

OVER THE FENCE

a novel by

Lowry Pei

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1

I remember I was next to the back fence when I almost died. I was in the back yard, doing nothing, wandering around scuffing my feet in the old leaves that were spilling off of the pile that I had put there the previous fall, and what was I thinking? Nothing cosmic enough for such an occasion. I was probably thinking about work without meaning to, or trying to figure out why Ellen was feeling however she was feeling, and then I found myself lying on the ground by the back fence, my face turned toward the house. My cheek felt ground into the dirt. I had no memory of getting there; I seemed to have fallen without knowing it. I wanted to feel my head to see what had hit me, but nothing seemed out of the ordinary, and besides I couldn't move my arms or, it seemed, any part of myself except my eyes, maybe not even them, except I was focusing sharply on some grass stems inches from my nose and it had been several years since I could focus well on anything that close, and they looked peaceful and shimmering there in the shade with the pear tree behind them and the afternoon light glowing on the grass behind that, and while I watched, a big, gorgeous, iridescent bug came into my view and made its way over some leaves, a beetle all purple-green, "like a Japanese beetle" I thought but it wasn't one and I knew that. I loved it for being there right then so I could see it, so shining and hard and changing colors as it moved, its clever legs clambering purposefully and smartly over the leaves, full of its own intelligence, and for an instant I saw just how smart that beetle was, smarter than I would ever have imagined, and how the beetle was living its own life walking over that grass and those fallen leaves, but also the grass and the leaves were living theirs, and even though they were not walking, their being exactly as they were, to be walked upon by that

beetle, was every bit as purposeful and intelligent and complete as the beetle's walking – and then I almost died.

That part I can't remember. I want to say that my soul left the body and I could see myself lying there next to the fence and I felt the silver cord connecting my soul to my body get longer and longer and thinner and thinner, and say that I even saw Charlotte Carter from next door turn around from her lawnmowing and spy me lying there and run for the house to call 911 – and that then I went down a long tunnel, toward a light that pulled me towards it, and I saw the outlines of familiar figures in the hazy brightness ahead of me – and that then a voice told me I had to go back – but I don't remember anything until I came to and it was like I was under some sort of white shelf, and it turned out to be the starched bosom of a nurse who moved away, revealing fluorescent tubes and acoustical tile and Ellen, and Ellen saw my eyes were open and started to cry. But just before she started to cry, in that instant, our eyes met and I realized she looked guilty. I saw it. And something else: she knew I saw. Maybe that was what she was really crying about. Guilty of what? For one second I was as smart as that purple-green beetle: she wanted out. And if I died, how clean an exit that would be for her. No guilt, no blame. She wouldn't even have to move out, if she could pay the rent on the house. I was thinking about whether she could afford that when my vision started to repeat itself, the same scene behind itself, behind itself, and dwindling to a silver dot, and I seemed to back-dive off whatever I was lying on. Then it's the middle of the night, I'm in a hospital room, somebody is breathing stertorously in the next bed behind a curtain, my brain feels like a horsehair sofa and my mouth tastes like I've eaten one.

I lie there and send my attention into all the various parts of my body cautiously, without moving, except the slightest wiggle of fingers and toes to be sure they work, and all the parts are there and still alive. I can tighten the muscle in my thigh and make the covers twitch a tiny bit, just as I always could. I can breathe all the way down into my lungs. I can contract my anus and send a little shiver up through my balls and my penis. I try to feel if there is anything wrong, if there is some terrible ominous ache that I'm somehow ignoring, not letting myself get the message that it's over for me after all, but the more I feel around with my mind inside my body, the less there seems to be to find. Something has definitely happened, but I'm still here. I start feeling with my fingers to see if parts of me hurt. There seem to be some minor bruises where I landed when I fell, but that's all. What the hell happened to me? It must be my heart. Isn't it always the heart? I begin to think of things it isn't. Aneurysm, cerebral hemorrhage, blood clot to the brain – did I have a

stroke? But both my arms work. I try making faces as I lie there in the dark, grinning with bared fiendish teeth, sticking out my tongue as far as it will go. My face still feels like my face. Mental illness, more likely. If a doctor comes in and finds me impersonating a crazed samurai – I start giggling and try to stop. But if it giggles, it's alive. Unless maybe this is the next life. So try and buzz for a nurse. But what would that prove? If the afterlife turns out to be exactly the same as . . . there is a dim light from the windows, reduced to almost nothing by the curtain that separates my bed from my roommate's. He got sick first, he got the bed with the view. Only fair. But I can't look out and see if I'm still where I think I am. I feel the lamp on the table next to my bed, looking for a switch, and finally find it. As soon as I turn it on, the stertorous breathing stops, and from behind the curtain a hoarse voice whispers, "Turn that. Off."

I recognize that voice, I'm almost certain; and nothing seems impossible anymore. "Erdman? Is that you?"

"Off," he replies. To hear him say that one word, all the grievances in the world seem to be summed up in my having turned on the light. Exactly like when we were roommates at Moo U.

"What are you doing here?"

No answer. Maybe this *is* the afterlife, and we've both died and been sentenced to one another's company for eternity, for our sins. I turn off the light.

"What are you doing here?" I ask again. Still no reply. Maybe he expects me to explain myself first. "They stuck me in here because I collapsed, or something. All I can remember is lying in my back yard, then the emergency room or something, then here. Somebody must have called the rescue squad."

"Pay attention," Erdman croaks, surly but weak and short of breath, unquestionably sick. Pay attention to what? I wait for him to go on, but all he does is wheeze, and in the darkness the wheezing seems amplified, too loud to be real, almost like twigs snapping. Jesus, is he in trouble.

"Listen, you'll make it," I say. "Whatever it is." But there is no reply except his effortful breathing, and I can feel that he is lying there awake focusing all his attention on every breath, and maybe he isn't ever going to get up out of that bed and leave the room. But I'm alive, right?

I lie there and remember hating Erdman at times – hating his smelly size twelve feet and his pile of gray T-shirts in the corner and his dandruff, hating him for being male like me and the two of us having to live together in our smelly unbeautiful maleness, wishing we had girlfriends. If I can still remember how that felt, still feel it somewhere

inside, I must be living. His door was always closed, and on it was a sign that read, "The occupant of this room is either sleeping, masturbating, or copulating. Keep out." "You wish," I wrote under it, but he didn't bother to reply. And now here we are again. I can't smell his feet, and he isn't doing any of the famous three things. It seems like half a lifetime since college, but not long enough for him to be over there struggling for each breath, or for me to find myself, without warning, lying next to my back fence with my face against the dirt. My feet are cold, I realize, and they shouldn't be cold on a May night in Missouri, and for a second I think Oh shit, here it comes after all. I wait for the cold to come creeping up my legs and paralyze me inch by inch and let me know I've died, but nothing happens. Maybe they just have the air conditioning too high.

"Erdman," I whisper. I figure he can pretend he didn't hear me if he wants. There is a long silence while he keeps breathing and I keep waiting after each breath for the next. "Remember the sign on your door?" He doesn't answer. I give him time, but why should he? And anyway, if I want to talk, how can he stop me? "Remember Betsy? I was the one who met her at that party, remember? And I was stupid enough to tell her I couldn't go to that concert she had tickets to because I had a date already, so I fixed her up with you and then I came back and I had to listen to her moan all night while she sat on your face? I spent the whole night sharpening pencils while you gave it to her. Didn't your dick ever need a rest?"

He doesn't answer. "Remember the time you pushed the pumpkin off the windowsill and it went flying down from the fourth floor and smashed on the sidewalk right in front of some guy, and you leaned out and yelled, 'What the hell did you do to my pumpkin?'"

No reply. I try to hear if there is any difference in the breathing. Maybe he doesn't care about those old stories anymore; maybe he doesn't care about anything outside that room or the next breath.

"Remember when you put the condom on the hood ornament of the Dean's car?"

Erdman starts to cough, violently, terrifyingly, with a retching sound as if straining to throw up his lungs; it sounds as if a hand reaches down his throat and rips something up out of him. Something with roots. I lie there feeling the hair on my arms prickle in horror. Is he dying? Shouldn't he be on a respirator or something, in intensive care, somewhere where people are watching him in case of something like this? I can hear the bedsprings being punished by the weight of his body hurled against them, as if he were in the electric chair and the warden threw the switch. Gradually it subsides, with periodic eruptions that I can hear him

try to stifle until he is only wheezing, and I can feel the tension as he focuses everything he has left on not coughing again. Time passes. I lie there, thinking of how many cigarettes he smoked in those days, maybe three packs a day – how, contrary to the sign on his door, he hardly ever slept more than four hours a night, which was why he had time to fuck Betsy half of Sunday and play pinball the other half and still write a history paper that was due Monday morning. Maybe it was the cigarettes. I smoked then, too. I remember morning cough. It wasn't like this.

"Erdman?" I say. I have to stop myself from saying "Are you okay?" which would only be the most inane question imaginable.

"Why are you in here?" he whispers.

Didn't I just tell him that? He's more out of it than I am, and selfishly enough I find that reassuring.

I feel my own breathing gliding smoothly, follow the air down into my lungs and back out, lay my hands on my diaphragm and feel it rise and fall, relish the tickling of the tiny hairs inside my nose as I breathe out into the darkness above me. All of a sudden I remember having a cold once when Erdman and I lived together, and how he ordered me to stop coughing because it was getting on his nerves, the unreasonable bastard, and now I wonder if even then he had some kind of foreboding that it would come to this. No, impossible. But I could be a little nicer to him, couldn't I?

How the hell did Erdman go from being the guy with the pile of gray T-shirts in the corner and the *Playboy* stuffed under the bed to what he is now? He's married, he has two kids, his wife seems like about the nicest person on earth, and what he's ever done to deserve that eludes me, just like why he was the one who got to fuck Betsy a hundred times, instead of me, when I met her first. Or why he owns a house big enough for him and his family and an in-law apartment for his ancient father, while Ellen and I are still renting. I wish he would tell me how all that happened, right now, before he dies and it's too late.

"We're going to split up," I say, and that surprises me – not just hearing myself be so certain, but why say it out loud, and why to Erdman, of all people? Why tell anyone – but why not go on, now that I've started? "Me and Ellen. My girlfriend. She's going to leave me. She doesn't know it yet, but she's going to." Then I almost forget about him, breathing there, as I lie and stare up at the dark ceiling and that sinks in. She's going to leave me. One day soon. Find a place, pack her stuff, and split. I remember we made love on the living-room couch among the unopened boxes when we first moved into the house.

"She knows," Erdman whispers. What the hell? Where does he get off telling me that?

I lie and think about Ellen: maybe she does know, maybe Erdman's right. I picture her in our bed at home; is she worrying about me? I can see her lying there propped up on one elbow, looking out at the back yard. A view I've liked for a long time – not just the yard, but her in bed. I remember how I was dying to get her there, almost as soon as we met, how seeing her, and the way she looked at me, made me fantasize about how she'd look naked and what she'd be like in a state of passion, dying to have her let me see that, to share everything secret with her . . . she knew how easy it was to make me want her, right from the start. It was all over for me the second she started to flirt with me and let on that she might want me, too.

Now I keel over and practically die and she's going to leave . . . just thinking that makes me tired, and Erdman's breathing is finishing the job, wearing me out with the labor he's putting into it, with the struggle of staying alive when after all it could end any moment – I know that by now, after what happened in the back yard, and the secret is it might not even be so hard to let go, it might be fine after all, only the bed feels like it's sliding forward, carrying me feet first into the dark, and all of a sudden I don't like this one little bit, it's picking up speed and I try to sit up but can't, I feel as if some sort of animal is lying on my chest, and for one instant I glimpse the branches of trees overhead against a black sky, and I have a premonition that there is an abyss I am being carried toward, stranded on this hospital bed, and just before I get there I either hear or dream that I hear Erdman's rasping whisper one more time: "You don't know a damn thing, Averill."

I woke up when someone came in to take my temperature at seven a.m. She was young and black, very dark, her hands were warm and when she took my pulse her fingers felt as if they had been lightly dusted with cornstarch. I realized the room was silent. "Where's Erdman?" I said around the thermometer. The curtain was no longer up, in the light of day the other bed looked perfectly unused. How did they get him out without waking me?

"What? Don't talk for a little minute," she said absently, as if we were related. What must it be like to touch other people, strangers, every day?

She took out the thermometer, glanced at it as if she already knew what it said, and shook it down with one fling of a powerful wrist. "What you say, now?" Her voice was mock-scolding.

"Erdman. The guy in the other bed. What happened to him?"

"I don't know, hon, I just came on shift. And I wasn't on this floor yesterday. But neither were you, huh?"

"You've been reading my chart."

She gave me a conspiratorial glance as if I'd flirted with her, and I thought there was some young black man somewhere who was very very lucky, or maybe there wasn't yet, but there would be one when she got good and ready, and he'd better appreciate the gifts that the gods had given him.

"What does it say?"

"Now you know a nurse's aide ain't suppose to act the doctor. But you don't look too bad this morning to me." Then she pursed her lips as if

she thought better of saying that. She turned away and made tracks out of the room on her white rubber shoes, all business.

Where the hell had he gone? The empty bed was made with those impossibly tight tucks at the corners that only hospital orderlies know how to make, the sheet was taut and smooth as a drumhead. He sure hadn't gotten up and walked away, that much I knew. Maybe they came in and wheeled him out while I was dead to the world. Or while he was. Maybe not a figure of speech. I didn't like thinking that.

Left alone, I lay there and took inventory again. My body felt so normal that what had happened the day before seemed impossible. A mistake. I imagined it. The whole thing, including Erdman, was a dream. Except I was apparently in a one-hundred-percent real hospital bed, and they didn't put people there for bad dreams. Which made me remember how the bed had slid forward into God knows what, and the hospital room, even in daylight, began to spook me again. Get the hell out of here, I thought, before anything like that starts up again.

Cautiously I swung my legs over the side and sat up, waiting to have my head feel like a balloon somewhere up around the ceiling, to have my legs fold up under me like accordions when I tried to walk, but everything worked, everything was fine, I went to the bathroom and peed just like a normal person and in the closet I found my clothes. There were grass stains on the knees of the pants, not too bad. Otherwise you would never know that the person wearing them had fallen on his face without warning.

Here it was morning, after seven, time to get up. Get dressed, go to work, peddle some insurance. What did you do the day after you unexpectedly collapsed and ended up in the hospital? I sold a life insurance policy. How much sense did that make? At least I could parlay this crazy thing into some time off.

But the truth was, I wanted to get the hell out of that room. There might not be an Erdman there, but I wasn't so damn sure there wasn't . . . something.

At any rate, there was a phone, and when I had my clothes on I picked it up and called Ellen. She answered on the second ring and when she said "Hello?" she sounded rushed and scared, and her voice halfway scared me.

"Hi, it's me."

She let out her breath as if she'd been holding it in. "Are you alive?"

"What do you mean, am I alive? Of course I'm alive, I'm calling you, aren't I?"

"What did the doctor say?"

"I haven't talked to the doctor yet. I just got up."

"You got *up*?" She sounded scandalized. "You got out of bed?"

"Yeah. I feel okay, why not?"

"Do you realize when they brought you in there yesterday, you didn't have a pulse? Your heart wasn't beating? They called me at work and when I got there they said at first they weren't sure they were going to be able to bring you back," she said, her voice rising in a way that I knew was on the borderline between tears and anger.

"Well, I'm back now."

"Don't you even *care*?"

"Hell yes, I care," I said. Did she have to sound so indignant with me? It wasn't my fault I had missed the whole thing. "What's the doctor's name?"

"Arnesen. At least that was the last one I saw before I went home last night. I can't believe you sound this normal."

"I can't help it."

For a moment neither of us said anything; I sat perched on the edge of the bed listening to Ellen breathe, and I felt I had to close my eyes to pay better attention. Suddenly, as we sat there, hooked to each other by telephone silence, it was like being a teenager all over again, on the phone with my girlfriend, trying to sustain the illusion of being together. "Where are you?" I said.

"In our room."

It was as if a woman I had only seen from afar called me up from my own bedroom and called it ours.

"Are you going to the office?"

"No."

"Can you come get me?"

"What if they don't want to let you out?"

"Get me anyway."

"All right."

As I hung up my heart was pounding. It worked today – that much was clear. I felt in my pockets to see if I still had my wallet and keys and Swiss Army knife; I stepped out into the hall, trying to look unremarkable, and checked the number on the door. No one in the hallway except an orderly pushing a cart of linens. "Where's the nurses' station?" I said to him. He gave me a dubious once-over and grudgingly tilted his head in a direction.

The nurse behind the desk had a couple of extra badges pinned to her uniform, medals for valor under fire probably. She looked the type. "Could I speak to Dr. Arnesen?"

"I'm afraid he's not on duty right now. Was it concerning a patient?"

"Me. I was in 317. I'm going home."

"Sir, um – " Her eyes flew down a list posted on a little stand in front of her. "Mr. Lucas, I'm not sure that's at all advisable. I really think – "

"It's okay." Most people in the world seem to have a hard time figuring out that Lucas is my given name.

"Would you have a seat, please?"

"It's okay. Someone's coming to drive me home." I started walking.

"Mr. Lucas!" Someone, somewhere, had taught that nurse what the military calls "command voice," and my foot stumbled a little when she said my name, but the mistake of the "Mr." in front of it allowed me to keep moving toward the elevators. I thought I heard her punching buttons on her phone; when I got to the elevators I took the stairs instead. No one in the lobby was interested in me. I came out into the outside air and sat down to wait for Ellen on the edge of a concrete planter where some pansies in full bloom were enjoying the end of May. The lines on their faces charmed me. A group of medical students in short white coats were clumped around a bench near me, talking with an earnestness that almost seemed like play-acting. The sky was pale in a way that meant it was starting to get hot, the tan brick buildings were as uninteresting as ever, but even they looked good now that I knew dying was the easiest thing in the world. Like falling off a log. Stop giggling. I could stop worrying about that, forever, and just enjoy the sun shining on my face. Enjoy the fact that I was still walking, people answered me when I spoke to them, Ellen was coming to pick me up. But what about the look on her face in the emergency room – maybe I had it all wrong – a car drove up and it wasn't her; an old man, helped by his old wife, laboriously got out using a four-footed cane and doddered past me and I thought, What the hell happened to Erdman? Surly bastard that he was, was his wife somewhere crying her eyes out right now, were his kids wailing that they'd never see their Daddy again? I tried to think when I'd seen him last – or maybe it wasn't even him, but if it wasn't – but then Ellen drove up in my car and the shining of her eyes, looking at me as she stopped, drove everything else out of my mind. It was as if her eyes pulled me toward her, past her hello and her "Are you really all right?" and made me put my hand in her hair

and hold onto it and kiss her. It was a real kiss, the kind we hadn't had for a long time. "Are you sure you shouldn't stay and talk to the doctor?" she said; her eyes said differently from her words. I kissed her again.

"I can talk to him later."

"You aren't going to die on me again?"

"No." She put the car in gear. I remembered the first time I ever made love to her, how I called her up in the middle of a Sunday afternoon and we were talking on the phone and I had such a hard-on from talking to her that I had to hold onto it just to be able to stand it because I knew, or I thought I knew, that we were only stalling for time, that there was only one possible destination for us, if only, somehow, but yet the magic words had to be said and what were they? "Can I come over and see you?" I said and the word "see" vibrated the way it does when someone says "Oh, I didn't know you were seeing her" and "yes" means Oh yes, I see all of her, naked, in a state of abandon, and she sees me, and we don't just see but we touch and all the other unpolitely mentionables are compacted into the innocuous little word "see." "Can I come over and see you?" I said, and she said, "Well . . . I don't know if there's much to do over here," and the teasing in her voice told me everything and I said "We'll think of something" and all the way over in the car my heart pounded the way it was pounding now. My hand rested on her thigh, curving to the inside, in touch with the long lively muscle of her inner leg as she drove, and just once she took her hand off the gearshift and touched my leg, high up, a little higher and she would have felt the hard-on she probably knew she gave me when she touched me. It felt as though we mustn't talk, mustn't even look at each other until we got into the house for fear of undoing whatever it was that had made her strange and daring and scary and willing all over again, carried us back to before the beginning. I closed my eyes and let her drive me anywhere, just so I could feel my hand touch her leg, feel how the back of my hand was just inches from a promise. We pulled over to the curb and she moved my hand away; maybe she knew I couldn't. Up the walk, we didn't touch, the screen door made the same creak as ever behind us and I closed the front door as she stopped in front of me and waited for me to come up behind her and cover her breasts with my hands, run my hands down her and feel her hipbones through the thin cotton of her pants. Her head was pressing back against me, her hand came back and for a long moment covered my hard penis. Then she took my hands away. "Wait," she said, and went into the bathroom.

The most wonderful wait in the world, for your lover to put her diaphragm in. Waiting and knowing. I bend down and untie my shoes,

kick them off, pull off my socks; silently I stand in the dim hall between the bathroom and bedroom, next to the coats on hooks that we won't need today, contemplating the old floorboards, listening to the sounds: tearing off toilet paper, then silence, then water running briefly. Quiet again. I'm barely breathing. My penis throbs in my pants, pressing against the khaki cloth. I want her to come and touch it. The bathroom door opens and she comes out into the shady hall in her panties and a camisole and nothing else, head down at first so that her hair hides her face, and then raising her eyes to mine. She is barefoot and her long legs are bare all the way up and she comes up to me, ready. We kiss; she begins to undo the buttons of my shirt with fingers damp and cool from being washed, and I can smell the faint perfume of contraceptive jelly, of sex, mixed with just her, her hair, the taste of her mouth. My hand goes down her as she pulls my shirt out of my pants; I feel her hipbone and the mound of her pubic bone, and down becomes under and the silky thin material of her panties clings to my fingers and to her, I want to press into the liquid softness of her cunt but I only stroke with my fingertips, teasing her wetness. She pulls down my zipper, reaching into my underpants, and I'm kissing her and then my shirt is on the floor and so is everything else and she takes me in both hands, stroking me toward her with her fingertips as if I need to be persuaded. Half-holding her I lead her toward the bedroom, and then we're on the bed kissing, body to body, and she is so wet and I am so hard for her that I go into her without even thinking and I am looking into the face of bliss, the bliss of anyone since the world began lucky enough to be able to surrender to bliss, and that face is my face, and my body is not my body anymore, her soul enters my body and mine hers and we own them both alike, to use however we want, together, with no laws except delight. When she comes it makes me come, or the other way around, and we rest together in a trance, unable to take our eyes off each other, and after some unmeasured time I'm hard again and she is hovering over me, her hair hanging down around her face and mine, making a tent for us, a canopy for our love. I know no one in the world could be luckier than we are, that it has all begun again.

We slept. She got up and peed, brought a glass of water back from the bathroom and we shared it, sitting side by side resting against the headboard, looking out at the back yard, the pear tree, the spot where I had keeled over. "I got the fellowship," she said. "Yesterday. I'm going on the dig. I'll be in Wyoming this time next week."

"Wyoming?" I echoed as stupidly as if I'd never heard of it. But I can't touch you in Wyoming, I can't see you naked next to me on the bed, your strong legs and the curve of your belly, with the sun cutting a

burning stripe across you and making your pubic hair glisten, if you're in Wyoming. You're a new Ellen, we just started over again, you can't go now. "You got the fellowship?" Weren't we just now soul to soul up above our bodies, soul in soul, or did I just make that up?

"I really was beginning to think I'd never hear another word from them, it's been so long since I applied. But I got it. Yesterday. I was too late getting off in the morning to take my lunch, so I came home to eat something at noon and I found the letter. I went back and told them at the Highway Department – I was cleaning out my desk when the hospital called me about you."

Maybe that was why my heart quit on me, because this was going to happen; I felt it was going to kill me all over again. She was going to drop it without thinking twice. Don't you even *care*, I wanted to cry out, just as she had to me a few hours before, don't you care that after two years we just received what everyone in the world wants, all over again, does it mean nothing to you? But I didn't say anything, I turned to her and held her to me as hard as I could. She put her arms around me, but the strength wasn't in them, she was being nice to me now, in a second she would start patting me on the back like a preoccupied mother with a suddenly affectionate child, and I felt as if it would have been better if she'd never – but no, it wouldn't – I wouldn't give up what we had just had for anything, and how could she?

"I'm glad we made love again the way we used to. That's what I want to remember about us," she said, her face against my shoulder. "I was afraid we never would. I thought you weren't interested anymore."

She thought *I* wasn't? "I don't want to remember it, I want it to happen every day, how can you just leave?"

"It's time," she said. I could feel her lips move.

"But what about this? Today, us?"

"I'm still here, I'm not leaving till Sunday or Monday, we still have some time before I go." Her voice was serene, gentle, sublimely calm, and I was a small boy throwing a tantrum in front of a goddess, but I couldn't stop.

"Why did they bring me back if all you're going to do is give me this and take it away? How can you?" How dare you, I almost said, but even then I knew that was going too far.

"Lucas . . ." She put her hand on my chest and pushed herself back a little so she could look at me, so that I would have to look into her eyes and see that arguments, that any words at all were not just futile but even pitiable. If a hurricane is coming, you don't argue with the weatherman; you decide whether to ride it out or run. She was offering me the choice.

But it was no contest. Would I rather have her for three or four more days, or would I rather have pride? I might be a fool, but not that kind; I kissed her, and regardless of what it didn't mean she kissed me back. It was like no kiss we had ever shared before.

I called the office and told Ron what had happened and that I was taking the rest of the week off; I knew he didn't like it, but there was no way he could argue. I called Dr. Arnesen and after I convinced him I was okay he told me a lot of technical stuff which added up to he didn't understand it, but I made an appointment with him, just to make him feel better.

It was impossible for me to get enough of Ellen; I practically followed her around, until she started to pack. I couldn't watch the familiar books and clothes, our life together, go into boxes and be labeled and hauled off to the post office. I knew all those clothes – some of them I had even bought; I had seen her put them on and take them off; I knew which things not to put in the dryer when I did the laundry. I had hung her underwear on a line to dry so many times that it had stopped feeling like an unusual act for me to perform. Most of the boxes went to her parents' house in Kansas City, or her sister's in Minneapolis; you don't take blenders and stereos with you when you go to dig up dinosaur parts in Wyoming, where even if there's a town on the map, it's nothing but a gas station and a post office. She was thrilled. After five years of doing the archaeology that the Feds told the Highway Department they had to do before they could run a road over anything old – sixty days, crew of three, get what you can – she was finally going to the major leagues. She had always been about four hundred times more interesting than me, I thought, as I weeded in the back yard so I wouldn't have to see her go through the stuff in the kitchen and separate hers from mine. She had already told me she was going to leave me her best kitchen knife and a frying pan she knew I liked, which seemed mocking compared to what I

wanted, but I was ready to take anything of her that I could keep. Kneeling on the dirt with a trowel in my hand, I was waiting for night to come and her to be done with her list for the day. And feeling hunger gnaw at my stomach, the way I had felt constantly since she had said she was leaving. Cavernous. Eating any amount of food made no difference.

While I weeded and Ellen packed, Vic, my neighbor on the side opposite the Carters, sat forty feet away. Vic didn't work anymore; he sat in his back yard, in his folding aluminum lawn chair with the fraying plaid plastic webbing, drinking glass after glass of dark brown iced tea, his eyes hidden by black wraparound NoIR sunglasses, and except for lifting the glass he didn't move for half an hour at a time. He was in his late fifties, or maybe the early two hundreds. The day we moved in, Vic had wandered over, wearing the sunglasses that absolutely prevented seeing his eyes, smoking a Camel, and said that whatever we did we must never block their driveway. But in the friendliest way. Given that I had a driveway of my own, it wasn't hard to agree to that, but why the hell would I block it anyway?

In his driveway was an enormous brown Chrysler, about twenty feet long and twenty years old, and each morning his wife, Ida, came out and drove off in it to do whatever she did, giving off an unmistakable emanation of cold rage. She never looked at me or spoke unless it was absolutely necessary. She did not allow smoking in the house, so Vic would come out on his front porch and light up and watch the street; he knew half the people in Columbia, had checked out groceries at Nowell's for twenty-five years, had two daughters, one in Jeff City, one in Ohio. Booze had done something to his heart, the doctor had told him he was a couple of months away from killing himself, so he had left the checkout line and gone out in the yard to sit with the never-ending glass of iced tea. He was still there. In the middle of each afternoon Ida drove the Chrysler into the unblocked driveway, dragged out another lawn chair, and sat there next to him, and as they sat they would not speak. One morning Vic had told me, as we each put out our trash, that Ida had left before dawn to drive to Ohio for a visit and he hadn't known where she was until he saw her note. He said it laughingly. A good joke on him.

He was there now, on the other side of a low hedge, as I weeded my garden and tried to convince myself I wasn't really hungry. Politely, he stayed turned away from my yard, silent, unmoving. Perhaps he knew everything that was happening on our side of the line, but he would never let on, would never even seem to know I was present unless I spoke first. I could agonize all I wanted, undisturbed.

Charlotte Carter distracted me from it by coming out into her back yard and asking me how I was doing. She stayed in her yard and just sent her voice over to ask – maybe she found it scary to talk to me after what had happened.

“I’m okay,” I said, getting up. “I seem to be, anyhow.” It was embarrassing to have almost died in front of somebody I didn’t know all that well. “I guess you saved my life.”

“Oh, I didn’t do that much, I just called 911. I’ve always meant to learn CPR, but I never did. It scared me to death when I saw you lying there like that.” There wasn’t a fence between their yard and ours, only a flower bed of Charlotte’s whose edge marked part of the boundary. She stepped over the invisible dividing line as if she wanted to examine me more closely. Make sure I was really alive. “You should have seen yourself. I was afraid to move you. When they rolled you over to give you CPR, you had dirt in your mouth.”

“I did?”

“I thought you were a goner,” she said, nodding in a satisfied way. Interesting experience, to see your neighbor croak unexpectedly. She was wearing baggy exercise clothes, as she often did, and her hair was pulled back by a headband. She had a long, narrow nose and had always reminded me of a collie, not one of the neurotic, overbred kind but the solid, well-brushed, well-behaved type that you might see on the cover of *Field & Stream*. It was impossible, dirt or no dirt, to imagine her putting her mouth on mine. I had insured a number of houses that she had sold around town.

“I guess the rescue squad thought so, too.”

“Yeah. They had you out of here in a *big* hurry. Are you really okay?”

“Far as I know.”

“Well,” she said; she seemed to be at a loss for how to end the conversation.

“I know, it’s weird, isn’t it?”

“You can say that again.” She looked relieved to be able to. “Well, I’d better go get Jason.” Jason was their four-year-old; it was time for him to come home from day care. She turned away and the next second, before Charlotte was even back in her own yard, I was thinking about Ellen again, the way that sometimes in sleep, after an amazing dream, I would go over it and over it the rest of the night, trying to make sure I would remember it when I woke up. And yet it would vanish when my eyes opened, often as not.

You don't become an archaeologist without liking to dig, and Ellen's hands were callused and as strong as mine; when she wrapped her legs around me and squeezed I could have been in a python's grip. The shampoo she used had a smell I associated only with her. She was gushy and sentimental with cats but not with children. She read constantly, she liked thousand-page novels and hard books that I never got to the end of. Once she started, she wouldn't give up, but I seldom finished the books she brought home from the library – African art, Rollo May, Karen Horney – they were too much like going to college again.

Her favorite of all hard books were mythology, especially Greek. She should have majored in Classics, I told her, and she said she would have except it was even more impractical than what she did major in. It made her happy to puzzle over the story of Eros and Psyche, or Aphrodite caught in a net with her lover by her husband, the lame blacksmith; and why did Aphrodite love the god of war? Ellen told me once that in myth nothing, including love, was exactly what it seemed. But after a year or so, she stopped telling me what all that reading made her think, as if her serious life was not for the likes of me. The only time I heard about it, after a while, was when her friend Cora would come over and they would have long complicated kitchen talks, late into the night. I thought that it was Cora's presence that kept Ellen from leaving me out; when they got ironic and philosophical and sad after a few glasses of wine, Cora always wanted to know what I thought. It wasn't as though I had nothing to say, but I could detect the impatience in Ellen when I spoke, even if Cora couldn't, and after a while I would get up and leave them to explain the world to themselves. I always wondered if she was waiting to tell Cora what she was tired of about me.

But she had liked me once, a lot; when Ellen and I had first begun to be lovers we had spent three whole weekends uninterruptedly naked in my apartment from Friday night to Monday morning. She taught me to French braid her hair, she let me photograph her naked. Once, after making love for a long time in the middle of the night, she said, "I feel so free with you, I feel like I can do anything." She wasn't shy about coming into the bathroom and peeing when I was brushing my teeth, but it took me a year to be able to do the same in front of her. She drank cup after cup of coffee but it never seemed to affect her at all. She could lie on her side with the arm that was under her crooked slightly behind her, and her wrist and hand emerging from the space made by the curve of her waist, in perfect comfort. It was dangerous to put my fingers in her mouth while we were making love, because she would bite them without realizing how hard. We had skinny-dipped once in Hinkson Creek, in some woods on

the east side of town, and been seen and whistled at by three guys who looked like frat brothers with nothing to do, but we just giggled and stayed underwater until they went away. We had tried to read aloud all of *Middlemarch* – it was her idea, she wanted to be the one person in her book group to do it – but even Ellen didn’t have the persistence to do that. She had gotten an incredibly good deal on an old Mercedes diesel, which made a loud rattling noise and smelled bad and was built like a truck and required technique to start it in the winter, and at the wheel of it she looked like a queen on a throne. She was outdoors a lot, didn’t mind weather, could drive up a muddy two-track country dirt road in a rainstorm and not get stuck, could tell immediately if a rock had been chipped by a human hand. Sometimes she would lie on the couch all Sunday in her bathrobe and a pair of my gray athletic socks, and read some two-inch-thick biography and only look up to say, “Would you turn the record over?” Sometimes she would fiddle with me in the middle of the night and wake me up; sometimes I’d try it and she would bat my hand away. When she had her period she slept with her panties on but she never wore a nightgown unless it was freezing cold. She loved to be licked. The first thing she ever said to me about sex was “I like anything wet.”

But there had been the other part, too. Maybe more of it than of what I wanted to remember. The silences, the freezing looks, the all-night muttered fights, the repetition. Weeks when I would leave the house in the morning and yell obscenities in the car on the way to work, when my stomach would knot up as soon as I came in the door in the afternoon. When she had to argue with me about everything I said. So tense that once in the middle of a horribly self-conscious silence as I was putting away the dishes I knocked a bowl off the counter, it cracked in two on the kitchen floor, and I went berserk and kicked it into a million pieces against the cabinets and kept kicking until I cracked the cabinet door. Ellen’s face was dead white. Then she came over and hung on my neck as I leaned, panting, on the counter, and I think we both wanted to cry, even if we didn’t, and that particular era ended. But it was not the last of its kind. Too hard, I thought sometimes, drained, just more than I could deliver.

Now she was leaving, and she made it look easy all day long as she packed. Then she would turn her attention to me, and I would feel it, and my stomach would stop growling emptily and everything but the moment would be forgotten, and while we made love and for a while after, it was as if the meadow of the present moment stretched out to infinity, and nothing else, not even her leaving, could ever come or ever change the way that moment felt.

But five mornings after the day I fell over in the back yard, I drove her to the airport and she checked her bags and kissed me and said goodbye and despite how anything had ever felt, her hand left mine and she turned her back on me and walked away without hesitation, through the gate and did not look back, and no matter how long I stood there and watched that door she would not be coming through it, and that flight was through boarding and the people who had come to see their loved ones off dispersed and the ramp agent and the baggage man stood leaning on the little lectern by the gate desultorily drinking coffee out of paper cups and occasionally glancing at me, wondering why I was still hanging around, and she was gone.

I got in my car and drove back to town, the car too quiet, too empty, no trace of her except a faint whiff of her shampoo when I got in, and a gum wrapper on the floor.

A block from my office I saw her Mercedes coming up the street toward me and my heart leapt, for an instant she hadn't left after all, we would pass each other and wave and when I got home from work she would be there . . . but she had sold her car to Cora, and it was Cora, of course, tickled to be driving down Eighth in Ellen's royal chariot; she beeped at me, waved so I couldn't pretend not to see her. Not that I didn't like Cora – I always had – but for a moment I thought she was rubbing my nose in Ellen's departure.

"He-e-e's back!" Ron crowed from the inner office when I walked into Martin & Gray. "It wasn't the Big Chill after all." What he meant was, There's a ton of work on your desk and on top of that, you're late.

"I had to take Ellen to the airport," I said automatically, before I thought of how saying it would echo inside me. Sandy at the front desk looked up at me as if she picked up something funny, and probably she did; her radar was very good. Or maybe it was just because she knew I'd been in the hospital. "Are you feeling all right?" she said.

"Yeah. Thanks."

"I heard you were – " I could see her fishing for a polite term.

"Deceased? Yeah, so I hear. But it didn't take."

By her face I could see that wasn't the way I was supposed to talk about my miraculous resurrection. "Well, I'm *glad* it didn't," she said, as if correcting me about something.

"What's new around here?"

She sighed a Monday morning sigh. "Very little."

The coffee pot was half empty; I made it three-quarters and went to my desk, where neat piles of new work, Sandy's trademark, floated on

the stormy sea of my own mess from the week before. Auto policy renewals, mostly; some of them already filled in by Sandy and needing nothing but my signature, some with Post-it notes in her back-slanting handwriting: "Call Mr. Kellaway about his deductible." A fax from State Farm about the rise in fraudulent claims for windshield damage. How you can prove to a client that Whole Life compares favorably to an IRA or Keogh plan. I appeared to have half-completed a set of forms for a claim about storm damage, but I had no memory of doing it. Contact your congressman concerning proposed changes in federal regulations. While You Were Out.

Out losing Ellen and almost losing everything else – who gave a damn about Mr. Kellaway's deductible? Why did even Mr. Kellaway give a damn about a few bucks one way or the other? Did he love anyone, did he have a life or not, that was the question, not whether some bozos might one day hit his car and how hard they'd have to hit it to make it worth his while to pay his goddamn premium. May you be T-boned by a large piece of Detroit iron, Mr. Kellaway, and every dime of your premium shall be returned to you tenfold.

I began signing the completed renewals, mechanically, because it required no thought. Who needed me here, anyway? Sandy could run the whole office by herself, probably better than it was run right now; she could do my job no problem and still answer the phone and deal with the people who walked in. Give her a car phone and she could go out and adjust claims too. Ron and I were nothing but parasites, the only difference between me and him being that I knew it. And I sat in the outer office and wasn't supposed to take more than an hour for lunch. If I could ever have pretended I gave a shit I'd be in charge, I'd have taken over when old Len Martin retired, but of course it was Ron who did because he bought the whole damn Happy Meal of corporate life. I remembered being on the plane to some regional sales meeting with the two of them, Ron and Len ordering a Chivas about every ten minutes as if they were duty-bound to get drunk on the flight to Chicago, talking meaner and louder the more they drank. "I like you okay, Karnowski," Martin snarled at Ron, "but if you don't produce I'll fire your ass, you know that, don't you?"

"Hey – I wouldn't want it any other way," Ron shouted. He reminded me of a guy I went to high school with, Barton Schmid, short guy, very muscular, all chest. The first guy to have hair on his chest, proud to take his shirt off in the locker room and show it off – I remembered him in the shower after gym singing a song that went, "She's just an innocent kid, she doesn't know what she did, she's just a personal friend of mine,"

the whole song at the top of his lungs as if he didn't know that all the other guys were there, as if he didn't know we were all trying to decide whether he was full of bullshit or not. He drove like a maniac, drove right over a traffic island once when he decided things weren't moving fast enough for him, played football of course. I heard he never made the team in college, probably ruined his life. Truth was, Martin would never fire Ron's ass, or even mine, for business reasons. He didn't pay that much attention anymore, x-ing off the months to retirement and his condo in Tarpon Springs, talking tough on the plane to get himself psyched for the meeting, to impress himself and the other guys his age. His cronies called him "Red" and he bought them drinks they all didn't need and he'd lift his glass and say "Puts lead in your pencil." It had seemed amusing once to watch that, from the outside, but the entertainment value of it had worn off. Especially if I wasn't outside it after all.

Now Ron had the inner office and it was his turn to act like old Red, only he must have known it wouldn't work with me to put his arm around my shoulder and snarl, "I like you okay, Averill, but I'll fire your ass if you don't produce." In fact he almost never said anything directly to me that could be construed as communication. Anything relating to business went through Sandy. Now and then he'd talk to some client or agent for me to overhear: "That Lucas is one smart son of a buck," he'd say in his office with the door wide open. "He doesn't have a whole lot to say, but when he does, it's just like E.F. Hutton." But if he thought I got my opinion of myself from him, that was a bigger insult than anything else he could ever dream up.

I got up and went out, past Sandy, past the blue glass vase on her desk, into the pale-green hall and down to the men's room. The building was old, the men's room built in the old style with wooden stalls and hexagonal tile on the floor and massive urinals like small bathtubs standing on end. As I peed I felt the stickiness on my penis and raised my fingers to my nose and smelled the smell of Ellen, of sex, of the two of us together, still left from making love that morning, and realized it would be the last time I would ever inhale that scent that dizzied me and pulled me out of the world of deductibles and bent fenders and into what mattered. By tomorrow that would be gone, the last trace of Ellen on my body, ever. I put both hands on the sweaty cold plumbing and leaned my forehead on the backs of my hands. Behind me the door opened, but I didn't move. It isn't that unusual to come into a men's room and find somebody leaned over a urinal contemplating his dong, and anyway I didn't care. There was a clanking and squeaking and then I heard the janitor dipping his mop. He gave it a slop on the floor. I could smell his cigar. "You all right, buddy?"

I zipped up and turned around. It was Lucas Gray, my pal because he and I shared the same name. "Wasn't sure if that was you, or not," he said. "How you doin'?"

"I don't know. How about yourself?"

"I'm hangin'." He moved the mop around perfunctorily, then leaned it on the bucket. No need to look busy in front of me. He took out his cigar, scrutinized me with eyes chronically reddened by smoke. "You don't look too good. Heard you was sick."

"I was something, that's for damn sure. Fell over in my back yard and my heart quit beating, but they got me going again."

"Just quit for no reason?" Lucas sounded like he wasn't sure whether to believe me.

"Far as I know. Then afterwards, my girlfriend left me." Why was I telling him, blurting it out the way I had to Erdman in the hospital? Was I going to tell everybody I ran into?

"Oh, now that's trouble." He nodded at his own words. "Everybody got to go through that trouble some time, but don't make it no easier." That was what I liked about Lucas; he wasn't embarrassed to be a philosopher.

"You married, Lucas?"

"No. I was, but . . . that was some while ago. I been seein' a little girl up in Centralia now and then. You know what she like?"

"No," I said, hoping it wouldn't be something I'd rather not hear about. Men's room confidences. Risky at best.

"Chinese food. She like them little ribs." Lucas smiled to himself, and even though I felt like shit he almost made me happy. I wondered how old his little girl was; Lucas's hair was mostly gray and to me he looked over fifty. "Why'd your girlfriend leave?" he said, abruptly, looking me in the eye and catching me off guard, and I realized that his old-black-janitor-don't-mind-me act worked even on me. "Go off with another man?"

The words made my stomach feel punched; another man? And wouldn't she be bound to have one soon, out there in the West where there were real men? One look at her and they'd be lining up to help her get her boots off. "No, she got a fellowship, she's going to Wyoming to work."

"Mh," Lucas grunted, shifting his cigar from one side of his mouth to the other. "Work is overrated."

"I know."

"Take care of yourself, Lucas," he said. He seemed much older all of a sudden, maybe patronizing, I couldn't tell. "You know what I did when my wife left me?"

"What?"

"I slept on her side of the bed. It don't sound like much, but it made me feel a little better. That way I *could* sleep, you know. After a while."

"That bad, huh?"

"Shoot, I loved the woman, course it was bad," he growled, frowning impatiently. Then he softened a little. "You love that girl?"

I nodded.

"What can a man do," Lucas said, opening his hands to the ceiling. "What can one man do." He put his mop back in its wheeled bucket; the audience was clearly over. Usually Lucas was not the one to end a conversation. Maybe I had reminded him of things he didn't want to think of; maybe the little girl in Centralia, the one who liked Chinese food, couldn't begin to fill the gap that had been left in Lucas's life.

"You got that right," I said.

"Take care of yourself," he said again, and hauled his bucket, squeaking, out the door. I examined myself in the mirror. I did not, in truth, look too damn good. I looked like someone who hadn't had enough sleep for a while now. Haunted. There were only a couple of gray hairs, but a person could look at my face and expect to find more.

Another man?

My stomach sank. Why did he have to say those words?

I signed everything on my desk, gave Mr. Kellaway his old deductible whether he liked it or not, wrote "Please file" on all the official notices and put them in a pile on Sandy's desk, apologized to her, made ten arbitrary decisions about pending claims on the basis of insufficient facts or none at all, and went into Ron's office after lunch, when he wouldn't be as sharp as before it. "Ron, I hate to do this to you, but I don't think I'm a hundred percent yet. I gotta take some more of my sick days. I cleaned up that stuff that was on my desk. Looks like I'm gonna be day to day for a while."

He leaned back in his chair, surveyed me sourly, and took a deep, put-upon breath. "You do look like something that dragged in the cat," he said, sounding pleased in spite of himself by his little witticism.

"I know."

"How many sick days you got left?"

"Seventeen," I said, pulling a number out of the air.

Ron sat forward, panicky. "Seventeen! Now look here, son, you've got to suck it up and get in here sooner than that."

I stood and watched him, thinking how much I hated it when he called me "son." Talking to me was making him very uncomfortable; all I had to do was wait him out.

"Work it out with Sandy," he said, his left hand fluttering toward the buttons on his phone, feigning busyness.

"All right."

"But remember, she can't do all the work out there." He picked up the receiver.

"Right." I closed the door on the way out of Ron's office; he could still see us through the glass in the partition, but he wouldn't be able to hear. Sandy and I shared a look; there was nothing to work out, really. The truth was, we had him over a barrel; his butt was saved weekly by two things: she was a good, conscientious Lutheran, and I didn't know what else to do with myself besides sell insurance.

"This morning I thought it was too soon for you to come back," she said, finishing the note she was writing herself on her blotter pad. "You've been through something major, after all."

I nodded, trying to look chastened and convalescent, to convey the impression that I was carrying myself around like a basket of eggs. But maybe it didn't even require an effort. "I'll give you a call tomorrow," I said.

"No hurry," Sandy said. "I've got things under control. You know what I think?"

"What?" I said, pausing as I was turning away. For an instant I thought she was going to tell me I didn't need to come back at all.

"I think – I hope you don't mind my saying this – I think you ought to go take a nice long hot bath. It always helps."

"Thanks, Sandy." It was the first glimpse she'd ever given me of a life outside the office; the only personal things on her desk were a small piece of driftwood and a heavy, spherical cobalt-blue glass vase. No mottoes, no pictures, no trolls. Sometimes she brought flowers that I assumed she grew, and put them in the vase. The only beauty, the only simplicity in the place: either that gave away everything about her, or nothing at all. She had always been too private for me to tell which. I had an unwanted vision of her in a steamy bathroom soaking in a hot tub, pushing forty and alone, her boobs floating sadly.

"And put on some Mozart," she added, "and you know what's really relaxing? Light some candles." I couldn't look at her. Next the candles would be scented, and God knew what else, but when she got out

of the tub all rosy pink would that mean anyone would be waiting there to see her? “Yeah, Mozart, good idea,” I said, closing the door behind me, ducking my head in shame. My shame, all of ours, for being human, for needing what we couldn’t have.

