

All Stories

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UNCAGED SONGBIRDS

By

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A diverse selection of the author's short stories.

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THE HEIRLOOM

The children were at play under the swollen spring branches in the filbert orchard. A March wind rushed down the long rows, rattling the limbs and muffling the excited cries of the little ones. Something in the distance sent them running toward the big white frame house below the orchard. Their unclasped boots and scarves flapped with each short bounce of their rushing feet as they came

beneath a spreading yellow forsythia bush in the yard. Under its luminous arching branches they huddled together with hushed, wondering voices, their faces turned toward the road running below the western edge of the orchard.

A man's gray head rose and fell above the bank of wind-torn grass, coming on until his figure was telescoped in the long gravel driveway. There he paused, a bony hand sliding into the open front of his faded jacket and fluttering over an inside shirt pocket to withdraw a stained pipe and a thin pouch. A little tobacco was deftly pressed into the bowl. Hunching over, he turned away to save the flame flickering below pale, half-closed lids. A few white puffs of ignited leaf whirled away as he started up the path.

From their hideaway the children watched his tall figure lean into the wind as he moved nearer, watched and gasped and murmured as he turned toward the stairs leading up to the front veranda. On either side of the steps grew massive holly trees that rose, dark and bird-inhabited, to the eaves beyond the second floor balcony. He climbed with slow measured steps and stood at the heavy door. No one ever came to the front door. Their mother went there only to sweep dry holly leaves from the porch corners. Now as the man hesitated, high airy giggles tumbled out of the bright forsythia below. He turned and descended, walking straight to the golden umbrella of branches.

Erica stepped forward, the second daughter, the second eldest, growing already out of her sister's clothes. Her sister, Maddy, secretive now away in the house, but Erica gladly out-of-doors, leading the other two little boys in play; the tomboy, her elders called her.

"Where's your daddy, girl?"

"Gone to work. Grandpa's inside reading the news."

"The news." He spat almost over her shoulder as she thought to step back but did not. "It's always the same or a little worse every cussed day."

"Grandpa knows all about it. He reads everything in the paper and his news magazine. When daddy comes they talk about it...the war that's in *your-rope*. Grandpa knows a lot of that news."

The old man bit down on his pipe and spoke through clenched teeth. "Waste of time."

Erica stared at the hand with its swollen knuckles cupped around the pipe. Thin strands of pale blond hair whipped over her blue eyes, and more streamed out around her crocheted woolen cap as fast as she tucked it in.

"I'll get grandpa. Come on, you kids."

The old man followed around to the back of the house as the wary little brood glanced over their shoulders at his angular frame. He stood under the cherry tree, looking up through tight-budded limbs at the fast-moving clouds. Beyond the network of dancing branches, the sky's airy white shapes were studded with small blue patches -- a blue almost the color of the girl's eyes.

"News," he muttered, "There's nothing new under the sun."

The back door slammed behind the grandfather as he stepped forward, pushing a battered felt hat down on his head with one hand and buttoning a shrunken black cardigan with the other.

"Well, so it's you. I could've used you in thrashing season but now there's nothing."

"It's not work I'm after. You can get the young boys for that. I'm on my way through to the river and need the strength to get there."

The grandfather, short, trim, his body used to physical labor, looked out of a bland leathery face with eyes the coloration of his granddaughter's but a more faded blue.

"I can offer you sauerbraten and cabbage...maybe a little grape wine. Come in, then. Wash up inside on the porch while I tell the woman."

The mother bent her head with brows drawn together, listening at the screened porch door. Her auburn hair was pulled back under a white kerchief. Retreating to her kitchen, she wiped her floury hands on a towel and moved back and forth from stove to sink to refrigerator.

The young children vanished downstairs. Erica sat in a corner next to the woodstove, which was burning now and which the grandfather had kept even after the electric stove beside it was installed. She pulled up her jeans and yanked off her boots. Her eyes followed the old man as he came in from the pine-scented washroom, his hair slicked down. His eyes darted around the room, but he averted his gaze from the curious girl and said nothing, only pulling up a chair and leaning on the checkered oilcloth covering the big scarred oak table.

Erica's mother came from the pantry, carrying in one hand fresh thickly sliced bread with a broken-topped crust, and in the other hand an oval green dish of newly worked butter. The rich yellow butter still glistened with beads of its finishing ice water. She nodded to the guest, who straightened up and dipped his head with respect.

"Are you going to eat, too?" Erica's mother asked.

"Uh-huh, me too," Erica said, holding her stockinged foot high over the woodstove's open oven door. "The kids are in the basement. Maddy's there. My feet are cold. It's going to rain. I'm hungry as a bear."

The grandfather came in with an earthenware jug of homemade wine. He sat down at the head of the table and filled two thick old tumblers with the pale rosé.

Erica hurried over and slid into a chair across from the stranger.

"My name's Erica, what's yours?"

The old man had his fingers clenched tightly around the glass of pale pink wine and was lifting it to his thirsty tongue. He took one long swallow and answered, "Bill."

"There's two Bills in my school but I'm the only Erica. Us kids all have unusual names. Did you work for grandpa? Where'd you come from? Where you going?"

"Here, here, let the man have his wine, Erica," the grandfather scolded.

Squirming with an anxious desire to go on talking, Erica leaned back and began to bite her fingers.

The old man studied the girl, the relief of the wine in his eyes.

"You musta been pretty small when I was here before, little magpie. I don't remember you."

"Maybe I was just a baby when you came here. I'm seven. I'll be eight in September."

The stranger's eyes focused more intently upon the girl.

"Well, this is March. September's half a year away."

Don't hurry it, girl. No, you don't want to hurry it.

"You help your ma and your daddy, I reckon."

"Daddy wished I was a boy when I was born 'cause I was the second girl, but I can do any stuff a boy does."

Erica's busy mother paused near the table and shook her head with amused censure.

"How do you know what daddy wished, Erica, honey?"

"'Cause I heard him say it...how he'd be needing a boy to help him...how he was worried 'til Sean was born."

"These little ears hear too much," Erica's mother said.

"I milk our cow. I go to school. I've been going a long time. I can read," Erica proudly revealed, directing her conversation to the old man. "I'm learning to read the news."

The grandfather waved his arm for silence and shook his hand at the girl as the steaming plates arrived in the mother's agile ruddy hands. Sauerbraten and red cabbage with apple, vinegar, brown sugar, and bacon pieces filled the heavy white ironstone plates -- the grandfather had eaten from this thick stained old ware in his childhood.

Erica held the large wooden-handled knife and fork in her small hands just the way her grandfather did, both angled over her plate as she chewed, then both utensils worked over her food, a little clumsily but unflinching.

After the main course came thick slices of gooseberry and grated lemon rind pie and two mugs of hot black coffee. For Erica there was milk still warm and frothy from the pasteurizer. The thin white strip of milk above her mouth made Bill smile for the first time.

"So...you read the news, girl."

"Ach!" the grandfather exclaimed, waving his hand.

"I do so read, grandpa. I can read a little of it."

"Ja...maybe a little."

"You stick to fairytales, girl," Bill said. He reminded Erica of a mad rooster.

"My teacher, Mrs. Hayward, says the news is going to be history. History is just old news, I guess, so we keep on getting more of it. Sometimes it makes me laugh. I like funny stories. I bet grandpa could find one in today's paper. He's always--"

"Here now, be quiet, Erica.

"How's the wife, Bill?"

Bill stiffened, staring past Erica and straight ahead at the wall which held a rack of copper pans.

"Passed on."

"No! I'm sorry to hear that. Was it sudden?"

"Yes...sudden. In the night."

Bill reached for the jug and filled his glass to the top. He gulped down half the wine, his hand trembling as he continued to stare toward the pans. Blood swiftly infused his cheeks, flushed little spots of red reminding Erica of a rosy-cheeked Santa Claus. He tipped the remainder slowly back and forth then tossed it down and began to talk.

"When I lost the farm we still had the hired man's cabin. Hired on...workin' like that, we had just enough for livin'. Anna made a garden...vegetables and flowers...like always. She loved flowers...and them tall hollyhocks...made her happy to see 'em against the sky. We even laughed about it all...sometimes. Didn't matter no more. Anna is sure somethin', not a quitter. Every day

the country got worse. Anna went right on, so I did, too. Right on...until... Huh...the wine...makin' me talk."

Erica struggled with the difficult phrases: *passed on...lost the farm...country got worse*, but she felt only the heavy sadness of the old man. Did he mean the wife died or went away? Sometimes people died. Once a newborn calf got caught in the underbrush and died. It was stiff when she discovered it, its legs stretched out, its fur matted and dry. Flies buzzed around the bloated body in the sun, and the terrible smell, the dark birds in the trees. She ran away. Her father came with a shovel. She couldn't go near those thick willows after that without remembering, without imagining the calf struggling to live. The whole scene came into her dreams for a while, over and over until finally it stopped. At about that time, her wrinkled great-aunt Melba told her stories of people who died and came back somehow. How could they? It gave her goose bumps.

Erica commenced a nervous squirming with the memory of the calf and of Aunt Melba's ghosts. She wanted old Bill to laugh. He was not a family elder demanding obedience, but someone she could charm and tease, the way her mother sometimes did with friends. She had seen it happen when she was lucky enough to be taken along to grange potluck...her mother arranging her baked beans on the table filled with tempting casseroles and pies and cakes. Her mother looking so pretty in her good navy dress with the white lace collar and the small corsage of imitation red cherries, smiling as the side lamps winked on her auburn hair, the rosy faces of laughter around the hall and the admiring eyes of the men.

"Well, I give a heap a thanks for the meal, folks. Now I'm on my way." Bill stood up and shook hands with the grandfather, who had stood up too. He nodded polite thanks to Erica's mother.

Erica was busy, hurriedly putting on her boots. She grabbed her hat and coat and followed Bill out.

"I'm walking to the crossroads with you."

"That's two miles down and the same two back, girl."

"I do it all the time." She pulled on her woolen cap. Her mother leaned out the door with her mittens.

"Here, put these on. I think a storm is coming. See that black cloud? Button your coat. Your hat's not enough; put up the hood if the rain comes. And you come straight home now. Hear me?"

"I hear, mama."

Together the old man and Erica walked down the long driveway, with the penetrating east wind rushing at their backs.

"She tells me that every time I go outside. I guess she forgets, but I never do."

"If you was mine I'd do the same."

"Don't you have any kids?"

"No. If I did they'd be older than your mother. It's a good thing I don't."

"Why?"

"I just don't wish anyone into this world."

"I'm glad mama had me...even on cold days like this. If the sun comes out I really feel good, like old Tiger cat when he finds a patch of sun to sleep in or lick his fur. He just loves it. You can tell."

Erica felt the bony hand grip her shoulder and had a

twinge of fear.

"Enjoy it now, girl. It goes fast and life comes down hard."

"What does that mean?"

"Things happen that keep you from gettin' where you want to go."

Erica looked up at Bill, her blue eyes widening.

"Where's that?"

"Well, huh, I guess a place where there's a kind of peace and not very much to need."

"But where?"

"Ain't really a place...just the way you feel."

"Then why can't you just feel it?"

Bill's eyebrows arched up, forcing even deeper lines than those already etched across his forehead. He fell silent and stopped to light his pipe. Puffs of blue smoke instantly whirled away in a sudden gust of wind.

"You might grow up to be a fast talker. That's how they got my money...fast-talkin', silver-tongued devils."

"If I had some money I wouldn't let anyone take it away...not unless I wanted to give it to 'em."

"Then you'd have been a help to me when that slicker sold me shares in the gold mine."

"A gold mine? Did you see the gold?"

Bill's mouth fell open and he grabbed for his pipe in amused surprise.

"You shame me, girl. Nope, never saw a single speck. Some friends invested and swore it was fixin' to be a real payload. Friends, they was. Hah! I was a handsome lad, see, with a pretty young wife and bound to give her everything under the sun. The mine was down in Arizona.

They just kept sinkin' more dough into that loser 'til there was nothin' left to sink. Leastways, we thought they did. Most of it wound up in their pockets. Them kind never lose nothin'...but the folks they con. Yeah, they lose those fast enough. Never did catch up to my debts. Hell for that. It's water under the bridge now."

"Are you still mad, Bill... 'cause a that old empty mine?"

"Not now. Once I wanted to break things...fight. Almost killed a man over nothin' at all. Kept havin' the urge to bang my head against a wall...sit down and howl like a wolf."

Old Bill's fierce laugh choked up in a fit of coughing.

"Did you howl?"

"No more talk. I'm tired."

They walked on in silence, passing a tall fir where crows were beginning a spring nest. The angry birds took turns swooping down and squawking at the intruders, circling over Erica's and Bill's heads in diving feints of attack.

Erica danced around, waving her arms and laughing.

"They do that all the time now...same old racket. They're making a nest. They lay green eggs."

Bill careened doggedly ahead, showing not the least sign of interest in the birds or the girl. In a few more steps he stumbled to the side of the road and half sat half fell on the knoll beyond the ditch.

"Hootch went to my head...can't do it anymore...used to be a little wine was nothin'...woozy...got to rest a spell. All that food and wine...didn't taste a

thing...that goes, too...everything goes."

Erica frowned as Bill muttered to himself and sank back on the damp earth. He stared at her, his faded gray eyes hardly blinking. She was like a freshly opened flower come upon among the rough grasses, a daisy small and innocent, yet soundly abiding.

For a moment, Erica thought Bill was going to cry. He reached out a long finger to touch her cheek.

"Now I've got to close my eyes a little. If you've a mind to stay then wake me when the rain comes. No, better go on home. Yeah, git."

He pulled his knees up against his chest, like a very old unearthed skeleton Erica had pored over in one of her grandfather's magazines. Without another word he lifted a hand to cover his face and dozed off.

Erica removed her coat and pulled it carefully around him, stretching forward on her knees. The white, lifeless hand over his face evoked a strange fear in her. She watched him with anxious attention, but then it was like spying. She turned away, shivering a little.

The sound of the water burbling in the ditch caught her attention. She pulled off her mittens and stuffed them into her pocket. Stirring up the red silt with a dry weed stalk, she watched fascinated as it coiled into the clear puddles in muddy curls. She set about damming the trickling water with stones from the road shoulder. As she squatted at her task she hummed a low, uneven working tune. After a while she sat up and studied old Bill. He was disturbingly motionless, without even a sign of breathing. Shaking him gently, she pointed to a dark cloud.

Bill opened his eyes and stared up in silence. He lay

looking deep into the sky, with a dread in his pale eyes so immense it left the girl in cringing awe. Then his eyes fell on Erica's spread coat covering him and he heaved himself forward, grasping her slight body and rebundling her quickly as he shook his head. Struggling to his feet he teetered a moment, centered himself over the opposed earth, and set off in slouching, falling-forward steps.

Erica trotted along at his side, glancing up at his face for any sudden change.

"Mama says winter is depressing and spring makes her happy. Are you depressed like that?"

"Maybe."

"Winter's okay with me. I like the way snow comes in the night. It's so quiet...so surprising in the morning. This winter the snow came before I went to bed. I turned on the porch light and stood on the steps looking up. Ooh, I like to do that. If you stick out your tongue, big cold flakes land on it and melt real fast. They float down right out of the black...little dancing things. If you keep your head back, you feel just like you're flying up through the sky. You even get dizzy."

Erica gazed out at the distant clouds. The black edge of an eastern storm moved overhead, driven by the wind. On the western horizon pale rays of sun still slanted down in glassy shafts. They shot straight into dark-forested hills, making spots of summery lime.

"Oh, look there! I'd like to be there," she cried, pointing to the far sun-spotted mountains.

Old Bill grabbed her arm. "Under those pretty patches is damp cold forest."

"But there's sun. If I was an eagle I'd fly there."

"Right fast you'll see the way things are," Bill said, tightening his grip on her arm.

"I don't want to be like you!" Erica shouted, pulling free.

"Hah! Your tongue will be worse trouble than your wild fancying. There's the crossroads, magpie. You'd better be hightailin' it home before the rain gets to your tender hide." Along with his warning came a little shove, but Erica stood firm with a stubborn glance at his grim face.

