

COVER PAGE

Aunt Krede

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Aunt Krede

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1

Crondoc

My mom and I moved to Crondoc last summer after my dad wandered off forever into some haze he carried around with him. She drove the station wagon, patiently following me for endless miles while I lumbered along at fifty-five or sixty in the big rental van. I remember the day we got here. It'd been raining and overcast all morning, but as soon as we turned onto the Thrall road from Artesia the rain subsided and by the time we reached our little house along the Perpend River the warm August sun was shining and the sky was bright blue and a fine silver mist drifted upward from the blacktop surface of the road.

Having come from the midwest and seen a lot of towns along the way, I thought Crondoc was a little quaint, remote and soporific, and now oddly enough I have that feeling again, but I made some good friends and I learned about the land and the river and after awhile I felt as though I'd lived here all my life. Which in a way I have.

It was about this time of year when we arrived. The first person we met was Deputy Bennie Hill, who is sort of our landlord in the stead of his folks who live in Orange County or some such place. Bennie was standing beside his patrol car gnawing on pumpkin seeds when we pulled into the driveway.

"I knew y'all were coming," he said with a self-satisfied grin as he reached out to shake my mom's hand. "My eyes are everywhere. Welcome to Crondoc, Miz Hopcross. And you, too, Ashmead."

His hand was smaller than mine but thicker, hard and strong. "You got a grip on you there, son," he said approvingly. "Well, come on and I'll show you the place."

And he showed us where the breaker box was, and the hose bibs and the hot water heater, and which way north was, and then he gave Mom the keys and his card, and he left. I've never been comfortable around people who call me "son," but otherwise he seemed like an okay guy.

Over the next few days, while Mom was getting the household organized, I explored the woodlands that stretched upstream along the gently meandering Perpend River, which made a long left turn at Crondoc, where it was swelled by Dingle Creek, and then headed westward over the rocks beyond the trees behind our house. The August afternoons were warm and the water was crystal clear but numbingly cold. There were reflecting pools, murmuring riffles and reverberant green deeps, and I found several secluded little beaches where the receding summer currents had left behind crescent-shaped fans of fine sand.

The winding country road that runs from Artesia through Crondoc goes on over to Thrall, where the dam is and where I went to school this past year. The road passes about a hundred feet in front of our house, beyond the wild roses, on the side away from the river, and follows the edge of the relatively flat flood plain for about a quarter-mile beyond Mr. Hudson's store to the turnoff where it goes south across the historic Dingle Creek covered bridge. From there it works its way upstream five or six miles to Thrall, home of the mighty Thrall Thrusters and the huge arsenic-green shops of the Meerson Construction Company whose business is building roads in places goats have shunned.

For the first few mornings, after we'd had breakfast, my mom and I would stroll up this road, past Beezle's Asylum, as Mom calls it, which is a simple white wooden church, over on the high side, with a little bell tower and a gold-painted cross on top, and then past the grassy yard populated by a Noah's ark of fanciful driftwood creatures poised motionless outside Mr. August Kuntzler's cabin, and then past the post office shack where Miz Bubby reigned supreme over the U.S.

mail, and finally to the Crondoc General Store and sometime gas station, owned and operated by the Henry Hudson family.

Occasionally a car or, more likely, a pickup truck would pass us as we walked, and the driver always returned our wave as he went by, which seemed very friendly and put us at ease. If Mr. Kuntzler was sitting outside on his porch, as he often was, he'd nod and call out "'mornin'" to us. Then we'd stop at the post office to see if we had any mail, and if Miz Bubby wasn't out delivering it along her route she'd tell us again that we couldn't continue to receive our mail there, that we had to put up a box by the side of the road, and that it had to be installed exactly forty-eight inches high at the top or otherwise she wouldn't touch it. She was obviously accustomed to having her way. Her grandson Bobby told me later that she'd quit using her first name altogether because everyone who had standing to call her by it was dead.

Mr. Hudson, by contrast, was warm and congenial. He'd been a safety inspector at NASA and had retired several years earlier to Crondoc with his wife and daughter Hanna and two younger children. He's a short, balding, garrulous man with a ready smile who relishes playing a key role in the hubbub of Crondoc society. Well, at least he used to.

2

The Historian

My mom had to go over to Thrall at the crack of dawn one morning to meet with Mr. Authore, the superintendent, about her new job as school nurse. I slept in until around eight-thirty and dawdled over breakfast until I saw Miz Bubby's old Chevrolet pause out front where, the day before, I'd set a four-by-four in the ground and mounted the mailbox on it according to her imperious order.

Apparently I'd done an adequate job, because the box contained a trade

magazine for nurses and a couple of bills as well as the usual junk ads. Still, this left me without a car or anything special to do on a cool but gorgeous autumn morning and I decided to walk up toward Hudson's store and take a look at Mr. Kuntzler's animal farm.

Mr. Kuntzler, his fine mane of silver hair already slightly awry, sat sipping coffee in his easy chair in the deep shade of the porch which encircles his modest log house. When I asked to take a look at his menagerie, he beckoned me in. He fetched me, as he put it, a cup of coffee and we sat down, he in his chair and I on the sofa next to him. He lit a cigarette. I noticed a slight palsied shaking of his hands as he held the match to it and a few days' growth of white stubble on his leathery cheek as he drew in the smoke. The whites of his pale blue eyes were distinctly bloodshot.

