

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Ann L. Yee for the degree of Master of Arts in English. Presented on July 27, 2001 Title: Houses Along Fourth Street.

Abstract approved: Redacted for privacy
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This thesis consists of four short stories and Chapter 1 of a novel in progress. Each of the four stories are thematically linked through a common protagonist, Nancy, and through a relatively chronological following of events in her life. I chose to tell Nancy's stories in an attempt to gain a better understanding of my own. While Chapter 1 of *Hensley House* is not thematically linked to the first four pieces, its inclusion as the last piece herein suggests a graduation from a largely autobiographical focus to a broader view of complex themes and multiple perspectives of those themes.

Houses Along Fourth Street

by
Ann L. Yee

A THESIS

submitted to

Oregon State University

in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the
degree of

Master of Arts

Presented July 27, 2001
Commencement June 2002

Master of Arts thesis of Ann L. Yee presented on July 27, 2001.

APPROVED:

Redacted for privacy

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

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Ann L. Yee, Author

Acknowledgments

Heartfelt thanks to my father and brother; to Dolly and Olive; to Barbara Quirarte and William Smedley; to my fellow fiction comrades; to Jennifer Cornell and Ehud Havazelet; to Marjorie Sandor and Tracy Daugherty for their instruction, their patience, and their unwavering faith in my abilities; and to Sean Bernard for so effortlessly teaching me things I feared I would never learn.

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HOUSES ALONG FOURTH STREET

HOUSES ALONG FOURTH STREET

My childhood was spent at Republic Cafe, a four-star dinner house owned by my father. People called it a gold mine, and it was my father who made it so. I worked there, beginning at the bottom, pouring coffee, clearing tables, as anyone serious about learning the business would do. For me, at seven, a full coffee pot or water pitcher proved too heavy, so I'd carry cup to pot, glass to pitcher. Some customers found it endearing, this little half-Chinese girl—often in tap shoes—gingerly stretching an arm into their dinner conversations, trying to snatch an empty cup. Others were annoyed. And while I wished I could go entirely unnoticed, I couldn't bring myself to leave the business for the normal childhood world of sandboxes and Big Wheels.

By thirteen, hostessing nearly every night and most weekends, I knew how to hold my own with the barstool men, the vagrants that wandered in, and the head cooks, whose relentless haranguing, I later realized, was really a kind of pride that I would choose their company over an evening at home.

Home was a twenty-six floor, steel high-rise. Portland Plaza, it was called—still is. All of us, my father, his mother Ahgine, my mother, my kid-brother Brian and I, had a unit on the twenty-third floor. 2301. The entire west side was windows, floor to ceiling. None of them would open—safety codes—but the view of Portland's west hills made me forget the glass in between. When I had the place to myself, when my father was gone on a drinking binge, and Mother had taken Ahgine

and Brian to church (she'd often let me stay home to rest up after a long night at the restaurant), I'd roll my mini-trampoline to the middle of the living room, stand it in front of all those windows overlooking all those buildings and all those hillside homes, and I'd belt out Rick Springfield's "Red Hot and Blue Love," jumping and twisting with fervor for a sold-out crowd of adoring fans I could not see.

When we were home together, as a family, it was dark. For all of us. As long as my father was yelling, my mother simply cried and held Brian and promised to be a better wife. But when he'd head for the door, saying she was disgusting—that he couldn't stand the sight of her—she'd thrust Brian into my arms and run after him. My father would shrug and jerk violently, trying to fling her from him, but he only succeeded in knocking her to her knees. She'd wrap her arms around his waist and beg him not to go. He'd drag her across the living room floor. Get out of my way, he'd say, and beat at her arms. She would drop to his ankles, gripping one in each of her fat, manicured hands. Please don't go, she'd say, her voice barely audible, her face puffy and wet. She wore bulky sweaters. He hated them, the way they emphasized her blocky figure. I'll keep the dishes done, she'd say. I'll pick up after the kids. I won't come to the restaurant when you're working. Please don't go. He'd raise his foot and stomp at her hands until she would cry out in pain and disbelief and fall away from him. Straightening his suit jacket, my father would walk out the door into the night, his eyes dazed, his head held high.

Summer mornings, while Brian slept in Ahgine's room on the floor near her twin bed, and the house was quiet and reeking of alcohol, I would walk the mile through downtown and into Chinatown to get to the restaurant before anyone else. I remember being too anxious to wait on the elevator and, instead, flying down the twenty-three flights of stairs, aching to hit that rush of outside air, to let the city swallow me whole with its harmless screeches and innocuous smells.

Though it was a straight mile to the restaurant, twenty minutes at most, I walked slowly and stopped often. Fourth Street, on the north end, was a buses-only street. In the early morning hours, hundreds of people piled onto the transit from that street—people heading to work in Gresham, Beaverton, Lake Oswego, Raleigh Hills. I saw one black woman several times. She was heavy, always carrying a long red umbrella and wearing shapeless dresses that failed to cover her lumpy calves. She looked strong and capable. One day, not needing to, I asked her for the time.

"I don't know the *exact* time, honey," she said, "but my bus usually comes at nine, and it's here now." She shoved off from the bench, using her umbrella like a cane, and lumbered toward the line. Her shoes, wide white nurse shoes, gleamed against her black legs. I imagined her lumbering like that all day, up and down well-lit wards, tending to old dying people and sick children, calling them honey and grazing their bellies with the fat under her arms as she tucked cotton quilts up under their grateful chins.

The restaurant, at ten a.m., was empty and eerie as a ghost town. Candles, snuffed out at closing the night before, sat cold and indifferent on every table. I'd hurry through the dark dining room toward the TV in the lounge. Even in the dark, I'd always expected to see a row of oily men still sitting on stools at the bar, tipping Tsing Tao's and turning their heads away from the blue screen long enough to watch me walk in and tell me how I'd make one honey of a girlfriend. I'd hit the light switch behind the bar and turn it all the way up, then prop the lounge door open with a chair so I could see the groups of chattering Chinese women with plastic shopping bags in each hand, shuffle down Fourth Street. Sometimes they would look in and rattle off something in Cantonese followed by nods and laughter. I'd pretend to understand—I longed to understand—but they'd soon wave a dismissive hand as they walked on toward the bus stop.

Those hours, alone in the place, I could pretend it was mine, that I was grown up, living on my own—the employees my only family. But the restaurant was really my father's house. He built it, cared for it as best he could. It'd been one of the first restaurants to open in Chinatown some thirty years before he'd bought it, and all of the decor had faded to a yellowish brown—the lanterns, the wallpaper, the ceiling. In some places the carpet had worn down to the cement. Booths were torn or pulled out and replaced with crude wooden benches. I was six the first time I saw it. My father knew he would sink a small fortune into a remodeling project and had brought my mother in, as he did on every restaurant, to show her his plans. She held my hand as he

walked excitedly about the place. He looked unusual to me with his suit jacket off and his tie loosed.

“See,” he said, “we keep the entrance here and the hostess counter there, but I want a big party room in back, a patio in front, and a lounge.”

I remember so much about that afternoon, meeting head-chef Raymond for the first time, getting lost in back rooms, kitchens, and pantries that seemed somehow bigger than just one city block. I remember watching the employees in their plainclothes watch my father in his tie, but I have no memory of my mother’s reaction. Maybe she was angry that he would take such a financial risk? Or maybe she was excited? Maybe she wanted him to be the restaurant entrepreneur he wanted to be. Now, thirty years later, I figure it was both, because even though she never cared for wealth, she must have wanted her Chinese husband to be respected in her American family.

And my father must have been scared, too, because everything he did was for the restaurant—even taking us on “vacation” to San Francisco three times that first year in search of top-notch chefs. We’d be driving through the heart of San Francisco’s Chinatown, me on a foam pad at the far end of our wood-paneled station wagon quietly devouring one sticky rice package after another, and my father would suddenly hit the brakes right in the middle of the street and gesture for my mother to grab the wheel. “Here! Take the car!” He would jump out and run down the street, calling out, “Eh, Ah Jing!” or “Eh, Liu Wong!” or whatever the guy’s name was that he

recognized from his old village in China. I remember his suit jacket flying up behind him like the back end of a magic carpet. And the guys would always come home with us, just pack up their things and follow us to Portland.

The first time he did this, my mother yelled after him, “Jeff! Jeff! What are you doing? You can’t leave the car in the road like this!” Her voice wobbled, and I thought, Well, that’s it. I thought seeing one hanging teriyaki duck after another must have filled him with nostalgia for his homeland, and he suddenly wanted out of this life he’d chosen with a maybe-Irish wife who couldn’t tend her own house and two children, who quit Cantonese summer class after only two weeks, whining about how hard it was. I felt such shame. I promised myself that if he came back, if he gave us a second chance, I’d learn how to run the restaurant so well, he’d be proud to have a daughter. About the third time he flew out of the car, though, I couldn’t figure out why my mother just sat there in the passenger seat, why she didn’t simply get out of the car, go around to the driver’s side and get us out of the damn road.

He found his cooks. The remodeling doubled business, then *Diner’s Club* tripled it. We sold the other restaurants and by the time I turned twelve, we had three houses, three cars and my father began blacking out. On the weekends, after closing the restaurant, he and the cooks would head across the street to a Mahjong club fronted by a topless bar. One night we were missing Ahgine at the house. We figured she must’ve been in the back peeling her onions when he’d started drinking, soon forgetting to bring her home. Ahgine was eighty-five by then and nearly blind. She

spoke an ancient dialect that only my father understood. Her glasses were thick as old Coke bottles and she wore four layers at all times: cotton, flannel, more cotton, then polyester. She rummaged through the busboy bins and salvaged crusted food from the dishes of empty tables for our own family leftovers. And she peeled everything the restaurant needed peeled—cases of shrimp, crates of oranges, waxy boxes full of peapods, guinea sacks bulging with onions.

That night, when her room was empty, my mother piled Brian and me into her Datsun to go looking for her at the restaurant. We found her at four a.m., sitting in my father's silver Riviera outside the topless bar, clutching her purse tight to her chest and rocking as she chanted prayers in Sze-up. Her nose dripped from her warm breath hitting the cold air. I'd seen her cry before, seen her pout for days at a time because I refused to eat her porridge or because my father yelled at her for bringing home other people's leftovers, but I'd never seen her scared.

"Oh, Jesus," my mother said, opening the back door. "Ahgine? Ahgine, what are you doing?" I thought my mother would start crying, too, but there was anger in her voice. "Nancy, ask her what happened."

"Ahgine, geng mutta?" I asked.

She looked at my mother and her face contorted as new tears sprung, but she didn't make a sound.

"Ada hui nai ah?" I asked her if he was across the street. She nodded.

