

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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This thesis, a collection of short fiction, attempts to surface some of the discrepancy between inner and outer lives, between who these characters want to be and who they've become, between the lives they might have had and those they've chosen because the former are too chancy and the latter too easy or too expected.

I hope the resonance for readers will come from a recognition in our own lives of, as Joan Didion puts it, the “apparently bottomless gulf between what we say we want and what we *do* want, what we officially admire and secretly desire, between, in the largest sense, the people we marry and the people we love.”

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Connections
by
Terrance Lane Millet

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Terrance Lane Millet, Author

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For our fathers,
and especially
for Tom

• • •

αλλ αλλην χρη πρωτον οδδν τελεσαι
Homer

Connections

Introduction: Pumpkin Soup

My father once claimed that he and the men of his generation sacrificed their lives to work, drudgery, and marriage so their children would not have to eat pumpkin soup. His neighbors, down on their luck during the Depression because there was no work, were reduced to having pumpkin soup as a meal at least once a day. Dad swore his children would never be condemned to such fare, and he implied that his school chums had bound themselves by the same oath. For many of them, it became a justification for sentencing themselves to work they disliked, which is impressive, since they made the resolution before they had families, even before they were married to the women they loved, or did not love, and who would remain with them.

He romanticized the story. Still, the picture of a family shivering in thin and dingy cotton trousers, seated on hard chairs, huddled around a supper of watery soup, ignored by the town, was a specter that haunted him very much and for a long time.

When I was teaching English with the Canadian University Services Overseas in Jamaica, a sort of spiffed-up Peace Corps, a woman from the town brought me a pot of pumpkin soup one day for lunch. It was an exotic concoction of pumpkin, mango, and a subtle, saucy dance of Jamaican spices. I took the recipe back home at the end of my tour and continued to enjoy the soup, but my father refused to taste it, and no amount of coaxing would change his mind.

On the other hand, the woman who brought me the soup in Jamaica refused to eat the pumpkin pie I'd made in return because the notion of a vegetable pie was strange to her.

These days, friends laugh at the story when I tell it over dinner, and they shake their heads at the peculiarities of people. But these same friends have refused to eat roasted pumpkin I've served, baked in buttered slices, crisped, gold, nutty, topped with cinnamon and brown sugar, because it

was neither pie nor soup. The question asked is always if the pumpkin on the plate was my Halloween Jack left too long on the doorstep before it was resuscitated. The specter of resistance and desire, of the push forward and the pull back, is never far off in the dark, just off the shoulder really, a grinning jack'o'lantern of shadow and light and hope and fear. And possibilities.

People are full of surprises, and that is one reason they are worth writing about. And so these stories are about the tensions in men and women who are caught by the discrepancies between the lives they wished to lead and the lives they do lead, between the people they loved and the people they married. Joan Didion has said that this pretty much sums up what's worth writing about. Always though, it seems what we are left with is that particular moment Carver strives for at the end of his best stories: a moment of connection around a table, sharing food and drink and laughter and light with whatever company gathers round, when the comfort of communion and companionship dispels for a time whatever the dark holds just outside the window, just back of our shoulder. And at times, there will be pumpkin soup upon that table. When we're lucky, we know that it's enough.

A Prayer for The Dying

It was tough when the old man died, and it was not an easy death. I stood at the window with my arm around him as he leaned on the table with his head in his hand the way he always stood, and he looked out as I steadied him. He gazed through the grey overcast morning across the city and over the lake, and we looked toward the Manitou Islands that were calling him now.

"The Manitou Islands?" he queried softly.

"Yes," I answered, and the big islands floated above the lake like hovering clouds disavowing the touch of the land and the water.

"Well, well, well," he said as though he had returned from a journey to many places and was pleasantly surprised to be back. I stood with my right arm around him and my brother, Peter, stood close by him on the other side. There were only the three of us there that morning when the dawn broke through the darkness and stole quietly across the lake. We stood in the silence and looked into the distance and there was nothing to say. The world was moving in a way that was too big for us, and we could only stand and be moved along with it. And that was the last morning.

He was in bad shape when I first saw him. The doctor had just taken him off life support and he lay back unconscious, sucking in great rattling lungfuls of air. I thought then that it would be a terrible fight for him and the doctor said he had only two or three hours left, but he was tougher than they thought, or more afraid, and it was probably a little of both because he hung on another thirty-six hours. I stood with my mother beside me and my sister, Cheryl, and Peter across the bed, then the women left, and it was just the old man and his sons. Until then I had always believed an ache in the throat or in the heart to be a figure of speech, but it became very real and it was a queer, big sort of pain that was very tough to control. I very

nearly couldn't, and I could see that it was the same with my brother and my father.

The nurse brought an envelope to the bed, and Peter took out a ring. It was a wedding ring, and we looked at each other before he handed it to me out of sight at the foot of the bed. But Dad was asleep anyway, and mother was in the corridor so I slipped the ring on my finger so I wouldn't forget or lose it before I gave it to her. A few minutes later I left the room and found her by the elevators. I told her we were going to move dad to a private room, and I gave her the ring, and she began to sob and hugged me.

"We're going to lose Dad," she said.

We sat through that first, long night, heavy with the silence of the hospital and the half-light, listening to him breathe, watching, and drinking in our last images of him. The sense of unreality surrounded first the old man in the bed, and then the room, and finally us like a web, and we didn't know if he was spinning it or if it was fate, but it quickly became palpable and real, and we watched him travel its threads and listened to the messages he brought back. I didn't know whether to discount his visions as delusional or be humbled by my inability to travel with him and to know more, but the things the night brought were outside ordinary experience, and the night puzzled and humbled us, and changed us in ways we will probably never admit to, even to ourselves. While he was asleep and peaceful we sat in silent vigil over him, alert, and the sense we had was that we were protecting him against something we could neither see, prevent, guess at or understand, but our impotence was not at issue because it was the doing that mattered.

He had been fighting hard for two years, and at the end he had been worn out. The fight had not been easy, but the end was. He slipped quietly away, and for a brief while no one knew he had left.

"Where's Dick? Is Dick coming down to visit?"

"Dick who?"

"My brother Dick!" he snapped, irritated. "Where's Dick?"

"Dick had a heart attack and died."

"Dick's dead? Dick had a heart attack?"

"Yes."

"He's dead."

"Yes."

"When?"

"A long time ago, Tom. He died in Nova Scotia."

"Dick's dead." He nodded in slow comprehension, as though it didn't fit with the facts.

"He had a heart attack. Dick had a heart attack and died in Nova Scotia."

"Yes."

"Well, well, well."

He had often wanted to be an invisible man but his life had other plans for him. Because he didn't do what he was supposed to do, he wasn't allowed to do what he wanted.

He wasn't a buffoon, but his life took queer turns as though to fulfill a predestined level of notoriety or public attention that he refused to pursue deliberately and with dignity, and so in the winter of 1948 when he walked to work over the layers of frozen snow and wore his new raccoon coat because it was forty below zero, the dogs started barking. He had left in the quiet of the early morning so no one would notice the new coat and the bearskin hat, and his breath wreathed his head in a pale frozen smoke and his feet squeaked eerily in the snow. But the dogs started barking and they barked because they thought he was a bear and were dismayed that he had appeared in their midst without them knowing it.

At first it was one dog that spotted him lumbering over the snow, a small yellow dog that yapped in rage and kept its distance. He tried to drive it off, but the cur refused to know him.

"Goddammit Buddy, go home!" he snarled but it was useless, and soon there were three dogs barking and howling. They ran around him in a frenzied circle of terror as he whirled like a dervish commanding the dogs by name. They ignored him. He continued cautiously and knew he must not run. In a matter of minutes he was surrounded by a dozen barking dogs that darted in and out to nip at the hem of his coat. The din roused the neighborhood and the windows filled with faces wreathed in mirth. Some shouted encouragement to the dogs, some to the man, and he continued to work, angry and weary, but the story never went away. The wind swirled up around him in tight little eddies and brushed his cheeks and touched him and it picked the story up and bore it away over the frozen, crystal landscape, and he walked out of ordinary life and into the realm of myth.

"Mother and Dad are coming down to visit tonight," he said suddenly.

"Are they?"

"And Jean and Lyman."

"Oh?" He hadn't mentioned his aunt and uncle in years, and she had been the aunt that raised him.

"Aren't they coming?"

"Yes. Everyone's coming. There's nothing to worry about, dad. Everything is going to be all right." And the old man lay back in his bed and fought for breath, and waited.

As a boy he walked upstairs to his bedroom over a flight of stairs newly varnished and still wet. His father spotted him halfway up and bellowed, giving chase. He ran up the rest of the way, then down the matching flight, also wet with

varnish. His father was incoherent with anger and plunged after him. The boy ran up and down the stairs twice before he was stopped and the varnish was ruined.

The memory haunted him, and in some ways he felt he never escaped those stairs and still ran uselessly up and down pursued by a frightening and shouting father. It was a tough time for him. He knew he had been bad, and his father had frightened him when he bellowed, "Devil take you, boy!" as he ran up the newly varnished stairs. Two days later he ran into the kitchen where his mother worked over the large, black wood-burning stove. She looked at him in alarm as he stood gasping in terror, huge tearing sobs wracking his tiny frame.

"Land sakes! What's the matter, Tommy?" she said gently and kneeled down beside him. He had learned that curses were real.

"I saw a sneek, and it had a dinger, and it dinged me!" he sobbed. The devil was in the back yard.

"George!"

"What?"

"There's George. What's George doing there?" the old man demanded.

"Where?" Cheryl asked.

"Dublin. How did George get to Dublin?"

"Did uncle George ever go to Dublin?" The old man thought hard for a minute, his face furrowed in concentration.

"I don't know," he said, and he really didn't know.

"Did you ever go to Dublin, dad?" He thought hard for a moment.

"I don't think so," he said, but there really was a question whether he did or not.

"Did your dad ever go to Dublin?"

"Christ knows! God only knows!"

"Did Dick ever go to Dublin?"

"Who knows where Dick got to!" he said, and shook his head in weary exasperation.

And then he had gone north with the cold. He left his new wife with friends while he took up his new position and settled in. There had been no house available immediately so he left his young family and he stayed in the staff house with the single men for a few months. Then his wife and two babies would join him. He was twenty-four, and he was getting tired.

He had gone north in the winter. He stood on the wooden platform where the cold was bitter and the single eye of the locomotive stabbed the night. His breath had been a frozen cloud and the platform creaked as he stood in the cold and shifted from one leg to the other and waited for the train. The frost stung his ears and burned them and he knew they would burn more when they warmed up, so he pulled his collar tighter around his neck and hunched down into it. His feet were cold too but he knew the train would be warm, and after a few hours it would be hot and stuffy in the cars. He would walk to the junctions between the cars to cool down then, and wish for some fresh air as he stood with his feet planted widely on the worn steel plates of the floor, shaken by the vicious rocking of the train and listening to the pounding noise of the steel wheels on the tracks.

The train came out of the night, black in the darkness, breathing steam as the big wheels rolled with the heavy thrusting pistons and coughing deeply in the cold, contemptuous of all the elements but time and man. The earth shook beneath it and its might was thunder, and the man on the platform loved the locomotive because, of all the machines man made, its nakedness and strength brought it closest to having a soul.

The steel rails lay down obediently and bore it into the distance, and the echoes of the past were fresh and newly minted as the train came out of the dark, dusted with the ephemeral murmurings of passengers that the engine shook off like mites as it plunged into the miasma of the future.

He sat up suddenly and looked around.

"How in hell did we get here?" he demanded.

"Where?"

"In England!"

"We're in North Bay, dad, in the hospital." He looked around.

"We're in a private room," he said. "How did I get here?"

"We got a room for you."

"Well, well, well." Then he dozed fitfully while we watched him.

"Where are we now?" he said later, half-opening his eyes.

"In North Bay."

"North Bay?"

"Yes." And he nodded slowly, taking it in with mild amazement before drifting off again.

It was a quiet summer day and he looked up, suddenly happy and cast the lure far, far out into the river. He realized how calm it was on the river, and thought that the wind was conspicuous not by its absence, but by its stillness. He stood by himself on the banks of the Red Sucker, and the wood-smoke danced sinuously in the air, and the children smelled of the smoke and the spruce-gum they popped from the sap pockets on the trees to chew, and they smelled of the clean river water and were happy. The northern jays scolded from the trees and swooped down to snatch food, and the squirrels scolded the jays, and at night the wolves howled from across the river. The people had come from the outside and would return there after a few years, and because they were young and their families were new they would remember these times as the best of their lives. The river saw it and had seen it before, but it would soon pass and not be seen again, and the river slowly passed by and emptied itself and its memories into the northern sea, and only the wind carried the memories like seeds to be sown and harvested in times that seemed like they would never come, but did.

At four a.m. he woke agitated and restless, and insisted we get him out of bed. We lifted him to the chair. He caught sight of the IV unit with the tubes drooping toward him.

"What's that?" he demanded, alarmed, and we told him.

We sat in the dark for a long while, silent, my brother and I seated close and facing him at his knees, and we all leaned forward as though in mute conference. It was strangely comfortable and wonderful because it was one of those times men share when they are very close and there is no need for speech, and the men are happy and comfortable in the silence and the closeness.

Then he reached out and took our hands as we sat at his knees, and he held them and bowed his head.

"You're special guys," he said softly and he said it three times, like a benediction. It was the only time he spoke directly to us as his sons in those final hours, and it was the only time to my recollection he ever said he thought we were something special, or even just all right, and I suppose that was the father's blessing I waited forty-eight years to hear.

When I left I went directly home and told my son what had happened, and I told him I didn't want him to have to wait through the long years, so I gave him my blessings as his father then and told him I loved him and admired him for his efforts at shaping his own life.

He was up for most of the day, and he was restless and peevish. We carried him to the window several times, and he looked out over the lake to the islands.

Manitou is the Ojibwa name for The Great Spirit, and the Manitou Islands hovered mysteriously out over the middle of the lake, and one could look at them and appreciate the reverence felt toward the creative spirit because the islands were far enough away to actually appear

hovering above the lake. The first peoples made pilgrimages to the islands until the white man arrived and built mica mines and kept the Indians away and finally pushed for a housing development there.

He slept for a while, but more and more fitfully as the day wore on, but for a while he was comfortable lying on his back, asleep, and I stood beside him and held his hand. Suddenly, hardly waking, he clutched my hand and pulled at it as though he were trying to pull off a glove.

"Take it off! Take it off!" he said.

"What?"

"Take it off!" and he continued pulling.

"There's nothing to take off," I said. He lapsed back into a fitful doze for a few minutes, then began to wring his hands like Lady Macbeth and pulled at his own fingers.

"Take it off!" he said. "Take it off!"

"Take what off?"

"The ring! Take off the ring!" and we knew he was talking about his wedding ring.

"I took it off and gave it to mother last night. She has the ring."

"Good," he said, and drifted away.

Later in the day we were all there with him again. Mother had begun to pitch her voice as though she were talking to him from a great distance.

"John called," she said.

"Old Waterman," he smiled tenderly.

"And Vivian. Do you remember Vivian, Tom?" And he laughed affectionately.

"She's a little squirt," he said.

"And Eileen?"

"She's a little squirt too," he said.

A few of his friends dropped in that last day, and two of them were priests. The first to arrive was a woman. Father Dawn, he jokingly called her. He was asleep when she arrived and when she began the prayers his eyes snapped open and he bathed in the soothing balm of her ministrations and gazed at her with such trust and joy and innocence that it was a shock to see it. I had never seen such pure emotion in his eyes before, and indeed had only seen such expressions of transcendental devotion and bliss in paintings of the saints and martyrs, and I realized there was much that he had guarded in his life and refused to share, for whatever reasons.

Later he gave the same beatific look to Reverend Clyter who arrived and said prayers over him. He had been asleep, but as soon as the priest began to pray his eyes snapped open, fixed on the priest with an expression of utter bliss.

When Aunt Mary arrived she was nervous and skittish. She had known the family for fifty years, and they had shared all the things that fifty years bring to people, including the end, and it must have seemed a huge and unfair thing that it should all be coming to a close now, because her eyes were wide and she was clearly frightened. I knew a little of what she felt, and it seemed unfair and fundamentally wrong that we should lose one another. It wasn't the dying that was the terrible thing; it was the losing of those we suddenly realized were an important part of what we were.

"Drum," he said.

"Hello, Tom," she said as she kissed him. He looked at her and thought for a moment.

"Are we in Halebury?" he asked.

"No, dad, we're in North Bay." But Mary was badly shaken by his confusion, and mumbled a few desperate words before heading for the door. He called after her.

"Drummer! Drummer! You be good, Drum!" but she didn't hear him, and they were the last words he ever said to her.

Later he was reminded that she had been to see him.

"She was?" he asked, delighted. Then he looked down at the floor and smiled and shook his head and said affectionately "Poor old Drummer," and he chuckled.

I asked later why he called her Drummer. She had been a great beauty when she was young, and she loved to dance and when there was a man available to dance she beat her foot on the floor in excitement. Dad said she beat her foot like a partridge drummed its feet in mating season, and he teased her about it and called her Drummer, and all their friends called her Drummer for fifty years, and she liked it.

"There's only one Drum," she said when she was eighty, "and that's me!"

I had seen pictures of them as young men and women together, singing and dancing and living, and it angered me for them because it was all ending, and they had lost their vitality and youth, and were finally even losing one another.

He was awake most of the night, and asked to get out of bed and sit in the chair. As we sat him up he looked suddenly at the bedside equipment again.

"What the hell is that?" he asked, puzzled.

"It's your life support machine."

He shook his head in disgust. "Christ!" he said with a rueful grin and looked at me. "Isn't this a bitch!"

Later that night Reverend Dawn stopped by again. The wind had begun to howl by then, and she said her father was dying in a hospital

eighty miles away. She said she would have to leave in the morning and wouldn't be here to conduct the services, and that broke her heart because the two of them had been talking about it for several years. It seemed perverse that she should find herself in the same situation as we were, and at the same time, but that night nothing seemed impossible.

I led her to his bed, and I told her to say the Prayers for the Dying over him so it would be done and finished. I knew it was what he wanted, and I knew there was a good chance it wouldn't be done if I waited. So we did it, and it might have been the hardest thing I ever did, not because it would displease my mother, who was agnostic, but because I had the thing done and stood there in the presence of it knowing what it meant for him and for me. I felt as though I was pronouncing him dead, and might hasten the event by doing so. The act held a level of responsibility I had not felt until that time. It was very hard, and that was only the beginning of the night.

After she left there was no sound but the old man's breathing and he worked hard as he sucked in the air that no longer gave him the oxygen he needed.

The coughs began deep in his lungs and wracked his weakened frame. He slowly worked it up as he fought for the air to fuel the coughs, and finally got it up and spat it out. We held him upright to make it easier for him and the spasms exhausted him. Then he shook his head.

"Isn't this a bitch," he said again softly, with a tough little smile.

And it was a bitch. He lay in a room peopled with the dead calling more and more persistently and he didn't want to go but they were becoming more substantial than his sons and his daughter and his wife who waited in the room with him.

"I don't know what to do," he said. "I don't know what to do."

"About what?"

"What else?" he said.

The wind howled that night and it came out of the northwest like a banshee and moaned as it tugged at the windows and tore at the bricks of the building. The three of us sat in silence and alone. We had lifted the old man into a chair, and he sat with his head back and his eyes closed, resting from the effort of breathing and lying in bed. Peter and I sat across from him, drinking him in with our eyes. Occasionally our eyes met across the darkened room, but the old man's eyes remained closed and nothing was said. It was a quiet, dark place with only the wind howling, and the nurses on their rounds were the only interruption in our watch.

I began to be bothered by the wind. It was eerie and I resented it because I thought it was going to take away my father. It was a clichéd and nonsensical thought I knew was true and I hated the wind because I knew I could not overcome it.

Peter loved the wind and it comforted him. He said it was wild and natural it made him happy and reminded him of the wonderful lonely places in the north where there are no people and only the wild and natural things live. He stood and left the room and walked down the quiet corridors to the enclosed stairwells. He knew the wind would be louder there and he stood alone on the stairs with the wind and listened to the rise and fall of its moaning, and it soothed him. In the end it would come down to losing his father, a man who refused to let himself be known and refused to give what his son felt was needed from a father, yet a man he loved and was bound to despite the monstrous heap of incomprehensibilities that defined their relationship. In the end he would lose his father, and it came down to that, and nothing else. Then he walked back to the room where waited, and the old man was still sitting peacefully in the chair with his eyes closed, and he looked at me and I looked back mutely.

Then I left the room and walked down the long ghostly corridor to get away from the wind. I walked past the nurse's station to the southeast side of the building where it was very quiet. The wind made no sound at all there, and I thought that it was very odd, and it pleased me. But the quiet became unnatural and I walked to a window to look out into the darkness. The window was wide open and the air rushed out of it with a shocking force. I realized the wind was forcing its way into the building through the room where my father was and it rushed through the hospital like a wind tunnel to exit here.

The realization filled me with panic, and walking back through the silent halls to the corner where my father's room was I could hear the wind coming from a long way off. As I approached the room the wind moaned and howled and it rose and fell and sometimes it almost shrieked, and I was alarmed at its new intensity and at the fact that the howling issued from this particular room and nowhere else. The room was a vortex of wind and sorrow and death and I walked into it knowing that the elements were to be accepted and dwelt in, but it seemed uncanny that I should walk into that chaos and find my father and brother at peace with it, waiting, and it was odd that the old man had accepted its inevitability and despite his restlessness willingly gave himself over to it now, just as I knew I would when it came for me. And that, I thought, would be easier than watching it take someone else. But now the room was a little space in amber with the scene frozen in a mighty stillness though the figures in it were alive in spite of their silence and stillness, and I saw myself permanently in the room with them as if I were looking at it from outside. I supposed this was what was meant by the term 'a moment frozen in time' and thought perhaps all moments were like this one if one had the vision to see them naked and revealed, and for some reason the thought that this might be so seemed perverse and joyless.

"Take the oxygen away," he said. "I don't want any oxygen." We removed the mask and put in his nosepiece. He fumbled at it and tore it away.

"Take it away! I don't want any oxygen." And we took it off and removed the nosepiece from the hose and held the open hose by the side of the bed and pointed it toward him so the gentle stream wafted toward him.

"No," he croaked peevishly. "Take away the oxygen." And we moved the hose out of sight to the head of the bed so the life-giving gas would settle over his face.

"I don't want any oxygen. I don't want any oxygen. Turn it off," he said. We looked at each other mutely, and turned it off.

"It's off now, dad. We turned the oxygen off." And he settled back, relieved. I walked down to the nurse's station and told them what had happened, and they nodded and said it was fine, and that was at 1 a.m.

At two a.m. the nurses came in for their rounds and he was sitting in the chair.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"They're the nurses, dad. They've been taking good care of you.

"Oh?" and he smiled at them. "I see." They did what they had to do quickly and efficiently and kept up a steady banter with him. He rallied enough to charm and tease them. Then they were done and moved toward the door.

"So long, Sweetheart!" he said toughly, and he grinned his tough little grin and tossed off a wave the way Bogart or Cagney would have. The young women turned, surprised, and their eyes filled with tears and they smiled and waved.

"So long, Honey," one of them cooed, and he watched them recede from the darkened room into the light, dressed in white. Perhaps he supposed all young women were dressed in white, that they were all angels or nurses and deserved the cavalier gesture no matter how archaic or

forlorn, and so his gift to them was the self-effacing and ironic gallantry that was the trademark of his generation, and a thousand romantic partings rattled in the celluloid corners of the darkened room, archived and evanescent as the dreams that permeate all times and places.

I sat beside him for long hours in the half-light. He lay on his side with his right arm stretched out over the bed rail and I held his hand. He pulled it back once to scratch his neck, and then stretched his arm back over the rail and when he didn't find my hand he stretched farther until I took his hand again and he settled back peacefully. That was the only time in his life he ever reached out for my company or for comfort from me.

As I sat there I saw, out of the corner of my eye, someone enter the room, but when I turned to see who it was there was no-one there. At one point I stood up to stretch and walked away from my chair. When I returned to sit down I thought at first my brother had moved to it, and then I saw him on the other side of the bed. As I stepped toward the chair I hesitated again and the thought came to me that perhaps I shouldn't sit there for a while, that the old man needed some space to himself. No, I thought, I'll sit there anyway and took another step and stopped again. I looked at the empty chair and was sure someone was sitting in it. To sit in it would have been like sitting on top of someone already there, so I backed away and decided it had something to do with dad and something else. As I reached the foot of the bed the old man sat bolt upright, suddenly wide awake.

"I want to get up!" he said. "I want to get out of bed."

"Do you just want to sit up in bed?"

"No. I want to get up. I want to get out of bed."

"Where do you want to go?"

"I don't know."

"There's nowhere to go, dad."

"I want to get up. I want to get up." So we lifted him up because his legs no longer obeyed him and we brought him over to the window where he gazed out over the city lights and into the darkness beyond. We stood there until the dawn broke and we could see the lake.

"The Manitou Islands?" he said.

"Yes."

"Where's mother?" he said.

"She's at home resting."

"Oh?"

"She was here all day, with Cheryl. She'll be back in the morning." And he nodded. I had not realized until those last hours how mobile and expressive his face was. It was the most expressive face I can recall ever seeing.

"Is Marc here?" He showed a real concern for his grandson when the boy wasn't around to see it.

"He's at home resting. He was here all day."

"Good. This will be a good lesson for him." And I wondered, what he meant.

"Who is that?" he asked, and indicated the empty space in the chair.
"Who is that?"

"I don't see anyone, dad," my brother said.

"Who's that?" and he pointed to the empty bed he had just left. Again, watching him, I saw someone out of the corner of my eye and turned to see who was in the room with us, and there was no one there, but he wouldn't get back into the bed until an hour before he died.

And the wind came out of the Northwest like it always had and it was the same wind that lay down the snow in Abitibi Canyon and whipped up the icy flakes around the big fur collar he pulled tighter around his neck. It was the same wind that had traveled south to Vermont in the 1930's and earlier and

brought the winters to his boyhood and made the sleigh rides possible when he was a young man. It howled the way it howled when the trappers in the north knew it close to its source and kept them inside the little log cabins with the cherry-red potbelly stoves fired, and it would keep them up all the night, haunting and invasive, and the same wind sang now full of the ghosts who came to see and to be seen by the man preparing to join the wind as it swept over the changing fields and the lakes and the rivers and the trees and the rustling marshes where the crickets and night-birds and all the life of the days filled the wind with their song, and the night brought the wind's innumerable imaginings to his bed, an old broken man who understood at last the wind's song and rode it secure and pillowed and sleeping like a baby.

"Oh Tommy, do you love me?" a lovely voice cooed once and long ago.

"You bet," he answered toughly and looked up into the summer sky and dug his toes in the sand.

"Do you have to go to war, T?" she asked.

"You bet," he said and cocked his head toughly. "All the boys are going—Poo and John, and George—everybody."

"Look at me when I'm talking to you!" somebody said once, and more than once.

"C'mon, T, let's dance!"

"You're a little squirt, Vivian," he laughed and they floated off into the crowd.

"Dad, sit up, and let me straighten out the bed."

"Tommy. Tommy." Dick said. "Don't cry. There. You see what you've done, Da. He's only a kid. Leave him alone."

"Dick? Dick?" And he opened his eyes. "Where's Dick?"

"Dick died of a heart attack, Tom, a long time ago."

"Dick's dead? He had a heart attack?"

"Tommy!"

"George? How did you get to Dublin?"

"Was uncle George ever in Dublin, dad?"

"I don't know. Where are we now?"

"In North Bay."

"North Bay."

"Sit up for a minute, Mr. Millet."

"What in hell is that?"

"It's your I.V. unit with a sedative."

"I want to pee."

"You have a catheter, Mr. Millet. Just relax and don't worry."

"Isn't this a bitch," he said.

"How are you feeling, Tom?"

"Okay. I want to pee."

"We're all here."

"Who's that?"

"Who?"

"Mother and Dad will be down to see me tonight."

