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Deborah Beth Davies

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WET DREAMS: A NOVEL

By

Deborah Beth Davies

A THESIS

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ABSTRACT

WET DREAMS: A NOVEL

By

Deborah Beth Davies

Liz and Joe Holt, Frank Medlar and Laurel McKay are four friends facing the hurdles of middle age. Sagging muscles, sick kids, contraceptive problems, parental loss, career setbacks and political woes are eased by friendship and sardonic humor. The stakes become higher when they meet a local waitress, Sally, who hitchhikes wearing only a gold ankle bracelet. Liz believes Sally has a role to play in her life....

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work owes much to the encouragement of Sheila Roberts, who allowed me to have faith in these characters.

CHAPTER 1

The year 1983 was the year I became obsessed with a waitress. I didn't choose her. She appeared in our lives, unexpected as an iceberg on Outer Drive and Woodward. She wore a gold ankle bracelet with a heart shaped clasp, and her name was Sally Ann.

Nineteen eighty-three had been a bad year for my family. One of those years when everything broke, but this year, along with the television, the dishwasher and the toaster oven, we broke too.

Wendall, my husband's father, died after a bout of pneumonia. His lungs had been weakened by fifty years of chain smoking, and he lay for weeks in a hospital bed in a coma, an oxygen bubbler beneath his nose like a jaunty handle bar mustache. Wendall died owing the bank \$200,000, and Joe and I inherited the firm and the debt.

When I met Joe I was in art school in Ann Arbor, and he was working on a degree in sociology. Wendall begged, bribed and browbeat Joe to join the family construction operation, and when Joe agreed he unexpectedly thrived on the work. There's a lot of applied sociology in building. Joe was as happy as a pig in mud with population studies, earthquake predictions, radon pollution charts and tensile metal strengths. We moved to be closer

to Wendall's business, and I quit school but kept up my interest in art. Wendall and Joe didn't always agree about the firm's future, Wendall belonging to the "no guts, no glory" school of finance, but the partnership went better than I'd expected, right up until the time when the recession hit Michigan.

In no time, banks were giving employees lessons on how to hotwire bulldozers in the middle of the night. Joe and I were Sane members watching our private lives go under with the Midland Nuclear Power Plant. Half our friends and neighbors lost their jobs and moved to Phoenix, Houston or the Silicon Valley, and four houses on our block were up for sale.

In first grade, my daughter, Ellie, was a precocious youngster who kept crickets in her underwear drawer. In January, she fell off a swingset, wearing ice slicked red mittens, and broke her wrist. By the time the cast was off, she had started on a pilgrimage through the stations of every known child's ailment. Strep throat, chicken pox, mononucleosis, stomach flu, measles...you name it, she had it. It took the better part of six months to discover she had an infection in the recently mended bone, and the infection was dumping gunk into her system, making her vulnerable to every passing germ. Massive antibiotics solved the problem; odd sounding products that made pharmacists crow with pride. By the end of May, Ellie was better, but behind in school and a stranger to her friends.



About the time that Ellie got better, I hurt my back. I twisted my ankle, carrying in groceries, went down with the Trix and Crisco and came up with torn ligaments. My doctor, a rotund blond, prescribed Aspirin, rest and swimming. She advised I avoid elaborate cures and resulting complications. Learn to swim a mile, she said, and I would save my life.

There I was, the epitome of the uninsured housewife, unable to lift our ten pound cat, Quince. I couldn't rake, vacuum, clean toilets, carry laundry or stand two minutes without bursting into tears. For a month I lived on the couch, staring at the fraying patches on the arms, where Quince determinedly sharpened his claws. We were trying to keep the heat bills down. I huddled under blankets like an irritable cave woman, trapped in a squalid cave.

Joe is never cold, or irritable either. He's kept his rangy build from inspecting outside work. If I look at him through a stranger's eyes, I see his brown hair is thinning, and his middle is going to flab a bit, though not so much as mine. Something about his shoulders and eyes makes him look predatory; actually he's easy-going to a fault.

After Wendall's death Joe crossed an invisible line into slobdom, the line that determines which men end up paying child support. He would sporadically help Ellie with her homework, run a load of wash, or read Dr. Seuss.

The next three nights he'd fall asleep watching "Dukes of Hazard" reruns, leave the stove on, burn pans, break glass and not clean it up. Never loquacious, he now was so quiet, particularly when we were alone, I wondered whether he'd tell me if the kitchen caught on fire. He picked his cuticles bloody, and was hurt and offended when I said he seemed depressed.

I alternated between bouts of housework and reading escape fiction. I noticed that year, a very strange thing about those stories. I began to see emerging from the pages, a repetitive background character I had never noticed before. This character was invariably a hard-eyed woman pushing forty, sometimes younger, going downhill and embittered at nineteen or twenty eight. She often had some outward physical sign of inward disintegration, such as telltale sagging breasts or graying nostril hairs. Something about the presence of this woman made me nervous. I scowled, curled on my fraying couch, and tried to analyze why.

Sometimes I thought about getting out my art equipment, the tiny bottles of paint that cost as much as Ellie's prescriptions, the spirit soaked rags, the stretching box I used to silkscreen cards. When Joe was in school, I had built up a small business, making greeting cards and selling them to campus stores. They were beautiful cards, if I say so. Clouds of mauve wysteria, blue gray Hokusai tempests, tiny red and gold teddy bears,

stylized white and black lambs. When we lived in Ann Arbor, I'd sold enough to buy art equipment, but it's difficult to market work long distance, and when Ellie was sick it had become impossible. My portfolio was stored between the wall and Joe's desk now, and both the desk and folder were gathering dust.

The spring of the year had been the worst; by late summer I was moving gingerly about. Ellie slammed around catching toads and drawing colored chalk sidewalk pictures, belatedly learning how to ride a bike. She didn't have to get to bed early, that summer; she spent the night with friends and came home stuffed with waffles and good times. There were days when I managed to feel almost human. Nights, when the windows were open, and the soft damp smell of late summer rains washed into the house, I felt restless and wondered what exactly I would do for the rest of my life.

I thought it would help if Joe and I got out more often. We began a Friday night round of rural bars, trying to avoid other familiar, worried middle class faces. We often drank with our science fiction toting, divorced friend Frank Medlar. Frank is a plastic surgeon, a specialist in cleft palate cases. He carries a notebook of before and after pictures, infants whose misaligned faces have been broken and rejoined. His ex-wife, a cool brunette, has moved to a Mexican commune where she lives with a woman and raises Saint Bernard dogs. Frank is thin,

smallboned, short, mustached, blond and sardonic. He drinks anything, bootleg beer, blackberry schnapps, Guinness, vodka and koolaid, and seems less a doctor than a facial carpenter.

Joe and Frank talk movies, Frank and I talk books. We never talked about sex until we met Sally Ann.

One rainy Friday I ordered pizza for the sitter, and Frank, Joe and I went driving in the rattle-trap black pick-up truck Frank bought to haul firewood. I held myself upright, braced against the springs, and we headed east, through an August rain. The country smelled of last year's oak leaves and cat urine. X-rated video rental shacks alternated with seasonal fruit stands and bargain shoe emporiums. We ended up at the ramshackle Connie's Bar and Grill. Connie is the owner, an amiable platinum blond who knows her customers by name. Most of the waitresses were just people, women with short cropped hair and fallen arches. There was a jukebox, and someone was playing "Honkey Tonk Angel." The place had pizza, nachos, chowder, cherry pie and Sally Ann.

Sally stood out like a pearl in a rubbery oyster gut. She had shoulder length white-blond hair and wore white knit shorts and a tank top. As I say, she had an ankle bracelet. She wore white, flat heeled plastic sandals. She should have looked tawdry, but she didn't. Marilyn Monroe must have looked like that. She a blank child's face, the face of a sleeping madonna, and she



absolutely, undeniably radiated sex. She maintained an air of stupefied distance, taking orders as though stepping over dead bodies. When she bent over to take our order, you could see the whole of her small, sun-gold breasts. She smelled of aloe. Frank claimed to be sick of women, but his eyes followed her as though leashed to her fanny like a dog.

Two tables away, some construction workers were drinking. One man with a receding hairline lurched over and dropped a napkin over Joe's eyes. It slid to his lap and lay there, a small white patch on the crotch of his blue jeans, showing women with curlers and rolling pins, and husbands cheating on their wives.

"You, Joe, better keep your hands off that one." The man belched. "Her mother, Connie, owns the bar, and she'll cut you off. Not to mention your wife, here'll cut you off from something, or maybe she'll cut something off'a you."

"You know him?" Frank asked, watching the man step into the back parking lot.

"An asshole," Joe nodded. "I want some nachos. What about it, Liz? Want to share them with me?"

Sally Ann brought the pitcher of beer and nachos, but was soon replaced by a woman in her sixties who called all three of us "Hun." We drank a little longer, and drove home. I put my head on Joe's shoulder, and listened to Frank sing "Plastic Jesus on the Dashboard of my Car."

The next Monday I dragged my whimpering body to the Y Center. The chlorine smell brought back memories of seventh grade gym classes when I'd still worn undershirts and hated open showers. Then I'd been one of the last girls not to wear a bra; now I was one of the few women there who wore one. Why, I thought, did I never get this right?

Disinterested in housewives' bodies since time immemorial, the Y was now competing in earnest for working women's newly won bucks. In the last year the locker rooms had added celery green carpet, pink and lavender painted lockers, a masseuse, weight lifting equipment, a sauna, a steam room, and a tanning booth. The smell of new paint still hung thick in the air. The last time I'd been there the lockers had been gray, and women had had their choice between cooking and volley ball.

I came to try the small therapy pool that sheltered men and women who flexed stiff shoulders, aching bones and assorted broken parts. The maimed ranged from basketball players with ruined knees to feisty old women who wore bathing caps over nonexistent hair. The lanes of the real pool were blurred with lap swimmers, noon time athletes, hairy chested men who walked as if their prickles were made of gold.

I loved the therapy pool. The warm water relaxed me, took away pain so that I could curl like an embryo, like a fish.

Soon I had a September routine. I'd send Ellie off to school. Then, stepping over towels, toast crumbs and Quince, I'd rush to the Y. I'd change and get into the small pool, float for a while, then switch to the large pool and swim a length front crawl. Then I'd get back to the small pool. For a week I swam one length. The next I swam two. By the end of September, I swam ten lengths, an eighth of a mile. I was drying myself with a rusk-rough towel, congratulating myself, flushed with pride, when the tanning booth door opened, and Sally Ann stood naked next to a sign that said "Get Tokens at the Desk."

There were women standing all around. Young women bemoaning first stretch marks, society matrons with electrolized eyebrows and tummy tuck scars, and old women whose breasts hung like withered grapes. Nakedness is a strange thing. All my life I've seen women naked, but generally the naked women have been my own age, plump when I was, shapely when I was, nursing and sagging when I was. This was the first time I had seen an entire room full of women, ages eighteen through eighty, united in dislike. It wasn't so much Sally's boyish thighs, the gentle rise of her stomach, the breasts improbably upright. Something about her glowed; gave off an essence. She was in some way burning, sparking cold energy.

I stared at Sally, entranced as the other women. I could not imagine Sally having been an awkward child, or an adolescent picking pimples by fluorescent light. She

seemed to feel herself the ultimate gift, perfection frozen in the present.

I pictured her stepping through a door in the middle of the night, naked like this, with a sheen of sweat on her breasts.

She began to rub lotion methodically over her body. Hands, arms, breasts, ass, thighs, calves, flawless heels. She was blocking the aisle. Other women had to go around her, stepping over benches in order to get by. She belonged, I thought, with champagne in a bucket, brass bedposts, and black silk sheets.

I jammed my tennis shoes on over damp, sockless feet. Outside, the air was unseasonably chilly. Disconsolate pigeons squatted on orange tile church roofs.

The Aspirin I'd taken felt raw and sour in my stomach. I could picture someone in bed with Sally, fucking her, that was certain, legs and arms waving in a glorious scramble. Someone who ought to be there, all tangled up with her.

Joe, I thought. I wanted to send Sally to my husband, the way you send bellygrams or clown-toted mylar balloons.



CHAPTER 2

Joe had news that night at dinner. A friend of Wendall's had referred a client to him, a Lapeer farmer who wanted site work done before construction in the spring. The project was a pig hotel, the first I'd ever heard of, a building where pigs never see the light of day. I hated the idea, but Joe was joking and cheerful. He likes learning anything new: DNR drainage regulations, what mix of concrete resists porcine urine, what fans ventilate rooms rendolent of pig. When the firm built a dialysis center, Joe spent hours reading about kidneys. When they built a warehouse he came to greatly admire fungus. The same all-accepting nature makes him like his clients as well.

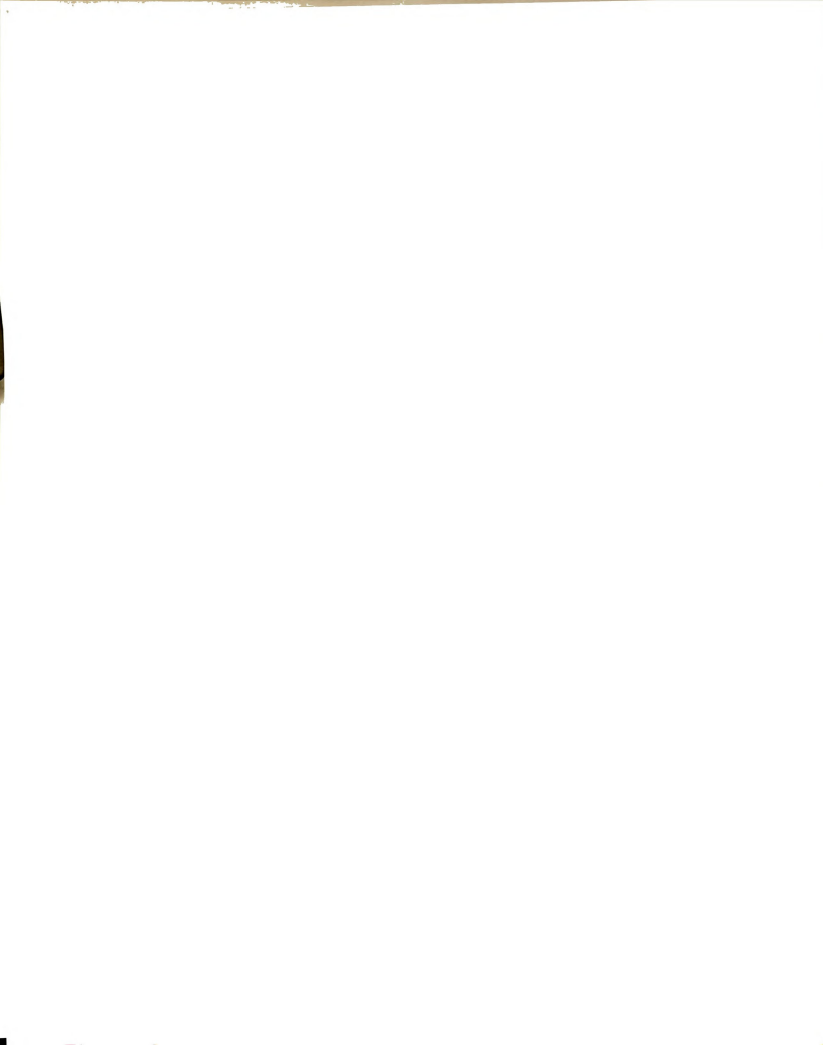
This particular client, Elliot, had made money raising soybeans, and now hoped to turn corn and railroad access into pork. Joe brought home a bottle of Cutty Sark from said client, as well as some chocolates he'd picked up for Ellie. He went to bed early, but I didn't resent it. Drunk, he looked comfortably tousled and familiar, not like days when he was sober, silent and withdrawn.

Ellie played outside in the September twilight. That's the closest kids get to dusk in Michigan, now that daylight savings has taken the world of summer shadow from

them. Inside, the lights reflected back from the windows. I looked around, aware of the creaking house we'd said we would remodel. The granite foundation and Michigan basement give its age away, as had, at first, the furnace and the plumbing. No two walls were exactly plumb, no floors truly level. You could put a marble down anywhere in Ellie's room, and it would roll, with increasing speed, to ping against the baseboards. There were days when I cursed the cracked plaster, smoothed over in layers by successive occupants. Other days, I loved the high arched doorways. The oak doors with their leaded glass panels had long ago been stripped, not of varnish, but from the house. The house felt open, for an old house, with nine foot ceilings, large windows, and odd gables and bays. That evening everything looked good: the old, cracked oak mantle glowed in the light of two hundred watts and promised solvency.

I spent the last of the evening helping Ellie make Kleenex birds, laboriously tying string around stuffed Kleenex heads, and fluffing out Kleenex wings. She was pink with pride and effort. In the midst of it all, a surfeit of chocolates caught her and sent her rushing to the bathroom, hand over her mouth. I ran her tub, found her clean pajamas, and, magnificent in crisis, tucked her into bed.

"I'm sorry, Mom," she kept saying. "I just couldn't help it. Will it hurt your back, cleaning it up?"



I felt guilty, hearing the fear in her voice, the fear that I'd start crying, the fear that things would be bad again, as they had been.

"I'm fine, darling," I reassured her, and kissed her damp, clean-smelling hair. I reached around behind her to pour cleanser in the toilet, which promptly began to foam alarmingly. No wonder, because I'd grabbed Mr. Bubble instead of scouring powder. Vomit-flecked froth came rushing up at me. I cursed, rattled the handle, and stuffed rugs around the toilet base.

With no warning, I was bone tired, exhausted as a runner who has hit the wall. I washed up and lay down next to Joe, who was warm and snoring. The sheets had come untucked and were shoved up around my rib cage. I pushed the cool smooth cotton down around my ankles, and fell asleep with the nubby blankets soft against my skin.

Ellie was fine in the morning and went off to school singing. I grabbed my suit and went straight to the Y. I didn't see Sally and I didn't stay long in the small pool. I changed to lap swim, working on my front crawl, eyeing the way that other swimmers brought their elbows back midstroke. I started trying to pick up bits of swimming style, instead of windmilling madly with my arms and thrashing my legs.

Because I didn't need so much energy, swimming, it was easier to think. I remembered I'd left a crate of cards in the basement, and wondered if the spring damp had

ruined them. One set, with small, sunbright marigolds, I'd never tried to market. My cards are expensive by the time I cover my printing costs, because I like to use good stock and color that will last.

I wondered if some of the local stores would let me display my work. Selling on consignment is not easy. Most big stores don't like to lose the counter space, and even in small stores, you need some say about where and how cards are displayed, or you just get the boxes back, crushed and flyspecked. My thoughts were interrupted when a swimmer crossed my lane, crashed into me and swam on without a second look. I think there's something pathological about male speed swimmers. If he did it again, I thought, I would shove his bald head down.

Strange that people couldn't get along, even swimming. I remembered an experiment I had read about. Scientists had put white mice under water in globes made of translucent, lung-like tissue. The globes filtered air from the water like external gills. There had been pictures of surprised mice treading water, each in its own little bubble of oxygen. People would all have gill implants one day, scientists told us. We would live in the ocean's rise and fall, swimming easily. I let myself float lazily to the bottom, and came up gasping and rubbing chlorine from my eyes.

On my way out of the building I ran into Laurel McKay. Laurel is second ward city commissioner and the



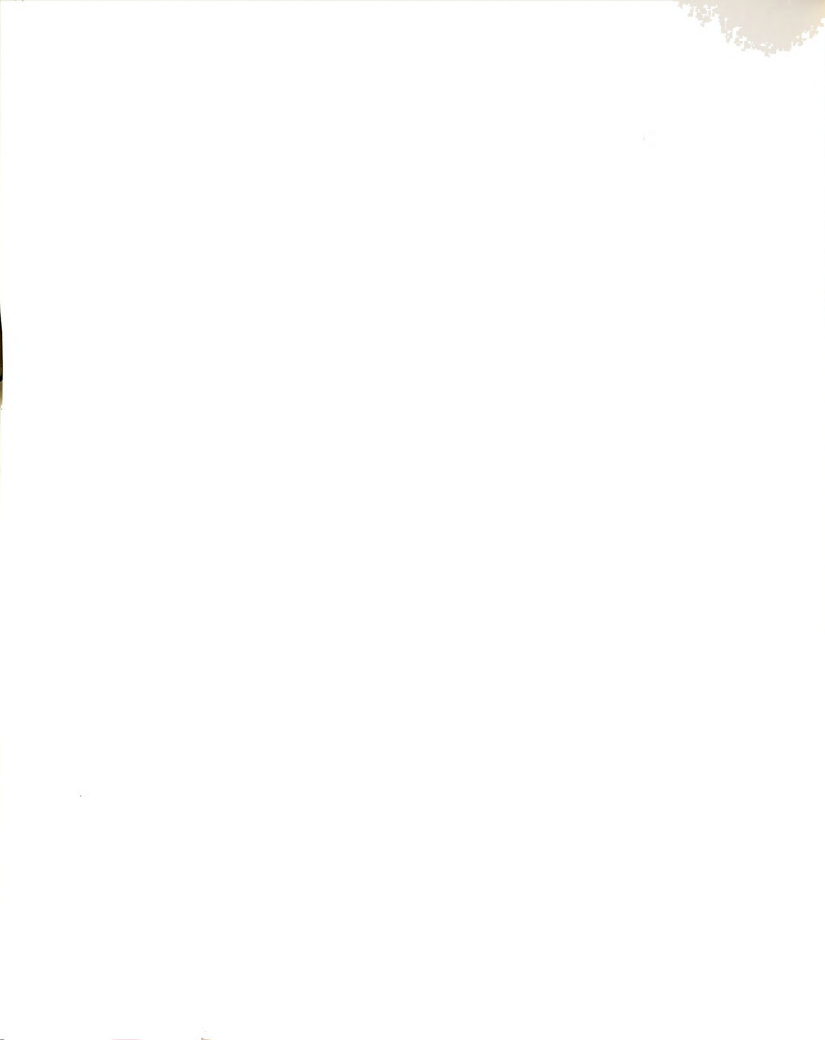
vice mayor, an honorary title of little importance that lets her run meetings when the mayor has the flu. She is also a good friend; a tall, flat-footed woman with tortoise rim glasses and a cloud of soft brown hair. We get along because we don't make each other defensive; she's had problems during the same years that I have.

I asked her to come by for lunch. She brought a bottle of white wine and served it while I chopped cheese into tuna fish. We'd met through Newcomers when we'd first moved here, and had been united by mutual boredom with the group. I hadn't seen her as often since she'd divorced Forest and first run for office two years ago.

Their divorce had made chairs of worthy causes tear their hair with vigor. Both Laurel and Forest, a department head at Eastern, had been active in every Republican fund raiser, every fine arts project, every abuse prevention board. Now when both are invited to a party, their friends quiver and separate into two pulsing groups, like maimed jellyfish longing to regenerate. Less from bitterness than consideration to the hostess, where Laurel goes, Forest does not, and the reverse is true.

Most of my friends blamed Laurel, and chose to kibbitz with Forest, who wears button down shirts, corduroy pants, and tweed jackets with the elbows patched. Forest had reputedly been faithful to Laurel. They had not had children, and no one knew what they felt about that.

I'd stayed in Laurel's corner. We'd spent hours,



sorting emotions. Forest said we were neurotic, comparing private lives. We were anthropologists, seeing if fragments mattered, would fit a pattern, could be named, categorized. We hoped to find opalescent glass; mostly we found potshards. We trusted each other not to reveal our discoveries.

Laurel poked at her tuna fish and drank chilled wine by the glassful, laughing when Quince jumped on the table, bunghole to her face.

She lifted him down and gave him some tuna on a napkin.

"No respect from the masses," she said. "He's voting for Stevenson."

Laurel was managing her own campaign for reelection. Why she wanted the aggravation was beyond me. Laurel was, however, an innately political person, one of those people who tell you, all too correctly, that the air you breath and the water you drink are pure politics. She had an accounting degree but had not worked as an accountant. While she'd been married, she'd run three successful campaigns for Forest's friends. She recruited armies of white-haired ladies to check voter records, gave cocktail parties, sent fund raising letters, gave radio interviews. Saying she is good in math is an understatement. She is one of those dreadful people who sing Handel's Messiah while doing income tax. Her opponent was a twenty-year-and-out Ford employee who had

gone to school for one year at Albion. He drove for Meals on Wheels and was an excellent bowler. You could see him out every Sunday, raking the lawn.

"You really love politics, don't you?" I said, looking at Laurel. She looked relaxed. Smug. Like Quince eating tuna fish.

"I guess I do," she said. "A lot of people didn't talk to me after I left Forest. Not that they cut me, exactly, they just didn't know how to take me. I'd been Forest's wife, then nothing. They didn't know what to say."

"You've never been just Forest's wife!" I thought, appalled, of the parties, the faculty picnics, the drinks after concerts she had arranged for him.

"You weren't his wife," I said indignantly. "He was your project."

"All the same," she said. "Do you have any idea what it's like to be stuck in an elevator with someone who works with your ex-husband?"

"Laurel, there isn't one elevator left in this town."

"I was speaking figuratively." She frowned and patted her lips with her napkin, then poured herself a slosh more wine.

"It's better now." She grinned. "If I got stuck now, people would say, 'Hey, you old bat, how's about the potholes on my street?'"

"And you like that."

"Hell, yes. I'm good at potholes. I have a lover," she added, as an afterthought.

I myself poured the rest of the wine.

"Where did you meet him?" I asked her.

"It was easy. I ran an Agony Column ad."

"You what? You did what? You did what?" She put her hand to my mouth, to shut it.

"Last July," she said. "I don't know why I did it. I was bored; I'd been working on the campaign for weeks and weeks, Forest started seeing Thessaly, who has the verve of a douche bag, and I wanted to see what I had that still functioned, besides my brain. I thought about putting an ad in the Ann Arbor News personal column, reading 'Unitarian Seeking Same.'"

