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The sureness of horses

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THE SURENESS OF HORSES

A Creative Project

Presented to

The Faculty of the English Department

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts

by

Kevin Arnold

December 2007

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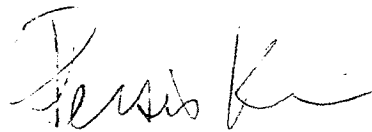
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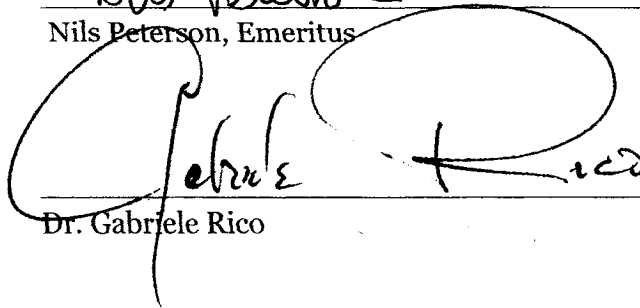
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ABSTRACT

THE SURENESS OF HORSES

by Kevin Arnold

The Sureness of Horses is a novel set in 2004 in Silicon Valley. It combines two plots. The first, a love story between a local poet and a horsewoman recently transplanted from Texas, is punctuated by horse scenes at a Stanford University ranch and riding to hounds on horseback.

The budding relationship is challenged by the second plot. Their lives become intertwined with another couple, who aren't as fortunate. They can't quite make it in the Valley, and come to a tragic end.

The novel contrasts the human challenges of Silicon Valley, the transient center of technical thought, with the timeless power, consistency, and warmth of horses.

1

The third time Wade and Diana met at the Palo Alto Café she wore a creamy shirt and tight riding pants tucked into shined black boots. The café was a comfortable neighborhood place with a coffee roaster the size of a Volkswagen. Even its sofas and tables seemed to emanate a deep coffee smell. As they were about to leave, Diana asked him, with her slight drawl, “Have you ever ridden horses?”

“I’ve always wanted to,” Wade said. Maybe not the fancy way she rides, he thought, but he definitely wanted to ride.

“I’m on my way to the barn. Would you like to join me?”

Would I! Wade thought. His hope was that Diana might lead him out of the six-year funk he’d been in since his wife had left him, one wrenching year followed by five lonely ones. Diana had glistening shoulder-length auburn hair and the assurance of a woman of means. She wouldn’t go out in the evening with Wade—she was in the midst of divorcing the man with the money. Wade couldn’t figure out if Diana was trying to maximize her divorce settlement, shelter the kids, or she was just gun shy about men. Now, he thought as he followed Diana’s white SUV across the local campus, she’s introducing me to her love, horses.

He followed her through an open gate to a private farm road. Brown corn stalks lay in a fallow field to the left of the road and the gnarled branches of a

raspberry patch, its season over too, lay on the right . . . fields waiting for spring. A line of silver and white horse trailers, parked next to a peaceful stream, seemed to wait as well. The wide spaces between the trailers, and a large field used to store a little hay, conveyed a luxury of space that didn't exist on the other side of the gate. In the distance a green ridge punctuated with an occasional oak made an irregular outline against the sky. Wade had a hard time believing they were still close to the heart of Silicon Valley and his job, a marketing manager at a small biotech company in Mountain View.

The paved road ended with a sign WHOA!—SPEED SPOOKS HORSES. Two riders rode by on what seemed incredibly small saddles. Wade wished he and Diana were riding in the same car—there was so much he wanted to ask. A smiling driver leaving the ranch, middle-aged like himself, waved to Diana and then to him, as if they were all in this world together. Possibly some day, Wade thought, he would feel at home in a place like this, where people were connected to horses. Belatedly, he waved back.

Diana got out of her SUV carrying two carrots. Wade joined her as she approached a giant gray horse, who made a surprisingly friendly sound through its nostrils—a cat-purr on a larger, louder scale. “Hey Grey Cloud, here’s a treat. Great nicker! I’ve missed you too!”

She handed Wade the other carrot. “Here, give this to Artemis.” She nodded toward the cinnamon-colored horse in the next stall. “There.”

Wade held onto the thick end. When the horse bit down, exposing her huge teeth, Wade flinched and dropped the carrot. “Could she bite?” he asked Diana.

“Artemis would be mortified if she bit someone. She’s very much a lady.” Diana picked it up and handed it back to him. “When she takes it in her teeth, snap off the rest.”

This time when the horse chomped down, Wade wrenched the carrot sideways and held onto the stub. It worked!

Diana patted the horse’s broad flank. “Give her what’s left with a flat hand.”

Wade made his hand so flat that his palm stuck up higher than his fingers. Artemis brought her lips forward at the last minute and pulled the carrot stub into her mouth. Her soft, dry lips barely grazed Wade’s hand. He tried to hide his fear by looking into Artemis’s eyes. They were larger than Wade’s knuckles, and seemed intelligent, almost soulful. The unexpected intimacy of looking into the huge animal’s eyes surprised him.

“Here, I’ll show you a little about grooming,” Diana said.

Looking fragile next to the massive horse, she grabbed one of Gray Cloud’s hind legs, raising it easily. “This is a hoof pick,” she said as she quickly cleaned his shoes. “Keep your eye out for rocks—they’ll hobble a horse.”

She handed Wade the pick, nodded toward Artemis, and turned to wipe down her saddle. “Bring your hand along her back tendon,” she said over her shoulder.

At first Wade crouched the wrong way, facing the same direction as the horse. After a sheepish look toward Diana, he turned around and touched the back of Artemis’s leg. She lifted her leg and held it up until Wade dug out a clod of dirt.

“See, nothing to it,” Diana said. “Now get the other hooves.”

“If I were to ride, what would I need?” Wade asked as he worked.

She looked over at him in surprise. “I have a spare helmet. You’ll need a boot with a heel. I can scare up a Western saddle if you want. They’re safer. If I didn’t love jumping that’s what I’d use.”

“Could we ride that trail along the stream I saw on the way in?”

“We could go . . . anywhere. This area has great horse trails.”

A wiry, silver-haired man wearing a frayed polo shirt drove by in a small pickup. “Hi Edward,” Diana said. “This is my friend Wade.”

Edward gave a long low wave from the truck. Wade thought he looked like a guy who’d watched *Giant* once too often, but couldn’t help feeling jealous of the way Diana stopped everything to acknowledge him.

“He’s my trainer. He’s good. Too bad he doesn’t take beginners.”

When Wade didn’t answer, Diana said, “How about helping me move a painting from the horse trailer to my car?”

Together, they folded down the back seats of her SUV and drove to her trailer, one of those he'd seen on the way in. She opened a side door and showed him a huge painting covered by a sheet.

“May I see it?”

She hesitated before unveiling it. Wade studied a slightly younger Diana in her dark coat and yellow vest. She was holding Gray Cloud's reins while she accepted a silver tray from a man in a red coat. “A going-away present from my hunt club, painted from an old snapshot.”

Diana looked more carefree in the painting than she did now. “What did you win?” Wade asked.

“A steeplechase, a flat-out race with jumps. I almost killed myself over one hedge, but I was lucky at the end. I like to go fast—that guy in the painting used to tease me about having a hot seat.”

Wade tried to hide his smile as they said their good-byes. Following Diana as she drove out toward the highway, he felt he'd visited another world. Feeding Artemis had been inexplicably moving, a glimpse into another. And Diana—how could he ever impress a champion? A teenage girl rode by on a huge brown gelding. How hard can it be to ride? he thought. *I'm going to learn.*

2

Jorge Calderon climbed out of bed as quietly as possible, careful not to disturb his wife Rita. He threw on a gray T-shirt, jeans, and a light sweater. He stopped by the alcove where his five-year-old daughter lay in a small bed. She was sleeping soundly, too. Jorge pulled a blanket up over her shoulders. Even with a college degree, his Silicon Valley job didn't pay enough to afford a bedroom for his daughter! And now he was wondering if he was going to be able to hold onto *that* job.

He made coffee and grabbed the newspaper from the front door. The Democrats were peppering Gore with questions in Minnesota while Bush played golf in Florida. Jorge's candidate, Ralph Nader, wasn't even mentioned. As he flipped to the sports section he realized what he wanted to do—hit the punching bag in the basement of the apartment.

He downed a cup of coffee, grabbed his sparring gloves from the front closet, and walked through the parking garage past his black Honda café runner motorcycle and down the stairs. He had mounted a punching bag in the far corner of a bike-storage room. He gave the reddish-brown bag a little hit, then moved a couple of bikes to make room and gave another, harder one. He stripped off his sweater and landed a series of jabs and crosscuts. "Take that, Lydia," he said. He found his rhythm and pummeled the bag until sweat was running down his face.

Back upstairs, Rita greeted him with a hug, but he could tell she didn't want to get any of his sweat on her—she was already dressed up, ready to go out. Looking pretty good, too, rope wedge shoes with ties that wound around her ankles and a matching skirt and boat-necked top. “Where you headed?” he asked.

“I was hoping you could make Mary breakfast. That way I can get to the Farmer's Market in Palo Alto before the crowds.” She looked at him for agreement. “Or we could get Mary up and all go the market together. Want to?”

“No, let her sleep. I'll shower and check e-mail. One of my customers in Kansas City lost half their tweeters yesterday afternoon, and I want to make sure the fix I sent them is okay.”

“You're still worried about your job, aren't you?”

He nodded. “I guess that's why they call it work.”

“That's a phrase Wade taught you—right?”

Jorge nodded.

“What does Wade have to say about what's going on now—about those tickets Lydia stuck you with?”

“He's been out of town. He got in last night.”

“Jorge, you look haggard—you've been losing sleep. Nobody'll confuse you with Jimmy Smits again, with those bags under your eyes.” She gave him a hug.

“Why don't you call Wade? Now, before he goes out.”

Jorge didn't move. It *had* been a while since anyone had told him he looked like the TV star.

“Do it,” she implored.

With a shrug, he picked up the phone and dialed. When he heard Wade’s voice he said, “Hey, sorry to bother you at home.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be in El Paso?” Wade asked.

“Lydia canceled my trip—last minute—so I’m out for Rita’s and Mary’s tickets. And I could be paranoid but it seems like everybody at work is a little cold around me, especially the managers.”

“Can I help?” Wade asked.

“I was hoping you could talk to Lydia on Monday.”

Rita flashed Jorge a thumbs up.

“Sure, I’d be glad to,” Wade said. “Lydia can be okay when she wants to be. I’ll nose around and figure out what’s going on with you two—or you and SnyderSound, whatever.”

Jorge started small talk then, wondering if Wade could hear the relief in his voice. “How was your trip,” he asked, and about Mary and Marita.

After he hung up, Rita said, “I’m glad you got Wade involved. I never understood why he’s not your manager any more.”

“I told you, he got kicked upstairs. He’s tight with the guy who owns the damned company.”

“Well, he’s a good friend to have.” She changed her tone and lightly touched his shoulder. “I hate to tell you this now, but your mother called again yesterday. She’s still dying to see Mary.”

Jorge frowned. "I'll bet it gets pretty lonely in the nursing home."

"At least there's a plan now. Wade will help. Let's not mope around. Maybe we should take in a movie tonight."

"I *do* need to pull out of this."

"I'll check the listings."



Walking out of the theater that night, Rita asked Jorge what he thought of the movie they'd seen, *American Beauty*.

"That sexy beginning with the rose petals was great. And Kevin Spacey drew me in. I'm glad he didn't sleep with the teenager. Those rosebuds made me think he would."

"I felt sorry for the wife, the lonely realtor. That scene at the open house was great," Rita said as she got into the car.

"He was the one without a job. He had to flip burgers!" Jorge snapped on the radio.

When he got home, Jorge turned on the computer to see if he had any e-mail from work. Rita went to the bedroom.

After he cleared his messages, he checked by the alcove to make sure Mary was sleeping well—she was. Jorge joined Rita, who was in bed reading a paperback. She wore a granny nightgown that covered even her arms, but Jorge knew the sexiest woman in the world lurked beneath. He quickly undressed and lay down beside her.

He stared up at the ceiling. "Come on, Rita, douse the light, please." He moved toward her.

"Let me finish this chapter." After a while she closed the book and turned off the light.

Jorge rolled over to her side of the bed. Sex had always been their solace, but lately Rita had withdrawn. He put his hand on her stomach.

She pushed him away. "Not right now, honey."

"Come on, that movie got me all . . . you know." He squirmed to show her how sexed up he felt.

Rita turned her back toward him. "Not the perfect thing to say. Maybe in the morning."

"Oh come on," he said, bringing his body next to hers in a position that could be a cuddle or an attack from the rear.

She flipped over toward him and took him in her arms. "You really are a mess, aren't you? I guess this is what wives are for."

He pulled her hand toward his nascent erection. Listlessly she milked him to hardness. After a while she pulled him on top of her. As they fell into a rhythm, Jorge started to work his hands around her buttocks, but she scooted away from his grasp. "Come on honey, just do it," she said.

He fulfilled the role left for him until, sated, he lay next to her in the dark. After a while she got up and went into the bathroom.

Guys were always falling all over Rita, and she ate it up, Jorge thought. Tonight some jerk in the parking lot was ogling her so much that Jorge—walking right next to her, obviously her husband—wanted to punch him out. Shouldn't making love with a much-desired woman lift his spirits? He moved to the middle of the bed and gripped the bedposts, one with each long arm. He started to flex his muscles but he stopped for fear of snapping the wood. *Things are not good for Jorge Calderon*, he thought. *Anywhere.*

3

A week later, on Saturday, Wade realized he'd overlooked a phone message and pushed Play. Steve Snyderman, the owner, had left a voicemail addressed to the entire company, hundreds of people. "My fellow employees," Steve started, which didn't sound like him at all. He announced an off-site meeting in two weeks. There wasn't any of Steve's usual pumped-up enthusiasm; its absence felt ominous.

On Saturdays Wade usually caught up on his domestic life—groceries, Costco, laundry. Today he started in on the mail stack, paying bills and glancing through a poetry magazine that had come while he was gone. He found a good poem about horses—one Diana might like—and marked it to show to her.



Diana surprised him by phoning mid-morning. "I have a little present for you—I thought I might stop by?" she said.

"Sure." As soon as he hung up, Wade looked around his house. It had gone years without a woman's touch, and it showed. After the divorce, he had kind of shut down, even taking anti-depressants for a while. His décor was from about twelve years ago. The picture of his ex-wife, Liz, was too prominent, almost a shrine. Time to replace it. He hobbled over and covered it up with a goofy picture his daughter, Amelia, had sent him from college. She looked cute,

clowning in a photography lab, surrounded by black-and-white prints that were bigger than she was. The snapshot made Wade long for her.

When she appeared at the front door, Wade's dog, Keats, came running in and gave two barks.

She looked sexy and sporty in her jeans, turtleneck, and loafers. She laughed. "What a name for a beagle, Keats."

"His howling's not the least poetic. I apologize to John regularly."

Diana brought the dog inside. Wade cringed as she perused his house. He hadn't seen where she lived, but the address in downtown Palo Alto was impressive. And she must have had a mansion in Dallas. Wade's house was a simple three-bedroom, two-bath cottage on the cheaper side of Palo Alto.

"I like the open feeling," she said cheerily.

"It was built in the fifties, what they call an Eichler. They weren't meant to last as long as they have. I'm afraid it shows."

"Oh, no, it's great!" She surveyed the tall beamed ceilings and the indoor-outdoor patio through the sliding glass door. "The casual California feeling, I'm starting to really like it." Her eyes stopped at the photo of Amelia. "Is this . . .?"

"That's my daughter Amelia, off at Bard." Wade motioned for her to sit down.

"Back East, *that* Bard?" she asked as she sat across from him in the living room.

“Yeah, I never see her. Say, I almost forgot. I found a poem I think you’ll like—here.” He picked up the magazine and read it to her.

The Love of Aged Horses

Because I know tomorrow
his faithful gelding heart will be broken
when the spotted mare is trailered and driven away,
I come today to take him for a gallop on Diaz Ridge.

Returning, he will whinny for his love.
Ancient, spavined,
her white parts red with hill-dust,
her red parts whitened with the same, she never answers.

But today, when I turn him loose at the hill-gate
with the taste of chewed oat on his tongue
and the saddle-sweat rinsed off with water,
I know he will canter, however tired,
whinnying wildly up the ridge's near side,
and I know he will find her.

He will be filled with the sureness of horses
whose bellies are grain-filled,
whose long-ribbed loneliness
can be scratched into no-longer-lonely.

His long teeth on her withers,
her rough-coated spots will grow damp and wild.
Her long teeth on his withers,
his oiled-teakwood smoothness will grow damp and wild.
Their shadows' chiasmus will fleck and fill with flies,
the eight marks of their fortune stamp and then cancel the earth.
From ear-flick to tail-switch, they stand in one body.
No luck is as boundless as theirs.

– Jane Hirshfield

“That’s a beautiful poem, very nice.” Diana stopped. “Horses are that way, you know. When I left one of my horses for the last time, he ran along the fence and just whinnied and whinnied. He *knew*.”

“I took a workshop from Jane once. She lives up by Muir Beach.”

Diana looked blank.

“The poet. She lives north of San Francisco, up on the coast.”

When Diana nodded, Wade said, “I’ll get us some coffee.”

He rejoined Diana in the living room as the coffee brewed.

She picked up the poem in the magazine. “So, you read poetry, and you know poets, do you write as well?”

“A little. How’d it go with your cat?” he asked, continuing a conversation from the day before.

“Minky’s in bad shape. I had to leave her at the vet’s. He wants to watch her. I worry we may lose her.”

“How old is Minky?”

“Seventeen. We got her before we had the kids. It’s her time, I guess, but I’ll miss her. And it might devastate Robbie and Beth.”

“I’m awfully sorry. I remember when Amelia’s iguana died. We buried him under a tree, like every other suburban iguana, I suppose. Amelia was a junior in high school when that happened. I’m guessing your kids are younger.”

“Robbie’s starting seventh grade, and Beth will be a freshman at Palo Alto High School.”

“They call it Paly. It’s where Amelia went.”

“You wriggled out of talking about your poetry. Can I see one of your poems?”

Wade looked over at Keats, who was resting on the rug. “Normally I love people to read them. With you I’m hesitant.”

“Really. Why?”

“I don’t write pretty poems like Jane’s, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“I’d like to judge that for myself,” she said as she stood up.

He stood to walk her to the door. “Maybe some time . . .” He didn’t say it as a question, but it hung there like one.

When she didn’t respond, Wade asked, “How about having coffee next week?”

She pursed her lips. “I’m sorry, but like I told you I don’t date. Let’s stick to horses. My husband and I are separated, but we have an agreement—it’s a long story.”

“Husband?” Wade leaned on a bookcase. “You’re still married?”

“Legally, yes. It’s too complicated to talk about now.”

They were at the door. “Why don’t you at least give me a hint.”

“I dated a bit in Dallas. It didn’t feel right. And Rob got all crazy, even though it was he . . .” She bit her lower lip.

“He what?”

“He—well he went outside the marriage. That’s how the counselor told me to describe it. But I really don’t want to talk about all this.”

“Okay, but I’m not sure I understand.”

Diana’s mood changed so that Wade almost thought he was talking to another person. “The jerk boinked a teenager. A summer employee at the law firm, from Texas Tech.” She shook her head.

Boinked? Wade hesitated. “So he’s free and you can’t date at all?”

She paused on the front step and managed a smile. “We should let Artemis rest a few days after that fall. Would you call having a daytime cup of coffee together a date?”

“Absolutely not.”

“Good answer,” she said. She seemed amused. “So let’s try it—early in the week.”

4

Wade loved seeing Diana across from him at the café in a short-sleeved yellow shirt and riding pants tucked into tall black boots.

“Still no problems from your fall, not even a bruise?” she asked.

“Not a one. Maybe I’m Superman.”

“Don’t say that. The Christopher Reeves story is so sad . . .” She shook her head.

The line for coffee grew until it stretched clear out the door. Half the people were dressed for work; the others wore athletic gear. A woman in a jogging suit pushed a three-wheeled high-tech baby buggy with twins while chatting on her cell phone about stock options and a real estate open house.

Diana asked Wade a question that seemed prepared, “I’ve been thinking a lot about you—why do you write poems?”

He shrugged his shoulders. “The world doesn’t especially want them—I’ve come to grips with that. No one makes money on poetry, except maybe by teaching, and not much then.”

“I don’t know about that. A friend in Austin told me that poets have begun to make real money—someone named Bill Collins or something received a six-figure advance for a book of poems.”

“He did? Good for him!” Wade said. “He calls himself Billy—an interesting guy. Maybe things *are* changing. I always think of those twins, you know, poetry and poverty? Keats, Emily Dickinson, Poe, a long list.”

“Suppose for a moment that you were right, that no one makes any money on poetry, period. Would you still bother with it?”

“I don’t do it for money, that’s for sure.” He paused and stirred his coffee. “How are your kids doing?”

“Beth is a handful lately, but Robbie’s still sweet.”

“When my daughter was around their age she looked down at her shoes—Amelia couldn’t have been more than thirteen—and asked me what Adidas stood for. I told her I didn’t know. ‘Well I do,’ she said. ‘All Day I Dream About Sex.’”

Diana laughed heartily. “What in the world could you say to that?”

“I managed a halfhearted chuckle, then asked her where she’d heard that. This was when she was spending most of her time at her mother’s.”

“What’d she say?”

“She said she overheard it at school. I knew something had changed.”

Diana took a sip of coffee. “They test us. They do.”

“It seems that at almost any time of the school day, half of the Paly kids are over at the shopping center across the street. God knows what they do there besides spend money and smoke. In the Midwest, we went to school early and stayed all day.”

“But Amelia got through the high school okay, right?”

“She’s doing great now. Still I wish I’d done better as a father. I wish I’d horned in more. Anyway, don’t worry, Beth and Robbie will probably flourish there. Paly’s a good place, especially for motivated kids. When it’s working right,

it has the educational quality of a prep school with less of the money-status stuff. It's good for kids to live at home. And Paly sent fifteen kids to Stanford last year."

"We'll see," Diana said. "I sure never thought I'd be raising them like this."

"You mean . . . separated from their Dad?"

Diana looked down for a second. "Rob, well I told you on Saturday. He . . . he had sex with a nineteen-year old Aggie student . . . he started driving her home every day . . ." Diana looked away. "Anyway, ever since then, I've prayed Rob would hang in with the kids, and he has. He supports them in ways I never could do alone."

"I don't get it, he lives here too? Alone?"

"This must all seem mysterious. After we separated in Dallas, his firm opened a new branch out here and his father wanted Rob to run it—the branch up on Sand Hill Road. Buchanan, Snow and Tyler—maybe you've heard of them. Anyway, I agreed—after a while—to come to California too, so they could be close to their dad. My friends thought I was crazy but otherwise the kids would have always been on airplanes, and having to decide where to be when . . . Rob bought a big house in Woodside. Yes, he lives alone. Anyway at the same time he promised to take total care of me financially, which he's done—I just send bills to the office and they get paid. He even got a barn and corral for Gray Cloud but I refuse to use it."

"Horse property in Woodside doesn't come cheap." Wade hesitated.

"Does he want you back?"

“Oh, he says he does, but it’s over.”

Wade took a deep breath. “Why haven’t you filed for divorce?”

Diana pulled back. “It seems best to leave things as they are for a while, for the kids, I mean.”

“Is *he* dating?”

“He says he’s not.” She raised her eyebrows. “Everything’s supposed to be as close to ‘the way it was’ as possible.” She shrugged. “It’s best, it is.” She looked away.

Wade frowned. “I’m disappointed you’re not dating.”

“I probably shouldn’t even be having coffee with you. But I’m glad I came.” She sipped her coffee and looked around the café. “California might not be as scary as I thought.” She looked directly at him. “We can still ride. I’ve always had riding buddies. Have patience, Wade; that and prayer are what get me through. That’s what life has taught me—patience. And prayer.”

5

Lydia, Jorge's boss, entered Wade's office and seated herself in the extra chair. She leaned forward and flipped today's date page back and forth on Wade's desk calendar. Wade considered the two of them more or less equals since they both reported to Sherry Snyderman. Lydia had taken over Wade's job of managing the Customer Techs when Steve wanted Wade to work full-time on sales.

"So, you wanted to talk to me about Calderon. I hope you're not going to ask me to do anything special for him."

Wade shrugged his shoulders. He didn't want to give her the satisfaction of appearing eager.

She sat back. "He's the one who bought non-refundable tickets—if he'd just paid a few extra bucks he wouldn't have had a problem. We're running a business here, trips get canceled all the time. Jorge Calderon creates more problems than he solves."

"I found it the other way around."

She flashed an ironic grin. "Well that was when you were managing him—maybe you were better at it." She laughed, but the muscles around her jaw were taut. "Seriously, Wade, don't get involved. It's inappropriate."

Wade tried to remain nonplussed. "Inappropriate?"

“I know you’re working with the Snydermans—Steve and Sherry as you call them—all the time, but remember you’re not a manager any more.” She threw her hands up. “I may call them Mr. and Mrs. Snyderman but *I* am Calderon’s manager. He reports to *me*.”

“He’s the best Customer Tech at SnyderSound. He can make anything work, you know that.”

“There’s more to the job than bits and bytes.” She rose and walked to the door. Over her shoulder, she said, “If I have to fire him, don’t get involved.”



Friday, close to three hundred SnyderSound employees gathered in the elaborate lobby of the Stanford Theater on University Avenue in Palo Alto. Steve Snyderman, a balding man in a cotton turtleneck with a SnyderSound logo and sport coat, attempted to mingle, but he seemed distracted and even more gaunt than usual. His smile seemed pasted on. Dark circles ringed his eyes.

Jorge joined Wade as they filed into the theater. They sat together toward the front. Jorge said, “Maybe he’s going to announce the holiday party.”

Wade laughed lightly, as did the woman next to him.

“Or maybe he’s planning to give everyone in the first three rows a hundred bucks to get the crowd going.” Wade’s second laugh at Jorge’s gallows humor was more subdued. Steve was walking on stage and Wade wanted to analyze Steve’s body language and concentrate on what he’d say.

Taking center stage without a podium, Steve thanked everyone for their hard work. “But times are tough,” he said. He showed charts that emphasized how the movie theater business was dipping despite Silicon Valley’s strong economy. “With the Internet and videocassettes, people aren’t going to movies as much. The problem starts there.” To illustrate the business decline, he described five sales situations (Wade was involved in four of them) and, except for an old customer in Minneapolis who was pressing on with a twelve-theater remodel, they all were postponing or canceling their orders.

“For the first time in our history,” Steve read from note cards, “we’re going to have to let some people go. After we break, I’d like you to meet with your managers. They’ve all reserved the rest of the day to talk to you about who’s affected.”

After he read from the cards, he looked up. “As many of you know, my Dad started all this with a storefront radio shop in Redwood City. He never laid anyone off. I certainly never intended to.”

His voice broke. “We simply can’t support our current structure.” He paused and took a sip of water. “Management will shrink too. I wish I had something better to say, but that’s the situation. I wanted to tell you all in person.”

Jorge leaned over to Wade. “So what do you think—Lydia’s history?”

“You wish!” Wade laughed with him, but they both knew he was whistling past the graveyard. Jorge’s situation was grim. For starters, he had to meet with

Lydia, while Wade met with the friendlier Sherry. *Stop worrying about Jorge—concentrate on yourself.* Wade was glad he'd put aside money to get Amelia through Bard.

He went right to her office. Sherry Snyderman, in jeans and a dark green turtleneck with a couple of splatter spots that gave her away as the mother of young kids, didn't look too much like a Marketing Director. After the pleasantries she said, "I'll get right down to business, Wade. One of us is out of a job. The good news is it isn't you. Steve and I decided that I should resign."

Wade drew a deep breath. "I'm sorry to hear that, Sherry."

"It's okay. You know I was already taking a lot of afternoons off to be with my kids. Steve felt I had to either start putting in sixty-hour weeks or . . . leave. You know I love this place."

"We'll miss you. I know I will."

"I enjoyed working with you guys. I'll still go to dinners when customers are in town, but as Steve's wife—not as Marketing Director. This is the right decision, absolutely."

"You seem relaxed about it."

"I've had a few days to get used to it. It'll be nice doing the Mom thing right. I only had you and Lydia as direct reports; you'll be fine."

Wade swallowed hard. "Lydia and I have been having words."

“About Jorge? I know all about that, more than you imagine.” Wade wondered what in the world was coming. Sherry took a long breath. “Wade, after working with you for six years I still have no idea about your politics.”

“Why should you?”

“I *shouldn't* know. Steve and I have gone over this a lot lately. You're involved in sales. A person's politics just shouldn't come up.”

“They made that clear in the sales training session.”

“That's right. Leave your politics in the parking lot.” She looked away, then looked back. “You've never met the Andersons from Las Vegas, have you?”

“Steve's mentioned them. They're planning five new theaters, right? I heard they're postponing.”

Sherry's window looked out on a meadow, a lush view available to only a few offices. She glanced out the window, gathering herself for something. “Yes. We hope to get that business next year.” She looked away again. “The Andersons are Republicans through and through. ‘Died in the wool,’ as people say. They speak highly of George Bush's son, the Texas one—they've already given him money, a lot of money. That's all they talk about lately.”

“I don't think he has a chance against Gore, do you?”

“No. But we really shouldn't discuss it at work. That brings me to the Calderon situation. He kind of stepped on his tie in Las Vegas.” She laughed, a little nervously. “Actually I was just using the phrase, but Jorge did wear a Jerry Garcia tie that day. The Andersons are just *not* Deadheads.”

Wade laughed long enough to be polite. “Most customers like Jorge. Surely this is about more than a tie?”

“Something happened right after Jorge’s demo. Anderson and his boys were talking about the fact that the Pakistanis got the bomb—Anderson made some comment that it was typical of Clinton.”

Wade put his head in his hand. “Oh, no! Jorge blew it.”

“He said something like ‘Are you going to blame that on Clinton too?’ It didn’t go over *at all*. Anderson has called Steve three times at least. He can’t understand why we keep a radical on the payroll.”

Wade took a deep breath. “Shit—excuse me—Lydia’s not acting on her own, huh?”

“There are wheels within wheels, Wade, you know that.”

In the field out the window a horse lowered his head to graze. “You know I hired him. He’s the best Customer Tech we have—even Lydia admits that. It wouldn’t be a good business decision to let him go.”

“We know you hired him. I like him, too, but last week Steve said, ‘Calderon’s history.’ He wanted you to know.”

“This doesn’t seem like Steve to me. I’d really like to talk to him.”

“It’s too late. Steve’s convinced that SnyderSound is in real danger. He’s doing a lot of things in a hurry. He’s definite about Calderon. Keep out of it. Really.”

“We don’t have many Hispanics. Isn’t there a problem firing him?”

“Legally, no. We’ll give him a short probation period.”

