

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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Marjorie Sandor

The four stories within, "Jim of India," "Shooting the Breeze," "Bridge," and "Point Reyes," are part of a longer work in progress, tentatively titled The Andy Stories. The stories follow Andy, a woman in her 50s, on a voyage across the continent and into herself. Of these, all are written in the present, except "Bridge," which is a memory of a visit to San Francisco when Andy was 12. Eventually, some of the Andy stories may stand on their own, though they were originally written in that wavery ground between short story and novel chapter. However, whether story collection or novel, the author intends this thesis to represent early drafts of what may eventually be a longer, and perhaps much different work.

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The Andy Stories

by

William B. Henkel

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William B. Henkel, Author

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These stories are but first, awkward attempts at getting at the real story beneath it all. Much here is left undone. But my thanks go to all of those who have read and critiqued my work, in and out of the classroom. Without your frank and incisive comments, this work wouldn't be half again as far along as it is.

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JIM OF INDIA

Andy set the teaspoon down, a wisp of steam a double helix rising and intersecting and vanishing. She sat quietly in the cabin, 6 am and just light. The sun was peeking through somewhere in the red Michigan pine woods behind the cabin and throwing long arms of color out onto Bear Lake, perfectly still except the flicking of birds to the feeder on the birch in front.

Late summer in northern Michigan, the last summer before her early retirement from 30 years as a school nurse. Andy wrapped her hands around the mug in the early morning cool, took measured sips of tea, just one cube of sugar, stirred in, crystalline and dissolving in the liquid as smooth as the surface of the lake beyond the window. She watched the progression at the birdfeeder, the nutcrackers and wrens displaced by a robin, by a jay, displaced by a woodpecker going for the suet, scrambled by a squirrel with an immense black tail, still trying for a share. Damn squirrel. Andy ran out and picked up a stone and threw it, yelling *shoo* — and felt ridiculous in her nightgown, barefooted in the cold dewy grass. Would the neighbors see? She retreated inside to her cup, panting a bit.

Quiet returned, as did the smaller birds. One hummer appeared like magic to catch a drop of red sugar water in the glints of first light, then *szp*, gone.

She worried about the birds, the position of the feeder — it wasn't a problem this early in the morning, but later when the sun began sinking in the afternoon, the cabin's picture window would reflect the lake a little too perfectly, a mirror image of west to east — and every few weeks she heard a thud, a smash, and went out to find a stunned bird that had flown into the window, thinking it was the lake. Sometimes she could nurse these to health with a dropper and a down pillow in the back room, though not when the neck was broken. The thought of these thuds and broken necks opened a small crack in the quiet morning, only for a moment. Andy, tall and calm and still feeling pretty with

her sandy hair not gray yet and figure at 56: the thought of the birds made her feel like the surface of linen sheets on the line, fluttering only briefly with her thoughts of revenge. A slight breeze and then calm again.

It was a still day and she would rather think of solutions, though that was Jim's department. Jim, her husband, an engineer, just retired at 60 — oddly happy despite it all, frustratingly happy. Jim had tried one solution: a pinwheel in front of the window, a pinwheel and windsock the shape of a northern pike in front of the picture window, turning the bright artificial colors, flapping, breaking the mirage — it worked like a charm on windy days, wind and neon pink on black would break any illusion. But was it worth it? And on still days Andy cringed and readied herself — and felt like spending the afternoon in front of the window waving her arms, *not here, not here, this isn't the lake!* Sure. And what then would the neighbors think? Next door the Pragues were already talking, let 'em talk, but the real point was: would Ruth Ann do this?

At any rate, Jim was not in bed and not even home at 6 am — he'd long since risen, headed out into the morning, briskly and happily solving things, a residual of his 40-year career, of early mornings and hard mental work, up to a morning of tinkering and precision, a good engineer, a good husband. He might be in his shop varnishing the cherry wood he felled from the family tree farm just north of the lake. Forty acres of woods. Jim and his father George had planted 30 acres in red pine and left the bottom 10 acres wild with hardwood treasure, walnut, oak, cherry. But George was gone now. George who built this cabin with his own knotty pine. George and his wife Gert lived 50 years together and died within a month of one another: how it goes, the length of mutual dependence.

So Jim might be out with that cherry tree he had turned into a grandfather clock, tinkering with clock guts and arranging weights and screwing on the face plate and putting on the finishing coats of varnish. Or maybe he was just strolling town-wards, hands behind his back as he had done since his father died, exactly the way George used

to walk, as if that death left Jim not bereaved but elevated, wise enough now to clasp hands behind the back and *stroll* downtown, surely mulling over solutions to the still day and the window before Ruth and Jerry arrived.

Inside the only sound was Gert's ticker and Andy's breath, synchronized like two metronomes — and then a buzz, meaning the muffins were ready. But Andy, who had been up all night, was falling asleep, and the soft buzz of the ancient white metal timer and the smell of browning bread merged with a dream of Gert at meal time. Her fat Scottish arms wrapped around Andy or flapped at George. George, a small man with a cigar, always in that tan cardigan, a kindly face, those mischievous eyes. He was telling jokes and teasing Andy, saying, "Mother, tell your daughter-in-law to put something over her bathing suit when she goes out, she's causing accidents," and winking. They were eating freshly baked bread and real butter, and someone said Pass the pepper. Pepper to put on the mash potatoes, so much pepper, and the cabin smelled of a roast — but not the smell of smoke, *oh shoo, the muffins!*

Andy jumped up and ran into the kitchen. A black cloud poured from the oven, and she would have thrown it open and yanked the muffins but she knelt instead and leaned her forehead against the glass front of the oven, saw little snatches of flames ignite and fail, the blackened muffins, smoke billowing around her, a small tunnel, and Andy inside, suppliant, not even crying, still. Jim ran in, all six-foot-six inches of action. He pulled Andy out of the way, yanked the tray of black flaming bricks of muffins out of the oven and into the sink, doused, the fire alarm now squealing, yanked the battery there too, and returned to splash water on Andy's face.

"I was about to do that," she said from the ground, laughing nervously. "About to save the muffins."

"Jeez Andy." She was crumpled in the corner ; Jim was towering over her. "Are you awake?" Sometimes Andy walked in her sleep.

"I didn't sleep much," she admitted.

And that was all. Jim was tall, thin, an army-issue bullet head, with cut angles and a crew top that hadn't changed since she met him. Not a psychologist, not one of those sensitive guys, not a toucher. But a good man, a good father: this was what Andy kept telling herself. He'd done his duty — two daughters and a son, all off now and doing okay, except maybe David.

Jim stood there hands dangling. He sighed.

"Let's clean it up," he said.

He opened the doors and threw the muffins out with the pan, waved sheepishly at Mrs. Prague next door, who was puffy-eyed with alarm (Jim mouthed and pointed using sign language: "JUST the muffins NO problem it's OK"). He sprayed Lysol around the kitchen, laying a strange disinfected odor over top of smoke. Andy made coffee, got a box of raisin bran down, cut in a banana for Jim. Wheat toast replaced muffin, with jelly. They ate outside on the picnic table because it stunk inside. Andy was wrapped in Jim's hunting coat and she was still shivering.

They ate in silence until she finally broached the subject. "So this is our last night alone here, Jim."

"No, they already called," he said. "They're coming at noon."

Andy put down her spoon. "It's hardly light and they called?"

"You know Jerry and his fishing. He's been up since 3."

"Wait a minute, Jim. You told them they could come at noon?"

"They said we could stay."

"Could stay! Could stay! I wouldn't, never."

Jim stared at her a moment, blinking. He shook his head. "We've been through this. It's not ours. It's theirs. Deal with it."

"But our last night?"

"We can stay if we want to. They're not kicking us out." And that was all he had to say on the subject. He finished breakfast, got up with a, "I'll be in the shop," and left

Andy shivering in his coat and going inside saying to herself, *to hell they're not kicking us out.*

She went into the bathroom, turned on the hot water in the shower, and imagined Jim out in his shop. George's work clothes were still out there hanging from the wall, by his fishing poles, the minnow trap, the life preservers, the gas cans, the shop tools, a small table saw, drill, chop saw, all Black and Decker. It was George. There was a bale of hay in the corner as a whittling seat, left over from a square dance at least 10 years ago. How could Jim let that go? She slipped out of his coat, out of her clothes and let the hot water steam the room, thinking : *to hell they're not kicking us out.*

When she was soaked, and red, and then dried, Andy came out of the shower feeling sleepy, rounded the corner and saw her dead father-in-law. She didn't even scream. The ghost was motionless, right outside the window with its arms spread like a giant bird, and it was wearing George's overalls, his plaid shirt, the railroad hat, a pair of his ankle high workboot, all of it stuffed with hay and fastened to a rowboat oar. There was even one of her father-in-law's last cigars, taped to straw fingers. It was George, scaring the birds. Jim had constructed a George scarecrow.

Andy sat on the floor and cried. For what? For the day? For Jim's solution? For a husband who would make a ghost of his own father to scare off birds, because now there were no birds in the feeder even, this bird breakfast hour, no sound.

Andy reached for Gert's hour glass and turned it over. Fifteen minutes per side. Twenty-four more times.

The ghosts. The ghosts were quite normal after all. Andy, who was not daughter, felt as if she'd lost her father and mother. She had no others — or the ones she had had were distant and shapeless in her mind. Worse than scarecrows; they were nothing at all. Andy received love from grandma Gert, those fat flappy arms wrapped around her and

beating like penguin wings on her sides. She got teasing from George, and something more. Attention, maybe.

Before Andy's first was born, George bought a pontoon boat, two fat runners and about 18 feet of flat deck with an awning, a captain's nook, lawn chairs, an easy ride. He would take Andy cruising way out to the Big Cove, a couple miles across the lake, to the west. Later he would take the grandchildren fishing in the same cove near sunset, and position the boat between two willows and a white pine, a triangulation, set the compass at 117.50 degrees exactly, lock in the wheel with his auto pilot and let the engine troll them slowly home as the sun set behind them. George was all confidence with his gadgets: "From here it'll strike the dock," he said, because he'd tested it a hundred times. Then he retired to the back of the boat to sit with his grandson David side-by-side in lawn chairs, with a line out trolling for walleye, coaching the boy, reminding him to say "fish on" or the catch was no good, not even looking at the boat's progress. And they would be about 50 feet from the dock, a miracle of automatic navigation, when George rose calmly, leaving David to a few more moments of hope, and cut the engine. They drifted past the buoys while he lowered the bumpers and they slid in gently to the dock.

George also had a boat-sized Cadillac LTD. And it was exactly like sailing a boat into the town of Bear Lake, to see George's friends. He joked with Andy to weigh anchor when they pulled up for a pancake breakfast at the Rotary Club. George's boat car also had its gadgets, cruise control and a compass on the dash. The needle swung just past "S," 190°, as they turned out of the driveway toward town along the lakefront drive, and he locked it in at 25 mph, quiet and enclosed and sailing over a bumpless universe past the outlet stream and boys with zepco poles in long pants and no shirt catching bluegill or nothing at all. Andy — who was taller than George by four inches — had felt like a little girl in the passenger seat, a little girl with a crush whose legs could barely touch the floor in that huge boatlike cruise-control car (did George wear stilts?). They silently and steadily floated south into the port of Bear Lake, that pretty little town on this northern

Michigan lake, a town of bright blue and red paint on small shops, white fences, a small hardware with Black and Decker tools and free popcorn. They ate sugary donuts at Betty's Coffee Shop and returned the smiles and greetings of George's ancient stooped friends who *reached up* to pat Andy on the head and to ask about her little boyfriend, even if her little boyfriend was her husband Jim, a serious faced engineer, six-foot-six, already imagining retirement and a trip through Europe and on to India.

George would push in the lighter and it glowed, electric ozone, and a smart pop — and then out came George's cigar, and the car filled with smoke, sweet, comforting. Her window slid down with a push of the button, but she didn't push it, he did. He was thinking of Andy. And in came Bear Lake, the fertile stink of stagnant water and pebbly beaches, a child's shout floating across the water and the baying of someone's hound dog, smell and sound wrapped around cigar. On the way back they stopped at the Martins to swap tales of hunting geese.

Andy, who tanned easily, nevertheless preferred it up here in the north. She felt at home on Bear Lake. When she was young her parents had always taken her on summer vacations to Orlando, Florida, where she suffocated in the climate, collapsed, flattened and sucked of energy. Here the air pulled life into three dimensions, straightening her back and waking her skin to the world. She went on brisk walks. She liked sweaters and cool nights and the warmth of bodies and campfires relieved against the cut of cold night air. She liked houses to look weather-beaten and compact like cabins, as they did on Bear Lake, A-frames and cedar-sided shacks and even a cabin built in the pines like Robinson Crusoe. But they all had a perfect lawn, cut low like a golf green, kind to bare feet.

Andy walked out now across the lawn in her own bare feet, the morning beginning to warm, and she thought to hell with the neighbors because she wasn't fully dressed for the day yet. Last year the Pragues next door had actually asked about her nightgown, a little

embarrassed, as if at 56 she was still turning heads, leading young Bear Lake boys to sin. Andy crossed the road in her nightgown with Jim's coat wrapped around her, which she wouldn't need in a moment, to the chair swing hung between two poplars down by the lake, a hanging double rocker. George had built it. George and Gert would sit here in the afternoons and swing and watch the world when Gert's baking was done and everything was ready for dinner and there was still plenty of time. Andy squeezed in between them. They made a funny pyramid, skinny, tall, and portly; the children out in the water laughed and pointed, and the threesome waved back. George smoked a cigar. Gert knit or macramed and then just sat. Just watching a sunset was plenty, but with Andy there, the old couple came outside to watch their grandchildren's joy. David, Pat and Carol ran and splashed way way out there in the shallow sandy bottom before things got deep. It was a performance. They performed a show in flippers, masks, snorkels, luring out the dog, calling, "Suzi Suzi!" to their mangy poodle who wasn't a water dog like the Martins' retriever. Suzi came cautiously until the bottom fell off and she was suddenly in over her head, the poor dog desperately trying to crawl onto anything, onto sunburnt backs, while Gert laughed and called look out! Then Pat and Carol dove under with their scuba masks and surfaced like aliens yelling *arrrrr!*, poor panicked Suzi, looping home wide-eyed with paws pulling at almost nothing, as they yanked off masks and yelled "*Come back Suzi, it's only us.*" Andy blushed and smiled at their wildness, thinking: children.

Jim would be back in the shop all the while. He was back in the shop in her memory; he was back in the shop this morning, too. Nothing would ever change. He could have been anywhere, South Chicago, North Pluto, Hackensack, your choice. India. At least Jerry went fishing, here, in this lake.

And Andy, what did she remember doing with herself? Sunbathing, taking the boys on a sail, helping Gert in the kitchen, tasks with George in town, the bank and a small sack of 8-penny nails. She remembered rowing the kids to the spit of sand called The Point, north of here, over there to the right from where she sat now, about a half a mile.

There they hunted frogs and slopped through the silt and the reeds in the tiny cove behind the The Point, a wild adventure that on the most daring days took them over to the tree farm. From this side a visit to the tree farm meant a swim across the cove of snapping turtles and pulling up through the muck and the reeds on the other side. Then they clambered through the shore trees and the pines into the woods to catch a trail west, along the lake, into the ravine, where the bears of Bear Lake fame dwelled. They stopped for blackberries along the way, flopping along in wet tennis shoes and tripping on tree roots, bruised knees and cut foreheads.