"I've been admiring your zoo," I said. Along the porch railing were arrayed a long line of smaller critters, squirrels and such, many of indecipherable shape. He uncurled his tall frame from the chair and fetched one of them for me.

"This is my favorite maybe," he said, fondly turning it over one way and then another before handing it to me.

I couldn't make head nor tail of it.

"It's my favorite maybe because I don't know what it is exactly. Maybe it's a salamander and maybe it's a dinosaur."

"Or maybe it's a snake on the verge of eating its tail," I ventured. It was, in fact, a convoluted piece of a branch of some tree, hawthorn maybe, glued to a base and slathered with shellac. At one end were two countersunk emerald-green glass beads for eyes.

He chuckled. "Different days, it's different things," he said. "So I guess it's a chameleon. But some of them, like that beaver out there in the yard, they're always the same."

The beaver had a tail made from an old boot sole cobbled onto its rump and I had to agree it was unmistakably a beaver although its slick dark surface made it look wet and that effect was better in the rain.

“What do you do with them?” I asked.

He shrugged. “Nothing. Oh, they amuse the tourists. People come to look at them, you know. And now and then I sell one. But mostly they’re just there, same as I’m just here. And they’re kind of agreeable company.”

Miz Bubby’s car glided slowly toward us down from the Dingle Road and turned even more cautiously into its parking place across the street, beside the tiny post office that wasn’t big enough to be its garage.

“Can’t see over the wheel,” Mr. Kuntzler chuckled again.

“She seems kind of crotchety,” I observed.

This induced a reverie in him. “She and I grew up here together. Well, she lived over where—you been to their place?”

I shook my head. “Huh-uh.”

“Toward Thrall anyway. You’ll see it. This cabin and the McMorey place were the only buildings here. ‘Course it wasn’t called Crondoc in those days. It didn’t have a name; it was just where Dingle Creek met the Perpend, which meets the Guillemot down near Artesia. My dad built this cabin right after I was born.

“Miz Bubby’s grandfather was one of the early pioneers. He owned damn near the whole valley, ‘way on up to Amarainy Peak. He and her father, Ben, they were loggers. This was in the days when a decent log was thick as a man was tall, and it was no mean trick getting them out of there, but Ben Bubby, he could figure out just where to put a steam donkey so he could clear a whole slope of trees without ever moving the damn thing, with cables and pulleys and skid trails going every which way. He could get logs out of places where other

men couldn't even get in to cut the trees down.

"Anyway, along about the time of the first war, a lot more folks started coming here to live on account of the work. The Bubbys built the old mill down there toward Artesia once they began logging the Dingle watershed, and when people settled here Ben sold them land so he could raise money for trucks and equipment. I worked down there when I was a young buck, first on the green chain and later as a sawyer."

At this moment the screen door squeaked and then slapped shut and a stunning young woman emerged from the cabin. She had long brown hair with shimmering amber highlights and eyes the color of honey. She more or less ignored my presence. "I'm going to town, Uncle August," she said to him. "Can I have the keys?"

He fished in his pocket for the keys to his pickup and gave them to her. Then he returned to his tale.

"Anyway, her mother – we called her the Red Queen on account of her hair – she kind of took it upon herself to oversee the domestic affairs of everyone in the valley, which she considered her personal domain, if you know what I mean. Her ancestral lands. If a family was in trouble she dispatched someone to help them. If a guy went a little astray he might find himself standing in her parlor, explaining his actions. If she didn't cotton to a fellow," he snapped his fingers, "he might lose his job and his house, just like that."

He went on for some time describing the Bubby family's slowly dwindling fortunes, but I found myself thinking about the girl with the eyes like oiled teak, golden and soft.

3

A Silver Devil

I stopped by Mr. Kuntzler's several times over the next few days, but I didn't encounter his niece again. I couldn't ask him about her, but I was dying to, and I think he knew that. He told me stories about the driftwood figures and where he'd found them and how he'd modified them and how they provided a buffer of sorts between himself and the outside world – meaning Crondoc and beyond. He described how the timbering business had slowly been taken over by outside corporations, how Meerson had obtained the lucrative quarrying and hauling contract for the dam in Thrall during the second war and then had gone into forest roadbuilding and gradually replaced the Bubbys as the economic wellspring of the community.

One morning I realized that hanging around hoping to see those shining eyes again was like waiting for Godot, and that I might just as well go fishing in the river. Besides, I wanted to suffer my gnawings in peace.

There's a gravel bar above the beach I call Keystone Beach and there you can stand on dry land at the upper edge of the riffle and look downstream into a broad expanse of fairly deep water. As I emerged from the woods that skirted the bar, I noticed in the shadows of the small trees on the opposite shore, standing in waist-deep quiet water, a man outfitted in chest-high waders and a straw-colored Panama hat. He wore a long-sleeved black shirt with a white collar and white cuffs. I figured it must be Pastor Beezle. He was fly fishing. We exchanged a nod and a wave over the loud whispering roar of water. The river was wide enough for both of us.

