MAY YOU LIVE IN INTERESTING TIMES

TEREZE GLÜCK
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INTERESTING TIMES
BY TEREZE GLÜCK

1995 Iowa Short Fiction Award Winner
Selected by Ethan Canin

Obsession, adultery, infidelity, unrequited love, suicide, betrayal, death—Tereze Glück's clear-sighted characters coolly assess their actions and reactions. When a man's wife dies suddenly, he feels liberated, and learning this stuns him. Taking a leap into personhood, a child watching her mother in the garden experiences empathy. A woman addicted to a lover realizes how she has squandered herself. A kiss in a taxicab sets two people on the road to inevitability. Scars, even small ones, reflect the power and mystery of the roads people take from one life into another. In the intense title story, suicide, long-distance love, and a cat's nine lives overshadow a woman's subterranean life.

Glück's wry and rueful stories chronicle her characters' struggles to tell the truth regardless of where that might lead them. Insistent, stubbornly spirited voices inform these tales; Glück's characters dig in their heels and announce, for good or ill, "This is who I am." In the end their moral integrity forces them to come face to face with themselves. At the intersection where these insightful stories take place, what is in one's heart and what one reveals to the world converge. Each story is a resonant act of self-discovery for both writer and reader.
May
You Live in
Interesting
Times
The
Iowa
Short
Fiction
Award
Tereze Glück

May You Live in Interesting Times
For Abigail

For my mother

and my father, in memoriam
To know rapture is to have one’s whole life poisoned.

—Phillip Lopate, Against Joie de Vivre
Contents
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May
You Live in
Interesting
Times
Sunrise

A kiss in a taxicab—that is a good thing indeed and much to be desired. We are speaking of a truly serious kiss, an important kiss: you know the kind I mean; the kind of kiss where your bodies begin to feel like water instead of solid things with boundaries. In this kiss you feel that you have no boundaries at all. You feel as if the particles of your bodies are intermixing, so that the two of you are getting, somehow, interwoven, interleaved; and then you feel that you could not undo it if you wished to. There you are in the taxicab, melded together like that, and so right, so strong does this feel, that you believe that nothing can ever go wrong. But in this, as in so many things, you are wrong. A kiss like this can be good, maybe, for a night. Part of
the good night you will feel the same way the kiss makes you feel: interwoven that way, so that nothing can come between you. The first bad feeling starts when it begins to get light. You do not sleep soundly, of course you do not, you are too filled with import and portent; so when it begins to grow light, you notice it.

This is an hour of the day I have always dreaded—dawn. Usually I aim to sleep through it and under normal circumstances that presents no problem, and when I wake up it is already full daylight which is not so brutal an hour. Why dawn should hurt I cannot say but hurt it does. I recall one dawn when I was actually walking down the middle of a highway. Four of us were walking. We hadn’t intended to be walking at dawn down the middle of a highway; not in the least. What we’d intended was to be riding in some stranger’s car, but what had happened, no one had picked us up, and we had walked almost the entire way from the one town to the other town. We were in college then. But whenever I thought of dawn, that was the dawn I thought of, and it didn’t feel good. We were cold and our stomachs ached. To be awake too early has always felt, to me, like a bad hangover. Even if I hadn’t been drinking I felt like I had a hangover whenever I saw the sun come up. My body just did not want to be awake to see the sun come up.

So to find myself cognizant at sunrise was in itself not a good thing. I had a pit in my stomach which I took to be a sign. My heart was sinking fast. I knew that the good part was over and what was coming over me now was something akin to dread.

Beside me the man stirs. I feel so sorry for him, suddenly. He seems, suddenly, so innocent—he got started with me unknowingly, not knowing how this sinking thing about me can just pull everything down with it. He probably thought he was getting to know a normal person, some good times, etc. etc. But the thing about a bad feeling is, it goes out and fills up all the air it can find for some ways around. So he lies there so innocent-like and maybe he feels good but not for long. There’s something about me that’s like a lead chain on a man’s leg, and I don’t mean it to be like that; but down I go, and down he goes with me.
All this ran through my head when I was thinking about the kiss I was planning to have in the taxicab. What's more this was a kiss that was going to take place on my birthday, with a man who lived thousands of miles across the ocean from me, so that we hardly ever saw one another, which ought to have made it all safe enough. I could imagine that kiss so vividly that my whole body started giving way just the way it would in the kiss itself. Why you can actually feel the matter of your body breaking up, opening up so that the molecules somehow aren't so tightly packed up in you—it's like they spread out and open up. A major kiss in a taxicab was something I had always dreamed about. There was something about it that just seemed outright wonderful.

But always on the other end of that kiss was this business of the sun coming up. So now I wished there was a way I could save myself from the entire enterprise; but I could not think how. There you are marching out on the road, thinking you'd get a ride maybe, but you end up walking right through the night and the dawn, so that you see the sun itself rise red and flat dead center over the middle of the highway. It is a terrible thing to see, and the body knows it has no business seeing it. I sometimes hear people say how they love to see the sun come up; either they love staying up all night to see the sun come up or they like to get up early and see the sun come up, but my body rebels at the very thought of it, for my body it is an unnatural thing to be awake that late or that soon.

Now you tell me how there is any point doing anything at all, when always you can see right behind it to what comes next. But there you are and what can you do about it? When I see the man I'll sure as daylight want to kiss him, and probably we'll find ourselves in a taxicab, and I know myself—"Kiss me," I'll say; "a major kiss in a taxicab—it's one of the things I dream about." Since it's my birthday, he'll oblige—poor soul. And there we both shall be, set out on our night road, all inevitability.

It's as bad as the sun coming up in the morning—desire.
A Cuban Girl

Around the round table they sat, watching their plates of food: the three children, their parents, their grandparents. It seemed a large number of people to have around one table. The little boys ate; the girl pushed small bits of meat from one end of the plate to the other. "Eat," the grandmother said. The mother's eyes darted around the table and the child thought: she thinks she's done something wrong! Still she did not eat. She stared at the meat. Around her the air pressed in and tightened, as if it were a vise, that harmless air; she knew, already, how nothing was harmless: not air, not ordinary acts.

Her brothers stared at her. One was dark and looked what he
was, Cuban; the other was as fair as a German, a Nordic, and had blue eyes.

She was the oldest. The brothers were taught to defer to her. “You must always take care of your sister, as she is a girl,” was what her parents told them.

She developed a condition of the blood. Her skin grew scaly and itchy; her mother wept. The doctor declared it to be a condition of the blood. She thought she might be dying, and that was why her mother wept and wrung her hands. Other children had died in the family, she was in fact the first that had not died. Before her there had been two daughters who died right away; she thought of them, ghosts in their white cotton christening dresses, their pink limbs flailing beneath the embroidery. No one knew why they had died but what her mother told her was that after that she was afraid to have daughters, that all her daughters would die. Julia listened to her mother say this, as she often did, and would think: ah, then I must not be a daughter; although she knew she was not, either, a son. So she grew to think of herself as something else, something separate, not belonging to either sex but only herself, the little dark creature.

The other thought, that she was a daughter and would therefore die, she did not allow.

Her mother would tell her this, of her fear of daughters, as they walked to school along the wide boulevard lined with fig trees and palms. The breeze blew her mother’s skirt so it billowed like a balloon; they passed workmen laying tile in the wall of a great house on the corner. This she remembered as vividly, as particularly, as an important, singular, occasion—a specific birthday, her appearance in the school play, the visit to the doctor in which he declared her to have a rare, a strange and rare, disease of the blood, causing her mother to weep and wring her hands and say: I knew it, a daughter, I knew it all along!

There seemed no reason in particular to remember this walk, the boulevards, the stillness in which she could hear the men laying the tile and scraping the grout—only that it lodged in mem-

_A Cuban Girl_ 5
ory so fixedly, and sweetly; it seemed it must mean something to persist so fiercely—as if the memory had reasons of its own. Something about a quiet so calm that small sounds can be heard, as, for instance, the sound of the grout being scraped into the cracks between the tiles—that much quiet is rare.

Or perhaps there was a day just like that one when they walked not to school but to the doctor’s office and the doctor told her mother she had a strange condition of the blood.

The doctor was puzzled and admitted it. Her mother’s hands clutched her own black hair and she turned to Julia as if asking for help. Her mother hardly seemed like a mother; she seemed instead like another child, a nervous kind of child with whom one must be very careful, whom one must not alarm, who alarms easily. Her mother held her arms out for Julia to run into them, which she did not; later, at home, she slipped through the back door and ran next door to her grandparents’ house, and into her grandmother’s arms. Her grandmother called her “child,” attesting to it, how here she was a child, and real.

Her grandfather swung in a hammock on the front porch and fanned himself with a flat fan woven of straw. He wore a straw hat and Julia could hear him whistling. She thought she would never lie in a hammock that way—she would never get that far.

She sat at the kitchen table with her grandmother and watched her shell beans.

“The doctor says I have a disease of the blood and Mama thinks I am going to die,” she said.

“That is nonsense,” her grandmother said. “You are not going to die. It is allergy. All the Mendozas are allergic. It is your lineage, your royal blood. You are sensitive but you are not going to die.”

Now her grandfather was singing instead of whistling. His voice reminded her of farm animals, the safety of animals on a farm. Her grandmother’s red hands sliced carrots. “Your hands are as red as mine!” Julia said.

“Yes, you see!” her grandmother said. They nodded to one another in agreement of something; of the proof of her safety.

From where she sat Julia could see the bushes with their red and pink flowers, the great beneficent landscape. She thought how in this very same landscape lived entirely different worlds, the
world of her mother and father and the world of her grandparents.

When they tried to make her eat she said: you want me to eat; fine. Here.

She would chew the food over and over before she swallowed it, so that it was as finely ground as a paste. She would swallow it and take the next piece, all the time staring straight ahead of her with a look on her face meant to be villainous. She knew her power. The entire family, that table-ful of people, was hers; she had riveted them all on her and she knew that she could withhold herself forever, if need be—she had the absolute power of denial.

When she had finished the food on her plate, she excused herself and went into the bathroom and threw it up. She made sure to make noise enough to be heard. In the small tiled room the heave and retch echoed, afterwards to be replaced with a resonating silence: her own, and the silence of her family.

Renunciation suited her, was easy to slip into. But she ought to be elsewhere; renunciation wanted a different landscape. She thought she had no business here in the fecund heat, the tropical vegetation. For the femaleness of her own body, its relentlessly blooming, she felt only disdain, a certain scorn; as if her body belonged not to her but to her family, or to this country. Heat was not her natural element, not the element of denial, but belonged to excess. So she came to believe in the cold, as a friend, as her habitat, a thing to be quested after. She dreamed of angular northern cities of gray granite and concrete. She imagined people in overcoats, isolated, enclosed in wool scarves, hats pulled low over their foreheads. She wanted those layers between her and the world.

These were things she longed for fervently, and willed. Already she mourned the beaches, the one part of the country she cared for: the beaches possessed austerity.

She was waiting and exerting herself, exerting her force. She
had her family impaled on her, desperate; her body was coming
down to bone, which was the way she wanted it.

But her grandmother she had no wish to punish; her grand-
mother stared at her, a little sadly but not afraid. Her grand-
mother said to her: Julia, it is your Spanish blood. You are proud
to the death. Her grandmother teased her that she had royal
blood—which she hadn’t—but her grandmother said she be-
haved as if she had, like a great proud Spanish horse. So, you
think you are a horse! her grandmother said, and Julia laughed.

Overnight, like an echo in the hills, an eruption of cannon and
gunfire. It was in the hills and then it was here, down from the
hills; the silence in the streets exceeded even the silence of her
family at dinner. History was overtaking her. Still the children
walked to school with their mother. The teachers unrolled maps,
recited capitals of countries, the names of rivers. However there
were small changes. Tile walls went unrepai red; the trees needed
pruning. The quiet of the family had a different character, was
not on her account, and she knew it. In the streets people nodded
brusquely to one another but no one stopped to talk. Her father
looked frequently around him. At meals when she excused her-
sel f no one seemed to notice. An air of preoccupation was edging
her out to the periphery. This enraged her but her rage, too, went
unnoticed, was absorbed in the greater anxiety. One night her
mother packed her father’s bags. In the morning he looked
solemn and took each child in his arms, a ritual farewell. All she
knew was that the great drama of herself had escaped her, was
overtaken, overshadowed. Even for herself it was dimming. Her
father took one of her brothers with him. Daily life went on as
before, with this change: her mother. With her father gone her
mother seemed to emerge and seemed like a true mother, and not
so much another child. Weeks and months went by. At school the
children were discouraged from asking questions; little by little,
covertly, nothing direct. In later years when people asked Julia
about the revolution in Cuba, and how her life was, she said this:
that there was in her life no dramatic change, no specific alter-
ation; but that at school if she raised her hand the teacher ig-
nored it, and if she called out to say what she thought they turned around and began speaking or reading from a book. This was her encounter with dictatorship, of course (she explained) she was only ten years old, eleven; a certain discouragement, she said. There were times the teachers told them what they ought to think. I didn’t like that one bit, Julia said, years later—her Spanish blood, she thought silently.

Her father had been gone a year when her second brother left. He left at night, in quiet, although he had a ticket and a passport. Their mother said: he is only going on a visit.

It was a whole year later, an empty year, a diminished year, when her mother gave her a ticket and said: here, you are taking a trip to Spain. I have always wanted for you to see Spain; we have friends there of course.

Later she reflected how in these years of being alone her mother was a changed woman, a new person altogether. Later when the family was reunited she reverted to her former self, watchful and afraid; but in these years when there was no one but herself she became large, certain.

On the airplane she threw up but she did not cry. There were two hundred children on that plane. When it landed in Madrid Julia stepped off the plane and waited. Nobody came for her. Nobody held up a sign that read “Julia Mendoza” although there were numerous signs with other names. Some children cried. After a few hours only a few children were left. Julia sat in familiar restraint, stoic control. All her life she had practiced for this, expected it. She was only curious, and even that, only mildly. She sat there for hours. Finally a nun approached her; child, she said, are you waiting for someone, is someone coming for you?

Julia held out a piece of paper with a name on it.
“Come with me,” the nun said; and Julia went.

She lived for a time in the convent, until the nuns found the people whose name was on the paper. In the austerity of the convent, with its straight-backed chairs, its narrow cots and concrete floors, starvation seemed an already accomplished fact: there was no point, no point any longer. Julia did as she was bidden. She ate
cured ham, even the fatted rind of it; dutifully she ate fava beans, squid in its ink. The food all tasted the same to her and had no importance and might as well be eaten as anything else; might as well be eaten as left there.

Through the arc of window light poured onto the floor, the wooden table. She lowered her head and whispered Grace with the nuns. Through the window she could see leaves, the knotted branches of the Judas trees.

Sr. and Sra. Estevez came for her on a warm day; they embraced her. They had been away, they explained, her mother’s letter arrived only last week, how would they have known? Sra. Estevez wept and Julia allowed her the embrace although she did not return it. She felt like an orphan leaving the orphanage. She wondered if she would ever see her family again, or if it mattered to her—she was not sure it mattered, did it matter, did she care? She felt more like a physical thing in nature than a person—she felt like one of the molecules of sunlight, or the bark of a tree: neutral, complete, its own end. Everyone attributed some great suffering to her, except for the Estevez children, who took her as she came, as the object she was: an object not entirely useless to them. She provided a useful and sometimes necessary third: Julia! they said, hold the end of the jump rope! Now one could jump while two turned the rope. Their games, through her, were more complex, more varied. That was enough for them. She began to feel like a thread in a pattern—a useful thread, one thread but a necessary one, as essential to the pattern and the fabric as any other thread. She was no more and no less than anything else.

Over the years the condition of the blood had lessened until it was quite forgotten. In the years of arranging the family’s various departures, the dead daughters, too, receded, overlaid by new event.

Julia stayed in Spain for eight months. Later she said this was
the happiest time of her life, and that she would not have minded staying there forever. She said she never thought of her family at all. Yet when the ticket arrived in the mail she dutifully packed her things and waved goodbye at the airport, feeling the same ease at leaving the Estevezes that she had felt at leaving her own family. So perhaps she was merely this, a person of departures, for whom departure is the natural medium. She said later that she went through all these comings and goings and separations with a calmness, an equilibrium, feeling no more fear than, she imagined, did the molecules of sunlight as they streamed from the sun onto the surfaces of the manufactured world.

No one ever asked but if they had she would have said: I was lost in that revolution, and it saved me.
Yellow Light

We lay by the water's edge, the blue and green drift of sea creeping towards us. My mother wore a bathing suit the color of an orange. Later I knew it for what it was, a risky color, a young color, and even then I suspected. My mother had a connection to color, was how she put it, and thought that even the blue of the water was hers. She thought she could do anything she wanted: put a whole body of colors together, and she liked to do just that. In hot weather she favored pastels. I like pale colors, she said, bleached colors. Colors called—she said them aloud to me—peach, aqua, shell, mint, seafoam, banana. Banana yellow is a very particular shade of yellow, she told me. A very pale yellow.
We were in Mexico, lying on the sand beach, where men walked barefoot along the dark wet sand by the water’s edge, selling their wares. My mother bought me a silver ring with a turquoise in the center, and three bracelets for herself. Behind us was the curved arc of hotels, their gardens of bougainvillea, hibiscus, jacaranda. My mother, who loved the names of things, told me these.

“I’m feeling better,” she said. “I’m recovering.”

She had come here to recover, I wasn’t sure from what but I had an idea. Recovery meant sun. She said the sun was a restorative. Already I knew her ways: how she would lie there, grains of sand sticking to her shining body. The sun reflected in her flat parts: her thighs, her chest, sometimes the flat of her cheek. Lying beside her I thought of her body as terrain, and these were the plains, the prairies, that glistened in the sun. It wasn’t the suntan she was after; I’d overheard her explaining that to friends one summer at our house on the lake. It was the sensation, the burning itself. She said it bleached her brain and that was all to the good.

I knew if I lay there beside her long enough she would tell me something. I always knew when she was telling me things that were marginal, that she probably shouldn’t be telling me. Usually it was about men, or love, or my father, but it might be her ideas about life: things she took for wisdom and thought she could hand on to me. At last she had a captive audience. She’d start in. “That Gordon,” she says. “He broke my heart.” I put my hands to my ears. “Don’t tell me,” I say; “I’m your child.” Don’t tell me, I’d say, even then, at seven, eight, nine.

“Oh, my poor Poppy!” she said, and laughed. “Poor old thing!” She had as many nicknames for me as she had colors, or daydreams. She didn’t have plans but she had plenty of daydreams. She scorned plans and I often would hear her, usually driving in the car with one of her friends and us, the children, in the back seat, complain of this or that person and his plans. “As if they had any control!” she said, and from the back seat I remember the shake of her head, the flyaway hair. People with plans were one of her complaints. She said they reproached her. “Sometimes I wish I could clear everybody off the planet,” she said. “But then who’d drive,” I said; because she didn’t know how to drive and
we relied on other people to get around. In the city it didn’t matter, we walked or took taxis; but elsewhere we either went with friends or we didn’t go.

Here’s the sun.

So long as there’s sun, my mother says, I make no demands of the universe.

Meanwhile I’m burning. My mother rubs lotion on my body, clears the hair away from my face and with her finger beneath my chin, arches my head upwards. “You have your father’s skin,” she says. “English skin.” My father is, in addition to being English, tall, pale and bony. She says my body is his as well and that I walk just like him.

With her finger she’s rubbing lotion on my cheeks, my nose. “Promise me something,” she says.

“I promise,” I say.

“But you don’t know what yet!” she says.

“I promise anyway.”

“Promise you’ll never leave me,” she says.

I was a knowing child. I watch her, swear I can see her skin mixing its colors, agitating and darkening before my very eyes, alive with cells. “Remember,” I say, full of genius so vivid I can feel it jump in my skin—“Remember when I was inside your body?”

She turns her face towards me, glistening with amber oil. “Oh Poppy!” she says, clapping her hands, smiling her smile. “I remember!”

Sometimes I swear too that I do remember: dark, a mire as thick and smooth as velvet, the heartbeat. My mother often repeated a story to me, one which I myself recall. At three or four how I said to her: where did I used to be? and she said: inside me. I was silent a moment, and then said: I’m sorry I had to be born because now I have to be outside.

I will say this for myself: I always knew what my mother wanted, and I gave it to her.

14   Yellow Light
Clouds are coming; she'll mind.

I steel myself, my heart, willing them away. She'll ignore them a while, strain towards cheer. "I have a theory," she says. "I fool the sun. When it's cloudy I lie out, grease myself up, just as if the sun were out. And the sun sees me, and it thinks—oh—I must be out, people are lying in me!"

She thought she could will anything: the sun to come out, the clouds to disperse, a man to love her.

In this at least she was right: she willed me. She said so. "Here you are," she'd say. "—here you are; I did it! I made you be here!"

"Come on, sun!" my mother said.

She told me how she had traveled along the coast of Portugal when she was young, how she and a friend had flung themselves onto the sand, even though it was April and still cool, and had flung their arms out to the side and said, "Bake me, sol!"

The sky was spotty anyway, even with her tricks: part cloud, holes in the clouds and moments of sun. I could see her thinking, now that the clouds were out and there was no direct heat from the sun to ward off thought. "About these men," she said. "I don't know what it is I do wrong. What is it I do wrong?"

In a few minutes the sun was out again and my mother said she had no business telling me half the things she did, but that was the way she was, and that was how it was going to be.

My mother, in Mexico, at family reunions in Amagansett, by the green lake in Connecticut, keeps watch for a cloudless sky. "I want azure," she says. "I want turquoise."

"Little peach," she says to me. "Little bear. It's good to have so many names. The Chinese have a saying: a well-loved child has many names. I don't know where I heard it. Maybe I made it up. But it's true."

Yellow Light 15
We look into each other’s eyes. Her pupils in the bright sun are tiny. Her eyes are a nameless color, khaki, she says, the color of army tanks. “Oh, your eyes are the color of army tanks!” she mocks.

She sighs, her eyes looking up now, a watchful hunter, hunting for light. When it comes, unequivocal, that un tarnished sun, it refracts off the shine of her skin, encasing me in a double warmth: its own, and hers.

Ever since I was a child, she says, this is what I’ve hankered after. My first broken heart. My father took me to Bermuda where I nursed my broken heart in the sun. I burned myself rightly there. We rented a boat with white sails and I lay on the bow, where the wind and sun both got me. In the morning my face was as puffed up as a melon and they had to give me pills to bring it down. Who could recollect a heart, broken or otherwise, under such a scorch, such searing?

My mother told me amazing things. There is a perfume, she said, by which I mean odor, not one you wear, which belongs with this landscape, although it is not here. She stopped then. With me at least she could be mysterious. But I did not care to prompt her. “The fragrance I have in mind,” she said, “is oranges. I will tell you about the first time I smelled orange trees in bloom. It was in Seville, in the south of Spain.” I knew the word, Spain, and that it was a country, but that was all.

She told me that in this city, Seville, the streets were made of cobblestone, and you could hear the horses’ hooves on the cobbled roads, that their hooves echoed on the stone. “I remember all that,” she said, “but primarily it was a place you could smell—overpowering, that perfume, pungent, stifling—I mean the smell of oranges.”


She props herself up on an elbow, I can see where the white skin meets, turns, brown. She’s smiling at me. “You are a brilliant child,” she says. “You are an ingenious person. And that’s what I think.”
She dives into the turquoise water and I watch her orange bathing suit and her shining skin send off light. I watch her the way a child watches its mother. She kicks up water like a fish, one of those flying kinds of fish, and then she turns and looks at me and I look right back. She walks toward me through the water and I stand there and let her. The light is in her eyes but I can see her fine.

And so it goes, each of us trying to surprise the other. The day proceeds and soon the sky begins to darken, until in that argument of light, the brilliant yellow concedes to gray. That day, my mother had so much sun on her I thought she’d become sun, herself. That day, and every day before it, and after, we seduced one another, until, by evening, in the clearer light of dusk, we were back together again, one body, one skin.
One afternoon walking along Michigan Avenue, Rose collapsed. She was right in front of a hospital and it happened that a nurse was nearby, so the nurse ran to her, but she was already dead when the nurse felt for her pulse. They carried her into the hospital and tried to revive her for over an hour, putting electrodes on her chest and doing CPR, but finally they gave up. Then they telephoned her husband, Andrew, whose name they found in her address book. She was thirty-three years old. Her heart just stopped.

They had to do an autopsy, because the law required it. Any unexplained death. They opened her chest and found her heart. They told Andrew she had myocardiopathy. “What?” he said.
“My-o-car-di-op-a-thy,” they said, very slowly, separating the syllables.

He asked what that was, and they said, Disease of the heart.

For the next four days he was barely alone for a moment. When he went to the bathroom—that was all. The four days carried him along inside of them. He felt as if he were floating, so empty and light that he had floated up into the middle of the living room, where he moved like a slow soap bubble bouncing gently in the air. Everything was very slow and weightless. The people around him—his family, Rose’s family, friends coming and going—seemed to him like padding in a room, placed there to soften the hard surfaces, so when he bounced against the walls they would not harm him. Sometimes he had the sensation that they had lifted him up and were holding him in their hands, like a bride or groom being lifted by the crowd and carried through the room. People asked him questions, which he answered. Would you like some tea? they asked, and like a small boy in school he tried to summon the correct answer. More difficult were the general questions: Can I get you anything? or, Are you all right? These questions required great energy, like essay questions at school, where one had to search not just for a fact but for an idea, a whole array of thought, and the reasoning that framed it. It was exhausting, and the exhaustion saved him. By the end of a day all he wanted to do was sleep, and he could, he was that exhausted, even grief could not keep his eyes open.

Then everyone disappeared as suddenly as they had come. It was like a switch that had been turned on and then off again. All the noise, the weight in the room of the bodies occupying it, and his own weightlessness as the bodies carried him from hour to hour, lifting him up on the sound of their voices. Then a sudden silence, and the weight returned to his body, and he fell with a great dull thud back into his life.

He did what any sane man would do, which was, whatever he had done before. He set the alarm for the same hour he always had, when he awakened he followed the same routine he always had, he drove to the office and parked his car in the same

*The House in the Woods* 19
parking lot, he took the stairs to his second-storey office, he sat at his desk, he drank his coffee and read the newspaper. He noticed that if he kept his day **compressed**, the individual minutes occupied and accounted for, that he could have some moments where he did not think of Rose at all. When enough of these moments occurred next to one another, a great emptiness would come over him, like a wave of air that had no oxygen in it, and he would get dizzy and feel actually ill. Self-loathing, which felt exactly like a hangover, would occupy him. It would occupy him rather than, say, "course through" him—a hangover was like an ache in the blood, something thickening and coagulating that could not move at all, that seemed to turn the blood thick and sluggish and poisoned. If an hour went by in which he did not suffer consciously he would despise himself for his hardness of heart, worse, his great emptiness, the looming lack in him.

His friends telephoned and asked him how he was. "How am I?" he said back to them. "I don't think we're very well designed," he said. He was an architect. He thought in these terms.

When Rose died he was right in the middle of building their house on a parcel of land that fronted on Lake Michigan. The house was ingenious. The bedrock was very low and so the foundation had to be very deep, and the bulk of the cost was on account of the depth of the foundation. So he designed a tall and narrow house, rising like a tree out of its deep efficient roots. When Rose died the foundation was in and the supporting timbers were up, and the house was like a skeleton growing out of the ground. He loved this stage in the life of a house, when it was just beginning to be recognizable. This was when he got tender-hearted about a house, and also wistful, because from here on in it changed so quickly. Every day something new happened to it, so that from one day to the next it never looked the same. It was an energetic thing now, a house-in-progress, like some young animal growing every day.

He was planning to take Rose to see it when she died instead.
Until it gave out on Michigan Avenue, anyone would have said that Rose’s heart was about as sturdy as a heart could be. It was a strong heart, in the way we speak about hearts. In the way that doctors consider hearts, engineering-wise, it may have been a doomed thing, electrically doomed, a pump with faulty wiring, circuitry with a built-in short just waiting to blow. But Andrew had seen it hard at work in the world, filled with will and desire, trying to have its way.

He was planning to take Rose to see the house, but also he was planning something else, which was that he might leave her. This had not quite reached the stage of a plan; like the house, it was more of a skeleton than a fleshed-out inhabitable building. It was not, even, an intention yet, so it was not even as far along as the house, for the house at its very outset was at least an intention. It was not, perhaps, even yet a thought. It was an underground thing, still subterranean, when she died.

The two together—her dying just when he was beginning to formulate an idea, a possibility, of life without her—the two together made him dizzy, as if he couldn’t get enough air in his lungs. He had a physical sensation, of something in his head splitting, leaving a hollow space in the center, where cold air would rush in; the cold air hurt, like the sensation of cold on an exposed nerve in a tooth. He thought this might be the sensation of guilt, or freedom. He had only a passing acquaintance with either of these. Maybe it was relief, at being saved.

