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Sunday Biography · Jeff Kross

RIGHT FROM THE START, these are the facts. My name is Dashiell Bennett. My mother named me after her favorite mystery writer, the creator of Sam Spade. Until I was twenty, when I moved three thousand miles away—about as far as I could get—to Seattle, we lived in a sturdy greying three-storied Victorian house, inherited from my maternal grandfather, on Huttner Street, in Woods Hole, Massachusetts. In Seattle I worked for a large detective agency. So you might be tempted to credit the forces of history with a certain inevitability, but I'll say this first: if anything, I became a private investigator in spite of my name and upbringing.

My father was a traveling salesman for a company that manufactured prosthetic limbs. He would blow into the house at one door and, minutes later it seemed, out at the other; he left us for good when I was twelve. My mother had always enjoyed a passion for mystery novels. But when my father left she disappeared, almost without a trace, as they say, into “hard-boiled” detective fiction.

Rebecca, my sister, was eighteen when my mother had her committed to the state asylum. Her early signs of psychosis, when noticed at all by my mother, were mistaken for recalcitrance. Me, I'm not a psychologist, but I would like to think that some of my wife's insights—she was a social worker when we met—rubbed off after eight years of marriage. So I wonder about the root of Rebecca's problems. Was it my father's desertion that drove her over the edge? Or was it some undiagnosed disorder of the brain, a chemical imbalance maybe? Well, I've given it some thought, and I still have no choice but to place the blame on my mother.

Lord, that woman! When I was in high school we read *Great Expectations* and it made more of an impression than I realized, because my memory has somehow characterized her as Miss Haversham: ascetic, inviolable, dry as a dead leaf. Her veins ran with an iciness that belied her frailty. There is one image that eclipses all the rest: a shrunken middle-aged woman propped in a voluminous bed, her silver head sunk lavishly in pillows. Of course there is a book in her hands. And on the night stand many more, piles of books in whose pages you could encounter at each

turn a gruesomely depicted murder, and where corpses were more common than fireflies on a summer night. A dim light casts a pall across her cheeks, accentuating her wrinkles. She looked like an invalid; or worse, a corpse. I was something of an avid reader in school, and I have impressions of gingerly approaching her great matriarchal bed, anxious to rescue her from that sordid world into which she had wandered. I would stand there, for example, offering her yellowed library copies of Jane Austen or the Brontës—books I suspected one’s mother *should* be reading—or once, attempting a compromise, *The Moonstone*. But then she would shake her head vigorously, her eyes livid, and shriek, “Get out of my room with that trash! Get out!” I would flee towards the door, but before I could escape she might call after me, “See you in the funny papers, sucker.” I’m serious. She was a travesty of motherhood: vicariously solving murders, uncovering new victims, speeding in thrilling pursuit down Ventura Boulevard, bruising her delicate knuckles on some gangster’s rocky chin while all about her the neglected lives of her children crumbled like untended garden walls.

I learned of her death, five years ago, in a phone call from my Aunt Bertha. Whatever sorrow weighted that woman’s voice, it wasn’t enough to blanket the contempt she held for me because I had been out of touch with my mother for years. Well, I flew to Boston for the funeral with Sarah, my wife before our recent separation. It snowed that day. Stamping up and down to warm my feet, I watched the minister cast an embarrassed eye over the sparse congregation of mourners and rub his reddened nose with the back of his glove. I had turned at the last words and dragged Sarah away with me. The hollow thud of the first shovelful upon the coffin lid hit me from behind, and I heard Bertha’s wheezing voice calling after me.

We took the train back to Logan Airport. Snow descended like powder on the rail lines, collected in the corners of the panes. Sarah curled quietly against me, her dark hair fanned across my shoulder. Drops of condensed breath trickled down the inside of the window; as I lifted my hand to wipe them clear Sarah abruptly shifted herself and said, “You shouldn’t suppress your feelings about your mother.”

“I’m not suppressing anything,” I said. “If you ask me, I’m *expressing* my total disgust.”

She sat up in the seat, disengaged a few strands of hair that had clung to

my two-day stubble. “I don’t know why you’ve got so much hate inside you. You never talked about your mother at all. Why not? What are you blaming her for?”

“Christ, what don’t I blame her for? She was a horror, that woman, an absolute horror. I consider myself a lucky survivor from that family. Rebecca wasn’t so lucky. Neither was my father, in a way.”

