

Father Me, Father Me Not
and other stories

by

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Father Me, Father Me Not

My preference for rooms with lots of windows full of yellow sunlight—and for dark-haired, affectionate men—goes back to the house I grew up in. Often I'd stand in the back hallway between the kitchen and Father's study and watch him sitting at his desk. He worked every evening on his sermons, his large hands turning pages in the winking blue light of the fluorescent lamp. That room was off-limits, and when he'd look up and right at me, saluting his gray-blond hair back from his forehead, I'd wonder why his face wouldn't change. It took me a long time to realize that he really couldn't see me there in the darkness. I wanted to go in there and have him talk to me the way he must have talked to people from the parish who would knock at the door sometimes, needing to talk. Those times he'd close both doors to the study, and I'd go up to my bedroom until he'd say my name at the bottom of the stairs. Before Mother had died, when I was seven, I'd spent my evenings with her.

Aunt Helen came once a month for years, from her farm forty miles away, to clean the house—with a flurry of mops and flapping clotheslines—and to fix endless rows of casseroles that she'd wrap in wrinkled foil and stack in the freezer. With her tight brown curls like snails and her puckery nylon dresses printed with pale flowers, she was a woman of smothering hugs that smelled of roses and sardines.

As she worked she'd wipe her shining upper lip with corners of a pink apron and call me "my poor child."

She'd wind my hair too tightly in huge, perforated tin curlers with pink rubber fasteners; she'd iron all my dresses and hang them in starched rows in the closet and fold all my jeans into a bottom drawer, and then she'd twist her large body at last into her coughing gray Chevy, roll down the window, and offer a powdered cheek for my father and me to kiss good-bye. "She's too skinny and quiet," I heard her say more than once. "You should let me take her home with me, come summer." And then she'd drive away for another month. I was always afraid he might say yes, but somehow he must have known that.

Somehow we took care of each other in that square white house beside the Congregational church with its blind windows marbled with pastel greens and blues. The town was surrounded by cornfields and was the whole world then. The only place "out there" was Aunt Helen's farm, where I never wanted to go. My mother had been small and dark-haired and smelled like soap, and she had talked to me a lot and braided my hair without hurting me.

I always knew the month was half-over when my father would start reminding me to wear a dress each day to school. Finally, when I was eleven, Aunt Helen's visits ended with a muffled conversation in the study, doors closed. I never knew what he said to her, but after that we saw her only at

Christmas; I'd hear from her each November, when she'd write and ask my dress size.

My memory of the day Mary Dale Castelli and her parents moved in across the street begins with my waking up very early. The clear circle on my frosted window was still layered with pink sky, and the floor was cold under my toes as I sat on the edge of the bed, listening. I'd heard it before, and I was afraid, more than ever that morning, that my father was going to die—a vague tight feeling that pulled me to the doorway. There I stood, hearing him in his bedroom at the far end of the narrow hall. At first I thought he was barely crying, sobbing, but that was wrong, because I was sure he never did that. And then I thought he must be trying to catch his breath, and then the springs of his bed creaked again and again. I stepped into the hallway, then backwards again when I heard a long kind of sigh, like pain swallowed and gone, a little like the sound I'd heard him make just the night before when he'd come through the door from the stinging blizzard into the warm kitchen. And then I heard nothing at all. I thought maybe I should call to him. But when I heard him get up, I went back to bed. I heard him walk past my door into the bathroom, then water running. When the toilet flushed, I wasn't scared any more; it was such an ordinary sound. He went back into his bedroom, and after a while I dressed and went downstairs to make his

coffee.

The high window over the kitchen sink was completely blind with white, so I went into the front room to look at the astounding pillows of snow that were heaped everywhere; trees were heavy with it, and threads of snow were sifting in slow arcs from branches through the early pink light. A moving van was outside in the street, long and orange, and two bundled men were scraping snow from the driveway across the street. All morning I watched, between my Saturday chores of dusting and ironing, as the two men carried things into the small green house. When Father came in for lunch about noon, he told me there was a girl just a couple of years older than I, that the father was to be artist in residence at the nearby private college, that maybe the new girl and I could be friends. All the other girls my age from school lived on farms.

The last thing off the van was a huge stone lion. I happened to be watching when the men, plumes of white pumping again and again from their open mouths, slid the thing down the ramp and struggled with it until it crouched beside the driveway. It was the strangest thing I'd ever seen, and I had the feeling that the new girl wouldn't belong any more than that reclining beast, which by the next morning wore a crest of snow along its jowly head, its frozen haunches.

But I was wrong. Mary Dale became the best friend I'd

ever had, my first really close friend. She was so different from me. The way she'd move her dark eyes to look around a room without moving her head made her mysterious; her laugh was a musical run. And she had breasts already. She was thirteen, but only a year ahead of me at the small consolidated school. I saw the way the boys looked at her when we went to basketball games on Friday nights. I wasn't so scared to talk to people when we were together.

But the best thing about being friends with Mary Dale was being with her father and mother. I'd go across to their house after supper, and we'd do our homework together at the kitchen table. I'd pretend that I belonged there. Her mother was short and had a chest like a shelf. Her shiny black hair was pulled back and twisted into a figure-eight shank and held with amber hairpins that slipped out easily; she was forever fussing with them. Her hands always moved when she talked. There was a narrow gap between her two front teeth, and there were fine black hairs on her upper lip. She called me Lizzie, and when she hugged me, I didn't mind. I felt as though I were her little girl. She never once said I was too skinny, but she'd put plates of food in front of us on the oilcloth-covered table while we studied our arithmetic or American History: slices of lemon meringue pie weeping with golden beads, plates full of crackers smeared with yellow cheese and topped with sliced olives.

Walking home afterwards to our house—where Father would be working in his study and would look up and say, "Be sure

to lock up now"—I would feel guilty sometimes, and sorry that I'd left him alone all evening.

And I felt sorry for Mary Dale's father too, because I knew that his wife was not beautiful enough for him. He was a man who needed beauty. Their house was a clutter of old battered furniture and stacks of books and newspapers. The house was heated with a huge space heater in the living room; it had an ornate grille lined with something that looked like mother-of-pearl that sometimes I could see flames through. He'd tacked pencil sketches onto the faded wallpaper with thumbtacks, and the tables were littered with sketches too. He even drew in the margins of newspapers. And a lot of the sketches were of Mary Dale.

The most amazing things lay around their house so casually. On the dining-room table was a bust of Mary Dale when she was a child. The eyes were blank, like statues' eyes usually are, but the cheeks were perfectly curved, and she must have looked just like that once. Her hair was sculptured in long grooves. "Here," he said the first time I was over there. "One way to see is with your hands." And he took my hands in his and put them on Mary Dale's stone face and moved my fingers over those blank eyes, that long grooved hair. His hands were gentle. One night I noticed a plaster cast lying on the kitchen counter, open like the halves of a shell—and inside, the inverted shape of someone's face.

Mary Dale used to complain. "I guess he doesn't want

to do me any more. I hate to sit still for him to draw me from so many angles," she'd say. Sometimes when I was there I'd notice him drawing, looking at me and then down at his paper and then up at me again. He never told me to sit still, and when he showed me what he'd drawn, I'd blush and then he'd say something nice like, "You have pretty yellow hair." I began to have dreams about him. He had dark curly hair that he didn't get cut very often, and he smiled a lot, showing straight teeth with gold edges. He liked to tease me. When Mary Dale's mother would try to give him a piece of pie, he'd say, "Better give mine to Elizabeth. We've got to fatten her up." He didn't tease Mary Dale that much, but she didn't seem to mind.

That summer after Aunt Helen stopped coming to take care of us, and after the Castellis moved in, there was a polio epidemic; it was 1952, and everyone was scared. Three of the children in our church got sick, and Father made trips to the county hospital and spent hours talking to people who didn't know what to do. Leah Bannister from my class got polio late in the summer, and one Sunday morning in November her father, a red-faced farmer with hands big as baseball mitts, came noisily into church when the sermon was half-over and stood in the aisle and asked all of us to pray for her. Talking like that made him choke, and he left abruptly, leaving us all stunned, even Father. Finally

he started a prayer and we all listened with our eyes closed. It was the best prayer I'd ever heard him say, and it talked about how we need each other all the time, but most of all when we're afraid. I looked up once, and he was looking at me. I shut my eyes quickly, and I remember one of the things he said next was that sometimes we need help to say the right things to people who need us. I had to remind myself that it was God he was talking to.

It snowed all afternoon, the first snowfall of the winter. At ten o'clock Leon Bannister showed up at the front door, still very upset. Father took him into his study and closed the door. After he left, Father came up to my room and told me to get some clothes and go over to the Castellis, that he was going to the hospital and might be there all night. He walked with me. When we were halfway there, their front porch light went on. We were walking slowly through the pale blue night, our shoes squeaking in the wet snow. Leah had been in an iron lung; I knew that. "She's gotten a lot worse, Elizabeth," he said to me. We were walking so slowly that we were practically standing still in the middle of the street. It was as though he never wanted to get there.

"What will I say to him?" He turned away and looked down the road that cut darkly through the snow out into the country. "What would I want someone to say to me if it were you?" I felt that it was the kind of question I wasn't supposed to answer, and anyway I didn't know how to. "What will I say

to the man?" he said, and that time he looked at me and I thought I had to say something. He'd never talked like that to me before.

"You'll know what to say, when you get there," I said.

"Are you so sure?"

"Yes."

When we got to their front door, Mrs. Castelli, in her blue bathrobe, opened it. Father handed me the paper sack with my nightgown in it as if it were something valuable. He didn't say anything else.

Mary Dale was already in bed, and her mother took me right upstairs and told me to crawl in bed with Mary Dale and not to worry. She said she'd leave the bathroom light on all night, just in case I needed to get up. It was cold up there; the heat from downstairs had to rise up through a big square grille in the bedroom floor; the bed was heaped with blankets, and Mary Dale woke up only long enough for me to tell her why I was there. Then she turned her back to me and slept. Which I couldn't do.

I could hear the purr of snoring in the next room. I got up once and knelt down beside that warm-air-rising grille, and looked down into the living room below. There was a lamp on down there. On the dim wall hung the sinewy Catholic Jesus who suffered in every room of the Castellis' house, a Jesus I wanted the same way I wanted everything else in that house. He was more passionate, somehow, than the pastel Jesus who knelt on our walls in a kind ray of light.

I felt all alone in that house that wasn't mine, under that Jesus. I could feel my fingernails dent the palms of my hands. I tried to pray, but I needed my father for that. I could never find words for myself.

I'd gone to mass once, with Mary Dale, in the small Catholic church across town. I remembered the votive lights that flickered all the time, and I just thought about those candles instead of saying words. I didn't want Leah Bannister to die. And I wanted to know what I should have said to my father's question. What was he saying to Leah's father?

Finally I got back into bed, but I still didn't feel tired. Mary Dale snuggled backwards against me in her sleep. I'd never slept in the same bed with someone else before.

I must have been almost asleep, though, when I heard the front door open downstairs; it scared me, and I couldn't figure out for a minute where I was. Then I got out of bed and crouched down beside that grille again, and Mary Dale's father was down there below. He flopped down into the chair right below me, still with his big overcoat on and his black galoshes, gaping with metal buckles. He just sat there and didn't move, and I looked down at him and watched him sit there for a long time. Of course I knew he didn't know I was there, and I could drift down and curl up on his lap and feel his hands on my face and hair and he would never know. I started to feel really good about that, and then he got up and I hurried back to bed and pulled the blankets up around my face and didn't move.

I could hear him come upstairs. The bathroom door closed and the upstairs went dark. When the toilet flushed, the light came back.

I knew he was in the room when the bed moved, and I heard Mary Dale make a small sound, a kind of whimper. His coat sleeve moved against my face, cold and wet still from outside, and he was saying something to her. "Come on, now, come on," but very softly, and Mary Dale's body went stiff and she turned over on her back. He seemed so big, bent over the bed like that, in the dim light, and I wondered why he still had his coat on. He was pulling the covers away from her shoulders, and she said, "No. No," and then, "Elizabeth's here."

That's when I raised myself up on one elbow, sure he would grin and be glad to see me and want to know what I was doing there. But he just stood up and left so quickly that I felt like I'd been slapped.

The rest of the night Mary Dale lay rigid in the bed, far over on the edge of the mattress; and once I thought she was crying, but when I touched her back, she pulled away. I don't think either of us slept after that. He had turned the bathroom light off, and the house was completely dark until morning, which was a long time coming.

Father came over to get me the next morning and took me home for breakfast. He'd cooked eggs for me and gave me

my first cup of coffee, with lots of sugar and cream. We were both tired. He said Leah was still the same.

That night when I answered the doorbell, Mary Dale's father stepped inside, his mouth a straight line. He just said, "I want to see your father." They went into the study and talked for a long time, which was very strange because I didn't think they'd ever talked before. When he left, Father stayed in his study, and then he came into the kitchen where I was drying dishes and he said he wanted me to come with him and talk. I still had the dishcloth in my hand, and I sat in the big leather chair by his desk. He was twisting his wedding ring, and he started right off, talking fast. "Elizabeth," he said, "I guess I haven't done right by you. I guess a girl needs a mother to tell her things, to take care of her."

"We take care of each other."

He didn't say anything for a few seconds then. He pushed his hair back from his forehead in that saluting way of his, and he kept looking at me with quick glances, and then down at his hands. "You like going over to the Castellis', don't you?"

"Of course."

"You and Mary Dale have a good friendship."

"Yes."

"You know," he said, "everyone needs affection. I mean, people who care about each other. It's perfectly natural."

"I know."

"I know that I'm not very affectionate with you. It just isn't my way, Elizabeth. But I do care about you, more than anything. You do know that, don't you?"

I told him that I did. And then I said, "What did Mary Dale's father want?"

"He's worried about his daughter. He thinks maybe you girls should have other friends."

"Other friends?"

"Not spend quite so much time together."

"But why?" I remembered the cold way he'd come through the front door, not smiling at me at all. "What did he say?"

"I just listened to him. Sometimes it's best to just listen. I did say one thing, though." I waited for him to tell me the rest, and finally he did. "I told him nothing you and Mary Dale could do would be wrong in my eyes. Because you're very young, Elizabeth. Perhaps not as young as I thought."

I folded the dishcloth into a neat square on my knee. I knew if I didn't understand, he might not ask me in there to talk with him again. Finally he opened a book and began to turn pages. "You didn't get much sleep last night," I said. "Perhaps you should go to bed early tonight." It sounded grown-up to me, that word, "perhaps."

As I was leaving the room, Father said, "Castelli seems to think that you'd lie to me if you had the chance. I don't

think so. I want you to know that too." He looked very sad.

It took me all evening to finish drying the dishes. I walked around the house, carrying a plate or a cup in my hands, looking out the dark glass of the windows. I knew only that Mary Dale's father was suddenly angry with me, and I didn't know what I had done. My throat was so tight I could hardly swallow. When I looked down the stairs before going to bed at last, the light in Father's study was still on.

Mary Dale was remote after that whenever I saw her at school, and strangely quiet. And the Castelli house was no longer my own. Mrs. Castelli always answered the door; they were too busy to have me visit.

One day, right before Christmas vacation, I came home to discover that they'd moved away as abruptly as they'd arrived. They left that stone lion behind. Mary Dale had told me once that her dad had salvaged it from an old library building that was torn down in the last place they'd lived. They'd lived lots of places. Our town was very small, really.

I went into our house and stood in the front room, looking at that stone lion lying beside the empty green house, and I knew that beautiful Vittorio Castelli—that was his name, Vittorio, like a song—was the first man to break my heart. And I didn't know what I'd done to turn him so cold. He was gone, and so was Mary Dale, the first really close friend I'd ever had. My father found me there, crying and

trying to pretend I wasn't. I turned my face away from him.

I remember he put his hands on my head, on the sides of my head, and turned my face toward him, and I leaned against his chest, sniffing and pretending that he was someone else, wanting with all my heart for him to be someone else. He is a man of few words, my father. That was one of the few times he ever touched me. And now, after all these years, I wish I could find the words to tell him that it was enough.

Baby, Baby, You Belong to Me

Walter is looking out the window of a cabin high on the bank of Cass Lake, in Minnesota, listening to the random static and applause of touching, silver-backed birch leaves. His fingers are on the keys of his old Smith-Corona. O Child, he types, and then his fingers stop and his mind goes on. Lately the world's been full of babies, each tiny face reaching against its mother, mouth first, with a no, no, no shaking of the head. He held his mother's new baby just last year, and the wet triangular mouth rooted hungrily against his chest. Tiny fingers grasped his shirt button as he handed the infant over to Janie awkwardly. She held the child against her and leaned her face down to be close, so that her long hair screened them. She and that baby were in another place, until Walter moved her hair and tucked it behind her ear so that she would look at him and smile.