For four days I had thought that nothing could be as bad as wanting Ellen all the time and knowing she was going to leave, but that was before I walked into the house in the middle of that Monday afternoon in May and found the emptiness waiting for me there. It was in the living room the instant I opened the door, in every room of the house, in every drawer and closet, in the refrigerator and the washing machine. It was more than her absence, but I couldn't stop myself from looking to see if she'd left anything behind, and each time I found nothing, the emptiness spiraled me down into itself. I went out the back door and sat down on the grass of the yard. Like a fool I had let the damn place ambush me. I was consumed with fear that I would never again live one moment that mattered, that I would be answerable to buffoons and at the beck and call of sons of bitches and the next time death came I would die without having lived. If I did not get a grip at once I would probably do something that would have Charlotte Carter calling not the rescue squad this time but the guys from Mid-Mo Mental Health. Or maybe this time it would be Vic; was he in his yard secretly watching? I pulled up a handful of grass and buried my nose in it, smelling the green juice of torn leaves and the cleanness of dirt, and that smell reminded me that the earth was still there after all. I sat there on the grass, hunched forward, and I could feel my spine curving around a huddled space, and at my back was not just my house and Columbia but the whole sky above Columbia that always felt vast and empty if you looked for a while, that whispered, if you stopped and listened, that you were just inches from the jumping-off place.

I couldn't imagine what had gone on inside Ellen in the last few days, letting her accept my wanting her so much as no more than her due, no more than pleasure. Happy memories to carry with her, light of heart and free of cares, into the future that she steadfastly refused to speculate about. She had nothing to say about what might happen when the

fellowship ended or when the dig was done or where she might want to work then, nothing but maybe and we'll see and when I asked her if she would be coming back to see me she said "Oh, of course! *Sometime*," with a chirp in her voice that shriveled my heart to a prune. A couple of sprightly oldsters we'd be by then, giving each other pecks on the cheek at some damn Elderhostel. But when we had made love it was not *sometime*, and if I was wrong to think that she was present at those moments then I might as well give up imagining I understood her, or love, at all.

I sat there until my legs were so stiff from sitting cross-legged that I could hardly get up, going around the same race track again and yet again, and part of me was saying that all I had to do was get through this minute and then the next. I was waiting for it to get easier, but it didn't. When I unsteadily got to my feet I went to the liquor store and bought a bottle of cheap Scotch, stuff I hadn't drunk in several years, brought it home and had a drink and it seemed to have almost no effect, except that the taste was harsh and that was good because it was a momentary distraction. Why wasn't I hungry? I looked at the food in the refrigerator, but I didn't want any of it until I saw that there was some chicken she had made. I unwrapped it from its tinfoil and took a bite and almost as soon as the bite of chicken sat on my tongue I started to cry; I had to lean over the sink and let it fall out of my mouth, bawling out unseemly grief, afraid the neighbors would hear, relieved that I could cry after all, sobbing out my being nothing but a useless man alone.

After a while it ended, I blew my nose, wiped my eyes, leaned my forehead on the cupboards, took a drink, wished that the crying would come again. I wrapped up Ellen's chicken in the tinfoil and put it in the trash; then I took it out again. I held it in my hand with the refrigerator door open as if I was going to put it back, and got stuck there for several minutes, and then I put it in the trash and took the whole trash bag out and dropped it in the garbage can by the back gate. It was dark out. Now cry some more, I thought to myself, but I couldn't. That was over. I knew that meant something harder would begin.

I ended up sitting by the radio in the dining room, tuning my way from the bottom of the dial to the top and back down again. Making it take as long as it could, working my way through the cheap Scotch. Finally, after I'd had enough Scotch so I didn't get scared when I thought about eating something, I ate about five crackers and a piece of cheese and wasn't hungry anymore. It was bedtime if I stretched the point, or was it? And as for getting in bed . . . I remembered what Lucas had said in the men's room. He slept on her side of the bed. Don't sound like much, but. I went in the bedroom and looked at the bed and it sounded like an act of

courage that I wasn't ready to imitate. I had to leave that room and turn out the light behind me as I went. Maybe turn off all the lights, and then see what happens: I went through the house clicking off every switch, and there was some relief, as if in the shadows something I needed might be waiting, faint as a shadow itself. Now the light over the Carters' driveway cast its cold oblique rays into the living room and dining room, and I could look out at street lamps and the lighted windows in other people's houses and wait for something to happen. I sat in the dark kitchen with the bottle and glass in front of me and watched the houses beyond the back yard, across the alley, and listened to the refrigerator run and considered carefully if there was anything to prove that I was not at this very moment a ghost in my own house, feeling the dull pain that ghosts feel, that renders them unable to leave this world. There were no instructions about what, if anything, the ghost should do with himself next.

From the next room I thought I heard someone cough, like Erdman in the hospital, but when I went to look of course there was no one there.

For what seemed like night piled upon night – and may have been, for all I can remember – I moved from one room to another, sitting in all the chairs, unable to get sleepy no matter how much I drank, watching the lights gradually going out in the houses around me and the occasional car passing by, the unchanging shadows thrown by streetlamps, touring my own house to see it all made ghostly and flat by darkness and silence. Behind the scenes, after the curtain had gone down and the actors and the audience had gone home to bed, I lurked as no wise theatre-goer should ever do, and saw that all that made up the show was artificial and dusty and without magic. Ellen's departure had revealed this to me, but it was bigger than her leaving and I could not imagine how this doleful enlightenment could ever be undone.

At last there began to be a hint of light in the sky, and I was sleepy, but I could not go in the bedroom. I lay down on the couch and slept.

When I woke up it seemed to be midmorning. My eyes felt creaky and dry. I was still in my clothes, and they were all twisted around and pulling at me, boxer shorts wound around my groin like bungee cords. I got up, shuffled into the bathroom, took everything off, peed, took a shower, washed my hair, told myself to become a human being again. I made the shower hotter and hotter bit by bit until it was as hot as I could stand, and then I turned the hot off and made myself not move while it got cold. If I said "Aaaa!" in a loud guttural voice I could stand it. I got out, and the only towel in the bathroom was a hand towel (had they been

hers? had she taken them?) and I had to get dry, so wetly I marched into the bedroom, past the mirror where I would never again see the two of us naked together and touching, and into the closet where the extra towels lay on the shelves behind the hung-up shirts that trailed on my wet back. And under them on the floor of the closet, forgotten in the packing up, was a cardboard box full of Ellen's turtlenecks and sweaters. From it came the smell of her – the smell of her hair in the morning, the smell of walking down a dirt road together and hoping for a leaf to fall so we could chase it and try to catch it before it hit the ground. Whatever I might have thought at the time, all that clearly had not mattered.

I had to get out of there. I threw a towel around my neck, grabbed an armload of shirts on hangers and a pile of folded pants and a drawer of socks and underwear, and fled from the room as if I were running from an oncoming flood. In what had been Ellen's study I dumped everything on the makeshift desk and pulled down the shades. All the room had in it was some brick-and-board bookshelves with my books on them but none of hers anymore, a desk made of a hollow-core door on filing cabinets, and a swivel chair I'd bought at a yard sale. It was a place I could bear to enter. I could put my underwear in a file drawer and mark it "U."

I got dressed and thought, Okay, start the day, begin.

Begin what?

I made myself get up and go out in the back yard and do jumping jacks to prove I could. I tried to stand on my head and fell over three times and gave up. I chinned myself on a low branch of the pear tree, scraping my palms, and couldn't pull myself up a second time. The momentum of habit propelled me into the kitchen and got me making coffee, and I had taken out eggs and bread before I realized I wasn't hungry. Somehow my stomach contrived to feel empty and full at once, closed off to food. Apparently it was going to be very cheap to live without Ellen. Or else maybe I would make up for the grocery bills in bad Scotch. I sat and drank the coffee and for a minute I almost wished I had to go to work, but then I thought of dealing with Ron and knew I didn't wish that.

"This is the color of death," Cora had once said, pointing to a swatch of pale blue and bewildering me. "I learned that when my mother died." I never forgot it, and now I thought maybe she was right and the sky outside was painted that same color, fake. A lure, a trap of some sort. That color ached in my chest with dread and it impaled me on my own emptiness like a bug on a pin, and the ache seemed to be creeping into my left arm, deep in the muscle, maybe even the bone. Wasn't that a sign? I could call up Arnesen, ask him, he would do more tests, but they would prove nothing again.

I wished I could go back to sleep; why had I drunk that coffee? My body felt wired together like a Rube Goldberg invention, and old. I tried to read the paper, but after about ten minutes I couldn't bear to be sitting in the house any longer; I had to brave the blue of the sky that still looked fake and painted-on, and go out.

I walked in the direction of downtown and everyone on the streets seemed to be at one remove; it wasn't my street anymore, or maybe I was on a Broadway of my own and they were on another and the two were only nominally the same.

The more I walked down the street, the more I realized there was something screwy about my vision. Everything seemed to be on TV; it was like having one eye, even though both were open and they both worked. I could tell by the way things appeared to shift as I moved that there was three-dimensional space out there, but I couldn't see into the depth of it. Couldn't feel it. It wasn't opening out for me; I could see that I stepped forward, yet I never stepped into the space in front of me – somehow it kept retreating, never letting me in. I was walking along inside an invisible phone booth, a confinement that went with me, and into this phone booth of mine were piped sights and sounds that almost convinced. But I was on to the deception.

A young woman, probably a student, passed me going the other way and I could see by her eyes that she was free in the fullness of space and had somewhere to go; there was a faint intensification of the sunlight in her vicinity and I could also see that she was subliminally both flattered and annoyed that I noticed it, because I wasn't the one she wanted to see it. What did I have to do with her flyaway hair that was escaping from the scrunchy that was supposed to hold it back? Or any other moment of any woman's beauty, how dare I even notice that such beauty was in the world when it was so clearly not for me?

Local Insurance Agent Arraigned on Sexual Harrassment Charges. "I Was Just Looking" His Pathetic Defense. Crawls from Courthouse Kicked and Spat Upon.

Down the street in my movable imprisonment, the illusion nearly perfect. All around me were images of people. But whether they were actually warm and breathing and having an inner life, and whether any of them actually saw me as anything more than a blip on their screen – who could say? I had taken that philosophy class in college. No one knew the answer. So pick one. The teacher argued that there was nothing to be gained by choosing solipsism even if you couldn't disprove it, and much to be lost. But what if it picked you? That question had not been on the midterm.

I turned up Tenth on a whim and went into Columbia Photo because I could always kill time looking at used cameras, and in there, talking to Dave who owned the place, was Erdman of all people. Erdman standing at the counter with a camera in his hand as normal as could be, talking away, overweight and bear-like as ever, as if he'd never been sick. He and Dave were deep into a discussion of whether Erdman should switch from Canon to Nikon, and when I walked up they both said "Hey" but didn't miss a beat. "Erdman, what the hell are you doing here?" I said.

He looked down at me as if at your local nut case. "What's that supposed to mean?" He had only one mood: grumpy.

"He's on the verge of spending three thousand dollars, don't interrupt him," Dave said, but I knew and he knew it was only a routine they went through from time to time.

"Minus twenty-nine hundred for trade-ins," said Erdman. "What's up your ass, Averill?"

"A week ago you were in a hospital bed at University of Missouri Medical Center coughing your guts out and you could hardly talk. Don't you even remember me being there? I thought you were going to die right in front of me, for Christ's sake."

"What are you talking about?" he said, scowling; I noticed a couple of long gray hairs corkscrewing out of his eyebrows. "We're all going to die, Averill, but I wasn't in any hospital last week."

"It had to be you, we talked about when we roomed together." But it was true that I had done almost all the talking.

"I don't know where the hell you were, or who you've been talking to, but let me tell you something: hospitals are not on my itinerary. I haven't been in one since I had my appendix out when I was seven, and I don't plan to go back. It wasn't all that much fun."

"What were you in the hospital for?" Dave asked, as he took a customer's claim slip for processed film. He was a nice guy, but I was reluctant to announce it in front of Erdman and the other people in the store.

"I kind of passed out, they dragged me in there and jump-started me."

"What does *that* mean?" Erdman said indignantly, as if I'd offended him personally by being vague. He owned a weekly paper, mostly ads, a rag that got thrown on front porches for free, and seemed to feel that people owed him the scoop on everything.

"Heart," I said.

"Oh. The ticker, huh?" His free hand, the one without the camera, involuntarily floated up into the region of his chest, and I knew from his look that he was thinking the two of us were the same age.

"Yeah. Listen, Erdman – don't go Nikon. The lenses cost too much."

That livened him up again. "That depends on how bad Dave screws me on the trade-in."

We both looked at Dave, who stood behind his counter with arms folded and an expression that was hard to read. Was he faintly amused, was he resigned to playing this game again and again to make a few bucks, was he ready to chuck it all?

"Have a ball," I said to both of them, and left. As soon as I hit the sidewalk I was back in my invisible phone booth, walking down virtual Tenth Street and then virtual Broadway, apart. Not Erdman in the hospital. Then who the hell was that coughing man?

Whoever it was knew something. "You don't know a damn thing" was the last thing I'd heard him say, and ever since then I had been discovering just how right he was. I had never understood Ellen, and what else had I been wrong about? That I could walk back into Martin & Gray and do my job, that I could put food in my mouth and eat it with pleasure, that I didn't like to drink a whole lot at one time, that I was in the same world I used to think I knew about, that there was real breathing life for me . . . I turned down Ninth and passed the candy place, pizza joints, clothing stores that were like licenses to print money, nowhere to go and subject to whim, exploring the illusion. In the spirit of research I went into the Heidelberg, where I probably hadn't been since I was in college.

For a moment I thought I'd wandered into the wrong place. It was too nice to be the Heidelberg; they had ceiling fans everywhere, new fancy ones with little glass-shaded pseudo-antique lamps hanging down from them, and there was plaid carpeting on the floor and wainscoting on the walls. It was full of people who looked like they might be professors. The shape of the room had changed; even the bar wasn't where I remembered it. The bartender had a recently shaved head and a mustache and goatee, and he'd gotten a sunburn on his scalp that was starting to peel and looked like it hurt. Ritually he wiped the bar in front of him and said, "Help you?"

"A draw," I replied. Reflex action. You don't sit in the Heidelberg without a beer in front of you. It was the same as ever: almost tasteless.

"Gettin' hot out there?" he said. He looked like a nice guy, clean-cut, maybe an athlete.

"Not really." I put down a five and the bartender made it go away, calling as little attention to the fact as possible, and replaced it with my change. It looked like counters in a game. Bar money. Like putting a hotel on Park Place: your lease on two feet of mahogany till closing time. There were beer steins on display behind glass to the left of the bar, and up above them on a shelf were Missouri basketballs covered with signatures, and footballs and tiger figurines. In the corner to my right a TV played silently to the accompaniment of 70's rock on the sound system, and people were watching it while they ate lunch, surrounded by tiger-footprint wallpaper with a strip along the top that said "Mizzou" between footprints, and framed posters advertising the football schedules of long-ago seasons that apparently were not forgotten. In 1948 a game was three dollars and a season ticket was nine.

In the mirror behind the bar I thought someone was looking at me, and when I leaned forward and peered into the mirror I saw a hand come up, dark with pink palm. Lucas. I turned around; he had a booth to himself. For a second I perched half-on and half-off my stool with a beer in my hand, trying to decide if his wave was an invitation.

"Is this where you eat lunch?" I said when I got within earshot.

He thought for a moment, judiciously. "Have a seat if you want," he said. "It's a free country." If you have the nerve to be seen with a black man, he didn't have to add.

I sat down across from him, aware that I'd never had a conversation with him where we weren't both standing up. "I'll bet I haven't been in here in fifteen years. They messed it up good, didn't they?"

He nodded. "Never shoulda got rid of them old tables. This one here had my name on it." It was speckled gray Formica now.

"Really?"

"You musta put it there, last time you was in."

"What do you mean?"

"Said 'Lucas' right on it. I didn't carve it there. Must have been you. Anyway, far as I'm concerned, this booth got my name on it. I always sit here if it ain't taken."

"You're shittin' me. I'll be darned. Did I do that?"

Lucas looked at me with head tilted to one side and a face that said don't be asking stupid questions. "How you holdin' up?"

He was a kind person and you couldn't bullshit him. "I couldn't even get in the bed."

He sighed and shook his head. The waitress brought him a cheeseburger and an order of onion rings and looked like she wondered

who I was to be sitting with her regular customer. "What would you like?" she said to me.

"I'm okay for now."

"Ain't you gon order?" Lucas said. His voice stairstepped up half an octave, reproachful.

"Oh, I guess not. Thanks."

"Bring him the same thing I'm havin'," Lucas said, and the waitress went away before I could say different. "You got it bad," he pronounced, pointing at me to make sure I knew who he was talking about.

"I know." I was a little ashamed to admit it.

"If you gon drink beer at this time of day, you better eat somethin'."

"You call this stuff beer?"

"You didn't go in to work today, did you?" Lucas said, as if proving a case against me.

"Do you know everything that goes on in that building?"

"Just about." He took a definitive bite of his cheeseburger, and I watched him chew it up deliberately. It had never crossed my mind that I would one day have lunch with Lucas, but one thing I noticed about him today, he wasn't an illusion. I was sure there was someone in there. "You empty people's trash and clean out their bathroom long enough, you gon know what there is to know. You should see what the ladies write in them stalls about men. When you're sittin' on the can, you might as well go ahead and tell the truth."

"I didn't know they wrote anything," I said, curious despite myself. "I always figured women were too well behaved."

Lucas gave me a pitying look. "Always say the same thing: men don't never do right."

"Thanks for telling me." Lucas paid no attention.

"He run around on me, he spend my money and leave town, he got another woman in Boonville. He drink too much, watch TV all the time, don't talk to me, don't show me no love. He hit me. He try to mess around with my daughter and she only thirteen. All that type thing. They hurtin'. Just like we hurtin'." He looked up and caught my eye meaningfully and I wondered if maybe Lucas was a preacher on Sundays.

"It didn't look to me as if Ellen was feeling any pain," I said. "My girlfriend. Former girlfriend. Happy as a lark, this past week."

"There always come a time when you got to pay," Lucas said, popping an onion ring in his mouth. "Her time'll come too." How the hell did he ever get to be so certain about everything? I couldn't figure out if

he was a sententious old guy full of simplistic platitudes, or if he possessed the wisdom of the ages. The waitress put a cheeseburger and rings down in front of me, and I ordered another beer. I had to admit the food looked good, especially after I loaded it up with ketchup, but after the second bite I felt stuffed and couldn't go on. The look of satisfaction that had been forming on Lucas's face faded out.

"What happen to you last week, anyway?" he said. "I don't mean the girlfriend. The way they looked in your office, it *had* to be serious."

That sort of pissed me off, as if Ellen leaving me wasn't serious. How the hell had he liked it when his wife left? "I died," I said. You figure it out.

He looked at me fixedly and solemnly, as if waiting for the punch line. When he saw that nothing was forthcoming, he pursed his lips and observed dryly, "You living now."

"When they brought me into the ER I didn't have a heartbeat. So I've heard. But they brought me back."

"You live through a miracle and you talk about it just like that? Like no big thing?"

"I don't know what else to say."

Lucas took a wrapped cigar out of his pocket and inspected it, as if he knew he couldn't light it in the restaurant but looking at it was better than nothing. It was a Hav-a-Tampa with the little wooden mouthpiece, the kind he always smoked. "How about 'thank you,'" he muttered, not looking up at me. It took me a moment to be sure I'd heard what he said. I replayed it in my mind; he sounded embarrassed.

"Do you believe in God, Lucas?"

He raised his eyes and met mine, firmly. "I do." His gaze didn't waver; but mine did, when I realized it wasn't himself he was embarrassed for – it was me.

Now I felt I was looking at Lucas across a great divide, and uncomfortably I wanted to get up and leave but that would be running away. I felt my phone booth re-creating itself around me, making me realize that for a few minutes I hadn't been alone. The room and the people in it were starting to go flat. Behind me, I heard a wheezing, rasping breath, right over my shoulder, and then another, and I was sure I recognized it; the hairs rose on the back of my neck. I leaned out to look in the booth behind me; right in back of me was a woman with abundant blonde hair, and I was inches from the outermost strands, looking over her shoulder and seeing the man across from her staring back at me. "What's your problem, buddy?" he sneered.

"Sorry." I turned away. It couldn't have been either of them.

Lucas was watching me with a dubious look on his face. "Something chasing you?"

I shook my head. "I don't know. I just thought – when I was in the hospital they put me in a room with a guy who was having a real hard time breathing, like every breath was going to be his last, and just now I thought I heard him. Behind me."

"Mm," Lucas grunted. I could see he didn't know what to make of me.

"I thought he was a guy I know. I mean, when I was in the hospital. I talked to him, I was sure he was this guy I went to college with, Erdman, but turns out he wasn't. It was in the middle of the night after I – collapsed, or whatever – and I started telling him all sorts of things. You know? Anything could happen. I felt like I understood everything that night. I knew Ellen was going to leave, and she didn't even tell me she got the fellowship till the next day."

He was still watching me, gently rolling his wrapped cigar between his fingers with a tiny crinkle of cellophane.

"Of course, that was about the only thing I got right."

"Just cause you're dead don't make you smart," Lucas said.

"I know." Now I did, anyway. We were both silent, contemplating. "I'd like to find that guy," I said, but I hadn't known it until I heard myself say it. "If he's still alive."

"How come?"

"I don't know. But I want to talk to him again."

Lucas folded his arms and considered me as if he wondered whether I could be trusted to wander around loose. "You really ain't gon to eat more than that?" he said.

"It's weird, I just can't."

"I don't know," he said, tilting to one side so he could reach for his wallet. "It's your life, but . . ."

"Here, let me get it," I said, reaching for my own.

"No, I made you order that thing."

"But Lucas, come on, man – " I didn't want to come out and say I made more money than he did, that it was unseemly and unfair for me to let him pay. Condescending white man. But damn it, it *was* unfair.

He laid a twenty on the table as if money didn't matter and stood up. "You can get it next time," he said.

Next time? Give up, I thought to myself, you've been bested by a pro. Blinking, we emerged into the afternoon sunlight. When I had been a student, coming out of a classroom building across the street the way some people were now, I had never really imagined myself over thirty,

much less thirty-five, never had the remotest clue that this confusion would be my life. Lucas unwrapped his cigar and lit it contentedly, surveying the scene as if he were in a foreign country watching the exotic natives go by. "Gotta be movin' along," he said, offering his hand; we shook, for the first time ever, as if it were nothing out of the ordinary. His hand was rough and strong. No one passing on the sidewalk seemed to notice we existed.

I crossed Ninth and cut through the quad, a bubble on the stream, past the old stone columns, past the power plant, and back toward my house. I had stopped trying to pay attention to people; what I did notice were plants. So many gardens were the same: petunias and yuccas, the yuccas stiff and unfriendly as usual. What made anyone think those two went together? Alyssum and New Guinea impatiens. The floppy leaves of tulips and daffodils from which the flower petals had long since fallen. I passed a rock garden where hens-and-chicks were baking in the sun, their bit of dirt already dry and cracked, and soon the weather would get really hot. Morning glories climbing up to porch roofs had closed for the day. Even they withheld themselves.

I got in my car, went to Tiger Liquors and bought a half gallon of cheap Scotch this time, and at the grocery store I got a stack of Le Menus and Budget Gourmets. Stock up for the long haul.

At home I put the frozen dinners in the freezer and then there was nothing to do. I wandered from room to room, hearing my footsteps echo. There were not half as many books on the shelves as there had been, not so many records, half of the pictures on the walls had been hers and were gone. In the back hall I glanced furtively into the bedroom, saw the spider plant hanging in the window there and realized I'd better move it if I wasn't going to go into that room; I darted in, grabbed it off its hook, and left, but even in that moment I thought I caught the scent of Ellen, emanating from her box of forgotten clothes. I closed the door on it. Anything else in there would have to stay.

In the living room I moved the coffee table, unfolded the sofa-bed we had bought in case of guests. A place I could bear to sleep. I lay down

to test it and the metal bar under the middle of the mattress caught me in the small of the back, but what choice did I have?

And what the hell was I going to do?

Call someone.

Cora, maybe. She wouldn't mind. She was the only person we knew who actually dropped by unexpectedly, in and out of our house like family, almost without knocking. I thought of her as part of my life, but the life she was part of was over. Besides, she would be at work.

I could call my brother Larry but why would I want to hear him sneer at me – the sneer only I can hear? It would be there all right, if I were to call and say that I was about to chuck even my paltry sliver of the insurance business. Or had chucked it already, without exactly deciding to. He would have just hung up from talking to some client about how he was doing with the money people hand over to him in large bundles to invest, because they're so soothed by his suits and his impeccable shave and his peppermint breath. Larry: so deep into the Zen of money that every fallible dollar that passes through his hands is blessed beyond miscalculation or loss. Or so his schools of clients believe, pressing sheaves of signed paper into his hands, certificates of their hope and fear entrusted to Larry Averill by the thousands. So many wanting to trust him that it's only fair he should charge a mildly exorbitant fee for his services, though he is already endowed with money-Zen, and perfect fingernails, and leather seats perfuming the interior of his Audi, and a wife who every day drives her silver minivan to the tony private school in New Hope to pick up Nadia, their fully gifted daughter fourteen years of age. And since he had the good sense to go to the actual Princeton that our father only imagined himself to be teaching at, and to learn to wear the right suit the right way, and then to marry a woman who knew that the place to buy was the Hopewell Valley – so that as real estate values went inexorably up, so did Larry and Joan – because he made all those brilliant choices, I his little brother, a failure and nonentity selling insurance in Columbia, Missouri, became someone he could purr at magnanimously without ever needing to drop an actually identifiable sneer.

Especially if even the selling insurance part fell through. Then fortunate Larry's generosity could blossom tenfold, could rain down invitations to idyllic Lambertville where I might soak for days in a hot tub of condescension . . . or, he might add, they would be renting the usual place on Penobscot Bay for three weeks in August and would I like to join them there? Perhaps as an object lesson in gratitude for Nadia, the fourteen-year-old, who wore her hair in four-inch spikes and her clothes in black and only black and insisted on calling New Hope "No Hope" and

put her Doc Martens up on the brocaded furniture no matter what Joan said. It made me think she really must be gifted. Though not like her sister Ariel, who was seven and had the gift of innocence. Every time I saw that child I wondered what Larry had ever done to deserve her.

If there were some way to hang out around Larry's kids without having to see him and Joan . . . but it wouldn't be about the kids. It would be about Larry's new toys and the inconvenience to Joan of having some part of their house completely redone. Over drinks Larry and I would gnaw the old bone of our father, the ancestral bore who still lived in the same drafty house twenty miles from me and four blocks from the hopeless little college whose only claim to fame is that Winston Churchill made a speech there once. And where Professor Averill declaimed to his captives for thirty-five years and always made it to the Civil War by Christmas. Or the Hundred Years' War by spring vacation. Or the Revolution by Columbus Day. He had other lectures for us, on how to live, what to become, how to be an improved version of his already admirable self. We knew them all by heart; unlike his students, we could not cut class. Even if we ran from the room or the house, in the end there was no escape. I grew up under a pounding of words.

Larry could shut them out somehow. At the age of sixteen he said he'd figured out what the old man really wanted, and the way to get the last word once and for all would be to go do everything Dad never could have. Which he did. I just shut up, kept my head down and my thoughts to myself, let the words wash over me, and waited to grow up. I don't know what my sister did. She was a girl; I adored her when I was a little kid, and then I began to think I hated her because she was a girl, and she and her friends didn't think I was cute anymore, and then one day she and my mom were gone.

That's the way it seems now. Everyone says there were Talks, but I don't remember them. I don't blame my mom for leaving him – I always wanted to – but somehow she forgot to take me. Maybe it was division of the spoils. Larry was seventeen and belonged to himself, Margaret was thirteen and belonged to my mom because she was a girl, and I? I was ten, and maybe because I didn't say much she thought I wouldn't really mind if I only saw her on weekends. It was temporary, anyway. I do remember that. But temporary lasted forever.

Eventually my dad contrived, at the age of fifty-one, to marry one of his former students closer to Larry's age than his own. I was fifteen and couldn't imagine how Carolyn could throw herself away on him. I thought he must have talked her into submission. But I had it backwards, it turned out; after a year he cringed before her. The Niagara of words had

shrunk to a sputtering trickle that a look from her could shut off. Still could, to this day. Were we grateful to Carolyn for that, or on second thought did we resent it? That would be what Larry and I would talk about over his expensive Scotch.

My mom did better for herself. Married a nice enough guy named Brad whose wife had died young, moved to Kansas City where Brad ended up owning half of a Dodge dealership, made a whole new set of friends, and might have had a fine time from then on out if Margaret hadn't grown up and started falling in love with women. I don't think Mom will ever get used to that. She still pretends that Suzanne, who's come with Margaret for five Thanksgivings in a row, is just someone who can never seem to find a better place to spend the holiday. If you ask me, they look happier than the rest of us. Except Larry's little girl Ariel. But she'll grow up soon enough, and then she'll probably be wearing black too, and she'll have to spike her hair even higher than Nadia has hers now.

I put a sofa cushion under my head and lay there tracing the cracks in the ceiling. The lump in my chest weighed a thousand pounds and the same ache was still lurking deep in my left arm.

Then I'm walking down Broadway again, on my way to the office, only I don't seem to be going the right way, and why is Sandy coming toward me? Isn't she supposed to be at work, behind the front desk? She looks at me peculiarly and I realize I don't have a shirt on, and surreptitiously glancing down I don't have anything on, but she is evidently determined to act as if nothing is unusual, and I try to do the same as we stand and chat about nothing. The people passing keep turning and looking and I can see them hiding smirks – Erdman, Dave, Charlotte Carter from next door, Cora of all people, most embarrassing of all. I don't want her to see me like this, but I have nothing in my hands that I can hold to cover myself – what could I have been thinking of when I walked out of the house like this and straight downtown with everything showing for people to point at, look at that dipshit with his pathetic little wienie hanging out, his hairy ass showing on Broadway for Christ's sake, look at him, what a loser! How did Ellen ever let me leave the house this way?

There is a coughing to my left, not violent but steady, and I know it's the coughing man from the hospital; he takes my arm and the hair rises on the back of my neck. I try to turn my head to look at him, but I can't. It's twilight and we're not on Broadway and no one else is around; we're standing in front of an old office building. At first I think we're

going to go upstairs to Martin & Gray, but then I see it's all different: this building has high glass doors and through them I see a big dim lobby, the ceiling lost in shadows, no light in it except what comes in through the doors, and Coughing Man is coughing to my left and making me go in. I try to look at him again but I already know that I won't be able to, and that I won't be able to break his grip on my arm as he opens the door and thrusts me in and marches me forward, into deeper shadow at each reluctant step. I have glimpses of high shelves, heavy furniture, everything gray and black in the gathering gloom, and I can feel the light and the outside world dwindling behind me to nothing, and myself being taken from the light forever, inexorably, no matter how much I want to slow our march into the darkness, and just when I can barely see, we come to another set of doors and Coughing Man opens them on a corridor that leads straight to blackness and says in a rasping whisper, "Run." I have no choice; he still has my arm. I begin to run as fast as I can, headlong, with him beside me step for step, and in three strides I am in total blackness and I can't stop running faster and faster. Something is pulling me forward, accelerating me, and Coughing Man's voice is at my left ear saying "Run" and the darkness is complete and I am in terror and despair knowing that there is no way back, knowing the doors have closed behind me and I will never again emerge into the light, my own legs bearing me with superhuman speed toward dark beyond dark, and with my last shred of control I summon the words "This is a dream" and cling to them and repeat them, running and hearing Coughing Man at my left urging me on, until at last it begins to break up and I can feel myself surfacing. Then I'm in myself again, and in bed, reaching up, awake, and clutching the metal rail of a headboard with both hands, pulling myself up into a sitting position, and I look around and I'm still in pitch darkness and I don't know where I am and even though I've waked up it hasn't ended, even though I'm not running anymore I'm still being carried headlong into an abyss. In terror worse than before I try to shout, and again the reality I'm in tears apart, and I awaken again, to find myself in my living room, on the sofa-bed, my heart racing, panting and clutching the sides of the mattress. I'm afraid to look to my left but I have to; no one is there. Outside the windows it is late afternoon; the sunlight is reddish. I lie and wait for my heart to slow, my breathing to calm down, wait for the fear to stop prickling in waves all over my body. It didn't happen, I keep repeating to myself inwardly – it didn't happen – keeping my eyes on the light.

When I could let go of the mattress I sat up, rubbed my face, took deep breaths, went to the front windows and looked out at the street

where just now a boy was passing by, riding on a bike with too-small wheels and wavy elongated front forks, intent on some kid errand. In the distance I could hear someone mowing a lawn. The afternoon light was utterly ordinary. I hadn't had a nightmare in years. What in the hell, I thought. What is going on with me?

Maybe I would be lucky if I didn't sleep.

Maybe dying wasn't quite the piece of cake that I thought.

Was that what that was?

All I knew was, I took back what I had told Lucas. I never wanted to meet Coughing Man again.

I went out the door and sat on the front steps; I wanted to be outside, under the sky, in the open light. The dream was still with me, the grip of that hand on my left arm, the whispered word "Run," and worst of all the ruthless acceleration against my will.

Who *had* that man been, in the hospital room?

Enough to creep anybody out.

Charlotte Carter pulled into their driveway next door, got out and waved to me, ever the same friendly collie. The ideal neighbor. "How are you doing these days?" she called. She sounded faintly proprietary, as if I had become a project of hers when the ambulance she'd called had carted me back to life.

What do you say? "Okay, I guess." Healthy, hearty, and lying through my teeth. "How about you?"

"You know how it is – everybody wants to buy a house in the spring."

She coaxed Jason, engrossed in some toy, out of the back seat and lugged a couple of bags of groceries up her front walk, herding him in front of her. Come home from work, light the barbecue, trade the news of the day. Assuming you had someone to trade it with. Her husband struck me as a bore, but what did I know? College professor. No doubt used to a captive audience. Charlotte's screen door slammed and I wondered what she'd find to say if she knew how I really was, or if they even noticed that Ellen was gone, from over there on their island of marriage. Might as well be China.

I didn't want to think about that, and I stood up and moved to the side of the house away from theirs, up my two-track dirt driveway. Theirs was gravel, but they only had a carport and I had a garage. I went in the garage door and idly turned over the tools lying on my workbench. Ever since we had moved in I had said I was going to build some nicer bookshelves for Ellen's study, and I had a perverse impulse to do it now.

Shutting the barn door after. It wouldn't have kept her from leaving whenever she decided it was time.

In the garden the tomato seedlings were doing well, some of the lettuce was already starting to bolt. Zucchini would eventually overgrow everything, like every summer. I never would have planted them, except Ellen liked them. Over the low hedge, Vic and Ida both sat, facing slightly away, giving no sign they noticed me.

The back yard was not wide, but long – just long enough to feel it stretch away, slightly downhill. From the back of the yard one could gaze upon the house from a distance, far enough away to contemplate it, and the life in it, as a whole. Between the near part of the yard and the far part an old pear tree bloomed and bore every year, in profusion, and most of the pears fell off unripe, to lie on the ground pecked by birds and gnawed by squirrels and to turn brown and ferment in the heat of late summer. They made a kind of sour-mash smell that both repelled and invited, lyrical from a distance but not as much fun close up. It was the smell of the neighborhood; there were old pear trees in all the nearby yards. Someone's orchard once. You could still imagine the way it had been if you tried for a while. On the other side of the street out front, a tiny stream trickled through and between a series of yards to vanish into a culvert; after that it went underground. When there was a downpour the trickle became a creek and flowed through the Carters' basement; they said nothing could be done to stop it. Maybe that was why my house was built on a slab.

Something seemed to be present in the yard and to pull me toward the back fence and the spot where I had keeled over. I was leery of it because of the dream, but I still couldn't help drifting in that direction. What if I went and stood there and this time it happened for good and it wasn't benign after all?

But I remembered nothing from the last time. How bad could it be?

I felt the way I had the one time I had held dowsing rods in my hand, waiting for them to move in the vicinity of water, except now I had nothing except my own body to tell me when I reached the exact spot. I was sure I'd feel it.

I passed under the pear tree; there would be pears again, later on. I might even climb up and try to pick some before the birds and squirrels got them all. But I wouldn't try to make jam out of them. We had ruined a perfectly good pot doing that.

I felt I had to approach the spot with caution; it pulled with a gravity of its own. I circled it, staying two long steps away. The back fence was old wire on a wooden frame, the wire looped decoratively along the

top; there was a gate in it that never quite closed all the way. The alley was lumpy and uneven; it had been a long time since the last load of gravel was spread on it. Scrubby mulberry trees grew wild along its borders, half-strangled by vines, chopped back impatiently, and bearing fruit that appealed only to birds and children; tough stands of mint had taken root in places where they could be driven over or stepped on or pulled up, with a clear conscience because they were indestructible, and made to release their piercing scent. The alley belonged to children, especially on bicycles, and grownups' vehicles were only tolerated there as momentary interruptions of their games. I heard them playing while I gardened, arguing over the rules, scheming so seriously you would have thought they were in a hurry to grow up and go to work.

I would have been happy to trade places with them, I thought, as I leaned on the back fence six or eight feet from the spot. I could picture myself in such an alley as a kid, all the afternoons of play and yelled calls from yard to yard, mothers trying to get their kids to come in out of the summer dark, early morning tennis balls thrown against back porch steps and learning to ride a bike despite all the falling off. Living the secret life of children who, as yet, have only glanced over their shoulders at the mystery of what the hell grownups were up to inside those houses. As a kid my allegiance had been to the closer mystery of what was inside me, something inarticulate and big, a thing that sometimes felt like a slightly exciting pain in the lower belly, like holding in the need to pee, which was what intense frustration always felt like to me then; sometimes I was sure that what was in me was a dream, taking shape inside my heart, only it wasn't time yet for it to be revealed to me. I knew I had to wait, and sometimes the waiting for the dream made a knot in my chest, and sometimes even the knot itself, and the knowing that I was waiting, was sweet and to be treasured, because it meant there was something worth waiting for and on its way. All that so long ago it hardly seemed like the same lifetime. Before the dream became the dream of a girl. And stayed that, though elaborated by now in ways once beyond my imagining; the dream had had many names and many faces, but Ellen was gone and leaning there on the fence I wondered if she or any woman or girl had been, after all, or could ever have been, the dream my child-self had so fiercely carried, guarded and secret, jealous and undisclosed.

But if she was not, if no girl ever was, what had I been doing all this time, what had I meant when I said the word "love"?

That was too difficult, it made me straighten up and move away from the back fence, and when I did I found myself pulled straight to the spot. It looked like any other square foot in the vicinity of the leaf pile,

where newish grass clippings were heaped on top of last fall's rotting leaves, but it had some sort of different feeling to it, a faint fast vibration, barely noticeable and pleasant, that came up through the soles of my feet and into my calves when I stood there. I turned around on the spot, making a complete circle: the Carters' yard with an overturned Big Wheel on its back walk, my own house looking small and almost uninhabited at the other end of the yard, Vic and Ida's place, the long view of the series of back fences lining the alley, and then my own fence again. I felt like a dog circling before it lies down. My body wanted to face away from the house, away from everything that had happened recently, and from what would: living alone, going back to Martin & Gray – and then what? Put that behind me too. The pear tree's long shadow reached me as I stood facing the back fence, and the alley was half-shaded by some weedy maples and mulberries and sumac that had sprung up randomly along the fence line. What would somebody think, if they saw me standing there, doing nothing?

Suspicious inactivity. What the hell is that guy up to?

Vic and Ida would see me if they bothered to turn their heads. But they wouldn't. And so what if they did? They sat there, weird as could be, day after day.

I could be bold and close my eyes, even. Open admission of doing something not on the regulation program. I did so. My left hand curled around my right, in front of my belly. I could feel the presence of the pear tree at my back and the viny fence in front of me, the leaf pile and Charlotte Carter's tool shed to my right, and to my left, the low hedge separating my yard from Vic and Ida's. Coughing Man had been to my left, in the dream, and that gave me the creeps again. I heard footsteps coming up the alley and I knew that whoever it was would pass by in a few more steps and see me there, standing there with my eyes closed acting completely strange, and could I let that happen? I wanted to think that I could do whatever I chose and it didn't matter who saw, but I could feel that my eyes wanted to open and I was keeping them shut by an effort. The walker coughed quietly; my neck prickled and my eyes flew open at the sound, but it was only a guy I knew by sight from down the street. He raised his hand in an embarrassed wave that said he'd seen me looking unaccountable, and I did the same; his eyes barely met mine. I felt obliged to pretend that I was looking for something on the ground, to give myself an excuse for being there. He had coughed to be polite, to say, I'm watching you do something you don't want me to see, better stop while I go by. People were basically considerate, weren't they? Or not.

After he had passed out of sight I closed my eyes again and recklessness seized me and it seemed to me I had nothing to lose. This was the doorstep, the place where a new thing had happened, different from anything else in my life, and who was to say that that door had closed?

Come back, I thought (but to what?). The crown of my skull tingled as if that would be the point where it would come into me, if it did, if there was anything to come.

I'm ready, I thought (but was I?). I survived what you did the last time, there must have been some reason I didn't die, tell me that, show me what it is, you whatever you are.

Tell me anything.

I waited, but nothing happened except a twig snapped under my foot, startling me a little in the quiet. Hardly a sign.

Again I spent half the night moving from place to place in the house, trying every chair in the half-dark, and again there didn't seem to be a place in the house for me. At some point, as I sat in the dim dining room, I heard Charlotte Carter making love. She came with a pure soprano scream of abandon that I would never have dreamed she was capable of.

I took off my clothes and lay down on the sofa-bed, humiliated by my neighbors' ecstasy. But late as it was, I couldn't go to sleep; each time I was about to let go and slip over the edge I would imagine, or dream, or really hear, a faint, steady coughing, and that would snatch me back from the brink. It scared me at first, but the more it kept happening, the more I was too tired to be scared, too tired even to ask myself whether it was real or not, and finally when the darkness showed the first faint signs of thinning out I did let go and fell into sleep.

But sun glaring in my eyes woke me up in an hour or two and all I could think of was to go out to the spot – that was where I had last felt more or less comfortable. More than I could say for any place in the house.

When I came out the kitchen door I saw that Vic was out, staring straight ahead.

My body knew exactly where the spot was, could go straight to it as if it were marked with a flag like a golf hole. I looked around, listened for footsteps but heard nothing; it was safe to close my eyes, no one was around but Vic. So why not try again.

Standing there with my back to the house, feeling the tiny vibration in my legs, I realized it was the only place left that I seemed to belong in. Maybe I should camp out, pitch a tent on the spot, finally get

some sleep. Ridiculous. The Carters would wonder what the hell was wrong with me. Or not – they'd be too busy having great sex. To think that must have been going on all along, next door, and I had never known. They could give a shit, probably, whatever I did. No wonder she was so chipper all the time.

Build a little hut there. A shed. Other people had sheds in their back yards, it wouldn't look strange. Before I could stand around and think about it too long and outfox myself I turned and headed back to the garage, to get a shovel and start digging. I would need to lay concrete blocks and make a foundation.

As soon as I began to dig I realized that I hadn't known what I was getting myself into. I remembered that the people before us had already dug the vegetable garden and we hadn't had to do it. Maybe this plan wasn't even possible – but that pissed me off, there had to be *something* I could do, and if it was difficult that was all the more reason not to quit. The roots of grass formed a thatch that my spade bounced right off of unless I used the corner of it and leaned all my weight into the dirt. To hear Ellen tell it, the earth took the lightest impression, and if you appreciated the nuance of every layer you would still be able to detect the weight of a foot that had stepped on it thousands of years before – it was not this elephant hide that cold metal could scarcely crack. Maybe I just didn't know how to dig. But damn it, I would anyway; I went back to the garage and got a pick that had leaned there unused since we moved in. I attacked, drove it deep into the ground, heaved up big clods. The dirt was medium brown, not the deep black of good farmland; it was sandy, and gave off a flinty metallic odor. It smelled a little like a river in the woods, but it was drier than I had thought it would be. The roots of the pear tree were everywhere in it, along with round pebbles; for a while the slowness of digging in it, the need to pause and cut roots, to pull out rocks that stopped the spade, made me more and more impatient, until I finally fell into a rhythm. Pant and dig, heave and grunt, move over a step and do it again. The work was hard enough to empty the mind.

I dug under the sun, sweating, piling dirt around me like a fortification. I forgot why I had started digging in the first place. I didn't need a reason. Digging was its own reason. I went back to the garage for clippers and finally a pruning saw to cut roots with, I drank pints of water, I took off my shirt. There was dirt in the waistband of my pants, dirt in my shoes, dirt in my hair. I dug a rectangular hole, more than big enough to lie down in, and when Charlotte Carter came out of her garage

and noticed me I was halfway to knee-deep. "Digging a new garden?" she called. "Looks like you're doing a terrific job."

"Thanks," I said, straightening up and thrusting my spade into a pile of loose dirt, arching my tired back. Her golden-brown collie hair looked clean and elegant in the sunlight, and I couldn't help trying to picture her in the throes of an angelic and glorious fuck. Even after what I'd heard I still couldn't imagine it.

"What's it going to be? Flowers or vegetables?"

I had forgotten I might need some sort of explanation. "Um . . . maybe a little of both." I could see her looking at my long hills of dirt and thinking, That's an awful lot of work, you must have *some* kind of plan. "Actually, I was thinking of building a shed, and I guess, you know, I'll plant things around it."

"Oh, I get it," she said, as if she should have understood all along. She really was an awfully nice person. "Maybe we should hire you to rebuild ours before it falls down."

"See if I finish this one first." She waved and headed inside. Was I going to have to build a shed for real, just to give myself an alibi?

I pulled my spade out of the dirt and bent over to start again, but my back refused to go on. Somehow that interruption had broken the spell. There were low walls of dirt on all four sides of me that I could have hidden behind; enough was enough. Besides, a wonderful sensation was occurring inside me: I was hungry.

I went inside and threw a Budget Gourmet in the oven, took a shower and enjoyed every growl of my stomach; when the frozen dinner and I were both done I gobbled three-quarters of it before I felt stuffed, sitting in the kitchen with a towel around me. I poured myself a drink and drank it looking out the kitchen window, contemplating my handiwork in the distance. For some moments I must have felt complete, because I suddenly noticed with a tiny jolt that I was alone.

My body was so tired it was a form of pleasure. As I crossed the dining room my towel started to slip off and I let it fall on the floor and dove onto the sofa-bed, pulled the sheet over me, put the pillow over my head to block out the light.

Afternoon again, and again I'm in my hole, digging. I'm deep into the earth now; the sides of the hole are higher than my waist. If I had a chair I could sit in the hole with my head at ground level, hidden behind high walls of thrown dirt. Even as I bend over to dig they block the view; I'm in a little world of my own making. My rhythm is perfect, effortless; I've dug to the point of unity with the act of digging. It should be hard to

throw dirt from deep down in my hole to the tops of the piles around me, but my arms and back feel only the smoothness of their motion. Without my having to watch with my eyes, a part of my attention goes with each spadeful of dirt as it arcs up through the air, guides it to land perfectly on top of the pile, keeps it from sliding back down into the hole. The dirt has become tan and clayey, but for some reason it isn't heavy. My spade hits a rock, and I pull it back and try to dig to one side – more rock – then the other. No luck. This is a big one. I keep exploring with the spade, looking for the edge. A giant rock, right below the surface; how could I not have noticed it earlier? Wasn't I digging freely, right there, just a minute before? I'm standing on it; how will I ever get it out? Hire a crane? Something I never imagined: dig all this way and reach a dead end.

I begin scraping away the thin layer of dirt over the rock face, thinking that if this is the floor I may as well make it clean and neat. It's beautiful – its surface gently curved in a smooth wave, as if it once sat at the bottom of a river in some prehistoric time. The last grains of tan dirt are gone. I sit down on the rock and admire it, feel its sensuous surface with both hands. I touch a tiny crack running across it, from side to side; at first when I look for what I'm feeling I can hardly see it. I bend closer – it's like being in an airplane landing on the rock's surface – and the crack grows more visible as I come closer until there is a definite gap, and I am lying with my face to the rock, my eye to the crack, peering through, and suddenly though my body is lying face down on a boulder my head swims with vertigo because through the crack I'm looking down into a space whose distant bottom is fifty, no, a hundred – hundreds of feet below.

I have to see more, and somehow I know I must not take my eye away or the slit I can see through will close. I feel in my pants pockets until I find my Swiss Army knife, and awkwardly I reach up above my head and insert the blade into the crack; I want to pry, just a little, open my tiny window just one more inch. But one little pocket knife can't budge a world of rock.