I hesitated. “You’re right,” I admitted—she always loved to hear that—“I’m blocking a lot of it out. I do remember one time that was fairly typical of my mother with Rebecca. I think I was in my mid-teens. I seem to remember Reb was starting to fill out her bathing suit. The three of us—my father was gone by then—we were on the beach just below the Nobska Point lighthouse. We spent a lot of time there during the summers. My mother was sitting in the shade, under her umbrella, reading one of her detective novels. She was probably miles away, sneaking down some back alley with Philip Marlowe. Rebecca had her head in my mother’s lap. My mother was stroking her hair, absent-mindedly. I was just looking out to the ocean, daydreaming, feeling too old to be there with my mother and sister. There was that bluish haze you see sometimes sitting on the edge of the ocean, and Reb asked my mother how far it was to the horizon. She was always asking that sort of question. Mother looked up, stopped stroking Reb’s hair, and said, ‘Fourteen miles.’ I don’t know where she got that from; she probably made it up. But Reb wasn’t satisfied, she asked whether it was fourteen miles no matter where you looked from. Would it be fourteen miles if you looked from the top of a cliff. Mother didn’t look up that time, she just kept on stroking Reb’s hair, sort of dreamily. Then she exploded. She pushed Reb’s head off her lap, knocked her over in the sand and started screaming, ‘Stop asking me all these stupid goddamn questions all the time! Can’t you see I’m reading?’ And then she calmed down and went back to her book. It was incredible. You should have seen Rebecca’s face. I’ll never forget that look. Total incomprehension. We stayed there a few more hours, nobody saying a word, then we went home. Rebecca trailed a few feet behind us the whole way.”

The brakes squealed as the train pulled into the station. “You were close to her, weren’t you?” Sarah said. A wave of frigid air rolled in as the doors opened. “Rebecca? I suppose,” I answered. “I guess I felt sorry for her, for having to live with my mother. Without a father most of her life. She

never seemed able to cope with the real world, she always seemed to be somewhere else. No doubt my mother drove her there, wherever *that* was. Maybe I was the same way for a while.” I recalled how the floorboards in our house were badly warped from age and the damp ocean air. Rebecca started taking ballet lessons when she was eight or nine and used to practice her *pliés* in the living room, her tiny white hand grasping the window sill for support, the sun streaming in on her dark hair. She would bend at the knee and go up and down in slow motion, so that the floorboards would creak with each movement. I used to sit beside her with my eyes closed and pretend to be on a ship as the timbers flexed with the swell of waves. I thought I was Christopher Columbus on his way to the New World.

“The last time I saw Rebecca,” I told Sarah, “was nine or ten years ago. When I saw what she’d turned into it didn’t seem to correspond to any memory I’d had of her. Her eyes were sunken and haggard; she looked amorphous in the hospital gown. I guess she was pumped full of drugs. Anyway, she didn’t seem to recognize me. It was embarrassing. After ten minutes an attendant took her back down the hall. The place reeked of Lysol.”

I turned to the window and noticed our reflections fixed there as the train station slid past, girder after girder. “You should have seen her as a girl, though. She was quiet and thoughtful; she had a dancer’s body. A beautiful girl. I don’t know what they did to her. Maybe my mother was that beautiful once too, before her insides shriveled up and froze.”

My father, at least, never left a body to be disposed of. What he did leave me was such a vague impression of him that memory has transformed him into a two-dimensional caricature. He had eyes like a goat. In his defense I will offer up the excuse that my mother must have made him feel completely inadequate; why else would he be so unrelentingly lecherous? That, in any event, seems the type of explanation Sarah might have offered. My father. You might have seen him lurking in the magazine concessions of bus stations, gazing without shame at girlie-magazine covers. If you were an attractive woman he might have offered to light your cigarette, and his smile would have brought the blood to your cheeks. He took no pains to hide his thoughts—he wore his lust proudly on his sleeve, as if it was an 18-karat gold cuff link. I don’t know which

came first, his embarrassing lewdness or my mother's need for sanctuary in mystery novels. There were those blatant pats on waitresses' backsides; the lascivious glee with which he pointed out to me, an impressionable kid of eight or nine, the full curves of a woman's breast on the tawny beach near Nobska Point, beneath the afternoon shadow of the lighthouse; the florid glances he cast at my mother at the dinner table, while she cleared the pudding cups and he merrily undid the top buttons of his pants. Did all of this drive her into that strange landscape of pulp violence, or was it the other way around?