"Yes."

"And Jean and Lyman."

"Yes. Everyone, dad."

"Is Dick coming too?"

"Yes."

"Who's that? I want to get up. I want to get out of bed."

"Okay. How's this?"

"Good. Good. Where's mother?"

"Home sleeping. She'll be here in the morning."

"Oh?" And the wind howled and sang and he supposed it carried him back to his bed and he could feel it blowing on his face cold and steady.

"I don't want any oxygen. Take it away." No, he thought, he didn't need it because the wind was bringing him all the air he needed.

"I'm outperforming the oxygen," he said enigmatically, "I'm outperforming the oxygen." And he was as the wings grew out of him and lifted him up and the voices crowded in and lullabied and called and nothing could stop the wind from entering the room.

"Good Morning, Mother," he said brightly, for the last time.

"Tommy! Tommy!" the voices called.

"Hi, Poo!"

"Let's go. John's waiting. We'll meet the girls at the dance."

"There's John!"

"Poo! Tommy! Let's go. We're late!" And they cocked their felt hats the way Cagney did and walked to the dance and strode in together strong in their companionship and young manhood, and the girls were there for them, Vivian and Twiz and Beulah and Eileen and Margaret.

"Look!" cried Vivian, "it's the Three Musketeers!" and they danced long, long before the telephone was built that would ring for the only one left who would pick it up to hear a widowed voice on the other end.

"Oh God," said John, "now I'm the last of the Three Musketeers."

My mother was there when he died, just as she was there when her father died in the same hospital with her sitting by his bed, waiting, a woman who despite her love battled with both men. In the end they relied upon her utterly and chose to share their deaths with her, and with no other.

"Tom, look at me when I'm talking to you," she said, just as she had said a thousand irritating times throughout the years. But his wonderful blue eyes drifted slowly across the room away from her and focused gently on something near the ceiling, and he never looked at her again.

I would try to think about it in the weeks that followed, but I couldn't, and it wasn't because I didn't want to. I tried, but my mind threw up a wall that I couldn't get past. I would begin to think about some aspect of those last days, wanting to follow it through, and suddenly realize I had been staring blankly at a page or out the window and time had passed. Or I would fall asleep. I drove by a friend's house to drop off a bill, and his wife was there with the kids. We talked for a while and I realized I was on the verge of tears the whole time and had to leave. I wanted to be held by a woman, I realized, to be comforted so I could cry about my father, but there was no-one I could go to because I had been cast in role of comforter, even with my wife, and there was no-one for me to go to. It was a tough realization, and when I thought how many people had cried on my shoulder over the years and how I had comforted them in their grief and hurts and then comforted my father during his last hours and had nowhere to go myself, it seemed hard.

The wind had blown from the north for days and it brought the cold rain and followed me south when I left. It didn't stop and the weather didn't break until the plane left the country and entered the dominion of another wind. It flew westward and south. I went to the high cliffs back home to look out over the Pacific as the steady ocean wind blew in from the West when I got back, but it was a different wind than the one I knew and it didn't tell me anything. It came in off the empty ocean and only the sea-voices filled it and they had nothing to say to me. I knew I was being a whiner and complainer, but what I wanted then was a big woman, and an older woman, a woman with depth and compassion and wisdom who could absorb my grief and weakness and understand it and not be shocked by it or judge it. I didn't know a woman like that, and I thought if there was a deity it would have to be both mother and father so we could fall into her arms and sob over the griefs and hardships of mortality, and be comforted and made whole.

And I supposed my father had nowhere to turn at the end for his grief and his rage and his fear, because he would open his eyes and look at one of his boys and recognize them, and his eyes would fill with tears and a mute grief before he closed them again and hid his grief and his love. And I guessed the old man wouldn't let it out because he couldn't trust anyone to take it, only the dead.

Afterwards I would be asked if I felt empty. I didn't feel empty because I had lost the old man's support long years before and the void had gradually filled up with other things, as much as such things can be filled. But I did feel a deep and grievous wound at his passing, and I walked around with the wound and the deep sense of the wound, and expected it would never go away entirely. It was not a feeling of being empty, it was more like a great blow, the sort of blow Malory spoke of when a knight received a deep and penetrating wound that never healed except by some miracle or pure intervention. I wished I could explore that metaphor because there was clearly something to it, and thought maybe I would one day.

I sat by the hospital bed for an hour or more after my father had gone, holding his hand, and thought "Let him go, he's gone, don't be morbid." But I didn't want to let him go just then because once I did I would never hold his hand or feel his touch again. He had beautiful hands, the most beautiful hands I had ever seen on a man and I had always admired them. They were large and beautifully formed and very manly, and his fingers always looked liked they had been newly manicured. I would miss those hands so I stayed by the bedside and gazed at him and felt them cool in my own. He was gone and everything was slipping away but we all stayed, and when we left we left part of ourselves.

And I thought back to a time long ago when I was only two and my father had taken me to a hospital and left me there. He put me in a crib and walked away and he didn't look back because he didn't want to

cry, and when he returned after three months I no longer recognized him. It had been a long time ago that he walked away from me and left me alone in the hospital, and now I would have to walk away and leave him alone in another hospital, and I would walk away and try not to look back because I didn't want to cry though I would never see him again, and it seemed very hard that life could do these things, and do them again.

But what I thought of for a long while was the sound of the north wind, and I thought of the long winters when I was a boy and the clean sound of the wind through the pines as it gathered up the voices of the hushed and luminous landscape, and then I remembered the summer wind whistling through the same trees and the marshes and it seemed as though all the voices that mattered in the world were gathered by the north wind and I wondered why it had sounded so lonely and sad in the room where my father lay dying.

The end of a man's own world can come in many ways; the slow accretion of incremental devastations can bring it, but it is different when you lose someone you love and cannot have imagined being without. It is a sort of dirty trick life plays on the living. Perhaps it is something that cannot be understood, that is beyond what we can understand. And there are different ways to deal with the sorrow of it, but mostly they are just ways to blunt it, and that is all that time does, really. Hemingway said that sorrow could only be cured by death, and if it is cured by anything less than death, the chances are that it was not pure sorrow, and maybe he was right. There are just ways to come to terms with it, and live with it.

My father's death was not the end of my world, but it was the end of something and a part of me didn't give a damn about certain things afterwards, and a part of me changed. And it made me realize what the end of my world could be and that frightened me very much. I knew after he died that the end of my world would not be my own death, for now I

hoped that would come before the other thing came. My own death would be an escape. The end would be to lose someone you loved and could not replace, and be left without them, and this was especially true of young boys just learning to be men or girls turning into women, or if it was the woman you loved in a way that made all other women uninteresting to you, because those were the things that you built your life on and they were its foundation.

A great Blue Heron had flown by the hospital window in the last hours and caught the old man's eye. He leaned forward to watch it go, intently and wistfully. The bird flew by both evenings, like a portent. The day he died and we were back home I stood where he had often stood and looked out over the lake and I thought how he would never stand here again to take in this view and it didn't seem right or fair that it should be so. As I stood there a great Blue Heron swept down and landed on the front lawn, coming in slowly and with great majesty, cupping and folding its big wings deliberately and with great beauty and grace. It stood motionless for a time and I thought how he had loved these birds, and as it stood there poised in a stillness that was almost painful another heron glided in. The noble birds strolled out onto the rocks and into the water lifting their long legs reverently and they stayed there as the evening deepened and the gloaming all but obscured them. Then rising on their great wings they lifted silently and glided into the darkness.

Afterword

Exactly one month after my father died, and at the same hour, (6 a.m. Pacific, 9 Eastern), a dream awoke me.

I walked down a long hallway towards a room where I was expected to give a talk. Approaching the door to the room, I saw there was a round

table within, and seated at the table was a group of all my father's friends. They were gathered to hear an anecdote I was about to recount, and he was there waiting with them, sitting to the right of the empty chair reserved for me, a little pale and weak and only a little confused. He was there to hear the story I was about to tell. It was the story of his life; he had not heard it before, and he didn't know the story, though it was his own, but he was interested now and earnest, and he wanted to hear it told, and to learn about it. It seemed not at all strange that the account had not been for him to tell, that it was up to me to unfold it in a way he could understand, and see what it was for the first time, so I leaned forward and put my hand on the back of his neck to gently massage the spot where I knew he was hurting, and he nodded softly, and I began to speak.

All the circle of his friends drew close, shoulder to shoulder and leaning forward to hear. They were eager to listen, and we were all happy to have been a part of the story, to know that he had given the sharing of it as a great gift, and we were comfortable and happy that he had shared his life with us, and we were thankful.

A Night With Beulah

My father grew up in a small town, odd even for a region where towns are notorious for their idiosyncrasies, and where eccentricity is a source of pride. The town of Derby Line had the additional distinction of straddling the Québec-Vermont border, and drew from the reservoirs of two national heritages to water its eccentricity. The U.S.G.S. men were swimming in more than the giddy liquor of nationalism when they laid down the border further north than intended, ran it through a dozen or more homes, the public library, and at least one saloon. The border never moved, nor did the buildings, but the bar in the saloon moved. It was built on narrow gauge railroad tracks, and when the Canadian part of the room closed at 11 p.m., the bar departed for that section of floor designated as U.S. soil. The patrons stayed aboard, and drank for two more hours.

This giddy mobility was especially handy when prohibition outlawed drink south of the border, and my grandfather, an incontrovertible Irishman and sheriff of the Canadian part of town, used the saloon and his jail to ensure that his southern cousins were watered from the well of their choice. In the best traditions of the Old West (notwithstanding it being the East), he smuggled cheap booze and Chinese labor over the border, using his jail as a stopover.

The old man shocked and delighted the town. He was wild and unpredictable, notorious for rows with his sons. Fistfights spilled out of the house onto the street regularly. Someone would trumpet "They're at it again!" in a jubilant brogue, and neighbors poured from their homes to the sidewalk as muffled shouts in the house ballooned to a din that detonated when the doors burst open and the spectators roared encouragement to the old man and his sons rolling onto the front lawn, pummeling and cursing one another. The old man never lost.

On one occasion they knocked over a kerosene lamp and set the living room rug ablaze. My father was still a child.

"Tommy, for the love of Jesus sit up and stop making such a row," the old man had snapped. "You'll drive your mother mad! Here, lad, sit up!" and he slapped the table. "Pay attention or I'll warm the back of your pants!" Tommy's lower lip began to tremble.

"Here," yelled Dick, the oldest son. "Don't talk to the kid that way. Look what you've done," pointing at Tommy's tear-filled eyes.

"I'll need none of your lip, Dick!"

"Leave the kid alone," he persisted. The old man leaned over and slapped his son across the cheek. While he was still tilted over the table, the boy reacted without thinking; his fist shot out and caught his father alongside the jaw. The old man's reaction was immediate.

"Jesus, Joseph and Mary!" he bellowed. "Hit your own father would you! By God!" and he flew across the table knocking Dick down with a roundhouse. "Aha!" he crowed. Dick leapt up, swung, and knocked his father back onto the dinner. Dishes clattered to the floor. A clot of mashed potatoes stuck to the back of the old man's head. George, in an explosion of hilarity, spewed a mouthful of milk in a fine spray over the scene. A thin wail of alarm floated in from the kitchen. The boys ignored it, cheering on their brother.

"Hit him, Dick!"

"Look out, Dick, he's sneaky!"

And they danced around in a frenzy while Tommy bawled in the corner. The old man feinted, then followed through with an uppercut that sent Dick reeling against the sideboard. The buffet rocked precariously, the lamp on it teetered, then toppled to the floor, breaking and spilling its contents over the rug.

"Ah!" gloated the old man. Dick approached him in a crouch, dripping gravy. His eyes flickered.

"Look out!" Pete yelled. "The rug's on fire. The house is going to burn down." Flames licked upward. Startled, the old man tore his eyes away from his son.

"Your mother will have our hides for this, boys. Quick, out the door with it." They knocked the dining table onto its side, kicked it off the flaming rug, smashed dishes, scattered the food, whooped with excitement, called a truce, grabbed the corners of the blazing rug and ran out the front door with it. The street surged with cheering neighbors.

But this is not a story about the town. It is not even a story about the people who shaped it, and were shaped by it; it is story about a particular week in the life of one man, my father, who fled from something in that town, and only near the end of his life reaffirmed his ties to it.

It is an attempt to understand.

His mother lost her mind when he was six. Townspeople said she had "gone mental," as though she had gone north, or south, but with less peril. Like other travelers on that particular voyage, she was gone for a while. My father was sent across town to be raised by his aunt Jean. It was an irregular enough event at the time to invite scrutiny, and my father, not yet trained in the Irish rough and tumble of his family, grew increasingly distant within the hushed confines of his aunt's house. He was the baby, and by the time he was a young man, the antics of his father and brothers were legendary and out of reach.

At twenty-two he married my mother, a local girl, and they left their home, their friends, and a part of themselves, for a new and distant life in the Canadian North. As I learned many years later, they had their reasons for leaving.

I've been told my father was dashing as a young man, with a reputation as a rake. Dog-eared photos show him laughing beneath a

Fedora, wearing an open trench coat on his shoulders, and lovely women on his arm. The women called him "T," and one frequently beside him was Beulah, the sort of soft, full-featured blond associated with Hollywood in the days before World War II. Perhaps he reminded her of Cagney and Bogart, leading men whose stature was greater than their physical size. He was handsome and a smart dresser, dazzling with his hat cocked to one side, his top coat open with its belt tied casually, and a white silk scarf tossed carelessly over a shoulder. His smile made women dizzy, I'm told, his blue eyes made them swoon, and his curly hair made them adoring. They called him "Blue Eyes," like Sinatra, and flirted shamelessly. He was sweet, and fun-loving, and crooned the latest songs at parties.

As for the details of that week, they are as real to me as if I had been there to witness them. I cannot explain how this is so, except to say the stories and their fragments have been so often mentioned over the years that the picture has finally revealed itself in its entirety. Over time, as the American writer Sherwood Anderson has said, we come to know many unexplainable things.

And so I can imagine that one night in 1941 a big band played in Stanstead College, that Beulah said "Tommy, come dance with me," that he swept her away in his arms while the other girls tittered, that they danced close and carefree and never thought to stop.

That Beulah watched him laugh, as he turned his blue eyes to her and sang, tilting his head the way Crosby did, that she thought she might know what heaven was.

But if Beulah loved my father, Hilda Lane wanted him. I see her watching from the side of the dance floor, her dark eyes snapping disapproval; she tosses back her head, pretending to laugh at something her cousin Poo just said.

"C'mon, cuz, let's dance," she would say, and Poo, an elegant dancer, would whirl her around the floor and into the crowd. As they

circled Tommy and Beulah, I know my mother would deliberately bump them.

"C'mon! Wake up, you two! Hey, cuz, let's switch and wake these sleepy heads up!" She would grab an abashed Tommy, whirl him into the crowd, leaving Beulah in the arms of her cousin, leaving her laughing deep in her throat.

"Oh, Poo Putney, what are we going to do with your cousin?"

"Hilda?" He smiles, "I think she has her eye on your beau, lover." And Beulah laughs again, because all her friends had their eye on him. It would make him more special, knowing he was coveted.

"Are you really going to join up, Poo?"

"Sure thing! First thing tomorrow. Waterman and all the boys are going. Tommy, too," he adds quietly. "And his brothers, Dick and Pete."

"Won't it be awful?" Her face crinkles in concern.

"Sure. But we'll put the Germans on the run pretty quick, and then have some swell times. Don't you worry. We'll be home in no time. Look, there's Tommy. Let's go snatch him back and keep my cousin out of trouble."

Tommy sees them approach, sees that Poo knows he's in over his head.

"Hey Twiz!" shouts Poo, "let's dance," and leads Hilda reluctantly into the crowd. Tommy takes Beulah into his arms and sighs.

"Poo dances like a dream, but no one dances like you, Tommy. Why! Just look at those girls all dying to have a turn with you!" And my father smiles, and shakes something off, and settles into the rhythm again. And Beulah asks him to sing for her, and says something about Hilda having a bee in her bonnet.

"Good old Poo," he says noncommittally, then "Look. There's Eileen and Vivian. Let's dance over and get them," and Vivian's eyes light when she sees them coming towards her, short, saucy, wonderful.

"You watch out, Beulah," she teases, "I'm going to dance Tommy right into the sunset! Come on, lover!" And Vivian laughs, and everybody loves her. She has just left beauty college and warns everyone to come to her for their perms, or else.

After the dance the moon sails between white clouds in a cobalt sky, and the young dancers float outside with it. The darkness is warm and close, the night a soft extension of a summer Vermont day, sleep is elusive and unnecessary. None of that group wants to stop, so they pile into their black Fords, the models Henry Ford offers in any color they want, as long as it's black, and they drive crazy and laughing through the quiet town and out along the country roads to the beach. The lake spreads the moonlight over its surface like wrinkled flannel. Moonlight marbles their bodies.

Beulah and Tommy wander the beach long after the others leave; they lie under the moon and the stars, hear small waves lap the shore. They taste the night. A blanket covers them. Their toes play idly in the sand.

"Tommy?" she asks.

"Mmm?"

"Do you love me?"

"Mmmm," he answers, and she snuggles closer, and thinks about the wedding night they never mention but which she believes rolls toward them from a future they do not question.

Is she a little afraid of him, afraid of her luck in loving him, afraid of losing him to the war, afraid of his charm? A stranger to his own attributes, he inhabits long, melancholy silences that will stay with him. Perhaps his eyes gaze vaguely on landscapes of long ago and far away, perhaps she loves this in him because it lends him depth and substance. Perhaps he knows this, and gazes out into the night with weight and responsibility on his face.

His mother's face, with its soft, round features of the Northern Irish, shapes his. She had been a great beauty in her youth, but his darker

coloring comes from his father, from the south of Ireland. The old man insisted he was descended from the survivors of the Spanish Armada, wrecked by Sir Francis Drake ("The only good thing the English ever did!" he claimed for forty years, slamming down his hand and glaring at the woman he married whose face would close up as she turned away), and he had the sharp, hawk-like features to make such a claim.

And Beulah studies his profile as he lies on his back, gazing up, sees the moon reflected in his eyes, thinks of the boy left in the wake of his older brothers. She sighs. She watches his lips form words, watches his teeth, perfect and even, bite off the syllables, says something to make him smile. Lifting her hand, she traces the outline of his profile, draws little tight circles around the dimple on his chin, then runs her fingers over his chest to the ribs broken playing football, and he grunts softly as she probes the scar where a kidney has been removed, damaged during that same football season. A quarterback, one hundred and thirty-five pounds, he was tossed around as much as the ball. Now these are the medals of manhood, the medals he will have to accept in place of those from a war that will not let him join.

A faintly tragic aura of manly suffering is in vogue; it makes young men like my father talk tough about things they don't understand. This, and his ironic self-depreciation, carve him into a romantic figure whose those planes and surfaces will endure.

This night he talks big about the war and heroism and responsibility, swears he will get by the doctors with his single kidney, quotes Kipling, embraces the poet's sentiment, calls the English "Limeys." Like young men everywhere, like all his friends, he is a patchwork of adolescent contradiction. The country is the same. His opinions stick to him as burrs stick to a dog running through a field, gathered thoughtlessly, clinging stubbornly. He will pass them down to me, constellations of disappointment implacable as stars in the firmament.

"The tommies are the best shock troops in the world," he says toughly. "They'll stay put until the last man dies, and never run. But," he continues, believing this to be a wonderful thing, "I don't want to be in a Limey unit all the same. I want to fight with the Canucks." And he quotes Kipling again as he will for the rest of his life, and perhaps it gives Beulah goose bumps. "Though I flayed you and I slayed you, by the living God that made you/ You're a better man than I am, Ghunga Din!" This is meant to show that he harbors no prejudice, and he continues in the same breath to enumerate the virtues and the shortcomings of the Krauts, Wops, Japs, Yanks and a host of other unhappy stereotypes. Only the fighting Irish escape a pejorative label, nor does he see the categories as pejorative. It is a wonderful and thrilling sort of ignorance, a simple ignorance that develops in later years to tough talk about "The Red Menace" and much similar nonsense. It is a nonsense embraced by the times, the sort of thinking that persuades the British die in their thousands on front lines and spurs tough-minded Canadians into wave after wave of annihilation on the beaches in Dunkirk. It is the sort of heroic delusion that young men embrace, especially in times of war, believing it is noble to die bravely and uselessly.

"The Yanks are unstoppable if they are winning, but they bog down under pressure." Does Beulah's heart sing with his knowledge, does she wonder how he knows such things, think he's wonderful? "The Vingt-Deuxs are tough, but they shoot everyone in sight, including their own men. Besides, you have to be French to join them." It is all nonsense, in a time of nonsense, a regurgitation of radio and news squibs and propaganda. It is the stuff of bravado and bullyboys becoming men, and no different than the slogans of the young anywhere, anytime.

"Tommy, do you have to go to the war?" she asks.

And he says through clenched teeth and narrowed eyes, "You bet! Poo is joining up tomorrow with Waterman. Poo Putney knows a doctor that will pass me in the physicals. I won't be left behind like a sap!"

And he will enlist and get his uniform. He will commandeer some photos as proof before he is found out and barred him from active service. He will retell stories about his pals in action as though he had been there with them, and will talk about the toughness of the Germans, and the tragedy of war.

"Will you come back to me?"

"Sure," he says, and dreams of medals and new wounds earned in the fight for good. She snuggles against the chill, loves him for coming back though he hasn't even left, and tries to imagine what he will be like, a seasoned veteran with new toughness and tragedy.

If she asks him about having a large family, it will bring him sharply out of his reverie. The notion will startle him. It is early to think about children; it will always be. He has only just attained manhood, freedom, and there is much to do.

But he will remember a line from Cagney if she asks, or from Bogart, and say the right thing for the moment, and Beulah might nibble his ear in gratitude, picturing a house with a yard and flowers, and him coming through the gate after work, her friends envious. Perhaps he rolls towards her then, kisses her hard on the mouth and pulls her close.

"Oh T!" she says, "let's wait until the wedding. We have to wait! Let's! Oh Tommy, no one will ever believe we did! But we'll know." And she shrieks in delight. And my father would acquiesce because he was a gentle man, a kind man, reluctantly swallowing his desires now and forever, like wounds to be borne, and he could have pulled Beulah close, and stared manfully into the heavens.

And "Oh, Tommy!" she would have said, as a tear spilled down her cheek, "To think you'd wait for me."

Three days after this dance, I've been told, the same group of friends gathered for a picnic at Lake Memphimagog. Beulah was absent, shopping

with her mother in Burlington. Hilda orbited Tommy like a bee. Inevitably, perhaps, they left the group and climbed the mountain alone. Apparently those dizzy heights contained, if not the burning bush, a glimpse into the world beyond, though the voice he heard was surely my mother's, not the creator's. Because he did not stare directly into the face of God that day, he didn't descend from the mountain carrying tablets proclaiming a new law; but because, as a French writer once said, "the mucous membranes, by an ineffable mystery, enclose in their obscure folds all the riches of the infinite," a new law had been decreed nonetheless. He met the group of friends waiting below a changed man, and the woman who would become my mother was wearing his shirt.

Soon after that climb he and my mother announced plans for marriage, and left the little town they were born in. An oil painting of the mountain by the lake hung on their living room wall for the rest of my father's life, a sad and curious symbol because it seemed he could not scale those heights again. I suspect my mother unleashed herself on him that day, and he was blown down like a field of ripe corn. We all came to know her unrelenting will during our lives, and it seems odd to think that such a thing could be present in a young girl. But it was undeniably there later, and over the years my father retreated into an exile of bitterness and sarcasm.

He kept pictures of Beulah. His favorite was a three-quarters profile with her lovely face turned up into the lens that had preserved her for the eyes of a man who loved her. She signed the bottom right corner: 'Tommy— love always, Beulah,' and he kept the pictures in his top drawer. One spring morning, when he was fifty, my mother went through his dresser after he left for work, and threw the pictures out. He came home to find another link to who he had been irreparably fractured. The woman he married was tireless, a ruthless campaigner, and his defenses had been intended for far different engagements.

Perhaps he kept the pictures as a sort of sacred trust, acknowledging a debt and a promise he had once made with his life and a woman who loved him. These things are rarely conscious, so perhaps it was an admission that, although he had turned aside from the road he was meant to travel, the pact was still in place, that part of him stayed committed to it. On some level he came to believe my mother had stolen his life, but if so, he let her steal it.

"He was a real doll," Vivian said to me forty years later, "a real dreamboat." Her eyes shone with coquettish glow that lit up the young woman she had been before she became the sixty-year-old hairdresser speaking to me. I realized I had missed something in not knowing her then, saucy and fresh, starting out on her new career, that this was probably true of any generation I cared to name, and I felt cheated and sad, and drawn to her.

The depth of my father's despair spilled out one day when I was twenty-eight. He turned his tired eyes to me, and said wearily: "Son, when you have children, your life is over." I did not believe that then, nor do I accept it now, but how can a son interpret his father's self-betrayal, or the arrangements he has made with his own heart?

Frank Johnson

Frank reached the Red Sucker River in early afternoon. He beached the canoe at the confluence where the river joined the Abitibi and pulled the prow up onto a small patch of sand by a rocky shelf. He looked down the river in the direction he'd come from and ran through the journey quickly and with satisfaction. It had been a good trip all the way.

Before noon he'd pushed the canoe along the shallow rill connecting the lake with his cabin to the river. He'd guided the canoe past the low water where the crawfish were trapped in pools around the exposed rocks, and he'd paddled along the bank where the current was mild. When the river narrowed and the smooth granite knuckles of the rapids pushed to the surface, he'd pulled into the deeper water. His shoulders bunched with each stroke as the muscles worked. The current was quicker there and slapped against the sides of the steady canoe. The paddle sliced the water, and when the paddle slipped, knocking against the gunwale, it flipped up a spray that darkened the worn red of his shirtsleeves and sent a hollow thunk echoing over the water. Sunlight had hovered in the pine trees across the river along the shore. He'd pulled out of the current toward the light. A bald eagle had swooped out of a dead tamarack and slammed into the water ahead of him. Then it climbed with a fish in its talons. He'd sat in the canoe and watched the bird, resting the paddle across his knees.

He'd been happy to see the bird, and the fact that it was late flying south meant there was still time before winter hit. He'd thought it was a good omen to see it. And now he was here where he wanted to be, at the clearing.

He lifted out his duffel and looked across the Abitibi. The sandy cliffs were high and pale there, covered with a thin carpet of topsoil that hung over the edges and into the air. Tamarack and jack pine grew to the edge and leaned out at awkward angles. Eventually their roots tore free of the

thin duff and they tumbled down to the river. The sand beneath the duff was soft and always eroding, falling away to form narrow beaches below that lasted until the spring melt washed the river clean, mixing the fine sand of the beaches into the water that carried away the fallen trees. It was a constant process, and the trees, stripped of bark and foliage, eventually washed up on the banks further down river, silver and dried by the weather. There was always plenty of driftwood, and it was good kindling. Frank picked up some of the kindling and walked to the clearing with a billycan he'd filled in the river. Then he dropped the wood and his pack on the duff close to a jack pine. He walked across the clearing to a small area ringed by river-rock. Within the stone circle was a grave with a smooth granite boulder at the head of it.

"I'm still here, Eva," he said, looking at the rock.

He returned to the pile of kindling and his duffel and formed a small steeple out of the smallest sticks. Then he surrounded them carefully with larger sticks until he had formed five layers. He walked across the clearing and sliced a forked branch from a poplar with his hatchet and cut the branch into three sections, each two feet long. He knelt and pushed the sections onto the soft dirt around the steeple, forming a tripod with two of the branches resting in the fork of the third. He could hang the billycan from this, and the green poplar would resist the flames. Then he lit the fire from the inside and sat down.

