

1980

ALL RIVERS RUN INTO THE SEA

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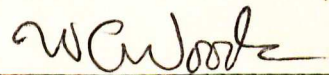
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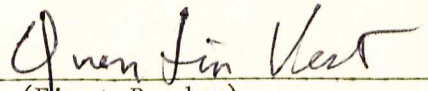
ALL RIVERS RUN INTO THE SEA

By

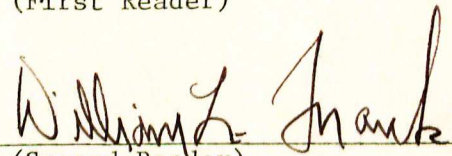
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(Director of Thesis)



(First Reader)



(Second Reader)

Date

ALL RIVERS RUN INTO THE SEA

Thesis

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of Master
of Arts in English at Longwood College.

by

Anne Hunt

1980

THESIS

Anne Hunt, BA

Graduate School

Longwood College

1980

80- 4983

PREFACE

I have been writing short stories for many years now. At an early age I found that the only way I could hold on to my ideas and thoughts was to write them down. Usually these ideas were manifested in situations and characters; therefore they fell quite naturally and easily into the form of the sketch and the short story. Lately, within the last year and a half to be exact, I have been introduced to poetry writing. Still, I am experimenting with this form of expression. However, the same principles which are important in my prose writing are ruling factors in my poetry writing also. These elements or characteristics are simplicity and clarity. By carefully controlling these elements I attempt to interject a subtle power into my work.

As the reader will see both the stories and poems which follow draw from everyday experiences, occurrences, and thoughts. They are not designed to fictionalize life as much as to portray it realistically. In doing so the purpose of my writing is to awaken in the reader a sense of the poignancy of everyday experience--not only of others but also of his own. They are an attempt, then, to expand not only my own consciousness but also the personal consciousness of my readers.

All the rivers run into the sea;
yet the sea is not full;
unto the place from whence the rivers come,
thither they return again.

--Ecclesiastes

THE VIEW FROM THE BRIDGE

"The Boat"

THE END OF THE ROAD

"The Ferry"

VIEWING AT WASHINGTON

"View from the Boat at 11:30 P.M."

DRINKING AND IN BRIDGEPORT COUNTY

"Regrets"

IS IT EVER GONE IN CHICAGO?

For TCH

"The Decision"

A KISS TO THE TOP OF THE MOUNTAIN

"A Kiss"

THE VISIT

"Day of Judgment"

WORK IN FRONT OF FACES

"A Scene by the River"

ANY PLACE LIKE ALBERTA

LEAVING THE RIVER BEHIND

The little girl had very large blue eyes and the old Negro thought that it was too bad that his children could not have blue eyes too. But then he loved the large brown eyes of his son so it was probably bad luck to wish for anything different. Then he thought that he had never seen any child with eyes he did not like but he had seen plenty of men with unfriendly eyes. The man who lived in the shack down the road near the store was one. You did not need to get near him to see the meanness in his eyes. It was plenty noticeable from a distance.

The Negro was boarding up a window in the boat shed for the winter because the family would be leaving soon. He had boarded up these windows every fall for as long as he could remember but this was the first time that the little girl had noticed. She sat on the woodpile and watched, kicking loose the bark with her heels and wiping

it away with her toes. She watched the Negro intently because any kind of physical activity fascinated her. The Negro fascinated her too, probably because he was always doing physical work, but she did not know that. She liked Joe because she had always liked Joe and always would. Joe was also Cecelia's husband which was a point in his favor because Cecelia made the best lemon pound cake in the world and the little girl loved pound cake.

"Joe, why're you boarding up the window?"

"'Cause the winters down here on the river can be pretty hard on the window panes, and your pa don't want to have to buy new glass every spring."

The little girl thought about that for a long time. She also thought about how she would go swimming soon and she wondered where her dog was but mostly she thought about the window. She never had been on the river for a winter and she wondered what kind of weather would break up all the windows. She thought for sure that if the weather got that bad the whole shed would blow away because there were a lot of cracks in the boards anyway. Then she smiled at the thought of the whole shed blowing away just like in The Wizard of Oz.

"Joe, what if a big tornado came. Would the boards stay nailed shut?"

Joe did not want to disappoint the little girl because he knew how much she thought of him. But he also knew that she was smart and would not take any nonsense.

"Well, I'm putting this board in awful tight. I'd say the whole shed would crash down before this here board comes out. I know the shed wouldn't last through no tornado. We've never had one of them down here anyway."

"Oh." Claire was losing interest because there probably wasn't going to be a tornado.

"Now, when I board up the big house tomorrow I'd be willing to bet that she'd stand through anything, even a tornado," he said, sensing her disinterest.

"Will you teach me to put the boards in?"

"Well, you'll have to ask your Pa that. And, anyway, you're not big enough to do this kind of work yet."

"I'll bet I am too. I can do lots of stuff that surprises people. My daddy tells me that all the time."

"We'll see. Maybe next year you can help. But you'll have to study me real hard this time so you can learn how."

"I will then, I'll watch everything you do."

The little girl sat with her elbows on her knees and her chin in her hands and watched the old Negro steadily. She didn't say anything more because she thought that grown-ups liked it when children were quiet. And that way Joe would know that she was serious about learning. Soon, though, she began to wonder if her father had gotten anything hunting. She thought about this off and on until she saw him coming down the lane from the road. She ran to him, leaving the Negro to his work.

"Daddy, what ya got in the bag?"

"Two ducks." He lifted her up and held her in his arms.

The two looked very much alike.

"Where'd ya get them?"

"The mill pond."

"Did David go with his father?"

"Yep, sure did."

"Did he have any luck?"

"Three ducks, better luck than me."

"Good."

"You're glad he did better than me?" The father cocked his head to the side and looked her in the eye.

"Nope, just glad he had good luck."

The little girl thought of the window.

"Joe says to ask you if I can help him with the windows next year. He says I'm not big enough right now but you always say that I can do a lot of things which surprise people. I've been watching all day and I'm sure I can handle it."

"We'll see next year. You've got to prove to me that you're big enough."

"I will, that's for sure." She was satisfied now because she knew she would be much bigger and stronger in a year. Now that she had gotten the windows out of the way she noticed how her father smelled. He smelled very much like the woods they often walked in together but she could also smell something else.

"Daddy, you smell funny again. Mom will be mad if she smells it too."

"Well, we won't tell her, will we?"

"I won't. But you don't have to tell her, she can smell it."

He knew the little girl was right. Her mother would be mad because it was only eleven o'clock and she did not like for him to drink before evening. He never liked to either but it had been cool in the early morning and the drink had seemed very right to warm up. He felt that that was very understandable. He would not drink much for the rest of the afternoon anyway because he had a lot to do out on the river.

"What's your mother up to anyway?"

"Packing this and packing that."

"Don't you think you should be helping her instead of sitting out here watching Joe? I've got a good dinner in my pouch here so I've done my part. You know what we believe about everyone doing their own part."

"I tried but I only got in the way. That's why I came outside."

"I should be so lucky as to 'get in the way!'"

"Oh no, you won't be in the way! She was saying she wished you'd get in so you could help her with the heavy stuff."

"I figured as much."

The two were nearing the house and the Negro watched them

from the shed. He was thinking how lonely it would be for him and his wife when the family left for the winter. Everything was so quiet and still in the winter months when all you could do was work at the store five or six hours a day. Then you could work the river for a few hours, but even the river became dull in the dead of winter. Sometimes he felt that life stopped during that season and you only lived for the spring when the river folks came down. They would have people coming and going all of the time and give big parties that lasted all night. It was a very good place in the summer. Everyone had a good time.

THE PAST

There was a time when the past
was knit together tightly,
when an ancient memory
was two, maybe three years old.
But since then time has passed
and memories once so vivid
are now nothing more than clouded
recollections
of things as they were before,
and the future can now be measured
with a terrifying ease.

THE END OF SUMMER

That summer if the temperature lowered to eighty degrees in the night it was considered cool. The breezes off the river were the only relief in the heat of the day and Claire and David would sit on the terrace when the winds were blowing and have drinks. Often they would come to want each other very badly and go to David's cottage and take long naps in the afternoon. They would wake up hungry just before dinner. Claire would go out to the garden and pick fresh vegetables for a salad while David started a fire for steaks. Dinner was always very good and filling and afterwards they would go for a walk either by the river bank or down to the club to see how the fish had run that day.

It was near the end of August now and David was leaving to catch a plane for Paris late that night. He had an assignment from his editor to dig up all the old haunts of the expatriates of the

Twenties for a feature. He was very excited even though it meant leaving Claire for the last three weeks of summer. Because he was going Claire could not eat very well and did not take her eyes off of David. She loved his brown eyes and his curly hair and she wanted him very badly. David reached over and pulled her onto his lap. He held her close and she could feel his heart beating against her side.

"You're not hungry tonight?"

"Not really."

"I want you to come with me."

"You know I can't. I've got to go to school."

"I never went. Traveling and working for the paper has taught me plenty."

"I want to come but I can't."

"I know. You need to do what your mother wants. And you have a good time up there. I know that."

"It'd be better if you were around."

"No. You're still young and you need to be out on your own."

"Will we ever be married?"

"The day you finish, if you want."

"That's what I want."

"We'll count on it. Make time go by faster."

"How long have you loved me?"

"Since you were a little girl."

"Are you serious?"

"Yep. I decided I'd marry you way back then."

"Wasn't I a brat?"

"I didn't notice. All I knew was that you had beautiful eyes and skin."

"All I noticed about you was that you were big and strong and that you were the nicest of all my sister's friends. Did you ever love her?"

"Why all these silly questions?"

"I'm just going to miss you and I hardly know what I'm saying."

"We don't have to talk." David said rubbing his face against her neck.

"I'm just nervous."

"Why?"

"Because you've been here all summer, so close, and tomorrow you'll be half way around the world. I'm afraid."

"Of what?"

"Of losing you."

"You don't need to worry about that. You're not going to lose me."

"You can't say that for sure."

"Yes I can say that for sure."

"You mean it?"

"With all my heart."

"Still, I worry," she said turning her head away from him.

"I wish like hell you wouldn't."

"I don't want to but I can't help it. I've always been afraid

of losing things I love, ever since . . ."

"Don't." He turned her face toward him. "Listen. I love you Claire. I'll always love you. You have to remember that."

"I'll try."

"Do more than try."

"Alright." She put her head on his shoulder and asked softly, "Will you hold me tonight?"

"You know I will."

"Tight?"

"Tight."

"And never let me go," she said finally.

"And never let you go."

The two sat on the terrace and held each other until the sun had set. Then they got up and went inside for the night. It was very hot and there was not a breeze off the water. It was the kind of summer night when the stillness which hangs in the air has no mercy. You want the stillness to break but it never does. Even when morning comes there is still the feeling that the night will never end.