"Dad's over there," I said and pointed to the topless bar. Ahgine clung to my

mother as she eased her out of the Riviera and into her Datsun.

“You and Brian sit here with her; you just sit here with her for five minutes,” she said, slamming the door before storming across the street to the bar. Brian crawled into Ahgine’s lap, and I held her hand and imagined the scene below the bar: Thirty or more Chinese men, some in suits, some in aprons, all sitting around a dozen card tables covered in Mahjong blocks gleaming under naked bulbs that swayed gently as my mother opened the door. They won’t talk to her, I thought, but he will be so mad—he will be embarrassed and it will make him so very angry. I thought about the woman at the bus stop, imagined her tucking Brian and me into a warm hospital bed, the fat under her arms grazing our bellies.

The next night my mother came into the restaurant during a rush. The wait was over ninety minutes. People lined the entryway, the hall, the lounge, waiting to hear me call their party name. She held Brian’s hand and wove her way through the crowd, touching my head before heading into the kitchen. “Tell your father I’m here.” I nodded but kept my eyes on the waiting list in my hand. I couldn’t believe she was there. We had a full house; my father was running the front with me as we often did during a rush. He was working the place, schmoozing the customers, glad-handing the big spenders, but really watching for tables, watching the busboys, watching the waitresses, and keeping me posted so the tables would turn over and over again—so we could pay the bills.

“Did you hear me?”

“Yes, but we’re really busy, and I think Dad’s talking to the health inspector,” I said without looking up.

She stiffened and placed her hands on my shoulders. “Nancy,” she said, leaning toward me, “tell your father that Brian and I are in the office waiting for him.”

“Okay,” I said, my face burning in front of all the customers.

I ignored her request, and within minutes I forgot she’d even come in.

Hours later, after the rush, she came up to the front again, holding Brian’s hand and clutching her sweater closed and tight against her chest.

“Mother, I couldn’t find him. I’m sorry,” I said just as my father also came forward.

She said nothing nor did she break her stride to the front door.

“Next time, Nancy, you let me know when she is here,” said my father.

“I looked for you, Dad,” I said in a small voice.

“Next time, look harder,” he said, watching the door. “We need to have dinner as a family. We will start having dinner here every night as a family.”

“Okay, Dad,” I said.

Three days passed. And then, at school, Sister Helen came to class and handed me a note. *Your mother is waiting for you in the lobby.* They’re getting a divorce, I thought. She’d been gaining strength from somewhere or something outside the walls of our house. She’d left a notebook in the bathroom a few months before. Her handwriting on the first page: *Goals: Maintain Sanity. Daily Meditation. Diet.* Her

words threatened to stretch my already constant ache of worry and dread. I took the notebook and tossed it into the top drawer of her dresser.

My grandmother Olivia was with her. They stood side-by-side looking out the window across St Mary's lawn. Grandmother jingled her keys. My mother had her arms folded across her chest. I tightened the grip on my backpack.

"What's up?" I managed, casual.

They turned. My mother's calm face surprised me—not even a hint of fear over what she was about to do. She gestured toward the car across the lawn, and we walked over in silence. He would ruin her, I thought, sap her strength with the same deft precision his mother used to de-vein shrimp.

My grandmother began to hum, nervously, as we drove away from St Mary's. I sat in the back seat, pulling threads from my uniform skirt.

"Nancy, honey," my mother began, "I'm leaving your father." She looked at me through the rear-view mirror.

I nodded. My grandmother stopped humming.

"I was able to get a restraining order, which is a piece of paper from a judge that says your father cannot come to the Plaza or to the restaurant."

I stifled a gasp.

"Your father hasn't paid any income taxes. Ever. Do you know what that means? We're nearly broke. We need to keep that restaurant afloat long enough to pay the bills, then we'll sell it."

I pressed my palms and forehead against the window.

“We’re picking up Brian and then you two are staying with Grandma at the Plaza while I go to the restaurant to talk with Big Ken and Meridee. Nancy, honey, I know this is hard.”

I stared down at the road flying along beneath us. “Meridee isn’t head waitress anymore,” I said. “Gretchen is.”

She looked at me again through the mirror, but I closed my eyes and gently blew on the window and wondered where my father would go.

I sat in my room, phone by my bed, Brian coloring beside me. An hour passed, then another. Finally, I called Gretchen.

“What’s happening?”

“Your mother’s taken over the place.”

“What did the cooks say?”

“They walked out.”

“Even Raymond!”

“Raymond, Big Ken, Little Ken, Jimmy, all of them. Took off their aprons and walked, single-file, right out the front door. Listen, kid, I’ve gotta hang up; your mom’s calling a meeting.”

I hung up the phone and sunk into a chair. Raymond had walked, too. He’d helped me pack thousands of to-go orders on a thousand busy nights while he himself

was swamped with orders, and he'd persisted—even through the early years when I would cry—in teaching me how to banter in two languages. She'd walked in, restraining order in hand, only two hours before we were to open. She must've tried to sit them down at a table in the banquet room, but my father had already been served, which meant the cooks knew and were simply waiting to see if she really meant it.

I sat in the chair until the phone rang. It was her.

“Tell Grandma to bring you kids down here.”

When we got there, she and the waitresses were sitting around the big table in the bar, and I wanted to tell her to get out, to go back to her house and leave ours alone. She stood up when I walked in and said, “Follow me to the office.”

I followed her back. In one hour we would open. The phones were already jammed with to-go orders and people wanting to make reservations. I followed her back to the office, and though she'd never done it before, I knew she was about to ask me what to do next. Be a man, I thought. She pushed the office door closed and took a seat by the desk. She looked old, defeated. I sat down beside her and she took my hand. Maybe it was fair, I thought, what she was doing to him—to me. He shouldn't be allowed to come home at all hours of the night, reeking of gin and demanding all of us to get up and clean out the refrigerator. He shouldn't get away with spending all his time at the restaurant and no time with her. For making her miserable, for making us afraid, for trying to cheat the IRS, maybe he deserved to lose his house, his business, his family, and to lose face with his Chinese friends. But I didn't want to watch.

“What are you going to do?” I asked.

“I have to find him, see if he will tell them to come back.”

But just before five, the cooks walked back in as unassuming as they'd walked out. They put on their aprons and cooked in silence the rest of the night. Before I left, I managed to catch Raymond in the walk-in cooler.

“Ai! Your mother, she doing something very bad, Annui,” he said, throwing chopped broccoli from a laundry basket into a cooler bin. “There are many thing she don't know.”

I nodded. “Why did you come back?”

“Your father say it's okay. He tell us to wait and see.”

Brian stayed at the restaurant with Mother, and Grandmother took Ahgine and went home to Salem, dropping me off at the Plaza on her way out of town. “Nancy, honey,” my mother said before we left, “your father has made it very clear that he intends to take you and Brian to China if there's a divorce. Under no circumstances are you to let him into the Plaza.” She hugged me before I left, and for a moment, I thought it might all turn out fine. For all of us.

That night at the Plaza, I pushed Ahgine's heavy yellow-wood chair from the east corner of the living room over to the west wall of windows. I pulled two comforters out of the Chinese chest in the hall and climbed into the chair with a book.

Around midnight, I heard the buzzer. He was in the lobby on the first floor. I walked, slowly, to the monitor by the door. My father's black and white face appeared

on the three-by-five screen.

“Hello? Nancy?”

I looked at him, grateful that he couldn't look at me.

“Nancy? This is your dad.” He was craning his neck to look at the camera hanging from the high corner of the lobby. The image on my screen rounded and stretched his face from left to right, like cartoon faces from the Saturday paper stretched out on silly putty. I wanted to laugh and cry all at once.

I pressed the speak button. “Hi, Dad. I'm here.”

“Yeah. Let me in now. I want to talk to you.”

“Mom isn't here, Dad. Brian, Mom, Ahgine, they're all at the . . . at work.”

“Nancy, I want to talk. Why your mother do this thing?” His voice wavered. He'd been crying. “Annui!”

I reached up, resting a finger on the door-release button before I spoke. “I'm not supposed to let you in, Dad. Mom said.” I wished for him to give me a good reason to open the door, to explain income taxes to me and why he hadn't paid them, to tell me what he did when he would stay out all night, to tell me I'd worked harder in his restaurant than anybody else, ever.

“Nancy, I am your father. Let me in.”

“I'm not supposed to.” I could see the rage building red in his cheeks even through the black and white screen. “Mom said you are going to take us to China.” I

tried to brush the tears from my eyes so I could see his face. He took a breath and held his hands up to the camera.

“Nancy! This is my house. You are my daughter. Now, you let me in!”

I nearly buckled under the weight of his cries.

“I want to let you in, I do, but. . .”

“Open the goddamn door.”

“I can’t, Dad.”

He pounded on the screen.

“Stop it! Dad, stop it!”

“Please,” he cried. “Annui, Please!”

I reached up with my left hand and touched his silly-putty face. His eyes were closed, both hands on the screen. “Dad,” I whispered, before depressing the off switch. The screen went black, and I walked over to the windows. The buzzer rang again and again. But after a while, I saw his car pull out of the covered entryway, a little silver dot no bigger than my fingernail. I watched him drive south on Fourth Street, past St. Mary’s, past the 7-11, past Brian’s daycare, brake lights shining at every block. I watched his right blinker flickering just before he turned onto the freeway, driving himself away from all of us.

COME SPRING

The winter moon cast a cool light on a strand of pearls hanging from my closet door. I stared at the pearls until they began to flicker and pulse like a loop of fireflies preparing to dance. I watched this transformation take place as I lay in bed listening for Mother's car or for the phone call to tell us she was on her way – that it had taken longer than usual to get the regulars in a cab or to balance the register tape with the tickets. Closing the restaurant was not a simple task. I used to help my father close every weekend, before the divorce and before Mother took over his four-star, fine-dining dream. He'd fled to another state after that, dreaming now--I told myself--of things that used to be his waking life. Colorado, I later found out. That's where he went. Then, instead of my mother, I was the one home nights and weekends with the moon and my younger brother Brian who dreamt, most likely, of Lego sets and He-Man action figures. But I'd stay awake in case she called, in case she had a question about how we used to do things before.

Earlier that evening, around midnight, she'd called once to tell us she had managed to close the lounge but that the banquet room was still packed with lawyers of a nearby firm celebrating their tenth year. Without her, the house had been very dark and so quiet that Brian and I felt like intruders. Neither of us had been able to sleep, and when the phone rang, we were sitting cross-legged in front of the television with blankets wrapped around us, our faces reflecting blue-hued images from the rounded screen.

“And why aren’t you guys in bed?” she’d asked.

“How do you know we’re not in bed?” I’d replied, and Brian had giggled on the other phone in the hall.