I don't know anything about flies. I baited a hook with four or five salmon eggs and cast it downstream into the wide, deep center of the current. My

strategy was to let the eggs float submerged in the current for as long as they would and then to retrieve them slowly. I didn't really care whether I caught anything; I just wanted to lose myself in the warmth of the sunshine, the glittering music of the water, the intricate play of the game.

As I backed and twisted the hook out of the lip of my second good-sized jack trout I realized Pastor Beezle had crossed the river and was walking toward me over the gravel bar. "Hi, Reverend," I said.

"You must be Ashmead Hopcross."

We shook hands.

"Pastor Beezle," he said. "I see you've already got your dinner."

I linked the fish on the stringer with the other one and plopped them back into the icy water. "Yeah," I said. "Two are plenty for me."

"Mind if I flick a few from here?"

I didn't mind, but I didn't relish engaging in a conversation either.

"You folks settling in all right?"

"Yessir, fine."

"Your mama, Priscilla is it? She'll be working over at Thrall School then?"

"She's a nurse," I said.

The fly described a lazy arc in the air behind him and then whisked off downstream, settling onto the surface with barely a ripple.

"You have a girlfriend, Ashmead?"

A pair of golden eyes swam in my gaze, unblinking, like the eyes of the trout. "No," I said. "Not at the moment."

Although he has the sallow, pudgy look of a man who eats too many pastries, Pastor Beezle moves with the quick, tentative motions of a frightened animal. He purses his broad lips when he smiles, so the effect is beaverish, as if bared incisors were an emblem of pleasantry.

“We have some mighty pretty young girls in the church choir, you know. You a singer?”

“No.”

He examined the fly and flicked it again through the morning air. He asked me what subject I liked best in school and I said physics.

“You believe in God, Ashmead?”

I didn’t want to hurt his feelings so I said I didn’t know.

“I think when Lord Jesus was your age he probably didn’t know either. He must’ve grappled with the same baffling concepts of God people do today. It’s really a matter of logic, though, just like physics. Look at a pyramid for instance. As you go higher, it gets narrower and narrower. Maybe the top is in the clouds, and you can’t see it, but you can see that it keeps getting narrower and narrower, and you know at the top it comes to a single point, eh? But you can’t perceive God the same way you perceive water, or gravity. You can’t rely on your senses. You have to go beyond your senses into a more innocent and natural world, don’t you think?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Sounds reasonable, I guess.”

He jiggled on the fly and glanced at me. “He’s out there,” he laughed, his eyes large with delight. “I can feel him. He’s hungry, and I’m casting bread upon the waters. He’s looking for the great temptation – the perfect cast, the perfect fly. Or he’s annoyed and wants to kill this thing. Either way, I’m going to get him.”

“How do you know that?”

“I come here once every spring, and again every fall, and I fish for a while and I catch a steelhead, every time. One’s the limit, you know.”

I hadn’t.

“It’s instinct, really. Like prayer. You reach a certain level of concentration,

you lose yourself in the task, you shed the world as we usually see it, you sort of merge into things on a deeper plane. Then you know where the fish are. You even know which particular fish you're going to catch."

His lips puckered just a little and his obnubilated blue eyes, barely restrained in their sockets, regarded me beadily. "When one of my parishioners attains the state of grace and speaks through the tongues of the patriarchs, that's the voice of God. And that's how I really know. By my instinct of God."

At this moment a great sinewy black-and-silver missile breached the surface, flashed in the sun and plunged again into the dark water. Beezle's hand jerked deftly and he quickly snubbed up the slack in the line as the fish ran downstream, leapt again, headed for the weeds, then turned and raced across the current toward us. Beezle kept gathering the delicate line. Finally he stepped down into the water with his net in one hand and scooped the sleekly muscular monster out of the river. It was easily forty inches long.

Pastor Beezle smiled again with his puckered little smile. He slipped his fingers through its heaving pink gills and held the fish aloft. Its wild yellow eye stared right at me. "God's gift," he said. "God suffuses the world, Ashmead, and brings us everything we desire. Even this silver devil."

He was a silver devil himself, I thought. Hooked on his own silver tongue.

4

Lorelei

One of the best places I'd discovered in my inveterate wanderings I called The Nook. It's smaller and rougher than Keystone Beach, beyond the gravel bar and maybe an eighth of a mile up Dingle Creek from its confluence with the Perpend, and it's almost impossible to find by accident — despite the fact that's how I discovered it. I took my mom to Keystone Beach the weekend after I found

it, but I never showed anyone The Nook. It was my secret place.

One broiling late-August day, I'd been obliged to spend most of the morning mowing the grass around our house, wondering the whole time whether the girl with the golden eyes might drive by and see me buff and brazen in my sweaty upper-body nakedness and, thus mesmerized, veer off into a ditch and call out plaintively for me to come and rescue her. She didn't, of course, and then even my mom abandoned me when she had to go over to Thrall to count aspirins and bandaids and familiarize herself with what she characterized as a tangled web of pointless procedures.

