DANCING WITH ST. JOHN THE DIVINE AND OTHER STORIES

By

Noel Anne Seif

A THESIS

Submitted To
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF CREATIVE WRITING

Department of English

1993

ABSTRACT

DANCING WITH ST. JOHN THE DIVINE
AND OTHER STORIES

By

Noel Anne Seif

This collection explores the complex web of family relationships, those between father and daughter, husband and wife, mother and daughter, and father and son. Some are narrative pieces in which the important action of the story has taken place long ago and is being remembered through the long lens of memory by a narrator much older than when the events first took place. Others take place in the immediate past when the events are still fresh and full in the narrator's mind. There is Peach, a gracious middle-aged southern belle who has gone mad and Malina, a Russian piano teacher who believes her sister's spirit lives in the body of her favorite pet canary to name a few of the collection's unusual and interesting characters. In each story, the narrator confronts significant, personal truths which, in delicate, simple, interior ways, change his or her life forever.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ANTHEM

She lay in the dark, listening to the soft thuds from downstairs, closet doors being opened and closed, drawers being searched and slammed shut and the footfalls of heavy boots across the kitchen linoleum. Her husband was taking her son hunting for the first time on opening day and downstairs while they thought she slept, they were making ready. She did not want this. It was bad enough that her husband wanted to go, sat in his chair in front of the television days before, cleaning his rifle, counting his cartridges, cleaning underneath his fingernails with his hunting knife, humming a little. She refused on principle to join in any of the preparations. She would not cook for their expeditions, she would not wash their garish neon orange hunting clothes, she would not look for misplaced articles like compass or canteen or deer license. This year her son,

Jamie, had said he wanted to go. He told her this months before, at the end of August, when the leaves were still green on the trees, and the heat unbearably humid. Deer season then seemed so far away and she thought she still had time to talk him out of it. But she was not successful. Let me see for myself, he had said, when she spoke of the absence of true sport, when she spoke of the danger, when she spoke of the gore. Are you ready for this, she asked him. I mean you have to gut the thing out, use your hands to take out things like the intestines, the heart. Can you handle that? Let me just see for myself, he repeated sourly, not looking at her. Her husband had said, Let the boy go for Christ's sake, he's old enough.

She and her husband, Joe, had had many arguments about Jamie. She resented how Joe always seemed to take the opposite view from hers, always seemed to be sticking up for the boy and interfering when he had no right to. Jamie wasn't his son but hers from a previous marriage, and in the beginning he had told her he didn't want to get involved on the discipline end of things, that he was the newcomer and thought it best if he stayed in the background. The problem was he wasn't staying in the background anymore and he seemed possessive of the boy in a way that made her feel jealous, like she always had to insert herself between them if she wanted to feel part of things.

But it was more than that. Even Joe had noticed it. It had started with dreams and fitful sleep. One night she awoke to find Joe shaking her.

"Hey," he said, looking at her funny, "who did you want to leave, who

were you trying to push out of the way?"

"What?" she said, startled to see Joe's face so close to hers. He had switched on the light, but the room still had a pooling darkness to it, in the corners and at the edges, like her dream had had.

"You were yelling in your sleep. You must've been having a nightmare," he said, sitting up on his elbow, staring at her.

"I must've been," she agreed, "but I don't remember any of it. Except it was dark. Very dark." As a child her nightmares were always dark; that's how she always knew if she had had one because the dark feeling stayed with her long after the particulars of the dream had faded. Her mother called them night terrors and told her, when she came to stand outside her parents' door pleading for permission to climb into bed with them, to say prayers and to think happy thoughts.

"Why don't you lay on me until you fall back asleep," Joe suggested, leaning over to switch off the light.

Another time she woke up suddenly and saw a sliver of yellow light under the door. She saw nothing else in the inky blackness, just this sliver of light and sounds like someone was moving something heavy and she was gripped with such an inexplicable and sudden fear that she gasped. It was only Joe, staying up late. She knew, though, where that came from. Not then but the next day she remembered that that came from her childhood when her father came home late, turned on all the lights, kicked at things, woke their mother up and demanded

that she cook for him. And when she was sick or was working nights, he came after her and her sister.

Two days before opening day, Joe, in that musing way he had of bringing up unpleasant things, said to her, "What's it about opening day that's got you so riled up?"

"What do you mean, riled up?" she demanded.

"We've been doing fine, and then when Jamie and I start making plans to go hunting together, you turn cold and distant like you feel threatened about something. And if I know you, you're boiling inside so talk to me."

"There's nothing to talk about. You know how I feel about hunting and that's never been anything I've wanted for Jamie. I've never kept that from you." Talking about it suddenly made her feel sad, resigned to the futility of it all.

"So it's about Jamie, is it," Joe said. "The boy becoming a man and wanting to do manly things and the mother still wanting him to be a boy. That's it, isn't it?" He had that satisfied look on his face like he had realized something important.

She wanted to hit him, to wipe that look off his face. He enjoyed doing that, probing, analyzing, making tidy clinical conclusions about everything. As if life was really like that, neat and tidy, and nothing was obscure or unknowable. "Go to hell," she said angrily, and she imagined as she left the room that he was already giving himself a congratulatory pat on the back for

having scored a bull's eye.

But he was wrong, partly at least, although she couldn't say why.

When she heard the car start up, she got out of bed and went to the window. Jamie was helping Joe load some supplies into the trunk of the car. She watched them bend over together, their heads almost touching as if in some sort of ritualistic prayer. Next to Joe, Jamie looked smaller, more boyish than she could remember him seeming in a long time. She wondered if he would ever seem manly to her, ever completely grown up. She watched them until they got in the car and left, their taillights disappearing beyond the bend in the driveway. Then she went back to bed.

All morning long the hills around her rang out with the sound of gunshot. She was working in the laundry room when she heard a volley of shots at midmorning. Joe had said that they would be hunting over in the state game area across the river from their house. The shots seemed to be coming from that direction, and she rushed to the window. There was nothing to see except the naked November trees and an occasional wash of weak sunshine between heavy pewter clouds. Below, the river snaked around the bottom of the hill, the dull steel color of dirty dishwater. She wondered what she would do if a hunter came up over the back hill, pursuing a deer. Scream at him from the safety of her house, she thought, and order him off their land. After a while she gave up trying to work and drove into town to do some errands. When she returned, Jamie and her husband were sitting at the kitchen table, eating lunch. They wore

their orange hunting outfits and their heavy boots; their rifles lay side by side on the family room floor. Perhaps it was the rifles laying there or the foreign orange color of their outfits, but she felt immediately like an intruder.

"See anything?" she asked, taking off her coat.

"Joe saw a buck with an eight point rack, but he couldn't get a shot off. He was too far away." There was eagerness in Jamie's voice and pride, just short of boasting.

"Sounds like you're enjoying it so far," she said.

"He's quite the scout. He found tracks that I didn't see and he helped make a blind," Joe offered.

She ignored him. "Just be careful," she said to Jamie.

Her husband got up and followed her into the living room. She would not look at him. Even from where he stood, she could smell the outdoors on him, the sky, the cold air, the trees. She remembered that smell from her father. The only time he smelled good like that was when he was hunting. The rest of the time he smelled of cigarettes and bars.

"Don't ruin it for Jamie," Joe said.

"I'm trying not to."

"Try harder."

"Screw you."

After lunch the two of them decided to hunt down by the river on their side just beyond their property line. There were too many hunters on the state

land and they were hoping for better luck in a more secluded area. After they had gone, she sat down with a magazine, but couldn't read. Her father had been a hunter, fancied himself a good one, too, but the real attraction for him had not been the act of hunting so much as the drinking. She remembered how her mother brought home grocery bags full of pints of Kentucky whiskey, the good stuff, real smooth her father crooned and how he distributed them so widely among all his gear. So that he would never be far from a snort, never run out, never become desperate. Even as a child she had known this. He prided himself in his Remington thirty aught six, sat and polished it at the kitchen table with a clean chamois and her mother's furniture polish, made her and her sister for some perverse reason she never understood, touch the cold metal barrel. Days before he was to leave on his hunting trips, he would have the house in an uproar while he scrambled to get ready. He couldn't find socks, long underwear, his whale bone hunting knife, his hat with the earmuffs. It was everyone's fault. He yelled and threw things and then, he was gone. Peace and quiet returned, her mother's clenched jaw expression softened, her sister quit biting her nails.

Her father, she remembered, never did get a deer that way. Instead he drunkenly mowed one down with his car and the state police allowed him to take the carcass home. (Of course he said that his wife was driving. No sense in adding a ticket to the cost of having the car repaired.) She and her sister watched him from the kitchen windows as he gutted it out. The yard light was on and they could see him back behind the swingset on his knees beside it while

he worked. Steam rose in the air in front of him and she had thought, It's warm, the deer is warm inside and then her father's hands came up bloody and full of something dark and dripping and she had turned away. When he was finished, he hung the deer from a tree and she had rushed at him when he came inside and said, Isn't it enough that he's dead? Why do you have to hang him too? Her father, astonished at her outburst, looked at her blankly. Why, that's how you get the blood out, he said. He didn't hunt much after that. The venison sat in their freezer for several years, mostly uneaten. Her mother tried to cook the roasts but the taste, wild and sinewy which left a coating like tallow on the roof of the mouth, was foreign, repulsive. She helped her mother load the frozen blocks of meat into the garbage can on trash day. They clunked together like stones at the bottom. Don't think about it, her mother said, to comfort her. That was her mother's personal anthem, her solution to all the troubles in the world, hers and everyone else's. She did what her mother said, then and other times. Sometimes it worked.

She was dozing later in the afternoon when she woke up to the sound of pounding feet along the side of the house. She was just sitting up when Jamie came in panting, his face flushed and sweating, his eyes sharp with purpose.

"I've got one, but it's wounded bad. She's out on the back hill, but I've got to get me some rope."

"Where's Joe?" she asked, feeling the prickly sensation of fear start at the back of her neck.

"He's tracking a buck. He said he'll be back up as soon as he could."

She heard him downstairs flinging open cupboards doors, rummaging inside. He seemed to be gone a long time. "Jamie," she called to him from the top of the steps. "Jamie, you can't leave it there. It's suffering, you've got to take care of it."

"I know, I know," Jamie called back, but he did not come up right away.

She found him sitting on a folding chair, the ones they stored for company. He sat with his elbows on his knees, his hands clasped together with his mouth to his knuckles.

"I'm resting," he said when she approached, but he did not look up.

She struggled to choose her words carefully. Finally she said, "Why don't you show me where it is? Then you can decide what you want to do."

The doe was down on all fours when they came up, quietly, behind it. It was bleeding from a wound in the shoulder and snorting, its breath steaming from flared nostrils. Its closed eyes were running a little at the corners. Tears, she thought. She saw black pools of blood in the dried leaves, a steady stream from the angry tear in its side. It opened its eyes and looked at them, beautiful black eyes, she thought, large, soft, beautiful eyes. Beside her Jamie moved from one foot to the other, cradling his rifle in the crook of his arm.

"Shoot it, Jamie," she said softly and then louder, more sternly, "shoot it."

Jamie brought the rifle barrel to the doe's head and rested it right behind its eye and at the moment he did that, she suddenly saw her mother laying there,

her mother prostrate before her father where he had knocked her down, the rifle barrel he held jerking from her temple into the black curls of her hair and back again while he labored drunkenly to say something. The rifle blast sent her reeling. She saw her father falling backwards, the rifle flash upward toward the ceiling, her mother cover her head with her arms while all around them the room rocked with the sound of thunder.

"Mother?" Jamie was saying. "Are you all right?"

"Yes," she said, "yes."

She looked up into the tops of the trees, blinked several times and took a deep breath. The sun shown weakly through the clouds. She could smell snow in the air and hear the geese honking as they flew over on their way to the river. Winter seemed to be gathering in around her like a woman gathering her long skirts. Jamie didn't need her any more. She thought she'd head home.

BECAUSE IT WASN'T LOVE

When Althea was dying, she was on a respirator and couldn't talk. Still with pad and pen she scribbled to Mandy, NOW YOU CAN LAY THE SECRET TO REST. FINALLY.

Mandy looked at her quizzically, stepped back to let the nurse pass and asked, "Secret? What secret?"

Althea wrote, REMEMBER? ME & BERTRAM? SUMMER, 1958?

Mandy asked, "Who is Bertram?" She had no idea what her stepmother was referring to. She thought that maybe she wasn't thinking clearly which was understandable given the circumstances.

Althea wrote back, LOVER, and thumped her chest a few times.

"Oh," Mandy said. Now she remembered and she nodded her head

vigorously.

Satisfied, Althea lay back and closed her eyes, leaving Mandy to her memories.

She had been thirteen or fourteen then, that summer of her stepmother's lover, and she and Althea were quietly at war. That was the summer she came fully to the realization that her mother was truly gone, not off on some trip and coming back soon as she pretended, that her father had buried a part of his life and was wanting something new. The new part was Althea who was a good deal younger than her mother had been, flashy in the way she dressed where her mother had been dull, outgoing and warm in a way her mother had been reserved and she had other things her mother didn't, a mole and dimples that gave her the feeling of ripe fruit ready for plucking. Later she came to see that her father's attraction for her was physical while Althea's attraction for her father was not as easily discernible. Perhaps it had been money as town gossip suggested although her father did not have a lot of money. What he did have was part ownership in a hardware store and a forty-acre apple orchard, but perhaps that was the same thing.

That summer she had seen a gray truck parked in the orchard driveway several times when she had been returning home, but it was always gone when she went outside to look for it. She had never heard it drive away and she had come to think of it as a ghost truck which gave her both a strange thrill and sense of alarm.

So the man's name was Bertram, the man she saw with her stepmother the day she surprised them in the living room. She had heard them before she found them, murmurs and little gasps of pleasure from behind the partially closed door, but the sounds didn't register with her as being anything more than slightly unusual. She first noticed the bare chested man, the sheen of his skin in the low light (the shades had been pulled against the glare of the afternoon sun) and then Althea's white slip clinging to her thighs and the two of them wrapped in a ferocious embrace with their lips locked together and she remembered thinking, That is not my father. Althea saw her first and jerked away and then the man turned to her and asked Althea who she was. Althea had spat out her name and ordered her into the kitchen.

There dressed in her bathrobe, Althea lit a cigarette at the stove and paced. "You've been spying on me," she hissed. "You little minx."

"Spying?" she said. "Mrs. Southwick came home early. What was I supposed to do? Knock before I entered my own house?"

"Don't get sassy with me, young lady," she said. "Well, it's not what you think. Nothing happened. Nothing at all." She turned and walked over to the windows.

"It doesn't matter what I think," Mandy said. "What will father think?"

Althea whirled around and came at her, her face distorted and flushed with rage, her fist poised for striking. Mandy ran out the kitchen door and down the steps, scrabbling up the nearby Chinese elm and she continued to

climb further and further up until she knew she was safe. Althea stepped outside long enough to see where she went and then slammed the door on her way back in, swearing vehemently.

It was a warm day in June and from her perch she could see the garden and the tops of the apple trees a little farther off and a gray truck parked in the orchard driveway. She waited for the man to appear which he did a few minutes later. He walked to his truck, leisurely, she thought, and she watched him climb in and drive away. The waxy green leaves stirred in the breeze and she rubbed the dried blood off her shins where she had scraped them climbing up. After a time, Althea came back again. This time she was dressed in a long skirt and blouse. She walked over to the tree and peered up.

"Come down now, Mandy," Althea said.

"No, I won't," she said. "Not until father comes home."

"Don't be silly," she said. "It'll be dark then."

"You'll hit me," she said.

"I wasn't really going to hit you. I was just angry, that's all."

"I think I'll wait just the same," Mandy said.

"Suit yourself. You'll get hungry," she reminded her and she began walking away. She stopped and came back.

"If you'll come down," she said in a tone so soft Mandy almost couldn't hear, "we can talk and I think we can come to an understanding."

"What kind of an understanding?" she asked, moving down a branch so

she could hear better.

"Come into the house and we'll talk about it," she said.

"I'll be down in a little while," Mandy said, and it gave her great satisfaction to watch her walk slowly back to the house, imagining her uncertainty, perhaps even her fear.

"Don't wait too long," she warned, turning back once again, but it was a limp, heartless display of authority.

On towards dark, Althea brought out her supper on a plate and left it on the stairs. "Please come down before your father gets home," she pleaded. "He can't know about this."

In the kitchen they squared off again, but this time she felt more secure.

"What do you want for this?" Althea asked, this being, Mandy was sure, her silence, her complicity.

"I don't know," she said. She hadn't given it much thought. "Everything."

