These five stories investigate characters who must deal with their unresolved, emotionally troubling pasts. The characters attempt to journey back to life having recognized that their isolation, safe and undisturbing as it is, is worse than a life in which the possibility of joy is mixed with the inevitability of loss. Thus, in the worlds of these stories, there is a line between the safety of emotional withdrawal, and the danger of emotional involvement. These characters negotiate that line with varying success.
The Caller, and Other Stories

by

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THE CALLER, AND OTHER STORIES

Introduction

This thesis is a book of short stories, or rather, stories frozen for a moment in the process of becoming one. Each story deals, in varying degrees, with the characters’ need to move from a safe world of isolation, to some sort of community or accommodation with the world as it really is. They move—because they want and need to—from a safe constructed fantasy in which loss and pain either don’t exist, or are explainable, to the “real” world, in which loss is the other side of joy. In other words, these characters reach through pain for joy, and either find it, though at the expense of increased pain, or fail, finally, to cross the line.

In “The Caller,” Ray, still suffering from the grief of his father’s death, discovers that it has been bearable because his mother has shared it with him, the both of them staying in doors for the most part, in the months since the death. The story begins when Ray realizes that his mother is about to go on a date with a man she has met before, but never mentioned. Ray feels betrayed by this move, yet also recognizes, emotionally, at least, that his mother is going on with her life. The story proceeds along these two levels of understanding. On the one hand, with his best friend Mike, he seems to recognize on some level what his mother is experiencing by helping his friend get together with a girl he has been watching on a beach at the lake. On the other hand, he calls a phone booth next to the neighborhood store and starts talking to a woman who catches the bus there everyday. The relationship between them is a fantasy in Ray’s mind, but quickly becomes “real” in the sense that the woman keeps forcing him to see his mother as a woman reaching out from grief. The story comes together at the end, when Ray meets the “caller,” and accepts the truth as somehow better than the fantasy. The last gesture of the story is when Ray kisses his mother on the neck, and looks at her in a new way, as someone young and vital, and to my mind, his recognition of her as someone separate
from himself is his means of escaping the grief and "shut-downedness" he has been suffering since his father's death.

While Ray seems to succeed on some level in his story, Rory, in "The Tower," does not escape the prison the past has bequeathed to him. The story follows one night in Rory's life, when he goes to a party in an apartment across from him, and tries to find some way to approach a girl he has been in love with from afar. After dancing with her, he kisses her, she slaps him, and at that instant, he knows that the "normal" world will never be his, and that he will be like his mother, who in this story, is Rory's version of isolation. What interests me in the story is the past: how Rory's whole family situation becomes who he is: his mother and father living in separate houses, his father's inability to be in close proximity to the ones he loves, his mother's total submersion in the allegorical world of Tarot Cards, and Rory's inability to get close to anyone as he grows up, and finally, his fear that he is trapped in the isolation his parents have bequeathed him, and his need to escape it. The weight of the past is like a wave in the story, pushing him toward the moment when he kisses Melody, a basically harmless, but ridiculous moment, and then finally sucking him down again into the realization that he is his parents, and that their world is his world and there is no escape. Even Jamie, who likes him despite his coldness toward her, cannot draw him away.

For most of Gabe's life in "East," he has been dependent on his friend Ryan to drag him through the big decisions and adventures. Ryan was the bold, interesting and vital one on the school playground, on scouting trips, in high school and in college. Ryan was the one who convinced him to go to college. Gabe was initially attracted to Ryan because he wanted to be like him, but by high school graduation, he was beginning to resent him. Gabe goes to college with Ryan, not because of Ryan's constant insistence, but because he sees the dull life his mother leads, following after customers at a local Walmart. The story opens with Ryan and Gabe driving home after college graduation, and Gabe sees this as another one of those moments. He has no prospects, and Ryan has already got a job. Pressure builds in Gabe, causing him to take control of the truck and turn off the road home for a detour into the desert. For me, at least, this is the point where Gabe begins to cross that line into a new world, but it isn't until the
wreck, and Ryan’s injury, and Ryan’s subsequent offer to find Gabe a job in Seattle, that Gabe realizes where he is. When he does, the need to get away from Ryan, who, for him, is the emblem of his paralysis, is so strong, that he leaves his friend to die in the desert. Gabe is in big trouble in just about every way, but he has broken through, horrifying as it is, into the world of movement, consequence and responsibility.

The fourth story, “Man with Dog,” interests me because it seems a reversal of the usual pattern my stories have taken. John Alexander, at the beginning of the story, is exactly where he wants to be. He has a family—two kids, a wife, a dog—which, to my other characters, would seem to be a total immersion in the stuff of life. But for John, these things are a semblance. His only emotional connection is a simple one, with his dog Beauty. His love for her is his means of dealing with the stresses of the rest of his life, because she does not place any demands on him. Thus, John is content in his emotional and existential isolation, until the story starts, that is, and the dog gets run over. Against his will, John lunges across that line into the world of love and loss and he spends the rest of the story trying to get back to where he once was, though in his mind, he is trying to “change,” to participate in the lives of his family, rather than be merely present. It is too much for him, though, and it is only when he acknowledges the new family dog that he reaches that state of almost non-being, of perfect, beautiful isolation in which he can float anesthetized.

The final story, “The Mother,” has been a struggle in conception, execution and focus. I have only the vaguest notion of how the theme, plot and character might fit together, or even of what form they will eventually take. As it now stands, it is similar to “The Tower,” in that a man who lives in his head tries to escape it by entering into a relationship with his neighbor, a divorced woman with a young son. Peter seems, to me, only vaguely aware of his unsuitability in dealing with other people, and his insinuation into the lives of Miribelle and Jeff leads to his realization, at the moment when a car is bearing down on them, that he will never truly be a part of their lives. The focus of the story, however, seems to be on Miribelle, rather than Peter, who is supposed to be the main character. Future versions of the story will focus, I think, on these two characters: Peter, rational, stable, static, a man fundamentally unable to deal with the constant
variations and instabilities of love, and Miribelle, irrational, unstable, wildly dynamic and essentially mysterious, to Peter and herself (and me, at the moment), a woman who weathers emotional storms in a way Peter will never be able to. The line I have been writing about, between the safe world in the land of fantasy, and the painful world in the land of reality, is between these two characters, and it may be that the line gets crossed, not by either of these two characters, but by Jeff, for whom the burden of the past lies ahead.

All these stories, then, are thematically connected, and the struggle of the characters are similar. Trapped and burdened by the past, they struggle and escape into life.
The Caller

Ray was eating cereal when his mother came home. She pushed through the door, drawing with her the late afternoon heat, and let her purse sluff to the ground. "I’ve met someone," she said. "At the Knapps’." The Knapps were old friends of Ray’s parents who had adopted his mother and helped her through the past few months.

Ray pushed his empty bowl away and folded his hands.

"It’s probably too soon," she said, "but I really like the man. He works out at the dam. He lost his wife several years ago.” She sat beside him and touched his arm. "I guess I want your approval. I’ve tried to be here for you—"

"Mom," Ray said. He looked at her tired face, the down-turned lips, the reflection in her glasses. All he could see was his own head, forehead sloping, nose huge, chin non-existent. He took his bowl to the sink and let it fall against the other dishes. He started the water, squeezed in the soap, and banged glasses against plates.

"You’re angry," she said.
"It’s too soon," he said.

She stomped her foot. "What do you know about too soon? Your father was gone years before he died."

Ray, eyes closed, let his hands soak in the hot water. The suds crackled and a bowl shifted against a plate. "I just don’t think . . .” he said. "Maybe you should wait.” She set her glass on the counter and stared at him. "Don’t go out with him yet, Mom.” Ray wouldn’t look at her.

"I think I will," she said. "His name’s Allan. He asked me out for dancing at the Moose Lodge on Wednesday. Ladies Night."

He knew he was supposed to be excited, to tell her it was okay, but he couldn’t. He started setting washed plates in the rack.

"Fine," his mother said. She went to take her usual nap.

After finishing the dishes, Ray went to his bedroom in the back of the house. He pulled out his bureau’s bottom drawer, set it aside, drew a plastic bag from the dusty area beneath and took out its contents: a photograph of his father, yellow, with a ragged edge
all around, an envelope of allowance money, and another envelope containing sheets of phone booth numbers, which he kept aside when he put everything back. He lay on the bed with the paper and the cordless phone, then punched the number for the phone booth outside the Denny’s at the intersection of I-5 and Cypress Avenue.

A man answered. “Hello?” he said. Ray could not tell his age.

“I’m your son,” Ray said.

“Bullshit,” the man said.

“It’s a shitty thing you did, leaving my mom.”

“Who is this?”

“She was sixteen.”

The man hung up. Ray listened to the sound of a distant ocean at the end of the line. He clicked the off button, then scanned the list for another number. He dialed the phone booth outside the hardware store on California Street.

“Hello?” It was the voice of an old man, shaky, hesitant.

“She was sixteen,” Ray said, “and didn’t know what to do.”

“Hello?”

“You took off for college and she—”

“Excuse me, son,” the man said. “Who were you calling?”

Ray’s mind went blank.

“Son?”

Ray didn’t like the sound of the man’s voice, a moist, phlegmy tone.

“Ray!” His mother stood in the doorway.

Ray pressed the off button and dropped the phone.

“What were you doing?” she said.

“Mike was on,” he said. “I haven’t seen him all summer. We were just joking around.”

“Don’t lie,” she said. She sat beside him and picked up the papers. “At least they’re local.” She folded them and put them in her bathrobe pocket. “I thought we had a talk.”

“I’m sorry, Mom, really, it was nothing—”
“A pregnant girl? Did you—”

“No!” Ray blushed. “I made it up.”

“I don’t understand you,” she said. She put her hand on his arm. “Why do you do these things? These calls?”

It had started several months before when he had gotten a modem for his sixteenth birthday. A present from his dad, he’d found it hidden in the closet three weeks after the funeral. He sent people e-mail, using an assumed name, but then his mother took it away because he was spending too much time alone. She thought he should get out more, spend time with his friends, play baseball. Ray had never played baseball, couldn’t stand the thought of it. He had gotten the list of phone booth numbers from a local hacker. After the modem, he called 800 numbers and told the operators their products sucked and that his lawyers would be in touch. He enjoyed the feeling of power, the fact that they couldn’t judge him on anything but what he said. He could be anybody. When that got old, he started calling long distance numbers: New York, Puerto Rico, and Delaware, because he liked the sound of the names. Although it was obvious now that he thought about it, it had never occurred to him that his mother would see the bill. He’d been saving the phone booth list for a special occasion.

“It’s because of your father, isn’t it,” she said. She sighed and looked at the window. The light brought out the tiny wrinkles around her eyes and the corners of her mouth. The skin under her jaw was beginning to loosen. “I’m worried about you,” she said. “Maybe you should see the school psychiatrist—”

“No!”

“They know how to deal with things like this,” she said. “God knows, I don’t.”

“Mom, I’ll stop. I promise.” He scooped up the phone and handed it to her. “Just a phase.”

She stood, then dropped the phone on the bed. “Well,” she said. “We’ll talk about this later. I’m going to get a little something to eat.” She pulled her robe close around her, outlining the folded paper in her pocket. “Are you all right for dinner?” She headed for the kitchen.
The day before his sixteenth birthday, in the middle of a geometry test, Ray was called to the office. His father had died. "Don't feel bad," his mother said on the phone. "He went peacefully." Ray wanted to go home but she said to stay until the ambulance came to take the body. "I don't want you to see him like this." Her voice was calm and Ray hated her for that. She had been expecting this, her tone said, it was no big deal.

Back in class, he wrote "fuck" next to each question, then twisted his compass until it was mangled and useless.

When he got home, his mother was on the couch crying. She stood and hugged him but he didn't know what to do. He patted her back. "It's all right, Mom," he said. Her tears on his shoulder embarrassed him. How, he wondered, did he get stuck with her?

She had gotten a job as a bookkeeper at Safeway's district office. She was determined to keep things going. She didn't seem to realize, not really, that her husband was dying, had died.

Later, when his mother was in bed and snoring, Ray went to the guest bedroom and lay down in the imprint his father's body had made in the mattress. The air smelled of sweat and smoke. Dust motes hung on shafts of yellow light, and Ray tried to imagine them as angels going to heaven, but they reminded him instead of the time his father had taken him to a giant wrecking yard outside Red Bluff. It was in the middle of a vast, yellow plain and as they approached it, white light flashed off the edges rusted hulks. His father sent him in search of a bucket seat. They separated and Ray looked at smashed windshields and dashboards and cars without wheels. He didn't see anything like a bucket. After a while, he climbed an old flatbed truck and looked for his father. The hulks stretched for what seemed miles. Beyond the back fence dried grass flowed to low foothills and a dark sky. A storm was coming in. The wind was getting stronger, blowing Ray's hair from his forehead. He found his father sitting in a crushed car, looking cramped and strangely still, surrounded by blue twisted metal, smoking a cigarette.

*   *   *

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Ray spent the night resisting his impulse to pick up the phone. The next day, he stayed in bed until noon, then searched for the list. He found it in the outside garbage, smoothed it out, folded it, and slipped it into his pocket. He ate lunch, then took the phone to the lounge chair on the back patio, a tiny slab of cement shaded by twisted oak branches. The heat’s heaviness pressed against him, lulling him to sleep. He awoke suddenly when the phone slipped off his lap. He unfolded the list and chose the number for the booth outside Shasta View market. A girl answered. Her voice was low, relaxed, mature. Ray leaned back and closed his eyes.

“I’ve been waiting to hear from you,” he said. “It’s been a long time.”

“Excuse me?”

“I’m Bill.”

The woman was silent. Ray heard cars in the background.

“This is a phone booth,” she said.

He told her that he didn’t know any other way to reach her. Then he said he was an artist doing a summer project. He was calling people, not prank calls, but calling strangers and painting them from the sound of their voices.


“How did you know?” she said. “You got it just right.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Okay,” she said. “My lashes are long only in my dreams.” Her laughter sounded like a distant wind chime.

Her name was Melissa. She was studying mining geology at Colorado State and worked summers at a geochemical lab. He told her he was twenty and went to Berkeley. She told him she caught a transfer at Shasta View every afternoon at three o’clock. He promised to call again.

* * *

When his mother came home, she seemed preoccupied. She took a longer nap than usual. Ray listened to her snoring while he put together a puzzle in the guest room. After dark she made a macaroni dinner and as they ate, she looked at her reflection in the
double-glass doors. Ray studied her, the scarf holding her hair back, the absence of
make-up, the dark circles under her eyes. She looked as if she had been crying.

“Mom?” Ray said.

Her eyes focused. “Yes dear?”

She was thinking about his father, he thought. She had been this way since the
funeral, when she wasn’t rushed, or frustrated at him for not sweeping the kitchen floor,
or for forgetting to take the garbage cans out to the curb. Or maybe she was having
second thoughts about the date.

“Mom,” he said. “Did you and Dad have a good marriage?”

She seemed to wake up. She pushed back her glasses and looked at the light over
the table. “We fought all the time,” she said. “You never saw it. We didn’t think parents
should fight in front of children.” She looked away. “I didn’t want him to accept that
promotion. Who wants to be married to a long distance phone call? I wanted him to quit
smoking. I thought we should have had another child.”

He felt as if he were entering an unknown room in his own house, a huge, empty,
floor-slanting space. “Come on, Mom,” he said. “It wasn’t always like that. You guys
were in love. Right?”

She took off her glasses and rubbed her eyes. “Yes,” she said. “Of course, Ray.”

“Then why this guy, Allan?”

She got up and put one hand on his shoulder, the other on his head. “Ray, I
haven’t been happy for years. Maybe you didn’t notice.”

Ray slid away, letting her hands drop. “I don’t want to hear this, Mom.” He
gathered the dishes. “Go on your date or whatever. Marry the guy. I don’t care about
anything. You, or anything. Who cares what I think?”

“What do you think?”

“Nothing. Nevermind.” Talking would only make things worse. She would get
teary eyed. He would have to feel sorry for her, tell her things were all right.

“I have a chance, here,” she said. “We have a chance. Let’s face it, your father’s
gone.” She sat at the table while he leaned over the sink. He could see her reflection in
the kitchen window.
“You want to bury us here, don’t you,” she said. “Keep everything the same.”

“That’s ridiculous, Mom.” He wanted to escape her voice, the way it seemed so reasonable.

“I don’t care if you never leave the house again,” she said.

“Fine,” he said. “I’m leaving. You do the dishes, for once.”

* * *

The air was cool. The moon lit a few high clouds and blue light seeped through curtained kitchen windows. Ray walked halfway down the block toward Michael’s, then came back. The house lights were off. He got inside his mother’s car and found a pack of cigarettes and some matches in the glove compartment. She had quit smoking after the funeral, but the cigarettes were still there. He leaned against the car’s trunk and lit one, took a drag, coughed, and tried again. His head spun, and he coughed and then spit to get the taste out. He looked at the cigarette’s burning tip and pictured his father punctuating conversation with jabs and flicks, arguing, his mother silent, soothing, until he got his way. He put the pack in his shirt pocket and headed down the street to his best friend’s.

Ray heard the evening news through Michael’s front door. He remembered how his father used to argue economics with Michael’s father at neighborhood card games, his and Michael’s eyes stinging with smoke as they peaked around the corner to see what the men were fighting about.

Ray stepped away from the door, then stepped back and knocked. Michael answered after a long pause.

“Hey,” Ray said. “Come on. Let’s go to the park or something.”

“It’s kind of late, man,” Michael said.

Ray looked down the street, then back toward his house. “My mom’s driving me crazy.”

Michael leaned against the door jam, arms folded. “So.”

Ray thought about all the times he hadn’t returned Michael’s calls in the past few months, how he had avoided him in the halls, and remained silent when he was trapped
into conversation. He had taken to going home for lunch to avoid talking to people, or eating while he walked along the neighborhood streets around the high school.

"Look, I’m sorry for ditching you," Ray said. "It was a phase." He patted his shirt pocket. "I got some cigs. We can smoke ‘em."

Michael sighed and shook his head. "All right, man. Hold on. I’ll be out in a sec." Ray waited at the curb.

Michael came out and they walked silently the rest of the way down the street, then followed a small path to the park. They sat in one of the concrete dugouts. Ray took a cigarette, lit it, and handed the pack to Michael, who blew out a great cloud of smoke, and sighed. Ray coughed.

"Where’ve you been, man," Michael said.
"Around."
"Haven’t seen you. Not even at lunch."
"Well, you know, since my dad died . . . ."

Michael started pacing in the dugout. He flicked sparks through the chain link barrier. "You can’t just abandon your friends, man, when something like that happens. I mean, I’m your friend, you know?"

"Thanks, Mom." Ray took a large drag and started coughing convulsively.
"We gotta stick together, you know? I mean, I’m sorry about your dad and all but ignoring my calls and avoiding me at school sucks."
"Yeah," Ray said. "You’re right."

Michael sat down. "Remember we used to come here when we were little? The place was huge. The end of the world. And now it’s just a park. Look at it." He gestured toward the baseball diamond. "Dead grass, litter, snotty little kids beating each other up—"

"Teenagers smoking in the dugouts . . . ."
"Yeah," Michael said. He laughed, softly, as if conserving air. "Hey. This weekend, we’re doing the lake. The whole family."

