

KEEPING
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Violent anger was the least expectation at the onset of this promising day. Yet, with the sun barely clearing the horizon, and right before my eyes, a trespasser brought down a black-tail deer on a remote reach of Ender Farm -- no permission sought, which would have been denied; it was not even hunting season. Until that most unfortunate upset, my early morning ride had been absorbingly distracted by the seasonal thrill of yet another autumn dressed in arousing flamboyance. The incident happened just after crossing a freshly harvested field, now a broad expanse of dry stubble sloping gently away from the farm's rising northeast forest. A few brilliant red sumacs, orange maples, and yellow aspens flamed over the hillside, solitary torches burning bright in among dark green surrounds of tall thriving hemlocks and Douglas firs. My head was tilted back in raptly intense concentration, my eyes eager for the fall offerings of this much less frequently visited part of Ender Farm. As I reached the high edge of the sweeping blond stubble, I was jolted from my blissful reverie by a large, maturely racked stag racing erratically down from the tree line. Its frantic leap into the open field sealed its fate. Out of the cloaking forest rushed a man in dark green camouflage, scoped rifle raised, oblivious to anything but his splendid target. He planted his feet apart, aimed and fired. I abruptly reined in my jittery horse, shouting hard invective at the intruder. My explosive fury surprised even my

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volatile self. The swiftness of all these spontaneous actions froze in a near simultaneous blur of incredulity.

A violent harangue in a refractory emotional state ought to be avoided, especially in such an unpredictable situation. I was fully aware of the risk taken, yet unchecked anger is such a bewilderingly delicious and powerful release. Elemental, primitive, and dangerously immediate, it is often the only recourse for the suddenly helpless.

Was such anger justly employed when, from the back of my nervous horse, I had loudly hurled my diatribe, furiously demanding the young hunter's name? Was my insistence even sensible -- a stranger bearing a rifle and sending me an indelibly menacing look? The foiled poacher spat to his side, emitting a low growl of disgust, then fled, leaving the warm carcass for me to attend. My wary eyes fell upon the big stag lying in glossy full-blooded beauty. It appeared to be merely dozing in the cool autumn sun. I felt oddly at fault, dismounting with a piteous murmur of apology. Unwilling to move any closer, I was still trembling with rage, feeling personally violated. Lingering adrenaline made me clumsy, shaking as I fumbled for my cell phone.

When the brakes of Ragnar's slowly jouncing truck squealed to a halt, he calmly stepped out, wearing rough leather boots, faded jeans, and a white T-shirt. Unperturbed as ever, as nearly as I could determine, he methodically donned an old work shirt. Along with these unconscious actions, he was coolly appraising the shot buck, such thoughtful scrutiny familiar to me, foreshadowing a practical outcome.

I jumped up from the prickly field stubble where I had been sitting with knees drawn up, waiting, brooding, inhaling the sweet sunburned grain stumps. My hand was still rigidly clasping Mariner's

reins. Anger flared again at the beautiful stag's death, at the cruel way I had lost this happily anticipated morning.

“Shouldn't we call the sheriff?”

He did not respond to my anxious question, but instead asked me what the poacher looked like.

“Youngish, skinny, tall -- not as tall as you -- red hair and a poorly mended broken nose...cowed glass-blue eyes, but clearly threatening.”

“Ah, one of the Roten boys.”

“Someone in this valley would do that?”

“Not quite in this valley...further north up in the east hills. They are a hungry lot...poor and hungry and too many.”

“Do you know every living soul around here?”

Ragnar laughed. “The living and an unfair amount of the dead.”

“What are we going to do?”

“You: nothing. Get on Mariner and enjoy the ride home. I am the one who must now do what he would have done.”

“You're going to butcher this poor animal?”

“*Ja*, anything else would be a waste.”

Ragnar walked to the back of his truck and reached his long arms across the side, unlocking one of the metal boxes set against the cab.

“Better finish your ride, my girl. Let me have a good-bye and then get on with your day. You are not ready for this much blood.”

“But then what?”

“I will take the meat to the Rotens.”

I had a fairly long way to go but I was angry enough to leave without kissing him good-bye. Rarely did I go any distance from him without doing that.

“The spoils to the spoiler,” I said testily. I lifted my foot and set it firmly in the stirrup.

“Not exactly, Wild Vi. Are you in such a hurry you will go away without a chance of feeling better?”

“You will make me feel better?”

“Usually I do.”

I relented, because otherwise all the way home I would be more regretful than angry.

“Better?” He held me a while longer, his silently answered question merely further encouragement for exclusive remedy.

I dropped my head back and smiled into satisfied gray-blue eyes that would later flash with an explanation, a story that would end with myself less easy with anger: I would hear the sorry truth.

I rode away enveloped in a splendid early fall day, the cooling crystal air a lens for the luminous golden rays of slanting sun. Everywhere I looked shone brilliant facets of autumnal color, in the near blond stubble fields and deciduous foliage, in the amber tones of the far-ranging valley and the distant smoky hills. My taut lips curled in awe and helpless irony, savoring a slow immersion in the wonders beyond my thin skin. The fierce adrenalin was ebbing away. I took a deep breath, gaining the mysterious admixture of fall spices.

“You are good for this season,” Ragnar had prompted in my ear. He has a way of doing that, making the felicitous condition of my external world dependent upon *me*, rather than the other way around. Held thus by disposition of day and man, I moved along in a shadow-dispensing frame of mind.

As I rode, I thought less and less of the slain deer and more and

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more of my life here, life with Ragnar and the others who had lately come into it, now an interlocking web I could never have imagined; so very different from the interim years of my long absence. As those foreign years recede, I am beginning to feel as if I am living the years I lost here, as if that rigorously demanding intervention of a worldly life were more of an anxious, fitfully long dream. Now I have awakened back in the real place. But not entirely the same place.

In my unprepared awakening there has precipitately occurred a whole range of startling things attached to but very different from my early life, known and unknown characters who belong here as much as I, or maybe more, certainly Ragnar, he: the cynosure of Ender Farm.

We have prudently kept our recently conjoined selves to separate living quarters, Ragnar in his functionally composed and inviting cabin, where he has comfortably lived for many years, me in the large family house. Mainly this has been Ragnar's wisdom. I, still with recurrences of the enfeebling emotional illness that brought me home, have wanted to draw everything safe and good as close to me as can be possible. Ever steadfast, he remains distant enough to accommodate an enduring habit of solitariness, knowing far better than I, in my as yet unconquered derangement, how best to keep what we have found. With this tidy compromise I have come to agree, very beneficially to agree. I am bound to heal sufficiently and come into my own strength under such liberal watchfulness. When we traverse the age-old path between each other's dwellings, as we frequently do, whether to cook or talk or share the night, more often all of these, the passing hours together are usually embellished with energizing excitement, ongoing self-revelations, deeply abiding pleasures, an invaluable advancement of thought.

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Ragnar came late to my kitchen, fresh from his shower and neatly dressed in tan cords, a flannel umber plaid shirt, but empty-handed.

“I thought you would come bearing bloody contraband,” I scolded.

I was seated at my breakfast nook table, eating my supper from a broad-rimmed Syracuse china bowl, white bean soup simmered with fresh sage from the garden, onions, and a tender-cooked smoked ham hock.

He fetched a matching white bowl from the glass-fronted cupboard, then generously ladled hot soup from my large glazed iron stove pot.

“You think I would bring you any part of illegal venison?” he replied, with the humorous irony he so facilely employs.

I shook my head and continued eating without further response, until finally I said, “How could that boy...and how could you...?”

He finished a spoonful of soup and said, “What would you have had me do? I came late to the scene of the crime, too late to do what you should have done...however grudgingly, given the boy his game.”

“His *game* all right,” I said, standing up to rinse my bowl, intending to rush from the room, all awash in anger again.

“This soup is very good, Wild Vi...diluted cassoulet -- nice with the cumin and balsamic vinegar. I want your company...please stay here until I finish...or at least go no further than the living room...where you can sulk on the davenport until I explain.”

“I’m sorry,” I allowed. “I know you’ll explain very well, and it will somehow turn out that you’ve done the right thing -- it nearly always

does. I don't like ill-mannered trespassers, especially those who hunt out of season...or even *in* season. It was not a pleasant experience." I decided to sit down.

"Good girl," Ragnar said with a thankful grin. This was not at all condescension related to his years beyond mine, but merely a variety of his usual address.

From our first encounter, I have been taken with his mellow-timbred accent, his care with proper words, the intriguing Norsk of his native country, which at our earliest meeting confounded my impatiently exploring young mind. I can easily revisit perplexing moments in my frequently impertinent youth, when I was mystified to be addressed as *voldsom lillejente*, fierce little girl. Inescapably worldly now and less impulsive, I have become more humbly diffident; curiously, more uncertain, generally aware of my short-comings.

Happily into my savory soup, Ragnar did not relish any further hot display from me. A favorable comment from so adept a food savant as he, even if mainly from hunger, worked very well at soothing my oversensitive disposition -- a more recently induced malady causing rapid and unintended transitions of mood that leave me painfully confused; still with me: that relinquished world's trauma-induced reshuffled chemistry, often making objectivity far more difficult.

I cannot anticipate overreaction -- as I have conceded, these days my emotions are raw, often uncontrollable. Ragnar was sitting beside me on the large wine davenport: a cool-surfaced, worn leather place of rest, where I am sometimes able to lose myself in a worthy book, albeit in few current fads of writing. Hunched down beneath one of the large, unlit

jade-green China lamps at either end of the long sofa table, I listened while staring into the cold and cavernous black fireplace. As Ragnar briefly sketched the Roten's plight, I could cannily sense many of the particulars left out. He had, after all, taken them the butchered venison. By now I had achieved a more rational state, and knew his offering of slain waste to be the most reasonable solution. It paralleled the paths I had taken for years in regard to the needy, but it concurrently reintroduced frustration. I again felt a sense of helplessness, and yet another loss of restraint.

“How can I say this if you break so easily, Wild Vi? *Ja*, they are the downtrodden, but you were not suffering over it this morning. Listen now, it has gone on for years. *Nei*, they are not always likable folk. There have been plenty of times when I was hardly less angry myself; especially when three of the younger boys took up local thievery -- but that conduct is seldom improved upon by impractical retaliation. You have to know where it is coming from. One of those boys later died in Iraq; another, also briefly a soldier, is lying in a veteran's hospital with part of his brain missing.”

“How many years has this...what on earth are they doing up there in the woods? Are there a lot of them?”

“I have never known how many there actually were. Some died at birth, or soon after. The final one died with the mother; she was worn down to a ghost-like impression when I last saw her...and constantly coughing. She managed to get enough money for heavy smoking, but it was childbirth that finally took her weakened body. After child upon child, I considered it a mercy when the father was paralyzed in a careless logging accident. He often worked half drunk, increasingly reckless in an

occupation risky enough when sober. He survives in their ramshackle house, in a wheelchair. The daughters care for him.”

“Daughters? How many are there?”

“Two home unmarried, three gone, married...or possibly divorced.”

“How old are the two at home?”

“Your age, or a little younger, late thirties, early forties.”

“Well...how do they live? I mean, if they happen to be obeying the law. Are there a lot of men at home?”

“Three other brothers who mostly come and go -- home when running away from something or down on their luck...if they have ever had any luck. The young fellow you saw is more or less the provider. He sticks close to the family junkyard, does odd jobs and trades things he picks up cheaply or free. The two women gather and sell various wild mushrooms. You have probably seen one or the other at the Saturday Farmer’s Market in Hayfield. They also sell wild berries, baked bread, dried herbs...various handwork.”

“Oh yes, the one I saw wasn’t overly talkative...but reasonably good at dealing with customers. I’d have thought her older.”

“Conversely, when I first saw you again, I might have thought you far younger...if I had not soon reckoned how old you must be...still so young to me. But you have not had such an easy time of it either.”

Ragnar drew my hand to his mouth and gave me one of his meaningful winks. For me, these manifold winks are always like a caress, an uplifting warmth, however diverse the causes.

“So, have I made my case for purloined meat?” He kissed my forehead in a manner intended to dismiss the subject. I knew this

evasion was for me. He did not want me any further involved.

“No, wait a minute,” I demanded, tugging at his sleeve. “You did say they were mourning more death?”

“That was to get your attention -- with your explosive temper, I often have to appeal to sentiment -- no longer relevant.”

“I think it is. I want to hear. Who are they mourning?”

“Still mourning after more than a year. *Nei*, let it be. You are too emotional now. You have enough invasions of peace in here.” He caressed my head, letting his fingers run through my lengthening hair, well knowing how soothing a gesture it is. At last he looked steadily into my eyes. “But you are not going to quit, are you, Wild Vi?”

“Come on now...tell me please. I promise not to dissolve.”

“Let us have the first fire of the season.” He stood up and leaned his tall frame over the wood box.”

Later, as we lay on my long davenport, bodies closely aligned in the firelight, I resumed the unwanted subject; not so easy to get my way with this taciturn Norwegian, at least not in this instance.

“Will you tell me?” I cajoled. I turned my head to reach his throat with my mouth. It was unfair of me, but so enjoyable. His weathered skin tasted of aftershave: *Royall Lyme*, a scent I have come to favor very much, almost as much as the *brennevin* on his breath.

“*Nei, lille* tease, you will get into a mood I do not want.”

“No I won’t, I won’t!” I insisted. Stiff as a recalcitrant child, I drew away, unable to amend my fretful conduct.

“Stop it now, calm down.”

He held me well enough to kiss me into single-mindedness, then spoke reluctantly into my ear, “There were also identical twins, fourteen

years old. *Helvete*, Wild Vi, I can feel this in your body!”

“You can’t stop now. Let me hear it.”

“Ah, I should never have revealed so much. I have seen what it does to you...this kind of thing. You cannot give it up.”

“Identical twins?” I coaxed.

He let go of me and stood up. “I am going to my cabin.”

“You know I can find out from anyone. I’m sure everyone in the valley knows. You know I *will* find out.”

He came back and stood over me. “*Faen!* it is more than you need to know. I will do this fast...when I have finished I am going to my cabin. Hanging around providing details only makes it worse.

“The twins were bright, cheerful, inseparable...much loved by their family. They were fishing up at Meadow Creek -- a good stream for cutthroats. Near where they fished the waters flow into a broad deep eddy. One of the twins slipped on a rock, hit her head on a boulder and, before the other could get to her, was washed into the eddy and drown. It may be she was dead before that, but she was gone before she could be reached. Her sister, who had failed to save her, went into shock. Three days later she hung herself from the oak limb in their yard, where they had often played on a childhood swing. This is probably more precisely said than you will hear anywhere else.”

While he was rapidly speaking I could see the unfolding tragedy as if it were happening, my mind displaying the startling minutiae I am so adept at providing, real or imagined. *This terrible misfortune is out of the past, my reason advised. Learning of it is a test of your own strength. Where are you now on the fluctuating scale of recovery?* I saw with considerable relief that my prevailing urge to somehow make things better, was overtaking worthless

pity and remorse -- an ingrained urge reinforced by Ragnar's decision to leave me if I started coming apart. At this point, consoling me would allow me to wallow in grief, as misfortune of any kind was likely to do these days -- raw emotions flowing into a sizeable catchment of years of submerged misery. He was completely justified in his decision to leave; still a part of me did resent it. That was the selfish part.

"Thank you for telling me." I sighed and gathered myself in. "God, it must be so hard for them," I managed with an even voice. Then more lightly: "They must need plenty of food...will like you all the more for so handily butchering the venison and giving it to them. I imagine that poacher boy -- what's his name? -- thinks my response contemptible. I suppose they'll now despise the owner of Ender Farm."

Ragnar slowly lifted his hands and slid them into his pockets, dropping his head back and carefully studying me with half-closed eyes. I remembered a medical diagnostician in a deeply intense evaluation. I would like to have heard from him exactly what he saw.

"The boy's name is Alfred, Al Roten. They will not despise you. I told him you have spent much of your life caring for others in foreign places...told him you thought he was a trespassing sportsman out for an irresistible trophy. He will not be shooting anything on Ender Farm again...so he says."

"I imagine he's been regularly poaching out there. How would you really know? He apparently also has a large open forest at his own doorstep, so I say good hunting to him...good eating for the Roten family...preferably without breaking the law on my land -- if it isn't the law or trespass I'm a carnivorous hypocrite, right? For me, it was a beautiful animal cheated of life. I may never eat venison again...I should

quit meat.” At that facile near avowal, Ragnar cast his head aside with disbelief.

“Well,” I continued, “possibly I’ll speak to the Roten women next time I’m at the market, let them know I’m human. Outside of necessary business dealings, they’re probably pretty reclusive.”

“As long as you do not...*ja*, fine...you know very well how to treat others...of all persuasions...hardly need advice from me.”

I laughed. “I need plenty of advice from you, poor man.”

“Poor?”

“Because of *me*,” I explained. “At least now you can leave me without reservations. I’ll be fine.”

I walked away into the foyer, then stood with my hand on the stairway banister. I was trying to keep images of the dead twins from surfacing, encouraged by my present, likely temporary, success. I thought I would make a show of going up to work at my computer -- I seldom feel alone or sad while engaged in writing, the gratuitous panacea of arranging words into concrete patterns. Ragnar knows this, himself a bibliophile with an impressive library. He had silently followed me, contemplative of something beyond my prescience. Then he came near and stood quietly for a moment. I looked up at him and smiled with, I hoped, a sparkle of reassurance, implying that he could now safely leave. My eyes change from indigo to violet in vanishing evening light -- then sometimes deep amethyst, Mama first told me. Ragnar has called this result a distraction from wiser considerations.

I offered a chiaroscuro farewell, standing half in waning crimson light shining through the hall windows; my good-bye then overruled by a decisive curl of that inveterately serene mouth.

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“Wild Vi,” he conceded, with no query in his eyes, merely a lambent flicker of anticipation. The look I returned drew from him amusing irony: “Amethyst, contrary to some beliefs, does not prevent drunkenness...not where *you* are concerned, *lille* girl.” He lifted my happily disposed body and carried me up the stairs to my dusky-rose bedroom -- writing, for the nonce, preempted.

I was awake, but too comfortable and contemplative to get up. Ragnar was gone; I assumed back at his cabin or somewhere on the land, attending to Ender Farm’s unremitting management. I lay listening to the gentle wind in the boughs of the tall *Cedrus deodora* growing close beside the house. From among its branches arose the noisy twitter of competing bird societies. Then Ragnar walked into the room with my breakfast on a tray. He perseveres in the certainty of my meals. I am likely to eat somewhat sporadically -- as when I worked in barren places - - not necessarily when I ought to eat and often only when my stomach insists, or something strongly appeals to me. He is best at making food appealing, a consistently marvelous cook, really a *chef*.

Beyond reliable, intuitively helpful, he is the individualist once only imagined. Some in the valley know him predominantly as a fiercely leveling force. Years of positive results have verified his benefit to all. Strength of purpose and generally sublimated anger promote his integrity. Any friend of his has a generous friend indeed, and there are many such. I would never wish to be his enemy: the fool who knows neither his worth nor the consequence of his cunning.

I stretched my arms high above me, toward the old brass-held ceiling lamps, and said, “You shouldn’t spoil me. I suddenly have all

sorts of things to say...now that you've kindly reappeared."

He set the tray on the chaise longue and handed me my robe.

"Not until you eat...here, just poached eggs over ham, topped with hollandaise...raisin toast...tea with milk...as you like it."

"How good of you but..." I guiltily feigned indecision lest he consider me awfully spoiled, twisting so awkwardly into my robe that he came to untangle me.

He then sat down on the edge of the chaise, silently watching me, his arms folded and his long legs extended. He was wearing jeans and a blue plaid shirt, not what he had on last evening, so I knew that he had left me at some incredibly early hour and gone back to his cabin. While I slept on, he had showered off the sweat of our lovemaking, worked a while at something, and eventually come to make my breakfast.

"Amazing, you've actually returned to me at...what hour is this?" Ragnar rarely wears a watch, yet his sense of time is nearly always quite accurate; time being to him like swans that know precisely when to migrate, domestic fowl that roost before sunset, dormant seeds that generate when given a pleasing medium -- the latent, unfailing habits of nature. I looked at my bedside clock. "Oh no, eleven-fifteen! Then this is lunch. I suppose you've turned the world over by now."

"*Nei*, only some of the hay Peter meant to do."

"You've been out on the tractor turning hay? And then come all the way back to do this? Trying to shame me?"

"Just feed you. You've improved some since last November, but you have fallen into bad eating habits again. Please be quiet, eat."

"Last November seems a minute ago...and yet on the other hand so much has happened that--"

“It is getting cold. Eat.”

I sat forward, picking up my fork. “You’re a bit forceful.”

“To which one am I speaking now, my *lille* companion or my boss?”

I laughed. “I did once resent you, because I knew I could never be your boss...could never belong here in the same way you do. That was when I thought our relationship was going to be a lot different.”

“*Ja*, I too...until I saw you, pale and thin and cold, stubbornly attempting to cut down one of my pine trees for wet firewood, *green* firewood. Yet, you have no idea how impressed I was. *This is lille Wild Vi, the one who gave me so much deviltry*, I said to myself...then realized I meant more than I thought I did.”

“I thought you were just mad as hell.”

“I had some anger -- because of what you were doing -- but I wanted you so instantly I was shocked...disgusted with myself. I had been able to decide nothing. I was not used to that...*berregud*, not at all. I wasted some time trying to reason with myself.”

“After the shock of...*you*, I tried not to believe what was happening, but that didn’t last long.” I frowned and bit into my raisin toast, thoughtfully chewing and swallowing. “I had no idea what your scrupulous rejection could do...alongside such startling honesty...thought I was better off in a state of antagonism...hadn’t enough strength left for reason. Paranoid, sick...closer to that greedy child you remembered, I kept thinking of you, suspicious, uncertain...maybe even envious of your marvelous competence...yet it was the only thought that gave me any pleasure: *you!* Should I be telling you this?”

“We are beyond that, Wild Vi. And by now you know you

belong here as much as I. You are the Ender who really belongs here.” He was neither smiling nor frowning -- Apollonian; the ever sublime equipoise I find so reassuring, but that lovely balance then appeared to dip beneath a weight of some other discernment, not yet to be revealed.

“Umm, this is delicious. You make good breakfasts. Everything you cook is good...really...*really*. You shouldn’t wait on me. I love it when you do.”

“*Ja, lille* fox...eat it all. I will see you later.” He stood a moment longer, then, as he moved away, his large hand squeezed the bedclothes covering my lazy foot.

“Wait!” My mouth was still full of toast. “Hugh is coming soon. He scribbled a postcard from Beijing,” I blurted out. Ragnar stopped and turned from the doorway, through which he reflexively ducks.

“Hugh is home...yesterday morning. I have talked to him.”

“He’s *home!* But you didn’t tell me...you didn’t even tell me.”

“You were having a nice ride...until Al Roten...” He shrugged.

I pondered this briefly before speaking. Did he assume that, had I known, I would have ridden straight to Hugh’s, instead of northeast into the tempting wild country less frequently visited? Hugh! After all this time, Hugh! Of course I would have ridden south, slightly east, veering off to Hugh’s place -- to the stone house I still think of as my great-great-grandfather’s, which it was. Why this reticence? For a moment unable to say anything, I studied that inscrutable face.

“All this time you’ve known and now...you were just going to go on about your business without telling me?”

He moved nearer the window above the garden, staring down. “The straw baler is coming -- Harold Jacobson’s son, Henry. He is doing

the field below the house. I have to be there...satisfy myself that it is dry enough after the early mist. Anyway, Peter cannot go, he's in town." He glanced back at me, then looked down over the yard. How very unlike him to equivocate. Why this strange evasiveness? I felt an unsettling twinge of something ominous. Finally he spoke, tersely. "We can talk tonight. Come to the cabin around seven. Better not disturb Hugh today, he is tired. Leave him alone for a while."

"What on earth...?" I exclaimed, but Ragnar had gone.

Several times during the rest of the day I reached for my cell phone to welcome Hugh home, but something warned me off. Ragnar's words were more than a suggestion regarding Hugh, he had meant them to stand. He never speaks with such exactness unless he is in earnest.

Ragnar had heated one of his famous barbecued chicken pizzas, a number of which are briefly in his freezer. He handed me a glass of Chianti when I arrived at his cabin, then finished the tossing of an olive, artichoke, and tomato salad with seasoned olive oil. We dined in the streamlined little nook in his shining granite-slabbed kitchen.

"Sorry I could not cook something more elegant. I was busy."

"Please don't apologize for anything you make...how can you? I should be feeding you."

I stared at the countertop. "Does it ever bother you that granite is radioactive? Polished old rocks...not always so friendly."

Ragnar laughed and said, "If I were twenty-five and sleeping nightly on the counter I might give it some thought."

"I've always meant to ask you: Don't good chefs, like yourself, usually scoff at electric ranges, even classy ones like yours?"

His lips curved in a gentle smirk. “I cook well enough on anything, including a campfire. Anyone who cannot cook decent food on an electric range should stay out of the kitchen, *any* kitchen.”

When we finished eating, we went into his pine living room and sat on the long red-leather davenport. I was eager to hear about Hugh, but at first confined my conversation to reminiscing about the summer past. It was a season I continued to think about with wonder.

“And now Hugh has come back...much later than he promised,” I said at last, and waited to hear how Ragnar would respond. He sat up and reached for me in a surprisingly consoling manner, protective.

“*Ja*...Hugh has brought someone with him.”

I too sat up, in astonishment. “What? Who?”

“A young Chinese woman twenty-two years of age, the daughter of his dead wife’s younger sister. A very bright young woman who is here for advanced study. Apparently Hugh was not only doing reporting but teaching a summer course in Beijing...she attended his class...at his invitation. He has become a sort of mentor to her, but of course...”

“What?” I said, still in shock. “But why is she here with Hugh? Don’t tell me--”

Ragnar picked up my trembling hand and held it firmly. I stared into those knowing and inconceivably sympathetic North Sea eyes.

“Wild Vi, I understand the attachment you feel for Hugh. He is after all the father of your son. Your concern for him is generous and profound...and your interest has become...somewhat proprietary.”

I sat in turmoil, realizing how right he was. I had actually come to think of Hugh as my province. Our irritably difficult and stormy reacquaintance, after so many years apart, had finally developed into

guarded mutual admiration, a special kind of love that perhaps also includes inevitable nostalgia. Looking at Ragnar, so generous in his understanding, I tried to smile, but a part of me was wounded and angry. I had no right to feel such painful loss, but was not ashamed enough of that feeling. Then, most regrettably, my eyes narrowed and I turned away, shaking my head. “How pathetic...next I’ll be stamping my foot at something none of my business...like a fitful child.”

“You are not one to hide your feelings well,” he said, chuckling at me. “Probably you should take a contrary lesson from one of your many favorite writers, Balzac: You would not want to class yourself, even a little, with the vengeful *Cousine Bette*, would you?” Because he knows my academic background well, and can himself appose so many literary analogies, he sometimes exposes motive in this relevant way.

There was the self-accusing frown of my swiftly averted face. A rough hand turned my head back to meet his eyes.

“Leave it alone. I know what is here between us, that I know.”

“And yet you have to put up with *this*,” I responded. How angry I was at myself. But before I could adjust to self-critical remorse the other anger was back. “Well, obviously they’re...?”

“He has given no indication of the sort of relationship it is, whether or not it is physical. But there is something more complex here. Certainly you know that your teenage relationship, mainly lust, especially on his part, was quite different from what he has come to feel for you now. Ah, this is difficult. Now he has come to know you and love you, but he also knows that he is not capable of maintaining the kind of relationship you and I have. Perhaps this new undertaking is in a certain way his defense. Finally, there is also the very real possibility that he is

only being a concerned mentor to a relative by marriage. He did lose his own daughter to a terrible illness...the last reward of a once promising marriage.”

“Yes, his daughter...and he is old enough to be this woman’s...”

Ragnar laughed. “*Father*, you were going to say but, thinking of us, restrained yourself.”

Now I was snapped to attention, back in the imperative world of Ragnar and myself.

“But I’m in my forties, for heaven’s sake. I know what I’m doing and how fortunate I am to have you.”

I tightened my arms around him. The woodsy pine fragrance of his shower soap, mingled with the fresh out-of-doors scent inherent in his very flesh, filled my nostrils with the sweetest pleasure. His warm flannel shirt was soft against my cheek, his solid, work-tempered body deliciously distracting me from worrisome thoughts. He at once fell in with my changed mood. Kissed to forgetfulness, I thought only of here and now, leaning back to speak my sentiments.

“Shrewd man, patient man, your wisdom always stretches this poor constricted mind. *You*, Ender Farm’s indispensable dividend: my chef de cuisine, my Viking wizard, my--”

“*Nei*, enough exaggeration. You are the highest dividend of Ender Farm...but your enthusiasm is better expressed in other ways. I am satisfied when I can make you smile. Let us see if I will find you that way in the morning.”

The morning did render its smiles. As I walked back to my house in the slanting rays of a still heatless early sun, I began searching for the

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day's purpose: a visit to the prolific Saturday market in Hayfield? This was only late September, and the harvest season with its superb local produce was still in full swing. Perhaps I would stop at the March farm and see if my friend Alfreda wanted to come along. We often shopped there together. Her sound opinions and practical nature nicely offset my hyperbolic seizures.

I in my vintage canary-yellow Ford truck was absent-mindedly cruising up the highway toward Hayfield, about two miles out from the March farm, when I saw a big Harley approaching. It also carried a passenger. I knew at once it would be Hugh and his visitor. As they passed, I could see little of the young woman beneath her shining new helmet, but Hugh of course could not fail to recognize me. I looked into my rearview mirror and saw the motorcycle slowing as if to come to a stop. My heart leapt as I pressed my foot down hard on the accelerator and sped away. For me, this was far from the moment for meeting and greeting, but I could only interpret my fearful response as cowardly, ah, very bad behavior indeed. My fierce code of conduct immediately needed me for a proper response, one that once made could not be revoked: I would now have to invite Hugh and his -- what should I call her, new companion? Yes, I would have to invite them to dinner in the most cordial and, worse yet, sincere manner possible. If I could pull it off with genuine felicity, Ragnar would certainly be impressed, and that, aside from Hugh's satisfaction, would be my redeeming reward, if I deserved any at all.

Alfreda and I were soon garrulously strolling the old red brick Farmer's Market strip at the north end of Hayfield. All manner of

possibilities for meals and winter food storage assailed our eyes and tempted our appetites, but I was also keeping an eye beaded for the Roten stall. I had distinctly felt that Ragnar wanted to discourage such an encounter, perhaps only thinking of my health as usual. He believed that I had overextended my presumed social obligations merely by looking after the farm's residents.

"After years of frustrating benefaction, I could hardly stop now," I told him. "I'm interested in how people are getting along with their struggles, and often contemplating ways to make things better for them -- naturally in the process healing myself," I quickly responded to his subtle frown. "Self-healing is looking beyond the self, isn't it?"

"Careful, *Emma*," Ragnar forewarned.

"I am neither *Cousine Bette* nor Jane Austen's *Emma*!" I protested with fierce denial. "Emma's general nature was apparently more evenly disciplined than anything in me."

"Socially disciplined. Self-reproach is not healing, Wild Vi."

"Or self-delusion," I argued back.

Ragnar grinned, quite familiar with my confessional nature.

Only one of the Rotens was in attendance, a woman of medium height, stocky in frame but not really plump. Her table, beneath an old gray awning, was spread with an odd collection of disparate offerings: dried and fresh mushrooms; various dried weeds prettily arranged in bouquets -- some of their stalk heads tinted in earth-toned dyes --; baskets of shining wild blackberries and plump mountain huckleberries; dense wreathes of fresh bay leaves; strings of purple-sheathed garlic; colorful knitted caps and mittens; carved forest animal toys; and small clever bird houses, according to a rough sign, crafted by one of her

brothers.

“If you came for my rye bread, sorry, I’m sold out,” she offered to my roving eyes.

I shook my head and fingered a few black velvet sachets of dried lavender. Then my eyes fell upon something really strange: a gray object floating in yellowish liquid in a tall glass canning jar.

“What on earth is that?”

“Oh, that’s just an eye-catcher, a pickled toad. It’s for sale, though...if you want it.”

Alfreda was enjoying a seizure of laughter. “It would be a grand thing for your coffee table, what a conversation piece. Roland might even write a poem about it.”

“Only Marianne Moore, could really have done it justice,” I said, twisting the jar to examine the fantastic creature. Its once watchful eyes were preserved in drowsy surrender.

“Roland would make it leap,” Alfreda praised. After meeting Ender Farm’s tenant poet, also my relative, a few times at my house, she had developed a slightly amazed fondness for Roland’s marked individuality, along with sincere respect for his talent. We very often find a brief dose of his cantankerous mockery entertaining as well. He is frequently willing to say what we will not.

I looked quickly into the Roten woman’s eyes; they were a cool grayish hazel, almost disdainful in their appraisal.

“I’m Viola Ender,” I said, “of Ender Farm.” I reached out my hand as reassurance; it could hardly be refused, after all, I might purchase something. She took my hand, briefly, almost shyly, then looked thoughtfully aside for a moment, off into the next stall, arranging her

next comment perhaps, then turned back to me. Her pale gray-red hair was roughly bobbed, mussed, with clumped thick strands falling across her broad forehead and over her left eye. She tossed the impeding hair aside as she spoke. Her uncertain voice began with a faint chortle. “Sure, of course...yeah, Ender Farm...but you know you’re...not exactly what I thought you’d be.”

“Oh-oh, what does she mean?” I said, laughing and turning to Alfreda. “Maybe I shouldn’t ask,” I playfully aimed at the Roten woman. “I’ve been here before but I didn’t see you.”

“Guess you saw my sister, Annie. I’d remember you.”

“And you’re name is...?”

She drew up her lips in an assertive little pucker and said, “Just Clare.” There followed a rather thick silence, until at last she stammered out, “As to the...venison--”

“Never mind that,” I responded, a bit uncomfortably. “I think it got worked out. It was...a surprise...unfortunate, but a...it came to a sufficient end. *Sufficient* was the best I could do, I and the slain deer now sharing more than the letter of the law.”

I held up a bay leaf wreath and said, “I think I’ll take this. It’s really nice. I have an old bay tree in the back yard. I pluck a fresh leaf off now and then for cooking, but this is so attractive, and aromatic too. What a great idea...simple and pretty.”

Clare laid my money on the counter, appearing to hesitate, then straightened her rumpled puffy gray jacket with a quick downward jerk. Her rough-worked hands and weathered face seemed too old for her, if Ragnar’s assumption of age was correct. Yet I noticed a glint of spirited curiosity in her eyes, a prolonged youthfulness with a trace of enduring

innocence. While she was making change, deftly fingering coins from a worn old partitioned wooden box, she said, “I heard you teach a class over at the library...writing is it?”

“Late last winter I did...and will again soon...if there are enough interested people who manage to sign up.”

“Folks love that class,” Alfreda chimed in. “I’ll be there.”

Clare affected an offhand manner: “Just wondered what it costs.”

I offered a welcoming smile and said, “Why, nothing at all.”

“Why’d you wanna do that...I mean do all that for nothing?”

“I enjoy it. I myself learn a great deal when I teach.”

“I use that library sometimes, doesn’t cost anything. Well, the taxes pay for it I s’pose...taxes we can’t... Haven’t much time for reading out there on the place...but when it snows up there...shut myself off from the commotion with a big old book sometimes.”

“In my class we talk a lot about books and writers. If you’re interested, why not drop in and see how you like it. The librarian will be posting a schedule in a week or so. You’re always welcome.”

“If I could get down when it snows...comes earlier up there you know...and my old truck...my brother Al’s always messing with it. He’s real good with machinery though,” she emphasized, staring at me with a certain amount of prideful defiance.

“I love this market...so glad you’re here,” I finished.

On the way home, Alfreda asked me what the mention of venison was all about. My concise explanation was partly received as old news.

“Folks kind of look the other way when the Rotens poach. They

fish that way too, out of season and without a license. Ragnar did get a little irritated one time, when one of the boys decided to fish with sticks of dynamite...thrown into his favorite cutthroat stream.”

“Lord, I can imagine. How did he deal with that?”

“He calmed down enough to offer them a couple of his old fishing poles. I think they remarked that they were usually in too big of a hurry to get food on the table...his method being just too slow.”

“Oh, no!”

“He finally told them point-blank no more dynamite.”

“And did they comply?”

“Well,” Alfreda chuckled, “no one’s heard any more explosions. He settles things for them sometimes...the way he does for everyone, problems they can’t quite solve themselves...so they listen to him.”

Alfreda was excited about the quality of the large huckleberries she had purchased from Clare, wild-flavored and juicy. I left her bustling around her kitchen, making preparations for a batch of jam and a pie or two -- I was promised a piece later with coffee.

As I drove the rest of the way home, I was dreaming about the summer past -- a rich and splendidly flowering solstice that came and went too swiftly, full of surprising twists and turns, capricious vicissitudes of life on Ender Farm, with the people I have come to care about. It was a special time, when my new relationship with my son, Marcus, was deepened by a second visit from the East Coast.

My day held still more golden promise: the changing slant of light, the inkling warmth of a long Indian summer. I opened the metal forest gate in back of the house, gazed up at a red-tailed hawk, then ambled further into the woods. Roland’s truck, now occasionally arriving

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on this broad path from his woods cottage, makes the formerly scarcely used back entrance road more easily traversable. He enters his place from another road, graveled and easier to reach the highway.

Drawn to ornate birdsong, I strolled a spongy swath long ago cut through the forest. Off the path to my left lay a large old nurse log, partially covered with dry moss. I climbed up and settled down, leaning against a sturdily developing hemlock. It had sprung from the moldering fallen tree and rapidly sent out anchoring roots. The grasping way these exposed tendrils embraced the log and reached hungrily down into the soil made me think of tenacity. "Grit," I muttered. Everything in nature strains toward its fullest moment of life, vibrating there in brief splendor. I dropped my head back and stared up at the network of boughs closing above my head. My dreamy gaze gratefully regarded chinks of sky, set the way I love blue.

Last summer had provided a reparative surfeit of that cerulean color, along with the bright golden heat. If only Hugh had been here. It seemed to me he had promised as much. I knew that Marcus sorely missed his lately introduced father. Hugh's severe depression and pain had wintered much better with the recent discovery of his remarkable son. Perhaps that discovery had strengthened him enough to resume his travel to foreign places -- China. I dreamed on, pondering successive memories of the fleeting summer, and then thoughts of my first spring back home, but something obscure was troubling me. I brushed vaguely at a lacy hemlock spray tickling my face.

"Feels like mid-summer," I encouraged; even though it was late spring on that day before our first summer together -- together in the

way we are now --, an unusually warm day. “Global warming, which should more properly be called *climate change*,” I interjected. I was still convincing Ragnar that my decision to come so early to the woods pond would be worthwhile. We were making our way through briery new overgrowth on the worn old trail to the water. My tingling face was constantly being brushed by prickly sprays of feathery hemlock, dark fir, whiskery pine needles, freshly pungent. “If we’re going to do this often, we’d better prune some of this stuff back.” I gingerly bent a thorny briar growing completely across the disappearing path.

We came out slightly above the oval pond. I had last seen it framed with the ice of expiring winter.

“Oh, it’s lovely, lovely, all the new green! What a difference.”

Ragnar glanced back through the dense woods, in the direction of his parked truck. He turned back to me and tipped up an old gray fedora he sometimes wears. The sun momentarily struck his North Sea eyes and they were for that instant purely crystal with the light.

“This urge of yours was not much considered, Wild Vi.”

“No...but you said we’d do it sometime.”

“In the summer. I am not complaining...only reminding you that your sudden urge includes no picnic, no wine, no blanket.”

“And best of all no swimsuits,” I said, laughing, teasing. I’m so often shy with him, and was just then. He remains wonderfully new to me in every nearness, perhaps always will. There is so much in him that anticipates and stimulates my own gradual discernment.

Why am I so cautious? I wondered as I walked ahead of him, down onto the curving sandy beach. His extraordinary experience, its deft use, imposes my shyness. A vividly precise manner of discretion

sometimes makes his distinctive voice a ceremony of speech. I listen and listen, trying to establish the true meaning of each word offered, to examine the context it holds, and what else lies beneath it. That is the connotative trick -- the mysterious paths of connecting thoughts. What particular impulse sends each one forth and where is it bound, and by what unique linkage does it travel?

I heard his feet crunch in the sand behind me and turned around. He had stopped and tossed his hat over beside a clump of ferns. Now he was unbuttoning his gray plaid shirt. Then he dropped down on the damp sand and began to pull off his Wellingtons. While I continued to watch, he stood up barefoot and unbuckled the belt of his jeans. He looked over at me and said, "You are frowning. A minute ago you were laughing."

"Heavy thoughts," I said.

"No heavy thoughts here. You will sink like a rock."

I began to laugh, letting my nervousness expand into sheer joy as I undressed and ran into the water -- the first time I had done so in this Elysian place since I was a juvenile girl. "Cold!" I shrieked, and felt, for a brief moment, fully that excited child.

Adapting ourselves to the bracing chill, we swam and cavorted and at last came together, standing in an oscillating capsule of silence.

I placed my cold wet mouth against his hard abdomen and looked up at him, faintly smiling. "No picnic, no wine, no blanket," I teased.

He clicked his tongue and said, "*Ja*, alas, no blanket."

He picked me up and carried my dripping body to a thick-trunked old vine maple growing above the sandy incline. Its prominent

roots were partially buried beneath a spongy carpet of fresh spring moss. Thereupon he sat, leaning against the tree, holding me astride his lap, face to face.

His rough-skinned hands drew me close. I heard the Norsk word *Vannlilje* softly spoken against my ear: *Water lily*. I, so named, could then catalyze two intoxicated bodies with a seductive transient image; so effectively refined that it shimmered across my mind, leaving no clear efflorescence of shape or form, merely an elevated feeling of nearly unbearable pleasure. Thereafter, I savored the offering of this floral epithet, borne from water and earth to a ravenous woman, a lyrical gift from the tongue of a self-determined man. He pressed his hand over my chest.

“Your heart is beating like a hummingbird’s.”

I could not even summon a smile, no longer conscious of the relentless devices of desire -- my immediate diffidence consumed by unabashed hunger. These high flames kindled in me are something entirely new, nothing like negligible, short-lived affairs, or one promising night with Robert, forever painfully suppressed. The hot fire of my youthful days with Hugh, innocently, sweetly mistaken for everlasting love, had congealed in memory, like a rare oddity frozen in crystal. Presently, my sensual expression was initiated with a vestigial shyness, perhaps childish uncertainty. I quite soon came to understand that this involuntary phenomenon heightened Ragnar’s appreciation, the recurring image of me as that amusing, wildly farouche child, not only extant but a part of me still evolving by his unbroken influence. Everything done in the past sleeps within us.

Later, we returned quietly to the cleansing sweet waters of the

pond. Ragnar ducked beneath the surface, then erupted like towering Neptune presiding over ripples of spreading rings. Tossing back waves of drenched hair, he held me by the neck and splashed cooling water over my inflamed body. Offering a slow, wistful smile, he kissed me.

“Time to go, my *lille nymfoman*.” This was teasing exaggeration of how easily I had come unfastened from conventional inhibition, how naturally I had reveled in expressions of the flesh. This could not have happened at any other time in my life, or with anyone else. He knows that, as he knows so much of me; his is a powerful knowledge, but a guarded strength I trust.

He drove with his shirtsleeves rolled and an arm bent outside the truck’s breezy window. The unseasonably warm air blew over our silently dreaming faces, rapidly drying our whipping hair. The big truck’s suspension jounced us over tractor trails edging brown-bedded, newly green-fringed fields, then home alongside higher wheat.

“Peter will wonder where we’ve been.”

“Wondering is a common pastime for those not objects of it.”

I studied his calm profile and began to giggle. “You are just full of aphorisms...*Ragnarian aphorisms*. I love them.”

“More interested in your feelings for the aphorist.”

“Having inspired them, the aphorist knows them very well.”

“But nice to hear you say...*ja?*...even without a blanket?”

“Especially so...sublime impulse.” The last word was nearly a whisper, my head lowered in vivid recollection. His fingers at my nape stroked through damp hair.

My former London associate, Virginia, and her daughter, Sylvia,

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came last mid-July. Ragnar, quite busy with the farm, at first kept to his own schedule and retired to his cabin early. After our lazily filled days and convivial suppers of light fare, we three women sat out on the long cooling white veranda of my large old family home, talking endlessly, spontaneously, frequently of insignificant things easily forgotten, yet momentarily provocative and humorous enough to keep us oblivious of time. The nights were warm, glowing with moonbeams and winking stars, the remote menace of the great black dome diminished by lively camaraderie. Eventually, the cloaking night's shadowy theater prompted more serious subjects. One evening, I, somewhat guiltily, spoke of the dearth of beneficent education, expansive education, which I consider the only remedy for global pestilence and continuous wars. Virginia at once began to lecture me on returning to the London NGO to receive a new assignment. Sylvia thankfully came to my rescue, and we moved on to the subject of climate change. The dark fires of the night sky had finally left us vulnerably aware of our tenuous cosmic journey. We lapsed into an awed, unanswerable silence. Thus temporarily muted, we gave up and went in search of replenishing sleep. I silently begged for the swift deliverance of sound sleep, renewal of positive effort, but, once alone in the stalking darkness, I felt the incredible audacity of such expectation. I dreamed instead while held in nervous wakefulness, snared in a mesh of unpleasant thoughts of abandoned duty and of mortality. Virginia, and of course Sylvia, are still in the race, the race to save the world. I am, for the nonce, disabused of my *Salvator Mundi* complex, this out of *absolute necessity*, as Ragnar puts it. I can save nothing if not first myself.

“How is Marcus?” Sylvia could no longer refrain from asking at

one of our late breakfasts. She had been fidgeting over the omission for nearly a week, which I thought remarkable restraint.

“You ought to know,” I said as I poured our tea. “Don’t you keep in close touch?...I was certainly under that impression,” I coaxed, teasing with a provocation perhaps near insolence.

“He didn’t say when he was coming here,” she answered, drawing her lips together in a swiftly perplexed little frown. “And we don’t...he doesn’t...Marcus isn’t the sort to get himself stuck in obligation...of course, he’s terribly busy...involved with his work.”

“I see...yes, that’s Marcus, busy and ponderously cautious.”

I at once felt sorry for acutely intelligent Sylvia. It appeared she did not communicate with Marcus as often as I did. I knew that he had seen her while at a conference in London. I knew little else, and never pressed him for answers, profoundly cherishing our late-arriving tender relationship: Mother and Son and all that it means to us; peace at last, our wounded hearts healing beyond expectation. Smitten Sylvia, who had met Marcus here only the previous winter, was apparently now painfully in love with him -- obviously at the insufficiently requited stage, where those objects of desire who wish to avoid capture enjoy devotion while remaining blissfully uncaught.

“My remarkable offspring is, I’m afraid, as stubborn as his father, but in different ways,” I offered.

Virginia then spoke up: “My darling daughter, at the risk of sounding pitiless, I suggest you not pursue someone who doesn’t want you. It will only end in something far more disillusioning than I.”

“Wait a minute,” I said, “I think that’s unfair to both Sylvia and Marcus..and you know that men often balk at long-term commitments

when their own affairs are uncertain.”

“Affairs *are* uncertain,” Virginia decided to play upon.

“Marcus has friendships not affairs, if that’s what you mean,” I responded. Virginia and I had long been in the habit of accommodating a wonderfully prickly relationship, and I spoke my mind, as she did.

“If you don’t mind, this is embarrassing...humiliating. I’d rather go have a talk with Ragnar,” Sylvia chided. “In the recent past he never impolitely personalized our conversations. Where has he been, anyway? Mother and I’ve barely had a chance to wave and call *bello*.”

“Oh, he’s busy, busy, busy. I myself hardly get to talk to him.”

“Have you had a falling out?” Virginia asked in an unsparingly gleeful voice. She tossed back shoulder-length gray hair, glancing with affected indifference at the ceiling and around the room.

“What a fox you are,” I said. “You have to have your wicked fun, don’t you? You haven’t seen me slipping quietly into the house on certain early mornings, or you wouldn’t say such a nasty thing.”

“I am snide and cynical, aren’t I? No doubt you’d call it the Brit in me. Probably it’s simply that horrid green beast rearing its reptile head. I apologize. Of course Ragnar continues to adore you.”

“Speaking of adoration,” I interjected, “I thought you’d be rushing over to Roland’s cottage and a...making yourself available.”

“Well, that *is* presumptuous,” Virginia complained. “And I *had* expected one of your nice dinners...so that all of us in the Ender sphere can be properly reacquainted. I would gladly help with some of the preparation and--”

“Ah, you want me to smooth the path to our poet in the woods,” I teased. “Roland knows you’re here...but our remote genius is not an

interposing animal...willfully avoids situations that distract him.”

“He’s willful enough when the *situation* arrives at his door,” Virginia said testily. Then less exercised: “So you’ve been talking to him since we arrived?”

“Yes, I’m often talking to him. Our solitary woods scribe just honored me with a poem.” I then saw that Virginia did not enjoy my innocent playfulness. “I’ve never seen it...he’s shown it to Ragnar.”

“Oh, of course, an encomium Ragnar has probably already appropriated...or memorized...or...at least wished he’d written himself.”

“Virginia, you still know little of Ragnar. Such things merely amuse him...it did seem that Roland’s poem half-amused him. Hmm, I don’t know; I’ll wait and see. It’s even possible that Roland’s written a poem for you. Give that man a bit more consideration.”

“I wonder why I should. He responded to my birthday message, which I had to *post*, his hasty lines handwritten in pencil...in *pencil*, of all things...and snail mail. He refuses to abandon the Dark Ages.”

“He writes his poetry with a pencil. You should feel honored. Aren’t you really going to hike over there and knock on his cozy cottage door...with all of that suspended enthusiasm about to rupture?”

“How would that look, if I rushed over and threw myself at him? I’ve already done that...am still blushing at the brazen madness of it.”

“Blushing more at the result,” I suggested with laughter.

I suddenly realized that Sylvia had quietly disappeared. I stood up, looking around. “Hmm, Sylvia’s gone. I was about to relieve her misery with news of Marcus. He’ll be here this weekend.”

“I don’t yet know how to feel about that,” Virginia pondered. “Poor Sylvie. Perhaps you ought to name this place *Doubling Castle*.”

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“But remember, jailed Bunyan provided his captors with the key called *Promise*, thus they escaped *Despair’s* castle. I hope you don’t intend escaping Ender Farm just yet. I’m having a nice dinner this Sunday for Marcus, which Roland, who always comes swiftly at the call of dinner, will likely be happy to attend. How’s that, Mrs. Putnam?”

“Well...progress,” Virginia said with a dubious grimace. She then laughed heartily at her choice of word, crying out “*Pilgrim’s Progress!*”

“Virginia, I wish you’d stay out of the kitchen. You confuse me with strange ideas. You’re treating the food like something hostile.”

Virginia yanked off her apron and tossed it onto the counter. “I’ve had enough of your insults...I’d rather go read a book.”

“Sorry,” I said, softening her stiffened departing body with a friendly pat. “I’m nervous...always get this way when dinners are up to me...I feel so rushed...if I had all the time in the world I’d probably feel the same. I want to please everyone with good food.”

“Best of luck, I’ll be in our bedroom...can’t go into the living room, Marcus and Sylvia have taken it over with faltering silences.”

“They’ll be all right. Will you forgive my insolence?”

“Suppose I must...but I’m still leaving. You and I are no good in here together...well, to tell you the truth, I love to eat but hate to cook. Damn...no one to talk to. Roland probably won’t arrive until he smells the food. Why don’t you get your savior to help? You two complement each other so well in here. You never complain to him.”

“That’s because I learn things...he knows what he’s doing...oh, does he ever...but he’s so busy now he barely has time to eat.”

“Then it’s up to you, poor child. Au revoir.”

In half an hour, I heard the back screened-door slam, and there was Ragnar, out of his work clothes and wearing clean jeans, clogs, and a T-shirt. He glanced around the kitchen like a sort of culinary chargé d'affaires, and said, "Did I hear you calling for help?"

Laughing, I rushed over to give him a desperate hug. "Are the airwaves crackling with my despair? How did you know?"

"When Peter returned to the barn after doing the milk, he said you were having a nervous breakdown."

"That early he noticed it? He saw me break a dish. Oh, Ragnar, I know you're really busy."

"This is probably more important than a few uncounted sacks of grain. What is that flattened mess in the Pyrex dish?"

"God, that was supposed to be airy cornbread. I got clever and added a can of corn -- like Mama used to do, but her bread was light and fluffy. It simply wouldn't rise in the oven."

"Because it could not carry the weight, silly girl. You have to add more leavening when you stress the batter that way...and probably you stirred it too much."

"What shall I do?"

"Throw it out...put it in the woods for hungry birds. I will whip up a fresh batch."

"But is there time?"

"Here is something worth remembering, Wild Vi: dinner is ready when you say it is. This is not a restaurant."

"It's a good thing, too, because the hamburger didn't thaw as fast as I thought it would. I'm just starting the meatloaf mixture. This was

supposed to be a nice family-style country dinner: escalloped potatoes, meatloaf, almond green beans, a fresh lettuce and tomato salad. What could possibly go wrong? Well, damn near everything.”

Ragnar studied my half-finished meat mixture, then glanced at the eggs resting on the counter. “Are you using eggs in the meatloaf?”

“Two. Would you mind cracking them for me? I hope this turns out moist and tender for a change.”

Ragnar hunted out a little container in my cupboard and cracked the whites into it, dropping the yolks into the mixture. “You know you use only the yolks, do you not? The whites toughen the meatloaf.”

I folded my arms and leaned against the counter, frowning a little, and said, “I wonder what else I’m doing wrong. I’m going to use oatmeal instead of bread crumbs...haven’t any dry bread. Okay?”

“Quick-cooking oatmeal?”

“No, just old-fashioned, down-on-the-farm oatmeal.”

“Good for you, but first soak it a minute in some warm milk. I’ll micro half a cup for you. When you bake the meatloaf put a pan of water beneath it in the oven...that helps keep it moist.”

“I suppose to you I’m just a hopeless idiot in here.”

“*Nej*, never an idiot...and there is still hope.” Ragnar smiled at me and clasped my bottom, lifting me eye to eye. “When you have kissed me hello, my *lille* compulsion, hand me the cornmeal.”

And so it went, on and on until we were all miraculously seated at the fully extended long dining room table. There were our nearest neighbors, dependable Alfreda and Bill March, and my perceptive blind friend, wittily literary Mary Fuller, and of course my food-focused distant relative the fiery recluse poet, Roland Ender; across from him sat my

handsome, Boston-raised, bio-fuel researching son, Marcus; and next to him sat our somewhat stressed but well-spoken British teacher, attractive young Sylvia; at her other side sat her petulantly put-upon mother, who was deftly stealing subtle glances at Roland, while barely turning her head; lastly, there was my very much required silver-haired Atlas, seated serenely at the far end of the table, sending me an occasional gobbled-up wink of consideration -- my nervous self growing more and more at ease, with the help of the wine and that reassuring compendious wink.

“Hugh should be here,” Virginia suddenly announced.

Damn her tactlessness, I thought, now Marcus will be reminded of his father’s absence. Hugh should indeed be here, at least for the sake of his son. But I knew I wanted his intractable self here for additional, rather more selfish reasons. Yes, we were an uneven nine without him, I facetiously observed, scolding myself for this intentional, yet so blatantly nonsensical, interpretation of something very complicated. Hugh would not fit in my desired completeness. I could never make this all neatly fit. Ragnar might have told me to open my clenched fists and let go of what I only imagined controllable. Ragnar quite naturally obviates by rarely assuming any sort of control, people with insoluble problems then being drawn to him by his worldly aloofness, and very soon discovering that his unaffected countenance harbors a realistic range of positive solutions, demonstrably effective. I could hear his reproving voice demolishing my assessment. “Leave Odin in Valhalla,” he might say, has said, hoping to quash Hugh’s playful designation of him.

“Ragnar is here, and we’ve barely had a chance to speak to him,” Sylvia interposed in her lovely amending voice.

If I had a daughter would she teach me this well? I wondered.

“Speak to us, Ragnar,” Roland directed, laying down his fork. These were the first words of recognition to arise from his mercurial plunges into silence. He swirled the red wine of his third glassful and swallowed with quite obvious pleasure, all the while his brilliant dark blue eyes fastened sharply on Ragnar over the goblet’s rim.

“I have no worthwhile comment...one thing I could say: you might derive your stimulant from good company as well as the glass.”

“Are you telling me not to drink, Norseman?”

Ragnar laughed. “*Nei*, drink all you want, salty poet...but light your fire with the spirits of the company.”

“By God, I should write you down. Get me versifying here and you might regret the end of it.”

“*Nei*, I think not, your poetry is good enough.”

“Oh, I love this!” Sylvia interjected; then blurted out, perhaps quite innocently: “This makes it all worthwhile.”

“And nothing else?” Marcus had meant to murmur. But in the sudden stillness of the room his soft Eastern voice was all clarity.

Pitiful Sylvia’s pale skin blushed almost crimson.

Roland looked from one to the other of the two young subjects, appraising them for a moment, then turned back to Ragnar.

“Ahoy there, *Ancient Mariner*, why not honor us with a few lines,” Roland coaxed, then aside to the others: “He knows the whole bloody poem by heart, you know. Nice way to resurrect the forgotten bones of poor old Coleridge...only sixty-two when he sailed off.”

“On second thought, have another glass,” Ragnar exhorted with a chortle of laughter. He stood up, reached for the wine decanter and topped off Roland’s steadily emptied glass.

“Better with mouth in my cups now, is it!” Roland exclaimed.

Everyone laughed, then Virginia said in her most prim British voice, “Why Roland, you sound positively Shakespearean.”

“Hah, what’s this condescension? a foreign voice learned at my pillow in some other incarnation.”

Now it was poor Virginia’s turn to blush, and she did so to the roots of her smoothly flowing gray hair.

“All right, Roland, you haven’t drunk that much yet,” I scolded. Admittedly, I was beginning to enjoy this. “What a brash man the sulky hermit is when he deigns to leave his bosky cage.”

“My God, now it’s the fair Doctor waxing eloquent; a true glimmering of propinquity; let me write this down.” Roland actually pulled a small crumpled pad and stubby yellow pencil from the inside pocket of his wrinkled jacket, laying them beside his emptied plate.

Alfreda and Bill March merely went on eating, laughing enjoyably and shaking their heads between bites. Mary adjusted her dark glasses and remained expressionless, as if awaiting a consensus. Marcus looked as though he had arrived at some weird theater-in-the-round, appearing uncertain as to how much participation was expected of him. Transfixed Virginia held a hand oddly clasped to her throat. I could not tell whether she was about to rise and flee the room, break into tears in our presence, or enter into our verbal shenanigans with some violently inappropriate response. It was Sylvia who just then gave me the greatest pleasure. So entranced by this wacky production was she, she had completely forgotten her own sorrowful uncertainties and burst into giggles of hilarity. “This is absolutely choice,” she announced. I, who had instinctively begun to understand Roland’s method, now found myself

laughing with Sylvia. Ragnar sat with his clever hands clasped beneath his chin, his lips curled in amusement, his candlelit eyes glowing with curiosity at how I intended to handle this. Thanks to Roland, I did not have to handle anything.

“Well, have I conducted myself accordingly? Am I not here to entertain as the oddity from the woods? Are not all poets considered moonstruck? Ragnar and Viola know damn well I’m performing with full cognition in play. The wine only allows me the same license as an inviolate jester. And,” he asserted, at last looking at Virginia, “If Virginia understood as much as her delightful daughter, she would laugh just as hard...and even with mercy. The only thing I do have to apologize for is my initial aloofness, while wolfishly assuaging my hunger and thirst, and *that* Ragnar brought to my attention. Enough of this, I’d like some more meatloaf...any left? The fresh sage and crushed fennel seeds therein are the coups de grâce. Dare I inquire if it was your construction, beautiful mistress of Ender Farm?”

“Not entirely,” I said, watching Sylvia present Roland with a hefty slice of meatloaf. I glanced at Ragnar, “but I can at least take credit for the sage and fennel.”

“She can take credit for everything,” Ragnar insisted.

“Hardly, and not the fabulous cornbread,” I praised, with my own grateful wink, warming to the innuendo of his acquiescing nod.

“Dessert is cherry pie with vanilla ice cream, both the lucky contributions of one of the best cooks in the county, Alfreda March.”

“Why don’t we have it later, I’m too full,” Alfreda suggested.

“Good idea, we’ll have it outside on the veranda, the porch,” I

corrected myself. Sylvia was already collecting emptied plates.

When we were seated on the veranda, with our bodies groggily gestating and our legs stretched out on the footrests of the old wooden chairs left out in all seasons, Sylvia happily announced, “Listen to the cricket concert, a thing you never hear in London.”

“You hear a good deal in London, which is very often worth hearing,” Virginia said, her chauvinism firmly in place.

Roland, who had his head back and was squinting at the stars, said, “I wonder how you tolerate our primitive milieu.”

“Why, I love it here,” Virginia exclaimed, then drastically changed the subject. “I hear you’ve written a *Viola* poem. I imagine we’d all like to hear it.”

“Very likely the opposite,” Roland said, closing his eyes and falling silent.

Then Mary, who had remained quietly reflective throughout the evening, although politely so -- generally quite happy to offer a few witty responses -- directed her voice to the sound of Roland’s. “I believe when a poet creates he means to communicate with a singularity worth hearing. Who better to voice the words of his labor than himself?”

Roland sat up and stared toward Mary, with silent consideration, which I could just discern in the dull glow of the carriage lamps.

“Hmm...well, turn out those lights...maybe a voice will brave the dark,” Roland offered in a nearly gentle manner, a temporarily assumed indifference. “Better to see the stars, anyway,” he added.

“Anything but about me, please,” I begged as I got up to flip the switch. I deeply regretted having told Virginia of Roland’s effort.

Roland, who apparently knew something pertinent no one else

did, announced slyly, “Let Ragnar say it. Yes, let him. I really wrote it for him.”

“Well, I’m not such a fool after all,” Virginia said in a low-keyed self-satisfied voice. “Go ahead one of you.”

“Please don’t,” I said.

“This smacks of selfishness,” Virginia scolded.

“But I didn’t mean--” I was interrupted by my son:

“I, for one, will lie in this chair until I hear it from either.”

“Then you will hear it from its author...and spare an inapt Norseman’s blush,” Ragnar added in an earnest but jocular voice.

“No one will notice in the dark...certainly not me,” Mary said.

“I defer to Roland,” Ragnar finished.

“Please, Roland,” Sylvia begged, “we’re giddy to hear.”

“I believe I am giddy,” Alfreda affirmed. “Are you giddy, Bill?”

“I’ve never been *giddy* in my life,” her ruddy husband replied with a chuckle. “But now I’m downright curious about it, Roland.”

“It was something I wrote in payment for Ragnar’s kind help in moving a piece of furniture...actually written while he was sitting on it in my living room, a davenport in perfect condition, which had belonged to Viola’s father, and which she generously donated to replace my shoddy couch. Ragnar was staring out of my window, reflecting on I know not what, while I scribbled for a few minutes. As you will see, I pay close attention to the world nearest my door, the world of Ender Farm. This little ditty is one of the results:

SHEPHERD'S GIRL

Wild thing, clear iris-eyed,

Native to far and wide,

KEEPING

Woman of girl he knew,
Back in the world he drew.

Now we depend on brow
Smoothed by her Guernsey cow.
Maiden of cheese and such,
Milking by Shepherd's touch.

When hair flies in the lane,
All praise to copper mane.
Hope renewed comes along:
Singer of moon-high song.

How then to keep her fire
Away from crippling ire?
Why, let the Singer roam.
His compass brings her home.

The praising voices fell away behind me as I slipped from my chair and stumbled along the dark veranda and down into the back yard. As soon as I stopped, beneath a gnarled old apple tree, I realized how foolish I had been to make such a spectacle of myself; certainly not what Roland expected: me tearful over his startling rhyme. This damnable emotion, I thought. It turned out that no one even saw me leave, or perhaps thought I was leaving to prepare the dessert. When I rather ignominiously returned, the carriage lights had been switched back on. Virginia was standing over Ragnar's chair, saying something I could not

make out. The others were clustered around Roland, except for Mary, who remained in her chair, listening and smiling in her own brilliant and unfathomable darkness.

“I’m getting the dessert,” I announced.

“I should help with that,” Alfreda called out.

“Me too,” Sylvia chimed in.

“I will simply wait to fatten,” Mary responded.

Virginia, without looking up, went on quietly talking to Ragnar.

While my companions chattered away as we worked in the kitchen, I could not keep my mind off the way Ragnar had brought me my Guernsey, Fern, how he had encouraged me to try and duplicate Mama’s milk-white cheeses. Those things Roland knew, of course, but how did he know I dealt so happily with Fern; that is, whenever Ragnar made it necessary for me to do Peter’s milking by taking him fishing? And had Roland heard me singing in other places? I enjoyed singing alone in the woods, and frequently vocalized lyrical images while astride Mariner, his ears flicking, patiently tolerant, as he dutifully bore me along the lanes or out into the fields. Roland must have somewhere taken in certain of these euphoric made-up songs, recording them with his sharp poet’s ear. His cunningly accurate rhyme went straight to my heart. The last part, about my anger and roaming, made me think of the way I sometimes arrived at Hugh’s door. Did Roland know of *that* too? I wondered what Ragnar really thought of these revelations, but supposed I would never have the nerve to ask. He had said that to recite it would make him blush. Unbelievable -- he was a taciturn man but fearless of emotion, and never restrained with me, except when he realized that he might reveal something hurtful.