"You're not a Unitarian," I said, peeved.

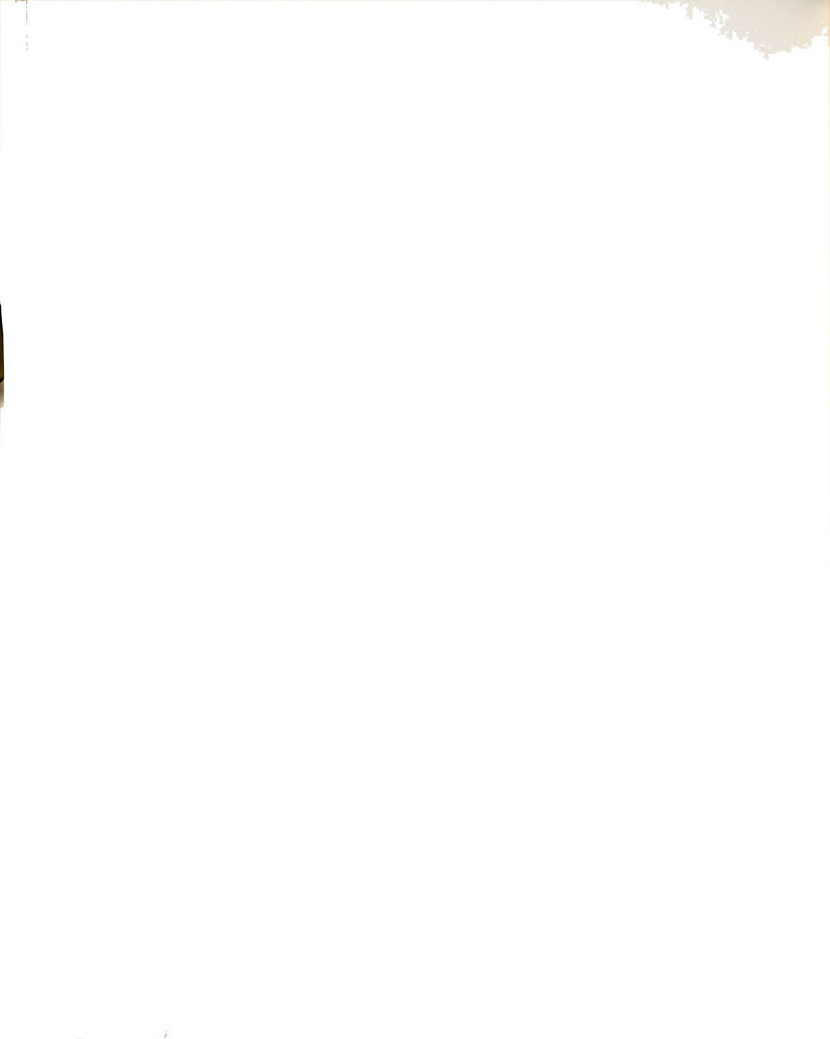
"You're a lapsed Catholic." Laurel has this tendency toward pragmatism. I, for instance, recall when she was a Democrat.

"I know, but Unitarians sound so safe. The ad was worse than that," she confessed, "by the time I'd finished. What's the point in being tacky if you can't have fun?"

"What did the ad say, Laurel?"

"Unitarian Shepherdess Seeks Swain of Same Persuasion."

"Laurel, that's disgusting. What if you'd been



hurt?"

"I just couldn't resist," she said. "It had been years since I'd done anything silly. What could happen? I have Unitarian friends in Ann Arbor; they checked out the responses and gave one their O.K. We met at a bar. It was perfectly safe, in public..."

"What went wrong?" I recognize Laurel's big build-ups.

"We got in a fight and he hit me."

"Laurel! He didn't!"

"He certainly did. We got in a, ah, heated discussion, drinking peach schnapps and contemplating Social Security. You know how I hate forced savings programs. He lost his temper and slugged me."

"Don't tell me you felt sheepish, Laurel," I warned her.

"Mostly I felt my jaw," she said. "He got up and left. I don't even remember his name now, but it was the start of something, Lizzie. The bartender was so sweet. He fixed me an icepack. His name is Al, and I spent the night with him."

"It doesn't sound romantic," I said.

"Maybe not. But it was peaceful. Al's about thirty five, I'd guess. Younger than I am. And he just seemed so relaxed. He didn't say much. He certainly didn't try to fast talk me, Lizzie, and he didn't say a blessed word when we were in bed."

I was surprised. I'd always thought Laurel would talk anywhere, about anything.

"Forest always talked when we were in bed," she elaborated. She bent down to stroke Quince, who was lying in a patch of light. "If I started fast, he'd say, 'Slow down, you're rushing your emotions.' So I'd slow down. I'd look at the ceiling, and take deep breaths, and he'd say, 'Loosen up, Laurel! You're not spontaneous!'"

"Did you tell him to go stuff himself?" I asked her.

"I tried to, Liz. But he'd tell me I was hostile, defensive and inhibited. If I tried to talk he'd tell me I was saying the wrong things...."

"He must think he's a psychiatrist."

"I think it's his teaching style. He runs workshops that sound like S and M clubs."

"Was he always like that?" I asked her.

She shook her head and Quince batted her swinging hair.

"It just kept getting worse. I couldn't do one thing to please him. Don't scold me, Liz. I know I shouldn't mess around before the election, but it's such a nice feeling. Just sort of whole and natural."

It seemed to me Laurel would be in a good mood to listen. I sat on the couch with the Kleenex birds, and talked about Sally Ann.

Laurel was impressed. "That's really sick," she



said.

My feelings were hurt. "Come on, Laurel, I've never said that to you."

"I'm not hung up on some bleached blond bimbo."

"I don't think her hair is bleached," I responded, stung.

"Are you sure you're not attracted to her?" Laurel queried. "That would be a lot healthier, you know."

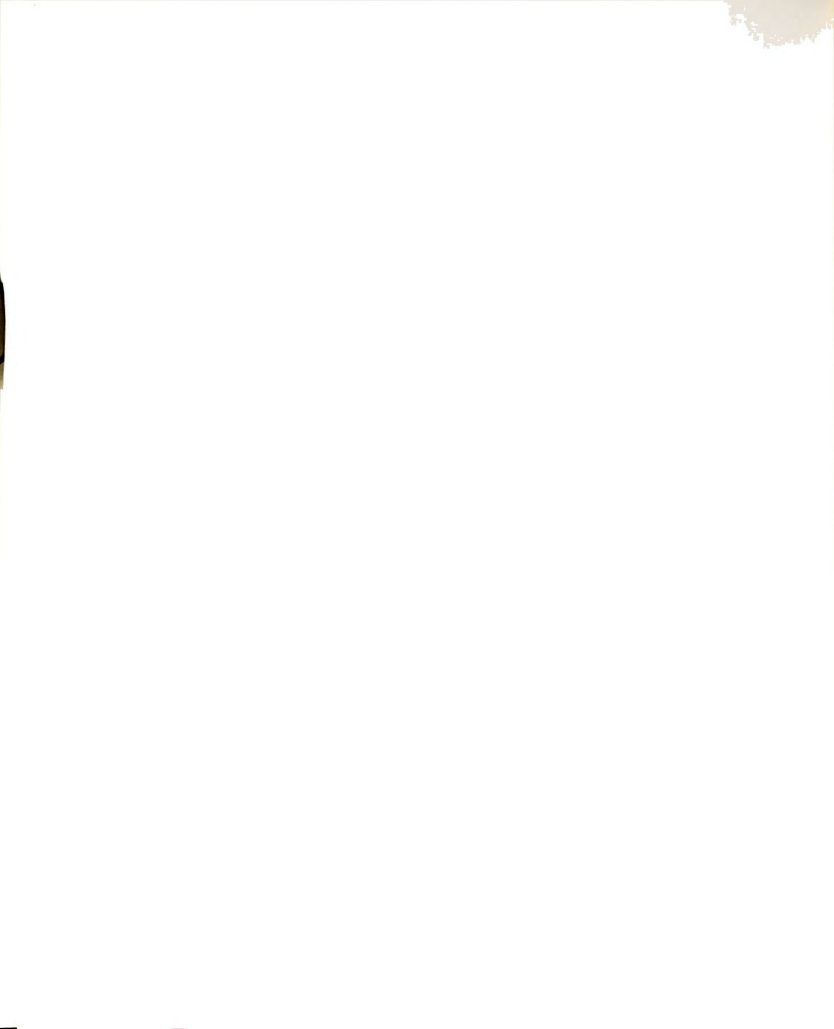
"I wondered that, at first," I admitted. "But I don't think so. There was only one time when I thought I was turning on to a woman, and then it turned out she was smoking the brand of cigarettes Joe smokes. She smelled like Joe, that was all."

Laurel was delicately picking a Kleenex bird to pieces.

"I just want to do something for Joe," I tried to explain. "He's not like Forest. He never criticizes; he never complains. I find I'm keeping a mental scorecard lately. He cleans up when Quince barfs, so that's one point for him, but I get up when Ellie cries, which is worth a lot more points. I catch myself reciting a list of things he's forgotten. I'm tired of asking him to wash the tub or straighten Ellie's bed."

"I can't help him in his job," I added. "I can't build fucking pig farms. He never asks for anything and I ask and ask and ask."

"You know," Laurel said, "you're developing a



complex."

"You try being an invalid. It's trickier than I thought."

"He did that stuff before, right? Hefted laundry, tucked the kid in?"

I felt like shaking Laurel. She was completely missing the point.

"I don't feel his help is freely given. I feel as if I'm extorting it, by needing it."

"Tell the truth," said Laurel. "This is really about your sex life."

"It is not about my sex life. We're always good in bed. If we could spend all our time in bed, our lives would be golden. In bed I don't have to ask him, Do This Joe, Please Do That."

"You can't hand out women like saran-wrapped butter brickle."

"She looks like saran-wrapped butter brickle. That's just it."

"Why would she want to go to bed with Joe?"

"Why not?" I asked Laurel. "I told you, Joe is good company, in bed."

"What's your standard of comparison? How much experience have you had? That's what you need...you're probably sublimating, yourself."

"What do you mean? You think I ought to go to bed with a stranger?"

"The right stranger," she said, "is not all bad."
There were times when it sounded good, the
zipless fuck romance. Falling in bed with someone who had
never heard you fart.

Having Ellie had been morally stultifying. My
closest childhood friend had had a mother who slept around.
Not only had my friend known, her friends and teachers had
known. She'd shed enough tears into my pillows to convince
me that children know and suffer when their mothers have
affairs. Fathers may avoid detection through distance, but
mothers are too busy and too close. They end up taking the
kid to the doctor at the very minute they should be burning
the Pink Sands Motel Receipt.

Was that what I wanted? I asked. I certainly was
lonely, waiting day after day to see if Joe would talk to
me. To see if he would turn into the person I remembered.
I didn't want a stranger. I wanted Joe.

"You're wrong, Laurel," I told her. "Logical,
but wrong."

"Bullshit," she said, scattering shredded bits of
Kleenix. "It's like sending Joe to the PTO. You're
sticking him with your work!"

After she left, I sat and thought over what
she'd told me.

It didn't ring true. Just for once, I wanted
him to go to bed without thinking of the mortgage, the
doctor bills, the gas bills. I felt as though all those

things shared my bed with me, as though he went to bed fucking a houseful of problems. And what he felt I didn't know; he wouldn't talk to me.

One thing I had gained from talking with Laurel. I had been wrong about those black silk sheets. That made Sally's room too much like Laurel's image. A white painted wood or iron bedframe would be better, maybe with a quilt draped over the foot of the bed.

CHAPTER 3

It took me a while to pick up the house the next morning, including tossing the awful bathroom throw rugs into the wash. By the time I got to the Y Center, the locker room was empty but aloe scented. I looked about wondering if Sally would be there.

There was no one in the room with hair driers. No one's feet showed under the john doors; the tanning booth harbored no escaping subliminal glow.

I slouched toward the pool, glancing in the sauna and the steam room. Both were empty. The showers harbored two women, each close to seventy. One was stick-thin, her flat stomach creased and wrinkled. The other was a massive woman, thickly padded with lard. Vericose veins stitched the backs of her legs to her buttocks. Her enormous fleshy bottom showed a thumbprint bruise.

The thin woman stood with her arms crossed over her chest and let the steaming water pour over her full force.

"I can't get warm, I simply cannot get warm," she repeated. "The therapy pool should never be so cold."

"I found it warm enough, Livie," her friend said. "You know it's hard to be vigorous if the water is too warm."

I skipped the therapy pool entirely that day, telling myself I didn't need it as much as some people did. While I swam lengths I found myself thinking about Laurel, about Laurel saying I was projecting my own lust.

Was there something wrong with me because I like to look at women? I've never had the chance to look at men in a locker room. The few nude models I saw in the art program made me think of polymer based reproductions of The Discus Thrower. I don't know what I would have wanted to see them do, instead of traditionally posing. Not aerobics. Gardening, perhaps.

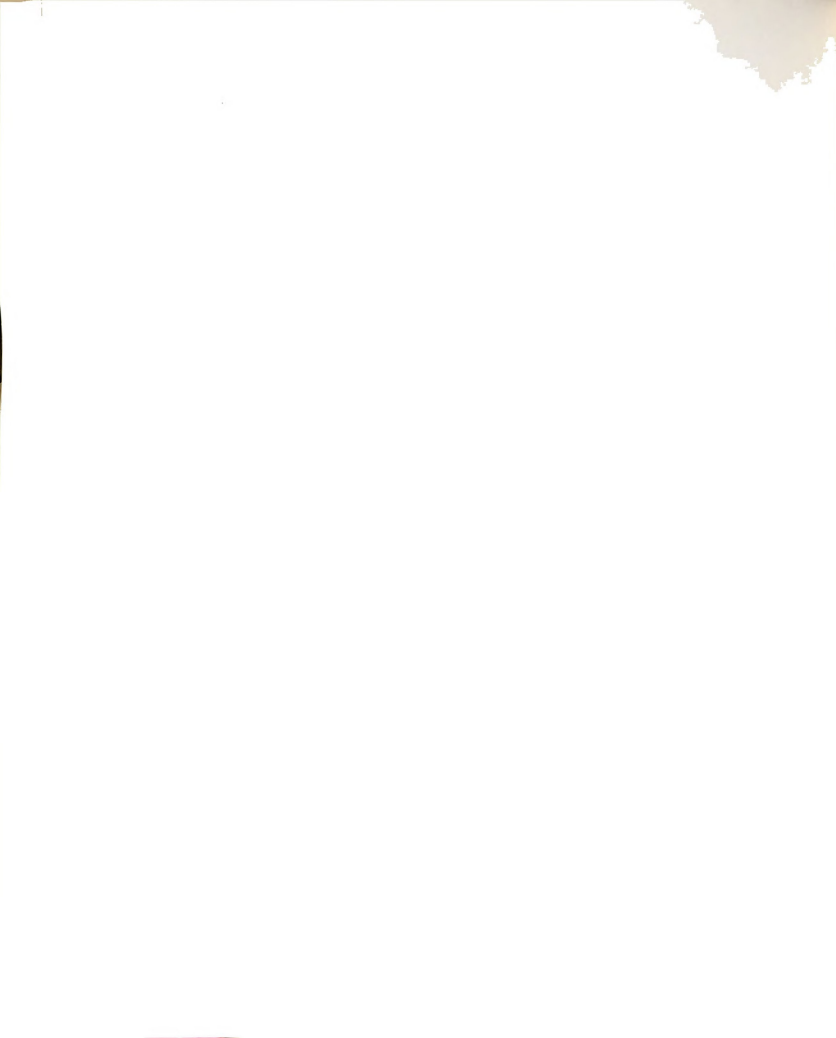
It wasn't just the locker room, with its unstudied postures. Women's bodies do fascinate me. There is something eternal but varied in the drooping curves women blandly and so improbably produce. Breasts flat as baking powder biscuits, breasts pendulous as goat scrotums. Nipples with brown tips extruded as though from a lipstick, nipples inset, cushioned in bulging rose. Women's hips, their derrieres sometimes truly, marvelously heart-shaped, sometimes molded like thumb pads, sometimes planked on bone. We live, I defended myself, in a linear landscape, a stick drawing punctuated by women, discs of sunlight, full moons, peonies, peaches, and eggs. What else was round or rounding? Some slugs...I gave up the theory, and thought about Reubens and Gauguin, Kollwitz and Cassat.

I thrashed on, musing about good old art and

nature, when my nemesis churned by me, splashing me in the face, cutting in front of me so that I had to break stroke and splutter. His pointed elbows, moving away, looking like shark fins through the foam. I began swimming again, determined I would outswim him.

The women in the shower had depressed me, the one bulging and breathless, and the other thin and cold. My mother, I thought, had been their age when she died.

My mother had been a tall woman, with thin blond hair. As a child, I had of course thought her the most beautiful woman in the world. She was so calm. I had never, as a child, known her to be unhappy. She made pies from cherries we had picked and pitted, so that even now the scent and sight of cherries brings back the remembrance of twisted wet black tree limbs, the heady scent of fermenting fruit fallen into the grass. I remember working with her in the kitchen, feeling the round of pie dough splay out beneath my hand. She made smoky tasting tea in an old blue china tea pot, and kept a painted rocking chair against one kitchen wall. I would pull the chair out into the middle of the kitchen, and rock and talk to her while she went about her work. To me she owned a world slow moving and sensuous. I had been sure when I was grown, I would own that self-created world. I had married Joe, to some degree, because he loved my mother, his own mother, Elaine, having died when he was ten. My mother silently influenced my decision to leave art school. I craved a



sense of time, of physical leisure, a sense of the life I believe she lived.

She had died of a stroke the year Ellie was born, and my father, still dapper, had remarried within two months. He and his wife live in Florida with her young children. He sends Ellie packages of seashells twice a year.

I swam twenty lengths before I quit. The S.O.B. was swimming in a lane he now had all to himself. I dressed stiffly, struggling to get my shoes on. The aloe lotion still hung in the air, displacing the pungent, stinging chlorine. I ran a comb through my hair and suddenly knew where the scent was coming from. In one corner of a room that held stored equipment, a rarely employed masseuse kept a three sided screen. When Rhonda, the masseuse, was not busy massaging, she folded towels and bemoaned her children's health. I knew why I hadn't seen Sally. She was behind the canvas screens, lying on a linoleum topped table while Rhonda's hands kneaded her smooth as polished stone.

Holding my breath, I stepped into the room and around the screen. I could tell Rhonda we were out of towels. Rhonda continued speaking, annoyance in her voice.

"Sometimes she breaths through her mouth. It must be adenoids," she concluded.

I stared at the woman exuding aloe, the not-Sally woman corporeal as bread. She was, I realized, my doctor,

Isabel Hibbs.

"Elizabeth," she said. "It's good to see you."

"Isabel," I managed.

"How are you doing?" she asked. "I'm glad to see you've been swimming. I myself swim a mile four days a week."

I tried to keep my eyes on her face and ignore her beet red thighs.

"I'm swimming," I told her. And added, "My back hurts."

"As long as you're getting exercise. That's what's important."

"It does hurt, though," I said, rebellious. "It hurts whether or not I swim."

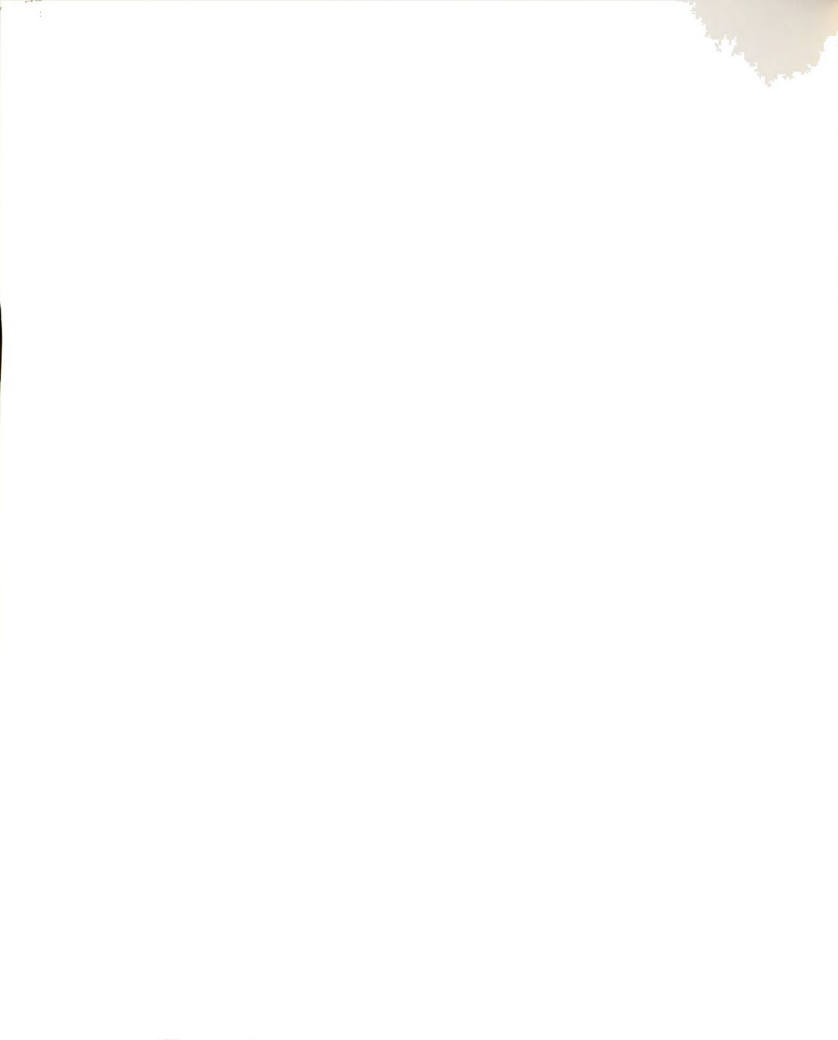
"It may always hurt." Her voice was cheerful. "There's more and more evidence that if back pain isn't stopped soon after an injury, it becomes like the pain after amputation. The brain cells keep on registering pain after the source is gone."

I stared at her.

"You mean, this pain is all in my head? That it's not real?"

"Oh, no, I don't mean that. It's like a jammed electric circuit. It's real...it's just not treatable, you see."

She nodded, head on one side. "So you see, it's important you don't strain those muscles. Swim, by all



means swim, that's mostly stretching, but don't lift. And try a massage," she said.

I drove home, tonguing an old filling. I'd never noticed this new rough edge. Joe would be late that night. He'd driven to Lapeer that morning to look for an apartment where he could stay in the weeks ahead. His car couldn't take daily commuting, and besides, there might be snow. He was gone by the time I got back, leaving cupboard doors open and garbage in the sink. I scooped Quince off a pile of clean towels, took the garbage out, and carried the rugs upstairs. Then because I needed something to distract me, I went down to the basement and got my old boxes of cards. I sat sorting through them until Ellie came home from school.

After we ate, Ellie helped with the dishes. I brought down a load of laundry and started it. Ellie sat drawing at the kitchen table, one of those pictures you make when you're very young, starting out with a rainbow of crayoned color that covers the entire page. Then you crayon over the colors with thick waxy black. It was my day for metaphors, I thought with irritation. Isabel Hibbs' talk about pain had reminded me of marriage; Ellie's overwhelming black looked familiar too. Later you take a knife or pen and scratch black from the top layer. Delicate tracings of life and color seem to be etched through. Ellie had four pictures in front of her, each blacked over. She had been peeling crayons and throwing

the scraps on the floor. She worked with concentration, crayon smearing her arms, face and fingers.

I turned away from the sink and dropped the dish cloth. As I bent over, I felt aggrieved muscles pull in my back. Scattered across the floor, I saw the crayon shavings, Joe's cigarette butts and two pairs of dirty socks.

I thought of Isabel Hibbs. Heal now, she had said, or never. I simply could not live with pain all my life.

Anger poured through me like adrenaline. I turned and without thinking, slammed my fist into the wall. It hurt, a nice solid hurt I could deal with.

Ellie's eyes met mine and flooded with apprehension.

"Would you please have the decency to pick this stuff up?"

I heard my own voice, bitchy, and cold as an ice age.

"I am so sick of finding bits of garbage all over the house." My voice stormed on beyond control. "If your goddamn father would ever do one goddamn thing, if he'd ever pick anything up--"

"He does pick up sometimes," Ellie said. She had to say it, but hearing her words made me shake with rage.

"Pick up these goddamn pieces of paper," I

ordered.

She scabbled up a little heap of torn crayon wrappers, and stood up, struggling to apologize.

"I'm sorry, Momma," she began. I knocked the wrappers out of her hand.

"That's what your father says. I'm sorry. I'm sorry! You'll all be sorry when I'm a cripple!" I screamed. I heard the words and winced. How utterly cornball. And yet I meant a cripple, of one kind or another. There are a lot of women with tears collecting in the hollows of their collarbones.

Ellie fled to her room. I poured myself a juice glass full of scotch and bolted it, feeling a wave of warmth distance me from pain. I put Ellie's drawing on the table and tried to smooth it. One corner was torn and the thick black crayon smeared on my hands.

I drank another scotch, then brushed my teeth in slow motion before mounting the stairs, right leg, left leg, stiff. Ellie was lying under the covers. She wouldn't turn to face me. I sat down next to her and rubbed her back. It hurt to sit on the edge of the bed, but I sat there. There was no one else who could do it; Joe wasn't home.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I hurt a lot, Ellie. I shouldn't talk about it; they say it only makes children worry about their own health. But I do hurt, and I get angry with you, because I'm tired. I need more help, but I

should ask. I shouldn't yell like that."

She turned to me and threw her arms around me, hugging me fiercely, drawing me down.

"Oh, Momma, I love you," She whispered. "I'll try harder."

My eyes blurred but the scotch kept my voice steady. I disentangled her hands from behind my neck and held them in my lap.