"Maybe," Ray said. "Mom and I might have something going on."
“Invite her, too,” Michael said. He lit another cigarette and sat staring at the other
dugout.

Ray leaned against the chain link fence. He couldn’t understand why Michael gave
a shit one way or another about him. They’d known each other forever, but what did it
matter? They were friends because they spent time together, and that was it. “Okay,”
Ray said. “I’ll go.”

“Good,” Michael said. “About time you joined the living, zombie boy.”

Ray dropped his cigarette and snuffed it with the toe of his shoe. “My mom’s
going on a date,” he said.

“That’s great, man. Everyone needs to get their rocks off.” He held up the pack
of cigarettes. “Mind if I keep these? They’re pretty stale, anyway.”

“Yeah,” Ray said. “Mom quit.”

“Good move,” Michael said. “These’ll kill you.”

* * *

At three o’clock the next day, Ray lay under the swamp cooler’s breeze in his
underwear, the moving air calming him more than it cooled. He dialed the number of the
Shasta View booth and waited. It rang four times before Melissa answered.

“I’m painting under the swamp cooler,” Ray said. “It feels great.”

“Shut up! I’m dripping out here and you’re torturing me!”

“When my father was alive, we used to run the cooler all the time. One thing he
hated was sweat. My mother would kill me if she knew it was on. She’s obsessed with
electricity.”

He could hear Melissa’s breathing, and cars moving around the parking lot. He
regretted mentioning his father.

“When did it happen?” Her voice sounded hurt, as if she had lost her own father.

“Last year. During the winter.”

“Ah,” she said, drawing the syllable out. “It must be difficult for you.”

“He was home for a year but he was different. Sick. It was a long time coming.”

“Your poor mother.”
“He coughed and made gagging noises and kept on smoking. ’I’m dying anyway, son,’ he’d say, as if it didn’t matter to anyone. It didn’t matter to him, I guess.”

The swamp cooler rumbled above him, seeming to shake the house, sending vibrations everywhere and making the hallway feel windy like a giant lung. He heard a trickle of water running into the pan. It was time to change the pads.

“What’s the matter, Bill?”

“She’s going on a date tonight. I think she’s been seeing this guy at dinners with her friends. She didn’t tell me anything.”

“She’s supposed to?”

“I’m her son. She can’t do this without . . .”

He tried as best he could not to think, not to put into words the sense he had of her having this life he knew nothing about.

“What?” Melissa said.

“It sounds stupid,” Ray said. “But it’s like she’s ignoring me. Like I don’t matter. Like I’m not good enough . . .”

“How do you think it feels to think you might never be in another relationship?”

He pictured his mother, the gray hairs beneath the yellow on the back of her neck, the twisted toes when she took off her high heels. He shivered. He hadn’t ever thought of her as that kind of person, lonely, wanting some man around, sex. There was a black-and-white picture of her on his father’s old night stand. She was very young. High school. Hair in an old-movies style—long, black, the bangs folded up, her neck exposed, waiting for a kiss. She was beautiful in that picture, he suddenly thought.

“She’s got me,” Ray said, softly.

“Not for long. You’re in college, right?”

“I—”

“Bill, the bus . . .”

After she hung up, he dressed, then lay on the couch listening to his heart and the slow breathing of the swamp cooler, feeling as if everything inside were draining out of his feet, leaving nothing but flabby skin. At one point, a newspaper thudded against the door
and later, small children passed, laughing. Then his mother came home. She walked into the living room and stood under the cooler without noticing it was on.

“Tonight’s the night,” she said. “I haven’t been to a dance since . . . .” She looked at him. “It’s been a long time.”

Ray embraced her, holding her tight against him, feeling the unfamiliar heat of another body.

“What’s this?” she said.

“I’m sorry, Mom.”

“Ray.” She patted his back. “Come on now, Ray.” She held him away from her and looked at him, her eyes worried, but her mouth smiling as if she couldn’t help it.

“I think it’s great you found that guy,” he said. “I think you should go for it, Mom.”

She let go of him and headed down the hall. “Help me pick out something to wear.”

He left the porch light on for her when he went to bed, but didn’t sleep until he heard her come in at two o’clock. He stood at his door, listening, wondering if he should ask her how it was. She hummed tunelessly as she shut the guest room door, then prepared for bed, washing her face, brushing her teeth, sounds he knew by heart, and when she began to snore, he lay down.

* * *

“A great week,” Melissa said the next day. “Talking to you. It’s mysterious, fun. I haven’t felt like this in a long time.”

“Like what?”

“Like something’s opening up. Things aren’t as bad as they could be, you know?”

“Not really.”

“I mean, I look forward to riding the bus these days.”

Ray was in the guest bedroom, which was empty except for a hide-a-bed couch, an old coffee table with a half finished puzzle on it, and a broken record player. Sunlight filtered through the dusty window and the air was stifling.
“Look,” she said. “There’s something I should tell you.”

“My mom went on the date,” Ray said. “It’s only been eight months. Seven. I still can’t believe it. I don’t think she’s making the right decision.”

“Decision? What’s that got to do with it? She’s alive, Bill. Do you expect her to stay cooped up for the rest of her life? Chained to a dead husband?”

On the coffee table, hundreds of puzzle pieces lay sorted by color. Ray started flicking them, one by one, against the far wall.

“I’m sorry,” Melissa said. “That was kind of harsh. I didn’t mean it.”

“It’s okay,” Ray said. He eased a few pieces off the table, imagining them falling from tall cliffs, trees, buildings.

“My job’s almost over,” she said. “I’ll be here tomorrow, but then I’m going back to school.”

Ray went to the hallway and started pacing. “We should meet,” he said. “I’ll bring the portrait.”

“No,” she said. “There isn’t any portrait. Come on, Bill.”

“There is,” he said, quietly. “I want you to see it.”

“Talking to you has made me feel good. I don’t know who you are, and I don’t want to. Let’s leave it for memory.”

Ray held the phone to his chest for a moment, then said, “Maybe you’re right.” But he didn’t want the calls to end. He needed them.

“Bye, Bill.”

“Tomorrow,” he said, but she had already hung up.

* * *

Ray paced the hallway, from his bedroom to the kitchen, punching the phone on and off, wondering what to do. He didn’t want to talk to his mother, see her happy and beaming and telling him she was going to have Allan over for dinner to meet him. He wanted to go see Melissa, but he had no idea where she was. He punched the “on” button and called Michael.
Michael’s father answered the phone. Michael was out for pizza and a movie with a girl. “He wouldn’t tell me her name,” Michael’s father said, laughing, “in case it didn’t work out. He didn’t want me to tease him.”

They talked about the lake trip, and after Ray hung up, he turned the phone’s power off and sat in the silent house. When he heard his mother’s car pull up to the garage, he scribbled a note telling her he’d gone to the movies with Michael, that he would be back very late, that he hoped her date went well. He snuck out the back patio, around the side of the house, and headed to the park. He took a nap in the dugout until it was dark, then started walking along the streets, heading down to his high school lunch route, then back up to his own neighborhood and around the block several times until the lights of his house were out. He went in and slipped into bed as quietly as possible, and put a pillow over his head.

His mother opened the door. “Ray?” she said, gently. “Are you awake?”

Ray didn’t answer. He tried to make his breathing regular and wished he knew how to snore.

“Ray?”

He stirred, as if waking up, and tried for a dry voice.

“Yeah, Mom?”

“Are you awake enough to talk?”

“Mom.” He sighed heavily. “Tomorrow.”

She shut the door after a minute of standing silent. Ray slipped the pillow under his head and stared at the ceiling.

When he was young, his room didn’t have carpet in it. One cold night, he woke up and found his mother, in a white gown, moving mysteriously around the room accompanied by the voice of his father from the hall, and after she left, he saw a space heater by the door, coloring the walls and the floor with tiny bands of orange light.

* * *

After mowing the lawn, Ray opened a can of Coke and sat just inside the line of shade on the driveway, watching gnats dance around clumps of mown grass. He knew his mother was happy, that she was going to continue seeing this man, that she would
eventually marry him, move into his house, visit his relatives, cook him dinners, Ray’s father, her first husband, dead and forgotten. He didn’t like the before and after picture. She was married, then she wasn’t, then she was married to a stranger. Other people would think they had been married for years and marvel at the strength of their longevity, maybe worry, a bit, that they themselves would never have it so good.

Ray sipped his Coke and looked at the dead gray street. The air was still and there was no movement, except for the gnats, and no sound, except for the drone of traffic out on the main road, and from far away, kids screaming and splashing pool water. He looked above the houses and saw in the dim distance the blue smear of the Sierras.

Grief was like a dark cave, he thought, but it was warm and familiar and he didn’t want to leave. He looked at his watch. Two o’clock. He would call Melissa in an hour, talk to her for a few minutes, and then it would be all over. What was he going to do? The thought of talking to someone else on the phone, of finding something new to do with it made him sick. School started in a month. He didn’t see how he could just drop back into Michael’s life. His mother would be away, now, most nights, he guessed. He finished the rest of his Coke, and thought of Melissa.

After closing the garage, and locking all the doors, he headed down the block toward Shasta View market. At the end of the street, he looked back. His house was small, he realized. He imagined coming back to it, years later, feeling like he couldn’t fit through the door.

The street shimmered in the heat, cars oozed by on fat tires, and bugs made strange, bottle-opening sounds. He crossed the street and stood by the telephone booth, its Plexiglas covering nicked and dusty. Inside, he sniffed the receiver, felt the inside of the coin return, and flipped through the phone book. The town map was missing.

He crossed the parking lot and went inside the market. It was cool, and mostly deserted. He wandered around the aisles, checking the clock above the bakery department, and looking out the front windows at the phone booth. He bought Rolling Stone and a bottle of Coke, and sat on the bench outside the doors, next to a row of pay phones. He tried to read, but it wasn’t working, so he watched the cars drive by, people wipe their foreheads and necks, kids complain and parents snap. Across the street, houses
sat squat, curtains pulled against the sun, swamp coolers on every roof, gleaming, reminding Ray of a giant graveyard.

A bus pulled up and the doors opened. Ray drank the rest of his Coke in a quick gulp, burning his throat. A thick thigthed woman in khaki shorts and a purple work shirt got out and sat on the bench beside the phone booth. “Melissa,” Ray said, and shook his head. She had lied to him.

Ray put a quarter in the pay phone behind him. He dialed, then turned to look at the woman. The phone rang several times, but she didn’t get up. An unfamiliar voice answered.

“Hello?” Ray said. “Who’s this?”
“Ray, is that you?”
“Mom?”
“Where are you, Ray? I came home early and thought we might eat out, or see a movie. I wanted to tell you about my date.”

The woman took a white cloth and pressed it against her forehead, then her cheek.
“Ray? Are you still there? Where are you?”
“I’m at the store.”
“Well, wait right there. I’ll come and get you.” She hung up. Ray held the receiver to his ear and stared at the woman. He was glad she was not what she said on the phone. She had kept something completely hidden from him, but there she was, revealed. He stepped into the sunlight and started slowly to cross the parking lot, but before he could reach her, he heard a bus approaching. He ran, then lunged forward, and touched her on the shoulder. She jumped up. Dark sweat circled her underarms, and a tiny drop rolled down her cheek. She was older, thirty, or thirty-five.

“Bill?” she said.

He stepped back, then shaded his eyes. “Ray,” he said. “My real name.”

“Lisa.” She looked toward the bus, then back. “It’s almost here,” she said. “This really is the last ride”

“Why did you lie?”
She smiled and hefted her backpack. "I wanted to be someone different," she said. "I was beautiful when I talked to you, and smart. And you were falling in love, weren't you?"

The bus pulled behind her, brakes screeching. The doors opened.

"No," he said. "No."

She walked the few steps to the door. "Thanks," she said. "I'll miss you." The doors shut and the bus drove away, trailing blue smoke. Ray coughed, then sat on the bench.

His mother pulled up. Michael was in the front seat. Ray got in back.

"I thought I'd take you boys out to a late lunch," she said.

"Who was that woman?" Michael said. "You were talking to her."

"No one," Ray said.

"Well," Ray's mother said. "The date was wonderful. We're going out again tonight. I thought first, though, I'd take off work early and—"

Ray leaned forward and kissed his mother. Her hand swept up and touched her neck. Ray leaned back. Michael was looking at the storefronts as they drove along, but Ray watched his mother. She was wearing a T-shirt, and she had done something to her hair. It lay flatter, seemed a little darker. She was a young woman, still, Ray thought. She was driving with one hand.
Because the sun was almost down, Rory pulled his curtains closed leaving a three-inch gap so that anyone casually looking wouldn’t see him. He pulled a kitchen chair forward, reversed it so his arms could rest steadily on the chair’s back, and lifted his binoculars. There was going to be a party in the apartment across the courtyard, he was sure, and he wanted to see who was already there.

The apartment belonged to a guy named Morton, who was a Senior and was going to be graduating in the Spring, and who threw a lot of parties because he didn’t care anymore and was just waiting to get out of town and get on with the rest of his life. That’s what Ghengis, Rory’s best and only friend, said. Morton was in the window. He was tall with a long face, a blond crew cut and a goatee. He wore an oversized dark blue T-shirt and held a beer. Rory couldn’t tell which kind of beer it was. There was a girl. She had short curly hair and was almost as tall as Morton. Rory didn’t know her. Morton and the girl were looking toward the right, talking to someone. Music floated across the courtyard, over the pool. Rory could hear it even though his window was closed. Then another girl moved into the window. She had long hair, not wavy, but not flat either, and it flowed around her shoulders. She was wearing a gray, baggy sweatshirt, and she was shorter than Morton and the girl with short curly hair.

Her name was Melody, and Rory’s heart quickened when he saw her. The insides of his thighs tingled, and his stomach contracted and felt heavy. He swallowed and kept on watching. She was holding a glass with some ice cubes in it. She turned around and looked out the window. Rory put down his binoculars, and could barely see her because the glare of the setting sun on Morton’s windows. He lifted them again and saw that she was looking at the pool. Her expression, he thought, was one of melancholy. He had learned that word in English lit when the class had talked about a poem called The Wanderer, about an Anglo-Saxon guy with nowhere to go, and no one to be with. Rory thought she had that expression, which was why he had fallen in love. She was in that class, too. She was two years older than he, though she wasn’t going to graduate, as Morton was.
She had a glass in her hand and she pressed it to her shoulder, as if trying to warm it up, or keep from dropping it. Even from this distance, he could see how thin her wrist was, how delicate her eyebrows. She lifted the glass to her mouth. She put it down, then lifted it again and spit out an ice cube. Rory put down the binoculars and walked around his living room, breathing steadily, calming himself.

He sat down and lifted the binoculars. Melody was gone. Morton was still there, leaning against a wall, talking to someone. Then Ghengis appeared. He was holding compact discs, looking down, then up at Morton. He leaned back, laughing. Rory could hear him. Ghengis shook his head, then disappeared. Morton was watching him, talking. Suddenly, the music got louder. Rory shifted his chair so that he could get a wider angle and see Morton's door. Ghengis was standing there, holding it open. It was almost dark, now, and yellow light spilled from the door over the balcony and down to the pool, catching a few leaves on the dark surface. They all came out and looked at the pool. The curly headed girl made swimming motions, and they all laughed and went back inside, except Ghengis, who walked down the balcony, then turned the corner and went into his apartment. Ghengis' curtains lit up, and Rory turned back to the apartment. He could see the top of Morton's head, but that was all. They were sitting on the floor, Rory thought. He imagined Melody cross-legged in white shorts, holding her glass, her hair touching, almost, the tops of her thighs.

He put the binoculars away and shut the curtains the rest of the way. He opened his kitchen cupboard and took the bottle of gin and put it in a paper bag. He added a glass, and two plastic quart bottles of tonic water. He added a plastic container of lime juice, shaped like a lime. He turned off the stove light, then went into the living room and looked around. He had a small CD player, a stack of books, a computer with a painting called "The Tower," based on the Tarot card, hanging above it. No couch or chairs, except the kitchen chair, or tables. Just floor and pillows. No TV. He hadn't realized how poor he was until he moved out of the dorms. He hoped, though, that if Melody ever came to his apartment, she would see instead an artistic guy living in obscurity, dedicated to the ascetic life.
He locked his door and headed toward Ghengis' apartment, thinking how the pool looked like an oil slick. He lived on the third floor, as did Ghengis and Morton, and he looked at the windows of the other floors. Some lights were on, some off. He knew none of the people living behind them. He looked left and saw, barely, Morton's window, and then looked right, and saw his own. He knocked on the door, and Ghengis let him in.

"Gin and Tonics," Rory said, lifting the bag.

Ghengis' apartment was filled with homemade particle board furniture—bookshelves, coffee table, TV stand, side tables beside an old couch draped in ratty, blue paisley cloth. Ghengis fixed himself a gin and tonic and then sat in the middle of the living room, surrounded by stacks of CD's he had pulled from the immense shelves behind him. Ghengis looked up, glasses flashing in the lamp light.

"So," Rory said. "What's up tonight?"

"You're going to the party, aren't you?"

"Party?"

"Morton's."

"He's having a—"

"Yeah, man. You going?"

"I wasn't invited."

Ghengis drank down the rest of his drink, then picked up another stack and started sorting them into three piles. "Come on," he said. "You don't get invited to parties like that. You just go. Quit feeling sorry for yourself."

"You know I hate going to places where they don't—"

"Know you? It's a huge world, bud."

Rory watched Ghengis sorting through the CD's and slowly sipped his drink. Ghengis always wore blue shorts, white socks, dark blue Birkenstocks, and a white T-shirt. Sometimes he wore a black T-shirt with a picture of a fish running from neck to hem. In really cold weather, he wore a purple parka and when he walked along the street, briefcase in hand, ears plugged by headphones, he looked like he was wearing a dress. He had long hair hanging from a receding hair line, squarish wire rim glasses, and a patriarchal set of whiskers after only a few days without shaving. Rory liked him because he was the
first person he met in the dorms. Rory spent most of that first day sitting in the middle of his room wondering what he was supposed to do with a whole week before school. His mother had left before noon, and he had too few possessions to spend any time setting them up. Then he heard sawing, and smelled sawdust. He opened the door and found Ghengis on the fire escape in safety glasses with a power saw cutting 2 x 4s. By the end of the night, Rory was listening to bands from Seattle, helping him build his loft, which the floor had named “the coffin,” because it was a giant box under the window with a door on top. Lift the door, tie it to the window frame, and voilá, the bed was revealed. By the end of the second week, Ghengis had had three parties and two music appreciation nights, and knew everyone. Rory knew everyone, too, but only because he met them in Ghengis’ room. When he saw them elsewhere on campus, he would say hi, and they would say, how’s it going, and then they would walk on.

Ghengis set aside a stack of CD’s and started putting the rest back in the shelves. Rory mixed him another drink.

“Will Melody be there?”

“Yeah,” Ghengis said. “I saw her. She’s already there.”

“I’m not going.” Rory sat in front of the window and opened the curtains.