“You’re so quiet, Viola,” Sylvia gently explored. “You must be thinking about Roland’s lovely poem.”

“And you are a caring, unselfish young woman, always attentive to others no matter what your mood,” I diverged, but with heartfelt commiseration.

“She’s a good girl...and plenty smart,” Alfreda praised.

“You two will make me all mushy,” Sylvia said with a laugh.

When we were handing out the dishes of pie and ice cream, I noticed, with a jolt of compassion, the way that Sylvia handed the plate to Marcus, her reverent eyes drinking in his appraisal of her offering. She settled back in her chair, staring out into the darkness, never touching her dessert.

“I’m still thinking about that clever poem,” Alfreda said to Roland. “There’s a lot in there...an awful lot for such a tidy little thing. Oh, wouldn’t it be nice to have such a gift.”

Roland laughed. “Keep it up, Alfreda, you may get a poem of your own,” he teased. I was pleased to see how he appreciated his fan.

Mary signaled her need of departure, as her caregiver was taking her to the doctor the next morning. While Ragnar went to bring his truck around to the front of the house, I devoted my full attention to circumspectly quiet Mary. She had uncharacteristically left her old dog, Pilot, at home. We stood on the walk, for an idle moment listening silently to the crickets in the warm night.

“This wasn’t the time to do much one-on-one talking, was it? But I love having you here...picking up on your discerning appraisals, my friend. Let me know when you have something you want me to read.”

“I always have something I want you to read. This clear sultry

voice of yours is a pleasure in itself. I know you've quite a small body, Viola, yet your clear voice makes you seem a tall woman. You read so well...always knowing just where to put the emphasis -- immediately recognizable scholarly understanding." She sighed. "I would love to have gotten my Ph.D., been a bit more than simply an English teacher. But even that was good while it lasted."

"And what have I done with my fancy literary knowledge? My God, how we need more good English teachers. You could still teach if--"

"No, no, no, that's over. I remain a teacher of my idle self."

"A worthy, worthy pastime. If we all studied as rigorously as you, what a different world it would be."

"You did a lot for the world -- I've been talking to Virginia."

"Oh, Virginia is always recruiting. She never gives up on me."

"I see why...how valuable you were...of course, still are. I'm beginning to wonder if...no, I'd better be silent."

"Wonder what?"

Mary tossed her gray-streaked black page-style hair away from her lean cheeks, pushed back her dark glasses, and said with hesitating voice, "Well...I'm wondering if this is...enough for you. You have so much in your caring self to give...extremely valuable things, too valuable to leave in fallow ground."

"Ender Farm is far from fallow ground," I argued, then looked up toward the soft squeal of Ragnar's truck brakes. He got out and came up the walk to lead Mary down. I hugged Mary and let her go with the promise: "See you soon, my friend."

Ragnar cast me a messaged expression, clearly indicating a desire to talk to me seriously somewhere ahead. With this recognition came the

sudden stirring that always favorably alters my chemistry. I nodded, with a compliant smile, then waited to wave good-bye, suddenly remembering that Mary would not see -- oddly, I often think she does.

Marcus was lying thoughtfully back in his chair, gazing at the stars. As I passed by, I laid my fingers on his arm. "How nice to see you there in such a relaxed state...in any state...merely to see you there."

Perhaps he'll think I'm gushing, I thought, and started to move away, but his hand quickly and tightly gripped my wrist. "Ma, pull up a chair," he directed, "No, wait, let me do it." While Marcus was arranging our chairs, I looked toward Sylvia, who was standing at the far corner of the veranda, next to Virginia. They were leaning against the railing, and quietly talking.

After we settled ourselves, Marcus said, "Thank you for not trying to manage my life. You've got no idea how I appreciate that."

His words appeared to imply that his life had frequently been micromanaged. He, having the willful nature of his father, must have dealt with Aunt Hilda's watchfulness with increasing impatience. But he would never say so to me. He remained loyal to her memory, even in the face of her ridicule of me. He had been her good son, the great joy of her childless life. No longer angry at the falseness of her accusations, I only considered his subtle revelations as helpful in knowing him better. Nothing was to be gained from hostility toward a dead woman. She had left him a good son for me too. Any favorable offering from Marcus was happily seized upon, assuaging the guilt of my late teenage years, when I could not properly care for him. The sorrow of it was my own to bear. My grateful response was a quiet smile.

"You don't need to be afraid to speak your mind, though, Ma. It

will never change my feelings for you, now that I..."

I laughed and said, "I've always spoken my mind, just ask Ragnar about that...now and long ago."

"It's tantalizing to think that Ragnar knew you as a little girl. I hope he'll tell me some things about you."

"He doesn't volunteer much...but tells me things about me when I ask him. He can sometimes be the video camera our family never had. He relates memories with a wonderful clarity...mesmerizing. Sometimes I pore over the family photograph albums...ask him pertinent things."

"I'd like to see them."

"Of course. What a good idea." -- One I would never have dreamed of suggesting. When Marcus finally arrived last winter, I at first tried to inculcate a little family history, but after his incredible acceptance of me I became much more restrained, fearful of appearing overbearing. Perhaps I did tread too carefully, so happy to have my son back, afraid, afraid this new life would vanish...and to think Ragnar has called me a *tough little woman*. He probably says it to attempt making me so.

Marcus wore a cool short-sleeved tan shirt and faded jeans rolled just above brown deck shoes, without socks. I loved to see him dressed so casually, enjoying his vacation. He lifted his curious head and raised himself on the weight of one elbow, his beautifully limpid dark eyes, Hugh's long jet eyes, fixed on Sylvia. He was not at all surreptitious about studying her. I watched him with a smile. His gentle expression appeared to be one of pleasurable appraisal, and perhaps a little awe.

Sylvia, a lovely pale narcissus, could be heard laughing a high tinkling laugh. She turned from Virginia and looked down the veranda. Sighting us together, she turned quickly back, as if even at that distance

she was rudely interloping.

“What a caring girl she is,” I softly observed, with no intention at all of influencing Marcus. “I thoroughly enjoy her. I think she’s wise beyond her years...I’m wondering how on earth she got that way.”

“Genetic serendipity, I guess. Unscientific, huh? You’re not allowing Virginia much of a hand in it.”

“Virginia’s a good soul, although sometimes overbearing. She doesn’t mean to be. She’s had a difficult life too. Both Sylvia’s busy parents made certain she attended good boarding schools. They surely love their sole offspring. Virginia badly wants to repair so much in the world. I’ve learned the hard way what cannot be done, and what might be...but never according to personal preferences. If you really want to fix things, you must learn to be an unbiased, assenting, and very calculating problem solver...willing to concede a great deal.”

“And that’s you.”

“Was...tried to be.”

“I wouldn’t suppose that faculty dissolves...no matter where you are. I think I see a great deal of it. I’d really like to just...get to know you...without getting involved in any other *profound* relationships.”

Marcus turned his thrown-back head and looked at me. Ah, those burning dark eyes. I was flooded with mother love, overcome by it. Yet a little smidgeon of me wanted to defend Sylvia’s love, wanted to say, *Don’t, on my account, reject something you may never find again.* I did not know the depth of his feelings for Sylvia. His reluctance to commit himself was entirely understandable, his life busy, his work important. I said something close to what I had told him last winter.

“Love is an expansive, timeless emotion...not to be feared. It

makes room for an enormous amount...actually in no space at all.”

“Love, yes, but cultivating a chosen mate takes time and space. That *is* to be feared. I haven’t been very good with Ruth.”

“Are you seeing her again?” I had assumed they were finished.

“From time to time. She’s around...convenient...puts up with my selfish habits. God, I really sound disgusting.”

I smiled and said, “No, Marcus. I suppose you’ll know when you love someone enough to consider yourself committed to something.”

“Have I somehow hurt Sylvia?” he quickly asked.

I thought quietly for a few seconds and finally decided to say, “Well, I shouldn’t speak for her. Perhaps she’s fallen in love with my irresistible son. There is some pain in that.”

“I could have slept with her when I was in London...decided I liked her too much to do that and then just leave without...”

“Golly, maybe you should be telling *her* this.”

“Right now I don’t want to...have other things on my mind. *Golly?* I don’t think I’ve ever heard anyone say *golly*.”

“Oh, you must have. The expression is still in use.”

“I really wish no one else were here right now, Ma.”

“I’m so sorry. I should have considered that.”

“Except...I wish Dad were here. Did he know I was coming?”

My heart sank as I realized that Marcus was trying to capture a family he’d never experienced, his real parents. He wanted us here together and all to himself. I had really believed a relationship was developing with Sylvia. Possibly I had romanticized when observing their encounter, perhaps because I am in love myself.

“I can’t write to your father or call. I get an occasional exotic

postcard scribbled with pretty phrases, some mysteriously in Mandarin -- all those agrarian idioms...nothing I can make out as pertinent...I'm really surprised when even that much arrives. He's never mentioned when he's coming back from China."

"He loves you."

I blushed in the darkness. How strange to have your son tell you his father loves you. I did not think so anyway, not in the way he wanted it to be.

"Not in the way you mean, Marcus."

"Yeah, it's why he left."

"You don't know that at all."

"I wasn't born yesterday."

"I know when you were born. I remember it very well."

"Don't change the subject, Ma."

"You shouldn't concern yourself with that...or wish for what cannot be. Hugh has many consuming interests. Marcus, you've been an adult for quite a while. You know how these things go."

"These things? These *things*? I know how I don't want them to go...and how *he* doesn't want them to go."

"Marcus, my darling, you've got to stop this. You can't speak for Hugh...for your father. It is not a simple matter. You sound incredibly spoiled and very possessive...but you can't be, not you."

"No, I know it. You're right, of course. Goddammit! Sorry. Possibly I'm going through another childhood. Idealism works better in the world of science."

"Does it really?"

"Now you're going to dispute that. Probably with some brilliant

philosophical observation.”

“I’ll restrain myself,” I said, finding it easier to laugh.

Alfreda and Bill March had come to say good-bye. I got up to hug them both and thank them for their good company.

“Poor Roland’s fallen asleep,” Alfreda said, eyeing him with the playful delight of a harmless school-girl crush. Witty Bill March, who missed little in human conduct, replied with a playful assertion of self-confidence: “Wake him up, Alfie, give him a thrill.”

Ragnar had known how tired I would be, and when he came back from taking Mary home he simply went home himself. He thoroughly enjoyed disappearing into his big peaceful cabin, especially after a long night of human commotion at one of my dinner get-togethers. But the next morning I awoke late and found he had cleaned my kitchen and made a large potato-onion frittata, left warming in the oven. I would have lovingly scolded him for the extra effort, but he was off somewhere doing farm business. Sylvia found his hearty skillet breakfast and kindly brought a slice to me with tea, after she heard me knocking around in my bedroom.

“How nice, but let’s share it downstairs; there should be plenty for all of us. Have you eaten anything?”

“No,” she replied, with a listless shrug worrisome to me.

“Where’s Virginia?” I asked when we were seated in the kitchen.

“Dead to the world. She was thrashing around all night.”

“Then let her sleep. I suppose she was mulling over Roland. I don’t think she said much to him. Every time I looked, he was talking to someone else, mainly to Mary, enjoying her literary bent. You look as

though you could stand a little more sleep. Why don't you go back to bed when we're finished here."

Sylvia sat angled away from her untouched frittata. She crossed her legs, tugged at her chenille robe and leaned forward on one elbow.

"You must try this; it's delicious," I coaxed.

"We shouldn't have come, Viola. I realize that now...but mother was so eager to get back here...and I suppose that was mainly Roland."

"Sylvia! I so enjoy seeing you. Don't you like the farm?"

"Of course I do. But I've realized, all too slowly, that Marcus should be here with you alone...getting to know his mother. You two have lost so much time and...he really doesn't want to share you with all of this...this nonsense."

"Nonsense?"

"Well, me hanging around...mother rather making a spectacle of herself."

"She's been fairly well behaved."

"But obvious. Sometimes she...embarrasses me. That sounds so selfish, but somehow we clash. I'm more like my father in many ways, that is, much more flexible and not so...so flighty and constantly judging everything against some unobtainable perfection."

"She means well."

"Of course she does...nearly always...and I do love her."

"I know you do."

"I'm going back to London, Viola."

"What! But we'd all be quite devastated if you did that. How unthinkable...what a terrible idea. You mustn't say that...stay the rest of your vacation, Sylvia...it goes so fast."

KEEPING

“No, I can’t. Please don’t be upset, don’t think me bloody rude. I’ve been so selfish. You and Ender Farm are wonderful...but I really need to be back at my work...need very much to keep busy. Are the girls using their horses today? I wonder if we could go for just one more ride. I’ve so enjoyed riding with you.”

“The girls’ grandmother told me they’re away with their parents, visiting relatives in Indiana. It seems I ride at least one of their horses more than anyone else does. We’ll certainly ride today. I’m going to use that time to change your mind. You are not, absolutely not, in the way here, Sylvia.”

We had ridden past the cabin of Ragnar’s nephew, Peter, at the edge of a curving horizon of ripe grain, and were on the old field road rising and dipping between thick forest and open farmland. I had not yet touched upon poor Sylvia’s startling decision to leave, still contemplating what more I could say or do. Suddenly a cunning idea came to me. It came because the hot sun was beating on our heads and neither of us had on hats. I stopped Mariner in the shade of a thick-trunked old maple. It had been growing at the forest’s edge for more than a century, thrusting its limbs over a weedy incline and sending long branches and speckled shade right across part of the lane.

“We’ve forgotten to wear hats and I’ll soon have a headache. Your pale skin is bound to burn, Sylvia...mine too. Please, will you sit on this patch of grass in the shade while I gallop back for hats?”

“But I’ll come with you, Viola.”

“No, I’m going to move fast...I want us to have a good amount of time out here. It’s such a great day -- those expansive fluffy white

clouds floating against this blue, blue sky.”

“I’ve got on sunscreen, Violea.”

“Nevertheless,” I called. “Rest and listen to the birdsong.” I had wheeled around and galloped off before Sylvia could say another word. I glanced back once to make sure she was staying put. She had already dismounted.

I was snatching two baseball caps from the back porch when I heard voices outside. Marcus was in the back yard, gazing toward the hazy blue-green hills above my indispensable woods. Peter was sawing a dead limb off one of the old fruit trees. Peter’s take-charge help on the farm was one of Ragnar’s great ideas. I listened to their brief exchange and smiled: Marcus asking friendly questions in his clipped Bostonian voice, then Peter’s amiable Norwegian accent.

“Sorry you couldn’t come to dinner yesterday,” I called to Peter.

“Thank you again, Violea, I was resting from *mange* duties around here...and doing some interesting reading in the evening. I would not fit there too well anyway.” His voice was a shy apology.

“Oh yes you would, you clever fellow.”

I turned to Marcus and said, “I’ve got a task for you that ought to be fun. You get to ride Mariner out beyond Peter’s cabin.” I kept talking as we walked toward the barnyard water trough, where Mariner stood waiting. “I’ve got all those cherries we bought at the market to take care of before they spoil. Virginia said she’d help me can.”

“Why do I need to go there?” Marcus asked in a suspicious voice.

“Sylvia’s going to get a very bad sunburn. We forgot hats. As I was riding back, I remembered the cherries...can’t just leave her out there, so I’d have to ride all the way out with a hat and then back.”

“Isn’t this a little transparent? Have you forgotten that you and Dad produced a quick study?”

“The evidence is irrefutable. Still, I’d hate to ruin Sylvia’s ride. She wanted to have one more so badly.”

“She can have all the rides she wants, can’t she? I might go on one with her later.”

I watched Marcus carefully as I answered. “I’m afraid she won’t be here later. She’s going back to London right away.”

His expression was one of reproachful disbelief. Then he saw that I was quite serious.

His dark eyes closed down in thought, with one curiously lifted brow, just the way Hugh sometimes does it. “Why’s she doing that?”

“I don’t know exactly. Something about her work.”

I stood by Mariner, stretching the reins toward Marcus with the same hand that held the baseball caps.

“Put on one of these before you go.”

“You’re devious, Ma.”

“Not as much as I am busy elsewhere,” I said. “It’s the same path you and I took. Remember how pleasant it is?”

Marcus threw his head back and stared down at me for a few seconds, then shrugged, donned one cap, rolled the other and stuck it in his belt. How did my little one get so tall? I was glad he at least had on a cool short-sleeved shirt, old jeans, tennis shoes.

“And only yesterday I thanked you for not trying to manage my life,” he said as he climbed on Mariner.

“I’m not a very good manager of anything...not anymore. It’ll be a nice place to say good-bye, though,” I softly mused.

KEEPING

“Yeah, thanks,” he said, but his irony held tolerant obedience, a thrilling veneration that was newly mine. He slapped Mariner’s loin with the ends of the reins and cantered off.

Now I would have to do the cherries or I would be a liar.

Virginia was of little help, once again, preferring to watch me trying to duplicate the way Mama canned, while she complained of Roland’s indifference.

“Why don’t you go for a stroll in the lane. Possibly you’ll find Roland out chopping wood for the winter,” I suggested.

“And you accuse me of being snide,” Virginia said. “These jars are boiling in the water bath now, what else can I do?”

“What *did* you do?”

“I watched the water come to a boil and I...well, at least I gave you moral support,” Virginia said, shoving her steamy hair away from her eyes and bursting into laughter. I was delighted to see her laughing. Could she possibly know that Sylvia was planning to leave, and yet so suddenly be seized with lightheartedness?

“Be off with you,” I ordered. “I’m going to take a cool shower and lounge on the veranda with a book.

“I was surprised to hear that Marcus was out riding with Sylvia. She’s threatened to leave, you know. I didn’t take it seriously.”

“I do,” I said. “Let’s not talk any more of it right now. But I would like to ask one thing of you...while I think of it: that you please not mention Hugh’s absence again. It disturbs Marcus.”

“I know, I know, I was sorry the instant it left my mouth.”

“Better to have felt something *before* it left your mouth.”

KEEPING

“Oh, Viola, don’t needle me. I am sorry. I’m terribly confused at the moment. I didn’t realize how difficult Roland would be.”

“I don’t believe he is that difficult. Try to put yourself in his place -- that often helps resolve things.”

“I simply cannot. He’s so unpredictable...unreadable.”

“On the contrary... Well, you look very svelte in your jeans and sexy tank top, casual sandals. I’m sure he’d approve if you presented your friendly self,” I encouraged. “I don’t want to interfere,” I assured her. “I’d just like to see a bit more happiness around here.”

At last Virginia decided to brave the shady lane to Roland’s. I was hoping he would snatch her in with as much enthusiasm as he had shown the last time she beat on his cottage door. Where it would lead I could not imagine, but at least they might enjoy themselves for a time. I felt certain that Virginia would never permanently abandon London, and that Roland would never leave his forest stronghold.

Barefoot and wearing only a thin flowery white shift, I had dozed off reclining on one of the weathered old lounging chairs. Something made me open my eyes. Ragnar was patiently leaning against the rail. In one of his hands he held the book that had fallen from my lap. His lingering curl of smile attested to a moment of quiet self-indulgence.

“You are here alone, Sleeping Beauty -- I cannot believe it.”

“I chased them all away to more interesting places.”

“You were sleeping soundly -- good.”

I stretched and yawned. “What time is it?”

“Does anyone care?”

“May I have you all to myself for a little while, boss man?”

Ragnar straightened his tall body and came toward me, laying my Alexander Pope on the side table and lifting me up from my chair.

“I was intending to ask that.”

He was freshly showered and shaved, wearing crisp khaki slacks, loafers, and a short-sleeved shirt nearly the color of his eyes.

“Umm, nice, you smell of *Royall Lyme*.”

He held me against him for a long leisurely kiss. Fortunately for my endangered bones, he has to securely hold my disarmed body aloft whenever he does that. I have sometimes wished I were taller.

“And you *taste* sweetly of telltale caraway.”

“*Ja*, the Norseman’s humor. You smell of the green tea crystals in your bathroom...and your pretty hair is still damp from your bath. It is humid today. Will you come to my place and eat with me?”

“I suppose I ought to be thinking about dinner for everyone.”

“Your kitchen is full of food. Let them do it for themselves, they are not children. Besides, I have prepared something for you.”

“What an assuming man you are.”

“I assume you will eat my food.”

“That, you know for sure.

“I’m surprisingly hungry in this heat,” I said, as we walked hand in hand to his cabin. “It’s going to be a sweltering night.”

“We will sleep with a fan...on fresh cool sheets with no covers.”

He glanced down at me sideways with a grin.

“Tell me honestly how you knew I was available.”

“Peter. Marcus is riding with Sylvia, and Virginia is probably by now having a fractious tumble with Roland.”

“Shy, minding-his-own-business Peter is your informant?” I said,

somewhat amazed.

He laughed. “*Nei*, I ask him how things are up at the house, from time to time...just when I know he is working around there.”

Ragnar had put cedar chairs and a table out on his fir-shaded deck. He left me there with a frosty glass of Pinot Gris while he fetched our early supper: a thick icy gazpacho soup, slices of his homemade olive bread topped with thin slivers of cold feta cheese, and a very fresh lettuce, tomato, shrimp, and avocado salad, crisp and cool. Its chilled dressing was made with the oil of filberts from our orchards, a product experimentation already on the market. Mixed with a few unknown condiments and French mustard, the oil gave a delicious nutty tang to the salad. I was experiencing gourmet heaven, feeling sated, cooled, revived.

Scraping at the deep seam of the pot-shaped empty white bowl, I managed to gather nearly a spoonful. I savored that last swallow of spicy tomato-red gazpacho. “At this moment I’m happy as a child in a meadow full of daisies.” I reached across the table and laid my hand over his. “Your incredible food! So refreshing in this flattening heat...how can I repay this...this wonderful love offering?”

“You will have your chance soon enough.” He winked at me over his wine glass.

“Morning, and you haven’t left me!”

Ragnar stretched his arms above his head, then gathered me up and ran his fingers through my hair. This was accompanied by the familiar Norwegian greeting of *God morgen*.

“*Goe moe-orn, lille sex. Ja*, still here. I want to talk to you.”

“About the poem?”

“You read me so well I wonder why I have to say anything.”

I snuggled against him beneath the thin sheet. His arms stayed firmly around me, until he tilted my head back to face him. Before me shone another enigmatic gray-blue message I sought to read from my stock of accumulating clues, but the pleasure of simply looking proved sufficient unto itself. Mere inches apart, we remained in celestial transit. I only wanted to kiss and be kissed.

Ragnar propped several pillows against the brass bedstead and leaned back.

“Before I let you seduce me, I want to talk.”

“I’d never have mentioned the poem if you hadn’t,” I said.

“I did not mention it...not yet.”

“In your eyes, in your manner, you did.”

“It is a well-knit piece for hasty work...maybe too rhymed for its somewhat tedious structure...but, for me, the subject alleviates that. I like most of it...easy to remember, cunning. I could have recited it, but not in front of the others...especially when I had no idea how you would receive it.”

“I know what’s wrong: you think I’m disturbed because you seemed not to care enough to forget the others and just spontaneously recite it...furthermore, I suppose you think Roland’s *ditty* implied that you control me.”

“*Ja*, someone might think so. Virginia spent some time trying to extract an opinion from me, trying to goad me into reciting *Shepherd’s Girl*...accurately believing that I could.”

“Why are you so sensitive about it?”

“Not sensitive, concerned for you. You have a mind of your

own, *velunderrettet*: well-informed. I never want you to think I--”

“You *do* control some things about me...thank goodness, darling. I’m a bit self-destructive and...tempestuous at best.”

He laughed. “*Ja*, sometimes...but I like my Wild Vi wild.”

“I trust you always...you keep me on an even keel...here’s proof of it...right here before your eyes -- I’m still alive, strengthened by your steady influence. It’s you who’ve saved me. I’m delighted with that little poem...although I don’t deserve it. Please recite it for me sometime...and with all the vanity you want.”

“Vanity?” He threw his head back with a mildly reproachful grimace, watching me as I strove for accuracy.

“Well...with all the truth on your side then.”

“There is a fair amount of truth about you in that small poem.”

“All right, all right, I’ve thought about it. I understand a great deal now. I’m not hurt or disturbed by anything you’ve done. How could I be? And Roland’s perception...I was deeply moved by it. You see? Our poet doesn’t miss much.”

“Where did you go when he finished his recitation?”

“Go?”

“*Ja*, you left.”

“You were talking to Virginia, how did you notice that?”

“Your shepherd does not miss much either...not about you.”

“No? Well, you know I’m thin-skinned...in some ways. I’m ashamed to say I wound up shedding a few tears under one of the old apple trees out back. Please don’t look at me like that...you also know what experience has done to me. It was just that I felt so thankful to have you...that Roland was clever enough to describe the effect of you.”

KEEPING

“You have always been overly emotional...in a way few of your forebears would recognize. I remember *you* very well. We have come to the end of this subject. Come here, *lille iris-eyes*.”

“Yes...never mind all that...back to seduction,” I teased.

“*Ja*, this time I will do the seduction.”

“You never have to.”

“Sylvia’s staying to the end of her vacation,” Marcus told me at dawn breakfast. I was eating in my kitchen with Ragnar -- “You did supper, I’ll do breakfast,” I had told him. We were enjoying the fresh morning coolness of these warm summer days, then sleepy Marcus had suddenly appeared.

“That’s very good news,” I said, emptying my cup of tea. Trying for noninterference, I went on in a casual manner, “May I cook you an egg or two in some acceptable condition...with toast?”

“No thanks. I can fix my own. I’m used to making my breakfast. Sorry to interrupt.” He nodded apology at Ragnar. “Just thought I’d say something before the others got here.”

I stared at Marcus, with a number of questions on my tongue that would go unasked. I thought I had interfered enough.

“Well, Ma...it was a good idea you had, I suppose...throwing us together that way. At least we’re friends now.”

“Weren’t you before...friends? It seemed like it.”

“Some stuff got in the way, but the air’s been cleared. Sylvia apologized for spending her vacation here. I thought that was pretty considerate of her. Then I apologized for probably some misleading conduct and...a...everything seems okay.”

“Okay, good,” I said, not certain of anything.

Ragnar stood up and carried his plate to the sink, where he began to rinse it and, I thought, wash it.

“Leave that, please, I’ll do them all later.”

“Then I am on my way,” he said, coming up to stand beside me. “I will not be around for dinner, if you had thought of it...a meeting in town.” He turned to Marcus. “You know, you could come, Marcus. I am talking to some of the farmers about planting *Jatropha*. Your useful research on this plant would make you quite welcome to the discussion. We are eating at *Booker’s*, in one of their meeting rooms. I will be leaving at five o’clock...if you want to come along.”

Marcus set down the egg packer he had just taken from the refrigerator, and turned to Ragnar. “That’d be interesting...a chance to have some input where it happens...so to speak. I’d like that. Sure, I’ll come...I’ll be over just before you leave, all right?”

“*Ja*, glad to have you,” Ragnar encouraged. He touched my cheek ever so lightly with the back of his hand and smiled, then winked at me and left. I saw how discreet he had been with me before Marcus, and knew that he sensed the defensiveness Marcus felt for his father.

“I can’t help admiring him,” Marcus said.

“Why do you put it that way?”

“You know why. But it’s okay, I’m okay with it. Anyway, it’s certainly none of my business...*absolutely* none of my business. It’s just Dad, I guess. God, I never knew the full extent of it...this condition of having a reasonably accessible father...after all these years of wondering where he was...*who* he was.”

“I’m so sorry, Marcus.”

“No, I understand very well that it isn’t your fault. You had no idea where he was either...until you returned and discovered him here. I’ve thought about that, too, what a shock it must have been.”

“Yes,” I said, feeling pained and wanting to end this subject. Luckily my phone rang. It was Alfreda.

“Tomorrow is another good market day, how about you women over there come with me to Hayfield? I could pick you up.”

“No, you’d have to drive all the way over then back into town. Virginia and Sylvia have their rental car. We’ll pick you up.”

“Fine with me. Come as early as you can, before the good stuff is all picked over,” Alfreda advised in her matter-of-fact voice.

I had left Marcus to his reading, then hurried sleepy-eyed Virginia and Sylvia through a breakfast of marmalade toast and tea. Almost immediately, we set off on a hike to one of the forest’s interior meadows, a favorite place I had been wanting to show them.

A worn old path ran northeast, angling away from the lane leading to Roland’s cottage. We all wore baseball caps, T-shirts, old jeans, and tennis shoes. I had a small backpack filled with bottled water and a number of granola bars, to stave off our hunger until the coolness of evening. Sylvia was walking beside me, Virginia trailing behind, stopping at birdcalls, gazing up into the trees and demanding to know, in a hushed voice I could barely hear, what sort of bird was singing or at least scolding us.

Finally I was able to turn to Sylvia and say, “Marcus joined us for an early breakfast. I was happy to hear that you’re staying on until the end of your vacation, Sylvia.”

“Oh, yes...sorry, I was being selfish...we had a good talk. I didn’t

see him this morning. Where did he go after your breakfast?"

"Back to bed," I said with a laugh. "He took with him a book from my library, an interesting biography -- an old friend of his."

"What was it?" Sylvia asked, pausing and turning to me with a rising curiosity she as soon attempted to quash.

"A very detailed book about Gregor Mendel."

"Ah, the clever nineteenth century monk who experimented with growing pedigreed peas in his monastery garden," Virginia called out. She had temporarily interrupted bird spotting to listen to us.

"Yes...now *there* was a statistical genius...so laboriously recording predictable inherited characteristics," I observed.

"Marcus must have been quite pleased to find such a book in your library," Virginia remarked, at once amending herself: "Of course, I didn't mean it was unusual to find it there. You're quite eclectic."

"Marcus was thrilled...after finding dear old Gregor, he sees me in an entirely new light," I postured dramatically and with gleeful laughter. "You should see Ragnar's library, if you want variety...oh, but you have seen it, haven't you?"

"It's just marvelous," Sylvia exclaimed. "It must have taken a lifetime of discriminating taste to assemble."

"Precisely," I affirmed, as we were suddenly brought to a halt.

A surprised little cottontail froze in the middle of the trail and wriggled his nose at us, then turned and leapt ahead in retreat, vanishing helter-skelter into the underbrush, his ears laid flat and his white tail wildly bobbing. We stood in the cool shadows of the great Douglas firs, laughing at the whimsy of it.

"Another of nature's gratuitous gifts," I said.

“Shall we get lost?” Virginia bizarrely suggested in a wicked spell of mischief. “I’ve brought my handy cell phone.” She pulled it from her pocket and held it up. “Then Ragnar will have to rescue us.”

“Sorry, my friend, Ragnar would never believe I was lost in this woods. And besides he’s incredibly busy--”

“Running Ender Farm, running *you*, running everything.”

“I’m sorry you can’t appreciate him,” I posed, and meant it.

“But I do, I *do*! Aren’t you used to my addled mockery by now?”

“But why go on with it, Virginia? Do you enjoy it so much?”

“I’m afraid at everyone’s expense,” Sylvia offered regretfully.

“I could never live this life...yet I suppose I’m envious.”

“You really know very little about *this life*, Virginia.” I pulled off my annoying cap and threaded fingers through my sweat-dampened hair. “Certainly not my childhood...any more than I know yours.”

“I *have* learned quite a bit about your childhood. The only thing my parents agreed upon was the school they sent me to, a good school. They fought a great deal, over the smallest things, and took separate vacations. Then I married the bloody image of my frequently absent father. Sorry, Sylvia dear, I know you have a fondness for your dad.”

“I believe I see a side of him you’ve never seen, mother. He’ll never let you see it now. Apparently it’s too late for any of that.”

“Somehow it always accrues to me, all of the blame. I married a man like my father and then tried to imagine him as the man my mother had intended to love. How convoluted...and how naïve I was. Mother patterned me after herself. My poor mishandled brain. Nevertheless, I am guilty, guilty, guilty. I actually thought I loved your dad...in the beginning. Then I was preoccupied with you, Sylvie dear.”

KEEPING

“You shouldn’t have been so much. I shouldn’t have taken dad’s place in your...heart,” Sylvia diffidently explained. Her voice held a sad affection that made me want to walk ahead and let them talk.

“I can hardly remember a time when he *was* in my heart. No, it was done to me by family, so I’ve done it to you,” Virginia confessed.

“No, you haven’t. I won’t let you. I believe you can change.”

We had been walking quite rapidly and now slowed to a more comfortable pace in the warming air, moving steadily along in a heavy, sweltering silence. I felt like an eavesdropper, and was anxiously trying to introduce a more innocuous subject. But perhaps their pained mutual exposure would eventually benefit us all. Looking ahead through the dense woods, beyond the nearly overgrown path, I caught a brilliant glimpse of my exalted open meadow. I inhaled a woody breath of pure ecstasy -- the ancient oak trees, tall grasses, golden sunlight! Just then my curiously transitioning friend shook me loose, although with a disparity I thought could easily be addressed.

“Do you know, Viola, there’s something about America...I’ve talked to British friends about this, heard it and read it: they say when they come here they feel a certain license to be uninhibited, a kind of freedom they simply cannot achieve in England.”

“No indelible restriction of class here, Virginia...restriction that invokes a sort of confining self-restraint...an enfeebling self-awareness. Over there it appears to be inbred, repeated in your schools, of course in pronunciation, subtly ongoing and accepted, as though everyone has agreed to regularly ingest a little poison -- to immunize against what? The imperilment of the privileged and their apex: royal ornamentation? Sadly, here it’s racism that bolsters its flawed purveyors. But I’m afraid

America is increasingly becoming a highly obscene imbalance of rich and poor. Uncivil illiteracy in the ascendant. And festering out at the fringes are the extremely ignorant paranoids and, alas, the apostate ineffectually intelligent. If something doesn't change soon, we'll be mourning the irreversible demise of our already crumbling and abused middle class. That catastrophe will undoubtedly bring down the rest."

"I'm righteously indignant at your...your acutely removed, rather glib assessment of England, Viola. Spare me, for heaven's sake; it's too hot to argue for lenience...a reasonable rebuttal."

"I don't believe there is a *reasonable* one."

"Nor do I," Sylvia agreed.

"Come on, enjoy the day. Look there...my golden summer meadow!"

We came out of the uncertain rambling pathway, with its shady overhead closure, and stood blinking at the edge of a dazzling blond meadow, a field of light surrounded by the sharp contrast of the dense forest we had just passed through. Early spring waters in this swampy declivity had dried up, leaving a few shallow pools, which now sparkled among nearly impenetrable flaxen grasses, thick reeds, and cattails. I was at once cast backward into generous hot summers of escapement, this quite swiftly accomplished by the pungent smell of desiccating vegetation and the steamy mud vaporizing before us. The ponds flashed a deceitful invitation to slip into a shimmering cool bath. Above and patrolling all around us, long-bodied, both blue and red iridescent dragonflies beat their shimmering diaphanous wings in erotic forays. The huge quiescent dark-leaved oaks, with trunks barely visible, towered here and there over the expansive, quietly seething meadow. Their lowest lichen-covered branches stretched horizontally, just above the sky-reaching bent-tipped

grasses. High against the glassy blue sky, one could easily distinguish the parasitical mistletoe, garlanding its ramous oak hosts with prolific dark clusters.

“In the fall, my grandmother gathered mistletoe here for the Christmas season...while I tried to coax tiny frogs from the mud.”

“How on earth did she get to it?” Sylvia asked.

“We carried three sections of a long pruner, to be assembled here. Gran stood on old stumps left below some of the long branches, and reached her little arms up with the heavy pruner. How hard she worked for her prized mistletoe. We filled big burlap grain sacks and dragged them to where a tractor sled could pick them up. I think we came out upon the field about where Peter has his cabin. Ragnar could then stop and toss them atop the baled hay being brought to the barn. He helped Gran climb aboard with her pruning things, then swung me up high in the air and settled me atop the bales for our homeward ride.

“Ragnar again, there in your childhood. I can’t quite imagine it. Do you try and recapture how it was then?” Virginia asked.

“I don’t have to try...simply move my focus over a little...in that instance, from myself and Gran and the mistletoe, to a strapping young Norwegian leaping from our big John Deere -- tossed blond hair and suntanned flesh; tall and agile and very purposeful, nearly always with leather gloves stuck in a back pocket of his Levis. He would tease me, test me, instruct me...sometimes scold me, with the same humoring self-possession so obvious today. I pushed back. I fought hard against the predictable, against any sort of repetitious conduct that promoted banal order. I desperately needed to test the limits of everything...drive things to a rebellious point that must sometimes have been very comic, and

perhaps trying. That's how I became Wild Vi."

We flattened the grass around a stump in the shade of one of the big oaks and sat down. I laid out a few granola bars and placed in the middle of the weathered gray stump three small bottles of water. Staring around us, we ate and drank in silence. In a while, I reached for the backpack and pulled out a pair of opera glasses from one of the inside pockets, adjusting them on a red-tailed hawk high up in one of the more distant oak trees.

"Oh! You had those all along. Why didn't you tell me when I was searching out the cries of all those unidentified birds?"

"Guess I was in a hurry to get here," I said, laughing and handing the binoculars to Virginia. She stood up and gingerly made her way out through the grass to see how close she could get.

"Viola, I feel I ought to tell you," Sylvia began in a rapid but hushed voice, "that mother is nearly delusional about Ragnar. She brings him up constantly...even though I try to discourage her."

"What about Roland?" I asked, with an amused lack of concern.

"She fantasizes having them both...of course she hasn't either. I've only confided in you because I can't bear to be solely aware of this sort of nonsense. Oh, why can't we just enjoy ourselves and end the hopeless dreaming? Poor mother, she's starved for love."

Sylvia suddenly pulled off her cap, dropped her head forward and ran her fingers through her hair. When she looked up, her face was tinted more floridly than the sun could have yet accomplished. "I can guess what you're thinking, Viola."

"No, not that you've denied your own feelings, my dear. I know you're in love with Marcus...how painful it is -- love unencumbered is

itself a kind of pain.”

“Forgive me, forgive me...but I wish I’d never met him. I’ll never have him and...knowing that, I will not give myself away simply to please him.”

“Of course not; that should be desired by *both* parties.”

“God, I do desire it.” She lowered her head into her hands, then looked up, watching her mother return. “I can’t talk now. I can’t tell mother a thing. She responds according to her own wishes.”

“Sylvia, dear, come upstairs to my room as soon as Virginia is asleep tonight. Right now look around you, my darling girl. Please commit this beautiful day to memory...let nature’s extraordinary gift be untarnished by something you will someday laugh about.”

Before he went off to sleep, Marcus related some of his evening spent eating and talking with Ragnar and his group of farmers.

“Ragnar has a lot of influence with those guys. He shares useful advice, intelligent advice and long experience...they’ve known him for years and they know how he runs Ender Farm. There are plenty of setbacks learned the hard way among those farmers. They don’t relate to subsidies...are pretty independent. They want to do it their way, to learn new things, whatever gets the job done better...and with high regard for the future...for their children and the environment. I’ve inferred that Ragnar had plenty to do with their forward thinking. They asked a lot of questions. I had a good time.”

“I’m so glad. I’d love to have been there, but I can imagine.”

Marcus had retired to my father’s spacious old room, which I had streamlined to a simple masculine taste, and which I hoped he could

breeze in and out of in comfort, his milieu-becalmed mind on other things. He was some distance down the hall from my room, and at a later hour presumably sleeping. I assumed he would not hear Sylvia climbing the stairs and passing by his door.

When she managed to slip away, quite late and only at the sound of Virginia's rhythmic snore of deep sleep, she came to my room. I had lain propped against pillows, not reading but thinking of solutions, in uncertain anticipation of some kind of usefulness. What could I offer? I could not speak for Marcus, much less apprehend his state of mind. I would have to listen very carefully to Sylvia before I could respond to her earlier disturbed plea for help. If only she could have found some solace in Virginia. A little surprised at this, I was gradually learning how far apart in sentiment and understanding they really were. Some of this was likely the result of Sylvia's formative years away at school, and also of Virginia's early years in the field. Still, they often clearly enjoyed each other's company, and seemed to anticipate each other's moods and predilections well enough. Although Sylvia appeared more accomplished at it than Virginia.

Sylvia entered wraithlike, barefoot and dressed in a gauzy cream sleeveless shift, her loose honey-blond hair flowing around her pale oval face, her dark-pupilled eyes moist with restlessness. I got up and we settled in comfortable lounging chairs arranged before one of the tall screened windows. Cooler night airs ruffled the thin drawn curtains. I poured out glasses of cold chocolate milk, kept chilled in a Thermos on the stand between our chairs. Sipping quietly from time to time, and making a few casual comments, I allowed Sylvia to begin whenever and wherever she chose. I thought I detected some slight embarrassment, as

if she were having second thoughts about disturbing me, or perhaps of revealing intimacies.

She glanced across the room, into the little alcove where my desk stood. "Have you been writing?"

"Less than I'd like. It's been such a busy summer...but it's absolutely necessary that I work at it for a certain amount of time, and with some regularity. Part of my fitness program."

"Marcus is so proud of all your efforts...your talents."

"What a startling transition that's been," I offered. "Suddenly an intelligent and loving son. It's gone to my head."

"I think it's the most wonderful thing...and to think that I was present when you both..." Her voice had trailed off, and I knew that she was suffering over something felicitous and promising (I and my son) cruelly apposing her own hopelessness.

"Violea, I'm quite ashamed of myself...speaking behind mother's back like that today...and then...selfishly baring my soul. I've always been rather keenly in control of myself...but lately...I've at least come to realize that I've never really been in love...only various silly crushes -- ridiculous exaggerations -- occasional unsustainable relationships...and longtime friends, then...*this*. Even a friend you've had for years can suddenly tempt you to change your life, but it's nothing like this. I've always been the one to put a stop to unwanted advances...yes, with my lofty ideas of perfection -- perhaps something of my pitifully instructive mother at work there. I did very rudely intend to flee...to get away from painfully drowning in a condition I've managed to fall into...all by myself."

"Oh, you had some assistance," I could not help amending.

"Perhaps...in a charmingly oblivious way. I can't blame Marcus

for anything. I mistook the initial chemistry for something deeper. Because for me it was. Oh, what's wrong with me!" She clenched her fingers tightly together beneath her chin, and was for a time unable to meet my gaze, staring down in desperation. "I'm falling apart."

"Darling...riding together didn't help then?"

"Oh, we were very polite to each other...apologetic. The really horrible thing is that Marcus knows how I feel. How could he not? It puts him in the position of being...*uncomfortable* around me. My God, Viola, it's unbearable! And then mother is...now I'm at it again, aren't I...bringing mother into it. But she simply doesn't realize how she's *ever so consolingly* pouring salt into a wound."

Sylvia stood up, folding her arms and swaying a little, as if to right herself. "Forgive me, I'll get through it. I must! I must! Enough to at least laugh about it someday, as you said."

"How heartless that comment now sounds."

"Oh, no, I hope I wasn't sarcastic. I didn't mean--"

"Of course not. You never *mean*. It isn't in you, Sylvia. If Virginia has had the least thing to do with your character, which she surely must have, her influence has been a marvelous success."

"Some things I owe to my father," Sylvia justly interposed. "I hope I haven't ruined your night. I'd better go to bed."

"No, wait. I'll be right back," I said. My moccasins fairly flew downstairs and, as quietly as I could, I hurriedly searched through a packed kitchen cupboard for a bottle of whiskey I had shoved to the back. I brought it upstairs and poured a little into Sylvia's chocolate milk.

"I shouldn't," she said.

"No, right, that's what Ragnar has told me...never drink when in

distress. But of course he's been known to give me some anyway. You see what a problem I've been...driving him to that."

"Ragnar," Sylvia sighed, taking a welcome swallow from her glass. I was glad to see that she had relaxed a little. "You know, at first I was apprehensive...no, I mean in awe of Ragnar. He startled me...not so much because of his size and strength, but more in the way the Vikings must have been in awe of their heroic Nordic gods -- we Brits have quite a lot of Viking in us. I've since noticed a special aura of calm about him, a sort of indifference that's at the same time aware of everything going on, and prepared for...almost anything -- a trait as useful today as in an age of chary warriors. I've come to see him as...well, a man very sensibly contained. He's an enviable individualist."

"Yes, well said, but don't forget that he's very much a human animal -- he'd appreciate hearing me say that."

Sylvia drained her glass, then set it down and stood up. "Have I resolved anything? I don't really know, but thank you, Viola, for your support, and for this drink. I'll attempt sleeping it off...not the whiskey." Very slightly tipsy, she managed a whimper of laughter.

"Just a minute, Sylvia...I think you should get every ounce of pleasure out of this vacation that you can. Nature is healing, and you so enjoy riding. I want you to do a lot of it."

"Yes, I really do enjoy it. I don't have to do a thing but get on Legs...the way Peter takes care of the tack and horses for us makes me feel rather special...he cheers me a bit, his gentle ways and quiet strength, his sweet shy remarks. I've seen how amusing he can be."

"Yes, he's a clever young man. Ragnar told me that when Peter's future is secure he intends to return to Norway and look for a special

someone to marry. He'll have no trouble at all in that department. He often reminds me of the young Ragnar...attractively dependable."

Almost at once, I considered what a reliable and nonthreatening riding companion Peter could be for Sylvia. She needed to get away from all of us and be around someone fresh and unbiased. "What I'm about to suggest, Sylvia... I can't always ride with you, and I don't want you out there alone. If the smallest injury happened to you I'd be a wreck. I want you to ride with Peter. What a relief to think of it. He's great with animals, good company out in the fields and woods, very trustworthy. He already knows so much about this farm. He can tell you all sorts of things...good for his English."

"Lovely, I'd enjoy it," Sylvia agreed. "Well, good night and--"

Just then there was a surprising knock on my door. I responded, and Marcus leaned inside. "Saw a light under your door. Are you reading so late, Ma?" Then he caught sight of Sylvia, and his eyes fell upon the bottle of whiskey. "Oh, sorry, a midnight tête-à-tête."

"I was just leaving, Sylvia said, edging away.

"Well, I woke up hungry...going down and raid the fridge. Want a sandwich or something, Sylvia?"

"No...thank you. I'm off to bed, hope I won't waken mother."

When the door had gently closed, Marcus said in a soft husky voice, "There goes an authentic vision unaware of the effect. I really ought to ravish her." His dreamy dark eyes held an aroused twinkle of mischief, yet not entirely flippant. His nightwear, a white T-shirt and thin gray pajama trousers, enhanced an unstudied image of health, the élan of youth and energy. Slipping his hands into the thin pockets, he

leaned against the wall, grinning.

“She could no longer casually let you,” I said with some emotion.

He rocked forward on his bare feet and straightened, displaying a more serious expression, but one of undeterred self-assurance. “How do you know she might not anyway?”

“She has too much regard for you...and for herself...to play so recklessly, injuriously...and I hope you’ll honor that, dear.”

“How honor it?”

“By leaving her alone.”

“What? I thought you were...inclined in the other direction.”

“I was...but I know when to...change course.”

“Urged by your little friend.”

“She hasn’t urged me, but she *is* my friend...she’s remarkably wise for one so young, but fragile, darling. I love to see you happy, my son, but she isn’t here for your pleasure.”

“All right, Ma, I’ll be good.”

“May I come down and make you a sandwich?”

“Great, I’d love your company.”

We spoke no more of Sylvia, but merely bantered and chatted of mundane things, enjoying each other’s company while I made a ham sandwich then watched Marcus devour it. He clearly basked in the reality of my attending to his hunger, accepting it quite naturally and gratefully as his filial right.

Later, as I lay awake thinking of Sylvia and my forewarning to Marcus, I determined that I instinctively felt it incumbent to be wise and strong before my son; in the process it facilitated, to some small degree, my own stability. However much he already knew or sensed, I could not

discuss with Marcus my current unevenness of temperament, the periods of self-doubt and instability with which patient Ragnar had sometimes to contend. It was an impairing situation I had never imagined could happen to me. As far as I knew, Marcus had little knowledge of Robert, even less of how his loss, so brutally lodged in my mind, had tipped the precarious balance of a condition apparently long in the making. If Ragnar had revealed to Marcus any of the condensed version of Robert known to him, I never heard of it from either of them. As to Ragnar's awareness, I knew he would never voluntarily open that wound to learn anything more from me. Whereas Hugh knew quite a bit -- my reluctant partner in commiseration of loss.

Virginia was now behind the wheel of their rental car, and we were headed up the highway to the March Farm. I was sitting in the back seat. I leaned forward and touched her shoulder.

"You haven't said a word about Roland, Virginia."

"She must have said everything to me," Sylvia lightly mocked.

"You see...that's exactly why I don't say anything. It all serves to make me the butt of one more bloody joke," Virginia fumed.

"You can speak without fear of anything but normal good humor," I coaxed. "Or, if you'd rather not, just remain silent on the subject."

"Roland was very entertaining...and I was entertaining. We entertained each other."

"Well, if you're going to talk like that, you can count on a certain amount of laughter," I said. "It appears you want to take a humorous approach."

“At my age, what else can I do?”

“There’s nothing wrong with your age in relation to anything, nothing wrong with enjoying and giving enjoyment...nothing wrong even with falling in love.”

“As you’ve done,” Virginia affirmed without intimation.

“Yes,” I agreed with a smile and softer voice. “I’m in the condition that neurotic and self-promoting Freud clinically attempted to tarnish -- ultimately diagnosed as a drive to continue the species. We are all to some degree at the mercy of our chromosomes, but we can relegate accordingly the precepts of those who exploit the great mystery of love.”

“But you see it isn’t at all like what you have. Roland and I provoke each other into a sort of temporary satisfaction.” Virginia sighed. “I wish it could be otherwise. Somehow we got off on the wrong foot and we’re still helplessly teetering on that damn foot.”

“Virginia...take this as kindness: I rather suspect that you are more the source of the problem than Roland. I know you so well.”

“How well do you know Roland?”

“I know him intuitively...could be it’s that miniscule batch of chromosomes we share. I *know* him. Once again, your desire for unachievable perfection is ruining the pleasure of flesh and bone here and now...perfection the enemy of the good.”

“My God, I could correctly argue myself hoarse over that. First of all, Roland worships perfection. His poetry hungers for it.”

“I don’t think that’s at all accurate,” I argued back. “Roland knows very well that, were it possible for unachievable perfection to be achieved, it would be the death of everything...all his glorious strivings. Whereas you, Virginia, seem to believe that perfection is waiting just

around the next corner. You cannot will the impossible.”

“Secondly,” Virginia went on stubbornly, “It’s quite clear that you see Ragnar as perfection.”

“Perfect for me -- in the vernacular. He constantly dissuades my proclivity to worship at his feet, warning me of future consequences.”

“He’s certainly proof that one can love a person with flaws.”

I laughed at her pathetic retaliation. Even without being able to see her face, I knew she already regretted it.

“You’re so right, Virginia...no offence taken.”

“Oh, you’re provoking my nastiness, Viola. There’s quite an amount to love in you, my dear...as Ragnar well knows.”

“I haven’t been able to revel in myself that much. His assertion of any merit in me leaves me constantly incredulous. I do marvel at his genuine wisdom -- instructive experiences are so often foolishly thrown away, but in his case forged into character...and therefore of monumental benefit. Ah, wisdom -- the rare thing I value above all else in humans...it signifies so much else worthwhile.”

“And that, you see, must be another thing he loves about you...as well as your tempting little body, you brainy wench. You’re really quite different from the Viola I knew...I mean before Africa. Regrettably, that changed you, of course...but before that you were a very serious person, so conscientious about your work...now you’re...why, at certain times you’re willfully mischievous...especially when you’re with him.”

“Yes...he does that...involuntarily...but he knows it.”

“It’s to do with your childhood, I suppose.”

“Perhaps sometimes...although much broader, deeper. But I was a *willfully mischievous* child in the beginning. I’m not presently interested in

analyzing causes. There's only *here and now*."

We had a few more miles to go before the March Farm, and I said, "This wasn't to be about me, Virginia. Can we talk any more about improving your situation -- if I can be of any help -- or do you accept the status quo?"

"I have no choice. Where is it going anyway? I'm not leaving my life in London...and Roland is--"

"What is your life in London these days?"

"She's been dating Tim McCready," Sylvia fairly shouted, her surprising revelation impelled by chronically provoked retaliation.

Virginia swerved onto the shoulder then back onto the highway, ostensibly to avoid some small flattened and desiccating animal.

"Mother!" Sylvia cried out in fear for our lives.

I voiced my alarm with some mischief, "Well, well, that *nattering old beanpole* nearly caused a wreck."

"It was horribly cruel of me to call him that. But I haven't been *dating* him, for God's sake. We do see each other so frequently in the office and...occasionally we have lovely long lunches together. You were right, Viola...when you told me how interesting he can be. There it was one day: your inescapable American voice sounding in my ear. I listened more closely to that bewitching echo, and of course, inescapably, to his words, discovering that he does indeed possess a certain amount of the wisdom you find so praiseworthy."

"Yes, doesn't he?" I said a little smugly, but with gladness.

My companions had all exclaimed over the abundance and beauty of the market's summer harvest, Virginia at once desirous of carting

home truckloads of things she would have no interest in preparing. When she went into ecstasy over succulent green pea pods, I reminded her that when we returned I was going out into Ragnar's garden and pick a basketful.

It was supposed to be my garden too, but it had happened that Ragnar did more of the work and I generally picked things to cook. I did help him plant, and often found myself attacking weeds, with a bent of mind both relentless and therapeutic. I always felt good, as if I'd really accomplished something when I finished work in that prolific patch. It sprawled below and north of Ragnar's cabin, and was nicely fenced in to keep out wild marauders. Long before the planting, Peter had worked manure into the cultivated dark earth, and the redolent rich soil later responded by producing splendidly luxuriant edibles. Peter was enjoined to help himself, and happily did so. Nothing grown was wasted, unused amounts going to the Hayfield Food Bank.

I had enthusiastically invited Roland to poeticize the diverse beauty: endless multihued heirloom tomatoes; various kinds of potatoes; even a few melons, and a pretty *mélange* of yellow-flowering squashes, these, pleurably hunted among their flat creeping vines, along with the cucumbers we freshly sweet-pickled as incomparable Japanese *sunomono*; the half-revealed marvel of globular dark wine eggplants, shining through the leaves, catching the sun with an oval burn of light; dense kale; tender green-spiked onions and huge bold leeks; aromatic purple garlic; various kinds of mild and hot peppers; the root plants Norwegians so favor, easy to store in their long dark winters: carrots, beets, parsnips, turnips, and rutabagas that Ragnar calls *kålrotter*, both red and white radishes; flower-

tipped peas and green beans, their delicate spiral tendrils grasping at the strings I helped to thread; crinkly fans of leaf lettuce; shiny, dark-leaved chard, steadily picked before it could bolt; and even a few artichokes, their purple crowns rising above fountains of silvery leaves. At the far edge of the fence, alongside elegantly flowering stands of mealy purple potatoes and their hearty golden relatives, grew several rows of sweet, small-kernelled corn. The silky tassels reached ever skyward, tender little oblong ears perched on thickening stalks, slowly ripening for late harvest.

What pleasure we took in merely walking through the garden before the light faded in the hushed early evening of late summer days, steadily discovering new growth and picking the surprises to lay in our wicker baskets. Returning to one of our kitchens, Ragnar and I washed the pungent yellow tomato dust from our hands and prepared a portion of whatever was gathered. Our joint evening explorations began soon after Marcus, Virginia, and Sylvia had departed. Ragnar had seen that I was too much alone; and, however tired from daily business, began to join me in my evening foraging. Each discovery, spaded from its loose moist depth as an unearthed treasure, or spied half hidden beneath a leaf, or dangling from a vine, I thought a wondrous miracle. Thrilled by the entire process, so reminiscent of garden plundering in my free-spirited childhood, my ingenuous cries of excitement continually entertained and amused Ragnar. By reinitiating me into the beguiling ways of a bountiful garden, he had sown a truly healthful prescription.

“I’ve no need to visit the Hayfield summer market,” Roland said, biting into a pungent red radish and chewing with a quizzical look of surprise, perhaps at its peppery sharpness, “no, never with Ragnar’s

veritable cornucopia of edibles continually available. He's done this for years...and now the fair handmaid's been harnessed for labor in the pea patch." He nodded at me, and I threw back my head with a low titter of laughter. "Ah, these small dulcet green peas you've plucked and shelled, Viola...prepared so tenderly. I will never have enough." Wayward little peas were dropping one by one from Roland's loaded fork as he brought it to his greedy mouth.

"Wasn't today's women's marketing binge quite useless self-indulgence...even an insult, Ragnar?" Roland impulsively queried. "What could they possibly find in that hodgepodge of stalls to improve upon your nourishing marvels of botany?"

Ragnar laughed, enjoying Roland's showy manner of expression even more than usual, then took a long swallow of the Pinot Gris filling his fluted glass. "Fruit," he finally answered.

"Ah, yes, but don't those old fruit trees produce something?"

"Something," I said. "They're mostly of sentimental value."

"Well, Ragnar grows humongous raspberries," Roland asserted.

"Today we bought the most wonderful boysenberries," Virginia enthused, turning to her daughter. "Sylvia's made two berry pies."

"You did?" Marcus said with surprise. He stared across the table at Sylvia, as if this socially active young teacher had performed a culinary feat beyond the realm of possibility.

"What is so remarkable about that?" Sylvia asked, looking up from one of Ragnar's half-eaten buttery trouts. She held her eyes steadily upon Marcus, until her cheeks flushed a soft rose tint, then dropped her demure head nearer her plate, reclaiming her fork and toying with the

remaining trout meunière -- so delicious I hoped she would finish it.

“The pies are beautiful,” I was delighted to announce, “delicate lattice work prettily done. We’ll have some with ice cream, later out on the veranda when the air is cooler.”

Marcus had finished his last bite of pie when he unexpectedly announced to Sylvia, within earshot of everyone else, “If you showed up at my house with a pie like this, one of your special London friends would have to fly over and kidnap you before I’d let you go.”

What on earth! I thought with some disappointment, hadn’t I just asked Marcus not to stir up insupportable feelings in Sylvia? Why had he tossed out such an intimate and rather strange compliment? Diffident Sylvia’s face was hidden in shadow, but I could imagine her expression.

“I’d kidnap her myself, but her mother will likely bring me a tasty pie soon enough...sans kidnap,” Roland curiously stated.

There are contagious vapors in the air tonight, I quietly mused to myself. Virginia was likely stewing over Roland’s intimation. Hoping to veer from any discomfort to Sylvia, I remarked, “Ragnar will make no such offer to me...his pies are far better than mine.”

“Pie is never involved in your kidnapping,” Ragnar said quite matter-of-factly. “You are the ransom.” I was astonished at this quixotic turn of events. Perhaps he had drunk a bit too much wine.

“Let’s relegate the rest of our emblematic pie to the pantry,” I urged. Everyone laughed loudly, Roland loudest of all.

Virginia then asked one of her slightly invasive questions, which I thought sounded a little too much like a prospective mother-in-law.

“Tell us about your Boston home, Marcus. Is it very grand?”

“Just a rambling old house that needs constant ‘TLC,’” Marcus downplayed, apparently forgetting that I had once stayed there.

“A very beautiful old Georgian landmark, as I recall...having once lived there for a time.”

“That’s right you did, Ma,” Marcus called to me with surprised recollection. “I’d hardly thought of it. What room did you have?”

“A small dark garret away up under the rafters,” I said. It was the truth -- good enough lodging for a pregnant little farm girl. Aunt Hilda had plenty of other unused space I might have occupied. I could easily remember wandering through the lovely rooms below, dreaming of what it would be like to have one of them for my infant son and myself. A large, expensively appointed nursery for Marcus was soon conveniently established next to Aunt Hilda’s bedroom. Not long after that I was sent away to boarding school. I wanted the very best for my new son, but I had nothing to give beyond my love. After each fumed bus trip to visit my indulged little child, I swore I would use Mama’s proffered money to educate myself to a point of complete self-sufficiency, then take back my son. But with my final diploma in hand it had been too late. Insidiously influenced by the steadily vilifying remarks of Aunt Hilda, Marcus did not want me. I might have snatched him away. I had the right to, but he was happy and very well cared for, and at the time I still had little support to give. I grievously buried my pain by fleeing to London, to the offices of an NGO, soon losing myself in years of rigorous work in the Third World, where human depravation far exceeded my own. These thoughts had all come flooding back when I answered Marcus about my old room in his house.

He fairly leapt from his chair and came to kneel beside me.

“When you come to my house, and I hope you will soon, you’ll have the best room in it...any room you want, *my* room: the old master bedroom.”

I smiled and stroked his arm, for an instant considering how Aunt Hilda would feel about that. “I don’t know when it will be, dear, but I would never deprive you of your bedroom, in any case.”

“Why is it, every time I decide to have a simple little canter with Sylvia, she’s out riding with Peter?” Marcus asked one morning. He and I were breakfasting early, Virginia was still sleeping, and eager Sylvia was already out riding.

“I thought you understood why,” I answered. “Have you noticed how improved she is? Peter is good medicine. He makes her laugh, and he knows all sorts of things about the farm...about agriculture in general, and nature. He has a pretty good head for literature, too. And of course he’s helpful and protective. I don’t have to worry.”

Marcus drained his coffee mug, sat a moment in silence, then made up his mind to express mild indignation. “I know all sorts of things and I’m fairly interesting...I can be helpful and protective.”

I could not help smiling, because my handsome adult son’s dark eyes were narrowed to a fiery impatience, his finely etched lips held firmly together in petulant objection. He must surely have sometimes done that as a young boy, when he was determined to have his way.

“My darling, you have many wonderful qualities.”

“As to Peter...are you being devious again, Ma?”

“Your ego is showing, dear. Not everything is about you.”

“It certainly isn’t.”

“There was something I wanted to ask you the other night, Marcus, something I noticed during the boysenberry pie farce.”

“What? Is there any more coffee? What about the other night?”

I poured him more coffee and explained. “You said something that seemed strange to me. You said one of Sylvia’s special London friends would have to come and kidnap her. What did you mean by that? I don’t believe she has a particular male friend in London.”

“Oh yes she does. You are cunning, Ma, very perceptive. I met him when I was there, her London male friend. He was not very happy to see me when I came to take her to dinner.”

“He was at her apartment?”

“Just leaving. I got the impression that if it were up to him he would have claimed her for himself a long time ago.”

“She must have known then, what you meant when you said that to her.”

“She knew.”

“I had no idea. Virginia has never said anything. What did Sylvia say about him...if I’m not being too inquisitive?”

“She politely introduced him and made no further comment. And she doesn’t tell Virginia everything about her life either. You can see why. She doesn’t want to be micromanaged, and, believe me, I can sympathize with that.”

“I try very hard not to be invasive, Marcus, but I so love learning things about you...just the pleasure of knowing more--”

“I didn’t mean you, Ma. You can ask anything you want...*know* anything you want, *tell me* damn near anything you want. Christ, after all

these years of mistaken impressions, of stupidity and wasted time, you've got a right to know some things. I know I hurt you badly with my damn narrow-mindedness -- I'm deeply sorry for that."

"Most of it wasn't your fault -- I could never be angry with you. As to the present, I think our remarkable relationship can withstand a few short-lived irritations. That's part of love, isn't it?"

Marcus stood up, barefoot, wearing khaki shorts and a T-shirt, his clean black hair a little mussed from threading his slightly more agitated fingers through the gleaming jet waves. He leaned against the counter and looked at me, those luminous dark eyes allowing me a glint of the undisclosed. Then I understood. I understood completely.

"You know I'm in love with her, don't you?"

"Yes, I think I've known without clarifying, simply going along being puzzled by what I didn't know...but instinctively knew."

"Christ, this is the wrong time for it. It's too much. I'm in love with you, too, *Mother of me*: the ultimate tie of love, the idea of you, the person you are...the works. With your Aunt Hilda, I admit it was often a dutiful love. With you it's pure, simple, unconditional thankfulness that you are you...that *you* gave me life."

This I could not easily withstand and lowered my tearing eyes. Marcus drew me up, holding me close as he calmly waltzed us about, humming a pretty little nursery tune that made my heart skip a beat.

"Will you sing me one of your made-up songs one of these days? Your resident poet certainly knows you...*Singer of moon-high song.*"

Emboldened by this and deeply moved by a sudden rush of impoverished memories, I said, "I used to sing you to sleep...a tune like that. Of course you don't remember."

“Maybe I do. Yeah, maybe I remember...my heart-song.”

I drew back my head, looked up at his smiling face and said, “What are you going to do, Marcus?”

“Nothing. I can’t do anything about it now anyway...don’t want to. She’s needs to go back and figure out what that guy means to her, or do something about it. She isn’t really dishonest...maybe with herself. She doesn’t see him as a problem, because she’s grown used to him, the way I’ve grown used to Ruth. *He* has more definite ideas.”

We moved back to the table. I cleared away the plates and sat down across from Marcus. Staring into his seriously pondering eyes, I asked, “Have you told her any of this?”

“No. She’s beginning to realize her problem.”

“Because you’ve refused to give any indication of how you feel.”

“Right.”

“She loves you, that I know.”

“That ought to help her figure it out.”

“But, Marcus, she doesn’t know how you feel.”

“She will...if she shows that guy the door for good. I won’t allow her to lean on him while she decides about me. A commitment like this is for life...as far as I’m concerned. I’m not moving to London. There’s a lot she can do here, but she has to want that. That’s asking a lot of her.”

“My God, you’re strong.”