THE PIGEON

On a cold winter afternoon a pigeon flutters from the barn roof and wings its way off toward the setting sun.

There it hangs for a moment, a black speck of dust in the fiery wind.

Then, like an old friend after a long absence, it returns and lights on the tin roof of the calf barn without a sound.

In a second the silence is split by the crash of a sheet of frozen snow that slips to the ground.

EVENING AT WINTERPOCK

Bill came by late that evening when the sun was dropping slowly in the west. I saw his car turn off the road and come barreling down the dirt lane with a cloud of dust hovering over it, then fanning out over the corn fields, and finally losing all shape and substance. He pulled his car off the lane beside the walnut tree which hung its heavy branches on the roof of the porch. He jumped out of the car, long-legged and energetic, and walked up to the porch where I was sitting. I thought that he looked rather peculiar in the late afternoon sun but could not figure out why. There was something about the brilliant yellow-orange of the sunset behind him and the darkness of the shadows across his face that caught me unaware for a moment--a single moment, just long enough to remember.

"So, where've you been keeping yourself?" I asked as he walked across the yard.

"I might say the same to you."

"You might, but you didn't. It's been weeks since you've been by."

"You haven't been exactly hounding my door, either, babe."

Bill took the front porch steps two at a time, gave me a kiss on the cheek, and settled in a chair next to mine. Then he propped his feet up on the railing and leaned his chair against the wood stacked against the wall.

"What the hell have you been up to today?" I asked noticing that he'd been drinking quite a bit.

"We went to Richmond and knocked around the museum for awhile, then went by Tom's to check out his new stereo system and had a few beers." He turned and looked at me. "Guess you had the day off."

"Finally. I slept late for the first time in weeks. Then split some wood and have gotten some reading done this afternoon."

"Are you still on the Thomas Wolfe kick?"

"Yes, and it's not a kick so lets drop the subject before we get into another argument about it," I said.

"Touchy."

"No sensible," I said with a smile.

"For the first time."

"I said lets drop it." I reached my foot over and nudged his knee. "Care for a beer?"

"Thought you'd never ask."

I got up and walked across the familiar wooden floor, creaking,

and opened the screen door. Then I turned back to Bill.

"I'm out of Slitz. So it's Bud or Stroh's."

"Bud."

"I've only got one six. That be enough?"

"Might be. If not, I can force down some Stroh's."

I went through the living room to the kitchen. The old ice box was next to the wood stove which had not been used in years for cooking, though I had more than once built a fire in it to keep warm in the winter. I reached in the box and pulled out two beers. Then I swung my foot around and closed the door. The solid clamp of the metal door was reassuring. I crossed back to the porch smiling to myself about Thomas Wolfe. It was true that every person I had talked to about him had laughed when I called him a great writer. Well, that was their problem. Maybe when I got out of school I would start a Thomas Wolfe revival. But maybe no amount of literary criticism could resurrect him. Perhaps he was a writer to be felt, not studied. That was entirely possible. Yes, that was possible and I would store that idea for future reference.

I came back out on the porch and handed Bill his beer.

"This one should be good, straight from Williamsburg," I said.

"You been home lately?"

"Last Friday I went so I could rake leaves for my grandfather. I'm afraid they're going to have to sell the house in the next few years because the yard is getting to be too much for him to take care of. And whenever he starts to make some headway my grandmother is out

on the back porch screaming that he's going to kill himself if he doesn't quit right that moment. Then he screams, 'Mary, you're what's going to kill me if you don't leave me alone.' Then she goes back in the house muttering and fussing and worrying, running from one window to another keeping an eye on him. It's enough to drive anyone crazy. I can't stay there for long without becoming a nervous wreck."

"Has he recovered from his stroke entirely?"

"For the most part, I think. Every now and then he puts his hand over his face and says he feels like it's going to fall off. That scares me."

"I guess it does. What causes it?"

"They say the die injected in his brain for tests can affect people that way."

"That must really be a wild sensation."

"It bothers him a lot. Especially when he overworks himself."

"So that's why your grandmother worries."

"Sure she has reason to but still she drives him up the wall which is just as bad, if not worse."

"What'll we be like when we get old?"

"I hope like hell I die before I get so old I can't do what I want. That's one thing I'm sure of since I've been working at the nursing home."

"Not all old people end up in nursing homes."

"Sure. That's easy to say. And it's true. But at the same

time the possibility is there and I don't want to have anything to do with it."

"Yeah. I guess I see your point."

"If you don't, I'm sure you will some day. Maybe you could stop by work and see what I mean."

"I don't think you'll ever get me there."

"So ignoring it means that it doesn't exist. Nice philosophy. But that doesn't make it true," I said.

"No, I don't guess it does. Probably half of our little personal philosophies won't hold water."

"None of mine will. I just create them to make life a little less painful and guilt-ridden."

"You're hard on yourself," he said turning to me.

"No, realistic."

Bill started to move to me but stopped. After that there were some moments of silence, filled with our sighs, and with the other sounds of the farm. The sun was balanced now on top of the oak tree by the road and the sky had become scarlet, almost like blood. Then, in a moment which hung in the stillness for hours, the two horses that had been grazing near the fence by the road galloped in across the field, side by side, with their hooves pounding the sodden ground. Then, the silence was even heavier after the sound of the horses died away.

I got up after a few minutes and went into the house for two more beers. I knew that Bill would stay for awhile and I was glad. The sun was setting quickly now; it seemed that once it touched upon

the oak tree that it picked up speed and purpose. Within a quarter of an hour I knew that it would have completely disappeared, then there would be a half hour of twilight, and finally darkness would enclose the house and porch. After that our eyes would slowly grow accustomed to the night and we would be able to make out the shadows and shapes of the barns, the pump house, the ice house, and the lodge. This night would be like so many others that I had spent on the farm at Winterpock and at the same time I knew that it would be different. That is the way things are. Times are spent in familiar surroundings with familiar people. Nothing is noticeably different except that a different date shows on the calendar. But there is a feeling inside which tells us that we have never been here before and we will never return. Each moment has its own imperceptible quality and power which we cannot name no matter how hard we try. And that was the way it was that night. I will always remember it though I will never return to it. Thomas Wolfe, you were right.

"Here you go." I handed Bill another beer.

"Thanks."

"Did I tell you I got a letter from Kath the other day?"

"No. How's she doing?"

"She seems to be having a good time. At first she was leading the pure life but now she's drinking a little on the side. And get this. She says in the letter, 'Claire, I'm going to be under the bright lights of the stage next month and guess what I'm going to portray . . . a drunken slut.'"

"Jesus! What play?"

"The Shadow Box. I'd never read it but checked it out and it's wild. I can just see her reeling around the stage with a skimpy dress, a rain slicker, and a bunch of cheap jewelry on, taking swigs from a bottle of scotch."

"What is it, type casting?"

"Bill."

"Just kidding. But don't forget that I've known her for a lot longer than you have and have obviously seen her from a different viewpoint."

"Drop it." I got up and walked to the steps and sat down.

"So she's not drinking much? I can remember watching the two of you drink beyond all reason on this very porch not a hell of a long time ago."

"Well, I don't associate reason with drinking, anyway. People drink to escape reason and the rational world."

"You do a fairly good job."

"So do you, buddy."

"Don't get defensive. I'm just giving you a hard time. I've always heard and believed that writers drink a lot because they have to face the hard and clean and cruel world so honestly and objectively when they write that they need to escape it when they aren't writing. And it gives them something to compare the world they must represent in their writing to."

"And one doesn't measure up to the other very well."

"Which is why my writing becomes both a passion and a vice," Bill said with finality.

"Have you ever read any of Kath's stuff?"

"A little. Lately she's been a bit uptight around me."

"How lately?"

"The past six months or so."

"She thinks you're too much of a cynic."

"And I think she's insane, so we're even."

"I know why you say that." Inside something turned over and I became uneasy. "I've thought that at times but I think that it's just that all 'arty' people seem a little different compared to the norm," I said defensively.

"You honestly don't think that it goes any farther than that?"

"Yes."

"Who do you think you're fooling?"

"No one. Look, Kath's her own person and no one else's. Can I help it if people are jealous of her?"

"Starting with you."

"Get off it Bill. If anyone's jealous . . ." I stopped myself.

"You get off it Claire."

"I'm sorry."

"It's okay. Let's drop it. Go get me another beer."

I got up and walked to the kitchen trying not to think about Bill. I felt as though the house had become less definite, more abstract,

in the past half hour. Perhaps, though, impressionistic would be more like it. It was as though Monet had come into the living room and redone everything in pastels. That was why people drank, I thought. So that the edges would be blunted. So that we could live with our surroundings. Everything that could possibly hurt had lost its power. That was as things should be. After all, why be sober in a drunken world? That was a good thought. Remember it.

When I got back out on the porch the night had come upon us and the crickets had tuned up to the point that their noise was the evening quiet. I sat down beside Bill and handed him his beer. He was very quiet and I didn't speak, knowing that he wanted the silence to continue. Finally, though, he began to talk, not looking at me but out over the fields which hung like a gray cloud beneath the black sky.

"You're good, Claire, at ignoring things and I guess that's the way you have to be. But I want to say a couple of things that I've wanted to say for some time and I guess that this is my best chance. You've known, or at least I'm sure it's been obvious, for a long time that I'm in love with you. And all this stuff about you getting married next fall bothers me. I think that you're looking for security in the wrong place and I hope like hell you think about what you're doing," he said, with his face remaining expressionless.

"I've thought about it. You shouldn't worry."

"I can't help it. You've known this guy since you were a kid and you've relied on him. You don't have anything to compare

it to."

"I've got more than you know."

"Well, just think about it. And know that I'll always be here."

"I know that."

"Do you really love him?"

"Very much."

"You've never given me a chance."

"Not because I didn't want to but because I already had David and would never risk losing him."

"That's a bad reason."

"It came out wrong. What I mean is that I care about you but that he is a lot more to me than you could ever be--because of all that he's helped me through."

"You're admitting that you depend on him."

"Is that so bad?"

"I think in your case it is."

"You think wrong."

"That remains to be seen."

"Bill, I'm sorry that you're upset or angry or whatever."

"Sweep it under the rug by saying you're sorry."

"I'd rather not have to take this. If you care for me you'll see that I'm happy."

"I don't see that at all."

"Or you won't see it."

"Listen, I don't want this to be a bad scene. I just wanted you to know how I feel about things. I love you very much and am concerned. Okay? I've meant all that I've said and I hope you think about it--for a long time."

"I will."

"I do want you to be happy. I just wish I was the one who could make you that way." He looked at me and I could see that he had softened a little.

We drank a few more beers together until we decided to go for a walk. Away from the lights of the house I noticed for the first time that Orion had returned which meant that the fall would soon end and the winter months would set in. Bill told me that he thought the weather would be mild through Thanksgiving, if not Christmas, so not to start worrying about the cold yet. That was reassuring. Then we walked back to the house in the darkness--it enfolding us like a warm blanket. Bill stopped at his car and said that he had to leave.

