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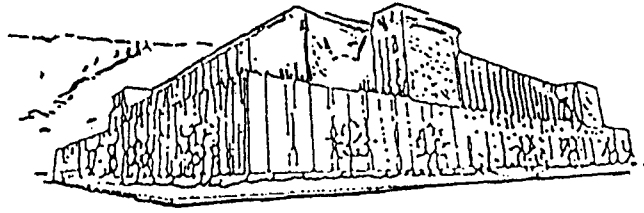
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Dapper Men

Stories by Arden Hendrie

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

The University of Montana

1998

Approved by:

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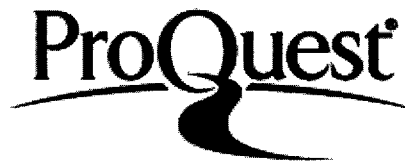
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My Baby, My Darling

Nancy Odum was an artist who lived in Mexico in a colonial town, full of Americans, and she lived with an American, Louis Bourjalis, who had proposed to her that spring, and she had accepted. She made tiny dioramas, a combination of painting and wire sculpture, most no bigger than a shoebox, but when she tried offering them to the galleries in town, the owners peered at the intricate, tangled pieces with something like dismay. Louis hated these people. So much that he would come into the galleries after she had been refused and start shouting about the horrible art on the walls, which led to Nancy shout at *him* later on. "Stop fucking protecting me!" she'd tell him.

Louis would listen sadly, as if tired, and when Nancy had calmed down, she'd think, He'll grow tired of me, too. He'll give up soon.

They rented a house near the top of the hill. It was a guest house, and the owner, New York Steve, had built it up from the ruin of a chapel, patching the walls into a large, two-story room and putting a bath and bedroom on the roof. When in town, New York Steve lived in the main house across the inner garden wall. Nancy had once lived with Steve, and in the months after Louis proposed she had begun seeing him again secretly in the unsold property he owned in town. Sparsely furnished rooms, a chair, a mattress, smiling Steve, things left in haste. Nancy's mother then called from California. Nancy's father had throat cancer, it had come out of remission and spread to his lungs. Quickly, Nancy booked her flight, then walked across the garden to tell Steve it would have to end. He listened and agreed as she knew he would, without a fuss.

When he came home that evening, Louis was bewildered by her. "Jesus," he said. "That's it? Say something."

Nancy was in no mood. She told him again that the news was not exactly a surprise. Everyone had been waiting, particularly her father. But she began to cry, not out of any memory, but because Louis was standing so near. She put down the food she was cleaning and turned to him. "You can't go. I want you to but you can't. My mother would have a cow if you go. You just can't go. You can't."

At first Louis said nothing. He took her elbow in his hand, as if weighing her arm, and stared at her. "Well. Of course," he said, and let go, walking distractedly out of the kitchen, then he came back to repeat everything again.

In California her younger sister met her at the airport. In the car she told Nancy their mother had refused to let their father stay in the hospital, although he liked hospitals and wanted to die there. "Maybe he thought he'd be safer," her sister said. "We put him in an electric bed in his study. He's cranky about it but can't say much. What else is new."

Nancy had not known what to expect or feel, but she was quietly unnerved by her sister's blitheness. Coming into the house, she saw she had entered a new regime. Music was playing. The women had wound the caretaking and errands in a tight, almost giddy speed with an immobile Van as the center. At first Nancy held back; she would steal glances at her father as if he might signal what her place should be. But that would not be Van. His dying had not changed him much; the austere, eagle features sat present, uninvolved in the body evaporating around them. Nancy took up the house's queer energy and began talking candidly at his bedside, and although he listened and understood, her conversation always veered into babble. "I'll see you in heaven!" she said, this popping out and ending one session. To which Van wrote back on his notepad, "Perhaps. But I would rather see you here, in this house." Once, she found him staring carefully toward the ceiling. Her younger sister had tacked a poster of a Brueghel above

his bed, but Nancy saw by the cast of his eye that it was not the painting he was fixed on, but a spot in between. His face hung with such implacable lightness that Nancy stayed in the hallway out of sight. He's making out where he's going, she thought. And this will be the last place he can see. Hit by restlessness, she coughed, and when Van turned to her, his mouth still open but his eyes in terrible, milky disarray, she jumped like an animal, full of fear.

At the end of the second week, near dawn, the night nurse woke Nancy's mother, who woke her daughters and told them of Vans' death, and at the breakfast table the women seemed to ease into a new, softer pattern. They cried with each other, then her older sister announced, "Well gals, let's go take a look at him."

So when her plane lifted away from Los Angeles, Nancy thought, Done. I am no longer needed here. As if the experience had given her a new strength and resolve. But minutes into the flight this was gone. She imagined Louis waiting beyond customs, his expression pained. He would finally tell her, *Your father did die*. A light, astounding thought.

And there he was, stooped and still high above the crowd, waving and smiling sadly. As she came forward and so did he, Nancy saw that his face began working off hers, or vice versa. Something, anxiety and love, pulled like a muscle across her, and after Louis drew away from his embrace to study her again, he said, "Oh, baby. Baby, I'm sorry."

"Didn't you miss me?" Nancy exclaimed.

For half of the trip they talked comfortably, coming up out of the valley to the higher desert, with the bare, bolted mountains. Nancy looked at Louis as he asked easy questions (about her sisters and their husbands), and she thought, Well, he loves me. Nothing to fear. When he asked about the service, she told him Van had planned everything: the music, who would speak, the fact that there were no flowers. Then she remembered an old man who had been never seen or heard of before. A roommate of

Van's in college. "He came up and talked about 'Van's perfect ear'. Can you believe that? My father had perfect pitch. He said Van wouldn't let him play his records because the pitch might be off. Can you believe it?" Louis didn't seem to be listening, and she poked him. "Hey, you."

"I have perfect pitch," he said.

"I was talking about Van."

"What did your mother say?"

Nancy sighed. "Louis..."

"What did she say about me?"

"Louis!"

He shut up. Nancy turned to the window, but in the reflection she could still see him, rubbing the spot on his chest, his head now drawn into his shoulders like a bull. She closed her eyes and let herself drift in the watery edge spreading inside.

When she woke, the town was visible in the dark, a glittery triangle over the hill. Louis had relaxed; one arm rested behind her headrest. Soon pavement switched to cobblestones and the car began rattling. At this hour the streets had emptied, the stucco facades flat and quiet passing up the hill, electric lines strung one to the next. To Nancy, these returns were an ancient kind of welcome, and this one she yearned for. They walked from the parked car up the alley, and here finally were the smells -- gasoline, punchy sewage, animal shit. Louis unlocked the outer gate to the garden and his dog padded happily out of the dark. As she bent to him, saying, "Hello pretty boy. How are you, pretty boy?" she glanced past the inner garden wall to the main house, but even the light in Steve's bedroom could only jar her slightly.

Upstairs Louis sat on the bed waiting in his underwear when she came out of the shower. She touched the center of his forehead, a spot where his big brows gathered upward in worry. He watched her as she studied the spot and scrubbed it with her thumb.

His lovemaking was gentle, he held his weight off her and she found herself touching his chest and shoulders with the same studiedness, as if he were something new. But sometime later she woke up with Louis calling out. He was squatting by the window, snapping the curtain with a shake. "There's someone in here!" he shouted sternly. "I said there's someone in here!"

Nancy sat up. Louis was a sleepwalker and needed only a nudge to calm and redirect him. But when she touched his shoulder, he turned to her with such a stricken face that she gasped. "I don't *believe* it," he said. "Baby, I don't fucking *believe* it." He stood up, covered his face in his hands, got on the bed and curled into a ball, and Nancy watched, not moving until his breath steadied into a deeper sleep.

For the next two nights, these episodes grew worse. Nancy had known them to appear after some outside trouble had occurred, which was about once a week: a boiling over from incompetence at the American college where he worked, or gossip heard, or the added injury that these troublemakers were so dull. "You do understand," she had told him, "that the world is populated with them. That you've chosen to live in a town *overpopulated* with them." But in response he would look away sadly, and she knew later in the night she would wake with him carefully holding her arm or leg, staring beyond it as if something dangerous lay on the bed. At most, he'd be up and facing one wall, touching it with his fingers and softly muttering. The episodes were not disturbing; she had a certain affection for them because of the secret care they allowed, but the two nights after her arrival were much different. She first found him on the staircase. He held the iron banister with both hands while one foot gingerly felt its way down. The second night she woke alone, heard a noise in the garden and came to the window. Below, Louis was bent naked and struggling with the locked gate to the alley. When she reached the garden, whispering shouts to him while furtively checking the windows of the main

house, Louis turned and dropped his arms around her in an embrace, surrounding her suddenly with his piquant smell.

Each time she led him back, and in the morning he was tired and remembered bits of it only as a potent dream. "I was on a cliff above a misty white canyon." Or, "You know who I thought it was out in the garden? Van. He was right behind the wall."

Nancy listened, never showing too much concern. Had she been worried, Louis would have cancelled his classes and stayed home the whole afternoon. As it was, he left each day and asked if she'd meet in town for lunch, and she answered probably not, not yet. Friends called with condolences, with the gossip she'd missed, inviting her to parties. She listened, feeling serene, or at least felt she could imagine herself as so. Like her mother moving through the house after the funeral -- not quite her mother, a life-like intimate. When shouts or laughter came from across the garden, and even when she recognized it as New York Steve's, she placed it away. At two each day Steve's maid came to clean the guest house, and Nancy took Louis' dog to the upper mesa above town. They walked across the grazing land to the reservoir and threw and retrieved a tennis ball in and out of the water for hours. She was thinking of Van, but it was work to do so. In her memories, he was always sitting. Chairs, car seats, at his desk. The spikes of bad and good were just as accessible, but they had as much weight as a picture of him reading on the couch. She imagined that critical spot in his study, the invisible air. Maybe he was assessing what rules would soon apply. Growing up, she had understood Van's code as an intricate, mysterious mechanism, set off by unknown variables, a change in temperature, a bad meal. Which brought her to Louis. His clarity and rules, once reassuring and necessary, now engulfed.

She stood by the muddy reservoir, the dog panting in the reeds, the same tough swirl that had overtaken her while watching Van overtaking her now. "Move," she told herself. "Move, move, move."

On the third day, she woke late and saw the night had passed without an incident. But on hearing Louis' muffled voice and cough downstairs, she wondered if she was mistaken. She dressed, and at the top of the stairs she discerned that there were two voices, the other unknown. A young blonde woman in cutoffs stood in the living room below, watching Nancy come down and at the same time speaking to Louis, who squeezed oranges in the kitchen area. "Well, hi there," she said. "I'm Pam." Nancy said hello, then checked Louis, who looked back glumly. The woman's cheerful tone was no doubt troubling for him. But the tone and posture were losing confidence. "I'm a friend of Steve's," she said, looking back and forth.

Louis came forward with two glasses of orange juice and gave one to each of them. "The water pump is out again," he told Nancy. "Pam," and he made a motion to the woman as she tried smiling while drinking the juice. "Is the bearer of the bad news."

The woman raised her hands nervously and started up again. Steve had people coming to fix it, that it would be off only in the late afternoons and evenings for the next three days, but Nancy wasn't listening very closely. She took Pam in. A small, rabbitty face, boy's hips, and breasts pushing at her t-shirt like jokes. It took a moment to notice that Pam had stopped talking and now was taking *Nancy* in. Then she swung around to Nancy's easel in the corner. "I like your work. Do you take classes here? I'm a painter, too."

When the woman left back through the inner garden wall, Louis was hunched with anger. "You would think," he began, "that he would buy a fucking new pump. He knows. He's over there sunbathing his bare ass with the flavor of the month doing his shit work."

"Calm down, Louis."

He exhaled, then hugged her. "I'm sorry. I'm late -- I got to go. Should I go?"

"Of course."

"Should I?"

But she moved him out to the garden, and from the alley he called over the wall, "Lunch today?" and she called back "Yes! Of Course!" before she realized otherwise. Inside, she saw she still carried the glass of juice. She drank it quickly, saying, "Asshole," under her breath when it was drained. "Asshole!" she shouted. She walked back outside into the garden, to the alley, then to the frontage wall of the main house, where she stood in front of New York Steve's giant door, then hammered her fist against it.

"Easy!" came a voice above. New York Steve looked down from the wall's ledge. He was chewing gum, barechested, dark and shiny -- as Louis had guessed, sunbathing on his roof. "Hiya, Nancy," he said, and he pushed his sunglasses up to the top of his little head. "I'm sorry about your pop."

"Shut up," she said. She had to squint upwards but refused to shade her eyes. "That was some stunt," she told him.

Steve chewed in round quiet bites. "Say again?"

"Is she up there? Never mind. Fuck you."

Steve was laughing, that dry bray, then he called her to come inside, but Nancy had started down the narrow road toward town. Turning one corner, she walked directly into two old Mexican ladies. She apologized in a flurry, adding, "Buenas tardes," and one returned the greeting while the other glared with displeasure from behind her shawl. "I'm sorry," Nancy said. What confused and infuriated her was not that Steve had found another so quickly (or, more likely, that he found the girl *during* their affair). It was the girl's appearance in the living room -- exactly how she had met Louis two years ago, delivering bad news from an absent, sunbathing Steve, with Louis unimpressed.

She made her way onto one of the hill's larger streets and into banging activity of the town. At the main square, she turned north; the south end of the square, facing the largest of the churches, was an area where Americans sat and congregated. She continued downward, the architecture gradually losing its size and flourish, until she was reaching

the poorer section of town, where Mexicans paused to watch her. She neared a sewage stream, and crossing the bridge the smell broke into her face. She stopped, turned, and made her way back up to the square and sat in the shade of the north side. The churchbells struck across town for one o'clock. In a half hour Louis would arrive at his favorite food stand across the street, and she waited.

When he came, greeting the cook with a joke, Nancy didn't move from her bench. He sat down at the card table and looked around him in the sunshine. Once, he gazed directly at her, but then broke away to talk to the cook again. If he does see me, Nancy thought, he'll wave to me but I won't stand up. Then he'll walk here to me and ask me what's wrong, and I'll tell him all of it.

She would fly to Boston, where her younger sister lived, whose husband would give her office work in his clinic. By spring she would have enough money saved to return, and maybe Louis would not be here anymore. She watched as Louis finally gave his order then craned turtle-like for one more discouraged sweep, missing her again. He took a book from his satchel and settled in the chair, chin on his chest, and stayed that way through the meal, reading and lifting the food to his mouth. She still waited, until he was up and walking off in his stooped sway, and when he was gone Nancy studied her hands lying in her lap as if they were responsible. "How fucking cinematic," she told herself, but was about to cry. A red dot was moving slowly across her sleeve. "Ladybug," she whispered, sniffing, and she angled her arm to let it reach the bench.

In the evening, Louis came home happy, with no mention of their broken date. He walked to the kitchen and placed a bottle of American whiskey on the counter, then stood back to admire it like a little boy, smiling at Nancy, too. It was a drinking night, Nancy saw. Louis afforded himself two nights a week for drinking, choosing with an unknown system. When he started for the stairs to change into running clothes (on these days, he would jog up to the mesa and back with the dog, who was now hopping with anticipation,

since it had not been taken *anywhere* that day), Nancy reminded him of their water trouble, and Louis came slowly back down. The running was to relax him before he drank, but more importantly, he liked to be clean.

Surprisingly, he only sighed and made no scene. They ate a small dinner and Louis set up the tumblers and ice on the coffee table. As he drank he grew both wistful and cheerful, pressing the glass to his forehead and rubbing his chest languidly with each complaint. Nancy listened. She was comfortable but careful not to match Louis' pace. The afternoon had shown her that the structures which held up certain parts of her and closed off others were not as strong as she would've liked.

"Today," Louis said, "an old couple sat in on my class. Friends of some such. Happy, cornfed people. But they were from Montana! They came up and introduced themselves, and told me that, and I said, 'What's it like, Montana?' The woman said, 'Cold winters' and the man said, 'God's country.' Baby," he said, leaning forward, "let's go live in Montana. Let's go to Colorado. I want to go to the mountains."

"You live in the mountains," Nancy said. "And you don't like the cold."

"I'd build us fires."

"I have friends here, Louis."

Louis stared into his glass. He raised it in a jerk, saying, "*You*..." But the whiskey sloshed over his wrist, and he brought it back to his lap, staring again. "Shit," he said.

With that word, *You*, coming out bitter, Nancy felt frightened. She whisked it away with impatience, which then became irritation. "There are people," she began, "who live here, who I enjoy talking to. And who enjoy talking to me."

Louis refilled his glass, then sipped from it and slurred, "I like talking to you."

Nancy stopped looking at him. She turned to the corner where her materials lay scattered over her work table untouched. Louis followed her gaze. "Those I don't like... tired of those," he said, pointing. "That one I like." Nancy stood and walked up the stairs to the bathroom. Louis called out, "I'm blind! Really! I can't see!"

When she returned, he was in a strange position. His head had lolled forward onto his chest as if a dead weight, but both arms were bent over the back of his neck, gently floating in an X, like a puppet. His dog had come to lie at his feet, where he licked Louis' shoe. Louis was mumbling, and when Nancy came closer she heard him say, "Nancy, he's way up there on the ceiling. High to the left. He won't come down. Come down here." Nancy caught herself glancing toward the ceiling beams. She sat in front of Louis, but his eyes were still closed. Then his large head popped up and his eyes opened dimly.

"Here he comes! Oh! Oh. Nancy, Nancy, Nancy."

"Louis..." she said, tiredly. But he closed his eyes and frowned.

"He keeps going away," he said. "I have to stay quiet. Change tactics."

"Good thinking." She bent closer and took his hand. "Let's go up to bed, Louis."

"No." Louis pulled away, surprising her. He tipped his head to one side, his eyes still shut. "I'm *here*. I'm right here. You know who it is? It's your father. Van is in this room. He's flying around this room. He comes down and cozies into the right side of my neck. I can see us from the back of his head. He's a scared little rabbit. Keeps going up. Hey Van!"

Nancy laughed, but it was immediately unnatural sounding. Louis' eyes opened partially. His eyebrows were gabled and sad as he sat quietly. Nancy felt her stillness in the scene, how she sat hunched in the chair.

"You're dark," Louis said to her. "He feels warm on my neck. He makes a space in the corner of my head. Oh." Color rose in his cheeks and his corners of his mouth trembled downward in a small, awful bending. "I'm sorry!" he cried, and he was weeping. He was sobbing, heaving his shoulders, wiping his wet face with the backs of both hands. "I'm sorry for all I did to all of you!"

After a minute he stopped; his breaths began to even. "Am I making this up?" he asked.

"I don't think so," Nancy said.

"I don't think so," he repeated.

But he was slack now. He continued to look down without any focus. His voice trailed, "Death shocked him. He's sad. He can't do anything here now. The world is completely lost to him. He's completely out."

"He is," she said.

"I'm so tired," Louis said, and soon he stood and walked quietly up the stairs. As he reached the top Nancy was roused back into place. She saw she had wrapped and tucked her body like a hard nut. She turned off the lamp and ran up after him to the bedroom, where Louis was asleep in his clothes.

That night Nancy fell asleep at an unknown hour, and in the morning she waited for Louis to wake until she began poking his side. "Hey... hey," she said, but he slept on. She had woken with a full but detached memory of it, like a film. Each time she picked over the memory, she did not necessarily feel belief. Yet at the same time when Louis' face returned in her mind, there could be no feeling of doubt, and this left Nancy with nothing. She shook his shoulder. "*Louis.*"

Louis opened his eyes, blinking. He studied her above him for a moment. "I remember it," he finally said.

"What," she asked, "do you remember? What could you possibly remember? Was that some fucking joke?"

Louis sat up. He looked at her directly, grabbing her upturned knee. "You do believe me," he said. "I can remember it. It's faded a little, but it was Van." And Nancy, although unable for a moment to look at Louis, did believe him, because her first reaction was belief. It sat in her like a stone. Louis took her silence as positive, because he began talking more comfortably, telling her that Van had no real interest him, that in fact, he could sense Van still *disliked* him. (Then why *you*, Nancy thought.) He couldn't clearly explain how he knew it was Van; the speed which his presence moved around the room

was certainly not her father's style, nor was the crying, but he knew it was him. He remembered most clearly the crying. "Although it was Van crying, not me. He formed a space in my head, then it grew hot and spread all over me."

"It wasn't a dream," Nancy said.

"No. I know what a dream is. This wasn't one."

"Is he alone?"

"Oh, yes, definitely so. At least, the change is total. Being alone, whatever that means -- I don't think that matters much there."

That morning, Nancy immediately went to work. For some time Louis sat in the living room with her, reading and occasionally asking if she wanted to take a walk. At noon he had called in sick and canceled his classes. Had he paid more attention, he would've seen that Nancy was not working with any direction: she would bend and cut the wires, then reattach them, add a spot of paint and minutes later cover it with the color before. When Louis finally took his woeful dog and kissed her cheek and walked out into the alley, Nancy let the ridiculousness of her thoughts snap out loud. "Then why did he apologize? Why did he cry?" She had been turning over the answer to her last question - - was Van alone. Her father, when she had last seen him, said he was ready. Looking forward to it. Here he was hiding in the rafters full of blubbery doubt. She backtracked, wondering how she could consider any of this at all, and then found herself again pressed into the baffling solidity of her belief. It was at this moment that the phone rang.

"Where are you?" a friend asked, sounding drunk. "I invite you to my party and you're not here. Come over here. Bring a salad. Christ, it's time to get you out of the house."

Louis was horrified by the idea when he returned from the mesa. He strode across the coffee table and sat on her, but Nancy was prepared. She had already dressed in a skirt and blouse and put on jewelry. She needed to see people and was going with or

without him. Louis rolled off her. "But I drank last night. I wasn't planning on drinking tonight."

"Then don't."

He had his hand up to his forehead, squinting with difficulty. "Don't you think..." he began. "What, with all of this. Don't you think there's too much going on?"

But she had made the decision to no longer think of it. "That's what parties are for, Louis."

They drove down the hill to the friend's house, a former hacienda with a fountain centered in the patio. Nancy's friend was in the restaurant business; after two failed attempts in the town she was now back with an Italian bistro, and throughout her house small scraps of paper were pinned up with handwritten messages: "I have faith in my own destiny", "I am strong, beautiful and have the right to succeed", "I will pay all my debts by June". Louis used them as a distraction, following one note to the next through the rooms in a quest, clutching his drink to his chest and pushing past the groups of people. Nancy let him go. Upon entering the house, she had seen the woman Pam in a circle of men, but New York Steve was not among them. She drank three cups of vodka punch before spotting him on the verandah above. He wore a faded baseball cap, his black ponytail sticking out the back, and as if sensing her gaze he turned and looked down to her by the fountain, smiled and raised his forefinger to the cap's brim and then back in a slow salute.

Louis was asleep in the morning, and Nancy woke in a start, inches from him, and went quickly to the shower. The water sputtered but finally steadied, and when she climbed into the tub, the water hit and an acrid smell bloomed off her head, making her jump out of the tub to the bathroom mirror. Her bangs were stuck to her forehead, and there, above one eyebrow, a triangle of hair was missing.

Louis had wanted to leave the party early, and did. Several times he had come up and taken her arm, asking, "Ready?" until she had finally taken *his* arm, led him out to the street, to his car, put him in it and told him she would see him soon. Back inside, a tan old woman who had been continually cornering Louis now came up to Nancy, telling her Louis had better see a masseuse. ("Did you look at him?" the old woman shouted. "All his weight is on his pelvis!") Nancy asked for a cigarette from the old woman then bent to the kitchen stove to light it, but the pilot shot up too high and bits of her hair disappeared in a flash. The old woman screamed but Nancy felt strangely calm, as if this were expected. Then she heard Steve's laugh. He was in the kitchen doorway. "Hello, Steve," she said. "Can you give me a ride home?"

In the bathroom the next morning she sat on the toilet and separated her guilt into levels -- that she was drunk, that she had not actually slept with him -- but each snapped back to Louis. The guilt at least had facts. New York Steve had driven her up the hill, parked, and would walk her to the door. He had begun making his way into the alley when Nancy climbed onto the roof of his car. She watched him come back out of the dark with a half-hearted smile. Standing in front of her, he made a face and glowered, and she glowered back from above. He rubbed her knees then moved one hand under her skirt and past her underwear. He cupped the bottom of her thigh and made a line up and down her, and then into her, with his thumb. "His little thumb," she told herself in dazed, disgusted consolation. The bathroom was now filled with steam.

Nancy waited in her robe downstairs, without any plan, while Louis slept. She had not realized how early it had been when she woke. The large, square room began glowing with sunlight, and the blinding shape of the window began its movement across the far wall. Soon, Louis' dog padded down the stairs and sat in front of Nancy on its haunches, yawning expectantly. "Poor boy," she whispered. But the dog cocked its ears and head as if to locate a sound, then gave a low, startling growl.

"Nancy!" Louis called from above. "Nancy! Nancy!"

She ran up the stairs. Louis lay prone under the blanket with one arm raised outside at a small angle. He was watching the ends of his fingers intently. "He can see this far," he said. "I'm behind him now." In his face, which seemed caught in the beginning of a shout, Nancy immediately recognized Van lying in his study. Louis dropped his arm. "He's inside a light. It goes out a little more and then turns dim there at the bottom and the sides. All he can see is darkness there, but not pure darkness. Colors. He can't focus on it, and it isn't opaque. Like water -- you don't have the feeling you can fully see into it, and he's trying."

"Is he afraid?" she asked.

