

IS THIS LOVE?

a novel by

Lowry Pei

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On University Avenue in Palo Alto in the 1970's there was a bar called the Shutter, where I hung out with my graduate student friends. We could just afford it if we didn't drink much. I was in East Asian Studies and my friends Jay and Sheldon were in English; we were ABD's – all but dissertation. The bar was a decent place to sit and argue ideas, not too loud to hear ourselves talk.

On a night that was in all other ways like many nights before it, a woman came in alone who made everyone in the place stare and then try not to. She looked about thirty. She was blonde, her turned-under hair looked sprayed in place, but the reason we stared was she was wearing a garment whose top was all ruffles and plunging neckline and whose bottom half was hardly more than hot pants. Something only one step away from a piece of fuck-me lingerie, worn to be taken off. What was she thinking walking into a bar alone, dressed like that?

She looked at no one, advanced to the bar through stares as if parting the waters, sat down on a stool with no one on either side of her, and gazed straight ahead. The bartender kept his composure. He did not ogle her exposed sternum, he placed a napkin in front of her and took her order, which I saw was tall and clear and could have been a club soda with lime. She crossed one very naked, very smooth leg over the other and sipped her drink from its narrow red straw, her back turned to the room. I could see the knobs of her erect backbone where the little ruffled item was scooped out in back; and below her bare upper back I could see the zipper that all the men in the room were thinking of pulling down.

People went back to their conversations but she had altered the shape of the room and the taste of the air.

After five minutes, a recently graduated fraternity brother got up from another table and approached her, perched on the stool next to her, everyone watching. He gestured toward his friends, trying to invite her, giving his sincere pitch. She barely turned her head. The answer was no; he tried again and it looked like the answer was nothing at all. He got off the stool and tried not to slink. He made a face on the way back, silently whistling, eyes to the heavens, playing for a laugh from his friends that he didn't get. After that it didn't surprise me that no one else came near her.

Sheldon was the first to find his voice. He usually was the first to comment on anything, but also he was gay, and probably she didn't have quite as direct an effect on him as she had on Jay and me. "Now, what do we call *this*?" Sheldon said.

"I don't think I know the word," I said.

"Man," Jay said a little dreamily. "Who's the lucky guy?"

"Are you sure that 'lucky' is the right adjective?" said Sheldon. "Anyway, I don't think it's you."

"Wait – you mean you're the one?" I said.

"She probably paints her fingernails while she fucks. And talks on the phone."

"No, that's too cold," I said.

"Does she look warm to you?" Jay said.

But I thought my friends were all wrong, that they knew nothing.

I lived alone in an apartment in Mountain View that I could afford because it was on a four-lane street and on the other side of the street were the commuter train tracks. The only time there was actual quiet was between two and five a.m.; I seldom opened the windows over the street unless loud music was playing. They didn't fit well; even when they were closed, grit managed to sift in onto the windowsills. I had yard sale furniture, stacks of library books on the floor around my desk, and a calico cat named Clarice whose litter box made the bathroom smell bad. I was locked in a struggle with my adviser, Professor Tutwiler, who in the last year had earned the alias of Rottweiler by turning down every dissertation proposal I brought him. Something needed to work, soon. The department had already extended my fellowship once, with visible reluctance. I was nearly twenty-nine years old and my life not only had not begun, it sometimes seemed that it never would. Intellect, like a tapeworm, was

beginning to eat away at me from the inside; the only things that made me feel fully human were my cat and the insistence of my thwarted desire for a woman to share my bed.

The next time came a week or ten days later, and again, when she entered it was as if a pulsing sign had lit up over the bar that read Sex. Again a man tried to talk to her and failed.

"What the hell is this?" I said to my friends. "She never talks to anybody except the bartender, why does she do this?"

"It's a psychology experiment," Jay said. "She has an assistant who takes notes. Either that, or she just does it to make your balls hurt."

"No, I'm serious. What does she want out of this?"

"You have to ask?"

"If she wanted to get laid, all she'd have to do is look at somebody for once."

"Maybe she's a he," said Sheldon.

"What?" said Jay.

"Maybe that's why she never does anything but sit there. She's a drag queen, she's a guy, she just wants to see if she can pass."

"She can pass," said Jay, "I'm giving her an A-plus right now."

"Hey, it makes some kind of sense."

"I'm telling you, she's not. Look at her ankles, look at her feet. She's not a man."

"But what does she want?" I said.

I thought if you had come in naked, the invitation to imagine having sex with you would not have been more blatant, it would have been less so. Your nakedness would have been an invitation and yet it would have revealed your helpless humanity, vulnerable and in need of care. My care, I wanted to think. The shape of you was like a word spoken to me alone.

I was summoned to the office of Professor Tutwiler; I sat in the chair facing him where I had sat many times in the past four years. In class, where I first encountered him, he was like the host of a good dinner party, who makes the guests seem smarter and wittier than perhaps they really are; he made me want to carry on the conversation one on one. In the kitchen, as it were, behind the scenes. For quite a

while that seat in his office had felt like it was mine by rights as his advisee, research assistant, TA. I felt that he was letting me in on mysteries by taking me on that way; but I never seemed to be able to grasp the secret, if one was revealed. I could see in his eyes that I was a disappointment now. The office was shadowy except under his desk lamp, and books climbed all the way to the ceiling. Tutwiler was not a tall man; he had to stand on tiptoe on a chair when he wanted to reach the top shelves. "I'm working my way through the titles you recommended," I said, knowing that wasn't enough. "It's really a case of..."

He waited, exhibiting patience. "A case of?"

Satisfying you. "Fine-tuning," I said.

"Has your argument – shall we say, evolved?"

I had nothing to offer that he had not already turned down. "Well, my focus is still the same, of course. It's a question of finding the right approach to the material."

Appearing to study his desktop, Tutwiler took a breath and let it out. Then he looked up at me. "Mr. Obata," he said. He seemed to reach for an easy tone that no longer came naturally, but the "Mr." wasn't a good sign. Tutwiler had been calling me Peter for a couple of years. "You know – I'm sure you know this – before every school year we have a faculty meeting to talk about the graduate students in the program. Their prospects, their progress." He waved his hand as if to say, You understand, it's all routine. Then it stopped waving. "Also their funding. Both the students at the dissertation stage and the more recently admitted ones. They're going to ask me whether we should extend your fellowship again. What do you want me to tell them?"

"Um – please let the department know my research is – that we're, um, close to a workable proposal." The "we" did not come easily, as it once would have.

"Are we?" Tutwiler said, gazing at me over his glasses.

"I believe so."

"You do understand that I need to see an approvable dissertation prospectus on my desk by the end of the summer at the latest." Tutwiler's voice almost sounded like he regretted having to say the words. He had never before set an absolute deadline.

"I see," I said.

"At the latest," Tutwiler repeated, nodding slightly in agreement with himself. This time there was no hint of apology. "Before you register for fall quarter."

"I see," I said again.

After the dimness of Tutwiler's office I was momentarily blinded by the sun on the Quad. Before you register. The threat was clear enough. Hoover Tower looked balefully down at me, the gravel under my feet seemed to tilt.

"Something's the matter with you, Obata," Sheldon said. "What have you got up your butt?"

"Rottweiler's foot."

Jay said, "Isn't he supposed to be helping you?"

"He wants a proposal that is quote, approvable, unquote, by the end of August. 'Before you register,' he tells me. You know what that means? Or else. No fellowship, no T.A.ship, finito, kaput."

"You're kidding," Jay said.

"You don't think he means it? Take it from me, he does."

"Go to the chairman," Sheldon said.

"That'll make it worse."

"Go to the chairman and tell him you've reached an impasse with your adviser and you need to switch. I did it," Sheldon said.

"But maybe you wouldn't want to do it the way he did," Jay said.

"Why?"

"He claimed his old adviser never turned anything back and wouldn't meet with him. So now the guy won't even say hello to him in the hall."

"So maybe I exaggerated. Just make it work. Tell him Tutwiler has been hitting on you."

"Oh for Christ's sake," I said. "He probably hasn't gotten it up in a decade. Listen, you didn't see the letter the chairman wrote me when they extended my fellowship. It's not good when they start using phrases like 'maintain satisfactory progress toward the degree.'"

Jay grunted, Sheldon rolled his eyes. "That's boilerplate," Sheldon said. "They never kick anybody out. If they were going to, I can think of a couple of people in English they would have started with years ago."

"I'm not in English," I said.

I was outside Liddicoat's on University Ave., the expensive grocery store where I never shopped, when I saw you for the first time outside the bar. You were all business, wearing a suit: gray and severe, floppy bow tie at the

neck, gold metal brooch on your left lapel with imitation pearls, no one could have looked more proper. Your outfit matched your careful hair and your composed face, and I felt a little crazy remembering you in the bar, as if that other outfit were a delusion of my own.

It excited me more to see you that way, in front of Liddicoat's, than in the Shutter, because when I saw you there I thought I could one day speak to you, I thought I could get to know you somehow, and that made me follow you inside, along the meat counter where I saw you buy ground sirloin (which was my first clue) and then the produce (tomatoes, onions) and then the frozen foods (peas, lima beans) and the cereal-and-pasta aisle where I saw you take down a box of linguine and one of corn flakes and I thought I might understand what to say to you.

You sat at the bar yet again one night when I was there with Jay. We accepted your presence now; we didn't have to talk about you after the first acknowledgement that you were with us again. After you had been there for a few minutes, sipping your colorless drink and turning your back on me and all the other men, I saw you pick up the bar menu and study it, then set it down and push it away disdainfully. Before I quite knew I was going to, I stood up and began to move toward you. I couldn't have done it if Sheldon had been there to stare too; I wanted neither of them to see this, I knew neither they nor anyone else in the place would understand what I was about to do. Standing up and making my way from the table to the stool next to you, I felt that I floated above myself and slightly behind, watching myself in silent amazement.

Though I didn't look at you when I sat down on the stool to your right, I could feel the force field around you. I knew how intensely you were aware of my presence, but I couldn't tell what it meant.

The bartender came and asked me, poker-faced, what I would have; I ordered a beer. I did not offer to buy her a drink. I took a sip and felt that she could get up and leave at any moment and it was now or never if I was going to speak.

"I hope you don't mind," I began. Stupid thing to say, of course she minded. Start again. "Is there anything good on the menu?"

She passed it to me without speaking. Potato skins, nachos, fried lumps of mozzarella – no wonder she wasn't interested.

"I see what you mean," I said. "Not so fabulous, is it?"

No reply.

"I was imagining something more along the lines of a grilled cheese and tomato sandwich. Or even a hamburger would not be too, um, mundane."

I was sure she hadn't looked at me, but then she said, "You speak English very well."

It helped me get a grip, because for a moment I didn't want her so much. "I was born here." In a relocation camp, the second child born to my parents there; the first, a girl, died.

"Oh."

"Actually, I was born in Heart Mountain, Wyoming."

"Wyoming?" I was sure she knew nothing, like most people.

"Yes."

"Are there many Japanese people there?"

"Um – not now. There were at one time."

More silence. I avoided looking at her in the mirror behind the bar, after one glimpse of the outline of her head between and behind some bottles. "What did you want to say to me?" she said, catching me unprepared after all.

"I was going to suggest going somewhere for a bite to eat. Probably Stickney's. Not very creative, I realize." All I could do was tell the truth.

"No," she said, looking at me directly for a moment. But I thought she faintly smiled. "Try again."

"We could go out for sushi."

No reply.

"Surf and turf. Eel and veal." Would she smile?

"Try again."

"I find you beautiful."

She drew a breath, straightened her back, turned her face toward me with complete composure. "You're not supposed to tell me that."

"Why not?"

You smiled faintly – I was sure of it this time – but to yourself, not to me. Would I have to slink away like the other failures? The song on the jukebox ended, it clicked complexly, another one came on while you perhaps thought about an answer, or ignored me. "Voulez-vous coucher avec moi, ce soir?" As if pointing at me and laughing. I willed you not to hear it.

"Grilled cheese is much easier to find than sushi," she said. "But I don't like Stickney's."

"Well...I know it's not very creative either, but there's always the Bun 'n' Burger."

"I have been there a time or two," she said. Her voice was flat, routine, but my heart leapt. I didn't dare look at her, not even glance down at her legs, much as I wanted to.

"What about now?"

"I suppose I could."

I took another sip of the beer, got up off the stool; something told me not to say anything more but to act as if all were taken for granted, of course you would stand up and go with me. When you did get off your bar stool I could not help one glance at you. I wanted you to come straight to my apartment, to my bedroom, where I would take off what was begging to be taken off and make love to you all night, every way I was imagining. But I knew better than to let you hear me thinking that; I had to look away and somehow my thoughts had to be on grilled cheese. You picked up your handbag off the bar, and as we walked to the door I felt the whole place stare. When I opened the door for you some man groaned behind us, and as it closed some remark got lost in clatter, thank God, because I knew what kind of remark it had to be and you could be spooked at any moment. If there was anything I understood about you it was that.

"My name's Peter, by the way," I said.

"Margo."

"Pleased to meet you."

She nodded but didn't reply.

We were stared at on the street when we got out of my car, we were stared at in the Bun 'n' Burger. People made half-heard remarks that I tried not to notice. I thought I had a pretty good idea what it was like to be her, foreigner, outsider, disturber of the peace. She ate only half her sandwich, in a well-mannered way that put me on my best behavior. When she ate the pickle I cringed inside, certain that some man in the place was making a comment about her giving a blow job. I knew better than to imagine I could look forward to that.

She told me her work (business analysis in an investment bank), I told her mine (Japan in the Tokugawa period). Neither of us cared much about that; but every once in a while she looked me in the eye for

an instant, and it excited me so much I would almost lose my way in the middle of a sentence. Fortunately the table was there to hide the lump in my pants.

When we left, she insisted on paying her share. We got into my car, to drive back to hers, and there she was in the dark semi-privacy of the front seat with me, eighteen inches away; it was all I could do not to lay my hand on her naked thigh. I knew that if I did it, she would lock herself closed to me at once and I would end up asking myself what the hell I could have been thinking when I chose to approach her, why did I bother anyway? But I did not try to touch her on the way to her car, which was a white BMW 2002, many cuts above my ancient Datsun. Before she got out she looked me in the eye momentarily and said, "Thank you."

"My pleasure," I said. "Would you like to do it again?"

Pondering the parking sticker in the corner of the windshield, she thought about it. "Perhaps," she said, with little enthusiasm.

"If you could tell me your phone number..."

"What's yours?" she said. I knew exactly this much: the first name she'd told me, and the kind of car she drove. I could see she wanted to keep it that way. I told her my full name and my phone number.

"I'll let you know if I want to go out," she said.

"Okay."

"No. I told you. We went to the Bun 'n' Burger. I had a grilled cheese, she had tuna salad. That's it."

"Yeah, but after that," said Sheldon. "Your place or hers?"

"Sorry, that's not how it went."

"Man, it is impossible to wear what she wears and not want to get laid."

"How would you know?" said Jay. "Have you ever worn that?"

"I have better taste," said Sheldon. "Come on, did she take it off, or did you?"

I sat with crossed arms and said nothing, trying to keep a straight face.

"The question is," Jay said, "did they make it all the way to the bed, or did they have to stop at the couch first?"

"The kitchen table."

"The desk."

Eventually they wore themselves out with pornographic invention; then they started theorizing about the social construction of sexuality; then the conversation wandered back to Nixon and whether the Judiciary Committee would ever nail him, if what they had on him already wasn't enough.

The next time, I met her at the Bun 'n' Burger, and she was wearing the outfit again. It was even more outrageous there than in the bar, under the bright lights, against the red of the Formica table top and the upholstery of the booth. I was sure now that it was a test; I had to keep my gaze from travelling down her ruffled neckline to the irresistibly bare and touchable place between her breasts – had to exhibit an inhuman absence of lust, had to pretend that we were not stared at, to override embarrassment at being part of her public spectacle. She ordered a hamburger and a side of fries; she ate less than half of the hamburger, and three French fries. I counted. I ordered the same and finished mine; after a while, she offered the rest of hers to me.

"Don't you want any more?" I said.

"No, thank you. Please – go ahead. I never finish my food in a restaurant; they serve too much."

"Not for me," I said.

"You're a man," she replied, and for the first time she gave me more than the hint of a smile. It came and went, but her admitting that I was male, and she a woman, as she sat across from me looking the way she looked, was almost unbearably exciting.

The third time, she told me where she lived and allowed me to pick her up. She lived in a “garden apartment” near San Francisquito Creek, a two-story stucco box containing a dusty rectangular courtyard with two or three palm trees, spiky palmetto, and low mounds of ice plant. After seeing the car she drove, I was sure she made a good salary, and I had expected her to live in a nicer place. Her second-floor apartment was reached by a balcony walkway that extended all the way around the interior of the box and reminded me of a motel, or the similar place in L.A. I lived in as a kid. She was waiting by the door and heard me coming; as soon as I knocked, she slipped outside, locking the door behind her with a resounding clack of metal on metal that told me not to imagine being invited in later.

For the first time she was dressed as she would have been during the day, in a pants suit but without the mock bow tie. The brooch with the imitation pearls had been replaced by one that imitated a tiny bouquet of flowers. She seemed oblivious to the shortcomings of my car; her manners were excellent. I took her to Ming’s, which if not absolutely romantic was at least not the Bun ‘n’ Burger. I would have preferred to go out for sushi, but I was afraid she wouldn’t like it.

At dinner she questioned me about my life and graduate school, and withheld all but the most innocuous information about herself. She gazed at me steadily with unnerving attention that made me eat and answer her in an unnatural, ceremonial way, hoping (against my better judgment) to receive my reward later. I talked more than I wanted to about myself. I told her what a relocation camp was, and how my father lost his dry-cleaning business and became a gardener after the war. I told her my father was senile now, lived in a nursing home in

San Diego, my mother in their small tract house in Clairemont Mesa, working at a department store and not making enough money to keep up the house. I told her my father now made allusions and jokes no one understood, not even my mother. She asked me why I was getting a Ph.D. and I told her about my run-ins with Professor Tutwiler. She nodded and said, "But what I was wondering was why."

"Oh." That was a harder question. "Well, because it's Japanese, I guess. Because – you know – that's why they put them in the camp." Some logic, I thought. She nodded as if she understood, but how could she?

She said, "Your adviser, he's getting old, isn't he?"

"Mm." It was true, but I didn't remember telling her that.

"I'm sure he knows it. He's just afraid of being replaced. If you're certain you're right when you walk into his office, you'll be fine." This seemed to have little to do with my situation, but so what, how important was it for her to understand that peculiar backwater of life?

When we arrived back at her place she placed her hand on my arm, opened her door, leaned over and kissed me on the cheek, and was out of the car before I could react. She left me the faintest smell of her: a scrubbed clean smell with a tiny hint, unless I was making it up, of perfume.

At night I groaned my hard-on against the bed, wanting you. I imagined the orgasms I would give you, imagined you finally relaxing, naked, into my arms, lying on me between bouts of making love and giving me lazy kisses in a bed where the liquids of sex made a wet spot in the center.

The fourth time, Ming's again (I could tell she was a creature of habit); again she was properly dressed – calf-length gray skirt with a narrow leather belt and a white button-down shirt, man style, open at the neck. This time she wore boots made of soft and expensive-looking leather. Instead of All Business, or Brazen Slut, she looked like Career Girl on a Date.

When I asked her a question about herself, she said, "You go first."

"But I already did," I said. "Last time."

"Now Peter. You haven't told me everything." Have you forgotten? she seemed to say – I'm a woman, women are entitled to

their mystery, women keep their secrets and that's why you want us: you'll never know. I remembered a girl who teased me with those words in high school, maddeningly, as if there were something she could say, if only she chose to, that would give away the secret of how to attain her love. But of course she would never say it to me, only to some other unnamed, incredibly fortunate boy.

I told her how my parents had a child before me, the sister I never knew, who died in the camp. "Your poor mom, can you imagine?" Margo said, and I thought her eyes glistened with tears. "Seeing your own child...?"

"No," I said. No, I could never imagine fully enough the devastation of my mother's hopes, that was a given. No matter how I tried or what I did, I would never have cared enough. Stumblingly, I tried to tell Margo the things I had not said before. I said things I wasn't sure I should, drawn out by her gaze – that I was a double only child because my sister died, that I was supposed to make that up to them somehow. That my mom hardly had a husband at any time I could remember, even before the nursing home. That at the beginning, senility had temporarily improved my father – revealed someone who tried to make a joke, who could forgive others for not being stoic and on duty all the time. That I finally thought I understood, even though my father never saw fit to explain himself before he became senile, nor could afterwards: they thought he was Japanese, so he would be Japanese. Or he would be what Americans thought Japanese people were like.

"But he is Japanese, isn't he?" she said.

"He's American."

"I know, but – "

"He's American," I said again.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"It's not your fault."

Again when we stopped outside her apartment she kissed me on the cheek, and I was ready and turned toward her, put my hand over hers before she could remove it from my arm, and said "Don't go yet." My heart was pounding, I felt I must kiss her on the mouth or frustrated desire would be more than I could bear.

"Silly boy," she said.

I put my hand up to her cheek and tried to turn her toward me for a kiss, but she hardened into a kind of statuary under my fingers.

The sensation of it paralyzed me, and while I could not move she slid out from under my touch and out of the car; but she bent down and looked back in at me, as if from a safe distance, the way one might look at an animal that could prove dangerous.

Were you thinking you might want that kiss after all?

"Goodnight," she said, and clicked her way inside.

While we were at Ming's I invited her to dinner at my place; she said, "I didn't know you could cook."

"Of course. Who's going to cook for me? I know how." I wasn't too sure she'd like my cooking, which was mostly of the pork chop in a skillet variety, but I had seen what she bought at the store and I knew she was no gourmet. Besides, it seemed to be more the idea of eating she liked, the first bite and perhaps the second; after that she lost interest and only tasted now and then, out of politeness I thought, so as not to leave her dining partner eating alone.

"I'll think about it," she said. Two days later she called and invited me to dinner at her apartment.

Did you know what fantasies would possess me the moment you made that invitation, what dreams that I had passed your tests and so now you would take me into your privacy and trust me with the reality of yourself, trust me to give you everything I had imagined? You must have known, you must have meant me to think those things.

The inside of her apartment was not what the building led me to expect. The paint job was so meticulous I wondered if she had done it herself. The walls were an elegant off-white, the palest cafe-au-lait. She had hung up a few framed reproductions – a Mondrian, a portrait of a girl who avoided the painter's gaze. She had an iridescent butterfly framed under glass, and some little nubby glass vases, probably old, arranged in an etagere. In a corner of the living room was an antique-looking writing desk, with delicate turned legs and tiny drawers and cubbyholes. Knick-knacks abounded on the horizontal surfaces – ceramic turtles, frogs, a unicorn with a flexible gold mane, a leprechaun holding up a mushroom for an umbrella. She had wall-to-

wall shag carpeting, off-white but different from the walls; the few books visible were fat novels – Ayn Rand, James Michener, Pearl Buck. On the coffee table and the end table she had made neat overlapping arrays of *Glamour*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *Fortune*, *Time*. In the corner of the cover of *Time* was a banner that read "Watergate: The New Evidence." Below that issue was an older one showing the Presidential seal with two hands in front of it, thumbs up, thumbs down. "The Press: Fair or Foul?" it read, but I was more interested in which sign Margo would give me.

She wore a red ruffled top with a scoop neck; a print knee-length skirt with a wide black belt; an apron; black open-toe shoes with medium heels; a little gold cross on a thin gold chain around her neck that made me wonder if she was Catholic. Or perhaps it was just part of this costume.

She served grilled chicken breast with lemon squeezed over it and a few grains of pepper, asparagus, rice pilaf, white wine, weak coffee.

When I went to the bathroom I got a glimpse of the bedroom. Ever since she had called I had been trying to imagine it, and her inviting me into it, but seeing it, my heart fell. The bed was clearly meant for her alone; stuffed animals were heaped on the pillow. The closet with two sliding doors was so crammed that dresses were peeking out where it would not quite close. Cosmetics crowded the top of a ruffled vanity, the blinds were down and curtains hung over them, the air was stuffy with the smell of powder. Over the bed hung a print of a Mexican senorita in full regalia, dressed in billows of colorful fabric, a flower in her hair. There was no place in that bedroom for a man.

In her home she became talkative; she seemed to possess an endless fund of chat, yet still she managed to tell me nothing about herself. She talked about a visit she had once made to Montreal, a show she liked on PBS, her boss, her co-workers (did they know of her evening excursions?), she told me about missing half a year of school as a teenager, because of an unnamed illness...she talked until I began to wish she would stop and then decided she was holding me at arm's length with chat, that she could go on indefinitely in determined blandness, leaving no silence so that no thought of intimacy could ever crop up, that she would talk until she wore out desire, wore out any wish to be in her presence at all, and I would meekly go home. Or was it another test? Was there something I was supposed to know how to

say, some way that a proper man would take charge, cut through the moment and bring it to the point of no return?

I went to the bathroom again in order to collect myself. I looked at myself in the mirror and thought, What am I doing here? I opened the medicine cabinet and saw a circular plastic case which I wanted to think was the right size to hold a diaphragm; I opened the case, and it was empty.

She wants to but she doesn't know how, I thought. She's nervous and that's why she's talking so much. She doesn't understand how any of this works, she doesn't know how to give the right signals, that's why she wore that outfit to the bar in the first place...

I opened the bathroom door and saw her still sitting on the couch, her feet drawn up under her, in the same girlish pose I had left her in, and before she could arrange her social face I glimpsed something shy that made me think yes, I was right. She took up the thread of her monologue again, but I went and knelt on the couch facing her, my knees almost touching her, hemming her in, and said, "Margo."

"What?" she said. She looked me in the eye.

"Could I tell you something? Something I've been wanting to tell you? Could I right now?"

"If you need to," she said.

"I really need to."

"All right, then."

"I mean, I wouldn't do anything you don't want, but I can't understand all this and I have to tell you I want you so much, I've been dying to make love to you ever since I first saw you, I'm sorry if you don't want me to tell you this but it's the truth."

She glanced up over my head. "I know that, Peter. Do you think I don't know?"

"I just can't tell what you want, or if you want anything from me, but I can't help it, I..."

"Of course you can." What did that mean? Was she taunting me? I reached for her, took her by the shoulders and when she didn't let herself be pulled toward me, leaned forward and kissed her on the mouth. She let me kiss her but her mouth did not open to me; but I could not stop trying. Then her mouth did open, too wide, as if she were at the dentist in unhappy surrender to pain. I found myself kissing a void between her teeth and pulled back.

"Please," she said. I had no idea what she meant and at that moment I was unable to care. Her hands were at her sides on the

couch, open with fingers slightly curled. Was she giving herself over to my will? I began to unbutton her blouse. She made no response, no sound, she stared at me in what might have been silent reproach – invitation? – then she closed her eyes, and her hands remained passive by her sides. I undid her buttons, and saw that her frilly bra hooked in front and unhooked it with trembling fingers. To see her breasts naked was a maddening fulfillment; I caressed her gently and insatiably, watching her face for any flutter of response, but there was none except that her lips parted slightly. I thought I understood that if she kept her eyes closed and pretended she didn't know what was happening, it could happen. I didn't try to kiss her mouth again, but I kissed her neck and her collarbone. Mouth against her skin, breathing the smell of her, I moved down her to the place between her breasts that I had imagined kissing from the first time I saw her; my tongue barely touched her nipple before she pushed my head away forcefully. Yet she did not open her eyes and after the push her hands remained resting on my shoulders without resistance. I thought she was telling me not that I should stop, but only what she didn't want. I laid my hand on her knee, noticing for the first time that she had a scar there as if from a childhood fall. I caressed her thigh, all the way up, lifting her skirt until she was as bare-legged as she had been when she first came into the bar, and then more so. She was wearing red silky panties that matched her blouse. Her legs were closed but I stroked her where they met, trying to tempt her, coax her to open them.

"Please," she said again.

We were alone, she was on the couch next to me with her blouse and bra undone, her breasts naked to my touch, her skirt bunched around her waist, I wanted her so much I could barely speak. "Please what?"

"Not like this, Peter. Not at all."

"But tell me how, then. Tell me everything," I said. "Whatever you want."

She shook her head. "That's not the way, either."

"Then let me tell you how I want to make love to you," I said. "Wouldn't you like to hear?"

"Haven't you said that enough?"

I thought if I too were unprotected, she might be able to trust me. "Would you like me to take off my clothes?"

She said nothing, and as fast as I could I unbuttoned my shirt and threw it on the floor, pulled off my shoes without untying them, unbuckled my belt – "Please turn off the light if you're going to do

that," she said. She turned her head slightly away. In a moment I had turned off the lamps, and in another I was naked next to her in the not-quite-dark. A light in the courtyard cast stripes on the ceiling through the mini-blinds. She glanced at me and then away again. I picked up her hand and guided it to my throbbing penis, tried to curve her fingers around it. "It's okay. Don't you see? Please, I'm dying to have you touch me."

Her fingertips barely touched the head of my penis. "I used to think there was something more," she said.

"More?"

"Like a pin. Something more that comes out sometimes. When men have erections."

"A pin?"

"You can make yourself come now if you have to."

"Oh," I said.

"Isn't that what you want? But you can't come on me. Or on the couch."

"Wait," I said. "Wait. This pin. Do you just not know anything? About making love?" A miraculous, impossible story blossomed in an instant: that all it was was that she was completely inexperienced, that I would be her first, her initiator, her tender guide into the depths of love.

"I must have heard it from my mother. I know, it's silly, isn't it?"

"You believed that?"

"Well, I was only a little kid."

But not any longer. I traced the hard curve of her rib cage and the soft firmness of her breasts. She acted as if nothing were happening, but she didn't stop me. My fingertips tingled with tenderness and desire. "Doesn't it give you pleasure when I touch you?" I said. "Doesn't it?"

She turned to look full at me in the dimness. She examined my nakedness up and down, not skipping my hard penis that stood toward her. "I'm yours," I said. "Please let me be your lover. I'll do anything you want. I can't stop thinking about you, I want you so much."

I tried to put my arms around her but she turned herself in such a way that instead I grasped at air and slipped awkwardly to the floor. I righted myself and knelt in front of her and thought, What did I do wrong? The carpet was scratchy beneath my knees. "Margo," I said.

She wouldn't look at me. "What?"

"I don't understand."

"I know you don't."

"Please," I said. "Look at me."

But she didn't look. "Get dressed."

Slowly, I picked up my clothes off the floor and carried them into the bathroom. I closed the door behind me; I thought of turning off the light and masturbating. In the mirror was my bewildered self. No wonder she didn't want me if I looked like that. I got dressed, listening for any sounds from the living room; but all was quiet.

One lamp by the couch was on again, but she was not there. Not anywhere in the living room, not in the kitchen that was separated from it only by a counter, not in the bedroom; she was not in the apartment at all. She had left the door to the outside slightly ajar.

It was nearly midnight and I was alone in your apartment. Was it so intolerable then, what had almost happened, so unthinkable that you were hiding in the shadows, watching your own door, waiting for me to go away, wishing you had never let me set foot there, much less touch you...but I had done it, there was no taking it back.

It was time for me to leave, and I knew that if I did, I would never come back. But I felt your secrets all around me and I couldn't walk out on them. It was a crazy thing to imagine after what had happened, but maybe leaving me alone with them was a way of trusting me, inviting me to another kind of intimacy...wasn't it all strange with you from the start? I had an illicit vision of myself untying a bundle of saved letters, pulling one at random from its envelope. Going through your drawers, your keepsakes, reading your diary, crawling into your bed to know what it felt like to sleep there alone. To leave the imprint of myself there so that you would, all unknowing, sleep with me, grow used to me, make room for me. I imagined stealing one of your dresses and taking you with me in that form when I left...yet all your clothes were only disguises, your closet burst with untruths.

In your bedroom I turned on a lamp on the vanity and looked around (was I really going to do this?) at all the armaments of your femininity, foreign to me, inviting and repelling me at once. Were they meant to make you beautiful to a man (to me?) or to armor you against all men, to set you apart, to draw the line of this far and no farther? Apparently I could not stop trying to cross it. I opened the little drawers of the vanity and when I found nothing there that meant much to me, I went to the dresser. On top of it was a wooden chest with a hinged lid, carved, with ivory inlay; inside the chest a tangle of necklaces, an old charm bracelet, a comb that may have been amber, and a

photo album, red leather with gold embossing. I picked up the album and carried it over to the vanity where I could open it under the lamp. If you came in now. But why had you left me alone there, if not for me to know you?

Banal snapshots of what I assumed must be your parents. A raised ranch house, a cocker spaniel, a swing set with a child on it, but the child was only five or six and I could not be sure it was you. She appeared to have been specially dressed up for the picture. Child with parents. Child with father. Was she the only child? Apparently. They were not rich and not poor. They were white. In their driveway was a 1952 Ford. Then a different house. They must have moved, or were they visiting relatives? The child was six or seven. I was more certain now that it was you in the pictures. You posed on your father's lap on a front porch swing, riding with your small legs straddling one of his thighs, his big hands grasping your torso. He looked as if having his picture taken made him uncomfortable.

Then it was your birthday. You were smaller again, wearing a party dress with lacy short sleeves and a spangled cardboard party hat held on by elastic which I could imagine digging in under your chin, sitting at a kitchen table in front of an enormous birthday cake. I tried to count the candles and thought there were five, but the focus wasn't very sharp. Next page, next birthday. Everything but the dress and the number of candles was the same. Next birthday, you were sitting at a different kitchen table, a chrome and Formica dinette, must have been after the move. And the next. In this one there was a big candy 8 on the top of the cake, and I recognized the Margo I knew. I decided that your mother must have made you a birthday dress every year because the style was always the same, and they were always some shade of pink (your favorite color?), and they always fit so they had to be new. I turned the page, you were nine and apparently your parents never got tired of the same ritual; I imagined the picture-taking happening every year before the birthday party, your hair and dress just so, your mother making a fuss. I turned the page and it was the same scene at a different kitchen table (moved again?), the same cake with a 10 on top, but the dress was different, this time you were wearing a miniature evening gown, your hair waved like a grown-up's, you were wearing a little strand of fake pearls and if I wasn't mistaken lipstick, and you had on white net gloves and a ring on your gloved finger. I thought of the work your mother must have put into dressing you like that, how indulgent she must have been. Next page, birthday again, everything was again the same, same kitchen as before, same cake, another evening dress, but the girl in the dress, now eleven, was terribly wrong, still smiling with lipsticked mouth (I was sure this time) but out of a face in which every bone

showed, your nose sharp like an old woman's, your arms like twigs, joints protruding, the cake that had always been too big now obscene in front of what appeared to be a starving child, starving yet smiling – how could you be smiling, and how could such a picture be taken as if this year were no different from the last? How could it be just one more page in your family album, did you not understand that it was like dressing up the inmates of the camp for a photo op so the public would be reassured that really, there was nothing to worry about, everything there was perfectly humane...I thought I heard a footstep in the other room and hurried to turn the page, glimpsed the next year (you looked almost as bad) before I was sure that you had returned and I had to close the album. Because surely you did not want me to see that.