He lifted his meerschaum pipe from his jacket pocket, pulled out a pouch of tobacco, and filled the pipe. He tamped down the tobacco with his finger, and when it was compacted, he struck a match on a stone and lit the pipe. Frank stretched out his legs and leaned back, waiting for the water to boil. The little blaze popped and crackled beside him. He blew a long, slow plume of fragrant smoke into the air and looked at the trees across the Red Sucker. There were spruce and tamarack and pine, he thought, and they hadn't changed much over the years because they were mature and because

the winters were hard and surprising. Only the flowers changed dramatically, and every season bright rafts of trilliums and tiger lilies bloomed along the banks. But it was fall now, and the flowers were gone. Even the sweet fern had withered and turned brown, and the only color lay in the leaves from the aspen and maple that littered the forest floor.

When the water boiled, Frank reached into the duffel again and felt for the bag of loose tea. He retrieved the bag, opened it and sprinkled a handful of the leaves into the boiling water. It was Lapsang Oolong, and he leaned over the can to inhale the fragrance of the tea. It smelled smoky and a little like tar, and Frank liked that. It reminded him of the old sailors on wooden ships, and he had read that the tea was a favorite with them too. It was after he'd read this that he'd decided to try it himself. While the tea steeped, he looked to his right, out over the river. Small waves scattered the sun in bright flakes, and he thought of the sequins on a dress Eva bought on a trip through Cochrane. The dress had been buff-grey, and the sequins had tossed off a small blizzard of silver light. He held his meerschaum pipe in his hand and blew another plume of smoke into the air.

He wished then that he had brought his fishing tackle, and he looked hard at the slow crawl of the big river. It was September, and he knew the fish would be striking. He stood up and walked back to the canoe and looked into the river. The water swelled up under its tight skin as the rocks pushed into the current, and the pickerel gathered in the swift current around the rocks. The fishing was best there, with the flesh of the fish firm and sweet, but the pickerel from the small, quiet lakes that fed the river were not as lively or as tasty as those where the water was quick. Their meat was soft and sometimes wormy when the water lay warm and still in the summer heat. Frank looked at the fish for a long time.

Then he looked up at the confluence. A dark stain stretched out into the Abitibi where the red water from the Sucker bled into it. A blue jay screeched above him. To his left lay the little river, the Red Sucker, where

the trees grew down to the river's edge and hung over the narrow beaches into the water. The shade was cool under the trees and the small river perch hid there from the kingfishers. Then he walked back to the fire, poured some tea and sat down again. He leaned his head back against the tree, tilted his face into the warmth of the sun, and inhaled the pungent smell of leaves turning into the autumn loam. He could smell the sharp scent of the pine tree and the lingering balm of the sweet fern drying along the banks. He roughed up a little of the duff with his fingers and held it lightly in his hand. It gave up a clean odor of summer savory.

Frank stretched out his legs and looked up through the boughs of the pine. The breeze was picking up and whistled in the pine needles, and high above raced the white clouds. Then he closed his eyes. They were cumulus clouds, he thought, small and puffy.

The fire was out when he woke. Dusk was closing in and the weather whistled sharply through the trees. A heavy scud lumbered out of the north. Frank hurried to the canoe, cursing as the rain hit, frigid and laced with sleet. The wind threw tight fists of ripples over the water, wrinkling its surface.

He pushed into the river and paddled fast, knowing the current would help him get home quickly. He pulled into the drift and stabbed the paddle into the water, feeling the deep muscles in his back bunch. The small wake of the stern hissed as he entered the rapids, and he plunged the paddle again and again into the deep current.

Frank knew he was being reckless. He wasn't a young man anymore, but he had a young man's strength and more endurance. He watched his hands with satisfaction as they curled around the shaft and knob of the paddle. They were strong hands and had carved the paddle they now worked. Once Eva had told him he had the fingers of a pianist. He smiled. His arms were strong, too, from the work of carrying and paddling and

chopping. He was a trapper and he was in good shape. He knew the river. He could travel fast now because the river was familiar to him. He could work up a light sweat because he needed the heat to rebuff the big wind coming along the river, and the trip would be over before the sweat had begun to chill him.

The rain got into his eyes, making it difficult to see, but Frank knew the rocks and was confident. He worked the paddle relentlessly and felt the muscles bunch and warm and swell in his back and his arms. He laughed. He had done this before. He would be fine. He thought about the berry pemmican outside the cabin in the rain. It would be wet and soggy now. He would scoop it into a bowl when he got back and stir in some sugar and a little of the dry pectin he kept. Then he would heat it on the stove and make it into a jam. He would eat it on his bread. It would not be wasted.

Frank brought his attention back to the river. Up ahead was the bend where he had seen the eagle. He would pull toward the shore there to miss the rocks in the middle of the river. It was always trickier moving downstream with the current, and now the water was low with the autumn.

He blinked the rainwater out of his eyes. Ahead were the rocks, and the water bulged slightly where the rocks faced the current, and then the river curled around the granite, leaving a trail of small eddies downstream. There were more of these swellings and eddies in the low water as the bottom came nearer the surface. In the spring the water was high and the river was less worrisome. He could see the rocks now and prepared to push diagonally toward the shore. He could see the tree where the eagle had launched itself in the morning sun. He looked up for the bird, but it was not there. It had taken shelter. The little inlet lay below. He would not be stopping there now. Then Frank looked back to the river. He locked the paddle against the side of the canoe, holding it tight there and using it as a rudder to steer to his right. As he did, the water bulged on the left and a

shadow moved to the surface. Frank quickly brought the paddle up and over to redirect the canoe. He'd had the paddle against the side opposite the shadow, and a submerged log, he could see it plainly now, bobbed free from the surface and slammed into the side of the canoe.

Frank was pitched headlong into the water. When he rose to the surface, the canoe was downstream and moving away quickly. It was capsized. There was a hole in the beam where the log had hit it. He hadn't tied down his duffel, and it would be gone. There was no point in chasing the canoe, so he struck out for the shore.

He crawled up onto a low granite shelf on the side of the river and looked out at the rocks where he'd lost the canoe. A dark shape lifted just clear of the surface forty feet upstream, remained there for three or four seconds, then disappeared. A minute later it appeared, then disappeared. Frank watched its slow oscillation. What he watched wasn't uncommon. A waterlogged trunk had floated downriver and its forward end had snagged on the bottom. Then the current pushed against the free end, setting up a rise and fall like a horizontal pendulum keeping its own time. The tip of the log would rise and sink, rise and sink, like clockwork until the log broke free or sank. It was one of the perils of the river that demanded diligence.

He shook his head to get the water out of his ears. His supplies had disappeared with the canoe, but the small skinning-knife was still secure in its sheath on his belt. He looked down at his hands, gnarled and brown from the sun and work, the shape of the paddle held in his curled fingers. The fingers were trembling and a pallor lay under the tanned skin. Then he felt his pockets for the pipe and the matches. The matches were sodden. The sleet sliced through his wet clothes, plucking up the skin on his arms and legs.

"Damn," he said.

He couldn't start a fire in the storm and couldn't travel in the dark. He would have to stay warm tonight, swim the river in the morning, then make a run for the cabin.

He moved quickly into a stand of aspen and kicked the loose leaves on the forest floor into a pile under an old spruce tree. Then he cut long saplings with his knife and shoved them into the ground one foot apart, fashioning a rectangle five feet wide and eight feet long under the lower branches of the spruce. He lined the bottom of the frame with branches cut from the tree to contain the leaves, filled the framework with the driest leaves on the bottom, piled the stack four feet high, folded the saplings over the top, fastened them so they formed a framed cover, and weighed them down with more boughs. Then he burrowed into the middle of the leafy heap and hoped the rain would let up.

The tree would help shed the rain and the leaves were good insulation, but he was still cold. He curled into a tight ball and listened unhappily to the wind and rain. He shifted as an icy trickle of water found its way to his back. The rain pelted the leaves, and its sound reminded him of it drumming on the cabin roof. Then he thought of the potbelly stove in the middle of the cabin floor and a fire in the stove and the hot, dry smell of the cast iron when it glowed red with the heat. He imagined the pop and snap of the fire, its heat from a heap of wood, the flames licking up into the night and the red heart of the blaze with a gray ring of ashes around it. He thought about the smell of wood when it burned, about each wood blazing differently with its own smell. He thought of the smoke curling up from a big, wasteful blaze.

"We'll make it, Eva." He spoke out loud into the leaves. The wind rattled the trees outside his cocoon, and he thought of the sun by his cabin that morning, and how the weather had made him careless.

That's it, he thought, I'm not coming back. If I make it out, I'm moving to into town and not coming back. Then he shifted to escape another trickle of water.

He had not begun to shiver. He was getting warmer; he'd worn wool shirts and pants because the cloth insulated even when it was wet. He always wore it for that reason. When the wool was damp from a light rain, it would lie pleasantly warm on his shoulders, but now the clothes were soaking and were slow to give up the chill of the rain. He couldn't hear the storm any more, so he poked a hole through the leaves and peered out. It was very dark. He pulled his head back inside, and remembered the berry pemmican he'd left outside the cabin door that morning. It would be too late to make it into jam now; the rain would have washed it away, leaving only a red stain on the drying-board.

He knew he had to keep his mind busy to keep from falling asleep until he was warmer, and he decided to recount all the events of the day, from the time he walked out of the cabin that morning until he'd reached the point where he was now. So he thought of sitting outside his cabin door telling himself he'd been ready for winter. Frank sighed deeply in the leaves. He remembered leaning back against the doorjamb and watching the light dance between the poplars around the cabin; it had skipped across the carpet of leaves past the little pines to the water's edge where it lit the reeds and sank into the water. Frogs had croaked in the reeds. Further out on the lake the sun had puckered up the water like silver flannel, and the bright flakes of light had been sharp in his eyes.

He'd wondered if this would be his last year trapping because he had begun to fret how the winter rode out of the north, quick and bitter on the Arctic wind, and he'd tilted his face up into the warmth of the morning sun and closed his eyes and wondered if it should be his last year because he was spending too much time daydreaming too.

Later, he'd brought out the strips of berry pemmican to dry more thoroughly in the sun. He'd inventoried his winter stores and gone over the items in his head: flour and beans and bacon and lard and jerky; Oolong

tea, dark coffee, sugar, salt. Then he'd thought about the meadow where the Red Sucker emptied into the Abitibi where he'd buried Eva twenty-three years earlier. He remembered how she'd loved the spot, how they had gone there for day-trips whenever they could, how he'd cleared a small area there after she'd gone and kept it up during the summer, and spent what time he could talking to her there and thinking.

Now, huddled in the leaves, he could not recall what he'd been thinking about next, so he thought instead about what he'd done.

He'd cleaned the cabin by mid-morning. It was something he did especially thoroughly on the days he visited the meadow, and he tried hard to maintain the cabin the way it had looked when Eva had been with him. He'd scanned the interior for a last look round: the rafter poles were straight, the shingles fast; the chinking was tight in the log walls, and a picture hung on the wall with a nail. A double bed stood beneath the picture and a blue gingham bedspread was folded down to show a red Hudson Bay blanket at the pillows. A long shelf of books ran along the wall beside the bed. The floor was swept; the pine planks were smoothed and sealed and a fur rug rested by the bed. Across the room a steel trap lay oiled and ready by his boots in a corner. Then he'd turned in the doorway toward the clearing and the lake beyond. He'd looked to the stream draining the lake through the trees. The tops of the trees reached to the clouds, and the clouds were dappled and had streamed to a single point over the horizon.

He'd guided the canoe through the rill to the river and paddled into the current. Halfway to the Red Sucker he'd pulled into a little bay to stretch the cramps out of his legs. He'd smoked a pipe, then entered the current again and paddled north against the flow towards the Sucker and the rapids that girdled the river below it. Then he'd seen the eagle, and thought it had been a good sign.

Frank thought about where he was now, buried in the leaves. He wondered where the other eagle was. There had always been a pair of them at that point in the river. It hadn't occurred to him the time. The leaves pressed in on him, so he pushed his thoughts deliberately back to the river with the sequin-like waves on the water earlier that day. He was very sleepy, and when he felt himself falling asleep, he thought harder and reached further back to remember Eva's dress and the first time he brought her to the cabin.

He closed his eyes in order to visualize the dress better and was surprised at the color when it appeared before him because he had expected a black dress, or a deep blue one, as she emerged from the changing room in Eaton's department store. But she was modeling a gray dress and walked back and forth preening self-consciously. She told him plainly that she loved the shade, that it was warm and subtle and lovely, that it reminded her of the soft, gray feathers of the northern partridge, ringed by rich brown and yes, he said, a ruffled grouse and she answered yes and said she would accent the dress with the same brown. He told her she was right, and he gazed at her in the dress she might wear two or three times, and he loved her and then it was later and she said Here, and handed him a book of poems and she laughed at his expression and said Yes, you can read them over and over and never wear them out and they will last a lifetime, she said, but we'll only be gone five or six years in the bush, and we'll have enough money saved for a house in town and meantime, Frank Johnson, she said, you can read to me at night. Now take me home. He paddled them home and it took two days and a night, and they camped at the Red Sucker. On the second day he beached the canoe in the lake by the cabin he'd built for her and walked across the glade. Halfway to the cabin he felt Eva's sudden absence, and when he turned she was nowhere in sight, and the sky, which had been sunny, had darkened and he looked at the book of poems in his hand. There were one hundred

and thirty poems in the book and he decided to read a poem every night until he knew them pretty much by heart.

Then he continued walking to the cabin and looked for her inside and saw the rafter poles were twisted and the shingles cracked. Snowflakes drifted through the rafters and dusted the bunk and the riven planks of the floor. A raspberry cane reached up through a breach in the planks, balancing a yellow leaf in the cold air. Across the room a steel trap lay iced beside a boot in the corner. He turned in the door and looked across the snowy clearing to the lake. The frozen stream wound through the trees and the tops of the trees stood white beneath a flat sky with heavy clouds that streamed toward a single point over the horizon, and it gave him such a shock that he woke up.

He was cold. The leaves over his face smelled like raw earth. He thrust his head outside the shelter and sucked in the cold air. It was light. He shook his head to clear it of the dream. Then he stood up and walked to the river. The river was narrow where he stood, and he had a good chance of making it across. The cabin was three miles downriver. The current could carry him to within a half-mile of it while he swam. He would have to make a run for the cabin when he reached the far shore. If the river carried him past the cabin he would have been in the water too long, and would be too cold and tired to double back. If he got out of the river too soon, he would have to travel through the trees and no trail to the cabin half a mile inland.

He stepped up to the water. It exhaled a wispy vapor. He didn't like the look of the water, but he had swum it before. Still, he knew he shouldn't fool himself. Cold and wet and fear had worn him down, and it had begun to snow. The snow whipped his face and vanished into the river. He looked up. The opposite shore was fading in the whiteout, and if the flurries thickened he might not recognize where he was when he landed.

He stripped, tied his clothes and moccasins in a tight ball with the moccasin thongs, then wove his belt through the leather thongs and

strapped the bundle to his back. The wool would absorb water and become heavy and cumbersome, but he knew it wouldn't drag him down like it would if he was wearing it.

He dove in. There was a sour knot in his stomach. The current took him at once. At first the water seemed warm, but he knew this was a trick of the cold air. The bundle on his back chaffed him and soon he couldn't see either shore. He had no idea how he was doing. He focused on his swimming, locking his thoughts on the memory of the clear lake that morning, and he held his thoughts tightly against the image of the sun on the water and the water soft and translucent. He kicked his legs slowly and steadily and reached methodically over his head in a slow crawl, breathing once every other stroke. He thought of his arms reaching up and forward, his hands cupping the water and pulling it down and behind him, and his feet kicking the water away. It was like climbing through a thick wind.

When he reached land, he had little idea where he was, but the swim had been easier than he feared and he believed he was still upriver, south of the cabin. He scrambled out of the water and into the trees where the wind was broken. He took the bundle of clothes apart and wrung them out as dry as he could and dressed quickly. High sand cliffs lined this stretch of the river, and he could not follow the shoreline which was narrow and treacherous and snagged with fallen trees. He went directly inland for a quarter mile and turned north, into the wind, parallel to the river. If he wandered too far inland he would miss the cabin. It was snowing heavily now, and he could not yet see enough to recognize a landmark, but the snow was melting as it hit the ground and there was no ice yet. The gusts cut through the wool of his shirt. He could only see forty feet to each side, less ahead into the wind and a little more behind him, and he hoped he didn't stumble into something nasty. The terrain was hilly but would flatten out closer to the home. He wanted to skirt the lake that lay between him and the cabin by staying close to the river.

He began to trot at a measured pace, squinting into the snow, looking at the ground to save his eyes. Branches lashed him. He ignored them, concentrating on climbing up each rise and down each slope into the wind, always into the wind. He was moving well and breathing deeply, when his feet began to numb. Then the bones in his fingers began to throb, and he thought it would be the wind that killed him.

"Too much thinking," he said into the wind and pushed back the fear. He thought about Eva's marker in the clearing, about the circle of smooth stones he'd heaped around it. It seemed a long way away from where he was now.

"Too much thinking," he said again.

He moved faster to generate more heat, but the cold snatched it away quicker than he produced it, and he was running into the gale which made it worse. But he had to gamble. He began to run quickly. His stomach churned, still sour. Don't panic, he told himself, or you're finished. His heart hammered as he focused on the pace and the direction of the wind and each single stride.

A split and leaning tamarack loomed out of the blizzard on his right. He recognized it. He was a mile southeast of the cabin and knew the trail. A mile was a very long way wet and freezing but he knew where he was and might make it, and if he did, he thought, with the ice stiff on his clothes as he ran, if he did, he would not come back to the cabin next winter or ever again. He would sit in front of the fire in Cochrane, and eat oranges, and spit the pips into the fire. He would peel the oranges and pry off small pieces of the rinds, and he would see the juice in the rind explode in a fine and tiny spray with all the colors of the rainbow in it, and he would remember to think they were like tiny explosions on the sun that he read about once. They called them solar flares in the story, and he thought that it was a wonderful phrase and repeated it, and he told himself he must notice these things from now on and always be grateful. Perhaps he would roast

chestnuts in the fire and when they were done and steamy he could take them away from the heat and crack them open and eat them very slowly so the flavor was not wasted. He hadn't roasted chestnuts since Eva had left him and he'd always meant to. He would look out the window where the frost had traced its passage and left its lace on the glass and he would look out to where the snow was falling cleanly and in banks and he would take down his pipe from the mantle, the curved golden yellow meerschaum pipe that was Irish and his favorite because Eva had given it to him when they were married, and he would fill it with the fragrant dark tobacco that he loved and light the pipe and sit back in the soft chair and enjoy his luck, and perhaps he would blow smoke rings. If he made it, he thought, every winter's day would be like Christmas, and he would behave as though it were, and would sit in the big chair before the fire there with a steaming mug beside him filled to the brim with mulled wine, or hot chocolate, or strong black coffee, or warm eggnog heavy with the dark Jamaican rum that he liked. Yes, he thought, he would stay in town by a fire and take it easy because he was sixty-four now and he would let the winter come to him like a lover because he loved the winter and he loved the snow and he did not blame it or curse it if it killed him. Beyond a certain point, he thought, winter is like a woman with soft arms, white and pure and reaching out, enfolding, and letting you sleep. She didn't conspire, he thought, you went to her because you were foolish, or made a mistake, or because you were ready. He watched the large soft flakes falling slowly and heavily and it really was amazing how some glittered like sequins and tossed off silver chips of bright light and he was surprised how slowly they fell around him because the wind had died down and it was warmer, warm as the partridge feathers on Eva's dress. He ran for the cabin and felt he really did understand the snow falling gently among the spruce that stood now like sentinels around him, their boughs heavy with white light, and as

he ran past the trees he smiled and they faded wonderfully in the distance and the snow and he laughed. Whether he made it or not, he thought, it is very beautiful.

The Image Comes Up

Julia bounced into the car, holding the photo envelope up like a trophy. She glanced at Rick briefly, happily, pulled out the pictures. He reached down and turned the key in the ignition.

"What's this? What's this?" She sucked in her breath, a long jagged rasp. She clutched the stack of photos with hands tense as claws. Rick bent closer. His ex-wife stared up at him. My God, he thought, she's beautiful. The edge of his vision blurred. The image seemed to shrink; the sound of his breathing merged with the noise of cars in the parking lot, and seemed to roll over him like a distant roar.

"How is this possible?" Julia said. Rick glanced up at her. She was white, stricken. His ears hummed.

"Don't look," he said, snatching the photos away. The car felt cramped and floating. "Where did you get these?"

"On my desk. I thought it was the film I'd lost and I wanted to develop it."

"Impossible," he said. "How could this be on your desk, for Christ sake? It's years old. I'd forgotten it even existed. It must have been in my roll-top, back in a drawer. Forgotten. How could it appear on your desk?" He was talking too much, too fast, and looked quickly at the photo again. He wanted suddenly to scream. Where had it come from? In the picture, his ex-wife was wearing a pair of earrings she'd just made. That dated the shot in the first year they'd been married—eleven years ago. "You must have looked through my desk and found the canister, and thought it was yours."

"No. It was on my desk." She sobbed once.

"How in hell could that happen?" He slammed the car into gear and backed it up. "It wouldn't just appear." He thought back, desperately trying to remember if he had run across the canister himself, thought it was hers, or something current, set it on her desk to be developed, and forgot about

it. Done it unconsciously, but deliberately, forcing the issue. He couldn't remember. He didn't *want* to remember. *Jesus*, he thought, *surely to God not. She must have stumbled on it, poking around in a fog, absent-minded as always.*

"What was on *your* film? Where could it have gone?" he asked, forcing his voice to sound calm and concerned.

"I don't know."

He stared out the window. The face of his ex-wife hung there like an after-image. *Oh God, oh God*, he thought. Beside him, Julia leaned forward in the seat and buried her face in her hands. Her shoulders shook. Rick thought back to the telephone call three years ago. *When are you going to leave your wife?* the woman in the car beside him now had asked. *Why?* he'd answered. *So we can be lovers*, she'd said.

He looked at her now, and realized in a searing rush that he sometimes hated the way she looked, the tiny burst veins in her cheeks, the crepy, translucent skin on her eyelids, teeth weakened by pregnancies, the crooked, generic nose, surgically remade and accidentally broken almost immediately afterwards by an old lover, all, all the doings of other times and other men. A history he wanted no part of and no part in. But here he was. How had allowed himself to be pulled away from his wife by this woman?

Julia sat in the seat, sobbing. *You pathetic bonehead Rick*, he thought, *how did you do this to yourself?*

She raised her head; her hands collapsed in her lap. "I look so old."

Rick felt his face go suddenly numb with shame. "Sweetheart," he said, "you look lovely." Her fingers groped towards his, tentative, trembling. He took them, and squeezed them reassuringly.

Double Exposure

The engine hummed like a sewing machine in the rear of the car. Snow packed the road and concealed the ice beneath it.

"Slow down." Rick Hill backed off the accelerator imperceptibly, and noticed his father shifting warmly inside his parka. The old man had been boasting how the air in its ample folds kept him warm, how the loose fit didn't bind his arms, how the parka worked because it was loose and trapped the air to insulate the body. Rick knew he would hear the details again when they got home. And he'd hear it again. He wore only tight jeans and a leather jacket, and the heater in the car was useless. He shivered, and saw his father smile smugly.

Snow squeaked under the tires as the spruce trees zipped by, blue boughs laden beneath the silent winter sky. The sun ricocheted off the snow into his eyes.

"Watch it." Rick ignored the remark, noticed this father shifting in the loose parka, and wondered if his grandfather's union suit was a good buffer against the cold. Rick once had a union suit himself once, but hated crawling in and out of it. It had encased him like a sausage. And yet his grandfather wore one year round—a lightweight suit for the summer with short arms and legs, buttoning up the front with a flap on the ass.

A shudder stuck its finger in his solar plexus and rippled outward. Old men were very quirky, he thought.

His father was getting quirky.

They approached a bend in the road, and a depression dimpled the surface. There would be a patch of ice beneath the snow. Rick's eyes locked on the spot. His father leaned forward.

"Watch it. It's slicker than hell up there." They hit the ice in the middle of the turn and the beetle skipped over the road toward the ditch as Rick slammed on the brakes.

"Watch it! Not the brakes! Oh dammit! You've done it now! Oh, Jesus!" The car spun like a hockey puck and shot off the road into a looming mound of snow; it shuddered and teetered in a queer, floating motion. A toneless groan from his father made the little hairs on Rick's arms stand straight up.

The windows glowed opaquely. Rick glanced sideways. His father turned toward him and gave a little start. The beetle continued to teeter, and his father gaped past him into the blank, pallid window. His hands folded themselves quietly in his lap, his gaze lost its focus, and he asked, "Are we dead, son? Is this heaven?"

Rick knew how his father thought: the old man believed they were in a cloud, that they had died in that beat-up 1957 Volkswagen and floated to glory seated in the front seats like indigents in an elevator. And it was not the elevator his father would have chosen to arrive in. He'd be worrying who would open the door to let them out, would already be preparing his humiliating little shuffle of apology and explanation and excuses about his son. The afterlife would not have been the thing he expected if he had arrived there in a Volkswagen driven by his son, their deaths transubstantiated into a ghastly joke.

Don't make waves boy, he'd always said. Go with the flow. Easy does it. Well, Rick thought, this time he'd almost made a wave big enough to sink the old fart for good. He swallowed a giggle.

For that matter, his father's question had made Rick himself wonder for an instant if they were dead. Uncertainty clamped down on his gut and throat like two icy hands, squeezing out an uncontrolled explosion of giggles.

"Heh, heh, heh," he trumpeted. His squeals bounced off the cab's dome.

"Shock," his father said, his own voice high with alarm. "Snap out of it, for God's sake!"

On the ride back, his father talked about the incident over and over,

how a conical rock suspended the beetle perfectly balanced in the air, how the snow buried them, how the car filled with an eerie luminosity. Blah blah blah. Rick had the impression that his father was already obsessed about the inside of the car, covered with snow, muffled, eternally opaque. He would no doubt wish to return and spend time there, alone, and Rick knew he would do so in his imagination. He would sit in the steamy kitchen at home, silent after the evening meal, oblivious to the family around him. He would send his mind back to the sparse Volkswagen cab and this afternoon. He would be solitary, rocking peacefully in a remote, white landscape. Isolated in his thoughts. Hidden from his family.

Quirky.

Going over it in his mind. Always in his mind.

"It gave me a start, seeing you here," his father interrupted. Rick glanced over at him quickly.

What had the old fool been thinking when he gave that little start, Rick wondered—that he had actually been alone for that split second in the crack between the worlds? That heaven for him was literally a place away from the family? Or worse, that he'd unexpectedly plunged hellward, and the proof of his fall had been the sinister presence of his own son seated beside him?

Their breath turned to ice on the windshield. They craned forward, squinting through small circles that wept on the glass. A dust devil whipped up a storm of frozen shards that danced along the road ahead.

Rick kept the car in second gear. The engine wailed in protest behind him and drilled at his inner ear. Burning waves of cold poured off the bare steel window struts into the cab, pinching his face. The road unwound relentlessly before him, a featureless, white track on a bleached landscape.

An eternity of the old man's pontifications about the damned parka with its ample folds, Rick thought—brrrr! His belly quivered with fear at the notion. He, too, was relieved they hadn't pulled up to heaven like that.

The incident had begun to shake a certain faith in his father, and that agitated him. He hadn't realized he'd had any.

He would take the driving lessons from his mother, he decided.

"I never thought we'd die together like that, son," his father said. "I always assumed I'd go first. That you'd survive." He reached over and patted Rick's knee. "Relax," he said. "The worst is over."

Rick kept his foot steady on the accelerator, peered over his knuckles on the steering wheel, and scanned the endless road ahead for telltale depressions.

The Last Stop

Peter Endhoven shifted away from the bus's window out of the sun. It was two in the afternoon and hot for June. The bus rolled along Bloor Street towards the hospital, its engine throbbing. He gazed out the window. Glass storefronts lining the street bounced the image of the bus back at him. The cloying, sweet smells of the city—cheese in the market, raw herring in the little kiosks, sour water in the gutters—swept in through the open skylight.