Althea took a deep breath. "Anything that's within my power, it's yours."

"Just don't expect me to love you," she said, surprising herself at what had come unbidden and unrehearsed off her tongue.

Over the years while their relationship had grown into an uneasy friendship, her relationship with her father was always marked with guilt. Had she done the right thing? Would her father have wanted to know? Should she

have been the one to tell him? She had asked him one day if he was happy. They were closing the store together one Saturday and had just come in from cranking the awnings down from over the big display windows out front. Her father was cleaning out the register and shoving the cash into a cloth bag from the bank. He straightened up at her question.

"Happy? Well, I guess I am at that. Why do you ask?"

"I was just wondering," she said.

"Oh, I get it," he said. "You're thinking about your mother and wondering if I'm as happy with Althea as I was with her. Is that it?"

"Not exactly," she said.

"Or if I've gotten over your mother," he continued.

She shrugged.

He turned and looked her kindly in the face. "Anyone who has lost someone like I have has to find his own way again. My way now is with Althea. She's good for me. She makes me laugh."

She had been prepared to tell him. Instead she said, "That's great, Dad."

When she was older, her father began talking to her about Althea's lack of money sense, but that was mostly when he wasn't feeling well, when his spirits were down. Then, before he died, he had discussed his will with her, starting right off complaining about Althea .

"She's never had a head for money," he fumed. "She's never had to work for a dime. A year after I'm gone, she'll have frittered away everything

I've given her."

"So what are you saying, Dad? That you don't want to leave her anything, that she doesn't deserve it?" She considered then that he was soliciting her support and approval for just such a plan or at least a validation of his feelings, but she wouldn't give it.

"No, I'm not saying that. She does deserve something."

"She's been a good wife, a good mother, you've had a good life together, haven't you?" She looked at him intently, but he turned away. "Am I missing something here," she continued, "something you're not telling me?"

"You're right. She's been everything you've said," but the note in his voice was still sour. "I'm afraid, though, I haven't been the good husband, I haven't always been faithful." His voice trailed off.

"What?" Her voice was more shrill than she intended. "To Althea?"

Her father nodded, still looking off.

"Have you told her, does she know?"

He shook his head.

"Why?"

"I don't know. They just happened. I didn't plan them. It's not like I thought about them. I didn't go looking for them if that's what you think. These were ladies who came to me."

As if that made it somehow more acceptable. "And mother? Were you faithful to her?"

He didn't, wouldn't answer her.

After he had died, she found a note. Forgive me, she read. I didn't mean to hurt anyone, not you, not Althea, not your mother. It always seemed okay at the time because it wasn't love. But I loved your mother, I loved Althea, I love you. She still had the note, still carried it around in her billfold behind the school pictures of her son, because it comforted her to take it out sometimes and read it. She thought about showing it to Althea but always thought better of it. She didn't know how to broach the subject after all this time and she wasn't sure she wanted to see Althea's reaction.

She had the note in her hand, though, when Althea woke up.

"Here," she said. "Read this," and she smiled at Althea to reassure her. "I found it after Dad died."

Althea read it and then scratched furiously on her pad. I DIDN'T WANT TO BE THE ONE TO TELL YOU.

"You knew?" Mandy asked in disbelief.

SUSPECTED, Althea wrote back. ON & OFF THRU THE YEARS.

"How sad," Mandy said.

IT'S OKAY. IT'S OVER & DONE WITH, Althea wrote back.

Mandy sat staring out the window for a long time. Althea, to get her attention, had to tap on her hospital tray with her pen. They played tick-tack-toe and hangman until Althea grew tired and had to stop. For the next several days Althea had other messages for her, that she used to hide the cashews when

Mandy came over and that she always cheated at cards. Mandy laughed a lot about that. At her death she had a note for Mandy too. THIS IS LOVE, she had written in letters that filled half the page and she had drawn a heart with an arrow through it.

BIRD ON A LEASH

He and Carla had gone into the bedroom that afternoon, but he could tell by the way she picked at the buttons of her blouse, avoiding his eyes that she wasn't eager to make love. It's like an obligation, Michael, she said to him one day, not like before. Before it had been sacramental, she said when he pressed her to explain, spiritual, meaningful and then she shrugged her shoulders and turned away. He had not known that anything was wrong; her words stunned him like a slap in the face. When he thought about it, it was an easy charge for him to dismiss because she was always doing that, trying to make something profound out of the ordinary, as if the common every day things weren't good enough for her and had to be jazzed up. Still, her words lingered, and that day as he went to draw the blinds, he thought oddly enough

of the priest's vestaments worn during Mass, the chasuble and the alb, and the smell of incense at Benediction, dim memories of his days as an altar boy at St. Adalbert's. He took a last look out into the courtyard before he drew the blinds closed completely and that was when he saw the woman.

She was stooped and she moved about slowly as if in pain. She was wearing a black shawl pulled so far out over her head that her eyes were hidden in shadow, only her mouth pinched closed like a fist and a chin white and pointed were visible. He saw movement at her feet, an orange flutter, and noticed for the first time the canary walking on the ground beside her. The bird wore what looked to be a little collar and was attached by a long piece of string to the woman's wrist.

Incredulous, he turned to Carla. "Take a look at this."

Carla came up behind him and peered over his shoulder. "What?"

"Look at the bird," he said.

"Where?" She moved beside him for a better look.

"It's just like a dog. I've never seen anything like it."

"Oh, that's disgusting," Carla said, turning away. "Walking a bird like a dog. How cruel."

"Cruel?" he countered. "How is that cruel? She's not hurting him."

"It could choke to death like that. A bird is meant to fly."

"Who says it can't fly?" he asked, bewildered. He had not expected this from her. He thought she would be just as amazed as he was.

In a few moments he heard shrieking and then a young boy and girl came out into the open. They danced a wide circle around the woman, every now and again stomping their feet at the bird. The bird flew a little away from them, but its leash prevented it from going far. The woman said something, raised her arm as if to strike them, and the girl bounded away. The boy flinched but stood his ground.

"Witch!" the girl began chanting. "Witch!" She began picking up pebbles off the ground and throwing them.

He wrapped at the window. "Leave her alone," he shouted. "She's not harming anyone. Those little shits," he said, turning to Carla. "Do you believe that?"

"You should go after them," she said.

Once outside he found that the old woman and her bird had disappeared. The children saw him coming and scampered over to the side of the building, eyeing him warily. The boy stared up at him with smooth brown eyes the color of chocolates. The little girl played with her blond braids and looked away. They wore pressed white shirts and socks with sandals, the boy in trousers and the girl in a pinafore.

"What has that woman ever done to you?" he demanded.

"She's a witch!" the girl said in a sing-song voice.

"She's so mean," the boy added.

"What does she do that's so mean?" he asked again. For the most part,

children annoyed him. His nieces and nephews he tolerated for holidays and then was happy to go home and be rid of them. Carla couldn't understand that, considered it a character flaw on the same level as not being able to laugh at yourself. He was riddled with character flaws, he decided.

"Oh, lots of things," the boy replied in a tone which suggested that the woman's meanness was public knowledge.

"Like what?"

"The bird on a leash is sorcery, my mother says so," the boy offered. "She keeps them, a whole lot of them, in her apartment."

"They do their business on her curtains. I saw once when my mother took us there," the girl confided.

"Oh, come now!"

"It's true," the boy eagerly asserted, moving closer. "I saw it, too."

"And she's got six toes," the girl added, joining her brother.

"She does, too," the boy confirmed. "She wears an old pair of shoes and the toes are all poking through and down here--" he gestured at his raised foot, "there's one more toe!"

"And no teeth," the girl said.

"Well," the boy began in a tone of discreet disagreement, "sometimes she has teeth and sometimes she doesn't."

"She killed a bat once," the girl said, changing the subject.

"She beat it to death with a broom," said the boy, his eyes widening

again at the recollection. "And all the time it was squirming and crying like a little baby."

They stopped talking as if conscious of the fact that they had presented all the evidence to substantiate their indictment. Their solemn angelic faces waited patiently for a reply.

He fought amusement at the corners of his mouth. "Even so," he said, his anger fading, "you should leave her alone."

"She doesn't like children," the boy said.

"Yes, well, that is her right," he said, at a loss for the right thing to say.

"It is our right, too," the boy said, and he took his sister by the hand. "We should be getting back now," he said to her.

They left him, looking back over their shoulders at him, first the girl and then the boy. He watched them until they went inside. For a moment he stood there, wondering what to do. Perhaps he should try and locate the old woman and explain that the children meant no harm, that they were just afraid. He knew that fear made people cruel, obliterated all other emotions in its choke hold. Even sensitive people, in the face of great fear were capable of terrible cruelty, himself among them. He had hit a dog once with a baseball bat when it lunged at him on the way home from practice, and then he had continued to beat it even when it lay writhing on the ground. A passerby had stopped him and kept him from beating the dog to death. He had never forgotten that. He wondered where this sudden need to explain, to justify came from. His eye

caught a glint of silver in the dirt at his feet. Reaching for it, he was surprised to find that the article of his interest was a metal clasp on a piece on twine. As he studied it, turning it over carefully in his palm, he knew somehow that it was the collar in which the little bird made its amazing jaunts around the courtyard. Looking up, he scanned the surrounding balconies, hoping the woman would show herself, but the balconies were empty. He pocketed it, intending to find the woman and return it to her later.

Inside, Carla was fixing a sandwich for lunch. "That was sweet of you," she said, looking up.

The collar remained in his pocket for more than a week before he decided what to do with it. Every day he looked for the old woman outside but she never reappeared. The children eluded him as well. Carla wasn't interested in helping to track her down because, like the children, the woman's appearance and habits frightened her a little, and he had to admit that he wasn't terribly keen on the task either. Still, there was something about her and the bird that intrigued him so he asked around. To the other tenants, she was well known. Oh, you mean the Bird Lady, they said. Ah, yes, the Bird Lady. So one day after work he went to her apartment.

"What you want?" she asked him at the door. She was wearing ragged slippers and a housecoat. "No money," she said. "I have no money."

"I'm not here for money," he said. "I've come to return this." He held out the collar.

"You come in," she said, grabbing him roughly by the arm and pulling him inside. "My birds escape," she added, slamming the door behind him.

Looking around, he found that the children were right. Birds perched on the curtain rods and the fabrics were spotted with droppings. There was a concert grand in the room covered with plastic, a few tables filled with photographs of birds in gilt frames, a floor lamp with a fringed shade, a couple of faded sagging armchairs, and a Persian carpet threadbare and dark with stains. All around him were the sounds of fluttering and chirping. An olive green canary flew over and perched on the woman's head. When it alighted, the woman smiled.

"He shows off for you," she said. She reached an index finger up and brought the bird down to him. "Here, you try," she said. "Hold out your finger." The bird hopped from her finger to his. It jerked its head from side to side, looking up at him with black beady eyes.

"What's its name?" he asked.

"No name," she said, shaking her head. "There are too many. He is my green one."

"I saw you outside with an orange bird, last week, in the courtyard. There were children--"

She cut him off. "The children think I am like Baba Yaga. In Ukraine, Baba Yaga was a good witch. They are wicked little ones. They try to hurt my birds."

"They were frightened. They meant no harm. I spoke to them."

"Oh, I know, people think I am mad woman," she said, her eyes narrowing sharply as if to include him.. "Rudolph is gone now three years. Birds are my family. They keep me young." She gave a little laugh.

"Was Rudolph your husband?" he asked.

She nodded, looking away. "I did not want to come here. He brought me. He said he would never leave me." For a moment her lip quivered and he thought she would cry. Then she turned back to him and smiled brightly. "Tea? I make some tea for you."

He watched her pad away to the kitchen. She wore her white hair twisted into a bun at the nape of her neck and even though her shoulders were now stooped and rounded, there was something in her bearing which suggested she had once been slender, even a little proud. A person of means, he decided, from a good family, with good connections, who married well. And now this.

She returned carrying a little tray. "Without samovar, it is difficult to make a good cup. I am sorry."

"This is fine, thank you," he said.

"A shame I had to sell it for money for food." Seeing the startled look on his face, she continued, "For my birds, food for my birds."

"Do you breed them to sell?" he asked.

"No, I do not sell my friends," she said, smiling again. "It is my little secret. I do not share anymore. People laugh. Rudolph, he laughed too."

"I would not laugh," he found himself insisting.

"Maybe," she said. "But I do not know you."

Her name was Malina and she had come with her husband to the U.S. during the war because he convinced her that they would starve if they remained in Russia. She taught piano and her husband managed a bookstore. Her interest in birds began when a neighbor gave her a bird as a present, shortly after Rudolph became sick. He was bedridden for a long time. Her canary, Ivan, sang to them each morning and kept their spirits up. Hearing them sing made her think of Vinnitsa where she grew up, of waking on spring mornings to the sound of birds singing through the open windows. Now her health was poor, she had shooting pains in her side that left her breathless, and no money for doctors. She managed, she said, by selling off her jewelry a piece at a time, and some antiques which she had brought with her from Russia. She had only her piano left. She would soon need to sell that too, she said.

"We must help her," he said to Carla that night. He was laying on his back staring at the ceiling with Carla on his shoulder. "How can we help her?"

"Be her friend," Carla said, but he wasn't sure he knew how.

"Why does she keep all those birds anyway?" Carla asked after a while.

"She has a reason, but she won't share it."

"Ah, a secret. Why won't she?"

"She's afraid people'll laugh."

For a time it seemed like Carla had fallen asleep. Then she said, "I

know that feeling."

He took to visiting her every week, bringing her things like eggs and cheese, fruits. She accepted his gifts graciously and always invited him in for tea. While they sat sipping in her cramped little kitchen, she told him stories about her childhood, about the cobbler who made her shoes, about the chimney sweep who came every year before Christmas, about the kitten she smuggled into school in her ermine muff.

"Why don't you go home?" he asked her one day. "To Vinnitsa where you were happy once."

"There is no one left. My family all dead, my friends moved away. Vinnitsa like people too, changed. I keep my Vinnitsa here," she said and she tapped the side of her head.

"Surely it would be better than this," he said.

She looked at him blankly. "Rudolph is here and my birds. What would they do without me?"

Not long after, Carla moved out, saying she was putting him at liberty to do what he wanted. She was retreating to help put everything in perspective, what she wanted from life, from him, from herself. This is not a break-up, she kept insisting. It is just a distancing. She needed to see the whole thing, she said, not just bits and pieces. Nothing was clear anymore.

He stood in the bedroom doorway and watched her pack. "If this is your way of letting me down gently, I want to know. If this is the end, tell me.

I'm not a little kid who needs to be shielded from the truth." Already he could feel the anger beneath his words, the searing.

"I am telling you the truth, Michael," she said, turning to look at him.

"So then I don't have as much liberty as you say."

"No, I suppose not."

The next time he went to Malina's apartment, there was no answer. When his pounding produced no response, he grew fearful that something had happened to her and he went to her neighbors. Eventually someone from building maintenance was called and he was let inside. Her apartment was dark, the birds quiet and he was certain then that something was wrong. He felt his way through the living room toward the kitchen, calling for her.

He found her in a back bedroom still in bed. Switching on the light, he saw instantly that she was seriously ill. Her brow was moist with sweat and her face was pale. She clutched at the covers with white fists.

"Malina," he said. "What's the matter?" He felt her forehead and was surprised at its coolness.

She moaned a little but did not answer.

When they were wheeling her outside in the hall on a stretcher, several children gathered around the doorway. Michael recognized one of them as the boy in the courtyard. The boy pulled on his sleeve.

"What's the matter with the Bird Lady?" he asked, his eyes round.

"She's very sick," Michael answered.

"Are you taking her to the hospital?" the boy asked again.

Michael nodded. They were already half way down the hall to the elevators when the boy's next question came floating after them.

"Who will look after her birds?"

At the hospital Michael learned that Malina had had a gall bladder attack, that she badly needed surgery but that she was so malnourished and her heart so weak that the doctors weren't sure she could survive the operation. He sat at her bedside all afternoon and watched night fall from her hospital window. He watched cars traveling on the street below, stop at traffic lights, pass over the bridge with the lighted railings. Over the river the sky was stained blue and pink like a bruise so wide and vivid that it made one gasp to look on it. Buildings, awnings, parking meters, fire hydrants all lost their definition to the lengthening shadows. To pass the time he began composing a letter to Carla in his head. Dear Carla, he thought, I am here with Malina at the hospital. She is very sick.

The next day Malina called him from the hospital. At first he did not know who it was through the strangled sobbing.

"Michael?" the voice said. "They said they will take them away. All of them."