"Where'll you sleep tonight? Won't you get wet?"

"Don't give a damn if I'm wet or not. If I don't stand here jawin' I'll make it to Bel Air Farms, where I can sleep in a worker's cabin. Mind what I say: enjoy it while you can."

"Enjoy what?" Erica asked, walking backwards.

"Your eagle trip and your little patch of sun.

"Hold on a minute. I just thought... Come back here, girl. Got somethin' I'll give you to pass on to your own boy some day."

Bill slid his hand into his hip pocket and drew it out with the fingers clasped around something quite shiny. He stretched his hand toward her and in the trembling palm Erica saw a gleaming circular bauble, about the size of her grandfather's silver pocket watch.

"What is it?" Erica asked, stepping forward, now a little shyly, with her hands crossed behind her back.

"A double-case 18-carat-gold Waltham pocket watch. Soft gold, but I took good care of it...hardly any dings. The only gold I ever had. See why it makes a man crazy? Look here. You just wind it every day at the same time.

Before you go to bed, maybe. Wind her up 'til she feels a little tight."

Erica took the watch into her small nervous hand. It was heavy and warm and oily smooth.

"I don't think I can keep it." Her lips tightened in a fine line of doubt, pushing out her plump rosy cheeks. "It's so heavy. Don't you need it for the time?"

"Nope. Time's nothin' to me."

"Mama would make me give it back. I know she would."

"Keep it and don't tell her for a while. Now let's have a shake on it, and you get on home."

Erica slipped the watch gently into her pocket and offered her hand. The two hands, one large, bony, and wrinkled, the other quite small and slightly soiled, moved slowly up and down.

"Gee thanks, Bill. Come back and eat at our house," she invited, but his piercing gray eyes quickly made her friendlier eyes dart away.

She walked backwards as old Bill continued to stand in the road, looking hard at her. A little further on she stopped and cupped her hands around her mouth. "Read the newspaper when you get one. I bet you find something so funny."

"You read it for me...but don't lose your spirit," he called over his shoulder as he turned away at last.

Erica walked along, kicking at small, angular rocks that had been thrown up on the road. Some flew into the ditch where veins of water trickled along over the red mud. Large drops of rain began to fall. She pulled the jacket hood over her woolen cap and stuck her mittenless hands into her pockets. In the left pocket she encountered the

cool liquid smoothness of the watch. Her heart leapt. Shouldn't she run and give it back? Bill was far away around a bend in the road now. What would mama say? She didn't like to keep things from her mother. Daddy might get really mad. The heavy timepiece was wonderful to touch and hold, and it had a nice clear ticking, like a heartbeat.

Climbing the steps, she found her mother at the door with an anxious look. Erica quickly evaded her mother's scrutiny and ran to her room, hanging her jacket on a wall peg, with the watch still inside.

That evening after dinner, Erica listened to her family gossiping around the table as they sipped their steaming mugs of coffee. The little boys were asleep in their bunk beds. Her sister, Maddy, went off to her room to immerse herself in her world of cowboy music and daydreams. The two girls had so frequently annoyed each other that they had been given separate rooms in the large upstairs. Erica watched from her pillow on the staircase, where she liked to sit and look down into the dining room through the sliding oak doors of the hallway. The doors were always left open. Under the hanging lamp, her father's big hands reached into a dark wicker basket filled with gleaming mahogany filberts from her grandfather's orchard. He cracked a fine-grained shell, extracting the meat with a delicate silver pick. His hands seemed much whiter in the artificial light, and almost like those of a giant, wielding the shiny little nut pick.

"I feel sorry for old Bill," her grandfather said. "He's lost without his wife...not much work to do now. When that gold stock came to nothing he was finished. He

was a scrapper before that little Anna came along. She smoothed out his feathers right quick, and he never took to the bottle like some...like old Prebstly who lost money hand over fist. You know, they came to me, those robbers with their phony stocks. I said, 'No thanks. I haven't got it to spare.' They said I'd be sorry. Hah!"

Her grandfather knocked a thick white ash from his cigar and retreated into a quiet, thoughtful mood, his drowsing head propped against his hand.

Erica tiptoed back to her room. She was just dropping off to sleep with the events of the day drifting through her head when she came to the watch and sat up. A pang of guilt stirred her heart, for she had already forgotten to wind it. She got up and crossed the room, reaching into her coat pocket. There was the cold metal sliding into her hand. She gently pried open the back of the case, using the metal tip of her hair barrette, and watched the movement clicking away with its tiny teeth, measuring, measuring time. She was deeply engrossed in this fascinating little engine when her mother entered the room.

"What's that you have?"

Startled, Erica closed the watch. She stood up quickly and tried to hide it.

"Let me see that. What on earth... Erica where did you get this beautiful old pocket watch?"

"Old Bill gave it to me."

"Why, Erica, how could you do such a thing? Haven't I taught you anything? This is a family heirloom."

"What's an *earloom*? It was his father's. He didn't want it anymore. I tried not to... You gonna tell daddy? I'll give it back." Erica started to cry.

"An heirloom is a fine old family possession, like a dish or a piece of furniture or a jewel that gets passed along from parents to children over and over again."

"Bill doesn't have kids."

"That doesn't matter. I have to tell daddy. Put on your robe and come downstairs."

"I don't know what got into her," Erica's mother was saying as Erica came into the dining room and stood before her father.

Erica's father, a stocky, blue-eyed man with sandy hair and ruddy cheeks, leaned forward in his chair, clamping a large scarred and weathered hand over his knee,

"Well, Erica, you can't keep this fine old timepiece. Maybe you're not old enough to know how such things work, but now you have to learn."

"Are you going to spank me?"

"No. This isn't the kind of thing that calls for a spanking. You didn't understand. You're getting too old for spankings anyway."

Eric caught her father's wink at her mother and began to feel a small amount of relief.

"The thing is, I'm puzzled as to why old Bill would want to part with this. Where did you say he was headed?"

"He was just going to the river...going to sleep at Bel Air Farms."

"Wednesday, grandpa is going to the feed store. Now you'll go with him after school and look for Bill. When you find him, you'll apologize and hand the watch over."

"I will, daddy," Erica said, brightening.

"Good. Now wind this fine old piece carefully and go to bed."

Erica was quite relieved to be let off so easily, but she began to worry. What if old Bill got mad at her? She didn't want to hurt his feelings. She felt dread deep in her stomach, the same as expecting to go to the dentist. She would have to go all the way through tomorrow, which was only Monday, and then the next day and part of the next before she could get the dreaded exchange over with.

On Tuesday morning Erica sat at the breakfast table, going over sections of the newspaper with her grandfather.

"See, girl, here's a story about a goose that follows a little *kind* to school."

Her grandfather folded the paper and laid it beside her plate, but as she was going over the words and looking at the picture her grandfather threw up his arms and exclaimed, "Gott in Himmel! It's poor old Bill. They found his body in the river."

"You mean he drowned?"

"Ja, dead...dead!"

Erica sat very still, trying to imagine what Bill looked like in the river dead, but she couldn't get beyond the last wave of his hand as he disappeared around the bend in the road.

"Poor Bill. Poor old Bill! He won't get his watch back now, grandpa. How can I give it back?" Her pale forehead crinkled in frustration and worry. "There was something the matter with him. He wasn't paying attention. That's why he fell in the river."

"I don't think he fell."

"What then, grandpa?"

"He must have jumped."

"But it's so cold and deep...all that water. Old Bill

wasn't crazy."

"Maybe just crazy enough to commit suicide."

"What's *sooside*?"

"It's...never mind what it is. He just meant to jump."

"You mean he was thinking about it eating here...and on the road and when he gave me the watch, he was thinking--"

"That's just it. He was going to the river, only we didn't know why."

"Then he wanted me to keep the watch... 'cause he wasn't coming back. We'll never see him again. Oh, Grandpa--"

"Don't think about it, girl."

"But why did he do it?"

"Your mama will sure be mad I told you. I was so excited I didn't think."

All day at school Erica thought about Bill jumping into the river. How could he do it? How? She thought over the things that Bill had told her. At recess she ran far out into the field and stood by a fence that separated the playing field from a thick forest of tall firs. It was the first day of April, April Fool's Day, when mama always managed to play a trick on everyone before the day ended, something that caught everyone off guard and made them all laugh. The sky was overcast and gray without even a pencil-shaft of sun to light the woods. She heard Bill's voice: "Your eagle trip and your little patch of sun." Nearer the schoolhouse, the children were screaming, playing April Fool's jokes. She did not want to go back, as if first she had to find something lost. She looked up

at clouds. Their shapes changed faster than she could make up names for them.

That night Erica's father said, "Well, it looks like you can keep the watch now...unless some relative turns up, but I don't think old Bill had anyone. He was all alone."

Erica sat still and quiet on the braided rug before the snapping fireplace. A chunk of damp wood hissed at her. When no one was looking she began to bite her fingers.

After some quiet reflection, her father told her, "We'll put the watch away until you're older."

"But I promised to wind it and never let it stop!" Erica cried out on the verge of tears.

Her father knelt and patted Erica's troubled head.

"All right, honey, you can keep it on your dresser, but don't carry it around."

Erica raised her bent head. The flames dancing on the shining hearth reflected across her somber face.

"Daddy, you know what, old Bill said the news was always bad, then he got printed and it was awful."

"All right, enough of this. Off to bed," Erica's mother called, frowning and shaking her head at Erica's father. "Tomorrow is a school day."

The usual approach of late night sleepiness would not surround Erica as she tossed nervously in bed. She had learned two new words. One was wonderful, like a gift at Christmas. The other made her shiver with its strangeness. Deciding to sleep with her lamp on, she stared up at her favorite picture, which had hung over her bed for as long as she could remember. It was a black and white photograph of real monkeys with glossy black and white fur, playing in

a dense forest. One monkey had eyes that looked right at her. Sometimes she whispered to him as she fell asleep.

From the dresser nearby, she heard the clear ticking of the large gold timepiece. It had a voice that called to her. She threw off the covers and hurried to hold the cool watch against her flushed face. Tenderly, as if it were a small living thing, she rubbed it over her cheek, then wound it slowly, carefully.

Settled back in her bed she whispered, "I'll keep it beating for you, Bill." She pulled the covers over her head, a little afraid but wishing he could answer.

THE END

THE UNTAMING OF THE SWAN

It was early spring. A man and woman were strolling down a forest path in a place called Laughing Water Park. The man's left leg was in a metal brace visible from the sides of his shoe below the cuff of his navy corduroy slacks. His stride was made in a practiced rhythm almost graceful to behold, like a dancer initiating an expansive

dance, the forward motion carrying him smoothly into the next balanced step. His face held a contented, rather amused smile as he studied both the woman and the tender green shoots and delicate buds which she carefully noted.

"More queen's cup."

The woman pointed at a tulip-leaved plant from which sprang a few thin stems bearing simple white flowers, each with six dewy petals.

"Oh, how I love spring...this fresh, fresh air heavy with sweetness...but a sweetness you can tolerate. And look there: a trillium already reduced to soft purple. They start in February."

She fell silent and glanced at the man beside her. He appeared to regard the shaded trillium and the fragile plants pushing up around it with an earnest absorption. His eyes were a clear, liquid brown, docile for the moment and full of pleasure. His face was not that of an invalid but of a man well acquainted with sun and inclement weather, the soft amiable crow's feet and smile lines equal to the furrowed brow of sorrows. Small fingers of breeze teased at his hair. She noticed how its color matched the silvery-brown scaly bark of the giant spruces growing beside the path.

"Are you tired of my chatter? I can't seem to keep all of this to myself."

A Steller's jay glided near, interrupting their voices with a raucous cry of "chook-chook-chook" as it bounced up and down on a hemlock branch just above their heads. Its sharp jet eyes glittered from a black-crested hood that dissolved into a twilight-blue back and tail. The restless wings folded just long enough to display their even black

bars, then the wild masquerade of innate strategy went on with a fluttering of wings. "Shack-shack-shack-shack," it chided, dancing on its swaying bough.

The man laughed and looked down into the woman's surprised eyes, which were nearly the same dusky blue as the jay's breast feathers.

"I like it when you point out things that interest you. Then whenever I see them I'll..." He shrugged and bent to lift a wayward wisp of auburn hair that blew over her eyes.

"I've taught you the names of flowers, haven't I? And you've taught me how to live in the present moment. I didn't know how...or never wanted to. It was always tomorrow, tomorrow, tomorrow..."

She spoke with nervous excitement that could suddenly surprisingly erupt out of a guarded quietness. Her head was down, half watching red ants stream across the wood-slatted walkway and swarm around a large dead beetle. Very quickly they attached themselves to the lifeless black casement and tugged in unison. A detail of pallbearers. Her body stiffened and her fingers clenched the hem of the red flannel shirt that blew against her, clinging to her hips. A shiver went through her body, and the man noticed at once.

"You're cold. You need a sweater."

"No. It's almost balmy. It wasn't that. Something just...I don't know."

Her dilated eyes were drawn up into bright triangles of misery and joy.

"It's much more than the names of flowers," he said, laying the back of his hand across her cheek.

She looked quickly away and knelt down to pick up a slender cone, sliding her finger over its pliant scales.

"Spruce. Its cones hang down from the branch like those of the Douglas-fir. Neither are true firs. The cones stand upright on true firs."

"You amaze me, Kate."

"I've heard that in Russia there's an expression for VIPs...funny..instead of the *big cheese*, they say the *big pine cone*."

He laughed. "God, Kate, you're a connoisseur of wonderful trifles."

He halted, resting casually on his good leg. Then he hunched forward and gripped her shoulders.

"Spring then summer and you'll go."

"But I'll come back, Hugh...always...always."

She slipped her hand inside his navy jacket and laid her head against his chest.

He stood still and held her, looking up at the clouds sweeping over the treetops.

"Shack-shack-shack-shack...chook-chook-chook," insisted their feathered eavesdropper.

"I'm happy," he spoke into her ear. "Here and now."

They followed a path which led along a swift burbling stream at their left. Its bed was mostly shallow and strewn with rocks, but there were here and there pockets of deep green. The water swirled around large boulders of basalt and splashed over the smaller rocks, varnishing them with a honeyed light. Fast-moving clouds made the sun appear to dart in and out of ragged openings as it shone recurrently over the stream, making changing spangles of gold.

Ahead, the ground they were traversing fell away into a steeply descending and narrow canyon. Breaking through the silence of the forest, and swelling in their ears until it filled their minds with a pounding white wall of noise, came the sound of the park's dazzling centerpiece, a roaring waterfall. Near where the stream became vertical, dropping nearly two hundred feet over a cauldron of water-chiseled rock, the path angled sharply away and ran across the rim of the cauldron.

They walked around the edge, stopping where the trail descended, and watching the misty white column tumble in fast-breaking patterns. These ceaselessly reaching fingers of white shot straight down into the deep inner side of the green pool, boiling up and sending out rings of foam that lapped at the fern-lined banks. The steep path they were on eventually wound back behind the waterfall, where there was a large dripping cave containing around its perimeter smaller, dryer alcoves of near total darkness.

For a while they stood watching Laughing Water give its noisy, mesmerizing performance. At last he turned away and started to lead her down the path, but she held back.

"Hugh...you want to go down there?"

"Yes, come on...behind the waterfall. Isn't it good luck? Or is that rainbows?"

"Waterfalls make rainbows...if the light is right. We don't have to go down. It's nice here."

"You think I can't negotiate that?" He had said it with a faint smile, but there was a tension beneath his words.

She blushed deeply in surprise, opened her mouth to speak, but then remained silent, pondering how she could

answer.

They pressed back against the railing to let a heavysset, jolly-faced man in coveralls, and a scarved woman wearing a long coat and rubber boots, carrying a muddy white poodle, puff by them on the upward climb.