"You don't always have to try harder," I told her. "Pretend you don't hear me. When I get like this, tell yourself it will all be over soon, and that I love you, and that I'll always love you, and it's just hurting that makes me yell like this."

"I know," she said. "When I was sick last year, sometimes, I couldn't help it, I just felt as though I hated everyone."

I felt calm spread through me like mercury expanding. She understood. I clung to her, letting her comfort me.

I thought she would fall asleep. Instead, she asked a question.

"Mom?" she asked. "Will I really die some day?"

"Everyone seems to," I admitted.

She was solemn.

"Will I go to heaven with Gramma, then?"

I told her stories about people who had pretty much died and been revived, people who had insisted there

was Something Out There. People who said they woke to light and music. A sense of someone waiting. What we all want.

I didn't say if I believed the stories. She nudged up against me, after a while drifting into sleep. I felt her frail ribs rise and fall against me, and lay curled around her, warm with her warmth.

I would start over, find some way to keep giving, would not become hard, closed, cold, brittle and dead. I would prove I was Joe's friend, and not the bitchy woman wielding a rolling pin on the napkins at Connie's Bar. How could strangers joke about me like that? Saying that Frank could lust after Sally, but if Joe strayed, mamma-wife would spank? I thought of the dreams I'd had when we were married. They none of them included being judged a termagant by assholes. None of my dreams had included being worn out with pain, screaming at a child, and failing, failing utterly to enjoy my life.

I would send Joe away. I would send him to Sally.

I wanted someone to mother Joe so that he would love me.

Sally could take him into a room like my mother's, the fire shining like melted copper through the old fashioned stove's isinglass, the feather bed swallowing the lovers into its center, soft on the surface, compact, unyielding below.

I saw her coming to him, stripping off her clothing, her breasts like crocus blossoms, her hips, smooth, unmarred.

She straddled him on the bed, lowering herself slowly--

She leaned down over him, pressing her lips to his--

She arched back, her lithe body shadowed on the ceiling--

Shit. I sat up, aggravated. I could get her that far, but no further. I wanted to see her take him, mother him, love him, fold him into the soft oyster world of sex, and the best my mind would give me was soft commercial porn.

CHAPTER 4

Sometime after midnight, I drifted up to the surface, uncomfortable, and unable to get back to sleep. I pivoted my legs out of bed, got up and took more Aspirin. I ran water into the tub, which hadn't been washed in weeks. I told myself the sticky gray ring was mineral deposit. Thin scummy bubbles floated across the steaming surface, but I lowered myself into the water with a thankful sigh.

I sat in the tub, adding hot water and rereading Peter Beagle's Last Unicorn. After a while the hot water tank was empty. I was sitting in tepid water when the bathroom door opened and Joe looked in.

"I was just getting out," I said.

"Couldn't you sleep?" he asked me.

"No. It's my damn back. How was your trip?"

"Fine," he said. "I found an ugly, cheap apartment. Just what I wanted. Come to bed and I'll rub your back."

"It's late," I said. "You'll get horny."

"I'll risk it," he decided. "For you, anything."

We lay down together, shoving aside rucked up blankets. Joe's warm square hands felt comforting. I started to cry and he mopped up my tears with a corner of



the wrinkled sheet.

"You have to see a doctor again," he said, his voice muffled.

"I saw Isabel at the Y Center today." I told him what she'd said.

"You need to see a different doctor."

"I've done that," I reminded him. "Remember Dr. Nagash?" When I'd first hurt my back, I'd seen a doctor who has a stellar reputation for dissolving ruptured disks with papaya juice. The man had looked like Ghandi, but had told me my problem was out of his realm, not in the bone, but in muscle and ligament.

"If your vertebrae fuse then come see me," he had reassured me.

"See another doctor, then," Joe urged.

"I am better," I said. "I can swim a lot further."

"You're not much better," he insisted. "You still hurt, and you still cry."

"What about you," I asked him, rolling over to face him. "Have you thought about seeing a doctor? You're so quiet, these days."

He traced a line from my forehead, down to my neck and breasts.

"I don't need a doctor," he said. "I'm not sick. I'm just inconsiderate."

"Are you happy?" I asked.

"If I'm not, a stranger won't help me. Anyway," he added, "right now, I'm happy enough."

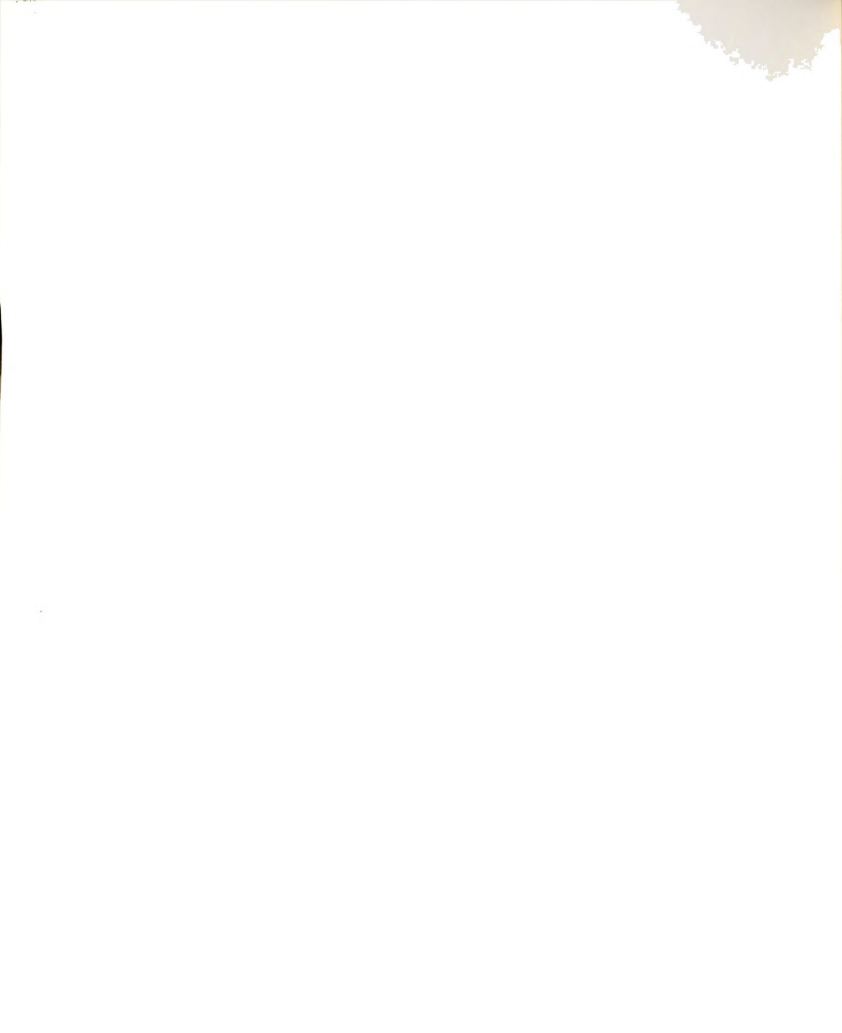
After a while, when the ache was massaged out of my muscles, we made love slowly and carefully. Playboy therapy, Laurel calls it. She says the hormones make your muscles relax. Our sex life really is all right. In fact, it's better now than it's ever been. When I first hurt my back we couldn't use traditional positions, and I'd learned a lot about oral sex. I'd come to think of his penis as a compact Gumby I could encourage when I couldn't encourage Joe.

That night I kept on trickling tears right through orgasm, and fell asleep holding Joe's T-shirt to my face.

Joe took Ellie to school, and I slept in the next morning. It seemed strange, waking to a sunlit, empty house. I groped for my slipper, tripped over Quince, and made a quick decision that just this once I'd forget my back and improve my mind.

I got a cup of coffee and sorted through my camel hair brushes. Some were clotted with Ellie's poster paints; some, Joe had used to touch up knicked enamel. Most were smooth and finicky as cat's whiskers; they lay in their cotton beds and stared up at me. I drank my coffee and stared back. Where, I wondered, was my stencil cutting knife?

The doorbell rang. It rang again. Laurel



stepped into the kitchen, pulsing with energy a Geiger Counter could read.

"I don't have to stay," she said, "if you're working."

"Do stay," I begged. It was so nice to spend time with a consenting adult. I had the rest of Joe's stay in Lapeer to work at whatever it was I decided to work at while Joe stayed in Lapeer. She talked, I fixed coffee and counted brushes. Where was the squeegee and was it hopelessly gummy? I thought.

"Milk, or sugar?" I asked her.

"Kahluha, and Black Russians," I heard Laurel saying when an hour had gone by. My teeth were floating on three cups of coffee. I now knew that Al liked sushi and Duck's Breath Theater. Any minute now I expected to hear about his first baby tooth.

"He hates contraceptives," Laurel confided.

My mind lurched to attention reluctantly.

"Repeat," I said. "Start with that last sentence."

"He says condoms make him feel like a tap dancer wearing rubbers, and diaphragms make him feel like he's poking a water balloon."

"May I remind you," I said, "that at nine months pregnant, you would feel like a tap dancer wearing cement galoshes, and resemble a giant water balloon?"

"Al doesn't mind if I use something," Laurel

reassured me. "So long as it isn't--"

"A diaphragm. I know, I know."

"I'm new at this," she said. "It wasn't a problem, with Forest."

"Maybe you ought to give Al up," I told Laurel. "What if someone found out you're screwing around?"

"Male candidates date," she said. "They've been known to sleep with women. Look at Kennedy, look at Johnson, look at Basil Brown buying it with coke--"

"Laurel, you're talking big time. Most of the local elected have church-going spouses who cheer for their hubbies at buffalo chip throwing contests."

"Why would anyone know?" she said. "None of his friends are political. Besides, he works in a non-political bar."

"I think all bars are political. Like air. And water."

"So, I don't meet him at the bar anymore. Al's apartment is way out of town, one of those townhouses that never really got going before a nicer one came along. There's almost no one there to see us. And Liz...listen, really Liz, he's so good for me."

"You sound like a moonstruck child explaining how meaningful it was being laid in a Corvette."

"Now that's bitchy. I didn't mean the sex, if you must know. Though that's good too, if I didn't have to be, well, so nervous about--"

"About what? For heaven's sake Laurel, tell me you're using something."

"We're improvising," she said, and gave me a dignified look. I hoped she meant they were improvising positions, not timing. In and out fast works in door to door sales, not in sex technique.

She stubbornly refused to keep her mind on the issue.

"Can't you see?" she said plaintively. "I'm sick of toadying up to people, making rounds of parties where culture is the higher priced spread. I owe so many people, Liz. Mert McNamara gave me a coffee, so I buy symphony tickets from her, though I can't tell an oboe from a bassoon. Timothy Moore introduced me at the Chamber of Commerce, so I'm going to do radio plugs for the United Way Campaign...Mick Brewster designed my yardsigns and didn't charge me, so I have to go see his wife in the chorus of "Flower Drum Song." Everything I do in this town has a follow up obligation. Al doesn't know one thing about politics, Lizzie. And I absolutely love knowing that, when we get into bed. It's as though when I'm with him the pace slows and I'm a private person. I'm a kid again. I chew grass stems, stretch, rub my stomach."

"Pretty soon you can combine those, chew grass and rub your stretch marks."

"I'm worried," she admitted. "When I started going with Forest, we frogged around, but we hadn't really,

um, consumated the union until after we were married. Then I wanted to be pregnant. It took us five years to figure out our bodies wouldn't work. I'm not the most fertile person in the world, and neither is Forest. For Forest that's an overstatement, and for some reason my body doesn't like his sperm, and rejects it, forthwith. I wanted to adopt, but the waiting lists are long, and Forest is older. We spent some time talking about a mixed-race baby; they've just liberalized the rules on that, but by then our marriage had sort of worn out with the strain. It was years before we admitted it, but both of us knew."

"Could you use pills?" I asked her.

"I'm over thirty five, Lizzie. Besides, after watching Marian, I'm not crazy about that."

Marian was a good friend who'd developed cervical cancer. Surgeons had in theory saved her by taking bits and pieces out of her insides, starting with the basic female equipment, shortening her vagina through plastic surgery, and generally paring her abdominal cavity. She still looks like Dollie Parton, but one leg drags, and it may drag the rest of her life. Marian had taken birth control pills since she was twelve, for acne. Three women we knew had lost a breast or breasts, and every one of my friends had been sent to a doctor in a panic at least once, for a mammogram. "We're going to make a little breast sandwich," the technician would say, as your flesh disappeared between squeezing metal plates. Always they



asked about birth control pills. We had a grim feeling. It's not nice to fool mother nature, and dangerous, as well.

"Besides," Liz added. "I watched my mother die of cancer."

So much for estrogen. I still remembered my first prescription of little white pills, lined so they could be broken in half. In their slim blue plastic case, they had seemed like a miracle to me, meaning I could go to bed with Joe as a princess, and not wake up a pregnant chimney sweep. That was a lot of years ago, before we'd chosen to have Ellie. Jumped into bed wanting her and never changed our mind.

"Al's last girl had an IUD," Laurel continued. "Al didn't mind once the doctor shortened the tab end of string. They're pretty much off the market now, because of lawsuits."

I'd once had a doctor who prescribed a Dalkon Shield for short term contraception. The nurse, I remembered, had scolded me when I cried with the pain.

Laurel went on petting Quince in silence. I didn't know what she wanted me to say, about contraception, or about Al. As far as I could tell, Al was not an answer to Laurel's problems, but what was she doing that a lot of middle aged men didn't do? She was hiding from time, finding a niche with someone younger, someone who's life wasn't bugpinned to the community wall.



"I'm getting a tubal ligation," she said abruptly. "I always start to say tubal litigation. The appointment's for the second week in October." She looked at me with Ellie's look that said, 'Don't scold.'

Joe had had a vasectomy after I hurt my back. The procedure, he'd said, was about as much fun as having a root canal done, but we both enjoyed the aftermath. Sterilization had done anything but sterilize our lives.

"Why can't Al have the operation?"

"He's younger than I am," Laurel said. "He might want children."

"Mightn't you?"

"I don't think so." She rubbed the bone above Quince's eyes and he leaned into her hand.

"I don't think I will," she said, and then changed the subject. "By the way I saw your blond at a party Al had."

"What would Sally be doing at a party in Ann Arbor?"

"A line of coke," Laurel said. "Al doesn't use it but he smokes a little grass. He says it's more natural than alcohol."

At any minute the conversation would turn to natural healing.

"What makes you think you saw the woman I know from the Y Center?"

"For one thing, there's the name. She was wearing a monogrammed white sweater over white wool slacks, with black high heels. She looks like walking heartbreak. For another thing, I could see the ankle bracelet. She came with a small town hunk from Ypsi, and left with a lobotomized law student dressed in maize and blue. They were talking about going down to his parents' place on Marco Island...."

"Marco Island!" I was appalled. How could Sally leave now? What if she never came back? How would I prove I was generous, then?

"When's she going?" I asked Laurel. "How long is she staying?"

"How should I know?" Laurel was amused and indifferent. "Listen," she said. "All this coffee is bad for you. Have you got any Camomile? Al says it's good for the nerves."



CHAPTER 5

Frank stopped that evening, bringing a case of beer, a frisbee for Ellie, and a new set of pictures. I sat on the couch and examined a child's malformed face, the damage in this case including a separated lip, a misaligned nose, and a lumpy, lopsided forehead. Joe opened a beer for me and glanced at the pictures.

"Can you really patch that up?" he asked Frank.

"That's a messy one," Frank said. "People think of these cases as cleft palate, but often the cleft travels up the top of the skull. Once these tykes were put out on hillsides. We'll need to schedule repeated surgery. We'll graft bone from the hip to shape the chin, and move those teeth--"

He gestured, slopping beer on the open pages. When Ellie came downstairs and gave him a quick hug, he turned the book face downward so she could not see.

When Ellie went outside, clutching the frisbee, Frank wiped the plastic protecting the scrapbook.

"The face will never be perfect," he admitted. "But we can make improvements. This kid will need years of speech therapy. He'll need orthodontic treatment. Some children like this have severe reading problems, because they, like the deaf, have trouble reproducing sounds."

"One more face for the notebook," Joe said.
"Don't parents bitch, having you charge in with a camera?
If that had been Ellie, I'd have seen you in hell."

"Some mind at first," Frank admitted, "until
they've seen the scrapbook. Then they're usually glad to
have me there. After one of these babies is born, most
obstetricians and pediatricians don't like to talk to the
parents at all. If they do, what they say is minimal.
They are too worried about malpractice cases to predict if
the kid will live, or discuss brain impairment. The
parents are in shock and no one will take time for them,
until I arrive with the infamous book."

He stretched his legs, and popped the top of
another beer can.

"I can show them other children born in the same
condition. Some that started in better shape, some,
worse than theirs. I can show them how the child will look
at twelve, at twenty. I'm old enough so I can show them
pictures of patients who've married and had babies of their
own. I think for parents any picture is worse than being
ignored, almost ostracized."

I felt queasy and was glad when he closed the
notebook.

"I was glad to see Laurel running for
re-election."

Frank and Laurel do not get on overly well. He
makes her feel six feet tall and aggressive; she makes him

feel like a counterculture dwarf. There's just a shade of unintentional animosity between them. I was surprised at the interest in his voice.

"Frank," I said, "I'm astounded. I thought politics bored you."

"She helped a friend of mine," he said. "He wanted to get a zoning exemption, and build an office on the east side. It was zoned neighborhood business, mostly boarded up housing and sleazy queer bars. Laurel helped ease the transition to general commercial use."

"Are you going door-to-door for her?" I asked him.

"Well, no. But I might be convinced to go bar to bar."

"That reminds me," I said. "I saw that waitress, Sally."

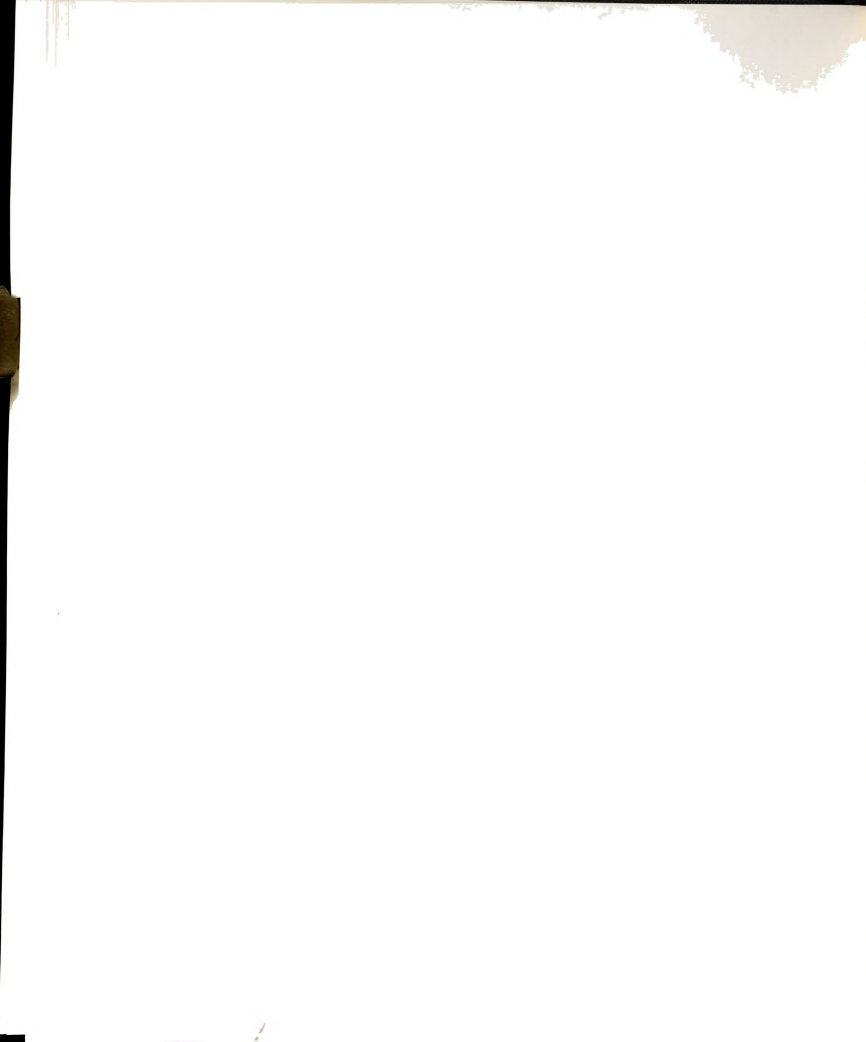
"You're hanging around Connie's turning into a lush," he accused me. "Why I haven't I seen you there? I've been back four times."

"I didn't see her in the bar," I said, and added on impulse, "I'm probably the only one here who knows how she looks in the buff."

Frank looked up startled.

"No tan lines," I informed him, "except for the ankle bracelet."

"Damn," he said. "Are you two cavorting in a coven?"



"Just getting my exercise," I said, virtuously.

"We both use the Y Center Women's Club."

"Son of a gun," he said plaintively. "Can I come with you?"

"Why not ask her out?" I was serious.

"No good. She'd love me for my looks or my money." I think Frank looks fine, sexy, even, but he is self-conscious about his height. When his marriage foundered, he nearly went bankrupt. His wife had invested in his office and wanted her cash out fast; refinancing had gutted him.

"You might at least ask," I said, feeling repetitious.

"Then again, I might not. Actually, I've tried twice to start a conversation. She won't look at me crosseyed."

"What's the Kipling line?" I asked. "Third wave goes farthest on the beach?"

He flicked beer at me.

Joe pulled out his own version of before and after pictures. He too had a portfolio, pictures of pig hotels. He and Frank talked building costs. I expressed the opinion that all such places stink in the nostrils of God.

Joe said I was always complaining about poor people starving. Pig hotels and the like mean cheaper protein for all.

"Oh, pig shit," I said. "How many people with real money problems are out buying pork chops? Animals are supposed to grunt and roll and get dirty. There's something obscene about those porkers living like processed food."

"You have a romanticized version of farm life," he told me. "What about the lambs the French raise in such small cages that the animals can never turn around? That way the flesh doesn't develop muscle. What about geese that are force fed to produce liver pate? Do you think chickens still peck around the barnyard?"

"It's not the same," I said. "Everyone knows about dumb poultry, and lambs and cows are vegetarians."

"Vegetarians?" Frank hooted.

"Herbivores, then. It's not the same. Any biologist will tell you, carnivores and omnivores have a different mentality. They don't just stand around contentedly munching hay. They range, they wander, they develop acumen. Keeping a pig in a cage is like keeping a cat in a cage."

"Let me know," Frank suggested, changing the subject, "if this man has pigs with palate problems. I could be a consultant...for sizable recompense."

Joe and Frank were soon discussing engineering principles involved in shifting teeth. Ellie banged open the door, wet, cold and triumphant, clutching the frisbee she had recovered from a pond.

"I can't stand it," I said. "Ellie, how could you do it?"

"First I used a stick," she said. "The stick was too short."

"If you get sick..." I threatened.

"Hey, there. What's this I hear, parental complaining?" Frank gibed. "When you signed up for this job, you knew the risks."

Joe hustled Ellie upstairs and ran her tub.

"Frank," I said, taking advantage of Joe's absence, "what do you think about monogamy?"

His eyes widened over the top of his beer can.

"An academic question," I reassured him.

"Well," he said. "I tried it; I didn't like it."

"I've been thinking about Joe," I confided. "If he wanted to sleep with someone else--to have a chance at something special, I wouldn't want him to give that up."

"Something special," Frank said. "You're talking what, perversion?"

"No, you oaf. Someone special. Someone like Jessica Lange."

He eyed me owlishly.

"That sounds reasonable," he told me. "That means you get to sleep with Richard Gere."

I was aware of a flush of irritation.

Richard Gere had always struck me as humorless. I can't bear to stand in line with someone with no humor.

I thought about going to bed with someone I couldn't laugh with. The thought was ludicrous, unpleasant, to say the least.

Joe had put Ellie to bed. I went up to kiss her goodnight, and when I came down he and Frank were watching "The Magnificent Seven" on television. I couldn't help sulking, though I tried not to show it.

Nothing was going right in my fantasy with Sally. I decided to turn the problem over to Joe, and see if he could or would make it behave better. I talked to him that night, after we were in bed.

"This has been a lousy year for me." I fumbled through the explanation, ending, "I don't like the idea you're just looking out for me. That you're not, uh, having a good time yourself."

"Then would I be here?"

"Yes," I said. "You would. You're too nice to leave."

"I'm alright. I'm fine," he said.

"Well, I worry. I remember how much I wanted to go to bed with you, when we were in school...I walked all over the campus, obsessed with you. It seems like such a waste. So if you find you really want someone"--

Joe was amenable. "All right," he agreed. "I'll tell you what, if Jessica Lange makes me an offer, I'll hop into her bed without a qualm in the world."