Wade felt his chest heaving. He made a fist with his right hand and pounded it into his left. “Damn. And my new manager will be, let me guess, Lydia?”

They both looked out the window as the horse raised its head and trotted up a knoll. “Only temporarily. But yes, Steve wants you to report to Lydia until we can afford to replace me with an experienced Marketing Director. You’ll do fine—you know how to handle people—Steve says it’s your gift. Don’t spend too much time worrying about Jorge. It’s just one of those things.”

Wade knew that would be impossible for him to do. Exactly why, he didn’t know, but he loved Jorge like a brother.

6

Wade met Diana at the Palo Alto Café Saturday morning. Wade felt she was all covered up in a sweatshirt and jeans. She took a seat at the only open table while he stood in line for their drinks. When Wade joined her he asked about Beth and Robbie.

“They’re with their dad until dinner. I toured both their schools—I sure hope this works out.” She knocked on the rickety oak table between them.

“Beth’s a good student, but Robbie . . . we’ll see.”

“Outside interests help get kids through. Amelia had her photography. Does Beth ride horses?”

Diana took a sip of coffee. “She was the only teenage girl in Texas who wasn’t horse-crazy. What she likes are kids, especially babies. When she was eleven she took all the first aid courses so she could baby sit. But, horses, no.” Her voice trailed off as she looked thoughtfully at Wade. “You seem down.”

“Something’s going on at work.”

“Anything you can talk about?”

“It looks like a good friend of mine will lose his job. I’ve been told to stand by and do nothing—just watch him get fired.”

She touched his arm. “That must be awful.” Diana frowned. “That feeling—watching something unfold, yet being powerless to change it—seems familiar.”

“Really? That doesn’t sound like you.”

“It’s probably hard to understand. Since I separated from Rob I’ve tried to hold what’s left of the old life together for the kids. I’m realizing now that it’s kept me from moving forward. Maybe . . . “

“I can move you forward, I can.”

“Maybe,” she said in the exact same tone of voice. “Maybe you’re a mind-reader.”

7

With a few minutes to kill before joining a conference call, Wade sat in the lunchroom at work scanning the headlines of the *San Francisco Chronicle*.

Jorge came in and took a chair next to him. He pointed to a headline. “See that, Nader’s going to hang in till the end. Maybe we’ll finally be able to vote on globalization.”

“Democrats come through for this country in the clutch,” said Wade. “Look at World War Two, Social Security, Watergate. Sometimes the gadflies have to step aside for the sake of the party.”

Jorge shook his head. “That’s ancient history—look at now. Clinton ruined welfare and brought us NAFTA. Did he ever do *one thing* for the homeless? Your party needs a message.”

“You just might put Son of George in the White House.” Wade lowered his voice. “We could be right back to guys like Haldeman and Erlichman. Clinton was at least human.”

“Just ask Monica,” said Jorge, and they laughed.

Wade cleared his throat and tried to get Jorge’s attention with his eyes. “Are you getting your resume out?”

“I’m gonna tough it out here.”

“If I were you I’d be looking. The Valley’s hot. I can get you some leads.”

“No, I’ve decided to hang in.”

“Jorge, I’m late for my conference call, but as a friend I’ll tell you it’s time to start a gonzo job search. You’ve got great skills. The response you’ll get will make you feel better even if you stay around here, which is unlikely.”

Jorge shrugged, going back to his ‘poor Mexican’ pose. Wade feared Jorge wasn’t going to do one thing for himself until they walked him out the door.



That night Wade pulled out a book Diana had given him about Jasper Ridge Ranch. It began with the natives—the author called them Costanoans. The creek that ran through the ranch had been wilder then, providing not only steelhead trout, which still swam the creek, but salmon too. Now, except when it flooded, nobody thought much about San Francisquito Creek.

How the author mined the history of those three hundred acres. The book detailed the way the ranch had changed hands, finally ending up with Senator Stanford, which is why the University owned it now. It was used for artillery practice during the two world wars. Everything seemed to touch Jasper Ridge Ranch. *What if he just called Diana?* Wade dialed her number.

“How was your day?”

“Rob called and asked if he could have the kids for a while, so I’ve had some time off.”

“I’ve been reading *Jasper Ridge Ranch*. It’s fascinating!”

“I love the trail ride along the stream. That’s one thing that’s better than Texas by a long shot—all that green. I’m about to go there now and do some chores.”

“To the ranch? Want some company?” Wade asked.

“I’ll only be there for a few minutes—Rob’s bringing the kids back at eight. The whole trip will be an hour, an hour and fifteen minutes max. It’s not really worth your time.”

“Oh, I’d like to see Jasper Ridge at night. Can I pick you up?”

“No, thanks. But I could meet you there in fifteen minutes.”

The moon hung low over the far hills when Wade entered the ranch. He looked up and thought, so that’s Jasper Ridge itself. Because of the oaks, the hill’s outline against the sky was blurry, textured like an optical illusion about where the hill started and the sky began.

There was none of the activity that had marked his previous trip to the ranch. The first stars appeared over the deserted barns. The moon was close to full; he could see a lot without lights. He took a deep breath, trying to let the ranch fill him up.

Diana had already led Gray Cloud out of his paddock. “I let a few people ride him today, so I’m making sure he’s okay.”

“You just like to get out here.”

“Guilty as charged, your honor.” She tied Artemis to the rail a few yards down from Gray Cloud. She pulled back Gray Cloud’s upper lip in a light,

pointing out something purple inside. “See those tattooed numbers? That’s how they mark track horses.”

“Oh, so they know for certain which horse won the race?”

As she carried her shiny-clean saddle back to the tack room she looked splendidly at home, as if she owned the ranch. When she came back she walked over to Wade and it was all he could do not to try to kiss her.



That night Wade dreamt he was high above Jasper Ridge Ranch. It was long ago, when bears roamed freely, and one was chasing him. Bears are fast, but he had a head start and somehow knew if he could go to the water he’d be safe. Naked on a hot, sunny day, Wade dashed downhill, with the bear gaining on him. He made the creek and jumped in. The cool water felt good. The bear entered downstream, intent now on fish. Wade tried to catch salmon in his hands before they got to the bear. He grabbed at them but they slipped away. He held one briefly, but it was squishy in his hands and escaped. Finally, he gave up and lay back in the cool water. The bear could have his fish. Artemis came over next to Wade and drank from the stream. Wade rolled over and slept in late.

8

Wade and Diana had been asking each other about their histories as if they were studying for an exam. Wade learned that Rob's Dallas law firm, with its new branch up on Sand Hill Road, was one of the biggest in the country.

"Wow, my life seems tame in comparison, I'm afraid," he said. They were back at the café on a weekday afternoon.

"Not really." She leaned forward. "You're more interesting than those guys Rob used to bring home, I assure you."

Wade rolled his eyes. "Please!"

She laughed. "Tell me more about your job—I don't know anything about Silicon Valley."

Wade tried to explain how he got involved in sales on the technical end, and ended up talking about Jorge. Wade finished his story by saying, "So now he's officially on probation."

"This is the friend you can't tell what you know, huh? What does this probation mean?"

"Theoretically he can get himself out of the dog house, but Sherry—the owner's wife—says it's just a required step on his way out."

"Ouch." Diana looked away. "So, you really *are* stuck in the middle."

"I go to the office determined to level with him—I even called people who could help him and gave him their names and numbers—but when I get into work,

he doesn't cooperate, and I don't get anywhere. I don't think he's called any of the numbers I gave him."

"Is Jorge really your problem? You say he's an engineer. He obviously didn't just fall off the turnip truck."

"I hired him, and I like him—he's my friend. For some reason I feel responsible for him. He's a compelling guy."

"It's his job to get along with customers, right? And he didn't?"

Wade shook his head. "Lydia overstates that. Most customers love Jorge. He can set up a killer sound system in an hour or two that really wows them, and fix all sorts of problems over the phone. I work with him all the time. You'd like him if you met him, Diana, I know you would."

"Is he a poet, too?"

Wade laughed. "Jorge? No. He's a *real* engineer! He has no idea I write poetry. Nobody at work knows. I'd rather they'd think of me as a good business guy, a pro. Think of it, you're in business. A tight situation comes up. Would you send out your poet?"

Diana laughed. "You always wriggle out of talking about your poems with me. It makes me wonder if I know you at all."

The café was surprisingly full for the middle of the afternoon. *Don't these people work?* he asked himself, aware of his irony. "Okay—you can laugh with me at my latest 'accomplishment'—a rejection slip from *Poetry* magazine. I just

got it and threw it in my briefcase, proud that it was initialed by the editor, with a scrawled 'sorry.'”

“May I see what you sent him?”

“This is probably a mistake,” he said, finding the poem, still with its rejection slip, “but I’ll read it to you.”

Invitation to the Opera

They say to handle each paper once,
but I can never do that with opera invites,
for I am someone who would like to like opera.
So when one comes, along with the bills,
fundraising letters from my daughter's pricey college,
small magazines that published my work --
magazines I keep renewing but never find time to read,
even gold-embossed credit-card offerings to my ex-wife,
it's the opera offer I can't throw away.

It would be so good if I could get my daughter to go.
I wonder whether to subscribe or just pick one or two.
Perhaps start with a familiar name:
La Traviata, Madame Butterfly, Aida, or Carmen.
Or how about these colorful ads for the new ones:
The Death of Klinghoffer or Nixon in China --
any program that puts the stars in tails and flowing gowns.
Some Wednesday, Friday, or Saturday, maybe next ~~year~~ season
I'll be there, part of the daringly dressed audience
as the lights dim. Imagine me in that heart-stopping
quiet just before the songs echo into the night.

“That’s a winner, Wade. Really, I like it. We always went to the opening in Dallas.”

“We?”

“Sorry, old habits die hard. Say, I have a girlfriend who lives for the opera. Can I have a copy for her?”

“Sure, take this one. Let me note that one change.” Wade made an entry in his organizer.

“You keep messing with them, don’t you? How many times did you re-write it?”

“A bunch—it’s embarrassing. I’m sure I’ve re-written it sixty times at least, not including little one-word changes like this one.”

“Do you ever ask if it’s worth it?”

The question made Wade vaguely angry. He wanted to say, “Who cares—it’s who I am,” but said, “I don’t know. I get one going, you know, and just work on it. It’s hard to say why. They nag at me, wanting me to change a line break or something.”

Diana moved closer to him and re-read the poem. “I haven’t been to a reading since college.”

“Perhaps you’d come to my group next Friday.”

After a long look at the poem, still sitting on the table, she smiled. “It wouldn’t be a *date*, right?”

“Absolutely not. How’s this, a ‘shared cultural event’?”

9

Diana was as insistent on driving herself as Wade was intent on picking her up, so they compromised by meeting at the café, which was close to the reading. Wade got there early and went over the opera poem in his car. When he saw her enter the parking lot in her huge white SUV, he was glad they were meeting first. He'd feel a lot better pulling up in his little Audi wagon than he would have in her land-yacht.

Diana walked to his car fast, purposefully, which Wade found appealing, and climbed into his passenger seat. He'd grown attached to the birthmark on her face. For him, it only underscored how attractive she was. Everything else about her—her reddish dark hair, her eyes set off by just a hint of makeup, the way she dressed, tonight a matching sweater and skirt with a scarf—was *just right*.

They drove through the “South of Oregon” half of Palo Alto, Wade's home turf. The area had been orchards and a dairy farm until the fifties, when it was divided into thousands of smallish home lots and sprinkled with a couple of strip malls and fifteen or twenty churches. The poetry reading was in one of those, a simple one-story Quaker meeting house.

They walked into the lobby, already buzzing with poets. Wade steered Diana toward a Stanford anthropologist, a newer poet who'd already won an award for his Hispanic poetry. Seeing them calmly chatting relaxed Wade—*I've*

worried about Diana and this reading too much. When she came back over to Wade she said, “He’s adorable.”

Jim Standish, a regular, cut in front of them as they were standing in line. Jim was over six feet, with thinning hair not quite enclosed in a bandana—a hill of a man, almost a mountain. Diana stepped back, letting him through. Wade instinctively knew that Jim was *not* the kind of poet for Diana, and it wasn’t just because he lived in a trailer in a friend’s driveway.

Out of Jim’s earshot, Wade said, “He can be a little overwhelming, but Jim was a founder of this group and writes good, strong stuff—he once wrote a poem about Whitman that I love. You’ll see—he reads before the break; I read after.”

They walked into the carpeted meeting hall, with chairs facing one another in an oval. The podium was at one end of the oval, in front of a fireplace.

“There must be sixty people here,” said Diana. “Will they all read?”

“Maybe half will.”

A few poets brought props—one read a poem that picked up the rhythm of a Conga drum he played. Another, who read a poem about her sister, passed around a faded snapshot of the two of them as children. But most of them, often shyly, unfolded a piece of paper and read a poem.

The anthropologist read a short poem in both English and Spanish that had Wade thinking about the lyrical limitations of English, with its short one-syllable Anglo-Saxon diphthongs. The Spanish version sounded much smoother.

The poems' subjects were as diverse as the people—some had a political slant, some were a bit angry, and many humorous. The funniest was when a grandmother read a poem about a frog-licking contest. Diana smiled and nodded through most of them.

Jim Standish, in his tie-dye bandanna, played a tune on a kazoo before he started his poem, "Teddy Bear:"

"What do you do
when you can't have her
any more but she makes you a Teddy Bear

with a pretty vest
and a tiny book about artists for it to read
when you're not home and a headband
like you wear and a little button heart so you'll

always have love. If only
she hadn't said that. I took it home,
opened the seam between its legs . . ."

At that, Diana hunched over and shook her head. "I don't believe this."

Wade touched her arm. "It takes courage to read a poem like that."

Jim's voice got louder as he went on:

". . . Oh my god,
its poor flat head with its
silly sad mouth and its
shiny black eyes, bobbing helplessly
back and forth, up and down. Its cotton insides
getting all torn up and jammed
up its neck."

Diana's face was taut. "It's just *dreadful*."

Wade shrugged his shoulders. "Shhh, he's finishing."

Jim modulated his voice down for the ending.

“ . . . it’s starting
to stink. When it gets too bad
I’ll leave it outside her kitchen door, hanging
by its little headband.”

Most of the audience clapped, while a handful sat mute. Diana wrinkled her brow and kept moving in her seat. She leaned over to Wade and whispered, “I’ve never heard anything like that. It’s *awful*.”

“Well, it was pretty gross, but there was at least *some* humor,” Wade whispered back. “A satire on loneliness?”

“Loneliness? No. It’s perversion, plain and simple. I can’t believe nobody walked out. Even my new best friend the anthropologist is *clapping*!”

“If it was truly perverse, believe me, nobody would applaud.”

She looked him up and down. “I’m sorry, but I’ve got to go home now.”

Wade stared at her, pleading with his eyes. “But I’m reading after the break.”

“You’ll have just enough time to take me to my car.”

“No, stay with me. My poem will seem bland after his.”

She stood up as the next poet approached the podium. “They’ll love it.”

When he hesitated, she said, “If you can’t give me a ride, I’ll have to walk.”

Wade followed her, head down. People rearranged their knees to let them pass. When they got out the door, he didn’t look back but he was positive people were staring. *What a disaster!*

They didn't say a word as they got into his car and drove off.

"Don't worry," Diana said as they approached the parking lot outside the café, "You'll have time to get back and read your poem.

Wade's only response was a shaking of his head.

Back at the café parking lot, she hopped out of his car without a word and climbed up into her SUV. Wade walked over to her window. She lowered it and said, "Thanks for inviting me . . . I wish I could have stayed." She started her engine and drove off.

He took deep breaths of the cool winter air as he watched her taillights brighten at the stop sign and dim, and then finally disappear.

"*Goodbye Diana,*" Wade said under his breath as he walked back into the poetry reading alone.

10

Two ships that passed in the night, he thought. Later, falling asleep, he pictured his freighter and her cruise ship on opposite courses a mile apart.

His waking-up thoughts took him back to the lonely days of his divorce. He'd desperately wanted to stay married to Liz, yet she'd left him. What seemed normal marital problems, to Wade, grew out of control until this new guy Tom came into the picture, wanting to move Liz to a ranch he'd inherited in western Massachusetts. Wade shuddered at the *unsureness* of those times. He didn't want Amelia to go through what she ultimately had—Mom on one coast and him on the other. As dawn broke Diana somehow replaced Liz in his half-waking dreams, leaving Wade as well.

He turned over and tried to think practically. How could he have been so wrong about Diana . . . what would he miss about her? *Sitting across from her in that riding outfit, I'd miss that. I'd miss the hope of having a woman in my life, so sure of herself I could count on her. I'd miss horses, too. Perhaps I could take riding lessons on my own, but where would that lead?*

He rose. After coffee, he whipped up blueberries and an instant breakfast in the blender. Later he bathed Keats in the sink. The dog had picked up some mud earlier in the week, and this was Wade's first chance to clean him up. Water splashed all over the kitchen. He grabbed two towels, one for each side of the dog.

The phone rang, and Wade heard Diana's amplified voice on the answering machine. "Wade, are you there? I'm so sorry about last night."

He put the beagle down half-dry and picked up the phone. "Just a second," he said, holding the phone against his shoulder. *Should he talk to her?*

"I wanted to call you last night."

Keats shook wildly, soaking Wade's pants. "I didn't expect you to call at all."

"I want to talk things over. Can you meet me for coffee around eleven at the café?"

Did he want to start up with her again? She made him into a bumbling Prufrock . . . *decisions and revisions that a minute will reverse* . . . After a while he said, "Okay, see you there."

She wore a pressed white shirt with one more button open than usual, and jeans. "It's good to see you again," she said.

He looked into his coffee cup as if his next line were printed in the whiteness on the top of his creamy latte.

She broke the silence. "I want to explain some things, Wade, to help you understand. I don't want to talk about that other guy's poems, but I want to ask a question about your opera poem. Okay?"

He shrugged. "Sure."

"I thought I caught a glimpse of you in that poem. But I wasn't sure. Have you ever actually been to the opera?"

“A handful of times, yes.”

Her brow tightened in confusion. “Well, did you like it?”

Wade nodded, waiting to see where she was going.

“So these poems you guys write don’t have to be true. You said in the poem you’d never been to the opera, right. So these poems seem to be about your own lives; don’t they call them *confessional*? Aren’t you supposed to say what actually happened . . . but you’re saying they can be . . . fantasies, right?” She took a sip of coffee. “Is there any chance that big guy never got a Teddy Bear?”

Wade laughed louder than he’d intended. “For the sake of Teddy Bears everywhere, I wish that could be true. But I . . . doubt it.”

Diana frowned. “Anyway, I acted like a child. I’m not sure I’ve ever been shushed before.” She shrugged her shoulders. “Which is silly, I was interrupting a poem. And poems mean more to you than me.” She hesitated. “Some of those poets seemed so negative. I like positive people who get out and *do things*.”

She could still rattle him. “Like what?” Wade said.

“I don’t know, just about anything—throw dinner parties, ride horses, ski, whatever.”

“Those worlds are pretty far from poetry, I’ll admit.”

“Now you look sorry you took me there.”

Wade was sure he turned red, because she’d nailed his exact thoughts.

“Look, I promised myself today I’d tell you about my marriage, so here it goes. Rob and I met at a sophomore mixer at SMU and were together our last

three years of college, Minnie and Mickey Mouse. We got married the summer before he started law school. Finally Beth and Robbie came along . . . it was like a dream. Eleven years. Then,” —she hesitated.

“Go on, please. It’s okay.”

“One day I got this call from one of our friend’s maids, saying Rob was involved with her daughter.” She turned away. Her eyes watered; she couldn’t go on.

“Oh, Diana, I’m sorry.”

She used her napkin as a handkerchief. “For months I stayed under the same roof with him, trying to make the marriage work. He said the affair was over. I couldn’t trust him anymore. I felt I had to be so sexy so he wouldn’t need another woman. I spent hours in the gym. I went a little crazy. I bought almost four hundred dollars worth of lingerie at Neiman-Marcus. I even bought *thongs*. Then one day I realized I never wanted to depend on him again and I moved out.”

She looked at Wade shyly, then looked back into her coffee. “I think about you, probably more than I should—I can’t ignore that. I don’t want to stop seeing you. I . . . I want to see you more.”

Wade could feel his anger melting. *Is this the same woman who walked out of the poetry reading?*

“Given that, it’s silly that I’ve never invited you into my home. Would you like to come to my place for lunch?”

I’d always wondered what her house was like. He nodded.

“I thought about introducing you to Robbie and Beth, but that’s probably not fair to them.” Her face had lines in it he’d never seen before. “Not yet.”

“I don’t know what to say. We *do* come from pretty different worlds.”

“Have you written me off?” she asked bluntly.

“Well . . . you seem different today, you’ve opened up . . .”

“I know. I’ve been trying to *keep things the same*, when things aren’t the same. And I’m a pretty private person anyway.” She took a deep breath and looked around the café. “We don’t have much time. Rob will be bringing the kids back in a couple of hours. But I want to show you my home. It might help you get to know me better.”

Wade nodded. “Let’s go.”

“Follow me,” she said, and soon he was behind her SUV on Middlefield Road, the north-south spine of Palo Alto. Huge trees canopied the road. She turned off toward University Avenue and pointed to a parking place.

After unlocking a gate, she took him around a corner to a small elevator. When they got on, she pushed ‘4,’ the highest floor.

The elevator opened onto a private alcove—hers was the only apartment on the top floor—with a teak loveseat with blue cushions next to a double front door. She unlocked the door and welcomed him in.

The condominium was at least twice the size of Wade’s house, with views of Stanford and the foothills beyond, turning from gold to green. The family kitchen, with overstuffed striped sofas, reminded Wade of French country houses

he'd seen in magazines. It had that "homey, not-decorated" look that might come from a high-priced designer.

The dining room table could seat twenty people or more. She led him through the living room, even more formal than the dining room. English foxhunting scenes were interspersed among more modern artwork. The painting of Diana that he'd helped her move was over the fireplace. Giant as it had seemed when he moved it, it fit perfectly in the space.

Diana showed him the kids' rooms, the guestroom with a cat—it must be Minky, he realized—sprawled out on the bed, and finally her suite, with a fireplace, where the bed was topped with a mountain of pillows.

The wall across from the fireplace held crosses, mounted carefully. One was at least a foot tall, almost square, with four red-and-white arrowhead tips in the center. "Isn't this a Maltese cross?" he asked.

She nodded. "From Valletta. I used to bring one home from every trip." She pointed him to a black one. "I like this, from Kenya."

Wade touched the shiny black wood. "So you travel a lot?"

"We did. I haven't been out of the country since we separated. Oh, once, to Merida, you know, the Yucatan? Rob thought we could patch things up in a foreign place—didn't work, but I loved that part of Mexico."

"So why so many crosses?"

"I come by it naturally. Mom and dad's crosses cover a huge wall. They brought me up Baptist."

Pretty conservative, religiously, Wade thought as his eyes dropped to the shelf of books with titles like *The Life God Blesses* below the crosses. “Rob too?”

“Once or twice he’d go to church for my sake, but no. I’ve found a good Presbyterian church out here, though, a big one in Menlo Park. How about you?”

“Liz and I used to go to a little church in Palo Alto—Presbyterian too, but progressive. I haven’t been for a while, but I don’t have the courage to be an atheist.”

“I’ve never thought of it that way,” she said. She lead him to the kitchen. “I just have time to get you some lunch.”

He took a seat at a kitchen table while she mixed the ingredients—tuna, four or five spices, and celery—for his sandwich.

“Is the tomato too green?” she asked.

“Delicious. You keep quite a home.”

“With Rob buying that estate I couldn’t see living in a garret, and I liked the idea of being in the center of town . . . but it’s not really mine. Everything’s in the firm’s name. Rob asks me if I need money and gives me whatever I want.”

“Sounds like it works, at least for now,” he said.

She finished her sandwich and started clearing the dishes. “It’s been three years now since I moved out of that huge house in Dallas. I’ve kind of been standing on one foot.”

Wade shook his head. “For standing on one foot, you seem awfully stable.” He took her hand. “You’re going slowly. That’s who you are. But this will work

out. You've both put your kids first, and . . . money won't buy happiness but it obviously *can* cushion the blows. I've never known anyone with these kind of resources."

She shrugged. "Rob says the Enron account—Billy's account, you know, Jolene's husband—brought in almost five million last year. The firm's rolling."

They ate and made small talk as if they were old friends. He had to remind himself that until she'd called he was working to put her in the past. She seemed kinder, even wiser.

As they passed through her front door, they touched and he moved this way and she moved that and Wade felt his arms around her, her full lips on his. Rather than stopping, they guided their bodies to the loveseat.

After a few kisses she pulled away and looked at her watch. "I worry Rob will come back." Then she laughed. "Of course he's never been early in three years, and Beth and Robbie aren't even out of school yet. And in any case the elevator would warn us."

"Let's go back inside," Wade said. The huskiness of his voice surprised him.

She took his hand. "I wouldn't trust myself. I haven't been with a man since Rob. Besides, here I can see the elevator." She put her hand on the back of his neck for another kiss.

Before long they were as breathless as teenagers. Should he put his hand on her breast? Gingerly, he did, and she continued kissing him passionately.

When he opened a button on her blouse, though, she gently moved his hand and said, “We’d better not get too disheveled.”

He frowned.

“But don’t stop, either.”

He contented himself with kissing and chaste petting until she pulled herself away and looked up at him. “You’d better go now,” she said, but she didn’t get up, and they stayed a while longer.

11

Christmas day fell on Saturday that year. Diana was in Dallas, staying at her mother's, and Wade's daughter wasn't visiting him. Amelia had called Wednesday and canceled a trip they'd planned for months. After Wade got over the double shock of not getting to see Amelia and having to spend the holiday alone, he decided to *do things* to get through it, something he'd learned from Diana. He'd go to Christmas Eve services at his church—he hadn't been in three years. The next day he'd head up to San Francisco for breakfast Christmas morning.

A fog bank from the ocean enveloped the city in a dark cloud. But Wade found the anonymity of Union Square without people perversely appealing. After a melancholy walk around its sidewalks he followed the trolley tracks up to Sears Fine Foods, normally popular with tourists. He was seated at a table in the front window, where he enjoyed Swedish pancakes and his view of the deserted, overcast street. After the Russian waiter cleared his plate, Wade jotted down the start of a poem:

Christmas Morning, 1999

In the fuzzy clarity of the last dark
I vowed to be easier on myself
Yet work harder for the things I care about
Life seemed so simple, lying there.

Now the only other soul in Union Square
Is blanket-wrapped, pushing a shopping cart.
He avoids my eye. When he looks up

We regard each other as in a holy place.

He put his notebook away and lingered over coffee. The hotel across the street was known for its medieval-costumed doorman. Today they celebrated the day by topping off the man's outfit—tights and knickers—with a Santa Claus hat. No wonder visitors think of San Francisco as a wacky, jolly place. But Wade was starting to know the city as a local, to see the other side of San Francisco, a place of chilly summers. Was it Twain who'd said the coldest winter he'd ever spent was a summer in San Francisco? Worse than that, he'd heard more than one resident fatalist refer to the ever-present possibility of suicide, "There's always the bridge."

He drove west toward the ocean, passing the slowly waking homeless in Golden Gate Park. The city ended at the Cliff House, a three-story tourist Mecca overlooking the Pacific. He parked, and poked his head in to the least formal of the restaurants. A latte? People were too coupled up; he turned around. He walked along a path overlooking the beach and couples huddled under blankets. He decided not to take the Freeway home but to drive along Highway One, the ocean route.

He drove down past the deserted Devil's Slide area, where the road seemed temporary and tenuous, on to the windy beach town of Pacifica. It was hard to believe how quickly the area became rural—he saw horses not fifteen minutes from the city. He continued south, where Highway One kissed the shore. At Half Moon Bay, just as he was about to turn east back to Palo Alto, he passed a

wooden sign on a run-down horse stable that advertised OCEAN RIDES. Wade vaguely remembered taking Amelia here, years earlier. He pulled over and did a u-turn and parked in front of the stables. Inside the makeshift office, Wade asked a man in a huge white cowboy hat if it there was any chance it was okay for him to ride in tennis shoes.

“Sure,” he said, “You’ll be fine, sonny. Hop on that paint, we’re about to head out.”

The poorly groomed horses made Wade aware of the quality of the horses he was used to seeing. Wade sank into his Western saddle—if felt like an easy chair—and joined a chain of somnambulant horses walking down to the beach. There was no varying from the path—*God I miss Diana and our rides.*

Still the ocean was as wonderful as anyone could hope, with the grey-blue clouds fading into the similarly-colored ocean. The leader even got the horses to step ever-so-briefly into the surf. That wonderful moment made Wade regard his horse—a dappled Appaloosa—with new tenderness. He was a *good boy*—what a difficult life he must lead!

Back in Palo Alto, he found a phone message from his daughter, sounding excited. Maybe his gifts had brightened her day! When he had realized Amelia wasn’t coming, Wade bundled her presents up and air-expressed them to her stepfather’s farm in Massachusetts. But when he called her, after she ticked through the presents he’d sent her—“The sweater was beautiful, I love having cashmere next to my skin and brown is the new black, and I can’t wait to use the

cash cards at Starbucks and Borders,”—she expressed the real reason for her high spirits. “You won’t believe what Tom and Mom bought me,” she said, barely able to get it out, “a horse.”

“Amelia . . .” *First she doesn’t come for Christmas, and now this.* He worked to stay holiday-cheery and, as quickly as possible, get off the phone.

In the afternoon he went to the ranch, stopping by a grocery store on the way to buy carrots. He parked outside the barn and looked down its wide aisle. Artemis stuck her big brown head out of the Dutch door and, as he called her name, whinnied fully at him.

The tack room outside the barn, normally locked, was ajar. Nicole, a svelte high school girl who worked at the ranch, was bent over working on something on the ground in the back of the tack room. Her sandy-blond hair cascaded around her upside-down face as she looked up at him through her legs in tightly stretched riding pants.

She didn’t move as he entered. “Hi, new guy Wade,” she said cheerily, and then straightened up.

“Nicole, hi. Incredible day for Christmas, isn’t it?”

“You’re really getting into this horse thing, aren’t you? Not many men do.” She took some reins off a hook, and handed them to him. “Here, I cleaned Artemis’s bridle.”

“Thanks.”

“Thank Jolene and Billy. They pay me.”

Wade grabbed the saddle and ambled down the barn to Artemis, but the vision of Nicole's jack-knifed jodhpurs remained.

He broke a carrot off in Artie's mouth and stroked her long sleek muzzle. With his hand on her neck, he opened the door and walked into the stable. *Three months ago I'd never get penned up with a horse.* He was careful where he put his feet. *Was the danger of horses—their sheer size and power—part of their allure?* He spun the combination on the lock to her feed room. She nuzzled her big head into the tiny room but he pushed her away. "Back off, Artemis, I've got a treat for you right here. After all, it's Christmas." The feed had a slight smell of molasses as he mixed it in with the remaining carrots and put it into her feed tray. Using a heavy brush that felt good in his hand, he groomed her as she ate. "Good girl, Artie," he said. "You're the best."