“Brian, is that you?” She was smiling. We could hear her smiling.

“No,” he’d said and giggled again.

“Well, where is Brian?”

“I’m sleeping,” he’d said.

“Did you hear that, Mom? He’s sleeping.”

“Just be sure you guys can get yourselves out of bed in the morning for school.”

“Of course. Always.”

I’d barely hung up the phone before Brian came running down the hall dragging his bag of Legos behind him with one hand and carrying two books in the other. He’d stopped just as he reached me and raised his eyebrows in question. I nodded, and we went into Mom’s room because she had the largest bed. Brian’s Lego bag was really a huge circle of denim fabric with a string threaded around the edge so when he set it down, it opened flat, at which point he could and would build spaceships for hours, and when he was through, he need only pull on either end of the string to pick up the whole mess like an enormous drawstring purse.

I told him I would read one book, and he didn’t argue because now having permission to stay up suddenly made Brian very tired, and by one o’clock in the

morning he was passed out on his twin waterbed—an extravagance allowed only because he was terribly allergic to dust mites.

A short time after two, I was lying awake in my own bed considering a dream I'd had the night before in which I'd walked into a spare room of our old home downtown—a high-rise condominium, actually. Someone had made up the bed in a pink satin comforter. As I lay there, considering the potential significance of the comforter, I determined it had to be Grandma Olivia's doing. She loved pink, and she was across town in Kaiser Hospital recovering from a radical mastectomy, where we'd brought her a dozen pink roses just days before.

The phone rang again at four a.m., this time waking me out of a sound sleep. I stumbled across the hall, glancing quickly through Brian's open door, where I saw nothing but his hand peeking out from beneath his covers, dangling alongside the bed. I grabbed the phone in the dark and flopped across the bed, letting my head sink into her pillow.

"Hello?"

"Hello. This is Richard Bennett. May I ask who this is, please?"

I said nothing. I sat up and looked at the clock. Five minutes after four.

"Who are you?" I said.

"My name is Richard," he said. "I, I'm calling from Sunset Mortuary."

I looked up at the ceiling but couldn't see it. I reached across the bed and turned on the lamp.

"Hello?" he said again. He had a gentle voice.

"Just a minute, please." I set the phone on the night stand and got up slowly, brushing my hair from my face. I crossed the hall and closed Brian's door without a sound. I went back to Mom's room, closing her door, too, before picking up the phone again.

"My name is Nancy."

"Nancy, may I ask how old you are?"

"Fifteen." I gripped the comforter and pulled it up to my chin.

"Is your father there, Nancy?" His voice was low. He spoke slowly as if each word caused him great pain.

"No. I don't know where he lives."

"Is there anyone there besides you?"

"No." I knew she was dead. Not injured or even in critical condition, but dead. I closed my eyes and listened to him scramble aloud for an alternative. When I spoke again, interrupting him, I was vaguely aware of his voice suddenly sounding more familiar than my own.

"Oh, God. Okay. I'm afraid your mother was involved in a fatal car accident."

"Yes." I held the phone with both hands. "Yes," I repeated. "I'll need to get a pen and a piece of paper," I said, staring at a notepad and pencil on the night stand.

“Yes, of course.”

I set the phone down once again and walked into her bathroom, feeling the air moving in and out of me, and the heaviness of the bathroom light on my arms, and how hard it was to support a body on nothing but the soles of feet. I picked up a bar of soap, turning it over in my hands, sniffing it to see if it smelled like her. It didn't. I looked in the mirror. My bangs were still too short. I heard Brian's door open and rushed back to the phone.

“I have a pencil,” I said.

The bedroom door opened, and I looked up to see Brian watching me, his small, round head tilted to one side. I took down the name and address of the mortuary without saying a word.

“It happened suddenly, Nancy--at five minutes after two a.m. She didn't suffer at all.”

“Yes. Okay.” Brian stood very still with both hands holding the knob. “Can I call you back? Brian just woke up.” I hung up the phone before he answered.

“Was that Mom?” Carefully, he studied my face, and casually, I answered him, looking down at the bed.

“No. It was Grandma. She's was just lonesome in the hospital all by herself and a little worried, so she called to visit.”

“Where's Mom?” He let go of the door and pressed his hands over a yawn.

“She’s spending the night at Susan’s because the restaurant took so long to close.”

“Oh,” he said, and scratched his nose.

“Let’s tuck you back in.” It was something I would have said when he was four, maybe five. He looked at me doubtfully. “It’s late.” I tried to sound exasperated. “We have school in less than four hours.”

I walked him back to his room, covering the top of his head with my hand. He crawled into the bottom bunk of his waterbed. I placed my hands on the bunk above him, steadying myself as I waited until he found his bearings among all the blankets and pillows and stuffed bears. I tucked the orange train quilt around him like a cocoon and sat on the edge of his bed, with the excuse that I was watching a possum scurrying outside his window. He barely responded; sleep swept him away again. I whispered finally, “You know that all kinds of stuff can happen, but we will always be together, and I can keep you safe?” With his eyes already closed, he mumbled in agreement, and suddenly as I sat there beside Brian, I was also hovering somewhere above us, seeing these motherless children.

In my room, with the door closed behind me, I sat in the middle of my bed hugging my knees to my chest, and I was sorry. I was so sorry I’d hated her for sending my father away, sorry I’d hated her for leaving us alone so many nights, so very sorry for ever wishing she would die. I stayed there like that, rocking some and crying quietly until the need for her overwhelmed me.

I went to her room and stood at her closet with my fingers barely touching the handles. I pictured what I would see inside. Her red dress with tiny black diamonds would be there and her long burgundy suede coat. I tried to remember what she'd worn that morning, and without warning, I imagined a flash of her smashing up against the windshield and the dashboard. I flung open the doors and walked into her clothes, burying my face against a red cardigan she wore two days ago when we'd driven to *Zupan's* in the middle of the night for sushi and cherries. I pulled the sweater from the hanger as I sunk to the floor of her closet. I stayed there with my arms around the itchy wool until I heard my alarm sounding across the hall.

I woke Brian and made him an omelette. I realized as I scraped and folded that I was averting my eyes from him and he was worried; I realized that I didn't have the phone number for Grandmother's hospital room; I realized that the sun was coming up faster and brighter than it should have on this day.

"Hey, Brian, I need to go in early today—science make-up exam. Can you go early, too?" I can't smile at him, I thought. But I shouldn't smile at him because I never smile in the morning. It would look ridiculous if I did. But my voice sounds so strange, and I'm making him breakfast, of all things. I turned around and looked directly at him. He'd been nearly on my heels, standing so close to me that I hit his head with the spatula. He looked up, searching, and I silently pleaded with him not to ask. He blinked, finally and then, looking away, he said, "I can go." I turned back to the stove, away from an image of him sitting on the playground by himself, forever

waiting for someone to let him in the building.

After he picked over the omelette and the both of us were dressed in our school uniforms—his blue, mine red plaid—I walked him to the top of the hill. We had done it a thousand times before. A ten-minute walk that took us to the top of Bailey Hill where he would go down the west side to his school, and I would go east toward Molly Zimmer's for a ride to St. Mary's Academy.

“I'll wait here until you get to the playground, okay? I mean, because it's so early.”

“Okay,” he said, and began walking. After a few steps, he turned around and said, “Bye, Nan.” He smiled at me then, just before he turned back to leave. It was a sweet, encouraging smile, and I knew I was going to break right there on the top of Bailey Hill, and I thought it would not be enough to let the tears flow, or to even choke them out, or even to wail and scream. Still the pain would come up like guppies spewing out of a drainage pipe, pressure so great that my skin would tear away. And it would go on like this and on like this, I thought, until the sun burned me down to a puddle on the curb.

I managed a wave. I stood, watching him walk toward St. Pius. The sun caught his light brown hair, and his corduroy pants bunched at the waist. His hands gripped the straps of his He-Man backpack, and he hung his head as he walked,

seemingly astounded by the way his feet kept placing themselves one in front of the other.

The second he disappeared inside the school, I ran all the way down Terra Linda Drive, past Molly's house without looking to see if her bedroom light was on, and past Jason Lodder's without remembering that just three days ago I had vowed never to pass his house without wishing for his eternal love. I ran across Martha's backyard and through the strip mall on the other side where I stopped, breathless, in front of the bus-route maps pinned behind Plexiglas at the Beaverton terminal.

I had never been to East-side alone. I traced the red line on the map from the fifty-three at Cornell Road, to the forty-seven downtown, to the seven that ran across St. Helen's Bridge.

As I sat on that first bus, I worried about whether or not I could find my way, and then realized it didn't matter. What was there to be lost from now? A man in a business suit sat across from me reading the morning paper. A woman wearing a black blazer over a white Oxford was making notes on a document and drinking coffee. A group of kids sat at the back, laughing loudly. The bus smelled of diesel fumes and vinyl seats, as it did on any given day. I wondered where the man worked, and what he would say if I told him that Rebecca Loughin had died that morning. I imagined his look of discomfort followed by some apologetic phrase. But if I whispered to the woman beside me, if I tugged gently at her sleeve and cupped my hands around my mouth, I thought she might lean toward me, and upon hearing it, she might insist that

she see me safely to the hospital. It occurred to me that I was the only one who knew. Richard Bennett had no way of contacting any other family members or anybody at the restaurant. I could spend the entire day window-shopping downtown. I could take the train all the way to Seattle and see the Space Needle. I could go anywhere, do anything. No one would know until I told them. I sat back, imagining the endless possibilities ahead of me, and I closed my eyes against the brightness of the sun.

HILDILID'S NIGHT

The first time I saw David go postal was right after I met him. We were at one of Aaron's family reunions—always an outdoor affair with lots of potato salad and lots of talk about how to make potato salad. David was five then, and had wandered over to where I sat on a picnic bench. "Wanna play?" he'd asked, and tossed a solid plastic, red die the size of a duck egg into my lap. I glanced at Aaron to see if he was watching my first encounter with his son, but he was listening to his brother's only fishing story and looking unusually amused. "Sure," I'd said, knowing it wasn't the safest thing to be throwing, but he was just a child and I wanted his approval, or his love, or I wanted to impress upon Aaron's family how well I could mother this kid—hard to remember now, for sure.

We tossed the die back and forth several times. He was so careful, and he grinned like no one had ever agreed to play with him before. He asked me a dozen questions. "Where do you live? Do you like sharks? Who's your favorite basketball player? Do you like rap music?"

"Wow, David, you sure do ask a lot of questions." I smiled.

"Sorry." He paused for a moment and then said flatly, "My mom went to Disneyworld last month." He tossed the die with a quick jerk, and I barely caught it with my left hand.

“Oh yeah?” What do you say to a five-year-old kid whose mother goes to Disneyworld without him?