"Oh," she said, in the doorway of the bedroom. "I wondered where you were."

"Here."

"What were you looking at?"

I held up the album, red under the lamplight. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have."

"You must have gotten bored, if you found that."

"Not at all." Wasn't she angry, now when she should be?

"It wasn't very nice to just leave you here, was it? Without saying a word."

"Oh well. I guess I upset you. I mean, I know I did."

Margo avoided my eyes. For an instant I thought, though it made no sense, that she looked guilty, but I was the guilty one, it must be that that made me think it – pushing the evening over the edge, and then on top of that prying into her private things – "I'm sorry," I said.

"I have a little, tiny, baby headache," she said slowly, still without looking me in the eye. "I think what I need is some tea. Would you like some?"

I did not understand, but I was becoming accustomed to not understanding, with her. "I would," I said carefully, telling myself that I would assume nothing anymore.

She had put on a blue linen jacket over the red blouse when she went out; it was the first time I had seen her wear something that didn't go with an outfit. Her hair, too, was no longer just so. Margo put

a kettle of water on the stove and we both stood in the kitchen waiting for it to boil. The clock on the wall said twenty past twelve. The kettle ticked, heating. She seemed to be in no hurry to talk, and I wasn't, either. What had happened didn't seem to bear talking about, but neither did anything else.

I said, "Did you go for a walk?"

"No." Would she say more? Apparently not. The silence grew too long before the kettle started to sing. She took two cups out of the cupboard and two tea bags out of a glass jar.

"Do you mind that I looked at your photo album?"

"No." But didn't she know what I saw there?

"Where did you grow up?"

"All over. We moved around a lot. Actually I don't remember much of it before I was nine or so. I see the pictures but they don't really seem familiar."

"Oh."

"I guess they were never satisfied."

I wasn't sure what to say to that. The kettle whistled, and Margo poured water into the cups; then she led the way back to the couch. Once we were sitting down, I took a sip and said, "My dad was never satisfied, either."

"With being a gardener?"

"With anything."

"He must have been satisfied with you, Peter, when you did so well in school."

"He kept it a secret. Anyway, it wasn't enough."

"For what?"

"I don't know. To make them happy, I guess."

"Well, of course not," Margo said, as if she knew. She slipped her shoes off and rearranged herself so she was sitting with her feet tucked under her. "I'm not *quite* ready to go to sleep," she said.

I wasn't sure what that meant, but I said, "Just tell me when I should leave."

She smiled as if I meant to amuse her, and touched me on the arm, sending a current through me. "You're a funny boy, Peter."

"I am?" I didn't want to be called a boy – but if it meant she could touch me... "Can I ask you something?"

"It's not the same thing as before, is it?" she said, but now maybe there was a faint gleam of amusement in her eye.

"No. It's about the pictures. You don't have to say anything if you don't want to."

We sat and sipped at the too-hot tea, looking not at each other but at the furnishings. I felt as though I had been in her apartment for more than an evening. I was beginning to know the knick-knacks personally, so that they were no longer tacky but simply themselves.

"I wouldn't eat," she said, as if that were an explanation.

"It must have been awful," I said.

"I really don't remember it being one way or the other. Supposedly I wanted to look that way. That's what my mother would tell you. But she doesn't know."

"What did you want, then?"

"I'm not sure." She blew on her tea delicately and sipped it; her shoulders were hunched a little as if she were chilly.

"Do you still have a headache?"

"A little," she said. "It's nothing." Her eyes met mine, and for the first time it seemed as though we saw each other with nothing to gain or lose. Haven't I always known you? I thought, as if it had unaccountably slipped my mind, and if I stopped to think I would remember.

"Want me to give you a backrub?" I said.

"Are you going to get other ideas?"

"I already had them."

She turned her back to me and I massaged her shoulders through the thin material of the jacket, gently; I paid attention to each vertebra in her neck, to the hollows behind her earlobes, I slid my fingers up into the roots of her hair at the nape of her neck. I held her head between my hands, only touching with the tips of my fingers and thumbs, and she let me tilt her ever so slightly from side to side. I closed my eyes and leaned closer to her, pulled down the collar of her jacket a little in back, and kissed her lightly on the back of her neck. She did not move away; I could smell the scent of her skin and the faint perfume. My hands remained on her shoulders; neither of us moved for several breaths.

I felt the unimagined was about to begin.

She touched my hands with her fingertips, briefly. "Thank you," she said. "You do that really well."

"Any time."

"Will you be my on-call masseuse?"

"Sure," I said, wondering if she had any idea that was a euphemism for someone to have sex with. "Masseur, that is."

"What?"

"Masseur. Masculine. Not masseuse."

"Oh." I thought she sounded disappointed. "Well, are you usually available this time of night?"

"Try me and see."

"But I'm not calling for – you know."

"I know, believe me." I'm crazy to let this make me happy, I thought.

Margo sighed contentedly. "Now I could go to sleep," she said. She stretched her arms above her head and arched her back, shrugging my hands off her shoulders.

"Yeah," I said reluctantly. It was almost one by the kitchen clock. "Well. Yeah, it's time."

She turned around and looked me over in a sprightly, sisterly way; she tousled up my hair with her nails and laughed at the effect. "Sleepyhead," she said. "Are you a sleepyhead too?"

"I am."

"Want to sleep here? You wouldn't have to drive back to Mountain View."

"I – of course I – I mean you know that..."

"The couch pulls out. It's really a perfectly fine bed, I've slept on it before. I'll give you a robe and a toothbrush, and we can have a sleepover," she said brightly. "What do you say?"

"All right." I knew nothing, I understood nothing, what did she want, what did she mean...I resolved to go where she went. I had to stop trying to make sense of her. No telling what she knew and what she didn't, or whether she was thirty or thirteen. Margo went into her bedroom and reappeared with a white silk robe, embroidered with orange peonies, a kind of garment I had never imagined myself wearing. "There you are," she said. "You can have the bathroom first."

"Thank you."

"You'll see, there are some toothbrushes in a cup on the shelf, they've never been used. I buy too many, that's all."

She went back in her room and shut the door, and in a daze I took off my shoes and padded into the bathroom. I stared at myself in the mirror. Okay, Peter, who are you now? And what do you think this is? Decipher this word: a sleepover. But I could not.

I chose one of her extra toothbrushes and brushed my teeth, peed, took off my clothes except for my underpants, then realized I had left the robe in the living room. I imagined her undressing in the next room, sleeping on the other side of the wall, with me on call, whatever that meant...would I sleep at all, or only spend the whole night waiting for her to say my name? I opened the bathroom door with my clothes under my arm and stepped out to find Margo, in a red robe over pajamas, taking the cushions off the couch. She looked at me in my white underpants and smiled indulgently. "You bad boy," she said, as if I had told a risqué joke. As if it had nothing to do with her. "Put your robe on."

I slipped on the slick silk garment and tied its long sash, feeling absurdly Oriental, a cartoon Asian, a eunuch, was that what she really thought of me?

"Help me pull it out, okay?"

Together we unfolded the sofa-bed and made it up, tucking the two sides in synchrony like a married couple. She had brought a comforter and two pillows – could it mean...?

"Do you have everything?" she said.

I managed not to say that I had everything but her. "Thank you."

She went into the bathroom and turned on the fan, so I wouldn't hear her pee, I thought. I turned off the lights, took off the robe, got in bed and lay there waiting for her to come out. Certain now there would be no sleep. She opened the door and turned the bathroom light off; in the dim light from the courtyard I could see her looking down at me as I lay there. What was she thinking? Come here, I thought to her, let me hold you, you will not come to any harm.

"Goodnight," she whispered, as if something might be disturbed if she spoke in her normal voice.

"Goodnight."

I prayed that she would leave the door to her room open but she closed it with a click. And now the rest of the night stretched ahead.

I lay in the dark and for a few moments I heard her footsteps in the bedroom, a drawer opening and closing, the click of a lamp being turned off, then silence. The neighborhood was quiet. I had to hold

onto my penis to bear the desire; again I wanted to masturbate but I wouldn't let myself. If I told Sheldon and Jay that I had spent the night at her apartment, they would try their hardest not to believe this was how I spent it, alone on the fold-out couch holding onto my dick and feeling it throb. Yet I had to triumph over desire, over self – it was all too private and inexplicable to tell anyone. But why, they would say, if I finally convinced them of what had happened, then what made her ask you to stay, what did she want? and I would have no answers but they would not accept that, they would keep saying No, come on, why? as if there had to be a why, as if I knew. Or worse, as if they did.

Their language had no word for this. But I understood why Sheldon thought she might be a man. Something was always off. I could testify she wasn't that, but what was she then, a woman or a child or what, and was she always acting a part or only sometimes? Now I was onstage too, in her play called "sleepover," but she wouldn't let me see the script, I didn't know my lines, I didn't even know what my part was called. Play date, brother, boyfriend? Was this her idea of boyfriend? That would be worst of all. But I had to believe, based on nothing, that it was not. What world was this happening in anyway, what was I here for?

It was too late now to go home and neither could I open her bedroom door, enter her room, enter her bed, why not was unclear but I knew. All I could do was lie there one room away from her with nothing stopping me but everything stopping me. It was like doing isometrics all night. And what was she thinking, or was she serenely asleep while my heart raced and my balls ached?

I wanted to get angry, to call you a cock tease, a ball breaker, if only so I could go to sleep, but it was impossible to do anything but continue to lie there as if I knew, in fact, everything that mattered: you wanted me, we were going to be together...on the basis of what? Nothing but wishful thinking, hard penis refused to give up but that proved nothing, presumptuous, absurd...Whatever I told myself, nothing changed.

The bright stripes on the walls and ceiling cast by the light in the courtyard didn't move. Every once in a while, a car passed by outside, but its headlights did not reach into the apartment. I kept

turning over, changing the position of my legs, trying to get comfortable and never succeeding. The small of my back hurt, clenched in frustrated desire. I kept wanting to know what time it was but couldn't see the kitchen clock. Maybe it was good that I couldn't watch the hands crawl. And when morning did come, what then? How could I be anything but useless after such a night? Just imagining the effort to be on my good behavior was too exhausting...

Without realizing it, I fell asleep.

The sound of the bedroom door opening penetrated my sleeping brain and by the time I surfaced and opened my eyes, she was standing by my bed in the dark in her pajamas, holding something in one arm, watching me. I raised my head slightly and saw that she had a stuffed animal.

"I had a bad dream," she said.

"Oh." I had a hard time getting my voice to work. My mouth was dry and tasted bitter.

"Can I be here for a while?" Like a little girl coming to her parents for comfort.

"Sure."

She got under the comforter and put the stuffed animal between us. I felt its head and its horn and realized it was a unicorn. Foolish thing. "What did you dream?" I said.

"Bad things."

She lay with her head turned away from me, on her stomach. "Thanks for letting me come in," she said.

"My pleasure."

A kid crawls into her parents' bed after a nightmare and in a moment she's out like a light. But I was not her mom and dad. Was she actually going to go to sleep, right there, less than an arm's length away? Worn out but helplessly awake, I imagined caressing her, first through the thin material of her pajamas, and then sliding my hand under the top, up her bare back, and then past the waistband of her pants – how she would turn over and let me unbutton...

I laid my hand in the middle of her back and did not move it, felt her breathe in and out. Silently I pushed my hard-on against the mattress. The contact between us radiated outwards from where my

hand rested on her. I felt it entering every part of me and willed it so to enter her, to spread gradually and irresistibly until she knew she could open to me because she already had. Please, I kept thinking. Please.

Margo reached back and took my hand away, but held onto it and didn't let go. She lay holding my hand and every once in a while she would give it a little squeeze. After a while I wasn't sure if she was awake, or doing it in her sleep. Or perhaps we were both asleep. Would I even remember this in the morning?

She turned her head to face me; I opened my eyes, and saw that hers were open, gazing at me.

"Are you okay like this?" she said.

"I guess."

"I'm sorry I woke you up."

"It's okay."

"I don't sleep well. I'm kind of used to it. But I shouldn't wake you up."

"Don't worry about it."

She closed her eyes and gave my hand another little squeeze, as if to say goodnight. After a bit I closed my eyes too, though I was sure I wouldn't sleep.

"Peter?"

"Yes?" I looked at her, but her eyes were still closed, and I closed mine again.

"Is this too hard for you?"

Yes, it is. "I can do it."

"Thank you."

My awareness was all in that hand that was holding and being held by yours. There, we were already together.

Despite the blinds, strips of sun burned their way into the living room and woke me up. I was facing the wall where the rays struck. Dust motes floated in and out of sun layers whose brightness hurt my eyes. For an instant I didn't know where I was, then everything came back. If all that had been real. I turned over; she was still there, asleep on her side with her back to me. The unicorn was still between us; I laid it on the floor, on my side of the bed. Then I watched her breathe.

Cautiously I sat up a little so I could see the clock on the kitchen wall: it was 6:25. How long had we slept? Four hours? Less? Not long,

but long enough for her to have awakened at any moment and gone back to her own bed, if she didn't trust me, if she wasn't safe next to me. I could imagine fitting myself next to her, putting my arm around her, lying there with my nose in her hair, the length of her body against mine. I knew better than to do it. Desire was still humming inside me but at the moment it was not torment, maybe I was just too tired, no, I was but that was not all. While we slept we had breathed together, the same molecules had gone into and out of her body and mine, I had breathed knowledge of her and she of me. I let my eyes close, feeling the charged space between us. My hand knew how her hipbone would feel, and her rib cage, and the inward curve of her waist between the two, if only it could cross the twelve inches of rumpled sheet, no longer guarded by a stuffed unicorn with a golden horn, but still that boundary had not been broken and must not. Yet. Was she a virgin? No. Yes. Maybe she willed it so. Maybe that was all that mattered. But everything that happened to a person mattered, that was the hard part, it mattered and it could not be undone. My touch too soon, the night before, could not be taken back now. I had to let her re-create herself.

To keep myself from touching her now I got up and went into the bathroom to pee, closing the door as quietly as I could, peeing against the side of the toilet bowl rather than into the water. No choice but to flush and hope it wouldn't wake her up. While I waited for the toilet to stop its trickling, I sleepily used the extra toothbrush. I drank some water. Then I cautiously opened the door and eased back out into the living room.

I stood and contemplated your sleeping face, and saw that you were younger than you made yourself look with makeup and clothes. I saw that you were doing your very best, every day, every evening, all your nerves on the alert, but not now and my heart went out to you seeing you unguarded and open; I felt it leave me, I felt you come into me. I knew in a moment I would not be able to help kneeling down and touching your cheek if I did not stop looking into your face. I made myself turn away, circle the bed and get back in on my side, as cautiously as I could but nevertheless you shifted your position in your sleep.

Now the kitchen clock said six-forty. I didn't know if I wanted you to wake up or not. How would you feel to find yourself there next to me, in daylight, no longer hidden under cover of night? If you were to jump up and rush back to your room, close the door and then through it, tell me to please leave at once...anything was possible, including that; anything, except that

you would not turn over to face me and open your arms, invite me into your embrace, that would not happen, I could forget about imagining that, for now anyway, but that was exactly what I could not forget.

I closed my eyes. I could feel the minutest variation in the distance between us when you shifted in your sleep.

You sighed and turned on your back, then onto your stomach, with your face toward me but your eyes still closed. I thought that the way you had your head canted upwards on the pillow would surely give you a stiff neck when you woke up. Maybe you were already awake, thinking about how to react when you opened your eyes.

I closed mine and waited. I could hear the blood rushing in my ears.

When Margo turned away and in the same decisive motion put back the covers I knew she had only been pretending to sleep. She got out of bed, went straight to the bathroom – I watched her go in – turned on the fan, peed (I heard it), splashed water. I heard her brushing her teeth, then all was quiet for a while. When she came out I thought I too could pretend, but at the last moment I couldn't not look. Our eyes met and she glanced away but not before something passed between us. She came and sat on the bed, on top of the comforter, cross-legged and facing me. She pushed her hair back with a little smile. "Good morning," she said.

"Good morning." To lie and look up at you and have you not look away was more than I had been able to imagine – my thoughts had gone too far and so not far enough.

"I'm afraid you didn't sleep very well. Thanks to me."

"I don't mind."

Without makeup, without your hair exactly so, in your modest white pajamas with the tiny flower print, you were the girl self. I loved this girl – abruptly I knew it, as if I had just invented the word. One moment it did not exist and the next it did.

"I was happy being next to you."

"You still are, silly," she said, giving me her indulgent smile.

"I know." I wanted to say to her what else I knew, it would come out any instant if I did not make an effort of will. I loved this girl within the woman, I had from the moment I saw her in the bar, trying

to play the woman and getting it a little bit wrong. And I would have to be her boy. No matter how much I wanted to reach up as a man and pull her down to me. "It's kind of early to get up, isn't it?" That much I could not help.

"What do you want to do?" she said.

But I wasn't allowed to tell her.

"You get to say," I said. "It's your house."

"Want to see if the paper came?"

"All right." I knew what she'd see, bulging my underpants, when I got out of bed, but I couldn't help it and as long as I lay there looking at her, thinking of what we could be doing, it wasn't going to go away. I felt her eyes on me there as I threw back the comforter and got up.

She seemed to hold in something she might say. I turned my back to her, picked up the robe off the chair where I had thrown it, and put it on. When I turned back she was watching me carefully, waiting, I could see, for me to know how to act.

I looked outside the door for the Sunday paper. "I don't see it," I said.

"Oh. No, it doesn't come all the way up. You have to go down by the mailboxes. They leave them down there."

"Oh," I said. I didn't want to get dressed.

"It's okay," she said. "You're decent enough now."

Barefoot, I felt the roughness of the concrete on the balcony. The black paint on the iron railing was peeling away, flaking at a touch, and there was rust underneath. Down the stairs, across the dusty courtyard, stopping to brush away gravel that painfully poked the soles of my feet. I felt mocked in the flowered robe, neutered. But no one up to see me at this hour. I took a Sunday paper from the pile at the entryway. The front page was all Watergate. From the courtyard Margo's apartment looked like all the others, except that its door was open. Then she appeared in it, wearing her red silk robe, brushing her hair and looking down at me. She had a barrette in her teeth. When she turned away the door remained open.

She was putting the barrette in her hair as I came in. I laid the paper on the counter. "Thank you," she said.

"When I saw you just now it was like we were..."

A tiny frown crossed her face, then a look that might have been embarrassment. "Ssh," she said, a finger to her lips. "Now we can have some orange juice and read the paper."

She had not folded the couch up; she dropped the Sunday paper in the middle of the bed, then handed me a glass of juice.

"Thank you." I had almost broken the rule of the game, but I saw that we would pretend it hadn't happened, because I was still learning.

We sat side by side, cross-legged on the bed, and sorted through the Sunday paper.

"Here," she said, handing me the sports, "do you want this section?"

"Thanks." So that was my part. It was simple, if I could remember how, to play house. Sunday morning. I was the dad. I had training in this from my growing up. Someone had to be with my mother, and who else was there but me? Too many Sundays my father sat silent in his armchair, eyes closed but not asleep; we could tell because a vibration emanated from him that made our stomachs tight. Now and then my father would draw the corners of his mouth further down, and mutter inwardly, or clear his throat. My mother and I pretended not to notice.

That was the wrong game altogether, if this was going to be that game again I would get dressed at once and leave and never return. But Margo and I might start over, invent it from the beginning. The only hope. "Want me to make some breakfast?" I said.

"Oh, I'll make it in a while," she said, opening the Sunday magazine.

"I don't mind. Really. You cooked dinner."

"I don't know if I'm that hungry," she said.

I wondered if she was ever hungry, or if she would ever admit it. "I always am when I haven't had enough sleep."

"Tsk – I'm sorry."

"It's okay."

For a few seconds, to my profound surprise, she let her head rest on my shoulder; I turned toward her so that my cheek was against her hair and for a moment I thought she was going to lift her head and we were going to kiss. It didn't happen, but her arm circled my waist, held me then let go. She sat up, resumed reading the paper as if nothing had happened.

"Breakfast in bed," I said. "I'll make it."

"There are some eggs in the fridge."

I found the eggs, a bowl and a fork. As I was beating them, Margo read the paper and only glanced up when I asked her where something was. She was letting me take care of her, I saw.

I would have liked to find some bacon too, but I wasn't surprised that she didn't have any. I cut up a little onion and green pepper to add as a gesture in the direction of a Sunday breakfast. I made coffee stronger than she would have.

We sat side by side on the rumpled sheets. "Thank you for making breakfast," she said. "It's very good."

"You're welcome." I wanted to thank her for letting me feed her.

We ate – she did not finish hers, of course – with the papers still spread out in front of us. She pointed out to me a piece about a Japanese garden; I began to tell her how the garden was supposed to embody the principle of *wabi-sabi*, but it reminded me too much of my unstarted dissertation, and besides I was afraid I'd start to lecture.

She asked me my sign and read me my horoscope. The stars had things to say about love, as usual. Was it her way of letting the word be spoken aloud?

Once breakfast was inside me, I could hardly keep my eyes open; I began yawning cavernously. She complained that it was catching, that I was making her sleepy too. Once when I yawned, she darted her fingers into my mouth and took hold of my tongue for an instant. "I got you," she said, pleased with herself.

"That felt really weird."

"I know. In the sixth grade my girlfriend used to do that to me. I could never get her back."

"I feel like I'm gonna conk out, I can't help it. Maybe I should go home."

Did a hurt look cross her face? "If you want to."

"I don't know, I've just been here a long time," I said, foggy-headed. I meant I didn't want to overstay my welcome, but as soon as the words were out, I realized it sounded as though I was tired of her company.

"You're welcome to take a nap," she said. But the spell of the game had been broken. Margo got up and carried both of our plates into the kitchen, began rinsing them. I felt foolish sitting on the bed alone, in the silk robe; I couldn't do it without her. I wanted to apologize but I didn't know how to say what for.

I got up and followed her into the kitchen, stood behind her at the sink. She didn't look around, stubbornly planted there with her

back to me washing the dishes. I put my arms around her from behind, held her, pressed myself against her back, my nose and mouth in her hair. She put down the plate she was washing and turned her whole self around within my grasp, slippery in the silk robe. Without knowing how, I found myself stepping back, my arms no longer around her. "If you want to go just go," she said.

"I don't."

"You just said you did."

"I was just afraid you were getting tired of me, here."

"Don't act stupid. You're not a stupid person. Do you think I do this with everybody?"

Were there half a dozen men in her life? "I don't know, who's everybody?"

"Oh! – go *away* then." She leaned against the sink, head down, retying her robe with angry tightness, and I against the stove, studying her. What now about those thoughts, the ones about falling in love with her? "I'm not in the habit of inviting men to sleep over," she said in a low, resentful voice, without looking up at me.

Did that mean I wasn't a man? "So are you sorry you did?" Perhaps not such a privilege anyway.

"Are you sorry you stayed?"

No fair to answer a question with a question, but why expect fair. "No," I said. It would have been more truthful to say It depends.

"Really? You don't look very happy about it...There, that's a little better."

"Am I that obvious?"

She seemed to relax; she shook her head. "No."

"Neither are you," I said.

"My feelings are easily hurt sometimes."

"I noticed."

"You really could take a nap if you want. I won't bother you, I promise. I need to wash my hair anyway."

Stay in the apartment while she took a shower, trying to read the paper while I imagined her soapy nakedness one room away? Too exhausting..."I bet you'd be more comfortable doing that alone."

She smiled. "I can always lock the door, if that's what you're thinking."

"I think I'd better go back," I said. But as soon as I said it I remembered the stacks of books surrounding my desk, the not-silence of traffic noise, the faint pervading odor of cat box, and why would I want to go back to that?

"It's up to you," Margo said, and went back to the dishes. But not angrily this time.

I folded up the couch, took off the robe and put my clothes on. The domestic feeling came over me again. Why was I leaving? It was stupid, just as she had said. But too late now to change my mind. I sat down on the couch to put on my socks and shoes, and she came and sat by me. I felt my pockets for my pen and car keys.

"Peter?"

"Yes?"

"Am I going to see you again?"

"Of course," I said. So much better if she hadn't asked.

"How are you going to call me if you don't know my phone number?"

"Maybe you could tell it to me."

She took a note card from a cubbyhole in her writing desk, wrote on it and put it in my pocket. "If you're never going to call, I want to know."

"I'm going to, don't worry." I stood up. "Thank you for letting me stay," I said.

"Thank you for letting me come in with you."

"What did you dream, anyway?"

"I'll tell you later."

"Well..."

She went with me to the door. Did she mean, after all this, to kiss me on the cheek and dart away? I put my hand to her cheek and she did not flinch; she even raised up a little on her toes to kiss me, once, twice; shyly her tongue met mine for an instant, then she turned her head and put her arms around my neck. I held her, I felt her body fully present against mine; how could I go now? But I seemed to have left myself no choice. And if I stayed, would she still kiss me, or was there only one kiss like that per night, or day?

"Thank you," I said.

"Call me."

"I will."

Then I was walking down the length of the balcony again, down the stairs with the rusty, peeling metal railing. A breeze rustled the stiff fronds of a palm tree in the courtyard. The air smelled of eucalyptus and dust, the smell of a summer day on the Peninsula, held in a trance by sun. I heard the sound of a door latch and turned, thinking she might have opened the door to call me back – I was ready on the instant to turn my back on my day alone – but it was someone on the

other side of the courtyard coming out. Other people, that close all along, while we were together. Had one of them seen me go in last night, and now come out again? Only logical then to think that Margo and I must be lovers. I crossed the dusty courtyard asking myself what we could truthfully be called.

I got into my beat-up Datsun and made my way to stark 101. Brightness made it hard to see on the freeway. A thin fog was actually best, it brought distant things closer and sharper to the eye than glaring sun, but such conditions hardly ever occurred in the South Bay; the weather was sun, smog, or rain. Sometimes in winter massive fog banks, the real thing from the Pacific, would pile up on the ocean side of the prosperous hills and on my way to campus I would see white fog bulging over the hilltops and streaming down green canyons in slow motion. I lived on the flats where fog of that kind almost never reached, a jerry-built nowhere that was farms or orchards fifteen years before. Still a few of those left in Mountain View east of the freeway. Now the flats were a place where people happened to end up because they wouldn't or couldn't leave, couldn't afford to move out of the cheap bungalows and "garden apartments" of the unwhite and unrich. The destiny of the flats was to collect auto body shops, parts warehouses, engine rebuilders, dealers in chrome hubcaps and recapped tires. A land of beige buildings with loading docks, a door every fifty feet, in each door one slit of window. The one landmark was the set of enormous hangars built on the edge of the Bay to house dirigibles, of all things, which proved to be of no use in war or peace. It was said that the hangars could be seen from space. Much harder to find thinly scattered islands of life: liquor store, restaurant, hair salon – Black, Mexican, Salvadoran, Filipino. My street was called Alma. Street of the Soul. A terrible misnomer, or maybe it was a warning about an afterlife that one would dread passing on to: flat and straight, pavement and train tracks, two-story box apartments opposite the tracks, block after block for miles.

I mounted the outside stairs to my apartment. When I opened the screen door its knob banged against that of the next apartment, entrances set at right angles and too close. In there lived a woman age twenty-one, with her younger sister and her mother. She had flirted with me one night right there on the landing, had let me kiss her, had even let me slide my hand up under her T-shirt and momentarily touch her braless breast, then slipped inside her door and spoke to me only once afterwards, to say she was busy, she had to practice the recorder with her sister. Nothing had happened, it had meant nothing, *shikata ga nai*. Nothing can be done about it. A favorite saying of both my parents. When my father said it, it meant nothing could be done about it. When my mother did, it meant that perhaps her sufferings could be relieved if only I would remember how much I meant to her and act accordingly.

From the sofa, Clarice the cat raised her head out of curled sleep and made a greeting between a yawn and a yowl, then came and bumped her head against my leg. I petted her absently, picked her up, carried her to the back door and opened it so she could go out. After a night in Margo's apartment I was not fully accustomed to the cat odor of my own. It was Sunday, the noise was not as bad as other days; I opened some windows. The space waited for me to be fully alone. When I was, I was a floating awareness, and the apartment was my body. On one end of my yard sale desk the veneer was buckled and peeling because the previous owner had somehow let it get soaked there. Probably next to an open window and no one cared. I had only two good pieces of furniture: a solid comfortable desk chair, because I had to have it, and an elegant overstuffed sofa on indefinite loan from a law student I knew in Berkeley who had been given it by his mother but didn't want it in his place. The floors were bare wood with most of their varnish scratched away, the homemade bookshelves were loaded to the point of sagging, my stereo was held up by a low slat table of the cheap-Swedish-modern variety.

For the first time I owned a TV, a big brown box on a rickety wheeled stand; I had acquired it when I saw Sheldon putting it out with his trash. "I don't have the patience to fuck with it anymore," Sheldon said, but my father had been the next thing to a miser and I couldn't resist something that big and also free. It weighed a ton, it took a minute and a half to warm up, and even then its picture kept blurring off into meaningless jitter. Every effort to improve it by attaching scraps of wire and tinfoil to the rabbit ears failed as soon as the viewer sat down. In fact it could only be watched reliably by

holding onto the antenna with one hand, and this had saved me from obsessively watching the Watergate hearings like some of the grad students I knew.

On the floor stood stacks of books the shelves couldn't hold, lugged home from the library under duress of Tutwiler's voice. Seeing them made my heart heavy: You haven't read...? There they still were, all that I didn't know but must if I was to call myself a scholar, to have any hope of writing a dissertation that might someday be deemed acceptable, in which I would have to demonstrate not only that I knew what was in each unreadable book but refute it, surpass it, triumph over it so that my unread thesis should become a "contribution to scholarship."

On the desk lay a pile of bluebooks, midterms from the course for which I was a T.A., on medieval and early modern Japan. The questions (I could recite them from memory) were about the politics of the shogunate, which had been central to more than one of my dissertation proposals. I went into the kitchen, chose a not-too-dirty glass from beside the sink, and drank a glass of water from the tap. I had to have the midterms graded by ten o'clock Monday.

A letter from my mother was sitting unopened on the kitchen table, and I decided to get it over with.

"Dearest Peter,

"It seems a long time since I last heard from you, I know you are busy with school and I have much less to fill up my thoughts than you do. How is your teaching going this summer? You must be up to your ears in papers to grade, I know you are doing an excellent job and not letting them get away with just writing any old thing that crosses their minds. There are so many ignorant people in this world, believe me because I work side by side with them, mostly Caucasians. If you met them (co-workers) you would not think they went to school at all and what's terrible is, they are proud of it. Unfortunately, by now that is the American way. In my opinion San Diego is no different from some little provincial Midwestern town in that respect. You know that is where all the retired military bigwigs and their frumpy wives come from. I can't stand the wives especially, they return everything they buy.

"I am writing because I noticed in the paper today that they are expanding UC San Diego again this fall. They are opening their fourth college and the school is barely ten years old. (I put in the clipping.) Naturally I thought of you at once. The faculty must be expanding too

and I am sure you are anxious to start looking for a position. We both know you would be an extremely desirable candidate at any college. You must be itching to get out of school by now and start life on your own terms. Of course it is always hard when young people first start out and you could save an enormous amount of money by living here with me. It is an easy commute to La Jolla and I would be glad to rearrange things to suit the two of us instead of just me, as it is all I do is leave things where they fall and I'm sure that isn't good for my morale. You must never imagine that you would be a burden of any kind to me, you know that as my son the bond between us is forever. I'm sure you must be aware also that I'm not as young as I was and some decisions need to be made about the house. It is slowly going downhill on my salary, but together we could get it fixed up and with a man around the house I know lots of little things would be taken care of on a daily basis that I can't manage alone. You could live here until you get married, which I'm sure must be in the back of your mind, I still remember that sweet girl Janice you dated so I know you will make an excellent choice of a wife when the time comes. You just have to let it happen. By then the house would be in some condition to sell. The price of homes here keeps going up. Of course I don't know where I would go then.

"I visited your father last weekend, no change. I always talk to him about you but I'm never sure he knows who I mean. He would have been so proud if he could have seen you get your degree. As it is I don't think I can bring him but you know I would never miss it for the world.

"I don't know why people like the weather here. There was a Santa Ana and everyone was in a rotten mood for three days. What can you expect when it's 95 degrees at night? Other than that, no news.

"All my love, Mother"

"P.S. Think seriously about the UC position, it could really be the answer for both of us."

I read through the letter as fast as I could, and when I reached the end I pushed it out of sight in the back of a desk drawer with the others. I held my head in my hands for a while. I always thought there were no more things left for her to not understand, and I was always wrong. No, mother, I am not an extremely desirable candidate at any college, I do not want you to come to my commencement that will never happen anyway if Rottweiler doesn't let up, I would rather cut

off my feet than live with you again, and as for getting married, you were the one who liked Janice Makuoka because she was a boring, prematurely middle-aged little prig. If there had been anything the least bit sexy about her you would have hated her, and if you knew the first thing about Margo and me, like for example her race, your blood pressure would go through the roof.

Of course I would have to write a letter eventually. Either that or I would have to call her. But I definitely was not going to do that now. One of her letters was as much of her as one day could bear. Afterwards I always had to find some way to banish her from my consciousness and today, for once, it was easy: all I had to do was let myself think about Margo.

She had actually kissed me. At last.

Maybe best I left before she could take it back.

I tried to remember the kiss as a physical sensation, and her body next to mine, willingly held in my arms, but I realized after one flicker of true recall that more was impossible and trying would only wear the memory out.