"I've enjoyed this evening Claire. You know that."

"So have I."

"Please don't forget what I said. I . . ."

"Don't," I tried to save him from words.

"But . . ."

"Bill."

"Okay."

"Goodnight."

"Goodnight."

Bill got in his car and left. I imagined that the dust probably rose and hovered over his car as he left but I could not see it because of the dark. Then I thought that it was a shame that he had chosen the very last moment to try and pick a bone that had already been picked clean. Until that point things had been good. Now they were bad. You could always count on that. You could draw a beautiful picture of life for yourself and if you did not get around to destroying it yourself someone else always would. The trick was to remember the good part and pretend that the bad part never happened. But then you would always end up saying to yourself, "Who are you fooling?" But you had to keep on trying just the same. That was what made you go to bed hoping that tomorrow would be different; that tomorrow would be clear and good. And one day it would be. You had to believe that. If you didn't it would be too bad for you to stand.

VIEW FROM THE ROOF AT 11:54 P.M.

"But then language of course
is a kind of lullaby."

--Charles Simic

A clear night, but dark . . .
Each star fine as a pinpoint--
Shaming the glare of the street lights below.

A freight train moves across the horizon--
The yellow beam of the headlight disappears long
before the rumble of the cars fades.

A jogger moves around the field below
at a pace my mind cannot keep.
One moment he is silhouetted against the street light,
Another moment lost in the shadows . . .
I cannot tell how wide his circle is.

The tennis game on the lighted courts fascinates me.
The balls hit the court . . .
A split second of silence . . .
Then, their hollow echo behind us.

CHRISTMAS DAY IN GLOUCESTER COUNTY

We spent Christmas day in Gloucester county with my mother's family. It was a warm day for December and the sky was clear and blue. My uncle's home was on the York river near a place called Capahosic, a small town which had as its claim to fame a small creek which fed into the river and on which were moored the small wooden boats of fishermen. These boats were not used as a source of income for the owners, but rather as a source of supplementary income and entertainment for farmers, businessmen, doctors, factory workers--men from all walks of life. In Capahosic everyone was equal. It was a very good place to spend Christmas day, it was a good place to spend any day for that matter. My uncle's house was the one which had seen many generations of my family live and die. It was a three story house with porches on the front facing the river on the first two levels. On the third level there was a catwalk from which my

great-great-grandmother had flung herself in despair when the Yankee army had camped across the river. The army never crossed the river and my great-great-grandmother never lived to tell about it. Evidently she had been a little crazy anyway because no one ever spoke of her death as a tragedy but rather as a family anecdote. It seemed a sad affair to me any way you looked at it, though.

All day long we strolled from porch to porch, room to room, and caught up on family gossip. Uncle John was still in Kenya doing missionary work for the Seventh Day Adventist Church. Cousin Paul was a great disappointment to everyone because he was living in New York working as a trashman (he was making twice as much as Dianne, the secretary who was talking about him but since Mother was within earshot I could not point this out to her). Tim, Paul's brother, was redeeming the family's deep love for country and state by taking up his father's, his grandfather's, and his great-grandfather's profession--the Law (they spoke this word in a hushed and reverent tone, the same tone that I have always pictured spinster women using when referring to sex). And Jane was at UVA, Alex and Mark at Tennessee, Karen at Hollins, and many others elsewhere. It began to bore me and so I took an egg nog and went up to the catwalk, perhaps in an attempt to recapture the frenzy of my great-great-grandmother for a second, perhaps just to enjoy the day for a few moments.

The river stretched out below the terrace which led up to the house. This time of year it was a gray green and always had a mist or fog hanging close to its surface. It was a bit clearer today but

not much. The mystery which the river held in the wintertime was still there. You could feel its power and its calling even from the distance of several hundred yards. There were a few small boats out but they hung close to the land, knowing that the river could change in an instant, winter or summer. As I stood leaning against the railing I heard the screen door behind me open and shut. I turned and saw Alex coming down the catwalk with a pitcher in his hand.

"I saw you sneak up here and thought I'd join you. Don't mind, do you?"

"No, not at all, especially if that's what I think it is," I said, nodding at the pitcher.

"Just eggnog, I'm afraid," he said with a smile.

"I'll bet."

"Really, it is, but then there's this," he said pulling out a pint of Virginia Gentleman.

"That's more like it. I'm just about dry here," I said, tipping my glass.

"Well, I'll fix you up, compliments of Dad."

"He's full of himself today, isn't he?"

"You should've seen him this morning if you think he's wild now. He had a blast getting ready for this."

"He loves to have everyone here, " I said. "Ya'll get along a lot better these days, don't you?"

"Yep. We're pals now, I'm glad to say."

"Good to hear." There were a few moments of silence as we both looked out over the river. Then I broke the silence. "How's school this year. Hear you're thinking about advertising."

"True. That's just about the only way I can use a little of my talent to make a lot of money."

I looked at him hard. "That's important to you?"

"Very. And I'm not proud of it either. But it is true. Everything that I want to do costs money. Sad, but true. You can't say that I'm not right," he said and looked at me intently. "I've always thought that you were one of the only women in this family with any sense. And part of that sense is that you are not afraid to admit the truth, even if the truth stinks."

"And how'd you know that about me? We might as well be e strangers. We see each other Christmas, maybe Thanksgiving, not much more than that."

"I hear things, you know. The aunts talk. From what they say I think I know you. Let me correct myself. From what they say and don't say." Alex had his foot up on the lower rail now and was leaning his elbows on the top of the railing over which our ancestor had jumped. He had his drink clasped between his hands.

"Explain." I leaned backward against the railing and looked at him, at his curly blond hair, his blue eyes, his strong shoulders.

"Well, I hear that you want to be a writer. That's good. I hear that you do well in school. Another point in your favor." He stopped and looked at me.

"And what is it they don't say?"

"Well, there's talk that you're a little wild. But they don't say in what way. There is rumor, though, whispered only in the darkest corners I'm sure. But it sifts down to me now and then." He looked at me, amused.

"Well?"

He leaned down to my ear; I could feel his breath against my neck. Then he whispered one drawn out word, "Alcohol . . ." He leaned his head back and laughed.

"Oh, Alex . . ." I joined him laughing.

"And so don't you see that puts us on the same level in the family gossip circle, talented--but degenerates." He looked at me and his calm eyes had grown wild. "Don't misunderstand me though. I'm talking old maids, not the people who matter. Pops thinks you're great. In fact, he spotted you coming up here and sent me after you. Says that you and I need to get to know each other better. Keep the family close."

"That's true. I see the old folks around here, reminiscing, and I think that it's been years since all of us kids have really gotten together and done anything beyond chatting. In fact, you and I haven't done much more than exchange a few civil words in the past five years. This is a pleasant change." His eyes shifted from the river where they had been trained for a moment and looked at me.

"It is, isn't it. Why don't we have another drink in honor of the occasion?" he asked, bending over and picking up the pitcher

of eggnog.

"I thought you'd never ask." I held out my glass to him.

"You know, this is nice. I mean, it being so warm on Christmas. Snow would have been nice but being able to be outside is better. I love this river, Claire."

"I do too. You were so lucky to have grown up on it. The few summers I had on the river were special. I won't ever forget them or stop wishing for them all over again." I studied Alex and saw that just by looking at the river he seemed to soften in some way. He seemed at home with the breeze blowing his hair and the afternoon sun on his back.

"I've thought, too, though, that you're lucky to spend so much time at Winterpock."

"I guess the two lives can't be but so different."

"No, I guess they're not. Both slow, calm, peaceful."

"Like today," I said and took a deep breath.

"True."

For a few moments we stood there on the catwalk and drank and studied the river. The bourbon was taking hold of me and the distant points of the river were becoming clouded. The sound of the water and the wind seemed to roar in my ears and the afternoon sun seemed to grow warmer with time.

Then Alex moved, suddenly, towards me, then stepped back and took my arm, "Okay, I've got an idea that you won't be able to resist." He leaned back and smiled. "Poet of my heart, dear Claire,

cousin Claire, I'll give you the river this afternoon. We're going sailing. Out to White's island. What a time we'll have. But first a wee bit of a swig of whiskey. I want to see if you're as wonderful a woman as all our aunts fear you are. Game?" He turned up the bottle and took a gulp.

"Game. Let's go!" I took a sip of the bourbon and it burned all the way down.

"We'll go down the outside stairs and sneak behind the box-woods to the boat house. We can't let anyone see us until we're off." His eyes now seemed to me the rational eyes of a mad man.

We ran down the side stairs and across the south yard to the hedges. Alex was pulling me along by the hand and finally we reached the wooden steps which led down the bank to the small boat house. We went inside and let the sailboat down quickly. Alex jumped in and helped me down, then paddled us out onto the river. We hoisted the sail which smelled of mildew and immediately caught the wind.

"We had it out last week when the weather was warm but a nor-easter came up and we had to turn in. I feel like today'll be perfect though," he screamed above the flap of the sails.

I leaned back. "So far the day's been a surprise, but a good one."

"We'll head out to the island, cut the sails, and drift. Then we'll lean back and observe the home of our ancestors from the distance it deserves," he said dramatically and then pulled out the bourbon.

"Care for some?"

"Sure, can I disappoint my fans?"

"No, and I'm not about to let mine down either."

He poured us both about an inch of bourbon in plastic glasses he had stashed under the bow. Then we both leaned back and took in the sight of Brydie Hill diminishing as we drew further out in the river. Soon we were near White's island and Alex drew in the sails.

"And now we drift, in thought as well as body," he said with a grin.

"You sure were anxious to get away from there."

"Always am when we have one of those overwhelming gatherings of the clan."

"Why?"

"Just the crowd and the small talk. I can't take it. Neither can Pops. That's why he drinks so much everytime we have one of these reunions."

"You think so?"

"I know so." He winked at me. "He told me that this morning and gave me permission to do the same. He was great. Showed me where his private stock was, as though I hadn't known since I was fifteen, and as though he hadn't known I had known since then. Told me to get tight and amuse myself. Not fall down drunk but just drunk enough to enjoy everyone and watch certain members of the family make fools of themselves."

"Do you see it that way?"

"What way?"

"That some members of our family are fools. They are our relatives, after all."

"I am being harsh, and also not explaining my father or myself. I care a great deal about our family, on the whole. There are a few personalities who I love but do not like, but there are also some who I just cannot stand when it comes to gossiping. I'm one of them myself, sometimes. I slip at times and add fuel to an already raging fire in Dad's study or out in the yard shooting skeet. I say something about someone, they pick up on it, and then things are said that ought never be said. That simple."

"I must really be out of it because I didn't realize that all this barbarous conduct went on," I said with a hint of sarcasm.

"It does, not often, but more than it should. One of these days you'll see it yourself."

"So why do you think it goes on?"