“Yep. She took my little brother, too.” He wiped his nose with the back of his right hand and tossed the die too high.

“Careful, honey. She took Jared, huh? Did his daddy go, too?”

“No,” he said and switched from an underhand toss to an overhand throw.

“Where did you stay?” I held the die for a moment.

“With Grandma and Grandpa Thomas. Throw it back,” he said.

I did. He held the die for a few seconds before he announced, “My daddy likes you.”

“You think so?”

“Yep,” he said, again throwing the dice too high.

“Careful, kiddo—this thing is a little heavy.” I tossed it back.

“Heavy,” he repeated, and drew his arm back like a pitcher winding up to throw a fastball. His eyes darkened and focused on my mouth. The die came flying at me, smacking my bottom lip. And in a flash, even before my eyes watered and my lip began to bleed, I saw his face, and he wasn’t in it. My whole body jerked, goosebumps rose on my arms. Aaron called out to see if I was all right. Dazed, I turned toward his voice, and suddenly, David was crawling into my lap and crying, “I’m sorry—I’m sorry, Nancy. Are you okay?” He put his baby hands on my cheeks, and I was sure I could see the remorse in his eyes. Then he wrapped his arms around my neck and laid

his warm, freckled face against my chest. I held him close, but in a voice serious enough to scare even myself, I said, “Don’t you ever do that again.” He didn’t say a word, but his body went limp in my arms as if he’d fallen asleep.

He spent the rest of the day clinging to me like a thistle. Aaron’s mother repeatedly commented on this. “My goodness, Nancy, I’ve never seen him take to anyone quite like he has to you. I have to ask him for a hug, and even then, I don’t always get one.” When David’s mother came to the reunion to take David home, he held my hand for a long time and stared at her across a wide span of grass where she sat in the car. Aaron, arms folded tight across his chest, stood talking to his ex-wife through the inch of her open window. Finally, David turned and hugged me so quick I didn’t have time to respond. Then he ran toward her car at breakneck speed.

Later that evening, I tried to tell Aaron what I’d seen. We were home again, making dinner together, which meant I was cooking, and he was trying to stay focused on the vegetables I’d asked him to slice. Inevitably, while we chatted about our day, the vegetables would be forgotten, and he would be behind me, first with his hands in my hair, but soon holding my breasts—gently cupping one in each hand.

“Is this how you help with dinner?” I asked as I tenderized thick strips of chicken with a silver mallet.

“I’m trying to be supportive.”

“Uh-huh. Slice the onions.”

“You always bring me to tears,” he said.

“You don’t cry when you slice onions.”

“Because I have that transparent middle eyelid. I just close it and I’m unaffected. What’s that thing called? It’s one of those psych terms you always throw around.”

“Nictitating membrane,” I said, smiling at the chicken. “It’s called the nictitating membrane.”

He kissed the back of my head. “See, I listen,” he said, taking a knife from the block and slicing into a large white onion. “David liked you. What do you think?”

“Of him?” I asked, setting the chicken aside and wiping my hands.

“Well, yeah, of him and the whole meeting.”

“I think it went well. He’s energetic, very talkative.”

“He was nervous. He felt really bad about your lip.”

“Yeah. That was weird.” I said, moving to the sink for a glass of water.

“Weird? How so?”

“Well, there was this moment where it just, I mean he just looked. . .” I laughed and shook my head.

“What? He looked what?” He’d stopped slicing and was grinning at me expectantly.

I realized how ridiculous it would sound if I said it seemed like his son had a psychotic streak, so I went another direction. “Well, you two are very different.”

“You mean we don’t act alike.” He immediately saddened.

“Well, no, I meant, I *mean* physical appearance. You’re so, *thick* – broad-shouldered, big hands – and he’s so thin, almost fragile, and his features are very small.” I glanced at Aaron. He kept at the onion. “And, of course,” I continued, gesturing casually, “your eyes are blue; his are brown.” I’d disappointed him; he put his whole body into the slicing, like he was carving up a deer carcass—something I’d watched him on our first camping trip together. “Okay, I meant both,” I said, trying to sound as if I’d conceded entirely. Better to let him think I’d found his son to be unlike him than seemingly certifiable.

“He looks like his mother,” Aaron said, “and he acts like her because he isn’t around me enough.”

“Why not try for custody? She doesn’t seem to want him.”

“Not a good time.”

You bet, I thought. I don’t want a child here. A year went by before we heard much from David again. Aaron and I got married. I moved into his three-bedroom, two-bath home at the end of a gravel road. He had a shop large enough to mend his nets, paint his buoys, and I had a man to hold. And in that first year, I wanted little else. In fact, in that first year, I’d wanted Aaron to pick me up and carry me everywhere. I buried myself in our life together. When he would leave for his tuna trips, I’d ask him to put me in his pocket. “Take me with you? I’ll bring you good luck.” He’d smile, wrap his arms around me, lean down and kiss my forehead. “I would if you didn’t get so seasick.”

Sometimes, I'd stay in my pajamas all five days, lying on our bed, or the couch, getting up only to exchange one psychology book for another on the shelf in the hall. I even went to the store in a robe and slippers one night when I ran out of cigarettes— I never could do *that* in the city. But this was Oakdale, population one thousand. Aaron's home. Five hundred miles from mine.

Hours before he was due in at the port, I'd start cleaning. First the garbage: junk mail on the floor, overflowing ashtrays, to-go boxes, cherry pits in a pile on the coffee table, wads of used Kleenex on the bedroom floor by the bed, five day's worth of newspapers strung out between the bathroom floor and the end table by the couch. Then the kitchen: soak the crusty dishes while wiping down the counters, sweeping up the floor, scraping dried sauces from the stovetop. Once that was out of the way, the rest was quick. Fold the towels that finished drying five days ago, vacuum, start the rice to go with the fish he'd bring home, take a cold shower to soften my puffed-out face, then race to the port and wait for him envelope me again.

When I'd see his boat sail through Hell's gate, out of the sea and into the cove, I'd run to the far end of the dock, hoping to catch a glimpse of him raising the floppers or hosing down the deck. The instant he secured the boat beneath the buying station, he'd leave the unloading to the crew, climb the ladder, and sweep me into his arms. I'd stand on my tiptoes, making it easier for him to bury his face in my hair.

"I *missed* you."

"I missed *you*."

“I’m covered in fish guts.”

“I don’t care.”

Evenings, depending on the season, he’d be in the shop tying ganions, pouring leads, painting buoys, or counting off rope by the span of his outstretched arms (six feet from end to end). I’d wash the dinner dishes, then walk up to the shop, and if the door was open, I could stand just outside, unnoticed, and watch him work. Aaron stood six inches taller than I did. Sandy brown hair, blue-gray eyes, thick square shoulders, large hands, a prominent nose. I felt a hypnotic rhythm to everything he did. It was like watching the tide come in, covering first your feet, then your calves, then your knees. When he’d see me, he’d smile and say, “How long you been standing there?”

For seven years, we had this life. David came for Christmas. David came for Spring Break. David came every summer for six, long weeks—each time worse than the last. He’d arrive with six pairs of shorts, seven tank tops, a prescription for Ritalin, a slingshot, and one pair of rubber water slippers. No underwear, no socks, no pajamas, no toothbrush, no updates or how-to notes from his mother. Aaron would try to wave her down before she drove away, but she wouldn’t even turn off the engine. And before David could shut the passenger door, the car was rolling down the hill. I would watch from the living room window, arms folded across my chest, tongue pinched between my teeth, abhorring the idea of having this kid in my space for seven days, grateful that Aaron had such a large family, so David could make the rounds all summer without wearing anyone out. I knew I was being ridiculous. I had argument

after argument with myself. *He's a kid for God's sake. You're the adult here. What the hell is wrong with you? He just needs a little attention, a little love. What's the big deal?* But standing next to David felt like teetering on the edge of the world, and I hated him for it.

I'd turn from the window and take a final look at our living room before he would barge in. We had a deep-green leather couch along the bay window with enough room to walk behind and look out at a partial view of the south hills. Matching chairs sat opposite the couch, and in the center was a glass coffee table with copies of *Fish and Wildlife* and *American Psychology* piled across the top. On either side of the rock fireplace were built-in, floor-to-ceiling bookshelves. Framed pictures sat on the mantle: Aaron and me in Jamaica on our honeymoon, Aaron and me in Newport for the wine festival, several pictures of various members of Aaron's family, and one of me climbing Face Rock in Colorado, before I'd met Aaron. My dark brown hair was shining red under the sun, and I was smiling up at a guy on the ledge above me as I hung from the ropes, but he isn't in the frame. I'd always meant to put up pictures of my brother Brian, but they were still packed in a box somewhere.

David's rubber soles would slap loudly as he ran up the stairs and across the deck to the back door leading into the kitchen.

"Nancy! Nancy?"

I'd walk quickly toward the kitchen, imagining myself opening the front door and running down the street instead of letting him in.

“Hey, David, how are you?” Every year he was a little taller—but just as thin. He’d be grinning, almost sheepishly, and his brown eyes would be looking at everything but mine. I’d watch him scanning this wall and that wall, the bookshelves, the stereo, Aaron’s recliner, my magazine basket, our pictures on the mantle. I’d dig my fingernails into the palms of my hands. It felt like such a violation that he could disrupt us so easily, and with such eagerness. He’d drop his plastic bag and wrap his arms around my waist, pressing his head against my stomach. “Hi, Nancy.” He’d say, soft and low, as if he were telling me a secret. I’d put one hand on his head and one on his back. “Maybe I can stay all summer,” he’d whisper. He always smelled like autumn leaves, and I didn’t care about him at all.

And then one day in January, David appeared on our front porch, unexpected. It was basketball season. The pre-game show was on, and Bob Costas was explaining how Clyde Drexler would need to shut down Carl Malone if the Blazers had any chance of beating the Utah Jazz. Aaron and I were snuggled up like baby birds—his long, muscular body curled around my shorter, softer frame—when David arrived. Aaron threw me a puzzled look and I frowned, annoyed by the interruption. He smiled and kissed my head before prying himself out of our nest. When Aaron opened the door, David looked him straight in the eyes—not even a hint of embarrassment that his own mother had left him there like a stray dog. All his clothes were stuffed into a single black plastic lawn-and-leaf garbage bag. She’d driven the four-hundred miles from her town to ours and then dropped him off at the end of our road—didn’t even bother coming up the driveway. Aaron, stunned but trying to sound like it was a

pleasant surprise, had said, "Well, hello, son. How did you get here?" But I knew. In almost the same second I'd heard David say the word *son*, I realized I hadn't heard a vehicle coming up the gravel drive, and I knew that everything was about to change.