And just a few months ago Janie took him to the basement of the Public Library, where the high windows were dusty and a bare bulb hung from the ceiling. Piles of old magazines were tied in bundles with heavy twine; some of them had come loose and fanned out onto the floor where he sat with her, bending over the pictures, late in the second month of her pregnancy. She showed him a photo essay in an old Life. Infants in utero, dressed in fragile, pear-shaped sacs of fluid. High foreheads and eyes blank as the eyes of statues.

And one was sucking his thumb. "Or hers," Janie said. Someone had invented a lens that could travel on a wire up into that dark place where even the unborn had never seen before. The photos were strange and membranous, like dreams. "You see?" she said. He stared at them, at the tiny, parenthetical ears. "Ours will have your ears," she said. "There's no stopping a creature like that." The amniotic sacs were like veils.

He closed the magazine. On the cover Jack Kennedy smiled and waved. They do it with salt water, he thought. He'd done research of his own. But she'd made up her mind. "How did you ever find this?" he asked.

"I remembered it from years ago. And I looked for hours. I wanted you to see."

"Okay."

"I can't help it."

"I said okay," he said. "Are you giving me a choice?"

"No."

And now it's over and he's trying to write a poem about it, to prove to her that he understands. O Child, his fingers repeat. And then he rams the carriage sharply to the right with his left fist. And the upper case X rattles like a machine gun.

Walter has always objected to ugliness in women. Drawn to

pretty women, he's avoided the plain ones, whom he's thought of as ugly, a simple exaggeration. Before he met Janie, he was always backward with women; his excuse was that—even from a distance—few suited him. But it was only an excuse; he knew that.

His own mother's devotion to a long-gone lover gave her a safe dignity in his mind while he was growing up, but he knew she was plain. She'd been abandoned by the man in the brown and yellow photograph on her bureau, the man who had gone off in that navy uniform and never kept his promise to come back. Because of the words she used, it didn't occur to Walter until he was twelve that maybe his father was dead. He was tall enough then to see the tops of the jars and brushes on the dresser, and he could see the entire face in the photograph that tilted backwards in its plain silver frame. The face was narrow and undistinguished, the hair very short, making the ears look big. And the idea began to form then in Walter's mind that it wasn't the man's fault that he had not come back. About that time—because "Mama" was a baby word, he supposed later—he began to call his mother by her first name, which was Helen. At certain times when Helen spoke of the other, stranger Walter, saying, "For us, both of us, there never could have been anyone else," her face acquired an unfocused look of such longing that she seemed relaxed and even pretty for a moment. It was the closest she ever came to betraying her feelings. The man

in the picture had that power.

Walter was never allowed to touch any of the things on her dresser. Once she caught him—he had that man's picture in his hands—and she took it coldly, saying, "That isn't yours. You leave that alone. It's mine, and you're not to fool with it," and he could feel the muscles around his eyes tighten and his eyes sting. She took the picture from his hands and said, "You're not to cry, now. There's no use crying over things you can't have. Not ever." He swallowed the moment down hard with his own spit—it was what she taught him—as he always did moments like that afterwards in his life, as if sorrow—or whatever it was—could be taken inside and passed through the body like a badly chewed nut or a berry stem. Better a nervous stomach than a weak mind. Helen was strong.

She married again five years ago, when Walter was twenty-four, shortly before he met Jane Riley. Janie isn't plain, with her long brown hair streaked with light from her temples, her fawn-colored freckles, and her gray eyes that look at the world with astonishment as if it continually presents to her something new. When she looked at him like that, he felt at once that the beauty of that look was attached to him somehow. When eventually he saw her look at others that way too, it was a personal affront, and he sometimes thought that her face in repose was uninteresting. Still, she loved him. He was sure of that. Didn't she move

in with him after only three months? And didn't everyone else notice she was pretty, the way he did? And wasn't it true, what they said to each other, that for both of them there never could be anyone else? And when Helen wrote to them last year—one of her rare letters—saying that she and Adam were going to have a baby, and Walter himself felt sick and could only say, "What's she doing? She's too old, for Chrissakes; she's way up in her goddamn forties," hadn't Janie said that perfect thing that he'd thought of so many times since: "You just let her live her life now, and we'll just live each other's"? And weren't they still that close? Even now? After being together for five years?

Walter has brought Jane here to Cass Lake because their baby was born dead, and she can't seem to get over the sadness of that. She says he doesn't understand. But didn't he sit by her bed in the labor room and watch her face redden and rear back, the lavender veins of her temples rise, the cords of her neck stretch? "You need to breathe," he said, "please." He was afraid she might die, and he thought, Did I do this to you? But he said only, "Please." And finally the pain took another break and she slept, and the nurses took her into the next room. He heard the doctor say, "Pant, pant like a puppy." The only cry he heard was hers, and a nurse took him down the hall to wait.

She cried a lot in the weeks after that. She sat at

her end of the sofa, knees pulled up to her chin. Her maternity leave ran up to the end of the school year, and one night she said, "I'm going to give up my contract. I just can't do it." Her long, dark hair wasn't shiny any more; she didn't wash it very often. She slept a lot.

He had told her to talk to someone, that she wasn't herself; and he had called her doctor for a name, writing it down on the note pad by the phone: Dr. Kenneth Katzner, 293-7328. He looked at it every day and knew it by heart, and every day he asked her if she'd made an appointment, and she always said the same thing, "Maybe tomorrow, when I feel better." She didn't want to go out; they made excuses to their friends. "I only need you," she said, but without looking at him. It was hard to get her attention sometimes, or to guess what she was thinking.

Working as a meat cutter at the Fareway, Walter liked the clean thud of the cleaver against the chopping block; liked the cool, waxy feel of the meat, odorless as a new wound; liked the slide of the sawdust under his feet. Even the rib-like streaks of blood his fingers traced on the white apron were satisfying somehow. Leaving the cool supermarket on a certain afternoon, he was struck hard by the high humidity and heat of the day. His body felt very heavy, and when he got home he stood still in the kitchen, staring at the telephone pad, a glass of water sweating in his hand. He had noticed that from one day to the next the top page

curled up from the bottom corners, and day by day ink lines tangled inward from the edges; flowing, aimless designs snarled closer around the therapist's name, until on that day it was overgrown entirely, and he knew he wouldn't mention it again. He found Janie propped in bed, reading in a low angle of yellow lamplight; the shades were drawn. He held the page, crumpled and clenched in his fist. When he held it out to her he could see the blood under his fingernails. "I'm going away for a few days," he said.

The pages of her book idly fanned against her thumbnail with a slow, ticking sound. She watched them move, and finally she said, "Would you really leave me here alone?"

And so three days ago they came north to this borrowed cabin. He brought his typewriter, and a ream of blank yellow paper, although writing was never something he could do particularly well.

Now he sits at the typewriter, looking at the triangular birch leaves outside the rusty screen and types automatically. And then he edits, and sometimes he asks her to read what he's just finished. She says something like, "You have to move me, offer something, something, more than this." And then she draws away from him and goes off to take another walk. He watches her go, down the hill, toward the lake below, wearing her rust-colored, down vest, quilted like a grenade. She always complains of being cold.

In five years they've never been this alone together.

He stands in the window; the lake breeze smells like rain. Was it a mistake, coming here for a whole week? He looks at the canary-yellow pages in his hand, at the poem she's just read. And then he puts his fingers on the keys again, to begin again. The S key always sticks, but he keeps on going, pounding the keys as hard as he can.

Self pity
is as barren
as a boiled egg
and twice as plain.

There. Would that get a rise out of her?

He leaves it in the typewriter and goes out himself, heading in another direction, out of the gray, clapboard cabin, through giant, feather-shaped, bluish pines and down the road, away from the lake. She is probably watching the lake breathe, toeing the puffed bladders of dead fish, the reeds cut off by motors and washed ashore. Watching the lake cleanse itself. The sky is solid blue and he looks for clouds. And they are barely there, low on the horizon, behind the trees. He tries to think of something he can build into a long, powerful poem. Something that will move her, more than her grief can. It's been two months, and she's buried herself. It was his child too. He saw that nurse with a bundle of white and didn't know what it was. He got tired of waiting in that small room with its outdated magazines and floor-stand ashtray full of white sand, and he started down the corridor. And the nurse walked past him with that

white bundle, and he didn't even know what it was. He never told her that.

Under the pine trees, his feet not making a sound on needles that smell musty and resinous, Walter stops. What was it that his mother used to say to him if he wanted something he couldn't have? If wishes were horses, beggars would ride. She was standing in a room, brushing her hair. There was a crackling sound, and her hair rose up to meet the brush with every stroke. That's when he asked her, and she finally said, "There wasn't even a war on. It was the freeway, where he died." And then she stopped brushing her hair and, with that look she got sometimes that made it seem possible, she said, "I was pretty then," and she pushed her hair back from her forehead and leaned forward and looked right into the mirror. It was after that that he always called her Helen.

On the sun-porch she had a certain pillow covered with pale blue felt and with a gold-colored leather seal glued onto it, big as a dinner plate. Lying there on hot summer afternoons, trying to read, he would smell the same scent that is here in these woods now. That pillow was hard and uncomfortable to lean against, a souvenir of a trip she must have taken some time. When she was very young, perhaps. It was filled with pine needles. And there it is. The smell of the woods makes him remember. Be careful what you

wish for. No. If wishes were horses....

He stands still. He hears only the conversations of birds and the far-away sweeping sound of the lake. The first time he saw Janie it was across a room, and she turned away from someone she was talking to with a slight sideways tilt of her face. She smiled at him—a grin, really—and then, as if realizing that she didn't know him, she turned away again. It was like that with Janie. Used to be like that. That was a party. And there were many, frivolous memories. One especially has stayed in his mind; it has a reality of its own that he can visit, reenter and walk through again like a scene in a play. Some detail might have been missed, the first time around. But parties are frivolous things, aren't they? Janie never did like to drink, but she loved being around people, even strangers.

In Phoenix, the first year Walter and Janie were together, a party on a certain November evening filled three apartments that opened onto a common courtyard. All the doors were open and stereos were playing. All evening he wandered through a chaos of Mexican string band and whiny Indian sitar music, of talking and laughter. And he kept losing her, looking for her, over and over. Turning away from a conversation and seeing that she was gone again, he went from room to room. He found her, of course; she'd be sitting cross-legged on the floor or leaning against a wall looking up at someone, her eyes open wide and her lips slightly

parted with that look of absorbed wonder. He'd move up beside her and she'd grin and touch him lightly on the arm, an acknowledgement. And then a few minutes later, when he was into the conversation, she'd be gone again.

And that time, the one he remembers so often, he followed her across a room and she whirled around suddenly as someone behind them said, "Hey, Janie," and he bumped into her; her eyes narrowed and she said, "Walt, do you have to follow me all the time?"

"How did that guy know your name?"

"We were just talking to him a few minutes ago. Don't you remember?"

"I don't think any of these people even know each other." The way he remembers it, it was so crowded that no one could move without touching someone else.

She put her face right up under his chin. "I'm just trying to get to the bathroom. Do you mind if I go in there by myself?"

And that made him mad, the tone of her voice. And he needed the bathroom too. So he did go in with her. And while she unzipped her jeans and tugged them down and sat, her knees knobby and tan sticking out from the gather of her white panties, he sat down on the edge of the tub. He took a bit of the white nylon between a thumb and finger. It was slippery and soft.

"Now I suppose you're going to tell me you love me."

she said.

"Let's get out of here."

"I'm having a good time."

"Let's go someplace by ourselves."

"You act like you're addicted to me," she said. He watched the side-to-side wiggle of her getting her jeans back up.

"You're leaning on me, and I can't stand it, and I'm leaving."

And she left the bathroom. When he followed a few minutes later, she was gone. He looked through all the rooms of all three apartments, but she was really gone. Their car was still outside, an old white Edsel he'd just gotten, a real find. He found her a few blocks down the street, walking fast. They drove out into the desert because he didn't want to go home and fight again. They didn't say anything for miles.

The wooden screen door clacks shut behind him and the inside of the cabin is shadowed; he's walked for hours. "Janie," he says, but there is only silence. He walks over to the window and looks over the tops of the trees down to the strip of sand marking the shore. The darkening lake is ruffled with low light. Behind him her vest hangs on the back of a chair; the posts of the ladder-back push up through the armholes like tiny arms.

In the bedroom, dark and too warm, he pushes open the window to let some air in. She's curled on the bed under

an olive drab blanket, someone's old army blanket. He puts his hand on her forehead; she's sweating, but she pulls the blanket tight around her neck and moans slightly, as if drugged by heat and dreams. "Janie," he says. He sits beside her and the old mattress sags under him and she rolls uphill, with a muffled protest. "Come on, now. Wake up. You're too warm. You won't sleep tonight."

He pulls the blanket off her shoulders, and then he gets it away from her grasp and she turns onto her stomach, her hands moving under her pelvis. She smells like damp wool. He touches her hair, combing it back from her neck with his fingers. Her t-shirt is wet and wrinkled, and her shoulder fits the palm of his hand perfectly as he tries to roll her over gently. "Bastard," she says. "Leave me alone." He moves his hand down her back and onto her round rump; her body goes rigid, and the sound she makes is not a word, but still a protest. "Janie," he says. She raises her head and pushes the hair away from her eyes. Her face is puffy with sleep. "Walter," she says. "You got what you wanted. Leave me alone. That's all I want."

Walking into the kitchen, he curses the black, pot-bellied stove. He could build a fire easily enough, but he doesn't know how to cook on the thing. "YOU'RE SLEEPING OUR LIFE AWAY," he yells. "I'M GOING TO TOWN." He listens. "JANIE." And then he says, as if to himself, "This isn't my idea of being alone together."

Put outside, standing by the dusty Chevy station wagon, he changes his mind. The place has no electricity, no plumbing, only the trees and the lake and the light and now the darkness. He tries to remember the name on the note pad, but all he can remember are the doodles, the invading, preoccupied scribbles. Back inside, he stands in the bedroom doorway and says, "I'd like someone to talk to, you know. There's nothing to do. I can't walk and write all the time. And I haven't got your goddamn talent for sleeping all curled up that way." He waits, and then he says, "Can't you say something to me?"

And so he goes down to the lake, pulls the peeling, gray-green, wooden rowboat across the sand, and pushes off. The water near shore smells like a woman and is littered with yellow leaves, curled like tiny hands. A path of orange light narrows across the water toward the low sun. He follows, with his back to the light, and watches the small roof of the cabin grow smaller. A light flickers in the window, and he knows at least she's up. He pulls hard on the oars.

Out on the water the darkness is not so consuming, and as the orange path of light broadens out and disappears, the water flutters with silver. It is a thin night, the moon an eyelash of light. He stops rowing and drifts. He tries to remember the names of constellations. Cassiopeia. Ursa Major and Ursa Minor, the little bear. He looks for Orion, with three stars in his belt and little else to define him,

but the hunter is not there, in the summer sky. He tucks the oars into the boat. The only thing to do is to wait it out. "Hello?" he shouts over the dark water. He drifts.

The night of that party they made love in his old, used Edsel, a white car with a surprised look. They drove out into the desert. The doors were open like wings and there was no one to watch for, only the towering cacti and the everlasting flat sky. There they were alone, but that was different. A long time ago. Her head had reared back that time too, but with pleasure, her long hair fanning out over the end of the car seat. When they moved to Iowa the car became a joke. It was a desert car, the windshield finely pitted by a sandstorm. On nice days the glass was clear, but when it rained it went blind with water. And when freckles of rust appeared on the body, they got rid of it.

He rows back across the lake, his stomach rumbling with the thunder, and makes it back up the hill just as a gentle rain begins. Striking a match in the dark, narrow kitchen, he lights a kerosene lamp, finds some cheese, and opens a bottle of wine.

"Walt?" she says, and he turns around. She is still clutching that drab blanket. "Can we build a fire? I'm cold."

"Yes. I'll do it." He pours some wine into a handleless cup and holds it out to her, but she shakes her head. "Hungry?"

"No."

"You're getting too thin."

"I know."

"This isn't working out, is it?"

"I guess not."

"I just wish you'd snap out of it. The world hasn't come to an end. It was beautiful out on the lake. Maybe tomorrow we can go together."

"This is a terrible place."

"You think I wanted it to happen?"