The poor man worked for a minor medical outfit that supplied hospitals and doctors with cut-rate prosthetic appendages ("Arms for the poor," he used to joke), and traveled for extended periods, peddling his disembodied wares across the country. God only knows what went on in those squalid hotel rooms he inhabited for months at a time.

Shortly after my twelfth birthday, my father failed to return home from one of his trips. I found my mother at the kitchen table when I came in from school one day. Her face seemed paler than usual. She was pushing teacups around the old wooden table in random patterns, like chess pieces. "Your father isn't coming home," she announced calmly, and sighing, added, "ever." "What!" I shrieked. My mother turned a complacent expression towards me as I repeated my cry of protest. Then she turned slowly back to the table. I felt ill. My stomach was turning over. Suddenly my mother, with the unexpected fury of a striking cobra, whirled in her seat and one by one hurled all the cups against the far tiled wall. They smashed explosively and I ducked their scattering fragments. "Stop!" I screamed, but she had already become serene. Whatever anger she possessed had apparently spent itself, in one swift, unpremeditated release, like an overwound mainspring. She patted her hair into place without looking at me. "Go outside and leave me alone," she muttered wearily, and I went.

Unnerved, I sulked outside and wandered around the old house, trying to comprehend my father's desertion. Had he written a letter? Had he called to say he wouldn't be home? How could she be so sure he wasn't coming back? For a moment I entertained the notion that my mother had discovered within one of her mystery novels the recipe for perfect murder, and had buried him here in the backyard. A quick inspection of the rosebeds didn't turn up any freshly dug dirt, but I still wonder whatever be-

came of him. Maybe he met a young woman—a waitress? a chambermaid?—in whose arms he would find that mythical radiance he always suspected existed but never knew with my mother. Who knows? The image I have, though, is of my father holing up in some malodorous hotel room with a chipped ceiling in the Midwest. Some little town in the win-swept badlands perhaps, where the breath in your nostrils is brittle with ice well into April. Supine on his rumpled bed, a dusty morning light sifting upon her face, lies the woman of his dreams. Hell, why not? Look closely, you will see that the woman is a fake, a composite assembled from the tools of his trade. The sparkle in her blue eyes is merely the reflection of the light in glass. The long shapely legs are wooden, and they will clasp him to her with the help of steel springs at the knee. The outflung hands which beckon him so temptingly are only flesh-colored plastic. Arms for the poor.

Though my father, as I say, never left a corpse, as far as my mother was concerned he was as good as dead. She never mentioned him at all. In order to pay the bills she returned to nursing; she had worked in a local convalescent home before her marriage and was able to work there again. Her approach to this career, as with everything else, was detached. In case I had ever harbored any illusions that nursing is an altruistic vocation, the sight of mother in her starched white uniform certainly killed that. Jesus, I pity the sick and the dying who delivered themselves up to her care.

One final memory before I get on with my story. I am twenty. The three of us have stopped off on our way to the beach so Rebecca can buy a new bathing suit. In the thick oppressive heat of early afternoon, we stand in the shop on Main Street. Mother turns in the mirror, rearranging and admiring a new hat with silk roses. I stand by the front window, my arm languidly curled around the calf of a female mannequin, watching the tourists shuffling in flapping sandals to the beach. Reb is hidden in the dressing closet with two or three new bathing suits. Flies buzz against the front window. Then the dressing closet door bursts open and my sister hurtles out screaming, jettisoned like a pilot from a cockpit. She explodes from there and continues with the same force through the shop door, out into the glare of Main Street. She is stark naked. I watch her strong legs carry her up the street, her black hair dancing above her buttocks. If the drawbridge didn't happen to be rising at that point, there's no telling how far she would have gotten.

In an instant, as I was leaping towards the dressing closet, my mother was making a dash for the shop door. The closet was of course empty. I turned to watch my mother scrambling down the street with a devilish fury, bearing with all her venomous intent upon Rebecca. The drawbridge was up, frozen against the sun. Before it, heaving, shaking her head wildly like a trapped animal, stood my sister. She was terrified of something; what, I didn't know. And before I could intercept my mother, she was upon Rebecca, knocking her to the street, engulfing her naked body and pounding her back and shoulders with her fists, blindly, furiously. Perhaps ten seconds elapsed before I could drag her from the crumpled, whimpering form of my sister. I knew then, looking at Rebecca curled like a fetus in the dust, that I would never forgive my mother.