Would she again? How could she not? No, that was nonsense, she could not if she chose not, women could say no at any time, could close themselves off, even when naked could become unavailable from one moment to the next, as if no intimacy had ever occurred. *Shikata ga nai*. But she wanted me to call, she must want to repeat the experience, she said she was not in the habit of inviting men to sleep over and that was easy to believe, but why me, especially after I all but undressed her so presumptuously and uninvitedly. I recalled the sensation of the scratchy carpet under my knees when I grovelled in front of her with my boner begging, man the shameful and abject, and her saying only "Get dressed." Yet she came into my bed, lay beside me, held my hand, actually slept next to me – was that her wish, to skip sex and go straight to afterwards, was I asking to be thwarted again and again if I imagined she could ever want what I wanted? She didn't say No, she said Not like this. But what did that mean.

I tried to feel some stirring of indignation or offended pride because she led me on but I could not. She owed me nothing, that was the hell of my position, any man's position, any woman's too perhaps but how would I know about that. At the mercy of the other, but how much mercy was there in love, and I had thought that dangerous word, even thought of saying it out loud to compound my foolhardiness, was

that just aching balls talking or could it be that I did love her, and if I did what now...probably there was no other woman like her in the world, but was that a good thing or a bad one, what was she like anyway, and what are you if you are not like anyone else?

She didn't say No she said Not like this, but how then?

Maybe she didn't even care about making love, if there could be such a person, or maybe something I would never imagine got her off...why wouldn't she eat, and what do you think about when you're sick for six months, and did it make her a different kind of person from everyone else? What if she wanted to make me fall in love with her, not so she could love me, but so she could dangle me and be the puppeteer. It worked didn't it. I had no control, I could make nothing happen and I didn't know what was happening, did she want to make me her contemptible pet, her eunuch, to be toyed with and then ignored, to be tempted and teased and kept in suspense, to be manipulated and humiliated and used...but then she would have to be an evil person, a person with a bad heart, and I could not believe that, after the way she lay beside me and took my hand in hers...which proved nothing...

This continued until I fell asleep on the couch. When I woke up, uncomfortable and hot, I splashed cold water on my face and then sat down to work on the stack of bluebooks, but found I couldn't bring myself to read one. I turned the A's game on, tried the rabbit ears in various unsatisfactory positions, and turned it off. I realized I didn't have food for dinner and went out to the grocery store. I cooked, I ate, but I still couldn't read the bluebooks. This had happened before and I resigned myself to solving it the way I had before, by setting my alarm for five a.m., knowing that if I worked flat out I could just get them graded in time to turn them back at ten. I sat in my desk chair, leaning forward with head to one side to read the titles on the spines of the books stacked on the floor nearby. Trying to find one I could bear to open. Finally I hit upon a study of the Heian *monogatari* which Tutwiler had once mentioned in passing, focusing mostly of course on *The Tale of Genji*. Even an academic could hardly avoid acknowledging that those stories dwelt upon courtship and love.

"What's up with you and Merrill, I mean Margo?" Sheldon had been calling her Merrill Lynch ever since I told them she worked in an

investment bank. "When's she going to come out and have a drink with us?"

"Yeah, and more to the point, what's she gonna wear?" Jay said. "Does she take requests?"

"Do I ask you this about your girlfriend?"

"I'm not dating Marilyn Monroe." The air was going out of the joke. Time to move on.

"A little jealous, are we?" said Sheldon.

"Oh, fine."

"You *are* still going out with her, right?" said Sheldon.

"No comment."

"Oh, come on, you don't have to be that way with me. How many times have you gone out, anyway?"

"I don't know." That was not true. "Five."

"Five – five is definitely enough," Jay said.

"For what?" I knew, we all knew.

"To have done some research," said Jay.

"In the stacks, or in the sacks?" said Sheldon.

Muffled snorts of laughter.

"*Su madre, cabron,*" I said. I hadn't gone to high school in L.A. for nothing.

"I couldn't resist."

I wanted to tell them I had slept at her apartment, that I had shared a bed with her, if only they would hear it and shut up, draw their own conclusions and keep their thoughts to themselves, not ask their predictable questions, the same ones I could not answer. They would not understand. But then neither did I.

The next weekend I was back at her apartment. I had invited her to mine, again, but only for form's sake; I knew she would only see me on her territory. On the way over to her place I stopped at a liquor store to buy a bottle of wine; the clerk was watching a little TV perched on the counter next to the register. The picture was crappy, but the sound was clear: "...again, in today's history-making vote, the House Judiciary Committee has voted 27-11 to approve the first article of impeachment..."

She opened the door wearing a black dress that almost reached the floor. It had a high neckline in front but was scooped low in back, like the outfit I had first seen her in, and as soon as she turned away from me and revealed that, her power was complete. Again we ate a

thoroughly uninteresting dinner, and I told her about my week that was almost equally without flavor. I handed the midterms back on time, I led a couple of section meetings, I read, I avoided my adviser. I did not tell Margo how many hours I had spent thinking about her and the things that had happened between us the last time, or all that I had imagined while lying in bed alone. She knew anyway, didn't she? It was she who gave me everything to imagine.

After dinner, we cleaned up the kitchen together and as we stood side by side I ran my fingertips up the smoothly bumpy river of her backbone.

"Be good," she said absently.

"I am," I said, touching.

In the tiny kitchen we could not help brushing against each other. She did not try to avoid the contact.

When she opened the fridge to put in a leftover, I was behind her and again caressed her back; as she straightened up I laid my hands on her hips, intending that she should turn and be in my embrace, but something happened between me and the refrigerator door that caused me to lose my grasp on her and stumble aside. I found her watching me with a small smile.

"Did you do that?" I said.

"Do what?" she said, all innocence.

"Can you do that whenever you want?"

The smile again. She extended her left arm toward me. "Here, hold onto my wrist."

I grasped her wrist with my right hand.

"Both hands. Get a good grip. Come on, hold tight." She tugged against my grip a couple of times to get me to hold on tighter. "Do you think I can pull my hand out?"

"No way."

"Okay. Don't let me. Concentrate." Her eyes were locked on mine, holding me in a wordless contest whose rules I didn't know, but I did not feel her pulling away at all and I was sure there was no way she could escape my grip. Enough time passed for an in and out breath, then Margo brushed the inside of my wrist with the fingertips of her free hand, merely a glancing touch, and for an instant my mind was blank and her arm slipped free. "You didn't concentrate," she said.

"I was. You did something to me."

"I just pulled out my hand."

"How did you learn that?"

But Margo only shrugged and looked pleased with herself. "A woman needs to know these things," she said.

She began asking me questions about my work and I ended up telling her about the strangeness of tenth-century Japan in *The Tale of Genji*, how Genji constantly has clandestine love affairs, sneaking into women's beds on the slightest whim, all the while reciting poems that all sound the same about sleeves wet with tears.

"The women are incredibly submissive. Well, most of them anyway. They aren't even supposed to let men see them, they're always hiding behind blinds and curtains, but when Genji sneaks into their bedroom they can't say no. Even if they do, it doesn't matter, it's bound to happen. At one point he even tells one of them something like 'I'm Genji, I always get my way.'"

"What a lovely arrangement for him," Margo said.

"He's their fate. That's how they think. If he makes love to a woman a few times and then she has to spend the rest of her life remembering it, that's her fate, it's all she can expect."

"Exactly," Margo said.

I didn't know what to say. I'm not Genji. But wasn't that obvious enough?

"Couldn't you write your dissertation about that book somehow? It's the first thing you've told me about you seem to really enjoy."

"There's nothing left to write about *The Tale of Genji*. Everybody's already said everything. There's other stories like it, though...but no way would Tutwiler approve it, he doesn't give a damn about that stuff."

"What stuff?"

"Art stuff. He's Mr. Rational Analysis. He wrote a book on economic history."

"Oh."

We both thought for a while, separately, sipping tea.

"You could get a new adviser," Margo said.

"It's too late."

"Why?"

"Because if I got a new adviser the whole point would be he wouldn't be Tutwiler, so he'd make me read a whole bunch of stuff I don't know anything about and it would just take too long, they're

already sick of me hanging on forever. They want me to get my degree and get out of there."

"I think the truth is, he's afraid of you," Margo said.

"Who?"

"Your adviser." What could possibly make her imagine that?

And how could she know anything about him anyway?

"Absolutely no way."

"No, I think so. I think he's afraid you're going to know something he doesn't."

She'd never even met the man. "Not much risk of that. And he's got nothing to be afraid of, he can always cut me off at the knees."

"He wants you to think he can."

"Margo, you don't know the situation."

"I work in an office, I work with men, I know how they think, Peter. All week long I think about business. I know how these things work."

"This is not business."

"Professors get paid, don't they?"

"Yeah, but..." I wanted to say something like of course they have to make a living but a university is about the truth, it's a whole different thing, only how could I when the university was about Hewlett-Packard, really, and she probably knew that, given what she did at work. "You can't patent anything in East Asian Studies," I said.

"Too bad. If your adviser had a few patents to his name he'd be nicer to you."

I sat back on the couch and stared at the magazines on the coffee table – "The G.O.P.'s Moment of Truth" – with a dissatisfied feeling that about this, at least, I should not be losing the argument. But what if she was right?

"All right, but he doesn't, so what do I do?"

Margo pushed back the lock of hair that was always falling in my face. "Just figure out what you really want to write," she said. "It's all up to you."

"If only," I said.

Margo turned herself so she was kneeling on the couch, looking straight at me in an admonitory fashion. "Stop," she said.

"Stop what?"

"Don't say if only. It's up to you. Not him. Forget him."

It isn't, I said inside. "Thank you."

"You're not listening to me."

"I don't know if it's that simple."

"Oh please, I didn't say it was simple. Really, Peter, give me some credit."

"I do." But Margo did not look convinced.

When, half an hour later, I reached for her meaning to kiss her (was this up to me?) I reached knowing that if she wanted to she could always slip away, elude me in the smallest space, and that only what she actually wanted would happen, so when she turned toward my touch and kissed me back I felt unqualified joy. But as we kissed my heart leapt forward, I couldn't help it, to imagine her giving herself over completely to my love, and would she? Would she now? The question wormed its way between us. When I began caressing her she felt the question in my touch and pulled back but did not take herself away, only turned herself so that she was half-lying in my arms with her bare back against me, her head on my shoulder. I covered her breasts with my hands, and she moved them away.

"Why?" I said.

"It isn't time."

"Will it be?"

"Have you ever known a woman to answer that question?"

"I don't know if I've asked it before."

"That was smart."

A sigh escaped me. If I had been Genji I would have said my sleeves were wet with tears.

"Peter, Peter. Do I have to tell you? You need to be patient with me. You just were kissing me, weren't you?" she said as if that were the limit of earthly desire. "Did you like it?"

"So much."

"I did too. Doesn't that make you happy?"

"Yes."

"Just stay with that happiness."

I was silent, but I knew I couldn't do it and the truth would inevitably come out.

Now it was her turn to sigh. Having done so, she crossed her arms over mine where they were circling her waist. She seemed to think a while before coming to a resolution; then she took my hands away and turned to look at me. She seemed neither angry nor excited nor melting, not unfriendly but not anything I could be sure of. "I know what you need," she said.

Of course she knew, how could she not?

Margo got up and held out her hand to me. "Well, come on," she said, in a tone almost of resignation. I took her hand and got up too and she was leading me to the bedroom against every expectation, the wildest hope happening now and how had it come about? Did she want me after all as much as I wanted her or was she only sorry for me, no surely not, if she didn't want it it wouldn't happen...she led me into the bedroom and cleared the stuffed animals away from her bed. "Go ahead," she said, "lie down."

The bed was not wide but wide enough for love. I lay down and held out my hand to pull her to me, wanting her more than ever as she stood looking down at me in her long elegant black dress. She didn't take my hand, but bent down, still standing, and unbuttoned the top button of my shirt. As she did so I caressed the sweet small roundness of her breasts through the fabric of her dress. She straightened up, taking herself out of my reach, and said, "Open your shirt, okay?"

Anything she said I would do, anything to keep her from stopping and again saying Not like this. I unbuttoned my shirt; she was watching and did she like seeing me undress this time? "Now your pants," she said, and I could not have been more willing, I unbuckled my belt, unzipped my pants and pushed them down, my underpants with them, and was naked in front of her, thank God, again.

"Now you can make yourself come," she said.

Alone. She meant for me to do it alone. What was she?

"By myself?" Was this what she thought of as love?

"I promise it will help."

"Please be with me," I said, holding out my hand to her.

She took my hand. "I'm here," she said.

I tried to guide her toward me; she took her hand back.

"Go on," she said. "Afterwards will be better."

Would she not kiss me first at least, would she make me admit I was nothing but helpless desire, her humiliated plaything?

"You have to trust me," she said. "Do what I say. Imagine whatever you want."

Too late to say no, I was already exposed for what I was, at her mercy. I pushed my pants and underpants down farther, past my knees, and then kicked them off onto the floor, squirming naked in front of her while she remained impeccably dressed and composed, watching me. I looked into her eyes as I stroked my hard penis with my fingertips; she was watching my hand as I started to masturbate. Did seeing this excite her? I was thinking of touching her breasts, of

kissing them, of how one day I would undress her again, would pull off her underwear as I had just pulled off my own, and at the same time with an effort I kept my eyes open, watching her watch me, watching her mouth open slightly, just imagine if she would take my penis between her lips and touch it with her tongue...I came, hot jism shot up and hit me under the chin, hit the pillow next to me, spread over my chest and belly. Her fingertips covered her lips, perhaps concealing a tiny smile. Then she turned away; she went into the bathroom and water ran, as I lay there with my eyes closed and mouth open, my hand still on my penis, heart slowing, an ache inside me from which there was nothing to distract me now. Margo returned from the bathroom carrying a wet washcloth and handed it to me. I wiped myself with it, feeling the slipperiness of semen on my body. The smell of sex was strong in the room. Margo sat on the foot of the bed, not watching. After a while she said, "Did you get it all?"

"Not all."

"Give me that, then." I held out the damp, sticky washcloth and she carried it into the bathroom by one corner, rinsed it out with great thoroughness, and brought it back to me along with a towel. I cleaned until the stickiness was gone, then dried myself off and lay there between embarrassment and something like righteousness, waiting for her to look at me, to do me at least the justice of acknowledging that I had willingly eaten humiliation from her hand. But Margo only went to the closet and pulled out the same white silk robe she had given me the weekend before.

"Would you mind opening up the sofa-bed?" she said, letting the robe fall over my now anything but private parts.

This time she joined me in bed from the beginning (she made me put my underwear back on first) and in her pajamas lay next to me, let me hold her, even put her arm around me and snuggled against me. "Isn't this better?" she said. "Now you're not, you know, blinded." But she wouldn't kiss me as we lay there together. That would be too hard for me, she said, and besides it was more beautiful this way.

"I've seen you now," she said. "So don't be ashamed if you need to again. But next time you have to get your own washcloth."

She fell asleep long before I did.

In the middle of the night I was awakened by a sound like a woman wailing in the distance, as if her sleep were a faraway place and she was calling out from there, wailing for help that could not come in time. Like a phone ringing at 3 a.m. – my heart was racing before I was awake, I was snatched into awareness and before I could move or say anything the wail accelerated irresistibly into a shriek.

"Margo," I said. "Margo." I shook her by the shoulder, I tried to put my arm around her but she flailed out at me and slid away all in one motion. Then she seemed to wake up; she stopped fighting and lay there breathing hard.

"Sorry," she said after a while.

"You had a bad dream," I said.

"Sorry I woke you up."

"It's okay. Come here."

"Did I hit you?"

"No. You tried. It's okay. Come here."

She rolled over toward me, let me take her in my arms. I remembered her coming into bed with me the last time. "Does this happen a lot?"

I felt her nod her head. "It's only a dream," I said.

Early in the morning I did, as she would have said, need to. I resisted as long as I could, but I wanted her more than I could bear. Out of some absurd remnant of pride I got up and did it in the bathroom.

Again I cooked breakfast (I was surprised to find some ham in her fridge, I added it to the scrambled eggs), again we read the paper side by side on the rumpled bed in our robes. "White House issues sweeping defense of President." "No clear-cut evidence, White House asserts." To hell with that. I opened the sports to a story about the Giants. A button in the upholstery of the couch pressed into my back and made me shift my position. New relief pitcher, no runs allowed in thirteen innings. I read the whole piece, then another. It was quiet in the apartment; the refrigerator made a faint thrumming, sometimes I could hear water running elsewhere in the building, now and then Margo turned a page. The clock said nine-thirty. It was as though I had entered a parallel lifetime. I turned the page and read about the A's, who were half a game out of first. Would they be able to repeat? Behind the blinds, she had opened the casement windows, and I could hear the dry rustling of palm fronds. A door closed and someone walked by on the balcony. Other people, that close. I would have to go out among them sooner or later. Maybe this episode would vanish then, would never have been.

"Have you ever been to Japan?" Margo said.

"No."

"Didn't your parents ever want to go back?"

"Back? They were born here, too. Anyway, they couldn't afford anything like that."

"Oh. Am I being nosy?"

"That's okay, I'm nosy too."

She turned a page.

"Margo," I said. I could feel the words ready to tumble out: I think I'm falling in love with you. She looked at me and put her finger to my lips. Had she heard?

Unspoken, the feeling was too much; I seized her recklessly, wrapped my arms around her not caring if she wanted me to or not, pulled her bodily over so that she was lying on top of me in a sea of crumpled newspaper. "Stop," she said, "what – "

I squeezed her in my arms. "Try to get away now."

She wriggled, but I wasn't convinced she was really trying. I squeezed harder. "Do you give up?"

"No." Harder. "Yes!"

"All right then." I relaxed my grip but still held her in my arms as she got her breath back. She was lying on me without being made to, and we both knew it.

Margo raised herself up on her arms so that she was hovering over me looking into my face. I told myself I must not let my hands do what they wanted. She seemed to be seaching for something, or stalking something, as she gazed. She darted down and kissed me on the lips, just a peck, then resumed studying me. Don't say anything, I thought, but I couldn't help it. "Can we try that again?"

"When I say so."

"When will that be?"

"It depends." She continued to study, and I wondered what she was seeing. Weighing her next move perhaps. "Will you do what I say?"

Her eyes held mine the way they had when she demonstrated her ability to get away. "Will you?" she repeated.

"Do whatever you say?"

She nodded her head.

"Don't I already?"

"Do you promise to?"

Her eyes said that if I played along now, possibly it was no joke. But then it never had been. The temptation to surrender, to allow her anything, was too great for me. To give too much, more than a person should, so that even being willing to give that much was faintly obscene. Hadn't I already, the night before? "Yes."

"Show me you mean it, then."

"How?"

"I'm thinking," she said.

I waited for what she would think of, my heart thumping.

"Stay there," Margo said, and got up. She went into the bedroom and came back holding a lipstick and knelt on the bed next to me. "We'll start with this. Here, turn toward me."

If I hadn't just said yes I would have rolled away and gotten up, but I couldn't back out so soon without being called a coward, by her or myself. She put the lipstick on my mouth with care, as if getting it exactly right mattered. "Do like this," she said, pressing her lips together and working them in and out, as I saw my mother do every time she put lipstick on. I did it. "Now let me see." She rubbed a little away from the corner of my mouth with her finger. "All right," she said. She got up again; I lay and looked up at the ceiling, with its lumpy sprayed-on acoustic plaster, and felt the lipstick foreign on my lips. She returned with a handful of implements, and a cushion in the other hand. "Here," she said, "put your head on this." She straddled me, sat on me without seeming to notice that it was a startling, intimate thing to do. "Have you ever had makeup on?" she said.

What could she be thinking? "No."

"There's a first time for everything," Margo said. "Hold still now and try not to blink." She began applying eye liner. When that was done to her satisfaction, she gave me eye shadow; she wasn't satisfied with the first color she tried and had to start over. She shaded it with a tiny brush, her face abstracted, lost in her work. She put blush on my cheeks and blended it in. "Your skin is such a different color," she said. "Everything I wear is the wrong shade for you."

"This is the only color I come in," I said. My first year in graduate school I had been called a banana – yellow on the outside, white on the in – by some self-proclaimed radicals when I refused to sign a threat to go on strike if their demands weren't met. Good thing they couldn't see me now. They definitely weren't radical enough for this.

"Sit up," Margo said, getting off me. I sat cross-legged on the bed and she knelt in front of me and applied mascara to my eyelashes, with some difficulty. It took a major effort for me to keep my eyes open while she put it on. "Well, I suppose that will have to do. I don't know what to do about your hair." She worked at it with her fingernails. "You'll have to let it grow out more."

Oh, I thought. It doesn't stop.

Is she going to make me go outside like this?

Could not happen.

Margo got up again, brought a hand mirror from her vanity, but kept it behind her back. She tilted her head and examined me from one side, then the other. "Look over there," she said, pointing to the kitchen. "Well, it's a start. Want to see?"

"How could I say no?"

She handed me the mirror, and for an instant I wasn't aware of seeing an image but only of feeling queasy. In the mirror, when I did see, was a mockery of my face that blinked when I blinked, but it wasn't mine. As if I caught someone else, a woman, trying to look like me and not quite succeeding, a woman who looked too much like a man, or a man who was not a man, a travesty. What was this face? Pathetic? Pretty? I narrowed my mascara'd eyelashes, peered at myself and experimentally pouted my red lips. Margo smiled. "Good," she said. "You're learning."

She stood up; I was still studying myself in the mirror. What floated into my head, from somewhere in my reading, was that in Kabuki all the women's roles were played by men, the *onnagata*. Some of those men-women were married, had children who were actors as well. "Come on, get up. Now we have to get you dressed."

When I stood up and she led me into the bedroom, I glimpsed myself in the mirror over the vanity, in the flowered robe, and for the first fraction of an instant I almost convinced myself.

Margo slid open the door of her closet and contemplated clothes packed so tight I wondered how she could find any one item. They were arranged by color. Seeing them, I realized she must spend most of her salary on clothes. Clothes and her car. That must be why she didn't live in a fancier building. She pulled out sleeves or skirts of dresses from where they were squeezed between others, and fingered them, looking me up and down. "But how can I fit into your clothes? Won't I ruin them?"

"Not if I pick the right ones."

She began pulling dresses out and holding them up against me, shaking her head and throwing them on a chair. I couldn't imagine actually having any of them on my body. Finally she found one she seemed to like, a simple dark gray sleeveless dress – at once I saw that sleeveless was the right kind because of my shoulders. "There," she said. "I think. Take your robe off."

I did. Did she care anymore when I was all but naked? I cared.

She looked at my underpants and made a small face. "Tsk. You really shouldn't be wearing those." Did she mean – ?

Out of a drawer she pulled a pair of black panties. "Try these," she said.

I looked her in the eye. "You want me to wear these."

"Try."

Didn't she know there were limits?

"You promised," she said.

Surrender made my head swim.

Without turning my back, without trying to conceal my tumescent penis, I pulled down my underpants, kicked them away, stepped into the panties and pulled them up, tight around my legs, too small, and she might have known, but did she? that there would be no place for my balls and my now unambiguous hard-on in a woman's underwear. The head of my penis emerged above the black lace, held tight against my belly by the elastic. "I guess not," she said. "Put yours back on."

I took my time doing it. See this? Any time you want.

When I was covered again, she showed me how to put the dress on. It wrapped around and tied with a sash, that was why she had chosen it, because I could wear it even though I didn't have her waist. She tugged and adjusted, pulled down on the skirt, retied the sash just so.

"Now let's look," she said, and closed the bedroom door so we could look in the full-length mirror on the back of it.

Margo in her pajamas and robe beside this other person, dressed except for shoes, who looked almost ready for a dinner party, a taller – woman? Only if one ignored the hair, if one did not notice that there were no curves on the taller one for the neckline of the dress to reveal.

"You look cute," Margo said.

I looked like a giraffe. "I don't know about that."

"Say you do. Use your imagination."

I glanced down at her; she was giving me an impish look, happiness in her eyes. I turned back to my image. "She looks cute," I said obediently. God forbid that anyone else should see this, but I felt as if the two people in the mirror – a couple? – were waiting for someone to take their picture. The taller one put his, or her, arm around the smaller one's waist, and she did likewise. They stood watching themselves together.

"My knees are not as pretty as yours," I said.

"Ssh," Margo said, taking her arm away. She studied me in the mirror. "Let's give you a name. Who would you like to be?"

This excuse for a woman, what could she be called? "It's up to you."

"Help me."

"Brunhilde."

"Oh, come on. How about Heidi?"

"Please not."

"Well, what then?"

"Mitsuko," I said. That was my sister's Japanese name.

"Is that Japanese?"

"Meet, Sue, Coe."

"Meet Sue Coe?"

"Yes."

"It's so nice to see you, Mitsuko," Margo said to the image in the mirror. "How have you been?"

"Um..." What was I supposed to say? Not since childhood had I played a game past the point of no return. "I guess I've just been my usual cute self."

"Your dress is very becoming."

"Why thank you. And how have you been?" I said to the mirror Margo. "A little bird told me you've been going out with a boy named Peter."

"Peter?" She appeared to search her memory for the name. "Well, I suppose I have gone out with him once or twice."

"Only once or twice?"

"Well, a few times."

"In fact, I heard he spent the night here."

"That's a secret," Margo said sternly. "That's just between us, Mitsuko."

"I won't tell anyone. But what's he like?"

"He's *different*," Margo said in a stage whisper.

"Different how?" Exotic Oriental?

"He does what I tell him. He lets me do what I want."

"Really...he must like you. But what do you want?"

Margo gave me an oh-come-now look. "That would be telling."

"You can trust me."

"You won't tell Peter?"

"No, I hardly know him."

We held each other's gaze in the mirror, waiting for what would come next. It was Margo's turn to say her line but she did not seem to know it.

"It's embarrassing," she said finally.

"You can tell me. Whisper it in my ear," I said, and when I spoke I was half Peter and half Mitsuko.

I watched in the mirror as she raised up on her toes and put her mouth to my ear. She whispered, but so softly, trailing away to nothing, that all I made out was "I..."

A pink blush was spreading up her neck. She looked away.

"I couldn't hear you," I whispered back. "Tell me again a little louder."

She shook her head, eyes still averted. I touched the back of her neck, put my arm around her. Was the show over, were we backstage now? "Let's stop now," I said.

"No," Margo said.

"My turn, then." I put one finger under her chin and raised her face up and would she? Yes. Kissed her and she did not turn away. I tasted lipstick, mine and hers. Our eyes were closed now and there was no one to see, not even ourselves, no one to say we could not do whatever it was we were doing.

She stopped kissing me; she leaned away, her arms around my neck, her middle against mine. "Your lipstick is smudged." She rubbed at it with a finger, then kissed me again. This time her lips barely touched mine. My heart was pounding. "Kiss me like that and it won't get messed up."

As we kissed, my hand came up from where I was holding her at the waist and softly caressed her breast. She moved my hand away. "Only if I say to," she said.

"I had to."

"No you didn't. Do you want me to stop?"

"No."

Margo slid her hand into the dress, onto my chest, felt my nipple. "I'll do it for you," she said.

Her touch made me close my eyes again.

"Your heart's beating," she said.

She continued to fondle me as if I had breasts. Her touch was like air invisibly supporting the wing of a bird.

"Don't you know that you're teasing me?" I said.

"No, you think I am," Margo said. "This is not teasing."

"What is it, then?"

"What is your name?"

"Peter."

"No."

"Mitsuko."

She smiled like a teacher who gets the right answer from a pupil. "You're my girlfriend, Mitsuko."

I considered this with a feeling of floating or falling. "And are you mine?"

"If you're mine, then I must be yours. Don't you think?"

"I no longer know what to think."

"Then don't. Just imagine."

"Is it proper for girlfriends to touch each other like that?"

Margo took her hand away with a conspiratorial look. "Maybe. But I am very private. Not like you."

"Are you going to keep secrets from me?"

"Of course, Mitsuko. Don't be silly. Everyone does. Look how many secrets President Nixon has. You keep secrets from me, don't you?"

"I don't know. Maybe I don't have any anymore. Maybe you have them all."

"I only touched you because your breasts are different from mine. Your nipples are like a boy's. I was curious."

"I am too," I said. "Very much so."

"You've seen me before."

"Then why not now?"

Keeping her eyes on mine, Margo loosened her robe, unbuttoned her pajama top and opened it to show me her breasts. "Show me yours too," she said.

The sight of her body willingly bare filled my awareness so completely it was as if I could not be anything but what I saw; when I pulled aside the overlapping layers of my dress I felt myself self-consciously reveal an imagined shape like hers.

"You are so beautiful," I said.

"No I'm not. See, mine aren't even the same, they don't quite match, there's something about me that never quite looks right. Yours are perfect."

She had gone too far; her words broke the spell. "Far from it." My eyes slid away from her gaze, but she was there again in the mirror. Mortifying to think I had compared myself to her even for an instant. She was whole and effortlessly complete in beauty, and I was hopeless, a wretched not even simulacrum, everything about me so fake that the notion of my fooling anyone was cause for more embarrassment still.

And even to be thinking that way, what was she turning me into, why was I letting her?

"Margo, please, I can't do this." Shame flooded me and unable to bear the sight of myself, or her eyes on me, I snatched open the bedroom door and fled to the bathroom.

I locked the door and stared into my dolled-up face; the image seemed to beat against the surface of the mirror like a caged bird, toward me and away. "I can't do this," I said again. I took off the dress

and dropped it on the bathroom floor; with a washcloth I washed off my Mitsuko face until I got the last smudge of makeup. I was again a man in his underwear, but who was this woman I had thought more than once that I loved? And what could I, or she, possibly do now? I studied my eyes in the mirror. Get dressed and go home now, Peter. Try to make sense of all this.

I opened the bathroom door intending to go straight to my clothes and get dressed, but Margo was standing in front of the door, properly covered again in her robe, looking up at me determinedly. "Hello," she said.

"Hello."

"Please don't be angry at me," she said. "It's such a waste of energy."

When I didn't move or say anything because I didn't know what to say or do, she said, "You mustn't be ashamed either. There's no reason to be."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sorry if it was too much all at once," she said meekly, putting her arms around me. She was the girl again, the one I could not resist. I held her but my heart was heavy, worn out by the confusion of feeling. After a bit I opened my eyes and looked around the living room. While I was in the bathroom she had folded up the couch. Sun was strong behind the blinds, my clothes were still piled on a chair. What time was it?

She looked up at me and said "Don't go yet," as if she heard my thoughts.

"What time is it?"

"Early." I knew it was not.

I caressed her back vaguely, too tired to want her except out of stubbornness, too tired to invite further frustration. When she moved away from me this time, I would get dressed. But she wasn't letting go; she seemed perfectly comfortable next to my bare skin. Half a minute, a minute, passed in silence. We continued to hold each other, swaying slightly. I began to feel self-conscious, but she was used to me wasn't she, maybe there was nothing surprising about this anymore.

"Are you still mad?" Margo said. I felt her breath against my skin.

If I had been, I had forgotten. "No."

"Thank you." She took me by the chin, raised up a little on her toes, and gave me a glancing kiss by the corner of my mouth. "I'll get your robe," she said.

"I think I'll get dressed."

"Why? I'm not. It's Sunday morning, why be in a hurry?" She went into the bedroom, and I tried to make up my mind what I really wanted, leaving her out of it if that was possible. She brought the white robe and held it out for me to slip my arms in the sleeves.

I didn't move to put it on.

"What?" she said, letting her arms fall, the robe cascading silently to the floor.

"Can I ask you a question?"

"All right."

"Do you mean to keep my hopes up?"

Her shoulders dropped as if I had disappointed her. "Yes," she said, the one thing I didn't expect her to say.

"Why?"

"Why is having sex so important to you, Peter?"

"What kind of question is that?"

"I asked first. Why?"

"You didn't ask first, I did." But she stared at me in wordless stubbornness. I could not back down now. "There is no reason why you find someone beautiful," I said, although at that moment I didn't, really.

"And if something's beautiful you have to have sex with it?"

"All right, look, if you really think I'm just a horny creep, fine, I'll get out of here."

Margo seemed about to reply and then her mouth tightened and she looked away. I crossed the living room and put on my pants, then my shirt, my back to her, not knowing what could possibly be said next. Maybe there was no decent way out of this situation, maybe this night and morning would always be a secret humiliation, to be forgotten as soon as possible, but I knew that I would not and the memory would attack on the sly in sudden accesses of shame that I could never explain to anyone.

I heard her footsteps behind me, felt her hand rest on my back. "I don't think you're a horny creep, Peter," she said.

"Thanks." For that ringing endorsement. I sat down heavily on the couch.

"You must be tired," she said, sitting down beside me.

"I am."

"Have some tea. It always helps me."

I thought of saying But I'm not you, no matter what you think.

"Or lie down and take a nap. I'll move over."

So much easier to comply, not to fight her, not to ask why, not to drive back to Mountain View and face the library books. "Okay," I said. I stretched myself out on the couch and she did not leave but placed herself so that I would lie with my head in her lap. As if she and I were...but what were we?

"Margo," I said.

"Ssh. Don't talk." She put her finger to the center of my forehead and it seemed to send me straight into sleep.

While I slept I was dimly aware of Margo putting a cushion under my head and going away, the sound of a shower and then a hair dryer. When I woke up I heard a soft thumping sound coming now and then from the bedroom and after a while realized she was ironing. I rubbed my chin; even if no one else would have noticed or cared, I felt the need of a shave, pictured myself taking my razor out of her medicine cabinet. What the hell was I thinking of. But I could not deny that to wake up this way, with her at her Sunday chores in the next room, made me feel, no matter how implausible it was, at home.

But what had I done with her – or she to me?

I sat up, put on my shoes, pushed back my floppy hair. I leaned in the doorway of the bedroom. Margo was wearing blue jeans and a man's white shirt tied at the waist, her hair pulled back in a barrette. "Did you have a good sleep?" she said.

"Yes."

"See – it was good you didn't go."

"Mm. What time is it?"

"Oh – one-thirty or so."

"Wow. Late."

"For what?"

I didn't have a good answer, so I went into the bathroom and used what I thought of as my toothbrush. She still didn't want me to leave?

"I guess I should get going," I said to her back. She had moved on to a different garment.

Margo parked her iron. "Would you like some lunch first?" she said brightly, as if she were my little housewife and nothing could

please her more, after everything that had crazily transpired, than to make me a lunch.