There is a footstep next to my head, and someone picks up the spade, and with a metallic scrape the crack is pried open and far below me a man in scaly armor and a helmet is walking with heavy and steady tread, and a pebble rolls through the crack and falls at his feet, and he looks up and sees me. Looks me straight in the eye as if he knows my name, as if he has been waiting all my life to get me in his power, and it is no longer hundreds of feet down to where he stands, he could reach up his armored hand and pull me down to him and I am certain that if he does he'll kill me. Above me I hear a soft, persistent cough. The crack is

widening, I'm holding on by an arm and a leg on either side and my head is over empty space. "Go down," Coughing Man whispers above me, and I'm sure that in a moment he will push me through and I will die.

When I awoke it was night again; the half-dark of the living room felt as if it was becoming my natural habitat. Then I remembered the dream. Coughing Man again – and someone else. Not to mention the sound of him the night before, keeping me awake. It wasn't ending.

What the hell is happening to me?

No answers. I swung my feet off the bed and sat up, to get away from where he came to invade my dreams, but what good would that do? The fucker was everywhere. In the hospital, the Heidelberg . . . what did he want, anyway?

But that was crazy, to think that way. He didn't want anything. He wasn't a person, for Christ's sake – he was a figment of my fucking imagination. What if he showed up at work? I'd be out of a job in two seconds.

"God oh God oh shit," I muttered aloud, getting up, my heart heavy in my chest. I padded naked into the kitchen and poured myself a drink. My back was sore from the day's work. You're losing it, I thought. There I was, standing in my kitchen in the middle of the night with nothing on, drinking cheap Scotch straight, I hadn't gone to work for days now and I didn't plan to go in the morning, I was digging a giant hole in my back yard for no reason, and to top it off an invisible guy with a cough was following me around and messing with my dreams. Was he out there someplace?

Stop thinking like that.

Before I knew it I'd be a homeless lunatic on the streets, unshaven, matted hair, talking to myself, peeing in alleyways. Where did they shit? I'd find out soon enough.

The Scotch was harsh, burning; it brought me back to myself. I leaned on the kitchen window and stared out at the yard, making up my mind to take my chances and go back to bed.

Coughing Man must have been through with me for the night, or maybe hard labor was what I had really needed all along. For the first time since Ellen had left me, I felt like I actually slept.

When I woke up, the sun was just coming up; long shadows stretched down the street, down the yards across from mine. The air was quiet and it smelled renewed, as if the night had cleansed it. I could picture my hole out back, waiting for me, the coolness of the dirt, the feel

of the old spade handle in my hands. I pulled on my clothes, drank coffee. My hands felt scraped and sensitive and I searched around my workbench in the garage until I came up with a pair of work gloves. Spade, clippers, pruning saw. Whistle while you work, Hitler is a jerk. Mussolini burned his wienie, now it doesn't work.

It was a surprise and a disappointment to see how shallow my hole was; the dream, apparently, had taken root in my convictions. It would be a long way down to the spot where I had begun digging in the dream, to say nothing of the world below that, but maybe that was just as well; the longer I dug, the better I would sleep. I began, and the strangest sensation came over me, something like *deja vu*, as if every movement could only be exactly as it was. As if dirt and shovel were an absolute.

I had been throwing dirt on the piles around me for some time, long enough to need a rest, when it occurred to me I hadn't even thought about going to work. Dangerous to get too used to that. Imagine what Ron would think if he drove up the alley and saw this; and what could I possibly tell him? That it was cheaper than therapy? Hell, even the word "therapy" would make him so nervous he'd probably burn rubber getting away.

I dug methodically, keeping track of time and doling out breaks to myself, going in for drinks of water and congratulating myself on getting hungry. When I was sure that I was ravenous I threw down my tools, washed my hands, and set off for the Heidelberg.

People on the streets seemed even farther away this time, no matter how close I came to them as we passed on the sidewalk. Hard to believe I ever had been part of their world, or would be again; they didn't respond to my passing through their space. Even young women, the ones with the most sensitive radar about strange males, didn't change course when they passed me, close enough that I could have touched their hair.

The Heidelberg was full. When I got inside, the sound of many voices at once was like orange color in front of my sight; I had been accustomed to nothing but the conversation of my own thoughts and the scrape of shovel on dirt. Or not even that, in the silence of two a.m. Was Lucas there? Because if he wasn't, I would have to go away. But I spotted him sitting in the same booth.

"Mind if I sit down?"

He looked up. "Well, well." He was having a barbecue beef sandwich and fries. "You lookin' a little better."

That seemed to mean he didn't mind; I sat down. In the presence of food I wasn't quite as hungry as I had been. "How you doing?" I said.

"Been waxing the third floor hall. You ever use one of them floor machines?"

"No."

"Always gets me right in the back of my neck, like a crick when you don't sleep right. Don't make sense. You don't wrestle the damn thing down the hall with your neck."

"Anybody take those offices up there yet?"

"No-o-o," Lucas said, dragging the word out scornfully. "Ain't going to, either, till McCullough get up off some serious dough and fix them up. Wax in the hall ain't gon cut it."

The waitress paused and pushed back a stray lock of hair, no nonsense, pencil at the ready. "Help you?"

"Just a cheeseburger. And a draw."

"You gettin' any sleep?" Lucas said. He looked severe, as if he might start lecturing me any minute.

"Some, yeah. Last night wasn't too bad."

"You come on back with me and clean baseboards, I guarantee you'll sleep."

"I've got a better plan – I've been digging a hole in my back yard. Big one. Three by seven, maybe four by eight." I knew that was an exaggeration, but it was something to be proud of, right?

"Four by eight? How deep is it?"

"Oh – two feet, anyway. Maybe a little more."

"What you digging this hole *for*?"

I shrugged. "I started off thinking I was going to build a shed, but I don't know – I just kept digging. I'll think of some reason later on."

"Like what? Trip to China?" Lucas massaged the back of his neck and examined me as if I were a muddy footprint suddenly discovered on a nice clean floor. "You sleepin' in the bed yet?"

He would have to ask that. I shook my head.

"That girl really mess up your mind. But good."

I shrugged again. What was I supposed to say to that? The waitress put a beer down in front of me and I took a sip, feeling slightly guilty, as if that, too, were a sign of degeneration.

"You ever planning to come back to work?"

"I don't know," I said, before I could think better of it. "I mean – yeah, you know – I've got to pay the rent, don't I?" But who the hell was Lucas to grill me like this?

"Everybody got to do what they got to do, that's a fact," Lucas said sententiously. "You got to stay home and dig your own grave and pull it in after you, that's up to you."

"Now wait a minute – just hold it a minute here," I said, but the waitress approached with a cheeseburger and cut me off. By the time she had asked me if I wanted ketchup and put it on the table I had realized I didn't know what to say. I took a bite of the cheeseburger; it was delicious. Dig my own grave, indeed. Lucas and I both ate methodically, not looking at each other; this time I got halfway through the burger before I ran out of appetite. I drank some beer, turned sideways in the booth and leaned back against the wall. From one of the adjoining booths I could hear women talking about calories while they ate. I glanced at Lucas, caught his eye, looked away. "It isn't just Ellen," I said. "Remember that guy with the cough?"

"One you wanted to talk to?"

"Yeah."

"You run into him somewhere?"

What the hell, I thought, just say it, he thinks you're nuts anyway. "Yeah, in my dreams."

Lucas turned his head to one side and looked at me out of the corner of his eye, scratching with his thumbnail along his jawline, as if he wasn't sure he'd heard right.

"Plus I keep hearing him at night. When I'm trying to sleep. He just coughs, not loud, just enough to keep me awake. Then I go to sleep, finally, and I have these nightmares starring Guess Who."

Lucas sat up straighter, leaned forward a little. "What kind of dreams you been havin'?" At least he looked as though he took me seriously.

"One of them, he made me go into this corridor where it was pitch-black inside, and he had hold of my arm, and he made me run, I couldn't stop myself, I just kept running faster and faster and I couldn't see a thing. It was scary as shit, let me tell you. Then I woke up, only I didn't, I dreamed that I woke up, and it was still a nightmare only worse. And then the other one, I was digging out back and I hit this huge rock at the bottom of the hole, and it had a crack in it, and man, you should have seen this, it went down so far below you could hardly see the bottom, and *he* came along and opened up the crack and tried to shove me down it. I can never see his face, no matter what." I stopped, aware of having made one of those long spiels people always make when they start to tell their dreams. Not noticing that no one else really gives a damn. I didn't look at Lucas. The ceiling fans rotated above our heads.

"Hm," he said. "What's down there?"

"Down below?" What could he be thinking of all this?

"Yeah."

"Like I said – I couldn't really see." It seemed a little too crazy to tell Lucas about the guy down there who I was sure was waiting to kill me. I was beginning to be sorry I'd started this.

Lucas took out a cigar and rolled it between his thumb and forefinger and thought. He sucked at his teeth, quietly, as if he were alone. "You have any other dreams like that?"

"No. Well. I don't know what the hell happened in the hospital. That was the first time. That could have been a dream, too."

"What about when he come at night and wake you up? You sure that ain't a dream?"

"Hell, I don't know what it is. Sometimes it's just as real as sitting here talking to you right now. I'm not sure of anything."

"He ain't lettin' up, though, is he?"

It wasn't really a question. "No."

A tall, middle-aged black woman with stiffly waved hair, businesslike in a red suit, approached and I could see she had her eye on Lucas; he caught the direction of my look and turned around as she called out, "Do you know I haven't seen you in a month? Finally I says to myself, if he doesn't give me a call today I am going to go find that man for myself. Not too hard to know where," she said, wagging her finger at him like a schoolteacher.

Lucas smiled at the wagging finger and said "Hey," holding out his hand. Hers brushed against his; she sat down next to him, comfortably. They filled up the narrow seat of the booth. Only when she sat down did she seem to fully take in that I was there, and I could see a little wave of stiffness go up her torso.

"I'm Marie," she said to me, holding out her hand with arm fully extended. The bustle of her sociability far overshot anything required of a chance meeting at the Heidelberg; it formed what seemed like an impenetrable armor.

"Lucas Averill." I shook her hand; her handshake was as businesslike as her clothes.

"Lucas! Of all things. Have you known my Lucas for a long time?" There seemed to be a number of much more pointed questions lurking behind that one.

"Well, we work in the same building."

"The next time you need insurance, you go see this young man," Lucas said to her. "He'll fix you up. If he ever decide to go back to the office." Young man? I thought.

"Oh, really?" Marie said brightly, as if she took special delight in the prospect of buying an auto policy. "Where do you work?"

"Martin and Gray. It's on the second floor. If you know Lucas's building."

"I have known Lucas for nearly twenty-five years," she said, flaring her nostrils with something of a "so there."

"Ah," I said. How to get out of this situation? Could this be the "little girl" in Centralia? Surely Lucas couldn't refer to this woman that way – she was practically as tall, and as old, as he was.

"Maybe you can fix him up, too," Lucas said to her. "You can use the business, can't you?"

"Always can," Marie said crisply.

"Marie's the best tailor you ever want to meet. She's all you need to know about clothes," Lucas said solemnly. "And you can see this boy need something to wear," he said to her with a little smirk, as if I couldn't hear. True, I was wearing blue jeans with plenty of dirt ground into them, and a short-sleeved shirt that was about fifteen years old, but he knew perfectly well where I'd been.

"I just spent the morning digging in my garden," I said to Marie, who seemed to be measuring me and finding me wanting with her professional eye.

"Some kind of spirit chasing him around, messing with his dreams. Plus his woman left. He need one of your good suits." What the hell was I supposed to do? Lucas sat there, talking about me as if I were a ten-year-old kid, telling my secrets to a woman I didn't even know, and on top of that I seemed to be getting roped into buying a suit I didn't need.

Marie smiled indulgently at him. "Lucas is always trying to help me out," she said to me. "I'll tell you a little secret: there's really only one thing you need to know about him." She took his left wrist and held up his hand, removed the wrapped cigar he was holding and put it back in his pocket, took hold of his thumb and bent it back. It was double-jointed; it bent back till his thumbnail was facing his wrist. "You see?" she said, satisfied with herself. "He's a generous man."

That seemed to make Lucas self-conscious; he avoided my eyes. "One hand scratch the other," he muttered, gruffly.

"You've been having trouble with a spirit of some sort?" Marie said, politely, as if asking about a head cold.

"I don't know what to call it," I said; the word *spirit* made me a little queasy, especially coming from a stranger.

"Many spirits will go away if you tell them. But you have to be very firm. It helps if you talk loudly to them. And don't let them get the idea you're afraid of them, it only encourages them. There's a lot of immature souls around who have nothing better to do than scare people and play tricks on them. Don't let them waste your time."

I couldn't get a word out; Lucas chuckled a little to himself. "Now look what you done, he look even worse than he did before."

"Prayer works better than a new suit," Marie said. "Not that I ever turn down a job."

"Thanks for the advice," I said. But please don't give me any more, I don't know if I can stand it. I couldn't remember when, if ever, someone had recommended prayer to me as a course of action.

"I don't think he know a whole lot about prayer," Lucas said, "but it never hurt to look good."

Marie reached into a shiny black purse and produced a business card. Marie Brace, Custom Tailor. Made to Your Order. "I'll leave you men to your lunch," she said, standing up. "But you call me, you hear?" she said to Lucas. "We'll have a good long talk. I don't want to be hearing about you secondhand."

"I hear," Lucas said, extending his left hand; she took it, then leaned down and gave him a peck on the cheek.

"Nice to meet you," Marie said to me. "I generally do men's suits in two to three weeks."

She strode off, and Lucas and I looked at each other. He seemed to be sizing up my reaction, and it made me uncomfortable. "Well," I said, and drank some beer.

"She don't always act like that," Lucas said. "Just cause she don't know you. She used to be a schoolteacher, and it always come out around white folks."

"I thought she acted like a teacher."

"Ain't it the truth? Man, anybody that's ever been in school for a day could see it a mile off. Marie will always do right. Once she's your friend, she'll be your friend for life. I married her sister. Lily. Lily went off with another man nine years ago, but Marie still like family to me."

He seemed like a different Lucas. "That must have been awful hard," I said, feeling ritualistic and inadequate.

He pursed his lips and raised his eyebrows, not meeting my eyes. "Hard enough. I don't need to tell you about it."

I finished my beer and put the glass down. "Well," I said again, thinking it must be time to go.

"You know what Marie was sayin' about spirits playing tricks on you? I think she got the wrong end of the stick. That guy ain't playin'."

"That's what I think, too," I said, before I could tell myself it was cuckoo to see it that way.

"You better check out what's underneath of that rock."

"What are you talking about?"

"Can you get back down there by yourself?"

"What do you mean? It was a dream, for crying out loud."

"Try it."

"Why?"

"That guy trying to show you something, and he don't really care if you ready or not. That's just his little way. But maybe if you do it yourself it won't scare you so damn much next time he show up. Either that or put some bottles on your trees."

"Bottles on my trees?"

"Ain't you never seen bottle trees? That's what people used to do around Fordyce."

"Never been there," I said. He mentioned it as if it were Chicago.

"Arkansas. Halfway between Pine Bluff and El Dorado. Bottle trees is how you keep all kinds of spirits away. People, too. But might not work for you, I don't know. You better go take a trip down that Grand Canyon you diggin' for yourself. You gon have to, one way or another."

I looked him over; Lucas sat back, crossed his arms, and contented himself with nodding slightly, as if he were some sort of a shrink. "You are about the last person I would ever have thought would have anything to do with the supernatural," I said.

Arms still crossed, he raised his eyes over my head as if asking someone or something to witness a dunce in action. "You can call it that if you want," he said. "But what you call it ain't gon make it go away." He was perfectly matter-of-fact. As if people talked about stuff like this over lunch every day.

"I don't think I even know what you're talking about," I said.

"Suit yourself," Lucas said. "But I tell you one thing – can't nobody do it for you. What *you* don't understand is," he said, pointing his finger at me, "you are in luck."

"Luck?" To have this unseen maniac terrorizing me whenever he felt like it, night or day?

The waitress, still in a hurry, stopped at our table and said, "Anything else? Another beer? Coffee?"

"No thanks," Lucas said. She scribbled on the check, tore it off and put it on the table, and I pocketed it. "My turn," I said. I pulled out three dollars and left them under my empty glass; Lucas added another.

"I thought you were going to let me pay," I said.

"We sat there a long time, she coulda had two tables. Two tips. It adds up."

Out on the sidewalk, Lucas unwrapped his afternoon cigar and lit it. "Maybe if you talk to Marie real nice, she might want to help you out. Let her read the cards for you while she makin' you a suit."

"Lucas, I don't *need* a suit."

He shrugged. "Yeah, but you need something. Maybe Marie gon help you get it. She could call me any time, must be some reason she just happen to show up today when you sittin' there."

"You really believe that?"

Lucas gave me a slow look and a gradual smile, his teeth clenched on the wooden mouthpiece of the cigar like FDR with his cigarette holder. "Makes life interesting," he said, and I had no idea if he was teasing me or not.

On the way home I heard the familiar rattle of Ellen's Mercedes, and Cora, driving it, beeped at me and pulled over to the curb. "Need a ride?" she said. "It seems like the least I could do. I still feel funny driving around in this car, like I stole it or something."

I wasn't sure I wanted to get into Ellen's car, but I did anyway. "Where are you heading?" she said.

"Home."

"You don't have to work today?"

"I've been taking sick days since I had that – episode, you know?"

"I'm sorry, I should have asked how you're doing. Ellen told me all about it, it sounded really scary."

"Oh, by now it's just an excuse to skip out from work." The car felt the same – higher than other cars, archaic, like something an older person would drive. Cora leaned slightly forward, both hands near the top of the finely cracked, ivory-colored steering wheel, and as she turned a corner her wavy chestnut hair fell in her eyes. She was dressed for work in a suit with a short skirt, formal and sexy at the same time. She pushed her hair back, and when she did, a fragrance came out of it that made me feel as if all beauty had once been mine and it never would be again. I wanted to jump from the car and run away, I wanted to bury my nose in Cora's hair.

"Have you heard from her?" Cora said.

"No, have you?"

"Unh-uh. It sounded to me like she was going to be a long way from a telephone."

"I imagine that's true," I said. And then, when she did get to a phone, she'd have had time to miss me, to have a change of heart . . . I

knew better than that. Cora pushed back her hair again. "What is that perfume you're wearing?"

"Perfume?"

"Cologne, something. It's on your hair."

She pulled a trailing lock of hair under her nose and sniffed at it, glancing at me with a half-smile. "You like it?"

I nodded and had to look away, out the window at my block gliding by, embarrassed by the way I'd been watching her. We slowed to a stop in front of my house. "Are you okay, really?" Cora said.

"Sure. I've been digging a lot. Gardening. I'm fine." But she didn't look convinced. Come out in the back yard and look at the tunnel to China, if you don't believe me.

"I'll come visit you sometime," she said, and then she saw I didn't know how to answer. "Maybe at work," she said as if there had been no little hesitation. "I've got to get Ellen's policy switched over to my name. Or whatever it is I'm supposed to do. *You* know."

"I know, don't remind me. How's the station?" I said with my hand on the door handle. Cora sold commercial time for the local TV channel, and if the advertisers were men I had a feeling they'd buy just to keep her in the office a few minutes longer. She was too smart for her job anyway, the way Ellen had been too smart for the Highway Department, but she had gotten stuck in it somehow after she came back home to deal with what turned out to be the last year of her mother's life. One time she said to me, "You know why it's always quicker driving back to Columbia than going away?" and when I said No she said, "Because Columbia sucks."

"I keep waiting for Forney Furniture to come up with another spot," she said now. There had been a commercial that ended with "Forney caters to your needs," and Ellen and Cora and I had made bets on how long it would take them to notice how it actually sounded. We all guessed way too short a time.

"Yeah, right." I got out, patted the warm roof of the car to send her on her way. "See ya. Thanks for the ride."

Cora drove off, giving me a wave, leaving behind a faint cloud of diesel exhaust. I had always minded that smell coming from buses, but after Ellen got the Mercedes, I didn't mind it from her car.

I turned my back on the street and already Cora seemed to have driven off a while ago. Even Lucas seemed kind of hypothetical. If Ellen wasn't real, off there in Wyoming, then the whole thing was a long dream. And what did I find when I woke up? Myself walking up the slightly sloping front walk of an unremarkable rented house in Missouri, the

“show-me state,” and in all truth I had damn little to show anybody for thirty-five years on earth except the hole in my back yard that I couldn’t wait to get back to and dig. I passed through the house, only stopping to pee, and out the back. In Charlotte Carter’s yard a woman in a two-piece bathing suit was playing with Jason in a wading pool. I didn’t recognize her at first; then I realized it was their regular babysitter, the one I’d seen before on weekends now and then, when Charlotte and her husband would take the afternoon off from parenthood. She’d told me they had made a resolution to give themselves at least one afternoon like that a month. What was the sitter’s name? Kristin. I had had a passing chat with her a couple of times. She paid no attention to me. I put my work gloves back on and started throwing dirt with a will.

The thought of Lucas at the Heidelberg came back to me even though I didn’t exactly want it to: Can you get down there by yourself?

Dig my way down. Man, talk about slow. Stop digging the hole so wide, make it just wide enough to get down, and steeper. Go faster that way.

The dirt was rocky, much rockier than my garden, and as I dug deeper the rocks got bigger; sometimes I had to excavate around one with a trowel before I could lever it out. My pile of dug-out rocks was impressive in itself. The dirt was changing color, becoming more tan, as in the dream, and there were veins of sandiness in it. Ellen would have known what they meant. Where was she at that moment, noon in Wyoming, what was she doing? The hale and hearty crew of diggers, tanned and clear-eyed and fit, were passing around a canteen, greedily devouring lunch with appetites sharpened by hard work in the open air and the excitement of discovery, and later on they’d head back to camp and go down to a stream to wash the dust off, skinny-dipping together, the men not-so-secretly aware of her beauty, watching and wanting her, and her knowing she could have her pick of them.

That girl mess up your mind. But good.

I could picture him, scratching his jaw, looking at me sideways, probably thinking that he had managed not to go off the rails like this. And why did he say to me, You are in luck? If this was what luck meant to him, he could have my helping of it and welcome.

The words “You’re in luck” rotated in my head like a windmill, over and over until they lost their meaning and became only breathing, only a rhythm for digging in time with the breath. I could feel the inspiration come on, feel time stretch out and the work become continuous, I could see the edge of the spade move the dirt aside in minute detail, could see the hole develop before me. Go for it, get there,

now – only I was digging too fast and it exhausted me and forced me to stop.

What the hell did I think, anyway? That I was going to all of a sudden find a door in front of me and turn the knob and walk through?

The day was hot; I wiped sweat from my forehead, looked around me. The shade of the pear tree would reach me sooner or later, but it hadn't yet. Jason was not in evidence, and Kristin was lying on a folding chaise longue getting a tan; she sat up as though she felt me looking at her. "Hi," she said, waving from the wrist with a side-to-side action as though wiping off a steamed-up mirror. It was quiet in the neighborhood, and she didn't have to raise her voice for me to hear.

"Hi."

"What're you doing?"

I was going to have to think of an answer to that question. "I'm digging." My voice sounded sullen and curmudgeon-like in my ears, but Kristin got up and ambled in my direction, a young woman whose brown hair brushed bare shoulders, whose bare feet touched the earth silently. Nothing better to do. She approached unselfconsciously, unarmed, as if we were both numbed by the quiet of a Columbia afternoon, as if I would not notice her mostly uncovered body, could not tell that she was a woman.

"That's quite a hole you've got there," she said, looking in. "Did you find something?"

"Not yet."

She yawned, gaping luxuriously, and only remembered to cover her mouth at the end. Looking up, I saw that her pink palate was like a kitten's. "Scuse me," she said. "Watching Jason always makes me sleepy. Except when I have to chase him."

"Where is he?"

"Taking a nap. He doesn't really, but he has to go and lie down anyway. That's how they do it at day care. He'd be there, only the afternoon teacher got sick, so Charlotte called me."

"Ah."

I didn't know what to say and neither, it seemed, did Kristin; she looked down into my hole and idly swiveled one bare foot in the loose dirt by its edge. I watched that foot, willing myself not to raise my eyes and stare at her smooth legs, or the slight protrusion of her hipbones that showed through the nubbly material of her bathing suit bottom, or the curve of her belly below her navel. Not think about the rest of her under her suit. She did not seem to be thinking of that at all. "What're you making?" she said.

"I don't know." The truth came out before I could stop it. Instantly I pictured her telling her friends about this weird middle-aged geek she met digging a giant hole in his back yard for no reason. "Swimming pool," I said. "Hot tub. Stairway to China."

"Swimming pool sounds good right now," she said. "Better than a hot tub. Aren't you hot already, digging out here in the sun like this?"

"Darn right I am."

"I couldn't believe the way you made that dirt fly, I just had to see what it was. I thought maybe you found something."

"Well – " I spread my hands out to say Here you see it, and met her eyes for the first time since she had come up close. Someone serious in there. Her eyes were more grey than blue, looking out at me as if she were hiding behind them. Or did I really see that? I wiped sweat off my forehead, hoping the back of my glove didn't leave a streak of dirt.

"Want some iced tea?" she said. "I've got a whole pitcher in the kitchen."

"Um – " I did, but her exquisite femaleness was almost more than I could stand. "Sure."

"Well, come on then," she said neutrally, and turned away. I couldn't have stopped myself from following her, even if I had wanted to try. I took off my work gloves and dropped them by the hole; from behind I couldn't take my eyes off Kristin, the knobs of her backbone, her shoulder blades, the twin dimples just below the small of her back. I wondered if Vic was watching this scene, or anyone else from behind some half-pulled curtain. I knew her invitation was only polite, there was no subtext, she didn't come over to make me want her. She couldn't be more than twenty-two, I thought, she probably thinks you're a hundred, don't make a complete ass of yourself. I stepped into the kitchen behind her and it was so dim inside compared to the brightness of the yard that for a moment I couldn't see at all and I almost bumped into her; I didn't, but I came so close that I could feel the space around her was different, just like it is around anyone if you get close enough. I could hardly breathe. She was looking in the cupboard for a glass; it was cool in the house, and silent, and maybe Jason was actually sleeping after all. The kitchen was all panelled and the fronts of the cupboards were wood-grain something that wasn't wood. Now that we were inside she seemed smaller, even younger, a girl still. She was handing me a glass of iced tea and pouring one for herself, and even though I knew it was totally inappropriate, I was still asking myself if somehow, by some miracle . . . a calico cat came winding her way around the door from the pantry. "Hi Molly, hi kitty," Kristin said, and the cat bumped her head against

Kristin's shin; she crouched down, holding her iced tea in one hand, and began to pet the cat. "Keedy keedy," she said in a high sing-song voice, stroking the cat's back, and I stood right behind her in the cool dimness, looking down on her almost naked back that almost seemed to be presented for my touch, wondering if it could be, thinking it would be so easy to stroke her hair the way she was stroking the cat, to reach down and run my hand down her backbone. My heart was racing and for an instant I was about to do it and then she straightened up and looked around at me and we both knew I was too close. "Excuse me," I said, stepping back. She drank her iced tea and I drank mine, gulping it, wanting to get away before I did anything irrevocable.

"Well," she said, "I knew you must have been thirsty." Her eyes were careful now, conscious of the situation, watching me in a new way. I felt she was going to read me the charges, tell me she knew everything I had been thinking and what a conceited pig of a man I was. Upstairs I could hear something bang on the floor, and she glanced that way: Jason. Don't leave yet, I thought, let me make it up to you somehow, but the next moment Jason was calling "Kristee!" from above. "I gotta go," Kristin said, setting down her glass.

"Thanks for the iced tea," I said, but she was already out of the kitchen, her bare feet padding quietly, quickly up the stairs. I was left alone to set down my glass on the counter of the dim, silent kitchen, next to the sink where one drop trembled on the verge of falling from the faucet, and to slink away in shame and helpless desire. Unbearable. I went straight to my back door, into my house, as if I had to hide, as if I were back in that dream and all of a sudden found myself without pants.

I sat on the edge of the sofa-bed, remembering how a friend of mine had said when he met the woman he eventually married it saved him from having crazy lust on the streets. Something better save me now. I couldn't be trusted anymore.

From the back of the house I heard four bangs on the frame of the screen door; I knew the kitchen door was open, someone could walk right in. "Hello?" a female voice called. It was Kristin, and I could hear Jason chattering to her, asking her where I was, was I in there?

I couldn't bear to answer her; like a burglar in my own house I tiptoed into the bathroom and tried to pretend I'd been there and hadn't heard her knock or call out. I flushed the toilet, took a deep breath, tried to collect myself. Then with ostentatious loudness I opened the bathroom door and strode into the kitchen. Out the window I could see Kristin and Jason heading away from me, hand in hand, toward the hole. Kristin was wearing a shirt now, several sizes bigger than she was; Jason had a toy

shovel, and she had a pail. They looked like two kids, a big and a little one.

I opened the screen door. "Hello?" I called. They were most of the way to the back.

Kristin turned. "Oh, you're there! I wondered where you went. I just came to see if it's okay if Jason digs in your hole."

"Be my guest." I let the screen door shut and stood there watching them, wondering What next?

She and Jason crouched on the lip of the hole, oblivious of me, as I approached. Maybe it would be a little easier now that she had something on over her bathing suit. "Don't throw the dirt in," she was saying to Jason. "Lucas's been digging it out all day, I'll bet."

"Yeah, and all yesterday, too." I hadn't been sure that she knew my name. Kristin stood up, looking like she was on her guard now, only hanging around in my yard because Jason wanted to be there. Jason turned so his back was toward the hole and let himself down into it feet first, along with a small avalanche of loose dirt; Kristin gave me an apologetic look. "It's okay," I said. Me decent human being after all, watch me jump nimbly in and sling that dirt back out with a flick of my manly wrist. Some dirt fell on Kristin's bare foot, and she drew it back in a way that made me feel I'd touched her uninvited.

I kept digging, next to Jason who was talking to himself about shovel this and shovel that and "Where's my bucket?" Kristin handed it to him. She wiggled her foot halfway into a pile of loose dirt and said, "It's cool."

"What is?"

"The dirt, it feels good. Do you ever dig in your bare feet? I would."

"Then you wouldn't be able to step on the spade," I said, doing it.

"Oh yeah."

Jason wound up with his bucketful of dirt and threw it; he had a good arm for a four-year-old, but his control wasn't so great. Some ended up in Kristin's hair on its way past her. "Be careful, Jason! God!" she said, swatting at her head. "And don't throw it so hard. You're getting it all over the grass."

"I don't mind," I said. "It's got to go somewhere."

Kristin looked at me over Jason's head, one adult to another, and mouthed the words "Don't tell him that." Next to me Jason continued his muttered soliloquy of instructions to himself on how to dig, scraping at the side of the hole with his plastic shovel and then patting it into place, sculptor-like. She looked away and ran her hands back through her hair,

moodily combing dirt out with her fingers, a person not to be trifled with. I bent over and dug, piling dirt on the side away from her. I heard her yawn. "Nap time," she said.

"No!" Jason protested. "I did nap time! I did it already!"

"Take it easy, I know you did," she said. "It's nap time for me, now."

"No," said Jason in an offended voice.

"No nap for me?" she said. I tried not to think what I was thinking about the lovely sofa-bed inside all ready to go. Guest bed. Waiting for a guest.

"No, nap, for, you," he said, punctuating his sentence with slaps of his shovel on a full bucket of dirt. "Get me up." He held his hands up and waved them.

"Here, let me," I said, and lifted Jason out of the hole. His little rib cage was taut and electric with boy energy.

"Thanks," she said. "He's really getting heavy."

"My bucket!" he cried, pointing at it still in the hole as if it were being stolen from him. I handed it to him.

"Say 'thank you,'" Kristin said, but Jason said nothing, grabbed his bucket, climbed to the top of the biggest hill of dirt, and poured it out ceremoniously over the rest. Most of it trickled back down into the hole. Kristin gave me an apologetic half-smile and I felt myself grinning back at her like an idiot and turned away. I pretended it was urgent to dig at the other side of the hole. "Is something bothering you?" Kristin said, a little impatiently.

Hell yes, but what could I possibly say? I'm lonely, I'm in need, your youth and beauty is more than I can bear, other than that nothing's bothering me. Except my job, and being thirty-five and feeling like a complete loser because my girlfriend walked out on me. And I've reached the jumping-off place and emptiness is gaping in front of me. Her question hung in the air, expecting an answer.

"I haven't talked to very many people lately," I said. Jason, with bucket and shovel in hand, ran off in the direction of the Carters' yard; she watched to see what he'd do there and then turned her serious gaze back to me.

"You really don't have a plan for this hole?" she said.

Knowing there was no reason she should care, nothing to lose, made me reckless enough to say whatever came. "There's a door down there somewhere, and when I get there, I'll open it."

Kristin poised the toes of one foot on the edge of the hole and curled them, making tiny trickles of dirt slide in. Her hands were clasped

behind her back, her head bowed, she was contemplating the bottom of the hole. She made a little “hm” sound to herself. “Okay,” she said in what I thought was a carefully neutral voice, and I couldn’t tell if she was humoring the local madman or not, but she had to be, didn’t she? “Where does it go?” she said. I had a feeling of sliding over some brink, not of desire this time – some other unexpected falls.

“You can come over and look, when I get there.”

A frown made two little vertical creases appear between her eyebrows. She glanced at me and then away. “You make me nervous,” she said. “I can’t tell what you’re – up to? I can’t tell if you’re serious or not.”

Her voice was clear, almost uninflected, so without guile that her thoughts seemed to have spoken themselves. She made me ashamed, and so did my not knowing what to say. Not to be serious felt like a terrible indictment, a failure of character that went back years.

“I’m sorry.” I stopped digging and leaned on the handle of the spade and looked up at her; she was wearing a man’s work shirt, big and pale green, like something Lucas Gray would wear to mop the hall in. In an oval over the left pocket the name “Ernie” was embroidered; the shirt was so baggy on her that she seemed to have no curves, no body, and then her wrists and hands came out of its rolled-up sleeves as a delicate surprise. Her neck glowed pink next to the green fabric of the collar, endowed it with grace. She looked back at me. There was no escape, I had to say something, and my mind was blank inside the way it used to be when a teacher would call on me and I knew I didn’t know the answer.

“I’m trying to get out of this world.” My mouth had opened, those words had fallen out and I couldn’t pull them back.

“With a shovel?” she said. Something like a cloud of gnats jittered in the air between us. What the hell had I said to her, and what did she think I meant, and was I? Maybe Lucas had been right about pulling it in after me. “You think it’ll work?” She looked faintly amused, or maybe she felt sorry for me; her gaze seemed to make me babble.

“I almost died last week, did Charlotte tell you? She found me, I didn’t have a heartbeat, they hauled me off to the hospital and brought me back. Dying’s easy, that’s not what I’m trying to do.”

She crossed her arms, bunching up the heavy material of the shirt, her face suddenly secretive, closed in on itself. The two marks appeared faintly between her eyebrows. “Kristeee,” Jason called. “C’mere, turn on the hose for me!”

At the sound of his voice, she turned away, it seemed automatically, and began to pick her way through the grass in his direction, arms still crossed, head down, not looking at him or me.

Relieved to get away, I could only imagine. But after a few steps she raised her head, turned and flashed me a look; her eyes seemed dark even though I knew they weren't. "Bye," she said, and turned her back again. Her bare legs scissored bird-like under the tent of her shirt.

About dinnertime – dinnertime for other people – the house cast a long shadow down the back yard; the tip of the shadow, the peak of the roof, was about to reach the roots of the pear tree. From the kitchen window, my hole looked like a tarp that I'd carelessly left lying out in the yard. The mounds of dirt were not so easy to explain. The phone rang: I was sure, as I stood up to answer it, that it was going to be a survey. Instead, when I said hello, a woman's voice said "Hello" and expected me to know who it was. It took me a moment to realize it was Cora.

"Oh, hey. How you doin'?"

"Are you *sure* you're all right?" she said, as if there had been no break between our earlier conversation in the car and this.

"Yeah, sure."

"What've you been doing with yourself?"

"Gardening."

"Well, are you busy right now? Are you eating, or anything? I've got sort of a problem I wanted to ask you about, with the Mercedes."

"To tell you the truth, I'm not doing a damn thing."

"Okay, well – do you mind?"

"No." If only she knew how little I minded something filling up even a minute or two.

"Well, I've got this problem with the battery. It keeps getting low on me, and then it won't start, and I have to get somebody to jump it for me, and I don't understand it. I took it to the gas station yesterday and they said it all looked fine."

"It keeps getting low? What do you mean? Like when?"

"Whenever I'm not driving the car. It drains right out for some reason. I'm not leaving the lights on, I know that. Maybe it just won't hold a charge. Is the battery old? I hate to buy a new one if I don't have to, it's such a big battery, I called Sears and they cost a fortune."

"Yeah, they do. But that one's not so old, it should work. Especially in the summer. Wait'll you try starting that thing in the wintertime."

"I never will if it keeps on like this."

"So is it dead right now?"

"Well, it's low. It might start, I guess, because I drove it home from work a couple of hours ago, but I'm afraid to go anywhere in it because I'll probably just get stuck there."

I thought. The solution didn't pop to mind, but I had lived with the car for a while, and what else did I have to do? "Want me to come over and look at it? I can't guarantee anything, but . . . "

"I'll take it without the guarantee."

Like normal life, I thought, as I got in my car. Not something I was used to anymore.

Cora lived in half of a little house in the neighborhood of Stephens College. A nice place; Ellen and I had eaten dinner there with her quite a few times, had hung out with her and a couple of different boyfriends watching movies on her VCR. The boyfriends hadn't impressed me much; Cora deserved better. But that was one of the problems with Columbia. And better Columbia than Fulton, or Boonville, or Jeff City. Either you took what you could get, or you went without; you could be picky if you liked, but you might have to spend a whole lot of time alone. I had made that decision half a dozen times, before Ellen, and it was always the same; yes first, because there had been no one for a while, and then no after all and look back and say I knew better from the start. The same for Cora, unless I was all wrong. The boyfriends, at least the ones I knew about, wore out their welcome pretty fast. She always said they didn't have enough to talk about. Ellen was probably telling herself right now that she had always known it was a mistake to be with me.

Underfoot on Cora's front porch I felt the same rickety board I had stepped on with misgivings every time I'd been there. Trumpet vine was growing on the porch roof. It was dusk, the cicadas were getting cranked up. I knocked on the glass of the front door because her doorbell didn't work.

She opened the door, no longer in work clothes but wearing shorts and a T-shirt instead. "Thanks for coming over," she said, stepping out on the porch with a flashlight and the car keys in her hand. "I guess we should look at it before it gets dark."

I got in, adjusted the seat to my legs – Cora wasn't as tall as Ellen – tried the key, and it cranked half-heartedly once, twice, no luck, halfway through the third revolution it gave up. "You see?" she said. "This is what always happens. And then when you jump-start it, it runs fine. As long as you don't let it sit for too long."

"Weird," I said.

"Want to look under the hood?"

"Might as well." I wasn't sure what it would tell me, but that was what men did, wasn't it? I popped the hood release and we lifted it up, grille and all in the peculiar way of Mercedes. Cora handed me the flashlight and I tried to trace the ignition wires. She was at my shoulder, close enough that I could feel her space and mine overlapping. All that gone from my life. Pay attention, I told myself; the wires were all hooked up the same as ever. Tried the cable connectors on the battery and they were tight. The ground lead screwed down the way it should be. Maybe the voltage regulator? It was just a black box, no way to tell if it was good or bad. "See anything?" Cora said.

"Nothing you haven't. I guess we might as well jump it off my car, as long as I'm here. Try to charge it up a little."

"Okay."

I maneuvered my car around so that it and the Mercedes were nose to nose, and we hooked up the cables and got Ellen's car going. As Cora had said, it started up no problem. "Tell you what," I said, turning the Mercedes off again but leaving mine idling, "just in case it isn't charging right, why don't we let it stay hooked up to mine for a while, get some juice into it that way?"

"That'd be great," Cora said. "If you're free."

I looked at her, she looked at me. She was Ellen's best friend, she knew good and well I had nowhere to hurry off to. "Free, indeed," I said. "You sure you don't have a date?"

Cora made a face. "You know what I think of dating." I'd heard her tell Ellen – and me – more than once that some date was going to be her last, that if it wasn't called something else, from now on, she wasn't going to have anything to do with it. "You mean, the right person hasn't asked you for a date yet," I said.

"Maybe. You want to come in and have a drink, or you just want to stand here and watch your car run?"

"What the hell, it's Friday night."

"Yes."

Cora led the way into her place. It was dim inside, and she didn't bother to turn on a light as we passed through her living room to the

kitchen. It was the favorite room in her odd apartment, and much the biggest, as if she or someone had taken out a wall. She had painted the cabinets and wainscoting in bright chalky colors like a school kid's art work and had built bookshelves all the way to the ceiling; one wall was covered with draped fabric tacked to the picture molding. Safety-pinned to it were photos of people I didn't know, produce box labels, cardboard coasters from restaurants, the cover of a Wonder Woman comic. Seeing her in her home, I thought she must know how to be alone, how to be good company for her own complicated self. What if I could learn from her. It was the only kitchen I knew that had a sofa and a piano in it, an old upright with cookbooks instead of music sitting on the rail above the keyboard. As far as I had ever seen, Cora lived in her kitchen and the rest of the place was an afterthought. "Gin and tonic?" she said, opening a cupboard.

"Sure, why not?"

She handed me a drink and I tasted it. She made them strong. She sat down next to me on the couch, not right up next to me but not far away either. I realized I'd never been in Cora's house without Ellen there too. Always in my head she had been "Ellen's friend" – and mine through Ellen, but always one of three, not of two. It took getting used to. Cora took off her sneakers, stuck her legs out in front of her in midair and wiggled her toes. "Ah," she said. "Aren't shoes a drag?"

"Well – it depends."

"I hate having my feet get hot. Why are you wearing those socks? Aren't they boiling? It's June, for crying out loud."

"I don't know, they're just what I wear. I spent the whole day digging in my back yard."

"It's making me hot just to look at you, why don't you take them off?"

Well, yes ma'am, I thought. But why not. I unlaced my old dirty sneakers and pulled off the athletic socks that I habitually wore and had never thought once about until Cora brought them up. I slid the shoes and socks under the couch so they wouldn't smell the place up too much.

"Now," she said, extending her legs again. "Can you do this?" She splayed her toes out, and then as if it were an awkward finger, she slowly made her second toe overlap her big toe so it was pressing down on the nail, and then slip suddenly off it with a faint thump. Her toenails were painted red, for her own amusement I thought. The irony of being frivolous when she wasn't.

"No way," I said.

"Try."

I wiggled my toes, but I couldn't get any one of them to do anything by itself. "Impossible."

"Come on, you're not trying." She nudged at my foot with hers. "Get that toe over there."

"That's easy for you to say. Your toes are extra long."

"I don't keep them cooped up in socks all the time."

"Yeah, right."

She got up and turned her stereo on, stuck a tape in the tape deck. Piano blues came out, filled up Cora's kitchen, transported me to midnight in the back booth of some bar with a good jukebox. Maybe the Heidelberg the way it used to be.

"So," Cora said, sitting down again and turning to face me. She looked as if she expected something.

"So?"

"So *tell*," she said, as if I were being deliberately obtuse.

"Tell what?"

Now the look was definitely Oh-come-on-Lucas-get-it-together. She took a swallow of her drink and so did I. "Oh, nothing," she said. "I guess nothing interesting's happened to you in the last couple of weeks after all."

"Oh – that."

"Ay yi yi," she said, slumping down with the back of her neck against the couch, her body nearly horizontal. She tried to balance her gin-and-tonic on the zipper of her shorts, but it wouldn't work. She sat up again, took another swallow, set her glass down on the floor, got up as if she had dismissed me from her mind and went around the apartment methodically pulling down the window shades. Giving me time to watch her back and appreciate the grace of her and think about what a clod I was. Finally, when we were thoroughly closed in against the night, she sat down again and said, "So excuse me for asking." She didn't face me this time.

"It stinks," I said.

We sat without talking as one song came to an end and another began. The singer was a black man with a voice that made you feel like he held you in the palm of his hand.

"It's always worse to be left," Cora said. "Leaving stinks too, but being left is worse."

"I know she wanted that damn fellowship, but it was the *way* she went off. As if . . . no big deal, you know?" I looked over at Cora and she nodded her head, but she seemed to be thinking something else. "Did she tell you anything?" And would Cora tell me, if she had?

"You know Ellen, she always believes she's going to get what she wants, in the end. Nothing gets in the way of that."

"So Wyoming was what she really wanted?"

"Must have been," Cora said. For the first time it occurred to me that Cora might be a little pissed at her too, for just up and leaving town.

"One night," Cora said, "we were talking, really late, just the two of us. You went to bed. I don't know if she ever told you, but we stayed up most of the night, I guess we drank a lot of wine." I had a vague memory of that, Ellen silent in her bathrobe most of the next day. "We talked about everything, I don't remember most of it, but one thing I've never forgotten is she told me life was really all about power. You know how you make pronouncements like that when you've had too much wine? We got into sort of a fight over it. I never completely trusted her afterwards, and I don't think she expected me to."

"What did you say life was about?"

Cora hesitated, looked self-conscious. "Truth with a capital 'T.' I told you we had a lot to drink."

"There's no need to apologize." We were quiet again for a couple of choruses. Ellen had certainly held all the cards right before she left, if that was what she wanted. It hadn't kept her from going away. "We had the greatest . . ." I said before I realized I was talking out loud.

"What?" Cora said, turning to face me again. I was embarrassed, I kept my mouth shut and shook my head slightly.

"Sex?" she said. "It's okay to say it, Lucas, I'm a big girl, we talk about it all the time."

"I know, I'm sorry." I felt like a complete fool. "Did she . . . what did she tell you?"

Cora gave a mischievous, evasive smile and said, "I'll tell you later."

"What's wrong with now?"

She shook her head, smiling with lips pressed shut.

"Well, I thought it was wonderful, anyway. But I guess great sex doesn't mean as much as I thought."

"Ah," she said. "Unfair, isn't it?"

"It is."

We regarded each other. She knew, all right. I couldn't help wondering what Cora was remembering when she thought about making love as if it really meant something. But wasn't I already horny enough without dwelling on that, hadn't I felt my balls aching ever since Kristin and I were in Charlotte Carter's kitchen? I had to look away, awkward all

over again. The tape came to an end, and I stood up; my drink was empty, too. "Why don't you turn that over?" Cora said.

"Maybe I ought to go out and make sure nobody's driven off in my car."

"Oh yeah."

"Thanks for the drink," I said. She shrugged as if to say it was nothing to her. I fished my shoes out from under her couch and carried them, barefoot, to the two hooked-up cars, Cora following behind. She stood with her arms folded over her chest as I disconnected the jumper cables, put down the hoods, got into the Mercedes and tried it. It cranked full force and started right up. I tried the headlight switch to make sure she didn't have the parking lights on, fiddled with the overhead light, and when I flipped it on something on the dashboard caught my eye.

"I've got the answer," I called to Cora, who still stood at a distance as if she were more interested in the night.

"What is it?"

"You had the rear window defroster on."

"What?"

"The defroster – see this switch? You must have turned it on without knowing it." She looked where I was pointing, a bit reluctantly, I thought. Almost as if she didn't want me to show it to her.

"All fixed," I said, turning it off. "No charge. House call and everything."

"Thank you," she said abstractedly. Some sort of awkwardness hung in the air – maybe the conversation had gotten too intimate, inside? I didn't seem to be leaving on the right note.

"I guess that about does it," I said. She didn't answer, and I got in my car. I thought about putting my shoes on, but I could drive home barefoot, couldn't I? Cora stood in the street next to the car, arms still crossed, inspecting me through the open window; her steady gaze made me uncomfortable, as if she knew things about me I didn't know myself – things she could tell if she chose, if she thought I was ready.

"Have you had dinner?" she said. "I've got food in the fridge. More gin and tonic where that came from. If you like."

"Thanks, I, um . . . I had something right before you called."

"Or maybe you've got a better offer?" she said with a faint smile that didn't seem to fit with her words.

"I really appreciate it," I said, but if I appreciated it so much, why was I acting like I couldn't wait to get away?