"Malina?" he asked. Somehow he knew it wasn't Carla. She would never do that, ask for help. But he knew they were both like that, determined in their belief that to show softness was to show weakness. When they fought,

there was always the clanging of armor.

"You must help me," Malina said. "Please."

"Who will take what away?" he asked.

"My birds," she said. "The county people will take them. They say so many make health problems. They will come and take them if I cannot find place for them. Help me, Michael."

The depth of her desperation startled him. "Let me see what I can arrange," he said. "I'm not sure I have room for them all, but I can take some of them at least. Perhaps your neighbors could help."

"I have hens nesting. There will soon be babies. You take my hens. Please," she said.

"Yes," he said. Hanging up the phone, he did not know what he was going to do. He did not know who would take them, how they would move them, how even to care for them. But looking out the window onto the courtyard he saw the little boy and he had an idea.

"I don't suppose," he said, calling through the lifted window, "that you have a wagon, do you?"

The boy stopped playing to listen. "A wagon? Yes, we have a wagon, my sister and me."

"Could I borrow it, for a little while, to move some things?"

"What are you moving?" the boy asked, skipping over.

"Some birds," he said. "The Bird Lady's birds."

"Can I help?" He flung his toys, a dump truck and a shovel, aside and began jumping a little up and down.

Michael smiled. "Of course, you can."

The apartment was still dark when they arrived. Michael pulled the curtains open to let in the light. The birds began to chirp and fly around. The boy chased them all about the rooms until he exhausted himself and collapsed on the floor, panting. In one closet they found old unused cages gathering dust. In another they found a wire mesh aviary, discarded perches, feed cups opaque with grime, sacks full of gravel and bird seed. They spent a long time washing cups, cleaning perches, cutting paper for the trays, outfitting the cages. The hardest part was catching the birds. They struggled to free themselves, their hearts racing like little motors nearly out of control, and Michael holding them, feeling their softness, their delicate bones, the wild beating thought they would die of sheer terror and was afraid. When the birds had all been caught and caged, he and the boy began moving them to his apartment. The nesting bird cages were smaller and Michael thought a wagon ride might jostle the eggs and crack them and so he carried them one by one to his apartment. They found a few neighbors who were willing to take some birds temporarily, but most of them went to Michael's. The cages made his apartment look cramped and untidy and he was grateful that Carla was no longer there to see them. He did not think she would have approved.

"So tell me," he said to Malina at the hospital later that evening, "why do

you keep your birds if it's not for the money?"

She smiled at him. "You have not forgotten. I do not tell this story very often but I tell it to you. You are my friend." She settled back against the pillow, her hands at her sides.

"When Rudolph was sick, after we have one canary, I go to pet store to buy another. So Ivan is not so lonely. I see many birds, many colors. They jump, they hop, they chirp at me. They are beautiful. I cannot make up my mind which to buy. But there is one who doesn't hop or chirp so much. He is shy perhaps, afraid. I watch him, he watches me. I buy and take him home but he does nothing. No singing, not too much jumping. Like he is sad. Like he misses something, I don't know what. I tell Rudolph he is sad. Rudolph says it is nonsense, that the bird doesn't know how to sing. Simple like that. I do not believe him. I think the bird is sad.

"Many months go by. Peter, we name him Peter after the czar, does not sing, does not hop too much. Then my sister in Vinnitsa is very sick. She writes to me for as long as she can. I feel so bad I can not go to her. She tells me she will come to me if she dies, somehow she will come so we can be together. On the day she dies, Peter sings. Not a little but much song. He fills the room all day with song. He hops and hops like he cannot be still. At first I think something is wrong. Then I think, no, this is Tonya. She is come back to me. She keeps her word." Malina began weeping softly, wiping her tears away with gnarled trembling fingers.

"So you see," she said after a while, "my birds are like angels. They are not really birds at all."

At home that night, he sat for a long on the edge of his bed, watching the nesting hens. There were four of them stacked in cages on top of his dresser. All but one was asleep. It was a pale peach color and it jumped from the top perch to the bottom perch and back again, peering at him with intense beady eyes, cocking its head from side to side as if puzzled about something. Like it already knew something about him and was trying to find out more, he thought. He suddenly found himself talking to it, talking to all of them, to welcome them, to reassure them. Later he thought of Carla, how he would write to her and what she would say when he invited her to come see his babies.

DANCING WITH ST. JOHN THE DIVINE

Through the peephole in the door, she could see two men standing there. The fisheye lens made them seem enormously rotund around the middle with small heads and fat fleshy hands. They wore navy jackets and pants and stood rocking back on their heels as if they were important people, people not to be toyed with. She could see that they were in a hurry the way their nostrils flared, the way one drummed his fingers on his folded arms. Behind her the stereo played Strauss and her mother waltzed, flowed from one room to the next, humming, circling, swaying, the bracelets on her arms jingling. The candlelight cast flickering shadows on the walls and incense smouldered on the mantle. It was not quite eight in the morning. She did not want to open the door.

"Who is it, Delia?" her mother asked as she swept by.

"Men," she answered. "Two men."

"Well, what are you standing there for? Open the door and let them come in." Mrs. Meyerson stopped dancing and sauntered over. She was wearing a long sheer robe and white satin slippers. Delia could tell that she had nothing on underneath.

"You're not dressed for company, mother," she said.

Her mother pushed past her and flung the door open. "Welcome to my party," she said in her best breathless and bright voice. She had two kinds of voices, an ordinary one that she used when she talked to regular people and a special one she used on men. Most men loved it when she talked that way; these men, Delia observed, did not seem impressed.

"Mrs. Meyerson?" one of them asked, stepping forward. "We have an order here from the Probate Court directing us to take you into our custody and deliver you to Willowbrook Hospital where you are to be held for a seventy-two hour observation period."

"Willowbrook? What's that?" Her mother seemed bewildered, confused, her smile fading. She pushed her hair off her forehead with a long ivory hand and turned back to her daughter.

"It's a hospital, ma'am. Over on Fulton Street."

"You're going to need to pack some things," the other man replied.

Delia's Aunt Caroline came out of the kitchen. "Constance. Here. Let me help you. Let's go upstairs and get you ready."

Constance, not Peach, Delia noticed. Everybody, even her Daddy, had called her Peach for as long as Delia could remember. Now she wasn't Peach but someone different, frightening. Delia realized that she didn't know this person, hadn't known her for quite some time. This woman, this Constance lit candles, played Strauss, chain-smoked Camels, stayed out all night with phantom lovers. This was not Peach. Peach was her Daddy's invention for the blond-haired, red-lipped girl-woman he had met at the N.C.O. Club at Fort Bragg after the war, but her Daddy had left and Peach had vanished.

Upstairs in the bathroom, she took bottles and tubes and jars and threw them all into her Daddy's shaving bag. It was one the things that he had not taken with him when he left. He had taken all the important things like the car, the check book, the Zampigi off the living room wall, the television, his tuxedo and all of his books. What he didn't take were framed family photographs, his wedding band, his old Army uniforms, his Purple Heart, his brush and comb set off his dresser, all things he no longer had any use for. Like trash, Delia had thought when she had found his ring on the floor under his bed. Use it and then throw it away.

Her aunt stuck her head in the door. "Does your mother have any shoes besides her high heels? Walking shoes maybe?"

Delia followed her aunt into her mother's room. Her mother was sitting on the bed with cotton balls between her toes, painting her nails.

"Mother, you're not going out on a date for God sakes! People are

waiting!"

"Maybe I'll meet someone--you never know," she answered dreamily without looking up.

Delia found some mocassins in the closet and gave them to her aunt. "We've got only a few minutes, mother, otherwise you'll have to go in like you are."

Aunt Caroline grabbed her mother by the shoulders. "It's time now, Constance dear. Time to go."

In the end her mother wore sweat pants, an old blouse with a fake flower pinned at the throat, a scarf on her head, and her winter coat. She blew kisses and waved from the back of the car.

"Just like she's going on vacation," her Aunt Caroline said with a note of amazement in her voice.

Her mother called a few days later. "I need cigarettes, hon," she said right off. "Can you bring me some?" No how-are-yous, what-are-you-doing-for-food, how-are-you-sitting-for-money type questions. Perhaps her mother figured that Caroline was doing it all or that she was old enough to look after herself which she was. But still.

"I don't have a car, remember?"

"Oh, that's right. I keep forgetting. Dick the dick took it. Has your Daddy called by the way?"

"No."

"Well, if he does, you tell him I'm gone, okay? Tell him I'm on vacation and that I'm having the time of my life."

"Okay, but are you?"

"Am I what?"

"Having the time of your life?"

"Yeah, I even met someone. He thinks he's St. John the Divine."

"Who's St. John the Divine?"

"How the hell should I know? But he's sweet. He wears a rope for a belt and goes barefoot and has visions of the apocalypse. He's really something."

"Don't you encourage her," her Aunt Caroline warned, wagging a finger over dinner. "She's going to get worse before she gets better. She's going to fall, hard. If she gets mixed up with someone like that, who knows what will happen. Your grandmother Lilly lost her mind a couple of times, got it back, thank God, but some people don't."

All this was new to Delia. Her mother had always been a little on the flamboyant side, but she thought it was the southern influence of her girlhood in Charleston, the land of magnolias and honeysuckle, the home, as her daddy said, of the lazy tongue. (Her mother thought Yankees talked like they had their mouths wired shut or worse.) Aunt Caroline thought that her sister-in-law's illness was brought on by living for other people, especially for men which southern women were so good at. And when the men left by death or design, the women fell apart because their strength was gone, because they had given it

away. Delia figured it didn't help to have the genes for it either, she knew that much from biology, and that was the scary thing. Perhaps that was what was in store for her, too, when she was middle-aged and married. Perhaps she'd get thrown over for someone newer, younger, someone with a more practical Yankee name like Barbara or Margaret and end up in a nut house like her mother.

That evening after her aunt dropped her off, she was admitted to the visiting area before her mother had arrived. It was a quiet place and people were inclined to whisper because the tall cathedral windows made them feel like they were in church, and because there were shadows in the corners and pools of lamplight which shone like grace in the long dark room. People huddled near the lamps and murmured. To Delia it seemed a matter of courtesy that no one looked at anyone else, as if it were a point of dishonor to be there and so people pretended you weren't. Delia looked around by looking at the mirrored windows. The patients were easy to spot because they had no coats on like all the visitors had and some wore robes over pajamas. They didn't look much different from ordinary people, but there was no mistaking her mother's friend.

She knew who he was the moment she saw him. His feet were bare and he wore a braided rope around his pants, but what was even more striking was his beard which flowed past his waist down to a little point. Delia immediately thought of the prophets of the Bible and Moses. He strolled past her and made his way to the far side of the room where an old woman and a young girl were

waiting for him. The girl was not much older than herself and looked like she had been crying. Her head was bowed and every now and again she wiped her nose with the back of her hand. The old woman took his hand and pleaded with him in a loud voice. It broke the quiet of the room and heads turned for a brief furtive moment to look at her.

"Take your medicine, Johnny," she was imploring. "Take your medicine. Don't be such a stubborn ox."

After a while Delia's mother came in. She paused in the doorway, her eyes flitting around the room. She looked like a woman waiting to be noticed, smiling expectantly. Delia waved at her and saw as she came closer that she had lipstick on her front teeth.

"Did you bring my cigarettes?" she asked, her voice breathless, her eyes like butterflies still flitting about.

Delia nodded. "I had to leave them at the front desk. You aren't allowed to have them all at once."

"Communists," her mother muttered, pulling out the last one from her pack. A nurse emerged from the shadows and lit it for her before disappearing again.

"Your friend is here," Delia said by way of conversation and then regretted it.

Her mother stood up, looking around. "Where?" she asked with a strange agitation. "Where?"

"Way in the back. He's with his family. You should leave him alone." Delia pulled on her arm and her mother sat down. "So tell me how you like it here."

Her mother stared down at her hands. "The food's not bad. The beds are a little hard, no sheets, just blankets. They think we'll strangle ourselves if given the chance." She gave a little laugh. "We can't even have pantyhose."

"What do you do all day?"

"We go to therapy and exercise class. Sometimes we get to read or play games. I've forgotten how to play checkers. They have checker tournaments here on Fridays."

"Have you made any friends? Other than--"

Her mother stood up and looked around again. She sat down blushing a little. "He saw me. He looked right at me." She was trembling with excitement and for a moment Delia saw herself in her mother's schoolgirl emotions.

"What's with you and this guy, mother?" she asked after a while.

But her mother wasn't listening. She was staring up, her face shining and radiant into the face of her new friend and he was extending his hand, pulling her up, away from the circle of light, into the shadows, and moving her into the gentle swells of a waltz the melody to which they heard, the two of them, only in their heads. And Delia watching them suddenly remembered a time not long ago when they had all danced like that together, her mother, her daddy and her, all holding each other's waists and shoulders, jumping around in a spontaneous

celebration because her father had just received news of an important promotion and they were all so happy. She felt a tearing inside her, a wrenching, but she caught herself before she gave into it, reminding herself that it was okay because she could still hold it back, still keep it down and away from her while she watched her mother, a stranger, dance with St. John the Divine.

DREAMS

Yolanda Galloway had barely turned thirty-two when she discovered she was pregnant. At first she thought she was sick with the flu, wracked as she was most mornings by the dry heaves before she left for work. She had to force herself to eat dry toast and then, like a slap, sharp and unexpected, it occurred to her that she was pregnant. A visit to the doctor confirmed this. He had wanted to know when she had had her last period, and she had not been able to tell him. When her mother died, she had stopped menstruating for several months, and her aunt told her that grief did that to you, provoked strange ailments and symptoms. When her own mother died, her aunt told her, she developed a strange rash near her amrpits and crotch and her gums

bled. Her aunt was a nurse, and Yolanda, feeling she should know what she was talking about, did not worry too much about it. She felt foolish telling her former boyfriend, Frank, about it because it was something you expected of girls high school age, not grown women, and also because she had broken up with him a month or so before she suspected anything was wrong

Frank took the news very well and straight off wanted to marry her. She refused for the same reason she broke off with him. He was becoming serious, a prospect that frightened her because the future, now that her mother was gone, stretched out in front of her like the gaping, glistening jaws of some wild animal. She expected it to snap shut on her at any moment trapping her inside. She tried to explain this to Frank, and how unsettled everything felt, how even the ground she walked on felt funny, spongy, but he responded the way he always did. You worry too much, he said. They stopped going out, but that didn't keep him from stopping over when he was in town on weekends, bringing a little something for the baby. Last week he brought a musical panda bear that played a lullaby when wound. The week before he brought a blue and white rattle. She left them in their boxes on top of the television because she didn't know what else to do with them. Frank was already talking about a nursery, about getting things ready, and she had thought, I am not ready, I am not ready at all.

She worked at the grocery store in town as the assistant store manager, doing the ordering, preparing the monthly reports for the home office,

stocking shelves, supervising the part-time baggers and cashiers, even working at the checkouts when they were short on help. Her boss, a portly man with graying hair and bifocals, had made it seem that it was an important promotion and that she had measured up. She didn't know how to tell him the truth or whether she risked getting fired when he found out. She sensed though that he will be like her mother, reticent but clearly disappointed, silently reproachful but gradually accepting.

She still lived on the old highway in the same house she grew up in and that her mother recently died in. The house was a two-bedroom bungalow with yellow siding, white shutters and a sugar maple in the front yard that every autumn carpeted the scruffy front lawn in crimson. There was a small creek out back which gurgled over a bank of rocks she and her brother put there when they were children. In the evenings after work, she often came outside to sit in the heavy aluminum chairs by the back door. The house always shook when a semi hit the pothole in front doing fifty-five. Motorists, when they broke down, always came to her house first to use the phone, a practice she didn't mind so much when her mother was still alive. Now it worried and frightened her.

That was in fact how she first met Frank when he came to the house and banged on the door, never bothering to use the bell. She was out back hanging out the wash when she heard someone yelling. Coming through the house to the front door, she saw him staring at her with his face pressed against the

screen and his hands cupped around his eyes. Like a kid, she thought and was prepared not to like him. He told her he was in trouble, that his truck had broken down, and that he could lose his job if his company found out that he had been drinking. Just a couple of beers, he said, to celebrate a friend's birthday. Then he stopped talking and looked at her. He was clean shaven and neatly dressed and she had liked his hands. They were bronzed like the rest of him, strong and purposeful but his eyes were soft. She let him in to use the phone and he called for a friend, a mechanic, to meet him. She made him a pot of coffee while they waited. They talked about the weather, a cool summer with too much rain, and she casually mentioned that she had lost her mother because that fact like the weather was also immutable. He had said he was sorry and she had felt that he meant it. Later he called to thank her and to apologize for the trouble. They started going out, not the first time he asked but several invitations later. She discovered he was not like she imagined truckers to be, loud and profane and unmannerly, at least not with her. There was a quietness about him that she liked very much, but at times she felt so overwhelmed with feelings of loss and sadness that it left her speechless. Frank was good company though and he helped distract her.