We never found out what it was that Rebecca had run from, and she never recovered. The doctors classified her as paranoid-schizophrenic and she was committed. My mother authorized it, signing the papers as easily as if they had been Christmas cards. If the actual scene hadn't been bad enough, a picture appeared in the local tabloid a week after the disturbance on Main Street. Some diligent tourist with a camera had been on hand. There was Rebecca, with the drawbridge as backdrop, standing naked on the hot pavement, her fists clenched to her cheeks. You can just make out my mother's leg entering the scene near the right margin. The appropriate editorial rectangles had, naturally, obscured the indecent parts of my tormented sister, yet the photo remained for my mother the unexpungeable smirch which she thought would stain even the name on her tombstone. With my disreputable sister now safely excised from her world like some horrible malignancy, she retreated more ardently into her mystery novels. I saw her only when she emerged from her room to scamper off to the convalescent home. Less than three uneventful months later I left our home in Woods Hole and moved to Seattle.

There is a second photograph of a naked woman which has figured prominently in my life. I work for the Rainier Detective Agency in Seattle. Until five months ago I was married, and Sarah is still the lump in my throat. Her clear ringing laughter had the power to make me feel immortal. I mean that. Because her eyes were narrow, she had the illusion of inscrutability. I know for a fact that she believed herself smarter than I, and she probably was, but to tell her would have given her an unfair ad-

vantage. She graduated Magna Cum Laude from the university here and had a deceptively easy time in graduate school. Until she had Diana two years ago, she worked as a social worker at a local family-health clinic. She was a bit resentful at having to relinquish the mental care of hundreds for the rather mundane care of just one, but she got used to it fairly quickly. She was resilient that way.

When I stop to think about it, it was probably her overabundant intelligence that was the weakest link in the chain that bound us. Her intellect led her down dangerous paths. Never satisfied with appearances, she felt the need to reason out, to search for the motive or stimulus behind each thought, behind each feeling. I don't know how she did it. The most casual of ideas might send her staggering through cerebral labyrinths for hours. As you might expect, she was frequently unhappy. I woke often in the night to the rattling sound of a pill bottle being unscrewed, or the squeak of the bed as she rose to pad barefoot to the bathroom. I suppose there have always been people like this, but until I met Sarah I had never met one.

Well, this was our major difference. Though my job requires some degree of regimentation and critical analyzing, I am by nature an impulsive person. If I happened to remark, for instance, that I didn't feel like going to a party she would say, "Why don't you feel like going?" If I answered, "I don't know, I just don't," she would say, "You must know why you don't want to go. You must have a reason." "I don't know," I would repeat. "Are you stupid?" she would insist. "How could you not know? Are you ashamed to be seen with me—I can't imagine why you would be—is that it? Is there another woman there you don't want me to meet? Who is she?" And so on, and so on, leaping with the dexterity of a mountain goat from one misapprehension to the next. How could I have convinced her that I merely didn't *feel* like going? A hastily contrived excuse would generally tide us over until the next flare-up, but they seemed to occur with increasing frequency towards the end. Still, if I thought writing her name would bring her back, as a sort of invocation maybe, I would sit here and write it all night, over and over again.

And of course there was my job, which Sarah never really approved of. Sam Spade or my mother would have found it unbearably tedious. I don't own a gun, the prospect of pain frightens me, and I have never been required to hit a man. No, more likely a dog has bitten a child and in

preparation for a lawsuit I must canvass the neighborhood, asking tired housewives in curlers and bathrobes whether they had ever noticed any vicious tendencies in the dog in question. Things like that — conspicuously unglamorous. I also do a fair amount of divorce-related investigations, which pay the rent, and it was one of these which precipitated my own wife's estrangement.

Half a year ago I was hired by a nervous middle-aged man in a well-tailored suit to track down his wife, whom he suspected was having an affair. The case was nothing unusual, but the man appeared so inconsolably shaken by the thought that it left an especially bad taste in my mouth. After going over the details I was able to trail his wife, an attractive blond, to a run-down hotel in the International District. I produced my credentials, slipped the manager a twenty dollar bill, was reluctantly handed a room key. I went up to the fourth floor with my camera. The flash of the bulb sent the two lovers scampering, but I managed to get a fair enough photograph; and even though photos these days are inadmissible, it was enough of a threat to expedite divorce proceedings.