"Because we pride ourselves on family. Ironic, isn't it? Because our family image, facade, is so damn important we feel we own everyone in it, therefore we talk about them under the pretense of genuine concern. At times like these everyone picks everyone else apart verbally as well as mentally. Quite a game."

"One which I'll observe. You don't have me convinced, you know."

"That's good, because I've been no better than them all by saying these things. I guess I need to slow down and relax; we came

out here to escape and I've brought them with me."

"Good idea. I want to hear more about you, what's important to you. Don't tell me it's money."

"Not at all. I wouldn't lower myself to think that money is important, but I do recognize its necessity."

"There's a difference?"

"A big one."

"Which is?"

"To think that it's important is to be subservient to it; to realize its necessity is to have power over it."

"I'm not sure your linguistics are sound."

"I am. To think that something is important is to give it value. To say that something is necessary is to accept it, and perhaps to put no value on it at all. For instance, I recognize that government is necessary, but it has no personal value to me whatsoever. The things which have value to me are people, love, friendship, knowledge, etc."

"But you must also think that those things are necessary."

"Of course."

"And money is necessary, but not of value."

"Right. Funny, too, that money is based on value, a system of values--or so people think. When, you and I know that it is based on a system of necessities."

"If that's true, and I'm not sure myself, but if I find it to be true, then it's very ironic."

"You'll see it my way--the more you think about it the more you'll be convinced."

"We'll see."

A silence fell over us. It was the kind of familiar silence which always follows conversations which deal in theories and debate. I laid my head back on the side board and looked up at the sky. It was a deep blue and contrasted sharply with the dull greens of the river and the gray emptiness of the trees. I could hear chain saws cracking in the distance and thought that it was a pity that anyone had to cut wood on a Christmas day but then thought that some people might have no choice. And you had to believe that happiness had nothing to do with leisure time and work time. Those who worked hard were, perhaps, in many ways happier than those who never had to work. It was just too bad that there were so many levels of society and that it seemed that one was so estranged from the other. It defeated all that was considered brotherhood and it set up battlelines for revolutions. Yes, the world was bad news for anyone who took the time to think about it.

The sound of the river grew louder as we sailed along, not because the weather was changing, but because the liquor we were drinking was affecting us. It seemed as though everything was very slow and calm and yet it was as though things were beginning to shift gears and the river, peaceful as it was, was beginning to rush on and on. Alex seemed to be a blur in front of me, but I could smell very distinctly the wet wool of his sweater and could hold on to that smell

for stability. He was steering the boat back towards the house and I could faintly make out my mother and his father walking down to the pier. They were a blur against a background which was even more of a blur but Mother's pink dress and Uncle Phil's plaid blazer were plenty recognizable. I looked at Alex and saw that he had noticed them too. Then the two were on the pier waving to us to come in. The motions of their arms seemed to match the motion of the world around them. I knew that dinner must almost be ready.

"Guess we had better head in," Alex said softly.

"Looks that way."

"Maybe we'll make this a tradition."

"Good idea. Give us something to hold on to."

"Something good."

"That's the way I see it," I agreed.

"Twenty years from now we'll dump the wife and the husband and the kids and rendezvous on the catwalk and continue from there," he said leaning toward me.

"I like the idea." I bent close to him and he kissed me on the cheek. Then we both straightened up and looked again at the two people on the pier.

"We'd better head in before they get mad," he said.

"Okay, I guess we don't have much choice." I looked at him for a moment, and then said, "Thanks for a good day."

"You're more than welcome, Claire, more than welcome." He put up the sail and the boat picked up speed toward the pier. We got

there quickly because the wind was strong and decided that we had better go ahead and put the boat up instead of just tying it to the pier. Mother and uncle Bill met us and we all walked to the house together. Dinner was everything I had expected, lots of food and too much talk just slipping through the air. Finally it came to an end and Mother and I headed home. All along the river road we watched clouds roll in and it was raining before we reached our house. That night I laid awake in bed and listened to the rain beat on the tin roof and tried to block out pictures I had of Alex in front of me in the boat. You did not find men like him often and when you did it was hard to forget them. Then I turned over on my side and listened to the rain until morning.

REGRETS

All that I was at one time--
and what I have become--
both I regret. Never to know
what was or is best.
Forever to need to change,
to flow, to move toward
an unknown being
who will be myself.

So I sit and look at my
blurred reflection in
the darkened window by my
desk, and watch car
lights pass and house lights
turn on and turn off,
and wonder where the people
behind those lights
will end up, and if
they too ever regret.

IS IT EVER COLD IN CHICAGO?

I let my class out early because of the blueness of the sky and because of the stillness which seemed to call us away from all responsibility and toward something better. To me that something better would be a long walk down an old dirt road near my farm at Winterpock. I needed to walk and to talk with myself and to watch the harvested fields * * * and those fields look like battlefields Kath said. I can see that, I thought, but it is not like you to think such things. No, it is not like you to say such things as that, but you must think them, yes, you must think them. * * * to watch those harvested fields roll by me as I headed for the old church two miles down the road.

I put on my corduroy pants, my boots, and a sweatshirt. They all smelled of mud and dampness from the evening before when I had

chopped wood in the rain and carried it back across the rutted cornfield and thought to myself that it is not easy to walk in a cornfield that has just been harvested. It is not easy at all. And that is a piece of trivia that I will carry with me for the rest of my life because I just happened to cut wood that day it had rained.

And I set out down the hollow toward the road that would take me to the church, a church I knew nothing about and had only seen on these walks and once or twice explored. I knew the building but I did not know the church and probably never would. And there was sadness in that, enough sadness for a thousand people, most of whom would never recognize the sadness in it even if I sat them down and tried to explain it. But I could not explain it. I could not explain it.

Never. * * * My grandfather has told me that we are all a part of everything else. That the blood which runs in our veins is no different than the sap which bleeds from a broken bough on a cedar. He tells me that the sun that we see rise is the same sun that has risen and set for all men. All of this he tells me while we sit on the back porch of his home and watch the daylight slowly turn into darkness. He tells me that there is something in our family to be feared and that your sister has escaped it but you have not. You will suffer for it, though in the long run you might beat it, but that is doubtful. No one has beat it before. I hope that me telling you this on such a reasonable occasion will save you from the horror of finding it out for yourself. But I have already seen it, Granddad.
Don't you know that I've already seen it? * * *

The walk down to the church was always a good walk whether you were alone or you were with people. As I climbed the hill at the end of the hollow and started down the dirt road I thought that this was where I should be. This was right and this was true. I began to pick up rocks along the way, examining each one carefully and keeping only the ones which were smooth to the touch. I would rub them against my cheek as their final test and if they passed they would go into my pocket. One rock I spent minutes on, deciding if it would go into my pocket with the others or be chucked into the woods. Then I decided to put it alone in my empty pocket and save it. I would save it until I could not remember where it came from and then I would be afraid to throw it away because I would know that I had kept it for a reason. Everything was done for a reason. Everything was done for a reason. I had learned that in grammar school. Everything is done for a reason. * * * And I told you, Kath, that there is more sadness in this world than we can take. Sometimes we are asked to take more than we deserve for things that we could not help but do or say or feel. As much as we plan to redirect our lives and find some internal order something happens to take away our desire to improve because we come to realize that improvement can only bring greater sorrow and greater loss. We are not asked to live for today or for tomorrow but to live for eternity . . . a concept we are too limited to even understand. And you told me that I was sick to believe such a thing and I told you that I did not believe it but that I knew that

it was true. * * *

The fields to the right of me as I walked to the church were scarred with stubs of dry, brown stalks which seemed resigned to sit and rot until they were earth again, only to be planted and reaped, planted and reaped, to make dollars less valuable each year to buy food for men who never lost track of their fields in ledgers but who had not seen and worked or felt their land for years. And I collected rocks as I have collected many things in my life and I put them in my pocket, in my pocket, in my pocket . . . * * * Bill, have you been saving that horrible memory all of this time until I did something halfway bad so that you could say, "Well, it took you awhile to get over what I said that night in the bar, so I guess it might take me awhile to get over what you said last night." How can you even compare, Bill? How can you bear to remind me of that night in the bar? * * * I have found I have already seen I have found it out already. At first I did not know but once I knew, once I knew, Grand dad, I knew. * * * And Kath, you've seen Christ and you believe that we are put in this world only to be happy. You believe that we can all be happy and that we can all live in perfect peace and now you've gone to Chicago for seminary and you're happy. And you've walked down this road with me and we did not collect rocks but we sang and we skipped along. And we call ourselves best friends but you don't know what I know and don't believe me when I tell you. You don't know and you'll never have to know because you've seen Christ and felt joy and found

freedom. Kath, is it ever cold in Chicago? * * * You said that you would come, Bill, but you didn't come and I waited until late at night and watched the road for your headlights but they never appeared. The window panes never lit up like ice frozen on glistening steel rods, I was alone all night and frightened and once I got up and went downstairs where a fire still burned and I looked at that fire for warmth but found it empty. Empty. Empty. And I wondered what it would be like what it would be like what it would be like * * * But I have seen it, Granddad. I have already seen it. * * *

I was halfway to the church when I realized that the dogs were following me. I stopped and petted Beowolf who was an old dog but no one knew how old and he was a very sad dog too. He was a spitz and had that soft face and tender eyes of those dogs but it was also rumored that he was insane by some of the people in town. But when I saw him, and each time I saw him, he was gentle and quiet so I loved him blindly above the others. The beagle and the setter zig-zagged in front of us but Beowolf and I kept a steady pace. We would not hurry for anyone. They could zig-zag and cover all the futile ground as fast as they wanted. That would be fine with us. That would be fine. There was no sense in trying to keep up. No sense at all. And then I noticed again the yellow stripes around a few of the trees along the road. A yellow stripe meant that they would be cut down for some reason. I could make no sense of why the trees were marked. Some were marked here and there; they were all different sizes and shapes. Some were near the road; some were not. Maybe they are diseased . . .

* * * And I told you, Kath, that perhaps one of us was marked, just like those trees. For no reason, we might be marked. We might have a yellow stripe painted around our waist right now and not even know it. And we walk on oblivious to the yellow stripe, the yellow stripe . . .