He saddled her up and rode to the barn Diana used. He grabbed Gray Cloud's halter and buckled it over the horse's head and led him out of the paddock on a rope. Holding onto the rope, he re-mounted Artemis and took the horses on a short ride. Gray Cloud followed alongside Artie, a few steps behind. Wade took them to a field where they could graze. Two riders in Santa outfits—Mr. and Mrs. Claus—rode by.

It was almost dark before Wade got home. *One of the shortest days of the year, yet the promise of spring has started.* He roughoused with Keats until he took the portable phone to the sofa.

Wade wasn't as shocked that her mother answered as he was at her tone. She was barely cordial. "Diana's told me about you," she said coolly. "I'll get her."

Diana picked up the phone. "Wade, just a second. Let me go into the study."

"What's with your mom? She seemed almost hostile."

"Don't mind her; she's never been thrilled that I left Rob."

"Oh." He hesitated a second. "How was Christmas in Texas? Lots of presents?"

"Today was good. The kids like being here, and, yes, we smothered 'em in gifts. I'd collapsed after that dinner party, but today was a pleasure."

"What's with this dinner party, anyway? Was Rob there?"

"Two nights ago the law firm practically took over the Dallas Country Club. They flew in partners and their wives from all over. With all the growth, especially in the Enron account, the firm has opened three offices in Europe now, and one in Tokyo. I'm supposed to play hostess—I agreed to it when we separated. It seemed like such a small thing until I had to be with Rob like nothing's happened. My friend Jolene—Artie's owner, you know, Jolene Tyler—hung in with me like a trooper while I stood by Rob like a . . . well I don't know, but I felt like a slave."

This is just bullshit. "You mean everybody thinks you two are still together?"

“They pretend they do, at least.”

Sometimes Diana made him feel like a kid outside a party, looking through a window, wondering what it was like inside. “There are parts of your life I’ll never understand,” he said.

“Oh, I’m not the least bit mysterious. Black tie dinners are a little like theater, especially with Rob.” She paused. “We behaved like a kabuki opera.”

“What’s that?”

“You know, where everybody plays their role. I had to duck behind the potted plants to whisper to Jolene about *you*.”

“That sounds a little better.” Keats came in and lay down on the rug.

“Jolene wants me to have a dinner party so she can get to get to know you,” Diana said. That may be fun.”

“Didn’t you say her husband works with Rob?”

“Oh, Billy Tyler’s going to know sooner or later anyway. He probably already does, from Jolene. I *should* have the Tylers over to meet you, and maybe Cliff. And your friends too. Rob’s always talking about these company IPOs. They seem to be debutante parties for businesses. The party will be *our* IPO. Think about who you’d like to invite. Maybe a poet?”

Just give up, go with the flow. “No poets . . . maybe Jorge and his wife Rita?”

“Whoever you want—it’s up to you. Have you been riding?”

He took a minute. *Play it straight.* “Yes, and I even ponied Gray Cloud like you asked me to. He and Artemis got on great.”

“Did you go off on your own with Artie?”

“No, earlier I drove to the ocean and rode one of those rent-a-clunkers.”

“You rode on the beach on Christmas . . . oh what am I doing in Texas!”

“I had to stay in this long line with a horse in front of me and one behind, like a train. Not nearly as much fun as riding with you.”

“The only outing I’ve had was to church yesterday,” she said.

“I went last night. The woman preaching said Christmas was based on some Pagan holiday, because Jesus was born in the spring . . . but she said that shouldn’t matter. This is our culture, and Christmas is a big part of it. At the end she had us all shout Merry Christmas.”

Diana gave a rueful laugh. “Here in Texas, today is Jesus’ birthday, plain and simple!”

They laughed together. “I miss you, Wade,” she said, her voice softer. “Much more than I thought I would. Thinking of riding with you got me through that awful party. I pretended Rob was you a couple of times. You two don’t look all that different from the back.”

“Let’s find something else to talk about.”

“Did you talk to Amelia? Did the sweater arrive on time?”

“Yes, and she liked it. But . . . her mother and stepfather gave her . . . an Arabian horse!”

“You’re not in competition with your ex-wife’s husband, are you?”

“I’d better not be. I have a hard enough time paying tuition.”

She lowered her voice into a sexier octave. “I’ve been thinking of you a lot. I miss you.”

“I have a surprise for you. It was hard to get in, but I made dinner reservations for New Years at the Village Pub in Woodside.”

“Oh, honey, I’m sorry, I can’t make it back. I wish I could leave, I really do. I’d wanted to be with you for New Years’ Eve so much, but Mom was just insistent that I be here over the Millennium. She’s afraid the world will end.”

“Mine just has. I really miss you.”

“I’ll make it up to you. I promise. Wait till I get home. Meanwhile I’ll picture you riding on the beach, but on Artemis, ponying Gray Cloud. Give them dozens of horse cookies for me, okay?”

“Hurry home.”

“Oh, I will. I can’t wait to see you again.”

12

Jorge thought about Wade Middleton a lot over Christmas, questioning Wade's character for the first time in the four years he had known him. *Wade should be able to protect my job, period.* Jorge decided to go see him at work on Monday.

When he arrived at SnyderSound, Jorge threw his briefcase into his cubicle and charged up to Wade's office. Wade was seated at his desk, talking on the phone. Jorge maneuvered past him and stood by the windows, watching the few people who came to work the Monday after Christmas park. The roach coach made its noisy entrance, staccato notes playing on its musical horn. Jorge's mouth watered—a hot cup of coffee would taste good.

When he hung up, Wade immediately stood up and welcomed Jorge. "Hey, I was just talking to Diana about you over the weekend. She wants to put together a small dinner party to get to know each other's friends. We were hoping you and Rita could come."

Jorge took a minute to reply as Wade sat back down. "Rita would like that, that's for sure. Her mom used to throw fancy parties in Havana before Castro."

"I didn't know that. They lived high down there, huh?"

"Her father taught at the Medical School. When they escaped to Florida—Rita was in junior high—the jerks didn't recognize his degree and he had to drive a cab. It killed him. Literally—he had a heart attack coming home from pulling

an all-night double shift.” Jorge shrugged his shoulders. “Sometimes I think that’s what makes Rita so pushy for Mary. She wants to give our daughter the start her father had given her before things fell apart.” He looked at Wade. “Let’s go get some coffee.”

“I’ve got just enough time.” Wade stood up. “Have you called those numbers I gave you? At least call Larry Moody at HP—he used to be a neighbor, the nicest guy in the world. I’ve already phoned him for you.”

Jorge followed him down the hall. “I’m about to, but it may not be necessary. I’m doing a lot better. Lydia’s been civil, almost nice. She even smiled at me yesterday. Besides, I have *you* in my corner.”

“You’d better hold onto your wallet when she smiles,” Wade warned, and then turned directly to him. “You can’t count on me, Jorge. I’m out of management. I’ve lost my vote.”

Jorge didn’t completely understand and changed the subject. “So are you and Diana . . . you know?” He thrust his hips forward with a little extra Latin motion.

“No, we’re not,” Wade said, awkwardly mimicking him and rolling his eyes. “We’re just riding horses.”

“Man, you’re going to get yourself killed. All that danger and no nooky, you’re nuts.”

Wade shook his head. “This wisdom from a guy wearing a Ralph Nader T-shirt to work?”

Jorge stooped, spread his arms like a beggar and affected an accent. “It’s who I am, man. Nader’s the only one *cares ‘bout us po folk.*”

Wade laughed. “If you’d ever known poverty, you’d never take that pose.”

“Oh, like you were ever poor.” Jorge hit him on the shoulder and ordered coffee in Spanish. *Wouldn’t Wade be surprised to know how tough things were after Dad’s stroke? Think he ever had to pick cotton, fingers cut by those little cotton bolls, like I did?* He blew the steam away from his coffee.

“Did you hear Lydia’s off on jury duty?” Wade asked.

“Imagine the poor slob who gets her on his jury,” Jorge said as, coffee in hand, they retraced their steps.

Upstairs, Wade said, “Meanwhile, call those numbers—start with Larry.”

Walking away from Wade’s office, the last words echoed in Jorge’s ears. What *was* going on with Wade? Wade had interviewed Jorge his senior year of college, on-campus recruiting, and had made him feel like he had a friend right away. That feeling of being special—wasn’t that why he’d taken the job in the first place?



That night Jorge and Rita awakened to Mary’s coughing and calling. Mary had had problems breathing for months now.

Jorge rushed to the hallway where they had her small bed.

She was sweating, a little twisted up in her bedclothes. She coughed deeply. “Daddy, I couldn’t breathe. But I’m okay now.”

He straightened out her sheets and picked her up and held her. “Just relax, Mer-Mer.”

Rita poked her head in the alcove. “Mary, let me fill the tub for you. The steam will feel good on your throat.”

Lying in the bed alone while his wife bathed their daughter, Jorge worried, *How can I do better for Mary?* He wanted a cigarette. He’d only smoked for a little while—he gave it up for boxing in college—but a smoke sure would taste good now.

Rita seemed to be taking forever in the tub—it was the middle of the night, and he feared he wouldn’t get back to sleep. The allergists had scratched all over Mary’s back to try to find anything that she’d react to. Jorge’s share of the last bill had been almost three hundred dollars. Imagine if he didn’t have insurance; the total bill was over a thousand. *Damn, it was the perfect time for a cigarette.* It was hard to remember why he’d stopped.

13

Diana flew in early January 2nd and called Wade to have him meet her at the ranch. “I’ll drop the kids off with Rob after church, change, and rush out to the ranch,” she said.

He went out a little early and drove to Gray Cloud’s barn, but Diana wasn’t there yet. He drove to Artemis’ barn. She nickered at the sight of his car, a first.

At the barn he removed the blanket that stable hands had put on Artemis the night before and fed her a carrot. He was still amazed at her size—Artemis’s head didn’t move a whit when he snapped a carrot in her clenched teeth—she was just so *massive*.

Her lips were soft, dry, and surprisingly dexterous. When Wade hand-fed her, Artemis was gentleness itself. He checked her hooves and groomed her, spending time with her mane and tail before he brushed the “must do” part, her broad back with its dark dorsal stripe, and her golden-reddish sides. Anywhere the saddle would touch had to be spotless, and it was. He threw the blanket and saddle across her back and cinched it up.

Once he exchanged her halter for a bridle, Wade knew Artemis would carry him wherever he wanted to go. She, who could overpower him in a second! This was the horse-mystery he kept mulling. *Do they really like us?* Artemis had whinnied just at the sight of his car today. *Why do they do our will?*

As he climbed up the mounting platform and threw his leg over Artemis, he heard Diana's voice behind him. "Howdy, stranger."

She looked stunning up on Gray Cloud, thoroughly at home, and smiled broadly at him.

"I've missed you," he said.

"Me too. It's good to see you."

"What's in the saddle roll?" he asked.

She smiled again and muttered, "Just some stuff. Maybe you'll see."

As they rode to the polo field, Diana held Gray Cloud to a walk. He was usually more skittish than Artemis, but when Gray Cloud rode too close, Artemis half-heartedly kicked out at him. Diana laughed. "Mares don't like other horses getting close. She'll settle down." Sure enough, not thirty steps later, Artemis gave Gray Cloud a little love bite behind Diana's saddle—friends again.

Diana pointed to Gray Cloud's ears, which were pinned almost straight back.

"That means he's nervous, right?" Wade asked. The horse's ears popped up, then went back again.

Diana nodded. "Remember, horses aren't predators. They're prey, so they're cautious. Thoroughbreds are especially spooky. But Gray Cloud's even more a nutcase today than usual—I wonder why."

A few steps later she said, "I'll just walk him until he settles down. Once he focuses on what he's supposed to be doing we'll be okay." She scanned the

field, her eyes stopping on something in the distance. She pointed to something fluttering in the wind on the far side of the field. “That’s what it is, a plastic bag. Gray Cloud knows it wasn’t there yesterday. Let’s cut across the field and ride up to it.”

“How can you tell that’s what bothering him?”

“It’s *what’s changed*. I could take him to a trail we rode last week and he’d shy at a replaced fence rail. Horses notice changes. They can act surely only when they know their environment.”

Gray Cloud wouldn’t walk anywhere near the plastic bag but Diana took a short rein and forced him close so he could see it was nothing to be afraid of. Sure enough, he settled down. They continued on, with Artemis lagging behind.

“C’mon catch up!” Diana called.

“This is as fast as Artemis seems to want to go.”

“Show her you mean business. Squeeze one leg at a time, left right, left right, move her along. Remind her she’s under tack. Let her feel you a little in the mouth, it’s okay.”

Wade had been schooled on this in his lessons and nudged her with his heels, but it didn’t have any effect. She plodded on at her own rate. He considered it heartless to yank her around by the reins—they were, after all, directly connected to her mouth. Besides, wouldn’t pulling on her reins stop her?

Diana said, “Use your stick.”

Reluctantly, he raised his crop and gave Artemis a light touch on her shoulder. She quickly caught up. “I hardly touched her,” Wade said, pleased and relieved.

“Sometimes they just need a reminder. She can feel a fly anywhere on her body, you know, so even a little tap can do the trick. When I jump in shows, Gray Cloud knows me so well I can merely turn my head to look at a new jump and he’ll change leads.”

“That’s incredible.”

“Let’s stay at a walk until they’re really settled down. We don’t want a spill.” With the horses stepping out, Diana seemed happy. “My favorite trainer used to talk about the best place to view the world. Where do you think that would be?”

“Maybe Mount Tam, up in Marin, looking back at San Francisco?”

“Never heard of it. Anyway, the trainer would ask that question, and we’d pretend not to know, but we all smiled when he’d repeat the old adage, ‘through the ears of a horse.’ I miss that guy. He used a bit-less bridle, no hardware in the mouth at all, but he could get a horse to do anything.”

“How?”

“For top riders it’s all in the seat.”

Obviously Wade’s seat wasn’t ready for that yet.

“Oh, by the way, it looks like that dinner party can work out in two weeks. Get me Jorge’s address and I’ll send them an invitation.”

Wade nodded. “Will do, it’ll be fun,” he said.

When they got past the main road they came to an old trestle bridge made from a railroad flatbed. Gray Cloud didn’t want to go over it.

This had happened once before and Artemis had simply led Diana’s horse across. “Let me lead him over,” Wade said. “He’s going slowly, like you with Rob.”

“Slow? He’s stopped! No—I can’t put up with this. Stay back.”

Diana led Gray Cloud back to the bridge a second time, smacking his front shoulder with her crop a lot harder than Wade would ever think of hitting Artemis. Gray Cloud’s legs locked and he turned away just before the bridge. After the third time, he emptied his bowels. The fourth time, Diana got a look in her eye, tightened even further up on the reins with her left hand and whacked his shank, behind her saddle roll, hard. Gray Cloud walked across without hesitation.

Wade wondered if he understood Diana—this side of her was like no one he’d ever been close to. He fell in behind Gray Cloud. “I’m not used to seeing you so tough.”

“You sometimes have to have it out with them. He’ll be fine the rest of the day. But I won’t see how I’ve done until we go to the bridge next time. If he walks right across I’ve done my job.”

The cloudless, crisp day made Wade feel lucky to live in California. TV that morning had shown snowstorms in the Midwest. Rain storms were due in

off the coast soon here too. But for now it was perfect. Diana pulled off a few overhanging leaves and gave him some to sniff. Inhaling pungent bay leaf that sparkling winter day was one of those moments Wade was learning to remember even as they happened.

As they rode through brush, hundreds of birds lifted up and scattered, flapping around them, but the horses didn't spook. He asked Diana why.

"Oh they're used to birds. Birds live with them in the barns." At last she said, "Okay, they're ready, let's trot."

He tightened up on the reins, kicked both feet, and Artemis trotted alongside Gray Cloud. Wade posted, rising and falling with each step.

"Good. You're getting the rhythm. Squeeze a little at the bottom of every post, let her know you're liking the trot."

"Like this?"

"Yes," she said, "but relax your heel, stay lower down, massage her belly with your calves."

"How's this?"

"Better, but . . . pretend you're . . ." she hesitated. "Imagine Artemis is a woman. Pretend you're making love."

They laughed like kids.

Diana got quiet. Wordlessly she led him to the trail by the creek.

After a while she turned off, bringing the horses up through dense brush into a secluded meadow. "Here, let's dismount."

She pulled two halters, a ground cover and a blanket out of her saddle roll. Weaving the reins up in the bridles and putting the halters on over them, she tied the horses to a tree and put down the groundcover and blanket. “I’m new here, but I’ve never seen anyone in this little meadow. I like to think of it as my secret hideaway.”

“Has it really only been three months since you first put me up on a horse?” he asked as he helped her with the blanket. “Back then I wondered where the safety-belt was.”

Diana laughed. “I’d forgotten.”

They sat on the blanket, and Diana pulled out a thermos and poured wine from it. Wade took a piece of paper and pen from his pocket and started writing.

“What in the world are you scribbling?”

“What you taught me about horses. I want to write down what you just said. I’ll read it to you when I’m done.”

Diana pulled some crackers and cheese from the saddle roll. She spread a cracker for him and fed him while he wrote.

After the cracker, he lay on his stomach to finish. Finally, he read to her:

Jasper Ridge Ranch

She’s teaching me about horses,
how you hang their halters
next to the stalls in case of fire,
and English saddles – almost bareback –
are not just fru fru but the only way
a horse can jump.

He sat up and took a sip of wine before reading the end.

She says rhythmically moving
up and down on a horse
is like making love to a woman.
Perhaps, I think, a woman
you're not in love with,
but I am not yet a horseman.

“Very funny,” She said lying down next to him. “Even charming. Taking you to my secret place is even better than I’d imagined.” She kissed him, a long lingering kiss. “And believe me, I’ve been imagining.”

His face inches from hers, with her hand on his back, Wade asked, “Do I finally get to seduce you?”

She said, “Oh honey this spot may not be as secret as I hope,” but she returned his kisses fervently. This time when he began to unbutton her blouse, she watched his fumbling hands with a knowing smile. As their passion built, she asked him, “Do you have a . . .?”

When he found what she was looking for in his wallet she smiled and drew him to her. She seemed to melt to him. He felt she could tell what he was thinking. *What in the world did I do to deserve this?*

14

When Jorge went on “probation” at work, he stopped wearing political T-shirts. As the probation wore on he bought a new corduroy jacket. Because his probation review wasn’t scheduled until Monday, Jorge had no fear he’d get fired before the weekend. When he saw a note on his desk Friday morning—Meet me in my office at ten, Lydia—he rationalized it was normal business. However, when he tried to sign on to the company computer only to get an “unauthorized user” message, he started to panic. He quickly tried three more times; each try failed. It wasn’t any use calling the help desk. He went into the men’s room and slapped water on his face. As he toweled off he decided to go up to Wade’s office.

Wade, sitting at his desk in shirtsleeves and tie, looked up at him and asked, “What’s wrong?”

Jorge shrugged his shoulders under his sport coat. “I’m supposed to see Lydia at ten.”

“That could be anything.”

Jorge felt perspiration on his brow. “They cut me off the server. That’s got to mean something.”

“I can’t believe they’d get ahead of themselves like that. It’s probably a mistake.” Wade put away some papers. “Why don’t I call them? Okay?”

“Sure.”

When Wade called the help desk, he breezily said Jorge was working with one of his customers and there seemed to be a problem. “He needs to log on.” After a while Wade turned to Jorge, covered the mouthpiece, and mouthed, “Bad news.” He spun around in his chair so that Jorge couldn’t see what he was saying. “They put me on hold for Günter.”

The Personnel guy. Not good.

When Wade hung up and faced Jorge again, he said, “They’re fixing it,” but he frowned.

“So, what’s going on?”

“Günter didn’t say anything directly.” Wade slumped a bit in his chair. “It’s fifteen minutes before you go in to see Lydia, right? Take a walk around the parking lot, settle your thoughts.”

“What did Günter say?” Jorge had a hard time calling him Günter. He had introduced himself to Jorge as Mr. Schreck.

Wade uneasily fiddled with some papers. “He told me he’d order the logon fixed right away . . . but he also said he’d like to stop by my office. You may be right; they might be about to walk you out the door. If they do, leave with your self-respect. The valley’s on fire, you’ll get another job.”

“You knew this was coming, didn’t you?” Jorge was surprised how accusing he sounded.

“I *feared* it,” Wade said defensively.

“I thought you were my friend.”

“What could I do?”

“Work for me behind the scenes?”

“I tried. What *did* you do out in Las Vegas? I think that Anderson guy might have called Steve.”

Jorge sat down. “He’s a pompous fool. Maybe I talked out of turn, but it shouldn’t cost me my job.”

“Those are the types you have to be most careful around.”

“What can I do?” Jorge hated the pleading note in his voice.

Wade leaned over to Jorge. “It’s *too late*. It’s been too late for a long time.”

“You should have told me.”

“I *tried*.” Jorge was so close to Wade that he whispered. “*You didn’t want to hear.*”

The sentences Jorge formed disappeared before he could get them out of his mouth. Finally he asked, “Tell me again how to get through this?”

“If you can stand a little humor I’ll tell you what my crazy uncle told me. If you’re going to get fired, sew some mistletoe to the back flap of your sport coat and walk proudly out the door.”

Jorge shook his head. “Not now, Wade.”

“I understand. Just be civil.” Wade got out of his chair. When Jorge stood up, Wade put his arm around his shoulder. “Call me after the meeting,” he said.

Ten minutes later, Jorge went to Lydia's office. Günter, who normally sat near Wade, was seated in the office across from Lydia's. After a moment's reflection, Jorge realized this was intentional; Günter was there to protect Lydia.

Lydia's desktop was clear. She gave him no greeting but motioned for him to sit down in a small chair in front of her desk. Her blinds were open behind her, so Jorge could hardly see any expression on her face because of the light. She started right in. "I'm sorry that, during the probationary period, you didn't improve enough for us to keep you on, Jorge. I really am. You'll get two weeks' severance."

After four years. He concentrated on not moving but he clenched his hands. He thought she noticed. *She was probably trained to avert any physicality.*

"There's some paperwork. And I'll need your badge."

"I brought my cell phone, too," Jorge said, as he took it out of its holder and laid it on her desk.

"You can keep that," she said, as if that made her magnanimous. "Steve Snyderman himself told me to leave that with you. He said you could use the SnyderSound phone discount until you get a new job. He's very upset about having to let you go."

Jorge replaced the cell phone in its holder. Then, somewhat ceremoniously, he felt, he pulled the lariat with his badge from around his neck and handed it to her.

Lydia quickly slipped the badge in her desk drawer.

So, he was fired. He felt somewhat relieved. He may as well ask what was on his mind. “Wade’s pretty tight with Steve, right? How much did he know?”

She looked surprised at his question. “That’s not important.”

“He couldn’t help me, huh?”

“Jorge, look—you’re responsible for getting along with the customers, and . . . well it didn’t work out. I don’t see much sense in going over things we can’t change. I’ll give you a good recommendation. No one doubts your technical skills.” She pulled out some forms, which he signed. “Günter will escort you to your desk to pick up your things.”

Rummaging quickly through his desk, he threw practically everything in the trash. He put all he didn’t throw away into a paper box. Günter didn’t say a word. *He’s trying to pretend he’s not looking while he makes sure I don’t steal anything.*

As he carried his box through the maze of cubicles, walking beside Günter, the few times he saw someone he knew in the distance they disappeared by the time they passed. He felt like the guy in *Dead Man Walking*.

▣

After he put the box in the car, the box representing four years of his life, he knew he should go home and face Rita, but he couldn’t. Instead, he drove aimlessly on the back roads around his office, and then finally went north on 101.

When he saw the Palo Alto exit he took it. California, especially manicured Palo Alto, was indeed a wonderful garden but he wasn't allowed to get near the fruit.

Out of some ironic perversity, he decided to try to find the house of the founder of Apple Computer. Steve Jobs had a kind of rock star status in Silicon Valley and Wade had driven Jorge by his house once—he knew it was right off Oregon Expressway. But today Jorge couldn't find it. He drove down one side street a few blocks and then cut back on another. These small expensive houses mesmerized him, as if he were in some kind of dream. Houses that would cost less than a hundred thousand almost anywhere in Texas cost millions here. Jobs' house, as he remembered it, was bigger than most of these; it would have been expensive even in El Paso, but Jorge couldn't find it. He parked beneath a big tree and watched some Mexican gardeners.

They smiled as they tossed their lawnmowers and backpack blowers into the bed of their truck in the bright February sun. Until now, Jorge had felt way ahead of them; today he was a little jealous of their outdoor carefree lives. The job he'd lost paid three times what they were making—almost thirty dollars an hour, with benefits. Still, he envied them.

Before he returned to the freeway he pulled off the road and called Rita. It was easier than telling her in person.

She was quiet on the phone for what seemed like forever. Finally she asked, "What did Wade say?"

"He said the Valley's hot and I'll find another job."

After another long pause she said, “You have to Jorge . . . you just have to.”

▣

“Who cares about Diana’s stupid party when I’m out of work?” Jorge asked Rita as he threw some clothes on the bed.

“Come on, this is how to get along in America,” Rita said. “You network, jobs come along. I wish I knew what to wear.” She pulled several things from the closet.

“That’s the least of my worries,” he said.

When she was dressed, though, he didn’t like her outfit one bit. She had chosen a short black skirt with a flowered cotton blouse tied in front, exposing her long tan midriff. She’d buttoned only one button. “You’re wearing that, with the bra showing?”

“I always thought you liked me being sexy.”

“You saw the invitation, she’s *retro*.”

“You’re wearing that black linen shirt, right, no tie, no jacket?”

Jorge nodded.

“Well, *I’m* Latino too!”

“At least I don’t look like a whore!”

She walked over and put her arms around his shoulders. “Don’t be that way.”

Jorge shook his head. “So I get to spend the evening watching the guys staring at my wife’s underwear?”

“You may be out of work” she said, moving away from him and turning back to look at him over her shoulder like a model, “but you’re still the husband of a very *hot* Cuban babe.”

“Couldn’t you just button a few buttons, for me?”

“The blouse pulls funny. I really don’t like it that way.”

“How about wearing your jacket or something?”

“Oh, honey, it’ll be fine.” She turned around, pushed herself against him to kiss him. When he moved to avoid her lips, she said, “Okay, I’ll wear a denim jacket over it.”

He finally kissed her back.



Turning onto Oregon Expressway, they passed the wooden *Welcome to Palo Alto* sign. Jorge said, “Shallow Alto. This place is starting to give me the creeps.” He maneuvered over to Channing, toward the party. “See that house?” he asked, pointing out a tiny bungalow not far from the freeway. “That’d cost half a million, easy, maybe more. Can you imagine? Why live here, anyway?”

“This town is a camp for kids though—look at that soccer field—and great schools—they’ve got everything. It’s like a park.”

“Kids? Spoiled rich kids.”

“I don’t know. Wade said he raised *his* daughter here—Amelia didn’t seem spoiled to me.”

“Yeah? She’s majoring in photography . . . who can make a living at that? But now all Wade talks about is Diana the horse woman.” He stopped. “I am curious to meet her, I’ll admit that.”

Rita put her hand on his leg. “Even if we don’t move here, there are ways we could send Mary to Palo Alto schools. One of the moms in our apartment complex is sending her son. She has a friend who lets her use her address. Look, those plum trees are already starting to bud, in February.”

Jorge felt cross. “They’ve been flowering at our apartment for weeks. Weather doesn’t know borders.” At a stop sign, he looked over at his wife and softened his tone. “Honey, I want the best for Mary, I do. But not by sending her to a school where she doesn’t belong. We are who we are.”

“Don’t worry. You’re going to meet someone at this party who’s going to give you a great job.”

“First I have to find a damned parking place for this junk heap among all these BMWs,” he said.

“There’s one over there,” Rita pointed.

He quickly did a three-cornered turn and wedged in between a huge black sedan and an SUV.

Before he got out, she put her hand on his arm. “Remember, Jorge, when you’re on the ropes, *show no fear*. Nobody’s going to do anything for a sourpuss. Think *fun*—this is going to be fun.” She looked down at her jacket, buttoned all the way to the collar. “I even dressed for you. Cheer up, you hear?”

Riding up to the fourth floor, Jorge caught a glimpse of himself in a thin elevator mirror. He stood a little straighter and patted down his hair.

Rita looked proper, holding a small bouquet like a bridesmaid or something. *What in the world are we doing here?*

15

When the doorbell rang, Diana called, “That must be your friends.” Wade excused himself from the other guests and headed for the door.

Diana arrived just as Wade opened the door. “Ooh, you must be Rita,” she said. It was so nice of you to come. And, daffodils! Let me get them into some water.” She turned her wide white smile on Jorge. “And you must be *the* Jorge Wade’s always talking about.”

While Diana cut the stems and filled a vase, Wade walked Jorge and Rita into the living room. Wade introduced them, and Diana came in with the flowers and introduced the three guests already there. “Cliff is one of my riding buddies—he used to play a lot of polo, and still hunts. He rides Artemis, Jolene’s horse, when Wade can’t.” Jolene raised her hand shyly when her name was mentioned.

Turning to the couple, Diana said, “These are the Tylers. We used to double date with Jolene and Billy when Rob was in law school. They’re new to California, like me. Billy came out to work with Rob. He manages the biggest account in the law firm, Enron, that energy company everybody’s talking about. It’s the biggest account at the firm, so be nice to him.”

When Billy waved her comment off, Wade asked him if he should open one of the bottles of wine Billy had brought.

“Not for me, but sure, open it up. Ah’d like a little Bourbon and branch water.”

Everybody else asked for white wine. Wade said, “So, I’ll open that *Far Niente* Chardonnay you brought, Billy. Thanks.”

“Napa Valley wine’s def-nitly cheaper hout here,” he said. “Ah’ll give y’all that.” Billy’s short haircut and jowls reminded Wade of a bulldog.

Diana said to Billy, “Napa Valley. Remember that partner’s meeting at Silverado—could it have been only two years ago? Who’d have ever thought we’d both move here.”

“I’m likin’ it more than I thought I would,” said Jolene.

Billy shrugged his shoulders. “California’s diffrent, for sure. Where are you two from?” he asked of Jorge and Rita.

“I’m from El Paso; Rita’s from Cuba,” Jorge said.

Rita gave him her hand. Rather than shake her hand, Billy lifted it to his lips and kissed it. She did a kind of curtsy.

Wade brought in the drinks and the crowd moved into the dining room, where they gathered around the dining room table, set up at one end with seven place cards.

Jorge nudged Wade, “Man, she has you at the head of the table. The big Kahuna.”

Wade shrugged, trying to be cool. Actually, he was a bit confused about playing host.

Rita laughed as she pointed to Jorge's place card. "And we're seated across from each other, just the way *Mama* did it in Havana."

Billy said, "Hey, the California primary's coming up. We all rallyin' roun' the Texan?"