She had not been thinking of his leg at all. He was strong...so strong. It was only that she liked being up on top...on top of the world. The thought of leaving the sparing sun and descending into the dark rain forest of the canyon disturbed her. But how could she say this? He would not believe her now. Anyway, it was a negative, unpleasant sentiment that tainted her deep happiness.

She moved down, letting him keep behind her, listening to his footfalls. The expert way that he handled his body was for her a feat bordering on the heroic, yet she was not so caught up in heady devotion as to be oblivious to his occasional irritation or regret. She thought of his hands touching her, a feeling so new it was startling. She pictured his high ruddy cheeks and the sensitive mouth that curved so greedily after her laughter. She wanted to turn and have him in her vision, but could not for fear of what he might think. Quite involuntarily and with a jolt, she thought of her husband. She was soon in the angle of a switchback and screened by a drooping hemlock. Gripping the wire of the fence in tight fists, she looked down and felt her knees buckling. It came to her that she was the one who could not walk here without stumbling.

He had been moving along easily with just the slightest splay in his stride. He stared at her rigid back. Even before the first blush in her cheeks and the slump of her shoulders, he knew that she hadn't meant

anything. Why had he said it? He was not even sensitive about it, sometimes only a little impatient. It was so long ago. Did he merely want a cutting edge for all his joy? Something to measure it by? Something to twist inside until his hands reached out to have her stop it. The consuming sensation of her was what he wanted.

He knelt down to tie his shoelace and from there he glimpsed her figure through the sweeping limbs of the lacy hemlock. Her hands were clenched around the wire, her face closed and white. She hung there at the edge of the cliff, like a butterfly impaled on a thorn bush. He found that it was hard, nearly impossible, to run down such a precipitous incline. When he reached the place where she had stood, she was gone. He could see beyond the waterfall. She was not there and not on the trail. Hunching his tall frame, he moved behind the blowing mist of the falls. Nearly crawling through the dim musty alcoves of the cave, he searched, not wanting to call her name but to find her as she was. She was kneeling in near darkness on cold dirt packed hard by curious spelunkers.

"I can't change anything back...don't even want to anymore," she agonized with her mouth against his throat. "The names of flowers...if that were all he didn't want to hear. Not the name of his wife and hardly the names of his children. It's always been tomorrow, tomorrow, a tomorrow that never comes. I try...no, I don't, not anymore. I'm kinder now, and he...he uses kindness very cruelly."

"Don't Kate. Christ, not now, not here, not with us. Don't hurt yourself like this. You...you still love him?"

"No! No!"

"Then don't hurt so."

She pulled away. Her smooth face was broken now, not ever pretty but a depth of beauty far more evocative; he had seen her turn heads with her earthy softness. Part of it was the caring, the compassion for others, her children. With him, her eyes always flashed that refulgent light, filling him with passion and conceit because he had somehow engendered such credulous luminosity. How could her husband not see what she was, the gentle opening of self to love and injury alike? So aware of her that first time, all he had needed was one glance.

"I didn't want to come down here...falling out of heaven. I never meant to say these things. I wanted our times to be peaceful, full of loving--"

"Kate," he said, shaking her a little. "I'm sorry I made you stop...selfish, I'm selfish with you. I'm glad you let it out. Forgive me for up there. This is where we learn things...down in dark caves."

Here, painfully revisiting escaped reality, they still remained very close, unwilling to separate and resume the disguise. They had spoken above the roar of the falls echoing through the cave, and now were silent. His eyes, growing accustomed to the dimness, roved over her warming face. Her heart pounded as she saw his serious mouth curve slightly with a certain smile.

She watched him take off his jacket and spread it on the moist dirt, which was nearly dustless and hard as linoleum.

"Are you cold?" she asked as her nervous hands reached out to unbutton his shirt and slip inside. She touched her lips to his chest, answering her own question, "No, not cold, so warm, and your heart is like mine."

"Can you hear it above all that?" He jerked his head toward the rushing water, then placed his hands on her waist, lowering her down upon his heavy jacket.

They were up on top now, brushed and straightened and drifting in a languid, secretive elation. He leaned against the crusted amber bark of a tall fir, watching her as she gazed at the crucial edge where the stream became Laughing Water Falls.

Looking down the stream at an angle almost parallel, she had no view of the stone cauldron or the thundering cascade. She could see the battered and bent wire fence which had been stretched across Laughing Waters' wild head as a safety precaution. There, the stream broke away and plunged into the sky, sending up a swirling rainbow spray. Something, probably a log rushing along in a swollen torrent, had torn a small hole in one side of the fence. Pieces of flotsam occasionally slipped through. The captured object would shoot out, balanced for an instant in space before gravity's invisible siphon pulled it straight down, bound for the center of the earth.

Her steady gaze, a question, left his eyes and moved over the near horizon of clouds tucked above forest.

He knew the question precisely and said in a cautious voice, "You never ask about her."

"I guess my asking is the silence...better."

"There isn't much she'll let me do for her...bring her things for her garden. Sometimes she likes that...if I manage to get it right. It's a tidy place. She doesn't share it with me or want me there...for a long time now it's taken my place. She's never told me the names of

flowers or trees or...her plants...suppose I've disappointed her by not already knowing them."

"What a joy...something I can tell you that you don't already know. Whether you want to know or not," she added, laughing with hopeful buoyance.

"Everything you tell me is what I want to know."

Kate thrust herself forward, away from the tree where she had been leaning and facing him. Stretching her arms, she planted her open hands against the trunk of his tree, then threw back her head and stared up at the highest boughs soughing in the wind. The late sun was burning itself out on the treetops. Wherever it reached in among the limbs it left red-gold patterns. A chipmunk crouched motionless in the crotch of a branch, only his bulging cheeks working furiously. His tail curled over his back in anticipation of darkness. His fluffed coat was ticked orange in the sun's cooling exodus.

Hugh's darkened eyes flashed a crimson glint. Why was he the one? Mystery of mysteries this man who loved to hear her say the names of flowers. In this moment she realized that she didn't really want to share his deflected thoughts, hear his pained revelations. Perhaps that was why she had never asked. Please, please let him stop.

"She's been a good mother," he went on. "I liked being a father when the kids were young. They don't need much now. I'm there if they do. Esther and I...we never did achieve...whatever it is that...what I think you and I have...that makes everything... I was there to make it work somehow, but not to get involved with her private world. She never let me in. She doesn't talk, doesn't listen, doesn't want to hear anything from me. I've tried

to... I think..." He made a careless, apologetic grin to dispel any notion of morbidity. "I think she'd be relieved if I just stopped breath--"

"Stop it! Oh, stop it," Kate cried. "Thank you for sharing, but please stop now. Please."

Her taut arms were still propped at right angles to her body, but her head hung down. Her slopping eyes rippled over little piles of dismantled cones, scales flung in small piles or caught in among the roots of the tree. Chipmunks' leavings. "If you were mine..."

"If I'm not then what am I? Christ!"

At the sound of his hard-bitten laugh she looked up.

"Maybe," he said, trying to hold some things back from her, "I can still go without what I never had...until I found--"

"Should we stop seeing each other for a while?" she said, wiping at her eyes.

"No! Well, all right, I guess I can't go without you. The more I have, the more I want."

"That's why I think--"

"No! Damn it, no."

He loosened her arms from the tree, in this way demanding a reassuring response, so sudden a response he almost chided her for its swiftness.

At the same moment, they knew themselves dwarfed and insignificant under the abiding deep-rooted fir, the old tree encoded with its life force. They had no plan, no tidy method of effecting change, caught in the certain spiral of life's relentless coil. He who had always slept well in his identity now knew it was only a role put on like a suit, now felt himself tumbling naked, caught in

forward inertia. His head echoed with the dirge of their spent years -- rote years obscurely encapsulated -- so much sleepwalking, then the compliance of her words: "...stop seeing each other..." No, he was awake now, wide awake.

She stood and let his hands caress her slack body as though smoothing out time, felt herself slipping into a pliant languor, as if she had made an innocent choice, the choice of an animal. Other choices were all without his hands, without his words, without the freedom to drift peacefully in his silences. No choices at all. How long would it go on? Something was going to happen.

Her eyes were opened. He drew back to look at her and she felt herself an object, an image flattened against a huge flickering screen. There was the vast field of her inert face, her own quivering mouth, and then his dark engulfing profile dissolving that image. Each impromptu scene was made without knowledge of the next moment, their bodies unclothed and intimate or riding somewhere in a car, but always surrounded by a net of tendrils continuing to grow, as if already entrapping them. In the next scene or the next, something would happen. They would laugh or weep or die, but she could not imagine them separated. Her eyes stared over his shoulder, with a glassy, transfixed gaze. He lifted her against him and the net vanished. The bubble of suspended time curved down. It shut out everything but the other solid body here and now, the oblivion of his mouth, and, slightly removed, the constant burble of the stream. Slowly the stream became the feeling of him, flowing through her mind and body, sweeping everything before it. There came a piercing scream.

It arced over the forest, splitting the air with the

desperate sound of raw fear. The rending horror of it jolted them both and filled her ears with pain as her narrowed eyes searched for its source.

A plump black-haired woman was running clumsily along the top of the steep bank across and further up the stream. She tore along the path through thorny creepers, falling, scrambling up and running blindly until Kate's red jacket must have caught her eye. The woman pointed wildly at the water, shrieking over and over and knocking dirt and rocks off the high bank, which she was unable to descend.

At first Kate walked forward slowly, as if in a dream, barely aware of what her eyes saw or how her legs were beginning to pump faster and faster, so that when she hit the water her stride broke well off the low bank and brought her down on top of the brutally hard rocks. For a moment, she was stunned by the pain shooting up through her legs, then she struggled forward, her shoes soon gone, her feet sometimes gripping sometimes sliding over the bruising stones. Ahead, out in the swifter current of the stream, floated a small, blue plastic carrier containing a bawling infant. It was moving rapidly, occasionally whirling into eddies or snagging here and there on protruding rocks. But even then she could not reach it in time, still struggling to bring herself close enough to halt its inexorable rush toward Laughing Water's head. Once there, it could pass easily through the rend of torn-away wire at the base of the mesh guard fence.

She had to reach it. Of course she could do it. Her hand was already reaching out when her body stumbled forward into one of the deep green pockets and she sank beneath the water as the carrier bobbed away. The surface

noises quickly diminished as the cold stunned her with its piercing bite. Stones kicked loose by her scrambling feet slid into the hole after her, grinding and clicking.

Kicking off the bottom, she rose to the sharp dominion of air where, with gasping and sputtering mouth, her eyes immediately began to search for the blue carrier.

"Kate! My God, Kate!" she heard Hugh shout from the shore, where he had been about to stumble into the water. But her eyes were locked on the carrier now. A tiny fist rose up as the carrier turned around slowly and shot into a faster channel. Would it catch the fence or...No! It was drifting to the right toward the opening. On all fours now, bruised, nearly frozen with cold, she thrashed and crawled through the shallow ripple at Laughing Water's head. Half lunging, half falling forward, her stiff fingers hooked over the edge of the carrier and drew it in. She had it! Shaking badly, she began to pick her way carefully over the solid bed of obstructing rocks. Her feet were too numb to ache anymore. She squinted at the wide-eyed baby now gurgling cheerfully, then back at the water to see where the deep pools lay. Splashing out to meet her, the amazed and weeping mother took the child from Kate's arms.

Hugh squeezed the water from her clothes, briskly massaged her arms and legs, then pulled his jacket around her shoulders. He rubbed her hair with his handkerchief, then held her shaking body against him. Her hair smelled of the sweet, moldering-leaved water. Never again would that pungent river scent rise in his nostrils without seeing her in the stream, without feeling her icy, wet flesh in his arms. After a while they both realized they

were being anxiously scrutinized.

The Mexican family, probably migrant workers who had settled in the orchard-filled valley, were lined up and looking at their rescuer with thankful smiles: the plump little mother, her small, golden-brown feet planted beneath dripping black slacks; the squinting old white-haired grandmother, now in possession of the baby, her shoulders stooped, her wrinkles smoothed by fat; and the slender, white-shirted, black-eyed young son, dangling the empty carrier in his hand. The grandmother rocked the baby back and forth in her arms and crooned Spanish words into its staring round face.

Finding herself noticed, the mother dove forward with outstretched arms.

"Gracias! Gracias! Muchas gracias, señora. Ay, Dios mío, mi niña, mi niña! Ave María! Me llamo María Espinoza. Cómo se llama usted?"

"She wants my name," Kate said to Hugh in a soft and perplexed voice.

The mother turned to her son and spoke in an eager voice, then the boy, who spoke English, said, "My mother will tell others, the papers...newspapers, how you save Marta. *Por favor*, what is your name?"

"My name is Kate," she told the boy with polite care. "What is your name?"

"I am Carlos."

"Carlos, my Spanish is so long out of use. Does your mother speak any English?"

"Only a very little. She is shy to speak."

"Oh I see. Perhaps she will understand me."

Kate was frowning, but she offered a smile to the

young mother and tugged at her arm.

"Señora Espinoza, please come with me, over there." She gestured toward the big fir where Hugh had been leaning earlier. They walked there together.

Hugh stared after them. They turned their backs and bent toward each other. He watched fascinated as Kate clutched his jacket against her body with one hand and gesticulated with the other to encourage the flow of broken Spanish, which she had apparently once known.

Kate shivered a little, staring into the grateful brown eyes. She explained with a gentle, imploring voice.

"Sí, sí, señora," Mrs. Espinoza responded in an agreeable voice. "You no *casada*."

"No, we're not married to each other. *Por eso, señora*, to tell the paper would cause a great sadness...a...I think *muchísima tristeza* is how you say it. You understand? *Comprende?*"

"Sí, *comprendo*. I no do this," Mrs. Espinoza promised. She glanced back several times at Hugh, with her dark eyes narrowed in appraisal. "*El hombre you amante*," she said in a light, conspiratorial voice, savoring the idea of a lover. "You...love?"

"Sí...yes." Kate laughed, a little embarrassed, and patted the woman's shoulder.

"*Pero*, I...never...never...not know you goodness," Mrs. Espinoza said, struggling to be understood.

"Forget," Kate said with a smile. "You will never forget. Nor will I."

"Sí, sí, I not forget you always, Kate."

They hugged, and the laughter of relief and gratitude flowed between them, welling up with a pleasurable mingling

of their sparely voiced understanding.

Kate held her hands under the warm blast of air as Hugh's big navy sedan rolled smoothly over the winding country road.

"I've no idea where my shoes went. Laughing Water swallowed them."

"I'll buy you another pair, my brave little trout. I want you to get dry."

She felt a sudden rush of euphoria combined with deep tiredness. She leaned back and turned her head to smile.

"I'm almost dry already...just a bit damp."

He pushed her hair away from her crimson cheek and saw that her face held a feverish luster.

"I hope you won't catch cold."

"Don't you know about the experiment someone did? They turned a cold hose on a fully clothed woman and let her walk around like that. Nothing happened."

"Probably on a hot summer day."

"I'll be all right. I'll just go home. Believe me, no one will notice."

He continued to glance at her as he drove between the greening hills and chocolate brown plowed fields. She had withdrawn into an exclusive place. There were faint blue veins in her lowered eyelids. Her skin was translucent, like the tissuey stuff of the fragile white blossoms she so often touted, mock orange. There were a few lonely freckles on her nose, and he had a sudden clear image of her as a carefree little towhead running through a meadow. He took her hand and held it against his lips.

"What did you tell the mother?" he asked, speaking

through her fingers as he kissed them.

"Said we were undercover agents...working on something incredibly important and couldn't give our names."

He laughed and started to respond to her playfulness, but had to concentrate on a flock of Canada geese, which had taken possession of the road center. The park exit led through a waterfowl refuge, and the flyway was teeming with geese sailing down to feed. In among the geese waddled a lone white swan, a large, ungainly bird, noisily irritated with its fellow travelers.

They watched as the last goose left the pavement and eased itself down into the slough alongside the road. He set the car in motion and turned to tease her for her outlandish answer, but the words died in his throat as he saw where she was looking, saw the confident bloom on her face. She was humming and smiling at the swan, now no longer a clumsy creature out of its element but a graceful beauty gliding over the narrow channel of water.