“Maybe I get that from you. That’s why I won’t let myself take it that far...to the point where I can’t turn around and maybe I’ve ruined someone’s life...two people’s lives, a whole bunch of lives.”

“But if she thinks you don’t love her...”

“I know...it’s a bitch...sorry. The way she is now, if I told her she might make the wrong decision, sacrifice herself and then regret it. It isn’t all about marriage. These are not Victorian times -- she doesn’t have to marry anyone. But I’m doing what I need to do, so she does have to come to me and live in the U.S., find meaning here important enough for herself...if she really wants me that much.”

“How much do you want her?”

“That’s the one thing you can’t ask me, Ma. Because so far I’m not letting it go far enough to give you an answer.”

“My poor darling, I think you have answered. I’d love to give you my opinion.”

“Give it.”

“Despite everything you’ve said, I think you ought to tell her you love her...then let her decide where she wants to live...and I guarantee you that London friend of hers will disappear for good.”

“I’ll give it more thought.” His voice was cool, noncommittal. A number of times I’d heard an amazingly similar response from Hugh; a stubborn willfulness, the certainty that his conclusion was the right one. But I also thought that Marcus was being very considerate of Sylvia, of her prerogative to realize her own aspirations.

“Tell me this, Ma: If Ragnar asked you to move to Norway with him would you?”

“He won’t.”

“Ah, you’re not playing fair.”

“All right...I’d go to the moon with him. How’s that?”

“Clever lyrics but it isn’t Norway.”

“Ender Farm is Ragnar’s life.”

“You still haven’t answered my question.”

“I can hardly conceive of it...but I’ve learned to be reasonably comfortable with myself almost anywhere in the world. I suppose I would have to move to Norway.”

“Don’t worry, I won’t tell him you said that, Ma.”

“He knows it, Marcus.”

“Has he such a dominant influence over you?”

“Well, isn’t that just the sort of love you’re looking for, when you want someone to change their country, their life style, for you?”

“Touché.”

“His is a positive influence...dominance perhaps mutual, darling. I’ve already put him through quite a lot and it doesn’t seem to faze him. From the beginning he named me Wild Vi, so that unpredictable aspect of me is hardly a surprise to him now that we’ve...now.”

“Never dull, I suppose...but I’m not looking for anything quite that uncertain in a relationship.”

“No, no, the relationship itself is not uncertain -- I couldn’t imagine it being -- it’s *me*. I’m temperamental...somewhat like your grandfather...and sometimes regrettably impulsive. Out in the world, I kept most of that inside me. I really was quite a steady person, plodding along with hope, even optimism...until...I fell ill.”

“I’d like to know that part of you, too.”

“You will someday...someday when it’s easier to do. Now, I’m thinking of you, of your happiness. How fortunate it would be for you if something I’ve said made sense...was actually helpful.

“You make plenty of sense, Ma. We’ll see.”

KEEPING

Virginia, Sylvia, and I were visiting at Mary Fuller's quaint old fairytale cottage. It was warm. We had opened front and back doors to let a listless breeze drift through. Mary had served us iced tea and a tasty peach coffee cake Alfreda gave her. Alfreda was caught up in family affairs, but had thoughtfully sent over the cake with Bill, who often busily passed by the entrance to Mary's long graveled lane.

"Is it any cooler outside? We could sit out on the nice large benches Ragnar put beside his garden paths," Mary offered.

"Ragnar again, the man is ubiquitous," Virginia said, ready to launch into a discussion based on her remark.

"I think it's cooler in here," I interposed, looking around the shadowy, sparsely appointed long room. "Let's bring that fan up closer. Ah, it's so warm out there the birds are silent. Better in here, especially now." Virginia was moving the standing fan. "The iced tea helps. But wasn't that coffee cake good? -- dear Alfreda. So you do want me to go on with Sigrid Undset today, Mary?"

"Yes, just where you left off weeks ago. I remember it well, the cold ice of a medieval winter. It will be a pleasure, sitting here mentally escaping the heat."

"Love that idea," Sylvia said.

"And I think you're an attractive young woman," Mary observed. "I hear the goodness in your voice. You are used to helping others."

"I've already mentioned that she teaches English to foreign speakers, and does lots of volunteer work," Virginia proudly affirmed.

"Very good news, especially with so much cruelty and avarice more and more openly applauded...as all the sad news comes noising into

my often mysterious television box,” Mary explained. “Apparently it’s now more expedient than ever for the greedy to trample on the rights of the less fortunate. They’ve shrewdly created a propriety out of enriching the self...while sanctimoniously blaming their victims for the resulting inequities.”

“Machiavelli’s timeless observations in *The Prince* can hardly be improved upon,” I responded to Mary. “Unchecked, the inhumanity is bound to increase. From the particular to the general, the fight to hold the top and rule the pecking order...at any cost.”

Mary sighed and added, “Resources diminishing among ever increasing populations...incidentally and temporarily made healthy by rapacious commerce.”

“It eases our sense of impotence to do what we can,” Virginia said, quite ready to argue for immediate and constant action.

“Since I can do little, I often cover my ears and hurry to turn the noise off. If I must know of bad times, I prefer to read about the ageless horrors recounted in the imaginative sentences of dead writers,” Mary said, issuing a cynical chortle. “Catharsis...parallel art soothes torment.”

“Here we are, Book II of *The Axe*.” I said, adjusting my glasses.

When I laid down the book at a good stopping place, I saw that everyone had become thoroughly absorbed in the story.

“Wonderful,” Mary said. “I read her tetralogy years and years ago. How very real, how very captivating her novels are, the Viking culture, the harsh times...marvelous descriptions of the startling fjords, mountains, farmlands. And the religious aspect, while not so vicariously adaptable, certainly fits in with the tenth century period of conversion. You know, *Viola*, it was when your young man, Peter, mentioned

Undset in your class that I remembered her.”

“Peter’s a delight...intimations of Ragnar,” Sylvia remarked, then glanced at her mother with some concern, likely hoping she would remain silent.

“Now I intend to get the books and read them all,” Sylvia hastily went on. “I did read a more modern work of Undset’s, when I was at school: *Jenny*, which left me unsettled...but that Nordic fatefulness has a bittersweet attraction, the harshness of life...also cathartic. I must have been too distracted to read further.”

“We’ll read her together in London,” Virginia decided.

When we at last stood up to leave, Mary said, “You’ve no idea how good it’s been to have you enter into my quiet little world -- all of this stimulating talk suddenly resounding in my dulled ears. Please come back soon.” Mary had not actually seen any of us, but I knew that today she had observed as keenly as ever, and was left with a certain amount to contemplate. I would doubtless hear her lapidarian interpretations later. They nearly always proved uncannily accurate.

Knowing that autumn would seem very quiet, and the confining winter quieter still -- after the welcome commotion of my summer guests, the great delight of having Marcus nearby -- I strove to augment memory with sociable dinners. When we were all gathered around the dining room table, our incorrigibly unpredictable master of verse very often behaved with high entertainment, usually evoking something worth digesting along with the meal, and unfailingly setting off the others in a stimulating way. With all of us further encouraged by a few goblets of wine, the conversation was seldom faltering or without interest.

“And here you are in my kitchen again, while the farm limps along without you.”

“The farm is running like well-oiled machinery, my girl. And you expect nothing less, right? You may have noticed that I arrange things so that I can digress from time to time.”

“How on earth do you do that in this busy season?”

“A matter of careful organizing...allowing for a mild amount of truancy,” Ragnar added with a rumble of laughter.

He had just arrived and was now temporarily leaning against the counter with his arms folded, watching me chop rosemary for barbecue sauce. He unfolded his arms and came to stand behind me, putting his hands on my waist and kissing my neck.

“Careful that’s dangerous,” I warned.

“I like to watch you, every small gesture is uniquely Wild Vi. You toss your pretty head...frown so seriously...then, when you invariably hold your tongue against your upper lip, I need to do this.”

I laid down the knife and turned around. “Then *I* have to do this.” I kissed his solid chest, which was all I could reach. He stood a moment in silence while I nuzzled into his taut warm T-shirt and ran my fingers along his belt and over his denim-clothed hip.

“*Ja*, my *lille* sex, enough for now,” he warned, moving away from me. “Your sweet body is far too available in that thin cloth.”

“Well, it’s hot.”

“*Ja*, too hot.” He grinned and winked at me. “And you are barefoot. This floor is getting messy, do you not want your thongs?”

“No, I do not, darling. I’ll shower later.”

He was wearing his kitchen clogs, which meant he was going to help me. How happy I was to see him and to have his help.

“Did you brine the ribs?”

“Yes, the way you said. I lugged up the old charcoal barbecue from the basement and put it below the back porch.”

“How in hell did you manage that, my *lille* girl? *Helvete*, why did you not let me do it?”

“I thought you were too busy. I did it sort of piecemeal.”

“Please understand, for such things I am never too busy. Marcus might have done it...if you could not find me.”

“He’s off riding with Sylvia. Do you suppose anyone will chafe at having to attack all those messy ribs tonight?”

“You cannot be serious, Wild Vi? Who does not like ribs? The wine will loosen up their finger joints...as well as their tongues. And the messier the better; it means you have cooked well.”

“Did you ever serve ribs to your shipmates?”

“*Ja*, sure I did. Fresh meat in port caused *fråssing*, gluttony. Merely to say that barbecued ribs produced a bacchanalian free-for-all sounds too grand...hungry sailors are hounds at their meat.”

“Did they eat a lot of fish?”

“*Ja*, plenty of fish.”

“You’re awfully good at fixing it.”

“That long at sea and you become very creative.”

Back to mincing, this time fresh sage, I looked up and saw that his keenly focused eyes were critical of something. “What?”

“Anchor the tip of the knife against the board with your left palm

while you are doing that, then move the blade back and forth ninety degrees as you cut. You will have more control that way.”

“Oh...like this? I see what you mean...easier.”

“I think it is time for me to sharpen your knives. And you need to use a larger knife, a chef’s knife...good for nearly everything.”

“I thought you might loan me one.”

“I brought one I use...on the counter. You can keep it.”

“No, I won’t keep this knife, darling. It’s your favorite.”

“*Ja*, you can have it...*lille* potato planter.”

“What? What on earth are you talking about? You planted all of the potatoes in our garden.”

“I am talking about a long time ago. When you were, I think, about seven years old. It was a very hot spring day, and Niklas was making you plant potatoes. He used to plant a small field east of the barn, remember?”

“Oh, God, yes. Mama was gone...in the hospital.”

“*Ja*, she had miscarried and was in Eugene. Niklas dragged you out of the basement, where you were painting pictures in the cool. He complained about your idleness. Out in the field he realized that you should have a hat...because, he insisted, you were going to stay there under the hot sun until you earned your supper.”

“I was so embarrassed. He went back to the house and took a big floppy straw hat with pink flowers from Mama’s closet shelf. I had to wear it in the field with my T-shirt and jeans. I didn’t even know how to arrange it on my head. I was embarrassed before you. I don’t even remember exactly what you were doing there.”

“Bringing out seed potatoes.”

“What made you think of that day?”

“The way you were holding your mouth. You knelt and dropped a potato into the hole your father dug, then leaned down and arranged it just so, with your *lille* tongue pressed against your upper lip. You were barefoot then, too, and your nose was running. I think you had been crying. I took out my handkerchief and wiped your face. Niklas said, “Christ, when Martha is gone I have no handkerchiefs.”

“You remember so well. I remember it too, as if it happened yesterday. I wonder...do you think if I'd been a boy he might have cared for me?”

Ragnar looked at me with an intensity that made me wish I had not brought it up. He was silent a moment. I speculated: *he doesn't want to speak because he will only have to say the truth*. I imagined I saw a flash of pity in his eyes, although his beautifully serene mask, which is really not a mask at all but pure Ragnar, revealed nothing.

“Sorry...I have made you unhappy.”

“No, it's all right. I know the answer anyway. I don't know why I blurted that out. What difference does it make?”

“I like remembering things about you.”

“Don't stop telling me things you recall because of what I just said, darling. “Please don't. I love your memories...*our* memories.”

“And you, my Wild Vi, should go on expressing your feelings. It is better to have them out. I regret that Niklas often acted like a fool...for a man of such intelligence. He did care for you...in his way. He made you wear a hat.”

I considered that a kind remark, but there must be a little truth in it. Niklas was a very distracted father, an unhappy man, but Gran had

tried her best to teach him elements of decency. He could be very well-mannered in the company of outsiders, deceptively charming.

“Speaking of potatoes, how are you preparing these?”

“Thin strips deep-fried in Canola oil.”

“Then I had better get busy.”

“How about letting me do them...and you do the ribs?”

“*Ja*...but ribs mostly do themselves. I will make a salad.”

“Great! You make wonderful salads. Surprise me...well, you always surprise me. The refrigerator is full of things. I’ll just assume once more that you don’t mind doing this.”

“Do not even bother to assume. When I come into your kitchen I like working here...especially with this *lille* summer nymph.”

My cat, Bussy, rushed in and began rubbing against my ankles. I nearly tripped. His demanding little paws padded over my bare feet, and his soft fur tickled my legs. He meowed his obvious food cry. I laughed at the pitiful urgency of that distinctive sound.

“Come on, spoiled, well-fed cat, out on the porch,” Ragnar ordered, opening the screen door. “*Koma*, I will fill your bowl. Eat, sleep, hunt mice. Even if you are overfed they are fun to play with.”

I stopped cutting to allow myself a brief spate of laughter. Ragnar was shaking cat food into Bussy’s bowl. “There are no mice in my house, for heaven’s sake,” I called out.

“He can dream of them anyway, out here in his soft velvet nest. You spoil every living creature...especially me, my girl.”

“Can’t outdo the incredible job you’ve done on me...a second chance to be overindulged...but something entirely new.”

Our dinner was enthusiastically disposed of by all present. We dined on the veranda, at a long wooden table that Ragnar and Peter had brought from the barn workshop; it had been cleaned and varnished and set in place against the far wall earlier in the summer. Ragnar did the ribs to perfection, the marinated meat falling from the bones into our eager mouths. To my delight, he praised my barbecue sauce, some of which I had made up. *Creative experimentation that tastes good is the ultimate reward for an adventurous cook*, he pointed out. His salad was a delectable meal in itself, and went very well with the shoestring potatoes and ribs: gently boiled ears of sweet corn were stripped into a bowl containing julienned skinned roasted red peppers, salty dried black olives sliced lengthwise, and minced fresh cilantro; over these few ingredients he poured a cumin vinaigrette with a dash of cayenne, expertly seasoned to everyone's taste.

"Ragnar at his salad best," touted Alfreda. "In his salad days," Bill March added.

Alfreda and Bill brought their old ice cream bucket, turning out the most wonderfully cooling dessert from Fern's rich supply of cream.

Roland had been so busy eating ribs that he failed to live up to his generally eloquent showmanship at table, leaving Virginia to fill in for him, unfortunately in an adverse manner far from amusing. She was on the attack -- completely unaware of the true feelings Marcus held for her daughter, she was testy and ready to expose any presumed flaw in his character. My skillful son performed quite admirably, responding with such gentlemanly solicitude that her feints and attempts at entrapment fell to pieces.

"With all the devotion you give your demanding profession, you've doubtless had little time to polish your social amenities...that is at

a really personal level.” Virginia had finally homed in on Marcus.

A short silence followed, in which I personally was aghast at this nervy attempt to reduce Marcus to an insensitive workaholic. Of course she was intimating his presumed poor treatment of Sylvia.

Marcus laughed and replied, “Yet somehow I got ahold of the normal methods of consideration...even empathy...just in time not to disgrace myself too seriously as a thoughtless boor.”

Bravo! I almost shouted, but instead managed silence.

“Whereas your lack of consideration could use a surprising amount of work...*after these many instructive years,*” Roland hastily informed Virginia between greedy bites.

I could count on cleverly adroit Roland to do my work for me. I did wonder more and more how the two of them got along when alone. There are indeed apparently unassailable relationships that thrive on attack and counterattack. Beyond playfulness, I would find such a rocky pairing totally exhausting. A steady diet of violent verbiage is not my idea of a healthful or enduring relationship. The very thing I am forever working on is control of my tempestuous outbursts.

Virginia had pursed her lips and gone rigidly silent.

I saw that Roland was watching Mary, as she daintily laid a rib bone back on the rim of her plate. He appeared to be fascinated by her deftness at so rapidly and intimately grasping new environments, all done without the visual cues the rest of us take for granted. Her sensitive thin fingers reached out and twined carefully around the stem of her fragile wine glass, which was nearly empty. Roland brought his napkin to his lips then stood up and grasped the wine decanter, walking over to Mary and easing his hand over her glass-gripping fingers. “Oh, thank you,

Roland,” she murmured, as he filled her glass.

“How did you know it was me?”

“You may laugh at this, but please don’t be offended. Everyone smells differently. I should say we carry our own aromas.”

“Why would I laugh? I must smell of the cheap cologne I quite painfully dashed on my razor-burned throat hours ago.”

“Not so much as your cottage...the evergreen woods...the oil you pour into your truck.”

“Jesus! That old junker swallows a ton of oil...but I fed that rusty hunk of metal yesterday...and showered this morning.”

“Nevertheless,” Mary said with a coy smile. “The admixture is not unpleasant; it’s merely you.”

“And you can do that with all of us?”

“Of course. I use whatever signals are available to me.”

“Effective,” Roland said. “I’ve considered that at times, usually in a noxious situation...in regard to humans. But of course we all use our senses instinctively...as other members of the animal kingdom become aware of each other...and make themselves known.”

“You would know me from the barnyard,” thoroughly washed and neatly dressed Peter announced. He was generally so quiet that everyone turned toward him to consider his unexpected remark. He blushed at our laughter and looked down at his plate. “Suppose I am in my cups,” he muttered softly. He has a lovely dry wit.

“When we’re preparing to ride, you always smell like the sweet hay you feed the animals,” Sylvia kindly revealed to Peter.

Marcus had laid down his fork, staring at Sylvia and appearing to weigh some thought I assumed none of us would ever hear. Then,

before Sylvia's innocent remark could naturally dissolve, he inquired of her, "And by what pheromone do you recognize me?"

"Hah!" Virginia exclaimed, clasping her hands beneath her chin. Her sudden judgmental incursion made the subject appear in an entirely different light, causing an air of uneasiness to hover above us.

"At the moment, I recognize you mainly as someone unused to a certain amount of wine," came Sylvia's gentle riposte.

Her smile saved us all. With the soft high trill of her generous laughter, the uneasiness collapsed and drifted away. I was relieved to see Marcus grinning.

When the dessert was finished and we were sprawled on the old wooden lawn chairs -- except for Peter, who was leaning against the railing with his legs stretched out -- we rested our filled stomachs while engaged in a slow discursiveness; mostly humorous flippancies.

Alfreda suddenly raised her head and said, "I think it's time for another poem from Roland."

"Oh, please, woman," Roland protested. "I've had too much wine, far too many ribs. Ragnar, by God, you turn out a fine rib."

"*Nei*, it was the sauce. Thank the expert sauce-maker," Ragnar said, winking at me.

"Ah, thank you, indeed, saucy sauce-maker. Because of you two, I'm no longer starving...of late lavishly wined and dined...at the moment happily passing into a gluttonous stupor."

Alfreda giggled. "It'd be fun to see what kind of poetry you can get out of your head in a stupor," she persisted.

"She's not giving up," Bill March said. "When she gets her mind around something she's like a loosed boulder going downhill."

“And I’m what stops her at the bottom,” Roland muttered a bit groggily.

“With a nice little poem,” Alfreda finished.

A silence flowed over our lethargy, along with the creeping darkness. There appeared no urgency for anyone to speak. Suddenly Roland snorted awake, sat up, and called out, “Why not!”

“Why not, indeed,” Virginia responded in a knowing voice. I laughed at how quickly they had reflexively developed a distinct code of understanding.

“You’ll likely call on your interpreter,” Roland said, addressing Alfreda but referring to me. I wished he would not condescend to my friend. Yet, we all tended to forgive his impudence, as he very seldom conveyed particularized malice, but rather a pervasive and unspecified existential vexation. He was indeed often brutally honest.

He stood up and leaned a bit clumsily against the railing. Peter stared up at him with an awakened gaze of anticipation. When Roland next spoke we realized that he was reciting:

THINK OF NOTHING
Not energized black space,
 hiding secret matters,
Not death in dreamless sleep
 beneath a surgeon’s face;
Not pi without a peep
 of where the math shatters;
Not vacuums in a lab;
Not catatonic Oms;
Not pure white fields of snow,

KEEPING

swallowing emblem domes.
Not Mneme's failed rehab,
but what you really know.

"*Que pensez-vous cela*, Professor Ender?" Roland inquired.

"Bravo!" I answered.

"Please don't say too much about it, Viola," Alfreda implored.
"I'm going to study it written down. There's a lot there to consider, but I think I understand that he means we know very little."

"Yes," I said, "It's a broad conceit with an unusual rhyming pattern. To make a sort of pun, it's a voiding poem, enjambed with a fillip at the presumptions of intellect."

"Hmm," Alfreda muttered. "By the way, what is *neemee*?"

"Mneme is memory," I said.

"Viola, I can't wait for your class to begin. Those evenings were getting more and more exciting."

"I enthusiastically agree," Mary spoke up.

Roland had remained silent, but he suddenly appeared at my chair, drew me out of it and danced me along the veranda, bending down to kiss my cheek. "You alone understand me," he said softly in my ear.

I politely allowed a little more of his ardor and then halted, thinking of Virginia. Thanking him with warmly conveyed sincerity, I patted him on the shoulder and stepped away, back to my chair.

"Afraid you'll have to learn to share her," Roland called out to Ragnar, who was leaning casually against the house wall, his face half in shadow. He laughed, unfolded his arms and settled his long frame back upon a sturdy old lawn chair. "I have already learned it." His succinct

low response was probably inaudible to everyone but me -- Alfreda and Virginia were talking and laughing loudly.

I got up and went to kneel beside his chair, turning my head to glance at the silhouette of Marcus having a conversation with Peter. A rough hand at the nape of my neck and fingers threading through my hair made me murmur pleurably and turn my head. Ragnar's eyes shone with steely flashes of the rising moon.

"Bill is asleep," he said. "I think he may have missed most of the poem." He sat up. "Well, I have to take Mary home now...left my truck outside. A while ago she apologized...the rich food and wine made her sleepy. Come inside with me a minute."

I walked unobtrusively past the others to the end of the veranda and went into the kitchen. Ragnar followed behind with his hand barely touching my shoulder. He flicked on the small stove light and surveyed my kitchen.

"This does not look too bad. Your method of cleaning up as you go along is a good plan. Leave the rest until tomorrow."

"Oh, I can probably do it tonight."

"*Nei*...can I not find you in my bed when I return? I know you are tired...I will not wake you...only to have you there when I wake up in the morning."

"You're very explicit. You didn't let Roland get to you?"

"*Nei*, Roland is Roland. He plays with amorous ideas but mainly he loves your mind. I have a more difficult time of it."

"You mean with me?"

"*Ja*, you...I am covetous of your mind, but there is always this demanding need of the rest of you...and good reason to believe you share

this sentiment.” -- the latter conveyed in a teasing voice. “I realize that we both...*nei*, this is not the right time to--”

“What, darling?” I insisted, putting my arms around him.

“We have less and less time...and more to fill it...ah, never mind, sleep is sleep. When I am tired I can be satisfied to retire alone, but you are hard to resist, my girl...wise and beautiful in your flowery summer dress. Sorry...it was only a mood sprung on me.”

“A Nordic mood...indigenous melancholy. I thought you were free of it...but I’m not surprised.”

“This is *not* melancholy, much less the wine...this is about *you*.” He lifted me up against him in the midst of that avowal, and my loose huaraches slipped from my feet. I had started to laugh but received an incredibly arousing kiss. For a moment I thought we were entirely alone. There was certainly all of that, the consuming passion he had implied, but I vaguely sensed something else, something slightly different about my self-contained Norseman. My head was not then clear enough to work at what it might be.

He set me on my feet and knelt to help me put on my huaraches, then stood up and turned to go.

“I’ll be there when you come back...*awake*,” I called softly.

“Asleep,” he said without turning around, and then he was outside with Mary. She stood up and took his arm. “Good night, dear Viola, come and read to me soon,” she called, waving a hand above her head.

Virginia called out a tolerant good night and started off with Roland, who turned back and blew me a kiss. Bill and Alfreda yawned their way out to their big shiny wine truck, while I stood on the veranda,

yawning too. Peter had already politely thanked me and returned to his cabin. Marcus and Sylvia came into the kitchen, insisting that they were going to clean everything that had been left undone. This surprised me, but I decided not to argue. To see them doing anything together made me happy. I went upstairs to take a brief refreshing shower, with the intention of rapidly slipping away to Ragnar's cabin, walking beneath a very brilliant high moon.

I did fall swiftly and soundly asleep, as Ragnar had predicted, and only awoke when he was cautiously slipping into his capacious bed. I squinted at the clock.

"Sorry...you were sound asleep. I just had a cool shower...this heat. At least you took pity on me and stayed put."

"You've been gone a long time."

"When I opened Mary's antique door for her, one of the hinges fell off. I had to get things from my tool box and fix it. She had a good laugh, accused me of heavy-handedness. A temporary job. She needs a new door."

"I need a Norseman."

"How about this one?"

"He'll do very well...no others around."

He drew me tight against his cool solid flesh, speaking softly in my ear, "Ah, you smell wonderful...like a spring garden."

"Lily of the valley from my shower. Oh, darling, you feel so nice and cool. I did open a window." I rose up to try and determine if any fresh air was moving at all.

"*Ja*, good. May I love you now or will you sleep?"

"Aren't you tired?"

“*Herregud*, my *lille* sex, I am wide awake...was wide awake driving back thinking of you.”

“I was only being considerate...knowing you’ve had a long day.”

“Then I am through asking, *lille* girl. *Koma*...here where I have already imagined you.”

“Wild Vi...my sister, Peter’s grandmother, is coming here in the fall,” Ragnar abruptly revealed while making our late breakfast. He was poaching five eggs and frying two thick slices of ham. He turned around to see my response. I was already flying out of my chair.

“Wonderful, wonderful, at last more of your family!” I exclaimed, hugging him and laying my head against his back as he turned over the ham. “I was always hoping that your pretty student niece would one day reappear; then she flew home for the summer. I’ll be thrilled to meet your sister. She’ll give me a little more of you...without of course even realizing it. Oh, I know she will...adding more pieces to the puzzle. Your blood relative...I couldn’t be happier.”

“Am I such a puzzle?”

“Yes, you are...sometimes you are.”

He was silent as he set the food on the table and filled our cups. I knew he had not yet finished with his news. He sat down and took a long swallow of his coffee, watching me above the cup rim. Ah, those incisive gray-blue eyes, sometimes gray-green, very often crystal gray, reflecting whatever space he holds; they read me very well.

“She is a conventional person. I have never really said much about you.”

“Probably you’ve said nothing at all..except that the farm is now

owned by a woman called Violea Ender,” I speculated with a laugh.

“You hardly need more puzzle pieces if you can know that. Peter is like me. I have come to realize he has told the family nothing about us. He does not like gossip...and he is somewhat fond of me.”

“Yes, I’m aware of that...of course he is.”

“She wants to see Peter in this environment...has only been to America once, some time ago, never here. I visited with her and her husband vacationing in Florida years ago. Since then I have been with her only on our farm in Norway. I am not certain she will understand how things are here, but there was not much I could do about--”

“Is she religious?”

“Just in a practical way...nothing fanatical. Why?”

“I want to know on what moral premise I’m to be judged.

“You will not be. She is kind and polite.”

“Well...*tolerated* then. She certainly knows what love means. Does she love her husband...if I’m not being too invasive?”

“*Ja*...he was older...died years ago...she grieved very much at his death. Norwegians are not generally openly demonstrative.”

“Will she think I’ve corrupted you?”

“*Herregud*, my sweet *lille* thing! You make me laugh. I would be far more concerned if she were to learn about my past...conduct.”

“Tell me about your past conduct.”

“*Nei*, now stop it. You already know a lot of it...can probably easily imagine the rest...with all of your cunning brilliance. Look, I am not as concerned about her as I am about you. If you want, you can like her easily enough.”

“Oh, I do like her. I adore her. She’ll be my older sister, my

Norwegian sister. Does she speak English? What's her name?"

Ragnar laughed. "*Ja*, she does speak it, you high-strung *lille* explosion...civilized English. Her name is Sonja."

"Your food's getting cold, darling." I bit into my toast and said, "Usually you're telling *me* that." I hesitated while Ragnar cut up his food and distractedly employed his fork, then I said gently, "Do you want me to pretend that you're simply Ender Farm's excellent manager...that is, that you have no other connection to--"

"Of course not. Pretend nothing...just be yourself. I am not living my life for Sonja. I like her. She is family. She likes me. She can find out for herself...however it goes."

"When is she coming? How long will she be here?"

"Next month, for two weeks. But...I am afraid...she is bringing along her best friend, Josefa, a woman I have known for years," Ragnar suddenly announced, "a woman she would like me to marry. I have found this slightly amusing and...Wild Vi? Will you look at me, please."

I had dropped my fork and turned my face to the window with astonishment. This was really more than I could presently tolerate. Why should this burden be dumped on me? I then remembered the time not long ago when Ragnar had sent me back to my house, away from his hot anger over a foolish mistake I had made, because he did not ever want to bruise my psyche with his wrath. I stood up without speaking, sliding my clenched fists into my pockets. With my head still turned away, I left the cabin, trudging morosely along to the house. He did not try to follow me, so I knew he understood that much.

I went up to my room, crawled atop my bed and lay staring out of the window at the already sweltering *Cedrus deodora*. I was shut

down (apparently the way I currently deal with the least disturbance), swimming in helpless inertia, so fixedly staring that the motionless sun-dazzled tree limbs fairly burned onto my retinas. As I came slowly back to myself, I swore that I would not be foolish enough to shed a single tear of self-pity or raging frustration. But I was already at it. Perhaps it was partly the dissonance of the lush warm night just ended, intimacy so fervently shared while sweetly embracing the erotic prime, and now excruciatingly taunting me. First high then low. It was like being cast into my inescapably recurring nightmares, the scary dreams where I, by my own mysterious power, soar far up into the stratosphere to a dizzying pinnacle of ecstasy. But all too swiftly I must descend, down, down, down, plummeting through a horrible menace of parallel high voltage wires. Only then can my feet touch the earth. That, they never do. Approaching death by electrocution, I wake up, still feeling like a tangled, mangled skylark. Poor Ragnar has already found me in this condition. *Poor?* I thought, for at the moment I wanted to punch him. How very laughable -- he would hardly feel a punch from me.

I got up, looked into my mirror and silently reprimanded the miserable face looking back. *You melodramatic fool, can't you handle this? Why are you so out of control, so childish, so feeble? There must be a very simple solution, a certain savoir-faire that affords this sort of nonsense a more realistic approach. But should not some of the blame be his? Why didn't he tell them about me? How different things might be now. I'm so very angry at him. How blasé he appeared, finding nothing at all inappropriate in my blithely entertaining the woman his sister is bringing to marry him. Of course, I've handled it wrong, and now he sees me as naively ridiculous. I see myself as ridiculous. My uncontrollable temper has ruled the day after all. "Just like your father,"* an accusing voice announced.

KEEPING

When I finally managed to achieve a sociable mask, I hurried downstairs and found Marcus cooking breakfast for himself and Sylvia. This gave me much pleasure and banished my need for seclusion.

“Hello, my dears, where’s Virginia?”

“Where indeed?” Sylvia mimicked her mother, but giggling with unconcerned innuendo.

“Oh, I see...well, good, good. How lovely to find a man waiting on a woman at table,” I said with rising cheer.

“And why not?” Marcus implored, in quite good humor as well. “I’ve learned to feed myself...and so far I haven’t killed anyone else at it. Good morning, Ma,” he enthused, with a very welcome hug.

“A cheery good morning to you...my proficient son,” I crooned, kissing him on his steamy warm cheek.

“ViOLEA, how can you be surprised at a man cooking for a woman with Ragnar waltzing around the kitchens on this farm?” Sylvia asked.”

My heart gave a stab of annoyance and I turned away. *Now I have to get through that mess somehow*, I was reminded.

“Yes,” I said slowly. “Well, I’ve just eaten his breakfast.” It was not really true, as I’d left my food mostly uneaten. “What are your plans for the day?”

“Peter’s going to show us a good place to ride,” Marcus said.

“Oh, I’m so glad you’ve included him. That young man is far too solitary. But how well he’s been raised.” I felt a surge of respect for his responsible parents, and even for the unknown Sonja, his matchmaking grandmother. “He’s chock full of natural wisdom too, very at home out there...and so enjoyable to be with.”

“Yeah, we appreciate the young Viking’s presence, Ragnarian, as you would probably say...besides we need a chaperone,” Marcus said, winking at Sylvia.

Winking is such a useful gesture, I thought, and then studied them both more closely. My heart quickened in pleasantly conspiring warmth, for I suspected they had slept together. I felt myself amidst a celebration I could not attend. But I could watch from a very short distance, with a vicarious enthusiasm that made me want to start all over on my own path of shared happiness. Hardly possible presently.

Not long after Marcus and Sylvia went off for their blissful ride, Virginia appeared in my kitchen. She was sullen, red-eyed and highly agitated. I had been sitting in the breakfast nook, mulling things over with a cup of strong tea. I poured her a large mug and said, “You look like you need this. You ought to comb your hair a little and straighten your clothing. That loose soiled blouse looks like you’ve been tearing through wild undergrowth.”

“Right...I have been. Viola, I’m absolutely at wit’s end.”

“Has your man mistreated you?” I sounded far too callous, quite unwilling to reveal just how much commiseration I felt.

“You jest from high in your ivory tower, but you ought to show a little sympathy for me. After all, the malefactor is your relative.”

“What has he done now?”

“I suppose if I’m to be honest we do it to each other. How dreadful to admit I may have started it. We got into a terrible spat. I accused him of being in love with Mary, with you...with anyone but me. Oh, Viola, we shouted at each other like wailing Irish banshees and then

I slapped him. Of course he slapped me back...twice as hard it seemed to me. Then we made love. That part was incredible.”

“You two are incorrigible, *unbelievable!* I certainly hope the nosy countryside doesn’t get wind of what appears to be going on out in my futilely innocent woods...or should I say primeval forest?”

“*Please...*don’t make light of it, Viola. This morning I cooked his breakfast, thinking of you and Ragnar joyfully engaged in all that culinary lovemaking. Then he insulted me. I threw a plate at him and fled. I might have broken my neck traipsing around in a blind dither. Look at my arm. It hurts terribly...some kind of stinging nettles.”

“Oh, my lord, Virginia...come into your little bathroom. I think there’s some calamine in the cabinet there.”

I cleansed her puffy red arm with disinfectant soap and, as I was applying the calamine lotion, said, “Listen to me, my foolish friend, if you have any sense left at all, when you get back to London you will rush into poor Tim’s gently adoring arms...although at the moment I can’t think why he adores you so. Do you understand? You’ve really got to stop provoking the savage poet inhabiting my woods.”

“He’s very gentle with *you*...as I observed last night.”

“We have a certain literary camaraderie, but as to his treatment of me, he wouldn’t dare be anything else.”

“Oh, he’s in love with you, Viola, like all the men around here, every last one of them. Incidentally, all the women are in love with your Ragnar, myself included. What a peerless couple you two make, leaving others few alternatives but envy. But getting back to your sex appeal, I ought to warn poor Alfreda to hang tightly onto Bill.”

“Now you really are delusional. Those two couldn’t exist without

each other, you silly woman. Here, take two of these aspirin. Wash up a little and go lie down. I'll wake you later and, if your state of mind shows any improvement, I'll hand you a glass of scotch."

"It's so easy for you, isn't it?" Virginia said before her nap.

She was lying atop the bed in her thin white nightgown. Her pale gray eyes now darkened, smoldering in the shadows of misery-swollen flesh, her shoulder-length silvery hair strewn unkemptly over the lace-fringed pillow case. I had a sudden early vision of her as the confused, very likely misunderstood child she must at times have been. I paused for a moment in commiseration, standing quietly by a floor fan I had adjusted to cool her slumber.

"Virginia, go to sleep, dear. I have my own problems." The last comment was a sighing murmur that I assumed had gone unheard.

"What problems...not anymore...do you? You ought to come back to London with me...really...even if you don't work you could stay there for a while. Think of that life...all the places you used to love."

"Go to sleep," I ordered, softly closing the door.

Marcus and Sylvia had come back and taken showers. Marcus asked for the key to Hugh's place, saying he wanted to look at his father's manuscript. I was very happy to oblige. Sylvia was going with him, and I suspected they were going to play house. To make them feel even more comfortable, I suggested that they prepare their dinner in Hugh's kitchen. I gave Marcus frozen lasagna, salad things, and an apple pie, telling him there were plenty of condiments in the cupboard and probably ice cream in the freezer. "Nice to keep the place in working order. I think there are a few bottles around if you happen to desire an aperitif," I said, and

sent them off with an attempt at a credulous smile. As they left, Marcus turned to look back at me, as if to say, “Do you know what I’m doing?” I smiled and nodded, and he sent me a stirringly helpless little shrug. My handsome young son was in love.

At five o’clock I opened Virginia’s bedroom door and saw that she was staring fixedly at the ceiling. “Time for your medicine,” I gently cajoled. “When you’re dressed come into the living room.”

Virginia settled on the leather davenport, barefoot and wearing a thin sun dress, rising now and then to swallow her scotch. I sprawled in a nearby wing chair, glass in hand, slowly sipping.

“Where on earth is Sylvia?” Virginia had revived enough to ask.

“In a place we’d both like to be,” I answered. “It’s not really a place but rather a condition one falls into.”

“Lucky if enjoyed even once in a lifetime, yet how nice to hear,” Virginia said, with a slight improvement of mood. “But if you mean what I think you mean, why on earth did you exclude yourself from that place? I’ve yet to discover anyone in a more reciprocal condition of love than you.”

“I was concentrating more on Marcus and Sylvia,” I answered evasively.

Virginia sat up and gave me a hard scrutiny.

“Has something happened?”

“What do you mean?”

“You know what I mean...have you had a change of mind?”

“One doesn’t change one’s mind about something so thoroughly consuming,” I said. “You’ve certainly, at some early point, been made aware of the old approach-avoidance complex and...well, I’ve recently

had cause to strongly desire avoidance.”

Virginia had planted her feet flat on the carpet and rapidly set down her glass. Her intensely sharp gaze held a single-minded attempt to penetrate.

“I’m afraid you’ll have to fill me in. I’m sorry, Violea, but my recent fizzle has left me ignorant of your circumstances.”

“No, I don’t think I want to explain any more...sorry.”

“Come, come now, Violea, I’ve entrusted you with most of my sordid secrets. You’ve got to share...it’s entirely possible that I might even be of some help.”

“Concentrate on helping yourself,” I suggested.

“Don’t’ be catty. You said you want to avoid something...do you mean run away? Couldn’t you do that by...let us say, going abroad?”

“Oh, you’re at it again, aren’t you, without caring the least about what’s happened to me? *Going abroad?* This isn’t grist for a Somerset Maugham novel -- although I’ve no doubt he could have made it into a highly entertaining narrative. I’m in a difficulty here...because I haven’t responded correctly to something that isn’t really my fault.”

“I don’t follow you. You’ve become completely obscure.”

I hemmed and hawed some more and finally ended by cursorily explaining my problem to Virginia, which I should never have done. I needed to get at least a minimal amount off my chest, even with Virginia, whom I should have realized was still on a single track to get me back to London.

“All you can think of is kidnap,” I said, “Why can’t you be more constructive...sympathetic.”

Virginia, thoroughly revived by now, got up quickly and settled

her energized body on a floor pillow beside my chair, looking up at me with a greedily regenerated vision of my future.

“Don’t you see, this is perfect. Leave for a while, Viola. Come to London and stay with me. You don’t have to do a thing but enjoy yourself. Think of how you love the galleries, your old friend, Turner, Kew Gardens, oh, so many, many things. Away, away from it all...at least until that Scandinavian matrimonial mafia decamps.”

“You certainly know how to sell, my friend...and it’s presently a seller’s market. How I would love to duck out, wretched coward that I am...just for a while...not to have to deal with--”

“Fly away, Viola, my dear,” Virginia coaxed, now fully in her stride, and back to the resourceful woman I know best. “Now is the time, and you have every right to feel betrayed by...by circumstance. Will you do it? For a month, a year, however long it takes to--”

“Now wait a minute, you almost had me talked into this cowardly retreat. But it could only be short term...I can’t simply--”

Ragnar had surprisingly strode into my living room. Virginia jumped up, spread her arms wide and cried, “Wonderful news, Viola’s coming to London with me!”

Rolling his eyes in disgust, Ragnar said, “Virginia, be a good sport and leave the room.”

“I’m afraid not...I cannot leave Viola exposed to--”

“Virginia, I’m not in any danger. For heaven’s sake, you--”

“On second thought,” Ragnar interrupted, *we* will leave. Please come upstairs with me, Wild Vi.”

“Of course, off to the bedroom, where you have an absolute certainty of remaining in command. Viola, don’t--”

“Virginia, my patience is damn near over. You have a real knack for butting in at an advantageous moment...for *you* that is. Wild Vi, will you come with me please. We need to talk *alone*.”

“I doubt that you’ll be doing much talking when Viola--”

“Enough!” Ragnar exhorted, but actually in an admirably level, although succinct, voice. Yet never had I seen him so impatient, so unwilling to belabor a point.

“Virginia, dear, you’ve really gone too far,” I warned, “Just let me handle this.”

“But you know what will happen, you’ll...all right, sorry, sorry. I’m going outside and sit on the veranda.”

Ragnar stood for several seconds, looking at me with immense disappointment. How could he so easily make me feel even smaller than I am? “Come upstairs where we can close the door and not be heard or interrupted,” he said. “Please...you know I deserve that much.”

Ragnar was propped against the wall, by my wide open bedroom window. He glanced down into the backyard and then turned toward me, leaning solemnly against the wall with his arms folded.

“You would not run off to London over this nonsense, would you, *would you?* How could you do that, Wild Vi? How could you leave the farm now, the fine garden I made for you...leave all of your friends, everyone who depends on you? How could you--”

There was a loud scratching at the door, and pitiful meowing. “Wait, Bussy will scratch the paint off,” I said, getting up from my desk chair and walking over to open the door. Bussy came flying in and raced around the room, tapping Ragnar’s pants leg with a playful paw. On his next frenzied circling, Ragnar snatched him up, turning him over and

mesmerizing him with stroking fingers. “And what about this dependent creature...how could you leave poor mad Bugsy...or for that matter, good old Fern? How could you--”

I jumped up from the edge of my chair and cried out, “And *you!* What about you? How could I leave you?”

“I was getting to that.” He tossed Bugsy on the bed and said, “You would run away over nothing? After all we have become, are *still* becoming...especially after last night...throw all of our pleasures aside for something so--”

“Stop!” I cried. “Why did you think so little of me I wasn’t worth mentioning to your family? Why did you ever let it reach this point? A woman is coming here who wants to marry you. My God, I even feel sorry for her.”

“On the matter of keeping silent, you are right and I was wrong, but silence is my nature. As to the other, it was so insignificant to me I did not think it could mean anything to you. You did not let me finish explaining. It is a silly vagary of my sister’s. I have never encouraged Josefa in any way...have never even considered it. They are good friends and have traveled to other places together. I am fairly certain that Josefa has never entertained the likelihood of any such...alliance. Peter has just called his grandmother and told her to bring his mother instead. She will do as he says; she adores him.”

Ragnar fell silent. He had finished what he wanted to say, quite compellingly accomplished, and with unassailable clarity.

I stood grievously speechless, feeling myself rapidly shrinking, ever shrinking with culpability, yet still entertaining ambiguous notions concerning Ragnar’s silence to his family. As if he had read my mind, he

responded to my hurt.

“By the time my sister and niece leave Ender Farm, they will know what you mean to me, Wild Vi.”

“What will *I* know...*if* I’m here?”

“*Herregud*, you certainly know that! Wild Vi...are you taunting me with threats...just as you did when you were...about six years old...do you remember? You were furious and crying and swore to me you would jump from the loft if I did not tell you where the mouser hid her kittens. Somehow you had discovered that Niklas intended to dispose of them. *You will only become too attached to them*, I called up to you, *and your father will not allow that many cats around here*. You screamed at me in a tearful rage and jumped...I caught you -- you were inexperienced enough to assume I could...but you had proved your willfulness. Wild Vi...are you going to jump again?”

I began to laugh and found I could hardly stop, like the bursting of a dam that went on and on, rolling over everything. The laughter was instantly curative...such a relief. When I was able to stop, I said, “Sorry, I couldn’t control myself, as usual, but it felt so wonderful I couldn’t stop. It felt like awfully good medicine...but it’s really *you*, you are the good medicine...you know precisely all the things that affect me...the ways they affect me...but not always the way I’ll respond. I never told you I was going to London -- it was Virginia who said that. Perhaps I *will* go there, go sometime with you.”

“Fine. Then let us get out of here before Virginia crows more nonsense about my calculating prowess in the bedroom.”

“I’d love to crow about your prowess here...discreet as I am. But to respect your modesty--”

“You left me with your *lille* hands clenched in fists. I understood your anger. It might have been better if you had simply punched me, and then allowed me to explain.”

“I wanted to punch you, that’s why I left.”

“And now?”

“Now...I’d demonstrate how I feel now...if Virginia were not waiting down on the veranda. Let’s go downstairs...and let Buggy have the bed all to himself. We can put him out later.”

“*Nej*, come to my place later. And by the way, I really care not a whit what Virginia thinks...her judgment is flawed.”

Virginia rushed forward as I walked Ragnar to my front door. Ignoring her agitated presence, he intently lifted me up and kissed me as thoroughly as if he were leaving me for a month. I was quite desirous of continuing with this welcome resolution when I heard Virginia gasp and moan -- apparently sounds of contrition.

“Ragnar, please forgive me!” she cried. “I’ve acted like a horrid shrew. I’m ashamed of myself. I don’t know what happened, or...well, I’m afraid I do know. Between my father and my ex-husband, and a few other disappointing men, my judgment is in ruins. Of course, I am an adult, I know must stop using that excuse, but for a long time I’ve been so untrusting, suspicious, that I mangle everything...certainly my own relationships. I simply thought Viola was in a situation that confirmed my own beliefs. I want to be fair to men, really, but it’s so difficult to accept them as having any honorable intentions, as having anything but loathsome self-interest. I--”

Ragnar had set me down and gazed into my eyes for a long moment, perhaps for a final assurance that I was restored to

reasonableness. Then he turned to Virginia and interrupted her self-excusatory ramble.

“All men are not worthless creatures, Virginia, just imperfect like yourself. Possibly you have revealed your shortcomings because you want sympathy...or maybe even advice. You are an angry woman and have generalized men with that anger. You will never be happy until you let yourself become vulnerable...impartially open to the feelings of others. There is nothing more attractive to a vulnerable man than a vulnerable woman. The right sort of man usually wants to help. Do you know that? If you feel inclined to ruin a relationship anyway, why not at least take a chance on something good happening before you judge, before you attack? You would perhaps make yourself agreeable if you could once feel what it is like to be the person you criticize. So,” Ragnar finished, with a mildly self-reproachful laugh at having presumed to offer advice, “an unsolicited male point of view.

“See you later, my girl.”

“How magnanimous...isn’t he utterly magnanimous?” Virginia exclaimed, as she paced up and down the veranda in a nervous bout of self-examination. That was some time after Ragnar had returned to the sanity of his work.

When Roland appeared at my front door, I began to feel as if I were one of the actors in a rapidly transitioning drama. The players were entering and exiting before I could fully come to terms with my own part in this careering vehicle. Then I realized I was the play’s dispossessed author, the play I had intended sadly fragmented and carried off by actors dissociated one from the other. The play I had believed to be achievable

sprang from my fated love of art, one of art's happy components being a lovely method of control; alas, temporal reality fluxes haphazardly and unreliably in the actual chaos of life.

At the sound of Roland's voice Virginia fled into her bedroom.

"If you expect to continue your...your *bad behavior* while in my living room, I'm not up to it, Roland."

Roland, who had apparently taken the time to dress himself rather more nicely than usual, in light summer slacks, white shirt, and brown loafers, threw up his hands and said, "No, no, I was actually concerned...so I can assume she made it back. She was heading in the wrong direction when I last caught sight of her skinny backside."

"But how did she become distraught enough to run away in the first place?...no, never mind, I don't want to hear it. Can't you two children behave yourselves?"

"Look, I only asked her why she was serving me *raw* bacon. Is that so monstrous? Did I deserve to have my crockery hurled at me, nearly injuring what brain I have left? I'm sure you know by now the woman can't cook worth a damn."

"Why do you dissociate yourself that way. Her name is Virginia, *your* Virginia."

"Oh no! Not by a long shot. *You* are my *Viola*...long before she is anything like *my* Virginia."

I clasped my head in exasperation and said, "Roland, do you assume she's listening? Is that why you're--"

"Of course she is. Come out, Virginia! Come here and tell your brilliant little colleague how good you think you are in bed."

"Go home, Roland," I said imperiously, in the hotly dismissive

way Queen Elizabeth might have exiled Sir Walter Raleigh. “We are not pleased with you. Don’t come back here until you’ve mastered a few acceptable amenities...perhaps a real consideration for your fellow human beings.”

“Uh-huh, well, I’m afraid I more resemble Rousseau -- as per his *Confessions* -- in my attitude toward my fellow human beings. We two see ourselves as skewed and skewered down through the ages.”

“Rousseau was perhaps paranoid.”

“And perhaps not.”

Roland turned around and sauntered into my living room, enjoying a binge of laughter as he went, then throwing himself into a wing chair.

“My God, you’re entertaining, Mistress Ender...a bit cruel. I’m here to exculpate myself. Bring out the poor maligned victim.”

“More than maligned -- you slapped her.”

“Ah, she’s telling tales. She slapped me first.”

“She told me. A gentlemen would not have slapped her back.”

“I never claimed to be one...but I think that’s inequitable of you, considering your liberal tendencies. What would a gentlewoman have done?”

“Virginia shouldn’t have acted the way she did, but it has to stop somewhere. You might have come out honorably.”

“I’d rather come out with my skull intact. Sorry, I failed. Try slapping me. Nothing will happen, I’ll consider it a love tap. You see, it has something to do with the slapper, doesn’t it?”

“How can you write such insightful, heartrending poetry?”

“That again? You’re far too intelligent to associate artful creation

with the pitiful personal habits of its creator. Let me read some of your work and I'll show you how it's done."

"Touché. So your great love for me is merely a shallow conceit," I responded with humored sarcasm.

"How can you say that? The innuendo was that I acknowledge your artful efforts to be unaffected by personal flaws. You and Ragnar are nearly the only two intellectuals I deeply care for behind this veil of tears...and occasionally Hugh comes into play. When is that AWOL fellow sufferer returning? Poor devil, his unrequited love drove him off."

"How long will you keep this up? This toying with the emotions of others, this bitter cynicism? Do you want to see me cry?"

"Never, please, *never!* I keep it up so you won't have to witness the horror of seeing *me* cry. Where the hell is Virginia, is something the matter with her?"

"What an understatement."

"May I go into her bedroom?"

I glanced toward the hallway and saw no evidence of Virginia lurking there. "I suppose you may, if nothing gets broken or thrown into disarray...and especially Virginia."

"I'll warn her not to disgrace herself."

Roland stood up and made his way into the hall, moving rather cautiously toward Virginia's door. I left him knocking gently and calling her name. It was my turn to sit out on the veranda.

Virginia and Roland had returned to his cottage, walking away amenably side by side. No telling how long that would last. As I stood

on the back steps I was stricken with a confusing remorse. Had I acted in a hurtfully inconsiderate manner? “I care very much for you both, do you hear me? Please behave,” I called rather fatuously, with what must have appeared a fretfully childish concern. They were already out on the woods path, their vanishing bodies dappled by sun and shadow. Virginia turned her head over her shoulder and waved her pale hand. Roland had turned completely around, stepping into moted rays of bright sun, one hand casually in his pocket, the other sweetly blowing me a kiss -- his entire stance a dazzling blancmange of absolution.

None of us has managed to grow up, I thought, except, as nearly as I could tell, my idolized, near mythical Norseman. I was laughing at us all as I went inside. But then I began to think seriously about Roland and the deep scars of war that would forever be a part of him, both mentally and physically. His pre-war personality must have been quite dissimilar; although I suspected that, being as sensitively removed as he was from the rest of his family, and so observantly interpretive of the untenable world and his uncertain place in it, he must have, from a very early age, possessed a sardonic quickness of wit, an increasing adeptness at readily construing the human comedy mortally onstage: the steadily remarkable achievements alongside primitively grotesque blunders that will always be part of the human journey. I have come to appreciate Roland very much, just as he is. My final resolution was that I must patiently overlook the occasional defensive rawness of his manner (this did not rule out future storms of impatience with him), just as Ragnar, so regrettably taciturn, appears willing to overlook countless flaws in me.

Marcus called me and, in a touchingly shy voice, announced,

“This old house is really a comfortable place to be in the fierce heat of summer...great-great-grandfather’s woodsy stone house...much cooler here...we’ll probably spend the night, not that I am not exceptionally pampered over at the family homestead, Ma.”

“Of course, my dear, I understand. Have you two found enough food over there for your meals?”

“Meals? Oh sure, plenty. Sylvia’s not a bad cook...for a busy young woman of the world. We’re thawing some dark steaks...they must be Ragnar’s venison -- he has a strange coding system.”

“Yes, it’s Norse. We all stock our freezers with his copious provender. Well, my darlings, a happy summer night to you both.”

“See you tomorrow, Ma...when I’m back in the very pleasant room you prepared for me.”

“It’s all right, dear one.” I smiled at his careful circumspection, hoping that he would never again feel a need to punish me. “I’m not in the least offended...I know Hugh would be as delighted as I am.”

With our conversation at an end, I stood in my warm kitchen, pondering various neglected projects. Even with a fan, it was far too hot to think of working at my writing up in my study -- a pursuit in which I so often yearn to be engaged. The heated air of the summer afternoon was uncomfortably still and heavy, worrisome in regard to the warming planet. It made me feel sluggish and useless, a condition I desperately wanted to escape. I decided to go down into the cool dim basement and examine the full shelves near the furnace room; crowded with dusty old, not-quite-relinquished oddities, some of which needed to be disposed of, while a few others might be taken to a secondhand store. One idle day last spring, while browsing in junk stores with Alfreda, who took more

pleasure in that pastime than I, we discovered similar discarded objects. We laughed at how they were dubiously referred to as antiques. “Still, one person’s junk is another person’s treasure,” Alfreda had cheerfully remarked. She considered things like a weathered old milking stool or a rusty kerosene lamp out-of-work remnants of the past.

In an hour and a half, I had nearly completed my triage of relics, lining up large filled boxes in three categories: useable, collectable, and discardable. I was feeling quite pleased with my progress, and went up to take a shower, intending to read a bit on the veranda, where I hoped to find a slight evening breeze.

When I had been settled in my chair for longer than I realized, deeply engrossed in the poetry of Thomas Hardy, my nearby cell phone went off.

“Shall I come and walk you back to my place...or can you trot over here by your own volition?”

I smiled with immediate happiness, taking great pleasure in the sound of that low-voiced Norwegian-British articulation that regularly quickens my pulse. That unique diction steeped in subtle irony is always startlingly perceptive and pointedly done, the complementary humor so life-affirming it can temporarily abolish my generalized apprehensions. The root of this marvelous irony is, of course, his long and uncommon social experience, aided by superior mental equipment and, there is no denying it, the male gender’s prerogative: less compromised early passage along many an adventurous path through this treacherous world.

“Oh...what time is it?”

“Probably around seven o’clock.”

“Exactly seven,” I affirmed, now standing and squinting through

the living room window. “How’d you know I was available?”

“I did ask you to come...Peter said Virginia is at Roland’s and Sylvia and Marcus are at Hugh’s.”

“That unassuming young man possess extra-sensory powers.”

“He is merely an outdoorsman aware of his environment...like me when I am outdoors.”

“He’s more like a Nordic troll peering from behind bushes.”

“Well, this troll is hungry and does not want to eat alone.”

“I’ll be over in a few minutes...just let me put on my shoes.”

“Bring your singing voice...perhaps for a morning performance.”

“What?”

“I have chorded your winter song.”

“How nice...possibly it’ll lower my temperature.”

“Not likely. Meet me in the garden, Wild Vi.”

“I see...first we pick our dinner, then we cook it, and then we feed ourselves lovely food,” I finished innocently.

How surprised I was. Ragnar had repaired and varnished an old wooden table and bench set long relegated to the barn workroom. The table and one bench were strategically placed between the wide rows of tall-strung green beans, their climbing young tendrils bejeweled with tiny flaming red blossoms. Not too far from the neatly set table was a good-sized hibachi resting on bricks. One side of it was smoking with rib-eye steaks, the other awaiting the celebratory prize: the first tender ears of our early-ripening sweet corn. This was another surprise: I had not even realized any of the corn was ripe.

Ragnar, in clogs, Levis, and blue T-shirt, greeted me by placing in

my hands a tall ice-cold gin and tonic. “More ice, I think,” he decided, removing the lid of a sweating copper ice bucket, plucking out another cube with silver tongs and dropping it into my glass.

I took a swallow then set my glass down, rushing toward him with a childlike exuberance I am unlikely to manifest with anyone else. He lifted me tight against him, laughing heartily at my by now familiar antics, and kissed me a sweet long gin and tonic kiss. “So there *is* an Eden,” I whispered. I felt a hushed sort of reverence, reverence for the magic of our thriving garden, for the nonpareil moment, and for Ragnar. He set me down and went to turn the steaks. I heard the soft whistling he sometimes casually displays when he is most content.

Spraying water hissed from the sprinklers, landing only a few feet away, cooling the air and lending our verdant alfresco haven a rarefied atmosphere of primitive mystery. The fresh-scented water’s fine spray steadily beaded various dripping leaves, sharply enhancing the cooling evening revival of growing things mingled with the pungency of newly turned earth. The immaculate wonder of childhood investigations on Ender Farm came back to me, even the old joy of initial discovery, the lush present melded with those rich images of the past. In that state of reclaimed innocence, I stood near an emerald screen of shady dangling pods spangled with golden light, gazing up at the warm blue evening sky.

Ragnar had planted two garden torches near the table. He took a leisurely swallow from his glass and went over to strike a match, cupping it in his hand. “It is early for these,” he said as the torches ignited in orange flames, “but they will burn for quite a while. We can enjoy them as the light fades.

“Come over to the corn rows with me. We will select the best

ears. You can test your harvest skills. I will strip away a few of the outer husks and lay the unshucked ears on our grill -- far tastier that way. The steaks are nearly done...not too large, because the fresh vegetables in this garden should be fully enjoyed.”

“A meat eater who favors salad?” I teased.

“The right salad is power, *lille* girl...plenty of mushrooms, onions, tomatoes...then fruits: the coup de grâce against senility.”

Only minutes after the distinctive sounds of corn ears being reaved from their stalks, the hot corn was ready to be lifted from the grill. Ragnar’s rough, heat-impervious fingers quickly stripped off the charred husks from the steaming ears. We sat side by side on our bench, leaning single-mindedly over our full plates, happily gnawing the popping sweet kernels away from their hard warm cobs. Our fingers and lips became smeared with peppery melted butter. Ragnar wiped his mouth with a paper napkin and turned to me. He laughed, running his fingers over my greasy mouth and flicking bits of corn from my cheeks. Winking at me, he put his hand on my neck, drew back my head and kissed me.

“Delicious, this corny mouth.”

“Sometimes very corny,” I said, introducing my incongruous self-analysis with untimely gravity. “Though I have never cared much for really corny jokes.” I swallowed more red wine, already swimming in the luxury of a tiddled mind. “The rib eyes were perfect...just the right size. Think I’m getting a bit tipsy.”

“Good for you. Maybe now is the time to stop.”

“No, don’t tell me to stop! I don’t want to stop ever, *ever!* I want this to go on and on and on...until the corn moon rises high up over the

corn land...until we atavistically return to corn worship.”

“We are doing our version of that, *lille* corn-eater...and the moon is rising high enough. But I think you have drunk your fill. Everything in moderation...except this,” he teased, kissing me into silence. I sat as if in a trance, watching the huge golden moon glowing at the far end of the bean row. Ragnar had gone over to dump the hot coals out onto the wet ground. He gathered everything into a large basket, then took my arm. With the torches flickering out behind us, we left the garden.

We walked silently toward his cabin, I occasionally stumbling on dirt clods in my dreamy state. “Lovely, lovely, lovely...like a dream...isn’t it a dream?” I murmured as Ragnar closed the gate.

He reclaimed my hand to steady me. “Too much of the grape?”

“Not really...just happily distracted,” I answered. How I loathe the end of anything immensely enjoyable -- the very reason I cherish photographs, which so effectively stop time.

It was barely twilight. We were drowsy and easily lethargic in the stultifying evening heat. The atmosphere had been building toward this enervating level of sultriness all afternoon. Ragnar turned on the large bedroom fan. We undressed and lay atop the fanned bed, occasionally exchanging languorous kisses, sated and so completely at peace. “Your hair smells of barbecue smoke,” I whispered. “And yours,” he answered. Holding hands, we teased each other or muttered discursive, fragmented impressions, our torpid state easing us toward sleep. Lying blissfully joined to this centering human presence, I thought of nothing but the tranquilizing clasp of our hands. Then I thought of nothing at all.

I sat up suddenly and cried, “Oh no! what time is it? The sun is

up. I'd better get back to the house."

"*Nei*, you do not need to. I have just come from there...your house is vacant...except for your fat cat, poor whining Buggy. His bowl was empty and I filled it."

"But you're awake and roaming around and I'm just lying here."

"It is only eight o'clock," Ragnar surprisingly justified. Then I saw that he was removing his clothes.

"What are you doing? I can't believe... Ah, you're intending to show me why I shouldn't go to London," I teased.

"Nothing so premeditated. The morning is cool and I am only taking advantage of opportunity." His querying mouth caressed my ear. "Intending to argue with me?"

"Not I, my darling...wasn't I supposed to sing?"

"*Ja*...later...I am hoping you will have reason to sing."

"But it's lovely, isn't it?" I said as Ragnar laid down his guitar. "You're a composer."

"*You* are the composer. I only followed along."

"With your magical notes. Amazing how you've embellished my spontaneous winter song. When I sing it I'm back dreamily serenading Fern on that cold winter night."

"You sing it from your heart."

"The way all songs should be sung...likely more so if sung by their lyricist."

"Sing it again," he directed, lifting his guitar. "We will make it perfect. For me, already perfect...I like to hear your voice."

Eager to join my voice to his cleverly measured chords, I could

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not refuse. Ragnar struck a note, and I happily complied.

Cold Winter, you warm me far more than June heat.

Cold Winter, my Winter, you rouse weary feet.

You make me cry.

You make me laugh.

How swiftly you impart cabin fever to this wildness in my
Heart.

Cold Wisdom, you burn me as fire out of hand.

Cold Wisdom, you teach me by love's reprimand.

Master of snow,

How well you know

Few young loves survive, but fire in the winter

Keeps spring hearts alive.

"*Ja*, I like that, but it should have a refrain. Will you sing it for the others?"

"I don't think I could. I'm shy singing it even with you. It's too personal, isn't it?"

"*Nei*, they will not necessarily understand...except for Roland. But they will like your voice, your artfully revealing words. You are not really shy singing your song to me, are you?"

"Yes, I am. Besides, you play very well...I'm such an amateur."

"You are not...I swear you are not. Your voice is like a clean mountain brook...high and clear."

"Now I'm blushing."

Ragnar stood up, shaking his head and laughing. "Blushing is always seductive. Come here, my clever *lille* songbird. Kiss me good-

bye. I am going to work.”

“Let the Jacobsons do it today...let Peter do it. Come swimming with me at the pond.”

“*Nej*, do not tempt me. I am going to the northeast fields where they are thrashing.” Ragnar kissed me a firm good-bye, but still I held onto him with more coaxing.

“Those fields?...then you’ll be near the pond. Come when you’re through. You’ll be all hot, doesn’t a dip in cool water tempt you?”

“Why do you not invite everyone there for a swim? Then you will not be alone. I do not like you swimming alone.”

I pondered this idea with growing interest and said, “I guess I could...organize a picnic. It would be fun, wouldn’t it? But you have to come join us as soon as you can. Will you please?”

“When I am finished I will come.”

“Do you think Bill would come...and Peter?”

“Bill is as busy as I am...but perhaps he would -- Alfreda would like it. Peter can come with me later. I predict you will have all the idle companions you want. Your enthusiasm and the cool water on such a hot day will be incentive enough.”

“You don’t mind sharing our special place?”

“Why do I care? When we are alone the pond is ours, but this is good for you...this time do not forget your swimming togs.”

“That only happens when you distract me.” My laughter followed him out into the warming day.