Diana sat up a little straighter and said, "You always go for the winners, Billy! When I first met you when you said Barry Goldwater would be the greatest president we'd ever have."

After the laughter quieted down, Billy said, "An he would have been. Speaking o' that, how about this upcoming turkey-shoot. Seriously, we're all voting for Bush, aren't we?"

When no one said anything, Billy went on, "He's loyal—predictable."

Diana broke the silence. "But McCain says what he means."

"Aww, McCain's a loose cannon." Billy looked directly at Jorge. "What about you?"

Jorge said, "She's for Bush; I like Nader. He's the only one who'll stand up to the corporations."

Billy laughed, hard. "Ole Unsafe at Any Speed Nader? Well at least he's not a *Demorat*. Tha guy might drain some votes for us."

Rita smiled at Billy. "I like the way Republicans respect freedom. You Americans forget it can be gone overnight, like with Castro. You can count me in, Billy."

Billy reached out and touched Rita's arm. "Jorge, that's a smart little lady. You should listen to her."

Cliff said, "I'll vote for Bush but it sure looks like Gore will win it. How about you Wade?"

Knowing he'd be as popular as a preacher at a brothel, Wade said, "I thought Clinton did okay. I'll vote for Gore."

Billy scratched his head. "I'm not sure I heard you right," he said.

"I'm telling you, McCain's a straight shooter," Diana interjected. "We need to recover the respectability of the office."

"Diana's got that right," Jolene said with a smile. She didn't seem to have noticed Billy's flirting, or didn't care. She looked at her husband lovingly.

Billy stared straight at Wade. "I can't believe what you said about likin' Clinton. The Enron guys keep talking about the Left Coast and it's true so many people out here are so darned *liberal*. I don't get it. Clinton had sex with a slut in the White House, we agree on the facts, don't we?"

Wade concentrated on keeping his voice soft. "You'd think that's all he did."

They were all still standing around the table with their drinks, waiting for a word from Diana before they sat down. Jolene joined in. "I can't get past Monica, no way."

Billy raised his drink to his wife. “That’s a girl. Bush’ll sweep Texas. He gives some of his speeches in Spanish—that goes a long way.” Billy glanced at Jorge and Rita awkwardly.

Wade looked around the table. “So if we were the only voters, it’d go to Bush.” He lowered his voice. “Scary,” he mumbled, almost inaudibly.

Heads nodded. Wade knew he’d never get along with Billy—they were oil and water. He looked over at Diana. *Was she a Clinton-hater, too?*

Billy looked Rita up and down. “Aren’t you hot in that jacket?”

“No, I’m okay.”

She gave Jorge an unpleasant look.

“Maybe you *would* be more comfortable with it off, sweetie,” Jorge said.

“W-e-l-l-l,” she said, spreading the word out to make her husband’s request seem a bit like a dare. Starting at her waist, as eyes turned toward her, Rita slowly unbuttoned her jean jacket. She removed it shyly, but her hesitancy added drama, and when she revealed her red bra, six people seemed to draw in their breaths in unison.

Everyone but Billy quickly looked away. He rearranged two of the place cards.

Diana quickly said, “Let’s eat!” She walked briskly to the kitchen, bringing back a huge bowl of Caesar salad.

After they’d seated themselves, Cliff said to Wade, “If you want to get close to Diana, you’ll have to learn to hunt.”

“That’s what I’m hearing. I haven’t ridden much, but I like horses, or at least I like Artemis.”

“There aren’t many field masters like Diana, fast and safe. Usually you get one or the other. Some of those guys are maniacs.”

Cliff, speaking to Diana, who was seated directly across from him, said, “I was just telling Wade how small the foxhunting world is. You know Florence Richardson, right?”

“Back in Virginia? Sure, she lent me a horse one day last winter, so I could ride with her,” Diana said.

Cliff looked right at her. “She had a bad accident last week.”

Diana turned to him. “Is she okay?”

“She was whipping in at the Middleburg Hunt and took a header into a beehive.” Cliff shook his head.

Diana let out a little gasp, almost inaudible. “Oh no.”

“The fall was bad enough, but she had some kind of allergic reaction. She didn’t make it.”

Diana’s jaw dropped. “Didn’t make it as in . . .?”

Wade’s heart skipped a beat.

“She died in the ambulance on the way to the hospital,” said Cliff.

Diana put down her knife and fork, and her face grew pale and tight. She pushed back from the table. “I can’t believe it. Excuse me.”

Wade wanted to go with her and comfort her but didn't think it was his place yet.

Diana stayed away for what seemed a long time but couldn't have been more than a minute or two. When she returned, she seemed remarkably composed, bringing in a platter of salmon. "Did the Hunt here send flowers?" she asked Cliff.

"I'll check tomorrow."

Billy took his eyes off Rita long enough to remark to Wade, "I'm telling you, stay far away from horses."

Jolene rolled her eyes at him, and then turned to Wade. "I'm so glad you're getting Artemis out." She passed Wade the salmon. "You could ride *her* with the hounds; she's great in the field."

"Have you and Cliff been talking? He thought I should hunt, too." *Is this hunting thing as dangerous as it seems?*

Jolene smirked. "Well, if you're going to hang out with Diana . . ."

"Don't get Wade all upset," Diana interrupted. "He doesn't need to hunt if he doesn't want to. He could hilltop though. But nothing's *required*." She laughed.

"Okay, what's hilltop?" asked Wade.

"It's also known as third field. Fields are groups." Jolene sounded like a school teacher. "There's a leader for each field."

“First field stays with the hounds,” said Cliff. “They ride pell-mell when the hounds are on a scent, taking jumps along the way. Second field rides just behind them, but they open gates instead of jumping. Third field doesn’t try to stay with the hounds at all. The reason we call them hilltoppers is because they trot from one hill to another to watch the hunt from afar.”

“That sounds doable,” said Wade.

Rita asked, “You mean they just watch?”

Billy beamed at her.

Wade saw a twinge of petulance move across Diana’s face. “It’s a *little* more complicated than that.” Wade thought Diana sounded defensive. “It’s not as exciting as being up front but you get out in the middle of places you’d never otherwise see, and you’re part of it. The only problem with hilltopping is holding the horses back, especially a hunt horse like Artemis. She’d see the hounds and want to run with them. But she’s a sweetheart, she’d settle in. Still, remember, Wade—you don’t *have* to.”

Billy piped in. “Just sah no! Horses are damn big, and not real smart. When Jolene hunts, sometimes we park by a tough jump jus to see ‘em fall. Sometimes they make the jump okay, but the horse bucks afterwards and they sail through the air. Everyone who hunts gets hurt, even the masters and staff. And you just heard tonight if you don’t break yer neck or get stepped on or dragged, the bees’ll get you for sure.”

Jolene glared at him. “Wade *likes* Artemis. Just because she bucked *you* off, sweetie . . .”

“Well ah’m right. Cliff, name one person in the hunt who’s nevah been hurt?”

“I broke two shoulders, but one was at polo,” Cliff admitted.

Rita leaned toward Billy conspiratorially, whispering something. Wade watched Jorge, who watched Billy, whose eyes were glued on Rita.

Diana picked up her plate and Wade’s. She seemed anxious to get away from the table. Specifically, Wade felt, Diana wanted to get away from Rita.

Rita said to Billy, “Let’s help her clear.”

Diana said, getting up, “No need to do that. I’ll get it.”

Wade was right.

“Oh, nothing to it.” Rita cleared Billy’s plate, then Jorge’s, and moved to the kitchen.

Billy took a salad plate and followed her into the kitchen as Diana was returning, carrying a pot of coffee.

Everyone became quiet as Diana filled people’s cups. Rita’s voice broke the quiet rising from behind the door in an alluring, suggestive giggle.

Jorge jumped up and went into the kitchen. After the swinging door closed behind him, Jorge’s words, “Come on, honey, we’re going home,” swept across the dining room.

Rita sounded annoyed, even petulant, saying, “Oh relax.” She swept back into the dining room, followed by Jorge. He grabbed Rita’s jacket from the back of her chair, spun her around, threw the jacket over her shoulders, and pushed her toward the door.

Billy came in from the kitchen. “Don’t leave too fast. Your wife’s been telling me good things about you.”

“He’s a technical whiz,” Wade interjected.

Jorge looked angry and confused.

Billy said, “Maybe we should have a talk about you and Enron.”

Wade could see Jorge wanted to punch Billy out and give him his phone number at the same time. Finally Jorge’s body language said “Where do I go to surrender?”

Billy said, “I’ll check into this Monday. Come on, Jolene, we’d better get going . . . I have an early tee-time and I want to hit a bucket of balls first.”

Rita and Jorge left. Cliff followed quickly. Wade and Diana were alone.

Wade, unsure of how to start a conversation, helped Diana move a few more dishes into the kitchen.

“We can just leave the rest on the table while the dishwasher runs,” she said over the whir of the machine. “Let’s sit down.”

She led him to an alcove next to the window overlooking Stanford and the twinkling lights of the houses in the foothills.

“Sorry about that scene. It was a bit of a mess,” Wade said.

“What an embarrassment!” Diana sounded angry.

“Do you think Billy made a pass at Rita?”

“Billy? No, he’s all bark and no bite. Jolene trusts him completely. He just had a bit too much to drink or something.” Diana frowned. “The problem was Rita. She was begging for a job for her husband. *Begging!* In *my* kitchen!”

“I thought Billy was a little overwhelming. I mean, *the little lady?* And the leers!”

Diana took a deep breath. “That’s who he is. I’ve known him since law school. He was the best man at our wedding.”

“Do I have to hear about your wedding?”

“I wanted you to know Rob trusts him with *anything*, that’s all.”

“I’m not sure what kind of recommendation that is. If Billy weren’t so close to you I don’t think I’d give him the time of day.”

She folded her arms. “I just don’t understand you sometimes. You just shock me.”

“Are you talking about Clinton? It’s so overblown.”

“I’m not talking about Clinton.” She looked at him strangely, and then looked away. “But now that you mention it, he did those filthy things in the oval office.”

Wade thought that, since Monica, *the oval office* had become an extension of the country’s most sacred church, but . . . that wasn’t the right thing to say now. He was never sure what to say around Diana when she turned so cold. They sat

in silence. The words that finally came out of his mouth, surprising even him a little, were, “I’m thinking about taking a trip back to the Midwest.”

Diana pulled back. “Where’d *that* come from?”

“I haven’t been back in . . . whew, over twenty-five years, but it’s finally time. I have to figure some things out.”

Diana looked out toward the lights in the hills and brought her hand back onto the table next to Wade’s. “About us, you mean?”

“Time for you and time for me
And time yet for a hundred indecisions
And for a hundred visions and revisions
before the taking of toast and tea.”

“That sounds familiar,” Diana said.

“I say it to myself sometimes. It’s from ‘Prufrock.’”

“Oh, I remember.” She sounded softer now. “I loved that in college.”

“When I get confused, chunks of it come back to me—

‘Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?
I will wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach.
I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.

I do not think that they will sing to me.’”

She said, “You and your poetry. I like you very much, Wade, but you get me confused. I guess we *both* need time to think.”

They sat silently for a few minutes overlooking the foothills until she walked him to the door. They hesitated, and then embraced. Wade half-expected to feel a brass breastplate but she was as soft as his memories of her.

She pushed away, gently. "Part of me is dying to invite you back in."

She felt wonderful in his arms but he wanted to be alone. He kissed her lightly on the forehead, dropped his hands from her waist, and left.

16

When a theater chain in St. Louis surfaced as a sales prospect, it gave Wade the chance he was looking for—a chance to return to his roots. Steve approved Wade’s business trip; Wade realized he was finally *going home*.

He tried to analyze why so *long*. He understood what was calling him back now—he felt he could tell better where he was going if he knew where he came from.

But why had he waited so long? Maybe because his mother had problems with liquor and his Ivy League father had a hard time keeping a job. No doubt, high school, difficult for everyone, had sometimes been hell. Back when Wade had arrived in Silicon Valley—still in his twenties—he didn’t want to face his past, he now realized. He’d wanted to forget it.

When he got to the terminal early, Wade let his imagination wander, and, while waiting for his plane, he began a list for the traveler returning home. *Step One: Wait Twenty-seven Years.*

As he was called on to the plane early, Wade thought of another step. Huntington was a wealthy suburb of St. Louis, and Wade had felt poor there. He’d cashed in frequent-flyer miles for an upgrade. *Step Two: Go First Class.*

Finally over St. Louis, Wade noticed how lush and green the land was. Why had he avoided this beautiful place? The rolling hills filled him with an unexpected emotion. When he deplaned and took the rental-car bus, a new

Mercury was waiting, trunk raised for his luggage. *At least I'm not returning in a potato truck*, he thought.

He met with a group of local investors who wanted to refurbish six theaters around Saint Louis. Using the standard SnyderSound slide set, Wade presented the company's systems. He flowed through the charts easily. When the investors reacted enthusiastically, he called Steve Snyderman to negotiate a discount; this was a planned part of the sale. The group agreed to make a decision by the end of the month.

Pleased the sales call had gone well, Wade drove off toward Huntington, twenty miles away, the place where he'd grown up. The terrain seemed inexplicably familiar. He'd heard about a new concept in physics that says people are connected to their place on earth through patterns in the molecular structure. He thought the concept was called *fractals* or something like that. Maybe he was experiencing fractals. But how could it be?—he was in his car. Still he felt remarkably at home under towering white clouds, clouds he never saw in California.

Rather than heading immediately north, where his parents' house once was, Wade went into town. The town used to have a somewhat rural feel, but now most of the farms had become tract housing and the town seemed upscale suburban. He stopped at one of the few traffic lights and noted that, except for one three-story office building, the downtown was still all small single-level buildings. Not much had changed. He felt he was in two worlds—real people

were walking about, looking like the people he'd seen in California that morning, but they were walking on streets that for so long had existed for Wade only in memory and dreams.

He parked in front of the Catlow Theater. Years earlier, his dad had dropped Wade and his sister off at this theater for their first movie, about a boy trapped in a well. The soundtrack reverberated with the pounding of the drill as they dug a parallel shaft to try to save the boy. The story scared Wade so much that he'd hidden behind the seats. To this day he remembered that terrifying pounding.

Passing the barber shop, complete with red-and-blue swirling lighted sign, he remembered how he'd walked the six or seven blocks from high school into town briskly on haircut days. Five minutes could save him an hour if he got a jump on the other boys who wanted after-school haircuts, too. He would always run and often get there first—this was Wade's earliest brush with *tempis fugit*. Now when he walked past the barber shop he saw that the haberdashery next door—he had a memory of asking for a white shirt and the clerk finding one in a blue cardboard box on top of the shelves—had been transformed into a Gap store that looked almost identical to the one at Stanford Shopping Center.

When the sun set behind the massive clouds, Wade left town and drove north toward his home, passing long white fences around a horse ranch that had avoided being turned into tract homes. A couple of proud dark brown Thoroughbreds stood at the end of a small track. The horse farm had been

rumored to be owned by the Mafia, and Wade remembered the community uproar when one of the race horses tested positive for drugs. That was all he'd known about horses then, a distant talk of racetracks and mobsters. Now he thought of Artemis, the way her brown eyes could see him without moving when Wade walked up behind her, the way she trusted him.

And he thought of Diana, too; the shy look she gave him when he first unbuttoned her blouse, and the first time she asked him if he'd be interested in a sleepover.

He turned in to North Huntington Elementary School and cruised around its parking lot. The school, a low building constructed of Midwestern sand-colored brick, was surprisingly similar to the Palo Alto school where Amelia had gone, but much smaller.

Wade followed the road he used to walk to his house with his friends. Ancient conversations came back to him: *What about the Giants swarming out of the dugout to throw punches at Don Drysdale? Adults don't beat each other up, do they? Why did God put sex the same place where you go to the bathroom? And why did Jimmy's mom meet him at the door in her bra and slip? Unlike any bra he'd ever seen, with no straps! Did she have to smile so knowingly as he stared, wondering what magically held it up.*

Unlike those slow walks, today's drive from school to his old house took only minutes. The homes were on half-acre lots—semi-custom homes they'd call them today—some split-level, set differently in the rolling hills. Between them

were small patches of trees. When he turned a corner and saw his childhood home, the wide lawn—one of the few flat lots, he realized now— was as big as he remembered, but not the house. Two Hondas in the driveway, one the same shade of silver as his Audi, made the house seem approachable. He felt an urge to go up and knock on the door. *Any chance they'd let me in?*

Step Three: Knock on the Door of the House Where You Lived. When he worked up his nerve and rapped on the door, a woman's friendly voice answered from another part of the house. "Who is it?"

"My name is Wade Middleton. I used to live here."

He stood waiting, almost hoping no one would come. He turned to start back to his car when the door opened a crack. "Oh . . . I shouldn't be bothering you. I live in California now," he said.

Wade felt the woman size him up and was glad he was still wearing his business suit.

A woman with bright, kind eyes opened the door wider; she had graying hair cut into the style they call "pixie." She introduced herself as Martha. "How long ago did you live here?" she asked, still tentative.

"I left in seventy-two. You've sure kept it up nicely."

She opened the door wide. "Oh, we moved in long after that, in eighty-four. Come in," she said.

A man with rolled-up sleeves looked out from a the entryway. "I'm Tom," he said.

Wade stepped through the entryway into the living room. Looking at the intricate wood ceiling and stone fireplace, he said, "It seems surprisingly elegant. I don't remember it being so nice."

Tom put down some wire-cutters he had in his hand and stepped forward. "I spent three months sanding down the ceiling. It had been painted over. Someone said the place was built by the fellow who started Greyhound Bus lines as kind of a fancy cabin, when Huntington was still summer homes for St. Louis people. She's a small house, and *has* taken some work. The toughest was the crawl space—the slightest rain would fill it up. I've got it to drain pretty well now."

Wade remembered all the problems his dad couldn't fix. "So, Tom, what do you do?"

"I'm the vice principal at a high school in south St. Louis, where Martha teaches English. It's a long commute, but we like it here. How about you?"

"Oh, I work for a company that wires movie houses for sound; that's my day job anyway. I also write poems."

"Really? That makes me think of that book I found. Martha, where's that old book?"

"It's around here someplace. I'll make some coffee. Tom, take him upstairs—see what he remembers."

Wade followed Tom up a short stairway to a room set among the sloping roofs. A tiny balcony overlooked the front yard. "This was my older sister's

room,” Wade remembered. “I think she might have snuck out those doors a time or two after we’d gone to bed.”

Tom laughed. “We raised a daughter in here, too.”

Wade stepped out the French doors into the dusk. Occasionally, he and his sister sat here after she’d come home from her dates. “Life goes on,” he said to Tom. “My only child is a daughter, off in college now.”

They walked into what had been Wade’s room, the rectangular room over the garage. He reached up and touched the plasterboard ceiling. “As I was growing, hoping to play basketball, I used to jump to the ceiling, no more than oh, ten or twenty thousand times.”

Tom laughed.

Wade remembered how good he had been at basketball for a while and his moment of glory in eighth grade when he’d fashioned an improbable hook shot to win a game. But he never grew past five foot nine.

He stopped in the hallway when he saw his parents’ room, where his mother would be when he came home. *This is what he’d stayed away from for so long.* She was never a sloppy drunk; he could remember no bad smells, no angry scenes. Each day was slightly different. Sometimes she would be lucid but argumentative. Other days, perfectly sedated, she’d seem warm and loving, but not quite there. On the worst days, she would lie barely conscious, sometimes half-dressed, her speech slurred.

If you're close to an alcoholic, the thing you never get over is that they love the booze more than they do you.

Wade realized he'd stopped talking to Tom, but couldn't find the words to be social again. He found, instead, another step. *Step Four: Inside Your Old House, Hold Yourself Together.*

Wordlessly, they went downstairs, where Martha had poured mugs of coffee.

"This house had quite a history before we bought it," she said. "The neighbors took to calling it 'the troubled house.' It had five or six owners in just a few years, and two divorces. Tom and I bought it from a young man's estate after a car wreck. Some people even said it was haunted."

"You seem to have turned it around." The kitchen was bright and cheery, coordinated in blue and white. He saw the hole in the cabinet over the refrigerator, where his Dad had once put a lock on the liquor. It hadn't helped.

Martha handed Tom a slim book, an old paperback with cardboard covers.

After he looked at it for a second, Tom handed it to Wade. "I found it between joists in the crawl space off the bedroom over the garage a few months back. Is it yours?"

Wade fingered it. "*101 Favorite Poems*. I vaguely remember it. It's a wonderful find."

Martha re-filled the mugs. "We figure it was here long before us."

Wade thumbed through it, a very old book. He checked the front for an inscription but there was none. Still, it was hauntingly familiar, like the clouds. "Might have been," he said.

Martha put out cloth napkins and fresh cream. "See if it brings back any memories."

Wade thought he might have remembered his father reading "Jes for Christmas" aloud to Wade and his sister. Could this be the book? He quickly scanned through it.

Martha asked, "These the kind of poems you write?"

"Well I don't rhyme mine much. But these are great. Here, listen to the way Kipling starts 'If':

If you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you,
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,
But make allowance for their doubting too;"

Wade stopped, thinking of Jorge. Martha smiled warmly. "It should be yours."

Wade shook his head. "No, I couldn't take it from you. But here's the part everybody remembers, the last stanza. Listen:

If you can fill the unforgiving minute
With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
And--which is more--you'll be a Man, my son!"

Wade remembers longing for a father who would have spoken to him like that. He looked at his hosts. "Maybe I should work on rhyming mine more—there's such a power there."

"Whether it was yours before or not, it's yours now." Martha looked at Tom, who nodded in agreement.

The next step came to him: *Step Five: Accept Life's Gifts*. "Well thank you, I'd love it."

Tom stood up and Wade knew it was time to leave. He shook hands with Tom and started to shake with Martha when she gave him a quick light hug.

"Come back any time," she called after him as he walked slowly down the driveway, reading another poem.

17

As he drove away with the book on the passenger seat, he knew *Step Six: Hit All the Old Haunts*.

Wade rode past the red brick Episcopal Church where he had been an acolyte. It had an unexpectedly modern brick-and-steel bell tower, unusual in this town with its veneration of the old. He liked it. A dry cleaner was pushing a cart with clean robes from his delivery truck to the sacristy, robes like the one Wade used to wear when he helped the Priest serve communion. He'd worn a white smock over a black robe. A subtle button at his feet, like a doorbell, had controlled the bells in the carillon, or more literally, the bell in the carillon; Wade could ring only one note. His job was to ring precisely when the priest presented the host. As Wade bowed in his white smock, the priest in his black vestments raised the wafers first, then the wine. Wade would time it perfectly with the priest's words: Holy (ring); holy (ring); holy (ring).

He drove past the high school which, because it supported acres and acres of surrounding farm country, was surprisingly large. The school's clay-colored brick center, with the gym at its heart, was three stories, with wings of classrooms protruding out into the Missouri plains. He spotted the English classroom where Mrs. Hautch taught him to love poetry. He had disappointed her. After her encouragement on his writing, Wade had worked hard to get into college, and earned an 'A-' the first semester but slacked off after the college applications were

in. She looked so pained when she handed a quiz back with a 'D' on top—*et tu, Wade?*

Wade hung a u-turn and headed back to town. He searched for the drive-in—The Spot—where everyone used to congregate Fridays and Saturdays. It was the place Wade always thought of when he saw *American Graffiti*, which he'd seen three times. *That would be a good feeling to recapture.*

Long before Spielberg's movie, Wade had cruised slowly in his dad's Pontiac Catalina. Everyone was out of the house on Friday nights, calling across the parking lot to friends, part of the scene. He could get to the Spot in minutes, but when he found the place, the Spot was gone, replaced with a Ten-Minute-Lube.

He sighed, remembering the chocolate malts.

How about that *chi-chi* restaurant? Across from the train station—that elegantly converted bank? Even back then his dad complained it was overpriced. But, on an expense account, Wade decided to splurge.

As he entered the restaurant, he noticed a phone in the back. Wade thought it seemed like a good time to call his daughter. It would be seven o'clock in New York—perfect timing.

Her cell phone didn't work in the dorm, so he had to call the pay phone on her floor. When Amelia answered, she said, "Dad! What's up?"

"You'll never guess where I am. Huntington, Missouri."

"Really? Old home week? I thought you always steered clear of there."

"I got a business trip to St. Louis. It was finally time. How's it going? Did you get that wall of photos up?"

"I have until next week. I've been in the lab since six this morning, so I'm kind of zonked. I don't spend much time in the dorm. What's it like, returning home after all this time?"

"It brings back the fear of getting home from school to see dear old Mom."

"Yes, Dad, you've told me. More than once. Maybe you should put it in a poem."

"I don't think so. I'm writing this list—it's kind of a poem, I guess."

"You and your lists, Dad. But hey . . . they're sweet. I *guess* I liked the one you sent me: "Seven Ways to Ignore Your Dad."

"A little guilt trip never hurts. How's it going with your roomie?"

"She's nuts. I mean it, lockable-uppable. She wanted me to watch TV with her—she watches eight hours a day—shows like *America's Most Wanted!* I tried to switch roommates, but it's almost impossible without making an enemy for life."

"That must be rough."

"I hide out in the photo lab. Oh, Dad—" The line was quiet for a minute.

"A guy wants to use the phone. Gotta go. Sorry. Bye."

Suddenly the line was dead, leaving Wade looking at the receiver. How he missed her.

Back at the bar he ordered a glass of wine and asked the chef what was good.

“Go for the swordfish, mate. A buddy flies it in fresh for me.”

Wade gave him a thumbs up. He sipped his wine. Tom and Martha seemed to be a truly happy couple, something he'd rarely experienced. *Any chance to be that way with anyone again . . . with Diana?*

The Troubled House, they'd called it. Now there was an image for you. *The child of a troubled house.*

The swordfish was excellent, thick and not overcooked, so he thought of another *Step: To Eat Well Ask the Chef*, but that was too mundane. And unfortunately not always true. Scratch that. But when the chef came out to see how Wade had liked the lemon sauce, Wade said, “I always tell my friends, to eat well ask the chef.” The tall Aussie beamed.

Wade drove west toward the ritzy area—Huntington Hills. He felt he was driving aimlessly through wooded estates and horse pastures, but slowly realized he was headed to his old girlfriend's former house—to Barbara's. He passed the Country Club, where he had escorted her to a fancy cotillion, and turned left on Barrington Road. He'd enjoyed such parties. He loved to dance, and Barbara's friends loved to dance. But Barbara was a horsewoman too, and they like to lead . . . Wade did better with other partners—they'd follow well, merging with his every move. People didn't seem to do that much anymore. Does Diana dance, he wondered, or only control horses?

It was hard for Wade to believe what he knew to be true, that these gated mansions didn't cost much more than the houses around him in California. He'd

looked at the ads; a six-bedroom estate with room for horses was for sale for a little over a million, which was less than many of the houses in Palo Alto now. But these places still gave him a queasy feeling, as if he could never live up to them. When he took the last right down the cul-de-sac to Barbara's he felt almost as hopeless as he had in his mother's room.

The sight of the discreet F. Gaylord on the mailbox brought Wade even lower. Barbara's father, a big-league banker with degrees from Dartmouth and Harvard Law School, didn't like Wade. He called him Barbara's "beau." In the end he gave Barbara a convertible if she'd stop seeing him.

Seeing the barn in the distance reminded him of their trysts. Barbara had sewn two sheets together, which they filled with straw. Like Wade's sister sneaking out of her balcony, Barbara would pretend to go to bed and slip out a window and join him in the barn. She lived for their lovemaking, maybe even more than he did. Unlike on the dance floor, there was never a problem as to who would lead. They would give and take equally. Wade knew they were in love—or at least he was—and that made everything right for a while.

He walked toward the dark structure, remembering the thrill of meeting her there, like Diana on the trail. The barn seemed deserted; it didn't even have any livestock. He finally got up close, lost in reverie.

Suddenly lights went on everywhere, and a bell clanged. He'd tripped a security alarm. In the distance dogs barked. He sprinted back to his car, slipping—once falling hard, scraping his hand—in his leather-soled shoes.



That night he took a flight from St. Louis to San Francisco, up in the first cabin again. Wade sat next to a man who looked like a tall Paul Newman. He was dressed similarly to Wade, still in his business clothes, but his tie, unlike Wade's, wasn't loosened. Wade watched him remove his wingtips and change into a pair of slippers he carried in his briefcase. Wade admired how relaxed he seemed. *He's a lot more organized than I am, a real traveler.*

The man introduced himself as a University provost, which sounded vaguely powerful and learned. He said his name—David something—Wade couldn't quite hear.

When David opened a portable computer and started working, Wade pulled out *101 Favorite Poems*.

The provost interrupted Wade's reading. "That book looks familiar."

"Here take a look."

"I had a book like this back in high school," David said, handling the volume like a curator. "Mine wasn't this tattered, but close. It's a classic—Wordsworth, Shelly, Byron—look, first copyrighted 1873." He handed it back. "Besides reading poetry, what do you do with your life?"

Shyly at first, since the man seemed so accomplished, Wade described his job, his daughter at college, and his house in Palo Alto. "And lately I have a new lady in my life who's got me riding horses," Wade concluded, with some pride.

"Palo Alto's a nice town. It's where I met my wife."

Wade could only imagine a happy marriage for this man. "So, do you two have kids?" he asked.

David looked away. "My wife's no longer with us. She got cancer very young. No kids."

"Pshew. Sometimes I thought a divorce was rough but . . . how did you get through it?"

David shrugged. "I threw myself into my work."

"You never remarried?"

"No. I've dated a little, but no."

Wade felt an urge similar to when he stood outside his old house—it was time to take a chance. "I hate to impose," he blurted out, "but I'd like a little help here. I have six steps for a poem or article on *going home*. But I need one more."

At least David didn't look at Wade like he was crazy, which is what Wade half expected. "Steps? I don't know what you mean."

"Pretend you had to choose one pithy thing to say to people who are returning home after a long time. What would it be?"

David looked quizzical. "You want me to distill life into one statement? My law practice, the years in the classroom, administration? I suppose you want the disappointment of my personal life thrown in too?" He laughed wryly. "All right, what have you got already?"

Wade talked him through the *Steps*. David smiled when Wade told him *Wait 27 years, Go First Class, and Knock on the Door of the House where You*

Lived, but looked concerned when he mentioned *Inside Your Old House, Hold Yourself Together*. He smiled again at *Accept Life's Gifts*, and said, "Good advice there, people have the hardest time accepting gifts, but they resent when the gifts don't come!" He laughed.

After hearing *Hit All the Old Haunts*, David looked at him like a country doctor doing a diagnosis.

"Whatever you say the last one is," said Wade, "that's it. No questions."

"You must have thought of some final step but rejected it."

This guy was smart. "I thought of that silly phrase 'what doesn't kill you makes you strong.'"

The provost raised his eyebrows. "That's even the title of a country song now."

"I looked it up—Nietzsche. He said it about himself."

"Why didn't you go with that?"