It was so different with her mother gone, so different not to have anyone to talk to or make coffee for in the mornings or to take to the beautician on Saturdays. Often she found herself coming home after work, sitting and staring at the living room walls with no energy left to make supper. She didn't

eat like she used to. When her mother was alive, they would take turns cooking and trying new recipes. She enjoyed baking more, cookies, pies, breads, while her mother was more of a chef, sculpting flowers out of radishes and trying tarragon with her capon and broccoli. For several months after her mother's death, going into the kitchen was likely to trigger a fit of weeping. She would find her mother's favorite china cup setting on the shelf in the cupboard or spot the egg timer on the stove and that would be enough to set her off. But the tears stopped after awhile as if they all fell together to form one large stone in the pit of her stomach. She remembered how it felt at the funeral home, greeting all those people. They were all at some distance from her as if she were looking at them through the wrong end of a telescope and their voices sounded muffled like so many words with no meaning. She didn't know what to say to any of them. All she could do was try and smile a little but the smile always got caught at the corners of her mouth and broke.

Before Frank she didn't have anyone she could talk to about it and even to him her talking was limited. He didn't know her mother and it was always such an effort to try and explain anything. Her one friend from high school, Stacy, started to stop by once a week and Yolanda felt her sense of duty and obligation, her pity in their heavy silences and Stacy's nervous chatter. She knew Stacy felt sorry for her now that her mother was gone and she was alone. Stacy married young and had children right away and Yolanda felt sorry for *her.* They never had enough money, the children always had runny noses and

Stacy was always recovering from an illness she caught from one of her kids. It was not the kind of life that Yolanda wanted for herself. They used to be quite close in high school although Stacy used to tease her about how prudish she was and how she never had any fun. Yolanda's mother used to say that fun had a way of seeming like work after awhile. Stacy had allowed, after she had been married for a couple of years, that Yolanda's mother was right after all. Yolanda hoped to find some way to tell Stacy about the baby but the moments were always awkward. She imagined that she would wait until after the baby was born and then give Stacy the shock of her life by greeting her at the door with a pink squalling bundle in her arms.

On Saturday morning she lay in bed listening to the noise from the highway and staring at the ceiling with her arms folded behind her head. It was her day off, and the day seemed to spread out before her ominous and purposeless. She didn't know what she would do with all that time. At least with work, she would get busy and not have to think. She knew the wash needed to be done and the house needed straightening, but she felt steeped in inertia, almost like she was weighted with stones. She thought that if she stayed in bed long enough, she might get some energy. She didn't sleep well all night. She kept waking up after dreaming of her mother. One time she woke up feeling that her mother was in the room with her as if she hadn't died and everything was just like it used to be. The effect of the dream while it lasted was comforting. It amazed her that even after that even after eight months, she

could still feel that--what it felt like when her mother was still around. She slept better now than she used to, even fitful sleeping was better, she knew, than no sleep at all. It had been like that for her until recently.

The other day she was stocking House and Beauty Aids when it occurred to her that her mother would never see, never even know that she had a grandchild. The memory of it now brought with it a sting of shame and she wondered how she would have ever told her mother about Frank and the baby. She could see her mother's face, her smile flattening into a long thin line of disapproval, her eyes narrowing in reproach, and her hands fluttering over her lap as she heard the news. Yolanda knew that there would have been several long days of silence between them, maybe even months while her mother struggled to absorb the shock that her daughter had been a *bad girl.* But there are never bad girls, she could hear herself telling her mother, only lonely ones and anyway she was not a girl anymore. The matter of her pregnancy would have become something not discussed between them, like the matter of her father's disappearance many years ago when she was still a child, and the on the day her baby was born, she would find out how her mother had been knitting and sewing for it all along. She closed her eyes and thought of finding a nice photograph of her mother to frame and put in the nursery.

A few moments later she heard someone drive into the front yard and she got up to go to the window. It was Frank in his truck, hauling a load of what looked like steel pipe. She watched him climb down from his cab and

then she hurried into her robe. He came to the door with a box which he held out to her when she opened it.

"It's for the baby," he explained.

In the noisy tissue, she found a gleaming silver cup with an ornately scrolled handle and a silver spoon tied with a blue ribbon. She fingered the smooth highly polished surfaces, stunned at the obvious expense. She knew that Frank spent a lot in child support and extras for his daughter, Becky, which didn't leave much left over for himself. "Oh, Frank," she said quietly. "You shouldn't have."

"You can have it engraved for free, at the store where I got it. This here," he said, pointing to the spoon, "is called an educator for when the baby starts learning to feed himself." He grinned at her and she could tell that he was feeling pleased with himself.

She put them back in the box and then sat the box next to the panda on the television set. "If you keep giving me things, I'm going to run out of room."

"I brought something for you today, too," Frank said after awhile.

"Frank--"

He cut her off. "It's nothing special and I didn't spend any money on it if that's what you're thinking. Sharon didn't take it when she left. I don't use it any more either. It would make me feel better if you had it."

He went out to his truck and returned with what looked like a stereo

receiver. "It's a C.B. base station," he explained. "I've got the mast and then antenna out in the truck because I thought we could put it up today."

"What do I need a base station for?" she asked.

"Actually, it's more for later than for now." He paused and shifted uneasily from on foot to the other, looking away. "The other day I got thinking about the time when the baby is due and you being all alone. If you go into labor, you might not have anyone to help you so I thought you could have the base station and when the time comes, you could reach me on it and I could come to take you to the hospital."

"What about your California runs?" she asked him. Frank went to California about every six weeks and stopped over in Reno on his way back. Once she took some time off from work and went with him. They stayed with her brother in Anaheim, went swimming in the ocean and stopped off in Denver so that she could see the mountains.

"I'm not going to take any California runs near your due date. I want to be here, with you, when the baby comes."

She shook her head, amazed that Frank could be thinking that far ahead, to the labor and the delivery. That all seemed so distant to her now, so unreal, as if they were talking about someone else. Her mother had once told her that childbirth was not for the timid or faint-hearted but would not elaborate further. Stacy had told her that it was as bad as everyone said it was. Yolanda tried not to think about it. "I don't have room for it," she said.

"It doesn't take up much room," Frank said, undaunted. "The mast and antenna go up outside and we could probably find some place in your basement for the base."

He spent all morning and most of the afternoon putting up the antenna, figuring out exactly where to put it and then running the wires into the house. After dressing she went outside and helped him raise the antenna by walking it up while Frank, on the roof, pulled it forward with a rope. After he secured it, he climbed down and stood beside her on the lawn, looking up at it.

"You know, Frank," she said to him after a time, "you're taking that thing down after the baby's born. I won't have that ugly thing on my roof for longer than that."

"Yes, ma'am," he said.

He showed her how to turn it off and on, how to use the squelch control, how to change the channels, how to change the antenna's direction, and how to tune voices in on single side band.

"This is channel nineteen he said, turning the channel selector. They were met with a blast of static and a rush of voices. "It's the channel most truckers use to find about road conditions, where the cops are with their radar, and local information. If you want to talk for a long time, you go to another channel."

They stood and listened to the chatter for a time before he turned it off. "How will I know if you're out there or not?" she asked.

"You'll have to call me by my handle and if I hear you, I'll answer." He held the microphone to his mouth and said, "Break one-nine for the Red Man. Do you copy, Red? That's a break for the Red Man."

She smiled a little. "You're the Red Man?"

"Yeah."

"Red Man," she repeated as they went upstairs. She had forgotten Frank was part Indian. He had told her early on that his mother's people were the Oglala Sioux, that his father owned a drugstore, and that they had met at a carnival. His mother had died of the white man's disease, cancer, and his father, now retired, lived in a trailer park in Florida. His brother was up to no good the last he knew, dealing a little and playing in a band.

In the kitchen she made him a bologna sandwich and heated up some tomato soup. She made a sandwich for herself and they sat the table, eating in silence.

"I have a C.B. in my truck," he said after awhile, "so if you're ever feeling lonely and want someone to talk to, try giving me a call. If I'm around, I'll come over. Or else we can just talk on the radio."

"Thank you."

Frank wanted to check the antenna installation before he left and Yolanda followed him out into the yard. In the mild twilight air, they stood looking at each other while behind them out on the highway, cars rushed by with their taillights on, leaving a long red necklace in their wake. She could

sense that he wanted to stay but was waiting for an invitation.

"I know what you're thinking, Frank," she said. "But maybe another time."

Without replying, he got into his truck and headed down the driveway to the road. It was some time before the traffic eased and he could pull out. Seeing him there waiting, a black silhouette in the cab of the truck, and then the sky above him smeared with the day's last color, she thought how small and insignificant they all seemed, Frank, his truck, the other cars, the barn across the road, and she was suddenly filled with an inexplicable sadness and longing.

The next morning she had a severe bout of the dry heaves and did not go into work. She told her boss that she had the flu and crawled back to bed. Later she found a box of stale crackers in the cupboard and ate them which helped a little. Stacy stopped by and then came back with soup in the afternoon. She drifted in and out of dreamy sleep, dreams which upon waking popped like large bubbles the color of carnival glass. But she remembered the one in which she dreamt of her baby. In it he was already a grown two year old child with soft brown hair ringing a round face in curls. He had huge blue eyes like two still, unbroken ponds and a round smile displaying the white perfection of his first teeth. When she awoke, the dream made her pregnancy seem more real and its outcome more pleasant. All this for a little boy, she thought. For the first time, she felt good about the baby, good to be having one in spite of all the complications it brought.

It was almost dark when she climbed out of bed and got dressed. She hauled a basket of laundry to the basement and put in a load of wash. She turned the base on, too, listening for the tenor of Frank's voice or the mention of the Red Man. Channel nineteen hummed, whistled and chattered, but she heard nothing of Frank. She left it on all evening; from anywhere in the house she could hear its clamor. At bedtime she sat on the basement stairs, watching the base and its red glowing L.E.D. displays. She was listening for Frank again. When she thought she heard him, it was his chuckle she recognized first and then his voice, muffled, saying something she couldn't make out. She grabbed the microphone and blurted out, "Is that you, Frank?"

The base buzzed with laughter. "Say little lady, what's your message, c'mon back."

She blushed with the realization that there must have been at least several Franks within range out there. She put the microphone down, uncertain about what to do next. When it came to her, it made her smile. She turned the base off and went upstairs. She would call Frank all right, she decided, she would ask him to come over, she would tell him she was cold, that she had a craving for peanut butter on toast. On the telephone.

DROUGHT

The girl in the chair studied the way the light came in through the slatted blinds and fell in stripes over the woman's arm and across the right side of her face. Zebra, the girl thought, and might have giggled about it at another time and place. Not today. She did not want to be there and there was nothing funny about the cramped airless room with the marginal air conditioning and the fake golden pathos on the windowsill. The woman on the other side of the desk was writing something down on her notepad or doodling, the girl couldn't tell which. This was her third visit. During the first two visits they put puzzles together and the woman had her draw a picture of her family with chalk and crayons. She drew stick figures and a house with a tree and a sun which seemed to exasperate the woman although she didn't say so. Then the

woman had her write the names over the people so that she knew who they were. The girl declined her invitation to talk about them and so they played at puzzles and endured long gaping silences.

Today the girl didn't think that they would play at puzzles because the woman had not brought them out from the desk drawer where she kept them and because the woman had about her this air of intractability which she had not had before. She just kept writing on her notepad, looking down with deeply hooded eyes.

"So, Veronica," the woman began, "why don't you tell me about that day, like what time you woke up and what you had for breakfast."

"What day is that?" the girl asked.

The woman looked up at her sharply. "The day your mother became so sick and went to the hospital. That day."

"You mean the day my mother tried to kill herself. I had toast for breakfast like I always do. I probably got up around nine." Her father had taught her that, a dislike for euphemisms, the importance of saying things as you saw them. No one as far as she knew had yet put real words to what had happened, not even her father.

"I hear some real hostility there. Are you angry with your mother about what happened?" The eyes had retreated under the hoods again.

"No, not really, no."

"Seriously now, you're not angry with your mother? She's tried to do

herself in and you have to step in and pick up the slack and that doesn't make you angry?"

The girl shifted in her chair and sat up straighter. "I am angry that my father sent me here. He doesn't have time for me so he sends me to a counselor. That makes me angry."

"Let's get back to breakfast that day. Your sisters, did you eat with them and how were they behaving?"

"Yes, I think we ate together. They were fine. They are always fine."

It was hot that day, she remembered, searing. The whole summer was like that, still was. She could tell it was going to be a hot day because everything felt sticky even at nine in the morning. Mallory had pulled Erica's braids, Erica had spit on Mallory, a breakfast bowl was knocked to the floor and broke. Her mother had called from the bedroom for them to quiet down.

"What did you do after breakfast?"

"Nothing much. My sisters went down to the beach like always."

She had ordered them out of the house, grabbed Mallory by the arm and dragged her off the porch, throwing her sand toys after her. Erica went willingly and then cried and threatened to tell their mother. Veronica had scoffed at that. Like she cares, she had said. They stared at each other defiantly and the younger two finally gave up and went off to play. She had to go back inside and clean up their mess.

"What was your mother doing all this time? Didn't she eat with you?"

"She slept a lot. She was still recovering from that baby that died. She wasn't feeling very good."

Actually her mother didn't sleep at all as near as she could tell. Sometimes when she brought her mother coffee in the morning, she would find her mother just laying there, her eyes wide open, staring at the wall. She didn't notice you either unless you spoke to her. She was off somewhere else, somewhere not very happy.

"Oh," the woman said quietly, demurely, "I didn't realize that your mother lost a child."

"Oh, yes. A baby boy. A boy for my father. It was before school got out, this past spring."

She remembered they all missed a day of school for the funeral and it had rained. Their new Easter shoes all sank in the mud at the cemetery and their mother had noticed the butterflies, mourning cloaks she called them and told them all in a high, lilting, unnatural voice that the butterflies were grieving with them. Veronica had not forgotten their black wings with the pale yellow borders or the way people looked at them, quickly, like they were afraid of what they might see.

"So your mother is sleeping all day; does your father know about this? Did you tell him?"

Her father had asked her a similar question. She could still hear his booming voice in her ear when he called from the hospital. Why the hell

didn't you tell me ? She could have held the receiver two feet away and still have heard him plainly. She had wanted to say that it was because her mother hated his secretary, Miss Burgess, with the red rosebud mouth, and that he knew that but kept her anyway and that all summer long her mother had wanted to go home from the cottage, but that he wouldn't let her waste the money they had paid for rent. She had wanted to remind him that he promised them two weeks in July but July was over with. She wanted to tell him all these things but instead she said then as now, "He was always so busy. There wasn't any time."

"But what did your mother do when he was home? Don't you think he could have seen for himself?"

"She always managed to get up half an hour before he came home. See, he had to drive all the way from Grand Rapids to the lake and sometimes the traffic was bad and sometimes he worked over, when he had a hearing or something to prepare for. He was never home right away."

She thought of the maternity blouses her mother wore over her father's bermuda shorts and her mother's face without her makeup or her ready smiles, how blanched it seemed and unformed like putty, and how she sat on the porch after supper, staring out over the lake, not saying much. Sometimes she'd say, What direction is Chicago, do you think? How about Milwaukee? Or she'd say, Look at that sunset. But they were just so many words; you could tell she didn't feel them. They didn't mean anything.

"It sounds like your father has an important job. What kind of work does he do?"

"He's an attorney in patents and trademark law. He studies inventions."

At night he brought home a brief case full of blueprints, drawings, and sometimes even mechanical devices. He would spread them out on the dining room table and examine them. These were his clients' inventions for which they wanted patents. He had told her once that most of what he saw was uninspiring, that only occasionally did he see something that was truly imaginative and useful. As the oldest and last to bed, she was sometimes allowed to sit and watch him work. She watched the same long and agile fingers that repaired their broken toys hover over gears and pulleys, massage their way between covers, bulbs and screens. Later he said that what she had thought was his reverence and respect for all working things was only his fear of breaking something that did not belong to him. He wrote notes to himself on yellow legal pads in his own indecipherable shorthand, using pens with chewed ends. When he puzzled over something, he paced back and forth and fiddled with his glasses. For her entertainment he sometimes blew smoke rings, small ones through the wavering loops of larger ones until a fit of coughing would force him to stop. If she asked too many questions, he would send her away so she learned to be quiet. She was happy then that her mother sat out on the porch, away from them, so that she could have her father all to herself. If only in this way, like someone outside the fence looking in.