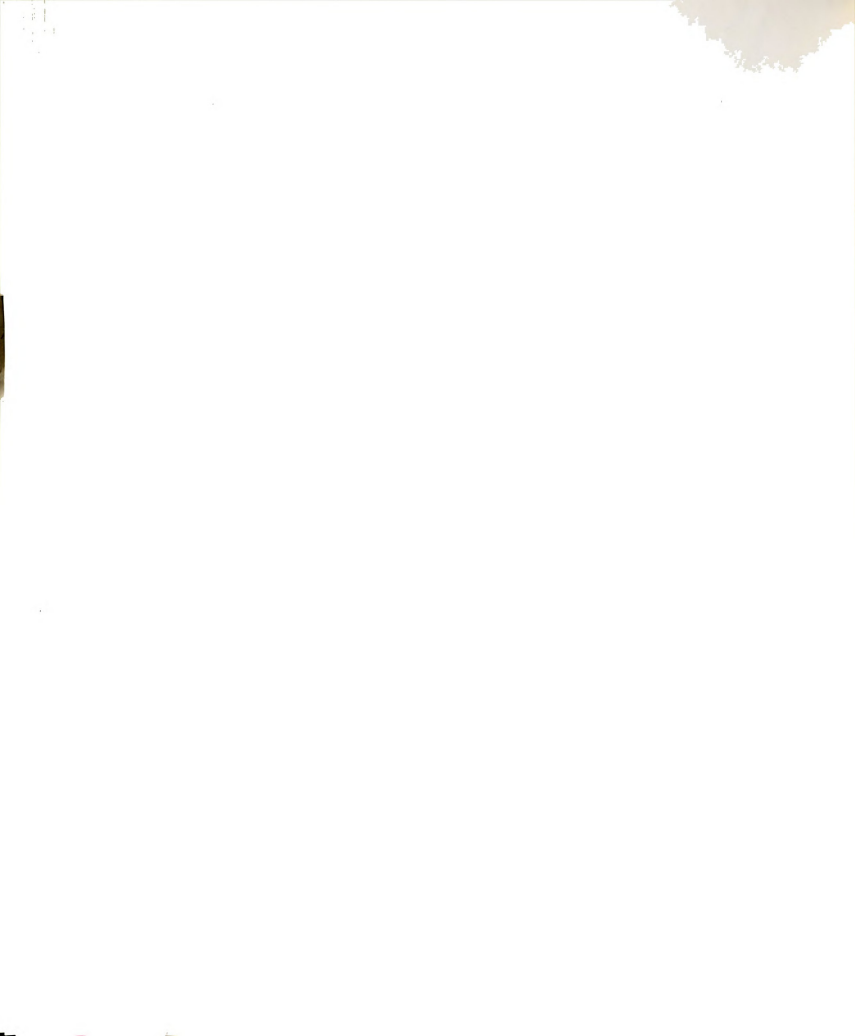
I laughed; it was nice of him. But then, that was

the trouble with Joe; I never knew what he really wanted to do. I rubbed the silky edge of the blanket, thinking whether I wanted to try the discussion again, and while I was deciding, heard Joe's peaceful snoring.

The next day my giving index was way, way down. Ellie woke up crying with a fever and sore throat. She ached all over, and her lymph nodes were swollen. The pediatrician agreed to fit her in, and I left in a hurry, bundling her, clinging and protesting, into her last year's winter coat. Her wrists stuck out from the coat sleeves, looking like bits of bone.

The doctor said she had an ear infection and a solid case of strep throat. He gave her another prescription for augmented penicillin, a super drug that chews its way through virus walls. When I got home after waiting in line to pick up the prescription, Joe had left for work. He might have never been there, I thought. He had disappeared completely except for his dishes on the table, underwear on the floor, and urine on the raised toilet seat.

The day was long and difficult. This was the second day I hadn't been to the Y Center, and I missed it. My back hurt, and I realized for the first time how important swimming had become for me psychologically. It released my tensions, structured my day, gave me the feeling that I was doing something productive with my life. I read to Ellie, warmed soup, picked up, cleaned the



toilet. She fell asleep on the couch with Quince tucked next to her face. I gritted my teeth and got the really old boxes from the attic: the stencil patterns I had made; the discolored tins. There had been a time when I had run amuck with this stuff; stenciling placemats, curtains, sets of dishes and napkins. I had known it was schmaltzy, but the color, the play had been fun, something I could do while Ellie napped. I rubbed the bits of dried paint with my fingers, and sorted through more shoeboxes full of cards. There were gold waddling ducks printed over waving celery; a child's multicolored beachball on a plain white card. How had I forgotten these things? I remembered myself, working on them, my hair falling forward around my face on summer afternoons, secure, and knowing Ellie slept in the cradle I had stenciled with love.

The phone rang: someone wanting to sell me health insurance. Ellie woke, crying. I poured myself a drink.

That night when Joe came home I exploded into temper. I asked Joe if it would kill him to pick his socks up, to clean the tub or carry the wash downstairs once in a while. He said, he did those things whenever I asked him. Why did I lose my temper? Why didn't I just ask?

I tried to explain how difficult asking had become lately. Joe was patronizing because I was angry. I grabbed my coat and stormed out of the house.

I walked in the grass, not on the cold hard

sidewalks that jarred me. I could feel the damp soaking into my tennis shoes. The stars were out. The houses all looked warm, like Christmas gingerbread houses. I walked for two hours. All the homes looked wonderful, from the outside.

CHAPTER 6

I started October with an appointment to have the rough edge of that filling filed down. I have never minded dentist appointments. Having anything cleaned for me, instead of by me, is acceptable. I sat in the office, waiting, and picked up a copy of a health and fitness magazine. I thumbed through, looking for calcium requirements.

What I found was a chart on facial wrinkles. I stared at the diagrammed dissolution of a face. There was the woman in her twenties, her thirties, her forties, fifties, sixties. They didn't bother going further, which said something in itself. I didn't mind most of the gruesome descriptions. Bags under the eyes, crows feet, turkey wattles, and parentheses around the mouth. What stopped me cold was the cheerful description of the tip of the nose beginning to slowly droop. "The eyebrows flatten," the italicized print informed me. "And the nose, from gravity, thickens, and droops, as does the chin. The nose looks thicker, enlarged and beaky. It and the chin seem out of proportion with the rest of the face." The column ended brightly, "The face is now older. It is a changed face. But it is an interesting face!"

In non-italicized print, at the bottom was a

single note about men aging. Men have fewer problems, the article noted, because men have thicker skin.

Amen to that, I thought, and went in to get my teeth cleaned. It was almost noon when I got out; too late for the Y. Sucking my teeth thoughtfully, I drove to Laurel's apartment, parked the car and walked up the broad flight of hardwood stairs. The building was one of the better downtown apartments, with plaster moldings, ornate carved oak lintels, and gray wool carpet that was worn but dignified.

Laurel let me in. I always needed a minute to defeat a feeling of trompe l'oeil here. Forest had kept the house but she had kept the living room, bedroom, and dining room suites, which filled the current apartment like oversized doll furniture. The solid walnut kingsized bedframe filled her bedroom, so that she had to climb over the footboard getting into bed. A long table with Chippendale chairs backed into the kitchen; part of a gold velvet wingback chair blocked the front door. Laurel dodged the obstacles and led me to a massive, green striped couch. She walked hunched slightly, as though someone had poked her in the ribs.

"Hello," she said. "Do you want to see my Band-aid?"

She pulled up a long yellow cotton jersey, revealing unzipped bluejeans and a red and green plaid Band-aid where five o'clock would have been if her navel

were a clock.

"How are you feeling?" I asked her.

"Awful," she said. "I thought this surgery didn't hurt."

"What hurts?"

"Not where he did the surgery. I just ache all over. My muscles, from my feet to my throat. I feel as though a giant smacked me right on the breastbone and knocked me ass over applecart. I'm nauseated, too."

"How long does this last?" I asked. I reached for an apple from a bowl on an end table.

"Not long, supposedly." She shifted her weight with a grimace. "My cousin's a nurse. She says, when they do a larascopy, they pump your abdomen up with gas, sort of like a helium balloon, so they have a good view of all the bits and pieces. When they stitch you up, some of the gas is still inside you, and it gets absorbed into your bloodstream and causes muscle cramps. She says the faster they stitch you up, the more it hurts."

"Can I get you some tea?" I asked.

"No thanks. I've got some Tylenol with codine I could take. This shouldn't last long. A friend of Forest's did the surgery."

"He probably sewed you up full of gas on purpose."

"No, he did not. Actually, he was very nice," she said. She squinted her eyes, as though trying to

remember a good meal.

"He waited," she said, "till I was out of anesthetic, and spent a long time talking to me."

"Oh, that," I said. "Frank says that's now routine. Studies show that doctors who do post-op chats have fewer malpractice suits."

"That may be." Laurel looked superior and patient. "He wanted to know what I thought of the lawsuit over the new hospital helipad site."

"He lobbied you while you were still moaning and writhing?"

"I was dignified and still," she said. "It hadn't started to hurt yet. I loved it, I loved it, I loved it. He wanted information so much, he practically kissed my feet!"

"Newsflash: helipad site controversy is aphrodisiac."

"Power is an aphrodisiac. The last time I had surgery, I was just so much red meat. Move here, that's a good girl, move it there, darling, suck it in, hold it, honey, this won't hurt. This time everyone knew who I was. And I liked it. It's safe to say I liked it quite a lot."

"What's with the helipad question?" I asked her.

"Well, they've got the helipad, you know that. Remember the drunk fireman who walked into a collapsing wall? They got him to Ann Arbor in less than half an hour."

"It doesn't take much more than that by car."

"It does if there's a football game, or construction, or slick roads. At any rate, the helicopter lift works for a lot of people. They transport burn patients, blue babies, heart attack cases and serum for snake bites."

"And the problem is?"

"The problem is, it makes a hellacious racket. You've heard how those things sound coming in. And the litter the blades kick up gets blown right across the street, into one of the last, nice quiet, east side city neighborhoods. Or it used to be quiet. Nowadays, the residents are out in front of the building with picket signs, and you can hear the housing values drop."

"How do you feel about it?" I asked, intrigued in spite of myself.

"The hospital ought to have landscaping done to break the noise pattern. It's going to court. It really doesn't matter what I think. But the doctor thought that what I think might matter, and that was...nice." She patted her stomach absently.

"I take it the campaign proceeds unimpaired without you?"

"The campaign is gathering momentum at the moment. As soon as I can zip myself into my clothes, I'll be going door to door. You'll hear some radio interviews this week on the local station. I timed it so they'd be

on the air while I was out of sight."

She waved a relaxed hand at the Chippendale chairs all around us. As usual, they were stacked with manila envelopes, hardbound notebooks, and computer print-outs.

"It's giving me a chance to catch up with some of this stuff."

"You really thrive on this," I observed, half provoked.

"I like it," she said. "It gives me the feeling I had as a child, when I learned I to do cat's cradle games for hours on end. There's pattern, and variety, and, I can do it. I can do it well. I can make things work...as well as anyone can. I've never been the picture straightening type, you know that Lizzie, but it bothers me to see programs botched because of carelessness. It depresses me to see grants lost, contracts bobbled because someone didn't do the rudimentary preparation. You don't have to be a genius for this kind of commitment. You just have to work at it. And I do. You know I do."

I did know. This was the side of Laurel a lot of people refused to recognize...the woman who got her teeth in, and wouldn't stop. Laurel could seem hard at times. If the commission was asked for money for an organization that couldn't document spending, she'd turn them down so fast that heads would spin. I also knew she would work to find alternate funding. And if anyone involved in writing

the proposal cared to try it, she would spend hours showing them how to document it right.

Some of the women artists I liked best were like Laurel. They weren't hard. They were concentrating on long range results.

"What gets me," she said, "Is that this doctor didn't have any idea I wasn't the person to see. He was so condescending when I couldn't tell him certain things. He wanted to know when I started menstruating. Good heavens, Liz, that was years ago. I don't remember when. I wasn't the youngest of my friends, or the oldest...sometime in seventh or eighth grade, I said. And he looked at me as though I was senile. If he'd asked me which year I ran the school newspaper, I could have told him that. But the other...it was just one of those things, like getting spots and braces. He said to me, 'Most women keep track of things like that.' I wanted to tell him most voters keep track of legal issues they're interested in, but I guess it isn't true. Smart voters don't. Not even doctors do."

I noticed an envelope sitting on the table. It was stamped to mail, and pre-addressed to the local branch of Right to Life.

"What's this? Are you sending these people a contribution?" This was long before the great medicaid cut-off controversy. We were then only beginning to sense the swell of the tsunami to come.

"Nope, nope. I'm returning a questionnaire they

sent me." Her nose wrinkled the way Quince's did at the scent of old sardines.

"They want you to say you're 'pro-life,' quote, unquote?" I asked her.

"Mmmmmmm." She nodded, picking at her Band-aid.

"Meaning what?"

"Honestly, Liz, what do you think it means? To Forest's mother, Adelaide, it means distrusting convenience abortions. To this particular group, it means denying an abortion even if the mother is twelve and knocked up by Uncle Ned."

"You don't agree."

"Of course not. And if I did, Lizzie, I'd still fail some of their other tests to define the pure in heart. This group, for instance, opposes Dignity in Death and Dying legislation, because allowing the terminally ill to die without extreme medical procedures might in some way reduce our respect for life. Having seen my mother die of metastasized breast cancer, I'd like to have had these people sit with her one afternoon."

"You didn't sign it, then."

Laurel shrugged. "My opinion doesn't matter. My job has nothing, absolutely nothing to do with issues like that. Plumbing codes, trash pick up, live traps, cemetery vandals, curb repair, pest control, ask me about those. I could be a commissioner from now till the Resurrection, and never, never be in a position to save one embryo."



"Oh, Laurel, damn it, you signed it! You're a hypocrite," I said.

"Better a live hypocrite than a dead reformer. What does it hurt? I know Stevenson will complete the questionnaire. We'll be even that way, and I can avoid the whole question. Besides," she said. "Sometimes I have qualms about convenience abortions myself. I might have had a child if the adoptable children hadn't been flushed and vacuumed from existence...."

This was not the kind of conversation conducive to continued friendship. Most of my friends are prickly and opinionated, and I don't believe I'd like them, if their views were easy to change.

There was a batch of short stemmed roses jammed in a glass on the table.

"Are those from Al?" I asked.

"No. He's been busy. He called me. Those are from Forest."

"I thought he didn't do that sort of thing," I told her.

"Maybe he thinks we're on a more even footing now."

As I drove home, I thought of a bitchy friend saying Laurel would never need a dildo; she just used politics. I wondered what would happen if she ever did lose an election, and I suddenly, soberly believed she would come entirely apart.

I asked Joe that night if he still had the wood he had stored for Laurel's campaign signs. Joe had made the signs for her before her first election. Her opponent that year had used white on red signs, very flashy, and later confided he had been reading about color psychology. I had designed Laurel's signs with plain black block letters. It rained all that October and her opponent's signs fell, and when they put them up again, the bottom of the stakes rotted and the signs sagged drunkenly. The signs Joe built stayed sodden but dignified.

"The wood's in the shop" he said. "Maybe I ought to get it, in case the bank puts a lock on the door."

"You don't think that will happen?"

"Not if I build this pig farm," he said glumly.

"Well, then, let's not put Laurel's wood out on the street. She really doesn't have a place to store it in that apartment."

"She could have someone else store it. What about that guy--Al?" he asked.

I'd told Joe about Al after I talked to Laurel. She'd known I would; knew that I was likely to share confidences unless she asked me not to repeat them. Joe and Laurel got along well. He'd always admired her.

Just now, though, I could hear his disapproval.

"I don't think someone living in Ann Arbor would be much help," I said.

"I don't think he would be much help if he lived

in Laurel's apartment. He sounds like a drip."

"A drip?"

"You know what I mean, Liz. Why does Laurel want to date a bartender? Why does she want to date anyone, in the middle of a campaign?"

"You may not know it, but Laurel's had some problems with her ego."

"Laurel? Give me a break. She's got an ego like the Great China Wall."

"There's a lot you don't know about Laurel," I told him. "Forest wasn't always so nice, once he shed his elbow-patch jacket." I had a vision of Forest standing over Laurel sporting a silk vest, an erection and a copy of The Joy of Sex.

"I will not believe Forest hit Laurel. She'd knock him into next week."

"Joe, there are other ways...other ways to hurt people. Maybe even not meaning to. And maybe it's easy to hurt older women. It's such an awkward age....I'm coming to see that now. All your life, men praise your naturalness. Suddenly, those same men go past you talking to someone who's twenty, praising their...naturalness. I'm lucky; I've got you for a husband. I'm almost the only one of my friends still married, still married to someone nice. Sometimes I think I ought to loan you out, on a round robin basis...."

"That's a laugh," Joe said. "The bank would

repossess me."

He sat on the bed and began to unlace his shoes.

"I'm exhausted," he added. "Where is the Racine machine when we need it?"

"The Racine machine? I'll bite."

"You remember it," he told me. "There was a young man from Racine, who invented a fucking machine. Concave or convex, it could screw either sex, and amused itself in between."

"Oh. That Racine machine," I said.

"Think we ought to have one?"

"Why not?" I answered. "We could stay home, and rent the bugger out."

CHAPTER 7

Sally got back to the Women's Club before I did. I heard her being discussed the next morning when I walked in.

A horsey looking woman was shaving her legs in the shower, and discussing Sally with a rotund friend.

"Lupus," she announced, rolling the word in her mouth like a marble. "She'll never lollygag in a tanning booth again." The speaker, shaving under her arms, stretched one fist toward the ceiling, unconsciously raising a power salute.

"Lupus?" her blond friend asked. "What's that, kidney failure?"

"Some sort of allergy to sunlight," came the answer. "My second cousin once removed developed it in her twenties. She was engaged to a man who sailed for a hobby; the disease just naturally broke them up, what with my friend stuck inside, and him wanting sun on ocean waves."

"Surely they can treat it?" The round woman was massaging cream rinse into streaked hair. It ran like melting ice cream down her ample body.

"Sometimes they use cortisone", the equine woman said, flicking her razor with a negative finger tip. "You know how that bloats a face."

Her friend blotted cream rinse out of her hair with a long white towel. Her voice was muffled by terrycloth.

"I heard she was pregnant. You know your skin gets dry and itches. That's why she can't use the tanning booth any more. I also heard she was pregnant, but had an abortion, and the Florida trip was hogwash anyway."

"She has lupus," the first woman insisted.

"Maybe," her friend declared, shucking off the towel. "Maybe she went to Florida, and someone broke her heart."

The woman next to her farted resoundingly.

I walked into the pool room. The water, lit from below, bloomed on the surface with splashes of light that looked like rippling water lilies.

The idea of swimming lengths was exhausting.

Gossip, it was all gossip, I told myself.

The small pool harbored the thinnish seventy year old and her elephant seal companion. I slid into the water across the pool from them, but the accoustics carried their every word.

"Too cold, too cold," the first woman complained.

"Like my mother's apartment. She's more difficult every year."

"It was hot in Australia," the heavy woman pronounced.

"I keep saying, mother, you're going to be ninety

five soon. You can't eat baby food for breakfast and then drink your lunch!" The thin woman pulled off her cap in exasperation. Tufts of hair stuck up rakishly from a nearly bald scalp.

"Shipboard food is excellent," the fat woman assured her, bobbing up and down in the water like a cork.

"Another thing," the Jack Sprat counterpart said darkly. "I'm getting sick of chopping wood for that wood stove. I got her a kerosene heater, but will she use it?"

"Cockatiels," the heavy woman said. "And wombats. And the opal mines were marvelous."

The thin woman ran her fingers through her sparse spikey hair.

"I can't figure out where she gets the pot, either," she announced with considerable pique. "Sometimes I think the paper boy brings it, but it could be the drug store delivery boy. She buys enough toothbrushes from the Exchange Club to stock a motel, and her cupboards are full of molding Civitan fruitcake. Sometimes I think one of those groups delivers it to her."

The fat woman skulled in a clockwise circle.

"I enjoy visiting your mother," she said.

"Mother likes you. Come show her your slides of Australia. I'll go through her cupboards while you entertain."

The peripatetic woman pushed herself counterclockwise, dabbling at the water contentedly.

"I'm not sure your mother would like my slides of wombats," she said slowly and thoughtfully. "You know she liked those closeups of the Elephanta Caves. Your mother," she added, "is a dirty old woman."

"My mother," her friend said, "is a bloody old bitch."

I stood in the shower afterward, pleasantly distracted, letting the water play on the small of my back. I wondered how the nonagenarian would describe her daughter. And where, indeed, did she keep her stash?

That was when I saw Sally step into the sauna. And I saw there was something wrong with her.

She had walked past the shower room, naked and holding a towel. The pale almost white hair still brushed her shoulders; the ankle bracelet rode the small well formed ankle bone. She didn't look heavy; she didn't look pregnant. She didn't look as though she suffered from any disease.

She looked calm but introspective, a unicorn with its head in a maiden's lap. I turned off the shower. I don't like saunas. They are really too steamy for me.

If I let her go, I would be a perfect coward. Jessica Lange my eyeball, I thought.

The redwood benches crisscrossed one another in the small wood lined room. You could nest high, near the ceiling, or closer to the floor. The air had an odd, thick, sweet smelling density.

I sat facing Sally. She was sitting with her legs stretched out, hands resting on her thighs. She seemed remote rather than tense or unhappy, but the aloofness had somehow changed. Before, there had been a subliminal exhibitionist awareness that strangers' eyes were appraising her. She now gave the impression of having left the shades up, of moving in thought, unaware of an audience.

It was hard to tell in the dim light, but I thought she looked pale, and her hair was limp from the steam. After a minute, she realized she was being inspected. She looked across at me with a small frown.

"You don't sit on a towel either," she said.

"No," I agreed. "I don't sit on a towel."

"My friends say you can get Aids from a bare sauna bench."

"What?" I was startled.

"From putting your bare, you know, cunt, on a sauna bench. That's silly. I think that's really silly. What do you think?"

Now or never if I wanted to ask a question. The heat seemed solid and unbreathable.

"Silly. Absolutely. How was your Florida trip?"

"The Aids thing. It's more than just, you know, silly. It's dumb." She eyed me as though classifying me. "Were we at a party together?" she guessed.

"I, uh, know Al. From Ann Arbor," I said.

"Oh, Al. Who doesn't? Honestly, that guy...." she let her voice trail off. I was losing her again. "I don't know him well," I said with some understatement. "He's more like a friend of a friend."

She shifted her weight, curling her legs in front of her. I noticed her left breast was slightly smaller than her right.

"I used to know him real well," she said matter-of-factly. "I lived up there weekends for most of two years. He is nice, isn't he? He's a real generous person. I haven't slept with him," she said. "He's a lot older than I am."

"Thirty-five," I said, automatically.

"Thirty-eight," she told me. "I've seen his I.D."

I filed the information away for later.

"Besides," she said, "Al has this hang-up about birth control. I take care of myself," she explained. "I just think it's tacky. My mother's given me birth control pills since I was ten."

"Progressive," I said. My word. Three years older than Ellie.

"She had me when she was fifteen," Sally explained. She pushed the damp white hair out of her eyes. "Connie--that's my mother-- works her tail off. She's always given me everything I need."

She extended one delicate ankle.

"She gave me the ankle bracelet," Sally said, "for my eighteenth birthday. It's eighteen karat gold. Isn't that sweet?"

"It must have cost a lot," I said, eyeing the ankle.

"Connie can afford it. She's a good manager. She owns two other bars besides the one we run. Last year she had to get an accountant to do her taxes."

The heat in the sauna was leaving me muddled.

"I think I know you from somewhere else," Sally said.

"Well," I said, "I swim a lot." I tried to look helpful.

"You know what? I think I've seen you at my mother's bar. The one she bought most recently. Don't you come in sometimes with two guys, one tall and one short?"

"Um," I said.

"Sure you do. "Connie's Bar and Grill. Beer and nachos. Gets a lot of shop workers. Your husband's cute."

"Um," I said.

"I like short men," she continued. "They make me think of my first boyfriend." She looked at me cautiously. "Your husband kids a lot," she said.

"Um," I said again, getting my thoughts in order. I pictured Joe and Frank, sitting with me. Joe a little withdrawn; quiet these days, a watcher. Frank with his arm around me, Frank mussing my hair.

Frank propositioning Sally.

"Your friend's cute too," she said.

I looked at her, stunned. I must have looked like a very stolid matron.

"Your friend. He's in real good shape. Does he work out, or something?"

I thought of Joe, filling in alongside the construction workers.

"Yes, he does."

"I thought so. There's something about him that's appealing. I like quiet men," she said.

There's quiet, and then there's quiet.

"Al was always quiet," she elaborated. "His first wife was a dumb kid too; now he goes for smart dames. He's screwing some classy lawyer-type broad. Everybody's gone on women getting an ed-u-ca-tion." I looked up, startled at the bitter tone of her voice.

"How was the trip to Florida?" I repeated.

"Pukey," she said. "Just pukey." She stood up and poured a cup of water over so-called coals.

"I went with this law student, Bruce," she continued. "His folks have a place on Marco Island. We drove together and spent the night in Knoxville, Tennessee. We had a nice time." She stretched luxuriously, remembering. "We drank two bottles of Dom Perignon champagne."

About that time I began to blank Sally out of my

budget. I had hoped she would drink Gallo.

"His parents' place is beautiful," she told me.

"They have brass tables made from ship portholes, and his father owned the ships. They have Karistan rugs and sliding glass doors that open out to the beach, and the drapes are raw beige silk."

She sounded like Ellie describing the Mackinac Bridge lights.

"And?" I said.

"We made love when we got there. Four hours later, we were asleep on one of the Karistan rugs, and his mother and father drove into the driveway."

I stared at Sally.

"They walked in and found you on the rug? With no clothes?"

"Not exactly." Her jaw jutted slightly, and she fingered the ankle bracelet.

"Bruce knew who they were when he heard the car door slam. At least he must have. He opened the sliding doors, scooped me up, raw, and chucked me out. I saw the drapes closing, and there I was with sand stuck to my ass."

"Then what?"

"His parents went in and they all three locked me out."

"They locked you out?"

She nodded, her expression lost in contemplation.