He was on his way to visit his wife. Last Saturday she'd collapsed, gripping her right side. He thought of the nurse in charge of their case. She had a catching smile, and he wondered what her laugh was like. It seemed as though he hadn't heard laughter for a long time, but it was inappropriate now, with his wife listless in her bed, dying. On the other hand, he thought, his wife once had the most contagious laugh that he had ever heard, and he had loved her very much, and for a long time.

Buildings rushed past. A small, haphazard line had formed in front of the Flora Theater, and, where the doors opened into a dark interior, a man with heavy-lidded eyes had glanced out at him from. Above the entrance was a billboard poster of a woman with red hair. Her head was back, and she was laughing. Her lips were painted moist and her teeth impossibly white. Her eyes were bottle-glass green. One end of a crimson sash fluttered over her naked shoulder, and she held the material between her fingers as it billowed around her torso and coiled on the ground beneath her feet, enveloping and suspending her inside its folds.

He did not mention the poster to his wife as he sat beside her in the hospital, cradling her waxy hand in his own. She'd lapsed into a coma and lay wrapped in the sallow cocoon of her own flesh on the high bed. Peter Endhoven wanted to believe she heard him, and when the chair became troublesome from the long hours of his sitting, he dealt with the discomfort

by telling himself that within her remote passivity she listened for his voice. He kneaded her pliant fingers in his own, trying to bring her consciousness back to the surface, and his hand moved quietly up over the frail wrist, over the mound of the wrist bone, then higher to the soft, slow weight of her unprotesting upper arm. "Johanna," he said over and over. He talked as he gazed at her arm, his gnarled hand cradling it in ways she had not permitted in years as his thumb traced slow circles on her skin, but in all his talk he mentioned neither the Flora Theater, nor the nurse, nor the new cafes he haunted for coffee and beer.

On his way home, he very nearly missed his stop. He'd been lost in thought, gazing at the blind fronts of the buildings that flashed by the windows of the bus. He sprang for the door as it began to close behind a young couple that lived on his street and stumbled down the steps after them. The young man said something to his wife, and she laughed in a way that reminded him of his own wife, and his brother, Julian. Julian's quips had for a long time consistently uncorked a bubbling laughter in Johanna, and Peter Endhoven thought about calling him. They'd once been close, but he hadn't been to New York to see him or his gallery in years. He remembered how hard it had been to get away for even short periods when they had worked their gallery together here in Toronto as young men. Johanna had worked with them. One rainy Tuesday in July they'd bought a Redon lithograph at an auction house on York Street. The lithograph showed a coiled, inky worm rising colossally upward whose trunk contained a shadowed, female figure, and the piece was titled after a quote by Flaubert: "Death: My irony surpasses all others."

The three of them had been exuberant over the acquisition. Johanna had insisted they stop at a gift store on the way back to their gallery to have the litho tied with a red ribbon. He had demurred, but she and Julian had laughed at his hesitation. *Really*, she'd said, *it's our first important buy, a sign of bigger things*. He'd told them to be reasonable. *I am*, she'd said. *We can't let*

it slip by, and he had nodded quietly, and agreed.

The gallery had been dark when they'd entered it that morning, and the heavy gilt frames of the paintings had mottled the shadowed walls. The old figures in the frames hovered inside their gloom. She'd turned the lights on, peopling the walls with somber portraiture. The bright bow on the tortured shapes of the Redon seemed suddenly out of place, and a shudder had gripped him. She'd glanced at him briefly and laughed. She'd said they ought to cheer the place up, make it inviting. He'd looked around at the art on the walls, and the dark figures in the paintings stared down at him with secret eyes. *Yes*, he'd said, *let's bring in some modern pieces, give the place some life*, and he'd looked at his brother, and then his wife, who was smiling at them both.

Early the following morning he'd unlocked the gallery—always the first one there because he had loved the ritual of swinging the heavy oak doors open into the quiet room, riding in on the fresh eddies of air—and, the worn, brass keys loose in his fingers, had walked to the far end of the gallery and turned to look back through the shop and the open doors framed by lights of leaded glass. Beyond the daylight spilt on the red carpet in the entrance, through the open doors and across the street, a storefront mirrored his own, depicting a solid reflection of a diminutive gallery whose dark entrance revealed neither its interior nor himself staring out of its shadows. *Like a painting*, he'd thought, *with life hidden inside*.

And then Johanna had come laughing through the doors on that Wednesday with the clouds marbling a high blue sky behind her, her arm around Julian's, and Julian's around a brown paper parcel. *A Chagall*, she'd laughed through bright teeth, lifting a bottle of champagne and shaking out her long, copper hair. *It will brighten the place up*.

When she had become pregnant, Julian moved to New York.

Now Peter Endhoven followed the young couple down the road. The silence drifted down around him, and he moved on towards his house, careful of the street's uneven cobbles. The house was on his left as he approached, its windows hooded with heavy curtains, and as he entered, the old hallway clock knocked in the hollow rooms. Dust had settled on the dark, wooden furniture.

"So quickly," he said out loud.

His feet released a quiet susurrant in the carpet's ruddy nap as he shuffled across the living room to the fireplace. Photos of Johanna, Julian, and his son lined the mantle. A young man, laughing and confident, looked out from a heavy silver frame crowned with a dusty bow of black ribbon. He ran his fingers lightly over the frame. "Isaac," he said. Then he moved down the row and stopped in front of a small, colored picture of the Resurrection. He reached back absently and removed his wallet, placing it beside the picture. The wallet had thickened over the last week, and nagged him from his hip pocket.

The cash he'd withdrew for food and bus fare had built up. Until now his wife had kept tight control over the finances. It had been an efficient system, and she had been very good at it. She would send him out with a list of what was needed, the price written out beside each item, and enough money to cover the total and his bus fare. He had not been given enough money to stop at a cafe for coffee or beer on those errands, and as he stood in front of the mantle now, staring at the photo, the awareness came to him again that he had more time and money than he could use.

When the nurse called that night it was to say that Johanna had died quietly in her sleep. Peter Endhoven had wanted to say something appropriate, but when he began to speak only his breath escaped into the telephone. He replaced the receiver gently in its cradle, caught the bus to the hospital, and arranged the funeral.

Three days later the nurse called again. Her voice was soft.

"How are you doing?" she said. He was the patient now, he realized, and she was there to listen. Even in the hospital the nurse, a young woman in her forties, had been a comfort, following him with her gaze. Had it been compassion in her eyes, he wondered, and did he want more of it? He longed suddenly to make her laugh, to hear the laughter float from where she stood far away through the telephone lines to where he stood. He would hold the receiver away from his ear and point it toward the room and spill the quick levity into the thick air of a house that hadn't quivered with excitement in more years than he could count. "The first week is the worst," she said.

"I'm feeling fine," he said. The receiver trembled slightly against his ear, setting up a noise like whispered static.

"Are you managing?" she asked.

"Quite well," he said. He had forgotten how gentle her voice was, so he talked about his wife, how she had been a good, church-going woman who never missed a service, who had taken him with her every Sunday.

"Every Sunday?"

"Every Sunday for fifty years," he said, "and when we traveled she would find a church to suit us." He remembered returning to Holland ten years ago. They had gone back the following summer too, and drove through the countryside in search of churches. It was a wonderful trip, he heard himself say to the nurse, through country as rural and green as the Ontario countryside north of Toronto. It had been good to be back to Holland for a holiday, and the churches were old and very beautiful and welcoming. In one fifteenth-century church they'd heard a choir under a steeple that had been built and burned down and rebuilt four times over the centuries, like a phoenix. The experience had inspired them to tour all the churches in nearby villages, and they'd attended services in most of them. It had taken a week, and Johanna had laughed in every village. When

they returned to Canada, she told him she was glad they'd gone, that it had been lovely, but did not count as fully as the service in her own church, and she doubted that she would ever go back to Holland.

"But in the end, home is where the heart is," he sighed into the phone now. He realized he was speaking more than usual, but did not stop.

"Shall we talk?" she asked. "We could meet for coffee." He thought of her laughter.

"Yes," he said.

"Let's meet tomorrow," she said, "under the green umbrellas at the Posthorn Cafe."

Her hair was a cuprous braid coiled loosely at the back of her neck as she sat opposite him. She had full lips and good teeth, and opened her mouth often and wide. Peter Endhoven watched her tongue shape her words as she spoke. It was clean and pink and pressed against her lower teeth when she inhaled to begin each sentence, and her laughter slid out of her throat and easily through the air surrounding him.

"Do you have any children who could visit you now?" the nurse said. He watched her tongue and teeth carve the sentence.

"Once," he said, "Isaac. We lost him in New York while he was visiting his uncle. An auto accident."

"And your brother?"

He told the nurse that they still talked and had once been inseparable. Then he thought about the telephone call thirty years ago that had caused the soft flush on his wife's cheeks to congeal into a hard red spot that never faded.

Julian had been on the other end.

Peter, he'd said clearing his throat, there's been an accident. An auto accident after dinner on the way to the gallery—we'd been celebrating a terrific buy, a small Rembrandt—remember the auction house on Madison, Peter, we

found it there—and were on the way to drop it off at the gallery—Isaac, he'd interrupted—paying too much attention to the painting, didn't see the other car. Is Johanna there? Have her sit down—Isaac, he'd said again—Isaac was driving—he'd glanced at the painting to make a point. . . Isaac, he'd repeated, and looked stupidly across the kitchen to his wife. Julian's voice faded away, tinny and distant. Oh God, the little voice said inside the telephone, the Rembrandt had us both unreasonably excited. We'd looked away for just a moment, something I said . . .

He'd put the receiver quietly down and glanced to the table where his wife sat, her elbows pressed into the old table rug, its muted red background bordered by a grate of twisted black lines. He'd thought of the little Dutch store where Julian had bought the rug for them on York Street to mark her pregnancy. Now her fingers were white around the stem of the wine goblet. His gaze had moved up over her wrists, to her arms, to her face. *Johanna*, he'd said. Her green eyes were brittle and she turned to the window. It was night, and the dark glass showed only their own reflections. *No*, she'd said. Then he'd told her about the Rembrandt, about the drinking and the accident. *Damn the Rembrandt*, she'd said, *God damn the painting and damn Julian. Damn his high life and his celebrations and his champagne*. Then she'd knocked over her glass with a vicious flick of her hand and the red wine seeped into the cloth and darkened it. He had reached out to her, but she shrank from his touch, and because he had needed to be held as much as to hold, he'd shuffled to the living room and wrapped himself in a blanket and stared across the shadows toward the photographs lined up along the mantle-piece.

"She came to believe the accident was a sort of judgment," he told the nurse now, and it suddenly became clear to him that he had never known what she had meant by judgment, that it had more to do with Isaac and guilt than with grief. "There were no other children," he said, "and she never got over it."

But three years after Isaac's death he had thought they were moving past the tragedy. She'd agreed to return to Amsterdam to visit the galleries they'd loved when they were young. *Perhaps this one time*, she'd said, *to please you*, and though it had been a bright day when they'd arrived and a good omen and they'd walked up Reichstraat toward the gallery, it had not been entirely to please him after all.

As they'd wandered through the gallery, she paid less and less attention to the paintings she'd loved once, refusing to approach Delacroix's Agony in the Garden at all though it had been their favorite. She'd concentrated instead on scenes of dying youths and lingered before paintings of the resurrection. He'd wandered ahead at one point, believing she'd rested for a moment, turned, and saw no sign of her.

Retracing his steps, he'd found her in front of a blaze of red. Approaching obliquely, he'd recognized the painting—Redon's The Green Death—and even from the angle of her profile he'd seen her eyes locked upon the green and spectral figure embraced by a serpent's trunk rising in heavy coils against a crimson world. He'd shuddered, but told himself this was good if it kept her in the world they'd loved. And though she'd claimed that only death could cure sorrow, that if it was cured by anything else it was not true sorrow, he'd felt they were over the worst of it perhaps, and while she had been in the ladies' room he had permitted himself to buy her a palm-sized issue of a commemorative Rodin Burgher he'd seen in the museum store, to celebrate the occasion.

On the way back to the bus, as he'd reached into his pocket to retrieve the little gift, she said that she was glad they'd come, glad to see the art that once defined her world, glad to affirm that it was transitory. She'd said its seductiveness had caused her son's death, and she was finished with it. She would commit herself, she'd said, to living a clean life, a chaste life, a life less trivial. The words had stabbed his heart like pins, and his hand convulsed around the tiny sculpture in his pocket.

She had become chaste and joyless, and thirty years had slipped by.

"I loved her," he said now to the nurse across the table.

"We do the best we can," the nurse said, sipping her beer.

"Yes," he said. His gaze wandered away from the nurse's mouth past her shoulders to the men and women peopling the sidewalk.

"Perhaps she blamed herself," said the nurse.

"Why would she?" he said. "She always pointed her finger elsewhere. She blamed Julian that her son was driving. Isaac was very much like his mother. He was living the life she wanted. That's what broke her spirit."

"She had you," the nurse said.

"A mother and her child," he answered, looking back at her. "What can replace that?"

The next day he took the bus and got off at the hospital. There was no reason to enter the building, no reason for even being there, he thought as he walked down the corridor towards the nurse's station. His footsteps ricocheted off the walls. Spotting the nurse's red hair from a distance, he stopped before she could see him, and walked back out of the hospital. He stood by the road, shaken, and stared at the rows of windows lining the hospital walls.

"So many windows," he said. Most were dark, revealing nothing of what was inside, but a few were lit, and one or two framed motionless figures who gazed out. He searched the distance, following the direction of their looks, and saw only the high and weathered walls of old greystones along the street. One of the buildings, he realized with a start, had housed a little gallery for local art that he and Julian had frequented when they had first moved to Toronto.

The three of them had ridden the trolley here for a day trip. Johanna wore a red scarf for the blazing autumn, and the leaves were red that lined the boulevard too. They had eaten around the corner in their favorite little

bistro. Johanna had laughed at something Julian said, and then she'd ordered champagne.

On the bus back home Peter Endhoven glanced at the Flora Theater. He put it out of his mind, but repeated the route the following day, riding the bus past his home stop to a cafe two blocks further down the street. It was the cafe where he had met the nurse. He emerged slowly, took a table on the patio facing the roadway, and ordered a beer.

"Pilsner," he said to the waiter. "Grolsch."

The waiter brought him the bottle of beer, a bottle, he noted, the same shade as the green umbrella floating above his table. Peter Endhoven sat back in the chair and looked out across the street.

"Anything else?" the waiter asked.

"Croquettes with bread," he said. He felt good as he ordered his lunch, and it was a pleasure forming the words in his mouth and he looked forward to the deep-fried croquettes with their crisp jackets and creamy centers. He blinked in the bright light, withdrawing a little from the sun, curious at the notion that he could do this whenever he pleased. He looked around at the other patrons seated nearby. There was company and the murmur of conversation. He felt suddenly alive.

"But only one beer," he said softly to himself, "just one little beer," and he noticed for the first time how his tongue's tip danced on a single spot of the roof of his mouth just behind his front teeth when it formed the consonants.

He did not make himself any dinner when he got home that evening. It was an effort to cook, and he had neglected to pick up cheese or bread. He walked through the kitchen to the refrigerator, opened it, looked inside, then closed the door.

The next day he took the bus to the last stop. When it reached the end of the line, he brought his ticket to the driver to be punched for the return trip,

and sat down again. It was ten o'clock in the morning. The Flora theater flashed by in a repeated blur of shadowed scarlet as he rode the bus to the end of the line, had his ticket punched, and returned. At 2 PM he got out at the Posthorn Cafe.

"How long has the Flora Theater been there?" he asked the waiter as he sat down and ordered croquettes. The waiter set down a beer. He was a large man with a tight shirt and shiny scalp. His hair was sparse and wiry, and his shirtsleeves were dirty at the elbows from the hard work. One of his eyelids drooped when he spoke.

"Always," he said.

"Open for the night crowd?"

"No," said the waiter. Air whistled through the thick black hairs of his nostrils as he breathed. "It opens in mid-afternoon for the first show," he said. He looked down the road towards the theater. "Anything else?" he finished, looking back to the table.

Peter Endhoven shook his head and sipped his beer. Across the street a plate-glass storefront bounced the cafe back at him, showing a bright scene with a tiny figure he knew to be himself seated beneath an emerald halo, and, behind him, the waiter entering the building, glancing back over the patio before disappearing into the doorway.

When Peter Endhoven returned home, he walked directly across the living room to the mantelpiece. The photograph of the resurrection was the only splash of color among the monochromatic row of family portraits. He turned it face down with a swift gesture, then stood quietly a moment before glancing backwards at a pastel version of the Ascension pinned to the adjacent wall. Its pinks and blues were bright against the muted green wallpaper.

The pictures had been cheap, and had riveted Johanna's attention on her sixty-fifth birthday. He'd objected to the colors, but she'd bought them

anyway. He scowled down at the back of the picture frame on the mantle and thought about Delacroix's The Agony in the Garden. He loved that painting, loved its dark shadows, the deep, muted richness of the red glow of Christ's robe burning in the center, mysterious, impossible. He remembered that Van Gogh had called Delacroix the greatest colorist in Europe.

"Yes," he said softly, thinking of the red robe alive with color, pulling the viewer into the comforting folds of its darkness, guiding the eye to the man lying cloaked in shadows with his arm outstretched, reaching for something outside the picture, outside the shadows. It had seemed to him once as though the most explosive passion in the world had been bound in the silence and shadows of that painting. Long ago in that museum in Amsterdam, after he had stood gazing at the painting for some time, he had thought the shadows moved, but believing it to be a trick of his empty stomach, he had stepped down the long stairs of the gallery to the cafeteria to settle himself with a little wine and bread.

Perhaps he would visit the museum again and walk the streets of his beloved Amsterdam, he thought now. "Yes," he said to the empty house and thought about the travel agency on the route to the hospital. But when he got out of the bus later that day he was in front of the Flora Theater. A crimson sash unfurled around a woman in a poster.

The lobby of the theater was dark. Writhing rococo patterns carved up the scarlet wallpaper. He handed his money to a woman in the vestibule and walked across the floor to the entrances. The curtains over the entrances were old, and voices leaked from behind them. An usher shuffled through the doors past him. Peter Endhoven followed, his hand trembling slightly as he reached out to part the heavy folds.

He walked down the sloping aisle, feeling for the chair-backs, and slid into an empty seat. His heart had begun to beat very loudly, he

realized, and the screen filled with shadows that shifted slowly and lightened, revealing a hint of familiar red, an impossible movement in the gloom, a prone shape wrapped in a bright sash reaching out to him. He cried out, then looked quickly round to see if he'd been noticed. The shadows moved and his heart became a hard and hammering knot. The figure in the gloom was too obscure to recognize. He pressed his fist against the agony in his chest as the figure looked out at him and beckoned. "Yes," he said and thought of the anguish bound within these shadows, passions framed in paint and silence and celluloid, forever in their own eclipse and he thought of the soft flesh of his savior uncovered by the hands of a French painter, yielding and soft and luminous, so like, he thought, what moved upon the screen and he remembered the yearning of his life and the great commandment of loving and yes, he thought, he had loved and yearned and his heart thickened as the vision swam upon the screen and the darkness lifted and beyond the figure that had almost seemed the painter's was the woman in the poster and beyond her was the roaring of his veins throbbing as he listened to his own red blood coiled and rising and he heard an engine sobbing on the street outside and listened as the bus accelerated down the street away into the distance.

Vince

Vince Armstrong sat in the back of the 1983 Impala and pressed his thumbs against his temple. At last the car had come to a stop. Paul Leblanc slid out from behind the steering wheel and looked around. "By Jeez," he said, plucking at the loose skin covering his Adam's apple, "look at that." George Riddell squeezed himself out of the passenger seat and leaned against the fender, fumbling for with his cigarettes. Vince pushed his door open with his foot and stepped out. He looked back up the way they had come in. The chalky road stretched south over the old railway bed, with no dips or turns before it disappeared into the trees. To the right of the road was a wide, flat-topped heap of dark, jagged granite that had been blasted out of the river to accommodate the dam. Vince had tobogganed down the slope as a boy in the winters when the snow was deep and the stones were buried. To the left of the road the country flattened and sloped toward the river. Poplars had begun to grow in groves there, and small pines, their trunks still covered with sparse, juvenile needles, crept out of the forest and into the clearings where the houses had been. There was nothing left of the town but the road, the old staff-house, and the dam.

Vince stepped into the bushes by the road, walked up to the spot where he remembered his bedroom had been, and a Canada goose flew out of the weeds in front of him. He blinked several times, rapidly, then turned to the two men watching him from beside the car.

Leblanc walked off, peering busily at the ground. George shook his head, saying, "Hell, let's not be babies about this," and turned, wheezing, towards the river. Vince looked hard at his back, then followed him to the bank and looked across the forebay. The sunlight wrinkled the river like old flannel where the dam, fissured and leaking, straddled the water, and Vince recalled the machines deep in the dam where his father had operated the sluice gates and monitored the big generators. A narrow elevator shaft led

down through the cement to that room, and the elevator was an open cage through which the murky concrete walls hummed past. Vince shivered at the memory. His father had plunged down that hole every day on his way to work with the dark waters churning the turbines that spun the river's current into electricity.

Across the dam was the hill where Neil Swenson had lived. Vince wondered if there was a marker. He felt the looks of the other men then, but he did not refer to Swenson, or to Swenson's daughter, Laura.

"Gone," George said, lighting a cigarette. He took a deep pull, left it dangling loosely on his lip, and held out the pack to Vince. Vince took one. Then George pulled a flask from his pocket and held it out. Vince shook his head and looked into the distance. Loggers had clear-cut the woods for a hundred square miles on the far side of the river, and there was not a tree or the chance of a tree in more distance or time than he could see.

Leblanc had wandered a little further down river towards the dam. Vince sat on the bank with George and smoked the cigarette, looking out over the river. He stretched his legs and looked at the water ten feet below. Then he slid down the bank to the narrow beach. The sand underfoot gave slightly and bulged around the soles of his shoes. Vince walked to the end of the small inlet where he remembered a stream entered the bay.

The river was laden with silt, and the water was the same color as the sandy banks. He looked down at the water as he walked to the stream. The water there was clear and lively over the rippled shallows at his feet, then slowed when it entered the torpid waters of the river. Only the tributaries that fed the Abitibi River were clear, and bright little sunfish hugged the banks, occasionally disappearing downstream into the muddy river. Vince thought they navigated by what passed for smell, because they found their way back out of the muddy waters to the clear tributary and took up the same positions on the sandy bottom, their noses into the current. They kept their positions with only their ventral fins waving, and they opened their

mouths to let the water flow over the gills. They were bold here in the shallows. The pickerel could not get at them, and the pike hid in the weeds with the suckers that fed off the bottom in the deep pools around a snag or rock. In the holes where the water was deep, Vince could not see the bottom, and only an occasional flash of muted silver from a flank showed where the big fish moved.

Upstream, on either side of the cut, were poplar and alder. Because the pine did not grow tall enough in the gully to form a canopy or develop a thick bed of needles on the floor, the openings between the trees were dense with thickets and small, whip-like branches of alder and poplar.

When Vince glanced back up the bank, George was looking down at him, watching. He climbed the bank, passing George on the way to the car. A cold wind blew off the river.

"Let's go," he said, and swung into the back. George whistled to Leblanc and climbed into the front passenger seat.

He was getting a headache as he looked out from the car window and watched Leblanc walk across the meadow. He pressed his thumbs stiffly into his temple again. This would be his last image of the place for a long time, and he had tried hard to notice the details and make every detail count, but his mood had spoiled the visit. He rehearsed the details over and over in his mind as he sat in the car. Then Leblanc got in behind the steering wheel, turned the keys he'd left dangling in the ignition, spun the car around, and sped back along the road they'd just taken in.

"That was quick," he said.

The road was gravel and dirt with a deep ditch on each side. Bulrushes filled in the low spots where the ground was wet. Then it was Queen Ann's Lace and Indian Paintbrush and fern to the tree line. The bush had been cleared back fifty feet on either side of the road, and the trees sprung up like a hedge in a straight line. Vince remembered them as having been taller. Tamarack and spruce and pine flashed by, stunted from the bitter

winters and stitched together by the alder bushes. Occasionally, a stand of swamp poplars opened the woods. What seemed to be clearings in the distance through the trees were boggy meadows where old beaver ponds had filled in, and Vince knew they were thick with mosquitoes and black flies. The terrain was impassable, and he recalled stories about the mosquitoes driving men crazy in a matter of minutes.

"My gut hurts," said George from the front seat.

Leblanc laughed. "Must be those beans you made," he said. "You hadn't ought to have ate them."

George grunted. "Nothing wrong with the beans," he said.

Leblanc looked at him. "You going to be sick?" he asked.

"No," said George.

"I'll pull over if you're going to be sick," he said.

"I'm not going to be sick."

"I don't want you to be sick in the car," Leblanc said. "Let me pull over."

"I'm not going to be sick, dammit. Keep driving."

"If you puke in the car I'll be madder than hell."

"Dammit, drive! I'm not going to puke in the car."

"I'm going to pull over," Leblanc said. "I have to take a piss."

"Goddam beer," snapped George. Leblanc stopped the car and walked over the shoulder. He looked up in the air and undid his fly. He held himself with one hand, placed the other on his hip, settled into an authoritative stance, and urinated into the ditch. George and Vince watched from the car. Vince hadn't realized Leblanc had such a big Adam's apple, but with his chin tilted into the air and the skin on his neck stretched taut, it was exaggerated.

"Neck like a damned chicken," muttered George. Vince raised an eyebrow.

When Leblanc was done, he zipped up his pants, and only then looked down from the sky. He kicked his left shoe with the right one three times,

then did the same with the other shoe. Then he turned around and walked back across the shoulder.

"Let's go," he said climbing into the car. Vince watched the trees speeding by. He folded his hands in his lap, curling his right hand inside the other, and absently rubbed the middle knuckle of his right hand with his left thumb.

Vince had not seen country like this since he'd gone south and worked in Texas, building houses. He'd been gone twenty years, until he couldn't bear the separation from the north any longer. A physical longing for the smooth, granite knolls of the Canadian shield nagged his bones like a dull headache, and he especially remembered the river skinned with summer sunlight or bright winter ice while the murky waters beneath strained relentlessly towards their distant emptying. Oddly, he hadn't been aware of missing the people as much as the place.

He'd only been back a week, staying in his mother's house on the lake, when the phone had rung.

"You're back, by God!" It had been Paul Leblanc.

"Yes," he'd said.

"Come over for a couple of days at the cottage," Leblanc said. "Same place, Trout Lake."

"I'm driving north next week, to Kapuskasing."

"Why?"

"To see what's left of Abitibi Canyon. I never went back after they bulldozed it. It's time."

"Okay," said Leblanc, "I'll call George, and we can drive up together. He'd like to see it too."

And because he hadn't seen either of them since he'd left high school though they'd been close once, he'd said, "Alright."

"We've got some catching up to do," Leblanc had said. But now, as Vince stared out the car window, he questioned the wisdom of the trip.

George fidgeted in the front seat. "Funny, old Swenson's cabin still being there, empty, across the river," he said casually. "He had three kids, didn't he? Don't remember his wife." He glanced back at Vince, suddenly attentive. "You were sweet on one of his girls, weren't you, Vinny? I forgot that. Laura, wasn't it?" Vince said nothing. "Ever hear from her?" he went on, twisting the rearview mirror to look at Vince.

"That was thirty years ago," said Vince. Leblanc chuckled, then George grunted painfully. Leblanc glanced quickly over at him and readjusted the mirror so he could see out if it.

Vince thought about Laura's fifteenth birthday, when they'd lain on the river's edge. He'd kissed her. She'd flicked her little tongue over the ridged muscles of his stomach. "Write me a poem," she'd said, and he'd quickly grabbed for a pencil. He glanced at the heel of his left hand as it rested on his paunch. A small, dark spot still contained a pencil lead that broke off when, in his excitement, he'd jabbed the sharp tip into himself.

"Oh, Jesus," he moaned.