When I'd finished the mowing I was hot and my skin itched from all the grass seeds clinging to it, so I grabbed a towel and a book I was reading, which I've never actually finished to this day, and headed up to The Nook.

There are two ways to get into it. One is to walk across the meadow behind Hudson's store, push through the tangled underbrush along the bank, and clamber down a five-foot slope of loose scabble. The other, which I always chose, is to walk along the river and then cut up Dingle Creek from the downstream side, around a headland where the water is a couple of feet deep.

Once I got there I cleared away a few pebbles, spread my towel on the sand, kicked off my shoes, peeled off my levis, the legs of which were soaked, and plunged into the icy water. I felt reborn.

I lay on the towel afterward, grappling with the book and its tediously labyrinthine plot that never seemed quite to coalesce, and then I gave that up and stretched out on my back to soak up the radiant summer, which soon rendered me torpid. Suddenly I was startled by the sound of leaves rustling above my head, in the undergrowth along the riverbank. The fact I was buck naked was suddenly the feeling I was buck naked, and I hurriedly struggled to get into my wet levis.

“Oh, don’t bother,” a feminine voice cooed as a few rocks clattered down the embankment with her. “All men are made pretty much the same, aren’t they?”

I turned as she stepped across the beach toward me. She was a goddess. She was tall, tan, well-fed and laughing. She wore sunglasses and sandals and a short, gauzy, flower-printed smock over a one-piece hot-pink mesh-net swimsuit. Under her arm she carried a rolled towel the size of a sleeping bag. Her ample lips radiated a brilliant metallic purple light, like iridescent plums.

“Hi!” she said. “I’m Hanna Hudson.”

“Hi,” I replied. “I’m Ashmead Hopcross.”

She smiled. “Hi, Ashmead. Mind if I join you?”

How could I mind? She spread her towel out beside me. It was at least two feet longer and wider than mine and twice as thick.

“I’ve been coming here since I was a kid,” she said. “I never encountered anyone here before.”

“Neither have I. You surprised me.”

She had two sandwiches. She shrugged off her smock and offered me one.

“You can take your pants off again, Ashmead,” she said, her eyes twinkling. “I’m just here for a tan.”

I bit off a mouthful of ham and lettuce and mayo and mustard. That’s the great thing about a ham sandwich; even after you chew it to mush you can still taste all its ingredients. I noticed her body was not so much covered as contained by the pink mesh.

“It’s okay,” I answered. “My legs are starting to pink up, anyway.”

She seemed skeptical. “Uh-huh,” she said. The dark hair that fell to the small of her back splayed out like a sunburst beneath her head as she lay down. She took off her sunglasses but kept her eyes closed.

"Aren't you afraid you'll end up looking like diamondplate?" I asked.

She laughed. "Well, I usually take it off when I'm down here. Just like you."

She had a joint. We shared that, too.

"I hear you're smitten with Marie."

"Who's Marie?"

"August Kuntzler's niece."

"Oh."

"Well?"

"Well what?"

"Are you smitten with her?"

"I don't know, I never really met her. I just saw her once, a few days ago, on Mr. Kuntzler's porch. She didn't even say hello. But I'm fascinated by her eyes, I'll admit that."

"My dad says she has the eyes of a tiger."

"I dream about her eyes. Like Blake must've. Eyes that gleam in the hot shadows." Pot makes me talk like this.

"You're in love," she proclaimed.

"Only with her eyes," I said. And that was true. I hardly knew anything about the rest of her.

"Have a girlfriend, Ashmead?"

"Nope. I seem to be scorned by women. First Miz Bubby, then Marie, and now I guess you. And I'm not sure but I might've been scorned by old Beezle, too, who asked me the same thing. So that's been my welcome in Crondoc – a flurry of scorn."

"Did he pat your bottom?"

"Beezle? Hardly. Does he do that?"

She shrugged. "I don't know *what* he does. He's creepy though. I wouldn't

want to be stranded somewhere alone with him, would you? And then there's all that stuff with people twitching on the floor and foaming at the mouth and moaning and blathering, and he says this is God talking to him – to him, mind you. And I suppose God says, 'Give Beezle five bucks.'"

"I don't think it's quite like that," I said, laughing.

"Yeah, but it's essentially like that."

"They don't roll around or foam at the mouth. Your mom told me."

While we were talking I found myself looking at her – I hadn't meant to, but I was. My gaze caressed her hair, brushed those amazing plum-colored lips, surfed the swoop of her breasts so barely restrained in that ice-pink net, circled her protrudant nipples, slithered over the soft slope of her belly, climbed her black-pelted tump and swept delirious down the silt-smooth rivers of her legs. And she still hadn't opened her eyes.

"I don't have a guy either. I'm hoping to find one who's been around, who's brainy and savvy and going somewhere."

"Me," I thought.

"I don't want to run the Crondoc store, you know? I want a different life. But that's my lookout, not some man's. I'll do it myself. Then it'll be mine." She paused. "You don't think a woman needs a man, do you, Ashmead?"