She puts her head down and her dark hair screens her face and he knows she's crying again. But she raises her head and her face is dry. "I'm not just feeling sorry for myself," she says.

"You read that?"

The shadows around her features move in the unsteady light from the kerosene lamp. "Sometimes you're mean with words," she says.

"Do you still want a fire?"

"No. Not if you'll come to bed. I'm so cold."

And so they crawl into bed, which is covered with a quilt tied with bright colored yarn. The sheets are cool, and the bottoms of her feet against his legs are like ice. "I just want to sleep," she says. And she does, plain and silent in the secrecy of sleep. Insects bat against the screens, and he remembers. It's always the same.

The nurse was short and blond and very young-looking,

wearing a shiny nylon uniform and white hose. Her crepe-soled shoes were silent as she approached, carrying something in her arms, a bundle of white, small and neatly wrapped. She walked past him down the long corridor, and it was the way she carried it that made him turn and look as she passed through the swinging doors that closed three times after she was gone.

Walter rouses himself, but again and again she passes him and walks the hallway. She's there, anonymous in hospital white, whenever he tries to sleep. He didn't know what it was; he never told her that—or that loss in the absence of sorrow is a sorrow too awful to share.

And now there is all this difference. He reaches over, and she's still there, curled behind him, sleeping. Between them now there is nothing new. But at the beginning of his sleep her dark hair swings as she walks past him in those silent shoes, down the diminishing hallway. That bundle of white. Bearing something forever away.

Cold Hands, 3 A.M.

Anna's hand rests for a moment on her rounded stomach; she tugs idly at the edge of her white uniform where it is stretched tightly and buttoned, and then she quickly picks up her fork again. John spoons gravy onto yet another biscuit—his third, is it his third?—and they continue to eat in silence. The platter between them is still heaped with fried chicken, and she's mashed too many potatoes again. After awhile she says, "I want you to drive me to work tonight." He looks up and swallows. "You need to get out of the house," she goes on. He pauses, his glass of water half-way to his mouth, and she says, "Well? Did you hear me?"

He wets his lower lip with his tongue, and he speaks very deliberately. "Drive you to work. You want me to drive you to work."

"I've been thinking about it. I don't like coming home alone in the middle of the night."

"You've never been afraid before," he says. "You've been driving yourself all this time."

"I know it bothers you that I'm working and you can't. I want you to do this for me. You will, won't you?" The table between them is scattered with their good dishes, white plates and bowls scribbled with a blue design and half-full of food.

"I guess I could, but it beats me why. I suppose you have your mind made up."

"Yes."

He stands up and carries his plate over to the sink, soundlessly—he's in his stocking feet. He stands there, with his back to her, looking at the doctor's diet, spattered and curled as an old leaf, taped to the cupboard beside the sink. Beside it is the grocery list he carefully wrote this afternoon and read to her as if it were a poem. "It's not my fault we eat like this," she says, looking down at her plate, smeared and empty. "It's just no use; you don't listen to me. I did try."

"You start nagging me again about that diet, about walking every day and all the rest, and I won't listen. It's my life," he says. "You really want me to drive you to work?"

"I'm getting fat. We both are."

"And get up at three in the morning and go pick you up?"

"All my clothes are tight."

"Get out of bed in the middle of the night and pick you up?"

"Yes."

"You really do, don't you?" It's an accusation, the way he says it. He is still staring at the two pieces of paper, one speckled and old and the other neat and new. Then he looks down into the sink, still with his back to her. "I'll take care of the dishes later," he says finally. "Get your

things so you won't be late."

The only sound in the room is the refrigerator's incessant purr.

John stops the car abruptly in front of the emergency entrance to the hospital and waits for Anna to get out, but she doesn't move. He raises his arm to show her the red-light digits of his watch—6:45—and the tiny dots separating the hour from the minutes beat on and off as if monitoring his pulse. "We're early," she says, but she has the breathless feeling of being late. She takes a deep breath of too-warm air. He has the heater on; she can feel it breathing on her ankles. She rolls down the window, and the air moving in is cool and smells of wood smoke. "Why do we always have to be early everywhere we go?"

"Well," he says, and his large hands move impatiently around the steering wheel, tracing a circle in the wavering light. Outside on the pavement, along the edges of the white brick building, purplish maple leaves scratch and skitter, crab-wise. "Better early than late," he says. "You might as well go on in."

"No. I have something to say," she says.

"Now?" He turns toward her. "You're not going to start in again, are you?" Under the green cap he always wears, now that fall is here, his face is indistinct and full of shadows. Still, she can see that he is frowning. "You'll be

late for sure."

"There's time. And I don't want a fight."

He is looking straight ahead, across the parking lot. This time of year it is already dark by seven o'clock. The lot is well-lighted and half-full of cars, and their shadows crowd the empty spaces on the pale cement. "It beats me why you insisted I drive you tonight," he says, "when you've been perfectly well able to drive yourself all this time." The engine of the car begins to throb, and he presses down on the accelerator to keep it running. "This car takes after me," he says. "It keeps trying to die."

"I can't stand your talking about dying all the time," she says. "I thought you'd feel better if you drove."

"So I'll feel useful, I suppose, and everything will be cozy. Maybe we'd both be better off if I'd just kick off."

"There, you see," she says, too loudly, turning to look full at him. He's looking down at his knees, and the visor of his cap casts a curving shadow over the top part of his face, but she can see his mouth. "I wish you'd stop talking like that," she says, very softly.

"You should understand that. That place of yours," he jabs his hand toward the looming building, thumb out, like a hitch-hiker, "is full of death." His hand is large and mitten-like in the darkness. "But you don't even try to understand."

"It's been two years, and you're strong again." She

stops. She raises her right hand to her face, and her face is flushed and too warm and her hand feels cold and good there. "The only thing wrong with you," she says, "is that you're afraid."

"Afraid? Oh, hell, Anna, we all have to go sometime," he says, pressing the accelerator again. The car rocks slightly. "You always think you can fix everything. You can't. Save that for in there," he says, jabbing toward the hospital again.

"It's like a sickness with you, being so afraid," she says, "and I'm sick of it." She reaches for the door handle; the plastic knob has long since fallen off, and the chrome prong of the handle is too small in her hand and cold to the touch. "I'm sorry," she says, looking back at him.

He still looks straight ahead and she leans toward him until her mouth meets the roughness of his face. She touches him only with her mouth, but her hands are moving toward his shoulders, and in her mind she is already turning him toward her, when he pulls sideways away from her—only slightly, but away. And there he stays, unmoving. She holds her breath, and when she finally lets it go, she pulls back and leans against her car door. The cold handle of the door is a relief, and the door unlatches with a sound so familiar it's almost a comfort. She quickly slides out, walks up to the heavy double doors of the building, and presses the buzzer.

She focuses on the words—EMERGENCY ENTRANCE—that are

painted on the door's window, perfect black letters. And then, far beyond in the brightly lit waiting room, which is small and almost always empty, someone approaches, moving slowly. Didn't even come close, she is thinking. I can make it happen. When I find the right words. He pulls away. Thinks I'm making fun. That I don't understand. An orderly in a green smock, unbuttoned at the throat, clicks open the door, and she hears the car behind her move away.

"You took too long," she says loudly. "You see this?" she says, even louder, pointing to the words on the door. "You know what this means? It doesn't mean take your time. Someone could have been dying out here."

He frowns and walks away down the hallway, saying nothing.

The emergency room is quiet. Anna has seen no one all evening. It is 12:15; the face of the clock is as white as the wall and hums a monotonous hum. Is this place full of death? Of course it's not true. Most people who come here will not die for a long time, and it's not an exciting place, a place of endless life-and-death moments; it's a place of routine, and often quiet, like now. The patients are asleep, most of them; and most of them will go home soon. Like Erica. Anna can't stop thinking about her.

Now Erica is asleep on the fourth floor, in the children's ward, while Anna is here in the basement emergency room. Erica was admitted yesterday because she has the mumps. She has

been a patient here many times before; she has cerebral palsy, and any illness is serious for her. Her muscles are so weak that she can't even cough without help. Now her glands are swollen on both sides of her slender neck, frog-like, and mock her smallness.

She is so frail that if she loses her balance, sitting on her bed, she falls back flat, and is unable to sit up again without help. That's what happened yesterday. Anna was visiting the children's ward in the afternoon, as she sometimes does, and she tried to help Erica get her arm into her robe. The girl fell back, startled, and said, "Don't touch me again. I can do it. Don't touch me. Your hands are too cold."

Anna called an orderly to help because she understood, knew Erica was right. The orderly looked at them, bewildered; Erica is so tiny, and Anna is a large woman with broad, strong hands. Erica looked at Anna with shadows of defiance in her pale blue eyes as the orderly lifted her shoulders forward so she could sit again. Cold hands. Now, the next day, the memory stings as Anna runs water over her hands, as hot as she can stand. Warm heart, someone said once. Cold hands, warm heart. She remembers that, too, but she tries not to think about that now.

Turning off the steamy water, she dries her hands. The faucets too; she polishes them so not a water spot shows. The entire room is immaculate white and chrome, and murmurs with

the hum of the clock and the gentle sound of the ice machine against the far wall. Should anything go wrong out there in the night, this room is ready. Waiting.

Instrument kits for all kinds of emergencies are neatly folded in white bundles on the shelves of cabinets with glass doors. The examining table is narrow and white in the outrageous light of the room. The glare makes her tired.

Erica is only seven. Somehow her words sounded like the voice of the world; but now Anna, remembering, is ashamed of feeling hurt. Everyone says Erica is a very brave child, hardly complaining at all. She's used to it all and knows she'll get better and go home. What did she say? Don't touch me with your cold hands.

The center of their mattress is like the spine of an overturned book. In the night, when she wakes up, his shoulders are massive and his hair, still very dark, makes a dark dent in the white pillow. His breathing sometimes mutters in his throat, and she is wide awake, listening. His back looms like a wall, and when she puts her hand against it he seems not to feel it at all. Once the knobby bones of his spine, the curving ribs, were close to the surface, tight to the muscles, and he turned naturally to her in the night. Now they have grown huge and separate; the distance between them is measured by their own bodies.

His heart pumps and squeezes inside, his bad heart. One

heart attack, then two, and he is afraid of dying; so he stays on his side of the bed, their life as redundant as a snore.

Still, he brings home from the store more and more of the forbidden foods: real butter, beef ribs red with barbeque sauce, cheesecake with blueberries big as his thumbs. "I have to have this one pleasure," he says. "If I can't eat the way I want I might as well be dead," he says. When she thinks of him while she's away, it's with a fork in his hand, across the table from her, his mouth shiny. Even his tongue has grown fat. Once when she touched him he said "Jesus Christ, Anna, your hands are like ice." And when he saw her face change, he said, "Warm heart, though. Warm heart."

It's always the same.

The phone rings and Anna realizes her mind has been wandering again. The ringing bounces back from all the hard surfaces of the room, and she answers. It's Alice Moore, fourth floor. "Anna," she says, sounding worried. "I'm having a problem with Erica Pine."

"What's wrong?"

"It's a nosebleed."

"That doesn't sound serious," says Anna. "I thought she'd be asleep by now. What time is it? As she asks, Anna glances up at the clock above her. 2:35.

"Two-thirty," says Alice.

"I don't understand."

"It started while she was asleep. The pressure from her swollen glands. And her fever is going back up. I can't get it stopped. I've tried everything."

"Ice on the back of her neck?"

"Yes. It hasn't worked. It's been over an hour since it began. Longer than that, even. Any ideas?"

"What does Dr. Spencer say?"

"He says keep trying and call him in a half-hour if it doesn't stop. She's getting scared, really. Could you come up here?"

"You know I'm alone."

"I'll come down and relieve you."

"I'm sure you can handle a nosebleed. I have to stay here, you know that. Call me when it stops." Alice has been a nurse for thirty-five years; surely she can stop a nosebleed. We learn that in our mothers' houses: ice cubes wrapped in old washcloths, a finger pressed against the base of the nose, the salty taste of blood in the back of the throat. Erica's probably not scared at all; it's hard to believe Erica is scared. She's such a brave child. Everyone says so.

Anna walks around the examining table, slowly. The white cloth covering it has ridges where it was folded. Big hospitals use paper now, disposable things. Here they still use cloth. In a couple of hours the laundry will fill the

basement with the fragrance of detergent. Now there is only a vague antiseptic smell, rubbing alcohol and Pinesol. Anna is thinking about Erica, so small that she seems to disappear when she lies flat in her bed, except of course for her face at a slight angle against the pillow.

She looks over at the glass door of a medicine cabinet and sees her own face floating there, a caricature. Soft crescents hang under her eyes and her jaw repeats itself. She unlocks the door and opens it, and her face goes away. From inside, rows of vials and bottles give off a medicinal odor as cloyingly sweet as the taste of envelope glue. She touches one of the small brown bottles with a fingertip, and then closes the door.

Opening the door of another cabinet, she pulls a surgical glove from its gray box; like a tissue box, it dispenses one at a time. The glove is soft and powdery, fine as the membrane of an egg. She pulls it onto her left hand, stretching it—taut and cool—over her skin. So touch, thin, fine as a baby's skin, it rises like a nipple over the stone of her ring. She grasps the glove by its rolled edge at the wrist and pulls it off with a snap. Alice is taking good care of Erica, Ann's sure of that. Alice is a small, pretty woman. Her hands are probably warm as bathwater.

Anna pulls another glove from the box and slips it from its wrapper, unfolding it like a message. Just one of the nurses, she is thinking. The one with cold hands. Cold

hands.

Anna crosses to the ice machine and begins filling the glove with shaved ice. Her fingers are large and numb from the ice, so filling the glove is difficult. It grows, bulges, until it resembles her own hands, plump and pale. She ties the glove at the wrist, awkwardly, like a balloon. She crosses to the desk and lays the rounded hand beside the telephone. "Come on down and relieve me," she says. "I think I can help Erica."

"Good," says Alice. And that's all she says.

Anna can hear the elevator almost immediately, the building is so quiet; and then she can hear Alice's heels tapping closer in the hallway. Her own shoes squeak on the tile floor, like a balloon being twisted.

As the accordion-like brass grill of the old elevator door closes, Anna can already see how it will be, placing the icy hand over Erica's small face, very gently, the middle fingers on each side of her nose, the heel of the hand on her forehead; she can see Erica's head move a little deeper into her pillow. As the elevator moves upward, she can imagine the huge hand conforming itself to the hollows of the small face, seeming to hold her there. Her eyelids will go shut, pale as eggshells, and slowly, slowly, the bleeding will stop. When the glove is lifted from her face there will be pale triangles where the cold hand lay. She will open her eyes, and Anna will say—can hear herself say, as the elevator opens onto the fourth floor,

and a small bell sounds—Yes, I do have very cold hands, don't I? An insult will become a joke. A blessing. A good idea.

Erica lies in the sharp white light from an overhead lamp. There are bloodstains on the front of her white gown. Bright blood appears in her left nostril and is blotted away by a young nurse Anna doesn't know, a black-haired woman, her hair pulled back from her temples in tight ridges. "It's not too bad now," says the black-haired nurse, "but we can't get it stopped. It's gone on for so long now."

"You can go back to the desk," Anna says. "I'll take over here." Erica's neck is swollen heavily and she has a look of sleepy resignation on her face. "You're not scared, are you?"

Suddenly Erica does look frightened, her eyes very round.

"Of course you're not. But you'd like to get some sleep, I'll bet."

The child nods her head and looks toward the young nurse, who still stands by the bed, making no move to leave.

"You see this?" Anna holds up the bulging glove. A thin trickle of blood runs down onto Erica's mouth and she frowns as the black-haired nurse wipes it away. "This is going to be very cold, you see, but it's guaranteed to stop your nosebleed."

Still Erica looks at the other nurse, and Anna looks at her too, and explains how the glove will work. Erica will

not look at it. "That's a good idea," says the young nurse. "How did you ever think of that?" But before Anna can answer, she says, "Here, maybe I'd better do that. Erica is used to me."

She reaches, and Anna puts the icy glove into her hands.

Anna leaves the ward and walks to the end of the hall where the venetian blinds have been pulled up crookedly in the narrow window that looks down over the parking lot. The thin wail of a siren begins to grow down below in the dark streets. It grows louder as it rounds the building, and then—with a blip of sound—it stops below. In the silence the red lights of the ambulance continue to sweep over the parking lot again and again. And then the red lights stop too.