The picture shows a blond woman leaping from the bed amidst a flurry of blankets. One long white leg is touching the floor, the other is still curled on the bed. Her face and breasts are in profile, her hair is scattered. The man, handsome and muscular, is caught leaning forward towards the lens and grasping the sheets modestly to his waist. His expression is a confused mixture of surprise, anguish, hatred. The portrait is of such vivid panic that any sense of eroticism is dispelled, although this was just the sort of photograph my father might have kept packed at the bottom of his suitcase. Who knows? In any event — what *was* I thinking? — I showed it to my wife one night.

This was the night she first proposed separate vacations. "I've been thinking," she announced after dinner, "that I'd like to go away with Judy for a couple of weeks next summer." Judy was her closest friend, another social worker, a woman so disconcertingly high-strung that I usually found her company intolerable. So this proposal had the unpleasant effect of a cold shower. To be honest, our sexual encounters had become sporadic, and I was looking forward to a quiet week with Sarah at a cottage on the coast. I had hopes for a rejuvenation. I stammered, "What do you mean? I thought we would go out to the coast again. Where would you go with Judy?"

"I don't know," she said calmly. "We were talking about Japan."

"You talked about this already? I can't believe that! What about our vacation? Sarah, why don't you want to go away with me? Japan? And what about Diana?" I slouched bitterly in my chair.

"She can stay with my mother," she said. "Or you can stay with her. Anyway, it's nine months from now, so forget it."

"Did Judy talk you into this? That bitch."

Things deteriorated from there. We argued for a while, and then grew quiet. I saw that I was fighting a losing battle, and decided to let slip the photograph. Maybe I thought a portrait of someone else's humiliation would somehow shift the focus away from our own miseries. I don't know what I was thinking. It was probably, after all, nothing more than a wayward impulse on my part, the sort of unthinking reaction Sarah despised. Anyway, when I brought out a copy of the photo from my briefcase she snatched it from my hands and I watched the color drain from her face. Her eyes grew wild. For a suspended moment she remained speechless. Then she convulsed into tears. "Oh God," she whimpered. "How could you! How can you be so sleazy? Don't you have any sense of morality whatsoever?" She choked on her words, coughed, fumbled for a cigarette. "Oh, Christ, you're so sleazy it makes my skin crawl. How could you do this to me?"

"To you? What are you talking about?" I tried to ward off an impending hysteria. "Sarah, please. I only thought —"

"You only thought what?" she snapped. "You only thought what? You *never* think! You couldn't care less about anything except yourself. You're even too self-centered to believe anything I ever say. You spend your life crawling like a worm on your belly into people's private lives, you and your goddamned camera. It's perverted, that's what it is, perverted. Your life makes me sick. I can't stand it any more."

"Sarah, calm down," I insisted. "I only tried —"

"You think you're pretty smart, don't you?" She was indignant now. I had often seen her anger make this unexpected tack. "Well, here's something you didn't find out, Mister Private Detective. Do you have any idea who this man is?"

"No. Should I?"

"No, of course you wouldn't. This is my lover too. I've been screwing him for months." She fled the room, crying. I stood reeling in the smoke

sent up by that bombshell. I tore up the photo and walked unsteadily to the window, braced myself on the sill and tried to breathe, inhaling deeply. A week later she left with Diana and shortly after that filed for divorce. Now I ask you, what am I supposed to make of such a coincidence? What are the odds, in a city of half a million, of finding yourself standing there like an idiot holding a photograph of your wife's lover? Get out your pocket calculators, do all the tricks on your slide rule, weigh out all the possibilities, but in the upshot all you'll ever come up with is just another example of randomness in an indifferent universe, that's all. Scientists juggle theories to explain how a star, light-years away, can appear to be simultaneously traveling towards and away from the earth. Two Iowa City high school sweethearts bump into each other in the Belgrade train station twenty years after graduation. Stock markets plummet, geological faults shift without warning, an electron jumps its orbit and we have a nuclear explosion. You think you have the answers? Well, let me tell you, at the root it all comes down to chaos. In Woods Hole, and three thousand miles away in Seattle, it was nothing but chaos right from the start.