"Whatever you like," Cora said. I was sure I'd offended her.

"Well, goodnight," I said. She had already turned away, and raised her hand to wave briefly without speaking or looking around. I started my car, put it in gear, watched her go into her house and close the door behind her, thought What the fuck? Am I being an asshole or what? Ellen and I had eaten dinner at her house a dozen times. Maybe that was the problem.

But start something and you've got to finish it. I let out the clutch and drove off, the night air pouring softly in the window. Someone tries to be friendly to you because you're obviously in a bad way and what do you do? Run off with your tail between your legs. I couldn't stand myself, and what was I running to? Two minutes of beating off to get my balls to stop killing me, and after that a night that would feel as though it might never end, cheap Scotch in the dark, the sounds of the Carters in bed, the lights of passing cars making weird geometries on the walls. A better offer? I was nuts. I came to the corner and turned.

Around the block, back to Cora's house. She might tell me to go to hell but even that wouldn't be any worse.

Barefoot this time as I stepped on the porch, I could feel the loose board spring beneath my sole. I knocked, waited, heard Cora's bare feet inside. She turned on the porch light, pulled aside the curtain that covered the window of the front door, examined me as if I were an item of dubious value in a display case; then she unlocked the door and opened it. "Well," she said. "I knew you couldn't be as dumb as you looked."

She closed and locked the door behind me. The same music was playing, but louder; she made two new gin-and-tonics and handed one to me with an ironic little inclination of her head. Then she clinked my glass with hers.

"Thank you," I said, making sure I looked her in the eye.

"Glad you could make it." We both sipped, watching each other. "Ellen told me you were kind of skittish."

"Did she?" I had never heard her say it to me.

"So – you don't want anything to eat?"

"Not really."

She looked me up and down. "You're getting pretty skinny," she said, pressing fingertips to my midsection momentarily. "No love handles on this boy."

"Nobody trying to hold on, either."

"Aww – poor Lucas. Life's not over yet."

"Close, though. They say my heart wasn't beating when they hauled me into the E.R."

Cora took a jar of olives out of the fridge and dropped a couple into my gin and tonic. "Protein," she said.

"I thought they went in martinis."

"So break the rules." She took out cheese, sardines, cold fried chicken, cherry tomatoes, Dijon mustard, applesauce. "Just in case," she said. "You never know, you might get hungry later on."

"Oh." Was I staying a while, then? "Thanks." Actually, the chicken looked good; I took a couple of bites out of a drumstick while Cora watched me with a sardonic look.

"Well, that's a relief," she said. "I knew you wanted something even if you couldn't admit to it."

"I've hardly been able to eat anything all week. Ever since she left. I take three bites of something and that's it, I'm full."

"Better full than empty."

I left the chicken leg unfinished and we sat down again on the couch. Not so awkward this time. "What was it like being dead?" Cora said.

"I don't know, I can't remember. It was nothing. But weird things have been happening to me ever since." If I could tell Lucas, why not her?

"Like what?"

"Like this guy's following me around, a guy with a bad cough, he gets into my dreams and he's trying to make me do something."

"Wait a minute, slow down," she said. "What guy? Where'd he come from?" I had forgotten how hard it would be to explain.

"I don't know. Well – no. I mean, he was in the hospital room with me, only I'm not so sure he was really there." The word *spirit* floated through my head, but I couldn't say it. "I mean you can't see him."

"Whoa," she said, looking at me as if she had to start all over again. "Stop. You can't see him?"

"Really. He just coughs, that's how I know he's there."

"Wow," she said, putting her hands behind her head and leaning back against the couch. "Seriously, that's . . ."

"Do you think maybe I'm going nuts?"

"Do you?" She sounded as if she'd accept whatever answer I gave, but I didn't know what to say. "What do you mean, he's trying to make you do something?"

That wasn't so easy either. "He wants me to . . . to leave this world. I think. I've been having some very weird dreams."

"He wants you to die?" She looked worried about me, and who could blame her?

"No, it's something else. But I can never figure out what it is, except it scares the shit out of me, every time."

"Lucas, are you sure you're okay? Is there something I could do to help you get through this?"

"How do I know? This never happened to me before." She seemed halfway scared; remembering how Lucas Gray took this in stride, I was even more surprised at him than I had been. "The part where my heart quit on me wasn't bad at all," I said. "A lot worse things could happen. In fact, right at that moment when it happened I was lying on the ground and I saw this beetle in front of my nose and it was the most beautiful thing I've ever seen."

"The most beautiful thing you've ever seen was a beetle?"

"Well, right then it was. You had to be there."

"I'll wait until my turn comes, thanks." She took a sip of her drink. "You mean you weren't scared? At all?"

"Hell, I didn't even know what was happening. Not till after it was over. I woke up in the hospital and you know what? Ellen was there, and I knew she was going to leave me. And she hadn't even heard about the fellowship yet." My one moment of enlightenment, my micro-claim to fame.

"I could have told you that six months ago," Cora said, "but I didn't think anybody needed to." She was studying my face as if I were trying to keep something from her. "Well, you never asked me, did you?" she said, frowning and sounding defensive.

"Why would I? You mean . . . what the *fuck*, I mean wait a minute, she told you she was out of here like last Christmas?"

"Well. Maybe I told her, and she didn't deny it."

"What made you tell her that?"

"I've got eyes, I could see. I thought everybody could. I got impatient, I can't stand to watch people I care about wasting their lives deceiving themselves."

"Holy shit." I took a swallow of my drink. In vino, and all that. "So all this time she knew and you knew and I was just living in a fool's paradise and nobody told me? Let me make a bigger fool out of myself? I thought you were interested in the truth."

Cora turned toward me, put her hand on my shoulder. "Don't. It wasn't like that," she said. "Nobody made a fool of you, I never thought that."

Her touch almost embarrassed me for some reason, so that I couldn't look her in the eye. "Well, it wasn't much of a paradise, either," I muttered.

Cora didn't take her hand away for a minute as we sat not looking at each other, and I began to become accustomed to the contact. After a minute the tape ended, and she got up without saying anything and went into the bathroom. I could faintly hear her peeing, which felt uncomfortably intimate, and then there was a long silence. My eyes roved over the room, the magenta woodwork, the high shelves of books, the billows of gold fabric, a different world, but all the while I was paying most attention to the silence. Water ran for a few moments. More silence. The door opened and Cora came out. She looked the same but different. She had combed her hair, I thought; its waves glistened. Her face looked careful, reserved. She came back to the couch and knelt on it, her legs tucked neatly under her, facing me, her hands curled in her lap, her back straight, as if she might be intending to meditate. She waited until she was sure she had my attention. "So do you want to leave this world?" she said.

I remembered telling Kristin I did, that very afternoon, but now, in Cora's kitchen of many colors, with food on the counter and a drink in my hand and her looking me in the eye – of course I didn't. Who would? I shook my head No.

"I have a thought," she said.

I waited, but no more was forthcoming. She watched me, serious and self-contained.

"What is it?" I said, when I couldn't stand the waiting.

But Cora said nothing. Her gaze held mine. I thought, not for the first time, that it would be impossible to lie to her. Ellen would have known in an instant what she expected me to say. I felt stupid, idiotic, condemned to be a man and hopelessly oblivious to the most evident things. "What?" I said again, aware of raising my voice, of sounding aggrieved, and knowing there was no reason for me to sound that way.

Cora closed her eyes momentarily, shook her head just perceptibly – or was it more of a shudder? – turned so she was sitting the usual way, reached down next to her and picked up her drink. "Nothing," she said. "Why don't you put on some more music?"

That I could understand, at least, so I got up and did as she asked. I picked a Phoebe Snow tape almost at random, put it into the tape deck, started it. Discomfort seemed to have returned to the room. When I sat down, Cora popped up and said, "Would you like anything else to eat?"

"No thanks – that was great, though."

Cora ate what I had left on the chicken leg I'd started, threw the bone in the garbage and put the rest of the food away. Then she turned around and leaned against the counter, arms crossed over her chest, and

studied me again, this time from across the room. She looked discontented, but I couldn't tell if it was with herself or with me.

"It wasn't fair to you, was it?"

"Aah – fair . . . " Since when was life fair?

"I thought you knew it was ending. Anyway, it was her job to tell you, not mine."

"Ever since I saw that beetle crawl in front of my nose, all I've done is find out how much I don't know. It's unbelievable. There's nothing left."

"I bet you still know how to write an auto insurance policy."

"Yeah, but . . . "

"Want to go sit on the back porch?"

"Sure."

She waved at the gin bottle and said "Help yourself," and I did. Her back porch was as rickety as the front, but she had a couple of old lawn chairs there with fraying woven plastic strap seats that could still hold you up. They creaked as we sat down, in the dark, amid the sound of cicadas. Cora's back yard wasn't big but in the night it seemed to be, the trees looked twice as tall as houses, I felt I could get lost three steps from the porch. As soon as we sat down I felt alone there, though I didn't forget Cora, and that made me comfortable with her at last; we didn't have to look at each other because we couldn't be seen, the shrilling of cicadas took the place of talk. We just sat, and now and then my chair creaked, or hers did, and the creaking seemed like primitive conversation. Faintly I could still hear Phoebe Snow from inside.

Time passed. Fireflies blinked and made their erratic meanders of light, some just off the ground, some in the tops of the dark trees like stars that were wandering off course. The tape came to an end.

The back of my hand, hanging down near the old floorboards, swinging by my side as I sat, toward me and away from me, blindly brushed the back of hers, by accident. I drew it away, confused; then let it swing toward her again, not by accident, and again a touch. My hand and hers turned and met palm to palm, and the fingers curved so lightly, mingling, that it was like a secret kept even from myself and her. Wasn't this forbidden, out of turn? Even to think that those hands were touching would have slipped them apart at once, and there would be no admitting it afterwards. My heart was hurting me more every minute with the thought of what a dupe I had been for months, the predictable fool I was that very afternoon following Kristin into the Carters' house, and now too perhaps, letting myself imagine there was something healing about this contact, but I must not think of now, must not think at all but only listen to

the night insects and watch the fireflies and breathe, suspended, outside time, outside my own life.

Time passed.

I became accustomed to that lightest of touches, even to the point of ceasing to notice and then being recalled to it by some subliminal change.

"Remember that guy Kerry I went out with?" Cora said. Her quiet voice startled me in the dark.

"Mm." Kerry was a lawyer and he made sure you knew it, made sure you knew, too, that his father was a Roto-Rooter man, that he was a guy on his way up.

"He called me the other day, told me he was getting married. I don't know what he wanted to tell me for. Showing off, maybe. I think he wanted to see if he could go to bed with me one more time before he loses his license to fuck around. But of course he didn't say that."

Kerry got me in a corner once and wanted to tell me stories about how he had been "a wild man" in college, but hadn't we all? I never could picture Cora with him, but it wasn't hard to believe that he wanted to talk her into one more for old time's sake.

More silence. I was so aware of my hand touching hers that I thought I could feel the individual whorls of her fingerprints. I began to imagine her having a life that felt like mine, messy and inconclusive. If I had been Cora, I would probably have invited him over, just to say See, I counted. I mattered to you after all. Or maybe that was what Kerry wanted to say to her.

She sighed. "Married," she muttered.

"You sound as though that appeals to you almost as much as dating."

Cora made a rueful sound that wanted to be a laugh. "I tried to do it once. But I didn't exactly go about it the way you're supposed to. For a year and a half I was seeing a married man. I was sure his wife was just an inconvenience. I was going to erase her and start over. It was going to be me in the white dress in church, me and him from the start . . . show the world what real love was – you can't imagine. How far gone I was. I would do anything for him. Anywhere, anytime."

"Still?" I said. Then why tell me, why touch my hand tonight?

"Oh," she said, as if I'd waked her up. "No. That was a long time ago. Anyway, it didn't rub off."

Married. Marriage. Ellen and I had flirted with saying those two syllables, but we never really had. Not so anyone had to notice. I rolled the

word around in my head, but thinking about marriage was like seeing the Grand Canyon on a postcard.

Cora's hand went away and I was fully alone, light in my loneliness, unburdened, free to be nothing and no one at last. I could have been a post holding up the porch roof, or a bush, or a hidden cat. It was like the previous nights without the heaviness, and I was ready to sit there in silence until dawn.

Cora's chair creaked and she yawned, though she tried to stifle it, deeply. She must be tired, I thought, Friday night, end of the work week, and I wasn't exactly scintillating company. "Maybe I should go," I said. "You must be getting sleepy."

She didn't answer for a while. I thought of taking her hand again, but it seemed the time for that had passed.

"It's up to you," she said quietly. I couldn't see her, but from her voice I judged that she, too, was lost in the labyrinth of night.

My own aloneness made me leery of breaking in upon hers. "I think I'd better go," I said almost in a whisper, and got up, trying not to make my chair creak as I did. I edged behind her and went down the porch steps, thinking I'd walk around the house to my car. Her footsteps behind me. She was standing facing me on the back walk; I could see her eyes flash slightly now that we were no longer in the dense shadow of the porch. I started to put my hand on her shoulder, but that was the wrong gesture, paternal and silly, and what was the right one? As if to push me away, Cora laid her hand flat on my chest, but she didn't push, and the presence of her palm there seemed to pull me to bow slowly forward to her, pressing against her palm, until my nose was in her hair and I turned my blind face slightly toward her and breathed the full scent of her into my lungs, and imagined that I could feel her breath tingling my neck, but I did not touch her with my hands nor did her other hand touch me. Then I thought I felt her tell me without words to go.

I straightened up; the contact between us was broken. "Goodnight," I said.

"Are you going to be okay?"

"I think so."

"If you decide to leave the world, give me a call first," she said; she turned and went inside. I heard the bolt shoot home as she locked the back door.

What would she do now? I wondered. What would she think of tonight, or was there no need to think? I had to duck under the low branches of trees planted too close to the side of the house, like passing through a wood, a secrecy, to get back to the street. Then there was my

car, still facing hers, and seeing it was seeing my house and my living room and the rest of my night.

I awoke having slept since just before dawn; my head was cobwebbed with lack of sleep, and the phone in the kitchen was ringing. I rolled off the sofa-bed onto my feet and stumbled toward it, halfway across the dining room before my eyes actually opened.

"Hello?" I said. There was the faint hiss of long distance on the line. The light in the kitchen too bright, sun pouring in the windows, it must be midmorning.

"Hi, can you hear me?"

My heart leapt and I was awake: it was Ellen. "Yes," I said, "where are you?" Maybe at the airport, Wyoming didn't work out. Maybe she knew everything that had happened the day before and was calling to tell me off.

"Do you know I had to drive twenty-eight miles to get to a pay phone? I'm in a gas station in . . . somewhere. I don't know if it has a name. But how *are* you?" her voice called sociably over the miles, as if we were standing at a reception, each with hors d'oeuvre in hand. What truth could I say to that voice? I sat down on a kitchen chair, naked; the cracks between the slats pinched my butt. My mouth was dry and tasted bitter.

"I'm living," I said, and thought how childish and sullen that sounded. She doesn't care if you're down in the mouth, twinkie. My heart was racing and I felt inept and caught; I ran my free hand through my tangled hair, looked around for a cup to drink from.

"You wouldn't believe how beautiful this place is," she was saying. "I had no idea there was anyplace like this. You know how they call it Big Sky Country? It's the truth, it's so big it's like you're on the top of a mountain all the time, the horizon looks about two hundred miles away

and there's always a thunderstorm somewhere way off in the distance, in fact there is right now, I never knew it but really in Missouri you're always closed in. You don't even know until you get here."

She seemed to realize that she was running on and made herself stop and wait for a reply. All I could think was, She's really gone. "It sounds great," I said. For a second I could feel her wait for more; I knew I hadn't been enthusiastic enough but that was all I could manage.

"It really is, you'd love it, I mean, anybody would unless you had agoraphobia or something. I had no idea there were so many stars, the Milky Way is so bright sometimes I swear you can almost read by it."

"Really."

"Yes," she said. She stopped again. I could hear her breathe out. "Lucas . . ." she said in a different voice. "Are you awake? Are you okay?"

"Depends on what you mean by okay," I said. No, you turkey, don't sound sorry for yourself, for Christ's sake at least *seem* like you have an ounce of strength.

"Well, what do you mean?" Ellen said, patiently. I pictured her standing in a gas station hung with fan belts and radiator hoses, smell of grease in the air, bored attendant idly listening. Best entertainment so far today. Impossible that I should even begin to say. It was more than her that I missed, more than her own absence that she had revealed to me. Still I took my cue and said it: "I miss you."

"I know." Prompt, factual, no twinge of remorse. "I miss you sometimes too," she said, but her voice said those times were few and dwindling. "Do you feel all right? Physically?"

"I'm fine, I've been working in the yard all week. I've got Ron over a barrel, he can't say no to giving me sick days."

"So how's the garden?"

"I haven't been gardening. I've been digging my way to China."

There was a puzzled silence. "What did you say? It's kind of hard to hear you."

I'm digging my own grave in the back yard, I almost made a pass at the Carters' babysitter, I can't bear the thought of going back to the office, I'm hearing things, now do you get the picture? Even in my head I left out the part about Cora.

"Lucas, are you there?"

"Yeah."

"Should I be worried about you?" she said, in a faintly annoyed voice, and I knew it really meant I don't have time for this, will you just grow up?

"Nah, I'm all right."

"Listen, I wonder if – did you find a box of my sweaters and stuff somewhere, by any chance?"

"Yeah, I did."

"Where in the world did I leave them, anyway?"

"In the back of the closet, underneath the towels."

"Tsk – I should have known. Well anyway. That's great, I was starting to think they were lost, I thought I sent them to my parents' place but I called and they said no. Listen, could you do me a favor? It's really cold out here at night and I could sure use those things if you could send them to me."

"Yeah, no problem," I said. Anything else you'd like, that you forgot around here? Not that I wanted those sweaters around anyway.

"We went to get the mail the other day and it was fifty miles to the post office. One way."

We. Was she sharing her sleeping bag already? Cora was right: she had been ripe for her new life. A few sweet, commemorative tumbles in the hay as an invigorating sendoff and then bye-bye and woops, I forgot something, one last phone call would take care of this chapter of her life once and for all. "Let me get a pencil," I said. I put down the phone, ran some water in a coffee cup, found a pencil and a gas bill to write on. "Tell me the address." I took a couple of gulps before I wrote it down. The zip code started with a high number.

"Thanks for sending that stuff," she said. "It'll really make a difference. You'd be surprised how cold it gets here. They say all they really have here is winter and the Fourth of July."

"Do they."

There was a silence. This threadbare moment, standing naked in the kitchen holding the receiver to my ear, would be the very last. Last call for illusion.

"Oh, Lucas," she said. Her voice was sad and a little reproachful. "Listen to me. I can't really talk right now, but you know anyway. Somebody had to do it. It was good it didn't get dragged out longer, you know?"

I thought for a long time, aware of running up a bill on her calling card. Did it matter what I answered? "I know," I said, because it was what she wanted me to say. It might be my last opportunity to do what someone who loved her would do.

"Write to me if you feel like it, okay? I promise I'll answer."

"Okay."

"Well," she said, and I could tell that finally it was hard for her to say the word, and that meant this was truly it.

"Cora says hi," I said.

"Oh, did you see her?" Ellen said, her voice ragged and muffled, as if she might even cry. "Tell her I'll call her sometime, okay?"

"Okay."

I heard her take a deliberate deep breath, in and out, as if getting up her resolve, and to spare her at the last moment I said, "Well, bye."

There was an instant of what I thought might be gratitude. "Goodbye," Ellen said. Then the line clicked empty, and I was aware of pressing the phone against my ear so hard it hurt; I took it away, hung it up, rubbed my ear, drank some more water. Outside somewhere, a car door slammed and an engine started, and it was if the sound set me in motion. I went straight to the bedroom closet, knelt there and gathered a double handful of Ellen's sweaters and turtlenecks to my face. The scent of her made me feel for one moment the old feeling that I was breathing in her life story, her dreams, her capabilities and faults, but had she ever really let me know her? Probably there was somebody else already, some other digger of trenches and feeler of bones. Right now he felt like the luckiest man on earth. Later he would find out differently.

Our whole time was vanishing in smoke as I let the sweaters drop, and to remember it if I could I pulled open my dresser drawers and found the pictures of her I kept there; I sat naked on the rag rug by the side of the bed and pulled them out, one by one. There she was – there we were – taking a float trip on the Current River together, water-skiing at Lake of the Ozarks; there she was leaning on a hoe in the garden and smiling. And later that same summer triumphantly holding up a green pepper. Lying on the grass reading a book. Trip to Minneapolis to visit her sister. Trip to New Orleans for Mardi Gras. And the packet that I knew by heart: Ellen caught dressing and sticking her tongue out at me because I was taking her picture half-naked, Ellen in her bathrobe with her hair piled up on top of her head, wound in a towel, and the swell of her breast just beginning to be revealed where the robe opened, Ellen taking a bath, Ellen reading again but naked this time on one of those weekends, Ellen on a day I would never forget when she had played at undressing for my camera and making sexy pictures, a day when there was only yes between us, and anything either of us wanted could only be good. Now here I was sitting on the floor by that same bed, my penis as stiff as a walking stick, holding in my hands the only evidence that there had once been such a day. I had taken it to mean that she loved me, that I loved her.

I put the photographs back and thought, for a long time, kneeling on the floor with the envelopes in my hands, feeling my hard-on subside. I knew I should tear them up or burn them to keep myself from ever

looking at them again, but I couldn't do it. Instead I put them in an old shoe box, and in the file cabinet in the study I found some red Christmas ribbon and wrapped it around and around the shoe box and tied it with a bow and put it up on a high shelf in the study closet. Then I made myself go straight back to the bedroom, stuffed all the sweaters and turtlenecks back in their box, taped it with ugly duct tape that was all I could find, wrote the address with the high zip code in jagged black magic marker, and threw the box out the kitchen door. A corner got dented in as it hit the yard.

I closed the door again and locked it, reminding myself of Cora the night before. Quietly, even deferentially, next to me Coughing Man coughed. "Go away," I said without thinking; I felt him go away. So Marie had been right. As soon as he was gone I missed him.

I walked deliberately back to the bedroom, and in the morning light I looked down at the bed with its rumpled bedclothes. The last time anyone had slept in it, anyone had been Ellen and me. And could I now, naked as I still was, lie down on her side or even on mine? I lasted one minute – maybe less – before I snapped upright and left the room, defeated. My time on the sofa-bed wasn't over yet.

I had to get out of the house. If only to keep myself from opening that ribbon-tied box. There were too many memories hanging around even without it. I splashed water on my face, drank a glass of juice, put on my clothes and went out on the front porch. To my right, Vic, too, was standing on his porch, surveying the street, and when I came out he raised his hand to me in silent greeting. I waved back. What had he done to his eyes, to need those glasses? He took out a pack of Camels, methodically extracted one, tapped it on his thumbnail, and lit up. He waved the match to put it out, then pinched its head between his finger and thumb, making me imagine calluses, and put the burnt match in his pocket. No smoking in the house, no matches on the porch. What about the ashes? Would he put them in his pocket, too?

I tried to imagine Vic as a child and gave up.

Go on, get out of here, put one foot in front of the other. Pick up that damn box in the back yard and carry it to the post office and get it over with. Luckily there was no line, and it took only a couple of minutes to send off the last of Ellen. Did I want it insured? How much was it worth?

No thanks.

I stood on Walnut outside the post office, vaguely dreading the possibility that Sandy, or worse yet, Ron might choose that moment to mail something. No, Ron wouldn't be bothered; he'd tell Sandy to mail it. And if I saw her . . . what did she do with her days, anyway? What life did she lead aside from Martin & Gray, aside from Mozart and bubble bath? It was tempting to think of telling her how I had really been doing recently. Even Sandy might have had her shining moment of poor judgment and no control.

I couldn't stand in front of the post office with my hands in my pockets, jingling my keys, forever. I began to wander aimlessly up Walnut. Force of habit maybe, because the office was in that direction, even though I had no intention of going there. Tempting fate. I could run into Ron anywhere, and there would go my excuse; I should just let him go on picturing me at home behind drawn shades, anxiously counting my pulse. Yet somehow it was the sporting thing to do. If he caught me, he caught me; give him a chance.

I passed the entrance to Boone Tavern's outdoor cafe, where people were sitting under umbrellas drinking cold drinks. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Kristin at one of the tables and waved to her, and vaguely she waved back. A chance, perhaps, to redeem myself, to buy her a cold drink and seem like somebody she might want to talk to after all. I moved in her direction through the tables, noticing she looked older today. Grown up. I was halfway there when I saw she was with some guy but it was too late to change my mind. "Hey," I said. Kristin wearing eye shadow, and a guy who looked like your basic Mizzou frat boy, polo shirt and all. I felt I was doing an excellent imitation of a complete idiot, standing there looking down at them. Who had asked me to come over there? She looked a little flustered but her social instincts saved her. "This is Lucas," she said to the guy, "he lives next door to the people I babysit for. And this is my friend Greg," she said to me. My friend. Yes, of course, she would have a "my friend," wouldn't she? What the hell had I been thinking of?

"How're you doin'?" Greg said, giving me a firm handshake and a look of great sincerity. Management trainee material, for sure. The polo shirt showed off well-developed biceps.

"Great, how about yourself?"

"Gonna be a hot one, I guess."

"Already is, if you ask me."

Kristin was watching me as if she were worried I might do something weird. "Yeah," she said to Greg, "do you really want to play tennis? I think we should go for a swim."

"Well. I don't want to interrupt your lunch."

"Nice to meet you," Greg said. And nicer to see me go away.

"You too. See ya," I said, at the last moment not quite able to look either him or Kristin in the eye. I didn't hear her say anything.

This is my friend Greg. She didn't look like a babysitter anymore. Old enough to have a Greg in her life. From the sidewalk I took one look at them. She was chatting away to him, natural as could be, and Greg was still looking sincere.

Okay, well, so what the hell can you expect. A vision of myself the afternoon of the day before, in the Carters' kitchen with Kristin, thinking the all-too-obvious thoughts, danced in my mind as if it were on TV for millions to point at and laugh. I was walking away as fast as I could, as if I could outrun my own ability to humiliate myself, across Broadway and heading at top speed down sidewalks that weren't as full as usual because the students were out of town. I tried to think of something I was good at, something I could get right. Didn't I have a talent for making it a little more palatable when people had to ante up for their auto insurance, hadn't I been able to talk to cash-strapped farmers in their yellow kitchens in a Missouri way that would keep them from hating my guts? Hell, and hadn't I been the guy in the white hat who shows up with the check after the barn catches fire and there isn't enough water in the pond to put it out?

That and seventy-five cents would buy a cup of coffee.

The grass of the quad under my feet finally persuaded me to slow down. Years before, in college, coming out of one of the old buildings, having survived registration or a biology exam, I had been another Greg, imagining that I knew where everything fit, including me. No more: in my mind's eye I saw myself like Charlie Chaplin, pulling my pockets inside out and finding nothing to face the world with. Must be something in there besides lint, or why hadn't I died for real when I had the chance? My old khakis were frayed at the bottom, their crease long gone. Like some retired duffer who would spend the rest of his life hanging around the donut shop telling the same stories to his cronies. I was too young for that, and too old not to see it coming. Maybe Lucas had been right about the clothes; I had to do something about myself, and what difference did it make if I spent the money? Did I have something to save it for? I looked in my wallet and there was Marie's card, slightly crinkled from being sat on. Turned out she lived not all that far from me. If I went that way, I wouldn't have to pass Boone Tavern again and see Kristin and that guy and be reminded.

Marie's place looked more solid than mine; it had a screened-in porch along the front, awnings over the second-story windows, dormers that looked out commandingly over the street. An old sycamore towered over her front yard, twice as high as the house. The yews growing along the foundation could not have been more staid and respectable. It looked so middle-class, so much like the home of a one-time schoolteacher, that I almost felt I needed to be wearing a suit before I could ring her doorbell and ask her to make me one. Was she home? She had a driveway, but there was no car in it, and her garage doors were closed. Walking up her front walk gave me time to be uncomfortable, to think I was invading her privacy, but after all she had given me her card. I mounted two stone steps and discovered that the screen door to her porch was locked; I could see the doorbell, but I couldn't push it. The porch was furnished with an uncomfortable-looking wrought-iron bench and some speckled, sword-like plants in heavy urns. She must be away, I thought, but I had gotten this far, so I knocked on the frame of the screen door though I wasn't sure how she could be expected to hear it. Silly, anyway; I didn't need a new suit. Then the front door opened, and Marie looked out at me. "Hello," I said, suppressing the impulse to wave. "Remember me?"

She stepped toward me across the porch without saying anything, but her eyes made me feel like a fifth-grader again. If anything, she seemed taller; she was dressed in green. Even green shoes, I noticed. The color went well with her dark skin.

"We meet again," she observed, opening the screen door halfway.

"Yes." For a moment I expected her to invite me in, but she said nothing, simply waited, watching me unwaveringly, giving nothing away. Maybe she didn't like people coming to her house unannounced, and I was supposed to know that. I felt I would be reduced to idiocy shortly. "I came to talk to you about – a suit." Would she ever unbend? She must not be hard up for business. "I thought about what Lucas said, and it began to seem like a good idea, so I . . ."

Maybe Lucas's name was the key; she stepped aside and held the door open for me. "Come in, won't you? You could look at my fabric samples and see if you see anything you like."

"Thank you," I said carefully. Something about her presence enforced company manners. The house was dim and silent except for the rich, intricate tick of a clock somewhere, and smelled faintly of furniture polish and something else I couldn't identify; there was a proper hall-tree in the hall, hung with feathered hats; the walls were plastered in swirls and waves and painted a faded robin's egg blue. The doors to the rooms were archways hung with curtains. I attempted not to notice my reflection

in the pier-glass; the house and its carpeted quiet and Marie's impeccable dress made me feel furtive and shabby. "I was just about to have some iced tea," she was saying. "Care to join me?"

"Yes, thanks."

She pushed aside a curtain and led me into a room where a dressmaker's dummy presided over a long table strewn with pattern pieces and fabric and pincushions. Measuring tapes and scissors hung from pegs on the wall, and the china cabinet was a rainbow of different colors of thread. The walls were white, the shades were up; I seemed to have passed into another house. "Just pull up a stool and have a look at this," Marie said, handing me a big book of fabric swatches; she went on into the kitchen and I could hear her opening the refrigerator. For a moment she hummed to herself – I recognized the song: "Too Marvelous for Words." Try to imagine Lucas in this house, visiting her – did she let him smoke? Surely not. Idly I turned the pages of the sample book, but the squares of fabric with their pinked edges didn't mean much to me.

Marie came back looking much friendlier; she actually cracked a faint smile as she handed me a glass of iced tea. "Any ideas?" she said, indicating the samples.

"Well – nothing definite." I wanted to say that Lucas had said she'd be the one to have the ideas, but I felt I had to pass some test first. Ordeal by politeness, perhaps.

"Summer weight suit?" she said, the words rolling off in a professional manner. "Or three seasons?"

"Summer, I think."

"Radio says it'll be ninety-three tomorrow."

"Really."

"Tropical wool," she said, opening to a certain page of cloth. "Just feel of it."

"Uh-huh."

"Don't get hung up on the word 'wool,' now. This is *tropical* wool. Special weave, the best. It's cool *and* it lasts. Feel how lightweight it is."

"I see what you mean."

"If you don't like that pattern, there's others to choose from, not so conservative. But didn't Lucas say you're in the insurance business?" She put the emphasis on the first syllable of "*insurance*," like a good Missourian.

"I am." If I ever go back to work.

"You want something you can wear to the office, or when you go on business trips? Or maybe when you take your girl out, some kind of a special evening? I could make you a gorgeous blazer out of this," she said,

opening to a creamy off-white faintly textured fabric. "Silk. If you want something a little more flashy." Marie's words faintly conjured a glamorous world of dinner dances, of cocktails in revolving restaurants high above a glittering metropolis, nothing like the reality of Columbia. As if her clothes would transport me to that other life. Take my girl out, indeed.

"Or we could go just a shade darker," she said, turning up a different sample. "Though I think the lighter one," she said, holding it up against my neck. "With a colored shirt. That would suit you. Pants in the ecru tropical. Contrasting." She nodded to herself, approving of her vision. "What do you think?"

Think? I felt too swept along in the current of Marie's thoughts to have any of my own. "It sounds great – I mean, can you give me some idea of what it would look like?"

Marie picked up another binder and paged through it till she reached a glossy picture of a square-jawed, Michael Douglas sort of guy in a one-button white blazer, looking like he was about to drive off to a lawn party in his Bentley and meet the most beautiful girl in three states. "Just forget about *him*," she said scornfully, putting her dark thumb squarely over his white face. Her fingers were long and slightly spatulate, and I was sure they were very strong. "You'd look good in it, I do believe," Marie said, half to herself; she looked Indian-like, absorbed in the exercise of sartorial judgment. Who was I to contradict the master?

"How much would that run me?" I said, though I felt that the intrusion of money into the discussion was indelicate.

"Ah. Well, now," she said solemnly. "Style does not come cheap, I'm sure you know."

"I dare say."

"Since you're a friend of Lucas, who's one of the best men I know in the world, five hundred." My face must have given away surprise. "With the pants."

"Ah." Did that make it a bargain? Marie must cater to some high rollers, I thought.

"In a department store – if you could find it – at least four hundred. And then it would just be" – she paused to look weary of the world's declining standards – "off the rack. Supposed to fit anybody size 40. I make it to fit one person. You."

Maybe it was that she knew my size by looking at me, maybe I didn't give a damn if I spent all my savings by tomorrow, maybe I really thought for one second that I'd be a different person in that outfit. "It's a deal," I said. A good thing Marie wasn't selling something really

expensive, like BMWs or Jaguars; I had a feeling that I had been destined to buy something the moment I walked onto her porch.

"You'll never regret it," she said. "Now you just drink that iced tea and let me measure you." She took down a measuring tape and withdrew into the impersonal serenity of a martial artist. She worked in silence; I could hear the clock ticking and the faint humming of her refrigerator. I felt like the canvas a painter paints on as she turned me, moved my arms, measured me more ways than a tailor had ever done. After a couple of minutes I no longer doubted that five hundred really was a bargain.

"There," she said, coming back to her social self. "Now, when I get the jacket basted up I'll call you and we'll make sure it's really right. If you could just write down your phone number – " She handed me her pencil and the paper she'd been writing my measurements on. I seemed to be dismissed. Was this the help Lucas had said she might give me?

I handed over the paper, almost reluctantly; I didn't know what to say. Instead I drank the last of my iced tea. Marie was watching me with her hands folded in front of her.

"Is there anything else I can do for you?" she said.

"Well – um, yeah, maybe. I don't know." She was still watching me solemnly and I was the fifth-grader again. "After you left, Lucas and I were talking and . . . "

She waited a while. "Yes?" I could see I would have to articulate it somehow.

"He suggested you might be able to help me out. I'm not sure what he meant. Said something about reading the cards." I felt as sheepish as if I were a Cub Scout making an indecent proposal to his den mother.

"Ah." Marie's face brightened. She looked at her watch, nodded slowly. "Yes, I believe I could do that."

I had no idea what the etiquette was. Was I supposed to offer to pay, or would it just insult her? It seemed to me five hundred bucks was enough to merit some kind of a throw-in. "Come along," she said, in a businesslike way. She led me through her kitchen, which looked as if it hadn't changed since the forties, and onto a sunporch behind it. I had a vision of her winding a spangled turban around her marcelled hair and pulling out a crystal ball, but all she did was motion for me to sit down at a card table. "I always do readings out here when it's warm enough," she said. Thoughts of a sign in a second-floor window downtown, Mme. Rosa Palmist Love \$\$\$ Fate Ring Bell & Walk Up. Impossible to imagine myself ever going up those stairs, yet here I was, asking for what?

"What is it exactly you would like to ask about?" Marie said, as if she could hear my thoughts.

"What *can* I ask about? I'm sorry – I don't even know what you do."

"I read the Tarot," Marie said briskly, as somebody else might have said, I read the Sunday New York *Times*. "It helps if you start with a question. Now actually, you don't have to tell me what it is, but I might be able to read for you better if you do. Or we could just look into the general situation, if you prefer. Seems to me I remember something about a spirit that's been bothering you, is that what you're wondering about?"

I thought. The truth was, I didn't even know the question. "Could we just look into the general situation?"

"Of course." Lying on the table was a velvet pouch closed by a drawstring; she opened it, took out a slightly oversized deck of cards, and handed them to me face down. "Pick one," she said.

"Do I get to look at them, or do I just pick?"

"Oh, look at them, by all means."

I turned the deck over and began to go through the cards one by one with a vaguely creepy sensation. I was a little reassured to see that there were kings and queens on thrones – but not like any deck I'd ever seen, and there the resemblance ended. Wavy seas, weird radiances, hands appearing out of clouds holding chalices and swords, war, skeletons, magicians, The Devil, The Moon, The Lovers. That was the one I wanted to get. But I couldn't just choose it, could I? Didn't it have to come up by itself? "I don't know how to pick one," I said. "I don't know what they mean."

"You just pick whatever one feels right. Whatever feels like you do now. Tarot'll take it from there." Marie was waiting for me patiently, as if she'd been through this process a thousand times, humming to herself as she looked out over her back yard. I wondered if I might be about to bring down some dire fate on my head by choosing the wrong card, but I couldn't come out and say that. For God's sake have some guts, I thought, running through the deck again, and there was a card that said it all. It was called The Tower – lightning striking a castle, blowing off its crown-shaped roof, setting it on fire, two people falling out of it in flames against a sky of black. Exactly how I felt.

"How about that one?" I said.

Marie's eyebrows went up slightly; I thought she started to say something and then held it back. "That's fine," she said neutrally, putting The Tower on the table in front of her. What had I let myself in for? "Now cut the deck. Toward me. Are you right-handed? Then cut with your left."

She sat with her back unnaturally straight and her eyes half-closed; I couldn't tell if she watched me cut, or not. I did as she asked, and she picked up the two halves of the deck and shuffled. Now I was sure she

wasn't looking at what she was doing. "Let's be in touch," she muttered. She put the deck down in front of me. "Again."

Two more times I cut, two more times she shuffled, then she said, "Now cut one more time."

I did. She took the half that had been on the bottom and put it on top and began to lay down cards.

"This covers you," she said in a quiet, matter-of-fact voice, placing a card called The Chariot on top of The Tower.

"This crosses you." Some people under a rainbow.

"This crowns you." Green oval, naked lady with what looked like a blue sash wrapped around her, upside down. I wanted to turn her right-side-up and look more closely, find out what she had to say to me.

"This is beneath you." Guy on the back of an orange horse, upside down.

"This is behind you." A dwarfish little man in purplish-brown, sitting holding a yellow circle with a star inside it. This is all too weird, I thought. She might know how to sew, but I could do without this mumbo-jumbo.

"This is before you." Death. Death is before me? A skeleton in black armor on a white horse, black flag in his hand, people dead and dying under the horse's feet, and below him in big letters as if I didn't get the message, Death. I couldn't take my eyes off the card, though she kept going in the same tone and at the same pace. "This is you . . . this is your house." Wait a minute, Death is before me, who cares about my house? "These are your hopes and fears." Was Lucas right after all about digging my grave? "This is the outcome."

The outcome? A guy carrying swords, tiptoeing, looking back over his shoulder. What did that mean? I couldn't help going back to Death. I had been sure that was behind me for now. Maybe nothing mattered, maybe I'd keel over into my hole any day now and all my problems would be solved. "What do you think?" I said, unable to keep quiet any longer.

"Very interesting," Marie said. I wanted to shake her and demand to know, now, about that card called Death. "It all fits together. I have to think for a moment."

Great, yes, think about how to break the news. Would you mind writing me a check for that jacket before you leave, in case you're not around to pick it up?

"This card that you chose," Marie said, pulling The Tower out from under the two on top of it. "Says a lot all by itself. This is the card,

some people would say, of Eshu-Elegba. Do you know Eshu?" she said familiarly, as if referring to a neighbor.

"Can't say that I do."

"He brings you to a crossroads. And God knows you're at one. He can eat you alive, and he can work a miracle. That's Eshu. He'll put you to the test, I promise you."

"Does he have a cough?"

Marie looked at me sharply; a wave of disapproval pushed me back an inch or two. "No, Eshu does not have a cough," she said in a frozen voice. "Why do you ask?"

"The guy – the spirit – that's been following me, he coughs all the time."

Her countenance softened somewhat. "We'll talk about that later," she said. "Now. There's a lot of sevens here, and seven is the number that comes when you have to make a choice. And don't kid yourself. You'll have to. Things are changing fast. You keep having all these different pictures in your head, different people you could be, all there at once inside you, and maybe you feel like it's way too many, but the train's left the station and you can't get off now. The only way to go now is right on through. Looks to me like you cut yourself off from people. Too busy with your own stuff right now. Only way you're going to make the right choice and get by the crossroads is know what your own stuff *is*, but it's seven different things and you don't know which one is really you. You got to take a risk. That's your outcome. You got to take some kind of a risk. Otherwise the chariot is going to be driving you."

She sat back and took a deep breath, surveying the cards. She looked satisfied with her own work.

"What about that?" I said, putting my finger on Death.

"Transformation," she said decisively. "Don't get stuck on how it looks, now. That's a good card. That's the card you want in a situation like this. It shows the change is going to come."

"How?"

She shook her head. "It doesn't say much about that. I know one thing, though. Eshu always tells you to pay attention to signs. And you might have to make some kind of sacrifice."

Sacrifice? Hadn't I already lost enough? "This spirit that's following you, what does he do?"

I told her about how I met him after I almost died, about hearing him cough in the night, about the dreams. Marie's face was long and pensive. She looked up at the trees outside while I talked. Afterwards she was silent for some time; I felt she could explain it all to me, if only she

would, but that she was weighing complicated, esoteric considerations about whether she ought to. "Well, one thing for sure: it's a guide," she said at last.

"A what?"

"A helper. Not what I thought before at all. You didn't tell me enough about it back at the restaurant." She sounded slightly reproachful. "You didn't tell me about that heart trouble, or whatever it was you had, either. Anything else you aren't tellin' me?"

"Well – my girlfriend left me."

"Ya-a-as. Lucas said that, didn't he? Oh my. You are in a pretty pickle."

"Tell me about it."

Marie thought for a while and chuckled to herself. "When I was a little bitty girl my uncle Ross had a farm over in Audrain County, near Mexico. He worked it with mules. And one day I was there and he was goin' out to hook up the mules and plow, and as he was goin' down the back steps he took up a two-by-four that was leanin' there by the door, and I asked him why he wanted that and he said, 'Marie, you can't expect no mule to do what you say just 'cause you tell her – you got to hit her over the head first to get her to notice you sayin' anything.'"

I'd heard that story ten times in ten versions, but I'd never heard it told about me; I thought about getting offended. But so what? Better to find out what she knew, if I could. "What does the hitting?" I said.

Marie looked at me, for the first time since I had gotten there, as if we might begin to have an actual conversation. "If you knew about Eshu, you could call it that. Some would say it's because Uranus and Neptune come together. It isn't the spirit with the cough. He's supposed to help you, even if he isn't very good at it. Or you could say you do it yourself."

"Me? I make myself keel over without a heartbeat? I make Ellen get the fellowship? What am I, God or something?"

Marie crossed her arms with a hint of a polite smile, as if that wasn't the right answer but I couldn't be expected to get the right one yet. "You could tell the story pretty much any way you want."

I sat waiting for more, but nothing more came. She swept up the Tarot cards, slid them back into the middle of the deck, and put the deck back in its pouch, its string drawn tight. I felt it choked me. My time was up, clearly. "Thank you," I said.

"Work with it for a while," she replied. "When you come back, we'll talk." She conducted me back through the house to the door; now the front hall and the porch seemed like a kind of protective coloration, concealing the real life out back. She opened the screen door for me and

looked up at her sycamore against the midday sky. "It's a beautiful day," she said. As I was gazing up in hopes of seeing the beauty she locked the screen door behind me.

Work with it, I thought, walking away. Work with what. A two-by-four to the head – did she think I was that much of an idiot? And what the hell was Eshu? Looked ready to take my head off when I asked did he have a cough, but how would I know? Maybe it was a Black thing and I wouldn't understand.

He brings you to a crossroads, I thought, turning onto my street. You got to make a choice.

The only thing I knew to do, out of sheer momentum, was to go back to digging. It seemed even more absurd than before, but what else was left?

I got into my hole and began to dig mechanically, remembering myself – when was it, only the day before? – saying I was trying to get out of this world. I had changed my mind at Cora's, but that felt temporary now. "With a shovel?" Kristin had said with quiet incredulity, as if surely no one could be that dense. Dig my way to a dream. Ridiculous. But if one thing was clear from Marie's cards, it was that I had to go for it now. Just fuckin' do it, no matter how crazy it might look. The train's left the station and you can't get off now. Either I would reach that dreamed-about floor of rock that would end my digging, not next week or tomorrow but today, this very afternoon, or there would be nothing to find and I would admit that I had no idea what I was doing, and stop once and for all. I attacked the earth, flung dirt with abandon; my body felt purified and lubricated and aligned with my mind's eye, and I could envision how deep each cut of the spade would go, how the sandy dirt would flow like water off its blade as I lifted it and threw, not only not tired anymore, but not even imagining that the work could tire me before I reached a culmination, not thinking of anything but what Marie had told me: the only way to go now is right on through. Today, now. I was breathing hard but like an engine, the air seeming to flow through me, to fuel me, and in my nose was the flinty smell of good clean dirt. I barely paused at the end of each throw, never really ceased to be in motion, flinging with the spade the way I imagined lacrosse or jai alai must feel and already, before the dirt had even reached its landing place, feeling the cutting edge of the blade pulling me toward the next penetration of the earth. My breathing became a kind of chant, a song of two or three tuneless notes, and after a while I realized that beside my breathing there was another breathing, in time with mine, rattling slightly, wheezing with a faint whistle on the

outbreath, and I knew he was there, to my left as always, but helping me this time. He had been so weak that I had known he would die, but now he brought me strength, the pop and rattle of his radio-static breathing sparked away the pockets of heaviness in my arms and sent effervescence through my spine, my gut was clean and empty singing the three notes and my sight rode the gleam of the forwardmost molecule of the metal edge of my sculpted blade, and without a doubt I would reach the bottom any moment now – any moment . . . just a few more thrusts of the spade, five more minutes, ten . . . Coughing Man was still there, egging me on, but my arms and my back were weighed down with sandbags of weariness, my legs had lost their spring, sweat was running into my eyes, my mouth was parched and there was nothing to find. There never had been anything, never any point in this whole ridiculous exercise except to leave me here at the bottom of a pit in my own back yard, surrounded by piles of dirt, finding out the hardest possible way what a damn fool I was. Marie had been right about the two-by-four. Better that than this. At least it was quicker. In disgust I threw my spade out onto the yard, as far away as I could.

I had dug down farther than I realized; my hole had become a triangle standing on its point, one side almost vertical and the other more gradually sloping down. I flung myself down on the dirt of the slope, my feet at the bottom, my head on a level with the roots of the grass, and lay there, breathing hard and looking up at the sky that was all I could see of the upper world. I could lie there invisible.

The sun was past the zenith; I was in shade, and the dirt around me was cool. Somehow, looking up at the sky in Columbia always made me feel the hugeness of space beyond the town – the farms, endless flat Kansas and Colorado all the way to the Rocky Mountains – and how small the town really was. A tiny fortification against all that emptiness. Thin cirrus clouds, high up, ribbed the top of the heavens, and an occasional bird circled up there, no more than a dark speck against the white and blue. There was an undeniable pull up into that sky, as if the beam of sight connecting me and the bird – and who was to say that it was not returning my gaze? – meant that I was only a step from being it. A long step, but somehow it could be done. I would be the circling one, and all of Columbia would be small and manageable far below, let alone one man in a back yard whose troubles would be nothing at all from that high.