"At first I thought, I'll stay here. After all,

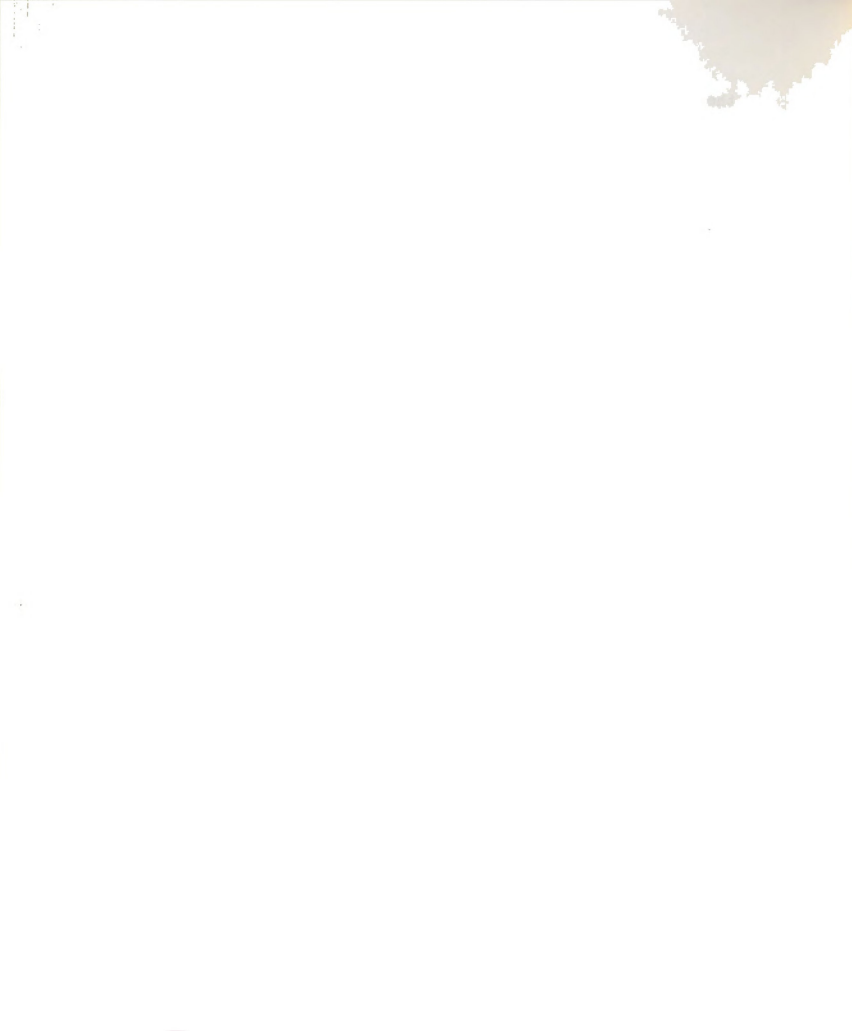
the view is nice. I could hear people talking ---not yelling, but sounding angry. I put my back against the house and I watched the ocean. There wasn't anyone around. They own a huge stretch of beach, but the house isn't near the water. People on the shore looked like cartoon figures, and I thought if I didn't move it would be alright.

"After awhile the voices stopped and everything was quiet. I kept thinking Bruce would come out and let me in, or open the bathroom window in his bedroom. Nothing happened and I started to get mad.

"Then I thought, the fucker just can't do this. If he thinks I'm going to stay out here, he's wrong, wrong, wrong. Because," Sally added resentfully, "Connie would never do that. If she'd come back then she'd have made a joke of it. She'd have done her best to make the poor schmuck comfortable. She'd have given me hell later if she didn't like him, but she would have been nice at the time.

"I pounded on the door," she added, "but nobody answered. The garage was locked. All the doors were locked. I prowled around the house. The drapes were closed but one was caught back a little. Bruce and his mother were sitting at the table, and his father was mixing drinks.

"I thought about throwing something through the window, but I couldn't find a good sized stone. The longer I looked, the more the idea seemed stupid." Sally sighed.



Her white-gold breasts rose and fell.

"Anyway," she said. "It wouldn't have hurt them. It would have convinced them I wasn't good enough."

Sally had little beads of sweat on her upper lip. Her lower lip protruded in the kind of pout that shows stubbornness.

"It's nice of you to listen to me like this," she said.

"No, it's not," I assured her. "How did you get home?"

"I hitchhiked," she said.

"You went out on the Marco Island causeway stark naked and hitchhiked?"

"I didn't have much choice, did I?" she said.

"Who picked you up?" I asked, my eyes wide with wonder.

"Some boys," she said indifferently. "They were college boys, but they were alright. One of them gave me his jacket, and they bought me jeans and a T shirt before they put me on the bus."

"What are you going to do about Bruce?" I asked her.

"Him? He's just a momma's boy." She dismissed him completely. "I just don't want it to happen again. I always thought I fit in when I went to Ann Arbor. I think it's because I'm pretty, and people are wasted a lot."

"You don't think you fit in?"

"Bruce's parents didn't think so. That's why I decided," she said, "I might as well go to college."

I took a gulp of prickly, suddenly cactus-dry air.

"When I was in high school," she said, "I had 700's on my S.A.T.'s, and I took the tests hungover."

"Where would you go?" I asked.

"U. of M.," she said. "I know some girls in sororities there."

"It's a nice place," I said absently.

"Did you go there?"

"I did, yes."

"Did your husband?"

I floundered mentally and chose Frank.

"He, uh, went to Wayne."

"What about your friend?"

"My friend?"

"Yeah, you know. Your friend. The tall guy."

"He went to U.of M.," I said. "He was in a fraternity there." Joe had stayed two months, then gotten his own apartment.

"It's too bad he's so old," she said. "He's really kind of cute."

I was getting tired of sitting on the hard redwood bench.

"Older men are nice," I lied. "They listen to your problems."

She looked at me thoughtfully as I opened the door

of the sauna.

"Weren't you scared?" I asked. "Hitchhiking naked?"

"Don't be dumb," she said. "Men never hurt me. What do you think? Do you think college is a good idea, or not?"

"Sure," I said, standing up and clutching my slipping towel. "Sure it's a good idea. It's just not what I'd pictured for you.

While I walked to the car, I tried to imagine how Joe must seem, seen through Sally's eyes. She didn't think he was married, and she liked him a little. What could that mean? Not much, I thought, with Joe staying in Lapeer.

I felt tired and let down. I heard Sally's voice saying, 'It's too bad he's so old.' Joe wasn't all that old, I thought. I wasn't that old, either. We'd both just had a bad year...and now, Sally was moving away.

CHAPTER 8

The next week Laurel and I drove into Ann Arbor. I brought my portfolio of greeting cards, meaning to stop at the store that had most recently carried my work. Laurel wanted some papers from the Ann Arbor city treasurer, but more to the point, she wanted to see Al, platonically. Al had gotten himself stuck babysitting, and she thought she'd see he had some food in the house. She'd made a pot of chili sauce and a tuna casserole. It seemed funny to me to think of Laurel in the kitchen; cooking was one thing she'd never liked to do. Even when she'd given parties for Forest, she'd found a caterer who did delicious vegetarian fare. Her baked walnut and cheese balls bechamel, with white wine, had been applauded as well as cheap. Unsure of bechamel's appeal to the child Al was watching, Laurel had rushed for the onions. Her Buick reeked of chili sauce.

We drove the back roads and got lost going into Ann Arbor, exploring steep, gold-maple lined hills; splashing through sandy low spots filled with stagnant water, scolded all the way by butternut fat squirrels. We found ourselves at the corner of Eusades and Fishbine roads; all about us were wild grape vines looping like endless kite string, the sunlight pouring down like Madeira

wine. We laughed, sang camp songs, I smoked Laurel's menthol cigarettes; she smoked a big black cigar she'd found on the dashboard, left behind by some visiting dignitary. It was so good to be with someone I could talk to--someone to lob a conversational ball back to me. Good talk between women is like vollying at tennis. Find the right angle to catch your opponent's serve, get it back, with backspin if you want, make the reply short or use distance, but keep in mind that you expect and want a return. Men serve conversations like Bjorn Borg.

It was a marvelous afternoon. I felt years younger than I did in the confines of my silent house. I pictured Ellie, with her bright vivacious promise, living as I did and my heart ached for her. At the same time I thought she would not leave, any more than I could. She was stubbornly loyal in friendship, I praised her for the trait.

Also I knew that laughing Laurel, cigar smoking Laurel, would be back to business by the time her stitches had dissolved, once again preoccupied with fat stacks of paper. None of my smart friends had time for back road jaunts, these days; most of the bright married women I knew worked full time, reading briefs while they spooned in supper and matched the kids' socks. Those that didn't work juggled children's needs and husbands' promotions, or mesmerized themselves with shopping and rounds of lunch. It had, I thought, been easier when Ellie was younger,



there had been more iconoclastic women home.

I didn't know, though, where that left me. Working would suck more of my energy and temper, leave me aching and more likely to pound on walls, particularly if I had to cope alone with each family crisis. I felt the car jounce and shudder over ruts in the road.

The idea of Joe with a second wife was becoming very appealing. I didn't want to lose him. He had once been the best friend I'd ever had. How could you leave someone you really cared for because they kept falling asleep in a chair? But how much I would love to have someone to talk to...maybe even if it meant sharing Joe for sex. I began to reconsider the old stories of oriental women who went out shopping for their husbands' additional wives. That was the rub. I wouldn't want someone like Laurel. I wouldn't want someone, I thought with a shock, who was smarter than me. Someone like Sally would be better, because these days I trusted my sex life more than my mental life.

Although not someone quite like Sally. Someone more bland would be better. Someone malleable.

"Being with you is such a nice change," I heard Laurel saying. "I'm tired of politicians; they're so obsessed with control."

Eventually the road meandered back to the highway, past a series of white clapboard houses, a Grange Hall and steepled churches. Then we were back to sixty three miles

an hour, reading billboards for Briarwood Mall. The conversation slowed to a trickle. Laurel's forehead was creased with deep tension lines.

"Your middle hurt?" I asked her.

"A little."

"I could drive," I said.

"No, I really like to drive."

We picked up the papers she wanted from City Hall, and stopped and ordered sandwiches at the Whiffletree. Ann Arbor was full of the oddest young people, most wearing corduroy pants and wool sweaters over button down shirts. There were a few token visionaries and holdouts. An old man in white shorts and shirt brandished a butterfly net. Girls wore pink silk shirts unbuttoned to their navels; a girl with her nose pierced sported black mohair unionjacks. On the whole the campus looked tame, like what might happen if a Savings and Loan threw a Come As You Are party Saturday night.

Driving through the campus raised a lot of memories for me. Some of them were wonderful, some uncomfortable. I remembered being the kid from a small town, on a small income, walking to one of the two jobs I always held, watching students demonstrate on the Diag, never joining in, wondering what caused my reticence. I remembered girls in bluejeans and Salvation Army T-shirts worn under hand-tooled leather belts and full length racoon coats. "Off the pigs," they had chanted. Pigs, always

pigs, damn it. My motto had been, don't act until you think and think and think.

We passed the apartment Joe had rented in his senior year in college. I remembered snuggling in his bed mornings, listening to the sound of mourning doves on telephone wires outside; the sun coming through venetian blinds in slabs of dust-filled light. I could still smell the cheap rose wine, the candles that had burned down. I hadn't thought then, I'd acted as soon as I had gotten my birth control prescription, and those had been some of the best moments I'd ever had. The year had been tension filled, with both of us working, arranging our wedding, my mother's illness, Wendall's pressure to join the firm. All problems had run off us as though we were waxed, impermeable with glory. Nothing ran off, now, I thought. All the pain soaked in.

Al's townhouse was out past the mushrooming North Campus. No Robber Ralph markets, no pornographic magazine stores grew here. North Campus has the feeling of a planned suburb. A little tackiness would have done wonders for the neighborhood.

Whoever owned Al's place was endeavoring to supply the lived-in look. Gravel and crabgrass had replaced the ubiquitous sodded front yards; curtains sagged at not-too-clean front windows. The place looked like regular dorms that had been converted to married housing. Kids' tricycles and broken plastic toys littered the lawn.

Laurel pulled the car up in front, and slid out of the car quickly, her skirts pulling up to reveal long, graceful legs and knobby knees. She took the casserole and handed me the pot of chili. Her face looked younger, less self assured.

"Damn," she said, when no one came to the door.

"He didn't know I was coming, but he's always home during the day...."

She pressed the bell again, and used the knocker.

"I can hear the T.V.," she said. "Someone has to be home."

"Not necessarily." I put the pot of chili down on the hood of her car. Holding the heavy pot was making my back ache.

"It'll scratch the finish," she said.

"Then let it. I'm not going to stand here holding that pot while you scratch on the door."

"All right, you scratch on the door and I'll look in the window," she said, and left me on the step. I tried to turn the knob, but it was locked.

"Nobody in the living room," she said.

"Mmmmm...no one in the bedroom. He's still got stuff all over the floor...bathrobe, the morning papers. I'll bet he's home. He never goes out without picking up. Maybe he's in the bathroom...." She moved toward the back of the house, and I moved to the kitchen window. I peered inside

and saw something that made me blink.

Al. Most likely Al, I thought. Blond and engaging, wearing a blue denim shirt and jeans; barefoot, an almost Robert Redford presence, the kind of man who, ten years from now, would still get carded in bars. He sat with a section of the paper open on the kitchen table, his legs spraddling a high chair with a chub-legged toddler inside. I remembered Laurel saying he was watching a friend's child, but something about the picture gave me *deja vu*. Joe, feeding Ellie, that was what I thought of, getting the spoon unerringly into her mouth, periodically wiping her mouth with a napkin, and all the time reading the sports page. The same slouched posture, the careful concentration first on the prune looking mouth, next on the winning play.

Without thinking what I was doing, I rapped on the window. He waved the empty spoon at me.

"He's here, Laurel," I said.

Al met us at the door with the kid carried on one hip.

"Oh, you're with Laurel," he said beaming. He put the child, Chad, down on the living room floor. Chad promptly began to eat the funny pages.

"You brought me something," he guessed. "I'll bet it was chili sauce."

"How did you know?" Laurel said.

"You've got some on your shirt sleeve," he told



her, and used the diaper on his shoulder to dab it off. Laurel blushed. I felt out of place. They couldn't be romantic; not with Laurel's pulling stitches and Chad in residence, but I could feel Laurel's barely checked pleasure. I had to admit that Al seemed promising.

He had heavily muscled arms, and his shirt was open at the neck, showing some gray hair in with the blond. He moved easily, spoke easily, didn't seem to be posing. I had, I realized, been expecting an aging beach boy. I liked the way he kept an eye on Chad's determined munching. The apartment had a pleasantly shabby look. There weren't any books or magazines, or even any records I could see, though those could be in his bedroom. There were no pictures or calendars on the walls. Al made me think of a nomad, but the apartment was a comfortable place, with no image to maintain.

Al insisted on heating the tuna casserole for lunch. His pleasure in the offer made us ignore the Reubens and beer we'd consumed. The three of us sat watching Chad's determined explorations, eating Laurel's casserole, which was topped with blanched almonds, and drinking perked coffee out of cracked, mismatched cups.

Al didn't have a lot to say. He seemed pleased to see Laurel. Once he came over, lifted her hair and kissed the side of her neck before he went back to the footstool where he was sitting. He asked about her operation and laughed in the right places.

"I'd have told him what he could do with his helicopter," he said.

That sounded like it might be Al's all-purpose comment, used to cover all dilemmas in his life; however it did seem to express concern for Laurel. He obviously was proud and amused when Laurel talked.

I went to the bathroom and stalled around to give them some time together, reading bottles in the medicine chest. Three blow driers, a bottle of Aspirin, and a bottle of liquid Tylenol. "Safe for children," the label said.

Al's bedroom door had been open when I walked through the hallway. His bed had been piled deep in rumpled acrylic velour blankets, beige and brown. I thought of stately Laurel in that bed; Laurel in a room with no books at the bedside table. Al didn't seem to have toothpaste, but he did have white teeth.

I pictured Sally staying here in Al's apartment. Oddly enough I could picture her, sleeping on the couch, or in Al's bed, wandering about in green bikini jockey shorts and a matching undershirt; sharing Al's funnies, drinking Al's coffee, but not sleeping with Al. Why not? I couldn't tell you. Something about the way that he looked at, treated Laurel. He struck me as being....

Well, a specialist. A man who likes a certain kind of woman. Someone accomplished. Someone wry. Someone to mother him.

Was that bad, or good for Laurel? Good, according to everything she had ever said.

I banged the bathroom door to give them a little warning. When I came in the room they were seated on the couch, their arms still entwined. Chad was now chewing one of Laurel's sixty dollar shoes. Al extracted the shoe adroitly and picked Chad up again.

Chad reached out and squeezed Al's nose. Al startled me, and Laurel, by emitting a loud, beeping sound. Chad laughed and squeezed again with a vengeance. Every time he squeezed, Al obliged with a beep.

"How much longer are you going to have Chad here?" I asked him.

"His momma is going to pick him up this afternoon. She's been filling out job applications"

"If she gets a job," Laurel asked, "are you going to be the sitter?"

"Nope," he said. "I'm just pitching in what little time I can."

He'd forgotten to beep, during this exchange. Chad, who was getting tired, began standing up, bracing his feet against Al's chest. Al followed us to the door, rumbled but undiscouraged. He gave us a wave, and flashed Laurel a smile.

"Come back soon, honey," he said.

"What did you think?" Laurel asked me.

"He'd pretty nice. He's sure laid back with that

baby. The most relaxed I've ever seen a man with a baby..." I let the thought trail.

"...that wasn't his," Laurel finished. She shook her head and laughed.

"Even if it was his, I'm not sure I'd care. Maybe I just use him...I can't see myself, married to him."

"Wouldn't you be mad about having had that operation?"

Laurel put the keys in the ignition but didn't start the car.

"No...no, I wouldn't," she said. "I might be mad, but not sorry. I'm still a little sore, but I feel free this way, Liz. Somehow I feel like a kid again. The whole question of children is over. There were years when I cried, earlier, nights when I couldn't sleep, days when I would have given anything in the world to get pregnant...those years are gone. I walked to the car this morning and there was kind of a tough looking kid in the parking lot, and my mind clicked in and gave him a nose-thumbing 'nya-nya.' For the first time in thirty years, I could be knocked down, bruised, assaulted, traumatized, mutilated, raped--but pregnant I could never get."

She sat there a minute, trying to get the keys in the ignition. "Maybe you better drive," she said. "I'm tired, all at once."

I came around to her side, and she slid out to

come around. We were both standing when a battered Ford Pinto pulled in beside us and a young girl with freckles and short brown hair got out.

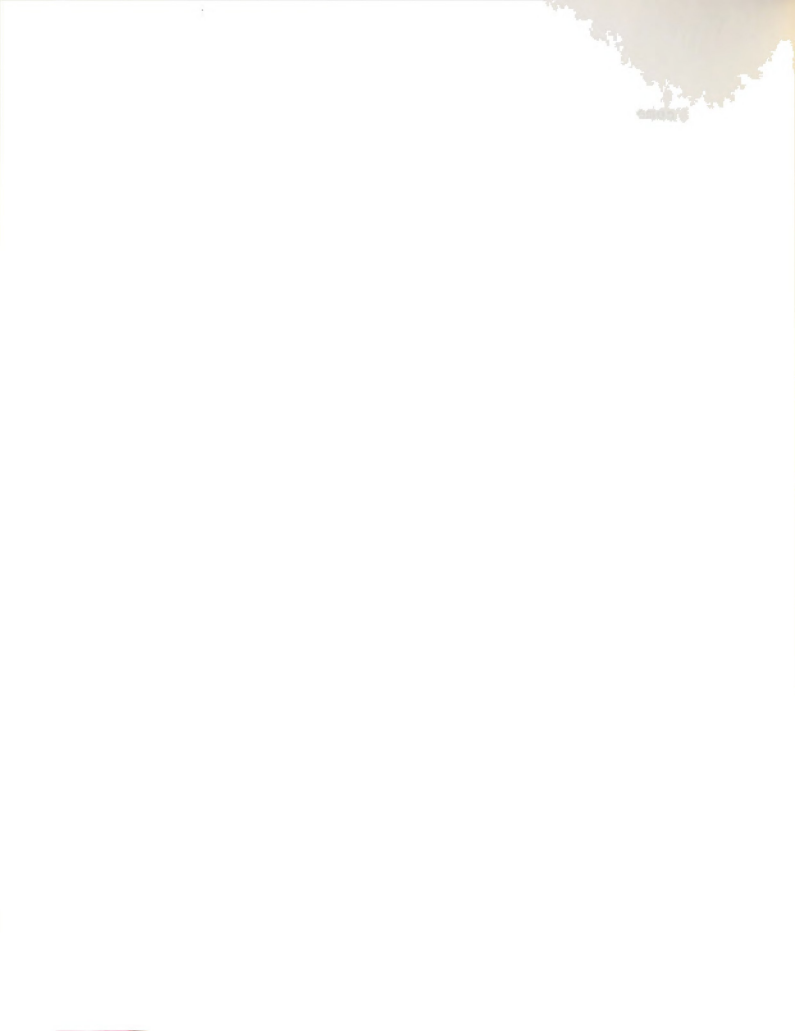
"Hi," she said, looking at Laurel. "Are you Al's new girlfriend?"

"Yes, I am," Laurel said. "Are you Al's old one?"

The girl laughed.

"Lord, no," she said. "Al's my dad. He babysits for me."

We drove back toward central campus in silence. Laurel's face was white with fatigue, and her tightly set mouth said she didn't want talk yet. Which was just as well. I certainly didn't know what to say.



CHAPTER 9

Laurel and I drove back through the campus and stopped at the first bar near a parking space. Laurel had two doubles, and then sat in silence, pursing her lips in and out, so that she looked like Nero Wolfe. I asked her if she was thinking, and she said, no, her lips were numb.

I'd hung on to my portfolio when we got out of the car. I don't tend to leave it when I'm parked in town. A friend of mine once had two acrylic paintings stolen from the back seat of a locked Volkswagen bus. Even though he never sold a single painting before or after being burgled, and later made a mint in interior design, he still mourns for his lost work.

I propped my file in the corner, behind the garlic toast, and took a menu. The selection was basic. Pizza, hamburgs, Greek salad, and imported beer. None of the waitresses looked like Sally Ann. Laurel took a long time making up her mind.

At last she said, "I want a hamburger. How about you?"

"We just had tuna casserole."

"I didn't eat much," she said. When I thought about it, I remembered her spreading spinach noodles artistically about the plate. She'd had a half sandwich

when I'd had the reubens. In fact, I hadn't seen Laurel eat since she met Al. She didn't look lighter, with her still bloated stomach. She ordered a hamburg with fried onions, and a side of fries. I had coffee. I watched while she ate the hamburg, licking her fingers the way a cat fastidiously cleans its paws. She ate the onion rings, first sucking out the onions. She used salt and vinegar on her fries and then ate some garlic toast. She finished up by chewing the ice left in her drink glass.

I didn't say much. After a while, she said, "Fuck it. Maybe, at some level, tubal ligation and all, I still want to be Blondie Bumstead."

"Did Al lie to you about having kids?" I asked her.

"No," she said. "He didn't exactly lie."

"Did you ask him?"

"No, I didn't exactly ask him. We were talking, the first night I went to his apartment. I said I'd been married, and he said he'd been married, and we talked about being married. You know. Then I said I was divorced, and he said, he was divorced too, and we talked a little bit about how it feels, being divorced. Then I said I'd wanted to have kids, but I'd never had kids."

"And?"

"And then he kissed me, and we made love for the first time. I thought," Laurel said, "we were having a parallel conversation. I guess it was just

horizontal...there were other times when he could have told me. He just never did."

through "Are you going to see him again?" I asked.

"I don't think so," she said. "I may want to, but I think I'm going to contemplate my navel...and my navel scars. Let's see your portfolio, Liz. I need something to distract me. And, there's no point in your wasting a trip."

She paged through my work carefully.

"Why always cards?" she asked me. "Why not something to please a big spender?"

"Some people do frame cards," I told her. "Especially grouped cards."

"Grouped greeting cards can't be where the money is."

"It isn't," I admitted. "That isn't what I intended. When I left school, I wanted to do some kind of work that people could buy if they didn't have a lot of money. The Chinese philosophy of value in utilitarian things. Beautiful cups for everyday use."

I cringed inside, thinking of the scratched tupperware glasses and bowls in my cupboard at home.

"That sounds good enough," Laurel said. "Let's see if it will sell."

We crossed South University and stopped at the bookstore which had once carried most of my cards. The new manager was a buxom blond past sixty, who looked like ambrosia, plasticized.

I gave her my alumna introduction, explaining that the store had helped me in the past. She flipped through the portfolio, her interest transitory.

"Nope," she said, "Sorry. I just don't have the space."

"You've carried my cards within the past year," I said.

"Look around," she told me. "Once, commercial cards were boring."

It was true. I wandered around the shop's addition. A lot of the work didn't appeal, but there were hundreds of styles printed on good rag paper. Cards that looked like silkscreens, although they were printed, hand-made cards with features that popped out, like a child's book. A series of golden mandarins with real hair mustaches. Cards that held balloons and chocolate. Reproductions of Renoir. Cards spattered with color like Ukrainian Easter eggs. Many of the most colorful cards came from Red China. I particularly liked the gold mandarins.

All were less expensive than those I'd sold in the past here. I'd gotten three dollars a card. Few of these topped a dollar seventy-five.

"There's a store on State Street that might take some on consignment," the buxom woman said. "I only have extra space for students' cards."

"I was a student here," I said.

The woman nodded. Her amber beads shook and sandalwood perfume billowed from crepey skin.

"You had your foot in the door," she said, "and you took it out. Maybe you should display your work at art fairs. It's good exposure."

At the moment, I felt exposed enough.

Laurel and I stood for a minute on the sidewalk.

"Want to try the store on State Street?" Laurel asked.

I tried to scrape up the energy. The pavement was hard, and my back hurt. The ride in Laurel's car, sitting on the floor at Al's place, slouching in the bar, and waiting while my work was examined had left six of my vertebrae feeling like cracked teeth.

How in the world would I sit through an art fair?

"I'm tired," I decided.

Laurel nodded thoughtfully. "I hate days like this," she said.

I drove back and took the expressway. Laurel slept, or seemed to be sleeping. I opened the windows, but the car still smelled like chili sauce.

Joe and I spent the next week involved in adult packing, finding athlete's foot powder, Roloids; and buying socks. He had found someone who would let him use a fifty ton trailer at cost to transport his bulldozer and grader to Lapeer. The construction yard looked empty without the old behemoths. I felt as though an invisible tar pit had

swallowed two faithful friends.