About this time I had a raging hard-on. I'd been lying on my side, facing her, and when I looked down it was peeking out of the waistband of my jeans. I stuffed it to one side and rolled over on my stomach.

Then one eye, one deep, limpid brown eye opened slowly and looked right at me, just like my pecker had a moment before. She smiled. "Pinking up in front now, are we?" she asked.

"Strong sun," I explained.

"Go for a swim, Ashmead. I won't look. I'm headed for college tomorrow

morning. I can't be starting something new now, you know?"

"Sorry," I said.

"Well, I am too, in a way. Now go jump in the creek. Get naked. Get cold. Relax. I'm bequeathing you this beach. I know you'll be a worthy keeper of its secret."

I was much-pleased by that, but I dashed into the water anyway, pants and all. She laughed.

"What do you call this place?" I asked, spluttering, from the glittering shallows.

"Solitude Cove," she said. And that's how The Nook became Solitude Cove.

When I splashed ashore again, she stood up. "Now that I've bequeathed it to you, Ashmead, I'm going to leave it to you," she said. "I hate to go. It's been fun meeting you. Another beautiful place around here is up on the ridge behind the old McMorey ranch, in the trees. Take a walk up there someday. I've done it many times. It's very quiet. Maybe you'll feel me."

"I'd like that," I said.

After she gathered up her stuff, she asked me to write and kissed me goodbye. It was a searing, languorous kiss that left me sheathed in a subtle purple glow. I lived in flashbacks the whole rest of the day.

5

The Kredes

The raging intensity of that afternoon had lapsed into a shadowy green emptiness as the Labor Day weekend approached. The beauty of every spreading dawn, every rippling morning breeze playing beside the river, every hot and longing afternoon in the shade of the cottonwoods, every shimmering crimson sunset was made keener by the imminent commencement of school and the

infinite loneliness of her absence.

Early one afternoon I walked up the road to Hudson's store. It was painful to go there and yet in a way, afterward, I'd feel somehow I'd been with her there, especially if I'd made small-talk with her folks, which was pretty much inevitable.

There was a large and unfamiliar flatbed truck parked outside the store this afternoon. On its bed were two huge wooden crates, covered on top with a canvas tarpaulin and carefully roped down. I noticed as I walked past that it bore out-of-state plates.

The Kredes were standing at the counter, talking with Mr. Hudson, when I came in. "Hey, Ashmead," Mr. Hudson greeted me. "These are your new neighbors, the Kredes. They bought the old McMorey place."

For some reason, I knew right away that things were looking up. She was a stocky woman with muscular forearms and a heavy jaw, almost as tall as I was and maybe heavier. She had a big, wide smile and big, wide teeth, and from their grasp she plucked the unlit stub of a cigar, revealing a gold incisor as she spoke in a smoky contralto.

"Hi, Ashmead, I'm Mary Ann Krede, and this is my brother, Lem Roy."

I shook hands with both of them. I can't say which had the stronger grip. Her skin was swarthy, but not as dark as his, and her eyes were a suspiciously vivid emerald green. Her features were coarse and raw-boned, framed by long reddish hair. She had at least one ring on every finger of each hand.

Lem Roy was a good six inches shorter than she was, with deeply tanned and supple dark-chocolate skin and black obsidian eyes. He had straight, blue-black hair in a short bowl cut. He briefly flashed a shy smile by way of a greeting.

"Great," I said. "And where's the McMorey place?"

"Right across from you," Mr. Hudson said, pointing. "That big old

farmhouse up on the hill."

The place where Hanna's trail ran along the ridge through the trees. I regretted in that instant not having yet walked up there. Now, I thought, maybe I couldn't.

"You lived here long?" Ms. Krede asked.

"No, my mom and I just moved here a few weeks ago. From Kansas."

"Aha. You and Dorothy."

"Priscilla."

She laughed. It was a hearty, throaty laugh. "Priscilla's your mom."

"Yeah."

"She's the new nurse over at Thrall School," Mr. Hudson said helpfully.

"Well, Ashmead, it'll take us a day or two to get everything moved in and settled, but anytime you and your mom want to come up and visit just come ahead. Okay?"

"Sure. Thanks." I could walk in Hanna's footsteps after all.

She clenched the cigar again between her teeth and paid the bill. They both thanked Mr. Hudson and he them. She scooped up the bag full of groceries and the two of them walked back out to the old truck.

Mr. Hudson smiled. His concave pink ears jutted out more jauntily than usual. "Well," he said, "*they're* different."

As I walked back down the road I saw a huge moving van slowly making a hard left turn onto their driveway and then lumbering up the quarter-mile or so to the two-story farmhouse that stood a third of the way between the road and the ridge. An hour or so later the cattle trucks came, three of them, big silver tractor-trailers full of bawling animals who seemed to know their long, stifling journey was over.

6

Cattle Call

A few days later, the last weekend before Labor Day, my mom made a point of having dinner at six because she was going out at seven on her first date with Bennie.

He arrived ten minutes late in his patrol car. He flashed the overhead lights as he turned into the driveway. He wore green-gray slacks and a shirt to match under a dark bombardier's jacket. His black hair was combed back. A gold chain glinted under the open throat of his shirt.