I was very pleased with my results at getting everyone to agree to come swimming. For Roland, I had only to mention that a picnic would

be involved and he was even more agreeable than Virginia. Still hurtfully complaining of her nettle stings, she wanted to know if our trek to the pond required any trailblazing. “Quite safe,” I told her. Then I managed to interest Alfreda, inviting Bill to come whenever he was available. I asked her to pick up Mary, who, when I called her, was sitting alone in her very warm cottage. This would be fun for her, a new adventure, I encouraged. Marcus and Sylvia agreed immediately with great delight, and asked what they could bring. Just yourselves and swimming suits, towels and blankets...but you can help me load my truck and carry things.” I had boiled the potatoes and eggs for a salad while I was talking on my phone, and luckily found hamburger patties and sesame buns in the freezer. I dragged out an old picnic grill, a simple apparatus that could be placed over an open fire, and which I had salvaged from my basement shelf-cleaning episode. I disabused Alfreda of her instant idea of dragging her ice cream maker along the trail. She then insisted on a chilled watermelon. Mary was bringing a sack of marshmallows, those used in her hot chocolate. We were set.

Mary fed Pilot a joyously received marshmallow. “Good dog,” she praised, patting him tenderly, “you brought me through the brambles and kept me on the straight and narrow. Good boy, old Pilot.”

We had spread out on the sand, above the curving edge of the pond, and were sprawled on blankets, digesting savory hamburgers along with my fairly successful potato salad. The lingering hot embers of our fire provided toasty marshmallows for anyone who wanted them. Bill had managed to come with Alfreda and Mary, but Ragnar and Peter were still absent. Marcus and Sylvia lay near each other, quietly conversing,

their swiftly drying swimsuits partly covering the fetching lithe bodies of healthy young animals -- Grecian figures in a Grecian glade, so pleasing to look upon. With barely a glimpse, I was thrilled at their subtly muted attentiveness.

“Why didn’t you bring a swimsuit, Mary?” Roland asked. “I could have guided you into the water. It’s so cooling...a shame to miss.”

“If she has no suit, underwear is acceptable,” Alfreda announced.

“I have an old suit under my slacks and top,” Mary cautiously intoned. “I can’t imagine what I look like...I was afraid to undress. I’m surprised I’ve had the nerve to mention it.”

“Can you swim, Mary?” Virginia asked with genuine concern.

“Once I could, years and years ago.”

“If you wore a suit you intended to swim, and so you shall.

Unclothe at once, it’s time for your immersion,” Roland commanded.

I got up and helped Mary with her top and slacks. Her lanky body was white and her thin flesh itself appeared shocked and hesitant at this sudden exposure. Yet there was nothing at all unpleasant in her demure physical presentation. Her white-streaked coarse black hair fell uniformly to her pale bare shoulders. She stood in a confused moment of stillness, statuesque in her striking black suit; it sharply enhanced the floury whiteness of her body, and was of a classic style so simple it might have been very old or purchased only yesterday.

Roland put his arm around her waist, took her by the elbow and walked her into the pond. Their progress slowed as they went deeper. I was glad the bottom had large areas of sand among the pebbles. Poor old Pilot stood on the shore, giving short nervous barks -- was he not supposed to be her safeguard? “Sit, Pilot,” Mary called. Her dark glasses

flashed in a spangle of sunlight as she threw back her head, squealing with surprise and delight. When they were standing in water nearly up to their shoulders, Roland let go and backed up.

“Oh, wait!” Mary cried.

“No, just swim toward my voice, Mary,” Roland called. “Come on, come on,” he coaxed, keeping her focused on where he was standing.

Mary slid beneath the water very slowly so as not to lose her glasses, then began a crawling stroke toward Roland’s voice. It appeared he was calling out a poem:

Swim, undine fair,
wings beating air,
devil-may-care.
Flail water, sprite,
hard to the right.
Beyond the tide,
rough waves astride,
I’ll swim beside.

We held our breath in amazed silence at Mary’s seemingly effortless feat.

“What fun, how lovely!” Mary cried, her pale face and glasses streaming with water as Roland lifted her up.

“Kudos, Mary, you *do* know how to do this. Here, take my hand and we’ll swim side by side.” Roland threw back his head, releasing a spray of water as he glanced toward the shore. “Enjoying our stunning impromptu water ballet?” he shouted at the fascinated audience.

There were whistles and loud clapping. “Brava, brava!” I shouted.

“We also enjoyed the poem, Roland. Where did *that* come from?”

“Just made it up,” Roland called, laughing and shaking his head.

“Exactly what you always do,” I called back.

Shortly after Mary and Roland left the water and were toweling off, Ragnar and Peter strode down to us from the woods path. Peter had on a dusty white tank top and Levis, apparently given no chance to go back to his cabin and change clothes. He made his way quickly to the water’s edge, where he began removing his work shoes. He was hot and tired and eager to get his body into the cool pond. Ragnar wore a clean sky-blue summer shirt, bleached Levis, and sockless loafers. He was carrying his guitar case, which he set against the trunk of the large maple where we had made love. My heart leapt in shy and rapid retreat, as I at once assumed he intended to make me sing.

“The Viking wanderer and his equally Viking sidekick have sailed in, stoke up the coals!” Roland called out.

Just as I was getting up, Bill hurried over to the grill and, in an admirably accommodating manner, began barbecuing hamburgers for Ragnar and Peter. I dished out potato salad and opened two beers, staring off at Peter who was now swimming across the pond. He had left on his dusty tank top, and I had caught a glimpse of shorts that looked exactly like swimming trunks. Perhaps they were.

“Isn’t Peter awfully hungry?”

“First things first,” Ragnar said in a buoyant voice.

“Are you going to swim before you eat?” I asked him.

“I am going to eat before I eat,” he answered with a wink.

How rewarding it had been with all of us playfully assembled in

the woods, reviving ourselves in the cool pond on that hot summer day. After the watermelon, I had passed out cans of iced root beer, warning everyone that more alcohol would make us too sleepy to get home.

“Drink on, we’ll simply camp out here,” Roland announced, he who would never have done it. His next remark did interest me: “Here, we have an unusual congress of accidental crossroads. But look how felicitously we motley few come together. It’s human nature for those who touch upon each other’s lives for very long to form an impregnable stronghold against the threat *out there*.”

“I’d rather not think of it that way,” Virginia said. “I mean, couldn’t we assume a more benign environment out here in the lovely woods...at least in the daytime?”

“I was not referring to the woods...or the farm...but *beyond*,” Roland said, with a distinct note of impatience.

“Of course there must be mosquitoes,” Virginia continued. While her suit was still damp she had covered herself in a long-sleeved blue blouse and white slacks, all the while wondering aloud if she would be eaten alive by bands of voraciously thirsty insects, those volatile creatures of the disease-carrying, highly mobile order Diptera. Worldly-wise regarding the still-existing foreign menace of malaria, and other noxious diseases, she was truly afraid.

“I haven’t noticed any mosquitoes,” I remarked. When the new purple one-piece suit I was wearing dried, I had thrown my sleeveless shift over it, a scarcely protective thin frock of summery lavender cotton.

“You don’t see them, it’s only when you begin to scratch...or when you hear that beastly humming next to your ear.”

“We are quite free of malaria here, Virginia. Anyway, my blood is

probably too full of vitriol to interest them.”

“You’re the least vitriolic woman I have ever known, Viola,” Roland put forth. He was tidily gathering up our watermelon rinds. I thought his orderly act surprisingly focused on the mundane for such a lofty thinker. As he knelt down to put the rinds into the garbage bag, I glimpsed the long white scar on his thigh. I had of course never before seen it. Unfortunately, he caught me noticing, and said with a strange soft bitterness only I could hear: “The ubiquitous shrapnel humans fling at each other while most loving in some other quarter.” He snatched up the Levis he had gleefully flung over a huckleberry bush, and hastily put them on over his swimming trunks. This saddened me, for I knew that he had forgotten himself in the happily carefree moments of swimming and cavorting, and was now reminded of his uselessly wounded flesh.

“You’re a handsome man...not just for your age,” I soothed, and without lying at all. “Isn’t it commonly known that women love men with honorable scars far more than those without them?”

“A silly romanticism...and actually a naïve self-indulgence. No such scars are honorable...only painful reminders of supreme ignorance and inescapable mortality.”

Virginia, who had come near to eavesdrop, joined us and said, “I do believe it’s an atavistic thing: the cave man with the most scars proved he could survive long enough for reliability...that is, the more likelihood of supplying meat for mother and child.”

“Undoubtedly so,” Roland said over his departing shoulder. He was walking away from us to speak to his devoted fan: agreeable Alfreda, plump-kneed, freckle-faced and cheerfully accepting of her matured and weathered body. She appealed to everyone, for here was kindness, steady

optimism, unaffected humor.

“He’s more comfortable with his loyal devotee,” Virginia said.

“Do you love him, Virginia,” I heard myself brazenly inquire.

“Really! What is it anyway: love? Can we glibly define anything so slippery? I understand very well the love I have for my dear daughter. Otherwise, how do we really know what we’re talking about? *Love* -- it’s something so undefined...or *ill*-defined. I am drawn to Roland. He’s talented...and incredibly satisfying. I believe I satisfy him.”

“Do you really believe that? Good sex isn’t necessarily love, as by now you must certainly realize -- something *I* was made to realize at a very early age -- however, the erotic does usually involve a measure of self-gratification. Are you a fan of his then?”

“He mesmerizes me less now with his, hmm...alacrity...sometimes there is cruelty...but I do continue to recognize his singular ability.”

“I’ve found with authentic love -- that happily incurable passion and, yes, compassion -- there’s a sort of awe of the love object that, in at least a few cases, strongly endures. In fact, a great part of the love thing is an increasing awe and wonder at how much value the beloved *other* possesses...more and more of which is continually discovered.”

“You rarely, if ever, have all of that along with good sex.”

“Lucky the few,” I said, with a secretive smile that was surely not received as very mysterious. Virginia was quick and bright but, I readily saw, firmly in the grip of deeply internalized scars.

“How smug you are, Violea. You’ll find out.”

“Do you want me to *find out*, my friend?”

“Ah, there you go again, always a well-placed arrow.”

“I thought the arrow was in me.”

“You’d like to see me cry, Viola. Is that it?”

“I’d like to see you less hard-hearted...and thereby more honest with yourself. I struggle with internal scars too, Virginia. I’m trying to ameliorate them...not turn them back into open wounds. I suppose I don’t set a very good example for anyone, but I *am* trying...am always wanting to trust...to find good in others...pleasure in what remains.

Virginia settled down on a mossy rock and quietly stared at the others below us. She tossed her water-darkened hair away from her long face as her pale eyes sent me a doleful glance.

I settled near her on a crumbling mossy log, waiting for a possible irruption of truth, while I, too, scanned the others below.

Ragnar sat with crossed ankles and knees bent out, on the higher dry sand, eating his hamburger and drinking his beer and talking quietly with Bill and Peter. Removed from the necessity of politeness, Peter was hungrily wolfing his hamburger without much conversation. Marcus and Sylvia were leaning back on their blanket, serious-faced and well into a soft exchange. Could they be planning their future as a couple? Mary had moved her blanket nearer the water and was lying quietly supine with her pale arms clasped above her head. Pilot napped near her feet, lifting his graying head at her slightest twitch. Roland waved his expressive arms to accompany his verbal entertainment, an indiscernible pastiche that caused his admirer, Alfreda, to giggle and shake her head. I watched him glance once toward Mary, who was within earshot. He paused a moment in thought, then continued with his playful wooing of Alfreda.

“Are you angry at me, Virginia?” I asked quietly.

“Not angry. How can I be? I’d like a little of what you have. I wish my relationship with Roland held some promise but I...I think it

only portends disaster. Oh dammit, Viola, I really believe his raging disappointment with his former wife is coming down on me.”

“How do you know that?”

“Well, I may be projecting of course. I’m probably visiting something similar upon him: the anger and mistrust that took years to develop with Nevil. Nevil, coming from the same sort of household as mine, was far from understanding. I’m afraid I often see most men as a necessary evil. Ragnar was so right when he said I’ve generalized men with my anger. My father was cold and cruel, you see. He really had no use at all for children...considered them a petty nuisance...and he treated them -- *me* -- accordingly. My mother thought this was normal male behavior. You may have guessed that ever since Nevil I’ve been rather exclusively celibate. America seems to give us Brits license to break loose. I appear to have gone *bog-wild* with Roland...who has likely been in the same condition as I for some time...of course, I don’t know -- men are quite secretive about such things. You see...it was your incredible relationship with Ragnar that emboldened me. I suddenly realized how much I’d been missing. Alas, I’m afraid I was dreaming of someone like him.”

“You can’t change people -- no, hardly at all, Virginia. Roland is Roland. You either love him or you don’t. I’ve accepted Ragnar as he is, of course because he’s so much -- yet a willfully independent man. But I wouldn’t change him for the world...not that I could.”

“But you *have* changed him, silly girl. Don’t you see that? He clearly loves you deeply and that has changed him.”

Surprisingly, I found that I did not like the idea of anything about Ragnar being changed by me. “How do you know that? You never even

knew him before you saw us together.”

“I’ve sussed a bit of what his personal life has been. I’m fairly certain he’s never wanted for women. But you see, those other women -- whatever else they may have been, and however well he treated them -- were for him elemental and exchangeable...or he would have chosen one permanently. *You* are not exchangeable, my dear...in anyone’s lexicon. You’re irresistibly one-off...furthermore, you’re in possession of some of his past -- a powerful drawing card. You must know you’re his darling, his *child bride*...the love of his life. Oh, I envy you so.”

“Then why did you say I’d *find out*?”

“Because it’s still hard for me to believe that what you’ve found will stand the test of time. Oh, it might -- your unusual arrangement appears more promising than most situations -- who knows? You’re both wise with experience. Actually, I said that because I was feeling so bitter at your criticism...and so envious.”

“However...you’ve as much as agreed with me...about yourself.”

“Yes...I suppose I’ll go home to Tim...and let him domesticate me. He does care for me...in a very nonthreatening way. It is quite tempting to be cared for so diligently. And as you say, there’s much more there than I had at first realized...blinded by disappointments. So you see, this madness will likely soon come to an end.”

“I don’t know whether to be sad or glad at that. I suppose I’m both. But we’ll see...we’ll see.” I stood up and pulled my tall thin friend away from her rock, giving her a commiserative hug.

Looking for Ragnar I found him sitting with his back against our maple, strumming his guitar. He stared back as if he had been waiting to catch my attention, and motioned for me to come to him. I settled down

beside him, then saw that the others were watching us.

“Now you will sing,” Ragnar quietly informed me.

Not even waiting to hear my shy protest, he had already begun my song as he spoke. I then saw that the others were gathering around, and that Roland had gone to fetch Mary. I then shrugged with laughing modesty and obeyed my skillful instrumentalist. By now his treatment of my song was very familiar to me, as familiar as the words I had strung together while dreaming of his imminent return from his fishing trip. I had been contentedly milking Fern that cold winter evening, as I dreamily vocalized an interpretation of our relationship, obliviously singing out my spontaneously made lyrics with a private building of rapture. Then I stood up from my milking and found Ragnar leaning against the door jamb with his arms folded. My crimson embarrassment did not prevent me from eagerly leaping into his arms. Now singing, I could easily relive those intimate moments, secretly offering Ragnar the pleasures of that unforgettable night. At our adagio ending, I sang with an airy soprano both comfortable and sustainable.

There was a moment of silence when we finished, as though the warm still evening were itself digesting our music, then a chorus of clapping and praising voices filled my ears. Not altogether certain of what they had actually heard, they seemed to feel my mostly alto-soprano rendering praiseworthy enough to share encomiums with Ragnar’s expert accompaniment. I myself applauded his masterful rendition, stretching my clapping hands out to him while the others joined in with more loud enthusiasm.

Then Roland spoke: “A love song...and from a worthy colleague of poesy. You are both creative artists. How well you play and also

compose, Ragnar; how well you sing your own lyrics, Violeta. I've heard you from a distance, but have never fully experienced your exhilarating voice. I offer both of you my humble thanks for giving this uncommon afternoon a perfect finale." The habitual formality of his delivery lent his voice a slightly amusing yet imposing authority.

Ragnar, generally taciturn, delightfully surprised me with his succinct response: "It is a rare nightingale who sings a new tune."

"Well said," Marcus appraised. My company of men had momentarily made me imagine myself a creature borne on wings that actually worked.

Everything in flux. Everything always changing. Virginia did return to London soon after our picnic, but without any apparent closure with Roland. Perhaps this imagined option left her feeling more secure in the choices available to her, however unrealistic. Not long after my very dissimilar mother and daughter friends departed, with tacit Sylvia's future plans unrevealed, I recalled Virginia's curious comment that I had somehow changed Ragnar. I had not carefully analyzed the reason her remark caused me to seek an answer from him, but the tenor of my voice must have influenced his response.

"If you have to ask, then I must not have changed very much. You have unexpectedly come into my life...you have not changed who I am; some of the things I do have changed. All in an instant, I cannot imagine life without you. I am not an emasculated Samson shorn of his hair, Wild Vi...as you seem to fear. Our relationship is strong enough to be vulnerable. That particular state is not a weakness."

"It's uncanny how you sometimes know better than I what I

seem to fear. How do you do that?"

"An extra sense part of the condition we share. I am less self-searching than you...which allows me more focus on *you* -- I have never enjoyed thinking about myself. I like thinking about you. I very much like the way you are with me, and you require what is always latently available in me, the assurances you need. Fortunate, *ja?*"

"Ah, yes, *fortunate*...but you really are a byzantine man...actually very complex...enigmatic. I know you so well, yet I know far too little of you. You've made it appear much simpler than it is."

"The simple does not announce itself and so becomes complex. Think of it as it appears...accurate enough and less trouble than useless speculation."

Perhaps seeking reassurance, I said, "Virginia is not certain we'll last."

"Or hopes to be certain of it...to steady her mind-set. Of course certainty of mind is like the false notion of perfection; it is always relative and very often merely a wishful requirement, a needed self-deception. Truth is a slippery thing to hang onto, until you measure it against a lie. Abstractions purported to be absolute advance risky suppositions."

"That doesn't sound very encouraging."

"Then think of you and I together as a concrete reality."

"Are we?"

"*Ja*. If you need assurance, I will prove it to you as often as you like." His summation by a wink and a smile was the immediate *ne plus ultra* of my contentment. He would patiently supply variants of this arousing assurance whenever I fell into doubt, because he knew how swiftly they could banish the black cloud often trailing above me.

“Veracious love is quite an investment of the self, isn’t it? And I’m forever seeking interest on my investment.”

“Your metaphor has a nice pun, *lille* girl. I can always count on you to be interesting.”

“Well, you finished that beautifully,” I praised, gainfully savoring the pleasure of our stimulating discourse.

Before Marcus returned to his work, we had an informative discussion about the very subject that consumed his working hours: bio-energy sources. His efforts were ever changing and reshaping simple beginnings into monumental possibilities. I was thoroughly convinced that safely harnessing natural energy is necessarily a collective process of environmentally friendly variables, which also requires a certain amount of input from every energy user. The type of energy consumption that requires no thinking at all is always the most dangerous. I said this to Marcus and he smiled and nodded his approval, but it seemed to me that he thought me rather superficially attentive. “I really am interested in this,” I said, somewhat forcefully.

“Hey, don’t misread me, Ma. I know that...how well I know it. You’re smart and you care. And that makes me smile...with gratitude.”

“Surely I’m the grateful one,” I responded. “I could never bring myself to imagine you so willingly back in my life.”

“All in the past, Ma. All in the past,” Marcus whispered in my ear as he hugged me good-bye.

And now my busy son is gone for another season. Those idle summer pleasures, too swiftly receding, leave me forced to think of another autumn. Out in the world, in less variable climates and in my

exigent existence, I rarely ever called to mind the striking transitions of the seasons on Ender Farm -- long ago a stirring influence on my life. Thus the first signs of the slanting golden light induced a quickening need to write profusely, the subtly changing light and brief rich colors stimulating an overwhelming creative hunger. Then, I abruptly learned that Hugh had returned, bringing with him a stranger. The inspiration to work at my computer was suddenly preempted by a confusion utterly bewildering -- why this new addition to a recurring anxiety, one I keep trying to set aside? How can I hold onto the little calm I have recently struggled to possess? Having now spent some time considering Hugh's unpredictable act, I am at least more coolly reflective, ready to face the situation straight on. I must greet Hugh warmly, and his companion too. I must welcome Hugh back into my life, at least the periphery of it. I must invite them to dinner and unshrinkingly extend every consideration in the process. There is no other choice. Hugh has told me nothing. And why should he? What right have I to ask anything more of him? I can hear him quite caustically posing that very question.

"I have for so many years acted on such a large scale, global and overwhelmingly consuming, in that busy milieu necessarily and gratefully disregarding meager private thoughts. Now I'm reduced to this."

"Reduced to what?" Ragnar asked. He had washed his truck and was squeezing out the chamois and draping it over the railing of his deck.

"You can answer in a minute. Take a deep breath first and look around you. This is a rich Indian summer day...of gold light...too fine to escape notice by sinking into contrived difficulties."

"Am I doing that? I always considered myself more durable.

Now I whine and whimper.”

“You are you...and right now your senses are even more fragile. You are not used to private dealings; an assault on your emotions from a number of directions...as you may see it. But you have come to tell me something and listen to an answer, Wild Vi. Wait until I get the coffee. Do you want some...or tea?”

We had our coffee seated at the table on Ragnar’s deck. I turned my coffee mug round and round, staring distractedly into the tall old sun-gilded firs. I was distressed at feeling so distressed.

Ragnar put his hand over my nervous fingers and said, “You have no idea how things are yet. Please do not rush to conclusions. Your life is not going to change very much because of what Hugh does with his. He is healing and coming into his own again. But never think that he discounts your friendship. He does not.”

“Is that what I fear?”

“*Ja*, you cannot bear rejection...unpleasant in the healthiest of times. You need a certain amount of consideration...have never had enough, and now you have much more time to be aware of yourself. You have awakened from a long difficult dream. You are hungry.”

“But, my God, I feel so self-centered...and helpless at the same time. As if...as if all those years of trying to improve life for others left me stunted in childhood. I must be reacting in a childish manner. Oh why don’t I just shut up and act appropriately? All of this will pass into nothingness.”

“You need not go *that* far. You will not dissolve your problem by making everything meaningless or absurd.”

“And why am I burdening you with this?”

“You know I will listen...even understand. You trust me, which is good. You feel guilty...but you should not.”

Ragnar turned my hand over on the table and pressed his large palm against mine. He looked into my eyes. He was freely exerting his influence, his ability to change me into something functional, or at least into a condition of satisfiable hunger. I felt that change.

“Let’s take the horses and ride far out somewhere, ride and ride and ride, far out. Can we, darling? Have you looked around us? Oh, it’s a jewel of a day!”

“*Ja*, it is,” he said, laughing. “Glad you finally noticed. We will take some sandwiches...and maybe a bottle of good wine. Go get a few things ready while I saddle our transport.”

I was to discover that Ragnar had underlying motives in his ready agreement to ride, clear objectives he had swiftly attached to my simple desire to escape with him into an inspiring environment. It was he who then plotted our course: to ride into the less visited but mainly deciduous woods beyond the filbert orchards. There, he said, we would find the most striking autumn colors, even if they had not yet displayed their full splendor. I enthusiastically agreed.

We were sitting on the blanket Ragnar had brought strapped behind Mariner’s saddle -- he had ridden out on my usual mount, and I upon Mariner’s slightly smaller, although equally powerful, companion, Legs. The two chestnut geldings were standing patiently head to head, while we finished our roast beef sandwiches and sipped Cabernet from small paper cups. We had spread our wool blanket on a swath of grassy meadow, richly greening up in the cool autumn mists. Examining it more closely, I thought it appeared to be an evenly cleared space, perhaps

once used for a garden patch. Then it came to me that it must have been one of the places Hugh's father grew his exceptional Chinese vegetables, many of which had become very popular at county markets. Likely, then, we were picnicking on the property Mama had left Hugh's father. We were on Hugh's land. Ragnar of course knew this, just as he knew every inch of Ender Farm. I started to say something related to this, but was thoroughly distracted as he set down his empty cup and drew me against his leather jacket. This finely creased, filbert-brown jacket, softened by wear yet unsullied, retains the captivating aromas of personalized old leather: brennevin and Ragnar's enduringly appealing outdoor ambiance. I threw back my head and looked up at him with a covetous joy I could not conceal -- those beautifully lucent slate-blue eyes quite discernibly reflected my thought.

"The ground is soft enough here," he adjudged. Claspng his hand on the nape of my neck, he drew me down into his space, my province.

Deftly disarrayed and enfolded, I heard the soaring wild cry of a flicker -- nature announcing its natural course. There followed one long kiss, or many such, indistinctly and gravely coalescing, we being wine-aroused by taste only, for this impulse is always in our blood.

Temporal awareness dissolved into a timeless exchange of heated pleasures. A spicy-fresh autumn breeze ruffled the edges of our blanket, returning us to the actual place where we lay. We sat up, straightening ourselves, his nimble fingers helping me with my sweater and jeans. I remained as sated and tenderly coddled as a fabled princess just then awakened from her postprandial rendezvous, an ardent rendezvous with a clandestinely desired suitor -- the older rendition likely ending sadly in

countervailing reprisal. Ours is a liaison of itself inviolate, yet too much with us to remain outside the risk of punitive hazard. My bodeful fairy tale allusion perhaps echoed an innocent medieval assignation such as Thomas Mann could ably set forth: a tryst seldom occurring without some kind of tragic consequence. Musing over my literary apposition, I could not overrate my prescience, for such *magical* insight is merely an amount of experience accurately contemplated.

“What will happen now?” I dreamily intoned, uncertain of how large a question it was, always uncertain when possibly questioning cosmology, but nevertheless still sanguine. How could I not be?

“The proverbial flower,” Ragnar responded, “eternally opening and closing. We are at the center, you and I.” He laughed and ran his thumb over my pouting mouth. “That is optimism, my girl, lest you misunderstand me.”

“You make me feel so good,” I sang, with a colloquial effusion that amused Ragnar. “There! That’s the way you smiled at me when I came to you with my embarrassing hangover -- the most innocent of inebriates! So much of that wretched first reencounter with Hugh was unnecessary.” My voice had regrettably changed to a darker tone.

“My woman-child-evoked-smile, you mean?” Playful redirection, returning me to my humored state -- he would say nothing of Hugh, yet obliquely touched upon that absurd circumstance. “As to the incredible moment when I lifted you off the concrete floor of the tack room and carried you home, you were a pitifully drunk woman...*ja*, a poor *naïf* bound for one helluva hangover. Grudge me that particular smile, my girl. You recovered. Sing to me.”

KEEPING

I looked at our restless horses and thought, *We are going to get on them and ride into another place...but carrying this one with us.*

I had stopped singing and followed along in disbelief, a mounting anxiety, for now my great-great-grandfather's stone house was gradually coming into view. Apparently it was our destination.

“Did you mean to come here all along?”

“*Ja*, it looks that way.”

Our horses jerked their heads and swished their tails, ready to move on. Ragnar dismounted and began tying impatient Mariner to the handy little vine maple I often similarly used. I remained as ready to move away as Mariner and Legs, and completely immovable in the saddle. Watching Ragnar with a flux of emotions, I glanced nervously up at the house.

“We can't just do this.”

“Hugh knows we are here. I called him.”

He took the reins from my hands and began tying Legs. I could not respond, confused by my emotions. Was I hurt, angry, suspicious, afraid; what was I? Ragnar lifted me down. I stood a moment in silence, looking at him, my sated body still pulsing from lovemaking.

“Aren't you clever...to have me in this mood and bring me here. Don't suppose for a minute I don't--”

“Wild Vi, you have an unhealthy tendency to avoid things. Why let something easily soluble get the better of you?”

“I thought today was just for us. I thought--”

“It was...and is...this is part of us. Remember how you started the

day...and why you came to me.”

“I came to you because... Guilty as charged,” I finally had to admit. I followed him along to the house.

By the time we reached it, Hugh was standing outside the front door. He was wearing Levis and a blue plaid shirt, his bare feet in leather moccasins. His temples held much the same tinge of grayness, the rest of his thick jet hair slightly mussed, as if he had just thrust careless fingers through a careful combing. His travel-weary face I read as authentically unperturbed, his contained selfhood -- that is, at the best of times -- innately held away from us, his dark, nearly Asian eyes as inscrutable as ever. These, he focused on me with a marked brevity, the black pupils emitting a swift glint of some likely unconscious reflex. I was sadly conditioned to judge it the familiar self-protective mockery always prevalent.

Looking back at him with stubborn reserve, I managed no other response than a broadly welcoming smile, and how it warmed me to give it. I was genuinely glad to see Hugh, also experiencing a fair measure of relief. My solicitous mind loved the idea of Hugh in this stone house. I reminded myself that he was not alone.

“I’ve already greeted Ragnar, who never changes, so now it’s your turn, Lea. You look good...tan...and maybe even healthier than you were. Hasn’t been that long, has it?”

I could not refrain from a slight frown, while I was remembering how he had promised to come back in the summer when Marcus was here. Quickly altering my expression, I smiled and said, “No, not so very long.”

“Well, come in. We’ve got coffee...none of your British tea, but

China tea...plenty of that. And Cháng has made cookies, fresh almond cookies. The entire place smells of almonds...nice isn't it?"

As we followed Hugh into the living room, I heard noises in the kitchen. The door was closed. Ragnar and I settled on the familiar leather davenport -- where I had so often reclined -- and Hugh in his wing chair. The large room had been comfortably straightened, setting in better order most of Hugh's untouchable disarray of loose papers, books, magazines, and journals. There was a small fire in the fireplace, the first of the season Hugh remarked.

The kitchen door opened and a diminutive dark-haired figure, about my size, moved through the dining room and into the living room. She was carrying a large loaded tray, balancing it gracefully as she set it in the middle of the coffee table. Thick, almost blue-black hair fell forward over the round shoulders of her hazy red sweater. Below her rolled jeans her delicate feet were fitted in plain black flats. When she lifted her head, I was stunned at her beauty, at the smooth, very palely coffee-creamed complexion, the limpid almond-shaped eyes of darkest brown. They were intelligent eyes and took in a great deal, adroitly and politely. Her demurely exquisite smile of greeting was the coup de grâce, irresistible.

"Hello again, Cháng," Ragnar said, helping himself to a cookie. He swallowed and told her, "*Ja*, I think you might be a good cook."

Hugh looked at me and said, "This is my niece by marriage, Wu Cháng. And yes, with her agricultural background, she knows good food, but she isn't here to cook...rather to extend her education, like all young Chinese fortunate enough to come to America."

Why did he say *niece by marriage*? I wondered. Could it be to

remove himself from the possible assumption of something incestuous? As soon as the thought crossed my mind, I disparaged myself with utter disgust. So egregious was the notion, I guiltily lifted my arm and clasped Cháng's cool hand in mine, smiling warmly as I did so.

“Welcome, Cháng...to this old remnant of Ender Farm...and to America. What a good teacher you have in your uncle.”

“Thank you. It is so nice here,” Cháng said. “The land of my family goes back many generations. I am fond of rural places. Large cities are difficult.” Her accent was thick, her choice of words carefully selected, but she clearly wanted to be as sociable as Americans were thought to be.

Ragnar reached forward and lifted the large teapot, then nimbly began filling the rather small teacups. Apparently for Cháng, a *girl from the provinces*, this helpful act was unconventional conduct. She watched Ragnar with a thinly masked look of surprise. Hugh took no notice, sipping his tea and thinking of whatever he was going to say next. Yet I lingered on the thought that Ragnar's subliminal act of impartiality had demonstrated an aspect of our flexible culture as easily as a knife slicing through soft butter.

Hugh, nearest the fire, set his cup down on the hearth and leaned forward, preparing to tell us something.

“We stopped in New York on the way here, then in Cambridge. Cháng has a scholarship at MIT, so she'll be leaving very soon.” Hugh looked at me quite directly and went on, “We also visited Marcus in Boston...a very pleasant visit...in a house you'll come to appreciate a lot more than in the past, Lea. By the way, our son and Cháng got on really

well...like two peas in a pod...even though she's headed for something quite different from his field: a Master of Science in Technology and Policy -- actually an engineering research degree...also involving certain courses in economics, politics, and law...these along with her technical field...pretty far from biodynamics, but somehow the two of them hit it off. When I think of it, I can see a lot of synaptic gaps linking those two fields."

Choosing to ignore all the relevant responses I might have given, I asked, "What were you teaching in Beijing?"

He had not expected the conversation to switch to himself, and held his right hand to his left shoulder, lowering his head in thought, a definitive stance so familiar and telling it made me smile.

"How best to explain exactly what I taught? Well, the kind of English I was often asked to teach my young reporter friends out on the world beat...those eager saplings wrestling with geopolitics who speak rudimentary English. You could teach it to them much better than I, Lea...no doubt."

"Oh no," Cháng loyally interjected. "Your class was so good for us...too many came."

"Yes, that's the way it is there, always too many everywhere. My class was bursting at the seams with aggressive hopefuls, desperate to nail the lingua franca they assume will unlock the world's coffers."

"It is so important," Cháng said.

"Cháng intends to return to China...unlikely she would find a job here, not with thousands of American students clutching their hard-won degrees to their unemployed bodies. I hear the greatest number of them

have moved back with their parents...can't hope to pay off their ruinously expensive student loans...loans amounting to billions. They may yet get some redress, but they still wouldn't approve of Cháng, even if she filled some niche no one else was as capable of handling."

"Are there good prospects for you in China?" I asked Cháng.

Hugh answered for her. "If she wants to succeed in her country, it's likely she'll have to join the elite...work for the government. She'll have to ingratiate herself, play the wicked game among a fierce minority of the favored. The hugely deprived masses of China are scarcely yet considered, except as a very threatening majority -- one out of every three persons in China still lives on less than two dollars a day. The avaricious nouveau riche and the old elite can only keep their grossly materialistic lifestyles by fiercely holding onto power. Fortunately for them, they have the military at their beck and call."

"Not very humorous irony," I commented, "Your zealous young students were learning the language of a country far too inattentive to its young native speakers...and slowly burying itself in corporate debt."

Hugh then changed the subject and said, "I heard about your golden summer days. Marcus made favorable comments on my weighty manuscript. Was he merely being a good son? I also discerned," he went on, now in a highly amused state, "certain hints of hanky-panky in this sacrosanct family house." Hugh laughed uproariously, flashing me a clear glint of meaning. I had no difficulty in reading his mind -- his intimation obliquely referring to the time when his son was conceived here.

"Marcus is mature enough not to be accused of hanky-panky," I

said, implying also that I thought him mature enough to protect himself from an undesirable outcome. “I believe he really is quite serious in the matter,” I added. I thought this was too private for Cháng’s ears.

“Could be that Cháng has changed his mind,” Hugh tantalized.

His cat-with-mouse manner unsettled me greatly. Thinking of Sylvia, I came close to wishing that Hugh had claimed this lovely Chinese girl for himself. But had he not just said she would be returning to China with her new degree? Still, if she married here she would be able to stay. My anger was rising. Likely he was only riling me, as he loved to do. It was one of those moments when I question my incurable devotion to Hugh. How I wished I could let this mischief fly off my back with the same facile laughter as he. I have seen too much human suffering, but so has he. How differently he handles the persistent pain and turmoil of subcutaneous outrage. For as long as I have known him, he has fought the humiliations of human frailty with bitter sarcasm. Just then I found his caustic humor regrettably self-defeating, and much too strenuous. Indirectly observing Cháng, I saw that she appeared to be accepting all of this as a strange form of humorous banter. So we will leave it at that, I decided. Then my adroit Norseman began speaking to Cháng.

“If I understand your scholastic choice correctly, you have bitten off a very large chunk of future possibility, pragmatic study that involves the success or failure of human viability...that is, the beneficial use of artificial and human intelligence in relation to the resources of a planet under mortal attack.”

Cháng was listening carefully, considering each word. “Yes,” she answered with awakening enthusiasm. “I must really put my head to the

grindstone.” She glanced at Hugh. “Is that the good idiom?”

Ragnar nodded his head, chuckled a little and said, “If you can do it right, I think China needs thousands of you.”

All the force of Ragnar’s comment was in the complexity of the word *right*. And how right he was. His swift and realistic arrival at the heart of complexity derives partly from having avoided the tedious old fragmentation of clear lines of reasoning -- the received ideas that result in academic numbing -- which unfortunately often accompanies a formal education; all that deconstruction required. A regrettable result of such parroted discipline is the deadening of imagination and thus of creativity. Yet a broad formal education is so vitally important for the ill-informed, who are the many. The vital cultural aspect of academia is dangerously slipping away into pragmatic technology.

“Although I’m always wary of assigning China large numbers of anything, I think you’re right, Ragnar. This dedicated young student may become indispensable...and not just to the future of China.”

And how loaded was that remark? I wondered, studying Hugh and wishing I were not so stricken with inappropriate paranoia. What had happened to my sound reasoning, my logical mind, my former ability to sublimate dangerous self-preoccupation into a worthy cause?

“I’m so glad to find you back here, Hugh. Obviously a working sojourn’s been good for you. Although, I wish you could have been here with Marcus last summer. He missed you.”

“I thought I’d taken care of that lapse in Boston. I was glad to visit Marcus...proud of my bright son. But I didn’t think there was any need to be here last summer. I was incredibly busy...obviously I had certain commitments...can’t be an idle dilettante like--”

“Behave yourself, Hugh,” Ragnar interrupted with a mollifying grin, “you are becoming as unmannerly as some of my rough ancestors.”

I was surprised at Ragnar’s swift defense, observing that Hugh at once fell into silent reflection. He had been summarily called to account by his revered Norse god, and had clearly not expected that.

“I’d like you to come to dinner tomorrow -- it’s Saturday.”

“Delighted...if Ragnar’s cooking. His food is worth--”

“*Stille!*” Ragnar swiftly scolded with a click of his tongue.

“All right, I was only teasing. Besides, I’m damned sure you’ll be in Lea’s kitchen. She loves it and you love it...all of that hot combustion turns into a hell of a good meal. Sorry, sorry...see how unworthy I am of your invitation? We *will* come. Cháng might express our gratitude by bringing you a side dish of Szechuan green beans; she was going to fix them with our meal this evening -- the sack you brought us earlier from your garden, Ragnar.”

“Ja, it is Wild Vi’s garden too...we share with everyone.”

“Oh, cook them tonight,” I said. “There’ll be plenty to eat.”

“No, I want you to taste them, Lea...although you really don’t need hot chili peppers to fire your disposition.”

I ignored this and smiled at Cháng. “Then please bring your special green beans. I’d love tasting a Szechuan dish.”

The rest of our visit was mostly about things happening in China, developments Hugh is very good at assessing. He gladly enlightened us whenever my querying encouraged it. I am fascinated with the trends of this burgeoning power already holding so much sway in the world. The humane handling of internal problems continues to necessitate steady

external influences, the vigilant push for equitable advancement along with China's formidable progress on the world stage -- an effective sort of watchfulness universally needed. I made my curiosity known, and how I enjoyed hearing firsthand incidentals.

"You might become a China watcher," Hugh observed, finishing our conversation with a favorable glint in his eye.

The season's increasing late afternoon coolness settled over us as we plodded homeward. We zipped our jackets and road along in silence. Finally I had to speak.

"Why does Hugh always find it necessary to be a little cruel?"

Ragnar coaxed Mariner nearer to Legs and looked askant at me from beneath his obscuring brown fedora -- practiced oblique appraisal.

"I think you know. He sometimes finds it necessary to treat you that way...to hide his true feelings."

I shook my head. "I don't know. I only know I feel disliked."

"It is quite the reverse, Wild Vi. We have talked about this before. Are you depressed again? You are smart enough to know you cannot have everything the way you want it."

"No, of course not," I agreed, but without much conviction.

"We did have a good day...in the beginning."

"*Ja*, we did...very good...another perfect image in my head.

"I certainly learned nothing much of their relationship...have no idea what it is. Anyway, it's none of my business."

"Will you go on thinking about it? It is not a good idea."

"I hope not. I don't want to. Oh, look at the gorgeous moon rising behind the hills. Everything is so still, so peaceful."

I began to sing, searching my memory for moon songs. This pleased Ragnar and he joined in, singing with me for the first time.

“The harmony of a Viking skald...and with a velvet voice. I love singing with you...had no idea you knew those popular old songs.”

“I have been in this country a long time,” he reminded me.

When we had turned out the horses, put away the tack, and were walking toward Ragnar’s with the picnic things, he said, “I will have you with me tonight if you like.”

“Oh you will, will you?” I could not help laughing. “Darling, you are presumptuously direct.”

“I said if you like.”

“Yes...considerate of you. I do like. You can just pick me up and toss me onto your bed...the way your lusty ancestors did.”

“*Ja*, I have already done that...playfully. Some teasing about my ancestry is all right, but I have never had the slightest interest in cruelty.”

“I know that very well. Let’s take a warm shower...nibble on something, drink a little Scotch...and then...if I’m lucky I might be carried off to Asgard.”

“You will be carried to my bed, after maybe an omelet. You may drink Scotch. I will stick to my brennevin. But you will not be carried into a myth, Wild Vi. *Herregud*, you are no illusion.”

“Your bed is as exclusive as a myth.”

“While you are there it is exclusive...*og dermed punktum!* You see: *that is that*. The Harvest Moon and *you* in my bed here and now on Ender Farm...for me, worthy of a saga.”

Ragnar had set a large bottle of softgel tablets beside my full

breakfast plate. I picked up the bottle. “Fish oil. Why this?”

“Follow the instructions: one tablet two times a day with a glass of water...preferably with a meal.”

“But why, what’s it for?”

“You. Omega-3 helps the brain with moods...among other things.”

“You mean with depression.”

“You sometimes have that tendency...you can probably make use of natural chemical assistance. Just take them and think no more of it...it is merely staying on the side of improvement. Simple enough, my girl. I would not give you improper advice...would I?”

“No, you wouldn’t. Sorry I make life so difficult.”

“*Nei*, in you, I have accepted random difficulties. You are strong. I only want to make things easier for you...when I can.”

“Was I bad yesterday...last night?”

“Stop the paranoia, you were wonderful last night. I have had that bottle for several days and did not get around to giving it to you until now. It is for you, not me. Just take them and do not question positive motive...it is for your well-being.”

“Your timing was suspect.”

“Just pragmatic. *Herregud!* do not make me tiptoe through your life, woman of this world. I try to be careful with your transient feelings, sometimes I fail. You usually tell me what you think, let me do the same. Do you not know something of me by now, Wild Vi?”

I jumped up and stood behind his chair, putting my arms around his neck and nuzzling my mouth into thick waves of silver hair.

“I know a fair amount...but you’re not always so easy to know.”

“*Ja, kjære*, you know this much: we are here together. Come eat your breakfast. It is getting cold.”

Feeling playfully obstinate, I sat down, folded my hands over my ham and eggs, and said, “Why are we here together?”

He lifted his head and stared at me in a long moment of silence. Those beautiful eyes full of Ender Farm winter skies, full of me.

“*Min skjelmse lille kjæreste*, be kind to *din elsker*.”

I know that *skjelmse* means mischievous, *kjæreste* sweetheart, and *elsker* lover. He knows that I want very much to understand his native tongue, but I know that his use of Norsk words can slightly remove me from the emotion he feels, emotion he was brought up to restrain almost reflexively. Even though he will sometimes tell me how he feels in plain English, I received his Norsk words as a sort of scolding endearment, but perhaps they were merely words expressed more meaningfully in his native tongue. He laughed at my pursed mouth.

“*Du er søt*.”

“Cute?”

“*Ja*, you almost know what I mean.”

“I know what you mean...I know a lot, *min elsker*.”

“You know a lot, *ja*.” He reached out and covered my face with his large rough hand, gently drawing the hand down over my eyes, as if by momentarily closing my eyes the subject was closed.

I finished my breakfast in contemplative silence, sipping my tea and occasionally smiling at Ragnar while he drank his coffee.

“I ought to let you cook the meal tonight all by yourself, since Hugh needs to be taught a lesson in manners. I am not the least bit

concerned about what you might turn out.”

“I’m concerned...about what I might turn out. But if you’re too busy to be my chef I’ll understand.”

“*Nei*, I will help...you know I like to cook with you.”

“I suppose you’ve cooked with plenty of women.”

“Sometimes I have cooked with women. Where is this going?”

“Nowhere...because I don’t want to think about it.”

“Good. What are you cooking?”

“I certainly wouldn’t attempt anything Chinese, since our pretty female guest could probably stun us with native dishes; although, I’m sure you’d have no problem cooking up a number of those provinces. I was thinking of Beef Wellington...and as an accompaniment I had an idea for something a little different: a purée of celery root, carrots, and of course, potatoes, maybe with a bit of sautéed shallot. I saw a variation in a cookbook and decided to add an item of my own: carrots.”

“Sounds delicious. I like celeriac, cold in salad or hot in potato cakes...or any way imaginable. Will you have gravy?”

“Yes, a light sage gravy. What do you think?” I stifled a yawn.

“Impressive. It is early but we need to get on with shopping. This is the kind of meal that takes some time. Where is your jacket, sleepy girl? We will go in my truck...plenty of gas in it.”

We were walking down an aisle of Myrrylton’s supermarket on the outskirts of Hayfield when Ragnar turned to me and said: “By the way, have you ever made Beef Wellington?”

“No, never,” I admitted. “It just sounded so elegant and tasty

that I thought it a fitting meal for a homecoming dinner.”

“I made it the spring before you came...for Bill and Alfreda’s anniversary dinner. It served ten people easily...depends on the size of the tenderloin fillet, of course. Five pounds should be plenty. I assume Roland is coming. Who else?”

“Mr. and Mrs. March...and dear Mary.”

“Ah, and I am to pick up Mary. You know you have no time to fool around with puff pastry. You will have to buy it.”

“I know. I called to make sure they had some. They do, frozen.”

As we continued our brief discussion of how things should go, I looked far down the vegetable aisle and saw Britta Hansen’s tall frame leaning over a bin of fall heirloom tomatoes. Pawing her way through the irregular shapes and odd colors in search of the perfect specimen, she did not see us immediately. How dismaying to have to deal with her at this busy time. Before she looked up, I turned my back and hurried off to find the vegetables I needed for my purée, leaving Britta to Ragnar. Unfortunate, I noted as I slipped away, but I was in a great hurry, with no time even to indulge my unease at seeing the two of them together. They would at once assume their well-known familiarity.

I glanced away from the carrot bin and saw them still talking, Ragnar grinning occasionally and nodding his head. Britta’s head was flirtatiously bent to one side as she listened. She is tall but shorter than he. She was immaculately dressed in mauve wool slacks and sweater, her pale blond hair as ever perfectly coiffed, but with a few airy little wisps seductively framing her rosy-cheeked face -- older than I but still very attractive. I tossed the carrots into a plastic bag and went in search of

celeriac, fennel, and mushrooms.

Looking up, I found myself sharing the vegetable section with the crotchety old grade school bus driver, Ole Olson. He complained to me concerning the picked-over state of the corn, as if I had all day to listen. “You’d think the whole damn countryside wasn’t full of decent corn right now,” he grumbled, examining and throwing a drying ear back onto the diminishing pile. Then Ragnar appeared behind me with the frozen puff pastry resting atop other groceries.

I flung my plastic sacks of vegetables into the cart and said, “Hmm, what was I looking for next?”

“I have everything else on your list, Wild Vi. Ed Shafer fixed us a good five-pound fillet.”

I would have thought you saw enough of her at the Hayfield library to avoid talking when we’re in such a hurry, I thought, but did not say -- I never shop very speedily. Besides, he had completed my difficult list with unassailable focus. Ragnar is a pragmatic shopper and seldom ponders displays of new items, as I sometimes dreamily do.

I glanced at his serene face and wondered if Britta had kissed him good-bye. Perhaps not, she too is Nordic, proud of her ingrained control and decorum. What simple-minded nonsense this was. Until recently, I have hardly ever felt jealousy. No sooner had I brought rivalry to mind than I realized I concurrently felt guilt. I had, in a manner of speaking and however innocently, removed Ragnar from Britta’s orderly existence, although she had sworn to keep him as a friend. And why not? They continue to see each other regularly on library business. But why guilt? I did not know she existed until it was too late to--

“Wild Vi, are you standing there trying to remember what you

forgot to write down?" He handed me the list. "Here, anything else?"

"I guess that's it," I said, skimming over the list and peering into the grocery cart.

Riding back in the truck I was silent, a bit disgusted with myself. *You have more important things to do than brood over your pathetic conduct*, I admonished myself -- I've come to believe, or to hope or anticipate, that instructing myself on more tolerant behavior will naturally program the desired results. Will it?

When he drives, Ragnar likes to have the radio dial fixed on a classical music station, or bluegrass, or a newscast. He knows that I am not happy with background noise when I am quietly engaged in resolving something. Thus he considerately inquired, "Mind if I turn on the radio? Just something pleasant."

"Fine. Whatever you like."

Brahms' Second Symphony was playing, of which I am especially fond...the quiescently imposing sounds of nature. I turned to Ragnar and smiled my appreciation.

"Thanks, *kejære*," he cheerfully responded.

"For what?" I inquired with surprise.

"For your smile...your soprano smile."

"I'll remember to sing it again."

"Not unless we can park in a shadowy lane."

"You make me laugh...and how I do enjoy laughing with you, doing anything with you." I blushed and fell silent, once again thinking I was too effusive for this contained Norseman.

"*Nå*, go on talking, shy girl, I like your brand of enthusiasm."

The day at once seemed very promising.

Ragnar had browned the fillet, while I peeled the vegetables to be cut up, steamed, and pressed through my ricer. He had placed the crusty brown meat on paper towels to cool, and set the pan of juices at the back of the stove. Next came the chicken livers. I stopped my work and temporarily became his sous-chef, simply handing him herbs and salt and pepper to make the sautéed livers. He began the duxelles. I watched him a minute, as he swiftly cut up the onions and mushrooms. He had removed his sweater and blue shirt and was cooking, as he often did, in his white T-shirt and jeans and kitchen clogs. His deftly controlling fingers worked so close to the angled blade of his big sharp knife I was mesmerized.

He glanced up at me. “Waiting to see me cut myself?”

“Not anymore, just enjoying it. You ought to be a bit worried about me, though. Look at this...I’m all over the board with this stuff. I never seem to cut anything the same size.”

“All you have to do is cut fairly equal chunks...careful with that outsized cleaver in your less educated fingers. Uniform size is not so important here -- just steam it and rice it together, *ja?*”

“*Ja,*” I answered, offering a gleaming wink.

“Get on with it, you tease.” He handed me the steamer basket.

I was still smiling. For this, he kissed me on the forehead and turned away to stir softened butter into the liver pâté. I continued to watch as he spread the sage-seasoned chicken liver pâté over the meat, then topped it with the duxelles of onion and mushroom.

Quickly washing his hands, he moved over to the cleaned marble counter top where the iced puff pastry dough rested in foil. He snatched up the rolling pin, dusted it with flour, and began to roll the dough into an appropriate rectangle. Next he set the cooled fillet in the center of the pastry dough, wrapped it, and started sealing edges.

“No thick seams or they will not bake well and become soggy. Now we set it in the pan, cut slits in the top and brush with egg yolk. Four-fifty for a few minutes, then four-twenty-five for a few more. You want it golden brown. Then you can keep it warm for serving.”

“It’s hard to squeeze this ricer. Do you think the vegetables are done enough to do this? Whew!”

“*Ja*, give me that, I will do it. *Nei*, this is fine...cooked.”

“Oh, it’s coming out nice,” I said, leaning over the bowl Ragnar was filling with fluffily mashed vegetables. “The bright carrots give it an interesting color, don’t they? I’ll just stir in some of dear old Fern’s rich cream...salt and pepper. Then we can reheat this later.”

“Now we can play with condiments...and a simple green salad with a decent dressing...then your thawed apple pies. Nice, my girl.”

Ragnar retied my loose apron and bent to kiss the nape of my neck, one of his firm bare arms clasp my waist while he leaned over, holding me tight against him. Tingling with pleasure, I tried to stand still and listen to the soft, low registered voice at my back, so easily wooing me with lyrical words: “What a *kvikk* kitchen *kvinne* you are, *lille* fox.”

“What?”

“A woman smart and quick in the kitchen, but a fox. *Ja*, you are foxy, my girl, small, wily, smart...and hungry.”

I laughed. “Clever language lesson. I’m definitely hungry. No

one else could rescue me here -- a sleight-of-hand maestro in my needy kitchen. I'm best at *imagining* good food. You prepare it perfectly."

"*Nei*, the eaters will determine how close we come to perfection."

"Incredibly good eats," Roland announced, quietly easing back his chair and rising, in order to tiptoe over to Mary's empty wine glass.

"No, no," Roland, "Thank you, but I've had enough."

"How did you know I was about to fill your glass, wizardess?"

"We've had that discussion."

"What discussion?"

"Olfaction."

"My cologne, I hope...and not motor oil this time."

"Yes...I've become familiar with the woodsy smell from your house, but this time your cologne is different."

"St. Johns Bay Rum...not as cheap."

Roland returned to his chair and asked, "Isn't anyone else going to rave about the food?"

"We're afraid if we talk too much someone else will eat what's left," Bill March explained.

"You ought to know that we bought the puff pastry dough."

"Never mind, Ragnar. Bill and I've tasted your homemade puff pastry...you gift-wrapped our celebration beef with it. That was the best present any anniversary couple with everything will ever get, either just hitched or old as the hills."

"Tell me we're still somewhere in the middle there," Bill said.

Everyone but Cháng quickly laughed. She was a little slow on

the uptake, but watched and listened carefully and smiled as soon as she caught the overall effect. Sometimes Hugh would mutter explanations to her, which none of the rest of us could hear.

“Well, we’ve toasted Hugh’s return, fellow diners...with a little kicker for his attractive, intelligent, and I might add lucky, guest. So I say we now toast Ragnar and Viola. Here’s to you two and a whole lot more of this breaking of gourmet bread with us...more of it, I insist, for years to come...years and years.”

“Thank you, Roland. Now I’m moved to say that Cháng’s green beans were just about the most exciting green beans that ever danced over my tongue. No, they *were* the most exciting...so much so I had to drink all of my ice water.” The other burning mouths present somehow found my admission highly amusing and laughed heartily. “Still, that hot fire becomes almost desirable,” I finished.

“The capsaicin triggers endorphins that cause euphoria...makes you crave the heat,” Hugh said, without lifting his head from his plate, or offering me the least hint of a specific response, appearing to consider his general information something we all should know.

“Cháng, will you come over and teach me a spicy Szechuan dish or two before you’re off to academia?” I requested.

“Oh, but I am so sorry,” Cháng apologized. “We are to leave almost immediately. So lucky I am preregister, but yet I must go.”

“Right, and I’ve got an East Coast lecture to do. I’ll see that Cháng’s comfortably inserted in her new environment while I’m there.”

I was immediately confused by a sudden ferocity that swept over me, replicating the heat of the chili peppers. This I had to accept as a

pitiful response to bitter rejection. The nonsense roaring in my head is hopeless narcissism, I argued with myself. But in the next instant I almost cried out, “Why did you bother to come back at all?” I clenched my fingers beneath the table and attempted a cheerfully unconcerned smile. “I hope you have time to join us in the living room for a fireside chat before you fly away. We haven’t even had dessert.”

“Nearly the equivalent of the entire population of this country has now reached middle class status in industrially thriving China,” Hugh said. “Over three hundred million Chinese achievers...out of one point three billion souls.”

We had finished our apple pie and ice cream, and were seated around the living room in a soporific condition of postprandial lethargy. Ragnar had helped me carry in trays of coffee and tea. It was he who posed the question of the economy in China -- our own middle class presently headed for a long slump, or slow extinction.

“I’m not qualified to specify but, from the little I’ve learned, I imagine things are not so rosy there for agricultural villages, or for factory workers,” I speculated. “Around the turn of the last century here in America, workers had to suffer and sometimes die for better pay, fair working hours, benefits. I don’t suppose Chinese workers have reached that particular level of sacrifice.”

“No,” Hugh said, “They leave their villages and are happy to find work in their megacities, whatever the conditions. Concerted attempts at worker improvements are a real and frightening possibility for Chinese officials. But it’s beyond ironic, isn’t it, that here in America there’s an effort among the wealthy one percent to take back the hard-won efforts

KEEPING

of the workers in the last century. Immorally excessive greed fosters a dangerously ruinous disregard for the less moneyed...and ultimately a denial of human rights. If the plutocrats could have their increasingly corrupt way, only the rich would be allowed franchise. They appear to be making headway to that end, knowing that diminished votes seriously threaten the American ideal of democracy.”

“We must be vigilant,” Mary said, despite her visual incapacity.

“In a manner of speaking, you are as vigilant as the rest of us, or even more so...I am proof of that,” Roland said.

Not as interested as some of the rest of us in continuing with China, Alfreda asked, “How does your poetry go these days, Roland?”

“It goes...unstoppable *poetica ad absurdum*.”

“The reason I asked is that I found a new little booklet of your poems right here on Viola’s coffee table. I saw some real interesting things in there. Wished you’d let me know where I could buy one.”

“You can *have* one, Alfreda. Why should you have to buy one? It wouldn’t pay for my eggs and bacon anyway. I can leave a copy for you with Viola...if you really want it.”

“Why thank you, Roland. I didn’t get much of a look but I had time to read a short one I liked. Let’s see, now where is it?”

Alfreda leaned over the coffee table and picked up Roland’s new book of poems, quietly thumbing through until she found her selection.

“Yes, here it is, real short...but says a lot:

FOXED

Frost-tracked fox ahead in the lane
Grins and sidles off again.

KEEPING

Of me, he has no fear.
I've stumbled through another year.
Foot on pane of ice that shatters,
Wistfully, I grin back,
Too late to say I know what matters:
Food and cozy winter den,
A fecund vixen in the pen.

"I probably should have named it "Writer's Cramp," Roland said.

"And that tells me a whole lot more," Alfreda said, "you see, I'm getting on to you, Roland."

"What more does it tell you?"

"Why that the important things to you -- some pretty tame in these later years -- are tasty food and warm shelter...but mostly the "fecund vixen" metaphor: more and better poems coming from your pen. Maybe you want them just as natural as the ways of the vixen."

"Bless you, my child," Roland praised with a sly grin, "you have already inherited the earth."

"Alfie has never been meek," Bill amended, "I married a nervy little live wire...and she's hardly slowed down yet."

"You were as quiet as the silent Sphinx," I told Mary as she was departing, already in Ragnar's truck.

"I really do enjoy it better that way; unable to see, I imagine I'm unseen...but there's loquacity in my head. Who wants to hear from me, anyway? I'm scarcely of this confusing world."

"Mary, you are wise, wise, wise. I'm coming over and tap your

wisdom next week. Then I'll read to you...anything you want."

"I'll look forward to your revealingly sensual voice," Mary startled me by saying.

Ragnar grinned and nodded his agreement. He put the truck in gear after I had tucked in Mary's long black coat and slammed her door, once again feeling the inclination to wave to her.

My parting with Hugh was not felicitous. He appeared distracted and, I believed, had been deliberately attempting to ignore me. More than ever, I felt as if I no longer existed to him. This left me in the mood of a child scolded by a loved one, helpless and only able to respond with cries of indignation and despair.

"Please say good-bye before you leave us again," I requested while Cháng was saying good-bye to Roland. "I suppose you came home because you wanted to show Cháng your house...American farm life," I added more softly, in a stupidly exposed and surly manner. I smiled at Cháng, who was fastidiously putting on her helmet. She smiled back quite cheerily and gave me a universally positive thumb's up, in a secure manner so modern and youthfully innocent I at once felt rather old and discarded. Perhaps my discomposed expression, vouchsafing a glimmer of sufferance, moved Hugh to respond in kind.

"Forever Ragnar's petulant brat," he chided, his steaming breath curling into the frigid black air. He grinned at me with familiar insolence, dark eyes flashing reflections of the house lights, like hot sparks darting from beneath his helmet.

I, having so long been acutely tuned to every variance of mood in humans, and especially in Hugh, had detected an unusual inflection in his

voice, as if he were reminding me of something, making me affirm what it was. I felt myself immediately protesting a skewed truth.

“We thank you for the excellent food and good company. You know...you’re my competition, Lea -- I still have a long way to go. It was nice to see you again...it always is. You get my questionable mental state in sound working order.” He kicked back the stand and roared off.

I stood, watching them vanish into the crisp night, until I could see only the motorcycle’s rippling flashes of light moving between the distant stands of alders. The image of Cháng’s delicately waving gloved hand repeated as a mental vision -- a robust little animal of determined forward motion, I thought, and remembered myself at that age. Once again Hugh had taken my youth and gone away.

A wind had arisen. I was again alone in the creaking old house. It was solidly built and could last another hundred years. I fussed wearily with the dishes that Alfreda had rinsed and neatly stacked, impatiently trying to get them properly into the dishwasher -- too many for all of them to fit. I swore softly, always listening for the sound of Ragnar’s truck going past the house. It was so late I knew he would probably go home and leave me alone to rest. I never heard his truck before I fell asleep, finally assuming he was still talking to Mary, or perhaps fixing something for her, as he sometimes did. The wind struck the house with a sharp blast. I sat up in bed, finding myself wide awake. I drew my heaviest winter robe over my naked body, another useful discovery plucked from Gran’s seemingly bottomless old seaman’s trunk -- thick olive green, satin-lined because it was made of scratchy boiled wool,

smelling of a lavender pomander. I pulled its comforting long folds around me, descended the stairs in my moccasins, and went through the kitchen, stepping outside onto the back deck and leaning against the railing. Very likely Ragnar had passed the house while I slept and was now asleep himself. The one or two silvery cloud tufts still left were scudding away, and the scoured starry heavens backed a full bone-white moon. Freezing wind instantly caught lengths of my hair and danced them straight up, whipping the tangled strands against my face. A few bright leaves from the ancient fruit trees sailed over the deck and whirled away. I stood for a while, thinking of nothing, letting the wind blast into my face. The numbing cold mercifully began shutting down my feverish malaise. Locked in welcome oblivion, I eventually heard my own voice, strange, as if it were someone else's.

“It’s Ragnar who’s kept my childhood,” I muttered. “Not a very surprising outcome...because of how he first knew me...known as a child first, lately as a woman.” *Can Hugh possibly think I’m still a child to Ragnar? He told me I was an unknown woman, someone he had met for the first time when I found him living here. Unlike Ragnar, he boxed away some memory of the child I was and now appears unwilling to attach it to the present me. Of course, a part of me has grown into someone else, but again it’s Ragnar who best puts the parts together, calling me woman-child. He respects the woman here and now but sees the total me, the rooted child who remains. Hugh and I finally became explosively close for a short time last winter...quite an achievement merely to know something of him, and then to share our son, once unknown to Hugh, once so needlessly estranged from me. I thought our surprising new relationship would become an unassailable friendship of trust, yet now I feel Hugh receding. I can hardly bear this cruel withdrawal, or understand it...more loss, the indifference, as if I were nothing at all, forever punished, my childish*

blunders never forgiven? The freezing wind makes me feel less, except that--

“You left this door wide open,” Ragnar said, “Wild Vi, how long have you been standing out here? Do you realize how cold it is? This wind makes it dangerous. Please come inside.”

Startled, I had spun around unsteadily and now cried out, “God! You scared me! I assumed you were home in bed.”

“*Nei*, I was just talking with Mary. She was quiet earlier and then felt like talking. She likes serious conversations one-on-one. I oblige her whenever I can because she is lonely.”

“Serious conversations? Is something wrong?”

“*Komme i hus*, it is too cold for you.” Ragnar, who stood snugly in his shearling jacket, put his hand on my shoulder and led me back inside. I nearly stumbled because my body would not work properly.

The fluky temperature had dipped below freezing, and the wind had thoroughly chilled me. So enamored of cold wind, I did not realize my frozen condition until I found myself trembling uncontrollably from lost body heat. I was hypothermic.

Ragnar studied me for a second or two, then gripped my shaking wrist and pressed his fingers into the cold damp flesh of my arm.

“*Faen!* What have you done to yourself now?”

He took off his jacket and threw it over the sofa, then picked me up and carried me upstairs to my bedroom.

“Take off your robe and get under the covers...unless you want a warm shower.”

“No...I don’t.” My teeth were chattering. “Maybe if you--”

“I will get a hot water bottle, the sheets are cold. Cover up!”

Ragnar returned very soon, undressed. He slid the hot water

bottle into the bed near my feet, then got in and pulled my shaking body against his bare flesh. His limbs, his body were hot to me.

“You’re...so...warm.”

“And this small body has lost its heat! *Herregud!*”

“My heart is warm...my heart is--”

“Why are you crying? Do you hurt?”

“Can’t feel much...but I can’t stop shaking...what are these frozen tears about anyway?...ice tears.” I tried to laugh.

Ragnar thumbed the tears from my freezing cheeks and kissed me. “*Lille* girl, we need to get your temperature up.” I could barely feel his fingers or his mouth, but his warmth was seeping into my bones.

“You came...you came...and you’re so warm,” I muttered through chattering teeth.

“Ah, you careless woman-child!”

The moment I awoke, now almost feverish, my mind began turning over heavy ponderings. Quite instinctively, I thought I would dress and slip away, bundle up and step outside. But why this urgency for more solitary thinking, this craving for numbing cold? It got me nowhere and removed any reasonable consideration of self-preservation. Yet, as if irresistibly called away, I eased toward the edge of the bed, and was immediately locked in powerful arms and drawn back.

“Are you getting up for *tisse*? If not, stay here. You get yourself into trouble with too much thinking and roaming around alone. Stay here and talk to me instead.”

“If I stay I won’t talk...I’ll run my fingers through these silver waves of thick...no, I won’t talk -- I talk too much. I know you’ll agree a

mouth is better used this way.”