Even as he relished the pluck and vitality of her essential nature, he knew that she had changed, that her battered self-esteem had been unshakably restored; his sharer of secrets and the names of flowers, his weakness, his strength, his wildness...his wild waterborne swan.

"You told her we were here for each other."

Her eyes flashed a wink at him. "Oh how she delighted in my revelation."

"The truth will have its satisfaction," he remarked.

Their laughter resonated with the mutual feelings they exchanged when words were superfluous.

"I think I know what I'm going to do, Hugh." Her voice held a certainty that was at once his own.

"Do you? And do you know what I'm going to do?"

"Yes."

He turned down a lane, parking under a pink ornamental cherry tree, its lush blossoms trembling in the spring airs.

Now they possessed the highest value of the moment. They were nowhere else but here.

THE END

GRANDMA IN THE WOODS

I run, flapping my arms through fog that rolls over the fields of green baby fuzz. Spring! My ninth spring. By now I think I've learned so many things. While I'm standing still, the fog curls up and touches me and slithers away in a ghostly animal shape. The sun's fiery tongue licks at the fog, but most of it gets away. The morning is too early for the sun to swallow so much fog. Ahead is the rock fence, jumping out of all that white. Chunks of black lava rock full of tiny holes. Grandma says a long, long time ago the holes were bubbles in hot lava. In this coolness it's hard to imagine melted rock all red with flames. Beyond the fence the fir trees are thick and dark as a cave. I skitter over to a place where some of the rocks have tumbled down, and wait there for Grandma.

"Aye-yi-yi, it's a pity, this comin'-down fence," Grandma says. "What would poor *grosspapa* say? So gentle

he was, and yet I think he might swear at this. I tell you I can hear it, and that was a rare thing...a rare thing."

She is thinking about her father again, always the same when we come here, *grosspapa* and *grossmutter*. It's what we all call them when we talk about the old days. My great grandfather cleared and plowed the fields and built the house and barn. Grandma says the house is Victorian. High up, it has a stained glass window of really beautiful colors, especially when the sun decides to shine there. Her father was an architect in Germany. He and my grandmother's four brothers made the rock fences with just their bare hands. There probably wasn't any moss on the rocks the way there is now. It's green as unripe apples, soggy from all the rain, spongy and fun to touch.

Everything feels good today, smells good. There is the quiet of morning and the waiting damp fields. Off somewhere I hear a calf calling for its mama. There is this soft fog, floating up so misty-cool against my face, and me snuggled inside the scratchy old wine coat handed down from my sister, Roboo. Her name is Roberta, but I had trouble saying that when I was a baby and now Roboo is just a habit. She doesn't like me to say it in front of strangers or the boys always standing around her. She thinks she has a boyfriend, and moons around the house with nothing else on her mind. That's what mama says. Moony old Roboo. Guess she wishes that dumb boy would just go crazy and ride all the way over here on his bicycle. And then what? Stare at her, maybe. She'd turn red and pretend like it was terrible. Pretend, pretend. What a bore.

Grandma tosses her carrying basket over the fence. It

lands beside me as she starts across the scattered rocks. She bends over and uses her hands and feet like a clumsy old bear. Her big rubber boots klonk against the rocks as she grunts her way to my side.

"Mercy, mercy," she says, standing up and looking back as if she has just suffered something awful. Anyway, she's laughing and brushing her hands over her skirt.

"Here, what's this?" She pulls a white crocheted scarf out of her saggy pocket. "Can't you keep it on your head, Marthy, girl?"

I put my hand up to my head and make a funny face. I didn't even notice it was gone.

"Auntie Min's good snood. She'll skin me sure if you lose it, after I helped myself for your bare little noggin."

Minna is my great-auntie and Grandma's sister. She usually stays in the house and sews or cooks. There's a wood stove with an electric one right next to it, but Auntie Min likes the wood stove best. Grandma argues with her when flowers need picking for market. Then Auntie Min comes fast outside, with white lips tight together and her pale gray eyes squinched almost beyond seeing. She chases the escaped chickens out of her herb garden to let off a little steam then goes into the flower fields. You can hear her time to time grumbling over the bursitis in her shoulder. Her head is bent down, noticing nothing. She snaps off stems dreamy fast, snap, snap, snap. Pretty soon she is liking the smell of the jonquils or narcissus or whatever is blooming then. Finally she turns her head up to the sky, smiles off at the hills and pretends the picking was her idea all along.

"I couldn't lose this old snood," I say, "because all this land is ours, and it wouldn't really be lost. All this land, way up to the top of the hill and beyond that and all the way to the river."

"Too smart for a smooth ride, way too smart," Grandma says, and gives me a little nudge while I tie on my snood. Now I remember why I don't like it. It bulges and scratches under my chin. After a while I'll take it off. Grandma won't notice.

"I'm so old I don't have to pay taxes anymore, or we wouldn't even have this land," Grandma says. "That's a hot one, ain't it? Just when I can hardly put one foot in front of the other I get a little relief."

"Everyone says owning land is the most important thing...except for having stacks of money."

"Who says? You learn that flibber-jibber in school? They ought to stick to the multiplications. Stacks of money are an abomination...and nobody really owns anything. The Indians knew it."

The wind comes up. Hyacinth sweet and cold, blowing fir needles and big splashy water drops down on our heads. Grandma has her shears out, snipping as we climb. Clip, clip, clipping all the new things grown over the path.

I'm thinking about the Indians, how maybe there could be some behind the trunks of the biggest firs. I love those trees. The tallest ones always ask me to dance. They use the wind to speak. "Martha, Martha," they sing, swaying high up like friendly green ghosts. I sway along, way forward on my toes, get tangled in the blowing ferns and fall over. I lie there laughing, then I see the Indians dancing. I can hear their drums and their chants

high up on the wind. It makes me shiver but not because I'm afraid. I want it to be, and so it is.

The field in the bottom land was their burial ground, or it might have been just a place where they threw things, the way a drunk old neighbor five miles from here throws his empty cans off the back porch. Nobody knew about all those Indian things until grosspapa's team of Morgans plowed up the stone bowls and pestles and clubs. Auntie Min keeps all of this stuff on the fireplace hearth. She has blue trading beads in a glass jar. Some have tiny stripes. Maybe Lewis and Clark brought them. Probably did.

The Indians lived on the Clackamas River that winds through this valley. You can see it from the top of this hill, our hill. The river looks like a little silver garter snake. It was chock full of big long salmon way back then. There was plenty of deer meat, too, but sometimes the deer acted like they could see into the future and vanished deep into the woods. Then the Indians burned off this hillside we're climbing, to make the deer come out. The trees here are big around and tall, so it must have been a long time ago, or maybe some trees lived through the fire.

When Grandma was very little, grossmutter took her into a room where an old pioneer woman was dying. The woman sat up in bed and shouted that mad deer were running out of the fire. She screamed that they were stuck red with flintstone arrows. Then she cried out how they were leaping into cloud light. I knew what that meant when I heard it. There's a kind of light from the clouds that looks like its burning. Sometimes it looks like the dirt-

polish shine on plow metal. Sometimes it looks like the light that comes through Auntie Min's frosted deer window in the parlor. That front door is stuck shut, never used. To me it's like the back door. I could lie on her thready, red Persian carpet and dream into that stag window for hours. Sometimes I do. That old woman saw all those things and told them exactly right, but she couldn't remember her own daughter's name. Maybe her mind got stuck in that place. All through her life she kept seeing the fur thick with blood and smelling the singed hides. She kept seeing the fire coming through the trees and the blowing white smoke. It must have been the most important thing to her. Her words went from Grandma to me and from me to...who knows where?

I look at Grandma and try to think of her as a little girl but I just can't. She always looks the same to me. I know her short hair is kind of thin underneath that old green woolen hat. I know her hands are never still even when she sleeps. Just looking at them I can see the kinds of things she does with them. They look worn out, mostly blue veins like little swollen rivers, and brown spots. Her fingers are bent at their tips. She says they just won't straighten out anymore. Dirt gets under her nails all the time. She scrubs it out with gray lava soap at night, but it's there again the next day. She wears an old Navy coat that belonged to her second husband. He was always drunk and just walked down the road one day and never came back. He might be dead, but Grandma says more often than not only the good die early. "I should have hired him to stoke the greenhouse furnace instead of marrying him. I didn't have enough sense to understand the

difference...or could be I was afraid of talk, keeping the old fool around," she told me once. He wasn't my grandfather. Nobody knows about my mama's father except Grandma and Auntie Min. When I ask Auntie Min, she gives Grandma a worried glance and holds up her finger for me to be quiet.

Grandma shoots off the path into ferns and huckleberry bushes. I can't see her, nothing but a swaying snowberry branch where she must have gone.

"Hey, aren't we going to the top?" I yell into the woods.

Her head darts around a little fir. "No, girl, no orchards today. It's something else I preternert forgot about. Came to me like a dream...just in time. You'll see. Shake a leg, slowpoke."

I unsnag myself from a spindly wild rose bush that's trying to grow without any sun. I don't want to hurt it but I'm in a hurry and thinking about dreams, a worrying one. Then I remember what it is and a funny feeling starts up. I want to tell Grandma. I tell her everything sooner or later but I don't know about this. I wouldn't tell mama.

Grandma stoops to pick a plantain leaf which she says will heal a cut on her finger. She holds it up close to her eyes and squints at it. "Right fresh healthy leaf." She strips a little bark from a hazel branch and winds it over the leaf held against her finger, then asks me to make a knot. "Better than salve from tinny old tubes," she says.

Grandma's eyes are small but dark and shiny and quick as little birds' eyes. Her face is narrow with cheeks up

high and a long, thin nose. Her mouth is hardly there, that is, you don't notice it as much as her eyes, unless she smears on some red lipstick. She only does that when she puts on her beaverskin coat and goes to grange supper with Auntie Min. Getting ready, she pats rouge on her cheeks in two round spots and dusts powder on her nose until it lands on her tiny eyelashes and shows up white. When she's satisfied, which doesn't take long, she says, "Get old beaver out of the *armry* for me, Marthy kid." The *armry* is a big closet made of reddish wood with a few shelves of funny old hats, receipts in shoe boxes, and a rack with seven or eight hangers of Grandma's best clothes: her coat, some old print dresses, a check jacket, a blouse or two, and a brown suit that's been in there since I don't know when. The doors have mirrors and make a creepy sound when they swing open and shut. Sometimes I swing them back and forth, back and forth, just to hear that spooky sound, until Grandma says, "For pity's sake, stop that racket right fast!" She keeps a whiskey bottle in there, too, with a little glass on top, one shot a night for sleeping. I tasted it. Ick! It burned awful, but Grandma says it usually knocks her out. Whenever I stay with her she falls asleep real fast, too fast, because I like to talk about things, or make her talk. I love her silly stories. She tells them right off the top of her head, so funny I'm still giggling while she snores. She does that loud enough to shake the pictures on the walls. Then I know she can't be worrying about anything. Her whiskey breath always makes me think of Christmas Eve when her brothers come and you can smell it all over the parlor. I fall asleep against her warm body that's twisted up in a long flannel

nightgown.

Grandma is swishing through the fern clumps that grow all over the hillside. Now her black wool skirt has little bits of leaves and twigs stuck to it. Auntie Min complains about this stuff coming into the house. I think it was her complaining that got Grandma to brushing her skirt all the time, even when there's nothing collected there.

"Grandma, you know what...I had...I think it was a bad dream."

"No! A tyke like you with a bad dream? Wsht!"

Grandma turns around and knocks down air with a fast hand. It means different things when she does that. This time I think it means she doesn't want me to worry, so I'm thinking about telling her more.

I have to stop and bang my boots against a skinny alder because I went through a rainwater stream and came out the other side with a lot of mud. Grandma waits, so I know she expects to hear more.

"I don't know why I dreamed it. The girls at school are always telling stuff about their moms and dads and babies and...well, there's this kid, Freddy. Sometimes he sits with me on the bus when there's no place left, 'cause he gets on after I do. Anyway, he has big ears. I never noticed it until the kids started teasing him. Then I felt sorry for him and started saving him a seat."

"Mmm," Grandma says, "That was just the thing to do." She pulls off her bandage and throws it away. Maybe it bothers her. "So, on with it now, Marthy."

"Well, anyway," I'm in a hurry to get this out. "Freddy was in the dream, and he was sort of like my husband, I guess, doing things like a husband does. At

first it seemed nice but then I was afraid. I mean after I woke up. Gads! I can't even look at Freddy and I don't want him to sit with me anymore. What if he could read my mind? I've been walking down and getting on the bus with the Anderson kids. Why'd I have to dream that, Grandma?"

"Oh, pshaw! Poor little tyke," Grandma says and she looks not really mad but not happy.

"Is it terrible?"

"Of course not. It was bound to happen, you see. It's all a part of life, natural as eating cherry pie.

"You know, when I was young I used to pick huckleberries with an old squaw named Josie Threefeathers, one of the smartest women I'll ever know. Taught me all about the woods. And not just that. Told me how Indians thought about things and how dreams was just as real as anything to them. Well, I thought that was a little odd until I thought some more. See, honey girl, your dreams are just like the funny old stories I tell, based on real life but didn't really happen. But they did happen somewhere, didn't they?"

"In my head?"

"That's the ticket. So the Indians treated those stories just like anything else that really happens."

I'm thinking about this while I bite my weedy thumb.

Grandma puts the back of her pruning hand under my chin, still holding the pruners, and makes me look into her eyes.

"Oh, pshaw, I'm getting you all muddled, girl. Your dream didn't happen in Freddy's head. Still, it was there in your head all right, and you know about it so it kinda scares you. But it's nothing to worry on. Little bits of

real life go into your head and get stirred together 'til they come out in funny ways in your dreams. Your giggly little friends talked about their folks, then you sat next to Freddy every morning, then you dreamed. See? So where's the harm in that?"

"Nowhere, I guess."

"Right, kiddo. So you can sit next to Freddy, if you want, and look Freddy smack in the eye and he doesn't know a thing...except that his ears are too big. Poor little scallywag. It's all a silly business."

Grandma picks up a rotten limb when she says that last thing, and smacks it hard against a fir trunk. Splinters fly all over. I start laughing and laughing. I feel so good. I don't know how Grandma can be so smart and funny at the same time.

We go into brush so thick it makes a roof over our heads. Grandma tunnels through, snipping right and left with her fast clippers, while I try to carry the basket on my head. Some of the leaf buds are already opening, the shiniest, most delicate little leaves you ever saw.

"Plenty of sap around here," Grandma calls over her shoulder. "Expect we'll see old black bear one more time, or didn't he come last year?"

"He didn't."

"Oh mercy, the years go by so fast I can hardly keep track. Well then, civilization got 'im, too. Looky here, ain't that a pretty mushroom? Poisonous as all get out. We'll go for the eatin' kind pretty soon now."

"Oh boy! Morels, huh? Down by the river."

"Yep, sure as there's a sandy bank. Got customers already begging for 'em. Old Davis keeps on askin' me

where I get 'em. Can you imagine that? Must think my brain's got as much dry rot as his barn."

"But I know right where to find them, Grandma."

"And you don't breathe a word, hear? Wipe out old Kate's electric payment."

Sometimes Grandma calls herself *old Kate* like she is talking about a friend. Her name is Katharine, but I never heard anyone call her that. When the gypsies come to buy her flowers for their parties and funerals, they call her *Mama*. She always gives them a little something extra.

"Do you believe the gypsies when they tell your fortune, Grandma?"

"Oh for pity's sake, no. They always tell me something good. Clever folks. That's called psychology."

"What's that?"

"Never mind. I'm not sure I could explain it anyway."

"I bet you could. You know about dreams."

All at once, I think of something and I feel just terrible again. I can't keep it to myself.

"Grandma...before I had that dream I think I was just imagining, once, I mean, that Freddy was my husband."

"Evil thoughts!" Grandma says, turning around and stamping her foot.

I feel sick.