At night he would fall asleep with Rose beside him, thinking “Please, God, get me out of this, let me leave.” He thought in these terms—let me leave—because he thought he could never do it by his own agency, without some intervention. Some hand of God, some deus ex machina, would have to release him. He loved her, but he saw that love mattered only marginally. He was like an animal caught in a trap, that would chew its own leg off to get out.

_The House in the Woods_ 21
It wasn't her fault. He was obsessed with her. He thought marrying her would cure him, but it did not. Marrying her would alter the equation. He had a way of seeing things—if something was wrong, change the equation. You didn’t try to fix the thing that was wrong—you just altered something that was within your power to alter. Then you waited. Something would be changed.

When he married Rose, some things did change, because in some respects his theories of changing the equation made elegant sense. They were as elegant as mathematics or houses. They changed in this way: when he married her he found himself tightening his grip, not loosening it. He thought—he did not think this outright and only realized later that it had operated as a kind of subconscious principle—he thought that by marrying her she would somehow rub off on him, that he would take on her coloration through the osmosis of marriage. Instead he became more terribly himself. He was certain he would lose her. She would know him too well now—where before he might have succeeded in weaving a kind of spell around her, so that she might imagine a life with him as something wonderful, now that life was here, and was no longer a thing to be imagined. He thought reality must be a poor second. The essential dullness and daininess of marriage—of him—would overcome her.

He thought this, in part, not solely because he thought himself a dull fellow (although he did) but because of the way he saw her. He saw her as so full of spirit and adventure, so bold and brazen and confident, that he could not imagine her bound by the order and sequence of daily life. For instance, her eyes. They were always alive in some way that astonished him. She had a monochromatic look to her—ochre-colored hair and skin and eyes. Her eyes moved from green to hazel to gray. They had a quality of light and movement to them that he was always trying to account for—was it actual, physical? Was it a variety of pigment? Maybe some eyes are more solidly colored than others, so they seem flat, but Rose's eyes were like masterful paintings, layer upon layer of glaze providing the molding and translucence of real flesh. In an art history course he remembered learning that some painters use thirty or even forty layers of glaze to achieve their effects. Oh, her eyes, her smile. Her smile was just as bad as
her eyes, just as bold and flashy. She seemed, in her body and features, to always be saying “Come on! Come with me!” But she moved quickly from one thing to another. He wanted to hold her down, to make her be still. She could not keep still, or be kept still. When he tried to hold her in his arms she would begin to wriggle after a few minutes.

Also, she had an eagerness, a readiness about her. She could be angry but she was never sullen. She moved from one thing to another, she did everything. She said, “I don’t want to miss anything.” She ran in local races, she went fishing with her father, she took cooking classes. Her restlessness seemed to fuel rather than frustrate her. When they went out to dinner, she’d be drumming her fingers on the table. “Let’s go,” she’d say. She never wanted to linger, anywhere. She would take his hand. Then she’d say: “Let’s go for a walk.” He’d find himself doing things he hadn’t planned—strolling through carnivals, learning to play the Bolivian flute. This was part of what was wonderful about her—how she opened him up, enlivened him. But it was terrible about her as well. He grew dimmer and paler.

Also, she was willful. When he thought of her, it was the thing he thought of most. There seemed to be no gap, no lacuna, between her will and her life, as if, like some youthful God in his early, eager stages, she would will a thing and it was so.

For Andrew, all this conspired to oppress him. He was simply not enough like her. If they had been on a level plane somehow—she with her strength, he with his—it might have been all right. But alongside her liveliness, her sheer good health, he grew more and more diminished, more and more inward.

He began to think in terms of saving himself. He would think: “I’ve got to get away from her, get away.” Was she never sad? Was she never wracked by self-doubt? He thought he would marry her and come upon these secrets. It was not that she was constant, or in any way perfect, or even an illusion of it; she could be moody, irritable, bored, argumentative, abrasive, difficult. It was just that her array of flaws provided him with no relief—she did not have the right faults, the ones that might relieve what oppressed him. She did not get depressed, despairing, filled with self-doubt and self-hatred, she did not grow bitter, nor petulant. This had never occurred to him—that just as people
have different strengths so they have different flaws. He thought everyone shared the same hidden treasure of demons.

So he would have to get away from her. He was suffocating. He could not breathe in the heady atmosphere of her energy.

He would think about leaving—daydream about it. But he did not know how he would be able to, he could not resist her. He daydreamed about moving away to another city. He daydreamed he packed a single suitcase and took a train somewhere, anywhere, leaving no forwarding address. She would never find him. He would have a new life in a small, arid town in the Southwest, where no lush greens would reproach him. He would live among cactus and adobe, in the dry brittle glory of the desert.

He was beginning to think that really, he ought to do something about all this, take some action, get some help, when the phone rang, and the person on the telephone said, "Your wife is dead."

A few weeks after Rose died on Michigan Avenue, Andrew remembered the house. He had not been out to the site since her death. It was a brilliant day in October, the sun was strong and warm and the sky was the brilliant blue of autumn. Each season has its own blue sky, they are never the same. The light differs, the blue takes on a particular cast. He took a long lunch and drove out to the site. The long thin house rose upward among the pines. Between the wooden beams were the generous spaces where the windows would be, open to the woods and sky. These spaces seemed to him like open-hearted, smiling creatures—generous spirits with their arms open in welcome, in pleasure.

He climbed the half-finished stairs and stood on a landing of wide planks. He could touch the branches of trees with his hand. He was a stranger to himself, entirely. He felt like someone shot out of a cannon, shooting around the planet like an arrow; someone catapulted out of the earth's atmosphere, weightless and as clear and empty of experience or character as a newborn, so that anything might happen to him, anything. He thought, "I am sprung."
High up among the trees, he looked boldly into the blue sky. A breeze might knock me down, he thought coolly. He awaited retribution, the hand of God. It did not come, although it would—it would. It would come, unrecognizable. It was called living.
Gone
Fishing

They are saying what it is that people say, about fish, about how there are other fish in the sea.
I shake my head. "No fish," I say. "No fish here."

This is what happened.
I got an e-mail from the man in Africa. E-mail is short for electronic mail, the latest technological feat around here. We do not send letters nor even memoranda. Especially we do not send letters overseas. If you want to send a letter to a person in Africa
you end up having to use a courier service which costs rather more than an airmail stamp. So nowadays you send an e-mail.

E-mail is how I had my romance with the man in Africa. E-mail figures prominently. I tried a letter once, typed out on my word processor, a three-page, single-spaced letter, which I sent by courier service since I wanted it to get there. The man in Africa sent me a five-line e-mail in reply. It was the longest communication I ever had from him.

The man from Africa came to New York from time to time, and we were just about at one of those times, when yesterday I got this e-mail: “Regrettfully, my wife has decided to join me on this trip so I’ll have to take a rain check. Maybe next time . . .” I thought what he meant was *regrettable*. One thing I was sure he did not mean to say was that his wife was filled with regret at the prospect of this trip. After all, if she was so filled with regret about it, then why bother to come? Let her just stay in Africa, if she’s so full of regret.

But I didn’t think she was, so I thought he meant *regrettably*. I thought briefly about sending him an e-mail asking if he hadn’t in fact meant regrettable, but I decided not to.

I did, however, send an answer, and quickly. I am not a person who thinks things over. Thinking things over is apt to be confusing. First you think one thing and then you think another. Better, I say, to just act, and act quickly, before you get a grip on yourself. You get a grip on yourself and the next thing you know, you do nothing at all. The possibilities are innumerable, and with so many of them staring you in the face, you had clearly better do nothing, and so that is what you do, day after day, until so much time has gone by it would now appear rather beside the point to do anything at all.

On the other hand that is not an unreasonable approach. In fact I would go so far as to say that it is a superior approach, an exceptional approach. But action suited me better. I had a horoscope that was all cardinal signs, and cardinal signs initiate. They do not sit around and think things over.

In the matter of thinking things over, I would have to take a rain check.

So I sent an answer within, I would say, a second or two. I
wrote: "Forget the rain check. Forget the whole thing. I guess I made a mistake."

Forget thinking things over, I say.

The man in Africa did not answer my e-mail.

What I began to think was, the man in Africa was breathing a big sigh of relief.

This only made me more angry, so after a day or two I sent another e-mail trying to cancel out the first.

Doing anything at all was always better than doing nothing. You stir the waters and nothing happens, so you stir again.

When I wasn't stirring waters, I was feeling pretty low. I ran into a fellow by the elevator who said Hello, how are you, etc., and I said to him, "My heart is broken," and he said, What can I tell you? Men are no good. Then he said what it is that people say, about the other fish in the sea. I just shook my head and said, No fish.

I was feeling low in the way that makes you run over a list of the people you know with the idea that maybe one of them could say something that might make you feel better. I called a couple of friends and then I did something that I guess you could call, let us put it bluntly, stupid. For want of a better word I guess you could say, stupid. Because it is not smart, it is certainly not smart, to call your ex-husband when you are feeling low, especially when you are feeling low about a man. But that is what I did. I called my ex-husband thinking he might tell me how wonderful it had been to be married to me. Regrettably, he did not. I said, "I'm feeling awfully blue," and he said nothing.

"Well," I said, "you don't say."

"I'm not exactly the person who can help you," he said.

28 Gone Fishing
Regretfully.
Maybe he said it regretfully.

I read the e-mail over and over, the one the man in Africa had sent to me.
Taking a rain check is the kind of thing he would say, even about a rendezvous. His e-mails to me were usually a brief assemblage of stock phrases to which I ascribed deep meaning and great depth of feeling, still waters running deep and all that. This was, after all, a numbers man. This was not a words man. Allowances have to be made, and I made them.

I went to a dinner party and I saw a woman there whom I was not especially fond of. She had a husband, which made me even less fond of her. She also had some gorgeous hair, which I do not, which made me all the more less fond of her. I was thinking of just not speaking to her, I was thinking of just pretending I didn’t see her, but she turned around and said hello to me—quite warmly, I have to admit—and asked me how I was.
“Awful,” I said. “My heart’s been broken.”
“Oh, I’m sorry!” she said, and put her arm around me, and all of a sudden I quite liked her.
She patted my head. “You know,” she said. “Other fish. There are other fish in the sea.”
“No there aren’t,” I said.

Let us face it.
Let us be frank.
You reach a certain age and there are not so many fish around.
For some of us there were never very many, and it gets less from there.
There are whole cities famous for their lack of, shall we say,
fish. Big, fishless cities, and this is one of them. This is the big-
gest, the most fishless city of all.

It is not surprising, it is not altogether unnatural, to try
to make a silk purse out of a sow's ear. There must be a fish
equivalent for a sow but in the matter of fish, I am no expert.

All of which was why I decided to send the second e-mail to
the man from Africa.

I realized that this was a risky thing to do, since there was al-
ways the possibility that he had asked his wife to come on the
trip in which case I was only going to get into more trouble in-
stead of out of it.

But if you stir the waters and nothing happens, then I say, stir
again.

Get those fish swimming! Move those fish!

I did not hear from the man in Africa, not even after the sec-
ond e-mail.

My ex-husband, however, did telephone. He said he was sorry
if he had been a little abrupt the other day, but I'd caught him at
a bad time, etc., etc. He said he was sorry I was feeling bad and if
I wanted to I should just go ahead and tell him all about it, which
I did. Then he said, Well, you know, there are other fish in the
sea.

I said he was a sweetheart for calling me, but that in the mat-
ter of finding another fish, I would have to take a rain check.
This was back in 1967. Bill Hilgendorff was going to Formosa for the summer. Formosa was still Formosa then. I never heard anybody call it Taiwan. Formosa had a certain ring to it. Later when I found out what had happened, I would walk around the city with the words ringing in my ears: *Died climbing a mountain in Formosa. Died falling off a mountain in Formosa.*

I fell in love with him in ninth grade, when I sat next to him in English class. It took me no time at all to fall in love with him. He had blue eyes like ice, and black hair, and there was something ir-
regular about him that suited me. I would whisper to him during class, and try to make clever remarks. Once he showed me how he could swallow a cold capsule, an ornaiud spansule it was called, the kind that had hundreds of multi-colored pellets inside a shell of clear plastic, without water. Not only did I find this amazing, but at the time I also thought the fact that he showed me this was a sure sign of his requited love. Today I've no idea why the one should have led me to believe the other, but back then I thought he was looking for ways to pay attention to me.

Bill Hilgendorff handed me a capsule. "Here," he said. "You try."

I put the pill in my mouth but I couldn't get it down. "That's okay," he whispered.

I always had the idea that I had to do something out of the ordinary, something quite stunning and astonishing, to distinguish myself. I thought that back then, and I still do I suppose. So when I fell in love with Bill Hilgendorff I decided to think of the most unexpected thing I could possibly do, and then do it. I owe the rest to my limited imagination. One day in English class I passed Bill Hilgendorff a note. "I love you," the note said. He folded it up and looked straight ahead. Then I whispered to him that he could live his whole life long and no one would ever love him as I did. I thought this was an amazing and daring and irresistible thing to do. Bill Hilgendorff thought otherwise, it would seem, because he asked Miss Blackman to change his seat. He did this not after class but by raising his hand right there in the middle of class and saying, Miss Blackman, could you please change my seat because Nina keeps bothering me.

This was not my first taste of humiliation. But it was an important step in sealing my resolve—not my resolve to make him love me, but my resolve to vanquish humiliation—to ennoble it, give it a good name. I was trying out the idea that it was something indeed to be humiliated and hold your head up. Maybe I thought that would give me a kind of license.

Miss Blackman did change Bill Hilgendorff's seat, but we stayed friends anyway, at least for a while.
I always thought of him as Bill Hilgendorff, the two names together. I thought Bill Hilgendorff had a real ring to it, just like died falling off a mountain in Formosa had a real ring to it. Of course I never called him Bill Hilgendorff to his face, but that was who he was in my mind, and it still is.

We were friends, as I say. We got together from time to time. One day after a snowstorm, when we had the day off school, Bill Hilgendorff called me and came over. There was more than a foot of snow on the ground and it was pristine and glittering. We started throwing snowballs at each other, and then Bill Hilgendorff lay down in the snow and made angels, moving his arms and legs to make a fan shape in the snow. I lay down to make an angel and he suddenly was on top of me, rubbing snow in my face and trying to get it down my jacket. I laughed and shouted and he rolled over so that I was on top, and I got some snow down his jacket, and then we rolled over again, like happy acrobats.

Friday nights, after the basketball games, we would all go to Bernie’s. Bernie’s was the local diner. We’d have something to eat, the girls at one booth, the boys at another, and then we’d decide whose house we were going to. Usually it was Lillian Greenberg’s house. Her parents were always out but they had a full-time maid and considerable amounts of money, so keeping us in food and cleaning up after us wasn’t a problem. We would play records, forty-fives, but no one ever danced. All the girls had a crush on somebody but usually nothing happened, although there was one Friday night, when we were Juniors, that everyone ended up making out. Not Bill Hilgendorff and I, though. We were just friends, it seemed, the famous just friends, and we seemed stuck there. I was the one that wanted something different.

But there was one time Bill Hilgendorff and I almost did get together. Bill Hilgendorff called me one Sunday and said: I’ve been thinking, and I think I might like you.

Like me how? I said.

That way, he said.

We decided that I should come over right away. I had high hopes of a rather foggy nature. My store of particulars was slim,
after kisses and embraces, but no one could have been more enthusiastic.

This was in 1962. Bill Hilgendorff fell off the mountain in Formosa in 1967, after we'd all finished college, but that phone call was in 1962. I walked to his house, my heart pounding against my ribs. Bill Hilgendorff opened the door. I had never been to his house before; Bill Hilgendorff never had people over after the basketball games, or after anything else for that matter, and not before either. I was hushed and somber, as if I were in a temple or church. I thought something momentous and final had happened and that from now on everything would be changed, and forever.

Bill Hilgendorff had made a fire.

We stretched out before the fire, lying on our stomachs with our legs stretched behind us, our faces propped up in our hands. I could think of nothing to say. I thought we ought to discuss the momentous event. "So you decided you like me," I said.

"I guess I've always liked you," Bill Hilgendorff said.

"What made you decide to say something?" I said.

"I don't know," Bill Hilgendorff said. Then he said, "I think it was the play." We were both in the Junior Play. We were doing a musical: Good News. Bill Hilgendorff had a second lead and I was in the chorus. "I liked how you looked when you tried out," Bill Hilgendorff said. "And when we rehearse."

We kissed a few times. I wanted more to happen, but nothing did. We didn't even kiss that much. Actually I don't remember much of that day at all, but I went home believing in it—believing that my life had been transformed.

When I got home I found a picture that had Bill Hilgendorff in it and I cut out his face and put it in my gold locket.

The next day I was sitting in the auditorium watching the rehearsal. They were doing a number I wasn't in. I was sitting next to a girl named Robin Kleinman and we started talking, and I found myself telling her that Bill Hilgendorff and I were going together. Going together was the way we put it then, in 1962. I opened my locket and showed her his picture, as if he'd given it to me.
That was when he stopped talking to me for good.

Robin told her boyfriend Lloyd Grossman that Bill Hilgendorff and I were going together and Lloyd Grossman, who lived across the street from Bill Hilgendorff, said, I hear you and Nina are going together.

For the rest of our Junior year, and for our Senior year as well, Bill Hilgendorff wouldn’t speak to me. He wouldn’t say, “Hello,” or “Excuse me” or “Goodbye.” He wouldn’t say any words to me at all, and he wouldn’t look at me either. If it was my house everyone went to on Friday after the basketball game, Bill Hilgendorff would sit outside in the car, whoever car it was. He would sit there all night, till two or three in the morning if that was how late everyone stayed. Sitting alone in the car was much better I suppose than just not showing up. Sitting alone in the car, in the dark, was declarative, an active dismissal.

He never spoke to me again during high school.

He started going around with a girl who was a Senior. I’d see them driving around in her Cadillac convertible. Blue, it was.

At first I’d thought I could do something to make things better. When we had our performance of Good News, Bill Hilgendorff’s father came backstage to congratulate him, and I walked right up to him and introduced myself. “Mr. Hilgendorff,” I said, “I’m going to marry your son.” I thought this was absolutely charming, just the way I thought it was stunning to tell Bill Hilgendorff back in ninth grade that I was in love with him, but Mr. Hilgendorff didn’t seem charmed in the least, although he did, I suppose, seem stunned.

When we were Seniors, and everyone took their yearbooks around for everyone else to sign, I handed mine to Bill Hilgendorff. If you asked someone to sign your yearbook, they usually wrote something personal. Your girlfriends wrote long treatises on the back pages or inside covers. Even the boys that didn’t like you particularly wrote things like, “Good luck to a swell girl” or “You’re sure to do well in the future.” But when I handed my yearbook to Bill Hilgendorff, he handed it back to me with just this written across his picture: Bill Hilgendorff.

No “Good luck in the future.” No “Best wishes.”
Sometimes I think I made it up, that he died. It sounds like one of the melodramatic things I'd cook up. He probably didn't die at all. He probably didn't even go to Formosa, for all I know. Only I know he did. He was home for three weeks before he went to Formosa to climb the mountain, and I saw a good deal of him. So I know he really did go to Formosa. As for his dying there, that was just hearsay, but unless you're there in the place where the body meets its end, in the room, or the car, or on the mountain with the body when it falls, then it's bound to be just hearsay, isn't it.

Our senior year, the second year that Bill Hilgendorff wasn't speaking to me, the second year that Bill Hilgendorff would sit in the car parked in front of my house rather than come in and rather than just not show up, Bill Hilgendorff got a new girl-friend. This girl was a year below us. Her name was Janice; her reputation was that she was pretty but kind of dumb. But Janice and Bill Hilgendorff got to be a regular couple. The school had regular couples, kids that weren't just going out together but that got to be some other status altogether. They became famous, celebrities. Everyone said their names in one breath, as if their names were one word. Bill Hilgendorff and Janice got to be in that category.

In our high school, this was real status. This was what you dreamed of when you went to sleep at night, if you were a girl. If you were a boy I suppose you dreamed about being on the basketball team or the football team, or maybe you dreamed about sex, but this was 1962, in Woodmere, in the Five Towns. I think our idea of sex was just feeling each other, rubbing our hands on one another. There was one girl in our class who got to be rather famous because she had sex and said so, and she wasn't a slut. She said she was in love and she believed in having sex if you were in love. People had a grudging kind of respect for her but they whispered behind her back anyway. If anyone else was having sex, I didn't know about it then, and I don't know
about it now. I know none of my friends were, and I know I wasn’t, although if Bill Hilgendorff had tried to do anything with me that Sunday afternoon in front of his fireplace, or any other time or in front of any other place for that matter, I probably would have done it, even if I wasn’t all too sure what it was I was doing.

Bill Hilgendorff and Janice were an item right up until the next year, when we went off to college. I went to Vassar and Bill Hilgendorff went to Yale, so it would have been convenient if we could have been friends. I never saw him at mixers, I guess because he was still in love with Janice. But I saw him that Christmas. Lillian Greenberg had a party over the holidays. This time we drank Scotch instead of Coca-Cola, and Bill Hilgendorff was drinking a lot of Scotch. He was there without Janice. Halfway through the evening, that is, about halfway through the Scotchs he would end up consuming, Bill Hilgendorff stood up and pointed a finger at me. “Only Nina understands me!” he said. This had more of the ring of accusation than acknowledgment, but I was glad anyway. Then he repeated my name over and over. “No one will ever love me the way you do,” he said, just as I had instructed him all those years ago. He came over to me. “Only you understand me,” he repeated.

Then he just wept.

After that we were friends for life.

Of course, as events turned out, friends for life didn’t actually amount to much, at least not in years. But it is fair to say that we were—friends for life.

He was weeping, that Christmas, and forgiving me, because Janice, who was pretty but, well, kind of dumb, was through with him, and he was suffering, maybe for the first time.

I was an old hand at suffering, I told him. I was just the right friend for him to have. My foggy afternoon desire had been stilled; I’d discovered exoticia at college, in the form of Southern boys, and no Jewish boy from Woodmere would ever thrill my heart again. For the rest of my life, right up until now, I only wanted what was different from me. I loved Southern boys and

Bill Hilgendorff

37
then Englishmen and once a fellow from South Africa, but I never again loved a boy from Woodmere, or even one from Manhattan or any of the other boroughs. So when Bill Hilgendorff wept on my shoulder at the party that Christmas, the time was right for us to be friends; neither of us wanted any more from the other.

Bill Hilgendorff changed.

When he got back to college he began to take LSD, and I guess he liked it because soon he took it all the time.

He got to be a person that suffered.

He called me on the telephone at three o’clock in the morning and said, “Give me one reason that I shouldn’t kill myself.” He said that if a person was unhappy more than fifty percent of the time didn’t it make sense for that person to kill himself? I laughed and stayed on the phone with him until the sun came up and he decided he wouldn’t kill himself after all.

Some weekends, Bill Hilgendorff used to drive up to Vassar on his motorcycle. Sometimes he took me for rides, sometimes we rode all the way into Manhattan. I even bought myself a leather jacket, which I still have, although I no longer wear it. I’ve grown timid now, and cautious about my life if not my heart, but back then I didn’t know a motorcycle was a dangerous thing, and I loved sitting behind him on his big bike, with my arms around him. We didn’t even wear helmets. He had the biggest motorcycle you could buy. I don’t remember the model number but back then I knew it, and used to throw the name and model number around in conversation.

We got to know each other’s friends, and got to be friends with each other’s friends. One night one of my friends at Vassar was so depressed she said she didn’t know what to do, and another friend said, “Call Bill Hilgendorff, he’ll cheer you up.” So she did, with all of us in the room, and when he answered the phone he said, even before he said hello, “Who could be so miserable as to want to talk to Bill Hilgendorff?” We couldn’t hear him but we could see and hear her, and what she did was laugh, and later she told us what he’d said, and that we’d been right, he had cheered her up.
Here is how Bill Hilgendorff got to Formosa.
On one of his LSD excursions, he saw God.
After he saw God he gave away all his possessions, including his motorcycle.
He gave away everything he owned, except his clothes, in the space of a single day.
This made no difference to our being friends. Now he talked to me about God instead of taking me for rides on his motorcycle, but our being friends never had much to do with content. I guess you’d say it was about history.
The God he saw, the God he met on his adventure, was an Eastern God, not a Western one. We were Jewish, Bill Hilgendorff and I, along with most everybody else in Woodmere, and we’d never been religious; but the God who came to Bill Hilgendorff’s room at Yale wasn’t Jewish or Christian or even Western. He was the God of the East, he was the God that is in you, the divinity that lurks and hides within you, what they call, I suppose, the divine spark.
I thought the phrase divine spark had a real ring to it.
After Bill Hilgendorff saw God he changed his name. That is, he didn’t really change his name; he returned to it. Bill Hilgendorff’s real name was actually Selwyn William Hilgendorff. He’d been named Selwyn after an army buddy of his father’s who had died during the war. He had told me this back in high school, before he stopped speaking to me, and he said he didn’t think Selwyn was exactly the name you wanted if you went to High School in Woodmere Long Island. But after Bill Hilgendorff discovered God, he stopped calling himself Bill and from then on introduced himself to everyone he met as Selwyn, and told everyone who already knew him to call him Selwyn. But I never did. I kept calling him Bill, and I kept thinking of him, when I thought of him, as Bill Hilgendorff. Things get a certain ring to them, and that’s the way they lodge in you.
After he gave away his possessions in a single day and started calling himself Selwyn instead of Bill, he found a guru. His guru was from India, and his name was Baba, and Bill Hilgendorff became a disciple, or student, or whatever it is you become when
you follow a guru. He was ahead of his times. Eastern thought and gurus were only just being discovered across the country, in colleges and universities across America, as if for the first time, the way people in colleges and universities always think they’re thinking something for the first time that no one else has ever thought before. I’d minored in Religion myself, with a special focus on Eastern Religion. I read books like *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*, and books by Alan Watts. We didn’t really have the phrase *flower children* back then, but we would soon, and I guess it would be fair to say that Bill Hilgendornff was in the vanguard of the flower children. And this was something real in him, not a posture; it hadn’t yet made its way in the world sufficiently for anyone to take it on as a posture. The first ones, the early ones, they always just meant it.

Bill Hilgendornff once took me to the Baba’s birthday party. The Baba wasn’t actually there himself, but his picture was, high up on a stage. Bill Hilgendornff never tried to explain much about his new religion to me, or maybe it was a philosophy, I was never sure, but later I learned that a picture of the Guru, or his name uttered or in print, could have the same power that his actual presence had.

The birthday party was a strange affair. It was held in an old theater, and a number of the guests performed, I suppose in tribute to the Baba, which I think is how he was generally referred to. This birthday party began to take on a crazy air. A woman got up on stage and sang “Ah Sweet Mystery of Life” in a high voice and a little off-key, as though she were a character in an old black-and-white movie, maybe the Marx Brothers or W. C. Fields, or something like that, and I was all but overtaken by a fit of laughing. I had to bite my lip to keep quiet, and anyway I had to lower my head because even if I was succeeding in keeping quiet I didn’t have very good control over my face. I was smiling kind of crazily, and not in the reverent way I thought must be expected, so on the whole it seemed the wiser course to keep my head down. My face was as red as a child’s when it laughs or cries. I couldn’t really keep from laughing after all. I suppose I was almost happy.

Bill Hilgendornff stopped taking LSD, I guess on account of having found God. But he never did try to acquire again all that
he had given away, he kept calling himself Selwyn, and he kept
go ing to the Baba's birthday parties, and he kept studying the
Baba's works.

Which was how he got to Formosa.

Baba had an ashram in Formosa, and also there was a moun-
tain there, where the Baba had gone once on a retreat. I don't re-
member the name of the mountain, if I ever knew. Bill Hilgen-
dorff always referred to it just as a mountain on Formosa. I guess
he thought it had a ring to it.

Bill Hilgendorff never tried to explain his new thinking to me,
not precisely. But when I was unhappy, he told me to look within
for love, not outside myself. I was an agitated kind of person, and
he told me that I should seek to quiet my mind.

I said that nobody loved me, and Bill Hilgendorff looked at me
in utter amazement, and said, "But I love you," he said. "How
can you not know that I love you?"

"I know that you love me," I said. "But not that way. I want
earthy love," I said.

"All love is the same," he said.
"I don't want God's love," I said. "I want earthly love."

"All love is the same," he repeated, as if hearing it twice would
persuade me.

"I don't think so," I said.

Then we looked at each other, as if looking at each other were
some kind of escalation of our argument. I looked at his ice blue
eyes and his thick black hair, which was long now, to his shoul-
ders. I don't have eyes like his; he really does have—did have—
the most amazing steely icy probing eyes. Mine are small and
hidden and darting.

He sighed. "I feel estranged from you when you say that," he
said.

"You should never feel estranged from me," I said, although I
could not think of the reason why.