Ragnar, who was lying on his back, smiling at my quicksilver diversion, turned suddenly to lean over me. “*Ikke så bissig, din rakeer,*” he muttered against my mouth. It means something like *Calm down, you rascal*. I have heard it before when I have teased him with my arousing intimacies. I tried to tell him that his native tongue spoken so softly was very seductive, but I was interrupted by the result of my own seduction.

Later, relaxing after our deep immersion in a marvelous panacea, Ragnar repeated, “Talk to me.” After what had so recently transpired, I was surprised to be told he was angry with me.

“Why are you angry?”

“You want to damage what I love.”

“How should I interpret that...the life you love?”

“*Nei*, as I meant it...damage your vulnerable self.”

“You won’t say certain things, my darling. I can hardly get an opinion out of you about--”

“You know that is not true, Wild Vi. Why do you say it?”

“I know, I know. I ask too much. I’m completely--”

“Do not start running yourself down. I will not listen to that. I want to hear what is going on in here.” He clasped my head with both hands and stared so imperatively into my eyes I closed them.

“Hugh doesn’t like me anymore,” I stated flatly. “Just when I thought he would be my friend...we would get along...I did give him the astonishing gift of Marcus...it changed his life. He doesn’t care to be here on the farm at all...and...he doesn’t like me anymore.”

“You cannot be that unaware, that insensitive. You were his first

love...but he had to leave that mythic child where she was. Then, after years of other beginnings and endings, of terrible trauma, and despite his damaged body and soul, he fell in love with a strange, long-misjudged woman...unknown, brilliant, still beautiful, a constant wonder, leaving him in an insoluble turmoil. He remembers that hot young relationship, has come to recognize some possession there -- together you made a son. Hugh is my friend -- he has to struggle with that too. Seeing you makes it difficult for him. It is also difficult for me...to watch and to be a part of. But as I have said, it is too late. I am as flawed as every other human animal. I cannot give you up...possibly I have rationalized that it would leave you in a very dangerous place.”

“I wouldn’t *let* you give me up...I refuse to be without you.”

“And that is part of why I will not. You need me. I am good for you and you are good for me. But it is not that simple...if only it were. You feel a proprietary interest too...and rightfully so; you want free access to Hugh...but you want him securely *over there*, in the *Ender* stone house, always reachable, yet you know that neither of you can ever interfere with each other too much.”

“Am I that selfish?”

“You cannot help it. Because of your own deep insecurity you like everything reliable...as familiar as possible...and accessible.”

“Thank you, doctor.”

“*Ja*, I *am* your doctor. Take my medicine, *lille* girl...you have taken more than that.”

I stood at the mailboxes -- the farm’s and Ragnar’s, which had always been separate -- and watched a motorcycle roaring down the

highway from the west. Was it Hugh? Yes. Curious how we meet out on the highway more frequently than anywhere else. He was alone, likely returning from Hayfield. A beautiful sunny fall day, I wore only a blue plaid wool shirt, jeans, and leather boots. I had been standing for a while beside the mailbox, perusing junk mail. I tucked the bundle beneath my arm and shaded my eyes, attempting to determine if he would stop or go on to the eastern road that led to his house. He was still moving very fast, so I merely waved and turned toward the long road leading back to the house. Then I heard the motor at my back. He roared up beside me and pulled off his helmet, shaking his hair into place.

“You look like the milk maid...or a kid playing hooky. Were you waiting for me?”

“What?”

“Nothing...just humor. Give you a ride back to the house?”

“I...oh, it’s all right, Hugh, I probably need the exercise.”

“Give you a ride back to the house.” He snatched the mail from beneath my arm and thrust it into a side pocket, then put on his helmet, straddled his machine, and said, “Get on.”

I got on gingerly, barely touching him with my fingertips.

“Arms around me, mooncalf...unless you want to get knocked off in the mud puddles -- looks like it’s time for the gravel man.”

“Yes. Ragnar’s the gravel man, along with everything else. He’s been busy, but now that things are settling down he’ll probably be getting around to it.”

“Why don’t *you* tend to it?”

“He has a routine and I don’t interfere...messes things up.”

“I’ll bet you learned that fast enough. Ragnar doesn’t have to fill

mud puddles. He can hire it done. He's flush in his own right, you know...part owner of the family farm in Norway. It's high-end produce now, doing very well. He doesn't have to live so simply...he just likes it that way...now more than ever."

I took all of this news in without a word, silently surprised, then said, "Ender Farm pays for the work done around here."

"Pays very well," Hugh said.

He revved up the engine before I could respond, but I did not have a clever retort anyway.

We moved along slowly. I wished he would resume his speed-demon attitude about getting places fast. I was growing uncomfortable because there were a thousand things I wanted to say. I knew I would say nothing...either a thousand things or nothing. Nothing.

"Weather's nice for a change," he shouted over his shoulder.

I did not answer because I was not certain he could hear me, or maybe because I did not want to converse in platitudes. Hugh could be the most silver-tongued colloquist imaginable, when he wanted to be, delivering perverse lectures with mesmerizing lyrical brilliance.

When we reached the house I got off, took out my worthless mail and asked, out of wonted politeness and without expectation, if he would like to come in for tea or something.

"Something," he answered, removing his helmet and gloves and laying them on the walkway steps.

I was truly surprised and wondered what I should do or say next. I merely nodded and proceeded up the path, heading for the kitchen.

"Is the kitchen table all right?"

"No linen, no silver, no Spode?" he disparaged with driest wit.

Instead of laughing I wanted to rave at him, turning my back and plugging in the hot pot. “You did want tea?” I asked over my shoulder.

“I didn’t want anything. Scotch and water?”

I started to ask him if he should be drinking quite so early in the afternoon -- it was two o’clock -- and immediately clamped my mouth shut, moving to the cupboard where a few liquor bottles are kept.

“Should I be drinking so early in the day? Should I be drinking at all?” Huge read me. “Preserve the brain cells for what’s yet undone.”

At last I was able to turn around and smile a little, with some measure of relief. While he was talking, Hugh had been removing his heavy leather jacket. He hung it over the chair back and sprawled in the Windsor chair, his denim-covered legs stretched out and his shiny black boots crossed. His Asian-tinged jet eyes were sending sparks of prescient calculation my way, without ever looking at me directly.

“I didn’t say a word, Hugh.”

“Yes, you did, to yourself you did: *Is he drinking too much?* You likely talk to yourself a lot. Interesting conversations, I imagine.”

“How do you know I do that?”

“I know you’re incredibly bright and you don’t vocalize much of that ongoing cerebration. It’s internalized.”

“It appears that, today at least, you’re not giving Alexander Pope a verbal run for his money either.”

“I don’t even try to *write* that way. But tell me, what’s the point of *cacoëthes scribendi* after Pope and Shakespeare?”

“You’re a rhetorical whiz. I’m afraid congenital writers can’t help themselves. Sometimes it’s hubris. And people forget and start over.”

“How, by texting? Most people never knew in the first place.”

“Here’s your Scotch and water.”

“You having some?”

“No, tea. I’m susceptible to stupidity with alcohol. You ought to remember that.”

“Precisely. You were so scared of me you drank yourself into a stupor. But you had the nerve to keep showing up. I had no idea why you kept coming back...thought it was just...leftover emotion.”

I sat down at the kitchen table and took a sip of black tea.

“How is Cháng?”

He took a swallow of his Scotch and eyed me quietly for a few seconds. “Busy sending e-mail on her laptop. She’s a tender ingénue, with a mind of steel...determined.”

“She’s going places,” I suggested.

“I’ve been to plenty of those places...something to do I reckon. Good for her...use everything you’ve got...her brain hasn’t even finished developing. I vaguely remember that age. Christ!”

“Hugh, should you...”

“What?”

“Should you drink when you’re depressed?”

“What, that again!” He crossed his arms and sent me a look of amused disgust. “This conduct is S-O-P for me...neither more nor less of the natural deleterious state.”

I set my cup down, dropped my hands into my lap and studied him. A lofty sensation, beyond admiration and approaching reverence, swept over me, recognition of singular courage.

“You’re so strong,” I said softly.

“Why?” he demanded, “Why, because I can resist temptation?”

“Nothing so simple or crass...because of what you went through, because of the way you heal yourself.”

“Like a sick dog under the bed? I have no choice...not quite ready for *that* yet. What is so commendable? Look at Roland with his scars -- God knows what he went through. Look at Mary with her eyes burned out...look at *you*, tackling chaos, *you*, lost in your *Salvator Mundi* complex...coming back here with hardly enough meat on your bones for a heartbeat. And then...I laid it on you.”

“If you have any remorse over that, any at all, you can stop right now. I understood. I do understand. Consider how I felt after sending shards of glass flying at you. What on earth was I doing?”

Hugh shook his head and laughed. “We’re just animals after all. You’re still a fairly wild one -- still a racing little engine powered by a high voltage brain. Actually, what you did felt good. No, I’m not a masochist but it woke me up. I...liked you for it. I’m leaving day after tomorrow. You told me to say good-bye, so this is it.”

Hugh drained his glass, stood up and grabbed his jacket. I was seized with a terrible shock of longing and loss and misery and love, the sweetest, most painful emotion, immaculate and inviolable.

Urgency thoroughly banished my diffidence. “You will never know, perhaps never understand, the feelings I have for you,” I avowed.

“Words from *my* mouth...at least give me credit for knowing a few relative things.”

“Will you come back?”

“Of course...generally I live here...that’s all.”

I chafed at the unspoken assertion so bluntly implied: *I'll come back but you won't be allowed to pull my strings*. Ragnar's accuracy then assailed me.

"Unnecessary innuendo," I candidly then dishonestly mollified: "I know I have no influence, I know that."

"The *bell* you don't have. You damn well know the complete opposite."

I followed Hugh out to his machine and stood on the walk's lower steps while he started the engine. Why had he left off his helmet, I wondered. It and his gloves were still lying on the steps. He would not forget them I knew. My hands were discreet fists. All he would get was a controlled smile. He sat looking at me for a few seconds, his right hand candidly raised to his left shoulder, his head angled to the right; then he leapt off his machine and came toward me.

Time slowed. The sun shone very bright. The man walking toward me with a slightly halting step had come a long way, from boy to man without ever diminishing the shaping past. There I stood, locked in a fearful blending of curiosity and wonder, as if I were only waiting some distance off for something decisive to happen to someone else.

He clasped my shoulders and leaned down, the intense jet eyes drawing closer and closer. I gazed up into them, up into an exquisitely starlit night, then felt a cool, unhurried self-indulgence brush my cheek and settle softly over my mouth. I closed my eyes for a brief languorous moment, tasting the Scotch. "Why should it be difficult to do this, kill the mystery?" he wondered aloud. He kissed me again, taking his time, but with a subtle difference I refused to name. Finally, he looked at me openly with a boyish smile. "There, now you're a *present* memory. Don't

look so worried, it's all right. Everything is as it should be...under the circumstances.”

“Hugh kissed me good-by,” I said.

Ragnar was pulling out dried corn stalks at the foot of our big dwindling garden. He finished the last few, then took off his gloves and smiled at me, that enigmatic smile of indulgence.

“I am glad to hear it. That will have been good for him...what he needed to do. But you did not have to tell me, Wild Vi.”

“Yes, I did.”

“Then you must feel some guilt...and why should you? Your feelings for Hugh are not a surprise to me.”

“If you kissed Britta would you tell me?”

“I do not kiss Britta, silly girl. We have shared no impassioned childhood...or child...only a former compatibility in loneliness.”

“I don't think Britta would be quite so blasé about it. For her, the *former compatibility* still exists.”

“Wild Vi, where is this going? Did you come here for this?”

“No, I wanted to see you...I always want to see you. And I...”

“What?” Ragnar coaxed, lifting me up against his faded old plaid shirt. The damp gray flannel smelled of dried corn stalks, moldering moist earth, and arousing workman's sweat, in which I sometimes detect the scent of caraway. He kissed me into a limp state and set me down, grinning at the sight of my bare feet.

“*Herregud, lille* mudlark, you have no shoes on...good thing you did not walk over holly leaves again. Were you in such a hurry?”

Still giddy from the kiss, I looked at my soiled feet and gave a

hoot of laughter. “I don’t believe I thought about it. I often like to go barefoot. I always used to...hated shoes. Now I’m toughening up again, you see?”

“When you were a wild imp the soles of your *lille* feet must have been hard as stone...the way you were always running shoeless through the fields. So...why did you really come out here. Not to help?”

“I’ll help. What shall I do?”

“Nothing, I am finished for the day.”

“I wanted to ask you about Mary. You said she wanted to talk seriously. Is something wrong?”

“Ah, your reason for coming.”

“That and to tell you about Hugh.”

“Hugh is a significant presence in our lives...whether he is here or not. About Mary, you are perceptive. There is really nothing very much wrong...but interesting, touching...possibly even sad. Let me go shower and I will come to the house. Shall I bring food?”

“No, my love, I’ve made stew...with loads of root vegetables.”

We had finished my rosemary-flavored stew and were sitting on the davenport in the living room. Ragnar responded to the touch of my hand by resting his arm over mine and clasping my wrist. The warmth and security of this familiar gesture -- which might include taking my pulse -- leaves me in a lofty condition not unlike that of a single glass of champagne on an empty stomach. For a while, it was so peaceful to be quiet and merely dream into the orange flames rising from snapping pine logs. I did not want to interpose any new subject and did not speak. He might then take up where he had left off in the garden, explaining what

he meant about Mary. At last, curiosity overcame me and I turned away from the fire, drawing his gaze away from it too. His darkened gray eyes shone with a keen understanding. He smiled as he presciently read my silent inquiry.

“All right...but I suspect you will make an active volcano out of dormant words.”

“How will I know until you say what hasn’t been said?”

“Mary is very curious about Roland...to put it simply but far too incompletely...maybe disloyally -- although I was not sworn to silence. She wanted to talk about him, but her interest -- gently advanced -- was nearly of a metaphorical cast, that is...full of *kennings*, as the skald might see them.”

I sat up, charged with the electricity of clashing thoughts.

“That’s an exciting analogy, skald...I want to know every clever innuendo, every substitution of this for that...of course from more than just a tantalizing literary standpoint. My immediate concern is from the heart...why hasn’t she asked me about him?”

“It may be that she thought your relationship, your assumed familial relationship, would make you less objective.”

“But apparently the whole thing is *subjective*. Yet, I’ve come to think of Mary as completely straightforward...I have speculated that her blindness has made her more fearless.”

“Because she is without a certain hope?”

“Is that what I’ve implied?”

“To some degree.”

“Then I take it back. Tell me, tell me how I can help her, what precisely she wanted to know.”

“Nothing precisely, as I have said. Now calm down. You are not to say anything to Roland. You certainly know that.”

“Of course...and I may know more than you...perhaps more than Roland. I doubt he's thought much about...or even fully grasps his own feelings, but *I* do. I've seen the attentive way he treats her, always with such tender consideration. Haven't you? You can't have missed--”

“*Nei*, I cannot have. They have things in common...as both have felt *Hel's* kiss, and well know *døgnliv*, the shortness of life. Those two are primed to understand each other's suffering. Roland is more gentle with Mary than I have ever seen him with anyone else. And she is consistently forgiving of his cynicism. Her thorough devotion to fine literature makes her irresistible to him -- as you are to me. She could be a useful, perhaps positive, critic of the lyric swan's cries, the work that keeps Roland alive. And...she has a calming effect -- as I sometimes have on you. You see, Roland cannot help being drawn to her thirsty soul; it asks for nothing but a millimeter of fresh rain...and that often used for the nourishment of others.”

“You *are* a skald...have you ever written anything poetic...as poetic as the way you just spoke?”

“When I was but a child I was influenced by Norse mythology, the sagas, all the great narratives I read while in the highlands tending sheep...the books my grandfather cherished and gave to me...I carried a few with me when I left. But we are talking about Mary and Roland.”

“We are talking about more than you think.”

“As is nearly always the case with you, my *lille* mockingbird.”

“Tell me something material.”

“She wanted to know his physiognomy...his stature, the essential composition of flesh and bone -- of course to own a convenient mental picture of him. But she said nothing like that.”

“I wonder how your description compares to mine. What *did* she say? How did she say it?”

“You are the poet, how do you imagine?”

“No, tell me, please tell me.”

“She began by inquiring how I liked Roland’s poem of you. But she already knew the answer to that and almost immediately suggested something else...that a certain amount of his poetry was *lean and dark and cynical, as the last tall tree standing in a twice-burned forest. I’ve imagined chinks of bruising caustic blue bowling down through the singed bare limbs*, she said.”

“My God, did she? And you said?”

“Here it is nearly verbatim: *Roland is of wiry medium height, five-eleven or so, with coarse dark hair, peppered light gray at the temples -- unlike the solid near-white streak in your hair -- but his hair is not as dark as the raven waves of Hugh, whose hair roots are Chinese. For Roland, you might recall the East European dark hair that comes near auburn. His wider-set eyes are a piercing sapphire blue -- the blazing eyes of the Ender who once employed me -- his proportionally narrow nose is arrogantly straight...the arrogance, as you well know, an important safeguard. His pale, rather thin and perpetually bombastic mouth ranges from a cynical smirk to a brutal, sometimes impishly gleeful, grin. His dark-whiskered, generally shaven chin is tapered forward, unafraid to lead where others fear to venture. I see these features as complementary, altogether fairly balanced and not offensive.* The hermit’s pale flesh, I told her, had more often than not escaped fiery encounters with the shrapnel of war...implying there was a certain amount of scarring but omitting any detail. She asked for nothing further, because my picture

had more than satisfied her innuendo.”

“Marvelous! I wish I could have been there, but you’re the next best thing. Your interpretive description is so accurate.”

“Remind me to carry a recording machine when next I speak with someone caught in your sphere of interest, Wild Vi.”

“*You* are a very accurate recording machine,” I observed, feeling a soaring admiration for my bright North Star. “Wasn’t she a bit startled by your direct response to her cunning poetizing?”

“*Nej*, that was my unforeseen assignment...the quicker divulged the better to satisfy a smitten condition...which she may deny.”

“You said her condition was sad.”

“I said possibly...maybe not. I am afraid that depends on the persuasions of your wily woods dweller.”

“I’m trying to imagine how this...*development* would change their lives.”

“Logistically, not much -- they are both set in their ways. But recognition would certainly alleviate mutual loneliness, neglected hunger for the specific understanding each can offer.”

“Yes. Of course, we can never imagine all the subtle attractions in play...an exchange of attention for them would *have* to be quite special, the exceptional sort of attention that values high mentation above other considerations.”

“Exactly. Can we go to bed now?” he digressed, advantageously following up with a persuasive kiss. I once again named him Viking. He then answered, "*Floke*," with a playfully scolding grin -- the word means flirt. Flirtation belongs to our colloquy, but just then I felt inescapably vulnerable -- so quickly and surprisingly removed from our consuming

subject that disingenuous trial words flew out of my mouth.

“What if I told you that I...wanted to spend the rest of this night working at my writing?”

He looked into my eyes for a few seconds and stood up.

“Then I would kiss you good night and go back to my cabin.”

Just as I was wondering how I could retract my idiocy and still save face, Ragnar clasped my elbows and drew me up to stand before him. He looked down at me, straight into my captured eyes, and said, “But I think you are not going to write tonight.”

“What makes you think so?”

“The anticipation still in your eyes, that fire you have...and now there is disappointment. Your emotions are too large to hold inside, *lille* girl. You never have to punish yourself merely for independence. You already have it. You always have it with me.”

How could I say that it was not want of independence but easy surrender I was fighting -- really the most volatile or chameleonic (when love is disguised as anger), subtle, and enduring of all emotions? It is an emotion far less capable of direct expression than flare-ups of true anger hurled bullet-fast at a target. Sometimes it frightens me to love as I do, as I have not done since I was fifteen: as if my world is caving in beneath my feet, or I am falling over a precipice to my death. But that unsettling fear had come and gone, like the firing of a single neuron in my brain, leaving me with regret at what I had just forfeited. Longing to exchange that regret and momentary panic for a more joyful state, I pressed my hands over my temples and lowered my head, searching for a moment of clarity. A deep-rooted uncertainty persisted.

Ragnar remained standing without touching me, yet there was

between us a palpable exchange of will and longing. His restraint was abler than mine. I lifted my chagrined head, waiting.

“Often I say things flatly, matter-of-factly, Wild Vi; it does not mean I want to encroach upon your freedom. I like to think that this relationship will endure exactly because it is unconventional, because we share no children or normal household, because we two remain free and independent...and choose to be together only out of responsible love, out of *authentic* love.”

“It isn’t really about loss of independence.”

“Then what?”

I put my arms around his middle, laid my head against him and tried to explain. “I thought for an instant -- only for a single instant -- the problem might be too much of you...sometimes I’m inclined to...well, to lose myself in you. For a moment my feelings frightened me...as if I were losing my grip on what’s real.”

Ragnar stroked his fingers through my hair and laughed. “Not likely...not you. Together we are real enough, my girl...I happily accept what you call *too much love*.” He winked at me. “It is only that you have the intense imagination of a good writer -- more writing and less self-examination...difficult I know. *Ja*, we now have a healthy lust for each other -- good for us -- was it not the ethereal Blake who said, *Dip him in the river who loves water*? But this pleasure is only one powerful reason why we want each other. Wild Vi...if you need to write tonight, then write.”

A vacillating blush crept over my face. “Will I be quite rightfully accused of hypocrisy if I now suggest going upstairs to bed?”

“In this case desire joins wisdom. Are you serious now or only teasing me?”

“I’ll tease you upstairs.”

He found this very amusing and said, with unchanged mood, “*Lille flokse*, will you have *too much of me* if I carry you there?”

For the present, I had no time to think any more about Mary and Roland, for Ragnar’s sister, Sonja, had arrived with her daughter, Dagney, Peter’s mother. I had wanted them to stay in my large house, because I had so much room and could have put them in the nice guest room I had prepared for Marcus. But Ragnar said matter-of-factly they would stay at his place, sleeping together in the king-sized bed in the cozy spare room of his big cabin, and that was that. Alfreda had offered Ragnar her large Lincoln sedan to comfortably convey them and their luggage. He drove to Eugene to wait for their commuter flight from Seattle.

I was not even allowed to prepare them a welcoming supper. Ragnar said they would be tired. He would feed them and let them go to bed, to recoup as much as possible from jet lag. I could hardly argue with that, having often jetted over the world with my head in a fog of misplaced time zones.

The following day we began preparing a dinner for his relatives, which was also to be my first face-to-face meeting, I was once again incredibly nervous. Ragnar, on the other hand, was his usual composed and comfortable self. He had installed himself in my kitchen, again as the masterly chef that he is, resuming his incredible *savoir-faire* at doing a dozen things at once with split-second timing and, it always seemed to me, perfect results. I was content to relinquish any falsified authority and act once more as his sous chef.

Ragnar had arrived with sacks of unknown groceries. He had

chosen a familiar Norwegian meal, an easy way to make his sister and niece happy, he explained. “And, I hope, keep them that way throughout the evening,” I had added to his light-hearted comment.

“Shall I chop the onions?” I asked in complete innocence.

“What onions?” Ragnar inquired.

“For the meatballs.”

“Serious Norwegians will never put onions in their meatballs, Wild Vi -- at least have not done so up to the present moment. You might find these meatballs bland, but then again the pepper, mace, and dry mustard in them will help. I know you like mushrooms. The meat balls are first browned then baked in a gravy mixture of beef broth and creamed mushrooms. For a Norwegian, this is comfort food.”

“Will there be any appearance of potatoes?” I inquired with uninformed hopefulness.

“*Ja*, there *will* be, *artig* girl...amusing girl.” He kissed me on the forehead and said, “Scrub those fingerlings I spilled into the sink, then fill a pot with water for boiling.”

“What are the guests doing?” I wondered aloud, as I vigorously brushed then rinsed the long miniature potatoes.

“Sitting in my window seat, reading my books, looking out at the farm...fortunately we have a beautiful fall day.”

I used a fork to test the beets boiling on a back burner, and said, “I’m sure Dagny is young enough to have learned plenty of English but what about your sister?”

“Sonja likes to vacation in Europe’s southern countries, warmer places where very few people speak Norwegian. She learned her English from Dagny...when my niece was first speaking it at school.”

“Very determined of her...must run in the family.”

“What?”

“A strong will...following through...accomplishment.”

“It runs in your family too,” Ragnar responded. He was putting the steaming beets into a sieve, to cool them down with cold water.

“Where is Peter, the beloved son?”

“In Hayfield getting a haircut. I told him he was beginning to resemble a shaggy sheep.”

“He has darling blond curls...I’m sure you did too.”

“Possibly...*ja*, long ago.”

“I remember your honey-blond hair...sometimes you let it curl at the nape of your neck. Women must have loved it.”

Ragnar threw back his head, with briefly dismissive laughter, but made no comment on that particular subject.

“We will get this meat into the oven, then make the salad.”

We were soon at the beet-slicing stage. Ragnar did this quickly, and, after he washed up, I laid the slices into a sieve to be rinsed.

“*Nei*, put them into the bowl. The color is part of the salad.”

“Of what does your salad consist, besides bleeding beets?”

“Two washed Golden Delicious apples, with peels left on; two tablespoons of honey and three of apple cider vinegar, fresh dill, and blue cheese...this blue cheese has walnuts -- finally Murrilton’s is getting more sophisticated products.”

I ate a slice of beet. “And this food is going to make Sonja and Dagny happy?”

“We can only hope. It will make me happy.”

“Hmm, I suppose you’d be even happier if the salad had a lot of

herring.”

“Now you understand what is important, my girl. Hand me the apples. You have beet juice on your lips...very tempting.”

Sonja is tall, but not as tall as Ragnar, a large-framed, fit woman, slender and comfortable with her farm-honed body, an easy comfort that makes even less deliberate motions graceful and natural. She is rather appealingly adapted to her age, a little older than Ragnar. She has the Nordic features one often sees in Scandinavian women, a slightly flipped short nose in a flat round face, but pale-brown eyes, keenly narrow eyes, crinkling with occasional sparks of wry humor and sharp awareness. I at once recognized an indurate quality that I took the literary license of tracing back to the medieval harshness of long-suffering womanhood. I had expected her eyes to be blue, but they would not belong in that face. Her dimple-cheeked daughter, Dagney, is a younger version of herself, except that her hair is still truly blond, not bleached the ripe barley of her mother's -- a desired continuation of the way one began and therefore a reasonable and pleasing solution. Dagney's eyes are a strangely shaded gray-blue that, in an eye-blink of looking, one might mistake for very light brown. They are not at all like the clear blue eyes of Peter, whose father I have imagined as a blue-eyed Nordic man the size of Ragnar.

I was wearing black flats, black velvet slacks, and an olive silk shirt, while Sonja was attired in a dressy pearl gray sweater paired with a fully pleated skirt of matching gray. She wore a short string of creamy pearls at her neck, and on her feet mid-heel gray suede pumps. Dagney wore much the same outfit, a soft-wool cerulean sweater and matching straight skirt, at her neck a single silver chain holding a small winking-

diamond pendant. On her narrow feet were taupe high heels, rather higher than her mother's. How had these two farm women, surely as given to casual dress as I am, managed the walk to my house? The path is not really smooth enough for their unstable footwear.

"We were expecting to eat something strange," Sonja teased her brother, helping herself to another meat ball when Ragnar passed her the bowl. Her politely modulated voice rarely hesitated, a rhythmic, accented voice conveying a soft undertone of wry humor. I could not have helped liking her, although I had intended to do nothing else.

"He is spoiling us with this good meal, *mamma*," Dagny offered. "*Onkel*en Ragnar--"

"English please, Dagny. You are an English speaker, and now you are where it is normally spoken," Ragnar scolded his niece, yet in a gentle voice -- he has excluded himself from this stricture, because he knows I love to hear and learn his Norsk words. Dagny must be near my age, yet she appeared unruffled and even glad of her uncle's advice.

"Sorry, Uncle...excuse me, Miss Ender," Dagny apologized. "It is such a strong habit to speak our family tongue when we infrequently come together. I meant no offense. Uncle Ragnar, I--"

"*Ja*, Dagny, for me you can forget the familial title. You know I have never cared for titles."

"Are you going to let her speak, *brother*?" Sonja asked, with a humored defiance in her voice.

I decided to enter into the spirit of the raillery and asked, "Did you quarrel as children?"

"We quarrel as adults," Ragnar explained, with a raised brow of amusement. "Fortunately, at many Norwegian tables the eaters rarely

open their mouths except to put food into them.” Everyone laughed.

“Well, I’d like to say that this pleasant meal has made me feel quite warm and friendly,” I coaxed my table guests. “I’m allowed to complement the chef, as I had little to do with any of the food.”

“Ragnar can take over the kitchen wherever he goes,” Peter said. “But we all come out the better for it.” He turned quickly to me and said with blushing cheeks, “Of course, your meals are really wonderful, Miss Ender...Viola. I am certain Ragnar would not have done quite so well without your help.”

“What a diplomat you are, Peter, but *wonderful* is going a little too far,” I suggested.

By the time we were having coffee in the living room, I had come to realize that neither Ragnar nor Peter had said anything to Sonja or Dagny about the relationship that had developed between my farm manager and myself. I also thought I knew how Ragnar liked things to proceed, in a very natural manner and without awkward explanations. Their understanding was to come through subtlety and observation, almost as if he were testing them to see how observant they were. I took care to do nothing that would accelerate the process. Undue familiarity might well have embarrassed everyone. But a blatantly personal display before others is not in my nature anyway. Keeping at the back of my mind what was not known, I conducted myself as the welcoming owner of Ender farm, delighted to have my invaluable manager’s family to a dinner he had been encouraged to prepare. I became so involved in drawing answers from these two rather guarded women that I did not have to pretend anything at all. While they conversed in a friendly manner, I saw they were loath to reveal anything of a very personal

nature. Throughout the early part of the evening, I experienced a confident, perhaps overconfident, satisfaction at bearing myself with what I hoped resembled circumspect Norwegian deportment.

“How is your farm?” I asked Sonja, who sat near her daughter on the long creaking leather davenport. With my mention of a familiar territory, I intended to evoke easy, perhaps lively, responses.

Sonja unclasped the large supple hands lying inertly in her lap, glanced at Dagny for affirmation, and said, “There have been lean times and better times. We are in a valley with good soil, a place where farms produce well. You would call it a breadbasket. We grow a variety of things and, with our animals, are lucky right now to have a demand for high quality produce...a good market.”

“We understand that you are not a farmer,” Dagny said. “That is, you have always been away...and Ragnar has been so long on this land it must be almost like his home. But he is also usefully familiar with our farm...we would really love to have him come and help us.”

“What on earth would I do without him here?” I said, careful not to look at Ragnar.

Then, for the first time, Sonja mentioned something of a personal nature. “Yes, he has surely been good for your farm. But, Ragnar,” she went on, turning to him, “you know our poor old Uncle Jørgen has been gone a long time. He was the reason you left.”

Sonja received no response from Ragnar, who must have heard this refrain often enough. He nodded acknowledgement, more to silence his sister than in actual agreement. I knew that he had left his home for other reasons as well. At quite an early age influenced by the renowned

explorers encountered in Norwegian history, he had wanted to see the world. But Sonja kept up her persuasive voice, turning again to me.

“He does own part of Almestad farm, you know, and so many times we have asked him to come home. But, of course, he has been here so long...” Sonja shook her head wistfully.

“You have no children?” Dagney asked.

“A son,” I said, rising to snatch from the sofa table a colored photograph I had taken of Marcus last summer. He was reclining in one of the old chairs on the veranda, smiling and sending me a rendition of Hugh’s raised eyebrow, half impatience, half amusement. I handed the photograph to Dagney. “He’s a bio-energy scientist,” I said.

“I see...not a farmer. Oh, he is so handsome...dark hair.”

An alder log fell forward in the fireplace, sending out sparks. Ragnar got up from his wing chair and removed the screen, grabbing the tongs to wrestle the smoking log back behind the andirons.

Sonja watched her brother perform this task as she spoke. “In America you have farms that are very large...agribusiness. Your family farms, I believe, are disappearing. But now you have a few small farms starting up with special kinds of produce for your big hungry market; a new attention to fresh and safe garden food, healthy food. This is a good development for you, if you can save the land. Our food has always been from the earth, not the factory. Healthy, fresh, simple.” She laughed. “*Ja*, we are accused of simple food, but we like it that way. Good simple food.”

“Here: only one cow,” taciturn Peter offered with a bright grin.

“This is easy for you,” Dagney said, laughing with her son.

“Peter works hard. We love having him,” I quickly praised with

complete sincerity. I smiled at Peter, who had settled his large frame on a square leather hassock to one side of the fire, and was leaning on his hands with his elbows resting on his knees.

I again arose from my wing chair, to see if anyone wanted more coffee or more of the applesauce cake I had made.

“Good cake,” Sonja said, brushing crumbs from her hands onto her plate and tucking back her short straw-blond hair. “Do you buy the apples? We have a small orchard on our farm...for our own use.”

“Our orchard is very old and tired,” I lamented. “Yes, I buy the apples. We’re a grain and filbert farm, but Ragnar is diversifying, trying new things for a new green world.” After a few brief glances, I was now looking fully at Ragnar for the first time. He offered me only a faintly amused smile. What was he thinking? I had no idea. Why was he so quiet? Did he intend for me to steer the rather stilted conversation in whatever direction I found most comfortable? I thought this likely.

“There’s a lot of farmer left in me,” I said, without considering where this might lead. “When I was very young I learned how to handle all of the equipment on this farm...and how to milk a cow...how to shoot a rifle.”

“Guns!” Dagney exclaimed. “I know nothing of guns. I think you have far too many of them in this big country.”

“We had a lot of rabbits,” I explained, blushing with a flustered defensiveness. “My father wanted me to shoot rabbits...we sometimes had plagues of them.”

“Oh, *ja*, rabbits are good eating. *Fa’r* did hunt rabbits, did he not Ragnar?”

“As did I,” Ragnar said. “In Norway and here. Martha Ender

liked to have them in her stew...and she canned them. This wild girl humanely dispatched infestations of them...and sometimes did help Martha put them into jars...containers used over and over, filling the pantry shelves...tall blue glass jars preserving everything edible.”

“*Wild girl?*” Dagney said, quickly fastening upon this unusual and, apparently to her mind, rather forward comment. A moue twist of her mouth made deep dimples. She looked at Ragnar with scolding eyes.

“*Freidig,*” Sonja said softly to her brother.

Ragnar had been sitting with his gray-wool-covered arms loosely folded, his long legs stretched out, his reflective face holding a subtle interest that only I, I fancied, might interpret. His sensually formed lips, so capable of profoundly messaged expression, had resumed their rooted serenity, the smoothly set flesh as unrevealing of what was held within as the solid oak of my closed writing desk. Thus, I almost jumped out of my chair with surprise at hearing him once more candidly respond, this time in regard to his sister’s gentle chiding at his presumed forwardness.

“My relatives think I have been outspoken,” he directed to me, with a twinkle in his suggestive darkened gray eyes -- they flickered with firelight and made me want to laugh. I did laugh.

“What will they think when you eventually say my name?” I asked. Had I gone too far?

“But he has told us you are *Violea Ender,*” Sonja interjected.

“A very pretty name, I think,” Dagney mused, “unusual.”

“But not so unusual as the name I gave her,” Ragnar said, “or as suitable...from someone who has known her since she was a devilish *lille* runny-nosed *jente*. She is and always will be Wild Vi.”

“Ragnar!” Sonja and Dagney cried out in a startled duet.

What should I do? Was I now supposed to uphold the polite manner I had been employing with my farm manager? It was his *wild girl among the rabbits* that first personalized the conversation. But Ragnar had seen fit to carry on in his own way and I decided to leave it up to him. All of this surreptitiousness, I thought impatiently, barely able to contain my laughter, which within seconds spilled out again.

Briefly joining my outburst, by emitting a barely perceptible grin, Ragnar then resumed his imperturbable circumspection. He said nothing further, merely rising to throw another log on the fire, although everyone seemed to be waiting for him to go on.

I looked to Peter as my weathervane and found him mildly shaking his head. He had snatched up Bugsy -- stopping his mad tear through the room -- and held my slowly pacified cat on his lap, his large gentle fingers stroking Bugsy to the purring stage. Peter merely offered me a shrug. Then I saw that his mother and grandmother had followed my attention, clearly trying to learn more or come to an enlightened conclusion, if further along than I supposed. If there were anything like sides, Peter was on ours, loyal to us. He smiled dreamily and let his blue eyes widen in a fixed gaze at the fire, as if he knew nothing at all that was pertinent and was only waiting for the conversation to resume. I do so adore him, and did especially at that moment.

“Last winter I began teaching a writing class, actually it was also a reading class, and Peter was my star performer. How well-read and how bright your young man is,” I said to Sonja and Dagney.

“You are a teacher!” Sonja said with surprise.

“She has a Ph.D. in literature. Ragnar has encouraged her to teach a class at his library,” Peter enthusiastically volunteered.

“It is not *my* library,” Ragnar corrected, “but a county library in which I have a special interest.”

“He has given them hundreds of his finest books,” Peter said.

“You tell us nothing of this, Ragnar...or you either, Peter,” Sonja scolded. She turned to me and said, “We hear nothing of this.”

Then Dagney said, “I think we know nothing of very much...that is, when we think of Ragnar...always the mystery of our family.”

“When I come to see you, we talk at length about the farm,” Ragnar reminded them. “Have I not given you some good advice?”

“Ragnar gives everyone good advice,” I interposed, trying to keep my voice in the mix. I had at last given myself permission to fully enjoy myself in the presence of this earnest and delightful family, and I was gradually coming, with increasing gratitude, to appreciate Ragnar’s rather ingenious indifference -- it acted upon us like the gravitational certainty of a reliable hourglass: once turned, inexorably revealing what remains and what has passed, while assuring that the last grain of sand will fall and announce the end of the beginning.

Peter went off early to do the milking -- I had offered to do it so that he could visit with his family but he only laughed and quickly threw up a dismissive hand, as if I had said something preposterous.

At the close of the evening, I walked out with my guests and stood at the top of the two stone steps at the end of the entrance path. Sonja and Dagney, giggling and cautiously holding hands, had carefully stepped down and trundled over the dewy summer-worn autumn grasses, then further ahead moved onto the pebbly roadway below. They turned pale moon-struck faces back toward the house, snuggling into identical

long gray woolen coats and waiting for Ragnar.

A large harvest moon still glowed with traces of dusty orange above the southeastern horizon. For some reason I thought of Mars and its two small moons. I had recently been finding its red dot resting on the horizon, but that happened in the frequently sleepless hours of early morning, when I distracted my restless thoughts by hunting for various constellations. Now Jupiter was a dazzling bright jewel high in the inky-blue western vault, much brighter than I could remember.

“We’ll have a nice day tomorrow,” I called to the two women. I had invited them to hike with me into the expansive old forest near the house. “Wear good walking shoes,” I advised.

“Oh, we have brought those,” Dagny called back, still waiting.

“Go in, you have no coat,” Ragnar urged me. His leather jacket hung open. He did not consider the crisp air very cold, nor did I. I tend to favor cold, perhaps too much, finding it invigorating, even curative.

Pausing a moment below the bottom step, Ragnar searched my nocturnal eyes. Standing two steps above his feet, I was, unusually, at eye level. I stood still as he stepped up one step, placed his hands on my shoulders, leaned down and pressed his mouth softly against my half-smiling mouth. Letting go of my shoulders, his long fingers slid through my hair to embrace my head.

“Good night, Wild Vi.”

“Good night, Ragnar, I answered, trembling not from cold. I had stolen a quick glance at the women below. They turned their startled faces away, somewhat late in recovering their circumspect behavior.

Last night I had wanted to have Ragnar’s muscular warm body

cuddling me toward a blissful sleep, not always achievable even with such helpful attention -- at the prospect of sleep my rapid cerebrations always accelerate rather than slowing down. *Ah*, my brain says, *you've given me all this lying-around time. What have you carelessly left undone or, worse, wrongfully set in motion? After the path you have chosen, what can lie ahead? Furthermore, how dare you irresponsibly seek rest amidst the ever exhorting categorical imperative?* The right and the good do sometimes coalesce. On this morning I sprang up full of curiosity, wondering what Sonja and Dagney were thinking about, what assumptions they very likely whispered to each other; or had they straightforwardly asked Ragnar about his relationship with me? There was really not that much to discover; it was by now quite obvious, as Ragnar had easily made it, without going the least out of his way, without doing anything any differently than he normally did, unless it was leaving me alone after that provocative late-night kiss.

“Good morning. Come in, come in. Did you have a good rest?” I inquired light-heartedly when the two women knocked on my door. They were casually dressed for our ten o’clock walk.

“*Ja*...yes, Ragnar’s guest bed is large and comfortable, and the floors are so warm,” Dagney enthused as they entered the foyer.

I led them into the breakfast nook and asked them to sit down while I collected my jacket, cap, and backpack. I thought I had detected a light camaraderie, a special cheerfulness in Dagney’s voice, certainly more familiar than her effort during last night’s politely formal exchange. Sonja’s behavior was more strained.

“Will you have some coffee before we start?”

“Thank you, but we’ve already drunk pots of it,” Dagney said. “Ragnar made us a huge breakfast of fish cakes and eggs and toast with

lingonberry jam.”

“We will grow fat eating big meals in that wonderful *hytte*.”

“Cabin, Mama,” Dagney corrected. “Now we have to go out and exercise...so we can fill ourselves with whatever is coming next that we cannot resist.”

“It was nice of you to let him fix a few things we like in this fine old kitchen,” Sonja said, looking around. “I am sure you cook quite well here too...and when you entertain friends.”

I laughed and said, “When I entertain friends, Ragnar is nearly always in my kitchen, giving me very welcome assistance...or actually taking over. Then, I become his sous chef. I’ve learned a great deal from him. So often traveling and working out in the world, I never did any fancy cooking...or hardly any cooking at all.”

“We have asked Ragnar questions about you, Violea,” Sonia frankly revealed. “He has never before volunteered anything...except that you are the owner of Ender Farm.”

“Well, he would be the one to dissolve any mystery of me,” I said with a laugh. “He’s very good at analyzing people and situations,” I then chose to add, inclining toward a more general emphasis. I immediately realized that I was still not comfortable with saying very much about our intimate relationship. They had guessed a fair amount, but I sensed that Sonia’s straightforward nature would lead to more overt investigation.

The morning was crisp but promised a balmy autumn day of sun and very little wind, more like a gentle spring day. Yet the natural world was once more slipping into brown dormancy, the promising spring buds remaining a dream sealed within the drowsy plant life.

We were walking on the now well-used lane that went along to

Roland's cottage, went there, that is, if one chose the angled left lane at the roadway's eventual branching. I pondered a hike into my secretive meadow, as I had not thought of introducing the women to Roland, unless I decided to hold a larger dinner including our local friends. We might walk almost to his cottage and turn around, or we might aim for the meadow. I quickly decided upon the former -- to summon memories of the past by entering my childhood meadow seemed inappropriate, too much focus on myself. The fall sun spangled down through the big firs and put me in a happy mood, quite eager to make friends of these two interesting women belonging to Ragnar's heritage.

Dagney knelt to straighten the curled denim hems above her tennis shoes. She stood up and pulled at her ridden-up charcoal-gray down jacket, then, with a quick whirling motion, kicked a small fallen maple branch from the path. She turned to me with a similar jaunty movement and said, "When you said that Ragnar was good at analyzing people and situations, I was surprised, because he said the same of you this morning at breakfast. He said that by the time our walk was over, you would know both of us well enough. He means it as a compliment, I believe, regarding your...a...your perception."

"Hmm, it's something one learns well or only slightly, according to how much self-preservation is required...or self-protection. Cast into unfamiliar places, one needs a special kind of sharp perception."

"Are you intending to question us about ourselves?" Sonja asked.

"Heavens no, I would consider that, as you said, *freidig*, much too forward. I'd rather know what you think about external things...life in your beautiful country...or the changes that time makes on every society, according to its customs...of course, the changes fast-moving technology

necessitates...and perhaps even going as far as what writers you like?”

“We have not time to read very much, but we do read...our family does like it. We use cell phones and computers like everywhere else. We are quite modern, overwhelmingly so...as you must know.”

“I’ve never thought otherwise,” I assured Dagny.

“Our country pays attention to its people, good health care, good education. But we are not quite so harmonious as in the past. They say a country with small population needs outside help to progress. So they say. Norway is now twenty-eight percent foreign born.”

“But you will never reach our heterogeneity,” I answered Dagny. “So many disparate parts we can seldom all agree on anything.”

“Unless it be war,” Sonja said. “Sorry, but it looks that way to those outside.”

“And to those at variance inside,” I suggested.

“Has my uncle...has Ragnar taught you some Norsk?” Dagny changed the subject by asking.

“Only in very small doses. I like to learn whatever I can.”

“He has told us to speak English, which we can do well enough,” Sonja remarked. Was she insinuating that I need not become close enough to Ragnar to learn his native tongue? Or was this merely undue suspicion on my part? How I hoped that Sonja had not hastily decided to dislike me. Preconceptions were often difficult to reverse.

Sonja walked along on the other side of Dagny. She wore a navy blue jacket and new unbleached jeans, which made her even more of a somber figure, even with her wispy crown of straw-blond hair. Both women tower above me, or so it seems, although they are not as tall as Ragnar. I refused to perceive them as any kind of threat or hostile force,

but restrained myself from metaphorically leaping at them like a naïve puppy eager for attention. How would this promising day end? So far I had made little headway at scraping the deceptively cordial moss from what lay beneath: Norwegian granite, compressed by a long unbroken lineage of Viking weight.

Even the best laid plans go awry. We soon encountered Roland working along the leaf-strewn lane some distance from his house. He was literally chopping wood, as I had so many times playfully accused him of doing. Actually, he was using both axe and chain saw, working on a formerly listing red alder the wind had thrown across the tunneling tree-lined alley, a very old lane especially lovely to walk along in the fall. He seldom drove over this broad communal footpath, using the roadway at the back of his cottage to reach the highway, but he had announced earlier that he was tired of walking around the fallen tree when he came this way. He was about to start up the chain saw when I called to him.

“Can a poet cut wood?” I teased.

He pulled off his black woolen cap and right leather glove, threaded back his hair between stiffly bent fingers and, while eyeing the two women curiously, said, “A foolishly serious poet -- and every true poet is such -- has no choice but to cut wood. Wood-cutting is the prerequisite, if not the objective, of the authentic poet. You two ladies are Ragnar’s relatives, I presume.”

“We are,” answered Sonja. She had warmed so instantly to the novelty of our woods poet that I was envious of his peculiar charm.

When I had introduced Roland to *Ragnar’s relatives* -- as he had cannily observed -- Sonja said, “Oh, I see...you live on Ender Farm?”

“Only a healthy stroll down the path, if you would care to enter my humble cottage for coffee and store-bought cake. I count Ragnar as a good friend...am happy to greet members of his clan.”

“He speaks differently,” Dagney said to her mother in a giggling voice. Both of their interests had obviously been kindled by Roland’s involuntary appeal. “We thank you, Mr. Ender, but we have eaten such a large breakfast...and already have had far too much coffee -- the caffeine is making me dance down this path like a newborn lamb. But we would love to have a look at your house, if we can. We would not intrude, of course...just to see how it stands in this wonderful forest. We have no such forest on our farm, but some lovely birches and a fine stream filled with trout. Norwegians prefer to have summer vacations in the remote woods...and so often near water.”

Roland tucked the saw and axe against the offending tree, and stood up. “Come ahead then, and have a look at my grand residence, my remote improvement.”

And so the day proceeded, with Sonja and Dagney standing back to admire Roland’s curious yellow cottage, “Something like a fairy-tale place,” Dagney observed, “with that pretty old chimney -- such smooth round stones -- a fairy-tale place, do you not think so, *Mamma?*”

“I might be happy there,” Sonja mused, “if it stood among our birches.”

“That old red truck looks faithful. How does it run?”

Roland swiftly studied Dagney to see if this was sarcasm and, deciding it was pure interest, answered: “With a lot of expensive fuel and vast amounts of oil...frequently induced at surprising intervals.”

“*Ja*, fuel is expensive in Norway too, even though our North Sea

is full of it,” Sonja solemnly agreed.

Before we parted, the two women asked Roland if they would see him again, and perhaps become acquainted with some of his poetry.

“That is, of course, up to your hostess...the seeing-again part, I mean. The poetry you might just as well avoid.”

“Oh, but you must hold your work in higher esteem,” Dagney said.

“I like what I do, but naturally I’m never satisfied,” Roland answered. He looked at me, the one who had been nearly speechless throughout most of this unintended visitation. I knew what he expected, and compliantly let my mouth run without consideration.

“We’ll have a dinner,” I enthused, and you can meet a few more of the regulars around here. Won’t that be fun? A large dinner. We’ll let Ragnar socialize at his leisure. Then Roland can read you a few samples of his poetry,” I added, deciding that he now deserved to reap some of his own mischief.

“How does Roland Ender’s relationship come to you?” Sonja asked, as we walked back to the branching roadway.

“He’s the son of one of my father’s uncles...a Viet Nam veteran whom my mother invited to live here in peace and write his poetry.”

“How good of her and how interesting. We would like to read, or perhaps hear, some of his poetry.” -- this last *we* spoken as if Sonja always knew what it was that Dagney liked, and perhaps she did.

So it was the meadow after all, a good long walk to illuminate our similarities and differences, and not least to wisely use this beautiful day. Rain was predicted for the next afternoon.

KEEPING

That evening I wrote in my diary, as I had lately done with more enthusiasm. I was alone again. Ragnar had taken his sister and niece to see the newly appointed county library. He said they would have dinner in town, and that his cousin, the semi-retired dentist from Eugene, was to join them -- Dr. Einar Almestad, conveniently en route to Portland on a business trip. I was happy to remain at home, but there would have been no room for me in Ragnar's big truck anyway. I imagined Britta in throes of ecstasy at meeting members of Ragnar's immediate family, presumably speaking Norwegian with them. Would she join the others at Booker's? I further imagined them all chattering away in the easy camaraderie of their native tongue. I had never met Einar, with whom Ragnar fished on occasion, but had learned that he had a comfortable fishing cabin located on the upper Deschutes River. Their spare familial relationship mainly hung together for the convenience of biannual steelhead fishing, and the related fishing stories that accumulated during their efforts. "Mutual surveillance while casting at dream fish prevents us from exaggeration," Ragnar had told me.

I wrote in my diary: *The meadow served a different purpose from the usual. Nature's open clearing possibly served to expose somewhat our hidden attitudes. My beautiful oak-strewn hideaway immediately reminded Sonja and Dagny of Norway's grand remnant oaks. A short preoccupation with a few childhood memories swiftly brought us around to the more shadowy present. My meadow did subsequently convey something of the magical effect it always seems to precipitate.*

"Look, *eik*, those beautiful things!" Sonja had excitedly praised

the ancient oaks. “To have them here on your farm is to have living treasure. On the farm, we planted a few in recent years. Once all of southern Norway was covered with *eikeskog*, but those fine oaks were all cut down in the seventeenth century. Now a few grow only as far north as Tingvoll on the west coast of Norway -- that is below Trondheim. In Nordmøre County grows the third largest oak in Norway. This oak is called The Mollestad, ten and a half meters in circumference with six big limbs that still put out buds in May, even though it has a hollow center. The Mollestad is over a thousand years old and has many legends in its history, as you might imagine.”

“Ah, you must love the oak as I do,” I said, happy for this shared interest. “The history of my oaks remains their secret, but I treat them to a lively imagination, filled with Native Americans and settlers and myriad wild beasts. Perhaps I will visit The Mollestad someday.”

“*Ja*, you must. The blond grass here reminds me of it, as it too stands in a farm field with green hills in the distance,” Sonja said.

“But this tall grass is wild...uncut,” Dagney observed.

“Yes, this is a special place where the land does as it pleases. I hope it will always be so. The noble trees, the boggy grass meadow, the surrounding forest all must do whatever they want.”

“What a good way of seeing it,” Sonja said, shading her eyes from the warming sun to stare into my eyes. “And the *mistletein* above in the trees...it likes the oak. How do you say it?”

“Mistletoe. My grandmother liked to share the mistletoe with others,” I said, laughingly delving into memory as I related the story of Gran and her little side-kick in the meadow. When I reached the part

where Ragnar tossed our burlap sacks filled with mistletoe atop the old rectangular hay bales, then helped us aboard the sled for the tractor ride home, Dagney exclaimed, "I did not think how far back you knew Uncle Ragnar...such a long time."

"Yes...but I left home when I was fifteen, crossing America to go to school," I said in half-truth, then asked my visitors if they were not getting thirsty or hungry.

I took off my backpack and set it atop one of the weathered gray tree stumps, then set out three small bottles of water and three narrow little granola bars. "A slight repast" I said, "nothing that will ruin your dinners, just enough for the strength to get you back."

We drank, and chewed our bars for a moment in silence, then Sonja shaded her eyes and looked up at the nearest oak, taking care not to look at me. "Does Ragnar come here?"

"I don't know. I've never seen him in this place...my special place. But I've no doubt he knows every inch of Ender Farm."

"He does care so much for this farm...a long time caring. I can see how it is," Sonja said. "With Ragnar, you have to guess things. I have never seen him on your farm...so I have guessed things wrong."

"I cannot believe he has said so little," I offered.

"About you, nothing...well almost nothing," Dagney said.

"Not so flattering, I'm afraid." I regretted my flushed face.

"It is just his way," Dagney defended. "He is private or...like that...as you know...never wants to talk about himself."

"He does not much think of it," Sonja added, fairly certain of her assessment. "His mind is on other things.

"So many times over the years we ask friends to dinner when he

visits us, neighbors, women who are curious about him. They see his photographs and when they meet him they are more curious. They think he is handsome,” Sonja said, her eyes twinkling so pale a brown I was certain the irises must have some blue in them. “But the women go away knowing nothing more than when they come...except that they might remember...maybe a few interesting special words from him...ideas that have little to do with Ragnar...just various opinions.”

“But opinions say a great deal about the person offering them.”

“Violea, you are right, of course, but you know what I mean. I am sure by now you know much of him by listening to his opinions. We can see that you know him very well also...because...because--”

“We love each other.”

“This is so surprising to us,” Dagney said. She jumped up, with a cringe at stiff muscles, then brushed nervously at her jeans. “We came here not knowing any of this. It was always Einar who told us over the years that Ragnar had his...companions. We heard of the librarian in your village...because Einar stopped in there to see Ragnar’s book collection. Einar thought Britta was a nice...well, such a nice encounter for Ragnar. We assumed that this was the relationship preventing Ragnar from an interest in our women friends; that is, in more recent times. His friend, Britta, must have expected him to... Then...I suppose it must have been just last fall when you...”

“Came home,” I said, now feeling very much the unfortunate interloper, and feeling so, alas, right in the middle of one of my favorite places. My probity had obviously been sullied the moment I presumably crashed the sacrosanct gate of previous commitment.

“You are so young,” Dagney blurted out.

“I doubt very much younger than you.” I gave a dismissive laugh.

“I have always thought of Uncle Ragnar as...set in his ways.”

“That’s really a way of saying you thought him too old to fall in love with anyone, Dagny.”

“Not anyone...but--”

“But *me*. How can you look at him, talk to him, *be* with him, and hold onto such inaccurate stereotypical ideas?” The two women looked extremely uncomfortable, and I said in a placating voice, “Perhaps we should go no further with this. It serves no purpose. Ragnar knows so much of my childhood. I’d love to hear of his. Of course, only things you would feel comfortable telling me in his presence.”

“Let us wait then, until later,” Sonja suggested. Again she looked around her and said, “*Ja*, this is indeed a lovely place. It must be full of wonderful memories for you...the forest all around and so...so private and untouched...just a few old trees cut down.”

“Yes, unfortunately, but perhaps they were dying or needed thinning,” I said, with little assurance that it was not merely a long ago desire for oak wood. I would have liked to hear some tales of Ragnar’s childhood exploits, but it was not going to happen in this most unsettled atmosphere. At least we were still able to speak amicably.

“We are going into the village tonight and should probably get back to the cabin in time to bathe and dress,” Dagny said politely.

“Yes, I hope you will enjoy our little town of Hayfield. You’ll likely discover Ragnar’s popularity. He assumes the unsolicited role of sought-after advisor...always with useful consideration.”

“They are drinking coffee and reading from my library, books

about America,” Ragnar answered when I inquired as to the whereabouts of his relatives. “I fed them a big breakfast and they feel lazy.”

“Plenty of good reading there...nice for them. I hope they don’t mind your absence this morning.”

“*Nei*, they know I have things to do.” Ragnar was talking to me while he dug the last of the small red potatoes from the garden. They were supposed to be part of my large rather impromptu dinner. As I was gathering potatoes tossed from Ragnar’s pitchfork, and dropping them into a bucket, I said, “Yes, one of your duties: digging potatoes for the interloper. How was your Hayfield evening?”

“Pleasant...banal but enjoyable,” Ragnar answered, ignoring my dark humor. “Einar and my sister know each other well enough to be entertaining, at times even ironic. Einar wants to meet you. I think Sonja had a hasty talk with him and got him interested.”

“That must have been out of Britta’s earshot.”

Ragnar stood up, forcefully shot the pitchfork into the ground with one deep thrust, and studied me a second or two in heavy silence. I merely smiled and brushed the dirt from my hands.

“Britta did join us for dinner.”

“And why not?...all of you Norwegians speaking discursively to each other in comfortable camaraderie...a welcome change.”

“*Ja*, you would have been bored.”

“Even if I couldn’t understand you, I’d never be bored if you were talking. I’d love, just once, to hear you speaking in your native tongue with all the stops pulled.”

“You did not want to come. I said the least of anyone there.”

“I’m sorry to hear it...since you know the most worth saying.”

“You do expect me to help with dinner?”

“No, thank you. You can entertain my guests...*my* invitation to *my* dinner this time. It would not look right to Sonja and Dagney to have you gone that long...prancing around my kitchen. I’ll manage. I’ve invited Roland over to keep me company while I cook.”

“*Roland* in the kitchen? He is not much of a cook.”

“Neither am I, but that’s a little vain of you, darling. I don’t expect Roland to do anything but make me laugh...and, at least for a while, represent a remnant of my family...moral support.”

“Was it that bad...your hike yesterday?”

“Not at all. Sonja and Dagney were pleasant company, polite, and very enjoyable conversationalists.”

Ragnar left the pitchfork standing firm and pulled off his gloves. He stepped toward me and put his cold hand beneath my chin, tilting my head up. “You must think I cannot yet read you well. I can read you very well. You are unhappy. In fact you are hurting.”

“Poor little ego,” I said with a laugh. “I can’t blame them.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Your relatives made it clear, in certain ways, that they think we’re a sort of *mésalliance*.”

Ragnar laughed. “How can we be, we are not married?”

“And that was the wrong answer,” I said, picking up the bucket of potatoes and walking away.

“Wait a minute!” Ragnar growled. “Give me the bucket.”

I slammed it down on the rough ground and kept on walking. *God, Viola, I mumbled to myself, now what are you doing?*

Ragnar caught up with me, set down the bucket, folded his arms and stood in front of me blocking my path.

“*Herregud*, you are difficult. Do you think I care what shallow conclusions they draw? They will get over whatever they think, but will *you* get over this *dumbet*...this foolishness?”

“I’m over it. I’m *over* it,” I insisted.

“They have said only nice things about you, that is all I have heard. Of course they think you are too young for me...they do not have to say a word...it is obvious. Have you considered that maybe they feel sorry for you...because I will die and leave you--”

“Oh, shut up! Please, please, stop,” I begged, burying my face in his old working jacket -- it always smells strongly of machine oil.

“And *you* stop that,” he demanded, clutching my hair tight in his fist. “I cannot stand to see you cry. You have suffered enough. I am sorry I brought up the obvious. I said at the beginning we could deal with it. I have only wanted to make you well and happy. Is this not ridiculous? You know Sonja and Dagney have nothing to do with us. You know that...so what is it? Are you afraid again?”

I stood stock still and thought a moment. While his fiercely demanding eyes bore searchingly down on me, I had come to a sudden realization. Nevertheless I persisted in asking, “What do you mean?”

“I think you know, you know what I mean. *Herregud*, your father made you feel worthless -- enforced at such a young age, that miserable affliction never goes away; it colors everything. I once teased you, said you reminded me of your father -- I only meant in temperament, and anyway I did not know you as I know you now. You are always afraid that you are too much like him, but you are not in so many ways. *Ja*, you

have something of his fiery temperament, but he never had your extreme sensitivity. You, my girl, are self-sacrificing, and you care very much for others...think how you have spent so many years of your life.”

“Oh, my darling, I’m the one who makes you talk, aren’t I? You will talk and talk to convince me of something. Everything you say about me is fairly accurate...and how well I know what a terrible waste of time it is to let it get hold of me...when there are so many worse things in life. If only I could control it better.”

“There is always someone worse off, *millions*...as you know better than any of us, Wild Vi. But greater awareness makes a psychologically ingrained attitude no less easy to bear. You are the daughter of Martha, too...very much so, but your own person. You have the most loving disposition I have ever known. It is beyond me how you can offer such devotion to a maverick like me...but I am grateful. You will never get over the way you were so carelessly devalued, but please let me keep reminding you how valuable you are.”

We walked quietly on toward the house

With Mama’s name invoked, I was looking far away across the luminous autumn fields and hills -- they too are so ephemeral, as is even the basalt of the distant mountains. I thought of my own insignificance, then of how I had finally come to love thinking of my mother.

At that moment, her presence and her voice were as near as the subtly cooing doves hidden in the holly trees we were passing.

There Mama sits in the garden, at an old table beneath the apple tree nearest the house. She is wearing a blue-flowered apron and shelling peas. I run up and jump into her lap. “Do you know the color of your eyes?” Mama asks me. “No, Mama,” I say, puzzled, for I have never

thought of my eyes at all. “They’re often a very special color, my darling, like the pretty brooch Gran wears for grange.” “Oh, I know that color, it’s purple,” I answer with smug satisfaction. “Yes, but an especially lovely shade. Your eyes become just like a violet quartz called amethyst.” When I heard this interesting news, Gran’s fancy old brooch became a magic charm. Yes, she always wore it on her navy blue crepe dress, for the grange suppers she so enjoyed; she would kiss me good-bye, holding me close to her violet-perfumed breast, where the oblong amethyst, set in curls of silver, sparkled and winked at me. How it makes Mama laugh when I first try to say the word she has given my eyes. She pronounces it once again in her soft airy voice, *am'-eh-thist*, then hugs and kisses me, lifting me from her lap, rising to swing my squealing body high into the fresh spring air.

“I’ve just remembered that I want to talk to you about Ender Farm...Mama’s farm much more than my unfortunate father’s,” I found it imperative to add. “I’ve been thinking about how things should go and I...but now is the wrong time, of course. I suppose I only brought it up because I can’t bear to have you think of my childhood as so terribly ruinous that the humiliation goes on and on. I do seriously try to work out so many important issues in the present and...but, no, never mind, what I wanted to say can wait. This isn’t the time.”

“Incredible, how you manage to assign yourself the task of some new...new what?...new possibility?...right in the middle of everything else going on around here...things affecting you, that is -- nearly everything does. But you cannot say what you have just said and then say no more. Shall I worry?”

“No, you cannot worry for an instant. In regard to what I’ve just

said, there's nothing to worry about...nothing to concern yourself with at this moment either...except perhaps the state of my haphazard dinner. It's already well behind schedule.”

Ragnar leaned toward me in his worn old gray work jacket, a solicitous suggestion flashing in eyes tinted the color of the heavy clouds gathering above us. “Well, you could replace Roland with me in your kitchen.” The rising wind ushering in those fast-scudding clouds was determined to dishevel dense waves of his scrupulously clean-cut hair. My hand spontaneously reached up, threading into place a few loosened silver wisps. Then, briefly considering an unseen spectator, I needlessly found myself nearly whispering: “No kitchen duty...maybe you could inconvenience yourself enough to kiss me...all I want from you today.”

“Inconvenience myself? *Ja?* Wild Vi, you cannot shame me into something already intended.” He thereafter offered the playful broad grin reserved for private pleasures, then set down the bucket and lifted me up to administer the only therapy that works.

Roland was leaning dutifully but unhelpfully on the kitchen counter, while I battered and fried a huge pile of chicken pieces dredged in seasoned flour. As I dropped more pieces into the pan, a sizzling release of blue smoke was sucked up into the stove fan. I briefly moved near the open window above the sink in order to inhale a deep lungful of wonderfully fresh air. “Buttermilk chicken,” I explained. “I hope it tastes like something desirable.”

“What could possibly go wrong? Unless you burn it.”

“In thoughtless childhood one can never properly appreciate what it takes to produce the gustatory joys of eating...that is, food like

this cooked to perfection by a loving mother...for the ignorant and the helpless. Could I have learned very much watching Mama? I can easily remember the great taste of her fried chicken, unforgettable...but not how she did it. Maybe some of her effort went in unconsciously: I'm doing this with a bit of familiarity...in a sort of automatic manner."

Roland settled in a Windsor chair, leaned on the edge of the table, which was loaded with various ingredients, and said, "Childhood is just the front end of the journey to childish old age, fairest maid. One hopes to live long enough to take advantage of that ill-gotten surplus of painfully accumulated experience in between -- if we're lucky it reappears as wisdom."

"How philosophical you are. Hand me that large blue bowl lined with paper towels, please. This batch is done."

Looking around and grabbing an ancient heat-cracked bowl, Roland asked, "How on earth did you get Ragnar out of the kitchen?"

