Skillen was the one chiefly buzzing in my head. I had yet to discover my lack of curiosity.

One must scrape past cities and culture and manners to imagine Florida, see the Spaniards there in a land stirring with animals and birds, silent but for their cries, inhabited by all but naked men to whom they couldn't speak. At the mercy of this lush, tropical, but alien land. And with less and less hope as they found themselves stranded on a spit of land, swamps all around, dying of malaria, their leader ill, some wanting to desert. And hungry. In this extremity they came up with the

idea of building boats and heading for the open sea. How they managed to do this is a matter for wonder, for no one knew how to build a boat; there were no tools or iron or pitch or rigging. There was also nothing to eat.

It is here that my imagination began to take hold, years later as I read. I could see those men, having made it across the ocean, convinced that they could step on shore, conquer the local Indians and rake in the gold, which would be lying in obvious display in villages waiting to be plundered. I could see these men dressed in the costume of the Spanish hidalgo, well-horsed and armed. Men who could wager with one another as to who could behead a man the more skillfully, and, selecting a native and setting out on their horses, attempt to do the job with a single sword stroke—using up enough Indians to satisfy themselves as to who had really won the bet. Men who fed human flesh to their dogs to make them more savage in attack. Now as they were lost in a strange land, it was the Indians who assumed the advantage.

I see the Spaniards stripping down. It's a matter of life and death building those boats. Everything must be ripped out of its old context. They melt down their spurs and stirrups and crossbows for iron to shape saws and nails and axes. And to eat, they kill their horses, though Cabeza de Vaca admits he could never bring himself to eat horse flesh. Even under duress the delicacy of sensibility prevails—for a time. Later he would be glad to eat lizards and rats. They turn the manes and tails of their horses into rope and rigging, cut palmettoes for fiber to use in place of oakum for the boats. And even their shirts they must sacrifice for sails.

Miracle enough that they can put together five boats and launch them, forty-odd men in each, the water reaching practically to the gunwales. By that time they'd eaten all but one of their horses. But that enterprise, too, is doomed to disaster, as the boats are caught in one of those sudden fierce storms that come upon the gulf. Even though Cabeza de Vaca and several of his companions survive the storm, their boat is swamped on the way to shore, and all their possessions, including their remaining clothes, are lost. When Cabeza de Vaca enters

the New World this time, he is as naked as the day he was born.

Let us pause to watch him struggle to shore. It's November now and cold, and he hasn't had anything to eat except toasted or raw maize since May. Skin hanging onto bones. The poor, bare, forked animal—that's where it begins, isn't it? Unaccommodated man, reduced to skin and bones and the animal instinct to escape death. Survival—that always pricks one's attention: that somehow among all those who perish, someone makes it out, lives to tell the story.

The Indians come to the rescue this round. Took the half-drowned, shivering men to their tepees and gave them warmth and shelter and food. They were afraid, these castaways, that they would be slaughtered, but it was that or huddling together on shore to die of starvation and exposure. And Cabeza de Vaca found the one preferable to the other. For seven more years he would wander the land, cross rivers, make his way through the swamps with their mosquitoes and seven kinds of flies, including the small ones that could leave a horse bleeding all over, live on the fruit of the prickly pear and roots and grubs and oysters, occasionally deer meat, journeying over unknown territory to the borders of New Mexico.

History, so it appears to me now, is born of such events, and then the mind keeps struggling with the experience ever after. The spark of curiosity alone isn't enough. Something must be put aside of the investment in the present, to allow things to live again. Jane Frances's birthday party was too important to be supplanted. Fortunately, I was rescued from my state of disappointment by Mrs. Pederson. She had us write a story using our new vocabulary and spelling words. I wrote one about a man trying to outwit a bronco and getting thrown off each time. It was a humorous story. I had never seen anyone ride a bronco, but I managed to use all the words. Mrs. Pederson chose mine to read to the class.

To go on: We have a man stark naked, stripped of all that Spanish nobility can offer, down to his native wit and strength and will to continue, who will journey in that condition, most of the time hungry, sometimes enslaved and beaten by the

Indians, his body in sores, subject to the pricks and stabs of bush and branch, and contending always with the flies and mosquitoes. There is only one large fact—the death that can assume such a variety of forms and still be death. And only one major operation of the will, whether to yield or resist, to continue the suffering; whether in the face of death to resist against the stings and arrows. And only one major recourse—prayer. According to his journal, Cabeza de Vaca prayed a lot, asking for God's mercy and for forgiveness for his sins.

They stumbled on in this fashion, eating or going hungry as chance provided, and as the Indians themselves did—until he and his companions were met with a curious notion: they were capable of healing the sick. The Indians insisted on it. They simply ought to be men who could heal the sick; they must blow upon the afflicted area and cast out the sickness with the laying on of hands. They gave up protesting and did what they were told. Suddenly cast in a strange new role, they added the blessing of an Ave Maria or a Paternoster and made the sign of the cross. And those treated by Cabeza de Vaca claimed they were well, rose up and went their way.

Now comes the strangest part.

They were asked to go to the hut of a man given up for dead, already being mourned by his friends. Cabeza de Vaca's companion hung back, afraid of failure, afraid his sins would get in the way, but Cabeza de Vaca, almost in anger at his companion's want of nerve, went to the sufferer. And though he found him with eyes rolled back and pulse gone, he prayed with fervor that his health would be restored and gave him every blessing. That evening after they had left, so Cabeza de Vaca's journal says, others told him the dead man "got up whole and walked, had eaten and spoken with them and that those to whom I ministered were well and much pleased. This caused great wonder and fear, and throughout the land the people talked of nothing else."

The news spread like wildfire. After that, wherever he went, whole villages would turn out, and to cure the sick he was offered bows, arrows, food, hides, the Indians divesting themselves of everything they owned for this man of power.

Perhaps you'll say, "History is bunk"—a historic remark! You can drive through C de V's landscape now, thanks to a man who had no truck with history. What are we to make of all this? I remember an image from a fairy tale I once read, of a princess who had to walk through room after room of an unknown castle. At the entrance of each, giant cobwebs blocked the way, and before she could continue, she had to tear them down. In the dusty gallery we stumble over yesterday's miracles. Who is obliged to believe that Cabeza de Vaca ever existed, much less believe in his story? He could have invented it. Eight years intervened between the experience and his account of it. There is always a story—why not at least make it entertaining for the grandchildren?

Let us suppose that this man, reduced to extremities, light-headed from hunger, slogging on by means of whatever hidden source of strength, all but two of his companions lost, does indeed arrive in Mexico—another Odysseus. But reconstructing that lost time imagines himself a conquistador after all, the role of a god. A fit tribute to his imagination. Or perhaps it was such a fantasy that allowed him to survive in the first place.

About the time a sense of history began to dawn in me, I went to visit my grandmother, then in her eighties. I had seen her only once before, when I was a small child living in the East. I wanted to know about the family, to discover "my roots," as people then were fond of saying. She told me how poor her father's people had been farming in Bohemia, little better than serfs. She married poverty. Then later as a widow with five children, she'd nearly starved. One by one she'd sent the children to the New World to live with relatives; then, thank God, she had been able to come herself.

"I have such a story," she told me one afternoon as she lay on the bed to rest. She was a tiny, wizened woman, with a brace on her leg from a previous stroke and a sharp birdlike face as yellowed as old ivory. And she told me that once in her village there came news of a pogrom, that to escape she had fled to the country with all but the youngest child, my mother, who had clung to her father and refused to leave. My grandfather had thought himself safe enough down in the basement

of their cottage, but had kept a single candle burning, which he was sure could not be seen behind the curtains.

But when the shooting came, a soldier's bullet found him out and he died holding the hand of his youngest child.

Whenever I thought of the story over the years, it was enough to bring tears to my eyes. It was inspiring, after all, that somehow amid all the horrors, people struggled on, managed to survive. My grandmother and my mother. And here was I, reaping the benefit. I think of this, a story I have held in my head for years, stringing one sensibility to another. And perhaps it was so for the descendants of Cabeza de Vaca, who could look upon their ancestor with pride and awe, not only for having survived but for having touched a mysterious power.

For myself, I can imagine it as being the truth. As I follow his story, I see a man forced out of his old life and sent through all the torments of the flesh, till all that's left is a bit of life hanging in the moment, as precarious as a match flame in the wind. Hardly knowing whether he wants to live or die. A man who possesses nothing, can lay claim to nothing but must simply throw himself into the perils of circumstance. Pushed to the point where life cleaves in two, at the wall where one crosses into darkness. With so many dead already, maybe only death lies in the storm of uncertainty surrounding the human will. And so believe, if you can, believe powerfully enough that though death might be easier, you will at least not choose to die. Perhaps if one reaches that state—a state wholly open: beyond riches or fame or conquest or love—one comes in touch with the genius of things, and it pours through, mysteriously igniting certain dormant and hidden powers. A pass through the mountains in a moment of extremity, the power to heal in a crisis of survival: perhaps it is a collection of miracles still gleaming under the cobwebs that joins us to the past. I do not know for certain. There is still the testimony of all those who stood at the wrong end of the sword. Their forgotten voices. A leap into faith on the one hand—or into chaos on the other.

However, though it could have happened, in an important sense, my grandfather was not one of those hapless victims. I

had never asked my mother about the story, that defining statement of our heritage. I just thought of her as that small child holding her father's hand when he was shot down. But not long ago, it came up in a curious way. We were considering how my grandmother had braved the journey all across Europe and then to New York; and our family from New York to New Mexico. All of us carried so far from the place of our origins. She said she had always wondered what had happened to her father. She was twelve, already working by the time my grandmother made it to the New World. "He was shot down by those murderers," was all she would say whenever the question came up, wiping the tears from her eyes, putting her hand up in a gesture that insisted she could endure no further questions. And when my mother once asked her aunt about it, she got a stony look in a set face, as though she'd trampled on forbidden ground. Naturally, the question nagged at her.

And maybe never would have been satisfied. But years later, a remote cousin who had immigrated some years after World War II, drifted out to New Mexico, and they met. "Bernard," she said to him one day, "you grew up in my father's village—tell me what happened to him."

He shrugged. "Listen," he said, "things like that—water under the bridge."

"But, really, I want to know."

"So why do you want?" he said with a smile. "He's like you never knew him, a stranger. My God, how many years dead?"

"That's not the point," my mother insisted. "It's always bothered me."

"Well," he said, "don't blame me. We never talked, it was the shame of the family. We let our ears burn till it all died down."

I add my grandfather's fate to all the things that I did not know as I sat behind Jane Frances Skillen in the eighth grade. I didn't know either that she belonged to one of the major ranching families in the state and was therefore in a social class well beyond mine or that her forebears had gotten their start by rustling cattle and then, their herds built up, selling short to the Indian reservations. Her great grandfather and his brother

had kept a butcher shop in town, and with his money, Skillen bought land to ranch. His brother, a restless sort, wandered up north to rob stage coaches. Before he was caught and hanged, he cut a couple of fingers from a young boy's hand in order to carry off the rings he was wearing. But she wouldn't have known any of this, nor I, that my grandfather, who'd been involved in a counterfeiting scheme, had tried to shortchange his partners.

I wonder now if my grandmother believed the story she told about the pogrom, had told it to herself so often it blotted out what happened. Perhaps it was what she needed to survive, assuming that the cousin's story is the truth. Or perhaps she invented it just for me. The angle of the light keeps shifting as it hits the objects in the dust-filled room. And which pose will you take after you've been swung around: sentimentalist or cynic or true believer?

But wait, I confess that I have something of my grandmother's penchant for fabrication. The cattle rustling is all local gossip and hearsay—no solid proof, and Skillen's brother is an invention on my part, though I read about just such a man—down to the boy's fingers. That's just my way of getting even with Jane Frances for that birthday party. But I want to set the record straight. Okay, so call me a liar: I'm no more unreliable than the next fellow. Yet I do love the truth, if there be truth to the imagination. History is still a problem for me; as soon as I touch a fact, it begins to move and wriggle as though it had a life of its own. I try to hold on as best I can.

The last I heard the great Skillen ranch was being sold because the heirs could no longer afford to run it. Now it takes on a new set of names, joins some other set of destinies. But it's connected to me as well. As I look back and see myself sitting behind Jane Frances Skillen, knowing little of New Mexico and almost nothing of the larger world, I can only marvel at the intricate threads of circumstance that brought us together, one behind the other, as different as the dark from the dawn, mercifully ignorant—for how else could the young bear to live—yet sharing almost everything in common.

Painting the Town

“Give yourself a can of paint and you can cover a multitude of sins. Only take a brush in hand and you got a house of a different color. A red wall, a blue corner, an exterior somewhere between Antique Gold and Up-to-the-Minute Sunlight. Fog Gray, Velvet Purple, Burnt Mushroom—”

“You some kind of poet? That’s good—a paint-pot poet!”

“Why I know a town in Oklahoma named Pink. You got it, the whole thing’s pink. Not my color, I’ll grant you, but you know anybody who’d flat out paint a whole town from top to bottom really wanted that color. Got right inside it and gave the world a new optical opportunity. Fortunately, it’s a hamlet.”

“Come on. Give the kid a break.”

“Possibility, that fleeting thing. Freshness. Cover up the past and you got it: a new surface, blank slate, tabula rasa. You do a public service in this business, kid.” That was his Uncle Mort, thin as a match, so tall he’d become round-shouldered stooping in the direction of conversation. His pupils seemed to enlarge as he talked, as if they might take in any amount of light, while he trailed cigar smoke and the smell of himself, cruising the aisles of the paint store.

“Come on, come on. I’ve seen all the dreadfuls I can stomach.” That was his Uncle Oscar. “Like the inside of a migraine headache. Put a brush in some people’s hands and what d’you get?—a new eyesore.”

Mort threw up his hands. “He thinks eyesores.”

“Tell me, kid, you afraid of heights? That scaffolding’s pretty narrow and times are it’s two, three stories to the ground. Personally, the smell of paint makes me sick. I sell the stuff, but I can’t stand it.” His Uncle Oscar: short, stocky, whose words

came out somewhere between a wheeze and a groan. They were giving him a tour of the store; though he'd been in it dozens of times, it was his first time as an employee.

So much for the killjoys. His Uncle Mort was irrepresible. "The smell of new beginnings—that's what's in a can of paint. You stir it up, see that color come together with the base, pure as cream. Then the first dip of the brush . . ." They paused at a display, freestanding cardboard: a woman, having blazed the first band across a wall, turns to flash a smile of triumphant achievement. Anybody can do it.

"You're in for a long, muscle-aching job," his Uncle Oscar assured him. "Your arms in good shape? You're not careless? God, I hope not. Turn over a can of paint and you got the mess to clean up, not counting the loss of time, to say nothing of the cost of the paint. People are so goddam careless. Makes me furious."

"There he goes; no wonder his nerves are shot."

"The other day some joker comes in here, pulls a can out of the bottom of the pyramid. Always trying it. Stupidity—from the paint store to the White House. You're not a careless type, smokes on the job, drinks?"

"Just trying to get even with me for the cigar. Oscar, you're a pain in the ass. Give the kid some encouragement, will you? Look at him. Tall, good-looking, healthy, full of juice. Reminds me of myself when I was young. Youth . . . Get me greased up a little, I could tell you a few stories."

"Spare him the trouble. Who needs your stories?"

"You're lucky, kid. About to embark on the great adventure. I had a motorcycle then." He leaned toward Matthew confidentially: "I was rather a wild youth."

"Okay. He gets the job done, he gets paid for it. If he don't, no bucks for college, Ellie's son or not. That's the world, kid. You better believe it."

"Don't take it to heart, Mat. Keep your enthusiasm. Color is the alphabet of the emotions. Paint is serious business."

"Goose shit!"

His uncle gave him a wink. They never let up on each other. "Don't give me any theories. Listen, Matthew, I fell and broke

my collarbone in this racket; next I broke my back. Maybe you remember. Weeks staring at the ceiling, months in a brace. Now I get to listen to him bore me to death. It's a living. Ok, so I'm grateful to be in the store selling instead of working my arm, breaking my neck. Let it be a lesson."

"You'd think nothing ever went right in his life," Mort appealed to him. "You're lucky. You get to go back to college the end of summer. You got a life ahead of you."

"If he weren't my brother, I'd punch him out."

"Listen, kid. Man should soar, aspire—invent himself. They teach you that in college? Why he's his own greatest idea. Let me tell you, I think of it often. Leonardo, that great painter, back there inventing wings." While Mort went on, Oscar rocked back on his heels, jingled the change in his pocket, stuck a finger in his ear, and examined the end of it when he pulled it out. Matthew stood by. Nobody was asking him to work his brain; the semester was over. "Looking at the birds and projecting man skyward. Living in the idea. Whenever I think of it, tears come to my eyes."

"So you got gloves, apron, brushes, turpentine, thinner, rags—the works," his Uncle Oscar broke in. "Don't step back to admire your work. And if you get a job you can't handle, let me know."

At that point the door opened, a woman entered the store, and complaint, advice, exhortation dropped to the ground. A swinging curve of the hip that kept lovely company with the movement of the thigh brought her forward as various takes of her face and figure, a variety of subliminal impressions accompanied her approach. A welcome vision, as though she'd come from somewhere else, a foreign country or a different bent. Black hair curling below her shoulders, large eyes fringed with long lashes. But it was not just those. Nor the cheekbones that created two shadows along the cheeks, setting off the wide mouth. Somehow she changed the environment, created her own weather, a charged atmosphere: exciting, unpredictable. Dangerous? She wanted something—she had that look—or had pushed something away from her, like a dish sent back to the kitchen. She was not young.

Bitchy. Okay, let's hear it. Get what you want and leave me in peace. I've got short breath and fallen arches, a nagging wife and bills to pay. So with Oscar. Mort was ready to doff his cap, bow ceremonially, tap his forehead to the ground. *Welcome, welcome.* Matthew stood between them, flushed at the neck.

"I understand you paint houses," she said, down to business at once.

"At your service, Ma'am," Mort said, with a sweep of his arm. He was going to embarrass them. Make some sort of gesture, gallant and stupid. Oscar jingled change. Matthew shifted from one foot to the other.

"I want mine painted," she said. "Black."

"Well," he said, "we have black paint." An unusual request.

"Good." She smiled slightly, for the first time.

"I don't recall I've seen a black house before," Oscar said, doubtful.

"I've always wanted a black house." The three men weren't going to intimidate her. Matthew was ready to admire her determination. "And now I mean to do it. It'll add a little contrast to the neighborhood."

"Definite contrast," Mort said. "You'll get a lot of old ladies on their porches."

"Lots of grays—painted lots of them." Count on Oscar for irrelevance.

Mort smiled at the woman to undermine him, the killjoy.

"Gray with white trim, white with gray trim, dark gray trim, even red trim." Black was giving him the fidgets.

"I want to be a witch in a black house," she said. A smile, ironic.

"Then you'll have your wish," Mort said. Light on the irony. "I've known some witches in my time, but you don't look like any of them."

Amazing what happened then. She smiled broadly and her whole expression changed. Matthew was fascinated. "How do I look then?" she challenged him.

"Why, you look . . ." Matthew watched. His uncle stood there, a stick fishing for a word. "Wonderful." She laughed, and the sound rippled along Matthew's spine.

She actually touched Mort on the arm, and Matthew allowed himself the thrill of that instant as he caught the scent of her perfume. "I should take you home with me," she said playfully, with almost a growl of pleasure. "You're just what I need." To his Uncle Mort, to that old man!

They arranged for Mort and Matthew to stop by her house, to figure the number of square feet and estimate the amount of paint. He and Matthew would begin the job together, then Mort would go on to another project and help him part of the time.

"Good," she said, emphatically. "It's the best thing I've done in a long time. Next to having a tattoo. Did you know I had a tattoo?" she said right to Oscar. "Maybe I'll show you sometime." His Uncle Mort nearly broke up. She laughed, as she took the pen to write down her name and address. Then they watched her leave. Something hung in the air.

"I tell you," Mort said, "if I were younger that's a woman I'd go for." He made his eyebrows dance.

"She'd carve you into mincemeat," Oscar said. "I'll bet she's had practice. She's no young thing. I wouldn't touch her—"

"You wouldn't get the chance."

Hands in the pockets of his shorts, Matthew wandered around the store. They were done with him. Good thing—he was weary of them both.

"You know who she is, don't you?" Oscar's voice followed him.

"No, can't say I do."

"I thought you were up on all the latest gossip, better than the biddies down at the public library. She's Anna Marconi's sister—some kind of fashion designer. Summers here. And she has a boyfriend, drives a white Bugatti."

"Sure. I know who you mean. Greek god type. Boots. Skin tight jeans. Silver studs down the shirt front. I've seen the teenyboppers practically on their knees begging for a ride in his buggy."

A series of speculative puffs of the cigar. Smoke over the aisle. Matthew could see the woman, her hair floating on the wind, her hand on the man's arm, as they drove in the white convertible.

So Matthew Brannigan was set up for opportunity by his two uncles. Six feet two in his stocking feet, good build, though he walked as though he had not yet grown into his frame. An open face. Everything to observe; nothing much to hide, few nuances yet. Fond of his uncles, he left room for both, catching a hint of the tragic here, a touch of gentleness there. False heartiness in the one; the groan of resignation in the other. But mostly, he thinks of summer, the sunlit stretch of days.

The house lay at the end of Larch Street, a two-storied rectangle with simple lines, barn red. Black over red—at the end of a row of white houses.

When they arrived, the white Bugatti was parked in front, and he and his uncle looked at one another: they should come back later. They were spared the trouble. A man slammed the door behind him, strode from the porch, climbed in the car and drove off with a roar. They waited a few moments, got out of the truck and knocked. She pulled the door open with a jerk, a vase in hand ready to throw. She gave them a look of incredulity and rage, as though they'd personally robbed her of the chance to let out a large store of sentiments. "Oh, it's you," she said, letting her arm fall.

"Sorry to intrude, Miss Cousteau."

"Go ahead, go ahead," she said. Then her face crumpled, and she hastily shut the door. "Goddamit," they heard her yell. "Goddam son-of-a-bitch." Followed by the shattering of glass.

"Rackety times," Mort said. "Think of grabbing her by the wrists and kissing her right on the mouth," he said. He paused to imagine it. "Watch that wildcat turn to sweetness. Ummn." He shook his head.

Matthew wondered if his uncle got his ideas about women from the movies: he adored Sophia Loren. His aunt Ruth had been a dour woman with a large raised mole just above her left eye. All through his boyhood, he'd stared at that mole, usually during Sunday dinners. She said things like, "Finish your potatoes, Matthew," just as his mother did, and she knitted endless sweaters and afghans. Matthew wondered if only women like Gina Cousteau went only with men who drove white Bugattis. A certain kind of man of which he had a fleeting impression.

Whether from the set jaw and angry stride, or from the gray suede jacket and soft gray boots, he caught a glimpse of a sophistication that he'd come closest to in liquor advertisements.

He'd slept with a girl for the first time in high school, an awkward and fumbling affair. And the rare times in college had been, in retrospect, the dishevelments of appetite, in fostering circumstance. He didn't knock them or the chance to prove himself. Actually, he'd been going with a girl since high school, Susan Minton, the daughter of his mother's closest friend. She made endless plans about their marriage, the ceremonial path to where love and sex would meet at the perfect crossroads. Until then he could dream—of what he hadn't the vaguest idea. He thought he wanted to marry her; at least he knew her, and somebody else might be a mistake. None of the other girls he dated promised more than an occasional good lay. But none of that seemed to apply to the driver of the white Bugatti. Here were lovers who threw things at one another.

"I think I've got it," his uncle said, snapping up the measuring tape. "We can start tomorrow."

* * *

The black paint went well over the barn red. The house would not need a second coat. They worked all that day together, scraping, then painting, but saw nothing of Gina Cous-teau. They finished the side wall and Matthew drove by after dark, curious to see the effect. The lights seemed to float on the darkness as though no house were there at all. He sat in the car for a long moment, then cut the engine.

"Why hello."

He gave a start. A dark figure blocked his window.

"What are you doing here?"

"I was looking at your house," he said, embarrassed.

She laughed, a rich throaty laugh. "Admiring your work?"

He laughed too. "I can't even see it. It's weird, you know. The way the lights just float, like something passing through."

"That's nice," she said. "You look at things."

He grinned with pleasure.

"Hey, you want to walk to the store with me? I need some company."

"Sure," he said. She oughtn't be out alone at night. If a danger leapt out from behind the trees, he'd go to the ground with it. She could wipe the blood from his forehead, weep a little.

"The evening was so nice," she said, as he got out of the car, "and I got this sudden hunger for something sweet. That ever happen to you?"

"All the time. I'm a chocolate fiend."

"Well, you're a growing boy." She gave him a little poke in the ribs.

It was maddening to walk alongside her. Her perfume, the rippling of her hair, a presence that, like the lights of her house, seemed to float in the dark, ineffable and evocative, made his skin prickle. He wanted to seize her hand.

At the store, they spent half an hour, looking at bags of cookies, reading out the ingredients aloud, getting silly over unpronounceable strings of chemicals ("What is this? Are they trying to poison us?") and speculating about the degree of sweetness. They had to be sweet enough, but not too sweet. In the end she picked out Danish butter cookies and chocolate chip. Not to be outdone, he snagged macaroons, ginger snaps, and something called Growly Bears.

"I think that guy wanted to throw us out," she said, with a giggle. "We weren't helping sell his product. But we bought out the store. You'll have to help me eat some of these," she said, as they walked back. He was fantasizing taking her hand, when she suddenly took him by the arm as they stepped from the curb. He couldn't believe it. He expected her to let go, but she kept her hand on his arm.

Great day, Mort. Peace, Oscar.

"Now we can have our feast," she said, as he stood on the stoop, holding the bag while she unlocked her door. "You like coffee or tea?"

"Sure," he said, though he never drank either if he could help it.

"I'll have it in a minute," she said, taking the bags into the kitchen. "Just make yourself at home."

He walked around her living room as though he'd been admitted to a private showing. He looked at the bookshelves and the masks and paintings on her walls and the plants that grew in profusion on windowsills, in hanging pots. Her things. He saw that the paintings were created not only with paint but with strips of cloth, velvet and silk, prints and solid colors, different textures. They looked like large flowers.

"You do these?" he asked when she came back. She set down a tray with a pot of coffee and cups and cookies heaped on a plate. "I heard you designed clothes."

"That too," she said. "But this is my passion."

"How come you want your house black?"

"Oh, I don't know. I wanted to give myself a little excitement, I guess." She gave a shrug. "And I was in a bad mood. Sometimes I do stupid things when I'm like that. Only this time, I'm pleased. I'm going to like my black house."

A simple equation: The man plus her mood equals a black house? Did he drive a white convertible for her? He took a bite of chocolate chip cookie. "Not bad."

She sat opposite him, watching him eat. "You look so good," she said, "I could eat you."

His face grew warm.

"I'm embarrassing you," she said. "It's a terrible habit I have, but you have a wonderful face, you know that?"

He seized at boldness, took her on. Cocked his head and looked at her, first one side, then the other. "So do you."

She laughed. "You're good for me, you know that. Sweet and unspoiled. Hey, you know, your uncle's nice."

He knew what she meant. "Yeah."

"There are some decent men around," she said almost to herself. "I have to keep reminding myself."

She stared moodily at the rug, no longer there.

"I guess I'd better get going," he said.

She raised her eyes, came back. But she didn't try to keep him. "Well, I'll see you tomorrow," she said. "Bright and early."

She walked outside with him. "My God, look at those stars, will you. Sometimes I feel like they could draw me right up."

"Well," Matthew said, "you've got something like a black sky right here. You can float along with the lights."

She laughed. "You're something. You got a girlfriend?"

"Sort of."

"I'll bet you do. I'll bet the girls follow you around."

She was embarrassing him again.

"Don't worry, they will. And this car. Where'd you get it?"

"Inherited it," he said. He patted the fender. "If the heater works, the radio doesn't. If you got the lights on, you can't use the windshield wipers."

"You ought to paint it," she said.

"You think so?"

"Put designs on it."

He thought about it.

"You just get some little cans of touch-up paint and you can go wild. Tell you what—I'll show you a few tricks," she said.

"Come around when you've got a free night."

"You bet," he said.

* * *

"What's that?" Oscar wanted to know, "A doodle parade?" The car sat out in front, a fourteen-year-old Mustang, its surface covered.

"Flowers of inspiration," Mort said grandly. "The transcendent landscape. Mountains fixed with fiery stars. An ocean—"

"If you're advertising for us, no thanks."

"Your work?" Mort said. "A mighty hand, a mighty brain."

"I had some help," Matthew said. "I painted the mountains, but—" he coughed, "a friend of mine painted the horses and the Indians."

"What are those over there?"

"Symbols of fertility."

"Hopi?"

"Navajo."

"What's that?"

"Thunderbirds."

"And those?"

"The four winds. Sun, moon and stars."

"Elaborate."

"Nice border."

"Maze design."

"You did the mountains?"

"Is that supposed to be the Last Supper or an Indian pow-wow?"

"Come on, Oscar. Appreciate. Think of the work."

"Paint a whole house in that time."

"What kind of flowers are those?"

"Sunbursts."

"Thought I recognized the glory."

"I didn't know your girl had so much talent."

"More talent in one little finger than . . . Well, I got to go."

"Too bad you got a date," Mort said. "I could tell you a few stories."

"Save the canned goods," Oscar said. "He's invented a whole panorama."

Actually, he was taking Gina Cousteau for a ride in the car. Now that she'd helped him paint it, she wanted to try it out. They'd drive along the ocean and stop and have some fried clams or shrimp. He knew a good place. When she stepped out to meet him, she looked different, younger. She was wearing a loosely knit sweater of blue and white, a scarf and silver earrings. She'd done her hair in pigtails and had put ribbons at the end of them. "Cute, huh? What d'you think?"

"Terrific," he said, though he wished she had left her hair loose so that he could watch it fly in the wind. He opened the door for her.

They drove out to see the sunset. Clouds floated above the bay, catching the afterglow. The light hung for a long time as they drove, rose melting into gold; then smoke gray across a darkening blue.

"I love being out here," Gina said. "You feel so free, like you could forget everything and start over. And this car. It could just take off over the water, in a flight of sparks."

Not exactly the sleek lines of the white Bugatti, but it was enough. She was in it.

"You like motorcycles? My uncle had a motorcycle when he was young."

"Too noisy," she said. "They terrify me."

At the fish place, they sat on rough plank benches at wooden tables and stuffed themselves with steamers and shrimp. He gave a lecture on the evils of gluttony and greed. "You'd make a great TV preacher." Then a litany in praise of their use of the economy, in the manner of the president. Finishing up with a little commentary in the style of his uncles. She laughed until tears came to her eyes. He was giddy with pleasure, not even guilty about sacrificing his uncles. He'd do worse for her sake. There really were women you sacrificed everything for—fought for, robbed banks for, made a fool of yourself for. All of it. He wanted to sit and stare at her forever, watch her go through all the emotions so he could practice up and get them right. She'd show him the genuine article.

"Hey, do you like to dance?"

"I adore it."

"Just follow me."

It was 3:00 A.M. when they got back, and he had to be up by 6:00. But he didn't care. Wouldn't have cared if his mother vented a storm over him the moment he crossed the kitchen in his stocking feet. He fidgeted while Gina searched in her purse for the key. Was he going to do it or not? "May I kiss you goodnight?" That's what he always said to Susan. The door opened and she turned to smile at him, on the verge of disappearing. His hands trembled. But before he gave way to the impulse, she had her arms around his neck and her mouth to his. Astonished, he hung on till his breath gave out. "My God," he murmured, breathless, then bent down and kissed her again.

"You're wonderful," she said, nuzzling him. "Your skin. That scent, what is it?"

"You really like it?" Expensive, that expression of his vanity. Amazing how her skin and hair had their own perfume; her very presence gave off a scent. Maybe if you loved, breathing was enough. You just drew breath.

He walked back to the car, but didn't get in. For a long time

he stood watching the lights float upward in her house, as though they bore her upward too. Lamps ascending into the dark. Then he watched them go out. Where did the light go? Just disappear? He couldn't imagine it.

* * *

"But I never see you." She had come into the store, interrupting a certain fantasy that had nothing to do with appreciable fact. He suffered a shift in gravity and dimension, a sudden alteration of time and reference. They walked out to the sidewalk, then up the street for a coke. He looked at her in the light of common day—she had claims—trying to figure out where she belonged. Silver bangles shook out the light below her teased hair, now brown at the roots. A band of freckles followed the curves of her cheeks. He tried to remember how he had seen her in the past, in his car, at the movies—how she ate, what she wore. To add her up into a sum of attitudes and qualities. He might have been looking at her across the street.

"What have you been doing?"

"Working," he said, with a shrug. "Nothing special."

"You haven't even called since we watched the Michael Jackson special."

"Yeah, well, you see, I've had this friend. Actually, my best friend at school. He's been worrying a lot about himself. . . ."

"John? Not AIDS," she said, horrified.

"Yeah, I mean, no—no, not that. Not John."

She gave him a strange look. "What are you trying to tell me?"

"Well, this friend has been in trouble—"

"With the law? Who've you been hanging around with?"