Once we were walking in the city and he went to hail a cab. He
stepped out for the cab and didn't see another car and I pulled
him out of the way. "You saved my life," he said. I laughed and
said, no, the other car wouldn't really have hit him, cars don't re-
ally hit people, things like that don't really happen. He was just
being melodramatic, I said.

Bill Hilgendorff
Right before Bill Hilgendorff went to Formosa, we went to the beach one day with one of my friends from college. My friend asked Bill Hilgendorff why he hadn't wanted to be my boyfriend back in high school. Bill Hilgendorff thought about that—he always thought about a question carefully before he answered it—and when he answered, he looked right at me. He had a bemused smile on his face, as if we shared a secret. “I’ll tell you why I wouldn’t be her boyfriend,” he said. “Because there was no percentage in it. Socially, there was no percentage in going out with Nina.”

“Look what you’ve done to me!” I said to him. “You’ve set me on a course for life—unrequited love.” I thought maybe it was even true.

Bill Hilgendorff and I both laughed. We must have laughed for a solid five minutes.

“Well it’s funny, but it’s not that funny,” my friend from college said.

Bill Hilgendorff’s older sister called me to tell me that he’d died. She’d known me a little, the way older sisters and brothers know their younger sibling’s friends. Bill Hilgendorff once told me how she’d rolled down the stairs with her boyfriend. I never forgot that. I never saw it happen myself, since I was only inside Bill Hilgendorff’s house that one Sunday afternoon, but I always had that image in my mind, the image of his sister rolling down the stairs with her boyfriend. As images go, you could say it had a certain ring to it.

Bill Hilgendorff’s sister had thick black hair just like his, but her eyes were different, they were hazel, and sparkling, not icy like his. I’d looked up to her. Everyone knew she was the smartest girl in her class. She’d been editor of the high school yearbook her year. But she was that sort of girl, every class has one, that does everything right, and is too serious. I was one of the smartest girls in my class but I was offbeat, a cut-up; I acted more like a boy than a girl in the ways I tried to draw attention to myself. As Bill Hilgendorff put it, there was no percentage in hook-
ing up with me. So even though I was maybe as smart as she was I was a different sort of smart than Bill Hilgendorff’s sister. But she had a kind of affection for me, I think. Many years later, many years after that summer in 1967 when Bill Hilgendorff fell off a mountain in Formosa, I took my little girl, who was three at the time, to one of the private schools in New York for an interview. Even at three they interviewed them. And there was Bill Hilgendorff’s older sister. She was the Director of Admissions. She was married so she had a different last name, and I didn’t know until I set eyes on her that the Director of Admissions was somebody I knew.

She gave me a hug. There was no question but that my daughter would be accepted to the school, and in fact she was, and in fact she went there, and goes there still.

When Bill Hilgendorff’s older sister told me that he’d died, I started to cry right away, so that I couldn’t speak clearly. I didn’t want her to hear that I was crying because I saw that it must be worse for her. I thought I didn’t really have any rights in the matter, not like a sister did, but in fact maybe I was wrong about that, because maybe it was the case that no one had ever loved Bill Hilgendorff the way I had.

At last I said, “How?” and Bill Hilgendorff’s sister said, “He fell from the mountain.” Later, when it went humming through my brain, the way it would for the rest of my life, at least the rest of my life so far, I turned it into fell off the mountain, instead of fell from the mountain.

I guess you could say it got to be my mantra.

Bill Hilgendorff’s sister said to me, “Anyway he believed in God.”

I went to the funeral, and after the funeral I went back to Bill Hilgendorff’s house. I kept thinking how often I’d daydreamed about this—being in the bosom of his family, with his mother and his father and sister and his many aunts and uncles and cousins. His father was one of five brothers, the famous Hilgendorff brothers, they were famous in the Five Towns. They’d grown up in Cedarhurst; my aunt had been in love with one of
them, Rafe, the second to youngest. I knew all their names. I used to think, when we were back in high school, that the fact that my aunt had been in love with one of them was a sure sign that Bill Hilgendorff and I were meant for one another.

I knew the names of his cousins as well. Many of his cousins were much older than he was—had been—since the family had been so large and his father had married late; his father had been over forty when Bill was born. My family was the same way, and I had always taken that as a sign as well. Also, Bill Hilgendorff’s mother was very small, and his father was very tall, just the way I was small and Bill Hilgendorff was tall, and I thought that was just one more sign, one more mark of the order of things, coincidences that are not coincidences but are the eye of God, any God you like, looking out for you.

Back at the house, I talked for a little while to Bill Hilgendorff’s sister. She told me that their very last conversation, right before he’d left for Formosa, had been about death. He said to her, “Will you ever be surprised one day when you wake up dead!” They didn’t see eye to eye; not since he’d taken LSD and found the Baba and given away his belongings and started calling himself Selwyn.

When Bill Hilgendorff died, I started waiting for my life to change. I thought that if something as momentous as a person’s dying happened in your life, it was only right that you should be changed by it. I wondered if, when somebody died, all that happened was that you missed them. The thought horrified me, so rather than think it, I waited for my life to change.

There were a few years when it seemed to, when I found myself not in unrequited love but in ordinary love, the kind I always imagined happened to everybody but me, Bill Hilgendorff having set me on my course for life. I got married and had a child, the same one that had the interview at the school where Bill Hilgendorff’s sister was the Director of Admissions. But after a few years I found myself not married any more, and back to my old ways. Then I began to believe that nothing ever really changed, not very much. Things got overlaid. Themes got enlarged. But something stayed the same, and usually it was something you wanted to be different.
But I always had the idea that maybe my life would have turned out different, I mean better, if only Bill Hilgendorff had loved me back when. It’s a nagging feeling, as if I’d forgotten something important. Or like a tune I know but can’t remember. I think it may be true that there is a certain time in our lives, just as there is a place, that comes to feel like home. This is the time, and it is different in each life, when some notion of our true selves takes form, is laid down. There is the rest of our lives, of course, but that is merely additive. Bill Hilgendorff set me on a course for life, of unrequited love, and that is a territory I have never really left.

One afternoon, about four or five years after Bill Hilgendorff died, I was standing in a crowd waiting for a bus. There was a man in front of me, not directly in front of me, but I could see the back of him, and something about the color and texture of the hair, or maybe it was the slope of the shoulders, made me think of Bill Hilgendorff and it was all I could do to keep from calling out his name. For a moment I thought maybe he hadn’t died after all, but had just been lying low. People do that. They have their reasons.

When I got on the bus I walked toward the back until I found the man. I looked at his face and it wasn’t remotely like Bill Hilgendorff’s.

This all happened so long ago. His father died and his mother remarried and moved away from Woodmere, but I still see his sister sometimes, since our children go to the same school. She still has that thick black hair, as thick and dark as his was, but she’s got different eyes, hers are hazel, and his were that piercing blue. Sometimes when I look at the night sky in winter I remember the blue of his eyes.

Right after he died I kept thinking maybe I’d take a trip to Formosa, a kind of pilgrimage was how I thought of it. I finally did go to Formosa, almost twenty years later, when it was Taiwan and not Formosa any more. I had some vague notion of looking for the mountain Bill Hilgendorff had been climbing, but I had a
tight schedule, I was there on business, and although I asked someone at the office if there was a famous mountain that people used to climb, I didn’t really make any effort to find it. In any case I probably would not have succeeded, for I understand that Taiwan is a mountainous island.
The Fabric of Society

 Everywhere you go you meet women who say the same thing: how it is no good with men, if it ever was. This happened to me with women I talked to while I was riding the bus up the avenue, it happened with women I met on jury duty, on trips to Mexico, on airplanes, in doctors' waiting rooms. Once I went to Argentina and it was the same thing, the same conversation.
Two of us were sitting on a bench in the jury room, waiting for our names to be called. I heard the name of a woman from my hometown, the mother of a childhood friend. I waylaid her: I said Hello, did she remember me, I told her this and that thing about myself, that I had a child but (I laughed) no husband. Then the woman next to me, a perfect stranger; said, I have three children and no husband; and the woman I knew—she’d been almost the first divorce in our town—said: and I’ve got four children and no husband.

We were all laughing as we said these things, throwing our heads back and laughing. It had all been years ago, the loss of husbands.

My friend Susan says she worries about the fabric of society. She says when women find out how much better it is to live alone, no one will get married anymore.

But why do women talk this way? What I mean is—do you see—there must be something in it.

On the bus a woman sighed and said to me: I’m so tired taking care of my husband, he’s been sick for twenty years. Just like that she said it to me: no good morning, no comment about the weather. Just: “I’m so tired taking care of my husband, he’s been sick for twenty years.” Then she said: “I can’t do it any more.” She said all she wanted was to live alone.

There was a time, and not very long ago, when all I did was hanker after a man, and want one, and lust after men. Just like all the books in the windows of the bookstores say: I thought I was a failure, that I amounted to nothing. I still think that but differently: now I think—all right; well all right. Often I hear Susan’s voice in my ear: how, if women only knew. Or what she’d said to me when I’d met her, shortly after my husband’s departure: she put her arm around me and said, You’re lucky, I had to go through that twice.
She meant the marriage, not the divorce.
About the fabric of society—I think she’s right.
I worry about the men. They’re getting more and more lost-looking: as if they were slowly turning weightless, and now they can hardly keep their bodies on the ground any longer. They’re just floating away, and who’s going to weight them down, who’s going to hold them down? They might as well be paper—things that don’t break or shatter, but tear: right into shreds. Things that can be rained away, even the rain can harm them.

After my husband left me I worried and worried that he’d harm himself, maybe even kill himself.
Of course he didn’t. Instead he moved in with another woman, who’d been a friend of ours. Now she’s just a friend of his.
I was scared, I admit it. I was desperate and I cried all the time and didn’t try to stop myself from crying. I had my child, whom I’d prop up on the couch and kneel in front of, all the time crying, I mean real tears. I’d say to her—Oh, little one, here we are, just us, what’ll we do? But as time went by all this passed, until I came to think how, if I had been a man, those tears would have washed me away, but how instead, being a woman, all they did was—salt me.
I mean cure me.
And now I’m preserved.
Salted, cured, time-resistant.
Mexico

This woman wrote letters to herself, primarily love letters. Rather, she did not write them but composed them. More often they were postcards, not letters. She imagined small messages written on postcards of tropical scenes, or disquieting photographs—empty rocking chairs, for instance, or rows of beach umbrellas with no one sitting under them.

These were simple messages she composed, messages that made no great claims for themselves. For instance she imagined the following: “My dearest, I think of you every day, I imagine you lying here beside me in the hot sun.”

Lately the postcards she dreamed of came from somewhere in the center of Mexico, a town of a certain reputation. This woman
walked along the gray concrete sidewalks of the city where she lived dreaming of tiled patios, a patio with terra cotta floors and white walls. She dreamed of stiff-backed chairs, one stiff-backed chair after another, of herself reading philosophers in their original languages, and then, of talking too much, talking right into the morning, through the uncomfortable hours when the sun begins to rise and the light begins to spread.

This woman, who composed letters to herself, had a real life, one with a number of persons in it, places as well, such as the place where she lived and the one where she worked, she had streets that were a part of her life, she had a daily life that involved walks along these streets, past windows, past trees, past assorted minor landmarks. Yet not one thing in her real life, this serious, current life of hers, was as real or large as the letters she composed.

Dearest, they would begin. Or: My dearest.

Once she received an actual postcard. On its front was a picture of a man and woman lying in one another’s arms against a background of green forest. Over the picture were the words “Mon coeur est plein de toi.” She did not know French, although she thought that “coeur” meant “heart” and “toi” meant “you”; but she had to find someone who knew French in order to discover its entire meaning.

This postcard was like the postcard of her dreams, although what was written on the back of it was ordinary, insufficient. Someone had written: “Waiting for an airplane—thought I’d drop you a line.”

This woman imagined conversations in cool rooms with no windows and many large trees growing in the artificial light. The conversations concerned a city somewhere in the interior of

*Mexico* 51
Mexico. Oh I know that kind of place, she says. The walls are white stucco and there are flowers everywhere. Maybe there's a fountain, the roofs are tiled with curved orange tiles. Different places are different-colored. This place is white. Oh, I remember—as white as laundry.

The summer is hot but airy and slow, like a hot day that still has a breeze. The city in its hot summer smells of tar, occasionally of fish from the river. She notices nothing, not one thing registers. Deep down, where the deep chemicals of the mind reside, the images of the world do not enter. She thinks about this when she walks along the gray sidewalks, when she is not composing letters to herself—she thinks about her mind, she thinks of the deep convolutions as palaces, forbidden cities. She tries to register daily life. She attempts to record what she observes: a yellow construction truck, a yellow that is really the color of the skin of an orange. She records this, places it in her mind. During the entire walk to work she does this and lets go all dreams of letters, conversations. When she arrives at her office she writes down all that she has observed and remembered, which includes: the yellow construction truck, a woman in a blue skirt with hair as short as a man's, a woman with white hair walking a Dalmatian, the sour odor of the city.

Writing this down, she feels virtuous and thinks if someone knew what she has done, they would admire her.

Once she had a conversation that interested her almost as much as her letters. She said to a man: I need to get the sun on my body! and he said, I hate the sun. He told her he liked caves and would like to live in one. She laughed and said, isn't that awfully, well, obvious? and he replied, what do you mean, obvious? and looked truly puzzled, and said, "A cave is a wonderful place."

This was an actual conversation they had, as actual as the postcard she once received.
Late in the summer, she received a letter of some promise. The letter had a number of words crossed out. She took this as a sign of the writer's indecision, which she found interesting. The letter was rather formal and was signed "best wishes," nevertheless there was a sentence or two in German, which could be promising—she decided not to translate them. If she did not translate them she could imagine what they meant, while she walked to work in the morning, forgoing the yellow truck; she could walk to work dreaming of the letter and its unknown words,dreaming of meanings.

A woman kneels in a garden. With a machete she cuts the woody stalks of birds of paradise and places them in a long basket made of straw. She carries the basket into the house. The garden is silent except for her footsteps on the terra cotta tile. This in itself is a wonderful sound. The woman stands in the doorway. Señora, she says, may I get you something, is there something you wish, etc. etc.

The younger woman—the woman who wrote letters to herself—sits at a small table near the center of the patio. The table is covered with a white cloth that grows brilliant in the sun. Small lizards grip a white wall, a sparse vine clings. This is the place of her dreams. The sun casts an absolute shadow. She sits half in sunlight, half in shadow, one arm cool and one hot. The hot arm glistens in the sun, the cool one shivers mildly.

On the small table lie a sheaf of heavy white paper and a silver pen. A book, entirely in Spanish, is held open with the weight of a half-empty glass. The woman arranges a piece of the paper and begins to write.

My Darling One, she writes,

Do not think I have forgotten you. I imagine you sitting here beside me in the hot sun. The day is hot and white and filled with quiet. All day I read in the sun and dream that you are with me. I want you to think of me as a

Mexico
condition in the world: I am in the world, anywhere in it, like air that can be breathed. In this way you are never without me.

My darling one—truly who can know you as I do? Eres como la noche, callada y constelada. I love and appreciate you.

This letter was written in one breath, as it were, with no words crossed out. The woman folded the letter and placed it in an envelope and sealed the envelope. She placed two stamps in the corner of the envelope: one purple and the other a golden yellow, with flowers engraved. Across the envelope she wrote her own name and her address in the city where she lived. The silver pen had a thick point and was filled with black ink, and the black heavy words on the heavy white envelope made this a letter which would stand out, a letter of some obvious importance.

The woman imagined herself back in the city where she lived, reading this letter, wondering what the words in Spanish meant. She imagined herself walking to work, thinking about the letter and its unknown words.

She thought: how good it is to take one’s life in one’s hands!

She thought: my darling one, no one can ever know you as I do.
Oceanic
Hotel,
Nice

Nicholas said, "I must have a cigarette."

*Said* is not exactly accurate, since he could hardly speak. It was, I think, a matter of strength, or lack of it—he just did not have the strength to use his voice. He whispered, kind of. To hear him I had to lean over, so that my ear was near his mouth. I hated this. His breath was warm and sour-smelling. I was as squeamish as a startled cat that starts at any sound, and slinks away, its body low to the ground, as if it thinks no one can see it. I thought germs were coming towards me on his breath—viruses like rain. His breath was hot, and also moist. I hated everything.

"The Chapel," Nicholas said.

"The Chapel?"
“I must have a cigarette,” he said.
I looked at him dumbly.
“My pants,” he said. All of this in that half-whisper.
“What?” I said.
He tried to gesture. He could not gesture any better than he could speak. This gesture consisted of a raised forefinger. I tried to follow some logical line of direction. I turned around and saw the closet, and a pair of sweatpants shoved onto the shelf.
Surely, I said to myself, surely he does not expect me to put these on him? Because it was clear he could not put them on himself. He could not so much as lift his arm, never mind his leg.
I got the sweatpants down from the closet. “I’ll get a nurse,” I said. This seemed a little shameful. But I was more relieved than ashamed.
I turned my back while they pulled the sweatpants over his legs. His legs were—you know. As thin as everything you remember—the prisoners of war at Andersonville, those famous photographs, or the survivors at the concentration camps. I am not exaggerating. I am not making one of those venal comparisons—you know, this or that is like the Holocaust. I am simply describing his legs, and the best description is in these images. There was almost nothing left of his legs. They were bones with skin pulled over them. There was no calf to speak of.
“Can you put him in the wheelchair?” I said to the nurse. I was thinking, Bless these people, I can’t believe they do what they do. I was as nervous as a cat. I wanted just to get out of there. The whole place smelled of illness with an overlay of sour-sweet camouflage. Hospitals don’t smell spanking clean—of Clorox, or laundry, or bright bleached things—they smell of illness and the effort to mask it. The smell can make you sick. When I am in a hospital I try not to breathe too deeply.
“His sweater,” Nicholas said.
The sweater was on a chair. I was as afraid of the sweater as I was of him. The sweater was dirty, with stains on it that maybe were food and maybe were blood as well. The sweater was matted. Under my fingers the sweater felt like old foul things dried and caked over. Nicholas’s whole apartment was like that, until one Saturday Gwen and I just went to clean it up. We went to Woolworth’s and bought every cleaning supply you could think
of and rubber gloves. I said, “I’d just like to hose this place down.” Gwen says I repeated this many times during the course of that day. We went there when we thought Nicholas was in Paris, only it turned out he wasn’t in Paris at all, he was in the hospital, but we didn’t know that. He did make it to Paris, apparently, but he collapsed there, or had a seizure, or something, and was taken to the hospital in Paris and the next day was somehow put on an airplane for New York and was met at the airport by some friends, not us, other friends, and was taken to a hospital in New York. That was last fall, and it was spring now; that was a different hospital stay, a different episode, although when I think back on it, it may be more accurate to say that it was just the beginning of a long episode which seemed to be shaping up to be, well, his last. Since then he never really got back home for more than a few days before landing in the hospital again.

To put the sweater on him I had to touch his arm, which made me feel faint.

“Oh dear,” I said to him. “I’m afraid I’m no caretaker.” I smiled. I got one arm in an armhole and somehow managed to get the sweater behind him and his other arm in. I felt faint again—I mean exactly that, as if I would faint. I lectured myself. If it’s awful to be near this, I said, imagine what it’s like to be this. But in truth this meant nothing to me—my whole body replied, But I am not this! This is not happening to me and I’m glad it’s not! This was said in protest. This was physical health resenting the tyranny of illness. This was one self encountering the fact that it was not in fact another self. This was me being imperial.

Still the sweater got on him somehow. The sick feeling in my stomach did not go away. Now we had to get him into the wheelchair. All this had taken, fifteen, twenty minutes. All this for a cigarette.

A cigarette, of course, was pretty much all that was left to him.

I went out to the nurse’s station. “Could somebody put Mr. Rhodes in a wheelchair please?”

“Where you taking him?” a young man said.

“To the Chapel,” I said.

The nurses had a discussion about who would do it. The one who was on duty was eating a sandwich. “It’s my lunch hour,”
she said. Another one said, "That's all right, you eat, I'll do it." This impressed me. This was the kind of helpful behavior we are led to believe has died out, but imagine, here it was, and right in the heart of New York City.

There was some discussion between the nurse and the young male nurse about how to best get Nicholas out of the bed and into the wheelchair. As experienced as they were, they were still perplexed. Finally they swung Nicholas's legs from the bed so that his feet dangled over the side of the bed. Then they lifted his shoulders and swung his body kind of sideways. I'm not sure what they did next; I think I turned and walked out into the hall. When I turned back around he was already in the chair. His face was gaunt and exhausted. He looked to me like one of those portraits of Christ, where Christ can't hold up his head, and his head leans to one side, and his entire body is limp with suffering. The male nurse came up to us. "Now Mr. Rhodes," he said. "No little side trips, you hear? No little side stops for a cigarette or anything like that." Then he turned to me, as if neither of us could hear what was addressed to the other. "You take him to the Chapel and that's it," he said. "No little side trips for cigarettes. Okay?"

I stared dumbly at the young man. "Well," I said.

"No cigarettes," he said. "This is a no-smoking hospital."

"Look," I said. "You be the one to tell him, not me."

He knelt and spoke to Nicholas. "No cigarettes Mr. Rhodes, you got that? This is a no-smoking hospital and that's the rule. It's not fair to other patients."

Then he turned back to me. He seemed to want some kind of answer, which was difficult, because I never could lie, not even small lies about unimportant things. I hung my head like an errant child. Then I looked up at him. I had the feeling that I had a kind of pleading look on my face. "Look," I said. "What difference does it make if he smokes or not? For God's sake, it's his only pleasure. Can't he just have a cigarette? Who does it hurt?"

The male nurse looked at me. "I sympathize," he said. "Believe me, I'm a smoker myself. But those are the rules."

I shook my head. I was trying to work myself up to the required lie.

58 Oceanic Hotel, Nice
“Look,” the man said. “Just don’t tell me. That’s all. Just don’t tell me.”

“Which way’s the Chapel?” I said, looking him in the eye.

It took a few minutes to get down to the Chapel. I wasn’t very spry with a wheelchair. Nicholas’s feet kept dragging, and he didn’t have the strength to lift them onto the footrests of the wheelchair, and I didn’t want to touch them. Every now and then I’d stop and try to lift his feet anyway, which made me shudder. All this time I was just thinking what a bad person I was to not even want to touch his feet, but there it was—I just didn’t, it made me shudder, and that’s that. He had on those thin stretch foam slippers they give you in hospitals, and the slippers kept coming off his heels, so that they hung from his toes. I’d stop the wheelchair and squat down and try to pull the slippers on without actually having to touch his skin, and then I’d try to lift his legs by just holding on to the slippers. In fact I did not succeed, not with the slippers or the footrest, and we’d wheel along and I’d hear his feet dragging along the floor.

Just as we got to the Chapel a man came in with a woman and a child. The man had an IV hooked up to him and wore the blue robe of the hospital. He had bandages around his head. He sat down in the back with the woman and the child. “Fuck,” said Nicholas. Of all the things he had said to me today this was the clearest.

“I’m sure they won’t stay long,” I said. After all, it wasn’t as if he wanted a cigarette, which could take some time if you wanted to enjoy a few. He was only here to talk to God, presumably, and let’s face it, conversations with God are pretty one-sided and after the first few minutes all you do is start to repeat yourself. I figure I’m as qualified to speak about this as the next fellow. I talked to God endlessly and I was always saying the same thing. I read a lot of self-help books which explained to me that I was doing the wrong kind of praying, which I had always somehow known, my idea of a prayer being to really really really beg God for whatever it was I wanted. When I didn’t get it, which I never
did, I always thought it was because I hadn’t wanted it hard enough and the thing to do was want it more. As dialogues with God go, I’d have to admit that mine were pretty primitive, not to mention missing the point, so it wasn’t altogether surprising that my prayers were never answered.

Although maybe they were answered only who could decipher the answer? Which was always the problem with God in the first place.

After a few minutes, the man in the Chapel got up and left, followed by his IV rigging, the woman and the child. “Thank bloody God,” Nicholas said. He tried to get his cigarettes but he really couldn’t move his arm, so I got them for him, gingerly, the way I’d put his slippers back on his feet. The sweater was, frankly, a mess. God knows what was on that sweater. I hated to think what was on that sweater.

I had some reasons to shudder in the matter of the sweater. Last fall my friend Gwen and I had gone to Nicholas’s apartment to clean it up. It was so foul, so dirty, I couldn’t bear to go there. When Nicholas and I would make a date, he’d say, “Meet me at my apartment and we’ll have a little drink,” and finally I said to him, “Nicholas, I just can’t go to your apartment any more.” This may sound extreme but then, his apartment was something extreme. So we would meet in restaurants.

All this was before he was in the hospital, when he could still get around some, could still go out to a restaurant for dinner. He was planning a trip to Paris—in retrospect this seems sheer madness, he was so ill, but he had got as far as he had got precisely by imagining trips to Paris and then taking them, God damn it. For some time he’d been living mostly on will, and it wasn’t a half-bad program at that. So he went to Paris, and Gwen and I decided to clean his apartment while he was gone as a surprise for him. Really I did it for myself because the apartment just made me so outright sick I couldn’t stand it. I just wanted to clean the God damned thing. I just wanted to hose the God-damned place down. A good hosing down was exactly what it needed. I don’t want to elaborate, but that apartment was thick with things you
wouldn’t believe—caked blood on the mouthpiece of the telephone and on the sheets, and thick layers of oozy substances that had dried. Some of them were food and some of them, well, weren’t. The sheets were filled with cigarette holes with charred edges. Gwen said, It’s amazing he never set fire to himself.

We put on rubber gloves and just went at it. Our original plan was to hire someone to do it and we’d just kind of oversee the task, and in fact we did hire someone, but when she started in cleaning Gwen and I looked at each other and just pitched in. Gwen said later, when we were having a drink and congratulating ourselves, Well we couldn’t exactly just stand there and watch her clean. In the end it took three of us all day and we didn’t even finish at that. The woman we hired, whose name was Marilyn and who was very kind, something you could just tell about her right off, cleaned the kitchen and the bathroom, and Gwen and I did the living room and the bedroom. There was a little study and in fact we never even got to the study and to tell the truth, one day was enough. One day could make you feel like a saint, which we did.

We found two dead mice under a fine mahogany table in the living room.

Also, we threw out all the bedclothes.

So I had some reason to be fearful of the sweater. But everything I was doing was something I hated, so I just grimaced and did this as well—put my hand in the pocket of his sweater and got his cigarettes. I took one out and put it between his lips.

“Water,” Nicholas said.

“What about water?” I said.

“Get some water. For the ashes,” he said.

“But I don’t have a cup or anything. Where do I get water?”

“Go look for a kitchen or something.”

“Look you can just tip your ashes onto the carpet. They’re good for the carpet.” I remembered how, when we were in college, everyone always used to say that. Everyone used to drop their ashes onto the carpet and rub them into the carpet with their feet and shrug and say, “It’s good for the carpet.”

But he was insistent so I left him there, with the organ and the pews and the stained glass windows, and went to find a water fountain, and a cup to put the water in. I found the fountain but
no cup. I kept wandering until I saw some people in uniforms—orderlies, maybe, something like that—and I stopped them and said “Excuse me, where can I get a cup? Is there a kitchen on this floor or something?” but they just shrugged and said no, there wasn’t. When I’d been gone a few minutes I thought I just better get back to Nicholas. He’d just have to use the floor, that was all.

So I went back to the Chapel. He was still there, slumped in his wheelchair. I’d been half-afraid I’d find him on the floor.

“I couldn’t find a cup anywhere,” I said. “Just use the floor. It’s good for the carpet.”

“What about the stub?” he said.

There was a fire exit right near us, that opened onto an alley-like affair. “The fire exit,” I said. Then I got half-afraid I’d put the stub out and get myself locked out in the alley. I had a whole, instant daydream about this—like something out of the old Alfred Hitchcock Television Hour they used to show on Sunday nights when I was growing up—I’d be locked out on this landing that didn’t go anywhere, and Nicholas would be in his wheelchair, unable to open the door, unable to call out for help.

“Matches,” Nicholas whispered.

I looked in the cigarette box, and fished around again in the pocket of his sweater, and then the other pocket. There were no matches.

“Nicholas, there are no matches,” I said. I felt oddly relieved, as if fate had taken over and it was all out of my hands. Everything would be over more quickly now, if he couldn’t have his cigarette, and then I’d be able to get out of there. Get out of there and go home, and wash my hands, and have a hot bath.

“Oh God,” Nicholas said. “Can’t you go find matches?” he said.

“But who could I ask?” I said. “You’re not supposed to be smoking.”

“Look,” I said. “I think we just better forget the cigarette thing.”

I wheeled him out of the Chapel and down the hall toward the elevator. It was all the way at the other end of the floor, so it took a few minutes. Nicholas’s feet dragged along the floor, and his slippers kept slipping off his heels. Every now and then I stopped
and tried to put them back on and tried to put his feet up on the footrest, but I wasn’t doing any better than I’d done before.