"No, not afraid at all. He's never been afraid of any of this. Wondering, maybe. Do you do that? Wonder? No. You can't use our concepts; they start not to work very well. They don't work." As he spoke his voice became stronger, he stopped squinting, and Nancy saw that he had been drawn out of it. She stood quietly until he spoke again, "Baby, I'm not making it up, am I?"

"I don't think it's important."

"It *is* important," Louis said. "Nothing continues on there. It has absolutely nothing to do with me."

Nancy sat at the edge of the bed. The dog was in the room, too, and he glumly lowered his head to Nancy, who petted him. "Why doesn't he come to me?" she asked quietly.

"He just can't," Louis said. "This is the best he can do."

Here, she thought, So typical! But again, she could not think of Van directly. His face, when she pictured it, disappeared soundlessly. And there was Louis, propped in bed. From where had this certainty ever come?

"This time he wasn't emotional," she said.

"No, he didn't notice me much. I just woke up wondering about him, about where he is now, and then it came on, like I was lowered into a pool. He knew I was there

watching but wasn't so irritated. He was occupied." Louis pushed himself up on the bed and sat next to her. "I'll tell you why this has to make sense to me. It's got no reality for me and is realer than I could ever make it. Do you see what I'm saying?"

"Yes, of course I do," Nancy said.

Louis sighed and rubbed his chest. "It makes me tired."

"I know."

"Did you have fun last night?" he asked.

"What did you say?" she asked.

Nancy did not mean to appear coy; she could not remember his question, or, for a moment, the party, and this trouble continued through the day. It was Saturday. She stayed in her robe and moved through the house blurred and indeterminate, forgetting what she had just done or was about to do. At times she was attached to Louis, then kept an opposite distance as if balanced on a pole. Then she would run halfway down the stairs to find him looking up pleasantly at her from his book. Late in the afternoon she saw Pam come out into the garden of the main house. Nancy was sitting by the window in the bedroom and watched as Pam squatted on the grass with a pail beside her and began weeding around the flowerbeds. The decision seemed to spread on it's own beneath Nancy, and when she first noticed it there, and then peered at it as if it now had risen into her hands, she closed her eyes to make sure it couldn't be easily forgotten. She came down the stairs, passing Louis, who began standing as she headed for the door. But Nancy waved him down. "I'll be right back," she said.

She came to the inner garden wall, which was a little higher than her waist, but with the bougainvillea plant climbing over it she had to crane to see Pam on the ground. "Hello!" Nancy called.

When Pam stood and saw Nancy, her small features tightened in an adult try at reproach. Of course she knows, Nancy thought, although this was no deterrent. Then she

saw that the girl didn't have the strength to hold it, her features were falling with a tremble. Be strong! Nancy thought.

"Steve's not here," Pam said.

"That's fine," Nancy said. "I want to tell you that I'm leaving town very soon."

"Huh?" The girl sniffed and wiped her nose, leaving a smudge of dirt. "That's too bad."

"I'm going to tell Louis. If you see Steve, tell him that."

The girl's face only curled a little more in confusion, but Nancy was already walking back across the lawn. She came inside the guest house and sat in front of Louis, who looked up expectantly, then quickly his face changed. "Jesus," he said. "Baby. What?" When she told him about Steve, the history opened like a hard hand and closed the room, and Louis made a small sound, like a breath, then stood abruptly and faced the wall, touching it with his head and fingers. When she reached what had happened the previous night, he ran outside and leapt the inner garden wall. "*Where is he? Where is he?*" she heard him scream. Nancy ran into the garden and Louis was coming through the gate holding a terrified Pam by the arm. "Does she know?" Louis demanded. He was red-faced and crying. "Tell me!"

"Louis!" Nancy cried. "Oh, Louis, Louis."

He let Pam go. The girl was immobile, looking back and forth between them. "Go home," Louis told her, and she stumbled backwards through the gate, then ran and was gone. Louis walked past Nancy. In the living room he was kneeling, lacing his running shoes as his dog stretched and pawed the tiled floor with worry and anticipation. Nancy stood just beyond the open door.

"What do you want me to do?" she asked him.

But he wouldn't look up to her. "I have to go running," he said. She could see an angle of his face, a slackness, his mouth open, his lips hanging slightly outward. He leashed the dog. He was still wearing jeans and an oxford shirt, and she wanted to tell

him to change. But he was gone past her, pitched forward out into the alley. He was gone hours, into the evening. Nancy packed her clothes, cleaned her brushes and packed her paints. She owned little else in the house. She cleaned the breakfast dishes, ate a little fruit and finally changed out of her robe. In the last hour it grew dark, and she passed it wrapping all of her unused wires into a spool. She heard the alley door lock tumble and the dog's great panting. Louis came in the dark room and turned on a lamp, then he paused, studying Nancy in the light, then he saw her bare worktable. "I need to go out." he said. "I have to get drunk. Will you come with me?"

"But the water is off," she told him, ridiculously. "You can't take a shower."

Driving down the hill, the car was filled with Louis' smell; he did not even bother changing his clothes, which were now dried and stiff. Nancy sat in the passenger's seat hovering in the smell with a different, much lighter kind of forgetfulness, almost in wonder. They passed people on the streets, some children peering into the car. Louis parked. "This bar has a band," he said, the first words spoken on the ride. The bar was for tourists and the band played Mexican and American rock and roll badly, but Louis drank and slapped the tabletop in the same shakey rhythm. After two more whiskeys, he got up and before Nancy could understand, he was on the stage huddled with the lead guitar player. People booed but the band started into 4/4 rockabilly time, with Louis nodding with his eyes shut and holding the microphone. Then he suddenly sang, a heaving shout of gibberish, English mixed with Spanish, and to Nancy's surprise some of the audience began clapping along. It was like a blues song, and he roared out, "My Baby My Baby My Baby!" then, "My Darling My Darling My Darling!" with all his might, and people were shouting back in response. "My Baby! My Darling!" he screamed, and she was crying it back, and he roared it back to her. In the hot lights, his face glistened and he doubled over the microphone. When he finished he came down to the table pale and stumbling. Nancy hugged him, but Louis said, "We have to go *home*." She drove them up, and in the house he fell into the chair with his eyes closed.

"He'll be further away," he said. Nancy sat across from him as his breathing quickened. "He wakes up out of the dark and his house is burning. That's all." He stopped and rubbed his mouth. "The fire is coming out his house, this orange flame, he doesn't know what it means. Nancy, he's a fox! He changed into a fox! And he runs circles around the house, trying to stop that fire. He tries to catch the flame and it goes to his chest, makes his chest molten. He leaves, out into the country, and there is a pole which he can climb up, high, high up! Miles, above mountains! There at the top is a platform and there are other foxes. They stand around being foxes together. They are very tall and slender and stand up very straight, all with this shiny, molten glow in their chests. But Van is hunched over, down on all fours; he's just joining the ranks of the molten foxes. *Ha ha!*" Louis laughed, but Nancy couldn't help but be alarmed by the vision. Foxes? Louis looked like a little boy on a carnival ride, head swaying with a dumb smile. Then he frowned.

"But he's shy, Nancy. They watch him and he crawls away to the edge, and they let him get on the pole and slide down, high above the mountains. Oh, maybe you didn't want me to watch. Should I go? He's swirling and hanging on the pole, just the pole in the sky. He's fine, though, but I should leave. He wants you to see he's fine. He's just swirling now. I'm coming out. Here I go. There, I'm out. I'm out now. Are you happy for him?"

"I'm happy," Nancy said.

"I'm tired," Louis said. "We have to go to bed now."

But they didn't sleep; they sat in bed deciding when they would move to the States; they talked about jobs. In a lull, Nancy once began to weep and apologize, but Louis made it clear he would not hear of it again, and he never did. They left the town within the week and moved to Denver. They married in city hall and lived happily for three years. One weekend they hiked to the Continental Divide, and on the way down near the base of the trail Louis walked a few paces ahead of Nancy and suddenly flung his

arms outward as if something had burst, then he fell forward. Nancy knelt next him and tried to hold his head away from the dirt ground. As she held him, she felt him grow cold. His dog was barking wildly in circles, then ran into the woods, then reappeared, touching Louis' open hand with it's nose. She couldn't move Louis until an old woman came from around a bend in the path. "This is my husband," Nancy said, as if the woman might not believe her. Together, they rolled Louis' body supine, and the old woman closed his eyes. She carried a fishing pole and had shiny bits of metal that flashed on her chest. She built a fire and sat as Nancy curled around it, unable to get warm. Later she tapped Nancy's shoulder, and Nancy saw that men had appeared. The body was covered and held on a stretcher by these men, who stood in file and waited for her to lead them.

Providence

When I arrived home, the phone was ringing. The woman on the line explained she was the mother of my daughter's boyfriend. She had a German accent, I thought, and she asked, "Mr. Hecht, is Celeste home with you?" I called up the stairs. I said no, and she said she believed that Rafael and my daughter may have run away to New York City.

"No, they haven't," I said. "She's upstairs." And I went up to her room, which was open and empty, the bed made, and I picked up the red phone on Celeste's desk. "No, she's not," I said. My daughter was fourteen. The woman, Gerte Fernandez, asked me not to call the police but to come to her house first and speak with her husband. Her husband knew they were going in New York. They were going to his mother's. I said, "Of course. Of course. We'll have to talk," and when I hung up I looked around me. It was Friday. A bubble window was framed into one wall. It was a skylight salvaged from a junkyard. On the moving trip here, I had asked Celeste what she wanted her room to look like. She pointed at a van passing on the highway, customized so its window fit as the centerpiece of a sunset, and she said, "One of those, but bigger." "You can consider that done," I told her.

In her room I looked under her bed and saw her tennis racket. On her desk were a jar of pencils, a binder with schoolbooks stacked neatly on top. The only hint of clutter was an open blue barrette, which I took. Then I had to sit down. Behind me, in my periphery, was an object rising.

My home, is what I was thinking. I don't know why. Through the bubble I saw my truck. When we moved here I extended the kitchen -- a large picture window above

the sink. I ripped out the carpeting, the crimped sheetrock. The floors were sanded and lacquered to flat water. But the first order had been her window. I did that in a day, working in a fury, dawn to dusk, before I had found work of my own. And for three years, I drove in each evening, took the power tools into the garage with the bubble hanging above off the clapboards like an eye.

That rising sensation lingered in my truck. I followed the woman's directions to the outskirts of town, the barrette stuck in my knuckles, my hand on the steering wheel, and I kept turning to look over my shoulder. It was snowing lightly and streets and houses were odd in the beaten light. I said things to myself, like, "You kids. Jesus. Jesus, Jesus, Jesus." But what were those words? They were for my benefit.

Celeste's hair, the burgundy coils of her mother, she always kept up. She hated her hair. And this boy Rafael would sneak a glance at me and reach behind her in a motion, unclip the pin, and out it would shoot in a mess. I liked him. He was literally beautiful, with light brown skin and blue eyes. I liked him, however, out of simple ego: he was interested in me, he listened when I talked, while later from Celeste's room I heard her insults. "The Hammer Man", "Steady Teddy." Clumsy, young words that sting mostly because they are so young. Then other times, alone and in company, when she fixed me with a deadened face and said, "Oh, Ted." Just my name from my daughter. "Jesus, Ted..." "Ted, willya calm down." I was rendered in two.

But we had come here, to New Hampshire. Here, I had made provident decisions. I joined subcontracting crews -- drywall, even roofing -- numbing work and people, until I reached a level of savings and connections and the jobs I wanted fell in place. I hired an apprentice. I let Celeste visit her mother for holidays. A woman who hated me. No, half of it was me. The other half was set in as much as her skin and bones.

Driving my truck, I said, "New York City," like a bewildering curse. I drove over the river and said, "Two kids," in this same way, wanting to be surprised and hurt, but

unable to make it fill entirely out. My face was smiling queerly. Then I laughed. An ugly, braying laugh. "Why run away, you stupid little kids?"

Rafael's parents lived in a subdivision cleared from the woods. Coming in, I recalled the contractor, who had bankrupted as the market dried beneath him. The streets were completed but half ended in mounds of frozen dirt. I found the Fernandez's number, parked and watched a woman, Mrs. Fernandez, come out on the stoop in a parka and a nightgown and wait. I was looking for a frame -- what my stance should be, but too quickly I had reached the house and she was introducing herself. She didn't meet my eyes, and we paused and she said, "Yes, well," and motioned me inside. Animals and babies was the smell. A kitchenette-living room combination, dimly lit, filled with overstuffed furniture. She sat, still in her parka, and explained that her husband would be home soon, that he went to the drugstore to make sure they had bought bus tickets there.

"You're telling me he doesn't know?" I asked.

"Yes, he knows," she said, and tried to smile reassuringly, as if my tone had been frightened instead of angry. An aquarium was beside her, and in the silty blue light, the woman was just turning old. Filling up with a milky heaviness. I calmed down and said I was sure they were fine, and she nodded. "My husband knows they are going to New York. They are going to his mother's."

Then I tried something else. I said, "Sie haben ein schönes Haus." She looked at me, peering. "You're German, am I right?" I asked.

"Oh, yes. Very good. Sehr gut. Danke."

"My family's from Germany. I have relatives there but I can't speak it very well." I heard a rising "awww" sound and saw in one corner a bird cage, a blanket covering most of it. "Is that a parrot?" I asked.

She said, "Please don't disturb it," as if I was, finally, a nuisance, and I was pricked in the chest, the sour air of the house filling me and roiling. The bird called

again, Awww? and the phone rang and I was handed the receiver. Benny, her husband. When I said, "Hello?" he spoke rapidly.

"Ted? They took the three o'clock to New York, just like I thought. They should be coming through Hartford about now. I talked to the guy who sold them the tickets. This guy -- they don't make morons any bigger."

"We should call the police in New York."

"No, that's not necessary."

"I think it is necessary. I think it's more than necessary."

I had tightened my voice, giving it gravity, but Benny didn't stop. "I come from New York. My mother's lives in the Bronx. Right now she's already sitting on the train on her way to Port Authority. Sit tight right there and I'll be over."

The line clicked, and I looked at the phone as if my hand had broken it, then I had to hang it up. Gerte was emptying the dishwasher, a ginger clatter. On the far wall were framed photos arranged around a crucifix. I put myself in front of them with my hands in my pockets. Studio portraits: an old, squat woman with blue hair, turning proudly up to the camera lights. Rafael dazed in a school picture, much younger. Then, also framed, was the snapshot that Celeste kept above her desk. They were at the beach, Celeste sitting behind Rafael, with the skinny boy cradled in her thick legs and arms. Her hair was longer, blowing over part of Rafael's face. "Look at this," I said.

"Yes?" Gerte had turned from the counter, and I realized I'd spoken too loud, and that I couldn't hold onto one mood.

When I'd call Philadelphia and speak with Celeste on holidays, I'd want to make sure she is getting out of the house. I'd ask after her old friends, what they're up to these days, where they go for fun. If Celeste was relaxed, I'd eventually ask for Deborah. We would be brusque at first, and then I'd say, "So how are you, Deb?" or, "It's nice to hear your voice," and either she'd laugh a little tired, and I'd see her clearly, scratching her long neck. I'd see her face. Or she will laugh derisively, cut glass. "OK, I see," I'd say, and

ask for Celeste. Deborah would apologize. She didn't know why she laughed, since nothing was funny, nothing funny at all, and her voice would reach that crack of volume. Her voice was the hardest thing she could use. What filled me wasn't anger or even pity - that she had no outlet now, that I was not there to duck a blow. Even hearing her breathe, that bright hot glint shooting me with the mixture of all that was bad and good.

Then she'd sigh; maybe I'd hear dishes in the sink. She was washing up, her back toward Celeste, who, depending on where she sat at the kitchen table, would be facing the hallway, the bay window, or her mother.

Benny Fernandez walked through the door in a sweat suit with a little blonde boy behind him. He came straight to me, shook my hand with both of his and told me to sit back down as he did the same. "This's my guy, Ingo," he said and ruffled the boy. Benny was trim, much younger looking than his wife, with two wolfish lines running down his cheeks to the corners of his mouth. He looked at me and idly beat a rhythm on the armrests of his chair. "Did you get some supper, Ted?"

"Benny," I begin, "I think I'm being very patient here. I understand your sense of security, but if we are not going to call the police, then I believe we start driving there now. To be safe, that's the best idea. Because, you know, my daughter's never been to New York."

Benny nodded. "I hear you. That's a good idea, Ted. But there's a snowstorm coming in. The weather station says it's big -- not good for driving." He stood up. "Give it an hour. One hour. That's when the bus gets in. You can stay for dinner and my mother will call when she brings them home. She spoils him. That's where they were going in the first place, I know. Rafael's not stupid enough to stay with any of the kids he knows down there. I'd come down on that. Then tomorrow we'll drive down early." And he walked to the bird cage and removed the blanket. A small emerald parrot was on the pole looking at him; it made a soft calling noise. He opened the wire door and it scooted

onto to his fingers. "Hey baby," he said, and lifted it to his face. The parrot nipped his lower lip then rubbed its beak on his chin. "Do you like birds, Ted? Hold up your hand a minute." I did just that. Benny flicked his wrist and with a great commotion the parrot flew to my fingers. Tiny feathers on its neck preened and fell, its eyes dilated, pale tongue out, then it cocked its head and in another burst flew up, hovering, up to Benny's shoulder.

"Ha!" Benny grinned. "She must like guys. She won't fly for Gerte. Right honey?"

Somewhere I was lost in this, hovering too, dumb like a child, and when Gerte asked me if I liked spaghetti, I said to her, Of course. I retracted just as quickly, but Benny stared. An animal disinterest was in him, and he said no, I should stay, and reminded me that his mother will call soon.

"Nevertheless," I said. "Nevertheless, I should be going. You can call me at home."

"She just put the pasta in, Ted. Sit right here."

At the table he made earnest remarks about Rafael, his intelligence, his talents, and Gerte warmed up. "Maybe this trip is Celeste's idea?" she said. "She is stealing our son!" and she winked.

We were all a little warmed up, but here I was about to respond and nothing came out. I raised my hands from my plate. "That's certainly possible," I said.

Ingo was across the table. Each time I smiled he looked shyly into his lap, so I took a quarter from my pocket and held it up, passing my free hand over it and palming the coin. I held out both fists. "Which is it?" I asked. Benny and Gerte paused, chewing and smiling, but as the boy stared at my hands one of his eyes crossed inward, and I was startled. "Hey, look at this," I said, and reached to pick it out of his ear.

"Buddy," Benny said, and pointed to his own eye. Ingo blinked hard. "Looking good," Benny said, and he turned to me. "That's called strabismus. He had an operation

for it a year ago; he was bandaged up for a month, and now here it is back where we started. What work are you in, Ted? Contracting?"

"I do finish work. Restoration, cabinetry. The staircase in the Town Hall is mine."

He asked what else, not what was entailed, just the location, and knit his brow as if picturing the house. Benny was a salesman in a sport's apparel store. "When I was a kid I was making twenty bucks an hour wiping up seats in Madison Square Garden. Here I get nine-fifty an hour. This place -- 'Live Free or Die.'"

"The Granite State," I said.

No crime," Gerte said. , "No garbage everywhere. Always the noise." She smiled at me briefly, cutting her spaghetti.

"That's right, honey," Benny said. "Ted, you ever been to New York? Yeah? Smell the subways. Whoosh! Hot breath from Heaven. I love coming down those stairs. Best smell in the world. Right Ing?"

Ingo said, "Right!"

"Right it is," I told Benny. "I grew up in South Philly. I took my ex-wife out to my neighborhood and she wondered how she ever married me, or how I ever got out, for that matter. But we used to drive up to the city sometimes, up to her parents in Connecticut. I remember coming up through Harlem and then crossing into the Bronx, how everything started to break up and spread out with the lots and fields. I thought it was nice, pretty. It was my favorite part. But my wife would joke about it, She'd point at some space and say, 'This is where we'll have our picnics,' or, 'This is where we'll have our summer home.' She couldn't see the attraction."

The city would filter into the yellow marshland, where once there were woods. On these rides Deborah tied one of her crepe scarves around her head, 50's style, her hair would frizz and stick from underneath like bits of wire. I'd come home from work she'd grab me, stick her nose into my armpit, "Oh, your smell! Don't you shower!" Or

suitcases were lined up across the floor and she sat waiting with Celeste, both of them wearing bows on their heads like cartoons. A joke -- both in matching dresses. Deborah biting her chapped lip and one leg vibrating on it's own.

I spoke up again. "I just want to say that I truly appreciate your hospitality. All this stuff gave me a scare. But I have a feeling everything will turn out fine." Gerte smiled politely, but had obviously grown uncomfortable in my silence. Benny fixed on me absently with his dark eyes. He leaned back, staring and nodding as he chewed, as if we'd reached an understanding. We hadn't, we were only finishing the meal.

By coffee Benny's mother had not called. As Gerte cleared the plates, Benny came behind me and held my shoulder. "Ted, could I show you something?" I followed him into a hall behind the kitchen and into the garage.

It was no longer a garage; the room had been sloppily converted. Batts of fiberglass insulation were strapped over the garage door and walls, with moisture wrap taped over. The room was balmy, warmer than the rest of the house. A ratty couch, a heavybag suspended from a ceiling beam, and another bird cage, much larger than the first, homemade from chickenwire and attached to the wall. A square at the top of the garage door had been left uncovered and opened to a window, and through it I could see the heavy snow fall under the street lamp. Benny sat on the couch and motioned me down. "These are cockatoos, from Australia. They're endangered." Two small white birds were huddled together inside.

We sat together. "Your ex-wife's alive?" Benny asked.

I nodded. "Yes."

"Could you tell me how you got custody, if you don't mind?"

"I don't mind," I said, and raised my hands at my answer. "It's the ruling that came down. I got lucky. My wife, my ex-wife, had a few more strikes, a boyfriend. So *she* was getting lucky, you see." I laughed and then began saying things about this man, that

he was my friend. Not my friend but an acquaintance, that he was a rich man, and a few other lies until it all passed. My wife never had had a boyfriend. But Benny nodded.

"That's a tough one. Life. I ask Gerte for a divorce every once in awhile, and she says, 'No honey, can't do it.' After I got out of the army we got back from Germany with the baby. We're staying with my mom and Gerte looks around and says, 'No honey, can't do this.' We came up here I think just because she saw it in a magazine. I said, 'OK honey.' I don't mind." He shrugged, then he rolled up one leg of his sweatpants. "Look at this." On his calf muscle were two pale crescents that twisted into themselves. "I got shot when I was sixteen. And one here." He tapped his hip. "I was in a gang. You start living through that stuff and you figure you're here for a reason; you start to keep your head down."

He stood, reached up and from one of the ceiling beams came back with a cigarette pack. He shook two loose and I took one. I hadn't smoked in years, but his movements were so unconscious that I was carried along. He lit his, then mine, and blew a line of smoke. "In the army I was crazier. You could get any drug you wanted over there. We'd go run around the woods, seeing elves. One time my buddies and I drove up camping in the Black Forest. We'd just drive off the road and see how far we'd get -- a lot more space between those trees over there -- and we'd camp. And one time we go off the road, and my buddy driving, Dennis Phelps, starts laughing and speeding up. Then Smack! We hit the biggest God-damn tree in the forest. I was in the cab and Pop! Over the roll bar. I flipped and hit another tree. Then it was quiet like nothing had happened. I was looking up the trunk of the tree, and you know I could see those guys on the hood, mashed up. I could see myself in a ball by this tree, one leg was leaning up on it and my arm was all wrong, inside out. I could see everything from the tops of the trees. They looked like pieces of candy with the snow on the branches."

Benny stopped and took another slow puff, and I had slid somewhere in my mind. I peered at him, trying to picture what was there. A whiteness. First a snow plain, or a

desert. Then nothing between the ground and sky. A sound like a roar. I wanted to say, *Tell me*, as if to hear it fully. Benny was smoking, looking forward. "You wonder," I said. "You wonder who is making these decisions or who is after you. It comes on like a train -- out of somewhere -- like an animal." I turned to him but he exhaled another line and didn't seem to listen, and I had made no sense. The words doubled into my head. "That's quite a story," I said.

He shrugged. "I woke up in the hospital and Gerte's with me. I somehow pull an honorable discharge. But my arm's such a mess that I got to use my left hand. Take a look at this." He pulled up his sleeve and his forearm was like a whittled piece of wood, full of connected scars. "The hardest thing to do was wiping myself on the toilet. You want to have some fun, try that sometime. Later Gerte tells me she's pregnant." Benny stood up. "And I say, 'OK.' We get married."

He walked to the corner and dropped the cigarette into a garbage can, then he gestured suddenly, swinging back. "It's stuff like this," he began, but he shrugged again. He pushed the heavybag with his fingers. "You know what I'm saying here?"

I waited without a response. He stood looking down at me, then turned to the birdcage and tapped the chickenwire. He whistled. "Citos, say a little something." The birds bobbed together and shuffled away across the pole. "These are from Australia. Cockatoos. They're illegal in this country."

Gerte shouted from the house and came to the doorway, Ingo on her hip, her eyes were shining. "Benny they're OK! Your mother's on the phone. Oh Benny, good news." She touched my arm sweetly. "Good news, Ted."

Benny spoke rapid Spanish with his mother. I waited next to him in the kitchen, leaning then pushing off the counter. I mouthed the question, *Is Celeste there?* and kept turning to Gerte and Ingo on the couch. The boy was sprawled in a star shape over her lap and

she held his middle tightly, whispering in his ear. Benny cupped the receiver. "Ted, everything's A-OK. I got your daughter right here."

"Hi Dad," Celeste said. A little drawn, sweetness and guilt. What had I expected?