"No, that's all right, thanks." Something in me was in a hurry to leave – to escape from what I had done? But I was getting my exit all wrong yet again. Or was it that she disavowed every intimacy now by the light of afternoon. I was determined not to let her, came toward her to catch her in my arms and she didn't try to slip aside as she easily could have, I knew, but with a little smirk let me capture her unresisting. Her arms stayed at her sides. She looked up at me impishly and said, "Well! I thought you wanted to leave."

I had no idea what I wanted at the moment, or could expect from her ever, night or day, stay or go.

"I don't know if I want to, but I do think that I should," I said carefully. "I need to go to the library."

"You're a hard worker, aren't you?"

"Probably not hard enough."

"I don't want to ruin your career, Professor."

Did she have in mind that we would still be together when I was called by that title? "Some career," I said, holding her against me. She put her arms around me at last.

"You're going to call me." Not a question.

"Yes. You can call me, too, you know."

"No. That's your job now."

"Oh." No use asking why. "Well, you can call Mitsuko."

"Will she answer if I do?"

"Maybe you could, um – you could call me and ask for her."

She raised up on her toes and kissed me, peck. "Very good," she said. "You're learning."

We kept kissing until I no longer remembered anything else. She pulled back and regarded me, her arms still around my waist. "Now do you want to leave?"

"No."

"Good," she said, letting go and turning me, guiding me to the door. When we got there she kissed me again.

"When will I see you?" I said.

"Call me. Don't go and forget."

"How could I do that?"

She opened the door for me. "Bye, Professor."

"Bye."

The sun was hot, my car would be baking inside, the steering wheel would be hot to the touch. Some blackbirds flew up out of the

courtyard as I descended the stairs. With my foot I pushed aside a brown palm frond that had fallen from a tree. She wanted to see me, she wanted me there in her apartment, but what did she want me there for?

And why did I let her do it?

How could she ask me to give her everything, even my idea of myself, to play with as she pleased? But what half-frightened me as I walked away was realizing that if she asked again I would not say no.

When I got to University Ave. I realized I really did want to go to the library and turned toward campus.

I looked up the subject heading “Kabuki” in the card catalog and found where it was located in the stacks. Standing, I opened one book after another, looking for passages about the *onnagata*. I read bits of Earle Ernst, A.C. Scott, and Donald Shively, not neglecting their bibliographies because after all I was a graduate student. One book led me to another. Before I left the stacks I learned that according to the *Ayamegusa*, the Bible of the eighteenth-century *onnagata* actor, the ideal woman can be expressed only by a man, and that in order to succeed on stage, an *onnagata* must be like a woman in his daily life. I left the library with an armload of scholarly books and for the first time in a long time I wanted to read them.

When I got home I cleared away what was on my desk, sat down with the books I had brought, and began to read. My cat, Clarice, came and meowed at me, then jumped up on my lap. Absently I rubbed her head. Kabuki was thought to have begun in 1603 when a certain woman performed dances by a river in men’s clothing. She flirted with a “woman” played by a man who hid his moustache with a fan. Same year as the founding of the Tokugawa shogunate. No doubt I read that before and dismissed it from my mind. If Kabuki mattered to me at all, it was only because the shogunate viewed it as a threat to the government. It was performed by women first, prostitutes, and when that was banned because they were corrupting the public morals, it was performed by adolescent boys, who were banned for the same reason. Then by grown men. The actors were outside society. Not citizens. Deception of the authorities was a way of life for everyone associated with Kabuki. They and the prostitutes were confined to a pleasure quarter outside the city proper, called the *aku-sho*. It was like

going back to the beginning of my studies; I lost track of the passage of the afternoon, I carried the book with me when I got up to eat or go to the bathroom or feed Clarice or let her out the back door. For some reason I couldn't explain, bald facts held a certain resonance, something more that I could not name but that attracted me. Each detail seemed a potential occasion for reflection and yet I could not stop to contemplate it because I had to know what was on the next page, as if beyond that turning there waited the very thing that would make all the difference. All what difference, I could not have said. But it was as if in creating Kabuki the players had uncovered a truth which had been waiting all this time for me to find and decipher it – as if those actors in Edo period Japan, a world in which I could never have felt at home, had left me a message whose implication I might grasp from one moment to the next.

When I looked up from my reading because I was too hungry to put off dinner any longer, it was getting dark.

To hell with the comparison of the Tokugawa regime to a modern totalitarian state. There was nothing to say about that that was not obvious. There were parallels, everything in life was regulated to an extent any dictator would admire, but they were fundamentally different for self-evident reasons. To drive that point into the ground would be a feeble excuse for a "contribution to scholarship." To hell with the intersection of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Shinto in the political life of 18th-century Japan. To hell, also, with the instability of the age of civil wars and how it gave rise to the rigidity of the Edo period. To hell with all of my dissertation proposals to date. I no longer cared about them, not about one single idea I had hinted at hesitantly for fear of Tutwiler's dismissal; I cared about this, the clue that was hidden somewhere in Kabuki.

I owed it to Margo. Without meaning to she had opened the door.

In bed, in the dark, I returned at once to the moment of standing in front of the mirror with her, as Mitsuko. How could I have called myself by that name, what did I think I was doing, honoring the dead? What kind of honor was that, me in drag just because Margo wanted to find out how far she could go before I'd say no?

But what if I didn't say no, ever...unthinkable but it made something inside me turn liquid and hot. Like the desire to say I loved

her. Wanting to say it not even knowing what it might mean. Not knowing (more reckless still) if she could love me. But how else could she ask me to give her everything? Wouldn't it be the most awful thing if somebody gave you their everything and you didn't want it, wouldn't anyone run from that? She must. No, ridiculous, there was no such thing, no one *must* love, or maybe all she loved was her power. But then how could she have kissed me as she did, how could she lie on top of me, in my arms, that way, and if I was wrong about what that meant how could I ever know anything about another person, how could I ever know there was love at all...

I called Margo on Monday and asked her out for Friday night. Neither of us quite said it, but it seemed to me we both knew we would spend the weekend together.

"So wait a second – you're going to write your dissertation on Kabuki now?" Sheldon said, pained.

"Not on Kabuki *per se*, but with that as kind of like the centerpiece."

"Aren't you going to have to get a new committee if you do something like that?" Jay said. I hadn't thought that far ahead, or even in that direction. "It's a good thing you passed your orals before you got off on this kick."

I gave them a three-minute lecture on the origins of Kabuki, ending with the curious institution of the *onnagata*.

"So in other words they're drag queens," said Sheldon.

"No."

"I thought you said they even wear women's clothes offstage."

"I don't know if they still do. They used to. It was supposed to make them better performers. There's a story that a fan was dying to meet one of them once, came to his house and found this woman in the kitchen talking to a fishmonger. He thought it was the actor's wife, but of course, it was him."

"Well, how was he not a drag queen then?"

"He had a wife."

"Does that prove anything?"

I had no answer for that.

"It's about representation," Jay said. "He becomes what he portrays to the audience. It's social construction all the way. I mean *really* all the way."

"So is everything else," said Sheldon.

"Oh bullshit, that's too easy."

"He doesn't become it. He doesn't turn into a woman," I said.
 "These guys have children, remember?"

Sheldon said, "Have you ever heard of a marriage of convenience?"

"It's really an example of owning the means of production," Jay said.

"Of what?"

"Come on. The feminine image. I mean, they *are* it. We're talking totally unalienated labor."

"So a handful of actors represent the triumph of communism?" said Sheldon.

"I'm not putting you on my committee," said Jay.

"It's not about being gay," I said.

"Well, it's about something, now isn't it," said Sheldon. "I mean, what makes them want to do it in the first place?"

"It's a tradition, it's three hundred years old, the government banned women from the stage."

"Still? Today?"

"No."

"Q.E.D."

"You could talk about it psychoanalytically," Jay said, "kind of Norman O. Brown style, you know?"

"I don't see Rottweiler buying that," I said, but inwardly I heard Margo saying "Forget him."

In my reading I learned that the word "Kabuki" derived from a verb, *kabuku*, which once meant to deviate, to stray from the norm, to be self-willed. The woman who started Kabuki costumed herself to look like one of the young men called *kabuki-mono*, flashy dressers, seventeenth-century-Japanese zoot suiters who acted more freely than was allowed.

I learned that a love scene was called *nuregoto*, "moist business."

I learned that there were two kinds of male acting, the *aragoto* that was bold and forceful, and the *nimaime wagoto* that was gentle and unaggressive, even effeminate, the style of young men, especially lovers.

I learned that the Kabuki is openly artificial, blatantly exaggerated, it has no intention of being the slightest bit realistic and

that is what the audience accepts, expects, demands. An actor called it *honto-rashii uso*, “a plausible lie.”

I learned that the Kabuki-goers in old Edo would travel a considerable distance to the Yoshiwara, the quarter of prostitutes and theatres, and there they would spend the entire day because the performance took that long. The curtain rose at six a.m. Ladies’ preparations to go the theatre, it was said, resembled those of men preparing to visit brothels. Later, in the nineteenth century, when the theatre-town was moved to Saruwaka-cho, one had to cross water by bridge or boat to reach it.

I learned that onstage, in what was called *hikinuki*, an actor could rip open a specially constructed costume to reveal another underneath, becoming someone else in an instant. Ladies in the audience would imitate them by bringing several kimonos and changing them, not quite so quickly, at rest-houses during the intervals. Theatre-going became a well-known addiction; those who had it were called “crazed for the *aku-sho*,” the “bad places” outside the rules of ordinary life.

My phone rang at 9:30 on Wednesday night. It took me a moment to look up from my book.

“Hello?”

“Hello, is Mitsuko there?”

She had called me before, but not since we had become – what? Closer? I wanted to talk to her without disguise. “Um...just a minute.” I tried to disengage my thoughts from what I had been reading. “Who’s calling, please?”

“This is her girlfriend.”

“She’ll be right there.”

But how could I become Mitsuko outside Margo’s apartment? I put the phone down, stood up, walked in a circle, sat down again. Okay, go.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Mitsuko, it’s Margo.”

“I was thinking that might be you.” At least that much was not difficult.

“How are you?”

“Oh fine. And you? Did you see Peter last weekend?”

“Mm-hmm.”

"How was it?"

"I'll tell you all about it in a second. But you go first."

And just how was I to do that? "Um, I, I've just been going to class and...the usual things."

"I've forgotten why you're going to school in the summer," Margo said.

Me too, I thought, faintly reminded of my oral exams. Think, pig. "Well, you know, it's – I just want to hurry up and finish, um, because it took me so long to go back to college. After I dropped out, I mean." Did that make any sense?

"Oh yes. Of course."

"I need to get my degree and stop being a secretary, of all things," I said. That wasn't bad, or was it?

"Oh I know," Margo said. "Being at that guy's beck and call. Picking up dry cleaning, for God's sake."

My mind raced. Yes. "He even made me pick up his wife's."

"Really? That's awful. You should put your foot down, I'm serious. Nobody should have to do that. Is he still coming on to you the way he used to?"

"Well, he comes over to my desk while I'm working and stands right there over me and tries to look down my blouse," I said, pleased with myself for coming up with that.

"Oh, every man does that," Margo said. "So do you let him?"

"Him? No. He's disgusting."

"The girl before you had an affair with him, you know."

"I know. He'd better not try it with me," I said, and felt myself sliding into Mitsuko.

"She got a very good recommendation out of him. Even though she could barely answer the phone, if you ask me. He was afraid she'd tell his wife."

"But it's just not worth it."

"I know. Not him, anyway. I mean, if he was younger and cuter," Margo said.

"And single."

"So if he was a whole different person..."

"You wouldn't be thinking about Peter, would you?" As I said this, I was lying on the couch with my eyes closed and the phone on my chest. Clarice came and added her small purring weight.

"You do keep coming back to that, don't you, Mitsuko?"

"You said you'd tell me all about it. We are friends after all, aren't we?"

"Oh you know that."

"Well?"

I waited.

"Well, he did spend the night."

"So you still like him this week."

"I think so," Margo said.

"You're not sure?"

"It's best not to talk about it."

"And how does he feel about you?"

"I can't tell for sure." How could that be? "Maybe it's just sex, you know?"

"So you made love to him?"

"Mm..." How could she be hesitating? Was she not sure if she had? Or was she thinking of lying to Mitsuko? Or..."Almost," Margo said.

Almost? "Did you want to?" I said, my heart thumping.

"Did Peter tell you to ask me that?"

"No, I haven't even seen him. You know I hardly know him."

"I should be more careful what I say to you, Mitsuko."

"I promise I won't repeat it to anyone."

"Oh, girlfriends always say that. Sometimes you can trust a man to keep a secret, but women, never."

"You can trust me."

But Margo was silent.

"Well, if you didn't do that all night, what did you do?"

"We talked, we...played. We slept. We had breakfast. We played some more. He took a nap on the couch."

"Are you going to see him soon?"

"Next weekend."

"So what do you think?"

"Mitsuko, really. So many questions."

"Am I too nosy? I'm sorry. Your love life is just so interesting to me."

"You need one of your own. Aren't there some cute boys at school?"

"Not really. They're too young for me."

"Oh come on, it's not like you're old enough to be their mother. Maybe you could teach one of them a thing or two. Just pick one you like and, you know, whip him into shape."

"You think it can really be done?"

"It's worth a try," Margo said.

"I'll have to think about that," I said.

"Don't think too hard, just let yourself go. That's my advice."

"But that's not what you do."

"We're different though, aren't we?"

"Mm. I guess. I mean I know we are."

"Isn't that why we're friends?"

"As long as we are, I don't need a reason," I said.

There was a silence, the game neither over nor not over, the two of us neither ourselves nor not ourselves.

"Mitsuko?"

"Yes?"

"I'm glad you were there when I called."

"Any time."

"Goodnight."

"Goodnight."

I learned that a woman cannot play the *onnagata* roles successfully because she can't help relying too much on actually being a woman, instead of learning to become one by means of art. Even if she learned all the techniques, she wouldn't succeed because the ideal woman onstage is gentle and tender on the surface, yet underneath that surface the audience must also see the strength of a man.

I learned that though the Kabuki hero suffers, his suffering is not tragedy. If it were, his torments and failures would bring him to a place of transcendence. But there is no cosmic victory; suffering is suffering, period, to be accepted without complaint because it is inevitable.

I learned that a Kabuki play is a series of frozen moments.

In the background of reading and grading papers, I began mentally rehearsing a conversation with Rottweiler in which I would convince him that this would be the scholarly project that would finally lead to the completion of my degree. Even in my mind it did not go well; he specialized in catching me off guard. The only way to get the edge would be to write a proposal stating my case in better-chosen words than I could manage on the spot.

As we ate dinner on Friday I told Margo about my sudden Kabuki revelation and how it came from her reminding me of the *onnagata*. Turning me into one, if only in a small way, for a moment. She made me be like something truly Japanese, and now what I had been studying looked different.

"But I didn't know that's what I was doing," she said.

"That doesn't matter, you did it anyway. Once I write this thing, I'm dedicating it to you. Of course, first I have to sell it to Rottweiler."

"You can practice on me. Go ahead. Give me your big presentation."

"Oh – it's pretty involved, all this stuff about seventeenth-century Japan, it gets kind of esoteric." Not to mention boring for her, if I started to lecture and didn't catch myself.

"I'm not so dumb, Peter. I can follow it if you tell me."

"That's not what I meant at all."

While we cleaned up the kitchen I talked my way through and then past the proposal I had started the night before.

"It's amazing how artificial it all is and nobody cares. No, not even that. It's what they want. The way they describe it, going to a Kabuki play was like going to a baseball game or something. They had vendors selling stuff to eat, people talked while it was going on, they yelled at the actors to encourage them, they even had sort of like cheering sections. In Kyoto, I think it was. And they know everything that's going to happen, I mean the real fans do, because they've seen all the plays before, and anyway the story doesn't even have to make much sense. But then there are these big moments of crisis and the audience is in tears anyway. Even though the whole thing is completely exaggerated and fake."

"Like opera," Margo said.

"Yeah, that's probably right." I hated opera. "I think Kabuki's even more extreme."

"Have you ever seen it?"

"No."

"Why don't you go?"

"To Japan? It's kind of expensive."

"Don't they ever come here?"

"I guess so. I think maybe a Kabuki company did come to San Francisco last year."

"Now I know what to get you for your birthday."

My birthday? So we were going to be together at least until October? "I bet you don't know when it is."

"I bet you'll tell me."

"October the eleventh."

"I'm the fourth," she said.

"Really? Of October?"

"Mm-hmm. That means I'm a year and a week older than you, and I always will be, so there," she said, as if she were my big sister.

She was wearing black jeans and a red-and-white cowboy shirt with mother-of-pearl snaps, and had her hair pulled back in a pony tail. She kicked off her sandals when we sat down on the couch. On the coffee table, next to a copy of *Time* blaring the words "The Vote to Impeach," was *The Tale of Genji*. "Hey," I said, picking it up. "Where did this come from?"

"I thought I'd give it a try. It's awfully heavy, though. I tried reading it in bed but my arms got tired holding it up."

"Do you like it? If you get into it you won't mind that it's long."

"I think I do," Margo said. "But go on. Kabuki. You didn't finish."

"Where was I?"

"It was like going to a baseball game."

"Oh yeah. And the artificiality of it. So. The tricky part is to connect it to everything else that's going on at the time. That's what I have to sell him on. But see, the government, the Tokugawa regime – did you read that book *Shogun*?"

"No."

"You'd probably like it. But *Genji*'s better. Anyway, they were totally repressive, I mean they virtually had thought control, their whole idea was to never let anything be the slightest bit different. This

was when Japan was cut off from the outside world, by official decree?"

"Wait a second," Margo said, getting up. "I'll be right back."

I assumed she was going to the bathroom, but she went into the bedroom and came back out with a handful of cosmetics. She knelt facing me on the couch. "Turn toward me," she said.

"Now wait."

"You promised me last weekend, remember?" Did that mean forever? "Just go on," Margo said, "keep telling me your idea, and don't mind me."

"Margo..."

"What?" she said, pert and bird-like, pleased with herself.

"It's not like I can just not notice what you're doing."

"Just let me play," she said.

"But why right now?"

"That's not a good question to ask," she said. "And I'm older, remember? So do what I say."

I took a deep breath and resolved to continue as if nothing were happening. "So the point is, it doesn't matter what you decree, people can't be controlled that way forever." She dabbed a spot of makeup on my cheeks and began rubbing it in, studying my face intently. "They're always going to break out somehow. That's why they had to have stuff like Kabuki. Prostitution was legal, too."

"Stop a second," Margo said, opening a lipstick. She applied it to my lips. I was watching hers, wanting to kiss her, noticing their color and wondering if she was putting the same on me. She mimed rubbing her lips together and I did so. She dabbed at my upper lip with a tissue. "Go on," she said.

It was becoming a challenge not to lose the thread, but I refused to give up. "Everything was regulated except when they went to this place where the theatre was. You see? And the government thought – "

Margo had taken out an eyeliner and was approaching my left eye with it. "Go on," she said.

"Well, they thought they could – " Involuntarily I shied away as she touched my eyelid.

"Close your eyes."

I did so, determined not to give in. "They had all these arbitrary rules. Like they made the actors shave their heads a certain way? Just to show them who was boss. But this is exactly the point, see."

Margo was putting eye shadow on my lids, so close to me I could feel her breathing. If I didn't have to hold still, I would have kissed her.

"I give up," I said.

"No you don't. Open your eyes." She had a mascara applicator in her hand. When I met her gaze she smiled in a proprietary way at her handiwork. "Go on," she said.

I shook my head, doing my best to look stubborn. "No, you have to hold still," she said. Painstakingly she mascara'd my eyelashes while I made an effort not to move or blink.

"When you learn to put it on yourself it'll be easier than this. It's hard to have someone else do it."

When did she think I was going to learn that?

"Keep talking," she said. When I said nothing, she added, "Please."

"What I was trying to get to was, it was basically a subversive activity even if...you're not listening."

"I am. But don't blink."

Looking into her eyes, I had nothing more to say.

"Come on, I'm trying to help you. You said this is what made it work."

"Then just do it."

She smiled again. "All right. If you insist." She sat back and studied my face, still holding the mascara. I wanted to kiss her, but caught halfway between myself and Mitsuko I didn't know how to make the first move.

"Come on," Margo said. "We need to find you something to wear."

I followed her into the bedroom and saw myself in the mirror, face all wrong for my clothes. At least this time it was a face I had seen in the mirror before. Margo could wear jeans and a man-style shirt, but Mitsuko could not, I thought, unbuttoning my shirt as Margo went through her closet. In a moment I had undressed. Free to do that now, with her. My nakedness no secret from her anymore. Hers was from me though I had seen almost all of her, touched her in intimate ways if not the way I wanted most. All of that as if it had happened with someone else, the Margo before me still unseen, unknown. From behind I put my arms around her, felt the roughness of denim against me. She gave me a little swat on the leg as if to say Behave yourself. "Put your underwear back on," she said without even looking around.

I obeyed. "What should you wear tonight..." Margo said to herself in a singsong voice.

"The same dress is fine with me."

"I want to find something cuter than that. Like this," she said, pulling out a black dress and holding it up to me. It was very simple, a sleeveless black A-line dress. "Try," she said, handing it to me. "Over your head."

With the dress above my head, I put one arm through an armhole, then the other, and then discovered I couldn't wiggle it down over me. "Help," I said from inside it. Margo giggled, but she pulled it down for me. It was too tight; I was sure the seams under the arms would rip if I got it on all the way. "Hmm," she said. "Take it off and let me see what I can do."

With a pair of tiny scissors she cut the threads holding the tops of the seams together. "Are you sure you want to do that?"

"I can always fix it. Or it can just be yours."

On the third try I could put it on. Margo tried different belts until she found one she was satisfied with, wide black patent leather. She made it tight to give me a waist. The dress was short on me, almost risque. "You see, this is when you need black underwear," she said. "You should buy some."

"I'll keep it in mind."

She took up a hairbrush from the vanity and brushed at my hair, shaking her head. "You have to let it grow out," she said. "I can't do anything with it yet except part it in the middle."

Plenty of guys had longer hair than I did. Jay and Sheldon would never notice.

"Now let's look in the mirror," Margo said, closing the bedroom door.

Better this time. The dress had a high neckline and it was black, it left a little more room to imagine the shape of the body under it. Margo took my arm and looked pleased. "Hi, Mitsuko," she said.

"Hi."

"I'm glad you could come over."

"Me too."

"I love your dress, you look like you're on your way to a party."

"I don't think I'll be much of a hit with these legs, do you?"

"You know, it's lucky you hardly have any body hair. Not like most men."

"It's not luck, it comes with being Japanese." Didn't she know that?

"But you're right, I forgot."

"Forgot what?"

"Pantyhose. Silly of me."

"Pantyhose?"

"Yes, black of course," she said, opening a drawer stuffed with underwear. She held out a pair of pantyhose, twisted and shriveled-looking, with white cotton at the crotch. I didn't want to touch them.

"Do you know how to put them on?"

"What do you think?"

"All right then, come here." We sat side by side on the bed and Margo showed me how to bunch the leg down to the toes and work up from there.

"You really think this is going to work?"

"They do stretch, you know."

On my legs they felt like sausage casings. Holding up my skirt, I tugged at them but the crotch remained an inch or two below my own, the waistband too low; I felt hobbled.

"You'll get used to them. They always feel funny at first and then you forget about it. Didn't you ever wear tights?"

"For what?"

"Um – skiing?"

"I don't know how to ski."

"All right, now let's look again," Margo said.

She was right – the legs almost seemed natural now, emerging below a dress. "This is a really strange experience," I said.

"No it's not."

"What do you mean, it's not?"

"Don't look at yourself. Look at Mitsuko. There's nothing strange about it for her."

Standing before the mirror I contemplated Mitsuko, who by coincidence mirrored my slightest movement, but who was not me. She was not beautiful, but not entirely awkward-looking. Her hair was probably the part of her that jarred the most. What did that hair mean? Was she trying to look butch? But then why the lipstick, the eye makeup? That was confusing. If I saw her at a party I would find her odd but these thoughts would come and go, my eye would move to someone else. It was best not to try too hard to figure people out, that was not what they were for. I remembered the words of Basho to his students, would-be poets: "Feel like the pine when you look at the pine, like the bamboo when you look at the bamboo."

"I wish I had shoes you could wear," Margo said. "I'm afraid you'll have to wear Peter's."

"Why? I don't need shoes, do I? You're not wearing any."

"But now that you're dressed, it's time to go out."

"It's what?" I turned to look at her directly. Was this her plan all along? No way she could really think I was going along with it.

"Look in the mirror," Margo said. "Talk to me there."

"Margo, I really can't do that."

"Look at yourself, Mitsuko. Remember who you are." Against my better judgment I looked into the mirror. What if she kept pushing and pushing, past every point of no return... "Peter can't do it, but you can, Mitsuko."

Sinkingly, I felt that perhaps she could be right.

"Can't you."

"What do you want from me?"

"I want you to believe in yourself."

"Is this me?"

"It's Mitsuko."

"Do I have to?"

Margo nodded, serenely, comfortingly.

Mitsuko covered her eyes with her hands. "I'm scared," she said.

"We won't do anything too scary," Margo said. "You can decide where we'll go."

"Then we'll stay here."

"Anywhere except that," Margo said. "Put your shoes on, okay? And I'll get my purse, and then we'll go."

My shoes were loafers, luckily black; they did not look too noticeable after all. Margo put her sandals on and the strap of her pocketbook over her shoulder. "Shall we?" she said.

Mitsuko was stuck standing in the middle of the living room, looking at her feet. "I can't," she said in a small voice.

"Oh come on. Of course you can. We'll just go out and get some air for a while and then we'll come back." Margo took her arm and guided Mitsuko out the door. "I'll drive," she said, closing the door behind her. "You don't seem to have your pocketbook."

No wallet, no car keys, no nothing, if she takes me out and murders me now, how will they know who I was?

Luckily Margo's outside light was not on. The balcony was dark, no one could have seen much. Two women leaving an apartment, one of them unattractive. A few doors down we passed a

light that was on and I kept my head down, my face turned away from the light. The last time we had left her apartment together, I had been Peter taking her out on a date, we had gone to Ming's, all had seemed painfully proper, she wouldn't let me kiss her and I had asked myself why I kept persisting but I couldn't stop. And now, of all things. It was like walking outside naked, except worse.

On the way down the steps Margo whispered, "Point your feet straight ahead when you go downstairs. It's more ladylike."

Two guys were crossing the courtyard; Mitsuko shrank toward the shadows but felt their eyes anyway, sizing up the two of them, seeing through their clothes. "Want to go to a party?" one said in their direction. "I know a good one. It isn't far." It was Margo he wanted, Mitsuko could tell.

"Pay no attention," Margo whispered. Was that what it felt like all the time? A door opened on the other side of the courtyard, voices swelled out, the guys forgot them and began to yell that they needed help carrying a keg. What if those guys had come over and tried to hit on them, what if they realized Mitsuko was Peter, wouldn't they drag their friends out to laugh and beat the crap out of me, and didn't Margo even think about these things? She had nerve enough to walk into the Shutter alone in that fuck-me outfit. It was inconceivable, how could she do it when Mitsuko dreaded even going out onto the street, but they passed no one on the way to Margo's car.

Inside, I felt a tiny bit more protected until Margo said, "Roll your window down."

"Do I have to?" Mitsuko whispered. How could she talk? Her voice would give her away at once.

"You haven't told me where we're going," Margo said.

"Isn't this far enough?" But Margo pulled out of the parking space.

Margo crossed Lytton and turned on University, drove past the movie theatre where people were standing in line, past the Shutter, turned again and cruised by the MBJ Ranch Room, around the block and back to University, pointing toward campus. Every time we passed a clump of people Mitsuko slumped low in her seat. "It's all right, hon," Margo said, patting her on the knee, "you look fine."

"Don't make me get out."

"Tell me where to go, then."

"Keep going and cross El Camino."

We passed In Your Ear, where I had gone to listen to music but Mitsuko was not about to, crossed the bridge over El Camino Real, and

drove onto the campus. Palm Drive was quiet and dark. In the distance there were lights in the windows of buildings on the Quad. The Law School never slept.

"Are we going to the library?" Margo said.

Imagine walking in there; the lights were bright and this masquerade would never pass. Students did odd things, everyone knew that, but still. "No," I said.

"Where then?"

"Turn here. Right." We were at a dark intersection halfway down the long straight drive to the Quad. The road led away from palm trees to live oaks. The old museum was an unlit bulk in the distance. "Now left."

"What is this?" Margo said.

"You'll see."

We parked in front of a small square stone building, under an oak whose low branches stretched improbably far, parallel to the ground. Held up by cables rigged to the trunk. Another car was already parked there, but there was no sign of people. Margo got out, and Mitsuko did too, again feeling as if she were stepping out naked. Probably the other car held a couple who had things to keep them busy. Our own car doors closing sounded too loud. Asking for trouble. Someone would pop out of the bushes any second and say what the hell do you think you're doing, what the hell are you anyway...

The building was a classical temple with a sealed stone door, flanked by sphinxes. "It's the Mausoleum," Mitsuko whispered. "They're buried in there."

"Who?"

"The Stanfords of course."

"Oh – creepy. Did he think he was the Pharaoh, or something?"

"He was, didn't you know? Come around back. Nobody ever goes back here."

"I don't know if I like this," Margo whispered back, taking Mitsuko's hand.

The streetlamp was not strong in front, its light obstructed by oak leaves, but the back was fully in shadow. There was a less-than-half moon in the sky. It took a moment to see clearly. I waited for Margo to take in that there was another sealed entrance to the back of the Mausoleum, with its own sphinxes, but these had prominent stone breasts. "See, they have boobs," Mitsuko said. "You Leland, me Jane."

"Jane had very firm breasts, didn't she?" Margo said. "I never knew these people were so weird."

"Oh well. Who are we to talk?"

"If anybody wants to know, we're just me and my girlfriend Mitsuko, that's all. You're doing beautifully," she said.

Car headlights swept past, lighting bits of formal plantings and tree trunks. Campus cops? Please not. "I was," I said.

"It's fine, there's no rule against being here."

It wasn't the cops, it was some guys with loud voices who got out of their car laughing. "Oh God. They're bound to see us."

"It isn't the worst thing in the world."

"For you."

"They're only boys, ignore them. Look at the moon."

We sat down in shadow next to one of the sphinxes and breathed the smell of oak and eucalyptus. Genji, on one of his stealthy love expeditions, would have recited a poem at this moment, about the moon and the season and the tears wetting his sleeves. Why was Peter not sitting here with Margo, instead of Mitsuko? I could be kissing her instead of imagining how I would be exposed and they'd kick my ass. On the other side of the Mausoleum we could hear the boys egging each other on to do something. They sounded stoned. Please let them not come back here, let them drive away.

Margo took her hand. "It's a beautiful night. Just relax."

"I can't, I'm too nervous."

"Forget them. They'll keep themselves busy."

Another outburst of stoned laughter, more raucous than before. "I've got to get out of here," I said. "Please."

Margo sighed. "Oh, all right. But it seems like a shame to let them drive us away when it's so nice out." She kept hold of Mitsuko's hand, and though Mitsuko would have taken a roundabout route to the car, Margo led her back the way they had come. When they emerged at the front of the Mausoleum, there were three boys perched on the long branches of the oak tree above their heads, making bird noises to each other. They fell silent momentarily when Margo and Mitsuko walked beneath them holding hands.

Voices sifted down from above: "Woo-hoo. *Caliente*."

"What have we here? Hello-o-o."

"...couple of dykes."

We closed the car doors, slam, and Margo pulled out. But then she stopped and called up to them: "Boys? Try not to show your ignorance." Derisive yells trailed after us as we drove away.

"There was no reason to be scared of those little boys," Margo said as we drove back up Palm Drive.

I kept quiet for a while, slumped down in the passenger seat. "Boys can be pretty mean," I said. "Doesn't anything ever scare you? Haven't you ever been in a situation that got out of control?"

"Not if I could help it."

Did that mean that at least once, something had gone clear over the edge?

"We scared *them*," Margo said. "Couldn't you tell?"

"No."

We drove in silence over the bridge and into Palo Alto proper. "Would you like to go back now?" Margo said.

"Yes, please."

"Maybe we should stop and have a drink somewhere first."

Was she a cruel person after all? "I couldn't," I said.

"You could, I promise you. All you have to do is believe in yourself and other people will too. You make the rules, you know."

"You do."

"Really, Mitsuko. You have a lot to learn."

"But can we please go home?"

"Oh, all right. Since it's only your first time."

In the quiet of the side streets Mitsuko could finally let out a breath she felt she had been holding ever since they walked out of Margo's door. On the way from the car to the apartment they passed a couple who paid no attention to them. In the courtyard the sound of the party was loud. "Are you sure you don't want to go check it out?" Margo said. "We still could."

"No, thank you."

"You need to learn to have some fun." But they climbed the stairs away from the noise. Key in the door. It clicked shut behind them. Thanking God, Mitsuko kicked off Peter's shoes and flopped on the couch, arm over her eyes.

"Leave room for me," Margo said, moving Mitsuko's legs out of the way and sitting down.

"That wore me out," Mitsuko said.

"You give men entirely too much credit," Margo said. "They're not half as big a deal as they want you to think."

"I'm sure you're right. Look at Peter, after all," Mitsuko said.

"Oh, Peter – why do you keep bringing him up? Do you have a crush on him? Is that your secret?" Margo said.

"I think maybe you do."

"Me? He's very sweet, I admit. But I don't have crushes."

"What, then?"

"That would be telling," Margo said.

"Why not?"

"One of the things you have to learn is when not to say. Didn't your mom ever teach you anything?"

"Not about this."

"Mine taught me how to go out on a date. I had to put on exactly what she told me, everything, even underwear. I had to play like I was waiting for a boy to come take me out, and my dad played the boy, she made him wear a jacket and tie. So she could tell me how to act. What to say."

"You're kidding."

"No."

"You didn't actually go out, did you?"

"Oh sure. It was just a game."

"You went out on a date with your dad?"

"They weren't dates, silly. My mom went too," she said, as if it all made perfect sense and why was I so slow? "So tell me, Mitsuko. Would you just walk up to a boy and tell him you liked him? Peter, for example?"

"Wait. How many times did that happen?"

Margo looked as if she wished she'd never brought it up. "Two or three. On my birthday."