George looked over at Leblanc in the front seat. Then he turned his head and spoke over his shoulder to Vince.

"What's the matter, Vinny? You haven't said three words in fifteen miles."

"Hell," Vince said again and shifted in the seat. "This damned bush never ends." He cracked the window open and raised his nose to the draft, sipping the fresh air. George turned back to face the oncoming road.

"Nothing wrong with the bush, by God," said Leblanc.

"No," said Vince.

"I never left the bush, and learned plenty," Leblanc continued. They drove in silence for a while. "Never hurt me," Leblanc said.

George twisted again in the seat, offered Vince a cigarette and gave him a long, inquiring look. Vince guessed that George was wondering about Laura, so he looked out the window into the thick tangle filled with snags

and started talking about the drive back to Kapuskasing, steering the conversation to the mileage and the state of the road.

Though Vince had once liked the idea that the bush couldn't be crossed, he was anxious to be out of it now. He didn't like the road they were traveling. It was a long, tormenting washboard that cloaked the car in dust as the tires pounded the gravel and spat stones with a staccato that drummed on the cab and left a chalky plume in their wake hovering like a pale shadow long after they'd gone.

They passed the river once more on the way out, where the road veered sharply east to avoid a granite outcropping. The trees thinned and the river was suddenly there, out the window on his left—a glittering snake following its own direction away into the trees again, disappearing from Vince's gaze with a flash through the thickening foliage south, towards its headwaters, Lake Abitibi.

"Long drive," said George. Leblanc stared ahead at the road. "Must be almost there," George went on. Leblanc squinted silently at something in the distance. "Must be damned near three hours," said George. He looked at his watch. "Yessir, it is," he said. "Three hours." He looked across at Leblanc, and belched fruitily.

"Just up ahead, thank God," said Leblanc, rolling down his window. Then they turned a corner and they were there, Leblanc speeding along circular roads that rippled out from the town center and pulling up to a worn brick building. A sign painted in black letters peeled from the red bricks. Vince stared at the shabby building from the back seat. A blistered, brown door welcomed them.

"The Empire Hotel," George read solemnly aloud. Vince raised an eyebrow.

"It has a bar," said Leblanc. "Let's check in."

"I'd like the single room tonight," said Vince, getting out of the car.

"Oh?" said George, and the three of them opened the door and stepped into the bar.

The gloom stank of stale beer. Opposite the door where they stood was a bar with a mirror. The reflection of a barman looked up at them, his white apron and jacket glowing faintly. They moved forward. The oak floor was badly scarred, and the grain was lifted from the daily mopping it took. Their boots thumped hollowly as they crossed the floor. The mirror was bright and the light was behind them, and Vince could only see their own shadowy images.

When they reached the bar, George lit a cigarette, took a deep pull, left it dangling loosely on his lip, and held out the pack. Vince shook his head.

"Let's eat," Vince said.

"Paul, let's eat," said George.

"Bologna," Leblanc said to the menu taped on the mirror, "and cheese sandwiches." He sniffed. "What about beers?"

"Wart Hog Ale," said Vince.

"What the hell is that?" said George, alarmed. "Get a Molson's Blue."

"Too gassy," said Vince.

"By God," said Leblanc. "Who would name a beer Wart Hog Ale? Must be foreign."

"Nope."

"Three Molsons," Leblanc said to the bartender.

"No," said George, "I don't want a beer."

"What do you want?" asked the bartender. He set two Molson ales in front of the other men.

"I don't know," said George. "What do you have that's good for a sour gut?" He leaned his elbow on the bar and put his head in his hand.

"You going to be sick?" asked the bartender.

"No," said George.

"I don't want you to be sick on the bar," he said flatly. "Go to the can if you're gonna puke."

George glared at the man. "I'm not going to puke on your damn bar," he snapped. "And fill this up." He pushed his empty flask across the bar.

"Easy," said the bartender. Vince looked at the man, waiting to see what he would do. His mouth was set in a thin line and his eyes were fixed, black and unblinking, on George. His head, bald, was set on a thick neck buttressed by a roll of fat above the collar, and his head moved with the shoulders. "I'll make you a Bloody Mary," he said, walking down the bar.

"Good," said George. "A Bloody Mary sounds good."

"No neck, by God," murmured Leblanc.

"Well," said Vince as he lifted his glass of Molsons in the air. He hesitated for a moment, glanced at Leblanc, then drank it half down. "You hadn't ought to have ate the beans," he said, mimicking Leblanc's diction, and then he finished the beer. He glanced in the mirror behind the bar. There was a thick line of foam on his moustache when he put the mug down. "Ahhh!" he said, pretending not to know it was there. He watched George and Leblanc look at him, then at the froth on his moustache. Leblanc became uneasy, his eyes glued to Vince's foamy whiskers. The bartender served George the drink, then moved back down the bar and busied himself polishing beer glasses. "Ahhh!" said Vince again, looking steadily at Leblanc and grinning perversely at his unease. He was enjoying Leblanc's discomfort. The road noise in his head began to fade, and he was beginning to feel better about some things.

"Well," Leblanc said to Vince's moustache, "that was the biggest Canada goose I ever saw." Vince said nothing. "That one that flew up out of the alders when you spooked him." His little black eyes were locked on Vince's mouth. Vince knew neither man would mention the froth on his lip. They would pretend not to see it, deny it was there. That was how they were.

"I don't want to talk about the goose," he said, and wiped away the foam.

"Okay," said Leblanc letting out breath and visibly relaxing, "we won't talk about the goose."

"Ohhh," George moaned suddenly, shaking his head. The bartender looked at him. "I'm fine," George muttered.

"What did you want to talk about?" asked Leblanc. Vince didn't say anything for a moment.

"Well," he said. Then he added "Well." He stared at the mirror and could barely make out his own murky features.

"Two more beers," Leblanc said to the bartender. Two lagers appeared in front of the men. The bartender looked at George.

"What about you, buddy?" he asked.

"I'm cold," said George. "Give me something hot."

"How about a hot B&B?"

"Sure," said George. "That would be fine. Give me a hot toddy."

The bartender mixed the drink, took the money and moved down the bar. Vince turned away from the bar and faced the window. He could see the trees from where he stood, and he knew they stretched for a thousand miles into the distance. The sky was blue-gray with bands of yellow from the setting sun. Winter came early, stayed late, and the days were getting short. The day had been chilly, though the sun had shone that morning. Vince looked out over the trees and heard the clock ticking on the barroom wall. There was no wind outside, and he knew the trees were silent under the rippled clouds. He was reminded of the ripples on the bottom of the sandy streams. The yellow bands turned orange and red as he watched and lit up like a puckered skin over the blue, and the colors spread evenly out over the sky. Then the clouds darkened, and began to vanish. The colors that skipped along the thin clouds reminded Vince of the bright little sunfish he had caught as a boy where he'd seen the perch that morning.

They were called pumpkinseeds, little fellows with round, orange bodies and a bright red spot on each gill, and the colors faded as the fish died.

Leblanc had started a beery conversation with the bartender.

"Son of a bitch," Vince said suddenly, and banged his fist down on the countertop. "I learned how to fish there, and there's not a damned thing left!" George, Leblanc, and the bartender looked at Vince and shifted.

"Swenson's trap lines lasted longer than the bloody settlement!"

"Vinny, take it easy," said George, turning back to the bar and looking into his drink.

Vince looked out the window. He would never see Laura again, and there was nothing left of the town but scrub bush and a bitter wind. He grunted aloud. The bartender turned to look at him.

"You going to be sick?" he asked across the room. "The can's to your right."

George breathed shallowly against the bar and let his belt out another notch. "I'm blowing up like a nickel balloon," he said.

"I'm going to bed," Vince said.

"No, stay here and have another drink," said Leblanc. "You'll feel better."

"I don't want another drink," said Vince.

"One for the road."

"No."

"Don't be so damned antisocial," said George as he bit back a burp. Vince looked at him. "First you get mushy back there, and don't hardly talk all day in the car. Now you won't be social."

"We hadn't ought to have drove there," muttered Leblanc.

"Hell," said Vince, lifting his hand to his mouth and chewing on his knuckle, pressing it hard against his teeth.

"He's been mooning over the girl all day. Laura."

"What happened to her, Vinny? Didn't you keep track of her?" said George. "Dammit. You didn't stay in touch with any of us."

Leblanc leered. "Where's Laura, Vinny?"

"She's dead," Vince said.

"What?"

"Laura's dead. She died when we were eighteen, a year after I moved out of the place." Vince felt the muscles in his stomach quiver and tighten, and he closed his teeth on the rush of words from his gut.

"Hell," said George stupidly, "no kidding."

Leblanc's tiny eyes were glassless, black windows. "What happened?" he said.

"Nurses killed her," Vince said. Both men were watching his mouth now.

"What the hell are you telling us?"

Vince slowed himself down. "I went to visit her in Mattawa the summer after my family moved out. She lived with her father in town. My dad drove me. He had a '57 Ford coupe, copper-colored. Nice little car with the double tail-lights." He looked at the two men, twisting his fist into the heel of his left hand. "She knew we were coming. We pulled into the driveway and honked the horn. Laura ran out of the front door. She was blond—remember, George? Fine, blond hair. When she ran it always lifted. It was lifting as she came towards me, towards the car, across the lawn to the car."

She'd run out the front door, her fair hair wispy in the wind and the laughter spilling from her mouth and her arms opened for him, running in a blue summer dress over the tattered yard, across the tattered archipelagoes of browned grass and patches of dirt, her feet skipping onto the sheet of rotten plywood her father had placed over the old well shaft. Her eyes had been locked on Vince's as her right foot came down on the edge of the wood and her left foot followed onto the center of it and she

began to disappear. My God, he'd thought as her smile froze, she's sinking. Something behind his eyes took a snapshot that froze that moment, and then she vanished soundlessly into the earth, leaving him only the image of her blue eyes, wide with astonishment.

"She fell into a well-shaft her old man had left open in the front yard," he said out loud.

Nobody had reacted, not he or his father, or Laura's father standing in the doorway of the house. Then everything exploded. The three of them were running towards the well, yelling and screaming and calling her name hoarsely and shouting for help. A neighbor poked her head out her window and said she'd call the ambulance as the three of them knelt uselessly by the hole and stared down into the blackness and called her name. Only their own curses rose up to them.

"What a way to die, by God," said Leblanc.

"She wasn't dead."

"What?"

"No nurses yet," said George.

The fire truck had arrived and the medics hauled her out of the hole, bruised and unconscious, and very beautiful, Vince thought, beautifully alive, with only a leg broken, a bird with her fine bones shattered and her pale skin bruised. He had wanted to hold her, to brush the dirt from her face, but was afraid to do so in front of the older men. He blamed himself because she loved him and ran to him with only room for him in her eyes, and had not noticed the plywood.

"We got her to the hospital, but the doctor was out of town for a week," he said, looking at George. "Only one doctor in town. Christ. There was no one to set the leg, but the nurses said it would be fine until the doc returned."

They'd taken her to the hospital, he thought, and the nurses had said she was fine. They'd said the doctor would be back in a week and would set her

leg. They said she was only eighteen and strong and had nothing to worry about. They twisted her leg every day so the bones would not mend before the doctor returned. For three days they deliberately twisted the break as she cried out with the pain of the bones grinding against each other, and on the fourth day she died from the shock of it. He gripped his beer glass and looked up into the mirror behind the bar at the men watching him.

"She was only eighteen and was supposed to be fine," he said. "Whenever I think of her I see her stepping onto that damned plywood when everything went slow-motion."

He ground his knuckle into the edge of the bar, twisting it, concentrating on the pain. Slow and graceful, he wanted to think, the plywood had lifted into the air as Laura danced forward, floating, then drifting out of sight, her arms raised, her gaze fixed on him, her hair floating as though it were under water as she sank. But he knew it hadn't been slow and graceful at all. She had plummeted into the maw of the raw earth, into a foul and musty hole. A brutal and bitter swallowing.

"It was a year after we moved out of Abitibi Canyon." He looked away from the two men in the mirror. "Where Laura and I grew up."

"More Molsons," said Leblanc, turning to the bartender.

"Jesus, Vinny," said George, "why didn't you tell us earlier?"

"Stupidity," said Vince. "Plain stupidity to cover the well that way, and stupid to wait for the doctors. What a waste."

The bartender pushed a beer in front of Leblanc, and looked at the other two men questioningly. "Yeah," said George, "more." The three of them stood at the bar, staring at the bottles that lined the shelf against the mirror. The bartender disappeared through a door, then emerged with an armload of bar towels and began stacking them intently out of sight under the counter.

"Well, by God," said Leblanc, "Enough of this. I'm going to finish this beer and call it a day." He glanced at Vince. "You take the single room, Vinny. George and I'll take the double."

"Fine, Paul. Thanks." Vince drained his glass, nodded at the men, and walked over the scarred wooden floor to the stairs.

Vince climbed the stairs to the room, opened the door, closed it behind him, flicked the light on, looked around, turned it off, then walked over to the bed. He stared at the floor and rubbed his knuckle. "Hell," he said, and sat down. "You damned complainer." He wished he hadn't talked about Laura. Now what was he going to do about it? The other men were going to feel sorry for him and he didn't want that. "It's all in the past," he said aloud to himself. "There's no good in whining about it now. Forget about it."

He could see the keyhole in the door across the room with the light coming through it. It seemed very far away, like a large thing far away and not like a small thing just across the room. It seemed like an opening of light looked at from a large, dark hole, and he was in the hole. He thought of the darkness Laura had plunged into, and he wondered if she'd looked at the darkness as she fell. Or had she looked back at the light she was falling from? He couldn't take his eyes off the keyhole; he didn't want to be in the dark, but he didn't want to turn the light on either.

But he'd been in darker places. Now the quiet spread through the hotel room, and the darkness developed a texture and thickness, covering him like a nappy skin. He stretched out on the bed and dozed off, grateful for the rest from the long drive and the prickly company of his friends. But almost at once he dreamed of Laura when she'd been fourteen, her hair bleached almost white by the sun. She walked away from him towards the deserted buildings of Abitibi Canyon and disappeared. The March Hare from Alice in Wonderland appeared and ran past him towards the empty houses. Vince ran after him in the dream, seeking a way out of the ruined

homes, looking for Laura, looking for his family. The Hare ran down the gravel road past the houses and out over the dam on the river to the little square outbuilding housing the elevator that lead down to the operations center where his father had worked. When Vince looked into the shaft after the Hare, he lost his balance and fell down the hole, past the open doorways to the operations room with its empty desks and chairs in front of the gleaming dials of the control panels choking the river's flow. Coffee mugs hung dusty on the wall over the lunch table. The room flashed past and Vince tumbled further down the shaft into the darkness, past the level where he knew the sunless water raged, past the granite rocks holding up the water, and the dam, and the world above, and he kept on falling.

When he woke, he couldn't tell if his eyes were open or closed. He sat up on the lumpy mattress.

"Hell," he said, annoyed at the derivative nature of the dream. Why had he dreamed that? He hadn't looked at that story since he had been a boy. He stared hard across the room of the hotel at the light from the hallway coming through the keyhole. He could disappear quietly and quickly in the darkness tonight, he thought, and no one would realize he'd gone until morning. Some people would never realize he'd gone at all.

It had happened to Laura.

It was happening to Abitibi Canyon.

He heard the other two men climb the stairs, muttering as they opened the door to the room next to his. Then they closed it. Leblanc swore coarsely, and then laughed a long, slow laugh. Then there was silence.

Vince stood up, walked across the room, opened the door, and stepped into the hallway. A bare bulb glared on the ceiling, etching a harsh halo on the peeling paint. He approached the door beside his own and stared at the doorknob and the keyhole beneath it. The keyhole was filled with the darkness. He knocked sharply on the door three times.

"George?" he said. "Paul? Get up. Let's have another drink."

"Vince?"

"I think I want to talk."

Then through the door he could hear George being slowly and unctuously sick.

Vince turned towards the stairs and wondered if the bartender was still downstairs. He moved cautiously down the steps. The stairway was very dark, and Vince kept his hand curled around the railing. At the bottom the door was open, and the doorway was lit up. A humming came from the room below. Vince moved towards the light, feeling the shadows perched behind him on his shoulders. He shivered as the murky walls crawled past, then he stepped through the doorway into the light.

It was warm in the bar. He looked across the room at the bartender standing in a cone of yellow light behind the counter. The man looked back at Vince, then wiped down the counter in front of him with a bright white towel and looked up again steadily. His eyes were still flat, Vince thought, and his lips were set in a thin, implacable line. The man had been humming, he realized in the sudden stillness.

"I'd like to talk," said Vince. The bartender nodded, and motioned to the stool. "I'm out of practice talking with people," Vince finished.

The bartender nodded again. "I'm not going to argue with you," he said to Vince and ran his tongue along his upper teeth, under his lip.

"Listen, I don't mean . . ."

"No," the bartender interrupted. "I hear mainly complaints and bragging. You got something to say. I heard some of it earlier." He ran the white terrycloth over the bar.

"Stupidity," said Vince. "You must hear a lot of it here. Maybe the dark brings it out in people." The bartender nodded again.

"I work at night," the barman said. "I like to work when it's dark." Then he looked at Vince. "I'll make us some coffee," he said. "I keep some French roast back for myself. The customers don't care for it. Too strong." Vince

watched as the man turned and walked to the end of the counter to put on a fresh pot of coffee. He pulled out five sweet rolls from a pastry case beside the coffee machine, put them on a plate, pulled two mugs of the shelf and set it all in front of Vince. The rolls were topped with thick icing.

"We'll eat 'em off the same plate," he said. Vince watched him walk across the room, switch off the outside sign, flip the cardboard CLOSED sign in the window. The sign now read OPEN as it faced the room. Then the man returned to the bar, reached up to the shelf stocking the liquor and took down a bottle of Scotch and two small glasses.

"We got all night," he said. Then he looked back up at Vince and nodded again.

He put a fresh, moist towel beside the plate for Vince to wipe the sticky sugar from his hands as he ate the rolls. Then he put another beside his own place.

"Eat," he said. "There's plenty." He went to the machine and brought the coffee pot down to where Vince was sitting. Then he leaned onto the bar, and poured the glasses full of Scotch, and his head was so close that Vince realized they would speak easily and be heard plainly yet anyone seated two stools away could have heard nothing. It was almost conspiratorial, but the room was empty except for the two of them, their heads close over the wooden bar that glowed burnished and clean in the soft yellow light. Vince was beginning to feel good and was losing the desire to talk. He swirled the golden Scotch around inside his glass.

"You must hear it all," he said, stalling. "Everyone talks to the bartender."

"Once I wasn't a bartender," the man said. "It's hard to remember that sometimes. I've been here behind the counter so long listening to people's stories it's hard to remember when I wasn't here. I have a story of my own. I know I do, but sometimes it seems pushed out by all the others."

Vince nodded and the bartender began to talk about the years behind the bar, about what he'd seen and heard, about the fragments of lives that paraded across the floor in front of him. He explained what it was like to spend a life behind the bar listening, wiping down the counter, pouring booze, cleaning up after the drunks, and always listening. He talked about opening the business every day and watching it swell with people in the evening and empty like a tired balloon at night. He talked about the long procession of beery confidences invented on the stools in front of him, about lives that unraveled and never seemed to mend, about how he listened and was never listened to.

"But what I do is important," he said. "It's more than pouring booze; it's listening. That's what counts." He looked at Vince, and Vince looked back into the bartender's dark eyes. "Listening at times like this," he said.

Vince listened carefully. The barman spoke of the stories, about how he'd listened until it seemed he knew how the stories would end almost as soon as they'd begun to be told. Thousands of them in this bar alone, he said. More. Tens of thousands. Lives of men and women that surfaced briefly and then sank like glittering fish under the covering sea. The stories themselves became like a sea that the barman swam through, and then the swimming itself had become his story. He said that he never thought his life would become such a thing, the swimming of a single man through these growing waters. It woke him up at night he said, and kept him awake because he feared dreaming of being afloat on that expanse of voices, tossed on their turbulence, drowning in voices that were not his own.

"You probably think I'm nuts," the barman said, "but sometimes it's like all the voices are becoming my own. All the stories. Like I belong to them."

"No," said Vince, "I don't think you're nuts."

The bartender poured the coffee. He kept the glass by Vince's hand filled with the fine, smooth Scotch, and Vince watched the man talk and listened to what he said about the dark and the loneliness and the uncertain

layer of light that covered it. He sipped the spirits slowly and swallowed hot mouthfuls of the strong, dark coffee, relishing its bite, and rolled the yeasty sweetness of the pastry over his tongue until the first faint fingers of dawn pried open the night sky. He did not stop listening, and as the barman talked Vince began to feel as though he was comfortably rocked in the clear waters of a brisk river, afloat in a current of bright voices filling the room.

The Gift

The last time I saw my mother she'd spread a century's worth of family photos over the Ping Pong table in her basement and stood over them like a general organizing a campaign. Six months later she's still cleaning out her house, packing up all the mementos she's saved. She called us here at my sister's last night and told her to tell me she's sending me a box for Christmas containing the records of my haphazard payments on a student loan twenty-five years ago, along with my father's canceled check for the balance of the loan in the amount of \$3,367. 47.

It's supposed to be a Christmas surprise.

I lean on the doorjamb to my sister's home office. I've been visiting her for a week now, glad to get out of the Oregon rain, but it's raining here too. So I'm feeling right at home, and Sheri sets a hell of a table. I could stay indefinitely. I look back over my shoulder to the dining room where a papier-mâché skeleton dressed in a white wedding gown sits at the head of the table, a permanent fixture, with a two-tiered wedding cake on the table in front of it. Miss Havisham, I think. Looking down at my sister, I try to figure this thing out. Sheri is into skeletons.

"What does she mean, she's sending me the records of my student loan? Does Mother want the money now? I had the money years ago for them, and Dad refused to take it."

I'm thinking this may be the meanest thing she has ever done to me, and no, I can't figure it out at all. Why now? I ask. Why would she deliver this particular blow at this particular time? I'm just about to start a new job in Oregon, make a go of it. A new beginning. She's gripped me in this contentious give-and-take all my life. She's hung on, and still has a grip on me, and that's something I don't want to think about.

My sister agrees, but she knows something she's not telling me. I recognize the look—the wide eyes and an expectant parting of the lips.

She's sitting at her desk in her office, cooking up recipes for brouhahas. She finishes the check she's writing, puts it in an envelope, looks up at me. I shake my head once, and look around the room. Pictures of Mother and Dad line the bookshelves, photos taken when they were twenty, and when they were sixty. A lot of pictures. They are sepia-toned, clearly from another era, and one in particular shows my mother at twenty-three in soft focus with water-colored highlights on her cheeks and lips. It's signed, "to Tommy, Love, Twiz."

There are a lot of bones on the shelves too. Sheri collects skulls as well as portraits—buffalo, crocodile, camel, cat, bear—they're all here, bleached and porous. The walls are lined with the horned heads of ungulates and the creatures that ate them.

"Why would she do that?" I say, looking back to the desk.

"Just to be mean," says Sheri. "To hurt you. What are you going to do about it?"

"I don't know. Maybe not talk to Mother for a while, maybe just forgive her."

"Send it back unopened," she says.

"I'm going into town and walk around to think things out," I say. This holiday bundle is going to take some mulling over. "I'll be back for dinner."

I've been saying "No thanks," for some time, refusing to accept any items from my mother, telling her they belong with her. She has a ledger for each of us—my sister, my brother, me—a big, black book listing the expenses each one of us incurred, from hospital fees at our birth, food, clothes for school, summer camp, bicycles, covering, in my case, more than forty years. She has one on my son as well. It all came down to money somehow. It wasn't sentiment she taught—it was the cost of things. Last Christmas she grilled me over the telephone about my grandfather's walking stick.

"Do you still have it?" she'd asked.

"Of course," I'd said, "and I love that walking stick. I feel a quiet pleasure in holding it, in rubbing my thumb over the worn blackthorn."

"Where is it?"

"Beside the front door, in an umbrella stand with Uncle Lyman's cherry wood cane," I'd said.

"You still have that, too?" she'd asked.

"Yes," I'd said.

"Thank God. Don't ever let anybody have those things," she'd said.

"They're all that's left of Uncle Lyman and Grandpa."

"Maybe I should send them back to you for safekeeping, have everything together." I'd like to do that too, get rid of the strings attached to the damned things.

"You keep them," she'd said. "They're yours now. Just don't lose them."

When I get back from town, the box is waiting under the tree. I don't open it, and won't open it with the other gifts Christmas morning because I don't want to be forced to deal with the contents yet. Once it's open, I'll be committed. I'll have to make some sort of decision and confront my mother. I stand in front of the tree and admire the job Sheri has done decorating it. Two of the ornaments are little white weasel skulls with red baubles in the eye sockets.

I walk past them through the living room to the study.

Sheri looks up from her desk and says, "'Don't tell your brother what's in the box or I'll never forgive you.' That's what she said to me on the phone."

"What's this all about?" I say. Something else I can't figure out. Sheri's in a fix either way. If she tells me, Mother will be furious; if she hadn't, I'd have been mad. I get the feeling we're all being eaten alive here.

Sheri pauses—she's painting her fingernails a deep and vivid red—levels a long, cool gaze at me over them. Then she says, "What does she have against you? Why can't she just let it go?" She looks down at her

nails again. She has our father's eyes—unusually large and blue and wonderful. The finest eyes I have ever seen. "When we talk, I spend half my time defending you," she says.

"Is Mother is losing her mind? Dementia? Forgetting that old family debts were forgiven, wanting money to hoard in her old age, lashing out and humiliating us. Maybe it's not her fault." The notion interests Sheri, and she's suddenly attentive. "Drugs might help," I say.

"I have some XENIX, if you'd like some," she says.

"I mean for Mother. To help with her memory."

"Dementia doesn't stop her from sticking in the knife," she says. Sheri's tough. Hard, at times.

Seven years ago her husband, a drunk, ran off with her daughter, his stepdaughter, who in turn left him for a younger man. My sister sued for divorce, lost the house, won the business, got back on her feet. Then the husband went on a three-year binge and did everything he could to ruin her. "I want to stick the stem of a broken wine glass in his heart," she'd said, "and watch him twitch."

Only yesterday he dropped by the office, yellow with cirrhosis and apologies. No one had seen him for two years. Sheri wasn't there, and when she heard about the visit, she said, "It's part of the AA Recovery Program—he needs to make amends—and I'm not interested."

"He's a puke," Mother always insisted, "and that's the worst word I can think of." But I liked him—I admit it, I admit it—twenty years ago, before he turned into the meanest man I knew and tried to grab everything my sister collected. A commodities maniac, he used her credit card during the break-up to charge ten thousand dollar's worth of museum-quality Indian baskets, and disappeared with them.

While they were still together, he bought her a gravesite for her birthday, and as I look at her now, I'm thinking that he'll be the one who's

buried in it. She learned how to be mean from him, and she's better at it when she wants to be, which isn't often, thank God.

"Look at the mother if you want to understand the daughter," he'd told me once, but he'd never followed his own advice.

So at noon Christmas day Mother calls and asks, "Have you opened the box?"

"No," I say, "we all slept late after heavy drinking the night before." A lie. She begins to explain what's in the box. Her voice shakes. I'm thinking it's nerves. She knows I'm going to be mad as hell once the box is open. The crap will hit the fan then. Whenever hell breaks loose in the family she's in the middle of it. But for now she can pretend it's nothing special, and I can pretend I don't know what I'm going to see. The bomb is ticking and I'm thinking this is as close to time travel as I want to get.

She says, "It's just some old records I've cleaned out, things you should take care of now." It sounds innocuous enough. But I know better now, thanks to Sheri, and this is the fundamental state of our family—pretending you don't know what you know, keeping it from the others.

"I'll call back again this evening and we can chat about what everybody gets," I say. And then, I'm thinking, you'll get yours.

"Have you talked to your son lately?" she asks. This is her way of bringing up another failure. After thirty years of smoking, she quit halfway through a box of Pall Malls, and still has the half-pack in her top drawer fifteen years later—minus one cigarette my son stole when he was eighteen.