The children spent the day wet and caught colds. Andy was always busy with that, she supposed, wiping noses and bandaiding knees and putting Vick's vapor rub in the humidifier. Sometimes a family needs a nurse. That day David came down with meningitis, the weeks beside his bed dabbing his forehead, bathing him. Reading him *The Adventures of Don Quixote*, turning the pages with one hand and fanning him with the other. Pat went through a window playing Red Rover when she was 12. There was quite a bit of blood, the kids were yelling somebody's dying, and there would be 17 stitches. Andy remembered holding a beach towel on Pat's wrist in the back of the station wagon saying *honey you'll be okay it's just a lot of blood you've got plenty more*, and glad the glass missed the artery. So she was needed sometimes. Still, it's hard to account for a whole life of just coaxing people back to health. Her job as a school nurse was paved with uniformity — as if it were all one shapeless child with one runny nose and one sprained ankle and one case of poison ivy; she thought today only of her own children. And now they were well gone, two lost to California, one to confusion.

She sat in George and Gert's swing and squinted west. Jim had plotted their children's coordinates with map and compass and declination and all the rest. From where she sat, she could just see the willow across the lake that loomed by itself in the Big Cove, which was also one of the trees George had used to position himself for his ride home. The willow pointed to Carol and Pat in San Francisco. Her eye moved north

a tad, around the shore, closer in. There was a huge whitepine leaning lakeward beyond The Point and the tree farm: that was David's trajectory.

When the children were very young, they sat with her, all three in a bundle, one year apart each, and if they had spent the entire day fishing and swimming and running circles around the lake — then and only then would all three be willing to sit still under Gert's comforter and wrap up with Andy and simply let the sun go down, maybe try to guess how long it would take until it melted into the lake below the trees out there beyond the Big Cove, a bet worth a nickel or a back scratch. Oddly it was Andy's eldest, and her only son, who stayed the longest — the two youngest were fidgety tom girls, too much nervous energy, running off to build sand castles and knock them over and chuck stones at geese. But David, the eldest, lasted until he was 8. He lay with his head in her lap watching the sun go both up and down. He was the reader, the quiet child — David who would let his hair grow long and wouldn't speak to his father after 16, or vice versa. The hippy, the pot head, the born-again Christian, perennially broke, still unmarried at 35, living in Montana where bears ate people, in his hand-built cedar shack and planning to become a writer one of these days. Maybe a poet. Oh, David.

And when David stopped coming, she was alone at sunset. George and Gert were inside playing their card game, Spite and Malice, and Jim tinkering before bed.

One night Jim came out and Andy almost jumped. He sat down and was quiet awhile, and then awkwardly held her hand, and they sat there like that for 15 minutes or so, while the sun sank like it always did in Michigan, slowly. He watched it disappear. Then Jim got up and mumbled, "Time for bed."

So Andy got bold the next day, and thought it time indeed. Not that they never slept together, but it had become rare. No, worse: mechanical. The children were off with the Martin grandchildren, old enough to go to a movie by themselves, and Andy talked Jim into a sunset pontoon-boat ride. George and Gert were set to go along, all four standing on the dock getting ready to untie, but Andy whispered into George's ear, and he said,

Ohhhh — uh huh, a little taken aback, but winked and smiled. He pulled Gert aside and said, "Mother, I'd rather stay home tonight." This was the tricky part of the plan and maybe she should have gotten George to agree earlier, but they were already on the dock, and Jim was already in the boat. George untied them and sent them off with a wave.

It was a warm still night, the sun hanging huge. They skimmed across the smooth water, like flying. Andy drove, though she never had control of the wheel before, but she steered them in a familiar direction, way out west to the Big Cove, as far away from all the cabins as she could get, and let it drift in the purpling cirque of trees and reflection and arcing skies. She pulled out of her purse a bottle of Jim's own elderberry wine — which he made and seldom drank — and out came two crystal glasses as if it were a magic trick, ta da! She lit a candle; it was still enough for that. The fireflies shot across the sky, double zips of electricity, and Jim drank one glass, then two (Andy refilled his glass each time he was distracted with sunset, a first star, firefly, meteor). And then while he was stargazing she had her blouse off, and he turned around. "Jim, let's make love" — and he looked at her with his are-you-crazy? eyes. This is not a big lake. There are binoculars.

She drove home full throttle 117.50 and almost slammed into the dock, let him tie the damn thing up and ran into her single room, jumping like a diver face first into bed, Gert's comforter, only one pillow.

Soon after, Gert was gone, Jim was still out with his projects, and George who was not to last long without Gert, came out on the swing to sit beside Andy. He walked out with a cane, and Andy had to hold his elbow, but still he had that cigar and teased her lightly. *Don't get any ideas.* A few weeks left to the summer, about a month left of George. She put her arm around her father-in-law, the two quiet.

There were plenty of things said afterwards during the days in the hospital. But the last thing Andy remembered George saying was, "It's a fine night, Andy. A fine place to

pass the time." Maybe he didn't say it quite like that or maybe he didn't say it at all, but to hell with it, that's what she remembered.

How much time had passed this morning? Jim approached the swing and stood behind Andy a moment, pushing it lightly. Then he sat beside her. She set her lips firmly, but surely Jim could see her hands shaking slightly.

"Out with it, Andy. It's not hard to guess the matter, but tell me anyway."

She didn't even turn, didn't hesitate. "How could you gamble the cabin away?"

"It wasn't a gamble," he said calmly. "I've said this a thousand times. It was a sealed bid — Ruth and Jerry outbid us, fair and square."

"A sealed bid? My god, Jim — it's a throw of the dice. A lottery. You couldn't talk about it? Figure out how to share the cabin?"

"It was too complicated, Andy, you know that. You know the problems as well as I do: When do we come? How long can we stay? Who gets the holidays? How do we avoid a fight? What happens when we die and Ruth and Jerry die and suddenly there are six of our children trying to divvy up the cabin?"

She was looking at him now. "Then they talk about it — one decides to give up his share, or two of them buy out the others, or they all just share it. You get in a fight and then you get over it. Life, Jim. These are precisely the things people talk about, sit down together, drink a bottle of wine, work out. Instead you avoid the whole damn thing and throw the dice? What a beautiful plan."

"A sealed bid, Andy. We had our chance to bid higher and we didn't. Life, Andy. Besides, it's my family, not yours."

"Ours, Jim. We're married."

"You're acting like a child," he said, and started away, then seemed to change his mind, sat down again beside her. "Listen to me, Andy. Now we can travel around the world if we want, to India, to wherever. We can spend a month with Pat and Carol in San

Francisco who you can be damned sure would never visit us in Bear Lake, and isn't that what you wanted? Wake up, Andy. Forget world travel even. How can we afford a month in San Francisco?"

"I haven't the foggiest, but here's what I want to know. Explain yourself to me: you'll go to India, but you won't make love in a pontoon boat —"

There, she said it.

But she didn't say this: sometimes I wish it was you, not them, who'd gone. She almost said it aloud to his retreating back, but she didn't, lost in the tangle of her memories. It all too confusing to balance out for or against one person, even Jim. No, especially Jim. Yes, OK, especially Jim. Jim, her suitor whose suiting was mixed with her parents' death; the young Jim had arrived with comfort and roses at the right moment, tall, reserved, four years older than she was, enough space for her grief and enough comfort for her love — an awkward man even then with his blockish head and long limbs, but it seemed to Andy that his awkwardness stemmed from a confusion over how to touch another with those club hands without boxing her over. There was the irony of course: the same huge hands tinkering with precision instruments, caressing clock guts. Surely he was capable of love. She found his blushing endearing. And he was steady, had an income, a family man, stay at home — all of those things she imagined her parents approving. He blushed and brought her gifts, perfume, flowers, all those rituals of courtship, and even a Slinkee, the real surprise, which is maybe why Andy fell in love, some coiled bridge between engineer and 19. They sat on Jim's front porch in Chicago, and let the Slinkee step down three flights with its funky metallic walk, and somehow this emboldened Andy to hope, to healing. Then suddenly a ring one day, as if it were all a logical progression: death, flowers, Slinkee, diamond.

It was summer. He had invited her to his parents' cabin on Bear Lake, her first time there. What a wonder, coming from the city all the way around Lake Michigan and way

up north to this slow, small, perfect town. He took her to the Moose Club because it was the only restaurant open that Saturday, and that was fine. They had a band that played Benny Goodman and you could bring in your own wine, and everyone knew Jim as George's boy. The band played on an elevated stage and the wooden dance floor looked like a high school auditorium. They ate on fold-out chairs and tables, though they were covered with white tablecloths and real silverware, cloth napkins, and someone had even brought candles. Jim would only dance the slow numbers, but they did dance and the other couples gave them room and sent them smiles and nods. She kissed him for the first time, on the dance floor, standing as high as she could on toes, and he kissed back, with warmth, a bit awkward still, clanking teeth and small bits of peppermint lifesaver, but he held her. He held her. Like two baseball bats around her, but OK, it was there. They stood in the center of the swirl of dance, and he pulled a small box out of his suit pocket and gave it to her — it was another Slinkie and they both laughed. Then he pulled the ring out of his pocket. The band stopped and the Moose Club exploded in applause. The way she'd imagined it, a little clichéd, but nice, warm. They were married by the end of the summer and David was born by the next. So what was there to complain of until Pat, their third daughter, was born, and even then Jim was kind but stubbornly sensible: three is enough, he said, separate rooms and some linear regression for the amount of love-making per month or maybe per year, *though Jim there are other ways*. But he never missed a birthday, an anniversary, flowers and a nice dinner. She couldn't remember many arguments.

Andy still sat on the swing, trying to puzzle out her husband, her life. And this change in retirement, her solemn engineer suddenly serene, and about what? Traveling? Going to India? Out of nowhere Jim had become completely obsessed with the idea of going to India. Where did these notions come from? They'd never even been to an Indian restaurant, unless you count the teepee they erected one summer outside the Moose Club. Had he studied Hindu irrigation systems? A sudden worship of skinny

cows? *I mean I'm sorry it's not fair to joke about it, but what was it? What?* All Andy could imagine of India was the claustrophobia of dust and poverty. And why so suddenly aggravatingly happy, this sulky meticulous man with his sensible bullet head, retired and all at once stuffed full of energy, suddenly the favorite uncle to Ruth and Jerry's children and she slipping into grumpy aunt. How did that happen most of all, as if her own warmth was only in relief to his coldness all along. And that was what really worried Andy sitting on the swing, these choices in marriage: tame stamped images of one another or mirrored opposites. But did anyone ever get through to something deeper?

Damn it. She chucked the rock, not at him, in the water. She was going to skip it, but it went tchunk and sank.

Andy got dressed and went chugging towards the Martins, her white nurse's shoes attacking the pavement, her chin up. She had to say good-bye to Pamela Martin. Pamela knew both sides of the story. She was friends with Ruth Ann, but still Pamela had stood by her all these years. Andy could almost smell the goose roasting, Pamela's own quiet room and clicking clock. And Andy was there at the driveway and all it took was a lean to the left, but she kept walking townwards.

I'm a mess. I can't go blubbering into Pamela's. I won't.

She walked the mile-and-a-half into town, faster than the lazy kids on stingrays, breaking through the gossamer of spiders and dragging along one spider trailer and ignoring the floating cottonwood seeds she'd normally try to catch as a wish for David, ignoring the *Yohoo, Andy!* from the long slow cars and the unseen smiles and flitting handwaves from car windows. She ignored the retriever that wagged its tail and wanted a pet, and she ignored the child crying, scared of the fast lady. He'd fallen on the grass trying to get out of her way. She got to the Shell station at the edge of town. An old friend of George's spotted her and waved yelling *Hey, good looking!* and walked toward her, but she waved briefly and turned away, walked the mile-and-a-half back, swinging

her arms and ignoring it all, back to the Martin's driveway, surely now I can take the right.

But she didn't. She kept going, chugged back to the cabin, grabbed the hourglass off the table and the boat keys off the hook by the front door just as Jim was emerging from his shop, as she chugged to the dock. He shouted: *Andy, lunch?*

She didn't even think of untying Jim's bowlines. She just grabbed the hatchet by the boat's fire-extinguisher and snapped the lines in two quick motions, leaving the hatchet buried in the dock. She jumped in and pumped the gas bulb and thank god the boat started on the first try because Jim was hurrying toward her now, almost on the dock, calling "Andy, lunch?" as she floored it and spun around toward the deep random water, heading west.

Andy floating on pontoons. The Big Cove. She had turned the hour glass over seven times, or was it eight, how could she have lost count but she did. Then she chucked it in the lake. A warm, drowsy day, the sun merely overhead and summery with no particular clues to morning or midday, too easy to suspend time and let it float like her. Andy knew she should be worried about sunburn, her clothes neatly rolled under her head as a pillow, but she was more preoccupied with finding a plan, hand in the water, looking at sky trees water, water trees sky. Then it came to her: a solution.

Close enough to noon. Time to operate. She gathered the orthopedics: the life preserves and seat cushions. Yes, the white medical tape from the first aid kit would be helpful too. Bring the patient's skeleton; scalpel please.

Andy worked quickly, efficiently. A seat cushion fit nicely into her slacks and worked as hips. She propped this on the captain's chair, and she didn't worry about legs, the slacks dangling empty like an amputee, but out of sight below the captain's nook. Two life preservers stuffed back to back in her blouse worked well enough for an upper torso, and she taped in a few Styrofoam cups, a distant approximation of breasts. Then

she tied this upright in the captain's chair. What would the head be? A rolled up beach towel. Look in the first-aid kit, find the needle and thread. She stitched the towel extra firmly in a ball, and even pulled out a bit for a nose and sutured around it. Add sunglasses, yes, and a visor, Andy's own visor. Yep. Ah, an important touch: the boat's bumpers slid into sleeves made fat but acceptable arms, and the right one she propped and taped on top of the windshield. She added a glove. She imagined the glove flapping in the wind, a friendly wave. Then a final positioning to the three trees, triangulate, slowly slowly, turn to 117.50 and lock in autopilot. Drape your bra over the mirror, Andy, a small final gesture, operation complete. She closed her eyes and imagined Jim and Jerry and Ruth Ann pointing west saying *Here comes Andy now!* and strolling out on the dock to greet her, *She's going awfully fast.* Then Andy reached for full throttle and readied for the back dive away from the engine into the embrace of the lake.

But no. Damn it, there is no way. Forget the moment after the naked plunge when the questions begin, where to swim, what next. That's a minor issue. The real problem is the arms and legs of the world between you and the dock. Swimmers, kids, dogs, maybe old Mr. Prague, with his spent ears and watery eyes, floating oblivious in his innertube. One second of blissful revenge, and then worry about him or some kid out swimming, Danny Martin, whoever, peering up with his scuba mask thinking Here comes a boat. No, you can't do it. Think this vague revenge through, Andy, because you don't even know what problem you're trying to solve and if you did this is a solution worse than the problem because life is between you and the dock.

Andy tore apart her scarecrow. She pulled on slacks, blouse, threw her bra into the lake and floored it to The Point, swooshing onto a sandy shore riding in her own wake and momentum, leaving the boat beached and plunging across the spit of sand into the

stagnant cove beyond, swimming through cattails and pond lilies. The mud sucked at her tennis shoes as she clambered out the other side onto the trail to the tree farm.

But the mud held her for a moment; she stopped and knelt on the trail. She listened to the hush of these woods. Hold still a moment. Andy remembered napping on the thick red pine needles when she was 20-years-old, so long ago, within those crisp and clean rows, rows whose bottom branches were neatly lopped off by Jim's chainsaw, a meditation in sameness, comfort, trees now 40 to 50 feet tall. Lush and pampered northern woods. The high sun filtered through, angled, reds, yellows. She got up and began walking slowly. The trail was as wide as a road, and she followed it through the plantation pines to the broad, surprising sweep of an ancient oak, the gateway to the bottom 10 acres left wild.

Here, too, there was a different feel entirely, even at the entrance. Above, among the tree-farm pines, there were a few owls and such, but the wild bottom 10 acres was where things lived, down the ravine that drained into the lake — they hunted there, hid at night. Andy knew this. She had found pheasant feathers on the edges, seen turkey tracks down by the stream, always a deer or two, once a young bear when they were picking wild blueberries along the edge of the farm, when she was just married, and George had to carry a pan and a rock, and only Jim could reach the highest berry.