One Sunday, a couple of months ago, I awoke suddenly to the sound of someone shouting. I turned in bed to see if the sound had woken Sarah, but she had already been gone for months, and I again experienced that sense of loss which had become a morning ritual. Crossing from dreams into the morning light had lately acquired the horrible sensation of a great fall, as if dawn was what awaited me on the other side of the gallows trap door. I tried, vainly, to crawl back into sleep. The shouting increased in volume. Sitting up in the rumpled bed I realized the noise was coming not from next door, as I had supposed, but from outside. I stumbled sleepily to the window and gazed through a thin curtain of rain. Across the street I saw a figure, stooped slightly as if fighting a stiff wind, slowly making his way up the sidewalk, past the deserted Mexican restaurant, yelling to the sky and the telephone lines at the top of his lungs. His clothes were loose-fitting, his pants long and filthy; a frayed woolen overcoat swirled about his calves with each step. His voice came to me like gravel tossed against the window. As he passed up the street—I couldn't make out a word of what he was saying—I irritably assumed him to be another of those religious fanatics who prophesy hell-fire and damnation on the Sabbath morn. But the sight of lunatics has always held for me bitter associations

with my own family, and I felt miserable the entire day.

The following Sunday morning I was again wakened from a dream by someone shouting. Sarah and I had been swimming in a warm lake where the fish nipped and nibbled at our toes; the green veil of sunlight filtering through the water to play upon Sarah's belly had restored me to myself. So when this scene dissolved into the cacaphony I recognized from the previous Sunday I became furious. Bounding into the living room I saw it was indeed the same ragged, stooped figure, screaming to wake the dead. I yanked up the window, intending to curse the man for violating my sleep; but there was something in his voice, an alarming despair, that lodged my own voice in my throat as if it was a chicken bone. I stooped lower and stuck my head out to hear what he was shouting.

"He beat me all the time!" the man yelled to his imaginary audience. "He whipped me with his belt! God he beat me for failing in school, hit me for talking at the table. The drunken brute! I've got the scars. You want to see scars?" That was all. He passed up the street, his arms wagging, and the rest of his words were muffled by a passing bus.

Well, what the hell? As I said, insanity was nothing new to me, yet I stood there at the window, incredulous, watching my breath vaporize on the cold air, watching the man disappear up the street. What on earth could drive a man to yell these things and disturb the serenity of a Sunday morning? I made an effort to fill in the details: a lonely grey-haired woman emptying last night's ashtrays and waiting patiently for her deranged husband to return from his noisy morning walk. . . . But this hypothetical scenario only made the man seem more ludicrous, and certainly more lamentable. Baffled, I made a pot of coffee and lit a cigarette, morosely thinking that even my dreams now were being short-changed. The recollection of Sarah's stomach lit with sun beneath the water made me wince involuntarily, as if some huge unseen fist was wringing the blood from my heart.

The following week was hectic. A teen-age runaway had led me to San Francisco and back, and on Saturday night I went to bed early, wondering if my dreams were again doomed to early interruption. By concentrating on my big toe as I fell asleep—a trick I'd learned from one of Sarah's psychological journals—I was able to temporarily void my mind, and my dreams, of any residual traces of my wife, and I awoke rested. Halfway through a stack of pancakes, the anticipated bellowings sent me leaping to

the living room window. This time he was on my side of the street. His voice came up clearly, burning and guttural. "Mary!" he yelled. His voice was almost supplicating. "Mary!" he repeated, as plaintive as a bull bellowing for a lost mate. "I was at Pearl Harbor when it was bombed. Took some shrapnel in my back and was shipped to Bremerton. She was a waitress in one of the clubs there." His voice climbed in a crescendo again: "Oh Mary!" Then he moved out of earshot. I returned to my pancakes, already cold. I had lost my appetite anyway. The realization that this crazed person was down there every Sunday morning recounting his life to himself, and to whomever else happened to be listening, was horrifying. I was appalled. Still, I couldn't help admitting to myself a type of morbid fascination.

Soon I became aware that these ravings were shaping themselves into an indispensable part of my Sunday. Maybe it was nothing more than a welcomed distraction, a reliable background noise more interesting than television. I spent a weekend, for example, a month after the screaming man's initial appearance, with a friend of mine, an attorney, at his rustic cottage on Orcas Island. On Sunday morning we had a late breakfast and sat in his living room drinking coffee, smoking good cigars, listening to old jazz records. But despite all the idyllic comfort, I experienced a peculiar listlessness: I was disappointed at having to miss that morning's installment of the errant autobiographer's life.