"Celeste," I said. "Well. Quite a time, isn't it."

"What?" she asked. When I said nothing she went on. "Dad, it wasn't a *plan* or anything. OK? It was just spur-of-the-moment." She paused again. "So I'm real sorry. I really am."

"We'll have to talk," I said. "Well. I love you and I'll see you tomorrow."

She paused and then said, "OK," and I heard her sniff. A muffled sound and the grandmother came on, talking in a crickety accent about my daughter's good looks, the silliness of children, then she asked for Benny. When Benny hung up I clapped my hands. "All settled!" I said. I put my hands on my hips then threw them out in the air. "It was nice meeting you. Good night! But I'll see you tomorrow. First thing tomorrow."

Benny shook his head. He led me to the door. The snow had covered everything; the curbs, the pile of dirt across the street, all gentle grades. No matter. I laughed and said my truck could take this. I walked out and started it up, and saw that Benny had followed. He stood by my window frowning and shivering. "Man, Ted, the roads," he said. Gerte and Ingo waited on the stoop, and I sat smiling at them, then finally killed the ignition. I would stay in the garage. Benny and I unfolded the couch into a bed while Gerte brought a stack of blankets.

I lay awake. My daughter, like me, would wake up tomorrow and for a few moments not know where she was. The electric heater hummed and gave a ruby cast to the blankets and the walls. After some time, the Cockatoos began making noise, chirping off and on as if it might have been morning.

There was a workbench in the room, and on it I found a roll of duct tape and began repairing the moisture wrap that had fallen away from the insulation. I used my pocketknife to cut the tape, to avoid the noise of tearing it.

When Celeste visited her mother, I thought of the house. My worry was never of abuse. I'd think of a smell that might appear in a room in certain weather, about the angle of light through a window, how a door creaks, the tone of her mother's voice from upstairs. Celeste would return here tired each time. When I finally would ask about her mother, how she looked, was she happy, Celeste might peer at me for a moment, as if with pity or even anger. Sometimes a knitted, fearful confusion. I'd ask again, believing that my daughter was misunderstanding me. *Just tell me how she seems.* And Celeste would give me a brief, acerbic answer, or she might throw her hands up and stay silent.

My wife Deborah studied French in college and now teaches it in a high school. She'd speak sentences to me to be romantic; they glided out of her. Later she'd give speeches. They came out in webs until I saw where it was headed and left the room. On my left palm are four white dots, the tines of a fork. She stuck it there, a perfect angle from my raised hand, and that stopped us. Deborah studied it, then made a hanging face of surprise, and I had to grin back. In certain moods she flung one or two things, a burst and it was over. But she was capable of storing much up, of driving Celeste to school, coming back into the house, taking a chair from the table and just as I turned and ducked, cracking its legs across me.

I knew full well what I could do. I could've broken her in half. But the confusion then! You would wonder such odd things: where do girls learn this way to fight, clawing and treacherous. Where are the rules that boys must learn. Why is she smiling. Why are you? As you hold her weightless off the floor. Or in a ball with your hands covering your neck as she yells and swings a broom. You are waiting for this to burn away. But you're smiling.

She began to kick me in the middle of the night. I'd wake up in the spasm, my head suddenly filled with light, and she'd be facing away and cursing. I'd hug her and say, "Wake up," although she wasn't asleep. I'd touch her red gown. I'd touch her back,

her skin was always warm and dry. *Tell me*, I'd say. But I would be sent further out in the dark room. I would stand in the corner and watch us both lie waiting together.

The Strangest Thing, Ever

1

Later the woman would collapse and Monroe would take her home, and there he'd sit down and begin thinking of the events that had slipped together. But at the party all he saw was trust in his powers. Monroe was fixing a drink for the woman, making offhand jokes that she kept laughing at. A slow song began and she looked at him darkly, offered her hand and then led him quickly out of the kitchen. He was twenty-six, his limitations and worth were defined, he felt, adult, and when they joined up in the center of the living room he was at ease with it all. The host of the party was Sigurd Loftsson, from Iceland. The woman's name was Carla. Monroe learned she worked as a secretary in special collections at the University library, where on the same day of the party she had met Sig and been invited. Sig studied geochemistry and was round faced, pink, coming up to strangers, staring at them a moment, and then saying, "Hello!" Monroe imagined his warbling lines with Carla, but here she was with her hand curled in his. She was overdressed in a silky suit, yet her hair was shaggy and loose with hints of purple colors. She asked him what he studied. When he told her she nodded and repeated, "Physics," almost wistfully.

"High temperature superconductors is my specialty," Monroe said.

She angled one shoulder away and Monroe saw that she wanted to be spun. Then she came back to him. "*There*. God it's great to dance with someone tall," she said. Her voice was deep but also cheerful. "I'm from LA. Where are you from? Are you from Oregon?"

"Texas."

"'Texshesh.' You have a nice accent."

"Yes ma'am."

But he wasn't from Texas. He had gone to college in Houston and afterwards had stayed another year and a half working in a genetics lab, so he felt fine saying it. He was

raised in Washington, so Oregon, where they were dancing, was nearly home. Monroe spun her again and this time, with a more forceful tug back, her hair lifted out of her face and light hit her directly, and he saw she the type of person whose features could suddenly be unattractive. She had painted on her eyebrows and had a small, birdlike mouth. Her cheeks, fully revealed, ballooned like like a baby's. Sometime later, Monroe stood alone by the stereo and saw her across the room looking at him. He raised his glass and she cocked her head and smiled. You look like a chicken, he thought. Just then, still smiling, she dropped to the floor like a sack. When Monroe reached her, she was being helped to her feet but was also struggling against the people. "OK OK OK," she said. "I'm fine. It's my leg."

Monroe asked quickly, "What happened to your leg? Did it fall asleep?"

She stared suddenly, a wild-eyed, stricken look, then turned away. Her mouth crook'd and he saw the tiny row of bottom teeth.

"Are you crying?" he asked. A faint warmth had come over him. He was smiling. But she covered her face and walked down the hall, walking in a stiff lope, until she reached the bathroom. The door was locked and Monroe came up behind her. "Do you have a car? Do you need a ride home?"

"No. Someone, Sig, gave me a ride here. I didn't know how to get here."

She looked at him, her mascara and one eyebrow were smudged, but when she tried to smile Monroe was even more strangely overtaken, and he drove her home.

Carla composed herself in the car, taking hard, regular sniffs, but then began to talk again, continuously, and Monroe saw how drunk she was. She had been in a car accident last spring, another driver hit her. Two months in traction and three months in physical therapy. Then she took the money from the insurance settlement and moved to Oregon. "I'm trying to meet nice people. I went to Eugene first. I have friends there. But it was still too LA, crazy, and I moved to Corvallis and I think I'm doing pretty well. I like my job. You seem nice, smart." The man who hit her had died immediately. He was drunk, ran a light and wore no seatbelt, and now his wife sent Carla letters.

"Letters?" asked Monroe.

"A letter, anyway. Isn't that strange? Park over here."

Monroe turned the car off and asked, "What did she say to you?" But Carla didn't seem to hear. She looked at the windshield. "Rain, rain, rain," she said.

"It's incessant."

"Incessant," she sighed. "That's nice. What's that mean?"

He turned to her, but she was serious. "Ceaseless," he said. "It goes on forever."

"Do you know who Linus Pauling is?"

Monroe almost laughed, but she went on, "I touched his Nobel Prize today. These hands." She held up her hands and looked at them. "I had to wear special white gloves."

Monroe was about to ask which Nobel Prize, but Carla came forward all at once, looking at his mouth. She overtook his vision and kissed him, then kissed him again with a sudden and surprisingly long tongue.

Much later he sat in her living room and heard her snoring. Small gusts. She was asleep in her bedroom. Monroe was naked and had the wife's letter in his hands. "Ms. Carla Vuckovic" was typed on the envelope, the address forwarded from Eugene. In his sleeplessness, the letter appeared and reappeared each time he looked toward it. He sat on the floor with his back to the window and used the outside streetlight to read it.

Dear Ms. Vuckovic,

How to begin? You must remember me (how could you forget, really, after my behavior). This letter is to apologize. But first introductions, since we were never properly introduced. I am Alice Fox, wife of Gerry Fox. I'm the woman who demanded you get out of your wheelchair and then quite nearly attacked you in the settlement hearing, and then was led away by her lawyer, a complete mess, bawling. I am sorry for this. My one excuse is that day I was not chemically sound. I was taking sedatives then, trying to sleep all the time. And that day I had lunch with my lawyer, and cocktails, and Whammo, decided to make an appearance at the hearing.

So I apologize. You might think this strange. Do you?

I'm not from LA. Gerry and I had just moved from North Carolina. He had finished his law degree and got work with NBC. I'm from Georgia, originally, from a tiny town in the southeast, the coastal plain. I doubt you've heard of it. But I like LA. We have a little house in North Hollywood, near the sign! I went to Georgia a few months ago thinking I'd move back, but I missed this place.

All this is perfectly bizarre, I know. And maybe I'm still not in my right mind. But I wonder about you. I remember the hearing so clearly, because I planned to make it known who was guilty here. But you were looking at me. I think you were afraid, but

also afraid for me. You, all immobile in all those casts and braces. So some piece snapped in me, etc. etc.

The second part of this letter is a confession. How did this fanatico get your address? I've had your number for a long time, from the paperwork, and last week I picked up the phone. I hadn't been out of bed yet, it was Saturday late in the morning and I don't think I had showered in three or four days. But I woke up thinking I have to apologize, and a woman answered -- Libby, your old roommate? Libby told me you had moved out of state, to Oregon, and I don't know what happened but I put on my Georgia accent and told her that I was your aunt. (The woman, you're thinking, is insane.) Here I was your southern aunt asking after her niece, whom she hadn't seen in years. Libby had no problem believing me. (Do I sound that old?) To tell the truth, Libby was not all that polite, and I take it you two aren't on the best of terms, because she was a bit gruff about news from you. And she sounded so sick, coughing and coughing. But she gave me your address, and she told me that if I talked to you, that Tyler wanted his "kit" back. But I was sweet as can be and asked, "Well what is our Carla doing with herself in Oregon?" And Libby said, "Jesus lady, I don't know." (Lady! Can you believe it?) She then said you might be starting another band. I said, so excited, "Oh I didn't know Carla played a musical instrument." And Libby told me you played the drums. Drums! I was truly excited -- very queer -- and I kept pressing her like a mother hen. She gave me the name of your previous band here in LA, and the name of your album, no less. And right after the phone call I took a shower and drove right to the nearest record store. "Bulb", I hope I got the name right. The salesman said they didn't have it in stock, but he could special order it, so that's what I did. And I drove to three more stores and did the same. Your special order aunt.

I just had a cup of tea and have looked this over. I see I've been close to raving.

Another break (break-down). I wasn't sure if I should send this but I think I will. I can become afraid all of a sudden. It's so giant all of a sudden, you're shocked that you can have something that size within you. But I do feel better. I hope you write me to but will understand if you don't. Do you like Oregon? I've never been beyond San Francisco. I hope you like it there.

Yours, Alice Fox

Not so strange at all, he thought. There was a completeness to the letter, like a world. Or worlds -- it pulled a balancing trick. Light, trembling, but together all consolation. It was typed on a manual, with an XXX through mistakes. He had taken it from Carla's desk. After having sex, his body had hummed awake for what seemed like hours, so eventually he had gotten up, taken his glasses from the desktop, opened the drawer and simply picked out the letter. One motion after the other, that was how he remembered. Had he even been awake? Sitting in the living room, he reviewed what had happened -- the strong, sweet smelling string that had pulled him along.

In bed they had moved on each other with constant grabbing and knocking around. He couldn't help a boyish amazement at the expanse of her and liked how this big newness was always a part of it. Afterwards, however, when they lay together, Monroe saw a small dented scoop in her abdomen. It looked as if she were poked with an invisible finger, and he pointed at it. Carla said, "That's from the stick shift. Can you believe that? The knob came off and it almost hit my liver." She sat up in bed, flexed both thigh muscles, then slapped the left, and Monroe saw it was oddly thinned, missing the right thigh's heft. She explained that the femur had been broken, and in the cast the leg had muscle had atrophied and never fully grown back. Both knees had been driven into the dash. They had puckered scars, and on her left shin was a long, waxy mark where the bone had snapped through. On each side of it were three pink dots where pins had been set. Finally there were thin, wandering scars along her hairline. She bent forward to show him. He lifted her hair, gently and unconsciously, and saw that they continued in little flecks over her scalp. She jerked back and he realized he might have looked too long. "It's just from glass. I didn't have brain surgery or anything. Why are you so quiet?"

Monroe shrugged.

"Why are you smiling? You could say something."

"I dislocated my shoulder once. But I was a little kid on my uncle's farm. My uncle said all kids are required to hurt themselves on farms." Carla seemed to be waiting and he threw up his hands. "That's all I was thinking!" he said.

"OK, fine. Be weird. I've had enough with weirdoes."

"Do you have that letter?" he asked. Carla kept the same, peering expression, and Monroe wondered what *he* meant. "From the woman," he said. "The wife."

Carla brightened and swung off the bed to her desk, where from a drawer she took out an envelope. She sat naked at the desk and turned it over in her hands. "You know, she's my age."

Monroe held out his hand. "Let's have a look."

"Oh," she said, surprised, but she reached toward him with it, and he reached also, then she dropped back, still holding it. "Actually, I don't think so. Why don't we go to sleep." And she put it back in the drawer.

Alone in the living room Monroe stood up and began examining the various objects on the table and walls. From the outside streetlight the room had a moony cast, and on one wall was a group of snapshots tacked up: Carla, with a shock of bleached hair, and others, all wearing leather jackets and standing in a desert. When she had come, she had licked the pads of her fingers and rubbed herself furiously, putting her other hand into Monroe's mouth. He was underneath, and she gripped him there like a handle with her fingers under his tongue and her thumb pushed into the underside of his chin. Her self-consciousness was nearly covered by the gusto with which she went at him, but it was there, banging blindly in the gusto, a small, frightened urgency. He considered it now as if he held it cupped carefully in his hand.

He lay down and stretched out flat. In the kitchen of his own house he did this when he couldn't sleep; it gave him a feeling of solidity. He had stopped thinking of Carla, he was growing drowsy and remembered how he had always acted like this. Monroe's parents were an older couple, nearly old enough to be his grandparents. They raised him in a caring but awkward way, as if he never stopped being a surprise, and when he began to recognize this it became almost suppliant. Hal, his father, would take him on trips from Seattle to eastern Washington, where Hal's older brother lived on a farm with his large family. The place was always full of bustle, so Monroe liked to come down from his room at night and sit in the quiet, blue light.

In the morning he was covered by a blanket. Once he saw this, and saw that he was still on the floor, he realized he had never put the letter away. The shower was running and he sat up and saw the envelope alone, flat on the coffee table. The shower stopped, shuddering, and he hid the envelope under the blanket, tucked his hands behind his head and waited. When Carla came out in a robe she looked down at him a little sadly and said nothing. Her white face, with faint whips of eyebrows, was even larger without makeup. Monroe said good morning, but it sounded incredibly unnatural.

"I brought out your clothes," she said, and motioned to the pile on the couch. Monroe thanked her and reached for his underwear and slipped it on under the blanket. He stood up, gathering up the blanket at the same time with the letter inside. Carla still stood there watching him, and this made him dizzy, hopeless, and then suddenly angry.

"You have a nice body," she said.

"What?" He put on his pants. "Well. Great, you do too."

"I need to exercise more." With that she went into her kitchen, and Monroe, stunted, went to the bedroom to slip the letter back in the desk and find his watch. When he returned Carla sat at the kitchen table and was bobbing a tea bag in her cup. "How old are you?" she asked.

"Twenty-six."

"I guessed about right. I'm thirty. Look, I don't want you to worry about anything because we know this won't happen again, but I'm going to give you my phone number. Could you leave your phone number? I know we're not going to run off together and that's OK. But it would be nice to talk to you again. Maybe just get a drink. Do you think so?"

"Of course," said Monroe. He wrote down the numbers for his home and the lab, he kissed her, hitting part of her mouth and big cheek, and got up from the table to leave.

He had given her his correct numbers, and he drove a block away before considering this. "I was being honest!" he told himself. He saw the day was sunny, and he began to number his reasons for reading the letter. One, he was curious and perhaps wanted to draw some context of her life into his. Which would mean he saw her as an object? He did like her -- something big and uncomplicated *in* her. It shone in her voice. "I wanted to read it," he said out loud, and here he admitted to the simple, childish lurch behind what had happened. A petty act.

People were walking in the town, families. The small pleasantness of the community could either reassure or cut into him with claustrophobia, but now he seemed too aware to make any judgment. He heard the tires' friction on the bright, wet road and crossed over the Willamette River. Within a few miles the road would change into the old highway and begin passing through the farmland in the valley. A habit of Monroe's

was to occasionally not turn onto his street but to keep driving. Once he did this with a professor visiting from the East. It had been early wintertime, as it was now, and the old man wanted to see more of the scenery. He couldn't believe how green the grass still was even though the trees were completely bare, and he kept pointing at the contrast, at the trees along the boundaries of the farms. Monroe saw it too, for the first time, as if he blinked and someone had colored in the ground.

But he turned into his street and got down to work in his kitchen. He lived in one of six bungalows built in a row, which thirty years earlier were cheap tourist cabins. Towards evening, he looked from a student exam he had been grading and said, "If I see her again, I will tell her about the letter." He even began a speech to Carla, and as he explained his actions he felt a rising in his throat and let his voice catch. For a moment the emotion filled him, then he said, "Liar," tiredly, and went back to work.

2

Monroe's main area of study involved mapping the critical regimes where superconductors survived and where they broke down. He tested the samples in a cryogenic Dewar can bolted to the center of the lab's floor. Through the Dewar, he could control the temperature, the amount of current density flowing through the sample, and most of all, the density of the magnetic field. Under certain fields, vortices would form. Tiny magnetic tornadoes which pierced through the sample, through the magically vibrating electrons, and whipped away all conductivity.

Monroe had chosen vortices as his thesis. The future in the field was open and promising, but when he had made the decision, it was more a matter of liking the company of those in the lab. His partner was a Ukrainian named Vitaly, a soft-spoken but high-strung man. Vitaly intimidated some of the faculty because of the seriousness with which he took his science; he could foresee oncoming problems days in advance, and if something impossible was given to him, his thin face would slacken for a moment, then out would pop a solution. Vitaly and his wife, Agatha, invited Monroe to dinner every few weeks, thick, potatoey meals, and afterward he read with their daughter. She was in second grade and they wanted her to have perfect English.

On Sunday, the morning after he had returned home, Monroe came into the lab and found Vitaly there still wearing his overcoat and cap. He was kneeling by the Dewar can, squirting helium out of a wand, checking for leaks along the tubes of monitor wire that entered the casing at the base. Monroe had set up this particular sample on his own, so he watched Vitaly anxiously, although he pretended to read department mail.

Vitaly switched off the gas and stood up. "Some leaks in the jackets," he sighed. "Not your fault. These shit old equipment gets loose." He tapped the metal case with the wand. "Bad plumbing."

They went to work disassembling the Dewar, and Monroe was checking wire connections through the computer when the phone rang. It was Carla. "It's Sunday! What are you doing studying?" Her voice, so loud, sent a flush through his body.

"Hey, do you know who this is?"

"How are you?" asked Monroe.

"What's my name?"

"Carla Vucovic. C-A-R-L-A."

"Guess what I just bought?"

"A car," Monroe said, then he remembered and winced.

"I got a car. I bought some hiking boots. Would you like to go on a hike today? It's so nice out. Do you have important things to do?"

"A hike," Monroe said, and saw that from across the room Vitaly was smiling brightly at him. Vitaly waved his wrench in a shooing gesture and mouthed, "Go, go," so Monroe agreed. She'd pick him up and he gave her directions to the building. When he hung up Vitaly teased him, "Hiking? When will you bring her for dinner? Carla. Carlotta. Very pretty. Vuckovic is a Serbian name."

Standing outside at the entrance of the building, Monroe made another pact that he would tell her about the letter and grew agitated as he imagined this. Then there she was, walking across the parking lot, swaying as she went. She was smiling and cocked her head, her black eyes little buttons, and Monroe felt a boom of confidence. My little chicken, he thought. Drums! Carla hugged him. She was neatly dressed again, in an oversized sweater and black tights, the new boots. She wanted to see the lab, but Monroe

shook his head calmly, explaining his partner couldn't be disturbed. "It looks like a pile of old stereos. I can tell you there's not much there of interest."

"Well, someday. I'm curious."

Her car was new. She unlocked the doors from a button on her keychain and inside it smelled of the factory. They drove west outside of town into the brief bit of farmland before the foothills. "Look, 'Llama farm.'" Carla pointed at a sign. "Look at these hills!" She hunched suddenly at the wheel, and then, seeing Monroe chuckle, she sat back shyly. The hills were lit in the sun and rolled down with little pooled meadows among the fir trees.

Monroe quipped, "They're arboreous," before he could help it.

"Exactly," said Carla.

The trailhead was a chain across the road where the pavement switched to dirt. They parked and began walking upwards into the forest, and soon the road was covered above by a quiet web of branches. Here Monroe turned serious and began gathering himself. Since she must have seen the letter that morning he would go directly to an apology. The sentence pressed on the tip of his chest, he opened his mouth, but it came out only as an empty bubble of breath. Carla pointed down into a gully running alongside the road in which water ran down in stepped ponds. "Beavers," she said. Monroe saw the hourglass shapes on the trees. "And look at that moss." She pointed at the certain trees that were covered by the green moss. "They look frozen there, don't they? Like they're held in a magic spell."

"Persephone," Monroe said glumly, mostly to himself.

They walked further up. Carla asked what Texas was like and Monroe answered, "Dry. The people are nice though." Although even this couldn't be further from his experience. He hadn't liked it there, he had grown sick of the fanatic pride of Texans, and he had been hounded by a disturbed man who had been evicted from the apartment Monroe had moved into. Once, while Monroe's parents were visiting, the man climbed the back fence and shat in his small patio. Luckily, Monroe had taken his parents out for dinner. When they returned and found the angry pile, his father Hal helped hose off the brick while his mother Brigid packed her suitcase and booked a hotel room. Three

months later Monroe left for good. He had been accepted into top programs all over the country. But he came back to the Northwest, drawn up into an old pair of withered arms.

"Carla," he said, "I feel I haven't been very truthful."

Carla stopped and looked at him. She sucked her small lips into her mouth, and Monroe couldn't tell if this was a smile or a frown. "I read that letter. From the wife. I took it out of your desk and read it while you were asleep. And I fell asleep after reading the letter. That's why I was in your living room, and that's why the letter was there. You must have seen it sitting right there."

Carla hadn't changed her expression. "I didn't see anything," she said.

Monroe waited, and felt his gaze slip sideways out of hers, like a drug. "Well, I put it back. I read it, that's all. It was a very childish thing to do. It wasn't very honest, but I'm not a dishonest person."

"I don't think you're dishonest."

"Good, good," Monroe said, then fell silent.

"It's just a letter."

"You're right."

"Maybe we should walk back down."

In a few minutes they reached the car quietly and got in. While driving, she looked ahead, peering. "Do you like me?" she asked

"Sure, of course."

"Maybe then you were trying to get to know me. Maybe you thought the letter would help you get to know me. You were interested in who I was. Does that make sense to you?" Her voice knocked out of her, but with sudden hopefulness.

"Yes," Monroe said, "it seems to."

She invited him to her apartment to talk. Monroe accepted, and at her apartment she put a CD into her stereo and brought him the case. Monroe took it carefully, like an offering. On the cover of the case was a cartoon of fighting schoolgirls and what looked like Japanese lettering. The first song came on with a crush of feedback which kept skipping, until Monroe realized this was on purpose. On the back of the case was a black and white photo of the band standing at a trashy urban street corner, and there was Carla.

She leaned against a lamppost and looked past the camera coolly. Her hair was lighter, maybe red. She was a good bit heavier and wore a t-shirt that didn't reach her pants.

Below the picture Monroe read, "Drums: Vuke."

"Vuke," he said, smiling.

"That's me."

Just then there was a fast roll of drums and the song seemed to kick into a wobbly sort of direction. "There's Vuke," said Monroe.

"There I am." They sat together on the couch and listened. The music and the lyrics were mostly incoherent to him. But he would occasionally look over to her and smile, as she did the same. "All my equipment is still stuck in Eugene," Carla said.

"Music is very important to me, some people don't understand what music can mean."

She sat forward and turned to him. "You like me?"

He nodded and she kissed him, and Monroe kissed back, but soon her tongue shot out into his mouth like a hard bird, and he put one hand under her sweater and across her bare back, then down passing the elastic hem of her tights and underwear. Carla reached for his hand and said lowly, "I don't think so. That's not going to happen." He made a sly, little boy face, but it did happen soon enough. It led to where he thought it would.

Toward evening Monroe woke up in her bed and realized, happily, that he had fallen asleep. He felt wolfish and saw Carla lying next to him. She was watching him with her head propped in one hand, her other arm resting over her breasts. He stretched and bit her neck. "Vuke, I'm hungry. Anything to eat?" Carla said she would cook something, but she was a vegetarian. "Of course you are," said Monroe.

In the kitchen Carla was in her robe chopping at the counter. Monroe entered and sat down in his underwear. The kitchen was small and cluttered, but in what he thought a purposefully wholesome way: spice racks, hanging utensils. "Did you ever write back to that woman?" he asked.

"Alice Fox?"

He nodded.

"No," she said, and resumed her chopping.

Monroe waited for any more from her. She slid the vegetables into the wok, and he asked, "You've never considered it?"