"Buford Pusser's here," I said.

"You wouldn't be saying that to his face, would you?" my mom asked as she finished her image in the bathroom.

I opened the door for him. "Hi, Bennie," I said, shaking his hand as he came inside.

"Hi, Ashmead."

"Hi, Bennie," she called.

"Hi, Pris."

Pris? My dad used to call her Pris when he wanted something, which, when we saw him, he always did.

"Mom says you might be offended if I refer to you as Buford Pusser," I said with a laugh.

He laughed too. "Well, I wouldn't be," he said, "but he might."

"All right, then. I won't."

My mom came out, looking good, her hair in braids, her levis a little too tight in my opinion, and wearing the silver necklace I'd given her with its pendant amethyst heart. She was eager and excited.

"Well," she said smiling, kissing me lightly. "We're off to the big city."

"Well, have a good time," I said. "I might go up to Krede's."

"Okay, honey."

"Oh, hey, Pris," Bennie interjected as we stepped out onto the porch, "okay if we take your car?"

"Sure, no problem."

"Want me to drive?"

"You're not going to give me a ticket, are you?" she asked as she got in on the driver's side and winked goodbye to me with a wave.

He laughed as he swung into the passenger seat. "Some of these little Jap cars," he observed as he buckled his seat belt, "are hard as hell to catch on a dicey road."

She started the engine. "This isn't one of them," she said.

After they left, I felt intensely alone. I stood outside on the porch in the orange autumn glow and gazed up at the tree-shrouded ridge above the Kredes' house and barn. On a hunch, and with wild anticipation, I dialed the number Hanna had given me so that I could call her in case her parents got killed or the store burned down or something. She was out, her roommate said. For the weekend.

"Well, just tell her Ted called," I said, and hung up.

I got a little apprehensive as I approached the wooden stairs leading up to the Kredes' big side porch, but the hike up their gravel driveway was too much of an investment to back away from. And the lights were on although darkness was an hour or more away.

"Hi, Ashmead," her sabulous voice called cheerfully through the screen door. "Come on in."

I stepped into a dark high-ceilinged hallway that lead to the living room

and a sitting room, to the staircase, and to the large old farm kitchen.

"Hi, Ms. Krede."

She wore bib overalls and a blue work shirt with the sleeves rolled up over her impressive biceps. Her rough rust-colored hair rambled down from the edges of a green John Deere cap. She'd finished up the dinner dishes and was wiping down the porcelain sink. She turned and smiled a broad, gold-flecked smile as I entered the kitchen. Between the ringed fingers of one hand she held the damp, chewed stump of a cigar.

"Ever been in here before?"

"No, ma'am."

"Well," she said, "let me show you around a little. Then we'll go out and see if we can give Lem Roy a hand in the barn, okay?"

"Sure."

"By the way, he likes to be called Lem Roy," she said, smiling, clamping the cigar between her teeth. "Me, I like Aunt Krede, or even just Krede. But obviously I'm neither formal nor modern, so deep-six the miz and ma'am crap."

She showed me the sitting room, which she called her parlor. It had three high windows adorned with frilly curtains, two looking west toward Artesia and one south, from which we could see our house across the road and a glimpse of the river. The walls were lined with books and a soft wine-red carpet covered the wood floor almost to the walls. Two couches reposed at right angles to each other and two high-backed leather chairs flanked and faced them. It almost seemed as if people were already sitting there, talking.

The living room, by contrast, was nearly bare of furniture and smelled faintly of turpentine. An iron chandelier hung from the ceiling and at the far end of the room was a large stone fireplace. Along the west wall an enormous picture window looked out over the meadow and up the hillside into the trees. Opposite

it was a wide doorway that opened on a back hall, through the pantry and into the kitchen. In the middle of the bare floor was a dark captain's chair. Beside it was a small table encrusted with colorful streaks and globs of paint, and facing them was a large easel no less bespattered. Against the wall next to the window was a serious-looking black component stereo and on either side of the fireplace stood a six-foot high black speaker cabinet.

"You an opera buff, Ashmead?"

I laughed. "Hardly."

"I get all my passion for painting from my operas," she said. "I love schmaltz. I suppose that means I'm really shallow."

She lit the cigar stub with a match and motioned for me to follow her out through the back door. "Lem Roy won't let me smoke in the barn," she said as we descended the stairs and slowly crossed the broad apron of gravel and dirt that separated the house from the cavernous hip-roofed barn and, to one side of it, the shop building, itself as large as a small house. "He thinks if the cows breathe the smoke the meat will taste like cigars."

She pointed to a group of about forty black cattle lolling lazily on the hillside now bathed in rubescence light. "Angus," she said. "The pride of Scotland. A truly elegant animal, for a cow. They're Lem Roy's lifelong work in progress."

As we entered the barn a pumice-colored hound with a big head barked once and trotted up to us, its tail milling furiously in circles like a ship's propeller. Aunt Krede patted its head. "Her name's Wagger," she said. "You can see why."

Lem Roy had gathered a group of about twenty young calves into a large common stall for the night. They were arrayed around the periphery, suckling big-nippled bottles of milky feed while he walked behind them, taking their temperatures and giving them shots, to which they seemed largely oblivious.