"He thought about it. Almost joined the army, but he's allergic to gun oil and shit on a shingle."

"What are you talking about?"

"Plus he's got a rich aunt." Something lifted his brain like champagne or helium. He couldn't stop. "But then he fell in love."

"So?"

"Love troubles. Hit him hard."

"And you're holding his hand every waking minute?"

"Yeah, I mean, he's been suicidal and—"

"Then he'd better get some help. You can't spend every minute . . ." She paused. "What does he do while you're working?"

"He's got a job."

"Oh. Just contemplates suicide in his off hours."

"Listen, Susan. It's just that I'm rather involved right now."

"Is it somebody else?"

What did he want? "You're free, I'm free." He stopped and looked at her.

"When we're practically engaged? What are you saying? And you haven't had the decency—"

"We're not practically anything," he said. "We never said we couldn't date. We haven't even—"

"Is that all you think about?"

"No, dammit," he said. He'd left off thinking. It was as though only now he'd come upon another language: the way Gina had tossed the hair out of her eyes and smiled over her shoulder at him while they were painting sunbursts on the top of his Mustang; her hair streaming in the wind (he'd asked her to undo her braids on the way home), her eyes gleaming with pleasure as they kept step, invented movement on the dance floor; his name in her voice. When she kissed him, he forgot that name altogether: being called, not back to himself but to another way of being. He wanted to forget the ache of who he was and wake up transformed into a lion with golden teeth or a huge white bear with diamond eyes. None of it quite real; yet he felt he'd just come alive.

"I wish I knew what you were talking about," Susan said. "You're just making fun of me."

"No, really," he said. "Half the time I don't know what I'm doing." She turned away, and he watched her, her name on his lips. He couldn't say it. Yet something tugged; a little thread still attached to her. "I'll call," he said. "Really I will."

The whole thing was a dream, one that he kept waking from and subsiding into. He was in her bed and she was lying on top

of him, tracing his eyebrows, curling his hair around her fingers. He loved the weight of her on his chest, the touch of her breasts, the smoothness of her thighs between his. A woman lying on top of him! There for him to stroke her back, run a hand along her buttocks and thighs. A gift, like a trust. After she'd dozed for a time on his chest, she said she'd been dreaming of red and green grapes, and laughed. He felt relaxed and sleepy, floating in fatness, at ease.

Two hours before, poised outside on the scaffolding just outside her window, he'd been tense with concentration, painting the back wall of the house and finishing up the trim around the window. The window was open and she was just inside, in front of her dressing table. She looked up and saw him, then came over.

"You're here," she said, opening the window the rest of the way. "Come on in." She moved back to give him room.

He set down the paint tray and brush carefully beside him and climbed over the sill. *I wouldn't do that*, his Uncle Oscar remonstrated: *You've got a job to do*.

So go to it, Mort said. Immediately, sir.

"Well, here you are," she said gaily.

There in his coveralls, their bagginess surrounding him. He was in her boudoir. She was one for scents all right. His eye jittered over a whole display of vials and bottles, tall and slender, heart-shaped, round; and stoppers, bulb-shaped, pointed, faceted, stemlike. He looked at her. They met in the middle of the room.

"Well," she said.

Question? Invitation? His chest throbbed. *Dangerous business. Don't step back to admire your work*. If he did the wrong thing, she'd probably boot him out. *Just dip in, kid*. He moved toward her, put his arms around her and kissed her.

She smiled, drew back, took the zipper of his coveralls and pulled it all the way down. He reached out and unbuttoned her tunic. She pulled back the sleeves from his arms. He drew her tunic over her head, undid her belt, tugged down her jeans. One suggestion followed another. He wanted to touch every part of her, encircle her waist, feel her warmth, snatch at

everything greedily, for himself. But the grace of her nakedness stopped him. He wanted to gaze at her, to keep her in his vision, to stand forever in that fullness, beside himself. The moment he did touch her, he seemed caught up in a momentum that threatened to take him out of control, beyond excitement. Yet he was held back by the gleam of a certain clarity. He learned from her the way he should touch her, allowed himself to be led and then went beyond her response. Knew from the way she moved, the sounds of her pleasure. He followed her, entered her experience and took his place there, found the rhythm, let himself be carried forward by it, to the last breathtaking, frenzied release, when he didn't know where he was going, but only that he had to get there.

"Oh," she breathed afterwards. "Oh."

Now she rolled over beside him, her head on his chest, while he stroked her hair. For a while they lay silent, apart, caught up in their various reflections.

"What are you thinking about?" he asked.

"A man," she said with a smile. "I don't know why. Maybe because I'm happy. Isn't that funny?"

The white car, the black house. A shadow.

"Sometimes what you think will be so wonderful . . ." He let her go on, but he didn't want her to. "I adored him, I really did. When he stood there down in the forge, supervising the students as they poured the bronze for one of his sculptures, he was like a god. Everything he touched was strong and beautiful. There was power there."

She was making a picture in his own mind that she must be seeing even more vividly.

"But then," she said, "he never thinks of anything but himself—his pleasure, his time. I tell you, I've sat by that phone for hours waiting for him to call, or just drop me a note. There's always some excuse: his wife is sick, the kids need this and that. He thinks he can have it all."

Susan stood in front of him: *I never see you*. He leaned over and kissed Gina to make her quiet. Pretty soon there'd be a whole confabulation in the room, more real than what was slipping away from them.

"I hate him," she said. "Oh, forgive me," she said. "Why am I thinking of that? You're wonderful, you know. You don't even know it. It's so natural with you, how to be a lover."

"Some men," she said, "it's like feeding roses to a dog."

There came a sudden banging on the door.

"My God, I forgot. I was supposed to meet my uncle and deliver some paint. It's out in the car."

They threw their clothes on. No point in his going back out on the scaffolding. They went downstairs together.

When Gina opened the door, his uncle looked from one to the other. "What have you been up to?" he asked. "Painting the town?"

"I forgot," Matthew admitted.

"I can see why. No problem. I'll just take the paint."

"I've still got a little work to do."

"Don't leave anything unfinished," his uncle said. "Once you start, do the job right."

* * *

"Women are to be appreciated," Mort was saying, "but never understood. I've been trying all my life. But then I don't think they know what they're all about either. Or us—they don't understand us any better." He paused to consider that idea fully, saw that his cigar had gone out, tried to relight it, burnt his finger and dropped the match. They had worked till dark, then gone for pizza and beer. Now into their third beer, Matthew felt the alcohol move into his fatigue.

Were you ever in love? He suppressed the question. He couldn't feature being in love with his Aunt Ruth. He remembered her bras and panties in formidable array on the clothesline. Her enemies were dust, dogs, encyclopedia salesmen, and children who picked her flowers.

"I was madly in love twice," his uncle said, as though lifting the question from Matthew's mind. "Or so I thought. Once with a girl named Helen. Beautiful girl. I mean really striking—she could've been in the movies. Jewish. She used to take me home and her mother fed me borscht and potato kugel, just

dying for a son-in-law to feed. I put on weight, believe it or not.”

“What happened to her?”

“Helen? She ran off with a jazz musician. Mrs. Bernstein cried when it was all over, despite my not being a member of the faith. Helen wasn’t really interested in me: a momentary diversion between her last man and the next. I felt devastated—for about a week. By the next Saturday I felt fine. Made me wonder about being ‘madly in love.’ Later on out in L.A. I found her boyfriend a job, and we all used to go to the movies together.”

“You weren’t jealous?”

“I think I was relieved. She wanted—too much from a man. She went through them like handkerchiefs.”

He felt tongue-tied. *Gina*, he wanted to say. All I know is her name. *Pay attention*, she’d said to him. *Pay attention*. To her? To what? It seemed like he couldn’t pay attention to anything but her. Fortunately he could paint walls and think of her, let the brush go on its own. Her image swirled in the paint he stirred, and gleamed on the freshly coated wood. It was formed by clouds and cracks on the sidewalk. Her perfume followed him into his sleep. And all of it became the outer reflection of longing. He had not known it could go so deep, whatever this was, like a nail driven through him to that extreme point where life flowed into him and spoke his name, there on the verge of that consciousness that made him separate, himself. That was her language, satisfying a hunger he’d never known existed, and creating one in the process. He ached with a sense of himself.

“I loved your aunt for her finer qualities,” he heard his uncle saying. “There wasn’t anything really physical between us after the first couple of years.”

Matthew looked at him. Giving it up after you went to such pains to get it; he responded with the sympathy of man to man.

“She liked a neat house and her pitcher collection. She’d do anything for me—except very little of *that*. She’d cry sometimes when I came home from my excursions.” His uncle shrugged. “I’m not a saint.” He signaled for another beer.

Matthew wanted to ask about his flings, but his uncle changed the subject.

"Susan's been around."

"What?"

"Making noises to Oscar."

"Why would she do that?"

"She said you were supposed to call her."

"I never made her any promises." But he had, he remembered.

"Maybe you didn't have to—you've gone together, what two, three years? Anyway, her mother and your mother . . . She's feeling neglected."

"I've been busy." Too busy for her? After that string of dates one after the other, bringing things up to the not-quite present. A habit. He'd never had to wrack his brains for what to do on weekends.

"I don't doubt it. Well, it's always easier getting in than getting out. Be careful—no, forget it. Things don't happen that way. Anyway, I believe in it, the sunbursts and all the rest."

* * *

"I've been dying to see you. . . . You never came by and when I tried to call you before, you were never there. . . . I'm so happy you called. . . . Remember all the fun times we had this spring?"

Her voice, reaching toward him, surrounding him, made him somehow dishonest, wearing false colors. *I'm not what you think. I can't go back. Gina, you've ruined me. Susan, the horizons are wider. Haven't you noticed the cliffs? The tracks going all the way to the edge.*

"I'm just not myself. It's hard to say, but I've wanted to be alone." He was going to do it neatly, cleanly. Take her to the movies and break it all off. Actually, he'd gotten a letter that morning that was going to change some things.

"You know, I haven't seen you since you painted your car," she said, when they came out of the theater.

The car, yes. Gina and the car. "You like it?"

She smiled. "It's kind of crazy. But I like it."

"It was a lot of fun."

"You should've called me, I'd have helped. Let's go for a ride," she said.

She'd ridden in it dozens of times before he and Gina went to work on it. Then, it was an ordinary car, somewhat notable for the rust along the bottom. He considered: They could go along the ocean, the same route he and Gina had taken, and could watch the foam break into the darkness at intervals. "The stars are wonderful," he could hear Gina saying. No, they couldn't go along the ocean.

He turned back into the country, along the avenues of dark trees. It didn't help. He drove silently. If Gina had felt bad enough to paint her house black . . . Had she felt that bad?

Susan reached over and put his arm around her shoulder, snuggled up to him. "Come over to the house for a while," she said. "We can put on some tapes and dance."

It was going to be harder than he'd thought. "I really should get back and turn in. I've got a long day tomorrow."

"Just this once. I've got something I want to give you," she said.

He wouldn't stay long, just long enough to get it over with. The house, he noticed, was dark but for a single lamp in the living room. "Where's your mom?" he asked, as they got out of the car.

"She's got a bridge game tonight. Your mother's there too. Come on in." He'd forgotten.

"You hungry?" she asked. "I could put together a couple of sandwiches."

"No, really, Susan. There's something I want to tell you. I just got a letter from my dad and . . ."

"That can wait," she said. "My turn first. Come in here," she said and led him into her room and shut the door. "Sit down," she said. "No, here, on the edge of the bed."

"Now close your eyes," she said, sitting down beside him. He could feel her hands on the back of his head, then their pressure as she made him lean toward her. His lips were

against her mouth. He kissed her lightly, but she did not let him pull away.

"Susan," he said, opening his eyes.

"You're cheating," she said. "And that wasn't much of a kiss."

She really wanted him to do better than that? Had he ever done much better?

"Come on now."

He did better than that. Before Gina, it would have scared him. He felt a little shudder go through her and then an exhalation of breath. They opened their eyes and looked at one another. Her expression was difficult to read. Breathing rapidly, she moved toward him again, took his hand and put it on her breast.

"What are you doing?"

"I want to, I want you to."

He didn't move, but watched her with a confused mixture of reluctance and excitement as she unbuttoned her blouse.

"Please."

Though he wasn't clear why she wanted it now, he felt drawn and in a way flattered. Perhaps in his new though tentative state, he had something of tremendous importance to offer her. He seized her and kissed her with force, then slipped his hand over her bare nipple. "Oh," she said, "oh." He was suddenly in a pitch of excitement, forgetting everything. He reached toward the zipper of her jeans and began pulling them down, but she wasn't giving him any help, and when he put his hand between her legs he felt her grow rigid.

He pulled away as though he'd been slapped. "You don't want to do this, do you?"

She sat silent, her narrow shoulders and small breasts exposed.

"Put your clothes on."

"She gives it to you, doesn't she?"

"What are you talking about?"

"You think nobody notices? You're not paying any attention. You just walk around doing what you please. It doesn't matter who you hurt."

He stood up, appalled. "You think she's a whore, don't you?"

She burst into tears. "I don't even know her. And she's so old—I don't even see why you like her."

So he'd driven her to this. Without wanting to be, he was sorry for her.

"I love you," she said, tearfully.

"No, you don't," he said. "But it doesn't matter." He grabbed up his jacket. "I think we're even," he said.

"Matthew," she yelled after him. "I do love you."

Back at the house, he was alone, his mother not having returned yet from the bridge game. For a long time he stared at himself in the mirror as though something might be revealed to him if he looked hard enough. "Your face is breaking out," he said to his image. "Isn't that swell? You're so big, you're clumsy," he said. "You ought to see yourself. Why don't you get a haircut?"

He slammed around the house, ate the leftovers from dinner—but nothing would satisfy—and went back to his room. At his desk he pulled out a sheet of stationery. He'd ordered it when he was a senior, but had never used it: a gray he supposed was elegant, with an initial *M* in a darker gray. "Dear Gina," he wrote,

It's the first time I've tried to write you a letter. It's odd. I feel like I've known you a long time, like you're my closest friend. Funny, isn't it? How everything can change. For me nothing has been the same since the day you walked into the store.

I don't know where I am.

I look into the mirror and I see a child—timid, scared and stupid. But when I look again, I see a man who wants to do right and learn and love.

Even though I've finished the house, can I come to see you again?

Matthew

She called him down at the store. "Of course you can come."

* * *

He wanted to bring her a present. But he didn't know how to buy a present for someone like her. He thought of flowers, but that seemed corny, and he didn't know how to buy her clothes. It had to be special, part of the language they spoke—of each other. Things he couldn't quite tell her in his letters. Some offering of himself. It took him a long time to decide. One thing he bought, the others he owned. Three things. He wrapped them carefully, went round to the house. He wanted to surprise her.

"Oh, I'm so glad to see you," she said, when she opened the door. "I just got off the telephone." She frowned. "That crumb. Like a bad taste you just want to forget. But you're here. I'm so glad. Come inside."

He brought out the packages from behind his back and displayed them like three cards he was holding.

"For me?" she said, taking one, hugging it to herself. "Oh, I love presents." She unwrapped the first, a shirt of red and gray check like one he'd worn and she'd admired. "I love that shirt." He'd found her size. "Like yours," she said, putting it on. Then she unwrapped the bottle of scent, half a bottle of "Gray Flannel," his big extravagance. He liked the idea of her using the other half. She laughed. "Oh, let me kiss you," she said. She rumbled up his hair. "What'll I ever do without you," she said.

"You'll have me," he said, as she unwrapped the third gift, his picture. "I hope you'll never have to do without me," he said. She gave a laugh that sounded almost like a moan. "You'll be here?" he said, worried. "You won't go away, will you? You won't die, will you?"

She looked at him tenderly. "Well, not if I can help it. Oh, you sweet thing. And you've come along now. If only . . ." She looked away. "If I looked at you as I ought, I'd think, 'Here is the son I never had.' Oh, my God."

"But I love you," he said. "I don't want you to be old, I don't want you to die. I just want—you. If you died . . ." He couldn't imagine the world without her. "You'd come back, though. I know you would."

She laughed again. "I'll always be here. For you. But," she said, "it's you who'll go away."

"The summer," he said, "it's going by so fast. And my dad keeps trying to convince me to transfer to school in California. It would be cheaper, and if I go to med school . . ."

"Then you'll go," she said. "You have a future—it's all in front of you, and my future is now my past."

"But you're my future. You're part of it. And I can't go away."

"You're talking like a child," she said, mournfully.

"Okay, then. But I will come back," he insisted.

"We'll see."

"I mean that. In two years on this day I'll be back."

"All right," she said, lighting up, as though the game itself were her delight. "We'll make a bet."

"Yes," he said, eagerly. "In two years on this day I bet I'll be here."

"It's a bet," she said.

"And what do I get if I win?"

She laughed. "You can name your prize."

"I want a ride along the ocean. I want you to tell me everything you've never told me. I want—"

"You can have everything. I can only lose."

"What do you mean?" he said, disturbed.

"If I win, I lose. If I lose, I'll still lose."

She stood in the midst of her riddle. Above him with a knowledge that beckoned, but promised to make him no happier once he had it.

"Whatever happens I will lose you."

"No," he protested. "I won't allow it."

She smiled as she approached him. "I love you," she said. "And I like my shirt. I like it on, but you can take it off. You made that choice, you know."

He thought about it. "But you?"

"Oh, I laid a few tracks, but you kept coming. You've done what you wanted to do."

He hadn't even thought about where the tracks were going, not till they'd got there and he was looking over the edge. But I'll go, he thought.

She smiled and put her arms around him. "What you want, you can have."

"Always?"

"How young you are." She gave a little laugh.

* * *

"A scandal," Oscar said, laying him out. "An absolute scandal. Did you think you were invisible? That nobody would notice? You and that woman!"

"Easy does it." This was his Uncle Mort.

"And if you knew about it," Oscar said, "you oughta be strung up. A party to . . . to . . ."

"The delinquency of a minor?" Mort suggested. "Moral turpitude? Let the boy alone," Mort insisted. "He's got enough on his mind."

"He's got a mother, remember. He doesn't need two."

"Was it Susan?" Matthew demanded. "Did she—"

"I'm not going into it," Oscar said, pushing the whole untidy mess down with his hands. "All I know is your mother said for me to tell you you'd better not look her in the eye until . . . well, you know. As long as you're under her roof. She says you'd better go talk to the priest if you know what's good for you."

"What would he know about it?" he said. "What have I done?"

"My God," Oscar said, throwing up his hands. "Though I must say, any woman who'd lead a young boy astray . . ."

The summer may as well have been over, for the huge crack that had struck down the middle of it. A wave of nausea came over him.

"Have you got anything that belongs to her?"

"No."

He had her letters; he wouldn't part with them. The dozens they had written one another, as though under the surface of all they said lay the unspoken that they must wrestle into words. As though he'd never had a thought before. And now he had a way of thinking. And she could see him, more deeply than he

could see himself. He loved her for that, for what she allowed him to see. "There're lots of nice girls your own age," Oscar went on. "But then some women are never satisfied. . . ."

"Okay, so tell your mother it's over and that's that." Duty done, his uncle patted him on the shoulder. "A fellow's entitled to make a few mistakes," he said.

"Provided they're his own," Mort added.

They left him alone then, went off to argue. He didn't bother to listen.

* * *

He wasn't going to do it. They could still sneak a little time together before he had to leave. Lunch hours when he'd steal away like a thief, his heart pounding, all his senses poised to see her. To taste a bit of stolen time. And after he drove out to California—he wondered what they'd think of his paint job out there—they would write. He'd rent a mailbox at the post office so that no sacrilegious eye could fall upon even the handwriting on the envelope. In two years he'd be out of school. Free.

It seemed to him that if he threw down everything then and went to Gina, he'd be one kind of person, and that if he gave her up and went on with his life, he'd be another. But maybe it wasn't that simple. And if he did either one, would he look back convinced he'd made a mistake? He could hear his Uncle Oscar saying, "You're just a young guy—you'll get over it." And he could hear his Uncle Mort say, "There are things you never get over—unless you want to be a dead man." At the moment, it seemed easier to die than to live and be whatever he was.

He pulled himself together to begin mixing up the beige paint that had been ordered for his next job, the facade of the newsstand on the corner of the main street. ("How about black and white and red all over?" "What are you, some kind of wise guy?")

After he finished, he set the last cans on the floor and leaned his back against the paint mixer. He was contemplating love,

betrayal, loss, death, and the white Bugatti parked in front of Gina's house.

"You're really into it. You didn't even hear me. What are you thinking about?" Mort asked him.

He looked up from an inner landscape of confused colors. He shrugged. "Nothing," he said.

The Rabbit in the Moon

Let's give the day to Coyote, I said. A bright day, the sun in the aspens, making golden shafts between the narrow trunks, hitting all the little flowers in the meadows: yellow, white, blue, the Indian paintbrushes of brilliant red. There we were, Toby and I bouncing down the road in the van, taking it all in, and suddenly a coyote crosses the road. Just like that—ambling across, then loping through the meadow beyond. "Look," Toby said, breathless. Just ahead of us, grayish, yellow-white fur, dog but not dog. "That's Coyote," I told him. I pulled up the van and we watched. We hear them up at the cabin at night baying at the moon. I've often wondered why. Maybe they want it, the whole thing—I've been in that mood. Maybe they see in it the most enormous jackrabbit they can imagine and won't be content with anything less. The Indians around here tell Coyote stories. Tricky, always breaking in when least expected. That's the way with Coyote.

* * *

"A coyote, Mom?" Toby said. A new discovery. We can see deer from the cabin, and rabbits, tassel-eared squirrels. The hawks sail above us. Now he's seen Coyote. "The coyote is a lean beast," I told him. "Sometimes lean as a stick. You can count every rib in the cage. They tried to shoot and trap him out, but he always manages, slinking around, finding a kill or getting his own. Not just surviving—moving on to new fron-

tiers." I like to think of him crossing the Mississippi, getting all the way up there to Maine, howling up those woods. "You never thought he had it in him." Toby laughed. He caught the drift, the tone, even if he missed some of the ideas—knew it was funny.

Once a month we get into the van, go down into the dazzle of Santa Fe and collect my welfare, my food stamps. Do the shopping, see Belinda. Come back home with the sights and sounds of civilization bopping around in our heads, shooting on and off like neon. Cars and tourists and Indians. All the stuff around the square, in the shops and galleries. Easy to forget there's so much.

"Look, Mom. Look." He's always pointing. At four, he's got a sharp eye. I think he's already set himself up as my protector and companion, maybe my guide into life. Then when we hit the traffic, he goes wild.

"Hey, did you see that? That's a big car."

"Government car," I told him. "Probably some muckety-muck in the state."

"What's a muckety-muck?" He laughed. You could tell he liked the word. His head whips around in all directions: cars, houses, people on the streets. Every time we come, it's a new adventure. I can see the anticipation in his eyes when we get ready to go, though I have to pull myself out of a vast inertia. He will throw himself into civilization, gather it all to the brim, till he wears himself out, gluttoned and exhausted. Or maybe he'll catch it like a disease. Then we come back together to the silence once again. So far, each time I've gone down, I've brought him back. As though I've stolen him. And how much longer can I do that?

* * *

I stood my turn in various lines, got my stamps, cashed my check. Toby always has enough to keep him occupied: staring at people, making little games for himself. Sometimes he'll talk to another kid. Standing there, tentative, shy, while I feel something squeezing me inside, hoping it'll all work out, be all

right. After I got my money, we went for the General Delivery. Found a letter from Glen in the P.O. I never know any more if I want to open a letter from him. I'm always afraid something's happened to him. Most of the time, though, the only news is he couldn't make the child support this month. I never count on him. I think fatherhood momentarily startled him out of his lotus dream. The cry of a child, nagging you into the here-and-now. Ready to sop up everything you've got. Too much for him. I just stood there holding onto the letter while Toby hauled his own mail out of the trash barrel.

"Look, Glen," I'd said to him, "it's different now. We've got the future sitting here in our laps. You know what that means?"

He looked at me like: *What is this?* And: *Okay, then, you take care of it.*

I mean, we'd screwed around, most of the time out of our heads those first years. I'd had enough even before that, but love was new to me, and I figured, why not try it. We latched onto a few of the dreams floating around then. Our own piece of land, raising our own food. Going to a place where you could breathe and the water had fish in it. I wanted to start with the land. If you had that, maybe you could figure out what else was important.

Step back to go forward. I was ready to shuck all my life that'd come before, the whole mess. If I didn't ask for the whole crummy business, I sure let it happen. Just a dumb kid. Throwing myself against the walls. And getting high.

But once the future was sitting there in my lap, it was over for me. I thought, I didn't know a thing, and nobody else that dragged me into this world did either. But now at least I know something else is possible. So even if I can't find it . . .

But Glen. He didn't know when to leave off. He was a good chemist, except he was more interested in the action in his own brain than anything in a test tube. What went on in his head was all he wanted, all he'll ever want. Maybe through the shadows the idea of Toby still nags at him, like the whine of a mosquito. Sometime after the money's due, he remembers, only he never has it then. He manages to work, gets good

money. But it probably falls out of his pockets while he wanders the bars. Or else he sniffs up the profits.

Finally, I tore open the letter. Pages of it. For some reason he writes a lot; maybe he can't quit once he gets started. He was okay—I skimmed along. Then something caught me up short. "Why don't we try it again?" he wrote. "I keep thinking about you, about us. I mean, I miss you. I even miss Toby. Think about it. Check enclosed." I held it in my hand, real money.

I got Toby out of the wastebasket. He'd reached in for all kinds of stuff he wanted to take home. I let him keep a travel brochure with a picture of the Alps.

We headed off to Belinda's. On the way home I'd do the groceries.

"You look like you've got something on your mind," she said, once we'd hugged and looked each other over and settled in for some iced tea.

"I got a letter from Glen. He wants me back."

"Well," she said, trying for the noncommittal. She had a husband who didn't want her to go back to school, a relatively settled life.

"I don't know." I sat there fiddling with the glass. You think you put somebody behind you, but then something opens up—a life you start to imagine. The things you thought you'd got past wanting.

"Why don't you leave Toby with me and take an afternoon for yourself? I'll take him swimming. You can both spend the night here."

I hadn't spent a night in town since I started living out at the cabin. I visit Belinda because she's somebody to talk to; she reminds me of a feeling I once had. But I always go back the same day to shake off the noise, the traffic, the press of folks on the streets. Listen again to the water in the creek below and the birds in the pines, the coyotes in the dark. Listen and let go, while Toby looks at his new library books. He pesters me to read to him immediately, though I make him help me put away the groceries first. He's learning to read, though sometimes I

can't tell if he's just memorized the story after a few times through. I'm glad he wants to learn, all bright and eager and interested. I put him off because I don't want even the sound of my own voice to molest the quiet when I first come back. It's as though I merge into the silence that surrounds us out there in the hills and the need for speech seems less compelling. I never feel alone.

A day to myself. What'll I do with it? This is, after all, Coyote's Day. Let's say he's—there are she coyotes too—let's say she's come down into town. Where she doesn't belong. Just for a day. Folks are walking up and down. Tourists licking the windows, seeing what they can see: Kachina dolls and blankets, bowls and pots and squash blossom necklaces. I haven't done any of that stuff for a long time. Haven't even thought about what I could pick up, only what I could slough off. Okay then. Let's do it. Otherwise I'd just sit with this letter on top of me. First do the square.

I went along the line of Indians sitting in chairs or on the flagstones in front of the Governor's Palace. Mostly young girls, stout women, and wrinkled old men, their earrings and necklaces spread out on sheets in front of them. Sometimes I wonder if they're bored, wonder if they do a character sketch of everybody who passes. Reaching-out-grabbing type. Never-get-enough type. Trying-to-hold-on-by-the-ends-of-her-claws type. Wife envier. Think tank. Terrible talker. Fumble-bead-nervous type. Penis-seeking butterball. You get the drift. And me? Picking-up-scrap lady. Haunted-by-past lady. I had the pick of forty thousand pairs of earrings and ten thousand necklaces, and I saw myself putting them on as I'd done once—long, dangling earrings I used to wear with a scarf around my head.

I turned the corner and saw a large placard: *Mountain Men Trade Fair*. A bunch of people were clustered around in the courtyard of the Palace, so I wandered in to see what was going on. Found a confabulation of mountain men all right, gathered with their furs and wares. Dressed up in buckskins and leather jackets, and sandals and hats. They nearly all had beards—and wives, it looked like. One of the wives was sewing a leather vest with little fine stitches. I passed by a pile of fur coats; a

woman was trying on one of bear skin. I thought of doing it myself, taking a little bear smell back up into the hills. But didn't bother. A whole array of necklaces: beads, bear claws, or feathers. You got your pick. Old Wanted Posters. One of the men with rather a scraggly mustache was accompanying himself on a guitar, singing songs he'd composed himself about the Old West and life in the hills digging for gold. I stood and listened for a couple of verses and two rounds of the refrain.

"Well, Glen," I said, "we tried some of that; thought we'd find something in the hills. Stood and looked at the moon."

Then I walked around the square for a while. You see some beautiful things, carvings and ceramics with intricate designs. I could feel the old possessive urge rising in me. Sometimes that happens to me in stores. Just comes over me like a flush of heat. And I can see how that happens to people. Bright objects. The glitter of promise. Fill up. Stuff yourself. That little burst of pleasure: You've got *it*. Filled in the space between your eyes. Till it goes empty again. Then run up and down, invent or scratch. I remember how it was when I bought my first car. You got wheels, babe. You got freedom. Step on the gas.

I could've gone to the thrift shop to pick out a newer shirt and some jeans, maybe some boots for hiking. Most of my clothes have come by the route of previous wear. Back in college, I'd go to the Salvation Army and find something to put on—a long skirt, a peasant blouse. I had a wonderful dress that looked crocheted. And a velvet bodice embroidered with flowers. You can find pretty good stuff if you're patient. Never bothered with bras or underwear, just put something on me to cover my skin. No shoes—too constricting. I liked going bare-foot and it never got all that cold.

But I could always go to the thrift shop. Here it was, Coyote's day, something special. I'd have to be more inventive. Let me bring something back with me this time, something I didn't have. I'm just scratching around like everybody else. And there's a man who wants—what does he want? The past back? Come on, Coyote, a little inspiration.

* * *

From the street, it was another doorway, but when you looked inside, you saw a patio with wrought iron benches and chairs and tables set round on the flagstones. I was getting hungry, and first the smell of coffee hit me, then the odors of Mexican food. I walked in the direction of the coffee smell. The shop sold magazines as well as pastries, so I stood in the midst of the coffee aroma, just drinking it in, and browsed over the selections, read a couple of poems, then started a story, but got bored with it. I used to read a lot in college, but I never had time to think about what I read. I went to class high most of the time, and learning was a heady experience. Great for intensity, but not much for logic. I got A's on all my papers though. Now I'm back to reading some of the books I liked then: Dostoyevski, Flaubert, even Shakespeare. I get a new batch from the library when I come down. It's different now, those voices speaking to me. I think, how can they know so much? How come their heads didn't explode into a thousand pieces? I never feel any wiser when I come away, like I could do my life any better. Only it seems I ought to. More than doing just what I can to get by.

But I didn't browse too long. People, I thought. I haven't had any people for a goodly while. With Glen there'd be somebody warm in the bed—I missed that. And talk. We'd talked a lot. I ordered a couple of enchiladas with green chile sauce and took them outside to one of the tables, looking the place over to see what offered. A couple of Chinese speaking the language. Not much there. Two matrons talking about how bad the job was. Had all I could take of that one.

I settled on an East Indian on one side of me: an old man with a sweet, high voice, talking to an Anglo, fiftyish, heavy in the jowls, with a bluish stubble on his cheeks. The Indian was wearing small steel-rimmed glasses, which glinted as he moved.

"For me, it's all chemistry anyway," the stocky man said. "I've ruled everything else out. I hate all that psychological bullshit when you've got all the explanations you need. Brain chemistry: you got alcoholism, you got mental disease, you got criminal tendencies. Sociopath and psychopath. Gambling

mania and depression. You may as well say God is one chemical and the devil is the other.”

Ah, I thought. For I’d done a bit of chemistry in my time too. Nothing high-minded. Just running tests for ASARCO, trying to figure out the percentage of lead, silver, and zinc in the ore. That’s where I met Glen, down in El Paso. Doing the same thing, but exploring his passion for mind-altering substances on the side.

“It is definitely simpler that way,” said the Indian, with a little high-pitched laugh.

Do you think, though, I wanted to say, that chemicals are going to decide what I’ll be doing five minutes from now or how my kid’s going to grow up in the world? The future in a formula?

“It is good to be retired,” the Indian said with a sigh, “but I am sorry to miss all of these fascinating conversations.”

The other man was looking at his watch, about to rise. He’d taken off all the time he could to be fascinating. “We must have lunch together more often,” he said.

I figured they’d get together about two years from now if the Indian hadn’t gone to his next incarnation.

They left, and I turned to a group settled around the table on the other side. A woman in long, pink skirt, concha belt, sandals, silver earrings with three layers of stones was in deep conversation with a young guy in shorts and a girl in culottes, both of whom leaned in her direction as though her words would dissolve before they hit the intricate conch of the inner ear.