"That's okay for Nietzsche, I guess," said Wade. "Superman. But hard times break most people."

David nodded. "You're right. If you ever doubt that, visit a homeless shelter. No. The step we find for you has to be more fitting. Hand me back that book, maybe I'll get an idea after the movie if I've been able to find anything."

The movie was *As Good as it Gets* with Jack Nicholson. Wade enjoyed it. The provost took off his headset and opened the poetry book.

The pilot announced the plane was on final approach. “So do you have one for me?” Wade asked after the movie ended.

“I might. I’m not sure. Go over the steps you have one more time.”

Wade summed them up quickly.

“Yes. The one I concentrate on is the one about *holding yourself together*.

That’s key. With that Nietzsche phrase you were looking outward, but a trip home is very personal. It may even touch on death. Here, this poem by Ella Wheeler Wilcox—not too long—might obtain.” He showed Wade the page.

“Obtain?”

“Oh, sorry, that’s a twelve dollar word that means something like ‘be relevant.’

Wade read aloud.

Solitude

Laugh, and the world laughs with you;
 Weep, and you weep alone.
 For the sad old earth must borrow its mirth,
 But has trouble enough of its own.
 Sing, and the hills will answer;
 Sigh, it is lost on the air.
 The echoes bound to a joyful sound,
 But shrink from voicing care.
 Rejoice, and men will seek you;
 Grieve, and they turn and go.
 They want full measure of all your pleasure,
 But they do not need your woe.
 Be glad, and your friends are many;
 Be sad, and you lose them all.
 There are none to decline your nectared wine,
 But alone you must drink life's gall.
 Feast, and your halls are crowded;
 Fast, and the world goes by.

Succeed and give, and it helps you live,
 But no man can help you die.
 There is room in the halls of pleasure
 For a long and lordly train,
 But one by one we must all file on
 Through the narrow aisles of pain.

Wade nodded. "So . . . what's the last step?"

"This isn't going to end up in some newspaper as what the provost says, right?"

"No, I'll steal it as my own, promise."

"What do you think it is?"

"They want full measure of your pleasure." said Wade.

"That's the line, but I'd shorten it to 'Give full measure of your pleasure.'

Live in the present, with the new people in your personal life, your new horse life. It'll all be gone too quickly."

Wade hesitated. The step didn't sound as 'final' as he'd hoped. But this was a gift, and one of his own steps said, *Accept Life's Gifts*. If he took it, the list was complete.

Inside the terminal, just beyond the security exit, a buffed-out black driver in a blue sport coat and tie waited for the provost. Wade tried to see if the driver's jacket bulged from a gun. Wade and the provost shook hands under the driver's wary gaze. Wade thanked him. "So it's *Step Seven: Give full measure of your pleasure.*"

David shook Wade's hand and walked off. Unaccountably, watching him walk away, Wade thought of the short lives of horses, with their twenty- or thirty-year life spans. Wade might get eighty years, three or four horse lives. Wade could live the rest of his life with Diana if it worked out, but not with Artemis. Wade was amazed how much he'd missed riding with Diana. Now he thought of Artemis, who would almost surely *file on* before him. *Shake it off*, he thought. Listen to the provost.

The terminal seemed oddly unfamiliar. Wade had to look around to find a sign to point him in the right direction home.

18

Getting to the café a little early, Wade ordered coffee and sat down with the local paper, catching up on the news while he waited. George Bush had played the conservative Christian card on McCain in Virginia, soundly beating him—probably cinching the Republican nomination. Gore was rolling over Bill Bradley in the primaries. He had some of the power of incumbency, jetting around in Air Force Two, but he was fighting with Clinton over Monica. Even though the election was six months off the media was treating it like an ongoing sporting event. Every news story analyzed who gained yardage.

Diana showed up wearing the same creamy blouse she'd worn when he first met her. She kept looking at him, as if she wondered what to expect. Wade felt his heart slowly warm to her again. The provost's words came back to him. *Give full measure of your pleasure.*

"So, tell me more about your trip," she said.

"It was great. Actually I visited the house of my old girlfriend, who reminds me of you."

"How is that?"

"Oh, I don't know. She had horses, too. I rode with her a few times; never enough to get going at it, but enough to whet my appetite. But she didn't look like you at all. Still . . . there's a similarity."

"Was she at her old house?"

“No, she’s long gone. Lives in New Mexico, I hear. The place was deserted. He laughed. “I walked out to her empty barn and tripped a security alarm. It somehow fits—she dumped me back then for security reasons!”

“That is weird.” Diana looked at him directly, so that the imperfection around her eye was more apparent than usual. “All in the past?”

“Oh, yes. She’s married, somewhere around Albuquerque, I hear.”

Diana raised an eyebrow.

“I heard about her from a mutual friend—I haven’t spoken to her in twenty years.”

“Well, that’s good.” She breathed a huge sigh. “I’ve been thinking a lot about you.”

They sipped coffee and moved their hands near each others’ on the table. “Yesterday I told Rob I wouldn’t play wifey at the partner’s retreat any more. That Christmas party was my last, period.”

Wade stirred his coffee. “How’d he take it?”

“He was dropping the kids off, all happy, and . . . it was like I punched him in the stomach.”

“I’m sorry.”

“We’re both so committed to the kids, but I can’t pretend nothing’s happened. I almost mentioned the D word to him.”

“You’re afraid to even mutter the word Divorce to him?”

“Not now, Wade . . .”

Wade moved his hand the last few inches to hers, and held it. They were silent for a while.

“I’m hoping you still want to ride?” she asked. “There’s a hunt weekend after next. You’d have to ride a lot between then and now.”

“You just expect so much,” he said with a smile.



At home, Wade had a phone message waiting from Amelia. When he called her back, he could hear music—something metallic—blaring in the background. “Just a second, Dad,” she said. A door slammed and the noise hushed. “I wanted to talk to you more about horses, Dad. I can’t believe you’re riding. I’m getting serious about bringing Ahab down to Bard. I could stable him practically across the street from campus.”

“Bard seems more artsy than horsey,” Wade said. He was standing by the kitchen counter, sorting mail as he spoke.

“Now, now. They’re not mutually exclusive. In those old French caves, what did they paint on the walls, Dad? Horses have inspired art for a long time.”

“Are you going to photograph him?”

“No . . . maybe. I hadn’t thought about it—that’s not my kind of photography. Who knows? It’s so weird that you’re starting up with horses just when I am. Do you canter?”

“Mainly we walk and trot. Diana’s afraid I’ll stop riding if I fall.”

“I almost quit the first time I came off. I cracked a rib.”

Wade sat down. “Cracked a rib! When?”

“Last summer. It wasn’t on Ahab. Mom and I agreed not to tell you so you wouldn’t worry.”

Wade wondered what else he hadn’t been told.

Amelia quickly filled the silence. “Dad, is this just a way to get along with Diana or do you really like horses?”

“I do. Sometimes I go out to the ranch even when I can’t ride, just to feed Artemis. She belongs to Diana’s friend, but I can ride her almost any time.”

“This is so unlike you Dad but it’s cool. That’s what made me call—I was with Ahab this weekend. I cried when I had to leave him . . . what breed is Artemis?”

“A Percheron mix. She’s dun-colored with a dark dorsal stripe, mane and tail. Everybody says she’s very much the mare—very particular about who rides her. She’s bucked a lot of people off but she and I get on fine. I spoil her to death.”

“Why am I not surprised? Maybe I can get out to California and we can ride together?”

“You *should* come. She’s something—I really want you to meet her. Did I mention that she has two kids—a girl at Paly and a boy at Jordan? But mainly I want you to meet *her*.”

“I *could* talk to her daughter about Paly . . . Oh—sorry, Dad. A guy wants to use the phone.”

“I love you,” he said.

“Me too,” she murmured, and hung up.



Wade went out to the ranch almost every night after work. One afternoon Jasper Ridge Ranch was even more active than usual; it seemed every local schoolgirl was out there with a horse.

Artemis recognized him from far away now—she put her head out the Dutch door and nickered.

“You crazy lady, you’re not even my horse but I missed you, I did,” he said, ruffling her mane.

The horse almost trotted in place, full of pent-up energy, so he let her loose in an empty ring, but she quietly found a place to lie down, and rolled over, thrusting her legs from one side to another. She quickly got back on her feet, shaking the dust off. Wade clucked and swung the lead rope around to get her going. She cut loose, cantering powerfully around the ring. Twice she threw her back legs into a buck that Wade knew could propel him out of the saddle like a twig. “Good girl Artemis,” he said. When she quieted down, Wade walked toward her. She met him mid-ring—her way of saying she’d had enough. It was time to walk her to the hitching post so he could groom her and put on her blanket, saddle, and bridle.

Diana rode up on Gray Cloud just as Wade mounted. “Well, don’t you look like an old pro up there,” she said.

“Not as good as you do, I assure you.” They smiled. “What’s with all the kids?” he asked.

“It’s Pony Club day. It’s like 4-H but for horses. A few of them will ride in the hunt next week, too.”

Soon they had the horses walking on the asphalt road, with Artemis a few steps behind Gray Cloud.

They veered off the pavement onto a trail. Diana said, “I heard from Jolene that Jorge may get that job. Billy’s really tight with the Enron brass, you know.”

“Oh, Jorge left me three messages but we missed connections. That must be what he wants to talk about.”

“Let’s take it up to a trot. That’s pretty much all you do in third field—walk and trot. That’s it, just push up a little with every step; go with Artemis’s rhythm.”

“Turn up this way?”

“Yes, I’m taking you back to that field.” Diana laughed.

“Really,” Wade asked, trying to imitate Groucho Marx.

“Sorry, big boy, no roll on the blanket today. Just talk, I’m afraid.”

They tied their horses to trees. Diana motioned for him to sit down.

“Here, on this log. We have all these things to talk about.”

Wade stopped her talk by touching her cheek. “I’ve been dying to kiss you,” he said, moving his lips towards hers.

“Oh, Wade,” she said, and for a while they blended into one another. Wade was ardent, but when his hands started to roam, she gently pushed him away. “Sorry, I need a clear head. And we don’t want to shock some hapless Pony Clubber who wanders over the wrong hill.”

As Wade withdrew, Diana said, “Not that there won’t be plenty of time for that in the future.”

Wade turned his head. “Okay, you’ve got my attention.”

“If you still want to meet Robbie and Beth, I’m feeling it’s time to introduce you. I haven’t figured out how to do it yet, but we should do it soon.”

Wade looked at the tied-up horses, trying to take this in. *Accept life’s gifts.* “It’ll be fun. We’ll need to do it right,” he said.

“Maybe an outing. I’ll arrange something.” She talked about her kids then, describing Beth’s independence and Robby’s petulance, in a way she never had before. She suddenly interrupted herself. “Oh, they’re coming at five. We’d better get back.”

Wade looked at his watch. “It’s almost four.”

Diana jumped up. “Oh, we’ve got to scoot, and I want you to canter today.”

He pulled her toward him for a last kiss before they got back on the horses.

“We only have a week to get you ready. Let’s trot to the end of the fence.”

With that she nudged Gray Cloud out of his walk.

“That’s the way,” she said after Artemis caught up. “She’s got a smooth trot. Now try to control it—lean back a little.”

“She’ll know to slow down?”

“Sure. Lean back and pull just a little on the reins. Full stop now at the end of the fence. Show her you’re in charge.”

“Whoa,” Wade said, tightening his upper legs and pulling on the reins, and Artemis slowed to a walk for two steps before stopping.

“That’s it. Good. Okay now, let’s see you canter Artemis. Be careful, she bucked Jolene off last month. Wait. I’ll ride on ahead and block the path. Head her straight toward me—that should stop her from getting too carried away.”

“What’s the difference between a canter and a gallop?” Wade asked as Diana moved far ahead.

“Cowboys call a canter a gallop. There are three basic gaits—walk, trot, canter—but a million names.” Diana set Gray Cloud across the trail. “Right leg back—kick her hard. Make that clucking sound.”

Artemis broke into a full run, which scared Wade. But, using his legs while concentrating on not pulling too hard on the reins, he held on.

“You’ve got to get your fanny lower. Can you get into a crouch, almost like a skier? Bend your knees. Hands forward, but weight back.”

So the lessons went until, late the next week, Diana finally told Wade he was ready to hunt.

19

Rita greeted Jorge as he walked into their apartment with Mary. “Good news,” she said, giving them both a quick hug. “Billy called! He thinks you have a real good chance at Enron.”

“Billy,” Jorge said derisively.

“You need a job!”

Jorge sighed. “Mary’s doctors couldn’t pinpoint anything,” he said. “The second round of allergy scratches came back negative, so we’re back to square one.”

Rita moved across the room. She spread her arms for her daughter.

“What did Billy say, exactly?” Jorge asked as Mary ran across the room. Jumping into her mother’s arms, Mary looked so happily alive—who could believe she woke up this morning coughing?

“Just a sec, Jorge,” Rita said as she smoothed her daughter’s hair. “Mary, sweetie, how about a little quiet time? Come on, I’ll take you into our room. The drapes are drawn so it’s dark and quiet.”

When she returned to the living room she said, “Billy wants you to come to his office—he kept calling it *his offices*. Rich Americans talk strange, I swear.”

“When?” asked Jorge.

“He wants you to call him back right away to set it up. The number’s next to the phone.” She paused. “Tell me more about what the doctor said.”

“When the tests didn’t turn up anything, he asked if there were any problems at home.” Jorge lowered his voice. “I think he wondered if it was in her head.”

“I’ll go spend time with her. You call Billy, okay?”

Jorge shrugged. “Maybe later.” He picked up the sports page.

His wife turned on her heels. “None of that. This isn’t just about you—we’re in trouble as a family. Call him, now. Period.”

He shrugged again, but picked up the phone.



That night, after Rita and Mary were asleep Jorge searched the Internet for information about Billy Tyler. The search produced four entries: a public relations announcement of his transfer to California; two of his law cases; and a recent entry that gave his home address—Whileaway Circle in Woodside. *That might be close to the law office where I’m to meet him at ten tomorrow morning.* He mapped the location and printed out driving directions in case he had time in the morning to check it out.

The next morning Jorge left home a little early and easily found the village of Woodside. He noticed lots of cars parked near a breakfast place and wished he had time for a cup of coffee, but he wanted to find Billy’s house.

The driving directions took him up a rural road. After another turn he came to Whileaway Circle. The six residents’ names were nailed on boards to a

tree. Jorge stared at TYLER, and noticed BUCHANAN, as well. *That must be Diana's husband.*

Woodside, Jorge had heard, was where Joan Baez and Shirley Temple Black lived. And the founder of Oracle, Larry Ellison. Yet until he was there and saw that tree-covered road, he had no idea of the country splendor money can buy in the middle of the otherwise-crowded bay area. *Rich guys sure get to live well!* It didn't seem fair, somehow.

He only drove up the road enough to see a couple of the houses—different styles, one more modern and one more Eastern, but both sprawling, with barns and rail fences, and quickly turned around. *Billy and Rob, so rich.* He'd seen enough. As different as the houses were architecturally, in another way they announced the same thing to Jorge: a life he could never have. Why dawdle there? Besides, he thought as he executed a three-point turnaround, if he hurried he still had time to stop in for a cup of coffee in that little village he'd passed through.

The coffee shop was still buzzing with people in sport coats and open-collared shirts. The walls were covered with hip memorabilia. Airplanes hung from the ceiling and a mounted buffalo head's eye seemed to follow customers as they walked by. Jorge tried to overhear conversations but could only pick up bits and pieces. They seemed to be talking business. "Just let's get past the second round of financing," one admonished his tablemate. Another said, "Forget computers—it's all nanotech and biotech from here on."

A guy was waiting for the receipt after the others at this table left. He had a beard, and seemed approachable. Jorge asked him, “Have you ever heard of Enron?”

“Of course. You work for them?”

“Not now, but I may start.”

“Everything I’ve heard about Enron is they’re *slick*. They use a ton of consultants, but mainly from New York and Texas. They’re just now getting involved out here. They’re wired to this new Bush. If he wins they’ll be golden. Even if he doesn’t, everybody needs energy, and they seem to have some mysterious lock on it. They get great P. R.; we could take a lesson from them on publicity, that’s for sure.” He signed his receipt and left.

Jorge paid his bill, too, and drove off to his appointment. He wished the guy hadn’t mentioned Bush.

When he gave his name to the attractive receptionist at Billy’s office, she stood up and said, “Oh, Mr. Calderon. I heard you’d be coming in. Please take a seat. Would you like coffee?”

“No, thanks,” he said, and almost as soon as he sat down in an antique wing-back chair, a knockout redhead—she could have been a model—greeted him. “My name’s Robin, I help Billy with personnel items. I’m so glad to meet you. Let’s go back to his office.”

Billy’s office was four or five times the size of Steve Snyderman’s office, with a view of San Francisco bay. Next to Billy’s desk was a conning station from

off a ship—Jorge recognized it from a tour he'd taken of a Navy vessel—for giving orders to the engine room. It had big words written on it like FORWARD and HALF REVERSE and STOP, and a huge handle to point to what the Captain wanted the engine to do.

“We’re meeting today to make sure all’s going forward,” said Billy as he moved the control to ALL ENGINES FORWARD. He guided the two of them to a coffee table near two sofas on the other side of the office from Billy’s desk.

“Ah asked Robin to join us. She works closely with Enron.”

“Billy says he’s heard you’re a whiz with computers and audio-visual equipment.”

Jorge said, “My job was to set up demonstrations all over the country.”

Billy said, “Let me fill in the picture here. Robin and I don’t work directly for Enron, but—he chuckled—they tend to listen to what we say. So let me describe the job. By the way, here’s an article about the company, quite glowing.”

“Thank you.” Jorge placed the latest copy of *Fortune* magazine on the coffee table with its cover blaring “Enron: The Most Innovative Company in America—Again” in front of him.

“That’s the fifth consecutive year *Fortune’s* chosen us; we’re very proud.” Billy sat back in his chair. “We’re—that is, Enron is—about to give a series of briefings to the California Utilities Commission. Some of the consultants have souped up their presentations with sound and film. I think it’s gilding the lily,

but if we do it we need to make sure all goes well. That's where you might come in."

"So you're talking about a part-time job? A contractor?"

"Absolutely not. We insist that this be handled by an Enron employee bound by an iron-clad security agreement. The content of these meetings can never be disclosed, ever. We've even agreed that options should be involved, to ensure there's no question of employee loyalty."

"Stock options?"

"Enron will have to make the offer, but with the great things I heard about you at the party we were talking about something like eight thousand shares at ten bucks. With the stock at thirty, the employee would get almost \$200,000 when they vest, and Enron traded at \$34 this morning, so they could be worth a lot more." Billy moved his hand like an airplane taking off. "This company is just getting its wings."

"It'd be a long time until I saw that money, right?" Jorge asked.

"Not really. We were talking about half the first year and half the second, so they'd be fully valued in twenty-four months. Like ah said, it's a great opportunity. Robin and I just have to make sure you're right for it."

"You're worried if I could do the job? I had to ensure nothing went wrong with our demos, and nothing ever messed up, ever. It's my specialty."

Billy looked at Robin. "No, I'm not—are you, Robin?"

“No. From what Billy’s told me and from what you’ve said here, that’s not an issue.”

“Well what is it then?”

Billy sat forward. “The content of these meetings is extremely confidential. *Extremely*. The confidentiality agreement protects us, and the options help too—understand they’re reversible on the part of Enron for any reason. But still it comes down to a matter of trust. There could be pressure on someone to illegally disclose information.”

Robin stared at the coffee table.

Jorge watched Billy look him up and down. “Are you *really* a Ralph Nader guy?”

“My politics don’t affect my ability to get the job done. Ask Wade.”

“Good answer. Ah’m well aware we met you through Diana—that means a lot around here. And your wife is a Bush supporter, right? So the whole family’s not crazy at least.” He didn’t laugh.

“Rita’s family lost everything when Castro came in—it’s colored her politics.”

“Like ah said the other night, you should listen to her.” Billy sat back. “I hope you wouldn’t mind if I interviewed her as well, if ah had her come in here.”

Jorge squirmed in his chair. “You want Rita to come *here*?”

Billy shrugged. “Ah’d just feel a little better.”

“I honestly don’t understand why it’s necessary . . . but . . .” Jorge nodded in acceptance.

“Okay then. Robin, I’ll ask you to set it up.”

“Will do.”

Billy walked over toward his desk and put the controller on ALL ENGINES AHEAD HALF. “Let’s get her in here. I like ALL ENGINES FORWARD best,” he said.

As Jorge followed Robin’s trim derriere back through the spacious offices with the leafy plants and expensive antiques, Jorge couldn’t help compare this walk to the one he took with Günter just weeks ago. How different companies look when they hire you than when they fire you! He reminded himself, *Remember the golden rule—them that has the gold makes the rules.*

20

Diana asked Wade over for dinner the night before his first hunt. “Are you nervous about going out tomorrow?” she asked.

“Not really. . . should I be?”

“I wouldn’t take you out if I thought you’d get hurt.” She took a sip of wine. “I’m not sure that I agree with Billy that horses are dumb, but they *are* big, and accidents happen.”

“I’m looking forward to it,” he said. “And I thank the hunt for tonight . . . for you asking me to stay over.”

“It’s not the first time, you know that.”

“First time you’ve actually invited me. Before it just kind of happened.”

“You silver-tongued seducer you.” She walked over to him. “But this is the night before the hunt, and I can’t think about that stuff now. I’ve decided not to just ride over. In the morning I’ll load up the trailer after all. It’s not as much fun as hacking over, but that way I can bring water for the horses and a few things to share for the breakfast,” she said.

As they were falling asleep he pulled her to him, but she rolled out of his grasp, saying, “I’ve set the alarm for five thirty. We need sleep.”

In the depth of the night, though, she moved toward him and they made love as if their bodies knew what they needed more than they did.

The next morning Diana seemed to spring out of bed when the alarm went off. Wade caught one glimpse of her as she brushed her hair before she donned her hunting attire. The image of *Diana, the Huntress*, a statue he admired in New York City, flashed into his mind. “You look lovely,” he said.

“Get up, lazybones.”

After she was dressed, stock tie properly jutting out from its pin, Diana put a white smock on over her clothes, making her look like a doctor.

Soon they were at the ranch attaching the trailer in the dark. She taught him to hook up the safety chains and check the trailer’s brake lights before driving to the barns.

It seemed to take forever to coax Artemis and Gray Cloud into that small steel enclosure in the dark. They drove across a busy thoroughfare to a dirt road in a grassy field that was already starting to fill up with other rigs.

The scene reminded Wade of actors before a performance. In the first light of dawn Diana worked to get Wade’s stock tie right.

A man came to their trailer carrying a silver tray with plastic cups of port wine.

Diana greeted him enthusiastically. “Good morning, Master.” She introduced him as Jack. He was a little taller than Wade, about the same age, with close-cropped brown hair—the hairstyle Wade knew as a “Princeton.”

“Stirrup cups. A little liquid courage.” Jack handed a cup to Wade.

“Diana, can you lead second field? It shouldn’t be a long day. They’re laying the drag for only six jumps.”

“Gray Cloud’s acting up, so I think I’d better hilltop today,” she said.

Jack seemed to immediately know why Diana was dropping back to third field. He looked Wade up and down. “Wade, you’re a lucky guy.” He turned to Diana. “Thanks for leading third field; I’ll have Richard take second.”

Wade and Diana mounted their horses. After a little warm up, Jack yelled, “Field please,” and the riders circled around him. Riding an impressive white horse, Jack was wearing a bright red jacket and carrying a bone-handled whip. He harped on the importance of closing all gates after everyone went through and thanked the landowner. The smiling landowner, in a red coat as well, nodded in appreciation. *It’s about to happen.*

The Huntsman opened a huge trailer and set the hounds free. Out bounded tens of English Foxhounds, bigger and whiter than beagles, with tails that stood up almost vertically.

The horses seemed to know they were about to hunt; their ears swiveled as if on gimbals. They moved nervously as the riders organized themselves into three fields behind the hounds.

Diana, leading the largest field with Wade by her side, walked her group up a hill to the left. She sat up in her saddle and turned backward to the field. “We should have a great day. The trick is to get a good vantage point. See those

two riders across the way? They're laying the drag. The hounds and riders should follow along soon." After a while Diana turned in her seat again and asked if the group was ready for a trot.

The woman behind her yelled "Sure, let's go!" Diana kicked Gray Cloud and led the horses up the hill onto a small knoll. Soon Wade saw the hounds across the way, scrambling along the scent path, followed by the first and second fields. The hounds were yelping loudly, "giving tongue," as they did only when they were on a scent, Wade would learn. The riders chasing the hounds were cantering at full speed across green hills. The spectacle of red and black coats on the multicolored horses behind the yelping hounds was something Wade felt he would never forget.

The hills behind Stanford were lush, dotted with houses and topped with clouds. After the hunt passed, Diana pointed off to another hill and said, "Let's go over there; we can see two jumps from there. We'll have to hurry."

The hill she pointed to was quite a distance; riding there Wade was quickly winded. When he caught up to Diana, he said, "Wow, this is work."

"Aww, this is a walk in the park. Wait till you're with the hounds."

She turned to the others and said, "How about a controlled canter up that next hill. Will that be a problem for anyone?"

When there was no reply, she led them in a trot until the grade picked up, where Diana kicked Gray Cloud into a full gallop.

All the horses seemed to go into high gear at once, like a cowboy movie where the good guys fly across the plains after the bad guys. Canterng uphill felt safer than on the flat—gravity kept the horses in check. Wade worked to keep Artemis’s head up and his own fanny down. He wasn’t scared, but he was winded. He knew he was flopping around on his horse and hoped no one would notice.

Diana yelled across to him, “Wade, tuck in like a skier. Remember, heels down, weight back.”

His ride smoothed out. Artemis was galloping full out. Wade perched on her back like a jockey, grinning from ear to ear.



As they stood on the hill, Wade watched Diana. Her tack was immaculate, with each leather strap in its keeper and, since her horse was at rest, her reins lightly looped.

Gray Cloud looked as if he were born to hunt—a perfectly configured dappled gray Thoroughbred from central casting. The white form-fitting saddle pad on his back was even whiter than Diana’s knit gloves. She sat as if she lived on a horse. Unlike the other horses, including Artemis, Gray Cloud didn’t even seem winded. As Wade was watching her, she turned around in her saddle and said to him over her shoulder, “I knew you could do it.” *Accept Life’s Gifts*, he told himself.

On Diana’s command the group would trot a bit, canter up a new hill, and the spectacle of the hunt would appear. It seemed as if we, the riders that Diana

led, constituted some kind of ancient court, and the field riders were graciously presented for our amusement.

Foxhunting, even without a fox, was as colorful as any movie on the big screen. The sport was all form. Except for the Huntsman, who directed the hounds, and the whippers-in, who kept the hounds from running off, everyone was superfluous. The first and second fields in their finery served no purpose. “The least-needed position in all of sport, less use than a batboy,” an aging rider had recounted to Wade at Artemis’ barn. “But call a field and I’ll tack up, trot on, and tuck in behind the Master.”

These riders were the antithesis of the Bauhaus dictum form-follows-function, which Wade had once used as a motto for his life. They represented the opposite: form is all.

Each rider had risen long before dawn for the excitement of being part of this scene, the thrill of being in the hunt. Is there any way a hapless kid from the Midwest, faced with this commitment to an ancient form, could be unmoved? Did Wade ever have a prayer of not falling for the woman who showed him this world? Now that he’d gone back to Huntington, he could see all this and accept it. *Give full measure of your pleasure.*

Wade was thankful for the rest at the top of the hill. He couldn’t imagine how the hunters who followed the foxes, useful or not, kept such a grueling pace.

After rides to two more hills, hours later, Diana said, “I think first field is already hacking back. If we trot over this hill, we can join them,” and soon the

three fields joined together, walking behind the hounds. When the trailers came into sight, the Huntsman jumped off his horse, vaulting like a gymnast. Talking constantly to his hounds, he handed the reins of his horse to Jack. Walking briskly as the hounds gathered around him, the Huntsman was the very picture of hunting tradition.

As the group removed their coats and relaxed into tweeds, they were a jolly lot, full of tales of the day's exploits and hunts past. One friend of Diana's, a little older, had come off her horse at a jump, but she was unhurt and said casually, "My horse and I were together over the coop, but when we landed on the other side I went left and the horse went right." She laughed and took a large swallow of wine.

Jack, who'd traded his red coat for a belted heather wool jacket and his helmet for a tweed driver's cap, came over and said, "Congratulations on your first hunt. I hear you did well."

"Thanks. Great fun," Wade said.

Diana seemed to have an encouraging word for everyone as people settled in for the breakfast. "The meal after the hunt's called 'breakfast' even if it's roast beef and potatoes at three in the afternoon," she said. She'd brought folding chairs for the two of them, which Wade set up in the circle where people shared food and wine.

Sitting next to Diana, he downed his second glass of chardonnay. Wade felt a kind of tired he wasn't used to—goofy, and full of thanks. *Accept Life's Gifts.*

Diana turned to him and said, "We'll have to wrap it up."

"So soon?"

"I told you the kids are coming in a couple of hours and we have so much to do," she said, standing up. She was all waves and smiles, but quick to leave. Wade gathered chairs and plates. They loaded up the now-empty water cans and tack and, finally, the horses for the short drive across the road. Knowing they were headed back to their barns, their homes, Gray Could and Artemis marched right in.

Back at Jasper Ridge Ranch, they washed the horses and tack and put everything away.

"It's hard, saying goodbye to you out here," Diana said, touching Wade's arm. "I wish we'd planned and you could at least shower at my place. But the kids really are coming any minute," she said. "I have to get ready for them, too."

It was time to leave. She moved close and kissed him lightly on the cheek. "You're *sweaty*," she said. "Actually," she continued, coming back for more, "I like salt."

Still, after they unhooked the cleaned-out trailer Wade went to her car and managed a light hug. Driving home, he found himself thinking of how vividly Diana reminded him of Barbara. At home he opened a bottle of wine and poured himself a glass. Wade knew he'd do better with Diana than he had with Barbara, he *knew* it. For starters, he wasn't going to phone her right now while she was busy with her kids. Still his fingers itched to dial her number.

Do we change—can we? Wade wanted to. He wandered into his study. Instead of calling Diana he dialed Amelia's number at Bard, but she was out of the dorm. It would have been fun to have told her about the hunt.

He looked over his crowded bookcases and pulled out an old slim volume—Scott Fitzgerald's *The Crack Up*. Fitzgerald didn't think of himself as a poet, but he had a chapter of verse in there called "Jingles and Songs." One of them, "Thousand-and-first Ship" started:

In the fall of sixteen
In the cool of the afternoon
I saw Helena
Under a white moon --

I heard Helena
In a haunted doze
Say: "I know a gay place
Nobody knows."

A page later, it ended:

Helena went off
And married another,
She may be dead
Or some man's mother

I have no grief left
But I'd like to know
If she took him
Where she promised we'd go.