I sat up and pushed the blanket back to the end of the couch. My shoes lay haphazardly next to Aaron's orderly shoes on the slate in front of the fireplace. I stood on the cool surface of the rock, one hand on the mantle for balance, and shoved my feet into a new pair of hiking boots, figuring if I was crowded out of the house, I'd head to the hill.

Funny how Aaron didn't invite him in right away. Odd how a son knocks on his own father's door. David stood outside on the stoop as they talked. Finally, emotionless, he said, "Mom said I could live with you guys." I didn't need to see David's face to know how empty it looked as he spoke. Aaron stepped back, gesturing for David to come inside.

"I'll call her."

"She just left," I said.

"I'll call her parents."

David stood in the entryway, staring in at us. I stared back. He wore a green tank top, and his bare arms hung at his sides. The veins on the backs of his hands stood out like ice-blue tributaries under pale, delicate skin. His nails were long; they looked like a girl's except for the thick line of dirt under each ridge. His brown hair looked matted, and it hung over his eyes in the front and was shaved along the sides and back—same cut every twelve-year-old boy was sporting. He looked just like his

mother with that little nub of a nose and rail-thin body. Nothing about him is like his father, I thought.

I didn't know what to give him, *how* to give to him. I decided I'd read to him every night. I brought a box of books down from the attic, stuff I'd read as a kid: *Hildilid's Night*, *Grimm Brothers' Fairy Tales*, and everything by Ezra Jack Keats. He'd lie in his bed, Batman comforter up to his chin, and stare at me with wide eyes from the first word to the last. "Look at the page," I'd say. "Try to read along."

For the first three months, he followed me absolutely everywhere. When I came out of the bedroom in the morning, he was already sitting at the bottom of the stairs, chin in his hands, waiting for me, and the rest of the day he would be at my side. I don't mean just following me from room to room, I mean within two feet of me every second and talking nonstop about nothing. "I have every basketball card there is." "I've seen all the *Rocky* movies; my grandfather bought them for me." "I have a Swiss army knife." "My favorite movie of all time is *First Blood*; I have the video of that too, and I've seen it twenty-five times." I actually had to interrupt him whenever I needed to use the bathroom. "Are you going to follow me in here, too?" I'd ask with less and less humor each time. "Oh," he'd say, like he was coming out of a trance, and then he'd sit in the living room and wait for me.

Every evening, before David went to bed, he and I took turns reading, and every morning, early enough to watch the sun rise over the rooftops below our backyard, I'd be in the den with a cup of coffee. One morning, as I sat there sipping, I

happened to glance up and see David slinking along the fence between our yard and the neighbor's pasture, which held two chestnut mares. The phone rang, a solicitor for the *Discover* card.

Two minutes; I couldn't have been on the phone longer than that, but when I turned around at the sound of a horse neighing loudly, David had climbed the fence and was aiming his father's old bow and arrow at the smaller mare. I flipped open the lock on the window and pushed it open within seconds, but he released the arrow before I yelled his name. He missed and drew out another.

"David!" He was less than fifty feet away from the window, but he didn't seem to hear me. "David!" I yelled louder, and still he did not respond. I ran from the den, down the hall, through the kitchen and out onto the back deck, yelling his name a third time as soon as I flung open the door. I was close enough now to see dirt on his cheek. He turned his head toward me, the rest of his body was still poised on the fence support beam with his arms straight out, aiming the arrow at the horse. "David! What are you doing!" He studied my face for a moment, looked back at the horse, and then lowered his arms and jumped off the beam into our yard.

I was vaguely aware of my heart pounding in my ears. I watched him, dumbfounded. He tossed the bow aside and walked slowly, casually, arrow in hand, toward the deck. As he got closer, I tried to see his face—had to see it—but he kept his head down. When he was within an arm's length, I reached for the arrow, but he jerked it back and turned his eyes up to mine. Nothing. He didn't look like he recognized me; he didn't look like a child caught in the act. He didn't look like a child

at all, just a mass of rage with eyes. I reached again, this time gripping his upper arm with one hand and taking the arrow with the other. He didn't resist. I walked into the house and closed the door, leaving him standing there.

I went to his room and just stood in the middle of it, next to his twin bed. He had sports cards all over the floor, clothes strewn about, and a framed photograph of himself holding his younger brother. I picked it up and felt a glimmer of hope when I saw the way he was smiling at Jared. I put it back and looked out the window at him. He had broken a low branch and was slamming it against the base of the oak tree. Bark flew everywhere. His face was fire-red, and he let out a sound with each blow like a boxer punching his opponent. I watched him for twenty minutes or more, until he exhausted himself and dropped to the ground. He lie there under the arms of the tree, breathing hard and staring blankly up at the sky.

That night, while Aaron and I were lying in bed, I broke my own promise and spoke to him about his son.

"He's driving me crazy. He follows me everywhere."

"He'll get it out of his system; be patient with him. He's just intrigued because you listen to him—you're the complete opposite of his mother."

"You mean because I don't let him throw food at the wall."

"Because you're fearless."

"Not true. Not true at all. I'm quite afraid of what I'm going to do if he doesn't stop clinging to me."

"You have to understand. Veronica dumps him off all the time with her

mother, who's crazy as hell. And who knows what goes on when his grandfather comes home. The man owns a camouflage Chevy pickup with a bumper sticker that reads *If God wanted men to cook, he wouldn't have created women.*"

"How can you leave him in an environment like that?" I asked, instantly disgusted with the grandfather, the grandmother, Veronica, *and* Aaron.

"What would you like me to do, Nancy? You just tell me exactly how I should father my son and I'll do it."

"Well, somebody has to parent him. He can't just flounder out there all alone like he is now." I felt the anger rising in both of us, but for some reason, I couldn't let it go.

"Nancy, knock it off."

I ignored him. "Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder is the absolute least of his worries. His favorite movie is *First Blood*; he can, and endlessly does, recite every television commercial verbatim, and at ten, he can't spell or tie his shoes or even wipe his own ass!"

"Nancy! Enough!"

"You know what we did yesterday while you were pouring leads? We practiced writing his name. *His first fucking name!*"

"Shut up, Nancy. Shut your mouth."

"And he still puts his shoes on the wrong feet. He follows me around like I'm his only link to the world, like he'll die if he loses sight of me—which is a sensorimotor phase that should've ended when he was a toddler—and he'd rather be with *me* than

with *you!*”

Aaron flinched. He stared at me, hands clenched, and then he left the room. I stood still, trying to catch my breath, feeling hot and cold and evil and righteous. I pressed the cool palms of my hands against my burning head and stared at the floor for as long as I could. Finally, I followed him into the kitchen where he stood at the sink, filling a glass with water. “Aaron,” I said gently, and put my hand on his shoulder. He dropped the glass in the sink and turned to face me, pulling me to him and pressing his face against my neck. I stood on the tips of my toes so he didn’t have to bend so far. His face was wet, and his words would have been incomprehensible to anyone but me.

“I know he’s a wreck. Oh God, Nancy, he’s such a wreck, and I’m a shit for a father because I don’t want to take this on. It would end us.”

I felt sick to my stomach. “We don’t have a choice now.” Suddenly, I saw what might become of us, how Aaron might someday look at me the way I looked at David. I stood there stroking his hair and letting him hold me.

The next day, Aaron tried to occupy David’s time with various activities in the shop, sweeping up lead drippings, separating hooks by size into coffee cans, untangling long-line rope. I went out there a few times. David spoke little around his father and made a mess of every task. Finally, Aaron came into the house and asked me to watch him.

“Nancy, just this week. I know I said I’d help out, but he’s jammed the lathe twice and cut through good rope lines. He has to be watched every second, and I’ve got to finish my nets.”

“Tell him to come in; tell him we’ll read together.”

David came in, banging the door against the wall.

“I’m hungry, Nan.”

“We’ll eat soup, then I want you to read me a story. Don’t call me Nan.”

We ate noodle soup at the kitchen table. David spilled his juice. He pounded his fist three times on the table and yelled, “You see what happens when I don’t take my pills?”

“We’ll clean it up,” I said.

It took us over an hour to settle in on the couch. He sat beside me. I didn’t shudder when his hand brushed my arm. I wondered if he knew how much I resented him. Probably not, I reasoned. He’d never known anything else.

“I don’t read so good,” he said.

“It’s okay. Just go slow and pretend you can hear Hildilid’s voice in your head.”

He took the book and held it in front of him, staring at the page with a frown, and then began very slowly, sounding out each word.

“‘If only,’ said Hil, Hil. . .”

“Hildilid.”

“. . .to her wolfhound, ‘I could chase the night from Heh, Heh. . .’”

“Hexham.”

“‘. . .the sun would always shine on my hut. I do not know why no one has thought of chasing away the night before.’”

Then school started. Fifth Grade. David was sent home on the third day for kicking a soccer ball straight toward a girl's head. Second week, David was sent home for bringing a gaff hook to school. Week four, he called his homeroom teacher a bitch. And so it went. For a while, Aaron took it all on, sitting with David each night over homework, talking to him for hours about sports and action movies, even taking him on tuna trips when they didn't cut into David's school day. After David hocked Aaron's Elgin pocket watch, an heirloom from his father, Aaron closed himself up and wouldn't try anymore. But I couldn't stop. I thought of nothing else but ways to help David. I began to see everything in relation to its impact on David. I would often sit in the back of his classes. His teachers would marvel, "It's like he's somebody else when you're here. Too bad you can't be here every day." I might have tried if David hadn't been sent to juvenile hall at the age of fifteen.

About a month ago, as I was eating my cereal and watching the morning news, I saw a boy, about eighteen, being led into a courtroom, his arms behind his back, his legs shackled. He looked about how David might look now, matted hair hanging in his eyes, long bony frame. I thought I might call Aaron, see if he'd heard from him. But maybe, I thought, it's better if I just let it go.

NANCY'S DAY AT THE BEACH

Before I had my big allergy attack on the beach, we were already on the outs, Aaron and I, we just didn't know it. We'd been at it seven years by then, the marriage bit, and if I'd known it would take me another five just to drop the word "doubts" within his earshot, maybe I wouldn't have told my good Samaritan to call Aaron. It's cruel, what we women do. Or maybe it just depends on how you're seeing things.

It was summer, July third, actually. I remember because the beach was normally deserted but since this blip of a coastal town where we lived threw such a July Fourth extravaganza, all the other coastal blips were abandoned by their residents who gathered here to feast and rollick in the frenzy. So there were a handful of people on the beach that morning, mostly kids, and mostly close to the stairs leading down because the tide was coming in.