“It was so wonderful,” she said. She had interesting little puckers just below the corners of her mouth that worked busily while she was talking. “It just happened. I walked into the room and suddenly I *knew*. Everything opened up in a different light like the petals of a flower—I loved everyone there.” She paused and the puckers smoothed down into the radiance.

“When do you think that will happen to me?” the young man said, almost petulantly. Like he’d been dealt out of the hand. She had a full house and all the chips. You could see the pleading in his eyes: give me the recipe, or even just a clue.

(Question, miss: When was the last time you loved everybody in the room? Well, son, I tell you. I once watched a guy masturbating in a phone booth, and this feeling came over me . . .) Well, I thought, eyeing a wire rack in front of the coffee shop, with a little sign in front that said *Free Newspapers*, I'll take a batch of those back to light the stove with. Hoopdydo. Can't have enough newspapers.

"But you'll just *know*," the woman said. "It's like a light going on. And you know the glory of yourself, just yourself." She poked her fork down into her piece of Black Forest cake, heavy with icing, and took a bite. "You sit down and look at the trees, you sit in the sun. . . ."

The young guy seemed to draw back. Wasn't even eating his doughnut. He was going to do gloom and self-abnegation for the rest of the day, you could tell. Maybe decide to duck the works and head for a monastery or Nicaragua. I know the feeling. I stood up and walked over. "I'm conducting a survey," I said, "about sugar in the blood, and how it affects the chemistry of perception in the visionary mode and lowers the absorptive capacity of the spleen. Can you give me any help?"

"I don't think so," the woman said sweetly, because she loved me too. Though the two little puckers were busy again.

I didn't think so either. "I'd be careful of that cake. Acid rain in the Black Forest." I went over and took a wad of the free newspapers.

The young man still looked deprived of uplifting experience, but I'd done all that Coyote could offer at that particular moment. I can see why he figures in the Indian ceremonies, poking his head in at just the wrong moment.

"How about we all go down to the Canyon," the young girl was saying as I sat down. "Think of all those people there affecting the vibrations."

Nice idea. Wouldn't have minded going there myself if I'd had the time. Collecting what I could. Trying to bring in a whole new era. Maybe I'd find somebody with a compatible astrological sign, and we could create some harmonic vibra-

tions together. But Toby couldn't swim forever. It suddenly occurred to me I ought to cash Glen's check, just in case. And decide whether to buy a ticket. . . .

Someone had put a *New York Times* into the basket, so I'd taken that too. Lots of paper. I practically never read the newspapers, but for once I'd know what was going on—Central America, Iran, the Philippines, South Africa—then I could light my stove. Double duty. Maybe I could find a place where they gave free matches too. I thought of the hotel lobbies: going inside, looking around at the rugs and chandeliers and collecting some books of matches—that way I could read the covers if I got bored. But I was distracted by two old men leaning against the wall just past the entrance to a dress shop across from the coffee place.

The one old guy (Western shirt, paunch, tooled leather belt) was saying to the other (white cap, barrel chest, cane): "Your wife in there?"

"Yeah, is yours?"

"Trying on clothes. She's been in a dozen shops. Indian jewelry's driving her crazy. I bought her a necklace and a ring. But she's hankering for some bracelets."

"I tell you I'm sick of turquoise. You get so you can't see for looking."

It's a dazzle all right. Just this place, and it's not big like a city. At first even a coyote might be confused where to look. But not for long, being Coyote. I could see the creature snatching a red-blue-yellow-green shirt off the rack, a shirt bursting with flowers and birds, and leaping in time with the rock band on the square and yelling, "Bring on the war dance. Bring on the broads."

Then I knew what I wanted to do. I'd go in that shop and try on clothes, own them for a little and be whatever I felt like. Maybe I'd always wanted to do that. The two men parked themselves on a bench and launched into a conversation about their grandchildren. I was in my jeans and a thrift shop shirt that still had its original colors on the inside of the pocket. But I was clean—I'd had a bath at Belinda's.

The two women circulated around the racks with me, but came to no positive conclusions, so they went out not long after I walked in. I had the place to myself. The proprietor, a dark-haired woman in a full-sleeved blouse and silver necklaces and bracelets, was sitting with a young woman with straight sandy hair and pale skin and glasses, who wore a faded denim skirt and vest. One of those expensive outfits that's supposed to look like you'd snatched it off the discard pile.

"You'll find some nice buys here," the woman said to me. "They take the clothes right from the main shop on the square and mark them down. That skirt you're looking at was a hundred dollars."

So, class for less. There's always some type trying to get it for less. And I had glittering social occasions to consider. I poked around, free to stay there for hours if I wanted. The two were visiting, not minding me at all—the proprietor delicately eating a sandwich. From silks and knits and embroidered skirts and blouses from India, I took the color of plums, and jungle greens, and tropical yellows and oranges, and blues like the soul of heaven. Back in the dressing room, I slipped into a long, luscious, purple skirt and a silk blouse. Where would I be going?

"Let me tell you what happened," the young girl was saying as I approached the mirror. "I met this retired general when I was on the continent, and he was going to a special convention in London. He belonged to a society for retired generals from world wars—they gather funds for war memorials. And he took me with him."

"Really? Why, how exciting. Tell me all about it."

"They had a very elegant little lawn party with tea, and cucumber sandwiches and cakes. The queen was there."

I paraded before the generals in my long dress and knelt and kissed the hand of the queen.

"I saw her too when I was National Committee Woman," the shop manager said.

"She has the bluest eyes, doesn't she, and such nice skin. She looked right at me and smiled."

"She smiled at me too."

They were even with their celebrities. But the girl had resources, I felt.

“Actually it was rather dull, all those ancient generals.”

Ah, the other got to rest her envy. But not for long.

“My one real companion was an Irish king.” A king, no less.

“They keep their titles, you know. Well, he made me a princess and gave me part of the realm; he has an estate and he gave me a rock.” She laughed. Now she was a princess.

And so was I. Princess Coyote, why not? My title from a rock. There were a bunch of rocks up at the cabin. My title was solidly based. So I stood around with tea and crumpets while the generals admired their wars and their china cups. I had my little war, I was saying. *Did you, dear?* I tell you, I once linked hands with a bunch of others like-minded and stood in front of a busload of inductees. Invited them to run right over us. But the police removed us before that could happen. I made a purple swirl in front of the mirror.

“That fits you splendidly,” the woman said.

They were talking now about the queen and the president. More social victories.

Would you like to consider the social experience of the El Paso County Jail, I was about to suggest. I was queen of the top bunk for ninety days. *How did you manage that, my dear.* Bad company. Naiveté, you could call it. Youth—but then what, I’m not sure.

You have a boyfriend who drives fast and takes you into the thrill of danger. (That was all I needed then.) Considering that your pa has gone off with another woman and your ma sits around with the shades drawn all day. What else do you ask for? Some music to move around to, a little grass. “Come on, girl, let’s go at it.” And we’d chase down the highway at ninety miles an hour. And go get lit.

Elliot was dealing drugs, but I never paid any attention. Not even when he had stuff in the car. I met one of his pals, some guy that got it across the border. But I didn’t think anything about it. You had all sorts of ways of doing it. I heard once how some filmmakers got it across in a truck they were using in the film.

We were crazy then, not a thought in our heads that went past the next minute. And Elliot didn't even have the animal's sense of fear. Not a first thought, let alone a second. They knew a federal agent was on their tail, he and Jack. So what did they do? Trapped him, took him out to the desert, made him take off his shoes and scared him into running through the cactus and into barbed wire. And laughed. And got in their car and left him out there. Did they think that did it—that they were off the hook?

And me? All I wanted was to ride around in that car and feel the wind in my hair. Then one night I looked around and a car was behind us, following us, and it didn't disappear. Elliot had a stash with him. We ditched them down an alley and checked into a motel, and I lay awake staring into the dark, trying to will them away. But at three in the morning they were at the door.

That's how I got to be queen of the top bunk. I huddled up there and wouldn't let anybody come close. Don't come near me, don't come near me. How do you get more exclusive than that?

"Could I try on that necklace," I said. Pink and rose beads with clusters of shells and pearls. I saw it going together with a slit skirt embroidered with lions and elephants. A sequined blouse. Bring out the trumpets. Let her blaze. Gold and red thread. We're on the town now. I want the velvet cushions, the tiger upholstery. Jazz me around, boy. I am fancy for you. Let me conduct the orchestra, sing opera. Give me Miami, give me Acapulco. Plumes and feathers. I am what I wear. Princess Coyote.

I put on, took off. Slid into one thing and another. Film star, rock singer, femme fatale. Rode the crest of the wave and not a moment too soon. We're off for the races, hand me the binoculars, cutie. Glen, you should see me now.

"I was coming down the hall and met the senator with just a towel wrapped around me. That's all he had around him too."

Suppose I strip, piece by piece in front of the mirror. Down to the basics. Bare skin. Not that that's where I was, in the El Paso County Jail. But close. Lost my job, my car, my mother's love, my friends, my future.

And the genitals? I wanted to ask the sandy-haired girl. Were they worth electing?

* * *

I've got my jeans back on again. I'll collect Toby. Belinda and I go back a long way, to high school. We used to ride around in her Mustang, go out to the lower valley and just sit and look out over the mountains. We'd roll a joint and pass it back and forth. The car, those nights—I was happy then. I didn't know what I wanted. I got a job in a bar, went home with a different guy every night. Till Elliot came along. Once he took me on a motorcycle trip all the way to Costa Rica. A whole week just riding that motorcycle. Crazy.

That three months in jail set me straight. I had to be something in the world. So I got my degree, got my job, met Glen. We went up to Alaska together, homesteaded in Oregon. Till Toby came. I stuck it out for a year before I headed here to Santa Fe. To the cabin.

Time to go back there now. Well, Glen, it's tempting. Just like whirling through all those clothes, as though you could be what you wear and think of nothing else. And you're still with me. I can't tell you what happens to me every time I open one of your letters. Maybe I could go back if I thought you could go forward. The future—somebody's got to reinvent it. Maybe it'll come to me. Some night when I go out to look at the moon.

Meanwhile there's Toby and me with our books and the woods. I draw a little when I'm in the mood. I read. I talk to Toby. Say I'm marking time. I figure it this way. You take what you can get. You dream. You lie low.

Venus Rising

The presence of his wife lingered at the edge of Jacoby's consciousness as potently as the surroundings announced her absence. When he came home in the evenings now, the house was not only dark from the outside, but filled with darkness when he entered. He let himself in like a man who might be taken by surprise and prowled through the rooms as though he were trying catch a thief in the act of robbing him. When he was alone in the house, the least noise startled him, and he would leave off what he was doing and listen with strained concentration. At times his mind began to wander, and he would begin to hear bits of nonsense, until he shook his head and brought himself back to the task at hand. Even so, a persistent hum followed at his ear, like a voice speaking below the level of intelligibility. Sometimes, though, he heard words spoken as if she were there speaking directly to him. At these moments, he would turn sharply as if to catch sight of her and then, in the pose of utmost stillness, listen again, straining to catch the sound of her voice.

This attitude was new to him. He was a man who heard what he wanted to hear and did as he pleased, who was galled by any suggestion to the contrary, saw it as an accusation of some lapse on his part, some mistake or failure. When his wife was alive, he frequently left her words hanging in the air as though she'd spoken them to herself or the cat or the chair he sat in. Very likely she was used to this, for she seldom said, "Did you hear me?" or gave any sign that she expected an answer. Now it seemed as though her utterances had left their vibrations still hanging in the air, a sort of ghost speech that, given just the right atmosphere, was stirred into sound again.

For the most part, these were trivial things: "I don't have any place for my cookbooks," or "There's hardly any room in the garage any more," or "We've run out of bird seed."

Were she there he would have shrugged them off with the same annoyance he had always felt. Now he waited to hear even such trivialities and went about slamming cupboard doors and clattering dishes and silverware when several days went by and nothing came. Although he had been alone for some months now, he had no desire to break his solitude. From his work as manager of his father's metal shop, he came directly home despite the insistence of his partner and the other fellows he used to stop with for a drink on the way home. After hunting through the rooms, he showered away the grime of work, ate hastily standing up, then read the paper, drank a couple of beers and went to bed. He slept as blankly as an empty sky. Weekends he watched football on television and sometimes a late-night movie.

The summer had come and gone. As he worked into the fall, a busy time of year, he was aware one day that the leaves had fallen and the meadows were covered with tow-colored grass that looked as fine as hair. The bare trees webbed the neutral sky, and it occurred to him that it was all over for another year. "The color must be glorious in the hills just now," her voice spoke up and reminded him. He was standing at the window looking into the yard. A few brown leaves still clung to the oak, and the ground was covered with maple leaves. The scarred stump of the plum tree he'd cut down stood in the middle of a bare space. "You know that's not true," he said irritably. "You know better than that. The leaves are over." He looked back into the living room, blinking into the silence. He had to hold himself in: there was a kind of stupidity even in the workings of memory, and what did come back to him was completely out of kilter. Every year she'd said the same old thing. And he was assailed by a sudden anger that her presence should linger in the dullness of repetition, in the things that had worn grooves in his hearing during the twenty-odd years of their marriage. He moved restlessly from one room to another, finally pausing again at the window.

He had cut down the plum tree one autumn in a fit of resentment over the stench of rotten fruit on the ground and the hordes of wasps hanging over it. His wife had been aghast when she'd come home and found what he'd done.

"I did all the jam from that tree," she protested. "Those plums made the best jam."

"You can just as well buy plums in the store, for all the trouble that tree gives us. Stinks up the whole neighborhood." He'd made a concession this time to nuisance, for ordinarily he liked the feeling that nature was giving him something for nothing, even though, as with the jam, you had to put your time and sugar into it.

"It wouldn't be the same," she said grimly.

The curse of woman was not, he thought, in the sweat she brought to a man's brow, but in her logic.

"All the jars I used to give at Christmas."

"It wouldn't hurt you to buy the damned fruit."

She didn't though. Since the tree was gone, she gave up any of its suggestions. He remembered how one morning she'd been surprised by the blossoms. The tree had come out during the night and when she'd come downstairs, it was in full bloom. "I didn't even know it was there," she exclaimed. "It was like a vision."

Now the sky was dark with the approach of coming rain. "If you look," her voice said to him, "you can see Venus rising." In a passion of irritation, he went into the kitchen and pulled out another beer, set it aside and went into the bedroom.

He knew that he should go through the closets and get rid of her things. But each time he made an effort to begin, the intention flagged, and he left everything as it was. He opened the door, looked at her clothes hanging limp and motionless. He'd found it difficult to touch her things, to put his hands on stockings or lingerie, to gather up her dresses. The softness, the flimsiness of the materials almost repelled him, and the bottles of her toilet water had always aroused in him something both insidious and questionable. For some reason, he ran his hand down a pink satiny lounging robe, then a shirt of some velvety material. He thought of her wearing the different textures next

to her skin, of the feeling of them moving against her breasts and thighs.

He went into the bathroom and for some reason ran the water for a tub, stripped off his clothes and got in. He never took baths, preferring his two daily showers, but it felt good to lean back and soak. He closed his eyes. Often when they were younger, she used to step naked from the bath, her skin fresh and glowing, and come forward to where he was, moving in a slow, teasing way, lifting a shoulder, giving a turn to her hip, looking at him with half-lidded eyes. Perhaps she was inviting him to view her, to see what suggestions she aroused and let her know what she was in his eyes. Then she would exaggerate her movements, and finally, turn to the mirror and stare critically at her body and her face, then dress, taking up one piece of clothing at a time.

Usually he kissed her and ran his hand over her back, then went on to whatever he was doing. He didn't care to make love to her just then, to break in upon the afternoon or the evening with something that would powerfully distract him. For she seemed to be imposing herself on him in a way he wasn't clear about, and though he never said as much to himself, just below the surface lived the doubt that this display of her physical nature entitled her to respect. He preferred to discover the female form next to him in bed in the early morning, where it had arrived under the cover of darkness. Then, his own energy awake and primed, he would summon his wife from sleep, nudging and caressing her until she responded, not quite fully awake. He shaped her response until she seemed ready and yielding, then entered her. Afterwards she got up and made coffee, fried eggs and bacon. Washed, dressed, satisfied, he attacked his breakfast hungrily while she sat over a cup of coffee—she never ate the first thing in the morning—watching him as though he were satisfying her hunger as well.

He was thinking of her now as he lay against the porcelain of the tub, seeing her in her younger years before she allowed herself to get fat and he'd awakened her mornings only if he felt hard-pressed. It seemed that he could feel her presence more strongly than usual, that if he opened his eyes he would

find her image wavering before him. He could see her clearly, her small well-shaped breasts, her slender hips, her full thighs. He didn't dare open his eyes for fear her image would leave him. He felt an almost overpowering desire to reach out and touch her, followed by the hope that she might extend her hand. But as he waited, her outline began to fade, and when he opened his eyes, he sat looking into the steam from the water. He sat without moving, allowing himself to drift back slowly.

Then he emerged from the bathtub, toweled himself down and went into the bedroom for clean undershirt and shorts. He caught a reflection of himself in the mirror, looking as though he'd surprised himself. He stood for a long moment in front of her closet, took out the pink lounging robe and put it on. A strange sensation overtook him, one he couldn't identify. He took it off and put it back on the hanger.

That morning he measured the space where a shelf could go in the kitchen, went down to the lumber yard and bought a length of cherry board that would show a nice grain when it was varnished. Home again, he cut it into lengths, carefully dadoed the sides, fit it together and applied a coat of varnish. It had been a long time since he'd worked with wood. In his youth he'd made furniture, and for a time he worked as a carpenter, finishing interiors for tract homes. But when his father's partner left, he went into the business—it would ultimately be his. He stamped out parts to order, did some body work on farm vehicles. When they'd bought the house, he had no interest in doing any carpentry, though his wife at first had asked for a broom closet, some shelves. They'd never got around to those things—he'd always been too busy. Now though, when he picked up his tools, they felt familiar in his hands. After the varnish had dried, he sanded down the shelves and gave them another coat. He wanted the varnish to have a soft glow, so after the second coat was hard, he spent a number of hours during the evenings after work sanding the wood and giving it a final rubbing of pumice.

On the weekend he fastened the shelves to the wall just under a narrow cabinet at the side of the stove, and gathering together the stack of cookbooks she'd kept on a chair on the

back porch, he arranged them alphabetically by author along the top shelf. On the other, he placed a small copper kettle that had belonged to her grandmother and an old coffee grinder. He felt a sensation at the back of his neck, as though someone had been staring at him, and when he turned his head, he was certain that she was standing just inside the doorway.

He stood still for a moment to lure her back by his silence, his receptiveness. He felt dizzy and had to lean against the counter. If she were indeed watching him, looking at him, she'd come back for her bookshelf. He wondered what she would think of a broom closet. He sketched out a simple drawing for it, measured the space, considered the proportions, and on the weekend went down and bought lumber, also cherry wood, and brass hinges. The project took longer, what with cutting the boards, gluing the widths, shaping the inside of the door so it would fit the opening nicely, finishing the edges. He worked evenings varnishing and sanding, the hours passing until, exhausted, he fell into bed. But he couldn't sleep. He lay awake, his mind busy with the project. In the shop his work grew mechanical. He waited for the end of the day to go home and finish the broom closet. He did not dare ask whether she would come, whether it would make a difference.

But when he put it in, he didn't have the sense of her standing there as he'd had before, and when he turned he had no particular sense of her image. He stood there for some moments admiring the wood, then surveyed the kitchen. It was a dark kitchen, made darker now by the fine wood of the shelves and broom closet. She'd once given the walls a coat of paint, but even that had grown dingy from the layers of grease and dust built up over the years. And the cabinets were nicked and scarred with wear. A dingy place. It would take him the whole winter to replace the cabinets, put in a new sink and paint all the open surfaces. As he stood there thinking of the task, he felt a sensation in his shoulder as though someone had touched him. He didn't turn around, he simply stood trying to keep hold of the sensation. Then he put his fingers up to test it.

He didn't hear her voice any longer, but it was as though they kept up a continual conversation. He kept her informed of

his progress. "After I get the measuring done, I'll order the wood. All cherry," he promised her. "It'll have a glow, I tell you." He would start in with the cabinet that would hold the sink, do the ones above it, then work to those over the stove. At first it was hard for him to work, the garage was so cluttered with junk he'd collected and stored over the years. She'd complained about that. There was hardly room for the car; it was one of the first things he'd heard her say when he was there alone. Piled on the floor, crowded against the wall was all manner of scrap iron, along with outdated farm machines he had bought at auctions and things he'd saved out of habit—jars of bent nails and used spikes, old spark plugs, rags and other odds and ends. He'd never known exactly what he would do with these. At one point, after an argument with his father, he thought of opening his own shop, doing something with wrought iron, painting the old separators and cider-making machines and selling them for planters and other decorative ends. He never launched into any of these schemes, but neither could he be persuaded to get rid of the stuff. You never knew when something might come in handy. He associated himself with this part of the house. The bathroom he used as a necessity; the bedroom he occupied as an uneasy interloper, put off by the scalloped curtains, the flowered bedspread; in the dining room he was rewarded for having provided. The garage was his.

His wife, at one point, had suggested that they make the garage into a sewing room that they could also use as a guest room, since they never had any room when her brother's family came to visit. But he wouldn't hear of it. As long as the stuff was there, it held the promise that he might do something with it. But if he cleared it out, he lost dominion forever to curtains and carpets and something that had always made him uncomfortable in his own estate.

Now he moved some of the old machines outside. If he wanted any real space, he'd have to clear it away in several truckloads, but he'd find time for that later. He made what space he could for the lumber, moved his saw to a better location, parked the car out front. He worked, measuring and saw-

ing and gluing and assembling. He took some days off work to buy materials and to plan the work. He became so absorbed in what he was doing that he would discover half the night had passed and if he were to function at all he'd better get a few hours' sleep.

One night, as he ended his labors by sitting at the table drinking a beer, he got up and took one of his wife's cookbooks from the shelf. He leafed idly through it, considering roasts and stews, cakes and pies. The elaboration of food had never been of interest to him, though there were certain things he loved: corn on the cob, a good beefsteak tomato, and chicken noodles. He hadn't asked much of his wife in that respect; in fact, he had a suspicion of unfamiliar dishes, what might be lurking under the surface. Now it occurred to him to wonder over the many ways a dish could be prepared. Had she, on those evenings he worked late, made herself little delicacies? He saw her sitting over a dish of mushrooms stuffed with crab meat. He wondered if she'd looked forward to his absence on certain evenings as a time she might indulge in a bit of culinary infidelity. As a matter of curiosity, he took down some of the other books, read about curries and stir fries. It must have been difficult cooking such things only for herself. Had she had company? One of the neighbor women? If it had been a man, he could imagine his coming, the smell of cooking in the air, of his being called to the table, tasting, looking at her appreciatively. And then—but it occurred to him that there had never been any unusual odor of spice in the air, nothing different when he entered the house. Yet, there they were, a whole shelf of cookbooks that he had rescued from a precarious stack on the back porch. Perhaps she'd sat here as he was doing now, turning pages, dreaming over recipes, imagining whole feasts.

And what would he do in the kitchen once he'd finished it? All this labor after she was no longer there to benefit. He thought of those ceremonies performed for the dead, where the relatives put out plates of food. In some way he felt he had done all of this work for her, but to what end and purpose? He was a practical man and usually he'd asked such questions before he undertook any project. Or if the answers didn't sat-

isfy him, the project didn't go. This time he had been carried along, planning and figuring, building and replacing without the slightest consideration of cost, impelled by some intuition that moved in the direction of a sensation he occasionally caught. Brought here to the glowing wood and gleaming tile and fresh paint that now seemed an ironic comment on his efforts. Suppose he stood in front of the stove and filled the kitchen with the smell of exotic dishes, would it make any difference? He felt stunned by the wall separating the living from the dead. Yet he felt compelled to woo back his wife by leaning into all the unrealized possibilities that had lived in her words, her gestures, all that had been spoken or left unspoken over the years.

It was winter when the kitchen was finished. The cherry wood glowed over the sink; new tile gleamed on the floor. He'd replaced stove and refrigerator. Curiously, he felt no expectation of her presence, as though all his labor had been preparation for something more. He stood looking out over the sink into the backyard where the ground was covered with snow. It was quiet and the bare trees stood against the pale sky, tinged with rose above the setting sun.

"Feed the birds," he heard her say. She'd always fed the birds. She'd spent half a fortune on bird seed during the months snow was on the ground.

"Lots of birds die because of the snow," she used to say. "They can't find food."

"Hell, they've been doing it since before the bird feeder was invented," he countered, wondering why it was always women who took on the things that nature did just as well by herself.

She had no answer for that, but she continued to feed the birds, watching their activities as she stood over the sink washing dishes. Sometimes she would pause and go for the binoculars and her bird book. Cardinals and blue jays were all over the place, and various kinds of sparrows. She had a great fondness for woodpeckers.

She'd had a bird feeder attached to one of the trees, but he didn't see it out there now. She'd put it up herself. Perhaps it had fallen and if he looked he was likely to find it buried under

leaves and snow. He left the kitchen and went down to the garage and surveyed the piles of rusted parts and old iron, the salvage of years, the things he'd hung onto in a fierce, saving way. The effort it would take to clear the place out depressed him, though there was no reason why he should bother. *It's piled up to the ceiling*, a voice said, perhaps his own thought. A load or a piece at a time he'd added it to it, and now it sat in a random collection giving out its peculiar smell of old metal and rust.

You've never made anything out of it came the voice in his head. It was quite true. He wondered what he'd had in mind all these years. He had an overwhelming desire to be rid of it. He backed up the truck as far as it would go and spent the next few hours heaving it full of junk. The first thing next morning, a Sunday, he drove it to the dump. The work got to his back, and he had to leave off for several days. He chafed with impatience. He wanted space, wanted the evidence of space under all the clutter.

At one point he came to a pile of iron rods and poles lying in the floor. He picked up several, started to throw them into the truck, and put them down again. He surveyed them thoughtfully, struck by a sudden inspiration. That afternoon he took one of the poles, cut various rods, welded them together until he had a tree with a number of branches, a spike welded at the top. Then, heating the rods, he attached large nails all over the metal branches. He went outside and with a snow shovel cleared away the snow from the stump of the old plum tree. Then he attached an extension cord to his drill, took it outside, and bored a hole in the center of the stump.

His new creation was too heavy to stand alone, so after clearing away the snow, he used a strip of metal to encircle the stump, pounding it into the hard ground, and in this mold he poured cement and set in the iron pole. Against the bare trees it looked quite barbarous, the iron spike sticking up, the nails bristling around it. He surveyed it with wonder that he had made it, that he'd such a thought. For the time being, he left the rest of the garage undone as though he'd now accomplished whatever had been important.

For several days he looked at the iron tree from the kitchen window. It took possession of the space around it, a tree of thorns, assured that nothing would come near it. He thought of his wife going out to put seed in the bird feeder that had once been in the tree. He had forgotten the bird feeder. He thought of going out and looking for it, but he hadn't thought to buy bird seed. He went to the bread box, took out a loaf of sandwich bread and started forming it into little balls, which he put into a plastic bowl. Then he put on his coat and hat, went outside and stuck them all over the nails on the tree. Once he was back in the house, a few sparrows flew up and took away the pieces. Just before sunset a flock of starlings flew over and settled all over the iron branches. The dark birds made a strange impression on him. Then the neighbors' dog started barking and all the birds flew up. But for the flash of an instant, before the birds had risen in flight, they had given him the impression of leaves on the iron branches.

He stood looking out the window, but no more birds came. The house, the yard were filled with a profound stillness. He didn't want to move. The trees, the snow, the birds, everything was like a set of syllables that one might read if only he knew the language. He stood until the sun became a red gash on the horizon, until the color faded with just a faint tinge, until that too was gone and he saw Venus rising and then the moon.

The Turkish March

From the apartment upstairs came the notes of a new piano piece. A relief at first. For Peter had listened to the last exercise repeated so often and with so little improvement he came to hear the wrong notes even before they were struck. Not that it much mattered. The tune, slight and sentimental, jarred him less in the execution than in the sheer repetition. Mercifully, the teacher had sent her pupil on toward a new, if uncertain destination. Peter thought of either a small, possibly hump-backed creature with pale skin and pink scalp showing through thin blonde hair, or else of a graying invalid. For him, the source of error seemed located in physical deformity. Who would be playing at this hour of the afternoon but one cut off from the world of work or school, at the time of day when he himself took a rest and tried to gather strength for his evening round of shopping?

But now he listened. Having established the melody with one hand—a melody immediately familiar, which maddened him for hours afterward without his being able to identify it—the player tried both hands together. Expectation was raised and disappointed, as one landed in a sour patch of sound. The player picked herself up and went on, introducing a new motif. Expectation strained forward as the notes came one after the other, slow, hesitant—wrong. A new start. But no better. She (invariably he thought of the player as she) kept going back to the beginning, determined, it appeared, not to play the whole until she could play it right. Till finally she gave it up, for that afternoon. But the melody assailed Peter from the heights of something perfectly mastered and immediately meaningful to the emotions—quite beyond reach. He sighed and got up, too

restless to sleep. For the remainder of the afternoon he took to his newspapers and was lost in the political stupidities from across the Atlantic. Even at this distance, they set his teeth on edge.

* * *

That evening as he returned with his demi-baguette and strawberries, his cauliflower and lettuce, his breakfast croissant, he had his first exchange with the woman who lived in the apartment overhead. He held the door open for her, a small woman, with a powerful inner determination that seemed to press her beyond the burden of her packages and her terrible bridgework. His sympathy went to her the moment she smiled. Who had done such a botched up job? A front tooth at that, yellow, oversized, mismatched with the good tooth it was anchored to. Metal underneath. He wanted to punch the dentist in the mouth, yank out a few teeth for his pains. The woman was afraid to smile. The bastard hadn't given her a chance.

They climbed the stairs, avoiding cigarette butts and wrappers and other trash on the steps. Earlier in the afternoon they'd have had to work past the motley crowd waiting for their turn at the bell of the second floor apartment: mostly young, dark, nervous, except for a large well-groomed fat man, and a svelte black woman who looked disdainfully upon the scene around her. *Le Clef d'Or*, a sign announced. *Sonnez et entrez*. Buyers of gold. Where daughters could sell off their mothers' necklaces and thieves could fence their loot. A jittery lot, Peter noticed. Keeping one eye out for the gendarmes, chain-smoking, crushing the butts on the steps. The smell of smoke hung in the passage, mingling with the evening's bourguignon.

"A terrible mess," his neighbor said in French. Despite her various parcels, she carried herself with dignity, moving almost as slowly as he did. She frowned, drawing in her nostrils, and looked at him. Her eyes, the soft and luminous irises set in a dark ring, had a complexity of expression that drew him: knowing, skeptical, yet eager, sympathetic. Above the ruined smile.

"As if the hallways weren't dirty enough," she continued.

"I've complained to the concierge, but she merely shrugs. Sometimes I kick the butts down from one step to another—right to the bottom. Let her see them there." A flash of defiance from the eyes.

Two dogs inside Le Clef d'Or barked as they passed.

"Tch. And the noise," she said, "it's bad enough on the streets. You can't escape."

He agreed to all of it, still upset by the yellow tooth. What had possessed her to go to such an incompetent? Lack of money? Ignorance? You never knew what you were walking into. Trusting and helpless you went, and somebody took your money and did a number on you. The clown probably soaked her plenty. "Where can you go these days . . . ?" he ventured, breathless from the climb. Who had turned the monster loose in the dental profession? What mentor had passed him on, signed his certificate, inflicted him on the public? He should have gone into politics—there, who noticed?

"They had the cops here last month," she continued, this time, to his surprise, in English, perhaps thinking he had more difficulty with the language than with the stairs. She gave a little smile when she saw his expression—nicer when her teeth didn't show—then took up her indignation. "Someone tried to break in, the burglar alarm went off, the dogs went berserk, the whole building in an uproar. Sirens. Gendarmes. Everybody on the stairs, in the courtyard. A big drama, I tell you. I thought of moving out, but what's the good?"

"The world's gone mad," he said. "Hijackers, terrorists . . ." He could have created a whole list if he'd had the breath, but he still had one more etage to go. At least he'd had the good sense to move in after the commotion. Otherwise his blood would have been up, and this time he might have enjoyed the services of a foreign hospital. But what did it matter? He had come to Paris to die. It was as good a place as any.

"I shudder when I go by," his neighbor complained, nodding in the direction of the Clef d'Or. "The way they look at you. Like they've come from slitting somebody's throat."

"Probably their mothers'," he suggested. They had arrived at his floor. "Do you play the piano?" he asked suddenly.

Clearly she hadn't expected such a question. But then she gave a little smile, melancholy and tender. "No, my granddaughter. I hope it's not disturbing you. I could . . ."

"No, no," he protested. "I love music."

Having unlocked the three locks on his door and put the door between himself and the street, he began to wash the lettuce for his salad. He didn't know her name; he'd forgotten to ask. He liked her face, the fine eyes. He was still troubled by the ruined smile.