"So what you're saying is that your father worked at home in the evenings while your mother sat out on the porch?"

"Yes."

"And you don't think he noticed anything unusual about your mother's condition?"

"I think my father had his own problems."

The woman looked up again. "Why don't you share a little what you mean."

"He didn't like his boss. He was trying to find another job."

Hate was a better word for it. Around the house it was always that bastard Harrington. She never knew what his first name was, but she did know him to be the tall, gaunt, balding man she saw in her father's office the few times she visited there. The man wore round spectacles and a bow tie and suits that didn't seem to fit properly. She always thought of her father's office as a dark and foreboding place except for Miss Burgess who gave them pieces of gum out of her purse and let them talk over the intercoms and spin around in the chairs until they were dizzy. There seemed to be too much wood paneling for her liking, too many massive mahogany desks, too many little green lamps that seemed to horde the light instead of dispersing it. Her father wanted the partnership the man had promised him, but he was told there wasn't the money for it or the client base. And then he became that cheap bastard and her father went behind his back, seeking positions with other firms. She remembered the

envelopes that came in the mail which her mother left for him on the kitchen table. There had been no good news. Her father didn't find another job.

For a time the woman didn't speak. She turned toward the window and the stripes caught her full across the face. She appeared not to notice or to care. After a while she turned back to Veronica. "Let's go back to the day it happened. Your father was at work. Your sisters went to the beach. Your mother was sleeping. What were you doing?"

"Just cleaning up after breakfast, doing the dishes."

Actually she didn't start cleaning up right away. She went down to the lake to check on her sisters. There was little wind that morning, no sound of the breaking waves which she loved, only a gentle lapping as quiet as a clock. That summer her father had spoken of the drought. She hadn't noticed it much at the lake except the sky was a deeper blue than she ever remembered, cobalt her mother would have said who always had fancy names for colors, and the water level was down. She could tell by the stains on the dock pilings where the water level used to be. There were a couple of sailboats out on the water already. They made her think of kites. Her sisters were ignoring her, still angry at her from breakfast. Behind her on a bluff hidden a little by pin oaks rose the beach house they were renting, bleached white and shuttered against the sun. She shoved her hands in her pockets, closed her eyes and tried not to think about anything. After a while she went back inside.

"And after that, what then?"

She sat back in her chair trying to remember. What had she done after she mopped up the cereal and milk off the floor? It was still sticky when she walked on it so she did it over again. Then she put the mop and bucket away.

"I'm not sure. I think I read for a while."

"When did you find your mother?"

"That wasn't until later. After lunch."

She had gone in to check on her mother before then. Her mother was laying on her side with her back to the door. She went around to the other side of the bed. She saw her mother's face, her large unblinking eyes, her dark curls crushed against the pillow. Mother, she said. Why don't you come down to beach, mother. Please. No, her mother said, her voice quiet, muffled. Had she already then? Please, mother. The sunshine will be good for you, the fresh air. Her mother's words for her and her sisters. It was funny hearing herself say them. No, just leave me alone. Leave me in peace. After that she went to fix sandwiches for her sisters' lunch. They were bologna sandwiches and they had chocolate milk from straws. They ate out on the porch. Erica kept swinging her legs and bumping the railing. Mallory yelled at her to stop. She noticed the lacy patterns of the leaves on the floor.

"Tell me about it," the woman said, gently, and put her pen down.

"I don't want to," she said after a long pause. "I've been trying so hard not to think about it." She felt tears marshalling under her eyes, something catching in her throat. She looked up over the woman, at the wall behind her.

"Sometimes it's good just to get it off your chest."

"That's what my father says."

She could still see her mother's arm, the funny way she was laying on the bed, the arm sticking out behind her back like it didn't belong to her. Her mouth was open, her eyes closed, and at first glance she thought it was good she was finally getting some sleep. Then she saw the bottle on the nightstand, coverless, empty. She shook her. Mother, she said. What have you done. Oh mother. She remembered sitting down on the bed or maybe her legs collapsing so she had to sit. Crazy thoughts went spinning through her head, all the possibilities and implications of her mother's act played themselves out before her like jewels she could pick and choose from. She sat for a long time. She remembered that outside the chimes sounded and there in the room the shade slapped against the windowsill.

"It's hard," the woman was saying, "to see someone like that and to know they did it on purpose."

But that wasn't it, not really.

Outside after her session was over, she kept thinking about it. What was it if it wasn't the shock of it like the woman had said? She was still thinking about it when her father pulled up in the car. It startled her to see that her mother was with him, that she was wearing lipstick, that he had his arm around her shoulder. Her mother smiled and waved a little. Climbing into the back seat, she suddenly remembered that on that day she had considered, briefly, not

going for help at all.

FATHER'S DAY

My father has always been a silent man, not given to much talk of any kind. My sisters and I never knew what it was he was thinking when he came home after working every day at Chrysler, but he would take a shot of whiskey with him out onto the back porch and sit and smoke cigarettes and stare out over the back fence past my mother's sunflowers and her rose trellis. We would watch him quietly from the kitchen. He would rub his forehead and the back of his neck with his free hand and sometimes mutter to himself and shake his head violently from side to side. There were other times he just sat there with his hands clasped together between his knees and his chin to his chest, raising his head only long enough to drag from his cigarette. We knew he was

thinking something, we just didn't know what.

My mother called it brooding. She was cheerful and talkative in the same way my father dour and silent. She told us that he had had a rough life growing up during the Great Depression and serving in the Second World War which included a brief stint as a Japanese P.O.W. in Burma. When we were growing up, my father never talked about his childhood. It was considered a subject that was off limits like sex and the occult. I remember one time when a friend and I were playing with green plastic army men, staging a battle on my bedroom carpeting and singing a kind of ditty that was popular among kids then about army life, how the rolls that were so hard they bounced and gee, Mom, I wanna go home. We had been singing for quite a while when my father came in and ordered us to stop. We were forbidden to ever sing that song again with my father's parting admonishment that we didn't know how true it was.

As kids we were told that the grandfather-we-had-never-met, my father's father, had died when my father was small, and so we were accustomed to seeing only my mother's relatives at birthdays and holidays. I remember asking my father a few times what his own father was like but my father brushed my questions aside, saying he could hardly remember. All of this changed, however, when my own son was born and my wife and I invited my parents over for dinner one Sunday afternoon.

My father and I were sitting out on the patio with the binoculars,

watching the birds. It was spring. We were enjoying one of those rare very warm days before the first mosquito hatch, before the first feathery greenness of the trees, before the full colorful explosion of spring blossoms. The daffodils were out, some tulips and hyacinths, the crocuses were already spent. My father had spotted a rose-breasted grosbeak and a Baltimore oriole. We could hear cedar waxwings in the trees, but because they were backlit, we couldn't see them well through the binoculars. Maybe it was the beer we were drinking or the spell of the afternoon, but my father started to talk.

"I think my father would have enjoyed this," he said, peering through the binoculars. "I bet he would have been very surprised at the number of different birds there are."

"Oh?" I said, sitting up, instantly alert. "Why is that?"

"He was a city boy all his life. I bet he didn't know much about birds."

I didn't want to appear too eager. I wanted him to keep talking, but I was afraid that if I asked a lot of questions, he would close up again. "A city boy," I mused. "You're a city boy, too, aren't you, Dad?"

"Afraid so. Born in Chicago. Can't get much more city than that." He laughed a little. "Y'know I've been thinking about my dad lately, maybe it's because you're a new dad and all, but it's funny how certain memories stay with you through the years." He was silent for a while and put the binoculars down.

"What kind of memories?" I asked to prompt him.

"I remember playing with his pocket watch with the gold chain and trying on the hat he wore. It had a red feather in the band. A couple of times my mother and I met him at the trolley stop after work and we walked him home. But he doesn't have a face for me anymore, just a big solid body."

"How old were you then?"

"Four, maybe five. I remember he bought me a tin of toy soldiers, Prussians, he said they were Prussians, with sabers and pantaloons and I played with them outside, listening to laundry flap overhead and I remember the smell of starch in the air."

"What happened to your father? Did he die when you were little?"

"Y'know I'm not really sure. I remember they fought a lot, my mother and dad. I could hear them outside through the open windows. He lost his job, I remember that. It was the depression then and jobs were scarce. I came home from school one day and my mother told me we were moving to my grandmother's and I never saw him again."

"And your mother never told you why?"

He had put the binoculars on the table and was sitting with his elbows on his knees. "She didn't really have to. I think my father had a drinking problem. I remember I came home one day to find my father on his hands and knees digging through the front hall closet. He was throwing out umbrellas, boots, and hat boxes, looking for my mother's purse. I took him into the kitchen and showed him where she was keeping it, down in the pots

and pans cupboard. I felt so happy that I could help him. I remember he dumped it upside down on the floor and took all the money out of her billfold and then he left. When my mother came home, she told me he had taken all the money we had left to live on. Y'know I can still see him there on his knees with all that stuff strewn behind him."

"What a thing to remember," I said.

"Good things are better, aren't they?" he said, turning to look at me. "Later, after we had been living with my grandmother in Springfield for a while, my mother told me he had died. And I believed her. But then there was this funny incident at school."

"What was that?"

"I must have been nine or ten when this man started hanging around the schoolyard. At first I didn't pay him any attention but the other kids noticed him and talked about him. He would just stand there on the other side of the fence and look at us like he was studying us for some reason. Then I started thinking he was staring at me but maybe I was just imagining it. He never said anything, just stood there looking. I must have gone home and told my mother about it because a few days later she and my grandmother called the police and had the man taken away. He never came back again and I didn't give it another thought."

"You don't think--" I began.

My father nodded vigorously. "I do. I do think that was my father and

y'know when I first thought that, I was a new dad like yourself. It wasn't until I was a father that it finally occurred to me. I mean, it makes sense doesn't it? Why else would my mother and grandmother do that? Why else would they care?"

"You're probably right," I admitted, exhaling slowly. I didn't know what else to say. I could see him in my mind's eye, on the back porch, rubbing the back of his neck, staring down at the floor.

"So now you know," he said.

"Yes," I said.

Behind us from the house my wife was calling us into dinner. My father and I stood up and faced each other. There was the awkward moment when we looked each other in the eye, when we were still thinking the same thoughts. My father bent down to retrieve the binoculars and our glasses. I wanted to say something like thank you, but the moment for that had already passed. Instead I put my arm loosely around his shoulder and steered him indoors to where people were waiting for us.

FINDING UNCLE HILLARY

Lying in bed in the dark, I could hear them arguing. I heard drawers opening and closing as my mother put away clean clothes, her day's work, and hangers jingle in the closet as my father took out his bathrobe. Their voices were low but already sibilant and intense. Outside my open window crickets chirped and a neighbor's fan hummed in the warm summer air. I wondered if I should get up and go to the bathroom. Sometimes if they heard me, they would stop talking, fearful of being overheard. But it was always too late. This way I had learned things like my father hadn't asked for the partnership my mother thought he deserved, that my father thought my mother was frigid (I wasn't sure I knew what this meant), and that my parents, both agnostics, were considering

joining some kind of church so that their children, me and my sister, Valerie, could have some exposure to religious values. Tonight being more thirsty than anything else, I climbed out of bed and padded down the hallway.

"But he's a drunk," I heard my father exclaim as I paused at their bedroom door, "and he'll probably go to his grave a drunk, and I don't want to have anything more to do with him."

"But he's your family," my mother answered, her voice full of amazement. "And he's missing, and I can't believe you don't care."

"He's on a binge somewhere. He'll show up when he's run out of money or when he's too sick to drink anymore. He's done it before. Trust me." My father's voice was full of muted anger and exasperation.

"Your aunt's the one who's really worried, not me. She knows him better than you do, and if she's worried, she probably has good reason to be." My mother's voice softened a little.

"She's getting old and she worries about everything," my father replied dismissively.

I heard the bedsprings creak as one of them climbed into bed.

"If something happens to him and he dies or is badly hurt, will you be able to live with yourself, William? I know I couldn't."

I waited for my father's reply but there was none, just the sound of their nightstand lamp being switched off and I continued on my way. On my way back I stopped again outside their door and listened, but this time there was no

sound.

Back in bed I wondered which of my father's uncles was missing. He had only two, Alfred and Hillary. Alfred was a judge and he and his wife, Marguerite, lived in Grosse Pointe. Once a year, usually in the summer, we visited them. They had Dalmations that jumped up and knocked you down and old and blind Mrs. Thayer, Aunt Marguerite's mother, who sat motionless in darkened rooms and scared us to death when we were playing hide and seek and we happened upon her ghostly and still presence. Uncle Alfred had lost his larynx to cancer and talked to us through a device he held to a hole in his throat. His speech was mechanical, even, and when you talked with him, it was difficult to make eye contact with him because you always wanted to talk to his throat.

I supposed it was Uncle Hillary who was missing. He was a bachelor and no one had much contact with him because he moved around a lot, Chicago, St. Louis, Denver. He said he went where the jobs were, that an architect made more money in the boom towns than the more sedate places like Grand Rapids and Detroit. Once in a great while Uncle Hillary would call for my father on the telephone. One time when I answered he would not tell me who he was. Our mother had taught us to say, May I ask who is calling? The gruff voice on the other end said, I want it to be a surprise . Tell him it's a surprise. It was a Saturday morning and my parents were still asleep. My father would not get up when I knocked at their door and told him about the call. Finally, my mother did and told Uncle Hillary that my father was sick. That's how I remembered

Uncle Hillary, a gruff voice on the other end of the telephone.

The next morning my mother woke me and told me that I was going with my father. Her pursed lips and the little frown between her stern unblinking eyes told me her mood was poor. But I asked anyway, "Why me?"

I did not want to go. I did not know what to say to him or what to ask him about. I dreaded the long hours in the car, the unremitting boredom, the pretense that we were, because we were together, close. My father was a patent attorney during the day and worked every night at the dining room table where he spread out the blueprints he brought home from the office. He studied them all very carefully, made notes on yellow legal pads, chewed the ends off of his pens, paced and smoked his pipe. He had inventions of his own he worked on, a toilet seat that automatically returned to the down position (it was too big and clumsy to work in a confined space), and a hands-free telephone headset you could wear without having to be close to your phone. He eventually did obtain a patent for it and then sold it to a company for a small profit. My mother, being kind, liked to say he was cerebral, but it was more than that. Children terrified him. Fatherhood was some kind of affliction like lupus or polio, not to be shaken off, something to be endured.

"Where are we going?" I asked my father. We were heading west on the expressway through downtown, past the basilica of St. Adalbert's, its golden dome glinting in the sun, past the fish ladder in the Grand River, past the twenty foot tall red letters that spelled Jesus Saves on the hill in Belknapp Park.

"We're going to find Uncle Hillary who seems to be lost again," my father said.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Lost is a poor choice of words," my father ruminated. "A better bet is that Uncle Hillary is probably off hiding somewhere while his sister worries herself sick."

"You mean Aunt Henriette," I said. Henriette was Hillary's twin. Twice a year she called to bring my parents up-to-date on the Illinois Bensons, who had married, who had been born, who was moving out of state. Even my mother admitted that this courtesy was more than my father deserved since he didn't seem to care about his family. My mother's family, her sister, and a handful of close first cousins were all a very different kind of people. They all had married and started their families at the proper time. The men worked in factories, at good jobs with the auto companies in Detroit and the women held part-time jobs at Hudson's and Kresge's or didn't work at all. My mother's family we knew and visited at all the right occasions during the year. They were nice people, somewhat bland in their tastes and habits, but they smiled for photographs and sent us money for our birthdays. What you saw was all there was to see. My mother called my father's family eccentrics. My father was not as charitable. He called them lunatics.

My mother once told me that Uncle Hillary had been like a father to my father, but then the war came and my father was shipped out and Hillary moved

on. My father wrote to his uncle every week, but rarely received a reply. Hillary wasn't there when my father came home to the family celebration on Harper Avenue, the young G.I. in his dress greens, wearing his purple heart, feeling like thousands of other G.I.s around the world at that time as though he had done something important, historic, and wanting everyone to share in the moment. Hearts are often crushed, my mother told me, on lesser points.

"So where are we going?" I asked my father again.

"First to Aunt Henriette's, I suppose, and then we'll see what she tells us," my father said, pulling on his pipe and settling back against the seat. I pulled out a book and began to read. The ride was going to be long and silent.