We waited for the elevator. Hospital elevators always seem to take forever, and this one was.

When it came, it had a lot of people in it, and they had to move to make room for the wheelchair. I wheeled Nicholas in and he said to a man next to him, almost as clearly as he’d said the word “Fuck” earlier when he saw the man in the Chapel, “Excuse me but do you have any matches?” The man put his hand in his pocket and like a magician pulled out a book of matches. I just laughed and laughed.

So we rode back down in the elevator and went back to the Chapel. “God damn it Nicholas,” I said, laughing. “Nothing like a little motivation.” This was why he was still alive at all.

We went through the whole thing again. I got the cigarettes out of his pocket, and put one between his dried cracked lips, and lit a match. He managed to hold the cigarette in his hands, holding onto it as if it were something that could support his weight, something he could lean against. But he couldn’t tip his ashes. When the ash got long, I’d take the cigarette and tap it, and the ashes fell onto the floor, and I rubbed them into the carpet with my foot.

When it was time to put out the stub I opened the fire door, and I had my daydream again. I was careful to hold the door open when I ground out the stub on the cement.

Then we did it all again.

All in all Nicholas smoked three cigarettes. He sighed. “I haven’t had a cigarette in four days,” he said. Not since his last visitor.

After the third cigarette I said I had to go. I took him back upstairs and the nurses took him out of the wheelchair and put him back into the bed. We said good-bye and I rode the elevator down to the main lobby. I was walking out the door to the street and there was a woman walking out the door right beside me, and I said to her, “I hate hospitals, I just hate them. If anything ever happens to me I swear I’ll just die before I end up in one of these places.” I was outright shuddering. She looked at me as if I were very strange. “Really?” she said.
I walked up Seventh Avenue and stopped at Barney’s. I spent an hour there, and I bought something expensive. I was trying to get the hospital out of my head, and its smell off my skin. I was trying to replace the hospital with aesthetic pleasure, expense, silk, perfume, gold jewelry, fine linen.

We had some fine old times together, Nicholas and I. We found each other very funny, very clever. We made each other laugh and were pleased with ourselves. Also we both liked good things—fine meals, good champagne, expensive clothes. We had some extraordinary meals, and not just in New York. We had them in Rome, and in Positano and Capri, and a couple of years later in Paris. We were once at a famous restaurant in Rome, although I forget its name even if it was famous. Nicholas would remember its name. He knew the names of all the best restaurants in Rome and Paris. It was early evening and we were sitting outdoors among a long row of tables. We were feeling very jolly, very witty. We were with a couple of other people, so we made a lively group. Someone said something, it doesn’t matter what, and we all laughed loudly. A man at the table behind us said, Well you’d think they could keep their voices down. He was with a boyfriend, that much was clear. They were Americans. We laughed again, over something else, and the man said, very uppity-like, directly to us this time, Could you please keep your voices down? We just shrugged and he said Hmph, you could at least be polite. Nicholas was smoking a cigarette and he turned around and smiled and said, “Oh, but we couldn’t possibly.”

That was when he had money, before he had to pay all his money to his doctors and for medicine. He was independently wealthy, he had always been a rich boy, so of course he had no insurance. What was there to be afraid of in those days? He got some venereal diseases, which was just par for the course, his course anyway, and he got an inconvenient abscess which ended up restricting his sex life somewhat, but why did he have to worry about insurance? He was young and essentially healthy and rich, and even more than that, he was talented. He wrote two books and published them to some fine reviews. So when he got sick he had to use all his money for his treatments. Then he had no more money so he went on welfare and was a ward of the

64 Oceanic Hotel, Nice
state. Even then we kept going out to good restaurants. He had an apartment in Paris, from the days when he was rich, and got some money from renting it. He didn’t get enough to live on, never mind enough to pay for his medicines, but he got some, and what he got he used for dinners out, when he could still go out.

The last time we had dinner together was in the fall, just before the trip to Paris when Gwen and I cleaned his apartment. I met him at his apartment even though I hated going there. I wouldn’t have a drink, though. This bothered him but it wasn’t just the disease, it was the filth in the apartment. I told him this outright. I wasn’t about to lie to him. Maybe I should have, but then, I couldn’t even lie to an orderly in a hospital about a cigarette.

His apartment was on the third floor of a townhouse, and there was no elevator. I went down the stairs first. I didn’t help him because it was easier for him to hold on to the bannister than to me. He could hardly walk. The disease had done something to his feet, I wasn’t sure what. He had neuropathy, although I’m not sure if that’s what made for the difficulty in walking. In any case he could no longer walk very well. He was very skinny and weak. I waited at the bottom of the stairs. Every now and then he’d curse. We went down the front stoop to the sidewalk. Nicholas held on to the railing of the stone steps while I hailed a cab. He started toward the curb, to the cab, but when he walked he would trip over his feet—one foot would somehow end up a little in front of the other, so that when he took the next step his foot would be in his way. He tripped and grabbed hold of the railing, which was still within reach. “Fuck,” he said. I went to help him, and put my arm through his, but I was shuddering.

It took us so long to get to the restaurant that when we got there, they had given our table away. I’d booked a table in the smoking section of course, so Nicholas could smoke, but they had to seat us in non-smoking. Every time he wanted a cigarette he had to go over to the bar. It took him forever to walk to the bar, so I spent a lot of the dinner sitting alone at the table, waiting for him.

The food was good; I remember. A restaurant critic was at a table nearby. Various people whispered her name and glanced
over at her table. Nicholas and I sat next to a very nice young man and woman. I don’t know if they were a couple or if they were just friends. We fell into conversation with them and it turned out her brother had died of AIDS. She was very friendly, very forthcoming. In fact when Nicholas wanted a cigarette she walked with him to the bar. She was being much nicer to him than I was. For me this was the beginning of the decline—I think of it that way—in which his presence, formerly a pleasure, had become a burden. He hadn’t given up but it seemed that I had.

We weren’t making clever conversation any more. We were trying, but trying only made it worse. There is something truly awful about bravery, I find. It makes you kind of weak in the stomach. Give me misery any day. At least it’s honest.

Nicholas’s teeth had fallen out long ago. He’d had false teeth made, but they were a problem. They were one of the reasons we’d been so late for dinner and had lost our table. It took him a long time to put them in. While I waited for him in the living room of his apartment, I could hear him cursing in the bathroom while he tried to put his teeth in. I guess they weren’t very comfortable, because it wasn’t easy for him to eat. I was sitting across from him, at this wonderful restaurant, where the food was inventive and elaborately presented, so I couldn’t help but see him, the gingerish, painstaking way he’d eat. He would drool a little, bits of food would fall down his chin. He still made a great ritual of offering me a taste of his food, and sometimes I would take a little from his plate before he began to eat, and I always gave him some of mine to taste, but in fact I had come to hate the ritual, its insistence, its provocation and denial. He was doing something for himself with this ritual—making claim to some normalcy, and making a statement—but I was reduced to audience, a functionary of his gesture. I tried to hold up my end, but I was minding more and more, and the fact is I was no good at dissembling.

That night, when I sat looking across the table at him, I kept thinking: Let me out of here, let me out of here.

I just wanted to run away.

I was as miserable as a sick cat. I could hardly make myself smile.

66 Oceanic Hotel, Nice
I took him home, and he held my arm as we walked toward his front stoop. I turned to look at him while he was talking and I said, “Nicholas, you’re bleeding.” His mouth was bleeding. He stopped and found a handkerchief and held it to his mouth.

I took him upstairs and got a cab for myself. When I got in the cab I saw that there was blood on my sleeve. I sat with my arm held away from me, as far as I could get it. I was shuddering as if I could shake it off—I mean the arm, or the blood. Shuddering was getting to be my main mode, at least so far as Nicholas was concerned.

When I got to my apartment I found a pair of rubber gloves under the sink and I put them on. I took my coat off and hung it on the door of the closet, away from anything else. I went into my daughter’s room. The room was dark and she was asleep. “You took sex education, didn’t you?” I said in a loud whisper. There is something about the dark that makes us whisper, even when it’s our intention to wake somebody up.

She bolted up in the bed. “What?” she said.
“You took sex education, right?”
“Why?” she said.
“I got Nicholas’s blood on my coat,” I said. “I can’t get sick from that, can I? I mean—you took sex education; you’d know, right?”

“Mother, I need to sleep,” she said.

In the morning I took the coat to the cleaners, and I’ve worn it often since then. I say that as if to acquit myself of something—some mean and furtive criminal act, such as fear.

Shortly after that Nicholas left for Paris and Gwen and I went down to clean his apartment, only of course he wasn’t in Paris very long at all, and at the time Gwen and I were cleaning his apartment he was already in St. Vincent’s Hospital, only no one had told us. Eventually I located him, and went to see him in the hospital, where he said to me, “I must have a cigarette.”

I would say my decline was complete by then.
After the hospital, when I got to Barney’s, I smelled the perfumes, and looked over the china and glassware, and I even tried on some expensive clothing I knew I would never buy. I tried on a black dress made out of the same fabric they use for tuxedos, and I was looking at myself in the mirror. I just stood there and stared at myself. I stared and I said to myself, “You have no compassion.” This was uttered coolly, just a cool assessment, an objective remark as neutral as a comment about the color of my eyes or the length of my hair. It was just a fact, like any other fact—trees, sky, concrete, illness, death. In the mirror, through the fine fabric of the black dress, it was as if I could see a burned-out center in the middle of my body, where a heart used to beat; and even this failed to move me. Upon reflection this is not so surprising; for, what was left to be moved?

I did not buy the black dress. It was too expensive, and in any case I had no place to wear it. I went back down to the main floor and bought a lemony perfume called “Oceanic Hotel Nice.” The bottle had an art deco picture on it, in bright blue and a mustard yellow, of a boulevard with a palm tree and the facade of a hotel. It could very well be Nice. I’d been there once, some years ago. It was raining when we were there, and we did not stay for long, but I bought a tin of olive oil, for which Nice was famous if I am not mistaken. I still have it, somewhere in the back of a kitchen shelf, unopened I expect. I’m like that—I buy things and then I forget to use them. But I wear this perfume all the time; it’s my offering. Of course Nicholas would have preferred a cigarette, but I don’t get downtown often.
Praise

I often daydreamed that I went to heaven, where I’d get credit: get credit for smiling at strangers, making conversation with taxi drivers; maybe for rescuing somebody. I don’t mean a person drowning, or anything physical, I don’t mean physical rescue. What I mean by rescue is, maybe, a shy person, a shy man: I’d win him over, ease his way; and when I’d die, I’d go to heaven and God would give me credit for this. He’d praise me, in front of all the angels. “You,” he’d say. “I mean her—that one.” I’d look around; me? You mean me? He crooks his finger. You, he says. He tells the assembly how I spread joy in small ways: a smile here, there. How I could rescue a body, a heart.
Oh, I'd think all this, and I'd be moved almost to tears—like
daydreams of eulogies. Oh, I'd move myself to tears.

Much of the daydreaming of this sort I did on Second Avenue
walking home from work; and by the time I reached the florist,
which was about the halfway mark, I'd have moved myself to
tears; actual tears.

In real life it wasn't so easy—this rescuing, this making a dif-
fERENCE. I would like—I would have liked—to cast around me a
slow aggregation of improvements. I don't mean good works, I
mean, more, energy. I knew myself for what I was, an indolent
creature; so deeds, distinct actions, I did not imagine. I wanted it
to be what I was, not what I did, that was the agency of rescue. So
I imagined improving the world by my energy. Maybe, maybe,
I'm a star in the sky: I'm a star, I emit light, energy, accumula-
tions of molecules. The energy from the star, the one that is me,
contributes to the world. Then, transformed, transmigrated, I am
an angel, in Heaven with my friend God, who pats me on the
back; who approves.

There was a man. He was a shy man, one with a certain charm,
an appeal. The appeal of diffidence, disarray. Mild dishevelment.
It was a thing that got my attention—vague disorder, a certain
forgetfulness. It seemed true; seemed something revealed. Really
I had no use for order. I mean, what can you do with order; how
can you improve on it? Give me disorder, maybe I can make an
imprint, make a mark, make a little order.

About this man: he had, first, a frayed collar—I mean frayed,
frayed like I'd never seen before—so frayed the threads stood up
from the collar like hairs on a cold arm. I looked so hard at those
hair-like threads I was sure I could see them moving, little pulses
of energy, minute quivers.

The second thing about this man, a thing I saw from the front
soon after seeing the frayed collar from behind, was the damp
spot in the front of his pants, where, I guessed, he hadn't shaken
quite dry. I'd fixed on the frayed collar: really stared at it, entering it. But this front view, this sight of the front, was a thing I had to turn away from. I looked at his face, but it wasn't looking down; it was intent, it was deep in listening.

We were at a lecture on Andean music. It was an informal sort of lecture, interspersed with small performances, and people chatted and walked around and stood and lit up cigarettes. That was how I got to see him from both the front and back: first I stood behind him, by the door; he leaned against the doorjamb and I tell you, I liked the way he did it, I liked the way he leaned: he leaned like a man who could be rescued; a man who could get me praise in heaven.

After a little while, when a second man played the Bolivian flute, the man with the frayed collar moved into the room. I followed, not too closely; and I took a seat where I could see him, and what I saw, a face, an odd, not uniform face, but a face with implications: I saw that face, and next, the damp place on the front of his pants. Saw and looked away, towards the speaker.

But I thought and thought about the man, and his signs, for there was about him a flagrancy of sign. I thought of the embarrassment of my knowing something he didn't know—of my knowing, however briefly, more about him than he knew himself. This is the kind of thing—this having of accidental information, information one is not really entitled to, which has just fallen to one, like a legacy from an unknown relation—this is the kind of thing that can make your heart go out to a person, at least a certain kind of person, at least my heart.

There is such a thing as miracles. I knew this. I have had a few happen to me. Miracles do from time to time occur. This lecture on Andean music: it was one of a series. One subscribed. A friend had arranged it and I had gone along, well all right, well why not, was what I'd said. The very next week, only a week away, would assemble this same assembly. I call that, well, a miracle: where a man with the look about him, the signs about him, of one who wants rescuing; and a rescuer, an interloper, a quester of places to intervene—I mean me—come together in the same place. I call that a kind of miracle.

Anyway, I take my miracles where I find them.

Praise 71
We met, our music group, for an hour and a half every Tuesday. Soon Tuesdays grew oversized, spilling over onto the other days of the week: Sunday for imagination, Monday for preparation, Wednesday for distillation, Thursday for concluding, Friday for strategizing. Saturday—well, Saturday. In such a manner a week can become wonderful, week after week.

I imagined many things. I imagined our affair progressing over the thirteen weeks of the series. At first I imagined conversation, awkward and charged. Then I imagined encounters—a coffee afterward, a drink. Then, about midway through the lectures, I imagined a kiss; a trembling thing, for, after all, we are speaking of a shy man, a reticent man, a forgetful man; a man so preoccupied that he neglects, forgets, to shake himself dry. Only on that first occasion was there a damp spot—his first appearance, his debut—but frequently there were frayed collars, a shirt untucked and the shirttail dangling out like a child who couldn’t keep up—now I ask you. It was May. It was an easy time for me, what with the sun and all, the appearance of flowers, the uncurling of leaves, to fall in love.

That kiss, the one in my imagination—the danger of it. A man like this is in constant danger. I recognize this man. He’s got a broken-down look to him, like his heart is broken. It’s already broken but anyway it keeps on breaking. Like poor Sisyphus—as if instead of rolling a rock uphill he was having his heart broken. It doesn’t matter what you do to that heart, or for it—how carefully you handle it—it’s got just one way of being in the world, and that way is, broken.

Therefore, the kiss is momentous, monumental, because it is so dangerous, so absolute. A man this preoccupied, so preoccupied that he has forgotten to get himself dry, endangers himself every minute, is at risk in every, any, action. That is why, I guess, a man like this assigns himself to doorjambs, propping himself up, waiting for something to befall him. But to kiss a man like this is to take your life in your hands, his as well. It becomes an immense thing. Just daydreaming about it, I lose my breath, I can’t breathe, I move myself, almost to breathlessness.

And so what you have got for yourself, in just a matter of
weeks, and on the evidence of just one embrace, one engagement of mouths, is an immense experience.

You have got yourself transcendence.

And you’ve got yourself credit in heaven, for being a rescuer of hidden cargo.

That’s what I am. I’m an interloper, an intervening agent, the ferreter-out of things, the one that brings them up to the surface, digs them up, gets them from the doorjamb into danger: I mean life. That’s what I want to do for myself—get, somehow, to be a heroine, nose out the souls. And in heaven, God will praise me, and in front of all his best angels.
Essence
and
Quintessence

I know a woman who always lifts the toilet seat whenever a man is coming over; that way he’ll think another man has just been. She read this in a woman’s magazine, she told me. And events seem to reward her—I’ve seen it with my own eyes; I’ve sat in a room with her and watched the men in the room with their eyes right on her. And now a man is in love with her—it happened to her just that way.

She sits across from me in her big new apartment. She’s proud of this big new apartment of hers and pleased with herself over it—she lets on that yes, she’s got a little money, more than a little; but she doesn’t say how or from where.

Listen, she says to me, you’re bitter. Your bitterness is poison-
ing your life. I know just what you need—what you need is me. This is what I am going to do: I'm going to take you for long drives in my car, while we're driving I'll play tapes for you that will make you love yourself. I send away for all the tapes and books they advertise in magazines and believe me, they work, look at me—not of course that I'm there yet, not that I don't feel the very same feelings that you feel, but I am on the road—; I tell you, I can fix you, I can help you.

I own as how cats get fixed, and dogs and machines.

"But your bitterness is ruining your life," she says.

"Well then," I say.

"But to be so bitter—!" she says.

This is her word for the night—she's that way.

"This is how I am," I say. "I don't want to be improved."

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She gives a party; she makes too much food. I try not to be impressed. She makes lasagna and chicken parmigiana and delicatessen-style sandwiches and cold vegetables with dip and a big salad. I remark to myself that she may be long on quantity but, well, isn't she just a little wanting in quality? It is true that the rooms are glorious. She has sun coming in the windows, and a backyard in the city. We wonder where she got the money; her father maybe. She works, sometimes, for him—she's learning to be a contractor. Also she's learning to be an architect. She's full these days of the idea of architects. A group of us go out to dinner and she says: oh what you all need is to meet some architects! Her eyes are just ablaze with the joy of it—there is nothing a good architect can't fix.

I see how everyone looks away—down, to the side, anywhere but at her. She doesn't notice.

But I'm thinking: well, and well, why don't I just let her? I could let her take me for drives in her long cool car—she'll drive me up to Connecticut, she says, as if I have never been to Connecticut, as if it were a place where miracles are wrought; look, she says, we'll drive through the woods; I'll show you houses like you've never seen. Or: what you girls need is an architect or two! At dinner, everyone looking away, her not noticing that they're

*Essence and Quintessence*
looking away, I think: why not? Let her get me an architect; maybe she can—save me, I mean.

There’s no question but she’s sincere. You have only to look at her eyes, if you can bear it.

At the dinner out, the one where everyone looks away, the one where she tells us about architects, and how an architect can save you—at that dinner she takes out a little notebook and every time I say something, she writes away in her notebook; I have the idea that she’s taking down what I’m saying, or the name of a book I’m talking about, and the way she does this makes her all right with me.

One night she takes me out to dinner. It’s just the two of us. In the end she pays, she insists. It’s a Latin place; we have small dishes of tapas and drink blue margaritas. “I have to make a phone call,” she says, and disappears for an hour. I look for her during the hour, a couple of different times, but I can’t find her anywhere—not by the phone booth, not in the bathroom. If it weren’t for the fact that she’s left her jacket on the back of her seat and her handbag on the table I’d think she was gone; anyone would. I’m about to leave when I see her heading back toward the table. “I’m sorry,” she says. “I’ve been sick.”

“For an hour?”

She looks startled—genuinely. “Is it that long?” she says.

I know that in fact she might be sick but that what is really happening is a man. I know she must have called a man, or maybe even slipped away to see one somewhere, and that he had either made her cry, or made her very happy. Either one of these things will keep you on the telephone.

I’m angry because she’s kept me waiting, and also, I’m angry because she has a man who keeps her on the telephone for an hour, but she starts in then to tell me how brilliant I am, how of all of us I am the one who is truly talented, how greatness awaits me, etc. etc., how I am, simply, on a different plane...we all want to be famous, you see; we all want to make our names. And here she is, telling me these things, and she is so sincere, as sincere as she is about architects, self-help recordings, drives to Connecti-
cut; there is nothing she does not mean. When she tells me how brilliant I am, I believe her. And because of all these things she says to me about myself, these things she says so sincerely, so absolutely, I think really, isn’t she something now.

The night I went to her house for dinner, the same night she told me how bitter I was, I met her little girl for the first time. The little girl had a round face—you’d almost say plump. You would say plump. I wondered where she got that plump little face, her mother was so bony. Maybe from the father. She was, well, a little plump all around, which was surprising, the same way the face was surprising. But she was only three; still she didn’t look like she’d come out of that mother.

We were introduced and I paid attention to her. I asked her questions: oh, was she in a little school? Was she taking ballet lessons? Here then—first position, did she know? I ran through the positions of the feet and she stood alongside me and watched and followed. Her name was Polly. Her hair was long and swung in front of her face like an old movie star’s hair—like Veronica Lake’s hair, if you remember Veronica Lake. It made me uncomfortable, a three-year-old’s hair swinging across her eyes that way—as if she was just a small woman, and not a child at all. I’ve seen children like that—small and knowing and worldly, looking worldly-wise. But for all Polly looked that way, she wasn’t that way at all—although maybe she was. I was going to say she was innocent but now that I think about it maybe she wasn’t at all. In fact now that I think about it I remember how she lowered her eyes and smiled. That was a very knowing thing to do. Of course she probably just learned it from her mother and didn’t know it was a knowing thing at all. In any case at the time I was preferring her to her mother, and after we ran through the five positions of the feet in ballet I said I’d read her a book, and I picked out my favorite, one I’d read numerous times, years earlier, to my own little girl. I had once known it by heart, and now it began to come back—like a prayer or a song, something you knew so well when you were a child that it’s embedded there, it never gets forgotten, only overlaid. Polly was a fine audience, all
wide eyes and smile. Now that I think about it, it seems to me
that she looked a little like a southern belle—flirtatious, and with
that hair. I admit that my heart sank when she went off to bed.

There was a man in the picture. At least, if he wasn’t quite in
the picture he was getting to be there. He was one of the reasons
she told us all that what we needed was a good architect. He was
an architectural student and I guess he was her idea of what just
about anybody needed. I met him for the first time the night we
all went out to dinner, the night she told us all that what we all
needed was an architect, and everybody looked away and she
didn’t notice. After dinner she said, I know a place! and nobody
else volunteered anything or knew a place, so we piled into her
car and she drove us to a diner. After a few minutes a man walked
in. She and the man exclaimed as if, isn’t it funny our running
into each other like this? and he sat down at our table and we all
chatted a while. I said, “You’re an architect? You’re hired”; be-
cause I was dreaming of building a house, my own house, way
deep in the woods but near the ocean too. I knew just how I
wanted it to be, and I started to tell him. “I’ll be your first com-
mission,” I said. “What do you say,” I said. He laughed and I
thought he was just fine.

I saw him again the night I went to her house for dinner.
While she was talking to me, about how she was going to take me
for drives in deepest Connecticut, the phone rang. With most
women you can tell when it’s a man on the phone. Not only does
the voice change, but the face changes too, as if the person on the
other side of the phone could see as well as hear the person they
were calling. My friend lowered her eyes and smiled and looked
this way and that way. She was making an arrangement that
seemed to involve tonight. When she got off the phone she
rushed upstairs. I followed her casually, not trying to keep up
with her. She was putting on make-up in the bathroom. “Oh
God,” she said. “Look at me, I need breast implants, do I look all
right?” She smiled, really a dazzler of a smile, as if I were a man,
or, more likely I suppose, because she was practicing; and then

78 Essence and Quintessence
she turned and pulled up the toilet seat, and gave me another
smile.

“So you do have a lover after all,” I accused. I hated anyone
who had anything I didn’t have.

“Oh, no!” she protested. “I couldn’t possibly go to bed with
him—I mean, you know, sex. Every night he comes over and we
fall asleep on the bed with all our clothes on. What do you think?
Do you think that’s all right? I couldn’t possibly take my clothes
off in front of him! He says nobody he knows has sex anymore.
He says his friends haven’t had sex in two years.”

I rather liked this idea. I liked the idea that it was a trend, and
that maybe it wasn’t just me.

“It’s all these diseases,” I said.

“I couldn’t possibly have sex with him until I have my body
fixed. I would at the very least have to have breast implants be-
fore I took my clothes off.”

It’s my turn to protest. She looks wonderful, she’s so pretty,
she has a lovely figure, etc. etc.

She’s not really listening; she’s moved on to the next thing,
whatever it is. Her head’s alert like she’s heard something—like
a cat or a rabbit with its ears pricked up. Then she’s down the
stairs, alert like a sharp little animal. I watch and remember, sud-
denly, a game we used to play when I was younger—we knew it
as “Essence and Quintessence.” You have somebody in mind and
you have to identify them by what I suppose amounts to free as-
sociation. The other players call out various categories—color,
for instance, or texture, season, time of day—and you narrow
your eyes because you are thinking, and you say the color or tex-
ture or season or time of day that this person you have in mind
reminds you of. And the others try to guess who it is you are
thinking of from your replies.

Our favorite category in that game was rodent. Not “ani-
mal”—just rodent. Sooner or later in every game you were
asked to provide the name of the member of the rodent family
which this person most reminded you of. It was the moment in
the game which most delighted us all. It always came as a great
surprise how many rodents there were to choose from; although
we were a little flexible in our ideas about what was a rodent and

*Essence and Quintessence* 79
what wasn’t. Still, as you gave your answer, you always would stop and think to yourself how odd it was, how oddly suitable, how people really did resemble members of the rodent family more than any other—how they did remind one of squirrels or chipmunks or weasels.

Watching her face primed, her trim little ears as upright as a rabbit’s, I am wondering what member of the rodent family it is that she most reminds me of.

She takes the stairs neatly, long-leggedly. But then, she’s got ballet slippers on her feet. I hear her opening the door to her architect. I can tell she wants me around—she wants an audience, is what I think. As for me, I only want to be out of there—her wonderful big new apartment, with its upstairs and its sleeping little belle upstairs, and its big kitchen and big table in the kitchen, its backyard and its architect who spends the night.

I think: she’s a fox.

I know I am taking a liberty but that was always one of the secret pleasures of the game.

Me, I slink out like the rat I am.
On the Plain

My heart just hurt, flat out like. This was a great calamity and I would not wish it upon any soul at all. I wanted just to swim in a cool stream where the water ran over the rocks as if there were comfort after all. I had lunch with a friend and she said to me: “I am nothing like you at all.”

That was a lonely thing to hear.

I would like to be a stone lying at the bottom of a wide flat river, with the cool water running over my body until I grew smooth and quiet.

Failing that, I would like to be an animal, a lion, maybe, or a leopard or a panther, in the African night, on a wide
plain in Africa. There I would sit beneath the stars, silent and brooding.

I had grown useless altogether.

There was a poem, and all I did was read it over and over.

This man, I could not help myself; he stood in a doorway in the place where I worked, and his face was full of sadness, his eyes were deep and close together, and as he stood in the doorway, he gazed down upon me and my heart went right out to him; I could not help myself. When your heart goes right out to a man, like that, you believe that he must love you immediately and altogether, or it could not have happened as it has; and then, everything proceeds from there, and your heart feels broken right away from the sheer force of its going out of itself—like your heart broke right through the borders of your body, cracked your brittle ribs into slivers, and shattered your skin and your whole body; and so before even you have had the chance to have your heart broken by the man, it is broken by its own hand—breaks itself, bursting out of there.

I knew that this deep stir within me was an insurmountable thing.

I could see how a man might believe that he would lose himself right there inside my body, and soon all he can think of is, how can he save himself?

I thought of Africa, and the wide plains and the dark night full of the quiet.

The man lived in Nairobi so I thought always, ever since he stood in the doorway with his sad face, of Africa and days and nights there. In the days I sit with him beneath the white sun and the white sky. We sit alongside one another and are quiet for there is nothing that can be said.

At night we sit beneath the stars.
The woman I was having lunch with said to me: "I am a cautious person."

Then she said: "How can you love somebody when you don't know them?"

But, I said.

People do differ. This simple thing is a large and deep thing that none of us ever knows. Or we know and forget. She looked upon me, my friend, as though I were as strange and wrong as an animal beyond its home.

I tried to explain myself to her, a bad thing to do. Explaining anything is like digging a hole and burying yourself in it.

I gazed out the window into the skyline and the hot, glazed day.

I told her that if only I were like her—if only!