"I appointed him greeter and fire-tender...bartender...also, most importantly: uniquely qualified arbiter of conversation."

"If you can get him to more than briefly open his golden mouth."

"I've given him no choice. Yes, he expounds beautifully when he wants to...very clever repartee, and often useful."

"Why did he allow *me* in here?"

"I told him you could make me laugh."

"Well, *that* makes *me* laugh...then I'm falling behind in my job description. I am not a comic, however...someone who lives to make others laugh."

"But your humorous sarcasm is a relentless social contrivance, Roland...so that's a bit deceptive. You really are wonderful at making

others laugh. You've designed an elegant aura of humor in which to disappear...a titillating smokescreen of self-preservation."

"If so, refrain from expository analysis...flaying at my smoke like that. You may topple from your queenly pedestal, chatelaine."

"Can't *topple*, I was never there. But God, you *are* funny!" I let out a helplessly shrill giggle. "Could you possibly bring yourself to mash these hot russets?"

"Now I'm a masher...all right, hand me the thingamajig."

"I should say that I had nothing to do with this meal," Roland announced, just as my guests were digging in. "Unless, of course, you find it extraordinarily palatable. Then I may take some credit...for the felicitous atmosphere in which it was concocted, at least."

"I think fried chicken, especially this fried chicken, is just the most wonderful food," Alfreda praised. "Fried chicken and mashed potatoes with this satiny, fresh-sage chicken gravy...and the green beans with corn! Oh, Viola honey, it's just about my favorite food."

"Mine, too," Bill agreed. "Are there any legs left?"

Ragnar stood up with the platter of chicken and walked over to Bill's place at the table. He lifted two legs from the platter with the silver serving tongs and laid them neatly on Bill's plate.

"Well, now I've got two more legs to stand on," Bill remarked, laughing heartily and turning to me. "You sure nailed it, Viola."

"We are learning so many new idioms at this interesting table," Sonja commented.

"I have been wondering something," Ragnar said, now reseated at the far end of the table. Everyone stopped eating, although his evenly

modulated voice was obviously directed at me.

“What?” I asked.

“What happened to the potatoes I dug?”

“I decided the russets would be better for mashing...I suppose a sort of reactionary decision.”

“*Ja*, you are right about that.” He smiled, with no intention of clarifying his terse appraisal, then deftly sliced into a chicken breast.

Of course he knows, I thought. He knows why I asked him to dig potatoes with me. I had wanted to be alone with him to say a spare amount about his sister and niece; to let him know, without showing great personal disturbance, what he had already appeared to know quite well, that they were not pleased to find the owner of Ender farm his younger, and possibly unstable, paramour...or however they viewed me; anyway, a younger woman too close to their kin, which might lead to problems. I did not even want to contemplate the *problems*, as they might now be fabricating them. No telling what Britta told them. Why could I not coolly leave it alone, as Ragnar had suggested? He had shown that he knew precisely why I was unduly sensitive about this. Beyond wanting to joyfully embrace his family, and be joyfully embraced by them in return, my superior and inferior ego halves were selfishly engaged in an old conflict. I ought to be thinking only of potatoes, I told myself; the rest was of little consequence, as my imperturbable lover had just reinforced with soundly messaged eyes.

“Your extended stay in the kitchen was a new experience for you,” Mary teasingly suggested to Roland. We were then seated in the living room, drinking our tea and coffee, along with my humble dessert.

Roland finished his slice of streusel-topped fruit cocktail cake, then addressed Mary as if he had been cued to center stage: “Yes, my brief appearance in that indispensable part of *my* cottage is routinely performed out of life-sustaining necessity...on kitchen duty any would-be accompanist, or even a curious onlooker, is regularly spared the shock of my cave-man-style food preparation.”

A huge laugh clattered over the room. Giggling Dagney again hinted at her wish to hear some of Roland’s poetry: “How *utmerket* your poetry must be.”

“Excellent,” Ragnar explained.

“Better to go on imagining than confront the reality,” Roland advised, but in a tenuously polite voice. He glanced quickly at me, with a helpless shrug at having once again confirmed my case.

“Then I will be so daring as to read aloud one of your poems, Roland,” Dagney went on, surprising us all. She opened her purse and withdrew one of Roland’s chapbooks. “We found this on Ragnar’s book shelf. It is so fitting. Today Mama and I were sitting at the window and we saw the most beautiful little bird, a hummingbird -- Norway has none. Then I discovered this poem...and have been studying it.”

Roland jerked up straight in his wing chair and stared intently at Dagney. He knew precisely the poem she was going to read. I was also familiar with it. Before Dagney found the page, Roland began:

TRUMPET VINE TANGENT

Sweet temptation in peril’s sky

less gainful, yet,

as seen from a Hummingbird’s eye,

one might forget.

KEEPING

Retrospection's a flightless thing,
a cage with bars,
yet sun on iridescent wing
red shifts blue stars.

Tiny heart's thousand-beat minute,
though feather-light,
flies with Hermes' power in it
when rivals fight.

Working with beats in measured rhyme,
nothing's done quick.
Flora's trope vibrates on bird time,
just in the nick.

Together we plunge into spring,
that fragrant maze,
pinioned poet and Rufous wing
with nectar craze.

A silence followed as everyone considered the poem. "We ought to think on that," Alfreda suggested. "The way nature makes us feel."

"Beauty at work...imaginatively positive," Mary adjudged.

"I used the dictionary to study the English words carefully," Dagney said. "It is a sudden glimpse that grows and grows into a larger, hmm...I think not an effect but...a moving force...or...an animated picture

of...getting beyond misfortune...you can see, *feel*, life's energy overcome past sorrow in the life-force of nature...the triumph of small things made large. So we learn about you." Dagney had directed a somewhat timid look at Roland and fallen silent.

"Unavoidable in that context," Roland apologized.

I stood up and stepped nearer the fire, folding my arms in indecision as to whether or not I should speak. Then I did:

"If you studied the poem's first stanza, you would see that each line relies on the next line until the entire stanza is end-stopped. The dependent lines, called enjambment, drawing the reader on until the threatening sky is subdued by the hummingbird's telescopic eye. The diversion and speed of the ravenous little hummingbird turns the methodical poet from dark thoughts swiftly back to creative energy. It's an artful capture of hurt and renewal, loaded with delicate innuendo and utmost clarity...as well as a skilled convergence of the specific and the universal."

I lowered my embarrassed gaze to my protectively folded arms, having tried not to even glance at Ragnar, or at his very likely perplexed relatives. *And now you've explained again, you over-reaching greedy pedant...too eager to live in explications de text*, I scolded myself.

Then, perhaps partly to divert Dagney's interest in the personal, Roland offered me a near paean of gratitude, incisively bittersweet.

*"She walks in beauty, like the night
Of cloudless climes and starry skies..."*

"There's enjambment. Forgive my impertinence, but Lord Byron may have had in his thoughts a vision like this chatelaine standing before you, alone in the darkness of her sorrow, yet thinking with a quick mind

clear and bright as the stars on a cloudless night. I can always count on her to tumble my poetry into an intelligent analysis.”

Now the focus was on me again. I blushed deeply with a brief smile, shaking my head and unwilling to say anything, then settled my disconcerted self back on the hassock beside the hearth, from which I probably should never have risen. When I took my eyes away from the fire, I saw that Sonja’s face was agitated, as if she were strongly driven to say something to me.

“You have then dark sorrow...of loss?” Sonja carefully asked.

“Ah, Lord Byron’s mystery woman,” I managed, with a soft utterance of laughter, a polite shrug of diversion. “Who will ever verify that particular subject of Byron’s lyrical beauty?” I ended evasively.

What else could I answer concerning myself, and to what useless purpose? A rush of thoughts assailed me, of Mama, Gran, my mutilated father, my young loss of innocence with Hugh, the anxious decades of rejection by my beautiful son. I thought of my long years looking at protracted or sudden premature death, walking through it and working alongside it, the utter ruination of entire cultures. I had immediately tried with all my might not to allow the sharp image of Robert, his noble head bloodied and silenced, so briefly my late-won future lying dead at my feet, but it was too late to stop it. There he lay. Perversely, it seemed I might have to kill him once again. Sorrow of loss? *Well, we all have sorrows*, I might have thrown off, but my mouth was filled with bile. My generous relative could not have foreseen the result of his well-meaning appreciation. Caught off guard and softened by Roland’s elegant praise, I had failed to exercise my rigorously self-taught avoidance. The question had dug into a wound I thought sufficiently scabbed. If I could recoup a

single loss, I would cry for my mother. Anger, the only other recourse I have learned, was here thoroughly unacceptable. My face must have registered the confusion that had taken hold of me. I had begun to tremble, imperceptibly perhaps. I should never have drunk the wine.

Ragnar, so long silent, came to my side and, with his arm around my shoulders, announced, “I think you should hear this voice singing. We will go find my guitar. You always complain to me, Sonja, that you have never heard me play. Now is a good time. Everyone can get more acquainted here while we are gone. Come with me, Wild Vi, we can talk about what you will sing while we walk over to my place.”

Oh yes, oh yes, I silently begged, get me out of here, get me out of this hazardous place in my mind before I stumble and fall.

As we walked along I could not speak, hardening myself, staring dazedly at the pebbles beneath my feet. Ragnar in time intervened.

“I enjoy making you sing because I like to hear your voice.”

Ignoring his comment, I asked, “How did that happen to me?”

“Poor Sonja, she has very little time here and wants to get at the heart of things...of *you*. Forgive her. She never means to be so forward, only concise. We are like that in my family. When I take you to Norway you will see. Forgive us all beforehand. What will you sing? One of my ballads? You are very good with those now.”

“I don’t know,” I said. I was having difficulty switching to the distraction he was attempting. We both knew that was what it was. If he would just kiss me, I thought, the only really worthwhile remedy I could imagine. Yet, I had not made myself very attractive tonight, first perhaps too glibly holding forth on Roland’s poem, to a roomful of polite but semi-interested guests, then ignoring Sonja’s query.

“Because of my hypersensitivity, you’ve resorted to your guitar. I know you don’t want to play right now.”

“*Nei*, I always like to play...especially when you sing.”

He stopped walking and stepped before me, his head bent down and mine upturned.

“Wild Vi, I did not tell Sonja things. I should take the blame for what happened. You are so privately mine I have trouble saying anything behind your back.”

“Then how can I fault your silence?”

He gathered me up, his darkened eyes first looking fiercely into mine, then flashing a velvet warmth I could just make out in the falling away beams of the yard lights. At last I was kissed, or rather, we kissed each other in recovering satisfaction.

The kiss of love, so often a sexual antecedent, is nevertheless a *thing in itself*, more fascinating, more mysterious, more sustaining, and more memorably aware of its object than the self-gratifying sexual act, even as performed with love. The fiery sexual act of love is *in the moment* and, although steadily craved, is as mentally irretrievable as the searing pain of a toothache; its irretrievability is partly why it is so often repeated; but the unselfish kiss of love is a unity more spiritual than physical, and to some degree deftly retrievable, a keeping panacea, lingering on in the mind until it might be reinforced.

“How did you bear my urge to pontificate?” I was emboldened to whisper as we drew apart.

He put me down and smoothed back the hair falling over my eyes.

“Always edifying...but too short. I could listen for hours.”

“Let’s sing a ballad together for them,” I suggested.

And so we did. It was a lovely Norwegian ballad, eliciting great surprise and pleasure, especially from Peter, but even from Ragnar’s two other relatives, not as yet won over.

Sonja came into the kitchen, where Alfreda was handing me the soiled dishes strewn over the breakfast nook table.

“May I help?”

“No, no, please, you should visit with Ragnar while you can,” I exhorted, smiling, taking hold of Sonja’s reflexively stiffening arm.

Alfreda offered me a rather strongly messaged glance, then my alert friend quickly explained, “I’m just off to powder my nose.” She smiled encouragement at Sonja and left the room. Given felicitous license, Sonja immediately got to the point.

“This has been an interesting visit, Viola. I have never seen my brother act as he does with you, not ever, not with any woman. Of course, he has been away so much; there were surely relationships over the years...of them I know nothing -- I know only of Britta Hansen, because of what Einar told us. You know how quiet Ragnar is about such things and...perhaps how reserved we all are. An Italian friend I made in Amalfi told me I am not...what was that word, *dimostrativa* I believe. Compared to an Italian, I am sure I do seem so...*ja*, for certain I hold back. Anyway, I think it is a happening very late-coming to Ragnar, something entirely new: your relationship. Am I too *freidig* now...too forward? I suppose so. I ask direct questions but I am also...quiet. It is a matter of what one considers too private to say outside the family. You might think that I see my brother so infrequently his well-being does not

concern me so much, but I do worry.”

I had turned away from the sink and folded my arms, leaning against the counter to listen. For a moment I studied Sonja, tall and vaguely threatening in her black sweater and slacks. She is a once truly blond Viking descendent, but her lined farm-woman’s face has nothing of Ragnar in it. Her lips are narrower, her weathered yet still pale face more flat than fully shaped, her short, slightly flipped nose dividing impishly squinting eyes, altogether suggesting a no-nonsense malapert nature -- an impertinence that would not work for me; the eyes now shone a provoked dusty brown, the black pupils enlarged by the heated throb of her professed concern.

Everything seemed so obvious to me I wondered why I should have to explain how deep my feelings for Ragnar go. But I understood that Sonja was trying to be courteous along with her perturbation, her brother obviously presumed to have been misled by me -- as if anyone could mislead Ragnar.

“It’s, as you say, late-coming for both of us...a quite surprising happening neither of us expected...but so incredibly fortunate.”

Sonja grasped one of the chairs at the table, as if for support, and spoke very directly, “But, you see, is it fortunate? Can it be so fortunate for Ragnar...at his age? You are still quite young...I mean to be with a man his age. Of course he appeals to you now, he is still a handsome man, but what will happen when he is older? How will you be then? How will you feel toward him? If you marry--”

“We have no intention of marrying, Sonja. Ragnar is happy as he is...living as he does. I would never try to change him, never could. I only strive for his comfort, his pleasure. To have a man of his mind, of

his independence, offer me his love, has been absolutely stunning to me...but so right for us...something neither of us might have had for the rest of our lives. We live each day, I feel certain, grateful to each other for what we've found. We live each day as it comes. No one ever knows the future." I struggled to alter Sonja's rigid face. "Please don't imagine I exploit Ragnar for any selfish or temporary...casual pleasure. It couldn't be done anyway. Can't you see that he and I go very well together in so many ways? I came home utterly alone, and he's given me so much...his wonderful friends. I've really known him such a long time...there's so much of our past between us. You have nothing to fear from me; I'd never wish to hurt anyone. Sonja, can't you see the good of it...and be happy for him?"

"*Ja*, I can see that he loves you. And why would he not? You are very intelligent...still very attractive. You make it easy for him to..." She threw back her head and exclaimed "Ah!" as if chasing away a thought too violent to express, then her face softened. "Violen, we did enjoy your entertainment. Ragnar plays and sings so well...and, of course, your fine voice. I should be wishing you well but..." She stared down at the floor with knitted brow, then out the window at the dusky rose-tinted forest, and finally at me. "I know I should be glad for you both but I--"

"Then stop right there and let me thank you for that tendency, Sonja. You're part of a life I love. I want to be friends with you and Dagny and...all of your family...your intelligent, very capable grandson, Peter, whom I adore. I need a family too, you see." I could feel the dampness collecting in my eyes, and saw an alarmed surprise spreading over Sonja's face. She stepped away from the chair and focused on me. I decided to take a chance on what I believed to be her innate good will.

She was, after all, only being an anxious and caring sister.

“May I be forward enough to give you a hug? It’s just the way we Americans are, we often like to hug.”

“*Ja?*” Sonja inquired slowly. “Well, I am old enough to enjoy a good hug between friends...so much the better if they are also found in my family...*ja*, why not?” She slowly extended her long arms to me.

“You are small as a child,” she said with me firmly in her grasp, “but quite a lot of woman,” she added.

She was a bit more considerate thereafter, but also, as I was to learn from Dagny’s slip of the tongue, completely undeterred from her conclusive opinion that I was ultimately not good for Ragnar.

The next day Ragnar’s grandniece, the granddaughter of his other sister, turned up to cheerily visit with her relatives. She is now back at the University of Oregon for the fall term, her final year before going East to continue her music studies. I was invited to Ragnar’s place to finally meet her, a beautiful and bright young woman, tall, blond and very Nordic in appearance, also very adoring of her great uncle.

We were sitting in the living room, drinking coffee and eating delicious slices of Ragnar’s lemon pound cake. The room had grown quiet, and I determined by their glances at one another that the women would have loved to chatter away in their native tongue, if only I had not been present. The grandniece, Karin, had obviously learned some things about my relationship with her great uncle and, I assumed, held much the same opinion as her relatives. When Ragnar got up to throw an alder log on the dwindling fire, I stood up too.

I had a very legitimate excuse for leaving, as I had promised to go with Alfreda to Portland. She had a doctor’s appointment, but had also

intended to do some shopping for items not found locally or in Eugene. When I agreed to go with her I had not known of Karin's arrival, and accordingly explained this and politely excused myself. On my way out the door I could hear the women excitedly conversing in Norwegian. Peter had declared that he too was about to disappear. "I leave the women to their talking," he said with a grin as he passed us on his way out to do some chores, which he had generously assigned himself.

Ragnar came out to the steps with me. Fortunately, he knew about my intended trip to Portland with Alfreda, and so could not fault me for departing, but he did wonder if I might not have been able to change my plans, under the circumstances.

"Under the circumstances, I'm happy not to," I said, and then regretted it. "I'm sorry...no, I only meant that Karin will be so much happier visiting her relatives without me there...making everyone a bit uncomfortable...they're all so polite, but I understand. Anyway, you know how it is when someone wants company visiting a doctor. Even Alfreda, buoyed by that breezy nature of hers, is likely to be just a little anxious...glad for my company." The latter was quite pointed enough to sound sarcastic, so I added, "I'm such a baby at doctor's appointments that I always consider it really brave when I go alone," by this flimsiness, hoping for a diversion from the actual subject.

Ragnar stood towering above me, his hands in the pockets of his corduroy slacks, the plaid squares of his royal blue flannel shirt wavering before my eyes. I then reined in my emotions effectively enough to raise my head with a nearly blithe expression of unconcern, this delivered into darkened gray eyes reflecting an unconvinced faint bluish-green.

"If available, I will go with you whenever you want. But here,

now, today, I think you are taking all of this much too seriously. They will be gone soon. Everything will go on as it was. Whatever their opinions, they do not matter to me. I do know they like you.”

“Yes, which makes it unpleasant for them,” I muttered, looking away. I’d better go before my disappointment, my hurt, creeps back into view, I thought. Ragnar was apparently quite realistic and unaffected by the way things had turned out, true to his nature. His concern was for me. I wished for him to simply enjoy his relatives. I had genially said good-bye to them, although they were not leaving until the following day. I was trying to make it as easy as possible for them to go away with only favorable memories of their visit, and with the possibility of discounting me as any sort of threat. The most I could hope for, but I had wished for so much more.

I made a point of not mentioning Ragnar’s relatives on the drive to Portland, riding along smoothly in Alfreda’s luxuriously comfortable Lincoln. We talked about the fall scenery, the harvest, the swiftly flown summer days. She wanted to know if I had any recent news of Marcus and Sylvia. I told her the little I knew, that Marcus was at a three-day conference in Copenhagen and that Sylvia was apparently dissolving an old friendship that had limped along for years. “She doesn’t want to hurt the man, just remain friends...I’m afraid that seldom goes well.”

“Will Marcus see her on his way home?” Alfreda asked as she zoomed around a long semi and let the car ease back into cruise control. Because of the arthritis stiffening her accelerator foot, she favored letting her car take over on long stretches of straight highway.

“He may stop over in London, but he won’t tolerate another fella

hanging around. You know how that goes.”

“Can’t imagine why she’d want anyone else hanging around...with Marcus as a prospect. Gosh, I sure wouldn’t. Oh, that beautiful boy of yours. He could have anyone.”

“No doubt...and I’m afraid he’s just as impatient -- and often as incredibly intense -- as his father. They’re alike in so many ways.”

“Where is Hugh, Viola? You never mention. Still in China?”

“Yes.” I found I had nothing more to say about Hugh; but was also reminded of my worry, unrest, as if I were not properly looking after him. But what action did I imagine as suitably useful?

“We ought to get to Saturday market a few more times, Viola; it will soon be over, but there’s still lots of good stuff. How about next Saturday?”

“Great. I’ll drive you,” I said.

Alfreda’s appointment was with an arthritis specialist. I sat hastily perusing magazines in a waiting room full of somber people with canes, walkers, crutches, and swollen-jointed bodies in various stages of disrepair. Depressing, I thought, why can’t they cure this damn thing? I could not seem to find the right magazine, if there was one: the political news was disheartening, in fact outrageous; I cared nothing for movie stars, celebrities, sports, home beautification; fad diets; fashion; or living in retirement. At last, cheerfully smiling Alfreda emerged, lighting up the room with her rusty frizz of hair and cherry red pants suit -- precisely what that dreary room had needed.

We had a pleasant time downtown, exploring the shops that had survived the economic downturn, and lamenting those that had not, but lingering in Macy’s in the landmark Meier & Frank building, now also a

hotel. We were looking for reasonably attractive hosiery prescribed for her arthritic legs. Alfreda laughed in amazement at the sultry and near invisible varieties of designer panties and thickly padded bras. “I wonder what Bill would say about this stuff,” she craftily pondered, staring with mock seriousness at a rack of scanty bright allurements, then allowing herself a seizure of giggles. I tried to imagine a relevant bedroom scene and myself broke into laughter.

“I know he so adored you in your bathing suit when you were flirting with Roland at the pond,” I said.

“Oh, Viola, do you think I flirted?”

“Of course, in the most delightfully ingenuous manner. It’s so enjoyable for all of us, including Roland.”

By the time we finished tea in The Palm Court at the old Benson Hotel, it was pitch black outside. We dashed to the parking garage in a chilly wind coming off the Willamette River. I offered to drive, but Alfreda said, “No thanks, dear, I’ll be fine; just recline your seat and off we go.”

I left Alfreda free to get us through the traffic and out of town, closing my eyes and allowing myself to be lulled into a lazy soporific state by the soothing motion of the car. But, after several miles of silence, the unmentioned subject loosened itself from the bottom of our leisurely journey and rose to the surface.

“I thought Ragnar’s relatives were quite nice...but I would never have recognized him in them if I didn’t know better.”

My eyes flew open as if I had been slapped awake.

“Really? You didn’t see any similarity at all?” I asked, stalling until I found some innocuous way to deal with the subject.

“Oh, a little of the accent...but his has a British twist to it. I happen to know he worked on a few British vessels when he was starting out...learned his English that way.”

“Yes, I like it...a Nor-Brit accent,” I said with a casual laugh.

“And they’re fairly tall women...that’s similar. A bit scary I imagine...for a little gal like you...well no, that’s silly. As near as I could tell they were real nice to you.”

“Yes, I said, emitting a quiet sigh.

Alfreda glanced expectantly at me, her face glowing a shadowy yellow-gray in the dash lights. It was not that she was rudely curious or bent on needling me for gossip, not Alfreda. More conceivably, she sensed that something needed to be aired, and she was there to see it got done to my advantage. That was the sort of concern I had learned to afford her -- a tuned-in motherly instinct she was used to practicing on her children, with calculated benefit, always ready to assuage unpleasant anxieties, ready to put things right.

I thought about the whole business for a while, then gave another long sigh, too soon hearing myself saying things I’d rather not have.

“They are very nice. I do like them, except that... They think I’m not good for Ragnar.”

“Nonsense!” Alfreda exclaimed, rocking her body closer to the wheel in sharp physical protest.

I stretched out the seat belt nervously, let go of it, and settled my tightly clenched hands in my lap. I had no idea that in the next minute I would find myself rambling freely on, in some vaguely self-examining monologue filled with rationalizations.

“I didn’t want to think about it...have not wanted to, although it

does crop up. It's been so lovely just to go forward one day at a time. Now I've *had* to think about it again...to consider that I might be selfishly harming him. I have at times been difficult...coming back home rather damaged...after all those years...that is...not in very good shape. Almost at once, I found myself miraculously rescued and...deeply in love. I've thought many times that there's no way I couldn't have loved him. Yes, sometimes I *am* childlike, yet I don't feel too young for him...even if they think it's wrong to...you have to pay, I suppose...you do have to pay for something this good. The sort of life I've lived can rapidly age a person too, if not externally, certainly inside to some degree, but still I feel that I'm not...well, of course there's nothing very conventional about me. My undesirable actions, as *they* see them, may have something to do with the past, my rather unorthodox childhood...or maybe I--"

"Lord, Viola, if he could hear you now he'd be mad as a cuckolded rooster."

"What?" I said, coming to with a nervous laugh. "Alfreda, you shouldn't have let me go on like that. For heaven's sake! I was thinking out loud."

"You wanted to be heard, that's for sure, whether you know it or not. Lord, you're so hard on yourself. Viola, you're not any of those things you're worrying about. You're the sharp-as-a-tack little songbird Ragnar loves. And you darn well deserve each other. Shoot! You two go together so well it's a relief to know you found it out when you did. Dammit -- relatives! Dammit!"

It was quite late when we returned and Alfreda did not come into the house. She turned the car around and waited for me to get out.

I put my hand on the door handle and hesitated. "I feel a little

embarrassed...inconsiderate too...sort of thinking out loud...it probably seems to you like a few cards are missing from my deck.”

“Just because I got a peek inside your mind? Viola, I like you better for it. Sometimes you say things I don’t quite understand, and I don’t expect to, but I understand this all right. It’s what my son calls *down-on-the-floor here and now*. And why should it matter what I’ve heard? Maybe it helped. Anyway, it goes no further, not even to my Bill. I’m supposed to be a friend, aren’t I?”

“You see what it means to have Ragnar? He’s given me the most wonderful friends...generously shared you with me. I’m so lucky.”

“Yes you are, and with that I leave you, dear. Keep thinking about it that way and you’ll do just fine. See you on Saturday.”

I went inside, standing in the foyer and briefly wondering what time it was, then did not care, decided not to even find out -- time rules everything. I was going to climb the stairs, do a brief wash-up and get into bed. If only I could fall asleep and not lie there pondering anything, very likely jumbling it up worse. If somehow I could stop thinking and simply take Alfreda’s sound advice.

A loud rap at the door jolted me out of my maladroit speculation. I opened it and was astonished to find Dagny standing there in her blue jeans and down jacket, arms straight down, hands in her pockets.

“Dagny! Is something wrong?”

“*Ja*, but not to worry. I have been waiting for you to return, so we could talk some. At last I saw your light in the window. We have not talked very much, you and I...only Mamma talking to you. Her thoughts about some things are not like mine. May I come in?”

“Of course, of course. Come into the living room. It’s probably

a bit chilly. I keep the heat low when I'm gone. Just let me light a fire," I babbled as I led Dagney into the cold, dimly lit living room. "I'll turn up the lights and--"

"No, please, I like this comfortable light. You do not have to make a fire...unless you want."

"I do want...it's cozier...will be just enough heat to take the chill off." As I talked, I was hastily crumbling old newspapers kept behind the wood box, then piling kindling and pine slabs somewhat awkwardly atop the paper on the grate and striking a match.

Dagney had removed her gray jacket and settled at one end of the davenport. I sat down at the other end, briefly smiling at her with what I hoped was welcoming encouragement. I stared at the fire, waiting for her to speak. She tugged at the sleeves of her pale blue ski sweater and began her intentions with nice praise: "I have enjoyed your lovely family farm...our walk in your wonderful woods...your many interesting friends and...those good dinners -- not all cooked by my uncle. I have enjoyed meeting you."

"And I you," I quickly answered.

"We are going so far away and I cannot imagine when we will come again. Ragnar has said that he will bring you to us. I was glad to hear that. He has never done such a thing. I am happy for him...for both of you. I could not go away without telling you that. My mother has had a more difficult life than mine...that is, it was harder for her, and she is, I am afraid, more conservative. It might help you to know that she married an older man. At first she disliked him, but he had worked on our farm and knew so much about it. Gradually she came to love him very much, and by the time he died she was in deep sorrow. That was

my father. He was a good man. I myself am very surprised by her idea that...ah, never mind. I believe it was in finding you and her brother, well...*together* that she has remembered her own sorrows. Perhaps she is thinking of you as of herself. She is thinking of the sorrow of seeing her husband in failing health, and of my father's worry at leaving her. I hope you can forgive her...she likes you, that I know."

"I understand...and I do appreciate everything you've told me, Dagny. Ragnar is so healthy that I hardly ever think of it. Who knows? I may die first -- then he might suffer. We cannot live our lives thinking only of how they might end. But I admit that Sonja's concern has made me wonder...has given me pause...because I could never think of doing anything to harm him and if--"

"That is what I feared. You must go on as you were, making each other happy. Do not let anything change your mind. It is so clear that you are very good for each other. When you come to us, you will meet my big hardworking husband. He is somewhat like Ragnar, as you can see in Peter. We have our bad times but mostly good times, and by now we could not do without each other -- but someday we will have to do that...as in all life. You are right: we cannot live our lives too often thinking about their end. We must appreciate every bit of living. Our family is proud of Ragnar. We know his worth. When I arrived here, I planned to tell you something important: that Ragnar is so much more than your farm manager. Then, of course, I saw that you already knew this...know it better than I."

"You've made me so much happier," I said as I hugged Dagny good-bye at the door, "I'm really fond of Peter...and your mother too, all of you. I'm sure I'll soon know Karin better."

“You should let our music student hear you sing when Ragnar plays. She would be so pleased.”

“Perhaps it will happen...but please write me...or send e-mail. I know you will be very busy but keep in touch with me. I want to hear how you’re all doing on the farm. I’m looking forward to seeing you there. Have a good trip. You must visit us again...and please give my best wishes to your mother.”

I did not see Ragnar the next day, Thursday, the day he drove Alfreda’s Lincoln past the house, transporting Sonja and Dagney and their luggage to the Eugene airport for their flight to Seattle, then on to Oslo. I peered through the half-closed white lace curtains in the living room, standing with moist eyes and watching my formerly anticipated new family melting away. I could have dashed out onto the veranda and waved at them, but it seemed somehow over-zealous and inappropriate. I had already said my good-bye. I had already made whatever impression they would take away. I knew I had been as honest as I could be.

It was Friday morning and I was in the garden, pulling carrots in the sun’s slanting silvery-gold autumn light. As I shook the stubborn damp earth from the bright orange root plants and laid them in my big wicker basket, I was thinking of tomorrow. I would pick up Alfreda for our trip to the Saturday market, greeting her sheepishly, wishing I had managed to keep silent. It has not been easy for me to exhibit too many weaknesses, especially with those who are still getting to know me. This has been true ever since the days, and there were many, when my father bitterly accused me of being the weaker sex.

I knelt on the damp soil, thoughtfully working at my task, until I

was startled from my musings by the familiar tan hand laid gently over my shoulder. There stood Ragnar, smiling down at me, his eyes nearly hidden by the lowered brim of his brown fedora. I wondered how long he had been watching me, knowing he always took advantage of such moments, a bit like a painter committing some curiosity to memory. I shaded my eyes and looked up at him. He helped me to rise and picked up my basket, giving it a quick shake to keep my piled-up and dangling harvest from falling out.

“You should wear a hat when you come out here.”

“All right, but I haven’t finished with this.”

“*Ja*, you have. Your basket is too full anyway. You will have to put these someplace cool.”

“Why? I was planning to--”

“We are going away.”

“Where?”

Ragnar laughed and kept hold of my hand, guiding me along over the dirt clods and through the tall wire gate, which he closed and latched. He wore clogs, faded Levis, a white T-shirt beneath an open gray flannel shirt, sleeve cuffs unbuttoned, as if he had, by sudden instinct, quickly set down his coffee mug and come into the garden.

“It was to be a surprise...but I think not with you.”

“I’ve got plans for tomorrow...but I guess you meant today.”

“I meant now...for several days...as long as we want.

“Oh...but I promised Alfreda I’d take her to--”

“Alfreda knows...she was happy to hear it. She said to tell you there will still be days enough for market.”

“Hmm, that isn’t what she said to me, quite the opposite. And

what is this mysterious destination?”

“You remember my old fishing partner Si Brown...your illustrious writing student?”

“Yes, poor Simon. I never knew if he forgave me for that class.”

“The Brown family, in the heyday of their local lumber business, bought land on the coast near Coos Bay. They built a woodsy old cabin on a cliff above the beach, for the family to use on vacations. Si likes me to use it when I clam over there, or fish. He likes to keep it occupied, more than it ever is.”

“And that’s where you wanted to go?”

“Where we *are* going. It will be good for you. And you will have my full attention...except for a few razor clams.”

“How romantic...I have to share you with razor clams?”

“Mostly you will have me all to yourself...too much of me if you like solitude. Have you ever eaten razors?”

“A long time ago. I’m innately an Oregonian, aren’t I?”

“We will find out at last. Do you know how to catch razors?”

“No, I’m afraid not...but Gran did. I toddled after her at a very young age...early mornings...the low coastal tides when plenty of clams turn up...or used to; me, spellbound, watching my little Gran shovel up those swiftly escaping things. She got her limit. You don’t catch them, you dig them.”

“Right. And the last time you ate them was when?”

“Years and years and years ago...I can hardly remember the taste. But I remember it was something sweet and nutty and wonderful.”

“You ate a few small chopped razors in dressing I fixed for my trout not too long ago, but they were mixed with other things...really not

the way to use precious razors. When you taste the plump whole ones I will fix, you might fall in love with me.”

“How magnanimous of them...sacrificing themselves for such a marvelous aphrodisiac. I might fall in love...all over again.”

“You will, *lille* muse...by choice culinary fiat. For that same result in me, all it took was a chain saw in your hands.”

We were on our way to the coast, the large chests in the back of Ragnar’s truck partially filled with whatever staples we would need in the kitchen, also a few toiletry items along with our casual and weather-proof clothing for an indefinite number of days. Peter was now in charge of the farm, which could have been left in no more trusted hands.

Very near the coast, we stopped and hiked into a roadside forest park to sit at a weathered old table beneath tall Douglas firs. We hungrily attacked Ragnar’s sandwiches and drank from plastic mugs filled with steaming black coffee from his big silver Thermos.

A Gray Jay sailed stealthily down from its tree perch and sat on the far edge of our table. Its beady black eyes boldly studied my uneaten sandwich half, which lay temptingly atop its wax wrapper.

For a moment I savored the first half. “Umm, so good, mayo, chopped eggs, green onions, celery; you used both sweet and dill pickles, creamy and delicious on this dark bread -- pumpernickel, isn’t it? No! I’m not sharing any with you, fly away, little thief.”

“*Ja*, Whisky Jack...a robber...better eat it before he does.”

Ragnar flung the dregs of his cup away from the table and poured more coffee for both of us, then screwed the Thermos lid back on. He leaned on an elbow and stared up at the tree where the disgruntled jay

had flown to argue at us. Gazing at the clouds drifting above, he said, “We may get some rain but it will be mild, and misty in the mornings. Nothing unusual about damp salty air...it is the coast.”

“Yes...and when the sun does come out it’s glorious.”

I sat quietly enjoying Ragnar. Wherever he alights he is always comfortable enough with his expansively used body to exhibit relaxed well-being. He was sitting sideways, his very long Levi-covered legs stretched out, slanting away from the outside of the bench. Because of his height, his pants cuffs are seldom rolled, unless he wears boots. Today, on his feet were brown deck shoes, well broken in but prudently polished and bearing only faint marks of scuffing. He had left his big sheepskin jacket in the truck but wore a warm gray plaid wool shirt. Its pale color intensified his chert-blue eyes. Variably receptive irises made that luminous gray nearly blue with the captured light of the partially cerulean sky. He focused on me, then winked, his sun-struck lips curving very slightly with a positive message. *How enviably composed you always are*, I thought but did not say. Caught in a dissonance of profound admiration and envy, I had to look away, cowardly I suppose, attempting to regain a carefully structured will that is perhaps self-defeating, an old method of self-preservation and now a punishment, quite pointless, yet presently inescapable. I am always ready not to need, lest what is needed dissolve into nothingness.

I did want to ask something, but began cautiously folding up my sandwich wrapper. Then, without looking at him, very likely about to appear obsessive on the subject of familial rejection, I said, “Should I write to them?”

He sighed with displeasure at where I had gone. “Why? It is

they who should write to you...write and thank you. But you are not going to think about this now are you? It is meaningless.”

“Not to me. They’re your family.”

“*Ja*, but that should exact nothing from you.”

“It shouldn’t? Then you’ve obviously distanced yourself from me. I have to assume you care nothing about *my* roots.”

“I am interested in everything about you, past and present, but it should not mean I have to cultivate your relatives. If I happen to enjoy them, that is another matter.”

I felt impulsively angry.

“Wild Vi, do not flash those fiery eyes at me. I have known your family well...and known Hugh and Roland for quite a while...now there is Marcus. *Herregud*, did I ever seem to curry favor with Marcus for the sake of acquiring a family? I like your very likeable son...just as it stands and not for any ulterior motive.”

“And you think I have an ulterior motive in befriending your family?” I fumed. “What would that be?”

“*Faen!* You fail to read an open mind. Can you not see that I hate to have you suffering over something so unimportant to us? I do not even care to hear the reason you are so bent on this...agenda.”

“Not *agenda!* Because I *love* you!” I shouted -- an onlooker would have hardly thought so. The jay loudly complained and swiftly darted from the tree. Away he flew in search of a more peaceful repast.

Ragnar drew in his legs, spread his hands on his knees and began to laugh. I could not watch him doing that without doing it myself.

“If...I...can’t acquire your family...how will I have more of you?” I demanded between soft rushes of laughter.

Ragnar shook his head in mild censure. “First let them realize how much of *you* they have in me,” he suggested.

I edged toward capitulation, but with a different concern. “My darling, if you take me there how will I be received?”

“As my *kvinne*, my woman, my chosen companion...with all the deference that requires, but also with the kindness of people who have come to know you enough to like you; and how could they not like *you*?”

The old Brown cabin has a lived-in charm. It is comfortable and inviting, a gratuitous offering of past lives usually inaccessible; its two-story exterior cedar-shingled and gable-roofed; its roomy interior smoke-seasoned, aged knotty pine. I wandered through the rooms with the impudence of an excited child, exploring nooks and crannies, spying on intimate photographs of a privately disporting family, feeling a lenient fondness for a mix of rather amateurish, yet strangely captivating nature paintings, and admiring or discounting as clumsy several heavy pieces of imperfectly made pottery. The rugs are braided cotton rags, of the sort Gran once made and lived with as a child; a few smaller throws tightly woven of earth-colored thick wools in intriguing Navajo patterns. The large spindle beds are covered with colorful log cabin patterned quilts spread over fir-green linens. I slid my hand between tightly tucked bed sheets in the master bedroom, testing the near damp coldness of a bed infrequently used, reminding me of the neatly made but clammy bed in my old room when I first returned to the farm. Along the wood floor, beneath partially opened wide slats of a redwood blind, I discovered a short section of base-board heating, and at once turned it on. The room is sparsely furnished, most notably with a king-sized bed, two brown

stuffed chairs, and a small, free-standing cast-iron fireplace. Set back from the big loft overhanging the living room, the master bedroom is adjoined by the cabin's largest bathroom, commodiously appointed with cinnamon-hued porcelain fixtures, installed opposite a dressing alcove and a spacious brown and ivory tiled shower. The only other bathroom is downstairs between two of the bedrooms. It contains a very large antique claw-footed white tub, long and deep. Maroon tile kitchen counters hold a trio of old-fashioned chromium appliances, a shiny plump toaster, electric coffee pot, and waffle maker, well-kept, well-made appliances, so long in existence as to have originated in America. There is also a modern microwave oven, and a new blender. Placed side by side are a large wood-burning cook stove and a smaller electric range. The cabin's four ample bedrooms, two bathrooms, and rather capacious living room, with its massive basalt fireplace, plus the very adequate kitchen, would surely have made it a luxurious getaway for its time. Even for this time it is warmly inviting.

I gravitated toward the tempting little library in a cozy nook off the living room. It smelled of old books and worn leather, candle wax and wood smoke, but something else, memories of very pungent thick-rolled maduro cigars -- the kind my grandfather smoked -- and aromatic dregs of port, like that left standing in casually emptied glasses at my grandmother's card parties. The distinct cigar aroma of my kindly but, alas, shadowy grandfather fleetingly placed me back on his olive-serged knee. Most of the shelves held oft-handled books about flora, fauna -- some lovely old Audubon books -- fish and fishing, also American history and local lore, along with a few ethnic recipe books. A wine leather-padded window seat invited me to sit, and I hastened to comply,

gazing out at the roiling white-capped Pacific. The stormy sea's constant low murmurings and sudden crashings echoed beneath a gently rising, cropped green bluff. What kept the grasses so low? Deer perhaps...or stunting sea winds. Beyond the huge picture window, supporting its comfortable dreamers' ledge, the view was framed by sinewy tree limbs clustered with the marked pairs of shiny three-inch needles that festoon shore pines -- lodge pole pines long driven into their leeward-listing shapes by the wild coastal winds. The entire milieu of woods-scented, salt-sprayed airs and cozily defensive shelter summoned a viscerally delicious seclusion. Sequestered here, I could see myself losing track of time, for a while laying aside matters perhaps grown out of proportion. As do the woods on Ender Farm, if allowed, the serene coastal nature here offers curative possibilities.

“So this is one of the places you hang out when you decide to rusticate...and clam,” I teased. “I’m surprised you return to the farm as soon as you do. It’s so lovely...so peaceful.”

Ragnar stood a moment with his hands in the back pockets of his Levis, smiling at me with an unsurprised acceptance of my enchantment.

“*Ja*, I thought you would like it. It suits you well, this place. You are not very modern...in a good sense. Ender Farm is restorative too...I return there happily.”

“Have you ever...are you generally alone here?”

He sat down beside me. “Sometimes Einar comes. But that is not what you meant. Have I come here with women? *Nei*, I never have. Saved for you...completely unexpected...but your *essence* has often been desired here...recognition seldom found anywhere...except in a sudden revelation of obscure poetry -- that surprising second of recognition I

now gratefully cultivate.”

Unexpected in an unexpected world, I thought, but that was much too facile, cynical and mocking of a ponderous offering beautifully abbreviated. I was at first unable to respond, not wanting to speak in a random manner that could be misinterpreted. I tried an evasive question: “You haven’t felt lonesome here?”

“I have never felt much aloneness when alone. Or...I have not until you...until I begin to miss you. But since our *encounter* we have not been away from each other for very long, have we? A few days apart now and then...good for realignment. This is different.”

Ragnar arose and stood silently at the window, looking out at the setting sun bleeding into the sea. It streamed redly through the gilt-edged trees, and tinted part of his face a roseate hue near Spanish gold. Fixed in this chiaroscuro emblem of light and dark, he appeared calm, not exactly waiting for anything to happen, yet quietly expectant of something. I thought of a wild animal fixedly gazing out from a hill, or peering keenly through the dark trees of twilight’s cloaking woods. I have seen photographs of a wolf doing this. Is it merely hungry and on the scent of prey? Is it thinking about where it will go, or how it will go? Is it waiting for a companion? Likely it is acutely aware of something I could never see or know.

“You look mysterious now...thoughts ranging far out to sea...a solitary Viking...one of those icons never to be known.”

“Wild Vi, you are writing. Just share this with me.”

“The way you spoke to me a while ago I felt I was being--”

“Appreciated...you are being that...and more.”

“Foolishly, I was going to say something like *courted*.”

“*Ja?* Well, an elaborate old custom, useful when there was more time for it, that...ritual display of colored feathers. Now, less dancing feathers and more of the real thing.”

“For birds it *is* the real thing.”

“*Lille* girl, you make me laugh. Enough of this.”

“No, not enough,” I insisted, standing to rest my chin against his middle. I stared up at humored gray pools holding my reflection.

“*Herregud!*...amethyst sorcery. If I kiss you now I may not want to stop...however,” he muttered and lifted me into a kiss.

“Guess we’d better eat,” I said with reluctance.

“*Ja*...fix something easy and lie down. We have to get up early.”

“No! Why?”

“Razor clams rise early. You know that much.”

“Yes, I remember that.”

I did not ask the hour; it was barely light. The strong coffee with toast had done little to revive me. I was quiet and groggy, being led along in a somnolent stupor, barely able to keep up with Ragnar’s long strides. In my childhood on the farm I was up before the sun, always an unconsidered matter of course. Now I felt out of my element. For years I have risen reasonably early, but not quite this early. We were walking over the damp sands of Ragnar’s familiar and carefully unpublicized clamming beds. The tide was so far out the ocean was a distant roar, and the white air was heavy with fog and mist. Sucking the salty moil of fresh vapors into my lungs, I began to feel more alive, becoming aware of my marvelous surroundings at last. Within a few more seconds, I was seized with a joyful rapture, perhaps at our simply existing there together in an

extraordinary space of nature.

Often we walked within a shield of opaque air, then a shaggy opening revealed a section of the high eastern bank, rough volcanic rock and sandstone topped with green furze. Below it, stretching out before us, were the narrow deposits of motley detritus the receding tide had left strewn in broad scallops. Occasionally, a watery infusion of the rising morning sun filtered in, reflecting off myriad tiny particles of suspended vapor and forming a dense column of pale gold light -- a dazzling warm glow. Bathed in this tickling damp enclosure of sensuous comfort and light, I stopped and stood still, slowly turning in a circle. I was nearly dizzy with the effect, as if my feet had left the earth and I were floating. Then vanished Ragnar returned to me, stepping back out of the fog ahead. Having found me thus revolving with outstretched arms in my shielding capsule of light, he was moved to laugh at my childish wonder.

At last we reached a reliably yielding spot familiar to Ragnar. He set down the bucket he had been carrying but kept hold of his narrow clam shovel, then walked into the barest surge of shimmering water. The quietly advancing wave had overspread a thoroughly waterlogged bed of sand that sank easily beneath our feet. I was barefoot, but Ragnar wore knee-high black rubber boots. Just as the water was drawing away, I glimpsed a place where tiny telltale bubbles rose to the surface.

Ragnar sank his shovel about half a foot from the disappearing bubbles and hefted up a mound of sand. He immediately handed me the shovel and knelt to reach into the sinking hole, for a moment groping in the watery sand. When his right arm was nearly up to the elbow in oozy sludge, he drew it out. Giving a quick rinse to the captured object in his hand, he held it up for me to examine. I saw that it was a large razor

clam, the inhabitant encased in a long and shiny yellow-brown shell.

“He’s so beautiful this plump fellow...poor little razor. How easy you make it look...but it isn’t at all. You have to know precisely how to do this. I couldn’t do it.”

“*Ja*, you could...before the morning is over you *will* do it.”

“Incredible...just now I was carried back to a forage along the shore with Gran...I innocently took all that for granted, as simply what was supposed to happen...always the next interesting thing. This is not the same. Back then it was a thoughtless reality, careless pleasure in seeing my first razor clam. Now, those eidetic old images are linked to this...my brain storing more memories.”

Ragnar handed me the shovel. “Let us see if brain and hand can catch one of these wily fellows.”

“What’s the limit?”

Ragnar roared with laughter. “You are optimistic. Good. You and I are licensed for fifteen apiece on this lucky day. Each person must dig his own. But the tide will not wait for you. Listen to me, seriously, Wild Vi. When you reach down and possibly find a clam *chez soi*, do not cut your fingers. Razor clams are razor sharp.”

After several failed attempts, I became an idiot. There were the signaling bubbles, my clumsy hoisting of sand, and nothing. Maybe I was afraid of getting my tardy fingers sliced.

“The clams are laughing at me. Can you hear them?”

Ragnar smiled patiently and said, “Let me dig a few so we have something to eat, then you can have another try.”

The razors were soon piling up in the bucket. I was wild with envy and a growing desire to rescue my pride. Finally Ragnar handed me

the shovel and wished me luck.

“Just don’t say anything. Let the poor incompetent do it all by herself, please. I may have gotten the hang of it by now.”

The next attempt failed again. I swore while Ragnar stood back quietly watching with his arms folded, neither laughing nor frowning.

I will be swift but methodical, I insisted to myself. Once again tiny silver bubbles rose up to taunt me. *I will get this damn clam or run down the beach screaming.*

I quickly placed the shovel’s edge about six inches from the bubbles and scooped up a load of sand, then dropped the shovel and knelt in the clear glaze of water, oblivious to my immediately soaked jeans. I reached down a bit diagonally, clawing carefully with the tips of my fingers until I felt the startling sharp surface of the desperately fleeing bivalve. “You’ve had it now you poor devil!” I shouted. Down my less cautious fingers swiftly drove, coming beneath and then around the poor hapless razor. I pulled it out, gave it a rinse and held it toward Ragnar with a victorious grin of delight. My hair was in my eyes, somehow both of my arms were covered to the elbows with gritty dark sand. My sandy jeans were dripping cold saltwater, along with the soggy bottom of my sweatshirt.

Ragnar snatched his phone from his shirt pocket and took a picture of me, then he stood my miraculous clam on its end away from the others in the bucket. “Nice size. This one you will eat first.”

I knelt there, still looking up at him with exuberant laughter. Drawing my hair away from my eyes, he raised me by my elbows and lifted me against him, then kissed me and said, “Never have I enjoyed clamming as much as this.” My clothes were about to soak him too. He

set me down, looked me over and said, “*Herregud*, you have certainly gone full tilt into the world of clams...what a sopping glorious mess you are, my girl. Do you intend to do that again?”

“Oh God yes! It’s wonderful.”

We were standing in the tidy kitchen, our sleeves rolled and our culinary bodies poised for preparation, at least Ragnar’s was. I had scarce idea how to proceed. Ragnar had gotten his fifteen razors. I had only managed to dig seven, one with a slightly crushed shell, but edible. He had rinsed the clams at an outside faucet. They were now lying in the sink, waiting for the next stage of their final journey.

“Your initiation into the world of razor clams is not over until you know how to clean and cook this largess.”

“I’m not worried...your cultivated appetite would never let me ruin these beauties.”

“Have less concern for my appetite and more at how *cultivated* you become at preparation.”

“You will cultivate me,” I teased, leaning soggily on the counter. My cold toes were gritty and I was very damp. “You’re presumably an expert at this.”

Ragnar had come out of our demanding clam pursuit rather more tidy, and was still in his clamming beachwear, standing at the sink in his gray wool socks. He held a small sharp knife in his right hand, and with the left selected a clam. “Your first triumph.” He took up my prize with a grin of shared pride, then slipped his knife into the long shell lip, gave a quick slice and flipped it open.

“Let me show you how to clean a couple...then go take a shower,

warm your chilled body...and these bare feet...you briny wench.”

“Well, if you like things pickled in the sea, I’m your girl.”

“You are my *lille undine*,” he said, bending to kiss my nose.

I pondered his Norse epithet. *Unda* is Latin for wave, and *Undina* was Paracelsus’ water-nymph, like *undine*, the Norsk for mermaid. I did briefly wonder about the other meaning discovered earlier in my Norsk dictionary: *a beautiful but heartless woman*.

At my thoughtful expression, Ragnar said, “May I not tease you with folklore? You are an intelligent and worldly woman but there is still the girl in you...the same curiosity...and sly devilry.”

“But am I a heartless woman?”

“Ah, you know too much. You like to test my *beberskelse*, my self-control -- just as you so often did in the past...when I usually went away laughing. Today I imagined you rising out of the sea, *lille* mermaid. That is all I meant.”

“*Beberskelse*,” I pronounced carefully.

“It can also mean mastery of something...of a language, and you may come to that.”

“Well, tease me any way you like, as you always do, especially in Norsk...then I’ll learn something new.”

“*Ja*, now watch. You saw how the razor was opened. Next I cut the muscle that attaches it to the shell...like this. While you have it on the cutting board, you cut off the tip of the neck...then you slit it open and cut away this part in the middle. Now you slit the digger by sliding the knife inside like this. You cut away the entrails from the digger...then you can rinse the razor and dry it thoroughly with paper towels -- you cannot have it damp or the beaten egg will not stick. After the egg, you roll it in

my mixture of crumbs and spread it out in a pan of hot butter and oil to fry.”

“What’s the mixture?” I leaned close, my interest captured by the way his hands worked so deftly and without hesitation.

“Are you going to fry them now?”

“*Nei*, I will show you that when you come back. Razor clams are fried quickly and eaten right away.

“Will you use the shower again...or try the old monster?”

“That incredible tub? I suppose you intended to shower...but you can join me in the monster if you don’t mind a little sand,” I teased.

Using a paper towel, Ragnar covered the finished clam lying on the cutting board, then turned to look at me. Were those penetrating eyes surprised or only amused? The tacitly reflective mouth offered a slight curl of encouragement, taunting me, daring me to carry out my suggestion. I wondered how we would both fit in the tub. But I had seen that the classy old porcelain-coated steel fixture was indeed huge.

Ragnar showed no sign of concern, appearing to consider the matter settled. “We can have an inch or two of brennevin while we relax in warm water. I put it in the freezer when we came in. You will find the aperitif glasses in the far cupboard. Ah, you cannot reach them. Let me wash my hands and do it. You get the bottle.”

“Are you serious about this...*tub crawl*? I know how you like to shower speedily, mainly to get clean...no nonsense.”

He was already washing his hands, and spoke in a mildly scolding voice, “It was *your* idea...the warm water will be good for us...good for you. Neither of us is really dirty anyway -- although one of us may have brought up half the beach. I like to see you relax. Nothing I do with you

is nonsense. Get the bottle.”

“This is wonderful.” I half drowsed in the soothing warmth. The bath salts I had poured from a green glass bottle smelled of gardenia, sweetly permeating the steamy air. We had set a small stand beside the tub to hold our glasses. Ragnar could reach them and occasionally held my frosty glass to my mouth for a sip. I sat with my head back against his chest, now and then thinking of our clamming episode and laughing, or rather emitting small unexplained giggles. The heat of the water crept salubriously through my bones, while each tiny sip of brennevin burned away inhibition. Leaning back thoroughly aware of a supporting body, I luxuriated in a transcendent state both thrilling and relaxing, as secure as a baby in its amniotic fluid, slowly approaching euphoria.

“Why all the giggles?” he asked, reaching his arms completely around me and kissing the top of my head.

“It’s mostly about me clamming.”

“Ah, but now you can do it...some of your comic antics have been recorded on my phone as proof...they also live in my head.

“This damp honey hair smells of salt...maybe seaweed when you were swimming up from the bottom of the sea.”

“I’m not the only one who’s amusing.”

“My glass had more in it than yours.”

He lifted a brown bar of soap from the soap dish on the stand and said, “We will wash your hair.”

“Wait a minute, what’s that?”

“Brown soap.” He examined the large bar more closely and said, “Brazil nut soap.”

“But what’ll it do to my hair?”

“Make it smell like someone’s idea of Brazil nuts. I can rinse you with this chaser glass I brought for you. Put your head back but close your eyes. If I see your eyes like this, I will lift you right out of here...you will get a hasty drying...there will be no supper.”

“But for want of my clam I’d open my eyes.”

“*Herregud*, it really makes no difference.”

The clam coating turned out to be cracker crumbs seasoned with salt and lemon pepper and mixed with ground hazelnuts. Ragnar cut off a small piece of my razor and fed it to me while he was hungrily frying seven more, in hot Peanut oil with dabs of butter for flavor. The cleaned remainder were in plastic bags in the refrigerator.

“Oh, God,” I said when I had swallowed and swayed in ecstasy against the counter. “You were right. I’m in love.”

“With me or the razor?”

“You...everything to do with you...like this vanishing clam.”

“Wise of you. Pour some of our Pinot Gris.”

“Do you think we should...after the brennevin?”

Ragnar laughed. “Barely a thimbleful of Nordic fever?...pour us a glass of wine to see us through the razors...in the large goblets.”

We finished our clams at a varnished rough-hewn pine table off the living room. Ragnar had made kale with sesame seeds, olive oil, and minced garlic, hotly and quickly sautéed to perfection. It was deliciously sweet and crunchy. There is great satisfaction in swallowing food that is simultaneously very healthy and so pleasing to the taste, especially when it’s from one’s own garden.

“How on earth would I describe the flavor of these buttery-sweet delicacies?” I asked, holding up a portion of my crispy fried razor.

“That will be your challenge, writer.”

“The hazelnuts make them perfect.”

“*Ja*, the multipurpose hazelnut...making you rich.”

My sated chef, the wonderfully tasty food, the snapping pine log fire, flickering lambently across the room, induced an effusion of great satisfaction. “Monetarily, I’m not rich but--”

“Monetarily, you are not poor.”

“Or you. You have earnings from the farm in Norway, don’t you?”

“*Ja*, I do, increasing shared earnings...quality produce coming out of the valley, and Norway needs it...Scandinavia needs it.”

I stopped eating and straightened up in the solid old pine chair, watching Ragnar as he finished his last succulent clam. Then I took a sip of wine and said, “They want you to come back.”

He swallowed the wine left in his glass, pushed his empty plate back and leaned on the table, running his long fingers thoughtfully over the rolled sleeves of a clean flannel shirt. The navy shirt accented his gleaming silver hair and the nobility of his ruggedly hewn face, but he was frowning.

“Why do you want to bring that up? Do you think I would go away now...leave work still in progress...leave *you*?”

“But if I weren’t on the farm you’d probably--”

“You *are* on the farm, at last. I am not going anywhere...except for my usual trips...and I will take you. Now we can wash dishes.”

When we were finished with kitchen duties, we lay quietly on a

broad old brown leather sofa, staring into the craggy stone fireplace and listening to the pine logs snap. The white T-shirt I wore with clean faded jeans was not quite warm enough, and I availed myself of Ragnar's warm-blooded insulation. I had kicked off my moccasins and snuggled my cold feet against his denim-covered legs. It was so good to do nothing and to think hardly at all, yet the slowing wheels of my mind never fully come to a halt. Speculative observations remain one of my most satisfying and clarifying endeavors, although most of the time I keep this to myself. Only sporadically do I hold forth on an irresistible subject, usually at an unexpected provocation or unavoidable cause of worry. Ragnar had his arm across my chest and had slowly closed his eyes. I felt a sudden urge to speak, but carefully restrained myself, gently easing my head back to rest on his shoulder and stare at his tranquil face. The angle of his head then revealed glittering slits of dark gray iris keenly focused on me.

"What?" he asked.

"How did you know there was any *what?*"

"Your tensed body, *lystelig* girl...lively one. I am not asleep."

"I was thinking that you're the most...hmm, the most complete example of Jung's individuation that I've ever found in any man."

"How extensively have you been looking?"

"You tease but I *am* serious. All the parts of you -- inner, outer, contingent -- coalesce in a perfect whole of self-realization, well-being"

"Then we must see that the same thing happens to you."

"I knew you'd say that...I *knew* it. You certainly never linger very long on yourself."

"Why should I? If you want to know something about me, you can ask. I am not averse to explaining whatever is explicable."

“I’d like an explanation of how you got that way...the way I’ve described...so very self-realized...collected.”

“A lot of experience in various places around the world...so, a lengthy discovery of *similarities* resulting from what Jung -- since you employ his ideas -- and others have called the *unus mundus*, one world; eventually an opposite way of life...but hardly a less useful manner of schooling: contemplations of nature while living for years in a single raw outpost. Ender Farm -- life there taught me plenty about individual crises: human nature, its predictability, unpredictability, and some of the countless ways it hangs you up. I have amassed a long familiarity with human nature and the habits of other animals...as well as the nature of growing things, experiences requiring self-reliance, going back to earliest days. A necessary complement, or you could say *ongoing support*, is intense reading...study, the love of it. You see...your farm manager is a lifelong student of everything.”

Ragnar fell silent, for a moment focusing raptly on my face, then running his rough thumbs over the pulsing veins of my neck. I closed my eyes, and he touched his lips to my shielding eyelids, issuing a softly dissolving laugh. He was apparently through with his concise summation of self. I opened my eyes to his underscoring wink.

“Your explanation is somewhat generalized. I could surmise most of it...you left out a great deal.”

“*Ja*...but you get the idea. Ask me something specific when it is relevant. In the final analysis, I am just one more evolving animal on an extraordinary planet...having somewhat familiarized myself with its rough terrain -- you know I am usually aware of those around me...concern and compassion easily arising from that awareness -- humankind cannot help

victimizing itself. I am sane enough for my own preservation. You, my *wild* Wild Vi, are very sane, and often your problems live *only* inside this *lille* skull. You are not always so predictable. I tend to enjoy that. The reasons I am drawn to you I could say forever...or never say.”

Just as I was about to investigate that tempting remark, I was stopped by an impatient dismissal of further discussion. With a swift footnote of early clamming, I was pro forma offered the decision of retiring -- the result, unsurprisingly predictable.

“One day soon there will be a subduction earthquake and all of this will fall into the sea,” I called above the sound of the waves.

Ragnar raised an eyebrow. “Then enjoy it.”

We had climbed down the weathered wooden steps built into the cabin’s green-capped cliff wall and were walking along the rocky shore. Our early morning clam-digging effort was over, the fresh clams cleaned and solidifying in their freezer bags. After more coffee, we had come out simply for a bit of rigorous walking in the late morning airs of an early fall day. A long white bank of fog came rolling in from the sea, eerie, unsettling and chilly, hardly summoning the ethereal joy of yesterday’s gauzy phenomenon.

Undefeated, I tugged my baggy white sweatshirt down over my jeans and tossed my falling damp hair back over my loose hood -- at that altered moment I wished for the diversion of cold. Everything I select for warm casual wear is usually oversized and comfortably obscuring. My large sweatshirt made Ragnar laugh. He studied my diminished self a moment and said, “I thought small women had an easy time of it finding clothes that fit.” I assumed he was recalling something Britta told him.

“Tall women like Britta might have a more difficult time finding the right clothes,” I said. Ragnar fell silent, giving me ample time to scold myself for bringing Britta into our private world. “Large baggy clothes are good shelter...comforting,” I went on, in a limp attempt to expunge her from the conversation.

“*Ja...maybe you wear my shirts for security.*”

I like them because they're yours and smell like you, remind me of you, I thought, but I realized that he was right about the security.

“I've borrowed your large shirts for convenience...for warmth,” I disingenuously offered.

Security? Yes, I craved it, even knowing it ultimately had to come from within myself. I began distractedly pondering aloud things better left unsaid.

“For years and years I thought of nothing much but demanding work...could not bear to think of the past...had no time to even consider anything as unobtainable as *security*. Then, very briefly, I had something that felt like security, or balance...immediately ripped away...surprisingly, I was left alive, blood coursing through my untouched brain. I retreated in guilt, reduced to a lost child, a quivering mess. I wanted my protective mother -- the way I have always thought of her. I became pathologically angry, or nearly so, fitfully angry at senseless death, at my failure to cope, at the selfish brutishness of others. I could hardly remember how I was before *it* happened...but afterwards I was a raw-nerved, wounded creature in flight...changing, changing into a chameleon adjusting to the current wallpaper, hoping myself invisible...looking back on earlier selves as if they were total strangers. When I stared into a mirror I was even more confused, frightened by my own image... Why am I saying this? I didn't

mean to. Sorry...this fog is different...nearly suffocating.”

“It will pass. Remember Carl Sandburg’s *Fog*?”

“Yes: *It comes on little cat feet...soft, friendly fog.*”

“And then it *moves on.*”

“Yes...thank you, darling...thank you.”

Ragnar took my hand and clasped it inside his sheepskin coat pocket. The skin of his palms is cracked and rough, his hands feel very strong, agile hands that can do both powerful and intricately delicate things, sure and supple and warm. I often tremble at the startling feel of that vitally calloused flesh. He is able to touch very hot things in the kitchen with bare hands. Last night I rubbed lotion into his hands. “Not too much of that, these rough hands are seasoned tools,” he reminded me along with his amused compliance.

“How do you think Peter is doing?” I asked.

“Just fine. He can use my voice mail...but I talked to him this morning while you were sleeping. He got the idea of taking Buggy to his place...easier to feed...human contact. Buggy ran away as soon as the door was opened. Peter found him sitting at your back door.”

“Poor silly Buggy, denying himself all that human attention. I hope Alfreda doesn’t think...I hope the last things in the garden--”

“*Herregud*, do not worry so much. Come back to me...to us. Allow yourself the pleasure of now.”

“Yes, only now...nothing else.”

“You should be praised for the clams you dug this morning. You got your limit. You are a fast learner...good with your hands, physically strong...for your size.”

“I used to help villagers carry water...some lived quite a distance

from a new pump we managed to install...possibly it made my puny white arms stronger...although sunburned. How could I teach them anything, set any sort of example, unless they saw that I was just another striving person like themselves...unless I could somehow illustrate how much more they could do?"

"Not quite just another person, Wild Vi."

We were walking and talking so intensely I never noticed how the low fog had mostly evaporated into the high blue heavens, or merely drifted away. I stared out at the golden shimmer on the sea and felt a rising euphoria.

I am alive and walking hand in hand where the land meets the sea on this despotic sun's miracle captive earth; here where incredible forces of nature are suddenly prominently revealed; here where the evolved who walk on finely ground star cinder have reached the capacity to consider the stretched and torn land, calamitous land reconfiguring its great mass as it floats on a fluid subterranean sea. Below the planet's crust, torrents of lava continuously boil away from the earth's seething iron heart, blasting into new forms. It is easy to praise the astonishing beauty born of cataclysm, to romanticize the highly unstable majesty of a violent and indifferent universe. It is even more miraculous to share enlightened consciousness with another understanding intelligence, to gainfully consolidate two separately burning flames...flaming brighter if only for the briefest instant, fully alive among monstrous cosmic fires.