Upon our arrival, Aunt Henriette pinched my father's cheeks and called him Billy. It was hard for me to imagine my father as an infant or a little boy, but wandering through Aunt Henriette's house while they talked, I saw photographs of him in bloomers, pulling a toy horse, with fat hands and wide bright eyes. In another, he sat on the knee of a man whose round white face seemed moon-like and strange, whose hands gripped my father at the waist as if he should fall. In another, both of them were dressed in chaps and fringed shirts with cowboy hats and lassos, wearing the forced, unnatural smiles demanded of them by the studio photographer.

From Aunt Henriette's house, we went to the rooming house which had been Uncle Hillary's last known address before his disappearance. My father talked to a boarder there while I waited in the car. When he got back, my father

who had been cheerful enough at Aunt Henriette's seemed dispirited, sad.

"Is anything wrong?" I asked when he did not start the car right away.

"No," he said. "I was just thinking."

"About Uncle Hillary?" I asked again. I thought of the round moon-like face of the man in the pictures.

"Yes," my father admitted.

The Herkimer Hotel where we stopped and parked the car was a dark and brooding building, sitting among old warehouses and the repair depot for the Grand Trunk Railroad. Most of the buildings were black with soot and some still wore the faded white lettering of old advertisements. The tall windows had become opaque with dust and there was something melancholy in the silence, in the emptiness of the streets. The hotel was identified only by an orange neon sign in the window. In spite of the heat, my father rolled up all the windows and locked up the car after we got out.

The air conditioning in the lobby was the only luxury. Old men sat around in yellowed undershirts and baggy pants. They watched television on a small black and white set perched above them on a shelf out of reach. At a rickety table, several men were playing cards. At the desk staffed by a small tough looking man with wavy black hair and a tooth pick in his mouth, my father inquired about Hillary Nelson. The clerk rummaged through a stack of index cards and reported that a "Larry Nelson" occupied room 402. My father explained that "Larry" hadn't been seen by his family for a time and might he be

kind enough to take us to his room so that we could see if he was all right. The clerk looked at my father, then at me and then back at my father. Without a word he took a key from a peg and came out from behind the counter.

We struggled up four flights of stairs in stifling heat. The building's only elevator had quit working several days before and had not yet been repaired. At the door to Uncle Hillary's room, the man rapped and called his name. Then he put his ear to the door and listened. Shrugging, he put the key in the lock and opened it.

The room was empty. The bed was unmade and strewn with clothes. Magazines lay on the floor next to a couple of empty liquor bottles. My father quickly moved to kick the magazines under the bed. But he wasn't fast enough--I caught the toothy smiles and pointed breasts of the cover girls before they disappeared. On the bureau top was an old photograph in a gilt frame of my uncle's family. My father took it down and we looked at it together. They were all there, Alfred, Hillary and Henriette, and Julia, my grandmother who died before I was born, flanked on either by their mother and father. Julia had beautiful long hair, braided and ribboned, brought over her shoulder, I was sure, for the camera. Her mother had a rather plump face with a grim stitch for a mouth. Her father was a gaunt man with chiselled features and piercing deep set eyes like my father's. He wore small glasses in round frames. Hillary and Henriette wore sailor outfits and looked fragile, angelic. No one was smiling. Before we left, the clerk told us that "Larry" like to frequent the Green Parrot

Tavern around the corner.

At that hour of the afternoon the Green Parrot was nearly empty. My father and I sat awkwardly at the bar on high cushioned stools and sipped our drinks. My father drank club soda with a twist of lime which is what he usually drank at parties and special dinners when he didn't want anyone to know he wasn't drinking. He was a teetotaler but for some reason preferred that no one knew this. I had a ginger ale and tried to keep from staring. I had never been inside a bar before. A mirror ran the length of the bar and in front of it in several tiers sat rows and rows of liquor bottles. They all had pointed caps, to make them easier to pour my father said, and there were wine glasses on racks hanging upside down like bats. I liked how the chrome spigots dropped an instant steady stream that foamed up the sides of the glasses and how the bar tender could know when to stop even when he wasn't looking. Beer was served in frosted mugs that they stored beneath the bar in a small refrigerator. In the subdued light, tips of cigarettes glowed like red beads.

After a while I became aware that my father was looking at someone behind him. I turned and saw a knot of people standing and sitting around a table near the door. We had not seen them when we came in. One of them was an older man with a round face, wearing a fedora at a jaunty angle on his head. He sat beside a woman wearing bright red lipstick and lots of jingly bracelets on her slender arms. The man was telling jokes and gesturing wildly and the woman beside him laughed along with the others. The waitress twice brought

drinks to their table and the man threw crumpled up dollar bills in her direction and kept on talking. It did not immediately occur to me that this was Uncle Hillary, at last, in the flesh, the gruff voice on the other end of the telephone, the angelic boy in the family photograph I had just seen, Aunt Henriette's twin.

My father got up and headed for the door. I followed him, stopping near the table where Uncle Hillary was sitting. I reached out and pulled at my father's arm, thinking that we came all this way, thinking that we should say something.

My father was already part way out the door. "No," he said to me. "Not here, not now."

Uncle Hillary looked up at us. He glanced at my father for a long moment and then at me. "Hey," he called after my father. "Hey, you look familiar. Don't I know you from some place?"

I was nodding dumbly and staring when my father yanked me roughly out into the intense white light of the afternoon.

"I am sorry," I said in the car.

"Yes," he said, not looking at me. "Me, too."

Back at Aunt Henriette's after dinner, the three of us sat out on the patio, enjoying the cooler air. It was twilight and the fireflies were out, flickering in the dark brush, down the slope of the yard, in between the trees. There in the distance I saw something else too, hanging before me like a vision: the roundness of Uncle Hillary's face touched just a little with recognition, and I

heard over and over again his voice in my mind, Hey, don't I know you ? I thought suddenly that my father had been right all along, that he was a good man, a decent man like my mother said, for having come for Uncle Hillary at all.

HALF ORPHANS

The summer her daddy married Georgina, Louise Fischer accompanied the newlyweds on their honeymoon, at least as far as Keenan Gap, West Virginia, in the Allegheny Mountains. That is where Georgina's mother lived and where Louise would be staying while her father and stepmother traveled around the South, taking in the sights. Louise did not like this arrangement because she didn't like Mrs. Wilkering whom she had met at the reception. Her father didn't seem to care. He had other things on his mind and besides, it was only going to be for a week or so. Louise knew it wouldn't do to argue the point, and was even a little intrigued at the prospect of traveling out of state. She had been to Ohio once when her grandfather had died, but for the most part, Michigan was

the only state she knew. If it hadn't been for Mrs. Wilkering, she would have been eager to go. First impressions, her mother had told her, are usually as right as rain.

Louise remembered that her first impression of Mrs. Wilkering at the reception had been one of suspicion. It wasn't a tangible thing at all, nothing that Louise could definitely point to or identify. Maybe it was the furtive way Mrs. Wilkering had of looking at you, that sly sideways glance with the half smile that seemed to take in even more than was there. Or maybe it was because she was so gigantic, a huge woman who seemed determined to make herself appear even larger than she was, who enjoyed the sensation that her enormous size produced. Louise was sitting alone at the head table when this very fat woman in a flowered kimono ambled over to her and sat down.

"I'm Georgina's mama," she said by way of introduction. "Georgina's my baby." They sat watching Georgina and her father dancing. "Yes, sir, she was the runt of the litter," the woman said after a while and she cackled a little to let Louise know that that was supposed to be funny.

Georgina was plump with dimples and curls. To Louise she looked like a smaller version of Mrs. Wilkering. She had once heard that if you wanted to know what you would look like in your later years, you had only to look at your mother. Louise's own mother had been pretty and petite, but Louise felt tall and gawky. She fervently hoped that what she had heard was true. "You'd never know it now," Louise offered, meaning it as a compliment.

"You wouldn't, would you now?" the woman mused. "She's as big as a barn and she ain't even pregnant." She glanced sideways at Louise. "You a city girl?"

Louise nodded.

"A city girl," the woman repeated. "Too bad. Are there any more of you?" the woman asked. She crossed her huge legs and swung her foot to the music. Louise observed that she wasn't wearing any stockings.

"No," Louise replied. "Just me."

"That's good, that's good," the woman said, looking off again.

"What's good about it?" Louise asked.

"You know where I'm from?" the woman asked again.

"No," said Louise.

"I'm from coal country, you know, West Virginia." The woman smiled down at Louise with her peculiar half smile.

"Is that why you talk funny?" Louise asked. She had never met anyone from the South before.

"Me? You think I talk funny? Yankees talk funny," she said and she rearranged her arms across her bulging midriff.

"Is that the place where they have sin eaters?" Louise asked after a while. "The people that eat the sins of the dead people so that they can go to heaven? I read about that once in the National Geographic."

"Yeah, there are still some of them kind around. Not like when I was

young. There were more then. My daddy had one at his funeral."

"What about your mother? Did she have one, too?"

"My mama ran off when I was young and left my daddy with five kids to raise by hisself."

"Oh," said Louise. Half an orphan, Louse thought, like me.

When Georgina and James came over to them at the end of the evening, Louise had fallen asleep but not before Mrs. Wilkering had filled her head with tales of sin eaters and divining rods and kudzu that grew so fast it covered cars. Louise also knew that Mrs. Wilkering didn't like children. She said they thought they were clever but they didn't know diddly squat. She said that a lot, diddly squat.

Louise was deposited rather unceremoniously on Mrs. Wilkering's porch while her father went back to the car for her luggage. There had been a brief heavy shower during the last half hour of their trip, but it had stopped, and now everything was fresh and the colors deep, true. The leaves still dripping were an emerald green, the branches of the trees an inky black, the stones along the road pewter-colored and polished, the gravel driveway the warm tan of shoe leather. Louise could not remember seeing anything so vivid back home in Mount Pleasant where colors there were always muted and blurred like watercolors bleeding. Here the sharpness, the definition of everything was like an assault and made her blink.

Georgina had gone into the house after her mother. They were not planning on staying, only long enough to drop off Louise since her father wanted to make Richmond by nightfall. Louise knew that that was only an excuse. How can you like a woman who weighs more than you do, her father had said after meeting her for the first time. Her father brushed the top of her head with his hand, told her to be good, and then hurried back to the car. When Georgina didn't come out right away, he honked the horn. Louise and Mrs. Wilkering watched the car drive away until it disappeared around the curve in the road.

"Come on in and meet the family," Mrs. Wilkering said finally.

Mrs. Wilkering's family consisted of three stray cats. She liked to pick them up and wear them over her shoulders like furs, and they hung there relaxed and content while she walked from room to room, showing Louise around. The house smelled like cats lived there, and Louise who didn't like cats stiffened when Mrs. Wilkering dropped an angora into her arms. "I don't trust anyone who don't like cats," Mrs. Wilkering said as if it were a test of some kind, as if she already knew. "They're my babies."

The cat dug its claws into Louise's arm before leaping down. Louise resisted the impulse to cry out. Instead she covered the scratches with her hand as if they marked her somehow as undesirable.

That afternoon one of Mrs. Wilkering's grandsons, Tyler Biggs, was dropped off while his daddy ran some errands. He was tall with pale freckled skin and long dark hair that needed combing. He had Mrs. Wilkering's sly smile,

but on him it was almost appealing. He took Louise out to sit on the porch.

"If you're gonna stay here awhile, you should know some things," he said in a low confidential tone. "That woman's bad. Real bad. Watch out for her."

"What do you mean, bad?" Louise asked.

"She likes the belt and will give it to you good. Once she beat me so bad I couldn't sit down for days. She's Satan's sister, I swear it."

"You must've done something to deserve it," Louise observed. "People don't do things like that for no reason."

"Hell," Tyler said, ignoring her. "That's nothing. My own daddy uses a board. A belt's got more give to it," he paused. "I haven't forgotten it neither. She thinks I have, but she's wrong. I'll get even with that fat old hag. It's just a matter of time."

"I'm sure you will," Louise said, not doubting him for a moment.

"It's easier now that she's slowing down, though. I can outrun her and she knows it. I don't have to worry too much if I'm careful."

Louise also learned that Tyler was twelve although to her he seemed much older, that he could already drive, a tractor that is, no different from a real car, he assured her, and that he was the best French kisser in his whole school, it was true, all the girls said so. He even offered to show her, but Louise declined, saying he didn't have to prove anything to her.

Over dinner, a can of chicken soup and a couple of thick slices of buttered bread, Mrs. Wilkering asked Louise, "So what did that peckerhead, Tyler, fill

your ears with today?"

"What's a peckerhead?" Louise asked. She had never heard that before.

"A babe," Mrs. Wilkering laughed. "Pure as snow. I thought girls like you only lived in convents." She wiped her eyes. "You'll find out soon enough."

Louise went back to her soup, not sure she liked being laughed at. "He was telling me about his school and how the girls all like him and how he can drive a tractor."

Mrs. Wilkering's face darkened. "That boy's headed for trouble. He's gonna be rotting in jail by the time he's seventeen, I'll bet money on it. Or else dead by some girl's daddy because he was messing around. I wouldn't get too chummy with him if I were you."

"Don't worry," Louise said, wondering who to believe.

Two days later after Mrs. Wilkering complained of being cold, Tyler came over to check on the furnace. Louise went with him to the cellar. Louise could tell he was angry about something, and didn't say anything. The furnace sat in the middle of the cellar and there was hardly enough room for anything else. They crouched under the heating ducts to get to the door. Tyler pulled the heavy iron door open and stared inside. He paused.

"What?" Louise asked. "What do you see?"

"I don't like the looks of this," he said darkly. "You better go get the old lady."

"Is it bad?" Louise asked.

"Can't tell," he said. "She should look for herself. Go get her, will you?"

Louise, unsuspecting, brought Mrs. Wilkering downstairs.

"What's the matter with that boy," she puffed. "Such a simple job and he can't get it right. Just like his daddy."

"I ain't a genius," Tyler said. He stepped aside to let Mrs. Wilkering through.

"You can say that again."

Tyler reached over and pulled open the heavy door. Louise stood by the steps, struggling to see in the near darkness. "It won't blow up or anything, will it?" she asked.

Mrs. Wilkering hooted. "Half-wits," she said. "A bunch of half-wits."

"Check it out," Tyler urged.

"What am I supposed to be looking for, boy," she said, looking in. "I don't see nothing. It ain't even running."

"You can't see nothing like that," the boy said contemptuously. "You gotta look in, I mean, put your whole head in, to see the trouble."

"What trouble?" she asked, but she put her head in, like Tyler said.

At that moment Tyler slammed the heavy door closed with all his strength. The door thudded against Mrs. Wilkering's head and shoulders and she groaned before falling down on one knee. Louise stood speechless. Tyler shot past her on his way up the steps. "Come on," he cried, grabbing her arm. "If she catches you, you'll get the belt for sure."

"But I didn't do anything," she protested.

Still, she fled with up the stairs with him and out of the house, past some leaning gray buildings with no doors, out into a field of tall grass and briars. Louise stopped at an old apple tree to catch her breath. They could still see the house from there.

"You have to go back, Tyler," she said. "You might have killed her. You have to see if she's all right."

"The hell I do. She's tough as flint. I didn't do nothing that she can't fix."

"You don't know that," Louise answered. "She might have a broken bone or something or else be bleeding to death. You have to go back, Tyler."

"The hell I do. You go back if you're so worried about her."

At that moment Mrs. Wilkering came around the side of the house, carrying a shotgun. She pointed it skyward and fired. The sound cracked all around them. Louise flinched. Tyler took off running.

"See what I mean?" Tyler shouted with something like triumph in his voice. He did not look back.

Louise saw the old woman moving slowly through the field, yelling at them. But Louise could see that she was hurt, hobbling a little, no doubt in pain. "Tyler!" she called, but he was already gone. Mrs. Wilkering stopped her advance, the rifle tilted forward, and she half sat, half fell down. Louise started, wondering what to do. The next instant she was running, running with

everything within her, back to where Mrs. Wilkering now lay on the ground.

At the hospital in Beckley, Louise stood in the hallway outside Mrs. Wilkering's room, waiting for her father and Georgina to come out. Mrs. Wilkering had had a heart attack and her condition was precarious. All of Georgina's family had been notified and were coming to see her. Louise would not, could not, go in, as Georgina had urged, to pay her last respects.

"She's not going to die," Louise told them all, even the doctors. But shame was stronger than her conviction, even though, in the end, she turned out to be right.