* * * There is something in our family to be feared, Claire * * *

Can that voice over the phone be you? Kath? Yes. I just got back from a lecture in Richmond. Just this minute I walked in the door. And the phone rang. Kath? How is seminary? Is the weather up there as cold as it is down here? It has already snowed. Yes. Believe it or not it has snowed. On the way back from South Carolina we ran into snow. Not much but it is only the beginning of October. Like spring up there? Hard to believe. How are your classes? I knew you would settle in quickly. I miss you. I'm glad you have found your place. Yes, I'm happy. I will never let you know, I thought. I'm writing and reading. Short stories. Some poems. I will write to you soon. Within the week. This is great of you to call. My turn next. Good-bye. Yes, I do love you too, Kath. Good bye. And I hung up the phone. Bad bye. We are not put in this world to be happy. Kath, is it ever cold in Chicago? * * *

My feet pounded steadily down the road to the church. Beowulf padded silently beside me * * * You are just like your father, she said. I have worked so hard to bring you girls up right and you are just like your father. I look at you and I see him. You are a constant reminder of everything I want to forget. And all the

time I was thinking, How can you say these things about me. Do you really believe them? And I said, Mother, you would have to think for days before you thought of something that would make me madder. Or hurt me more. It does not matter if you are sorry. I will remember it. Yes, Mother. That's okay. I know you weren't thinking, I said. But you were thinking and you know it. You stay awake at night and think it. And it's true. I know that it's true but you just don't know what it means. Sometime think about what it means. * * *

Okay, Bill, I'm sorry. We will put last night in our little bag of forgotten memories too. You and I are the only two close friends I know who have such a store of bad, horrible times. But we've lived through them without falling apart. There is something to be said for that. Something. I don't know what but something. * * * And I will go home in the snow to see my grandfather. He has had another stroke and has been in the hospital and they have just now told me. It has been over a week. They do not know that my grandfather almost knows me and that the rest of our family are strangers of the worst kind. They are all strangers but Granddad and I are friends and he has almost died and I would not have seen him for one last time and I would have hated you all for that relentlessly. I would have hated you though I would have continued to love you but the hate would have been there if it is not there already. * * * Don't you know that I have seen it? The only barrier. Don't you know that I have seen it? * * * If only I could have found warmth in the fire. Just a little warmth instead of cold, loneliness, and despair * * * I will forgive you for anything

you have ever said because I am no better than you are. We are the same. We are running in frenzy and despair for the end of the world which we will live beyond. We will see the end but we will live beyond . . . * * *

At one point the road begins to slope downward and does not level off until the church is in sight. Here Beowolf decided to stop by the road and lay down. He would not budge and so I left him there to rest. I imagined that if I were that old I would not continue on either. I probably would not have begun in the first place. I would not have begun in the first place. I would not have begun if I had thought that I could not finish. That way you would not disappoint yourself. But then you might also not get anything done. That was the risk you had to be willing to take if you wanted to live a safe, easy life. You could try to learn your limits and work within them. Then, by the time you were as old as Beowolf, you would have learned. You would have been through enough to have learned. * * * Your father has gone into the state mental hospital to be treated for alcoholism. It is good that he has admitted to himself that he has a problem. I am sure that now he will straighten himself out. If he can call on the strength of the Lord he will be able to lead a normal life. A normal, productive life. Grandmother, do you really believe what you are saying? He's fifty years old and has not been productive for one moment in his life, I said. And she became angry and told me that no child should say such things about her father. You should be forgiving as I have always been forgiving, she said. No father should do what

he has done what he has done not do what he has not done. No child should say . . . * * * Everything is done for a reason * * *

Your sister has escaped it. She is in South Carolina with a husband and a baby. They don't make a lot of money and won't take any from me but they are happy. They are happy, Mother said. * * * You know that Mother has always liked you best she said. To her you are everything she loved in Dad and not the things she grew to hate. Sometimes I can tell that you convince yourself that you are as bad as Dad but you are not. You are not as weak as he is. You are not weak. * * * If I could only find warmth in the fire . . . * * * How can you say that I destroy everything and everyone that I love? Bill, I have never done anything that I thought could possibly hurt you. You have been dear to me since I first met you. How can you accuse me of this on a night such as this? We are here to talk, not to accuse. But I do forgive you, even now as you say these things. You have your reasons. I understand. We are all angry. * * *

And finally, there it was. The white clapboard church with the dirty red tin roof. Behind it the out houses, still in use. And down to the left the cement pool used for baptisms. I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Baptism for the forgiveness of sins. The sins that we have committed, that we commit, that we will commit. Father, forgive us, for we have sinned . . .

And I walked to the church and placed the rocks I had gathered on the front steps and headed back to Winterpock to try to build a fire to warm myself by.

THE DECISION

What you build
can bring you to your knees
if you build it on sand
instead of stone,
if you don't build it at all.

Is it free will or destiny
that will deliver me
to death's doorstep?
To which am I subject?
To what do I kneel?

11:59. I must decide
or I will die when the bell
strikes my blackened name.

mountain full of trees, flowers, and ferns. The air was warm from the sun and the wind was blowing from the south. The trees were bare but the earth along the side of Bunker Hill had recently been turned up so that it was fresh and new, giving us the feeling that spring had arrived many months before it was due. The wind coming down off the mountain carried the fragrance of moist red clay and sometimes of cedar, making us want to go up the hill and walk along its knoll which overlooked the hollow Kath's house was in. We rode bikes down to her grandmother's cottage and began our hike from there. Leaving from her home the path to the top of the hill passed by the old mill which was one of her family's favorite places. We planned to picnic there and carried with us

A HIKE TO THE TOP OF THE HILL

Although it was the second day of January, it was warm in the mountains of Virginia, even hot if you were in the sun. The trees were bare but the earth along the side of Bunker Hill had recently been turned up so that it was fresh and new, giving us the feeling that spring had arrived many months before it was due. The wind coming down off the mountain carried the fragrance of moist red clay and sometimes of cedar, making us want to go up the hill and walk along its knoll which overlooked the hollow Kath's house was in. We rode bikes down to her grandmother's cottage and began our hike from there. Leaving from her home the path to the top of the hill passed by the old mill which was one of her family's favorite places. We planned to picnic there and carried with us

knapsacks full of bread, cheese, and wine. The wine was made from the grapes which grew behind Kath's house. It was put up in old bottles which had been handblown years before. I had tasted it at dinner the night before and looked forward to drinking it in the outdoors where it seemed to me all good wines should be drank. We crossed the road running in front of Mrs. Elliot's house and followed a stream which flowed down off the mountain. It was running high because of the rain we had the week after Christmas. At times our footing was lost and we sank into the mud along the banks of the creek.

The hill was mostly pasture land, but it had patches of wooded areas scattered along the southern face we were climbing. Separating these wooded spots, which were mainly cedar and hickory, were old barbed wire fences. Many of the posts which were intended to support the barbed wire had long since rotted out and in these places the wire lay on the ground, red and brown with rust. We searched for these places to make our way across the fences on our way up the hill which made our hike a winding one. More often than not, though, we would have to cross the fences where they were still upright. We spent more than a few moments with pants or jackets hung on the wire and the knees of our cords were stained with mud before we were halfway up the hill. Our only goal was to pass the mill pond either going or coming, and Kath assured me that we would. And I believed that she was right. I trusted her sense of direction here more than I would in a big city.

As it turned out we spotted the mill pond from quite a distance and decided to go on past it and stop on the way back. That way the hike to the top, which would become more difficult towards the end, would be behind us when we relaxed to eat. And that way, too, there would be no hurry while we ate. We could stay at the pond until dusk and sip wine and not worry about getting caught in the dark while walking back. And so we continued upward through the woods and fields, shedding our sweaters as the sun grew hot on our backs.

"Has your family always owned this land?" I asked.

"Oh, we don't own it."

"I thought you did."

"No, Mary and Mark, the Dunkers, own it."

"And they don't mind us walking around up here?"

"Of course not." She shook her head. "But Daddy's trying to trade that field down there, between our farm and theirs, for the hill. I don't know if it'll come through, though. Kind of foolish on their part if you ask me. As it is we can use the field for crops or grazing and we can hike on the hill. But they can't use the field this way and they need it more than we do. So if we swap we give them rights to the field and really can't do much more on the mountain than before. Daddy just wants to own it for the sake of owning it. When you see the mill up close, though, you'll see that it's a pretty big plus for the mountain, I've got to admit."

"So he'd gain something by it."

"Not as much as Mark will."

"And the Dunkers don't see it that way?" I asked.

"They will eventually. Dunkers don't exactly like change."

"From the looks of things they don't. The way they dress and all."

"I think it would be wonderful to be a Dunker woman," Kath said. She was getting that far away look in her eyes.

"What makes you say that?"

"I've always thought it'd be the perfect spiritual life. To live for your family and your church. Nothing more. No worldly interferences."

"They pay bills too, Kath, they don't live in this country for free."

"But it doesn't affect them the way it does other people."

"I can't be as sure about that as you are."

"Don't be so cynical."

"It just bothers me when you seem to imagine things to be as they aren't."

"There 's no telling who sees things as they really are. It's impossible to say and you know it."

"But taxes and inflation are realities and you can't escape them."

"I disagree."

"Okay. I guess it's a matter of opinion anyway." I knew

when not to argue with her.

"But to be a Dunker woman would be such a simple and humble life." She pronounced the "humble" without the h--it was one of her favorite words. "Just think, getting up at the break of dawn and doing laundry by hand and cooking a big breakfast and sewing all of your own clothes . . ."

She went on with this and I thought of her back in college vomiting all morning after a big party and checking into the infirmary to avoid a test she had not studied for. And I thought of her perceptive insights into religion and her desire for knowledge and for men and the fact that she saw God when she was a sophomore and I could not make it all fit, once again. And yet Kath was Kath and there was nothing hypocritical about her to anyone who knew her.

"It'd be a good life but it wouldn't be for me," I said.

"Claire, of course it would be. You're one of the humblest people I've ever known."

"All I want in life is fame and love. Is that humble?"

"It's humble of you to know how horrible that sounds and yet still admit it to me."

"You could make anything sound humble if you looked at it that way," I said.

"You don't think that a person's humility has anything to do with the things she says, do you?" she asked.

"Some of it, sure. Not all, but some."

"A very little part, if any. It's what you are, how you

come across to people, and of course to God."

"You've got a strong point. I don't agree but I see your point."

You couldn't argue with Kath when it came to things like this and it was best to bail out as early as possible. Not that you didn't listen to her, because you had to. You just had to make sure that you didn't listen too hard or you would start to believe everything she said. At times she could be very convincing--almost to the point that she took control of your mind and bent it into seeing things the way she did. But her point of view was one which was right for her and for her only.

Our conversation seemed to drop off as we began to really work at making it up the hill. We were crossing the pasture and the knoll of the hill seemed to be within touching distance. But we walked and walked for the longest time and it did not seem to get any closer. I started to look down at my feet so that I would not be depressed by the long distance we had to go, and soon I looked up and saw that we were just a few yards from the top. And then, in a moment which hung in space, we were there. We flopped down in the grass, the dry brown grass of winter, rolled our sweaters up into balls for pillows, and sprawled out, looking up at the sky.

"This is heaven, isn't it?" she asked.

"Pretty close."

"When I was in high school I used to come up here in the afternoon and read and write."

"I used to ride down to the river on my bike and sit under some trees on a cliff. It was great."

"Sometime I'll come home with you and we'll go there."

"That'd be a good idea. If we get the chance. As it is we probably won't get together again until summer."

"And maybe not then if I go out in the field."