That patch of beach where I used to walk sits low, hunkered down, and banked by a cliff that holds Highway 101 up top. The bank's bound to wash out, if it hasn't already, because that tide hits hard and fast twice a day. I got caught in it once, wandering down too far—about a mile or so past Trickle Creek, which runs into the ocean at a good pace. Once you get past that, there's no way up the cliff, not all the way up, so I climbed as far as I could, up to a little ledge, and watched all the crashing and thrashing for about three hours before I could go down again. But that was early on, when I was still a newcomer to Aaron's hometown. By the time I had my hyper

histamine hoedown at the beach, I had learned the true nature of the cove and the tides—that's one thing I could see plain as day—and I knew I had enough time if I really moved, to make it to the creek where I could double-back on the highway—not a particularly fun stretch of road to walk along, what with one camper after another honking as you hug the tree-line, but worth it for time on that beach, which is the western-most tip of the contiguous United States, which means gale winds, often pushing eighty-miles an hour, gnashing at you so hard that you laugh until you cry. I used to, anyway.

Our house was a straight mile from the water. You could take 101—also the town's main road—but even though there was no stoplight (not a single one until the next town up), it took longer because it curved around the hardware store and the bank and the Circle K. Plus, Officer Peavy, former runt of Aaron's old high school, spent his shift up and down Main Street, turning round at the top of the dock on the south end and round again at Porter's Pizza just north of town. Aaron, not the bully type, said that he and few other guys, high on spring fever and senioritis some ten years back, had hauled Peavy up the Rogue just before graduation and made him eat periwinkles, shell and all, until he puked. Aaron said some were still crawling when they came back up. The plan then was to douse him in old long-line bait (meaning rotten, wormy bottom-fish carcasses pureed in somebody's mother's blender) and dump him in the crab tank back at the dock. Aaron said he'd felt bad about that part, especially since by that time, Peavy was crying and asking for a "time-out" so he could suck on his asthma inhaler.

So, Aaron ducked out on that. He didn't lie or anything, even told them it might not be such a good idea. But he must not have put his heart into it because in the end the other guys did it anyway—getting caught by dock security just before the crabs could do any permanent damage—and Aaron got to hear the whole thing on the ride in to school the next day. Said he never laughed so hard.

The Peavy story was one of the first things he told me about himself. I wish I'd *really* listened. I wish he hadn't brushed my hair back when he told me, or promised by his tone, by the way he wouldn't let me out of his sight, that he could replace the deaths in my family. But mostly, I guess I wish there had been nothing to replace.

Aaron and I met on his son's fifth birthday. Aaron's first wife had asked if I'd take a few pictures of their son with his cake and whatnot because I was an aspiring photographer and because we were neighbors. She and Aaron were almost done by then—just weening off, her in one town, a bigger one, and Aaron driving up from his blip town once a month. I suppose you could say he and I hit it off right away. It's hard to know for sure now. What comprises a true "hitting it off"? Certainly we were both attracted. Aaron is one of those broad-shouldered, narrow-waisted types that used to be all I needed. He said it was my eyes that snagged him.

Well, that's certainly one way of looking at it, isn't it? Sure, you could say we were both adults. *Aaron and his wife were just about done, and I, Nancy, was a photographer.* Isn't that nice. You could see it that way; two consenting, full-grown, full-blown adults off to make a life together. Why not? That's what Aaron would say.

But Aaron is wrong. Here is one truth: I was sixteen, and didn't even own a camera. One truth is Aaron was twenty-four and should have known better. One bit of truth, one slice of solid-gold, takes-the-cake, Lord Almighty truth is: I did know better. I did know better. But when his wife refused to go back with him, I went instead because there wasn't anybody left alive who could stop me and because Aaron was one of those broad-shouldered, narrow-waisted types that used to be all I needed.

On the drive down to his place, I slept a lot. It was September, I remember because the other foster kids were getting ready for school, and it was hot. Sweat dripped off the tip of Aaron's nose as he packed my dresser, my nightstand, my boxes of books into the bed of his pickup—strapping it all in with black bungee cord. I climbed into his cab and wasted no time falling into a deep sleep. We left Portland—my hometown. We passed Salem; we sped through Eugene. I slept through it. We took the cut-off at Drain, a road I'd never been on; we crept through Elkton, glided through Reedsport. I slept with my head on his leg, sweat soaking my hair. South through North Bend, Coos Bay, then Bandon, Langlois. I slept. I missed the change in landscape, the crowded streets giving way to empty fields and thick, dark forests. I slept through the shift in temperature, from muggy city to moaning coastal winds. And I kept sleeping long after we arrived, and Aaron said it was good—that I needed it, that a job, a friend, a life, aren't things the newly orphaned should concern themselves with. Sleep, he said, was a good thing.

That day on the beach, though, I nearly died. I'd taken an antibiotic just before I left the house. Ceclor, for a nagging cough. Turns out I'm allergic to Ceclor. Fifteen minutes into my walk, I'm on those stairs leading down, and I start to wheeze. Just a little bit, just enough to make me think of Peavy and his asthma. I have allergies, I think to myself, it's allergy season, so I'll wheeze this year. No big deal; something new and exciting to look forward to. The wind picks up, moaning and all, and the tide chimes in. I love this part. Thrusting my hands deep into my pockets, I hunker down onto the beach. It's a beautiful day. A handful of people, mostly kids and mostly close to the stairs leading down, are talking, laughing, looking for shells. I hit the sand, and that's when I notice the tingling in my legs. And the wheezing, it gets worse. I ignore it because dammit, this is my time on the beach—he doesn't follow me here. This is my time, and I have to hit Trickle Creek before the tide comes up. I trudge on.

But within minutes, the tingling is everywhere—even my face—and I realize that what I thought was the sun going down fast is really my vision going black. I'll sit for a while, I think. And almost before I send the “sit” signal, my legs buckle and my butt hits the sand. Down at the stairs, maybe two hundred yards behind me now, I can just see the outline of people, like charcoal on slate rock. Maybe I should yell for help. But my throat feels dry and small. And I'm tired now. Jesus, I'd never been so tired. I lay down, kind of on my side, and I stretch my hand out so the tide can lap at my fingers. Time passes. And then somebody says:

“Tell me why you're small?” *What?* I look up. It looks like a man, maybe with

orange hair, standing over me. “Tell me who to call,” he says. Call Portland, I think. Tell them I’m coming home. “Aaron,” I whisper. “Call Aaron.” And then I laugh, or rather, wheeze until I nearly die because I can’t remember his last name. My last name.

In the cab of his pickup, Aaron is frantic, driving fast. He’s talking, but I can’t hear him over the engine. My head on his leg, his hand on my chest. The truck slows.

“Nancy? Nancy? What’s it worth? Masking brain noise?” No, no, that’s not what he said, couldn’t be. We’re heading north, he said, passing Langlois.

“Nancy, Oh Jesus, Nancy, stay awake.”

Stay awake? Oh, yes, I hear that. “Yes,” I whisper, “Oh yes, Nancy, do stay awake.” I agree. And that’s when I feel the blood in my heart; it’s far too slow, far too slow, the way it’s moving in and out. And I see the truth, right then I see it, that nobody’s alive anymore, but home is still there. I can go back to Portland. *Damn heart, beat faster!* Because I can go back to Portland. And I yell the words—I’m sure I scream the words: “Nancy, for God’s sake, whatever you do, don’t close your eyes!” And even though everything is black and my lungs are collapsing in on themselves, I breathe and I breathe, and I keep my eyes peeled.

HENSLEY HILL HOUSE
(Chapter 1)

Hensley House began as a one-room cabin for loggers who were clearing old growth from Sagalla Forest in 1942. Whole logs were used and are still exposed today in what is now merely the warming room of a twelve-room lodge. The original cabin, now the warming room, is called *the warming room* because of the river-rock fireplace that makes up the entire east wall, and for a long time, this was the only source of heat—even after the twelve rooms were added. Twelve oddly shaped, various-sized rooms—*spaces*, really, additions furiously tacked on whenever Noah Teagle, one previous owner of Hensley House, went on a mushroom binge and decided he needed a space for every drug-induced hallucination. Most of the spaces were doorless drafty rectangles with low, flat ceilings, which worked fine for a kitchen or a coat and boot room, but not quite as well for the bedroom of a guest in search of a still, quiet, *private* place to reflect upon the day. Each had a hardwood floor and at least one window facing west, and steps. Steps everywhere. Step-up to the kitchen space, step-down to the bathroom space, two steps up to the washroom, two steps down to any door that led outside, of which there were three: one in the warming room, one at the bottom of the stairs, and one leading out to the back deck with a distant view, between tall firs, of a slice of Pacific that the locals called North Shore.

An upstairs, what some called “*Henslier* House,” was added last—thrust up among ancient cedars on the north end just off the kitchen. Teagle’s grown-up kids

built it, hoping it would encourage a buyer. Three full rooms up there—one of them a vaulted-ceiling master bedroom with double-paned Anderson windows where you can see all the way down to Point St. Michael's buying station at the end of the port. It's quieter up there. All kinds of people gather downstairs at every hour of the day and night, but a heavy door separates Henslier and Hensley so all you ever hear is an occasional screaming southeaster—more continuous during February and sometimes December, and often joined by a rain crashing hard against those long windows, demanding that you look up to see if the ocean itself isn't on its way up the hill.

Marta first learned of the house in 1978 when Grady was still fishing the *Robbie M*, and the Spruce were still young enough to give a distant but wide view of the north beach where the fleet went for silver season. Teagle, at that point in a wheelchair and barely visible behind a mass of yellow beard, sat motionless day after day in front of the warming room's rock fireplace, the deck to his back. This is how he was the day Mrs. Chaffin of Chaffin Realty brought Marta up to see the house.

In his final years, Teagle had managed to collect every newspaper, butter tub, aluminum can, and fruit jar. One collection per room on the main floor. After the wheelchair, he couldn't make it up and down the single step, so he'd simply tossed items from a doorway into the appropriate space. Teagle had no cats, though maybe he should have. Mice scurried to distant corners as Marta went from one room to the next.

“Well, it does need some work,” Mrs. Chaffin said. She had lived in this town all of her life (Marta had met her as Rhonda *Lewis*), and still she wore white heels to show a Docking Port original on forty muddy acres in November. “But it’s prime location—just minutes from town, panoramic views, high-quality timber. You could level the house, sell the timber, parcel the land off in lots, and make a good profit, don’t you think, Mrs. O’neal? Rhonda didn’t mean it. She loved acreage as much as the next local; she was simply “selling” the way Mr. Chaffin had taught her. “Nobody wants to live in this armpit of America, Rhonda,” he’d say. “You have to show them a way out.”

Marta stood with her large hands on the railing. Every night, she thought, the sun sets right here off the end of this deck. The view could be hers.