* * *

He discovered that on certain days they went to the shops at the same hour. Once they'd passed each other in the market, but his neighbor was so preoccupied she failed to notice him, and he didn't want to startle her. Some evenings he didn't see her at all. She must work then, but not always at the same hours. And her granddaughter must be home alone all day. He was curious about her. His neighbor must prepare her meals ahead of time. He could hear her saying, "Now for lunch, there's a nice bit of sausage, and you can heat up some soup." All he knew was that after lunch the child (young woman?) practiced the piano.

"So you're an American," his neighbor said, when they met again, this time after they had introduced themselves. Sophie Mitkin. Peter Sziv.

"I thought so, though your accent isn't typical. I was in the States for six years. My teenage years," she said, with a rush of pleasure. "I love the States."

"Actually," he said, "I was born near Budapest, though I grew up in South Bend." Which she probably never heard of before. In a whole community of honkies, like one big family, eating, drinking, dancing together, marrying one another, going to the funerals of friends and relations. His mother and father working their lives down to the bone marrow. Citizens. The great achievement. They could claim his bloody carcass too.

"My people are Russian," Sophie told him. "My parents

came from the same village, though they didn't meet until they were grown and here in Paris."

A young Chinaman, squatting illegally in the empty maid's room on the sixth *etage*, passed them with a bundle of laundry, greeting them shyly.

"When were you in the States?" he asked.

"During the War," she said significantly.

One of the fortunate refugees. The pure race—it took a dentist's mentality to think that one up. Add it to four thousand years of the might of the stronger, and the displaced person. Humanity by the teeth. They had reached his landing. "By the way," he asked, "do you know the name of the piece your granddaughter's practicing?" He avoided the word *playing*.

"Of course," she said, her eyes brightening. "'The Turkish March.' Mozart. Did you see *Wuthering Heights*? Merle Oberon. Lawrence Olivier. They go to a ball and a woman plays it on the piano. A wonderful film. I saw it six times. I remember every scene, and I could always see myself . . ." She stopped, embarrassed.

Going to the ball like the wild Katherine. He completed the fantasy for her. Charming. He wished his own had been as harmless, even as they had been bootless. Friend, he'd thought, of revolution, assistant to change. Holding cupped hands for the flare of the match, as he played spy for Army Intelligence. Two or three days high on amphetamines, courtesy of his superiors, forty or more hours without sleep while he and Arno, companion in folly, combed the Hungarian countryside, mingled in the towns to gather news of the direction and prospects of that doomed and betrayed revolution. Then back to their base in Austria to drink a bottle of bourbon and plunge into oblivion until they were sent out again. Only youth and a strong constitution could withstand such punishment—for a time. After the tanks came, he was put to the task of resettling refugees, in charge of the whole effort in Yugoslavia. He had written various papers for the U.N. Years later, back in Chicago, he still kept in touch with some of those he'd sent to the States. The grateful owner of a delicatessen, who heaped upon him gifts of his favorite sausage, a musician now battling leukemia, a law-

yer for those with claims in Hungary. And Arno was there, grown prosperous in the import business, married to a fashion model, the two of them traveling back and forth to the Europe he could never quite leave behind.

The habits of his old life had made drinking a necessity, a nightly pathway to oblivion. Most nights it was a wonder he got home at all. Once he'd awakened in an alley. Even while Arno was warning him and his own wife nagging at him in the hangdog way that made him want to kick her, he knew it was coming. His liver, his heart—what didn't turn against him? Fortunately, he'd kept all his army records. From the government he received compensation for total disability. Money, at least, was no problem. When he was on his feet again, so to speak, he told Arno to find him a place in Paris.

* * *

She'd never been a beautiful woman, Peter decided, not even when she was young. Though her smile still disturbed him, it was becoming part of how he expected her to look. In the company of the prominent nose, the splendid eyes. Probably she'd never been slender either. Always a little extra in the arms and breasts, extra padding on the hips. An ample woman. The cheekbones, the eyes you couldn't see to the depths of, the full mouth, they had gotten her a husband, maybe a lover or two. Imagining herself at the ball. Imagining passion. The extreme you pushed everything toward. In America, her Russian sensuousness. At her high school they must have looked at her, stood back, wondering whether or not to touch. He tried inventing a past for her, seized on what he took as their common bond: the various dislocations that had brought them to apartments just above one another. To which they both climbed the stairs slowly.

He closed his eyes, tried to disengage his mind from the struggling performance overhead and sleep. He could have shut the window, but he needed air. He had chosen the middle of the afternoon, while the shops were closed, to rest, to rescue strength so that he could go out to buy the makings of his

evening meal. Though the fruit and vegetable stands were mobbed then, the *boulangerie* where he bought his half loaf of French bread, and standing in line tired him, still he liked the press of people in the streets. It was his social life. His anonymity allowed him the privilege of being merely a spectator upon the scene: housewives, French, oriental, all sorts; clerks and businessmen en route home, jostling elbows, winding through the press of people. Finally, all of it was less than nothing to him.

He was alone. No one left except a brother in Toledo he hadn't seen in years and had no desire to see now. No claims on him. His health was shot, his useful life was over. And the uses of that life were now so distasteful to him he woke up at times trembling and sweating, the sheets twisted around him. He could seldom remember the details of those dreams, but they soured his mood for hours afterward.

* * *

"My daughter brought her to me," Sophie said, "and told me, 'Please keep Marguerite while I go on vacation.' She wanted to go to Los Angeles, where there was something going on. She was divorced then. 'French men are so boring,' she said. 'There are no jobs. I need to find myself.'" He and Sophie were sitting in the cafe just opposite their street. Sophie was eating liver paté. He was having a salad. Red meat and cheese were bad for him, so he lived on chicken and fruit, bread and salad. He liked the discipline of his diet, though this time he allowed himself a glass of wine.

"What could I say?" She shrugged and offered her open palms. "What is there to say to such discontent? I said to her, 'Go and explore then. There is always such energy in America. You'll find a place for yourself and Marguerite.' At least she'll have a change, I thought. A future for Marguerite. I kept waiting. One postcard, then nothing. I tried writing her hotel."

"You contacted the embassy?"

"No. I didn't want to cause trouble for her. I didn't know . . . Even now, I say, surely she'll write."

"When was this?"

"Three years ago." Sophie played with the bread crumbs on the tablecloth. "She had no patience with Marguerite. She's an unusual child. She can't stand butter on her bread—it gags her. She used to scream if she saw chicken cut up. She won't eat any meat. Whenever Paulette went to buy clothes, she would hide under the dress rack. And school. Impossible. She would soil herself, so they'd send her home. Poor thing, and she hates so to be dirty. It's too much for her. She drove the teacher wild. I can't tell you how many days I had to take off from work to go to the school. So I took her out. I have a student from the Sorbonne who comes once a week to tutor her. She likes to read, especially books with pictures."

"She doesn't get lonely?"

Sophie shook her head. "She watches a little television, plays with her cat. Sometimes she likes to go with me to the Tuilleries. She holds my hand in the metro. Occasionally we go to the museums. She likes the cinema. The Indonesian girl who cleans—they're great friends. Then of course her music . . ."

"How old is she?"

"Nearly twelve," Sophie said, "but she looks like eight."

"What will happen to her?" she said, putting down her fork, pressing her napkin to her lips.

He poured more wine into her glass, but she did not touch it. She twisted the corner of her napkin, looked off into space. Then she recovered herself, smiled, lifted the glass and held it to the light, as though proposing a toast. Ruby red, dark, with a gleam at the center. "We're the only ones left," she said.

* * *

What would happen to her? he asked as he listened to her play—this violation in the logic of generation. For the world, she was an idiot, not of intelligence but sensibility. And Sophie and he were two of a kind. Time was nearly finished with them, ready to throw their carcasses aside. Time for him meant waiting. The color of time had changed, now that illusion, ✓

expectation had dropped out of it. Slowness on the stairs; pill bottles on the shelf. The neighborhood with a restless surge of blacks, East Indians, orientals, coming from who-knows-where, living who-knows-how. Bombs on the Champs Elysées, in Le Magasin. Time was a dark rush that soon enough would drop him too.

Now she could play the "Turkish March" all the way through, and there were passages that kept the proper notes and rhythm. It was clear that she liked the piece, for certain phrases leapt past the notes toward a suggestion of triumph. But she had no control. The piece came patched with repetitions, new starts, uncertain passages. For him, it became these errors and repetitions. He lay in bed every afternoon listening for something that might be called progress, but error dogged her. Hopeless. He could never sleep. It wasn't her playing that kept him awake, but his own disquieted mind, going round and round with the latest absurdity in the Middle East or Latin America, the most recent piece of corruption he'd read about. For every day he read the newspapers, French and American, with the avidity of an addict, the fascination of a man watching an anthill.

Like the folds in a sheet of paper, the lines of history crossed and intersected his, Sophie's lives, turning things awry, creating the inescapable before and after. He often thought of this when they were together.

The two of them met now on Fridays for their dinner together, the night she worked late. By then Marguerite would have eaten, watched television a little, and gone to bed. She did not practice in the evenings for the sake of the neighbors who might want quiet then. The fat man on the other side felt no such constraint, but practiced his trumpet with impunity, even sometimes early on Sunday morning.

"Before we left for the States," Sophie was telling him, "there was a wonderful year. My father was rich then; we lived in a beautiful house and I had lovely dresses. But even then I knew. One day a fine house, the next day, broke and on the streets. My father was like that."

She had accepted casual elegance like the weather. Expensive restaurants, good wine at the table. A governess.

"He had a radio station then in North Africa. The Germans wanted it, but he wouldn't sell. Of course they wanted to kill him. We had to leave everything with only a few hours' warning. I remember he spent the night burning papers." Other things she would not speak of.

In one of his recurring dreams, people kept moving, running, falling into shadows in unknown territory. His life had been given to this ambiguity, this struggle.

"I loved it aboard ship. The captain was very kind to me. Always showing me things in his cabin. It was a wonder my father permitted it. He let me blow the boat whistle. Each time I did, two Indians would say, 'It was like that last time—they blew the whistle just before we were torpedoed.' The passengers asked me, please would I not blow the whistle." She grew animated as she spoke of her youth. She had been happy then. When she came back to Europe—but before she could tell him, a police car whipped past, followed by an ambulance.

"My God, it's right here in the neighborhood," she said, standing up. "Look, there's a crowd."

"Our building?" Peter said.

She went white. "Marguerite! She's alone. Oh, dear God, I hope nothing's happened."

He leapt up to pay for their dinner.

She was trembling. "I just want to satisfy myself she's all right."

When they arrived at the apartment, bystanders filled the sidewalk. The ambulance was in the driveway that led to the courtyard, and someone was being carried down on a stretcher. The concierge was talking to the gendarmes. "Who is it?" Sophie asked around her.

"Robbery. The Clef d'Or."

"They shot the woman. In the head."

"Is she dead?"

"Imagine—with all the dogs barking."

"They knew the place. They did something to the dogs."

"Her husband was away."

"Is she dead?"

No one seemed to know. The ambulance shrieked off down

the street, and they were allowed to enter the building. Sophie hurried up the stairs.

* * *

Marguerite is ill, he read on a note that Sophie left under his door. I am staying home to take care of her.

For a number of days no sound came from the piano. He telephoned once to ask how she was. Sophie had come up the stairs to find Marguerite hysterical. The shots ringing out, the sirens. The first robbery had left her terrified. This time she developed a fever. She didn't know where she was.

Where could you step, he thought, but into the fevers of the mind? From the flower seller he bought daisies (marguerites), and some bonbons and asked the concierge to take them up. He'd seen the child only once, from the back. Hair dark like Sophie's. Small for her age. He wondered if she had Sophie's eyes. She must be a pale child, from being deprived so much of the sunlight. Would Sophie take her to the park down the avenue when she was better?

He'd come across a crippled veteran there at the entrance on his way back from the post office the other day. He was wearing a ragged overcoat and held out a can for coins, at the same time ranting and waving his cane. Whether denouncing the government or swearing at those who passed by indifferently, Peter was unable to tell. He was unshaven, possibly drunk. They have saved a place for you on all the metro cars, he thought; one has to stand and give you a seat. On the other side of the park, a Vietnamese woman with a baby held out her hand "For the baby," she said.

When he saw Sophie on the stairs, the flesh of her jaws looked heavy and her eyes were tired.

"How is Marguerite?"

"Better, thank you. Tomorrow I'll go back to work. The concierge will look in. I'm going out for strawberries," she explained. "They're her favorites." She smiled. "I used to pick them when I was young—in the country they grow wild."

He was relieved. The mother would never return. Sophie

must know that as well. What sort of life included Marguerite? Better to unzip the past and step out. Poof—it's gone. She'd gotten a face-lift maybe and gone on the most recent crash diet and exercise program, bought a new wardrobe and had a lover who thought her accent adorable.

He was entertaining these possibilities when he heard again the first notes of "The Turkish March." Shaky. She was badly out of practice. And she'd never play it well. Not like the woman in *Wuthering Heights*. Not anything close to what Mozart had in mind. But she was back at it.

He would see Sophie again. He would sit across from her and listen to her story of how she'd come back to Europe after the war and found every aspect changed, how she'd wept over leaving her friends behind, her other life. She didn't know a soul in Paris. The flat was so cold she spent hours in bed reading, far into the night after the rest of the household was asleep. It was her only real pleasure.

"The Turkish March." And who remembers the Armenians? The jumble of history knocked in his head. Marguerite had gone back to the beginning. And he was again prepared to hear another version of that much-patched piece. Gradually she took hold of the melody. He wondered if she'd like to go for a picnic in some quiet place, the Bois du Boulogne or somewhere farther out in the country. Perhaps Sophie could take a day off during the week when there would be fewer people. He would buy strawberries and search for a bakery that made the good tough French bread now so difficult to find.

He drifted deeper, the melody enticing him like a conjuration, her playing of it fused now with that intimation of form that danced beyond the notes, calling up somehow the taste of strawberries, the image of Sophie's eyes, luminous and dark, her yellow tooth and jagged smile. Separate, yet blending as a single sensation; for a moment, all contained. His chest rose and fell in rhythmic breathing. He let go and fell asleep.

The Gift

Her awe had come to be a little embarrassing. Everything Connie saw, each thing more wonderful than the last, brought an outpouring of enthusiasm Mildred had finally come to excuse: her sister had been deprived after all, what with her family to keep her tied down and her limited opportunities to broaden herself. Not that she didn't read and keep her mind sharp—Connie had always had a good head on her. Won the essay contest her first year of college. Then came one of those marriages that owed more to biology and confused innocence than it did to mutual advantage. And with three kids always underfoot, it was from then on mostly hit and miss in the mind department. Finally came the expectable divorce, leaving Connie with few resources as the world went and an uncertain future. Mildred had reconciled herself to the spectacle of waste. Some of her students she'd watched squander their youth on the spot, getting high, getting drunk, waiting haplessly for tomorrow. But the worst disillusionment was having the bright ones come back a few years later. Connie, well . . . at least Mildred could say she was fond of her nephews, decent, solid types that would keep the world nicely huffing along.

At this time of their lives, though in some sense it was too late for Connie to make up for what she'd never had, Mildred was glad to give her whatever she could offer of the accrued benefits of her experience and introduce her to Europe. It had been difficult trying to beat down Connie's admiration for her, over how she managed the confusions of diverse currencies and bus schedules and knew so much about ruins and monasteries and cathedrals.

"I've taught this stuff for years," Mildred protested. Trying to

impress on hamburger-fed youth the wonders of history and culture. A thankless task. Had in fact attempted to bring it back in slides and cards and various mementos for her classes. "And besides, I'm something of a bore."

"I know," Connie teased her, after Mildred had done her usual lecture on the mythology, history, and local lore connected to the temple they were seeing. "But at least you've been somewhere." And Connie's wistfulness as she stared into a set of imagined adventures made Mildred want to counter with protests that would, of course, have been useless.

True, she had traveled. Totally independent, she'd always scorned organized tours. Having been up and down the continent, she could pride herself on being a veteran of ferries and buses, a visitor to out-of-the-way spots, where accommodations were cheap and clean, if unpretentious, and the proprietors took a friendly interest in her. Travel had given her another life, allowed her to move out of the familiar and to look back at it with a certain hard-nosed irony. At times, she had to wonder if this was a blessing.

But it was very good to have Connie along. Responsive to everything, she rekindled for Mildred something of an original excitement, which had been rather blunted over the years. Mildred had long ago entered the sphere of discrimination, comparing this and weighing that, keeping, discarding, qualifying. While the two of them had contemplated the Freiburg cathedral—Connie in aesthetic bliss over the rose window, "Oh, just look at the light, will you. Oh, it sends chills down my spine"—Mildred considered the stages of its being built, the people having to wait for two or three centuries for walls to rise, buttresses to fly. Having to reconcile themselves: Well, not in my life will the spirit rise to architectural heights, but maybe the grandchildren. That was faith—it could move stone toward the sky—and no wonder hordes of tourists wandered around letting their eyes go where spirit had difficulty following. She enjoyed seeing the cathedral again, but she had seen it before, and though she tried to lean back to something original in her response, she had ceased to feel surprise.

Whereas Connie was like a child first experiencing the col-

ors of sky and trees, or like a woman in love, everything lit in the glow of her own feeling. Traffic and litter and ugly apartment complexes didn't seem to cross her vision. "Oh, it's like I'm just beginning," she kept saying. Splendid and foolish (for Mildred knew about such things) and it would come to grief one way or another. Or perhaps it wouldn't—it would simply linger in a golden cloud of illusion, of perfect things sealed off and forever cherished. But she was concerned about the note, whether of envy or petulance, that had crept into Connie's voice. Beneath the admiration appeared such a hunger that Mildred began to feel quite tender for her sister. The monuments of the past stood in the exalted sphere of things waited for too long, and too long desired. And somewhere there lurked, for Connie, an implied criticism of herself, which brought out an underlying dissatisfaction: she wanted to be more than she was, and now, at a time of her life when she might look back with some satisfaction at what the years had required of her, Connie seemed to view her experience as a consolation prize and revealed the uneasy sense that she ought to have been more. "Just think if I could have done this years ago."

She kept looking around for something, as though ruins and cathedrals, walls of old stone, and buildings that belonged to other centuries were the vocabulary of a language she had yet to learn. And even that was not enough.

"Just imagine," she kept saying to Mildred all across Europe, "here are people still living their lives among all these things." How splendid that they could buy their clothes and meat and stop for a beer in buildings of medieval stone.

"Maybe they don't pay any more attention to them than my freshmen," Mildred countered. And though she was not a snob, though she had never wanted to live anywhere else, it was true that she had come back to Europe again and again. She could catch a note almost of desperation in her sister.

"No, but they've been shaped by them," Connie said. "They've had a chance. There's something there," she maintained stubbornly, "even if they've thrown it away."

"Well, yes, I suppose," Mildred granted her. "But people keep fleeing it for our place." She was merely trying to keep Connie

from going overboard, though her loyalties, as with a long marriage culminating in affectionate regard, mindful of faults and dissatisfactions, were still intact. Perhaps there was something, after all, to be said for looking back at home from another shore.

"But even if they do, they've had *that*," Connie insisted, whatever *that* was.

"Well, but think of the war—and what came afterward." It humbled Mildred to think that so many knew it as a living memory. So much sheer death. So much sheer bulk left behind for history. Maybe, she couldn't help thinking, the world would be better off for a little less history.

It didn't matter what Mildred said. Connie wanted something. And even if every stone spoke wonders, it wasn't enough. But slowly, almost with a sense of triumph, she was coming to something on her own. The really extraordinary thing, she decided, was the people you met. That was the offering of chance, and she, too, could get whatever Mildred got in the here and now, though Mildred had had various rounds before her. Already Connie had an address book full of names and addresses of people they'd come across during their various adventures across the continent, some of which were beginning to puzzle her: who were these people and where had she encountered them? Fortunately, there were pictures to be developed that would jog her memory. She, far more than Mildred, was the sort who could strike up a conversation anywhere, and who would turn to her sister afterwards with a little surge of delight at having been there at the right moment to receive what she considered a gift. For, she insisted, when people gave you a piece of themselves you wouldn't forget even if you forgot their names; that was a gift. Something happened then, like the leap of a spark. A moment's recognition. A glimpse beyond the borders of language and custom to something you could witness but not altogether describe. For, after all, it was the people they kept meeting who had lived among these ancient things, whose soil ran deep with history. To these, she turned her eyes as though to see clearly to a deeper impulse. They had something that waited for her curi-

osity, observation, eagerness. Something beyond the terribly ordinary that had been her life. And she was saving these up like sweets put aside for later to tell her what she'd missed and what, if anything, she might regain.

Now they were about to take home their bundle of unsorted impressions. They were to fly home from Zagreb the next morning, and that afternoon they were having a final splurge in a fish restaurant they'd read about in the guidebooks.

"They have rock borer mussels here," Connie saw on the menu. "I wonder if I should try them. They're fearfully expensive."

Mildred shrugged. Her only interest in seafood was fish. She hated things you had to dig out of shells or worry out of claws, even lobster.

"I don't know though." For some reason, she had these bursts of hesitancy.

"Dear heart, we're going home tomorrow, have anything you want."

"They're really quite delicious," someone volunteered, from the table next to them.

Gratefully, Connie turned toward an angular young woman with a long face and pale eyebrows and large friendly teeth, very much in contrast to her companion, an older man but powerfully built, who sat drawn back and darkly quiet. His face immediately compelled her, the high sloping forehead, the prow of a nose, dark hair and beard that swept away from his face with a life of their own. And when he looked up—the eyes darkly luminous—she wanted to say to Mildred that he reminded her of certain saints and prophets in frescoes they had seen. Engaged in their intense inner life, they stood apart, preoccupied, both tempting and discouraging you from pilgrimages beyond your expectations of the possible. He was like that. Connie had yet to decide whether men like this simply walked the street and artists put them to service as prophets or whether, here, even now, among men in the street occasionally walked a prophet. She had once put the question to Mildred, who laughed. Very likely Mildred would say they were looking at a certain kind of Slavic face on a man who sold

shoes or managed a pharmacy or was some variety of bureaucrat. If old men had dreamed dreams and young men had had visions, well, that was another age.

Theirs were the only two occupied tables in the restaurant, so the conversation continued. Mildred was tired and left her sister to carry on; Connie was so much better at it than she was. She listened as Connie praised the beauty of the old part of the city and regretted that they had had only two days in Dubrovnik and that the six weeks of their trip had gone so quickly.

The young woman, whose name was Janice, had been in Yugoslavia for two years now, she told them. She was a student of Slavic literature on a fellowship at the university. And the man, Connie decided, must be her professor.

Connie looked at the young woman as if she, too, were extraordinary. It was amazing where people found themselves: here was one who'd put tongue and teeth around a language whose letters she was just learning to decipher, and was burrowing into its literature, and could now sit in the company of a prophet and speak to him in his native syllables. She marveled at the way such people had found their way to obscure parts of the globe with such tenacity of purpose. Eye and tongue and ear and heart all connected, and with the shapes of syllables touching the spirit of a culture. Oh, it was—amazing. She saw that Mildred also regarded her with interest.

Indeed here was another professional, though at the moment Mildred could consider herself little more than just another tourist. She didn't know this country. She'd picked up only a few pieces of its history. For her, as for the majority of people, mostly the language of wine and sun and ocean, which fortunately required no translation, would have to suffice. She found herself among numbers of such visitors, particularly the Germans, who had been brought apparently by that appeal alone. Nearly all the waiters and hotel managers, they'd discovered, spoke so much better German than English, as though all the painful history of World War II had never been, but was all dissolved by those elements the tourists basked in, as they sat nude on the beaches and watched the young drink their mishmashes, the sort of abomination only the young could

tolerate: orange juice with red wine floating like a stain on the surface.

"And this is Dusan," Janice said, indicating her companion.

"I have been in your country," he said, with a heavy accent. "New York, Chicago, Los Angeles," he added.

"Did you like it there?" Connie asked, though the question sounded fatuous, somehow beneath his dignity to answer. But she couldn't help asking.

"Ah yes," he said. "The energy—one has to go to America for the energy. And such space. I drove a car all across America. The space. It is like a blow on the head. An explosion."

Space and energy. She thought of clutter and decaying cities. "Yes, one goes there for the energy," Janice said.

"Ah, yes," he said, as though the sheer memory were expanding him. "Here, it is—" with his hands he pressed the space into a ball, "so closed in. You have everything—even innocence."

Mildred wanted to scoff: who was innocent anymore? Her innocence, she wanted to tell him, had vanished long ago. And not just because she'd come to Europe. One had only to read the newspapers.

"Only," he said, "there is so much stuff. The bookstores, the galleries, the shops—filled with stuff." His extended arms could not encircle even the suggestion of it. He left off, as though his observation might both introduce and conclude any conversation between them.

But in a few moments they were seated at their neighbors' table, and as they ordered fish and conferred about the wine, the atmosphere became lively and cheerful. Connie was grateful to have such an occasion before they left. Dusan's manner seemed to relent and his speech flowed more easily. He revealed a great knowledge of the fish to be caught along the coast and tried to recall the American equivalent of the one they would be eating. If she did not feel altogether comfortable with him, at least he was not an unyielding presence at the table. Being in a foreign country lent a different quality to strangers, Connie had noticed. It was hard to read their expressions, to make a guess at what they were thinking. At home you

got used to the nuances of meaning of certain gestures and tones of voice without making a conscious effort, and you didn't notice the difference till you were somewhere else. Their food served, they launched enthusiastically into the mussels they had ordered, found the wine better than they expected. By the time the meal was over—it came to far more than Connie had anticipated, but at that point she didn't care—they had planned to spend the afternoon together at the Mimara, the local equivalent of the Louvre and the pride of the city. None of them had seen it before.

"I've not been in Zagreb for thirty years," Dusan said, and for some reason Connie found this astonishing. "I came to see her," he explained, indicating Janice.

He was not her professor then. She had got it quite wrong. And she dared not hazard a guess as to the nature of their friendship. He had come to meet Janice, he explained, who was interested in his writing and had been corresponding with him for over a year.

"Dusan is a famous writer," Janice said deferentially, to which he gave a shrug. He had written a screenplay for a film that dealt with the political confusion after the war, a young man's exile and his subsequent return. The film had been highly acclaimed abroad, though it brought mixed reactions at home. He had received some previous recognition as a poet, mostly in his republic, but his work had never been translated into English.

"I want to translate it," Janice said. "There's a press in England—I think they'll do the book."

"It must be a difficult language to learn," Mildred said.

"Oh, it is," Janice said.

"You need a lover for things like that," Mildred said with a smile. "That's how I learned a little Greek." She hadn't meant to say it, but the wine had loosened her tongue. "I've forgotten it all now—except for wine-dark sea."

They laughed appreciatively while Connie sat astonished. Her Mildred? So plain and outspoken it was no wonder she'd never attracted a husband. She'd never heard Mildred make such an admission and she felt she'd been absolutely up-

staged. A little Greek. The phantom of a man rose across her vision and excused himself. He'd come between the moments she'd been collecting. . . . Was she going to have to take him home too? She looked at Mildred, who sat drinking her wine imperturbably. Wasn't she the least impressed by having a famous writer at her table? But then Mildred had gone off to summer seminars and had actually had a course at Columbia from Jacques Barzun. Whenever she could at home, Connie went for lectures and readings herself, and occasionally went up afterwards and shook the hand of a woman who wore a scarf and interesting earrings or a fellow in jeans and sport coat, people who were obviously waiting for the audience to speak its praise and clear out so they could be whisked off somewhere for drinks or dinner. On one great occasion she'd heard Saul Bellow, who'd come to St. Louis and for whom she'd made a special trip, but she'd been too shy to go up and shake his hand. Now they had a poet and a famous writer to take back, and a young woman who was going to translate him. These people seemed very modest. Modest—the word sat on top of something she found impenetrable even as she floated in the haze of sociability created by their eating and drinking together. The wine was floating her toward confusion. She was beginning to think Mildred had betrayed her in some significant way she couldn't define. And she was hoping for better from this man. He wasn't giving anything away cheaply, and where was the moment to be cherished, that would stand out and remain from the largesse of strangers to whom she had looked for clarity? She regretted that she'd never heard of him.

As if he had some hint of her thoughts, Dusan said. "Yes, we know about you, but you don't know about us. We've been reading your writers for years. Everything translated, all the big names." He laughed quietly, as though at some private joke.

She saw a large bombastic, energetic creature called America, whose antics everybody eyed while it stood oblivious. She felt curiously exposed as though she personally had been spied upon. She wanted Dusan to think well of her, though why it should matter wasn't clear to her.

"It must be a great thing to be a poet here in Yugoslavia," she said.

"It's okay now," he said. "In the beginning my family thought I was crazy. Be an engineer, they said, study math. We took all the trouble to raise you up—now you want to become a disaster. We can't give you any money."

Perhaps he'd said these things before, Mildred thought, and wondered how long it had taken for the lines of amusement to form as he said them. "It's like that in the States," she said. "until you make it. If you ever do . . ."

By now Connie wanted to go back to the idea of learning Greek or some other language from a lover. The news about poets wasn't good. She had heard of people standing in line to buy a poet's book—where was that? She didn't read much poetry herself and was regretting it.

"Yes, but you're not forced to become a bohemian—or think that is the only way of life for you if you want to write poetry. You can live like other people. You don't have to spend your time drinking and having nervous breakdowns."

Other people did that anyway, even if they weren't poets. And Connie thought it might be better to be a bohemian than to be simply ordinary.

They rose to leave.

Mildred wasn't certain she wanted to see yet another museum, but it was the last day and Connie should make the most of it. It was warm outside, and they walked all the way from the restaurant, Dusan remarking on the changes in the city from when he'd been there thirty years before. They agreed to meet in an hour, rather a brief time, Connie thought, to do justice to such a place. But even Mildred responded eagerly to the suggestion that they rejoin across the square for a cappuccino at a cafe famous for them.

As they went through the museum, Connie tried to decide what piece, if she could have only one, she might choose for the living room, and she thought with awe about the man who gave all this to the city, who had filled his life with collecting. It didn't seem right to go through the rooms so quickly—it seemed a kind of neglect not to stand before each painting and

make a discovery. When she and Mildred went to the cafe, they found Dusan and Janice already seated at a table.

"Well," Dusan said when they had sat down. "A few nice pieces by well-known artists and a lot of the second-rate. It reminds me of one of your provincial museums in the States."

Connie had been just about to say, "Wasn't it wonderful?" and was glad she'd held back. She found Dusan guilty of a certain disloyalty: other people must be terribly proud of that museum. She glanced over at Mildred, who was rubbing her calf and who looked ready to be grateful for the coffee.

"Well, we saw it," Dusan said.

For a moment they sat in silence, while Dusan looked around him. "I used to come here during my student days."

Connie tried to picture him as a young man, slender and without the beard, perhaps with the same intense look in his eyes. But at the moment he sat heavily, panting a little, looking a bit woozy. He'd drunk considerably more wine at lunch than anybody else. They'd ordered a third bottle.

"The last time I was here was the last time I saw Slavko. He was sitting right over there. He would have been the greatest poet of this generation." He mused on this in silence.

"What happened to him?" Janice asked.

Dusan roused himself as the waiter brought the coffee. "He hanged himself—with his belt."

"That's terrible," Connie said.

"He was wild, crazy, up all night arguing, writing, drinking. He would sneer at the others: 'You call yourselves poets. Hang-ers on, touting the second-rate.' He kept saying he was the best. Then he published a book, and the critics took it apart; they were waiting for their revenge. He would have been the greatest poet of this generation."

For a moment they all stood in an uneasy relationship to the absent one, not knowing where to put their feet. They had the unsettling experience of being visited by a specter.

"Is that why he did it?" Janice asked.

"I don't know. Nobody knew. He'd been here. He was with a woman, very ugly, very cruel. I don't know what he saw in her. Maybe he did it to shock people. They'd been laughing, joking.

She wanted to go on a picnic. There was nothing wrong—at least not so we could tell. They found him the next day.”

“Strange,” Janice said.

“Happens every day,” Mildred said, resisting this man’s death. Her feet were tired, and she wanted to drink her coffee in peace. She wanted to get back to the hotel and relax and pack her things and dawdle over them and remember what she’d bought and for whom. She would not sleep well that night; she’d be listening in her sleep for the alarm.

Connie frowned in her direction.

“I think it was his gift that destroyed him,” Dusan said. “I don’t think he knew what to do with it.”

The pall of absence hung over them for another moment, then they talked inconsequentially of other things. Clearly the afternoon had come to a close. They separated with handshakes, the usual exchange of addresses.

At the hotel the sisters settled their bill, arranged for a taxi and spent their last night in their room.

Connie was packing in a slow, distracted way, picking things up and putting them down again as though she didn’t know what to do with them. She looked as though she might burst into tears.

“What’s the matter, dear?” Mildred asked.

“I don’t know, I keep thinking about Dusan’s friend.” The whole thing seemed so stupid, such a waste.

“It happens all the time,” Mildred said. “Even when they aren’t the greatest.”

“That’s what’s so terrible,” she said.

“You’re just travel-weary,” Mildred said, trying to comfort her. “It’s time to go home.”

Connie knew what Mildred was doing, trying to bring her around. No doubt it would be good to walk in the door and find the familiar, the rooms where she had carried on her life, cooked the meals and picked up after the kids, now three tall grown men. She didn’t know whether it would be the same life she’d left before or somehow different. But at least she would have the same things to look at.