“Shut up,” Ghengis said. “Just go and talk to her.” They had spent several nights talking about Melody in particular, women in general. Ghengis’ conclusion was that they were best avoided, while Rory said they made life worth living. But really, Rory had to admit as Ghengis shoved the last of his CD’s on the shelf, it was he himself who wanted to avoid women, while Ghengis was obsessed with them. Rory had spent hours with Ghengis in the dining hall, playing cribbage and watching the women on Ghengis’ “hair list,” the list of women who had beautifully long and full hair. Rory had had to work hard to get himself to feel anything about these women, while Ghengis added more to the list as weeks went by. He even knew when their classes were because his network of friends would tell him, just to watch him shake his head up and down, side to side, and then make an excuse to go back to his room to write it down. One time, Rory was walking through the student union on his way back from the bookstore and had watched, from the steps, as
Ghengis, briefcase in hand, taking those huge steps, walked four times around the quad following three different women. He was such a slave, Rory thought.

"You know," Ghengis said. "If you talk to them, they become normal. They're only interesting if you don't meet them. That's why I never meet anyone on the hair list."

"She doesn't like me," Rory said. "She has a boyfriend. I'll go on and on about something and she'll be polite, but really hate me and avoid me in English and then I'll stop going and fail the class and college along with it and then I'll go home and avoid reality like my mother."

Ghengis looked at him, then picked up the case of CD's and a towel. "What you need to do is learn how to be spontaneous," he said. "Let's go swimming."

Rory pushed the front window's curtain aside. The water was still, thick. "I hate swimming," he said.

Ghengis turned off the lights. Rory put his gin, tonic and plastic lime back into the paper sack, then added his cup after dumping the ice and rinsing it in the sink.

"Come on," Ghengis said.

"I'm not going to swim," Rory said.

A few minutes later, he found himself standing next to Ghengis' shorts, Birks and T-shirt. Ghengis, in underwear, had slipped into the dark water, and was floating around. "This is great," he said. "Come on in."

"No," Rory said, but he pulled off his T-shirt, took off his shoes and socks, and sat on the edge, with his feet in the water. He looked up at the apartments. Most of the windows were unlit, and no one was watching. No one would see him in his underwear. He looked up at Morton's window, but could barely see the top of its yellow glow. The music was loud but indistinct, a beat and screeching guitars, and it irritated Rory. He thought he saw something by the railing and was about to stand up to get a better look when he felt two hands around his ankles and then he was underwater, floating in silence.

* * *

Rory didn't hate swimming, but he had been avoiding it since moving into the apartment complex a few weeks before. Swimming, or mainly just floating underwater,
was an escape, not from his own problems, but from the problems of others. What Rory wanted most was to have problems of his own, problems with other people. To him, there were problems on one side, and loneliness on the other. He was tired of loneliness.

His father had taught him to swim at YMCAs over the course of years, but it wasn’t until he was twelve that he began to need the water. Before then, his parents constantly moved. When his father settled down long enough to get a real estate license, they moved into a house with a swimming pool. It seemed to Rory that once the family situation stabilized, the marriage began to fall apart and it had been falling apart ever since.

His parents fought nightly all that first summer long, their voices erupting like the bugs zapping in the blue electric flame on humid evenings. One time Rory was sitting in his room building an elaborate castle out of the sanded 2 x 4 blocks he and his father had made together. He was in the center and had three sides complete and was trying to figure out how to build an arched gate, when the floor began to vibrate. He looked up and listened. Heavy steps sent shock waves from the other side of the house, where his parents’ bedroom was. His dad was yelling. “Goddamn it. I bought the goddamn car and I have the right to say how to use it.” The floor shook again, and Rory guessed that his mother was stamping also. She yelled something, but he couldn’t hear what she said.

“I don’t want you driving all over hell and back,” his father said. “If you want to get out of the house, go for a walk. We live in the country, for Christ’s sake.”

Rory pulled his knees to his chin and covered his ears. His parents fought over the dishwasher, the pictures on the wall, the position of the chairs in the living room. They fought over television shows, bedspread colors, and the darkness of toast. He tried to block out all the sound, and he mostly could, but still the floor vibrated and one of the towers on his castle was shaking. “He can ride the bus,” his father said. “What’s wrong with the bus?”

Rory kicked the tower over, then stood. He kicked the walls down until all the blocks were spread around the floor like sea wreckage. He ran out of the room into the backyard and looked at the pool, a giant concrete hole surrounded by a cyclone fence. Rory took off his clothes and slipped in, as silently as possible, and was immediately cold and shivering. He swam to the bottom of the deep end and hung on to a stone his father
had thrown in during an argument about pool maintenance, and when Rory looked up, he
saw the leaves moving in circles where he had disturbed them. How silent it was, he
thought, and how he wished he could live underwater for the rest of his life, floating from
place to place, waving, but never being able to talk, never being able to hear anyone.
After a while, he wasn’t cold anymore until he rose to the surface to get a breath.

Years later, he still loved the pool. After his first year of college, he spent the
entire summer on a raft, depressed. He had no friends—his dorm mates had not made
plans to see him over the summer, or invited him to their houses. Not even Ghengis.
While he floated, his mother sat in her little work room, painting huge versions of Tarot
cards. She spoke often about her past lives, though Rory didn’t want to hear and always
changed the subject. Her favorite was about a woman in Northern Europe, or Russia.
She pictured a log cabin, a lamp, no windows but a few cracks between the logs, and the
call of wolves all around. She had been trapped, she said, shuddering whenever she spoke
about it, because leaving meant being torn apart. She didn’t remember the death, but she
was sure it was from wolves. She used to love dogs, feeding strays and even the
neighborhood dogs when she woke very early in the morning—to her husband’s
irritation—but now, since she’d conceived of this past life business, she hated and feared
them.

After his parents split, Rory liked to go into her workroom on summer mornings
and sit with her and drink tea while she painted. She had hung gauzy curtains over the
windows making the light diffuse and dreamlike. She had tiny, silent fans situated around
the room carefully placed to blow the curtains, to move bits of paper and cloth she had
draped on the backs of chairs and casually hanging off the ends of tables. The effect was
peaceful, and Rory often went into the room when she was not there just to listen to the
rustling sounds, but mostly he read books and watched his mother, hand on forehead, stare
for hours at her cards, scratching every now and then with a brush. Her water color
palettes crowded the work table and her finished Tarot cards hung, laminated to hard
wood, at the point where the ceiling met the wall. He knew his mother was crazy, but he
loved her, and he liked the world she inhabited, filled as it was with Egyptian mysticism,
reincarnation, and a universe that could be understood and interpreted by a deck of cardboard pictures.

Just before his first year of college, she had started on another version of The Magician as a gift for him to hang over his bed, telling him that he could be a great mystic, that he had great visionary powers. He tried to talk her out of it, both the picture and the powers, but she insisted, so he talked her into painting, instead, The Tower, telling her that it stood for the destruction of crippling ignorance. What he didn’t tell her was that, for him, the lightning bolt was his desire to break down his sense of isolation, his inability to really get anything out of his friendships, his inability to be truly interested in other people, as he thought he was supposed to be.

Interesting things happened to him while he was floating in the pool. One late September, when he was fifteen, he was lying on a raft, staring at the oak trees when his father came out of the house with a couple of suitcases. His parents had been fighting all morning, this time over the best way to use the spare room. His father wanted it completely to himself, as it always had been, but his mother, who had recently taken up watercolor painting, wanted a section for herself. His father had agreed, in theory, as he always did, but the argument raged over who got which half of the room, which tables, chairs, curtains and whether to have carpeting or a refurbished hardwood floor. Although the sky was overcast, the air was warm and humid and so Rory had gone out to float, tired of their voices and frustrated, because he knew there was no coming between them. His father put the suitcases in his truck, then went back into the house. Rory dipped himself underwater, then came back up and sat on the side of the pool. His father carried two boxes to the truck, then went back, and came out with clothes on hangers.

“Dad,” Rory said. “What are you doing?”

His father approached him, grabbing the chainlink fence surrounding the pool and shaking it. “I can’t stand being in the same house with that woman,” he said, shaking his finger at the door. “I’m leaving.”

Rory looked at his father’s face, at the long eyelashes flickering over tanned cheeks, and was excited—as if the really good part of a movie was coming up. “Divorce?” he said.
"We’ll see," his father said.

Rory watched as his father moved a few more things out to the truck, including his favorite floor to ceiling reading lamp, and two bookends he’d made out of ping pong paddles. Then his father drove off and silence fell over the house like deep sadness and it seemed to Rory that no matter what he did with his legs, still dangling in the pool, he couldn’t get the surface of the water to ripple.

It was the last fight Rory ever saw his parents have. He had been hoping, for years, that they would get a divorce. Sometimes, at the bottom of the pool, he would imagine himself and his mother traveling all over the country, she looking for jobs and places to live, he trying all kinds of crazy ways to make friends because it didn’t matter, he’d be leaving in a few months anyway. At one high school he would be a smoking, drug abusing loser with long hair, and at another, a smart, preppy guy who knew all the countries in Europe. But he knew, deep down, that despite all the fighting, his parents loved each other, and that it was the love that made them struggle and fight.

But they didn’t get a divorce. His father had done well in the real estate market, and he bought a house several lots away, and their family spread over two households. Rory and his mother lived in one house, a three-bedroom tiny place with white stucco walls, a dark, rough shingled roof and a patch of weed infested lawn. After his father moved out, his mother turned the spare room into her studio, dyed her hair jet black, and became a mystic. Rory’s father’s house was surrounded by nothing but overgrown grass. After three months, the grass was mown and edged, and the place looked like a golf course. Rory went over every weekend and ran his father’s riding mower, drawing patterns in the grass—the Yin and Yang was his favorite. Weekend evenings when his mother was not staying over, they watched television together, and Rory slept on the couch.

* * *

Rory lay still beneath the water of the shallow end, listening. He heard Ghengis swishing toward the deep end. Rory quickly gulped air from the surface, then dived down, following the curve of the pool’s bottom toward the deep end. When he reached
the grate, he held on to it, then looked up. He could barely see the surface and Ghengis was floating across frog-like. Then there was a splash, and another splash, and he could see several other forms in the water. He let go of the grate and rose to the surface, taking a huge breath when he broke it, and then flipping his head to throw his hair behind him.

The music from Morton’s apartment was a lot louder. People were standing around the pool. Rory looked around the edges, but didn’t see Melody. Morton was in the water, and he and Ghengis were splashing each other in the deep end. Then someone broke the surface behind him. The curly-headed woman he had seen in Morton’s apartment said, “Hi,” then ducked under the water again. She came back up.

“This is great,” she said. “Figures Ghengis would think of something like this.”

“Yeah,” Rory said.

“I’m Jamie,” she said. “Do you know Melody?”

“Kind of.”

“Roommate, that’s me.” She shook her head and tiny drops sprinkled the water’s surface. “Try to follow me,” she said. She ducked under the water, and he was about to follow, when he saw Melody sitting on the diving board. She had her knees drawn up to her chin. She was wearing white shorts and her hair was dry, hanging over her shoulders. She was holding a glass and drinking from it, and she looked perfectly content to be sitting there, while everyone else was in the pool. The pool was getting crowded, in fact. Rory looked around. Several people were on the balcony next to Morton’s apartment, and some were standing, dripping in their underwear, around the edges of pool. Melody, meanwhile, sipped her drink, and talked to no one.

* * *

At sixteen, Rory wanted to fall in love. It was what he needed, he decided, because he wanted to be like everyone else, and if he could fall in love and get together with someone, then he wouldn’t be lonely, for one thing, and perhaps other people would start trying to meet him halfway. He found himself, then, in Algebra II class sitting next to a foreign exchange student from Taiwan named Meilei. She was lovely: short, thin, long dark hair she let loose. It fell in front of her face and when he watched her at lunch time,
he thought it was very mysterious the way her Chinese eyes peered tentatively from around columns of hair. When he walked by her in the hall, she smiled shyly. He invited her to restaurants where he talked to her about whatever he wanted to, and she would sit silently, listening and smiling. He didn’t mind that she had a very difficult time speaking English. She seemed to enjoy the sound of his voice. He told her about his mother’s ideas, about how Christ was an avatar, one among many, and how he had learned his healing powers in Egyptian temples and was well versed in Sanskrit. Mei Lei smiled and nodded. He told her that Christ couldn’t have died on the cross, because his side was still bleeding, and wounds don’t bleed once you’re dead. Then he asked her about what she thought. She said nothing. She smiled and sipped tea. He imagined her saying everything she needed to by the way she clutched the porcelain tea cup in her delicate fingers.

A month later he went to a basketball game to see if he couldn’t make himself interested by being among a crowd of excited people. He sat near the top bleacher and enjoyed watching people he saw in the halls dance around the court, amazed at how good they were at basketball while sucking at math and barely being able to read. Then he saw Mei Lei. She was making out with a member of the pep band, her hands fluttering up and down his back, and when her lips parted, he saw her tongue touching his. Rory got up and left and called his mother to pick him up.

“I thought I was in love,” he told her. “But there she was, with Butch.”

His mother reached into her shirt pocket and handed Rory a card.

He opened the glove compartment and looked at the card in the light. “Mom,” he said. “The Fool? Thanks a lot.”

“What do you see?”

“An idiot walking off a cliff. He’s holding a white rose. He’s looking up. There’s a white dog jumping up.”

“The Fool is free from all conventions,” she said. “He walks his own path.”

“But he’s about to fall off that cliff!”

“Maybe,” she said. “But maybe he’ll keep on going. What’s a cliff to a fool?”

“I’m not a cartoon,” Rory said.
She shrugged and took the card back. When they got home, she touched his shoulder. “It’ll be all right,” she said. “Love is no simple thing.” She pressed her palm against his chest. “You’re too beautiful.” She pushed his hair behind his right ear.

“There’s only one person on the planet for you. You knew her in another life. You’ll find her.” Then she hugged him close and the warmth of her made him sad. For a moment, he thought she was right, her whole crazy world making sense, and then it was gone, and he sat on the couch in darkness, while his mother puttered around her work room, turning on lights and fans.

Rory skipped class the last afternoon of his Senior year in high school. He had been accepted at a university, but didn’t know if he wanted to go. On his way off campus, he stopped by the smoking area behind the temporary buildings. A girl sat on the concrete bench, smoking. She had extremely short orange hair, except for a mohawk kind of thing which flopped over on one side, making her hair seem almost normal. She wore a leather jacket, a short plaid skirt, old Victorian boots, and a white blouse. Around her chokered neck hung beaded necklaces, one of which had fake shark’s teeth on it. She was crying, deep sobs crying, and then taking drags on her cigarette, then hacking, and crying again.

He stared at her until she looked at him.

“What the fuck are you looking at, bug?” she said.

“What’s the matter?”

“I’m on the rag,” she said. “Fuck you for asking.”

In the middle of the smoking area was a giant concrete vat filled with sand called the Smoking Pit. Rory kicked it lightly with the tip of his shoe. He couldn’t figure out what to say to her, but felt that he should say something, that there was this person in real pain, struggling with some deep problem.

“Well,” she said. “What do you want?”

“Nothing,” he said.

“Are you going to smoke?”

“No,” he said.

She had stopped crying. She flicked the cigarette expertly into the sand, then unzipped a pocket and took another out, then stood up.
"You have no right to come here and disturb me," she said. "Go away, bug."

That night he decided he would go to college because he thought he would meet a lot more people like her, and he would start dressing like them, and be one of them, and do what they did. You could do things like that in college, he was convinced. The next morning, an hour before graduation practice, he hooked one end of a hose to the gate beside the pool, and put the other in his mouth and took a few breaths. He slipped into the water, swam to the bottom and as he breathed, convinced himself that he was in love with the girl, even though he could barely remember what she looked like, seeing only thick mascara and black red lips and what looked like a dog collar around her neck. He made up a history for her. She had already graduated, and had spent a year on the streets of a city, Los Angeles maybe, or New York, or maybe windy, rainy Chicago, and she went to clubs and drank Vodka and smoked cigarettes and spent the night with different people in different apartments. And maybe she had a boyfriend, a musician, but that was over because she started to fall in love with him, but he was interested only in a fuck every now and then. But she was sick of that life, just a fantasy, after all, and she had come back into the real world, which was why she was crying. She came back to the smoking area to figure out where she went wrong. That's what people did, he thought. They went wrong, then they wondered what happened.

Though he was sure she was just passing through, he thought maybe someday he would find her, and so for a while that summer, he walked the streets at twilight, hoping he to see her flicking cigarettes into the gutter by the movie theater, or at the park behind the post office.

At the end of that summer, his room was a cell: four bare walls, a bed, two sets of drawers, a nightstand and a window covered by dark blue venetian blinds. He sat on his bed, cross legged, because he could not assume the lotus position anymore. When he was fifteen, he could do it. But now, he was no longer flexible enough to imitate his Mother's Buddha figures. He was packed and ready to go to school, and he was trying to prepare himself for a new life. He thought about how his mother and father were split, but not split. It seemed to him perfectly natural that they should love each other, yet live apart, and this feeling scared him because he did not want to end up like them. He wanted to be
surrounded by people, living breathing bodies struggling and fighting and arguing over dirty dishes.

His mother came in and handed him a bookbag. He lifted it, noticing the weight.

"The Tower," she said.

He stood and took a look around the room.

"Let's go," she said. "Your father's out in the car."

"He's going too?"

By the time he had driven up to the giant brick building, his parents had lapsed into a bitter silence after a three-sentence argument about the best route to the university. His father said that he wanted to drive around and look at the town while his mother would help him move his few possessions. She put a nail in the wall and hung the picture, and then she sat in the middle of the room and began to meditate. Rory closed the door in case any of the other people might see her. After a while she stood up in a single graceful motion, and said, "There. I've put my protection on the place."

"Thanks, Mom."

He stood with her on the curb until his father drove by. "Knock 'em dead," his father said. "Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

When the car disappeared around the other side of the building, Rory realized that they now lived in three places, two houses and a dorm room, the perfect family. The feeling remained until he met Ghengis that night, and found himself surrounded by people watching him help with the loft.

It had been the best year of his life, but when he left for the summer, having already made plans to move into an apartment the next year, mainly because Ghengis wanted to, he began to see things. He began to see that hanging around a lot of people was a false closeness, a physical closeness and not any other kind. What he wanted was a girlfriend, but the idea, still, was abstract. A Girlfriend, capitalized. An allegorical Helpmeet. He thought about painting a Tarot card, calling it "The Girlfriend," and then carrying it around in his wallet for luck. He even went so far as to sit down at his mother's desk, one morning, when she hadn't come home from his father's. After a few sketches, he went out for a swim instead.
By the end of the summer, he had decided to leave himself open for love. He would look around, he would let his imagination take him away, and he would try to get to know the women he met. On the first day of class that Fall semester, he saw Melody. She sat in the back of the room, like him, and he snuck glances at her and when she explained one day in class how she felt sorry for Grendel because he was on the outside and couldn’t have fun with all the other people in Heorot, he was in love. How did she know him so well! He was Grendel!

But he only watched her, and sometimes followed her into the Student Union and watched her eat homemade sandwiches wrapped in plastic and foil. Then, only a week before, when he saw her around his apartment complex, he could do nothing but sit at his window in case she wandered by.

* * *

He had been staring at Melody so intently he didn’t know someone was behind him until he felt a cool hand touch his shoulder.

“You forgot to follow me,” Jamie said.

“Sorry,” he said. “My turn.” He raised his arms and let himself sink to the bottom. He looked up and saw murky darkness shifting on the surface. He touched bottom, then crouched down and held on to the grate. He imagined Jamie swimming around looking for him, then thought about Melody on the diving board. He wished she would get into the water.