Not the first time to think such thoughts. Every once in a great while I saw the possibility of up there – sometimes when I'd be out on the summer-melting highway moving along to the sizzle of my tires and then suddenly slow down for a town, POP. 1050 20 MPH, old Bunny Bread

signs rusting on gates, and stop somewhere before the appointment to sign a policy or check out a claim. Maybe in front of the regional high school where the local hot-rodders got rubber in three gears and the breasts of girls pressed the unappreciative covers of their loose-leaf notebooks. My car's engine would tick, cooling. It could break a person's heart to watch them drag Main, going nowhere. Drive to the next town and drag Main there too. And back, between the fields, between the rows. But over Main Street there would be some spire or roof-peak, some weathervane, maybe even a cornice carved with stone garlands and a date would be enough, and I would look up and see peace up there, peace if I could be the copper rooster and take the view from the sky. Or that hawk slowly circling without even needing to move its wings, lifted by the air itself . . .

You got to take a risk, Marie had said. That's your outcome. Otherwise the chariot is going to be driving you.

Against the sky, looking down at me, Kristin appears, wearing the green, tent-like “Ernie” shirt again, over bare legs. Her feet made no sound approaching. I must look damn peculiar, and what is she doing here when she has better things to do and always did have? Too late to think that now. Just try not to be completely embarrassing this time. She contemplates me and the hole as if she’s expecting something; I feel as though one of us should speak, but something seems to be preventing it. Maybe it’s not necessary. She’s got my trowel in her hand, and she turns it over in her fingers meditatively. The toes of one bare foot curl over the edge of the hole and send a few grains of dirt rolling down. Above her the hawk continues to circle.

“Can I come in?” she says, as if she were standing on a porch.

“Of course.” I sit up and move over to make room for her, and I know I’m not supposed to think it feels intimate to do that. She climbs down into the hole, goes straight to the bottom, crouches down and scrapes gently with the trowel and there is a face of rock, half an inch below the dirt. How could I have missed that?

“Help me,” she says, and I crouch down too; I don’t have a tool to dig with, but all I have to do is brush the thin layer of dirt aside with my bare hands. In a minute, working together, we’ve exposed a rock as smooth as if it had lain for a century at the bottom of a river. Kristin gets a grip on the back edge of it and I can see she wants to pull it toward us; it seems far too heavy for her, but that isn’t stopping her. I take hold of it too and we both pull; for a moment it resists, stubborn, and then it slides a couple of inches, opening a gap. Some little clods of earth fall through,

disappear into the darkness below, and there is no sound of them hitting bottom. Kristin kneels on the rock and puts her eye to the gap. Today she's wearing shorts under the oversized shirt. I have to know what she's seeing; I kneel beside her, bend forward to look in, but just when my nose is about to touch the rock, when I'm about to see what's down below, I'm standing up and so is Kristin and we're still on the rock only now it's the size of my back yard and the crack in the earth that we had been about to peer into is a chasm. On the other side of it is a cliff we could never climb. Kristin is a step closer to the edge than I am; the rock curves smoothly, unbrokenly away and down, and just as I think that maybe it's dangerous to stand there Kristin starts to slide as if the rock surface has turned to ice. I know there's nothing to stop her. Her hand shoots out toward me instinctively and I grab it to hold her back, but my feet can't find a grip either, I'm sliding too and the curve is steeper and steeper, I have no control and then we're over the edge.

We fall into the sound of voices, a thousand voices all talking at once, enough to drive a person mad, and my vision is blank except that I can still feel Kristin's hand grasping mine, and then it's as if I were wearing glasses that someone is scribbling on, I begin to see like film whose emulsion is half scraped away, and we're falling through something dim that is either thin water or thick sky. It thins out, grows brighter, and it's sky that we're falling through, but slowly, more gliding down than falling, as if we were underwater. I look over at Kristin for some sort of a clue but she doesn't meet my eyes; she lets go of my hand, and as we continue to fall she ever so slowly rotates away from me, her arms floating up from her sides dancer-like. She seems to be guiding herself in a way I don't know how to do, drifting away from me, on her own path. Around me are the tops of trees, the tallest trees I've ever seen, so tall that the branches seem to be floating in air, too high up to have grown there from the ground. The leaves are pale green and the bark is a smooth soft greenish-gray like the bark of beech trees or poplars; somehow the sun of this world is not the same as the sun of mine – maybe there isn't sun at all but some other form of light. For a long time I drift down among branches, an entire world of branches, airy and spacious, silent and at peace; to my right Kristin is drifting too. We're far enough apart that we don't pass through the same openings in the branches; I can no longer see her face because her back is turned to me. At one point she raises her arms above her head as if to make herself sink faster. I keep wondering where the birds are, why there are no squirrels; though the leaves of the trees move gently as if in an imperceptible breeze, they're

perfectly quiet. Finally I reach the lowest branches, and pass them, and I can see the ground below me as if I'd stepped out a third-floor window and were floating calmly down. The trees grow wide apart, and below the branches the space feels open; in the distance I can see Kristin reach the ground just before I do. I'm standing on grass – pale grass, different grass – and though the smooth massive tree trunks are holding up a sky of branches, I'm not in the shade; everything is giving off the same even luminescence. Kristin turns and walks away as though she knows where she's going, but where could that be? I watch until I lose track of her among the tree trunks.

I turn in a circle, surveying this world. It becomes warmer. A blue jay screeches somewhere, and for the first time I can hear the rustling of leaves. The impossible trees are on three sides of me, spaced far apart on a vast meadow that's like a park for giants, and on the other side a stream – a small river – is flowing fast, but the surface is barely rippled so I know it must be deep. Beyond the river, the land slopes up in rounded grassy hills, and whatever is beyond them I cannot see. The sky without branches is only slightly brighter than the branches and leaves themselves. I haven't forgotten that there was a world above this one, and yet I'm not underground. That was sky, space, that I fell through. If anything this world feels bigger – who knows what lies over those hills or back through the cloud-tall trees? Maybe Kristin knows, but now that she's gone, there is no more evidence of humanity here until I see, about as far away as the back alley seen from my kitchen door, a man sitting in a chair. He looks very small next to the trunk of a tree. He is in profile, not looking at me, not moving, but even from that distance I see something I recognize at once – the dark glasses of Vic. He gives no sign that he's aware of my presence, but I feel sure he has seen me come floating down and knows where I'm standing now. I take a couple of steps in his direction – I'll ask him for an explanation, demand one . . . but after a while I realize that I'm not getting any closer. Even if I could get there, I know he wouldn't answer me.

Obscurely I know that this is my chance, but chance to do what? I have no idea where to go, or why I would go anywhere, but the stream pulls me toward it and I'm standing on its bank looking down into clear water. Its bottom is smooth pebbles and rounded rocks, and I can see some small fish darting against the current in the shallows. I sit down among some tallish grass growing on the bank, take off my shoes and socks, plunk my feet in the water, wondering if it will be icy cold, but it's perfectly refreshing and I lean back, against the trunk of a tree, a willow growing there, normal size, trailing long flexible streamers strung with

narrow leaves, making a kind of curtain around me so that I am safe in a world within world that feels familiar and even made for me. Beyond it the sky seems brighter, hotter, and for the first time I'm in shade. For a moment I'm eleven years old and on some expedition of my own, away from my father, away from Larry and my sister, making my own journey for once without someone always talking in my ear telling me what to look at, what to care about, what to do. I look over my shoulder, past the willow streamers, and there are a few old apple trees growing there, low, with curvy convoluted branches, and under them the grass vibrates with green. I know they weren't there before, and the willow wasn't either. So who put them there? Kristin's gone, I haven't seen anyone else but Vic and he paid no attention to me, whose world is this anyway? Is it all some kind of trap maybe, a trick for the unsuspecting, with Kristin to lure me here and then . . .

"Don't be silly," a voice says next to me, the voice of a woman I turn to see sitting with her bare feet also in the stream, hands behind her on the ground, leaning back relaxed as if she's been there all along, as if she knows me. She's wearing a lavender dress; her hair is brown and past her shoulders. Somehow I cannot look directly at her face for more than an instant; I get a glimpse and then her face becomes vague to me, but I can see the rest of her. She looks a little like Charlotte Carter only her nose is not so long. "It doesn't work like that."

"How does it work?" I say.

"Oh, take it easy. You'll find out. Relax." I can see perfectly clearly the hollows at the base of her neck, her elbows, her wrists and hands, her feet in the stream. The loose-fitting dress hides the shape of her body but not her being a woman.

"Is this yours? This place?"

"Partly. You could put it that way."

Her words remind me of Marie, but she's not Marie, that much is clear. "What happened to Kristin?"

"She has somewhere to go."

"Is it far?"

"You look and you'll see." I look around, out across the park for giants, but nothing is different and Kristin is nowhere in sight. "Not now, silly."

"What should I look at now?"

"Me."

I try to look her in the face, but I can't see her for more than an instant and even in that instant she's changing. The only way is to look just to one side, as if she were a faint star, and see her out the corner of my

eye; even then I can't make her out clearly, only feel her gaze looking back at me. All I know is that I'm attracted to her. "I can't see you," I say.

"It's all right." She puts her hand on my hand. "Touch me instead."

Why can't I just reach over and touch this woman who even invites me to? "Is it allowed?"

"Yes."

I put up my hand and touch the side of her neck with the lightest of touches, and she tilts her head slightly as if to make it easier. My hand rests just above her collarbone, as gently as possible; she is definitely there. "You see?" she says.

"What's your name?"

She doesn't answer; I think she expects me to know. I can feel the slightest hint of a pulse beating in her neck.

"What's your name?"

"Alison."

"Really?" It seems so much like a regular name.

She laughs at me; I take my hand away. "Yes, really, why not? Do you want to call me something else? If you really have to, you can call me Jane or Elaine or whatever you want, but my name is Alison, so there."

"All right."

"Be sure and remember it. Okay? You're not going to forget, are you? It did take you a long time to get here – I knew it would, I don't mind, but please don't go and forget now. If you remember my name it will make it much easier."

"Alison Alison Alison Alison." It feels like nonsense, but my mouth knows how to say it.

"Oh, and please stop feeling ridiculous. There's no need, it's a waste of time, it only makes everything harder."

"Do you know everything I'm thinking?"

She laughs again, with genuine pleasure. "You don't think you can hide things, do you?"

"I don't know."

"I know what's inside you. Everything. Pay attention. You're still wondering where Kristin went, but you think you shouldn't care about that, you should remember she's got a boyfriend, you want me to stop talking so you can go look for her, it embarrasses you that I'm saying this." With a swift dart of her head she kisses me glancingly on the corner of my startled mouth. "Got you."

I take a deep breath. "Oh."

"You see?"

"Yes." The possibilities seem both wonderful and frightening.

"Don't worry about it. You worry too much anyway."

"What else do you know? Everything? The future? Do you know what other people are thinking, too?"

I can feel her smiling, even though I can't quite see it. "I have lots of opinions," she says in an amused voice. "All you have to do is ask."

But how good are your opinions, I want to say, and aren't I making this whole thing up anyhow, isn't this just some new kind of damn foolishness? Didn't Marie just tell me not to kid myself?

"Cut it out," Alison says. "You help create everything you look at, don't you know that yet?" She reminds me of a girlfriend I once had, named Elyce, who wanted to be a Buddhist. "Talk about kidding yourself. Pay attention. Look at me."

I try, but after one glimpse, instantly vanishing like a dream, I still can't see her face. "Watch," she says to me. Suddenly I can see her and she's Ellen, right in front of me, but before I can pull myself together and speak to Ellen, she's Kristin and I feel foolish and exposed, and then she's Cora, and then Sandy, and then she's the girl I was in love with when I was in the tenth grade, and . . . "Who else would you like me to be?"

"I give up," I say.

"I'm not them," Alison says. "Come on. Do I have to wear a disguise? I'm me."

"Okay, okay."

She puts her hand on my arm, above the wrist. "Can you feel that?"

I can see it, and I know that the next thing she's going to say is "pay attention." I feel a little smile pass over her face as she hears me think that. So do it, I tell myself, and yes, I do feel the touch of her fingers on my arm.

"Let's take a walk," she says, getting up. She holds out her hand toward me; I stand up and take it. It's my job to keep feeling the touch of that hand, I know. And to feel my feet on the earth, the air in my nostrils, to see the world around me. All at once. We walk slowly, each step a separate act, a decision, as if I were learning a dance, or how to walk all over again; we pass through the curtain of willow leaves and out into bright sunshine, making me remember how the light was only a cool glow before – did she make that happen? We step slowly by the apple trees and she says, "Do you remember how we stood here and leaned on that branch right there and talked?" The branch is old and thick and low, nearly horizontal, perfect to lean on.

"No," I say.

"I know you don't. But we did, dear. About how we'd be together one day."

"I don't remember."

"Stop saying that. Say you do."

"I remember," I say, in mock obedience.

"Better," she says, and gives my hand a little squeeze. "It'll come back to you. It was a long time ago. Twenty-three years."

Twenty-three years? I was twelve years old? "Wait," I say.

"Sh. It's better to say you remember."

But I can't, yet. It's all I can do to be here, with her, holding her hand, looking around at the vibrant green of the grass, the meadow stretching off into vast distance under the tallest trees I've ever seen, the river with water plants, iris-like, growing along its banks, hearing the distant caw of crows, the whistle of a cardinal.

"It changed," I say, meaning since I came drifting down out of the sky.

"You have to see what's here."

We walk for a while, feeling the heat of the sun, and I listen to the sound of crickets in the grass. It occurs to me to look for Vic, but he's nowhere in sight. And Kristin? Did she really come here with me?

"Do you know Kristin?" I say.

"Not very well yet."

I thought you had lots of opinions, I think, expecting her to hear that and respond, but she doesn't. We keep walking, and I wonder where we're going.

"Next time," Alison says.

"What?"

"We'll talk about Kristin if you want."

"Next time?"

"You have to go." She turns to me and puts her arms around me and for an instant I can feel the contact, her body against mine. "Goodbye. Pay attention. Come back." Then she turns me around, guiding me by the elbow, and I'm facing a stairway leading up. The steps have metal treads, grooved in a diamond pattern, like the stairs at work, and I feel I'm in some sort of building. Alison isn't next to me anymore but I can remember the fleeting hug she gave me. To my left is a banister with wrought-iron uprights, to my right the bumpily-plastered wall of the stairwell with a handrail mounted on black brackets, all terribly solid and boring and I don't want to go up but she told me I had to go. I take hold of the banister with my left hand and start up, a step at a time, reluctantly. It is hard to

haul myself up the stairs against my unwillingness and the weight of my body; it helps if I pull with my hand. How many steps are there?

"Ten," Alison's voice says behind me. So she's still there. I count the steps in front of me: four to go. I'm more than halfway, but I want to see her again, and I turn around even though I have a feeling I'm not supposed to. Below me is the foot of the stairs, and a hallway with wooden floorboards, and Alison has turned her back and is disappearing through a door just as I turn; I have only one glimpse. My heart jumps: she's naked. The door closes behind her and I stand there as if she might come back out, but I know she won't and that for some reason I can't go back down. And what is that hallway, what happened to the sunny world that we were in, where did she go, can I go in there with her? Did she know I saw her naked, did she want me to? But I know, against my will, that this is not the time, I have to leave; still I can't turn my back on that last glimpse of her, and so I back my way slowly up the stairs, counting, step by step, and reach ten, the top, my hand on the iron ball of the newel post. Now turn around – I might as well, it's over, and in front of me is a dusty little empty foyer and a door to the outside where it is hot and bright, I can see a sidewalk and what looks like a parking lot and it is all breaking up, shredding like tattered flags, evaporating . . . I open my eyes on the sky. Kristin is standing there above me, her toes curling over the edge of the hole, sending a few grains of dirt rolling down.

She looked a little flustered, as if I had caught her at something, instead of her catching me. "Hi," she said. "I didn't mean to . . ." She seemed to be embarrassed for me.

"It's all right," I said. "I must have fallen asleep, I guess." I sat up and tried to look normal; my whole body felt creaky with immobility, and the abrupt movement made my head wobbly. The sky had clouded up. How long had I been there, anyway? And how long had she? What was she doing there? I shook my head; I could feel dirt fall out of my hair.

"Jeez, you're covered," she said.

"I know."

"You okay?"

"Yeah."

"I saw you throw your shovel, earlier – did something happen?"

"I just got fed up," I said. How to describe what I did after that? I climbed out of the hole, brushed dirt off my pants. There was a lot of it; I was sure the back of my shirt was dirty, and I had dirt down my neck. Not the most attractive way to present myself, if it mattered at all. Nothing was going on here, right? So it would be okay for me to take my shirt off and shake it out. Kristin didn't exactly watch, or not watch; she looked self-conscious until I got my shirt back on. "Are you taking care of Jason?" I said.

"Oh, I'm done. I just came so they could go to a movie. It was their time out day, but they're back."

"Oh." I wanted to ask her where Greg was, if she had been dating him for a long time, if they had slept together the night before.

"I've got to have something to drink, want to join me?" If she could ask me into the Carters' kitchen, I could ask her into mine.

"Um – " She seemed to be assessing me, quickly and carefully. Was I dangerous? "For a minute."

As we passed the shovel I picked it up. I could put it back in the garage; this project was over. Kristin stayed about six feet away as we traversed the back yard, reminding me of how we had floated down side by side but apart. The house looked low to me, unremarkable, almost camouflaged; it was a place no one would notice in a photograph. Its one barely distinguishing feature was fake shutters, black with white squares, permanently nailed against the house. I could see that the ones flanking the bedroom windows were in need of repainting. Above the house, now, the sky was low and gray.

I leaned the shovel against the house by the back door, held the screen door for Kristin, and we went into the dimness of the kitchen. Did it make her nervous to go in there with me? She took a few steps into the kitchen and stopped; I turned on the light. What did I have to offer her? Should have thought of that sooner, before she got in here and I opened the fridge. "Um . . it looks like all I have is beer and orange juice." Or cheap Scotch. Suave guy that I am.

"Oh. Orange juice is okay."

I poured her a glass and got myself a beer, clinked her glass with mine, immediately wondered if that was flirtatious. She seemed drawn into herself. We stood there, glasses in hand, sipping self-consciously, looking out the window at the no longer sunny back yard as if, now that we were inside the house, we both wanted out again but didn't know how to get there.

"Can I ask you something?" she said, without looking at me, and her tone said maybe she shouldn't.

"Sure."

"What were you really doing out there?" Really doing. She must have noticed something peculiar.

"Were you watching me?"

"Not for very long."

"What'd you see? Anything interesting?"

She glanced at me with a slight tilt of her head to one side, bird-like. Her eye seemed to catch me off guard. "I didn't think you were sleeping."

The statement hung in the air unanswered. I glanced at her, but she kept her eyes on the back yard. Don't worry, you can always leave, I thought.

There was a gap in time like a held breath. Just say it, I thought, what is there to lose? "There's a whole world down there." I put my beer

on the counter, leaned on the windowframe looking out. Easier than looking at her.

"The one you were trying to get to?" she said.

"I don't know, I don't have anything to compare it to."

"What's it like?"

Out the window, the cloudy, watery light reminded me of the way it had been when I sank through the trees. "Kind of like a huge park with the most incredible trees I've ever seen. Clear up to the sky. I floated down as if I had a parachute on. Even slower. But when I came back I went up a set of stairs." And you were watching me do it, I thought. Watching me when I saw Alison's naked back.

"Really?" she said, with a dubious look on her face. "You came up a staircase?"

"Yeah, why?"

"That's how I get there. Down some stairs."

I turned to look at her: I knew what she'd said, but it didn't seem possible. "Get where?"

"*You* know – there – inside. I had a feeling about what you were doing when you said there was a door down there somewhere. The other day."

"Wait a minute. Does everybody except me know about this already? Is this what people do on weekends nowadays? Or what?"

She smiled in a mischievous way. "Only in California."

"No, come on, seriously," I said. All of a sudden I felt as if I were the younger one and she was tutoring me.

"My sister lives out there, in Redwood City, she goes to so many spacy workshops you can't imagine. Last time I went to visit her she made me go to a weekend on reading people's auras. But she didn't tell me it was 'clothing optional.' So all these people took their clothes off and I was the only one wearing anything and it made me so uncomfortable I left after the first morning."

California? "Clothing optional"? What did I know about her, really? "But what about – you know – the stairs," I said. "Going down the stairs? You do that?"

"Well, not every *day*, or anything," she said, looking a little pained.

"What do you find down there?"

"Like you said – there's a whole world? I think it's different for everybody. Amy, that's my sister, she knows how to do it too. She goes into a dance studio and sees herself in the mirror, dancing, and that's how it starts. I never heard of anybody trying to actually dig their way in. That

was pretty funny. But I had a feeling about what you were up to when you said that about the door."

I took a drink out of the beer and felt it go down, cold and delicious. Who would ever have thought any of this?

"Did you meet anyone down there?" Kristin said.

"Yeah, a couple of people, actually. But one in particular. A woman." Will you freak out and leave if I tell you I went over the edge holding hands with you?

"What was she like?"

"She knows everything about me, she wants to give me advice. I couldn't really see her face."

"Did she give you anything?"

"No."

"You're supposed to ask for something. It helps you get back there." What did that mean? Was Alison waiting for everyone who came floating down out of that sky?

"Oh yeah? She did tell me her name. She made me repeat it." I felt as though I had been on the verge of forgetting.

"Was she scary?"

Were there scary beings down there? "No, I can't wait to see her again," I said without actually thinking. That sounded crazier to me than it apparently did to Kristin; she nodded as if she'd expected that. "Do you have somebody like that?"

Her face clouded over, and I felt I was treading on something I shouldn't. "I usually go down there to be with this little girl," she said.

What? I thought, but she sounded completely matter-of-fact, a Midwestern woman in her twenties wearing baggy overalls that ended in shorts, and under them a man's white button-down shirt, also too large. Her brown hair down to her shoulders with only the slightest wave in it, almost flat against her head, her voice a Missouri voice. A voice from the show-me state. "What do you do when you get there?" I said. Too late not to go along.

"Play, mostly. Whatever makes her happy. Fix up her room."

I felt myself nodding as if what she was telling me made perfect sense. Go down these stairs into some other world to fix up a child's room. Right. I'm standing here in my kitchen, drinking beer and talking about this activity as if it were a float trip down the Gasconade or a picnic at Cosmo Park.

"The first time I found her she was hiding under the stairs. She was all dirty and lonely and scared. As soon as I saw her I started to cry. I

cried the whole time. For real, the pillow was soaked. That's when I found out, what happens down there is real."

I didn't know what to say. A few weeks ago what she'd said would have been a bunch of pathetic hooley, but now I envied her ability to say it without doubting. I took the last swallow of beer in my glass and waited for Kristin to go on, but she seemed to check herself, as if she'd already revealed more than she had meant to. "Do you think this is nuts?" she said.

Make a choice now. "No," I said.

"Don't pretend, I hate it when people do that."

I could picture her turning her back, dignified, final. "I'm not pretending." This time it was true.

She was still gazing out the window, a little sullen, determinedly not meeting my eyes. "There aren't that many people you can talk to about this stuff."

"I'll bet." I could just see myself trying it on Ron, or Erdman. I opened the refrigerator. "Would you like some more?" I said, sloshing the juice container to make sure there was some.

"Boy, no wonder you're so skinny," Kristin said, putting her hands on her hips. "That's the most pathetic refrigerator I've ever seen. What's the matter, don't you know how to cook?"

I felt about sixteen. "No, I . . ." I couldn't admit to living on frozen dinners. "I've been eating out a lot. Things have been sort of, um, peculiar – remember I told you how I keeled over out there, and all that?"

"You don't look like you've been eating much of anything," Kristin said severely. "And I'm an expert on that."

"What do you mean?"

But she ignored me. "I thought someone else lived here. With you." She sounded as though she wanted to take old Someone aside and tell her to feed me.

"Someone did. Not any more, though. She moved out." All at once large drops hit the windowpanes and it started to rain loudly, from off to on just like that. "Damn – the hole's going to get filled up with water." Why hadn't I thought of that before?

"So?" she said, looking amused at me. "You can put goldfish in it. Call it a fishpond."

"Fishpond? How about mudhole?" I knew it didn't make sense for it to matter so much, but it did. "I put a lot of work into that thing, I've gotta go cover it up, I gotta find a tarp or something." Out the screen door, slap behind me, rain cool on my head as I headed for the garage. No tarp, no sheets of plywood, nothing but old window screens. Should have built

that shed I told Charlotte I was going to. Then up on the rafters I saw my tent in its bag. That would do. I came out of the garage to find Kristin standing under the tiny bit of roof protecting the kitchen door, watching me with arms crossed, still amused.

“What’re you gonna do?”

“Put a tent over it.”

She shrugged her shoulders as if to say Okay, be that way. “Well – thanks for the orange juice. I gotta go.”

“Oh. Okay.” Here I was standing in the rain holding a musty old duffel bag, cutting a dashing figure as usual. “I’d love to talk more about all that sometime.”

“Oh, sure,” she said, offhand. It either meant yes or no. Or nothing. “Bye.” She walked out into the rain as if it were just a different kind of good weather, headed toward the Carters’. Before I got to the hole I heard her put up the kickstand on her bike, looked over my shoulder and saw her ride off. There was already a puddle at the bottom of my hole, and trickles of mud running down its sides. Those had not been in my dream, and they were not allowed.

It took a while to get the tent up, and by the time I had finished I was well soaked, my clothes plastered to me, my hands covered with mud. No doubt mud streaked my face where I had pushed my wet hair back out of my eyes. A good thing Kristin hadn’t stuck around to see it. I wondered if Charlotte Carter was watching this sideshow out her kitchen window – or if she’d seen Kristin go into my house. Juicy gossip for someone. I stood in the back yard with my arms out from my sides and my face up and let it rain on me, wash the mud away. Whoever might be watching already thought I was nuts, so what did I have to lose? Or else no one was.

I took off my squelching sneakers and socks outside the kitchen door and padded into the house dripping; when I got inside, the rain outside seemed harder. There was a brilliant flash of lightning and then, after a few seconds, a crack of thunder and it really began to pour. I wanted to see how it looked out front – I always enjoyed watching sheets of rain dance on the street – and when I opened the front door I smelled something tasty and there, sitting inside the screen door, was a paper bag neatly folded over and stapled at the top. I picked it up; even though it had been rained on, it was still warm. A takeout from a Chinese restaurant – two egg rolls and a helping of won ton soup.

I carried the Chinese takeout into the kitchen while it continued to pour outside, put the two egg rolls on a plate, emptied the won ton soup into a bowl. I opened the two little plastic containers – hot mustard and duck sauce – and placed one on either side of the egg rolls. The food smelled unbelievably delicious after all the Le Menus and Budget Gourmets; the plate and bowl made a picture of festivity on the white metal top of my kitchen table. It made no sense that Kristin had ridden off to some Chinese restaurant, and back, in the rain, to bring me this, but I was transported with happiness as the rain sluiced out of the downspouts and overflowed the gutters, noisy and splashing. I took another beer out of the fridge and toasted her silently, wondering which direction to turn in order to face where she lived. I sat down feeling like a guest, picked up an egg roll and dipped its corner first in hot mustard and then in dark and shiny duck sauce, leaving a swirl of yellow behind, and took the first bite. The wonderful hotness of mustard shot up my nose and almost brought tears to my eyes. So this was what tasting something was like. I had forgotten.

Alone in my kitchen, in the rain, I had a little dinner party with Kristin. The conversation was excellent – the same words we had spoken before she left. They were more than enough to think about. She knew, somehow. More than I did by far. And had seen a bit of the world. “Clothing optional.” But she hadn’t taken hers off when everyone else did. She went down the stairs, and found this little girl hiding under them, and cried till the pillow was soaked . . . what did that mean? I had the most pathetic refrigerator she’d ever seen, no wonder I was so skinny. And how

was she an expert on not eating? She didn't look like someone who starved herself, but maybe when she was younger? I offered her the other egg roll but she didn't take it.

Why not make that hole into a fishpond, keep goldfish in it? If I thought of her saying that and paid close attention when I thought it, I could see just for an instant the amused look she had had on her face, and that look went very well with the soup. It was the perfect amount of food; it filled me up. But not the way I usually was, where somehow I knew I was still empty even though I couldn't eat any more. Not that frustrated way. But slowed down, able to sit in the darkening kitchen and contemplate the rain.

After it got dark, Coughing Man came and sat with me as the rain tapered off; I knew because I heard him breathe. For a while I was worried that he might have designs on my dreams, later on. "You got what you wanted, didn't you?" No answer. After a while he coughed quietly in a noncommittal manner.

"I went down there, I met Alison, I stuck my feet in the river, wasn't that what you were trying to get me to do?"

The leg of a kitchen chair scraped against the floor slightly, as if someone sitting in it had shifted his weight, and the back of my neck prickled – was someone actually there, someone with a body? Who the hell was I sitting in the dark with? I reached up and grabbed the pull string hanging from the overhead light, and there was my kitchen, mundane as ever, my two used dishes still sitting on the table, my counters covered with speckled Formica that was slightly buckled and darkened in one spot where I had put down a hot pan by mistake. Nothing and no one. I put the dishes in the sink and turned the light off again. Time for bed. I let the darkness and quiet wash back over me as I stood in the living room taking my clothes off, listening to the dripping from the eaves now that the rain had stopped, and I lay down on the sofa-bed as circumspectly as if there were someone in it who must not be disturbed. Some balance was being maintained by remaining perfectly silent, but a stifled cough tipped my precarious equilibrium. Damn him. "It's a start," Coughing Man whispered. I could almost feel his breath on my ear.

I awoke early; past the trees in the front yard, the sky was bright. Sunday morning, time to sleep in; even the churchgoers would not be up yet. Time for Charlotte Carter and her husband to make love before Jason woke up. That made me think of my last glimpse of Alison and I knew I

had to go back right away. She had said we could talk more the next time, and anyway I couldn't wait to see her, and I had to go down there before I forgot how, and remember this time to ask her for something, the way Kristin had said. But the hole must be full of mud for sure. I couldn't do it there.

I was already lying down, wasn't I – what was the point of going anywhere else? I arranged myself like a knight on his tomb, hands crossed on my chest, feet together. Relax, for crying out loud. I closed my eyes but the brightness of the day leaked through; I pulled a pillow over my eyes, settled myself again. Don't fall back asleep, I thought. I tried to will myself to relax, to let my limbs get heavy and sink into the bed. Thoughts of the girlfriend I had right after college, Elyce, trying to teach me yoga. Your body is full of sand, heavy heavy sand, gravity is weighing it down, pulling your body into the floor, and now bit by bit the sand starts to trickle out . . . she always said I would have no trouble being flexible enough if I would only learn to relax, but it was never true. Stop thinking about that, go down the stairs.

Where are they?

Behind my eyelids I search for the stairs. Vague flashes of the giant trees I floated by, and the river bank, but these are memories, not real seeing. Alison. I can't see her face. "You're supposed to ask for something. It helps you get back there." Does that mean it's going to be hard, because I didn't know to do that? Or maybe I won't even be able to? I refuse to accept that. Kristin knows how, knows the stairs, are they the same stairs for her? I can see a dusty little hallway, bare floor made of worn boards, old wainscoting. Almost the right place. I don't see the stairs, and I can't seem to turn my head, can't choose what to look at, the way it is in dreams most of the time. To my left I glimpse a railing, and I will my awareness in that direction and gradually the stairs come into focus. I'm standing in that same foyer I came up into the last time, I can see the ball on the newel post clearly and I step up to it and put my hand on the railing, take hold of it, look down at the step. Diamond pattern metal tread under my foot. I step down. "That's one," I say to myself, remembering Alison saying that there are ten, and bring my other foot down to that first step. I have to stand there for a while to catch up with myself, to feel that all of me is one step down, already at that first remove from the upper world. Doubt flickers in and out, some voice saying it probably can't be done, it won't really work this time, I'm making it all up, and I have to catch a moment when the voice isn't there to make the next step down. I hold on to the railing as if it's my anchor that will keep me from floating back up into the everyday reality that I can still faintly hear outside the windows up in my

living room – bird calls, the sound of a car going by. Again the same waiting on the second step, the same doubts, the same outwitting of myself so that I can keep going down. How could it have been so easy before, effortless, irresistible even? Because Kristin was there? Maybe I could slide down the banister – but I know it's not that easy. On the third step I realize that I've been watching my feet and I try to look around, at least look ahead past the next step, but it's hard to raise my eyes and I can't quite see the hallway below, the one where I glimpsed Alison naked from the back as she disappeared into a doorway. Fourth step. I look up at the space I'm leaving – a mistake it seems, I get stuck there for what feels like a long time before I can move on, and then I'm on the fifth step and halfway down, I realize, the doubts redoubled because am I really anywhere or is this all so much baloney, I don't feel halfway there, but I can see that my head will soon go below the level of the floor I'm leaving and then I will be under the ceiling of the other world, no time to stop now and I take another step down and then, boldly, another. I have to wait extra-long to catch up with myself but now I can feel that I am definitely down below. There are only three more steps to go. I can see the floor of the hall I'm coming down into, which looks like linoleum; it's as if I am at work. I try to look around but my vision is clouded when I lift my eyes. Another step, impatient now to get there but held back by something inside that tells me I can't hurry, and then another and I'm holding onto the iron ball of the newel post at the bottom and trying to get the doubts to shut up, and I take the tenth step down. My foot is on the floor of the inner world. Let go of the railing. The eagle has landed.

I look around me, willing away the cloud that is before my eyes, and now it feels as though I'm in a school of some kind, or maybe a cheap hotel. The hallway is dim, wainscoted, brown. There are closed doors, one to my left, one in front of me where Alison went last time, and to my right the hallway moves off at an angle. More doors, more wainscoting. It seems to slope slightly up as it goes that way. I could go there but I don't want to, I must see Alison, and I go to the door straight ahead and turn the knob; it opens inward on brightness. Featureless brightness like a brilliant fog, like flying in an airplane through sunlit clouds, not just before me but above and below, so that one step in I can't even see a floor beneath my feet. I'm floating in a white-out, blinded.

Now what?

"Alison?"

No answer. I slide my feet forward cautiously, ready to bump into something, but nothing's there. Have I made some kind of mistake, taken the wrong stairs, opened the wrong door?

"Alison, are you here?"

I begin to feel she is. Waiting in the dazzling brightness. Am I supposed to pass some sort of test?

"It's not a test," she says from somewhere in front of me.

"Is this where you live?"

"Yes. Some of the time. Most of the time. This is my room."

"Is it always this bright in here?"

"Sometimes it's dark," she says, and instantly it is, velvety and total black, dark like lying back on an overstuffed sofa and sinking in and in. "You can come in more." I shuffle a couple of steps forward, my hands in front of me, groping. "Don't worry," she says. Her voice is right beside me in the darkness, and then she takes hold of my arm and guides my hand up till it touches her cheek. "See? Pay attention. I'm glad you came back soon. Can you feel me?"

"Yes." Her cheekbone is definite under my hand. "Is it going to stay this dark?"

"Maybe. Don't worry about that. I know what you're thinking, so why don't you, silly?"

Of course she knows, how could I forget, and she must mean it, right? I can feel her laughing at my doubts, and I let my fingers slide down her cheek, down the side of her neck, her bare shoulder, and I'm all but certain that she is still naked and waiting for me to touch her. I'm trying to stay with it with all my might, not to lose the sensation, not to let her slip away from me in the dark. "Stop making such an effort, you'll drive yourself nuts," she says. I'm getting a hard-on and part of me is thinking this is already nuts and part of me is remembering Kristin crying till the pillow was soaked and saying "That's when I found out, what happens down there is real." The phrase "clothing optional" flits through my mind and makes me smile. "Can anything happen here?" I say.

"Pay attention."

I caress the soft small fullness of her breast, her ribs one by one, the curve of her waist, let the back of my hand brush against her pubic hair and her thigh. I'm hard as I can be, and though I was naked in bed before I started this, I'm dressed now, and I say to her, "Is it okay if I take my clothes off?"

"Of course."

It seems to take a long time, as if I were learning to get undressed all over again; finally I'm naked and I can hold her next to me and try to feel her body all at once. She's fairly tall, only a few inches shorter than me, and what I can mostly feel is her hair against my shoulder. It's

longish, like Ellen's, but the woman who is or is not in my arms is not Ellen. Or Kristin either. "Can you make it so I can see you?"

"Let's lie down," she says, guiding me in the dark to some kind of mat on the floor, and then we're stretched out together, on our sides, facing and touching. I'm trying to keep feeling her, to stay with the sensation of her skin under my fingers, her hipbone, her side, and it keeps slipping out of focus, turning into memories of women I've been with, and I keep pulling myself back to Alison, reminding myself that this is this and not something else.

"You talk too much," she says. "To yourself. No wonder you're this way. Come inside me."

But can it be that I can actually make love to her and feel it? I know I'm not supposed to let myself doubt, but I can't help it; I've never even had a dream where I actually came, no matter how big and pounding the hard-on I woke up with. God knows I want her. I turn her gently on her back, caress her breasts and her belly, part her willing legs and it's all kind of theoretical and vague; but then I realize I'm beginning to see her, dimly. I'm kneeling above her, wanting her, and I catch a glimpse of her teasing eyes in the half-darkness as she waits for me, and that makes me come into her. Making love to her is something I more see myself do than actually feel; when I come inside her it's a mind thing – nothing actually shoots forth to mess up the sheets. But isn't the mind where I am with her? She comes too, arching herself under me, I can feel her rib cage against mine, and then we lie there and hold each other, she as light as a spirit in my arms.

"I love that," Alison says.

"Everything's easier here, isn't it?"

"Comparisons are odious," she says. "You wanted to make love to me, didn't you? And why shouldn't you? It's your world."

"I thought it was yours."

"Foolish boy. I told you years ago. But you've forgotten." I realize that now I can see her better, except that her face is still elusive, and I can look around and see where she lives – a huge room, as long as my house, with here and there a sofa or a bookcase full of books, mats and pillows on the floor, a high-ceilinged space stretching away into a dim impression of paneling and chandeliers. Yet it's homey, lived-in, all made the peculiar way it is to suit Alison and no one else, and our being naked together in the middle of it seems perfectly ordinary and serene. There are tall French doors leading to a sunny outside. "What do you do all day?" I say, caressing with my eyes her small breasts and her graceful neck.

"I read a lot."

"Read?"

"Yes, why not, I can read too, you know. Stories about where you are. In the body. That fascinates me."

"Have you ever been – up the stairs? In a body?"

"How else would I know about making love? And all the rest of it. Of course I've been there, many times. And I'm with you, anyway. I see what happens."

"You do?"

"It's easier to understand it from here. Easier to think I do. You have the hard part. You're right about that."

"It's nice to be right about something."

"It's overrated."

"Really?"

"There are more important things."

"Tell me some."

She kisses me on the corner of the mouth and gets up and walks toward the French doors, and I follow her out into the sunshine. Her straight brown hair gleams in the light almost liquidly; I think of seeing her naked for an instant in the dusky hallway as I was halfway up the stairs, but now in the full light of day, walking on green grass, she is even more beautiful. I catch up to her, put my arm around her waist, she fits against my right side as if made to be there. Or I fit her. "I'm always here, you know," she says.

"Where?"

"To your right. You just don't know it. If somebody else is there I make room, but I'm still there."

"All the time?"

"You could take walks with me. I mean you do, but you don't know it. But now that you know, you could. In the body. Just don't talk to me too loud or people will think funny things."

"If I talk, will you answer?"

"Don't I always?"

We're walking down a grassy path with some trees to our left and to our right seems to be a sort of garden – or meadow – it's indistinct to my sight, maybe shifting, but always green and inviting. "What happened to that place we were in before?"

"I was surprised you came there," Alison says. "When you didn't even know. It must have been because Kristin was with you."

Oh yes – I meant to ask about Kristin. Being with Alison almost made me forget.

"Tell me about Kristin. She's been here before, hasn't she?" The sensation of Alison's body next to mine, hip to hip, comfortably ambling naked through the sunlight, is suddenly so present that my heart feels like it can barely hold all of the moment.

"Yes. Not here. But in the other place, where the tall trees are."

"So you know her already?"

"I know you, dear. I know how you feel. All the time. I know what happened with her."

"If Ellen were still here, it would never have . . ." crossed my mind – is that the truth?

"Pay attention," Alison says. "Ellen had to leave. She was right that it was time and past time."

"I was in love with her, I think."

"Yes, in a way, at the beginning, I know, you had so much desire for her, and that was just what she wanted. For a while."

"I didn't do a very good job, did I?"

"What is a good job? You had things to learn. You needed to connect with someone to learn them. I wanted it to work better for you, but maybe it couldn't. Everything takes time where you are."

The path winds into light shade. Must be birch trees, I glimpse their white bark.

"Be kind to yourself, dear. You aren't very."

"I know," I say, starting to feel guilty about that, as if that would do any good.

"Pay attention," Alison says.

"What about Kristin? What did it mean that she brought me that food?"

"It meant she felt like it, that's all. She's open. She doesn't know any other way to be. She could get hurt, and maybe she knows that. You have to be aware. And don't push, whatever you do. Dare, but don't push. Never push. Believe, but don't presume."

"I try to make things mean too much, don't I?"

"You worry a lot. More than you need to. Get yourself tied in knots."

"I know."

"Do more than just know."

I think about that, feeling inferior. "I dug a hole, didn't I?"

Alison laughs. "Yes, you dug a lovely hole, that was excellent," she says indulgently. "Now we should go back." She turns us around and we head back up the path. I watch our bare feet matching step for step, and when I look up we're going in the French doors. Dimly I can feel my body

lying on the bed, my back beginning to ache from immobility, but I'm not ready to leave, all I want to do is stay here with Alison.

"You can always come back," she says. "Whenever you want."

"Kristin told me I should ask you to give me something," I say, suddenly remembering. "So I could get back easier."

"You know where the stairs are, don't you? Don't worry, it'll work. How could it not?"

Alison goes over to one of the bookcases, takes out a thick book like an old novel, and lies down on the floor to read, propped on one elbow, serene within herself. All I want is to stay with her, still, but she seems ready for me to go. I look away from her, at the room and the outside where we've been, and when I look back she's not lying there anymore. Not anywhere in sight. "Alison?" I say.

"Find me," she says, invisible. I go to the French doors, survey the outside, nothing. Crazy idea that maybe she's up in a tree, but no. Or hiding behind some sofa. I look; no Alison.

"Keep looking," she says, but I've run out of places. "Look down."

I'm still naked, and when I look down at myself I have Alison's breasts, and her waist, and her hips, and there's no penis between my legs, no balls that I've felt there all my life, but instead the mound of her sex, and I can feel her hair lying on my shoulders. "You *are* me," she says.

I turn around and around to say how can this be or how did you do it but there's no one to say it to; I'm alone in the big room, as if it were my room, and not knowing what else to do I go over to where her book is lying open on the floor and crouch next to it and try to read it, but the words on the page won't hold still because my heart is racing and I'm too excited to see them. I kneel there and touch myself cautiously, gingerly, thinking of all the times I've touched a woman's body but this time it's my body shaped in a way that has always been magical to me. My skin is sensitive to the lightest touch, my nipples almost shrink from contact; it's like I have just shed my old skin and this new one is not tough enough yet to face the world. And yet this excites me, I feel wetness blooming inside me.

"You can call him to you," Alison says, invisible, in my ear, and I know she means me, she means Lucas, because I'm Alison now, and can I really? But anything can happen here, I know that. Come to me, I think, and Lucas comes and kneels by me and caresses my breasts that like to be touched after all, he lays me down on a mat and is tall above me and runs his hands down me and down me, and astonishes me by sliding his finger inside me where I have never felt anything before, it makes me lift myself toward him without even willing it and with my fingertips I trace the

length of his stiff penis, touch its dark, heart-shaped head, knowing how that feels to him, and then it is far more astounding to have him enter me, open me and divide me, fill me up with so much bigness so far inside I had no idea, and make my mouth open with gasps I can't help as he fills me again and again. I always thought sex was even better for women, and it is. So good it's halfway scary.

Then I'm me again, lying there in Alison's arms, almost disappointed no longer to be her. "See?" she says calmly, as if what we have just done happened every day. "I'm you. You can't get away from me even if you try."

"I'm not trying," I say, but my back is aching insistently, and I know that now I have to go. Reluctantly I get up and begin to put on my clothes. Alison sits up and watches me get dressed, patiently, and when I am she stands up and magically she has a dress on – a longish cotton dress, some medium brown color without a name, surprising me with how dowdy it is compared to Alison herself. Like a disguise. But I know what's beneath the surface, or at least the beginnings of it.

"I'll walk you up the stairs," she says. I have my arm around her again, and again we are fitted together with her to my right, as we step the few steps from the door of her room to the foot of the stairs. Will she come up with me, could she, and be my lover after all, could that be the ultimate surprise she has up her sleeve, the best of all saved for last? "I'll be with you all day," she says, as we set foot on the first step. "To your right. As long as you know it." Step by step we go up until her head is about to come even with the upper floor and she says, "I have to stop here."

"I don't want to leave you."

"You can't," she says, and heads back down the stairs, and when she steps through the door into her space she's naked again and I watch until I can't see her anymore, thinking of her lying down and starting to read her book. I have to force myself to turn around, use the railing to pull myself up the stairs, unwillingly, and at the last I turn again and back up the final step taking a last look at the hallway below.

Then I'm out, in the hot, dusty foyer, going out the door into a parking lot . . .

My back was killing me. I pulled my knees up against my chest and hugged them to me, trying to stretch out the ache, then sat up, feeling light-headed. My arms had been bent so long in the same position that they were half-asleep, and when I looked in the mirror in the bathroom I could see the red imprint of my hand on my chest.

I didn't see Alison in the mirror; she was younger than me and a hell of a lot prettier. I saw a man who in five years would be forty, and seeing me was a weird shock: I had fulfilled the age-old command, Go fuck yourself. If I was Alison, then I had fucked myself not once but twice, once as each of me. And liked it, especially when I was her, a woman, only I so obviously wasn't a woman. This was my body, not Alison's but this one, so definite, so incomplete. With the little extra hanging off it, visible and vulnerable, needing somewhere to hide itself.

Be kind to yourself, Alison had told me, but there was a difference between that and self-indulgence. I couldn't face myself all of a sudden, couldn't look myself in the eye. What was I thinking of, anyway? What was I turning into, and who could ever imagine a life lived like this? Exactly how the hell was I planning to pay the rent, and rent or no, what would someone who lived a second life in another world do all the rest of the day?

I had to get it together before I went completely around the bend. Okay, it was a great experience, but enough was enough. Watch a baseball game, for God's sake, have a beer, eat some real food, take that stupid tent out of the back yard. Which would still leave a gorgeous hole and several mountains of dirt and rocks. Throw it all back in.

You can put goldfish in it, call it a fishpond, I heard Kristin's amused voice say, and it gave me a flash of her and reminded me that if I didn't watch out I could still make a complete laughingstock of myself, yet again. Just because she brought me a Chinese takeout it didn't mean she was going to supply everything else that was missing in my life, and anyway she had a boyfriend.

So get it together. Suck it up. Take your head out of your ass and look around.

I did twenty push-ups and twenty sit-ups on the floor of the living room, grabbed my toes and pulled myself, panting, toward them until I couldn't take the pain in the backs of my legs, got up and stalked into the shower and turned it on me without waiting for the water to warm up. So it was cold, so what? Deal with it.

I got out and got dressed, pulled the sheets off the sofa-bed and closed it up. Enough of that too, I could sleep in the damn bed. I went into the bedroom, opened the windows all the way, tore off the sheets and pillowcases that had been there the last time Ellen and I slept together – for whatever that turned out to have been worth – rolled them up in a bundle and stuffed all the bedclothes into the washing machine. I went through the house opening every window in the place as far as it would go. I pulled out the vacuum cleaner and slammed it around, chasing dust balls, swearing when it tried to eat throw rugs. I took down the curtains that Ellen had put up on the front windows and jammed them down into the trash. A person could get along just fine with window shades. I always had, before she came along. I started looking for anything else of hers to throw away, but that reminded me too much of looking for things of hers to keep. Fuck it, it wasn't about that.

I went out the back door, grabbed the shovel that was leaning there, headed for the hole. The tent sat there like some eight-year-old kid's back yard camp-out. I pulled up the stakes, took out the tent poles, bundled it up, and stood looking at my big achievement. Should put an outhouse over it, I thought, it's deep enough to hold a hefty load of shit. I flung a couple of shovelfuls of dirt back in, kicked at the pile and tried to shove it in the hole with my foot, threw the shovel down. Even filling it back up would be more work than it was worth.