They say nothing in the car on the way home. Inside the house John stops to bend over and take off his shoes, one hand against the wall for balance. It's an old habit, acquired in his mother's house, before Anna even knew him. He always takes off his shoes just inside the door. She stands behind him and waits, and then follows him into the kitchen. He opens the refrigerator, and as he stands there, the plate of fried chicken under foggy waxed paper in his hand, Anna tells him about Erica. All of it. She tells him how she felt, that Erica didn't want her to touch her, that it hurt so much, and she didn't know why. But that everything was suddenly too much, and she wanted something to go right,

really right, for an insult to become a blessing, just for a moment. And that it didn't happen, of course, and that she knew it was foolish.

"We should have adopted a baby," he says. He puts the food on the table and the plate meets the table top with a knock, like a single footstep. "You wanted one. Time just went by. I didn't know it was so important to you."

"No, it's not that at all. It's just that for now, for this part of my life, I seem to have lost all my connections." She sits at the table, looking at her hands curled in her lap. The plate of chicken is on the table between them, still covered. The lines where the waxed paper is creased are feathery and white, and beads of moisture have formed inside. He has forgotten it, and he looks at her. "I thought Erica was such a brave little girl," she says, "and she is, but she was scared. She wanted the other nurse to take care of her because she was used to her; that's not so hard to understand. Anyone would know that, but I thought somehow that..."

"You take good care of lots of people. This one little girl doesn't make that much difference, does she?"

"I suppose not," she says. "And then there was something else."

She tells him about standing at the end of the hall and hearing the sirens and seeing the red lights. She tells him about pushing the button for the elevator and then

running to the stairs, She tells him about running down the stairs, getting breathless—heart pounding—running down the hall to the emergency bay, stopping, one hand against the wall, looking to see who it was, who it was being carried out of the ambulance into the brilliance of the treatment room.

"I was afraid it would be you," she says. She shakes her head from side to side. "I'm always afraid it will be you. All those nights, waiting there in that room, all night; I'm always afraid it will be you."

She looks at his face, and the flesh around his eyes is plumped with feeling, a look she hasn't seen for a long time. He starts to say something, but he doesn't. She looks away from him, down at her hands, and closes her eyes. He moves his chair closer, and the legs of the chair make such an innocent sound against the kitchen floor that she is afraid she may cry after all.

"You should have told me before," he says, very softly.

She looks at him, but he is already turning away so that she can't see his face. He walks to the door of the kitchen, and then stops, but he doesn't turn around. He looks very tired, the way his shoulders curve forward, the way his hand rests on the doorframe. "Anna," he says. He waits for her to answer, but when she doesn't, he finally goes on. "From now on I want you to take the car. I'll always be afraid I'll oversleep, and be late to get you."

And then he leaves the room. Pretty soon she hears the springs creak as he sits on the bed. It is the middle of the night, after all.

She sits for awhile, both feet flat on the floor. She's tired, too, and tomorrow is another day. And what else? Finally she gets up and walks down the hall into the bedroom. He lies on his side, turned away from her. Though he's only a shape in the dim light, she can see his shoulders moving slightly as he breathes. He's not asleep. She could say something. If I say the right thing, exactly the right words, will he listen? Will he? I can't think of them, of what I want to say. He's not asleep. Is he?

He might be asleep.

She walks back down the dark hallway toward the light of the kitchen. It isn't so terrible, after all. Erica is probably asleep. And he's all right. It isn't so terrible. She carries the plate of chicken over to the refrigerator and opens the door. The little light inside has burned out, and the food is crowded in the darkness. She pushes the plate onto one of the shelves, on top of something else. It slides a little as she lets go.

Killing Time

Driving me half-way across the country to his brother's farm in Ohio, Alan kept saying, "Don't worry. You'll make a big hit." Funny that in New York his high laced shoes and his favorite plaid shirts had made him seem different because the men in my office always wore suits. When we arrived to the shouts and waves of his family—all those plaid shirts and flowered sundresses—I thought his clothes made him seem the same. And he fell into a different way of talking, introducing me to all his relatives. A red tablecloth fluttered on a table set out in the shady yard, and the trees and the grass smelled steamy and sweet in the heat. There were chickens running in the driveway and a hefty black dog with loose eyelids and a long pink tongue. Everyone gathered around us. "Oh, yes," they all said, real slow. And, "Well, good." They looked me over, slowing down when they came to my belly. And I looked up at Alan, who suddenly was proud. I guessed everything would be all right.

One of the nephews grabbed ahold of me with a hot sticky hand and dragged me over to the porch steps where a cat was having kittens. The boy crouched down and pointed. I always had heard cats did that in secret places—in barns or behind furnaces—but this one was different. She was too used to being around people, I guess. The birth was black and gummy-looking, and I couldn't watch for too long.

I didn't want to, but I kept walking over to look. I'd been feeling so special. That little animal didn't make a sound. I could have killed that cat, just for making me watch.

Alan's a photographer. I first liked him because he's a real artist type. He has a reddish beard and brown hair, which I thought was pretty unusual until I met his brother that day. Alan used to take me to his darkroom when we first knew each other. The light was red in there, the red I see when I close my eyes in the bright sun, like that day in Ohio when I looked for a moment through the blood of my own eyelids and thought, "Oh, no." Anyway, I used to love to watch him developing his pictures, the way he'd flutter his hands over the paper under the enlarger, making shadows like quickly flying birds. He could control how the picture turned out that way. He could print the same picture a lot of different ways by how he moved his hands. I just watched. It seemed like a power he had. If I touched his arm in the red dark, I could feel the hairs rise up under my fingers. We all have some kind of power. It's hard to figure.

After they got through meeting me that day, things kind of split up. That's what started me feeling bad, I guess. The men were in the side yard shooting beer cans off the fence, while the women were hurrying about preparing food. I'd never heard shooting, except on television. For them

to be doing that seemed obsolete. That's a word I learned at work. I type real fast, but I don't spell too well. But I keep looking things up, which is a real smart thing to do. Anyway, what they were doing was so obsolete. Well, I suppose that's not fair. They were having a good time, taking turns trying to hit their target. The tiny plastic push button off an aerosol spray can—a tiny thing, the size of the end of someone's little finger—had been stuck in the middle of a piece of cardboard. Someone would hit it soon. They all tried. Their quarry. I watched.

I'm a Show-me from Missouri, and I'm quiet, but I've seen a few things. But no one was asking. No one was paying much attention to me. I knew I should be in the kitchen, cutting up potatoes for potato salad or something, making a good impression. But my sister-in-law, Willa, had said, "There are plenty of hands here, and you must be tired from the car." Willa is married to Len, Alan's brother. Twenty years older than Alan, he is, and he has no teeth and looks very old. He has a reddish mustache and gray hair. That day his hair was real short around his ears and around the back of his neck, and his skin was white there, the rest of it so sunburned. I guess he'd just had his hair cut. And his red plaid shirt looked new. I wished I'd met Alan's family before I married him. That's what I was thinking. I started to know they didn't like me, but then I decided to feel superior, a lady of leisure. Luck had turned me into that. That's what I

was thinking. And I started to believe it, holding my chin out a little. But not for long. I wandered back inside.

I sat at the kitchen table for a minute, one of those plastic-topped tables with tubular chrome legs, bent like big hairpins. It was loaded with food. Two little blond nieces were licking chocolate frosting off beaters and sprinkling paprika on yellow mounds of deviled eggs. Alan's sister—he calls her Sister, but her name is Judy—gave me a sweaty glass of iced tea with sugar. She was rolling out biscuits, hot as it was. The flour made a little cloud. Maybe she didn't know what to say to me. "You going to nurse your baby?" she asked.

"No," I said. "Alan says I shouldn't." She bent over a little more, and I could see the pink tip of her tongue moving along inside her upper lip. She was thin and pale as a peeled twig. "You don't listen to him, now," she said. "It's like nothing else, and it's the best thing for a baby."

"I think he'd be jealous," I said. I didn't even know I thought that, and I guess I didn't know what I was saying. It made it sound like Alan was running me. It was embarrassing.

"Jealous?" Judy smiled big. "Then you are lucky, girl."

"Yeah," I said. "I think I'll go find him." It wasn't just a way of getting out of there. I really wanted to be by Alan.

I watched them shoot. With a lot of shouting and fanny-slapping and giving of advice, the men were having fun.

They were saying things like, "Well, damn it all to fuckin' hell," until they saw me there, quiet as a post. And then I asked if I could try. "You go rest," Judy had said when I'd left the kitchen. "You'll have plenty of work to do after your baby comes." And so there I was, out with the men— Len and Alan and the farmer from the next farm, Joe Clearmont; Joe's two sons, Smitty and Ding; and Judy's husband, Frank. Right away, Alan came over to me, and he bent over so no one else could hear, and he said, "Can't you be helping, now?" And he pointed to the house. Well, he never talked like that in New York. The way he said it. Can't you be helping, now? I started to tell him what they had said, about going off to rest, but I decided not to say anything. Alan thought they wouldn't like me, I could tell that.

Anyway, there I stood, with a gun in my hand. Don't ask me what kind. I know nothing about guns. Len showed me how to hold it, with my arm out. It was some kind of a pistol, not a long gun like a rifle. And how to turn my head sideways toward the target, and how to put my feet. His toothless breath was sweet and smelled of beer, like silage, and he put the side of his face close to the side of mine, showing me how it was done. He was liking me fine. One of the Clearmont boys said something smart, low and teasing, like I was his sister. "Better watch it, Len," he said. They were all so familiar like that, like I was part of them, just like that. A big yellow cat lay at the boy's feet, sprawled in the sun, and he

bothered it with his foot.

The sky was real blue that day, except where close to the distant ground it was faded gray, like it was a picture printed with too much flutter of hands. The long fence holding that target was made of squares of wire, with a run of barbed wire along the top, with those ceramic electrical things, like white spools. That Clearmont boy was real young, probably fourteen, and wanted credit for knowing something, so he said it again. The cat reached out its claws in the dust, in a patch of sun, and I could feel old Len's whiskery face on mine. "Hey, Len, you ain't enjoyin' that?" the boy shouted.

They all laughed. Len pulled his hand back from the gun, back along my outstretched arm, and he was standing close with his arms around me in a circle, like I was a rolled-up rug and he was about to carry me off. And they laughed all over again. I just stood there with my arm straight out. Len backed away, and so I was on my own.

I took aim. I could see that plastic button real clear, small as it was, like it was a bright eye in a dark place, and my arm didn't tremble. They were still laughing. Especially Alan. It made me feel real calm, waiting for him to stop. Knowing that something was about to explode.

Moment in a Hollywood Movie

Safe in her own bed, in her own apartment, Suzanne sleeps well, curled slightly, a pillow crumpled under her tangled, reddish hair, dreaming her favorite dream. Last night it was already dark when she walked uphill from the Laguna Pharmacy on Coast Highway. Arriving home, she walked through the small rooms—checking behind the shower curtain, snapping on the light in the walk-in closet, glancing into the narrow, yellow, Mexican-tiled kitchen—satisfying herself she was really alone. Often she spends her evenings out with Ted, whom she loves, but last night he was on duty (he works for the Laguna Beach Police Department) so she fell asleep reading. She sleeps naked under only a sheet; it's a warm night.

Now her eyes move behind her shiny lids and she murmurs something in her sleep and licks her upper lip. The morning is turning pink behind the eggshell drapes, which move slightly. Pleated lavender shadows fan out across the pale carpet, and there are no sounds in her dream. Suddenly there is a loud knocking, and her eyes open and her open hand tightens and her book falls off the edge of the mattress with a whispering sound. More pounding, and then he is shouting her name, "SuzANNE, SuzANNE," over and over. She doesn't recognize the voice. Still he pounds on the door. She turns over onto her stomach and pushes her face into the foam pillow and tries to think. She has no phone. She

thinks of screaming. The surrounding buildings are close, separated by courtyards bound with high board fences, but she doesn't know any of the neighbors, except for Mrs. Murphy, who is too far away to hear. The door is locked, and whoever he is, he'll go away. He'll go away. The pounding is louder, and he shouts her name again, "SuzANNE."

And then she hears the door open, the way in a dream doors open when they're locked, but like her fists clenched in the sheets under her chin, the footsteps moving across the living room are real. She's not breathing at all. The bed sinks down as he sits beside her. She lifts her face slightly and looks up at him and recognizes him and then she presses her knuckles against her throat and says, "Go away."

"Suzanne," he says. His hand moves under the sheet and up and down the long crease of her spine. She pulls away, but there's no place to go.

She tries not to breathe, not to move at all, and in her mind she stands up naked and runs out into the street where no one believes her. He's stopped saying her name, and she tries to remember his (a cowboy name, Smokey or Dusty) but she's seen him only once before, the time Ted said, "Meet my old buddy." Pushing his hand away, she winds the sheet tighter around her thin body. She feels sick to her stomach. Her legs are crossed at the ankles and his hand is still now, on the small of her back, outside the sheet, and he is silent for a long time. Neither of them moves. She

swallows, but doesn't make a sound, and finally he simply gets up and leaves. She hears the door shut behind him and she waits for a long time to be sure he's really gone. Then she pulls the sheet loose from the bottom of the mattress, and wrapped in it still, she goes to the door.

The lock button in the doorknob is pushed in like a navel, and she pushes the door shut and leans against it, her forehead against the white painted wood. Suddenly she pulls hard on the doorknob without turning it and the door comes open. She pushes it shut again, and then she pushes all her weight against the door, using her shoulder, and in the quiet she hears a click. She sits down on the edge of the chair by the door. It wasn't locked at all. All those times she so carefully locked it, it wasn't locked at all.

Back in bed, a blanket pulled up because she's cold, she tries to remember the dream she'd been having, but when it begins again, she pushes it away with horror, and she is wide awake until the alarm goes off at last. Twice she even gets up to check the door again. "Well, nothing happened," she says right out loud as she soaps herself in the shower. "I'm all right."

And she knows that when she tells Ted what his so-called friend did, he'll probably break his neck or arrest him or something. "He'll kill him," she says, as she leaves the apartment for the short walk down Cypress Drive toward Coast Highway. Her hands are in the pockets of her sweater as she

walks quickly. And tight in the fingers of her right hand she clutches the key.

* * * * *

Suzanne climbed the dusty stairs to her Iowa City apartment early one late-winter morning, hearing the front door of the house click shut behind her and imagining Jason, whom she loved, walking away. They'd spent the evening stuffing all his possessions into a huge Maytag dryer box. He was leaving for Chicago the next morning, hitchhiking. She walked quietly through the soft breathing of her sleeping roommates and into the bathroom, where she stripped and stepped into the steaming claw-footed tub. She left the water running full force while she soaked. If they heard the water, they at least wouldn't hear her sobbing. She curled down toward the surface of the misty water and cried right out loud, and then she dried herself quickly and slipped into her nylon nightgown, which stuck to her damp skin. Chicago seemed the farthest place from Iowa there could be.

A week later, with a timing that made Suzanne think there must be a design to it all, Alex, whom she had once loved, called from southern California. "Two years is a long time," he said, and he sounded just the same, and she thought maybe she still loved him.

"How did you find me?"

"I called your Mom. How are you? I mean, how are you

really?" he wanted to know.

She told him how she hated college and didn't know what she should be doing but it wasn't this. He said the wife he'd married shortly after leaving Iowa wasn't his wife any more and that he might ride his motorcycle back to the midwest for a visit. Would that be all right with her? And she said maybe and thought yes, yes. She tried not to sound too eager. Her mom had always said, "Don't appear too eager." She remembered certain promises that she hadn't kept and the softness of his dark hair and of his mouth.

When a few days later she was walking to her hospital job at five-thirty in the morning, she looked away from the lavender light over the river and saw the name ALEX scrawled in the cement of the sidewalk beside two small hand prints, fingers reaching. She was sure it was meant to be. She'd walked that way for months and never noticed the name before, or the small hands. Something was definitely going on in the universe she didn't understand, so why fight it? She gave notice at work that morning, telling the starched head nurse, Miss Clark of the stern straight mouth and the upturned yellow hair, that she'd work out the two weeks' notice and that was it. She arranged to drop her classes, which she hadn't attended for days anyway, and told the landlord, who was furious, that she'd be leaving soon. With her last paycheck she bought an airline ticket. The next time Alex called—and she was mighty glad he did—she told him which

flight to meet. And a few days later she got a letter from him which described the sea, which she'd never seen before, and said that he wanted her to have his babies and that he was happy. "You were so young two years ago," he said. "I can tell that you've grown up a lot and things will be just the same."