Then, suddenly, the world became light. Rory turned around and there was Jamie, floating just behind and above him, her form blocking the intense pool light just under the diving board. She was in her underwear. He could see her tan lines. They rose together. The manager of the apartment was yelling at people to get out of the pool, nightswimming was not allowed. The music lowered and people were moving toward the ladder by the shallow end.

“Meet you in the laundry room,” Jamie said. She laughed, then gathered up her clothes and, dripping the whole way, walked through the gate and down along the first floor balcony to the laundry room.
Rory looked over his head, trying to see Melody. Ghengis put his shorts on over his wet underwear and climbed the stairs.
Rory scraped the water from his body with cupped hands, and looked around. No one was looking at him. He went to the laundry room. Jamie was twisting her hair, getting the water out over the sink. She was still in her underwear and Rory was embarrassed to see her standing under the harsh fluorescent light.
"Got any money?" she said, pointing at the dryer.
"Yeah," Rory said. He fished two quarters out of his pants pocket. "Enough for one load."
"All right then," she said. "I’ll go first."
He stood there, looking at her.
She frowned. "Turn around," she said. "I’m going to take off my clothes." He turned toward the dryer and inserted the coins while listening to her change. "Okay," she said. "I’m done." He looked over his shoulder and saw her in her sweatshirt and shorts. She put her underwear in the dryer and started it going.
"How about you?" she said, pointing at his underwear, which he was hiding behind a bundle of clothes.
"It’s all right," he said. "I can change upstairs."
"You live here?"
"Yeah, across from Morton."
"Ah," she said. She looked at him and wrinkled her brow. "You’re pretty cute, you know. How come I haven’t seen you before? You don’t like to party?"
Rory shrugged. "Turn around," he said.
"Why? Not like I haven’t seen what you got."
Rory blushed and waited.
"Oh, all right," she said.
He put on his shorts and his sweatshirt.
"Okay," he said.
"I liked you better the other way," she said.
Her underwear clacked against the side of the dryer.
"You don’t talk much," she said. "What’s in the bag?"
"Gin and tonics," he said.
"Well! Let’s have some!"
"I’ve only got one glass."
"We can share."

He took out the mixings and fixed a drink. The ice cubes were mostly melted, but a few nubs were left. Jamie wrinkled her nose when she tasted the drink.
"A bit harsh," she said. "But I like it."
She took another sip and handed it to him. He drank also, though the idea of sharing food with another person usually disgusted him. He didn’t see how he could get out of it this time.
"So," he said. "You know Melody? She’s in my English class."
"She hates that class," Jamie said, waving her arms toward the door.
"Doesn’t seem like it," Rory said. "She always has something to say."
"Yeah, well." She finished the rest of the drink and handed him the cup. She opened the dryer and decided that her underwear was dry enough. "Let’s go back to the party," she said.

He followed her to the stairs, then at the third floor balcony, he started for his own apartment. "Hey," she said. "Where are you going! You owe me a dance."
"Gotta change," he said.
"All right," she said. "But you better come back."

He changed, combed his hair, and turned out the lights. He looked across the courtyard. Morton’s curtains were open, but the lights were off, except for a black light, and a strobe light. Glowing T-shirts jumped around the living room.

Rory turned on the light, deciding not to go over. Then he looked at the picture of The Tower over his computer, and thought about the way his mother re-interpreted these pictures to fit her mood. He looked at the man and the woman falling from the tower, looks of fear on their faces, followed by tear drops of flame. What if, he thought, they
were skydiving? Being excited was the same as being scared, wasn’t it? He touched his chest. It felt the same, anyway. And Ghengis was right. Go for stuff. Improvise, and all that.

He turned off the light and felt his chest again.

* * *

In the last weeks of the previous summer, Rory’s father had acquired another riding lawn mower, and on the Saturday afternoon before Rory was to head to school and his new apartment, they mowed the lawn together, each on their own mower, traveling a double spiral, from the center at the house, until they were hundreds of yards apart at the edge. After cleaning up and mowing the tight spots around the house with a hand held mower, they went up to the roof to get a bird’s eye view of the lawn, and to watch the setting sun set high clouds on fire.

“Dad,” he said. “How come you and Mom live like this?” He waved his hand in the direction of his mother’s house, a burning yellow spot at that distance, then back to the roof. “Why didn’t you get divorced, like other people do?”

His father stood and walked to the edge of the roof and stared at the single tree in the middle of the backyard. Rory joined him at the edge.

“Love,” he said. “Simple as that.”

Rory went back to the chimney and sat down.

“She’s the only woman I’ll ever love,” his father said. “It’s as if we love each other so much we can’t stand the rest of life when we’re together. In the bedroom, though, when there’s nothing between us, just us in the naked night flesh to flesh . . . .”

He turned back and looked at Rory, then shrugged and put his hands in his pockets. “That’s love,” he said. “That’s what it is. You can’t live with it. I can’t, anyway, and neither can she.”

“I don’t believe that.”

His father shrugged again.

“I think you could live in the same house,” Rory said. “You just have to work at it. Keep trying and refuse to fight over all that bullshit.”
“Where did you learn this stuff,” his father said. “Telelevision?” He walked to Rory and lowered his hand toward Rory’s shoulder, then pulled it back before touching him. “Work at it. Hell. Have you ever spent time with a woman?”

“I get along with, Mom,” he said.

“You and her, you’re the same,” he said.

“No we’re not,” Rory said. “We are not, Dad. She’s crazy. I don’t believe any of that stuff.”

His father tapped Rory on the head. “That’s where she wants to be. She runs everything inside there. That’s when she’s happy. Can’t give up anything for anyone else.”

They watched the sun go down and then Rory went home.

The next morning, he loaded up his father’s pick-up, then went to say good-bye to his mother. He brought her a pot of boiling water and her pouch of herb tea. He watched her arrange the cups and fill the tea cozies (which leaked tea leaves) and thought how relaxed she seemed, so at home in her white work room. She didn’t pace as his father did, or sigh at odd moments, or pound her fist into her hand and shake her head at television commercials.

“Why do you love Dad?” he said.

“I’ve stopped asking those kinds of questions,” she said. “No answers.” She pressed her palms to her skirt, then drew a card from the deck near her paintbrushes. She handed it to Rory, who lay it flat beside his saucer.

“The Chariot,” she said. “Perhaps that’s it.” She pointed at the two sphinxes. “Love and Lust.”

He tossed the card back onto the table. “Come on, Mom,” he said. “You could get divorced, find someone else, have someone around all the time.”

“Is that what you want?” his mother said.

“Mom,” Rory said.

“Why didn’t you ask this a long time ago?” She poured him a cup of tea, and waved her hand seven times over the steam before taking out the tea cozy and handing him the cup.
"I was afraid," he said. "I thought maybe if I said anything—maybe you were staying together because of me, and if I said something, that would be it."

"You wanted us together," she said.

"No," he said. "You fought too much. I wanted you guys to split up."

He drank the tea and handed her the cup. She set it down before her, put her palm over it, and tapped her hand three times, then lifted her hand and peered into the cup.

"That's not what it says here," she said.

He grabbed the cup and dumped the leaves on the floor. "You don't know anything about me, Mom," he said. "This crap doesn't tell you anything."

He walked out of the room, then walked back and stood in the doorway. "Well?" he said.

She turned on one of her fans, and a curtain moved by the window, and then she shrugged, and in that shrug he recognized his father's gesture, and his own. He shivered as the cool faint gust hit him and he realized that he was not himself, but the two of them. When he slipped beneath the water later that night, with only the moon to show the surface, he didn't know if what he felt was hatred, pity or both.

* * *

Ghengis was sitting by the stereo system, sorting CD's. Melody was sitting on the arm of a couch, talking to Morton. The strobe flickered, sputtering like a bug light, and everyone flashed green-yellow teeth under the black light. Rory went to the kitchen and made himself another drink. He had had three already but he couldn't feel them. He started drinking, standing by himself in the kitchen, listening to the music, trying to distinguish the yelling voices, and feeling in his feet the vibrations of the dancers and the bass speakers.

Jamie came around the corner.

"You owe me!" she said. She set her beer on the counter, then opened the refrigerator. "You think you got problems," she said. "I got problems. This beer sucks."

Rory noticed how the label of her beer was peeled away.
She closed the refrigerator and pointed at the tatters. “I don’t want anyone to know I drink this shit,” she said. She opened the new bottle, flipping the bottlecap out the doorway. She drank, then leaned against the wall. “Hey,” she said. “I like your hair.”

Rory had shoulder length hair, tucked behind his ears. He had let it grow out of loyalty to the Smoking Pit woman.

“Thanks,” he said. He began to feel the gin shrinking the top of his scalp. The floor felt softer. “Thanks,” he said again, then turned and headed for the dance floor.

“Hey,” Jamie said. “I’m not done talking to you!”

Rory ignored her and sat by Ghengis. “She’s on the couch,” Rory said. “Does she dance? Have you seen her dance?”

Ghengis started a portable CD playing music, then started switching discs on the five CD changer. “Who?” he said. “What are you talking about?”

“Melody.”

“Oh, yeah. Huh.”

He pushed the changer in, then looked at Rory. “Look, man. I don’t know. Go with the flow. Just go talk to her. Ask her to dance. Fucking kiss her, for all I care. I got my own problems.”

Rory finished the rest of his drink, then headed back toward the kitchen. Jamie was still there. He turned away, then turned back to her.

“Hey,” she said. “This gin isn’t bad.” She had the bottle open, and took a tiny sip out of it. “Like rubbing alcohol and pine sol.”

“Stop that,” he said. He took the bottle away and set it on the counter. “Where’s the cap?”

“I threw it away. That means we have to finish it.”

Rory shook his head. “Who are you, anyway? Why do you keep bothering me?”

“You really know how to get to a girl, don’t you.”

“Leave me alone.”

“No,” she said. She grabbed the glass out of his hand and set it on the counter. “You’re so cute I can hardly stand it.” She took his hand and held it up to him. “Look at these,” she said, pointing at his thin fingers. “Beautiful. We’re dancing.” She pulled him
out to the dance floor, and held on to him has she started shifting her feet, swaying with every step.

Rory jerked his hand away. Ghengis was leaping around as if casting petals on the wind. Rory looked at Melody sitting on the couch, squeezed between the arm and Morton. They were talking into each other’s ears. Rory started jumping, twisting his arms, leaning back, then jumping again. He started flipping his hair.

“Hey,” Jamie, said. “Take it easy.”

The song stopped, and Rory ducked behind a few people, then circled around to the couch. “Want to dance?” he said to Melody. She looked at Morton, then said, “sure,” and held out her hand. Rory took it and they went to the center of the living room and started dancing. Rory jumped around like before, and swung his hair. Except for earlier with Jamie, he had never done this before. It felt great, pulling at his scalp, brushing against his face. It was still wet, and tiny drops, every now and then, flew out at people. He looked up, pulling the hair from his eyes, and saw Melody following along, her hair photographed in the strobe light. It amazed him how easy it was.

The song stopped, and while they waited for the disc to change, Rory said, “You make English worth going to—the things you say.”

“Oh,” she said. “I knew I recognized you from somewhere.”

Genghis came up behind Rory and said, “Is that strobe making you sick? It’s making me sick.”

The music resumed and they began to dance again, but halfway through, Jamie came up and whispered in Melody’s ear, and took her place. Rory was pissed. He walked away, and went to Melody, who was standing in front of Morton. He touched her shoulder, and when she turned around, he looked at her face—this was the closest he had ever been to her—and saw the eyelashes, the tender skin of the eyelids, the darkness under her eyes, the smooth curve of cheekbone to chin, and he leaned forward, hardly knowing what he was going to do, and as he moved he felt his hair, now mostly dry, fall around his face, and then he kissed her on the cheek, his eyes open, looking at her ear through strands of both his and her hair. Gently, she pushed him back, touching his chest, and he closed his eyes, and then opened them. The strobe light shut off, and it was dark, then someone
turned on a lamp. Melody was looking at him. Her forehead was wrinkled. Morton stood behind her. She slapped Rory, but he didn’t feel it, and it seemed to him that the music had stopped, although he could still feel it in his feet. He stepped back, watching as Melody shook her head, and turned away, and then he looked around and everyone was watching, surrounding him like a wall of eyes. Ghengis’ glasses flashed above his white glowing T-shirt, and the people sitting by the wall seemed frozen, staring, and Jamie, standing next to Ghengis, watched with wide eyes. Rory turned around and took a few steps.

“I only kissed her,” Rory said. “I thought—” He looked around for his drink. He couldn’t hear anything and thought he had water in his ears. He held his nose and blew. Then all the sound came back in a rush, like a fan turning on, and the first sound he recognized was Jamie, laughing.

“You got the wrong girl,” she said, and walked toward him, arms open. He went to the front door and darted out, walking quickly toward his apartment. When he saw Jamie coming out of Morton’s door, he ducked down the stairs. The pool was dark again, and smooth, broken only by the swish of a floating skim filter. He heard Jamie say, “I’m not sure. Maybe he went home,” and Ghengis say, “I can’t believe he actually did it,” and Jamie say, “he wouldn’t be so bad if he’d just relax a little—did I tell you what he said to me?”

Rory pushed off his shoes and slipped into the water. His heavy sweatshirt made it easy to sink to the bottom and caressed him as he sat cross-legged, letting air bubble from his mouth. Slowly, he eased his way up again and when his head broke the water, he listened. The filter swam around him, its tail swishing gentle sine waves, while above, thudding music shook the buildings.
East

Two men drove east in a yellow Toyota pickup with a camper shell. They had just graduated from college and were heading home. Ryan, the driver, was happy. He had a job lined up with an engineering firm in Seattle and he was thinking about how to ask his girlfriend to marry him. His friend, Gabe, head sweating where it rested against the passenger side window, was unhappy. He had no job, no girlfriend, and, as far as he could see, would never have such things. For several hours, he had listened to Ryan hum tunelessly. It seemed to him that all his life he had heard that humming, and sometimes he wondered what tune it was Ryan imagined. As they crested the Cascades and started toward eastern Oregon’s scrub desert, Ryan said, “So, buddy, what are you going to do?”

“Nothing. I’m going to go home, sit on the couch, and rot. My mom will plant potatoes in me next spring, maybe a little squash—”

“Come on.”

“I have no fucking idea, Ryan.”

Tiny droplets of sweat glimmered on Ryan’s upper lip as he smiled. Gabe thought there was no one else in the world who disgusted him more. Secretly, he thought of himself as smarter, as more feeling, as keyed into the deeper things in life, which was why he chose history after he had failed the term of engineering Ryan had urged on him their freshman year. He loved reading and he liked talking in class about the movements of power and ideas. He liked contemplating what might have been had certain battles been won or lost, had certain leaders lived or died. Refusing to think of the “future” and of “potential jobs”, as Ryan constantly did, seemed wonderfully rebellious. But now that school was over, for good, his knowledge of history had gotten him nowhere. Ryan was an engineer. Ryan always landed on his feet. Ryan knew exactly what to do every minute of his life while inside Gabe, deep down, there was only uncertainty, a lack of a center. It was the part of himself Gabe liked and thought about least—until graduation.

“All right,” Gabe said. “You know me. What should I do? What should I aim for in life? Set me on the path to greatness.”
Ryan pulled his hand through his hair, then readjusted his left leg. "You could farm."

"No."

"How about graduate school? You could teach."

"I can’t afford it, and in two years, or four, or six, I’d be in the same boat."

"Okay. Maybe find a business. A restaurant. A bookstore. Start at the bottom and work your way up."

"Bores me to tears."


"Be easier to shoot myself. Just drop me here."

Outside, firs lined the highway and on Gabe’s side, glimpses of a white water creek showed through trunks and roadside brush. Ryan sighed. They drove along in silence. Gabe had seriously asked the question. Nothing appealed to him, and he wondered if he would work a job he hated, or not work, or take up drinking, or let his mother support him for the rest of his life. He was scared because he didn’t seem to want anything, except to get out of the truck. Ryan started humming again, and Gabe watched Ryan’s mouth as the corners slowly, imperceptibly, lifted.

"You’re not helping," Gabe said.

"You’re helpless," Ryan said. He pulled a bottle of water from behind his seat and drank half. "Want the rest?"

Gabe hesitated, then took the bottle. While he drank, Ryan said, "Ever since we were kids. Always apathetic. You’re the king of negative attitude."

What Gabe remembered was always being pissed at Ryan, as he was now. The insufferable, perpetually happy boy whose every action was showered with praise and admiration. It made Gabe sick to think about it. They had met in Kindergarten, and by first grade, had been best friends. They lived back fence to back fence. In second grade, Gabe fell in love with Cathy, a beautiful redhead with cat-eye glasses who loved to play on the swings. He liked to sit next to her during art projects, and he would take the next swing during recess, often beating her to the playground and saving a seat for her. He told Ryan about her one day, trusting Ryan to keep a secret, but Ryan ruined it anyway.
He began to show off on the monkey rings, calling out to Cathy, looking to make sure she was watching him. His arm got caught in the rings. There was a crack, and a thud as Ryan fell, and another crack. Ryan was screaming and Cathy stood over him, looking at the bone poking through the skin and the flannel shirt. She had gone to get the nurse while Gabe threw up behind the handball court. She followed Ryan everywhere after that, helping him with his cast, handing people pens to sign it with.

And then there was the scouting trip when they were thirteen. The boys had flown up the hill while Gabe trudged slowly, falling farther behind until the scoutmaster gave him a whistle to blow in case anything happened, then went on ahead, following the boys. Gabe had been fat, out of shape, constantly thirsty and his feet hurt. His shoes were old and too small. His mother refused to buy new boots because he was growing too fast.

He got to the top of the hill, went down a little way, and found the rest of the troop setting up camp on the side of a lake. On the other side, a stone cliff rose to a ridge, beyond which lay the peak.

"I'm going to climb that cliff," Ryan said to him the next morning. They hiked around the lake without telling anyone until they found a place Ryan thought looked good. Gabe, who had always warned him against doing dangerous things, decided not to this time because it did no good and made him look like a pussy.

The cliff was about fifty feet high, sloped slightly, and had lots of rocks and ridges for Ryan to hold on to.

"It doesn't look very solid," Ryan said.

"It's rock," Gabe said. "Climb."

Ryan started up, holding tightly to rocks and ridges. Halfway up, he grabbed at a rock and pulled it out. Gravel fell to the base. Gabe stepped back, trembling. Ryan grabbed another rock and pulled it out. There was a loud crack, and then the face of the cliff to his right slid off, a sheet of rock, flaking down, then cutting under Ryan, leaving him no way to descend. Gabe was scared at the thought of Ryan falling, lying broken on the rocks, ashen faced, his leg twisted under, and the trembling became intense loneliness. But then a calm overcame him. He thought about school, and everyone asking him what
had happened, about Ryan’s parents, the perfect parents, begging him to tell them about their son’s last moments of life.

“Gabe,” Ryan said. “Get some help.”

Gabe froze, watching Ryan cling to the cliff for life, then bent to pick up a rock.

“Gabe,” Ryan said. His finger tips were white and his legs shook with tension.

“Hurry. Please!”

The calm receded, like the ocean going out and the trembling returned. He threw the rock across the lake, into the camp, then yelled for the scoutmaster.