Back in the cabin I was quiet and reflective. Our faces were flushed and coolly wind-burned, our hair misted with salt, our ears still roaring with the endless surge and echo of the sea. Ragnar was equally quiet, passiveness for him quite natural and easy, a normal condition, although I can at times rouse him to expound. He made a mesmerizing

driftwood fire in the friendly old stone fireplace. We lay together on the davenport -- I, gratefully tucked against him absorbing the warmth of his body. Finally, I felt a need to say something about my change of mood on the beach, that involuntary preoccupation with the dark moments I usually manage to suppress.

“You’d think by now I could restrain myself from slipping into that dismal abyss.”

“Wild Vi, you have said almost nothing to me about those very difficult times...with the man you loved. You shared them with Hugh, I imagine to alleviate some of his pain. He related certain parts of your more abstract revelation today...one night while enjoying my brennevin. Those unfortunate experiences were not that long ago. I am glad you can say anything to me now...a sign of healing.”

“I’m too ashamed, often too pained, to say very much. There’s horrendous guilt: I’m not sure anymore if I really loved him. I altered his life unexpectedly...only to witness its loss. We were both in need of...of an intimate attachment. It seemed to me a very promising occurrence at the time. I’d known him so long, liked him, of course, then suddenly the known parameter switched to something else. I really had no time to adjust to that new aspect of him. That...*sudden transition* was borne out of my own malfunction on the job, a horribly weak moment of collapse. I became distraught...he was the one qualified to understand. Almost at once I was...bedazzled, hopeful...grasping at... I’m sorry, this is terribly unfair of me. I’ve never said these things. I so crave your wisdom...but should I be sharing these...disturbances?”

“If you want. Why not? It cannot hurt me. Maybe it will do you some good...partly why we are here...away from distractions.”

KEEPING

“Everything for me, what about consideration for *you*?”

“Your trust is consideration.”

“But how can I give you more *profound* consideration?”

“By healthful breathing in my proximity...or anywhere at all.”

“I can hardly respond to that...and what you continuously cause me to feel is...unbelievable...uncontainable and...often excruciating. All of this...this *effusion*.”

“*Ja*. Come, effusive one, this is where I carry you up to a fairly decent bed...but one that never had me in mind.”

“You could sleep diagonally...a little more kicking space.”

“Just as long as your geometry parallels mine...the ancient and original mathematics of curvilinear coupling.”

Rested and relaxed on the drive home, we enjoyed spontaneous snatches of wordplay, then fell unconcernedly silent.

This brief escape had been good for us, an uninterrupted period of focused connection and nature-stimulated reflection. We were loaded with succulent razors for the freezer and I, in praise of clams, and high praise for my clamming teacher, happily anticipated exceptional meals.

Ragnar went off to confer with Peter, while I listened to various phone messages, drank cups of tea, and dealt with sneak attacks from madly attentive Buggy. At first he had displayed aloof hostility at my inconsiderate absence, but he soon overcompensated, with even more accelerated versions of his usual zany pranks.

The rutilant autumn leaves were blazing all around us, merging into autumn's far-ranging ruddied spatters in the smoky-gold sunlight. I

was sitting with Mary on one of Ragnar's sturdily crafted benches, set along the lavender-scented walkway beyond her cottage.

"I've missed you, Viola. I'm afraid I've been socializing with Britta. She comes unannounced, but with books my fingers are hungry to attack...words flung like compost over my dormant brain. She wants news. She's a news gatherer. I don't quite understand what purpose it serves...but her sharp gleanings are spare chaff when she comes here. Poor Britta, there *are* some things to like about her."

"How can I disagree...without discounting Ragnar's good taste? But tell me how you are. What have you been reading, Mary?"

"I've been listening to poetry, as a matter of fact...something rather interesting to relate: Two days ago, coincidentally after my busy caretaker had performed the infrequent function of doing my hair and dressing me decently -- a sprucing up totally unknown to Roland -- he appeared at my door. At least I wasn't in my frowzy old housecoat, which is why I like to know when guests are coming. But I met you in my housecoat, didn't I? I could never have faulted Ragnar for that, for meeting the exceptional daughter of Martha at last. How good of him, how really good to bring us together. Anyway, Roland drove me over to his forest bastion, where he served tea and biscuits and began reading me intriguing poems from his latest chapbook. He said he was in need of a discriminating audience."

"And he certainly got one," I affirmed, zipping up the collar of my blue Polartec vest -- the breeze had quickened, but Mary was well prepared for it in her heavy navy jacket. Interested to the point of also becoming something of a news gatherer, I cautioned myself to begin with an impersonal question. "Was his new work stimulating?"

“Oh, yes, certainly, of course. But let me go on with a bit more description of that afternoon. Apparently Roland had his brainstorm of fetching me as soon as he opened the package of chapbooks delivered to his mailbox. He told me he went at once to his cupboard, looking for something to feed me, as he was going to call it an invitation to tea. All he found in the larder were some baking supplies, eggs, and raisins. He had been hoping to discover cake or cookies. How amusing that is...as if these things would simply appear for his convenience. He decided to do something with what he had, and immediately set about making sugary little biscuits with raisins in them. Then he came to get me, and I was served his clever concoction with Earl Gray tea. I asked if he had used a recipe book. No, he hadn't, just threw ingredients together with things remembered from the past -- I suppose that had something to do with his wife's cooking. When he finished reading selections from the new chapbook, he didn't ask for my opinion of any one poem, or even of anything generally, but suggested we go for a walk. He helped me on with this old navy pea jacket, took my arm, and off we went on a path through the woods. For a while I enjoyed the sounds of the birds in silence, then I did what I reckoned was expected of me, quite voluntarily commenting on a few of the poems, but in a cursory way at first. He would ask a few questions, then I would respond a bit more explicitly, but he did appear to listen very carefully to what I said -- I could tell this by the thoughtful silences after my comments. I felt he was seriously weighing my commentary, as if it were quite important to him. I was quite flattered to be there in such a commanding, if mystifying, position. I am hardly a reliable critic of poetry, knowing only what I like or what moves me. You, on the other hand, are knowledgeably superb in your

judgment...as you've so often demonstrated. Well, I suppose he's shown his new poems to you."

"No, he hasn't," I said, laughing with delight.

"I wonder then, is he simply generous enough to offer this exclusive plum out of a presumed loneliness? I mean...does he feel sorry for me?"

"Perhaps some...or perhaps *he* was lonely. Don't we all feel a kind of commiserating concern, if we care for others...or love them?"

Mary gripped my arm with intensity and said, "Love them? For goodness sake, I've been sitting here hoping you won't think I'm talking out of turn behind Roland's back. Am I? Still, there's little I've said I couldn't say in his presence. I do *appreciate* his consideration...but you see the rapport I feel isn't only because he was forced to suffer excessively: those monstrous war experiences...a wife who left him at a time when most needed, as he himself has clearly shown, his anger so obvious in certain poems. No, there's something else..."

"Viola...I do wish I could assemble a better image of his physical appearance. I know he's fairly tall, or seemed so when we were together at the pond."

There was a candid sort of spontaneity and a different kind of interest in Mary's voice. I then considered how much Roland's special attentiveness had meant to her that warm summer day at the pond. He had not been at all patronizing or falsely attentive, but fully aware of her reticence and apparently hopeful of sharing the pleasure of the pond.

"You're a writer, an observer...assumed to be adept at describing features -- oh, that's not what I meant...it sounds so phony. You've said some things about Roland in the past but...he has dark hair and graying

temples and blue eyes -- Ragnar told me that much. Is he...is he seriously scarred? Surely he has mental scars, but is he...badly physically scarred? Please understand I'm only considering how it may be affecting him."

"I don't think he would like me to say. That *is* painful for him. Scars are such explicit reminders of their causes. He's reasonably tall, yes -- not as tall as Ragnar. He's lean and keeps himself in pretty good shape: his woodsy workouts. His face has no discernible scars...is strongly set -- startlingly like my father's -- yet there's a lovely sort of pained wit in his angular features, sculpted by years of defensively fending off particular encounters with the hellishness of life. He's courageous and still deeply immersed in beauty...often painfully so. For him, the agony separating pain and beauty is a monstrous chasm filled with very hard experiences. He draws on that dark place without, I'm sure, willfully visiting there, a place indirectly feeding a strong creative urge. He's quite...self-fortified, which involves walling off that dangerous chamber of self-destruction; but there can be no impervious wall; menacing images are surely bound to escape, surfacing in partially unintended poems...or uncontrollable fits of rage. Of course, he's steadily, sometimes deliciously, acidulous: part of his wit and part of his bitterness -- as you well know -- but not so much with you, I think. You, my dear friend, may be his soul mate in pain and beauty. I went from the exterior to the interior in rapid time, didn't I? I probably had myself in there somewhere."

"Violen, I think you've romanticized a rather specific relationship, haven't you? -- although very literarily, I must say. We do have a special understanding of pain...we do tend to translate beauty as art...but those sentiments hardly--"

"No, don't discount the obvious: he's very comfortable with you.

I think, if he were so inclined, he could devote a precious amount of his selfishly poetic self to you, without the normal barriers, without fearful reservation -- and very beneficially, I'd say...for both of you. It's clear that he's aligned himself with you in a meaningful way. Only you and he know, or will come to know, what that means. Along with all the other characteristics, he's quite naturally ultra-sensitive, clearly always has been -- an infuriatingly difficult combination...but rich ground for an innately poetic soul. Alas, pain can function as a brutal necessity. I do think I should say no more. After all, what do I really know?"

"You know so much...know it well. Now, with all my so-called wisdom, how on earth am I to proceed with this?"

"With caution, I'd suppose -- he is a volatile man, yet one I think who would never intentionally do you harm. Proceed by your own clear understanding...the helpful sensitivity that makes me come to you for advice and solace."

"I'm continually reminded of why Ragnar loves you...a man so well equipped to fully appreciate who you are, Viola, and *you* are really nonesuch."

"No, wait a minute! *You* are nonesuch, Mary. I'm such a failure at treating myself it's pathetic...embarrassing." I laughed, hugging Mary as I spoke.

"Viola, it's your *own* perception, *your* expert analysis of human qualities that I find so valuable. Much of what you've said I've intuited, but this is still quite a lot to digest. Let's go in now and have tea...with something quite different from Roland's sweet little raisin biscuits -- from my humble cupboard I can offer a single-layer German chocolate cake. *Single-layer* sounds less destructive, yes?"

Mary tossed her hair and her dark glasses flashed at me, her face beaming, perhaps with new possibilities. Had I assisted her in a positive manner, one that would cause no harm to either of my friends?

At last Alfreda and I were discursively strolling along through the Hayfield Saturday market, still catching up on local news. Alfreda had an earlier dental appointment and we had come in separate vehicles and met at a tea shop near the market. Stalls were half-filled with end-of-season harvest, and the hazy air remained thick with the distinct smell of sweet fried onions and grilled hamburgers. I thoroughly enjoy all the color and activity of the market, simply as an event in itself -- there are very few vegetables on display not growing in, or already taken up from, our farm garden. Our late afternoon arrival meant that very shortly the formerly bustling stalls would vanish from the avenue in a piecemeal hauling away. Trucks were already backing up to load the leftovers, and Alfreda and I hurried along to see what we could find. Alfreda went after a basket of large figs. I suddenly remembered that the Roten women usually offered some of the finest wild mushrooms available in the county. I motioned to Alfreda in the direction of the Roten stall and rushed ahead.

Clare was there alone, leaning over the half-emptied counter and toting up monies from the cash box.

“Hello, Clare,” I said, glancing over her table, “I suppose all of your wonderful mushrooms have disappeared by now.”

“Hello...haven’t seen you in a while. Well, I’ve got a few baskets left...already back in the truck...not the biggest, mind you, but I fancy everything I sell’s the best...just not quite as large...still some real nice chanterelles, fresh picked. Just got my truck backed up there and it quit

on me. I was doing my numbers here...but I've got to figure out how to get home with my stuff. Can't call Annie, she went to the hospital with appendicitis -- just in time, poor kid. A good thing there isn't much left here. How many baskets you want?"

Alfreda came hurrying up as I was blurting out something entirely spontaneous, my inveterate habit of rapid problem solving: "You know, you could put the perishables in my truck...just lock up the rest -- I see your truck has a canopy -- then I could drive you home."

Clare looked up at me, her smoky hazel eyes widening, taking in my offer with a fair measure of surprise and disbelief. "What? You mean you'd take me home...really? Then I'd gladly give you the rest of my baskets at no cost. But no, you better not; it's way out of your way. You don't have to do that...really, though?"

"Of course," I assured her, displaying no sign of inconvenience, even though Alfreda was sending me a curious frown of admonition.

Clare walked with us back to my truck, intending to show me where I could park for loading. As I unlocked my faithful little canary, Alfreda surreptitiously displayed a glower of caution along with her hasty goodbye, while she gripped my arm as if to awaken me from unsound judgment. I felt a mild irritation at what I saw as unjust condescension. Seeing that I was determined to carry out my Samaritan solution, she sighed with a ponderous shake of her head, then twisted her plastic bag of plump green figs with a quick spin and retreated to her Lincoln. She was parked a block away.

Half an hour later, Clare's old truck was secured and my truck was carrying a few leftovers, including my mushrooms, as we wound up through the hills a few miles south and east of Hayfield. The woods

began to thicken and the trees grow taller, then the pavement became gravel, although evenly dispersed and well-traveled. Clare was quiet, staring out the window into the dense woods with a kind of awe, as if she were seeing her locality for the first time. Her expression had finally become almost sullen -- I thought perhaps steeling herself for something unavoidably unpleasant. Occasionally she glanced at me with a nervous smile. I had already begun to assume that she was perhaps embarrassed at what I would find at the end of the road. Neither of us were prepared for that.

At last we turned off onto a long winding road lined with a few spindly evergreens and large black fir stumps from long-ago logged away trees. My truck swayed as I dodged, or was unable to dodge, a profusion of potholes in the narrow dirt road. As we rounded the last sharp hairpin curve, I spotted an off-plumb tall gray cedar house slumbering perhaps a few hundred feet away. Dark-windowed and precariously tilting a bit, the awakened old house appeared to glare threateningly down at my jarring intrusion. Its artificially hilly surround bristled with eclectic piles of man-made objects in various stages of dereliction. While I stared up at the poorly maintained house, the nursery rhyme of the *Old Woman Who Lived in a Shoe* came singing into my ears. I struggled to remain expressionless, nearly laughing aloud at this fabulous, crudely deconstructed Disneyland of rusting, moldering impedimenta. The entire completely inconceivable accumulation was strewn over the abused grounds in a seemingly helter-skelter fashion; yet, if one looked more closely, the objects of each pile displayed a vague sort of kinship. Thus, tumbled out before us sprawled a treasure trove for the dubious advocates of *found objects*, those sorely afflicted persons who might well consider this sordid mess an enticing

hidden wonderland of the grotesquely splendid.

My bedazzled eyes had still not fallen upon the most incongruous object of all, but as this came into view I must have emitted a soft gasp. Parked in a weedy niche beside a lean-to porch sagging away from the house eaves, stood a gleaming black Mercedes sedan. If meticulously constructed high-end new automobiles could blush at the questionable company they are sometimes made to keep, it would surely have turned a deeply humiliated bright red. The mere sight of this expensive machine had immediately transformed Clare into a creature of livid consternation.

“God, it’s baby brother Wayne,” she muttered. Then her voice became anxiously assertive, even threatening, a voice so unlike my slight knowledge of her I was startled. “You better go quick...now!”

“Wait a minute, Clare,” I cheerily announced in a soothing voice, still densely assuming she was ashamed of her junk-yard homestead. I jumped out of my truck, went around to the truck bed and grabbed one of her craft boxes. “I’ll just help you unload your things and--”

“No! Leave! Leave!” she cried in a desperate voice. Then I heard a groan of defeat, along with the expletive, “Oh, shit!” as we both looked toward the house.

A short, thick-bodied young man with a red-blond beard and pale brown hair yanked into a pony tail walked rapidly toward us. He wore a black leather jacket, open over a skull and bones black T-shirt, and black pants cuffed above sharp-toed black cowboy boots; all rather ludicrously juvenile, I thought. But, despite his round baby face, he exuded a rough, intimidating manner, jumping my heart into rapid beats. I had actually started to offer a friendly smile, but the air was so intensely foreboding I froze and looked gravely at Clare with questioning eyes.

“Why the hell you hafta pull this, big sister? Goddammit, with Annie and ol’ pop in the hospital...Al out somewhere peddlin’ his trash...I figured I could roost here a couple a days in some kinda peace...at least until I get things movin’.”

“Listen Wayne, my truck broke down and I got a ride, that’s all. She’s just leaving now, so never mind.”

“Oh no she ain’t...hell if she is. You can see I got a hot car settin’ over there. You bring her in the house now, while I think on this damn mess you caused.”

“I didn’t cause anything. You...*you* cause every damn thing that happens to you...I’m not going to stand for this. How dare you! How dare you bring that car here! Take it and leave...if you have any brains left you’ll take it back where you found it.”

“Can’t do that, sis. This is money, real good money. Come on now. You want the cops here? Come on now, get in the house.”

Wayne, in order to make his point, had walked up behind me, taken me by the shoulders and pushed me toward the house. Clare followed, screaming expletives and accusations, half threatening, half begging.

“For heaven’s sake, if you hadn’t said anything I’d have assumed the car was yours. I don’t care anything about you or whatever you’re up to. Just let me go!” I argued, as I was pushed through the front door and into a very austere but reasonably tidy living room. I was still in a state of disbelief, yet my self-defensive fear index was swiftly climbing. I rapidly tried to guess how much influence Clare really had with her felonious little brother? I was about to find out.

“I’m going to leave now,” I flatly stated, heading for the door.

“Oh no you ain’t, lady. Even if I have to use this.”

Clare and I stared in horror at the small brown pistol Wayne had pulled from his coat pocket.

“My God! Oh, my God!” Clare shouted. “How rotten can you get? Just how rotten? Give me that. You give me that right now, or you can shoot me. You wanna shoot me? *Me!* Who fed you and changed your filthy diapers, you worthless little shit!”

Clare walked straight to Wayne and snatched the gun from his hand, then raced across the room toward the kitchen sink. She opened the window above it and flung the pistol out into the woods.

“Hey! that Baretta’s worth somethin’. Now I gotta go out there and scrounge around in the damn woods.”

“Go! Get out of here! And don’t come back!”

“You can howl all ya want, ol’ sis, but you’re gonna listen to me. I’m gonna do what’s gotta be done. I’m after a big rental, see, gonna shove that beauty inside and truck it up to Seattle. I got a friend up there can get it on a container manifest. Look, I know a guy does this all the time...yeah, big payoffs. Even with incidentals, I can make a damn good chunk...ship those honeys places where rich guys don’t ask any questions. And they’ll pay top price...better than takin’ those expensive wheels to a chop shop...and lots more dough.”

“All right, all right, we’ll talk about it later, but first let her go. Just let her go, Wayne.”

“Can’t do that...sure’s hell can’t do that now. She’d damn well queer everything...call the cops...maybe run right down to that fuckin’ nose Sheriff Hiller. That ol’ boy’s canned my ass just once too often, and for nothin’, *nothin’!* This is big time, see? I’m a professional now.

I'm goin' places."

I had an itching desire to at least offer a bruising suggestion of where he was going, but Clare did it for me, with a wildly distraught voice approaching hysteria.

"You fool, I'll tell you exactly where you're going: straight to lockup, that's where you're going, you idiot! To think that a little brother of mine could turn out to be this stupid. What did I do, what in God's name did I do to deserve--"

"Shut up! Shut up now! I blame you for this mess."

"Oh blame *me!* Blame everyone but yourself! My God!" Clare screamed, curling her fists and shouting at the stained ceiling."

"I think what I'm gonna hafta do now is take her with me...up to Seattle...just until I get the deal closed, see...then maybe--"

"*No!* No, you can't! They'll come looking for her, don't you realize that? It's kidnap, you fool! Take the car back. It's a terrible thing you did. You have to let her go."

"Sorry, can't do that. She'll go right to Hiller. Besides, they're for damn sure already lookin' for the car. Nobody loses anything that expensive without howlin' plenty."

"I'm leaving now," I stated matter-of-factly, mainly just to see how far I could get.

Wayne rushed toward me, swearing and waving his fist. "Don't make me tie ya up, doll. Maybe I will anyway. I gotta sit down here and get real cool, think about this a while. Get in that chair over there before I knock ya into it. Sit! Not feelin' too easy right now."

"If you lay one finger on her, I'll--"

"Hey, I'll smack ya a good one, sis. I've had about enough of

your smart mouth. Christ, ta think I come home to this.”

“Oh *why?* Why did you ever come back? Things were actually getting a little better around here...until Annie and pop had to go to the hospital. A lot you care. We don’t need you at all. Al’s doing all right here now...*he* actually tries to help. Get lost, you worthless--”

Wayne had jumped up and slapped Clare sharply across the face. Poor Clare screamed and began to weep and mutter.

“Now see what ya made me do. Goddammit, see what ya made me do. We’re gonna sit down, and you shut up while I figure this out.”

We had been sitting for what seemed like several hours -- I wore no watch. Clare, her head down, was unable to even send me a glance so great was her humiliation. Wayne busied himself making phone calls to find a large enough rental truck for the car to fit in.

By that time, I had memorized all of the room, such as it was, its nicked and stained old furniture, an oppressive dark brown, early fifties. Resting in a corner was one odd piece that I supposed might be antique, a primitive wooden cradle that Lincoln might have slept in. My eyes had just settled on it, as a useful method of escaping the uncertain reality of the present by sliding into a fictional past.

It was at that point that Ragnar walked into the room, without knocking, without announcing himself, he merely walked into the room, hardly even looking very surprised at what he must have already guessed. Ragnar! His sudden presence produced an instant restoration of sanity, standing there in his Levis, rough work boots, and familiar blue flannel shirt. Ragnar! -- nodding at Clare as the nominal head of the household, and immediately sending me a comforting wink, with a curt little smile of reassurance.

Intending to swiftly rise, I let out a barely audible gasp and leaned forward in the musty over-stuffed chair where I had been squirming around for the last two or more hours. But Wayne immediately jumped up and stood in front of me, harboring some idiotically unformed idea that I was still under his control.

“Hey, Ragnar, how’s it going?” Wayne bawled out in the most ludicrous ambivalence imaginable.

Ragnar gave no answer as he walked across the room, pushed Wayne aside, took my hand and pulled my rather stiff body out of the chair.

“You missed your supper, my girl. I have come to see you home. Are you all right?”

“Yes, yes, I am now,” I blurted out with a rush of relief.

“Hey, she’s...hey, wait a minute, you can’t...see, I was just talking to Clare’s friend here. Hell, I’ve got--”

“Shut up, Wayne. You have nothing to say worth hearing.

“Go on out and get in your truck, Wild Vi. We are leaving. Go on now, my girl. You must be hungry. Supper is waiting.”

I got as far as the open side door leading to the porch, then had to stop there to listen and watch. I had begun to shake badly, too much adrenalin. I desperately wanted Ragnar to come. I desperately needed to flee this dismal junkyard prison, but not without Ragnar.

“Now wait a minute, my friend, you can’t just walk in here and--”

“I am no friend of yours, Wayne. You have never made that a possibility, never learned anything worth a friendship. What a waste of a life. I have only one question, easy enough to answer: can you explain why Erik Jensen’s new Mercedes is parked outside?”

“Well, I...it’s a...none of your business.”

“Wayne, try to imagine how lucky you are that I came along. I will give you a head start to return that car exactly where you found it. Think of it: no Sheriff Hiller, no jail time. It is dark outside now, so maybe you can get it back down there without anyone noticing. This is probably one of the luckiest days of your life. On the other hand, if the car does not turn up back where you found it in about half an hour, there will be hell to pay for you. Goodbye, Clare. You will need to put an iced compress on your face.”

In the last moment, Clare looked up with a quick darting glance, her soulful hazel eyes floating in blood-red pools of hurt, shame, and disgust. One side of her woefully aged face was strawberry red.

“Thank you for bringing me home, Viola!” -- a cry of propriety rising above the deep chagrin that had kept her silent. Its pitiful timbre carried a faltering message of concern and misery.

“Of course, Clare, goodbye, goodbye,” I called, “I’m so sorry.”

“Why should you be sorry?” she muttered bitterly.

I felt the urge to rush over and give her a consoling hug, but Wayne was standing above her, ready to engage in an exhausting and futile clash of wills, so I quickly departed.

We crossed the length of the creaking porch, Ragnar, with his arm against my back, his guiding hand gripping my trembling shoulder. He had to duck dangling bunches of drying herbs -- cleanly mollifying as I passed beneath them. Inhaling their familiar scents, I had experienced a sudden conflation of anger and elation, the liberating pungency of fresh lavender, rosemary, sage, and thyme, briefly contemplated within the monstrous incongruity of their enduring usefulness here in this place --

savory herbs of pleasure and healing, carefully gathered as tamed nature's pleasing provisions, the worn hands that picked and bound them cruelly spurned, the diligent head steadily commanding those honestly laboring hands brutishly attacked by nurtured blood kin!

"How did you know...how did you know where I was?" I queried in anxious astonishment as we descended the steps.

"I knew you were with Alfreda, and when you did not return I called her. She and I are more familiar with the ways of the Rotens."

"Not so sure I can drive very well," I said, shivering doubtfully beside my truck. Ragnar put his large hand on my shoulder and turned me around into his arms, his stern voice explicit and instructive.

"*Ja*, you can. I will go ahead of you...I know the roads better. If you want me to stop for any reason honk your horn."

"Oh, wait, there are some things of Clare's in my truck bed. I'm supposed to keep the baskets of mushrooms."

"Then I will remove the rest," Ragnar said and proceeded to do so. Dazed and shaking, I stood within the junk-filled perimeter of a ghostly pale old yard light, trying to recover from the madness I had just experienced.

We could hear Clare's shrill voice inside the house, demanding Wayne's immediate return of the car, her insistent cries interspersed with his barking accusations of betrayal.

"Poor Clare. Incredible...I can't stop shaking."

Ragnar finished laying the boxes on the porch floor and came to give me another reassuring hug. "Calm down now, my girl. Get in your truck. Just aim for a glass of Scotch...fried razor clams...and me."

"It sounds so wonderful and sane," I said with a deep sigh.

Then I snapped to attention and quickly slid behind the wheel, never more eager to reach an agreeable destination.

“Better?” Ragnar asked. I was leaning back against him on the wide leather davenport in his living room, gratefully adhering to his sensible and soothing voice. After a cool glass of Scotch and water, I had found our supper of fried clams irresistible. I still felt slightly stunned, but was slowly settling into grogginess.

“I had no idea I could eat, until the Scotch...the incredible taste of your razors. Now I’m feeling dopey...and like a dope. I know you think I’ve been a fool. Poor Clare. I only wanted--”

“*Nej*, you are wrong about what I am thinking...I am merely glad to have my arms around you. I would never criticize you for being kind, just as I would never have let you go up there if I had known about it...at least not without me. Unfortunately, the timing was miserable. I imagine it is generally risky at the Roten’s -- they seem to go from crisis to crisis. I do not believe Wayne comes around there very often anymore. He has caused too much trouble for them. He is currently the bad boy of that hapless family...their nemesis.”

I did not tell Ragnar that Wayne had threatened me with a pistol. No telling what would have ensued from that. It appeared to me that Clare had, temporarily at least, quashed his crazy idea of its usefulness. Instead, in a need to relieve my shaken equilibrium, I said, “Wayne had an idea he’d force me to go to Seattle in the rental truck he planned to use transporting the car...so I wouldn’t call the police.”

“Tell me no more. It will ruin my evening. I was fair enough to that imbecile tonight. I might have given back what he gave to Clare.

When I called Erik and he told me his car was back in front of his house, he wanted to know how I found out about the theft. Then he answered his own question: *The sheriff tells you everything*. I merely laughed. I told him he had better keep his fancy new machine locked in his garage from now on -- his feed store is a profitable business.”

“After *us*, Wayne was left with no choice. Your consideration offered him a chance he ought to appreciate, your anger informative, producing a useful review of his failings...maybe even a lesson -- your sudden appearance was really a shock. What will become of him?”

“Not much that is good...unless Clare can have some influence. I often see, without excessive bias, how the underdog looks at the world. Understanding and punitive measures seldom meet, however. It could be bad for him. But I was mainly thinking of poor Clare. Despite the efforts of his weary sisters, Wayne was not seriously exposed to a decent set of values. His selfish father was a raw man, hardly a model. For the most part, the boy ran wild.”

“Was your father a model?”

“In many ways...but easily swayed by cant.”

“Did you run a bit wild?”

“Hardly. I had my duties...and I was surrounded by well-meaning women with quick flat hands -- all to the good -- until I got too big for it. But by that time I was made as I am.”

“Well-made. Strange...I did run a little wild...always wildly in love with my environment -- as you must have meant *Wild Vi* -- in love with a mysterious future that hung above me like a sweet ripe plum.”

“*Ja*, wild girl, dreaming girl, you always had the positive influence of Martha and your Gran...and sometimes even me.”

“Yes, I did. Our similar convictions about good influences, about so many things...I’ve come to realize. Back then you all managed to instill humility without dampening that wild enthusiasm.”

“That is how you became Wild Vi.”

I pressed my lips to the palm of his large warm hand, murmuring into the cracked leathery skin, “This strange evening you saved me from who knows what wretched fate. If you hadn’t come--”

“That would never have happened...but I think you will not visit the Roten homestead again. *Koma*, while I am still in your favor,” Ragnar teased, rising and drawing me away from the davenport. “Tonight you can sleep in my bed...no more worries...sleep until the sun finds us.”

A rosy strip of light streaming beneath the blind fell across the pillow and penetrated my closed eyelids.

I yawned. “Is this the reason your bedroom window faces east?” I softly whispered into my slumbering rescuer’s ear.

“Mm? *Ja*, that horizon is my alarm clock. But not so much when you are here, you warm *lille* thing. *Herregud*, now I am fully awake. If you cannot sleep more I will wake you up good.”

I ran my fingers through the tousled silver waves and drew my arms around his neck. “I’m wondering...”

“What?...*What?*”

“How you are going to wake me up *good*.”

“*Faen!* I just remembered I have to meet the arborists today to look at the filbert orchards.”

“When? The sun’s hardly up.”

“Ten o’clock,” Ragnar asserted, throwing back the covers.

“Can’t you stay a little longer...I wanted to ask you something?”

“Not one of your heavy discussions now, I hope.”

I was wounded. I had believed our conversations were equally cherished, often profoundly memorable. I thought of them all day.

“Do I talk too much? I’m sorry. After years of having no one to talk to -- I mean not the way I do with you -- I guess I’m annoyingly loquacious.” I threw off the covers and dove for my clothes, racing into them without letting Ragnar get in a word. “I’ll just have breakfast at my place. See you later...or maybe not. You’ll probably be busy. Anyway, good-bye.”

“Wild Vi, stop! I was too direct and now you are angry. Please do not go away from me like this. It will ruin the day for both of us. You know how I like talking with you, listening to you. Let me fix your breakfast, but no coffee for you...maybe Fern’s calming hot milk. You flew out of bed like a wildcat.”

“Have to learn to keep my mouth shut,” I said, rocking back on my heels without turning around.

“*Nei*, stop it, please. I love to hear your ideas, your witticisms, anything. Do not make me tread so tenderly with you. I enjoy you, you know that, everything about you...except this. But I understand. You have been sensitized by misfortune. I am the one who must learn to keep my mouth shut. But you should know I do not like that. We need to speak freely, unless it is really hurtful.”

“Somehow it was.”

“Then I am sorry. I never mean to hurt you. We will surely talk tonight, as long as you want...and I will listen with pleasure. You will have my full attention...if that is so wonderful. Come and kiss me now,

and I will feed you.”

I was stopped by gray eyes both insistent and patient, yet I felt a twinge of perverseness. His smile was fetching enough to make my heart race. I did not want him to know this, but of course he did. I folded my arms and threw back my head in a feint of stubbornness.

“You are cutting into breakfast time. I want the kiss, my girl.”

I moved cautiously into his proximity. His responding kiss was masterful theft, leaving me with no more argument.

I had cooked dinner, to keep myself gainfully busy, away from self-criticism, and, more importantly, to feed a hungry man who well deserved to be fed. We had creamed chicken fettuccini, along with nearly the last of the chard from the garden, sautéed with garlic and sesame seeds, and a simple salad of thick slices of our huge beefsteak tomatoes, stirred with olive oil, wine vinegar, and slivered scallions also from the garden. Ragnar was pleased and complimentary. We took the remaining Pinot Gris with us to sip before a warming alder fire.

Half sprawled at opposite ends of my massive leather davenport, we were digestively quiet for a while. Then I straightened up, preparing for conversation, but found that I could not initiate anything -- it still seemed to me I had been censured for attempting to speak in a manner lengthier than Ragnar had wished. He rearranged his body with his chin propped on his hand, elbow resting on the davenport arm, looking at me as if to say, *Get on with it. I'm listening.* I stared into the fire, thinking I could initiate nothing that he would enjoy hearing; too unfair after his long day in the orchards.

“You wanted to ask me something this morning,” he prompted.

“You don’t really want to hear anything.”

“I want to hear *something*. Is this yet more punishment for my loose tongue? You had a question. Ask it, my girl.”

“But you see, I have thousands of questions. I’m afraid it’s hopeless.”

“Start with one.” He was grinning at me, and my heart pulsed with a sad thought.

“How soon will you be tired of my eager chatter...or are you already? -- that was not the intended question by the way.”

“Your unintended question, after what I said this morning, deserves no answer, is already answered; however, I remind you that the answer is *never*. Never will I grow tired of your inquiring, speculating, sultry, and even sometimes obnoxious, voice. The intended question, I have not yet heard.”

“You’ve just reminded me of a professor I had, delivering a lecture on semantics. Now I’m expected to ask something meaningful in an atmosphere that--”

“Wild Vi, talk to me without this damned wrangle...use some of the innate good sense I know is there...please.”

“Sorry, I’ve boxed myself into a disappointing corner. Anything I say now will be ludicrous. It was a language of mood...of such adoration and longing...longing to know more of you...after an inspiring night of *us*, inspiration so relative that...now everything is wrong...I”

“*Herregud*, this is laborious! *Ja*, the mood you want is not here, only misunderstanding. I think we will have to finish this upstairs...with more inspiration!” His emphatic voice startled me.

He snatched me from the davenport and strode out to the hall to

ascend the stairs. A swift unclothing followed a weak protest that ended in surprised laughter. Overridden, but how could I complain?

“Inspiration? Here is inspiration.” He drew me close, softly advising in my ear, “The questions will come to you later...or maybe dissolve entirely.”

“What questions?” I whispered into a stream of morning light.

Ragnar muttered mocking complaint into his pillow, which was indistinguishable, then growled out a grainy laugh.

“You have your sense of humor back, *lille sex*.”

“*Ja*, after *lille sex*,” I mimicked.

“Quite a lot.”

“Right now your Viking ancestors would recognize more of you than I do. What happened last night?”

“Which part of last night?”

“The part that rather swiftly got me here.”

“Ah, the good part. You know all of that well enough.”

Ragnar yawned, running curled fingers through his hair, not groggy anymore, rather a little impatient, for such an early hour.

“You’re not often quite that...aggressive.”

“Necessary...we were getting nowhere. At least now you know where I stand...or lie. My Wild Vi, are you in the right mood now to ask me something substantial? Anything?”

“I feel more like telling you something.”

“Is it good?”

“You’ve guessed that I crave details of you.”

“So it appears. What more can I tell you?”

“Everything...or at least small particular things. Do you really know all seven parts of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*?”

Ragnar sat up with surprised laughter. “*Ja*, I do. Certainly I do. Are you expecting me to prove it?”

“I’ll ask the questions. I’m well familiar with that poem, although I doubt I could accurately recite much of it anymore. What induced you to do that?”

“A youth’s good memory and long hours at sea...enamored of words, especially seafaring words.

“This is very interesting, Wild Vi. Not what I expected. You are an unpredictable *lille* thing. What will you ask me now?”

“Have I...changed anything loved in you?” I sprung on him.

Ragnar sat back against his plumped pillow, folded his arms and stared at me with a thoughtful frown. “That is really a very convoluted question. Now I am wondering what you are getting at. Where are you going with this?”

“Can you answer?”

“*Faen!* There are a lot of answers...requiring further questions. Have we not touched on this before?”

“Yes but...please try to answer.”

“Then I will have to guess what you want. Have you changed anything loved? Only you can really know that. Mmm, try this on: I am not impaired by you, but only improved. That fairly well covers it...if the horse is still before the cart.”

“Why am I doing this?”

“I have a few ideas. Sometimes I would like to shake you, shake you hard and say, *Look who you are!* But that is not really what we are

talking about. Love is a special condition, too often preoccupied with the cause of that condition. You want my past, my present, my thoughts and...persuasions. I understand, because I sometimes want the same of you...but I am certain I will never have the entirety of you...so I continue to appreciate whatever you give me. Ask me what you want, you will still have to take me as I am.”

“May I...continue to ask you about yourself?”

“As I have said.”

“Love is not a relative enough word for *love*.”

Ragnar laughed. “*Nei*, it serves its contexts well enough...in every language. When you say it I understand what you mean. It still surprises me...very much, Doctor Ender...and always will.”

“Ma...what if Sylvia came to Boston and lived in my house for a while?” Marcus’ hesitant voice on my house phone inquired.

“What if?” I answered with leaping heart. “Are you asking my permission...my self-reliant adult son?”

“I thought I ought to at least tell you. Without *you*, I wouldn’t even know her. She’s considering it...and...I’ve been wondering if--”

“You’re not getting cold feet?”

“No!...just the opposite. But you have never even been here yourself. It seems a little selfish to--”

“I have been there, dear, have you forgotten?”

“You know what I mean...since we...since I’ve finally *grown up*.”

“Oh, what a lovely way to put it, my darling boy.” I tried to hold down joyous laughter.

“Why don’t you give it a try.”

“It’s a helluva big decision for Sylvia and--”

“And for you, too, but you’ll never know until you try.”

“So...you think it’s reasonable then? I have never sought your opinion of anything in all these years and it seems like I ought to...respect your good judgment.”

“If only good judgment applied to myself. Marcus, I know how independent you are and I love you heaps for asking...or for any reason you can think of. Let me know how it goes. Please tell Sylvia to call me whenever she feels like it.”

It was a day for surprising phone calls, for no sooner had I finished my uplifting conversation with Marcus than Mary was on my phone with unfortunate news.

“Viola, something really ridiculous has happened. I was out walking on my path and fearlessly stepped off to take a branch from my wonderful bay tree. I say fearlessly because Ragnar made the level sides entirely smooth with shells and bark dust, but something apparently dug a hole just where I put my foot. I’ve sprained my ankle. Poor Pilot was so ashamed of himself for not protecting me.”

“Oh, no! Lucky you have your cell phone. I’ll come at once.”

“No, no hurry. I always carry my cell phone when I walk -- by now I can punch it very smoothly. My caretaker, Amy, came and took me to the Hayfield clinic, but I wonder if you could...well, if you could come and stay with me a few days...just until I get back on my feet. I’m not supposed to walk too much right now. You see, Amy can’t stay over. She has a family and only comes during the day twice a week. Lord, I don’t know who else to ask...besides I’d rather have you than anyone. Am I asking too much?”

“Of course not. Do you want me now then?”

“If you could...I mean as soon as it’s convenient. I’m so grateful. My davenport can be made into a bed. Please bring some books along with your clothes, my dear friend.”

“They’ll miss you so much at the farm. I suppose Ragnar hated to let you go.”

“I never saw Ragnar. He was on his way to Hayfield. I saw Peter coming from the barn and told him to tell Ragnar where I was going and why. He’ll understand of course.”

I had brought some things from the garden and freezer, and we had finished my hastily prepared meal of a beef sauté loaded with garden vegetables. I was presently making up my davenport bed with a fresh mound of bedclothes Mary had directed me to find. Mary was listening to television news, her faithful Labrador Pilot asleep beside her big chair. She wore a navy velour housecoat and was settled in her recliner with her wrapped foot gingerly placed on the footrest. I donned a comfortable pair of gray sweats, and soon kicked off my moccasins to sprawl on my bed. I had a certain book in mind. Rising and twisting around on my knees, I reached up to adjust the wall lamp for better light.

Mary turned off the television and placed the remote on the stand beside her chair. Her hearing is finely tuned, and her movements always seem so facile to me, but of course sound is her keyboard and she knows the arrangement of her fairy cottage very well.

“I’m planning to read you more of Sigrid Undset,” I revealed.

“This is going to spoil me so much. Your edifying company and

your heavenly reading. I dearly love your sensuous voice. You might have been a compelling actor...Ragnar has said you are beautiful.”

“I’m an aging child,” I said with laughter. “Now here goes.”

When I finished for the night, Mary said, “I am right there...at the enchanted Nidaros Cathedral in what is now Trondheim, the blue Nordic fjords...the rough wild beauty of that place, stark and full of myths and family vengeance, violence, struggle. I am there so thoroughly. Oh, it’s a hard but magical reality, Viola.”

“Yes, dear, it is.”

We talked quite late, happily about Mary’s early years with her parents. At last I said, “Now let me help you to bed.”

In the morning, after our ablutions, I helped Mary to her chair. She gripped my shoulder and said, “I cannot get used to how small you really are. Your voice and manner are commensurate with such stature I always think you tall. I am taller than you.”

“Yes. I’ll bring your breakfast on a tray. Then you won’t have to get up and sit at the table. What do you eat for breakfast?”

“Just tea and toast with jam...sometimes oatmeal.”

“That’s how you stay so beautifully slender. You have a lovely figure. You were stunning last summer in your black swimsuit.”

“Oh, I’m a knockout...for an aging woman with no eyes.”

I did not respond, because I had not yet achieved a deep enough rapport with Mary to know how to handle that remark. Did it arise from a perpetually bitter wound, or was it more a passing spurt of mild black humor? Or was it Mary simply facing reality? I believe that if we are to deepen our friendship, which I find so promising, we will often have to be quite frank with each other, but in useful ways. I had already come to

Mary in a highly disturbed state, in need of wise counsel. She had been very straightforward, incisive and consoling, smoothly encouraging me to think more rationally. I am not very good at rationality when in mental pain. I think of what Mary has gone through and what she has done for herself as so exemplary that I wonder how I could ever complain to her about anything. But it is the mark of an enduring friendship to be able to do so.

When we had finished our tea and toast, Mary said, “Now I want you to take a walk on my path. Please go immerse yourself in nature for a while. You should not think you have to be here every minute holding my hand. I plan to put my fingers to work on Rimbaud -- the very book Ragnar brought me the day I met you. I keep it right here on my table. What a serendipitous day that was.”

As I walked along in the cool autumn sun, I thought of the life Mary leads, so often alone, although she has a few acquaintances, Britta for instance. Britta intends to cultivate Mary and to see her more often. I hope it is not because Mary is my friend, thus merely a handy pipeline for Ender Farm gossip. Mary is too loyal and circumspect for that ploy anyway. She possesses and offers an adroit understanding and is, luckily for me, conveniently well-read. Her impatience with certain benighted residents of Hayfield amuses me. Already I have learned a fair amount about her childhood with her professorial parents.

Mary’s busy mother and father traveled as often as they could get away, sometimes on sabbatical, with their only child always in tow. This fortunate circumstance continued until Mary matriculated at Stanford, travel resuming during summer vacations. By her cum laude graduation, she had seen a great deal of the world. I was so thankful to hear her

bright memories of cities like Paris and Rome, Hong Kong and Buenos Aires, cities I also know to various degrees. I tried to draw her out, far more desirous of hearing her vivid experiences than of relating my own. Her unique recollections were luminous and riveting. One very special happening was sharply related, as if she had just that moment descended Rome's Spanish Steps on her way for coffee and cannoli.

"I'd been visiting museums and galleries all day and was headed down the steps in a great thirst for some café's richly creamed coffee and wonderful pastry. I was carrying a thick tome of Etruscan art, which I had bought for my father's birthday. My mother was never happy unless I wore a hat in the sun. A strong wind had come up and was about to send my pretty straw boater sailing away. I grabbed for it and dropped my hefty art book. It bounced down that elegant steps and struck a young student on the head. He jumped up, turned around and let out a stream of curses in a strange language I soon realized was Hungarian -- I had been briefly to Budapest, but had never learned to keep that difficult language in my head for very long. I hurried down the steps, blushing and offering an apology. I was seventeen and there stood my first memorable love.

You must try to see me as I was: a slender young girl with long dark hair and large brown eyes full of chagrin. My fierce accuser was a handsome lad, thin and wiry with pale skin and an abundance of wavy black hair. At first his eyes were narrowed, eyes much darker than mine, flashing glints of anger. As he looked me up and down, his face softened into the symmetrical porcelain lineaments that are sometimes observed in fortunate young men -- oh, that image is so clear in my head. I tried to explain what had happened, and found that he spoke fairly good English

but with a thick accent -- we Americans are indeed lucky that so many Europeans know our language; far fewer of us know any of theirs.

We ended up drinking coffee in a small side-street bistro, with gusts of wind stealing our paper napkins away and whipping my hair into my eyes. His parents had fled Hungary in 1956, just as the inspiring anti-Communist revolution was suppressed by Soviet forces. He was very bitter that America had not come to the aid of the revolutionaries when they cried out for help against the Soviet tanks rolling in. They had believed so firmly in democratic principles. Still, the country gradually liberalized under the counter-government; they began privatizing state enterprises -- economics are presently in the doldrums there, just like everywhere else. We were both full of ideals and felt we had much to talk about. Eventually we fell silent, studying each other with awakened confusion, because we realized how little we personally had in common, yet we could not escape the poignant attraction that had so fortuitously drawn us together. Oh, we were so young, but János had grown up very fast, owing to the hardships of his family.

“Good heavens, I’m talking way too much. I hadn’t thought of that in quite some time...or allowed myself to -- it could only have fallen on your ears. Where is he now, my beautiful János? Ah, life.”

I had been at Mary’s a week and had come to find her sharp wit, beguiling revelations, and unaffected, helpful commiseration irresistible attractions. I saw how readily some of these qualities may have captured Roland. Even her unconstrained periods of silence were enduringly beneficial, often leaving me alone to think or work at my laptop, on an

aspect of my writing I could not let alone -- frequently inspired by her unbiased convictions. She also implored me to go out in the refreshing autumn mists or mellow sun. I felt enriched and buoyant, hopeful that I had inspired similar feelings in her. I had not talked much about myself, or been asked to. She explained her heightened volubility as encouraged by my ability to receive it in the right manner. I was flattered indeed, but assumed that her graphic revelations were mostly inspired by her long solitude and my useful proximity. Her alert mind sought to share stored pictures her eyes could no longer advance.

“My confidante, you’ve become my confessor,” Mary asserted, laughing over our breakfast one morning. “I’ve told you so much...but what I didn't mention I know you already know: Ragnar’s conveyance appreciated. I find the episode of my blinding...unspeakable.” Laying aside awakened pain, she said: “I wonder...Ragnar hasn’t communicated with you. I haven’t heard your cell phone chiming.”

“No, it’s not surprising...leaving us this uninterrupted time. It’s a kindness, meant to be beneficial, a healthy separation...like fasting. He’ll call or show up when he’s had enough solitude.”

“But don’t you want to call?”

“I do but I won’t. I’m the irrepressible woman-child, dear Mary. I have to redeem myself...rein in my exuberant emotions.”

“This sounds much too self-effacing, Viola.”

“He well knows *that* diagnosis.”

In the middle of the following week, Britta came to visit Mary while I was out on my morning walk. When I spied her silver Volvo

station wagon parked beside the cottage, I was tempted to backtrack and wander off the path into the fields, as far as I could get. “You coward,” I muttered, sighing and edging toward the kitchen screened door. I might as well try to slip in and get myself a glass of water before the onslaught. I was quietly swallowing when I heard Britta’s voice resound across the uncarpeted, sparsely furnished living room.

“It might well be that they’ve had a falling out and she’s using you as an excuse to get away.”

Mary gave a dismissive hoot of laughter and said, “Britta, you’re deluding yourself. They’re devoted to each other. Besides, it was I who asked for her company.”

“Are you aware of the rumor that she’s emotionally disturbed? I believe I know Ragnar. I don’t think he’s quite up to that. He hasn’t the patience for it. He’ll soon tire of her.”

“Britta, please stop this. I’m thinking the less of you for it, and you couldn’t be more mistaken. Are you sure *you’re* not spreading the rumor yourself? I thought you said you were going to treat her civilly. You’d better stick to that courtesy behind her back as well.”

“Of course I will be courteous. Ragnar has asked me to. I’ve no intention of falling into his bad graces.”

“Let’s change the subject...have any more of my kinds of books become available in your library asylum?”

“The ones you really like I’ve probably already loaned you. I’ll see. Maybe we can order you a few more interesting titles.”

I was almost laughing out loud as I entered the living room and interrupted the conversation. Britta at once called out “Hello, Viola, how was your walk? You’re looking well.”

KEEPING

“Thank you, Britta. You’re looking quite well yourself. What a gorgeous suede pantsuit. Would you call that color buckskin?”

“Buckskin? I suppose...a sort of yellowish gray. Let me pour you some tea. I’ve made tea for us and brought some Danish pastry.”

Following a conversation of mundane trivialities and then Britta’s departure, I said, “That went well. I don’t believe I caught a single snide remark...after I left the kitchen, that is.”

“Oh, Viola, how long were you there?”

“Long enough. I only came that way to brace myself with a glass of water.”

“I’m so sorry Viola. I tried to silence her.”

“No, it’s better to know where we really stand. She’s certainly looking glamorous. I wonder if she dresses that well when she doesn’t expect to encounter me?”

“How would I know? Her perfume smells expensive. We rarely discuss clothes. She intends to make a favorable impression at all times. She’s mentioned buying designer jeans as part of her wardrobe...if that’s considered dressing down. I’ve no idea. I myself try to look nice when I’m expecting company...or going out.”

“It’s what we do. Guess I shouldn’t fault her for that.”

“Considering what you heard, you were very generous in your treatment of our...exasperating diva.”

I then realized that my muffled cell phone chime was announcing contact with the outer world. I hurried to dig it from the pocket of my coat hung over a kitchen chair.

“Are you not interested in hearing anything about Ender Farm or

its inhabitants?” Ragnar asked, his deep voice startling to me.

“I am, of course I am! What’s happening there?”

“Nothing of much interest...since you left. Bussy has fairly well torn up the bottom of a curtain in your living room. You are missed. I can no longer ignore the absence of the Ender of Ender Farm.”

“I’m so glad I’m missed,” I said in a softly inveigling voice. “Tell Bussy I’m very disappointed in his bad behavior...the little beast.”

“Roland wants to come over there...and I will come too, if that is acceptable...in a couple of hours?”

“I’m sure it is...I know it is. We’ll see you then.”

I had helped Mary into the shower, then to don an attractive black sweater and slacks set, which went so stunningly with her svelte figure and black hair and dark glasses. The neatly curved, white-striped jet hair fell just to her shoulders when washed and combed into place. Amy, her accommodating young caretaker, brought her monthly to a Hayfield salon to make certain Mary’s thick hair was smartly cut and easily manageable.

I quickly showered, did a rapid blow-dry, and dressed myself in Levis, loafers, and the soft white London sweater I had arrived in. Britta found me somewhat different earlier: tumbled into old jeans and a gray sweatshirt I wore beneath my down jacket, a casually disheveled outdoor appearance that I’m sure gave her great satisfaction. She had perhaps even pitied Ragnar a little for his *beguiled* indulgence.

“Viola,” Mary began with an anxious voice. We were sitting quietly in the living room awaiting our visitors. “I’ve hesitated, but now I feel I ought to tell you something. There was more that happened on the

day Roland served me his clever little raisin biscuits. You remember that I told you I didn't quite know how to properly handle that relationship?"

"Yes."

"Well, as we were about to part, Roland appeared to indicate how he wanted things to proceed. I read in his strained voice a fair amount of apprehension. He said that he would never be able to sustain any sort of commitment, that he and your Virginia had been in a mutually rewarding relationship of physical pleasure, that was all. Perhaps he thought he was confiding in me rather than delivering a blatant warning. I don't really know. I wasn't able to tell you this before...but I've learned how easy, how beneficial, it is to unburden one's self with you. I have buried my feelings so deeply that I have trouble saying anything very emotional about myself. I was hurt by Roland's disclosure, you see. I'm afraid I responded rather bitterly. I hardly know where it came from, my instant loss of aplomb. I answered him in an icy voice: 'I'm delighted to be your friend and humble critic, Roland, to offer you complimentary advice on your poetry, to listen to you on any other subject. However, I feel we shouldn't be speaking so personally about your private affairs.' He was silent. It was obviously not what he wanted to hear, but I've no idea what he *did* want to hear -- it seemed to me that he hardly knew himself."

I shook my head in surprise, while silently trying to organize some useful speculation before offering any comment. I was saved by the sound of Ragnar's truck doors slamming.

"Oh, Ragnar herring, your wonderful pickled herring!" Mary exclaimed when Ragnar announced his donation to our tea party.

"And a few drops of cold aquavit," Ragnar added, placing on the

kitchen counter beside his generous carton of herring a frosty new bottle of caraway-flavored Scandinavian liquor, aquavit. “Very good company for herring...nice if you have small glasses.”

“This is turning into a splendid lark. Let’s set out my card table, take the folding chairs leaning against the porch wall, and sit in the warm autumn sun. Viola says the sun is bright today.”

Mary, leaning on a kitchen chair, explained to me where to find small glasses, paper napkins, tidbit plates, and a linen cloth for the table. We were soon all gathered outside. Roland had helped Mary to her chair. Settled in warm coats at our table, placed beside a huge whispering clump of pampas, we dished from the platter of spicy herring and tossed down small amounts of aquavit, while exchanging good-humored pleasantries. The aquavit burned my interior in a tantalizing way. When Roland went inside for a carafe of water, to be used as a chaser, Ragnar, in his warm sheepskin coat, leaned toward me, zipped up the collar of my jacket and gave me a soft kiss on the forehead, winking with a secretive greeting. His sunlit crystal eyes silently spoke of his pleasure, and reflected mine. The brilliantly angled bright sun, steadily penetrating the magical blue ether surrounding us, gently supplemented our warmth. Sun-heated nut shells and drying bark dust spread along the path’s even sides gave off a slightly cloying sweet woodsy scent. A faint breeze ruffled the irregular defile of deciduous trees along the disappearing curve of path, the leaves fluttering a vibrant display of golden red and chrome yellow. I tried to portray this incomparable scene to Mary, who was as ardently responsive as if she were seeing it.

“But it’s all so *here and now*, isn’t it?” she insightfully assessed. “Like nothing else...because of us...through your eyes, Viola...oh,

perhaps the colors of van Gogh.”

“Yes, bright chrome brush strokes, a brilliant rhythm flowing through everything...to which we add our wild passion...as he did.”

“Aquavit and poets,” Ragnar commented.

“A perfect alliance,” I said with laughter.

Ecstatically downing another chunk of herring, I declared, “Ah, sweet-wined herring, so perfectly spiced...I could eat this forever.”

“It is why she tolerates me,” Ragnar said with apt playfulness.

Following the downing of several coveted glasses of aquavit, slyly fortifying his heretofore silent nature, Roland said. “Alas, this tipsy poet offers little to such a worthy gathering...perhaps a questionable poem?”

“You have your scintillating conversation to offer us,” Mary immediately replied, “but of course now we must hear the poem.”

“Later maybe,” Roland said, surprisingly agreeable. “Let the Ender Farm principals take a walk in the sun while I help you inside. If Pilot will allow me,” Roland added, staring uncertainly at Mary’s jealous canine companion. “Come, Pilot, over to this side,” Mary directed.

Ragnar stood up, also with willing compliance, and suggested that he carry in the chairs and card table. I washed and dried the diminutive plates and glasses, letting Ragnar restore them to a high shelf.

Roland and Mary were sitting in the living room, already well into argumentative oblivion, exchanging opinions of recent news events.

We strolled out to the wood path, smiling into the sunshine in a complicitous, unhurried silence. “You two men are like conspirators,” I said at last. “Am I wrong in thinking so?”

“*Ja*, for me you are. I had no intention of separating the party, however much I wanted to have you to myself. But I cannot speak for

Roland. He has been unusually quiet. I hope he has found a soul mate. Then he will leave you to me,” Ragnar teased.

We walked to the end of the path and stood at the edge of the field, watching the sinking sun gilding the dry blond grasses fiery red.

I shivered with pleasure, visitations of cold aquavit enhancing a splendid day, this perfectly extended moment escaping transition.

Ragnar opened his coat and drew me against a soft gray flannel shirt, his solid body freshly scented with Royall Lyme.

“Are you warm enough, *lille* girl?”

“Perfect,” I said, smiling up at him.

He lifted me up and kissed me, in suavely prolonged hunger, so that I wished to return to Ender Farm with him at once.

“Herring and aquavit,” I muttered against his rough chin.

“*Ja*, a choice introduction to this...sweet on your mouth.”

“I’ll be home at the end of the week,” I whispered shyly.

“This is to remind you of that,” he said and kissed me until I forgot where I was. At last I stared into his eyes and laughed, because he was laughing too. “Careful, *lille* girl, or we will end up on the grass.

“I think Mary finds you a very helpful companion,” he suggested, wisely returning to earth.

“She’s a wonderful friend...for whom I have you to thank.”

“Thank me this way...there will be no other chance.” We had wrapped ourselves together in a final kiss. “*Herregud*, please come home soon. *Ender Farm* it is called, remember?”

I sat with Mary on her long black davenport, and Roland and Ragnar sat in two black leather chairs. I had turned on the wall sconces

in the darkening room.

“Now we’ll hear your poem,” Mary requested of Roland.

“Sorry, no,” Roland said. “I’ve drunk too much...in fact drank too much before I wrote it. It’s objectively cruel...or the thing would seem so...and certainly be misunderstood.”

“By whom?” I asked.

“Never mind,” Roland pleaded.

“You’ve written a poem to be misunderstood?” Mary questioned.

“Pointedly written...perhaps as counterattack,” Roland hinted.

I saw Mary’s face flush, and decided to agree with Roland that the poem should remain unheard. I had not counted on Mary’s own brave insistence, or should I say her stubborn willingness to receive a requital that Roland had predicted would be misunderstood?

“Get it off your chest,” Mary commanded. “We all know each other well enough to receive your clever *tantrum* with equanimity.”

“It wouldn’t endear me to anyone here. You know I’m incurably direct.”

“But not so much in your poetry,” Mary argued.

“Then you haven’t read it well enough. Sometimes it’s more effective than a well-aimed bullet.”

“We promise to stay out of the line of fire,” Mary coaxed. “You had a reason for writing it, now let us hear it.”

“I’ve cooled off since I mentioned the damned thing...was a fool to ever mention it at all...or write it...haven’t that many friends I value so much...all of you here in this room.”

“Now you have insulated us, and Mary wishes it. Get on with it,” Ragnar said with terse impatience.

KEEPING

I put forth a carefree aquavit laugh, and said, “How can anything hurt us now? Is it written down? I’ll read it. Do you still want to hear it, Mary?”

“At this point, I could not be more unconcerned at the effect.”

“Come on Roland, give it to me...if you have it written down.”

Roland pulled a scrap of paper from his pocket, handed it over with a look of consternation, and made as if to leave the room.

“Oh no you don’t. Sit right back down. The perpetrator awaits his crown.”

“Listen to her, Doctor Ender at it again, stealing my thunder,” Roland adjured.

I laughed, fetching my glasses from a side table, wondering if I would regret this.

As I read, Roland sat forward, leaning on the chair arm, his head propped on his hand and turned away in resistance, perhaps evaluating his work, yet resembling a guilty, justly punishable schoolboy.

HE WHO LIVES ON WORDS WILL NEVER SPELL THIS

Inserted newly in her world,
he feared to analyze
the meaning of her kindness
and penchant to advise.

Muted attention remained his only choice,
or news of labored verse refined,
to keep him perhaps on her mind
and gain a needed voice.

KEEPING

"Your judgment is insightful,
yet I will never change:"
His old defense, not owning
it lay beyond her range.

She turned to him in wonder,
and, at this crucial hour,
retorted with a blunder,
her dulcet words gone sour.

Roland stood up and retreated across the floor, "And now I think you'd better take me home, Ragnar," he implored.

Mary let out a wonderfully rich spate of laughter, which brought me great relief, and surely Roland too.

Then she had her say: "How amazingly concise and accurate you are, Roland...except for two things: The actual meaning of the subject's *kindness and penchant to advise* was in no way grasping, as I believe was so implied, but only affectionate; and your caution never *lay beyond her range*. The lady in question was forgivably provoked by misapprehension. She probably likes to think herself in much better control, however, and she usually is...but no harm done. As you say, nothing at all worth ruining a valued friendship."

"My face is culpably red," Roland answered, edging away with a feeble farewell.

"Oh, stay put," Mary fairly shouted, "The air is so much clearer now, and this party is still in progress."

Our afternoon tea, or afternoon aquavit, had ended in a warmth of pleasure, with a captivating promise of future stimulating gatherings. My stay with Mary was as helpful to me as to her, and she sent me off eager to return and hear more of her rare experiences and *insightful*, as Roland had written, opinions.

Then Hugh returned. He came without announcing himself, and for several days I had no idea he was back in the forest house. It was only when I was out riding Mariner on a cold winter day and something drew me in that direction that I was surprised to see smoke curling from his chimney. I rode up to the house in amazement. Perhaps I should not even make myself known, I thought. After all, he had not called any of us, as far as I knew. Perhaps he *had* called Ragnar. But surely Ragnar would have told me, unless Hugh gave specific instructions that he was not to be disturbed.

Mariner solved the problem of my arrival by his loud whinny. He was well familiar with this destination and expected to have his rest in the shelter behind the house.

Hugh flung open the door and called out with sarcastic humor, “Woman and conveyance around to the back!”

There he stood in moccasins, black turtleneck, and jeans -- his hair an inch or two longer -- enjoying my irrepressible gift of laughter. I thought he looked tired and hoped he was not depressed. Once Mariner was tied in the lean-to, he might have greeted me with a hug; instead he stood indifferently aside at the back door, waiting for me to enter. I was coolly instructed to go into the living room while he heated up leftover coffee.

I sipped the bitter coffee, glancing away from the flickering light of a dying fire in the dark fireplace, first a quick assessment of Hugh, who did not look at me, then politely out the side windows at the chilly gray day. I had sensed the sullenness of his manner, and presumed I was seen as an interloper. Yet how could Hugh, who had come so far from China and another life, appear to hold so much hostility? I believed we had parted amicably, yet I well knew how his strange moods came and went without the least warning or explanation.

“I’m so glad to see you,” I was no longer able to resist.

“Why?”

“Hugh...? Must we always...start all over.”

“From what point?”

“Why are you so angry at me?”

“Am I? Couldn’t I just be angry period?”

“Am I allowed to ask why?”

“No. You’re allowed nothing.”

“Well, I’m glad you’re home, glad you’re back in this house.”

“Right, everything tidy and in its place...just as you like it.”

I stood up. “I seem to have intruded. I’ll go then and see you on another day...when you’re feeling better. Welcome home.”

Hugh remained seated in his large leather chair, his troublesome foot resting on the footrest. His gaunt face was starkly drawn, his head belligerently angled toward the windows and half hidden, the single dark eye visible as an indecipherable shadow, yet menacing.

I turned away, just then aware of the dampness in my eyes, and uttered a nearly silent oath at how easily he could make me cry. As a child, I might have stamped my foot in rage at how accurate he could be

with his quillet tongue. Yes, I wanted him back in this house, the Ender Farm house, happily ensconced in a world that was not really his. But there was more to it than that. I stubbornly still believed I could will his happiness...ridiculous to the point of blindness.

I felt a storm of tears boiling forth and grabbed up my jacket, rushing through the kitchen and out to Mariner. When the screen door banged shut and left me in seclusion, I leaned against Mariner's saddle and wept. Then I heard the door bang again and Hugh came to stand beside me.

"Sorry, sorry, sorry, Lea. Come back in. Please."

"Neither of us can help how we are...how we badly behave," he explained when we were back in the living room, seated in our separate chairs. "Unfortunately, I haven't much tolerance for either of us. It really is inexcusable, but apparently will remain so. You came back into my life and...*you came back into my life!*"

Healing a palm across my wet eyes, I said, "You want to punish me for that. How could I help it? You were living here...*are* here...on my farm...and Marcus--"

"This trifling little patch of land is no longer yours. Have you forgotten? -- thanks to your mother. Have you forgotten that?"

"I've forgotten very little. But some things I only knew more recently. Sorry, what can I do? I'll always have a special kind of love for you, Hugh...hopeful and appreciative...I always will."

"You're too damned candid...facilely candid!" Hugh shouted out, standing up. He rushed toward me far more rapidly than his aching foot could bear. I shrank back as he reached into his pocket and handed me a crumpled tissue. He leaned down over me as I wiped my eyes, and said

in an angry voice, “Do you realize how damned difficult it is to hear this self-serving slop from you?”

“Don’t talk to me like that. You’re better than that...so much better. You have a brilliant voice...precisely fitting words you can play with so eloquently. I welcome your presence in this house...and in my life, as much as you can tolerate. You can’t change that.”