In her confusion, she turned her eyes on Mildred. "Is that what you think, really?"

She seemed almost angry, but Mildred couldn't tell whether her anger was directed toward her or something else. She felt curiously at a loss. She went over and put her arms around Connie and kissed her. "You know what happens when you go in search of treasure," she said. "There are always dragons sitting on it." It was the teacher in her speaking. Then she added, "Travelers must be content."

But Connie gestured as though to wave her off. She had to have something, she had to. "Mildred," she said, fishing around. "Don't you remember any Greek? Have you really forgot it all?"

Dreaming Crow

*White Bird flapping white wings
—overtaken by darkness.
Come out, sooty one.
Charred by the darkness of the world?*

I sat up with a start, head hollow, ringing with dry laughter. Sat up in alarm. Felt the bed under me, the covers in a tangle. I'd landed there in the middle of it, but from what point of departure? Felt my shoulder. Absence. "Crow," I shouted, "Crow, dammit," and in the dark heard the rustle of wings. Hadn't lost him, and if I lost him, I'd never lose him. Haunt me like a demon. But he was here. Had ridden home on my shoulder. And sat with head tucked under a wing while I took off into another crow dream. For of late, I'd been dreaming of nothing but crow.

A sudden light went on, cracking across my skull like a billy club. Hell and goddam! The cops? The landlord? My ex-wife? Bill collector? Insurance salesman?

Just Ernie. Of course, Ernie. And what the hell was he doing in my partial awakening, the switchman turning out the black? When my eyes focused, I saw him standing at the foot of the bed, looking at me out of the silence of long waiting burdened with thought—and Crow with his claws hooked over the chair back. I was trying to reach back beyond the dream, maybe beyond the beginning of my life, that blast of birth, when the sudden, too sharp light dropped me into this year's calendar. Tried to shake the dead days out of my head. A rattling as of

abandoned parts. A fog, a buzz, a falling into place: he must have brought me home from McIntyre's. Maybe, maybe not—he'd done it before.

To be on the safe side, I said, "Thanks. Thanks a lot."

"For what?"

"God damned if I know."

"Well, I sure as hell don't."

"Oh." I started to turn over, in an effort to get below the racket in my head. "I must have galloped home on the whiskey. Flown with Old Crow."

"You were roaring loud enough."

"Miracles," I said, to account for the gap between there and here. "There're still miracles in the world."

"Tell me about it," he said, slumping down into the overstuffed chair, into the distortions of springs.

I was not then of a sufficient clarity to take him on. One of his bad nights, I could tell. Had that large sad look in his eye. It would have been a waste of philosophy anyway. "Done any work on the book?" I asked him.

"Tried," he said. "Threw out the whole first section. It's about time. I've been giving myself the lie all year. . . . Now I've got to start over."

"Ernie," I said. "I heard you read it." Could anything still have brought tears to my eyes, that might have had a chance.

He shook his head. "It's not there yet. Not the way it's gotta be."

Crow circled the room and landed on my shoulder. Helpful creature. A burst of distraction. Might've been good for Ernie to have a crow. Take his mind off the damned book he'd been trying to write for fifteen years. An account of his experiences: for those who weren't there in the muck and the horror. Who would never know flaming jungle and wasted life. An experience of consciousness, he called it. All this time he'd been trying to haul it back, over the distance of years and the gulf of forgetfulness—trying to get it right. Every word. A final monument for those who'd never have the chance to speak.

"How can you stand it?" he said.

"Stand what?"

"That crow flapping around."

"I'm used to him. It feels odd when he's not there. Like a growth you can't get rid of. Gets to be part of you." Performs a service. Lets you carry your darkness on your own shoulder.

"His feet are ugly."

He was in one of his moods all right. Always circled the thing that was on his mind.

"Maddy's coming tomorrow. With Roy."

His wife and kid. Separated. Still loved him. Believed in bridges, in paths around obstacles. Believed that obsessions would melt away and normal daylight return. Believed perhaps in redemption. Their visits left him in the hole for a week.

"Better get some sleep," I told him. He'd probably come up to escape his apartment, or himself. "You're welcome to the chair."

"You mean I can bounce on those springs all night."

"Suit yourself." I'd reached the limits of hospitality. I wanted to turn over. I would sleep again even though Crow would be waiting for me, something growing out of the dark, shapeless at first, then forming his image. Now in one guise, now another, a terrible suspense building, as I lay waiting. God knows what for. For him to speak? So far he hadn't spoken.

* * *

I think he must be a myna bird, if not a real crow. Your basic black bird. Someone had taken a knife and split its tongue. I have never known anyone who could do that, take a knife and slit a bird's tongue. And I have often wondered where it put you afterward. I have looked into its eye on other occasions and felt all I laid claim to split and shatter like a mirror. Once it spoke. Someone had tried to teach it to say, "All that glitters is not gold." And it had held onto the first part, flying dizzily around the room, spreading a mockery, it seemed, by saying it over and over. Only sound. Not human speech. Split the tongue and take the creature beyond the bird. To what curious sphere?

All that glitters . . . I would not have put it down as the nesting instinct, but every once in a while, I would find a little

hoard of things collected: a paper clip, a silver button, a bit of cellophane, a dime.

I myself had collected enough bright objects in my time, seizing first on one, then another. All fresh and smart in the gleam of the spanking new. Love and money. Marriage and kids. House and home. All that glitters.

All fallen away. Now the kids were grown and had flown. The house, the life that went with it—collapsed. I'd dropped through the layers and folds of all that had held me up, the structures of the quotidian, and landed here, naked, a creature without a shell, in this derelict gray apartment house, where others had similarly found their level. At least momentarily. For they came and went. Except for the street, the prison, or the grave, I do not know where they could fall farther. Sometimes at night I woke and listened to the wind blowing through me, all my doors and windows banging, and a familiar, yet ghostly stranger wandering through the corridors. Martha, Jess, Lilly. Where are you?

Nothing left but Crow. And he had no words now. Not even half a platitude. For a time, I'd tried to teach him his name. Called him Charley. But he wouldn't say it, wouldn't answer to it. Only Crow. The sound of raw bird. I called him as hoarsely as he answered. Out of the mixed flickering of whiskey and dream I would wake to Crow.

* * *

"Come on, have a drink with us, Jarve," Ernie said, dragging me downstairs.

Down to family. I knew what he was after. Wanted somebody else in the room to deflect the emotional charge. I couldn't stand the voltage myself, but I went down anyway. Owed it to Maddy maybe. I liked her. She was a plain, down-to-earth type, but when she smiled a radiance lived in her briefly, though it didn't happen often. She'd set herself up for a hard life. Had the man she wanted and didn't want any other. They'd been married before Ernie had gone off to play hero, as he put it, and when he came back they had a kid, Roy, sometimes called

Mickey, a thin, sallow, hazel-eyed youth, who seemed embarrassed by his father.

I had brought Crow for the sake of the kid, not that he'd likely have an interest. But this time Maddy was alone.

"Lovely to see you," I said, giving her a hug, as though I were back in the social folderol of my old life.

For a moment she clung to me as if to take some comfort from my arms around her. Then she said, "It's useless, isn't it?"

I wasn't sure what she meant specifically: her visit, Ernie's recalcitrance, or the way of things. But it looked like she'd given up on something.

"I can't make him see," she said, standing in the space between Ernie and me. Ernie's back was toward us, his gaze turned out to the back alley, where the garbage cans leaned or lay on their sides from the assault by cats and dogs. From his attitude I could read him. He wasn't looking out but in; if not to the past, to somewhere beyond the present.

"You know, Jarve," she said, as though Ernie had left the room, "I'm not coming down anymore. Finally, I know when I'm licked. And I've been a fool hanging on so long." She pressed her lips together. "It's not fair," she said, angrily for her. "If you can't let go of things and *live*," she lowered her voice, "then what's the point?"

She grabbed her coat and rushed to the door before either of us could say a word. A shiver started through me, but I turned it off, damning Ernie for getting me involved. It wasn't any of my business. I was just going to walk out myself, but a bottle in the center of the kitchen table caught my eye. By means of the shortest distances between various points, I found a tumbler and poured myself a drink. Then another.

"She's right, of course," Ernie said, following my example.

"Then what're you doing here?"

Ernie shook his head. "Because I'm trapped—in a place I can't get out of. That you can't remember or forget. And there's no other ground. No place to call home. It's like you've lost the world, Jarve," he said looking at me. "And there's nothing else in its place."

Couldn't say anything to that. Figured I'd lost it too. Where

was some sweet spot of grass to lie on, give your body to, close your eyes and rest?

"I've got to do it, I can't go back on it. There's no peace until *they know*. It would be throwing it away. It was a sickness, Jarve." The muscles in his face tightened. "And how can you cure it if you just bury it?"

Why you? Maddy had wanted to know.

Ernie had shrugged: *Why anybody?*

I'd never gone to Maddy's neighborhood or walked past the house that waited for the return of husband and father. To which he had come back—at first. Tried for the normal. Went back to his old job. Thinking maybe he had found his spot of ground. I could imagine him picking up his old life, trying to put it together even as he had the book before his eyes. In a fever to start it. To put his malarial vision on paper. A continuation of the fever that began it, whole scenes replaying vividly before his eyes. But the more he worked, the more it eluded him. Till his whole brain was on fire. He put everything into it. Evenings, weekends, hours in the middle of the night. Ever more consumed.

He lost his job. Tried another, lost that too. Fell farther down the economic scale: short-order cook, night watchman, janitor. A sleepwalker, the book always in his head. Then he chucked it all. How could he play the part when he wasn't there?

"She deserves better," he had told me a number of times. "Why does she bother?" he said, almost angrily. "She followed me here. Couldn't let go. I thought I'd at least clear the path."

He had a disability check coming in. Grocery money. He'd work a day or two periodically, enough to collect unemployment. The rest was the book, when it was going well; the bottle, when it wasn't.

I poured myself another shot, poured one for Ernie. The good guest. Peculiar what people clung to—or abandoned. I'd left too. The newspaper office, the Kiwanis, the First Presbyterian. Just picked up one day and walked out. Let's say I'd been crushed beneath the weight of fact. Lying too long under a refuse heap. Weighty as a tombstone. The heaviness of repetition. The day's disasters, punctuated by the news of a few

lottery winners. The weight of the world, yet flimsy as newsprint itself. Wrapping for the day's sink mess. For what? For Crow to pick at.

Once I hadn't gotten the facts straight—so a rival told me and sent me Crow to eat.

* * *

I see you, Crow, dragging behind you liver and lights, the message of sex, the uneven throb of the heart—all the organs exposed, globules of flesh seeking their function. Oh, it goes beyond the beat of blood, the pulsations of the nerves. These raw things. . . . When love discovers you, it pulls away the skin, fingers all the tingling parts, turns outside inside.

And the eye opens, looking down through the layers. The wound and the eye meet through the hole in the flesh.

* * *

I woke up to find Ernie banging on the door. It wasn't even light yet. I moved unsteadily to the door, opened it and leaned against the jamb.

"You mean you're just getting up?"

"What's the hurry? Can't even see by the sun."

"Hell, it's about gone down. You've slept through the whole damned day."

"Jeez, what'll I do tonight?" I said, with a sense of loss.

"Come with me down to McIntyre's. I've got a little cash. I did an article, a protest piece," he said, with great contempt. "But it's money."

When the book came to a standstill, he wrote protests—against pollution and violence and crime, against greed and corruption, against inefficiency and stupidity. It was nearly a full-time job. "Spinning your wheels," he called it. Never touched the real springs. On the contrary, you had to hit people inside, make them see. Otherwise they'd never change.

"Sure," I said. "Why not? Come on, Crow."

"Aren't you afraid he'll just take off when you're walking out in the air like that?" Ernie said, as Crow rode my shoulder.

"His choice," I said. "If he can find a good life elsewhere, I won't stand in his way." Although I wasn't sure why, I'd miss him, sign of my darkness, my faithlessness, all the things I'd given up.

McIntyre's was beginning to fill when we got there, factory workers in for a quick one on the way home, a couple of guys from the bank, their styled hairdos and shirts and ties offering a contrast to the rest of us. Slumming before they went home to the wives and kiddies. One of the fellows gave me a nod—knew him from my other life. Only now that I had Crow, I'd let go of the amenities. Marks a man. Folks stare, though all the steadies were used to me, God knows. Thought I was a little off. Harmless. Scarcely caused an eyebrow to lift unless somebody was in the mood for a little pleasantry.

Which somebody was. Just as I'd begun to put myself in the mood I'd come to get into. Had sat down and ordered a double scotch. Heading for the fog. To match the smoky atmosphere. When here comes a guy, maybe a foreman; looked like the type: well put together, arms like a wrestler's, tattoo on the left. Clipper ship. Not original. "Baby Doll" below.

"How come you got that crow?" he said, leaning over the end of our table.

"It's his sister," Ernie explained.

"Sister? What is he, some sort of environment nut?"

"Religious. Talks to the birds," Ernie went on. "And other creatures. Rabbits, even moles. All in their own language."

"Let's hear you say something."

I made a half-hearted caw.

"You're full of shit." He turned away and went to the bar.

"Only he doesn't answer," I said.

"Patience," Ernie said. "When he has something to say . . . Actually," he raised his voice in the direction of the guy at the bar, "she really is his sister. Enchanted by a wicked magician because she wouldn't deliver. Been carrying her around for seventeen years. But when she's free," he said emphatically, "she'll tell you the secret—of crowness and black magic."

He was into it. Loved this kind of nonsense when he was in the right mood. Played with the words he had left over: jokes and puns, odd bits of anecdote. He kept it up all evening. I was just as well pleased the guy at the bar ignored us. Might've thought Ernie was making fun of him and caused trouble.

"Her name's Marigold."

All that glitters is Marigold. I ordered another scotch, to have it handy. Ernie, the same. I'd have been glad to sit quiet for a spell. I'd reached that point of silence booze brings me to before I land in the well beyond it. Half listening, I sat contemplating the scene: the colors of the bottles melting in the mirror, words and smoke intertwined. I tried to take a crow's eye view.

"Actually, she was a gift from his Aunt Caroline," Ernie said, addressing no one in particular. "Kept birds, filled up every room of her house—parakeets and lovebirds and finches. They all had free run of the place. She liked them better than folks. Less shit."

On the way home he was still making up nonsense, laughing, doubling over. Could hardly walk straight. One of his rare nights. And mine. Somehow I'd forgotten both past and future.

"O Crow!" he said, doing obeisance, "Great Bird, descending to us folks. Giver of light and life."

"Where does he get that?"

"Don't you know?" he said. "In the dark. Always in the dark."

We'd walked up the hill together, our arms around each other's shoulders, the moon tilting over the trees.

* * *

Certain things I remember vividly. The box on Ernie's kitchen table. "Maddy's stuff," he said offhandedly when I came in for a nightcap. He uncovered a little box and picked up a wedding band. "She shouldn't have hung on so long," he said. "Too many years." He sat silent for a moment, in another space. "Well," he said, back again, contemplating his glass, "Here's to her. The good life. . . ." He picked up the ring again. "It'll come in handy."

I figured what he'd do. Earlier that week there'd been a big set-to. Brother Crawford, who in the name of his church next door owned the apartments, had surprised two of his tenants in a compromising position. I had seen them coming and going, the girl having caught my attention with her dangling pink earrings and bright pink heels thin as toothpicks. She chewed gum and carried a transistor radio, worked as a cashier at the Dairy Bar. The lad, large, soft, ingenuous-looking type, with a shock of red hair, had been laid off from the parts plant. Brother Crawford told them he'd either marry them or kick them out—thereby offering occasion for the freedom of choice.

They had opted for a life together. Cheaper in the long run to rent only one apartment. The ceremony was the next evening, after work and before bed. The ring would be Ernie's contribution. The present inmates of the Petite crowded inside the little apartment. Patty, who worked at the Roselyn bakery, brought a day-old cake. There were balloons, somebody's notion of the festive. We listened to the ceremony, saw the ring located on the proper finger, and wished them a happy residence at the Petite.

The rest is a jumble. I remember waking up one night, raucous cries in my ears, the lashing of sounds, a terrible quarrel. Then I was looking into a silence so black I woke with an unreasoning terror and lay in the dark waiting to hear some friendly noise. The bed clothes had been fought into the usual chaos. "Crow," I called, turning on the light, trying to push aside the darkness, "say something." I didn't want to go back to sleep. Instead I got dressed and went downstairs, to roust Ernie up.

His light was on. When he was going on the book, he sometimes sat up all night. I didn't want to disturb him, just sit in the room while he was working. I turned the handle and opened the door, saw that he had fallen asleep across the typewriter, head leaning on folded arms. I knew I shouldn't awaken him. But being alone just then was too much for me.

"How's it going?" I asked him, once he'd sat up and shaken off sleep.

"Don't even ask," he said. "It's all junk."

"Maybe you need a breather," I suggested. "Get away from it and let it take you from behind."

He shook his head. "It's me," he said. "It's been in front of me so long I can't see straight anymore. I tried to get inside, to go so far in . . . Now I wonder. Maybe none of it happened like that. Or maybe it doesn't matter."

I noticed the crumpled pages lying on the floor.

I had nothing to offer. His had been the braver route, no doubt. I'd gone down a little narrow alley, found my dead end, and let it go at that.

He shook his head, played with a pen.

Maybe we were looking at two sides of the same wall. I don't know how long we sat in our separate stupors, when suddenly he rounded on me. "What're you doing down here pissing your life away? You going to rot here?"

I was caught up short. So far we'd given each other berth. With forced calm I said, "I'm supporting the Reverend."

"Come on, Jarve."

I'd done my duty by the public. Muggings, shootings, arrests, promotions. The world's a gaping maw—hungry for facts. Or maybe just sensation. A little pinch to know the blood's still in the veins. Thirty years I'd given to it. "Who the hell are you?"

The way he looked at me I knew I shouldn't have said that. He turned away. "What do you do when you can't get rid of . . ." he said, "when you can't find . . . ?"

I was in no mood for unfinished sentences. I got up and started back to my room.

"You understand me, Jarve," I heard at my back.

But I couldn't say I did. I was too numb. "Sure," I said, and stumbled back upstairs.

* * *

That was the last I saw him. Two months ago. I think of it as a long silence. I'd climbed the stairs, untwisted the covers and fallen asleep. Then the shot rang out. I don't know whether I heard it or the commotion in the hall. Ernie had a gun, of

course. These days you have to have your weapon. I flung myself out of bed and rushed down the stairs, already afraid of what I'd find. Patty was pounding on the door, a couple of others behind her. He'd locked it. I broke in the door, yelled to her not to come inside, but to call the police and an ambulance. By the time the sirens tore up the night, everybody in the house was up and people in the neighborhood had gathered on their porches and along the street, some in their bathrobes.

Brother Crawford appeared, befuddled from sleep, appalled by the noise and confusion that had descended on his property. He demanded to know what had happened. When he knew, his face paled, and he suddenly turned quiet, almost diffident, saying to the police, "Yes, sir," and "No sir," and "Not to my knowledge, sir." Just the week before, they'd come looking for a fry cook who'd been forging checks. But when they'd gone to his room, they discovered he'd decamped, leaving his rent unpaid as well.

I recognized the reporter from the newspaper—had hired him as a kid. When he started to ask me questions, I waved him away and went back upstairs. I had managed to keep my head through the worst of the commotion, but once back in my room I couldn't control a fit of violent trembling. Following that, I sat in a stupor for hours. Somebody would have to tell Maddy, I kept thinking. Who? Images of faces rose to my mind, some of the people I had known in my youth, now long dead. And then my mind became a blank.

* * *

The time passing was no more than the rustle of crows' wings. Sometimes I slept all day and sat up all night, making a pretense of reading the books I'd checked out from the public library. Not for the sake of knowledge, not from any impulse of curiosity or imagination. Just to take up the time. Thrillers, Westerns, all the junk I could lay my hands on. I read pigheadedly, kept my eyes to the page to avoid looking out or in. My money was nearly gone, and if I didn't do something, I'd be out

on the street. But I refused to move. No place to go. Nothing I wanted to do.

My life lay at the bottom of the can, no point in picking through the trash. Ernie at least had tried to capture something real. Tried to find the words. And look where it landed him. Me, I was a facts man, stuck with only a new round of facts, now as dead as Ernie himself.

"Well, Crow," I said, reaching out for him, eager for a little conversation, "you 'spose there's anything to be salvaged from all of this mess?" He cocked his head, gave me a beady stare. I wouldn't find my image mirrored from his eye. What did he see? Probably a large eye, red rimmed, staring back.

Ernie's father came to see me. He was a large man, both big boned and solidly padded, who brought in a smell of after-shave lotion and an unwanted briskness of movement that momentarily and painfully stirred the air. He didn't belong in the Petite, where the odors congregated in the hallway, the stink of disposable diapers mingling with smells of cigarette smoke and yesterday's fried potatoes.

Maddy must've told him about me. I hadn't gone to the funeral. Easier not to go, not to see Maddy or the kid, nor to stand there in the light of not-yet-spring, looking at the bare ground. I wasn't sure why he came, what he thought I could do for him. He took off his overcoat, sat in the one armchair I could offer. Three-piece suit, silk tie—he'd done well in life. A doctor.

"A terrible waste," he lamented. "He could've gone to med school, the whole trip paid for. Wouldn't have had to struggle the way I did. I just can't understand it—all the advantages. The way he treated all of us."

He was indignant all right, the aggrieved parent. And I could understand that. Just didn't want to listen to him. Didn't even offer him a drink.

"I think something must've happened to him over there. Maybe he got off on drugs."

He sat there staring into space, until the silence became crushing. "My God, why did he do it?" he burst out, his eyes brimming.

I reached under the bed for Ernie's manuscript, what was left of it, and handed it to him. I'd rescued it, but couldn't bring myself to read it. Maybe it would only confuse him, but at least he had it. Then I brought out my bottle, and together we finished it off.

* * *

At first I thought the young couple next door woke me up. Since Brother Crawford had married them, they'd done nothing but quarrel. But I could never tell. The dramas of the day bled into the fantasies of the night till you couldn't separate one piece of nonsense from another. Quarrels and lovemaking, swearing, drunken husbands threatening screaming wives. Crazy laughter and obscenities. No matter who moved in or out, the faces you met on the stairs were always the same.

For some reason I got up and went to the window. Outside the moon was brilliant. A clear blue-purple shadow with a gauzy sheen lay over the trees, plants in a moonlit sea. I opened the window and let the chill air flow in and around me. And I thought of Ernie, of the times we had spent together, drinking and commiserating. I remembered walking home from McIntyre's that night, our arms round one another's shoulders as we came laughing up the hill. And of other nights.

Curious how things look sometimes, the tilt of the moon in the sky, the wash of light. As though everything had arranged itself according to your feeling. As if you were in love and that gave things their hue and color. The sky and each leaf and branch shimmering in the newness of your seeing. When had I looked at the world that way? As a kid? As a youth looking into a woman's eyes and seeing something beyond even myself, something being created there? On my first job in Chicago, when the excitement of running down to the firehouse in the dead of night raised every detail of the streets to vividness? The blood must have beat in my ears then, a woman's touch awakened me, and the world laid me deep in sensation. I must have been a lover.

Now as I stood there, struck with that memory, forgetful in

the shimmer of moonlight, I whistled softly. Behind me, from the curtain rod above my head came an answering whistle.

* * *

Now that I'd had a response from Crow, I was overcome with the need to talk. Poured out my whole history, all my dissatisfactions and regrets. Guilt and frustration. Failures. Talked till my mouth was dry, my throat hoarse. And my hands empty. Got me nowhere at all. Just got thrown back on myself by that beady eye. Nothing from it. So I had to give up. I had to do something though; I had to get out. The room had become a prison.

I'd taken to standing by the window at night, looking out. But the full had passed, and we were back at the dark of the moon. Nothing out there but black branches against the darkened sky. You couldn't whistle the moon back. But I tried it in a mood of experiment, just to see what might happen. I gave a long, slow whistle. And waited.

From Crow came a long, slow whistle.

Again, in the mood of experiment, I did a long note and a short note. I stood tense with waiting. He gave that back too. Then long-short-short. He did it. I kept on, thinking now he'll quit. But he wore me out first. We'd kept going till I could hardly pucker. But no matter how complicated the pattern, he could give it back to me. I had the feeling he was enjoying himself, that I'd finally hit the spot where his real talents lay.

The next day he landed on my knee as I lay in bed working up the energy to climb out into the day. He looked at me, took me in and gave me a whistle, two long notes followed by two shorts. I said, "Great, Crow," but he just repeated it, flew up and around, landed back on my knee, looked me straight in the eye and repeated it again. It sounded like a challenge. I gave him back note for note. Then he did another, adding a note this time. I gave that one back too. And he went on, calling the tune, you might say. Till finally I could see what was going to happen. His whistles were getting so complicated I couldn't hold the pattern in my head long enough to repeat it. I

got all mixed up trying to get it out. He cackled. He was laughing at me. He'd won.

So there I was, not knowing what to make of it. There had been communication. *All that glitters . . .* We could forget about even half a platitude. For the time being, I had run out of words.

* * *

That evening I went out with Crow for a round at McIntyre's. I hadn't been out of my room for three days or more. I'd eaten everything on the shelves, opened the last can of beans and eaten them cold, right from the container. I had spent my money down to the change in my pocket. Rent due next week. I'd be kicked out on my ear. Had to go somewhere, find something to do with myself. I couldn't put off the next move forever. But the thought of change terrified me.

"What'll you have, Jarve?" McIntyre asked me, after we'd exchanged pleasantries.

"Tell you what. How about a little contest? If this bird here can out-whistle you, you'll stand me a drink."

"What's this?"

"Really. He can do it. No shit."

McIntyre looked dubious, as though he had better things to think about.

"C'mon, McIntyre," one of the regulars said. "This joint could do with a little entertainment."

He shrugged. "What do I do?"

I showed him how Crow would imitate me. Then I said, "Whistle, Crow. Show your stuff." Crow started off easy with three notes. McIntyre had no trouble with that. Then four. Five. McIntyre had to concentrate when it came to seven and eight, Crow mixing up the long and short. He kept it up pretty well too. Got about a dozen. Then he messed up. Crow gave a cackle. I had a drink.

Others wanted to try it. One of the bank guys good with figures. But he didn't last beyond McIntyre. Then a fellow in a tweed cap and a blue denim jacket, feisty looking, pushed

himself up to the corner of the bar. He'd memorized the whole of "Paul Revere's Ride" in the fifth grade and could still recite it. Damned if he couldn't out-whistle some goddam bird. He lasted through fifteen notes before Crow got the better of him. His face had grown red, first with effort and concentration, then with defeat, and I was afraid that only a good fight would relieve his feelings. But instead he stepped back and gave Crow an admiring appraisal.

"I'm damned," he said. "He's a smart one."

I had all the drinks I wanted. Every fellow who joined the crowd had to try it. I was carrying on, roaring at the top of my lungs, "Crow, you're a gold mine."

There is always something. Deeper than wisdom, deeper than error, deeper than hope or despair. Always something that escapes your deepest notice: it was still down there, the magma of the heart—the pith, the juice, the old vinegar. Once again I had discovered complexity, only this time it saved me from something worse, from nothingness and the void.

"To Ernie," I yelled. "To the good life!" Tears were streaming down my face, and I was laughing fit to kill. Both at once.

Tooth

And tonight what was there for him to sample from the feast of knowledge?—if only his tooth weren't killing him. You never knew. Step into a classroom, scan the blackboard, and there it is: a bit of sociology here, maybe a graph of the divorce rate (heaven help us, a miracle any two people could live together in this day and age); the structure of the atom there, a marvel to behold. Every year a new particle, you could bank on it. Physicists splitting their brains all the way to infinity. . . . Or Miss Jinero's Spanish lesson: a loving tongue—*te amo, te amo*. Someday he was going to make it to Mexico. He had dreams of a warm climate, flashing wings of exotic birds, colors in the air. As soon as he reached the border, he'd dive right into the lingo: *¿Como está usted, amigo?* Drawings of cells. Three sexes for the paramecium. Who'd have thought? He bet it was still not known to the general public. And poetry—he was a lover of poetry: "My words fly up, my thoughts remain below. Words without thoughts never to heaven go." Ah, Claudius. With what he'd gleaned over the years, he could probably recite volumes.

Shenbel entered the classroom where Whitney held forth during the day—Great Books of the Western World. Before he moved the desks and swept the floor, he read the blackboard, as usual. Right now he needed a piece of learning powerful enough to take up his whole mind. A revelation. To carry him beyond the toothache that seemed to lift his eyeballs with its throbbing. He'd looked in the mirror the day before, surveying the line of damaged teeth he'd lived with over the years. Trouble again from an old grief to the upper jaw from the only fight in his life that had ever come to blows. Sometimes when it was

very cold those teeth were like struck cymbals. Now he'd wait, as he'd done before, for the pain to subside; he was terrified of dentists, though he'd worked up his courage to go a few times since that night years ago when, more dead than alive, his mouth full of blood and at least one chip of tooth, he lay defeated on the floor of Worley's Saloon. But this new trouble, if only it wouldn't last, seemed to come from the root. Before he came to work, he'd tried to quell it with a rag soaked in whiskey and would have been glad to sit back in his ancient red velvet chair and soak himself as well. Three or four shots and tooth and brain would meet in mutual numbness, consciousness dropping away like eyesight. But they'd fire him—old Koontz, the engaging old weasel in the business office, was just waiting to clap him on the back and say, "Rudy, boy, don't you think it's time to call it quits? Things have got to move forward, you know." He didn't dare give him an excuse.

Whitney's blackboard: During this part of the semester the same lost soul entered the dark forest and once again was set upon by leopard, lion, and wolf. Shenbel knew all about it. Getting lost from the safari of life, he liked to call it. Once years ago a student had left the book behind and Shenbel had carried it off and set upon his own journey all the way through the Inferno—reading the notes, working his way through words he didn't know in a language learned late, for English had not mothered his consciousness. It was a struggle, like everything else. But as he made his way downward, the adventurer grew real to him, the Dante who'd descended into the pit and lived to tell about it. Though Shenbel didn't believe in Hell, he believed in the experience of it. Purgatory he'd attempted; Paradise he could only imagine. And Virgil—forget Beatrice—he'd been looking for all his life.

The circles of Incontinence, Violence, and Fraud swam before his vision as he tried to frown away the pain. For years they'd been giving him a free education, and they didn't even know it.

"Hi there, Mr. Shenbel."

"I didn't even see you."

He turned to where Ketchum sat at the very back of the

room, his books laid out, holding above them a face lambent, receptive, the scars of adolescent acne across the cheeks. Too open, it seemed to Shenbel—anybody could walk in. Careless with himself. A shock of hair flying into his eyes with the gust of his ideas, books and papers scattered about, while he presided cheerfully over the chaos. Where had he come from, this beamish youth? Still they came walking out into the world: polished white teeth in a clean smile. Young teeth, fluoride-treated. Twice-yearly visits. There was something to be said for the technological improvements. And for youth.

“How’s it going?” Ketchum asked.

Shenbel felt for his jaw. Not to be touched. “It’s going, but it could go better.”

They had conversations, he and this kid, late at night when the rooms were swept and the fluorescent lights buzzed in the silence. Once or twice a week. Sometimes Shenbel found other students in the classrooms, a boy and girl supposedly studying, as an excuse for making out; or girls planning some social event; or groups, always groups, protesting this and supporting that. These he passed like a shadow, and if they noticed him, they gave no sign. To his mind, they could have belonged to another planet. He’d been young enough for all the stupidities of youth, but he’d never been that young. Ketchum he always found alone, whether by choice or circumstance he couldn’t tell. Sometimes Shenbel saw him walking across campus with a girl, never the same girl, trying to shorten his stride, frowning and concentrating as though intent on the right thing to say. But he studied alone, until late.

It was curious the way they’d fallen into conversation. Shenbel had asked him about the book he was reading. He was always curious. Sometimes he picked up notebooks, forgotten or abandoned, and read fragmentary and often strangely garbled versions of something heard in the lectures. It remained a puzzle to him, all these pieces and scraps that people carried away. Including his own. And he wanted to say something about where his own thoughts had wandered as he read and took things away to mull over. He listened to Ketchum, who was eager to talk, maybe with anybody, freely, with the confi-

dence of newly acquired, self-evident opinions; Shenbel could tell he'd been listening to Whitney more carefully than some, for to tell by the notes, the lectures hadn't changed all that much over the years. But before Shenbel knew it, he was challenging, arguing, defending, and they were off, like two strangers who've discovered they grew up in the same village.

"Got an exam?" he asked Ketchum.

"Midterms. They kicked me out of the library, and you know how it is in the dorm."

"Yeah, you got to wear ear plugs just to make it across the campus."

Ketchum laughed.

The students amazed him. The throb of rhythm seemed like a great ache of sound reaching up into a vast empty space. How did they study? No wonder they left so much knowledge behind in the classrooms for him to erase. They didn't need it. Their heads were full already. They could keep their music—no, he thought, he'd have been willing to take it in exchange for his toothache, even trade.

"What's the matter? Are you okay?"