She showed the letter to Nancy and Elaine, her two roommates, and they all agreed that it was the most romantic story they'd ever heard. Then they made popcorn and spent the afternoon packing her things into small square boxes, which they promised to ship to her as soon as she got settled. Elaine said, "Maybe you'll be discovered," and Nancy said, "Yeah, maybe you'll be one of those unknown natural talents and be a movie star and you can send us plane tickets and we'll visit you," and Elaine said, "Yeah, for months." That's when Suzanne said, "I think I'll walk over and see Doug. Maybe he's heard from Jason."

Doug was Jason's old roommate, and when she got there, Jason's bulging dryer box was still sitting in the corner of the basement living room. "The United Parcel guys wouldn't take it like that," said Doug, pointing. "If they'd picked it up it would have ruptured and filled up the whole place with his junk, just like old times." He also told her that Jason had not hitchhiked at all, nor had he gone alone.

"I really must be dumb," Suzanne said to him.

"You always seemed so naive," Doug said then. "I used

to think I should tell you, but you seemed to care so much."

"Yes, I do."

They kissed for a long time, and she thought, Well, I'm leaving town anyway. And she thought maybe it was Doug she really loved. And she promised to write.

The next day, a Sunday, Suzanne's mother came through town, unannounced, and took her to brunch. She was wearing a knit dress and a lot of fine gold chains and was nervous, looking at her watch a lot and asking the usual questions about school. And Suzanne gave the usual answers, about everything being fine, fine. "I'm meeting Brian in Minneapolis tomorrow," her mother said, and Suzanne tried to remember which one was Brian. "We have to talk things over. Everything gets so complicated, baby."

"I suppose."

"Can't live with them, can't live without them."

"I suppose."

"He's worth it, though."

"Brian?"

"Of course."

The next morning Suzanne got onto a Greyhound to go to Des Moines to catch her flight. She carried the cookbook Nancy had given her as a going-away gift, and as the bus mumbled away from the quiet city, she leaned back and looked at her face reflected in the chrome frame of the gray window. How had he described the sea? Restless? Always moving? In her

purse was the letter she'd written to her mother, explaining and telling her not to worry. And that she'd let her know where she was when she was settled. She was going to change planes in Kansas City, and she'd mail it there. She'd never flown before. She was wearing her best wool dress—a black and white hounds-tooth check. She knew she looked good.

* * * * *

Suzanne is still too pale to pass for a California girl, especially today, trying to forget the hand on her back and wanting to tell Ted and to have him get mad and hold her and say she's all right. She doesn't feel all right. She works automatically. Right after work she'll tell him. Her stomach hurts and she can't help thinking about what might have happened, her so naked and with no one to help her or to hear her if she had screamed. She feels like screaming now. She smiles at every customer.

Across the back of the drug store (Suzanne has worked here for a month) there is a lunch counter with two booths and fourteen stools; the tops of three of the stools are cracked and taped, and every lunchtime they are full of people who work in the neighborhood and of tourists who come in from the beach in their bathing suits and shed sand onto the floor. Until recently, the counter was run by Goldie and John, both fiftyish and both with gaunt, sinewy faces. Goldie had the look of someone who works too hard and is always tired. They were from Missouri, and she was a good cook;

customers loved her daily specials, which she fixed in the back room in an electric roaster: corned beef and cabbage, ham hocks and lima beans, homemade vegetable soup. John stood by and talked to the customers.

One day he said, "Goldie, you're too damned contrary," and she smiled one of her rare smiles at Suzanne and said, "Well, what's wrong with that?" Everyone laughed but John. He showed Suzanne pictures of his daughter, Angela, in various beauty contests he'd entered her in. "One day she'll be a winner," he said. "Oh, leave the girl alone," said Goldie, and Suzanne wondered if she meant Angela.

One day Angela came in for a few minutes, a tall, lank girl with bleached hair and tired eyes and nervous hands that twisted her hair. She said something to her mother and then left. She never came back again, and someone said she ran off to Las Vegas and got married to an older man she'd just met. John never mentioned her again, but took down the shapshots he'd taped to the mirror behind the counter, and he gave Goldie even darker looks. She bent over her work behind the counter and looked tireder and tireder, until one day she stayed home, and John served hamburgers to the customers at lunchtime and closed the counter early. Vito, the owner, put a battered help-wanted sign in the window, and the lunch counter has been closed now for six days.

The store has been very quiet, and Suzanne can hear the music and talking from the Barefoot Bar across the boardwalk.

Why can't I fall in love, Someone is singing this afternoon, in a strong voice, like any other man, and maybe then I'll know what kind of fool I am. He's a drifter, Smokey or Dusty, and the more she thinks about what didn't happen, the more his hands tangle in the sheets, and the more she is bound and gagged and unable to run out into the street and stop people passing by and say, "Look, I'm really all right. I can take care of myself." She smiles at the customers.

Two men come in from the back door by the beach to buy small bottles of turpentine to take greenish-black spots of tar off their feet, and a guy wearing a narrow orange swimsuit and speaking with a heavy accent insists on buying a bottle of Castoria.

"That's a children's laxative. Are you sure that's what you want?"

"Cas-tor-i-a," he insists, so Suzanne sells it to him, and he comes back a few minutes later for a refund, streaks of the smelly orange stuff on his bare shoulders. She drops the slippery bottle into the trash basket under the counter. "Caster oil," he says, and she hands him a pink and white bottle of baby oil and says, "It'll give you a wonderful tan," and he smiles and leaves. Vito has been watching her and he crosses the store and says, "And who's going to pay for that?"

"He didn't understand what he wanted."

"But who's going to pay for it?"

"It's only fifty-nine cents."

"When I told you to be nice to the customers, I didn't mean that nice."

"I'll pay for it."

"Good."

She gets the change from her purse. And then The Leaner—Suzanne calls him The Leaner—comes in and slouches against the front glass counter and waits for his usual, a 10¢ cigar. He buys five a day, one at a time, and every time holds out the coin, waiting for her hand to put it into. But she waits, hands at her sides, until he puts the money on the polyp-like rubber change mat, and she doesn't pick it up until he leaves. He always turns at the doorway and smiles back at her.

There are few customers the rest of the afternoon. Suzanne takes rows and rows of merchandise off the shelves and dusts the grit and sand away and replaces the bottles and boxes neatly. Grit and sand. Maybe his name was Sandy. He must have been drunk, or crazy. Her hands and her white jacket are streaked with dirt. This is the best job she could find. "Get a college education," her mother always said. "It's always something to fall back on." She feels light-headed, and—looking through the watery plate glass window at the cars moving by—she wishes she could fall back on her bed and curl up and sleep forever.

* * * * *

The plane descended in a slow curve. The lights of

Los Angeles made a long loop between the water that was just so much darkness and the city that was a scatter of colored lights, mostly amber. It landed with a bump, and Suzanne followed the others into the airport, looking for Alex, who, when she finally saw him approaching, looked slightly older; he'd grown a mustache and his forehead was a little higher. He didn't seem to know what to say to her, but looked at her intently, and when he did speak, he sounded far away, and she felt slightly dizzy. They waited for her suitcase to come around on the snail-like conveyer, and then they walked out into the warm night of the parking lot, where he couldn't remember where he'd parked his car. Finally they found it and drove out of the snarl of traffic and lights onto a straight expressway, where her ears popped at last and the traffic sounds became suddenly distinct. She looked over at him and laughed.

"What's so funny?"

"This isn't real."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm really glad to see you."

He grinned, and they pulled into a drive-in. While she sat at a bright orange fiberglass table, he brought her a paper cup full of biting orange drink. She looked down at her hounds-tooth lap, and the evening stretched out long before her, past banks of bright flowers and Spanish architecture and into a small apartment in the shade of an avocado tree and

onto the bed where he told her that soon he'd be free. She said, "I thought you already were," and he said, "Well, really, it is over," and she said, "Yes, it really is," and he said, "I paid half of the first month's rent and I'll take care of you."

The next morning she found the landlady, Mrs. Murphy with pinkish hair, and explained that she'd pay her own rent. Mrs. Murphy looked up and said, "Alex said you came out here to be with him," and Suzanne said, "Well, you can't believe everything you hear." The courtyard where they sat was warm and walled with a large wire cage full of small, brightly colored birds.

"It's very embarrassing," said Suzanne.

"You don't need to be embarrassed."

Suzanne had only fifty-three dollars left, but she gave thirty to the landlady. "Don't worry about the rent," she said. "I can take care of it."

The landlady took the three ten dollar bills and folded them up in her hands. "The rent is already paid until the fifteenth," she said. And then she leaned forward and squinted a little at Suzanne and said, "He's a scoundrel, that Alex. You're doing the right thing."

"I'll take care of the rest as soon as I get a job," said Suzanne. "You do believe me, don't you?"

Mrs. Murphy was looking at the little birds nodding on the branches inside the cage. "Even if I leave the cage

open, they never fly away," she said, smiling at Suzanne.

"They like it here."

"He's not a scoundrel at all," said Suzanne. And she was sorry she'd sent him off like that. She'd never been the one to end a thing before.

Early the next day, Suzanne began looking for work. She didn't know shorthand and didn't want to be a waitress and couldn't bear the thought of working at the nursing home where a kind man interviewed her. "You don't have back trouble, do you?" he asked, and she saw a way out and lied. He called a friend of his who owned a drugstore down the street, and she went there. They didn't need anyone, but sent her to the Laguna Pharmacy, on Coast Highway near the boardwalk, and they told her she could start on the following Monday.

The rest of the week she wandered around town, looking into art galleries. One of them was filled with paintings that were heavy with doughy pigment, pictures of people and dogs, each of whom looked a little like Bert Lahr and exactly like the jowly lionine artist himself, who came out of the workroom in the back to mount yet another picture on the crowded wall. Even a ceramic bust on the floor under one of the tables had his square, sad countenance. The room was full of his face. Suzanne wanted to leave, but he was suddenly in her way, offering her a cup of tea. "No," she said.

I didn't mean anything by it. I just want to get acquainted." The artist was burly and wore a silver chain that hung crooked in the tangle of chest hair at the throat of his green shirt. She looked at his face and imagined him saying, "Oh, but I'd like to paint you, my dear," just like in a novel, the kind she loved to read, and she felt like laughing but was afraid to. She imagined her body with his face and she fled out into the crowded street.

In another gallery she talked with a tiny, wrinkled man who looked grandfatherly despite his black Harley Davidson eagle t-shirt. She told him she was from Iowa and had just found a job, but it wasn't much, and he told her about a woman he knew who didn't have any skills and became a prostitute for only two years and saved enough money to take over a Woolworth's in a rather large town in Kansas. Suzanne decided to go back to her apartment. She remembered what her roommates had said about being discovered for the movies, and she wondered if she had great, natural, undiscovered talent. She began to walk more slowly, and to smile mysteriously.

She had a Master Charge card, and she wanted something cool to wear, so she went into a small dress shop, Mandy's Boutique. The shop was crowded with circular racks of brightly-colored garments and lined with mirrors. She kept looking at herself in those mirrors, smiling back at herself when she thought no one was looking. There were three other customers in the shop and she noticed they were doing the same thing—

sneaking smiles at themselves but not at each other. She picked out a pair of denim shorts and a plain t-shirt, nice and small, which she tried on.

In front of one of the winged three-part mirrors, the saleslady said, "But you've got them on backwards, dear. They're supposed to zip up the front. It must be nice to be so young and thin that you're built the same front and back." Suzanne went right back to the dressing room. When she came out to make the purchase she suddenly realized that if she charged anything, her mother would know where she was. Might come after her. She still hadn't written to her. Or called. She said, "I think I'll just look around a little," and walked around the shop, the shorts and t-shirt in her hands, and then—without thinking about it at all, but about her mother, who might be frantic right this minute, tapping her polished fingernails against some table top or other, and saying, "She said everything was fine, fine,"—she walked slowly out the door and quickly up the street, thinking, Maybe she doesn't even know I'm gone.

She made it half a block.

The policeman's name was Ted, and he was very tall. Suzanne had always leaned toward tall men, and for this one she even cried, and for the shopkeeper, who finally said, "Okay, okay, but don't come in here again." The three of them stood in the middle of the shop, and there were others standing

around staring, multiplied by the mirrors as if they were a jury, and none of them were smiling. Ted followed her out into the bright sunshine and she couldn't stop shaking and she kept saying, over and over, "I don't know why. I mean, I wasn't even thinking, and I'm really not that sort of person. It just happened, that's all. You've got to believe me. You do believe me, don't you?"

He said, "Wait a minute," and while she did, he pulled a pad of paper from his shirt pocket and wrote down his name and a phone number and tore it out and handed it to her.

"Are you all right now?"

"Yes," she said.

"You're a long way from home."

That evening she sat in her courtyard and looked up at the avocado that hung there like a large, green globe. It was very high in the tree. She'd never eaten an avocado and wanted it to fall into her open hand. It was nice sitting there under that tree, surrounded by the high board fence. She could hear the creaking of the tiny birds in the next courtyard, though they were not so noisy in the evening as they had been that morning, when she had heard them through her open window. And she began making plans for her future. She'd wait a couple of days. And then she'd tell him how guilty and awful she felt, and how scary it was to not be able to understand why she'd done such a thing without thinking, and that she had to talk to someone and there was no one who would understand,

have compassion for the innocent, criminal mind. He'd be charmed by that. When she called him.

* * * * *

Ted and Suzanne are sitting in the Barefoot Bar, at a small table. She can see out across the beach to the sea, but he has his back to it and looks at her. He's always been good at listening, but he's never been much of a talker. But he's just said something, and she wasn't listening and has to ask him to repeat it.

"He was probably just drunk," he says.

"All day I couldn't think about anything else."

"But nothing happened, right?"

"I told you. I'd hardly call it nothing."

"Well, okay, you're right." His auburn hair is bright from sun bleaching and his skin is tan and his eyes very brown and slightly magnified by his glasses.

"All day I kept thinking about what could have happened. And I couldn't wait to talk to you."

"You should wear something in bed."

"I should what?"

"Well, really, you should get a phone."

"I was careful. I mean, I thought I was safe."

"I'll talk to him."

"What will you say?"

"What do you want me to say?"

"That's up to you."

"Nothing happened," says Ted, "because he wouldn't do anything like that."

"He wouldn't?"

"No."

"Would you have done what he did?"

"Of course not."

"I thought you'd at least be mad at him."

"You don't seem as mad at him as you do at me."

"It just makes me sick to my stomach. I can't eat this," she says, shoving the small plate of french fries away from her toward him. "I'm really jumpy. I thought talking to you would make this all right."

"I still don't know what you want me to say."

"I think I'll go for a walk."

"Sounds like a good idea." He starts to get up.

"I mean by myself."

"I thought we'd do something tonight."

"I feel like walking home by myself."

"It's dark, Suzy. You're not scared?"

"I didn't say that." And then she walks quickly away from him and out the door toward the beach. She walks across the sand, the part that is loose and sinks under every step, and then the part that is hard as cement, and then the part that is mostly water and slides away. She stands in the edge of the water and looks at the sea that moves and whispers and is covered with a veil of lights all the way to the straight

line of the far sky that is smeared with silver and purple like a tarnished spoon. She climbs out onto the rocks, carefully, awkwardly. If she called home, what would she say? She thinks she hears someone walk along the beach and stop behind her, but she doesn't turn around. She doesn't hear anything but the ocean and the cries of gulls.

Ducking her head a little, she turns enough to look back to the beach behind her, but there's no one there. Climbing down from the rocks, she slides and scratches her left leg—a long red mark that stings as she walks back through the edge of the water. She bends down and puts her hand into the water and puts a fingertip into her mouth, like a child trying to figure something out.

And then she walks slowly up to the boardwalk, sits on the edge of it and takes off her shoes and pours the water out of them. Looking back toward the Barefoot, she sees Ted standing there in the doorway, watching her. She turns her back on him.

At the far end of the beach, near the exercise bars that cast shadows like huge hairpins, there is a phone booth, and when she closes the folding door the sound of the ocean decreases. Is it earlier or later in Iowa, and where could her mother be now? It keeps ringing. It rings for a long time, and she turns and looks back down the beach, and Ted is standing there, not very far away really, but not very close; she can't see the look on his face. She turns away and lets the ringing go on. Maybe she's asleep, or washing her hair.

Finally she puts her finger on the phone cradle and presses it down, but she still holds the phone to her ear and listens to the silence. Ted is still there, behind her, thinking she's talking on and on. She begins making plans for her future. She'll smile big, or maybe a little mysteriously, and she'll walk up to him and say, "Well, now I feel better." She'll lean against him and pull his arm back around her shoulder. And he'll say, "Who were you talking to?"