Rhonda, who’d been trying not to stare at Marta, stepped off to the side to take her in as Marta took in the north beach. She was somewhat legendary, this Marta woman who never married her man and yet stayed with him even through the worst of seasons. Some called her the horse lady, since she was rarely seen up close, but rather from a distance in any number of pastures, riding, brushing, feeding a horse. She wore faded jeans tucked into scuffed leather boots. Her long muscular body was softened only by a dark-blond braid, wrapped at the end in a blue rubber band, the kind used to hold asparagus spears at the supermarket. Marta reached up to the pocket of her Hickory shirt, and Rhonda winced at the sight of long nobby fingers without fingernails. Gnawed off? Rhonda wondered, or maybe just twenty-odd years of being a

fisherman's . . . *partner*.

"I wouldn't level or parcel, Rhonda." Marta said it low, but firm. Then she lit a Pall Mall and drew in deeply as she continued looking out at a distant view of a calm sea. "Would Mr. Teagle take zero-down if a balloon payment came later?"

"I suppose he would have to; offers are slim. Need some time to talk it over with Grady?"

"No," said Marta, "Grady is ready to move."

* * *

After Teagle's power of attorney signed the offer, Marta sent Grady up to Hensley House by himself.

"I don't give a flying flip if Kesh and Mara can graze for weeks on prime Hensley Hill hay!" He held her serious stare just fine at first. In fact, she was the one to look away, focusing instead on the gin and tonic cupped like coffee in both his hands. "Honey." Softer now. "We can't afford an eight-thousand dollar balloon payment in two years." He scratched diesel-soaked fingers through his wirey beard and sipped from his cup.

"Just go up and take a look at it," said Marta. "I'll worry about the money; you just get up there and take a look." She was holding a cigarette and had Gert, a twelve-year-old Skipper Kee, thrown over her shoulder like a baby. "For me, Gray, do this thing."

Although he would never admit it, Grady stood five-ten to her five-eleven, and

she could load hay bails, toss off eighty-pound cornflakers (if she used her knees), and probably even choker-set as well as he could. Grady had met her when, after graduating from UCLA with a degree in history, he and his brother Stan had come up to work on a shrimp boat for the summer before hitching back East to look for a teaching job. She'd sold them their bait and stuffed a couple of beers inside their cooler. That week on the ocean, he'd found a solitude unlike any other he'd been able to create on land. When they weren't hauling nets, he could read and smoke and rock for hours under an open sky. And when they came in to unload, she was always there, a carton of cigarettes in one hand and a book in the other. She knew how to let him be, and that made him want to be something for her.

Marta snubbed out her cigarette, set Gert on the kitchen counter, and pulled the rubber band from her hair. Slowly, she smoothed her fingers through the braid until her hair dangled wild and loose down the length of her back.

He drove up to the house that night. It took five minutes to go from their two-room shack on the swamp flats to the bottom of Hensley Hill. The road leading to the top was paved, and at one time or another, he'd been in nearly every house along this road. First house: a double-wide on the right, Nadine and Jim Mason, bank teller, fisherman, three miscarriages before baby Paula's arrival last May. Second home: three-story wood house, Karla and Chester Laughin, high school sweethearts, married fifteen years. Chester'd had a mistress (Megan Dowling) for most of that time. Megan had boys, whereas Karla had one girl after another. Two miles up came the next three

houses: all Kennison's, all owner-built ranch homes, all facing north shore. The Killer Kennison Clan, as some called them, owned half the Docking Port fleet and were responsible for almost as much product to hit the dock every year. Generations of fisherman. The youngest, Mark Kennison, had recently married a rich city girl half his age—which would make her nineteen—and packed her back to Dock Port to live out her days as a dock maid.

The houses and pavement ended at the top, but the road continued on up into Sagalla Forest—gravel for a while, then an old Cat road, then nothing but deer and cougar trails. Grady turned down a muddy drive just before the gravel began. 3693 Hensley Hill. The wind picked up, slowly swaying thousands of heavy limbs overhead as he bounced along the pot-holed drive leading to the house. A long driveway would be nice, he thought. He could bring his crabpots up here, stack them along the road, and quit paying dock fees. He could string out long-line gear, knit tunnels, splice rope, paint buoys, all on his own property.

He came to a clearing. To his right, the moon outlined a make-shift barn with a pasture just up behind it. To his left stood the house. Smoke billowed gently from a fat rock fireplace. Must've built the fireplace first, he figured, then the main cabin around it. Looked like stones from Moose River bed—large, smooth black stones, like shoe-polished moon rocks. He was mildly curious about the inside but not so curious about Teagle. He parked the truck and got out to stand with the barn and pasture at his back while he looked the house over. A strong wind moving through all those firs

was enough to squelch the engine of his pick-up, and he'd shut off his lights as he neared the place.

From the main cabin, rooms jutted out every which way like barnacles on a clam. But off to the right, and creating a carport, an upstairs had been added, reaching far up into the starry night. It would've looked off balance if it weren't for the rock fireplace. All that stone in opposition to all that height made it at least visually acceptable. And she could have her Arabians close by. She could have a garden—or even a goddamn nursery if she wanted. She could have her quiet and her loud all at once.

* * *

In late November, boat owners who can afford crabpots are at the dock, sometimes around the clock, gearing up for the opening of crab season. December 1. The port's dock was built in a cove that opens on the south end. You can't see west unless you climb the bluff above the port. The boats can't be anchored in the cove. Or rather, they can be anchored too well. The anchors get sucked deeper and deeper into the sand—something about the way the currents swirl into the cove. One night, when Carl Iverson on the *Wendy Three* made the mistake of staying out too late to get his boat hoisted up, he dropped anchor in the cove. The next morning, he woke with his head pressed up against the bow in his bunk room; the stern had lifted entirely out of the water. Shrimpers on the *Maka M*, heading out that morning, laughed and pointed as he climbed out of the cab to a near-vertical deck. “You really tied one on last night,

eh, Ivy?" He waved them off as if he could fix the problem with one hand, but they already had their winch attached to his prop and were reeling him in.

So, the boats have to be lowered and hoisted in and out of the water. No boat, it says in the port handbook, is allowed to exceed forty feet in length or thirteen feet in width to ensure the safety of the dock and the vessel as the hoist maneuvers a boat in and out of the water. All of the Kennison vessels exceeded these measurements by a few inches. Boats are lined up on trailers along the dock according to seniority. This year, Jack Yeager finally died and the *Mary Elaine* (named after his daughter who had the great misfortune of marrying Carl Iverson) got sold to an urchin diver—losing its number one parking slot of fifteen years. It now sits all the way at the end, some fifty boats away from the hoist.

The best slots are the ones closest to the hoist, which also happen to be the first twelve slots on the seniority list. Boats head out around four a.m. during salmon and long-line season, and if a guy has to wait on the hoist because his boat is parked a few hundred yards up the line, he's missed a few thousand dollars before he's even hit the water. If his boat has a live-tank system or a king-size fish hold that he can ice-up, he can stay out for days at a time. And when all of his lines are jerking nonstop because he's hit a salmon pocket, and they're paying two-fifty per pound at the dock, and every hour the port is sending out a radio message that the quota for the year is about to be met, and he knows he won't see money like this—or maybe any at all—for another six

months, the last thing he wants to do is head home. But he'd have to if all his boat can hold is a dump-box full of coho. That's three hours lost. Time is money.

With the exception of Yeager's move, the line-up has been the same for many years. Frank Reid's *Gemini* has the first slot. Frank used to be a high-powered attorney down in Sacramento, but his nose-powder habit blew him up north and into fishing life. He'd bought the *Gemini* from Art Parsons, the old guy who owned the fancy house on the bluff, and the next three boats down the line (*Domino*, *Waverly*, *Netherland*). Art didn't give a shit about seniority. He owned and operated a million-dollar pine products company over the big hill and bought a few boats for the few guys with guts enough to go up and ask him for a handout. At seventy-five thousand dollars a pop, it was local charity to Art, and he could sit up on his bluff, when he wasn't at his wood factory, and watch his boats come and go. He was good about working a deal with a guy, but mentally it didn't make it any easier for a guy to get a break on a boat from an owner who made more money in one hour on the phone than he made all month on a rough sea. And while Art Parsons may take twenty-grand off the asking price, he never took less than twenty percent of the gross.

The next seven were all Kennison's: *Jaradey*, *Andrea Marie*, *Freeline*, *Jacob D*, *Mistress*, *Pacific Brute*, and Mark's new one, the *Dawn Treader*. All of their boats were painted and fibreglassed twice a year. All of their boats had top-notch electronic equipment: depthsounders, color fishfinders, VHF's, sidebands, Loran satellite receivers, Loran plodders, Woodfreeman auto pilot systems, e-pirb locaters on every

mast, stainless steel transducers on every belly, radars strong enough to slice through the thickest Dock Port fog. Thirty-grand per, easy, just for the light show. Grady's hull alone had cost him thirty-grand. Kennison boys had the gear and the permits for every season. And their decks reflected that: hydraulic power blocks for crabpots and lone-line pots, fresh-water systems for live-tanks, salmon gurdies on the stern, mechanical baiting systems on the bow, holds big enough for a five-day tuna trip or a halibut season in Alaska. But surprisingly, they hadn't bought into the urchin fishery.

Grady's slot was another ten boats down the line. Now completely off the actual wood planks of the dock, the *Robbie M* sat on pavement at the base of the bluff among all of the sleek, zippy urchin boats—the jet ski's of the ocean. He was worried by this new breed of fisherman infiltrating from California. His paint-chipped, twenty-eight footer looked authentic, earned, next to their fifteen-foot fiberglass speedsters. The urchin guys were fond of fluorescent colors, bottled water, sake, and boat names like *Dive Bomber*, *Jazz Mine*, *Reef Ripper*. If a guy on the dock wasn't recognizable, he was an urchin diver. If a guy was constantly in a wet suit, he was an urchin diver. If a guy made five-thousand in four hours on a limited-entry permit that the locals didn't get in on, and he took all of his money back to California at the end of the season, he was an urchin diver. Grady was not alone in his worries.

It took a week of flatbed trips to the dump to clean out Hensley House. Marta hired her grown daughters, Sam and Sarah, to buff the floors and scour the place with disinfectant. Sam brought her kids up, and they ran wild all over the property—

unaccustomed to more than a shared square of neat, green grass in front of an apartment complex. Sarah, who had no kids and barely enough personality to hold down her job at the one hardware store in town, found the quiet of Hensley House so appealing that she knew a room of that place would be her sanctuary for years to come.

On November 30, 1979, Marta built a fire in the warming room of her new home, left the girls to tend to it, and headed for the port. She parked her Datsun hatchback beneath the *Robbie M* and climbed the ladder to hand Grady a ham and cheese. He was in the bilge, bathing in hydraulic fluid.