I rarely saw Sally now at the Y Center. She no longer swam or used the tanning booth. She'd joined a noon aerobic dance session. Her tan faded and her ankle bracelet was tucked into a sock.

Laurel determinedly got herself back to business. She bought a three hundred dollar rust colored walking suit, borrowed a golden retriever, and went door-to-door in the transient part of her ward. Kids came around to pet the dog and adults followed the kids.

I already knew what Laurel wanted for the city. She lusted after funding for neighborhood centers, like those Toronto's City Council had voted in. Each center had playground equipment, a basketball court, and a modest building which housed adult education classes, shop classes, and abuse counseling. There certainly were no taxes available in the city, but sometimes funds could be pried out of foundations and wealthy individuals.

I saw Laurel speak, Saturday night, on television. She looked like a competent stranger, not like the laughing woman who'd found herself lost at the corner of Fishbine and Eusades roads.

The night before Joe left, he went down to the basement and pounded away on Laurel's campaign signs. I sat on the steps, but he couldn't hear me, and I couldn't hear him, over the hammering. After a while I went upstairs. I didn't think he noticed. I arranged samples

of my work on the floor. I still liked some of the cards very much. But how long had it been since I'd designed any new cards? And if I did, what kind of cards would I design? The mauve clouds of wysteria belonged to another woman; as did the trim gold-jacketed teddy bears. I didn't see anything of the person I was lately. Toilet bowl cleanser cards, perhaps. Or maybe, potatoes. Wasn't there some theory that potatoes were like art? What is the state of a natural potato? Do you leave the dirt on, or scrub it? One of those Do You Like Raw Carrot questions.

"What are you doing?" Joe asked. His voice startled me.

"Nothing," I said. "I was thinking about potatoes." He shrugged, accepting it, and poured himself a drink.

He stood hunched against the counter. It was the last night he'd be home for a week. Maybe I'd get something done, nights when I wasn't waiting to see if he would ever talk to me.

"The man I'm working for looks like a potato," he observed.

"Elliot does?"

"Sort of a lined potato. Maybe a sweet potato. The shape is right, but his face has all up and down lines."

"Sounds more like celery."

He considered.

"Blanched celery."

"Do you like him?" I said.

"Not much, no," Joe answered.

"You once said owners were half the fun."

"Half what fun?" he asked.

"You don't like it, do you," I asked. "Building this pig farm. Then, knowing I shouldn't, I said, "Do they have room to turn around?"

"Who?" he said. "Are you talking about pigs, or people?"

"The pigs." I had to know.

"No, they don't," he said.

He looked so miserable that I stood up and hugged him. He hugged me back, but it wasn't much of a hug.

"I'll call you tomorrow night," he said. "From the apartment."

"Tell me again what it looks like."

"It's nothing special. It belongs to one of Elliot's friends. There's a sink, a stove, a toaster...."

"Skip that. Tell me about the pink bathtub."

"The bathtub is pink," he recited. "The bathroom tile is black and pink."

"I like to know these things," I said.

"There's a dining room table, dining room chairs with plastic seat covers, and new lampshades, with celophane wrap or some such thing. There's a green chair

and sofa the color of wilting dandelions. The sofa material has little metallic tufts for decoration. If you sat down on it naked, you'd be scarred for life."

"You'd better plan on getting out of the house in the evening."

"Elliot got me a ticket so we could go to The Sound of Music."

"Lucky you," I said.

"Lucky, lucky me."

"Joe," I said. "You still seem depressed."

"My father died and his business is going belly up. What do you want, Liz? Mazel tov and pink champagne?"

A lot of angry answers came boiling up then; a list of the things I wanted, starting with shared grief. Somehow I choked the explosion back. I could feel my mother's presence blow into the room like one of Chagall's loving ghosts. She hushed me, putting her warm palm over my mouth and nostrils. I felt calmer, but I could hardly breathe.

I tried again.

"Joe, do you think being married is boring?"

"No," he replied with disinterest. The answer wasn't enough.

"Sometimes I think sex just messes up people. Sometimes I think marriage doesn't work," I said.

"So?"

I thought, how many two letter words are there?

"Joe," I said. "Sometimes I don't feel I even know you. You never talk to me--"

"That's not true."

--unless I talk to you. If you want to sleep with someone else, please just do it. I don't want to be a damn boulder around your neck."

"Mmmm," he said. "It doesn't seem very likely. Did you see that the Daisy Beebee Gun Company is being sued for fifteen million dollars?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Some kid shot out his best friend's eye."

"Joe," I said, "did you hear what I was saying?"

"I'm here, aren't I?" he asked. "How could I not hear?"

CHAPTER 10

The weather became worse as we moved toward November, overcast, drizzling and dreary every day. Ellie, down to her last antibiotic capsules, went trick-or-treating in a cheap plastic costume, and showed no signs of recurring strep. Joe called home to report his progress on the pig farm. Willow topped hummocks had been bulldozed, then graded level, and the reservoirs begun. Each plastic-sheet lined, sand-filled reservoir was an achievement, a goal met before the long delaying, sticky mud siege of Michigan spring. Joe said the land was mostly flat as a highway, stretching unbroken toward Lake Huron under bleak gray skies. I knew Joe's knuckles would by now be cracked and bleeding, his lips split by exposure, his eyelids reddened by wind-blown grit. Elliot was at least proving to be a paternal employer, a widower who took Joe home, fed him pork roast, and told him stories about Grampa and the bear.

I spent my own evenings helping Ellie with her homework. There was wash to do, dishes, a little cleaning, PTO night, groceries to buy and unpack. If Ellie had friends over, I produced punch and cookies; if the punch spilled, I wiped it up. When we were alone I could ask Ellie to help me, but when she had friends with her, asking



stuck in my throat.

Some nights after Ellie went to bed I spread my cards on the table, and they looked back at me with enigmatic gloss. The night I baked Ellie an apple pie for her birthday, I was aware of straddling two periods of my life. There was the pillow textured, crumbly dough beneath my fingers, the clean apple scent, the bitter, back-of-the-nose nutmeg smell. Those seemed to me something from my childhood, as well as from my own mothering, when it worked. I had to stand with my legs apart, an invisible bar spreading my ankles. The posture somehow relieved the pain in my back, but it also kept me aware of my own body, of aches and pains, time passing, of the not-apple world. I felt as though my hands, gummed with dough, belonged to one person; my feet, awkwardly planted, belonged to someone else.

I didn't see much of Laurel. She had, she told me, ended her friendship with Al by sending his daughter a mixed bouquet of pink sweetheart roses and baby's breath. She put her energy into the campaign now. The newspaper had not yet made endorsements, but it certainly seemed infatuated with Laurel, always carefully referring to her as "Commissioner McKay." Pictures appeared showing her meeting with businesswomen, and cutting the ribbons for a Transit System terminal she had championed. She gave me the rest of her Tylenol with codine, along with a note saying I should try a another doctor. I didn't have enough

mental energy to try a new kind of toothpaste, let alone tackle the world of medicine.

I still swam, but no longer saw Sally. The receptionist said she'd had her membership transferred to the Y Center in Ann Arbor. I pictured Sally nude in the rain on eastbound I-94.

I felt restless after Sally left. As though I was looking for something. Impressed by an article about back health and walking, I started trying to walk every day as well as swim. Mostly I headed west of town, where there were dirt roads and nettle thickets, ranch houses and dirt bikes in a ratio of two to one. It was wonderful to breathe air free from chlorine. I saw dead garter snakes, a dead mother opossum. Gray canes rattled, dry sumac dotted the fields.

Laurel scolded me because the streets there were often deserted. They weren't safe, she said, when she picked up her campaign signs. I kept walking because I liked the freedom, the sense of anonymity I found. I liked the scraggly landscaping done with spare tires, the cheerful cast-concrete yellow painted ducks waddling up walks, small posed madonnas, trucks on blocks, the general sprawl of the land.

All the exercise ate precious hours. An hour to swim, an hour to walk, an hour getting both places, tying shoes, showering, finding parking meter change. My health had become a part time unpaid occupation. And through it

10/10/10
10/10/10

all, my back still hurt.

Sometimes I drank to keep myself cheerful.

Sometimes in addition to Aspirin I took Laurel's Tylenol. It was Tylenol number three, which has very little codine. When I took one the pain would not go away, but it backed up in my mind, helping me keep my temper, and I counted the remaining pills several times a day. I pictured death as a round white tablet, a door that swung silently open like the door of a bank vault.

The first Friday in November, I was swimming the nineteenth of twenty planned laps when the paging system blurred out my name. I had to dress to answer the phone at the reception desk.

Ellie's voice met me. "Momma? Can you pick me up?"

"What's wrong?" I asked her. I'd barely toweled off, and my clothes felt stuck to me.

"I itch," she said.

"You itch?"

"I want to come home," she told me.

"Does your teacher think you should come home?"

"No." The voice was reedy and glum.

"Are you going to get her?" the receptionist asked me. "You could finish your swim first."

"I just finished," I said.

When I got Ellie home, I began to think her teacher and the receptionist had been right. She didn't

have a rash, she didn't have hives, she didn't even scratch. She watched the Smurfs and had seconds on soup for dinner. We watched a PBS special on otters before she went to sleep. I limped downstairs wearing wool socks and Joe's ratty old blue bathrobe, just in time to see Frank let himself in the front door.

He looked worse than I did.

"Are you alright?" I asked him.

"No, I'm not," he said. He sat down on the sofa and patted the cushions for me to join him.

"Can I get you a drink?" I asked.

"Not now, thanks, Liz. I'm too upset to drink, and you know how serious that is. I'm being sued for eight hundred thousand dollars," he said.

"What on earth? Who's suing you?"

He shrugged. "I can't remember. Bart. Barth. Bartholomew. Some name like that."

"Why are you being sued, Frank? Don't make me hand you straight lines."

"Actually," he brightened, "it isn't just me. There are four of us. Yours truly, an obstetrician, an intern, and an anesthesiologist. We're being sued jointly for three million dollars."

"What's the case about?" I said. "Did something go wrong in surgery?"

"Nope," he said, shaking his head. "Something went right. I helped deliver a baby, fool that I am. I



haven't done obstetrics since my residency."

"Frank, what the hell did you have to do with delivering a baby?"

"Very little," he mused. "Very damn little. I had just checked in to see how labor was progressing. Ultra-sound had showed some facial abnormalities, and I like to visit the parents right after delivery. That's when they need to see someone."

"So you told us."

"I could hear the woman screaming; not screaming, exactly. You know that guttural sound of labor gone wrong; half moaning, it peaks high, like a dog's howl. Regular as a siren, involuntary as a hung man's last crap."

I nodded, remembering.

"I stopped and talked to the nurse. Her obstetrician had had the resident induce labor, which was part of the problem. The contractions don't fade; the woman doesn't get much rest. To top it off, the poor little cheese had an anterior presentation, so that the back of the baby's skull was against her lower vertebrae. She wasn't even feeling the pain of labor contractions. She felt as though someone with hobnail boots was kicking her in the spine."

Frank stopped, and I saw his face was wet with perspiration.

"It's cases like this that made me become a plastic surgeon. Thank God my patients are all

anesthetized."

"They couldn't give her any more pain medication?"

"They can't give much. You know that. Things were worse because her own doctor wasn't there. He had another case going, a really bad one. The other name in the firm was stuck in a fender bender, and there wasn't another obstetrician who wanted to get involved. It's not considered good ethics, you know. Interfering with someone else's O.B. case is sort of like rustling; most doctors won't step in unless there's an emergency. So here's this poor little cow, absolutely lowing, and I'm sure she couldn't have been more than sixteen. Her boyfriend was with her, but he was in a state of stark terror. I kept saying, talk to her; she can hear you. I might as well have been talking to a rabbit. He sat there, clutching her hand, not saying one goddamn word.

"When I was a resident," Frank continued, "we dealt with anterior presentations by turning the patient from side to side. Sometimes, a sharp change of position turned the baby. If that didn't work, it was considered correct for the obstetrician, once the cervix was dilated reasonably, to reach through the pelvic opening, up through the dilated cervix, and turn the child so that its face pressed against the mother's spine. That's the normal position," he added. "That's why most newborns look awful. Their noses have been flattened against their mamas'

bones."

"Frank," I said. "Somehow I thought you were a plastic surgeon."

Frank was examining his well scrubbed hands.

"The process to turn the kid has been going out of favor," he admitted. "It isn't medically necessary, it just relieves pain, and any non-medically justifiable action brings about an increased risk of post-delivery suits."

"You didn't."

"It worked fine." His voice was stubborn. "I got both the mother and father's consent. The mother was as game as she could be, and as soon as I turned junior, she stopped that sound and looked at me...she'd had her face turned to the wall."

"Couldn't you have used forceps?"

"No," he said. "Not without risk."

"Was the obstetrician angry?"

"I don't give a rat's ass. He delivered her normally six hours later. It's not as though I stole his case."

"Why didn't the intern do what you did?"

Frank gave me a wry look and picked at a hangnail.

"Among other things," he said, "I had small enough hands. Christ, I'm tired. I'd take that drink now, Liz."

I got out the last of the Cutty Sark.

"Could you have hurt her?" I asked him.

"I suppose it's happened. There are risks connected with anything. There are also women who don't walk for days after delivery because of pressure on the spinal nerves. There can be cord damage. I'm not a bit sorry."

"Is that why they're suing?"

"No. Oh, no," he said. "They're suing because the kid died twelve hours later. The brain wasn't developed....there wasn't a chance it could live."

"Then why sue you?"

"Liz, it's standard legal procedure. People are sued who aren't even remotely connected with a case. I've got a friend who was sued when his partner lost a patient. The boy died in surgery before my friend ever saw him. He was at his daughter's kindergarten graduation when the kid croaked."

"He didn't lose."

"The case was settled out of court...as this case will be."

"Are you in trouble with the hospital?"

"The director's mad as hell. He says I risked legal complications...I'll be on his shit list, no doubt about that. Ah, well, life goes on," he said. "Tonight, I'm crashing early."

We sat in morose, companionable silence. I wondered what it would be like to cart Frank off to bed.

As if in judgment the glare of carlights pulling into the driveway skewered us on the couch. Someone had turned in fast, crunching on gravel. Someone slammed the car door and was coming up the walk.

Laurel stalked into the room, her raincoat swinging open.

"Oh Christ, it's Frank," she said. "Have you seen the headlines?"

"It's been another long day," I said. "The paper's still in the mailbox."

Frank shook his head.

"I missed Brenda Starr," he said.

"Take a look." She waved the front page of the paper. "Isn't this cute?"

"Local Pro-Life Group Endorses," the headlines informed us.

Halfway down the page, were pictures of Laurel and her opponent, Jim Stevenson. "McKay fails to return Pro-Life Questions. She dodges issue, says Pro-Life Stevenson." I noticed they didn't give Laurel her "Commissioner" label.

"You told me you completed that questionnaire," I said.

"I did. It's still sitting on the dining room table, all stamped and ready to mail."

"Why didn't you mail it? You never forget anything, Laurel."

"That's part of the problem. I still remember my mother biting through her lower lip the night before she died."

"It doesn't look good. Not returning the form," Frank told her.

"Thank you, Dan Rather. How insightful you are tonight. I did send a note to the paper, explaining my position."

"Do they say so in the paper?"

"On the second page. Three other candidates refused to return the form, but I'm the one that gets the attention."

We all stared at the article that monopolized the front page. There was Laurel's statement, "Not pertinent," showing in bold black and white.

Under Stevenson's picture ran a much longer quotation.

"No one belongs in government at the local, state, or national level who does not at all times and in all ways support life."

"I waited for this," Laurel said, "all through October. I just didn't expect the timing to be so professional."

"Professional?" I asked.

"The weekend before the election. The paper cuts off all publicity as of Sunday afternoon."

"Could you get a letter to the paper tomorrow?" I

asked her.

"I don't know if I should," she said. She collapsed in a chair near us. "Almost anything I do looks defensive now."

"In what way," Frank asked, "does the city rule on abortions?"

"Stevenson says the city could refuse to grant zoning changes to medical facilities where abortions take place. In the past ten years, not one such facility has built inside the city. I handled this wrong, damn it. I should have faced this group. But every time a woman opens her mouth on this issue, she gets taken apart, labeled..."

"Surely it's not as bad as that," Frank said.

I thought I heard Ellie stirring, but when I checked her, she was asleep. I came back downstairs to find Laurel and Frank regarding each other with mutual fatigue and antipathy.

"Can I bum a drink?" Laurel asked. "I really need one."

"I'm out," I said.

"Hell," said Frank. "Liz, can you get a sitter? We could all go out. I don't like drinking alone."

I hesitated.

"I'll pay for the sitter," he offered. "After all, my frisbee put Ellie in the soup."

"That's forward," I told him. "I've heard stories about men who pay for the sitter."

"All lies," he said. "I've never bought a baby
sitter in my life."

CHAPTER 11

I got dressed and called one of the neighbor girls, Janet Babcock. Janet trudged across the street, the streetlight gleaming on her fuzzy pink slippers. I left instructions, and Frank left money for pizza and coke.

I wasn't worried about leaving Ellie with Janet. The Babcocks were home, for one thing. It was Janet who'd taught Ellie how to jump rope and ride a bike.

We stepped out of the house into damp November weather. It smelled like high school football games, like fog on Halloween night. Laurel sat next to Frank in the truck and I sat next to Laurel. She looked oversized and awkward next to him. She'd left her coat and was wearing jeans and an apricot cashmere sweater. Her hair hung loose, and she should have looked relaxed, but the lines around her mouth were set like wood putty. We drove to Connie's listening to Frank's repertoire of off-color limericks.

Connie's had a new outside light. It was much brighter, and the bar looked garish, the parked cars and trucks showing dents and scrapes.

"Where is this? Hell's Half Acre?" Laurel asked us.

"Never you mind," Frank answered. "It's a

non-political bar, this."

"There's no such thing," she said, using my line, "as a non-political bar."

"This one is. You could dance bare-ass on the tables, and there isn't a soul here who would recognize you."

"They'd know I was too old to dance on tables."

"There you go with that negative thinking again."

"A-political," Laurel snorted. "Does it have indoor plumbing?"

"You betcha," Frank said. "Just empty the bucket when you're done."

Inside, the bar was quiet, nearly empty. A handful of regulars were drinking at the bar, watching television, drooling over Maureen O'Hara in Spencer's Mountain. Sally was gone. The atmosphere seemed empty, flaccid, the place defined by old varnish, stale beer and smoke.

We started drinking Bloody Marys which came served in beer mugs with leafless stalks of celery surfacing like periscopes. Then Frank insisted we have a round of Margueritas, licking coarse salt off the glass rims, sucking on undersized limes. When we switched to a pitcher of beer I started drinking slowly, which wasn't at all what I wanted to do. It was nice to be out of the house. It was nice to be with adults. Drinking till I

slid under the chipped black wood table sounded good, but I knew Ellie was home, and Joe wasn't. Parents Without Partners ought to offer a special service: someone to mind the farm while you tie one on and then dry out. Since no such service exists, I sipped my beer slowly. Frank was telling Laurel about being sued and she couldn't help laughing. For her, he had given the story brassy overtones; the mother's suffering diminished, the child's death skipped over. It became a saga of Frank On The Carpet, Frank playing Cyrano, trying to cheer her up.

Laurel's hair had sprung into soft, light-catching tendrils, a great cloud of it, all wild around her face. Her apricot sweater clung, showing off her figure. I faced a heavy set balding man who was leering at Laurel, recognizing him as the man Joe had called an asshole the first night I'd been in the bar. As I watched him I saw his face take on a sullen expression. He approached our table.

"I've seen you," he said. "You're that woman on the news."

Laurel's eyes widened.

"I saw you on T.V.," he continued. "You're one of those pro-abortion women."

Noise blared as Connie turned up the volume on the television set.

"Isn't that right?" The man said. "Aren't you pro-abortion?"

I was aware of Frank sitting next to me, tense and watchful. For the first time, I realized that yes, he was small. The man must outweigh him by easily a hundred pounds.

"Well?" he asked. He spoke slowly. He was very, very drunk.

"At the moment," Laurel said, "I'm pro privacy."

"You're a real pretty woman," he said. "A real looker." He reached out and fingered one of her damp curls.

"Bet you use one of those special cream rinses," he told her. "The ones with dead babies in them. My wife and I, we never could have kids."

He belched and walked back to the bar stiff legged. Passing Frank, he looked like a giant. Frank put his hand on Laurel's thigh.

"Liz?" Laurel said. "I'm going to lose this election. If someone in this podunk bar cares, I'm out of it."

"No, you're not," Frank said. "Don't be an idiot, Laurel."

"How am I going to go on campaigning through this shit? I have to speak Sunday at an East Side Baptist Church potluck. How will I ever manage to face the people there?"

"They're not all going to be like him," I told Laurel.

"He's so sure," she said. "They're just so darn sure. They never have a moment's doubt. Never, never, never. If I ever saw one of them at a loss, I wouldn't be so scared."

"Come on, Laurel," Frank put in. "This guy found his conscience in a bottle. Drinking coffee tomorrow, he'll have some doubts. Everyone has doubts."

"Not this group," Laurel said. "I've been listening to them all October. You hear them everywhere, and they're all so simplistic. The woman who cut my hair today gave me quite a lecture. She said if women who are raped can get treated, women will lie and say they are raped."

"I clipped a letter from the paper," I admitted. "Someone wrote that no one ever put a gun to a woman's head and made her get pregnant."

Frank shook his head.

"Never, huh?"

"Never," I repeated.

"Never a knife or a billy club, either, I suppose."

The man was still watching Laurel.

"Excuse me," Laurel said abruptly. "I have to pee."

She got up and left the table in tears.

"Don't sit down on the bucket," Frank called after her. "I knew a girl who got a spectacular bull's-eye

bruise from a pail."

"Frank," I said, "shut up."

"It's not funny," he agreed. "I've got pictures of some terrific kids this guy could adopt."

"You and your a-political bar," I scoffed. "We should get going when Laurel gets out of the can."

"Let's not rush," he said.

He touched his left eye, and flicked a brown tinted contact into the palm of his right hand.

"Soft lenses," he said. "I've got a spare pair."

Without the lens, his left eye twitched and watered. I watched as he took the back of a spoon and mashed the lens to a pulp. By the time Laurel came back to the table, the lens looked like a slightly thickened smear of gelatin.

"What's he doing?" Laurel asked, returning.

"Playing Mad Genius. Hush and watch," he told her. Next he found an antihistamine capsule in a pocket of his shirt.

"Allergies," he said. Twisting and pulling the two halves of the capsule open, he dumped the multi-colored time release beads out on the floor.

He slid the gelatinous lens into the transparent capsule and eyed his creation, unsatisfied.

He had his back to the man at the bar.

"If I add just a drop of the Bloody Mary..."

The crushed lens floated, embalmed in thick,

viscous red. He slid it into his shirt pocket.

"Wait here," he told us. "The title of tonight's program is, 'The Sure Shall Be Unsure.'"

"It sounds like PBS special on birth control," Laurel mused. Her face was white but interested, watching Frank make his way to the bar.

"I don't think he should do this," she said.

"I'm sure he shouldn't," I concurred.

Both of us waited, mouths agape, as Frank started a conversation. Both of us expected to see Frank go crashing to the floor.

Frank said something, and gestured for a pitcher. The man replied. Since their backs were toward us, our view was limited.

Laurel finished her drink while I poured the last of the beer.

We sat in silence watching the television. O'Hara and Henry Fonda were a class act all the way. I was daubbing my eyes when I felt Laurel stiffen beside me. Frank was approaching our table, with the big man in tow.

"Meet Bernie," Frank said. Bernie carried a pitcher of beer, and sat down without meeting Laurel's eyes.

"The doc tells me you're O.K.," he said. "Sorry about my mouth."

"I'm not O.K.," Laurel said. "Frank, what are you doing?"

"Don't get emotional," Frank cautioned. "This is a rational business discussion." As he spoke, his eye twitched violently.

"Research costs money," he said, turning to Bernie.

"Fifty," Bernie said. "I told you. Fifty is all I've got."

"A medical breakthrough," Frank argued.

"Government intervention keeps the quantities limited, but some rich bastard will pay up fast enough."

The man swallowed. He ran a hand over his glistening forehead.

"You really make a hair restorer, out of--out of--"

"Placenta," Frank said smoothly. "You yourself mentioned the collagen in cream rinse. Ask yourself what would be a more logical next step?"

The man nodded, his eyes on the capsule Frank was holding.

"This is the next step," Frank said. "Lifelong, luxurious hair. It's all a question of hormones."

We all four watched the small, smushed lens floating in a bloody haze.

The man reached out and touched the capsule. He pulled his hand back as though burned.

"One hundred dollars," Frank said.

"Fifty," the man repeated.

The waitress who called everyone Hun brought another pitcher of beer.

"Ninety," Frank said. Both of them drank. They haggled, and slowly, the price went down until they settled at seventy.

"Wash it down," Frank told Bernie.

"Wash it down!" Bernie's eyes bulged. "I thought I rubbed the stuff into my skin."

"Nix," Frank said. "I tell you, you've got to start trusting your doctor. The thing is systemic. The hormones have to react with your chemistry."

"This won't make me impotent, will it?"

Frank turned to me, his eye jumping.

"Noticed any problems?" he asked me.

"I have a hard time getting any rest," I said, which was certainly true.

Frank gave Laurel a lecherous wink.

"How about you, sweetie?"

Laurel's face flushed dull red. The purchaser guffawed. He spread out the dog-eared ten dollar bills on the table, dropped the "hair tonic" on his tongue and chugged it down with beer.

"Let me buy you another drink," Frank said before the glass was lowered. "Let's make it a friendly transaction, while we're here."