There was something else too. Down below in the ravine Andy had buried something 35 years ago, right after David's birth, as soon as she could get out of the house, carrying David in her arms. It was close to one tree in particular, an alder, with its sign. She wondered if she could still close her eyes and find the alder and feel its bark like Braille; five years during summers she had visited the spot daily and for a time she had done just that, picked her way down here with eyes closed, arms out, and found the alder with its bear-clawed bark. Finding it was more of a ritual than a marker, because the spot itself was easy enough to find. It used to be, anyway. She had chosen the place where a 150-foot maple had given way and fallen, its roots up and cracked in the middle, ripping a

huge hole in the sky. Here Andy had planted an oak 35 years ago. She had planted it with David in one arm, or nested him in leaves, the baby resting if she were lucky, while She dug carefully and cleared some of the brush, and kept at least the bushes at bay. This is what she wanted to search for first, the oak she had planted.

Then she entered the ravine. She left the trail and followed a depression in the leaves and ground, which began clearly enough and quickly disappeared. A game trail. They had always fooled her, but that was okay. The ravine was dense and humid, and it swept through down trees being sucked up by roots of other trees, all that toppled and standing life, hiding places for her children, a hollow in an oak, memories of mosquito bites, vines to swing from and fall, David's sprained ankle. She remembered hauling water to the oak in the dry spells of five summers.

She closed her eyes now and in a minute ran into a tangle of branches. She looked around to get her bearings, and continued. A few hundred yards and she knew she was getting close, so she closed them again. She found the downed maple by touch, huge still, not yet part of the soil. Follow it with your hand, Andy, past its roots, yes. Go straight, and: alder. She ran her hand up the trunk, and found it, 10 bear-claws healed bumpy like ragged scars and stitches twisting down its white-bark leg.

She opened her eyes. There was the oak. It too was about 40 feet tall, its tangle of roots maybe swallowing the treasure she was after now, which was all right with Andy, but she'd check anyway. She dug at the base of the oak and it wasn't where she thought it was, and dug a little to the right, nothing. She was a mess with lakewater and sweat and dirt, her white tennis shoes throwaways now. Again nothing.

Then she found it. A small clank, and she pulled out a metal box, mud blue and tiny, a rusted latch that disintegrated in her hands. There was a card inside, wrapped in tin foil and two sandwich baggies and then foil again. Despite its wrapping, the damp had eaten at its edges, but it was there. Words in Jim's careful hand, inside a Hallmark card, with

the cover a picture of a Norman Rockwell couple gathered around an impossibly pink newborn, now framed by yellow, humidity-eaten gilt. He had written inside:

Your body, our mind, your soul, our kind

Your son, is born, our hearts, are warm.

A stupid thing really, sort of a poem but not really, signed love Jim, in his perfect script. Thirty years? Sentimental words buried and forgotten. She sat in the dirt against the oak, held it and smoothed it over and read it again, and then one more time, then just sat there without reading.

It was probably noon. They'd be waiting for her, wondering about the boat, calmly expecting lunch. Let them wait. She was trying to find something here, or at least rediscover something. Because this too must be Jim. Not Jim of solutions, not Jim of the single bed. Jim of India? Maybe.

She put it back.

SHOOTING THE BREEZE

They would tell how David was just sitting there on his porch when she arrived, reading. She walked to his cabin on the Beartooth Pass side of town, down a winding gravel driveway, partially hidden by pines. The neighbor's dogs were barking at her, following her and wailing, and he looked up, surprised, she thought, by a visitor. Then his eyes refocused from book to lane, maybe trying to pick out why a woman was walking down his drive, then why his mother was walking down the lane. He'd left home eighteen years ago. They hadn't seen each other since.

Andy tried not to notice too much at first, doing her best to turn off intuition, to erase the sight of his head ducking back toward book. But then she was relieved when he put it aside, got up and walked quickly, even forcefully, to greet her. He was taller than she remembered, and stronger, a wiry strength in the way he walked. His back was straight, beard unkept, hair long and bleached by the sun, and those wild blue eyes she remembered staring into when he was a child, when her worry over him was as persistent and vague as it was now. He didn't hug her, but he took her bag, the only thing she had, grabbed her elbow and guided her back on his porch, pulled out a cooler to sit on and gave her his chair.

They sat in silence, looking at one another, she at his windburned skin, the start of lines under his eyes, the first touch of gray hair, and those large hands, callused and scarred — and beautiful.

"I got your letter," he said finally. "You'll be staying?"

"I'd like to. For a while. It's good to see you, David."

"Not here," he said. "I mean you can't stay here, in my cabin. It's not fit for it." And he got up and tugged on her elbow again, gently though, and led her out the drive and down the street.

She almost said, David, can we sit awhile? It had been a difficult trip. But she followed instead, through the town of Cook City, Montana. They walked past a sign that said Pop. 101, most of whom seemed to be out looking at her, stopping to wonder. He led her, and said, "Cath. Maybe Cath can help." Then, as if coming to himself, he said, "You're tired. Hungry. How does it go for the traveler? Shower then a meal? Then we'll catch up."

"I'm fine," she said, relieved at least by the logic in this abrupt greeting. "Who's Cath?"

David didn't answer. They walked down the one main street in town. Andy felt on parade, eyes watching her, a foreigner. She was glad for her big bones and horse-rider looks, her own bit of Montana disguise, but her skin still seemed too soft to her now, too baby-like and touchable here, even after the travels and camping out these last weeks in Yellowstone, hovering on the edge of this parachute descent into her son's life, unannounced except a quick note: "David, I've left your father. For now. I want to come see you." Conversations stopped on a porch outside a bar called Mort's Elkhorn Saloon and small grocery, as a group of men paused to watch a son and his mother walk across town. She smiled and nodded and felt the tilt of her head exaggerated in comparison to the response.

She was trying not to think: he's not greeting anyone. Such a small town. Eighteen years here, and he should be saying hello.

Then he guided her left off the main street into a tight neighborhood where the cabins were squat, as if anticipating the weight of the coming snow. The dogs had the same look; they didn't get up from sagging, outdoor couches, offering only a muffled woof in protest of the strangers. She looked at David for a similar exhaustion, sloping shoulders, but didn't see it. Those were working hands, working shoulders. One less worry.

There was a larger cabin, a two-story A-frame, well taken care of, tidy porch, the front door painted red. David headed straight for that, knocked and walked in without

pausing for a response. A woman stood inside, moving among piles of sorted tools, ropes, helmets and camping gear. She had short cropped hair, plain, almost mannish features, but with something immediately appealing to Andy, a focus and power that was still somehow womanly. What was it in some women that immediately attracted men? Andy could sense this woman had whatever chemical it took. She was plain besides, short, mottled skin, but beautiful lips and the body of a gymnast.

This was Cath. She barely looked up.

There was another man there too, about David's age and built squat like the cabins, hands in pockets and smiling down, a malicious smile through dirty hair that Andy disliked immediately. She felt strangely jealous. That was Tommy, she found out later.

They all stood awkwardly, except Cath, who continued stuffing clothes in a large duffel. "Been a while, David," she said. "Who's she?"

"My mother," he said. "This is my mother, Andy. I was hoping she could stay with you. My place isn't fit for it."

"You two can go to hell as far as I'm concerned," she said calmly, without stopping her work. "Take care of her yourself. I ain't taking her in." The same smile from Tommy, who hadn't looked up at David yet.

So they walked back across town to David's house. Andy heard behind her as they left, "You get the hell out, too, Tommy. Damn men. Get out."

Yes, Andy liked Cath immediately.

Back at his cabin, David cleared a path through books, magazines, papers, to his shower. Andy didn't have much with her, a small bag with a change of clothes already well changed, a few toiletries, a book of love poems by Pablo Neruda, a journal to keep her company, that was all. So he lent her a pair of his overalls for a six-foot-six man, and a clothes pin to bunch and clip them in the back. She just doused her face, put on his overalls, rolled up the legs, and came out.

"I'll shower later. We'll clean your place first, David." She was afraid of the response to the motherly suggestion. "If you want to." But he smiled and shook his head, yes.

"Aren't you hungry?"

"Later," she said.

So they just got to it, fell into a groove of working together and dividing the work, without a word. He began gathering and boxing. She found a broom and a magazine as dustbin, a mop, a five-gallon paint can as a bucket. Outside, they lit a fire in a trashbarrel with the first of the trash, and began bringing out what-all to burn, old newspapers, magazines, letters, files.

It was a glorious day, becoming that way. She had her first sight of needles off a nearby larch floating in, golden, against that powder-blue sky and the rising smoke. She threw sappy twigs into their barrel fire and their sweetness offset the smell of trash burning.

She spotted a man out there on the end of the drive, too, on her first trip out squeezing the mop and feeding the fire. He was stocky, a bit stooped, leather face, maybe in his 50s, 60s — hard to say from a distance and with the weathering. He was trying to be nonchalant, camouflaged in his hunting fatigues, acting like he was looking for deer tracks out by the road. She saw him three or four times in the first half hour, pacing back and forth, the long barrel slung over his shoulder. Then she saw him walking briskly back toward town.

She told David, and he said, "Gotta be Willy."

A knock came a few minutes later when she was squeezing the mop into the toilet. David answered it. Andy came out of the bathroom and stopped suddenly. The man was in the doorway, holding a gun. He stared at her a minute, seemed to realize his impression and shoved out a jar that looked vaguely bloody.

"Huckleberry preserves," he said. Everyone just stood there. "I brought you huckleberry preserves." Still they stood there until he noticed his gun was also kiltered in their direction. He put it down.

"I was going hunting," he said, patting the gun gently with his right hand, holding out the preserves with his left. "Don't have to." Silence. "Maybe I can help clean."

Finally Andy smiled, stepped forward to take the preserves, introduced herself and said please come in. "You and David know each other?"

"Hard not to know people here," he said, smiling widely. "I'm Willy."

"Yes you are."

So he began hauling out trash to the fire too, and the three fell into a new, closer rhythm in that small space of cabin and what all.

"Knew a woman once," Willy said, slipping immediately into a groove, "a packrat you might say. Saved everything till it flowed out front and piled in the seats of the old trucks she had on blocks. Packed away some man who jilted her even, killed him they say and left him there on her wedding bed till the whole town broke in for the smell —"

"A Rose for Emily," David interrupted. "You got 'A Rose for Emily' mixed in with your story. William Faulkner, you know."

"Don't say."

Andy was over by David's music, an entire wall filled with albums and an old turntable. She chose a Patsy Cline album and put it on. Willy let his story be and was dancing around the living room with his gun singing "Crazy," when Cath walked in.

"Wha d'ya doin' here, Willy?" she asked.

"Just delivering preserves."

"In yer camouflage?"

"Yeah," he said. "And now get the hell out of the way because we got some cleaning to do."

"And you're helping by dancing with your gun?"

"Damn right."

Cath shook her head at it all, watched the three go at it, then joined in.

So that was Andy's first day in Cook City, September 21, fall equinox, cleaning up a little, moving in, meeting the town's welcoming committee. Meeting David's friends?

If it weren't for the thought of bears, early October in Montana could have been as distant as a dream. Andy drifted through the trees like a fugitive. Never had she wanted to hike so much, to disappear into a forest. She would stay around Cook City for the time being with her eldest, her only son. But how does a mother stay and not get in the way? The answer seemed to be in the woods, and that's where she escaped. She was a Midwesterner and the 7,000 feet of elevation coursed in her veins, swept her outdoors.

There was a grove of aspen and alder all the same and she walked down a trail with her head to the side and let them cross her vision so that it was as if the grove were moving, not her. She did this with the lodgepole too, and they reminded her of another place when a man, her husband?, had planted perfect rows and lopped the branches. But she'd never seen a forest grow like this by itself, not at all the feel of a Midwestern tree farm, yet so straight and clear of underbrush almost, except the bearberry and bear grass, the carpet of wild blueberry or just the needles. You could walk anywhere, without a trail. And those rows and rows of perfectly straight trees to infinity. She would spin with her eyes open, or the forest would seem to spin as if she were still.

Once she saw a bear out on her own — a grizzly? Maybe. Cinnamon, like smoke through the trees, fast as a horse but low to the ground, running through the barred light like it existed in strobe, on off on off. Those things could eat you here, the bears could, and it made all the difference. She wasn't especially frightened, just completely awake. And once an owl greeted her — a great gray owl as large as a child, a day creature. It swept onto a limb about 25 feet away. Those great dish eyes and curious head tilted and stared and blinked. It swooped even closer. Then it was off, with its six-foot wing span

cutting through the closely packed forest, an impossibility, slipping through trees like a ghost in a prison breakout.

So Andy was glad to get out of the cabin and let David be when she could, not knowing exactly what to do for him and with him while she stayed, except be there some and be away some — that and she knew what she couldn't do, which was drape her motherhood over him. Not in Cook City, Montana. Not anywhere, she supposed.

The old man, Willy, helped get her away. Willy. He only frightened her a little. An odd man, some weird patchwork of brains and stupidity, clumsy grace, boisterousness and something almost like tenderness. He could be a bit too much sometimes, despite his charm, like a character you'd spend the day with in a book but scrupulously avoid in person. Still, he broke the silence of the cabin and of the day, and she thanked him for that.

She went hunting with him when he wasn't working or drinking. He drank too much. He even admitted he fit the divot in the barstool down at Mort's bar where he spent most afternoons and evenings and even some mornings. But when he was sober he was fine, good company. He was a self-proclaimed gossip, a teller of tales, mostly lies, all with the kernel of truth within. So he claimed.

They headed into the woods together, she for the hike and he for the hunt. He had awkward, jerking movements, a strange rocking gait, some violent reflection of his bachelorhood, she supposed — until he took a bead on a pheasant and swung and crouched and bang! in a single movement of grace, the pheasant tumbling forward from its low loud flight. Then he picked it up without a thought, beyond ego, like a master potter finishing a perfect vase, not thinking, just finishing it. Or crouching and bugling in the fall to call out the bull elk in rut, playing a birth-control diaphragm he kept in his pocket. He played it like a wind instrument, a hollow primitive echo, a lute, an oboe, only wilder than that. It was like an ancient choir, a hypothalamic call and response, and the answer from the woods became a chorus of frustrated desire. Elk grunts echoed, the

big bulls wanting more and more, despite their ten females — which were actually called harems. He told her that: the bulls' keep were called harems.

Willy had shown her the trail toward Cut-off Mountain, along a cold stream where they had watched three otter play one day. A couple hundred feet above the stream bed, the trail ducked into a grove of larch. These had become her favorite trees, especially this time of year. Fall was advancing but it was still warm in the sun and she climbed and napped among them. Larch needles pelted her jacket like soft rain. She woke up in a shower of slivered gold, the gold against mountain blue. She told David about this and he said, Yes, that grove was exactly where he wanted to be buried, exactly like that.

Buried? She tried to read either serenity or desperation in his face, but his expression itself was buried in beard. All she had were his own mountain blue eyes, beautiful, unreadable and gazing elsewhere.

Still, she knew life and death were closer to each other here, especially in the fall. The pheasant in the trees reminded her of turkeys, and Willy shot one, which struck her as remarkable because there was certainly more sky than bird. They ate it later, stuffed and with sweet potatoes. He tried to teach her to shoot, too, at a squirrel he called a squeekie — Andy never liked squirrels anyway, so she pulled the trigger but missed. Her ears rang for a day-and-a-half and he said try again and she said, *no, you shoot, Willy*. But she was glad she tried, as if that finally transported the last pieces of her from Michigan to Montana.