I was starving because I hadn't eaten breakfast yet, and I headed back toward the house wondering if I'd find anything to eat. I had given the last of the orange juice to Kristin. Beer and frozen dinners. Anything else? The last few slices of an ancient loaf of bread. On the counter still sat the two containers the Chinese food had come in. I threw them away. Not supposed to think about that, either.

I walked to the Broadway Diner, telling myself the exercise would do me good, sat down at the counter among the Sunday morning crowd. "Coffee?" the owner said, pots in hand, caf and decaf.

"Sure."

"Unleaded or regular?"

"High octane."

"Now you're talking." He poured and kept working his way down the counter. "Morning, folks. Need to see a menu?"

The waitress was in front of me, scrawny and short of breath, holding herself still with an effort long enough to say, "Ready to order?"

"Yeah, I'll have two eggs sunnyside up with sausage."

"Home fries and toast?"

"Sure." Might as well go for it. She scribbled on her pad so fast that she had to write it over again, slower, so the cook could read it. Better switch to unleaded, lady. "And could I have an orange juice?" But she had already moved on and didn't hear me.

The food came and it looked good and I ate it. It took three or four cups of coffee to wash it down, and that was okay with me too. But when I left, the sausages didn't seem to be sitting very well in my stomach. I kept tasting them over again. Not that I felt sick or anything. But.

I stopped at the drugstore on the way home and bought the Kansas City paper and when I got there I read the news and the whole editorial section because, God damn it, I was an adult. And would acquit myself as such.

It was noon; I realized I hadn't mowed the lawn in ages, and if I didn't, it would get too tall to mow at all. Of course the lawn mower didn't want to start, and of course I had started thinking it was finally time to buy a new one when it decided to work. Which was a good thing since I had already spent five hundred dollars on some clothes I didn't need, while I was playing with half a deck. No way I could get out of that now. But no more of that kind of bullshit. Time to get it together.

By the time the lawn was mowed, there was a Royals game on, and I sat down in front of the TV and opened a beer. I studied the game closely. Now and then I commented on it out loud and then I reminded myself not to do that. It made me think of Alison saying she'd be to my right all day. But having an invisible friend – much less an invisible girlfriend – was for six-year-olds.

When the game ended I walked to Nowell's and bought chicken, barbecue sauce, corn on the cob in a plastic-wrapped package, eggs bread milk juice, Tater Tots. I came home, put the food in the fridge, folded up the bag and stuck it in the broom closet, fired up the barbecue grill, and ate. The corn was only okay. I tried to think when I had last had an unfrozen vegetable. I drank some Scotch and thought about going back to work in the morning, getting myself used to the idea. If Ron gave me any shit he would live to regret it. And I was bound to run into Lucas. Have to ask him to do me a favor and keep quiet about some of the crazy things I'd

told him in the past week. He was a good man, he'd do it. Maybe give me funny looks in the hall once in a while. I could live with that.

And then what. Write policies, adjust claims, keep the house and the car maintained and food in the fridge and the bills paid and my ass out of trouble and then what. Read the paper every day, watch sports, have a drink, read a book. Find somebody to go out with, not to mention in with. Somebody my own age. A flash of the back of Sandy's neck, the view of her I had every day at the office, imagine kissing her there, no never. I could volunteer my services to Cora until the real thing came along for her, but there were lots of guys she could have if she chose. She probably wouldn't pick me after hearing all this nonsense about Coughing Man and leaving the world, not to mention whatever little tidbits Ellen must have told her, about what a dud boyfriend I was, before she left.

Except that she did touch me of her own accord. But there it was again: the meaning problem.

I had a flash of the Missouri River in midwinter, somewhere south of town, around Easley, standing on the bank of the wide river with Ellen while big chunks of ice from shore to shore came floating down, fast, crunching off each other as they came around the bend, a sound you could hear before the river was even in sight, larger than mere people, the sound of time or death; the cold sharp in my nose and mouth and her gloved hand in mine like a statement that in the face of something awesome we were together – or was it only that now I wished it had meant that?

If I was really going to get up and go to work in the morning, it was time to go to bed. I went in the bedroom and the stripped mattress just looked like a mattress. Not so new, either. On an impulse, I picked up one side of it, struggled with its limp weight, and flipped it over, wondering if Lucas had thought of that when his wife left. Then I put on clean sheets and pillowcases and there was nothing to do but get in.

I turned out the light and the darkness of the bedroom surprised me. I had grown accustomed to the streetlights shining into the living room, and there was no moon; I felt hidden and secret as I took off my clothes and dropped them on the floor, and I was glad I couldn't see myself in the mirror except as a dim gray shape. Gingerly I lowered myself onto the bed. Would I sleep on her side? But the hell with that; there was no her side. It was all mine. The time we had spent together rolled up behind me like an old rug and there was nothing in there but dust.

I lay in the dark, thinking because I couldn't help it, of Ellen and sharing this bed. Was it possible to do everything we had done, the trips, the weekends, the living together day by day, the gardening and even the

naked pictures, and never really touch, not even when she cried out ecstatically? Maybe she never meant to let me touch her, maybe that was what she was all about. Maybe I only fumbled at her because that was all she would let me do, maybe from the start she kept herself to herself, doling out my ration of what seemed to be union, alone inside and preferring to be alone. It had been easy to get me to want her and maybe after that she just let me fool myself. What was I, that the two of them had known for six months I was going to be left, and no one bothered to inform me? Just pick up the paper or turn on the news and I would hear how women were violated and downtrodden and at the mercy of men – we rapists, we abusers and abandoners, a lower race of boundless selfishness and corruption – but what about all the days and lives that didn't make the news, what about the power women had to dangle and to judge, to say Come and then at will, Now go. Go on. Your time is up. I am whole in myself, I am the all that is, it's not my fault that you're a man and incomplete, go find whatever wholeness you're capable of, put your hands on someone who has the patience for them, someone who finds you interesting – or don't, it's nothing to me.

And all along, I had said that I loved her, had told myself she must love me or why would we be living together? Maybe I knew everything about Ellen except the stuff that mattered, maybe I knew nothing about love except the power of the word. Alison had practically said as much. If she was me, if she was always there inside me, if she knew so much why didn't she help me out?

On the shelves in my study, unopened for years, were some books about Buddhism that I had never been able to get through. Desire is the root of all suffering, they said. How could I forget. Elyce, the girlfriend who had given them to me, seemed to think she was doing me a favor when she gave up having sex with me. One of her favorite passages said that there was no chariot like disappointment on the path of dharma, whatever the hell dharma was. And right now, this minute, I was about as disappointed as I could ever get, and less enlightened than I had been at twenty-three.

I lay there on my back with my hands on my chest and a sheet half-covering me and waited. Let what I was afraid of come now if it was going to. Some bellow of red outrage or ancient sobs left over from childhood, all the irretrievable moments I couldn't live without but had to, the one hundred disillusionments I didn't want to face – if it had to come, let it. Now.

It was like standing on the spot by the back fence and asking Something to enter me through the top of my head. Nothing happened. I was through with that nonsense about magical spots and spiritual beings. So I collapsed, fine. It happened to people. Breakups happened every day. So did a lot worse things, that made the news. When I made the news it would be time to feel sorry for myself.

Lying there willing myself to go to sleep, I had flashes of the top of the stairs, of Alison's room but no Alison, of the sky as seen from my hole out back. It was enormous, limitless, and sight seemed to go up into it and curve with the curve of space out into an infinity that waited just beyond the outskirts of town, patient and eternal, in which a person was no more than a lost thought.

Then I'm in my hole and it's raining and there is no tent. It's raining but I can see the full moon over me and the moon is coming down out of the sky, at me, and the face is not benign. I hear popping like bubble gum and crackling like sticks breaking underfoot, and louder still, like firecrackers. I'm in a foxhole and I can smell roasted metal flying overhead; I know if I don't keep my head down it will sizzle me like fish guts dropped in a fire. An indifferent murmur slides under the explosions and the whistling metal and into my heart and lets me know once and for all that I am empty, my so-called world is empty, whether I live or die is of no significance. I am squirming my way blindly down into the mud in the bottom of my hole, trying to hide from that which doesn't even have to bother to pursue; then I'm falling in darkness and silence except for a faint echo as if someone spoke just before I came here and I see the man in the moon coming at me again, all rock and his craggy lips parting to show his chipped teeth. I think his millions of tons are going to hit me and reduce me to atoms but he passes through me instead and I understand that of course he passed straight through me because I am not there. Nothing but the falling, the emptiness of despair in the pit of my stomach. I want it to end but I know it won't. I open my mouth to howl, but there is no one to howl to and no point in making a sound and no sound comes out, I gulp for air like a caught fish and then I snap awake, holding onto the side of the mattress with all my might, making hoarse sounds out of a dry throat, my heart racing as though it will jump out of me. I can see out the bedroom window, into the dark back yard; I close my mouth, try to swallow, still holding onto the bed for life dear or not, panting and waiting for the dream to ebb away, for the world to become solid again and myself in it and life worth something. Deliberately I relax my grip on the mattress, keeping my eyes open, trying to breathe slowly and deeply

and slow my heart down, focusing on the yard in which, I keep reminding myself, nothing has changed, nothing is out of the ordinary. It is just dark. Like every night. The window is open, and I can hear a breeze pass through the trees, and nighttime cicada sounds, and footsteps that sound as though they pace slowly in front of my bedroom windows – though I can't see a thing change – one way, and then another, and then stop. There is a long silence, a held breath till it becomes painful, then a cough. I pull the pillow over my head, but it does no good; the cough comes again. "Go away!" I shout, flinging the pillow away and raising myself up on one elbow. I remember Marie telling me you must never let them know you're afraid of them, and I am and he knows it and he's still there; I can feel him outside the window. "Don't do this to me," I say, falling back and closing my eyes. "Please. I can't take it." He moves a couple of steps and I think I hear him breathing and I know as if he said it out loud to me that he has no intention of going away.

He's not going to let me sleep, I know it. Every time I start to drift off he'll make some sound and I'll be snatched awake again and it will go on until I'm exhausted and good for nothing, and then it will still go on if he wants it to. I think of begging him, pleading with him to let me sleep, let me go back to my old life, but even thinking that is a mistake. All my loud resolutions have come to this: I'm ready to shit bricks because Coughing Man has me at his mercy.

I try to remember what Marie said to me when she read the Tarot cards. The train's left the station and you can't get off now. And all that stuff about Eshu. He brings you to a crossroads, he can eat you alive, he'll put you to the test. Shit, I guess so. Did she know this was going to happen?

What else does Coughing Man want from me – he, or Eshu, or Lucas, or Marie, or anybody? Or does anybody in this world want a goddamn thing from me? Anybody with half a brain could do my job, and even Kristin, kind as she is, told me exactly the real reason she brought that Chinese food and left it on my doorstep: because my refrigerator was pathetic. Nobody wants anything from people who are pathetic.

"All right then," I say aloud for Coughing Man to hear. "If you're so smart, do something. I'm ready." But I'm not so damn sure that's the truth.

No reply. His refusal to show himself is the loudest thing about him.

I tell myself the emptiness inside will go away if only I can remember the trusted moments of my life, the saving memories that must be somewhere in my past, and I try like a frantic student trying to research

an impossible paper due at dawn, pulling every book off the shelves, opening each one for a hasty glance and then throwing it on the floor with all the rest, until the library is ransacked and still I don't know where to begin.

I woke up to find the sun shining on me hotly, already high in the sky, and turned over and it was after nine o'clock. Should be at work by now, but I wasn't, and my head felt like I was wearing a hat made of bricks – if I went to the office, they'd know at once that I was no use anymore. Bound to find out soon, but I might as well put it off as long as I could.

There was only one place left where I belonged, and that was back down the stairs. I lay on my back, pillow over my head blocking out the light, hands crossed on my chest, and waited.

The dusty wainscoting of the foyer came into view. Look to the left; there were the stairs, and I was at the top of them, gazing down. I could see all ten steps and the floor below, silent, waiting.

It was easier this time, I didn't have to stand as long on each step to catch up with myself, I didn't have to spend as long outwitting my doubts. The memory of touching Alison drew me down. But if she was me, then . . . that was too confusing. Maybe that was only her way to make me feel better about having to leave her at the bottom of the stairs, not being able to take her into the upper world. Sensation of my hand on the railing travelling slowly down, vision of the molding around the stairwell as I passed beneath the floor above. The rough iron ball of the newel post was in my hand and my foot was touching down on the floor of the lower world.

The hallway is dim here, quiet, the doors are closed. I have a sinking feeling of what if Alison isn't there, and I open her door and find her room dim too, half-lit. It feels like a house whose owners are away on a long vacation; my footsteps echo and Alison doesn't answer when I call her name.

"Talk to me," I say. She isn't going to leave me too, is she?

But there's no answer. I trot through her space at a speed that I feel could become panic if I'm not careful, around the sofas and futons and bookcases and out the French doors into the green outdoors that we walked through together, but it feels deserted too, the sunlight watered down, and I don't want to be there by myself, I've got to find Alison. Back inside, I half-expect to find sheets thrown over the furniture, and I call her name knowing she's not going to answer, feeling like an intruder. I have to go back to the hall.

Still dimness and the faint smell of dust. I look around me at the other closed doors, but none of them feels like the right way. The hallway leads off at a slight angle to my right and sloping uphill, and I start up it with no real hope. Maybe I've offended her so much, with everything I thought during the day yesterday, that I've driven her away and all that I will find here from now on is this vacancy. And closed doors. There are more of them, there are what look like elevator doors, and a door with a window in it through which I can peer into what appears to be a disused gymnasium, and with every step I feel worse, my heart heavier with the conviction that I have spoiled everything, even here, and it is too late to undo what I have done.

I try a door at random, and all I can see is darkness; I can smell earth and damp, and I can feel something's in there that I don't like, something that doesn't like me. Hastily I close that door again. I don't want to find out what's behind the rest. I know I'll never find Alison if she doesn't want me to. There is nothing to do but leave.

The hallway is dimmer, it smells more pungently of dust, it echoes more loudly of absence.

It was hard to climb before, knowing that I was leaving Alison behind, but that was easy compared to climbing the stairs when there is nothing behind me and nothing at the top. I haul myself up by the railing, my legs mired in reluctance to move at all, and it feels as though the ten steps have been climbed three times over before I am finally near the top. As I lift my foot to the last step I look around and the foyer isn't solid, it's in shreds and I seem to be seeing through its walls to the outdoors, I look above the parking lot to the trees around it which are thicker now than they have been before, and as I put my foot on the top step I lose my balance, my legs are swept out from under me and I feel myself starting to tumble backwards down the stairs but even my fall is in slow motion, slow and slower until I am stuck in a horizontal position, lying on my back in something like thick sky and my back bumps gently against hardness, above me are the branches of trees with sun flashing through them and I am lying naked in a stream, against a sandbar that keeps me from washing away with the current that lifts me gently off the bottom. The water curls around me like minnows nibbling at my skin.

I sit up. My eyes are open, aren't they? And aren't the stones hard under my butt, isn't the sun hot and too bright to look at, just like the sun of the upper world? I'm sitting in flowing water up to my waist, in a boat-shaped depression next to a rocky sandbar and a fallen tree, and a little ways downstream the creek I'm sitting in joins another; I know this place, I've come here a dozen times and this is Hinkson Creek, or Grindstone,

I've never known which for sure, and not too far from here Ellen and I skinny-dipped and the frat boys caught us at it. Somebody could come now, too, any moment, and what the hell would I do?

On the sandbar is a pair of shorts and a T-shirt and my sneakers, which look the same as ever, only wet. I was in bed, so far as I know I never got up or got dressed . . .

A piece is missing. How big?

Half an hour at the very least, to throw on clothes and get here, hurrying all the way. The sun is high in the sky, and what time did I wake up? Nine?

Alison, please forgive me, you told me you'd be to my right and answer me, I'm sorry I thought that being with you meant I was crazy, please tell me what's going on.

No reply. Then I remember she told me not to talk to her too loud or people would look at me funny.

"Alison," I say out loud, self-conscious though no one is there to hear, "would you talk to me, please? Give me a clue?"

If she doesn't answer it will mean . . . oh, shut up.

This is a good moment, Alison says, and relief floods over me. Stay with it, pay attention.

"How did I get here?"

Better than going to work, isn't it? she says. Don't worry about that. Take a dip.

I lie down again, suspended in living water, breathing its forest smell, and let the creek eddy around me, gazing up at the narrow strip of sky between the trees, lost between worlds. I know she doesn't want to answer me, but how am I here?

I could watch the clouds pass all day, knowing Alison is with me again. Is this what it is to be free, to see something in freedom?

I lie there until my forehead begins to feel hot from the sun; then I duck my head under to cool off, and crawl out and sit dripping on the sandbar. The stones are warm from the sun and hard, but I can move them around and make them bearable to sit on. Water trickles out of my hair and down my back, drying on my skin. After a while little schools of minnows come and dart around the gravelly shallows, where no doubt they were before I rudely materialized in their space, and I can make out crawfish, almost the same color as the bottom, hanging around waiting for whatever it is they eat. There are half a dozen at least, once I notice the first one. A couple of tadpoles, too, starting to grow their back legs. The water makes no sound, slipping past rocks and fallen branches; in the tops of the trees a breeze brushes past, but the air around me is still. Along the

banks I can see how high the water has been, earlier in the spring; now it's shallow, summer depth. If there is a piece missing, at least I haven't slipped into another season. Unless this is next year.

But once the continuity is broken, does it really matter how big the piece is? Isn't any gap, even half an hour, enough to cut you off from all time before? Like being on a boat leaving the dock – once the docklines are cast off, even at that first moment when there's only a hand's breadth of space between boat and pier, when a person on deck could still lean over, holding onto a stay, and give a last kiss, or the one left behind could still press a flower or a ring into the hand of the departing, you're already away. You aren't on land anymore. No roads, no highways, no street signs; you're on your own.

When I had been dry for a while, something made me stand up and put my clothes on; I didn't want to leave the moment, but maybe it was time. Or maybe the moment wasn't possible to leave.

The two creeks joined at a rocky shoal that I could cross without much wading. Above me on one side was a high bluff, its rock face half overgrown, and on the side that I crossed to was a place to climb up the bank. Nothing had changed, as far as I could tell yet, except there were some pawprints by the water as if something big had come to drink there; the tracks looked like the tiger pawprints on the Mizzou wallpaper at the Heidelberg, come down off the wall and into real life. I climbed up the bank and there was the trail, all as it should be; I had been up it half a dozen times before, but never with Alison, and never having such reason to wonder what I would find when I came back to town.

"Now can I ask you how I got here?" I said to Alison, quietly.

Down the stairs.

"But isn't this real?"

Alison didn't answer. I had a feeling she was offended by the question.

The trail wound through trees and bushes and came out at a mowed field – as ever – and the field curved around a bend in the creek and ended at a gravel parking lot where I did not find my car. It wouldn't have done me much good if I had, because I didn't have the keys.

Start walking. In damp sneakers and old clothes, with nothing in my pockets, no wallet to say who I was, no keys to anything, and a jump away from my past, I felt cut loose, unfettered on the face of the earth at least for this time, at least until I got hungry or sleepy or needed

something I didn't have with me. I didn't have much, but for now that felt like the way to be.

"Are you still there?"

Yes. I'll walk next to you, it's what I'm used to. But make room for me, okay?

"All right." I moved a little farther from the edge of the pavement, so Alison wouldn't have to walk on the road.

"Have you really always been there?"

Remember when you had the invisible circus and you were the ringmaster and the trapeze girl was in love with you?

"That was you?"

You used to talk to me for hours.

"I wish I could remember."

Say you do. It helps.

Come on, say.

"I remember."

I could feel her laughing at me silently because I sounded so unconvincing.

Oh, it'll do for now. Don't you remember the dreams you used to have, about a girl, the ones where you never wanted to wake up afterwards? A long time ago, before you ever had a girlfriend?

"Yes. I do. But not very well. Just the feeling."

Just the feeling. You are a silly person sometimes, do you know that? And incredibly forgetful, but that's all right. Things happen as quickly as they can.

"What about when I was twelve, or whatever, didn't you tell me something happened then?"

We leaned on the low branch of an apple tree and talked about everything. I told you things you needed to know. That girls would like you, that love mattered to you a lot. And it would come. I knew. I tried to get you to let yourself dream it just the way you needed it to be.

"I thought I did."

You only get what you let yourself have, you know. What you let yourself dream. The dream doesn't mean you'll get it, and it doesn't mean you'll get it right away, but if you can't even let yourself dream it then you don't give yourself a chance. That's what's so strange about you. You don't know how powerful you are. As soon as you dream something you say, Oh no, that's only a dream, I can't possibly have that, the world doesn't work like that, and then you can't. You go around thinking there are these rules that say you can't get what you want, invisible powers

making everything so difficult, but you know what, dear? You're the invisible power. Only you use it mostly to keep yourself from using it.

"You mean I can just imagine any damn thing I want and it's going to happen? I can make Ellen come back? Make Kristin come over and say, I'm bored with my boyfriend, I need someone new in my life, I think it might be you? Come on. If that was how it worked, it already would have happened." Reminded me of Marie, too, when I asked her what it was that picked up the two-by-four and hit me over the head and she as much as said that I did it myself. Sure thing.

If you imagined it every day, it might. Did you ever really try for more than a minute? Did you ever act like it was already so?

Like it was already so? "Yes. When I had dinner with Kristin, after she brought the Chinese food."

Ah. Yes. That was very good. You see? You're learning. If you did that every night, who knows what might happen? Things take a while where you are, they don't come right away.

"It would make me feel pretty damn silly."

So? Would you rather get what you want, or keep from feeling silly?

"Ten points for you."

A hundred for you if you do it.

"Well then, how come stuff people don't want happens to them all the time? Awful things, even?"

How do you know what they're dreaming of?

"Oh, please. You mean I can just go ahead and blame the victim and that takes care of that?"

It doesn't matter if you can't understand what people choose. It just is, you can try to help them get through it. Blame has nothing to do with it.

"So did I choose to have Ellen leave?" I said, knowing good and well I didn't.

You knew she was going to, in the hospital.

I had forgotten that. Or not forgot, but put it somewhere out of sight. Like the ribbon-tied box of pictures on the highest shelf, where I wouldn't notice it when I opened the closet unless I made a special effort to look up.

"So? Knowing something isn't the same as choosing it, is it?" Even as I said it I knew the logic was right, but there was something wrong in there too.

There was a moment of what felt like stubborn silence from Alison, as if she refused to get involved in such a boring argument.

I told you, you have miraculous powers. You don't have a clue how to use them, but that doesn't mean they're not there. It's like giving a seven-year-old a race car to drive. Not that you're any different from anyone else.

"How come you know so darn much?"

She gave that internal giggle again. I told you I have lots of opinions. Do you know how many mistakes I've made? I've always been the way I am. I always say yes to things, I always take a chance, I've gotten in trouble a thousand times but that seems to be how people do it. Learn the hard way.

"Isn't there something else on the menu?"

It makes the learning stick. After a couple of hundred tries. Except when people forget everything, the way you do.

"Thanks for reminding me."

Ellen got to choose too, you know. It wasn't just up to you. She left for herself. But she helped you.

"How much help like this am I gonna have to go through?"

Even I don't know the answer to that one.

We walked together in silence for a while; we had gotten back to town and turned toward my house. The streets were still leafy, the yards still green, kids' bicycles still lay on front walks. When I passed something on my right, like a mailbox or a tree, I left space between me and it for Alison. The flowers in people's gardens hadn't changed, or the way the sun felt coming down on my neck. Anybody might choose this, but somewhere in the world, right now, refugees were starving.

"What about concentration camps? Nobody chooses that."

For half a block Alison didn't say anything, and I began to wonder if she had gone away.

There are things I don't understand. Her presence was subdued, quieter.

I felt betrayed for a moment, but who did I think she was, after all? If she was me, it was already amazing how many answers she had.

There's stuff at work in the world that we don't know much about.

"You can say that again."

Ask Marie, see what she says. Put her on the spot.

My house, too, stood there on its lot unchanged, the Carters' house on one side and Vic and Ida's on the other. The front door was locked, and as I walked along the side of the house I began thinking of ways to get in, looking for a loose screen to pry out, a window I could raise. But I had left the back unlocked, as I often did without thinking about it. Really, someone could always break in if they wanted to, but the whole point was

that they didn't. It seemed to be midafternoon, and Vic was sitting out in his yard, as ever; I wondered if he had seen me go out my back door earlier in the day, wearing the same clothes I had on now, and walk away, and if he or anyone else had tried to speak to me then, and found me strangely unresponsive. Or if none of that happened. If there was just a gap. It was harder to believe there could have been, now that I set foot in my own kitchen and found that it looked exactly the same, the habitual kitchen that I had known for years. The same until I saw a note lying on the counter that I knew had not been there the last time I remembered. It was in my own handwriting, and appeared to be scribbled in haste: "*It will not* work to fight it." The underlining was almost pressed through the paper in its urgency.

"Fight what?" I said aloud.

But Alison didn't answer.

I went through the house, and it was like playing hide-and-seek with myself. What other surprises had I left for me to find?

There were traces of blood in the bathroom, streaked on the toilet seat and on the floor and the edge of the sink. It took me a while to believe that they were what I knew they were.

The pictures of Ellen were gone.

The spider plant had been put back in the bedroom.

There was a sock on the floor that I did not recognize, too small to be mine.

The drawers in the study were pulled out as if someone had been looking for something. But I couldn't find anything missing except for the pictures.

The message light was blinking on the answering machine. Beep, then static, then the canned operator voice reciting, "If you would like to make a call, please hang up and try again." More static. "If you would like to make a call" – I shut off the tape. That was the message you got if someone called and hung up just as the machine kicked in.

The bloodstains in the bathroom gave me the creeps, and when I started cleaning them up, I found more. Was it mine? I examined my body from head to toe and found myself intact. And if it wasn't mine . . .

All of a sudden I was exhausted, I had to lie down on the couch and take a nap.

Half asleep, I was sure I got it: Ellen was here. She came to get everything that was left that had anything to do with her. To erase the last traces of her presence, to put me behind her once and for all. That sock came from someplace in the bedroom, it was hers but she dropped it and

didn't notice. And she got her period unexpectedly, and that explained the blood in the bathroom. She couldn't find a Tampax, because I threw out the two or three that had been lying on the bottom of the cupboard under the bathroom sink. Unless she hid some somewhere I never saw.

Groggily, I got up and stumbled into the kitchen, to prove it to myself. She would have taken the good knife, the sharp one that she left for me even though it was really hers. But it was there, in the drawer where I kept the knives. And there was more blood dried on the bottom of the drawer.

It was a struggle to think straight, or at all, I was so tired. The blood in the drawer kind of spoiled the theory about her period. And I was in one piece, wasn't I? It didn't come from me. And she hadn't taken the knife. Maybe she cut herself when she tried to get it? But why would she have, that made no sense either . . .

I lay down again, wondering how she could have gotten back so fast from Wyoming and timed it so perfectly to come when I was out.

Bright sun shining hotly in woke me up. I sat up before I remembered what I'd found in the kitchen. Yes, the bloodstain was still there inside the drawer, ugly and brown, unmistakable. All wrong. To get away from it I went and sat on the front steps in the sun and waited for my head to clear. Most peculiar day of my entire life, and the smell of someone cutting their grass came from down the street as if nothing had happened. Charlotte Carter drove up, got out of her car, and waved. So she still existed, and she didn't act as if she'd seen any murders or wandering zombies around my place. I waved back, and she came toward me, trailed by Jason, with a look on her face of what? Embarrassment? Determination? "How are you?" she said.

"Oh, fine," I said, standing up to talk to her. No use trying to tell her otherwise. "How about yourself?"

"Good – um – can I talk to you for a second?"

"Sure."

"Jason, would you go inside and see Daddy, hon? Okay?"

Jason, surprisingly, did as she asked, and she turned back to me with the same look only more so. "I know maybe it's none of my business, but we've been neighbors pretty long now, and I was just wondering, well, I've been wondering how you're doing. Really."

"Oh." But what made her get concerned today? Or did it just so happen that this was the day she got up her nerve to talk to me this way? Too late to turn back now. I saw her wait for me to reply and then decide to plow ahead.

"I haven't seen Ellen's car in quite a while, and the other day Kristin told me she'd been talking to you and you said Ellen didn't live here anymore."

Ah, gossip. That was what she wanted. The dirt. Understandably enough. "She doesn't, she moved to Wyoming." But did you by any chance see her lurking around, staking out the house, waiting for me to leave so she could come in and grab a few things? "She got a fellowship to go on a dig there, so . . . she's outta here."

"You mean . . . ?" She looked as though she hadn't really believed Kristin had it right.

"For good."

"I'm sorry," Charlotte said, but I had a feeling that the truth would have been more like "How interesting." I watched her, wondering how she'd get on to the really difficult part. Which weirdness of mine was she trying to lead up to?

"You know," Charlotte said, seeming to examine the railing by the front steps, "Kristin's worked for us for a couple of years now, and I really like her a lot. She's a wonderful kid. Well, she's not a kid, she's out of college, but you know what I mean, I really feel like she's almost family because she's taken care of Jason so much. Anymore it's only now and then because of her job, and I think she just does it because she's so fond of him, you know?" She gave me a kind of helpless look, as if she wanted me to throw her a life preserver, save her from herself. I nodded. "But anyway, she's – I feel kind of protective, I guess because I'm a woman" – now she was truly embarrassed – "Is something going on between you and her?" she blurted. She thrust her neck forward like a snapping turtle and peered up into my face as if to catch the truth before I could hide it. And did she see that I liked being asked that, even as I was pissed off and wanted to tell her to go home?

"She brought me a Chinese takeout the other day. But she didn't even stick around to see if I found it."

Charlotte didn't know what to make of that, any more than I did. But why should I help her? What made it her job to meddle in my life, or Kristin's?

"I worry that she could get hurt pretty easily," Charlotte said.

Oh, do you now, I thought. And then you see her marching into the jaws of danger over here, and God forbid that she should have anything to do with such a fiend and monster as me. What a lovely concerned neighbor you are, Charlotte Carter, I'd like to wring your oh so happily orgasmically married neck. "Have you met her boyfriend?" I said,

trying to maintain a semblance. Hang onto the advantage. "He seems very sincere."

"Oh." She hadn't expected a counterattack on that flank. "Yes, I agree with you. He does."

"What does he do, do you know? He didn't tell me." You've served your notice, now go home.

"He's going to vet school."

"Ah." Making him all the more admirable to a collie like yourself.

"Well, I don't want you to think that I see anything wrong in . . . I hope I haven't offended you."

I let it hang for just a moment extra. "No problem."

"Well, I'd better get going and see what Jason's into by now," she said, giving me a slightly ghastly rendition of a smile.

"Good idea," I said, turning away as if something of enormous interest were suddenly transpiring across the street. I made a point of staying on my front steps until I heard her go inside. Damned if I was going to let Charlotte Carter drive me into hiding.

When I thought enough time had passed after her screen door slammed, I turned and went in myself, and without wanting to be I was drawn back to the kitchen and that drawer that made no sense and gave me the willies.

I took the knife out and held it in my hand, the wood of the handle solidly in my grasp, the blade dangerous. A weapon. It will not work to fight it. When I read the note I hadn't thought it meant a literal fight, that someone shed blood fighting a losing battle in my house. Not someone, me. It was my own handwriting. But when?

Night came as I was gnawing on a leftover piece of barbecued chicken. I had kept Ellen's knife next to me since the afternoon; I had to be on my guard. I went and locked the front door; someone could walk right in there while I was in the kitchen. And half the windows in the house were open, anyone at any moment might cut a screen and raise a window and climb in – in the middle of the night, while I slept – but if I closed and locked them all I'd suffocate. Go around and put nails in the sashes so they could only be raised so far. That seemed too paranoid when I thought about actually doing it, but the walls of my house suddenly were no protection at all. Full of gaping holes, an open invitation to come and do unmentionable things. I locked the back door too.

Even if the windows were locked, couldn't someone with real determination break them?

"Alison, what's going on here?" I had asked before and gotten nowhere but I had to ask again.

I can't tell you, dear.

"Can't or won't? Do you know?"

I can't tell you.

"I thought you were on my side."

I am. I'm you. It's hard for me, too.

"I didn't ask for this, damn it."

She was pointedly silent. The night outside seemed to come up to the windows and press itself against the glass, every window an eye looking in and no escape anywhere. To go outside would be to throw myself into – what – the unmerciful, I was sure of that if nothing else.

"Coughing Man, is this some trick of yours?" I said in a loud voice. I picked up the knife, ready to slash him if it was, not that it would do a bit of good.

"Talk to me, damn you."

Nothing. A car passed on the street, a dog barked.

"What good are you?" I said, but I knew taunting wouldn't work. I went around and turned on all the lights in the house. It only made the dark darker, the house smaller. Puny and permeable. I sat in the living room and tried to watch in all directions at once, waiting. Why had I never taken karate, or learned to fire a gun? All I could do was get the knife from the kitchen, keep it on the arm of the sofa next to me.

I tried to picture how it would begin. I would hear a window being opened, pick up the knife, stand up – or he, it, would already be in the house when I first heard a sound, would come into the room and catch me sitting and before I could get up . . . I stood up, to be ready, but I couldn't remain standing all night, at some point I would have to sleep. When you snooze, you lose. Big time.

I would be sleeping, then, and some sound would wake me, and would it be already too late? Or would there be no warning at all before the first blow, from what? An axe? The knife had better be under my pillow, next to my hand, I had to have some defense. Roll over and stab with all my might, pierce the leathery flesh.

It will not work to fight it. But that was talking about something else, wasn't it? It had to be. You didn't just lie there and let it happen to you. Only a loser, a pathetic coward, would not fight for his life. Contemptible. Better off dead.

Make the first move, I thought. Or at least be on the move. Guard duty. I patrolled the house, slowly, from room to room, constantly aware of my back. In the back hall, two steps from the bedroom door, I smelled a terrible smell, sour and vile, and gripped the knife harder and stepped through the door. In the center of the top sheet lay a little pile of shit, like cat shit, old but still stinking, moldy, half-dried, as if it had been there for days, with a brown stain around it on the sheet. Fear and revulsion made my heart hammer. I knew it had not been there before, impossible not to have noticed it, whatever put it there was in the house with me. They like to scare people, and they're doing a great job on me.

Find it, kill it, drive a stake through its heart, bury it at the crossroads. But there was nothing to be found except that stinking shit. I ripped the violated sheet off the bed, rolled it up in a ball around the turds and the stain that made me want to gag, and took it at arm's length through the house to the back door, thinking to throw it outside. Why not

go outside myself, take it far away, if the wrongdoer was in my house already? Why not leave altogether, unlock the doors, open the windows and leave and not come back until that thing had vacated once and for all?

I undid the bolt on the kitchen door and stepped out into the night, left my house with all its lights blazing. I realized that the shades were up, that anyone passing could have looked in and seen me pacing with knife in hand. What if Charlotte. She would know for certain that Kristin should stay far far away from me. That Ellen got out just in time. Or had I dug that hole to bury Ellen's dismembered parts? That would be the obvious, the only reasonable explanation, Officer, I only wish I'd called you sooner, before he had a chance to get away.

I carried the balled-up sheet to the garbage can by the back gate, and stuffed it down in as far as it would go. The knife was in my pants pocket, point upwards, and as I bent over to jam the sheet in it stuck me in the side, painfully, and made me recoil. For an instant I thought someone had attacked me. Or a wasp had stung. Then I figured it out. I pulled out my shirt-tail and felt to see if there was blood, but there didn't seem to be.

Deep in the back yard, the light from my windows didn't penetrate, and all I could make out were shadows and darker shadows – the back fence, the pear tree, the neighboring houses where all the lights were off. My place looked as if someone were in the last frantic all-night packing session before the moving van came in the morning. I edged over toward my hole, staying in the darkest part, closer to the fence, as if the hole would be like a base where I could stand and not get tagged out. I almost fell into it; it was full of water. Didn't I have the tent over it when I rained? Full nonetheless. Full to the brim, the water black and almost invisible until I saw a faint star rippling in it. Call it a fishpond. Deep enough to drown in. I couldn't hide there.

I looked up at the house and there was a figure silhouetted in the kitchen door. Had she called the cops for real?

In terror of being seen, I vaulted over the back fence into the alley and crouched there behind the vines. It was really there. All the time, with me, in the house. But who was it? No one I knew, not Coughing Man who never let himself be seen, not anyone or anything I could think of, until I came to Eshu. He can eat you alive, Marie had said. Why in God's name had I messed with such things, things I knew nothing about, had I brought this calamity down on my own head and would I even get out with my skin?

I peered through the fence and thought I caught the last glimpse of a figure moving out of the frame of the door. Not as big this time. Even, perhaps, a woman.

Ellen in there planting new nasty little gift packages for me. You won, you got what you wanted, now leave me alone. When you walk out on someone, you don't get to come back and punish them. That's backwards. You're gone, so stay gone. Please.

I still had the knife in my pocket. She wouldn't get to take that away.

Where was I going to go? There seemed to be no good answer to that question. All my money was in the house – and the car keys – I couldn't go and spend the night in a motel, and anyway I felt as though anyplace between four walls could be a trap where whatever-it-was would corner me. I'd had it backwards; the outdoors was safer.

In the darkness of the alley a few fireflies blinked, wavering silently through the dark air. Impossible to predict their path or even to know if one flash and the next were the same firefly or a different one. I moved behind a clump of mulberry and sumac that would hide me from the house, and stepped on mint; the smell was piercing. I bent down and felt the plants; there was a massive stand of mint there, along the edge of the alley. I sat down on it, crushing it, sending up so much mint smell I was afraid for a second it would call attention to me. But it seemed to surround me more like a cloak of invisibility.

Methodically I bent the mint stems to the earth and inward toward the center of the clump, making a kind of mat, and when I had bent them all I lay down with my head in the center of it. I had to move a few rocks out from under my back; then the ground was tolerable to lie on, breathing in mint, washing out of myself the vileness that something had left in my bed for me to find.

Just don't let the sun come up and the neighbors find me here. Or the cops. Did Charlotte really do that?

I'm on the stairs again, walking down them with no more effort than going down the stairs after a day at work. Alison's waiting for me at the bottom, and I realize how much I miss seeing her in the upper world. And touching her, feeling the two of us fitting together as we walk where she is leading me, not into her space but down the hall, the way I went last time when I looked for her and found nothing. Her arm around my waist sends strength into me. She leads me straight to that door I opened last time, the one where something was waiting that I didn't trust at all, and I can tell she wants me to go through it this time.

"What is that in there?" I say. But she doesn't answer. She puts her hand on my arm and reaches down into the pocket of her dress. When she pulls her hand out it's curled around something, and she holds out her

closed hand as if she wants me to guess what it is; but I have a feeling I shouldn't talk. Her fingers uncurl, and on her palm lies a roundish green stone, translucent, almost like glass. The greenness and light of the upper world seems to live inside it. The moment I see it I want it, and I know it's what I would have asked for without knowing it, if I had asked for something the first time I came. But now she gives without being asked. I take it, and turn its smoothness slowly in my fingers, looking into the green; Alison leans forward and kisses me on the corner of the mouth, gently. A sendoff. Now go.

At first all I see is darkness with vague glimmers; I can't even tell how big the room is that I've entered. Then I hear the sound of water dripping, and the echo of that sound, far away, and the smell reaches me, unmistakable, of damp and earth and cold water over rock. I'm in a cave, a big one, standing on a little shelf halfway up one wall of it, and it's the size of what? A ballroom? A football field? I can just make out that on the other side there are passages leading off into the dark, and I don't like the looks of them. I have my hand on the stone in my pocket, and I understand now that Alison must have given it to me because she knew it might be hard to get back, hard even to remember that there is a place to go back to. Down the middle of the floor of this cavern a tiny stream is trickling, fed by the water that constantly drips from the ceiling, each drop echoing in the silence. Away to the left runs the trickle of water and out the opening of this cave, out past branches and tufts of grass into the light of day that penetrates just enough, back to where I stand, so that I am not in complete blackness.

Without knowing it I have closed the door behind me, and Alison hasn't come in with me. I pick my way along the ledge I'm on, my eyes becoming accustomed to the dark, seeing that it turns into a set of steps cut into the rock that will lead me down to the floor of this cave. What have I gotten into? All I know is that I'm going ahead, and down the steps carved in stone, and they feel tipped and dangerous underfoot; I have to hug the wall so I won't slide off and fall to the rock floor below. My stomach does not like this descent; I can feel in my gut that same something I felt last time, only stronger. It sets up a humming inside me, a quivering that threatens to take me over; I have to clench my teeth to keep control. I want to run across the floor of the cave to the mouth, but I can't because I'd be sure to trip on a rock and fall, break my head or my ankle and be left helpless here, at the mercy of whatever is in this place. I pick my way across the floor that is stone and gritty mud, breathing cave air and listening to the constant distant dripping and the echo of my footsteps, wondering what hears me as I stumble across loose rocks. I

follow the trickle of water in its ancient channel, but I don't step across it – somehow I know that setting foot on the other side is trouble.

I have a feeling of having survived when I emerge into the air scented with leaves and decorated by bird calls. The opening is half-hidden by branches of saplings and undergrowth, and I push them aside and it feels like anywhere in the Ozarks, on a hillside forested with scrubby second growth. The stream is wider now, has more water in it though still it's only a long step across, and it's running faster, over round rocks that make eddies where twigs and fallen leaves pinwheel. Water bugs are skimming the surface, and beneath them their shadows carry circular gleams of rippling darkness and brightness at the tip of each leg. I can hear the shrill whir of cicadas from somewhere above me in the trees; the sun must be hot up there, but where I am, in the dappled shade, it's cool and the ground is strewn with a soft layer of leaf mold. I crouch by the stream, dip my cupped hands in it, drink from it, listen to it. It smells of forest and coldness, like a trout stream. Then I look up, and sitting on the other bank, across from me, is Kristin.

At least I think it's Kristin. She's sitting on the ground with one knee drawn up, her arms clasped loosely around that leg, resting her cheek on her knee, and her hair is falling down around her face and hiding it from my sight. She isn't wearing any of the things I've seen her wear, but instead a loose-fitting dress. She might be meditating, or grieving, or asleep if one could sleep in that position, and I don't want to disturb her but I feel I have to be certain it's her. Don't push, I remember Alison saying, Never push, and I make myself hold still, as still as the woman across from me, and keep quiet, and watch until I can see her breathing, and try to match my breathing to hers. As if we will understand each other if we breathe the same breath.

Is it even Kristin, sitting there in silence on the other side of the stream that I could step across? And how does she come to be in this place? I remember going over the edge holding onto her hand the first time, and her walking away after we finally reached the ground under the impossible trees, and I wonder if you can walk from there to here.

I sit and breathe with her until my eyes fall closed, and in a peculiar kind of meditation, or sleep, or dream – in some place as if I fell into my own pocket and lived down at the bottom of it for a while – I see her standing over me after I came up the stairs, lying in my hole, and then I see me lying there, and I try to be her, to breathe my way into the inside-Kristin who looks down, curious, surmising what's going on, and . . . something else I can't name but I can feel it, a presence inside the chest that is so habitual that she doesn't even notice it but I, not being her but

only trying to for an instant, can tell it is there. It's not something you would want to carry with you, if you had a choice, but she doesn't. That's all I halfway know, if any of it is the truth, but what in the world is truth here, and when I look up I see that she has pushed her hair back from her face and it is indeed Kristin. I still don't know if she knows I'm there, or if I should be. The longer I sit looking at her, the more the moment feels private and my being there an intrusion. Maybe I should get up as quietly as possible and leave before I become a nuisance and an imposition, or maybe it's a test of whether I can be there and manage not to push. I follow her gaze to a spot on the surface of the stream, where ripples are constantly forming behind a rock, and I too gaze there until even that begins to feel too forward.

Something makes me look up and it's Kristin's eyes on me.

She's older than I thought. How old is she?

But crouched there like a child.

I start to say "Hello," but at the last instant I stop myself. It would be too loud. I feel she's been here for years and has grown wise in the ways of this spot, and I am a trespasser stumbling in unthinking, rude in my ignorance, my naivete.

"How did you get here?" she says, her voice barely louder than the stream. "No one comes here, no one is allowed." And why is she here, at the entrance to this dangerous place, when she has all of the outside world waiting for her?

"There's a door, high up on the wall of the cave. And steps."

"I've never seen anything like that."

"On this side of the stream. The side I'm on now."

"Stay there," she says, before I have even thought of doing otherwise.

"All right."

"Where does this door of yours go?"

"To the hallway."

"Hallway?"

"The place I get to first when I go down the stairs."

She thinks about that, watching me, frowning slightly in concentration. "How can that be?"

"I don't know." I feel obscurely it's my fault, even though I stumbled on the door and opened it knowing nothing, even though it was Alison who led me back.

"Things don't happen by chance," Kristin says, as if to answer my thoughts. "No one comes here."

How can I justify myself? "Do you remember when we went over the edge together, and floated down through those trees? The ones that go clear up to the sky? And then you walked away? Remember that? You were the one who took me over, when I didn't even know how. Or where we were going."

She sits with her hands in her lap and thinks, as if she has a century's memories to sort through. "Yes," she says finally, not looking up at me. I know she doesn't want to admit it. "I didn't understand that either. Why I helped you."

"People have been helping me a lot lately. More than I deserve." Those aren't the words I'm expecting to hear out of my own mouth.

"Then who will you help?" Kristin says.

I'm stumped and ashamed not to know. Am I a selfish person, taking up room on the earth? All I can think of is what's in my pocket. Pass the gift along; that's the best I can do. "I brought you something," I say.

"Why?" she says, on guard, watching me. As wary as an animal who's had experience of traps.

"Alison, my – " I don't know what to call her. My lover? My teacher? Nothing's right. "Alison gave this to me," I say, taking out the green stone, showing it to Kristin on my palm.

"Isn't it so you can get back?"

"I know the way." I can see the color of it grow on her as she looks into it. Under these trees, there seems to be a world inside the stone, matching the place where we are, and maybe Alison gave it to me for Kristin in the first place, not for me at all; she always knows more than I do.

"But why give it to me? Do you want something in return?"

"No."

"Don't lie to me," she says, severe and cold. "Do you think I can't see? Do you think I'm a child for you to manipulate? You want me to trust you, but why should I? A gift won't make me do that."

I am too humiliated to look at her. I feel that to do anything at all would be to obtrude myself, to say "Notice me" when all I want to do is disappear. Or go back in time and try again.

"It's not a real gift," she says. "You want to barter. You want *me*. Can't you understand: I don't want you to want me the way men do. Men want too much. Everything. You want to steal me from myself."

Please don't say any more, I think, that is all I can bear. I sit with head bowed in shame, unable even to get up and leave. But the greenness of the stone flashes up at the trees in response to theirs, as if it belongs

here, and not to follow through with the gift, once offered, seems as fatal an error as to give something in the wrong way. I put it down on the edge of the stream, and stand up. "If you tell me not to, I won't come back."

Kristin draws both knees up in front of her and hugs them to her, contemplating the stream.

"You know where the door is," she says without looking at me.

"Thank you." I turn to go, take a few steps away from her, remembering what I have to get by in order to make my way back.

Kristin's voice comes from behind me. "Don't you say goodbye?"

I turn to look at her. "That's what a friend would do," she says.

"Goodbye," I say, and hello.

"Goodbye," she replies.

My heart feels reprieved, and I can turn and go as a whole person, and it's easier to make it through the echoing, dripping dark and past those mouths of tunnels in which the something here waits. They make me think of when Coughing Man first grabbed me and propelled me headlong into the blackness, but he's not what's lurking there. I would know him by now. The stairs seem less risky than they did on the way down, and I put my hand on the doorknob and it won't turn; the door is locked.

Oh.