"No. Why are you asking me this?"

He shrugged. "Because it would be the polite thing to do."

Carla didn't turn around from the stove. She opened a jar of spices, smelled it, and pinched some in. "She wasn't exactly polite to *me*, Monroe. Did I tell you about the settlement hearing? She screamed at me. She went crazy."

"Which is why she wrote. She's apologizing."

"Fine. Apology accepted." But later, when she sat down to eat, she said, "You know I was stoned too. I could barely see straight when I got hit."

Monroe sat back. He hadn't predicted any of the conversation. When he had come into the kitchen his first question had slipped out of him -- not completely as a surprise, but wherever it had lain waiting was a secret. Once the question was in the air he had felt a part of a flow, and now when Carla continued, asking, "What would I say, anyway? What do you say to someone like that?" he wiped his mouth and spoke plainly, "Tell the truth. Say you were scared by her actions at first and that carried on. But you're thankful for her letter, apology accepted. But tell her how the letter made you feel. Did it not make you feel something? What did you feel?"

"I don't know."

"Yes you do."

"Scared," she sighed. "Weird."

"Yes, but why. Because she was trying to help you. And she also wanted you to help her."

Carla's head tilted and shook it briefly, as if these two sets of information conked inside. "*Excuse me? What?*"

"Helping," Monroe said. "Forgiveness." The words continued out of him. "She's asking you to forgive her, obviously. And she's saying that she forgives you."

But Carla was laughing uncomfortably. "Hey, her husband -- her *drunk* husband -- hit *me*. Remember? I almost got killed, too."

Monroe raised his hands calmly. "Fair enough. I was just thinking outloud." They ate quietly, but soon he felt himself falling back into place and couldn't stop. "You could call her up," he said. "Get the number from information. It's simple. See what kind of person she is."

"Listen," Carla said. She put down her fork and began rubbing her eyes.

"If you like her, you could tell her --"

"I'd like you to leave."

Monroe was about to explain more, but Carla sniffed, and he saw the fat tear form in a crystal and drop down her cheek. He apologized, sat helpless for a moment, and then went to her room to dress. When he returned she was scraping the plates over the garbage. "It's all right," she said flatly. "But I'd like to be alone." Monroe left and began walking to campus, to the science building. In the lab, Vitaly had left the certain components of the Dewar spread neatly across the worktable. They looked shiny as gifts; it was obvious that he had examined and cleaned each piece. Monroe clicked off the light and drove toward home, drove onto his road, to his house, where he called Carla's number, which was busy. After a hour he called again and got her machine. "I want to apologize again," he said in a drone. "Not sure what I was thinking. I thought I was being helpful and understand if you're not interested in seeing me again." The episode had ended, he decided, and he finished grading student exams and then went to sleep, eventually lying down on his kitchen floor.

There, he pictured again the farm in eastern Washington. It was an original homestead. Norman, Hal's older brother, had stayed on while Hal had gone to college and later worked as an aeronautical engineer for Boeing. Brigid, Monroe's mother, didn't accompany Hal and Monroe on the trips they made. She considered Norman and his family to be crude and their house unlivable. But Hal thought it important that as a child Monroe spend time there, however rustic it was. And there was a business side to the visits, for Hal was considering buying back a percentage of the land, which Norman would continue to farm. The farm granted Monroe a certain freedom -- dusty, rolling, blown open land, with machines as big as houses. This was still a time when he was fastidious about his appearance and would sometimes change clothes twice a day. He

worked out a system of quick, secret baths by using the sink and a washcloth. His cousins, all at least ten years older, regarded Monroe with humor and some curiosity, but mostly let him alone when he quietly followed them about the house and property. Norman didn't have this deference. He was a short, compact man, like Hal, but Norman's features lacked Hal's softness. They were smaller and pulled more deeply into the center of his face. With brief insistence, he put Monroe to work whenever he found him idle, Hal smiling a little painfully at this.

One morning, Hal and Norman planned to survey a neighbor's property, and Norman motioned Monroe into the truck. They drove off and within a few miles stalled. Hal and Norman got out and began tinkering with the engine, then Norman yelled, "You turn her over!" to Monroe, who sat in the cab, but Monroe didn't move. Monroe was eight, he heard him calling, louder and louder, and he heard Hal's voice, "Would you turn the key, Monroe?" Then Norman came around from the hood and opened the door. "Out," he said, and when Monroe sat, looking at him transfixed, Norman took his arm and pulled him out of the truck, for a moment dangling him off the ground, already reaching with his other hand for the key. Monroe heard a slick, wet pop inside his shoulder, screamed and fainted. After the incident, Brigid forbade Hal to bring him, and Hal's own visits became less and less frequent. Monroe last remembered Norman waiting with them for a doctor in the emergency room. He sat across from them, rubbing his neck, with his eyes resigned on a spot a few feet above their heads. In two years he would die of a heart attack, found slumped in the tractor seat, his wife and children would divvy up and sell the farm. But in the waiting area as he stared above them, he was for the first time almost serene.

3

On Monday Monroe and Vitaly began rewiring a new sample into the Dewar. Tuesday this continued. In the evening when they came out of the building, they would blink and smile dumbly at each other; both surprised to find people walking forward and making shimmery noise nearby. Vitaly once had asked after Carla, but Monroe pretended confusion, then said, "Oh!" as if he remembering, and waved the question away. He

thought of the experience as a distant little land which he had stepped briefly into. On Wednesday, however, Monroe came back to the lab from buying lunch at the student union, and there was Carla, stubbing a cigarette out on his desk, and Vitaly was also smoking. Monroe stood in the doorway, rain on his glasses, with the warm bags of food cradled against his chest.

"Here is Monroe!" said Vitaly, and stubbed out his cigarette too.

"There's no smoking in here," was all Monroe could say.

"Ah, it's OK," Vitaly said. "She's had a hard day."

Carla waved at him, a small, baby's wave. "How are you?" she asked.

"Carla told me about the woman. This is a very interesting story," Vitaly said. He spoke excitedly and began nodding.

"I called her," Carla said. "After you left. I called her and talked to her that night."

"Really." Monroe set the food on the worktable and took off his glasses to clean. She was wearing another sleek, incongruous suit, lavender colored, and was absently touching things on his desk. He wondered how she had ever gotten here, and how he would get her out.

"You were right, she was nice. At first she was really nervous, and I was too, but we talked for awhile. She asked me all of these questions about what I was doing. I mentioned you."

"Hm. That's fine."

"There is more!" Vitaly said.

Carla nodded. "Right. She called me today at the library. She got *my* number there. Can you believe that? I must've told her where I worked. And she wants to visit me. She said she had been planning a trip to Mendocino; she was going to fly into San Francisco, but she said why not keep going North?"

"Why not indeed," Monroe said. Carla's face withdrew a moment, confused by this. Vitaly also looked up, and Monroe gently changed his expression and told her to go on.

Carla had told the woman that it was a little far for just one visit, but the woman had said she wanted to see Oregon. She said she might fly to Portland, or Seattle, and rent a car. At which point Carla became nervous and flustered, and told her she might be out of town, and then hung up and immediately called the lab. Vitaly told her to come over.

"It's very interesting," Vitaly said, nodding.

Monroe sat on one of the benches and leaned forward onto the table. "I'm not sure how I can help you. I think it's your decision." And Carla looked at him questioningly again.

"How long will she stay?" Vitaly asked Carla.

Carla said just for lunch or dinner. "She wants to see me, that's all."

"Do what you think is right," Monroe said.

"I have it." Both of them turned to Vitaly. Monroe saw his face slip from soft and open-mouthed to a bony grin, and he knew Vitaly did have the solution. Monroe, he said, could meet the woman. Carla would call her and say the three of them would meet for dinner at a restaurant. But on that night Monroe would come first, explain that Carla would be late, due to her job. Monroe would talk the woman, consider her motives and character, and then excuse himself briefly and phone Carla with his conclusions. Carla then would decide if she wanted to meet or not. If so, she would come and Monroe would be there. If not, Monroe could explain her absence, and that would be that.

"Wow," Carla said. "What do you think?"

Monroe wondered if he could swim across the room, the air in the lab was so rubbery. He wondered in a resigned way if Carla had told Vitaly how he had read the letter. Carla was the same age as this woman, he remembered. He felt slippery, then called it curious. Why not? He looked at both of them, they were unmoving, still smiling at him, and he sighed and shrugged. "Call her up," he said. "Make a date."

Carla did so that night, then called Monroe at home. "Could you come over? She wants to come in less than a week. I'm not sure about this." Monroe drove to her building. She sat him on her couch, mentioning the woman once -- "It's just she had

everything so *planned*" -- then began kissing him, and he unbuttoned and rolled into her. With her face in the cushion, she murmured, "You just want to fuck me."

Monroe held himself arched from behind. "What?" he demanded, as if daring her. "What did you say?"

Afterwards, when they lay finished, Monroe got up and apologized, explained he was had papers to grade at home. "OK," she said meekly. Thursday and Friday night he told her he was having trouble sleeping in her bed. Saturday she called to tell him she had her own plans, drinks with friends from the library, but late in the evening she called drunk, shouting over bar noise that she wanted to come over. Monroe told her that she didn't know where he lived. "Yeah I do," she said, and soon enough she swung through the front door of the bungalow. Monroe had been waiting on his couch, and she dropped down with her head in his lap and stared up at him. She told him that as a child she wanted to be a ballerina. Corny, she thought, but she kept at it until her late teens, when her bones and body grew too heavy. She had once had a boyfriend who began cheating openly on her. She was living with him, and for a week she never left the apartment because she thought she was so ugly. Did he understand this? Monroe mostly patted her hair, then covered her with a blanket and left her asleep on the couch. He felt responsible, but only for a few more days, as this would end soon.

In the morning Carla seemed to have worked her fears into a giddy hope. "This is saying I'm getting a new start. That's what it is. It's a stamp of approval on my life. Maybe Vitaly should come to the restaurant, too? After all, he helped."

Alice Fox would meet her for dinner on Tuesday and stay at a local motel that night. She would be driving down from Astoria on the coastal route. She told Carla on the phone that she looked the same except her hair was shorter, and Carla passed this on to Monroe, along with any other physical details she could remember. Monroe went about his business, but behind all of it he knew there was a queer, wobbly mounting of his own. He was enjoying this. And within that enjoyment was power, which could always double back into wrath. He found himself daydreaming angry conversations with Carla; halfway down the hall outside of the lab, or in his open front door as the rain blew nearby. On Tuesday he came home from the lab, showered and shaved, and went through

a number of pants and shirts before choosing. He drove to Carla's, who she was waiting in a dress, the first he had ever seen her in. She made a pirouette and laughed nervously, then landed with a thump on the couch. Monroe kissed her cheek, winked and left.

The restaurant was across the street from a park which banked the river. Monroe parked and stepped quickly to the entrance, and inside saw her immediately, since it was early yet and the dining room was empty. She sat half-turned from him at the far corner with a drink. Monroe moved to the bar to see her face, then began walking toward her. At that moment she turned out toward the room, saw him, smiled and sipped her drink, and looked back out the window. She was small and striking, with a long neck and large, oval eyes. She was dressed in a black turtleneck sweater and grey pants. Monroe came closer and she turned to him again, watching him approach with a gently perplexed look. When he reached the table he saw that she had to be somewhat older than Carla. The sides of her mouth were curled upwards, and two clean lines had broken on her face.

He introduced himself, "Alice Fox? I'm Monroe Shipman. I'm a friend of Carla's."

But the woman had become grave. Her head tipped and she paused, not taking his hand.

"She'll be late," Monroe said.

"Oh! Jesus. I thought something happened. Is Carla all right? Did something happen?"

Monroe, startled, grinned and waved his hands in front of him, and here he realized his own face had been rigidly solemn. "She'll be a little late. She had an unexpected meeting at work. Fifteen, twenty minutes late is all."

"Of course," she said, a little weary. Then she straightened and patted the setting across from her. "Well, sit. There. Monroe, yes. Carla told me about you on the phone. You're her boyfriend? If I remember, you're studying science. Physics?"

"Yes, we're good friends." He smiled at her again, calmly, and the waiter appeared and he ordered a gin and tonic. "That's my drink," said Alice, and pinged the lip of her glass with her fingernail, a high note, to which he found himself nearly blushing.

"I know zip about science," she said. "I was a Spanish major, not that I remember any of that, either. But it's always seemed -- clean. I guess with all the laws. 'No energy is ever lost,' et cetera. If that makes any sense."

Clean, Monroe thought. It felt like a new word. She finished her drink and looked out the window. "Are you from Georgia?" he asked.

"Did Carla tell you that?"

"I recognize your accent. I used to live in Texas."

"And you've been to Georgia?" Monroe almost said yes, but shook his head.

Alice said, "You've got a good ear. Are you a Texan?"

Monroe smiled unexpectedly. "No. I'm from this area, really. My parents live in Washington. I went to school in Houston but I've never been to Georgia, only New Orleans."

"Not quite Georgia, is it," she said, and Monroe shook his head again. She turned to the window and wiped her hand over the glass, clearing a hole in the moisture. "Well I haven't been there in ages. It feels that way, anyway. But it's so nice to be in a real, actual town. After I got settled I took a walk by the river. I'm already saying hello to perfect strangers. And then Astoria. Have you been there? All that water; that town is perched on the end of the world."

"It's pleasant."

"Oh more than that, I hope!" she said suddenly. "I mean, I'm sorry. Of course there's probably a sameness after some time. Never mind."

The strange little burst settled, they were silent and the waiter came with Monroe's drink. Alice looked at the ceiling and Monroe began seeing the two of them as already circling each other in polar orbits. She exhaled loudly, then stared at him. "What do your parents do? You like your folks?" she asked.

"Pardon?"

"What do they do?"

Monroe described his father's work. "But he's retired. My mother never had a job." He took a drink, tasting a streak of lime. "Of course, I like them fine. But I don't see them very much. We don't have much to say to each other." She nodded, her eyes

narrowed almost imperceptibly, and he went on talking. "We have that sort of relationship. It's accepted on both sides. I made a decision, somewhere, to separate myself from them, from their lives. It happened when I was pretty young, when I was fourteen. And I've stuck with that decision."

"You sound disciplined."

Monroe shrugged; he was growing confused and irritable with this unwieldiness rising around him, but she touched his hand, touching off the knuckle of his thumb. "I don't mean to pry," she said. "These days I can get a little forward. Pushy, although I never used to be that way. My daddy died when I was very young. And I don't think my mother ever liked me very much. Loved me but didn't like me. That's still a terrible thing to say, isn't it. She didn't know what to do with me. And she remarried, to a man I absolutely detested."

"Why?"

"Why did I detest him? A hundred reasons -- no reasons." She flicked her hand, then leaned back. "What did Carla say about me? Was she very worried about my coming here?"

"I think she's looking forward to meeting you."

"Well, she's met me before, you know."

"Right. Of course."

"Of course," said Alice. "Of course, of course, of course."

Monroe laughed softly.

"I was just thinking," Alice said. "Why was I thinking this? I was thinking of my husband Gerry's memorial. It was in Philadelphia. That's where his family is from. He has a giant family. But at the memorial I saw three friends of his, and the four of them, with Gerry, they had been friends together since I don't know when, forever. They all had gone to the same boarding school together in Philadelphia, from seventh grade up. A Quaker school. Gerry's family was Quaker. I saw the three of them together, these middle-aged men, Gerry was thirty-six, so they must have been the same. And looking at them was so pretty and sad. Because you know they joked with each other, they had that

easiness, but you could see how bewildered they were, because one of them had disappeared, just gone, the strangest thing, ever.

"But I remember that I thought, There's a family. Maybe more than Gerry and I were. Compared to them maybe we hardly knew each other. We were married only two years. So that might be it, that families can come from wherever, I suppose." She sighed and looked in her glass. "Here I go. Alice isn't making much sense."

"You are," Monroe said.

"You're being gracious," she said, and touched his hand. They were quiet, and over Alice's shoulder Monroe could see a person outside looking in one of the large windows flanking the restaurant entrance. The person wore a hood coming up into a point, the hood of a rain jacket, and the point would move back and forth as the person tried to see through the fogged glass.

Here Monroe began telling the story of Norman's farm. Then he stopped and began describing Hal. He told her his father was always kind, *he* was gracious. Always patient with Monroe. Alice listened carefully with her chin raised, but Monroe trailed off his description and turned back to the farm, what he would do there, his mother's displeasure, washing in the sink, his smiling cousins. Then the drive in Norman's truck, sitting between the two brothers. He could smell Norman, the smell filled the whole truck. He told her about the accident, because he wouldn't move, and didn't know why.

"Were you afraid?" asked Alice.

"I thought that was the case. But I don't think so. I was waiting for him to grab me. I was hoping for it, for some reason."

"Maybe you admired him," she said.

"That's right," Monroe said. "I did. I admired him. Why did you say that?" He asked again, intently, "Why did you say that?"

But there was Carla, strangely, standing by the entrance. She was shaking off her raincoat and smoothed the front of her dress. She waved at him from across the room, the same wave as in the lab, and she was smiling wildly, joyously. Monroe held his hand up palm out from the table, which meant *Stop*, but Carla waved again and began moving

toward them. He looked back to Alice, but she had already noticed the exchange and was twisting around in her chair, and Monroe saw Carla brighten again, and wave. He reached and gripped Alice's wrist on the table. She turned back to him, and when she did he let go of it. For a moment, she was focussed on him. Her lips were slightly parted and upturned at the ends. Everything was careful. As quickly as he could, he tried to understand what was being given to him through her expression. But then he remembered that this was exactly how she had looked when they had met.

The New Land

In the lounge of the airport hotel in Salt Lake City, Laura first saw the Indian, a stocky man with his hair standing out in a crew cut. He was stooped at the bar. The bartender was watching the TV, but would occasionally turn toward the man and nod and smile briefly, as if the Indian were telling hard luck stories or bad jokes. She paid intermittent attention only because soon after they had arrived, the man had turned to them and shouted, "So what do you think about that?" as if they had been listening, too. Then, a half hour after this, the man appeared at their table. He stood above them, nodding and swaying a little. Joey leaned back in his chair. "Have a seat, friend," Joey said. "Get comfortable. Take a load off. Tell us your story."

But the man stayed where he was. He seemed troubled by Joey's tone and tilted his large, round head, squinting, then he backed away and left the bar. Joey shrugged and clinked his glass to Laura's. They had begun drinking to celebrate the end of their ski vacation, and perhaps their relationship. That afternoon they had driven down from the Wasatch Range, and during the ride Joey had accused Laura of callousness. Their argument was brief but very potent, releasing tension in the car suddenly like a steam crack and whipping clean the air. Afterwards they both felt happy, certain pretenses were dropped, and they decided to celebrate.

After drinks they went to their room and soon dozed off together, but as they were sleeping the man from the bar burst into the lobby armed with a rifle and demanded that everyone leave the hotel. Laura and Joey, still drunk, were too sluggish in getting out of bed as the alarm sounded and the intercom repeatedly told them to evacuate, and just

when they were ready the intercom ordered that everyone now stay in their rooms. Laura peeked out the door first. The hotel was built in a circle around an atrium, all the rooms on landings that overlooked the lobby below. Laura could see him sitting on top of the check-in counter, legs folded under him and a rifle in his lap. Their room was on the third floor, and Laura recognized his black hair and black T-shirt. He looked younger from far away. He now wore sunglasses and smoked a cigarette. "I said everyone get out of here, please!" he yelled -- deep out of his gullet, a nervous and clouded accent, something she hadn't before heard in real life but could immediately recognize. She wasn't afraid but did feel a welling, cinematic kind of sadness, like Faye Ray to King Kong. *You* have to leave. Or they'll just come and get you, she thought. Later Joey peeked out, but on the landing were two cops crouched behind the pillars. They were chatting, sipping coffee, but when they saw Joey they angrily waved him back into the room.

Their reason they could celebrate earlier that evening (and the reason for ridding the pressure, like the snap of clean sheets) was that both saw that the relationship was not only ending but had never much started. It was simply overdecorated, a bunch of shininess. Joey's father was a lawyer in Boston and the night he had met Laura he offered them the ski lodge that he co-owned with a partner. His name was also Joe, and he and his wife took Joey and Laura out to dinner and then up to their condo for a nightcap. His father was a swarthy, happy-looking Italian man. He had Laura walk with him arm-in-arm down Newbury Street, and by the look of his wife Laura imagined him as having affairs. His wife hadn't aged nearly as well; she was Irish, fat bodied but with a hanging face. Tiny black eyes which assessed Laura through the meal. They owned a condo in the Four Seasons, and one wall was a thick plate window overlooking the Boston Gardens. Outside it had been snowing, but now, with this vantage above the trees, it was a kind of snow Laura had never seen before. The park below people walked through the

pools of light. The tree branches held by snow, even the whorls in the sky, were all defined by the glow of the buildings surrounding the park like old city walls. The whole picture silently operating on music.

At this moment Laura decided to take their offer. She had been seeing Joey only a month and had been very coy when he first pursued her. His forehead was low and he kept his hair short; it bushed out just above his brows like quills. "You remind me of some animal," she had told him in a bar once.

"I got the heart of a lion. I got the eyes of an eagle and the nose of a beagle."

"Like a woodchuck," she said. "You look like you root around things."

He seemed dispirited a moment by this. But he kept taking her barbs with more jokes. She liked him; he was attentive and at that time her life was shapeless (she temped, the people she knew did the same or like-minded work, while he was studying for the Massachusetts Bar). She told Joey that she had never downhill skied in her life. She'd never been west of Ohio. "Laura, no problem. Let me do this." They were sitting in a restaurant, the plane tickets on the tabletop. "It goes like this," he said. "If you have a shitty time, you pay me back. OK? What? Why this look?"

She saw that her arms were crossed, and she relaxed her features. *Lahra*, he said, with a Boston accent. He slid the ticket across the table and she went with him.

On the bunny hill she learned a fragile and ugly balance. But then to be so high up, on the tops of mountains! The sky painfully blue. On the runs she'd gather far too much speed too quickly and let herself tumble into the snow, while Joey would puff to a stop behind her, grab her armpits and pick her up. She didn't like it. Snow stung her wrists and other skiers raced by so fast and dexterous they seemed inhuman. Joey was kind and tender, but soon she could tell from the wince in his smile that he knew she'd made her decision and wasn't trying. One morning she found herself coming toward a stand of trees. *Here we go!* She drifted in and was able to angle and tuck her body so that only her side, hip to shoulder, hit the trunk. She bounced like a ball, expelled.

As she must have unconsciously known, the decision led to more time in the cabin. "The mountain always takes its due," she said as Joey checked her bruises; a joke, told with a cowboy twang. Joey glanced up irritably, but then he smiled. He cut down on his skiing time to be with her and bought her dinners in Park City. The cabin was a part of a compound off a steep mountain road, a teenage guard posted at the gate. They were log cabins, but dark, mirror-tinted windows cut the walls lengthwise, and inside it was all white and smooth. The style didn't give up many signs of living. Hermetic, Laura thought. No family photos. Even the books over the hearth looked untouched, except for *The History of the Ottoman Empire*, which Laura began reading; it was earmarked and full of tiny penciled codes in the margins. Mehemet the Conqueror strode through the doors of the Hagia Sofia, a satisfied man. A small, wiry man, by the looks of him. A bundle of nerves who probably talked too fast, sadly adding insult to injury for the Greeks.

After so many hours of reading, Laura grew restless. She began short walks around the cabin in the snow. These new woods: Aspen grew thickly, straight up, ungnarled, and she walked in patterns: lines directly out and then parallel back in, or braiding the trees, turning when she came near a neighboring cabin. One evening Joey went night skiing (telling her his decision in the same comforting, paternal way, the same facial movements, "How does that sound, honey? OK?"), and she headed out to a small crest that she had yet to explore. Just beyond it in a slight gully was another cabin, and she saw in its bay window a man sitting with his back to her leafing through a magazine under warm lamplight. After a few minutes another man came in the room wearing a blue silk kimono and a towel wrapped around his head -- a turban, wild eyes, he even had Mehemet's vandyke beard. He was waving a CD case and put the disk in the stereo, then he began dancing, snapping fingers, stretching his arms above his head and slowly, lushly shifting his hips, but the other man never looked up. Laura leaned into the trunk of a tree

with her cheek resting on the bark, and a papery ribbon slipped into her guts and privates, waiting and waiting.

Voyeurism had been a habit forever, Laura believed. It was practically biological, and she used this as an excuse. As a little girl she hid -- in cupboards, closets, with the doors cracked, she watched people from within the hedge along the street. Her mother was a pianist and intensely protective of her time. She owned a Steinway baby grand, and she kept it in her bedroom where she practiced and gave lessons. When Laura burst into the room by mistake, her mother would begin tapping a high hard note until Laura backed outside. With the note, her mother would stare placidly at her, eyes like plates, and years later Laura guessed the look hadn't been frustration but giant, struck ambivalence.

They lived in western Massachusetts. Laura's father had been a professor at a local women's college and died of cancer when she was four. A thin young man in pictures with a uneven beard. Always squinting. What else? His cigarette smell, which left her most definite memory. Her mother remarried when Laura was eight, and this man, Nathan, owned a farm in the Connecticut River Valley that had been in his family for nearly two hundred years -- corn and dairy. Nathan had just moved back from Canada to run the operation. He was tall and burly, but for all his bulk, his movements were gentle, precise. An odd match next to her mother's shawls and witchy uncombed looks. He was amazed by her, Laura saw. When her mother sang out from a corner of the house, stormed on the piano, he would sit up and smile half-conscious and suspended. Sometimes he would notice Laura watching him, and he'd raise his eyebrows to try to share the feeling. When they moved out to his farm he took Laura through the processes, showing her the machines top to bottom, the steaminess and sloe eyed drones.