She opens the door of the phonebooth, stands there, and just looks at him for a long time. Then she begins to walk.

Heels first, backwards, she walks away from him, leaving a double track in the sand, like a small plow. And then she turns, and her feet thunder down the hollow boardwalk. It sounds like a wooden porch, somewhere, sometime, a wooden porch and a screen door, and she a child and someone in there to take care of her, a long time ago, she can't remember quite, but the sound is familiar. And then it ends.

And then the sidewalk is rough under her running feet. She still has a shoe in each hand, and her arms are pumping. In her mind she keeps arriving as she runs along, out of breath, arriving home, fitting the key into the lock, whirling around against the door, pushing it shut against everyone in the world. There was someone there in bright colors, behind the petit-point of the screen door, someone there a long time ago: "Now, Susie, where have you been?"

In her mind she keeps arriving, whirling around against the door, pushing it shut against everyone in the world and finding herself alone with a sound—of spiked heels following her across a polished floor, of a suitcase latching, of a phone being hung up, of a gun being cocked in a Hollywood movie.

And someone says, "Okay, now reach." And she does, hand over hand, running into her own courtyard, unlocking her own door, turning around inside and pushing it shut, wanting that sound, and after the sound only the sound of her own ragged breathing, in and out, and of her own voice, laughing, "Reach," when she hears it at last. It's not her whole life that passes before her eyes, but the small things of her own apartment, when she hears it. With her hands up in surrender, palms forward and fingers curved like a baby's, her back to the door, she hears it at last. That click.

Long Trail of Blue

The lines of the figure move and grow as if drawn by a finger from behind on a frosted glass. But the glass is not glass, but his arm, the pale skin of his arm.

Edward Swain sat at his desk in the bank, watching the reflection of the white ceiling in the gleaming surface of the dark polished wood. Behind him, beyond the high arched window draped in perfectly pleated damask, lay the town square. The latticework of the spring house on the park cast netlike shadows onto the brown flower beds and the rusty brick sidewalk. Tulips, not yet in bloom, had pushed their pointed tongues up through the brown leaves of last year. Swain never looked out of his window. He knew what was there; he'd looked at this town square all his life. He looked instead at his hands, at the little moons of cuticle.

Swain's desk gave him power. He studied his hands, the tent of his fingertips touching together over the open folder centered on the wide expanse of the desk. Fred Weston was sitting opposite, nervously picking at the crease which flattened out over his knee. They were probably his best clothes. He wanted to finance a car. Swain had known Fred all his life.

"Well, I answered all the questions on the form. I don't know what else I can tell you."

"Yes, I see." But Swain was looking at Fred's face, at his eyebrows which grew almost together. The young man looked

down quickly at his knees. "You know," said Swain, "we did have to repossess a car from you."

"That seems like a long time ago. I've been working hard since then. You can ask anyone in town. I settled down. We're both working." Swain looked away from the young man's face and focused on the white wall behind him. Yes, he remembered Fred's wife, Angie, serving coffee in her white uniform that strained apart in little crescents, button to button.

"You can ask anyone," the young man was saying.

"We don't base our decisions here on town gossip."

"I know that, but you have my record there. I was kind of wild back then." He started to grin, but Swain's eyes fixed on his face again, his narrow face, and the grin disappeared quickly. "I work hard and I can afford this car."

"Yes, sir?"

"How old are you now, yes, I see here, twenty-six. You and, ah, Angie is it?"

"Kathy."

"Yes, of course. Kathy. She has a waitress job?"

"That's right."

"You'll be wanting a family soon, I suppose."

"I don't see what that has..."

"Fine, fine, well, let me check some of these references. I'll get back to you on this. You must excuse me now."

Swain stood up, his fingertips on the edge of the desk.

Fred stood up, too, but he didn't want to leave.

"How long will it be, do you think?"

"Not long. I'll get back to you." Swain extended his hand. Fred had to lean across the wide desk, through the white reflection of the ceiling. Swain could feel the roughness of the young man's hand—the hard hand of a man who worked with tangible things for hours every day. "I'll be in touch," said Swain.

"Thank you, sir. I hope this isn't a problem. There's no risk, you know."

"You think you're a good risk, do you?" Swain smiled for the first time.

"Yes, I am." And then the young man was gone.

The lines of the figure move and grow as if drawn by a finger from behind on a frosted glass. But the glass is not glass, but his arm, the pale skin of his arm, and the finger is a needle, a hot needle that leaves a trail of blue, like capillaries.

Swain took the ten-thirty-seven into the city for his first visit with a Dr. William Brockhaven, a name from the yellow pages with a trustworthy sound. He left the station quickly, but he slowed down to look over the concrete railing into the river churning below, the brown water ruffled with navy blue. He walked on, slowly, wondering how he could

begin telling his story. It had been a secret for so long in the safety of his small town. It is best to be bold, he thought. Straightforward, yes. With such a wife as Janet, how can a man really enjoy his life? Was this a common story? Had the doctor heard it before? But a story well told... Yes. Her drinking causes me all the pain she says she can't stand. Good. A wife whose breath is always yeasty. When she says "sure" it sounds like a broom sweeping across the floor. She undoes her clothes at night with stumbling confused fingers. He'd never told anyone these things before, though he'd rehearsed them in his mind like this for a long time. Yes. Stumbling. And confused. Good. Dr. Brockhaven would understand. It couldn't continue; someone had to know; things had to change.

As Swain walked along, he fingered his beard, moving the fingers of his left hand slowly down from the corners of his mouth. The beard had been a good idea. It disguised the concave configuration of his features from nose to chin which for forty-five years (nearly forty-six) had—along with his habit of gnawing at the soft insides of his lips—given him a prim look which he detested. He was walking slowly still, out of pace with the traffic. He watched for his reflection in each new window; it pleased him to see that still unfamiliar face among the other flat wraithlike images and to know that it was his. No one, not his wife, not his son, not the people whose faces he saw every day in the bank,

no one had guessed that the beard was a signal of changes to come in Edward Swain. Still, it pleased him. He had covered up his resemblance to his father, and to his son. He resembled no one. He was coming into his own.

As he walked in front of Sandman's Deli, with its warm smell of garlic, corned beef and dill, he paused to see his glassy reflection once more. He looked at his watch. He had plenty of time to make the one o'clock appointment. He looked up and raked the underside of his chin with the backs of his fingernails. Yes, she's spoiling things, so many things.

It was then, moving slowly and with people brushing past him on either side, still looking up slightly into the April sunlight, still with his left hand to his face, that it happened. Like a bundle of clothing tossed carelessly, with the innocent sound of an armload of books falling onto a table, without a cry or a warning hesitation in the way the city moved, a man fell from above onto the sidewalk not three feet ahead of Swain. With the shock the air before him quivered to his eyes like water. The crowd parted like a splash.

Swain instinctively reached out his hand toward the shoulder of the man. What had happened was not clear. Strangers who had been passing each other in opposite directions in a great rush stopped and stared down at the man. Some in mild interest went on, thinking only that one of them

had stumbled and fallen. There had been no cry, only the terrible thud. People in the gathering crowd looked at one another—he could have hurt one of us. Someone pointed up into the brilliant air. By fives and sevens they all looked up and saw the window (six stories up, someone counted), its draperies blowing like neckties in the spring wind.

Swain looked back at his own hand, reached out toward the body. His hand shone white in the sunlight, pointing in five directions like a star, tendons stretched horribly. Beyond it, the side of the man's head listened to the sidewalk. He could have been sleeping but for the odd angle of his arms as they spread out from his shoulders. His mouth sagged with the triangular softness of an infant's, tiny bubbles growing on his lips like fine red lace.

A bright scarf of red unraveled from underneath his head, a terrible fringe, sticky in the sunlight. The sweet smell of wine mixed with the garlic and the fecal odor of sudden and violent death. Swain stared. He reached out his hand, still, toward the man. He didn't want to touch him, but he couldn't get his hand to move. Part of a tattoo, drawn like a map in blue ink on the man's arm, twitched from underneath the rolled sleeve of his shirt. And then it was still. It might have been the tail of a fish, or a mermaid.

Swain straightened up. He pushed his way through the crowd to be sick against the fender of a car parked at the

curb, but he could only shudder into his hands. He could feel hot prickles of sweat around his eyes and under the collar of his shirt. He looked up again at the open window with its draperies like signal flags flying, red and white. He hurried away from the sirens and the stench.

In the train station he washed his hands, rubbing soap that smelled like cocoanut carefully between his fingers and rinsing them for a long time. There was a long rusty stain in the sink.

"A man just jumped out of a window and landed at my feet," he said.

"The hell." The man standing next to him looked, not at Swain, but at his reflection in the mirror.

"Right at my feet. I could have touched him."

The man tightened up the muscles around his eyes and turned away quickly. It doesn't matter, thought Swain. Nothing has ever been more real. It is just not the sort of thing to tell a stranger.

"Dr. Brockhaven is with a patient," said the answering machine when Swain called from a pay phone. At the sound of the tone he said he was too upset to talk and that he hoped the doctor would understand.

....a hot needle that leaves a trail of blue, like capillaries. It is a fish, and the tail fins quiver and flip slowly, as if under water, as the finger of the hot needle

creates it. It pulses and swims and tries to escape the pond of the skin, pale skin of his arm. The blue lines grow and from the tail of the fish grows the curving warm belly of a womanly creature....

Swain twisted a newspaper in his fingers for most of the hour and twenty minutes it took to get home. It turned his fingers black. From the window of the train he watched the back streets, the ditches, the trenches of debris, the parking lots full of bright maroon, blue and green cars. He stared without seeing at the waffled metal back of the seat in front of him. Near his station he discovered them in his hands: a bunch of tight-lipped early daffodils wrapped in a cone of last week's newspaper. The frail edges of the bright yellow petals were drawing inward brownly. He didn't remember buying them, only remembered his hand stretched out over the broken body on the sidewalk, and the blue tail of the fish. He dropped the flowers into the trash barrel at the station. No one saw. He drove straight home.

Janet was standing at the dining room table sorting and stapling white pages. "Isn't it a glorious day?" She was wearing a yellow dress made of something soft. Her hands gathered the papers together quickly and her voice was light. "Everything's so green, Ed, have you noticed? Even the air is green."

"You going somewhere?" he asked.

"You mean this?" She tweaked at her skirt with long fingers. "Yes. I told you about it this morning."

"Oh?"

"I just got home. We got so much done. We want to change hospital policy so that families can visit with children who are patients, so that brothers and sisters can visit and parents can spend the night. I think it's going to work out. I'm sure I told you about it." She was excited.

Janet was tall and slender. Her dark hair and eyebrows made her fair skin seem paler than it was. She smiled a lot as she talked. Swain watched the triangular wings of her shoulder blades move under the soft fabric of her yellow dress as she bent over her work. "You're home early," she said.

"Yes, well, I went into the city."

"You didn't mention you were going in."

"I wasn't going to tell you."

"Oh?" She turned her face toward him and then moved it just a bit to the side as she spoke, her eyes staying on his face. "Is something wrong?" She moved toward him, her eyes bright. On the shiny surface of the table were a coaster and a clear glass, beady on the outside. Ice and lime peels. She put the back of her cool hand on his forehead. She traced the lines across his forehead with one knuckle, then glanced at the wrist of the same hand. "I'm nearly late. I

have to take these reports by three-thirty."

"Something happened today," he said.

"You're upset, aren't you, Ed?"

"Can't you stay here?"

"You mean now?"

"Now."

"It can wait a few minutes, can't it? I won't be gone long."

"You can do that later. I want to talk to you."

"Really, I'll be gone only about twenty minutes. I'll be right back, and we can talk."

"Wherever you're going, you can bet there's a drink in it."

"I said I'd be right back. I can tell you're upset."

"Your friends are more important to you than I am."

"I'll be back soon." She gathered up the papers from the table quickly. "And, Ed, I don't appreciate the crack. I hate it when you do this." She left, and Swain looked around at their home: the bright chrome and glass of the tables, the jewel-like enamel ashtrays—green, blue, and red—the shiny black leather couch, the blazing panes of window glass, the shiny leaves of the plants, the waxy glare of the kitchen floor. He closed the drapes.

He looked at the backs of his hands, the tendons and the veins and the clean square nails. He was restless. He walked back out to his car. He drove out into the countryside. Just the driving made him feel a little better. Trees were

beginning to leaf out; the fuzzy green branches did give a fine green glow to the afternoon light. Old nests clung like shaggy burrs to the trees' skeletal fingers. Fields plowed in the fall had thawed, and the earth appeared freshly turned and smelled musky and damp. He drove.

His father—he thought of his father, who lived only twenty miles away. His father, whom he hadn't seen for years. He tried not to think about him. He had never felt that man to really be his father, except for the uncanny resemblance which grew year by year. Swain's son, Randy—thick waisted with adolescence—had the same features: the deep-set eyes (Swain looked at his eyes in the rear view mirror, squinting into the sunlight), the concave profile, the small ears close to the head. Swain had listened to his mother. "That man never did anyone any good. You just forget about him. I have," she had said, again and again. And Swain had.

Or thought he had. But his mother had died ten years ago. His father hadn't known. (Why would anyone have told him, after all?) But soon after that he had walked into the bank. Swain had been a teller then. The man had presented himself. He had waited in line, like everyone else, in front of the window with the placard—shiny black plastic with white indented letters—that said EDWARD SWAIN, and when it had been his turn he had just said it.

"We have the same name, I'm your father."

Just like that. Without any warning, without altering

the hush of the bank, just, "I'm your father." They had walked to the restaurant on the corner and talked for a half-hour, awkwardly. Angie Weston (or was it Kathy?) hadn't worked there then, but another waitress with long fingernails and eyelids like bruises had brought them their coffee. Over the heavy mugs and the coffee spoons and the little plastic fluted tubs of creamer they had talked. Swain never remembered what the mam had said to him. But he remembered what he had said to his father.

"You came too late. Not it seems strange. I'm doing fine." His father had been wearing a green shirt with crossed folds of newness and had looked very hurt. He had left, after all, when Swain was five. He hadn't even recognized his father at the head of the line, through his teller's window at the bank.

Swain had given Janet the card on which his father had written his address, and she had gone to see him. He was living only twenty miles away. She took Randy over to see his grandfather at least twice a year. Randy would come home with small toys and books. Swain had to tell them not to talk about his father. "He's really a great guy, Dad," the boy had said once. "He wasn't there when I needed him," Swain had replied, and the boy had never mentioned him again.

Swain drove to his father's house. The address had been in his wallet for years just in case of some kind of emergency. Now Swain wanted to see his father. Suddenly, he was looking

at his father's face again, and the man was older than he was when he stood in the bank and said, "I'm your father."

"Has something happened to the boy, or Janet?" he was saying now.

"No. No, of course not. I just thought I'd visit you. I just thought I'd come to see you, how you're getting along."

"You almost missed me," said the father as he indicated the way into his living room. It was a neat, square room. A shaft of sunlight left a long rectangle on the gray carpet. There were a lot of books, and on a record player a shiny black record turned; shifting triangles of light met at the center of the spinning circle. He was spattered with white paint, even his hands, thick knuckled, were spattered with white paint. "I'm painting a house for a fellow, just come home for something to eat. Sit down, sit down."

"You're well, are you?"

"Sure, can't complain." Swain looked at his father's hands, curled on his spattered knees. It was hard to picture this man playing Chopin on a wide stage, leaning into the music. Swain remembered that the skin of his mother's hands had finally been as dry as the paper itself as she folded and unfolded the clipping until after a long time it broke into pieces where it had been folded. It had been a grainy newspaper photograph made of tiny specks of ink that thinned out from the darkness beyond the spotlight to show his profile,

his hands on the keyboard, and the long empty slashes that were the shiny satin lapels of his suit. Swain hadn't thought about that for a long time, his father's face in his mother's hands. The picture had been with her things after she died. He realized that his father was looking at him, expectantly, that he must have said something that Swain had missed. "I guess I don't know what to say," he said.

"I have thought for all these years," his father was saying, "that if you ever did come to see me I'd tell you that."

"What's that?"

His father looked puzzled, and then he began again. "I have thought for all these years," he said, and it sounded like something he had practiced in his mind, "that if you ever came to see me I'd tell you that your mother was a good woman, and she had reason to be mad at me. I drank an awful lot after you were born, and I ruined a lot of things. But I ruined things for myself, too, and she was wrong to teach you to hate me."

"She had a hard time."

"How's that?"

"I said, she had a hard time."