I said I lacked the self-protecting gene, and that there was nothing I could do about it but yield myself up.

But after all I kept at it, explaining myself right away.

I said no, she was wrong, I did know him, right down deep, but what I didn't know was information about him.

She was a good friend. She tried to tell me it was a good thing to be like me, better than to be cautious like her.

I have lived alone for seven years.

She says, my friend, that she could never bear to be alone like that. Once I couldn't bear it, I said. But now I can. And now I wish I had never set eyes upon that man standing in the doorway—never heard of Africa or dreamed of the plains around his house, and the equatorial stars that shine down upon him.

I believe he is a sad man, a man of deep sorrows.

I don't see, really, my friend said, how you can think you love somebody when you don't even know them.

She said it was just attraction.

I have never understood anything at all in the world.

I am more like that stone or the lion in the night—just a natural thing, itself.

On the Plain
It is true that we got together. And it was him that did it; but it all did me no good, my heart was sheer broken.

When we got together, it was like my daydreams—quiet, nothing said; but it was all a mystery to me, and nobody said anything. I said a little something. I said: Have I alarmed you? He said no. Then he went back to Africa.

It would have been better if it had all never happened. If I had never laid my eyes upon him.

The night animals stalk in the night, on the plains, in the deep woods where the sunlight never comes, they walk and walk alone in the African night.

I dream I am the lion who sits upon the wide plain near the house where he lives.
I was looking at my foot. I was looking for a scar I got when I was fourteen years old, and I tripped over the metal stake of the tarp where the boys slept on their cots. This was the summer I went on a camping trip to Mexico. I’d had that scar all my life since that summer, only now I didn’t have it anymore. True, it was some time, maybe even years, since I’d actually looked for it. It wasn’t as if I was in the habit of looking down at my feet in search of the scar. I wondered why I looked just now, and I thought maybe it was because this summer was reminding me in some strange way of that one, the one when I was fourteen. So then I wondered why, and I remembered how happy I was that summer I went to Mexico and tripped over the tarp. I
was happy because I was with strangers, and had no history, and among these strangers I became something new. When I returned to my life, I returned to that history, its great weight of disappointment, so it is not as if that summer changed me forever, except in the way everything changes you forever—the way everything is additive, gets included in your history, gets incorporated. I will never know who I might have been without that summer when I went to Mexico, I have no way, really, of assessing its contribution to the person I turned out to be. There’s no need, really, to work it out. I had a feeling that summer, a joy, and also I kissed a boy in the back of the station wagon where he lay in his sleeping bag. In fact we more than kissed. I did not know the name for what we were doing but I was so happy to be doing it at last. He lay on top of me, we had our clothes on, we were fourteen and this was a long time ago and I had hardly ever kissed anyone at all before never mind taking our clothes off. What I mean is, it never even occurred to me, the removal of clothes. I realize now he did not exactly position himself to our mutual advantage, although at the time I did not realize that, so I felt his bones grinding into my bones. But these were mere details. What was important was the event itself, that it was taking place. Even the boy was a detail. He wasn’t anyone I particularly cared for, it was sufficient that I didn’t mind him. The great thing was the kisses, not the boy doing the kissing; the kisses, and the strange boniness I felt grinding into now my stomach, now my bones. Not even for a minute did he get his body where it should have been; I would have to wait some few more years for that. But I was grateful anyway.

I was grateful because I did not know who I was. This was my first such excursion, my first venture into those suspended states when who we are floats away from us, rises weightless from our shoulders, and floats away, floats away. It would return. It would return, and without question, I was better off without it. Later in my life I would often say to friends, “If only I had amnesia, if only!” because I was always happier in this state, in which I had a rest from myself, the great gripping insistence of myself. And yet I was myself still—that summer when I was fourteen and I went to Mexico and tripped over the tarp and got a scar on my
foot that lasted all my life up until now; I was myself still, just as I am myself this summer, where I gaze out at the trees, and they are magnificent, where I walk along the dirt road of the farm, where I visit with the cows and the meadows, and the days are endless, and nobody knows who I am, and I am like a bird.

There's a scar on my hand and it is still there, I suppose because I got it much more recently. I got it maybe twelve years ago, when I was walking on Picadilly, in London, and my life was falling apart although it hadn't quite yet fallen apart altogether, I was just watching it happen. A woman walked by me on Picadilly, carrying a black pocketbook made of plastic, and the corner of her pocketbook brushed me by, and left a little cut on my left hand. It was nothing, but the funny thing was, it turned into a real scar, and I thought that was interesting because my whole life that year was just one big scar: my husband left me and there was nothing I could do to stop him, because he was right to leave me. How could I stop him? I had my eye elsewhere. I was looking for a lover as if I were a young girl again, and there was not one thing in me, not one cell or chemical or thought or beat of my heart, that kept me from this quest. I tried to lie, really I did, I kept telling him, "don't leave, don't leave!" but half my heart was already gone, so how could I persuade him? It wasn't as if I didn't love him, it was just that this was the best I could do, and it wasn't good enough. This is who I was, and I can't even say I felt guilty, because this was just who I was, the way an oak tree is an oak tree, how could it feel guilty for being an oak tree and not, say, a pine tree? From where in myself was I going to find the impulse toward self-control, toward guilt? I could not locate them in myself, any more than an oak tree could locate in itself pine needles.

A friend of mine said I was extremely clever at getting myself off the hook.

Only, what hook? I wondered. I was happy to take the blame. It's all my fault! I said. What's more, I paid, and heavily, because after that woman brushed by me on Picadilly and left me with

Amor Fati 87
that scar on my hand, my life was not exactly easy, and just because my husband moved uptown and I was looking for lovers is not to say that I found them, or found love either for that matter. In a way it was rather like that encounter in the back of the station wagon, all those years ago, where the kisses and the up-and-down motion, even with our clothes on, mattered more than the boy. It was so dark in that station wagon I couldn’t even see the boy’s face and to tell the truth, just as well. I do remember his name, but not much else about him. So it is not as if I got the scar on Picadilly and life was just all roses.

Mind you, I’m not complaining. I brought this all upon myself, on account of what that self was. Which is why it was such a relief, so refreshing, to leave it behind, the way I did that summer I went to Mexico and tripped over the metal stake that pinned the tarp to the ground, and got a scar on my foot.

I realize that what happened in Mexico, in the back of the station wagon, was no more than what happened to everybody eventually, in one place or another. But that was exactly the point: because I thought the things that happened to everybody, like kisses and groping in the backs of cars, would never happen to me. If you think that way, then the most ordinary things become extraordinary. What’s odd is, the way I was with that boy in Mexico, in the back of the station wagon, wasn’t at all the way I was for the whole rest of my life. For the whole rest of my life I was always falling in love, and instantly. I have read about people like this, people like me, in books, and we don’t come off too well. What the books say is, we confuse sex with love. But in the end, what was I to trust, myself or the books? There was a way in which the men were faceless, replaced one another, but that doesn’t mean I didn’t love them, and it doesn’t mean I didn’t suffer over them, and mightily. If any single one of them had ever said to me, can I come over tonight? every night in a row, the way the man I married did, I would have just said yes, to any single one of them. If any one of them had asked me to empty out a closet I would have and that is the truth. It’s just that no one asked.
We drove to Mexico, that summer I was fourteen, thirty of us and six counselors, in station wagons. I always sat in the back and sang. We had pillows in the back, to lean against, and I remember a pillow flying out of the back window on a highway in Rolla Missouri on the way to Mexico. That night it stormed and we piled our sleeping bags on top of the picnic tables at the camp site but it didn’t do any good, everything got soaked. But everything that happened that summer was good, not one bad thing happened. I remember being so hot in the backs of those station wagons, and sharing one of those pre-moistened paper towels, and how black it got from the dirt on our bodies. I remember watching a red sunset that blazed through a sky of clouds, as if the sky had a hole in it and the light was pouring through the hole, and I even remember thinking what a deep thought this was; and the whole summer was like that, the ordinary becoming extraordinary, like seeing sunsets and having new ideas about them that you had never had before, and believing in them.

This summer, and it is twenty-five years later, I was running low on money and I heard about a place where you could have a cheap vacation, and a rest, and I went there. It was a working farm in Virginia. There were other people there, some couples, and a young family, and some people like me, who were alone and seemed to be getting away from something. People went on trail rides and played tennis, but I just went for walks. I’d come back from my walks with bunches of wildflowers, and I’d put these in my room. They lasted for days, and the honeysuckle filled my room with a sweet perfume.

There was a woman in the room next to mine who was a painter, and every day she carried her easel and her paints to a hill that looked down over the farm. From this hill—for I had walked there myself—you could see cornfields and trees and the silvery silo rising, and bales of hay on the long meadows. The woman, whose name was Mary, would look at these things and paint none of them, at least not recognizably. I know, because I
ended up going with her up the hill. Mary and I fell into the habit of talking at breakfast and one morning she invited me to join her. I sat in the grass and watched her arrange her easel. She showed me some of her paintings. They were on heavy paper, which she pinned to a canvas board. They had rich, deep backgrounds, heavily worked in faded colors that were in between one color and another, so that if you tried to describe the colors you would not know precisely what to say: greens with gray in them, colors that were the color of the earth. She showed me one painting and said she had stained the paper with actual earth she had taken from the dirt road that led up from the farm to the hill. The earth was a color like red clay, and the paper fairly blazed with it. She said, “I want the paintings to have history,” and I assured her that they did. Then, on these layered backgrounds, she would paint objects—natural things, like wood and branches, and stones, and hands, and also man-made things, like wheels, and bolts, and tools.

So from talking at breakfast, we got into the habit of walking together to the hill every day. I would read, and watch her paint, and I was contented. She did not mind if I talked, she said it did not distract her and I could just chatter away, and I told her every story about myself, about my husband, and my infidelities, and my subsequent history with men younger than me, and men living on other continents, and men married to other women, and how I had no guilt.

One afternoon, after we had spent a number of pleasant days in this manner, she told me a story. I had noticed, as I watched her paint, a long red scar on her arm, and I asked her how she came to have it. She took the long way around, telling me. She said there was something I had told her, about the man I was married to, that had reminded her of the time when she was married to her first husband. I told her about the time the man I was married to came home and found me lying on the couch, listening to an opera, Verdi I think it was, Forza del Destino I think, with my hands behind my head, gazing at the ceiling. He walked into the apartment and he said, look at you; you’ve left home, haven’t you? You’ve just run away, run away, and then he walked out the door. I told her that I knew that moment that there was nothing I could do to save anything.
She told me this story.

When I was first married, she said, my husband and I went to India to teach. We were there for five years. We were on an island, and I got sick. I had malaria. I was treating myself with quinine, but I was so sick. I bought somebody’s airplane ticket so I could get off the island quickly, because otherwise I’d have to face an eight hour ferry trip back to Calcutta. So I told my husband that when he got to Calcutta, he should go to the hospital, but if I wasn’t at the hospital I would be at the —— Hotel in Calcutta and that he should come find me there. That hotel cost fifteen dollars a day; that sounds cheap now, but it was a lot of money to us back then, we were getting paid seventy-two dollars a month. I never walked around with more than five dollars in my pocket.

I took the flight, and I went to the hospital, but they wouldn’t let me in, because I had treated myself and they said I wasn’t as sick as some other people. But I was sick enough. So I went to the —— Hotel where I’d told my husband to meet me.

I was sick and I was delirious. When you have malaria, you don’t sleep. And the time came when he should have been there, but he wasn’t there. All night I waited. He didn’t come until two days later. It turned out he’d been with some friends and had just gone with them to some other hotel. But that night, when he didn’t come, I thought about our whole life together, and everything got turned around, and I knew that everything between us was over.

It’s odd, she said. People always seem to resist the notion that things can happen in an instant, like falling in love or out of it.

But the scar? I asked her.

She said that in that room, she had been so feverish, so delirious. She had been looking out the window, to see if her husband was coming, to see if she could see a man, even in this darkness, walking up the path to the front door of the hotel, or if she could hear the sound of a taxi that might be arriving, with him in it; and she leaned out the window, and there had been a nail sticking up from the windowsill. Fortunately she had not punctured herself on the nail, or she’d have been in even more serious trouble than the malaria, but she’d scraped the inside of her arm right along the nail, like a trail, a pathway, she said. When her fever went down she saw what she had done to herself, and she treated
her wound as well as her malaria. She said she always thought of that scar in just that way, like a trail, a road, that had led her out of one life and into another life, and she was glad she had it, because whenever she seemed to be at the end of something, she would look at her scar and think about the way your life would carry you through one doorway and into another. She said she was grateful for her scar, that it wasn’t disfiguring, and it was like some kind of angel in her life, a mark, a sign, a voice that was always there for her.

We grew close on that farm, Mary and I. She was older than I was, and had married again, and had three grown children, but she said she always went away alone for a little while in the summer so that she could paint without any distractions.

I had been thinking about myself at the farm, because my days were so empty and I had so much time to think. I realized how long it had been since I had had empty days. I worked in an office, I had two children of my own, and when I took vacations I usually traveled through some foreign country and every day was full of sights and explorations. I loved that kind of traveling, I loved for my days to be so full that at the end of them I was thoroughly used up, and it was only because of the money that I hadn’t done that this summer, and that I found myself on the farm with days of endless quiet. But in these days, in the long expanse of morning and afternoon, the watching of the sun as it traveled through the sky, the listening to birds, the small examinations of blades of grass—for while Mary would paint I would often poke through the grass, looking for small wildflowers and even looking at the blades of grass themselves—in these long hours, I thought about myself, and I wondered what kind of person I was, and what it was I was doing. I could see that in some fundamental way I was what I suppose the world would call amoral, but it puzzled me, because I really did believe that everyone else was more like me, and I kept discovering that they weren’t. Whenever I talked about desire, and adultery, people always looked at me strangely and said how they could never do that kind of thing. That was how they put it: that kind of thing.
These exchanges made me feel like something separate, and apart, but mostly it just puzzled me, how different people could be from one another, and I wondered and wondered why.

I could see how I was—predatory.

Dinners at the farm were at community tables—what was called, family style—and a comradely feeling soon sprang up among the group of people there. There was a couple from Washington and a man from Florida who sold real estate and a banker from Philadelphia and a woman who taught sailing and said she wanted to get away from the water, and also a teacher who taught at a small college in Tennessee. As I say, we grew comradely and there was something about the farm that made us feel safe with one another, and I found myself speaking freely about myself and my life. Well, I did that anyway—I wasn’t a private person. That seemed to be another gene, or chemical, that I was lacking, along with the ones for guilt.

One evening we went for a long walk, to the railroad bridge. There was a train that we always could hear but never saw, and we had in mind to finally watch it. We brought beer with us, and the professor from Tennessee brought a harmonica. We walked and the conversation turned to love, and one of the women began to ask me questions: would I have an affair with a friend’s husband? No, I said. So there’s a line you won’t cross, she said. I told her it wasn’t that simple; what happened was, I just couldn’t get attracted to a friend’s husband, so it wasn’t a matter of making a conscious decision, a moral choice; if there’s a line, I said, it’s in my unconscious. Well how close a friend? she asked. Did you ever have an affair with a man when you knew the wife? I thought about this, and I remembered that once I tried to, back in the days when I shared a summer house with a group of friends, on a lake up in northwest Connecticut. We’d been going there for years; I’d gone there with my husband, and then with my husband and child, and then with my husband and two children, and then just with the children. There was a house next door to us that was empty year after year; the grass around the house was unmowed and the trees had grown up around it, like a house in a woods in a fairy tale. Then one summer a young couple arrived at the house with their two small children. They were our age. They mowed the lawn, they brought friends up on
weekends, they put up a volley ball net. At night we could hear them playing their guitars and singing. Later we found out they actually had a band that played local gigs back in Westchester, where they lived. Eventually we got to know them and we all became friends, and as the summer progressed, a mild flirtation sprang up between the husband and me. One night when we’d been singing and drinking margaritas, the husband and I ended up kissing on the lawn. It never went beyond that, but only because of him; if it never went beyond that, it wasn’t to my credit.

I told this to the woman who was asking, would I ever have an affair with a man when I knew the wife? I said, it’s not like I was really close friends with the wife. I see, the woman said, so the line is, not if it’s a close friend. Well, I said, it’s not as if I had a prior relationship with the wife. I met them at the same time. I liked her well enough, but I liked him better.

This conversation seemed oddly casual, even rather light-hearted and exuberant, as though we were discussing somebody else, and not only somebody else, but somebody not entirely real, a character on a television show, or in a novel, and not even a current or familiar novel, but something old and far away in time, someone in the nineteenth century maybe. I kept listening to my answers as if I were a doctor examining myself, just the way I was always looking at my foot or my hand for their old familiar scars.

Then the woman said, but how can you stand the deception, the sneaking around, the subterfuge? And I thought about this and I said: I like it.

Mary was curious about me, but not accusatory. We continued our long days together, even after this evening of revelation, and the group of us continued to be comradely at dinner and take walks together, and one night we all went to town and went to a movie together. I guess we were like children at a summer camp, and I could not say that one person grew perceptibly chillier toward me. But I was so puzzled by myself, so curious. I kept wondering why nobody else was like me. I said to the woman who’d
asked me, “How can you stand the deception” that I bet a lot of people liked the deception but just wouldn’t admit it, and she said she thought that was probably right. Why do you think you like it? she asked, and I thought and thought. “Power?” I said, but I was really asking her, because in truth, it was all a mystery. Later I thought that there was a way in which I felt more alive, more vivid, when the stakes were high, or that I was like one of those people who need to take risks—mountain climbers, sky divers, people who drive fast cars in races. Only I liked my dangers to be emotional. I didn’t like physical risk. I was willing to risk my heart but not my life.

One night at dinner people were reminiscing about high school, and somebody said something about how some girl or other was a slut, and we all laughed and said, remember that word? And I put my fork down, and I said, quite cheerfully, “I’m a slut!” and everyone laughed. Later we were talking about Faust for some reason or other, and about Faust making a pact with the devil, and I said, “So where is he, the Devil? I mean, I’d make a pact with him myself, if he’d just show up,” and everyone laughed again. I always had the notion that if you admitted something on the order of either of these things, it was quite likely to be the truth, and if I couldn’t be a moral person, well at least I could try to tell the truth.

We were walking along the dirt road that led to a woods, Mary and I, and I was looking at the landscape. There were beautiful trees behind the meadow, all different, and the black and white cows were eating the grass, and also there were the remnants of trees that had died—whole trees, all dry and brown, and also trunks of trees with no branches. I was looking at these trees, and wondering what it was that had happened to them, whether they’d been struck by lightning or their branches had been blown off in a storm, or if they’d had some disease. Someone said that in the summer, when the leaves were all open, the branches

Amor Fati 95
were full of water, and that was when a strong wind was most likely to break them off, on account of their being so heavy, with leaves, and fruit, and water.

It was the day before I was leaving, and the sense of nostalgia that precedes departures began to assemble around me, like a fragrance or a melody in the air, suggestive and intangible. That evening after dinner Mary said to me, come with me, and we went to her room, where a painting was tacked to the wall. “It’s for you,” she said. Like her other work this was abstract, there was nothing in it that I could name or recognize. It was the softest green color, the color they call Eau de Nil, and behind the livery green were suggestions of shapes and objects, glimmering through like remnants of past lives, artifacts of earlier painting by earlier hands. Traces of handwriting, partial outlines of objects, filtered through the web of green, like fishes and plants glistening through dark, murky water.

She had titled the painting. In the left corner she had written my name, in a fine delicate script, and then at the right, the title of the painting: Adulteress. The title startled me, but I looked at the painting, at how beautiful and mysterious it was, and I thought, well, if this is a portrait of me as an adulteress, well then, all right.

She lay the painting flat, for it was quite small, between two heavy sheets of cardboard, and sealed the edges with tape, and wrapped it well, even tying it with string for me. When I got home I cleared a place for it on the wall, for my walls were filled with things, paintings and drawings from this or that excursion. For weeks I kept thinking about the farm, and what had happened to me there. In the mornings, getting ready for work, I would look into the mirror and wonder and wonder who it was that was gazing back at me, what reflection glowed there, and every morning I wondered if I might wake up to the sunlight that poured through my windows, even in this apartment in this gray, concrete city, and if that might be the morning I would feel sorry—sorry for anything I was or had done. But I never have, felt sorry. And it seemed to me as if all these years, all the way
back to that summer in Mexico when I kissed a boy, and tripped over the stake of the tarp one dark night and got that scar, ever since then, and probably even before, even earlier, I had been drifting away from myself, taking to the sky, some strange and soaring bird. There was no moon the night I tripped over the stake, and the night was entirely black, and the stars bridled in the sky, but no light from the stars glistened on the stake, and so I tripped over it. I suppose I was rushing somewhere, not looking down, probably I was rushing off to the station wagon, to kiss the boy and have him roll his body on top of me, and have my life begin, full of crimes, and scars, and that love, which is called passion.
The Man in the Snow

It must be the stars. I think it may be the stars. Various things have happened. It snowed, the first real snowstorm of the winter. It was the best kind of snowstorm, with broad, flat flakes piling up on the ground, not too much wind, and for some reason the snowplows didn’t come out, or at least so it seemed. The city grew quiet and white. You could not see ahead of yourself, not very much—you saw the screen of snow, moving like a living thing. On a day like this, this kind of snow, the city feels like your old wise animal friend that maybe you had when you were a child.

Nevertheless it was not a good day. I stood on the sidewalk along the white avenue and a man standing nearby clutched his
heart, and fell to the ground. All this happened so fast. The security guard from the office building rushed out and leaned over the man, breathing into his mouth. He pulled open the man’s overcoat and shirt and began to press the man’s chest with the heel of his hand. People gathered around. The security guard issued instructions, I don’t know what. The man’s skin was pink and bright against the snow.

The ambulance came, the men with stretchers. I watched everything. I wasn’t what they needed right then, so I only watched. Through the small window of the ambulance I could see the medics working. I could see the back of one of the medics, his shoulders heaving up and down, the movements, I supposed, of massaging a heart. Inside the ambulance the light was warm and yellow and for a moment it seemed like a small cottage with a fire going—it was that kind of light.

The ambulance drove away. People stood around and talked some. They seemed reluctant to leave; I know I was. I thought somebody would tell me something if I stood around—the man’s name, who he was, something about him. It seemed as if knowing the man’s name could make you feel better—as if it were right somehow to know somebody’s name, if you had seen them fall to the ground like that, and their shirt torn open and their pink skin, as pink and thin and naked as the skin of a sow. I don’t think I ever saw skin look so pink and naked as that man’s skin, that moment—not even my child when she was a baby.

People stood around and repeated what they knew. We described to one another how we’d seen the man fall to the ground, how he’d reached for his heart as if to hold onto it, just like in the movies. We told each other how the security guard had come out and leaned over the man and put his mouth on the man’s mouth. Nobody knew anything else. Nobody knew the man’s name or if he’d worked there in the building where the security guard stood by the door and had watched him fall.

After a while we went our separate ways. It was still snowing and the snow was still clean and not cleared away yet, but I was feeling downhearted after this, even with the snow. I was downhearted anyway, really. Thinking about that man and how he’d clutched his heart, I thought, it must be the stars—something about the stars and hearts. Because just last night I’d come home

*The Man in the Snow*
and the man I used to be married to, who was visiting our little
girl, said to me, don’t be alarmed, but I’ve been in hospital. He
was English so he said it that way: “I’ve been in hospital,” rather
than “I’ve been in the hospital.”

I tried to look a little alarmed, but then, he seemed all right,
and I thought, well—all right; I suppose you’re all right. “I
thought I’d had a heart attack,” he said. He was a young man—
well perhaps not young anymore—but not old. He was some-
where in the middle. He was forty.

“Only it wasn’t a heart attack,” he said. I think my mouth
must have fallen open and he hastened to explain. “Only they
think it is my heart. The doctor said, ‘One man in twenty who
comes to the hospital with chest pains has a heart attack within a
year.’”

I began to cry. It was true that he wasn’t my husband any
more but we were friends.

“It’s about a will,” he said.
“For God’s sake,” I said.
“How should I leave it?”
“What a stupid conversation,” I said.
“But what should I do—I ought to make a will.”

“You leave everything to Annie,” I said. Annie was our little
girl. “You don’t leave anything to me, if that’s what you mean.
You leave it all to her except of course anything you want to
leave to somebody else—but otherwise her. It’s better tax-wise.
But this is stupid.”

“So I leave it all to her,” he said.

“Well I suppose you have a perfect right to talk like this,” I
said, crying again. “Only look,” I said, “you’re going to be just
fine.”

“I go and have a stress test,” he said. “I’ve got all these medi-
cines,” he said sheepishly. “Have you any idea what they cost?”
He reached for a paper bag and emptied its contents onto the
couch. “Look at that,” he said. He went through them one by
one. “Stomach, stomach, heart, heart, stomach,” he said.

“Couldn’t it be your stomach?” I said. “You’ve always had a
weak stomach.”

“There’s a school of thought that says it could be my stom-
ach,” he said. “Well, gastric, anyway.”
“Oh, I think so,” I said eagerly.
“Only they did a G-I series,” he said.
“And?”
“Well that’s just it,” he said. “Nothing showed up so they leaned towards the heart. So then the cardiologist said that thing. The one in twenty. He wants to do an angiogram.”
“Then do an angiogram,” I said.
“The man in the hospital bed next to me had an angiogram,” he said. “And his heart stopped right in the middle.”
We both laughed.
“Then listen,” I said. “Don’t do an angiogram.”
“That’s just what I thought,” he said.
“Then what do you do?”
“A stress test,” he said. “Only not for a while. So my heart won’t stop halfway through the stress test.”
We both laughed again and then I began to cry again. “Oh my sweetie heart,” I said. I sat in his lap and stroked his hair. “Try not to be nervous. Maybe it’s stress. Did they give you tranquilizers? Let me see your palm,” I said. He stretched out his hand and I followed his life line. “You’re going to be fine,” I said. I leaned my head against his and stroked his back with one hand and his hair with another. I could hardly believe we weren’t married any more. We were always good friends. We liked each other.

That was last night. I dreamed about a bus of people and he was on the bus. There was something in the dream about hearts—I don’t remember what. Then today came the snow. I stood on the sidewalk in front of the building where I worked, thinking about the man I used to be married to, and his heart. It was a good heart. I felt sad and somber and as quiet as the snow. I stood there just thinking for a moment, about to flag a taxi, when suddenly the man standing just in front of me clutched his heart and fell to the ground, as if he had been a character in a movie and not a real man with a real heart at all.

At the end of the day—it was a Friday and so it was the end of the week as well as the end of the day—it was still snowing and still white and quiet and still the snowplows hardly seemed to

The Man in the Snow
have made a dent in the streets. I walked home in the snow. I was grateful for the quiet.

At home I watched the snow through my windows. After a while the phone rang. It was a friend and she was crying. She said she had a friend up in the country and her friend had been feeling very bad and now she had disappeared. She was a very responsible person and she hadn’t shown up for work and no one could find her. “I talked to her on the phone,” my friend said, “and she said things to me like: ‘I can’t go on,’ and ‘I’m worn out.’ Oh, come on, we need you,” I said to her but all she said to me was, ‘You’re a good friend and I’m sorry.’ Then I called her back twenty minutes later and there was no answer and I called the place where she works and they said she hadn’t shown up. I’m afraid she’s done something to herself.”

I said, maybe she’s gone for a long drive. Maybe she needs some sun. All that snow in the country—I’d need some sun. Maybe she’ll just drive around for a while. Maybe she’s on her way to the city.

After I said all these things, and some more, my friend and I were both quiet. “She’s not frivolous,” my friend said.

“No, she isn’t,” I agreed. I knew her a little. “She’s not melodramatic.”

“Her father killed himself,” my friend said.

We were both quiet.

“Well, we don’t know for sure,” I said.

A little while later the phone rang again. It was my friend. They’d found the woman in her car, in her garage, still alive. “That damned old garage, it’s so big and old, it’s full of leaks, thank God,” my friend said. “Only is this my fault? I was the last one to talk to her and I didn’t do anything—I could have talked her out of it, couldn’t I?”

No, no, I said, it wouldn’t have made any difference.

It’s my opinion that these things point to the stars. For instance, the coincidence of hearts. Everybody’s heart was just giving way, one way or another.

Leo rules the heart. The sign Leo rules the heart. I thought
maybe something was afflicting Leo, and things just weren’t good for the heart at the moment.

And as if all this weren’t enough, my little girl woke me up the other night and said: I’m worried about my heart stopping, so I want to stay awake and listen to it.

I could tell you more.

Things happen. Things start to unravel. It’s my opinion that once things start to unravel there’s no stopping them. You just let them run their course. You wait for that little burst of energy to spend itself—this affliction to hearts, for instance. If you’re lucky it proves to be only a minor cycle. Nevertheless it is wise to be careful. As for me, I plan to stay indoors until the streets are plowed, or the stars change signs, whichever happens last.
Arson

He leans against what used to be a counter, in this room that used to be the kitchen.