Later, after Ryan told the story over and over, the boys went swimming while Gabe hiked alone into a small stand of trees, sat against a trunk, and ate pink and white animal cookies. He hadn’t wanted Ryan to die, he told himself. He wanted him to fall, to break some bones. He wanted Ryan to have to be carried down the mountain to the van. He hated Ryan because he loved Ryan, because he wanted to be Ryan, wanted his father to be alive, to know who he was, to be small and skinny and light and clever. Gabe opened a paperback and started reading. He ate another animal cookie and took off his shoes to air his blisters.

* * *

By late afternoon they were on the plains and it was hot, at least a hundred degrees. The hood of the truck was brown with grit, the road ahead shimmered and Gabe’s bare feet hung out the window.

“Let me drive,” Gabe said.

Ryan pulled over and got out. He pressed his hands against his back, then stretched, touching his fingers to toes. Gabe slid across the bench seat and thought about how he had never been able to touch his toes. He was no longer fat, but he was still big, and not very flexible. He put his boots back on, then gunned the engine. Ryan rushed around the truck and got in.

They drove along for a while. Gabe watched the white dashes slip under the hood. Not a single car passed them. He looked at the dirt, the scrub brush, the way the horizon merged into the desert as if it were one and the same. He was going to tell Ryan that it
was a perfect metaphor for his situation, but Ryan had fallen asleep. Presently, he woke up, wiped the moisture from his forehead and pulled another bottle from behind the seats. He drank one half and Gabe drank the other. Then Ryan started humming again, patting his knees in beatless accompaniment.

“I wish you wouldn’t do that,” Gabe said.

Ryan stopped, and after a few minutes of silence, he started up again. Gabe said, “I gotta piss.” He slowed the truck just enough and turned onto a dirt road. He stepped on the gas and the truck pushed further into the desert. Gabe knew that Ryan wouldn’t ask him what he was doing. Ryan never asked those questions, like it was some hero’s code. Gabe pressed the accelerator to the floor and the back end of the truck swished around with each turn or bump, releasing dusty clouds into the pale sky.

After fifteen minutes, Ryan said, “Okay. Where are we going?”

“The back way,” Gabe said. “Scared?”

Ryan looked at him. Gabe couldn’t tell what he was thinking. Ryan rolled down his window and stuck his arm out. The wind whisked across the stubble of Gabe’s crew cut, making him smile.

Ryan started to hum again. He hummed for another fifteen minutes, Gabe estimated. He could hear it even above the whistle of the wind in the cab and the rattle of the camper. In quick looks, Gabe focused on Ryan, the tense face, the clenched jaw, the hum, thin, almost keening.

Gabe smiled and nodded. He slowed down a little.

“That’s it,” Ryan said. “Stop. Let’s go back.”

“No way,” Gabe said. Making Ryan nervous didn’t feel as good as he had expected.

Ryan opened the glove compartment, shut it, looked through the back window at the camper, then looked at Gabe, who felt his look for an uncomfortably long time.

“You know,” Ryan said. “It’s all your fault. If you would’ve just picked something and stuck with it, you wouldn’t be in this sorry state.”

“Don’t bullshit, me,” Gabe said. “I’m not stopping.”

“All you ever did was follow me around.”
“Fuck you.”

Ryan leaned back. He unbuckled his seat belt and put his feet on the dash, his arms behind his head. “I liked it,” he said. “Someone, especially someone big like you, someone shaped like a school bully, following me around like a dog.”

Gabe gripped the wheel until his knuckles turned white.

“You don’t have any self,” Ryan said. “That’s your problem.” He laughed, as if appreciating for the first time the truth of his theory. “Always looking for someone else to be.”

Gabe reached over and grabbed Ryan’s T-shirt. The collar lifted away from Ryan’s neck, revealing a delicate, fragile collar bone.

“I’ll tell you what to do,” Ryan said, ignoring the pressure of Gabe’s hand. “Go get a fucking needle, a huge knitting needle, and poke yourself. You’ll explode. Nothing there but gas.”

Gabe let go.

“You’re just a thought balloon above my head,” Ryan said.

“That’s right,” Gabe said. “You know it. I don’t really exist. It’s not even me driving this truck.”

Ryan put his feet down.

“Stop the truck, Gabe.”

“No.”

“It’s my truck.”

“I’m driving.” Gabe started weaving on the dirt road, letting the tires ride the edges.

“Quit wasting time. Turn around and let’s go back.” Ryan scooted closer, then kicked Gabe’s right foot away and hit the break peddle at the same time he grabbed the wheel. The truck swerved, and for a moment, before everything went black, a floating sensation, beginning in Gabe’s stomach, rose up to his chest, then back again until it punched him in the gut.

* * *
The world was upside down. Ryan lay cradled, asleep on the ceiling of the cab. Broken glass everywhere, an intricate maze carved in glass on the half of the windshield still intact. Gabe’s head was thick, confused. Outside, the desert was blue, the sky a smeared gray, yellow, brown. Gabe shook his head against the throbbing.

“Ryan,” he said. “Like the Zipper, man. Remember?” He reached up, or was it down, and pushed Ryan’s shoulder. “I’ll never forgive you for making me go on that thing.” He pressed against the ceiling, then released his seat belt and fell heavily. The world suddenly reversed itself and Gabe had to get out right away. He kicked open the door and crawled to a bush and puked. He wiped his mouth and looked at the truck, perfectly upside down, like a tortoise that had given up. He wondered for a minute if it was going to explode, like in the movies, and decided to wait and see, even smelling popcorn. Then he heard a voice. “Ryan?” he said. He stood, wavered, shook his head again, and rushed to the passenger side. Ryan’s leg, bloody, stuck out the window. Gabe grabbed for it, then saw that it was broken. Horribly broken, at the ankle. The blood was dark red, almost bluish in the fading light. He reached in and pulled Ryan out, then away from the truck, letting the leg drag in the dust, and arranged him near a sage brush. He started slapping Ryan’s cheek.

Ryan opened his eyes. “Idiot,” he said.

Gabe explained the situation, then got a couple of blankets out of the camper, arranged one for a pillow, and covered Ryan with the other. He was afraid there might be shock, though he didn’t know what to do about it. Night was falling and Ryan seemed to be asleep.

Gabe sat beside Ryan’s head, rocking with his arms around his legs, wondering what to do. It was getting cold. He was pissed at himself. It was Ryan’s fault but that didn’t really matter. Who cared about fault?

Ryan woke up. “I need some water,” he said.

Gabe found an unbroken bottle and held it to Ryan’s lips, then gave him a couple of aspirin.

“Aspirin,” Ryan said. He half-laughed. “I need a hospital.”
“There’s a town nearby,” Gabe said. He looked east at the faint yellow-white glare on the horizon. He went a little way off the road and stood on a rock. Tiny sulfur lights gleamed and behind them, two red lights blinked irregularly. He sat down beside Ryan.

“It’s not far,” he said. “I can carry you. I can make a sling, or something, or hold on to your legs.”

“All right,” Ryan said.

Gabe checked Ryan’s foot, no new blood, and then watched his face closely and thought how peaceful Ryan looked, and he thought how rotten he felt, as if he himself had snapped Ryan’s leg, had done it out of anger or spite over some ridiculous thing, like the humming. He felt as if his own foot were broken, not Ryan’s, and that it had always been broken, and always would be. Gabe leaned back until he was staring at the sky. The milky way was a clear band. Nothing ever changed, Gabe thought. Nothing. He didn’t know what it was, why he couldn’t think of his life as something ahead of him, or behind him. He was stuck in the present, tightly wound, like a roll of tape without a loose end.

He woke Ryan up and pulled him over his shoulders, bent double with Ryan draped over him, then grabbed Ryan’s legs and arranged him piggy back. He lurched toward the town.

They stopped ten minutes later to rest. Ryan drew quick breaths, then held still for a few seconds, then breathed quickly again. Gabe looked at the desert. It looked like the moon, powdery dust, dead bushes in grotesque shapes all around.

“I’m sorry about the truck,” he said. “I’ll pay for it, somehow. Maybe my mom. She can get me a job down at Wallmart.” Gabe shuddered at the thought of it.

Ryan started to say something, but Gabe couldn’t understand him. He held his head close to Ryan’s, but Ryan was just mouthing words. Gabe poured water in his mouth, and Ryan drank.

Gabe thought about running as fast as he could to the town, then bringing help back, but he was afraid Ryan wouldn’t make it, that he’d die alone out in the desert and it would be Gabe’s fault, but then he’d die if Gabe didn’t do anything, and carrying him wasn’t going to work. Gabe put his head in his hands and tried to think straight.
“Gabe,” Ryan said. “Gabe.” He voice was soft, but it sounded okay, lucid, as if he were recovering.

“The pain,” Ryan said. “God it hurts.”

“Maybe that’s good,” Gabe said.

“Look,” Ryan said. “Don’t worry about the truck. I’ll buy a new one.”

Gabe laughed and Ryan laughed along with him. Gabe grabbed his hand and held it tightly.

“When I get to Seattle,” Gabe said, “when I get settled, an apartment, a routine—I can start looking around.”

Gabe loosened his grip. “For what?”

“For a job. There’s gotta be something there. Maybe you could sell coffee.” His laugh was whispery.

Gabe let Ryan’s hand drop in the dust. “You need to get started,” Ryan said.

“You need to move on.”

Gabe stood. Ryan, in the darkness, seemed very far away. The lights of the town glowed in a rising mist. He’d heard those words before, back before college when Gabe hadn’t known what he wanted to do. College had seemed pointless, just more high school. He’d spent June reading books and taking care of the back yard. Almost every day, Ryan, over the back fence, tried to talk him into applying at the college he was going to. “We can be roommates,” he said, flashing an extra application. It was the last thing Gabe wanted, to be with Ryan. He’d been with him all through high school, watching him get one girlfriend after another, head the tennis team, become yearbook editor, and of course he was the one who could always find alcohol for parties. He was funny when he was drunk. People called him to do things. The last thing Gabe had wanted to do was be around him another four years. But, finally, he did. What convinced him was his mother.

He had gone down to Wallmart, where she worked, and watched her. She wore a small blue jacket, and she looked frumpy—bags under her eyes, plump, hair dyed a coppery shade of auburn. She smiled and deferred to the customers. An older man, with an unlit pipe dangling from his lips, had forgotten a purchase. She chased after him, running down the aisle, batteries in upraised hand. The sight disgusted him, the way she
chased after the man, reaching toward him as if her life depended on him, an old man no better than she. He felt it in his lower stomach, a rumbling, gurgling disgust and he left the store to get some fresh air. He walked home along the railroad tracks and went to Ryan’s house and got the extra application.

"Gabe," Ryan said. "I don’t feel so good. Come here."

Gabe bent down.

"I’m afraid," Ryan said. "You gotta carry me. We have to get to that town." His voice was very weak.

Gabe stepped away, just for a minute, but found himself continuing to walk. He wouldn’t let himself think about what he was doing, or where he was going. The town was just ahead but he didn’t plan on stopping there, or anywhere, because his legs were numb, everything was numb, and he was going to walk forever. He heard Ryan’s voice, weak, calling out. He could hear the pain in the voice, the fear, the need, simple, like an animal’s and it made Gabe shake but he couldn’t stop walking, couldn’t turn around. He imagined Ryan lying there, looking at the stars, wondering, wondering. Tears streamed down Gabe’s face—he could taste the salt, his chest expanded with short breaths, and he put his fingers in his ears to block out the voice and kept walking.
Man with Dog

When John Alexander stepped into the house after a day at the insurance office, his wife, Liz, said, “You love that dog more than me.” She was a plump woman, a foot shorter than he, with a mop of short, dark hair already graying at thirty-five.

“Not true,” John said. He set his briefcase next to the umbrella stand, loosened his tie, pressed his jacket into the closet, and glanced at the garage door. “Do we have to talk about this now?” John was tall and slender. His long nose, sloping forehead and sparse, swept back hair accentuated the narrowness of his skull. His office mates called him “the greyhound,” and “narrow minded” when they thought he wasn’t listening.

“You don’t love me at all,” she said. “It’s been obvious for some time. I take care of the house, earn extra money at the doctor’s office, see the kids off to school—I feel like a single parent.” She backed up before him as he edged his way through the kitchen. She put her hand on the counter and sent a spatula clattering to the floor. “Damn it.” She struck the counter and stamped her foot.

He touched her shoulder. “Of course I love you.”

She stopped frowning, lifted and opened her hands, leaned forward and closed her eyes. His hand dropped to her upper arm, squeezed, then let go.

She shook her head. “Jesus,” she said. She bent to pick up the spatula, whipping it off the floor. “I can’t believe it. A dog.”

John slipped by her and opened the garage door. The dog’s tail knocked against a cardboard box. The air smelled faintly of urine, dog food, wet fur.

“Beauty,” he said. “Byoo-tee.” He closed the door behind him. “No. No. You can’t go in there. No dogs in the house.” He patted her head and stroked the soft folds of her ears. “Good girl. She won’t let you. Good dog, hairy old thing.”

As he crouched, Beauty tucked her head between his chest and leg. He scratched her back, then under her collar, murmuring, “How’s my Beauty? Good girl,” then scratched the spot at the base of her tail until she groaned.
He let go, followed her to the back door, and let her out. She darted across the unkempt lawn into the old walnut orchard, then came running back, shooting left, coming around again in widening circles as he walked between the rows of trees.

Several minutes into the orchard, walking along, thinking of nothing, he heard his wife slam the door. She was probably right, he had to admit. She had been agitated in recent weeks by his absent mindedness (he had forgotten Sandra’s tenth birthday), and he would have to do something about it, but he was sure she loved him, though it was hard for him to think about such things. He thought for a moment about them. He did love them: Sandra tearing around the house with a ten-year-old’s energy, her brother trying to keep up; and Liz so cute he could hardly stand it, sometimes—her hands waving as she spoke of the doctor’s office, her scolding, her games with the children, her half-moon glasses for paperwork. And they loved him, too, he thought. They always asked him to play or watch television—though he was often too tired to join in, and took to wearing ear-plugs to shut out the noise. Still things were as they always were and he would make a note to try and help out around the house a little more. It was the least he could do.

"Beauty," he called. "Beauty! Here girl! What’s up, girl? Here girl."

He stopped and listened. Sometimes she found a decaying animal in the old orchard and sniffed at it, dead to his calls. He walked until he reached the road separating his part of the orchard from McConklin’s. He had handled Bill’s insurance for years and when Bill decided to sell half his land, John, promising never to cut down the orchard, was the obvious buyer.

"Beauty," he called. "Beauty? Where are you girl?"

He walked along the road, his voice growing angrier. "Beauty come!" he repeated.

Then she caught his eye. She was lying beside the road. He quickened his pace, forcing thoughts of metal pins and hours of patient care against the tightness in his chest, but when he reached her, she was dead. Her eyes were open, glazed green, her tongue, still wet, lolling over yellow teeth. A tiny pool of blood lay under her velvety ear. John put his hand to his mouth. Air rushed between his fingers. He closed his eyes, then opened them. He touched her whiskers. She still wasn’t breathing. He walked back and forth in front of her, not looking, but still seeing her in his peripheral vision. He did not
want to pick her up, or bury her, or have anything to do with her. She wasn’t his dog, he
told himself. She was gone. Just a thing there. Could be anyone’s, certainly not anything
he was connected with. He turned and walked back into the orchard. The white-skinned
trees stood mute on black walnut pedestals. The idea of death was something he did not
ever want to face, and it shocked him as unjust that he should experience such grief so
unexpectedly. Tears wet his cheeks and when his chest began to heave, he leaned against
a tree until he could get control of himself.

He found Liz sorting tax receipts in the study. The kids were in the living room,
arguing, working on a puzzle. Liz looked at him over her glasses.

“Beauty’s dead,” he said. “Hit by a car, I think.”
She stood up, took off her glasses, and reached for him. He pushed her away.
“I don’t know why she went into the road,” he said. “She never does that.”
She reached for him again. He backed away into the hall, knocking over the
umbrella stand. Mark and Sandra came around their table to see what had happened.

“It’s your fault,” he said, looking first at Liz, then sweeping his hand from her to
the kids. “I don’t know how or why, but it’s all your fucking fault.”

There was a moment of stillness, frozen around a word never spoken in the house.
John shrugged. He walked past Liz and the children and took the stairs to the bedroom.
He pulled a suitcase out of the hall closet and set it on the bed.
The children came down and watched him through the door as he packed.

“Dad?” Mark took a step forward. He was eight years old, and blond. His hands made a washing motion as he approached.

“Stay out,” John said. “Let me get my stuff together in peace.”
Mark slipped back to the doorway. “Is she really dead, Dad?”
John slammed some underwear, then socks into the suitcase. “She’s really dead,”
he said. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Where are you going, Daddy?” Sandra said.

“Out.”

John sensed Liz just out of sight at the bottom of the stairs, listening. He looked
at the eyes of his children. No tears, yet he sensed hesitancy in them (his life insurance
salesman’s eyes still acute after years of management). They were scared. The nameless dread, he’d called the look, something to instill in customers if you wanted them to buy. But he didn’t want to sell his children anything and in his anger, he didn’t want them to want him to stay. It was time he got out, the game was over, he was tired.

“I’m taking off for a few days,” he said. “Got some work to do out of town. I’ll be back.”

“When?” Mark said.

“I don’t know.”

He shut his suitcase, draped his suit bag over it, and pushed toward the stairs, then down. The kids ran ahead of him, ducking into the living room, leaving a clear path to the front door. Liz stood next to the umbrella stand, the briefcase at her right leg.

“This is ridiculous, John,” she said. “She’s a dog, for Christ’s sake. I know you loved her—”

“It’s not the dog,” John said. He set the bags in front of her and reached for his coat.

“Yes it is,” she said. “The dog’s dead, and now you’re leaving. It just goes to show who had priority around here.”

“Shut up,” John said. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.” He wouldn’t look at her.

“I know better than you think,” she said.

John folded the coat over his arm, opened the front door and took his bags out to the car. He came back for his briefcase.

“You always know better than I think,” he said.

He saw that she was crying and he felt that he was right to be leaving, that she should be taught a lesson. What could he do, anyway? He looked at the kids. They ducked around the corner out of sight.

“That dog made life bearable around here,” he said, then shut the door. He listened carefully to the deck’s creaking boards as he walked, then got in his car and headed for town.
He checked into a Motel 6, unpacked his bags, and broke the seal on the toilet. He lay down on the bed and thumbed through the Bible. The words were a blur and in spite of his own anger at Liz, he started to cry. All he could picture was Beauty dead on the road. He thought about the way she looked in the morning when he came out to feed her—the eyes bunched into worry, the one ear cocked, the other flopped down—then blood under the same ear. He closed his eyes and shook his head but the picture didn’t go away and so he let himself look at it, at the funny angle of her neck, the way the hair was ruffled along her back, as if she’s seen some animal and chased it into the— Where, he wondered, could he ever get another dog like that?

Just before Mark was born, John and his family had moved into the new house with the walnut orchard. Liz had thought it would be a good idea to get a dog, if not for protection, then at least so that the children could learn responsibility. John did not want a dog—yet another thing to take care of, and he was already feeling overwhelmed with a family and children and things to do at the office. Policies changed at corporate headquarters every week, it seemed, and at that time he still did sales work. He could not keep up. He was exhausted from washing dishes, cleaning and vacuuming, doing most of the cooking, making sure Sandra had everything she needed, while pregnant Liz, bitter and irritated one moment, loving and over affectionate the next, never seemed to give him any breathing space.