She paid attention and was calm, but the farm, the mix of open space and dark pungency, buttressed her sense of secrecy. In the first year she told herself to keep Nathan at arm's length, although he was always kind. She would, however, hide in places

where he would find her: in an empty vat, between the machines, in the bed of his truck. Nathan would look perplexed, pluck her from the spot and set her on the ground. The old men who worked there shouted at him that she'd get herself killed or fuck up the equipment, but Nathan was quiet, and she'd strut away as if rudely interrupted. Once while she sat on a high rafter waiting for him, Nathan came in the barn and shot a sick cow. She could only see part of the scene, part of his giant shoulders from behind and the cow's haunches. Then he started cursing, cursing more loudly, and the shot cracked into the barn and seemed to start and end in her own chest. Laura opened her eyes and saw that Nathan had squatted next to the cow with his back towards her, and he stayed there at least a half an hour; he was holding the gun loosely and running his other hand back and forth over his neck.

What an odd kid you were! she'd think later. She kept her embarrassment over those times light and on the surface. There was a shapelessness behind it, a guilt that was unnerving and easily treacherous. Nathan's body. The tight curls in his hair turning blonde. The slow, deliberate movement.

As an early teen Laura began spending time in the hayloft, sometimes to take school friends, although by then both boys and girls found it odd and boring. Usually she read there alone when her mother practiced. She would lay a blanket on the floorboards, take off her clothes and open the loading doors so the sun shone in, and masturbate if the feeling came. One afternoon she lay naked, finished, and heard Nathan's sudden cough on the ladder, and his head popped up to the platform across from her. In an instant he almost smiled, then looked away sadly and his hand came up like a clumsy, fluttering wave.

Laura heard him climb back down, leave the barn, and she curled up hopelessly. In the following months neither Nathan nor her mother spoke of it, but Laura kept a low profile from them both, and her outlook slowly bridled and then grew almost malevolent, because she saw him as silently using the incident. When he talked to her, told her to do

a chore, it dangled black on a string. At fifteen she left the farm to a boarding school in upstate New York that her mother had attended when she was a girl. While Laura was away, her mother sent a letter with the phone number of an apartment in town that she had begun renting. *Dearheart, we are not separated, nor are we planning any such thing,* her mother wrote. *Both of us believe that this occasional time away, a total of a week out of the month (really, not much. A day here and there), will strengthen what we have. You'll learn, as you grow older and live with a man, the importance of negotiations. People must be together. We are built and determined that way. But to have success, as with any part of life, there must be time with yourself. You do understand, I know. I'm blathering away. For your vacations we'll be together at the farm.*

Negotiations? By college, the schedule had reversed itself and Laura wondered why this was considered a marriage, then in her senior year Nathan had an aneurysm. A pocket of fire sweeping out a tiny section of his brain. It took with it his strength, control of half his body and most of his speech. In the hospital he was mute. His only noises were ruminative moans when her mother fed him spoonfuls of crushed ice. He left the hospital when he regained his balance, sold the farm and moved into the bottom floor of a house a few blocks from her mother; she would stay with him parts of the week, which surprised and baffled Laura. What was this sort of love? Did they have rules? How were agreements reached? Laura would wash the dishes after supper and through the dining room window she could see her mother on the screen porch, having a cigarette and listening to Nathan work together sentences. Those who knew him decided his faculties were intact, although he now tried to talk more than ever before. He would always be cheerful when Laura came to visit. *'M happy. Angel. Good to see you, too. Good, good, good.*

Again, Laura could never take one detail as defining, and taken all together they felt neither sympathetic nor haunting, just present in her, like weather outside. On their last

night in the cabin Joey asked about the farm. They lay in bed and he had his head cradled on her hip, the sweat from his scratchy nape on her skin. She told him about cross-country skiing with her mother in the woods that bordered Nathan's property. They went at night, and her mother wore an old mining helmet with a strong light attached; it could chop through the dark and occasionally light up wild animals. Joey was beaming up at her when she finished. "My mother hates the woods," he said. Then he rose up suddenly and looked in her face, kissed her lips and drew back. "Let me say something. Baby," he said. "Everything's fine. Everything's fine. OK. Laura, do you know what? I love you. I'm in love with you."

His voice! It was amazingly blind and straining. It gripped and compressed her. Laura said, "Well, Joey. Well, that's so sweet."

He registered this. He winced, squinting as he smiled, and laughed weakly. He turned in the bed and fluffed his pillow. She heard him laugh to himself again after he switched off the light.

Profess. Her reaction, whatever it had been (fearful somehow? a blinking animal covered in a new brightness?), left her solidly awake for the night and Joey quiet for most of their trip out of the mountains the next day. The ground rose nearly vertically on either side of the road and was studded with fir. Joey began bits of small talk, pointing out hawks wheeling in the sky. Then he asked, "Do you think I'm spoiled? A rich kid. Do you think that?" Laura turned from the window and he glanced at her casually, continuing, "You know, no sense of an honest days work."

"I don't know. You lost me, Joey."

"You know, I rent your skis, I'm picking up the tab, I buy you an outfit. I buy you dinner. And you," he waved his hand in his face. "You're... What are you? I look at you. Hello? Hello? Nobody there, nothing." He shrugged. The moment he began Laura saw for a second both of them in the ski outfitters in Park City, where he had been sweet, almost feminine, as he commented on the colors, what matched her eyes. Now listening

in the car she was tricked, and this mounted into anger. Joey spoke again, outward past the wheel, loudly this time as if in another conversation, "What do you fucking know about life."

"Let's not talk. Can you not talk now?"

But Joey looked ahead, rolled his shoulders and smirked. Fine, was what he was saying.

"Fuck off," Laura said.

"Fuck off! Hello. Fuck off. Hm, that's funny. *You* fuck off."

She turned toward the window, but before a thought could come Joey yelled "Jesus!" raggedly, and slammed the brakes so hard that the car spun left. Her head smacked the door window and made a crunching sound like snow underfoot. The car had stopped backwards, in the other lane. Joey gripped the wheel and his face, she saw, was contorted not with fear but with anger. He was counting down, it looked like, mouthing numbers. He put the car in reverse and made a three point turn to the gravel shoulder on the other side of the road. "I saw a rabbit in the road," he said. "Did you see the rabbit?"

"I'm not sure. I bumped my head."

She was touching the spot on her head, and Joey reached over and touched it, she felt his fingers. "Wow. You sure did," he said. "God-damn rabbit." He laughed, a small, jerked sound, and touched his fist to her shoulder. But when she looked at him he had changed and appeared tired or older, and he smiled. "OK? Damn rabbits."

She didn't believe that there ever was a rabbit, but said, "Fucking rabbit."

"Right!" he said, patted her knee. "Let's fuck off." He started the car.

They began joking on the road, the momentum turning into a rhythm between them. Who could say what had happened? If this was his temper, then there it was; she'd never seen it before and, as they both now knew, she would never again. A stinging spray from a deep, briefly opened vein. They kept up careless cursing -- Asshole, Sugardoll, Jackass -- but knew these words were delicate, and they came down the mountain into the

wiped plain of Salt Lake City. In the lounge they had to pay a fee to drink because of religious law, and they ate bar snacks for dinner. The Indian man came and went. Last call was announced at ten and Joey protested. "Aw, the deuce you say!" he said to the waitress. Joey gave Laura the key told her to go up to the room, and five minutes later he followed with cans of coke from the vending machine and a bottle of rum he had bought off the bartender for forty dollars. They fixed each other drinks and watched TV until they fell asleep. Then after the alarm sounded and they were dressed, Laura peeked out the door.

"There's a man down there with a gun," she said.

"I said everyone get out of here, please!"

Neither of them was afraid, mostly due to their drunkenness. A phone call came; the manager explained the situation and told them to remain calm, stay in the room. Yes, the man was a Native American, but the manager wasn't sure what tribe. "Wounded Knee!" Joey yelled, and hung up. They flipped through the stations on TV looking for news of the incident. Their energy took on a slippery edge, like that of little kids. Joey began throwing bits of ice from the bucket at her, first hitting the side of her face, then she tried to catch them in her mouth. He got up and bounded over the furniture, running the perimeter of the room over and over without touching the floor. Then Laura noticed that a red light had begun snapping through the curtain folds. Outside in the parking lot were three police cars and a large black van, also with a rack of lights. Joey looked out the hallway door and then quickly closed it, sat on the bed and yawned. "Cavalry," he said. He took a sip from his old rum and coke and lay down on the bed with the cup resting on his chest. "That's it. Adios. I'm going to sleep."

Laura was pulled to a stop, sudden enough that she felt a lurch outward from her breast. "What time is it?" she asked.

It was two-thirty. Their flight would leave in four hours. Joey put the drink and his wristwatch on the nightstand, turned out the light and rolled away from her. There were noises outside. Someone said, "Hey. Hey! Give it here." But the voice was close by and without an echo. Nasal, unlike the Indian. She flipped TV stations and watched half of an old Technicolor movie without the sound. But she *was* scared, and it would move through her in a disheartening flash every few minutes. She climbed on top of the bed with her feet on either side of Joey's ribs, then jumped lightly, as if she were on a tree branch above a river. Joey looked up at her.

"I have an announcement. Do you want to hear?"

He propped himself up and reached for his watch, holding it close to his face with both hands in the dark. Laura bent far down on her knees so her hair fell in her face and the crown of her head was level with his chest. "Feel my head here," she asked. "Right here," she touched her bump and waited. She waited, still scared, and when she leaned back Joey was looking at her vacantly. His eyes passed over her, and he swung his legs out from the bed, gathered a blanket and a pillow, and walked into the bathroom. He came out after a moment to collect his watch on the sheet, and Laura could see through the bathroom door that he had made a bed in the tub.

In the morning before dawn a few cops milled red-eyed in the lobby, but there was no sign of the Indian. Joey didn't ask as he checked out. He said nothing all morning; on the shuttlebus to the airport he tipped his head back and closed his eyes, and in the terminal he sat and closed them again, and later disappeared to find a newspaper. Laura had stayed awake for the rest of the night, but the effect of sleeplessness (nearly two nights full, she realized) had so far been serene. One reason was that while she had waited in the hotel room, her fear gave way with most other sensations, until in her mind was windy and mammoth. This was exhaustion working, she knew, but she remembered how Nathan had once told her what it was like to remember a word. He could picture the object clearly. He saw a loud white space, like hers, and then maybe the first letter would

appear, stamped black against the space, taller than a building then out of his mouth, *FFFF*. Many times that letter was it. With luck, the rest of the letters would tumble out of the hole in a rushing escape. The sound a great breath out of a chamber. *FFLOWER*, *SSSNAKE*, *CARRR*, *SSTOVE*. His breath would almost seem to break. For moments afterward it looked as if this kind of mastery took too much from him.

Somewhere in the night she heard it: *You fucks! You motherfucking fucks! Bastards! Get! Get!* Then heavy sounds, falling sounds, a clatter, and a hiss.

In the terminal Laura grew deeply tired. Their flight was delayed an hour, then another. The mountains were visible through the windows all around them. With the sun on them they moved from an early purple color to a scorching, violent white. Joey stood up and said "Newspaper," and walked away. He'll never come back, she thought, and he didn't. Leaving the hotel that morning, they had passed two policemen at the doors; one was writing on a clipboard and the other said, "Jeremiah Coles. J-E-R-E-M-I-A-H." But it seemed feasible to her that the memory was from someplace else. If so, where? Her flight was announced over the speakers, and she stood up, got in boarding line and handed in her ticket. The gangway tilted down to the plane; she was oddly surprised by this and found herself taking larger and larger steps. She saw two women greeting passengers at the door to the plane and she wondered how they would receive her. With a smile. If she had moved more quickly, came forward running, and if she had smiled, would they have opened their arms?

The cabin was uncrowded. People shimmered, adjusting themselves. In her three seats she was the only person. She saw a boy across the aisle wearing a sports jacket, his feet not touching the floor. "Hey," she said, and he turned to her. "Are you scared?"

He shook his head no.

"I am. Come here and hold my hand."

The Dapper Men

My wife interrupts stuttering Tommy Fallows from Classics. It's eleven PM, December 31st. She hands me the phone receiver and says my brother's name in a flat tone. So flat, moving away with a resolve so sleek, touching guest's arms and shoulders and disappearing through them, that at this moment, drunk, I can only marvel at its terribleness and beauty. It's early, though, and Tommy, who catches my expression, pinches my cheek, "Ch-ch-chin up, Stromberg," and I lift the phone.

"Bill!" I say. "How's the trip? Are you settled? How is Jeannette?" Stopping, I hear the noise on the other end, a watery clatter, a bar. I yell harder, "Are you there? Bill!"

"Carl?" he yells. "Carl, look around. Can you tell me if Jeannette is there? Did Jeannette show up, Carl? She's got your address! You have to speak up! Carl?" Then, "For Chrissake," and the line disconnects.

Are my brother and I close? Not particularly. A shared childhood translates to later arrangements. If tragic, I'd expect iron, unquestioned bonds. If monotonous, maybe avoidance. We have mostly delicate rules -- some tuned humor, certain agreements unsaid. Who knows why. Our mother, a nurse, was perpetually tired; she worked nights at Massachusetts General, and my brother and I were left alone. Except for summers, for which we were put on the bus to southern Vermont, to the farm of her father, a small, manic German who took on our moral upbringing, and who might sometimes snap from protectiveness to dissatisfaction and grab us by the hair. And that's about all. Both of us have done well with our lives. Bill is still taller than I am, broad shouldered, and he is a

lawyer for a media conglomerate in Los Angeles. I am a professor, Boston College, fifteen years. I have been nicknamed "the Neo-Norseman" by little, petty colleagues who are unhappy with my publications on Scandinavian mythology. Here at my New Years party, I'm drunk too, though I doubt more than Bill. Nothing is particularly abnormal, and I walk to the bedroom, smile at my guests, and in the bedroom I feel rosy, a sweet bloom which marks new sadness.

The phone rings. "Carl? Carl -- *Hoo Man!* I forget about the weather here. Listen to that." I hear nothing, then a quick, hollow sound, maybe a gust of wind. "I'm stomping my feet! Jesus!"

"Where are you, Bill?"

"Park Street, the Commons. I'm near the fountain. When's the last time I was here! I'm at a phone booth. I was in a bar, full of kids. I couldn't hear with all those kids yelling. Hey, Carl, listen. Is Jeannette at your place yet? I'm wearing her coat. Wait a second. You don't even know what she looks like! She might introduce herself. Look for a tall woman. She's brunette."

"What's happened, Bill?" I stretch on the bed, nearly flat. My head is propped in the pillow, cozy and high enough to sip my drink.

"My fault," says Bill. "That is, she said we should get a cab. Carl, she's twenty-six, never been on a subway. I said you don't take cabs in Boston."

He waits, and I realize I have to chime in, which I do. "That's right."

"Sure." He pauses again. "She's not there. Is that what you said?"

"That's right."

Bill sniffs. "Hey, Carl. How are you?"

"Why don't you tell me what's happened?"

"Carl, could you pick me up? Do you think you could do that?"

But I take a sip, long and drawn, and Bill hears it.

"OK," he says. "Right. Here we go. Carl, we took the T. You know, the T! To me, you get everyone on the train. It's a church. You say, *excuse me*. I told her, when we were little I'd go here for peace and quiet. Remember? We'd dick around in the fountain? And that crazy fucker Big Matty Campbell tried to drown me."

I stay quiet, sipping. "Anyway," Bill says, "we get on at Boylston -- this is three hours ago. Got our tokens, get in the car, and Jeannette's still nervous. She's from Carmel, Carl. Twenty-six. So I climb on, and to put her at ease, I sit by the biggest black man ever. He took up two seats. And I pat the seat next to me for Jeannette, and she's skittish but takes it, and we hold hands. You know, she has this dress, this crimson crepe thing I bought for her. That was most of the deal. Carl, did you know I almost wore my tux tonight?"

"Of course I did."

"Well, I didn't. But we sit together, I can see us together in the car window opposite us. You always look perfect in those windows. Something in the light is right. Same with bathrooms on airplanes. You look perfect in those mirrors."

"It's true," I say. It is not.

"So, you see it? It's our window, and I smile at her in the window. There's a little Mexican woman down the row from us, and the black house next to me. He's got a little radio up to his ear, tiny transistor thing in his hand. Then at a stop this man gets on. He hops on, hops up the steps and into the car, and he looks around with this expression, like we're as happy as he is. And he points right at Jeannette and says, 'Truly, truly amazing dress', then sits right across from us. This guy -- what was he? Snow white hair, blown back, but he was young. Skinny build. He had a suit, a big overcoat like a cape, and this white scarf draped on him. He cut a figure, is what he did. You know what Ronton called us when he dressed us up for church? 'You cut a fine figure.' Like that."

"'Dapper little men,' is what he said," I correct. I should note that Ronton was our grandfather's last name. *Opa*, was what he liked face to face.

"Dapper, exactly," Bill says. "*Perfect*," he imitates Ronton's accent.

"*Perfekt*," I say. "Wilem, du must *lehrnen*."

Bill ignores this. "Wilem," I say again. The sound rising stiffly out of me.

Ronton, who, as I said, was a small man, wiry, still had a powerful body from farm labor. He could lift us off the ground by our scalps when orders were not carried through. And Bill took the heavier stuff. He was the contentious one.

"But he didn't make it, Carl," Bill says. "The suit was a little small, tight. Cheap shoes. And he wore white socks. And he had it in the eyes, too. But he sits there, looking at all of us. And Jeannette, I can see in the window, is smiling. Then he leans across the aisle and says to the black man with the radio, 'Horses or dogs?' I think, *here we go*. But the black man says, 'Horses,' politely, and I see a racing form in his lap. 'Any luck?' the dapper man says. Black man says no. Dapper man says, 'I always lose,' and the black man says, 'You got to hope for a good run,' or something, and dapper man says, 'Sure, but I always lose,' something like that, and the black man starts nodding. Then a Mexican lady gets on at Copley, and she waves and sits with the other Mexican lady, two little Mexican ladies. They're chatting in Spanish. Then the guy, he leans over to them and says, 'You two are friends?' And they give him a look. 'Friends? You know each other?' he says, and they finally say, 'Yes, yes, friends,' and they turn back to each other. Then he's looking at us, our turn. And two things are happening, Carl. One, I am happy. I'm light, leaning forward. But two, I'm thinking, if he opens his mouth, if I am addressed by this, this I-don't-know-who-you-are, then I'll kill him."

Bill pauses. For effect? A loud laugh from the living room, and I hear a car pass by Bill. "Wilem," I say, "Wilem, could you hold on for just a minute?" and I lay the phone on the bedspread, then fold my hands over my stomach, and I stay there for about two or three minutes.

If you were to ask me why, I might tell you this is a temporary withdrawal, a kind of fetal necessity. But more likely that's a lie; what's in me is power and regret. I am

assessing a piquant landscape. I imagine Jeanette, dark-haired. Dark looks in which we men let our shabbiness swim. But the picture slips outward, and I see Big Matty Campbell's hands covering my brother's head, holding my brother in the bubbling fountain water. I watch amazed as William, still submerged, rakes holes in Big Matty's shirt. Or I think of William at thirteen, of the scuffle that locked Ronton in the closet. It was an accident -- Ronton reached for Bill's hair, and Bill, taller, slapped his hand away and pushed. Down Ronton went through the coats. We stood looking at him struggle, upended and strange, then Bill turned to me with a half-frown, and he shut and locked the closet door. We were gone two hours, taking Ronton's truck on a furious backroad drive, and when we returned and Bill unlocked the closet door, the old man was weeping.

My wife is nearby. I hear her voice. Studied, social, but now with a growing nasal bite. A ricketyness which makes me think of our age. Long ago in graduate school we tried to have a child. The fertility problem was mine, and Bill sent gifts from the West Coast. Little vials of tiger penis, ground elk horn, zinc. A diaper which supposedly held ice, and a few other contraptions and jokes which horrified my wife. Meanwhile, the ghost baby grew in our little apartment. We hated it, the mute intimacy it held on us. Rules were established which saved the marriage, but they were of the delicate kind.

So it is the smallness, I guess, which gets you. A voice's pitch, sperm count, the strength behind a shove. Until you wake out of a dream. An insect has visited, an enormous mayfly. A film covers the room. A face, whose features, if you could see them, would push, thin and suffocating as a bubble.

Soon enough I stop staring at the ceiling and see my position on the bed. One leg is crossed and propped lazily on another, the drink on my stomach, and through the triangle in my legs my wife is standing at our bedroom door. In her blue dress and that stronghold of a jaw, she doesn't have to say a word. I pick up the phone.

"Wilem!" I say.

"Look at this," he says, "It's snowing. Hey, is it snowing over there? God, I miss these trees. Big trees. What kinds of birds does Boston have?"

"What?" But I cup the phone and direct this to my wife, "What kinds of birds does Boston have?" She stares at me, and sighs.

"I'm looking at a large bird," Bill says.

"A duck. A mallard," I say.

"Not a duck. Ducks don't sit on branches. A condor, maybe."

My wife smiles at someone beyond the door, she touches this person's arm, then turns back reset to me. "What happened, Bill?" I ask.

"In the subway? Nothing. The bell went off and the guy gets up. He says, 'Good luck. Happy New Year,' et cetera, to the black guy, who says, 'Thank you very much,' and 'To you and yours.' Then the dapper man says, 'Oh, all my friends are dead. They died last year.' The black man says, 'That can happen, that's a real shame.' They both nod, the door opens and out he hops, saying 'Off to the park!' and he waves at us from the platform. That's it," Bill says, laughing. "Off to the park!"

"Off to the park!" I say to my wife, and waggle my fingers. No change, except she closes her eyes, I've vanished, and she leaves.

"Right," says Bill. "We start up again, moving along for a minute, then Jeannette says, 'Are we near a park?' and I tell her that the Commons -- which, I have to tell her, is a *park* -- is right above us, that we're *underneath* for the next two stops. All of a sudden she holds my hand and says she wants to go see it. She has to see it. I look at her, and you know what? I would've gone. It felt like a decent, Christmassy thing, but she has this expression, some pouty confusion, already sitting there before I say anything. What was it? Maybe malice. Sort of fierce, pathetic. Sort of blind."

"Like a duck," I say.

"A dog. Right. I say, 'We are not going to the park,' and I smile at her. I stay on her and I keep smiling. She can't keep looking at me, and she stands up, holds onto the

pole, and I stay on her. She does something, smooths her dress, and she begins to sneak these looks at me, like, *Oh, you're still here?* And when the bell goes off she lets go and walks right out of the doors, she walks straight out of the car in her dress. Right down the platform, hugging herself. I watch her, then I look around the car. I'm still smiling. But the black guy sits there with his radio and the Mexican ladies sit there; nobody bats an eye. She left her coat. This is a mink." Here Bill stops, and for some time I don't hear anything, then he sighs, a crackle on the line. "At any rate," he says.

I wait a little longer, facing the ceiling. The cold is sobering him, but I am not ready to rise out of this yet. "Wilem," I say.

"Man--"

"Wilem."

"Listen," he says. I know he's turning uncertain. His voice has hardened, following me. "Carl, just once. For one moment I'd like... Do you have any fucking idea what I'd do if you were standing right here?"

"Wil-lem!" So shameful!

"I tell you what. Fuck it, Carl. All right? You can fuck yourself." He pauses, sniffs. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean that, Carl." I stay quiet and wait. "Carl," he sighs. "I verk und verk."

Then he booms. "Du villst lerhnen!" It comes like a pure ringing bell. "Im-mer! Immer late! Always late! I verk und verk! Rauber! Stealing from me! Stehlen!" He starts laughing. "Aus!" Then he's coughing. But I hear one more deep filling breath: "Aus! Let me out! Open! Open! It is dark! Oh, Jesus," he says, and coughs. Still coughing. "Perfekt! Jesus. I'm scaring myself."

And then I'm so sorry. A pass, just barely, just the tips, into a small, black world. I stand up from the bed. "Bill, stay put. I will be there in ten, twenty minutes."

"Great," he says.

"We will find Jeannette," I say.

"We will," he says, tired out. "Right. I looked all over the park, Carl. All over, back and forth. I've got her coat right here. I got to wear it, it's so cold. But I couldn't get off until Park Street. I mean, I didn't. I sat there and the doors closed. But at Park Street I ran out."

I'm held stooped, hovering over the phone. "I'll be there soon." But Bill doesn't hang up. "Just a second," he says. "Just one more thing. What do you think -- could you see an owl here? Do you remember? I'm still looking at a pretty big bird. He's sitting up there on a branch like a brick. It's not a regular bird."

I think quickly, almost frantic as a child. "Perhaps an owl." I say. "A hawk?"

"A hawk. That's it. Perfect. I'm looking at a hawk."

"A hawk."

"A hawk. He's sitting right there."

"No," I say, and slowly sit back on the bed. "Oh, William. I don't think so."

"Are you sure? You don't think so?"

"No," I chuckle, and am again older and relaxed. "That's not possible."

"Aw, I'm kidding. I'm sorry, Carl. I'm kidding."

Driving, though, I've chastened. I pass over the Charles. The water appears faintly burnished in the dark, one mass moving slowly. I can picture him peering drunk from the booth into the branches. *Look at that.* There are plenty of woods nearby, in the north, or the west. The world is full of woods. Blown over by a cold front, they recognize the park trees and land, and here, because of this mistake, they have to spend a day or two. Their small, angry brains are wheeling. What surrounds them? They look down from the branches to you, to me. Who would play these games?