"No, no, looky here," Grandma says. She laughs and takes hold of the snood still wrapped around my neck, yanking my chin up. "I was thinking of myself. Oh, you're so young...but never mind. It was the times I grew up in that I blame for some of that misery."

"What misery?"

"My first marriage. I had a humdinger of a husband, a

real one, played house...wasn't much good at the house part, or much else either, I guess. Somehow I was made to believe that thinking certain thoughts, or doing certain things was shame. My poor, stupid husband didn't have the sense to help me. Fool! He fancied he was a gentleman. Didn't want me selling my flowers. He wanted lace. I cooked with my boots on. He swept all the food off the table with his hand stuck in a fine black leather glove. Dumped me right off at Minna's when I was in the family way. He...oh lord, what am I saying? That devil understood no more than I did."

Grandma looks so funny, I mean strange. Her eyes aren't looking out at anything. She sits down hard on a stump, with her boots stretched out, and begins picking the caught things off her skirt. After a while she looks up, and I think she must have forgot me she looks so surprised. She rubs her eyes with the back of her pruning hand. My heart jumps I'm so afraid.

"Must be the hay fever got me already," she says in the softest voice. I think she's talking to the sky.

"I did love that way. My skin was so smooth you can't imagine. I don't even recognize these hands, these wrecked old hands. It all went so fast. But I did feel that way once. Silly old fool."

She looks like me, sounds like me. When I feel mixed up, sometimes I talk to the sky. I put my arms around her.

"Are you all right, Grandma?"

"Not altogether but I never have been. There I go again confusing you, little pokeberry. A person can think things that scare just like dreams. They pop into your head before you know it. The trouble is, somewhere back at

the beginning of you, somebody, or lots of somebodies, started you to saving up all your guilt for this one little thought. And then you have another thought. You see...pshaw, no! You don't see because you can't yet. By the time you do see I might not be here, so just listen to a riddle and remember it for later. You hear?

"It took me a long time to learn this, and if you remember it in time it'll save you a peck of trouble. Do you know you are still getting a soul? Some people never get one...a soul."

"What is it?"

"You might just call it character, that is a kindness toward everything, learning not to be too selfish. When you get a hurt then you come to know how another can feel that pain, too. That's experience."

"Experience is a soul?"

"You can't have a soul without it. Anyone who tells you different is a fool. Here's what you have to remember, little weed. You have to figure out how to get things right inside yourself. You have to know what your feet are standing on. And here's the hard part: you have to keep on getting a feel for what is right."

"How?"

"Sounds like getting ahold of the wind, doesn't it? And, worse yet, everyone is trying to close your mind. Don't you let 'em. Your mind is your last free place. It's like a big open field you can run through in every direction without any ugly signs. See how we go through the woods making a new path? You can think new paths. All you have to remember is that everything concerning you goes on inside your own head. And here's one other very

important thing: the golden rule."

"At least I know that, Grandma: don't do to others what you don't want them to do to you."

"That's it, kiddo. Good enough. Now you're set."

Grandma hops off the stump with a satisfied smile and picks up her basket.

"Where are we going, anyway?" I ask, looking around.

"We're here," Grandma says, pulling back a big fir limb and stepping into an open meadow.

The sun is there and the dark woods all around makes the place seem blinding bright. I just stand and stare.

"Oh, Grandma, oh, it's beautiful!"

Grandma laughs. "You're getting a soul, Marthy girl."

Pink everywhere. Everything pink. Little waving fluffs of pink. I want to run through the color like Grandma says I should do with my mind. But I think, what if I break something? I settle down on my knees and touch one flower.

"What is it?"

"Lady Slipper, an orchid. The root is good for headache if you know what to mix it with."

"Do you?"

"I did once."

I want to roll in the Lady Slippers but I sit back carefully among them. Who would think the woods could hide such a place? -- like a sweet cherry inside a chocolate.

Grandma starts to pick, bending down each delicate little stem.

"No, Grandma!" I shout. "Don't do to the flowers what you don't want them to do to you."

"Good learning. Now pick, girl. They can stand a

little thinning. We'll make people who can never see this happy. Just a few. That's why we're here. The Lady Slippers are glad for the extra space. They know I'd never destroy their beds."

I snap one off and hold it up close. It doesn't really look much like a slipper. It's so little and helpless. I feel dizzy here in the sun. All that pale color ripples back and forth in the wind, like a sweet pink river. I close my eyes. I'm getting warm and lazy.

"Lady Slippers, Lady Slippers, I know where you live," I sing.

Grandma is on her knees. She holds up a pink bunch, thinks about it for a minute, then slips a rubber band around the tiny stems. Her sweater cuff is stretched out and hanging from her coat sleeve. I feel a little sad but mostly happy. Grandma's head is resting on a huge white cloud. She looks like she belongs here, nice in the sun, especially because of her smile. Her eyes are bright and watching me, like a little fox's. She really sees me.

THE END

A FAVOR

Joanna sorts through her mail, pausing to study a certain postmark. She tears open the manila envelope and

reads:

Dear Little Sister:

Your tasty letter arrived today. Did you happen to receive a furious "mind message" that cried out for a sane communication, such as only you can deliver? What a nice batch of news marinated in your amusing opinions. After all my gadding about I've a few surprising morsels for you, too.

First, let me warm you up a bit. Picture me in the comfortably lined silk robe you sent me for my birthday, blue for my eyes you said. Here I am, sitting at my ebony writing table, my bare feet nestled in the white shag, kneading my toes as I write. Oh how my cramped little toes needed to be set free. I've just come from a homespun wedding in the woods of Brightenbush. It was Midge and Raleigh's girl, Beth, getting hitched to a callow stranger, hitched with nothing more florally substantial than chains of daisies. She looked like I imagine Ariel, gossamery and ready to float off into a moment or two of pleasure. The bride and groom danced to a flute -- I did, too, hence the tired feet. Those two ingenuous children are convinced they'll remember their unhesitating, ad-libbed vows. I did detect several fortunate loopholes couched in their adoring promises. Oh well, I'm just tired and cynical.

Remember Grandad's enormous pink cabbage roses, and how we little ones cavorted beneath those ponderous blooms? I can't find a start of them anywhere. No one even knows what I'm talking about when I ask for them. Vanished, like so many other old pleasantries. I must have those monstrous efflorescing things again, sister. Do you know where to look? Their blowzy pink comes more and more to

mind, firmly attached to my early nirvana. Nirvana is not something I expect in the future. I've had it.

At least I finally feel *at home*. Here I am, safely ensconced behind the black-shuttered windows of my freshly painted, sheltering old house: palmetto green, an evocative color but subtle. My biennial-bearing apple tree in the back yard is shuffling in the breeze the last of its large, shiny, red-striped yellow Gravensteins, plopping a few of them on my perfectly cropped emerald lawn. My big hissing sprinklers are throbbing out their life-affirming sound, spraying over a lazy afternoon's secret strivings -- eternal emerald grass. Glancing across the room, into my beveled-glass gilt-edged mirror, I find my slightly unfocused visage flattered by a handsome gold frame. With the enhancement of distance, I appear much the same as I did before flying off to India. Closer scrutiny reveals a difference in my eyes.

Beside my china cup of Keemun tea, I have a generous swallow of *eau de vie*. EAU DE VIE! I wish it were. After that, I'll slide between the cool linen sheets of my bed and thrash around, helpless as a wet-winged moth.

My shutters have swung open on a tenuous breeze that smells of wet grass and scented flowers. There are the curling vines of the morning-glories, little murex funnels closing in a fast-arriving dusk. Everything around me is so comforting, and uncompromised by the least inattention. Why do I feel as if I'm hovering on the crest of a rough swell, about to slip down into a dark drowning? I envision the puzzled squint of your gray eyes, and precisely the way your pale eyebrows come together when you frown.

I've always undertaken to send you positive assurances

-- best spirits, best opinions, best photographs -- not to deceive but for the sake of avoiding eristic discomfort. After all, why do we write but to bolster and cheer each other on? Who needs querulous opinion or a repetition of the ubiquitous bad news which drives us into seclusion, or the reverse: furious wandering over the planet? I write the above as a defensive foreshadowing of what follows. Forgive these next pathetic revelations of my woeful derangements, fetters of distraction that bind me to my worst self. The equivalent of an illness setting in, or something perverse trying to flush itself out. Ha! No worse than the common cold...but on rare occasions pneumonia!

Now I believe I've warmed you up sufficiently. Dig out the photograph I sent you while on my last adventure. The photo where I'm standing beneath a spreading date palm whose fronds were filled with a medley choir of songbirds. There I stand, all innocence -- such innocence I would be most happy to disclaim -- your roving sibling about to step into an abbreviated barque floating on an algae-filled canal. There is good algae and bad. I feel certain this was bad. The picture is so perfect, the ensuing story so unsettling that I could not bring myself to relate it, not until a recent event which has left me as I never am, confused. In the enclosed, sealed envelope you will find another photo, at which you are not to look until you finish reading what I've written here. As to the first photo, lovely isn't it? It was taken with a medium yellow filter, using ASA 160, a shutter speed of 500 and an F-stop of 11. Immediately after it was snapped the photographer pushed me into the canal and floated off in the barque with

my camera. In that case, you may well be pondering, how I could now be in possession of either photograph? Read on.

I emerged covered in a thick coating of olive-drab ooze, transformed into something prehistoric -- this piteous atavistic footslog only after squirming around in a noxious slime for what seemed the age of mankind. I now had a frog's eye view of the proverbial pond, and was swiftly converted to the causes of purifying the earth.

What prompted the photographer's unspeakable act? No, not theft. I was more or less acquainted with the man, and he was known and respected as a frequent sojourner in the region. The question certainly occurred to me more than once as I ignominiously crept, in my defiled state, back to my hotel. Once there, with a steady stream of maledictions, I scrubbed my contaminated body back to recognition, then set about getting whatever inoculations I had not heretofore received, against undetermined numbers of leaping, crawling, flying, swimming, and rapidly dividing parasites frequenting that nourishing -- to the aforementioned -- sludge. Shortly thereafter, the camera was delivered, emptied of its film, with a brief note requesting that I meet the absquatulating malefactor in the hotel lobby at one o'clock the afternoon of the following day.

Violent reprisals had taken possession of me, totally foreign to my generally phlegmatic nature -- especially in warm latitudes. I popped and simmered in a stew of revenge and even envisioned a wild rush into the lobby, swiftly followed by a hole shot clean through the offending neck -- even then I could not bear the idea of perforating that prepossessing head. Of my uncontrollable curiosity I was

more than a little ashamed. Beneath the rage was a barely acknowledged disappointment: a newly encountered person I believed I could respect, a promising relationship hovering on the brink of some depth, destroyed by madness. I refused absolutely to believe I was what I must have been seen to be: a fatuous woman striking a facile pose of *savoir-faire*. No, I had been caught up in the innocent *joie de vivre* of the moment: a technically perfect photograph assured of a memorable recollection, especially by dint of its stirringly allusive maker. The man.

I had met Karill Ramsajoom a week earlier at the hotel pool while taking a late afternoon dip. He was quietly provocative, not at all a masher. A geologist of eclectic interests who often stayed at the hotel, tall, thin, dark of course, and angular with narrow, deep-set eyes that burned with uncommon intelligence and lethargic amusement. He spoke a smooth, beautifully accented English, tone perfect. His impeccable physical presence was undaunted by the heat or the laxity of the hotel staff. I, contrariwise, was perturbed by both and began to wither in that climate as soon as I stepped from pool or shower.

Karill Ramsajoom had a manner of delivery which made the simplest polite statements strike at something large beneath, revealing its parts like a subtle hammer tapping out the fracture points of a great obdurate rock. And, like the rock, midway through the cocktail hour I was beginning to crack. However careful and courteous, it seemed we meant to impress one another, circling massive massifs, tapping here and there, pausing to enjoy the timbre of an escalating wit echoing in our silences.

Gin and tonics with tart-rindy limes came and went as

we draped ourselves ever more casually over the creaking wicker chairs, tottering unevenly on the red tiles of the veranda. Panniers of crimson geraniums flamed at odd angles, and progressively so, suffusing the afternoon with an earthy essence of *Pelargonium* redolence. The sky soared higher and higher to a hot blue, and slid down at last into a thick raspberry aspic. The feather-fluffed pigeons roiled about and murmured to their roosts, setting off the garden parrot's tyrannical scream.

Something intangible was then palpable on the skin, a bag of devilish airs disbursing a purple mist of camouflage. In one instant all senses super-alive and vivid, in the next the bare-faced marble of a stupor. I could sense the falcon eyes swooping down on a shadowy self several removes away in a desert of flat emotion. Feebly, I sought a synapse of revival, but instead leapfrogged into maudlin ecstasy, a felicitous, fawning lump of pickled flesh.

The man could hold his liquor. I narrowed my eyes and battened down. I had heard that quinine water was bad for vision, gin even worse. Yet I thought I saw clearly enough. Why, in back of everything, social amenities, a bric-a-brac of beginnings, scales of interest rising and falling, why was I there, he gently implied. Why was anyone anywhere? I heard my voice responding to his innuendo. Now I had made inroads -- I appeared clairvoyant, to both of us. Gin. A timeless milieu such as our surround was worth exploring I explicated.

How nice it was to have a choice, he suggested, but what he really meant was how unnice not to have a purpose. I did have one: an eclectic acquisition of life, and of

lives in places familiar to them but not to me. Did I have to be out tap, tapping at rocks, looking for oils to grease and shine the acquisitive, artificial world? At this he found me too sensitive and himself misunderstood. Perhaps I needed to pull myself together. I had misinterpreted -- the sultry darkness, the surfeit of gin and tonics, the perfect gentleman with his sudden raw appraisal. I was incensed, possibly supersensitive but certainly smashed. A malevolent egg was laid. I broke it with a spurious, honeyed smile, which I gradually realized was lopsided. The sterile yolk ran out, tainting everything with a sticky tempera of small retaliatory strokes. I began my list, which, as you recall, is my method of ordering my mind when it threatens to benumb itself. Small mole on weathered left cheek; intense black pupil indistinguishable from iris; knobby linen shirt, or raw silk; ostentatious Rolex; outsized ruby on right ring finger; sinewy hands; long ear auricles; vainly coiffured coils of black hair; patchouli cologne; gin-cheroot breath; rising and falling intonations, rumble, rumble, rumble. His words reverberated over my head as it dropped back against the pillowed wicker -- restorative as falling asleep amidst a tithing sermon. I believe he was then enshrining geology, fathoms away by now, vacuuming nickel nodules from the sea floor. Presently, I heard a sharp, demanding voice from the sunken pulpit and awakened.

"I think I need to eat," I said.

I don't remember going to my room but I do vaguely remember descending in something fresh and cool and green. I was at once borne away to a place of polished brass, spicily incensed airs, the quaint room's winking decor the

result of a few interspersed candles, a dark cavern strewn with pots of heady gardenias. Stringed instruments were continuously plucked, and there was a suggestive flute. I half expected a sinuous dancing belly.

I recall pale yellow chicken wings floating in a scalding broth of clear amber, glowing with a plump raw egg yolk and garnished with a slice of lime. Beginning a silent list of the ingredients churned up from the bottom of the bowl, I held forth a fluted water chestnut. Candlelight protracted this muzzy contemplation. I was then interrupted by the arrival of a cluttered mound, a curry studded with large pink-striped shrimp served by a great smiling walrus swathed in aureate brocade. Karill Ramsajoom's dedicated mouth opened and closed over his fork. The fork went up and down quite smoothly, until I was again an object of sharp focus in the appraising falcon eyes.

"I have my way of doing things...I suppose omnivorous curiosity; it seems all right to me," I offered, in what I imagined was a succinct voice but could not have been.

He ate a shrimp, and shook his humored head from side to side, a discreet interior moment, manifesting only a sly containment of opinion. With me or against me? Nothing but an exasperating amused smile.

Concerned that I was not eating, he selected and fed me a glistening shrimp, impaled on the prongs of a bone-handled huge silver fork.