In the following weeks he appeared religiously, bent beneath the rain, sometimes below my window, sometimes across the street. From these cryptic fragments I deduced that Mary, the waitress, had become his wife; that he had been discharged from the Navy after receiving a Purple Heart; that he had two children; that, before they were full-grown, Mary had been killed in an auto accident. I heard about his job in a lumber camp, from which he was apparently fired because of an accident with a chain saw. I heard about his ungrateful children, now living on the East Coast. Then, three weeks ago, he paradoxically brought himself up to date by shouting about his Sunday morning strolls; it made me think of the snake that has swallowed his own tail and winds up where he started from. "Why won't anyone listen to me?" he wailed. "Why?" I watched him round a corner then, his voice trailing off like vapor, and I haven't seen him since.

Has it ever been the silence that's wakened you? Have you ever sprung upright in your sweaty bed, startled not by the branches rasping on the panes or the wind clicking in the shutters, but by the total absence of these sounds? The following Sunday I awoke with a start in just this sort of vacuum. From my bed I could see the early light blazing through the windows in the living room, gilding the walls, but I knew intuitively that the shouting man wasn't making any more appearances. Despite the morning sun—a rarity for this time of year—I found myself growing terribly despondent. Silence and an empty bed: can you imagine a more hopeless scene? There was an aura of loneliness so palpable you could have put a frame around it and hung it in a gallery. What can I say? My stomach felt empty beyond its capacity. My throat was constricted with grief. In the curling smoke of my cigarette I perceived all the forgotten lines of a once familiar woman. I missed my wife and daughter. Loneliness, I realize, is just a case of looking at life from the wrong side of the mirror, but so help me, I couldn't get them out of my mind. I stayed in bed all morning, crushed by lassitude. I pounded the pillows, sought to pound from them the lost scent of her perfume, a strand of her hair, any remnant. I cursed the hollowness of the apartment. I tried to count my emotional losses on my fingers as if they were measurable quantities. Then, past noon, I gave up, got out of bed, and telephoned Sarah. She said she would come over on Friday. She was busy until then.

Friday was a nice day. The early greens were seeping across the clinging browns of winter like water into a sponge. The forsythia was budding. Their chromium-yellow tips looked like an artist's first brushstrokes on a new canvas. I left work early and upon arriving home found Sarah and Diana sitting on the sofa, watching cartoons. Diana wore a pink ruffled dress and her hay-colored hair was pulled back in a mother-of-pearl clip. She sat in the curve of Sarah's arm, happily wagging her feet; her expression was seraphic. Together the two of them presented such a perfect picture of domestic bliss it nearly made me giddy. I leaned to kiss Sarah but she averted her lips and I touched instead the soft downy prominence of her cheek. "I missed you," I said.

"Oh?" Her eyebrows suggested some dim surprise. "Did you miss me, or did you miss the security of having me?"

"Oh, for God's sake, Sarah, do you have to get analytical now?"

She pulled Diana closer. "Okay, I'm sorry," she said, but so clinically

that it put me on guard; her voice was clean as a scalpel. “As a matter of fact, I’m kind of glad you called. I thought you might want to see Diana one last time.” This stunned me. My daughter wriggled out of Sarah’s grasp and looked at me curiously, wide-eyed.

“What are you talking about?” I demanded. Diana shrank back from my sudden anger, covered in her mother’s arms.

Sarah ran a casual hand over her hair. “I got a job offer in Cincinnati. The money’s good, and I can start in two weeks.” She stared me sternly in the eye, defiant. “I’m going to take the job, Dash. And I’m going to take Diana with me.”

“You can’t do that!”

“Oh?”

“I can go to court!”

“Look,” she said, emphatically, as if she was lecturing the obvious to a not particularly bright child, “I’ve got custody. If you want to go to court it’s going to cost you and me both a lot of money and a lot of time, and I’ll tell you right now, I’m not going to give any ground on this one. I refuse to capitulate, understand? Listen, the odds are all in my favor, the most you might get is an occasional visitation, but it’s going to bankrupt you first. So why don’t you just do the sensible thing for once in your life and not fight it. It’ll be easier all around. That, at least, should make it tempting for you.”

Diana was cringing inside Sarah’s elbow. A pitiable confused look shadowed her face. “Sarah,” I shouted, “what the hell do you think you’re doing? This is my daughter! Who the hell are you to take my daughter away?” Her placidity completely unnerved me: “I’m simply trying to raise my child without any unpleasant memories. You happen to be an unpleasant memory to me at this point, and I’d like to forget you. And I’d like Diana to forget you.”