Then it's coming; it's crossing the channel and coming for me, and it's so fast that I know there's no escape even before it's upon me. I have nothing to fight it with and I don't know what it wants except that when it gets through with me I won't recognize myself, the self that I think is me will be ripped to shreds and what's left will be face down in the mud. It flashes through my mind that Kristin knew this would happen and that was why she wanted to say goodbye. It was a trap and I saw it far too late, I was not even a challenge, I could be had and it's over, but before it reaches the top of the steps I can hear someone working at the door from the other side, and it's flung open and Alison pulls me through into the hallway and slams it shut. I'm crouched on the floor of the hall, and she's crouching beside me, holding me by the shoulders and looking into my face as if it's a window on something she must study.

"You have to be very careful in there," she says. "Be ready. All the time."

"I don't even know how," I say to her. But you know, don't you? Tell me, if you do. I remember what she said about how people have to learn the hard way.

"I gave you that to protect you, you shouldn't have left it behind. You don't understand how dangerous that was."

"I'm starting to get the picture."

We stand up and slowly retrace our steps, back down the hall. Even Alison seems tired, and I don't want to be anywhere but close to her.

"Can I stay with you?" I say in front of her door. "Go to sleep with you?"

"No, dear. We can't do it that way. But I'll be with you up the stairs. To your right. You know that."

"I need to sleep, I can't seem to sleep anymore, or if I do I can't remember."

"It may have to wait," she says, and am I in that deep? Is there no turning back?

"Tell me if I'm going to make it," I say, because I can't help it, even though I'm sure she won't.

"It's up to you," Alison says. She turns me around so I'm facing the stairs and puts her arms around me from behind, presses herself against me so that I can feel the length of her against my back; the sensation is steadying. Maybe if I could take her with me, keep her next to me all day – her physical self I could touch – then I might have a prayer, but that's impossible.

She's still holding me from behind. "There's something I can do," she says. She doesn't tighten her embrace, but somehow the contact becomes even closer and then she's melting into me until there is no Alison behind me anymore but I can feel that she is in my body, the back of my neck is the back of her neck, her fingertips are at my fingertips, her heart in my heart. But still the other, still Alison. "You can carry me with you like this," she says, or thinks. "All the way up. As long as you remember. And talk to me if you have to talk."

I lift my foot to the first step, and Alison and I start up the stairs.

I sit, stiff in every joint, on the packed dirt of the alley, my face and neck lumpy and misshapen with mosquito bites. It's first light; the sun will be rising soon. Silence lies over the neighborhood like sleep; the night insects have ceased and the day ones have not begun. The only sound I hear is a mourning dove making its solitary call. I stretch my arms out in front of me, grab my toes, and pull my aching back forward, trying to touch my head to my shins, but don't even come close. Get up then, walk it off. Before I leave I rearrange the pressed-down stems of mint so that no one could tell a person has been lying there.

The alley is so mild and ordinary with back fences and accidental trees and the honest faces of garages and sheds that it's hard to believe any of the things I remember. Especially the worst ones, the shameful and terrifying. Makes me think of Marie saying there are a lot of immature souls around who have nothing better to do than play tricks on people. Having a field day with me. Just tell them to go away.

Go away, go away, go away, with each slow step of my leaden legs down the alley. Go away and leave me be. Let me breathe in this air of morning and early summer and Missouri, here on the northern edge of the South and the eastern edge of the West, and know where I am and what day it is, and let me get through my days as I know how to do, that is all I ask.

But is it?

I want too much, as Kristin said to me in the underworld. That must be the answer. I want things out of life that it isn't prepared to give. Getting in way over my head. Why the hell did I choose the Tower? Is it all because of that, because I happened to pick that one card?

The train's left the station. Marie said that too.

But I'm not going to abandon my house and everything in it to who or whatever was there during the night. I retrace my steps, up the alley, and watching carefully I approach the house down the length of the back yard. It sits there as bland and unremarkable as ever. The kitchen door is closed. It wasn't, the last time I looked. And as I get closer I realize the lights are no longer on. Nothing out of joint here, the house says to the neighbors, nothing unusual, the fun's over, folks, time to go home.

Or one more booby trap, but what the hell am I going to do? Leave town? I've got to go in there someday.

To be on the safe side I make a tour of the house from the outside, peering in all the windows I can see into. Just furniture, all in place, and a few newspapers lying on the floor, and a dish or two on the kitchen counter. Nothing, thank God, sitting in the middle of the bed waiting to gross me out. As if none of that nonsense ever happened. I can go in like a reasonable person and make a pot of coffee and sit and think out my next move.

Or I could if the doors weren't locked. I have to pry out a screen with Ellen's knife and climb in a window like some inept burglar who doesn't even know enough to break in while it's dark. "Very funny," I mutter, putting the screen back where it belongs. "Hilarious. Go away."

Into the kitchen, enjoying the peace of my own house, thinking how lovely it will be to sit in a comfortable chair after a night on those lumps and rocks, and I reach for the coffeepot to dump out the old coffee and I see that it isn't coffee at all but blood, red-brown and half congealed. The sight of it almost makes me throw up. Worse when I have to tip it out of the pot, sliding thickly out like snot or a five-pound slug, and watching it go down the drain is too much like drinking it, I turn on the water full force to wash it down but that only thins it and splatters the whole sink and me and everything around it with pink drops. I turn off the water, rip off my shirt because I can't bear the thought of that touching me, throw it on the floor and run from the room.

Don't look. Don't think about it. Just let it go down the drain. But I know it's there and there isn't going to be any letup, is there? They're playing cat-and-mouse, putting off the moment when they break my neck.

I can't handle this. But as I think that, I know I don't have a choice.

Even Alison isn't willing to tell me what to do, and you, Coughing Man, my so-called guide, a big help you are. I've got to get out of here. Whatever it is isn't going away.

Could be my last chance to get anything from my house, money, car keys, clothes, anything. I pull off my shorts; when they drop on the

floor I hear Ellen's knife hit the floorboards, and I pull it out of the pocket because I can't be without that and put on long pants, a clean shirt, stuff socks in my pockets along with the knife, grab my wallet and all the money out of my top dresser drawer, search the study frantically for anything I really have to have, but what would it be, my passport has expired, my birth certificate, why the hell would I want that, checkbook, what if it rains. I realize it's like a camping trip. Grab my windbreaker from its hook in the hall. Stuff is in the garage, the tent, sleeping bag, where the hell is my Swiss Army knife? Fuck it, buy one, but get out of here while there's time. Car keys. My stomach sinks; I know they're in the kitchen, hanging on a hook by the back door, and that means going past that bloody sink, but I've got to have them. Suck it up, man. The diluted blood has left a pinkish trickling coating on the walls of the sink, and I can smell it now, unmistakable, a dark crimson clog coagulating and blackening in the drain, and I can too vividly imagine it in a few days with flies crawling on it as it rots and whose blood is that? Is it mine? Is that my future sitting there in my own kitchen waiting for me? I have to make myself turn my back on it, grab the car keys off their hook, and leave.

Into the garage, just let me have two more minutes, that's all I ask. Pull the tent in its bag down from the rafters, the sleeping bag, stuff things in with them, flashlight, water bottle, my Coleman lantern and my camp stove are up on a shelf right in front of me but don't get fancy for God's sake, get out of here, and I rush out of the garage ready to throw my gear in the car and turn the key and be gone. But there's no car in the driveway.

I have to look again, and yet again, I have such a hard time believing it's not there. It *was* there, when I circled the house, wasn't it? I'm sure it was. It had to be.

It wasn't in the parking lot at the nature area when I came back from the creek, and I walked home and I found it here, didn't I? Or am I kidding myself?

Didn't I?

It doesn't matter, there's no car in my driveway. I drop the tent and sleeping bag and run out to the street, look up and down the block for it, but I already know it won't be there.

Get out of here. It's gone, it's only a car, there's no time to lose, move it.

I dart back, pick up the tent and sleeping bag, and keep going, running flat out for the back gate with a duffel under each arm, hoping to God no one sees me. Like some crazy run for the goal line.

I can't slow down until I'm in the alley and a couple of houses down from my own. When I look back, I see my place from across Vic's yard and the neighbor's beyond that. The sun is above the horizon, casting low diagonal red rays above and across the back yards that are still mostly in shadow. Most beautiful hour of the twenty-four. But I know what's inside my house, and I look at its ordinary exterior as at a remembered day to which I can never return.

And now what? I stop and take an inventory of my pockets, to see what I'm beginning life over with. Some money, a couple of credit cards, useless car keys, one kitchen knife, three pair white socks, the clothes on my back. Better get somewhere fast, before people start to get up and see me wandering through the streets with sleeping bag and tent in hand, homeless. Lights are starting to come on in kitchens. Let them not look out their windows as the coffee perks and say Who is that bum passing by that riff-raff that undesirable element, what is *he* doing loitering vagrantly in our sight? Better call the cops, dear, and have them beat him appropriately (sweetie), and hurl him into a urine-drenched cell and you know, darling, whatever they do with Those People, but can't we get him off of our sidewalk, hon? AT ONCE?

I'm going, I'm going. Put down the phone.

I have one shot at this. So don't speed up and don't slow down, don't do anything to call attention, look like I know what I'm doing and am perfectly entitled, if I saw someone like me walking down the street would I even notice or care?

Yeah, but where the fuck am I going?

Think yourself invisible.

What?

Think yourself invisible, Alison says to my right. The stuff too. See it vanishing from sight. And yourself. You're right. No one will look. And if they don't look, how can they see? Especially if there's nothing *to* see. Why look at that?

"You think in circles."

This much help I can give you, dear. Please take it.

I am in no position to refuse. People will begin to leave for work soon, to take children to school, to start up the machine of respectability and either it will grind me up or it will keep them distracted, as long as I walk this walk, wear this face, normal normal. I try to see myself and my belongings disappearing like something on *Star Trek* getting beamed up. Fizzing away to nothing. Champagne going to your head.

The back of my neck is stiff, my eyes feel gritty and sandy from lack of sleep, I wish I could shave and brush my teeth. Nowhere to get

clean clothes unless I buy them, nowhere to pee. No, plenty of bathrooms at the University. Jesse Hall, the Union, Brady Commons, the hospital, all over the place. Never use the same one twice in a row, look decent, look as if I have somewhere to go. Till money runs out, and by then I won't have a job, and my car's already gone, my house will be next for not paying the rent . . . this is saving my skin? You got to take a risk, Marie said that, and if this isn't enough to satisfy her, or Eshu, then nothing ever will be.

I could go buy a toothbrush and a tube of toothpaste (I think as I pass a house where I once paid a claim, tree fell on it in a storm), something that would fit in my pocket, no better yet I'll buy a backpack too, charge it and let them send the bill to who or whatever is in my house, everybody has backpacks nowadays, melt into the crowd. Toothbrush, razor, when I need a bath I'll go to the nature area and dunk myself in the creek, long walk for a bath but what else do I have to do? Vacation from life. Travel to a foreign country, the country inside the country, no plane ticket required.

That sustains me for a block or two until I remember what I'm running from. And what's to stop it from finding me today, any more than yesterday?

Maybe I'm like a field mouse nibbling its way across a mown field and having no idea that above it a hawk circles or that even at that moment it descends, accelerating, on silent wings. And worse because this thing doesn't care about walls or locks, or time or space for all I know, even a mouse has its burrow but I have no place. I never finished digging the hole, not that it would have worked.

Be ready, Alison says to my right, but how is the question she never answers.

The only place I can go is the creek. It was the starting place, where this peculiar and dangerous life began, the place my body went to of its own accord.

I turn and head downhill, toward Stadium Boulevard, just have to hope I can cut through a back yard of some people I once worked for without their knowing I am no longer one of the permitted, and I manage it and cross Stadium Boulevard where traffic hasn't started to thicken yet, and get onto the golf course and damned if there isn't someone there before seven in the morning but he fails to notice an outcast on the fairway, and on the other side of it I work my way to the nature area gradually, stopping to put down my stuff and rest in clumps of trees, wondering if this is what it's like to fight a guerrilla war. It takes me half the morning until I've crossed the last road and walk into the trees trying to look as if I do it every day, melting into the undergrowth even though

God knows anybody who looked right now could see me, it's not as if I have vanished into the Black Forest, but no one's there to point me out and yell "Arrest him!" Not all that far in, I reach the joining of the two creeks, and I drop the duffel bags at last about ten yards back from the bank, in a little weed-choked copse, a destination for squirrels and birds.

I sit down on my sleeping bag and look around me: high bushes on the side away from the creek, pretty thick though there are some gaps, and mostly thin trees on the other. Saplings, recent growth, with a couple of tall maples among them. Random vines, pokeweed, sticktight, crown vetch. I'm in deep shadow, and through the branches and tree trunks, the tan stones of the creek bed look bleached. With Ellen's knife I cut away vines and weeds as best I can, set up my tent, roll out my ground pad and my sleeping bag so that in this world I still have some kind of a home.

I straighten up (am I invisible?), throw some cut vines over my tent, peer through the branches to see if anyone is nearby, and edge my way out through the trees and down to the water, to where I appeared. I brush leaves off my clothes, dip my hands in the creek and run them back through my tangled hair, drink double handfuls of creek water though it may not be a good idea. Fish live in it, tadpoles, crawfish, it can't be all bad.

My stomach growls. I have to eat something, now.

Means leaving here. May not be the greatest plan. But who knows what's safe anymore.

I'm starving and I have to put food in my stomach – except as I'm standing up to go, I happen to see in the mud at the water's edge those same footprints I saw the last time, too big for any dog, and I crouch down again and touch the deep marks made by the claws. Water filling them up gradually as if they were just made. The woods are quiet, a breeze can be heard faintly stirring the tops of the trees, but nothing else. Looking for eyes among the leaves, a dappled coat slipping silently through shadows. Eshu always tells you to pay attention to signs, Marie said that too, and I see it all right but I don't know what it means.

Another look, three hundred sixty degrees, but there's nothing and I've got to eat. All the way back to town I practice seeing myself invisible, that is all I know to do. I ask Alison for her advice, but she won't answer me, and I think she lied when she said she was always to my right.

On College Ave. I come upon a canteen truck and buy a hot dog and stand there and eat it in three bites. I figure that'll get me as far as the Heidelberg where I can eat real food. And I'm almost there when I spy Lucas standing on the sidewalk studying the short remains of a cigar,

thinking no doubt of putting it out and going in. I'm so glad to see him I could hug the guy, cigar and all.

"Lucas! How you doin'?"

He scopes me out for a second before brushing my outstretched hand with his own, barely touching as if the contact made him uncomfortable. "I'm hangin'."

"Man, it's good to see your face, the weirdest things have happened to me . . ."

He keeps on looking me up and down as if he wonders why this guy is acting so damn friendly, as if we've never had a conversation beyond hello in the hall.

"You about to eat lunch?" I say to him. "I'll buy this time, what do you say? I gotta talk to you, Lucas."

Again there's too long a wait before he answers. "What about?"

"Man, it's . . . it's strange, there's something happening at my house like you can't imagine, something's in there and it's doing stuff to me, messing with my head. I think I should have taken your advice and put bottles on the trees. Or something. Come on, let's go inside, I'll tell you about it, maybe you'll know something I can do."

But Lucas doesn't move. His feet are planted four square. His red-rimmed eyes hold mine as he takes a last puff of his cigar. Then he marches two steps to the curb, drops the butt neatly down a storm sewer, turns and marches back till he's right up in my face. Bigger than me, older, his eyes heavy with experience, giving me a look that's like being served a stinking dead fish on a platter. He scares me all of a sudden. "What is it, what's the matter, have I - ?"

"I can't be takin' care of your ass at all times," Lucas says in a voice between a whisper and a growl, leaning forward slightly, driving his implacable presence into me. "You understand me? Are you a man or what? You too old for this kind of bullshit even if you are white. I ain't your mama. You best pull some manhood of your own out of wherever you keepin' it. Don't come lookin' for a piece of mine. Ain't you ever hear God help those who help themselves? He don't be helpin' nobody who sit around on they sorry ass goin' 'poor me.'"

My sight is half blanking out, I barely see him turn on his heel and leave, can't even move my head to watch him go into the restaurant, I'm stuck there like a scarecrow on a pole. My stuffing leaking out and crows perched on my shoulders, screeching their mockery in my deaf ears. Shame paralyzes me until I catch a glimpse of someone passing by goggling at me like What the fuck is the matter with *him*? and that forces me to put one foot in front of the other, put distance between myself and

anyone who may have seen me get the word, once and for all, that I am not a man.

For a while I walk blindly, head down, seeing nothing but the sidewalk before me, barely glancing up even when I come to a street, under a sky of black, through a gauntlet of cold stares, hearing Lucas's words over again. Out of wherever you keepin' it. If there's anything to pull out, and there has to be, or I can never face him or anyone again.

Finally I'm able to look up, and I discover I'm over by the MU power plant, alone on the street, and no one is watching me and my feet are carrying me in the direction of my house, instinctively, and that is where I am trying not to go. The only other place I might have some excuse to be, in this direction, is Marie's, and she is the only person left who might understand any of this. If she's still speaking to me.

All the more need, now, for invisibility, when to be seen at all is shame. By tunnel or trench I should travel, away from human eyes, but I cannot. Perhaps this will be my last appearance on the surface before I vanish altogether.

Head down, I manage to feel my way to Marie's and am standing on her porch, knocking on the frame of the screen door, daring to raise my head as her footsteps sound inside the house. She opens her front door, not as implacable as Lucas but neutral, neither welcoming nor not. She unlatches the screen door, holds it open. "You got my message," she says.

Message? I might as well pretend I did, and I nod. So she's expecting me. "The jacket's ready to try on. Just take a minute."

Mutely, I follow her into her formal front hall, through the curtain into her workroom. Draped carefully over the table is an off-white silk jacket, or the idea of one, sketchily sewn, pinned in places, not yet lined. Without words, Marie stops me in the center of the room, holds the jacket up to me, narrows her eyes slightly in thought. Then she motions for me to hold my arm out and slips it on, slowly and cautiously. The other arm. She turns me, raises and lowers my arms, places pins, mutters to herself, makes marks. She pinches and pulls at the garment. "You've lost weight," she says; I think she disapproves. Spoils the fit she had so carefully calibrated.

"I know," I say.

"I'm not making this for you to starve in."

"All right."

She slips the coat off me and lays it on the table again. "Done in a few days. The trousers too. Alter them on the spot. If need be."

I nod, and I know I'm dismissed, this is my only chance. "Marie, can I ask you a question?" I say.

She crosses her arms over her chest and regards me with somber face, enigmatic, not unsympathetic exactly, but as if from a distance of more than the few feet between us. The way you watch someone go through a thing you recognize but cannot help.

"Go home," she says.

"But that's exactly what – "

"I know. I read your cards before you came."

Her dark, impassive face gives away nothing of what she knows, and I feel like a kid asking the teacher to give him the answers to the test in advance. "Isn't there anything you can tell me?"

"No one knows but you." She inclines her head and her gaze in the direction of the door, and irresistibly I am in motion, out of there, borne on the wave of her authority through the front hall and across the porch, Marie following me to make sure I go, and as my foot hits the front walk I hear her latch the screen door behind me, and she says one more time, "Go home."

I reach the sidewalk, and which way am I going to turn, am I going to do as she has ordered me or run and keep running? I'm standing there head down in thought and someone big almost bumps into me, passing by, and it's Erdman and he says, "Go home."

"Wait," I say, but he hasn't slowed down, his grumpy back is lumbering away, ignoring me.

Even Erdman. How does *he* know?

But what about the blood, what about the note, isn't it suicide to go home? Still I turn in that direction. I can always circle around it, make my way back to my hideout.

I come to the end of Marie's block and there is Sandy putting a letter in a mailbox and she doesn't look up at me as I pass, but I can hear her say it: "Go home." And Cora is driving by in Ellen's car, in the direction of my house, and she slows down and calls out, "Want a ride?" but I shake my head no. Kristin's in the passenger seat, ignoring me. Those two don't belong together, that much I know. And after they pass, Ron doesn't belong across the street looking at his watch that tells him the date and then glancing up, seeing me, catching me in my lie about being too sick to work. I pretend there hasn't been eye contact, keep moving, head down, if I don't look he hasn't seen me and he won't be on his way back to the office to fire me, to order Sandy to take all the personal stuff out of my desk and put it in the hall, where Lucas, recognizing it, will throw it in the dumpster with the dead mop heads and the sausages of used Kotex rolled up in toilet paper . . . I am standing at my own front door. To my left I'm aware of Vic on his porch, smoking a Camel and watching me.

I have a key this time, and I am taking it out and steeling myself to use it when I see that the front door is actually open a crack already. Come in, it is saying to me, out there you are unwanted and I'm all you've got left.

I step into the house, into the dimness of my living room. I hear the sound of a cupboard door closing and a dish rattling, and through the dining room I see Ellen in the kitchen getting herself something to eat; she glances up and waves to me, the Ellen she once was, or I thought she was. I'm halfway across the dining room when I look out the window and see Charlotte Carter throw open the curtains of her living room window and show herself to the world naked, her husband coming up behind her with an enormous boner and clutching at her breasts, leaving blushing red handprints of heat, running his hands down her body, pulling her to him. He's about to come into her from behind when they both take time out to look me in the eye and point at me and laugh raucously, uproariously, I am the funniest thing they've ever seen and she whips the curtains shut.

The vision knocks me back a step. I feel as if I've been spun around against my will; my head whirls for a moment. Then I get my balance and look up and Ellen is coming toward me, tall on powerful legs, her strong arms beginning to reach toward me, and then I see the scaled armor begin to cover her, I see the nodding plume of the helmet above me, and it is not Ellen at all but Him, the one who lives below, who has been waiting for me, waiting to kill me, all along. Coughing Man tried to push me down where he lives, Lucas told me to go down there of my own free will, he almost killed me once in the underworld when Alison made me go into his space, Marie ordered me to go home, Ellen was only him in disguise. Everything was betrayal, I think as I back away from him, taking out the knife that is still in my pocket, holding it in front of me as if it can protect me from what I know nothing about. My knees are shaking so badly I can hardly stand, but I keep backing up, if I can just make it to the front door that I left open when I came in . . . He stops and folds his arms, watching me back away. He doesn't need to move, doesn't need to chase me; he can kill me any time he wants.

But still I back my way to the door and bolt through it, slamming it behind me, off the porch in one leap and into the middle of the yard before I realize that it's nighttime and in the dark front yard I hit a thickening of the air as if I were trying to run through Jell-O, that stops me in two steps. As if gravity had monstrously increased to the point where my limbs weigh more than trees. I can no more continue into that than I could pick up the house.

It was a trap all right.

There is nothing to do but use what I have, useless or not.

Listening at every step for some movement from Him, I inch my way into the garage, feel around till I find a flashlight, and look at the tools: shovel, pick, pitchfork, axe. Hatchet. I have never looked at them this way, trying to choose one with which to fight to the death. Spear would be the best. I lash Ellen's knife to a rake handle, winding wire around and around until it can't come off, and I take the hatchet and stick it in my belt. No time for scruples, no time for civilization now. Stab as he comes; plant the butt of the rake handle against the ground and hold it so he runs up on the blade and impales himself and while he's writhing in agony, hack. Chop the back of his neck and it's over for him.

I have my homemade spear at the ready as I leave the garage. I know he could be anywhere, could materialize out of the dark back yard already at top speed. There is no place where I am not in danger. But I arrive at the back door and what is there to do but go in. Nothing there, but I know he is. The house spooks the shit out of me, he could come out of the laundry room, explode through a window, he could be waiting in the shadows of the living room, and I am trying to guard all sides at once, holding my spear in both hands and wishing both ends had blades to slice open his guts. There is nothing in the shadows. Deep breaths; my heart is pounding. With my spear before me, step by step I move through the dark house; the head of the hatchet digs into my side as I take each step. The silence is complete. Finally I inch my way, keeping my back to the walls, into the bedroom and it too is empty.

Or not.

And I am here with no choice but to watch out the night.

I stand in the corner of the bedroom with my back to the wall, facing the door, my spear at the ready. The windows are to my right; if he comes in through there I'll cut him from the side before he knows where I am. Unless of course he knows where I am at all times, unless he comes through the wall, unless he's playing with me and can pop me like a blister at any moment. Standing in the dark I begin to hear the house ticking and breathing, talking to itself, weren't those footsteps? But when I hold my breath to hear better there is nothing. I can't do that forever, and under the sounds of my own breath and the blood running in my ears I keep being certain I hear steps on the porch, something moving in the yard, the front door latch quietly turned, and each time my heart pounds but no. My back begins to ache from standing so long, my legs are cramping from holding still and trying to be ready at any moment to spring, my eyes are full of sleep, my mouth is dry and this will be the way he finishes me off, my body will betray me as well but what can I do? I

begin counting and telling myself make it to a hundred, make it to a thousand, fifty more, twenty more, each time when I think I'm about to keel over twenty more, each time this is the last, and then I realize that the darkness has begun to thin out, that I have lasted the night. Have done the impossible and that is all I can do, I must sleep. With one last effort of thought I realize I'd better have the knife in my hand, and I unwind the wire that holds it on the rake handle, turn after turn, I can't believe how many there are, until I get it loose and I can lie down, on my side, knife in my hand. Alison, Coughing Man, Eshu, somebody. Help me now.

Crushing weight on my ribs, a stab of pain that feels as if something in me cracks, and I try to throw it off, a hand over my mouth, he's here, and I pull my hand with the knife in it out from under the pillow and stab upwards, my fingers still asleep. The point cannot pierce, the handle turns in my grasp as if I had stabbed the sole of a boot. His knee crushes down on my groin, pinning me, the horn-hard heel of his hand is on my mouth, splitting my lip, forcing my head back, suffocating me. With both hands, with all my strength, I try to force the point of Ellen's knife into him and it barely breaks the surface and he doesn't react, he doesn't even feel it; I strain to work it farther inward, if only the blade won't snap, and then his weight is gone and his hand is gone from my face and I am left there, a thrown rag, as if I am not even worth the trouble of killing.

Silence. I don't know where he has gone. All I know is he can come back whenever he wants, and the note was right; I could never have the power to fight that. Give me any weapon, any armor, and I would still be at the mercy of the merciless.

As I seemed to hear so many times during the night, the latch of the front door is quietly turned. But there is light in the sky now and I am sure, this time, that the door opens. So this is how it ends. Quiet footsteps cross the living room, too quiet to be his, I am almost certain, and approach through the back hall and it's Kristin who enters, wearing the dress I saw her wear in the underworld, her eyes on mine at once. Have I injured her after all, was my wanting her to trust me unforgivable? She comes straight to the bed and takes the knife from my nerveless fingers before I can move, before I even know how to react. "Who will you help?" she says again, and this time I know the answer.

"You."

She plunges the knife into me, in and up, into the heart.

It burns as if she had stabbed me with a soldering iron, it boils inside me, my mouth is filled with burnt blood, as I try to grasp at the handle and pull it out of me my fingers crumble into ash like smoked cigars, my hands and my toes fall silently away, my feet are cinders, the top of my skull and the sides of my cheeks flake off in sudden acrid shelves of ash, my eyes collapse inward, a wind starts up from somewhere and it is blowing this heap of ash that used to be me away away

Then I was a deadman, and deadman dead I played my game. No one knows it but my kind. I played till trees blew down, I played till creek ran dry, I played till there was no juice in the apple and no bug in the air. I played till ash and smoke. I played till bone and darkness. I played till even the wind went, last to go. I played till no voice to call come in, no in to come, no time to call. I played dead tired deadman, ash alone, long past too long but deadman can't drop dead and ash must dance for fear of what? What can ash fear that has not happened, and how far dragged out, how long beyond the end prolonged can being become, a living deadman, and still when there is nothing to cling to not let go, still one insane jitterbug skittering its crumpledance on the rim of nothing, no one to watch, no one to bring the curtain down, no one but ash itself to wither into flake mote speck molecule atom

And still each atom jitters in darkness and knows itself jittering, and begs its creator *Let me go, let me go*

I recognized Death from the Tarot deck. It stood before me and opened its black cloak and there was nothing inside, infinite nothing, and its skull mouth said Come and I jumped headfirst. I was floating in black space face down, over nothing, below nothing, nothing behind me, nothing before me. Spread out your arms and legs, Death said, and float. There is no earth below you, nowhere to fall. You have lost everything. You have failed at everything.

I floated for a long time, missing the earth, remembering color, remembering the smell of life. All that over now, all that in the past for good. Even in that last moment when Kristin was killing me, I glimpsed (I could now remember) a morning on earth outside the windows, past her avenging silhouette, and even as I died I missed it and floating in blackness so deep that I couldn't tell if my eyes were open or closed, I missed it more.

I tried to look around me and perhaps my eyes had been closed because there were others floating in the dark distance, arms and legs

outstretched, face down like me. I could not tell if they were aware of me or not.

All of you are full of fear, Death said. So full you can no longer imagine any other world.

The bone fingers of Death reached out, and there were as many as it needed and could reach as far as it liked, and they touched all the floating souls on the back between the shoulder blades and with one movement drew them close together, and they were countless, and some of them floated over me, and onto my back, and others I floated over and upon, as if we were skydivers in endless free fall, and some of them merged with me for a time, and I with some, now effortlessly, now with difficulty, before we floated apart again, and some remained at a little distance. Onto my back floated my brother Larry, and his two daughters, and my father (even here, where he weighed nothing, I resented him), and I melted into my sister and my mother, and I touched the hand of Vic, and Elyce the Buddhist, and Cora was beside me all this while, and Ellen floated with her fingertips inches from mine for a time before we clasped hands for an instant and then let go, for the last time; and everyone who joined with me was also joined with others I did not recognize, and so outwards and outwards in a shifting and reconnecting cloud of souls that I glimpsed whole for an instant before the finger of Death came again and with one flick sent us spinning apart.

I'm on my back in the dark, I can smell leaves and water, I can faintly hear the sound of a breeze passing through trees. I am lying on the bony ground, the hardness of the earth, and I love every irregularity that pokes up into me. There seems to be no sky. I am lying on something smooth and puffy which I realize is my unrolled sleeping bag, and next to me there is breathing. I'm in my tent, with someone, in my hideout, and I reach up my hand and find the tent zipper and open the flaps. Now I can faintly see branches against sky. Too dark to make out the person next to me. I feel myself; no clothes, no knife, no possessions of any kind.

The hair of the person breathing next to me is the hair of a woman.

When I try to turn over I realize my body can barely move; the lower half of me has not yet returned from death, and I have to lever myself with great effort, using only my arms, to turn myself on my stomach. Paralysis. Struck the spinal cord, maybe. God knows what. I look out into the woods, and at least I can still breathe their presence, the damp fermenting smell of rotting leaves and fallen trees. The tent opening is facing the creek, and in that direction is a dim blue glow which I think at first must be the earliest intimation of dawn. Except it's moving through

the trees, soundlessly. Sometimes tree trunks can be seen silhouetted against it for a moment, and then it wanders to one side or another, and gradually it seems to grow closer.

It must have been across the creek, because it seems to go down the bank as if it has to wade across, and then come up over the bank nearer to me. Its light is like the glow of fireflies, grainy and without edges. It expands and contracts, changes shape, ripples with movement as it approaches. Then it's directly in front of the tent, over me, and close up I can see it is made of tiny flickering blue pulsations that constantly seem to grow closer and then farther away. It's too late to be afraid, and anyway in my condition there is no escape. The glow swirls and eddies, as if it is trying to escape and something else is holding it back. The pulsations seem to be swarming more and more impatiently, growing harder to control, and at a given moment it is released and it pounces on me like a creature, covering me and the person next to me from head to foot, and I can see her now. My killer. Kristin. She is wearing the same loose-fitting dress, asleep. The blue tingles like jazz, like electricity muted to a caress, and under it I can feel my body coming back to me, or the other way around: taking me all the way into itself once again, allowing me back into the one home I've always known.

When I can look up again, I see what's been behind the blue glow all along: a bear whose shoulder is as high as a man's, a grizzly perhaps, if a grizzly's hair could be all white. It turns around a couple of times like any animal getting ready to go to bed, lies down, chin on its forepaws, gives one long sigh through its nose and goes to sleep. When its eyes close, they irresistibly close mine too.

When I awaken, the blue glow is gone and it is dawn without doubt; I can see every vine, every fallen leaf on the forest floor, and next to me now I see Kristin in a brown dress, sleeping with one strand of hair caught in the corner of her mouth. I want to pull it out with the tip of my little finger, smooth it back as a parent would do for a child, watching for any flutter of her smooth sleeping eyelids. Who would have thought that she could drive the knife into me and send me to the world of the dead? I don't know why she is here, but I know better, now, than to imagine it has anything to do with her wanting to be my lover.

My legs work, and I crawl outside the tent, stand up and stretch my arms out, turn my face up to the brightening sky that shines through the canopy of leaves. My clothes seem permanently gone. What I am to do about this, when Kristin wakes up, I have no idea.

The white bear is gone too. But I imagine he has again left his footprint by the stream.

The silence is deep, orchestral, except for the rustling of leaves under my feet and the calls of birds. Then even they are quiet.

From my right what I think is Alison comes out of the woods. I think it's Alison wearing the almost dowdy dress I've seen before, barefoot, her eyes solemn; then I try to keep thinking that because it's what I know. But it's not Alison; she sees past me as if I am hardly there. No play in these eyes, no invitation. Taller than Alison. Not the same dress after all. Whoever this is, she scares me. She inclines her head slightly to me in acknowledgement as she passes me by, goes to the tent, holds out her hand to Kristin, who stirs and awakens, catches sight of her; Kristin's eyes widen, her mouth opens slightly, she seems to gasp inaudibly. But she reaches up and touches the hand, and not-Alison helps her to her feet. Kristin stands hand in hand with her for a few moments, her head bowed, and then looks around her; the being that is not Alison steps between her and me at the instant when otherwise Kristin would have seen my nakedness. Gently she turns Kristin to face the stream, and holds out her other hand to me, so that Kristin and I are flanking her as she steps slowly down to the bank. I had thought there were trees in the way, but today there are not, and the creek is more of a river, fast-flowing over stones. When we are not quite at the edge where the earth has been cut steeply away, she stops, lets go of our hands, and without speaking gestures to us to sit on the ground. There is a silent wait; she seems to be gathering herself, or something is gathering itself, and at one moment I feel I might burst and it's all I can do to keep from jumping up and running from the spot, not to run away but because something unbearable is building inside me. She who is not Alison crosses her wrists in front of her, slowly reaches down, gathers the material of her dress in both hands, and pulls it off over her head. The dress drops to the ground by her side. She is wearing a white sash tied around her waist that hides nothing, so satiny glistening that it seems to give off a light of its own, and so does she; she makes me face in one onslaught the sum total of longing and desire in my life, the cause of all suffering, every moment of wanting every girl and woman I have ever loved or wished for, every yearning for beauty gone or never to be mine, every second in my life when the magic descended and pulled me irresistibly toward someone who – I understand now – for that moment was this being who seems beyond any name, beyond any act of mine except perhaps prayer.

She is facing the river, her hands at her sides, waiting.

Across the river there is a stirring in the forest.
The sound of twigs cracking underfoot.
Something flashes red amidst the green leaves.

It is the nodding plume on a bronze helmet, and the helmet is worn by Him, The Man, and I think of how all three of us are here unarmed, defenseless, at his mercy, and again I want to jump up and run and I can feel how Kristin wants it worse than I do. "Don't move," She says, without looking back at either of us. There is no possibility of disobeying.

He approaches, and I hear him clanking slightly as he moves; his armor is like that of a samurai, small hinged plates like the scutes of an armadillo, a tunic of armor that drapes over him and fluidly follows every movement of his body, armor that he wears like old comfortable clothes.

On the opposite bank he stops and stands facing the being who is not Alison. In a scabbard at his belt he is wearing a short sword. His hands, too, fall to his sides, but I know how fast he is, I know it was already too late for us as soon as he had us in sight.

Gradually her arms float a little away from her sides, and she turns her open palms to face him, and he mirrors her actions; I see his glittering eyes fixed upon hers, and the palms of their hands seem to be speaking to each other from across the river. His bearded face is heavy with old experience. I sense that every muscle in her body is taut and ready; I can't breathe, can't take my eyes off Him, and again I feel about to burst from some intolerable pressure within; then a shrill whirring of crickets breaks the silence and he takes a step forward and gradually, as if he were tired

from a long journey, he touches one knee momentarily to the earth and stands again, never taking his eyes off her.

She tips her head back; I can hear her inhale deeply, and as she breathes out, she laughs under her breath. Lightly she jumps down the bank and steps into the river; he climbs down more slowly and strides into the shallow water. They wade to the middle and when they meet there, she offers him both her hands, and he takes them, and they contemplate each other as if it has been a long time. Then she drops his hands and half-turns to call to me, "Come." Nothing else could make me approach him, but no one could refuse if she told them to come closer. If she said Come here and die, I would.

I climb down the bank, feeling my puny and vulnerable nakedness, the insignificance of myself next to both of them, but she is looking in my direction and waiting. The stones are wobbly and hard under my feet as I wade out, and the closer I get to them, the more she blinds me to all else in the world, and the more he plants fear in my heart, so that I can barely stand when I am next to them, and it is only her touch on my arm that steadies me and keeps me from washing away with the current that is up to my thighs.

"Take his armor," she says to me.

But how can she imagine that I . . . ?

Slowly, not once taking his eyes off Her, he unbuckles his sword belt, his tunic of armor, and takes them off. "Hold out your arms," she says, and I do and he gives his armor to me in a heap and I stagger under its weight, it feels as impossible as if he had handed me a piano, but both of them ignore me and he places his belt and sword on top of the armor and I gasp out "I can't." Then he looks at me for the first time, a look heavier than the armor, and she glances at me as well, and I know that it doesn't matter if I can't, I have to hold it up and in fact it is no longer too much for my arms to sustain but the heaviness is still there somehow, I can feel it through and through my body as if it has passed into me and every cell has to bear it up against gravity. Under the added weight the soles of my feet press painfully against the stones of the river bottom.

He is naked now except for his helmet. His body is not bulging Popeye muscle, but lean and flat and stretched and hard, invincible and covered with scars, some from wounds that surely should have been fatal, some mere nicks, but all so old, so grown into the fabric of his skin, that I hardly noticed them at first because they decorate his entire body. His penis is heavy-looking as the clapper of a church bell, his balls hang relaxed and full; I don't comprehend how he can have stood gazing

directly at Her nakedness all this time without becoming hard. He must have iron control. Or great respect, or both.

"Take off your helmet," she says to him quietly, and he lifts it off his head and hands it to her. She takes it like something she's held in her hands before, adds it to the load that is weighing me down, and turns to beckon to Kristin. "Come down to the water," she says.

Kristin, too, cannot but obey, but I can see reluctance in every movement as she gets to her feet and climbs down the bank, stands at the edge of the river with her head bowed. Never once does she glance toward The Man.

"Look at me," She says to her. I am watching Kristin, She is watching her, and now The Man turns his eyes to her too, and I know how alone she feels as she lifts her eyes and steels herself to gaze back. "Come," She says, holding out one hand, and when Kristin doesn't move, she turns fully to her and opens her arms, putting herself between Kristin and The Man.

"Be afraid if you must," She says, and Kristin puts her head down and closes her eyes and wades out, step by slow step, as if to her own execution, until she's caught and held in Her embrace, breathing hard, her head against Her shoulder, hiding there. As the embrace continues it lights her up, fills her with herself, her own beauty, her courage, the way a newly metamorphosed cicada's wings expand and harden in the sun after it has struggled its way out of the too-small shell of the grub; when she finally raises her head, her eyes are clear and wide awake. They are more like sisters now, Kristin and Her, and they turn side by side to face Him and he bows to them, deeply, exposing the back of his neck. She takes up his sword belt, draws the sword from the scabbard and offers it to Kristin. But Kristin only stares at her, all eyes, unable to move, until She nods at her commandingly, like a strict teacher saying: now. Then Kristin, standing in mid-stream up to her waist, her wet skirt swirling in the rushing water, takes the sword in her own hand and lowers it to The Man's neck and brings forth a rivulet of blood.

Even before he can fully straighten up, the bottom has vanished from under our feet and we are all sinking into the river, She holding Kristin in her arms, The Man beside me. I am released from the burden of the armor as we descend into thin water or thick sky and I recognize where we are and where we're going. No one speaks; the sky thins further and the giant trees are already below us and I realize that I'm still holding the helmet in my hands as we slowly drift downwards.

He gestures to me to put it on, and I dare not refuse.

Blackness descends over my sight, blackness and buzzing, clanking metal, the sound of gears, of explosions, of boots against a door, smashing glass, I hear a baby shriek and it is rolling in a cobblestone street and a man in uniform kicks it like a football, its mother screams, a rifle butt knocks her down, another man in uniform kicks her in the head and when she does not stop screaming and trying to crawl after her baby, shoots her as an afterthought. Barely do I remember the helmet and I rip it from my head and the eyes of The Man are full upon me, eyes so deep and heavy that he has to lend me the courage just to hold his gaze, to know that I have lived for thirty seconds what he has always borne and always will.

“You were those soldiers,” I blurt out, and if he is going to kill me for daring to speak to him, he is, there is nothing I can do to stop him. All he does is look, forcing me to fall into his eyes that are dark brown and bottomless, and the weight returns, a heaviness that paralyzes as if a stone the size of Jupiter lived in my chest and its gravity prohibited my heart from pumping. I was everyone, I feel him say, or think within my chest, silently. I was the baby, I was the mother they shot. I was the other soldiers who killed the soldiers you saw, later that day. I was their mothers when they heard their sons were dead. I did all the crimes you know of and all that you do not, and I suffered them all in turn. I was the killer and the killed, the torturer and the tortured, the rapist and the raped. My armor is nothing, not even protection, because I cannot die. I know the answers to your questions, the ones She cannot answer, but you could not understand them unless you could bear the whole of it, and you cannot. Even She cannot. No one can. That mystery is not for your kind. The knowledge would crush you now.

I carry it for you. And for Her.

Dwell instead upon the mystery of courage.

He releases me from his gaze, and his eyes travel to the helmet I am still clutching; I hand it to him. He carries it as one would carry an old, well-worn baseball glove. We are floating down through leaves, through branches, through tree smells of eucalyptus and sycamore and pine. She has one arm around Kristin’s waist, and Kristin, touched by her, is a beautiful woman and yet she looks like a child next to Her full glory. Sometimes branches pass between us, but we are not drifting apart as Kristin and I did, the first time I came this way. The sun is bright this time, as hot as the sun of the world I know, and the trees are holding their countless leaves up to that brightness in a trance of heat. We sink through layers of quiet. The Man closes his eyes, his hands clasped in front of him,

loosely cradling his helmet, and seems to go into the deepest rest, utterly relaxed upon the air.

So far to the ground that it's like forest on top of forest.

At last we are below the lowest branches, and what might be the height of a house in my world feels like a single step. We touch down, lightly; the armor lands in a faintly clanking heap a few steps away, the belt and sword beside it. The Man opens his eyes, lays his helmet on the ground, and turns his gaze on Her, and I know he wants her to himself now. To have done with us. She kisses Kristin on the forehead and releases her; the kiss seems to have left behind some of Her inward light. Kristin could leave now, go off through the trees and back to her solitude that I will never disturb again, but she doesn't; she turns her back on us, pulls her dress into place and smooths it out, wanders a few steps away looking around her at this meadow vaster than any that she or I will ever step into in the upper world. Then she lies down on the grass, her hands behind her head, her ankles neatly crossed, and contemplates the sky.

The Man holds out his hand to Her as if to say he won't wait any longer, and she who is the magic that a man must bow to when it shines through any woman – she steps to Him and gives him her hand as if she were his compliant wife, and yet she gives with a teasing, sidelong glance, and even I can see who has tamed whom. I don't belong here, it is unseemly for me to witness even the beginnings of their intimacies, yet they have not sent me away, and in their presence it is not for me to have a will of my own. He puts an arm around her waist, they are side by side, there is no space between them and I can no longer look up at their faces, my eyes are cast down to the ground by a greater power, to spare me a sight that would mean I could never return to my world and love a woman there.

"Bind me to her," The Man says, the first words I have heard him speak aloud. His voice is quiet but its resonance makes my chest hum after he speaks.

Bind me to her. What does he mean? I ask myself, looking around, and my eyes light upon the sword belt lying on the grass. He handed it to me before, I can dare to pick it up. It is old as he is, ageless, worn and yet indestructible, its leather and metal chased with signs and emblems half rubbed away, indecipherable stories of ancient battles, and I carry it to where they are and kneel in front of them and wait. Is this what he meant?

"Bind his ankle to mine," she says, and it feels rash and impudent, but how can I not? Their feet are touching, hers glowing with grace and his scarred and callused, and I slip the belt behind their waiting ankles and loop it around, put its tip through the heavy buckle, and holding the

buckle in my right hand I pull the belt tight with my left, my heart is racing, and as it tightens all the way my fingers don't slip out in time and I am caught there, my reckless fingers are actually touching – Brightness –

I am blinded by it, blown as if by a hurricane, I am touching nothing, They are gone, the grass is gone, Kristin is gone, the trees are gone, I am wheeling alone in space, falling or rising I can't tell down from up, bright bright intolerable and then dark, I'm standing on my head in blackness, toppling over into bright again, and with a loud protesting creak I land in a chair, my desk chair at Martin & Gray.

Sandy looks around abruptly, with a What the heck? look on her face. "Are you all right?" she says.

But I can't answer; my head is whirling and I'm in too many worlds at once. Still under the trees with Them, still living the eternal horror under The Man's helmet, still half-paralyzed and watching a blue glow approach through the woods. Still seeing the white bear turn around and around before sleep, as my head is turning now, and for a second I have to rest my forehead on my hands so I don't collapse to the side. I can feel Sandy tactfully trying to ignore me, as if she knows I need what little privacy there is to be had.

As I straighten up again, Ron sticks his head out of the inner office. "Something just happen out here?" Same as ever, he looks at Sandy for the answer.

"I think Lucas's desk chair is about to give up the ghost," she says in her best blase-efficient tone.

"Please. We can't afford for anything else to break this week. The Xerox machine was enough." But he still doesn't look at me, and Sandy keeps her eyes on her work. I sit behind my desk and try to size myself up. I'm dressed, thank God. I'm wearing a short-sleeved white shirt and khakis. The air conditioner is on high, it must be hot outside. My lip is at the stage of healing where it becomes interesting instead of painful, my rib cage creaks when I lean to one side, but it does not feel as though someone dropped a boulder on me. No one is the slightest bit surprised that I'm here. Somewhere They are making love, bound at the ankle by an improbable servant, me, and their pleasure is making waves that travel even as far as where I am sitting now and cause me to think thoughts that have no place at the office. At that I hear a giggle within, or to my right, and that is the Alison I know. "Are you there?" I whisper.

"Did you say something?" Sandy asks, without looking up from what she's writing on her desk pad.

"No." Careful, Alison says. They might not understand.

Might not, indeed. Though how do I know who understands what? Who would look at Kristin and see . . . well, I will. A secret that I'll keep.

I wonder if Greg, the boyfriend, the vet-to-be, if he knows any of this. In everyone hidden worlds. I think of Kristin as she was, held in Her arms, and where is she now? Still there, contemplating the sky? Was it only I who was blown spinning out of there and back into this?

There in front of me is Sandy, her blonde hair short and permed for summer, exposing the nape of her neck that looks self-possessed and yet vulnerable, and I remember her telling me about the hot bath and the candles and Mozart. She's wearing a flower-print blouse and white pants, and the same gold earrings she wears every day, so simple they're hardly noticeable, and narrow silver Hopi bracelets, and a signet ring from college. She sunburns easily, and her arms are covered with freckles. In her blue vase today there is one almost unearthly white iris. I try to imagine the lover who left her, the one who should have been but wasn't waiting for her to emerge from her bath – didn't he know she was a pearl beyond price? A magical being touched by Her?

No. Or he'd still be there.

"Are you all right?" Sandy says again, quietly, so Ron won't notice, looking over her shoulder at me. I nod, and I can feel the smile spreading on my face.

"Is Ellen still out of town?" she asks, and I have a feeling she's guessed that Ellen came back and that's what the smile is about.

"Ellen's out of town forever."

"What?"

"She's gone. Beyond the blue horizon. She left on a fellowship, she moved to Wyoming."

Sandy is silent for a moment, and I see that her pencil isn't moving. She never forgets anything, and I'm sure she remembers a day two years ago when she remarked on how happy I looked and I told her how Ellen and I had met. "I'm sorry," she says, swiveling in her chair to face me fully as she speaks. "That's too bad."