"How's it going, babe?" she said to him.

"Good," he said with a grin, glancing at her and acknowledging me with a nod. "Two bulls, maybe three."

"Best crop of calves we've ever had," Aunt Krede remarked to me as we walked out into the fading light and toward the shop building. "Lem Roy's a breeder. It's an arcane art and he's a master of its mysteries. He understands cows. He meditates about cows. These black bovines are his one true love. But when he needs a fling, when he has to get away and have some fun, he plays with his puppets."

As we approached the shop I noticed the flatbed truck parked under a huge bigleaf maple tree. The two wooden crates, about five feet along a side, were still on it.

"Bet you can't guess what's in there," Aunt Krede said when she saw me looking at them.

"Nope."

She raised the garage door at the end of the shop. "Ants," she said.

"Ants?"

"They're my hobby." She flipped a switch and the whole ceiling erupted with fluorescent light. "This is our shop. Old Mose built it himself, and he did everything right. The floor is solid and it's dry and warm in the winter. The ceiling's ten feet high. It has its own two-hundred-amp service."

There were tools everywhere: hand tools along the walls and on long benches, nuts and bolts and parts hanging in tapestries of plastic bags, a lathe and a drill press and a radial-arm saw. One corner was devoted to Lem Roy's puppets, and puppets of all sorts were suspended from the ceiling or caught in a timeless *danse macabre* against the wall. Beyond this room was a small closet laboratory containing a microscope and a computer and a refrigerator among

numerous other scientific-looking things.

“And here,” Aunt Krede said triumphantly, gesturing through an open doorway toward the empty back half of the building, “is where we’re going to build the myrmecorium.”

“No doubt,” I said. “What’s a myrmecorium?”

“An ant hotel,” she said, her eyes flashing with glee. “You can come help if you want to. It’ll be fun, you’ll see.”

“Sure,” I said.

Shortly afterward Lem Roy had finished with the calves in the barn and the three of us sat around the heavy round red-oak dining table in the kitchen. Aunt Krede and I drank coffee while Lem Roy steeped a pot of herb tea.

“Well, Ashmead,” she said cheerfully, “what’ve you been up to lately? Dreading school?”

“Actually,” I said, “in a way I’ll be glad when school starts. It’ll distract me.”

“A teenage boy can’t find enough distractions?”

“I met this girl.”

“Of course.”

“She’s gone away to school.”

“Uh-huh. Life is leaden and empty.”

“She’s Mr. Hudson’s daughter, Hanna. The whole thing’s actually insane. I was hiding in a rabbit hole and she fell in. Then she slathered me with lovelust and flew away. I’m an exploding supernova. The center of me is a throbbing sorrow swelling through all space.”

“She *slathered* you?” Lem Roy asked incredulously.

“Well, it was more than a sprinkling and less than total immersion,” I said.

“Oh, and adding insult to injury, Pastor Beezle told me God speaks to him

personally. People go into trances and say weird stuff and actually it's God, talking to him."

"And what does God say?" Aunt Krede asked, savoring a new cigar.

Lem Roy made a sound like a sheep bleating. "Baaa!"

"I don't know, but he caught a huge steelhead." This rated a laugh. "And what about you guys?"

"We're settling in," she said. "By Labor Day we'll be in a pretty normal mode. Maybe we can get the ant house ready over the long weekend."

Lem Roy raised his eyebrows as he sipped his tea.

Aunt Krede got up and came back with the coffee pot and a porcelain clown cookie jar. "You like chocolate-chip cookies, Ashmead?"

I love chocolate-chip cookies.

"Want a glass of milk?"

"Can I live here?"

"Raw or pasteurized?" she asked from the refrigerator.

"Raw."

"Most folks prefer pasteurized," Lem Roy said. "It goes with shrink-wrapped meat and bug-free vegetables."

Wagger had a cookie and I had several. We talked about my mom and her job and Hanna and Mr. Kuntzler and Marie and I guess I did most of the talking. Lem Roy eventually excused himself to make preparation for bed and I thought I ought to be going.

"We're going camping next weekend with the Hills," I told Aunt Krede, "so I won't be able to come over then, but I would like to help with the ant house."

She smiled. "Lem Roy assures me it won't be finished by the time you get back," she said, "so you'll have a chance."

"What do you *do* with the ants?"

She laughed. "Nothing. They just fascinate me. I watch them sometimes. I study them. I try to understand their life. They're easy keepers, and they give me a break from housework and even from painting."

"I've seen those little glass-walled ant farms."

"Well, the myrmecorium will be a giant glass-walled ant menagerie, a whole ant world. It'll be great, wait and see."

I thought about the Kredes as I walked down the driveway toward our house. Laconic Lem Roy, his black eyes full of ancient mischief. And salty Aunt Krede. Her left front incisor was, she'd said, "solid gold." She could smile wide even with a cigar clenched between her teeth.