She hasn't forgiven him for it.

"We talked last week and he seems well."

"What's he doing?" she wants to know.

"Going to school," I say happily, thinking she can't find fault with this, "working towards a psychology credential. And working part-time as a security man."

"Christ," she says, "he's been saying that for eight years," and then she brings down the hammer, tells me he called her last night and they talked. She already has the news, knows what he's doing, knows when I talked to him. She says she asked him about her father's Masonic Apron she once gave him as a memento. She recounts the conversation to me, word for word: "'Do you have it?' I asked him. 'No,' he said. 'What did you do with it,' I asked. Silence. 'Did you sell it,' I asked. 'Yes,' he said. 'Oh God,' I said to him, 'why did you do that? You're breaking my heart.' 'I had to eat, Grandma,' he said. 'I would have sent you five hundred dollars,' I told him. 'Don't you know how important that apron was to me?'"

I'm thinking that would have been another five hundred dollars written into the big black book.

"Mr. Big-Shot," my mother is saying now on the phone, "Mr. Hoity-Toity. Who the hell does he think he is anyway? Selling Gramp's Masonic apron. It breaks my heart. He told me he needed to eat. I could have sent him five hundred dollars if it meant keeping the apron," she says again.

I don't know what to say about it. He's never mentioned the subject to me. It's something else I can't figure out. Who to believe? The difference between mementos and evidence. Never talked about, never lied about. I wish my mother asked less and gave differently. She gave my son Dad's Longine watch, 1944 vintage, his wedding present from her, and the kid pawned it. I still don't know who to be madder at—him for selling it to a junk dealer, or her for giving it to him. Who in hell gave him the right to sell my father's watch?

She did, of course.

But I don't say this. We've all got our thumbs in each other's eyes as it is. Besides, I have to admit, she gave me Dad's army watch when I was seventeen—another Longine, her gift to him in 1942—and I lost it in a fight.

So I hammer her with my philosophy about this sort of thing instead.

"Never give important heirlooms to children or grandchildren until they're thirty years old and settled down. Until then, they don't give a damn about anything. Who's kidding who here?" I say. I'm ranting, but can't stop. It feels good. "I don't know anyone who was given stuff at that age who still has it, for Christ's sake, Mother." It's a sore point for me, and I feel myself getting riled. "I admit you gave him items that were Dad's and Gramp's that he pissed away." Things I wanted. "Kids are like baby birds in the nest—heads up and beaks wide open, gobbling whatever they can get and shitting it out without a thought." I realize I'm rubbing her nose in this, getting as much mileage out of it as I can before I have to eat the crow she's stuffed in to that damned box, and I don't want to admit to myself how good it feels. "It's not until they start to work for their own things and provide for their kids that they have the remotest clue how significant heirlooms can be." I'm looking across the room at the Christmas tree and thinking about myself, about the items I'll never see again.

What I don't say to her is how appalled I am that my own son could have pawned these things. In fact I defend him even though I agree with her sentiments. I'm remembering the summer my son visited me and on the way out the door to the airport he'd reached in his pocket, pulled out my Montblanc fountain pen, and casually handed it to me.

"Here," he'd said, "you should be more careful where you leave this."

"Where was it?" I asked.

"In your desk drawer," he'd said. "You should lock it."

"Lock my own desk?" I'd asked. Something else I don't want to think about, him perched on my desk, meditating intended mischief. It's not good topic for phone conversation at this point, and I can see Sheri perking up now, listening to the talk about heirlooms.

Trust. We're more alike than we want to be. I think of a visit home we all made four years ago, of Sheri and my son sitting across from each other after they hadn't seen each other in a couple of years.

"What were they like together?" my father had asked afterward.

"Like card players," I'd said, "telling each other stories. Neither of them could believe a word the other said."

My father had laughed harder than I'd ever seen. He told the story to friends the next night over supper, and laughed again until tears filled his eyes.

"I'm having eggnog and rum for lunch," my mother says now on the phone, bringing me back to the present. I can hear her gulp, a thousand miles away. She's been a teetotaler off and on, and this swallow of booze for lunch is a cocked hammer. I'm thinking about a good belt of Cognac for lunch myself.

"Goodbye," I say, "I'll call later," and hang up. I look across the room at my sister. "Let's have some Apple brandy for lunch."

"I wasn't going to tell you," she confesses, "but I said to myself, 'You can't let him open those things in front of everyone. It would crush him.' So I decided to warn you. She's cutting you off at the legs again. Don't ever let Mother know I told you. She'll be furious." Sheri is not going to let this go for a while, I realize. Not until I open the box and she sees for herself what's ticking away in there. I'm thinking that this is familiar enough ground, Sheri stirring things up, herding us into the boxing ring to see what happens, but Mother's move has an exquisiteness of timing I hadn't seen before.

By four o'clock I can't put it off any longer. I have to open the box before she calls again. I take it to the bedroom, cut into the tape. Inside is a handful of wrapped gifts. I unwrap them—a rock from the town I grew up in; a Bambi tree ornament she's made out of wooden clothespins; a key chain from the city where I was born; a manila envelope bound with enough packing tape to preserve a mummy. She's sealed this thing against man and the universe, a veritable time capsule. It's marked "PRIVATE—To Be Opened in Private First," and I know this is it, the bomb.

I open it. It's full of stuff I don't recognize—old papers, pieces of cloth—and I'm thinking, good God, has she lost her mind completely, when I recognize something: a plastic bag filled with my Boy Scout merit badges. I'd forgotten that was a Scout. The badges are utterly unfamiliar. I riffle through the folder cautiously and see a small Christmas card with a scribble I made when I was one year old with my father's neat writing surrounding it: "To Mother, from Tommy and Rick, Xmas, 1946."

And my kindergarten notebooks are there—report cards, a Pee Wee Baseball League National Champion crest. She's boxed these items and sent them to me for Christmas, things I'd completely forgotten about. A handprint made when I was ten, the graduation certificates from public school, Junior High, and High School, my birth certificate, a birthday card from my grandfather for my first birthday. I find my first letter to my mother here, and a handwritten invitation to her and Dad to attend my grade eight graduation. There is a portrait of me at nine months, dressed in the white wool sweater my mother knit, with matching shorts and socks. These forgotten objects, at first as foreign as a stranger's, off-gas a cloud of sudden and penetrating familiarity. My gut recognizes that it's me I'm looking at. I'm feeling as though I'm peeping at my own forgotten private moments, trespassing, as though I'm going through a stranger's underwear drawer, and it stuns me that my mother has kept these things, has known me through them all these years. Has handled them. Known me in this unexpectedly intimate way.

And yes, there's another envelope too. I open that, pull out three folded bank statements, my father's check, a notice: Paid in Full. That's it.

I'm feeling now as though I belong more to my mother than to myself. I didn't simply emerge from the womb at birth and leave it behind: in a very real sense the womb came out with me and I've been floating in it ever since. My mother's love. She remembers more about my life than I do. She has the evidence, after all. I'd believed I'd been outmaneuvered by her my

whole life, but this is beginning to feel different. What I'm hearing is my mother telling me about her knitting that little baby's outfit. What I'm seeing is that young and beautiful woman, twenty-one years old, younger than my son is now, sitting on the roof of the tenement building on Government Road in Kirkland Lake, all summer, pregnant with me, starting off her family life, knitting me that suit. She used darning needles, so the stitches are numerous and tight, and now she's sending it to me. And dammit, my eyes are hot.

I close the box, walk downstairs to the office, and telephone her. It occurs to me she's been guarding this treasure so it wouldn't be lost. She's saved everything. The curator of the family. Maybe she's afraid if everything disappears, she'll disappear too. These things are her tangible proof of our lives together, not just heirlooms and junk. She's had them since the beginning of my life and is handing them to me at the end of hers.

She picks up the phone. I tell her what I'm feeling.

"Okay," I admit, "I squandered some things along the way too. I've been a shit."

"I just wish your son felt the same way," she answers, "that he'd held on to the things I gave him."

"Mother," I say, walking over to the bookcase and picking up the portrait of her at twenty-three. I'm looking at the word "Twiz" in the bottom right corner, the name my father called her before they were married, the name she signed her portraits to him with—Love, Twiz—portraits that now line my sister's bookshelves in the rooms with the bones on the walls. I love this sepia-toned photo that used to be mine, and in it my mother is beautiful, a real stunner. I'm falling for her myself right now, just looking at the picture. She was my first love. What happened? "Sweetheart," I say, "don't be angry about that. Let it go. We've got to let some things go."

Twiz. What the hell is going on here?

And then I say, "I want to thank you for keeping all this, for keeping it alive. Stuff that's as old as I am." I'm walking out of the office with the phone and through the living room toward the kitchen. I'm feeling alive, really alive, in spite of the walls bristling with the skulls of cows and wild goats. One wall looks like Death Valley turned on its edge. I can feel my eyes roll in their sockets. Leaving the room I pass by Sheri's antique Mexican shrine filled with the fierce little skulls of weasels and cats nestled between crude paraphernalia of death. "Little testimonials of my beginnings," I'm saying to my mother, "that I was there. Thanks. And thanks for the thousand other incidents of love and support I've never mentioned." And then I say thanks for sending the records of the loan payments too, for taking care of it all those years ago, for looking after me even when I should have been looking after myself.

"I thought it was up to you to burn them, dear," she says, and I know she's right, that it has to be my act, my closure.

"That's a real gift too," and as the words tumble out of my mouth I'm thinking that I'm laying it on thick, but the words won't stop and, God help me, I mean every one of them.

Her voice on the other end of the telephone is as shaky as it was yesterday, and it's dawning on me that the tremor isn't fear of my reaction or meanness at all, that if gratitude could leak through a telephone, it's doing that now, that my mother is afraid because she's reaching into the future, seeing it, darkly. Sheri looks up as I walk into the kitchen. She sees me smiling and goofy—I can feel the sappy grin on my face—and pours another glass of the strong apple brandy, places it on the counter beside me, and, with fugitive articulation, gives my arm a squeeze. Always the diplomat. I've got the feeling she's picked up the shifting winds in the telephone and moved flawlessly into another role.

I finish the conversation with Mother and hang up.

"What was that all about?" I ask Sheri, turning.

"What?" she says.

"All that suspicion and crap about Mother's motives this morning."

"Are you jumping to conclusions again?" she says.

"No, dammit," I say, "I was listening to you again."

"About what?"

"Mother's motives," I say. "She sent me this stuff out of good will."

Sheri looks at me. "Then why," she says, "did she keep the financial records all these years. Why even have them? Why didn't she listen to Dad and throw them out?"

I gulp some cognac, searching for an answer.

"You've got to learn to stand up to her," she says. "The men in this family have always been weak."

And then I'm suddenly thinking about a conversation with my boy last summer, the two of us sitting in the cab of my truck driving aimlessly around town to get away from Mother and Sheri, to be alone together after my father had died. He'd turned to me.

"You're the oldest male in the family now and have to establish a presence," he'd said. It sounded medieval. He'd said, "There isn't much time, Rick." He'd called me by my first name, as dramatic as his aunt.

"What do you mean?" I'd said.

"The family has always been run by the women—Gram—and neither you nor Grandpa could stand up to her. None of us could, and now," he'd said, "Aunt Sheri is ready to take over and run things."

"How do you know all this stuff at your age?"

"It's a matriarchy, Dad," he'd said. And then he said, "Dammit, if you don't take over now, it will be too late for the rest of us. The men will never be in charge of their own lives. We won't know how."

But I've got the answer now. I look at Sheri.

"She kept the records to prove we were there. To show the interdependencies. To prove that it was all real," I say. "She was the only

one strong enough to do it. She collected our history and made it concrete. To her, it proves we existed and loved one another." I looked around at the bones peppering Sheri's walls. "You're doing it too, only it isn't all there yet."

My God, I think, the women in my family. Odi et ami. I reach over and take Sheri's hand in my own. The truth is, I need these women, and I love them, and I need the cognac because I'm looking out the window at the rain coming down, thinking hard that the stripped, winter trees close by the house really do look like finger bones, but further down the hill, where Christmas lights outline the evanescent shapes of houses, the trees are filled with light from the colored bulbs, long boughs of light in the air, and I can't see the skeletal branches at all, only the full, pulsating shapes of the whole trees alive with the bright colors fleshing them out, beating and full and beautiful and I'm thinking, oddly, about my son.

Surfacing

"You relax, and I'll make dinner," Rick Hill said to his wife as he opened the cab door and paid the cabbie. "I'll grill us a filet with a light salad. The cabernet will be good with it. Not too heavy. You take a bath and I'll handle everything." He took some change back from the cabbie, said, "Thanks," then unfurled the umbrella, and held it aloft protecting his wife's head. The rain was light but he thought the gesture was important. Melissa said nothing. Rick held her close and looked at her. She remained slightly disheveled from her fall into the lake, but even in the garish slap of neon she was lovely. They'd dried her clothes on the ship's Laundromat, and she was presentable. More than presentable, thought Rick.

The shadows fell from the street, obscuring her in their folds, and a trace of perfume floated towards him, animated by the effervescence of her female sweat mixed with lake water. He breathed the old ambrosia in, inhaling her atoms, and let his gaze stay with her. She did not meet his look, but stared fixedly ahead at the apartment entrance. Rick took her gently by the elbow and guided her up the stairs to the foyer doors. She did not resist, and Rick thought this was a good sign. When they got to the doors, she glanced at him.

"I don't want a bath just yet," she said. "Maybe later."

"Later's fine. Whatever you want. Just relax." He watched her mouth as he pushed the glass doors open and let her through. There was a slight curve on her lips, the beginnings of a smile he hoped, but he couldn't tell if it was for him or at him. "Relax," he repeated, and he breathed deeply as he guided her across the foyer towards the elevator.

When they entered the apartment, Rick sat her down on the sofa. Then he went to the kitchen and opened the wine. He poured it carefully into two glasses, filling one more than the other, and took the full glass into the living room.

"Here," he said. She reached up and took the glass without looking at him. Then he went back to the kitchen to begin dinner.

"I wish to hell we could go to Greece, or Italy, and get out of the winter," he shouted back towards the living room. He pulled two steaks from the refrigerator and banged them loudly on the counter beside him, but there was only silence from the other room. Outside, the cold, damp winter winds snaked up from the lake and rattled the windows. Rick shivered. He looked out the window. The dark waters of Lake Ontario flickered coldly where the streets ended their long, slow drop to the shore. It was a cold lake, he knew, and very deep, the coldest of the Great Lakes, and that was because it had been gouged out of the granite by glaciers ten thousand years ago and was fed by deep springs whose origins were icy and mysterious. It was a slick and shadowed patch, ringed by festive lights, but here, where the street lamps that threw down a harsh and tactless glare, festivity seemed far away. Occasionally a car horn, trumpeting faintly, fell upon Rick's ears. He glanced back towards where his wife sat in the living room.

Before he began cooking, Rick wanted color. He wanted only a few colors so they would be bold and arresting. He wanted Melissa to focus on them and take in the food and forget about how bad the day had been. So he filled the fruit bowl with the yellow and orange and red of bananas and tangerines and northern apples and placed it in the center of the table. He set out some white feta cheese and yogurt and amber honey. Beside that, he set up a plate with red tomatoes, sliced and sprinkled with coarse, green basil. Then he stood back. They were simple, strong colors, Rick thought, and they were honest. He sliced some bread and sprinkled summer savory on the bread plate. Then he set the table with the plates and flatware and two candles, and he lit the candles and placed the bread on the edge of the table where it would be in easy reach for each of them. He set the bottle of wine beside the bread and wished the deep garnet of the wine showed

through the green bottle more, to anchor the colors on the table. He thought about decanting the wine, but dismissed the idea. Instead, he brought his glass of wine from the kitchen and placed it on the table.

Rick walked back to the kitchen and turned to look at the table. He was satisfied, so he began cooking the steaks. While the grill was heating, he made the salad, tossing the greens with a little brown sugar and balsamic vinegar and dried currents. Over the top, he sprinkled sesame and anise seeds and a handful of chopped walnuts. As he worked, he glanced into the next room to check the table. It looked good, he thought. Then he had the sudden wish to be somewhere hot and sunny again.

He brought his attention on the small details around him. When the steaks were done, he took them to the table and called his wife.

"It's all set," he said, and she came in through the doorway and sat down, carrying the glass of her favorite wine that had not been touched.

"Well," said Rick, pulling his chair up to the table, "bread?" He nudged the plate towards Melissa. She took a piece. Rick passed the meat to her, then the salad, watching as she helped herself to small portions. He nodded approvingly. "Take it a little at a time," he said. He speared a steak and ripped off a chunk of bread and bit into it. Then he cut a piece of steak and ate that, watching Melissa while he chewed. She nibbled a forkful of salad slowly. Rick took a gulp of his wine, realized what he had done, and took another sip, holding it on his tongue and savoring it. Then he slid two pieces of tomato onto his plate, and did the same for his wife. He sliced two pieces of feta cheese and crumbled one of them over the tomatoes. He passed the other slice to Melissa, then took a bite of his steak. "Well," he said again, "how is it?" He looked around at the table, then at Melissa. She looked up.

"It's very nice, Rick. It's fine." Rick nodded. Then she looked back down at her plate.

"Steak all right?" he said.

"It's fine," she said.

"Not too rare?"

"It's fine," she said.

"I'm glad it's fine," said Rick. "And is the salad fine too?" She looked up quickly. Then her glance slid back to her plate and she chewed slowly, meditatively.

"Yes," she said.

"And the bread and the candles and fruit, they're fine too?" Rick took a swallow of wine.

"Fine," she said.

"Fine," said Rick, and he took another swallow of wine, then refilled his glass. He bit savagely into the bread. He was beginning to feel warm. He watched Melissa closely and she shot him a quick, expressionless glance. Rick took a deep breath.

"And are *you* fine?" he said. "Is *everything* fine?"

"No," she said. "I'm not fine, and I want the bath, now," she said, leaning back from the table. "I want to do some thinking alone."

"I'll clean up," he said, and looked at the unfinished meal in front of them.

"I'll help," she said, and Rick nodded, grateful for this small gesture. He scooped up the plates and cutlery and carried them to the kitchen, leaving only the goblets for her to carry. When he got to the counter, he filled the sink and squeezed in the detergent. The suds began to form, and he dumped the plates into them. The citrus smell of the soap filled the air, and Rick thought of summer.

He stood over the dishes, washing each one slowly. The water was hot and sudsy, and he rinsed off the soap with blasts of tap water before placing the dishes on the rack. With every rinsing, the water rose. The sink would soon be filled and he would have to let some of the water out. He lifted the stopper and watched the water level lower.

Then Rick pictured Melissa slipping on the deck that afternoon, pitch over the boat rail and slip beneath the icy waves of the lake, her head tilted up toward what he imagined was the receding surface gleaming above her. One moment she had been standing next to him, and then, as she reached out to snatch a seagull feather carried on the wind, she was gone. But the descent would have gone slowly for her, he thought now, once she'd hit the water, cloaked in winter woolens as she was; her eyes would have focused on a surface that mirrored nothing so much as her own dismay. Astonishment would have flooded her mind, and disbelief that this most inevitable of things, her own death, should have arrived so ordinarily. That it should be now, she might have thought, like this. And then surprise would have sent fine threads along the fibers of her awareness as she recognized the shape of her life, the seamless sum of uncountable and hitherto apparently random components that were, in fact, a single gesture seen now by her in its entirety because this particular moment would have been the one she inhabited more completely than any other, the only moment any of us inhabit fully, he thought, so that, finally, she would have identified the pattern of her life as clearly and completely as she had previously recognized triangles on a page.

"Ah!" she may have thought; this was my life.

He wondered what that pattern would have looked like for her, and he wondered at her owning of it, just as he had earlier that afternoon, as he stood frozen by the boat's rail, watching her sink, a gin and tonic clutched in his right hand. He'd wondered what had been on the other side of those lovely eyes gazing sightlessly through the water towards him as he stood leaning on the rail, hidden from her by the pliant separation of lake and sky.

"We need a double sink," he said. But Melissa said nothing as she dried the dishes.

Then she said, "Would you have jumped in if I had been a stranger?"

"For Christ sake, Melissa," said Rick, "what a thing to say." He looked at her suspiciously.

"Would you? I've seen you move quickly before." She concentrated on wiping the towel round and round the plate she was holding.

"I love you, you know that. What could be more incentive than that?" Rick made his voice sound reasonable. "Let's not argue about this."

"You love me," she said, and Rick knew she was not going to let it go.

"Yes," he said.

"And what could be more incentive to jump in after me than that?"

"Exactly. Except something happened. I hesitated."

"Something happened." He glanced over at her.

"Yes," he said brightly. "Like a misfire, a short-circuit in a synapse. A fluke." She had furrowed her brows into a tight knot. Her lips were pursed. He hated it when she repeated what he said, and he knew it was not a good sign. He glanced at his empty wine glass waiting by the sink. Melissa's was beside it, still untouched.

"So you hesitated," she finished. Rick's gut tightened.

"I don't know what happened," he said, and he didn't, he thought, he really did not. "I got caught in a sort of trance." He picked up the SOS pad and began to polish an aluminum pot lid. The thought suddenly hit him again that he would have gone down with her, would have taken her down to that place to experience it together. They might both be at the bottom of the lake right now, cold and bloating. He shuddered. "Goddam it," he said. He put the SOS pad down and lifted his gaze to the window over the sink. He could only see the kitchen reflected in it, and his own dark silhouette. He leaned forward and listened. The rain had stopped. Far away on the lakeshore, the lights would be twinkling on the water. It would look festive, but God only knew what was beneath that black surface besides pale fish suspended in the icy waters.

"You were thinking, that much was plain," she said beside him. "Trying to decide whether you wanted me alive or not."

"Jesus, give me a break."

"I thought I knew you, but it was a stranger watching me in the water."

"I'm not a stranger, godammit. I know you very, very, well." Rick looked back at the sink. "And you know me," he added. "And I want you alive, here with me. Alive" He reached out for her but she moved away, shrugging him off with a little gesture. He turned back to the sink, picked up a plate and began rinsing it. "Maybe the extent of the thing made me freeze. It wasn't just a stranger to be saved. It was the threat of losing everything--"

"I know where you're going with that, and it won't work," she said. "You're right; I know you very well. Maybe so well that I'm beginning to realize that I don't know you at all."

"What does that mean? That doesn't make any sense."

"That I know you better than you know yourself. This time your slick talking won't get you out." Rick was shocked.

"Slick talking? What the hell do you mean?" The skin on his face felt suddenly thick and hot.

"Slick Rick," she said, "deciding whether to get me or not," and she threw the towel down with a slap on the floor. Rick reached down to pick it up, and she walked out of the room. He straightened slowly and dried the remaining dishes. Then he emptied the sink. The water raced down the drain with a sucking sound. He focused on it. It was a good sound. It meant the pipes were clear and things were in good shape in the plumbing. In working order. He sighed contentedly. He hated sluggish plumbing. Then he heard his wife turning magazine pages in the next room: *slick, slick, slick*, they went.

But Rick knew the truth. Her sinking had surfaced for him the remembrance of plunging through the cold and amniotic folds of the lake

ten years earlier. The dimming of the world above had been a fading light in his brain as his consciousness fled and the waters dilated beneath him.

He considered this now. He never spoke of it, but those moments had been the most peaceful of his life. And now a slow dream floated where the waters darkened, and the dream called him, but it was not the call, it was his willingness to answer it that continued to dismay him. It had been a stranger who saved Melissa today, someone standing beside Rick who leaped into the lake as he stood gawking at his wife's receding face, someone else who pulled her to the surface.

"Coffee?" he called pleasantly. There was no answer from the next room. Rick hung his head. Then he began to make the coffee. When the machine was bubbling along nicely, he went to the door and looked across the living room. Melissa was sitting in the couch, her long legs drawn up under her. Rick was struck again with her beauty and thought he would never get used to it. "I'm making some coffee," he said. She looked up.

"Let's say I was a perfect stranger and fell into the lake. Would you have jumped in?" she said.

"Dear God," he said, "yes. It's a simple reflex then. You have nothing to lose." He had a sudden, bright idea. "There's no real risk of failure then," he said quickly, "don't you see? You try, and that's all you can do. No blame if you fail." She was nodding at him with an odd little smile playing on her lips. He began to feel a little queasy. "But if it's someone who means the world to you," he plunged on, "and you fail, you never get over that fact, that you did not come through for someone you loved and who depended on you. A stranger would just be grateful that you tried." He looked at her hopefully. He walked across the room and knelt down at her knees. "It would have been enough just to have tried."

"It's too close to home, sweetheart," he went on, "when you know the person." He made his voice somber. "When they sent us on special assignment, in the service, they'd pair us up so there would be no

emotional compromise, so there would be detachment and clarity in action. So you could weigh the risks and not compromise the mission; so you could act sensibly. With no hesitation."

"Act sensibly," she said with a brittle little laugh as she rolled her eyes. Rick realized he'd brought out the special assignment story too many times. "And if it had been someone else and you'd jumped after them and drowned, where would that leave me, besides standing on deck watching you disappear?" Rick looked at her blankly. "This isn't about you, you self-indulgent son-of-a-bitch," she said, suddenly vicious. "Can't you get that through your head?" She looked at him hard. "But nice try, Slick." Rick looked back. She was staring directly into his eyes, searching for something, and he saw in hers the reflection of a stranger looking back at him. Well, he thought, he had married her because she was smarter than he was, and she didn't let him get away very much. "What if we had a child, and it had fallen overboard?" she said. "What if it had been one of our children?" she said. "You've been telling me you want to have kids." In spite of himself, Rick could feel his mouth drop open.

"What?" he said. Then she stood up.

"I'm going to take a bath," she said. "If we'd had kids, and one of them had fallen overboard and you'd stood there and watched, I'd want to stick a knife into you!" Rick looked up at her, dismayed. "And watch you squirm," she finished. Then she slapped him hard across the face. Rick sank back into the sofa, raised his hand to his cheek, and watched her walk out of the room.

"Jesus, Melissa," he said to her back. His face throbbed. "How can you say that? Where did that come from?" But he was beginning to see where it came from and realized it had been there the whole time—and her seeing what he didn't, that had been there too. His vision had been locked in close in to himself. Children! He'd been seeing himself first and then his wife in relation to him, but she'd had a picture that hadn't had herself as the center

of it. A family would not revolve around her; the family would be the center and she would revolve around it like a mothering satellite, and it suddenly became clear to him: that's the way a parent had to think.

He watched her disappear from the room. "Dear God," he said, and the rage that had begun to build with the slap ebbed.

How could he tell her that for a brief instant he'd envied her descent, had wanted suddenly, impossibly, to switch places with her and ride the smooth folds down to that calm interface between the worlds, a place where *is* and *is not* flowed imperceptibly together? And it wasn't that he desired extinction; quite the opposite, it was the moment of *satori* he craved, because he had never forgotten the feeling of bliss, of freedom, of letting go that had come in that instant of fading consciousness. He'd seen more completely then than ever before; he had owned his life fully for the first time, had recognized its wholeness, had been satisfied with it as though it were, after all, an object he'd, quite consciously on some fundamental level, created. He had, he supposed now, as his face throbbed, been as close to "god-consciousness" as possible, floating like an embryo in the lake. But just as his physical vision fluttered off like a dark moth, and the colors, he thought, dear God the colors! had stood naked and irresistible before him, hands had grabbed his slack shoulders and pulled him up out of that blooming landscape. The inner light, flooding him with cold, bright realizations of hard angles and soft curves intersecting in new meanings, faded and was lost. He'd awakened lying on the deck of a boat, looking up into a circle of faces murmuring how lucky he was. Since then, he'd stood like Lazarus with a foot in each world, and that vision floated like a ripening egg suspended beneath the waves of the lake, waiting.

Then Rick thought of the dark hours when he and Melissa had lain awake nested in the thick blanket of each other's whispers, keeping the nights at bay. They'd been his favorite times, and now seemed to stretch into the past like a string of faintly twinkling lights in the darkness. Perhaps

an end had come to the whisperings, he thought. She was his wife, and he'd failed her in some essential way. He'd been a mystic when she'd wanted a hero.