Now and then, at quiet moments in the office when Ron's somewhere else, and the phone isn't ringing, and Sandy and I are shooting the breeze together, I've tried to bring up the subject of her love life, or at least make an opening for her to mention it if she wants; but she always laughs it off, or finds some words that could mean anything or nothing. I've about decided I'll never know, but when she says she's sorry Ellen left me, her voice is low and full of lived life. "Thanks," I say.

The phone rings and she turns back to answer it.

For a moment I think I should go through the papers on my desk and try to figure out what I'm supposed to be in the middle of doing, try to find out what it will take to look convincing in this masquerade of being the old Lucas, but they are already convinced and I can't bear to read a form or a business letter with the air of that other world still in my nostrils. I have to be by myself, talk to Alison, find out what month it is, I have to go home and see what's there.

I get up from my desk and go out past Sandy into the hall. It's cool and shady there, high-ceilinged and old; the floor looks as if Lucas has just waxed. Quiet. I listen for sounds of him somewhere in the building. How he'll look at me I have no idea. But I can't hear him anyway, and I take a drink from the water fountain, and perch on the sill of a frosted-glass window that opens on the building's air shaft. Its glass is embossed with tiny concentric circles that remind me of the patterns Lucas's buffer leaves on the floor of the hall. I close my eyes and try to see those cloud-high trees and the vastness stretching away, opening out into places I can't imagine, and I can remember but remembering isn't being there.

You know the way, Alison says to me.

"What if They're there?" I mutter under my breath, lest someone come out into the hall.

I can feel her smiling. If they don't want you there, you won't go, that's all.

"Do you see them often?"

Hardly ever. You were very fortunate. More than you know.

"I'm starting to learn," I say.

I lean my head back against the window and feel Alison's comfortable presence and think, I'm back. No one seems to know I was gone. It's a weekday and I'm at work. I must be getting paid, I must be living life . . . outside the window, down below, someone opens the squeaky lid of a dumpster and throws in a load of trash. It clanks shut. Quiet again. Everything ordinary is a surprise: that, too? Still going on?

And what will I find at home?

I'm startled by a footstep right next to me and only then do I seem to hear in retrospect the steps before it, coming down the hall. My eyes fly open and Lucas is watching me, cigar in mouth, examining me a little dubiously as if I were something that might need to be cleaned. "Need something to do?" he says. He's got a push broom in his hand, and he leans the handle toward me.

Not angry this time; I'm grateful for that. And many other things. "How are you?" I say, taking the broom.

He tilts his head minutely right and left, eyes to one side, as if he's thinking that over. "All right so far," he allows.

His gaze meets mine and for an instant his eyes are the eyes of The Man, bottomless and full of the weight that must be carried through the world. But with him, today, I don't have to be afraid.

"Lucas, what day is it?"

"Man," he says, shaking his head. "And you say you're in business. It's Thursday, what do you think?"

"Is it still June?"

"Ya-a-as, it's June. It's *been* June all this month. You smokin' funny cigarettes out here or somethin'?"

"Remember you told me to go down and find out what was – you know, underneath? I did it."

He watches me as if he has no idea what the hell I'm talking about.

"Don't tell me you don't remember."

All he does is smirk faintly, more to himself than to me.

"When everything came down I was sure everyone had been setting a trap for me. Even you. I should have known better, I'm sorry."

"Now you figured that out, you really owe me."

"Thank you," I say. Then I get embarrassed and start pushing invisible dirt with the broom. "I mean, I know 'thank you' isn't really enough."

Lucas nods in agreement. "Looks like I'm gon be eatin' some good lunches. On you." His eyes say he's letting me off easy.

"Oh – hey – you want to go now?"

Lucas regards me with pursed lips. I'm a whole new kind of dumb he's never seen before. "You *do* know it's three in the afternoon, don't you? You better go run some water on your head fore a payin' customer see you like this."

"Shoot, I guess so." Seeing as how he insists that we play the game. I give the broom back to him and he's about to go, but I extend my hand and he stops and takes it and the grip is firm and it lasts a moment longer than either of us expects.

Then it's back to the office and I feel like I'm floating above myself, over my own shoulder, as I pull a file and spread out the policy renewal forms and sharpen my pencil and begin to make notes, just like a real honest-to-God insurance agent. Among the papers on my desk is a stiff note from Mr. Kellaway pointing out that I failed to change his deductible as requested. I change it, I change lots of things, I write Post-It notes and attach red "Sign Here" tags, I even talk on the phone to someone who believes I know what I'm saying, and we are all serious, Ron the most

serious of all, as if every piece of paper deeply deeply matters. And meanwhile I'm floating up above, somewhere around the old light fixtures, and the more serious we get and the more everyone buys the package, the funnier the whole thing seems.

Seven minutes after five. Sandy leaves her desk the same as every day: nothing out of place, every paper clip and pencil in its proper container, no loose papers, no coffee cup with one inch of cold coffee in the bottom. A note about what she needs to do first thing in the morning, on a lavender Post-It, stuck in the middle of her blotter. She takes her sneakers and a mystery novel out of a desk drawer, clicks off the radio that plays subliminal rock 'n' roll all day, we chat while she puts the sneakers on, she says goodnight and is out the door, gone to the mystery of her own life. Ron left a little before five. I turn off the air conditioner and quiet washes in around me. I float down from above myself and back into my body, to meet the quiet, to be alone, and remember, and wait for the curtain of the evening to go up.

I feel, as I step out into the late afternoon street, that everything that will ever happen to me already has, and so I'm free. The ordinariness of Columbia is a world of signs and wonders to me, returned from elsewhere, as surprising as if I had gotten off a plane and found myself in Marrakech. In each of the people I pass I glimpse one of Them, or both together; each person sends his or her own particular ray to me, to anyone who has eyes to see, but before today I never have. The invisible world simmers behind everything around me, full of power, and the world of objects seems to tremble on the verge of dissolving – except people believe in it so fervently, love it so much, that at each instant they save it by so much believing, just when this bubble is about to pop. Not time to leave it yet. Not when music and laughter pour out of a restaurant across the street where people are drinking beer after work, not when Thursday night is the first night of the weekend as it has always been at Moo U, not when women are taking the barrettes out of their hair and shaking out of it so much brilliance that a man's heart stops at the sight.

The late afternoon sun shines in my face as I walk towards home, passing in and out of the shade of buildings and trees, with Alison at my right and memories of other skies and other trees inside me. I have paid for those memories and they are mine.

And what will I find at home?

I turn the corner and for one thing the house is still there, still the same unobtrusive bungalow slipped in between Vic's place and the Carters', calling no special attention to itself. No aura over it, no angels or demons on its roof. I stand in front of the house looking to catch whatever messages may be flashing from its windows, but there are none; it takes a

while before I make the first discovery, even though it's right in front of me: my car's still gone. And let it go. I can walk.

It's the yard that I want to see first, the deep back yard where the pear tree is lit up by afternoon sun and casting its shadow on the place where this all began, and the hole that yes, I really did dig. No water in it anymore. Already a couple of weed seedlings have sprouted on my mounds of thrown dirt. I really could make it into a fishpond, and these would be the beginnings of landscaping around it. People would say, "How did you get the idea for this?" and I would answer . . . It's a long story.

In the garage I look at the tools with which I vainly imagined I might kill The Man, and I remember the darkness of that night. That, too, will go everywhere with me now. I carry it for you, he said; but a piece of it is mine for good. As much as I can bear.

You should thank him sometimes, Alison says. No one else is strong enough to carry the sorrow. Without him She couldn't do what she does.

"Is that why she loves him?"

She loves his compassion.

I think of him half-crushing the life out me, cracking my ribs, but I know what she means. If there were no compassion in him, why would he suffer?

The hatchet's lying on the workbench, a rusty, homely old tool that probably wouldn't cut a sapling without a good sharpening first. Much less the armor of The Man.

That was quite a show they put on for you, Alison says.

"You call that a show?" She doesn't reply; I feel as though her silence is almost envious. "It was for Kristin, too," I say.

I go in the back door of my house – this time I even have keys in my pocket, but I don't need them, it's unlocked – remembering the last time I came and what was waiting for me then. I close the kitchen door behind me and stand looking around with my hand still on the knob. Outside the kitchen window that I look out of when I do the dishes, afternoon sun is shining on the wavy white metal roof of the Carters' carport. The refrigerator is humming quietly to itself. The clock on the wall says five-thirty. The place seems extraordinarily neat, and after a minute I begin to realize it's because things are gone. Magnets neatly lined up on the fridge, but no notes to myself, no cartoons, no coupons; no coffee mugs dangling from cup hooks under the cupboards; the poster with the chili peppers gone leaving a rectangle of whiter wall above the stove; the wall thermometer in the shape of a Coca-Cola bottle no longer

hanging there. No coffee maker, either, where it should be on the counter. I look in the cupboards and all my old dishes are gone, all the empty plastic containers and juice bottles, the coffee can of silverware not good enough to use but too serviceable to throw away. The old shelf paper that Ellen put there, long since wrinkled and torn at the edges – gone. There are three or four plates and glasses I don't recognize, just enough to get along on. Two soup bowls, one mixing bowl, three cups. The cupboards all but empty. Have I moved out, am I poking around in someone else's kitchen unannounced? I open the doors down below to look for my pots and pans and half of them are gone too, but I recognize the ones that are left. Perhaps I still live here after all. In the drawers even the better silverware is missing, replaced by a handful of new stuff, shiny and smooth as if just bought. I pick up a fork and it feels solid and good in my hand. Next drawer over, one spatula, one can opener, one big spoon, paring knife, that's it. No old plastic bags, no splintering toothpicks spilling out of their box, no used twist-ties, no dried-out rubber bands. Next drawer: empty. More has been going on here than I imagined.

No pictures on the walls, in my study perhaps a third of my books remain on the shelves, in the bedroom I find half the shirts that once hung in my closet have disappeared, sweaters no longer try to bulge out of the dresser drawers when I open them. Nothing left that isn't necessary and even some of that might be missing.

I go from room to room opening windows, letting the afternoon air wander in. Open the front door so only a screen divides in from out, so that later a breeze from front to back will carry the coolness of the evening through the house. Back to the kitchen, to open the back door, and this time lying in the center of the bare kitchen table is Ellen's knife.

My neck prickles; a wave of sensation washes over me and for a moment there's nothing else. I sit down and contemplate it, shiny and clean and simple on the white metal table top; to look at it now you'd never know where it had been. And who put it there just now? But it doesn't matter, really. What matters is, it's here, and so am I, still in a world where anything can happen.

"What should I do with it?"

That's up to you.

All I know for sure is, it isn't mine, even though it killed me. It was Ellen's once, and Kristin held it in her hand, and every armed power, whether it's armed with a kitchen knife or sheer imperviousness, belongs, in the end, to The Man. Except She takes the sword away from him; but she gives it back, too, and there's no ending. It passed through my life, it

accepted what I finally gave, and maybe it's done with me, or maybe it's not.

Not something I can part with. I look around me, wondering what I can do with it, and after a couple of minutes I have the answer.

I pick it up, with respect, and carry it outside, leaving the kitchen door open behind me, down the length of the yard, through the summer afternoon, through the memories I waded through like tall grass, through the dappled shade of the pear tree and the presence of the Others that can't be seen, until I reach the hole I dug never knowing what for. My grave, Lucas called it. Yes and no. I hold the knife up and tilt it until it catches the sun and flashes in my eyes. "Thank you," I say, and drop it in.

I kneel in loose dirt by the side of the hole, looking down at the knife. Live here, I think to it. Make this your home, so that I never forget what I have been shown. Then I take up double handfuls of dirt and throw them in until it's covered up and no one would know but me.

They say you can never go away from a place once you've buried your dead there. And what about the living?

Maybe I am going to end up buying this house.

I go in and open the fridge and there's food enough for dinner in there, and beer, and I take one and open it and carry it out to the front porch where I can sit on the steps and watch kids riding their bikes and people coming home from work, and hear the snatches of conversation and radio music and smell charcoal fires and cut grass, and remember what it's like to be one with this world.

When I go inside, I notice the answering machine for the first time, and it's blinking. A message from Marie tells me that my suit is done. And the crackled voice of the recorded operator: "If you'd like to make a call, please hang up and dial again . . ."

I sit down and eat – a leftover piece of steak, brown and peppery, green beans, French bread – and there's room inside me for food, at last. Wash one pan, one plate, one fork, one knife. Done.

The day is long, dusk has not begun to set in.

I call Marie and ask her if it's okay for me to come over and pick up the new clothes, and she says yes.

I feel strangely tall as I walk down the block, above myself, my feet like someone else's footsteps that I only hear, my body without weight. I feel I'm invisible, or perhaps I should say I feel I am the invisible part of myself. In the yards, the grass is midsummer-thick, not balding as it will be in August. As I pass old swaybacked sheds with flaking white paint or

brick-pattern tarpaper I imagine the cool of their dirt floors and the quiet of tools waiting to be used.

Marie's house never changes from the front; I have a feeling that the curtains have not shifted a millimeter since the first time I came – that she's decided they're correct as they are, and that's the way they'll stay.

She is perfectly tailored, as usual, as she holds open the screen door – this time in blue. I picture her at a church social, or chaperoning a dance, a pillar of respectability. "How are you?" she says.

"I seem to be fine." She probably knows better than I do, or could find out. We pass through her formal front hall, like some sort of air lock, and on the other side is the smell of roast chicken, of family dinners, and I wonder who she's close to in this world, who loves her and whom she loves. Lucas, for sure. I wonder why the two of them haven't married after all these years. None of my business.

"I had a little trouble with it," Marie says, "but I like the way it came out. Hope you do. I don't let anybody walk out of here wearing anything they don't feel good in."

"I wouldn't worry about it," I say. The jacket is the first thing I see as I come into her workroom, so clear and vibrating I wonder how I'll live up to it. Marie takes it off its hanger, holds it for me to slip on; then she turns me to face a mirror. Over my shoulder I can see her examining me, up and down.

"I wish you'd gain back a little of that weight you've been losing. Most men your age would love to lose five, ten pounds, but there is such a thing as too much." She turns me to her, settles the lapels the way she likes them, buttons the jacket with expert fingers, surveys her handiwork with pursed lips and a slight frown on her dark, solemn face. "Can't do much for you if you won't eat," she mutters.

I hold up two fingers side by side. "From now on I will. Scout's Honor."

She has me step behind a screen and put on the pants, and they, too, are a bit looser around the waist than she likes. "Look," I say, "every time Lucas and I go to the Heidelberg, we'll have extra onion rings until they fit right. I owe him, anyway. And you. A lot more than onion rings. But I don't know what to do about it."

"We agreed on five hundred," she says. Is she annoyed with me for even bringing that up?

I take out my checkbook and write her a check and she puts it inside a fabric-covered box, next to her rainbow of thread.

"That, you owed me," she says. "The rest you pass along."

"But what *is* the rest?"

She looked impatient at being asked that. "I never thought it would be up to me to help out someone like you, and you didn't know what you'd be called to do, either. That girl needed something you could give. But it wasn't what you thought, now was it?"

"I did have something else in mind."

"Men always do," Marie says, matter-of-factly. "Just remember to keep paying attention. Don't fall asleep at the switch. Or Eshu'll have to hit you with the two-by-four again."

"Once was enough," I say, smiling.

"Oh." She's disappointed in me. "You think you're going to get off with just once?"

I have to look away, in confusion, and when I take my eyes off Marie they're drawn to my image in the mirror which seems to be waiting for me to pull myself together. The man in the mirror still looks ready to face the world. I may not know much, but the clothes seem to.

Marie's face, watching me watch myself, softens again as if I had complimented her work out loud. "Well, no need to think about that just now," she says.

I look at her over my shoulder in the mirror. "Marie, can I ask you a question?"

"All right." I feel it's my last chance, and it better be good. She waits, patiently, but the very patience of her waiting makes me nervous, and there are too many questions and I feel foolish asking them, Am I going to be okay now, Am I going to forget everything after all, How long is it going to be till the next time, and I can't ask any of those things in her house wearing her fabulous suit.

"Cat got your tongue?" she says, with a little twinkle in her eye. She leaves the room and I hear her steps, through the kitchen, out to her back porch, and back to me. She's got the Tarot deck, and she takes it out of its velvet bag and spreads the cards out on her work table, face down. "Turn one up," she says. I stand looking over the backs of cards, every which way, all the same, trying to feel which one I should pick. "Don't think," she says, "just take one," and I reach and turn a card over and it is The Lovers.

I glance at Marie, feeling myself turn pink, and a little smile plays at the corners of her mouth. "Well, now we know what's on your mind."

The man and woman on the card are naked, and an angel out of a cloud hovers over them – above the angel, a sun, radiance. Enormous wings, big enough to enfold them both. It keeps its distance, though. Will it come down to earth, touch ground?

For now it hovers.

"I don't think you need me to read that one," Marie says.

I lay the card down, face up, and I can feel it looking at me as I transfer my wallet and keys to the pockets of my new pants. Marie gives me a paper bag out of her kitchen to put my khakis in. "Thank you," I say, holding out my hand, and she takes it and her grip is as strong as I imagined. I want to do something else, to kiss her on the cheek perhaps, but her dignity makes it unthinkable. She walks me to the door. "If anything needs to be altered you come back," she says.

"All right."

Then I'm walking away so well-dressed that it seems almost as out of place as being on the street naked. No longer floating above myself but back on the ground. In half a block I know what I wanted from her, before I left: her blessing. Which she never owed me, and has given me already, more than once. But all this only the beginning.

I come to the main street that crosses my path between her house and mine; to the west sunset has not yet begun, to the east are intimations of evening. A block away I see a girl, no, a woman riding a bicycle in my direction, her flying hair lit up by low sun as if she is a being of pure joy, and I can't take my eyes off her even though it's rude not to. When she comes abreast of me her eyes catch mine and for an instant I think she'll snap at me to stop staring, but she stops her bicycle and gets off and it's not that: she's Kristin. I can feel the pain of her stab again, faintly, a wound no one else has ever dealt. I could fear her, and she me, but there is nothing to fear; I love her and yet I don't know her; I want to cradle her in my arms, to take her to my bed, and yet I'd be embarrassed if she let me; I want her to know that we could love each other, and yet I want her to forget it if it makes her uncomfortable for even a moment; I want her to know that I will never speak it, and she will never have to admit she knows.

"How are you?" she says in a low voice, and I can see in her eyes that she remembers. She knows I do, too.

"Wonderful."

"You must be up to something kind of special," she says; I had forgotten my outfit.

"Oh. Actually, no, I'm going home. I just bought these clothes, do you like them?"

She nods. Her eyes are saying something altogether else, and I wonder suddenly what she saw happen after the knife went into me, how she found her way to that tent where we encountered Her.

"Where are you going?" I say to her. "You looked beautiful, riding along with the sun on you like that." I hope that wasn't going too far.

"Greg's place," she says. She's breathing a little fast from bike riding, lips parted slightly, nostrils flared. Just those two words, and I know that they are lovers in full flower; what was between them before was nothing like this. She knows I can see, and without shame she lets me. She wipes away a couple of beads of perspiration at her hairline, runs her hands back through her hair.

"Remember how you said I ought to turn that hole into a fishpond? I think I'm going to do it. It filled up with water one night, but then it all drained out by the next day."

"I think you have to line it with something. My dad made one with some kind of plastic."

She looks a little younger here in the upper world, young woman in shorts and a tank top, carefree, but I'm not fooled by that disguise anymore. "You know, I need to tell you something, about, um . . . the other. In case you're worried. I'm not going to go poking around looking for you anymore."

She averts her eyes, and I feel as though I've mentioned something like reading her mail or lurking outside her window while she undressed. Her face has an inward and private look. "Why would you, anyway, after what I did?" she says.

She meets my eyes again and we share a long gaze; there is nothing to apologize for, nothing that calls for blame. "Because you were the one who did that," I say.

"I'll come over and see your fishpond, okay? And we can talk more."

"I'd like that."

"I have to go, Greg's expecting me."

Then she's back on her bike and on her way to her lover, and I am across the street and heading home, and it's dusky in the shadow of houses, and Columbia is not its ordinary self anymore.

It seems to me I've done the right thing, emptying out my house; there's room for me now, room for quiet. There have been too many voices, too many feelings, for a long time, and everything needs to breathe. I almost feel, coming back, that I am disturbing the house's time of rest, and I pass through it and out into the back yard as dusk settles over Columbia.

Over the low hedge I see Vic standing in his own yard, smoking a cigarette. He takes off the wraparound black glasses and rubs his eyes; he leaves the glasses on his back doorstep. I wonder what it's like for him to take them off, finally, at the end of the day, to see the last of daylight unobscured. Does he wait all day for this moment? There are few pleasures in Vic's life, as far as I can tell, and I hope this is one.

He looks around in all directions, taking in the neighborhood – which isn't like him – and sees me, and he even raises his hand and waves. Something he hardly ever does from his back yard; usually it's only in front that he acknowledges my existence. He can speak to me from his porch, or on the front walk, but I've learned that we preserve each other's privacy in back, he by the strictness of his immobility that makes even picking up the glass of iced tea a decision and an action. Still, he not only waves to me but walks slowly toward the hedge; he makes a slow circular gesture of his cigarette hand that may be his way of beckoning to me. Perhaps it has something to do with what I'm wearing.

I stroll to meet him as if we chatted over the hedge every evening at this time.

"How you doin', Vic?"

He takes a drag and thinks it over. "Never better." Whatever that means.

"Beautiful evening," I say.

"Sure is. Ida's in Ohio again." Ah, is that why he wants to talk?

"She tell you she was leaving this time?"

"Yep."

"How come you didn't go along?"

He doesn't answer for a while, then: "Long drive to Ohio." I wonder if I've asked something I shouldn't. Seen her drive away often enough with the cold rage in her eye. "Can't smoke in the car."

"Ah."

"I guess if she didn't go off now and then, I'd have to. Doctor told me I better not drive, the way my eyes are. No long walks, either. I don't know how far I'd get."

I try to picture Vic leaving home on foot. "You might have to stay at my house," I say, which is about the most peculiar living situation I can think of.

"Yours left too," Vic says. It's not a question.

"Yes."

"She coming back?"

I shake my head. Vic betrays total lack of surprise. I've always guessed that he knew everything. He finishes his cigarette, drops it, grinds it out with his toe, pushes the butt under the hedge. Better not let Ida find that, I think. I try to imagine her young, try to believe that Ida was Kristin once, but it's impossible.

"Wives need to be to themselves sometimes," Vic says.

"We weren't married."

He gives me a glance that says he knows that, do I think he's a fool? No, Vic, not you.

"Besides, Charlene – that's the girl in Ohio – she'll come visit when she wants. Her and the twins. Those boys of hers'll throw water balloons at the cat and want Ida to cook 'em hot dogs at midnight and walk on the couch with their muddy shoes on. No matter what anyone says." He has a faint smile on his face, saying this. "One time I caught 'em putting Drano in lemonade to make it fizz. That's when I locked up everything you can poison yourself with. They got in Ida's car and took the brake off, and it rolled out onto the street, but luckily they didn't have the key, so they couldn't start it. They were planning to drive to the store and buy popsicles."

"Vic, how can you just accept everything?"

The faint smile is still there as he looks me over. Then he lights up another cigarette, waves the match out, pinches its head, puts it in his pocket. "That's a damn good question," he says.

But he doesn't seem inclined to answer it. He stands there smoking and watching the smoke curl up into the still evening air, and I watch it too; it leads my gaze up into the sky that is changing color moment by moment.

"Well, I'm going to quit feedin' the mosquitoes," Vic says, turning away.

"See you."

He moves slowly off across his yard toward his back door, and as he reaches it I hear him cough a low persistent cough, and a wave of recognition passes over me: of course, from all the sleepless nights, the dreams – of course.

Everyone was a part of it, like some sort of barn-raising or quilting bee in an invisible world. For me – except I was in it, without knowing it, for Kristin too – and she for someone else? Maybe I'll find a way to ask her.

You should do that, Alison says inside.

Am I beginning to understand?

I feel her inward smile. Every day's a school day, she says.

Inside my house, now, it is dark already, and after I've hung up my new clothes and taken a shower I discover one more thing I can do at last: I can sleep.

Then it's morning, and I get up, and this looks like life as I once knew it, brush teeth, eat breakfast, go to work, but I know better; I know everything's changed. To say so I wear the outfit again, even though it feels more like I should be going out on a date than walking to Martin & Gray. Why not get my money's worth out of it?

Even at eight o'clock in the morning the sun is hot. July first, summer for sure; the yuccas in people's front yards must love this weather. I'd rather be at the creek. Or in it. Tomorrow I'll go there, look for the footprint, see what I find.

I get to the office and Ron wants me to go check out a claim in Hartsburg, something about a shed roof and a thunderstorm, and it dawns on me that I do need my car after all. I have to quick make up something about it being in the shop; when I don't ask Sandy if I can borrow her car, he mutters to himself and throws me the keys to his Bonneville. The least he can do is let me drive his new metallic-green boat with the high-

powered air conditioning. "There's fresh oil on Providence Road down by Rock Bridge, so don't go that way. I just got the thing Simonized."

"Roger."

On the way out of town I look at the name on the file: Elroy Bennett. I know Elroy, I've dealt with him for years. First time I wrote a policy for him he asked how come the agency sent out a "peckerwood kid" like me. His way of trying to make friends. A country guy, probably lived on the same place half his life, rents the land to his neighbor to farm but won't move away. Ten years ago I would have sworn he was eighty, but guys like Elroy look old before they're old and then they live forever. On the way to his place I drive through Hartsburg itself, all hundred yards of its main drag, and everybody that's out of the house watches me drive through. No young faces in Hartsburg. I feel bad for them; their sons and daughters have left and probably they aren't coming back. On Elroy's road I hit a giant mud puddle and think how Ron's going to have a cow about it, but hey – he'd have had to drive through it himself, if he were here. I leave my jacket in the car, try not to get mud on my new pants.

Elroy doesn't look any older, he isn't missing any more teeth, he isn't any more stooped than he already was; but that was plenty. One thing I glimpse as I'm standing at his door waiting for him to come out is that he's gotten himself a big screen TV. And plenty of wood piled in the yard, so he'll be warm while he watches it in the winter. I try to tease him about it while he walks me slowly over to a shed that looks about his age, ask him if he watches Oprah every day, and it turns out he does. "Who makes up all that stuff?" he says. Then he tells me how the shed roof half ripped off in that big storm we had two-three weeks ago – and it might have, but it probably half came off in every gust of wind for five years before that. I can imagine the sound of it banging away. The edges of the torn metal are thick with rust. "You sure this is galvanized, Elroy?"

"Well, hell – they call it that, anyway. No-good metal nowadays."

"You know I'm not supposed to give you more than fifty per cent of replacement on something like this. The bean-counters in Kansas City won't like it." As if I could give a damn; I'm just saying it because Elroy expects me to.

Elroy bends a little more forward, puts out his lower lip, and allows a meditative blob of spit to fall on the ground in front of him. He rubs out the damp spot with the toe of his shoe. "You've known me a good while now, Lucas," he says. "You don't think I'd try to cheat you, do you?"

Looking at the sad glint in his old eyes, I don't think he's trying to get more than that roof's worth, I know he is. And he knows I know,

which makes it not really cheating at all. It's a game, and I want him to win; the damn company can make enough money without having to hold out on Elroy Bennett. "Never," I say to him. "You tell me how much it's worth, I'll send you a check."

He considers; it turns out he's not very greedy after all. "A hundred and fifty sounds fair to me."

"Done." We shake on it; I'm afraid of hurting him if I grip his bony hand too hard.

"I got a pot of coffee inside, if you want some," Elroy says, surprising me. He never was exactly the soul of hospitality.

"Thanks, but I gotta go on. Don't you think it's kind of hot for coffee, anyway?"

"Nah, you don't understand it. You keep your inside good and hot, you won't even notice it on the outside. I been tellin' people that all my life."

"Anybody ever believe you?"

"Heh," he mutters noncommittally.

I'm about to go get in my car when something strikes me. "Your wife still living, Elroy?" He shakes his head. "You living here all by yourself?"

"My cousin Wallace's girl, Ginny – she comes over now and then. She says I oughta go live with them in Jeff City, they got what she calls a in-law apartment in their house. I always say she ain't no in-law of mine. Anyhow, she knows I can't stand to live in no town."

"You aren't going to be one of those old birds that blows up the house trying to light the stove, are you? Or some damn fool thing like that?"

He gives me a conspiratorial look. "Not unless I double the insurance first. Make my kids rich."

"I guess you must be doing all right after all," I say.

"No need to guess," Elroy says. "You sure you don't want that coffee?"

"No thanks." He turns his back and stumps up the front steps and into his house without saying goodbye, which is just the way he is.

I get in Ron's car and drive back up the road, taking the mud puddle slowly because the Bonneville is already dirty enough. Not a bad life, going to visit Elroy, letting him squeeze a few bucks out of the company. Give him something to be happy about for at least a couple of days. And so back to town, and fill out a couple of forms and pull another file, and it will go on like this, weekends, Mondays, and then . . .

I wonder if Alison can show up in a place as new and sterile as Ron's car. "What then?" I say aloud.

She doesn't answer.

"Come out, come out, wherever you are."

And if I don't glance her way at all but only straight down the road, I can feel her shoulder against mine if I choose to, leaning into me a little whenever I turn to the right.

On my way home from work I make up my mind I'm going to find my car. Unless it vanished, but hell, if it vanished, I'll unvanish it. It's just lost somewhere around town, misplaced, all I have to do is find it. Not as if it were lost in New York City, for crying out loud. And if I can't find it, I'll declare it a total loss and collect on it. There are some advantages to being in this business.

Still, a person could spend a long time searching, even here. Especially on foot. I pick up the phone and dial Cora's number.

"Hello?"

"Hi, it's Lucas."

"I do know your voice, you know," she says a little impatiently. "It's good to hear you, I was wondering if you were still alive."

"I sure am, how are you?"

"Well, it's Friday, I'll say that much for it." She sounds like it's been a long week.

"Yeah. Listen, I wonder if I could ask you a favor, now that the Mercedes works – do you think I could borrow it sometime? Just for a while?"

"Sure, what for?"

"Well, this may seem a little weird, but I lost my car."

"Oh yeah?" Cora sounds amused. "No kidding."

"Yeah, I – I don't know, I must have left it somewhere around town, you know how you park your car and forget where you left it sometimes?"

"Uh huh . . ." Her voice is dubious; or is she trying not to laugh at me?

"So anyway, I was wondering if I could borrow the Mercedes and drive around and look for it."

"Be my guest," Cora says. "Do you think it'll be a long search? Like . . . days?"

What's on her mind, anyway? "I don't know."

"I have a feeling you won't have to look real hard," she says.

"How come?"

"Because you left it parked in front of my house. I've been wondering how long it would take you to call."

"What? No shit. Is that where it is?"

"You really didn't know?" she says incredulously.

"No way."

"Will wonders never cease."

"Well – I'll be over, then. Are you going out, or anything?"

"I have been back and forth over half of Boone County today, wearing a suit and a pair of stockings that were too damn hot, and I am not going any place for any thing."

"Okay, see you."

I could swear I drove home from Cora's that night – and that was a long time ago, wasn't it? Haven't I used the car since then? I picture myself driving; that's easy enough, but when was it, and can anything turn up anywhere now, am I just going to have to live with gaps and slippages in time? People are going to think I'm a complete flake.

Let them, Alison says.

I go out the back door, because Cora's is in that direction, and as I'm walking up the alley the neighborhood is quiet, the shadows are lengthening and starting to blend together. I wave to Vic sitting in his yard, and he raises his hand slightly off the arm of his chair. Late sun gilds the short scrubby mulberries along the margin of the alley, the sumac and spirea, the old looped wire fences further looped with vines. The trees of the neighborhood seem taller and leafier and younger than usual, standing up high to catch the light. Here and there, islands of garden stick up out of the mowed grass. All the back yards flow together into one stretch of land, country-like, with shallow undulations that are filling up with shadow. A landscape closer to the heart. To walk through it on a summer evening with somewhere to go might be all a person could reasonably need.

Oh, reasonable, Alison says. Do we have to be reasonable?

"No, I suppose we don't."

And my car is there, which isn't very reasonable but it's there anyway, just like Cora said. While I'm looking it over as if it would tell me what I've been doing behind my own back, Cora comes out on her porch wearing shorts and a T-shirt, carrying a glass of something with ice cubes clinking in it, and says "Hi" and sits down on the steps, watching me.

"Look familiar?" she says.

"I still don't understand. I could swear I drove this thing away from here."

"Well, I could swear you didn't." She takes a sip of her drink. "Maybe you were planning to come back."

"I must have been."

Cora sticks her bare feet out and contemplates her toes. "Don't you think it's peculiar that women put nail polish on their toes?" she says, as if hers were some other woman's feet. I come closer; she wiggles them in what seems like a parody of flirting with someone.

"It doesn't seem much like a thing you'd do," I say, sitting down next to her.

"Thank you," she says drily, leaving me a little off balance. Was that not what she wanted to hear?

"So how come you're all dressed up?" she says. "Have you got a hot date? Now that you got your car back, you won't have to ask her to drive." Cora has always liked to tease me, and as usual I'm not quite sure what to say. "Come here and let me see that jacket. Where'd you find that, anyway?"

"A woman named Marie made it for me," I say, leaning closer to her. She feels the lapel between finger and thumb, runs her hand down it; she doesn't seem to notice she's touching me at the same time.

"This is incredible," she says, turning it back to look at the white silk lining. "Who's Marie?"

"She used to be a schoolteacher – black woman, older. She lives pretty close to where I live. I think she can sew anything."

"I believe she could."

"And she's kind of, um, psychic. I guess. Whatever that means. She can read Tarot cards."

"Hm," Cora says. "No kidding."

Is she making fun of me? "No kidding," I say.

Cora takes a sip out of her glass. "Want something to drink?"

"Sure."

"Then come inside. Unless it's going to make you decide to run away again." She sounds as if I'm really not invited if I'm going to pull what I did last time, and that makes me duck my head sheepishly as we go in the door.

"I won't run away."

"You sure?" She looks me in the eye.

"I'm sure."

From in the house, the outside seems enveloped in dusk; maybe it's the window screens, but it's suddenly evening. "What would you like?" Cora says, choosing a tape and putting it in the tape deck. Piano jazz comes out. "I'm having fizz water so far, but I could go for something more interesting. Like, say, gin and tonic. You can have something boring if you prefer."

"I don't think I prefer boring right now." I'm struck again by how alive her kitchen is, full of colors and pictures and fabric and books, as jam-packed and messy as mine is pared down and put away.

She makes two drinks and hands me one, holds her glass up and I clink it with mine. The smell of gin is heady and inviting; I can tell that I could no longer drink half a bottle of Scotch without feeling it.

"Come help me look at the garden," she says. "Before it gets dark."

We go out to the back, where Cora's got a little eight-by-eight plot surrounded by marigolds and snapdragons whose colors are dark in the dusk. Four tomato plants, cucumbers growing on a trellis made of stakes and string, basil, parsley, a couple of short rows of cornstalks. I look up at the surrounding trees, wondering how the corn could be getting enough sun, but they seem fine. Knee high by the Fourth of July, is what I've always heard, and it looks like they've made it with a couple of days to

spare. Cora feels the leaves of plants, then kneels down, holding her glass in one hand, pulls a couple of weeds, rearranges mulch. "Your garden looks good," I say. Better tended than my neglected patch of earth. Have to do something about that this weekend.

"It's enough to grow too many of everything. Except corn," she says, still weeding.

I hunker down beside her and pull a couple of weeds myself. "I'll trade you my extra tomatoes for your extra tomatoes, what do you say?"

"It's a deal."

Cora stops weeding, sits down on the grass and leans back on her elbows, gazing up at the violet sky above the treetops. She's dressed for sitting on the ground, but I'm not; I take off the jacket, which is glowing white now while the greens around us darken to shades of gray, and hang it on a stake that's holding up the cucumbers.

"So this Marie read your Tarot?" Cora says, and I nod. "What'd you learn?"

Ah, but that's a hard one. I don't know where to begin. "It said I had to take a risk. I had to make a choice," I say, sitting down next to her. "A change was going to come."

"Bold prediction," Cora says.

"Yeah, but it did happen."

"Was this before or after?"

"After."

"I was really worried about you when you didn't come back for your car." The dusk makes the yard bigger and the sky deeper, and the cicadas have begun in earnest their long night's shrill and whirl, coming and going in overlapping waves from the trees above us. "I called you a bunch of times, but you never answered."

"Looks like I made it."

"Tell me the rest." I remember Cora saying that life was about Truth with a capital T, and I would tell it if I only knew how.

"Remember the coughing man I told you about? The one who wanted to make me do something?"

"Yes."

"I did it finally. I left this world, sort of. Just for a while. It's not as impossible as it sounds. But I don't know if I can explain it, and anyway it would take half the night."

"I'm not in a hurry."

I asked for it, didn't I? And I want to tell her, I don't want to hold things back, if I can just find the words. Then it will be her turn to decide if

she's going to get scared and run away. "I went to the world of the dead," I say, but even as I'm saying it I think this is not the place to begin.

"And then your neighbor called 911."

"No, I don't mean then. I mean later. I was actually there, where the dead go, floating in this dark space, and Death was in charge. You were there too."

"I was?"

"Yes."

"I'm absolutely sure I'm not dead, Lucas."

"Neither am I, but I went there."

She gives me a baffled look. "You lost me."

No wonder, I think, but where do I start, where does it start? "It's like this: there's a world inside."

"Inside what?"

"Just . . . inside. Inside you, inside the earth, inside things. Do you know what I mean?"

"No."

"It's not a physical place, you go there in your mind, but it's a whole world and it actually exists."

"Actually exists?" she says, leaning back on her elbows. I can hear the quotation marks. "What does that mean?"

"You're not going to go and get philosophical on me, are you?"

"Well, what do you mean?"

"Do I actually exist?"

She feels my arm to see if it's solid. "Yes."

"So does this. It's not just your imagination. There's an earth and a sky and everything. There's a woman there who's my – I don't know what to call her. She gives me advice, she shows me things, sometimes she – this is going to sound really crazy." I'm pretty sure I shouldn't say this to Cora, but it's too late.

"What?"

"Sometimes she makes love to me. But she is me. And I'm her. I talk about her like she's someone else, but really that's just an illusion. Or a mind thing."

Cora's quiet for a while. Then in a pained voice she says, "So are *you* still you, or not?"

"God, yes."

She doesn't look convinced. "Does this woman have a name?"

"Alison." And I do feel foolish saying it, but I have a certain loyalty to her, or to myself, that I will not go back on.

Cora sits and considers what I've said for a long time, studying the ground in front of her, pulling up blades of grass. She knows I mean it, I can tell, and it's up to her to decide what she'll say to all that. I know how Kristin must have felt when she told me she went down the stairs to be with a little girl.

"So," she says finally, in an offended voice, "does this mean that now you're totally self-sufficient?"

"What, are you kidding?"

"Why not? You've got a whole world you can always go to, you've apparently got this – girlfriend you carry around with you all the time, what would you want with actual people?"

"What? Wait a minute, don't – just hold on. It's not like I can't tell the difference. And besides, things that happen in that world aren't like regular life – more like lessons, you know what I mean? Not like this." How to tell Cora about The Man, about Her, the shining one, about coming up the stairs to find myself sitting in the creek – I can't unload all that on her all at once.

"What kind of lessons?" Cora says.

We're both silent for a while, listening to the night; I want to say something about trust, or courage, but I'm afraid it would come out sounding like empty words. Like every horoscope in every paper.

"Is it like a dream?"

"Sort of. It's like if you were to wake up in a dream. I can't tell you how it is exactly, you'd have to go see for yourself."

"I'm not going there unless I get to come back."

"Oh." Is she taking this seriously after all? "Well actually, you have to. But then after a while, when you come back, all this seems a little different. It's more – I don't know what to call it. More present now. Or maybe what I mean is, I am."

"I sure hope so," she says severely, making me feel sheepish again. "Oh, don't look like that. It's okay. Are you going to show me how this thing is done?"

I know she means it but she doesn't know what she's asking for. I almost want to keep it to myself. "It takes a long time, you can't do it all at once. You have to keep working at it. And some of it's liable to be frightening."

"Just show me the first step."

"Right now? Really?"

"If you can."

I can hear in her voice that she knows it's not a game. And is she, too, at a crossroads, has she been waiting for Eshu to come and put her to

some test? We're interrupted by the woman who lives in the other half of the house coming out her back door, passing within a few feet of us on the grass; she and Cora indifferently say "Hi." The neighbor goes into the garage, starts up her car with a great flurry of light and noise, and backs it out the driveway; then the darkness and quiet flow back, darker and quieter than before.

"All right," I say, sitting up straighter. "Is she going to come back soon?"

"I don't know, why?"

"Because this is a good place for it, I think."

"What do I do?"

"You need to lie down. You have to be totally relaxed."

"Oh, I get it. You tell this to all the girls."

"No, only you."

Cora gives me a look that takes the place of another smart remark; then she lies back, draws up her knees with a sigh, folds her arms across her chest. "Stiff," she says. "Spent too long in the car today."

"Just let yourself relax." After a minute I feel intrusive sitting there watching her. It doesn't feel like the moment to say anything more, either. I too lie down with my head on the gently prickling grass. Stars are starting to come out, and fireflies. I'm aware of the warmth of her bare arm next to mine, her quiet breathing, the scent of her hair, and being next to her feels the way it felt to sit on her back porch side by side and touch without admitting it.

In the trees the play of fireflies makes the faintest and most open of nets over the dark leaves, as if the same blue glow that brought me back to myself has been thrown over the world. Cora must have been ready for this without knowing it, the way I was ready, and maybe readiness calls a guide to itself somehow – if that's what I could somehow be. It feels presumptuous to think that I might do that for her. But good enough is good enough; Coughing Man wasn't such a terrific guide, but it worked.

I think of The Man, and that makes me sit up because one cannot meet him lying down. I remember the way She held his helmet so familiarly in her hand, as comfortably as he did, and I think of being plunged into the world that lives beneath it always, the inhuman depth of his knowledge. He made me taste of it. Or no: he allowed me to. That taste was part of the treasure that I suffered for, and I can never take that back, never unremember. The back side of the mask. I tell my clients we can insure them against almost anything, but The Man teaches just the reverse. And he is Her lover, Her road to joy.

I feel as though I were sitting on a high promontory, up in the night with the town of Columbia stretched out below me, though no such promontory, as Cora would probably point out, actually exists. Columbia all lit up, but not as brightly as it imagines itself to be. Beyond it, farms, into the silent distance. Solitary houses out there. Every light marking someone's hopes and fears. At my back a wood, dark and inviting, the white bear in there someplace, guardian, helper, whatever he may be. Faint sounds float up – a yell, a car accelerating, a snatch of music. I've heard it said that if you lie quietly beside a cornfield at night in midsummer you'll hear the corn grow – the whole field rustling softly as if a breeze blew through it, even when there is no breeze. I don't know if it's true, I never tried it, but now I think I can almost hear the world itself breathing. My own life is going on somewhere down below as I look on.

In the distance, as across a sea, a dog barks, a train rumbles along; I sit and wait until the sound of it has sunk again beneath the breathing silence.

I turn to look at Cora. "How do you feel?"

"Good," she answers quietly.

"Do you still want to try it?"

"In a little while," she says. Without looking at me, she turns her hand palm up in the space between us, and waits. When I take it, she meets my eyes; this time there's no going back, no pretending this isn't happening. I remember that when Cora was beside me in the world of the dead, Death said that we were all so full of fear we didn't even know it. But maybe not tonight.

"Can I trust you?" she says.

"Yes." I think she knows that, that she's asking me other things without saying the words, and the answer to the unspoken questions is also yes. She looks away, at the dark trees; I know she's aware of my eyes on her, but for a bit she won't look back at me.

I remember, not too long after she and Ellen became friends, the three of us were going somewhere in Ellen's car and Cora was in the back seat, and she said something funny and I turned to share a laugh with her and her hair was blown by the breeze from an open window and there was a secret look, a look that almost seemed to be a promise, that Ellen, her eyes on the road, never saw. Afterwards I was sure I made it up, that it was just random desire I hadn't quite managed to suppress. I think of Alison saying I should be kinder to myself; if I had been, at that moment, I would have understood that what I thought I saw was no illusion.

"One time," I say, feeling for the truth of it, "one time when you two were talking in the kitchen and I went to bed, I remember lying there

and hearing you through the wall, I couldn't make out the words but you know how everyone's voice has a certain note that's theirs, and I heard the note in your voice and the note in hers and I thought, what if Ellen could go back to Cora's place, and Cora could stay here? I completely forgot about that, until now. But I did think it. I don't suppose Ellen would have taken very kindly to that plan."

"I thought the same thing," Cora says. She did? Where was I, what the hell was I missing?

"I was sure it was only me, those crazy wishes you can't help."

"Really even then it was already . . ." She leaves words hanging in the air between us.

"Go on," I say.

She shakes her head No in a little performance of stubbornness, but I am tinglingly aware of the presence of her hand in mine, seeming to tell me something else.

"Too late," I say. "Can't stop now."

I feel her withdraw a bit into herself. "I don't want to talk about Ellen."

Is that what this is about? "I won't, I promise. But just tell me, okay?"

"I don't know if you loved her or not, but I knew you wanted to," she says. "Don't ask me why. But it really wasn't about that with her. She got you, she moved in with you, she took charge, and then . . . after that, it wasn't that interesting."

In silence for a while we contemplate the night, and with her free hand Cora slaps at a mosquito. At one moment, the cicadas all stop shrilling, wait a second, and then resume together, as if they are an orchestra that someone conducts, but the someone is invisible and unknown to mere human beings. She took charge; it sounds simple, understandable, when Cora says it like that. "I wish you'd told me that a long time ago," I say to her. "And I wish I'd told you."

"I almost gave up, I was sick and tired of waiting for something to happen."

A firefly wanders by Cora, a foot above her, and flashes its wavering light, and her hand darts up to it. "Oh!" she exclaims. "Can't believe I caught it. When I was a kid and we used to try to fill up jars with them, I never could. Look."

She holds her hand out toward me, closed but not too tight, and in a few seconds I can see the silent crescendo of light leak out between her fingers. She opens her hand, and I can just make out the dark bug on her paler palm, and then it lights again and flies away. She lets her empty

hand stay there in midair for a moment as if still letting the firefly go, or waiting for it to return.

Above us, the world is still being sewn together in beauty. I feel that if I were to do the obvious, to turn to Cora at this moment and kiss her, I would be pushing something that wants to make up its own mind to begin. It would be easier to push than not, easier than not to start the boat of the night sliding down the rails we both know are there. But resist. Wait until She comes and gives us her blessing of irresistible desire. Then it will be time enough, and if She does not, then there will be less to regret.

"Would you like to go for a walk?" I say to Cora, and she looks at me as if she knows what I have just been thinking.

"That sounds good."

I stand up, hold out my hand and help her up, brush myself off, pluck my jacket off the stake where it's hanging. She runs her fingers back through her hair; then she puts her hands behind her head and arches her back, stretching, and I think she is waiting too and even luxuriating in it.

"I need to go inside and get my shoes," Cora says. We mount the steps of the back porch and enter the kitchen together, blinking for a moment in the sudden burst of color. She puts her shoes on, I leave the jacket on the sofa, she turns out all the lights but one and we leave; as we come out onto the street she takes my hand again.

"You know what?" she says.

"What?"

"I knew all along why the car wouldn't start. I had to think up some excuse for you to come over. I hope you don't mind." Her eyes are teasing me again.

"I hope it was worth the trouble."

"We'll see," she says.

The sidewalk is dim, in between the pools of streetlight, and the neighborhood is quiet.

"We could go somewhere and have dinner," I say. "If it doesn't sound too much like a date."

"I won't call it one if you won't," Cora says.

Hand in hand we duck under some low branches that overhang the sidewalk, heavy with dark leaves, and for an instant it's as if we are hiding together in the shadows. And I know that Eshu may be waiting for us at the corner of the next street, that he is not far off and never will be, but for this moment, under Her protection, we are free.