"Meaning?"

"They give you a small church, along with another student sometimes, sometimes not, and it's in your care for ten weeks."

"Think you could handle that?" I asked.

"I'd be a beautiful, high experience. It'd be frightening but I'm sure I could handle it."

"I'd be a nervous wreck."

"Claire. No you wouldn't be."

"I know I would."

"It'll come to me though, I know. And it'd come to you if you were put into the situation."

"Maybe so. But I don't have a year of seminary behind me to give me that kind of confidence."

"You'd do well. There's no doubt about it."

"I guess I'd give it a good try." Again there was the feeling that sometimes it was better to give in than to argue.

"But I just don't know yet if I'll do it. I think I'll decide when I get back to Chicago and get into the next quarter. I'll look at it from the proper perspective then."

"That's probably best."

"I think so. We'll see. I don't like to rush into things," she said rolling over.

"Not something that important, that's for sure."

I pulled up a long piece of grass and looked at it against the sun. It was a pale gold color and though it was dead it was capturing in the bright light. It had tiny seeds clinging to its tip and I rubbed them between my fingers and they all scattered from one another. One flew back and caught me in the eye and made me drop the stem and roll over on my stomach, prop myself up on my elbows, and rub my eye. Soon it stopped watering and the scratching pain went away. Kath got up and walked to a rock a few yards away and sat on it. We stayed on the top of the hill for almost an hour without talking, and then, without debate or decision, just got up and gathered our gear. With a few words we left the hill and angled our way down through the fields and woods toward the mill. Kath seemed to know where she was going and although I had begun to have my doubts we broke through a small forest of cedars and saw directly in front of us the mill.

It was a huge structure, made of gray stone, and sat just on the edge of the pond. The mortar toward the foundation had been washed out from between the stones, making the building look as though it would collapse any moment. But it had obviously been that way for decades, and weathered many storms. The trough where the water poured over the dam was cracked by roots which grew in between the stones. It was easy to imagine, though, how it had once operated, the water

turning the mill wheel in the trough to generate power. Down from the dam the lower pond was shallow and funnelled under a small foot bridge and on from there into the stream we had followed earlier in the day. We walked around the mill and Kath showed me the rectangular stone above the heavy wooden door which had the date the mill was erected inscribed on it. As far as we could tell the date was 1843, but the last digit could have been an 8. Kath thought she remembered her father saying it was 1843 though. On the other side of the building was a doorway which had nothing but hinges hanging along the sill. We stepped inside as far as we could but the floor was gone and water filled the foundation. There were old milk pails, lanterns, harnesses, and even wooden tools hanging from the exposed beams.

"This place would be great to remodel!" I said above the sound of the water below us.

"That's why Daddy wants to own it."

"It'd be beautiful!"

"I've thought about that. Just think of the parties you could have. People out on the pond in row boats, barbeque under the weeping willow, a bar inside and one over there," she said pointing to a tree which hung out over the water on a small point of land. "It would have to be in the spring, when things were beginning to bloom."

"Or the winter--a couple of fireplaces, people ice skating and even cross country skiing. You ought to keep on your dad about doing it."

"We do. It's really a matter of waiting Mary and Mark out."

"I'd wait a life time for this."

"Daddy practically has," she said walking around the side of the building.

While we talked about the mill and all of its possibilities we began to unpack our lunch. We sat just out of the shade of the willow tree so that the sun would warm our backs. Each of us leaned against the old mill stone which was over-grown with ivy and stretched out our legs. Then we began to eat and drink wine, resting after our long hike.

"What part do you have in making the wine?" I asked.

"I pick the grapes and Dan and Daddy make the wine. Family tradition."

"Every year?"

"Yeah. This is 1973's batch, I think. Hand me the bottle." I reached over and gave it to her. "Yeah, 73, the Year of the Goat."

"What?"

"We name them after something funny that happens each year. In 1973 we had a goat wander into one of our pastures and try to pass itself off as a cow. It would just graze out there and try to blend in with the herd. It stayed for about a month and then left. Never knew where it came from or where it went."

"Remember any others?"

"Yeah, my favorite was the Year of the Pig. We had this pig

that kept getting out of the pen, it was in the winter when it was cold, and he would get into my dog's house and it was hell to pay to get her out. That went on through March at least. Ended up having the pig for dinner the next Christmas."

"Nothing beats the country, that's for sure," I said.

"You can say that again. Living in Chicago has taught me that. I missed Virginia pretty bad at times."

"I hope to never leave it, permanently at least."

"You're lucky David's a Virginia man."

"I know."

"I have a hard time accepting men who aren't from Virginia."

"I wouldn't take it that far."

"There's something romantic about Virginians."

"Only if you happen to live here."

"You could be right."

"Thank you," I said.

"What?"

"I'm just kidding. It's just that you usually get in the last word."

"Claire."

"Like I said, just kidding."

"I know sometimes I'm difficult. Does that make you mad?"

"Kath, I'm just kidding. I like the way you are, well, persistent. It's a part of you and it's good. We make a good

pair because we are different. Okay?"

"You're sure it doesn't irritate you?"

"Of course it does sometimes, but not enough to make me mad," I said trying to get off the subject.

"I tell everyone at school how balanced our relationship is. I guess that there're always going to be little things that irritate one another."

"Sure," I said laughing. "You just have to realize that sometimes things aren't going to be perfectly harmonious--with us or with anyone for that matter."

"Okay. I'll try to see that but well, things can be close to perfect, even on this earth."

"I'm sure they can."

We quieted down and ate in silence. For a long time we just sat and enjoyed the view of the surrounding field and pond. Then Kath began to talk.

"One time, when I was in high school my cousin Sarah and I came up here and sat in this very spot and got high. It was a warm spring afternoon and the trees were beginning to turn green and they were reflected in the pond with hardly any distortion. The day was as still as a summer evening before a thunder storm. And we just seemed to be a part of everything around us. There was just no separating yourself from the ground you sat on. And then I looked up and saw the two Dunker children just floating down that hill over there like two angels, their hair, golden and shining, flowing out behind them. They had on

light blue dresses which came down to their feet which were bare. And they were reflected in the pond too, and the pond had ducks swimming on it and lily pads along its edges. And they stopped and waved to us and we waved back, all of this in slow motion. The memory of that day has never left me. Every detail's as alive right now as then."

"Those are the things which make remembering worthwhile," I said.

"It was one of the highest, spiritually I mean, days of my life. Lots of times I've smoked have turned out to be spiritual moments. Haven't they for you?" she asked.

"Not quite so vividly, but I think so, a little."

"Being in the mountains has a lot to do with it, I think."

"Yes, I guess so."

"You ought to move up here, get a place and write."

"The bucks, Kath."

"You know what I say about that. Have faith and the Lord will take care of you."

"I don't think I've got the pull you've got."

"Of course you do, Claire. Probably more."

"No, I don't think so."

"You shouldn't doubt," she said.

"Wait til you get out and pay rent and car payments by yourself. No money from home. It's different."

"You don't pay rent, do you?"

"No, but electricity, some oil, phone, insurance . . ."

"Don't let it get you down."

"It hasn't. Just made me see things more realistically.

I wanted to do it before I got married," I said.

"I don't like to see you this way."

"I'm happy, Kath."

"How can you be with all that to worry about?"

"That's just the way things go."

"It shouldn't be."

"Things aren't always the way they should be."

"That's why you've got to make them the way you want them.

If you believe hard enough . . ."

"Like I said, it doesn't work that way when you have bills to pay."

"But . . ."

"Let's drop it. We just don't see eye to eye on this and aren't likely to any time soon. This is one of those things," I said, trying to make her stop.

"Okay, but . . ."

"Please . . ."

"Alright. Sorry," she said giving up.

"Don't be."

"I am though."

"Okay."

We were quiet again, looking at the land around us. It must have been a half hour or so before we decided to leave and when we did it was beginning to grow dark. We walked along the stream most of the way back and finally cut across one of the newly turned fields towards Kath's grandmother's house. When we finally got there we went in for a drink and found that Dan was there. We told him about our hike to the top of the hill and he told us about his day in the woods cutting and splitting timber. He was good looking, blond hair and a smile which lit up whenever Kath entered the room. He loved to talk to her, partly because they had been the two oldest children and had spent much time together and partly because she amazed him with some of the things she said. He was a very down to earth person and she was just the opposite.

"Did you go by the mill?" he asked.

"On the way down."

"Was the water high?"

"Pretty much so," she said.

"Any signs people been around there lately?"

"No. Why?" she asked, a little curious.

"Pa and I heard some shots up that way yesterday and were wondering if some people were up there hunting. Mark would be furious if that happened."

"We didn't see anything," Kath said.

"Good," Dan said, dropping the subject.

"The weather is beautiful, isn't it Dan?" Kath said.

"Yeah. But we've got a hell of a winter ahead of us."

"Just might," I said breaking into the conversation.

"What'd you think of Bunker Hill?" he asked looking at me with interest.

"It was great. A nice day."

"You should see it up there in the spring--or the fall."

"Kath told me about one of her trips up there in the Spring. Have you ever told him that story?"

"I don't know. He was away at school then. Have I ever told you about the time Sarah and I went up there and got high and the two Dunker twins came down the slope, like two little angels? They just floated down and waved to us. And we waved back. Everything was reflected in the pond, and the lily pads on the pond sort of bobbed along and there were ducks . . ."

"Kath, there's never been a lily pad on that pond," Dan said with an amused look on his face.

"Of course there's been."

"You're wrong about that."

"I remember them vividly."

"You must have dreamed them up."

"Dan, I did not dream them up. I remember that as though it was yesterday."

"Okay. If you have to have it that way."

"Quit trying to destroy . . ." Kath began. She often became defensive of the things she believed. Probably because they had needed so much defending in the past.

"I'm not trying to destroy anything, sis . . .Calm down," Dan said softly.

Kath was angry, but then caught herself and said, "It doesn't matter anyway, it's real to me and that's what's important."

"That's fine," he said and got up to put a log on the fire. "Would ya'll like to go up to the board room and stoke up a fire tonight and drink some Jack Daniels?"

"That sounds good. I've told Claire about the board room. Are there still rats up there?" Kath asked.

"I guess so, but there's nothing to worry about," Dan said.

"Who's worried? We can get drunk, prop our feet up on the stove, talk about literature, listen to the rats in the walls, just get down to the basics," Kath said.

"Whatever turns you on," Dan said and winked at me.

"Good. Now let's get home so we can eat before it gets too late," Kath said getting up.

"We hopped on our bikes and rode back to Kath's house. Dinner with her family was nice; they were good and simple people. Afterwards we went with Dan to the board room and got the fire going. It warmed the room up quickly and soon we were leaning back in our chairs with our feet propped up on the stove. The night passed quickly and before I realized it we were heading back through the hedge to

the house. Outside it had turned cold and we worked our way through the boxwoods to the side porch. It had clouded over and it was difficult to see in front of us. But we made it and crept through the house as quietly as we could and went to bed. It seemed that I was asleep before I even realized that I had gotten under the quilt. I must have slept soundly, too, because I don't remember having any dreams at all that night.