You say you were working in the kitchen, he says.

He smiles, a smirk. He leans against the charred counter as if he owns it, lives here.

A little accident—now come on.

He’s unctuous, his elbow possesses the counter that was white—I remember. I had books there; my cookbooks. Now they’re ashes.

I try to think what the man is getting at.

He thinks he can just wait and he’ll hear what he wants. Will
you look at him? He thinks he’s an old hand, knows what’s coming: confession.

“There was no accident,” I say.

“You were cooking—you’ve said as much already.” He throws this down, an accusation; more, his proof.

“That’s right,” I say.

He looks at his fingernails, bending the knuckles back: the man’s way. He must have been practicing this—his timing, his stares at me, then away. I can imagine him telling it later, wherever it is he winds up, at home, at a bar: so I said to her, isn’t it true you were using an appliance.

Oh, yes, that’s when he’d got her. Around the table they nod, admiring of his skills for detection.

That’s what he was—a detective.

“Look,” I say. “The smoke alarm went off. I just left. Out the front door. The rest is history. The rest is ashes.”

He only stares at me. He thinks he’s on television, he’s got his own series—Fire! maybe they call it.

When I heard the smoke alarm go off upstairs, I went to the staircase and thought: I’ll go up, I’ll go see. I thought it must be some malfunction or other—as if a fire, I mean a real fire, could not happen to me, as if I were not that important; not that real. Even thinking about flight made me feel like a malingerer. I’d lecture myself—oh you, you’re overreacting. Oh you; as if you’d have a fire.

So I hovered by the base of the stairwell, contemplating ascent; and thought finally, well, no; just in case.

And it was a good thing.

I’m not exaggerating. I was out the door, across the street in the hayfields where I looked upward to see if there were smoke coming out of the second storey; when it blew up, blew into flame, like an eruption, like a lid blown off.

I thought, first off: my clothes!

Then: lucky thing I got out.

Then: there’s a lesson for you.
The man didn't stop, didn't stop insinuating. He kept looking sideways at me, sly-eyed, and back again at his fingernails. He thought I'd actually started it, I knew that: and maybe he thought as well, on purpose. He wanted arson. He wanted his big break. That's what I thought: that he wanted arson.

As if I'd burn my clothes, my house, my things.

Every day I went back to try to salvage something from the fire, and every day he was there. To investigate. To investigate the site. Mostly he just leaned against what used to be the white kitchen counter and watched me sift through remains.

The third day some people from the insurance company came. Instantly they were busy with cameras, the measuring of things, the taking of samples. As much as the police detective leaned on the remains of the counter, the people from the insurance company explored, examined. Once the detective said to one of the insurance men: she was working in the kitchen you know. The man from the insurance company looked up and said, this didn't start in the kitchen, mister, it started on the second floor. And he explained how you could trace the progress of the flames, how the fire left a trail behind itself—blazed its trail, I thought; left varying degrees of disintegration, a variety of char.

The insurance men came twice and spent a long time each time. When they'd finished they said: a mouse chewed through a wire between the walls. They said the fire had been burning inside the walls for about two hours before the smoke alarm went off, and that by then, the walls had grown so hot they'd actually exploded. They could tell this by the fragments of wall, their shape and location—that the wall had burst rather than just burned, like a building blown up by a bomb.

These insurance men, they were like coroners, only of buildings instead of bodies, the way they could analyze the corpse of a building and reconstruct the event.
We found another house, in town. People sent money, clothes, furniture: strangers as well as friends sent us these things. My husband salvaged some papers of his although they are a permanent dark gray. Most of all I missed my clothes. But I liked the house in town so much better than the house across from the hayfields—I could walk to the general store, I had neighbors whose voices I could hear, whose faces I could see.

I liked it so much better, life got so much better, there were times I could almost see that man again in my kitchen, eyeing me and his hands: and I almost wondered if he mightn’t be right, and if I had done it after all: burned down my house, to get out of it, to save my life.
Ansel's
Mother

1. HIS MOTHER

Here in the hills of North Carolina where we now live, I listen to the birds in the mornings and at night the footsteps of animals walking on the roof. I don't know what kind of animal, maybe raccoon or squirrel, something small. Although I was raised in the country and have lived in it all my life I am not especially familiar with wildlife. For all I know it's rats, but Walter says no it's more likely something a little larger.

My sons come to visit me from time to time. I want them to come but when they get here I start to want them to leave. The
oldest is a painter of pictures and the youngest sells used cars and
the two in between have jobs I don’t recall, although I believe
one of them is actually between jobs and that his wife is support-
ing them. The painter of pictures is also supported in large mea-
sure by his wife, a tall girl for whom I have no particular rancor
but no particular affection either. As for grandchildren only the
oldest, the painter, has them, and he has two small and rowdy
boys who tire me.

2. HIS WIFE

When Bonnie stayed in D.C. with one of Ansel’s friends she
said, “That Ansel he’s just a saint. He’s done so much traveling
this year, he had such a great time in New York, and he said to
me ‘Now go on just have a fine time, I’ll look after the boys.’”
She shook her head—reddish hair, the auburn variety, thick and
straight, hair cut like a cap on the head, like the old saw about
cutting somebody’s hair by putting a bowl on their head.
“That Ansel he’s just a saint,” Bonnie said.
That was in January.

3. HIS LOVER

She complains of his happiness. “Oh you,” she says. “I know
you’re just blissful down there in Richmond aren’t you. I wish I
dived down south. Ever since I met you I come across Richmond
everywhere, articles, movies. I can’t bear it. Is it wonderful? Is it
wonderful? Are you blissfully happy without me?”
“Blissfully,” he says.
Sometimes when he calls her she says, “Oh it’s so good to hear
that voice of yours. Just talk. Just let me hear that Southern
voice.”
“Just let me hear that Jewish angst,” he says, and they both
laugh.
4. THE WOMAN HE SHARES HIS STUDIO WITH

He always had a fair amount of mail, personal letters and such. There was nothing out of the ordinary about that. He made friends everywhere and also that was part of his art, part of his work, making connections with people who were interested in his work and then keeping up with them. Being an artist isn’t just about doing the work, it’s about working the room as well, as they say, and Ansel is very good at doing that. People like him and he makes the best use of that. He is the first to admit it. He says When it comes to my art yes it’s true I am an operator, if you want to put it that way. He was not only my studio partner but he was the husband of my dearest friend.

One afternoon the telephone rang and Ansel picked it up. He was completely silent so the person on the other end of the phone must have been talking. He grew visibly pale, enough so that it was noticeable. Also his face caved in the way faces do—they go limp-like, something sags in them. All in all without having heard a word I could see that something was happening on the other end of the phone, something quite startling to him, and after a few minutes he just said, very deliberately, I can’t talk now I’ll call you back later.

What was all that about? I asked.

He gave me a long hard look. Come with me to pick up the kids, he said. They were at play school.

I got into the car with him.

I’ve been having an affair, he said.

Rosemary, I said. I looked at him. Am I right? I said. He hadn’t tried to keep her a mystery entirely; he just hadn’t told the truth entirely, either. Sometimes when she called it was me that answered the phone, and I knew she wrote him letters. He said she was a friend. He’d met her last summer when she spent three weeks here in Richmond. Bonnie took the boys to the mountains so Ansel could do his art.
I had Ansel’s big drawing pinned up on my wall for almost a year before I took it to be framed. He’d written out precise instructions for me when he gave it to me, but one way or another I never got to the framers. They closed at five o’clock on weekdays, and I never got back from work before then. The place was open Saturday mornings but either it was raining and I was afraid of getting the drawing wet, which would have ruined it since it was in charcoal on paper, or I’d slept late, or I was away for the weekend. I suppose I could have looked for another framer but this one was right around the corner from where I lived and I couldn’t pass up on the convenience, especially considering the size of the drawing and how hard it was to transport anywhere let alone in a taxicab. Also too there was the money. The drawing, which Ansel always called the big drawing (in a letter he wrote the sentence, I just sold another one of the big drawings, and in another he wrote I am working on more big drawings), was at least six feet by six feet or maybe more so I knew it was going to cost me a lot of money to have it framed. And so it hung on my wall for the better part of a year before I took it to be framed.

I finally did take it, at the end of June when the weather was reliable and I found myself in the city on a Saturday, and it took more than three weeks for them to finish it on account of its size. Everything had to be cut to order—matte, wood, glass. By the time I picked it up, just a few days after the anniversary of the day I met him, which was also the day we got together, as it’s euphemistically put, he was no longer speaking to me.

He said to me on the telephone: We can never speak to one another again. Never. For the rest of our lives.

Then he said: I wrote you a letter. It’s three lines.

I decided then that there was no point in reading the letter and that when it arrived I would put it away unopened along with all the other letters he had written me which I had opened gratefully enough. I did not so much as entertain the notion of throwing it out. To throw out a letter from somebody you love, or once loved, any letter, even one that was certain to pain you, was a
travesty, and beyond my capability. Also there was a way in which I almost believed in magic—as if by holding the letter in my hand, running my fingers over my name written in his big handwriting, the words might somehow be transmogrified into some pure and glistening declaration of love. In any case I would save it.

When it did arrive, about four days after we spoke on the telephone and he said to me We can never speak to each other again, ever, for the rest of our lives, I did at first put it down on the table where I always put the mail, and for a good quarter of an hour or so I let it sit there, which made me feel composed and virtuous and in mastery of myself. But at some point I lost interest in my chosen posture, which suddenly seemed to be exactly that and no more, a posture, a pretense, a gesture.

I retrieved the letter and opened it.

Dear Rosemary, Ansel had written,

Our relationship is over. I have ruined my life. Please don’t try to contact me either at the studio or at home.

Ansel

A few days later the framers telephoned and said the drawing was ready. Since they were so nearby, the man there was kind enough to carry the drawing to my apartment building for me. I’d been worried about how I was going to carry it myself, so when the man offered I accepted.

I was going away in a few days so I didn’t have a chance to hang it up. I put it on the floor of my bedroom, propped against the bookcase, directly in front of my bed, so that when I went to sleep at night and woke up in the morning it was pretty much the last and first thing I saw. In fact I loved having it there in my bedroom at eye level, I think I liked it better than when it was on the wall, but it was too grand a drawing and I was too proud of having it—Ansel had inscribed it to me—for me to keep it hidden in my bedroom where nobody but me would ever see it. I wanted it someplace for everyone to see.

But I noticed that having it framed had done something amazing to it. It seemed to shine out from its frame in a way it had not when it was only pinned to the wall. I remembered that I once wrote to Ansel, I know this sounds crazy but I really do feel like
you are an angel who came into my life and shone light on me. Now when I look at his drawing shining out from its frame I remember that and I think it all over again.

6. HIS WIFE

The phone rang and when I picked it up there was silence. "You must have the wrong number" I said and I hung up the phone. Right away it rang again and a woman’s voice said "It’s not a wrong number."

It was a low voice, Northern but no particular accent.

When Ansel came home I said to him I think you better tell me what is going on here, and he did. He told me everything. He told me things I didn’t want to know except I want to know everything. I said Did you tell her you loved her? Did you? and he said he had. I started to hit him in the chest and he didn’t try to stop me, in fact he was almost compliant, so I started to think ‘he wants me to hit him, he thinks that will make everything all right,’ which made me so angry that I ran into the kitchen and got a knife. I wasn’t really thinking about anything specific. I mean to say I had no particular intentions. It’s more like—first I did one thing, then I did another thing.

7. HIS FRIEND

Frank remembered it exactly. Every night after dinner they played poker, but one night Ansel didn’t play. That was July 4th and someone had made a big batch of margaritas, that being someone’s idea of an appropriate July 4th celebration. Rosemary came into the room. She was in Richmond visiting friends, and they’d brought her with them. Frank remembered thinking that she was cheerful but maybe a little overeager, the kind of person that wants to be part of whatever was going on. She and Ansel fell into conversation. They sat in chairs facing one another drinking margaritas and talking. Ansel was all smiles. So was she.
When the poker game started someone said, Hey, Ansel, we’re starting, because he had played every single night, but he said, Maybe later. Then later after they’d played a couple of hands Frank said, Come on Ansel aren’t you playing? and Ansel said, No I don’t feel like playing right now.

Then he started giving everybody back rubs. He stood up and walked around the table giving every single person a massage while they played poker. Frank remembers that the minute Ansel started on that first massage, he knew right away what was going on, even if Ansel didn’t. He gave every single person a massage while Rosemary watched. Finally he said to her Hey, isn’t it your turn? and started rubbing her shoulders. She put down her margarita. Frank said later “I looked at them and I thought, He is never going to stop until something stops him.”

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8. HIS MOTHER

Lord, was it Christmas the last time I saw Ansel and the children? Is that possible? They all came, as they do every year: Ansel, David, Jed. John did not come; I forget why. Walter mixed up a batch of eggnog, every night different neighbors stopped by to visit with my prodigal sons returned, and to play with Ansel’s boys. Ansel was always very popular, very popular. He liked his music. He would take Bonnie by the hand and dance with her, then he’d pull me up and dance with me, then he’d dance with the boys. They were happy enough, as happy as most people, which I daresay is enough.

One night it snowed and I came down to the kitchen for a moment alone. The house was entirely quiet and except for the wind I might have thought I had ceased to exist.

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9. THE WOMAN HE SHARES HIS STUDIO WITH

It is not as if she did not have her own troubles, with Tony down in Florida on a shoot and not answering her letters or
phone calls. “He’s more selfish than me,” Ansel said to her. All afternoon that bothered her. A person does not want her own poor judgment thrown in her face.

One morning shortly after Ansel had told her about Rosemary, the phone rang repeatedly and each time, whoever it was would hang up.

She thought, God damn it. She looked through the desk and found Rosemary’s telephone number in Ansel’s address book and dialed the number. Rosemary answered with her name. She worked in an office where people answered with their names rather than hello.

“Look have you been calling here and hanging up?” Nancy said.

“It wasn’t me,” Rosemary said.

“Well I wish you would just stop it,” Nancy said.

“Look,” Rosemary said. “It’s true I’ve done that in the past. Maybe twice. Sometimes when Ansel doesn’t answer I just don’t want to leave my name over and over. It’s embarrassing. You can understand that.”

“Perhaps if something embarrasses you then you shouldn’t be doing it,” Nancy said, as coldly as she could muster.

Rosemary laughed. “If that were the case I’d never get out of bed in the morning!” she said. “Anyway Nancy it wasn’t me.” Then she paused.

“It must have been one of Ansel’s other girlfriends,” she said.

10. ANSEL’S MOTHER

Of course I can hardly believe it. And yet it is so strange. How often anyway did I see him? Twice a year? It is not as if he were a part of my life. He was, in a way, no longer a part of my life. He was gone as thoroughly as birds are gone, the way birds fly away from the nest. I mean this exactly: I have watched the swallows in a nest over the back door. I watched them be born, I watched them for days on end, their mouths open, their necks craned, waiting for their mother and father. Their mother and father fed them all day, day in, day out. I recall thinking how exhausting it
must have been for the mother and the father. One would fly to the nest with I suppose an insect in its mouth and would drop the insect into one of the gaping mouths. As always seems to be the case one of the babies was the most aggressive and I worried that it was getting all the food, but Walter said no, they were all getting their fair share, or if not their fair share then at least what they needed. No sooner would the mother fly away, assuming let’s say that it was the mother, when the other bird would swoop down with its catch. The baby birds were bizarre looking creatures, all beak, all open mouth and craning neck. I watched this for three weeks. I watched the baby birds grow feathers and begin to look more like birds and then one day, quite suddenly, all four baby birds just flew away.

The nest is still there. I sometimes show it to the boys before I fix them their dinner.
The
Dance
Floor

And your personality may undergo a radical transformation in the next half hour.
—James Tate, "Consumed"

This one danced, that one danced.
I wanted them all to get off the dance floor, and all the men would dance with me, and the ones that did not dance with me would watch me and wish they were, and the women also would be watching me, with unpleasant tastes in their mouths on account of envy. That was a taste I knew.

But the dance floor was full of them—other women. A man ran his hands along a woman’s spine. One hand stopped on her
shoulder blade while the other slipped into the small of her back as if the small of her back were a glove. Everything belonged. Then he gently pushed her so she knew to turn, and I saw her face and how pleased she was. I was dancing as well although not touching my partner and I opened my eyes more widely and raised my eyebrows to try to look the way the woman looked, so that someone would look at me and envy me.

I knew a few ways to draw attention to myself but on the whole they were not good ways. I moved a lot on the dance floor. I could shake my shoulders in a real shimmy—that got attention. I did a lot with my face as well. I knew the things I did were not really much use but I did them anyway—I thought I ought to do a thing until something else replaced it. What I wouldn’t do was try repose—I thought repose meant you’d be forgotten.

I wanted, really, anybody’s attention, anybody’s envy—anybody at all would do. But there were some people whose attention or envy I wanted more than others. The man from the office in Canada and one from the office downtown, who was Latin and wore soft gray shoes and danced like a Latin—I wanted them to notice me. And I always kept my eye out for strangers. But for now I watched these two, they were the best dancers on the floor. I started in moving around the dance floor, and I kept putting myself in their way, where they’d have to notice me. And they did, notice me—they smiled and called out hello. But they seemed content enough with their partners.

The Canadian man was fair and Nordic-looking. He could do the kind of dances that require partners—the old dances, the jitterbug, the lindy, the two-step. I danced once or twice with him and it felt good. When he spun you out you could lean way back so it felt like centrifugal force. We danced well together but I passed him by—that was how I put it.

The Latin man danced with a woman I thought was beautiful. I minded that she was beautiful, but I minded in a way that was cool, for me—I frankly admired her as well. I told other women I thought she was beautiful; people do not like that, I don’t think. Yesterday morning at breakfast I said to a few people at my table, “Isn’t so-and-so beautiful? I think she’s just beautiful,” and everyone started talking about whether she were beautiful or

118  The Dance Floor
not. “You really think she’s beautiful?” one woman said. You could tell what she really meant. Another woman said, “Hmm,” showing that she was thinking about it. I dug in. “She is, really, a stunning woman, a dazzler.”

There were no men at our table, it was breakfast, I don’t know where the men were. If there had been men at the table I may not have talked that way—I don’t know; I can’t be sure.

We were at a business meeting and people had come in from all our different offices. During the day we listened to speakers tell us we could do anything we wanted, anything at all. There was nothing we could not accomplish. We had within ourselves the capacity for greatness. These speakers spoke to us on topics with names like self-management and peak performance. I believed everything. I believed everything they told me. One of the speakers told us about a man who worked in a toll booth in northern California. The man in the toll booth was written up in the speaker’s book on peak performers. The man in the toll booth was a peak performer. When you drove past his toll booth, you saw that he was dancing. Then if you drove past his toll booth again, you saw that he was still dancing. The speaker drove past his toll booth repeatedly and every time the man was dancing. He collected your money on a spin and handed you a receipt from behind his back. From the toll booth, our speaker told us, you could hear music. The speaker, who specialized in the study of peak performers, took the man in the toll booth to lunch, and the man in the toll booth said, hell, all those others, they work in vertical coffins. The speaker asked him what he meant and the man in the toll booth said, they come to work alive and then they go into those little boxes and suddenly they’re dead, so I figure that those boxes must be vertical coffins.

Our speaker explained to us that the man in the toll booth was a peak performer. He explained to us that every one of us could be a peak performer.

I thought of dancing in the airless, sunless cubicle where I worked—I thought of being discovered there, and written about. Peak performer found in cubicle. But I believed him.

The Dance Floor 119
Out here on the dance floor a lot is happening. There is a lot going on. Everybody knows everybody else. That in itself is something. Everyone is away from home, and the days have been mild and clear like the best fall days. This place is in the woods—look out any window and you see trees, woodsful of them. The leaves are turning and the sun is out. These are the most perfect days of autumn, maybe of the year. You think these days will last forever, as if the wandering earth had lighted someplace it would never wish to leave.

At night they give us champagne. This is to make us happy, which it does. A band plays, and plays well—it surprises us. We don’t expect it from a place like this. We expect champagne, after all it is not the expensive kind. We expect music as well, we expect a band, what we do not expect is that it will be good. Every song they play makes me believe in them. I believe they are all the old groups from the fifties and then from the sixties. They are the original everything. Every song they sing belongs to them. We are all very gay and becoming excitable. Possibly something might happen. Something may occur after all. The Latin man in his soft gray shoes, how beautifully he dances, like a man from a distant country who grows up with a different music in his ear—for instance he may fall in love with the woman I find beautiful, whose face I admire.

The Latin man turns in place, with a series of small quick steps. People stop to watch his feet. When he turns in place, with those rapid, nervous steps, the woman just dances as usual. She doesn’t try to match him, she doesn’t compete. If it were me dancing with him, I would turn too—I’d move as fast and soundlessly as he does. Before the night is out he will dance with me—I know it. I caught him watching me.

I am dancing with a man I’ve known for a while, a nice-looking man, a good dancer and with large hands, which I like. His skin is shining with perspiration and the perspiration gives his skin a luminous, translucent quality.

One year I’d danced with him all night at a Christmas party, until three or four in the morning, and then we went out to breakfast with a small group of others like ourselves, who
wouldn’t leave the party or let it go. Since then we act as if we’re old friends whenever we see each other, we start conversations but we keep finding out that we don’t really have much in common. Still we feel friendly towards each other, we like that we stayed up all night, dancing with each other, and then went out to breakfast. It feels good the way a private joke feels good. That’s often the case around here—this friendly feeling but with no common ground, except the office and the dance floor.

The band plays a slow number and the Latin man heads my way. It’s late, people are heading upstairs and the floor is empty, it feels like a marathon dance when there’s almost no one left—I’m always left. I never leave a party till it’s over. I have to be the last to leave or I think I’m missing something. The Latin man reaches me—the beautiful woman is dancing with somebody else—and he smiles and gestures. I walk toward him. He holds me in his arms and presses his body against me. I could have him if I wanted. I know it.

It is late, there is no one to see me dancing. Still I’m glad he has asked me to dance. He says he has waited all night to dance with me. This pleases me—I admit it. Of course it pleases me. The days and nights have seemed so laden, everything is out of proportion—it is this weather, these speakers, who tell us we have the capacity for greatness in ourselves, and whom I believe. These things conspire, I am not alone in this, we have grown excited and hopeful—not only me but everyone.

The band finishes. The Latin man says, let’s go get a drink, but the bar is closed, there’s no place to go. He has those unlikely soft gray shoes, you don’t see shoes like that often, nevertheless we say goodnight and go our separate ways.

A van drives us back to the city the next afternoon. The drive is through country, the view is all trees. The sun is strong and shines through the windows of the van. The windows are tinted so the light seems more golden than it really is, and the way it
really is is good enough. But the windows make it better. I am all sentiment, all preparation. I feel like prepared ground—like something purified for sacrifice. There is nothing I do not understand. My heart is as full as any heart that has undergone something truly. I dream of the dance floor as if the dance floor were a moment in history, as if something occurred there. In the van we are mostly quiet, a man sitting in front talks to the driver and every now and then others of us talk. There’s no way to know how anybody feels. I watch the leaves through the glazed, tinted windows, their brilliant colors, the brilliant light.

And suddenly your life might be transformed.
May
You Live in
Interesting
Times

An ordinary morning. I get up, I wake my
daughter, I shower, I get ready for work. Then I have to give the
cat a pill. I have two cats, and one of them has a heart condition,
and every morning I have to give the cat a pill; a quarter of a pill,
to be precise. I cut the pill, which is minuscule even in its en-
tirety, into quarters. Then my daughter holds the cat, the one
with the heart condition, in her arms, and I pry open his mouth
and pop down the quarter of a pill. Then I wash my hands re-
peatedly, to get the cat’s saliva off, and then I start telling my
daughter that we’re late again and she’s going to miss her bus to
school, and she says: “Mother, it’s my business; don’t say ‘we’re’
late; I'm the one that's late; only I'm not late, your watch is fast, your watch is always fast."

We quarrel about this a little, but eventually we're out the front door—me with my briefcase, my newspaper in the briefcase and a pair of shoes to change into, all the signs of ordinary life. My daughter has her book bag, and she never does in fact miss the bus, at least she never has so far, and anyone who was looking our way as we walk along 69th Street to York Avenue, where eventually her bus will pick her up, would think we were just ordinary people with lives like anyone's life; and so I suppose we are. Except for this: except that at any moment, I might do anything—put down my briefcase, and get into a taxi and say: "Airport." And then I might buy a ticket to anywhere—Morocco, maybe, because it is a place I dream of being lost in; or someplace strange, strange to me anyway; maybe Goa or the Seychelles or that island off Kenya, I forget its name; or someplace I have never been or maybe never even heard of.

This is my subterranean life.

My daughter is right about my watch.

I deliberately set my watch fast so I won't be late for anything: because I hate to be late. Until the day I take the taxi to the airport and buy a ticket to Goa, I don't want to be late for anyplace I'm expected. The problem is, my daughter knows I set my watch fast, so she doesn't pay attention when I tell her to hurry. The other problem is, I always get everywhere early, and then I have to wait for everyone else.

I leave my daughter on the corner of York Avenue where her bus will pick her up. Of course, she's early. She leans against a wall, her book bag on the sidewalk, and gestures me away. "Go," she says. "Leave." She waves me away. I try for a kiss, just a small one on the cheek, but she pulls her neck back like a turtle and reprimands me. I settle for a tap on her arm. I used to wait
for the bus to arrive, but I’m not permitted to any more, and I
don’t want to embarrass her overly. I embarrass her enough as it
is. I want to show her I’m trying at least.

So I go to work, where I’m ordinary, like everybody else. I do
my work. Maybe I even do it well. The day passes. Some days
it’s hard to work, and I do things slowly and call my friends on
the telephone, and those days pass as well. At night I come home
and fix dinner or order out, and my daughter and I sit on the
floor and eat our dinner at the coffee table instead of the dining
room table, because the dining room table is always piled with
mail and magazines and catalogues, and in any case we can’t see
the television from the dining ell, and while we eat our dinner we
like to watch television. And in this way the evenings pass in
their turn.

This is our life.

The cat, the one with the heart condition, is in his fifth life. We
have calculated this, my daughter and I, from his first catastrop-
he, which was some extra surgery when we took him to be
fixed. It turned out his testicles had not dropped, and they had to
open him up and dig them out. This required some fairly consid-
erable unpacking of his innards. That was when he used up his
first life.

Then he fell out the window, or maybe he jumped. It was two
o’clock in the morning before I realized he wasn’t in the apart-
ment. I wandered from room to room looking for him but he
wasn’t in any of his usual places. Then I woke my daughter, even
though it was two o’clock in the morning, and she looked in the
usual places as well. I remembered that I’d opened the window
because I’d burned the lamb chops and smoked up the kitchen,
and I’d left the window open for a while. So it was my fault.
“Alice,” I said to my little girl, “I think Pierre’s gone out the
window.” I was sure he must be dead and I told her so. She
climbed into my lap and cried. “That poor cat,” she said. “He was
such a good cat and I never really showed him how I felt about
him.”
We sat in the rocking chair, her on my lap, and had a little cry. In the morning she said to me confidently, "I bet you’ll find him, I bet he’ll be all right." I walked her to her school bus and came home and looked out the window into the gardens below. Then I rang the doorbell of the man who lived on the ground floor. I woke him up, even though it was eight-thirty in the morning, but he was very nice about it, and he said, why yes, he had heard a cat meowing during the night! We walked out into his garden. I couldn’t see anything but he said, There, do you hear it? I didn’t hear anything but he said he did, and then we found Pierre curled up under one of the potted trees. He had to have a pin put in his leg. His front paw was in a cast for a month.

That was his second life.

Then he swallowed a thread and got lacerations in his intestines, and ended up with peritonitis. That time everyone thought he’d die; his fever shot up, and they had to take out half his intestine. It seems that when they operate on cats, they lay them on a heating element, and our cat was on the operating table so long that his back got burned. Months later his skin was bubbling up and peeling off, leaving raw red hairless flesh underneath. Eventually his fur grew back where he’d been burned, but it grew back white around the edges, an eternal reminder of his sufferings.

That time was my fault as well. I’d seen a little thread coming out of him, and I’d tried to pull it out, thinking it was just a little bit; but it was long, and I’d hurt him, so it was probably me that lacerated his intestines.

Then he got the heart condition: that was his fourth life. So I figured he had started now on his fifth life.

I was in my fifth life myself.

The reason I knew I was in my fifth life was because a man told me so. This was in Bangkok, at the temple of Wat Po, so I thought he should know what he was talking about. I was by myself, and I tagged along with a tour group of Australians. They didn’t seem to mind, unlike the Americans I’d tagged along with.
on other trips in other places. The Americans always minded, and said so. Someone always looked icily at me and said, *excuse me but this is a private tour*. The Australians were friendly and fell into easy conversation with me. I liked their accents. I always liked all those accents—British ones, and Australian and even South African, which nobody likes, I think just because they’re South African.