“I can’t believe this! This is my daughter, my family! How can you pretend that she’s not? Do you think you can get rid of me that easily?”

Sarah stood and took Diana’s pudgy little fingers in her palm. “I can certainly try, Dash. Maybe some day I’ll meet a man I can love again, and that man will become Diana’s father. I know one thing, though, and you’ll probably never understand this: when I fall in love again I won’t have to think of you at all any more.” She tugged at Diana’s arm and headed for the door.

“Wait a minute!” I kneeled on the carpet before Diana. My daughter was so frail and confused I was afraid Sarah might rip her arm from its socket in her haste to leave. I firmly grasped Diana’s shoulders and stared into her eyes, which were quickly filling with tears. Suddenly I didn’t know what to say. Sarah had undermined me altogether. “Diana,” I managed to croak, and then she burst into tears. Their impact had such a tangible force they knocked me backwards on the rug and Sarah, stooping to lift Diana, walked quickly to the door. I heard her shoes tap on the wooden stairs to the street and heard her smooth voice cooing, “It’s all right, my little angel.” I heard Diana’s choked sniffles. Turning to look at the television set I witnessed a cartoon cat explode when a mouse put dynamite in its food.

How could I have let something like this happen? Could Sarah have so deftly, so irrevocably put aside our past, as if all those rhapsodic promises and midnight dreams were no more than a bundle of letters stored away in an old trunk? I recalled a rainy weekend we had spent in Vancouver, shortly before our marriage; a heavy downpour had driven us one afternoon into the shelter of an empty museum. There, in the cool shadowy vaults which rang with our footsteps, amidst the bric-a-brac of all the dead and vanished civilizations, we came upon a display case set apart from the rest. Beneath the glass two skeletons lay in the dirt, a neolithic male and female, their bony arms forever locked about one another. Thousands of years ago they too perhaps had escaped a sudden storm by seeking shelter in a cave and had died there, clutching each other in this everlasting embrace. We stood before them a long while, reflective, silent as corpses. I remembered also that we later walked hand in hand down the dismally wet streets and that, standing before a hardware store, Sarah had suddenly thrown her arms around my shoulders and pressed herself against me. I saw she was crying. “Those skeletons,” she murmured. We hung there, suspended in the greyness, Sarah clinging to me like an extra limb grafted to my body, her chest trembling, when I noticed over her shoulder that the back of her coat and my face were reflected in the store window, among the door knobs and faucets. Now, standing years later in my living room, I knew that window with our reflections would be preserved forever, long after all the cities of the world had crumbled to dust and blown away. Would she too remember the exact moment we had stopped and breast to breast stood huddled on that wet street, or that an old woman

walking her poodle had smiled at us as she passed by? How could she choose to forget? Had nostalgia become such a dispensible sentiment that she could discard without any remorse the memories of her husband, our aimless walks, the position of my hand on her back the first time we kissed? And I thought then, for the first time in this new light, of my own family, of my crazy sister, my lecherous father, of my mother lying now in some untended grave outside of Boston, of the smashed teacups strewn about the kitchen floor . . . and I realized that the danger in what Sarah was doing could be overwhelming. I began to feel sorry for us all like I never had before.

Two days later it was Sunday. I woke early. As I was bending down to look for my slippers beneath the bed I discovered one of Diana's tiny white socks. It was dirty and one of her toenails had shredded a hole in the tip but I lifted it slowly to my cheek and held it there a moment. Then I hurriedly got dressed in a sweater, jeans, and sneakers, and bounded down the wooden staircase to the street. It was drizzling again. The sanctity of the early morning silence possessed me like a spirit, and I ran the three blocks down to the lakefront. I stood there, hands pressed on knees, dampened by sweat and mist, and caught my breath. A few mallards lounged like heirs to a peaceable kindgom on the mottled surface, one rested on a log near my feet, its metallic head tucked securely between its wings. A light breeze roughed up the water halfway across the lake. That feathery edge on the water I chose as something like a target and cupping my hands around my mouth I gathered my breath. "My name is Dashiell Bennett," I shouted. "My mother named me after her favorite mystery writer. I was born in Woods Hole, Massachusetts, on Huttner Street. We lived in a grey Victorian house with a widow's walk and white shutters. My father was a traveling salesman." Then, already, I was out of breath. Well, that's a start, I thought, and walked back home.