Even though he knew Diana wanted time with her kids, Wade finally gave in to his urge to call her.

She relieved him by quickly saying, "I can't talk long—I'm helping Robbie with his fractions, but I'm so glad you called."

“Okay, I’ll let you go.”

Her voice then sounded muffled, as if she were protecting the mouthpiece from prying ears. “I’m not sure I’ll be able to sleep without you,” she whispered.

“Oh, but you will. We’ll have many nights together,” he said as he hung up.

21

A month later, Wade met Jorge for lunch in the Indian restaurant near Jorge's Enron office in Mountain View.

His friend was sporting a new look—a black polo shirt and a blue blazer, and he wore his sunglasses at the table.

“So should I start calling you *Giorgio*?” Wade asked.

Smiling, Jorge took the wraparound glasses off and put them on the red tablecloth. “You can call me Jorge, but roll the ‘r,’ *paisano*.”

As a lithe waitress, a young Indian woman with a red dot on her forehead, came into view, Jorge said, “Good, Chitra's here.”

When she came to the table Jorge said, “You may not recognize me. I am *Giorgio*, but you can call me *Jorge*.” He *did* roll the ‘r.’

The waitress tried to hide a smile and seemed to blush. “The chef has a very good lamb curry today.”

“Okay I'll try it, Chitra.”

Wade nodded.

“Good. I will bring your *naan*.”

She was back at their table quickly with hot bread and a green sauce.

“Chitra,” asked Jorge, “How long have you been in America?”

“Almost three years.”

“Your English is very good.”

Lowering her eyes, she said, "Thank you."

"Do you have a boyfriend?"

She turned away. "I will see if the curry is ready," she said as she left the table.

"Down boy," Wade said as she disappeared around the corner. "How's Mary doing? Did those tests show anything?"

"She seems better. She still doesn't have her own room. We thought about a bigger apartment but we want to move into a house."

"Can you afford it?"

"You're thinking the old SnyderSound way. Like you told me, the Valley's *hot*. Half those options come due next spring, can you believe it? Worth hundreds of thousands of dollars! Rita wants us to buy a house in Palo Alto first thing, no matter what."

Wade broke off a piece of naan and dipped it in the sauce. "What, exactly, are you doing at work?"

Jorge dipped, too. "If I told you I'd have to shoot you."

"Get off it. Let's start with the basics. Do you have to be at your desk nine to five?"

"*Eight-thirty* to five." Jorge laughed. "I can take all day for lunch but they really want me to have my feet under the desk at 8:30. If I get in early, keep my mouth shut, and make sure the presentations go off without a hitch, I'm golden."

"What are the presentations like?"

“Don’t ask. I couldn’t stand poverty again. One thing I *can* talk about is the knockout receptionist; guys take extra trips to their cars to check her out. There’s eye candy everywhere.”

Wade thought of tired-but-pleasant Helen, the receptionist at SnyderSound. He laughed. “I’d have a hard time giving up Helen, the way she helps with our trips.”

“The one who wore that brownish-green cardigan from Thanksgiving to Easter? You might give her up if you saw this gal. She revs the guys up, she does. We have a separate travel department. She’s a babe too.”

Wade moved back in his seat and was quiet for a second, looking his friend over. “I don’t know why, but I worry about you and this job.” Finally he said, “I’m not sure Enron is a place Ralph Nader would want you to work.”

Jorge shrugged. “I’ll vote for him, but a man’s got to do what a man’s got to do. Rita’s never been happier and I’m having a blast. I’m headed to Houston next week. They booked a limo to take me to the airport, and one on the other end too.”

“Living large, amigo.”

Jorge sat back. “You bet, gringo.”



After Wade’s first hunt, Diana gained confidence in Wade’s horseback-riding skills and one day led him on a long trail ride through Portola Valley and Woodside. Using keys she got from someone in the hunt, Diana opened gates

that took Wade past nature preserves and mansions, including the bulldozer-strewn Japanese-style mansion site of Larry Ellison. Even though Wade got a little nervous crossing two big intersections, Artemis was sure-footed even in traffic over blacktop. The perfectly-cool, slightly overcast day went without incident. *Accept Life's Gifts.*



Although Wade and his friend met for lunch roughly once a month in the spring of 2001, it wasn't until May that Jorge opened up to Wade about how unhappy he was becoming with Enron.

Wade looked around the restaurant thoughtfully. Because he only went there with Jorge, the familiar red-painted walls somehow seemed to belong to their friendship. "I'm not sure I understand exactly what the problem is," he said.

"I'm looking very differently at Enron. In a word, it sucks. Even before the stock started going down it sucked, and it's worse now because people are scared."

"I always worried about that place," said Wade.

"They're just such Texans," Jorge said, shaking his head as if that explained everything.

Wade raised his eyebrows, asking for details.

"It's hard, because I can't reveal any specifics of the meetings. The Enron guys make the P. U. C. guys in Sacramento look like lambs at slaughter. The Enron folks laugh at them behind their backs. They call them 'Sacra tomatoes.'

Then they shorten it to tomato—they say things like ‘What was it that tomato said about power spikes?’ I’m expected to laugh with them. When I don’t, I feel awkward. When I do laugh with them, I don’t sleep well.”

“You have anything to say in the meetings?” Wade asked.

“No way. Maybe I’m a token techie, maybe I’m a token Mexican. I don’t know.”

“Maybe you should wear thick black glasses and a serape.”

“Very funny. I wear a blue or brown suit and never smile.”

“That’s the way to play it.” Wade nodded slowly. “All alone, huh . . . no friends there at all?”

“They’re MBA lawyer clones. They don’t have friends, they have *con-nections*.” Jorge looked around. “I wonder where our favorite waitress is today.”

“Maybe you scared her off, Lochinvar.”

Jorge shrugged. “Seriously, Wade. I don’t like those Texans. They plum—hell, I’m even talking like a Texan now—anyway, they ignore the commissioners. The guys who count seem to be in Houston and Dallas, or from there—if Billy Tyler wants something, the only discussion is how fast it can get done.”

“But he’s in Menlo Park. Your office is in Mountain View, right?”

“The bosses always go up there to brief him and come back with a long list of to-do’s.” Jorge shook his head and looked around the restaurant. “I give up. I guess I don’t want to talk about Billy after all, or Rita. Are you still riding horses?”

“I am. I’ve learned a lot about consistency from Artemis. She just goes out and does her job. Of course Diana says I spoil her with carrots and horse cookies.”

“You and Diana are finally doing it, right?”

Wade rolled his eyes. “A gentleman’s lips are sealed.”

“It’s about time. Have you moved in with her?”

“No, no talk of that. But we see each other a lot. Tonight we’re taking a picnic up to Foothills Park. I’ve lived here for years and never been there. It’s got that lake and everything. How about you?”

“Up Page Mill? I think that’s for Palo Alto residents only. Rita talks about it as one of the hidden benefits of moving there. You know Rita wants us to buy a house near you, right?”

Wade nodded. “To buy in, you’ll have to pretend money doesn’t mean anything. After a year or two, though, the homeowners get these smiles on their faces. How else could guys like us save the kind of money that gets built up in equity?”

Jorge moved his chair in closer. “Well . . . options.”

Wade grimaced. “Yeah, that’s how everybody’s making money now. All those Microsoft millionaires up in Washington, and Oracle folks down here. Gates and Ellison are two of the richest people *in the world*. Can you imagine? Richer than Kings and Arab sheiks. Still . . . things can go wrong. One of my neighbors still owes taxes on his options, even though they’re worthless.”

“What?” Jorge asked. “How could that be?”

“The stock was high when he exercised the options, so he owed taxes on the difference between the price and the option-price—and then the stock collapsed—fell to under a dollar.”

“All I know is, as much as I’m hating Enron, I’m going to get a hell of a paycheck—and soon. How about if I ask around there for a job for you?”

“Remember I’m just a kid from the Midwest. I’m finally feeling ahead of the game because my house keeps going up. What an investment! One down the street sold for more than six hundred thousand. That’s twice what I paid nine years ago. It’s nothing like your fancy stock options, of course.”

Jorge gave a satisfied smirk.

Wade smiled back. “I have so much else going on with Diana and horses and everything—I’d better keep the job a constant for now. But thanks.”

Jorge moved closer to Wade. “Can I ask a question, and you’ll answer truthfully?”

“Sure, Jorge, anything.”

“Remember how Billy interviewed Rita alone—the wife interview? Do you think that was on the up-and-up . . . or the . . . down-and-dirty?”

Wade looked away. “That’s a tough one. Can you just put it in the past?”

Jorge looked over at his friend. “I want your opinion. Before I got married, my mother made me promise that I would forgive Rita anything. She said marriage is one long lesson in forgiveness. But not this.”

“You could drive yourself nuts over this, Jorge.” Wade pushed back from the table.

“Once after I’d had too much to drink, I confronted Rita about it. A bad scene. She said she wouldn’t honor the question with a reply. I couldn’t believe it when she finally told me it was a private interview—I’d think that personnel specialist should have been in on that meeting . . . she made me sleep on the couch that night.”

“Let it go,” Wade said as he stood up. Looking across at his friend, he knew he was asking the impossible.

22

Wade sat reading the Sunday *Chronicle* while Diana heated up coffee cake in her kitchen.

“What did you think of my church?” she asked across the counter.

Wade had many things he didn’t like about the service, including the ‘my way or the highway’ tone of the sermon, but he settled on complaining about the songs. “I wish there were a little more nuance to the music,” he said, not looking up from the paper.

“Oh, the new-music question. Everybody talks about that. I take it you miss the old hymns . . . the newer songs are easier to get into—they played them back in Texas, too.”

Wade put the newspaper down. “They seem like ‘7-11’ music; seven words repeated eleven times.”

“I admit the lyrics can get a little monotonous. But the kids like ’em.”

Wade, seeing that things were almost ready, set out a couple of place mats and silverware. “By the way, have the kids said anything more about yesterday? About me? Beth seemed like a southern girl acting polite, but Robbie didn’t even try.”

Diana looked down. “It’s going to be a hard road. We always knew that. I figure I’ll have you to dinner with them in a week or two.”

“They loved those paddle boats, but let’s face it, besides that, yesterday was *dreadful*. I was awake much of last night wondering if you’d give up on me.”

Diana took his hand. “No way. Your first meeting with them was bound to be awkward. And remember, Robbie *adores* his father. I was a little surprised he consented to go on an outing to meet you at all.”

Wade went back to his paper. After a while he pointed out an article in the pink section. “Look, Galway Kinnell’s coming to San Francisco for a reading.”

“I know that name from somewhere,” said Diana.

“He’s a big-deal poet. You know that poem I have on my refrigerator, ‘Oatmeal,’ about having an imaginary breakfast with John Keats.” Wade handed her the pink section of the paper.

After a quick glance she said, “Is he really this handsome?”

“Come up to the reading with me and find out.”

Diana studied the picture. “Who is this guy again?”

“If you ask almost any poet in the country, Galway would be on their top-ten list. He’s won a Pulitzer and started the Poetry Workshops at Squaw Valley. He’s always in the *New Yorker*.”

“Oh, I remember a poem about a bear from college. He’s Irish, right?”

“*Galway?* Hmm, let me guess.”

She laughed.

“Come with me. It’ll be better than the last poetry reading, I promise.”

“Talk about low expectations!” She straightened a magazine on the table.

“What was he like in his workshop—is he a good man?”

Wade smiled, slightly shaking his head. “That’s a question only you would ask. I can’t judge whether he’s a ‘good man’ or not, but he’s a good teacher. I like him, very much, but he’s got this reputation around women—a little licentious for the academic crowd.”

“Is that a fancy way of saying he fooled around?”

Wade tried not to resent Diana’s way of looking at the world. “His poetry is very sensual—you wouldn’t expect him to be a monk. He was always very gentle with his students. Sometimes one of us amateurs would feel so full of poetry with him we’d want to do it full time. ‘Don’t quit your day job,’ Galway would say. He’d say it a lot more gracefully, of course. Once I went to a workshop with him at a really tough time—the worst part of my divorce. He asked me a few questions and I ended up writing a poem about Amelia.”

“Oh, could I see it?”

“I can print it off my laptop—just a second.”

Japanese Graveyard on Kauai

One afternoon I drove Amelia past Kappa,
 deep into desolate cane-hauling roads.
 We came upon an old graveyard on a hill near the ocean.
 Before the tall cane it had overlooked the Pacific.

I got out, trying to convey my wonder to my young daughter.
 Wooden markers, in Japanese with a little English,
 marked the lives of turn-of-the-century fishing families.
 I coaxed her out of the car and she walked

to one grave, then another, one with fresh flowers,
 but most overgrown with weeds.
 I told her about prosperous fishing fleets,
 gone now. She stood silent.
 This is all that's left,
 I told her at one family's grave,
 after the tortuous trip from Japan,
 after building the fishing fleet

after extracting an honest living from the sea,
 after constructing villages --
 they're tourist towns today, I said.
 No words from her as we returned to the car.

I said I hoped we had more left than that
 even though I'd moved away from her mother.
 In the rental car dwarfed by the tall sugar cane,
 I watched her so silent,
 a cotton skirt over her bathing suit,
 watching her father out at the edge of somewhere.
 Her eyes said what can he teach me but chaos?

“Divorce is devastating,” Diana said. “You’ve said it so well.”

“I wrote it so long ago it seems like an artifact. Now you know why I don’t
 show my poems at work.”

Diana waited a second and then nodded. “You can’t wear your heart on
 your sleeve at the office.” She walked to the other side of the room. “Do you
 think kids get over divorce?”

“I’d like to think so, but . . .” his voice trailed off.

“That poem helps me understand why you write . . . there’s no other way to
 say some things, is there?”

Galway's reading was held on a warm afternoon at a large auditorium at the University of San Francisco. "A full house, imagine. For *poetry*," Diana said.

Galway carried himself with surprising vigor, especially for seventy-plus, as he came to the stage.

Diana said to Wade, "I see what you mean about good-looking." As he started reading, she whispered, "And the voice! He's not a womanizer, he's a *magnet*." She leaned in to Wade. "There's a *huge* difference."

"Down girl," Wade said as Galway read 'The Bear,' with its ending:

"the rest of my days I spend
wandering: wondering
what, anyway,
was that sticky infusion, that rank flow of blood, that poetry, by which I lived?"

Diana whispered, "I don't know if it's him or the poems, but I'm getting goose bumps."

When Galway read "After Making Love We Hear Footsteps," Wade whispered, "It's about when he had his son."

"I like the line about the familiar touch of the long-married."

When Galway asked the audience for questions, Wade raised his hand. Wade couldn't tell if Galway recognized him, but he at least called on him.

"Could you read 'Oatmeal?'"

Many poems later, as the crowd gave Galway a standing ovation, Diana said, "That was great," and, as they filed into the aisle, she teased, "He's everything you want to be, isn't he—reading poetry and boinking women all over the country? Wade with all the stops out."

“No,” said Wade, leading her through the crowd. “No,” he said, squeezing her hand. “No, no.”



The heat of the day had dissipated as they returned to the peninsula with its golden hills and green oaks. They found themselves laughing at the fact they couldn't agree about anything. Diana challenged him to find *something*.

“Let's see. Politics? I don't think so.” Wade shook his head. “This can't be so hard,” he said. “We're both Presbyterians?”

When she rolled her eyes, he said, “Of course, horses.”

“Bingo. It really helps that you like them, I'll admit that.”

“And at least you now can abide poetry.”

“*Two things* we can agree on!” Diana said with a laugh. “Horses and Galway Kinnell.” She put her hand on his thigh, and he put his on top of hers.



That night in bed, Diana said, “You know, looked at from this angle, you're more handsome than Galway.”

“You must mean in the dark.” Wade ran his fingers through thinning hair. “He's *still* got that shock of hair to throw around!”

“I knew you wouldn't believe me,” she said as she moved over toward him. Those were the last words of their night.

23

The afternoon of Election Day 2000, Jorge answered his extension at Enron. It was Wade. “I took the afternoon off to help Diana get ready for the party. Have you picked out your tie?”

“I’m glad you called—when Rita said something about ties, I didn’t understand. You know I never wear ‘em.”

“Diana likes party gimmicks. Something about dressing up for the election, but she expects most people to come in spoof ties. You can just loop it around your neck. Wait ‘til you see mine. Cliff is wearing a funny one too, and Billy’s coming right from work, so he’ll wear a real one.”

“Billy . . . oh great.”

“It’ll be fine. Have you voted?” Wade asked.

“I’m going to on the way home,” Jorge said. “We might be a little late. The baby sitter for Mary flaked. Rita’s scratching to find a replacement.”

“I might be able to help. Just a second.” A minute later Jorge heard Wade say, “I’ve got it covered. Beth will take care of her here—I’m at Diana’s. Beth’s crazy about kids. I went into a supermarket with her last week and she couldn’t take her eyes off the babies.”

“Are you sure?” Jorge asked.

“Absolutely. She’s setting her room up as we speak. When I left she was sorting through Golden Books. She’s thrilled.”

When he hung up, Jorge did the math on his options for the second time that day. He pulled out the contract they'd given him when he joined: it clearly said 9,000 shares at a strike price of \$10. No mistake there. He opened the paper to the Enron share price, \$71.25, and entered it into a calculator. He multiplied it by 9,000. The display read \$641,250. He knocked the calculator lightly against the desk and the numbers didn't change. He subtracted the \$90,000 he'd have to pay for the shares and the calculator said \$551,250 . . . for Jorge Calderon—who could believe? What a sweet payday that would be! And the first half of it would come in three months. Over two hundred fifty thousand dollars. *Damn!*

Knowing he had that kind of money coming made it easier to go to this fancy-ass party tonight. The same hot-shots were going to be there that had been at the previous party, including . . . Billy. It was hard to hate him thoroughly since he was so involved in Jorge's windfall, but all Jorge had to do was think of Rita going over to that private office for an interview and the bile flowed so freely he could almost taste it. Still, *two hundred fifty thousand dollars, more money than mi Padre had seen in his lifetime. Soon.*



Driving to the party in his new Honda Accord, with Mary in the back seat, Jorge and Rita listened closely to the news. Two of the networks declared Gore winner in both Pennsylvania and Florida, which basically gave him the election. No matter how things came out in the Western states, the radio pundit said—

although he didn't say it was over—at the end of the night it looked like Al Gore would be the next president.

When a commercial came on, Jorge lowered the radio volume and turned to Rita, who wore a silk sweater set. “You look great.”

“You're relieved that your wife isn't dressed like a floozy, aren't you? I hear it in your voice. Hah! I bought the outfit because it looked like Diana, Queen of Proper. When in Rome . . . at least I don't look as silly as you do in that tie.”

He looked down at the wide chartreuse stripes and laughed. “As you know, it's Diana's deal—her connections got us here.”

“I don't want to get to the party early,” Rita said. “Drive through South Palo Alto. Maybe we really *can* afford a house like Wade's next spring. Let's nose around down this way and look.”

Whenever Jorge told Rita about the stock going up again she already knew about it, down to the fraction. He figured she might be doing the options math once or twice a day herself.

“Wade lives around here, right?” Rita asked.

Jorge maneuvered down Middlefield Road onto a side street. “I think it's that one right over there. I remember from the big tree in front.”

Around the corner was a For Sale sign with a plastic box with real estate fliers. “Stop here, honey, I want to see how much it costs,” she said.

He stopped the car while she retrieved a flyer. She glanced at it and handed it to him.

He shook his head. “Three bedrooms and two baths. Family room. \$689,000. Imagine. In Sunnyvale it would cost under five hundred thousand. In El Paso a little cottage like this wouldn’t run six figures.”

“It sure would be nice for Mary to have these schools,” his wife said. “How big a down payment would it take?”

He did the math in his head. “With closing costs it’d be a hundred and fifty grand. Maybe we could do that once the options pay off, but I’d hate to think about the payments.”

“Interest rates are low now. What does Wade say?”

“He says his house is the best investment he ever made. It’s made him a little lazy, if you ask me. He won’t even look at another job.”

“If he sticks with Diana he may not have to.” They both laughed. “Let’s get over to the party,” she said.



Diana met them at the door. “Oh, flowers. You shouldn’t have,” she said.

Mary peeked from around the corner with a shy smile.

“And this must be Mary . . . What a pretty dress! I’m glad you could be with us tonight.” She looked up at Jorge and Rita. “Let’s get Mary settled in before we join the others.” Diana guided Jorge, Rita, and Mary to the bedroom wing, where Beth was waiting.

Mary, somewhat shyly, walked toward Beth.

Beth handed her an elaborate toy horse, almost half Mary's size. "My mother gave this to me when I was your age and I wanted you to have it."

Mary smiled and looked up at Rita hopefully.

"What do you say?" Rita asked.

"Thank you," Mary said. She and Beth started to put on a miniature saddle.

After he saw that, Jorge felt he could leave Mary comfortably.

Diana guided Jorge and Rita to the family room, where Wade and Cliff, in overstuffed chairs, and Billy and Jolene on a sofa, were watching the election returns on TV. A sliced honeyed ham waited on the wet bar and *hors d'oeuvres* were set around the room, fresh shrimp and warm pastries that made Jorge's mouth water. As at the last party, everyone was drinking white wine except Billy, who held a mixed drink. *Probably Kentucky Bourbon*, Jorge thought as he nabbed an incredibly large shrimp.

On the humungous TV, Dan Rather was saying it might be late into the night before a victor could be named. "Pennsylvania was solidly Gore's but Florida is suddenly looking a bit wobbly," he said. "Two of the Western states, Oregon and New Mexico, and possibly Nevada as well, are unlikely to be decided until past midnight."

"That's midnight Eastern time," Wade was saying as Jorge and Rita took two chairs in the back of the room. "It's like nobody's heard of California."

“California,” said Billy, stuffing another handful of cashews. “Everybody knows how you’ll vote—Bolshevik.”

“I just mean the time,” Wade said. “The newscasters all assume everybody lives along the Atlantic seaboard.”

“Yes, in apartments with doormen on the Upper East Side,” said Cliff. “And we all get our groceries delivered from Gristede’s.”

“New Yorkers may have money they’ll vote pinko-liberal, too. All those election maps color the Bush states red and Gore blue—it should be the other way around,” said Billy.

Diana came in carrying a vase with the irises that Rita had brought. “I loved the delicate bouquet last time, but these are just *perfect*,” she said, looking around. “What’s going on? Why does everyone look so glum?”

“To have a chance, Gore had to win Pennsylvania, and he did. And he won Florida, too, from the exit polls, but now they’re not so sure,” Wade said. “It looks like a long night.”

“Let’s see what’s *really* going on,” said Billy. “Let’s go to Fox News.”

Wade handed Billy the remote. On the flag-draped red, white, and blue picture that Fox presented, Florida was completely up for grabs, “Possibly leaning, now, toward George W. Bush.”

Billy beamed. Jorge sighed and told Diana he was going to go back to check on Mary.

When he got to the room, Mary was jumping up and down on the bed, with Beth cheering her on. The bright wallpaper, toys, coloring books, and the easel made Beth's room like a children's enchanted sanctuary. Jorge took mental notes to talk to Rita about fixing up Mary's room.

"Higher," said Beth. When she saw Jorge she said, "Oh hello, Mr. Calderon. I hope you don't mind me getting her all riled up like this."

"No problem," he said.

"Your wife probably doesn't let her jump on the bed. She might be mad at me."

"Don't worry about it." A dark cat wove a circle around Jorge's feet.

"Minky, don't," Beth said. Then, to Jorge, "Who's winning the election?"

"Nobody knows. Who do you want to win?" asked Jorge.

"Mom and Dad want Bush, but my teachers say he's not too swift. I don't care. I'd rather just play with your daughter, thank you very much. She's a doll."

Mary, standing beside Beth, said, "Let's draw some clouds and a rainbow."

As Beth set out watercolors, Jorge felt Rita was right—they should buy a house in Palo Alto in the spring.



When Jorge buckled Mary into the back seat and put the toy horse next to her, Mary said, "Better buckle Star in, too."

He chuckled as he complied. He said to Rita, "I guess the party wasn't as bad as it might have been."

Rita laughed. "You just like it when your wife's all covered up."

"You did look nice. And you didn't flirt as much as you do some times. I guess that means a lot to me." He put his hand on her knee. "And you're right—we should buy a house in Palo Alto as soon as possible. At work they have this way where some broker gives you money and you don't even have to sell your stock."

She put her hand on top of Jorge's. "Really, that'd be great. Mary's fallen asleep, let's look at that house over by Wade's again."

As Jorge drove south, Rita said, "Isn't it funny that no one showed emotion about the election. In Cuba people would have been throwing things at the TV or cheering wildly."

"They care here too, but tonight they seemed to keep their opinions inside and just watch things develop. Everybody was so *quiet*."

"Who do you think's going to be president?" she asked as they passed into south Palo Alto.

"This might go on a while. Florida seems to be a real mess," Jorge said.

"You know my Cuban friends in Miami might swing this big American election for Bush, can you believe that? I'd be so proud."

Without thinking, Jorge withdrew his hand and put it on the steering wheel.

Quickly they were in Wade's neighborhood. Jorge parked the car in front of the for-sale house they'd seen earlier. "Would we be happy here?" he asked.

“Oh, Jorge, yes,” she said. “It would be just great.” As she spoke, Wade’s car came around the corner. From the car they could see a corner of Wade’s garage door swing up. He parked inside, and the door closed behind him.

“Why don’t those two just move in together?” Jorge asked.

“Oh, Diana wouldn’t do something like that. She’s traditional. She’ll keep everything on the up-and-up for the kids. Does he stay over at Diana’s when the kids aren’t there?”

“I think so. Sometimes Wade comes into work in the same clothes as the day before, which I’ve never seen before.”

“Do you really think we could move to a house like this with the good schools and keep our stock too?” Rita asked.

“I do. But Rita, I feel I need to tell you something.”

“Yes?”

“That time with Billy . . . I won’t ask you what happened again, but I want you to know how much you could hurt me.”

Rita stiffened in her seat. “Oh Jorge, don’t think that way,” she said, visibly softening. “I can make you forget everything, *mi corazon*. I know I can.” She put her hand on his knee. “It’s what I was born for. Let’s go home.”

24

After Jorge's options came through, in July, 2001, he asked Wade to meet him at the house he was buying. It was the house around the corner from Wade's.

Linda, the real estate agent who had sold Wade his house nine years earlier, waited in her copper-colored BMW as Jorge drove up. She got out, wearing an expensive-looking reddish-brown suit that matched her hair.

"You're lucky the first offer on this house fell through," she told Jorge. "You're getting a very good deal, considering the market. There were two bidding wars this week, and one house on Santa Rita went for a hundred fifty thousand over the asking price." She threw open the door. "Come on in."

Jorge took his umpteenth mini-tour of the house. After he looked again at the master bedroom, with its private bathroom, he went down the hall and looked at the bedroom next to it. "That'll be Mary's," he told Linda proudly, thinking of the tiny alcove where she now slept. The third bedroom was very small, but maybe he could set up a punching bag in there. That was all he worried about missing from the apartment complex. After leaving the kitchen with its swinging, bar-like doors, he and Linda toured the garage, which, except for a few cabinets probably removed from some kitchen, was just studs and tarpaper. "There's something depressing about the garage, almost eerie. You don't get much for 700K, do you?"

“Midtown is very desirable. Young families are bidding it up,” she said.

Wade came in through the open door and joined them in the kitchen.

“Sorry I’m late, I couldn’t get off a conference call.”

“Hey Wade, hi. I hear you’re dating a pretty horsewoman from Texas,” Linda said.

“You Realtors are up on everything,” Wade said, wondering how she’d learned. “You won’t believe it but I’m jumping horses. I got over a two-foot fence last week.”

Jorge turned to Wade. “The fireplace has a crack in it.”

Wade looked over the swinging door into the living room. “I don’t know about the crack but I like double-sided fireplaces,” said Wade.

“The owner wants me to sign off on it.” Jorge turned to Linda. “That’s the situation, right? What do you recommend?”

“Many homes have this kind of damage after the ’89 quake. It draws fine, I checked. Most people just live with it. Of course, in another earthquake it could come down . . .”

This was one headache too many. But Rita wanted this house. “Wade, what do you think?” he asked.

Wade shrugged. “Any chance the seller would knock something off the price for it?”

Linda shook her head. “They have a backup offer.”

Wade shrugged. "I know the price is hard to get used to, Jorge, but Linda knows the market. I'll vouch for that."

Jorge absently turned the water on and off at the kitchen sink. "Is there anything else I should worry about?"

"Everything else looks pretty standard for a forty-year old house. It should close in about a week."

"Can Mary transfer schools soon?"

Linda put her hands together. "The school district usually cooperates once you have a signed contract."

Wade nodded. "The school's two blocks away," he said.

"Let's do it then," Jorge said without emotion.



Back at the Indian restaurant, Wade said to Jorge, "For a guy who just bought a house in Palo Alto, you seem down. Are you okay?"

Jorge rested his head on one of his hands. "This fucking job. And the mortgage will be over half a million bucks. I've never owed money like that."

"I trust Linda, and she says it's a good deal," Wade said. "By the way, did you catch that huge Beemer she's driving? When she sold us our house, she was still teaching school and driving a beat-up Volvo wagon. It seems everybody's suddenly rich around here."

"I'm not sure what you're saying."

“She used to teach school and now she’s driving an eighty-thousand dollar car that matches her hair! This ain’t a sleepy college town you’re moving to.”

Sometimes Wade seemed like he was from another planet. “So you’re saying I should just count on the money?”

“Not at all. People go broke here, too. They forget to do things like you did: selling enough stock to pay the taxes you owed on your options.” Wade saluted, touching his hand to his head. “You’re smart.”

“My broker recommended against it, but I followed your advice.”

Wade waited a bit, then raised his eyebrows. “Your broker wanted you to run for luck?”

“All the guys at the office work with him! Everybody’s holding on. They say, ‘It was a good buy at \$90 and it’s an even better buy now that it’s dropped to \$60.’ Wall Street says Enron’s way undervalued.”

“How much did you sell to cover the taxes?” Wade sounded worried.

“Fifteen hundred shares—one-third. That covered the fifty grand I paid for the shares and fifty grand for the taxes. I paid Enron and sent the IRS estimated taxes just like you said. The stock broker is lending me the down payment for the house as long as I leave the shares with him.”

Wade stared at him. “You’re buying the house *on margin*?” He swallowed. “I didn’t know.”

“Look, don’t scare me now! Just because I don’t necessarily like everybody at Enron doesn’t mean they can’t make money hand over fist. They’ve been doing it for years.”

“What’s your backup plan?” asked Wade.

Jorge felt badgered. “The stock shouldn’t go much below sixty before it starts up again.”

“What if it does?”

“I’m not borrowing the max. My broker says it can go down quite a bit from here and I’ll be okay, even though nobody thinks that’s going to happen. And you say the house is a good investment.”