Frank bought two more pitchers of beer, using the bills on the table. He and Bernie drank and talked

football spreads. Laurel and I made no attempt to keep up with their drinking, seeing Frank was already starting to spill and slur.

At last Frank belched, a huge, satisfying eruption. An introspective look appeared in the eye that didn't twitch.

"Son of a gun," he said. "I forgot to ask about piles."

"Piles?" Bernie said stupidly.

"You know. Bloody piles. Get it? Ructions on your asshole."

Bernie shifted his weight uneasily in the chair.

"What's my asshole to you?" he asked Frank.

"I just hope you don't have piles. Frank shrugged. "We counteradvise with piles. I should have asked."

"What the hell difference would it make, goddamn fripping piles?" the huge man demanded. "I don't plan to grow hair on my fucking ass!"

"I don't expect you will," Frank soothed urbanely. "It's just that if something went wrong, the piles could get worse."

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

"Just if something did go wrong." Frank smoothed his own hair back.

Bernie's face was taking on an increasingly ominous glower.

"Nothing better go fucking wrong." He poured himself more beer.

"Of course it won't," Frank agreed. "The odds are astronomical. Still, I wish I'd asked about the piles. I really shouldn't drink. That's why those sons-a-bitches took away my license."

Bernie raised the glass to his mouth. "The hell you say," he muttered.

"Of course, it makes sense that there could be trouble with piles," Frank considered philosophically. "Any sudden weight gain can cause hemorrhoids to act up. The same is true with varicose veins, and it doesn't help your heart much. Bloat is mostly cosmetic, unless your blood pressure's bad."

"Tell me what you're talking about or I'll cut your fucking cock off." The man's hands shook as he put down the beer.

Frank glanced about nervously. "There's no problem," he repeated. "It's only that this specimen was fresh, and warm, in the pocket of my shirt."

The customer looked bilious. "Still warm," he said. "Mother of God."

"It's not just as simple as snipping the stuff into hair cream," Frank said waspishly, glaring with his one good eye. "The capsules ought to be irradiated to make sure the cell matrix doesn't have fertilized cells, but when you have incompetent help, what do you expect?"

Bernie burped thoughtfully.

"I expect hair," he said.

"I guarantee you'll grow that hair," Frank replied promptly. "The other possibility is too remote for concern."

"Try me," Bernie said. He had grown suddenly quiet.

"Have you ever heard of an ectopic pregnancy?"

"No." Bernie's face was blank and worried.

"That's when a baby doesn't develop in the uterus," Frank lectured. "There have been premature babies taken from intestinal lining. One young woman in Detroit recently carried a baby four months that way, and it lived, delivered Caesarian. In other cases when the embryo is carried in the blood stream, say to the brain, it develops as a tumor would--"

He broke off. "Never mind," he said. "I'm sure all you'll grow is hair. You've got major medical, I trust?"

Bernie rubbed the back of one hand against his mouth, staring.

"This had better be a joke," he said. His voice was shaking. "It had better be a Christly joke, that's all I've got to say."

One hand shot out, undeterred by liquor, and grabbed Frank by the collar.

"You motherfucking joker," he said. "I'll teach

you to laugh at me!"

"Wait!" Frank screeched, terrified. "I'll give you back your money! Remember all medical breakthroughs carry a certain risk!"

He was pushing bills and change frantically across the table. "Keep your money. Keep it," he urged.

"I ought to flush you down the toilet head first," Bernie threatened. He let go of Frank to count his money.

"You've drunk half my money," he said. "I'll get the rest out of your lying hide! I'll bet you're not even a doctor. You'll finish this night sorry you tried to con me, you shit. You fucking sleaze."

The tension at the table was broken by a high pitched beeping.

"Excuse me," Frank said. "That's my pager. Probably that Mexican poor woman expecting twins."

He turned to Connie who had appeared when voices were raised at our table.

"Where's your lovely blond ass-waving daughter?"

"She's registering for school now. You folks can leave," Connie added. You've had enough to drink."

We quickstepped to the parking lot. Frank's victim lagged behind us, his arm gripped firmly by Connie, who loudly lectured him.

"Stay away from that crazy Dr. Medlar," she warned Bernie. "He's got a notebook full of babies"

pictures, and all the kids are deformed."

We turned in time to see Bernie bolt for the shrubbery, one hand to his mouth.

Frank slid into the pick-up truck, resetting his wrist alarm.

"What you saw there," he said dreamily, "was a miscarriage of justice."

"Oh, shut up," Laurel said, laughing and wiping her eyes. Then her shoulders began to shake and she was weeping, leaning against me.

"What's the matter?" Frank asked. "I dealt with your positive pro-lifer."

"Sure you did," said Laurel. "Now all you need to do is get Forest's mother drunk. I'll send Adelaide over, and then you can work on my cousin, and while you're at it, you can talk to the woman who cuts my hair."

"It will take a great deal of time and commitment," Frank admitted.

"Shut up," Laurel repeated.

"Fuck you, then," he said, suddenly very drunk.

I sat between them while Frank slept and Laurel drove home barefoot.

"I'm getting corns," she said, "from going door to door."

CHAPTER 12

Saturday morning I had a hangover. It was the first time I'd ever awakened wincing and not felt Joe breathing by my side. Ellie was downstairs watching Saturday morning cartoon shows. I went down and put the coffee on.

It was a quiet day. I tried to call Laurel but her phone was busy. She either was making calls or had the receiver off the hook.

Late that afternoon, Ellie started fussing. She itched, she insisted.

"Let me see your stomach," I said skeptically.

Her thin hands rucked up the "Save the Seals" t-shirt. There was nothing visible there except ribs, and the thin blue tracings of veins beneath the skin. I checked her hair for lice and told her to take a shower. I sat on the couch, watching the last lemon wedge of sinking sun.

We watched a rerun of the show on otters and ate leftover chicken from T.V. trays. I sipped coffee and my head still hurt.

"I itch," Ellie repeated. "I itch, and I've got a hive."

"Let me see the hive," I told her, and she held

out the arm she had been rubbing with the heel of her hand. Near the inside of her left elbow was a raised spot that looked half silver dollar pancake, half spider bite.

I had seen hives like that. My roommate in college was allergic to peanuts, and protein allergies are the worst. If she is kissed by a peanut butter eater, she breaks out from her head to her toes in itching mint-sized lumps.

Ellie had begun to scratch near her wrist. I watched her ragged fingernails scrape thin red streaks on her arm.

I called her pediatrician's answering service, and he promptly called me back.

"It's the antibiotic," he told me matter-of-factly. "Just go ahead and throw out whatever is left."

"What if she gets strep again?"

"We'll deal with it later. I'm going to prescribe some Benadryl to take care of those hives."

The only open pharmacy, six blocks away, was busy. I stood in a line with people buying Preparation H and condoms. I was tired and cold, and wished I had more gas in my car.

I got back to the house and found Ellie crying behind the sofa, a refuge she'd used when she was three and wet her pants. The hives were starting to appear in earnest. She soon had coin-sized welts on her stomach,

arms, and scalp.

I ran her a tub and poured in half a box of baking soda. She was crying and angry, tossing about, and insisting the hives now hurt. I got the Benadryl down her, spooning it in while she was in the tub.

By the time I slid her into her worn pajamas, she had hives between her fingers and toes, and hives on the soles of her feet. The hives that were in swollen clumps pulled at the skin, making it sting like drying burn tissue. Her hair was matted with a paste of baking soda and the home-made poultice had cracked off the worst welts. I'd sprayed her stomach and chest with Chloraseptic throat spray, because a nurse had once told me it numbed chicken pox.

I sat by the edge of her bed, and she wound her fingers in my hair, sending white flakes of baking soda down my neck. I hummed old songs to her while she whimpered. Froggy Went a Courting, He Did Ride. Songs Joe used to sing. About the time light drained from the west window, the blue-green, syrupy Benadryl made her fall asleep.

I edged away from Ellie little by little, went downstairs and took two of Laurel's Tylenol. I tried to call Laurel, but there was no answer, and when I tried to call Joe, the phone rang and rang. I cleaned up the kitchen, shooing Quince off the table and giving the rest of the chicken to him. Not having Joe to talk to made me

nervous. Ellie was sick and I wanted someone else to know about it, but I couldn't think who else would be interested. Frank might laugh at Ellie's hives, if he wasn't still hungover, and my father was in Florida, twelve hundred miles away. I gave up and hauled Quince up to my bedroom, Quince who usually prefers to sleep alone. The shades were stuck and wouldn't pull; the thick frost patterns looked eerie. Quince must have known the temperature was dropping, because he snuggled up to me.

Sometime during the night, Ellie crawled into bed beside me. I lay still, back hurting, feeling her warm against my side. She was streaked with green Chloraseptic and caked with baking soda; she breathed open mouthed, her hair was stuck back from her face.

When she finally woke Sunday morning, she looked worse but felt better. She had hives on the corneas of her eyes; you could see the raised ridge of white near the iris, and she had little bloody tracks all over her body, around each of the hives she could reach to scratch, but overnight it most of the itching had stopped. I fed her popsicles and read to her. Though mostly she read Beverly Cleary, these days, now she wanted the old favorite picture books by Margaret Wise Brown. Anything familiar, that was what she wanted.

I tried to call Joe, and got no answer. Laurel called.

"Are you ready for this?" she told me.

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"Adelaide went to church this morning, and the church bulletin had an announcement urging voters to support 'pro-life' candidates. The blurb was stuck between bingo announcements and marriage enrichment schedules."

"What did Adelaide say?"

"She's mad as hell," Laurel said.

I told Laurel I'd make some phone calls for her.

I fed Ellie macaroni, put her in the tub and made six calls. I got three not-at-homes, two people who liked Laurel, and a woman who told me women have no place in politics.

I could hear Ellie calling me. Christ, you stupid child, I thought, give me a minute: I'm doing this for you. But the sound escalated, the fussing sound children make when they will not be ignored. Hoo, hoo, hoo, I thought and went upstairs to find Ellie was sitting on the edge of the tub, her poor pelvis dotted with welts like non-pareils.

I started to pat her dry.

"My ankles hurt," she told me.

I kept on patting, short on patience. What next, I thought.

"Ow! Mom!" she said. I clasped one ankle, intending to guide her foot into pajama pants. I was cross and grabbed hard. She had said the hives were better. Ellie gulped with pain, and I could feel her ankle hot to my touch.

I scooped her up and carried her dripping into my bedroom and set her down in the middle of my bed. She sat in her pajama tops, rocking on her bare bottom, hugging her knees and whimpering.

Both ankles were as red and inflamed as bee stings, swollen thick as a grown man's muscled calves.

"What else hurts?" I asked her. The room seemed silent around us.

"My elbows," she said. "And my knees. And my hands...they hurt a lot."

I called her pediatrician's answering service, and once again he called me back immediately.

"Can she breath?" he asked me.

"Yes," I told him.

"She's not having any breathing difficulty at all?"

I considered. Ellie was still whimpering and rocking.

"No," I said. "No, she is not."

"Well then, it's not dangerous." He sounded tired and patient. "She's developed a serious allergic reaction...."

"I don't understand," I said. "She's had penicillin before. Even in its ultimate and penultimate forms."

"That's the pattern," he said. "People who have a reaction don't usually become sensitized until the second

or third time the medication is used. She took this successfully with that bone infection, and it cleared the infection up. You can't really blame the drug."

"I hadn't thought to."

Ellie gave a moan that sounded angry. She began to knead first one, then the other swollen wrist.

"I'll prescribe cortisone," he said. "Be sure you follow the instructions. You'll notice that the initial doses are spaced close together. You should keep her away from penicillin now."

"I certainly will," I said.

The pharmacy sent the bottle of cortisone tablets. By the time I started Ellie on the drug, she was sobbing, and so was I. Her knees were swollen as though both kneecaps were broken, her elbows throbbed a rich, infected red, and arthritic looking nodules thickened her fingers. After I gave her the cortisone I put her in the bathtub. The cortisone, mercifully, soon made her groggy and she drowsed, half floating, as long as I sat by the side of the tub and read.

When the hot water tank was out of hot water, so that I could no longer keep her bath warm, I took two more of Laurel's Tylenol tablets, woke Ellie and once again carried her to bed. By that time all my thoughts had run together, the light in the room seemed haloed from my fatigue, my mouth was dry and the house echoed with midnight silence. I slid Ellie into my empty bed and

looked at her. Her breathing was slow and even. Between the hives on her face and the pudgy joints of her fingers, she looked like some small alien, a moon child. I knelt down by the bed and took her hand and kissed it, feeling the angry heat pulsing beneath the skin.

I thought of Frank's comment. "You knew the dangers." I didn't, I thought; no one knows the dangers. This child was not, to the doctor, even dangerously ill. Some women kneel by a sick child every day of their lives; Ellie might someday kneel by such a child.

She looked so different, and so distant. Moved by some impulse out of my past, I padded barefoot into the bathroom and scooped baking-soda water out of the tub. I carried it back dripping from the palm of my hand to her bedside. There I dipped one finger in the water, and traced a cross, up, down, left, right, on her forehead under her bangs. It left little cloudy white tracks of water.

"I baptize you, Elizabeth Ellen Holt," I whispered, "In the name of the Father, the name of the Son and of the Holy Ghost." Please God, I added, whether you're a man or a woman, let this child be able to choose whether or not she has children, and if she has them, let her love them as much as I love her now.

I dried my hands on the covers and slid in by her, thinking of times I'd wanted Ellie out of that bed. Of times when Joe and I had wanted to make love, and

nightmares had roused her with visions of vampires slithering out of overhead lights. Of waiting for Joe...waiting to feel his hand, under the covers, cupping my breast, moving slowly down to my thighs. Of his hand tracing the melon arch of my stomach when I was pregnant. Of the nights when he'd come in late from a construction site, and burrowed against me, pressing against my buttocks, sometimes waking me so that we made love, sometimes both of us falling back to sleep. I thought of waking up to the smell of coffee and bacon; of all the times I'd stayed awake, waiting and watching for him. How young we had been, I thought. How young we'd really been.

I was half asleep when I saw the beam of light arc the ceiling. There was a car pulling into the drive. Laurel, I thought, or Frank, and then I knew Joe had come home. I struggled out of sleep and stood at the head of the landing. Joe came in carrying his suitcase. Thinking Ellie and I were sleeping, he had started toward the kitchen before he looked up and saw me. I stood shivering in a pink flannel nightgown.

"Where have you been?" I asked. "I tried and tried to call you."

"I was driving home," he said. He could hardly have been driving all weekend, but he put the suitcase down.

"I wanted to come home," he said. "I missed you and Ellie. I told Elliot that was all we could do, this

year."

"Was it?"

"Almost. The ground is deep frozen. He'll have to decide if he wants me back, in the spring."

"If he wants you back! You have a contract."

"Not for the building. Just for site preparation," he said, and then took a closer look at me.

"What's that green stuff on your nightgown? You look as though you've been rolling in Easter egg dye."

I looked down at myself. I was spattered, more than spattered, with green Chloraseptic throat spray. I looked as though I'd butchered a pig with mint-green blood.

I'm glad you're home," I said. "Ellie's sick." My voice quavered, and Joe started up the stairs two at a time.

It took a while to explain. He looked at her, disbelieving.

"Are you sure she's alright?" he said. "She looks half dead."

Actually, she looked pretty good. She was still breathing evenly, with her hair spread over her face, and her fat, star-fish fingered hands clutching her blankets.

"Jesus," he said.

We were both too tired to talk. Joe made himself a bedroll of pillows and blankets and curled up on the floor next to Ellie's side of the bed. I fell into a

dreamless smothering sleep like black swan's down. My last coherent thought was that I was glad to have a second car in the drive.

CHAPTER 13

I woke up four hours later, knowing, even in my sleep, that Ellie was due for her cortisone. She took it, mumbling, and fell back on her pillow. I gulped four Aspirin with water, set a clock, and went back to sleep. By the time I woke she and Joe were downstairs, watching some awful gameshow; actually Ellie was watching it, sitting in Joe's lap while he slept. I looked at him, his head tipped back, jaw slack, his legs sprawled. Quince was curled half on Ellie and half on Joe. I fixed myself bacon and eggs, and sat reading the Sunday papers. There were letters for Jim Stevenson and for Laurel, and there was the newspaper endorsement, waffling at the end. McKay had more experience, and more education, but wasn't it lucky the city had two good candidates? Laurel was at the Baptist potluck. I finished making my phone calls. Most people were noncommittal, and one hung up on me.

Joe slept in front of the T.V. while the Lions got slaughtered. Ellie spent her afternoon in the tub, but was more cheerful. She took her watercolors with her and painted murals above the soap ring. The water would turn charcoal gray, then I'd add hot water, diluting it, and she would set to work again.

I had a strange feeling of time being suspended.

I walked around the house, touching familiar things. Too much Aspirin had made my ears ring, adding to my sense of unreality. One fragment of my brain wanted to do more work for Laurel, but the impetus was lost in a vast blanchmange of fatigue. By evening Ellie was tired and fractious. She and Joe watched television, and she yelled at him for teasing her every time she yawned. She talked and sounded like a much younger child, and ended up asleep in his arms. I set the clock to remember her next cortisone tablet. As time went by the doses came farther and farther apart. Joe took Ellie up to bed. I locked up, and on an impulse, left a light on in each room, because it made the house look safe.

Lou Christie, in the 60's had a hit song that chorused, "Lightning is striking a-gay-hin," and described a passionate couple clenched in a car in the rain. That morning fate whomped us with one more lightning bolt. My mother always said problems came strung together like teething beads. It started with Janet Lamb leaning on our doorbell at three in the morning, her pink slippers soaked with rain.

"It's my dad," she stammered. "He's having this--this operation, because he's been having trouble with his leg, and it wasn't supposed to be so bad, but Mom called and she's crying and crying. I don't know what to do, and I could see your lights were on...."

It was an odd situation. I barely knew Janet's

father, a big bear of a man who had an artificial right leg. He was an engineer for Commonwealth; he traveled a great deal, and when he was home he spent his time with his wife and brood of kids. I knew his wife on a casual basis only; a spare, pleasant woman whose daughter sat for me.

"Do you want me to go down to the hospital?" I asked her.

"N--no." Janet looked miserable. "Mother wouldn't let me come. She kept saying to get a man, to get Uncle Arnie, but Aunt Jane says Uncle Arnie's working second shift...."

"I can go." I heard Joe's voice over my shoulder. "I hate to leave you alone with Ellie again, Liz."

"Maybe I could drive with you." I was speaking on an impulse, the words pouring out before I could stop and think. Fresh cold air blew into the living room, tugging at me; I wanted with sudden intensity to get out of the house, to run, run away, to be free of illness, free of the people Joe and I had become.

"I could stay with Ellie," Janet said. "One of my sisters is old enough to watch the other kids."

Joe gave Ellie another cortisone tablet. Janet sat down on the couch and pulled a green afghan over her feet. She'd stopped crying but her breath came in hiccoughs. There were tears on her glasses, so I cleaned them and handed them back to her.

The night was crisp with cold. We drove through the city, never stopping, because all the traffic lights were set to blink. I had the sense of being on a journey that hospital visits evoke; a feeling one is going farther than can be measured in city blocks. The new wing of the hospital, with sliding glass doors and low-static carpet, reminded me of an airport terminal at night: the long empty corridors, people carrying baggage, visitors passes held like passports in white-knuckled hands.

We found Christine Babcock in the third floor lounge, listening to a nurse.

"It's no good," Mrs. Babcock said. "It's a stroke, or his mind's going...."

The nurse looked sympathetic but exasperated.

"Are you family?" she asked us.

"Neighbors," Joe said. "But we'd stay, if we could help."

Mr. Babcock had not had a stroke, she told Christine firmly. "He's having an unusual post-surgical reaction, that's all."

"He's had so many operations," Christine insisted. "Nothing like this has ever happened before. You don't know him, anyway," she added with sudden spirit. "How could you tell if he had changed?"

"Janet asked us to come," I said. Christine looked at us, blinking. It was, I think, the first time she'd realized we were there.

"Maybe you should call Janet," Joe said. "She's very worried."

Christine nodded wearily.

"All right, I'll call her."

"She's at our house," I told her. Joe talked to the nurse, then followed the nurse down the hall. I couldn't help listening while Christine talked to Janet.

"So much worse than last time," I heard her saying. "The doctor came by and checked him...I just can't believe it....he's not himself at all, and how would the doctor know?"

I turned to study a poster and found the nurse standing beside me.

"If you could get her to go home and rest, that would be best," she said. "She can't help him, and we're having to take care of her as well as him."

"Has he had a stroke?" I asked.

"No, it's just what I told her. Older people don't take anesthesia very well. It's processed through the liver, but age slows the process. He's disoriented, but he's not disorderly. The confusion is unusual, but we sometimes see it. His wife needs all the rest she can get before he goes home."

Just then a doctor walked by, looking rumpled, and Christine hung up the phone and launched herself after him.

I found Norm Babcock's room. My eyes took the details in slowly. Joe's back, the back of his head,

definitely thin on hair; the hospital white, the lights, the tubes, Joe's coat on a footstool, the empty second bed in the room, the open bathroom door.

Norm lay propped in a pile of pillows. His color startled me. He wasn't white; he was gray, the pale gray of self-kilning clay. His big head lolled, his sheets were rucked up, showing the operation that had brought him to this condition. Trouble with the leg, Janet had said. Trouble with the left leg, and now the left leg too, was gone from the knee down.

Diabetes, my mind said, but my feelings were absent, detached with shock at the sight of the man I knew, lying nude to the waist. The stump of his right leg jutted crookedly out toward Joe. It looked healed and at peace. The left leg, recently amputated, was swollen at the knee, so that the knee was as thick around as the thigh. A flap of white, bloodless skin had been tucked over the kneecap and sutured in place like the flap of a child's glued envelope. Between the two truncated legs a catheter centered in his penis, the tube surrounded by a drop of blood the color of pomegranate juice. It hung wobbling, like milk from a huge engorged nipple. Norm was mercifully unaware of the disarray.

"He won't stay covered," Joe said. "Maybe the sheet rubs him."

"No wonder Chris didn't want Janet to come."

"Hello, hello," Norm said. He gestured for me to

come forward. "Are you here for the concert? Arnie should have saved you a seat."

Joe shot me a look. "That's me," he mouthed.

"Damned poor service," Norm was saying. "Didn't used to let cats in here. Damned foolishness.

"Is this going to bother you?" Joe said.

I realized he was talking about Norm's poor body, splayed out in plain view.

"He looks just like I did when they put me in those stirrups," I said. "It's not quite the same position, but it's close enough."

It was true. Something about the pulled back sheets, with the traces of blood stains, his upright knees, the I.V. tubes did remind me of labor. Even Norm's meandering mind made me think of a roommate who'd given birth lost in a cloud of sodium pentothal. She'd screamed at her husband for taking flying lessons while she was having his goddamn kid. Her husband had silently held her hand through the criblike bed railings, and later confided woefully that he'd never been in a plane. Now Norm was caught in the meshes of some alternate mental life.

"Have a seat," he told me. "Mind that ginger cat there. I've told the young man sweeping floors he ought to put it out. Are you here for the Leontyne Price concert? Damn it, Arnie, don't hover over me!"

"So far as I can tell," Joe said quietly, "we're at a concert at the Masonic Hall. He's mad at me because

the last time we fished, I caught all the bluegills."

Norm noted us talking and gave me closer attention.

"Are you one of those prostitutes that've been hanging around here? I told those girls to give up. Christine wouldn't like it, you know."

"This is my wife," Joe said.

"I won't hold it against her," Norm allowed.

"The bluegills, though, that was damn cheap, you taking my line like that."

He took another look at me, turning his head sideways the way a bird will when it wants to examine something.

"Maybe I'm talking too much," he announced abruptly. "The doctor keeps telling me there aren't any cats here. I've seen a big ginger tom, hanging around for three days. It sits under the chair by the bathroom." A sudden worried look crossed his face.

"My damn bladder," he said. "If you folks will excuse me, I've got to go see a man about a dog." He'd propped himself up on his elbows, scooting toward the edge of the bed, the catheter tube swinging wildly, when Joe put his hands on Norm's shoulders.

"You have to have a nurse here," he said. "You can't get out of the bed."

Appalled, I pressed the emergency button, and stood watching. Norm struggled for a minute, trying to

lift himself on his arms; Joe pushed back as though he was trying to contain a hot air balloon rising, trying to ease something fragile gently down. In a minute the nurse came in, a different nurse, this time. She brooked no nonsense. She came up to Norm and shouted right into his face.

"Mr. Babcock! You have a catheter! If you try to get up, you'll fall and hurt yourself badly. If you act like this, we'll have to strap you in."

Norm lay back. "Don't do that," he pleaded. "I'll lie still." But she had already fastened a strap across the bed, and was adding a second strap.

"I'd like to give him a sleeping pill." She sounded angry and defensive. "We're understaffed tonight...I can't keep running in here to check him. But his doctor doesn't want him taking any more medication, and he really must not fall or dislodge that catheter."

"I could stay," Joe said. I waited for her to tell us that visiting hours were over.

"That would be fine," she said. "He'll improve more rapidly with someone here. I'd like to tell you to use the empty bed. I can't do that, but the big chair opens and I'll send blankets and pillows for you."

She was out of the room in three strides, the squeak of her shoes audible behind her. I heard Christine's voice in the hall and Norm, who'd been tugging at the bed strap, stopped and turned his head to it.

"Hello, Christine," he said, when she came into

London, 1841

My dear Sir

the room. "There's a stray cat hanging around here.

Sometime, I'll show it to you."

I saw her face brighten when he said her name.

"When are we going to have lunch?" Norm asked her.

Joe was holding a cup of cracked ice to Norm's mouth when I last looked back. Then I was involved getting Christine home, calming her, trying to tell her I really did think Norm's mind would be all right. She sat huddled in the corner of the front seat, a small woman in an incongruously cheerful tartan coat.

"I just can't stand it," she said. "I just can't stand it."