"Perhaps you are a polymath, but you've drunk yourself past the point of certainty," he said. His self-indulgent laughter was expansive, obviously very much enjoyed.

"You giveth and taketh away," I mouthed. How well I

remember that retort because of his resounding laughter. You know I will go to dangerous lengths to elicit such a response in a playful moment.

Quite unexpectedly, my body felt alive and alert, a last gasp of this bizarre metabolism. I should by then have been laid out stiff as a frozen tuna. My odd digestion was synthesizing sweet melon balls while I noticed everything: a lizard on the ceiling, inching away from the turning fan blades; a tempting entangled threesome sitting just behind Karill Ramsajoom -- I observed with astounding clarity one of the men subtly but painfully expressing desire for the other's sparsely clothed female companion, his eagerly kneading, surreptitious fingers employed beneath the table. In the next moment my eyelids threatened to stick down. The sudden curious excitement that had revived me had just as suddenly departed. In argumentative denial of my crapulous state, I nevertheless wished to go straight to my hotel room and collapse. The marzipan arrived.

I slept until noon; a vengeful headache leaving me useless thereafter. The following day we arose early and had our *chota hazri*, a light breakfast which for me was tea, an orange, and a delicate pastry. We were then driven to a narrow gage railway which carried us into the gloriously cool high hills. Along the way, we entrapped ourselves in a provocative conversation which approached altercation, a discord soon halted by the spectacular beauty of the hill country -- in that there was sensitive accord. The return trip was endured in fatigued silence, the pungent aroma of firs and pines drifting through our open windows and serving as a tonic for ill temper and malaise.

It occurs to me now that I was insulting from time to time, without intending any meanness, of course. I believe it was a reaction to the immense pleasure he had unwittingly bestowed; ultimately this became intimidating, therefore making it necessary to assert my autonomous self. Nothing of arrogance. I'm well aware one never achieves elevation by putting another down.

He disappeared the following day. I was loathe to admit how bereft his absence left me. My expressed opinions are not often so readily grasped, or my silent thoughts so accurately intuited. A day later, I was strolling outdoors with my camera when he appeared and invited me to climb into the fatal barque or skiff or damnable little boat.

Thus my post-submersion descent into the hotel lobby was as agreeably anticipated as dipping my hand into a cobra charmer's basket. I wavered uncertainly over some terrible error I might have committed -- you above all others know how difficult I can sometimes be unawares --, then dismissed the idea in a quick reassessment of my adherence to customs and general courtesy -- not then admitting to any insolence on my part -- and went downstairs to await the unfathomable, beneath insufficient fans. I was indeed floundering in a confusion of anger and inescapable curiosity.

"Let us go into the garden," were his first words as he approached. I, who had rehearsed such violent imprecations, followed along in rigid silence. He sat down on a palm-shaded bench and motioned for me to sit beside him. Not wanting to appear docile, pliable, or forgiving, I walked on a little further and lowered myself into a

wicker armchair.

The garden was warm and empty, except for a molting parrot rustling through shady leaves, and a diminutive mermaid pouring a thin stream of water into a lotus-filled copper basin.

His hands were on his knees, creased khaki, and his mouth maintained a curious expression of compassionate benevolence that induced me to speak. I was shaking and, for one of the few times in my life, mumbled incoherently.

He laughed and said, "You look very different today, tangible, touchable, lovely, alive with uncertainty. Do you feel it?"

"I might have drowned."

"The water was not over your head."

"I might be dying from disease, as we speak."

"I think not."

I struggled up from my chair. I meant to leave because I simply could not cope. Me! It was ridiculous. He went on explaining something, and I stood still, consumed with a desire to hear what possible explanation there could be.

"I wanted to give you a chance at honesty, release, the pleasure of disorder. It was not an easy decision. I could not stand that cold white confinement, your flawless dress, shoes, skin, mind, all as one invulnerable defense. No variance. No possible escape into Nietzsche's playfulness. One must take a chance, sacrifice feelings, slay the demon."

"What are you talking about?" I fairly screamed.

"About a soul encased in alabaster. Highly polished, but opaque. So perfect one must always reach for you, even

though you hardly breathe at the right moments. You attack so defensively, a self-cornered sovereign terrified of the least attachment or abandon. What a repressed construction, constriction. You could not have yourself more remote, a mind diamond-bright and yet not living in this world, in my world. Ah, the thwarting of possibility! You cannot know, remember, how very good you are within a certain range of drunkenness. You are very, very good."

The hammer's sharp tap had fractured the rock exactly where intended.

I sat down a few feet away and stared at the scrawny parrot preening his scant feathers. The scene remains in my head: the parrot pulling his clipped blue wing feathers repeatedly through his chipped beak; Karill Ramsajoom's black eyes searing my back; I, holding myself together, the heavy moist air holding me down, everything else held in abeyance; then the garden letting out a sob of warm air. I believe I muttered "thank you" as I passed by his watchful posture, but I don't remember whether or not it came out as sarcasm.

Ensuing invitations for supposed deliverance in the company of the munificent Mr. Ramsajoom -- my enlightened self presumed to be in a state of gratitude -- were at once construed as attempts to further examine my "deficiencies." These polite requests I ignored with vitriol in my veins. I packed my suitcase for a hasty retreat.

My developed film reached me before I departed the hotel, except for the one photograph, which I had not seen until it arrived last week, accompanied by, of all things, a rather lyrical ode to the subject in the snapshot. If I had not seen the photograph I would not believe it. Never.

Put it alongside the other perfect image and tell me what you think. The truth, please. I hope you won't dawdle, as I must make a decision. Love, Evelyn

Joanna tears open the envelope and studies the newly arrived photograph. She is looking with widening eyes at a drenched woman she knows to be middle-aged but who resembles far more an ageless sea sprite, clothed in a muddied white dress which clings voluptuously to her shapely body. She is bent slightly over the surface of the water, her right hand clutching her prominent left breast, her loosened blond hair darkened with dripping canal wash, her head turned up and her startled blue eyes blazing out of a streaming wet face. Surely this was Evelyn, but the indecorous transparency -- leaving very little to the imagination -- the never-before-observed utter abandon of the laughing mouth! Such childish display was wholly out of character.

THE END

THE UNFINISHED BOAT

A murderer could enjoy beauty. She was noticing the way the filtered sun wrapped their view in a pale citrine light. The faded-blue above hinted at a quick renapping, velvet given a half turn, a familiar watercolor sky she had dubbed *Seattle gray*. A faint wrinkle came and went on her

smooth brow. With two fingers she drew away the blowing strands of fine blond hair disturbing her averted gaze. She couldn't look at him while holding a malevolent thought.

They were sitting outdoors at a restaurant above the marina on Lake Union. Each was attractive and together a striking pair, but unaware of the point of interest they provided for other diners on the deck: the chestnut-haired man tanned to a fit non-carcinogenic turn, and both with stylish sunglasses of gold and tortoise shell; she in a black and white, slim-skirted crepe frock and wearing black wing-tipped white heels; he in a smartly cut, olive-gray suit with an open-necked white shirt and well-tooled, shining brown loafers; both wearing smooth gold jewelry, understated in density and design and noticeable only by its low glint in the blanced sun.

Moored just below their table was something she had a moment ago referred to as an unusual sight: the unappointed, sugar-white hull and stepped cabin of a boat still in the making.

"It reminds me of a miniature Greek village, clean and without distracting adornment," she said. "A kind of whitewashed, surrealistic quality."

"Let's name it *Wittgenstein*," he suggested. "It has the pared-down-to-essentials spareness the philosopher favored."

"He was fond of placing empty flower pots here and there," she contributed with the exclusive pleasure of shared understanding. She had only a quarter of an hour earlier discovered that they were both equally devoted to Wittgenstein, a coincidence so rare it instantly negated

several other presumed disparities.

She bit into her black caviar on toast, chewing with deliberate appreciation, then brushed off her fingers with a quick gracefulness he found a little intoxicating. She had continued to stare at the virginal white boat. Lifting her stemmed glass high and squinting through its refracted light at the rocking miniature Greek village, she took a swallow of her briskly bubbling Mumm's and toasted: "To *The Wittgenstein*."

"No not *The*," he said, "just *Wittgenstein*."

"You're right. *The* would be de trop. Our master of language wouldn't approve. But it's so perfect, isn't it? So nice that it should be there just now. I mean because we both appreciate the way it is, new and spotless and...and pure. It's a shame it can't just sail away like that."

"And we in it."

"We in *Wittgenstein*," she was a little surprised to hear herself affirm, believing the proposal to be far too intimate, yet carrying it forth, "sailing away from all deceit and dross...all clutter...all disappointment, all..."

She was staring at him now and he at her, the intensity of shared feeling that might have been visible in their eyes cloaked by their dark sunglasses.

Each thought the other in possession of an exquisite surface beauty, he a dark iris, she a pale narcissus. Their onlookers might suppose them to be lovers. A very mistaken assumption. Neither one had seen what provocative qualities lay beneath the other's elegant fabric coverings. Although she had followed him halfway around the world,

they had never met until today, and the only part of her body he had touched was her cool hand when its airy fingers were offered in greeting.

She reminded herself with a jolt that he had taken a life.

What would you think if you knew what I'd done? he ruminated in silence.

His full lips opened over even, well-cared-for teeth, which flashed their white dazzle with considerable effect.

"I believe I've seen you somewhere before," he said. "What a terrible line, but it happens to be what I believe."

No doubt, yes, very possibly, she thought. You've become rather familiar in a superficial way. At a street café in Budapest, I watched you eating raw green and red peppers as if they were crisp apples. You spoke German to a dark-haired Hungarian woman whose English wasn't very good. Fortunately for you, German could be mutually employed. I heard you remark that only Hungarians can speak Hungarian -- fusillades of consonants that stick in the teeth. On your social evenings, you liked to frequent the splendid Rézkakas Restaurant, remarking several times on the way the patrons gorged themselves with the generous servings. Once they were out from under the Russian boot, those who could afford it urgently partook of rich goose livers, flattened little delicacies floating atop everything but dessert. In latter-day Budapest, one quickly learned that brandished goose livers were synonymous with liberation. For a short while the prices made the tourists assume they were in a better place than heaven. Each night for a week you spoke of these things as

you sat at the same table with the same attractive Hungarian woman. You might have glimpsed me across the pale green, old-world milieu, beyond the tall red roses at your table and the exuberant gypsy violins plying their trade over your companion's shoulder.

"Of course, you know something about me from...from the report, I suppose. Now you've learned that I once taught philosophy, and you said you've taken a number of classes. Good heavens, to think that you would suddenly bring up Ludwig Wittgenstein -- as you did at nearly the beginning of our conversation -- is more than serendipity. It's...it's, hmm, providential?"

"Well, he's *it*, isn't he?" she asserted. "If you want to speak of quintessence, the way language works. And what else is philosophy good for but explicating that?"

"Nothing. Not a thing."

He removed his glasses, ostensibly to rub his eyes but actually to attempt the penetration of her sunglasses.

In brief and automatic mimicry, she lifted her glasses a trifle above her scrutinizing blue eyes.

Lambent mahogany delight rewarded her, as if he had just found his favorite dish on the menu.

It's been a merry whirl, she thought, and here we are speaking of far more than sealing-wax, and with the body but a few months in the grave. We've come down to the line. That's why I'm sitting here withholding the truth while the real and expert liar sits before me, she reminded herself.

Why would someone like you have a job like this, he thought, a low echelon information gatherer who has pondered Wittgenstein's deceptively simple truism that

language is grounded in the form of life? -- *If lions could speak to us, we wouldn't understand them.*

"I'm sorry to drive so relentlessly to the point, but I'm still just wondering a little why you didn't tell us about your brother."

"Because he's been dead for years and years, as I said. Obviously, that's why my sister didn't make him a co-beneficiary. I certainly wasn't trying to hide anything. I just never thought of it."

His sunglasses were back in place, his mouth battling a grim transition.

I don't give a damn about this avenue of discourse, she told herself. I'm just sitting here trying to figure out who you are and why you did it. There was no history of depression, and she might very well have lived a while longer.

"Well, we just wanted to clear that up. You know, close the file. The company has paid out a fairly substantial sum and we don't want any loose ends."

"None that I know of," he said, and waited for her to say whatever else was on her mind.

"I guess you've been having some rather interesting experiences lately."

"Yes...I have. You know..."

He fell silent, raising his hand to his chin then again removing his glasses for a closer study.

"I know this sounds crazy, but you haven't been in Florence lately, have you?"

"Italy? Me? Why do you ask?"

"It's just that... When I was following you to the table awhile ago, it was... Well, the back of your head

gave me a strange feeling, as if I'd been staring at it before in...I think, the Piazza della Signoria."

She gave a very convincing laugh of amazement and inadvertently tugged at the gold bracelet she had bought at a shop on the Ponte Vecchio.

"The back of my head? How amusing. Is the back of my head so uniquely recognizable?"

"Somewhat...though not as memorable as the front...if you'd take off those glasses a minute."

"For a minute, I will, if you'll leave yours off. The sun bothers my eyes, even in this anemic northern light."

"I guess you just don't look like, or talk like, or act like what you're supposed to be," he said folding his glasses and sliding them into his breast pocket.

"*Supposed to be?*" she repeated, faintly unnerved, even though she was used to being furtive and could prevaricate endlessly when necessary.

"Well, what you are, I suppose, but somehow it doesn't quite add up."

"Ah, because of Wittgenstein."

Enthralled, he had watched her smooth lips purse and flute out the name with erotic audacity.

"Did you study his *Tractatus*?"

"Only to see why he refuted it. The *Investigations* was more to my liking. There's a lifetime's work. I replaced my rose-colored glasses with these." She held out her sunglasses.

His long fingers forming a church of contemplation now folded down under his chin and he leaned forward, resting on his elbows.

"Jesus Christ," he said with a softened voice. "The

average person has never heard of Wittgenstein and doesn't know the *Investigations* from a pumpkin patch."

"The average person *lives* in a pumpkin patch," she said with a generous smile. "Which is just fine with me."

Impossible, he thought, impossible that this woman is a claims adjuster, or whatever they call them.

I'm getting a little too clever here, she mused, but if he knew, what then? Is holding forth on Wittgenstein any more likely to disclose a private investigator? Can I help it if I'm an incurably sensible realist who needs to eat and likes to wear nice threads? So I foolishly majored in philosophy. What came next? An advice booth like Lucy in the *Peanuts* strip?

"Look," he said, pointing. "There's someone in our boat."

"I feel a bit violated." She squinted at the nearly completed boat with proprietary concern. "I had just reinvented myself down there and was ready to cast off."

"Was I along?"

"Can you handle a jib?"

"It doesn't have one yet."

"Whoops. It's too large to paddle."

"My mother said the same thing to me when at the age of twelve I backed her Mercury sedan into the garage door."

Her responding laughter had given her a certain depth, rich with possibilities and inviting exploration of her entire promising nature. He was certain he had seen only the tip of this gradually melting iceberg.

"Language is a wonderful place in which to play," she offered with a spontaneity that crinkled her bright eyes.

"Yes," he agreed, looking at her hands. There was

only a small gold bow on her right middle finger.

Her cell phone rang and she retrieved it from her briefcase, excused herself and turned away.

Wavelets stippled with silver danced in the muted fall light. A float plane came gliding down. For a moment, he watched it skimming along, slicing through a high wash of water, then he turned to study the familiar back of her blond head, his mouth forming a slow smile.

"I'm working, of course," she said in a voice held low against her cell phone. "Well, you know how to take care of that, don't you? What did you do when I...when you were alone? Even if I were there I wouldn't be doing it, so what's the problem? Show him what you have. Convince him that he needs to tell you. I'll talk to you about this later. Good-bye."

She turned back to him and said, "Sorry."

"You sound like the boss."

That I am, she thought. It's my agency, and this contract is doing me in, just keeping track of where you are in case anything incriminating turns up. Nothing ever will unless I mix it up, and, damn it, that's another profession.

She busied herself with returning the phone to her briefcase, thereby avoiding a response.