Father, on your birthday
I wrote my first poem.
It was completely unadvised.
I only notice now
looking back through my journal
I have kept
for three long months.

Tears of anger shape now
that I should be born too
on March thirteenth.

What right do you have
to reach in late night
into the life I have worked to have
to keep separate from yours?
Why won't you leave me alone
at this late hour
as you did when I was born?

A POEM

Father, on your birthday
I wrote my first poem.
It was completely coincidental;
I only notice now
looking back through my journal
I have kept
for three long months.

Tears of anger shake me--
that I should be born too
on March thirteenth.

What right do you have
to reach in this silent way
into the life I have worked so hard
to keep separate from yours?
Why won't you leave me alone
at this late hour
as you did when I was ten?

And this is where I will find the rest of my family. I thought, surely they would be waiting for me, but they have gone to anything.

Before I entered the building to follow her I sat down on the front steps. People were coming and going all around me and I wondered what their purposes were. There was a real thing to think about as I picked out a small, old woman to follow. She appeared to me to have been through a long, long life. There was a feeling about her that she had been through a long, long life. She had been through a long, long life.

THE VISIT

The lawns of the hospital were trimmed in a way that strained them to look natural. The trees were positioned so obviously randomly that I wanted to pull them all up by their roots and pile them on top of each other against the buildings of brick and metal. But I parked my car and restrained myself, partly because I was civilized and partly because there was nothing I could do anyway. This was a place of futility for those who lived here from one day to another; it was also, and even more truly, a place of futility for those who visited.

Men and women, each very alone, walked along the sidewalks and roads. Some slept on the benches; others sat on the curbs with their feet in the gutter. They seldom noticed me pass them and if they did it was simply with a slow nod, a measured turn of the head.

And this is where I will find the hope and joy of my family, I thought. Funny what people come to before they even know they have come to anything.

Before I entered the building my father was in I sat down on the front steps. People were coming and going all around me and I wondered what their purposes were. That was a bad thing to think about so I picked out a small frail woman to watch. She appeared to be in her late fifties or early sixties. There was no telling about age here though. And, in fact, physical age probably never entered into the picture anyway. Her long silver hair was matted to her head and then hung in snarls around her shoulders. She had her left hand raised to a point near her right ear and was twisting a few stray strands around her index finger. I could not tell a great deal about her features from where I was sitting but it was obvious that her clothes were sizes too large and mismatched. She had on a pair of jeans with cuffs turned up two or three inches, revealing white socks gathered loosely around her ankles. Her blouse was made of some kind of printed material, flowers perhaps, and it was unbuttoned half of the way up, her white undershirt showing when the wind caught it in the breeze. Draped over her shoulders she had an old yellow rain slicker that looked like it needed a good downpour to wash the mud from it. She clutched a plastic bag between her knees as though it were far too precious to put on the ground. She made you want to run over and hug her. But you could not do that because you knew that she was different and would

not understand.

I got up from the steps and went inside. The receptionist pointed out my father in the reading room and went back to her desk. Already my mind was in total confusion. Just as it always is when I have something difficult to say or do. I saw my father, who had just looked up with a sudden motion and then frozen, his eyes on mine which immediately fled his gaze. He was dressed neatly, so different from the old lady outside. Khakis, flannel shirt, v-neck sweater. All fitting perfectly. His legs were crossed and he was comfortably seated in an easy chair. Only my father could be comfortable in a place like this. He could be comfortable anywhere because he would not allow himself to be uncomfortable. Or was that just my imagination? No, Mother's family had always said that too-- that he could be at home with the very rich or the very poor. Some of them thought it disgusting, but others, who saw it as one of his strongest assets, envied it. Maybe it was some kind of built in defense he had. It was probably too late to figure that out and I wasn't sure that I even wanted to try.

Who was going to speak first? I guess I should. Take advantage from the start. That is what he taught me when I was growing up. Claire, he said, never let anyone get a jump on you. Being the aggressor, the one willing to take a risk, that is the key to winning.

"Dad, it's good . . ."

"Claire."

We both spoke at the same time and then there was silence. I sat down beside him and tried to smile but couldn't. This is going to be hard, I thought. This might be the hardest thing that I've ever done. I can't just tell him. I can't just say it without talking first but I don't want to talk. But I have to think about him too. I don't know why I should but I have to. You cannot be cruel and seek revenge this late in the game. You have to do what's right.

"It's been a long time, Dad."

"Months, I'd say.

"At least.

"What've you been up to at school? Busy?"

"I guess I have been. I haven't been home in a long time." I should've come home before this but just didn't. If only I'd come one last time that would have been good. I would have seen Granddad one last time and sat out on the porch and talked. But I didn't and now it's too late.

"Have you almost finished up? I hear it's just a matter of months now."

"As far as I can tell."

"And then you'll marry David."

"In the fall."

"He's a good man. It's been some time since I've seen him."

"He's doing fine. The paper keeps him busy."

"I'll bet it does. I read his articles all the time."

"You're not the only one. He's becoming pretty famous around the state. He enjoys it but it takes a lot of time."

"Do I detect a hint of jealousy?"

"No, not at all. I'm happy for him and he makes plenty of time for me regardless. And I'm busy with writing too, so it works out."

"How's Winterpock?"

"Great. I'm going to stay there for the summer."

"I'll bet it was cold this winter."

"Not so much so. I spent the entire fall cutting wood so I had plenty. Wood heat is so different from oil or electric. We put in wood stoves, you know. It was great. Made me lazy at times, but I loved it."

"I can remember some good times there, when it belonged to Aunt Lilly. Charlie and I would go up there on breaks and hunt and cut wood. We'd stack the wood everywhere--the porches, the sheds, between trees. Everywhere."

He was beginning to look sad now and I felt a little sorry for him. I didn't want to, but I did. That was what was so bad, no matter what he was your father and there were memories and it was just sad. But you could not let that happen. Sure, you were surrounded in this room by weakness and illness, but that was no reason to break down. You have to do what you came here to do so don't get upset before you even start.

"Claire, you must be finding it hard to be here," Dad said, pulling me away from my thoughts. "You seem upset."

"Well . . ." I started to tell him why I'd come.

"But you have to understand that it's good for me and that therapy is helping me. It's been weeks since I've even wanted a drink."

"I'm glad, Dad, I really am."

"And I feel better."

"That's good."

"I know it's hard for you to accept it. To accept anything I've done for that matter. It doesn't help now, but I'm sorry. I caused you to hate me and I've made you angry at the world. But I've always loved you and your sister and your mother. I love your mother even now. I could kill myself for hurting her as I have but it is even more of a punishment to go on living. I wanted to die for a long time you know. You think I'm just saying these things but I'm not. Believe me. If I thought for a second that you believed me it would be easier."

I stood up and walked over to a book case and started looking blankly at the shelves. When I turned around he was facing me. It was like looking into a damned mirror. Why have you chosen this time to say all this? Maybe you'll think the same thing about what I say. I'm sorry, I don't want to hurt you but I have to.

"What's wrong Claire?" He put his hand on my shoulder.

I turned around and tears were coming down my face. I clamped my jaw but they kept coming.

"Granddad's dead. He died last night. You have to come home."

When I said it something broke in him and he sat down. I went to him and put my hand on his shoulder and squeezed it.

"Dad's dead," he said looking off into space. "Dad's dead."

"I'm sorry."

"I should have been there."

"You couldn't have known."

"He's dead. Dad is dead."

He dropped his head into his hands and began to cry and I left him alone for awhile. I went to the door and looked out and saw that the little lady still sat on the bench clutching the plastic bag between her knees. At least you could count on something, I thought, at least you could count on something.

DAY OF JUDGEMENT

Suddenly it is all too clear;
Clearly it is all too sudden.

WORDS IN FRONT OF FACES

The tavern on Marshal Street had an open air cafe in the back which was sheltered by trellises overgrown with grape vines. In the night time the tavern had gambols and roving minstrels and it was a good place to go and drink beer. The music would become loud and often bawdy around midnight and there would be a lot of laughter and shouting. At two o'clock it would close down and a tired crowd would leave, feeling they had gotten their money's worth.

In the daytime Augustin's Tavern was very different. It served lunch from noon until four and the people who patronized it were mostly businessmen and women looking for an hour of repose in their day. This is not to say that they were not the same crowd who came at night, for they were very much the same crowd, only wearing different faces.

On a cool afternoon in April the cafe was no more crowded than usual. Only half of the tables were in use. All of the patrons appeared to be business people, with the exception of a few. One young couple were obviously students. They were dressed in sweaters and cords and had knapsacks of books pushed under the table. They sat next to each other and often reached to one another with a gentle touch. They seemed very much in love and there was more than one envious glance from the other diners in their direction.

Another couple sitting in the corner in the back had the appearance of being husband and wife. Although they sat across from one another there was an air of familiarity between the two which was the kind that comes from spending much time together. Many of their mannerisms were the same--the way they held their wine glasses, the way they wiped their mouths with their napkins, even a habit they both had of tapping the table top lightly with their left index fingers as they spoke.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"I am too. I didn't think it would end this way," he said, uncrossing his legs and leaning forward.

"I didn't think it would end at all."

"Even now, it's hard."

"I know," she said softly.

"But we can't go on pretending."

"You're right."

"It's not that we don't love each other, it's just that things have changed," he said, lowering his voice and looking around.

"You don't have to worry about people listening. They're going to find out eventually. It won't damage your precious career, if that's what you're worried about," she said in measured words.

"Here you go again," he said.

"I know that wasn't fair."

"When has fairness entered the picture lately?" he asked.

"Let's not get into this. It's old hat now."

"That's fine with me."

The man and woman looked away from one another.

"Listen, we've got to make some decisions. We've got to go through with this. What about Elaine. How can we--when can we tell her?" he asked.

"Tonight."

"She's not going to understand."

"Do you expect her to?" she asked.

"No, I'm not sure I do."

"You do what?" she asked.

"I'm not sure I understand."

"I'm not sure it's good to try to understand, just accept," she said bluntly.

"You sound so cold sometimes, Claire," he said tightening his jaw.

"I don't mean to. I still love you very much."

"Then why not . . ." he began.

"I can't. It just isn't what I need."

"Are you sure you know what you need?" he asked.

"No . . ." She took a deep breath. "I mean, yes. I need to be free. Free of you. I need to be on my own for awhile. I think I began to depend on you when I was too young and I need to learn to depend on myself. And that's what I'm going to do," she said flatly.

"Keep your voice down," he said looking around and finding that no one had looked up. "You had two years of that and then you came back to me. What makes you so sure that won't happen again?"

"I'm a lot older now. And I've learned a lot of things."

"Like?"

"Like I want to make a life of my own. I want to be my own success."