"Everybody has a hard time. I'm not excusing myself, you understand, but we none of us know each other's lives well enough. Well, it's my fault, I know. You have a fine son, and Janet's a fine girl. It pleases me no end to have

them visit me."

"Randy likes you. He likes you better than he likes me."

"I'm sure that's not true. They're all right, are they, Janet and the boy?"

"They're all right."

"Janet's a fine girl. Pretty, too. She always makes me feel good the way she gets excited about things. She has a lot of spirit. You're a lucky man."

"Yes, she's fun all right. If things get too gloomy for her she brightens herself up with gin." Swain suddenly had the feeling that it was all somehow his father's fault.

"That surprises you, doesn't it?"

The old man looked at Swain intently, leaning forward, his hands still on his knees. "Is that why you're upset, why you came to see me now, after all this time? You and Janet are having trouble?"

"No. We've had trouble. She drinks herself to sleep every night."

"Every night?"

"No. Not every night. Often enough." Swain looked at his father and knew that somehow his father must know that it was a lie, that it was something else he hated her for, because he was no longer a part of it. "Sometimes she drinks. Not so often. Not so much. But when she does, it scares me." Swain moved his feet slightly on the smooth

carpet. "I saw a man die today."

His father stood up quickly. He stepped around the big chair he'd been sitting in and stood behind it, still facing his son. It was a green plastic recliner. The arms and seat of the chair were neatly mended with tape that was nearly the same color of green. "What do you mean? Who died?"

"I don't know who he was," said Swain. "I really can't talk about it." He looked at his own hands, stretched out over the arms of his chair. He walked to the door. "I'm sorry, I don't know why I came here."

"I'm glad you did. You don't have to go. I could fix us something to eat."

"No." He looked back at his father. "Maybe I'll stop by again." And then he left quickly. He felt foolish. The closed door of his father's house was covered with weathered brown varnish, crosshatched with lines like the skin of a reptile. From the other side of the door he could still hear the music that played inside the old man's apartment, his father's house. Chopin. The fifth etude. He remembered that sometime, a long time ago, he had heard that music before.

Swain parked his car in the gravel parking lot of the tavern and watched the faces of people as they passed through the cone of amber light at the entrance to the building, leaning toward each other, laughing, or looking down if they were alone, but when the door was opened he could hear

people laughing and the mumble of a television set inside. He got out of the car once, but when he heard the crunch of his own feet in the loose gravel he felt conspicuous, though no one was around for the moment, so he got back into his car and drove.

He walked through a residential area across town from his own near house. He watched lighted windows, listened for voices, thought about the man who had died. He tried to mourn. He tried to imagine a life for him, that man who threw himself into the April sunlight, into the crowded sidewalk. He tried to imagine the feeling of falling, straight and fast, into the street, quietly so that no one looks up. The night air was cold. Finally he went home.

He let himself into his dark house. Randy was asleep. Janet slept, too, lying on her side. He got into bed carefully. He was very tired. He closed his eyes, and he slept at once.

The lines of the figure move and grow as if drawn by a finger from behind on a frosted glass. But the glass is not glass, but his arm, the pale skin of his arm, and the finger is a needle, a hot needle that leaves a trail of blue, like capillaries. It is a fish, and the tail fins quiver and flip slowly, as if under water, as the finger of the hot needle creates it. It pulses and swims and tries to escape the pond of the skin, pale skin of his arm. The blue lines grow and from the tail of the fish grows the curving wide

warm belly of a womanly creature, its waist curving around a tiny embryonic fist of a heart which makes a sound as it beats. It is a sound like the blip of a hospital machine, monotonous as a pulse. The needle moves in circles around and around the breasts and then forms arms with fingers that send out rays of curving lines which grow and become her hair, falling in waves of blue lines that blow and curl like some fine Art Nouveau etching on his arm, the white skin of his arm. It burns, and the blip, blip is mechanical as a metronome and loud as an alarm that something is about to happen.

She has no face; the blue lines pulse and move like the long tendrils of a sea plant under water, but she has no face, yet she sings and the music is the high pitched wail of sirens on a Chicago street on the first warm afternoon of spring. She is falling and pulling him with her through the bright air, and the people below do not look up.

Swain woke up. He was breathing fast and his skin was damp and cold. He turned over and put his hand on the silky slope of Janet's body; she was lying on her side. He pulled close to her. She made a small sound, and opened her eyes to look at him. "I had a bad dream," he said.

"Where were you all night?"

"Out walking around."

"I hurried back this afternoon and you were gone."

"I went to see my father."

She sat up in bed. "Ed, tell me what's going on." He pulled at her, his hands closed around her arms tightly, tried to put his face against the soft nightgown of her body. She pushed him back. Her breath was warm and sour. He pulled himself over her, but she pushed at him and slid from the bed. "No. You tell me what's going on."

"Swain felt a great anger. He grabbed her and pulled her roughly onto the bed. "You're plastered again, aren't you?" he shouted.

"For God's sake, keep your voice down, Ed. Are you crazy?"

"What's the matter, you don't want Randy to hear me?"

"You're drunk yourself, you must be."

"Oh, no. Not me. I can't stand the sight of you when you've been with your goddamn friends. You've ruined everything. You can't face life without a drink in your hand."

"You should try it yourself sometime, it might just make you a little more human." She pushed her head hard against his chest and got away from him again. She stood in the dim light of the bedroom. "Whatever's happening with you, I want none of it, Ed Swain. Don't push at me like this."

He shoved her hard, his hands against her shoulders. The melon pink of her nightgown swirled and then wilted in the shadows as she turned and fell against the wall. She

scrambled to her feet at once. "This is the last time, Ed," she was screaming. "The last time. You think you're so goddamn perfect. Just look at yourself."

"Why I put up with you," he shouted, "is more than I can imagine." He quickly pulled his clothes back on. As he walked down the shadowy hallway he stopped. He saw his son standing at the end of the hall, his eyes large and the skin of his face tight with fear. They stared at each other.

And then Swain quickly left the house.

Mr. Swain has let himself into the bank. It is very early. He is sitting at his desk. He has not turned on the light; he does not want to have to explain to anyone. A silver light shines through the window behind him. His shadow is huge; it covers the desk and half the wall beyond. Under his hand is Fred's file. Swain opens the folder and turns in his chair until he can see the application by the dim light of the window. It is marked "Denied" in his own neat handwriting. He finds the number and punches it on the buttons of his telephone. The electronic tune seems loud in the quiet room. The first time he gets a wrong number and wakes someone who's never heard of Fred Weston. The second time, Fred himself answers.

"This is Mr. Swain of the State Bank."

"You're kidding. What time is it?" His voice is husky with sleep.

"I'm glad to tell you that your loan is approved. It's a role of this institution to encourage members of this community to be self-sufficient and reliable. You'll soon have a fine credit rating. You may come into my office and I'll have the papers ready for you, and the check. I thought you'd be pleased to know."

"Yeah. Sure. This is on the level?"

"Of course. I'll look forward to seeing you soon."

"Sure. Thanks. Good-bye."

Swain listens to the hum of the dead line and then hangs up the phone. He feels a sense of his own power. Later, right on time, the mammoth door of the vault will be swung open. The tellers will come in to work. They will walk one by one past the inside of the vault door with its silver and gold-colored gears behind panels of heavy glass. They will carry drawers of money out to their windows and hoist themselves up on their chairs. Fred Weston, who rarely pays his bills on time, will come into the bank, and by the time the day is over he will have his new car. His wife, Kathy—her name is Kathy—will sit beside him as they drive around the square so that everyone can see. Swain is thinking all of these things as he closes Fred's folder. At least he will have his new car. He pushes the file across the smooth top of the wide desk. "Poor bastard," says Swain.

But as he waits in the shadows and the silence of the empty bank, his voice sounds thin and small.

In a Couple of Days

Through threads of rain the woman watched her five-year-old son Benjamin, hesitant and small, walk down the front lawn in his mustard-yellow slicker with its helmet-like hat. The curving black bars of the dream that had awakened her that morning still gripped her like dark fingers. As soon as Ben disappeared from sight in his yellow raincoat, she drove downtown just to get away from the house.

Downtown on the square she stood at the iron grill fence in front of the Old Courthouse, a century-old building recently restored for commercial use, red brick and a gold dome against a slate sky. The rain had stopped. On one of the second floor windows gleamed the gilt words COURTLY SQUARE FORGE, and, inside, a strange glow moved behind something black and curved like the ribs of an animal. The red indoor-outdoor carpet covering the long steps that led to the second story entrance was spongy with water under her feet.

When she stepped through the doorway of the FORGE, a new shop, a small room full of things made of black metal, it was quite dark—for the middle of the day—and many of the candles in the candleholders on display were burning. The man sitting at the desk by the door looked up at her, a blank stare. "Am I intruding?" she asked. She felt like leaving.

"Well," he said, "no, of course not." He stood up.

"You're my first customer today. Do you want me to turn on the light?"

"When she said, "No, it's nice like this," and stepped inside, he leaned back against the wall, hands behind his head, elbows out like wings. "This doesn't seem like a place of business, though." She smiled, indicating the candles. "This is pretty weird."

"You'd prefer flashing neon?" He grinned. And she felt better.

"Not at all." Flat-black wrought iron candle holders hung from the high ceiling, stood tall on the floor. The candles on the low display table in the center of the room were lit. Shadows licked upward with every step she took. The cage-like item in front of the window turned out to be a pot rack. When she touched it, he said, "That's a copy of an antique I found in New Hampshire." The woman examined it closely, the rustic construction, the flattened hooks welded across the bottom. Dozens of the racks were stacked on the floor. She glanced at his dark curly hair and very dark eyes, then again at the sleeves of his white shirt, rolled up above his elbows, and at the long vein that stood out along the inside of each arm, like a lamp cord under a rug.

"I had a dream last night," she began.

But he exhaled a slight laugh and pushed at the air between them with the flat of one hand and said, "No. That doesn't sound like a customer."

So she looked at the pot rack again, at every inch of it. "You do this work yourself?"

"Yes. It's a living. But this is what I really like to do." He pointed to an openwork relief frieze along the far wall, tiny intricate human figures of twisted wire and other bits of metal that in the moving light seemed to move slightly among their shadows against the wall. The silence seemed to be all right. "How much is that?" she asked him finally.

He didn't say anything right away. "I don't like to sell some things. That's a prototype. But I could make one for you. I have others in my workshop." He paused for a moment, and then he said, "No two are alike."

"Well," she said, "I'd like to buy a pot rack. For over my sink. There's an empty space there."

"I sell a lot of these," he said as she wrote out a check. He told her the price as though it were an apology, and that his name was Jason Moser. "I try to make each one of these exactly like the original." He looked carefully at her check as she handed it to him, and then he said, "Thank you, Lisa."

Lisa parked way back by the road so he wouldn't hear her coming, so she could change her mind. Tufts of amber grass grew up through the gravel of the barnyard, and the air close to the ground was cluttered with groups of white butterflies. She approached the clang and hiss of his work and wondered if she should have come. Always before, Benjamin had been with

her. Mornings, before he had to go to kindergarten and before Jason had to open his shop at noon, Lisa had brought Ben out here sometimes and they had watched Jason work. During the winter months the workroom in the lower part of the gray barn was heated by a wood-burning stove. Jason had showed them the tools he used in his work to form the small delicate figures and the huge found-object iron creations. Sometimes he'd be working on pot racks or candle holders, which he sold to department stores in Chicago, Kansas City, St. Louis. Come spring, Jason had sometimes taken Ben down to the pasture to ride the slow gray horse named Alice, and Lisa had stayed uphill and watched them together.

But this morning she had asked Mrs. Riley down the street to watch Ben and see him off to school. And now she stood outside the wide doorway of the barn. Jason was just inside, working with a flame so bright and blue she couldn't look at it. When he turned off the torch and flipped the hood back, his face was wet and beaded from the heat, and he was grinning. "I had a feeling you'd show up this morning."

He always teased her about that: feelings, hunches, dreams, the paranoia of coincidence as a kind of bond. Once Lisa had told him about a dream she'd had that he would do a wire sculpture of a bicycle, and two days later there it was; he was finishing it one morning when she and Ben dropped by with ham sandwiches and a a big slice of watermelon for lunch. That was one of her favorites because of the recognizable wheels

with spokes. He'd given it to Ben, who liked it too. "Did I make your dream come true?" he teased her, spinning a spoked wheel. Some of the things he made she couldn't understand at all.

"I had a feeling," he was saying.

"You did?"

"Yes. Where's Ben?"

"Visiting a friend."

Jason bent down and rested the welding hood against the frame of the wide door. "Let's go to the house for some coffee,"

"You're working."

"So give me a break," he said, shoulders rising, elbows in, palms of his hands pushing upward. They started toward the house.

Lisa had never been inside the old farmhouse before. The pine floor of the kitchen gleamed like honey. Walls were painted blue, and the kitchen table was a slab of golden oak on a base of heavy pipe, painted black. "You haven't stopped by for awhile," he said, pouring coffee into dimestore mugs. "I was beginning to think it was something I said."

"It was."

He stirred his coffee slowly, cream swirling like marble. "Oh. What was that?"

"You were telling Ben last time," she began. She looked intently at her metallic image in the curve of the coffee spoon, a tiny face, and upside-down.

"Yes?"

"About how there aren't too many people, about how you like living out here, away from town because the only people who come around are people you really like." She looked at his face. "You remember that?"

"Not exactly."

"Well, I just got to thinking that you asked me once if I wanted to come out and see where you worked, and I did, and then I just kept dropping by, and you seem to like that, and to enjoy Ben. But, I don't know."

He had his cup near his mouth, but he put it down without drinking. "You want me to tell you to come out here all the time? That I want you to?" A thin muscle twitched in his jaw. "Jesus. What is this? I thought we were friends."

She idly turned the spoon over in her hand, and her face appeared right-side-up on the spoon's curving underside. From outside the rusty screens came the sawing sounds of summer insects and a train in the distance. "Tim's always mad lately." She felt her face redden, saying her husband's name.

"You know," he said, "sometimes when Ben is down by the pasture, feeding apples to Alice or something, and we talk, well, those are good times, you know?" He stood up. "I want to show you something."

He took her by the hand, the first time he had ever touched her, though she had touched him often on the arm, on the shoulder, as they talked. He led her into the next room.

"Now," he said.

The living room was small. In the corner stood a Franklin stove. Lots of books were stacked against walls hung with paintings all the way to the ceiling. A piece of metal sculpture, about three feet high, stood on a low table in front of a window. It was a tangle of shapes, heavy wire and flat pieces of metal that looked as though they'd been ripped apart and then reassembled. "What do you think?" He turned it so the shadow it made on the carpet changed.

"You know I don't know about such abstract things."

"Watch the shadow," he said. "Now it's an eye." He was turning it as he talked. "Now the opening of a cave, now a fist."

"A swarm of bees?"

"The bud of a leaf?"

She didn't really know what to say. "It confuses me," she said finally. "I can't think of what it might mean."

He stepped back from it. "Maybe I'll change it," he said, as if to himself.

"I could guess. I feel like I should be able to figure it out, if it means one thing." She moved back a couple of steps and sat down on the sofa. "I'm no critic, am I?"

"I think you're pretty honest." He was looking at her. "If you told me what this was, I could say you were right, and we could both save face." He grinned.

"You wouldn't do that," she said.

"You know what I think?" He was still standing by the dusty shaft of light from the window, looking at her. "I think we're too careful about each other's feelings. I've never had anything this fragile with anyone. I don't think I like it."

"Maybe that's because I have a husband."

"You never talk about him."

"Okay, Jason," she said, more loudly than she meant to. "Tell me what it means." She pointed.

"Frankly, I haven't decided," he said. "I'm really not sure."

After that she stopped by the farm to see Jason two or three times a week, sometimes with Ben, but oftentimes without.

During the couple of months before Lisa and Tim were to move, Lisa visited Jason often and always alone. "Soon I won't see you anymore," she kept thinking. But she didn't say much about that. They had talked about it—her leaving town—and they didn't talk about it anymore.

On moving day Tim had two friends over to help him load all their furniture into a rented Ryder truck. Both men were named John, and the three men drank beer as they worked, and a couple of times they left for an hour and came back smelling like whiskey. About four-thirty the two Johns left, and Lisa ran the vacuum cleaner through the empty house. Tim had a few small things left to load. He was very drunk and kept slamming doors. She tried to stay a room away from him.