She stopped wearing the pink party dress when she was ten: I had seen that for myself, hadn't I? The impatience on her face was obvious, but I had to ask. "What did it feel like?"

"Oh, it was just what we did. Now no more stalling, Mitsuko. How did you meet him, anyway?" Margo said.

"Meet who?"

"Really, Miss Innocent. Peter, of course."

Too confusing, this was getting in too deep. I sighed; Mitsuko put her hands to her cheeks. "I don't know," I said, closing Mitsuko's eyes.

"Oh, of course you do."

Think. How did I meet Peter. Must we do this still? I wanted to stop and think about what she had just told me, and I couldn't keep coming up with new material forever, could I? But something inside didn't want to admit that. I'm supposed to be a secretary, I'm in school – "He's a T.A. in a course I'm taking. On Japan."

"Oh really. That was lucky for you."

"So he's always in class. Like a regular student. But of course he's older than most of them, he's my age."

"Did you think he was cute from the start?" Margo said.

"Not right away."

"You did too," Margo said.

"How do you know?"

"I have my ways."

"Well, so I went to his office hour, and I, um, I asked him something about the reading, that's how I got to really meet him," Mitsuko said.

"What did you wear?"

"This."

"See, I knew you liked him. Did he ask you out?"

"No way. I think he's kind of shy. Anyway, he's going out with you now."

Margo put her finger to her lips. Not to be mentioned. The game must be going somewhere else, somewhere new.

"You should go to his office hour again. Wear something a little sexy."

"What do you think this is?"

"You're cautious, aren't you?" Margo said.

"Compared to you."

"Wear something else he hasn't seen. Make sure he gets the message this time. Flirt with him."

"Is this what your mom taught you?"

"No," she said curtly, as if the question offended her. Maybe I had broken a rule?

"I think Peter's cautious too. Like me," Mitsuko said.

"You never know. He probably has another side you haven't seen yet."

"I think you know more about Peter than you're telling me."

"Mm – maybe. Or more about you, Mitsuko."

Mitsuko yawned deeply. "Excuse me," she said.

"Tired?"

"I guess I am." I knew I wasn't allowed to say that as Peter, I had been up till two-thirty working on the dissertation proposal the night before.

"I think you just don't want to tell me how you really feel about Peter," Margo said.

"Didn't you say everyone has secrets?" Mitsuko said.

"But you always tell yours after the lights are out. You are sleeping over, aren't you?"

"Of course," I said.

"Go put your robe on, if you're sleepy."

In the bedroom I found I could not unzip my dress, and had to come out and ask Margo to do it for me. "You'll learn," she said. I took it off and draped it over a chair, searched among the white garments until I found the silk robe. Mine now; she expected me to wear it, to sleep with her. When I asked her, as Mitsuko, if she had made love to Peter, she said Almost.

I heard Margo close the bathroom door. Not sure what to do with myself, I looked around the bedroom and thought of the red photo album, in the box on top of her dresser. If Margo could poke into Mitsuko's secrets, then why not. I turned on the small lamp on the night table, and opened the album under the soft glow from its ruffled shade.

In the childhood part, now, I could see Margo better than I had before. My first time in the apartment felt like a long time ago. Was she a happy child? It was impossible to say. Even Margo could not, she did not remember. Said she didn't. Believe her then. It was the ten-year-old birthday dress I wanted to see again, the pearls, the hairdo...what kind of education was this that her mother gave her? But the picture of the starving eleven-year-old blotted everything else out even though I thought I was ready when I turned the page. I made myself study it, study the gaunt smile, the highlights in little Margo's snapshot eyes, but the more I studied the less I was certain of. The picture screamed that the smile was not to be believed; but what was? What was the photographer thinking, what did her mother and father tell

themselves, not just on her birthday but on any day or night that year, or the next when she was hardly any better, twelve years old looking like ten, the page I had only glimpsed the time before, as Margo came in and I closed the album. In the twelve-year-old picture she was definitely wearing makeup but it did nothing to conceal the truth, only what was the truth? Her dress was slinky, sparkly and gold, her nails painted red. Her hair was perfect. No more party hat with the elastic scrunching it down on top of her head. I turned the page expecting to find thirteen, but twelve had been the last birthday picture. So the game had become impossible even for them.

There were a couple of blank pages. Faint marks suggested perhaps pictures had fallen out. After that the next picture was dated and Margo was seventeen. She appeared to be getting ready for some occasion, or maybe to perform in a play. She was in a bedroom (hers? it must have been), sitting in front of a vanity rather like the one she had now, in a bra and a half-slip, a woman who must have been her mother was hovering over her, in the mirror Margo was looking up, resenting the camera's intrusion. Her hair was piled on top of her head in an elaborate do. A formal gown lay strewn on the bed in folds of peach-colored silk. Next page, Margo with the gown on, at the prom, definitely nervous holding the arm of her date, generic white high school boy in a white tux. Margo was heartbreaking, her face a seventeen-year-old's but her body the one the twelve-year-old should have had. Her breasts did not fill out the bodice of the gown, her arms were still thin but no longer shocking, just delicate. She appeared to be trying much too hard to look grown up, and aware that she was not succeeding.

Next page, same year, Margo with girlfriends (happier), proof copy of yearbook picture (stiff and fake), graduation. Margo with her parents who had reached middle age, the father's head lowered a notch, the mother shaped like a tree trunk. All three looking uncomfortable having this picture (any picture?) taken, uncomfortable even standing together, the mother holding Margo's arm, Margo between them tightly self-controlled, the father hiding within himself.

I went back a few pages but they were still blank. Between twelve and seventeen nothing, missing years.

I went forward. According to the date printed on the border of the picture, Margo should have been in college and apparently was. Hanging over the stone railing of what was perhaps the patio of a dorm, with girlfriends. This time, in a white sweater, she looked like everyone else. She fit in. Even I was grateful for that, think how she

must have felt. More college, Margo smiling out of the back window of someone's jam-packed car, Margo in a dorm room with other young women, Margo on a ski trip, Margo with boyfriend. He was much too tall for her, and he did not come close to looking smart enough. I could imagine how silly they would have looked slow-dancing together. And then, did she...I preferred not to picture that.

But she must have, because on the next page was Margo standing on a lawn in what had to be a wedding dress, holding Tall Boyfriend's arm and he had a dark suit on. She was nineteen years old.

I felt myself turning red, as if someone were watching me and knew that I had never been told.

But why should she have, Margo would say. It was a long time ago. Or was it, how long did it last? I turned the page, and the next and the next, but there was not one more picture of Tall Boyfriend. Tall Husband. What else had she kept to herself? I flipped through the rest of the album, fast, but there were no other pictures of her with any man.

What was she thinking, doing that, she of all people? And why that guy, that beanpole with the sheepish look on his face, as if he were ashamed of being so tall? Did she have a honeymoon with him, could it be that like any other couple they had sex in a hotel room the night of their wedding and the next morning and so on after that, and if she did, if she could do that, what happened? That was the question. What happened then. Because something did. Maybe it was all an incredible mistake, he married her and then found out she couldn't or wouldn't have sex with him. But surely he would have known that before. Or did he do something terrible to her, was he the reason everything with her was so convoluted – maybe that was why she never mentioned him. But why keep the picture then?

Maybe getting married was like the prom. Still trying too hard to grow up. Was she thinking that if she married someone, that boy or anybody who happened to ask, she'd be like everyone else?

Imagine if that clumsy, pimply, too-tall boy was her first. Someone had to be. I couldn't bear to think about it. Whoever made love to her then, when she was so breakable, so newly formed, should have brought tenderness and restraint to her like bringing flowers, should have known everything she could not say she was feeling and made each second of it what she needed it to be. But he had not. Someone, sometime, had not. Of that I was sure, and thinking of Margo then made a wincing in my gut, the thing I felt as a child when I saw someone skin their knee. It was worse to see it than to have it

happen to me. I wanted to have been there from the beginning so that she would never have had to suffer crude unlove. Whether it was him or somebody else.

The sound of Margo opening the bedroom door made me look up from the album. She came in and closed the door behind her, but didn't come closer. Under her gaze I remembered what I was wearing.

"I just found the most interesting picture," I said.

Did she hear that I was hurt? "Show me," she said. She came over to where I was sitting on the bed and laid her hand on my shoulder, looked down at the wedding photo. "Oh. That. Yes, I had a friend who was getting married and she was just my size so I put her dress on and made my boyfriend pose with me. For a lark. You know." From the sound of her voice I would not have said that it was a happy memory.

"Oh. I thought..."

"No."

"It's none of my business, maybe."

"Why not? You're my girlfriend, aren't you?"

It was true I hadn't yet taken my makeup off, but couldn't we stop? Did I have to be Mitsuko, even now?

"Aren't you?"

"Of course."

"I have an idea," Margo said. "Do you think we can both fit in my bed?"

"I'm sure we could."

"I mean, we're good enough friends for that, aren't we?"

"I'd love to."

She turned off the light on the vanity, closed the photo album and put it back in the box on the dresser. The small lamp was still burning on the night table. "Let's try," she said.

I moved the stuffed animals and lay down, acutely aware that now it was Margo's turn to undress. But she did not, she came and stretched out beside me in her jeans and her cowboy shirt. "I guess there's enough room," she said.

She reached over and turned off the lamp beside the bed. The room was utterly dark. The blinds were down over the windows, and curtains were pulled shut over them. I could see nothing, not even an outline of the woman beside me. I laid my hand on Margo's hip and felt the roughness of the jeans. "Aren't you going to take your clothes off?" I said.

"Not now, Mitsuko."

Still Mitsuko? Wouldn't she ever let go? "Why not?"

"Now you're going to tell me your secret," Margo said in the blackness. "The way you really feel about Peter."

I did not know what to say.

"Come on, Mitsuko. You don't have to be shy with me in the dark. Tell me everything. That's what girlfriends do."

What everything, it made no sense...but why expect it to, with her. "I don't know how."

"You've really been very sheltered, haven't you, Mitsuko?"

"Until I met you."

"You always did what you were told. Or you tried to. You tried to be good."

"Yes."

"You can't be good forever, you know, Mitsuko."

"I suppose not."

"I know what you want Peter to do, even if you won't say it. You want him to touch you like this, don't you?" Margo said, sliding her fingers inside the robe and fondling Mitsuko's nipple, or mine. "And you want him to kiss you of course," she said from very close by, and her mouth came down on mine gently, open, her tongue softly seeking mine. She was above me in the darkness and we were kissing and I felt my soul start to leave me. She pulled back and I was almost no one nowhere, suspended in blackness.

"And after he kisses you for a while you want him to go on touching you," she said, opening my robe. In the dark it seemed as though she wanted to see all of me with her hands. She was straddling me now, surely she felt my hard penis even through the denim of her pants. I raised my hands to her breasts and touched her as she was touching me, and she did not stop me when so easily she could have moved away. With trembling fingers I found the snaps of her shirt and unsnapped one and still she did not stop me, two, three, she was open to my caress as I was to hers. "You like it, don't you Mitsuko?"

"Yes."

"And what if he undresses you even more?"

My head swam. "I'd like that too."

"Yes. You would."

She untied the sash of my robe and I pulled out the tail of her shirt, I unbuckled her belt. She ran her fingertips down my belly and I did the same to her, I struggled to unbutton the tight jeans and she continued to touch me as if that were not also awkwardly happening.

"Will you be embarrassed if he undresses you all the way?" Margo said.

"It's too late for that," I said.

"So you'll let him."

"Yes. Of course I will."

She pulled my underpants down and I tried to do the same with her stiff jeans, but it was impossible until she raised herself up. She let me pull them down around her knees, taking her panties with them. I was dying to see her but I knew that I must not turn on the light. "You know he's going to try to play with you, don't you?" she said, exploring the head of my penis with tiny light touches. "Once he undresses you? Are you going to let him?"

"Yes."

She let the backs of her fingers trail against the length of my penis, and her legs were parted just enough to let me do the same with her slick beautiful wetness. I turned my hand over, my finger went inside her and in the darkness she gasped and pulled away, gone, her hands no longer on me. I reached for her to pull her down to me but she had retreated beyond my grasp, to the foot of the bed, the belt buckle clanking as she moved. I started to sit up.

"Stay there." Her voice had lost all its suppleness. What was she doing over there in the dark?

I lay back. If she stopped now. How much did I have to take?

"Mitsuko."

Stop now. No more Mitsuko. "Yes?"

"Never let him do anything you don't want."

"Will he?"

"He might not know better."

I could not think of a way to ask the question. The two of us seemed immobilized, stuck apart, breathing hard.

"If I let him do anything he wants?" Mitsuko said. "What will he do then?"

I felt her weight shift on the bed, cloth rustled and the belt buckle clanked again. For God's sake no more games. Then she was over me and kissing me and relief flooded through me. I didn't know if I was allowed to touch her or not, but I did and she sat up and moved my hands away. I understood. Only when she touched me, only where she touched me.

We kissed until whatever had gone wrong was forgotten. Once or twice her breasts brushed softly against me.

"Do you really want him to?" Margo said.

"Yes."

"Inside you? Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"I think you're in love with him."

"Yes."

"Then he'll come inside you," she said, and holding and guiding she came down on me of her own will, slowly, the infinite beauty was coming into being, the head of my penis was barely in her and she stopped.

"Like that," she said.

"God. Margo." I thrust upward and at once she was gone, I was no longer in her, I reached for her and grasped at emptiness.

"Don't you understand you can't do that?" she said in a voice choked with outrage, from the foot of the bed. "You're Mitsuko."

"Come back. I'm me, I love you, for God's sake come back." I reached for her and touched her shoulder this time, but she eluded me in the dark.

"That's enough. Don't get carried away, Mitsuko. You can say all that to Peter. This is between you and me."

I thought that if I really were Mitsuko I would cry in frustration and anger. But I could not. I wanted to slap her face but I could not. I wanted to hold her down and make her have me but I could not. I wanted to leave but I could not. "I can't do this," I said to the darkness.

She didn't answer right away; I heard her breathe out. "Please don't be angry with me. Not now."

"What the hell did you expect? Do you know how unfair this is?"

"Please don't," she said, flinging herself down on me, her arms around my neck. "I'm sorry, please don't, please."

I held her to me as hard as I could, as if the force of an embrace could make her accept that she was going to be my lover, that she already was, starting now. "Don't you even know what you're doing to me?"

"I can only do what I can."

I put my hands on her face to kiss her and realized she was crying. "I'm sorry," she said again, her voice blurred this time with tears. "Don't you understand, I'm doing the best I can."

What if that's true. Then what.

I felt a tear warm against my collarbone, felt her ragged breathing, all of her next to all of me, body to body in frank nakedness

unresisting, and yet. And yet. And when? Ever? What if she never could?

"I love you," I said, having not meant to say it again. All it did was make her cry.

"Don't," she said in a muffled voice, against me. "You shouldn't."

"What does that mean?"

She only shook her head and sniffled. I stroked her back, long downward caresses, stopping short of where I wanted to go. If she could lie on me like this, feel us touching everywhere and not leave, and she did want me after all, that was out in the open at last, wouldn't she have to get used to it finally, wouldn't the last barrier have to come down?

I willed her to know that it was only good between us, that everything was allowed. Hadn't I done things with her, for her, that I never would have imagined possible?

She rolled off me and lay with her back to me, and I turned with her and put my arm around her. I would not let her leave again, she would have to feel how much I wanted her. I fitted myself to her and my hand cupped her breast. She took it away, held it in hers, preventing me from touching her again.

"Don't go away," I said.

She drew her knees up, made herself small in the bed beside me, all elbows and heels and back. For a minute I still tried to hold her, then gave up in disgust and lay on my back without trying to touch her, staring upwards in the dark.

"Peter," she said, her back still to me.

"What?" I knew my voice was not friendly. I waited, but she didn't answer. My heart sank; irritation turned to dread. "What is it?"

"I can't," she said into the pillow, more to herself than me. Did she think she needed to tell me again, after what had just happened? Did she have to rub it in?

"You can, for Christ's sake."

"You don't know."

"Don't play games with me. You've done that enough tonight."

"Games – you don't know anything, Peter," she said bitterly, with her back still to me. I thought that would be all I'd get. In a muffled voice, as if she didn't want me to hear, she said, "I can't help being the way I am."

There was a long silence. I wanted to say many things I knew I shouldn't. Does that mean take it or leave it? She was too proud to say

anything but yes, and then where would we be? "I don't understand any of this," I said. But I couldn't help thinking maybe I did, that it was him, the guy she did or didn't marry, he slapped her around, no, he forced himself on her in awful ways I didn't want to imagine, ways she couldn't forget, and that was why there were no men in the pictures after him –

"Are you sick of me?" she said in an exhausted voice, like one worn out by tears.

I turned over and put my hand on her shoulder, urged her toward me. "Come back," I said. "Come here. Please."

"I can't be what you want."

"Come here anyway."

She turned over toward me but kept herself curled in tightly, her knees pushing me away. I put my arms around her, tried to coax her into an embrace. When it did not work I took her hands and kissed them, put the tips of her fingers in my mouth. The ache in me could only be cured by being closer to her.

"How can you still want me?" she said.

"How can I not?"

Slowly she stretched out her legs and allowed me to draw her close to me, until she was lying in my arms, but still withdrawn into herself, rigidly keeping her distance. She seemed to have a long silent struggle with herself before she could finally relax her vigilance.

"Are you going to go away?" she said.

"No, are you?"

After a minute she put her leg over mine for an answer.

I knew she was aware that I still wanted to make love to her in exactly the way she could not. But now we would both ignore that, now we would make love by what would not occur. And by what would: we would sleep together naked in her bed. If we ever fell asleep. Talking seemed to be over for the rest of the night, even if we stayed awake. Words could not go where they needed to. But the more we did not speak, the more I felt we sank into an inner world obscurely shared.

Finally Margo turned over, and this time when her back was to me she reached for my hand and pulled my arm around her so that I was fitted against her, holding her.

I lifted myself up on my elbow and kissed her shoulder, and she turned her head so I could kiss the corner of her mouth. "Goodnight," she said.

"Goodnight."

After a while she fell asleep holding my hand, like a keepsake, but I couldn't stop imagining what must have happened, trying to understand.

In the middle of the night, when I had finally gone to sleep, the wailing woke me with a pounding heart. "Margo," I said as soon as I could make my voice work. Wake her before it got worse. I grasped her shoulder. "No," she wailed, louder.

"Wake up." I shook her and she rolled over away from me, lay there gasping. After a bit she reached her hand out and felt for mine. I held on. "Is it always the same dream?"

"Pretty much."

"What happens?"

"Don't make me talk about it, okay?"

When I awoke I was alone in Margo's bed. I found the clock and it was almost nine. Even in daytime the bedroom was nearly dark. How long had she been up? I had no memory of her going away. Everything came back to me; at once I felt her absence as an emptiness inside. Maybe she left in the middle of the night, unable to bear me next to her after what happened, maybe she slept on the couch after all?

I hurried into my clothes and opened the bedroom door to find bright sun streaming into the living room and Margo perched on the couch turning the pages of a magazine. She was wearing a white blouse and a pleated skirt and her hair was done as if she were about to go to work. How had she managed to do all that without waking me up?

"Good morning," she said, looking up briefly with a pleasant, neutral smile.

"Good morning," I said. I sat down beside her – she even had earrings on – and leaned over to kiss her. She smiled self-consciously without meeting my eyes and presented her cheek.

"Margo," I said.

"Mm."

"What's going on?"

"I promised a friend of mine I'd go shopping with her this morning. I'm glad you woke up, otherwise I would have had to just leave you a note and go."

"Oh." Wasn't it she who never wanted me to leave? Or was that someone else?

"Did you sleep well?"

"Look at me."

She looked at me with eyes that said I might have been anyone, to be asked polite questions, to be left an innocuous note. "Yes?" she said.

I put my hand to her cheek and bent forward to kiss her on the lips and she let me, with the utmost propriety, as if checking that little item off her list. "I really need to go," she said. "Have some orange juice if you want. You can let yourself out. Just close the door behind you."

"Wait. Margo, look at me. You don't have to go right this second. Would you just talk to me? You can't just say nothing and leave."

"About what?"

"Us. You and me. Everything."

"Everything's fine. You can call me later on. I really have to go," she said, standing up. I stood up too, grasped at her arm but of course she slipped away.

"What is it?" Margo said. Her voice suggested that she might eventually lose patience if I were not reasonable. But of course she would do her best to be polite.

"What are you doing?"

"Please," she said. "I told you. I really do need to leave now."

I stared at her and she evaded my eyes. She seemed to need my permission actually to step out the door, even though she needed me for nothing else. "Would you give me a hug before you go?" I said.

She stepped up to me, reporting for duty, put her arms around me, leaned her forehead against me momentarily, looked up at me. "There," she said. "Is that better?"

No. I couldn't say that. I could feel that she would not let down her guard for one moment, that even though my arms might be around her there would be no embrace between us, no sign of our being in any way together. "I miss you," I said, but she was already freeing herself.

"Call me later," she said on the way to the door. I didn't answer. She stepped out, then popped her head back in and with a cheerful smile said, "Okay?"

"Okay," I said automatically.

Her hand waved bye and I heard her rapid footsteps click their way along the balcony and down the stairs.

I was alone in your apartment and everything in it mocked me. Hey, Peter. All that? What you think you remember? Never happened. I went back

in the bedroom and threw myself down on the rumpled bed but even that already had nothing to do with us, there was no us, no Peter and Margo after all even if I could smell your presence on the sheets. No love had been made, no anger endured, no confusion and tenderness...I thought of leaving a note but what could it say? I had said that I loved you the night before and look at me now. What could it say except Come back, Come back, and hadn't I repeated that often enough?

It must not have been the truth, I thought, when you claimed that picture was only a lark, only a dress-up, he was way more than that, something you couldn't even say. Or wouldn't. Maybe you knew by now I'd take anything from you, believe anything, let you jerk me around any way you wanted. I was a fool or worse, a doll for you to dress up, a talking doll that made the proper sounds when you pushed my button. Talking Jap Boy. Nothing happened, I have to go now, bye.

The air in the apartment was poisoned with her horrible polite indifference, with frustrated desire, with the violence of my hopes. I had to get out, I couldn't bear to leave this way, to let the night before come to this, I had to have something of her no matter how much she withheld. Something, but not a lipstick or one of her knick-knacks, not a toothbrush or a teacup, something that was her but what. I had a vision of myself turning the place inside out, not like a lover but like the police, dumping the contents of every drawer, reading every piece of paper in her desk, going through the pockets of every jacket and coat, violating her privacy in every way, to find what? There had to be something, didn't there? But my imagination stopped there, went blank. Still I could not resist going through the cubbyholes of her desk. They were filled with mockingly ordinary objects. In one I found a collection of loose keys and studied them, one to her car and unidentified others. I carried them to the door and tried them one by one until I found the one that fit. Stuck the rest back in their place and left. Now I had a secret of my own.

Back in my own place, I took out the key to her apartment and knew that it could not keep her from locking me out. But how could she?

I threw the key in the desk drawer and looked at the clock and tried to estimate when I could call her. Shopping. If that was really what she was doing. Who went shopping at nine in the morning? She

could spend the day in dressing rooms trying on new disguises, anything to avoid looking in the mirror and seeing herself. No that wasn't fair. But none of it was. How could I keep telling her I loved her when she only told me not to. Didn't even seem to know what she was throwing away. Maybe all she knew was I volunteered to be used and she used me and that wasn't love, that was me being a fuckhead, idiot, pussy-whipped. If only I could make her feel what it felt like.

Clarice set up a yowl from in the kitchen, next to her food, to let me know that it was old and she wasn't eating that nasty stuff and I had been neglecting her. "Shut up, enough," I said, but I went and threw out the old cat food and put down some fresh.

It was all impossible. I remembered her lying on me, crying in my arms and saying she was sorry, she was doing her best, and my heart opened to her no matter what I thought I should feel.

I wanted to hold her that way again, now, all I wanted from her was to let me love her, was that too much to ask?

In the solitude of my apartment I yelled "FUCK" as loud and long as I could; the force of the yell left me coughing and seeing stars. I tried to muffle my coughs, listening in shame to the walls around me, hoping no one had heard. No fists pounded, no feet stamped, no one came to punish or comfort me, only the sound of passing cars.

Up to me then. I drank a glass of water at the sink and watched the Saturday traffic go by. I could go out and – what? Basically I was broke. If I went somewhere I would spend money, if only on gas, and I didn't have any to spare.

The phone rang and I rushed to the desk to seize it. "Hello?"

"Hello Peter." It was my mother's artificially sweetened voice. Involuntarily I closed my eyes. Could I pretend she had the wrong number?

"Hello, Mother."

She sighed comfortably; I could picture her settling in for the long haul. Please get the picture, Mother. Of all times, not now. "How are you?" she said in three singsong notes. "It feels like such a long time since we talked, I know it's only a couple of weeks, but even so. How's my sweetie?"

"Fine," I said in a voice that gave away too much.

"Is something the matter?"

"No."

"You can tell me. You know that."

Please don't tell me what I know. "I'm fine. I'm busy."

"Oh really, I'm sorry, well if you're too busy to talk..."

Fuck. Don't start. "No, I'm just..."

"What?" Clipped now.

"Just plain, regular, normal busy, okay? I'm in graduate school. I have to write a dissertation proposal, not to mention a dissertation, you know?"

"Well I know that, Peter. Of course you do. How is it going?"

"I have a new approach I've been working on," I said.

"Oh really." Exaggerated excitement, expectant wait. Couldn't she just stop trying to suck a life for herself out of me? I knew she never would, but even so I tried to outwait her. There was a tense silence.

"Well, you know I *would* like to hear about it."

No escape. "It's complicated," I said. "It's sort of connected with..." I couldn't bear to get into it, or anything. Please just get off the phone. There was no way out. "I don't know, Kabuki. But not just that. I mean, it's still about the same period I've always been working on."

"Kabuki? Your father and I saw a Kabuki play years ago at UCLA, did I ever tell you about it?"

"No." And please don't right now.

"Well, I couldn't understand a word of it, and there was something – mm – tacky about it, well that's not quite the word but I'm sure you know what I mean, it didn't make me want to see another one very much."

"Yeah. Well. I'm writing about the seventeenth and eighteenth century anyway. Not some American kids at UCLA."

"No no, these weren't Americans, they were the real thing. I wouldn't have paid all that money to see a bunch of American college students. Trying to act Japanese."

American college students? What do you think I am? "Fine," I said.

"I must say, Peter, sometimes you are very moody. Like your father. It runs in his family." That was an unfair thrust and she knew it. Her feelings obviously hurt. Moody, I wanted to shout, I am more than fucking moody, I'm beside myself, leave me alone. "Your poor father," she said when I didn't reply. "You know, I wouldn't admit it to anyone but you, it's my duty after all, but I hate visiting him more and more." She said this confidentially every time we talked. "Seeing him this way. It would be so much easier if you were here."

"Why? He'd be exactly the same."

"Well, if you went with me to see him maybe we could take him out to eat."

What?

"Well, I just mean to Picadilly or something," she said in a squirming, subservient voice. Oh yes, great, let's lead him down the cafeteria line and see if he takes five pieces of pie, see what nonsense he babbles to the cashier...

"I don't think it would work, Mother. He doesn't know who I am anyway."

"Sometimes he does."

"Did."

There was a silence that I could feel turning weepy. Not now, please, for God's sake. "Do you think it's some kind of punishment? I just don't know what to think, Peter, I mean it seems so unfair, doesn't it?"

I was horribly reminded of telling Margo, the night before, that she was being unfair to me, taking myself so seriously when there were real troubles in the world, like hers for instance which she could not explain, like my parents who had gone through so much more than I could ever bear, only to produce me, a useless weakling sitting at home feeling sorry for himself over a girl...

"It does," I said. "It is. Of course it's unfair. It's horrible. Nobody deserves it."

She sniffled a little. "You're a good person, Peter."

What did that mean? Despite everything? "Please," I said.

"You were always tender-hearted, even when you were a little boy. Sensitive. I always had to be careful of your feelings."

Jesus, no more. "Mom, I'm just me. Relax. Take it easy, okay?"

"I like it when you call me Mom. You hardly ever do anymore."

She waited, but there was no answer I could make to that. "Well, I suppose you have to get down to work?"

"Yes, I do. I think I should get to the library." Not that I had any intention of leaving the apartment; I had to be there if Margo called.

"Well, I'm sure you know best," she said in a voice whose nearly imperceptible quaver I heard even if no one else on earth would have. Steeling herself for the tidal wave of loneliness that would flood over her when I heartlessly hung up.

"I do have a lot of work, actually," I said. I knew she heard the callous voice of the ungrateful son.

"Well, you must do what you must, then."

"Thanks for calling."

"It was so good to hear your voice," she said wistfully. "You could call me once in a while."

"I know, I will." But now I would not have to for two weeks.

"Well, I'll talk to you soon then. I love you sweetheart, bye-bye."

"Goodbye, Mother."

I hung up. Please, I thought. Please hear yourself. Picadilly, for Christ's sake. To drag your senile no-longer-husband to a sterile cafeteria, helped by your reluctant and insufficiently affectionate son, to smile at the cashier as if this despair were happiness. And this would be the special treat. Why even live.

I made coffee and went back to my desk, where I tried to read over what I had written two nights before, but every few minutes I looked at the clock and revised the time when I would try to call Margo. At eleven-thirty if she was really shopping she still would be, noon eating lunch with her friend, one would be much too soon. Let her wait, realize her mistake, realize she missed me. Just let her, for God's sake, allow herself to remember that she had wanted my arm around her in the night. At one-thirty I couldn't bear it and called, no answer, the joke on me of course, she was off somewhere without one thought of us. At two, after half an hour of not being able to concentrate on what I was reading or breathe in all the way, I tried not to call again but couldn't stop myself from dialing. No answer.

If only I could lose myself in what I had been writing before this happened.

I made myself not call until five, and then I waited until five-thirty.

There was no answer.

I went out and bought a gallon of Red Mountain, the cheapest wine in the store. The TV on the counter was saying to anyone in earshot, "The latest Gallup poll, out today, finds 66% of the American people in favor of President Nixon's impeachment. On Capitol Hill, Senator Richard Griffin has made a statement urging the President to consider stepping down..." The whole time I was out I imagined my phone ringing and as soon as I got back to my apartment I called her. There was no answer. I ate a pork chop and some frozen peas and drank three tumblers of the wine. It was Saturday evening and we should have been together and we were not. No use to call now. Who was she with. Phone off the hook.

I had a vision of appearing at your place, ringing your doorbell as Mitsuko, but I owned none of the accoutrements of Mitsuko and how could I crawl like that anyway, how could I even think such a thing.

What if she's walking into the Shutter in the fuck-me outfit, I thought, if I lose her like that I'll die.

I lay on the overstuffed couch and it was plain to me that if I didn't stop I would drink the Red Mountain all night and get sick, or pass out first. If I could vomit up what I was feeling I would, but it wasn't a something, it was a lack that stretched from the present moment until the next time I would hear her voice. And then if she sounded the way she had in the morning, onward indefinitely after that.

There was only one thing in life that could use up time. I made a pot of coffee and sat down at my desk surrounded by notes for the prospectus of my dissertation. At midnight I had the phone in my hand and had dialed the first six digits of her number but was able to hang up before I dialed the seventh. I worked until four-thirty in the morning.

When I rolled over and looked at the clock it was almost noon. I stumbled into the bathroom, splashed water on my face, already thinking when would I call. Have to get myself together. I took a shower, got dressed, started coffee, all the while telling myself after one more step I would be ready, I would pick up the phone. Once I had the cup of coffee in my hand there was no excuse for feeling so unprepared, to call her from a place of weakness was worse than not calling at all but I had to, that was it. Had to hear her voice, or not hear it and what then, nothing good. As I dialed I imagined the two of us in our robes the previous Sunday, and her ironing while I took a nap as if that were my home. Her phone rang, my heart thumped.

"Hello?" Thank God.

"Margo. It's Peter."

"I thought you were going to call yesterday." So it would be my fault we hadn't talked?

"I did, I called a bunch of times but you weren't there."

"Really? I should have been." Whatever that meant.

"After a while I thought maybe your phone was off the hook."

"I wonder how that happened."

"I don't know," I said.

Now what.

"So what did you do yesterday?" she said, sounding as if I had been off gallivanting around while she waited by the phone that didn't ring.

"I worked, I tried to call you, I worried." Don't say that for Christ's sake. Too late.

"About what?" Impossible for her not to know.

"Us," I said, but was there even an "us" or was that just my presumptuous delusion?

"Don't," she said. I waited but she had nothing to add.

"Please say more."

"I can't talk right now, Peter, I have to go, I'm having lunch with someone. I'm sorry. But call me later, okay?"

Someone? Oh God, not Someone. "I need to see you," I said, against any remnant of better judgment.

"Call me," she said again. But please hang up now, I thought, that's what you mean isn't it, why not just come out and say it?

"All right."

"Bye, then."

"Goodbye."

I sat staring at the worn floorboards.

Someone. Shopping. I can't talk right now.

So all the time, I thought, did you have a Someone, was I just your entertainment on the side?

You had gone out with me on Saturday nights but there were six other nights in the week.

You with shadowy Someone in bed, where things were happy and easy and you got everything that really mattered. You only needed me on the side to play with, to make me do things Someone wouldn't.

Don't do this to me. Kill me but don't do this.

For a moment I really believed you had.

I moved around the apartment as if I might find some spot in it, some corner where I never stood, where I could evade the thoughts, but there was no such spot.

I ate some tuna out of a can, drank the end of a pitcher of orange juice.

I sat down at my desk, picked up the page I had been writing at four-thirty in the morning and read it over. Not now. Thought of calling Jay but I couldn't talk to him about this, him or anyone. Tell anyone how I became Mitsuko, actually went outside in her clothes? Not likely.

Imagine if my mother knew. The final blow of cruel fate for her son to turn *that way*, and what else could it mean to her. She would never understand how it really was. She or anyone else.

Call me later, when was later, what did that mean, two hours, next week, never. No, she did say call me. She said don't worry. But how.

There was still only one hiding-place and that was my work.

At four-thirty in the afternoon I called and the phone rang twelve times before I hung up.

I didn't want to go out in case the phone rang while I was away but I was out of food and had no choice.