"Toothache," he muttered, his head like a gong.

"Hey, that's too bad."

Shenbel straightened up in a curve of dizziness. "It'll go away." He started to move the next row of desks aside and resume his sweeping.

"Yeah," he said, "a little thing like that and it wants to take over. You try to hold on, it says, me, me, only me." Dante, Miss Jinero's loving tongue, they flew off the brain as if from a dung heap.

He swept slowly, halted, tried it again, then decided to take a few minutes out. His heart seemed to beat in his tooth. A little conversation would maybe take his mind off. He went back and sat down across the aisle from Ketchum.

"So what d'you think?" he said to the boy, pointing to the blackboard. "This is my favorite. Of all of them, this is *the* one."

"Be nice to have a place to put everybody," Ketchum said. "You know, be able to look at them and see what they're living down in the gut."

He nodded. It would help, a sort of metal detector of the soul. "You get that," he said, "after you've been knocked around for a while. Only most of the time it works about ten years too late."

It was not a reassuring statement, and if it weren't for his tooth, he might have been less blunt. Even though they sat on the same level, Shenbel seemed to stand over the boy from the height of the trash pile he'd collected over the years.

"Your face is swollen, did you know that?"

"It feels like it," Shenbel said. "After yesterday I didn't look." He touched his cheek. It was hard to know about his face, with the tooth taking up all the room for complaint. It felt tender, this part of him, softening around the edges of his age, melting like wax, loosening away from his life. Ketchum's face, the eye regarding him thoughtfully, seemed to be growing toward whatever he was leaving behind. And whatever lit the eye, don't let it go out please. He shrugged. "It's hurt before—but not this bad. These teeth have got a history." He laughed wryly, revealing those that were missing in other locations, along with those that had been filled, capped, pulled back into service. "Now it's only here, in this tooth." History brought up to the present.

The rest was gone; it was always going. And if regrets clung to any of it, forget it. History was the tooth. Up-to-date.

The boy was looking at him as though trying to peer down into his life. His expression was puzzled and innocent, as though Shenbel had just presented him with a conundrum he couldn't fathom but was burning to discover the answer to.

"When did you come over here?" he asked irrelevantly.

Shenbel smiled. They hadn't exchanged much personal history in their debates. And he'd rather tell this boy something important. He was asking, even if he didn't know how to ask. And Shenbel owed him something, too, for the beer he'd brought in his book bag two or three times, that they'd sneaked off to the janitor's closet to drink so as not to get caught. And for the conversations, when Shenbel had ended up presenting his opinions about Oedipus' fate and Orestes' guilt—opinions he scarcely knew he had, but that had taken shape out of the inchoate—with such heat and enthusiasm he felt like a fool

afterwards. Now he'd have liked to be able to stand in front of a classroom, a pipe in his hand, walking up and down significantly, and tell this youth the history of his country and culture, and all that had happened since the war. New horrors they kept discovering all the time, things pushed down. But the events were a blur, even though the war was always with him, even when he wasn't thinking of it, filling the space below the surface of his consciousness and even his dreams, as though it were a flavor of himself. If extinct races rioted in his blood, determining his jaw and his very teeth, they rarely spoke to him, though they might speak through everything he did. If all of history had created him, he was still merely a small quivering set of experiences—like an animal. At the moment he was little more than his tooth.

But he had to say something, if only to get past it.

"Many years now I came." He could remember the coming, the boat sailing for days over the ocean that would divide his life in two forever. "It was very strange when I first came."

He leaned his jaw on his hand, shifted to the other side, found it impossible to sit still; he stood up, his head seized with giddiness. For a moment he was afraid of losing his balance. "I didn't know where I was. And everything I knew was gone. . . ."

He walked to the doorway and peered down the hall. He had a whole building to sweep and straighten, and it was waiting, endlessly large and dark. When he switched on the lights in the rooms, he sometimes had the impression something secretive and furtive had been acting in the dark while he was away. Perhaps a kind of residue of ignorance that waited in the shadows, trying to maintain its territory, or even take over. He thought of spending the night walking back and forth, trying to walk out the pain. That way he could be alone with it. He could groan as he pleased and no one would hear him. But not yet. He walked back inside the classroom and sat down again.

Ketchum had taken him back. And in spite of himself he was remembering. Chicago, the first time. "Where was I?" he said. "Ah, yes. I didn't know how I could continue my life."

"You'd better see about that tooth," Ketchum said. "Why don't you just go home?"

"Impossible," he mumbled. "No, I can't do that. All of it's got to be done tonight. Otherwise . . ." He drew an imaginary knife across his throat.

"They're not going to fire you because you're sick."

It was too much trouble to explain. They would fire him; he'd felt that intention at his back for weeks. From week to week he'd waited for the axe, not knowing what had spared him. They knew he was lying about his age even if they couldn't check the records. He'd lied about his age when he got the job. Now he had to keep working; there was no choice, even though he was already past retirement. At the college they'd have been willing to pay him his miserable wage forever if they hadn't wanted his house. The only employees they could keep on the grounds crew were simpletons and degenerates. This he knew. It always took three men to change a light bulb.

"Come on," Ketchum said, taking him by the arm. "You need to get home and lie down. You look terrible."

The familiarity of the touch surprised him. The only firmness he could find. He felt boneless and tentative, as though he had to push his way into the next minute. His surroundings seemed to drop back like theater sets, leaving him on a darkened stage with only a spear of pain to hang onto and an arm that held some obscure extension. "It was very strange," he was saying, going back to the streets of Chicago.

"You see, it's like this." He wanted to make a philosophical statement about how you depended on things being in a certain place, like the ground under your feet, the sun in your eyes, and the smell of rain in the air. The language that spoke of these things: the taste of a good goulash, a plate of goose with a good red wine. And a country with its history, like a house over your head. Real things. But his tongue was a slab of meat.

He was aware that they had left Hite Hall and were moving somewhere in the stereo-filled darkness of the campus. The kid was saying something, but the throbbing of the tooth drowned out the words.

"You're really afraid they'll fire you?" Ketchum asked again.

Couldn't believe it, eh? Wait, he wanted to say, you haven't

read enough. Just keep going down, one circle at a time. The fear was with him every day. He could see Koontz walking into the building, waving to students as he crossed the campus, coming upon him while he ate his bologna sandwich, and saying, "Rudy, we've got a little problem."

"You see it's my house; they want my house."

"I don't understand." Ketchum was steering. He was a help, this kid. Not a Boy Scout or a kiss-granny. But not in the world yet.

"To build a new gym." They wanted to buy his shack to tear it down, let him go where he would. "Things are moving forward," he could hear Koontz saying. "We've got a bright future. Can't let one old falling down . . ." there he'd paused, not wanting to say the word, "just one little jot of land there stand in the way of progress. We're offering you better than you can get on the open market, Rudy boy," Koontz had said, with another pat on the shoulder.

Money in his hand but nothing to buy, that is, nothing he could pay for. The place was worthless except for the land. "Maybe I will sell, Mr. Koontz," he told him. "After I retire. Four more years now."

"Think about it Rudy," Koontz said. "If I were you, I'd take the money and run." And Shenbel heard the warning in his voice. Let them fire him—Koontz must have figured it out by now—and they had him.

"But if they tried to fire you, you could fight it," Ketchum said.

"Fight? What have I got to fight about? To fight takes money." Even if you had a chance to win, he might have added. Always, there is something to be lost, long before it's only your life you have left to lose. And when everything has been blown to the winds, you know this.

"Fire you?" Ketchum said. "How long have you worked here?"

"I don't know. Twenty-five years maybe—what's the difference?"

He tried to look into Ketchum's face. The eyes caught a gleam from the streetlight and held a certain fierceness in the

dark. Youth: he tried to remember. In its way full, yet empty. With a sense of wrong. Immediate. Such wonderful rage. And he'd had such a wonderful opportunity to exercise it while they were running all over his country, making it into a graveyard. It had taken all of his youth, even more, just to keep up. And when you'd kept your life around for a while, stuffing it full, more and more scraps, pushing it this way, that way into the shapes of choice, what did you gain? They had reached the street at the edge of the campus.

"A lot of rooms swept, and trash picked up," he said, mainly to himself. "Maybe you just, how you say, maybe you wonder what you got done, maybe only getting from one day to the next."

"You know what the kids around here call you?" Ketchum asked.

"Call me?"

"A nickname," he said. "Plato—that's what they call you."

"They're making fun," Shenbel said.

"They've got nicknames for everybody," he said.

Shenbel laughed, then held his jaw. Picking up trash. Gathering scraps from the blackboard. He could barely feel his legs walking as he threatened to fall into some space between pain and laughter, some space where absurdity would fill him like ether and he'd float above the void. "Do you see where this is leading?" he tried to say. "A toothache will shove me out the door and into the street. Right on the sidewalk." He laughed again. It was killing him.

He had marveled once that the extraction of a front tooth caused the favorite mistress of Louis XIV to fall from favor. How did he know this?

Ketchum said, "We'll be there in a minute."

Then they were on the porch. Key? No key. There was nothing to steal. Take it all and you'd give him a little more room to move around in. Inside, he sank heavily onto the divan where he slept nights. The kid set a pillow behind him. No, he didn't want to sleep. Impossible. Look, he told him, on the shelf in the kitchen. He tried to point. The bottle and a glass. Hunt around, glasses in the sink somewhere. He always used them all before

he washed them. Have a shot. Good, thanks, you're a . . . The boy bent to remove his shoes, a blessing. How good the toes felt in their freedom, like pigs let out of the pen. If only he could give them a little appreciation. . . . The boy put a glass on the table. He kept nodding as the boy poured, "Good, more. That's good. Very good." He sipped it slowly, moved the whiskey around in his mouth. Some for the tooth, the rest for him. He dared not drink too fast, make himself sick. Put the tooth to sleep and then himself. Two in the same cradle, rock-a-baby baby. No, he didn't have a dentist. Years ago he'd had an old man with a soft voice and gentle fingers, but after he died, he'd let his teeth do for themselves. He didn't know the name of one.

He felt himself sinking toward a tormented oblivion, the props pulled out from under him. He almost wished he were back sweeping floors, at least doing something, trying to push his tooth away from himself. Fighting it back like an enemy. Before it landed him on his back, stripped him of everything, rooted him moaning in the second. He concentrated on the whiskey, the sensation of it going down, searing and warming, lifting his head away, but unfortunately taking the throbbing with it. Like lightning through the clouds, forking through his skull. He tried to speak.

"How you say? The Colossus of Rhodes. In the sea they discovered a foot." His tongue was sliding around his teeth and he heard an alien sound in his ears. He could not tell if the sounds were coming out in words.

The kid was hunting around for something.

"Have you got a telephone directory?"

He tried to remember about the telephone. No, not a telephone. This foot of the great statue, it could only give you an idea. "Never shall we know his fabulous head."

"Wait a minute," Ketchum said. "I'll be right back—I'll go get some pain killers."

He heard the door slam. Sometimes a foot is all you get. Even for history. So let it go. He'd have to offer Ketchum something else. Even from his own life, only scraps. A photograph, a lock of hair. Sometimes that's all you get to carry away to the

new life. In Chicago he was a baker. They taught him that, his cousins. Four in the morning he started mixing up the bread, letting it rise, putting the pans in the ovens, till the whole shop was filled with the good smell of yeasty dough and baking bread. All the women out in front, picking out the loaves for the customers, wrapping them up, laughing, talking. Till they fled the bakery into marriage. Then one day, in walks Anna. They need a woman; she needs a job. His cousin Emil happens to be there, on his way to becoming a hotshot accountant, meanwhile the one who does their books and their taxes. They both look at her: hennaed hair piled up on her head, a face like a heart, with a little cleft chin at the delicate point, a wonderful high color on her cheeks. And eyes that would melt an ice floe.

He nudged Emil. "She's mine," he said.

"Like hell," Emil said. And from that moment they were rivals.

The men were around her like bees and wasps. It was a wonder she got any sleep, though maybe she went without. Some days she stood and yawned all morning over the bread. Emil gave her a whirl. He was a man who loved a good time, laughed and joked, always had a hand on a woman's waist. Young or old, it didn't matter: he could sweet-talk them all. He was a good dancer, could whip out all the fancy steps. And for Anna, he'd do anything. Restaurants, night spots. Shenbel couldn't compete, not with his salary. Once he managed to lure Anna off to a dance, but then Emil showed up and kept cutting in. Shenbel was furious. "Get outta here, will you?"

"Or you'll do what?" Emil said. "How about if we fight for her?"

"Fight?" It was ridiculous.

"Yeah, like this." And Emil caught him first in the shoulder and then right in the uppers.

While he lay back with a mouthful of blood and loosened teeth, Emil grabbed Anna, who made no protest, and disappeared.

But Anna didn't marry Emil either; she ran off with a beer distributor who delivered to the delicatessen next door. So too bad, Emil.

Shenbel was aware that the kid had come back and was standing over him with a glass of water.

"Take this," he said, putting a tablet in his hand. "It will relieve the pain. Don't drink any more whiskey. You've got an appointment in the morning first thing."

Let me tell you, he wanted to say. It's a stupidity. He wanted to offer Ketchum something, but it was hard to make sense out of things. He could go back to the day when he came to open up and faced a padlocked door. The bakery impounded by the IRS. Emil was outraged. *Just picking on the little guy, that's all.* But you paid the taxes every year. Ah, but two sets of books, one for the business and one for the IRS. *It's not like you're cheating anybody—it's taking care of your own.* Hell, I can spend it better than those jokers. Look at the waste. And was that for Anna too? Who knows? For a while, the tax people thought Shenbel was in on it too. But what did it matter? He was the only one left, all the other cousins had gone on to marriage, to college, to a new horizon. If Emil had to pay a big fine to stay out of prison, he was still an accountant.

"Too bad, Emil. Beer over bread." But at least an accountant can support a wife. He can keep better books. You see, he wanted to tell Ketchum. But he couldn't get his head straight. He could see Emil vividly, the thin line of dark mustache above the fleshy lip, ready for a night on the town, Emil standing there above his toothache. And Anna, heart-shaped face pulling away from his life, from their lives. Only the memento of a tooth that remained loose in his jaw, sensitive to heat and cold, now inflamed. "All in my tooth," he said. "All the circles."

He stood up unsteadily and walked up and down. "It's taking my head off."

"In the morning, I'll take you," Ketchum reassured him. "Sharon's got her car."

Ketchum's face wavered in front of him. Tomorrow. A shore to be reached, like Odysseus swimming for the rocks. Or Dante trying to see the stars.

Then suddenly something broke and he felt a taste in his mouth, liquid and vile. All that had gone rotten, festering at the root, pushing him almost past endurance, now subsiding and

leaving its accumulated foulness. He grabbed a piece of newspaper and spat. He felt nauseous. A tremor ran through him, followed by another, till his whole body was trembling violently.

He sank down again, wrung out and exhausted. "It's just a chill," he said, as Ketchum put a blanket around him. He could feel the sweat standing on his forehead. "Oh boy," he said. "Oh boy." But the pressure was gone.

He closed his eyes for a moment and felt himself leaning toward that dim time when the tooth would become a neutral thing no longer connected with his head. It would go. Rotten, festering in the service of his life, which he would eventually lose as well. "My house you can have, see," he said. "Everything—it all goes." His head was still a whirlwind inside. He couldn't remember anything he'd been saying—maybe only nonsense, all the sense there was in a toothache. Not much to offer. It was so much sound in his ears. But now, at least, he was no longer haunted by Emil's face, or Anna's, or even Koontz's, and the pain had subsided.

"Is it any better?"

Shenbel tried to focus his gaze. Again, the boy's face. The clear eye, looking past the puzzle of innocence, trying to peer down into his life. A slight lift to the corner of the mouth, not really a smile. The cheek still soft, the whole face unformed, not yet pulled this way and that by choices. But leaning over him, moving toward him, it seemed to offer something he might take with him just now into a blessed moment of peace.

In the Wilderness

So Andy had got himself a woman, the old rascal. An interesting moment in the life of man—now let the comedy unreel. As he worked on the heating system in the mobile home that up till now had housed Andy Torgasson's solitary pursuits, Daniel amused himself, giving play to speculation: What made a man on the edge of his dotage suddenly discover Woman? And believe he had thereby entered Paradise? She was really something, so Daniel had heard from the old horse himself in tones of admiration mixed with wonder. Beautiful, Andy told him. And what a great sense of humor; he loved her laugh. The letters she wrote! He had them tacked up all over the wall so that he could see them the last thing before he turned out the light and the first thing when he got up in the morning. Daniel had gone far enough in the direction of curiosity to determine that this was true. The whole wall was covered with letters that looked to be closely written and extensive. Also pinned up on the wall near the door was a nude drawn by one of the fellows who worked for the Park Service. A strange young fellow who spent all his spare time drawing nudes and handing them around to anybody around the camp who happened to be in short supply. Daniel had been offered one himself. These revealed a considerable skill in drawing, a keen attention to the appeal of the female body, but the faces, with their accentuated cheekbones, slanted eyes and pointed teeth might disturb the courage of a man. Not Andy apparently, caught as he was in the undertow of enthusiasm. Though why he had pinned it up next to a wall full of love letters was a question.

To cap off the list of virtues Andy had enumerated, his woman read books. Daniel ought to appreciate that. Ah! Naturally the

man couldn't keep this precious object to himself—he had to show her off. Would Daniel come to meet her? She was driving up that weekend, and for the occasion Andy was making a stew, his own special recipe, with wild turkey he had shot. A love offering, no doubt. Would Daniel come for supper?

Daniel couldn't make up his mind. He'd hemmed and hawed over the potential sacrifice. Society he'd let go of a chunk at a time during the course of his seventy-three years, and he wasn't sure he wanted any of it back. He tolerated the ranger in charge of the post, a born-again Christian, decent but tiresome, whose wife had once tried to lure him into sociability with the promise of chicken-noodle casserole and jello-marshmallow salad. He joked with the youngsters he worked with around the camp, and with the Mexicans, who spoke Spanish among themselves while he took in their lingo and relished a few choice comments. He exchanged pleasantries with Macfee, the patriarch of a clan, who owned all the land around that the government didn't and kept dominion with his store and gas station and corral of horses he rented out, and who had allowed Daniel to pitch his tent on a small scrap of it. Daniel had watched people come to play for a while at the edge of the wilderness, and finally, done in by the isolation, move on. He'd been around longer than anybody else, a fixture, an eccentric, who kept up an unbroken stream of banter. He babbled along for anyone willing to listen or for himself if he had no audience. It was all the same to him who came or went. Andy, who'd wandered in several months before as a volunteer for the Forest Service—like Daniel a man without home or ties—was the only one who'd set foot inside his tent. For Andy, he decided, he'd go to supper and see his woman.

For Andy was a curiosity: a rich man determined to be poor, owner and captain of a fishing boat with a seven-man crew, director of a cooperative of fishermen, an educated man to boot, and a public figure in his home town. One day, fed up with it all, he'd decided to sell his boat, and he left his house, with its row of expensive suits hanging in the closet and original art work on the walls. He walked the Appalachian Trail from Maine to Florida, losing eighty pounds along the

way, canoed the intercoastal waterway with a college kid who wanted adventure, did a stint on the crew of a tugboat on the Mississippi, and emerged from it all lean and hard, ready for a new life. When he spoke of the trips he'd made to New York to sell fish for the cooperative and of nights on the town when he'd lived like a bon vivant, when he spoke of the harshness of a life on the sea, it was all in the past. A decade or more ago now. He spoke of the relief it was to get out of all of that and roam the world, a free man. But now he spoke of the woman. "To think this is the first time I've been in love. That I might have gone to the grave without that experience. To miss it." He shook his head over the enormity. He was fifty-eight years old.

The next evening Daniel toiled up the hills on his bicycle. It was perhaps two miles to the forestry outpost, the conglomeration of mobile homes that sat exposed in their ugly utility—the government issue already falling apart—just above the entrance to the wilderness area. The light was disappearing behind the peaks of the Mogollons now that the sun had set, and he could tell it was approaching zero. The presage of snow hung in the air. He needed no weather forecast, he could smell it coming. Not for nothing his hawk's nose, his sharp eye. He was already prepared. Earlier that week he'd bicycled the fifty miles into Silver City for his provisions in case a blizzard came to block the pass by Mogollon Baldy. He could be snowed in for a month, for all he cared, holed up like a bear in its cave.

He leaned the bicycle against the porch and went in, his boots on the bare boards announcing his arrival. Andy opened the door for him. "So we managed to lure you out after all. Thought you might not make it."

"I've made it out in lots colder than this." He stepped into the overheated living room. "I see we got the heating fixed for you."

"Blasts you right out of the place, doesn't it? You're either freezing or in hell. I've got all the windows open."

"It's the wonder of anything made for the government, my friend. Either it quits on you or gives you twice what you bargained for. We'll have to send off for a new thermostat."

The woman was standing by the table, smiling, ready to

welcome the old curmudgeon Andy had been telling her about. Daniel tried to look at her without irony. She was a slender woman, not tall, with a face he found agreeable enough but certainly of no great beauty. She made no pretense in that direction: she wore no makeup, not even lipstick, which prejudiced him in her favor. Her mouth was generous, with some firmness in the chin. She did not look hungry, yet there was nothing to suggest that she had come from marriage or motherhood. Her dark eyes seemed to lead into a rich, secret sentience, as though she were not afraid of solitude. Where had she come from?

"This is Ruth."

She shook hands with him, while Andy towered over her with his large ruddy face and dark beard, like some knight errant ready to ride under her banner. Daniel didn't know whether to congratulate or pity him. He was a man who'd traveled the sea, hunted in Africa and Alaska, a dedicated wanderer, carrying all his life in a backpack, alone but not lonely, he maintained, for life itself was the great adventure, the mistress who possessed him and whom he followed, looking always to see what was around the corner. Till now—or so it appeared. Now Love had put its hooks into his hide and turned him into an idiot. If he could just see himself at this moment—an instructive moment, in Daniel's view—just see his face, open like a manual on youthful folly; just see the work of woman, the way she'd turned him roundabout and inside out. Daniel wanted to give her a wink. He knew what she was up to. She had a power; give her credit for that. And let old Andy square that with his pride. All his buried life rising to the surface, emerging like an ancient animal, but not one you could shoot. Well now, and what next? *He will abandon her.* The thought struck Daniel with the force of sudden knowledge.

"Welcome to these savage regions," Daniel said. "You'll be privileged to hear the music of coyotes all night long."

She laughed. "I grew up in Santa Rita actually," she said, "but I haven't been out here for a long time. I've been away."

He didn't ask her where; he disliked such questions himself. He took off his light parka and the sweatshirt under that, then

the thin pullover he wore beneath at layer three. He was now down to flannel and still too warm in the room. But the demands of society, such as it was, ruled against his underwear.

"Let me take that stuff," Andy said, and went to hang it in the closet. "Sit down wherever you like."

Wherever he liked included the straight-backed chairs at the table or the vinyl-covered sofa and matching chairs set around a cheap veneer coffee table against the wall at one end. Daniel noticed that the sheets that had covered the windows, decorated with indecent drawings by some of Andy's Alaskan friends, had been replaced by polka-dotted curtains.

"Smell that stew?" Andy said. "Doesn't it smell wonderful?"

"You're putting a great strain on my dietary habits," Daniel said. "It's been that long since I ate meat you'd think I was lying if I told you."

"We won't tell on you," Andy said. "It's mostly vegetables anyway. And wild turkey doesn't count. How about a glass of wine?" he said, taking a bottle from the shelf and searching for a corkscrew. "Ruth brought it up specially for the occasion."

Daniel shook his head. If he drank wine, who knew where things might end up? Wine fuddled the brain and danced with your intentions and was, in its way, nearly as bad as love. He'd done with trafficking in such things, for they complicated a man's life, deterred him from purpose, if he had a purpose. He was beginning to wonder about that.

"Come on," Andy said, opening the bottle. "And you'll get to drink it out of our special heirloom crystal." He poured the wine into three dime-store tumblers and handed him one. "We've got to drink to the occasion." He held up the glass in Ruth's direction as though to toast her.

"See," Daniel appealed to the woman, "ever since I opened the door I've had nothing but temptation put my way. You see what coming to supper can do?" He sat holding the glass like a strange object.

"A glass of wine wouldn't corrupt *you*," Andy insisted.

"Oh, you don't know." He shook his head doubtfully. "Think of those Hindu sages. Out there in the woods practicing piety for eons and eons. Then along comes a pretty woman," he

said, looking significantly at Ruth, "and all those vows and all that spiritual capital is shot to hell in a single instant of desire."

The woman laughed. Andy was right; she had a nice laugh. He said he loved to make her laugh. Daniel supposed it was what a man could do for a woman, once all his pieties had slipped away and he'd lifted his head to look at the wreckage.

"Besides," Andy said, "after tonight you can go back to your tent and practice—what's the word—austerities, the whole kit and caboodle, as much as you please. Anyway, I thought those were reserved for the British during wartime."

He knew Andy was putting him on, for he, too, had read books. When you saw a silent bearded man in the public library, alone but not lonely (he will abandon her), holding a book and sitting straight in a chair as though he were not accustomed either to the chair or the book in his hands, you could hazard a guess it was such a one as he or Andy come down from the hills for a moment of communion with the monuments of intellect. Though he himself had given up the public library, probably for the duration. He'd read too many books as it was, and it wasn't clear he'd done himself any favors.

"The Hindus were on to it long before the Brits," Daniel assured him. "That's why the Brits conquered them. You might think it was for power and money and land but you're mistaken—it was all those rishis out in the woods practicing piety and putting off temptation. All those forty million Vedas. The Brits had to have some of it. Along with the cooking. Seeing as how they know only to boil things. Very spiritual, those Brits." He could babble on like this indefinitely. People found it amusing, never knowing when to take him seriously, and it gave him a reputation for idiosyncrasy. Andy and his woman let him go on; he was their pet for the evening. Why not? He was enjoying himself.

"Simplify, simplify, simplify," he said, out of one of the books he had read long ago (for a time his own sacred text). A notion that had brought him to these regions nearly forty years ago, ready to shake off the fetters of mind and spirit, free the inner man, make his life bear fruit and flower.

Andy was setting bowls of stew on the table. From across the room, the aroma teased at him and pulled him toward it. His stomach growled. After all this time the old animal still lurked, ready to surface. It was enough to sorely vex a man. The woman reached into the oven and pulled out a pan of biscuits and started to arrange them on a plate. Deftly, with a sure touch. She'd made them no doubt, and very likely she had a history of baking biscuits. He pictured her with her hands white with flour.

Though he hadn't come to any resolution about it, Daniel took a swallow of the wine. The flavor filled his mouth, fruity and somewhat dry. He held the glass up to the light and caught the ruby gleam and drank again. You made wine by corrupting the grape, whereas with water, there you looked for purity. He felt his head rise slightly from its moorings. Andy looked at him approvingly. Daniel tried to see himself at this moment—ridiculous, no doubt. This was what society did to a man, dragged him away from himself, domesticated him, robbed him of his manhood. Perhaps his face was open too, a manual of unconscious sensuality and self-deceit. Whereas in the wilderness . . . But there, too, you found the old animal. He drank again.

"Wait'll you put down some of that stew," Andy said, setting out the cutlery. He was not behindhand in bragging about his cooking. He cooked with imagination, if you believed him, with invention, with a certain devil-may-care. He put the whole kitchen sink into an omelet: yesterday's leftovers and whatever struck his eye from the refrigerator became today's challenge to the stomach. He lavished in the prospects of a good meal. He announced for your benefit the menu for his daily fare and often as not would invite you to share it for the sake of admiration. Though it might be easier to brag about it if nobody ate it. Daniel had heard about these feasts. And heard Andy complain afterwards about the wretched manners of his guests. How they shoveled in the food and belched unashamedly and drank their beer and put their feet up on his coffee table and filled his ear with men's talk and coarse laughter. Barbarians, he called them.

He could go out on the trail with Spartan fare, but let him

come back to a good meal and a glass of wine. This was the point he maintained with Daniel. He'd cooked antelope and venison and could make a dish of bear meat that would melt on your tongue—most people didn't know how, he was pleased to tell you. He'd eaten shrimp up in Alaska till it was coming out of his ears, and salmon, even walrus and seal. He had a taste for sea turtle and conch. He'd eaten his way around half the world with the same enthusiasm he brought to everything else. He was a man not to sit idle, this man hot for experience. Daniel had to give him his due. He was whistling as he set the plates. For now he had a woman too. Someone to cook for.

Daniel went to wash up and then sat down at the end of the table where Andy and Ruth already sat across from one another. A candle had been lit. Andy always ate his evening meal by candlelight. Just because a man lived alone didn't mean he had to live like a barbarian. Now he held up his glass. "Here's to the occasion," he said. "A great occasion. Sitting here with the two of you, having a good conversation and a good meal."

He spoke as though from a hunger he never knew he had, then took Ruth's hand and looked into her face. He was caught all right—it didn't take a wise man to figure that one out—caught in the tangle of her gaze and smile. But he would abandon her all the same. Daniel could not tell how he had arrived at this certainty. He marveled how knowledge could embarrass you in its uneasy presence or in its appalling lack. How long he had waited to be struck by some utter certainty, the flash that might tell him where to set his foot. Now all he could do was look at Andy from the vantage point of irony, and at the woman too, while the wine raised him up.

"Well," Andy said, with a face full of emotion. "Well." He broke his gaze, put his spoon into the stew, held it poised for a moment to let it cool, then tasted it with a cook's critical inquiry. Daniel hesitated, then dipped in his spoon at the edge of the bowl. Perhaps he could leave the meat to one side. But the meat had cooked with everything else. He saw himself in the lapse of resolution: habit at bay. Andy was watching him as he put the first bite into his mouth, either unsure whether he would eat it or impatient for a word of judgment.

"Wonderful, isn't it?" Andy said, turning his gaze back to the woman as into an enchanted mirror.

Daniel approached the food warily. In spite of himself, he was being drawn in. What had all the years meant? His nostrils quivered from the flavors and he felt a drop of moisture form inside. He took a biscuit from the plate Ruth offered, helped himself to butter.

"What do you eat?" she asked him.

"Potatoes and nuts," he told her.

"Just potatoes and nuts?"

"That's all. I've worked it down to that. I've got my protein and my carbohydrates."

"Doesn't sound all that healthy to me," Andy said. "I guess it can't be hurting you though. I've seen you on that bicycle."

"Never had a sick day," Daniel bragged. And yet it wasn't enough. Simplify, simplify, simplify. He'd let it all go: wife and sons, the neat but undistinguished home under the maple trees. He'd always known somehow that he wasn't on the right track, suspected it even before he made it through law school. But doggedly he'd done it; even then he was a glutton for discipline. Duty. But he never took the bar. He'd worked for peanuts in a law office, mostly reading contracts, while his sons came and his wife grew restive. The year he'd bicycled out West for his vacation, he'd found his way up to the wilderness and never gone back. Simplify. He'd worked for the Park Service and for the Forest Service, switching back and forth as he got fed up with one, then the other. He'd lived first in a trailer with his books and his solitude, but even that suggested too much of what he'd tried to escape. The past dozen years or more he'd lived in a tent, even during the coldest winters. He drew his Social Security and worked for a token. He'd stripped his life down to the bones.

But it wasn't enough. He'd just about let go of the potatoes. "Perhaps I'll go to fasting," he said, almost to himself. Surely, surely there was something more—even yet after all these years. Something to justify the sacrifice. "If this were all . . ." he murmured. He had fancied himself growing light as air, like a bit of milkweed ready to sail over the hills. But now smell and taste

worked on him, and if he dropped back into heaviness, what would his life have meant?

"Let me give you some more stew," Andy said, taking his plate.

"No," he said. "That was mighty good."

"Just a little," Andy insisted. "Can't stand having it for breakfast." Big and cheerful, a regular cornucopia of enthusiasms. A man to meet life on her own terms and enjoy himself. The bowl he set down was more than half full, and Ruth passed Daniel the biscuits. They were intent on feeding him, filling him full, for now and hereafter. The old animal craving food, the bottomless maw; they would come to fill it again and again. But his stomach felt bloated. He was filled with disgust, and he was afraid the wine would send him reeling if he stood up. He pushed back the chair. He wanted to leave, but it would be insulting to the woman. Enter a door and you had to worry about such nonsense.

"If I had to choose just one thing to live on," the woman said, "I think it would be nuts."

"She brought up a bunch of pecans when she came," Andy said, as though everything she did had to be wonderful.

Daniel looked at him. "I'll bet they were the small ones," he said, for the sake of perspective. If nothing else, he was a connoisseur of nuts. "Let me see them."

She brought the bowl with the pecans. He looked at the dry papery shells. Chances were, half of them were desiccated inside. He could see tiny holes where something had bored into them.

"I've got some in the tent," he told her, "the meat all nice and firm. You practically never get a bad one." On sudden impulse he said, "I'll give you some."

"I'd like that," she said appreciatively. "Only won't you . . ."

"I've got twenty pounds of them." If nothing else, he was rich in pecans. "I'll even shell them for you." The words slipped out before he could tell what he had betrayed. The wine had confused him.

"That's goddam fine of you," Andy said, clearly meaning it.