“I didn’t want you to have all your eggs in one basket. If you get into trouble all I could help with is a few thousand I have in my IRA, hardly enough to stave off disaster. I thought you were *selling* stock for the down payment.” Wade put his index finger and thumb a fraction of an inch apart. “You’re putting yourself on thin ice.”

“Wade, enough. *Cut it out.*”

25

Rita invited Wade and Diana over for dinner in their new house. Wade, a little late from work, ripped off his tie and splashed water on his face and rushed over to his new neighbors.

Rita opened the door for him with a quick hug, and took him into the family room, where Diana was already playing Monopoly with Beth, Robbie, and Mary. Robbie was winning big. When Mary's piece—a hesitantly moved silver top hat—landed on one of Robbie's four railroads, Wade couldn't watch any longer.

He pushed through the swinging door to the kitchen and joined Rita while she cooked. Under her "Kiss the Cook" apron, she was wearing celery green pedal-pushers and a matching boat-necked top. White bead bracelets danced as she chopped the vegetables.

"What's that smell?" Wade asked. "All the wonderful spices of the world! What's this you're cooking?"

"Fish and salsa." *Sautéed Red Snapper with Cilantro Butter Sauce*, from a recipe my mother gave me, and, from the *Miami Herald* years ago, *Black Bean, Jicama and Corn Salsa*."

The counters were covered with pots and bowls. "It sure looks like you're having fun."

“Oh, Wade, tonight in my new kitchen I get to cook the way my mother taught me. Everything’s fresh!”

“Smells kind of sweet and spicy, my favorite combination.”

“Somehow I knew that,” Rita said with a little laugh, still holding the spoon.

He looked carefully at her. “I’m never quite sure I understand you.”

“Do you want to?” Something in her body language seemed flirty—an unaccounted-for smile, the way she cocked her hips. *She was a pistol, no doubt about that.* As she carried a full saucepan from one counter to another, he asked her the question he’d held for almost a year. “Jorge worries about your interview with

Billy. What happened there?”

Sauce spilled onto the floor. “What a thing to ask!”

“I’m sorry, let me get that,” Wade said, grabbing a paper towel and stooping down.

She motioned him off. When she leaned over with a sponge, she moved a hand to her breast in the low-necked shirt. Wade found her crouched figure erotic.

“I’m curious about Billy’s . . .” Wade searched for a phrase. “Office politics” he said at last.

Standing up and putting a hand on her hip, she looked Wade in the eye. “He was . . . professional, if that’s what you mean. He’s a man of his word.”

“I’m not sure I like the guy.”

“Oh, I appreciate that type of man—direct. Understanding someone is more important than liking someone, don’t you think? Want to try the fish?” she asked, holding a small piece of white fish with red sauce on a wooden cooking spoon close to her mouth. Wade had to lean in toward her to take the bite.

Just then Diana pushed through the door holding two empty wine glasses. “I noticed Jorge’s glass was empty,” she said.

As Rita and Wade quickly moved apart, Diana gave them both a puzzled look. Rita ran her hands along her sides, as if to smooth something. “I’ll get another bottle,” she said, opening the refrigerator.

Wade fumbled in a drawer for the wine opener and took the bottle Rita offered.

“Mary’s so well-behaved,” Diana said.

“She loves that toy Beth gave her. All week she’s asked, ‘When will Beth be here?’”

“They’re playing with the horse now,” Diana said. “We’ll have to get Mary up on a real horse. I know a trainer—the guy who’s teaching Wade how to jump. Edward—he’s great with kids that age.”

“I imagine Beth’s terrific on a horse,” Rita said, pulling a huge wooden salad bowl out of the refrigerator.

“Unfortunately, she never took to it.” Diana pressed her lips with disappointment, then smiled.

Wade filled two glasses and handed them to Diana, who pushed out through the swinging door.

Wade avoided Rita's eyes, but he stayed back long enough to ask her, "Anything I can do?"

She laughed half-heartedly, almost derisively. "You're something else, Wade, you are. I can't believe you asked me about Billy. It's nobody's business. Go on, now," she said, dismissing him with her hands. "What I do to make things work around here is between me . . . and . . . me."



Beth and Mary made Lincoln Logs into fences for the toy horse. "Can we call him Star for that mark?" Mary asked, pointing to a white spot on the horse's forehead.

"Does Star whinny when you go to see him?" Beth asked Mary.

"What's whinny?"

"It's how horses say hi," Beth explained. She tried to imitate the noise. "I'm sure he always whinnies when he sees you."

Mary laughed, which somehow cheered Wade. For some reason, he was rooting for her to like horses—maybe it was something he got from Diana, or maybe it was that, now that he knew horses himself, he felt that horses might be just what Mary needed.

Rita summoned Jorge to help her serve. They took places around the dining room table, set at one end of the living room.

“Sorry about the small table.” Rita laughed nervously. “We couldn’t buy all new at once.”

“Oh, I like it,” Diana said. “It’s cozy.”

“I just can’t get over this fish, or the salsa either,” said Wade. “Such a combination of tastes. Wonderful.”

“You’ll have to give me the recipe,” Diana said.



When the women went into the kitchen with the dishes, Jorge poured two snifters of brandy, saying, “Let’s go into the living room.”

“Of course,” Wade said, “Let’s retire to the hearth, as proper gentlemen do.”

“I have a business proposition.” Jorge motioned for Wade to sit down.

Wade took a seat in a canvas chair on a black wire frame he remembered from Jorge’s apartment.

“My broker just told me if Enron stock gets any lower, I run a chance of losing the house.”

Wade sat back in his chair and took a deep breath. “I have to admit I was afraid of that.”

“The stock nudged up a bit this week, so there’s no immediate pressure, still . . .” Jorge fiddled with the fireplace tongs, slowly opening and closing them.

“You said once you had an IRA you could borrow against if I ever needed help.”

Wade closed his eyes and tried to breathe deeply. “Can't you just sell stock?”

“I *have* sold stock. If I sell any more I'll have no future.”

“I have to think this through. I might be able to borrow against my IRA, but I can't commit. You'd have to sell more stock—a lot more.”

Jorge breathed a huge sigh. “Wade, you don't know what this would mean to me.”

Wade stood up. “I shouldn't do this. But I sure don't want you to lose this house. All three of you seem so *at home* here. Let me check.”

“This is all going to work out, buddy. I can feel it.”



The following night, as they were cleaning up from dinner, Wade told Diana the trouble Jorge was in.

“I don't see how that's your problem,” Diana said.

“You saw how happy they are in that house. I can't stand by and watch them lose it.”

“Between turning yourself inside out to keep him in an old job and helping him find a new one, you've done an awful lot for Jorge already.” Diana put down the dishtowel and started wiping the counters. “What would you do if Jorge went under?”

“I’ve been thinking of ways to protect myself—I have to think of my responsibilities to Amelia too. I could have him sign a no-interest loan and record it against that house.”

Diana looked up at him. “You mean, like a second mortgage? That’d protect you I guess . . . still, I’d just tell him I was sorry but I couldn’t help. No matter what you do, I sure wouldn’t worry Amelia about it. She’s a *child*.”

“I don’t feel I can loan him money without discussing it with her. Do you mind if I call from here?” he asked.

As he moved toward the family room to call, Diana said, “Of course you can use the phone, I wish you’d stop asking silly things like that. But I’d rather not listen . . . if you don’t mind I’m going to bed.”

Alone in the family room, Wade picked up the phone, but didn’t dial. *I’ll just have to find a way to help Jorge now and Amelia when she needs it, too. Diana’s right, why bother her?* He turned out the lights and walked to Diana’s room. She was in bed, smiling at the TV, which had a home video of a dog chasing its tail. When a commercial came on he said, “I didn’t call her after all.”

“Bravo.” She looked up and gave him a smile. “Come to bed,” she said, patting the space next to her.

26

In Wade's third month of jumping lessons, Edward had Wade take Artemis through a very slow warm-up. "That's it," the wiry New Zelander, about Wade's age, said. "Sit on her like a sack of potatoes. Move *with the horse*. Now that she's stepping out, okay kick her into a trot," Edward said, and Wade tightened his legs around her wide body. Artemis kept walking.

"Don't massage her with your heel, Wade, *kick* her with authority—she'll know what you want."

On Wade's command, Artemis leapt into a trot. Wade concentrated on posting each step.

"Come on round here," Edward commanded as he exchanged glances with Diana, who was watching from a small grandstand.

Wade brought Artemis around to where Edward was adjusting some jumps.

"Remember, you're continually giving your horse messages, the key is to make them the messages you want. Now, you've learned to ride rather later than some of the other chaps, but it's okay. Today we're going to show you can really jump."

As Diana watched silently, Edward said, "Start over these poles at a trot. They're set just the right distance apart for her to trot them."

Before long, Wade jumped over two poles raised at opposite ends so that the horse would jump at the lowest point, at the center of the 'X.' Edward asked, "Ever heard of a gymnastic?" He pointed to three similar jumps placed so that a horse would have to jump them one after the other, with only a step or two in between. "It's the perfect exercise for you now. I've set the jumps pretty low. Take Artemis to the rail and come back through the 'X's."

Wade brought her through the jumps, which was a little like being on a kiddy roller coaster, where you couldn't do much but hang on—a quick set up, hit the ground; up, ground; up, and it was over.

Edward walked up to Wade. "Artemis almost stopped on you, you know."

"Before the first jump?" Wade asked, remembering a hesitancy.

"Exactly. Make sure she's got energy in her trot *before* she starts. Put some leg on her."

Wade brought her through the gymnastic again. This time he was a little more ready for the staccato rhythm of sequential jumps, and his job, pushing her past her hesitancy.

Edward raised the jumps and Wade took her around a third time, again without incident.

Edward raised the jumps again, but this time when Wade brought Artie into the gymnastic, she stopped at the first jump. Wade was thrown forward and fell off onto the crossbars. He lay there, unhurt except for his pride. He looked over at Diana, who had averted her eyes.

“Don’t gawk over at the bleachers. Re-mount, straight away. That’s what I had to do in the Olympics—my horse quit and I flew into the jump. Seven years of hard work, gone in an instant. *Think!* What did you do wrong?” Edward asked, jerking Wade to his feet.

Wade brushed the dust off his riding breeches. “I thought I’d done everything the same.”

“You looked down. Good dancers never look at their feet, nor do good horsemen. Artie saw that the Xs were higher, and jumping three of them is a lot of work. She looked for any excuse to stop. Your glance down was all she needed.”

“She knows I looked down?”

“Of course. She knows everything you do on her back. Now get up and try again.” Edward lowered the fences. It was getting toward the end of the hour; Wade felt bruised and put out.

“Leg, leg, leg,” he said as Wade approached. “Eyes up.”

Artemis jumped like a dream—they sailed over the fences.

Edward put the fences higher again, to a little over two feet at the center of the ‘X’, which was as high as Wade had ever jumped. “All right. One last round to show you’re a real jumper. You can do it. Take her out to the rail and come round over these.”

As Wade rode Artemis toward the jumps, he concentrated on keeping his heels down. “Leg, leg, leg,” the trainer yelled again. Wade clamped his legs as

tightly as he could around the horse's middle as he approached the jumps. Just as he'd been taught, Wade let Artie pivot Wade's legs into jumping position, and felt the horse land, and leap forward again and land and finally one last leap and the landing, where Wade turned Artemis back to Edward at a trot.

"Good. I was so unsure of you getting to this point I almost didn't take you on as a student. I know people who've ridden all their lives who couldn't do that any better. You were together with her on all three jumps. And I'm not just pissing in your pocket."

Wade looked up at Diana. This time she was looking proudly at him. She came down from the grandstand and shook Edward's hand and kissed Wade. "Good work, both of you," she said and walked between them making the kind of upbeat small talk that so endeared her to Wade and, probably, he thought, to Edward as well.

27

On Tuesday, September 11, 2001, Diana's phone rang out of the dark.

Diana answered. "Mother! Is something the matter?"

Wade raised up on one arm.

Diana put her hand over the mouthpiece. "Turn on the TV!"

He found the remote and pushed the 'on' button.

Diana's voice went up an octave—"But you and Dad are fine?" Diana asked, almost out of control. "Okay, I'm turning it on now. Yes, I'll call you back. Yes, Mom. Yes, I will. Mom, I said I would!"

A picture of a two-towered skyscraper filled the screen. "The World Trade Center," Wade said. "I ate dinner there with Steve Snyderman after we closed a big sale."

The TV screen showed one of the towers being hit by a big jetliner; they replayed the airplane flying into the tower three times. Each time, after the crash Wade was mesmerized by the plane still embedded in the side of the building, with flames and black smoke billowing. The announcer said it was the jet fuel exploding. A word in the corner of the TV said LIVE. A pundit came on, someone Wade recognized from previous air tragedies, calling it "one of the worst accidents in aviation history. I hate to say this but we have to presume everyone on that plane, reported to have taken off from Boston this morning, is dead."

“It’s like a special effects movie, but . . .” Wade said, “It’s real. People are burning as we watch them.”

“Mom said one of the women in her prayer group was on the plane.” Diana shook her head as she stared at the screen and then at Wade. They were both still in bed, up on pillows and elbows. “There had to be children on that plane—can you imagine? I don’t want to!”

“Or in the building!” On the screen, firemen rushed in to keep the stairs open so those in the floors above the plane could escape. The elevators had stopped working on impact. An engineer who’d built the building called the station, warning that, with the heat, the tower might collapse. Paper and the gray remains of things that had burned—ashes from the fires above—were everywhere.

Suddenly the screen split and the announcer seemed confused. “Another plane has hit the second tower!” It was burning like a Roman candle.

“Did he just say *terrorism*—isn’t this an accident?” Diana asked.

Wade sat bolt upright. “He did. My God.”

“Let’s watch it in the family room.”

She made coffee and handed Wade a cup. The huge family room TV showed images of people on the top floors of the first tower jumping to sure death.

“My God, they’re jumping out of the top windows!” He impulsively called Amelia’s dorm, fifty miles from New York City; someone said she’d been in the photo lab since before dawn.

Diana said, “Sitting here peacefully on a beautiful day feels makes me feel guilty. *We are safe, aren’t we?*” Dazed people were streaming out of the towers in a surprisingly orderly fashion on the ground floor; firemen were continuing to rush inside and up. The announcers expressed fear that the first tower, at least, would collapse.

“I’m scared too. It must have been like this when JFK was shot, when we were kids,” Wade said. “I remember the adults watching the shooting over and over, watching Kennedy’s body suddenly slump, hoping what they saw somehow wasn’t true.”

Diana was more restless than he’d ever seen her, a different woman. “I have to keep reminding myself *we’re safe*. You’re safe, I’m safe, our families are *safe*.”

Wade hugged her, as much for himself as for her. He had customers in midtown Manhattan, but the only person he knew at the south end of New York was Galway Kinnell. He must live close to the Towers—the south tip of the island, where he taught and lived, couldn’t be more than twenty blocks across. Wade had Galway’s home number and wanted to call him. But the thought of calling him now didn’t feel right. What could someone say in the face of this?



The phone rang. It was Jorge, who had never called Wade at Diana’s before. He seemed so upset that Wade didn’t recognize his voice. “They’re not even going to open the stock market! My broker said if Enron stock didn’t go up

this week he'd sell me out. It was trading under 33 yesterday—it seems like just a month ago it was seventy. Who knows what it'll be when the market re-opens. I'm scared shitless. I look around at this house—Rita loves it and it's been so great for Mary.”

“Not now, Jorge, not now. You heard about the fourth plane, right?”

“The one in Pennsylvania?” Jorge's voice changed as he was able to talk about problems outside himself. “I'll bet the Air Force shot it down to keep it from Washington—they won't tell us of course. I heard Bush is up at forty-thousand feet on his way to Nebraska—*our hero!*”

“Mayor Giuliani *does* seem like a hero, leading folks in the streets. I've got to give it to that guy.”

“I guess so. Wade, I need to talk to you soon.”

“I know buddy. Right now's not good, with everything going on, okay?”

“Okay,” Jorge said.

“I'll talk to you soon,” Wade said, hanging up.



Diana made phone calls to friends in New York and Texas but, once he knew Amelia was safe Wade sat glued to the television. In the early afternoon, looking exhausted, hanging up from a call to her kids, she said to Wade, “I need to be with Beth and Robbie tonight. They're a little frightened and are asking for me. The school district didn't call school off—can you believe that? At any rate Rob is taking them out to dinner and then delivering them here. He thinks they'll

be here by seven.” She leaned over and hugged Wade. When they moved apart, she said, “I hate to ask you to leave, but I think it might be better if you’re not here then. It’s a time for the three of us to be alone.”

“That’ll be hard, but . . . I understand. I had to go home to feed Keats anyway; I’ll just stay there. Maybe we can have breakfast together after the kids are off to school tomorrow.”



Later that afternoon she said, “Let’s take a little time now for ourselves before we have to face the world, okay sweetie?” They curled up on the sofa. “Let’s reset to where we were before the planes—pretend it’s still yesterday. No early wake-up, no terrorists, no frantic calls from Jorge. What was the highlight of yesterday?”

“If I don’t say *when we made love* I’d be in trouble, right? But that’s it,” Wade said quickly.

“Too easy. Okay, except for *that*, what was the highlight of your day?”

What stood out? “Maybe with Artemis. I was fiddling with the combination lock and she licked my hand. It wasn’t actually a lick; she put her dry lips on my hand as I spun the dial on the lock. I never knew a horse would be intimate like that.”

Diana smiled. Some of the shadows retreated. “She loves you, she does. Who would have ever thought you’d become a horse person?”

“What was *your* favorite moment?”

“In bed. I was playing possum when you brought out that poem. You used someone else’s poem to seduce me, you rascal! You found a good poem, I remember that.”

“I’ve still got it in my pocket. Here.” Diana read the poem again:

Bedtime by Nils Peterson

If we have quarreled our bodies wait
patient as horses. At last their owners
huffy and proud set off leaving
the sweet beasts to each other.
They turn, nuzzle, and flank to flank speak
the eloquent touching language of the dumb.

“But we weren’t quarreling,” she reminded him.

“I guess I should have saved it for another time.”

She hit his arm playfully.

The poem was still hanging in the air when the phone rang. “Should we answer it? Wade asked.

“With kids there’s no choice.” It was Jorge again. He was slurring his words. “Sor to keep botherin you,” he said.

“What’s happened to you?” Wade asked.

“I waned to aks you somethin’ very impohtant.”

Wade started to ask him if he’d been drinking, but why? It was obvious. He’d never seen Jorge drink anything but an occasional glass of wine or beer.

“Wade?” Jorge said, almost a cry.

“I’m right here buddy. What’s up?”

“We’re so thankful for that money you lent us, but . . . with all the margin calls it’s run out. We’re broke again. Rita wanted me to ask you once more if you can help us save the house.”

Wade hesitated. He knew Diana could hear what he was saying, so he measured his words. “Jorge, I’ll try to help you and Rita any way I can. But I’ve less than four thousand dollars to borrow against in my IRA. When the market opens up again, even that may be gone.”

“You’re right about that. My broker says, when the market reopens, it’s not going to be pretty.”

“So, how do you get blood out of a turnip?” Wade asked.

“Is Diana listening?”

“Diana’s pretty upset. One of her Mom’s friends was killed. We’re counting our blessings one minute and scared the next. It’s not a good time to make decisions.”

“My broker said he would sell me out.”

“Will that leave you enough to pay off your down payment?”

Jorge hesitated. “No,” he said softly.

Wade took a deep breath. “Look—get out of the house. Take Rita for a walk to the Palo Alto Café. Buy her a latté. I used to walk there all the time—it’s a great place—one of the charms of the neighborhood.”

“And then what?” asked Jorge.

“Things always got better, just for the walking and the camaraderie . . . and time. Give it a try.”

“If I do that will you meet first thing in the morning? I think I can get through this if you’ll agree to that.”

“Okay, buddy, we can meet at Palo Alto Café at seven. Can you do that?”

“Okay, I’ll set the alarm. Gu bye.” Jorge sounded like he was about to crash.

28

Wade enjoyed getting back to his own house in time of crisis. Keats, bursting in from the back yard where he'd been all day, jumped excitedly and wagged his tail wildly, then brought an old dishtowel, trying to get Wade to play tug o'war. Right-handed, Wade always won, but it was a fair fight if he used his left hand. Tonight, left-handed, try as he might, he couldn't dislodge his beagle from the towel.

Toward the end of the evening, he couldn't help himself from turning on the ten o'clock news. The anchorman said it was "The worst attack on America in history. The world will never be the same." They re-showed pictures of the firemen running up into the towers—all presumed dead. Wade wanted to find some way of thinking about it that made any sense at all, but he came up empty. As a young man he'd doubted if there was evil in the world, but he'd gradually accepted that there was. Still . . . the idea that people could hate America so much that they'd give their lives to kill people who were just going about their business . . . My God, what could justify this?

He muted the volume and sat at the kitchen counter, fingering the bills he should pay, but couldn't.

He wondered if he could write a poem about this day, but no, it wasn't his to write. It belonged to those most affected—New Yorkers. *Galway will write*

one, assuming he's still with us. Wade said a silent prayer for Galway and all the people of Manhattan.

He'd put on his pajamas and had just settled in for the ten o'clock news when he heard a knock on the door. He peered through the peephole at . . . Rita! He quickly opened the door. She was wearing a long khaki-colored trench coat, buttoned all the way up.

"What's up? Where's Jorge?" he asked her.

"He's sleeping. I saw your light—may I come in?"

"Sure. Can I take your coat?"

"No, that's fine," she said. "How about a glass of wine?"

He opened a bottle of Chardonnay. "Jorge called earlier—he sounded about as upset as I've ever heard him."

She seemed peculiarly nervous as she took her seat, shaking her head. "I've never seen him drink like that. He's sure we're going to lose the house, the best thing that's ever happened to us. Mary's asthma—or whatever it was, the doctors never made up their minds—just disappeared when we moved in. And Jorge—for the first time he seemed to feel equal to you gringos . . ." She laughed nervously.

When Wade didn't laugh along with her, they both looked over at the muted television, showing the millionth picture of the towers falling, collapsing into rubble. People running blindly through dust and paper, trying to cover their faces with their hands. "I guess it's all gone," she said.

“Jorge will pull through. He always does.”

“He’s not the same guy. When I got home today from Mary’s school he was drinking—watching Jerry Springer! You won’t believe what he said. ‘Even though we have more money and no violence, sometimes I feel just like those guys on the show. Jerry Springer!’”

“He’s meeting me first thing tomorrow,” Wade said.

“That’s good. He always wondered why you couldn’t save his job at SnyderSound. But that’s over—you’re all he has now.” When Wade didn’t respond, she slumped a bit on her stool. “Ever since my family had to leave Cuba, I’ve been waiting for things to get good again. They finally did—Billy did just what he promised—and now this. Who would have figured Enron would have problems? And now terrorists?”

“I’m so sorry, Rita.”

“You really *are* our only hope now, Wade.”

“I’m not sure what I can do. I wish I had more money.”

“That’s okay.” She breathed deeply, seeming to relax. “This wine tastes good. Can I have a few drops more?” She smiled playfully.

As he filled her glass, she looked up at him from the side of her eyes, hands on the top button of her coat. “Have you been wondering what I’m wearing under the coat?” she asked flirtatiously.

“I was afraid to ask.”

“For *auld Lang syne*.” Slowly she unbuttoned the top button of the trench coat. “It’s what I wore to the first party.”

“Oh, I recognize it. The one Billy liked so much.”

“That’s what everybody else noticed. What *I* noticed was *you*. You kept sneaking peeks.” She laughed as she unbuttoned the rest of the buttons, showing her breasts filling the red bra and her tanned midriff below.

Wade wasn’t shocked; somehow he’d expected—hoped for?—this. He was initially protected by the solid counter between them but, as she dropped her coat he felt compelled to move toward her. But just as he rounded the counter the phone rang. He stopped and picked it up. “Just a second,” he said.

29

Jorge had to get up and go to the bathroom. Even in his stupor, he appreciated having a true master bedroom with attached bath. In this house he was going to have to leave.

He raised the toilet seat and urinated, but that didn't relieve his discomfort. He knelt and threw up in a rush, and then came an onset of diarrhea. Even his body was betraying him.

What was happening! Some people—nobody knew exactly who—had attacked the World Trade Towers, and his world, too, had fallen apart. Where was Rita? He'd crashed early. She was here when he blanked out—*Where could she have gone?*

Stumbling to the master closet, Jorge groped for his robe and threw it on. He quietly opened the door to Mary's room. She was sleeping on her side, looking like the little angel she was. No more breathing problems. *How could a mother leave such a child in the middle of the night?*

In the kitchen the bottle of Tequila was still on the counter. He poured a little into a glass and drank it. *That'll settle my stomach.*

He noticed a light on in the garage. *I thought I'd turned that off.* He looked in—both Hondas were still there. *So she's somewhere in the neighborhood.* Ever since Rita flirted with Billy at Diana's party, he couldn't trust her . . . any further than he could throw her . . . as he thought of the cliché he

pictured throwing her across the garage. Suppose his suspicions were true, that she'd slept with Billy to get Jorge the job. *Think that through.* And now she's persuaded him to buy a house half a block from Wade's.

Billy wasn't the only one who'd stared at Rita's red bra. Wade too! He recalled Wade at Diana's party—cooler than Billy, but just as curious.

Jorge suddenly knew where she was: around the corner at Wade's. Fucking his brains out! As he snapped the garage light off he had the urge to run over there, right now. Catch them in the act. *No, stop this!—keep cool.*

In the living room he poured lighter fluid on the logs in the fireplace. He stuck a match and watched the flames grow. *A slut. I married a whore.*

He went back into the kitchen and dialed Wade's number.

30

Wade picked up the phone, but there was nobody on the other end of the line. Then he heard some breathing and a voice, mumbling. “Jorge?” he said.

Rita stood up and straightened her skirt.

Jorge said something Wade couldn’t understand.

“Jorge, you’re drunk!”

Rita grabbed her coat and pulled it around her.

Jorge managed to get one sentence out clearly, “Where the hell is my wife?”

“How should I know? Just get yourself some sleep,” said Wade. He tried to make his voice sound as soothing as possible. “Look, buddy, I’ll be seeing you in just a few hours. Go to bed.” He hung up.

Rita buttoned her coat. “I’d better get back over there.”

“You’ll be okay? If he sees you in that outfit he’ll think the worst.”

“I can change in the garage. I left a pair of sweats there, and unlocked the side door. Don’t worry, really. I’ve been handling this guy for fifteen years.”

“I’ll walk you home?”

“No, not a good idea.”

“Just to the corner?”

“Do you have a long coat? We don’t want you traipsing around the neighborhood in your jammies.”

He grabbed a raincoat and opened the door for her. At some level, Wade felt that he'd been spared. He could not remember ever turning a woman down—it was part of some unwritten male code, *but maybe I'm outgrowing it*. It would have hurt Diana so. Still, he wasn't at all sure what he would have done if the phone hadn't rung . . . he could still picture Rita's near-nakedness.

At the corner she stopped and said, "I wish I could kiss you goodnight. You've really been great to us—you'd deserve anything I could have given you. But 'never kiss at the garden gate; love may be blind but the neighbors ain't.'"

He laughed.

"Do what you can, okay?"

"You know I will."

"*A Dios.*"

31

Jorge drained the Tequila bottle into a tall glass. He threw the bottle in the garbage, where it shattered. If Rita were over at Wade's house, of course he would lie about it. *Take it easy. She'll show up.*

He took one more slug of the Tequila and went back to the master bath. He silently checked on Mary again. Looking at her sleeping peacefully, he wondered how in the world Rita could leave what was so wonderful. He heard a noise in the front of the house. It sounded like a door opening quietly; a stealthy, sneaky sound.

He went toward the garage—he could see a light coming under the door. Hadn't he turned that light out? An intruder? This fancy town was supposed to be so safe, but maybe something had happened to Rita. Maybe he had been wrong to call her those awful names.

He grabbed a knife from the kitchen, took a deep breath and opened the door to the garage. "Who's there?"

He saw a blur in the far corner, which he slowly recognized as his wife, with her back to him. Because a car was in the way, he could see only her bare shoulders.

"Marita Torres Calderon, what in God's name are you doing?" he asked.

She didn't turn around. "I was just changing," she said. "I've been on a walk."

“On a walk! Rita, turn around,” he said, suddenly feeling very sober. His voice wasn’t loud, but it was authoritative, barely concealing his fury.

He moved toward her. “Turn around,” he said, reasonable and resolute.

“Oh Jorge, not right now. Just go inside, okay? It was a long walk, I was all sweaty and I wanted to change before you saw me.”

Part of him wanted to go inside, just as she asked. He could hear his mother saying, “Marriage is forgiveness.” But he pressed on. “I’ll go in once you turn around.”

“You want that really?” she asked ruefully. “Are you sure?”

When she said it that way, he was positive he *didn’t* want her to turn around.

Finally she started to turn, moving from behind the car. He asked, “Where the hell have you been?”

“I told you—I went for a walk,” she said, and stopped turning.

When he said, “Yeah, sure,” she continued turning toward him until she was fully facing him, naked as the day she was born. *She’s been with Wade, sure as shit.*

“My sweat suit’s right there,” she said carefully, looking at the folded cotton on the workbench.

“You god-damned slut!”

His rushed across the garage and, with his left hand, grabbed her around the back. He always thought of her as strong, but as he pulled her toward him she seemed small, like a doll.

His right hand, holding the knife, seemed to take on a life of its own.

He heard her say, "Jorge, love, no." Her hand went up to stop him but she was too late and too weak and he saw the knife enter her and withdraw and stab her again.

And again, until she fell over toward him onto the cement.

32

Wade was awakened from a deep sleep by the telephone. “Who is this?” he asked as Keats came to the bed, tail wagging.

“Sergeant Ames, from the Palo Alto Police Department.”

“What’s going on?” Wade’s mind flashed on the image of the falling towers from the day before, but there was no way this could be about that.

“Mr. Middleton? We’d like you to come down to the station.”

Wade felt a sense of dread. He got up on an elbow. “What’s going on?”

“Something we’d rather not discuss over the phone. It involves your neighbors, the Calderons. It’s best discussed down here.”

“Are they in trouble? Can’t you tell me *anything*?”

“It would be better if you came down. Ask for Sergeant Ames.”



Sgt. Ames was a fit middle-aged officer with a full moustache. He offered coffee but Wade refused. He led Wade to a bare interview room and indicated a chair. “I take it you’re an acquaintance of Jorge Calderon.”

“Yes, he’s my friend.”

“I regret to inform you he died last night.”

Wade gasped. “He’s . . . *Jorge* is . . . dead?” He pictured Rita turning the corner to the house where Jorge waited, just hours ago. *Jorge is dead.*

The officer leaned back in his chair. “Yes. Sure I can’t get you that cup of coffee?”

Wade nodded dumbly.

The sergeant stuck his head out the door and asked someone to bring coffee. “Mr. Calderon committed suicide,” he said to Wade.