One night, David told her how he'd ended up here, of his first trip into Silver Tip Ranch before settling in Cook City. He was a kid of 17, and that was the last she'd seen of him. He'd hitched out from Michigan heading West for the first time, green and naive on a tip from some bum who told him a guy named Gordon Lucas in Montana might need an extra hand on his construction crew. Log Dog Construction? What the hell. He

called from a phone booth in Traverse City feeding quarters in the clicking machine and Lucas said Yeah, that's me.

"You need any help?"

"No" — pause — "What can you do?"

"I dunno," David said. "I can work, I s'pose."

And Lucas: "Have you ever built a house?"

"No."

"Ever worked construction?"

"No."

"Do you even got any tools?"

"No sir."

"How the hell old are you?"

"Seventeen."

"You're from Livingston, Bozeman?"

"No sir, Traverse City. Traverse City, Michigan."

What the Well, by god, stay there."

And a click. So David called back.

"Lucas, what?"

"Excuse me again, Mr. Lucas, but I've only got \$47 to my name which isn't much but it makes a hell of a lot of quarters and I'm gonna use em all to call you until you say I can come."

"Go broke," he said. "I don't give one flying goddam. Go broke in Traverse City."

Click.

So then David had to make good on his threat. He went to the bank across the street and counted his money — he was wrong, only \$39.25. He traded it all in for quarters, walked back to the booth, and started feeding them in, patient, not even thinking yet.

Rings and clicks, rings and clicks. Lucas didn't even unplug the phone on the other end,

just picked it up and put it down, picked it up put it down, until David was down to about \$17 or so. Then someone picked up the phone, not Lucas but a woman, who said, "Enough boy. He said be there in two weeks — go to Yellowstone Park, Slough Creek Campground, the Transfer Station. Two weeks." And she hung up.

"Two weeks?" he said to the dead line.

The transfer station?

But he said *thank god* too, scrounging food where he could and down to \$8 by the time he pointed his thumb west — but enough to make a long, hungry three-day hitch including 14 hours on an exit ramp in Minnesota where someone had scrawled on a post, "stranded 28 hours, 1966," then scratched it out with a "36 hours." But he got out with a van of hippies and then on a long ride with a trucker which landed him at one a.m. in Paradise Valley north of the Park just out of Livingston, Montana, none of which he could see yet. He woke up the next morning to his first mountains, rolling out of his one wool blanket in the cold cut valley that dropped out of the high plateau of the Park, with its wind tunnel grass land and sharp massive sides, cold air like a shot from a cannon barrel dropping down out of high country. Wild and windswept, the West.

He washed in a milky river and looked around him for bears, took three rides with Yellowstone tourists to get to Slough Creek, asking always about a "transfer station," assuming it was a train depot, and all his rides looking at him crazy — *there are no trains in Yellowstone*. "Yes," he said, "but a transfer station — I'm supposed to go to a transfer station."

They dropped him off at Slough Creek. He walked into the campground about a mile over wide-open terrain and saw only the beat-up old storage barn with a few men — cowboys, by god — loading up a wagon with supplies and those huge draft horses, six of them, towering beasts, and a load of lumber. It was raining, cold, and a suspended silence hung over the place, over the men and their wet work and the quiet rain. David was already soaked; he had no real rain gear. He broke the silence and asked about the

transfer station, and an old bowlegged man mumbled *ya got it*. He asked, "Silver Tip Ranch, Gordon Lucas?" And they pointed to the plywood in back of the wagon and jerked a thumb and said *get in*. So he did, and rode the thirteen miles up the creek bed in the back of the horse-drawn wagon on the 120-year-old wagon road over the small pass and up the valley, no one saying a word, the two old men in front hunched like the horses in the rain, David in back bouncing and clacking his teeth, thinking where the hell? driving to nowhere and arriving at the ranch surrounded by its huge nothingness, just on the edge of the park boundary (with nothing but a post to mark it). Wild country in front, wild country behind. Out there. He was seventeen years old and dwarfed by it all. The ranch was nothing but a few log buildings, a barn, a main lodge and a cook lodge, quarter horses and drafts disappearing in mist and twilight — and wilderness.

Andy thought it a lonely story. And she thought she caught David crying one night, hunched over with his face to the wall, when she had been out. But he came to and said he'd been sleeping. She peered into those deep red-rimmed eyes and wondered about drink or smoke, but could smell neither on his breath or in the air. She found out in time that he rarely did either — there wasn't that to worry about, either.

He passed his nights alone, content to settle in his cabin, to read. They spent their evenings in silence and she tried to find things to do with herself. It's true, she knew that there wasn't much to go out to. A place called Mort's Snorts and Betty's Grub was the center of all activity: the post office, restaurant, laundry, mayor's office, bar. Everything. David didn't go there. He said he rarely wrote letters, made his own meals, had his own washing machine, hated politics. And he didn't drink, not anymore. He went to Mort's, he got foolish. So he stayed home.

How do you meet people here, Andy wondered. Is this really all the more difficult for men than women? No. Think of Willy. Still, she wanted to do something for David from the first, but here she was stumbling over her motherly instincts, trying not to

scream: *Get out there, find friends, take a wife. You're 35. For chrissake, go make up to Cath!*

When she asked him about her he said: "She's with Tommy."

"Maybe, but she doesn't love him. He just hangs around. I don't even think he loves her."

Then he said, "Are you worried about me for me or are you worried about me because you want to forget you?"

There: The Montana in her son, the ability to hit the mark.

But she wanted to do something more than forget herself, and more than just nag. She hatched a plan, just one little something to do for him. It was a simple thing — a motherly thing. David had been out helping Lucas patching roofs before winter and crawling under buildings to pull wire. It was always temporary work, a week at a time, never much romance to it. He'd come home and dirty up the shower and know that he was dirtying up the shower and he seemed to say with the way he did it that he didn't yet resent that part of her presence, the fact that he was aware of messing things up. And of course his acceptance of this couldn't last, not with his need to be alone and the sadness that sometimes seemed to overwhelm him, when she caught him slumped in his chair and unable to speak or get up. She sensed the guilt: being a tired and sad son surely drove the sadness even deeper. Or so she imagined.

When he was young they had brought each other comfort. Her eldest had marks of the youngest — being held onto a bit too long, the child in him that had never been released. So here he was at 35 not yet fully grown, and that look that said hold me still, which competed with a more sullen space of the part of David aware of the years and the ruts in his life and his need not to be held. This was also in his face, especially around the eyes, those marks of exhaustion with nothing to show for them really but the calendar. He was still a laborer, scraping by on pick-up jobs after 18 years away from home.

Still, she caught a glint of pleasure over the small things she'd do, just a mother's presence in a house, when it mattered if the toilet seat was up or down. Not that it changed his ways and the chaos he chose to live in or even caused him to actually lower the toilet seat. Everything but his record collection was jumbled about in piles, even after their initial day of cleaning which only succeeded in making paths through it all. Not that this bothered her. It was a lot like the abundance you get in a house of all plants, a jungle of green as if you live entangled in roots and life. But he had no house plants in Montana, just a mess of the last dozen years left piled haphazardly in a small cabin.

Except the record collection. She didn't want to forget the exceptions, and she would formulate her plan around them.

Andy wondered whether Cath thought the same way she did. Had she made the distinction between music and everything else when she lived here? Did she try to be neat with everything — bring her own home here? Or had she done the opposite? Had she just thrown records on and off and piled them wherever like they would clothes and dirty dishes? That would have been a mistake.

So Andy schemed. She got Willy to drive her one day to Gardiner, then Livingston, and finally Bozeman, in search of the same cleaning fluid David had in an empty bottle by his turntable. Willy didn't understand why she needed exactly that, but he did it, and they finally found it after driving a few hundred miles.

Andy went to work the next morning when David was away. He returned late in the afternoon and was trailing work clothes on the way to the shower, probably thinking his mother was out of the house somewhere with the old man Willy. He wasn't noticing much — she was there, hiding in the kitchen. But even though he was surrendered to exhaustion, she saw him catch a hint from his wall of records, that weird, glowing dustlessness. Then he spotted the cleaner, the new bottle. He stopped, just in his underwear, and began to pull albums out, one by one, randomly across the alphabet, put them back, and took out another. He played a song off of one, scratchless, then another.

Settling in cross-legged, he brought down whole stacks and went through them meticulously, cradling the records:

"My god," he said, "they're so clean."

He turned and Andy was there, and the look he gave her was that of a lover, just for a second. She was standing in his oversized T-shirt, feeling the embrace of the afternoon's long light, allowing her son a glimpse of her own beauty, leaning against the door jamb and gazing at him.

"Mom, I —"

"We should listen to music," she said. "Take a shower and we will. I've bought beer. Willy bought it for us."

But she didn't tell him about Cath coming over, and when he emerged from the shower she was there, so the three sat on the floor and pulled down his albums and listened to the best song from each, his choice, to see how far they could get through the collection, with the beer there, beer which he said he hadn't drank for a decade because, he said, he worried about his tendency to habit and those things that took his mind away awhile. Like reading, though that seemed less dangerous than alcohol. But the beer was cold now and tasted incredible despite Willy's choice of Hamms. They found themselves giddy and laughing on the floor while he and Cath said: "This album, *this* album," dumbly trying to explain the context of the song to Andy. She listened closely because even the gestures told her stories of her son, each important song tugging out a moment of intensity in his life. The beer loosened his tongue, so that he even let her know what album he first made love to Cath by, which Patsy Cline.

"You played it the first day here, Mom. You had no idea."

He also told her what became their signal music for dance, Dan Hicks and the Hot Licks, and a dreary album by a group called The Cowboy Junkies he listened to over and over when she left too. They were quiet a moment at that because he had both in his

hands, but he chucked the Cowboy Junkies across the room and it smashed to bits against the woodstove.

"Been wanting to do that." And they all laughed.

Cath wouldn't stay, but she had come, and lingered late, almost until three in the morning, and later she had a black eye but she denied it when Andy asked, "Did Tommy do this to you?"

"No," she said, "I got thrown."

"I'll kill him if he did."

"It was Missy, my horse Missy."

Cath milked cows for David's neighbor Dennison in the summer when she wasn't off fighting forest fires. Willy told Andy this on one of their evening strolls down the road out of town. He was her gossip column, her source of news and information. They hiked, she asked, and he answered, with varying degrees of precision. Cath was addicted to fires, he said, spent her falls crazy with anticipation for smoke from the woods, just like any of the crew, moping if one didn't burn.

"That black eye, Willy. What d'ya think? Was she thrown or hit?"

"I dunno. Can't imagine Tommy getting away with hitting her, but maybe he could. I saw her thrown once, anyway," he told Andy. "Never seen a human body fly that far, but Cath's so compact, rolled in a ball and traveling through air. She landed in rock too, a scree field. But she's up as soon as she's down, after that horse, holding its reins and talking low to it, not even brushing off that leg of hers. I could see it from where I was standing, the ripped open jeans and blood over that other scar. The old one. But she's got that horse calmed and she's up on it and riding away with her back straight, hair bouncing, a princess you know. Royalty."

"But Tommy? Stick to the point. Are they together? What happened with David?"

"I dunno on both counts. We've been wondering. She races cycles too, which is why she knows the crazy ones like Tommy. She laid one down at 85 once, and that's the leg with the real scar. You see it come out in the summer — one ugly mess of a leg but she don't care. She and Tommy hotwire tourist cars in the summer, line 'em up downtown, ramp 'em, and jump 'em on their bikes. They get wild, even though she doesn't drink. But love? Nah, don't think so. Ask her. Ask your son."

"I did ask David and I will ask her, when the time's right."

"As for me," Willy said, "I'm not going to ask you about him, about David, because that seems a bit too much for me to know. Besides I figure it's simple, really — some people just ain't happy and he just happened to land out here where he can think too much. I'm not going to ask you about the white pills they say he took once either, though you're a nurse, you'd know. But I will ask you if you're leaving when he gets better."

The last stopped her short a second, then she shook her head. "White pills? Willy, your stories!"

"So they say. But are you leaving?"

"I came not knowing that he was bad off. But I'll leave if he gets better. Or if Cath decides to come back. Sometimes a mother makes it worse anyway."

"But you? Don't you want to stay?"

Andy looked over and stopped. "No. I don't think I can stay. It's too lonely here, Willy."

"Pardon me, ma'am, but that's a lot of bull. I mean if you'd be just a little friendly and come down to Mort's . . ." — but he shut up because she was just looking at him.

"OK, forget that then," he said. "Here's the big question: Are you married?"

"In a way, yes."

"That don't seem to answer the question, Andy."

"That's the best I can do right now."

"Sometimes it seems like you're running from something — you got some trouble, something. From a husband? I don't know why — you just got some mystery tucked inside you, like you robbed someone somewhere."

Andy just leaned over and kissed Willy on the cheek and said, "This fugitive is glad she met you. Shush now."

Andy visited Cath and stared Tommy down, surprising herself with that, as if she'd actually take a swing at someone. Cath seemed to like that about her. She even asked Andy to join her on a smaller fire in late October toward Beartooth Pass, which climbed to 12,000 feet out of the high northeast plateau of Yellowstone. It was cold work, ice on the creek in the morning, and a dry stuffed forest of kindling. The smoke stung Andy's eyes all day, and she didn't quite understand what was possessing the men around her — and the sole woman, Cath — their eyes red too but alive with savage excitement over sixteen-hour days cutting trenches in front of the fire line. It was like war, a hot, ugly business. A person longed for this?

She heard the tales then, so many stories, of crews caught in a rager that could gallop up a hill like a horse and swallow them all. And Cath showed her the final defense, a pitiful little fire-shield that looked like a tinfoil blanket. If you couldn't outrun it you dug yourself in and covered over and let the flames sweep over you. Sure, to bake in your own oven.

Andy cooked for the crew and bathed soot out of eyes at night, treated a sprain and some scrapes and one second-degree burn — nothing major. It snowed on the eighth day, and that was that.

Late fall Cath took her into Yellowstone Park to show how she and David had met, out to Silver Tip Ranch for a week. Silver Tip — another name for a grizzly, for the silver fringe of fir in the fall. David would join them for a night. They drove about thirty miles from Cook City on the northeast entrance road to Slough Creek campground,

deserted of tourists this time of year, just an old log building shuttered up where Tommy and the old cowboys who worked for the dudes out at Silver Tip kept their hay for the draft horses that still pulled the wagons the thirteen miles up Slough Creek. This was the transfer station.

David met them there, and the three rode horses over the small pass, up the 13-mile ribbon of Slough Creek, back to the ranch — it was a seasonal dude ranch; there was no one there now. They arrived late, and it was already near freezing with night closing in. The trip jarred on Andy's bones, and she thought of nothing but sleep, but a shot of whiskey revived her.

She was surprised that David and Cath wanted her around. They wanted to show her everything, to explain this place, and they each stuck close to her, guiding her by the arm. In the last of the light they took a tour. All the buildings were log. There were several guest cabins, a barn, a cook cabin and a main lodge like a log castle in the middle of it all. The creek looped around behind the ranch and formed a wide meadow, which was in turn encircled by mountains and forest going green to black in the rain of twilight.

In the main lodge, they lit a fire in large stone fireplace and sat far away from it, in the center of the room — bear and moose and elk mounts stared down from 25-foot high walls, eyes glassy and alive in the firelight.

They hung a pot by the fire to heat up the stew they'd brought with them, and when that was warm they ate it quickly and greedily, sopping it up with a dense corn bread, sitting on the ground without a table. Andy sensed a ritual, that Cath and David had done this before, when just the two of them were caretakers out here one winter, a love affair still young. The three sat cross-legged on a bear skin rug, huge, with paws and head intact and deeply shagged, like the rug of a Mongolian emperor, eating their stew. Andy wasn't sure if any of this was sacrilege or a sign of respect — among all of the staring dead — and maybe Cath and David weren't sure either, though maybe there was a thrill to the uncertainty.