Bill came to visit to see how they were doing in his old house and when he saw how far along Liz was, how disorganized the house was with its half unpacked boxes, he offered a standing invitation to dinner for as long as they needed to get settled in. John did not want to accept, but the thought of cooking more meals forced him into it. The first night, after dinner, Bill showed John the litter of puppies his favorite dog had set down a few weeks before. They lay in a square of two-by-six boards designed to let Lady out, but keep the puppies in. Six of them lay sleeping, but the seventh, a fuzzy black and tan, pointy eared puppy sniffed its mother, nuzzled a sibling’s tail, then looked straight at John. His resistance melted. Overcome by the sad beauty of the moist, questioning eyes,
he knew what he would name it, and he asked Bill if he could take it off his hands. Bill promised to deliver it weaned in a couple of weeks. Immediately, John sat down on the soiled newspapers, turned the dog over to check its sex. “Good girl,” he said, and put his finger in the puppy’s jaw. “Good dog. Pretty puppy.” He mumbled in baby talk while the puppy tugged at his finger, then curled up next to his leg and went to sleep.

“Amazing,” Bill had said. “Even I can’t go in that box without old Lady growling up a storm.”

Lady’s eyes were open, but she seemed too exhausted, to John, to make much of a fuss. “I have a way with animals,” he said, hoping it was true. He was proud of himself and kissed the puppy’s head.

Mark was born the day after the puppy came to live with them, and John found that he didn’t mind the nearly sleepless nights, the crying, Sandra’s jealousy, Liz’s neglect. He named the dog Beauty, house-trained her, fed her, spent hours in the garage reading newspapers and corporate briefs while petting her or holding the other end of an old sock while she tugged and growled. He explored every inch of the orchard with Beauty leaping around his legs, tearing around trees. It was a peaceful time which seemed to him now, as he lay on the bed, so very long ago.

John sat up and coughed. He weighed the bible in his hand, then threw it at the television. He put on a jacket, ran down the stairs to his car. He drove out to the road between his orchard and the McConklin’s and looked for Beauty. She wasn’t there. The county must have been out, or maybe Liz had done something. He had been in the orchard at night many times before, but it had a strange quality for him now, a mysteriousness without sound. No feet or panting sounding down the rows. He watched the warm yellow of the windows as he glanced down the diagonals, wondering what Liz was doing, how she was holding up against what he had done, if she was wondering if he would come back, and if he wasn’t, what she would do.

He returned three nights to walk in the orchard. Sometimes he sat at the trunk of a tree watching how the leaves drooped as darkness fell, and other times he searched for Beauty’s grave, more and more certain she had been carted off to the landfill. One night,
walking close to the house, he heard Liz whisper into the darkness, “Who is that? Who’s out there.” He decided it was best if he stayed away.

* * *

For a week and a half, John refused to read the messages Liz had left at his office, and he had disconnected the phone in his hotel room. He wanted her to suffer, to spend some time thinking about how much she needed him, but underneath it all, he did not really know what to do. Since his office had grown big enough for a full time manager, he had retreated from hanging around the sales force and the account managers. He did not think it was a good idea to be on familiar terms with people over whom he had the power of hiring and firing. But he began to notice, going into his second week away from home, that his office mates were looking at him strangely and were conspicuously silent when he entered the lounge area for coffee. The secretary, who took Liz’s messages, was not a friend of hers, but he suspected she was passing information on to the young men she liked to joke with on breaks, or when they came in from sales runs. This made him angry. He did not like the fact that others were aware of his problems.

Matters came to a head when Milland, a pudgy, balding salesman whose breath whistled through his bristly nostrils, caught him at the coffee machine. “You’re welcome to stay with us,” he said.

“Is that so?” John said.

“We have an extra room.”

“I see.”

“Since Nancy moved out, the place is real quiet. My daughter spends most of her time at school. She’s a sports fanatic, you know? Anyway, nothing there to disturb you.”

“I’m not sure I get you, Milland.”

They walked down the hallway, past open office doors, toward the reception area.

“You gave me a chance,” Milland said, gesturing around the office. “I figure I owe you one.”

“No,” John said. “What makes you think I need a favor?”
“Well——” Milland swung his head left, then right, his glance darting into offices.

“I heard about your wife.”

John stopped walking.

“Motel 6,” Milland said. “No place to live, John. Really. I have a perfectly good extra room.”

“No thanks,” John said. “I would like to inform you I’m not having problems with my wife, and even if I were, it’s no business of yours.”

Milland backed away. John looked up and saw heads sticking out of office doors.

“That goes for all of you,” John said.

A voice from the far end of the hall said, “I heard it had to do with the dog!” The men and women started laughing and they stepped out into the hall. Most were holding coffee cups.

John took a step forward. Milland slid around him to stand by the secretary.

“Who said that,” John yelled. “Was that you, Brinkley!” He took a few more steps, then stopped. He addressed the backs of his co-workers as they stood around the coffee maker. “I would like all of you to know that my personal life is my own and it is running smoothly and that none of it matters to you.”

“Narrow-minded greyhound,” someone whispered.

“More like a whippet,” someone else said.

John ground his teeth and clenched his fists. He wanted to rush at the crowd, punching and kicking. What angered him the most was that they all seemed to know exactly what was going on, which meant Liz was blabbing all over town. What kind of game was she playing? Did she think she could make him come home with such behavior? Well, let her play, he thought. I can rise above it.

He walked to his office door, opened it, told the secretary to hold his calls, then slammed the door as hard as he could. The air pressure in his office slowed the door at the last minute.

He was aware, suddenly, and with a sadness made worse for following anger, that at forty, his marriage was the only thing he had, and that he would never become involved with another woman, and that his history with Liz was the only thing separating him from
a completely pathetic existence. He saw himself an old man in a rocking chair, blanket over legs, his bony, spotted hand resting between the ears of a sleek, black dog. He saw himself dropping off as if to sleep, dying in that moment, his hand on the dog, the dog whimpering, licking the hand, trapped in a deserted house. John shivered. He picked up the phone and called Liz.

"Liz," he said. "I need you to forgive me. I want to come home."

"What makes you think I want you back?"

How could she not? She had left messages at the office, at the hotel. What could they be other than her wish for him to return?

"For the sake of the children," he said, "if nothing else. For the sake of what we have."

"What do we have?"

"Love." He said the word but he did not believe it and his lack of belief confused him, but for the moment, all he wanted was for her to believe it.

"I don't know, John," she said. "I still love you, but I don't know about you. I think maybe I had you wrong all along. A nagging feeling."

"The dog—"

"No, not the dog. Something else. I don't have it yet—"

"Let's talk, then. We can meet. At the house? Maybe a restaurant? My hotel room is kind of shabby——"

"All right," she said. "I'm not sure it'll do any good, though."

"I want it to do some good."

He heard his son say something to her in the background. Liz muffled the phone before she replied to him.

"Okay, John," she said. "I'll meet you at Moriarty's on Thursday. Around seven? I don't want to leave the kids alone too long."

"Yes," he said. "Good."

"I'll call the lawyer, too. Tell him to hold off for a week or so."

"The lawyer?"

"You didn't get my messages?"
"Yes. Well, no. I didn’t look at them."


John thought she might hang up. "Liz?"

"I started divorce proceedings."

"Ah, Jesus. Liz. I can’t believe it."

"We’ll talk about it later."

"It was impulse," he said. "I wasn’t going away forever."

"We’ll talk about it later." Her voice sounded shaky. John wondered if she were crying. "At seven." She hung up.

He held the receiver, his heart thudding at the thought of lawyers and divorce courts and what would be written in the newspaper and what his office mates would say, until the busy signal snagged his attention. He set the phone down. How could she do such a thing? He suspected he had profoundly misjudged her but he could not guess in what way. He thought for a brief moment that he had awakened riding on a wave. He had no idea how to control a surfboard. It was not like a horse. You couldn’t show it who was boss.

The phone rang. "Mr. McConklin here to see you," the secretary said.

"I told you to hold my calls."

"He’s here!"

"Oh." John sighed and looked out the window. Cars zipped past, sunlight glinting off hoods and roofs. "Show him in."

Bill sat down and said, "John, I talked to Liz." He was a fat man with thick gray hair. He wore a white baseball cap on his wide, flat head, and a dark blue windbreaker. His skin was dark as if from a lifelong tan.

John sighed. "Who hasn’t?"

"Frankly, I’m not sure she’s going to take you back."

"Oh, really." John had always felt warmth for Bill, who treated him with respect, but this sudden intervention into his personal life was hard for him to take. "Look," he said. "We’re friends, Bill. We’re friends because we don’t get mixed up in family matters. Let’s not start now."
Bill looked at him, then shook his head. John didn’t like the suggestion in Bill’s expression that he, along with Liz, knew what was going on. You’re being ridiculous, Bill’s lifted eyes said—quit being a jerk and get with the program.

“All right,” Bill said. He looked around the office. “Dove has a litter in the box,” he said. “You know Dove? Lady’s granddaughter. Makes her Beauty’s niece, so to speak.”

“I’m not interested,” John said.

“They’re fine dogs.”

“No.”

Bill stood up. “Fine,” he said, shaking his head. “I hope you know what you’re doing.”

Bill left without having a drink, and since it was only a few hours till quitting time, John decided to have a drink for him.

* * *

John had been sitting at the corner table at Moriarty’s for five minutes before Liz came in. She wore a calf-length black dress, a white, long-sleeved, high-collared blouse with a tiny silvery pendant winking in the dim light. She had gotten her hair cut along the sides and she seemed to have lost weight. He remembered when she was his secretary, fifteen years before, when she had flirted with him and he had been flattered and shocked. It seemed to him then that he must have been something special for such a woman to love him, and that feeling was the reason he married her. He had forgotten until the feeling came to him sharply, followed by the dull ache of loss, and finally, anger.

She ordered a drink at the bar, and pointed at the table. John nodded, though she didn’t look at him. She sat across from him and set her purse on the table.

“So,” she said. “You want to come back?”

John did not like her tone, a little too confident, unhurried.

“Why did you blab?” he said.
“Blab?” She shook her head in disgust. She looked as if she had a slight headache. “I talked to Bill about it. I left messages about a lawyer. Did I tell someone about Beauty?” She flipped her hand left, “Maybe I did,” then right, “I don’t know.”

“Well, you shouldn’t have.”

She grabbed her purse and stood. “If you’re going to make accusations, I’m leaving.”

The waiter came with the drink. He looked at John, then at Liz. John gestured at the table and the waiter set the drink down, then left. John put his hand, palm up, on the table.

“I’m sorry, Liz,” he said. “Really. I’ve been edgy—”

She sat. “You said we had love.”

“Yes.”

“A funny kind of love—to show it only to a dog.”

“I can’t express it,” he said, thinking fast. “I came from a family; we were all pretty cold—”

“I knew it. You never call your folks—”

“They’re dead now.”

She sighed and sipped from her drink. He watched the way the pendant shifted between her breasts. “After we were married,” she said, “I loved the way you let me do what I wanted. You didn’t make me work when the children came along, you helped get me the job with Dr. Wells, you never had a problem with my independence—”

“I love you,” he said. “Why would I want to interfere—”


“I never learned how,” he said. “I can, Liz, really.”

She looked doubtful.

“I do love you.” He reached for her hand. She let him hold it—warm, soft, slightly moist. “Let’s start again. I can learn. We can make changes.”

“I don’t know.” Her voice sounded like she had already made up her mind, but John thought he saw an opening in the widening of her eyes.
"Think of the kids," he said. "A divorce, at this time in their lives, they need their father. I can spend more time with them. Take an interest. I am interested."

"I'll have to think about it, John." She withdrew her hand.

"No more dog, either," he said. "Beauty's gone. Good riddance! A bad influence. I don't know what came over me. Pressures at the office, maybe. We all have to express love somehow—Really, Liz. I think that's it. I didn't know how to show you and the kids my love and somehow I got mixed up." He shook his head and breathed rapidly through his nostrils. He was almost overcome with the emotion of his inspiration. He swept his hair back then folded her hands in his. "I've been stupid, Liz. A complete idiot. A child. Ignoring you, the children—-I don't know what to say. Give me a chance. You're the only thing I have, you and the children."

"John," she said. "John, stop. You're begging."

He sat back. He felt the sudden urge to throw his glass across the bar, but he suppressed it. He was begging, he knew, but he had to get back into her good graces. He did not want to lose his only chance at having a family. He pictured the black lab, walking dejected around the house, sniffing at his dead master's hand. He shuddered.

"We have a new dog. Bill stopped by and gave one to the children."

"A dog?"

"The children are depressed. They miss Beauty."

John let go her hand and sipped his beer. "Even so," he said. "This whole thing. I've got to make changes. I think it's important for us to try. We don't want to throw it all away."

"All right," she said. "I'll think about it." She stood up. "I'm not too sure——"

"The kids——"

"Yes, there's that."

A silence grew between them. He watched her eyes. She seemed to be looking at a spot above his head and he realized he had no idea what she was thinking, whether he had reached her at all.

"Let's go to the hotel," he said. He smiled, then lowered his head.

She laughed. "The hotel? Don't be absurd. We're not kids."
He shrugged his shoulders. He had never asked her to a hotel before, had rarely initiated love between them.

“You must be under a lot of strain.” She finished her drink, then reached down and touched his hand. “I’ll let you know,” she said.

John saw the faces of the other men turn to her as she walked out of the bar and although he could still feel the pressure of her touch, he hated them and his own luck at having screwed everything up.

* * *

At the end of a week, Liz still had made no attempt to contact him. John’s only consolation was that the lawyers hadn’t either. He paced in his office from window to door. For several days he had felt uneasy. He had become used to the smirks of the office workers, he had learned to sneer at Brinkley, he had told Milland that things were going just great and that Milland would be better off to find a woman to fill his house, if he could. The uneasiness came from the fact that the entire decision about his future life lay in Liz’s hands. Her “yes” or “no” was the difference between a dreary life and a chance, at least, for companionship, if nothing else. It was hard for him to understand her hesitation. He made all the money, the house payments were huge, the electricity expensive. He did not see how she could survive without him. She would not return his calls, and when he caught her on the phone, at the Doctor’s office, or at home, she said politely, “John, I’m thinking through some things,” and hung up. Every time he heard her voice his stomach tightened and he felt like he’d had a pot of coffee. He’d pace his hotel room or his office until frustration forced him to work, or go to sleep (with the aid of pills, or a stiff drink). He did not like the feeling that he had really screwed things up. He was not used to it. His management of the firm was impeccable, smooth, and although he had a feeling his associates did not much care for him, he knew he had their respect in business matters.

He paced all afternoon trying to think of a way to stack the deck in his favor. At closing time, he picked up the phone and dialed his home number, hoping to catch Liz, hoping he’d manage to say something to get her to talk to him some more.
His daughter answered the phone, tentatively, not yet phone confident. He felt an impulse to hang up, then said, "Sandra. Hello honey!"

"Mom’s not here."

"That’s okay," he said. "I called to talk to you."

They talked for several minutes about missing each other. Sandra told him about the new dog, how they’d named her Xena with an X, how she liked to chase walnuts and how she had a little basket next to the fire place.

"Your mother lets the dog in the house?"

"She keeps us company,” Sandra said. “We like to pet her.”

"Will you tell your mother to call me?"

"Okay."

Sandra told him she was not doing so well in school because of the spelling tests, and Mark was getting into fights all the time. John found himself glad to hear this, though he had no idea how the children had been doing beyond Liz’s assurances, every few months, of their intelligence.

"Are you going to Bill’s?" Sandra said.

"Well, I don’t know. When are you going?"

"We’re going to dinner. We’re taking Xena with us, she’s going to visit her brothers and sisters!"

"That sounds wonderful," John said. "When are you going?"

"Friday, after school.” She talked about the after-school-club she’d been spending a lot of time at lately and about some friends whose faces escaped him.

"Okay, honey,” he said. “Daddy has to get back to work."

"Bye."

"I love you, Sandra,” he said. “Don’t forget that.” But she’d already hung up.

John wondered if Liz had something going on the side with Bill, but then rejected the notion. Bill was a happily married man and it was natural, as a friend of the family, that Liz would go to him—— He dialed Bill’s number and asked if he’d like to meet for a drink later that evening.

They met at Moriarty’s. John bought the drinks.
“Look,” John said. “I’m sorry about the other day. You’re a friend of the family. It’s a wonderful thing you did, giving that dog to the kids—”

“Liz insisted. You should have thought of it yourself,” Bill said, “as a father—”

“I haven’t had much practice at that, I admit.”

Bill’s expression was skeptical and he kept looking around as if expecting a friend to appear at any moment. “So you want me to help you with Liz,” he said. “How did you find out she was coming over?”

“Is that why you think I asked you here?” John sat back. “I wanted to apologize for being a jerk—that’s all.”

Bill did not appear to believe him.

“Sandra told me,” John said. “But what difference does it make? How could you help me anyway? We both know Liz. She’s intelligent, with a mind of her own. She’ll do what she thinks is right, even if she listens politely to us all night.”

“True,” Bill said. His eyes lifted as if John had revealed some new insight. “She’s a wonderful woman, in that way.”

They drank in silence, then John told him about a new life insurance policy opening up due to changes in Federal regulations. Bill sounded interested.

“I’m a sucker for these things,” Bill admitted. “The kids are gone now. They have their lives—but Sue, she’s not like Liz. I’m not sure she’ll handle it as easily when I’m gone.”

John winced. He had never spoken to Sue except in trivialities. He had always thought of her as desperately dependent on Bill—but then he thought Liz had been the same way.

“She’s a strong woman, though,” Bill continued. “She’ll get back on her feet. I don’t want her to have to worry about money.” He leaned closer. “Maybe I just want her to have time to mourn me.” He winked.

John spent the weekend distracting himself with books on Medieval history. He had worked his way to the Reformation when Liz called and told him she would meet him the following evening.
When she came into Moriarty’s, she looked even more beautiful. She wore a rose, mid calf, long-sleeved dress low-cut and strapless. She’d died her hair lighter, a reddish brown, and her skin was darker, as if she had been spending more time in the sun. To John, she looked years younger. A young woman of twenty-nine, thirty——

“You’re beautiful,” John said, when she sat down.

She looked at him appraisingly, then smiled.

“No really,” he said. He wanted to say more, but then thought of how her beauty was the result of his leaving. He didn’t want to bring that up, didn’t want her to know he knew it.

They ordered drinks. She insisted on paying.

“All right,” she said. “I’ll take you back.”

“Good.” John moved to take her hand. She let him.

“There’ll have to be some changes,” she said.

“Okay.”

“More time with the kids.”

“I’ll make a point of it.”

“More affection. I want you to show your feelings a little more.”

He lifted her hand and kissed it.

“We have a new dog,” she said. “You can love her, she’s really cute—just like you, in some ways—but I want you to share responsibility for her upkeep with the children.”

“No problem,” he said. “They’re older now. It’s about time for them to be trusted with some of these things——”

“Yes,” she said, “but the main thing I want you to realize is that our relationship is a partnership. It’s something we have to work at to maintain.”

“Of course.” He scooted around the booth so that his hip pressed hers. “We can’t just let things drift——”

“Right,” she said. “We have to work at it like a business, sort of, or a collaboration. Making assumptions that it works automatically——”
John began to kiss her neck and stroke her forearm. She shivered and laughed.

"John Alexander!" she said. "Are you trying to seduce me?"