The Allies

At the party downstairs some already talked with a shiny fervor, with the music loud enough that they could lean into others. Upstairs the professor's younger son, Noah, lay on his bed while two women sat on the edges. The boy had a migraine and was moaning; he had pushed away the sheet and sometimes moved on his bed with languid jerks, like a worm. His older brother, Tom, leaned in the doorway. He had pointed an electric fan at Noah and was piecing together the party voices that rose through the window.

Tom was sixteen. He was high from smoking pot, and when the scene of his brother closed into him, he tried to keep his mind busy, looking at the bare shoulders of the younger woman, her giant black braid. Through the window was the top of a pecan tree, an ugly, sticky thing. A sack of gypsy moths covered the end of one branch, and from the high vantage, a window light across the street hit and filled the sack, making it glow like a bulb. A shirtless black man moved past the lit window; Tom skirted back to the graduate student. She was twenty-five, he knew -- in his mind he repeated this. A perfect number. A secret formula.

Aslami Erdemir was her name. She had an oval, open face. In her lap she had Noah's feet, which she was rubbing. The other woman, the wife of a poetry teacher, looked weary and sad. She wiped Noah's forehead with a washcloth and occasionally glanced at Aslami as if she had just noticed her and was freshly discouraged.

Is that necessary? the woman said to Aslami.

I think so. All nerves go to the feet. Brain to the big toe. Shit, you know?

Tom liked to hear her talk. She was Turkish, with a low voice. With her accent, she said Ta instead of The. *I tink so. To ta feet. To ta bik toe.* She used profanity so much that Tom wondered if she knew what the words meant. She wore red running shorts, leather sandals, a man's tight undershirt and no bra.

She turned to him. Maybe you should get your father. You think?

The other woman said, Oh I don't think so. But Tom, you don't have to stay.

She was looking at him and waiting. No problem, Tom said. I'm A-OK. No problem.

On the bed, Noah said, OK. I'm OK, I'm OK, I'm OK. Then he hissed. Haah, haaah. It's like a fist! Aslami stood up quickly and walked past Tom. Under her breath she said Fuck -- *Faouhk.* She went down the hall and into the bathroom, and Tom watched as she bent down to scrub her face with water from the sink.

Earlier in the evening their father, Kimball, had given the boys cash for dinner and a movie downtown. Their mother, Julie, had left a week ago on a sudden trip to her sister's in Connecticut, and for the first few nights Kimball took the boys out to supper, beaming at them, telling jokes. But in these last days he was asking if they'd rather go alone. That night they rode their bikes to a cafeteria restaurant, and Tom, eager for the coming party, talked about anything. The party was held for a famous writer visiting the town, and Tom asked why she was famous, since Noah was the reader.

Noah shrugged. She's the ugliest writer known to exist, he said.

What?

She's famous because she's a good writer and people buy her books.

Tom shook his head and went back to his meal. Man, forget it, he said.

He was older than Noah by nearly three years, but at times he felt fragile in front of his brother. He had a sense that if he wrapped his hands around whatever hard piece

lay inside Noah and squeezed, it would be him and not Noah who wouldn't withstand the pressure.

They had lived in this town not even a year. They had moved to Alabama mid-winter, from New Hampshire, where their father had taught at a small college he and Tom had named "The Dipshit Farm". For the trip, Tom rode with his father in the moving truck. He knew his roles. Solid ground: to organize, collect, keep an eye peeled, or simply lighten the mood. In motel rooms, they aped accents of local newscasters together, and each morning Tom was up packing Noah's bag while Kimball took the first shower. At meals, Kimball called the waitresses Ma'am or Darlin'. The boys laughed, but sooner or later their mother snapped irritably and the table would fall quiet. Kimball then would not look at any of them. Tom would hear the sound of his father's leg jiggle on its own beneath the table, and at night in the motels, Tom would wake up with Noah talking erratically next to him, talking in his sleep.

In the cafeteria restaurant, Tom had news. Friends in his homeroom were forming a band and had invited him to play.

Noah took a bite of cornbread. You don't play an instrument, he said.

Cymbals, Tom said. Plus I'll be working on lyrics.

Noah began snickering, until Tom said, Forget it. Why don't you fuck off? At least I got friends. And at this Noah looked shocked, his mouth a little open; he stared at Tom, then looked off for the rest of the meal and said nothing until they were inside the movie theatre. There, towards the end of the movie, Tom saw him bend over and lay his head on his knees. Noah said, It's too bright. He pushed past Tom to the aisle and said under his breath that he had to go home. Tom sat and kept himself annoyed, holding the armrests and watching the screen intently, but the theatre seemed to lighten, he noticed the pattern printed on the walls, and he walked out quickly into the hot weather, rode his bike and found Noah squatting at the beginning of the neighborhood, rocking with his

hands balled in his eyes. Tom straddled his bike. Get up, he said. C'mon, let's go. He wanted the resolve in him to stay strong, but soon all he could do was show nothing.

I can see the house from here, Tom said. Noah got up, picked up his bicycle and began walking head down, bent over the bike as if pushing it up a hill.

As they neared their house Tom focused himself. They passed the park and cannon, and the houses began to mix back and forth, as some of the old houses, like theirs, had been repainted and refurbished, while others were collapsing into brush. He began to hear the music, and at the back door were two graduate students, both blonde with mustaches, smoking a joint. One said, The Brothers Kimball! but Noah dropped his bike and passed them. Tom, however, had straightened. He sniffed the air. You guys smell something?

They laughed, and inside, the kitchen was filled with smoke and groups of people began turning to him, smiling bashfully. He saw Noah across the room, already taken in the arm of the poetry teacher's wife. They stood in front of Kimball, who wore his leather vest and a string tie. Aslami stood too, holding a cigarette away as she bent to Noah. Everyone with deep concern ... Kimball peered at Noah and put his hand up to the boy's forehead, but Noah made a slow movement, knocking his hand away, and the poetry teacher's wife took him toward the stairs as Kimball lifted his chin up and out, frowning.

Aslami saw Tom. She brightened and waved at him. Here Tom felt a clear bolt, and he walked slowly to them.

Hi Tom! How are you, Tom? Aslami said.

Then Kimball swung over and blinked, his big face and red nose. Captain, he said, and put his hand on the side of Tom's neck. Our boy's having trouble.

He'll be all right, Tom said.

Aslami looked back and forth between them, then drew hard on her cigarette. Maybe I'll go up there. You think that's all right? she asked Kimball.

He looked at her, his hand still on Tom's neck, but took a sip of his drink and didn't answer. As they stood together, a very short old woman came up to them. She had white hair held back by a shiny purple and gold headband, and she peered at Tom. I got a question for you, she told him. Then she turned to Kimball. Is this one yours? she asked. Kimball introduced the woman, the famous writer.

I like your books, Tom said.

She peered again. Just tell me something, she said. You know that park down your street? I saw another one of those mounds in it. You know what those are? All over town you've got them, rectangle shapes. They're covered with grass.

Before Tom could say yes or no, Aslami answered. They're bases of old buildings. They all got burned up in the Civil War.

Aslami smiled brightly, but the old woman was looking at her as if she were a troubling blur. Right, she said. She turned to Tom. Did you know that?

Yeah, Tom said.

Ah horsecrap, the old woman said. Bullshit.

Aslami laughed and Kimball gave Tom's neck a squeeze, but Tom was reddening. I did know that, he said.

The old woman had already moved away and been stopped by a new group which bent to her. Tom said, I really did know that. But Aslami was asking again if she should check on Noah, and Kimball frowned, then raised his drink. You do what you must, he said. We do what we can. And Aslami looked questioningly back to Tom, who wanted to speak and had opened his mouth, but she walked up the stairs. Kimball squeezed Tom's neck once more and then patted his back, pushing lightly, and Tom felt the signal.

He cut straight through the middle of each room and since no one stopped him, but gave only those brief, hopeful smiles, he was soon out on the front porch and didn't turn around. He walked to the side of the house, where he paced, muttering at himself angrily, and then took some filling breaths through his nose and looked into a window.

Although he didn't know why, he missed his mother sharply. Inside the house he saw the writer bunching her face at another group. His father was leaning against a wall, listening to a student. His chin was raised, he was smiling and stroking his beard gently and rhythmically, and he was so powerfully all by himself.

* * *

As the noise of the party rose into the upstairs room, Aslami found herself unable to focus her attention. She picked through the murmurs and bursts of voices, and then suddenly she saw the boy's face. Placid, then tensing until all parts were wracked. Margaret ran the washcloth over him and his features again relaxed. He lifted his head and stared down at his feet in her lap, at her. *What are you doing to me?* a tiny, animal demand, then he dropped to the pillow. With her hands around his foot, she felt blind with fear.

Four nights ago, Aslami had come outside her apartment with her poodle, Baby, and had seen Noah come out of some trees up the street, walking away and holding his bicycle. She could recognize his gait even in the dark, back and forth like an old man, and she happily called out his name. He stopped, and when he again began walking, never turning around, her realization came down like thunder. The boy had been spying. His father had just left the apartment. She had watched Kimball leave from her bay window. There she had sat sadly looking from her reflection to the stand of trees across the street, then she had asked her little dog if she wanted to pee.

The affair had begun at the start of the semester. As it spread over her life, students began commenting on her giddiness, but also her new passivity -- of asking others for opinion, of refusing decisions. Once, she was known as "The Ottoman Umpire." She would march women to their guilty boyfriends and blast the men with threats, which were Turkish and stunningly violent. But in bars and parties, the men tried to stand closer. Their young faces lit not just sexually, but wanting a masculine secret. She told them stories: the Birmingham steel executives who invited Aslami and her best friend up for room service. The two men ordered giant plates of fruit and chuckled at

each other, and Aslami grew testy. Aslami stood and began stripping, explaining that even naked, nothing would happen, that they could lie in bed and talk like human beings. One executive agreed but stopped at his underwear. When they arranged themselves, side by side like boards, her best friend ran into the bathroom and locked the door, and here Aslami paused. *I mean, we were in high school. I was seventeen years old and making a point. Jesus. Fuck-me. In-shal-lah.* But the executives only began laughing. They coaxed her friend to unlock the door, and told them both to get on home. Aslami finished with Turkish curses as the students surrounding her shook their heads.

What could be done? In the upstairs room she held onto the boy, pushing her thumbs into his instep and swaying like a prayer. Whatever part she played in this process, she told herself it was one among many. The boy's brother Tom brought in a fan. He aimed it -- the breeze opening the room. Then Tom smiled at her and was nodding as if sympathetic, and this made a spike of hope. But he began to stroke the underside of his chin, an absent, rhythmic motion, lifting and tilting his head, and she stared until suddenly she realized from where the gesture came.

Margaret asked, *Is that necessary?* and nodded toward the boy's foot.

Margaret knew. The woman barely tolerated Aslami's presence, but Aslami answered her calmly. She wondered if Kimball had told her fat husband the secret, or if, like so many others, Margaret had simply seen Kimball walking her through campus, or a neighborhood street, on one of the sunny days she had brought her little dog to class. Class would end and they met in his office, where Kimball made no move toward her but simply said he would see her home and took the leash of Baby. As they walked, she would keep a few steps behind with her arms folded and head down. Her little dog by his cowboy boots.

Eventually Aslami would study the side of his face: round and pink, his chin up, courtly and even somber as if this were a parade. Then his features would flicker, he knew she was watching. His eyes slowly widened into little balls, and he worked his lips

and big brows with almost imperceptible twists. This was a game. If she laughed at all, everything would disappear back into place. But if she didn't, she soon would have to, because his features, continuing to tick in tiny but increasingly horrible ways, would become a mask.

At her apartment Kimball would stand looking over her bookcase, the photographs and curios arranged across the tabletop, while she checked her messages and fed her dog. He liked the fact she was so neat.

Why? she asked, but he had picked something up, a bauble, a framed photograph.

Who's this? he asked.

My father.

Ah. The farmer.

It was her second father, the doctor, which she had told him before, and when he looked blankly, she told him again: Osman bey the farmer, Ekrem bey the doctor, Larry the judge, whom her mother had met on an airplane. Kimball would pick up more things until finally Aslami pushed him into the chair by the table, sat down across from him. If Baby was near, she would put the dog in his lap, then light a cigarette and watch him stroke her.

She likes you, she'd say.

For my warmth and kindness.

I think she smells something familiar. It's your little pink pee-pee down there.

Kimball smiled. You'll watch your language in front of my girl.

She would grow anxious again, wondering if this was all they enjoyed, this flex and push of the boundaries of their worlds. His expression, a little sly, saying, *Ask away. Ask anything, but you may not like the answer.* And finally she would grind out her cigarette, move the dog from his lap to the floor and sit on him, wrapping her arms around his shoulders and demanding, *What? What? Tell me!*

The boy began crying, a low, terrible sound. Like something old in him was leaking out. Feeling uncontrolled in herself -- that she might cry -- Aslami walked quickly to the bathroom and washed her face then checked the mirror. The secret was a yellow sheen around her eyes. She loosened her features and bared her teeth. Before the reading, Kimball had introduced her to the visiting writer, and the old woman seemed to growl, Star student, eh? Where'd ya get all that hair?

Outside the bathroom Tom stood with his hands behind him, pushing off and then falling back on the wall. He smiled again at her.

He'll be all right, Tom said.

Oh don't worry, he'll be fine, Aslami said.

The boy looked puzzled for a moment and frowned. That's what I meant, he said finally. They stood for a moment, then Tom said, Hey, I'm all right. I just smoked some dope with those guys out back.

Oh, Aslami said.

Sure. But don't worry about Noah. The other night I woke up and he was out in the hall, sort of patting the wall. He was saying my name and saying, *Where do you think it is*, or something. It took me a little while to figure out he was still asleep. But I got him back in bed. He gets worked up sometimes. He was OK.

Aslami nodded. Then she said, You know, my grandmother always got migraines. Once a month, boom, migraine. And you know, she used grape leaves to cure them.

Grape leaves, Tom said.

She'd put them on her forehead and over her eyes. Aslami put her palm on her brow and smiled. Tom was nodding intently. They work, Aslami said. They cured her. I got some at my house. Maybe I'll go get them. You think? I could run over there right now.

Sure, Tom said. Sure, I'd go, I'd go with you. I know how to drive if you don't want to. We could go right now.

She looked at him. OK, she said. Here again she felt a wash from her center, rising like a color. It expanded, strong and faceless. She wished this was hope, or at least something pure, but in its center was too much of a need. Let's go, she said. Right now.

* * *

At her apartment was a man named Byron. He lived down the hall and still kept a key from when they were closer friends. That night because of the heat, he had come in and switched on her air-conditioner, then showered. Afterwards he dressed in the fresh clothes he had brought, then lay out on her couch while her little dog settled onto his stomach, and he clicked the TV on with the remote and lit a cigarette. The poodle tucked in her head and blinked, troubled as he exhaled.

Do you miss your momma? he asked.

The poodle sneezed. Oh you hush bitch, he said. He knew of the reading and the party; he had once studied in the same program as Aslami. But after receiving his degree he found himself still living in town, still in the South, and until recently holding his job at the University library, where he recognized the program's new students -- their books and their pale, carefully dipped faces of distraction.

Aslami, he had felt, was different. A person of high emotion, but with reserve that came from a depth she did not want anyone to see. They had met when he helped her move into the building, and on that night they had lay drunk together in the center of her floor, surrounded by boxes. They found her mother's picture, and Byron brought in pictures of his own. There was a shot of his mother, a tiny, attractive woman, like Aslami's. *Look at them*, Aslami said. *The same mouth and eyes! Look how pissed they are!* It was true, a thin mouth and squint, a toughness like a leathery skein above the fury. A few drinks later Byron was weeping. His head rested on Aslami's stomach, and she simply traced his hairline with her finger until he fell asleep.

He knew she understood not to push at the center of another's sadness, that it was to be guarded, a companion. He soon told her he was gay, information which he had never given out in the town. A year later he told her about the man he had met, a graduate student in finance, the first man he had seen who lived in the town. Aslami cooked them both dinner, at which she worked a kind of motherly magic, stroking the student's hand at the table and cooing Turkish praises, then turning to Byron and nodding her approval.

Look at the soft hair on his arm! she would say. Look at those eyes. It's true! Don't blush! At the end of the meal Byron felt woven into something golden, and to his astonishment, he could see the same in the man across the table, a light, shimmery happiness at their fortune.

And when Aslami began seeing the professor and would later run into Byron's apartment weeping or banging with energy, Byron was at first heartened. She had been so lonely, he knew, and she was in love. He trusted the professor; he had taken his seminar the previous spring, the professor's first class and Byron's last. He had seen the man as another sort of ally, not in emotion but intellect, one who paid attention to the irritants that most ignored. Stupidity, even the smallest sign, was something to battle. But within the first weeks of the affair this judgment was thrown. Byron stood in the hallway listening to the professor use the most ridiculous pet names: my high country girl, my mama bear, sugar plum, and her sudden bark of a laugh. Not simply cliché, but blind and ugly. When they made noises of leaving, Byron would run outside to the stoop and wait. Thinking that if the professor looked at him, one glance, it would give.

What tricks had he used with the class, or him? Force of presence? A strange mix of baritone and dry, bitchy humor? He had shut them up with an eyebrow or a quick puff of his cheeks, and he had only relaxed when Byron spoke, a dreamy smile appearing in his beard. Although Byron's thesis work was not in the professor's field, and the professor made no definite show of interest, Byron scheduled conferences. Had Byron

ignored that each literary anecdote was repeated each meeting? The placid attentiveness, slightly amused, was space -- smooth as the shiny skin over the man's forehead. A bowl which Byron filled with anything.

Six months later, on the apartment stoop, the professor would step by and nod at Byron with the same smile. He would walk to his car while Aslami stood at the building's entrance, and when Byron turned up to her, a dirty child, she would look down at him with a pleading face.

But boredom was the strongest root of evil, as the professor had explained with light defeat during each of their appointments, and if anything played a role in Byron's attitude, he knew it was this. His boyfriends left after one or two months, citing Byron's sudden malice. Once a lawyer who had come to town on business, who seemed to enjoy his outbursts, called and invited Byron to Miami, but Byron laughed into the phone with full alarm. He stayed. He spread over Aslami's couch and let his head tip over one end to let the black balls of regret roll out his mouth. Aslami had stopped accusing him of enjoying it all; he knew she saw him as her own punishment. She let him take Baby for walks. At four o'clock he rode his bicycle to the University library, where he worked at the circulation desk until ten, where, some nights late in the summer, he saw the wife of the professor come through the foyer, sometimes with her younger boy.

He knew from Aslami that she had two children. She had thin, erect looks, like a regal bird uncertain of her surroundings. In early September, he began making small conversations at the checkout, and she said yes, she remembered him from the parties last spring, but she was otherwise brief. Byron was not discouraged. He asked her about the Northeast, and she said how much she missed the fall.

How many times had he heard this from northerners? But he kept on. He complimented her outfits, which were draped, peasant style things, and she would wave him away, at first a little suspiciously, but her need for the flattery crinkled out, and Byron found himself coiling as she lingered at the desk, bringing on a certain speech that

he once considered vulgar. *Look* at your nails, Mrs. Kimball, he told her. Bitten right to the quick. You've got to stop these *terrible* habits.

Oh Byron, she sighed, the ringing Northern whine. *Byrin*.

She introduced him to Noah, who always placed his books on the counter and then stepped back behind his mother, as if to block influence. Byron called him little man and her sweetheart: Well hey there little man. Now *sweetheart*, look at this. This book'll take you through New Years! Look at the type. You'll go *blind*!

At this time Aslami's affair was in the early stages. The professor was still walking her little dog from class, then sitting at her table, and Aslami told Byron that was all. But as the affair progressed, as the professor now drove to and from the apartment building at leisurely hours of the day, Byron noticed his wife frequenting the library perhaps more regularly, and the voice he used gathered momentum.

Look at these art books. Sweetheart, Missus Kimball, are you an artist? Are you? Don't be shy. Now wouldn't it be just *something* to own one of these pictures. My, my, my, my.

Until he felt it unwrapping through him. She tried to use other students at the checkout desk, but he happily called her over. He began the treatment with other women of Mrs. Kimball's age, of which the library was full. But he most looked forward to her. He'd sense her nearby, look up and see her trying to move across the foyer via the far wall with her head down, with her son hurrying to keep pace. Sweetheart! he called. Missus Kimball! Where are you running to?

She would stand with Noah, her long arms useless at her sides, while the boy stared at him with the disinterest only children have.

Well hey little man. Don't you look handsome tonight. Oh, do you two have to be on your way? Is that it? Well, you be careful. We'll see you!

He knew he was shouting, he knew the other students behind the desk had begun looking at him archly, and one evening as one more saddened older woman had backed

away from the counter, Byron turned to a freshman girl shelving behind him and shouted, *Sugar, tell me. Am I offending you?* and he was called into the supervisor's office and given his notice.

But he never came back after that night. He spent his time at home, or, when he could, in Aslami's air-conditioned apartment, especially when it was unoccupied. And on the night of the party, Byron came in and fell asleep on the couch. He woke once to the phone ringing. Aslami's answering machine clicked on and he heard the professor's voice, blurringly drunk amidst party noises, a distant signal: *Mama bear? Where's my mama bear? This is papa. Where'd my cowgirl go?*

Byron mimicked him, then fell back asleep. He woke again to the lock rattling and the little dog barking on his chest.

It's me Baby! Janum benim! Aslami said, and then exclaimed, Jesus! It's freezing! When she saw Byron, her eyes snapped away and then back. He was smiling. Aslami's mouth opened, and again she looked through the room as if it might not be hers. Byron, she said finally.

Right here, Byron said, and waved. You got yourself a message.

She rubbed the bare skin above the scoop of her shirt and stared a moment longer, then walked straight across the room into her kitchen. Byron shifted on the couch to watch her go, and when he turned back there was a teenage boy in the doorway, with glasses, a somewhat large head. Hi there, the boy said.

Hello, Byron said, but he was already studying the boy. He took in the overall ranginess, then the handsome adult size of his nose, the eyelids and weak chin, until the proportions threw themselves together and Byron couldn't help but giggle, as this was Julie and Bob Kimball's eldest son.

* * *

Before leaving for Aslami's apartment, Tom had sat in her truck a block from his house. Next to him Aslami smoked and asked strange questions. Did he and Noah know

anybody in this neighborhood? Why did they move here? Did Noah get migraines regularly? In the dark, her profile looked angry, her bent, fierce nose and narrowed eyes, but her voice was high and jumbled. They had left the party only a few minutes before. He had moved through the crowd and followed Aslami head up with a somber, calm expression. Although the marijuana still made jumpy grabs, he believed that what he had accomplished with Aslami -- the decisiveness of it -- was smoothing. Physical enough that everyone in the party might recognize him anew. Tom followed her outside the back door, where the stoned students turned to them. Brother Kimball! one said.

Hey, Tom said. I'm on a mission of mercy.

But in the truck she took a cigarette from her handbag and lit it, and they sat.

Well, Tom said, finally. Once there was this kid Kyle. After we first got here, this little kid walks came over and says, I'm Kyle. I'm seven-and-a-half-years-old. He was this little black kid He never really stopped talking. He came by all day this summer, he sat on that porch talking. Noah taught him to play frisbee. He's a smart kid. He showed us places around here. Then his sister came over one day, and I think his grandmother. They came into the backyard looking for him and Kyle wouldn't come out of the house and they wouldn't go in. My mother invited them, but they said no. But he came out and we haven't seen much of him since.

Tom stopped, seeing he had talked too much and that this wasn't the answer Aslami was looking for, or she simply wasn't paying attention. Kyle's sister had looked his age, sleepy, rubbing her neck. She had stood a distance from the back door calling Kyle, and further behind, near the treeline was the old woman who called things to the girl Tom couldn't understand. When Tom's mother coaxed Kyle outside, the girl took his hand and the three of them walked into the woods.

Do you like this town? Aslami asked. I'm sorry, she said. I don't know what I mean.

She started the truck and they drove down the street. To Tom, the cab was becoming strangely miniature. Aslami scratched her bare leg at the calf and smiled. Look. I got Poison Oak.

He nodded. From the light of the dash he could see the black hairs on her leg, stopping at her knee. Now he was growing hopeless. They dipped down the slope of the road, off the high ground of the neighborhood and town and into the intervening woods. A water tower passed high through the branches as if floating. Then the ground leveled into the narrow land along the river. The sound of the power generators rose up and fell from behind the pine trees, feeding in and out. Tom thought, *The sound of heat*. And here he felt a kind of grounding base from his smartness. He looked at Aslami's legs again, up the line to her stomach and breasts, and he was present again, a level strength from his chest to his groin.

You know, Aslami said, I used to live in a neighborhood like that. I kind of liked it. When we first moved here, we lived in Talladega. My step-father was a doctor. You know the Talladega Super Speedway? My real father was a farmer. Or he ran a farm, a melon farm, in Turkey. But he was stabbed by one of his workers when I was little.

Tom nodded, again locked in confusion, but she went on. Then *boom*, my mother married my step-father and he moved us all to Talladega when I was ten. Turkey to Talladega! That's where he got his residency. Then he got a practice in Birmingham, and he died too. He had a heart attack.

She paused. Oh fuck. Oh sorry. I don't know why I'm saying all this.

No, no, Tom said and waved his hand. I know shit like that can happen.

She nodded. That's right. So we lived in this house in Talladega when we first got there, for some reason, this kind of poor neighborhood. And all the kids would say, *Are you black or what?* And I said no, but went to my mother and asked. She told me, You tell them you're a Turk. And Jesus, can you see how that went over? A Turk? You know? Gobble-gobble-gobble-gobble.