Daniel shrugged. A sort of idiocy prevailed, and he was

being infected. It was like being sober in a roomful of drunks. For Andy, nothing could be less than splendid, gleaming as it did in the light of his rapture. Replete and satisfied, he sat entwining Ruth's fingers between his own. "Coffee," she said, leaning over, just touching his cheek with the tips of her fingers. It must have been a delicate touch, just the trace of a sensation. Sometimes, Daniel observed, she would reach over and touch Andy on the arm as he spoke, and he would pause for an instant to acknowledge the gift. Now, though, he tore himself away. "It's what they do," he complained to Daniel. "Turn us into slaves." Apparently there was no help for it. He got up to run water into the kettle and put it on the stove, took out the instant coffee and spooned it into three cups. Three instead of one. Ordinarily he would be doing the same thing by himself, alone but not lonely. When Daniel had gone to wash up, he noticed two sets of matching towels in the bathroom.

"It's snowing," Andy said.

It was the cue Daniel had been waiting for. "I'd better get back to the tent," he said, standing up. "I'll just get my things." He went to the closet in the small unused bedroom on the other side of the living room.

Andy stood waiting for him.

"Stay the night," he said. "It must be ten below out there."

Daniel slipped on the pullover, then the sweatshirt. "I'll be plenty warm."

"It's two miles down that road in below-zero weather," Andy said. "I've got a perfectly good sleeping bag right there in that little bedroom."

"I'll be just fine," Daniel insisted. "I've been through every kind of weather known to man."

"And the wind's blowing too," Ruth added.

"Probably twenty-five below with the wind chill. I'm not going to let you go out in that," Andy said.

"Please stay," Ruth said.

A kind of intimacy in her tone caught him in his already vulnerable state. He wouldn't allow himself to stay. A drink, a meal of stew, and now a bed for the night. He had to toe the

line before he felt something slip and give way, the discipline that had governed his life, created his very sense of order. But Andy had seized the zipper of his jacket and pulled it down, and was tugging at one of the sleeves. "You can go home in the morning," he said firmly. "You don't even have to have breakfast if you don't want it. But I'm not going to let you go out in that."

At that moment he saw himself an old man, small in stature, white hair as fine as the filaments of spiders' webs, old limbs that had refused to yield to frailty. He stood, suddenly helpless in the face of a great confusion. The woman on the sidelines, obviously against him, seemed the greater threat even than the man with his strong hands pulling at his jacket.

"All right," he said. "I guess that's what you get when you're invited for dinner. You're so popular nobody'll let you leave."

They laughed.

They spent a little time recalling various winters in various places and went to bed shortly after. Daniel lay in Andy's sleeping bag, hearing the sound of voices and light laughter as Andy and his woman got ready for bed. He lay in the dark trying to forget himself. To forget the body that would never be satisfied. He was too warm. In his own lair he might have shivered, but at least there he held the body down to a minimum. Sheltered it with his battered tent and wrapped it up in his ancient sleeping bag. And escaped it finally in sleep. But if he could have stepped outside his own hide for a moment, stepped into ecstasy . . . It was all he asked. If Andy could get it by looking into a woman's eyes . . . that intensity . . . But if he did, only that would satisfy him, nothing less. And when you had to come back . . . Maybe that's what had taken him around half the world following his mistress into the next moment—to escape the coming back. It must create a great unsureness in a man to pause in one spot for very long.

He woke at dawn after a dream of a settler's cabin he'd once found. He'd held up an iron skillet from the ruins but had put it back, as indeed he'd done when he found it. In the dream, he had the sense that someone else had been there and just left, but he didn't know who.

It had stopped snowing and the sky was a clear brilliant blue. He had to walk the bicycle back to his tent over the uncleared road. The air felt good on his face. He looked out over the mountains he'd been seeing for forty years now, wave after wave of peaks that disappeared into the distance, the red bluffs rising up where the river had cut the gorge. The peaks were white now except for that raw rock. He'd been over miles and miles of that territory, most of it on foot. If you went far enough in, it was a wild place still. The moment a man's back was turned, the animal life took over.

That afternoon he came back to Andy's place. He'd made a promise after all, and something still puzzled him. Andy was gone, out shoveling the snow from the bridges. Nobody would be coming in for a week, not till the snowplows cleared off the road, but Andy was not a man to sit idle. Had to use up his energy, he said, use himself up or he was a horror to live with.

The woman was baking bread. In the warmth of the room, she stood kneading the dough, which yielded a pleasant fragrance. She had good, strong hands with big knuckles, and her kneading fell into a rhythm as she folded and pressed the dough. She shook back her hair once when it fell across her forehead and then nudged it into place with her upper arm. Daniel sat at the table watching as she worked, cracking nuts, carrying on the way he usually did.

"Well, I've always been suspicious of those Eastern religions anyway," he said. "At least with Christianity I can tell what's heading down the path and dive out of the way if I need to."

He looked to see if she was offended, but she merely smiled.

"Out in the wilderness," he went on, "at least you can let some things go." Even if you'd betrayed something, did it mean you never got it back? Not even a glimpse?

She loved the wilderness, she told him. She'd grown up so close to it, but hadn't really explored this part of the country. It was only now she'd made a beginning, coming out. She was grateful to have met Andy, who knew so much, who had such feeling for all the life in the woods. Daniel told her about a couple of trails she could take when she came back in the

spring. (He wouldn't think any more about Andy abandoning her.) Told her where she could find the elk herd and what it was like down in Little Bear Canyon. She could find watercress there. There was a little pool about a quarter mile down from the camp, maybe Andy had already told her about it, where there was a hot spring damned up so you could bathe in it. He told her where she could look for potsherds; there were Indian mounds all over the place. He himself had discovered an Apache burying ground he'd never revealed the location of to anyone—didn't want the graves to be disturbed. And once he'd come across the remains of an old settler's cabin. He'd picked up a skillet and some old square nails. Nobody knew about that either.

Her eyes shone with eagerness. He thought of the meal they had eaten together and of the room when it would be filled with the smell of baking bread. He'd have been glad to toast her with a glass of wine. Meanwhile he cracked nuts and extracted the beautiful, whole nutmeats until he had filled a sizable bowl. It was the best he could do by way of an offering.

The Old Hotel

I

If you found your way out to the old hotel in the years following the Korean War, leaving the blacktop north of Deming and churning up dust for miles on the narrow dirt road that crossed the range, you'd have wondered that anybody still inhabited the place. It looked abandoned, like the shell of an older, more extravagant life. By then one side of the porch that swept the whole front end had broken off, and the columns were split as though they'd been struck by lightning. An effort had been made to give the exterior a new face, but the boards had soaked up the paint, eating up money and will and enthusiasm, till finally you could see the line along the side where the effort had been abandoned halfway down. It was an attempt to catch things before they hit the downside forever, but it was all patchwork, and no amount of it could turn things around. The whole place was sagging under the burden of weather and time, so that if you went inside, you'd have expected every door to hang crooked in its frame.

If you came looking for Jack Whedon, the owner, chances are he was off somewhere "looking after his interests," as he put it, leaving the management to his wife, Penny, who kept things going in her own fashion, and to their daughter, Jewel, who had to grow up there. Jack had made a deal with old Jesse Harris, who'd have run things into the ground with his drinking alone if two wars and a change of style hadn't sent away his clientele.

"Put some arm and back into the place and you've got yourself a gold mine." The old man had brought him back to Dem-

ing and was treating him to a few drinks after showing him around the place. "Why you could make it into the showplace of the county. That hotel made a fortune in its heyday. On account of the springs. Folks all crippled up with arthritis and rheumatism walking away sprightly as a roadrunner." And now that the latest conflict was over and that great general was in the White House and the Communists were cleaned out of the government, the days of glory were coming back. Maybe Jack could turn the place into a fancy dude ranch. "What I wouldn't give to be young again," the old man said, "and watch the good times roll."

Jack took it all in, whiskey breath in his ear, as the old man leaned toward him and tapped the counter for emphasis. Jack had come from managing a restaurant and then a so-called nightclub, where the ranch hands came to drink and dance, but he didn't have much of a head for details and had allowed himself to be overcharged by the wholesalers and cheated by the help. At the moment he was standing at the lag end of opportunity, looking for an opening for his talents. He was intrigued with what he could do with a hotel in the middle of the desert: the great dining room and parlor across the front, the two extensive wings with balconied rooms that faced one another across the mesquite. A windmill to generate electricity and a well for water. An old stables—they'd even kept a milk cow—and sheds for the chickens. All of it watered into existence by the springs that bubbled up from deep in the rocky ground and fed the bathing pool. There was something grandiose in the isolation of the spot, the cactus-studded landscape stretching away to the blue imprint of mountains in one direction and twenty-five miles to the nearest town in the other.

"I'm thinking of taking over the Hot Springs Hotel," he told his wife that night. "Old Jesse is going to let me buy in."

"Let you! Why he's been trying to unload that white elephant for as long as I can remember."

"It looks pretty run-down," he admitted. "But it's all solid underneath." It would be a challenge to scrape away the old paint, replace the rotten boards, tackle the hotel as if she were a

ship that would take dominion of the desert once more. Think of what it would do for the county. Bring people out there to drink and dance, not only the townspeople but the folks down in the valley. Give them something to do on weekends. Then when he and Penny got a little cash, they could really put the place in shape. They'd go after summer people and guide hunters in the fall.

"And work ourselves into old age and bankruptcy, whichever comes first. It would take a fortune."

"You've got to see the place to appreciate it. I know—at first I wouldn't have believed it myself." Besides they didn't have to do everything at once. The place had a history in those old boards. There was local color; there was charm.

For a moment Penny Whedon was taken aback by this excess of imagination, for in the past Jack had never entertained more than the notion of stepping into a good spot and making a killing the next instant. But now that she'd nursed him through a couple of failures in which circumstances and other people seemed less to blame than his own stupidity and flaccid amiability, she wasn't about to give him any margin. Finally, after he'd painted the prospects in colors that came gleaming from the liquor bottles in the mirror at the back of the bar through a haze of whiskey and self-deception, she laced into him with such scorn he felt the hollowness of a man who hasn't eaten for three days. The next morning he went to the lawyer's office, where the old man, hardly able to believe his luck, sat in a quiver till Jack signed the contract.

"What the hell," Jack said. "Opportunity, that old bitch, don't come but once."

Although she'd been dead set against the idea, when the time came Penny packed up their things and acted as if she were moving up in the world. Whether or not she believed it, she worked like a demon along with Jack, running back and forth to town for paint and wallpaper and a hundred other items, arranging for loans and credit, hiring the help and getting a good write-up in the local paper, with pictures on the front page.

They turned the old dining room into a restaurant; that is,

they added a few tables and printed up a menu. Then they cleared most of the furniture out of the parlor and put a bar at one end under a large gilt-edged mirror and called the rest a dance floor. On weekends they brought in a three-piece band—saxophone, violin, and piano—which played with more energy than talent. But the place was lively. Folks came from town, from the valley, even a few from fifty miles away. It was a novelty, the old hotel. People had known about it long enough to have forgotten about it. Teddy Roosevelt had lodged there, and one of the deer heads hanging in the dining room was attributed to his prowess. Even a few tourists came to spend a night in one of the four rooms Jack had managed to refurbish.

But when the summer ended, they were deeper in debt than ever. The circle of reputation was still too narrow, too limited, to appeal to more than casual curiosity. The hotel was too far off the beaten track to draw much of anybody during the week. And weekends were unpredictable. There were bars enough for the young bucks who wanted to get drunk and pick a fight, lodgings enough for tourists, resorts enough for a chosen clientele. No one came any longer for the healing powers of the springs.

By the time Jack let the regular help go and faced a winter of struggle as they tried to gather their resources for spring, he was ready to give up the place as a bad job. He was a man of brief enthusiasms and quick discouragement, and he'd known even as he signed the papers that he had taken on more than he could handle. He took a part-time job in the valley as a bartender, and rumor had it he was fooling around with a woman in town. But curiously, Penny worked harder than ever. She made the hotel her domain, hanging on, scraping by, clinging to the place for cold comfort. Perhaps now that she was in it, she couldn't let go or wouldn't because she'd always had a stubborn streak. At times she wanted to laugh: Jack was such small potatoes, thinking he could fool the future with his half-way measures. She could see through him all the way to his backbone, a man who could only think small, but enough for him to outswamp his talents. No wonder he was a disaster. It

would have taken a certain magnitude, a flourish to bring it off—the talent for risk, for adventure. And money. She could recognize the means even if she couldn't imagine the measures. Meanwhile she entertained her own schemes. Bad as things were, she couldn't wholly cut herself off from the sense of possibility. Suppose something should come their way; say a land developer passing through, a wealthy investor. Till then she honed the practical side of her nature to a fine edge. She put aside every cent she could, paying the creditors just enough to keep them at bay, scrimping on meals, piecing and patching. She stopped going to town unless it was necessary, for otherwise she'd have to take Jewel to the movies and buy her ice cream. From now on they'd do without.

At first Jewel had been delighted by the old hotel. She went through all the rooms, opening the doors with a wonderful thrill of imagined adventure, watching motes of dust float in the light that entered through the tattered curtains. She was certain to find a fortune in gold under one of the old beds, and lifted mattresses that had been raided by field mice for their nests and yanked open reluctant drawers. She looked for clues to an unsolved mystery such as she read about in the Nancy Drew books. But she turned up only a few stray hairpins and some fragments of yellowed newspaper. For a time she played over and over the records she found in the shelf of the Victrola in the parlor, listening to voices that sang hollowly of obsolete longings and dead loves. She tried the old piano, which had taken new felts and a tuning to bring its dead notes to life. During the summer there was the interest of seeing who'd come up the road and park in front. She could lie in bed and listen to the high sweet notes of the violin, rising above those of the sax and the old piano, and listen to the last words before the car doors slammed. But after a few weeks of that she lived only for the school bus that took her to the one-room school in the Mimbres Valley. During the winter blizzards she stared out the window at the snow and dreamed of running off to New Orleans and living on a riverboat, or to San Francisco and crossing the Golden Gate Bridge.

II

Sometimes at night Jewel was awakened by the howl of coyotes cutting through the indigo stillness across great distances. It was as though she'd heard their voices before, howling through her sleep, though she couldn't remember, and she wondered what they wanted, hurling their voices to the moon. Sometimes she imagined them coming in close, putting their noses to where people had walked and their ears to walls, listening to the breath of sleepers. And a shiver would go through her at the approach of their wildness. Sometimes, from the room next to hers, she heard human voices, but it was even harder to tell what they wanted. Jewel would try to remember how it was where she lived before, in town—the schoolyard where she played. But even when she came back to the town, she knew it had forgotten her, as though she'd been carried along by a river to another part of time and space. She wasn't sure where she lived; she floated somewhere between the voices of coyotes outside and the voices on the other side of the wall.

"When I married you, you said we'd be rich. And where is all that money? And all those good times? I had a better life during the war, all those boys wanting to buy a girl a drink and have some fun. And what have we got on our hands? A dead loss. I don't know why I don't pick up and go back to town, or away to somewhere with real human beings. I know about you—just leave me here to drudge while you cat around and have yourself a time."

"So that's what you were doing while I was overseas."

"What did you expect?"

Suppose her mother did leave. Then she'd be there alone. And when the coyotes howled again, Jewel heard a new note, one that went beyond any words she knew.

"All right," she heard her father protest, "let's just leave and go on back to town."

"What the hell would you do there?"

"Get a job."

“Who’d hire you after this? And how would I show my face in the street? How could I look anybody in the eye?”

Such nights succeeded those days that Penny found fault with everything, tongue-lashed anyone who crossed her path, so that even the cat did well to hide. And the outcome was always the same.

“Christ!” Jack would mutter, when he again reached the point where nothing he could say would make any difference, as he already knew. And Jewel would hear the springs complain as he turned over and took refuge in silence. She’d have been glad to go back to town herself, for she was the oldest child in school and had nobody to talk to except her teacher. Miss Blackburn gave her chores to do that made her feel important and brought her books from the public library and told her she could do the best lettering of anybody she knew. Jewel painted signs for her over the doors that said “Exit,” and “Walk, Do Not Run,” and wrote the day’s spelling words in colored chalks on the blackboard, inside a border of flowers. In one of the library books, she found poems she could memorize and learned to recite “The Wreck of the Hesperus” and “The Song of the Shirt.” After school, if she could escape from helping in the kitchen, she scouted the land beyond the hotel for arrowheads or drew pictures of the mountains or played some of her old pieces on the piano.

Without telling Penny, Jack put the hotel up for sale, but no buyer stepped forward. That done, he seemed absolved of responsibility. He spent less and less time there, going off to prospect for manganese and feldspar, or sitting with his cronies at the bar where he worked weekends. So that he wasn’t around when Henry Betts, a lawyer from Deming, came out one afternoon. He had a mission of some delicacy and was just as well pleased to find the wife instead of the husband.

When he had telephoned, she couldn’t figure out why he should come unless it was on the wings of some disaster Jack had perpetrated. He could have traded the hotel for some worthless mining claim or delivered them to a scheme that was bound to leave them worse off than before. More likely a secret debt was about to strangle them—back taxes or Jack’s liquor

bill. Or even worse: by this time he could have made some woman pregnant. Her fears raced over the groundwork created by suspicion while she prepared her face for sociability. Meanwhile the lawyer was taking his time, looking around with interest.

"I've heard about this place," he said affably, "but I never made it out here before this. My Daddy used to talk about it."

She invited him to sit down on the brocaded rosewood sofa that she'd had Jack restore to the parlor and that was her special pride.

"Lots of nice antiques you got here."

To keep herself from fidgeting, she offered him coffee, for she had some on the stove in the kitchen. When she'd done that, and they'd arranged themselves and were clearly waiting for whatever had brought them to this moment, the lawyer said, "I've come to tell you about a woman who needs a home, a special kind of home."

If he'd come looking for charity, they had none to spare, but she knew enough to keep quiet till he'd finished. Miss Viny Trilling, he went on to explain, came from a good family, had grown up like you and me, but when she came to be an adult, she'd taken her childhood with her and couldn't tell the difference between what was in her head and what was happening in the world. Or didn't want to, for at times she was as sensible as you and me and other times she was crazier than a coyote. Lately, she'd seen from the porch a man she claimed had visited her in a dream and promised to carry her away to the mountains and make her his wife and give her a child of her own. Nothing would dissuade her from this illusion. And sometimes she'd slip out of her room and go roaming the streets, even in her nightgown, looking for him. Her brothers were at a loss—there was nobody at home to take care of her. They wanted her to be in a place where she wouldn't cause embarrassment but would be well treated. And he named a sum for this purpose that Penny could scarcely believe.

She had a hard time hearing the rest: that Miss Trilling would have to have fresh strawberries with cream when they were in season and oranges in winter, the big, sweet navel oranges

from California. And there must be a feather quilt on her bed, and nobody must open her trunk but herself. Penny could only think how much she could put away and what it would take to hide it from Jack, who just then appeared, back from his latest foray into the hills, face grimed and his jeans and boots gray with dust.

"Got caught in a sandstorm," he said by way of greeting. He came forward, a slender man with a scraggly red mustache and an apologetic stoop to his shoulder, and shook the lawyer's hand.

"Go wash," Penny said. "You aren't civilized. And I won't have you on this sofa."

He gave a good-natured shrug and retreated. He went down to the springs, threw off his clothes and stepped into the pool. He let the heat close around him and the water lave his tired muscles. Like a caress it was as he floated. He closed his eyes and almost fell into a doze. For a moment all his troubles fell away, and he let himself drift into the pleasure of his fatigue, his body loosened from the pull of gravity. He allowed himself a certain luxury of sentiment, enlivened by the whiskey that had eased his homeward journey: things would work out. They'd go forward into the future. His girl would grow up and find her way in the world. Daddy's girl. He thought how she was growing toward the woman she was going to be, how the child and the woman were blending together. Sensation and feeling became a single glow he was melting into. Then the water became too hot for him to stay in any longer, and he emerged looking as though he'd just been boiled and peeled.

III

Actually the Whedons were visited by what at the time was a double stroke of fortune. Not long after they agreed to take in Viny Trilling, they received a letter from a certain Everett Ferril, who used to come to the hotel as a boy with his parents and had fond memories of the place. He had recently retired from his teaching position in a private school in Switzerland and

wanted to spend some months at the hotel writing his memoirs. He hoped the piano was in tune because he wished to devote time to his music. And he would like to hire a horse for long morning rides into the mountains.

They spent the next weeks preparing for the boarders. Mr. Ferril appeared first, a much younger man than they expected. Though he was impeccably dressed in suit and tie when he arrived, they didn't know what to think of him. He looked un-American, if they let themselves dwell on it, an unknown quantity, shaped by a life in a foreign place. A life that had left its marks and channels in his face as though he'd brooded over it but never resigned himself to it, and that gave him a look both worldly and unsatisfied. Something intense and barely subdued played under the surface like an electrical field that made his hair go awry and gave a spark like anger to his eyes. Which were everywhere, taking all in—the hotel and Jack and Penny herself. But Penny was not to be rattled. She didn't care what he was like or what he saw as long as he paid his bill and gave her a future. Then he stepped forward, kissed her hand, and gave her smile so full of charm that she was struck by the novelty and entirely won over.

"You're right welcome," she said.

By the time he was settled in, Viny arrived. Penny and Jack went with Henry Betts to meet her at the train station in Deming, where she arrived with her brother Frank. "Take good care of our Vinita," he said, as though he couldn't bear to part with her. "She's our most special girl."

When they arrived back at the hotel, Jewel had just come home from her last day at school and was waiting to meet yet another stranger. She was not yet used to the first and ducked around corners to avoid speaking to Mr. Ferril. He was quite a tall man and seemed to look down at her from a great distance. A very gallant man, her mother said, who cast a spell with his foreign culture and manners. He spoke both French and German, so that his speech held a different flavor from what she knew, spiced with foreign words and the names of cities Jewel recognized from the outdated globe in her classroom. She was so awed by him she'd laughed when he kissed her hand, and

was so embarrassed by that rudeness, she was perfectly tongue-tied in his presence. By contrast, her parents, whose speech and manners seemed suited only for a land of barren rocks where cattle foraged, didn't seem to care about the difference.

Viny Trilling was another matter. She was a child, newly born every second. When she looked at Jewel with unclouded eyes that seemed more violet than blue, a moment's terror overtook her, for her eyes seemed to draw Jewel into a territory that was both familiar and tantalizing, but one she dared not enter for long. She could hardly take her eyes from Viny's face: the pure brow, the unspoiled complexion without freckle or blemish, just the faintest touch of pink along the cheeks. She was like a china cup, but with a stubborn tilt to her head and a stubborn set to her jaw. She was twenty-eight years old.

"You can show her where her room is," Penny said, after Viny had offered a surprisingly strong, frank hand all around.

"I'll want to see the kitchen first," Viny said.

"Whatever you like," Penny said. "Jewel will show you everything."

She's used to having her way, Jewel thought enviously.

"I'll put away her things," Jack said.

"You be careful with that trunk," Viny said. "And mind you don't open it. It's got my things."

Jack required the help of Mr. Ferril to carry the large brass-bound trunk to her room.

"I traveled to Europe with one like that years ago," Mr. Ferril offered. "I didn't know anybody still used them."

"Break your back, don't they?" Jack said, glad to set it down. Meanwhile Jewel took Viny toward the kitchen.

"Where do you keep the dishes?" Viny wanted to know.

"In the dining room."

"That's what I want to see."

Jewel opened the china cabinet so that Viny could survey the stacks of plates and bowls and saucers. "I'll need a special bowl for my strawberries."

"I know one," Jewel said, and brought out a little china bowl with lavender flowers around the edges that she had often used herself, it was so light and elegant.

"Amaranths," Viny exclaimed. "The perfect thing."
"It's yours then."

And she smiled with such radiance Jewel had to look away.

During that spring she and Viny and Mr. Ferril were treated to strawberries and cream every morning for breakfast. Viny always took the longest to eat hers, saving one until the very last. They teased her about it—she only did it so that they could envy her and she could lord it over them. She'd laugh with pleasure, hold up the strawberry on her spoon for all to admire, put it in her mouth and close her eyes, shutting them out of her exquisite pleasure. Jewel envied her; yet she always ate hers right up. Viny the Hoarder, Jewel the Greedy, they called one another. And Mr. Ferril, what was he? What did they want to call him?

They hadn't thought, he went on so quietly while they teased each other and laughed. They never considered him part of the game, he was too . . . grown up. And they both had to look at him, as though they needed to discover more than how he ate his strawberries. Though he chatted and told anecdotes that made them double over with laughter, he seemed quite beyond them, as though he could, if he wanted, refer to some private store of superiority. He treated them all—Penny, Viny, and even Jewel—as if they were ladies, but quite impersonally, as if he adored them all and would have extended this courtesy to any woman, even if she stood before him in rags. He praised Penny's cooking, though it was of the meat-and-potatoes variety, mediocre and overdone. He went round the old hotel with a memory attached to every object and corner, piano and Victrola and porch and dining table. How extraordinary he could remember so much about all the mere objects of their daily existence. He told about former guests, whom he remembered in vivid detail and, it became clear, even as a boy, he could recognize human frailty and turn it to ridicule. Jewel liked his way of making fun of people, because he made fun of himself as well. With his presence, together with Viny's, the place grew lively, glowed with a life borrowed from somewhere beyond it.

But he never said much about his present circumstances. There was no mention of a wife or family, or a home he came

from. He'd grown up in Michigan, but had lived all his adult life abroad. He had a low opinion of the students he had taught; "rich men's brats," he called them, "like pieces of spoiled fruit." He didn't explain why he had left Switzerland or where, as a man in his forties, he might be going. "He must have money," Penny was fond of saying, implying that he also had everything else—good looks, nice clothes. And what was he doing here?

"Mr. Flight," Viny called him.

It was a peculiar summer. Just at the point where Jewel was about to close the door on her childhood, she was asked to live it all again. Penny had taken her aside. "You'll have a job this summer," she said. "And you'll be paid for it. Ten dollars a month in your bank account." She could buy clothes for the fall when she'd be going into town for school. Meanwhile she was to be a companion for Viny. Jewel readily agreed; she'd never had so much money before.

The summer was an invention, created from whatever fell to hand. When they discovered a litter of kittens in the shed, apparently abandoned, they fed them with eye droppers until they could eat on their own. They sewed little dresses and caps for them and made elaborate visits to one another and invented conversations for their babies. They explored the attic as well and took down tables and chairs to make a special house in one of the unused rooms. Sometimes at night Jewel slept with Viny and they lay awake late like girls at a slumber party. Though once Viny woke her up in the middle of the night moaning and crying out.

"What's the matter?" Jewel asked her. "Did you have a bad dream?"

"I'm the matter," Viny said, sitting up. "Why was I born?" she moaned, rocking back and forth. "Oh don't turn on the light, don't let me wake up." She sat blinking when Jewel did so, and rubbing her eyes. "Where will I go to find my love? He was here and then he was gone."

It was peculiar, her living in a dream that way, and Jewel wondered that she should have miseries like that when she hadn't a trouble in the world and didn't have to do anything she didn't want to. She could let each day go wherever she

wanted and do as she liked. She didn't have to cut up vegetables or help with the dishes, though mostly she shared whatever chores Jewel had to do.

What particularly took Jewel's fancy was the trunk of clothes Viny had brought with her, all old: cloche hats of velvet and stiff ones with broad brims; hats with plumes and bunches of feathers and rings of pearls and artificial flowers and veils. Dresses of *crêpe de chine* and taffeta and velvet, and scarves and shawls embroidered with peacocks and roses. Gowns that trailed the floor and silver shoes and beaded slippers. Her dress-up clothes.

Since Viny's arrival, Jewel looked forward with quickening interest to what the day would bring, as though each day were to be lived without the burden of the previous one. And time flowed without being time. It made her feel guilty somehow, like living off the fat of the land. If, now and then, she was seized by a moment of misgiving, she would go to the mirror to remind herself that she was growing up. The first thing she would buy was a bra. The summer would come to an end and she'd be ready.

"How do you like Viny?" Jack asked her one day, out of idle curiosity.

"She's okay," Jewel said with a shrug and immediately felt she'd betrayed her.

While they went their way, Mr. Ferril sat at the piano in the parlor, limbering up with scales, then filling the hotel with music. Jewel envied him. Though she'd taken lessons up till the time they'd moved into the hotel, nothing she played was ever perfect. And now she was a year away from her music. The teacher had let her work on songs in the songbook to play while the younger children sang, but what she knew kept slipping away. Mr. Ferril could play pieces like "Clair de Lune"—which Jewel thought was the most beautiful music she'd ever heard—and works by composers. Sometimes he struck chords that filled the whole place with sound. "Rachmaninoff," he would tell her, one more of his foreign words. When she looked at the music he left open, it appeared so complicated and difficult she could only wonder how anyone played it.

One morning after she and Viny had admired themselves in the full-length mirror Jack had helped them move from the hallway into their special room, Viny wanted to attend a ball in the parlor and dance to music on the Victrola.

"But Mr. Ferril is practicing," Jewel said.

"We'll wait till he's finished," Viny said reasonably.

Jewel didn't want him to see them, and when it was quiet, she took off her gown to go and see first that he was gone. But as Viny was dancing to the music with an unseen partner, he appeared. Jewel felt a sudden rush of shame. She was too old to be caught like this. But curiously, he went up to put the next record on the Victrola and said to Viny, "My name is first on your dance card, ma'am. I hope I may claim the honor."

"Of course, Mr. Flight," she said, and gave him a gloved hand and allowed him to lead her to the center of the floor. They sailed around the room as though an admiring crowd were witnessing. Viny's dress swirled out around her, in a sheen of pink silk. Movement filled the tune of the waltz and made it less plaintive, and for a moment it was possible to imagine other dancers, other voices. Jewel envied her and the way the pink dress curved across her breasts and fitted her waist and flowed to the floor. She'd yet to have her first formal, and she wanted one, and to go to a prom like they had in high school. When they finished the waltz, breathless, laughing, they grasped each other around the waist. Mr. Ferril's forehead glowed.

Then he started the record over again and asked Jewel to dance.

"I can't," she said. For though she counted steps and concentrated, she always tripped over her partner's feet.

"Just follow me," he said, taking her hand, looking at her in a way that intimidated her.

"Just put yourself inside the music," Viny said.

Jewel clutched her dress up into a knot so that it wouldn't trail, and tried to follow, blindly, stumbling, till her face was hot and her hands were moist.

"A little practice is all that's needed," Mr. Ferril said kindly. "It's all anything needs," and he squeezed her hand.

She couldn't bear it. She stood there in the silver shoes that

slipped against her heels and felt the summer collapse beneath her.

Viny plucked her sleeve. "We're late," she said. "The carriage is waiting."

She was glad to flee from Mr. Ferril's gaze, but she couldn't put from her mind the picture of Viny dancing.

"We'll teach you to dance," Viny said when they were together.

"I can't," Jewel said, without understanding why. She knew she would adore dancing with Mr. Ferril if she could dance like Viny. She'd seen films of Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire, and she could imagine being whirled around a ballroom. But it was possible to imagine herself doing it only if she didn't attempt it.

It was more than she could bear to see Mr. Ferril almost every time she turned around. Though he practiced the piano in the mornings after breakfast and sometimes worked in his room, he seemed to have a great deal of time on his hands. He had bought a new car, a Hudson with silver fenders and a wide body, not long after his arrival, but after he'd taken them for a brief excursion and they'd reveled in the newness of it, he apparently had nowhere to go. It sat in front of the hotel.

"So what'll we do today?" he asked them one morning after breakfast, as though he had so far advanced into their company they were a threesome. Jewel looked at him uncertainly, but he appeared to be waiting for his answer from Viny.

"Let's go on a picnic," Viny said, clapping her hands eagerly. "We can pack sandwiches and go on an excursion and eat outdoors."

"The car," Jewel said, hoping she wasn't being forward. "We can go in the car."

"Absolutely," said Mr. Ferril. "A wonderful idea."

Penny packed sandwiches for them and made a thermos of iced tea, and they drove off for the City of Rocks, a few miles from the hotel. It was not so much a city as a chaos of rocks, as though the earth in a mad moment had flung out boulders in every direction. They made a great heap on a small rise where they'd been pushed above the ground, and the soil having settled among them, grasses and mesquite and a few small

cedars grew out of their midst. They gleamed white in the sun as they approached. The sky was brilliant and cloudless, with a solitary hawk cruising above.

"I'll bet anything could live here," Jewel said, as they surveyed the boulders. "Snakes and mice and rabbits and scorpions and—"

Viny was momentarily startled by a lizard.

"It's weird," Jewel said, "I wouldn't want to be here at night."

"I didn't think you'd scare that easily," Mr. Ferril said, teasing her.

She ignored him. "Let's climb on the rocks," Jewel said to Viny. "I can go highest, I'll bet." She scrambled up among the boulders to the point where she could look out over the desert and down at Viny and Mr. Ferril standing together. "Come on," she yelled. "It's not hard. You can see everything."

They reached her finally, took in the view of the mountains, and sat down on the rocks to catch their breath.

"The world's out there somewhere," Jewel said.

"And luckily we're here," Mr. Ferril said, "and it can all go hang."