I ate dinner, I drank some more Red Mountain, I kept putting off dialing the phone.

After it got dark the telephone rang.

"Hello?"

"Hello," Margo said.

"I'm glad it's you," I said.

"Is Mitsuko there?" she said.

Oh. I bowed my head and closed my eyes. Must I? But if that was what it took I could only try. "I think she might be," I said. "I'll see. Just a minute."

I put down the phone knowing she'd hear it clank on the desk, got up and walked into the bedroom (she would hear my footsteps), stood with eyes shut. If I could have looked into the mirror and seen Mitsuko it would have been easier to be her. I took off my shoes. Walking back into the living room I slid my feet softly along the floor and made sure to point my toes very straight ahead.

"Hi, I'm here. It's Mitsuko."

"Oh, I'm so glad you're there. I was afraid you might not be in. I really need to talk to you."

"How come?"

Margo sighed. "I kind of hate to bring this up, but have you seen Peter lately?"

"Um...no." Was that the right answer?

"Are you sure? Not yesterday or today?"

"Oh yes, I ran into him today."

"How did he seem?"

"He wasn't really like himself, something was upsetting him I thought."

"Oh. Did he tell you what it was?"

"I thought it had something to do with you."

"I was afraid of that," Margo said.

I didn't know what to say.

"This is so awkward," Margo said.

"What do you mean?"

"How much do you like him, really?"

"Peter?" How do I answer this? "I'm not madly in love with him if that's what you mean. Why?"

Margo sighed again. "Well, I feel funny telling you this because I'm sure you like him, but he says he's in love with me."

"I could have told you that."

"I thought you didn't know him all that well."

"Oh, well, he asked me to keep it a secret. But I guess it came out."

"Yes." Margo's voice was sad.

"Is that so bad?" Mitsuko said.

"I don't know, I hope not, I just don't..."

"What is it, what's wrong?"

"Do you think you could talk to him for me? I know it's a lot to ask. If you see him, I mean."

"But what am I supposed to say?"

"Could you just let him know I didn't mean to hurt his feelings? Somehow?"

"I'll try. What happened, anyway?"

"It's too hard to explain right now," Margo said. "It's embarrassing, too."

"Oh come on, you can tell me," Mitsuko said. "You know I can keep a secret, I kept Peter's, didn't I?"

"Not now, not on the phone, please. Maybe some time when you come over, okay?"

"Okay," Mitsuko said, "but just tell me this, I'm dying to know. Are you in love with Peter?"

There was a silence, suspended. "Mitsuko, really," Margo breathed. More silence. "Please don't ask me that."

More silence. Mitsuko sighed.

"When do you think you'll see him? Tomorrow?"

"Yes, in class. I'll tell him what you said."

"It's so selfless of you to do this for me, Mitsuko. I have to find a way to say thank you."

"Maybe I'll need a favor someday."

"Mm," Margo said. "Well – goodnight, Mitsuko."

"Goodnight."

I hung up the phone, threw my head back, and breathed out. Oh thank God.

Thank God for Mitsuko as well. Without her what would we have done?

I would call tomorrow as soon as she got home from work, it would be only a few days till I would hold her again, maybe by then...

“Thus, [I wrote, and being a pack rat have never thrown it away] the relationship between the Shogunate and the Kabuki theatres epitomizes the problem of Tokugawa governance. The overarching goal of the regime, or what passed for its political theory, was the prevention of social change of any sort and the maintenance of feudal hierarchical relations by minute regulation of behavior. Unfortunately, exhortation and decree could not freeze society forever at the moment when Ieyasu came to power, much less control the workings of the human heart. The Kabuki theatre, most vividly of all manifestations of popular culture in the Edo period, obliquely expresses the denied, repressed, but not yet stifled needs of the populace, and the Shogunate’s many efforts to control and censor it demonstrate the ultimate futility of the Tokugawa form of government. The attempt to impose an official reality backed by state power must, in the long run, paradoxically crumble before the alternate, unsanctioned reality that is the inner life of the powerless individual.

“The *onnagata*, the actor who plays the women’s roles, is central to this dissertation because he is the essence of Kabuki. The stylization of Kabuki, its alternate reality and pushing of boundaries, are all seen at their height in the actor who defies the reality of his body to become more womanly than a woman. Hence this form of performance, and public acceptance of it, is essentially subversive; it subliminally conveys to the audience the possibility of overthrowing all restrictions, no matter how taken for granted they may be.

“In the first chapter...”

On Monday, after going to the class I was T.A.ing for in the morning, and leading a discussion section after lunch, I read over my new dissertation proposal one more time and slipped it into Professor Tutwiler's mailbox. Nixon had finally surrendered the last batch of tapes, the ones the Supreme Court had to order him to release.

At six I called Margo and we agreed that I would come for dinner on Friday. "And this time I won't make a date to go shopping Saturday morning," she said. Neither of us wanted to say more than that about what had happened, on the phone. Let it wait until we were together. There was no mention of Mitsuko but she hovered somewhere on the line, listening in.

On Wednesday, the department secretary told me that Professor Tutwiler wanted to see me as soon as possible. Normally she would have wanted to find out what it was all about, but today all she cared about was that Nixon had the gall to admit to the coverup and then tell the Cabinet he wouldn't resign.

Tutwiler turned the pages of my proposal, reviewing his own comments that I could see written between the lines and in the margins, plus his typewritten summary remarks. His capacity for thoroughness bordered on the fanatical. Occasionally he grunted to himself as he read. I sat and tried not to squirm visibly.

He dropped the proposal on his desk and sighed. Disappointed again. "Can you find me one line of social protest in a Kabuki play?" he said. Had he wilfully missed the point? I knew the question was rhetorical and held my tongue. "They are utterly traditional, based on utterly conventional Confucian values."

"I'm aware of that," I said. "It's not what they say that I'm interested in, it's the way they're performed and the fact that they exist at all."

My response apparently did not deserve an answer; in any case, Tutwiler made none. Blinking slowly, he stared blankly past me, because I happened to be in the way while he thought. "What sources are you proposing to cite," Tutwiler said finally, "concerning the workings of the human heart?"

My own, I wanted to say, but I knew it would be suicide. "Perhaps the poems of Basho," I said. Tutwiler gave a grudging nod

which seemed to concede that at least I had thought of that. "And actually, when it comes to social protest, Chikamatsu did write a play criticizing the fifth Shogun. Of course he set it in an earlier era so he could get it past the censors, but everyone knew it was about Tsunayoshi."

"What year did that occur?" Tutwiler said, as if he didn't know.

"Early eighteenth century."

"A century and a half before the regime fell?"

"Yes."

"Have you come up with anything else of that nature?"

"Where the actual content of the play is openly critical of the government? No. But that isn't my argument anyway."

"Evidence, Mr. Obata. Hard evidence is what this proposal needs."

"The peasant uprisings, the Shinano riot and so forth..." I had been trying to rehearse the conversation mentally for two days, but I lost my place in the script.

"What about them?" His type of thing, his turf. "You're saying Kabuki had something to do with the rice riots?"

"In a sense, yes. The connection is cultural, in other words, um, if you think about the typical Kabuki hero who's fighting injustice and has superhuman powers and all that, and the action is always violent and over the top, basically it sanctioned rebellion. It gave people an image of that kind of heroism that went beyond the boundaries." But that was only part of it, that was not the whole thing and I couldn't blurt it all out in one neat irrefutable package with Tutwiler staring at me from across the desk, waiting gloomily for me to go on. The other key was the ideal of *ninjo*, passion, sincerity, devotion, which was at the heart of all the plays about love. But even to say the word would seem to invite scorn, let alone to claim it had as much of an effect in the world as the cost of rice. I fell silent, berating myself for cowardice.

"Are you claiming that the *onnagata* represents the repressed needs of the entire populace? When farmers were starving, did the *onnagata* represent their need for food?"

"That is not my argument." Surely he knew that perfectly well.

"Is there any evidence whatsoever that Kabuki contributed to the overthrow of the Tokugawa line?"

"Directly? No. But again – "

"Why should we see these plays as anything more than a safety valve?" Tutwiler said in what sounded like genuine puzzlement. But wasn't that a good thing? Wasn't I supposed to bring him a new

thought? "Yes, of course, there was social discontentment. Society *is* discontentment. Why do you suppose the government tolerated Kabuki at all? It was a diversion, and diversions are means of control."

"A control which ultimately failed."

"Agreed," Tutwiler said in a disagreeing voice. "But did it fail because of what you're calling cultural forces? That is the question. So far, I fail to be convinced. Rural peasants would never have seen the inside of a theatre in the first place, would they?"

"But when they migrated to the city looking for work – "

Tutwiler pointed his finger at me in a way that I knew from class. It meant Bingo, you're on the right track. "Exactly. And why do they migrate?" Oh great, I thought, the historical present. "Local producers are at the mercy of price fluctuations on a national scale. There are crop failures, the feudal domains lose their self-sufficiency. You know all this. Yes, obviously there are riots, but do they ever show any signs of growing into organized political movements? No. Rioting doesn't threaten the government, in fact it contributes to the stability of the regime, not to its downfall. The lower classes get their frustrations out by looting a few storehouses, then they go home and go back to work."

What was the use? He didn't want to hear it any other way. But if I gave up now I would only berate myself more. "In the case of the *iijanaika* disturbance in 1867, compare it with Kabuki, you had people in the streets wearing outrageous costumes, men dressing like women, women dressing like men, it was a national phenomenon. Where did they get these ideas?"

"In 1867 the regime was on its last legs," Tutwiler said in a voice that seemed oddly sad, even nostalgic, as if he had lived through those times. "Of course there was disorder. The phenomenon you're talking about was nothing more than a symptom. The shogunate had essentially collapsed already."

"You're not challenging yourself, Mr. Obata. You need to think more about your use of the word 'reality.' You seem to assume that just by putting an adjective in front of it, 'official' or 'unofficial' or what have you, you can carve it up into mutually exclusive precincts."

Well, wasn't that exactly the case in life? "I would say that it's not I who do the carving, it's the situation. In fact, the government contributed to it by their own policies."

"Ah," Rottweiler said. "The situation. Reality, properly so called, is the *entirety* of the situation. The notion that multiple realities operate independently in the same time and place is in fashion right

now, I admit, but it's a little too convenient, don't you think? It begs the question. Of course the social world was perceived differently by the rulers and by private citizens. Of course power makes all the difference. Does that surprise you? I can't imagine why."

"What do you mean, it begs the question?"

Tutwiler looked almost betrayed, as if he wanted to say How can you ask me that? "Something – some things – are true about this period, Mr. Obata. I'm not saying I know what they all are. But we're here to get at them with a certain amount of rigor. Not just to write whatever we happen to feel is intuitively correct. Why exactly does Kabuki matter so much all of a sudden?"

I knew he didn't want the truthful answer, and I chose to believe he did not want an answer at all.

"It interests you this month, but it never did before. You may not think so, but I'm doing you a favor by speaking this way. Your argument – am I right? – is that the *onnagata* phenomenon tells us something about Tokugawa governance, but I don't see that it teaches us anything that can't be found in half a dozen books. Books which hardly even mention Kabuki. Frankly, it's an excuse to indulge this new interest of yours. The tail is wagging the dog here.

"Tell me this," he said, and I knew I would be able to tell him nothing. "Are you prepared to go to Japan and interview contemporary actors? Is your Japanese good enough for that?" The question hung in the air along with Tutwiler's reproachful gaze; he knew perfectly well that I couldn't claim more than a reading knowledge of Japanese – certainly nothing approaching fluency. I kept my mouth shut. "Are you prepared to read the original sources? Are you aware that Edo period theatre documents are written in a script that even Japanese scholars find extremely difficult to decipher?"

Tutwiler sat back. He looked hurt, of all things. I knew I would have to speak. The longer I waited, the worse it would be for me. "I was not aware of that," I said.

"Before you brought this proposal to me, you should have looked into it deeply enough to know such things. I know you're capable of graduate level work. This is not what you owe yourself, or me."

"I beg your pardon?" My voice came out choked. "What do I owe myself?"

I thought I saw Tutwiler hold back a reply. Perhaps he was debating with himself whether to give up on me altogether; perhaps his momentum had carried him beyond where he meant to go. "I don't

wish to be unnecessarily unpleasant," he said. Of course not; to crush me fully would reflect on him as an adviser. "I'm sure it helps to know everything you can about the cultural context of the period. But this is not a program in theatre, and it cannot become one to suit your convenience. Nor is this the English department, which seems to think it has become the department of everything."

I could tell he enjoyed that little dig. A couple of years ago I would have too, but now I was unable to respond. Ideally I would have somehow let him know that I saw him as my severe but kindly mentor. I couldn't bring myself to do it.

"In any case," Tutwiler said, "as far as it concerns Kabuki, your argument is *post hoc, ergo propter hoc*. You haven't proved a cause and effect relationship."

"This isn't geometry, isn't it going a little far to talk about proof?" I said. "What makes any of these things more than someone's theory?"

Tutwiler steepled his fingers and studied me over them as if examining a newly discovered and none too pleasing life form. The silence lengthened. Too late to take it back. Tutwiler picked up a pencil, tapped its eraser once on the desktop, put it back down and held it down with one finger as if it might get away.

"Believe me, Mr. Obata," he said, watching the pencil, "scholarship is not merely a series of clever conjectures. Or elective affinities." He met my eyes. "Whatever you may think, this is no game. The issue here is the truth. It entails certain responsibilities which I thought you understood when you enrolled in the program. If you have not taken them seriously, I advise you to do so at once."

I couldn't hold his gaze; I shifted my eyes to the window behind him. I had to end it, get out of the office somehow, before anything irrevocable could be said.

"Please study my comments carefully," Tutwiler murmured, sliding the proposal toward me.

I nodded without making eye contact again. "I will."

"I need to see a revision in short order," Tutwiler said. "If this project is to continue, a revision should be on my desk next week."

As I drove to Margo's on Friday night I felt as though surely the week had been more than a week. The impossible had happened, Nixon had resigned, he had left the White House that day; what had seemed as though it would never end was over from one moment to

the next when he stepped onto the helicopter. If that much could change, Margo could have gotten used to the idea of being my lover. Was I still going to have to be Mitsuko? I remembered about the black underwear. Too late. Anyway, couldn't we stop that now? Mitsuko had gotten us together, her work was done.

Margo opened the door to me and even before it closed she was coming into my arms, I was holding her and she reached out without looking to shut the door all the way. We stayed in an embrace for some time without speaking.

"Hello, Peter," she said at last.

"That's better," I said.

"Yes."

"That was awful, wasn't it?"

I felt her nod her head.

"Were you really out all those times that I called?"

"Not all. I knew it was you."

"But you didn't answer."

"Couldn't."

"Why?"

"Not now. I'll tell you later."

I was going to insist, but the word "later" was followed by a kiss.

"Something I have to tell you," I said as we drank a glass of wine on the couch.

"Oh," she said. She took away the hand that had been resting on my arm, as if I were about to hurt her. "It isn't good, is it?"

"It's not like that," I said. "It's Tutwiler. He rejected my proposal. As usual. I've got to rewrite it by next week. And what's more he already told me weeks ago I've got to give him one he can approve by the end of the summer. Or that's it."

"It?"

"Well, he didn't say it in so many words, but I think if I don't do it I'm out of the program."

"Can he do that? Let you go like that?"

Let me go? I thought. As if I were struggling to get away. "Not all by himself, but I'll bet the department would go along with him. My welcome is just about worn out, I told you that."

"When did you see him?"

"Wednesday."

"Oh, Peter. Why didn't you call me?"

"I don't know."

"You are such an odd boy sometimes. Have you not figured out that we're friends?" In fact I had not, quite, not in that way, until that moment. "What are you going to do now?"

"God knows."

"No no no. That's not the way to think. Now you have to negotiate with him."

"Negotiate? You don't negotiate with somebody who holds all the cards. Besides, you told me to forget about him."

"That was different. Now you've got your idea, you need to help him say yes to you."

"Dear Professor Rottweiler, here's how: Y-E-S."

"Well, what's in it for him to say no? Won't it look bad if they let you go?"

"Maybe he thinks it looks worse if this drags out any longer. Maybe he thinks I'm hopeless. Maybe he thinks it would just be throwing good money after bad."

"Would it be?" she said.

I looked at her. "Thanks a lot."

"Are you a good investment for them?"

"What does that mean?"

"They're in the business of making Ph.D.'s, aren't they? Future professors? Are you going to be a good one?"

I thought that for the first time I understood what she was like at work. "Truthfully? I don't know if I will or not."

"But that's what you have to know, Peter."

"You're tough."

"I can help you if you let me."

"I believe you."

"Well?"

"What?"

"Will you?"

"Yes, but couldn't we wait a while? It's Friday night."

"All right," she said and took a sip of her wine. "Would you like to get dressed before dinner, or after?"

"I am already."

Margo said nothing and waited.

"Oh," I said.

"Hmm?"

"You're not thinking of going out that way, are you?"

"Didn't you just tell me it's Friday night? Of course we're going out."

"Why do you want to go with Mitsuko instead of me? Seriously."

She gave me her small enigmatic smile. "I'll tell you later. After I talk to her."

We ate, and like Margo, I did not finish what was on my plate. Thinking about going out as Mitsuko took away my appetite. As we were cleaning up afterwards, Margo said "Go ahead, I'll finish up." I knew what came next. I went into the bedroom, took off my clothes, put on my robe, sat down at Margo's vanity. This is what the actors feel like before they go on, I thought. Except they know what they're doing.

Margo came in and found me there. "Admiring yourself?" she said.

"I was waiting for you."

"You know what to do, go ahead."

"I do?"

"Oh, I'm sure you do, you're a quick learner."

I wasn't so sure about that. But Margo was watching me in the mirror, there was no way out. "You are going to help me, aren't you?"

"If you need it."

I looked at her collection of lipsticks, read some of their microscopic labels. More of an admission of what I was capable of, if I picked one myself. Nearly Nude. Tangerine Dream. "What color should I - ?"

She chose one and uncapped it, twisted it up and handed it to me. In the mirror I saw myself, sitting there in the flowered robe about to put lipstick on, of my own accord. Would I do anything for her, was there no line I wouldn't cross? And did she have any idea when to stop?

With the lipstick on my lips I already began to see Mitsuko in the mirror. But now I was in charge of the illusion. I took up the eyeliner and discovered that applying it was harder than it looked.

"Don't go all the way to the outside corner of your eye," Margo said. "You always leave a little gap there. It makes your eyes look bigger."

"Oh."

She was right about the mascara; it was easier when I put it on myself.

"You forgot the blush," she said.

"That's too much," she said. "Just a little dot on the end of your finger. Put it right there." She touched Mitsuko's cheekbone.

"Too bad your ears aren't pierced," she said. "I might have some clip-ons, though."

"You look extra cute tonight," she said, standing behind Mitsuko and playing with her hair in the mirror. "If I could just figure out what to do with your hair."

"What happens if you comb it forward?" she said. "Try."

"It doesn't want to stay that way," I said.

"Well, put mousse in it then."

"There, you see? Now show me your hands."

I did, watching her eyes in the mirror.

"Do you see what's missing?"

"No." But I knew what she would say.

"Nail polish. Last time it didn't matter but tonight it does."

"Why?"

"Tonight's special."

"What are you up to now?"

But she only smiled. When my nails were painted red I looked at my hands and wondered what the real Mitsuko would have been like grown up. She would have been there my entire life. My parents would not have lost her, they would have been other people. Impossible to imagine.

Margo dug in the tiny drawers of a jewelry box until she came up with some shiny black clip-on earrings. "Ouch," I said, when she put them on.

"You have to suffer to be beautiful, you know."

She got out the same black dress; I noticed that the armholes had been neatly altered to fit me, where the week before the seams had been hastily cut open. "Did you do that?" I said. She nodded. "Thank you."

Margo was dressed almost the same way too: blue jeans this time, instead of black, and a white oxford shirt, tied at the waist. She untied it and tucked it in.

Mitsuko put on the dress and then black pantyhose.

Margo held up a gold chain to try the effect, then a silver one. "That's better against the black," she said. "Put this one on." But Mitsuko couldn't hook the catch, and Margo had to do it for her.

"Now come see yourself," Margo said.

They stood in front of the mirror and Mitsuko took in the fullness of herself. Who knew what was beneath the dress? Only Margo, and Mitsuko would not take it off for anyone else.

"You're beautiful," Margo said.

"Don't say that."

"Ah," she said. "Now you understand."

Margo gave Mitsuko a small black purse on a long silver chain. "Take your lipstick and some money," she said.

Mitsuko still had to wear Peter's black loafers. "Suppose you got some of those in patent leather," Margo said. I didn't want Mitsuko to admit I couldn't afford it.

"Ready?" Margo said, giving her own hair shaping touches with a brush.

"I don't know."

"You are, just look at yourself."

They turned out the lights and this time when they stepped out the door Mitsuko felt excitement as well as terror. "Where are we going?" she whispered as they crossed the courtyard.

"You'll see."

"Not where we met? Please not there, I can't go there."

"Don't worry. You have nothing to worry about."

In Margo's car they cruised south on El Camino by the light of headlights and signs, orange floodlights over parking lots, blinking clear bulbs strung above ranks of new cars, a neon cowboy whose lariat changed position, a martini glass tipped as if by an invisible drinker. Rarely a brief patch of dark, a clump of trees, a creek under the road or a drainage ditch. I knew no place we might be going but I felt temporarily safe in the anonymity of the car. No responsibility. It was all in Margo's hands.

She pulled in at a rectangular windowless building surrounded by parking lot. Above its entrance a lighted sign said THE CROSSROADS and in smaller letters, The International Club. There were plenty of cars in the lot and as we pulled up I could hear music

faintly pumping from inside. "I know it doesn't look like much," Margo said, "but it's fun."

"What am I supposed to do?"

"Just remember who you are. And don't go home with anybody else."

"Don't even joke about that. You're not going to go off and leave me, are you?"

Margo laid her hand on mine. "Don't worry. Just let yourself enjoy being you."

"So easy for you to say."

We got out of the car. My heart was racing and so was Mitsuko's. In a few seconds she would have to present herself in a public place and everything could go wrong, it was only too obvious what she was...did Margo really know what she was getting them into?

"You forgot your pocketbook," Margo said. "Remember, it goes with you everywhere. Don't walk off and leave it."

I put the chain of the purse over my shoulder and it helped, in a way. The real thing, real money in there, Mitsuko carrying it must be real enough too. As we walked toward the door I felt as unsteady as if I were wearing high heels.

The doorman, busy and bored, took our money for the cover charge and stamped our hands with hardly a glance at our faces. Beyond the door I, whoever I was, had a confused impression of orange and red, smoke, human beings, loud music. "Come on," Margo said in Mitsuko's ear, took her hand and began towing her toward the bar, and I floated after them like a balloon Mitsuko trailed on a string. Margo was smaller and slipped through openings in the crowd where Mitsuko could not help rubbing against people, men, as they passed by. Margo could not move, or stand still, without men noticing her; next to her, Mitsuko was almost concealed. Hardly even observed as she watched them check out Margo; she thought how lucky Peter was to have such a girlfriend. They must think Margo was there to meet someone, mustn't they? To get picked up, to start something. If they wondered why she was holding Mitsuko's hand, surely they thought she was dragging her homely, shy girlfriend along with her for protection. Or perhaps to help the poor thing meet a man. Mitsuko couldn't help bumping into one, who smiled at her and raised his eyebrows. "Excuse me," she said reflexively, heard herself and I remembered her voice would give her away. Maybe it was too loud for him to hear her. "My pleasure," the man yelled, but thank God Margo was pulling her away from him. At the bar, standing behind a couple

who ignored us, Margo made a show of heaving a sigh of relief and pushed her hair back with her hands, then fiddled a little with Mitsuko's bangs, arranging them. Was that allowed? Apparently yes. Margo waved at a bartender and somehow managed to order vodka tonics. "The only thing wrong with this place," she said with her mouth next to Mitsuko's ear, "is it's too loud."

But was that so bad? Mitsuko felt the music gave her something to hide behind. When the drinks came it took her a moment to realize that she should pull money out of her purse. Margo had already paid. "You can get the next round," she said. She held up her glass. "To Mitsuko," she said. "Your debut."

"To Mitsuko," Mitsuko said. They drank. Maybe no one would notice after all, she could slide under the radar and just be one more body in the crowd until we went home. I fingered Mitsuko's necklace, touched her earrings to make sure they were still on, tugged her skirt down a little. Margo saw and discreetly shook her head. No. Was I calling attention to myself?

A man's hovering face kept pointing at us from down the bar. At Margo. His mouth would open slightly in a goofy half-smile when he stared at her; then he would look away but it was obvious he was only waiting until he felt he could turn back. Had Jay and I looked like that at the Shutter when we saw her? "Somebody's staring at you," Mitsuko said in Margo's ear.

"Subtle, isn't he?" Margo said. She waited until he turned toward them again, then struck a movie-star profile, head cocked back, fingertips to her cheek, mouth open, eyes raised to the ceiling for a moment before she turned her back on him, her smile went from fake to real and we both burst out laughing. "What happened?" Margo said, gesturing over her shoulder with her eyes.

"I think he might have to go change his pants," Mitsuko said. Her drink was gone and she boldly held up her hand to signal the bartender for another.

"See?" Margo said. "I told you it would be okay."

The music's pounding beat never let up, never varied. The room was long and people were dancing in the middle of it; among them was a man in a Hallowe'en Nixon mask, waving his arms in Nixon's V-for-victory gesture. Past the dancers I could vaguely make out horseshoe-shaped booths. Mardi Gras masks hung on the wall, surrounded by feathers, eerie white faces that reminded me of Kabuki except for one painted half red, half black, that seemed to stare at me with special force. Someone jostled Mitsuko, looking for room at the

bar. "Nice to bump into you again," a man said, the same man she had said "excuse me" to on the way in. He had followed her? I flung a panicky look at Margo, but Margo only looked tolerantly amused. The man planted himself at Mitsuko's shoulder and leaned in to speak to her. "What's your name? If you don't mind. I'm Carl." Would he not see, from a foot away, what had to be obvious?

"Mitsuko," she said.

"I'm sorry, what?"

"Mitsuko." This time she more or less had to yell.

"Nice to meet you." I tried to smile politely. Could he only see what he wanted to? Carl's top button was unbuttoned to offer a view of his chest hair and he was wearing two gold chains, one fat, one thin. His hairline was starting to recede a bit and he had a prominent Adam's apple. "Would you like to dance?" he said in my ear.

Oh my God. Mitsuko's hand flew to her mouth before she could stop herself. "I really can't," I said.

"Oh, sure you can," Margo said. Wait, you can't do that to me. "It's okay, she's just shy," she called out confidentially to Carl. "She really does like to dance." Mitsuko tried to look daggers at her but Margo ignored them.

"I know how you feel," Carl said. Only too happy to make allowances. See what a nice guy I am, how I deserve all of your attention tonight. "Come on, I thought you looked like a good dancer."

"I'll hold onto your pocketbook," Margo said helpfully.

"Just one song," I said, handing it over.

"Okay," Carl said. "Coming?" He led the way through the crowd, casting possessive glances over his shoulder at Mitsuko. At one point he held out his hand as if she would take it but she pretended not to notice. I could dance, yes, but Mitsuko shouldn't dance like Peter, should she? Carl had found an opening and began to gyrate. Again he wanted to take Mitsuko's hand but she shook her head. She danced closed in on herself, with arms at her sides and head bent, tentatively swiveling her hips and swaying, her arms swinging in counterpoint to her body. She could ignore him and what could he do about it? She could close her eyes. The song seemed to go on forever. After a while she realized that to dance this way she should have long hair, toss it heavily to one side and then the other. Not yet though. When it grew out she would do that. She collided with someone and it was Carl, bumping her with his hip, wanting her to bump him back. Not you, Carl. Men were such obvious clowns, she had to feel sorry for him. After that she kept her eyes open and stayed out of his way.

At one point, looking around from under my eyelashes, I noticed two men dancing together; I wasn't sure it was true at first but then I noticed two more. No one seemed to pay any attention. This was a gay bar, then? But there were plenty of other women here besides Margo, unless I was crazy they were women, flirting with men or turning them down. I could tell that the more I avoided Carl's eye, the more he thought I was flirting with him. How was I supposed to get out of this? The song ended and of course he followed Mitsuko back to the bar.

"I told you she could dance," Margo said.

Carl was excited now. "Come on, just one more? Why not?" he said to Mitsuko.

Please just go away. "No, thanks." Then inspiration: "I need to go to the bathroom, excuse me." It was even the truth.

Margo gave me a small ironic look. Did she mean that I had used every woman's excuse? Or did she already know what I didn't think of until a moment later, working my way through the crowd? I would have to decide which bathroom to go into.

In grade school, at the urinals with other boys, a boy would start with himself and count off, boy-girl-boy-girl, the whole point being to make girl land on someone else, and the other kid would get mad and count back and make it land on you. In the eighth grade some white kids claimed they believed Japs had no balls, they pulled down my pants to see if I really did. Not to mention that gay men had sex in bathrooms and wouldn't I be asking for it up the ass if I walked in dressed like this? But I couldn't go into the women's could I, except they had stalls, yes, you could close the door and maybe that was my only hope, because the need to pee was suddenly killing me. I couldn't walk into the women's for God's sake, but when I was outside the restrooms I was too afraid to go into the men's. Sheldon would be pissed off if I he knew I thought like that, Don't flatter yourself he'd say. If I had been in the habit of praying I would have said a prayer as I opened the women's room door, and even though I didn't maybe it was answered. There was no one at the sinks and I darted into a stall and closed the door just before music and female voices pushed their way into the room. I remembered to sit down on the toilet to pee. In a moment there were women on both sides of me.

"What an asshole, can you believe him, stupid Guido."

"Is that really his name?"

"Why do you make us come here?" The voice came from the stall next to me.

"Me – who was in the back room making out with the DJ?"

"You don't have to tell the world."

"Now that's tacky."

Toilets flushed, stall doors opened.

"Do you have a brush?"

"Do I look like a beauty parlor?"

"No, a beauty queen."

Giggling. How many of them were out there? The woman next to me flushed and left the stall.

"So are you going to?" Water ran.

"Him? Are you kidding?"

"How about Dawn when she goes down like that, doing the bump?"

"If you forget to come up, you can't go home alone."

More running water and laughter. Would they ever leave?

"That last guy you were dancing with? He's gay, he's just trying to make his boyfriend jealous."

"No way."

"Doesn't anyone have a brush?"

"Come on girls, let's go."

Shoes clicked and shuffled toward the door. If they were all leaving at once maybe I could slide out behind them – if no one else was coming in – there was no way to know. I stood up, pulled up my underpants and the pantyhose, flushed the toilet, straightened my skirt, listened at the stall door but there were too many sounds, the music was loud and I couldn't tell if the steps and voices were coming or going. All I could do was take my chances. I opened the door and kept my eyes on the floor, tried to slip out invisibly but there was someone right in my way and I looked up and she knew at once. "Oh," she said, disgusted but not surprised, and two women were at the sinks, one looked over her shoulder, the other saw me in the mirror. "Need to borrow a Tampax?" she said, making sure she had eye contact. The others snickered and then, thank God, I was out the door.

What the hell was I getting myself into? Way over my head, I knew that.

When I got back to the bar Carl was still there, talking to Margo who looked impatient now but was still answering him. Keeping him there so he could try to hit on me some more? "You're back!" he said to Mitsuko delightedly.

She managed a half-smile.

Margo's eyes met hers, as if to say Should I encourage him? Don't, Mitsuko signalled. Then Margo's face changed and a hand took hold of Mitsuko's shoulder. "Sweetheart," an insinuating voice said in her ear, "why didn't you tell me?"

The voice was familiar, she turned and it was Sheldon. Fuck. Run away. Too late, now he knew. How long before he would tell Jay?

"Me of all people. I saw you dancing. Why didn't you tell me? I would have brought you here a long time ago. I know some people who would be dying to meet you."

"Don't. Please. I can't – " Was Carl taking all this in?

Sheldon shot an appraising glance at me. "Oh, you have a date?"

"No. God. No way, this is who I'm with," I said, grasping at Margo's arm for dear life. "This is Margo."

"Oh of course!" Sheldon crowed delightedly, extending his hand. "Margo! I've heard so much about you!" Carl was backing away, already looking elsewhere.

Margo shook Sheldon's hand politely. "This is Sheldon," I said.

"Shelley," Sheldon said.

"He's a friend of mine. Of Peter's."

"Freshen up your drinks and come with me, girls, we've got a table in back. Peter, I'm so hurt you never told me."

"Mitsuko," Margo said.

"What?" Sheldon leaned over, unsteadily.

"Her name is Mitsuko," Margo said. "Not Peter."

"Oh-h-h," Sheldon said, blinking at Mitsuko and looking her up and down. "I see, yes. Not Peter, of course. No, that's obvious. What was I thinking?"

Carrying our drinks, we followed Sheldon, who half-danced his way through the dancers in an uneven weave. Margo seemed perfectly comfortable, at home even; Mitsuko followed her because I had no choice, dreading what next. Seven or eight of Sheldon's friends were fitted into a booth. "Squeeze!" he commanded. "Squeeze in for Margo and Mitsuko!"

Margo laid a hand on his shoulder as if it might calm him down. "I'll get a chair," she said.

"No no! The more the better." Sheldon sat down and pushed himself mercilessly in, both hands gripping the table, to groans and protests. He patted the narrow strip of seat next to him on the outside. "Go ahead," Margo said to Mitsuko. She sat down next to Sheldon unwillingly, wedged up against him because there was nowhere else to

be. But where would Margo fit? Mitsuko tried to slide over more but it was impossible. As if it happened every day, Margo sat down on her lap. No one looked surprised except Mitsuko. "Am I too heavy?" she said in my ear.

"You're perfect." Mitsuko put her arm around Margo. On her neck I could smell perfume.

Sheldon was introducing them, people were making sounds and faces of greeting, some looked interested in them, some looked bored. Mitsuko lost every name as soon as she heard it. What I cared about was that Margo was sitting there on my lap in front of them all, announcing to the world that we were a pair. Besides Mitsuko and Margo there were five men and two women at the table. For a moment. Then I realized the women were men too. Of course. And as they looked Mitsuko over, which they were clearly doing, surely they knew. No secrets here.