It was spooky, David told her when they'd finished, in the winter alone out here — even with Cath the one winter they were caretakers. He was out in the dark of the lodge one night, a bit of moon shining in and glinting off eyes. He swore that he was under one of the coyote heads when it suddenly careened off the wall and flipped twice and its teeth sunk in his cheek before he could jump.

"It was that coyote," he said, pointing up.

He showed Andy the scar too. He had begun to believe in ghosts out here — as did Andy for a moment from the telling, touching the scar in the leap of the fire light, thinking: so this is why you've come.

He told her how the ranch had been there before the Park even, in the late 1860s. It was settled by one of the original whites here, Frenchy Duret, a trapper and a son-of-a-bitch from all accounts. He hated grizzlies. Trapped them with huge iron shackles and spring-loaded steel traps large enough to maul the leg of a quarter-ton beast. Frenchy would walk in and sit just out of reach of the trapped bear, just sit there taunting it, insulting it, emptying his rifle over an hour, slowly, tormenting it, popping a foot, a shoulder, a snout, and finally dropping the crazed beast — then ripping out its vitals while it was dying to wear around his belt. Quirts, they were called. He wore a hoop of quirts around his belt, and a necklace of fangs.

Andy thought as she listened that they all had stories here, and they all came back to Frenchy Duret or at least to what he represented. She sensed some seed of that brutality in each of them. And they showed a certain soaring joy with the telling that even David, quiet David, entered into. Indeed, it was David who was doing most of the telling that night, the story of Frenchy's demise, which he had in turn learned and absorbed when he worked out here at 17, cut off from the world for months with Lucas' log crew.

This, the demise, was 1868 — five years before the Park was formed by Teddy Roosevelt. Frenchy must have clamped onto one of the largest grizzlies in the area — how big? 1000 pounds? 1200 pounds? Who can say. Big as all hell. Frenchy walked

the six miles from his camp right here. He must have grinned when he came upon the bear, and sat down with his taunts and insults and unloaded all six shots from his six-loader into it because when they found the gun with the teeth marks it was empty.

They had hung Frenchy's gun on the wall, clawed and bitten, as evidence.

There must have been no time for a re-load. They found the broken steel chain as big as a man's leg, and it was hanging too in the lodge — looking impossible for anything living to break really, but the bear surely attacked with some immortal fury. And then some kind of hand-to-hand combat followed with the five-foot musket between man and bear. But that wasn't quite the end of Frenchy. Not yet. He crawled five miles toward the ranch with its emergency medical supplies which were a needle and thread and a bottle of whiskey — but only five of the six miles back. They found his body a mile from home. Did the bear follow, slowly taunting him? Was it the same creature or the spirit of revenge or Fate itself which stole his liver there and — so they say anyway and who really knows — his sex?

Andy looked up at David then in front of the fireplace, those glowing eyes alive — not dull as they were when she worried about him during the day. This was a different kind of worry and a new excitement too. She said: So this is why you've stayed.

The next morning David took off back to work, hunched in the rain. Andy thought it must have looked a lot like this the day he arrived, only now he was the rider, his own bit of cowboy. It was strange for her to see, as if a son from a northern town went away to return with a southern accent — plausible, even convincing, but difficult for a mother to accept as fully real. Her son the cowboy? Even after 18 years he was surely more Michigan than Montana.

Cath was a foreigner too, an Okie, but there was something natural about her place here. Was this what a lack of physical beauty gave a woman, something real and

completely present? Maybe. And what of David, a man certainly with his own physical beauty? Had Andy left him the worst of herself, her own clumsy, self-conscious ego?

Again, maybe — to all questions. Cath stirred up her own kind of response. But Andy had always found herself struggling through the distraction of the attention to her own beauty to find her way to anything as perfect as Cath in front of the woodstove feeding in sticks, leaned over, concentrating, an iron skillet full of bacon for just the two of them, and an old tin pot already beginning to percolate coffee.

Cath and Andy spent a week out at the ranch, their second week together. This was different from the fire duty without the surrounding of men, despite the work they did. A tree had fallen into one of the guest houses on the edge of the ranch, and they replaced a small section of wall, dropping a few lodgepole pine about ten inches in diameter across the creek, dragging them over with the horses, peeling them, fitting them in and notching the frame joints along a two-by-four to allow the green wood to move as it shrank. They would chink it closed later with horse hair and chinking cement. Cath had done all of this before.

They even made their own lumber. Cath set up a chainsaw and jig and nailed a board to the log as a guide. It took several minutes to run the chainsaw slowly, patiently, down the log. She wore goggles and her hair filled with sawdust and woodchips, giving her the look of some giant, hairy insect. Andy insisted on trying it too, once it was set up. She found herself drawn to the patience of the task and the droning noise and flying sawdust insulating her from her thoughts, focused in entirely in the moment. And she was as happy as she'd been for a long time concentrating on wood and whirring blades, walking the chainsaw down a twelve-foot length, aware of her fingers like she was aware of trees to climb when they hiked in grizzly country.

No, she whispered to herself, not the violence and adrenaline, but this simple kind of focus: this is why he's stayed.

They also set up bucks to peel logs they'd use directly in the walls, and that was a less satisfying chore because Andy couldn't quite capture Cath's smooth motion of pulling the two-handled blade toward her.

So she sat nearby and watched Cath's grace and power and waited most of the day before she finally asked Cath to explain David.

"You're his mother," she said. "You explain him."

"Yes, but the last 18 years — this I don't know. Has he been lonely the whole time?"

Cath pulled back and a peel of lodgepole stripped off like apple peel, smelling sweet like that too. "I think he likes his loneliness," she said.

"Always?"

"No. You're asking if he gets depressed. Yes, of course, you know that."

Andy didn't press it then. She went to fix their lunch, but later when Cath was still peeling logs she asked, "Did you leave him because of his depression?"

"You're looking to blame someone?"

"I'm looking to understand." But no, that wasn't right — she *was* looking to blame someone, she realized, because she felt all of the blame on herself, as she always would. A mother who passes on the concentrated essence of her own faults. She was the original loner.

"Yes, I'm looking to blame someone."

Andy took the blade from Cath and tried to spell her. The bark chunked off haphazardly. Cath put her arms around Andy and helped her pull, until she got a rhythm going, and it began to slide. It was a revelation of sorts, that first feel of success, like learning a sweeping dance, the waltz, getting it right.

"Why do you think he gets depressed?" Andy asked.

Cath's head was on her shoulder. "Who knows." She almost whispered this in Andy's ear, pulling smoothly into a quiet sweat at 60 degrees. "Why does anyone? I suppose he thinks too much and he's not sure what life is and what he's supposed to do

and how to just live in it. Who's different? Though he does sometimes — you saw him here, just fine, all lit up."

"Yes, but those were just stories. He was just lit up to tell stories. They didn't even sound true to me. Violent fairy tales."

"And what do you want him to be lit up about?"

What indeed? Andy wasn't sure. A steady contentment instead of a brief release, perhaps, which was what the alcoholic did, or any addict of brevity did, including the storyteller, when the exaggeration just led you further into the let-down of reality. And what about herself? David was a searcher who'd ended up here like the random towns in eastern Montana that existed only because some pioneer's wagon busted down. But what was her search and why was she here? She had left Jim to his dumb excitement over exotic India while he let home dry up and blow away. Was this David's India? What about hers?

Arms around her still, Cath said: "It's good that you've come."

The compliment surprised Andy, as did the closeness, and she had to let it settle a while.

Later, when they had finished work, she sat alone in the meadow looking at the sharp, defined mountains rising out of the fuzzy, watercolor green of forest, and thought of Cath's embrace. As small as the gesture was, it reminded her of an old friend she had lost touch with inevitably through marriage and children. She and Trudy would meet at lunch-hour by a pond near work and fall into conversation and wake from it to realize they had been there over an hour without eating a thing.

She wanted to say that men didn't communicate the same way. They didn't enter the world through talk, but conquered it by story. World adventurers, Odysseuses all. Ah, but the exceptions. Was David really that way? And maybe she was just feeling especially cruel and crabby and anti-Jim today, a judgment she wanted to extend to all men.

She remembered one day by the river with Trudy when Jim had driven by and stopped and shouted for them — repeatedly, he said, and she simply didn't hear until she looked up and he was there, in front of them, angry: "I've been yelling for five minutes. Are you deaf?"

He said later that she seemed out of it — was she drinking on her lunch hour? This surprised Andy too. Talking — the right kind of talk — was to her the complete opposite of drunkenness.

They left the next day, and Andy thought about the differences between men and women on the ride out. It kept her quiet, and Cath seemed to like it that way. They had another cold rain that night, though it had cleared in the morning. The valley lay misted, a few hundred feet below the snowline, though when they climbed a rise the horses would trod through about an inch of new white. The higher snows had driven the animals en masse down into the valleys, and they saw elk, deer and moose everywhere now, one black bear, a few bison. A coyote cut across their path, looking skinny and a little worried.

They made it out to the truck by noon, loaded up the horses in the trailer, and drove slowly through deer and elk as far as Andy could see. Cath said this was a favorite wintering ground for the herds, and it seemed they'd already gathered. It was a primitive scene unimaginable except on the Serengeti perhaps, a lost time. As their truck lurched over the dirt road, dust and snow rose to cloud motion. They started up small stampedes through the flanks of the herd. It was as if the elk were one giant beast whose skin quivered and rippled in reaction, but only so far, and then the stampede died.

Andy was looking at the scene, through it. "Cath," she said, "I'm trying to figure out the big stuff when I should be working on the little, when I should just be watching this all. But I can't help it: what makes men different from women?"

Cath didn't even say More big questions. She just drove a while at their walking speed through the herds, lurching on the dirt road.

"You don't know?"

"I don't know," Cath said. "Seems to me the question is a man's question, if you gotta act like there are man things and woman things. And you and I aren't exactly all women just like David isn't all man. No offense — we've got it mixed up in there, which isn't all bad if you look at the people who are all man or all woman."

"But I don't mean do women knit and men hunt, are men on top, women on bottom. Do men and women need something different?"

"I don't mean knitting and hunting either, and you're still ridin' the right thing down, but your questions are out there. Head questions. Man thinking. It's all too big and none of it helps. How the hell do I know?"

"Okay, then: Do you love David?"

This time Cath didn't hesitate. "I dunno. I don't know. He's a pain in the ass — no offense — but he's a pain in the ass sometimes. Thinks about himself mostly. But he understands things. He's not stupid. And those eyes. David's easy to look at, too easy. I mean he's beautiful and I'm not but he doesn't know how to hang out."

She looked over at Andy. "Yeah, I guess I do love him. I don't know. He drives me crazy."

And Andy: "If you decide to come back to him, I'll leave. If you leave him I'll stay — at least for a while. So tell me."

Cath was quiet now, not asking about Andy's past — where she might be running to, from. And David's father? Andy could almost hear the questions rattling around in Cath's mind, but they drove on without talking, through the herds and out to the park road. The blacktop was higher, clear of deer and elk. When they got to it, they accelerated east toward Cook City.

Cath had told Willy she'd stop by on the way back and check if he needed anything. He, Tommy and Lucas were working the sheep in the herding pens before trailering them to lower country for the winter. Cath and Andy drove to the pasture just across the Park boundary and pulled up on the edge of the fence. The ground crunched as they stepped out, but the sound flew out and was swallowed immediately in that immense country. They heard nothing though they could see the sheep pushing and surging at the gates, some domesticated reflection of the wild herds across the boundary. In the silence, the vastness of the movement seemed disconnected. Willy and the men were engulfed in a horizon of animal motion, hunkered in its center and working at something, wrestling and pinning sheep.

When Cath and Andy walked up, Willy smiled at Andy but no one said hello. They were bloody and Tommy especially so with a knife in his teeth and his devil grin, his beard speckled red and his shirt dyed crimson. The buckets around them were full and floating. Andy peeked in while they stood there in the middle of the sheep and silence. Even after two months here she still felt that tug to polite communication, which she knew was an import from the East. And she knew that but felt awkward still and couldn't help but break this immense silence of the moment that was about to drive her crazy.

She asked, "What's that?"

"Ma'am?"

"What's that — in the bucket?" She pointed.

Tommy looked up at her with the blood and the grin and the butcher's knife and red eyes and even gory teeth like he'd been waiting all his life for this moment, saying, "Them's balls, ma'am."

She had heard them call it Mort's, or the Elkhorn Saloon, or Mort's Snorts and Betty's Grub. Mort was forever behind the bar while Betty didn't work here anymore (to save the marriage), but everyone got used to the name and the burgers tasted pretty much the same

as they did before. Out there in the restaurant, in Betty's Grub, the tables were clean vinyl, respectable, and she could easily enough imagine a tourist thumbing through a menu in the summer and finding the antlers on the wall quaint and country and as interesting as driving a Winnebago through Yellowstone. It was easy to enter there, even inviting. The Post Office window in the hallway had fake flowers. The grocery around the corner was small, but clean and welcoming. But Mort's corner wasn't. You had to cross a wide, dark dance floor, littered and sticky, past hulking speakers and a bandstand with nowhere to hide.

Willy was there. She approached slowly the circle of backs gathered even this early in the evening and listening to his story.

"Tommy and Dennison were holding 'em down so I guess she can't see," he was saying, "and Tommy looking up at her question, blood all over with that crazy grin, 'Them' balls, ma'am! Them's balls' It was history, boys! Tommy made history!"

He laughed and shook his head. "Ah but you've never seen anything prettier than her. She's standing there beet red, mouth open trying to figure us and it and the world out, with her mouth open in a bit O round like — well you know like what. Ha! And then Cath is laughing and the boys are laughing and she's just blushing pretty and then says, 'Oh . . . I see.'"

"Willy."

Andy stood still, her hand trembling a little. The others had seen her and were looking down, clearing their throats. Mort nodded at Willy until he turned around.

"Willy, I need. Can you help? It's David."

What was this scene and was she creating it, one harder to buy than any she'd heard? Outside, the snow was gray and slanting out of the twilight sky and picking up momentum. It had started as huge, individual flakes. Before she let herself get worried about David, the flakes reminded her of small parachutists, and she had opened her

mouth and said welcome to planet earth and snagged them with a quick, lizardy tongue. But the wind had picked up and the weather was starting to blow in horizontally when she began to think too much.

"He said something this morning, Willy. He just looked unsteady, walking around the cabin picking things up and putting them down. Couldn't even sit and read. Then he said he was going to do something foolish tonight and left. Been gone all day."

She told him she'd checked Cath's — no one there. He wasn't at Lucas's; no work today. She had walked everywhere in town she could think of.

She only had hiking boots so Willy strapped her into snowshoes and wrapped her up with what he could. He grabbed headlamps and packed in extra wool, and she didn't want to make a plan other than to begin and not to talk or speculate. To hike up and into the snow. Well, yes, there were footprints pot-holed into the first six inches of snow. She saw those before she got Willy. They were leading toward Cut-off, which would have relieved Andy if she let herself think about it because she and Willy knew the trail so well. And it would have worried her too if she thought of the time David told her about his grave under larch needles. But because of the scene playing in her mind she wasn't thinking yet and said, *shush, Willy* when he began to tell her of the last time he was out here in the snow at night chasing someone and how it was worthless.

"No talk," she said. "Let's just try it. Those are his footprints. I'm sure of it."

But the tracks were disappearing already in the blowing snow and the closing darkness. As soon as they left the lights of town, Andy also felt closed off, disappearing, and when they turned on their headlamps that seemed to isolate them even more in a close horizon of white and blowing white, a small, domed universe in the darkness. But she didn't want to think about that either.