The guide was showing us a series of friezes about the life of Buddha and his various incarnations. Then he told us how you could figure out how many lives you’d led: you look at your fingertips, at the swirls of your fingerprints. If your fingerprints make circles—actual, closed circles, not just swirls—that represents a completed life. He looked at all our fingertips. Everyone was in their first life, except for two fellows who were in their second lives; and there was one girl, I think she may have been an aborigine, because she was very dark, and the guide looked at her fingers and said she was very evolved, she was in her ninth life, which was her last. Then he looked at my fingers. I’d waited, because I wasn’t with the tour really and I didn’t want anyone to be angry with me the way the Americans always got angry with me; and he showed me how the swirls on four of my fingertips made complete circles, and he said that each of those fingers meant a completed life. So I was in my fifth life.

I was very excited and pleased about this, and the guide seemed to be as well, for after that he stayed by my side and seemed to direct all his explanations to me. I thought this was because the woman in her ninth life was so advanced there was really no talking to her at all, whereas I was in the throes of it all—the very midst of the struggle, the journey. He even said something like that to me—that there were things I saw and understood, but there were things I still fought against. When he said this to me, it seemed to me as if he had said something altogether revelatory and astounding, although, like the things you read in horoscopes, I suppose you could say they were true about anyone. But all that afternoon I felt singled out in some way, justified somehow—as if I’d finally been given credit for what I was. I felt I’d somehow gotten the recognition I deserved.

I had thought anyway that I wasn’t in my first life because I was a Scorpio rising, and one of my astrology books said that all
souls with Scorpio rising are very evolved. The book said: “No young soul has Scorpio rising.” Anyway I could tell by how I felt that I wasn’t a new soul, not entirely; but also I could tell what a long way I had to go: because I minded everything and everyone so much. The woman in her ninth life looked as if she didn’t mind anything any more. After the guide had said she was in her ninth life, I’d followed behind her and tried to listen to what she was saying, and she did have a way about her, an aura maybe, as if she were wise or at peace in some way. Maybe this was my imagination, but she did exude something and people clustered around her and listened to her. The quality she had about her was of someone no longer angry or yearning, and I was very far away from that.

It was a Saturday, and my birthday, and my daughter and I were taking the train back from my mother’s house. It had been an interesting week—interesting in the sense of the Chinese curse, “May you live in interesting times.” There was a man I’d known for a while; I mean in the Biblical sense. His name was Martin. Of course he was married, but even worse than that, he lived not just in another city, but on another continent—Africa, to be specific. So he was not somebody I saw a lot of, and anyway there was his wife, who was all that I was not, as is always the case. She was tall and Southern. She rode horses. I don’t just mean that she rode horses, I mean that riding horses was a passion for her, a life subject, an undertaking. I didn’t really know too much else about her but I could invent the rest; I had some scraps of information from people who knew her. I had dinner one night in Lagos with a man who knew them both who said, “I like him but I don’t like her.” That was the kind of thing it made me happy to hear; and I discreetly encouraged him to go on. Of course he knew nothing about me and the man, beyond that we knew each other because of work. But what he said about her was: “I don’t like her; she’s a dolly” (he was British, so he used words like “dolly”). He said she was all surfaces, all glittering and flirtation and cast-down eyelids.

I had the idea that men liked this kind of thing, and I guess
Martin did; but it was gratifying to hear that this man I was having dinner with, didn’t.

I was having dinner in Lagos because sometimes my job took me to interesting places. I produced corporate videotapes for a large company. That was how I had met Martin in the first place; he was going to be interviewed in one of the films. My job took me to Yugoslavia and Paris and London and Bangkok and São Paulo as well as to Lagos, but I only found Martin in all that time, and to tell the truth, it wasn’t really all that wonderful to have found Martin.

That was some years ago. More than three, in fact, although he, at least, wasn’t counting. I said to him last time I saw him, you know we’ve known each other now for three years! and he said, “Three! I thought it was two.” Then he did some quick calculations and realized it was three.

What had happened this week, that had made it interesting in the Chinese sense of the word, had to do with Martin’s wife.

First I heard that she died. I heard this on a Monday, right before lunch. One of the secretaries told me. That was stunning enough news. I thought to myself: a riding accident. This was the kind of news that sobers a person, and makes a person reconsider things.

For instance, maybe I wasn’t the unlucky one after all. I’d always assumed I was; that was just the way I saw the world, that everyone else was luckier than I was. I figured Suzanne—that was her name—was just flitting through her life, always getting her way, and anyway, she had Martin, didn’t she? while I had done rather a lot of crying over him. I used to think about them together in their house in Africa, sitting out in their garden in sling-back chairs, listening to the birds and looking at that clear wide sky.

I met my friend Julia for lunch and told her that Suzanne had died, and she said, “Suicide.”

“Don’t be silly,” I said. “She was Miss Perfect. Miss Southern. People like Suzanne don’t kill themselves. People like me kill themselves.”

May You Live in Interesting Times
Julia shook her head. "Suicide," she said again.

After lunch I asked one of the people at the office what had happened. I could do that without giving anything away, since after all I'd worked with Martin. The man I asked said, "They're saying she had a heart attack, but in fact she killed herself."

That was the kind of thing that made a person reconsider even more.

It signified little, in terms of Martin and me; we were an old case, by now. I had always said, his being married had nothing to do with it. Wasn't a factor, I said. Neither was his living in Africa and my living in New York. Not a factor, I said. From the outset I saw it clearly—the problem was Martin and me. He was absent and I was too present. So it wasn't as if this news made me anticipate any change between us, because it didn't. But it certainly made a person reconsider.

I was reading a book by a writer I'd recently encountered, named Paul Auster. In the book I was reading, there was a character with his name. The book was very familiar to me. It had in it the kind of downward spiral of fortunes that seemed to me to be always looming on the sidelines—the exact kind of downward spiral that I thought would take me off one day in a taxi to the airport and eventually to Morocco or Goa. The character in the novel starts out almost normal, passing for normal, as I do. But soon he begins his descent. The effect, for me, particularly in the light of my interesting week, was that someone, Paul Auster in point of fact, had been listening in on my mind. There were strange coincidences. One of the characters lived on East 69th Street. I lived on East 69th Street. Another character had grown up in a town called Northfield. I had grown up on a street called Northfield Road. There was another character named William Wilson, and I had had a professor my junior year at college named William Wilson. He taught Blake to Keats and Nineteenth Century American Literature. You could say this was not so strange, after all we all had to live somewhere, had to grow up somewhere, our professors were bound to have names. But three coincidences? I call that strange.
I had to stop reading when we went through the tunnel before reaching Penn Station, since the lights in the train go off then. I began to daydream. I daydreamed that I took my book, and held it so its title showed. This was the kind of thing I liked to do in any case. Whenever I traveled, I always made sure I was reading something I considered impressive, so if someone saw the book I was carrying, they would get a certain impression of me. I would carry Camus or Jane Austen or even Tolstoy, or a new author like this Paul Auster fellow. I imagined our walk through Penn Station, my daughter's and mine—up the stairs from the track, along the broad courseway to the escalator, up the escalator, past the magazine stand where on the trip out, I always bought a magazine (preferably one with a horoscope in it), up the last escalator where the homeless stand with their paper cups out and out onto the street where the veterans sit in their wheelchairs with their paper cups out, and the black kids try to hail taxis for strangers, although no New Yorker ever falls for this.

They've recently put in a formal taxi stand, so that people get in a real line, just the way they do at the airports; but that autumn day that was my birthday, the week of Martin's wife's suicide, there wasn't yet any taxi stand.

In my daydream, I've got the Paul Auster book tucked under my arm, and just as I'm about to hail a taxi, a man approaches me. "How do you like that book?" he says to me.


"Why do you like it so much?" the man says.

This stumps me; I'm no good at explaining things. I encounter them whole, and almost carelessly. Books, people. Like Martin—I first saw him standing in the doorway of my office, looking left and right for me. Of course he had no idea what I looked like, I guess he was just looking for someone who might be coming that way. But I saw him there and the whole of him came over me—his whole presence. It's always been that way with me.

So I say, finally: "I don't know."

This doesn't please the man altogether, but he accepts it. Then he says to me: "I'm Paul Auster."

Of course my mouth quite drops open. My daughter, in my daydream, is beside me. During the train ride—I mean the real

May You Live in Interesting Times  131
one—I’ve been reading the occasional paragraph to her when I hit upon something I think she’ll particularly like, and she now wants to read the book herself. Paul Auster doesn’t know it, but that’s quite an accomplishment.

I’ve always been in awe of fame. It would be nice to be able to say that I’ve always been in awe of accomplishment, but the truth is, it’s more fame that captures me than accomplishment. I always wanted to be famous; that was my idea of revenge. I thought every unrequited love I ever had would see my face on the cover of a magazine or read my name somewhere; “Eat your heart out!” I’d think. I had no talent for living well, being too cranky and ill-tempered, not to mention the fact that I was in my fifth life, which surely accounted for my perpetual discontent. But I reckoned that I ought to have been famous. I had advantages and I had drive. But I remained unsung and in awe of the—sung.

In my daydream Paul Auster and I became friends and of course, rapidly, lovers.

When the train got to Penn Station, and we started our actual walk through the bowels of the station to Seventh Avenue, I half expected to actually find Paul Auster in precisely the manner of my daydream. This is because I always take everything to be a sign. A dream when you’re sleeping is a sign, a daydream is a sign. Books you read, where the characters live on the same street you do, are messages from somewhere about something, only you can’t be sure what. This kind of thinking was right in keeping with a Paul Auster book, which was one of the reasons I was having a daydream about him.

The other reason was that I’d seen his photograph in the newspaper when his most recent book was reviewed, and he was a handsome fellow.

But he was nowhere in sight, so I was left with my feelings of portent. I suppose it was because I was in my fifth life, and hankering after the spiritual, that I was so filled with feelings of portent. I was hankering after the spiritual but what I got was superstition. I thought, Maybe in my next life I’ll have the real thing.
I wondered what I ought to do about Martin—call him, or write him, or do nothing at all. I had never quite worked out my place in his life, any more than I’d worked out my place anywhere else. He was an absent, remote sort of fellow. Suzanne was his second wife. He had two children with his first wife, who was also a Southern belle—I knew someone who knew her, too—and she had just left one day, leaving him with the children. He was living in Africa then—Zaire or maybe Kenya. He’d always lived in Africa, since the day he finished college and went to work for the company. The two boys went to boarding school somewhere in Indiana, where he’d gone to school. He was on his own for a while, I understand, and when I first saw him standing in the doorway of my office, he’d been married to Suzanne for two years. He sat in my office and we talked about the filming I’d do in Africa and what stories we would cover. He seemed very sad to me, and gentle. I remember how instantly he seized hold of my heart—This man! I thought; and I thought I could cheer him up.

There was a dinner that night that we both went to, and he sat across from me at the table, although it was a wide table, so it was not easy to carry on a conversation. But he said a few things that I thought might be leading remarks—I mean remarks that meant more than they said; it was a few months before I got a chance to find out. Someone mentioned a restaurant in the city and he said, “I’d love to go there but when I come to the city I have no one to have dinner with.” I laughed and raised my hand. “Me,” I said. “I’ll go,” and Martin nodded his head, I thought maybe even eagerly, and raised his eyebrows in that way people do to show they’ve taken notice. Then later I was talking to the fellow next to me about my ex-husband and he said, it sounds like you get along so well, and I said how we probably got along so well because we didn’t live together; and Martin suddenly said—for he was not a part of our conversation, and his sudden entry seemed, to me, to mean something—“That’s what my wife says, that we get along better when I’m away.”

When the dinner was over I lingered in the room, a glittering room on the tower floor of a glittering glass building, with views of the city in lights; but everyone departed rapidly, and Martin
was gone. All that night I thought, what did he mean by what he said? I felt foolish, the way you do when you aren’t sure what’s transpired, and you have a good deal of feeling but little in the way of evidence. I hadn’t read a Paul Auster book back then, but I was looking for signs anyway, as I always was. I’m not sure I ever did find out what he meant by what he said, that night or any other night; but we eventually got together, so maybe I hadn’t been wrong when I thought I detected hidden intentions.

I had the idea, even back then, that things weren’t so good between him and Suzanne, although he never talked about it and I never asked. He traveled all the time, and I don’t think they really lived together for the last year or so. He had changed jobs and moved from Kenya to Burkina Faso. I remember looking for Burkina Faso in a large leather-bound atlas that one of the secretaries kept on her desk, and finding it there, tucked between Niger and the Ivory Coast. There was nothing for Suzanne in Burkina Faso—no horses, no English club, no dinner parties, no old colonial society. They kept the house in Kenya and she spent time there and at their apartment in Paris. I knew they hadn’t been really living together because he’d written me a letter about six months earlier. This was the only letter I ever received from him in the three and a half years we had known one another, although I had written him dozens. Not answering my letters was just one way he’d disappointed me. When he’d show up he’d say, “Thank you for your letters. I’m sorry I didn’t answer them, I’m no good at writing letters.” So when he did finally write me this one letter I thought he must be in a state of some extremity and in fact the letter bore that out. He started out saying, “Things here are fine,” and then began a catalogue of disasters. He had left the company we both worked for and taken this job as CEO of something or other in Burkina Faso, and it wasn’t working out very well; he was writing to me during the course of a Board Meeting, only the board had asked him to leave the room. Considering that he was the CEO this seemed rather insulting. Then it seemed the board wanted him to do something he considered unethical, although he didn’t say what. Added to all this was the fact that, as he put it in the letter, “As anticipated, Suzanne has declined to return to Burkina, opting instead for a course in French in Nice (towards what purpose??)” He’d written the “to-
wards what purpose??” with two question marks, and I could feel his bewilderment.

I wrote back to him, a letter of some intensity. I told him, outright, that he ought to leave that job and come back to the company I worked for, that they would want him back. Then in a peculiar way I took Suzanne’s side. What is there for her in Burkina Faso? I said. What would she do with herself?

It was some months after receiving this letter that I ended up having drinks with the man I worked for. His name was Peter, and I was fond of him. During the course of the conversation Martin’s name came up. “That was a loss,” Peter said.

“You could have him back,” I said slyly. I had often wanted to tell people about me and Martin—I was proud of having captured him, however mild his interest in me. I am not a discreet person, and I suppose I am a little perverse—I quite liked the idea of being whispered about, it seemed to grant me a kind of importance. But I also had the idea that when you talk about yourself, everyone rapidly ceases to be interested in you. It’s what I call my Camouflage Technique. As far as I can tell no one ever gossips about me, nor ever has, although there has always been a reason to, one way or another.

Peter raised an eyebrow. “Why do you say that?”

“We’re friends,” I said.

We sipped our drinks.

“You might mention this in the right places,” I said. Peter knew the right places and had access to them, which I did not.

I could see him taking note of everything I said. He nodded. “I’ll do that,” he said.

This felt, briefly, like power. I thought about the idea that I could alter something in Martin’s life, and that he might never know it, and it thrilled me. The idea that I could be instrumental in someone’s fate was intoxicating, and that night, and for a few days afterwards, I felt lightheaded, like a girl happily in love.

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I worried about whether my cat was in his fifth life or actually his last.

When he first got his heart condition, he had an attack of some

May You Live in Interesting Times
sort, where he couldn’t breathe, and he lay flattened on the floor, his legs splayed out beneath him. We took him to the vet, Alice and I, and the vet said Pierre was constipated and we took him home. But then he had another attack and we took him again, and this time they ran tests and found the enlarged heart. So maybe that was lives five and six right there.

Counting his lives and trying to decide how many he’d used up reminded me of Passover dinners, reading the story of the Exodus the way we always did, going around the table and everyone reading one paragraph. We’d come to the series of paragraphs in the Haggadah where the rabbis discuss the various possible meanings of various Biblical phrases. For instance: “Rabbi Akiva said: ‘The days of their lives refers to the days only, but all the days of their lives refers to the days and nights both.’” (Italics mine.) But some other rabbi had some other idea. There were a number of passages like this in the Haggadah—a Talmudic agonizing that seemed to me to have worked its way through all the generations and right into the present.

After I started Pierre on his regimen of pills, he had another attack (seven), and then another (eight).

Sometimes I thought about this at night when I was trying to fall asleep.

I got a portable oxygen unit so that I could give him oxygen when he did have an attack. My friends shook their heads and laughed; not that they wouldn’t have done the same, but it was ironic, my having to dispense this kind of care on a cat, because I wasn’t a cat-lover, and I’d only gotten the cats on Alice’s account. I got a cat and not a dog because I wanted the most maintenance-free animal you could find. My other friends had cats and were cat lovers, while I took a rather perfunctory view of the matter; and now here I was, foregoing weekends out of town because Pierre couldn’t skip a pill.

I thought maybe it was Buddha who said that life gives you the experiences you need, not the ones you want.
Every time I had my horoscope done, or the tarot cards, or my palm read, I heard the same thing. What about men? I’d say. What about love? and whoever it was would shake their heads.

I had a serious horoscope done once, when I was twenty-one, and the astrologer said to me that I had been cruel in love in a past life and that in this life, I would have to suffer in love to make amends.

One of my astrology books said, “Saturn keeps a perfect set of books.” So I had a cat in need of constant care, and my life alone, with unrequited loves on foreign shores.

I always thought that I knew everything, that I could see my life like a ribbon of road running straight before me, no turns, no twists, no unexpected digressions. And that life that I saw was a life alone. I thought, as well, that I was the only person this alone, that no one else (barring the most marginal, to whom I refused to compare myself) lived a life so austere beneath its surface.

To put this in a rather more material way, I went a long time without sex. As long as the time between Martin’s visits, to be precise.

That was why I liked Paul Auster. Everyone in his books lived the subterranean life that I was living. It didn’t even seem to strike any of them as peculiar. While I thought myself singled out in some way, they viewed themselves and their lives as entirely natural, logical manifestations of the condition of the world. I was sure there was a glistening world to which I had been denied entry. This left me in a state of fury. Paul Auster’s characters seemed to view themselves as natural reflections of a disordered, atomized world. Their lives spiraled downward but they were never enraged. Just that they existed, if only in his imagination, comforted me, for I esteemed them and did not mind my lot quite so much if it put me in their company.

A number of the characters in Paul Auster’s books were detectives, or if they weren’t actually detectives, they found themselves thrust into the role of detective. Everything seemed to be a clue to something else, or a code. Everything was connected. I thought about his books. They were puzzles that were like sirens,
beckoning to be solved. One book was like a Möbius strip, seeming to follow a line but in the end turning back on itself; or like one of those Escher prints that seem to have an irrefutable logic, but when you look more closely you see that the situation is logically impossible—like his picture of the waterfall that flowed upward, or the hands drawing one another. Another book was like those Russian dolls that hold progressively smaller replications of themselves; in the book, each revelation was like the opening of a doll, revealing the homunculus within.

And so I was wondering what I ought to do about Martin. The fact was, I was quite excited about his wife’s suicide. It was as if I was designed for high drama but never could find any to latch onto, and now circumstance had provided me with events that matched my nature. My emotions, their intensity always in discord with the ordinariness of my life, were suddenly taken up like water in a sponge. The effect was one of great relief. Not the standard relief, as in “Her and not me”—not that at all. No, this was the relief of finding a repository for my natural turbulence.

I always liked the idea of that Chinese curse. It was meant to be a curse, but for me it was a longing. Those brief moments when it was bestowed upon me gave me a quiet kind of peace, as if I was finally in accord with the universe.

I decided I ought to write Martin a letter, and at least tell him I was sorry and thinking about him, that kind of thing. I worked carefully on the letter but before I had a chance to send it, he telephoned. He was in New York, having come from North Carolina where he’d been to Suzanne’s funeral. I met him at a bar, the way I always did. In a strange way we’d become friends. He had disappointed me so often, I had quite given up on him; once he had come to Philadelphia for an intensive five-week course for senior managers, or some such thing, and not seen me even once. I thought then that he did not care for me at all. And yet he had continued to show up from time to time. My feelings for him got transformed rather than just going away. Somewhere along the line I lost my desire for him, so now I could see him as just a person, a hapless kindly sort of fellow. Buddha said all pain comes
from desire, and I always thought that was the case with me; but being only in my fifth life, I was filled with desire, and all that went with it—disappointment, anger, resentment, envy, bitterness. Desire constrained your life as well; I could see that. Life provides you with its gifts, but they aren't what you had in mind; they aren't what you desired. I was like somebody looking for a needle in a haystack, coming upon myriad unexpected prizes—rubies, diamonds, emeralds—and tossing them away, muttering, "That's not it, that's not what I'm looking for."

When a person disappoints you repeatedly, your ardor must cool, in spite of itself and yourself; and it was a relief to be free of the feverish desire that had had me in its grip since I'd first seen Martin standing in my doorway. But it was as if a certain amount of desire existed in my nature and had to fix itself somewhere, and would just wait in the wings until the next object presented itself. This made life a wearying enterprise, with only brief respites between unrequited loves. But this was my life as I knew it and I could see no alternative except to go through it.

I saw Martin just that one night. I remember. He wore a white sweater and had put on a little weight. He wasn't a particularly handsome man but some sorrow in him had appealed to me. I found him now at the bar, and he kissed me hello, a cool, perfunctory kiss, as his greetings always were. He told me the story, in bits and pieces. This was not her first attempt. She had made six suicide attempts before this one. She blamed him. When they took her to a clinic and said she should have psychiatric treatment she sneered and said, "He's the one who needs treatment, not me." She engineered her attempts for maximum effect: she took an overdose on an airplane, so that she had to be carried off the plane on a stretcher. Once, when they were traveling, she came back to his hotel and found her hanging by her hands from the railing of the balcony. Another time she broke the mirror in the hotel and cut her wrists, so that there was blood all over the room.

It struck me that he was more stunned than grieving. I thought that when Suzanne killed herself, it hadn't been some-
thing that cut right into the fabric of his life. I don’t mean that he was hard-hearted or didn’t care; but there’s a difference when somebody dies who’s been part of your daily life, whom you depend on; and she wasn’t that. It wasn’t loss he was feeling now. He was sad for her, I think; but he didn’t feel the loss of her. I expect by the time she actually succeeded in killing herself, it was as much a relief as anything else.

From time to time I put my hand on his arm, feeling the soft wool beneath my hand. I patted his arm. We were old friends.

Of course I said, as people do, why? What happened? What brought this on?

“Oh, I had an affair,” he said.

“I see,” I said, my voice soft. I could feel my face moving—my eyebrows moving up, my mouth curling a little around the edges, my chin tilting upward.

“It was nothing important, just a weekend thing,” he said. I nodded.

“You’re lucky she didn’t call you,” he said. “She went through my telephone book and called all the women. One person I know of actually lost her job. The only reason she didn’t call you is because it said—” —here he named the company I worked for. “She assumed you were just a business acquaintance.”

“Um hmm,” I said.

Then I just passed over it, somehow. I can’t say how this expresses itself—in gesture, in some electromagnetic charge that goes out into the air. I was always seeing the world that way, electromagnetic-like, just the way I was always seeing signs and connections. How can I explain? This was only one more thing in a long line of things.

“One way or another,” he said, looking elsewhere, “I have always thought that we were true friends.”

“And so we are,” I said.

He told me that the company had been in touch with him, that there wasn’t a specific job but that they wanted him to come back. “Do it,” I said. “There’s nothing for you in Burkina Faso.”

We parted after a few hours. “I can’t talk any more,” he said. “Forgive me.”
He left the next morning, without seeing me again. As it happened, I had tickets that night for a reading, and Paul Auster was one of the writers reading from his works. I went with a friend; I had introduced his books to her, and she was as enthusiastic as I was. I had told her about all the coincidences between his books and my life. She was a mystical kind of person herself, so all this seemed significant to her. We agreed it must all mean something.

When he came onto the stage she whispered to me how handsome he was, how he was exactly her type. And then he began to read from his new book. He read: “When Thérèse left me ...” My friend and I jumped in our chairs, and looked at one another, our mouths open. “Thérèse!” she said. “His character has your name!” All the rest of the reading I quivered and watched him, looking for signs.

After the reading the authors signed their books. The other writer, the one who’d been reading with Paul Auster, was more famous than he was, and the line for his autograph was longer than the line for Paul Auster’s. I wanted somehow to make up for that. When it was my turn Paul Auster said to me, “How should I inscribe it?” and I looked him boldly in the eye and said, “To Tereze.” Of course I spelled it differently, I said, the Hungarian way, but it was pronounced the same.

He looked up at me from the table where he sat. “Well,” he said. “Isn’t that a coincidence.”

“There’s more,” I said, growing even bolder. He looked at me quizically. “I live on 69th Street.” He looked even more quizical, as if this meant nothing at all to him, and I reminded him that one of his characters had lived on 69th Street. But this flustered me so I did not tell him the rest, how I had grown up on Northfield Road and how I had had a teacher at college named William Wilson.

I did tell him I was writing a story in which he was a character, and he said, his eyebrows still raised, as kind as he was quizical, “You must send it to me. Really. Care of my publisher.”
It was only a month later that I found out Martin was coming back to the company. He was going to head up the office in Bolivia. He had spent twenty-one years in Africa—all his grown life. I called him to congratulate him and said, it seems I’m always hearing news about you third-hand, and he apologized and said how he’d intended to telephone me but apparently it had all been announced while he was on vacation. He couldn’t see me but I was nodding; I expected that soon I would be hearing that he was getting married again. Certainly I was bound to be disappointed; this would turn out to be just another version of my unanswered letters, or his trip to Philadelphia when in five weeks he didn’t see me once. We continue to remain ourselves. Even the most catastrophic events barely make a dent in us. Poor Suzanne!

A little while later my cat died. He had been growing thinner and thinner and I was wondering all the time whether he was in fact in his fifth life, like I was, or whether each attack counted for a whole life, which would put him somewhere in the neighborhood of eight or maybe even nine. I finally took him to the vet one day, just to see if the vet could get him to eat a little more. The vet called me right after I’d left him there, just when I got back to my office, and said, “Well, he decided the matter for us; he just died in my arms.”

I cried a little. I liked that cat; he was my kind of cat, aloof and regal and a little contemptuous. He suited me just fine, that cat.

I once read that in China they thought cats were divine, and that when a cat died it ascended to heaven and spoke directly to Buddha, putting in a good word for its earthly owners.

I wondered if my cat would put in a good word for me, what with swallowing that thread and all.

I was reading a Paul Auster book at the time the cat died, which wasn’t so surprising because I had gone out and bought all his books and was reading them pretty much one right after another, not entirely, maybe reading something else in between, but almost. I’d found yet another coincidence. In this book, the one I was reading now, a woman gives the hero an illustrated leather-bound copy of Moby Dick on his thirtieth birthday,
and I had once done exactly that, and on the man's thirtieth birthday.

I had the book in my briefcase but I took it out and walked home, holding the book so the title showed. I daydreamed that a man came up to me and said, How do you like that book? and I said, It's terrific, and he said, Why? and I said, I don't know, and he said, I love you.
There was a mild smell of gas in the kitchen, and I remember thinking, just casually, What if we should die now? What if we should die, with all this unfinished business? I mean—I was expecting a letter, and it did not come, and I was agitated on account of it. I was thinking: God damn it, the man said he'd write, why doesn't he write? and it didn't occur to me, not in any serious way, that I might die right then, and no letter, ever. And then, if he did write, I wouldn't be able to answer it, and it would be a couple of days before he knew what had happened to me, and that it wasn't that I wasn't answering his letter, it was just that I had died, which wasn't my fault, and which was not the same thing as ignoring him, it's not as if he had to feel bad
about it or think I just wasn’t answering his letter. All he’d have
to do is think—Oh, she died; that’s all. She didn’t not love me
after all.

But me, I had to die without ever knowing if he sent me a
letter.

Body parts. Remember our bodies, their fevers and feverish
desires? Remember this—how I put my hands right up your
shorts, brave-like? Brave for me. I thought I was being like a man
when I did that. And now my body lies scattered among the tall
grass. This is a good end for my body. I was coming to pieces,
anyway, and all the time. This is right. This is fit. This is as it
should be. My skin peeled back, revealing the muscle and sinews
there. That was really me, all the time. If you wanted anything at
all to do with me, you had better be thinking: viscera. That’s re-
ally who I was all this time—just raw organism, pulpy, and
bloody, and striated, and beating like a heart.

I remember this: how you put your long hands on my back.
Your whole hand could cover almost my whole back. You put
your mouth on my shoulder blade like we were cats, you the
mother cat and me the young one she’s lifting up and carrying.