When Aslami stopped, smoking her cigarette, Tom began trying to fantasize. That she would reach and hold his leg, rub him, that she turned to him wearing a robe. But it slid, the looks became sympathetic, not dark, and soon he stopped, as all they could do was hold each other cradled and unable to move.

When she stubbed the cigarette into the dash ashtray and said loudly, So what about your mother? Do you think your mother likes it here? he gave up and buckled in, chanting, *fuck you, fuck you*, in his head.

The drug's effects, once too strong, were mostly lazy and faint, and Tom now wished they would roughly overtake him. Aslami was facing forward. She had a stiff bend out the side of her mouth. You know? she was saying. Your mother might not like it here. Sometimes it's hard to come to a new place. I know that. And I think that's what's wrong with your brother. It's stressful. Tom imagined Noah sleep-walking in the hallway, the particular odor he had, how he touched the wall then stared alertly back at him, as if unsure which of them should be there. As Aslami kept up the wavering drone, he let the image of his mother push forward and combine all the worries. She stood at the kitchen window in New Hampshire, years ago. Hard winter light came through the window and divided the room. He was sitting on the floor, playing with something. Look at him, his mother said. She was biting her thumb and talking to herself. Maybe Noah rested on her hip. From her tone, he knew she was watching his father walk up the long driveway, carrying his satchel, coming home from his classes. Look at his shoulders, look at how he walks. His poor back, she said. That stupid, stupid man.

In the truck they turned off the river road, driving up into woods again, up a hill and into another neighborhood. The area was near the University. Most of the houses were brick and dainty, with clipped hedges and shutters. Aslami continued on, asking again if Noah had migraines before, if they liked their school and had friends, what Tom wanted to do when he was older.

Shut up, he thought.

Why do you call your dad Kimball?

Tom sighed. Because that's his name.

I think you should call him dad. Aslami pulled suddenly to the side of the street but left the truck running. That's my place, she said, and Tom leaned and saw the building with various lights on, flat brick and meaningless. Aslami said, He told me once that everyone was called by their last name in Texas. I said, Yeah, right.

He's not from Texas, Tom said.

Aslami looked at him. What? He's not? She had turned her body to him in the seat, and she held her hands together in her lap, looking very young, and Tom studied her curiously.

Kimball is not from Texas, he said. He laughed and rubbed his chin, and the scene began welling in him. It was unsteady, but he held her there. *Jeez*, he said. Is that what he told you? He'll tell people that sometimes. It's a joke. No way, no way is he from Texas.

Aslami kept staring at him, and Tom said, If you want to know, he's from Indiana. Did he tell you about the bucking bronco? He laughed again and opened the truck door. Texas, he said, chuckling.

Aslami stayed in her seat while Tom stood outside and grew uncomfortable, the engine chugging. Finally he leaned down into the cab. Hey, are we going in?

Aslami cut the engine, she opened her door and almost stepped out. OK, she said, and twisted back oddly, laying prone across the seat to look up at Tom. You know, your father and I, we talk. I consider him a friend. He's a good person to talk to, your father. You understand? OK? Does that make sense?

Sure. I got you.

Aslami nodded. She sat back and nodded again, then got out of the truck. Tom let her walk in front into the building, keeping a distance as if the confusion might spring back on him again. But when he reached the apartment door, cool air flowed out, making

him stop. Two lamps lit the inside. Small woven rugs lay across the floor and the furniture was all varnished darkly, with doilies placed on the tabletops. He saw that in this room he might explain himself, as she could to him. A TV was on, then clicked off, and a small dog came from around the couch which faced the TV. The dog barked and walked in the direction of Aslami, and then Tom saw the head of a man sticking from the end of the couch, smiling at him. The man's head was round and nearly bald, but he was young. Tom said hello, and the man blinked, then said hello back, then began to laugh in a high-pitched way, almost a whinny. He jumped off the couch in an agile movement, like an acrobat, and Tom saw how small he was. A round little man in a black t-shirt and pants. He was coming forward, still laughing, to shake Tom's hand.

* * *

The grape leaves were wrapped in a clear ziplock bag, slicked together in a dark mass. They were kept in olive oil, and Aslami stared at the bag, surprised somehow by the weight and pliantness. The lie about Texas had slipped into her in a vague and unreasonable way, like a gas, and Byron's presence expanded it so fiercely that she was overtaken, even her memory. But now she could remember anything. Here in her kitchen was the bag in her hands. She had once found a scar on the side of Kimball's thigh, a very faint white line with three dots on either side. He had smiled down at her over his big, pink body and told her that was where he snapped his femur, thrown from a wild horse at a ranch in Texas.

The dog barked and Aslami jumped, then knelt to it on the kitchen floor. Ohh yavrum, she said in Turkish, and stroked it hard down its back again and again. Baby, janum benim. Minik karu. Ohh bebek, aydun oi, inshallah.

The clearest picture of her grandmother was set in the ferry rides across the sea of Marmara. Once a month they took the trip, accompanying her mother for tea with the fat aunts, whose husbands, now running the farm, never appeared. On the boat her grandmother mixed complaints of the burning behind her eyes with curses against her

dead son-in-law. When Aslami was eight, with her grandmother dead for a year and her mother now engaged to the doctor, she was taken on a last visit across the water. Aslami's head had been shaved for lice, and although it had grown enough to part to one side, she couldn't help imagining the fun her aunts would have and cried all through the trip. Her mother, however, ignored this. Later Aslami would realize that the woman was calculating each insult which would be slipped like a razor into the coming afternoon. Before the tea Aslami was sent away. She walked along the borders of the fruit groves. A group of women pickers called at her from the middle of a field, Pretty little boy! Come here! Give us all kisses! Aslami waved and was running over the ground to them. When she was close enough, the women stopped shouting and began to stare. They all burst out laughing and swept her into them. Aslami had told Kimball that this was her favorite memory, because all the women wanted to touch her, and she had so wanted to be a boy.

Kimball stroked her hair. Not a boy anymore, he said.

Yes I am, she told him.

Aslami stood up from the kitchen floor, brushed the dog hair from her hand into the trash can, and finally turned toward the living room. Byron and Tom stood side by side. Tom was expressionless and speaking to Byron, who listened with a wide grin. Both were facing the open kitchen door. In the last few minutes she had made the decision to separate herself from the present, but now this was fragile. She came out to them carrying the bag. So you have met, she said.

Her voice was stilted and Byron mimicked her. Yes. We have met, he said, and then went on in a giant drawl. Strangest thing though, I feel I have known Tom for so much longer a time.

Oh Byron, Aslami said. Byron, please.

Now Tom, Byron said. Tom, did you know I took one of the first classes your father taught last spring? *Historical Reversal in British and American Narrative*. A real

shit fire, that one was. And did you know I've met your mother and little brother. They come over to the library and we chat. Did you know that?

Huh, Tom said. He shrugged and looked blankly into the space between them and Aslami. I guess you got the complete set.

Aslami struggled with herself, but Byron laughed. This boy's smart! A wise-ass boy. But a responsible boy. Tom here told me about your mission of mercy. A wise and responsible boy. Do you like that? That quality of responsibility?

Tom, she said. Tom, Byron is a friend of mine. He comes over here because his place gets very hot and I have an air-conditioner. He's sensitive to heat. Here, I have the medicine. She raised the plastic bag filled with the leaves. I think we should all go and you should go back to your apartment. OK?

You think so? Tom, I've got some questions you might be able to answer about your dad. He's a man of mystery to some, your dad is.

Oh Byron, she said. Oh fuck. She felt the supports in her not crumble but fade, so she was left hovering in a large space. Tom had moved closer to the doorway where a service table held an antique tea set. He picked up a saucer and turned it over. Byron pulled Aslami to his side with an arm around her shoulders and addressed the room: *Fuck*. Pronounce it correctly. Hey, Tom, he said. We're just kidding. We're playing around.

Tom had moved against the wall with his hands behind him. He was bouncing lightly again off the wall, all his features weirdly fixed as they had before in the hallway of his house. Oh Byron, she said again.

Oh Aslami. What is it? Tell me.

Byron! she pleaded.

Aslami! Tell me! Aslami!

She heard herself, her voice tapped far into her head. It was a giant rock and she was saying terrible things. She could tell by Byron's face how terrible this was.

Something small broke through his face, pulling his features inward, making him like a little boy. She felt shame, but this fell away just as quickly as it rose and she was emptied and impassive. Byron closed his eyes and smiled, and when he opened them, he whispered, Where's my mama bear? Where's my high country girl? He walked to the doorway and stood beside Tom. Tonight, he said, is a good night for a party. Hob nob with the local literati, meet famous dyke writers. Tonight is that night.

He saluted and left. She heard the door to the building hiss and the truck door open and slam shut, then three blasts of the horn. Her little dog barked. Baby was at her feet and she knelt down on the floor and stroked her. Ohh janum benim. Minik karu, inshallah.

Hey, don't cry, Tom said.

I'm not, she said to him. But he was focussed a little to the side of her face and wouldn't meet her eyes. She stood and found her keys on the table, then pushed the button for her answering machine. When Kimball's voice came out, horrible and odd, she clicked it off. She looked at Tom, who was peering forward, and a high laugh rose out of her throat, but it was a laugh she had never heard before.

After a moment, Tom said, I can drive if you don't feel well. I know how to drive.

Her little dog sat watching from the floor. Without looking at Tom, Aslami came out to the hallway and waited, then locked the door and gave him the keys and the bag of grape leaves. She waited again while he stood examining the bag in his hand for a moment, and then let him follow her outside.

* * *

When the two filed out of the building, both heads bowed, Byron half-wished that he had never made this move. But when they split at the bumper, Aslami heading for the passenger's side and Tom for the driver's, he perked. This is exciting, he said to Aslami. But she reached into the footwell and brought up her handbag, lit a cigarette from it and stared ahead. Tom, Byron said, turning to the boy, you're driving.

Tom set the dark bag of leaves on the dash, then turned over the engine. He pumped the gas then bent down to study the knob on the gearshift closely, found first, then went back to the wheel and held it with both hands.

Lights, Byron said.

Sorry, Tom said. Sorry. It's OK! I got it. Tom scanned the dark dash until Byron reached over and turned the switch. The tree branches overhanging the street lit up white. Tom held the wheel again, motionless, and after a moment the little truck came out into the street like a boat. Pushed, Byron thought, by the featherlite force of confusion.

They drove quietly, and the silence, the warm air blowing through the cab, and the pressure of Aslami and the boy's shoulders into his, all chastened Byron. He tried to picture himself entering the professor's house, full of rude glee, the crowds separating, but the scene wouldn't gel. The truck turned out onto the open river road, and the air turned earthy. If teachers smiled and asked how he was keeping himself busy these days, he would give them the short of it. But they would be drunk and not particularly care about time. They would be growing tired, lying on the furniture and listening to old records. The professor might give a nod, a clap on his back, and call him Bill or Bart. They wouldn't ask, *Byron, where is your heart pointing to these days? Are you still burning up from the center out? Where is your work that needs to be done?* If he could answer, he would tell them he'd grown a little lost, a little fat. Maybe my heart was broken, he would say. But I have my comforts.

Aslami leaned forward in the seat. Tom, she said. I'm really sorry about this.

But her voice was meek as a girl's, setting Byron as wrong. And I am sorry, too, he said. We should all apologize to each other. A full united front.

Please be quiet, Tom said.

Byron looked back and forth between them and a happy fist opened in his chest. But I thought we had a united front! Allies! What will we tell our papa bear?

Aslami slapped him. She had swung her left hand up in an arc right up his chest to strike his cheek, and was staring at him savagely. OK! Tom said. But Byron hit her back. He was able to pull his right arm from behind Aslami's and backhand her with his knuckles. He smiled at her, inches away, but the truck tipped sideways. Aslami screamed and Tom yelled, *I'm sorry!* They were off the road's shoulder and passing into the pine trees. They glided through the branches, then Byron watched as a small but sturdy tree came forward in the lights, one of its low branches high enough to spread over the hood like a cape, then the bumper hit its trunk, and the ball of angry impact sounded in his center. Byron and Aslami had their hands braced on the dashboard and Tom still gripped the steering wheel, breathing shallowly. *We're fine*, Byron said, and reached over to touch Tom's chest. The boy's leg jerked up, catching on the stickshift. Tom twisted himself against the door and Byron saw for a second his terrible face and then was kicked straight in the stomach. It crushed, then traveled through him in a sad way. *Of course*, he thought, and sighed out the air in his lungs. The boy kept kicking and Aslami had disappeared -- her door open -- and Byron was simply going to slide head first out into the woods, the boy's furious feet behind him.

Then the kicking stopped. Byron's face rested by a tire, half in a bed of pine needles while his legs bowed up into the cab. He breathed in the pine smell and heard the boy breathing. He heard the driver's door open and close, and the boy's footsteps through the woods. *You got me but good!* Byron called. He flipped himself supine on the ground, tucked his legs out of the truck and rocked with the momentum to his feet. The woods were lit brokenly from the headlight rays. Aslami stood not far from the truck, staring at him. Where'd he go? he asked her. She was crying again. But Byron was fueled, fully and gratefully. He ran up the flattened truck path, then saw the boy fifty yards ahead on the opposite side of the river road. But the boy was walking, not running, and this sight stopped him. He had wanted a flight and the boy was not playing.

Byron! Aslami called from the woods. Wait please! Goddamn, wait!

Byron crossed the road and trotted along the shoulder until about twenty-five yards separated him from the boy, then he walked too. Hey there! Killer! he yelled. The boy had begun moving up the slope, up toward the plateau of the town. He moved deliberately over the loose rock, bent over and spacing his legs wide. As Byron followed he heard his name again and saw that Aslami was running across the road now, waving. When Byron reached the top of the ridge, he was sweating and had to stand for a moment. The river was a giant curving band below. The power station sat fenced beside the river lock.

Aslami was tripping in the gulleys of the ridge. I'm coming! she yelled. But Byron felt himself growing softer, or smaller, losing scope. The boy was near a fence which bordered the ridge, then he turned and disappear into it. When Byron reached the spot he found slats missing and squeezed through the hole. The other side was darker with dense trees and a path through them. Beyond each side of the trees and brush, houses and backyards became visible. The boy was walking a short way ahead. In one of his hands Byron could see the glint of the plastic bag, the medicine for his brother.

I found the hole! Don't worry! Aslami called. Her voice sounded too frantic now. But as he heard her come on the path, she spoke quietly, as if understanding this. I'm right here, she said.

The path turned downward gradually into denser growth. Worn roots shone in the ground. So I take it this is where you all build your hideouts, Byron said. He wanted his tone irritable, but pitched it too loud. They walked further and Byron saw that they were in a small ravine. He tried again. Is this where y'all play?

This is a cowpath, Tom said.

Tom never turned from walking, and Byron tried harder to read the boy's voice. He was close enough to touch him. He heard Aslami behind breathing short breaths, while in front Tom's were forcibly long. Byron wondered how he had come into this

dream, or who had come into his. He understood somehow that Aslami felt the same, that they were moving through another's center.

Tom turned up the side of the ravine and at the top they were behind a house. A group of people sat on the grass, listening as one man played a guitar, and then these people began turning and standing. They were students. The group split in two as Tom walked toward them. As Tom passed, their expressions changed, moving to dumb and amazed, and through the kitchen and to the stairs, the people stepped quietly out of the way. At the top of the stairs the boy went into a dark room and out of it came the poetry teacher's wife, who saw the two below.

She hissed, What did you do?

But they looked past her into the room, where the father stood staring at them. The man's look was a challenge. It deepened, then broke quietly with a small frown which offered nothing. He turned to the bed, where Tom had opened the bag and was putting leaves on Noah's forehead. When Tom was finished, he looked up. What? he asked, as if only annoyed to find them there. In the dark his features were hooded and slack. Whatever had been held in him was now given up. His brother sighed, moving in the bed, and Tom watched him. You all can go, he said.

They stepped back out of the room. The father went also, saying nothing, his expression still caught in a thoughtful kind of trance, then a small, puff of his cheeks, as if to show that the only reaction left were tired relief. He was closing the door when his son said, No, not you, Kimball. You should stay.

My Record of Luck

I thank Pete Fish, who taught me stonemasonry. *The hardest art*, he called it. I thank Pete because he told me, *Go to Colorado*, and this led me to Nancy, whom I now love.

Nancy Bourjalis! I say her name. I am in Denver. A clean, emptied city. Somewhere near is Nancy's home. I see her compact shape and hold her calm features in my mind. At two-thirty this morning I arrived in the city and parked in a small lot near the ballpark, turned the seat down and slept. It is now dawn, and I have woken to another back spasm and crawled onto the lot, where I lie supine, face to the sky above the brick building tops. My sweat is cooling, the asphalt grows hard, and I am thinking of Nancy, of Pete Fish. Then my dead brother, my dead mother, whose debutante picture sits in my car -- then the venomous women I loved before Nancy. I thank them all. A window light appears in the highest story of a building and I say "Thank you!" But in a whisper: my muscles and organs still clutch me in confusion. "Thank you," I say.

Stay with me, I tell them.

Is this too fast?

I must end Pete Fish's story first.

In the Boston village of Belmont, Pete Fish pickaxed a buried electric line. We had set about demolishing a set of concrete steps -- in their place the owner wanted rough granite block. Pete was shot in the air and landed some fifteen feet away still holding the pickaxe, then jumped to his feet, flung the tool and stomped through the garden cursing as I followed behind and apologized. The accident was in no way my fault, but I was long in the habit of taking blame around Pete, as his temper came so quick and could

blacken the day. The accident, however, changed him. Through the next two weeks we arranged the stone, but in the middle of work he sat on the ground and stared for minutes. He misplaced his tools, and instead of firing off at me, a childlike befuddlement went through his face. He shrugged. When the stairs were completed he wrote me a check which included three extra weeks of pay and said that was all, he was sixty-two years old and had had enough. I listened to him, then took his hand, shaking it and insisting we have a final drink. He shrugged. We drove into the South End, to the bar where we'd first met.

"Do you remember?" I asked in the bar. "What an odd night that was. Remember when we met? Such strange days."

"A-yeh," Pete said. "Strange they were."

"I was almost a lawyer. I'd be a lawyer right now if I hadn't met you."

Pete nodded. We sat quietly, until I grew uncomfortable.

"A lawyer!" I said, and shook my head. Then with more heartiness, "Five years working together!"

"Thirty-eight. Thirty-eight years total for me," he said.

We drank more. I asked, "What will you do?" Then before he could tell me I was overcome with sadness. I said, "Pete, I don't know what I'm going to do. Why did you hire me? What do you think I should do?"

Pete considered me, then closed his eyes rubbed his face as if this were not unexpected. He told me I was fine, a good worker. I had people who'd care for me. But I told him no, no I didn't. Pete said, "Johnny, you told me about your family, already. It's a sad story, I know." But I told him no, not that. I told him how the woman I lived with had changed her mind about me, 360 degrees. Pete had little use for personal information, but what did I care on this last night?

When I finished and sat emptied at the corner table, Pete did not respond. After a moment he said, "Well, this girl you're with is a rich one, at least. Am I right?" and he

reached and touched my shoulder in a fumbling way, then stood up. He said, "Well, I'm sorry Johnny," and walked out of the bar, and his broad lumbering back was my last picture of Pete Fish.

But in two weeks a letter came, and in it was Pete Fish's advice for me -- pages of it, as if I now had a fortune which he had taken upon himself. He wrote in a tiny hand, *Johnny, when I was little I wanted to go to China. I wanted to be a missionary. That means we got an arbitrary life. Or, Johnny, opinion is nothing to be afraid of. You do need conviction. But remember everything out of you is opinion. When you know that, then you know responsibility. You watch out, Johnny, for the people with a plan. Watch out for them. I include a woman's love. A woman's love is dear but to them everything has to mean everything. This is dangerous.* Near the end of the letter, Pete wrote that he always wished he had gone to Colorado. In Colorado a man could still stake a three month mining claim. *But you don't mine, Johnny. You take a sturdy tent, canned food, books, lamps, a generator. You find a good spot in the woods and you build a good stone base with available materials. You have a summer of peace.*

The letter came in mid-April. It had no return address, but with the postmark and a phone I tracked him to North Carolina and received from his sister the news of his death. The news broke strangely, like a mist. If you were to analyze the effects -- sleeping difficulty, sciatica (which had rarely troubled me during my years of stonework) and a daytime dreamyness which further annoyed the woman with whom I lived -- you might think them extreme, as the woman did. But it was not his death, per se. If you would look quickly at my history. My mother had a tumor in her brain. After my father left for work in the morning, she helped the maid clean the breakfast plates and then quietly went to the bedroom and would nap, as she called it, and get up when he returned in the evening. She died when I was seven and my brother three. My brother is gone, too. At seventeen, on a clear day, my brother piloted his Cessna into a low Berkshire

mountain. I tell people the stories not for sympathy but purchase. This act of disappearance. Unemotional, unpromised, gone.

What can one do with history? I lay flat at night, listening to the nerve splay from my buttocks into the backs of my legs and downward, then I screamed when it spasmed. She woke and I feigned sleep. On the first of May I called the accountant who ran my father's estate and persuaded him to wire five thousand dollars, then left a short letter for the woman, apologizing. I took my tools, some clothes, books and old photographs, and drove onto the westbound Pike.

If only I had been taken directly to Nancy, caught some magnetized flight, a wave that would have dropped me at her door. But perhaps it did; it was simply more spiral than straight.

Six months ago on this first trip I stopped in Denver at a gas station perhaps not far from this parking lot. But at that time my stop was to call Aspen, where a friend from my brief days in the Boston University Law School now lived. My friend was amused by my reappearance after the five years, but I explained my story and must have shown a novelty he needed.

He invited me into the mountains, put me in his guest house, fed me and directed associates toward me for stonework. One of them, a lady whose divorce he had represented, wanted a slate bathroom floor. She came from the East and missed the ocean, so I scored and chipped the stone into a fish pattern -- a surprise. Did I see how much she resembled what I'd left in Boston? The sleek height, long neck and limbs. Rich, with a quick and angry mind. At the parties in Aspen, like those parties in Boston, the woman told my story to show I had given up what the rest of them should. I stood by; I said shy, intelligent words; created for them the anomaly of delicateness housed in my burly working body. A month passed and I had moved into her home. Sciatica returned; I could not feel my feet for hours in the morning. I built her a hearth and patio. I watched

the mountains and remembered Pete's mining advice, and at a hardware store outside of town I found myself asking the old men. I was given either strange looks or was told that if it were possible, the paperwork alone would kill me.

But the Aspen woman perhaps had her own sources of advice, and one Friday in October I arrived home and was told that she would no longer be used. My things were stacked in a small pile. I drove away on route 82 and soon began talking to myself, talking more rapidly, returning to the same question -- *Where do you think you're going?* - until I felt the snap of a spasm. On the roadside I lay in the snow, sweating, my legs jumping like fishes. Then I called her from a gas station. "You see," I told her. "Now I really am spineless." She hung up.

But less than a week after this conversation I met Nancy.

We would meet in *Sunlight Springs, Healing Mineral Waters and Comfortable Family Lodging*. After my collapse I drove north, holding my tricking spine from the seatback, thinking that by the time I came upon the I-70 junction I would have decided on east or west, but then I passed this billboard and took the exit. The operation was set alone in a hollow, at the foot of one mountainside and facing the other. Behind the small building of rooms were a line of four square bath houses made of cinderblock, the sulfur smell drifting out of them, across the yard, up to the second floor landing where I would stay. My first night set my schedule: the bath houses had closed at 9 PM and I lay awake and walked on the landing, and I did not understand how compressed I had become -- my back, my organs, how thin my breaths were -- until I entered the baths the next morning and slept in the water. I slept from morning to noon, ate at the small cafe, and slept again in the water until supper. I created a harness by looping old towels under my armpits and securing them to the handrail. Within a few days the muscles softened, although the nerve was still a hovering presence, withholding judgment on this absence of abuse.

On the fourth day, I brought out my tools and offered my services. Simple handywork -- tuckpointing old mortar, replacing pipe -- for meals at the cafe. Afternoons I took trips into the woods with pry bar and wheelbarrow, collecting mid-sized stones for flower planters that I had planned for around the baths. On the sixth day I had enough stone, and some time after I began work a woman walked into the yard, watched me, returned to the motel building, then came back to the yard and watched me again.

"You're making a planter," she said after a moment.

I turned to her. She wore a bathrobe and stood a little too far away for me to know if this was a conversation, but then I saw her face and understood. She was unrelaxed, squinting although there was no sun, and what really did I understand? Did I know her face should be opened? *Someone has told her to do this.* That is what I thought.

This is Nancy, of course.

I said, "Yes, it's a planter." And she nodded.

"I saw you get the stones," she said. Then she added quickly, "I saw you in the bath the same day, yesterday, but I didn't want to disturb you. You had those straps on. Did you hurt yourself? I think it's nice you're fixing up the place. I've been watching you work from the balcony. The owners said you were a guest, and that you were just helping out. I think that's great, what you're doing." She paused, a little winded, and tucked in a dark strand of hair. "So..." she said. She was looking above me toward the mountain, smiling, now tired. She had stepped nervously into another place, but I hadn't followed.

"You're going into the bath?" I asked.

She looked herself over. "Yes. Yes, that's what I'm doing." She sighed and picked the belt of her robe and examined it, then she half-smiled at me and opened the door.