They walked into the storm, into the woods. How far? A mile, three miles. Hard to tell and she didn't want to guess. She wouldn't consider bear either, nor eyes in the woods, and really, she told herself, she and Willy were the most fearsome creatures she

could imagine now, wool pants and caps thick with snow, two abominable beasts of the winter. Willy started yelling behind her, "Andy, I'm not" — and she'd cut him off with, "Just a little more."

There was some sense at first to this. Where the trail was wide they could follow the tunnel of trees and stick with it. Some sense, but not much and getting less and less as the trail narrowed and steepened and began to switchback, until finally even she knew that they'd left the path a while back.

Willy said, "Andy, I'm not," and she said "Shush," but he stood still.

"Andy, no shush. This ain't right."

"Just another mile," she said.

"We're the ones'll get lost. You're not even sure he's out here. And what're we, some sort of adventure rescue team? Look at us."

"He's here. The larch grove. I think he's there. I'm almost sure."

"And we're supposed to find it? We need help if we're gonna do it. We should'a gotten help in the beginning."

He started back and wouldn't listen to her and said, "We'll come back if he's not home, with plenty of people. He's probably home now. Andy, you shush. C'mon."

But David wasn't home. And when she rushed into Mort's for reinforcements she half expected noise and the breaking of glass or maybe she was too panicked to pay attention. So it took her a good, long moment to realize that her son was at the center of Mort's dance floor, in the noise and clutter and shouts and swinging arms, bloodied, a good head taller than Tommy, with a look of joy in his eyes as Tommy swung and missed or connected but did little damage. David was just waiting, it seemed, bottling his fury, stepping back slowly and taking Tommy's punches.

She said "David," but it was too soft and too late because he stopped suddenly, planted himself and took one furious swing. It was an impressive enough sight, but not

as amazing as the fact that Cath appeared out of the crowd and swung at the exact same moment and the two connected like mirror image fists converging and landing — one mighty crack on Tommy's jaw that laid him out cold.

Everyone stood around blinking, cross-eyed over the feat. Tommy tried to get up, saying, "Once there was a bar," and then he collapsed again. They dragged Tommy out and Andy went with him to check on bones and the possibility of a concussion. But he wasn't bad, just sleeping. He woke up for a second in Mort's bed and said, "Ma'am, you're beautiful," and she said, "Tommy, shut up."

She left him to his sleep and came back and knocked back a shot of whisky. David was dancing with Cath, wobbly but clear-eyed, happy. He came by and said, "Mom, sorry — I'm drunk, a drunk skunk." So she got another shot of whiskey, grabbed Willy's hand, and danced with him, swinging wildly and fiercely — leading.

When the music slowed they came together, and Willy took the lead. He slipped his arm around Andy and put his cheek against hers, the sweet smell of alcohol sweeping over her nose, which reminded her of the ranch, of the lumber, of her son's cabin, of Montana. David was still there beside them with Cath, and they too were dancing in each other's arms.

"Talk to me, Willy," she whispered. "Tell me a story."

"True one?"

"Yeah, a true one."

He thought for a moment, and his story took a while to emerge and came out slow too, the length of the song and in a close third person, and it could have been to Patsy Cline but it wasn't though it still sounded right.

"Once there was a bar," he began. "So you heard them say. Not a bear but a bar. It was Mort's. They say there was a man there who knew the bar well — very well — with a butt that fit the dip in his favorite barstool. You know his name. Have you heard this story?"

Andy shook her head no.

"You know this man. This time there was a woman too, we all know now. She was almost as old as this man, with a man's name herself, but very beautiful. Let's imagine she's a princess, because we can — we can imagine — though this one had a son which makes her not-princess I 'spose. In the beginning of the story, those two weren't at the bar yet because they were out rescuing the son who, turns out, didn't need to be rescued. And the son had brought a good woman to the bar who might one day be his, be the son's princess. There was a fool there too 'course, crazy Tommy, complications, ya gotta have a bad guy, who sat beside the twosome on his own barstool, crunching a whiskey sour in his mouth — actually biting off bits of glass and spitting shards at the son's feet.

"And the son probably said: 'Jeezus Tommy, not the glass thing again.' Which would'a been the start of it.

"The old man didn't see any of this but he's seen it all before. And the crux of the problem for him, for the old man, was this: he wanted his woman to stay." He paused.

"Do you want me to shush now?"

"No Willy."

"He wanted his woman to stay. But there was a deal with it: if the son took up with the young woman, or if the son got better, the woman would leave. How could he win without being a complete arse? It was the riddle of the Sphinx, the unsolvable deal whose answer is the Fate of Man. Or something.

"So he said: 'Ah shit, I give. I give.'"

"Shush now," she said.

"But he wouldn't shush now because it was all driving to the ending the quiet listeners always want and expect. Late night after the fight with peace settling like cigarette smoke, men close to women. Tommy's back, look over there, no hard feelings, done with Cath anyway, though he's breaking glass all over the dance floor just for the hell of it or because he can — break glass."

Andy climbed up on Willy's feet.

"So she, Andy, the princess, danced on his feet, on Willy's feet, who was looking over at Cath and the son dancing slow. And now the answer. 'Shit,' he muttered, which was his bit of cowboy poetry he pulled out when he didn't know what else. But then his princess kissed him, in the middle of their slow dance, this the second real kiss of his life. The poor old bastard. No shushing. This one was not like the first, no my beautiful friend, not like the first. This was no mother-hen lip-peck on the cheek with a little I'm glad I met you. No no. These lips were slow and lasted. I'm your witness. My god they were lasting almost on eternity, lingering too long though into the words that had to come next — but why god weren't the words left alone so he could at least pretend he didn't know for just a while, for just twenty years or so. No, more than that. Just a little while to pretend. That's what he wanted to tell her, the ending he wanted to shoot for. But what he got was different, and even he wouldn't ignore it. Was he s'posed to make up more stories about white pills? Couldn't do it, because as the stagehands and sceneshifters began their dissolve into the next day, and then the next, there really wasn't anything left for her to worry about, no reason to be here. Time for her to move on.

"And he: he would still be standing there alone in Mort's until the four steps back to his barstool, and sit down with a bottle, surrounded by broken glass, trying to put her long, long kiss beside what he was just smart enough to know would be her last words: 'I might not ever be back.'"

BRIDGE

This is what she remembers: a street steep as a mountain. She remembers too the cement steps they poured in the sidewalk just to climb it. In a city of steep streets, Taylor seemed like the cliff face of a little mountain, and San Francisco its valley.

Andy was 12 and visiting for the summer, but why was her Aunt Imogene up there? It was essentially an abandoned street during the war — no one *lived* up there. Not during blackout, perched and exposed, with Japan out that way past the setting sun. Aunt Imogene made sure to point that out the day Andy arrived. But that was beautiful, too: the sunset was beautiful. They could also look the other way toward Golden Gate Park and the span of the dark massive bridge that rose and reached out into fog and mist — though that was blown free later and she could see the way it joined way over there to another country, to another continent it seemed. Back toward her own Villa Park maybe. Andy'd never go over it, though — bridges were the worst targets for bombs and torpedoes. She read that somewhere, or maybe her father'd told her.

That first week, Andy climbed down Taylor and explored the wide-open park with its bums and big trees that ten kids together couldn't get their hands around. In the park, mothers gathered on swings and benches with flocks of babies. The old men played chess for all the world to see. She crept up to the edge of the Golden Gate, to a sign that said: "Danger, Don't walk on the bridge." So she sat on the grass and watched cars try to cross the bridge as fast as possible. It was like a race; they mounted and rose in an arc and disappeared from sight as if they were flung into the sky. And then another would come, and do the same thing.

Later, her aunt explained earthquakes. Andy remembered huge arms lifted and rolling in fat and muscle to emphasize her point: *The earth itself shakes.*

What did that mean?

Andy could climb out on her aunt's flat roof. Aunt Imogene herself took her out there the first time. They had just arrived and Imogene wanted to show her the house.

Downstairs, a piano sat in the middle of an open room with nothing much else in it besides a doorway out back to a screened-in porch, which also had no furniture. Her aunt had nailed one photograph on a wall, and that was all. It was a framed picture of a uniformed man with a large, red face in an open laugh, lines around his eyes, and a big meaty nose.

"Who's that, Aunt Imogene?"

"That's the pilot," she said.

Then she took her upstairs, beyond two bedrooms up to the attic and without a pause began to crawl through a window the size of a cereal box. Well, maybe a little bigger than that. But this was an extraordinary thing, watching her aunt crawling face-first out of a tiny bit of glass, out into the black night. Andy followed cautiously through and clutched the window-ledge with one hand. In the dim light, she saw a small, flat ledge, her aunt's shape, sloping roof, then the world.

How strange that first sight of a city was for someone from Illinois. They sat out there for quite a while until Andy finally let go of the ledge. She looked *down* on San Francisco, the snuffed lights of the black-out and the scream of the air-raid drills rising to them which seemed a note or two higher than in Villa Park. It could have been her imagination, though that was part of the strangeness: the shrill sound set against this calm that stretched out below them forever, like the sea itself, though the real ocean was over there, beyond it. She could see that too, dully in the star-light. Below, the city rested or closed in its power, with only a light or two peeking out of the giant blanket of darkness that covered it all, but only for a moment, and then it too was snuffed out.

The first night, she felt naked, uncovered up there. But in time she also felt above and away from something, so that it was easier to breathe in her aunt's house, easier to sleep, like climbing in a tree or napping outside in tall grass. Andy knew that when she

stepped off the plane if someone had asked her where she wanted to live she would have said down below. Way down low. Don't take me up high. And now? She wasn't sure.

But who could really worry about the war when there was an Aunt Imogene around? — Aunt Imogene, the ruler of the castle atop Taylor. What was Andy to make of her aunt? Truth be told, she was more worried about that than she was about bombs. How was she to act? What was she to do?

Part of the answer had something to do with cellos.

This Andy almost guessed when she first met her aunt. She hadn't thought much about cellos in her life. Did she even know they existed? But Aunt Imogene's muscly arms with their unlikely sweep and grace made her think of something like a cello — that and the way her aunt stood with her feet pointing out, *en pointe* like a ballerina, and her knees bent like a ballerina's *plié*, only much larger than any ballerina you cared to think of. Freeze two hundred pounds of aunt in a *plié* position and shove in a huge stringed instrument and there you have a Polaroid of Aunt Imogene. Only Aunt Imogene was no snapshot. This was the amazing thing; she was almost always in motion.

Aunt Imogene was the first cellist in the symphony, which rarely played these years. She was the first cellist which meant she was the best, but *not* the only — which in turn meant Andy was forced to listen to a whole squadron of strings which gathered every few days at the Taylor Street house. Aunt Imogene explained that the usual practice hall had been converted to an armory — big, open, lots of space. So she, the first cellist, insisted they come to *her* house to practice. Aunt Imogene could get away with such things.

Andy was immediately employed to haul cellos up the hill for a nickel a trip, and this is how Andy met Clair, a girl her own age. Clair seemed to already know Aunt Imogene. She called her "Mrs. Imogene" and refused to call Andy Andy.

"You're not Andy," she said that first day when they were resting atop Taylor after hauling five cellos up the hill. "Your name is Andrea." This was how Clair talked, the way Andy imagined an English schoolgirl from the movies would, with an insistent

formality, over biscuits and tea. But she almost always wore the same clothes, and they weren't English, just baggy pants and an old sweatshirt, and a scarf, every day a scarf.

"Where do you live?" Andy asked her that first day.

"I live in a tree in the park."

"People don't live in trees. I don't believe you," Andy said.

"It's true," Clair said. She didn't seem insulted by Andy's lack of faith.

"Take me to see it then." But she wouldn't take Andy to see it, and sometimes her story changed, and it wouldn't be a tree but a cave over that way by the ocean, or a cabin on top of Mt. Tamalpais over there.

"You're crazy," Andy said.

"You're boring," Clair said. And they both laughed.

Andy asked her aunt if Clair lived in a tree, but that didn't solve much either. "Maybe she does sometimes," Aunt Imogene said. "Sometimes she lives with her mother too, but she's not around very much. Never has been."

At any rate, Clair always came up to Taylor Street to play, to pass the day, especially when there was music practice, and that was fine with Andy, whether or not she lived in a tree. The whole summer felt oddly privileged, and this was part of it. *She* lived in the castle — Andy did. When Clair came over, they'd climb higher and higher in the house until they sat on that flat roof out the attic window above the porch. There they'd point out lights at night that blinked out from under that huge black-out blanket in the city below. There was one light down there that never went out, and Clair said, "Oh yes, that's the light from my treefort." But Andy didn't believe her. She imagined her father's maps and coordinates — he was an air raid warden in Villa Park, Illinois — and she supposed she could figure out exactly where the light came from if she could remember what her father taught her about maps and coordinates. But she'd never tell on those people below who were obviously cheating, whoever they were. She told Clair this and Clair had no idea what she was talking about. Clair was eleven-and-a-half, a younger

woman. Light to her was no rebellion; she said she simply forgot to turn it off, night after night.

So they sat on the roof as the frog burps of cellos and the giant cricket wings rubbed below until they were called down to their cello-hauling chore. Clair listened seriously to the music. At first Andy only giggled. But in time the sound drifting up to them became too normal to laugh at, and strangely beautiful. Something she longed for all day.

Up here on the roof at night they talked in this bubble of space that floated on music, and Clair would tell her things. Strange things Andy had never heard before. It was hard to make sense of some of the things she said, just as Clair didn't always understand Andy. Clair's favorite subjects were palm reading and magic and the way some people are really animals. She told Andy that Aunt Imogene knew about people who weren't here anymore, that sometimes she could talk to them. Clair was also sure that Mrs. Imogene could look at peoples' hands and tell their future. But her ideas got even stranger than that.

"Sometimes I wonder, " Clair said that first night on the roof, "if cities have hands. Maybe they do, Andrea. And palms, and last nights and tomorrows. Maybe that's why you live on Taylor Street. Everyone else says it's a target. Go ask them and then tell me why you're here." She looked over at Andy. "Anyway, you know Mrs. Imogene didn't move up her until the war began."

No, Andy didn't know.

"But of course she would come here. This is where eagles live. The pigeons live down there."

Andy didn't even want to ask what that meant, but she couldn't resist saying, "So you're a pigeon, Clair."

"She's an eagle," Clair said, ignoring the comment. "She's an eagle just like my father."

All other questions aside, Andy had to say that Aunt Imogene struck her as much too fat to be an eagle.

"You ask her then, Andrea. You ask her whether she is or not."

"I'll do no such thing," Andy said.

"Fine, then you'll never know."

But despite any of this Andy liked Clair from that first day. She grew to look forward to Clair's strange talk just like she looked forward to the music. Besides, they were growing rich because they worked well together; they were careful with the cellos when they hauled them up and down Taylor, for the nickel would come only if nothing touched or scraped on the way up and down. It was helpful that some of the cellos — though not all — had suitcase wheels attached.

They also had some help from a certain Mr. Stiltz, one of the musicians who had a car, a black gangster-looking thing with a rumble seat and all. He'd help some, but very little, because he had no patience in waiting for the other musicians, not all of whom were as punctual as Mr. Stiltz. This would have made Clair and Andy angry, except for the money. What's more, one day in the middle of music practice Aunt Imogene said, "Mr. Stiltz, I do believe your car is driving downhill without you." Everyone rushed to the picture window and pressed noses to glass and sure enough Andy saw the car bounding down hill like a pony, jumping almost with glee, and finally flinging itself in the air and coming to rest upside-down against a tree in the creek bed 500 feet below.

Clair whispered, "Andrea, she cursed his car. *That* was magic."

Maybe it was. At any rate, there was no more Mr. Stiltz the next time — not that he died but he wasn't there and Andy suspected that he wouldn't come to music practice anymore. *She* wouldn't, if she were him. Didn't she wonder then why the cellists didn't simply meet at the bottom of a hill instead of the top?