"Sleep four hours," I said, "and he'll be better when you get back."

Janet looked up when I opened the front door.

"Ellie's still sleeping" she told me. "I looked just like that when I had four impacted molars out."

Then she caught sight of her mother and remembered.

"Was it a stroke, Mom?" Janet asked her.

"No," her mother said. "It was--it was just some medicine he took."

Janet, reassured, turned back to me.

"I hope you don't mind," she said. "I woke up once and ate most of your peanut butter."

"I don't mind." I watched the two of them walk

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across the street together. I took two more Tylenol with scotch and went to Ellie's room.

As Janet said, Ellie was still sleeping. Quince lay against her, a round gold ball with measuring eyes. Ellie's sausage-fat, pale fingers were hooked in his soft fur. I looked around at the room, the clutter, the pale yellow curtains, the stained carpet, the snow-filtered early November sunlight bright on the floor. I carried Joe's pile of blankets into her room, drank the rest of the scotch, and fell fast asleep.

Joe came home at noon. I came downstairs to find him fixing breakfast for Ellie. She'd had her next dose of cortisone, and the smell of burned toast filled the house. Ellie was sitting in a chair, watching "Pinwheel" on television, where a clay model dog chased a clay cat up a paper tree.

"How's Norm?" I asked.

"All right," he told me. "Now he says, 'I know it's silly, but I seem to be seeing cats.'" He launched into a description of Norm Babcock's progress, but I was inexplicably angry with him. Joe's decision to talk to me made me nervous. I would start counting on him, if he kept on that way, and if I started counting on him, I might get hurt again. I answered him monosyllabically, but it didn't slow him. He even described the breakfast items he'd checked for Norm's first meal.

Later, we took turns watching Ellie, and voting.



In spite of November sunlight, and the few remaining maple leaves, the wind was bitterly cold. The turnout at the polls promised to be light, which was bad for Laurel. I listened anxiously to the news.

The people I saw in line at the polls made me additionally nervous, and what was worse, a lot of them were people that I knew and liked. Apple-cheeked older men and women came, with the men driving up to the curb to let their wives off. Some were my neighbors, people like Christine and Norm Babcock. We'd bought their kids' school calendars and fed each others' dogs. I loved this neighborhood because the church held it together, gave it a life beyond social status and carefully manicured lawns. Now I thought of the church bulletin on Sunday, thought of Laurel, thought of Ellie, and got a stomach ache.

The only reprieve in the day came while I was voting. I stood in line with a group of people who knew one another. They chatted over my head about Kiwanis travel films. It was an innocuous conversation, but I was so tense that my hands shook.

I stopped at the women's room. Coming out, under full sail, were the couple from the Y, the richly padded woman and her gothic friend.

"Look at these sweet wool lambs the Sunday school classes made, darling," the heavy woman said, plucking the other woman along.

"Mother will be out any minute. She'll be cross

if I'm not waiting."

"Let her be cross. There's no harm in looking at lambs, is there? By the way, this church has the nicest new curate..."

I pushed open the heavy oak door and found myself facing a small, curious, squirrel-shaped face under a mat of gray hair. Definitely the mother, I thought, the famous, infamous mother. The woman was small, and her shoulders tremendously hunched. She was wearing snagged polyester pants and a fox fur jacket. In her hand was a man's razor. She was shaving her chin.

"Don't just stand there," she said. "If you're coming in, come in." She waved the razor at me. "Go on, go to the can."

I went to the can. When I came out, she was putting away the razor, and patting at a bit of soap foam.

"Startled?" she said. "My daughter never likes to see me shaving, but it's cheaper than electric needles, and nobody gives a damn if I've got stubble, anymore."

She squinted at me. "It's hell to be old," she said. "The first half of your life they tell you you're a hussy, because you're a woman. Then you get old and grow a bitty bit of hair on your chin, and ratty-ass kids start peeking at you, and laughing. If I had a razor strap, I'd strop their behinds good."

She fingered one spot where she'd knicked a bit of skin.

"How are you voting for this ward's commissioner?" she asked me.

"I voted for Laurel McKay," I said, and held my breath.

"So did I," she said. "Mind you, I don't hold with abortions. If I did, my daughter wouldn't be here voting today. A damned inconvenience, a natural born fusser she has been. But," she said, ominously, "I've never seen a man I'd trust to take the trash out. Until God gives us some new sex, I'll vote the woman every time."

She ran her hand over her chin and eyed me in parting.

"Be good," she told me. From somewhere out of my childhood the answer surfaced.

"If you can't be good, be careful."

She sniffed. "Anyone can be good, if they work hard enough," she said.

I went home to find Joe playing Crazy Eights with Ellie.

Laurel won the election by only nineteen votes.

CHAPTER 14

Laurel's win-lose-or-draw party was held at Forest's house. We left Ellie propped up on pillow playing Yahtzee with Janet Lamb.

Once inside the door a wave of noise engulfed us. Forest's friend, Thessaly, met us with champagne, and hovered, the anxious blond hostess, until we downed a glass. It wasn't the kind of furniture I like myself, lots of pecan wood, oversized mirrors, and crystal chandeliers. Thessaly was a stick thin blond who usually wore retainers. Tonight she looked poised and lovely in a Navajo sweater dress.

"So glad you could come," she said. "Forest and I are so proud of Laurel," making it sound as though they'd hatched Laurel from an egg. Across the room, I spotted Forest's ubiquitous tweed jacket. He was talking to a woman wearing an Indian Dashiki. The crowd was the usual motley election crowd mix. Thessaly's son Michael was home from Stanford. He stood near by, wearing Rebocks, an open necked dress shirt, and blue jeans, trying to impress a woman wearing a red wool suit and pearls. Neighborhood children crossed the room bearing hazardously tilting paper plates. All the food was finger food. Bite sized bits of lasagna, chicken puffs, melon balls, frosted

grapes, dinner rolls and brownies threatened to momentarily be ground underfoot.

Laurel came up to me and gave me a bearhug.

"I did it!" she said, and launched into a recount. My neighborhood, I learned, had split their vote, roughly half voting for Laurel and half for Stevenson. Midway through the rundown, she was interrupted by a reporter, and was then swirled away by the crowd.

I noticed there was a young man following in her footsteps. He made me think of the heavy set woman's description of the cleric. He looked about twenty seven, a lost lamb, young and blond.

I drank three glasses of champagne, and mingled. The people were as diverse as their dress. Forest's mother Adelaide was there with Catholic neighbors who glowed with stories about Laurel as a child protegee. There were three women lawyers, a nun, and a DSS administrator discussing blue movies. Frank was in the kitchen showing how he made tacos. Four cases of Great Western champagne were stacked on the back porch.

I went to the bathroom, which was more glass, tile and pecan wood, and talked for a while to a woman who did junk metal sculpture and taught modern dance. She went out. I looked at myself in the mirror, and swallowed. The fluorescent light made my skin look yellow, and I had great dark circles of pain and fatigue under my eyes.

"Liz, it's me, let me in." The voice at the

door was Laurel's. I let her in, and watched as she ran a comb through her hair.

"Who's the lamb?" I asked.

"He's the new assistant city attorney. Isn't he a love of a man?"

"He certainly looks like one."

She gave me a rueful smile. "No scoldings, no warnings? No saying my heart needs to be a-political?"

"No advice. But I wonder. Do you still think about Al?"

"When you were a kid, did you ever have a friend you didn't really talk to? You just sat around together and read comic books? Al was like that, and I do miss him. But not as much as I would have missed this party," she said.

"That boy out there likes you," I told her.

"Mmmm. I know it. The trouble is, he seems like a child. I keep wanting to tell him...eat your soup. Wear your coat. Speed up. Slow down."

"Oh, hurry up," a woman wailed. "I'm out here with my legs crossed."

"I'm glad you won. I really am."

"So am I," Laurel said.

Downstairs, I found Joe and started edging him toward the back door. The dining room looked out on a patio. We were near the windows and could see our reflections, wraithlike against the night, toasting us

back.

"I've given Laurel a hug," I said, "and stepped on thirteen different insteps."

"I've been kissed by more women than could fit in downtown Hudson's."

"Downtown Hudson's is closed," I told him.

"Strewth," he said. "Look at that. Isn't that Frank?"

Out on the patio stood Frank and Sally. Sally was wearing black four inch spikes and white wool dress cut down to her tailbone. Her hair had been cut short and feathered over her cheekbones. She had added a string of baroque pearls and left the ankle bracelet home.

One of the men standing next to us saw where we were looking.

"Quite a cupcake, isn't she?" he beamed. "Came with Thessaly's son. A friend of a friend of a friend."

Friend of a friend of a friend! I thought. That was my husband she was wooing! Or that's who I thought she thought he was. Or had she found out I was married to Joe? This was too confusing. I watched as Sally and Frank went into a long, slow passionate clinch--a real bottom grabber. Frank was just her height. They swayed there with the cold November wind blowing leaves around their ankles, a judicious crowd watching like judges waiting to score an Olympic event.

When she broke away from Frank, Sally saw the

group of admirers. Her eyes skimmed, unconcerned over the faces of the crowd until they caught my eyes. I know it's dubious to claim you can read an expression, but just at that moment I knew to the bottom of my female soul that she was looking for me, and daring me to stop her. It wasn't a look of malice, just a flat look saying, I am what I am. I have noticed you exist, but feel no obligation to you.

"What's wrong?" Joe said. "You feel stiff. Does your back hurt?"

"That's my husband she's got there."

"Sure it is. In that case, she's wearing my coat."

We watched as Frank took the suit jacket from his shoulders, and placed it like a cape over Sally's bare back. They walked slowly away.

No! I thought. It wasn't fair. I wasn't sure I wanted Joe in Sally's arms any more--though I didn't know why not--but she shouldn't have taken Frank instead of Joe. I'd used my dreams about Sally to convince myself I still loved Joe, and now Sally was cheating. She was ruining everything! It was all coming down to Joe and me, and an absence of Sally. Somewhere behind me, I heard Thessaly's son's voice.

"Sally and I are friends, and that's all we've been since we were thirteen. She doesn't tend to retread a romance, you see."

"But why would that gorgeous girl leave with such

a queer bloke?"

That was Forest. Slowly, slowly, then quickly, quickly go fuck yourself, Forest, I thought.

"She's hard to predict," Michael said.

"Mercurial, that's what she is. She had some story about the fellow making her mother split her sides, in a bar. That doesn't make sense, does it? Well, it might with Sally. Besides, she said, she could tell Frank's wife has the hots for some tall old geek."

"That's odd," Forest said. "I thought Frank's wife liked women now."

I walked with Joe to the car, still clutching my champagne glass. My feet hurt, my back hurt. Poor fantasies, I thought.

Driving home, Joe kept up a mindless conversation. No wonder they say only shallow streams babble, I thought. I wanted to ask Joe if he wished he were Frank now...wished his hands had clung to Sally's heart-shaped bottom, wished his hands were sliding the pearls from around her neck. I looked hard at the tall old geek Sally said I loved.

"The girl Frank was with looked familiar," Joe said brightly.

"She what? Looked familiar? That's Connie's daughter," I stuttered. "You've seen her in Connie's Bar!"

"I guess I never really noticed her," Joe said.

He'd never really noticed her! He'd never really

noticed? What else hadn't he noticed, this whole past year? I could hear my mother's counsel of noble restraint and understanding, but my impulses were way beyond me now. To hell with noble restraint! I felt my wrist jerk, automatic as a knee struck with a rubber mallet, and I tossed my remaining champagne squarely into Joe's face. Drops of Great Western beaded in his eyebrows. How could he be so utterly blind! He hadn't noticed her?

"Just what was that about?" He pulled to the curb, blinking. I stared at him. He wasn't pretending disinterest, I could tell.

"How could you ignore someone like that! What are you, a zombie? Don't you notice anyone or anything, anymore? I'm sick of this, do you hear me? I'm sick of you never talking to me, I'm sick of you always sleeping. I hate it when you say you'll do something, and then you don't!"

"I tried talking to you this afternoon, and you wouldn't answer me."

He fished out the hem of his shirt and daubed at his face. I could still see bubbles inside each tiny drop of champagne.

"I tried to talk to you about Norm Babcock," he told me. "I told you tomorrow they're going to try him on a bedpan."

"Joe, I said, "Joe, I think you're schizophrenic!

Half the time you don't talk at all. Then you're off on a roll, discussing urine output. You're driving me nuts,

Joe, do you hear me? Driving me fucking nuts!"

He ran a hand over his now dry face.

"Say something about your feelings," I said. "Go on, I dare you. Talk about your feelings! Say anything at all."

"I had an affair," he said, "when I was in Lapeer."

Snow flurried against the window.

Say anything, I thought.

"Who was it?" I asked.

"A woman named Charlene. Elliot's daughter."

"How long?"

"Once. Only once. The night before I started home."

The phone had rung and rung for a long time, I remembered. I didn't say anything. I sat there, feeling as though I'd bought Joe a marvelous present, and found out he had returned it for a K-Mart bowling ball.

Except that I had never given him the present. All I had really done was to window shop.

We went home, paid Janet, and checked on Ellie.

Joe locked up. I slid out of my high heels and eased my nylons off. I sat on my edge of the bed, the silk

feel of my dress cool beneath my thighs. I took off the oversized earrings that had been pulling at my ears.

Joe took off his tie, trousers and suitcoat. I noticed he had mustard from the party on his tie. He sat on his edge of the bed and picked at his toenails. I massaged my earlobes. Outside, the snow scoured against the window pane.

"It isn't just a joke," I said. "You know, the farmer's daughter? It's pushing it, Joe, you have to admit."

"It isn't a joke," he said.

"Is that why you thought Elliot might not extend your contract? He's ticked with you for tumbling his daughter in the hay?"

"No. No," Joe said. "I think he wanted what happened to happen. He and I went to see her, in The Sound of Music, and after that he kept talking about Charlene. How unhappy she's been since her divorce. How much talent she has. The voice lessons she's taken, and the prizes she used to win. He took me to see her sing, and he sent me to fix her plumbing."

"Her plumbing."

"Her hot tub plumbing." Joe said.

"There wasn't much wrong except a circuit breaker Charlene had forgotten to trip."

Of course she had, I thought.

"That last week, Elliot kept telling me I was

like a son to him. He'd cuff my shoulder and say he liked a hard-working man."

"It sounds disgusting," I said. "I think you've committed incest."

"I drove to her house," Joe continued. "It's not much of a house, though it's in a new suburb. It's got one of those porticos that are too big for the design...."

"I'm not interested in designing houses."

Joe looked woebegone. "Charlene has black hair," he told me. "Sort of white streaked. Frosted. She made me think of Laurel, but with more, um, fat."

I had a feeling I knew where the fat was.

"I fixed the tub. She fixed me a drink." Joe rubbed his jawline, recollecting. "Then she put her arm around me, and said she was glad I was there, and that she was lonely. I remembered you saying it was hard for older women, alone."

"It is for some women," I allowed.

"At first, I thought she was shy," he said. "She's not pretty, but she's not ugly. We ended up in the hot tub with the spouts gushing and steam as thick as fog."

"It doesn't sound like a fate worse than death," I told him coldly.

"It wasn't," he admitted, "but I didn't like it much."

"Poor man," I said.

"It started out alright," he sighed. "I liked

the hot tub. They sure relax tight muscles, Liz. Getting one of those would really help your back. The problem is, screwing in a hot tub isn't easy. I think it would take some practice, if you're going to do it right."

Practicing sounded fine to me. All those bubbles, and the water swirling.

"Her breasts floated on the bubbles," he remembered. "They made me think of plane pontoons."

"Will you tell me what happened?" I asked him.

"First we just sort of slopped around. Then she started to get determined. Did you know," he asked somberly, "oral sex is hard in a hot tub?"

"I hadn't thought about it much," I admitted.

"There wasn't any rim to sit on," he complained. "A rim would have made it easier. Every now and then she'd duck under the water, play pearl diver, and pop back up."

I eyed him, fascinated.

"You didn't like it?"

"No dependable timing," he said. "It made me nervous. I was afraid she'd want me to reciprocate."

"Then what?"

"She dried me off and we went up to her bedroom. She wanted me to wear a rubber."

"But you had a vasectomy," I reminded him.

"You think I didn't tell her? She said she was afraid of AIDS, and men lie about things like that. She had this packet of immense French Ticklers, big old

rose-colored creepy crawlies." He shuddered. "There I was, bobbing over her like a demented caterpillar, about to ah, engage, when I noticed the way she smelled."

"Um," I said.

"She'd just used a douche or something. And she smelled like Mr. Bubble. She made me think of Ellie, and you."

"And?"

"I ran out on her."

"You didn't do it?"

"No," he said. "I didn't. But I would have. If the hot tub had had a ledge. If she'd let me, without a rubber. If she hadn't smelled like Ellie does when she's clean and ready for bed...and then coming home and finding Ellie was so damn sick...."

Men ought to learn to cry, I thought. Like screwing in a hot tub, it takes practice if you want to do it well.

"Then I had trouble on the way home," he continued, swallowing hard.

"Driving home."

"That's right. I'd just grabbed my clothes and run out the door with my coat and my shoes on. No socks. And I still had that thing. I peeled it off in the car. I meant to throw it out the window, but it sort of poinged off the dashboard and landed out of reach. I stopped to get dressed at that rest stop where they've had trouble

with gays lately. And I...and I...."

"You got stopped by the police."

He nodded.

"Thank God no one else was there...just me and the cop. I tried to tell him I just wanted a place to put my clothes on, and he said, good, because that's all he'd let me do. I was terrified he'd charge me with indecent exposure, or worse...and when he looked into the car, there was the rubber. I got dressed somehow, but I lost both socks, and that pair was almost new."

"You didn't have an affair," I said.

"I don't know if I did or didn't. I don't know if I have a job or not. God only knows what Charlene will tell Elliot. Are you angry?"

"I don't if I am or not," I said. "Let's go to bed."

"I may never get it up again," he told me. "I tried to masturbate the first morning I was home."

"Nothing happened?"

"Absolutely nothing."

I reached over and fondled him through his shorts. The material was soft, the way cotton gets from a lot of washing. I would figure out how I felt later.

It was obvious Joe was going to recuperate.

After Joe turned on his side in sleep, I stayed awake, thinking we're all held hostage by our chemistry...allergies, immunities, musks, hormones. We're

each of us like the surface tension of a river. The shape of our private lives flickers below the surface. Our needs surge, rise and dive like dolphins: would that they could sport in us, swimming painlessly.

CHAPTER 15

Joe recovered. Ellie recovered. I recovered.
The business didn't recover. It went bankrupt
instead.

Joe got a letter from Elliot, thanking him for services rendered. It sounded as though Joe had been strained like boiling fat. Without the likelihood of a spring construction contract, the bank couldn't see its way clear to carry us any longer, and Wendall's faithful mudflecked machines were sold to pay the debt.

Frank took us out to dinner when the firm officially folded. We drove to Detroit and he fed us dinner at the London Chop House. Frank had pork tenderloin, Joe had prime rib, I had lobster Newburg, and we all drank cold duck. The waiter was an absolute lamb, and I pictured him with Sally, then wondered if Frank thought of Sally any more.

"What happened to the Great Romance?" I got up the nerve to ask Frank.

"Ah, yes, whatever happened to romance?"

"You're dodging the question," Joe contributed for me.

Frank eyed his mint jelly, and pushed it toward his pork tenderloin with his knife.

"It was great," he said dreamily. "Like a terrific dinner...like this pork tenderloin."

We stared at him, astounded, and he had the grace to blush.

"You can't describe the nuances of some things," he muttered. "It was nice. Quite nice. Maybe a little lonely. I almost wished I had someone I knew to share it with."

"How did she pick you up?" I asked him, half afraid she'd used my name.

"She just marched over to me, and said, 'My feet hurt. Let's go some place so I can take off these bloody clothes.'"

"You must have felt incredibly macho," I said. "Forest was so jealous his tweed coat turned sloth green."

"To tell the truth," he said. "I felt like a failure."

"Why?"

"I dunno, Liz," he said, poking a pomme de terre frite with his fork. "I just kept thinking, if this woman knew I was having my hospital privileges suspended for six months, she'd be out of bed, gone like a buff-breasted Canada goose. She made me so nervous I could hardly function. Not," he added severely, "to say that I did not function. Fortunately, lust overrode introspection, allowing me a unique, yes, unique, learning experience. Pass the blue cheese."

"Will you see her again?" I asked.

"Don't know. I doubt it. She got very irrational when I said I was divorced."

I looked at Joe while I passed the blue cheese dressing. I doubted Sally cared about Frank's hospital privileges, but for some reason, he had believed she would. I wondered if Joe would have felt like a failure, with Sally. That was something Joe never seemed to me, but now that I thought about it, my favorite people are failures. Laurel seems invulnerable, but I know how frightened she was that she would lose that election. And people have told her she is marked in this state; she'll never be a candidate for higher office. If she'd been coldblooded and clearheaded about it, she would have checked the questions "yes" and won the landslide she deserved. She couldn't do it, any more than Frank could leave a sixteen-year-old girl whose pain he could relieve. Any more than Joe could have left Wendall to founder without him, or I could have silkscreened cards the year Ellie was so ill. Maybe failures have more fun in bed with other failures. I thought about it while I dabbed a potato with sour cream.

I also thought about the counsel of Bill Fry, the banker who had steered us with relative safety through the shoals of bankruptcy.

"It's a pity Wendall was so set in the way he did business," he told Joe. "People know what happened, and you won't have trouble finding work in this town."

Within a week, Joe had a job as a construction foreman. He doesn't like the work but it's tiding us over. He's eloquent and funny when he's complaining; I think he'll eventually start a business of his own.

Norm Babcock came home from the hospital in December. He has one of those lightweight mechanized wheelchairs, and a customized van. Neighbors keep the sidewalks clear for him, and take turns shoveling his drive. The curbs in this neighborhood are wheelchair access, and worth every cent.

"You know," Norm said to me, "I had crazy dreams after that operation. I can just remember bits of what I said to you and Joe."

"Sometimes," I said, "It was hard to understand you. You talked a lot about a big ginger cat."

He looked relieved, and I watched him wheel himself manually up the block. There was a light drift of snow over the leaves now. He hit an incline and the chair turned on with a smooth, bumblebee buzz.

I watched him go with a great deal of fondness. I think taking care of Norm Babcock was what saved Joe, finally. When Wendall was in the coma, Joe had spent hours with him, holding the hand that did not move, waiting to make some small joke, daubing spittle from the mouth that would not respond. Joe and Wendall had vehemently disagreed, that last year, about the business; Wendall's anger had been followed by Joe's impotence to help and his

withdrawal from us all. Laurel, who fancies herself an analyst, says people grieve hardest when the parent lost does not approve, and now, never will. I hadn't understood, but I had instinctively wanted something to give Joe's heart the galvanizing shock I could not give. Maybe Charlene's bobbing breasts started the healing process; maybe losing the firm was the best thing for Joe. Helping Norm let Joe constructively relive his father's illness, and I'll never know if a night with Sally would have done as well.

Ellie's swollen joints gradually subsided. She has not gotten strep. She has a new friend who says "shitty" all the time.

Laurel is getting along with the Lamb, though I think he bores her. She and Forest get along better. Sometimes I think she still misses Al, but she wouldn't change her life.

With Ellie better, I am working again. Laurel has commissioned me to do a mural for her office, anything, she says that represents daily life in this town. The wall is huge and I've been sketching, sketching, sketching, but so far I have no idea what I'm going to do.

My back is better. After the election, I went to a rheumatologist Frank suggested, and admitted Laurel's pills had been keeping me sane. Doctor Najuri has soft jowls and thick trifocals. He eyed me sadly under lank graying hair.

"What does this tell us?" he asked. "The important thing it tells us. The codine says to us that your body wants no more pain."

Oh, Lord, I thought. A medical Simple Simon.

Majuri continued. "Aspirin does not work in all cases. Some people excel, their kidneys excel at excreting Aspirin. Sometimes Aspirin is the drug of choice. Sometimes, not."

He suggested a drug athletes use to reduce inflammation.

"What about side effects?" I could already hear my friends' warning voices. Majuri pointed to a poster of a three-year-old child suffering from rheumatoid arthritis.

"Some individuals have adverse reactions. So we monitor your blood, yes?" He peered at me. "In my practice, I have learned that pain also causes adverse side effects. People drink too much, despair too much, and give up on living. Try what I suggest," he said. "Try it for two weeks."

I stopped spitting up blood from taking too much Aspirin. The ringing in my ears stopped, and the pain stopped, most of the time. Sometimes I still use Tylenol with codine, but the use is occasional, and I own my life again.

Once I felt better, I lost the urge to send Joe packing. I know I could survive without him now, as a parent, if I had to; it wouldn't be easy but it no longer

sounds impossible. Earning a living sounds hard, but not impossible, either. And once I knew Joe could leave, I believed he wanted to stay. The house is littered with drawings for his spring project; he is designing the hot tub he's going to build. There are days when we quarrel, but there are days when we are happy. There even are days when we are still in love.

I did see Sally once after she moved to Ann Arbor. Frank has been dating a redhead named Camelia, a big-boned Boston Celtics fan with an engineering degree. The bars we go to with them are chosen for projection T.V. screens. We'd been watching a Pistons game at Frank's apartment, and Frank and Joe were in the kitchen, scrounging for beer, when the camera unexpectedly panned in on Sally. She was with a very collegiate group of students sporting bright wool scarves, sweaters, and fraternity pins. She was looking away from the camera, which lingered over her cheekbones and the shine of her hair.

I thought she looked a little sad, a little distant. She did not look as though the game interested her at all.

I felt a sudden surge of protective instincts.

Run. Run away, I thought. Find your ankle bracelet. You were a goddess, in Connie's Bar and Grill.

She turned, and seemed to look right at the camera, which meant she seemed to look right at me.

I will do, the look said, what I choose to do.

The crowd noise was mounting.

"Enough tit shots," Camilia said. "Come on, get back to the game."

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