He kissed her bare shoulder and ran a finger along the seam of her dress.

"We're in public!"

"I have a hotel room."

They got up to leave. John noticed how the other men in the place looked at Liz, and at him. He thought he saw hints of anger and envy in their expressions.

They took his car to the Hilton.

"What happened to Motel 6?" Liz said.

"I thought maybe this would be romantic, if you took me back."

They checked in and went up to the room.

"No flowers?" she said.

John opened a night stand and took out a small box. She opened it: a tiny, jewel-eyed dragonfly broach.

They fell on the bed, laughing and tickling each other and then they made love. Afterward, as night fell and Liz slept fitfully, her feet and hands twitching, it seemed to John that his life with her could be a happy one—if he could at least act happy, soon he would be happy—if he assumed he'd be the father everyone thought he should be, he'd be that father—and husband. For a long time he mulled over the things he could change until, finally drowsy, he put in his earplugs and fell asleep dreaming of the walnut orchard.

*  *  *

John began his new life on Tuesday morning. He got up early and talked to Mark and Sandra while Liz made breakfast and packed their lunches. He watched Sandra refresh the dog's water and fill her bowl. He squeezed Mark's shoulder and kissed Sandra when they went off to school. He did this every day.

He taught the children how to play gin-rummy. Sandra competed with knit-browed intensity, while Mark's eyes wandered all over the living room between hands. John learned to gauge their attention spans and go on to other activities, puzzle making, if he could swing it, but mostly they watched television until bed time.
Their favorite show was a sitcom about a dog and cat who talked to each other and cracked jokes about their uncomprehending owners. The baby, a cute-eyed toddler boy, soon learned the trick and all three cracked jokes. John didn’t like the fact that the parents were idiots: the mother was spacey and sweet, the father was a whining wimp, and he didn’t like the depiction of their life as ordinary. But the children liked the show because everyone at school liked it and John learned to laugh and have a good time. They sat together in the guest room on the big bed, Mark on one side, Sandra on the other. The children looked expectantly at him when something was funny. When he laughed, they laughed.

John found that his re-introduction to television made him more popular at the office. He had made it a point to join people for lunch. Awkward at first, he soon gained the ability to make allusions to sitcoms and to talk about them as if they were more clever and funny than they actually were. He found that when he used an amazed tone of voice which assumed profundity and masterly craft in the thing discussed, people assumed he was on to something they hadn’t quite caught. They began to respect his opinions. During coffee breaks they dropped by his open door and brought up something about the news, or remarked critically on a detective show episode, or a magazine article. He began to receive dinner invitations and occasional words of sympathy for his recent marital troubles, which, all admitted, he had handled with class, dignity and aplomb.

This last John particularly liked, because it didn’t at all seem true to him. He was suffering more than he ever had with all the effort he was putting in to being “sociable” and “affectionate” and “considering others before himself.” He found it difficult to concentrate on his work. He found himself rearranging his files and fiddling with software configurations on his computer. He began to delegate more of his tasks to others, telling them he thought it would improve morale for everyone to have a hand in the decision making process and the smooth running of the office. But deep down he feared that he was moving himself farther from the integral position he thought he had maintained as head of the office. Any of the younger men could do his job, and just as well. This was something he did not want to know.
At night, after the kids were in bed, he read in a yellow pool of light next to Liz, who had taken up quilting. He enjoyed the sound of her sewing machine and the way she stitched old bits of cloth together fascinated and comforted him. He often found himself awakening with a start at her touch. He made love to her as often as he could, varying the time of day and the style of request. At first it seemed awkward and strange, as if he were invading. He was a little afraid, in fact, that she would tire of him, but soon he began to look forward to it as something that could take him away from constantly thinking about what to do next in order to appear considerate and loving. Sex brought him back to his younger days. He hadn’t slept better in years.

The biggest problem was the dog. She reminded him of Beauty and of his time away from home and because she was not at all like her. Xena did not run around the house when she was let in. Instead, she insisted on sitting at John’s foot and chewing his shoe laces. He could not bring himself to discipline her against this, she was just a dog, after all. Sandra fed her in the morning, Mark at night, and Liz, because she got up so early, let her out to pee in the hour before dawn. Sometimes, after dinner, John would walk alone in the orchard, breathing the air and enjoying the solitude. Often, Liz would let Xena out, and Xena would come straight to him, following at his heels as if waiting for him to stop long enough for her to reach his shoelaces. He did not understand why the dog was attracted to him, why Liz let her out when he was walking, or even let her in the house, for that matter. He suspected she was testing him, and so he would not talk to Xena, or touch her with his bare hand.

John’s new life went on successfully for several months until one evening in late summer when, after a party at Bill’s, he drank more than he should have. He had been particularly cynical the whole afternoon, venting all his critical distaste on television, offending those who had expressed their liking for the talking dog and cat and toddler program. He admitted to everyone, most of whom were his customers, that he thought the whole insurance business was worthless, cost way more than it should, and preyed more on people’s fears than appealed to their senses of responsibility. “Life insurance policies are the Papal indulgences of the Twentieth Century,” he said. People shook their heads, and Liz packed up their things and drove him home. She did not talk to him.
He lay down on the sofa to relax and let the alcohol work through his system. He slept for an hour and woke up when the children asked if they could play cards. “Fine,” he said, and walked quickly away to the guest room. His head throbbed, but once he rested it on the cool pillows, he felt better. The kids soon followed him in and turned on the television.

“What’s the matter Daddy,” Mark said.

“I’m sick.”

“He drank too much beer,” Sandra said. “I think he had some wine, too.”

They switched through the channels and settled on a cartoon, which John had previously laughed at them with. He sat up. The television was blurry. They looked at him during moments of humor: he could tell by the sound effects, but he frowned instead of laughed, and their looks of puzzlement, even fear, started to make him angry. How could they depend on him for so much? he thought. Didn’t they have lives of their own? Couldn’t they figure out what they liked without him around to approve, or disapprove?

Mark took the remote away from Sandra and flipped to the talking pet show. A furry, lizard like alien landed in the neighborhood and after much confusion caused by trying to communicate with the adults (they set out huge rat traps for it), the alien finally meets the toddler, the dog, and the cat. All four of them start cracking jokes as the adults run around the room wielding brooms.

“That’s it,” John said. “This show has got to be the worst thing in existence.” He stood up. The children looked puzzled. He reminded himself that they were only children. What did he expect?

He went into the kitchen and poured himself a large glass of water. He heard Liz in the study, sewing and humming. He pictured her in the yellow light, her half-moon glasses flashing as she turned her head. He wanted to throw his glass of water at her. The kids started fighting. He heard a large thud. “Mama,” yelled Mark, crying. John put his hands to his ears and tried to block out the sound. His head was pounding.

“Can you take care of that dear?” Liz yelled.

“No I can’t,” he yelled back. “I can’t take care of a fuckin’ thing one minute longer.”
He heard Liz get out of her chair and cross the carpet into the guest bedroom.
The crying turned to whining. John found aspirin in the utility drawer and took four, then
drank another large glass of water. He held the glass next to his temple and it slid through
his fingers as his grip relaxed and shattered on the tile floor. He shook his head and
pounded the counter. "Son of a bitch," he said. "Son of a bitch." He pulled down three
copper pans from the rack above the stove and tossed them clattering to the floor. He
opened the baking cupboard and pulled down bags of flour and sugar. He took a milk jug
out of the refrigerator and threw it against the wall. It split open and milk cascaded down.
He found a box of cereal and emptied it on the milk. He opened the plastic container
drawer and threw lids Frisbee-like into the dining room. By the time he calmed down, Liz
and the kids were standing in the doorway watching.

"All right," he said. "All right." He deep breathed and avoided looking at their
eyes.

Liz took the children downstairs to their rooms. He heard them asking her
questions. She answered in calm tones. When she came back up, she sat calmly at the
dining room table.

"Okay," she said. "What's the matter. I've never seen you do this and you've
been drunker."

"I don't know what to tell you, Liz," he said. "I love you, at least I think I do, but
I can't stand it any longer." He sat across from her. His arms left streaks of flower on the
table top. "All these things I've been doing. I'm never alone. For one minute of the day,
I'd like to be alone. Can you understand that, Liz?"

"Yes."

"It's all worth it, you and the kids, but I don't think I can do it. It just isn't in me."

"I know," she said. "Why don't you go for a walk? It'll clear your head. I'll
clean up here."

"You're not going to throw me out?"

"No," she said. "I need you. I need you for your money, at least while the kids
are growing up, and you being here, it helps the kids. They're doing a lot better, you
know? The teachers make it a point to let me know."
John walked to the glass door. "So love has nothing to do with it? I went through all this—"

"Love is not an easy thing, John." She stood up, took the broom out of the closet, and started sweeping. "Who can say where love ends and simple need begins?" She gathered the pans and put them in the sink. "Why didn’t you stay away? You didn’t have to come back."

He did not like the alcohol in his head. He couldn’t think clearly. "I guess I didn’t want to be alone," he said.

She looked up at him. "That’s the first honest thing you’ve said to me."

He opened the door. The air felt good. He could smell the dirt beneath the walnut trees.

"Go on," she said. "I’ll let Xena out in a minute."

He walked across the lawn into the orchard and thought about Liz. He did not understand her. Did she love him? Did she want his money? Did he love her? He had no idea what anything meant and he suspected that he could not count on anything when people were involved. Even sales—— He did not like this uncertainty.

When he got to the road, he walked to the spot where Beauty had died, and then went back into the orchard. He picked up a dead branch and began to swing at the branches. His headache was receding, and he swung harder and harder. He let the anger out, like waves pulling away from a beach, and it felt good to strike at the walnuts, smacking them, hearing the crack and the soft ticks through the leaves. He positioned himself before a low hanging branch and hit a walnut against a trunk, but it fell uncracked. Then Xena came from behind him, loping slowly, and grabbed the walnut and worried it with her floppy jaws. She dropped it in front him and nosed his shoe. He batted it into the trees. She did not chase it, as Beauty would have, but looked at him, tongue lolling, tail wagging slowly.

"Come on, girl," he said. "Come here, that’s a good dog. Beautiful dog. What are you doing here? Come on." He put his arm around her neck and pressed his knuckle into her ear, working it in circles until the dog groaned with pleasure.
The Mother

Peter set a cup of coffee on the stone bench on his tiny front porch. Felix the paperboy had left the paper in the middle of the lawn, so Peter was forced to get his socks wet with dew in retrieving it, but the spring sky, a pale blue promising the depth of late afternoon, the unseen birds giving voices to the trees, and especially the warm air caused Peter to forgive Felix, and to at first enjoy the cold sensation, and then, as he sat on the bench, to peel off his socks. The air between his stretched toes felt good. He opened the newspaper and began to wait, scanning the lines of print without reading. A light piano sonata, Mozart, floated through the screen door, and when Peter lowered the paper, he thought how steam rising from the coffee broke into turbulence the same way a sonata’s theme did. By the time he had flipped through the hard news, the city living pages, the sports section, and had reached the classifieds, his neighbor, Ms. Rainwater, made her appearance. He had never met her, and only knew her name from her mailbox, but he was convinced she was old fashioned, decorous. Her presence was first announced by the clomp of obnoxious pumps echoing in the hollows of the house across the street, and then she walked into the sunlight, wearing, today, a white mid-calf dress and carrying a black purse. Peter admitted he was attracted to the woman—she looked like Jackie Kennedy, with wonderfully slender legs, and bare arms, and although she occasionally wore a bracelet of pearls, she never wore rings or any other kind of jewelry—but he had convinced himself that there could never be anything between them. He was thirty-five and divorced and had decided that he was done with relationships forever, that he had the tendency to depend on anyone close to him for far more than they could handle, which led inevitably to pain and disappointment. One must recognize one’s flaws, he often thought, and find ways to live with them.

There she was this morning in her white dress. He set the paper aside, sipped his coffee, then held the cup in the air, as if to say “cheers.” Ms. Rainwater waved at him—she was wearing her bracelet, it slipped down her arm as she raised it—and then, instead of immediately getting into the car, she turned toward her front door, and flicked her hand. A small child, a pale, dark-haired boy of about seven or eight, wearing an oversized
Levi’s jacket, came running to her, the door slamming behind him. He reached for his mother’s hand—in his amazement, Peter assumed the boy must be her son, and that she also must be divorced—and together, mother and son, got into the car. He realized he was still holding the cup in the air and hastily set it down on the bench. The woman started her car, a gold, two-door Malibu from the mid-seventies, her first, gotten just after college, he had liked to think, and pulled into the road.

Peter splashed coffee onto the lawn, then took the paper into the house and turned off the music. Instead of starting a shower, which he did every morning after nodding to Ms. Rainwater, he sat in his reading chair and wondered why it was he had never imagined her with children. Then he began to wonder if she had custody of the boy, or if he was there on some sort of visitation rights. He and his ex-wife did not have children, which was the main reason for the divorce. Peter had wanted them desperately, but his wife, convinced she would not make a good mother, and worried that it would cut too much into her research at the University, had flat out refused, with no compromise, for the two years he had insisted on discussing it. She had turned, in his mind, from the wonderfully warm woman he had met at a coffee shop to a cold woman, more at home in a lab, mixing test tubes of this with test tubes of that and writing silly symbols on a chalkboard.

But somehow seeing this woman, this Ms., or was it Mrs. Rainwater, with a child, struck Peter, and he felt in his gut, a kind of gnawing, hungry feeling, that he had been evading something for a long time, for all the long weeks he had been watching her in the mornings. The feeling was unpleasant, not unlike what he had felt the weeks it had taken him to tell his ex-wife that he thought divorce might be a good idea, a feeling like he had had too much coffee without any food. He walked around his house and looked at things, as if seeing them for the first time: no pictures on the walls, a threadbare overstuffed chair—the only piece of furniture in a once overcrowded living room—a tiny television on a stack of boxes, a toaster competing with a counter full of crumbs, the compost at the bottom of his refrigerator, sacks of beer bottles nearly tipping over in the hall, and bed sheets darkened by long use. The house, for the first time, disgusted him, and seemed to him a den of squalor. His clothes, both clean and dirty, littered his bedroom floor. He picked them up, and stripped the bed, and did three loads of laundry. Then, naked, he
scrubbed the blackish shower tiles until they sparkled white. He finished his shower, ironed a white shirt, and put a crease in a pair of black jeans. He sorted and arranged his clothes into the set of drawers his wife had graciously bequeathed him, took a look around the place and didn’t feel any better. He couldn’t stop thinking of Mrs. Rainwater, and how sad it was that she was raising a child alone.

* * *

Peter owned a used bookstore, a job he loved for it consisted of reading books, buying and selling them, ordering them, stacking and sorting them, and on occasion, discussing them with customers. Although business was not what it had been—the student population was dwindling due to state government shenanigans—he still hoped, one day, after he repaid his business loans, to expand his inventory, and perhaps open another branch in another town.

He had been reading *Sons and Lovers* during the slow hours of the day, when the sunlight from the glass back door crept along the tiled floor, but he could not get into it, seeing behind the words both the boy, the boy’s mother, and his own filthy house.

He gave up and went back to check on the cats. He had adopted, for the store, for atmosphere and companionship, truth told, a little calico stray whom he’d named Rags, imagining her a bag lady, and his adoption a valiant rescue from the evils of society. She was not as old as he had thought, and with food and care and the warmth of the store, she had managed to get pregnant, as if she had always been, and only waited for the right time to show. She’d had her kittens only days before, the same day he had seen Mrs. Rainwater with her son, and Anna, his most recent Assistant Manager, who would be leaving when Spring Term ended, had named the litter of cats after Russian authors, Pushkin, Tolstoy, Chekhov, Gorky. Peter stood over an old box, donated by a woman and her hundreds of children’s books, if he remembered right, and watched the kittens mew and push at their mother, Rags, who languished on an old blanket, eyes half lidded. The cat reminded him of Mrs. Rainwater, and so he went up to the office to examine the recently purchased used books and saw a magnificent volume containing the works of Michaelangelo. He flipped through the pages until reaching the *Pietà*. He wondered
where Joseph was in all these Madonna images. It was as if he were there to lend Mary 
the semblance of legitimacy, to lead the donkey all over Egypt.

* * *

He stood absolutely still in the tall grass of his backyard and listened. Sure 
enough, he heard the tinkling sound of ice against glass, and he knew Mrs. Rainwater was 
one again on her roof, drinking. He had heard her, off and on, for a week, ever since he 
had gone out one night to look at the moon when the newspapers started announcing that 
it was at its closest point to the earth. He got a ladder from the back shed, covered in 
cobwebs and dust, and set it up against the gutters. He took a look around on the roof, 
remembering years before when his wife had made him smear the flat areas with a sticky 
white tar-like substance one of her colleagues had developed. In the moonlight, the roof 
looked like the moon itself, except for the litter of dried leaves and branches. The 
streetlights glowed blue and made of the neighborhood, its overgrown trees and neat, 
ranch style homes, an eerily quiet, nightmarish place. He walked as carefully as he could 
toward Mrs. Rainwater’s house, and winced at every creak of the roof. He sat down, legs 
dangling over the eaves, and looked at the fence separating their houses. She was sitting 
beneath an overhanging branch, as if shading herself from the moonlight. Beside her patio 
chair sat an orange crate holding up a kool-aid pitcher of clear, slightly luminescent liquid. 
He watched her as she drank, but she didn’t look at him, or say anything, or give any 
indication that she knew he was there. Then she stood, and walked over to him. For a 
brief moment, he felt like running to the other end of the house and letting himself fall in 
the old compost pile, but he repressed the emotion, and stood up as she approached. She 
wor a black tank-top, short white shorts, and sandals. Her hair hung loose over her face, 
and then she spoke in slurs.

“Well,” she said. “Mr. Stalker. Hard to see by the moon. Why don’t you come a 
little closer?”

“What?” he said. “What did you say?”

“Come on over.”
He shrugged and went back to the ladder. He made it all the way to her door before thinking this wasn't such a good idea. But before he could think about the implications, work out the details of why he should stay at home, of how his essential being was incompatible with women, or other people, for that matter, of how he could never understand what people were thinking, or feeling, or how he was supposed to handle them, she leaned over the eaves above the door and said, “No, idiot. Get your ladder and come up here.”

He obeyed her by fishing for an expandable ladder, extending it to its greatest length, then angling it from his backyard to her roof. The fence acted as a brace, which was a good thing because the ladder seemed fragile beneath his weight. He joined her beneath the overhanging branch.

“Why do you watch me?” she said. She kept brushing her hair out of her eyes but it kept falling back and Peter thought it a wonderful gesture. A person could fall in love with that, he thought, and he scooted closer to her. She was sitting in the chair, sucking in an ice cube, then spitting it back out.

He sat down, cross-legged, on the other side of the crate. “I’m not going to answer that,” he said.

The pitcher was almost empty. Peter took it and swished the ice cubes and lemons around, and smelled the gin.

“Have some,” she said.

“I hate gin,” he said. “Import beer. That’s my drink.”

“Have some,” she said.

He lifted the pitcher to his mouth, and drank the rest down. It was quite good, mostly water anyway. He spit out a lemon, which landed next to her feet. She slipped off her sandal, picked the lemon up with her foot, picked it out of her toes, and put it on her upturned forehead. She let it slip off when she looked at him.

“Well,” she said.