"I love you, Melissa," he said to the empty room.

Rick tried to stop thinking, but it was useless. He could hear her drawing a bath upstairs. He got up and walked back into the kitchen and stood at the sink. He looked out the kitchen window into the night. His reflection stared back at him. He shivered. Melissa's wine glass stood on the counter, untouched. Rick picked it up and drank the wine.

Upstairs she would be undressing, stepping into the hot water, easing down into the water's embrace. It would be very different than the lake, Rick thought. It was volume and mass that gave the lake the sort of presence and resonance that it had. With size came complexity and space for the illusion of spirit and volition to inhabit. Big lakes, and mountains, and the sea, seemed almost to contain volition.

Water in a bathtub was very different, and yet people had drowned in their baths.

Rick thought back to the cab ride and Melissa smelling like a mermaid, livid in the seat beside him.

"I could have drowned," she'd said. He'd looked at her mouth.

"I know," he'd said. She'd looked out the window into the night.

"My God, I would have thought you'd come after me," she'd said.

"I wanted to," he'd said. "I never would have gotten over losing you."

"I'm the one who wouldn't have gotten over it, you fool," she'd said.

"This isn't about you, you stupid ass." Then she'd buried her face in her hands and sobbed. It had been a long, ragged sound that went straight to Rick's belly. He'd grunted as though the wind had been knocked out of him. Then her shoulders shook, and she'd cried, emptying herself.

"Hell," he said now, standing at the sink and rubbing his face, "it wasn't as though I didn't want to jump in after you, for chrissakes." Then he walked back into the living room.

She would leave him now, he thought, and it was hard to imagine living without her. He reached out and felt the warmth spot on the couch where she'd been sitting.

He turned and walked upstairs, crossed the hall, and stood outside the bathroom door. Melissa had left it ajar to prevent the room from steaming up. He rested one hand on the doorknob, rubbed his cheek with the other where she had slapped him, and narrowed his eyes. What if she left him? How could he stop her now? He had never seen her so angry. Earlier that day, he might have gone down with her, and they'd be together forever. That was a stupid thought. He shook his head. But he hadn't trusted himself to save her.

She would be torpid in the tub. He pushed the door quietly. He would cross the room slowly, quietly and her eyes would remain closed. If he pushed her under the water, her eyes would open, wide and blue, staring up at him startled. If he held her under long enough, they would remain open afterwards, looking up even more sightlessly than they had in the lake, and he would sit beside her on the edge of the tub and hold her hand. She would be very beautiful and would never leave him. He would remember her like that, her flesh pink from the warm water, her lips parted slightly as though in astonishment. He would smile down at her. She would be relaxed and going nowhere. Her long legs would be reposed, the tight taper of her thighs utterly relaxed, cradling the dark triangle of her mons, the soft mound of her belly dimpling above it into the navel and then the plexus rising over the ribs and her smooth skin stretched like a living tent topped by small breasts and their ruddy puckers, the skin descending then to the hollow of her throat and her neck supporting her lovely head,

crowned now with fine filaments of long, black hair fanned out like sea coral in the bath water.

Soon, he would think as he sat there, he would have to leave her and make a telephone call. But now, he would think, she was very beautiful and she was relaxed and going nowhere and the water was warm.

Rick pushed open the door and stepped into the room. Melissa opened her eyes and looked at him. He walked over to the tub and sat down on the edge of it. He smiled and took a deep breath and placed his hand on her head and ran the hair through his fingers.

"You're very beautiful," he said.

"You've been obsessing again," she said, "I can see it in your eyes." He raised one corner of his mouth and looked at her. The simple truth was he did not want to lose her.

"I don't want to lose you," he said. She looked at him, startled. Then she laughed, and he watched her lips and Rick felt something very deep inside him shift and ease. The tip of her tongue pressed against her lower teeth when she laughed. Rick did not want to lose that either. Then she stopped and opened her mouth to speak. Her tongue stayed tight against her bottom teeth and she paused with her mouth open, a small, tense hesitation that indicated that what she was about to say was deliberate, important, and this was a habit of hers that Rick loved very much and wanted always to see.

"Sweetheart," she said, "stop brooding. This isn't about you." She reached up and tapped his head. Rick sat back and took a deep breath. "I want you to be here, with me, with the living, and not lost in your head," she said. Rick looked around the room. "And I don't want you jumping into the water after strangers," she finished. She moved her hand and rested it lightly on the soft swell of her belly and tapped it lightly. "Save your heroics for us," she said. "For *us*."

Rick stared at her hand. The air around him was moist and steamy, thick with the heavy scent of her bath oil. He inhaled slowly. Steam and fog were the real interface between water and air, he thought, right here, in their own bathroom. The steam carried the perfume of the bath oil to him as it mingled with Melissa's chemistry, Rick thought, changed and unique and he thought that smell was the oldest of the senses and ran deepest and lasted longest. It was alchemy, he thought. Melissa was alchemy incarnate, changing invisibly before him. She was more full of life than he'd imagined.

He was not looking at her lips now, not looking for signs. He stared at her hand resting on the small mound of her belly. "Jesus," he said, "yes." He stroked her hair. Then he brought a handful up to his face and breathed through it and groaned, pushing down the dark thoughts that swam up. "What do you think about a vacation, a small trip south to California, to Napa, where the air is dry and the land is wonderfully parched, and the grapes are the best in the world." He looked down at her long, cradling fingers. "I need to dry out," he said. "I need some sunshine. We need some sunshine," he added. Melissa drew her legs up and prepared to get out of the tub. Rick stood and stepped back, reaching for her towel. As she stepped out of the tub, she slipped, and a small cry of dismay escaped her lips in her falling. With a speed that surprised him, Rick's hands flashed out and grabbed her, holding her up above the hard edge of the tub. Her blue eyes were fixed on his and did not waver. Rick thought that they seemed very deep, as deep as he could ever want anything to be.

"I've got you," he said, and her arms were tight around him.

Fire and Ice

Rick Hill lay in bed beside the fire and listened to the frozen grass outside bend under Randi's feet as she circled the house to reach the glass doors of the basement flat. Each blade of grass was sheathed in ice, and the blades crunched as she walked over them. She was earlier than usual, and the morning was still dark, but he knew the lawn was pale with frost and he knew her footprints would leave a dark trail behind her, leading out of the shadows and down the hill to the apartment. The world outside was monochromatic through the glass, black and white in the night, and the thin fog that hugged the ground would eddy around her ankles, and Rick worried about it because she wore no socks in her slippers when she came to him. He looked around the room, now bathed in the soft orange glow from the fire, then he saw her outline against the glass. She slid the door open, stepped inside and pulled her shirt over her head in an easy motion that lifted her red hair into the air. Then she released her belt, stepped out of her pants, and walked across the room to the futon on the floor where Rick waited. Her hair caught the light from the coals and her skin lit with an orange glow. The diamond in her wedding ring was a cold fire on her finger. Her hips rocked smoothly as she walked, cradling the bright triangle of her mons, and her breasts swayed to the rhythm of her legs. She bent, lifted the sheets and slid under them.

"Hi, you," she said.

"Hi," said Rick. He did not say anything else until she was warm. They lay on their sides with their lips touching. Rick inhaled: Randi's scent was tinged with an overlay of sharp ozone from the cold November morning. She moved in against him, slid her arms around him, tightened, and sighed, deeply. Rick pulled her close and just pressed his nose into her skin below her ear where the musky smell of her sleep still lingered, and her fine hair fell down over him.

"Hello," he whispered, and closed his eyes.

"I was on my way to yoga class," she said, "but wanted to snuggle."

"How was your day yesterday?" he said.

"Good," she said. "Mmm, you're so warm."

"Tell me what you did," he said. She spoke into his mouth then and held her eyes closed as she whispered, and he spoke back against her mouth as though they spoke a sort of Braille with their lips. Then he closed his eyes too, and the blue-gray light of the morning pried away the night while they talked and filtered in through his eyelids.

Rick had planned on not falling in love with anyone for a long time yet, and had hoped to travel and be in the world. He'd been thinking about living abroad. Now he was thinking instead of a woman who was married and about her children who were nine and twelve and very present in her life, and he was thinking how much he missed raising his own boys who were grown and gone and rarely called. Now he lay in bed holding Randi and he wondered if she would think the better of what she was doing and telephone at some point to say that for the sake of her family she was calling it off. She had occasionally whispered of "reality," and Rick knew not only the sound of that word but also the feel of it. He knew the movement of her lips saying it against his. The word had a very palpable nap to it.

"Reality," he whispered.

"Shhh." As he lay in her arms his heart eased. He lay quietly holding her tightly; nothing else mattered. It was useless to try to put it into words. He just liked to have her face very close as he studied the freckles on her lips and kissed them one at a time, and he liked that she liked that too. Now his nose and lips brushed hers lightly, and she whispered about her day as though it were a secret between them, and he was very happy. Then she folded him in her arms and pulled his head down to her bosom and held him.

"You're still cold," he said. "And you're early this morning."

"I had a bad dream," she said. Rick wrapped his arms around her and pulled her closer. She said, "I had a bad dream at 4:30 and needed you." Rick raised his head to look at her, then at the clock. It was 4:46 a.m. He pictured her waking up in bed beside her husband and needing to drive across town in order to be comforted. Then he put his hand behind her head and ran his fingers into her hair. Slowly, he guided her face into the hollow of his neck and shoulders.

"Tell me about your dream," he said.

As he listened, Rick remembered one October morning when she had not arrived and had sent no note about it. He'd thought at the time that she could have slept late, but that had not explained the absence of a note the night before. At the time he'd thought that she may have had sex with her husband and did not have the ambition to shower in the morning to remove the evidence before coming to him, Rick, in the morning. He'd suspected the worst and had not liked to think about that because he'd known he was in an untenable position: he felt too strongly about a woman who was another man's wife and who would stay that way for the foreseeable future. He did not like sharing the woman he loved. It had been bearable for a while when he had not been in love with her, but that had lasted for only about two weeks.

The sky was lightening now outside the big window as Randi talked about her dream. Rick watched the clouds take shape and pulled the blanket around his chin.

He loved Randi like he had never loved another woman, but the fact was he did not entirely trust her. The circumstances of their relationship had set a precedent of deception and betrayal. She was very good at it. She'd had an affair before Rick with a man she'd met through the Internet and who lived across the country. Rick could not imagine how in God's name she had managed that. And on that morning when she had not

arrived, he'd thought that she could have been with another man even then, just as she had been with Rick, and she could have told Rick later she had overslept and he would believe her, just as her husband had believed her when she'd told him she went to Yoga class at six am and had been lying in Rick's arms.

He had asked for this. He could blame no one else. He was not proud of himself. He had been passive at first, had simply allowed it to happen. He was feeling all the anguish and fears that he had vowed to stay away from when he'd decided not become emotionally involved again, but he had never been very smart about taking his own advice, and had been bulls-eyed pretty neatly.

Knowing this did not make his anguish any less.

On the other hand, she had made him very happy. She had shown him passion and love and he would not want to change any of that. He was more aware of his own nature now; she had done that and he loved her very much for it. She had shown him what could be real, even if it turned out not to real in this situation. It had been real enough to him to want the whole thing she'd represented and not to settle for less in spite of the icy fear that knifed him every time he thought about losing her.

And he'd known that October morning that she'd likely had very good reasons for not being there. He'd known she loved him very much too, and he'd known he was indulging in his own insecurity and fears. That he would so quickly suspect her bothered him, and the suspicions themselves were a torment. He was not guiltless in the deception of the affair, and knew that his suspicions of her were little more than an admission of his own untrustworthiness. He did not like this in himself. She would have been hurt if she'd known. She would still be hurt. She had been taking a big chance in being with him as often as she had, and she was risking a great deal. He was being selfish, lying in bed distrusting her and feeling sorry for himself even now as she recounted her dream. He was afraid of losing her,

and afraid of betrayal. He knew he was even being dishonest in his presence with her now.

Rick murmured softly as he lay beside her now to let her think he was still listening. He nestled in closer to her, but his mind moved back to that particular morning.

Rick had gotten up and showered. When he was dry he had walked into the bedroom closet, selected a pair of Khaki Dockers and pulled them on. Then he'd gone into the living room where the futon was and walked to his desk. As he'd crossed the room, the door had opened and Randi had stepped in. She'd looked at him silently.

"What are you doing here?" Rick had said. He'd looked at the clock. It had been eight-fifteen.

"I'm sick," she'd said.

"What about work?" Rick had said.

"I canceled work," she'd said. "I've been throwing up all night." She had slipped out of her clothes and walked to the bed. Then she'd jumped under the blanket and pulled it up to her eyes. "I wanted you to know what was happening. I started throwing up yesterday afternoon. I'm sick." Rick had looked at her. There were dark circles under her eyes. She'd beckoned him with her finger. "Come over here," she'd said. Rick had walked over to the bed and sat down beside her. He had put his arms around her and held her tight. "I was asleep when you called yesterday afternoon, and that's why I sounded odd."

"I have to go to work," Rick had said.

"I know. I just wanted to come over here and lie in your bed for an hour or so, and smell you, and rest."

"Good," he'd said.

"I wanted to call you at three a.m. but didn't want to wake you."

"I was awake," Rick had said. "You should have called."

"I don't want to be a crybaby and call you in the middle of the night because I'm sick."

"You should call. I want you to always call. Promise me."

"I promise."

"Promise"

"I do."

"Good," he'd said. He was exhausted.

"You seem distant," Randi had said.

"I'm tired," Rick had said. "I only got three hour's sleep."

"It seems like it's more than that. Kiss me." Rick had leaned down and kissed her mouth. "You might catch my bug," she'd said.

"How's your stomach now?" he'd said.

"Better. And I have no fever. It seems to be going away."

"Food poisoning," Rick had said.

"What?"

"Food poisoning. It has all the symptoms of flu but goes away in twenty-four hours. Flu doesn't. There isn't a twenty-four hour flu. It's usually food poisoning."

"Oh."

"I've got to leave."

"Go," she'd said. "I'll lie here for an hour or so. Kiss me then." Rick had kissed her again.

"I am a little distant," he'd said. "I pulled back so I won't get hurt. I'll be fine. It was all me. My imagination. I'm a mutt."

"I love you, mutt," she'd said. "Don't be distant. Come back. Don't go away."

"I'll be fine," he had said. "I'm not going anywhere."

"I love you," she'd said. "Now go. You'll be late."

"I don't want to lose you."

"I'll come by your office later."

"I wasn't going to be there. Then you would have worried and come back and I would have gone to the bar at five, and you'd have been in a tizzy."

"Why?"

"Because I was being a mutt. I'll be at the office when you come by at lunch."

"Kiss me. Now go. You really will be late." Rick had stood and gone to the bedroom to dress. He'd pulled on a black sweater and pulled his blue blazer from a hanger. Then he'd walked back to Randi, knelt, and hugged her.

"See you in a couple of hours," he'd said. "What am I going to do? I'm hooked on you."

"Good," she'd said.

Now Rick looked out into the February morning and sighed. Then he became aware of the silence.

"What does it mean?" Randi said. She had finished telling him her dream, and Rick realized he was back in the present and had missed much of what she had been saying. He lifted his hand to her face and cupped her cheek.

"I'm not sure," he said. "But you're here now, and it's all right."

"You take such good care of me," she said. Rick pulled her closer.

"No," he said, "I'm still a mutt."

"I love you, mutt," she said. Rick laughed and took her hand in his and squeezed. He felt the ring on her third finger, a plain gold band that he'd given her a month ago. She wore it always.

"How do you get away with wearing this?" he asked.

"He hasn't noticed. He never notices anything. He hasn't noticed the earrings you gave me, or the two Valentine bracelets from you with hearts

that I wear every day. I'm invisible to him. He hasn't said a word to me in three days."

"I don't understand that. I can't keep my eyes off you."

"You love me," she said.

"What's the matter with him?"

"He says I ruined his life. That he was heading for the good life until he got me pregnant."

"That was twelve years ago for God's sake! You were only nineteen years old. How can he say you ruined his life when he was ten years older than you and should have known better?"

"Yesterday he lost his temper in front of the boys and said that whatever it was that had triggered his outburst was the second biggest mistake of his life. Then Michael piped in and said, 'Was marrying Mommy the first biggest mistake?'"

"My God," said Rick. "Leave him and come to me," he said.

"I can't," she said.

"I'm running out of patience. We have a problem."

"We have a problem all right," she said, "but it's not the one you think it is."

"What is it?"

"You underestimate my protective instincts. If this thing begins to threaten my family, I'll be gone."

"I don't want it to threaten your family," said Rick. "I know you'd leave. You've said that from the beginning." He looked at her face. She looked back, and then her hand went to her mouth. Through her fingers, Rick could see her chin tremble.

"But I don't know if I'm strong enough to leave you," she said. Rick thought of the boys, and how they would never know about this, about how he and Randi would give up what they had so that her sons could grow up in a home that had not been broken. Hearts were another matter.

"The boys have to come first," he said. It would be a loveless home, though he knew that did not justify what he was doing.

"Yes," she said. "I'm in this marriage for the long haul. I've said that from the beginning."

"I know," said Rick, "and I'll support you all the way." And though he knew he couldn't live like this for much longer, he could not see his way out of it. He felt suddenly very tired.

"I love you," she said.

"I know," said Rick.

"You're the love of my life," she said, "my center. You complete me."

He reached out and drew her close, pulling her head under his chin against his shoulder. He breathed in the scent of her hair. "I know that," he said.

"Do you?" she asked.

"Yes," he said, "and you're the love of my life too. You know that."

"Yes," she said, and Rick thought that if he lost her he would miss her very much and for a long time.

It was light now. The sun was rising over the trees.

"I have to go," she said. "I have to be at work soon."

"Yes," said Rick, "but I want you to stay."

"I never want to leave," she said. Then she sat up and sighed. Rick ran his hand up and down her back.

"How are we going to work this out?" he said.

"I don't know. Something will happen."

"Mmm," he said. He was unsure of her again. Then she stood and walked over to the clothes on the floor. She faced him as she dressed and shared the process. She never turned her back when she dressed and she stayed open to him. Rick loved this in her. When she was ready, Rick stood and walked over to her. He hugged her tightly and she pulled him hard against her and kissed him. Then she turned and opened the door.

"I'll call in an hour."

"Good," he said, and she stepped outside. Rick leaned out into the morning and the cold air was sharp and good on his skin. He could smell the ozone again.

"You'll freeze," she said. Then she laughed at his nakedness. "Don't let anybody see you."

"I like the cold," he said, and he watched her walk across the lawn to the corner of the house. She turned back to him there and looked him straight in the eyes and blew him a kiss. He waved. Then she was gone, and Rick looked at the spot where she had disappeared, her red hair like an afterimage in the air, and then he looked down at her footprints in the grass, the two sets very clear now, one coming and the other going, one set straight and true and leading purposefully toward his door. Rick nodded, and suddenly it became clear to him. The first rays of the sun touched the frost and the frost caught the light on each blade of grass and lit the lawn with a white fire that outlined each dark green footprint that Randi had left, and Rick stood leaning against the doorjamb looking at the two directions of the trails as the sun lifted a little more and the frost became too bright to look at. But through the glare he could see the colors of the prism scattered like tiny rainbows on the grass, and he thought "Rainbow, rainbow, rainbow," and he thought of Randi in that white and icy light with her fiery red hair and pale skin, and he thought of the fire still burning behind him by the bed, and the bed still fragrant from her, still holding her heat.

When the Bright Rain Falls

It was the middle of summer, and Rick Hill was glad to see the lake. He was glad to fish it, too, although it was not his home anymore and the rocks were treacherous because the water was low. The beacon lights were exposed down to their pitted footings and rode the rocks like barnacles. Beds of pike grass grew in the shallows there, and northern pike moved slowly through the grass, but where the water was deep and the rocky outcroppings cooled the sandy bottom, the pickerel waited in the shade.

Rick glanced at Jimmy on the seat beside him, then eased the boat around to the west side of the rock so he could approach it with the morning sun in his face.

"Why are we going around to this side, Dad?" Jimmy asked.

"I want to keep the sun between us and these little islands so when the boat comes to the shallows the shadow won't move ahead of us and drive the fish to cover," Rick said.

"Why are they afraid of shadows?" asked Jimmy.

"Because the lake's shallow and there are too many fishermen," said Rick. "The pickerel get skittish." Jimmy became still and peered into the water. Rick let up on the throttle and the engine died. He lifted the anchor and lowered it quickly and quietly, careful to avoid knocking the cedar hull. The rope burned his hands slightly and it was a good feeling.

He reached for the tackle and prepared Jimmy's line, rummaging through the old box, the paint flaked and the trays loose now, selecting an old red-and-white float that had been his when he was a boy. He frowned at the scarred plastic, surprised his father had kept it, attached it to Jimmy's line two yards from the end, opened a jar of fish eggs, ran the weighted hook through three of them, and handed the weighted hook to Jimmy.

"That should be about right," he said. "Try it."

"Thanks." Jimmy swung the rod back sideways, then forward, sending the hook six feet away into the water. Rick nodded his satisfaction, then reached back into the tackle box and selected a thick, nickel lure. The spoon was short, wide, with two faceted eyes cut from red glass, and trailed a fine, triple hook that had never caught a fish but had been his father's favorite when they'd lived further north on the Abitibi River. Now Rick didn't care about luck; he liked the lure's familiarity and he thought again about the plastic float his father had kept and never used. He closed the tackle box. The paint had been a new muted green once, and Rick remembered that his father had been very proud of the box and of the tight trays that moved smoothly and quietly.

Rick cast far out to the rocks and the cool holes waiting there.

"Why can't I cast too?" Jimmy said.

"No reason," said Rick. "Just thought you'd like to take it easy. I used to have good luck with that float."

"I don't use the float. Grandpa taught me how to cast."

"Well then, you must be pretty good. But the boat's small, so how about letting me cast for a while, and then we can switch?"

"You always give me a float," Jimmy said.

"I like both," said Rick. "I like to sit and think about the fish circling the bait down below trying to decide what to do. It gives me a chance to think too."

"But you get to choose." Jimmy wasn't going to let him off so easily, Rick thought. He liked that, and it was new feeling.

"Mmm. Not always. Sometimes you have to cast. Even if you'd rather not."

"Says who?"

Rick laughed. "I guess it's what's expected."

"Why?"

"Probably for no good reason." Rick snapped the rod behind his head

and cast again. The line unwound with a faint, high song, comfortable and good in his ear. The spoon carved a loose spinning arc towards the deep water. The glass gleamed red, and when the spoon hit the water with a heavy splash, Rick smiled. He eased the tension and reeled the line in, thinking about all the fishing lures lost in the lake over the years, populating the rocks and weeds like dim ghosts in shafts of light as the lake's silt settled down on them. Each one a fisherman's hope. Rick shook off the thought and glanced at Jimmy. Jimmy met his eyes, then turned his attention to his own red-and-white float bobbing alongside the boat.

"I wish Mom were here," he said.

"So do I," said Rick. "I wish we were all together again." Then he cast, sending the spoon higher and further. *Bite, dammit!* he thought, and let his mind go back to the trip getting here.

He had come up through the flat country of southern Ontario and driven into the rolling northland that caught the small lakes between its hot hills and hollows and held them low and still beneath surfaces like black glass. Then the highway rose over the Barry escarpment, and the woodlands of oak and maple gave way to the northern pine forest until the country fell away into the basin that held Lake Nipissing, and was open all the way to the horizons with conifers and occasional stands of swamp aspen or birch. Now it was hot and bright in the summer, but in autumn the fields rolled out around farms stubbled in the rain and pungent with fallen leaves. In September the snow came, and the winters were cold for a long time, until April brought the colorful little towns springing up through the melting snow like crocuses along the roads, and the acrid tang of tree buds burst in the warm rain.

Rick had been away from northern Ontario for a long time but he was always aware of the seasons when he came back. When he was a boy, it had been unspoiled country all the way north, and he had driven south over the road to Toronto many times with Jimmy's mother laughing in the seat

beside him. Rick thought now of the smile she'd had when she was seventeen. Her right front tooth had been chipped on the inside corner, and he'd liked that because it was unusual and gave her a candid sort of charm.

"She likes the lake," said Jimmy now. "We always visit Grandpa when we come up here, but we don't go fishing." Rick nodded.

"How did he teach you to cast?" Rick said.

"From the dock. He taught mom too. She wasn't very good, but she laughed a lot."

She had laughed very much and for a long time once, but she had not smiled two mornings ago when he'd picked Jimmy up to bring him here. She'd had the bags packed and on the front steps as Rick approached over the lawn. Her new husband stood quietly in the doorway beside her. Then Rick and Jimmy had driven north, and Jimmy sat quietly in the seat beside him watching the nameless little towns roll by outside the car windows while Rick looked ahead over the winding road and considered the fact that the tooth had been repaired and he had wished that Jimmy was more vocal.

Now he cast again and again into the lake, angrily snapping the tip of his rod like a whip for more distance. The spoon was too heavy for the light pole, but he didn't let up. He looked over the lake toward the far shore. Small, round domes of pink granite rose smoothly out of the lake. The water was clear and plentiful and married the rocks in very particular ways that made the country hard to forget. Wherever there was water there was granite in the water and out of it, below it and above it, and where the granite did not stretch away to the horizon, it seemed the water did.

Rick looked over at his son. Jimmy had his mother's brown eyes and her strong line along the chin, but he had Rick's disposition and Rick's father's watchfulness. Rick tugged his line gently as he reeled it in and looked down into the water. *Come on*, he thought, *bite*. He visualized the fish easing out of the shadows into the light, following the lure up into the clear water.

He imagined the pickerel with its mouth open and gills flared, ready to strike. *Come on*, he thought, *goddamn it all, anyway*. He cleared his throat.

"Any bites?" he asked.

"No," said Jimmy. "Maybe a nibble."

"Fishing is all about patience," said Rick. "The secret is not to fret. Just ease into the rhythm of the fish." Jimmy nodded. Rick thought about the fish hovering over the sandy bottom, keeping their positions with their fins wavering, feeling the pull of the waves on the surface high above them as they hung in the thick silence. "It's a different sort of time down there," he said, "below the surface." He wasn't quite sure what he meant by that, and looked away to the horizon, casting the lure far out into the lake again. "Do you know what I mean?" he finished.

"Sure, I guess," said Jimmy, looking down his line into the water. "But Dad?"

"Yes?"

"They're just not biting."

"You're right," said Rick, and laughed. "We're not having any luck. Shall we try further out on the lake?"

"Sure," said Jimmy.

"Let's go." Rick reeled in the lures. "Sometimes a place will work, and sometimes it won't."

"It's just luck, right?" said Jimmy.

"Sometimes that all it is. But sometimes there's more to it."

"You have to trust your instincts, right?"

"Well," said Rick, "yes. You have to go with that."

"Dad?"

"Yes?"

"Doesn't Grandpa know that about fishing?"

"He knows it about other things," said Rick.

"Grandpa told me you make your own luck."

"Sometimes," said Rick. "Often you do. I'd hate to think it was all the time." He looked up over the lake as he secured the rods and tackle. It was quiet and the morning was cool. Earlier, a wispy fog hovered over the water, but it had dissipated as soon as the sun had risen. "Let me think about it."

"Why doesn't Grandpa ever fish?"

"He fished a lot, once," said Rick, "but he doesn't enjoy it anymore."

"He likes to eat them, though."

"He does, doesn't he?" Rick laughed.

"He fusses too much when he comes in the boat," said Jimmy.