The water move inside. I heard it. I worked with the stones for some time, but had trouble putting together a stable course. Then I saw the course was too close to the

bath doorway -- someone might bang their foot. I took the edgy energy I now had and went to my room to smoke and read.

I would like to say now that during the night and the following day I could think only of her, but no. Occasionally her last expression rose up. A flash of age. A starkness. Something I had no right to see.

After supper on the seventh day, I entered the bath and saw her asleep in the water, her feet poking up from the surface and head resting on the concrete rim. I looked around me, then stepped down and arranged my harness. Her face was placid, her black hair wetted back like a sculpture, and in this stillness I wondered from where the expression had ever come. When I woke, the water was echoing in the room. Nancy was up, coughing raggedly with her fist at her mouth. I moved toward her, but my harness held me. "What's wrong?" I said. "Did you swallow water?"

"I'm sorry!" And she coughed again. "I didn't mean to wake you up!"

"I'm awake," I said. "Just a moment." I struggled with the harness. But she was out of the water, already tying her robe. Out of nowhere, I said, "I'm John Albright."

She looked down at me from the doorway with terrible confusion, her hair stuck across her face, but she was trying to smile. By the time I freed myself, she was gone; the yard outside was empty.

Keep one eye on where you're at, was Pete Fish's advice on the job. *Check the level. Take a step back.* After I looked through the motel building, into the mirrored windows of the closed cafe and the lobby, I paced the upstairs landing... I remembered this. I went to my room and lay down. I was sweating. *You forget why you are here*, I thought. *You're running again.* I closed my eyes, drifting but not sleeping. When I opened them, I saw my room. Its muted colors, the items arranged across the bureau. A shot of my mother holding my brother as an infant. My mother's debutante photo in its walnut frame. She wore mink gloves, clasping her hands together in her lap, tucking

them too closely into her stomach in expectation. In the top drawer of the bureau was Pete Fish's letter.

I wrapped myself in the blanket and came out onto the landing. It was dark, possibly near morning by now. I lit a cigarette and walked to the end, then peed into the bushes below. A dog barked from behind, and I peed on my blanket while putting myself away, and through a door down the landing came a squat black-haired dog and the woman, both watching me.

Her hair was in a ponytail, and she wore an old-fashioned flannel nightgown. She looked even smaller. She said, "I'm Nancy Bourjalis," and was peering carefully.

"Johnny Albright." I was smiling, still dreamy, but as she looked at me my features loosened and wobbled. "I have back trouble." I patted myself.

She nodded. Her dog walked to me and sniffed my blanket. The dog was neckless, pig-shaped. "From masonry," Nancy said.

"Yes."

"You don't really sound like a mason."

I must have shown a loss, a whirring, because she looked even more closely, and her face suddenly mirrored mine. "I just saw you yesterday working. I saw the tools in your car. Maybe I'm prying."

I shook my head. Her dog lay down between us.

"It just seemed interesting work. I saw you picking the stones you used. I mean you were picky with the stones, I noticed. I was standing right here. I wondered, how does he decide?"

She waited, and I said, "You can tell if they're happy. Someone once explained it to me that way."

"Right. I don't know. I asked the owners about you." She studied me again, and her face grew more alert until her eyes were urgent. (Was this my face? I thought. What

are you seeing?) She touched her throat and her features fell. "I am sorry. I am prying. Look at me. God. Good night. Good night, Johnny. Come on, Frankie. Frankie, come."

The dog stood and shuffled into the room, and Nancy smiled again before closing the door. I stood on the landing in my blanket. I was awake at a volume, and I remained so. When there was enough light I began arranging the stone for the planters again. I worked through breakfast at the cafe, and at ten I saw Nancy carrying her suitcase to her car. Her dog clambered into the back seat, and she shut the door and the trunk, waved and walked over to me. "You're almost done," she said.

"Where are you going?" I asked.

She told me Denver, home.

I stood up. She waited and smiled but saw I had nothing to say, and she went on. "This was my last breath sort of thing, or my re-entry, or something. It's back to real life. Got to get a job." She waited, then extended her hand, "So. Very nice to meet you."

"I'm going to Denver, too." I said.

I said this perhaps too formidably, as if I might follow her and sit in her car, but the decision was encompassing. She paused for only a moment, alert again, then asked where I lived. I said I was in transit, basically headed to Denver to start a small stonework business. I could call her, I said, and then out of the blue I added "You look strong... you look like you should work with your hands."

She laughed quickly. "That's actually a nice compliment."

She waited again. "You mean I'm solid," she said. "Is that what you mean? I do like gardening. I like to paint, also. I'm a painter. I have a good eye."

"Exactly. I know you do."

What had been recognized? She gave me her phone number on a scrap of paper and drove away as I repeated *I'm going to Denver*. In the evening I called and left a message that I would arrive in two days. I finished the planter. I went to the bath but could not sleep. At nine that night I found the owner locking the baths. I thanked him

and gave him my keys. At the interstate junction I turned east, and hours later, passing the final flag of mountain, I saw the orange in the night sky that was Denver and below it the black sea prairie, a blown and gorgeous space. I drove straight into this city, to this very parking lot. When I let go of the wheel I was disconnected from electricity. My body sifted down, prickling into white. I slept in the car seat until that piece of muscle separated, rose out of me wetly and exploded in a bubble out of the dark.

Pete Fish wrote: *Johnny, I am not trying to heap my regrets on you. That's the last thing. I just think there are things you, or people of your type, tend to ignore. No disrespect meant. But you were raised comfortable. You are trusting. You look for the good. And that is good, of course. I first looked at you and I saw that quality. Well, I nearly laughed outloud. I said to myself, I wondered, what century are we in? the way you talked to me. You had a bowtie, and I remember the little printed ducks on it. It is funny what I remember now. I can see things in my head like movies. But you asked why I hired you, and that's it. Ask me what I had for breakfast, and poof, that is gone. I'm sorry, Johnny. I don't know what for. You asked where to go. I will just say again that if I could go anywhere, Colorado would be the place.*

Here is the letter in my hand. I lie in another motel room, the grit of the parking lot showered out of my hair, the broken nerve in my back now hanging in shakey trellis, and evidence of an infatuation surrounding me. In my other hand is a stained gas station receipt on which she wrote her name and number. *Nancy Bourjalis*. Her handwriting an uncertain mix of cursive and block letters. As I scrutinize each swoop like what? Tea leaves? Stars?

This morning I pulled out of the lot and found this motel, ate breakfast and drank coffee until my teeth rang, then I ran -- hopped, my back and thighs still delicate and my feet half numb -- from the diner to my room across the street, and I nearly shouted her name as she answered the phone. But she shouted back, loud as my own voice.

"Johnny!"

"Do you remember me?"

"Of course I do. Of course I do. How strange is this. I was just talking about you. Can you believe that?"

"Well, then," I said, but I was halting. The momentum or brightness was turning outside of me, loud and teetering in my eyes. I firmed up. "We should meet. If you're still interested, and discuss the possibility of stonework."

But Nancy was whispering, "It's him," out of the receiver, to someone else in the room. Then, to me, she said, "Yes. Whenever you're settled. Or what about coming over here? Would you like dinner? We could eat tonight, if you like. Or--"

I said yes, certainly, and she exhaled. "Oh, that's good."

So I lie sadly relaxed. Her enthusiasm is incorrect; I see how my own is again being built. Wires and struts into puppetry. Yes, I remember the other women, one after the next, and what I created with all of the kindnesses -- a sapphire ring belonging to my grandmother, rocks chipped into fishes (for God's sake!), or simply the acquiescence to their will -- stacked together so tight that they take form and carry me, the faceless shape of a giant. This is Pete Fish's warning: he saw the need in me and knew the wreckage it could cause. His own wreckage sitting in the letter.

Driving to her house I arrange myself into a stolid float. I find a liquor store and buy two bottles of wine. I skirt along the high edge of the downtown basin, north into Nancy's neighborhood, brick split levels and then a sudden, ruined Victorian. She comes to the door smiling, wiping her hands vigorously in a towel. "Do you like Mexican food?" Ferns, small cacti, toys and found things laid across the window sills. The squat dog approaches and looks sternly back and forth. "Remember Mr. Albright, Frankie?" In the living room an older woman stands up. Nancy tells me this is Beryl, a visiting friend, and the woman nods quietly and sits slowly back down. I nod back in

understanding, for this Beryl is the safety for the evening. No funny business. Big shifting bones and a bowled helmet of gray hair.

"And these are your paintings," I say.

They're propped along a sideboard. Sweet but overly bright landscapes. Yellow hillsides which signify deserts. A steeple in a valley town. But leaning below are larger canvases, much different.

I squat closer. The paint is accumulated in small letter-like marks, criss-crossing, building into thin figures, and these stretch in giant white shadows over a green landscape made of the same broken lines. A landscape like scratched ice. I'm startled. It's a battle, the figures both float and cut into the ground. "Ghosts," I say.

Nancy nods, but she is squinting at these paintings, her hand covering her mouth, and I calm down. "What you do," I begin again. "What you understand here is the relationship between the abstract and definite. Don't you think?"

"Yes, that's it." Nancy turns to the woman, who stands behind us. "See?"

Over dinner I keep turning to the paintings. I don't calm down. I tell Nancy, "They're very powerful. I flew over Nevada once and saw those giant prehistoric animal paintings; they painted them over miles of ground. What are they called? That's what I'm reminded of. Aren't you?" I ask Beryl, but she continues her silence, and soon I stop noticing. We're drinking, and I see Nancy and I fill outward, talk with jumpy and then lush attachment to ourselves and possibility. We move into our plans: advertising, customers, supplies. Stonemasonry, I explain, has its own inherent selling power, because the *feel* of stones is so strong in people. "Do you know what I have for advertising? A little sheet of Xeroxed paper with a photo of a drystack wall I built in Massachusetts, and under that it reads 'Albright Stonework' and a phone number, and that's all that's required. People call and say, 'Did you really build that wall?' People know. They might not know how or why, but it is in them. They want that wall."

"Right, right," Nancy says. "I believe that. Downtown at the library they put up a steel sculpture. Big, red abstract thing, actually beautiful, really. I saw it and thought, Jesus, finally something other than a wild horse or a sad Indian. But all these kids are always playing around it and climbing all over it. They know."

"Precisely," I say.

"A low bid doesn't hurt," the older woman, Beryl, says.

I turn to her. She is chewing slowly and has cleaned her plate. "Very true," I say. "Although in Aspen, where I've done some work, certain customers would only take the highest bid. But then that's Aspen for you. If a tool broke, they threw it away. I worked on a site with a two-story bedroom, a cylinder shape, where the walls, floors, everything was covered in lambskin. They melted the seams together with a heat gun."

Nancy makes a disgusted noise. "Aspen," Beryl says. She is studying me in a casual way, a half-squint, sucking her back teeth. I look into my glass. The story may have spiked too high, and I am drunk.

"I quit that job," I say.

"Do any skiing?" Beryl asks.

"A little. I do like to ski."

"Well, I'm joshing," she says. "But if you don't mind, John, could you tell me some about your background? Nancy and me're curious. Can I ask?"

"Certainly," I say. "Certainly."

"*Beryl*," Nancy says, but stops. Her voice has become drawn. Something is turning here; the older woman's gaze is less hooded, keener. Her hands lie curled on either side of her plate, and I see how large they are, like mitts, fingers like roots.

I put my hands on the table in the same position. "My father was in the paper business and is retired; he owned three mills in Massachusetts, and that's where I am from. Actually," I say. "Actually, there's really no more business. My father had a stroke

--he's in a home now, you see. And we lost my mother when I was pretty young, I'm afraid." I open and close my hands in a small blinking gesture to Beryl, *There it is*.

"I'm from California," Nancy says.

"I'm being nosy," Beryl says, and sighs. "Nancy said you didn't seem like the mason type. I mean, you do look strong. Any brothers or sisters? Kids?"

"A younger brother," I say, wondering where this woman came from. "Laurence. Larry. He passed away when I was a teenager, I'm sorry to say."

"Jesus," Nancy says. "OK. We don't need to talk about all this."

"Oh, I don't mind," I say.

"No need," says Beryl. And she stands up and takes her plate, pausing above us and staring down at our food with sudden querulousness. "Nobody tells anyone anything anymore. All through?" she asks me. But I am dumbly lost. "Beryl," Nancy says, like a warning. But the old woman clears my plate with hers and turns enters the kitchen. Nancy watches, then moves her eyes to me and smiles briefly. She has let her head tip into her hand. We are paused there, and I must look away, to the dog at my feet, I scratch its ears, and when I look back Nancy is standing. She walks through the archway and into the adjoining sitting room, where I can see her reach into a bookcase and come back with a framed picture. She stands to my left, a little behind me, and holds it out, a photograph of a man. "This is a picture of my husband," she says. "Louis Bourjalis. He died."

I take the picture in hand. He is turning in a chair towards someone next to him, his hands clasped behind his head. This man. Broad-shouldered, a little plump, smiling comfortably. "When did he die?" I ask.

Nancy studies the photograph with me. "Almost seven months," she says.

She stays a moment more, locked into the picture, then takes it from me and back to its resting place. "I'm very sorry," I tell her. I nearly forgot to say this. When she returns, I am still sitting and useless. "Well. I *am* sorry."

"That was a little strange, I guess. Was it strange?"

"No, no, no, no. But!" and I slap my thigh, "It is late. It's that time where I'll begin to impose if I stay any longer."

The terribleness of my words -- my face, raised eyebrows and an idiot's smile -- quietly breaks the room. Nancy nods, but it is short and stricken. I stand and she walks me into the vestibule. The squat dog follows. I put on my coat, and as Nancy opens the door locks, Beryl appears, wiping her hands. "Leaving us?" she asks. For some reason I touch the older woman on the shoulder. "Petroglyphs!" I say. "That's what Nancy's paintings are. Don't you think?" Outside I tell Nancy we'll discuss the business further and she nods, walking with me until the sidewalk. At my car door I wave, and Beryl waves back under the porch light; Nancy doesn't. But I don't drive away; I take a few steps from my car, into the grass bordering the walk. I look down into the roots of an elm, and although there is nothing to see but their shadowed triangles, I say, "Hey, look at this," and bend toward one spot. There the expected twinge, a small strum and flutter inside my hips as I bend, but nothing horrible, no burst. Even so I buckle in my best gasp, *Oh-haah!* and drop to my knees, my forehead touching the grass, one hand dug in the earth, the other clutching my back, and the dog now feverishly licking my neck. Nancy rushes to my side.

They take me to the basement. I lie in the dark and see straight to the floorboard cracks above, light coming in over the pipes and feet treading back and forth. Beryl's voice, murmured. Then Nancy says, "Just never mind. I'm going up. OK? Does that meet your approval?" And the long slices of cracked light snap out.

Earlier, on the porch, I kept my breath at a hiss and I told them I could drive, but Nancy said no. I was led through the house again, Beryl and the dog ambling ahead as Nancy gripped my shoulders to hers. In the basement, I heard the collapse of something heavy and soft. Nancy clicked on a lightbulb and ran back up the stairs. A giant bare mattress lay on the floor, a carpet covering packed earth. Beryl stood hands on her hips,

looking at me. "You know, you could make a very nice room down here," I said to her. "Just pour cement over the floor, level it out, and carpet the area. It's very simple." But she stared. The dog, sitting on its haunches and staring also, showed more interest. And as Nancy ran down the stairs with the bedding, the older woman walked back up without a word.

Am I a liar? I lie here for some time and think, *No, you're simply trying. You're fine.* I simply want to be known by her. I have yet to be known. I have that right. Don't tell me otherwise.

Seven months ago, where was I? Pete had sent his letter. I sat with it in the woman's apartment on Beacon Hill. I could look out onto the Commons. The woman arrived home in the evening, saw that I still sat by the window and threw up her arms. *Do I look like your mother? Do you want me to button your pants? I used to admire you. For Chrissakes, Johnny.*

In this basement, as I stretch my limbs under the weight of covers and try to reach either side of the mattress, it is again revealed how I've forgotten. This is their bed. The mattress is new; I smell it. King-size. This was in Beryl's stare. And it was in Nancy, circling around the bed, tucking in each side, then studying it like a riddle. She patted her dog, who has stayed with me. She is in her room on a smaller bed. A single mattress that lay dirty in this basement when they first arrived. "Hey," I whisper. I hear the clinking of the dog's collar. "Go upstairs," I say. "Hey. Good dog. Go home." But the dog is still, black as the room. "Come on, hey, Frankie. Here we go, good dog, good dog." And Oh! but I can't keep any center. I watch myself twirl out, spinning and hovering in this bed, my chest a flood.

I stand. The dog is shifting, yawning, and when I find the lightbulb in the cold air, he blinks at me then makes his slow way up the stairs, already aware of my decision.

In the kitchen I find a lamp, a pen and paper scrap. *Dear Nancy, I write, and Beryl, I had a lovely time. The problem seems to have solved itself. You were right,*

Nancy, all it took was some time horizontal. But I won't use up any more of your hospitality, and have decided to leave a bit early. Today is a busy day. Please contact me, Nancy, if you continue to be interested in stonework. I give my motel and fold the paper tented on the counter.

In the dining room, where the dog is waiting, I pause once more at the paintings. The white figures are silent, rigid. The dog and I go into the sitting room, and from the bookcase I pick up the Louis Bourjalis' picture and tilt it toward the street light. His eyes are ringed, as if the skin is stained. In a ceramic bowl on the same shelf is a thin gold necklace with a crucifix, a string of beads, a miniature teddy bear, and a wrapped cigar. Not from Nancy, I think. From his friends. I smell the bowl, dense in my hands. A lamp behind me clicks, flooding the room in a shot, and there is Beryl in the doorway.

"Well, now," she says.

"I'm very sorry," I say. "I'm very sorry. I was just leaving. I left a note in the kitchen."

One hand is open at her chest, her body is covered in a giant t-shirt. "Leaving?" She squints, noting the bowl in my hands. I put it back. "Leaving. Well," she says, and she lowers herself onto the sofa, slowly and steadily, which tells me no one is leaving. She raises her chin. "Taking a look at Louis?"

I've put my hands in my pockets and lean and smile easy as I can at Beryl. Her stomach sits on her lap like an upright boulder. The dog circles on the rug then drops.

"He looks like a very nice man," I say earnestly. Everything bright.

"Never met him," she says.

Then she says, "Well, I'll tell you, I was fishing. Up in Estes Park. I fished all Saturday then came down the trail, getting near the trailhead, and Frankie here," she motions to the dog, who opens an eye to me, "he comes out of the woods barking a storm. Wouldn't let me pass. Then there was Nancy kneeling next to Louis, who was face down.

on the path, flat on his stomach, arms out. She was in shock. The first thing she says to me was, 'This is my husband.'

She pauses and tucks her chin, smoothing her front. As if in afterthought she raises her eyes back to me, and there almost smiles, a ticking underneath.

Go to hell, I think. But have a only child's resentment.

She continues. He was dead, she knew, but Nancy said he was in a fit. They worked him, Beryl breathed while Nancy pumped his chest, and all her breath blew right back out. After some time Beryl built a fire. Other hikers came down the trail. Paramedics took him to Boulder, and Nancy spent the night with Beryl. "She said she didn't really know anyone else in Colorado. They were each other's company, I guess. They hadn't lived here long. I gave her a job at my flower shop. Life turns, you turn." She sighs deeply, then raises her arm to me. "And here you are. Giving us another scare. I'd imagine that fall of yours brought back some memories for Nancy. But it's good to see that you're up and about."

"Yes," I say. *Where did you come from?* "I'm sorry," I say. Her flat open hand, still raised and holding nothing. "I'm sorry," I say again.

"I told Nancy to take that trip into the mountains. She almost moved back to California after the funeral. But she stayed to make a life. And I told her, 'You should get to know this state.' So I give her a week off and she comes back with stories all about you. Tells me she met a real gentle, honest man. And here you are. And I see those qualities. But let me be frank, John. I notice other things. I see that you don't lock your car, you leave the windows half open with your belongings piled like trash in the back. I see that you missed spots shaving. I see that you drank two bottles of wine in an hour all by yourself."

"I should be going. I'll be going," I say.

"I don't mind carelessness, John. As long as it's not mucking up other people's business."

"Exactly. I agree. Thank you."

"Nancy has real talent. She needs a better job than potting plants, but excuse me, not with you. I don't pretend to know her feelings. What I know is that she dearly cared for Louis, and when young people have that taken away, they want it back. But here she is. Hello, Nancy. Here is Nancy. You can tell him, can't you Nancy."

She stands in the door behind me, in her flannel robe, and if the scene has wound even further into itself, or if a crack of air has appeared, I couldn't attempt to say. My interior has gone dull. Her face is searching out this room. She says Beryl's name questioningly, and Beryl smiles up to the ceiling with her mouth in a curled black shape. "Everything's fine," Beryl says. And I'm smiling at Nancy. A queer and dolorous smile.

"Thank you," I say. The dog stands up, knowing again where to go, and when I reach the front door he is waiting.

I am outside. Nancy stands behind us, saying Beryl's name again. She says my name, but I reach my car, my open car windows. I see her, she stands on the walk holding herself as the dog checks the ground, and I wave and am out in the street, away down the street. Dark trees, dark windows. The red traffic light slips quietly over the top of my windshield. Too late, although the sight clears space in my mind. *Well, goodbye, Nancy, I think. Goodbye, Wife. Goodbye, City.*

The space clears further. In it I put an inventory -- Why not? Wall tent, used is fine, army issue. A cookstove (tent will need a stove jack), boxes of canned goods, rice. Lamps, lamp oil. Bedding. Cookery. I'll stop in Boulder. I'll make a list. As I pass through another red light, I see it would be simple to go straight into the mountains, to a small mountain town where used equipment lies about in junk stores. Paperwork? I will ask a landowner. I will be straightforward, rely on goodwill.

Another red light floats by. This record of luck.

Do not think of her in terms of a promise.

Air has filled my car. I remember how, one winter in Boston, my roommates threw a party after finals exams, jacket and tie. I grew drunk and opened all the apartment windows, and after opening the last one, in the kitchen, I wiggled out onto the ledge. I walked the circumference of the building, eight stories up, and with each corner swung a leg over the open yawn of air. I repeated this twice, then curled into a window well and slept. Later in the night I woke from the cold, found the kitchen window still ajar, the apartment empty. I walked for blocks into South Boston, then passed a pub and heard men singing from inside. They were a group of ten or so at the end of the bar, thickset men. The bartender shook his head at me. "Private party," he said. But one of them had already clasped my shoulders and called me Frank.

"That ain't Frank," the bartender said.

But it was too late, these were stonemasons. There was Pete Fish in the center, cursing as the others agreed. This was a wake, I was told. His apprentice had fallen from a scaffold. I offered Pete my condolences and he raised his drink, spilling some over my shirt. Then he saw me, my suit clothes and bowtie, my face, and he spat on the floor and left. On Monday morning I drove to the address the bartender had written after the rest of the men filtered away. It was a church; there was the broken scaffolding on the steeple. I told the men I was strong, I'd worked summers in my father's lumberyards. That I'd work for little pay, that I'd work for nothing. Fine, they laughed. Go nuts.

That day, the next, and the following two weeks I shoveled the fresh mix onto mortar boards and ran them up the scaffolds, losing fifteen pounds in the middle of winter. The next job, Pete took me with him. A patio in Chestnut Hill. I asked him when I'd start receiving pay. When I started earning it, he told me.

"Go to hell," I say outloud.

But of course I am thinking of Beryl, too. I'm turning left, and left again. If the mountains are my destination, then I've made no headway.

"You bastards go to hell!" Nothing, quiet streets.

But Nancy! Nancy, who can see the isolate energy within the world of things. Together, we could travel to quarries -- redstone, dark slate, gaudy marble from Europe, sandstone, the strength and simplicity of granite. Basic as bread. Together, we could work: I'd move the stone as she would stand back and tell me, *More, more. There. Perfect.* None of the impassiveness of Pete. Pete Fish, who I explained my history to in the hopes of understanding. But still, if a course of brick was considered aslant, a stone laid wrong, down it would go and out it would come from my pay. Finally one day while I worked he stood behind me, then said, *That's the stuff, Johnny*, and I was shocked. A petty old man who had stretched me so far. Out I snapped, stretched with the feel of quality.

I reach a large intersection with actual traffic waiting at the light, so here I must stop. I see into the cars. A man eats a donut. Another blows on his hands. A blasting horn behind me and I move with the others, left again onto the larger street whose name is familiar. It is the street of my motel; I recognize the shops and houses along it, the odd giantness of a football stadium. It's growing light. A blue presence in the houses and trees along the street, then sunlight smacks the rim of the stadium all suddenly overdone. So here I'll grow sentimental. I'll remember Nancy Bourjalis, who was kind.

The muscles of my back span lightly.

Go to your motel, lie down, lie flat.

Here I am, stopped in the motel entrance, blocking the drive, the car chugging and waiting patiently, the lobby ahead a miniature fluorescent bubble. I see the grass islands brightening from the daylight into perfect, wet green.

I put the car in reverse.

A woman in a dress is coming out of her car. Not a dress. A gown, and she's barefoot. Walking toward me, then running, then walking again. A dog is keeping pace behind her. I'm woven through, trembling just underneath my skin, my chest, now my body. In front of the car she stops and smiles hesitantly, squinting. She holds up a piece

of paper, a note left in her kitchen, raising it against the sun. When I smile, she comes to my door and looks at me, then folds both hands over the edge of the open window.

"Why did you leave?" she asks me.

She waits, then asks, "Didn't you want to stay?"

Why did I leave? This question -- a straight and golden line. All that it takes is her standing near. Everything in her face. I say, "Yes," with everything here, around me.