But there were the nickels. Also, eagle or no eagle, it was difficult if not impossible imagining Aunt Imogene spending more than a few passing moments on low ground.

One night Andy told Clair about Villa Park. They were on the roof.

"In Illinois nothing sticks out but the skyscrapers," she said. "And everyone who can lives far away from them. They go west. They go north."

"What do you mean?"

"Toward the sun, that's west," Andy said. "Toward the park, that's north."

"Why don't you just say toward the sun or the park. You could just point at them and say over there, if you wanted to."

"Because it's not always there. The park isn't always there."

But Clair didn't get it and so she was a child after all, which was a relief to Andy because sometimes she acted like a midget version of Aunt Imogene.

It was dark that night, but enough moonlight to see the outline of things. "No matter how straight they want to be," Andy said, pointing out the random twists of streets below her, "the hills won't let them and all the streets know it. Except Taylor. It just plows straight on up."

Clair yawned.

Then they heard the voices below calling them, "Clair," "Andy," and they picked their way off the roof through the window and down the stairs, but by that time the adults had forgotten them. Aunt Imogene was holding someone's hand and looking at it and Clair tugged on Andy's sleeve and whispered, "Palm reader. I *knew* she did that, Andrea." They crept closer to see. But no, Aunt Imogene wasn't reading a palm. She was removing a sliver of uncoiled cello string from the tenor cellist's finger.

Then the musicians began to play again, something that rose beyond serious practice and into a ragged, wild song. Bows picked up speed and slashed at the strings; all those strong fat fingers ran up and down the neck of the instruments. Clair began to move. She

began to dance. She twirled around the room, around and between the cellists, then directly in front of the photograph of the pilot, with her neck straight, eyes glazed, arms out and the scarf flowing behind her like wind. It frightened Andy just a little, but she couldn't take her eyes off it even though the dance made her want to cry. Clair was so beautiful the way she was dancing, spinning faster, and faster.

That wasn't the most remarkable night of music, though. One night, Aunt Imogene took the girls to a symphony and paid for a hotel room in the center of town afterwards and said she would leave them there for a night on their own. This was their big night, she said. She gave them \$5 each, bought them dinner in advance, and hired the concierge to watch out for them. She told them it was their night to be women, so they should sneak it in before they had to be girls again. But, she said, no sneaking *out* of the hotel, and to ask the concierge if they needed anything, no matter what time, and to call her too if they wanted.

"You're not worried about being left alone?" she asked them both.

They just looked at each other and back at her, not sure what she meant. Imogene smiled and said she knew they wouldn't be, and left them.

Clair and Andy laughed and bounced on beds for hours until they got hungry. Downstairs, they dined in the hotel restaurant where three waiters kept the water glass always full. It had to be nearly midnight, but the dining room was open and no one seemed concerned about the late arrival of two young girls. In fact, serious men held out chairs for them, brought them heated towels and listened to them with great attention as they pointed to things at random from a giant menu. Fashionably late women, they were.

After dinner, they braved the revolving doors and were swept outside and had to jump out on the sidewalk. A heavy wind had come up and it looked as if it might rain. They were staring at the bleak sky when the concierge came out and asked if they needed to go anywhere. They said no, thank you, remembered Aunt Imogene's warning and followed

him back in. So they went to their room and bounced on their bed again and soaked for hours in the bath, which was large enough to fit them both. Then they wrapped up in bathrobes and looked at each other quietly, expecting to fall asleep, but they couldn't. They were thinking of the symphony, but they didn't talk about the music, as if it would break some kind of spell.

Andy was thinking of the nervous feel of the crowd around them in the hall before the musicians had arrived, formal and serious. She remembered the way the low, watery voices canceled themselves out in a trickling mumble, and the way the strange murmur of applause sounded like wind in the trees when the musicians appeared. Andy and Clair knew the cellists, of course, but they were as distant as the other musicians, concentrating and way up there in their gowns and tuxedos. Sixty adults sat down at once. There was a brief moment of chaos as the strings and horns tuned up, a musical traffic jam. Then the conductor appeared and walked to his position in front, bowed, turned, clicked his wand for silence, and that last chance to clear throats all around. He held silence in his hands for a moment, then threw it out to the symphony, and suddenly it was everywhere — music.

Andy sat now on the hotel bed holding hands with Clair trying to remember those sounds. What she remembered instead was how it felt in her chest and in her legs, and moments when the music filled her breath or when it was so quiet she couldn't breathe. How could anyone sleep after that?

They couldn't. So they put back on their dresses and snuck barefoot past the front desk and snoring concierge, into the streets, still holding hands. The wind had died down, but bits of branches and clumps of leaves lay everywhere from the night's storm. It had to be early morning; the sky was turning purple. Andy wasn't amazed at the sky nor was she amazed that they had stayed up all night. But she was amazed that she hadn't done this before, because it was really quite simple. You just kept your eyes open.

They walked through the city, past store windows and imagined things to buy with their \$5. They kept walking through the morning until they were on the edge of downtown and the start of the neighborhoods of those huge houses that all looked like mansions, like so many Golden Gate parks. The night's storm had toppled a tree as long as the neighborhood. It had just missed a house and spanned the road to crush a garage on the opposite side of the street, pinning a car underneath like a squashed beetle. Clair and Andy paused there, watching the delicate balance of this huge tree over its destruction. Then they saw an old Chinese woman on the other side of the neighborhood walking towards them. She was bent over a cane, but with a face upturned in a smile, and very small — in fact, about their height. She walked directly under the tree without pausing or ducking, right up to the two girls, and stopped.

"Big tree," she said, and tapped around the corner and out of sight.

Then a noise began to mount from somewhere, from everywhere. Noise rose and pierced like a siren, howling, desolate and as ecstatic as that: voices, which began as separate, distant shouts, then grew and joined and mounted in a roar. It was as if the entire city was shouting itself awake. Suddenly doors opened on all sides and people rushed out of homes in front of them and the restaurants and shops behind them.

Clair and Andy were pulled into the thick of it, hand-in-hand for as long as they could hold on, until the crowd broke in two like a river around rock. Clair was tugged left and Andy right, so quickly there wasn't a chance to call out. Then Clair was gone, and Andy was lost in a tight press of people, and it was like being swept along powerless to a strong current, sometimes eddying and sometimes doubling back on itself. When it did Andy saw only backs and arms and feet below. She saw someone lose a shoe with one sweep backwards, and then saw the same shoe again as the crowd surged forward, with no chance for anyone to reach down and grab it.

Then suddenly she was spit out the edge. She jumped into the cover of a small alleyway, a back doorway to a shop of some kind. The door was locked so she squatted

among boxes that said frozen chicken, though it smelled like fish. She was breathing heavily and she leaned against the wall to rest a moment and inspect herself for injury. Her feet had been stepped on several times, one of the toes was already going black and blue, her legs had a scratch or two, but apart from that she was fine. Even her dress was fine. This was somehow an enormous relief, that her dress wasn't ripped, and she wrapped it around her knees and clung to its hem as she watched the rush of feet from the crowd beyond the doorway. It looked like splices of film at the wrong speed, the jumble of motion and light blinking on and off.

Andy wondered if her aunt was responsible for even this. Was this like the symphony, part of their big night of being an adult? She wished for Clair, who knew the city and might find this exciting and not frightening, and she thought of the old woman too, the woman who had walked under the fallen tree, that quiet woman who was somehow the start of this noise. Andy imagined the woman and Clair beside her now. She imagined the woman spoke a language that sounded like birds. The thought of this kept Andy calm squatting among the boxes until the crowd finally began to recede, and she got the nerve to re-join it.

Though the streets were still over-stuffed with people, Andy could pick her way through now. She knew which direction to head — mainly north, until she could find something familiar. She had room to look around: at directions, the angle of the morning sun, the people around her. Andy noticed that most everyone had a peculiar expression, eyes far away but still holding onto something closely, just as the couples around her clung to each other in an unlikely slow dance amid the noise.

Andy made her way north, slowly, a mile or so, skirted the park, which seemed to be the center of everything, and headed east. It was well past lunchtime when she finally climbed the steps up Taylor Street, out of the tide of people, above. Aunt Imogene wasn't there when she got home. No note. No explanation. Andy would have liked an explanation. So she grabbed a blanket instead and went to the roof, curled up and closed

her eyes in the cool of midday, with the ocean of people below, the sounds of shouts and explosions drifting up to her.

She woke to flames of color high over the city. The sun was sinking. Aunt Imogene was beside her, sitting cross-legged and upright, quietly watching the scene below. Clair stuck her head through the window and crawled out on the roof.

"There you are," Clair said. "We danced today, Andrea, all day long. Mrs. Imogene played cello in the park and we all danced around her. So many people I've never seen. It was wonderful, like Gypsies. Then when we were all done and too tired to dance we lifted the cello in a tree with two strong ropes. There were too many people to carry the cello out of the park."

Andy stretched and sat up straight. Clair, still in her dress and scarf, put her head in Andy's lap and pulled the blanket over herself. "We'll get it down in the morning, Andrea," she said from Andy's lap. "We'll climb the tree and lower the cello down."

"Don't fall asleep yet, Clair," Aunt Imogene said. But it was too late. Clair had been up all night and all day, and she was already lightly snoring.

Andy sat quietly for a while. The crowd was still surging below and the day fading.

"What happened, Aunt Imogene?" Andy asked.

"War's over." She looked over at Andy. "Try to wake Clair." Andy shook her, and whispered in her ear, "Wake up Clair," and then the same more loudly. She shook her again but Clair just shrugged and mumbled something and looked at peace, so she gave up.

"Ah well," Imogene said. "This is more for you, anyway."

It was almost dark and Aunt Imogene had to squint at her watch. "You'll pardon me if . . . yes, here we are, exactly the hour. Three, two, one." She snapped her fingers.

And lights. Lights in the city. One, two, three, then a million stars blinking on below. The sound of the crowds below rose in pitch, a yell from a hundred thousand people, swallowing up fear and sending skyward something beyond joy and sorrow.

"Now look at the bridge," Imogene said. A few hesitant lights this side of the city, then another and another, and suddenly light was rushing across the bridge in an arc, and then light on the land across the way, shimmering and dazzling, like another country.

"A miracle," Aunt Imogene said. And she got up and walked to the edge of the roof, stood on one foot, leaned forward and stretched her arms out like a huge, magnificent bird, as if she were soaring over the city, across the bridge, away, and back.

POINT REYES

The city made Andy feel as awkward as a poorly wrapped package, untied bits of herself flying here and there. It was a gusty day in San Francisco. In front of her, Carol pushed baby Gobby through downtown at a smart pace, and Andy was sucked along in the brief opening behind her.

Gobby — short for Gabriel — was Andy's first grandchild, though he was adopted. He rode in a new three-wheeled jogging stroller that looked like a drag-racer, streamlined and tilted low to cut through the wind. Andy caught glimpses of baby up ahead, arms out and delighted, talking nonsense to the stream of pedestrians floating by. Bye bye bye bye bye bye.

Gobby sat up there innocent of packages, far removed from his East L.A. birth and his real mother. He was Carol's boy now. Andy watched him getting a wondrous baby drag-race ride down Divisadero, pushed by his tan, pretty, put-together mother who had enough energy for all three of them, pushing him and dragging her downtown to see where Jerry worked at his engineering firm, to do a little shopping, to have lunch at her favorite Indonesian restaurant. Carol's husband Jerry was a good man, Andy thought: calm, logical, organized. A find. That is, Andy found him to be a lot like her own husband, Jim. Was that the problem?

But Andy was determined not to ruin this reunion. She had come all that way to be here with her daughter's family, and no, this was certainly not Bear Lake, Michigan. Nor was it the San Francisco of 1945 that Andy remembered and had yet to explain to her daughter — that was the last time Andy had been here, when she was 12. It was easier to pretend she hadn't been here before and to act as lost as she felt.

How had it all changed? Actually, things seemed the same *down here*, lots of people on the streets, traffic, those intense fashions, cafes and the stink of fish markets. A mile of jewelry stores. A city.

Of course, she was older. What she remembered from 35 years ago was endless curiosity that tugged her attention into the city, with only a glance or two beyond city limits. She remembered her crazy Aunt Imogene, of course, who refused to leave that empty house perched on Taylor hill like a bomb target in the middle of World War II. No one, not even Andy, wanted to run anywhere then, despite a war. But what she felt now was a nervous urge away, to the mountains north, and further along the coast out toward Point Reyes. *That's* where she wanted to be right now. That would calm her down, to sort out what all this meant, this reunion with a daughter who was not entirely happy about what her mother had done. If Andy could just get away for a while, then she could come back and do this: meet Jerry, have lunch, explain things to everyone's most proper satisfaction.

I've left your father — for now.

But as she slowed her walk down Divisadero, Andy felt the eyes of men on her and she saw that she'd fallen well behind Carol. Suddenly there was a stumble-drunk infant, maybe a year older than Gobby, toddling toward Andy out of the crowd, locking her in the eye, its arms out. Andy knelt to receive a hug but the child was swept into arms and away — Andy looked up to see a baby face over a shoulder against the sun with one hand out to her, and then that disappeared in the crowd.

"Mom, did you trip?"

Andy looked around and blushed. She was on her knees on the sidewalk in the city. She got up.

"Here, hold Gobby," Carol said, taking the squirming, kicking baby out of the stroller and handing it to her mother. Andy stood there in the slipstream of people, trying to

wrap one arm after the other around this rebellious sack of potatoes. Gobby was a huge child.

"Let me take her, Mom."

"Carol, can we sit for a moment — I seem to be —"

"Jerry's office is just a few blocks away. And we're late. Sshhh, Gobby. It's okay."

"Just for one minute, Carol."

Carol put Gobby back in the stroller. "Sshh, Gobby. I tell you what. Why don't you sit here. I'll go get Jerry. He'll be worried. I'll go get him and be right back. Sshh, baby."

"But —"

"It'll only take a second. Gobby likes it when I run him. You can wait on this bench." And she jogged off, cutting through pedestrians, dinging a little bell on the handle bar of the stroller, yelling over her shoulder, "I'll be right back, Mom. Don't leave!"

"My queendom for a king," Andy said to herself as she sat on her bench. "My queendom for a king. Who said that? Wasn't Shakespeare. Ann Hathaway? Aunt Imogene? Me?"

Andy crossed her legs. She wasn't sure. She thought, though, that this was a fine city. She could see why her children wanted to stay. Too hot today. Too many people for her. But behind her bench there was a nice park, right here on a main drag, large enough for a few kids to fly kites. A strong breeze up there above trees and the buildings yanked around paper dragons while a single gull floated above it all in the washed-clean sky. Seagulls in a city. The street was clean too, or maybe too clean, with pastel sunshine, azaleas in the windows like brushstrokes, eucalyptus trees leaning south, one palm.

Andy could see a bum across the way hitting up the hesitant tourists like her. But even that bum with his plaited hair and baggy corduroy had a certain fashion and presence, a street actor, with a rat-a-tat-tat rigmarole. Hey man, bop! Hey man, bip! His hands emerged from pockets and unfurled like waves, asking for quarters. Half-step here, half-step there. People moved so quickly, they all did, in their walk and the energy of those rapid-fire conversations. Even that bum made her feel a step or two behind, a dance-school dropout.

What's more, though she liked the guy and everything, the bum that is, he brought up a sticky point of logic. If there's a bum on the corner of her daughter's city, why would she hesitate to tell Carol about her Aunt Imogene and 1945? Nothing truly vagabond happened then. Yes, they'd seen the Golden Gate Bridge light up on VJ Day; that was kind of odd, or at least unusual. But Imogene herself was no odder than any black sheep and guilty of nothing beyond being husbandless. Yet siding with that woman would land Andy square in the camp of the family eccentrics.

Had she become her aunt?