“Holy crow,” she said, “light a cigarette down there, and it’s all over between us.” She held out a paper sack.

Grady smiled and pulled himself up out of the engine room. “Well, then, a dock maid you would no longer be.” He took the sack and added, “You could take your horses up Moose River and marry that rancher you see every Saturday.”

Marta touched her finger to the tip of his blackened nose. “He doesn’t like to ride bareback,” she said. “It’d never last.” She leaned her backside up against the captain’s chair and waited for him to take a few bites of his lunch before she spoke again. When he’d finished his sandwich and started on the plums, she said, “Gray, I want to turn Hensley House into a lodge.”

Grady pulled the seed from the plum and looked it over before dropping it into the paper sack.

“I think it’s the best way to pay the mortgage,” she continued. “And we could take the upstairs; you’d never hear the lodgers.”

He finished the plum and took a swig of coffee from his thermos.

“You could even come and go from the back door.” She knew it was asking a lot. Grady, above all else, preferred life in his head to life around him.

Grady leaned over toward the cab window and tossed the rest of his coffee out over the dock. Turning back to Marta, he finally spoke. “Who’s going to pay to stay up there? It’s drafty, there’s barely enough hot water for the two of us, and that driveway’s almost a mudslide.”

He hadn’t flat-out resisted. Marta was encouraged. “Well, we’d need to remodel the bathroom downstairs, add another hot water heater and a water-filter system because of that old well, and the rooms need doors, and maybe some. . . .”

“Money,” he said. “I know you’ve already thought it out, so where’s it coming from?”

Marta folded her arms over her chest and nudged a bolt on the floor with her boot. “I’m going to ask the Kennisons.”

“Christ, no.” Grady shoved off the skipper’s chair and dropped himself back down in the bilge.

Marta got up, too and leaned over the hole in the floor where he stood. “I’m not asking your permission,” she said, calmly.

“Can’t I at least *act* like you need my permission before you take the helm?”

“You won’t have to do a thing, Gray. I swear it. I’ll do everything. It will be my loan.”

“And suppose George Kennison says yes? Docking Port doesn’t see enough tourists to keep a Motel 6 running.”

Marta put her hands deep in the pockets of her jeans and looked out the cab window. Quietly, she said, “I’m sure the urchin divers are getting pretty tired of sleeping in their bunk rooms.”

“Oh holy fuck, Marta.” It came out in a whine.

“And the Kennisons,” Marta continued, matching his pitch, “they could pick up their hung-over deck hands just up the road instead of hunting all over town for them at three a.m.”

Grady gasped. “So, the Kennisons and the reef rippers—if they don’t kill each other—will be regulars in our living room. That oughtta work fine, Marta.”

* * *

That evening, the winds had died down, and the tide lapped gently against the jetty. All of the guys were up on their boats, drinking, smoking, even singing at times. Everything from CCR to Corky’s polka 8-tracks could be heard up and down the dock. Some of the wives and a lot of the girlfriends were down, too. Lots of calling across decks, lots of laughter, all hopeful for a solid season, which opened at midnight. A few of the guys had already left the dock, searching for rich crab grounds where they would hover until they could begin dropping string after string of pots.

George and his son Mark were up on *Dawn Treader's* deck. George's eldest, Dan Kennison, was on the *Jacob D* beside them. Dan had three sons, Rich, Steve, and Little Dan, and they were each up on the next three boats. All of the Kennison's deck hands were on the dock below, some coiling fifteen-fathom shots of rope and others rubber-wrapping cornflakers. Dan and his boys were bantering back and forth across the boats as they oiled crab shivs and checked hydraulic lines. George and Mark sat on up-turned five-gallon buckets and talked quietly about the grounds this year, where to lay strings, what pockets to avoid. Mark's new bride, was curled up on the captain's seat reading *The Stand*. She glanced, briefly, out the cab window when she heard Marta coming up the ladder.

"Well, hey, Marta. Haven't seen you in a while," Mark said as he took her hand and helped her up on deck.

"Hello, Mark, George. You guys look about ready to take her out," she said. Fran leaned back in the chair and looked through the back window onto the deck. It was the first time she'd ever seen Marta, who stood taller than George or Mark. She shook hands with them both, George first. Looked like a firm grip. Her blond hair was shiny and straight, falling almost past her hips, which did not look, to Fran, like they belonged to a forty-something woman. Her face was and forearms were dark, tanned from years spent outdoors. But, to Fran, her features were striking, Scandinavian perhaps. She wore jeans, loose around the middle but tight around muscular thighs, and she'd tucked them into black cowboy boots with a square tip. George couldn't

hold her gaze for very long, though he seemed to like her okay—not used to a woman on his boat, Fran figured. But Mark talked to her easy enough, probably known her for years, both of them.

George offered Marta a beer, and she took it while Mark pulled up a crate for her to sit on.

“Boys, I came up here to ask for your help. You know Grady and I have been livin’ in that rat hole on the swamp for fifteen years, and we just recently got into Teagle’s place up on the hill.”

“Yeah, we heard about that. We’re darn happy for you,” said George, “but it sounds like a lot of work cleanin’ up after Noah. That reminds me about the time he used to have a place beside us up Langlois Mountain when we were kids. We both had dirt floors and hay beds—guess he never wanted to forget that.”

Fran slipped quietly off the chair and slid the deck window part way open.

“I thought you inherited this fleet from your family, George.” The wind picked up and Marta tipped her crate back against the railing and pulled a red bandana from her jeans pocket. She set the beer between feet and folded the bandana into a triangle on her leg before tying it around her hair. Fran watched the men watching Marta’s stubbed fingers fold the cloth.

“Hell no,” George replied, “I joined the army at fifteen just to get away from the nothing that we had. But until then, I lived in that damn place with no windows and open spaces between planks—two sisters, a brother, and Ma. My father would be

gone for days at a time, probably on a drunk, and when he'd get himself home, he'd give each of us kids a whipping, said, 'I don't know what you all've been up to, but I'd bet you got this comin' to ya,' and I suppose we did."

George rarely spoke of his father. Mark waited to see if there was more, but George sipped his beer and looked up toward Parson's house on the bluff.

"What can we help you with, Marta?" Mark asked.

"Well, I've got the house all cleaned out. It still needs a lot of work, but there's nine rooms downstairs and three upstairs; I'd like to turn it into a lodge of sorts." She paused for a moment, pulling a cigarette and a single wood match from her pocket and holding them gently in her fingers as she continued. "The place sits on the southern edge of forty acres of old cedars and spruce scraping the sky, and there's a view of north beach from the back deck or any tree on the property if you dare climb enough—which I have."

The Kennison men leaned in. Fran closed her book. And Marta continued.

"There's pasture, too; I've got Kesh and Mara up there already. Kesh can run for days if he jumps the fence and head up into Sagalla. I don't think anybody's walked through that forest in years; deer don't seem the least bit spooked when they see me. And I see owls at all hours of the day, hear them at night. Grady saw elk tracks on the east end, and the chanterelles stand fat and firm on every clump of moist soil. The wind rattles the downstairs windows, so I'd probably replace those, although once the trees around the house get a little bigger, that spot where the house sits will be

completely sheltered from a southeaster, except for maybe the upstairs.” She took a deep breath, and when she continued, her pitch was a little higher, and she was smiling. “It can be raining and blowing like mad, but deep in the forest, under all those limbs, you stay dry, and you barely hear the howling. You know, I found old saws up in those woods, and green wine jugs, and two arrowheads at the base of a bedrock overhang!” She laughed, and then added, “Magical up there, just magical.”

The place was with her as she spoke—like a vibration had begun in her chest and was spreading out to the rest of her, filling her full of some private, harmonious sound. The dock noise faded around them as they began to hear what Marta was hearing.

“I’ve walked for days all around that property, and yet it feels like I’ve only seen what it wants me to see, like it’s only showing me little bits at a time. Little things slow me down—like the Amanita mushroom. Christ it’s bold!—bright red body and stark white speckles. They’re poisonous, but they won’t kill you—just make you sick as hell. Slave owners in ancient cultures used to make their slaves eat them. The hallucinogens would get distilled in the urine and the owners would drink it to get the high without the poison. Can you imagine that? Drinking urine? Drinking the urine of your slaves! There’s Indian Pipes up there, too—look like curled baby fingers made of wet rice paste and they stick right up out of the nettle beds. And I’ve found half a dozen creeks with all kinds of frogs. And the sounds! Oh, the sounds up there!” She laughed as it tickled inside.

“How much you figure you’ll need?” George asked.

Marta looked up from her hands at George’s old smile. She nodded then smiled back before striking the wood match against the bottom of her boot. “Ten thousand, maybe” she said and lit her cigarette.

George whistled. “Well, that’s a lot, Marta. I don’t know if we have access to that kind of—”

“Yes, yes it is,” she said. “Would you be interested in being partners?” she asked. “I was thinking of heading up there, too.” She gestured toward Parson’s house with the tip of her cigarette.

“Partners? No. This is your thing, Marta. Maybe Parsons is your best bet.”

“We’ve kind of got our hands full just now,” added Mark. “Dad’s been thinking about trying to get an urchin permit for the *Dawn Treader*. If that happens, we’d need to learn a new fishery, buy new gear—it’s a big investment.”

“Yes, that’s a big move, but you guys know the importance of staying versatile, and you know, better than anybody, how to do it. I’m sure you’ll do fine.” She grabbed her empty beer bottle and stood up. “I’d like it if you’d come up anyway, take a look, come see so you can tell your seasonal help about it. It would be a convenient place to send your deckhands, too. I know how irked we get running from one bar to the next looking for ‘em when it’s time to hit the water.” Marta rolled her eyes for emphasis, and the Kennisons laughed and nodded.

“Go on and talk to Parsons,” Mark said. “I’m sure he’ll give you a hand, Marta. Sounds like a neat place up there.”

“Yeah. Hell, he might even throw in some wood for a new roof,” said George.

Marta shook each of their hands again and Fran slid the window open all the way as Marta moved toward the ladder.

“I’ll do it,” said Fran. Marta and the men looked up, startled. “Wait, let me come out.” Fran pulled her head back through the window, giggling as she momentarily caught her ponytail on a snag in the frame. A second later, she was climbing out of the cabin and onto the deck with them, ducking her head to miss the arm of the crab shiv. “I’ll go into partnership with you,” she said, looking up at Marta who suddenly looked taller still. Fran put her hand up on the arm above her head to steady herself, to look older than nineteen.

“Marta,” Mark said, left arm outstretched, “this is Frannie, my wife.”

Marta took a step toward her and held out a hand. Fran took it and wondered as she did so if her own fingers would ever look as useful.