Some hilarious story had been in progress when Sheldon led them to the table, and now the teller, who was in drag, went back a few steps for his benefit and resumed the tale, a complicated scandal full of names Mitsuko didn't know in relationships she could only guess at. Margo was holding her hand. Shielding her really, sitting on her lap and obscuring what Mitsuko so visibly lacked. The other women had given themselves breasts which were persuasive enough under clothes. How hard could it be?

Margo turned her head to speak in Mitsuko's ear. "Are you okay?"

"As long as you're here."

"Do you want to dance?"

Would there always be one more thing Mitsuko hadn't imagined? But why shouldn't they, now, after all this. "Okay."

Margo got up and held out her hand to Mitsuko, who took it and stood up aware of eyes on the two of them. There was no room to move away from the table. They began to dance, Mitsuko shyly swaying as she had before. This time she would learn from watching Margo. But Margo was imitating her. Teasing her? No, mirroring. When Mitsuko dipped her shoulder Margo did too at the same moment, and when Margo turned, Mitsuko felt herself turning before she thought of it. Sometimes their hands would touch, brush for a moment, then part. No one was leading. They were together in time. Mitsuko felt she could stay in this trance forever, the two of them becoming each other, alone in a floating world.

When the song ended Sheldon clapped, too vigorously, and a couple of his friends joined in. Mitsuko blushed; Margo silently mimed joining in the applause, with an impish smile. It wasn't my doing, was it? I thought, sitting down selfconsciously next to Sheldon, avoiding his eyes and everyone's. Margo seemed to be looking around for a chair. "Don't," I said, reaching for her hand, and she let herself be drawn back to sit on Mitsuko's lap.

"That was wonderful," Sheldon said. "You two are so pretty together."

"It's all Margo," Mitsuko said.

"Oh no it's not," Sheldon said. "No offense," he said to Margo, "you're glorious, but there really is something about Mitsuko that's very special too."

"I know," Margo said.

"I had no idea, when she was just plain old Peter. No idea at all."

"She never was," Margo said.

"Sorry?" Sheldon leaned forward uncertainly.

"You said Mitsuko was Peter. But that's someone else. We both know him, too. But Mitsuko is always herself."

A peculiar smile came over Sheldon's face, something like the Mardi Gras masks on the wall above him. "She's a lucky girl then, isn't she?" he said, looking from Margo to Mitsuko and back. "Speaking of Peter, you know, I was there when he first saw you. At the Shutter. You were dressed in a fairly daring style, as I recall."

Shut up, I thought. Just shut up now. You've had too much to drink, whatever you're thinking of trying, don't.

"I told my two friends, Peter was one of them, that you were in drag. But they wouldn't believe me no matter what. Isn't that amazing? I knew they were just in denial, of course, but they didn't, you see? That's how convincing you were."

Margo cocked her head to one side and examined Sheldon as if he were under glass. Though he never got flustered it appeared that for once he might. "If you were straight, I would have convinced you too," she said.

"I didn't quite hear?" he said, leaning forward.

"That's all right," she said, smiling. "We need to go. Thank you so much for letting us join you."

Margo and Mitsuko stood up and waved to the table generally; some waved back. Sheldon seemed about to get up, but then thought

better of it. "Mitsuko! You are going to come again, aren't you?" he called.

She turned her palms up and raised her shoulders, pantomiming uncertainty.

"Make it soon."

Hand in hand, Margo and Mitsuko worked their way across the dance floor. "Want to dance again?" Margo said in Mitsuko's ear.

"There's no room."

The crowd around the bar was thicker than before. They had to force their way upstream against people coming in.

"If you go out now, you might not get in. We're gonna max out any minute," the doorman said.

Outside they both breathed out. Even El Camino seemed quiet for a moment. Behind them music swelled and faded repeatedly as the doors opened and closed.

In the car, Margo gave Mitsuko a hug across the gearshift. "You were fabulous, I'm so proud of you," she said.

"Thank you."

They held hands as Margo drove, except when she had to shift gears. "How about that Carl?" Mitsuko said. "Didn't you love his shirt? All the way down to here?"

"He tried hard, let's give him that."

"So weird to meet Sheldon there."

"Shelley?"

"I didn't know he called himself that. Too bad he had to go and get nasty. Too many drinks."

"Jealous. He couldn't help it."

"That's even more weird."

"What are you going to say when he asks you out?"

"Say I belong to you."

There was no party this Friday night in Margo's building. Mitsuko was almost disappointed no one was there to see her as they crossed the courtyard, now that she knew a little better how to be herself. Margo unlocked the door and then they were inside, alone. "Ah," Mitsuko sighed, putting her pocketbook down on the coffee table.

"I have a little brandy, would you like some?" Margo said.

"Are you trying to get me drunk?"

"Only a little."

"Okay."

They sat on the sofa side by side, shoes off, feet on the coffee table. Margo reached up and turned off the light. "There," she said. "Now it's quiet."

Mitsuko slid down and let her head rest on Margo's shoulder, took Margo's hand in both of hers. They made a complicated nest of twined fingers.

"You really were very pretty, dancing," Margo said.

"You were."

Margo gently freed her hand and took Mitsuko's arm into her lap. With her nails she tickled the inside of Mitsuko's arm, up and down. "Ee," Mitsuko said softly. Margo touched her more lightly and it became more ticklish.

When Margo let go, Mitsuko's hand came to rest on Margo's thigh and she let her fingers gather gently up, stroking. Margo turned to her and played with her bangs, ran her fingertip down Mitsuko's nose to her lips; Mitsuko's tongue came out to meet her touch.

"Who are you?" Margo said.

"Mitsuko," she said with an effort.

"Perhaps we should go in the other room," Margo said.

In the bedroom Margo unzipped Mitsuko's dress. In a moment Mitsuko was naked except for Peter's underpants and her necklace. "I know your secret," Margo said. "You're always ready to take off your clothes."

"Only for you."

"Wear your robe."

Mitsuko slipped it on, tied the sash, lay down on Margo's bed, waiting. "Would you undress for me?"

"Remember who you are," Margo said. She closed the door and turned out the one light and again the darkness was complete.

Would there be the sound of her belt buckle, her zipper? No. Margo lay down, put one blue jean leg over Mitsuko possessively. "Did you like what we did last time, Mitsuko?"

"So much."

"When I showed you what Peter would do?"

"Yes. Please, yes."

"You have to remember who you are."

"I know."

"Promise."

"I promise."

"The first thing he'll do," Margo said, and her lips touched Mitsuko's as she spoke and we were kissing.

After a long time we stopped to breathe. Mitsuko had a thought and I debated with myself whether to say it. "Maybe it isn't right for me to imagine Peter being with me. He's yours now. And you're my best friend, I couldn't do that to you."

Margo was silent. Her finger touched Mitsuko's lips.

"Maybe I would let you," she said. "Because we're best friends."

"He's too in love with you to look at anyone else."

Margo thought. Her hand did not go away. Mitsuko touched Margo's cheek, her neck in the darkness. "Think of him like Genji," Margo said. "Think of me like Genji."

"Oh," Mitsuko said. I remembered that in the tale Genji was said to be so beautiful that other men wished he were a woman.

"He always gets his way," Margo said.

"I know," Mitsuko said.

"You can't say no to him," Margo said, and her hand slid into my robe, caressing. Mitsuko allowed herself to touch Margo's breasts through the cotton of her shirt, to feel her nipples become hard, before she unbuttoned the buttons.

Margo was above her now, she untied the sash of the robe and opened it, making Mitsuko feel like a present being unwrapped, and Mitsuko unbuckled Margo's belt, unzipped, pulled down and down.

We were naked, kissing. Mitsuko knew her finger was not allowed to go into Margo's vagina, no matter what Margo did to her.

"Will you try to say no to him?" Margo said.

"It's no use," Mitsuko said. "If he wants to come into me, he will."

"Yes," Margo said, and her hand was guiding, and she came down so that Genji had his way. Inside her. Genji moved a few times, slowly farther in, then stopped. We seemed to be one body. "Kiss me," Mitsuko said. Margo's mouth came down on mine, Genji moved again and Mitsuko came.

"Oh God," Margo wailed when she felt it begin, and tried to pull away, but my arms were too strong for her at my moment and she could not. "Let me go," she panted, struggling.

"Margo." I could no more let go than die.

"I can't. Let go."

With a groan I released her; instantly she rolled off me, off the bed, and was gone. I heard the bedroom door open and the bathroom

door close. She locked it behind her. Water ran. There was a long silence. I waited, suspended in love and fury. She made me be Mitsuko, a public spectacle, seduced me, had her way in everything, and after all that she treated me like some kind of contamination? A curtain of anger came down, a black cloud of unwillingness to accept any more. I was her puppet after all. Enough. I lay in a burning silence staring up into the dark. Get up now. Go. Do it. Go home. If I never saw her again I could not bear it, and if I left I might never, but I could not bear this either and I had to have some self-respect finally, didn't I?

As I was sitting up I heard the door of the bathroom unlock. She came back into the dark bedroom and sat on the bed next to me, took my hand and held it on her lap; she was wrapped in a towel.

"I'm sorry," she said.

I was in no state to say it was all right.

"I didn't mean it that way at all," she said. "Not inside me."

"What, then."

She did not reply. I took my hand back.

"What did you mean to do?"

"I didn't know you'd come so easily."

"I can't do this." I bent forward, head in my hands. Would I stand up next, would I walk away?

She laid her cheek against my back for a moment. "I don't mean to hurt you. You have to believe me."

I couldn't answer.

"Do you?" she said plaintively.

"What do I have to do to make you understand?" I said.

Margo pulled my hand toward her again and held onto it hard. "Stay with me," she said. "Please. We've done so much. Please don't give up now."

How could I leave when you spoke to me like that? It makes no sense to say this, but right then I almost hated you for being the woman I loved that much.

"God, Margo." I lay back down, exhausted.

Slowly she lay down next to me, the towel still wrapped around her, and took me in her arms from behind. For a while we said nothing. I kept thinking, If you love me...there was no end to the sentence. Maybe she couldn't.

“Take that towel off. There’s nothing to be afraid of.”

At first she didn’t respond, then she unwound the towel from around herself and dropped it on the floor. We lay there with nothing between us except our thoughts.

I kept remembering dancing with you and how we had been perfectly attuned, flying on the same wing, but no matter what happened, even this, even making love which you now said was only a mistake, we were always apart in the end, I would always be wanting what I could not have from you.

Yet you were next to me, not pulling away.

I wanted to sleep next to you every night, not with all this struggle first, but because you wanted to. I wanted to make love to you myself, not Mitsuko submitting to the attentions of Genji, nobody but the two of us in bed together. Why was that so impossible? But I dreaded knowing, too. If you told me a why in a way I could understand, then perhaps it would mean that these things could never be.

But I knew I had been right from the first moment about you. When I knew nothing at all, I already knew you and I were connected somehow. That was not the question. The question was whether you could bear to realize that yourself.

"What are you thinking?" Margo said softly in the darkness.

Things I couldn't say. "What do you want from me?"

"This."

"You want it to be this difficult?"

"No. This," she said, and held me tighter. I was grateful despite myself to feel the weight of her against my back.

"Then why is it so damn hard?"

"Now you," she said. I might have known she wouldn't answer, I thought. "What do you want?"

"You already know."

"Do you know what I think? You want everything. It isn't enough for you to do something *with* me, you want *me*. My self."

Was that really true? And if it was, then wouldn't I be exactly the kind of person I didn't want to be, wouldn't I be, of all people, my mother? "Speak for yourself," I said.

"What do you mean?"

"You made me into Mitsuko, what more is there, what's left?"

"Oh," Margo said. How could that be news to her?

We lay for a long time in silence; there seemed to be nothing more either of us could say. Finally Margo said, "Let's go to sleep."

"Okay." There was no point in not agreeing. We had to get up to slip under the covers. In the dark Margo went away and I heard her rustling dresses in the closet. When she came back she was wearing a nightgown. So that was all the nakedness with me she could bear? But she came into my arms and I found myself kissing her, thinking I shouldn't, I should keep my distance for once. But if I could have, I would have been someone else, not me.

She turned over and snuggled her back against me as if nothing had gone wrong between us, or if it had, it was a momentary diversion, nothing more... "Put your arm around me," she said. "It feels good that way." How could she just assume like that, I thought.

But I volunteered for this.

I put my arm around her, and she took my hand and held it close to her, against her breastbone, as if she had to have it there to keep her safe.

We slept, but from time to time I awoke. Each time I expected to find that she had gone away, and each time she had not. Part of me was on guard against the nightmare coming back. Once I got up to pee and when I slid back into bed she turned toward me in her sleep and I stayed awake as long as I could to be aware of her wanting to be next to me.

In the morning I wanted her all the more fiercely because I could see her in the dim light leaking around the blinds and curtains. She had to know I did, it was only too obvious. When I began to caress her through the thin silk of the nightgown she took my hand and held it to her mouth and kissed my palm but gentle as she was, she would not let me keep touching her.

"You need it a lot, don't you?" she said.

"Not it. You. With you. The way it was last night."

"Last night was between them."

"No," I said. That was over now, wasn't it? It had to be.

"Yes, it was. It was between Mitsuko and Genji. Genji made a mistake with her, but that was their problem. They'll have to work it out."

"Margo, listen to me. What is there to hide here anyway? What do you think is the big secret? I made love to you last night, if you don't remember." But already she had all but taken the reality of it away.

She looked at me as if carefully considering the source of my mistake. "Maybe you need another woman to have sex with."

"Did you hear what I said?" But Margo didn't answer. I could only stare at her and feel alone. "I'm lost," I said.

"If you need to have someone else for that, I don't mind."

How could she imagine that such a thing was even possible, or was what I wanted, much less suggest it? "Don't you remember what Mitsuko told you? I'm not interested in anyone else. You know that."

"Well, if you are, just tell me."

"I'm not going to be."

"Ever?" Margo said, looking me in the eye defiantly. I couldn't answer. "I think we should get up now," she said and then slid out of bed and away. Her momentum carried her out of the room in one continuous motion, as if there could be no reason to stay longer, nothing hanging unsaid, unanswered between us. From the back, in her nightgown, walking out of the bedroom, she was a stranger.

Maybe she would always be happier when something kept us apart. Me in the next room or hidden behind Mitsuko, me fenced off behind her rules, forbidden to do or say what was true. True for me but never for her. Could make a person crazy.

Was I going to leave, then?

There was no joy in that thought either.

I searched through the cosmetics on the vanity and eventually found the nail polish remover. She noticed me taking it off, but said nothing, and neither did I.

Maybe my mistake all along was to imagine I could change anything. What did I think I was, her savior, the man in a million?

Love suffereth long, and is kind. I had heard that text read more than once, but never before felt the full weight of it. Try to give everything and it turns out you have hardly given anything, certainly

not enough, never enough. And yet the imperative remains: be kind. Be kind in the face of frustration, kind in the face of your failure, be kind knowing your love is not enough. Is not what is wanted after all.

I might have been named for a saint but I wasn't one, that was only too clear.

I took a shower, brushed my teeth, but I still did not feel ready to be onstage.

We ate breakfast with cautious and careful motions, as if we had never done that together before. After a while she said, "I'm sorry about last Saturday."

All I did was nod my head.

"You just shouldn't have let me walk out the door."

"How was I supposed to stop you?"

We both drank coffee, avoiding each other's eyes. Margo sighed. "I know. It wasn't your fault."

"Thank you."

She winced a little. "The truth is I ran away."

"It's over, it's okay." But the ache of aloneness in me was not all right, especially not that close to her, and across the table from her I was asking myself if I could live with it.

It was midmorning, and I was on the couch re-reading a part of the *Genji*. Somewhere in its thousand pages there had always been something to read, before today, but it had lost its charm. She was sitting in the armchair opposite me holding the front section of the paper but not looking at it. "Ford takes oath as 38th President, says 'long national nightmare is over.'" We seemed stuck in awkwardness, unwilling to admit that we didn't know how to be together now. "All right, now," Margo said abruptly. "You're you, and I'm the East Asian Studies department. And you have to sell us your dissertation proposal."

"What?"

"Come on, it'll be good for you."

I grunted. Must we? But maybe it was good if she gave us something to do. "I don't feel much like a salesman today."

"That's the first thing you want to say to us?"

"Oh all right. If we have to." Suck it up, I thought. "Good morning. Thank you for meeting with me."

"Better," Margo said.

"Look, how can I do this without my proposal in front of me?"

"You mean you don't know what it says by now? You're not planning to go in there and read it to them, are you?"

"I don't even know if there'll ever be a meeting like this."

"Well, there won't be if you don't prepare." Why did she have to do this right now?

"Fine." I thought for a while and Margo watched me unnervingly. "My dissertation, as I believe Professor Tutwiler has told you – "

"Don't bring him into this. It's not his dissertation."

"My dissertation is a study of the relationship between the Tokugawa regime and the Kabuki theatres. It's an attempt to discuss –"

"Why 'attempt'?"

Did she have to keep pouncing on me like that? "That's the way academics talk."

"You're going to do it, aren't you? Not just try to?"

I had to avoid her gaze by looking up at the corner of the ceiling. "In my dissertation I discuss the inevitable, um, breakdown of the, of government by decree which is exemplified by – this relationship. In other words...shit. I need the thing in front of me, damn it."

"Just talk about it. I know you can."

"Look, if we have to do this, the damn point is this. The government thought they could tell everyone what to do and what to think, but it didn't work because no matter what, people find a way to express how they really feel, and that's what you find out when you look at Kabuki. And whatever the hell Rottweiler says, I think it's a damn good example. They tried to censor it, the actors were non-people, they even closed the theatres, it still survived, why? Because there was some kind of truth in it. You can only order people around so much."

"Good. Except take out the swearing."

"The whole point is – " I wanted to say that the whole point is that *ninjo* may seem weaker than *giri* but it's stronger in the end, human feeling stronger than any rules people make, but she wouldn't know those words and I didn't want to go through a whole explanation. "Well, that was it. What I said."

"Thank you for that presentation, Mr. Obata. That was very interesting," she said. "Now we want you to know, we have total confidence in your brain power. We wouldn't have let you in if we

didn't think you could do it. But here's our question. We've held up our end of the bargain. We've given you a fellowship for – how many years?"

"Five. Which is already one more than they wanted to."

"And we gave you a job as a T.A." I nodded. "Which is where you met Mitsuko, by the way, a very important fringe benefit – "

"They know about that?"

"So what we want to know is, what are you going to do for us? To keep your end of the bargain?"

"Finish my dissertation and get the hell out?"

"Peter. Don't answer a question with a question. And do you really believe that we just want our students to go away?"

"Okay, okay, you want them to make a contribution to scholarship. To increase the amount of knowledge in the world."

"Are you going to?" she said.

"How the hell can I actually claim that?"

"Why not? Doesn't everybody else?"

"It sounds too, like, megalomaniac."

Margo pursed her lips and studied me. "What else do they want?" she said.

"Well, obviously, they want me to get a job and become a professor, and I suppose after that they want me to publish ten books."

"And why would they want that?"

"Makes them look good, I suppose. Makes people apply to the program."

"I told you it was business."

"Argh." I slumped down on the couch. I didn't want her to see me like this, weak in the very place where I should be strong. The edge of the coffee table dug into the soles of my bare feet. "I don't know."

"You do," Margo said. "I think you know exactly what they want to hear."

I thought, That doesn't mean I can tell it to them. But she didn't want to hear that and I didn't say it. I started to feel alone again.

After lunch Margo took me out shopping. "You'll be my date this week," she said. It was the first time we had been out together, with me as me, since we had become whatever we were now. She held my hand in public, in the daytime, as much as to say to anyone who cared, This is my boyfriend. But wasn't it all for show, all a deceiving appearance?

No one cared about us anyway, except a few who gave us looks that meant Japanese man, American blonde, what is she doing with him?

I thought perhaps you enjoyed those looks, but I didn't. Still your touch was irresistible to me. I wanted to think it meant as much to you, that your hand in mine was a secret apology for all that you withheld, but I wasn't quite able to believe that.

In a store she liked, Margo slipped behind the curtain of the dressing room to try on a half-dozen blouses and beckoned me to join her when no one was looking. One after another she put them on and took them off – what did I think? But I was too dazzled and thrown into turmoil to know which ones I liked better. There were a couple she didn't try on; she handed me one and whispered, "Try. I need to figure out your size." The second one, pale lavender, was big enough. "Do you like it?"

"Mitsuko might."

"I'll buy it for her."

The clerk was scandalized when we came out together but tried not to show it, I was embarrassed, Margo serene.

I wondered what you were trying to prove, doing something like that, if that was your way of having a lover, making strangers imagine things about us that would not come true when we were alone.

Margo spent a while looking at bras, leaving me hanging around awkwardly among the mannequins, perfect plastic femaleness in sexy underwear that could only make me imagine her undressing in a way that wouldn't happen, feeling tantalized. When we left that store she whispered, "I was thinking of trying to get one for you, but I changed my mind."

In a men's shop she bought me a package of black Jockey underwear.

Afterwards, we went to the grocery store in Town & Country Shopping Center. I said I'd cook dinner: lamb chops, artichokes, new potatoes, salad. She bought two bottles of wine, much more expensive than I would have chosen. My cooking was better than hers, but neither of us finished what was on the plates.

After dinner Margo said, "Maybe Mitsuko and I could go to a movie."

Was I still going to do this? Someday there had to be a last time. I pictured myself standing in line under bright lights, people with nothing to do studying those around them and discovering me, nudging and whispering, poorly concealed glances. I would shrivel under their eyes. "I don't know."

"Why not?"

"Don't you think I'm pretty obvious? People are bound to see. It's different at a place like the Crossroads, they're used to it there."

"All you have to do is feel comfortable with who you are."

"Margo, stop. Gay men get beaten up."

"Trust me," she said. "Anyway, you're not gay."

"It's other people I don't trust," I said, but maybe that was not the whole truth.

"Oh Peter," she said, putting her arms around my neck. "Don't be a stick in the mud. Let Mitsuko go out with me, come on, please? Nothing bad will happen. Even if anyone sees, nothing will happen. When was the last time you heard of anyone getting into a fight in a movie theatre?"

No more, I wanted to say. Just no more. Just let me be, with you. I've done enough. Or don't let me if you can't accept me. But as soon as I thought of never seeing her again, I realized I still couldn't bear it.

"Please," she said with serious eyes. As if this mattered in some way I couldn't know.

Perhaps if I became Mitsuko just once more, then later on...

The lavender blouse had a modest scoop neckline with proper little ruffles. To wear with it Margo gave me a navy blue skirt, a string of imitation pearls, a gold circle pin. When I saw myself I wanted to say no after all. "I look like I'm in the eleventh grade at some boarding school," I said. "Where did this skirt come from?"

"Oh, I just had it around. I really can't keep track of everything."

"But it fits me, more or less."

"Maybe I borrowed it from someone and never gave it back," Margo said. Didn't make sense. Maybe she had done this with other men. Mitsuko kept that thought to herself.

"I'm so flat-chested," Mitsuko said in front of the mirror. "It's embarrassing."

"Small is beautiful," Margo said.

"But there's nothing there."

"There's you," Margo said. "What else does it take?"

"I need another glass of wine," Mitsuko said. When she drank it there was lipstick on the rim of the glass and that helped me feel prepared.

"Here," Margo said just before we went out, and dabbed perfume behind my ears and on the inside of my wrists. "Now smell," she said.

I did. It was the same perfume I had smelled on her neck and it gave my heart a sensation of longing. "That's you," she said. "That's who you are."

At the movies, as we waited in line for a ticket, I tried to keep my eyes on Margo, or the posters for coming attractions, and make eye contact with no one else. Anyone could be in the line. Jay could be there, Tutwiler, any professor I had ever taken a course from, Ellen the department secretary. Imagine if she knew – she whom every student and professor talked to, who knew everything about everyone, the center of the whole web. A man in line ahead of us stared at Mitsuko until his wife squeezed his hand and distracted him. The wife made an admonitory face and shook her head minutely, but he gave Mitsuko another once-over before she and Margo went in.

Even after they got inside, Margo wanted to buy popcorn, though I couldn't imagine she would eat it. Just to make Mitsuko stand in the lobby a little longer. At any moment she would be denounced and surrounded, people would be craning their necks to see over others' shoulders.

None of it happened.

Inside, in the dark, Mitsuko could slide down in her seat and hold Margo's hand and think about what might happen when they went home. And inside Mitsuko I was there as well, watching both of us. Not happy with what I saw.

We were on the couch side by side, feet up on the coffee table. We had one glass of brandy between us, which we traded back and forth. "Mitsuko?" Margo said.

"Hm?"

"Could you tell Peter something for me?"

"I wonder what he's doing right now," I said.

"You know where to find him, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Would you tell him he could come over tonight?"

"Of course." Hope came too fast, too strong; I couldn't stop it.

"But there's one thing he has to know."

Oh. "What's that?"

"I have my period. Just so he knows what to expect. He gets so upset because I don't give him what he wants, but really, tonight it's not my fault."

"All right," I said, not graciously enough.

"Make sure he understands?"

"I will."

"Thank you, Mitsuko. You're so good to me." Margo gave her a hug, a girlfriend hug that had little to do with me. "And thank you for going out with me tonight. I had a good time. I think I'll just go to bed now, Peter can let himself in. Tell him not to be too long."

"Goodnight," Mitsuko said.

The bedroom door closed, and as quietly as possible I washed off my Mitsuko face in the bathroom. I knew what she did not want from me tonight, but what did she want? I undressed in the living room, draping Mitsuko's clothes neatly over a chair, imagining Margo in bed waiting for me. She had never done that before, and what if this should turn out to be the only time ever, all this turn out to have been for nothing?

I was Genji visiting a lady's bedroom by night, but a Genji who would not have his way. On an inspiration I tiptoed to the front door, opened it as silently as I could, then closed it so she would hear it click shut and then lock. "Who's there?" Margo said sharply from the bedroom.

I said nothing as I moved toward the bedroom, opened the door on the darkness that I knew held her.

I heard her move suddenly on the bed. "No," she said, and there was fear in her voice and it wasn't pretend.

"It's me, it's all right, it's only me."

As if she hadn't heard, she turned on the lamp on the bedside table, her eyes wide, her knees drawn up, sitting up in her pajamas, cornered. When she was sure it was me her eyes closed, her head fell back against the headboard of the bed. "God," she breathed. "Don't do that to me. Never do that to me. How was I supposed to know?"

"I'm sorry."

She slid down on her side, turned away from me. I lay down next to her. "I didn't mean to scare you."

For a while she just breathed, recovering. "You know I have nightmares," she said, as if I had betrayed her.

"Is that what they're like?"

She didn't reply. Time passed, her breathing slowed. I drew my fingers through her hair; it glowed in the lamplight. We had never been in her bed together at night except in blackness.

"I thought you knew that."

"How would I?" Did she think we dreamed the same dreams?

I waited a while in silence but she didn't answer. "Look at me," I said. I tried to turn her over toward me. At first she wouldn't budge but then she did turn over a little so she could glance at me over her shoulder. I saw the girl in her again, the one I had always loved. "Did somebody...you know. Do that?" I said. "In real life?"

She turned away. "Don't."

"That beanpole? The tall boyfriend?"

"Stop. You already know everything, there isn't any more." She sat up and started to push back the covers as if she were going to slide out of bed and leave.

"Don't go," I said. I heard myself sound peremptory, but I thought if she did slip away, it would be the last time we would ever be there together. I touched her hand but I didn't try to hold her back, I only touched. If that was not enough then nothing was.

She looked down at my hand as if I had broken an unwritten law. Her hand moved away and we were apart. She sat studying the coverlet, picking invisible pills of lint from its surface, saying nothing but not leaving. I knew there wouldn't be another chance. "Listen," I said. I had to try to ask one thing even though I was afraid asking would drive her away. "What happened when you were twelve?"

She didn't answer. I had no idea what she made of the question. I waited for anything, and each moment that nothing came, I asked myself if that was her answer.

"I tried to sleep in the bathtub," she said without looking at me.

"What?"

"I took my pillow and my covers and I tried to sleep in the bathtub."

Margo was silent, and in the silence I thought maybe I did not want to know any more, after all, but I couldn't stop because for once she had answered me. "Why?" I said as quietly as I could.

"To get away from the sound of them. My mom. After they went to bed. It was like she pushed the sound out to me. I mean she knew I was right there on the other side of the wall and I couldn't help hearing. It sounded like she was being torn. Down there. But it was fake, I could tell she was making the sound on purpose."

I saw that I knew nothing.

"My dad took the lock off because we only had one bathroom. At night they just came in and did whatever they had to, like I wasn't even there. It was so disgusting. I guess they thought it would make me go back to my room."

I thought of her turning on the fan so I wouldn't hear her pee, the first night I slept there. A thing anybody might do. I was afraid that if I spoke, she would notice she was telling me these things and stop.

"After my mom would finish peeing she'd sit there on the toilet and start lecturing me. Grow up. You're being a baby. You're too old to act this way. After a while I tried to sleep on the couch in the living room. It didn't matter where I went, there was no place to go to get away from them. *They* thought *I* was crazy."

My stomach was sick imagining her in the dark house at night, looking for a place to be alone with herself and never finding one. I had to ask. "Did your dad do something he shouldn't have?"

"Oh God," she groaned, the very voice of disgust and disappointment. She flung herself down with her back to me, shutting me out. "I thought you were different," she said bitterly.

"What?" I said. "Wait."

"I should have known. Is that what you think every time you look at me?"

"No."

"How long?" she said.

"What?"

"How long have you been thinking that?"

"I'm trying to understand. That's all. That's all I'm doing," I said to her back.

"You really want there to be some big secret about what's wrong with me, don't you?" she muttered, more to the wall than to me,

as if maybe it was no use even speaking to me anymore. I fought back panic.

"Margo, please, you have to help me understand you."

She turned over abruptly to face me, propped up on her elbow, her eyes locked on mine. "No. You don't get it at all. You have to stop trying."

It took me a moment even to hear what she said. "How can I do that?"

She watched me in unblinking silence, waiting, and I was sure it meant that if I had to ask, I'd never find the answer. And if I didn't, then we couldn't be together. Finally she said, "Mitsuko knows."

I had no idea what to say in reply.

"Listen to me. There isn't any more. I'm just who I am, if you don't like me then go. Stop trying so hard to understand me. You already do."

"I do?"

"Don't you know that?"

"No."

She closed her eyes and shook her head as if she couldn't manage one more word.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"Stop. Please. Just stop talking for a while."

I didn't know what she wanted, only what I had to do. I pulled her down into the rumpled sheets and took her in my arms, and she did not resist. I held her and stroked her hair, feeling her wounded head beneath my hand, her heart beating against me. It had never felt this way to touch her before. My stomach was still sick.

"This is hard for you, isn't it?" she said after a while.

"Yes."

"Tell me right now."

"Tell you what?"

"Are you going away?"

"Stop asking that. I'm not going anywhere."

We were silent together for a while. "Anyway, all that's over now," I said, before I could think how stupid that was.

Pointedly, she said nothing.

"Why do you keep those pictures, why don't you just burn them?"

"There's too many things I can't remember already. I'm afraid I might forget everything."

"Maybe it'd be better that way."

"I'm not planning to forgive her." For a moment her voice frightened me, and I thought I understood where her power came from. There was nothing I could say, all I could do was be there next to her, powerless to alter the past.

We lay there holding each other and after a while we were all there together, Genji and Mitsuko, Peter and Margo, the grown-up woman and the girl self hiding in the dark, myself as a lost little kid wandering between my two lost parents, and even my sister who I somehow was, and who, in a different way, Margo was, everyone we had ever been and even, faintly, everyone we ever would be, together in the hope of peace.

In everyone's life there are things that happen to them that are beyond their control, there are irrevocable decisions they make when it is their turn to be in charge, there are moments after which something is different, and then there is *the* thing. For me it was right then, holding her, still smoothing out her hair. My life is divided into before it and after. Margo took a deep breath. "Could I say something to Mitsuko?" she said.

I had to wait a few moments for her to arrive within me. "Yes."

"There's something I need to say about last night. I know it seems like a long time ago now, but all day I've been meaning to say it. Last night Genji lost his head. He was reckless, he should have known better. But he couldn't stop himself. It only happened because he loved you."

"Really?" Mitsuko said.

"Really."

"And you know I'm his now. Whatever happens. Don't you?"

Margo put her finger against my lips. "Ssh. There's no need to say those things. If he doesn't know by now, he never will."

That night was outside time. We kissed for a duration that no clock could measure, and then I began unbuttoning her pajama top. Her touch stopped me but in a new way. "Remember," she said.

I remembered everything, but I said "What?"

"I have my period. So you can't."

I unbuttoned another button. "You could say that differently."

"How?"

"We can't."

"Oh," she said. But I could tell she couldn't quite say that.

"Trust me."

"I already did."

When she was naked and lying beside me openly, willing to be seen, she was the very landscape of truth. All I know is that we lay in a trance I cannot describe, unable to look away from each other even for a moment. We must have talked sometimes, but I barely remember it, except for when I said "You know last week, when you ran away? Before I left I took a key to your apartment. Out of the desk."

"Oh." She was quiet for a while, tracing a pattern with her finger on my chest. "Was that only a week ago?"

"A week and a day."

"What were you going to do with it?"

"I thought having it would make me feel better."

"Did it work?"

"No."

"I know."

"I'll bring it back."

She thought, and as she thought her mouth seemed to await a kiss. I gave it to her.

"Would you like to keep it?"

"Yes."

I know there was more that night, more that I can't say because it cannot even be remembered, it is so different from all the rest of life.

When we woke up in the morning we stayed in bed. After a while her hand moved down me until I knew she wouldn't stop; when she touched me I remembered her saying that once she had thought there was something more, like a pin. She curved her fingers tentatively around my hard penis, held me awkwardly, moved a little. I shifted so that it would be easier for her.

"Help me," she said.

I put my hand over hers, arranged her fingers, moved her hand.

"Like this."

"Like this?"

"Yes."

My hand that had been helping her traveled up her arm to her shoulder and then her neck and caressed her face. I was touching her lips when I came; she pulled away so that I wouldn't come on her. I dipped my finger in the sticky wetness on the sheet and touched it to her, between her breasts. "Don't," she said, but I thought it was only a reflex.

"It won't hurt you."

"Peter..."