Andy felt better sitting down. She crossed her legs: that always lent a certain confidence to her position, like when a man puts his hands behind his head, claiming charge of all he sees. His kingdom for a queen. People on the sidewalks walked that way too, in control of territory. Invincible behind sunglasses, stepping with a city step, either legs way out in front and graceful as swans, or slouching and defiant.

She watched the people, tallying up the differences between a child's city and a grandmother's. There seemed to be few, except that unseen immensity of blacktop and her own desire to escape. That and all the fashionable black. Black on black. She didn't care for that — black everywhere and pins sticking into flesh. True, there were a few remnants of rainbow on old hippies, a man or two not completely crypt-bound in black. A block away, four orange Hare Krishnas stood in a circle chanting. A skinny little guy in bell-bottom pants went by whistling, and even he was put together like a gift. In fact

there were all sorts of men, not just men in black, Andy admitted, but all of them packaged for Polaroid photos, packaged to take home.

In a moment one of them caught an eddy in the stream of pedestrians and floated up next to her on the bench. He looked to be in his 60s, well preserved. Distinguished, Andy would say. Except what? He wore all gray — a gray three-piece suit and shoes and even his hair had a distinguished tint of gray, although his tie was white and stood out because of it. He looked over at Andy, and she caught a brief hint of light in his eyes too, the spark of kindness surrounded by laugh-lines, although there was that something else there too. A hint of a blush, maybe. Fred Astaire's offstage stumble. Winston Churchill's sagging shoulders. Something.

The man crossed his legs, unfolded a newspaper and flipped it forward like sheets, then settled into reading a middle section — business or sports? He turned a little away from Andy, just slightly, a peculiar shift in body position of someone who knows he's being watched.

That move, what did it remind her of? And this odd suitcoat, this gray man with his one touch of white. It set Andy shuffling through memory. Did she know him? No, she couldn't. Here she sat on a bench among three-quarter of a million people so far away from home and a friend would sit next to her? Ridiculous. But there was something. Was it someone she would have known from her first visit to San Francisco 40 years ago? Or maybe an outsider from the East like her? Was this someone from Bear Lake, Michigan?

"Pardon me," she said, and she had to say it again, with a little tap on his shoulder. "Pardon me."

The man looked up at her.

"This is going to sound strange — but don't I know you?"

He blinked and tilted his head slightly.

"You'll forgive me," she said. "I know this is a big city but I just get the overwhelming impression that — something. I've seen you. Or know you."

The man was still looking at her, uncommitted, though not unkind.

"You're not from Michigan?" Andy asked.

"No." He cleared his throat. "From here. Excuse me," he said, folded his paper and began to rise.

Andy reached for his arm and blurted out, "Where were you in 1945?"

"Excuse me?" He sat back quietly.

"I mean when the bombs dropped in Japan — VJ Day — the end of the war when they lit the bridges here in San Francisco. You're from here?"

The man blinked. "Now that's an odd question. I was, let's see, eight-years-old in 1945. In Clarendon, Iowa. My family moved here well after the war." He said this all rather mechanically, as if he were answering a survey. "Your name is?"

"Ms. Andy Bartle." She put out her hand. "Andy Bartle. You'll forgive me for being so curious — it's just that I get those . . . do you ever get those things. *Déjà vu*?"

"Yes I do. Sometimes." He shook her hand, and smiled now, kindly. "I'm Michael. Michael Williams. You're from?"

"Michigan. Bear Lake, Michigan. You've heard of it?"

"No, I'm afraid not. Your family is?"

"Here — well, spread about, you know. My son lives in Montana and my two daughters here in San Francisco. Marin County really."

"You seem a little — lost? Have you gotten your directions confused?"

Andy blushed. "I'm sorry. I must seem at wit's end. I guess I'm feeling the country bumpkin today. That and I haven't seen my daughter for years and now she's quite different. Or maybe my son-in-law makes me a little nervous. And now I meet my grandson for the first time. He's adopted. I mean he's my grandson and all, don't get me wrong. I just feel so—undone."

"Undone?"

"Yes. My hair a mess and all over the place, and this old faded skirt from a thousand years ago. Calico! Who wears calico? What a package! But look at you. Your suit perfect, every hair in place. And that white tie!"

"Your package looks fine." He laughed. "This? Yes, the tie does stick out. It's a present from my son. He said I needed a dash of something bright."

"A son? You have a son?"

"Yes, ma'am — I'm well along in life." He smiled.

"Well, of course. Of course you have a son. Forgive me. I've got one too. And a daughter, two of them. Even a grandson. You just were looking so — I dunno. You were sitting there in all that gray with the whitest tie I've ever seen causing Déjà vus and looking so . . . son-less."

He laughed. "Ms. Bartle, you're quite strange. Would you like to have a cup of coffee? Maybe a glass of wine? It might help, settle you into the city, that is."

"Well, I could . . . but no. I'm to wait for my daughter. She went to fetch my son-in-law from work."

"Call them. There's a restaurant right there. You can call them. You have his number?"

That she did. Andy rifled through her purse past a dozen family photos she'd refused to throw out and found a note crumpled with Jerry's work number.

In the restaurant, Andy leaned against the phone, praying that Carol, Jerry and Gobby were still there, but a woman said they'd left a little while ago.

"Oh shoo." She rushed out and told Mr. Williams. He threw a twenty on the table, told the waiter they'd be right back and they hurried across the street, back to the bench, and waited. But there was no Carol and Jerry. Michael finally said the only thing was to leave them a message at the work-number and wait for them in the restaurant.

They returned to their bottle of wine and Andy had one glass, then another— and she thought that Mr. Williams was perfectly sensible to urge wine over coffee.

"Tell me something of your childhood, Mr. Williams. Michael? May I call you Michael? What sticks out?"

"Michael's fine," he said and thought a moment. "My childhood? We lived on a farm, which is no surprise in Iowa. What sticks out? When I was a kid a tornado wiped out our farmhouse. That sticks out. In fact, it almost erased of the entire town of Clarendon. I remember huddling in the basement and they had to pry me out. You can imagine. I was 6, in the basement, with the top of my house just blown away, which oddly enough I can't remember at all. I mean I've somehow forgotten exactly how and when the upstairs was blown to hell. I remember afterwards though, my mother dragging me out of there and taking me to a friend's."

"And the town?"

"Clarendon looked like the end of the earth to me, of my world anyway. That's what I remember. All the buildings flattened and smashed to bits. Scattered families. I was just a kid and we were religious and it looked like the curse of God to me."

"You believe that?" Andy asked.

"I don't know. I did. And I thought there were miracles too. We found someone's cow a few miles away, carried by the storm and set down carefully enough to keep it alive. It mooed and wanted to be milked as if it were no big deal, flying around in a storm like that. A philosophical cow. We found the family radio the next day too, sitting in a field that had been stripped of all its corn. It was just sitting there waiting for us, its antenna pointed in a spiral as if to say the tornado went that 'a way. We took it back to our friend's house, plugged it in — and it worked. Though about five years later in a new house a bolt of lightning hit the antenna and blew up the tube — truth." He laughed. "So God was certainly telling us something of electronics."

Andy tried to pour Michael another glass, but he put his hand over his glass. She frowned and poured herself another anyway. "I like that story," she said. "It makes me want a storm, Michael, a gale to scatter the world a bit. I'd love a storm today, and maybe even a dash of lightning. Something wild. I keep on thinking about Point Reyes. My crazy aunt took me out there when I was here last, in 1945. I was 12. It was from her house I saw them light up the Golden Gate after the blackouts. VJ Day. War's over and the first thing she does the second day of peace is take me to Point Reyes. All I remember is sun and wind and huge waves and blue clarity." Andy flushed. "Listen to me trying to sound like Robert Frost. Blue clarity! A great place though, Point Reyes. It's been years but my daughter tells me there's a trail out there above the coast. That's where I'd like to take my grandson Gobby. To get to know him. Have you been there?"

"Yes, but it's odd you mention it, because I haven't seen it for a long time. In fact, I haven't been out there since I was young, on my mother's back. That must have been within five or ten years of your visit. Maybe that's why you recognize me."

"You're making fun of me."

"I'm sorry. I was joking. I'm not sure it was the same trail, but it was Point Reyes. It's hard to imagine that I can still remember — what was I, two? — on a vacation here before we moved west. That was a stormy day. Just my mom and me walking way above that surf and those deep green hillsides with the grass-seed bowing down. But now you've got me playing the poet too."

"Who in their right mind, myself excluded, would hike to Point Reyes in a storm?" Andy asked.

Michael didn't laugh. "I don't know," he said. "My mom was drawn to places like that I suppose, to rocky headlands and lighthouses. To tornado alleys, for that matter. That day on Point Reyes I remember riding on her back. Then things went slow, kind of hovering. This is another weird memory and you'll forgive me. We saw a group of people descending the cliffs to the beach, and my mom stopped. There was something

out there in the surf, being tossed around in the rock and foam. That's all I remember. Just something floating in the surf, tilting crazily in the waves and people walking down to it. That's all. I haven't gone back."

"And now you think it was a dead body."

"Yes. I suppose I do. I'm sorry I'm morbid all of sudden."

"But what if it were something — anything else. A bit of ship. A treasure."

"Maybe. But it's a weird feeling."

"I think that was just a dream, Michael. You would have been too young to remember. That is, I want it to be just a dream. Forgive me if it wasn't."

"You're forgiven and we can talk about something else now."

"Let's not talk about something else. Let's go somewhere else. Finish your wine and let's go out. Do you want to? I need to be outside."

"Your daughter?"

"She's still not here, and what are we to do about that? I'll call her again."

She imagined Carol's voice: "Mom, you left the bench where I told you to stay, then you left the restaurant after you left a message and now you're drunk!" She was most assuredly not drunk. Not at all. "I'm not drunk," she said aloud, and grabbed Michael's hand and surged outside. But she'd forgotten her purse, and then remembered the call.

"Wait, Mr. Michael Williams. Don't you run away!" And she dashed back inside to grab her purse and call. Then she ran outside again and couldn't help smiling when she saw him waiting patiently with the traffic spinning around him and the crowds and everyone so wonderfully put together.

"Where should we go?" she asked.

"I'm not exactly dressed for a hike, Andy."

"We must, though — if not Point Reyes, then certainly there's a beach you could take me to."

They hailed a cab, Michael said "Muir Beach" to the cabbie, and Andy said "Hurry" for no apparent reason. Wasn't that what you're supposed to do? The cab accelerated as it should, hurtling forward, passing street cars, and the butterfly hills of San Francisco were just right for the soaring joy of early guilt and escape, as if they were being followed, leaving her own daughter behind — ah, but surely they would get the message and that would be a relief to them, and later they would laugh at their spontaneous mother and Gobby, when he was old, would tell of the day his grandmother ditched him for some man she met on a park bench. Everyone would laugh.

But no, perhaps everyone would not laugh —

When they arrived at the beach and stepped out of the cab, the wind bucked the door and the pounding of surf swallowed sound, just as she hoped it would, with the kind of salt wind you can open your arms and lean into. It had driven the people away too, the wind had, back to the warm, close city, leaving her and Michael to that white, empty expanse against the darkness of the Pacific Ocean curling and crashing in foam. She kicked off her shoes and ran across the breadth of beach waving her arms, sending a flock of sandpipers skittering away on their stick legs. The water was cold, and Andy could feel the tug and tow of the water below the sweep of the waves. It was all how she'd imagined it would be, dangerous and beautiful. She ran back to Michael, who was leaning on the edge between boardwalk and beach with his hands in his pockets.

"Take your shoes off, silly." She knelt in front of him in the sand to help him. "Gray socks!" she yelled. "I can't believe you have gray socks too!" And she took those off for him, tossed them high, and they arced with the wind and caught in beach grass like scraps of kite.

"Mr. Michael Williams," she said, smiling up at him. "I do believe your feet are as white as your tie. You don't do this much, do you?"

"Do this?"

"Run in the sand."

"No, I don't." He was beginning to blush and Andy frowned at this.

"Shame on you, Mr. Williams." And she got up, grabbed his hand and yanked him onto the sand. "Shame on you coming from Clarendon, Iowa, and living by the ocean all these years with those ghostly white feet. You ought to be ashamed."

She dragged him about twenty feet forward, leaning into sand and wind and pulling him. Then she dashed off flapping her arms and hooting, leaning over to run a grand circle right, chopping through the edge of surf and then kicking up sand and huge footprints as she completed the circle in front of him. He was still standing in the same place, hands in pockets, smiling, though sadly now.

"Your son's right. You are somber." And she grabbed his tie and pulled him forward by it, but he reached up and held her by the elbow.

"Andy, I'm —"

"Boring."

"No. Yes, I am. What I mean is, I'm married, Andy." He looked suddenly very tired.

"But you're not with your wife anymore, are you Michael?" She almost shouted this.

"What makes you think so?"

"You asked me to wine."

"And you think that means something."

"But you aren't, are you — with your wife?"

"No. I'm not." He let go of her elbow. "And it's true, it's a marginal thing, my marriage, but there it is. I can't blink off forty years." He waved his hand, a small movement away. "We seem to be doing something here that I did when I was nineteen. You're marvelous and I'm glad I met you, but I'm sorry. I should go."

He turned and began to walk away. Andy stood for a moment with her hair blowing across her face, little whips right to left, and her skirt flapping left too, like a flag.

"Michael," she called out. "I left my husband three months back — that's what you need to know about me!" He kept walking. "Damn men!" Then she sprinted around him,

grabbed his shoes and socks, and dashed upwind, over clumps of beach grass, through a few low dunes, ducked behind one, and dove headfirst into the sand, sliding to a halt with socks and shoes out in front of her. She rolled over, brushed sand off her skirt and blouse and sat upright, panting slightly, keeping as quiet as she could.

The sun was warm out of the wind. Andy imagined she could, if she wanted to, fall asleep right where she was, if the need arose, and these socks and shoes, she told herself — they would make a fine pillow, though the thought made her feel slightly deranged and it must be the wine after all. Something absurd about the way she saw the world today, too small and too large at once, but perhaps sleep would be fine if he were to —

But no, there was his shadow, and there was Michael himself, all gray and white with that kind, sad smile, hands still in his pockets. He sat by her.

They were silent for a moment in that hollow pocket of sound between dunes. The surf rang quietly like a shell to the ear. In a minute he said, "You must admit you're acting a little strangely, stealing my shoes and socks. Would it be too much to ask for them back?" She looked over at him. His arms were wrapped around his legs and he was staring into the surf. "I mean, surely we're capable of something beyond adolescent pickup scenes on the beach."

"Which is why I stole them — you and your assumptions."

"Well, we're not quite ninety-nine yet either, Andy."

"So you're going to abandon me here and I'm supposed to call my daughter who thinks I'm a lunatic already and a shameless grandmother and she suspects I don't love her son — not yet — and that *I'm* the one who wounded her father." And there in her mind's eye appeared Jim's sensible crew-cut head as looming, judgmental and final as the Old Testament. Andy felt tears coming and damn it she didn't want that. "Forget the rest of the history of the world and say I picked up a random man who abandoned me on the beach please come save me? Shame on you! The first man I meet in San Francisco and on a park bench and I'm going to —"

Then he was kissing her.

— sleep with him I'm married too you know at almost sixty a good grandmother and you can't do that until you tell me I'm beautiful —

He was kissing her, and perhaps this would be more difficult to explain away than she'd ever imagined, the white of his body against the ocean like a lighthouse on a gray shoreline in a storm. Not a port of safety, mind you, just gray light gray light gray light. "Michael Williams," she thought. "You're a binary code. You're sending me semaphore and I don't understand." What in the world's to be done about logic and judgment and a mind's eye stuffed with spectators when there are lips on neck, hands on skin, his, hers? Theirs. Andy wasn't sure. So she cast aside thinking, untied her calico, and drew him in.