"Claire . . ."

"David. Why're you doing this. You feel the same way I do. I know you do."

"I guess I still see you as a little girl and I won't let this happen if I think you still need me."

"You don't have to worry about me."

"You can forget about even asking that. I'll always worry about you," he said.

"That's not what I want."

"That's what you've got, honey."

"Half of what's wrong is that you've always treated me like a child," she said.

"I know."

"Then why didn't you quit? I tried to make you quit that."

"It's not that easy," he said sadly.

"Things would've been different. I thought that when Elaine came you'd change, that you'd begin to protect her and need me.

I wanted you to need me like I needed you."

"I needed you more than you know."

"I can't believe that," she said sharply.

"That's your misfortune."

"Okay. Okay. Can't we stop this? We're not making any sense," she said.

"I think we're making more sense than we've made in a long time."

She leaned toward him and held her voice low and steady.

"You would. David, listen. I've thought about this for a long time and you have too. You've known for as long as I have that it wouldn't last. It's not built on the right things. So we've got to admit that and work from there. Trying to understand, picking it all apart-- that's bad. We shouldn't do it. We just need to make plans. Plans that won't hurt Elaine."

"Anything we do will hurt her," he said.

"I mean plans that'll hurt her the least. She's strong. And she's perceptive. Don't kid yourself into thinking she doesn't know something's wrong," she said.

"I won't let you hurt her."

"Don't you ever say that to me again," she said raising her voice.

"Shh . . ."

"I wouldn't hurt her for anything. You'll hurt her by holding on to her too tight if anything."

"I assume that means she'll stay with me," he said.

"It doesn't mean any such thing. We'll never let one of us possess her entirely. We'll have to decide who'll keep her first and then once we get everything straight we'll just see how things are. And we'll let her have some say in the matter. But whatever happens I warn you against treating her like a child for the rest of her life."

"I'm not going to take this off you. Not right now. Have you said everything you called me here to say?" he asked bitterly.

"No, not if it's going to end this way."

"How else can it end?" he asked.

"I'm not sure."

"Certainly you don't think I'm going to say, 'well Claire, this has been a nice lunch. Let's do it again sometime.'"

"Don't be angry."

"Okay. Okay. Let's drop it. We're upset and that's a good sign. I was afraid for a long time that we'd drift apart and stop caring. I thought for some time, too, that your mother would pull us apart. I'm not sure even now . . ."

"Don't bring her into it," Claire said.

"You have to admit . . ."

"I haven't listened to her for years about you."

"You may not have listened but you had to hear her."

"She's bitter about all men because of Dad."

"And she thinks I'm like him."

"What does it matter if she does? I know you're not."

"And maybe even that . . ." he began.

"I don't want to get into this. You're wrong," she said with finality.

"But I've thought . . ."

"David."

"Okay." The college students had looked their way and David lowered his voice. "We have to tell Elaine. We'll just tell her. That simple. It'll be okay after awhile."

"Alright," she said.

"Why don't we pick her up from school?"

"Good idea."

"I'll have to go by the paper first."

"Fine."

"You know, I might take a couple of days off and go to the river," he said slowly.

"Why don't you?"

"Just might."

The man paid the bill and walked behind his wife towards the door. He reached in front of her and pulled it open, then followed her out onto the street. Then he looked at her and asked her reasonably, "What are you going to do?"

"I don't know."

The two walked down the street and blended in with the rest of the crowd hurrying to their jobs.

A SCENE BY THE RIVER

"People are putting up storm windows now,
Or were, this morning, until the heavy rain
drove them indoors."

--Howard Nemerov

Outside the women were talking.
It was difficult to tell what about.
One kept speaking of Van Gogh in a low voice between
altered syllables.
The other kept watch over the river and would talk of
the weather the past winter and let her
thoughts drift into the spring.
Neither one seemed to be listening but both were sure
of the conversation.
A young girl came out and served drinks to the two and
rested her hand on the shoulder of one.
Then she said to them both,
"Why don't you come in, I think it's beginning to
rain?"

ANY PLACE LIKE AUSTRIA

I

"The only thing I ever envied you for was Elaine."

"Well, I envied your fame."

"If you'd had it you'd have found it as worthless as
I have."

"What you need is a good dose of rejection slips in the
mail."

"You've been published a lot."

"Never as much as I'd hoped."

"But still you've had pride in your writing. And you've
been able to do the things you wanted to do --not the things other ex-
pected you to do."

"Was there a lot of that?"

"Always."

"I can't believe that of you."

"After awhile it was hard to tell what I really wanted."

"I guess I know what you mean. I went through that too."

"But you realized you were losing yourself and you took hold and you changed things."

"And hurt a lot of people in the process."

"But it turned out for the best."

"I can't say that I agree."

"Why? You never lost Elaine. I've always wanted a child."

"I'm surprized you never had children."

"I considered it, not getting married but having a child. But I knew that wouldn't be fair. At the times I hated my career the most I was the most committed to it. I couldn't give it up."

"Like I said, there must be something to say for fame. Maybe people always want it. Kind of a romantic thing, I guess."

"That's true. There have been good times. And for the theater fame is not all that widespread so there is still a degree of privacy. And, of course, there was always money to go to Europe. I grew very attached to Austria. There you could always pretend that you were who you used to be, if you were lucky enough to remember."

"I've regretted not going with you that time you asked. But it was Elaine's sixteenth birthday. As it was I just sat on the patio and watched them sail along the river. She and one of her friends sailed all day and I fixed them dinner and then they went out. But it

was a beautiful day in many ways."

"Those would be the best times for parents. Just watching their kids have a good time."

"You have to be careful about that though. Or you start envying them. That's happened a lot."

"I can't see that happening."

"I can. You probably would've wanted your children to fit some special mold--something you thought would avoid all that went wrong in your life and you would have applied pressure and it would have caused a great deal of unhappiness."

"Did you do that?"

"In some ways. I had a very hard time dealing with the men in her life because I'd been so unhappy in my marriage. For a long time, and I mean a long time, I would find a thousand things wrong with every boy she brought home. Finally mother pointed it out to me and I realized what I was doing. So I toned it down and everyone was a lot happier."

"She's beautiful, isn't she?"

"Yes, she looks like her father."

"I've heard quite the contrary--that she's beautiful but looks like you."

"Well, I guess that's all relative. She's very much her own person. Little of either one of us in her."

"Wasn't she into writing too?"

"A little. But more art. We'll go in soon and I'll show

you some of her paintings. Water color is her thing."

"You were always an impressionist."

"But I was never like her. It's hard to explain and I don't think we ought to go into it."

"I do. I want to know."

"Kath, it's been so long. I feel the old friendship but I'm a little uncomfortable right now."

"Why?"

"Because so much has happened to both of us and I just feel funny right now. Disjointed."

"I'd like to see that change."

"Kath, look. It's been a long time and a lot has happened. Already we've proven in this conversation that we aren't the people we used to be. They were other people--those kids in college. I get a feeling of wanting to look back and laugh but I've always fought those feelings and always will. You must see what I mean."

"But I think you're wrong."

"And I know I'm right."

"You're being stubborn. You used to accuse me of being stubborn."

"It's not a matter of being stubborn, it's a matter of knowing what works best in your own life."

"I wish that you'd reconsider. I came here for a reason. I think you know that. Don't you?"

"Yes."

Then at least hear me out. You've said one thing today that

makes me think you might need what I've come to offer."

"Kath."

"Hear me out."

"Okay. Okay. But first let's have some lunch. And I want to show you Elaine's paintings. They're really very good."

II

The two women stood in the library and looked at the paintings on the south wall. The collection was impressive, several large paintings surrounded by smaller ones which were in many cases more captivating than the larger ones. All were similar in subject matter--rustic scenes of barns and sheds, powerful scenes of the New England coast, and some smaller still-lives of shells, leaves, pieces of wood--all very naturally painted with a hint of the impressionistic, a faint hint indeed, but it was still there. On the other walls of the library were shelves with books and magazines haphazardly stacked. The definite arrangement of the paintings seemed somewhat out of place in the general disorder of the room. The library was very warm, lived-in is perhaps a better word, a place where one could rest, unthreatened by anything outside. It was obvious that much work had been done in the room--a great deal of thinking, writing, dreaming, reading, of trying to find a way for the voice within the walls to be heard. Success was noted in many ways--photos on the shelves; pictures of awards, readings, and lectures; letters of acceptance . . . the things a writer might save or might not, depending on the mood and on the outcome.

The two women spent an hour in the room browsing, paying little attention to each other and perhaps too much to themselves. One wandered around the room, looking closely at the volumes of works as well as the memorabilia scattered here and there. The other browsed for a short time and then sat at a desk and began to jot down words and phrases and to sketch boats and people in the margins. Eventually she got up and motioned to the other to follow and soon they made their way out to the terrace where they sat again, this time with fresh drinks in their hands.

III

"Elaine's as perceptive as her mother."

"A great deal more so."

"I'd like to meet her, I've only seen pictures, you know."

"She's in Maine now, with the young man I think she'll end up marrying. I think I'll lose her to Maine even if I don't lose her to him."

"Does that bother you?"

"No more or less than it should."

"Then for the most part you aren't tied down here?"

"Not in that sort of way. I've plenty of deadlines to think about though."

"Well, I've got something I want you to think about. I'd like you to spend a few months with me in Austria. It'd be good for you as a writer, for me as an actress, for both of us just as people.

Why not do something spontaneous for a change?"

"That's a biting question."

"I didn't mean it that way. I just want you to say you'll go."

"I can't."

"Why?"

"What do you want me to do, close up the house for 'a few months?'"

"It won't go away."

"It takes a lot of care in the summer, it's the best time down here on the river. I can't just leave it."

"It will be here next summer, just as it always has been and always will be. I want to go to Austria and I don't want to go alone. We used to talk about doing something like this but it was just that, talk. And now there's the chance to, well, sort of fulfill a dream. I've missed you. The two or three phone calls a year have always made me feel that things between us will never change and now we can find out if I'm right."

"I've told you more than once that there's no way a person can go back. Why are you trying to?"

"Because I've found that everything I used to look forward to was phony, phony as hell."

"You can't mean that?"

"I can and I do."

"And what let you in on this big secret?"

"People. People who use other people."

"Honey, that goes on everywhere. But there's a lot of good too."

"Tell me."

"Good in the things you do, in many of the people you know, not all but many, good in . . . well, good in just living and creating, that's a good word, in creating."

"Can't you see that I'm asking you to do just that? This is a chance to go to a new place and meet new people--to become fresh again and to re-establish one of the best friendships either of us ever had the chance to experience. I'm begging, Claire, I need this touch of the old, of the sure . . ."

"Kath . . ."

"Please say you'll think about it."

"Well . . ."

"Just think about it. I know that if you do . . ."

"Okay. But I'm not promising . . ."

"Just so you'll think about it."

"I will. I promise."

THE END