That was the way with adults, it seemed: they were ready to condemn something before you had a chance to try it out, like a secret they wanted to keep for themselves and never let you in on it.

"I'm going down," he said. "My stomach is about to digest itself."

Jewel didn't care.

"Do you think it's a grand place?" Viny asked, gesturing toward the expanse.

"Yes," Jewel said. "I want to see Paris."

"I saw a picture once," Viny said, "of a tall tower. They said it was Paris." They climbed down to the base of the rocks, where Mr. Ferril had spread a cloth under the shadows of some cedars.

"What could be better?" Mr. Ferril said, taking a bite from a ham sandwich. "Sky like this and sun and rocks. You never know how good food can taste till you eat it out in the air."

They ate and drank hungrily, then Jewel jumped up again, ready to explore.

"What energy," Mr. Ferril said. "All I want to do is sit here forever and watch the clouds." He leaned back against a boulder.

"That would be boring," Jewel said, "with nothing ever happening."

"What do you want to happen?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. Something. There's all this waiting—and nothing happens."

"The same wherever you are," said Mr. Ferril. "All this waiting for something that never happens. And if it does, it's too late."

He reached down and broke off a blade of grass, put it between his thumbs and tried to blow on it. "I used to do this when I was a kid." She hated him just then, throwing out something mean and then playing with a blade of grass. Speaking from that superiority of his she had no defense against. She looked at him as though he'd spoken a curse. She made a face, so he couldn't get away with it. She was sure it wasn't true.

"I want to go to school," she said, emphatically.

"Yes," he said in a dull voice, "I suppose you do."

Jewel was mortified that she had revealed herself so openly.

"Itching to run out into the world, are you? Well, it's not all it's cracked up to be, and there are things I've done in it I wish I hadn't." He cracked his knuckles, then picked another blade of the grass. "Grass is wonderful stuff," he said. "Trample it down and up it comes."

"You've seen lots of things," Viny said. "There and there," she said, reaching over and running her finger over the lines of his forehead. "Those are all the things."

He smiled and took her hand. "I'd rather be here with you than to have seen any of them."

Jewel had heard men say things like this in films, only you knew it was false even when you wanted it to mean something, even though everything came out with happy endings. Mr. Ferril was lowered another notch in her opinion.

"You don't know anything," she said, going off. He'd put her in a bad mood, and she wanted to take a swipe at him. She went around a boulder to chew on a long grass stem and dream about school starting and the clothes she wanted. She

was impatient now for the summer to be over; it always got so boring. She wanted to forget about Viny and Mr. Ferril and take her thirty dollars and go shopping. If he wanted to sit there with her and Viny when he could be off speaking French and walking along the Seine and seeing the insides of cathedrals, he must be like the donkey that wanted horns instead of ears. Or like a monk or a man shipwrecked on an island. Only he'd come to this place out of his own free will. So he must be crazy. Or maybe wicked. It occurred to her he might indeed be wicked, but she didn't think he'd killed anybody.

She'd been watching the way he acted in the hotel, as if he'd come to stay and wanted everybody to like him. Easy and familiar with the women, as though he had crossed some invisible boundary and gained their territory. She'd never seen a man act like that before. With her mother, for instance. Touching her arm, or putting his arm around her shoulder when he asked for something, making a little joke and laughing when she laughed. It was shocking, though her mother seemed not to mind at all, but even to welcome it. A change came over her then, like the sun moving out of a cloud, and she joked and laughed till the color rose to her cheeks and she looked warm and pretty and pleased. Between her parents there was no such intimacy. They either moved behind a cloud of indifference or acted as though they had the goods on one another and would give no quarter.

Mr. Ferril was gentler with Viny, more tender, occasionally taking her by the hand and saying, "Look here, isn't this lovely?" and showing her the sunset or a rock with veins in it. And she would smile at him, her eyes glowing with pleasure, but it was the same pleasure she had for the sunset or the other things that gave her delight. Though sometimes she would scuffle with him the way the kittens tumbled with each other.

With Jewel, it was different. He'd never touched her except when they had danced, but she found herself wanting him to look at her, wanting him to laugh with her the way he did with her mother. And when he said to Viny, "Isn't it lovely?" his voice touched a nerve that made her shiver. Sometimes she wanted to kick her legs and bang her head on the floor just like

a child to make him look at her. She was awkward in her desire to please him without knowing how, angry that it should matter, because he was such an old man and she disliked him besides. When he did look at her, she pretended not to notice.

Toward the end of the summer, Viny's brother Frank, and the lawyer, Henry Betts, came out to the hotel for an afternoon's visit. They all ate in the dining room, a small group in a room of empty tables. Then Viny insisted that Jewel come to sit in the parlor with them. When it was nearly time to leave, Viny and her brother hugged one another as though they never wanted to separate; then Frank held her at arms length to look at her again. "My darling," he said. "My rose of Jericho."

"The name of this place is solitude, Brother," Viny said, "and its song is sung by the coyotes."

"She's a genius," Frank said to Penny and Jack afterwards. "Only she's never had a place to be it before. She lives differently from you and me."

That night Jack had a brainstorm and lay in bed under the rush of his enthusiasm. Think of it, he told Penny, they had a real start this time. With Viny there year-round and Ferril staying on indefinitely, they could attract other boarders. Build up the summer clientele. With a little luck, they could make a real go of it.

Penny could see him lying there, an ill-defined lump under the covers, eyes wide open to receive the gleam of the future. All caught up. He was such a fool she could almost pity him. She tried to be patient. Surely, she argued, they ought to let well enough alone and see if, for once in their lives, they could get a little ahead. What was the point of taking on risks they couldn't cover?

"But we've got a chance, don't you see?"

"Birdbrain," she said, and turned over and went to sleep.

Jack lay awake a little longer, staring into the dark. Then turned over as well and folded his arms across his chest. He wasn't about to fight her. He'd go back to his cronies and his mining claims and his woman in Deming. Penny could do as she liked.

IV

Penny had it in mind that the dawn of one of these days would find her far from the hotel. She saw a woman sitting alone on a train, in hat and dark dress and pumps—stylish without being conspicuous—while the vortices of travel whirled away behind her. She could almost watch herself looking through the window at towns speeding by while the wheels thundered out distances. She kept putting money away into the secret hoard she'd started even before that image of herself possessed her fantasy. But now that it was there, she let it carry her forward to different cities and other men. She wanted to go somewhere in the world where nothing would hang onto her. She wanted to shed this life the way a dog sheds water, leave the hotel and all the things that had gone awry to fade beyond memory, sealed up in a room she'd never open. Even Jewel didn't belong in this picture of herself because Jewel could only remind her of where she'd been. And Jewel would be old enough to fend for herself one of these days. Jack wouldn't let her starve—he and his whore. They could all do as they liked.

In some ways, they were two of a kind, she and Jack, and at times she looked at him as though he were part of a conspiracy. He'd done all right, wandering among his cronies and whores, going off on his fruitless hunts for manganese and feldspar. Anything that would take him away from the hotel and to the price of the next drink he'd do. Short of stealing—and maybe that too. He'd never need a cent more than he had. But her little hoard was growing. She even gave Jack a crumb now and then for the sake of good will and a clear path to the future. And because he couldn't let her get the better of him, he'd put a little cash her way when he had it. He'd got himself a partner, a worthless sort of blowhard, who knew everything about the country and had only till now avoided being rich for the sake of some obscure principle.

But fall was coming and the moment she'd have to look Jewel in the eye and deny her what she'd been counting on. For if Viny was their bread, Jewel was their butter.

Indeed it was coming on September, but nobody'd taken her

to town for school clothes, though Jewel kept nagging about when they were going. The plan had been that she would stay in town with the Folsoms and go to high school. Though she was only thirteen, Miss Blackburn had said she was ready. But every time Jewel mentioned it, Penny put her off.

Finally, knowing she couldn't dodge the question any longer, Penny made her come back to the bedroom and closed the door and told her. "I know you've been counting on going to town and boarding out this year, but you've got to understand that we're hanging by a thread and can't afford it."

Jewel couldn't believe it. "But I could work, I could babysit and wash dishes and—"

Penny shook her head. "Maybe next year, when you're high school age anyway. Besides," she continued, "those schools don't teach you anything you can't put off for a year. Besides," she added, as though this time she had the real clincher, "You'll get a better education right here. I've talked to the principal and to Mr. Ferril, and he's agreed to be your tutor. You can go on with your piano and he'll teach you French—said it was a good way for him to keep in practice. Why, you'll have a real European education."

But Jewel was not mollified. All she could think about was being in town where she could go to the movies with girls her age and giggle over boys and have skirts to wear instead of jeans.

She went off in a fury that was new to her, and made Viny cry because she told her to go away and leave her alone. She sat in her room in a stupor of disappointment, then went out back where Jack was killing chickens, a job he hated. She stood by while a headless chicken jerked and flung itself around the floor of the shed, the other chickens nearby clucking their distress.

"Daddy," she said, following him to the pump, waiting till the water washed over his hands. "Daddy," she said, trying to keep her voice calm, "how come I can't go to school like we said?"

The fumes of the day's whiskey fuddled his brain, and the hand that held the axe belonged to someone else. Then anger

burned him: he felt unhinged by circumstance, and the look in her eye made his own eyes moisten. He'd have enjoyed the luxury of giving way, of sitting right down with a good drink and huddling his woe with an endless compassion.

"I could work. Mrs. Folsom said she'd be glad to have me, and Jonie's there."

"Young girls need their folks," Jack said, suddenly convinced of this. Young girls wanted to wander off by themselves, and all heedless they went down dark streets without knowing what was waiting for them.

He concentrated his small red-rimmed eyes on his hands, lathering them up, rinsing them off, examining the stubborn dirt under the nails. "Why, you got the chance of a lifetime right in your own backyard. That Ferril will teach you things that'll take your breath away."

"I just want to go to high school," Jewel wailed.

"Actually, the principal was against it," Jack said. "Didn't want to set a precedent. He said, 'That young gal should wait a year.' He was thinking of you doing your best. And meanwhile you won't have to leave Viny. Because it would break her heart, you know." He gave her a direct look. "You wouldn't want to do that, would you? She'd take it mighty hard." He walked back to the shed to pick up the headless chicken.

Jewel had been momentarily silenced. Of course, she'd have missed Viny. More than her parents, though she didn't like to admit it. Viny took up a space that no one else could fill. But that didn't change anything. "I'll have to go sometime," she said. "Viny has her own life."

"Well, and you got yours, puss," Jack said kindly. "You don't have to rush it all at once." Time enough to know what a hard place the world was. He felt he was doing the right thing by her, protecting her for her own good. There were usually good reasons for doing almost anything. And he tested that theory on the basis that he felt better than he expected to, found himself on solid ground for a change.

Jewel ran off to her room, her head full to bursting. Suppose she just ran off to town, took the money in her bank account and hitchhiked across the country. Suppose she killed herself.

But though she tried, she couldn't live in her disappointment. Her consolation, such as it was, came a few days later when they went into town and she bought a new skirt and sweater with her savings. Then she and Viny went to an adventure film while Penny went to the stores and shopped. Viny put her head down whenever the hero was in danger.

From that time on, Jewel nursed a sense of blame for Viny. It was her fault she wasn't going to school. She knew it was wrong, but she couldn't help herself. Viny had created her circumstances without knowing it, had helped create the net that bound them all, tied up the knots of possibility. The hotel bound Jack and Penny; they held on as though it were their invention out there in the desert. And now she had been pulled into the trap. Viny was free—she could travel in any space and come back and be what she was. She would never be hustled out of her domain to be locked in the narrow, closed space that Jewel resisted and that everyone she knew had entered. Had it been possible to hate Viny, Jewel would have been glad to do it. But Viny was without malice; her only harm lay in being what she was.

She tried to put herself at a distance, as though Viny presented a treacherous quicksand that would keep her from moving where she needed to go. But it was impossible to get away.

"I've got something to show you," Viny told her one afternoon in her usual way, recognizing no change between them.

"What is it?" Jewel said, without interest.

"Come and I'll show you."

They went to her room, where she opened a drawer and pulled out a small leather pouch. From it she took out a rabbit's foot. "I thought I'd lost it," she said joyfully, as she held it up.

"Is that all?" Jewel said cruelly.

But Viny paid no attention. "It's a coyote charm," she said.

"To keep them off?"

"No, to bring them," she said.

"Why would you want to go and do that?" Jewel said, her interest quickened. But she went on, "It's just an old rabbit's foot."

Viny didn't answer for a moment. Then she said, "They're

part dog gone to the devil, and you can't tame them. They howl for the part that used to lie in front of the fire, only they can't have it. They'd be too comfortable, and the desert's the only place for them. So they howl for the sake of what they are."

"What's the point of that?" Jewel said. "And who'd want them close anyway?"

"They make you remember being out there with them."

Jewel gave a shrug, tired of the game.

"It works by moonlight, by the full moon," Viny said, picking up the charm. "We can go out then."

"It sounds dumb," Jewel said.

"You see this hotel," Viny said, as though she hadn't heard. "It's under a curse."

More nonsense, but she could almost believe it. "Why?"

"Because it's here and it has no soul."

"You think it ever had one?" Jewel said in a mocking tone.

"Of course it did, every place has one. You have it for a while, then you have to let it go wandering on. You can't hold onto it. And if you try without it, everything goes out of whack."

In some ways Viny was uncanny. "I don't know what to do," Jewel said, in a rush of misery.

"Here," Viny said, holding out her hand, "I'll give it to you."

"That's all right," Jewel said, putting her arm around her. "You don't have to give me anything." There was nothing Viny or anyone else could offer her.

"It'll be a secret between us," Viny said.

V

Jewel did take refuge in her piano lessons, though not at first. When she took out the yellow-covered John Thompson music books and tried her old pieces at the keyboard, she made so many mistakes she wanted to tear up the music. Afterwards she ran off to weep in her room. Mr. Ferril kept telling her she had real piano hands because she could reach a whole octave, and he told her she was very talented. He bought for her the

notebooks of Anna Magdalena Bach, and she practiced when she could, Viny sitting in a chair beside the piano, quiet, not disturbing her, as though it were nothing for her to hear the same piece played a dozen times. They created a schoolroom as well, moving the bed out of their special room and moving in a secretary. Jewel was learning French and reading *Ivanhoe* and *Julius Caesar* and *Romeo and Juliet*. Sometimes they read passages aloud so that Jewel could get practice in public speaking, with Viny for the audience. And so that Jewel would learn how to use words, Mr. Ferril made her write poetry. He kept pushing her; the more he pushed, the harder she tried. He was inviting her to go somewhere beyond anything she knew, but she had no idea where he was leading her. She had come to idolize him and was afraid that she wouldn't live up to his expectations. At the same time a kind of quarrel lived in her, ready to flare up into rage.

"There's a girl in France just eight years old who writes poetry that puts philosophers to shame," he said once. "Don't you want to do something like that?"

"I'm not eight years old," Jewel said.

"That's not what I'm saying."

She didn't want to write poems; they sounded stupid. But she learned to play "Für Elise" and "Malagueña" with such aplomb that Mr. Ferril kissed her on the top of the head and called in Jack and Penny to listen. "Mighty fine," Jack said. "Nice touch, don't you think." And Penny said the other kids would be jealous if they knew.

She could have spent hours at the piano. She had caught on finally, and it came easily, the notes in her mind moving her hands. She skipped through the pieces one after the other. When she played particularly well, Mr. Ferril put his arm around her and said, "That's my girl."

He went to town to buy her a book of Mozart's sonatinas, and that evening they went to the piano to try the first. She was very excited.

"Here, now," he said, "come with me. I'll get you some music paper, and you copy it out. That way you'll know it. You sleep with that music in your head and let it take hold

of you. That way you'll play it. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

She didn't think she did, but she wouldn't admit it. She was filled with uncertainty. She wasn't sure what he wanted of her, something more than playing the piano.

"The passion is there—all that remains is for you to let it out."

She remained silent.

"Look at me," he demanded.

She was beginning to feel suffocated by his presence there in the room. But then he smiled, and gently pushed the hair away from her face. "A lovely girl," he said gently. "Young and lovely and full of promise. Kiss me," he said.

She leaned over and kissed him on the cheek.

"Now on the lips," he said, and this time bent forward and kissed her lightly on the lips. "You see," he said. "That's a kiss between friends. It's a little doorway to be entered. Whole realms and countries to be imagined."

"Kiss me again," he said.

But she turned away.

"I'm trying to help you," he said. "I'm trying to make something of you. You're young but not stupid. Try not to be stupid." She turned to leave. "You want the world, don't you? You may as well get it on your own terms. At least before they beat it out of you."

She had no idea what he was talking about.

He gave a little laugh. "I suppose I'm frightening you. Maybe that's a good thing. Think of me sometimes," he said, before she closed the door. "Tomorrow Mozart. Both purity and passion—you can't get better than that."

That night she lay in bed, reliving the kiss like a tune that played itself over and over in her mind. She felt it on her cheek and against her lips. She could call up the sensations in those spots that linked with others and collected in a place she wasn't sure about. Because when she touched it, she was sure she shouldn't, yet it seemed all sensation flowed there and made her feel more herself. She didn't want him to kiss her; she wanted him to kiss her until she didn't want any more. She'd do anything not to be drawn to the next kiss. And she touched

the place that seemed itself a doorway, herself a doorway that things might enter. She didn't know what to do. It was the first time she'd been kissed on the lips. Now it was something she didn't know how to live with, for it led beyond itself. To honey and anguish. She wanted something desperately, but had no idea what. Not Mr. Ferril and not music and yet those too. He had an idea about her that she resisted, but she had none about herself.

"Do you want babies?" Viny asked her a few nights later, when they slept together.

"I don't think so," Jewel said. "I think they'd be horrible, crying all the time and having to be changed and fed."

"A child is real," Viny said.

"Of course it is, but you and I are real."

"It jumps and plays, and that's different from what's in your head."

"Of course it is. Lots of things are real."

"Yes," Viny said, touching her forehead. "When I do this, I know it's all in my head and outside it's real. Only it's different with a child, because it lives in its head, but it's outside. And you can talk to it—and say what's in your head. And it knows. It's different from other people. And if you had a child, it would be yours."

"I don't want one," Jewel said.

"What do you wish when you break a wishbone?"

"To go away from here," Jewel said.

"I want to marry Mr. Ferril," Viny said.

Jewel lay in silence. "You can't do that," she said.

"Why not?"

"Just because. Suppose he doesn't want to marry you. Suppose he has a lady somewhere else. It's a stupid thing to say."

She wanted to pinch Viny and make her cry and push her out of the bed. She wasn't supposed to want Mr. Ferril. He belonged to her, only she didn't want him.

"Besides," she said, "he's a wicked person."

"He's a wicked person," Viny said, "but he's a good person. He takes me down to the river to look at the birds. We're going to catch a bird; he said he would."

"That's stupid," Jewel said. "What would you want with it?"

"To have it," Viny said. "Like the kittens. Only a baby would be better."

The lessons went on, but though she thought everything would be changed by that kiss, Mr. Ferril acted as if nothing had happened. He seemed to have lost interest in her, to have lost the focus of his idea. He never said, "Don't you want to be a great musician? Wouldn't you like to play all over Europe?" or any of the notions he'd teased her with. Her playing went badly; the harder she tried, the worse it got. And after the lesson ended with his putting a record on the Victrola and dancing with Viny, she sat there glumly, full of disgust. If he'd asked her, she'd have refused, though she wanted him to ask. If she could only play the piano better than anyone in the world, then Mr. Ferril would give her all his attention. She watched Viny laughing and clinging to his arm, their hugging afterwards and it was more than she could bear. If only she could lie on the floor and kick and scream, but she couldn't do that either.

Suddenly it occurred to her: What if they went off together and took off all their clothes down by the river? Viny wouldn't have cared. She hadn't thought where Viny and Mr. Ferril went on their walks together while she practiced. Maybe Mr. Ferril had kissed Viny a long time ago, because Viny was beautiful and they could dance together like Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. When they went out that afternoon, she left the piano and watched them disappear up the road. She wanted badly to follow them and spy on them. The next day when they were going to take the silver Hudson into town, she deserted the piano and ran out to the car because she couldn't bear to be left behind. Mr. Ferril accidentally closed the door on her finger, and she cried. She knew she was being allowed to go because of her finger. Though they ate dinner at a Mexican restaurant, she didn't enjoy it. Her finger wasn't broken, but it would be a few days before she could go back to the piano. That meant she could go with them on their walks. She saw that Viny and Mr. Ferril held hands and let their arms swing as they walked.

But even after her finger healed, the lessons went badly. Mr.

Ferril's mind seemed to be elsewhere. He was virtually silent over breakfast, and when he went into town, it was by himself. For the first time since he arrived at the hotel, he'd received several letters all in one week. He started to use the telephone once but thought better of it, jumped into the Hudson, and went into town.

"If you have a baby," Viny said one night as they lay together, "you can tell it words, and it will say them back, and then it will make up things to say. Isn't that fun?"

"Are you going to have a baby, Viny?" Jewel asked, pushing herself up on her elbow. "Tell me, are you?"

"Mr. Ferril says I can have one if I want."

"But you can't do that, Viny," Jewel said. "It would be wrong."

"No, it wouldn't."

"You're not even married."

"I don't care," Viny said, stubbornly. "He has to go away first. But if I have a baby, it will be real."

"Who does? Mr. Ferril? Where's he going?"

"I don't know," Viny said, "but he'll come back."

"Does he love you, Viny?" she asked shyly. Perhaps that too was something that entered a doorway.

"He says so."

"But if he doesn't come back, what'll you do then? It will be terrible," she said, as though it had happened already. She knew she'd gone too far.

Viny whimpered softly beside her. "A baby would be real," she said. "Don't tell," she pleaded. "It's a secret between us. Promise—you have to."

No matter what she did, it would be wrong somehow. If she told, Viny would cry and tell her she was mean and maybe never forgive her, and Mr. Ferril would hate her. And Penny would blame her for not saying something before. If she kept the secret, she'd be miserable and never have a moment's peace. But suppose Viny only imagined a baby without ever having one, or suppose Mr. Ferril came back and married her. That way she could go to school and everybody would be happy. She was willing now to let Viny have him.

VI

Mr. Ferril left them soon after, saying he'd been called away on business, but that he'd return as soon as everything was settled. He took only a small valise and left the rest of his things and paid his room and board for the next month. He kissed the women on both cheeks, as the French do, he told them, and drove away up the road. Viny waved to him until the car disappeared.

After he left, the hotel settled into dullness. Jewel let her music go and only played when she was seized by the fear she would forget. Her French and math books lay entirely unopened. Penny didn't say a word to her about studying. Lethargy took hold of everything. Even if something needed desperately to be fixed, it was left. The sink got plugged up and the dishes went unwashed for days before they called the plumber. Jack slipped in and out without anyone noticing. Penny could tell Jack a dozen times to nail a loose board, but when it got fixed was another matter. Sometimes things ran out, like bread or eggs, but Penny didn't seem to care. Jewel and Viny spent a lot of time playing checkers and listening to soap operas on the radio, or if it was Sunday, to Jack Benny and Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy.

She ignored Viny much of the time, but Viny didn't seem to notice. Viny moped around the hotel, played with the cats, and sang to herself. She had a hard time getting up in the morning and looked pale and irritable over breakfast. Not even the advent of the large, sweet navel oranges from California revived her. She looked at the brilliant fruit and pushed the plate aside. For long periods she sat in her room and stared out the window.

Then the lethargy was pierced by voices. Penny and Jack seemed to spend half their time quarreling.

"If anything's going to get done around this place . . ."

"Sand down a rathole."

"It's what I hate about you," Penny said. "Like you've forgot Viny's here and keeping food on the table."

"I know all about it, but I got things to do. And Viny's being taken care of."

Their exchanges were as brief and fruitless as they were necessary to their existence. Jewel stayed clear of them, because it was like entering a cross fire to come between them. But then something created a tension in the air that was almost like a purpose. Jewel wasn't quite clear what was going on. Whatever she overhead was fragmentary and inconclusive, but clearly it had to do with Mr. Ferril.

"I never liked that man," she heard Penny say, "not from the first moment I laid eyes on him. I figure it was in him to do something like that."

"You'd never know it the way you two carried on."

"Listen, he was our bread and butter, and all I did was be nice to him."

"Yeah, I'll bet. I had him figured for a ladies' man from the very first go."

"Just what do you have in mind, Jack Whedon? When I want to go roving in the clover you can be sure I'll make the most of it."

"I 'spose you would."

"And isn't it just like the pot calling the kettle black?"

Always, just before Jewel could figure something out, they went on to their own private grievances and let her hang with a suspense that finally drove her to Mr. Ferril's room. She opened the wardrobe and fingered the cloth of his finely tailored suits, the tweed jacket he wore on walks. The smell of him still lingered in the room. She looked at the pile of books he left, the Shakespeare she had read from, a novel by Stendahl, and the plays of Molière. A crystal ashtray still held ashes and cigarette butts in it. She found a little notebook with his handwriting, listing his expenses. He had a peculiar way of making a seven. As she leafed through it, a photograph that had been taped lightly to the back fell out.

When she picked it up, she saw a family. The woman, petite and slender, with her hair swept up elegantly, stood next to a young boy, almost her height. She held his arm as though she depended on him, and although he faced the camera, he seemed to glance off to one side, but whether at her or something outside the frame of the picture, it was impossible to tell.

The two of them seemed linked together by the same eye that looked outward and somewhat askance and took in everything with the same humor and touch of superiority. And the same energy played in their expressions. Behind them stood a man taller than the boy. Jewel looked at them closely. These were his parents, where his origins lay, the ones who called him Everett and told him he mustn't spoil his supper and to watch out for the cactus thorns, who sent him to school and expected him to study diligently and mind the teachers. Behind the trio were the columns of the hotel, white and smooth in the sunlight. The hotel was young then, the paint still fresh, and all, it appeared, was whole and sound. Others were gathered on the porch. Jewel could make out the edge of a rocker and a man's leg extended. On the back of the photo was a date: June, 1919. She wondered why he had left it behind.

The rest was negligible. A crumpled handkerchief. A fringed bookmark. A paperweight. A mixture of French and Swiss coins on the windowsill. These Jewel examined one by one; they'd been in his pockets as he'd walked the streets of foreign cities. Then she put them back where she'd found them, left the room, closing the door quietly behind her, and never said a word about having been there.

At that point, with a sort of grudging truce between them, Penny and Jack kept things mostly to themselves. When Jewel asked questions, they told her Ferril had gone away and wouldn't be back. He had business matters to settle. And quietly Jack and Penny gave themselves to speculation.

"No wonder he wanted to come here. Seems strange now we didn't know anything about him."

"We never asked, you idiot."

"When I think of it—him being around our girl and all."

"Now you think about it."

"And what did you think with all the money coming in? Well, it's all catching up with him, poor guy. I don't know though. I think he was planning to come back, even wanted to. He left all his things—there's some expensive stuff there."

"Maybe that was just his way of clearing out."

"I don't believe it," Jack said. "Maybe he just wanted to start over."

The way Jack wanted to do. His partner had just told him about the assayer's results on some rocks they'd brought down from the Black Range. If they could find an outfit willing to go to the expense of taking out the ore, they might have a good thing. And if the hotel did go under, as he thought about it now, he could put his time where it would do the most good. Penny could get a job in town as a receptionist or a telephone operator. That would carry them along until he hit pay dirt. He'd have to find the right moment to put it to her. For right now he'd bide his time.

It didn't take too much evidence before Penny got wind of Viny's secret. She cornered Jewel one afternoon and said to her, "Maybe you know something I don't know. But the way Viny's been sick these mornings means only one thing, far as I'm concerned. What can you tell me about it?"

Jewel shrugged. "I can't help it if she's sick."

"Nobody said you could."

It was curious, though, the train of Penny's logic. If Viny was pregnant, it could be one man as well as another, and Jewel was party to yet another quarrel.

"What do you take me for? As if I'd lay a hand on her."

"Well," Penny said, "you never know."

For once Jack rose to ire. "You think a man's got no honor?" he said. "Taking advantage of a poor woman who doesn't have her stock of wits."

"Well, someone did, unless it's a virgin birth."

"And you still can't believe what's right in front of your eyes. All that high-toned culture he slickered you with." Jack gave a little laugh. "And you didn't even keep an eye on her."

"How was I to know? And say what you want, that Viny has plenty of wit." She knew how to flirt anyway. She could play with a man like any woman, for all she was a child. Penny could see that. Even so, the bastard should have left her alone; he didn't have to stoop that low.

They blamed each other for not being more careful and

blamed Jewel for not looking out for her and in the end decided there was no help for it. They couldn't take her anywhere to bring it off, because it wasn't legal, and if they tried to do it illegally, Viny could die or they could get themselves in trouble and even land in prison. Nor could they just sit by and take the money and let her have the baby, though Penny'd have been glad to do that if she could get away with it. But she had enough saved up to take her to California and keep her going till she got a job. She was philosophic about it: all good things came to an end eventually, and if you could make anything out of them first, you were ahead of the game. All they could do now was call Viny's brother and let him take her. The moment she was gone, Penny would buy her train ticket.

When Penny told Jewel that Viny would have to leave, she burst into tears.

"What's the matter with you anyway?" Penny said. "You were all broken up because you couldn't go off to school. Now maybe you can go."

But it didn't seem to make any difference. Viny begged not to go and wouldn't be comforted.

"Don't let them send me away," Viny pleaded as they lay in bed together for their last night before she went away.

"I tried," Jewel said. "Only nobody will listen."

"I can't go away," Viny said, "because of the baby, and because he'll want to see it."

"But when he comes, he'll come to where you are."

"But that's not the right place," Viny said. "Let's run away!"

"Where would we go?"

Viny lay silent. Then she said, "Listen, I've got the coyote charm under the pillow. I want you to take it."

"I thought you gave it to Mr. Ferril," Jewel said.

"No, I only showed it to him. I'll give it to you. Here," she said.

Jewel took it and leaned over and kissed her on the cheek. She thought about it and kissed her on the lips.

"Only you have to use it, while I'm still here."

"I don't know how."

"Be quiet in there," Penny said at the door. "You can't lie there talking till all hours."

"Take it," Viny whispered, "and go outside after everybody's asleep. Just hold it in your hand and they'll come round."

Jewel was afraid of the dark. She didn't like the idea of going outside in the cold or meeting creatures in the dark. She didn't think anything would bother her, though she couldn't be sure. But she couldn't refuse Viny on her last night.

"They won't harm you," Viny assured her.

"What am I supposed to do?"

"Nothing. Just wait."

Jewel put on her bathrobe and slippers and listened for sounds from the next room. Then she moved to the door, opened and closed it quietly, and slipped down the hall to the front door. Off in the parlor sat the piano she had neglected for so long, a black rectangle in the shadows, and the Victrola under the gilt-rimmed mirror that caught a gleam of light from somewhere. The floorboards creaked beneath her movements, and she had to pause between steps so as not to wake anybody. The front door complained when she opened it, and she went out quickly. It was bright outdoors, though the moon wasn't yet quite at the full. She descended the steps, watching for the loose board, and walked out back past the springs. It was a clear night filled with stars. On the ground a light powdering of snow had left a few traces. Carefully, she walked out through the mesquite and yucca trees far enough that the hotel was a large irregular shadow behind her. She let the silence gather around her till she heard only the rustle of night things. And how do you know they are there? she wondered.

But as soon as she thought it, she knew they were gathering in the bushes, circling her. They moved on paws that were quick past stealth, their tails poised and their noses in the air. She felt the wildness behind their eyes and the hunger that went straight to the moon. The hair stood up on the back of her neck. Even though she couldn't see them, she felt the pulse of their blood. She caught her breath and pushed away fear, and let her breath out slowly. They had made a circle around her,

and she stood at the center. It was as though she could feel herself entering the space, taking possession of it. She thought of all the people she knew, Jack and Penny, Viny and Mr. Ferril, and she didn't want to be any of them. I want my own experience, she thought. She didn't know how she could get it. But the circle seemed to hold all the shapes of possibility, the ones that entered dreams and those that the daylight brought to form. Dimly, if only she could catch hold of them, were projections of the future. There were hidden things, and things she could almost see, that appeared closer, moving and shaping. She had never known anything like this before, nor had a sense of the future growing out of herself. In a moment it was gone. Even while she tried to capture it, the coyotes had moved away and the night took up its usual sounds.

She walked back toward the dark shadow of the hotel, past the low wall that surrounded the hot springs. A mist rose from the pool and evaporated in the air. The moon glistened on the surface of the water, but if something dark collided with the reflection, she didn't notice. She was intent on a vision of the future. She could see a time when the hotel would be gone without a trace and she'd be out somewhere in the world. She wanted to rejoice because she was certain she would be free. And she wanted to weep as though she were mourning the deaths of all she had known, something of her own death as well. But there was this she had lived. And what would remain of it for her to remember?

DUE	RETURNED
JAN 30 1992 MU	NOV 24 1991
FEB 28 1993	DEC 29 1992
MAY 19 1993	MAY 01 1993
MAR 15 1995	NOV 16 1994
AUG 06 1996	PR 27 1996 MU
JUN 17 2002	JUN 10 2002 UM
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