THE ONLY ONE

"Isn't this peculiar, Candace?" my mother said to me one day. We were sorting through boxes of my father's papers. My father had died the previous autumn and with my mother's assistance, I was finally going through his personal effects. At the time of my father's death, my mother and father had been divorced for twenty years, and he and I were not close. But there the two of us sat one afternoon, sifting through layers of accumulated years of living, my father's cancelled checks, his weather diaries, blue air letters from Blackwell's and the Bodleian detailing business transactions my father had with them for books and research, lists of words to check in the *O.E.D.*, old marking records for my father's students, old pipes still pungent with the smell of his

cherry-flavored tobacco, a handful of letters from colleagues and students, and picture postcards of Oxford and the British Museum left over from his summer vacations in England. I wanted to burn it all, but my mother quietly insisted that we at least knew what we were burning. *You never know,* she had said, *what you might find.* I think she was curious to see how a man she once knew so intimately had spent the last years of his life, even a little eager to find some trace, some proof that he still loved her or at least still cared for her, as she did him, despite their years of separation. She was hoping to find an old photograph of the two of them or perhaps an old love letter. But there was nothing like that. Those things had been disposed of long ago when my father was at his most punitive, his most bitter, just after their divorce had become final. He had told me after he did it, that he had burned them all in the barrel in the backyard, watched how the white ashes rose and drifted away on the wind, and his voice was smug with satisfaction. Later I understood that he had hoped I would tell her--he would use me to hurt her because, after their divorce, he no longer had the power himself. I had never told her about that or any of the other things I knew that my father had done and my mother didn't. He had done enough hurtful, malicious things that she knew about without my having to add anymore. I hadn't considered, however, when I agreed to do this, that there might be one or two artifacts to be found which, like undetonated bombs, might explode in our faces. My mother had just found one.

"What did you find?" I asked. Already I felt a sense of dread as I moved

across the room to the chair where my mother was sitting.

"What do you make of that?" she said, holding the paper aloft.

It was an old bill from the Pederson Mortuary in Chicago for funeral services rendered in the amount of nine hundred dollars. It was yellowed and brittle and the creases were splitting. There was no name given, and my father had marked it paid, dated it and noted a check number.

"I don't know," I said blankly, staring at the paper in my hand.

"We were still married then," my mother observed from her chair.

"That's right," I said.

My mother's brow furrowed in thought. "Who could have died then? I don't recall that we ever paid for anyone's funeral expenses. Your father's parents were long dead by then, my father, too . . . my mother died long after the divorce."

"Yes," I said, thinking.

My mind tipped backward, slowly at first, and then tumbled and rushed and I was standing breathless, back home in my parents' house on Norwood Avenue and my father was puffing heavily on his pipe and telling my mother that he had to go home. We had just finished eating dinner and were still sitting at the table, Mallory and me, and my mother and father. It was July. Erica was away at camp. My father, a teacher, was enjoying his summer in "exquisite leisure" as he liked to tell everyone which included a little research for the

Oxford English Dictionary and a breeding canaries, nearly thirty of them, which he kept in a huge aviary in the attic. It was a task he couldn't manage alone and so all of us, except my mother who refused, were conscripted to help him. My parents hadn't been getting along for quite some time, and I think my father enjoyed getting away from it all, loosing himself in a hobby. For her part, my mother enjoyed having him gone, his brooding silences and unspoken criticisms which hung heavily in the air like curtains whenever they were together.

My mother looked at him, bewildered. "Home?" she said.

"Joliet," my father said. "Henriette's not well. Roberta called today and she sounded anxious."

"What's the matter with Henriette?" my mother asked. Henriette was one of my father's aunts, and she and her sister, Roberta, were the only ones left of my father's family. My mother mistook the urgency in my father's voice for concern and her face softened.

"A stroke, I think. Roberta isn't quite certain. She didn't get to talk with the doctor. Henriette's still in the hospital. I thought I'd go down tomorrow and pay her a visit." My father tapped his pipe on the edge of the ashtray.

"Of course," my mother said. "But I have to work tomorrow. I wouldn't be able to come with you."

"It would probably be better if I went by myself," my father said with a reassurance, it seemed to me, too easily given.

I sensed immediately that it was all a sham, Henriette's illness, my father's concern for her, the need for a trip to Joliet. For some reason, it didn't have the ring of truth. My father simply wasn't close to his family. We rarely ever saw them and he hadn't much talked about his childhood there except to make it clear that it had been unhappy and that he preferred not to be reminded of it. Perhaps most importantly, my father was not a loving or caring man. Once, after dinner when I began having sharp unbearable pains in my stomach, my mother, fearing appendicitis, summoned the doctor. I lay in bed writhing a little and moaning while my father paced back and forth in the hallway, rubbing his hands together. Seeing his agitation, I was struck by his concern for me. Then the doctor came and diagnosed my problem as severe indigestion and gas, and my father confessed to my mother in front of me how relieved he was, not that his daughter wasn't seriously ill, but that this wasn't going to cost as much money as he feared it might. That's what we represented to him, money spent, unceasing financial obligations, money which might be spent on more useful, even more important, things. Another time he and my mother purchased a desk for me. It was one a few substantial gifts I had ever received from them that was brand new, that I wouldn't have to share with my sisters, and I was giddy with happiness. It was made of a lustrous honey-colored maple, its surface so polished I could see my reflection in it. After it had been delivered, my father came into my room and reached his arms out to me as if to hug me. Instead he grabbed me by the shoulders and shook me, telling me in a voice full of

controlled fury, that I had better take good care of it or face dire consequences. Later my mother told me that my father was a child of the depression, that he had grown up knowing extreme want, even, sometimes, hunger but I was not comforted. I kept seeing his pinched and contorted face, feeling his hot angry breath on my cheeks. So I wondered about this trip. There was something he wasn't telling us. I was a little surprised when my father asked me, before I went to sleep that night, to come with him to Joliet.

We did not go to the hospital when we got into Joliet near noon the next day. Instead we pulled into the parking lot of a funeral home on a busy thoroughfare. I thought that Aunt Henriette had died and that my father had forgotten to tell me. This wasn't unusual since my father was very often non communicative, especially when he was involved in his research and had hit a snag somewhere. There were sirens sounding and fire trucks thundered by as we stepped out of the car. My father appeared not to notice. He walked a little stooped around to the front door, and I thought for the first time, *my father looks old.* I almost felt sorry for him, but it seemed a useless emotion because it couldn't be acted upon, given my father's need for distance and reserve. Instead I looked down at his shoes which were glossy from fresh polish, and we went inside.

My father did not ask for Aunt Henriette. Instead, a somber man with jowls and bifocals perched at the very end of his nose lead us into a viewing

room with an open casket.

"Will there be any other visitors?" the man asked.

My father shook his head. "I don't think so." His voice was barely audible.

"When you are finished, please see me so that we can finalize the arrangements." With that, the man left the room.

In the casket was an old wizened man, with wisps of long white hair trailing over his shoulders, so thin that his skin was a mere drapery over sharp angular bones. His frail wrists, his fingers were without jewelry, and he wore a dark colored paper suit with the creases from the packaging still obvious. The paper crinkled noisily under my father's touch. Then his shoulders began to heave, but he swallowed and touched the casket to steady himself.

"Who is this?" I whispered.

"This, Candace," my father said loudly or so it seemed in the quiet room, "is your grandfather."

"How can that be?" I demanded. As children we had been told that both of our grandfathers had died before we were born. My father's father was a particular mystery since we had no photographs of him. A photograph of my mother's father as a young man graced our mantle for as long as I could remember.

He ignored my question. "He used to throw feed bags over his shoulders like they were pillows, and his hair was thick, and now look at him. Gone," my

father said. "Stolen."

I went over to look out the window. Outside people were walking by carrying grocery bags and brief cases, waiting at curbs for the traffic lights, and I thought *life never stops, not even for death,* and the idea terrified and comforted me at the same time. Behind me my father was now wheezing a little between silent sobs; it sounded almost like constrained laughter of the sort you hear in school when everyone is supposed to be working in silence. I wanted to go over to him, to touch him, but then I remembered all the missed opportunities that had passed between us, how a hug could turn violent, and I was afraid. I waited until he was done and then we left the room. Before leaving, my father paid extra for a new suit, a navy blue one and a bow tie, and then we got in the car and drove home.

"Mother doesn't know about this, does she?" I said after we had been driving for a while.

"No," he admitted, not looking at me.

I thought *my mother does not really know this man; she thinks she does, but she doesn't. What else don't we know about,* I wondered. I felt as if I were standing over the edge of a high building and was about to fall off.

After a while, an enormous silence enveloped us. I sat there listening to the low hum of the engine, the wind at the vent windows. I tried not to think about anything. In that silence grew the tacit assumption that I would not say anything to my mother.

Several weeks later, I was helping my father clean the bird cages. The sun was shining, falling in sharply angled patterns on the floor through the low dormer windows, and the attic smelled warm and musty. The canaries, especially the males were lively and cheerful, hopping from perch to perch, trilling a little and sometimes breaking into full glorious song. I was blowing the chaff out of the seed cups as my father had taught me so as not to waste any of the seed that hadn't yet been eaten. My father was filling the water dishes with a pitcher of fresh water that he had brought up from the kitchen. The atmosphere seemed charged with expectation. My father, I noticed, was breathing sharply through his nostrils, a prelude, I had come to recognize, to speech.

"My father," he began without preliminaries, "was an alcoholic. He used to come home so drunk that he'd have to crawl up the stairs on his hands and knees. I saw him like that many times and when it first happened, it frightened me terribly. I thought he had hurt himself so badly that he couldn't stand up. He used to beat my mother, slap her, throw her down on the floor--the drinking made him mean. Eventually my mother couldn't stand it anymore and she threw him out. He tried to dry out, several times, but he could never stay that way for very long. And after awhile they got divorced. Divorce was almost unheard of in those days, not like now. You had to really need or want it because it carried a stigma. People thought less of you if your parents were divorced. My mother told me to tell people my father had died. I did what she

told me."

"So you never told mother about your father?" I asked.

My father would not look at me. He was measuring and trimming clean paper for the cages, using a large knife, and his movements were precise and careful. "Your mother," he said, "has never known privations of any kind. She would not have married me if she knew the truth about my family. Her parents wouldn't have allowed it." He paused. "*I was not good enough. . . .*" It was not a confession, however , but an accusation dripping with bitterness and recriminations.

"What about your father?" I asked. "Did you ever see him again?"

He nodded. "After their divorce, my mother wouldn't let him see me so he used to come to the schoolyard or the park, bringing little presents. I would tell my mother how I earned them at school. One day he told me he was moving away to find work. After that I never saw or heard from him again."

"How did they find you?"

"Through Aunt Henriette. They called her."

"Did you miss him?"

"Oh, I missed him," my father said. "I always believed that when I grew up, I'd find him again. I found him all right," and then he snorted a little and choked on a sob rising in his throat.

Without thinking I put out my hand, but he squared his shoulders and threw his head back.

"Let's hurry up," he said after a moment. "I've got grading to do."

We finished our work, put our things away and went downstairs. That was the last my father ever said to me on the subject of his childhood.

During my senior year in high school, my father told my mother he wanted a divorce and moved out of the house. He pretended to be having an affair in order to force a separation because my mother still clung tenaciously to the idea of saving their marriage. He even had the letters to prove it, letters he manufactured at his typewriter at school and then forged with his make- believe lover's signatures. I knew this because I found one such letter still in his typewriter one day after school when he had stepped away to use the restroom. He did not know that I knew because I was standing looking out the windows when he returned. The letters though had the intended effect and my mother at last decided that divorce was the only solution to their difficulties.

Both of them had begun confiding in me about their roles in the divorce, especially my father who perhaps felt that in sharing these confidences, he was also exonerating himself. He liked to say how my mother had fallen in love with him largely because of his socks (he wore argyles; then as now, he liked to wear fashionable clothes and have people notice and admire him) and how my mother never wanted to have children. But she loved us in a clearly demonstrative way and so I was not shocked or bothered by what he told me. I am certain that my father felt close to me during this time although he had no

right to. I said little when he talked me, I just listened being the dutiful daughter I was. I knew by experience that he did not really care what I felt so I did not tell him.

I was home the day he left and helped him pack. He had his suitcase open on the bed and we were stuffing shirts, socks, belts, even the cufflinks my mother had given him for their twentieth wedding anniversary, into it. He was in a cheerful mood, and I thought it odd. Sadness, even wistfulness would have been more appropriate. At one point, he paused and put his arm around my shoulder.

"You know, Candace," he began. "You're the only one who knows all sides in this mess, *the only one,*" and he said this pleasurably, as if this were an honor, a distinction I could take pride in and that he had helped make possible.

"Lucky me," I said.

"What was that?" he asked.

"Nothing," I said.

Now looking at my mother's face twenty years later, on this golden autumn afternoon, I considered for a brief moment whether or not to tell her what I knew. Instead I took the paper and put it back.

"Well," I said brightly, "I guess we'll never know about that one, will we?"

And my mother, smiling a little, was already reaching for another box.

PICTURING DUGAN'S FACE

Mother Mary Celeste was ill, so ill, in fact, that when Mother Elizabeth went in to check on her before Matins and didn't hear her breathing, she rushed to her bedside and put her ear to Mother Mary Celeste's dry feverish lips. For a moment Mother Elizabeth wildly thought that Mother Mary Celeste had died during the night, alone, with the benefit of extreme unction, without the solace of her confessor. But Mother Mary Celeste was breathing quietly, regularly. Relieved, she straightened up and adjusted her habit pulled on in haste in the cold predawn dampness of an October morning. At the windows she drew the curtains open. Dawn was still some time away. She could see nothing but her

own reflection in the glass, the long chocolate brown robe, the rope belt knotted at the waist, the chocolate brown headdress with its black band across the forehead all worn by the Brown Franciscans. She wondered about that person in the glass. It did not look like her, being rather too round and soft. She always considered herself rather tall and flat like a piece of lumber, but perhaps the shadows did that and the rippled panes of glass. Behind her Mother Mary Celeste stirred and moaned a little.

"What is it, sister?" Mother Elizabeth asked, going to her side. She bent to fluff her pillow and smooth the long hair trailing in gray ringlets off her forehead which was hot and moist to the touch.

"I can't go home," Mother Mary Celeste wailed, rolling her head from side to side. "Mother won't let me. I want to, but she won't let me."

At that moment, Mother Valencia stepped inside the door and asked, "How is she?"

Mother Elizabeth shook her head. "Should we admit her? Was this the right thing to do? She's delirious. I'd feel better if Monsignor were called, I really would."

Mother Valencia gave Mother Elizabeth a look. "I'll call the doctor. Perhaps Monsignor will come by later after Mass. Pray, Mother Elizabeth, pray," she said as she retreated. "It is not up to us."

Later she returned with a bowl of cool water and a cloth. She wet the cloth and laid it on Mother Mary Celeste's forehead. Mother Elizabeth offered

the sick woman water.

Mother Mary Celeste pushed the glass away. "Mother doesn't like me," she said, her voice petulant. "She never liked me, not from the first."

"Oh, I'm sure that isn't true," Mother Elizabeth soothed.

"It is, it is. I was never good enough. She always liked you much better."

Mother Elizabeth started forward in her chair. Mother Valencia patted her arm and whispered, "She had a sister named Elizabeth. Don't worry. It's not the Mother General she's referring to."

Soon Mother Mary Celeste settled back against the pillows and began to snore. Although her body was resting, her mind raced, spinning in and out of thoughts and ideas that had only the thinnest of gossamer connections. When scrutinized the ideas receded and then vanished altogether until she couldn't remember why she was thinking them. In the back of everything, however, was the gray farmhouse, always the gray farmhouse. Her mother's *domicile,* that's what her father mockingly called it when he was angry with his wife, and feeling bitter. It had come to be theirs from her people, not through hard work as he had preferred and the sweat of one's brow, but through privilege and ease. The barns were his though, the foundations built of stone he had dragged from the fields, the timbers from trees he had felled, the hardware purchased from the lumber store in town with money earned on the sale of his milk. You are poisoning your children's minds, her mother had often hissed at him. He had often countered that the truth is never poison except to liars and thieves. Then

there followed after these outbursts, for there were many, her mother's imperial silences, and the children became mouthpieces for the parents. Tell your mother that I am going to town this afternoon. Tell your father that the baby has a doctor's appointment today and I will need the car. Tell your mother that I am going to market. Mary Celeste hated to bring her father's messages to her mother because they were snatched away from her with disdain and she was dismissed as if she had done something wrong. Eventually her father would say, gently and with a pat on the head, Tell your mother I will not abide it any longer. If she has something to say to me, she can say it herself. All this in the kitchen by the stove with the tea kettle singing and the baby wailing for there was always a baby or else in the barns with the stink of manure and the grunting of the cows. It is not your fault that your mother is not happy, her father would say, but she did not believe that.