Wade stared at the policeman’s large, perfectly groomed moustache as if it could help process this information. “I was going to meet with him for coffee this morning.”

The sergeant’s bushy eyebrows raised.

“Is Rita okay—his wife? And his daughter Mary?”

An aide handed him a Styrofoam cup of coffee. When Wade took a sip, the thin man continued, carefully and kindly, “Mr. Middleton, the daughter’s okay, but not the wife. It appears that Mr. Calderon stabbed her, fatally, before committing suicide.”

“Oh my God!” Wade dropped the coffee, splashing it on his trousers. The cup bounced off the table, and splashed on the floor.

Sgt. Ames motioned toward to a paper towel dispenser. “Very early, at 3:47 AM, his six-year-old daughter dialed 911. She found them in the garage. She hasn’t said ten words since.”

“Mary. My God!” His mind flashed on Mary’s slow movement of her Monopoly piece—that silly silver top hat—so carefully moving from one property to another. Little Mary! *How* could she get through this?

“We have her here with the psychologist. When she heard your name, she asked for Beth . . . your daughter?”

“Beth is Diana’s daughter . . . Diana’s my . . . friend.”

“Well, Beth and you were the only people Mary wanted to see. I couldn’t explain on the phone. I apologize for keeping you in the dark.”

Wade rubbed his eyes. “Give me a minute.” He stood up. “I thought yesterday was a nightmare, and now *this* . . . I’d like to call Diana.”

“I was going to ask you to do that. Ask her to bring her daughter too. You can use that phone. Can I tell the psychologist you’ll see Mary? Mrs. Hillman thinks that little girl needs to see someone she knows. Imagine coming across the bodies of your mother and father . . .”

“Of course I’ll see her,” Wade said.

“Make your phone call. I’ll be right back.”

Wade dialed Diana’s number. “Oh, hi, Wade,” Diana said. “I’m just walking out the door to take Beth to school.”

“There’s been an accident,” he said. “With Jorge and Marita. They’re dead.” He said the last word incredulously, as if he didn’t believe it.

Diana let out a gasp.

“I’m in the Palo Alto police station.”

“What are you doing there?”

“They have Mary here. Can you come down?”

“Why me?”

“Mary’s been asking for Beth. The police asked me to call you. Honey, Mary found her parents dead this morning, in their garage.”

“I just hate to drag Beth into this.”

“Diana, please come down and bring Beth.”

“Just a second.” She covered the mouthpiece; he could hear her talking to Beth.

Finally she said, “Okay, I’ll be right over.”



Sgt. Ames led Wade to the small room where Mary sat, still in her robe and teddy bear slippers, with her head down. He introduced Wade to Mrs. Hillman and left. Wade glanced at the psychologist, who seemed earnest in her brown blazer. But his eyes quickly moved to Mary, who wasn’t moving at all. “Hi sweetie,” he said. She didn’t look up.

“She’s in shock. We’ve been concentrating on her breathing,” Mrs. Hillman said. “She did drink a whole cup of water. She’s a very good girl. She says her name’s not Mary.”

“What is your name?” Wade asked.

She looked up at him briefly. “Marita.”

Wade shook his head in recognition. “Oh, I remember something about that. That’s her mother’s name, so she went by Rita and called the little girl Mary,” Wade said.

The child continued to stare at the floor.

“Beth should be here any minute,” Wade said, hoping to get a smile. But Mary—no, Marita—he’d have to train himself to call her that—didn’t change expressions.

A doctor with a stethoscope looped around her neck, who looked enough like Mrs. Hillman to be her older sister, came in. “Could you give me a moment?” she asked, and Mrs. Hillman and Wade went out into the hallway.

“Can you believe it took over an hour to get a doctor in here? Let me give the caseworker a call while I have a minute. She’s trying to find next-of-kin.” Mrs. Hillman ducked into an empty office, leaving Wade alone in the hall.

The sergeant approached. “Mrs. Buchanan is here.”

Diana and Beth came up the hall with Sgt. Ames. Wade and Diana came together for a long silent hug.

“How’s she doing?” Diana asked.

“She’s asking for Beth, again—I’m so glad you brought her,” Wade said. “As soon as the psychologist comes back we can see her.”

“All you told me is that Jorge and Rita are dead. What happened?”

“The sergeant says Jorge stabbed her, then took his own life.”

Diana let out another almost-inaudible gasp. She brought her hand to her mouth. “Why did he do that?”

“All I can think about is what more I could have done. I think he died hating me.”

Diana raised her eyebrows, confused, as the psychologist joined them.

“Let’s not leave her alone too long,” the psychologist said.

Wade quickly introduced Diana to Mrs. Hillman, who took them into the small room where Marita was lying down on an exam table, still in her slippers. Wade could tell right off that they’d given her a sedative.

Beth walked over to her.

“She’s using her given name—Marita,” Wade said.

Beth hugged her. “It’s okay, Marita.

“Mommy was all bloody,” the little girl said flatly. She seemed very sleepy. “She didn’t have any clothes on.”

Diana and Beth gasped in unison.

“Your mommy loved you very much,” Wade said.

“Loves,” interjected the psychologist quickly.

Wade wondered what weird theory drove the psychologist to lie to a child.

“Where is Mommy?” She was almost asleep.

“It might be hard to see her today. But don’t worry, you’re safe,” said Mrs. Hillman.

Diana stood apart from the others. She looked like she was fighting back tears.

As Marita shut her eyes, Mrs. Hillman wrapped her in a blanket.

“She can finally rest,” the psychologist said. Let’s go where we can talk.” Motioning toward the door, she said, “We can meet in my office.”

Wade, the sergeant, Beth and Diana huddled around Mrs. Hillman's desk. She turned to Wade. "So far the case worker hasn't turned up much. The closest living relative seems to be her father's mother in El Paso, but she's in a nursing home. Unless we can come up with a plan, we'll have to send her to the county hospital. They do the best they can over there, but someone she knows would be much better—"

Wade looked at Diana. Beth said, "Mom, everything you've ever taught me says it's our duty."

"Honey, you have school," Diana said.

"I'll keep up with school. Don't worry about that."

Diana turned to Mrs. Hillman. "What would the long-term solution be?"

The psychologist looked down at her desk. "We normally find a relative who can take in a child like this but . . . every situation is different."

"Maybe she could stay with me," said Wade.

Mrs. Hillman quickly said, "We discourage opposite-sex single people in situations like this. Especially non-relatives."

"Diana, maybe you and I ought to talk alone," said Wade.

They rose and left the room, leaving Beth behind, wide brown eyes pleading. In the hallway, Diana said, "I just don't know. I've tried to make everything stable so Beth can have a great sophomore year. An orphaned child . . ."

Wade reached out to pull her toward him, but she backed away. “I wish I could take her in,” he said. “If she stays with you, I’d help in any way I could.”

Diana seemed lost in thought, almost as if she didn’t hear him. “If I *did* take her in, there’d have to be some end to it.”

Wade touched her shoulder. “I know. But I can’t imagine her going to the county hospital, not knowing anyone . . .”

Diana backed away. “I don’t know what to say . . . It’s never smart to make long-term commitments on the spur of the moment.”

“I agree,” Wade said.

Diana stood up with her hands apart, kind of in surrender. “I guess she *has* to stay with us tonight.”



When they told Beth that Mary—now Marita—was coming home with her “just until they can find a relative,” she was overjoyed. The psychologist smiled as well.

As Wade and Diana walked down the corridor, Sergeant Ames asked them to step into the room where he’d first talked to Wade. “Before you go, there’s one thing I was curious about,” he said.

After they sat down at the small table, the sergeant said, “The phone records show only one call from Jorge Calderon’s house last night—to Mr. Middleton’s home at 11:37. What was that?”

Wade looked at Diana, who was expressionless.

“He was upset,” Wade said. “Rita was . . . Rita had come over ten minutes earlier.”

Diana backed away from the table.

Wade finished by saying, “She went right home.”

“But she ended up naked?” Diana asked.

“Not with me,” Wade blurted.

Sergeant Ames said, “Thank you.” He looked from Wade to Diana and then to Wade again. “It just seemed odd. I was curious.”

33

It was almost noon when Wade watched Diana's SUV, with Beth and Marita strapped in, leave the police station. She didn't look back.

After Wade left Steve Snyderman a voicemail telling him what had happened to Jorge and that he, himself, wasn't coming in to work, Wade was drawn to the Indian restaurant where he'd eaten so many times with Jorge.

He headed down Middlefield Road to Mountain View almost on auto-pilot. When he sat down in the booth, the Indian waitress asked, "Where's your buddy?"

"Jor— Jor—" Wade started, but he couldn't get his friend's name out. He stared at the small red dot in the middle of the woman's forehead and whispered, "Jorge's dead. He died last night, unexpectedly."

The young woman put her hand on his shoulder. Wade felt himself crying in some combination of grief and guilt. "It's okay, it's okay, it's okay." The quiet tears grew to unexpected sobs. "Let me get you something. I'll be right back."

She brought him naan, dipping sauce, and tea, and sat down in the booth across from him.

"He was so full of life," she said. "What happened?"

He looked into her eyes and said, "It was a terrible accident. That's what it was, a terrible accident. His wife died, too."

“We must give thanks for their lives,” she said, taking Wade’s hand. “It was the will of Allah, the will of God as you say.” They sat like that for a long time.

▣

That afternoon Wade roughhoused with Keats and watched TV: images of New York Fire Department heroism, images of Osama bin Laden, images of the worldwide sympathy and support for the United States. Around four he called Diana. He asked if he might go there for dinner, but she said, “Maybe tomorrow.”

“Isn’t there *anything* I can do?” he asked.

When she said, “Not really,” Wade fed Keats, closed the blinds in his bedroom, and was asleep within half an hour.

▣

The trip to Diana’s the next day didn’t go well. Shortly after he arrived, as they sat in her family room, she said, “Wade, I can’t get my mind off that phone call from Jorge’s house to yours. What happened?”

After a long silence, he decided to come clean.

“Rita came to visit me after Jorge fell asleep that night,” he said.

Diana looked so hurt and shocked that Wade was immediately sorry he’d told her. She stared at him, her eyes sharp. “She did? Why? What about? *What happened?*”

“Nothing ha- happened.”

“Nothing happened,” she repeated incredulously. “No seduction?”

“We just . . . talked. She was worried they’d lose their house, and even more worried about Jorge.”

“You’re not making me feel any better.” Diana folded her arms. “It might be best if you left now.”

“I told you nothing happened.”

“After what I went through with Rob, having you involved in something like this is the last thing I need.” Arms still folded, Diana stood up.

Tentatively, he stood too. “Diana, you’re not being fair,” he said.

“No Wade, this is the best thing right now.” She walked him to the door. “Beth and Marita are settled in. This is best.”

“The second that door closes behind me I’ll miss you. I can feel it already,” he said.

“I’ll miss you too, Wade. But I can’t deal with you right now.”



Wade’s next two days were miserable. He had to screen his calls because he didn’t want to talk to the reporters. He hadn’t had his name in the paper, and he wanted to keep it that way. Also he was out-of-the loop about Marita. It was wrong for Diana to force him to face this alone. *Why couldn’t she at least listen?*

Fortunately, Steve was at a finance meeting in Reno and Wade was able to avoid people at work. He thought of little but Jorge and Rita, and wanting to see Diana and Marita again. Diana didn’t return his calls, except once, when he was at work.

For consolation and wisdom Wade looked to poetry, but only John Keats's odes helped. He marked "Ode to a Nightingale" to read to Diana.

My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains
My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk, . . .

Modern poetry did nothing to console him. It had been the same after his father's death—only John Keats, who was only 26 at his own death, seemed worthwhile—how did he know so much so young? Keats the beagle, though, couldn't help now. In the evening, when the dog brought the dishtowel, Wade turned him out.

Diana finally called. She said Marita had temporarily moved into Beth's room. In the same detached tone, she said Beth had talked Diana into inviting Wade for dinner on Saturday, because Marita was asking for him. But Diana made it clear—"only for dinner."

Wade called Amelia, but she wasn't in her dorm. She called back and left a message on his answering machine. *He didn't look forward to telling her about the whole mess.*

When Friday night finally came and he arrived at Diana's with a manila folder under his arm, he was surprised that Marita met him at the door.

"Hi, I hear you're back in school," Wade said. *She looks like a miniature of her mother, but scared. Shoulders down, circles under her eyes. He'd never seen Rita scared.*

"Yes," she said shyly, as Diana joined them.

"Are you staying in Beth's room?" he asked, watching her twist her hair.

She moved partially behind Diana's skirt. Marita cheered up a bit as Beth came and quietly took her hand. Beth said a polite hello to Wade and walked the girl down the hall.

"Come on into the family room. Dinner's almost on," Diana said.

Following, Wade said, "She's doing better than I expected."

"Yes," said Diana, "I'm very proud of her."

Diana and, in his turn, Wade, described everyone—Beth, Robbie, Marita, Amelia, Rob, even Billy and Jolene—as 'fine.'

As they seated themselves in the family room they both praised Mayor Guliani's courage in New York City, and wondered aloud how the country would change now.

Wade had great hopes that the poetry that he'd found so comforting would make Diana feel better, too. "You'll like it, it's some of the best poetry ever written in English," he said. But as he pulled the poem from the folder she was strangely silent. Still, he stuck to his plan and started to read the last three stanzas of "Ode to a Nightingale."

"Thou wast not born for death, immortal bird!
 No hungry generations tread thee down
 The voice I hear this passing night was heard
 In ancient days by emperor and clown
 Perhaps the self-same song that found a path
 Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home,
 She stood in tears among the alien corn . . ."

Diana interrupted. "Please stop, Wade," she said.

Wade folded the poem and returned it to the manila folder.

“Sorry, I just can’t. Also I’ve decided not to discuss any more about what happened to Jorge, or anything about that night or Rita, so don’t bring any of that up. I’ve spent a lot of time praying—I even went to church two mornings last week. Maybe this is all part of God’s plan; perhaps little Marita has been put in my life for a reason. They’re even helping at the law firm—Billy’s setting up a trust fund and handling the legalities.

“This might be the perfect time to give you this, then,” Wade said, pulling an official-looking document from his folder. “It forgives the loan I made to Jorge—it seemed to be the least I could do for Marita.”

“Wade,” Diana said, startled. “Can you afford to do this? Think of Amelia. She has needs too.”

“I’ve thought it all out. I’ll find ways to pay for Amelia’s grad school or whatever. Maybe this way they can keep the house in Marita’s name. It’ll be a good investment. No matter what, I decided I want to do this, so I had a lawyer draw this up and had it notarized.”

“Maybe she’ll have something for her education, at least.” Diana put the paper under a paperweight on the coffee table. “Billy is working with Enron, telling them that he expects them to do right by ‘the adorable little girl,’ as he calls her.

After a long silence, Diana said, “So anyway I’m staying active. I’m riding and praying and doing all I can to keep myself sane.” After another silence she

continued, "When I think of that night and you and Rita I almost get sick to my stomach."

"Let me explain about that."

"Maybe some day, Wade. Now all I want to do is get through the day and take care of myself, my kids, and little Marita."



Wade rode Artemis around the creek after work, where he mouthed long soliloquies into the horse's ear about how wrong Diana was to not listen to him. He didn't like to jump horses alone out of fear of an accident, so he limited his jumping to his Saturday morning lessons. But he rode almost daily.

Early the next week, coming back from riding, he saw Jolene in her car.

She rolled down her window. "Hey Wade, good to see you. Billy and I are thinking of you a lot—he's grateful that you signed that paper. He's setting up a trust fund for that little girl, you know."

Guilt is a great motivator, Wade thought, but he said, "I heard that."

"I'm so glad you're getting Artemis out."

"She's wonderful. I can't thank you enough."

"Will you be riding her in the opening hunt?"

"I doubt it . . . you know, with all that's happened."

"I think Diana still wants to go . . . you should talk to her," Jolene said.

He called and asked Diana about the hunt.

"I might go. I haven't missed an opening hunt in fifteen years," she said.

“I’m riding Artemis regularly, but . . . I don’t have a trailer,” Wade said.

“Oh, there’s no reason why we can’t go down together. Come over early Sunday morning; we’ll get you dressed and off we’ll go. I keep finding your riding gear, and I opened the laundry last week to find one of your shirts and a stock tie. Just bring your boots and you’ll be all set.”

“How’s Marita?”

“She’s slowly coming back to life. On bad days she looks like she’s been hit by a train, but Beth is so good with her. The law firm’s helping, too. Billy got the County Coroner to put down ‘unknown,’ rather than ‘possible suicide,’ so that Enron insurance money should come through.”

Wade raised his eyebrows. “I should be involved in these decisions. There must be something I can do.”

“Oh, Wade, there really isn’t anything you can do yet. Marita seldom leaves Beth’s room except for school, and Billy’s got the paperwork under control. These two weeks have been hard on all of us. Come by at five on Sunday morning; I’ll have hot coffee.”

34

Very early Sunday, long before the first sign of the sun, Diana met Wade at the door in her Jodhpurs and a starched white shirt. “Right on time,” she said. “You’re sure you still want to go?”

“Would I get up this early otherwise?”

She led him down the hall to her bedroom, where she had laid out his hunt clothes. Her fast walk and crisp demeanor telegraphed to him *don’t talk about anything personal*. It was hard to believe all the loving hours they’d spent in this room.

As she approached the bedroom she said, “You’re not going to worry about your liberal friends who get so upset about the poor little fox?”

“It’s hard to get a bleeding heart about coyotes. They eat pets and calves.” *Keep the conversation at a distance*. “I look forward to this. I love the pageantry. When I’m out there focused on something that’s been done the same way for centuries, time stands still. I think of nothing else for three hours.”

“I used to think if it weren’t for me, you wouldn’t ride. I thought you would have stopped by now.” She looked at him speculatively.

“You got me hooked on the hunt,” he said.

Wade felt awkward undressing in front of her now and went into the walk-in closet to put on his breeches, knee socks and a white collarless shirt. He sat down on the tile ledge of her Jacuzzi tub so that Diana could fix his stock tie.

She was treating him brusquely and couldn't get the stock pin through the tie. "Be careful with that thing," he said.

She didn't laugh. "Here." She handed him two small safety pins. "Pin the ends to your shirt so they don't flap around."

She started working on her own tie and the pin broke through her blouse; she pricked herself just below her neck. He thought he saw a tear in her eye. "I just don't want to get blood on the blouse," she said, holding the material away from her skin.

They filled the elevator with folding chairs, hunting jackets, water buckets for the horses, and a picnic cooler. They loaded up the SUV, and headed for the ranch.

They had a hard time getting Gray Cloud into the trailer again; they gave up and loaded Artemis first. Then Gray Cloud marched right in.

"Companionship," Diana said, shaking her head.

"Maybe horses know best," Wade said.

She ignored his remark and pulled out her keys. "It's two and a half hours, past Gilroy." She held the keys pensively. "If you're going to drive, you will go super-slow around all the corners, won't you?"

"Yes, dear," he said, taking the keys and climbing into the driver's seat. An unexpected feeling of them being an old married couple swept over him. They entered the Freeway without conversation.

When Highway 280 twisted east, the sun was rising over Mount Hamilton, through thin clouds. The windshield filled with stunning pinks, yellows, and blues; one of the most dramatic sunrises Wade had ever seen. Wade broke the silence. “It makes me want to get up early like this every morning.”

“Yes, I guess so.”

“How’s it going with Marita?” he asked.

“She’s making progress . . . I kind of hoped to get my mind off those worries today. Maybe we *can* forget everything for a few hours here. Opening hunt has always been one of my favorite days of the year.”

Diana took a huge breath. “Now that we have everything and Gray Cloud and Artie are safe in back, and you driving so well, I’ll admit this is a nice moment. You did bring the big plastic water jugs for the horses, didn’t you?”

“Yep, they’re in the tack compartment. The sunrise—it’s hard to believe it’s real.”

“It’s the pink next to the yellow that’s unexpected. It gives a girl hope,” she said with a little laugh.



About an hour further south, she turned to Wade in a completely different tone. “Wade, what *were* you doing with Rita that night?” she asked without rancor, like a friend.

“Nothing,” he said.

She shook her head. Miles of countryside passed.

“If she hadn’t ended up naked in her garage, maybe I could believe you, but I just can’t believe nothing happened,” Diana said.

“She was worried about Jorge, who normally doesn’t drink at all. He was passed out at home. She just needed a friend.”

“What was she wearing?”

“Why do you ask? She was wearing a trench coat, buttoned all the way up.”

“That’s a long way from naked,” Diana said. “Did the trench coat stay on?”

“No, after a glass of wine . . . “

Diana shook her head. “*Oh*, after a glass of wine. And then?”

“Underneath she was wearing that outfit she wore to the first party at your place, the one that got Billy all excited.”

“Who could forget!” Diana didn’t laugh. “So she was there to seduce you.”

Wade took a deep breath. “Maybe . . . okay, probably . . . she kept saying how much she appreciated what I’d done for them. I know they needed more help, and—”

“And?”

“It was a *Deus ex machina*. Just as she removed the coat, Jorge called.”

“Did she turn you on?”

Wade wasn’t sure what to say; Diana looked so scornful.

Finally he said, “We never kissed, if that’s what you mean . . . if you had the evening on film you wouldn’t cringe at anything I did.”

Diana took a huge breath. “I don’t know whether to believe you or not.”

Wade glanced over at Diana. “When Jorge called, Rita buttoned right back up. The scene finished before it began.”

“Then how *in hell* did she end up naked?”

Wade took a deep breath himself now. “I wonder about that all the time. I don’t know for sure—she wouldn’t let me walk her home. She said she could handle Jorge. The police said she had a jogging suit in the garage. I imagine she was changing.”

“Okay, say for a minute I believe you. There’s still another question. What *would* have happened if Jorge hadn’t called?”

“I know what you’d like me to say, Diana, but . . . I just don’t know. I hope I’d be strong enough to resist—and I love you.”

For miles she didn’t say anything.

Then she said, staring out the window, “This is a pretty time of year . . . the first tinge of green in the hills.”

35

Wade maneuvered the rig onto smaller and smaller rural roads—the last ones were dirt—until they reached the ranch. They were early; only three other rigs were already parked, including the hunt truck with its yelping hounds. While Diana and Wade were unloading the horses, the Master came by in a white lab coat like Diana's with Bloody Marys, his specialty. Diana passed, but Wade took one. Peppery, good.

Within an hour, forty hunters were mounted in their hunting coats. The Master shouted, "Field, please." When the Huntsman released the hounds, the horses perked up. "We're going to the south part of the ranch to start. Four or five coyotes were spotted there yesterday."

Separated into three fields, the riders held their restless horses to a walk as the processional moved to the center of the ranch, behind the hounds. The land was soft after an early rain.

"Everything smells so fresh," Diana said.

"I love it when we get into a new field with the mist still clinging to the earth," Wade replied, holding Artie back.

When they arrived in the middle of a large field with a few scrub oak trees, the Huntsman cast the hounds in larger and larger circles around him. The hounds tried to catch a scent in the tall grass. Wade and Diana and the others rode behind the Huntsman and the Master, waiting.

As the hounds went over a rise to the west, they started ‘giving tongue;’ they were on the fresh scent of a coyote. They yelped frantically. It was as if this were a movie, and someone suddenly said, “Lights, Camera . . . Action!”

Artie took off behind the hounds at top speed. Wade kept as much of his legs gripped around Artie as he could. Diana yelled from behind him, “No rules now Wade, *just go.*”

He could see a coyote not thirty yards ahead, followed by the hounds. *Keep your heels down in your stirrups and you’ll stay on.* What surprised him was how relaxed he felt, joining Artemis’ rhythm in the middle of all the excitement.

The lone coyote was a little bigger than the hounds, but the pack had the strength of numbers; should the coyote dart the wrong way or stumble even for a second, the hounds would kill him and eviscerate him on the spot. They barked in an excited cacophony as their white tails stood straight up like antennae.

The entire chase was matched in speed. The coyote, running for his life, stayed eight or ten feet ahead, followed by the furiously yelping hounds and Artemis, who thundered after, followed by other horses.

Ahead was a stone fence with barbed wire strung above it. Beyond that was a wooded glen. The coyote sensed his sanctuary. For a moment the hounds gained on him, getting as close as five feet. Then he found a little extra speed and bounded over the fence, scruffy tail flying, well ahead of the nearest hound.

Although a couple of hounds found their way over the fence behind him, most of them quieted as he disappeared.

The riders had no way over the fence. In other areas of the ranch they'd built wooden coops over the wire, but there was none here and Wade could see that the wire was almost invisible—no way for even the most foolhardy to risk a jump.

“See what they're doing?” Diana asked. “Wandering back and forth, tails in the air, trying to re-find a scent? That's called feathering. This chase is *over*. The nearest gate is five minutes down that way, even full out. Let's wait and see what the Master wants to do.” She looked at him. “You rode like thunder, I'll give you that.”

“At the end, I was rooting for the coyote.”

“I think we all do,” she said in a whisper, “but it's bad form to say it. It's the chase we love.”

The Huntsman and the Master talked quietly at the edge of the fence, looking glum. The Master yelled over to Diana and Wade, “Let's cool the horses down. There's an outside chance he'll come back out.”

Diana turned to Wade. “Sure,” she mouthed, rolling her eyes..

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The hounds never got scent of another coyote. As they rode through one of the most remote parts of the ranch, Diana yelled over to Wade, “Your saddle’s leaning to one side. Put more weight into your downhill leg. And you have to tighten that girth.” They were moving at a fast trot with the others in second field, trying to catch first field. “Can you reach down and cinch it up from the saddle or do we have to stop?”

“Let’s not fall behind—I’ll get it later,” Wade said.

The trot took them down a narrow path cut into a steep hill. “Keep your weight level along here,” said Diana.

Artemis picked along confidently. But Wade, fearful of the precipice below him, put too much weight into his uphill leg and felt the saddle slip further. Wade tried to balance his weight, but it was too late.

As the saddle moved to her side, Artie gave out a little sound, kind of a whimper, which scared Wade. He . . . was . . . falling. He reached out a hand to grab some of Artemis’ mane, but failed. Suddenly he was on the ground, half under Artemis. He held one hand high, clinging to the loose reins. He could see the saddle sliding down her side, moving toward her belly. Wade let go of the reins and tried to roll away, but he ended up directly underneath his still-moving horse.

Artie's back left hoof came toward Wade's chest like a sledgehammer. The horse's weight could kill him instantly. Instinctively, he moved his gloved hands toward her leg, wrapped them around her hoof, and drew in his breath sharply for the blow.

The hoof landed on his chest but the blow never came. As soon as the hoof touched his jacket he could feel the leg rise up from his hands. It seemed a miracle! He rolled over, trying to get out from under without rolling down the precipice.

Diana dismounted. "Oh Wade, can you breathe?" she asked, dropping to her knees.

Wade touched his chest where the hoof had been and took a deep breath. "Yes," he said. "I don't believe it but I can." He felt lightheaded, as if time had stopped.

She prodded his shoulders and his chest, as thorough as a doctor, making sure nothing was broken. Then she put her arms around him and held him. "When I saw you on the ground I knew . . . how much I care for you . . . love you."

Wade looked up at her, stunned. She had never used that word before. "That's one good thing out of this," he groaned.

"Look," she said. Artemis had circled back and stood next to them, the saddle hanging upside-down around her broad middle.

"Lie still as long as you need to," Diana said, keeping her arms around him.

Wade felt waves of adrenalin. "I thought I was going to die."

"You could have." She touched his face. "Do you think you can ride back in? Can you stand up?"

Wade got to his feet on the steep slope. He lightly shook his arms and legs. "I'm okay," he said with a little surprise in his voice. "Just let me stand here a minute."

"I'll help you mount up when you're ready," she said, fixing Artie's saddle. "There's a rock on the uphill side; when you feel you can get on, I'll bring her to you."

After his breathing settled a bit, Wade climbed the rock and mounted Artemis.

Diana got up on Gray Cloud and looked toward where the others had gone. She took a deep breath. Finally she said, "Let's head back in. I think there's a gate if we go this way." She led him at a careful walk.

They caught up to the others on the trail—everybody was hacking back.

Safely at the trailer, Wade removed his hunting jacket and examined the hoof print. He couldn't believe it. The mark was so clear you could see a few nail holes outlined in dirt against the black of the jacket.

After he quietly told the others what had happened, he hung his jacket on a trailer door. When the Master examined the hoof print, he shook his head.

"Wow, that *was* a close call."

Cliff offered an explanation. "It's the fetlock. She relaxed her fetlock."

Diana came from her side of the trailer nodding in agreement. Wade looked at Cliff in anticipation of an explanation.

“Here,” said Cliff, running his hand along Artemis’s leg, indicating the place where her hoof jutted forward from the rest of the leg, far below her knee. “This extra joint is called the fetlock. It’s what gives horses such great control of their hooves. They can relax it in a split second. That’s what happened.”

“Still, it’s a miracle,” Diana said. Wade saw tears glistening in her eyes.

“Good horses hate to step on humans,” Cliff said. “I once saw a horse throw its body around in the middle of a jump and take a bad spill rather than step on its rider.” Cliff left to get his horse some water.

Wade ran his hand along Artie’s leg. He couldn’t tell if he was still light-headed from the shock of the accident or from how he felt about Diana’s tenderness. Somehow it was all wrapped up with horses. “I have to say, Diana, that what just happened makes me love Artie more than ever—all horses really.”

Diana walked over and slipped her arm around his waist. “What just happened makes me love *you* all the more.”

He put his arm around her shoulder.

Diana smiled. “And now I’ll admit I liked that Keats poem more than I let on. I couldn’t let you get close, reading poetry to me and all. It seems silly now.”

“I’ve missed you.”

Artemis whinnied.

Afterword

Two years later, as Marita was starting to take jumping lessons from Edward, Wade wrote Marita a letter and left it on her night stand:

Dearest Marita,

Now that you're thinking about jumping, I want to tell you the little I've learned. A rider on horseback can't jump a fence. Only the horse can do that. If you try to help the horse by raising your body, you'll throw the horse off.

Our job is to let the horse know what's expected. Set the pace and direct the horse to the fence. If she strays off course even a quarter inch, correct her immediately. Let her know she's taking the jump—period. Sink as low into the stirrups as possible. Relax so that when the horse starts her jump, she propels you forward into your jumping position. If you grip her ribs with your legs like a clothespin you'll pivot into place. At the top of the jump look where you want the horse to go next. If you want the horse to change direction after the jump, step into that stirrup and open the reins that way. If you want an extra step before the next jump, sit back. The rest is up to the horse.

You can't think about your father or mother or anything else. When you're jumping, you don't even have time to be thankful for Beth and Diana.

Once a Master told me that to jump in the hunt I'd have to learn to throw my heart over the fence. It didn't mean anything when he said it, but over time I realize he understood what's required. That is what you have to do Marita: as you approach the fence you must throw your heart clear to the other side. Mid-jump all you can do is stay balanced, comfortably dependent on the sureness of horses.

Love, Wade

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