He scooted closer until he was sitting beside her legs. He reached out and touched them. They were warm, and for a brief moment, he felt a stab of grief; it had been so long since he’d felt that kind of warmth. She stood and he stood with her and they walked
toward the ladder. He went down first and looked up at her as she followed. They went in through the back door. The house was dark, he could see nothing except faint patterns of light from the streetlights through the curtains. She lead him by the hand to the bedroom and as he lay beside her, the gin hit him and the darkness and the warmth of her body made him forget everything. Later in the night, after several hours of sleep, he woke up and drew his knees to his chest and shivered. He felt as if something was opening up in him or in front of him, and that he had walked in unknowing, as if finding a whole new set of rooms in his book store, lined with the unfamiliar books of favorite authors. He scooted back until his back touched hers—she murmured—and the warmth calmed the gnawing butterflies.

It wasn’t until dawn that he remembered the boy.

* * *

"Who’s that," the boy said.

They were having coffee, toast and fresh strawberries in the dining room when the boy walked in, sleepy, hair pressed flat on one side.

"Mr. Stalker," she said. "Mr. Stalker, this is Jeff."

"Hi Jeff," he said.

Peter looked for an expression of betrayal, or anger, or at least puzzlement, but the boy merely shrugged his shoulders, pulled up a chair, and started eating toast. His mother poured him a glass of milk.

"Miribelle," she said. "That’s my name, you know."

"Ah. I like Mrs. Rainwater better."

She nodded, smiled, and they finished the rest of their meal in silence. Peter could not wait to get out of the house. When he was young, his parents had divorced, and his mother had had a series of boyfriends, not one after another, but they would show up from time to time, and although he didn’t think much of it then, when he looked back now, he thought of her actions as faintly disgusting, somehow. He also did not like the fact that he himself, her child, was in some way a burden on her ability to have relationships—as if he were the product of a teenage pregnancy. The boy brought all this to Peter’s mind, and he
couldn’t help but think the boy was aware of it all, too. Children, Peter thought, were a lot more intelligent and perceptive than adults, especially parents, were willing to admit.

He sensed her watching him as he left the house, tracing the footsteps he had seen her take all those mornings. “Peter,” he said to her before he reached the sidewalk.

“Goodbye, Mr. Stalker,” she said.

* * *

He left the ladder up for a week and visited her every night but he made a point of leaving before the boy awoke. One morning, Miribelle stopped him as he was pulling on his underwear.

“You can’t keep avoiding him,” she said. “If you’re going to be around here. I can’t have someone who won’t take responsibility. I’ve had enough of that in my life.”

“Your husband?”

“What a jerk. As if Jeff didn’t exist.”

He got back in bed and curled up beside her, his chest against her back, his arms curled protectively around her.

“You’re talking marriage?”

She glanced back at him, then pressed herself deeper into the mattress. “Every relationship has the potential, you know. I have a child. If I didn’t think you’d make a good father, you’d be out the door.”

Peter was glad to hear this. It was as if his marriage of ten years hadn’t happened, as if he was back on track to a real life, to something worth living again. He thought about Jeff, growing, working summers at the book store, arguing with him about the worth of the later Hemingway, and of course, there might be other children. He rolled out of bed, came around and kissed Miribelle on the forehead. He got dressed and went out to start the coffee. He made French toast and soon Jeff and Miribelle were at the table.

Miribelle asked him to stay and look after Jeff while she ran some errands. After her shower, she emerged from her room in a pale blue dress, with a dark purple handbag, missing only, in Peter’s mind, a pillbox hat. From the doorway, he watched her walk to her car. The air was warm and the sun shone in the street, while the lawn, dew speckled,
lay in shade. She got into the car and waved and although it had only been a week, he felt as if he had been married for years, as if Miribelle had been the girl he met all those years ago.

Peter found Jeff in his room. The place had a bed, a set of dresser drawers, a closet, a tiny desk covered with construction paper art projects, and, barely seen beneath heaps of clothes, toys and stuffed animals, a dark blue carpet. Jeff was in the middle of the room taking Legos out of a Lincoln Log bucket. Peter cleared a space on the floor and sat down. He started picking bricks out of the bucket.

“This place is a mess,” he said.

Jeff looked at him, then shrugged.

“Not that I mind,” Peter said. “You should see my place.” He laughed. “What are you making?”

“A spaceship.”

Peter started making one himself. It had a slender fuselage, with short “engine” wings. He zoomed it around a few times, and in spite of himself, he liked it, remembering that he had the knack for making things when he was a kid.

“Where do the people go?” Jeff asked.

“You have to imagine they’re in there,” Peter said. He pointed at the clear brick representing the cockpit.

Jeff stood, then crouched down, squatting as he concentrated. His fingers brushed lightly over the legos as he searched. Peter marveled at the tiny hands and fingers—the fingernails so precisely fitted, tapping on white bricks. Jeff selected a long flat piece and attached it to the head of his spaceship. Peter saw the ridge of backbone through the boy’s T-shirt, the tiny expansion and contraction of breath. This small person amazed him, and he thought the kid could have been his own.

“How’s your father?” Peter said.

“Okay,” Jeff said.

“Do you miss him?”

“Yes. But he and my mom don’t get along. They yell at each other. He’s a sexist.”
Peter laughed.

"He wouldn't let mom do anything," Jeff said. "And he hit her once."

Peter went to the window. The backyard was calm, except for a slight breeze ruffling the short grass, setting the juniper pillars swaying. He couldn't imagine Miribelle being hit, or taking it. She worked as a cosmetic saleswoman at Penney's. She was tough. A fighter. He tried to picture her marching resolutely along the sidewalk in bright sunlight, but instead he saw her sobbing in bed. It had only been a week; he didn't know what to expect of her. They spent their nights huddled together as if for protection, and their conversation was about his bookstore, how he had started it with his ex-wife, how he still made loan payments to her, how he hoped to expand into several stores, the problems with his assistant managers, the good ones being graduate students who left. But never of her. She answered his questions, but offered no more—and he had attributed it to the squemishness of divorce—it had only been a few months for her, and the custody battle and in general to a desire to get rid of the bitterness of the past by never mentioning it again. He could sympathize. Still, he knew nothing about her and hated his blindness, for he was sure there was something there, something he could take care of if only he could see it.

He picked up a book lying on the desk and flipped through the pages. "Jeff," he said. "You want to go to the bookstore with me some time?"

"What's that?"

"We have lots of books, like this." He flipped through the pages again.

"Yeah," Jeff said. He went over to the window and looked at Peter, straight at his face. Peter looked away in embarrassment, then looked back, seeing Jeff's eyes for the first time, the intense blueness of them, extremely blue, almost alien.

"I like looking at the pictures," Jeff said. He shuffled through the construction papers and showed Peter a nearly incomprehensible sequence of pictures, a comic strip of some sort.

"We have cats there, too," Peter said. "Do you like cats?"

*   *   *
A month later, or perhaps two, or maybe even three—it was hard for Peter to keep track—they were almost a family. Peter spent less and less time at the bookstore, coming home early to be there when Jeff came home from school. Half of Jeff’s toys were at his own house, in the extra bedroom. Peter spent the nights at Miribelle’s and sometimes cooked dinners for them at his house. One night, Peter and Jeff had fixed a Mexican dinner. Peter did the cooking, and Jeff cut some of the vegetables, and grated the cheese. They had set the table and were waiting for Miri to come home. Jeff climbed on a stool and looked out the window and saw his mother’s car in Peter’s driveway. Peter went out and found her slumped forward against the wheel. “It’s all right,” she said, when he opened the door. “I’m really tired, that’s all.” He helped her to the table, but she hardly ate anything and Jeff’s eyes were red when it was time to go home.

“What’s the matter?” Jeff said. “Is she sick?”

“Was she ever like that before?” Peter asked. “You know, before, when your father. . . .”

“No,” Jeff said. “I don’t remember.”

* * *

In the middle of the night, he woke up and found Miri’s side of the bed empty. He sat up and listened for her. She was not in the bathroom, or in the kitchen. Early autumn rain fell softly against the window, almost lulling him back to sleep, but Miri’s absence scared him. He was in her house, in her room, beneath her blankets, yet she had gone, she had left him, he was sure. He got up, put on some sweats and padded through the house. He checked Jeff’s room—Jeff was sleeping silently and Peter watched the tiny eyelids flutter for a moment, before moving on. Her car was in the garage. He sat down at the kitchen table, and waited, wondering what could have happened. Then he heard the house creak. He went to the backyard, his feet getting wet and grassy—he had mowed the lawn earlier that day—and saw the latter against the rain gutters, almost invisible in the dripping ivy. He climbed and found Miri, sitting in the chair, beneath an umbrella. She had a drink in her hand and she was trembling. Peter squeezed her shoulders, then kissed her neck.

“I’m scared,” she said. “Jeff, you, my job, the divorce, my life—all that’s under control. I
know that, but it doesn’t seem to matter. I can feel the badness here.” She pressed the glass to her stomach. “It won’t go away. Sometimes when I’m at the counter, watching women perfume their wrists, it strikes me and I shake and my voice wavers and I have to tell them that sometimes I have an allergy.” She set the glass down and put her hand on his, and at that moment he admitted to himself that he loved her, that he couldn’t understand why, but seeing her, here on the roof, rain dripping from the umbrella onto her slippered feet, he knew that he would never willingly part from her, would always feel a need to protect her, though he didn’t know what from, or even how.

* * *

Peter took Jeff to the bookstore on Saturdays. Jeff read in the children’s corner, drew pictures, talked to other kids who came in with their parents, and played with the cats and tried to keep them out from under the customers’ feet.

Posted next to the front and back doors was a sign. “Don’t let the cats out into the street, please.” Jeff asked Peter about it.

“They might get run over,” he said, pointing to the traffic. There was an alley behind the back door and cars zoomed down it unpredictably.

The cats tended to hang around the back door and Jeff took it upon himself to be the doorkeeper, making sure none of them escaped. As each customer left, he’d say, “Watch out for the cats!”

* * *

Spring again, and Peter, Miri and Jeff were sitting on the roof. Clouds dotted the sky and as the sun sank, the clouds turned red, then purple—a rippling carpet making the atmosphere seem vast and cosmic. They lay on the roof, looking up, imagining space travel and worlds they’d like to see. Jeff liked the idea of Cat World, where everyone was a cat and all the buildings had carpet on them, in case you had to stop and scratch on the spur of the moment. Peter imagined a world in which everyone communicated in books. No one said anything that wasn’t considered and weighty. Jeff wanted there to be pictures in the books, and Peter said, as Emperor of Book World, he would allow Jeff, Prince of
Bibliographica, to have a monopoly of pictures. "Just clouds," Miri said. "Nothing else. We'd move around, change everyday, every season, waiting for light to make us beautiful."

Jeff got up and started walking around.

"Careful," Miri said.

"The kid knows," Peter said. "You shouldn't be so protective."

"Look at the birds," Jeff said, pointing into the depths of the tree that partially covered the roof.

Miri sat up. "I'm a mother," she said. "If you were really a parent, you'd know what it feels like to worry about what's going to happen to your son."

Peter stood and walked toward the driveway side. "I see," he said. "No matter what, I'm not a parent. I just happen to be here. Nothing really matters."

"I think there's a nest," Jeff said.

"I have to know I can rely on you," Miri said. She put her hands to her face.

Peter walked toward her, and just before he reached her, she put her hands up, as if to ward off a blow.

"Miri," he said. "Miri." He lifted her to her feet and hugged her.

"I'm sorry," she said.

Peter enjoyed the hug, imagining how cloud creatures wouldn't be able to hug like that, body to body, the warm pressure, and then suddenly Miri was struggling against him, pushing him away. "Get away," she said. "Move." He held on tighter, but she redoubled her struggles. "Jeff," she yelled. "Get away from there!" He let go and turned. Jeff was leaning over the roof's edge, small hand resting too lightly on the branch, bending it anyway, staring into the leaves at a mass of twigs near the trunk. He was pointing. His feet were apart, as if he were about to take a step. "Mom, look," he said. Peter couldn't move. He felt as if he were falling backwards. Miri rushed forward and grabbed Jeff violently back and started yelling at him at the top of her voice. Jeff started crying, and Peter looked around the neighborhood to see if anyone was listening. He went to Miri and tried to calm her. "It's all right," he said. "Nothing happened. He's all right. Let's go down."
The next day, while Jeff was at school, Miri called Peter at the bookstore and had him take the nest out of the tree. "I don't care what you do with it," she said. "Don't even tell me what you do with it. Just get it out of my tree."

* * *

Jeff had gone to bed. The living room was dark, except for two pools of light. Miri was on her old green chair, leafing through a fashion magazine. Peter lay on the couch, trying to read To The Lighthouse, but not having much success because he kept looking at Miri, slightly irritated at how often she turned the pages, barely looking at them, and because he was worried about the way the lines around her eyes suggested fear, or worry, or depression or anxiety. After nearly a year, Peter felt he was no closer to knowing her, and it made him wonder how much he knew anyone, or even himself—but thinking about such things gave him a depression he could escape only by walking, and he wanted to stay near Miri, because she seemed to need him so much.

He leafed through the book, looking at the rows of letters, the columns of text almost unbroken by paragraphs, and when he looked again at Miri, she had her hand up to her shadowed face, the magazine dangling in the other hand. Peter set the book carefully on the ground, and went to her, standing behind the chair, his hand on the back of her neck.

"Honey," he said. "What's the matter?"
"I don't know," she said. "I don't know."

Peter moved around and, on his knees, hugged her, laying his head on her breasts. She snuffled, dropped the magazine and put her hand on his head.

"Is it me?" Peter said. "Do you think I don't love you?"
"No," she said. "Yes."

"I don't know how to tell you I do," he said.

"One time," she said, "I was feeling a little sluggish. It was when we lived in Belgium, Jack was working for the military, and I didn't get up early enough to fix breakfast and he walked into the room and poured orange juice on me."

"Miri—"
"What kind of a man would do something like that?"

Peter turned off the light over the couch. He put the book back on the shelf.

"Another time," she said, "at the breakfast table, I was telling him and Jeff—Jeff was about five or six, then, I think—I was saying something about college again, and he told me to shut up. I said that since we weren’t going to have more children and then he hit me. I couldn’t believe it. Right there."

Peter stood by the chair and looked at the top of her head, at the neat line through her dark hair through which he caught the barest glimpse of her scalp.

"But Jeff didn’t do anything," she said. "He didn’t say anything, or seem to think anything of it. It was normal to him."

She started crying again and Peter put his hands on her arm, then her shoulders, but he didn’t know what to do. He could not conceive how this affected her, how it felt deep down inside, because the only relationship he had ever been in, besides with Miri, had been with his ex-wife, and though she wasn’t particularly emotional, she was warm, she took care of him, she listened to him but hadn’t seemed too distraught over his desire to have a family, over his final decision—and it was a decision, after all, not the culmination of an emotional storm—to get divorced. It was all an equation with her, as if everything were just energy, and must be conserved—a little less on this side, a little more there, a solid here, a gas there, equilibrium. Standing there, looking at Miri living in some horrifying world of the past left him mystified, frustrated and, deep down, nostalgic for the days when the fact that he could do nothing for her would not have come up.

Peter knelt down again. "What can I do?" he said.

"Nothing," she said, and hugged him. "I just don’t know if I can love you," she said. "I think Jack drove it out of me. Shut me down."

"That’s not true." He started pacing around the room. "Absolutely not true. You do love me. I practically live here. You trust me with Jeff."

"Yes," she said. "Maybe you’re right. Maybe we should get married. Start trying to be a family." She moved toward the hallway, looked back at him, then went to Jeff’s door and peeked in.
"We are a family," he said, coming up behind her. Together they looked at Jeff, at the dark line of eyelashes, the way his hair draped slightly over his ear, and when Peter closed the door, she hugged him, let go, then hugged him again.

Early in the morning, before dawn, Peter left Miri sleeping, made a pot of coffee, put it in a thermos, and climbed up to the roof and watched the mountains slowly appear in the growing light. He had no idea what it meant to be in a family. He had been an only child. His parents were old, now dead. And he still felt that the closer he got to these strange people under the roof the farther away they got, the more mysterious they became.

*   *   *

They were to have been married a month, but Miri had decided that she couldn’t go through with it, that she had too much baggage to carry around, and that she ought to spend some time in therapy. She worked weekends at Peter’s bookstore in order to afford it and he was glad to have her. She had a natural ease with customers, a dimension he had never seen. She smiled at them, asked about the books they liked, though she never read herself, and always found a way to touch them, sometimes on the lower arm, or the hand, or brushing against them when she helped search for title. She wore a faint perfume, and Peter, often wrapped in figures and inventory lists and bank loans and the impending sale of his house, would sometimes catch it at odd places in the stacks as he walked, suddenly reminded of that first night on the roof.

On weekends, Jeff came down to the store, though he was getting more comfortable, at nine, with being in the house alone, and sometimes read books, other times read them to the younger kids, but mostly minded the cats, feeding them and letting Peter know if the food was low, cleaning the litter boxes, petting them and playing with them and making sure they didn’t escape into the dangerous world of two-ton cars.

It was spring when he was walking along the science fiction aisle and caught her scent, stronger than usual. He stopped, listened, then peered over a row of books and saw her standing in a flowered dress she had made from a pattern he had given her for Christmas. She was pulling out paperbacks, one after another, looking at the covers, then
putting them back. He snuck around, then ran up the aisle and hugged her. She kissed him back.

"Let’s get married," he said. "Things are okay. They’re fine. I don’t know what it is we expect, what we think has to be in order for us to do it, but let’s just forget it and do it anyway."

"Look at these," she said, pulling out a couple of books. "Every book is about dragons. They used to be bad things, and in this one," she flashed it at him, "they’re practically pets."

"They look good on covers," he said. "What do you say?"

She replaced the book and squirmed out of his arms. "Maybe," she said. "But not yet."

They heard the bells on the back door open. "Hey," Jeff yelled. "To lly! Come back here! Kitty kitty kitty kitty."

Miri brushed past Peter. "Jeff? Let him go. Let him go out there if he wants to go."

Peter followed her out to the central area of the store and saw Jeff standing with the door open, his legs spread, one foot braced against the jam, the other against the glass.

"Jeff!" Miri said. She was beside the cash register now.

"Kitty kitty kitty," Jeff said. "Tolly. Come here." He bent down and rubbed his fingers together, as Peter had taught him.

"Miri," Peter said. "It’s all right."

Customers began coming out of the stacks, attracted by the anxiousness in Miri’s voice.

The other cats, Checks, Gorky, and Pushy with the one white ear, darted through Jeff’s legs and out the door, following Tolly. Jeff jumped up and followed them into the alley.

"Jeff!" Miri screamed, and sprinted forward. Peter chased her to the door. She was outside, running toward Jeff, who was near the end of the block, kneeling, holding out his hand, Tolstoy sniffing while the other cats crept along the alley walls, eyes darting about the unfamiliar world.
And then a giant car, an old Lincoln Continental, dark blue, vinyl roof peeling, came rumbling around the corner, trying to make the turn quickly so that it wouldn’t block traffic, and Peter, holding the door open, paralyzed with inevitability, knew—by the way a shaft of light reflecting off an upper story window seemed to light up Jeff’s hand, the way it also seemed to strike the car’s grill and glance, almost caressingly, Miri’s pearl bracelet—that there would never be a marriage, and that all along he had known that Miri would never survive.