The last thing he carried to the truck was Ben's aquarium. Lisa saw him move uncertainly down the steep front lawn carrying the bright prism of water swirling with ferny plants and darting fish. Earlier in the afternoon she and Ben had tried to tell him it couldn't go like that, but he had insisted that it wouldn't spill. Three hundred miles they were going, but not a drop would spill. He had muttered something about air-ride suspension, and she had shrugged and walked across the gray cement of the porch into the house. Later, she had noticed that he'd set the aquarium on the edge of the open porch and forgotten about it. And now she watched out the front window as he moved awkwardly up the ramp and put the fishtank on the floor of the van. And she saw him twist his face into the sunlight to look back up at the house.

"But my fish will be dead," Ben had said, only to her. His blond hair had clung darkly to his forehead from the heat. "I've given them names and everything. Tell him."

"And lots of our things will get wet, but do you want to cross him?" She hadn't resisted saying that. Ben had simply walked off, to play with some of his friends, she supposed. For the last time. Ben had lived in this house all his life, and this move wasn't easy.

Lisa had been drunk herself only once—a long time ago—and it had made her sick, everything churning, moving. Now she moved back quickly from the window. Its watery surface flashed an image of her own face turning away, but she couldn't

bear to see the empty living room, so she turned back to watch Tim, her forehead against the cool glass. She was forever trying to imagine how things looked to him. He had been drinking so much lately, and was so constantly angry, that it was harder and harder for her to see things from his point of view. He always seemed so angry.

Halfway up the hill he slowed and took a single step sideways, nearly falling, and she wondered if the solid house she was standing in had shifted for him and settled a little deeper into the hillside, and if the puffy white hydrangea blossoms by the front step spun. When he reached the front door he gripped the doorframe desperately. Finally, he said, "I can't stand to see this place empty." His shirt had a large wet spot across the front in the shape of Wisconsin. He stood in the doorway, refusing to step inside. "Let's go now," he said.

"We'll go in the morning," she said. "The way we planned."

Still he stood there. There were dark half-moons of perspiration under his arms. "We'll go now," he repeated.

"We should have paid someone to move our things."

"Oh, Christ," he said, half-turning and then quickly turning back. "I'm going now. You follow."

"No," she said. "Anyway, Ben's not here."

"Well, get him. Where is he? He should be here."

His voice was loud, and his hands were fists. "Where is he?"

"Not far. He has friends to say good-bye to." She

stepped closer to him, and he nodded a bit without meaning to. "You can't drive now." She looked past him down into the street. The ramp still leaned down from the back of the yellow and silver truck onto the dusty concrete street. "You want me to go get us something to eat?"

His eyes narrowed. "No," he said. "No, I don't want anything to eat."

But there was nothing left to do in the empty house. Finally Tim came inside and stretched out on his back in the middle of the living room carpet, struggled out of his wet shirt and closed his eyes. For awhile she watched him, watched his face relax; he began to look like himself again, though now and then his body would twitch and struggle. She looked at him, his shoulders well-muscled and hard from working out, his chest covered with curling hair, his mouth relaxing in sleep. She thought about touching him, touching his mouth with hers, hoping he would wake up sober and caring; but for a long time he had been drunk by bedtime and could do no better than torment her for hours and mutter names at her. It was somehow all her fault. "Bitch," he would say. "Bitch." No, she couldn't touch him, didn't dare wake him up now. He changed so when he drank. He had changed so. Sometimes she felt she didn't know him any more at all. Moving might be a new beginning. He had said it too: "Things will be better." He flung his arms out in his sleep.

She was a little hungry, and Ben would be hungry too.

When she opened the screen door to leave, Tim roused himself and opened his eyes. "You going someplace? Where you going?"

"I'll be back," she said.

"Bitch," he said, and closed his eyes again.

She got into the car and drove, slowing toward the end of the street when she saw Ben and Adam Riley, his best friend. They stood together at the stop sign at the end of the street, looking across the highway and the field beyond. Adam's shiny hair was blue-black in the sunlight, and both boys were wearing their favorite red shirts with numbers on the backs. She called to Ben and told him to stay close, that she'd bring him something to eat. He nodded, silently, his small face pinched and tired, and then looked away again. She couldn't get the picture out of her mind as she drove across town and then back with a bag full of hamburgers and fries: Ben standing there with the red stop sign above him, the two boys looking off into the haze where the vacant green field met the pale sky.

When she got back, there was an oil spot on the street where the truck had been parked, and the only thing left in the house was the phone, which didn't make a sound when she tried to use it. Even the suitcases and the pillows and blankets they had planned to use for sleeping that night were gone.

She called to Ben from the back door and from the front, as loudly as she could, and then roamed the house, circling

it again and again, trying to think. Finally she walked down to the end of the street, to Adam Riley's house. The drapes were pulled, and she rang the bell many times before Anna Riley opened the door a crack. Lisa had been in Anna's living room only once before, when she had gone to collect for the March of Dimes. The room had been dark that time too, and the stereo had been on, some slow, outdated music. Anna Riley was a small, Italian-looking woman, a strange match for her large, loud, Irish husband. Anna kept to herself, in the dark it seemed. She let Lisa in, pulling a pale quilted housecoat closer around herself. She seemed altogether pale to Lisa, like a plant away from the light too long, not like the mother of a lively boy like Adam. "Where are the boys?" Lisa was asking her. Anna swallowed and shook her head from side to side as though she might not understand. Lisa was scared and talking fast. "I can't find Ben, and he was with Adam a little while ago. I can't find him. Do you know where he is? Where's Adam?"

"Adam," said Anna, "is out back. I just looked out and saw him. He's just sitting on his swing."

"And Ben?"

"Not there. You can come through the house if you like."

Lisa followed Anna through the dim kitchen; the dishes weren't done and the place smelled sour. Adam was in the back yard. "Is Benny in trouble?" he wanted to know.

"Where is he?" Lisa stood over the boy, who was dragging

his bare feet in the short dusty path under the swing. "Do you know where he is?"

"I never saw him after he went home."

"He went home?"

"Your dad sounded real mad. He was yelling real loud."

"And he ran home?"

"Yes. Is he in trouble?"

"No. He's not in trouble. He's all right." She tried to smile at Adam, and he smiled back. "Ben's going to miss you."

"Are you guys ever coming back?"

Lisa looked down at the smooth hair and the round eyes. Adam's face was olive-tan and dirty around the mouth. "We might come back for a visit."

Back in her own house she walked through the empty rooms again. In Ben's room she found a walnut-sized super ball on the floor; she picked it up and put it in her pocket. And in the living room she noticed Tim's shirt, knotted into a ball in the corner. She sat on the carpet and smoothed the shirt with her hands; it smelled of sweat and beer.

Ben wouldn't have said no to his father. She could see in her mind how it must have been: Tim, his mouth a thin line, telling Ben which suitcase to carry. They'd gone ahead without her, driven off without her into the dimming afternoon.

The thing to do, of course, was to get into the car and follow. The Ryder truck couldn't possibly make very good time; she'd be able to catch up with them, or make it to the new house before they did. She walked quickly through the house one last time. She looked into the shiny ebony interior of the oven and into the refrigerator, pulling out the empty vegetable drawer. A bit of dried lettuce leaf clung to the lip of the drawer like the fine wing of an insect. She peeled it off with a fingernail and rolled it into a tiny, spongy ball; she flicked it into the sink. She found the keys to the house in the bottom of her purse and dropped them onto the kitchen counter with a clatter. The new people would take possession tomorrow. When the front door clicked behind her she didn't look back. Turning onto the highway she saw Adam—red shirt and black hair—standing in the field across the way. They both waved.

She drove north on highway forty-seven, and in twenty minutes she was in Wisconsin; the road curved and wound downhill. She knew Lake Geneva was off to the left, behind the trees that made yellow-green shadows on the road. Coming up on the right was a massive house she'd noticed many times before, a huge fortress built of rectangular limestone blocks. Strangely, there was no vegetation in front of the house. It was ugly, really, rising up squarely from the bare ground, and had been empty for years. She slowed down and looked at it. There was no traffic behind her. The chain that had sagged across

the weedy gravel access to the house was down; the ends of it hung lifeless from low stone pillars. She turned the wheel suddenly and made a low cloud of dust. Wheat-colored weeds grew from jagged cracks in the flagstone drive. She left the engine running when she got out of the car.

Walking around to the side of the house, she startled a cat that was sunning on one of the windows' deep sills. A streak of gray, it skittered into a stand of blazing yellow forsythia, and she walked over to the window, leaning her face toward the dirty glass. It was no use.

Inside everything slanted with gray and grayer shadows. The window was made up of square leaded panes and one of them was cracked. Most of the other windows were boarded up, and there was so little light inside she could see almost nothing. Something massive in the center of the large room was draped in a white cloth. What was it? A pile of furniture? A dining table, all of its leaves in, and over that, on its back, a tall bookcase, With glass doors. A pile of priceless oriental rugs. And over it all the gigantic dropcloth. To protect it all from dust. Or maybe it was a pile of packing cases. China, packed in fine straw. Leather-bound books with gilt-edged pages. With secret inscriptions in faded brown ink, in a slanted hand. TO J.L. FROM C.M. CHRISTMAS, 1848. Or something more personal and antique. TO MY DEAR.... Yes, something personal, not straw. Someone's possessions, underneath it all. The shadows moved, and Lisa pressed

closer. Someone had to have belonged to those things. And to have gone off and left them. We'll go off now and nothing will matter; we'll send for these things later. She could almost hear it.

A shadow on the window made her jump a little and she turned quickly. It was a police officer wearing reflector sunglasses that mirrored her face like spoons. She stared at him, at the twin reflections where his eyes should have been. "Looking for something?" he said. He seemed embarrassed. "Place has been boarded up for years. We're supposed to keep an eye on it."

"I've been by here so many times," Lisa began. "Taking the kids to the beach. Well, I won't be coming by here any more. We're moving, you see, and, well, I was just curious."

"Quite a monster, isn't it?" said the young man.

"You know who lived here?"

"No. Who?"

"I don't know," said Lisa. "I thought maybe you did."

"Someone with a lot of money. And no class, if you ask me."

"Yes," she said faintly. "Well, I really wasn't bothering anything. I noticed the chain was broken. Did you think I was breaking in or something?"

"It's all right. I just thought I should check. Actually." He was grinning down at her. "It's a slow day."

Lisa walked quickly back to her car. She was shaking

and suddenly very tired. Policemen always scared her; she couldn't say just why. She hadn't been doing anything wrong. But she was shaking and wanted more than anything else to be home, with familiar things. With Ben and with Tim. But by now they were way ahead of her. She glanced in her rear-view mirror at the police car behind her and then at her own eyes, very dark and wide open. She turned left without thinking why, and headed back toward home, toward a locked house with nothing in it but a very clean refrigerator and matching oven and range. Harvest Gold. Wall-to-wall carpeting, attached garage, nice neighborhood. The house had sold quickly; it wasn't hers any more. She drove over the speed limit all the way back, passed her old street without a glance, and drove downtown. Parking her car on the square, she wrote out the message while sitting in the car. Her hands were still shaking. It wouldn't be different; it would never be different. She wondered if Ben was hungry, if he would get some supper. And she wondered if his fish were swimming safely through their private sea-storm on their way to northern Wisconsin. She placed the telegram from a phone booth, and ordered it sent in the morning. The new house probably didn't have a phone yet. They'd wonder where she was. THAT WAS DIRTY TRICK STOP SEE YOU IN COUPLE DAYS STOP LISA.

She looked out at her car—a blue Nova, the back seat full of houseplants—and down at her long legs. She was wearing shorts and a t-shirt. Even with the sun going down it was

very hot inside the booth. She dialed Jason's number. When after eleven rings he answered, she said, "I want you to take me to supper, right on the square where everyone can see, but I don't have the right clothes. Can I come over?"

He sounded out of breath, as if he'd had to run for the phone. "I thought you'd be gone by now. What's going on?"

"I'm coming over right now. I just wanted to see if you were there."

"Tell me what's wrong."

"He had some guys help him load everything into a rented truck, and then he took off, with Ben too, and he was so drunk." She had a sudden glimpse of the silver and yellow truck on its side, sliding on its side over an endless field of low green plants, and of Ben flying against the ground, his bare arms flung out. "I'm scared something will happen to Ben, and everything we own is in that truck, but it wasn't my fault and I can't do anything about it." She closed her eyes, and an avalanche of water rushed out of the ruptured doors of the truck, clotted with tiny red-gold fish; and furniture and rugs and dishes exploded with a terrible sound. "And, Jason," she said, "I can't follow them. I tried, but I can't. I can't go chasing him all the way up there." She swallowed hard and looked out across the square. The bricks of the street were worn, a rolling field of bricks. "I'll be there in ten minutes," she said, and hung up. He hadn't wanted her to go

at all. He'd be glad to see her. She smiled a little. It would be all right.

And he was glad to see her, but she pulled away from him. She went into the bathroom and took a long shower, and then rubbed herself dry and put her damp clothes back on. When she went back into the living room, her hair damp around her face, he wouldn't look at her. He slouched against the back of the worn sofa. "Jason," she said, but he refused to look at her.

"I just don't understand how you let that happen," he said. "It's just like you, though. You do just let things happen. Don't you?"

She didn't answer. The shower had cooled her, and now she was rubbing the ends of her long hair with a blue towel. She curled into the corner of the sofa. He was looking at the ceiling.

"Don't you?" he repeated.

"I don't know what you mean. You sound mad."

"You're always talking about that boy, about keeping things together for him, and you let him ride off, with his father so drunk. It doesn't figure, that's all."

"But I didn't let him. I told you how it happened." She moved closer to him and curled around to face him, putting her face against his chest. "Come on, it'll be all right."

"I didn't think I'd ever see you again," he said, very softly. He began touching her hair. "I really wanted you to

stay."

"Well, I did."

"But I wanted you to really decide." He pushed her gently away and stood up. She could see the crease of his spine under his thin blue shirt. Then at last he turned around and crouched down beside her so their faces were level. "Stay here with me. In a couple of days we'll drive up and get Ben. It's what you want."

"Yes," she said, "it's what I want." They held each other for awhile, until the room went dark. She thought about Ben. She could see him drooping against his father in the darkness, the truck's motor churning, the oncoming headlights lighting the windshield now and then like the lights of a summer storm.

Jason was still sleeping the next morning when Lisa got up. While water was boiling for coffee, she walked out to her car with a pitcher of water. A putty-colored stray dog walked across the gravel barnyard and watched her without barking. The ground was damp under her bare feet and she shivered, spilling a little water on her hands. Inside the car she leaned into the jungle of plants and began watering them. It seemed important.

Back inside the house she made a cup of coffee and carried it to the bedroom door. Jason slept on his back, stretched out over the width of the bed, his arms spread out.

She could see the flutter of his heart under the taut skin over his ribcage. She watched him sleep for a long time, and then she turned away. She thought about leaving a note.

For miles down the highway she imagined him waking up and finding her gone. She imagined him walking out to the barn, past the dog that didn't bark, jerking the welding hood down over his face, lighting the torch, melting the metal together according to his own design. She should have left a note.

She remembered the way without a map. She and Tim had driven up together to pick out the new house. She stopped only once for gas and once for coffee, which was too strong and left a bitter taste. And Tim's habit of anger burned strongly in her stomach. He would be very angry, and she rehearsed what she would say.

The house was just the way she remembered it. A huge blue spruce in the front yard. Colonial blue shutters. Windows divided into square panes. Lawn fine as the green of a golfcourse.

Taped onto the front door was a telegram envelope with her name scrawled on it in Tim's hand. She pulled it down. The door opened easily to her touch, and the air inside the house was cooler than outside. No one answered her call. The curtainless house was strange. Even the familiar furniture, sitting at odd angles and surrounded by boxes marked in her own hand, was strange. She opened the envelope. He had

written on the back of the telegram.

Lisa,

If you get here before I get back
stay close. Phone will be hooked up today.
I'll call. Anything's better than waiting
in this empty house. At first I was mad.
I never thought you'd do anything like that.
I've never been so tired. Tell Ben
I'm not really mad at him. And tell him most
of the water sloshed out, but the fish
made it.

Lisa's skin went cold and she moved about the house frantically, looking for a sign. There was a tube of toothpaste on the rim of the blue bathroom sink. And a red toothbrush. A suitcase lay open in the hallway. But nothing was unpacked. None of the beds were put together. Mattresses leaned against walls.

She looked out the front window of the upstairs bedroom that was to be Ben's. Behind her, on his dresser, the aquarium filter gurgled like a dying patient. And three fish swam in mindless circles. She could imagine Tim, scared and rough-faced, driving south in an empty Ryder truck. But for all the world she could not imagine—could not conjure up a single vision—of where on earth Benjamin might be.