The other woman who was in the kitchen with me when it
happened had a life up in the air anyway. She just got back from
Yugoslavia, and just in time, too, or she’d have been killed for
sure over there, shot up in the streets by sniper fire. She came
back to live in Kentucky and she said to us: Kentucky? Ken-
tucky? What am I going to do there, what will I do? That’s where
she got a job so that’s where she went. She had a mild face and a
mild voice but no one should be fooled by these things, I mean
the woman lived in Yugoslavia for twelve years, doing transla-
tions and teaching English and weaving. Now our bodies lie in-
termixed. We’re part indoors and part outdoors, but that makes
sense too, life was like that, always straddling things, one foot in
the door, the other one halfway out, ready for escape.

I Was Expecting a Letter  145
I wasn’t like that myself, at least I didn’t think I was. Me, I just committed myself, outright, instantly. I thought everything was like jumping in the water—you were either in the water or you weren’t. I say I’m in love and people say to me, “Oh, you’re not in love, you just think you are!” They说 this accusingly, and it works: I’m accused. They say, “How can you think you’re in love, you only just met the man!” But they’re wrong. I used to think I didn’t love anybody and now I think I loved everybody, and I was just beginning to understand that, and admit it, when I smelled gas in the kitchen at this place we were, this art colony, this kind of summer camp for artists, and before I knew it the gas exploded, and our bodies were in parts, mine and the woman from Yugoslavia and Kentucky.

Listen: don’t not say things. I’m thanking God I said as much as I did say, and didn’t wait. You mustn’t wait. I’m thanking God I told that man I loved him. I was so angry and agitated, when I saw that empty mailbox, thinking, damn that man, he said things to me! The man went back to his real life, to his wife and children. He swore, absolutely swore up and down the night that he would not forget me, but guess what, no letter. I was thinking all these things when I stopped, I was just getting a beer from the refrigerator in the kitchen, honestly, honestly, is that something a person should die for? I was just getting a beer when I stopped because I could smell something, gas, I thought, and I said to the woman from Yugoslavia and Kentucky, is that gas? Is that gas? and she stopped—she had been boiling water for tea—and she turned to me, her mouth open as if she was about to answer me, and the gas exploded, and now I will never know what it is she was going to say, and if she smelled the gas too.

I didn’t know much about the woman from Yugoslavia, or what her life was like or who was in it. In twelve years there must have been someone over there, but she’d only just got to Kentucky. I remember that she was wearing an apron there in the kitchen; it said: The Children’s Art Carnival, but I didn’t know the story behind it, where she’d gotten it, or what the Children’s Art Carnival was.
When the policemen came, one of them wept, and got sick in the grass. But there was such a fine line between our bodies alive and our bodies dead, I wanted to tell him not to mind so much. It just made me marvel and marvel. All our same parts were there, just disassembled and not flowing any more, like electricity that goes down in a storm. Just last night there had been a storm and the electricity had gone off and was off for hours, in fact it was probably the storm that caused the gas leak. Branches of trees were down everywhere. One big branch came crashing down right over a stand of daylilies. I walked by them this morning and I remember thinking, "Oh, the daylilies!—but they'll come back," because their roots were strong and intact, even though the foliage and stalks and flowers had been crushed beneath the weight of the big branch. Smaller branches of other trees were down as well, with small round fruits on them that I could not identify, although somebody told me they were black walnuts. A man with a power saw was cutting up the big branch that fell on the lilies. We said hello to one another, and except for the woman in the kitchen, he was the last person I spoke to in all my life.

It's not like it was so sad. It wasn't anything like the pain of looking in my mailbox, and seeing how it was empty again, still empty. The gas exploding was nowhere near as bad as remembering the man, the one I was expecting a letter from, how tall he was, and the odor of his long, warm skin. He lifted me up and kissed my mouth and said, "I love you" and then he went away, and days continued to come and go, only where was he? I walked past the studio that had been his, where he had made his drawings, and it was all clean, the walls a glistening white, all traces of him vanished; except I could see the shadow of his tall body, only this was a shadow cast not by light but by time, and I could hear the sound of his voice like music that comes from somewhere else, only you don't know where. Only, I couldn't hold on to any of it—it was gone from me, just gone, his body, his skin, his voice, the way he'd widen his eyes. He had another life. I said: "Ah, two ships that pass in the night!" and laughed, to show how
I was brave, to show I knew the score, but he shook his head and said, "No. No." I believed him, but anyway he was gone.

He had a look he got—he'd widen his eyes and raise his eyebrows and purse his lips. I wasn't sure what the look signified or when he'd resort to it. I hadn't got that worked out yet, I hadn't seen it often enough to draw conclusions, and then he left, although he said he would see me when he came to New York, where I lived. You'll see, you'll see! he said. He must have detected in my face the worry, the concern, the history and fear of disappearances. I was waiting to find out all of these things—when that look came over him, under what circumstances, and if I would see him in New York, and if we weren't, after all, two ships that passed in the night but were maybe something more. I walked up and down the dirt road between our rooms and our studios saying to myself, what happened? What happened? and every day my heart was at once full and broken, all at once, both at once, so in a way, it was right that my body should come apart the way it did, blown right apart, my heart ending up exactly how it always was anyway, full, of blood, and broken as well, torn apart in the explosion.

But what I'm trying to explain is that the pain of the explosion was nothing compared to the pain of the empty mailbox, of the man's mouth, and voice, and the weight of his body. I wished I could have died then. That would have been happiness. But I had to endure the completion, the two of us rising from where we lay, the washing down of our bodies, the putting on of clothing, the casual departures, the opening of doors, the exits through doorways, the entry into large rooms filled with other people, the empty mailbox.

Don't you see, don't you see—how when it comes to pain, death has nothing on life.

I mean, do you really think the gas exploding was worse than the empty mailbox? I mean—which do you think hurt more? And never mind the empty mailbox; forget the empty mailbox. Which do you think hurt more: the explosion, or the man's body, and hands, and blue open eyes, and imminent departure? And never mind the departure—what if we hadn't parted, hadn't had to part, don't you think it would have all hurt anyway, just the sheer electricity of it, the man and me together, the constant jolt
and shock of it, shock after shock going through your body, none of them enough to kill you but every one of them enough to sear you, so that you are just impaled there, on the man’s body, his glowing skin? Listen: I know why God made babies cry and wail the way they do, and made them so, let’s face it, irritating; it’s because we would die otherwise, from the poignance, from the love, because it is unbearable. Don’t you think it breaks you apart, blows your flesh wide open, flays you, leaves you dismantled, the way my body is now, just to want the man, just to desire one another and have one another?

I mean: I don’t know how people live. I just don’t know how they do it.
My mother loved to garden. I can remember her, kneeling in the rough dirt, asking why she hadn’t done this for a living? Then in the next breath she would tell me, “Never try to make a profit out of your passions.” That was the surest way to lose them, she said.

This kind of quick reversal was all just a part of her lifelong argument with herself, and left me unimpressed. My mother was like some errant law of thermodynamics, some sound principle run amok—for every thought there was an equal and opposite thought, and so on—and she had to utter them, all of them. She had no capacity to keep a thought to herself, and seemed almost helpless in this regard—as if her thoughts were little bursts of
energy, electrical charges just running their course. She liked to think of herself in these kinds of terms, in terms of physics and chemistry and mechanics. If she wasn’t talking about electrical charges she might be talking about herself as chemistry; she said everything was a matter of chemistry and insisted, even, that she could feel her body, its singular chemistry, urging her onward, with herself as hostage, strangely will-less. This was not to say that she regarded herself as a victim; of what? she would say; victim of what? “Tautological,” she said to me. I had no idea what the word meant. “Those chemicals of mine,” she’d say—that’s how she referred to them, like some trying and dear possession. She said those chemicals of hers were just the cards she was dealt.

She liked to talk this way—chemicals, card-playing, thermodynamics. She said mixing metaphors was really a way of making connections, and that making connections was a sign of intelligence. She told me that when she was at school there was a popular puzzle going around; it was billed as an “intelligence test.” “‘What do these three words have in common?’” she quoted for me; “Rat, blue, and hole.”

I had no idea what she was talking about.

“Cheese,” she said. “The answer is ‘cheese.’” She told me that she had gotten this right all those years ago, when she was in school, and that it had been explained to her that the question tested for the ability to make connections, a sure mark of intelligence; and that ever after she had puzzled over events as if they were factors in a similar question; and that if she could make the connection—find the right answer—she would be rewarded, or praised.

She said that she must have encountered this intelligence test at a particularly impressionable moment, and came to think of this penchant of hers for making connections as a particular talent—her own gift.

I said I guessed I wasn’t all that intelligent.

Whenever my mother works in the garden, she starts out kneeling. She kneels for a while and then sits, finally, on the grass. She does this in a way that suggests she’s resisted sitting—
as if it were giving up, or not pure in some way; not the proper way to garden.

I’ve been watching her from the screen porch and I run across the lawn and jump on her back, knocking her over. “Don’t do that!” she says, unconvincingly; “Stop gardening,” I say. I hate that she spends her time in the garden, and I tell her so. “I hate this garden,” I say.

“I like it,” she says.

“You like it better than you like me,” I counter. At the time this seems to me at once sly and daring.

“Actually, I don’t,” she says.

“However, I do like it considerably,” she adds.

All the time she’s digging holes with a trowel, where she’ll plant bulbs. Her hands are covered with dirt—the gloves were dispensed with hours ago—and there’s dirt on her forehead as well. She puts down the trowel and breathes deep. “This is hard work,” she says.

I can see that she’s pleased with herself.

In the autumn it’s bulbs, in the spring, the small plants she orders from catalogues. In between are the catalogues themselves, their heavy coated pages with photographs of the different flowers, some very close up, others showing beds or even fields of flowers.

The catalogues began to arrive in January. She greeted them the same way I did the first snowfall—that unabashed pleasure. She read them tirelessly and repeatedly, for hours on end. I had once heard somebody call somebody else a “golf widow,” and one evening I took the catalogue from my mother and told her that I was a gardening orphan. She laughed and said she guessed it was true, in a way; except that it really wasn’t true at all.

Then she laughed again and wound a long strand of my hair around her finger as if it were her own. “Don’t you like how I contradict myself,” she said.

I said she wasn’t nearly so surprising as she thought she was. She put her arms around me. I protested—that was my idea of
punishment, to deprive her of myself—but she caught me and said, “You have to hug me so I’ll live long,” and I relinquished myself to her arms.

Her passion for gardening was a fairly recent thing. I can remember her puttering in the garden at the summer house we used to go to when she was still married to my father; but it was an offhand kind of gardening—hardly the passion it was soon to become.

My father moved out when I was three years old. I remember my mother then, sitting on the chair in the living room, crying noisily. She cried as if it were her afternoon’s pastime—the way I played with my toys or watched television.

At first she cried because my father had moved out, and then she cried because she thought she would never find another man, and then she cried because she found a new man and he made her cry. When I remember this it seems to me that she cried for a year or two, but only on the weekends, when she had time; during the week she worked and she was all right when she was busy.

I wasn’t too pleased with the idea of a new man being around but as it turned out I didn’t have to worry much about him. I thought it was just as well he was making her cry.

Sometimes when she cried I used to put my arms around her and tell her everything was going to be all right. I would stroke her hair and say “Shh, shh.” This did seem to help; she would look at me and smile and say, “What an old wise thing you are,” and she would stroke my hair as well, and tell me that my hair really did feel like silk even if that was what everybody always said about hair, and that my eyes were such a shade of blue.

Once I heard her on the telephone talking to a friend and she said, “It’s just that I’m all alone.” When she got off the phone I looked at her, right at her, although I could not have been more than four or five at the time—and I said, “What about me?” This seemed to startle her, as if it were a new thought entirely, something that had simply not occurred to her, for she looked at me as

The Blue Iris 153
if amazed; “Why that’s right,” she said, smiling; “you’re right!”
She scooped me up into her arms and kissed me.
“Well,” she said, “I’m all alone except for you.”
But all this was before she took up her gardening.

It was when my grandfather became ill, and we started going out to see him every weekend, that she began to garden with a vengeance.

She started out small, just ordering a few things and planting them in the early spring. But we were out there now, at my grandmother and grandfather’s house, every weekend, and I could see she was restless, although she no longer cried, at least not about the men. She cried about my grandfather but that was a different thing, and a different kind of crying. For one thing she tried to keep it secret. Around my grandmother and grandfather she was insistently cheerful. But still I could see that she was restless. She’d walk along with me while I rode my bicycle, and she’d play with me when I insisted, but soon she began to ask my grandmother if she could just order a few more things? My grandmother told her she could do whatever she pleased in the garden, that she should just consider it hers.

That was when I truly lost her.
She tried to get me to help her in the garden, and even offered to pay me. Sometimes the temptation of hard cash proved too great and I would dig holes for her or gather up the weeds; but for the most part I refused. Soon it became clear that this was not just a passing thing. In the spring she ordered small plants and in the summer she put in her own seeds and in the fall, the bulbs; and soon I could see that only the dead of winter was safe.

It was in the fall that my grandfather died, and I went for the first time to a cemetery. The cemetery was spacious and green with shade trees and simple, elegant stones. I saw the names of people I had only heard of—my great-grandmother, for whom I was named, and a cousin of my mother’s who had died when young, and a baby who had died at birth. We stood around my grandfather’s freshly dug grave and my great-uncle said a prayer. Then we each put a handful of dirt over my grandfather’s

154 The Blue Iris
grave. This solemn occasion impressed me greatly and for a long time after.

At first we had come to my grandparents' house because my grandfather was ill but now we came because my grandmother was alone, and still my mother went out to the garden. That fall she got me to help her dig up a group of large, thick-rooted plants. My mother wanted more room for her bulbs. My grandmother still had a gardener for the heavy work, and the gardener was supposed to dig up the plants; every week he promised my grandmother that he would do it the next week, but by the end of October he still hadn't done it and my mother said she needed the space for her bulbs and soon it would be too late; so she did it herself. It took all weekend to dig up the plants. We didn't have the proper tools and after a while it became clear that the best way to do it was with your fingers, for the roots were like thick matted tendrils entwined in the soil. We would dig around the edge of the plants with trowels and then plunge our fingers in between the tendrils, the way you run your fingers through your hair.

I helped for a while and it is true that I even enjoyed it, although I would not say so at the time. But my mother sat there on the grass, by that cluster of entrenched plants, all day Saturday and all day Sunday. When she came inside in the evening she looked changed, almost—sweaty and her face smudged with dirt, but her skin shiny and translucent, and I could see how the effort had agreed with her. She said her bones hurt, and my grandmother fixed her a drink and they sat together in the living room, sipping their drinks, with the evening light pouring in through the windows.

That was the part of the garden where she planted the blue iris.

She first saw a picture of these particular iris in a magazine. The magazine had an article about a garden and one of the pic-
tures showed a bed of iris banking a fence. She showed me the picture eagerly—she showed it to just about everyone. She knew I wasn’t particularly interested but she didn’t require interest.

They were striking flowers, I can admit that now. The top part of the iris was white and the bottom petals were a deep blue-violet color. My mother studied the picture in the magazine night after night, and when her catalogues came, she turned right away to the section on iris, and there they were. Margarita, the iris was called, and she ordered a dozen, and planted them in the bed where the plants had been that she’d dug up with her own hands.

We kept going out to my grandmother’s house, not every single weekend, but almost that often. The new catalogues would arrive and my mother would read them as before, and reread them, and mark the things she wanted. In the spring she ordered a wooden bench and chair so my grandmother could sit out in the garden drinking tea; as it turned out my grandmother never did sit out in the garden much, but my mother did. She liked to sit on the bench with the sun in her face and look over her garden. She looked as proud and content as an old master surveying his master work.

Each season she would attend to something else in the garden—find some neglected corner she could reclaim. She said that the wonderful thing about a garden was how it was never finished. She said she had always been much better at starting things than at seeing them through, but that in a garden, these came to feel like the same thing.

While she worked in the garden, I rode my bicycle or watched television. Sometimes I played poker with my grandmother and sometimes I succeeded in getting my mother to take me to the bowling alley, or to town. If the weather was good we might go to the park and fly a kite. But I could always see that hungry look in her eye, and she’d look at her watch from time to time, and I knew she was wishing she could be back in her garden.

In June the blue iris bloomed. My grandmother always met us at the train station and the first thing she always did was tell my mother what had happened in the garden since our last visit.
When we got to the house my mother ran out to the garden to see the bed of iris for herself. She came inside, breathless as a girl, and told me I had to come see the iris, she knew I didn’t care about flowers and gardens, but I had to see them anyway, they were that beautiful.

She took me by the hand and kissed the top of my head. We went out onto the porch where we had a view of the whole garden. It was a sunny day and the tall iris glistened in the sun. “Aren’t they beautiful? Aren’t they beautiful?” my mother kept repeating.

I thought then that she was truly happy.

We went outside to look at the iris close up. “You see how a garden is beautiful from wherever you stand,” she said to me, and I did see, then; from a distance it was a large mass of blue-violet and white and the green of the long leaves, and close up there was the intricacy of the flower. It is true that I saw all this but at the time all I said to her was, “I don’t care about gardens,” and tried to look bored.

“Imagine,” she said, her face bright in the sunlight, “imagine that I was ever so discontent.”

Then she told me that gardening had changed her life.

She said the most you could hope for was to be completely absorbed in something, so absorbed in it you didn’t think at all about yourself.

She said she had finally brought her life down to a very few things, and the right ones: me, and my grandmother, and something she loved to do.

“After all,” she said to me, “I am in the middle of my life.”

I didn’t see how this remark had anything to do with anything else she had said; but later I thought about it, and thought that perhaps what she had meant was that it had taken her half her life to understand this.

I left her there in her garden, and watched her a while from the porch. It seemed so long ago that I had watched her sit on the couch and cry, and I thought that maybe it was true that a garden could be a good thing; for there she was, sitting on the garden bench, content to view the blue iris, the prisoner of her own heart.
We
Never
Look
Up

Lately the city has seemed so strange to me, like a landscape from a film. We city-dwellers, we never look up. But then if we do, we see the city rise before us, the city of familiar photographs—mist enclosing the towers, the spires disappearing into the gray fog; or the brilliant midnight-blue sky that you see on some nights, with the buildings foreshortened and looming. Sometimes you catch the red sun setting between two towers. But it’s the blue nights that get me.
One blue night I walked with a man along East 54th Street. We were searching for a bar and having no luck. I was nervous and we had walked all the way to the Plaza Hotel before he said, what are we doing here? We decided we didn’t want the Plaza. We had to turn around and retrace our steps, and that made the walk twice as long, and it was hard for me to walk and talk at the same time, because of being nervous. So I said things that were meant to be amusing only weren’t, which made me feel a little foolish, although the man was nice to me and kept up the conversation as if I were being interesting.

We walked back down Fifth Avenue and turned left on 54th Street. I remembered a seedy bar I’d gone to years ago. In those days it had a piano player, which was a good thing in a bar, and the wallpaper had been peeling even back then, but I’d had some all right times there—sweet in that bittersweet way that makes the memory better than the thing itself. So when the man said he didn’t want the Plaza, I said, I know a bar on 54th, a little shabby, but they’ve got a piano.

So we went there, and it had no charm at all. It was my town, not his, so it was my fault. We were the only ones there, and although the piano was still on a platform at one end of the room, no one was playing. The wallpaper was the same as it had been all those years ago and it was still peeling and so were the leather banquettes.

It turned out to matter because a place rubs off on you. My conversation was no better than it had been on the avenue. I wanted to be flirtatious and a little intoxicating, to tell stories. Instead I sounded rehearsed, although the man faced me and encouraged me. I remember thinking, and maybe I said to him, You’re a nice person, did you know? Because I was appreciating that he was being kind to me, when everything about me was falling flat. And I know; I can tell the difference. I know when I’ve got the air humming, when I’ve got a little charm going in my favor.

Then the conversation started getting places I didn’t want it to go. The man looked down at his drink and said, “I can’t do this, you know,” which gave me a sinking feeling, and I swirled my
drink around and looked down at it. I remember exactly how he was sitting, beside me on the banquette but turned to face me, with one leg propped up a little on the seat. I felt as if a fine mist came right over me. It was real sorrow; just that. I could feel my mouth and eyes, how they grew different. Sorrow on a face is like a kind of daze. The resignation saps the liveliness out of your face; your face goes a little limp and soft. I imagine it is not an altogether displeasing visage, and there's a kind of comfort in that kind of giving up, that kind of abdication. I looked at him in this way, with this face.

Do you mean you never want to talk to me again, never want to have anything to do with me? I said.

Not at all, not at all, he said. I just can't cross—that line.

What line, I said.

I mean sex, he said.

Well then, I said, well then we won't have sex.

This seemed to me the most amazing and daring thing to say. He looked at me strangely; it occurred to me that his expression might not be unlike my own.

Just so you talk to me, I said—softly, for this seemed a pathetic thing to say. I wanted to salvage myself, so I looked him right in the eye, to show courage. The thing is, I said, how do I get you out of my head?

Later I blamed the bar for all this.

As it turned out I guess I didn't do all that badly because when we left the bar we went back to his hotel and up to his room as if none of this had ever taken place, and a few weeks later when he was back in London I wrote to him and said, "That awful bar—it rubbed off on us." I spoke to him on the phone and he said, "Oh, yes, it was definitely the bar!" and we both laughed.

Only of course it wasn't the bar at all. Or maybe it was. Maybe it was and it had more than rubbed off on us, it had seeped right into us. That bar was done for, a finished thing. Yet there it was. It was on its last legs a dozen years ago, and ought to have closed down back then, only it hadn't. I was the same myself. I kept things up long after I should have. I mean letters, phone calls; I
didn’t know how to take no for an answer, you had to tell me no three times, four times, before I believed you, and even then I didn’t believe you. I was like this in the smallest ways; if I went to a store, and there was something in the window I liked and they said they didn’t have it in my size, I’d say, why don’t you check in the back? and they’d say, It’s not in the back, and I’d say, well, look anyway. The thing is, half the time they’d have it, they were just too lazy to go look, it was easier to say no. This kind of thing did me no good at all, it encouraged me in my worst habits. I don’t think I ever really gave up on anything; things just got overlaid with other things, replaced. So I kept writing letters and telephoning the man in London. He was polite but un-enthusiastic.

There was a time when he’d called me, and often, and said startling things to me on the phone, so that I’d turn my chair around to face the window so no one walking by my office would see my face. He’d say: "Imagine I’m doing this to you—" and when I’d answer my voice was so low and throaty I could hardly get the words out, and it would startle me how my voice had got like that, just from what he was saying to me. But all that ended somewhere after his trip to New York, when we walked along 54th Street on that blue night, and ended up at that bar with the piano but no piano player.

Now all I want to do is something mean, but I can’t think what. If I had his home phone number I’d call up and then hang up, to get his home life stirred up and in trouble, but it’s as if he’d planned for all this—infidelity, and with someone like me, someone not trustworthy. His number was unlisted. I called information in London but they wouldn’t give it out. I wanted revenge but I had no imagination. If I haven’t done much harm in this world, it’s not for lack of wanting to, it’s just incompetence.

I hope I have done harm; I hope I have.

You say something like that and your heartbeat goes right up, your heart races, and you look around as if you think you might be caught. You think maybe God himself will come down from the heavens and plant himself right there in your office on the

We Never Look Up  161
tenth floor. Maybe when you say it what you’re really doing is trying to summon God; but anyway he never comes. I know; I’ve wished my own sister dead, and out loud, and nothing happened to me.

Then I think, if nothing happens, why not do it, why not be outright evil? and that’s when I see for sure that I just can’t think of what to do: I can’t think of one bad thing to do, that would hurt him. I’d like him to be so wounded that his heart hurt every minute; but that’s it—it’s in his heart I want to hurt him. I’d feel better if I thought he was suffering over there, but I’m sure he’s not. Sometimes someone in the office mentions his name; since we work for the same company, that’s not so out of the ordinary, but it always goes right through me like a laser beam burning a hole right through my body. Then I think of him, and I think of that pleased voice of his, a way he can sound, so altogether pleased with himself, so the-world-is-my-oyster pleased with himself. That’s when I hate him most.

The night we walked along 54th Street was one of those grand blue nights. Those nights seem like a triumph. When I’m out on a night like that, I begin to think maybe I can have my way, I think I’ve got a kind of power. This is how it feels: like being on the crest of a wave, and the wave is just carrying you along with it.

The thing about God, is, God is looking after the wives and children. Only I have an answer to that: I was once somebody’s wife, and God didn’t look after me. Then I answer that: because it was my own fault.

The fact is, when I was somebody’s wife, I used to meet a man in the shabby bar on 54th Street. On our first assignation, he put his hand on my knee and looked down at his hand there, and said, I’m on the verge of a divorce. I looked at his hand and said, I have a wonderful marriage. I had it worked out that one thing had nothing to do with another, my marriage and my romance.
But what happened was, I remembered that I loved the man I was married to, but I couldn’t quite actually feel it. I remembered the fact of it, and kept thinking the feeling itself, the feeling-in-the-present, would return, only it did not, and soon the man I was married to moved out and moved in with someone else.

As for the man I used to meet in the shabby bar, he is still married and has two boys. He left the company where we both worked and moved up to Greenwich Connecticut and took over his father’s ball bearing business. I remember him now with no feeling beyond embarrassment. He was a nice man, but a little boring, and whatever it was that had so fixed my heart on him was forgotten altogether, was not even memory. He was what I got into my head; that’s all. Someone mentioned his name to me the other day, they’d seen him at the country club, and his name meant no more to me than any name.

But since that time I have lived alone with my child, watching my child grow up, and I can’t remember much of that either. I look at her, my little girl — only she’s fifteen now — and I say out loud to her: what did you do all those years? What happened?
The Iowa Short Fiction Award and John Simmons Short Fiction Award Winners

1995
Listening to Mozart,
Charles Wyatt
Judge: Ethan Canin

1995
May You Live in Interesting Times, Tereze Glück
Judge: Ethan Canin

1994
The Good Doctor,
Susan Onthank Mates
Judge: Joy Williams

1994
Igloo among Palms,
Rod Val Moore
Judge: Joy Williams

1993
Happiness, Ann Harleman
Judge: Francine Prose

1993
Macauley’s Thumb, Lex Williford
Judge: Francine Prose

1993
Where Love Leaves Us,
Renée Manfredi
Judge: Francine Prose

1992
My Body to You, Elizabeth Searle
Judge: James Salter

1992
Imaginary Men, Enid Shomer
Judge: James Salter

1991
The Ant Generator,
Elizabeth Harris
Judge: Marilynnne Robinson

1991
Traps, Sondra Spatt Olsen
Judge: Marilynnne Robinson

1990
A Hole in the Language,
Marly Swick
Judge: Jayne Anne Phillips

1989
Lent: The Slow Fast,
Starkey Flythe, Jr.
Judge: Gail Godwin

1989
Line of Fall, Miles Wilson
Judge: Gail Godwin

1988
The Long White,
Sharon Dilworth
Judge: Robert Stone

1988
The Venus Tree, Michael Pritchett
Judge: Robert Stone

1987
Fruit of the Month, Abby Frucht
Judge: Alison Lurie

1987
Star Game, Lucia Nevai
Judge: Alison Lurie

1986
Eminent Domain, Dan O’Brien
Judge: Iowa Writers’ Workshop
1986
*Resurrectionists*,
Russell Working
Judge: Tobias Wolff

1985
*Dancing in the Movies*,
Robert Boswell
Judge: Tim O'Brien

1984
*Old Wives’ Tales*,
Susan M. Dodd
Judge: Frederick Busch

1983
*Heart Failure*, Ivy Goodman
Judge: Alice Adams

1982
*Shiny Objects*, Dianne Benedict
Judge: Raymond Carver

1981
*The Phototropic Woman*,
Annabel Thomas
Judge: Doris Grumbach

1980
*Impossible Appetites*,
James Fetler
Judge: Francine du Plessix Gray

1979
*Fly Away Home*, Mary Hedin
Judge: John Gardner

1978
*A Nest of Hooks*, Lon Otto
Judge: Stanley Elkin

1977
*The Women in the Mirror*,
Pat Carr
Judge: Leonard Michaels

1976
*The Black Velvet Girl*,
C. E. Poveman
Judge: Donald Bartheleme

1975
*Harry Belten and the Mendelsohn Violin Concerto*,
Barry Targan
Judge: George P. Garrett

1974
*After the First Death There Is No Other*, Natalie L. M. Petesch
Judge: William H. Gass

1973
*The Itinerary of Beggars*,
H. E. Francis
Judge: John Hawkes

1972
*The Burning and Other Stories*,
Jack Cady
Judge: Joyce Carol Oates

1971
*Old Morals, Small Continents*,
*Darker Times*, Philip F. O’Connor
Judge: George P. Elliott

1970
*The Beach Umbrella*,
Cyrus Colter
Judges: Vance Bourjaily and Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.
Tereze Clück grew up in Woodmere, Long Island, and now lives in New York City, where she works for a large multinational corporation. She is a graduate of Vassar College. She has received a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts and has been a fellow at the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts and Ragdale. Her stories have appeared in numerous magazines, including the North American Review, Antioch Review, Gettysburg Review, Fiction, Epoch, and Story.

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