I touched that same finger to her nipples, and she didn't stop me, but her eyes were wide watching me and she seemed to hold her breath, waiting for what I'd do next. "Be careful with me," she said.

"I am."

I went down and got the Sunday paper while Margo was making breakfast. We read it together on the couch, saying little; sometimes she read the section I was holding, leaning against my shoulder to do it. "Walkout threat by Haig and St. Clair put Nixon on narrow road to resignation." When she went away to get more coffee, she asked me if I wanted some, and when she came back she sat as close to me as before. "Ford talks to Cabinet." It didn't matter what we read.

After a long time she got up, set up the ironing board in the bedroom, and began to iron. I resisted the impulse to follow her. "Do you do this every Sunday?" I said from the couch.

"I suppose. I try to do everything I'll need for the week. It saves me a few minutes in the mornings."

"I'm impressed."

"Oh, don't be. It's just that I'm always running late on workdays."

If we live together, I thought, it will be this way.

"What are you going to do today?" Margo said from the bedroom.

I got up and went to the bedroom door, leaned there watching her. She was a small woman, delicate-boned, my beloved, I had no desire to do anything but be where she was. Yet if this was our life now, I could honor it by doing what I would always have done; if we were together then we would be, wherever I was. "I guess I ought to see what I can do about my proposal. I don't know how much there is, really. That I can change."

"Just be strategic, that's all. You don't have to sacrifice your principles."

"How'd you like to be my ghostwriter?"

"I'll be your consultant, if you want."

"Editor?"

"My spelling is terrible."

"I can handle that part." She upended the iron and came over to me in a way that said she had a right to be held by me before I left, and I had a right to hold her.

At home I found a letter from my mother in the mailbox, but I didn't open it. She'd have to know about Margo one day, there was no preventing it, but not now, not yet. A neglected Clarice yowled about her lack of fresh cat food and how much she resented my absence. "Come on," I said, "I know you just slept the whole time." She had deliberately left a turd on the floor outside her cat box, to punish me. I opened the back door after feeding her and she shot out, down the back stairs to the messy little no-man's-land between the carport and the back fence, where the landlord kept the garbage cans and the remnants of his half-baked maintenance projects.

How strange it was that Margo still had never set foot in my apartment. Even now I couldn't imagine her sleeping in my bed, or

doing anything in my place except maybe perching on the couch waiting to go somewhere else. I could imagine us stopping by for a moment, to get something – she would look around at the way I lived, noticing everything whether I wanted her to or not, the noise from outside, the cat box, the smudges around light switches and on door frames where my hand had rubbed a thousand times. She would be curious but would she be willing to stay? If Clarice got up on her lap, would she pet her, or would she make her get down? All I could picture was us going back out the door. She would not be sorry to leave, and we would end up back at her apartment, where our life together lived.

There was so much for us to learn.

I rooted around in the desk drawer until I found her key, and put it in my pocket. I sat down and tried to read over my proposal, but I kept looking up and seeing the apartment through her eyes. Finally I gave in and went to the kitchen, pulled out a bucket and a sponge, and began to clean. A year of fingerprints, an extended family of unvacuumed dust bunnies. The more I cleaned, the more needed to be done to make it ready. Scraping with my nails at hardened yellow droplets clinging to the kitchen walls was a way of saying I loved her; maybe she'd never know that, but I would.

Yet I still had to convince Tutwiler there was more to my argument than tail wagging the dog. That nagging thought finally got me to stop cleaning and go to the library; in the catalog of the East Asian collection I worked my way through the books about the Tokugawa period in Japanese as I had done many times before, looking for promising titles. Something even halfway relevant to what I was trying to say. But not too relevant, please. The last thing I wanted to find out was that someone had written the whole thing already.

Standing in the stacks, I knew what he'd say: How could I peer into the minds of the populace, a hundred and fifty years later, and prove that Kabuki helped propel them into the streets? When the farmers were starving, did the *onnagata* represent their needs? No, of course not, but...

What about the farmers anyway. That was what he wanted. Economic forces at work. Give him enough of that, maybe then. Sitting in front of a drawer from the card catalog, I had glum visions of the kind of book I did not want to read anymore, exactly the sort Rottweiler himself had written. The first one I reluctantly opened

claimed that the class consciousness of the emerging proletariat brought on the downfall of the regime. Marxism would get me in more trouble with him than Kabuki.

I pulled down Tutwiler's book, the one I had been in awe of when I first walked into his office, and stood among the full shelves reading it for the first time in several years. The notion that the evolution of agricultural markets was the key to the era was just his pet idea, for Christ's sake. His method of proving it made his theory right, and it was the right method because his conclusion was valid, and of course he thought I begged the question because his was a closed system, forever confirming itself. How could it have taken me so long to understand that even Tutwiler had proved nothing, except to himself?

It's all up to you, Margo had said to me, just figure out what you want to write. Perhaps Tutwiler had done exactly that long ago. But by the time I came along he had forgotten that, and his choice had hardened into truth.

When I left the library it was late afternoon; the sun was low and warm. Margo's place was a lot nearer than mine; when I got in the car I knew I could drive there, walk up the stairs, put the key in the door and she would be surprised but then not – I thought. What if I was wrong, though. Maybe she needed to be alone and that was why she had let me know it was okay to leave? Don't get ahead of yourself, I thought, and turned toward Mountain View. Don't imagine you're suddenly going to sleep there every night. But I had always gone too far with her, why would I stop now?

When I got back to my apartment I called her and she said, "Are you at home?"

"Mm-hm."

"I know we didn't say anything about it, but I was kind of hoping you'd come back."

"Oh. I should have, I was at the library."

"Silly."

"I just wasn't sure if you'd want me to."

"Am I that hard to understand?"

"I don't know, I'm just slow sometimes...now I miss you."

"You didn't before?"

"Then, too."

"Good. Well, you'll just have to keep on, I guess."

"What about tomorrow?"

"You are going to call me, aren't you?"

Wait, I thought. We don't have to still do that, do we? "No, seriously. Tomorrow."

"Oh. Seriously," she said, mocking me laughingly, and made kind of a glow in my chest. "All right then. If you say so."

"I do."

I opened the back door thinking Clarice would be waiting to come in; she wasn't. I went looking for her. She almost never left the lot the apartment stood on, just pretended to hunt among the junk along the fence, or got in yelling matches with other cats, or curled up and lurked there like a beast in the jungle. I knew she could hide from me if she wanted to. She could keep so still in the shadows that I wouldn't see her from five feet away; I kept calling her, though it felt foolish to be repeating "Clariice" in a loud, wheedling voice. She was not to be found. She wouldn't run away, would she? Cats could do anything and you couldn't stop them. What if she got hit by a car? I went inside and ate dinner, telling myself she would come back when she was ready.

At nine o'clock Clarice had not returned. Paying me back for being at Margo's so much. I went down the back stairs again and called "Clarice" along the fence, in the carport. I got a flashlight and looked under cars. I went out to the street, but where would I even begin? Still, though it seemed absurd, I walked past the next few apartments, self-consciously calling. No luck. I tried the other direction for a while. Maybe she had left for good. Fed up with having her needs ignored, and who could blame her?

On the way back into my building my flashlight reflected off shining eyes under the bushes by the driveway. "Clarice?" I said. There was no movement. "Come on, cat-face, is that you?" I came closer, the crouched cat didn't bolt, it was mine. When I got my hands around her, she poised her teeth against my wrist as if to bite me, but didn't. A message.

"All right, I'm sorry," I said, pulling her out from under the bush. "Can we go inside now?"

In the apartment I put her on my lap and petted her for several minutes before she was willing to purr. "Things are just going to be different," I said. "There's going to be changes, you'll have to get used to them. It'll be all right, you'll see."

In bed alone, I felt I was proving something I didn't want to prove. As if I meant to say to Margo I could still manage fine on my own; as if, after trying so hard to get close to her, as soon as she let me I changed my mind. She wasn't thinking that, was she? Let her not misunderstand, not now...

Maddening to know she wanted me to share her bed and I was not in it. Made no sense. I knew, didn't I? Why else did I think of going back to her place? Except I couldn't seem to trust myself. Or was it I didn't trust her. No place for that now. This was no game anymore, we were not apart.

If the phone rang I would get up now and go there. Keep my promise to be on call. Of course it didn't.

All day at the library, I tried to find a way to make Tutwiler think he was hearing from me what he wanted to hear. As I read and made notes a part of me never stopped thinking of Margo, of holding her, when we became more than one and one. Now and then I allowed all of myself to think only of her for a few moments, but no longer because I knew if I didn't resist, the book in front of me would evaporate, and so would the library, and Japan, and I'd never get Tutwiler's seal of approval. Had he ever felt this, as he sat over a book? He was rumored to have once been married, but if he had been, he no longer was. Had he ever learned to take the advice of Basho, or was he only in life to seek explanations, to think with rigor about provable facts?

Perhaps he had tried to live that way with his wife. And that would have been why she left. A mistake I was not planning to make with Margo. There were things about her I would never explain – hadn't I always known that? But without words, I could be her. She had taught me herself.

All of the previous night's doubts vanished as soon as I saw her. We ate dinner, we talked about what Tutwiler would ask me and what I might say. She got me to read to her a scene from the *Genji*, and then we went to bed. Her period gave us a reason why we couldn't make love, a reason that wasn't hers, that just was. Easier that way, we could kiss and touch in almost freedom.

In the morning, when the alarm went, daylight sneaked past the curtains, and her eyes did not deny me the privilege of seeing her by day. She didn't rush to cover herself as she got up, but as she put her robe on I saw the night self slip away. "You can stay in bed if you want," she said, "but it's late for me, I have to get ready now."

When she came back from the bathroom she had brushed out her hair. She sat down and made herself up, plugged in her curling iron. The kettle whistled and she rushed out. From the kitchen she called, "Do you want some tea?"

"No, thanks."

She came back with a cup in hand. Would she not eat anything? "Have something later if you want," she said, watching herself in the mirror as she wound her hair with the curling iron. "You know where everything is."

She regarded herself in a dissatisfied way, plucked at her hair. "I should have gotten up earlier and washed it. If only somebody hadn't kept me from going to sleep." Her eyes slid over at me, momentarily teasing. "But don't watch me, okay? It makes me nervous."

I had been waiting to see her get dressed. I got up and put my robe on, brushed my teeth, returned to find her dressed in a pants suit and low heels, grimacing at herself in the mirror on the back of the door and giving her hair glancing strokes with a brush. "This will never do," she muttered.

"You look gorgeous," I said.

"Oh you're sweet, but really," Margo said distractedly.

"I mean it. You're Ms. Professional."

"I'd better be," she said, looking at her watch. "Oh God, this is so typical, I have to go ten minutes ago." Off the coffee table she grabbed a copy of *Fortune*. "I'm sorry I have to run."

"Just a second," I said, taking her in my arms. She put hers around my neck; I felt like the wife in my silk robe, holding her all dressed for work. For a moment we were as close as close. Somehow she managed to break away. She kissed me hastily. "I'm sorry, I really have to."

"I know."

"Call me later," she said, and was out the door. It shut behind her with a click, cutting off the sound of her rushing footsteps, and the apartment was abruptly quiet. Alone, I thought of the first night, when I came out of the bathroom and found her gone, and the morning she ran away. Now as if I were at home I became a floating awareness

unseen by any eye, existing from the inside. A consciousness that made coffee and ate an egg and a piece of toast.

After breakfast I cleaned up the kitchen. Time to get dressed. I went in the bathroom to comb my hair, and seeing myself I realized I had been feeling like a caterpillar turned butterfly and living a newly created life, but no, there I was, the same Peter who would have to go back to the library and face facts, no closer to the answer than the day before. What the hell *was* I going to tell Rottweiler, anyway?

Silently, Margo's apartment said I didn't have to turn back into a caterpillar if I didn't want, I could be who I chose. You make the rules, she had once said, and I didn't believe her but maybe I did after all. Maybe Mitsuko heard and inwardly assented. Or was that before there was a Mitsuko? Perhaps there always was, and Margo knew that when I didn't.

I went and sat down at Margo's vanity, still in my robe, and looked at what was in front of me.

You know where everything is, don't you?

Yes.

Could it be that...

Would I, then?

I picked up a lipstick, uncapped it, twisted it up, leaned forward and applied it to my lips. Rubbed them together.

Good morning, Mitsuko.

Hello, Peter.

Why are we doing this? She's not here to see.

All the more reason then.

I don't really think...

I do.

Mitsuko took up the eye liner and began to draw, taking her time, with care. Stage by stage she brought herself into being, and the more she worked, the more I became convinced she could go to Peter's place that way, a solo flight that would make Margo proud of her. She searched out the black dress, because it had been the most successful thing she had yet worn, put on her pantyhose and even the same silver necklace, though it took her several minutes to learn how to manage the catch.

Really? We're going to walk out the door like this, without her?

Trust me.

Mitsuko put Peter's clothes in a paper bag, his wallet and keys in her pocketbook. She stood in front of the full-length mirror until she had fully absorbed her own image and was sure she coincided with the

woman she saw there. Then she turned off the lights, took a deep breath, and left, pulling the door shut behind her.

True, the dress looked much more like Friday night than Tuesday morning. But better to be a woman oddly dressed than a man trying to look like a woman and failing. The building was quiet as Mitsuko crossed the courtyard. There were a few papers lying in the entryway – “Greece quits NATO as Cyprus war erupts.” The mailboxes were opened up and the mailman was filling them. He only glanced her way once. Mitsuko saw she did not interest him sexually and so to look closely would be a waste of his time; invisible she emerged onto the street. A few blocks away, on Lytton and University, people would be in offices and stores working away, having left the houses and apartments to their own silent devices, to make it through the day alone, like pets. Some people stayed home, no doubt, but they apparently did not wish to be disturbed, they pulled their shades or did not look outside. Or they did, hoping, but no one came to alleviate their solitude.

She had a bad moment when a Highway Patrolman stayed behind her for a mile on the freeway, but he sped up and passed without turning his reflector shades toward her.

It occurred to Mitsuko that if one of Peter’s neighbors saw her drive in and park, they would know it was his car she got out of. But so what? He could have gotten himself a girlfriend. Japanese like him, that’s the kind he would have of course, it made sense that way and once it did, they would stop looking before they really saw.

Mounting the outside steps toward his apartment, Mitsuko felt herself female under the dress. She put Peter’s key in the lock and stepped inside; Clarice came off the couch and rubbed against her ankle as if nothing were different. The Mitsuko-sensation began to elude her; was she just Peter in disguise?

His proposal was in the typewriter, his stacks of books waited, the rooms were knee-deep in his habits.

She went into Peter’s bedroom, to see herself in the mirror.

Look what we did. Wait’ll she hears.

I knew you could.

What now?

Oh, now...I suppose I have to go.

Don’t.

This is still life, you know. You still need to get on with the day.

In the mirror Mitsuko gave herself a little wave, from waist level. Then she took off the black dress and hung it up in Peter’s closet.

I knew the library so well that in it I was invisible. I could have found my way into and out of the stacks in the dark. I knew the faint squeak of its floors underfoot, one librarian's bald spot and another one's favorite scarf, the soft breathing of ventilators and the clack of card catalog drawers sliding home. Deeply familiar frustration hung in the air like the scent of floor wax, not just my frustration but that of everyone who wanted the final piece of some puzzle from a book they never found. Frustration tolerated for years and finally accepted, even embraced, as the honorable burden of scholars.

I knew how to follow a trail of footnotes as well as anyone. That was not so hard. The trouble was, the trail either branched and then branched again, or circled back on itself. If it circled back, what was within the circumference was already too well known, picked over and played out; if it branched, life was too short to finish the search. The trail I was following branched. Nevertheless I continued.

In mid-afternoon I came upon a paragraph that I could have written; if I stuck it into my proposal, it would not seem out of place. "It is possible," I read, "to interpret their political satires and artistic themes as expressions of an autonomous commoner morality and world-view which conflicted with the official Confucian ethics and embodied a current of protest against them." So, I thought, I'm not the only one. The footnote told me that Takao Kazuhiko, whoever he was, would read my dissertation and say Yes, of course. Tutwiler almost certainly didn't know that. He might not care, but then again he might decide my ideas were worthy of at least a little respect. Of course what I held in my hand was only someone else's paraphrase, I would have to get Takao's book, published in Tokyo...he had beat me to it by a few years, but did it matter? There would be something minutely different

about my argument, and that was all it would really take to justify yet another footnote. If the books surrounding me proved anything, they proved that.

The library didn't have Takao's book. I knew they would try to get it for me, but it would mean yet another delay, and there was no time for any more of those. Even if Tutwiler saw it, it was a toss-up whether he would say that meant there was no purpose in my making the same point over again. I would have reasons why it was not the same, why the difference was in fact crucial, reasons which I would advance in hypocrisy and which he would know how to refute. I could see, I thought, all the way down that road.

I put back the book I was holding and left the library. I had done what I could do and it wasn't crazy after all. There was no more.

I made it to the East Asian Studies office just as Ellen was getting ready to go home. "Is Tutwiler here? I need to see him."

"Right now?" she said, which seemed to mean, Don't you know it's time to get out of here?

"When he can. I could just leave a note in his box."

"Well, I think he's in. If you want to go see. At least he was in here a while ago complaining about the budget. If he wouldn't photocopy entire books, there'd be plenty to go around."

"Some people are just more equal than others."

"Tell me about it."

The department was nearly empty as I climbed the stairs to Tutwiler's office. I could hear Ellen locking the office door. The old wainscoting gave off a dusty smell, the same as ever. Tutwiler's door was open and he was behind his desk. He saved old blue books, tore out the parts students had used for their exams, and made his notes on the unused pages, in tiny, exact handwriting; he was doing so as I stood in the door and knocked softly, twice.

He finished the sentence before he looked up. For a moment he was himself alone, in the middle of a thought he was reluctant to give up, and then he assumed his professor face. "Mr. Obata," he said evenly, giving nothing away.

"If you're not too busy – I could come back, I was in the department and I just thought I'd check to see if you were available."

"No no – this time is as good as any. Better than some. I was expecting to see you this week."

"Yes."

He gestured toward the chair. I sat down and he looked at me as if to say, Well?

There was an awkward pause.

"Do you have a revision to show me?"

There was nothing to do but say it. "Um, no. What I have already given you is my proposal."

"You chose to disregard my comments, then," Tutwiler said. Apparently it came as no surprise.

"The more I look into it, the more I believe what I have to say is valid. I'm not the only person to make such an argument."

"Interesting. How so?"

"There's at least one author who takes a similar position. Though we don't have this book in the library. It was published in Tokyo five or six years ago. By someone named Takao Kazuhiko."

"Where did you find it?"

"It was alluded to in a book on late Tokugawa."

"Mm." He regarded me over his glasses. "So, only a paraphrase? You don't have the actual source?"

"No. As I said, Takao's book is not in our collection."

Tutwiler studied the upper bookshelves behind me, as if he might find it there. No luck. The silence became wearing. "In short," he finally said, "there really is nothing new to report about your proposal."

"If you want to look at it that way."

"Mr. Obata. I have to ask you the same thing I asked you last week. What do you want me to tell the department about your progress toward the degree?"

"Is that my decision?" I said, and instantly I heard Margo's voice saying Don't answer a question with a question.

Tutwiler shut his eyes briefly as if asking invisible powers for patience. "I have tried to give you every opportunity to influence it positively."

The words I wanted to say were so clear in my mind I thought for a moment I had spoken them aloud. When did you ever really do that? But what came out was "Apparently I was not destined to succeed."

Tutwiler's eyes shifted away from me and back, locked in. "Let me be perfectly straightforward, Mr. Obata. It's too late for anything else. There's some sort of basic misconception at work here. I'm beginning to think that graduate students believe we bring them here to indulge themselves. I hope you don't imagine this field of study exists for the entertainment of recent college graduates who happen to be fairly clever."

I held my tongue.

Tutwiler leaned forward. "I would have sworn you were an extremely promising student. What happened? It's obvious that something's missing. I don't even know what it is. I don't like saying this, but you don't give me any other choice. Did you not understand what getting a Ph.D. was all about? Did you think it was supposed to be easy?"

He waited, as if in genuine distress that I might relieve if I said the right words. "Hardly," I managed, which was clearly not enough. He sat back and I saw his face become set and closed.

"I don't know what you think is going on here. I suspect you believe my colleagues and I are fools, just because we were born two or three decades before you. Let me tell you, we have not wasted our lives. We're a good deal tougher than your generation, and we've been through things you have no conception of. Unlike you, we don't think about ourselves all the time. We have a life of the mind. We are actually capable of devoting ourselves to an impersonal ideal. I'm not even sure you understand what that means."

"Thank you for making that clear," I said, in a shaking voice that threatened to become much too loud.

"We don't owe you a fellowship, Mr. Obata. Our financial aid monies are not limitless. We can't support years of vacillation."

Did he want me to say I understood his position? Tutwiler would extort nothing more, certainly not that. I stared at a point on the wall behind and slightly to one side of his head. My neck and back were like iron. Don't let him win. Show no emotion. No apology. No whining. No concession. No anger.

"I suggest that you apply at once for a leave of absence."

I stood. Tutwiler did not, as if that courtesy or ceremony would be more than I deserved. How easy it would be to pick up the desk lamp, bring its heavy base down on his head and kill him.

"Before you go, Mr. Obata, let me put it in words of one syllable. Grow up."

To become as admirable as you, Professor? To live a life as fulfilled as yours? But the words did not leave my mouth. I turned my back. Walk away, do not speak, do not slam the door, do not even bother to close it. But in the doorway I stopped, turned to face Tutwiler one more time. Maybe I would have said my piece for once if the man behind the desk had not looked so small and drained. We stared at each other, stuck in baffled feelings.

"You're old, Professor Tutwiler."

"I'm aware of that," Tutwiler said in a flat voice.

"Were you ever young?" I said, but as soon as the words left my mouth I felt they were pointless. Without quite looking at me, he raised his hand off the desk with palm toward me, pushed it at me like a policeman halting traffic. For a moment, before his hand dropped back to the desktop, he pointed over my shoulder toward the hallway.

"Go," he said dully.

I went.

So five years of a person's life could come to an end as abruptly as that.

If I failed, you failed, I thought. You taught me nothing, you are no teacher at all.

My feet were on the dust and gravel of the Quad, crossing diagonally with no clear destination, past the side of Memorial Church, behind it, where was I going? The Registrar's Office of course, not to join the ranks of students but to leave them.

Grow up. I heard Tutwiler say it again, so superior, so condescending, and saw red, ready to strangle, to choke the life out of a living man and watch him struggle and die. You think being like you is so great, so fucking important...I ducked behind a high shrub, between it and the wall of the church, and hid my face in my hands but did not cry as I feared I would. If I had been Mitsuko I would have. But I passed through the moment and took my hands away. I leaned my forehead on the gritty cool stone, hidden from the world.

What I should have said when he told me to grow up: I have. But no words would make him believe that. Even if he did, so what? Tutwiler was the easy part.

I remembered you calling me "Professor" once, and now you had a lover who was a nothing, who had no answer to the question "What do you do?" That was bad and there was worse. Thank God my father would never have to know, would never understand and give me the look, worse than any words, that would say You have failed us. But my mother would, and it wouldn't be "us," it would be You have failed me, your mother who would do anything for you, who has lost everything else in life already and now this, too. As if she would have sat there in the audience at commencement, if only I had not failed her, and when the doctoral hood came down over my head it would have restored her daughter, her husband, her hope, her youth. All lost again, lost at my hand now, the old cruelty done to her this time not by the world but by me. I wanted to run out of my skin to get away from that look I

could already feel, intolerable weight of her eyes on me reducing me to an atom, but no matter how small it might crush me I would never be able to squirm away. Let me out of here, out of being me, but there was no out and besides if there was a way out of me I would lose you too and I couldn't bear that...

Suppose you said you were disappointed in me in a quiet polite voice and then silently swam down into the invisible depths of yourself, suppose when I went to touch you, you slipped through my fingers like smoke and irrevocably away, suppose there was never an answer on your phone or when there was, it was a voice I hardly knew saying safe neutered words...

If that happened.

Nothing else came, a blank if that happened, erasing me.

I stood with my head against the church, filled with fear. I had not tried to pray, not really meaning it, since I was a kid, but I tried.

Afterwards I raised my head and looked around. Had anyone seen me there, like that? But it was August, the workday over, the campus emptied out. The only sounds were my feet on the gravel and the scratching of palm fronds that rubbed together. As I crossed the Quad I wondered if Tutwiler was still in his office, if he would look out and see me and think Good riddance, or something much darker, hating me even, I would never know. I did not look up to check his window. I felt in my pocket for her key. It was there.

I drove to your place wondering if you would be home from work yet, if you would open the door and see me and somehow know. No. I would have to say it. How long before it would sink in, before you would really reply.

I had crossed the dusty courtyard of your building, mounted the steps with the railing rough under my hand where rust was coming through the black paint, in uncertainty and desire and hope and relief and even daring to feel I might be coming home, but I had never done it like this.

I rang the bell but somehow I knew the apartment was empty before I touched the button. I let the reverberation die away and put your key in the lock, opened the door. Quiet inside, the apartment waiting for you to come home and bring it back to life. I cranked open a couple of the casement windows, letting in air and the sound of cars and the smell of eucalyptus; I adjusted the blinds on the side where sun was beating in. I couldn't sit down. I straightened the magazines on the coffee table, put the pencils on your writing desk in their cup, arranged the pillows neatly on the bed. Please come home, I

thought. The vanity reminded me of becoming Mitsuko, alone. Her dress at my place now. She had helped us many times, but this was not something Mitsuko could do anything about, was it? Please come home. I tried to find a place to be when you came in, where should you find me, how should I try to look, but it was absurd wasn't it to try to look any way. Maybe you would be tired from work and just looking forward to putting your feet up or taking a shower and I'd be in the way, secretly you would wish I had not chosen this moment to surprise you, you'd try to hide it but I would know. Why didn't I bring some flowers, that was what people did of course on the way home from work, buy flowers, but I never seemed to think of anything like that until too late, no I could go now and get some, then if you arrived while I was out I'd come to the door with a bouquet in hand the way I should have weeks ago probably. Except I was really broke now. I was hesitating, fingering my car keys, when I heard your key in the door and you opened it and saw me. I wasn't ready, neither were you, you stopped with your hand still on the doorknob. You looked me up and down as if you had to make sure it was really me.

"Peter," she said, when she was certain.

"Hi."

She came in all the way, closed the door behind her, set down her pocketbook on the counter. "When did you get here?"

"Not long ago. I let myself in. Is it okay?"

She came over to me and took hold of the front of my shirt between two buttons, as if I might try to get away. "For a smart person, you ask the most foolish questions sometimes." A look of amusement broke through. "But you're learning, I guess."

I kissed her and she wanted to be kissed, but what I had to tell her was humming inside me, making a hollow place in my chest. "Wait a minute," she said. With one hand she held onto my shoulder while she slipped her shoes off with the other. "There," she sighed. "I'm not wearing those for at least a week. Or maybe a month." She draped the jacket of her pants suit over a chair, plunked herself down on the couch and patted the place next to her.

I sat down by her and took her hand. Her fingers slipped between mine naturally. "Listen," I said.

"Wasn't I?" she said saucily, but I didn't go on. "What is it?" she said in a different voice.

"Something happened today," I said. I couldn't seem to blurt it out, it would be too real if I said it out loud, I couldn't go on.

"Peter, what? Don't make me wait, it's not good is it, tell me what." Her eyes blazed out at me, ready to defend herself, I knew.

"I told Tutwiler I wasn't changing my proposal, and he kicked me out of the program."

I felt as though my face wanted to cry and laugh at once; I had to keep it from turning to Silly Putty by an effort and it wasn't working. She shook her head slightly. "Oh Peter," she said. She put her arms around my neck and held me. "Are you okay?"

"No."

"You scared me." She drew back so she could look at me.

"I didn't mean to."

"What happened?"

"He just – threw me out – he never even listened to what I had to say – it's five years of my life, you know how much work I've put into this, and then today, just like that –" I was afraid I might lose control of my voice.

"Getting fired is always like that. You never get used to it."

"Fired? It's more than a job," I said.

"Not really," she said. "Not any more. It didn't even pay decently anyway."

"All I've ever really been good for is this, you know?"

"No, it isn't. And don't say things like that to me. Do you think I don't know better?"

"No," I said, but she must have heard that I wasn't sure she wanted to know me like this.

"What did he say to you?"

"Bad stuff." I didn't want to repeat it.

"Tell me."

"Basically he said I was wasting their fellowship money, I didn't even understand what a Ph.D. program was all about. He told me to grow up."

Her eyes held mine. "That's his problem," she said disgustedly. "Not yours. Whatever he said, it doesn't change you one bit."

She dropped her gaze and seemed to think for a while, privately. I would have put my arm around her if she hadn't been holding on to my hand.

"Try not to worry," she said. "You'll find something. I've been fired before, I know it hurts, but you always do find something. Honestly. Sometimes it's for the best."

She was leaning against my shoulder. We were quiet for a while; I was trying to imagine what I could possibly find. The sun got lower and redder. After a while she said, "I think I'll take a shower."

She went into the bedroom, reappeared in a white terrycloth robe. "I won't be too long," she said. "Don't go anywhere."

While you were in the shower I found the want ads from the morning's paper and read them with growing bewilderment. Where do you start when there is no reason to do one thing more than another? I could always run an ad for myself. Position Wanted. Male, 28 yrs, bookworm, good with bibliography, seeks gainful emplmt. Smart, but slow learner. Few practical skills. Need to preserve girlfriend's respect. Pls reply soonest Box Such-and-such.

She came out of the bathroom in her robe with a towel wrapped around her hair; a cloud of moist warmth came out with her. The sun was shining horizontally against the blinds; shadows were beginning to creep up at the bottoms of the windows. She sat down by me on the couch, rosy and fragrant under her bathrobe, and tucked her feet under herself. "That's better," she said comfortably, as if we did this every day. "What are you doing? Are you reading the want ads already?"

"Mm-hm."

"Well, don't. You don't have to find another job today."

"I have to pay the rent, you know."

"We'll be okay."

I had to think about those three words for a bit. "You're sure?"

She nodded. "Don't worry."

Perhaps that was not possible, or perhaps it was. No telling what she might know that I didn't. No telling what might happen if we were called "we." She smelled like shampoo and a hint of perfume.

Margo took the want ads away from me, folded the paper up neatly and put it on the floor. "Enough of that." She took my hand in her lap, traced the lines in my palm with one finger. "I'm sorry he said those things," she said. "He didn't have to do that to you."

"You know what was the worst? Besides telling me to grow up? He told me all I do is think about myself all the time."

"I don't like this man one little bit."

"Actually it wasn't just me. It was everybody my age. Our age."

"He doesn't know anything about us."

"Do you know what this is going to do to my mom?"

"I don't care about your mom. All I care about is what it's doing to you."

I turned to her and took her in my arms, hid my face against the warmth of her neck and the damp tendrils of hair escaping from the towel wound around it. The tears that leaked out of my eyes felt no different, warm and wet, maybe she didn't notice. "It's okay," she murmured. "You did what you thought was right." That made me cry in a way I couldn't hide; she held onto me until it went by.

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be."

I wiped at my eyes with the backs of my hands; she unwound the towel from her hair and offered it to me. "That's better, isn't it," she said.

I leaned back, let my head fall back against the sofa, closed my eyes. So much for that. "Do you realize I've basically been working up to this damn degree my whole life?" Margo leaned against me and I put my arm around her. We sat there like that for some time, her head on my shoulder, her damp hair soaking into my shirt. Shadows made their way to the top of the windows.

"Now you get to start again."

Once more I tried to imagine what that would mean. "When my father started again, he became a gardener."

"You could too. If you want."

"Some rich lady's Japanese yard boy?"

"You know that's not what I mean."

"How would you feel?"

"What?"

"With a boyfriend like that?"

She sat up away from me. "Do you think I care about that?"

"I'm sorry."

"You have to trust me, Peter, I trusted you."

I wanted to take her in my arms again, but we couldn't get comfortable. She turned herself so she was kneeling facing me on the couch. Her head was bowed. "Please tell me something," she said.

"All right." I had no idea what it could be.

"Is Mitsuko here?"

"Oh. Want to hear something else you don't know? It was Mitsuko who left here this morning, after you."

"Really and truly Mitsuko?"

"Mm."

She looked up at me with a smile. "That's wonderful. What did she wear?"

"The black."

"Oh...I knew she could do it. Did anybody stare?"

"I don't think so."

"So now when I want her to go out with me, you won't argue with me, will you?"

"I don't know about that."

"Is she here now?"

"Wait," I said. It took a few moments to feel her inside me. "Yes."

Margo took a deep breath and let it out. "Mitsuko?"

"Yes?"

"I have to apologize." She spoke in such a way that I knew she had worked up her resolve to say the words, but I had no idea what she meant.

"I've become so used to being the shining Genji and having my way."

"Oh," Mitsuko said. I was only pretending I understood.

"It's only because you let me. I didn't really think enough about that. I thought I was the strong one, I didn't stop to think how you had to be strong too, to give what you've given me. Maybe I was thoughtless and rash sometimes because I don't believe in being afraid. If I've been unfair to you, will you accept my apology?"

Unfair? Of course it was unfair, but that didn't matter. What else could it have been? "There is nothing for you to apologize for. Nothing."

Margo closed her eyes momentarily, where Genji might have bowed. "Thank you."

"But sometimes I wonder if someone like you, someone anyone would say yes to, can ever know – "

She squeezed my hand so hard it hurt. "No more of that. No more ever now. No one is stronger here, or better, or more beautiful."

The sky was purple between the blinds, the room was beginning to grow dim, to tuck itself in around us.

She ran the fingers of her free hand back through her hair. It was starting to dry and turn wavy again. She played with the ends of it, keeping her eyes on her lap, almost shyly.

"Mitsuko?" she said in a soft voice.

"Yes?"

"Please don't go away."

"I wasn't planning to."

"I mean when Peter and I are together. Whatever we do, even the secret things. Stay with us. I mean from now on. Please."

"All the time?" In such simple words life goes over the edge.

"You don't have to say anything, or show yourself at all, just be there with us. I just want to know you're there. Promise me. Please."

"I promise," I said. Mitsuko and I both did. It was too late for anything else. Too late for anything but this. And how could I ever have imagined that this would turn out to be what I would promise someone – what I would, of all things, want?