“The hell I can’t. I’ll sell this place and leave for good.”

“My God! You wouldn’t do that. You *wouldn’t!* Someone else in this house? It’s yours...*yours!*”

“No! You imagine it’s still yours. The incongruity of me here is a blasphemy on Ender Farm.”

“Oh, don’t say that. You don’t care a thing about Ender Farm.”

“Right. It’s a bloody obsolete monstrosity!”

“You’re only saying that to hurt me. If you believe I still think of this place as mine, yes, I do...in my heart...the history of it...maybe I think of it as mine and therefore yours.”

“I ought to slap you for saying that. If Ragnar were here, would you talk to me like this?”

“Yes, if I had to convince you of something. You really hurt me, Hugh...throwing such carefully spoken words back at me as *slop*. *Why?*”

“That’s what you want to hear, isn’t it? I’ll never say it. You know the answer...as if it were flashing across the sky. You want me to go on suffering here, suffering with inadequacy, a self-knowledge that shuts you out...remain here so you can feel comfortable.”

“I’ve never really felt very comfortable about anything in my life. There’s too much misery in the world for that.”

Hugh had thrown himself back into his chair, his head slumped

down for several minutes in silence. I had become fearful of saying anything, as if I instinctively knew what was happening. His face was softening, slowly evolving into another Hugh. Finally he spoke, with an answer that was supposed to substantiate everything, thereby dismissing every cruelty up to this point. Essential Hugh.

“Have you realized that I’m mostly angry at myself...for staying here and taking it...for being what I am? At first, I was too damned ill to be anywhere else, and then there was *you*...and then, incredibly, there was Marcus -- I stayed with him in Boston on the way back here.”

“Why don’t you say, on the way *home*? This is your home.”

“On the way home,” Hugh repeated with surprising obedience, and I knew that, however he saw it, he was indeed *home*, the only true home he had ever known and would ever know. In regard to Hugh, I was not certain of anything but the core of his nature.

“I’m going now,” I said, already hoping for another better day. “No matter what you say, or how you are at any given moment, I still believe I know you. I’m glad you’re here. I do care for you.”

“You think that gives me pleasure? Get!” he shouted. “And don’t come back until you can stop talking like this.”

“Forgive me for coming here...with the truth you cannot bear,” I obstinately pleaded as I left.

“Forgive my existence!” he shouted back.

I cried all the way home, nearly reveling in misery, along with the shifting colors of the late afternoon’s blazing horizon beyond the winter trees, the crimson dusk rippling through my tears.

I stubbornly wished that Hugh would go back to whatever he was doing when I arrived, and not touch any alcohol.

As I put away the tack, I was glad Ragnar was not at the tack room as he so often was. I even went so far as to hope that he was in Hayfield talking to Britta, the pain of that thought assuaging my guilt at giving so much unwanted attention to Hugh. I would continue to give it to a starving man, even if he threw it back in my face. There was that other guilt: I could never jump into Hugh's lap and be the adoring child I sometimes was with Ragnar. Does a part of us not forever remain in childhood, embrace it, love it, need it? In Hugh's presence, I always felt compelled to be very strong and brilliant and dauntless, however much I failed. When quite a young woman, I had wanted to demonstrate to him how smart and capable I was, desperately trying to keep up with his easy brilliance. Somehow that deeply ingrained attitude has continued up to the present moment. Yet, he can so easily make me cry like a wretched child. How pitiful we are, I thought, and how I both want Ragnar and do not want him near me at this moment.

I went early to bed without touching any food, and Ragnar found me there. I pretended sound sleep, but he is uncannily tuned to my most difficult moods. Somehow aware that I had eaten nothing, he turned on the bedside lamp and handed me a cup of warm milk.

“Drink this or you will only thrash around all night.”

“You don't have to experience the *thrashing around*.”

“You do not want me here?”

“I always want you here...but not to punish you.”

Ragnar, in jeans, flannel shirt, and stocking feet, sprawled on the chaise lounge across the room and waited for me to drink.

“What has he done to you now?”

I set the half empty mug down on the night table and folded my

arms. “Why didn’t you tell me he was back?”

“By now you know why. He was in no mood safe enough to have you around.”

“It’s all right,” I said. “Everything is all right.”

“Obviously not, Wild Vi. Your beautiful eyes are red.”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“All right, but do not lie to me, please. Let us not come to that. I know you too well and our trust is important -- it works both ways. I am here if you need me. Good night then.”

Ragnar stood up to leave, his tall frame already turning away.

“No, *no!* Don’t you dare leave this room. If I *need* you? When did I not? Please come back...if you can tolerate this stupid misery. I only want everyone’s happiness...that’s all I’ve ever wanted.”

“All? That is a helluva lot, *lille* girl. You are way too intelligent to say that...or believe it possible in any consistent manner.”

“I know. I seem to have slipped, or fallen, into a bottomless pool of romantic subjectivism...drowning for escape...but it’s the cynicism, you might say, even the wisdom I’ve achieved, that’s killing me.”

“Ja, now you are talking about reality, about knowing too much of it. To live sanely, you belong somewhere in the middle, between hope and reality. That is what imaginative art does, cathartic art...your writing; it entices us to know and to feel while removing us from our own pain; at the same time describing an actual commonality that keeps us sane. You know this.” He winked at me. “Now if you want *my* happiness, all you have to do is recognize my existence right here in your life...recognize it in your special way.”

“Rescued again,” I conceded, offering my outstretched arms.”

“If I had known you were going there, I would have stopped you,” Ragnar said, as he set a plate of scrambled eggs before me.

“Why are you always feeding me?” I said, changing the subject.

“I like to feed you. I have to feed you. I have to keep you from hurting yourself. You have too much guilt.”

Ragnar sat down and sprinkled pepper over his chive and cheese scrambled eggs. “Anyway, eat...then we will talk.”

I quietly finished as much as I wanted and finally said, “I can’t help Hugh. Why have I no effect whatever?”

Ragnar took a swallow of coffee and said, “But that is the point, Wild Vi. You have unavoidable effect. He has had time to think about your recent appearance, to think about a love entirely new to him. It has little to do with his youthful lust -- those short happy memories with you have retained only an innocent purity; linked to you but locked away. The love he has now is partly admiration, like looking at a fine work of art and knowing you could never have done it. He wants to be more like you and cannot be. It must have begun with his hard street life in San Francisco, the overt violence in his nature, a fierce defensiveness. Your presence surely exacerbates him. You are soft and attractive and very bright. You can overcome with those features, without even being aware of it...and he knows he cannot have you or be you. He is hard and bitter and untrusting...only impressive in his brilliance, and still perhaps in his mature good looks. But you are part of his early awareness of something good, and you gave him a great unexpected gift, however late in arriving, a dotting son. No other woman did that. He mentioned to me that he has been with Marcus. Your son longs for a unified family, and perhaps

this has set Hugh off.”

“My God, you are incisive. I should have talked to you much sooner -- would have, but it seemed like a violation of us.”

“You have talked about it some, from time to time.”

“But not like this. He had two wives and... I know it’s none of my business, but how on earth did he treat them?”

“The Chinese wife: probably with sustained fascination, delving into a culture he loves; from her he had a daughter, at least for a while, then he suffered the loss of both. The young German reporter in Beirut must have been treated more as a protégé, with a protective fondness for a companion he could cultivate, influence, and stun with his brilliance. This is just speculation.”

“You’ve speculated very convincingly.”

“I have only done so for your edification. Another opinion is sometimes useful.”

“What understatement. I’ve been...too much in the heat of it, the emotion of it, to see it as you do. Yet I believe I instinctively know the things you say about him.”

“Of course you do. You are too perceptive not to. Wild Vi, I find myself in the uncomfortable position of Hugh’s apologist. I have to defend him with compassion, as I always defend you before him.”

“I expect you to defend him. He admires you very much, and I know you care for him. He never speaks roughly to you, I imagine.”

“Sometimes, depending on his mood, he speaks roughly *with* me, but not *at* me, no, never that. I believe he generally expects me to correct him when he is angry...when his anger is uncontainable.”

“Do you?”

“*Ja*...in a carefully oblique manner.”

“Lord, you’re important to him.”

“You are more so, Wild Vi. That is why his anger with you is so great. It is his defense, the dark side of a love that must be suppressed, or at least remain out of sight. That is why you make him so angry. You refuse to conduct yourself according to his rules. You know this, do you not?”

“Do I? I’m in school here...in a most fascinating expository class. The unfamiliar part is my own unwieldy emotion -- it overshadows my reason. He reduces me to tears.”

“*Ja*, unfortunately. You are drawn to him like a magnet. For all you once shared with him in a formative time he has a part of you.”

“You have a greater part.”

“But you have a maternal, care-giving nature, and your heart beats for positive change. You cannot give him enough without all the rest, Wild Vi. It is nearly tragic, because Hugh knows a relationship with him would not work. He would have to become someone else.”

“He would have to become you.”

“Ah. Well, this speculation serves no purpose. In a few ways, I am sorry for all of us...but never sorry I have you. I will keep you as long as I can...as long as you want.”

“If *you* want, you will keep me for what we here on earth call forever. But I’m not of much use lately. I do nothing on this farm but follow your advice. I’m ineffectually rustivating. Actually, it’s the thing I wanted to talk to you about. Remember when I touched upon it, and caused you some consternation?”

“*Ja*, I remember.”

“Well, it’s only that I want to be more involved...not alone but involved in the farm with *you*. I could do a lot more.”

Ragnar offered me one of his censorious looks and said, “After all those taxing years of giving yourself...giving yourself to the point of impairment, do you not deserve to come home and, for a time at least, merely be Viola Ender of Ender Farm?”

“Floating on my lily pad?” I said with mild sarcasm. Then I smiled broadly. “It fascinates me to hear you say my actual name.”

“*Ja?* You are easily fascinated. For me, you are Wild Vi. And you can learn anything you want in order to run this place. I think you already know plenty.”

“But never enough to dispense with you.”

“You can dispense with me now for a few hours. Will you be all right today? I have to meet the arborists and see that the orchards are ready for the coldest part of winter.”

“I’ll be all right -- the child needs no babysitting at the moment. I’m going to make a huge pot of soup, throw everything into the pot I can find lying around.”

“Go easy on the *everything* and I may join you for supper.”

Ragnar was laughing as he donned his leather jacket and fedora. He kissed me long at the back door, and said, “Wild Vi, you can be a fine strong woman when you feel this *uforgjengelig* farm in your bones.”

“What?”

“A farm that will not perish,” he said, and winked at me as he hastened away to his calling. *A farm that will not perish* -- a far cry from Hugh’s cruel definition of an obsolete monstrosity.

The soup was bubbling away on the stove when I heard a furious pounding on the front door. I hurried into the hall, hoping the fussy door would not stick, as lately I opened it so infrequently. But Ragnar's skillful repair prevailed and it opened smoothly. There stood Hugh in jeans and black leather jacket. His helmet was lying on the veranda floor, his thoroughly mussed, gray-templed black hair giving him a strange wild appearance. With the noisy stove fan running, I had not even heard his motorcycle. He ran his fingers through his hair and looked at me as if he expected the door to slam in his face.

I pulled down the rumpled hem of my old blue turtleneck and ran my hands nervously over my jeans.

"How the hell can you go without shoes in this weather? Not even any socks," he said, staring at my bare feet.

I too stared at my feet in absent-minded surprise -- I like to cook barefoot, but Ragnar has gotten me to at least put on thongs when we're in the kitchen together. I did not mention any of this.

"I was cooking," I said -- of course a baffling non sequitur.

"That explains everything," he replied with an ironic grin. "Are you going to let me in?"

"Of course, come in. I'm just a little surprised. To what do I owe this astonishing appearance?"

"I rarely seek to astonish," he corrected, throwing his jacket over a kitchen chair and slouching down into another. He glanced toward my furiously bubbling soup and said, "Better turn that stuff down before it flies out of the pot."

I turned off the burner. "It's finished."

Hugh was again staring at my feet. “Can’t you put something on your feet? I’d feel a hell of a lot better.”

“You came here to see that I’m shod, then?” This caused a short return of laughter from Hugh. I could not resist responding laughter at such an infrequent sound. Perhaps a promising beginning.

I opened the broom closet and pulled out a pair of shearling-lined brown moccasins, tugging them on. “There, I’m decent. Actually, the floor’s pretty clean,” I reassured.

“Doubtless...with Ragnar around...but his floors are heated.”

“At least you’re concerned about part of me,” I dared to say.

“Perfect segue. I’m concerned about *all* of you. That’s why I dragged myself over here in this freeze-up.”

“That’s...encouraging,” I offered cautiously.

“True to your oversensitive nature, I suppose you rode home yesterday bawling.”

“Leave me some pride.”

“Why? Pride is mostly detrimental. Ask me about it. *Pride goeth before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.*”

“I didn’t think you went in for Proverbs.”

“Sometimes...when apropos.”

“Want a glass of wine?”

“Sure. Why not? One innocent glass.”

As I was opening the cupboard for the Cabernet, Bugsy, hearing a cupboard door opening, rushed into the kitchen, then spun completely around his recently emptied bowl and meowed plaintively.

“No, you little beggar,” I scolded.

He meowed a loud complaint, then tapped Hugh’s Levi cuff and

sped away.

“Your cat is a wacko.”

“Yes, but he keeps me sane. Here, take this and we’ll go into the living room.”

Hugh had hardly settled on the davenport with his wine when I decided to say some things perhaps startling. Before I could begin, he stood up to build a fire, crumpling old newspapers from the wood box and setting in kindling, topped off with a large alder log. He struck a match, eased it slowly along the papers, then turned around and smiled. “Winter fires again,” he said as he picked up his wine glass.

How generous and irresistible his smile. Was his appeasement meant to consist of mere felicitous behavior, a wordless evasion of his previous wounding actions? Often the verbal becomes a weapon, yet his insightful speech can be delivered with stunning eloquence whenever he chooses. Hours before his arrival, I had already come to realize how I must respond to what happened yesterday, especially after my talk with Ragnar. A great deal had been clarified, or verified.

I remained huddled at the other end of the long wine leather davenport, drawing myself up to speak with some trepidation.

“I’m glad you came here. I was wondering how I could apologize without interloping. A phone call seemed inconsiderate. It was wrong of me to come to your place and speak as I did, wrong of me to invade your privacy and insist upon things I have no right to say.”

Hugh looked at me keenly, perhaps surprised -- anymore than that I could not ascertain just then. Although I may have appeared cool, I was struggling for complete sincerity, hoping I would not be thought ingratiating, maudlin, or self-serving. Hugh did not respond by word or

readable expression as I continued.

“I’ve been so assuming, so selfish I’m ashamed. My God, I who love words feel these are inadequate and clumsy...no matter how I say them. But I want you to know that you’re always welcome here, in my home, at my table, alone or with anyone you care to bring. I hope you can forgive me...but perhaps not. I won’t come to your place anymore, disturb you in any way. I promise you that. *I promise.*”

Hugh picked up his wine glass and drained it. When he stood up I thought he was going to leave. I was prepared to accept that. But he merely jabbed a precariously burning log into place and sat back down, looking at me quietly. I lowered my head and stared at my hands, then at the fire, until I heard his voice and looked at him as calmly and civilly as I could manage.

“So you want me to...” he began then stopped. “I spent several days with Marcus. There is a lot of you in him. I strongly sense that he thinks I’ve treated you badly...that I treated you wrong long ago. I don’t know how I could have--”

“No, you didn’t. You couldn’t. You didn’t know. Marcus surely knows that. If there was anyone to blame it was me. I was so incredibly young, and I did what I was told was best for everyone...for you. What could you have done then? You had plans, a life of your own.”

“Christ, so did you.”

“I’m afraid I was just an innocent child who thought I was in love -- delusion or not, I do remember how wonderful it felt. I wanted your happiness, that was all. What do children know of life? When at last I tried to find you, tell you, you had vanished. I nearly collapsed when I found you were here. I knew I’d have to tell you...that day when I went

home so drunk I knew that much. I also knew that Marcus hated me. I was far from well...it was all too much to...hardly bearable.”

“And you had to fear *me*. Ever since then you’ve had to fear me: half mad, unpredictable, intimidating -- I’ve been consistent in that, haven’t I? -- consistently cruel. I know very well how to act humanely, know how I should have acted with you. I just didn’t...*don’t* do it. This time I arrived back at your stone house morose and angry with myself.”

“It’s very much *your* house now, Hugh...and you...you have no justifiable reason to hate yourself.” I hesitated, fearful of saying anything too personal, but then said, “You are innately good.”

“I came here today to apologize. What happened? Why should *you* apologize? You do have a right to say personal things to me, Lea, to say almost anything you want...without receiving savage verbal abuse. I often like the things you say. If you stay away...it will be my loss, a very sad loss. You...enrich my life. I won’t torture you. That was...at my own expense. But I can’t blame you for not wanting to...don’t cry about it. Jesus, I’ve made you cry...I do that far too easily -- dammit, even when I apologize. I suppose you’re right, you ought to give up on me. Marcus would be angry. He certainly loves you now.”

I had cried, struggled not to but cried, ashamed even of that. The entire sad affair profoundly tore at my insides. I had pulled a crumpled tissue from my pocket and blotted my eyes while Hugh remained fixed in silence, watching me. I was certain he abhorred witnessing my loss of control. I looked up and laughed. “Well, this is some kind of catharsis I suppose,” I offered stupidly. It was not at all a catharsis. I was drowning in sadness and pity. I could hardly say that. I really wanted to throw my

arms around Hugh, like a comforting mother or sister, and tell him that he would be all right, that I would never give up on him. He was right about fear, I was afraid of doing anything of the sort, fearful of unknown consequences. I realized then the extent of his raw vulnerability and how easily I could damage him. I saw his fiercely constructed wall as a shield against his frailty. His incredible power of reasoning, of understanding how to survive when under threat, made him do that, had always made him do that. His dominantly perfected emotion was immutable anger, or so I thought, at least with me.

He stood up and announced, “I’m going into town now. Do you want anything?”

In this wrenching moment, his simple neighborly gesture seemed so incongruous, so grossly insensitive I wanted to scream.

I stood up too and said, “No...no, nothing...thank you.”

Then, nearing the front door he did something in silence, as if not trusting a single word from his mouth. He turned around suddenly and took my head in his hands, his fingers drawing back mussed strands of my hair. His thumbs slid over my cheeks, those dark erudite eyes boring into mine. I stood looking up at him, unable to look anywhere else, dumbfounded when he bent to kiss me fully but tenderly on the mouth. He smelled of wood smoke and fresh country air, and tasted of my Cabernet. His awry mouth curled ever so slightly as he turned away, snatching up his helmet and striding to his motorcycle without looking back. I stared off with an amazed smile, watching him disappear over the gentle rise of road that leads through the fields to the highway.

Ragnar called to apologize because he could not eat my soup. He

had to go into town for a meeting. I was thankful for this, but tried not to sound too happy about it. I did not tell him about Hugh's appearance, did not want to let any of it into the real world. It bore little resemblance to reality, almost as if I had only imagined it. I ran the strange afternoon through my mind over and over. Hugh's tidy fire was still burning in the fireplace so it must have happened. I sat gazing into the fire for what seemed a long time, occasionally adding smaller pieces of alder. What was Hugh doing now? Was he still smiling some as he rode away, as he walked the folksy streets of Hayfield? *No, Viola, that is vanity. You have no such influence, if you ever did.* He had left me in a state of gratitude for his appearance, even though I felt that nothing much had changed. Still, I was hopeful of being proved wrong. I wanted to have a positive effect on his life. I so much hoped to keep him near and agreeable, but I felt I could never again set him off by telling him so. What right had I to want so much and offer so little? Where was it that Ragnar had placed sanity? *Somewhere between hope and reality.*

"I had a great time with Dad," Marcus said on my phone. "He really is incredible to listen to. He's seen so much, been so many places. His insight is amazing...much like yours. There's something enthralling about the way he talks, acts...insightful and ageless."

"I wish you could say that about me," I said with laughter.

"Hey, I know how intelligent you are, Ma...also glamorous as hell. Don't let it go to your head."

"How could I? Mucking around on the farm? You should see me: old clothes and barefoot in my kitchen."

"Doesn't matter -- when you've got it you've got it."

“Is Sylvia there?”

“No, she’s in London right now, due back day after tomorrow.”

“Give her a hug for me.”

“Easily done. We’re about to be snowed in here. How about you?”

“No sign of any yet, but plenty cold and wet.”

“Keep warm, Ma. I’m thinking of you.”

“The same. I love to hear it. Wait, darling...you didn’t...you didn’t...?”

“What?”

“Say anything disturbing about me to Hugh?”

“Only good things. Sorry...I sometimes intimate that he should have...well, that you two should be together.”

“No, we shouldn’t, Marcus, as deeply as I care for him, we really shouldn’t. Please try to refrain from that. I know you don’t realize how it disturbs him. You don’t understand that for Hugh your comments are not merely self-indulgent prodding.”

“Because he loves you. I understand that much.”

“In certain ways, yes, but please darling, leave it alone. You must see that if Hugh and I were any more together than we are now the good relationship we’ve made would be destroyed. However painful it may be for us, Hugh and I both know this...and you have lived enough to fairly well understand it...if you only think about it a little.”

“All right. I’m sorry. Don’t say anything to Ragnar.”

“Of course not...Ragnar understands so much.”

“I never want to upset you. I’ve done way too much of that.”

“And never mind that either. Let’s just enjoy what we have.

Please call often. I so enjoy hearing from you. Are you still coming for Thanksgiving?”

“Wouldn’t miss it. Bye, gorgeous.”

I punched off my phone and stood feeling perplexed. Trying to obviate a dangerous inclination Marcus clung to was a delicate maneuver of love and concern. Had I finally convinced him of the seriousness of his remarks?

“How is your arthritis?” I asked Alfreda. Lately missing her nice down-to-earth company, I had driven over to the March farm on a rather slick highway -- the morning frost taking its time to disperse.

“Oh, same old same old. I smear on ointments, rub things in and keep on going. What choice? We haven’t done this nice coffee klatch thing in a while. I’ve been missing you. Have to get all my news from Ragnar on chess night.”

“We get so embroiled in things, don’t we? You and your family, me and the farm...all the principals involved. Still, I’m so often thinking of you. We do much better in the summer.”

“Ah, summer, how lovely it is. Winter makes it precious.”

“But you know, Alfreda, I’ve always really liked winter, if it isn’t too destructive...a time for taking stock and getting motivated. Winter days can be so harshly pure and clean, beautiful, invigorating. The skies when they open up are stunning.”

“You’re a writer for sure, and I like listening to you.”

We sat in Alfreda’s tidy red and yellow fifties kitchen, on lemon yellow vinyl padded, chrome-framed chairs, at her same-vintage yellow Formica kitchen table, sipping coffee in the pleasure of easy company.

“How’s Bill?”

“Busy with winter chores, still trying to beat Ragnar at chess. I think sometimes your clever man lets him win.”

“No, that isn’t Ragnar. Bill’s a savvy man anyway. I’m so glad they play chess.”

“Aren’t you going to teach class anymore? I’ve been waiting.”

“It got put aside...Britta and so forth. Now, I suppose people won’t want to drive into town.”

“Yes they will. Folks around here don’t stop moving in the winter. It’s just more challenging. And what is this *Britta and so forth?*”

I brushed at a sleeve of my green turtleneck and said, “She told Mary it’s too costly to keep the library open that late at night.”

“Are you kidding? What nonsense. Does Ragnar know about this?”

“No, I didn’t want to start anything. It always makes me look bad...as if I’m attacking her.”

“Heck, she’s certainly attacking *you*. Well, I’m going to encourage Ragnar to get you back to doing what we all need. And while I’m at it I’ll give Britta a small piece of my mind.”

“Alfreda, dear, please go easy there. She’ll know I’ve been talking to you.”

“Sure, so what? This is a nosey county.” Alfreda ran her plump fingers through her childishly frizzy red hair, then pertly dashed a finger against her freckled nose. “How else would we know anything?”

“You’ll do as you please,” I speculated, getting up to refill my cup. “Could I have just one more small slice of your prune cake? It’s out-of-this world delicious.”

“Help yourself. You’d better start getting yourself to the grange potlucks again. Britta takes Ragnar by the arm and parades him around like he’s her one-and-only.”

“I’m more interested in what Ragnar does.”

“Just laughs and puts up with it. Why doesn’t he bring you?”

“Well...we had a little contretemps over it some time back and he’s found that I’m...uncomfortable there.”

“Uh-huh, with the gossips. But why should *you* be uncomfortable there? You’re Viola Ender of Ender Farm.”

“An expression you have in common with Ragnar.”

“Lovely to think so...but my crush on him is harmless...as you surely do know, Viola. Since you, he looks at no other woman.”

“Did he do much of that...look at other women?”

“Before you? Of course. And believe me they looked back.”

Several days later, when Ragnar returned from his chess night with Bill, he called to see if it was too late to come over, then swiftly arrived with a nearly full bottle of The Macallan, kept for me in his cupboard. I had rapidly made a snapping pinewood fire.

“Thought you might like a small sip on a cold winter night.”

“What have I done now?”

Ragnar laughed heartily and said, “Can I not bring you a bottle of scotch without ulterior motive?”

“You want me mellow when you tell me something unpleasant.”

He responded while following me into the living room with my tray of bottle, pitcher of water, and glasses. “I was only going to suggest that maybe you should begin teaching your class...even if it is winter.”

“Oh-ho, Alfreda’s been telling tales,” I said as I poured scotch.

“You are lucky to have her friendship, my girl.”

“You don’t have to remind me. I adore her.”

“Alfreda sets a lot of things straight. I had no idea the library was suddenly off limits at night. No one consulted me.”

“I’m surprised Britta didn’t tell you while she was proprietarily parading you around the grange.”

“Let me laugh without censure. I find this tale-telling amusing. Well, you are still lucky to have Alfreda,” he said with more laughter.

“You can come to the grange with me any time you want...if you are brave enough to shake the hands of well-meaning friends.”

“Which ones?”

“All of them.”

“Even the gossips?”

“They stopped that a long time ago. It ran out of steam. The gossip has switched to others more worthy. I will take care of Britta’s notion of overused electricity. You can resume your class.”

“So kind of you to go against her.” The scotch was doing more than Ragnar had anticipated.

“You are a feisty woman tonight, Wild Vi.”

“When the cat’s away the mice will play.”

“Ah, silly girl, come here.”

Ragnar dragged me across the empty space of davenport and pulled me into his arms, delivering an ardent kiss with a scolding mouth.

“I like The Macallan on your mouth...when used as intended. It is certainly warming me...or is that you?” he teased. “Time to carry you upstairs, I think.”

“I can walk...have you noticed?”

“*Nei*, let me carry you. It amplifies my mood.”

“To think that you can carry me?”

“*Nei*, you are a small thing...it is the pleasure of having you.”

“Do you have me?”

“Sometimes I wonder.”

“Well, you *do* have me, so you can stop wondering.”

And there I was, once again at the head of my class, so to speak. Britta had been promptly overruled. Alfreda called to say that Britta was planning a surprise visit to my class to check up on me. “Why,” I asked, “to see if I’m of sound enough mind to be there?”

“Let her come,” Alfreda said in a huffy voice. “She fancies she can teach the subject better than you. She’ll find out plenty.”

“She can be highly annoying. I’m tired of her tactics. I just might run her tight little ass out of there.”

Alfreda laughed until she said she was crying.

I wondered how I would handle a possible visit from Britta. Should I totally ignore her, or simply nail her with a question she was unable to answer? I had a lot of fun playing with that idea. Just because she was a librarian did not mean she was not something of a lightweight, in the very comprehensive realm of extraordinary literature. I thought of the years I had escaped the here-and-now with my ecstatic nose buried in superb books...how I had studied and researched and studied, and then went to work for an NGO. I finally decided this conjecture was a lot of foolishness and that I would treat Britta just as I did everyone else.

For at least the first two lessons, I did not have to treat her any

way at all, because she was easefully absent. Many of my former students have returned, and this in itself is flattering. I at least choose to see it that way -- my ego not being grandiose. Mary and Alfreda were there, and Peter Karlsen, his intelligent Ragnarian eyes and manner constantly reminding me of his uncle.

We did a little catch-up and socializing at the first meeting. Then I decided my students ought to get *my money's worth* and I sent them away with a hard assignment -- by hard I meant serious: they were to write a two-page critique of a well-known work *they* considered a classic. They would not necessarily have to finish the book in so short a time but read enough pages to form a credible opinion. This would tell me a great deal about their understanding of fiction, what they thought it was, how it worked, and how it was created. "In only two pages!" a pretty new girl named Patricia Nilsen complained -- she is the daughter of my Hayfield doctor. "If I knew how to do that, I'd already be a pretty good writer," last year's teen-aged know-it-all, Gary, muttered. "Aw gee whiz, when do we get to write?" his friend, Colin, added, both aspiring journalists. "You *are* getting to write, and to do that you will all have to do some thinking," I said and bid my class good night.

After the second class, I, Mary, Alfreda, and Janet -- one of the farm wives who had returned to my class and whom I had invited to sit with us -- walked over to the town meeting spot, Booker's, and sat in a booth drinking glasses of a local pale ale. Alfreda already knew Janet quite well, but Mary and I were only acquainted with her from my class. She is a work-weary, gray-haired thin woman in her fifties, with a bland face, except for very soulful faded-blue eyes. During class, I noticed a certain distraction and sadness in her face. I am specially tuned to such

moods and I invited her to come with us. To open her up a bit, I made the mistake of asking about any children she might have, generally a voluble subject. Alfreda sent me a strongly messaged look but it was too late to retract my question.

“My son was killed in a tractor accident four years ago. My daughter is in New York, working in an advertising agency. I don’t hear much from her,” Janet tersely informed us, her tight lips barely opening, taut hands clenched over the breast of her white blouse, as if something were caught in her throat.

There was a brief silence, then Mary and I both spoke at once. I let Mary continue, believing she would likely say something far more meaningful than I.

“That is a heavy load to carry, Janet. But it’s really a good thing you’re in our class. There’s a heap of understanding right here at this table. Reading good books and writing are actually wonderful journeys both into and away from parts of the self. I mean, you can use different perspectives and go beyond so much.”

“Yes”, I agreed. “Of course, everything begins with the mind, and if you can tap into its creative drive you might well be headed for moments of blissful discovery. The good thing is that there’s no end to the process. We always have the capacity to learn and enjoy more.”

“Makes a fine overhaul,” Alfreda said, and we all laughed, *all*, including Janet. Her listless face then bloomed with true *character*, the unconscious human composite of another that we can observe with great pleasure and benefit. Now what lay beneath? As with myself, that was the part of herself she was still discovering, would forever be discovering. Gradually I will come to know her, as I am coming to know all of those

in my class interested enough to come back. Britta has so far not entered the classroom.

I was surprised when Mira Anderson stopped in one day, the former care-taker of Ender house, whose husband Raymond had, until last year, for many years custom-farmed for us. She is aging gracefully, but Raymond, who reluctantly retired in his eighties, now walks with a cane, I was told. Strenuous farm work takes its toll, yet Raymond, like so many inured farmers, had never wished for any other life.

Mira's actions are nearly always directed by family events, and I wondered what she would reveal over tea and the lemon pound cake I had hastily set before us in the living room.

"May and Linda will both be away at college now, and they've agreed with us that they should sell their horses. I am sorry to see it, the swift passing of time, but they cannot expect you to board horses they will not be able to ride."

"Of course not," I said, at once realizing how much Mariner and Legs meant to me, and to Ragnar and the farm. I then made a very quick decision, even as Mira was smoothing the way.

"I know how much you care for the animals...have enjoyed riding them, so I--"

"Quote me a price, Mira, and I'll make you out a check."

Mira drew up her work-honed frame, pulling at her old brown sweater. Her dark little eyes sparkled beneath her bangs of bobbed gray hair.

"I pret-near expected it, Viola. I'm so glad the horses will stay on Ender Farm. They're at home here now. So, you can go right on

enjoying them.” She pawed through her tattered black leather handbag, withdrawing a slip of paper with a price for the horses and tack, while I laughed softly at her guileless intent.

“Whenever the girls want to ride, the horses will be here for them,” I said filling her tea cup.

“Thank you, Viola.” She eyed me more intently, as if deciding whether or not to speak, then said, “I always thought you were so lucky to have Ragnar...but I do think he’s quite lucky too.”

“How kind of you to say so.”

“It’s just the truth. Ragnar has sure been good for this farm, what with...well, with Niklas not caring and Martha loving it so. After Niklas met with that terrible accident, we all thought Ragnar and Martha would...but it didn’t work out that way. I mean--”

“Yes,” I said quickly. “Not all things are predictable. Mother and Hugh’s father -- the whole county knows a little of how it was.”

“Isn’t *that* the truth. Why, I could tell you some things...that is I could tell you how Ragnar looked after Martha.”

She hesitated a moment, but I knew she was going to tell me. I thought of her revelation as a gift from a newly trusting friend.

“One time Raymond was over helping with the haying...well then, Martha and her widower friend were out walking in the orchard near the stone house. Niklas was up to Hayfield, where he liked to go, you know. But he came home earlier than usual, pretty drunk, and started looking for Martha. Ragnar was not far out in the new hay with Raymond, but he dropped his fork and disappeared when he caught sight of Niklas. Of course he went over there to tell Martha. She came back just in time to see Ragnar taking a rifle away from Niklas. Why, my Lord, Raymond

thought sure Niklas was going to shoot Martha...just for not being at his beck and call...or shoot Ragnar!...but, no, Niklas insisted he was going rabbit hunting, and Ragnar got it all settled down somehow...oh, a few more times like that. I don't believe Niklas ever knew that much about Martha's widower friend...too busy with his own... It wasn't that easy in those days around here. Maybe I shouldn't bring up the past. I was just thinking of...some things you never saw...and probably never knew. Poor Martha, only wanting a little happiness. I sure hope she had some. She did love this farm. I tell you, I'm so glad to see Ragnar now with...a good Ender. How many more times will I be seeing you, Viola, to tell you these things? Well, now I've talked too much and stayed too long. May and Linda will sure be glad about the horses. I'm right proud of those two grandchildren -- both girls liking to study the way they do...said they sure liked your class over at the library."

When I finally waved good-bye to kindly, well-meaning Mira I did not know whether to laugh or cry...sad old memories...damp humor in my eyes. Now I own two horses that seem as though they were always mine.

In the morning I awoke still thinking about Mira's story. The night before, Ragnar had been at one of his meetings, and I had not seen him for almost a day and a half. I awoke so early I thought he might have just risen himself, so I walked over to his cabin. The morning was wrapped in eerily silent fog. I walked down the holly lane through the drifting opaque white mist, thinking about having a steaming warm cup of Ragnar's coffee while I told him about the horses. But Ragnar was not there. Neither man nor truck. I took my phone from my pocket but found Ragnar's phone turned off. Of course he could be in a hundred

places, but I called the March's. Alfreda said Ragnar had not been there and that she had no idea of his plans for the day. She wanted to talk more but I was beginning to worry. I said I would talk to her later and gave a falsely cheery good-bye. Why should I be so worried? I certainly knew a few days could go by with Ragnar engaged in his own affairs. Yet he always got in touch with me at some point. I called Roland.

“No, fair chatelaine, I haven't seen him. Leave the man alone, he'll come to you when he can.”

“But you don't understand, Roland. He doesn't do this.”

“Well, now he has. I would not worry at all.”

“I would. I *am* worrying,” I said and punched off.

When I had called everyone I could think of, without learning anything, I saddled Mariner and rode instinctively into the woods, maybe as if Ragnar's strong will were directing me. I rode beside the rising field leading to the pond, as far as a vehicle could go, and there at the edge of the field I saw Ragnar's truck. He was not nearby or anywhere in sight. I tied Mariner to a tree limb on the narrow path leading toward the pond, and began to walk, actually to run. I had somehow gotten into a state of absolute panic, fear, terror, tears streaming down my face. A briar caught me and pulled me back. I ripped myself free and kept running, slapping away branches as I went.

Ragnar was sitting against our tree by the pond. He stood up in shocked surprise. I ran straight toward him, throwing my arms around him and weeping against his old leather jacket.

“Wild Vi! Wild Vi?” he said, stroking his fingers through my hair. He lifted my hand, which I only then realized was stinging and bleeding from thorn pricks. “Herregud, look at this,” he scolded, lifting my hand

to examine it. “What is it? What in hell has caused this?”

“*You!*” I cried. “I thought you...I thought something...” I was unable to finish, and fell silent with a sudden awkward realization.

Now that I had found him entirely whole, still breathing and speaking, I was filled with anger, seething anger at myself for coming apart so easily. “Sorry, never mind, just crazy me!” I managed, backing up and then turning quickly around. I began to run as swiftly away as I had run toward the pond, futilely fleeing from my hopeless state, my emotional stupidity, my selfish interference. How idiotic I must have appeared, I thought. I had just reached Mariner, and was untying the reins when Ragnar grabbed my shoulder and turned me around, holding me inescapably.

“Stop this! Stop it now.”

He grabbed Mariner’s fallen reins and began walking horse and woman back to his truck in silence. I was so miserably humiliated I resembled a frenzied wild animal looking for a chance to leap away.

We sat in the truck, Ragnar holding tensed hands at the bottom of the steering wheel, looking at me then out over the fields, and quietly waiting. I had turned to stone and could show no emotion.

“Are you going to say anything? Why did you come here?”

“If you don’t know--”

“I think I know. I want *you* to tell me.”

“You want me to humiliate myself. I won’t.”

“Good for you, *lille* girl, but this is ridiculous.”

I stared at my hand, which was slowly trickling blood.

“Getting blood all over my truck,” he complained in a startlingly sane, almost humorous voice. “Here, let me...”

Ragnar reached across me into the glove box. Snatching at a tin of Band Aids, he began working on my hand.

I burst into tears.

“Please just let me get on Mariner and go home.”

“All right, but I will be there when you arrive.”

He got out, came around to my side, opened the door, lifted me down and held me against him for a solemn moment. Then I was rather abruptly helped on Mariner and handed the reins.

“Work some of this out of you on the way home, Wild Vi.”

I let Mariner plod slowly home, thinking of Ragnar’s suggestion. He walked toward me from the tack room, glancing at me but saying nothing as he led Mariner away to remove the tack. I turned around and hurried toward the house, not *my* house at that moment, Mama’s.

There was a fire roaring in the fireplace, and a cup of tea waiting for me on the coffee table. How nice and dependably reassuring this all was for the wayward hysterical child. I was not going to get away from this as dumbly frantic as a loosed wild animal. I would have to speak and to somehow absolve myself. I did not think I deserved absolution, but rather deserved to be shut in my room, as Mama teased but had never, ever done. Perhaps she should have, except that I could never go against my mother...nothing serious I could remember anyway -- maybe when I was very young and quite selfish.

I decided to take a shower, undressing and ripping off Ragnar’s bandages, letting very warm water fall over me for mindless minutes. I did not want to face him, having laid myself bare. Maybe he will get tired of this and go back to his peaceful cabin, I thought. He was stoking the

fire when I came into the living room.

“I just reheated your tea.”

“Oh...thank you. Why are you so kind to me?”

“Am I not usually kind to you?”

“I think I’ve broken a very obvious, but unspoken, rule.”

Fearing his certain disappointment, I had not looked at him. This he did not like.

“You think too much. Nothing has changed. Please look at me. You are still Viola Ender of Ender Farm, entitled to give orders. You are an intelligent woman...*woman-child*. Look at me!”

I looked. At this prepossessing man: his cloud gray eyes and smooth fawn lips, his high lean cheeks, tan and weathered; his waves of silver hair; his beautiful rough, rough hands; this unstudied outdoorsman still in his field clothes, yet always so trig -- as the British express that healthy, well-groomed appearance; this tall Norwegian seaman, farmer, chef, musician, technician, mediator, and intellectual explorer; this wise, so well known and forever mysterious man; and this -- most amazing of all -- apparent lover of me.

“I violated your peaceful reverie with shameful noise.”

“*Nej*, not just that. You were afraid. You have lost too much and you will never get over it. Wild Vi, sometimes I like to be alone in nature...to think...I have always done so. I should not have turned off my phone.”

“*Please* always turn off your darn phone whenever you want to be alone. Don’t let me change you...*please!*”

“I have acquired a certain responsibility for you, Wild Vi...an accountability far more pleasure than burden. You yourself claim some

obligation to me.”

“Yes...of course I do...part of why I had such fear.”

“*Ja*, you will have to stop that...but I will not turn off my phone again...a sacrifice I do not mind. I can see who is calling and answer as I please.”

“Still, it’s an incursion.”

“Not for long. Forget about it. How is your hand?”

“Just a little puffy...those wicked briars.”

“Come and sit by me, let me see your hand.”

I sat close to Ragnar on the davenport, gazed a minute at the fire and then muttered, “Forgive me.”

He examined my hand as he spoke. “If you think you need to be forgiven...forgive me too.” He leaned back, reached into his pocket and held forth a tube of anti-biotic cream. “Give me your hand.”

“God, you are so methodical...you think of everything.”

“Not quite everything: I turned off my phone.” He winked at me, then gently smeared the cream over my puffed red scars.

“Mira Anderson was here yesterday. I have things to tell you.”

“*Ja*, you bought the horses. Good for you.”

“Lord, do you know everything?”

“About you I know a lot. It has been too long since I held you. You can tell me all about it later.”

“So you see, I’ve learned something more about you from Mira,” I said, pushing away my half-eaten breakfast of scrambled eggs.

“You already knew I looked after Martha,” Ragnar reminded me, as he slid my abandoned eggs onto his plate.

“I think you loved her...and...I remind you of her.”

Ragnar stopped chewing and looked steadily at me. “*Ja*, I did love her as a friend, but you are wrong. You do not remind me of her, not very much, except in your humanity.” He refilled my coffee cup and went on with his deconstruction of my supposition. “You know you are willful and quick-tempered...sometimes like your father. Despite your new dependence on me, I am dazzled by your *in*dependence...years of it. You do not quite realize that if you had found me floating in the pond yesterday, face down, you would be able to finish your life without me. You did it before, you can do it again.”

“My God, that’s horrible, *horrible!*” I said jumping up.

“You see what I mean. Sit down. We are not about to test my assumption. I have to worry about you...because strong emotion so often overrides your good sense...your excellent reasoning power. But,” and here Ragnar gave a long sigh, “emotion is the state that extends your receptivity to the negative and positive...in a philosophical sense and a creative sense having little to do with logic. You certainly know what Keats called that.”

“Negative capability.”

“*Ja*, professor. Most worthwhile writers possess a sensitivity sometimes painful -- this is not self-indulgent nonsense. Compassion is inherent in you. In certain ways, that painful sensitivity, so early arriving as to seem congenital -- and very likely an amount of it *is* -- is what often makes so much wonderful, as you are unmindfully wonderful and strong, a wonderful argument for life.”

“I can’t contain that much. It makes me want to cry...dammit.”

Ragnar laughed at this. “You are not crying, you are swearing.

That is the irony of a writer.”

“You haven’t read any of my work, how do you know I’m a worthwhile writer?”

“You have spoken with me and others very insightfully about literature. You sing your own lyrics. Your talent has become quite obvious to me. When are you going to *let* me read your work?”

“Whenever you want. I don’t know what you’ll think.”

I stood up and coaxed Ragnar to pull out his chair so I could sit on his lap. I threaded my fingers through his hair, softly kissed his faintly curled mouth, then laid my head on his shoulder.

“Are you buttering up your critic? *Nei*, this I never had...not until you returned, *lille flokse*...it is why you can probably make me do almost anything...or nothing. As to your work, I will always tell you exactly what I think.” Ragnar continued to laugh.

Britta appeared at the back of my class at last. When she walked in and sat down, my face rapidly flushed with hot anger. I immediately thought: *Oh, no you don’t Viola. You will smile and welcome her to the class.* This I did. She returned a curt nod, quite elegantly coiffured and wearing a trim navy pantsuit. Although I had attempted to look presentable in my rose sweater and gray slacks, she always made me feel disheveled. *Avoid the superficial*, I advised myself.

Right in the middle of a discussion concerning the ways Wallace Stevens employed words -- Janet, who had once taken a poetry class, had brought up the poet’s brilliant wordplay -- Britta said, “It seems wrong to say that writers should never use simple words.” This was incredibly out of place, because I had been commenting on the way Stevens synthesized

painterly images with philosophical methods.

“When did I say that?”

“Well, it is known that you have said it.”

“I’m afraid such spurious rumor has betrayed you, Britta. I once told my class that to always use the simplest word could, at the very least, render a work ineffectual. I believe I said that one should use the *right* word...and went on to say that a practiced writer could make the most appropriate and accurate word understandable by its context. Is that what you remember, class?”

“Yes,” came the synchronous answer.

“It could also make the work dense gibberish,” Britta replied.

“You would so rashly indict the *right word*?” I exhorted with exaggerated surprise. The class then began to titter in amusement. “Creative literature grew out of myth, and myth is both cogently durable and ornate. Of course, if we must dumb everything down to the lowest common denominator, we’ll have lost the meaning of literature entirely, robotically communicating *not much* with a mere shake of the head. Not very enlightening or inspiring. Not very enriching. Not very cathartic *divertissement*,” I said, honking out the last French syllable and looking down my nose at Britta until my eyes nearly crossed. The entire class loudly erupted with uproarious delight. I joined in.

“Seriously now, class, the better your vocabulary the better you can express yourselves, the more you can say. Isn’t it obvious?”

“A great deal is obvious,” Britta charged. After that she said no more, but a short time later left the room.

I have not tattled to Ragnar about Britta's appearance and her rigidly haughty censure, but as soon as she left my class she called Ragnar to enlist his help in curbing my iconoclastic methods in the classroom. Apparently, I am endangering the sacrosanct process of so-called *creative writing*. It seems Britta has broken her earlier pledge never to complain to Ragnar about me. It was Alfreda who kindly informed me that Britta had called Ragnar. She knew this because Ragnar was playing chess with Bill when Britta called him.

"I think it's only fair to let you know," Alfreda said when she stopped by with a pumpkin pie. "After that wonderful class, you deserve this pie, and you deserve to hear as much as I can tell you about that silly woman's sneaky ideas."

"She's not really that silly, Alfreda. She merely despises me on principle, and otherwise -- she believes I took Ragnar away from her."

"Well, good for you. But I'm pretty sure you never even knew she existed until she made herself known to you." I did not dispute this, but I did soon recall that Hugh had mentioned her existence early on, after I had irrevocably fallen in love with Ragnar.

"And as for Ragnar, that man has a mind of his own, Viola. You know what he said to Britta?"

"What?"

"He said, *The way to feel better about yourself, Britta, is to stay out of that writing class and stop talking about it.*"

I enjoyed laughing over this, then said, "I'm going to make a pot of coffee. Please sit down, Alfreda, and help me eat some of this lovely pie. You and your delicious pies are a tonic for nearly everything."

“May I come to you on Christmas? I’m sure Sylvia and Marcus will be there.” Virginia presumed to write in an e-mail. I was even more surprised when she wrote that she was trying to get Tim to come with her. This seemed a little suspect, knowing how Virginia operated. Could she be planning to taunt Roland with her new relationship? She went on to say: “I know how you dislike Christmas holidays, perhaps we can all lend them a more festive atmosphere for you.”

Actually, I have no plans for Christmas and prefer not to think of it. The thought of it always summons regret because that overtaxed old holiday has been ripped to shreds by commercialism. Such hype and droning falsity could never live up to all of those flashy promises. I also remember, with wrenching sadness, how desperately Mama tried to make us all happy at Christmas. Only as a very young and innocent child did I hear a merry tune from Emily Dickinson’s *bird of hope* in regard to the joys of Christmas...chiefly: holly and mistletoe, the scents of candles, snow, pungent evergreens, sparkling ornaments, and jars of curly ribbon candy. Undue expectation ends with misery. I pondered Virginia’s suggestion, and at last sent her an e-mail I supposed she would find disagreeable:

I’m sorry, Virginia, I have no plans for Christmas, which is, alas, nearly upon us again. Please don’t ask me to explain, even that would be painful. You already know how I feel about it -- as you’ve just written. Probably all the flights are booked anyway. Come in the spring, my dear friend, when we can enjoy the beauty of nature on the farm, without that horribly programmed jollity I cannot bear...all the

soppy falsity that goes with it...the idiocy of constant Jingle Bells, etc. If you are favorably stimulated by that season, I wish you a happy pastime. Love, Viola

I rather swiftly received an answer that described me as a Scrooge, a Grinch, and so forth. But her message turned somewhat forgiving near the end: *I, too, am sorry, my dear friend. I will indeed try to understand your position, respect your wishes and come in the spring, now that I've been invited. And guess what, I have not forgotten that today is your birthday. HAPPY BIRTHDAY! Lucky wench.*

I was surprised at that -- even Marcus did not know it was my birthday, but Virginia had remembered our little celebrations whenever I happened to be in London on the aforesaid date. I preferred not to think much of my birthday. Virginia's sarcasm only amused me. I am glad that we are good enough friends to engage in this bantering sort of exchange, which is quite often refreshing in its honesty. And I am pleased to know that Virginia really enjoys coming to Ender Farm. I believe she looks forward to her visits.

Later in the evening I walked over to Ragnar's, and we shared a delicious meal of fried razor clams and brazed buttered kale. I had been served two huge sweet clams coated with a mixture of ground filberts and bread crumbs, fried in butter. I ate with gusto, laughing in between bites at Ragnar's teasing about our hilarious clam digging on the coast.

"We will dig them again soon to keep you in practice," he said. We were resting before the snapping pine fire in his living room when I mentioned Virginia's e-mail.

"At least I've gotten her to stop hounding me about Christmas."

“That is good because you will not be here for Christmas.”

“I won’t? Where will I be?”

“You will be in Norway on the family farm. They have asked for you to come. I like the idea.”

“But I...I don’t even--”

“Do not argue and do not worry. Bill is going to check in on things here while we are gone. You have never experienced a Christmas like the holiday I am forecasting: eating, drinking, laughing, singing, and plenty more of the same. There will also be skiing and sledding, a lot of exercise for your appetite. For you, Christmas will be an entirely positive experience. Peter will be there, and Karin, and Peter’s mother and my sister, and a lot of other folk hanging around, eager to get a look at my woman.”

Staring at him in silent amazement, I finally said, “But...but you’d have to make reservations and--”

“Plane reservations are made. Your lodging will be my spacious old bedroom...with me in it.”

“Oh, Ragnar, that’s very, very tempting, but I thought Marcus might come out and--”

“Marcus may come to Norway if he likes. Your son is welcome on our farm, and Sylvia too. But if he does not come you will see him often enough, my girl.”

“Norway with you...it’s an exciting thought.”

“I hope irresistible. By the way, I have something for you. You may have forgotten this is your birthday. I have an expensive bottle of champagne and a fancy cake.”

Ragnar handed me an envelope with a card inside, a photograph

of a sparkling piney limb with snowy mountains in the background. On the green pine branch, near a lush pine cone, sat an exquisite bluebird. Inside the card I found a folded sheet of pale blue paper that was filled with Ragnar's beautiful Norsk script, written with lapis-blue ink.

"Oh, darling, you've written my Norsk message at last. But I can't read this, will you translate?"

"*Nei*, I will not. I recall that you said you wanted to translate it yourself. Do it at your leisure, and maybe you will enjoy the result. If your effort makes me laugh, all the better," he ended with a wink.

I spent several nights on this wondrous note, still polishing, with increasing delight, when it was put aside for my favorite holiday.

Sylvia was back in London when Marcus flew out to join us for Thanksgiving, a holiday I really do enjoy, especially now that I can cook with Ragnar. Alfreda and Bill were spending Thanksgiving with their children and grandchildren, but Roland kindly picked up Mary in his still functioning old truck -- which he fondly calls *Hack* -- and brought her to our table. Peter drove down to Eugene and brought his cousin Karin back, a lovely new addition to our celebrations.

"When you and Ragnar make culinary love in the kitchen, we are all amply rewarded," Roland praised, pushing back his twice-emptied plate. "I could live on the delectable leftovers for a week."

I had blushed at Roland's assertion as to what went on in the kitchen, glancing at Hugh drinking his wine, then I said, "And you *will* have leftovers, Roland. You can take as much as you like when you go, turkey and anything else you fancy."

"Oh, none left for me, *Violea*?" Mary teased.

“That huge turkey? There’s enough for everyone,” I said, again looking at Hugh, who did not appear interested and was merely deftly using his knife and fork. He had said very little, except to Marcus.

“I will share my portion with you, Mary,” Roland offered.

Ragnar winked at me, and I looked to see if Roland had noticed, but fortunately he was looking at Mary, who had asked permission to give Pilot a leg bone, if he could attack it out on the veranda.

“I’ll give it to him, come Pilot” Roland said, trying to lead Mary’s faithful companion away with the bone stretched out toward his aroused nose. “He won’t come without your permission, Mary.”

“Go ahead, go on now, Pilot,” Mary coaxed.

Pilot looked toward her with a soft whine, then stared at the turkey bone and followed Roland out. Everyone laughed.

“He would never have done it without your say-so,” I said to waiting Mary.

“He’s a faithful animal,” Marcus said, “and intuitive.”

I smiled at Marcus. I thought he was missing Sylvia.

“I wish Sylvia could have come,” I said.

“She had an important appointment,” was all Marcus offered.

Peter took a swallow of his wine, and said dutifully, “Karin would like to hear you sing, Viola.”

“Oh, maybe later when you’re...whenever you feel...” Karin shyly stammered out in an apologetic voice.

“Karin will be surprised,” Ragnar commented.

“Please don’t prime her for great things,” I begged.

“No need of that,” Ragnar answered. “Are we now going to eat the mince pie Alfreda sent, or is everyone sated?”

Pie later, everyone agreed.

“Why don’t we recover in the living room by the fire,” I quickly suggested. “We can have some coffee, already brewed.”

Ragnar followed me into the kitchen. When I finished pouring the coffee, he stood behind me with his tempting arms around me and said, “*Herregud*, you smell delicious -- sage and lavender. I think Marcus wants to tell you something. You should probably soon find some time to be alone with him.”

“What?” I exclaimed with an instant feeling of dread.

“*Nei*, do not worry. Maybe you are going to be a grandmother.”

“A grandmother! What on earth would make you suppose that?”

“He said Sylvia had an important appointment, possibly with her London doctor. Right now Marcus is quite distracted, but he is trying to join in for your sake and Hugh’s sake...and the rest of us.”

“My darling, this time I think you’ve over-intuited,” I suggested, pushing the tray forward for him to carry into the living room.

Of course, once there I could not help stealing glances at Marcus. I soon decided he did indeed have something on his mind, something that had nothing to do with Thanksgiving.

Ragnar had brought one of his Spanish guitars. When the coffee and conversation diminished, he suggested that I sing before we stuffed ourselves with Alfreda’s mince pie.

“Do you know, shy as I am about singing this way,” I said to everyone, “I still love it that we can play and sing and even recite poetry, the way families and friends entertained themselves long ago. I doubt anyone does it anymore...too busy with all those hand-held inadequate

connections.”

“I’m a divided self on that matter,” Hugh said. “I like the quick access to certain amounts of information, but fiercely regret that there’s now little human exchange in the natural sense: face-to-face. And virtual reality should really be called *virtual elusion*..that’s *elusion* not *illusion*. The rewarding process of writing an expansive, sometimes usefully historical letter is gone forever.”

“Well, I’m a would-be poet who writes with a pencil,” Roland said, “a lucubrating Luddite of the first order.”

“Oh, Roland, you’re wonderful!” I exclaimed, amidst a sudden epiphany of joy. I remembered Ragnar saying, *Compassion is inherent in you*. I choose to believe it inherent in most of us, but if it must be taught it can surely have the same effect.

“May I interject something here?...as Hugh has touched on the subject of writing,” Mary asked. “I wouldn’t interrupt when we are about to hear beautiful music, but I’ve just remembered what I intended to ask you earlier, Viola, and I may forget it again.”

“And I want to hear it, Mary. Please tell us.” I invited.

“Well, really, I’d like *you* to tell us...or at least perhaps respond to something troubling. The other day I heard a well-known actor say in an interview on television that he did not read fiction, *made-up stories* was his condescending definition. I was astonished, because he had made his entire career on so-called *made-up stories*. Did he realize he was dismissing Shakespeare, who even in his legendary historical plays was indisputably writing fiction? It seems to me there is a great difference between merely slipping the lives of one’s self and one’s family or friends into a mediocre semi-fictitious plot, and the rarity of actually imagining an existence that

is wonderfully provocative, then writing it in a unique and original way. Isn't that what *creative* writing is supposed to be?"

"Mary, you've touched on a critical subject that is philosophical in nature, which has to do with truth. Without very imaginative fiction we would have very little evidence of truth. Surprisingly, it is scarcely found in non-fiction. A prominent writer commented that a good book must be autobiographical. I disagree. There is a definable difference between turning one's life into fiction and the imaginative work issuing from a gifted writer's frame of reference: the construct of learning that is uniquely applied. It's a matter of breadth, focus, and conceptualization. In other words, I don't have to keep telling you the story of my life to present provocative ways of being in the world. This singular awareness is what makes imaginative fiction so wonderful. What autobiographer is going to reveal much uncolored truth, even capable of escaping bias in that genre, or, for that matter, what *biographer* deeply enamored of the subject can objectively portray truth? Revealing the naked truth about a corrupt individual or society is an act of valor, always subject to brutal retaliation. The relative vehicle of artful fiction makes the same process blameless, revelation praiseworthy, exposure often urgently necessary -- there shines forth the unshackling truth. But imaginative fiction is now the mortally wounded victim of technology's sound bites, of a limiting narcissism and mediocrity, yet this sadly dying art is the most edifying, profoundly revealing, vividly memorable, and cathartic method we have of ever grasping powerful truths. I've left out a recital on the express joy of simply plunging into motivated writing. Sorry, a brief offering."

"Quite a lot," Hugh said. "Is your singing also cathartic?"

I responded with a rather moue smile and a shrug.

“Thank you for that, Violea,” Mary said. “I find that I wholly agree with everything you’ve said. And now you’ll sing.”

I had never sung in Hugh’s presence and was especially shy for this reason. Would it render me too much the romantic he detested? *Never mind, this is your life, let him evaluate as he will*, I scolded myself. Ragnar played expertly, his mellow voice joining me during the chorus of an old Norwegian narrative song that certainly pleased Karin. She came to hug us and offer incisive praise, surprisingly demonstrative. I had glanced at Hugh while singing. He was watching us with an intense but otherwise solemnly unreadable expression.

Mary held her hands clasped to the side of her face and called out, “Lovely. I’ve long known of Ragnar’s talent, and lately yours, but how has your voice become so proficient, Violea?”

“Obviously by singing,” Roland answered for me.

I laughed and said, “I sang a great deal with schoolchildren all over Africa. When they are well enough and have something to sing about, they express themselves with beautiful voices...keeps you on your toes too...and it’s a lovely way to establish friendship and trust.” I had never mentioned this before and, unfortunately, it brought back startling memories. I felt very unsettled, shaking my head with a sort of rueful glance at Ragnar. He winked, offering a promising smile.

“You’ve got the right man,” Hugh suddenly offered when I told him good night on the cold veranda. “You and your valiant Viking make enviable music together...in every way. You both deserve each other. As to what you’ve done for me: Marcus...we’re going fishing tomorrow.”

“Sounds wonderful. I always meant for you to have him, even if

I couldn't. What pleasure it gives me, Hugh. You're forever a part of this family...however much you desire of us."

Hugh did not speak, only glanced at me as I walked with him to his motorcycle, then he stepped away. Astride his transport he became a darkened composite of machine and man beneath silvery moonbeams. "Please take care," I could not resist calling out. He did not look back, merely raised an arm, kicked over the engine and sped away.

"Do you need anything?" I asked Marcus, while standing in the bedroom that is always his whenever he visits.

"Nothing at all, surprising diva. The dinner spread was out of this world, and what a great evening."

"You are missing Sylvia," I speculated.

"Of course I wish she were with us, but I'm fairly content to be here with you. Otherwise...got a minute? Maybe you would..."

"What?" I said gently, settling into one of the leather chairs.

"Don't know if I should bother you right now with..."

"My darling son, I've rarely seen you so indecisive. You will not bother me...not ever."

Marcus leaned forward in his chair and stared at me. Knowing nothing, I offered no comment, only smiling encouragement.

"Sylvia is pregnant. I cannot imagine what you're thinking -- I'm hoping not too poorly of me. You see...she forgot her pills when she left London last time she was there. In spite of that...I guess we were a little too sure of ourselves. I've never really spent much time thinking about children...mostly thinking about ways to save the planet...and my small contribution to that end. But now it's finally come around to me, in a

very personally responsible way...for *us*.”

I felt usefully calm...thankful for Ragnar’s perceptive advice.

“By this confidence, I suppose I can ask how Sylvia feels.”

“At first she was startled at the news, then justifiably angry at me because I asked her if it was *really* accidental -- you see how wary I am. But I had not let her initial warning keep us from...enjoying each other, and I can’t blame her for *that*, can I? I quickly apologized, and profusely, because I know she’s a very honest person. After some fairly weighty contemplation, she seems to have concluded that having my child would be a marvelous way to share our lives.”

“And so back to you,” I encouraged.

“I could have waited a while...but it’s all right. I love her and I will love the child. It does take a little getting used to.”

“You really are my son. I’m very proud of you, Marcus, and I certainly adore Sylvia. But I’m afraid you’ve made me feel a little old...a grandmother,” I teased, again thinking of Ragnar’s incredible prescience.

“A very young grandmother. You’ll probably spoil the poor kid.”

“I’ll try not to, but isn’t that what grandparents do? By the way, when you tell Hugh tomorrow I’d love to hear of his response.”

“Yeah, that should be plenty interesting. Suddenly he has a son and now this.”

I left Marcus dubiously laughing, and was laughing myself. Hugh would make an interesting grandfather indeed. And there was a lovely sort of security in it for him, quite life-affirming.

Ragnar was in the living room, waiting by the dying fire for me to come downstairs. When I did, he stood up quickly.

“Come to my place.”

“Why? I’m not ashamed of you in my bedroom.”

“You know I always prefer that you come to me when you have guests...and especially your son.”

“We’re not fooling anyone...certainly not Marcus.”

“*Nei*, but it seems more considerate. Besides, I can have you all to myself in the morning, and feed you. Get your coat. It’s chilly out.”

Ragnar held my hand in his big rough hand as we walked along in the moonlight. I was feeling incredibly happy. He glanced down at me and said, “You are happy.”

“Yes, right now I’m very happy. Can it last?”

Ragnar did not answer but said, “Your singing was very fine. I am always proud of you.”

“Thank you. Your playing was very fine. Why so proud of this fretful woman? I’m too often terribly emotional.”

“You have been through a great deal but you are very strong, Wild Vi...strong, talented, intelligent...and most amazing of all: mine.”

“More amazing, *you* are mine.”

I stared off at the moon-shimmered hills, profoundly enthralled with Ender Farm’s indispensable manager, with our precious land, with everything. “My God, I really *own* this farm...for a while at least.”

“*Ja*, at last you have said so. I am glad to hear it.

“Tell me about Marcus, was I right?”

“Well, of course you were. You’re always right.”

“Unnecessary flattery, *lille* grandmother.”

“Oh, *please*. At least wait until it happens.”

“You will be proud enough of that.”

“Right again.”

“We’ve gotten through a lovely Thanksgiving. What will happen next?” I asked Ragnar. I was lying happily embraced, in his expansively comfortable bed -- Asgaard I call it: the fortress of the northern gods.

My Odin rumbled an impatient reply, a commandment echoing across our sacrosanct metaphorical mountaintop. “*Herregud*, give it up, Wild Vi. You know you can predict almost nothing of the future anyway, much less order it to your liking.”

“Oh, if only I could. I’m not *that* naïve, however.”

“You really do not want to know the future, my Wild Vi. We have enough trouble figuring out the present.”

“Everything is up in the air right now; everyone around me in the middle of something rather uncertain...more and more what I thought I knew very well is becoming utterly mysterious...everything is always in flux...but so fascinating.”

“*The middle of something rather uncertain* is one description of human life. But *this* is certain, *lille* girl...also mysterious...*always* fascinating.”

“Don’t let go of me, but I want to ask something. When I madly disturbed you, so contemplatively sitting near the pond...were you...”

“What?”

“Were you thinking of Hugh...of...me and Hugh?”

“You know I was...more of the *uncertain* part of life.”

“Not for me. Hugh’s doing much better now. I think he’ll be all right. He’s so pleasurably thankful to have Marcus. He did seriously tell me something I already knew very well...that I have the right man.”

A tempting smile altered Ragnar’s serene mouth before he spoke.

“That pleases me some...a great deal actually. And what else would such pleasure be for, if not to share it with you?”

“And I’m looking forward to sharing your birthplace with you.”

“Ja? I am looking forward to sharing my birthplace with *you*.”

“But I’m not holding my breath for anything. Nothing is more wonderful than here and now.”

“At last you are content with living in the present. Really quite an accomplishment.”

“For which one of us?”

“Both of us, *lille* girl.”

“Yes, I said, “and, in a more intoxicating sense, *we* are the ones *up in the air*.”

I have somewhat mastered recurrent descent into the world, the *getting involved*, but I’m not thinking about entailments now. The deeply gestating winter is bound to bring us many more incredible revelations; then all too quickly: the glorious unfurling of another spring. Here and now, I am solely immersed in the endless wonders of unfolding reality, swiftly streaming by.