"Well," said Rick, "he's uneasy in the boat now, and he prefers rivers." But his father had never been an avid fisherman. He'd had bad luck on the water and with his tackle. He'd lost his favorite hunting knife when he'd dropped it while fishing in the Abitibi River with five other men. Three years later, he'd fished it up again in front of the same men with the leather handle ruined and the blade rusted. It was a sort of hex he'd had when he was around people and on the water. And then, once, in front of several families on a picnic, Rick had been in the boat and pulled the starter cord on the outboard. He'd forgotten to put the motor in neutral. It had caught and the boat lurched forward, pitching him into the river. The boat roared off into the far bank as Rick thrashed in the water. He'd begun swimming to the shore and brought up a handful of weeds. Then he stood up. The water had been only up to his waist. Everyone had laughed. He'd looked up at his father standing silently on the shore, then turned without a word towards the boat and walked across the shallows to get it. "Like father, like son," someone had said. Rick had known he and his father were embarrassed for and by each other, and that was something that would not change. Perhaps, Rick thought now, even though they loved each other, they had identified with one another too much.

"Why is he uneasy?" asked Jimmy now.

"He wasn't always that way. He was better in the woods. Then he was sure of himself. When I was your age, he was confident and graceful, and a powerful swimmer. He had wonderful blue eyes and perfect teeth. He seemed fearless to me. He was a wonderful shot too, and could keep a can in the air with a lever-action rifle," Rick said.

"Just like the movies. A marksman."

"Yes," said Rick. "He had an old Marlin 32-40. It was a beautiful rifle with a walnut stock that was dark from all the years he'd had it. An orange flame leapt from the barrel when the gun was fired. That always impressed me. Once I threw a can in the air and grandpa shot it as soon as it touched the ground. The can spun back into the air and he worked the lever and shot the can every time it touched the ground. He never missed. Then he looked at me and laughed out loud. I didn't know he could shoot like that. He used to be full of surprises."

"How did he learn to shoot like that?" Jimmy asked.

"He never really talked about it," said Rick. "But he had been in the Fusiliers and the army had trained him to shoot."

"Was he a sniper?"

"He never talked about it. He was pretty young when he joined the army, probably 18 or so. Hard to imagine what those times were like. Are you all right with that?"

"Sure," said Jimmy.

It was easier to condemn his father than it would have been to condemn someone his own age, or his son's, for the same thing, but Rick could not help it. He could not help it though he knew that he would have done the same thing rather than slog about with a gang of noisy men to be shot at because of another man's inability to be silent. He would have chosen to die alone in his own solitude, responsible only for himself and for his own mistakes.

It seemed as though at times he and his father had been at war for the same qualities in each other's personality but at the same time, Rick loved to see those shared qualities in Jimmy. Rick put his forehead in his hand and looked into the water.

Jeez," he said.

"Are you okay, Dad?" Jimmy asked.

"Yeah," said Rick. And it suddenly became clear to him that what he hated in his father were the qualities he hated in himself first, and he realized that the way back to his father was through Jimmy. As long as he could not forgive himself, he could never forgive his father for making him in his image and he would lose his son because in spite of what he'd thought about taking responsibility for himself, he, Rick, never really had. Jimmy was proof of that because Rick was losing him.

"Did he just get old?"

"I think it was more than that," said Rick. "Sometimes you lose your confidence, or something happens to make you stop believing in yourself, and then you stop being active. It never happened to your great-grandfather, but it happened with Dad as he got older."

"You mean Grandpa."

"Uh-huh."

"Will it happen to you?" asked Jimmy.

"We all get old," said Rick.

"I mean the other part," said Jimmy.

"I hope not," said Rick.

"I'll never let it happen to me," said Jimmy. Rick looked out over the lake.

"Good," he said.

"And if it happens to you, I won't leave you behind. I'll help you and be fearless too."

"You'll be a great help," said Rick. "I can see that even now," and he looked at Jimmy. But Rick knew the truth. It hadn't been just age. He stood up to start the motor, and as he turned, he slipped on a slick patch where the water had pooled on the floorboards. He sat down hard on the seat and his breath exploded out of him. "Jesus!" he said. He felt his face get hot, and looked quickly at Jimmy who was watching carefully. "Oops," said Rick. Jimmy looked away. Rick stood again, checked to see that the moor was in neutral, started it, and headed towards a small island in the deeper water of the lake feeling all the while that he never felt more like his father than when he'd made the same kinds of mistakes.

They approached the island from the west again, and Rick lowered the anchor. As the boat slowed, he peered down into the water. It was like looking through a sheet of old, imperfect glass. The pike grass covered parts of the sandy bottom, and at the rock ledges the water deepened quickly and darkened to a deep, tea-brown. It was very still down there, and the weeds did not move. The fish would be waiting in the thickest of them, with only their gills moving and their ventral fins pulsing slightly to maintain their position until a perch ventured too far from its rocky cover. Rick tossed Jimmy's hook out over the ledge to the deeper water where the pickerel would be.

Jimmy was looking down into the water, leaning over the side of the boat, peering towards the weed-tops just visible six feet below. He'd put his hand in the lake to the wrist, and moved it slowly back and forth. Rick looked up; it was still early morning, and the lake was quiet. He handed the rod to Jimmy.

"I want to cast," Jimmy said.

"Okay," said Rick. "It's deeper here. Maybe we'll have better luck," and he took over the float. Jimmy watched it ride the little waves, but did not pick up the casting rod. Together they watched the old red-and-white bob on the surface of the clear water. Finally, Rick reached into the pack under

the seat, pulled out a bologna sandwich, handed half to Jimmy, and they ate the bologna, chewing in silence, watching the small waves move. The sandwiches were good, with thick slices of meat between layers of lettuce and pickles, and hot mustard on the bread. Rick sucked the bread from his teeth. "How's the sandwich?" he said around his tongue.

"Bologna," said Jimmy. "You always make bologna sandwiches."

Rick stopped for a minute and looked at Jimmy. "What's your favorite?" he said.

"Peanut butter and honey."

Rick looked in the cooler again and rummaged through the sandwiches. "Here," he said, pulling out a separate wrapping tacky with honey. "Grandpa must have known you'd be wanting one of those."

They'd put the sandwiches together early that morning, the three of them, standing quietly side by side at the kitchen counter, happy to be packing the food and filling the thermoses with coffee and drink. The smells of toast and eggs had warmed the room, and the kitchen was comfortable in the yellow light.

"How far out are you going?" his father had asked Rick as they worked.

"I don't know. Just to the islands."

"The Manitoulins?"

"No, the rocks close in."

"Have you been to the west shore?"

"No, not in a long time."

"You and I used to boat there."

"Yes," Rick had said, "I remember."

"How long will you be gone?"

"Not long. Try not to worry." Rick had looked down at Jimmy.

"Ready?" he'd asked. Then Rick's father had walked with them down to the boat.

"Take your time," he'd said, and when Rick had looked back before disappearing around the point, his father was still standing quietly on the shore. He'd lifted his arm in a wave, and Rick had waved back.

"Grandpa's always watching," Jimmy had said.

"Yep," said Rick.

"What for?"

"For us to come back safely." Then Rick had opened up the throttle, grateful for the retreat the roar of the outboard provided. But it was good with Jimmy in the boat beside him now, and Rick watched the little waves that lay on the surface of the lake ahead of them and looked for a change in the color of the water that would indicate the rocks below, and he thought about how his father had taught him to notice the small things that you could see only when you were alone or very still. Then the small birds came out, and the big animals appeared. The wind in the trees and the reeds with the leopard frogs singing and the night crickets were more vibrant then too.

The prow hit the waves and threw up a spray like a fine, bright rain in the morning sun. Rick lifted his face into it and relished the sting of the water on his skin, the smell of the lake in his lungs. The thunder of the outboard and the crack of the wooden bow on the lake formed a bubble of noise inside which Rick formed a quiet center with his mind, like his father had taught him, and he looked out from that quiet place to the trees on the receding shore and at the sky high above and the seagulls there that followed the boat. Noticing these things was like a conversation with his father, and Rick felt a surge of quiet joy.

Rick knew that he loved his father for showing him that trick in walks and hunting—laughing suddenly after a good wing-shot—and for naming the animals and the birds as though they were familiars. He had learned from his father how to match the calmness of the inner and outer worlds. It was like moving in a dream. His father had not expressed it like that, had

never talked of inner and outer worlds. He had simply read the Thornton W. Burgess stories of Sammy Jay, Reddy Fox, Peter Rabbit, and Buster the Bear to Rick and then taken him on walks through the woods where he'd tilt his head at a scolding blue jay.

"Sammy's upset," he'd say to Rick. "Reddy Fox may be close by, looking for Peter." Or he might stop and point out sign on the path. "Buster's been here," he'd say and look closer. "Early this morning. There's a blueberry patch close by." Then they would follow the tracks back and pick berries for lunch.

Rick had not hunted because of the stories and the walks. He'd come to feel personally about the animals.

. As Rick rode the boat now, he was grateful his father had read no stories about fish. Rick looked up over the lake, then glanced down at Jimmy. He enjoyed the tackle and he liked the peace and the calmness on the water. There was little talking, and Rick often didn't care if he caught anything or not. Being in the stillness with the water and the sounds of the water and the birds was enough, and being alone in the boat with Jimmy was good too. Jimmy seemed to be able to move through the quiet into his own solitude. He had not learned it from Rick.

The seat in the boat had become uncomfortable now, and Rick realized he had been gazing into the water for a long time. He shifted and sat up. It had been easier to be at peace with the animals, he thought, than with his family. That required another sort of skill.

Now Rick crumpled up the wrappings and wiped his mouth. He watched as Jimmy ate half the sticky sandwich and re-wrapped the remainder.

"Try casting," Rick said, handing Jimmy the rod. Jimmy took it, twisted in his seat and brought the rod back over his shoulder, snapping it forward smartly and sending the lure in a high arc.

"Nice," said Rick.

"Too high," said Jimmy.

"Grandpa did a good job. I didn't know you could cast that well." Rick watched him reel in the line.

"I felt a hit."

"Probably just a snag," said Rick.

"No," said Jimmy.

"There are weeds down there," Rick said.

"There!" said Jimmy as he pulled the rod up quickly to set the hook.

"Set the hook!" said Rick, and he knew he was too late.

"I already did."

"Bring him in slowly," said Rick.

"I know, Dad. I won't lose him. You get the net."

"All right," said Rick, and he watched Jimmy bring the fish in, playing him, giving him line when he fought hard, tiring him out. "You're awfully good at this," said Rick. "I had no idea."

"You're never here," said Jimmy.

"Well," said Rick. The fish was alongside the boat now, and Rick quickly dipped the net down behind it, scooping it up. "It's a beauty. A pickerel." He looked up brightly.

"I know," said Jimmy. "You can tell by the fight what sort of fish it is."

"Oh."

"I'll bet it's twelve pounds. You thought it was snag."

"Sorry," said Rick. "You were right. Well done."

"Grandpa will be happy," Jimmy said.

"Yes," said Rick. "He did a good job teaching you," and he set the fish on the floorboards. He reached for the pliers to extract the hook.

"I can do that," said Jimmy. "Grandpa says you should always set up your own lures and unhook your own fish."

"Right," said Rick.

"You've got to finish what you start. That's what he says."

"Right," said Rick, wincing, and handed over the pliers. Then he looked overboard to the red and white float bobbing on the waves. "Watch the dorsal fin," he said.

"Dad!"

"Okay," said Rick. "I'll stop fussing."

"Where's the chain?" said Jimmy. "We need to get him back in the water and keep him fresh."

"Here," said Rick, and he thought again that the only way back to his son was through his father. "Damn," he said. Jimmy looked at him sharply.

"You'll get one too," he said. "Don't worry."

Rick laughed. "Not an eight-pounder on this little float."

"Well," said Jimmy.

"Not right here under the boat."

"Not if you keep rocking the boat and talking, Dad. You can have the rod back after I catch another fish."

"No problem," said Rick, and he watched as the float quivered once, then twice. Something small had nibbled the bait off the hook, and Rick thought about leaving it down there, bare. It seemed too heavy to bring up, like a sudden and great weight. Then he began reeling it in.

"Did you lose the bait?" said Jimmy.

"Something got it."

"You lost it; you weren't paying attention and didn't set the hook."

"You're a lot like your grandfather," said Rick.

"Thanks," said Jimmy, and looked at Rick with real appreciation. Rick brought in the float and set the empty hook on the floorboards under the seat. He watched Jimmy cast, seeing his father's style in the bent elbow, the short arc of the arm, and the quick snap of the wrist at the end of the cast. After some time, Jimmy stopped and set down the rod. He dangled his hand in the water. "No more luck here," he said.

"It's late for them to be biting now," said Rick. "What do you say we head for the far shore and have the rest of our sandwiches there on the beach? Then we can explore a bit and catch the sunset fishing."

"Sure."

Rick wished then that he'd brought a beer or two to help the day along. "Ready?" he said. Jimmy pulled his hand out of the water and settled into the seat. Rick secured the tackle, pulled in the anchor, and started the motor, careful of the slippery floorboards. He looked out over the prow. The sun was high, and a scattering of small, dark rain clouds peppered the sky. An anvil-head billowed up over the west horizon. There would be quick showers in some places, but the rain would move on and the sun would have the day. Rick was not worried. He knew the lake and felt the old confidence settle down on him. He opened the throttle slightly for more speed. The boat clove the water and the small waves hammered brightly on the wooden hull. Rick wanted to reach the far shore in plenty of time to leave again before dark. He had seldom boated on the lake at night because he worried about the rocks. But thinking about it now, it seemed odd. He had never ridden home with his son at night after a long day, yet when he was a boy it had been a frequent occurrence on the Abitibi River. It had been very special to come home like that with his father, and he had never tired of the adventure. Every time had been as good as the first, and he was struck now that he had never done anything like it with Jimmy. There had never seemed to be the time, but Rick thought now that there had really been all the time in the world.

He eased up on the throttle. Perhaps they could return later than he'd planned. He thought about the night rides on the Abitibi River on his father's knee in the rear seat beside the old Johnson 25 outboard when the hot engine had felt good beside him in the night's chill. His hand had grown numb from the vibration as it rested under his father's on the steering arm, and the water had been nappy with starlight on the river.

Tonight he and Jimmy would not be heading home like that. They would return to his father's house, but Rick had stopped thinking of it as home. He looked at Jimmy who would be returning tonight to his grandparents' house, a place he felt he belonged, but Rick remembered when it had changed for him, when he'd discovered the other thing his father was no good at: mentoring a son who had become a young man. That had climaxed when Jimmy had been born. His father had come to him when Rick had faltered at the changes a new family brought and had complained about no longer having time for himself.

"Rick, when you have children, your life is over," his father had said. "You owe everything to your wife and kids. You just buckle down and tough it out." It was the most telling betrayal Rick had ever felt. It had taken the wind out of him and undercut everything he'd believed about his father. It had been hard to think that his own life had spelled the end of his father's, that he had never suspected his father felt that way and had been bitter because of it. That was when Rick's attitude about home had changed. He had been running from his father ever since.

He was beginning to see that now. He was beginning to realize that there was more to his father's words than he'd heard, that his life was not over, it had just changed a little and expanded to include his son. It was just the end of selfishness, nothing more than that, and spending time with Jimmy this summer and taking the joy from being with him every day had shown him that. It was just the end of boyhood so that you could become a father and guide the boyhood of your own son that his father had been talking about, and Rick blinked hotly into the cool spray coming up over the prow of the boat. And the times that he had been away from his son because of the divorce clawed at his face now, tearing at the serenity he fought to keep there, and he wished his father had been a little better with words.

That had been his father's legacy for eleven years, and Rick wanted to change that now because it was not what he wanted. It was not what anybody wanted. His father had become bitter at that earlier time, and had been distant, but for all of Rick's boyhood he had been wonderful. It was when Rick became a young man that his father had wavered. Rick wished they'd never had the problem. Rick had chosen to ignore his father's loneliness even though he had been there for Rick in ways Rick had never been for Jimmy. The thought hit hard and Rick felt the wind go out of him as badly as it had once before. He knew the truth about it too; he had known it all along but had not acted on it. "Like father, like son," Rick thought.

Now Rick looked up over Lake Nippissing as the wooden hull of the boat hammered the small waves. The water ahead spread out like puckered, silver flannel. He eased up on the throttle to even out the ride. Tonight they would ride the boat home and his father would be standing at the window, watching them ride in. He would wave to signal the safe route in when he spotted the boat, and he would walk down to the shore to meet them. Rick was anxious to get back, but there was still some fishing to do. The wind was keen over the bow of the boat, and as Rick looked for the shore, he blinked rapidly. The sun was very bright on the water.

"How are you doing, Jimmy?" he called over the wind.

"My bum hurts," Jimmy yelled back. They were sitting close but shouting as though they were far apart.

"Sorry," said Rick. "Here, slide a life vest under and sit on it. Come closer. We'll slow down a bit." He slowed the boat down and reached under the seat for the vest and handed it to Jimmy. "Would you like to help steer?" he asked.

"Sure," said Jimmy.

"Then hop over and sit on my lap. Bring the vest with you." Rick held the wheel steady as he reached over. Jimmy nestled in against Rick's chest.

"This is a better idea," Rick said. Jimmy reached for the wheel and Rick slid his own hands down to guide him. "Ready?" he asked.

"Yep."

"Then let's go," said Rick, and he opened up the throttle. Jimmy's hands were firm on the wheel, and Rick covered them with his own. They were cool in his fingers, and Rick could smell the boy-scent of his son's hair. He pressed his lips down on the crown of Jimmy's head in a silent kiss, then looked up into the wind. Jimmy nestled closer in to his chest.

"Well," thought Rick, "here we are," and the lake rolled out ahead of them like wavering glass.

Across the lake, the west shore hung in the distance. Rick had boated to it often when he was Jimmy's age with the girl who had become Jimmy's mother, before her tooth had been chipped. They'd picnicked on one particular beach each time, lying on a large, blue towel on the hot sand. Rick wanted to find that beach now.

For an instant it seemed to him that the young couple might still lie on that beach across the water, and he wished that if he looked hard enough or drove fast enough he might see them. But that girl had been gone a long time. Now the woman with the chipped tooth lived in another town with another man, in a house filled with the furniture Rick had helped buy, and she'd fixed her tooth badly and ruined her smile.

The shore ahead of him wavered, distorted by the heat waves rising from the lake. The trees shimmered, and it was not at first a shore he recognized. Above it, white clouds climbed and caught the sun, bright against the blue sky.

Rick looked hard. The rocks were high and pale there, covered with a thin carpet of topsoil. Pine trees grew to the edge of the soil and leaned out towards the lake. Eventually their roots tore free of the earth and they tumbled into the water. The sand beneath the duff was soft and always eroding, falling away to form narrow beaches at the base of the rocks that

lasted until the spring melt washed the rocks clean, mixing the fine sand of the little beaches into the water and carrying away the fallen trees. It was a constant process, and the trees, stripped of bark and foliage, finally washed up on the banks further along, silver and dried by the weather. There was always plenty of driftwood, and it was good kindling, and Rick remembered the little fire he made for Jimmy's mother that day on the beach.

He scanned the shoreline for some trees to offer some shade, where he and Jimmy could stretch out with their backs cushioned on the thick duff and take out the sandwiches and look up through the pine needles to the clouds overhead. And if a blue jay landed on the limbs above them and announced their presence, he would tell Jimmy about Sammy Jay and about his father's stories.

Ahead of them on the lake, a summer sun-shower appeared, brief and quick on the water. The fine rain had caught up the sunlight, making it bright and solid in the air, and the sudden wind had caught up the rain in a golden dance over the lake. Rick swerved the boat, steering it into the rain, and laughed out loud. Jimmy looked up over his shoulder at him, startled, then cried out as the prow of the boat plunged through the shimmering, wet line. Rick eased off the throttle and let the boat drift. The fine drops whirled around their heads, and Jimmy's hair lifted in the wind against Rick's face. Rick opened his mouth and tasted his son's hair.

"It's a rainbow," Jimmy said. Rick laughed again.

"Perhaps it is," he said.

"It is, Dad. It's a rainbow touching the earth."

"It could be," said Rick. "I hadn't thought of it."

"There's a pot of gold right here," said Jimmy. He looked over the side of the boat into the lake.

"You're very literal," laughed Rick.

"It's what they say about the end of a rainbow."

"Well, you may be right. We could be as close as you can get." The rain came down like wet light around them, and Rick squeezed Jimmy's shoulder. He rested his hand there, and Jimmy leaned into it as Rick opened up the throttle. The prow of the boat lifted clear of the water as the boat surged ahead, pushing Rick back into the seat. Then the prow settled, and Rick could see clearly into the distance as the boat pushed suddenly out of the shower into the clear air, skipping brightly over the water towards the shore.

They reached the shore when the sun was dropping towards the trees, and Rick knew it was not the place he wanted to be. He was too far north and began to follow the shoreline south towards Calendar Bay. The granite knolls rolled smoothly down into the water and the shore had not changed, but Rick's memory of it had. He wasn't sure he could recognize the little cove when they passed it. Then the motor jumped, jarring the boat and stalling. Rick started the motor, and the engine revved uselessly.

"What happened?" said Jimmy.

"We hit a rock. It looks like we damaged the propeller. I'll take a look." He shut the engine off.

"We're stuck," said Jimmy.

"We'll fix it," Rick said.

"How?"

"Let me take a look," Rick said as he scooted Jimmy aside and moved to the rear of the boat. He lifted the engine on its hinge, exposing the propeller. The blades spun uselessly.

"Is it broken?"

"No," said Rick. "The props fine. We must have sheared off the cotter pin. Look in the tackle box and see if there's another one. It's a little brass pin."

"Nope. What is it?"

"It's soft brass so if you hit a rock the pin will break off before the propeller does. We just have to fix the thing in place with something else. Look in my book bag there and hand me some paper clips. The big, funny-shaped ones. And some pliers from the box."

"Are we stuck here?"

"Nope. And if we were it wouldn't be a problem. We'd make a fire and camp out."

"Here."

"Thanks." Rick inserted the soft metal clips and twisted them tight, and then he clipped them off. "All done."

"How did you know how to do that?" asked Jimmy.

"Grandpa showed me."

"I didn't know you knew stuff like that. I thought you were only a teacher."

Rick laughed. "Grandpa gets around," he said. "Let's stop here and take a break. Let's finish off the food and do a little shore fishing." He started up the motor again and eased the boat into a cove of round granite. There were pines trees and duff on the rocks and shade beneath he trees. He reached out and grabbed the rock, holding the boat steady as he sat and shut off the motor. "Jump out and tie us down," he said. Jimmy scrambled over the bow and carried the rope to a stump, pulling it tight and securing it. Then Rick passed up the tackle and food, and they climbed the sloping granite to its crest.

The sparrows swarmed like bees from the trees in search of seeds on the rocky soil, and they clattered beneath dry pines that dropped their cones on the pungent duff. The shade was cool under the trees, and Rick sat and leaned his head back against the earth, tilting his face into the warmth of the sun, and breathed the smell of leaves and loam, and there was the sharp scent of the pine tree in the air and the lingering balm of sweet fern and his eyes were heavy. He roughed up a little of the duff with his fingers and

held it lightly in his hand, and it gave up a clean scent of summer savory. Jimmy sat down beside him.

Rick stretched out his legs and looked up through the boughs of the tree. The breeze sang distantly in the needles, and high above, small, white clouds raced. He folded Jimmy in his arm and fell asleep.

Rick woke to Jimmy shaking him. "What's up?" he said. The sun was going down.

"Let's eat."

"Good. Then we can fish a little and catch the sunset feeding."

It was dark when they set out. Rick eased the boat out of the cove, careful of the rocks.

"What about the rocks?" Jimmy said.

"You look for them. Look for the places where the water is flat, calmer than normal."

"It's scary. "

"Look for the little signs. We're going slowly here, and when we're out farther we'll look for the beacons. Just trust your instinct. Keep an eye out for the one we hit coming in. It's on the right side."

"Here it is, Dad, but we're on the wrong side. You said right."

"Good," said Rick, "that's fine. We know where we are now." There would be trouble all around them below because the water was low and there would be rocks where he would never know. It would be luck now. "We're fine," he said. "Let's backtrack a little and swing out around the other side of that rock. Then it's straight home." He reached down and squeezed Jimmy's shoulder. "Well done," he said. "We're in good shape now. Sit down. Watch the fish." Jimmy had caught another pickerel from the shore, and Rick had pulled in a small perch, and the fish had slid forward on the floorboards. "Don't step on them. Scoot them to the back." Rick put the motor in reverse and pulled the boat back to where they could

go around the rock from the other side. He could see its pale shape against the dark water surrounding it. Then he put the motor in forward and went ahead, trying to follow the same path they took on the way in.

Rick looked up over the lake and the wooden hull of the boat slapped the small waves. The water ahead was nappy under the stars. He kept the throttle eased back and the engine's smooth coughs were slow and soft. Tonight they would ride the boat home in the dark and his father would be standing at the window, watching for their lights on the lake. He would wave the flashlight to signal the safe route when he saw them, and he would walk down to the shore to meet them. But the water was black beyond the bow of the boat now, and Rick strained to see the rocks. He could not rush, but he could feel the old confidence returning. And something else. The Abitibi had been fraught with deadheads when his father had ridden them home in the dark, he realized now. The old man had simply gone on a wing and a prayer more often than he'd admitted. There was a certain knowledge beyond simple denial, he thought, and its name was grace. A simple sort of trust. Of peace. Relaxation.

"How are you doing, Jimmy?" he said.

"Fine."

"We're clear now; let's open it up and go home." Jimmy moved over tight against Rick and Rick wrapped the blanket around him, holding it firm in the circle of his arm. Then he eased the throttle forward and the boat leveled out. It was deep water all the way now, and Rick felt could not get his breathe when he thought about the black depths below and not knowing what was there. The muscles of his belly shook. He reached over and took Jimmy's hand in his own. "Are you warm enough?" he asked.

"I'm good," said Jimmy. "I like riding the boat at night. I like the lights."

Rick's father was waiting on the lawn as they pulled into the small bay at the foot of the house, holding a lantern high to guide them. His face wavered in the halo of light, and his smile was tight.

"Grandpa!" Jimmy shouted. The older man suddenly laughed.

"Welcome back!" he said. "You two have been out tomcatting a helluva long time. I hope you brought me some fish!" The boat was close enough for Rick to see the relief in the older man's eyes and the pleasure at their return. "Everything all right?" he said to Rick.

"Yeah. A little trouble with the propeller earlier, but we fixed it."

"Good. There's hot coffee inside." Rick watched from the boat as his father waded into the water and gripped the bow rope. Then he reached over and tousled Jimmy's hair. "And a hot berry pie for you," he said, "from Grandma." Jimmy reached down and lifted the string of fish.

"Look," he said.

"Did they jump into the boat?"

"No. We caught them."

"Sounds like a fish story to me. There've been reports all day on the radio of fish jumping into boats. These look like that kind of fish. Nippissing Boat-Leapers." Jimmy laughed.

"No, Grandpa, these are pickerel. We caught them across the lake, didn't we Dad? I caught two, and Dad caught this little one." He held up the perch. Rick laughed and stepped out of the boat into the water. "Good thing we had the sandwiches. Dad said it was a hell of a fishing trip for three fish," he said. The water was warm on Rick's feet as he listened. He stood beside his father and they pulled the bow securely up onto the sand.

"Watch your language," said Rick, laughing.

"You all right?" his father said quietly. He looked at the propeller grease on Rick's hands.

"Fine," said Rick. "We sheared off the cotter pin and had to cobble together a fix." Rick looked into his father's eyes, and the older man nodded quickly at him.

"Good," he said again, and squeezed Rick's shoulder. "You look a little rough." He turned to Jimmy. "Come here, you, and let me lift you out." Then he picked Jimmy up and held him for a moment with the boy's arms around his neck before setting him down in the water. Rick was suddenly grateful and happy as he pulled in the boat on the shore. Then he walked to the stern, clearing his throat and splashing loudly as his father held the lantern high again, laughing to relax Jimmy, joking and teasing, looking up at Rick with joy and no embarrassment now, and Rick looked quickly down at the mooring and wondered how long the embarrassment had been absent with him not seeing it gone, and he reached for the rope to keep his head down and busy and watched his own tear, a bright drop of gold on its way to the waiting water of the lake, lit briefly from the light of his father's lantern.

"It's good to be home," he said.