His black coffee and her latté arrived.

"Seattle's mania," she said, spooning the curls of chocolate off the foam and lifting her cup. "We're a nervous lot, but I think the gray skies make us want to sleep, so we need a lot of caffeine. I should quit, but after the champagne..." She shrugged.

"One of the lesser vices."

"What are yours...other than coffee?" she asked, keeping her voice light in order to sound less probing.

He raised both eyebrows. "That's really a personal question, isn't it? I don't even know your given name. You know a lot more about me."

I'll say, but not quite enough, she thought, offering only the compliance of a wordless smile. The less said about herself the better.

"Want to walk down and take a closer look at your contained Greek village?"

"I don't think so. Not too close. I might see something I don't like. From up here it looks immaculate."

She saw a different aspect come into his eyes, a sudden understanding of her attitude towards him. He looked sad, forlorn, lost. For an instant she relented, dropping her gaze to his hands. The backs were smooth and sun-caressed, the left wrist bearing a gold watch, the right a gold chain bracelet. The fingers were tipped with trim, clean nails. Supple hands, strong and very touchable. What had they done? A faint shiver traveled up her spine.

"Shall I talk to you?" he asked.

If human ears could rotate, hers would have bent forward. Her eyes were riveted like a cat's on a reachable bird.

He studied her perfectly formed Nordic face, the small, ever so slightly upturned nose, the pale hair brushed back away from delicate pink ears pierced with tiny gold hoops, and the rapt, glacier-blue eyes set in rose-tinged ivory flesh. The thought of touching her was too dangerous to sustain. For him, she had become like the

boat upon which they had bestowed singular properties: untarnished, genuine, essential, flawless, and he was very close.

"And you enjoy thinking," he said, as if his interior assessment had been voiced.

"Well, yes; it's helpful."

"But the kind of engaged reasoning we apparently share makes me feel a kinship with you."

"Like with a sister?" she said.

His face closed briefly, yet her steady gaze insisted that he had initiated this.

"You really ought to be more careful," she admonished, immediately startled that she had begun to defeat her own effort.

She drew back to distance herself, her arms outstretched with hands resting on the table, waiting.

"My sister...she taught me how to sail. Actually, she was more like a doting aunt than a sister...the difference in our ages...when I was small, so much fun."

He looked at his watch. "It's getting on, I guess. Do you still have some time?"

Was he serious? For a purportedly heavy thinker, his question was terribly naïve, but, of course, it could be a ploy to endear himself, throw her off.

"Oh, I have all the time in the world...I mean, that is within reason."

A wisp of hair had blown into her eyes and she pushed it away, fully aware that he had reached for it, too, brushing his hand over hers.

"Reflex," he said with a laugh.

"Do you have children?" she asked, knowing the correct

answer. "A wife?"

"No. Well, I did have a wife."

"Is she alive?"

He gave her a long, searching gaze.

"She was the last time I noticed. We don't see much of each other anymore. She thought Wittgenstein was an eccentric fool...got his private life mixed up with his genius."

"Then didn't understand his genius," she offered.

"Yes, more accurately."

"That would be off-putting, possibly a paramount offense," she went on with a droll voice.

He laughed. "I don't live by Wittgenstein alone. But in a way, yes, I do. Without thinking about it, I do. Everyone does."

She was mentally performing the Ritz Brothers' kick to her backside because she had side-tracked him; she, the information gathering sleuth, had led him away from the primary subject. Why? How to guide him back?

"It would be difficult to say who was more important to me, my mother or my sister," he said, making a swift U-turn without the least encouragement.

Again, she was amazed. The man is well on his way to incriminating himself. Does he feel the need to confess? Is that sharp little worm of guilt gnawing at his scarified heart?

"I think I loved them both equally."

Or was the little worm gnawing at her heart?

Then why did you kill her? Your own sister! A suicide indeed. Why did you kill her with one massive dose of bleeding heroin? you cruel bastard! she wanted to shout.

He thought her deportment remarkably serene, the way she sat with her hands folded, her eyes radiating a compassion of which she must hardly be aware so close was it to her obvious natural goodness.

"Is your mother dead?"

"Yes."

"I'm sorry."

"It was the same thing that killed my sister."

Oh my God! she thought, wincing.

"Please forgive me. I didn't mean to upset you, to be so morbid. It's all over now, and I'm living with it, getting used to it."

How amazing, I believe I was beginning to find certain qualities in you attractive. How easily our emotions flood the cerebral cortex and short-circuit reason. Well, this flood tide is definitely receding. I've had enough. These silent musings forced her up out of her chair.

He stood up, too.

"God, I'm driving you off with all of this. You said you had plenty of time, and I guess I was just unburdening myself."

She thought of her contract and her rather lackluster performance and sat down, refolding her hands.

"No, it's all right...if it will do you some good."

"Our boat is empty again." His eyes traveled over the white hull from bow to stern and back.

"Good for us," she said, laughing a little and then wondering why he was still looking away.

"Do you know how myasthenia gravis works?"

"Somewhat."

"The face collapses," he said, turning quickly around

and meeting her eyes.

The tightened muscles in his cheeks sent a chill through her body. She was sure he had clenched his teeth, yet in the next instant his face was calm, the drawn cheeks relaxed in a smooth serenity, the soulful brown eyes pouring warmth over her as if it were she who needed comforting.

He moved his chair closer to hers and sat down.

"I don't even have to close my eyes to see those two flaccid faces: my mother's and my sister's. There are some myasthenics strong enough to live with the deterioration for quite a while. They weren't.

"Some years ago my sister and I watched my mother degenerate to an emaciated husk. She couldn't swallow, couldn't breathe, and they didn't have the helpful drugs they have today. She was exhausted and insisted on coming home from the hospital to die. Then she got pneumonia. That was the end.

"By then my sister already had the insurance she'd purchased with the money from her dead husband's estate. He was an inventor...small things: pouring spouts; door handles, window latches. The royalties added up.

"As to the disease, it wasn't long before my sister knew what was ahead. Then, almost overnight, she was in the middle of it. She took the required drugs but had to have her thymus gland removed to stop the antibodies that prohibit neuromuscular transmission. That didn't help much and was followed by steroid treatment. She was never a very strong person, except in spirit, always attracted every cold virus that came along. She was getting tired of fighting, wanted very much to get it over with. Her

quality of life was gone, and she was beginning to hint at enlisting my help. I tried to cheer her up. Futile and ridiculous.

"She'd done a great many things for me besides offer her love and advice when I was growing up...bought me the first of everything that a lucky kid gets at various stages, sent me to good schools. When my little brother died so young, it had drawn us even closer together. Finally, she had a large request to make. It was payback time. I--"

"I don't want to hear any more."

"What?"

"Don't tell me any more."

"I thought you wanted to know."

"Are you dense? How can you be so intelligent and so thick-headed simultaneously? Are you myopic? Are you stupid? I can't believe that you are. I couldn't like you if you were such an idiot. Why are you telling me this?"

"There's a certain rapport here that... You're the first one who ever... Look, something rare has happened, and I'd like to--"

"Oh, Christ! Even if I were who I said I was it would be the wrong thing to do."

"Well, I never believed you were exactly who you said you were."

"And who did you think I was? A member of the Hemlock Society?"

"I...what is your first name?"

She shook her head and threw up her hands. "Are you some kind of purblind idealist with a one-track mind? Are you a...a one-note-Johnny-genius-otherwise-moron...possibly

even an idiot savant?"

"Jesus, I'm getting royally insulted. Those words don't go with your mouth at all. I know you've been following me around...I finally figured *that* out. I hope you enjoyed yourself as much as I did. Listen, I'm going to finish what I started, so please just shut up and pay attention.

"My sister wrote a suicide note long before she was ready, while she could still use her hands, and I just--"

"Oh, I think I'm going to pieces here. I can't seem to crack your cranium with the ugly truth."

"...so I went out on the street and just bought pure heroin. Do you realize how easy that is? That rotten stuff on the street for once put to humane use. What a world this is. Death with dignity? Oh no, we're more humane to our dogs and cats.

"First I gave her some of her Mestimon, which strengthens the muscles for swallowing, then I mixed the heroin with--"

"Shut up! Shut up!" She had actually placed her hands over her ears.

"...mixed it with some warm milk and gave her just a little, then we waited a bit, and finally I--"

"I'm a private investigator! Do you understand?" Contracted to tell them everything you're telling me. Am I getting through to you at all? Can you hear me?"

"...and finally I knelt over her bed and lifted her head. Of course, her eyelids had fallen, but she tried a shaky little smile of relief and thanks, then struggled for the glass to take the rest -- both times I had to help her. Miraculously, she got it down and that did it."

She gave a deep sigh, dropping her head into her hands and flinching at the touch of his fingers on her shoulder.

"It's all right."

"Is it? Now what do I do?"

"Tell them if you have to."

"How on earth can I do that and go on breathing?"

"I think you're in the wrong business."

"Couldn't we just go down to our little white boat and sail away?"

"We could, my sweet, but it's not finished."

THE END

WHO GOES HOME

I'm going back. I've always known I would have to. Driving myself from the airport might have been a mental and physical risk fraught with the perils of distraction. I flew back and took a motor coach where no plane goes. Sitting on a bus and staring out the window while locked high above big wheels, which may for a time absorb any abrupt shocks of change, I'm free to dream along in slow reimmersion. Immersion in the belly of the long evaded beast: recollection. Is there any benefit in visiting the past? Can it even be done? It doesn't matter. If this

return is deleterious and damages my psyche, still I must go, even though I have great fear of what I'll find. I know I'm going to laugh. I'm going to rave. I am likely to cry easily and often.

The increasingly familiar land, the trees, the wind, the voices that arouse my senses, all bend me backwards into that place, charging me with a bright chromatic current of nostalgia. An old specter rises and I grip the seat edge with both hands, trying to withstand the electric paralysis of near total recall. There the place at the roadside where my lively neighbor lay with the life bleeding out of him, he and his sorrel gelding mangled by the speeding, liquor-hazed driver of a log truck; I, ill-fatedly passing by when the sheriff shot the horse. I see the bleeding horse lift its startled head. Again I imagine what I so often imagined thereafter: the leisurely young rider and his gleaming horse caught up in the wheels and broken. On the shoulder gravel lies the supine body of the young man to whom I sometimes spoke in shyness; quietus, only his fine red hair rising in a spiritless breeze. Looking back, I am a witness to the same moment that will come to me, to every living thing, this present self quivering, fluctuating, conceding the ephemeral, astonished by such distant clarity, which I could hardly then interpret. There is the feel of that inchoate lesson life demands, a moral to be learned as soon as possible, the reckoning and the sharp necessity of letting go: forward motion. To own motion, in whatever small increment, is to cheat death, but only for a comparatively short time. Always, the extreme importance of the moment, then suddenly its absolute unimportance.

One must have been born among these souging green nuances of timber to so frequently, often unconsciously, long for them, so that in dreams one's little sphere of artificial existence is punctured by the sharp truth of what has gone before. One hungers for anterior visions even with their accompanying pain, if only to live again in those shaping hours and days. Where the heart began to beat and lungs first filled with air. What you did. What was done to you. Who *they* were. The initial parts of the eventual self. Never mere dusty tables holding dusty ornaments, never mere weedy paths leading between farms and woods, the intricate parts are you, you, having only partially escaped but always on the brink of something more. A formative self had to be slowly absorbed into that landscape, gradually percolating down to its prevailing order and disorder. There live the secrets of the place. Not like the merciless metropolis where I have long sojourned, where one is flotsam rushing down a swollen stream, here caught, there caught, sometimes bruised or seduced by something spurious but no part of anything touched. Crowds of humanity all escaping together but each member of the mix alone, floundering on a glimmering surface of persuasive temptations, diversions which abet the self-deceptions that mask the secrets.

In my mind's eye: a road soon to be a reality, flecked with pretty flints and round pebbles to fit a child's hand; a road cursed with ruts making wondrous white ice puddles; a road mantled with grass and fallen red-veined leaves; a road leading through scented pines' wind stirrings, the coolness of a shimmering green spring, the silent, consuming heat of summer. A beguiling road for the

unworldly, at the terminus of which inescapable, invasive letters ultimately arrived in the old flagged mailbox -- one that called my brother Alex away to war and finished him in that man-made horror which always exists somewhere -- a spirited, full, short life, which only lives again by a million visions of him imbedded in this richly exposed, transitory brain. Alex, a cheery force of cunning optimism easily summoned: an unstoppable blur of motion and laughter I once, happily unaware, defined as invincible.

My ankles begin to ache, as they do in unison with my wrists whenever the known coming events take unknown shapes: the anxiety and wonder of long ago when I naively pondered the meaning of that one driving force so misappropriated. Love, then, was whatever I had not yet touched or tasted or smelled, eventually whatever mysterious chemistry enabled me to work through the day in a hot field beneath a scorching sun, without pain or exhaustion. That was recognition of the other, a sweating young man, a fascinating hired enigma equipped to capture with only the power of his eyes. Years later, love has myriad colors and textures and sounds within which hide malignancies so intertwined with hate that the two branches are indistinguishable upon the same gnarled tree. The tree itself remains a mystery. Perhaps I will yet discover where its roots drink.

Faint sounds grow louder in my thought, some not human but a few the noise of words as yet indistinguishable, as if awakening from a dream's bold statements to discover crude mutterings. I begin to hear Great Aunt Finnie's intoning lecture on sibling abuse, this after I snatched up a garden stake and chased my sister through a forty-acre

field to Auntie Finn's house -- sister Ivy had done no less than cut into a homely spice cake I had struggled to bake for mama's birthday. Next I see the diamond glint from Gran's small and pale-lidded dark eyes, hear her vivid laughing words, epigrammatic, witty, teasing, scolding us, but always with a moral; then animal sounds: a bleating lamb, a calf lost in the tall meadow grass and crying for its mother. There is the call of one bird, a meadowlark soaring up out of a cold pale dawn, followed by the raucous chorus of a hundred beaks and fluttering indigo wings ushering in a sweet-aired morning. From the cleft in the woods comes the burble of falling water laughing on boulders as it tumbles into my restorative pool -- for a moment, I am swimming there naked, fearless, turning and turning in the green depths. Always the whispering voices of the wind, the humming pines on my hill, breezes thrumming over the dancing boughs of sparkling needles; seasons of bluster, the Douglas firs, bending and creaking in wildly thrashing storms. Then...but please not the disabling sound of someone crying -- is it me or mama this time? -- It is her, and I have been the instigator, insisting upon carrying a jar of peaches from the cool brick milk house; it has slipped from my small hands and broken over the stones, mama's sweet, thick peach halves swimming in syrup which soaks into the earth. She cries with her head back, as if beseeching consolation from the indifferent sky. My shocked toddler's body is stricken with everlasting grief. Only years later do I understand what made her cry so -- the oppressive heaviness of repetitive tasks given with no husband's gratitude, only the expectant needy love of careless children. Finally,

the sounds of a screen door slamming and of running feet thumping on a worn path. In the dimness of dusk, our ragged old ball flies over the huge gray barn, and I shout to Alex, for Ivy has already been imprisoned, "Anteover, send somebody over!" Back and forth soars the ball and round and round we run through the tall, shadowy-blue grasses, screaming with thrilling shivers of near capture, until she appears off in the distance at the back door, in her flowered dress with defining apron, her body framed in the kitchen light. She calls to us in the soft, high voice that we always hear. We don't want to stop, we don't want to come in at all, but we can no longer see in the chilling darkness.

At last I make out my hill. Often I was alone there, but sometimes in the fall with the hired boy, Roy, standing on some high place at the edge of great-grandfather's hand-cut road, zigzagging up through the dense woods to his lofty orchards. Resting our hands from the heavy galvanized buckets of apples we carried down to the house, we looked out over the quiet valley. Far below lay pristine, virginal dark copses bordering cultivated fields edging our cherished undulating river, all then still the venue of Indian myth. Like the wind I rushed up that overgrown trail in the early dim light of spring mornings, to reach the top before the sun, to watch its honeyed light flow down the chocolate rows plowed between the varied, hand-grafted apple trees. Above my head sweet blossoms clustered in lush white profusion on every smallest branch, the industrious little honey bees already beginning to buzz, dusting their worker bodies with nectarous pollen. Often I climbed up and straddled a limb to greet the sun.