There must be something she could do to please her mother, some special errand, some special deed, a cultivation of a different personality. She would smile more, she would trap retorts, mockery and arguments under her tongue, silence was golden after all, she would ask her mother for nothing but give everything. Not my will but your will be done, she prayed. Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. Still her mother withheld her love. It was like a star, this love, glittering, unattainable in the night sky when the air was frigid and cheerless. Father in heaven, be thou not far from me.

Her siblings, Elizabeth, Megan, Bridget, Patrick, and Dugan, were all

showered, it seemed to her, with kisses on the tops of their golden heads and caresses all over their chubby bodies. Each one grew like a protuberance from her mother's hip and were removed only for bedtime. Her father gave her rides in the wheelbarrow and carried her on his shoulders but he was bony and muscular. It was not the same. What did I do, she asked her father one day, that she hates me so? Her father was silent for a long time. Your mother doesn't hate you. She--and then he paused and couldn't finish. You know, he told her after awhile in that private voice of his that told her she was about to hear something special, I had different names picked out for each of you. I wanted to call you Hyacinth because you came first. Into the spring of our lives. Because you were my little flower. That year for her birthday, he planted hyacinths for her in the back of the house so that she could see them on her way to and from the barns. He called them his mary celestes. After their first flowering her mother tried to dig them up. They attracted the wasps and the wasps threatened her babies. Her father would not help her defend them. The next spring they bloomed stouter, more prolific than ever and her mother left them alone.

On the day of her First Communion, when she wore white dotted swiss and a veil with seed pearls and daisy appliques and white gloves and the priest held before her the host that rose with well manicured fingers from the glittering golden chalice, she gave herself over to the fragile beauty of the moment and closed her eyes. Dust motes danced in the beams of sunlight which

seemed driven through the high arched windows of St. Catherine's and she imagined that angels, not people, sang for her from the choir loft in low feathered voices. She felt it on that day, that she would always want, would always search for, that same sense of purity, serenity, godliness she then felt. She would become, as the Dominicans who taught her had themselves become, a bride of Christ. She would wear a gold band on her finger and forsake forever the secular world. She would become Sister Maristella, *the star of Mary*, wear a habit to cover the allure of her hair and seek out the hard comfort of her rosary beads when she was troubled or alone. God at least would find her willing and eager to serve and would cause his blessings to shine upon her.

If she felt these things as an eight year old child, she knew them with absolute certainty the summer of her eleventh birthday. That summer they rented a cottage on a lake with a dock and a boat tethered to it and loons. Her father did not come, could not get away. Farmers never have time for vacations, he had said, but he did not seem disappointed. Little Mary Celeste had become tall and angular. Her mother studied her with pursed lips and a frown. That haircut, she would say, makes you look like a boy. Stand up straight. Don't slouch. What it is about your eyes? You look Oriental. Father, she would ask, in the evenings during milking, do I look Oriental? He would say, Oriental ladies are the most beautiful ladies in the world.

At the lake the sun burned the sand so hot it was painful to walk upon. She sat posted on a blanket to watch the children while her mother guarded

against heat stroke and stayed inside. The children clustered at the water's edge and dug channels for their boats. The sun and the sound of water lapping at the boat's hull made her sleepy. She laid down on the blanket. The children's voices rose and fell, tinkling like chimes. From far away she heard the sound of a motorboat and then a dog barking and then she fell asleep. She awoke to someone calling her name, Megan, she thought, calling her name over and over. She looked up, prepared to be angry. The children were in the water. *We can't find Dugan. We can't find Dugan.* She heard terror in their voices and alarm. She struggled to her feet, but before she could reach them, she saw Elizabeth, arms flailing, bring something up out of the water. A doll, she thought absurdly and then realized with horror that it was Dugan, dripping, lifeless, blue. Oh God, she cried, and she took Dugan out of her sister's arms and ran with him to the cottage, to her mother, feeling his coldness, his near perfect stillness, against her own heaving body. But there was nothing her mother or the doctor, called so hurriedly from town, could do. Little Dugan had slipped away without saying good-bye, without telling anyone where he was going. Her mother howled with grief. Her father stared unblinking off into the distance and did not hear people talk to him.. On the day of the funeral it rained, cold and steady, all day. *Tears from heaven,* Father Brogger said and blew his nose and wiped his eyes like the rest of them. At the cemetery, she noticed the dump trucks filled with dirt, waiting at the curb. This is the end, she thought, this is truly the end of Dugan, of a whole lifetime. It will never be the same. Even without her

mother's terrible silence, full as it was with reproach and accusation, she felt the enormous burden of her guilt. She did not shrink from it. *Take up your cross and follow me,* she remembered and she took it up.

For a long time afterward, her one comfort was her ability to picture Dugan's face. She would lay in bed, in the dark after a particularly trying day, and in her mind's eye, she saw his golden curls, the velvet of his eye lashes, his little mouth like a rosebud and his chubby cheeks that dimpled at the corners of his smile. Sometimes she could even hear his giggles, more like a series of high pitched squeaks, and hear his voice, the lazy almost complacent way he had of talking as if he were practicing being charming. In thinking of him the crushing weight she carried would be lifted off momentarily and she could breathe more freely. But only for a moment. Maywi, Maywi, she would hear him say, and her eyes would fill. She could not remember exactly when it was that this ability was lost to her, but she discovered it shortly after her father died. (Yes, it was a heart attack that took him, Father Brogger said to everyone at the funeral home, but heart break, too.) In recalling her father's face, she discovered that Dugan's was fading from her memory. The set of his eyes, his smile, the slant of his nose, all vague and indistinct. It was painful to consider her disloyalty and she was ashamed, but it could not be helped. Time is the guilty one, my dear, the Mother General said to her. Not you. But she was not comforted.

Now her fever brought forth many things long since buried, like treasure, in time and distance: the gray fedora her father wore to Mass on Sunday with

the red feather in the band, Dugan's wagon made out of barn board, the clanking of empty milk pails, the table in the kitchen with the chipped formica, her mother standing on the porch in her navy blue Sunday dress, holding Dugan, and Dugan, reaching out to her, smiling, holding something in his hand he wanted her to see. He was laughing and his eyes shining and his hair blown back a little in the breeze. And she was thinking as she reached for him that he wasn't little anymore, and then suddenly he was waving and retreating into whiteness and someone clasped her hand and she was back in her room at the convent. She recognized Mother Elizabeth when she opened her eyes.

STONEHENGE

Mara had foreseen an affair for him, encouraged it even. By then her illness was well advanced and she had no delusions about what was in store for her. She lay each day propped up in the corner of the couch with a book to read and her ice water nearby and sometimes she read but mostly she dozed or lay back looking up at the ceiling, thinking about things. Company came on Sundays when she felt up to visitors. They were mostly business associates of theirs, she had been in interior design before her diagnosis of cancer, and he owned the jewelry store in town, but she most enjoyed the wives and husbands of their bridge group who could look at her without looking away. Cancer is not pretty, she told people. It is not an illness for the faint of heart. Edward is fortunate

that I am not a coward. She wore turbans or scarves, nothing when it was just the two of them alone, kaftans in bright bold prints that billowed out around her and disguised her thinness, rings that spun on her fingers. Edward was not as brave as his wife. He always left the room when Mara started talking about her illness.

"You need someone, Edward," she had said one day after their guests had gone. "I can see it in your eyes."

Startled, he turned to look at her. "What's the matter with my eyes?"

"They're narrow, hungry looking like starving people's. A haunted look." Her voice softened, faltered.

"Good God," he muttered, turning away again.

"We must find you a lady, Edward," she said and when he turned sharply back to her in protest, she continued. "A real lady, Edward, not the husk of one." After that she, mercifully, slept.

Later that evening she took it up again. "I was serious, Edward, about finding you someone. We should start with our bridge group. Perhaps one of the ladies there will do."

"Why do you want to give me away?" He did not know what else to say. It was an odd notion that she should want to find him someone, that she should think him needy like a child.

"A sick woman," she said, drawing herself up, "should have no guilt and I feel guilt for you, Edward, much guilt."

"What have you done to feel guilty about?" His heart began to race and he sat down to calm himself, trying to prepare for her confession, a revelation which might come crashing down on him like a boulder from a mountain.

She touched his hand. "It's more what I haven't done," she said. "I haven't been wifely. I haven't looked out for you. It's been a terrible burden, this illness, and you've had to care for me and there's been no one to care for you." She had a way of telling the truth, peeling away the accumulation of the passing years, revealing the essence of the thing. She had told him early on that death did that, took you by the hand and showed you all the important things in life which were not many; only love.

"You worry too much, my dear," he said. "I'm all right. I can take care of myself."

"Yes, you can, but you deserve better, you need more than I can give you."

Still, he didn't tell her.

Grace had been a neighbor of theirs who had moved away some years before. She and her husband had moved to a nearby town where they had had a house built on a river. Before her illness Mara had gone there for lunch and pronounced the house and the view breathtaking but it was not a friendship that survived much beyond that. Edward was surprised to see her when she came into the store. She had a watch that needed repair and a stone, an emerald, that had fallen from an old ring. She laid them both down on the counter and looked

up at Edward expectantly.

She smelled faintly of perfume and the cold. She wore her blonde hair shorter now in a wave off her forehead, very becomingly, Edward thought, and she still had that studious air about her that had caught Edward's attention when he first met her. Even Mara who had been brassy in her youth was never that. She gave the impression that she watched and weighed everything she said before she spoke it, that she was measured and controlled. There was something very satisfying, even comforting about that although he didn't quite know why.

"Did you have any ideas for your emerald?" Edward asked, holding it up to the light. It was a large flawless stone.

"Not really," she said. "I'm afraid it'll get lost if I don't have something done with it. I've lost it once already and I'm afraid if I lose it one more time, I'll not find it again."

Edward looked in her eyes. Ever since Mara had told him about his own, he had become interested in other people's, in what they said, in what they didn't say. Most people's eyes, he had discovered, were not the eyes of happy people. Grace's eyes he wasn't sure about. They seemed a little distant and cool, perhaps a little sad. "We could fashion another ring for you," he said.

"No. Please," she said. "Not that. A pendant, a brooch maybe, but not a ring." She looked away as she spoke.

"It's just that emeralds are shown to their best advantage in a ring setting where the light shines directly down on them. All of the facets then are brought

into full play. A pendant or a brooch won't catch the light as well." He always enjoyed working with the large stones, the way the light flickered across them like fire caught in ice. There was something hypnotic about them, too, as if you could drown in the deepness and purity of their color. When he was younger he liked to imagine the crowns of the medieval kings and queens, the glittering miters of the Renaissance popes, the bejeweled necks of marquessas, the fat jeweled fingers of the cardinals. The long slow afternoons in the store induced such reverie.

"I could never wear a ring like that again," Grace was saying.

Edward noticed that she now wore a plain gold wedding band where before she had worn a unique pear-shaped diamond. Mara often accused him of noticing jewelry first before he noticed the people wearing them. This was probably true but not always.

Grace saw him looking at her hands. "I'm still married," she said, "but I don't know for how much longer. My husband and I are separated."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Edward said and then he added, "Mara's very sick."

"Nothing very serious, I hope," Grace said quietly. She looked up at him for affirmation.

"She has cancer," he said. "Very bad cancer."

"Oh no," she said like a wail. She stood for a while considering. "How awful for you," she finished.

When she came for her emerald, now a tortoise with gold feet, they went to lunch together. Afterward Grace invited him to come home with her. They had coffee in her bright airy kitchen and Edward could see swans down on the river and the sun like shimmering lace on the water. Leafless brown November trees scalloped the far hills. There was something very sad in all of it despite the sun and the natural beauty, despite Grace's kindness. For the first time he felt himself a solitary person as he would be without Mara. It was an odd feeling, unsteady, like he should be gripping things for support. His coffee cup felt very real, very substantial, in his hands.

"I don't have the courage," Grace confessed later when they were laying in bed together. "I thought I did, but I don't."

"It's all right," Edward reassured her. "I know what you mean." Every time he had closed his eyes, he saw Mara in her turban, Mara, ghostly and cadaverous, floating in the air above him.

"How do other people do this?" Grace asked. "I thought it was supposed to be so easy."

"I don't know," Edward answered. "I wonder how many people aren't really comfortable about it, but do it anyway."

"Yes," Grace agreed. "Probably more people than you think."

Still, he enjoyed holding her, enjoyed feeling her warmth and the soft curves of her body. It had been so long since he and Mara had slept together much less made love. After the cancer had spread to her bones, it hurt her to be

touched. That's when they moved her to the family room, to a hospital bed with railings so she couldn't fall out, where he wouldn't hurt her by rolling over. "Is this the beginning of the end?" Mara had starkly asked him, looking up at him, her eyes searching his face, her mouth working hard to hold back the tears. He had taken her hands and kissed them. Another time she told him as her hand lingered on his chest and sought underneath his shirt at his collar, "The hardest part, Edward, is saying good-bye to your body. That's the hardest part." In Grace's company it wasn't easy to forget all the memories of Mara that hung on him like comfortable old clothes. Even Mara could not have accounted for this. It was easier when you were young and were just building your histories. When you were older and your histories were already acquired, they got in the way, were firm and implacable.

"Chaste," Grace pronounced one day, giggling a little. "That's what we are. Chaste."

His visits with Grace were punctuated by visits to the doctor with Mara. They took x-rays to monitor her loss of bone mass. They showed him pictures of her honeycombed pelvis. They wanted more chemo for her, proposed experimental new treatments. He did not dare to say no. Instead Mara said no. Enough, she declared flatly, shrunken and child-like in her hospital gown. There was nothing child-like in her eyes, however. They were direct and sharp as flint. Her doctors didn't argue. She did say yes to morphine.

Edward followed her doctors out into the hallway. "This is it, isn't it?" he

asked quietly.

Both of them nodded.

"How long?" he asked.

"Two weeks, two months. For as long as she wants to fight," one of them said. "It is out of our hands now."

"Look at me, Edward," Mara said when he returned to the examining room. She was looking at her arms and legs, turning them slowly from side to side, inspecting them. "I have become my grandmother." And her voice was full of wonder.

Edward began taking mornings off at the store to be with Mara. He was haunted by the fear that she would die alone, that he would return one day to find her still and cold. That was the sort of death he feared for himself, to die alone, to have no one there when life finally pulled away, to have been abandoned by friends and family. That was the sort of death his father had had. His father had been divorced and drinking alone for many years when pneumonia had sent him to the hospital. He had died alone there, with tears in his eyes, a nurse had told him. Only later did Edward realize that that information would have been better left unsaid, but it was too late. He had already been marked by it.

Mara did not talk much anymore, that is, she did not talk with him so much as to him. She said, I'm cold, Edward. Read to me, Edward. Water, Edward. He put her skeletal arms through the sleeves of her pajamas, massaged

her skeletal feet. He brushed her thin white hair and carried her to the picture window so that she could see the cardinals, bright red spots like blood on the snowy landscape. He cradled her in his arms when he bathed her, sudsing the loose, leathery skin with gentle strokes of his hands. Stonehenge, she said, watching him.

Grace made a steaming pot of soup and brought it over. She smiled at him, touching his cheek. He seized her hands.

"I am not ready," he said. "I thought I was, but I'm not."

Grace studied him carefully. "She is ready, Edward."

"Yes," he acknowledged.

"May I see her?" Grace asked after awhile.

"Grace--" Mara cooed weakly when Edward brought her in.

Mara died in the morning. It had snowed the night before with the wind whipping and howling at the windows. Edward could not sleep. He felt strangely alert in the darkness, holding Mara's hand, listening to her breathing. "Stay with me, Edward," she had said before she drifted off to sleep. In the middle of the night, she had awoken and asked for water, but when he brought it to her, she was no longer thirsty. She lay back against the pillows and stared at him with bright, feverish eyes.

"You know, Edward, you have a beautiful nose. Funny I never noticed that before. I wonder why."

"You should be sleeping," he admonished her.

"It's hard to sleep when you're busy," she said.

"Busy?" he said. "With what?"

"Making plans," she said, smiling a little.

"What kind of plans?"

"Just . . . plans," she said.

Sunlight was streaming in through the windows when he felt her hand slip out from under his. He roused himself with a start. She wasn't breathing when he bent over her to listen. He shook her a little, but she didn't respond. He felt her hands--they were still warm. He arranged them on her chest and then pulled the blankets up. He sat for awhile next to her, staring at her face, her mouth slack as if in sleep, her eyes closed. He stared at her for so long that he could no longer see her as Mara, until the colors in the room all blended together and swirled around him like a storm.