Warmed by that beneficent old star, I leaned back and drowned myself in a lush abundance of pink-tinged white efflorescence. Only myself and laden branches quivering faintly against chinks of deepest blue heaven.

I see the faded gray roof of the house, the house in the valley, the valley of small farms, a few hundred acres intact here and there, still our three hundred acres all of a piece; the provincial estates of the wheat planters, the potato and corn growers, the dairy farmers, and the proud orchardists. This sprawling valley scraped into being by a massive glacial drive for the sea, this antediluvian quondam mix, this flood remnant, this rough dry lake bottom, forever dulling the plow's sharp edge with a damned rocky bed.

The valley flows between two escarpments, spurs of a rambling northwestern range; it flows like a smooth, flat river, very unlike the tortuous, once wild river at its center. Native canoes swept down that serpentine waterway, paddling to a churning confluence of leaping speckled trout and long salmon. There the travelers fished and hunted and traded skins for glass beads, the blue beads of Captains Lewis and Clark, much later worked from the plowed, disked, and harrowed earth and collected in great-gran's canning jars. Later still, they were removed, counted, and studied, crude bits of pierced cobalt glass held up to the light in small, idle fingers. Dark viridian conifers march over the deep-rooted hills cradling this valley. In places the carved face of nature, bare skull rock, protrudes, sculpted basalt from which I once invented the shapes of menacing animals and furtive hermits.

Deep within the foothills of my memory lie the myriad

unwitnessed mysteries of the forest. Beneath the clumps of ferns arching over the rotting vegetation, beneath the black humus and the creeping insects, rest the footfalls of a sleeping generation, the swift-footed natives, burning the fauna out of the hills, singed and smoking wild animals shot with arrows as they fled the fire; *required sustenance*, was how Gran explained this unselective act. Their strewn arrowheads, their abandoned bowls and pestles, their tomahawks stood on Auntie Finn's mantle where I often took them into my hands with wonder and lively imaginings of those who fashioned and used them.

But getting back to these familiar hills, as I am doing at last, they fly green banners of forest rolling due west, conjoining as foothills of a dense mountain range running parallel to the foaming, icy Pacific, their western slopes fanning down to the edge of the continental shelf, beneath the eroding crash of sea interminably pounding upon volcanic rock -- that tidal zone once a barefoot child's private store of sea treasures, sand castles, and warming sun; a dazzling expanse of restless water so loved at first sight that a tottering small me ran to embrace it, to fling myself into the bubbling foam. I tumbled face down, snatched from the waves by the man who loved my mother. Not my virulent father, but the diversely gifted man who loved my mother, all of her life, quietly and patiently, in the kindest ways, demanding nothing but her occasional presence. He lifted me high into the air, safe above the betraying green waves, as I cried and coughed up sea water. I heard his reassuring woodsman's voice, an economy of enduring truth, and I hear it still: "She will never forget this." A lesson taught by water -- that without which we

cannot live, that which also kills us -- marked by a voice I instinctively loved; another lesson swiftly evolving into a code of expectation, hence a temporary philosophy of inevitability.

Now I'm alone in this bus. Standing and lurching forward, I've emitted a soundless grimace of laughter springing from nervous anticipation. If you know where to look when those dark oaks sway in the wind, you can see the house. When the trees are still or shaped with snow, you can see nothing. There it is! Just a glimpse. The same old carpenter gothic carapace which cobbled our squirming selves together for a time. Perfect in my mind's eye as it rises from great-grandfather's architectural dream.

A farm wife in a faded blue scarf has turned her curious gray eyes upon me. I stare back, desirous of asking what she sees. A woman in Lord & Taylor who doesn't belong here? I know all of what you know: crocks of milk; churns of butter; wet newborn calves; sleet, rain, wind, drought; summer sweat and winter ice; sickness and injury and death; voracious insects; harvest machinery running through the nights; sprouting seeds and toil in black earth; jar after jar of canned everything; grange potluck; rousing school tax initiatives; debts; a cemetery of relatives. Would you care to know what I know? Not likely; to be caught in between is a bittersweet heavenly hell. My excuse for desertion is at least sustainable. Some minds inherently expand to a distant place, dragging their bodies along. Still, I have not forgotten the frozen winter apples only obtainable here, the sweetest fruit, the bitterest cold.

I catch another glimpse of the weathered roof, and I

smile. The corners of my eyes are wet. Rocks, wood, termites, all of those invisible fingerprints and footfalls, the residue of straining lives permeating the walls, the ceilings, the floors. My humble nest at the end of the road, my ornate old saltbox of sorrows and laughter. My knuckles are white clinging to the seat back. Cold hands. Cold feet. The eclectic things inside that place, hoarded impedimenta holding us off, holding us together, the charged atmosphere of us; her bent head hiding grief, revealed distorted in the round glass bottle, bright blue on the ledge above the kitchen sink; that cracked red leather chair; a lapel pin stuck in a dusty pink satin pincushion. The lamp in the parlor, two hundred and twenty-six strands of tiny colored beads dangling from the shade -- once a spendthrift of time, I counted them -- beads swaying above extravagant fingertips in the heat of summer. Too hot to move, only good for napping, while the silver dollars beyond the bay window rattled their seeds in a warm wind and made swaying shadows on the yellow wall. Awakening to the aroma of bacon and coffee on a gloriously lazy Saturday morning; the sharp scent of fresh-mown grass rising from below the bedroom window, where already he worked to evade the noon heat -- he, looking up from time to time at my window, thinking of me, of my face against his flannel shirt and his mouth against my hair. It all began in that house, that forlorn old bastion exposed now when the oak limbs move.

Stepping off the stale-aired bus, I stand waiting, staring through the passing windows as it grinds off. Its distant sound dies away and I'm waiting still, holding my breath while the opaque blue exhaust fumes hang in the

chill air. A red-wing cries. Silence. Moving over into the middle of the pavement, I feel tall, as though I'm looking down on myself, suspended in one frame frozen on a black and white screen, incarcerated there until an eastbound trucker applies his brakes too late. The film starts up, taking on color, and I am moving. I hear the jagged shoulder gravel crunching beneath my feet. Cold soothes my over-sensitive head, aching from the fumes. A teasing air feints and stalls then comes to welcome; fresh with the sweet smell of willow catkins, it fills my lungs. There is always an edgy rustling and settling when one starts down this road, the invasion noted, this invader then recognized as something familiar, something which belongs.

The road divides the fields which are mine. Now I'm traversing what is mine: that which cannot be taken away, like a soul. Am I afraid? How will I face her; oh how will I do that? I imagine myself helpless, being wound back in upon a giant invisible spool. I laugh, reminding myself that I am free, that the road itself has freed me from the trouble at its end.

I am running through the field, blond pigtailed flapping against my back. The world is growing larger, but still all right here. My arms are full of the daisies I can't stop bringing her, radial white petals around a softly pollen-dusted sun. The withering ones distress me, and the dying ones, but there are enough to fill the house over and over. She is smiling, arranging my latest offering in a crystal bowl upstairs on the table by her window, where April blows the white organdy curtains licking at fast-sailing clouds.

There I am, curled in the roadside grass, waiting for Ivy's return on the school bus; sleepy, staring at clouds. Clouds shaped like other things, clouds like clouds, like clouds so thick one could stand on them and not even fall through. If only it were true. Where did it all go? I am standing in soft white. Snow. The heavy sky is falling in minuscule white patterns, no two alike she says, holding the magnifying glass. If you drop your head back and stare into the violet dome, you will rise up and up through the cool feathery clumps wetting your skin. I stick out my tongue, giggling at this taste of snow, and pull on the rope of my sled. The hired man fashioned it out of cedar, a bit crude and heavy but with runners waxed. It was all right. It was fine with me. I had only seen one in a catalog.

Right there. Remember that place? Walking with your scythe-pricked hand dripping blood, quick and dark splashes staining the road dust. How strange and fascinating, this sudden red leaking from a startled hand. When it's all gone, you will be, too, I thought. They supposed I was crying from the pain of the wound, but I was crying because it could happen to me. He said, "Lucky I didn't cut it off. Next time you'll know where to stand." He was right. I did know where to stand the next time: nowhere near the man; out of his sight. The lesson of the scythe, learned from the indifferent and incidental provider of my chromosomes. I stare at the faint white scar running along the edge of my left hand, no longer a scar but an abbreviation of something much larger.

Once those incidents were all of me; now they twist inside around a hollow center, an endless Möbius strip of

unfinished mysteries. I listen for early, interior voices, hoping for comfort on this cold spring day, wanting only the virtuous things of earth-loving, unshelled youth, vulnerable youth. Thin-skinned, and still that way. I feel bitterness and laugh with it, the more withstood the better, the sharply enlivening pain of endurance: stoicism, a useful counterbalance for the thin-skinned. I could not then imagine change, or else how did I run and stain my fingers and mouth with wild red strawberries, and forget time? How did I cut an azure pool with my streak of foaming light, touching rocky bottom then shooting up, a straight thin reed stretching for the whorl of sun, and forget time? How did I lie in sweet grass filled with humming insects and not feel the oppressive heaviness of time? In a mirror, it's so easy to see. A buzzard diving at a living carcass is time at me.

My hand-raised Guernsey heifer came fresh and kicked my pail across the barn when I tried to milk her. Her tail slapped me in the face. Her huge bovine eyes looked at me with disgust and horror when I pulled at her bursting teats. Stretching out her neck, she bellowed loudly then stepped quite deliberately on my foot. Shaking the flies off her back, she urinated a great steaming river upon the freshly laid straw, turning her head to me with a drooling snort. I swore and threw the empty pail at the wall. There was Roy, leaning against a stanchion with his arms folded, laughing. "She's the bossy one, Fuzz," he said, putting his fingers in my close-cropped hair. While I cursed on, he righted the tumbled milking stool, then milked my beloved nemesis. She stood still, letting her rich milk ping into the bucket, only flapping her ears and

chewing. I lay in the sweet straw watching his hands, watching his whole agile body, sinewy arms reaching from the rolled sleeves of his blue plaid shirt, worn Levis taut over jackknifed knees, his heels up and the toes of his scuffed boots in the straw. His dark head bent over the pail brought tickling brown waves of hair against her big warm tan and white belly.

Before he went away to school, we started reading in the hayloft, sometimes with rain drumming on the roof and doves cooing in the barn's louvered cupola. On a day of humid heat, we argued over a book: Nietzsche. "You're smarter than that. Use your head," he scolded when I misinterpreted. Heatedly ashamed, I suddenly pushed him out of the loft onto a dusty heap of straw, then scrambled down to assess the damage. He picked me up and threw me into the water trough, quickly fishing me out when I began to weep in a serious onslaught of confusion. It was too much for him. He placed me on an untrussed bale of spilling hay to remove my wet shirt and jeans. The hay stuck to my damp body and caught in my hair. I sat in a rapturous daze as he removed thin shafts of fescue from my skin and tangled hair. I was sixteen and fiercely, besottedly in love.

First there is the pine tree. I recall a baby spindling thing, but here it is tall and swollen with cones, a pungent adult humming softly with an uncertain repertoire of fickle breezes. There, the crooked prune tree, bending to the east, just dressing its naked branches in white lace. And there is my gnarly limb. I am swinging by my knees from you, crooked tree, occasionally stopping to sink my teeth into a plump Italian prune. Late summer,

and she is there picking roses for him to bring to his invalid wife. I know nothing of the outside. I am merely a pendulum, swinging, swinging. There are the silver undersides of the leaves and the sky and the earth, the sky and the earth, the sky and the earth, melting together in crimson streaks as the sun sets upside down.

What has happened? Our shortcut, the footpath that meets our road is overgrown. Vanished. Still, I see Alex running down that open path, straw-blond hair flying down that path, the laughing wet mouth, smudged button nose, mischievous blue eyes. Towhead, little towhead, you are always coming down that path, racing along in your funny torn trousers with a handful of dandelions. "You all did it," she said, "You all brought me dandelions, as if you had discovered gold." Tell me something, towhead, tell me when you come to nothing it has been for something. Whisper it in my ear. Lie to me.

Is that...yes, our hired man, that big red-faced Swede who moved into our worker's cottage, fixed it up and never left. His once square shoulders are stooped now and he's muttering, thoroughly smashed. So you're still here, brawny old beast, tough as leather, once strong as steel. I will not look, do not want to see you like this. On the day you arrived your English was broken into odd pieces and you had already forgotten your own tongue. You stood looking up at her and politely lifted your filthy hat, dropping it on the edge of the veranda, which I had just tried to sweep with a large unwieldy broom. I asked you to remove your dirty old hat from my clean floor. You did so, smiling and bowing your huge frame before three feet of brazen insensitivity. "Daughter!" she scolded. My small

self thereby experienced shame. Old man, old man, once you grinned with even white teeth and strummed your guitar like a troubadour. Remember the ballads you taught me? Perfect lyrics from broken English. How I came to love you.

Another silent mystery, staggering down my road too drunk to see, to care about me, not even me! I'll kick no rocks festering over you, my erstwhile teacher.

Kick...no...rocks!

Is that a light in the window or a last glint of sun? No one must come to meet me. I'm coming all the way alone, the same way I left. House, do you know me? I've returned so that neither of us will forget, here to sleep inside your belly and listen to the rain. It will fall soon enough, a cathartic solvent that makes us worship the sun. It rained the day Alex was given back to the earth. Funerals are best that way, if they must be tolerated. Alex was golden light. If the sun had been shining more of me would have died.

I had to go. Everyone I loved had gone but her. She stayed on and on alone here. Except for him: the deer hunter and the fisherman, the tree-topper and the carpenter, the electrician and the plumber, the mechanic and the man who could bake croissants like a pastry chef. He came from the north, tall and silent, always walking out of the woods to help her with something or sit with her. I loved him, too. Oh yes, over all these years I've loved him. He who snatched me from the sea, when the man who bred me never noticed.

It's growing dark. Don't expect much. Let it happen. There will be weeds here and there, trees unpruned. The steps will be sagging. What are those strange light shapes

on the hill? Moonlit mounds of beef. Yes, of course, and those hills over there are the same. My hill must be the same. Tomorrow I'll climb the path. Please let there be no houses anywhere up there. I can just make out the hill clearing where I first rode the neighbor's white stallion bareback, those thundering big hooves scaring up a chucking red-throated pheasant from his camouflage, the earth coming swiftly to meet me and sweet clover in my mouth. Rolling onto my back, I laughed until I had tears in my eyes, while the borrowed horse ran away home. Only slightly bruised, I lay searching through tender stems for four-leaf clovers. With squandering patience I could find one.

A little hurt begins. Walk faster. Up there on top of those hills is the threshold of space. Those black firs jab into the universe. Now a star or two. Out there space on and on, infinite solar systems of burning gases, some kind of life in primeval and super-advanced stages. But I'm here, here in this little microcosm of alpha and omega. What is there to fear?

I was right. The steps are all sagging a bit, and a brown tangle of weeds in the garden, swallows' nests in the eaves. Ah, it's starting to rain. The wind is good, and the rain against my face nice and refreshing. Don't be afraid to put your foot on the veranda. Thousands of your careless footfalls are there, thousands and thousands. Now the door -- the key in the lock needs to be wiggled back and forth. This door is solid oak, heavy -- one of the loveliest things about our house.

Is that a fire flickering just over her shoulder? So nice to find its warmth. She's busy tending something, doesn't see me. Her auburn hair always turns crimson-gold

in the firelight. No...no. I am alone. A little dust,
the blue bottle barren of her reflection. But yes, the old
red-leather chair and the beaded lampshade. I am laughing.
Or is that the wind in the pines? Only the wind knows why
I've come back, I and the wind, only to ponder if it is
possible.

THE END