And then an enormous marmalade moon breached the eastern horizon like the phosphorescent brain of a jellyfish rising slowly from the amniotic sea, and its light flung from the trees sinuous spooky black shadows that slid across my cheek and slithered down my leg and sprawled like alien hieroglyphics over the white gravel that crunched in grudging deference as I passed.

7

Potluck Potlatch

The Dingle Creek Road winds east for fifteen miles beyond Crondoc, far past Pastor Beezle's modest A-frame and the Hill's well-kept little ranchette. It's paved for all but the last mile or so, following the creek upstream until it reaches a parking lot at the Amarainy Falls trailhead. From there you have to hike up a mile-long switchback trail to reach the pool at the base of the falls. And from there it's another rough, rocky three-mile climb to the upper plateau, where the streams that tumble westward off the Amarainy drainage gradually collect themselves into Dingle Creek, and where, only a few miles farther on, the campground is located.

Before we left the Hill's house, Billy showed me his car, which his father had impounded on account of some speeding incident. It sat in a double garage scattered with mechanic's tools, a sleek, metallic-teal Corvette, maybe ten years old, that looked freshly minted and embraced in its maw a monstrous chrome-accented engine he claimed had come from a police chase car. I'm not much of a car buff and I like Formula I cars over muscle cars for the same reason I prefer gymnastics over wrestling or chess over checkers. But it takes all kinds and he seemed like a friendly guy a little obsessed with his car.

Lucretia, Billy's twin sister who looks just like him, was going to bring along two of her friends, Bridget Bubby, who is Miz Bubby's granddaughter, and — my heart leapt — the almond-eyed Marie. Although the rest of us would be seniors, Bridget, who in some ways is the most assertive and forthright of any of us, was only a sophomore. She's sort of chubby and fresh-faced, with innocent pink lips and steely blue eyes under a canopy of blonde brows and lashes. But her demeanor is that of a playful piranha. When, after she'd egged him on, Billy'd claimed he could make the hike from the trailhead up to the campsite in four hours, even with a pack, she'd reminded him of the time he'd decided he was going to walk home from camp, and his father had left him behind, and next morning some forest ranger had found him, soaked and shivering near the top of the falls, after he'd lost the trail.

I found out Bennie's wife had long since moved to her folks' home in Palm Springs where she now worked as a librarian. They'd been divorced for several years. Apparently she was a tireless tippler. Both kids seemed to enjoy living with him but there was a certain furtiveness in the atmosphere that I found vaguely oppressive, like an overcast sky.

Anyhow, when we set out that afternoon, with all our tents and food and paraphernalia, we took a long back route, south through Thrall and then east

along the Guillemot Valley highway and then north again over twenty miles of dirt-track mountain road, used mainly by the Forest Service, that took us directly into the campground.

Bennie and Billy led the way in Bennie's desert-tan Land Rover. Lucretia drove her powder-blue convertible. My mom and I followed in our station wagon. As usual, she let me drive. But she wouldn't let me pass the Land Rover even after Lucretia did.

It was late Friday afternoon when we pulled into the campground. Billy and I were assigned by Bennie and my mom to set up the tents, but the girls set up their own, which belonged to Marie. Then we all went swimming except Bennie and my mom who stayed behind to arrange things.

Lucretia, slight and pretty like Billy, with the same gold-flecked blue eyes and wavy black hair cut about the same pageboy length, looked willowy good in a bathing suit. Recreation was her principal interest in life and she was utterly at ease on the beach. She cultivated, as best a Crondoc native could, the image of a debutante.

Marie wore a two-piece white bikini that fit her like Cinderella's slipper and left as little to ravenous imagination. Her body was strong and supple, compact and sculpted. I was seized by the urge to gaze at her but I didn't want to be caught doing it. She must've known because she came over and sat crosslegged beside me.

"I just figured out where I've seen you before," she said. "On Uncle August's porch a week or so ago."

"Well, I don't have neon eyes," I surmised.

She smiled. "I suppose he told you all about that tedious stuff he calls God's sculpture."

"I don't think he used that term. He said he enjoys their company. And he

intimated they somehow keep the world at bay.”

“Do you like it? Driftwood art or whatever it is?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. Some of it’s okay. I didn’t think of it as art exactly. Just whimsical gewgaws I guess. Why?”

“I don’t know. Hick consciousness is making me crazy.”

I gazed out across the little lake, sparkling in the autumn sun. Beyond its far edge was a brief grassy meadow and beyond that the black trunks and green tops of trees and beyond them the purplish mantle of the Amarainy foothills and beyond that the blue cloud-spangled sky. A warm breeze stirred. Surely Indians, or “indigenes” as Lem Roy preferred, must’ve camped in this place for thousands of years, on their way from one place to another. It was too cold for wintering, but summers were, apart from an occasional thunderstorm, idyllic. The scenery was great, the weather was mild, the water was clear and wood was plentiful.

“Pretty, isn’t it?” she asked.

I looked back at her, and those eyes, soft and yielding as the wings of a moth, those eyes the color of caramel, of quicksand, by the intensity of their looking drew me into their orbit like a comet on the end of a gravitational gumband.

“I hope you won’t mind my saying this, but your eyes are so beautiful, so mystical almost, I can’t help looking at them. They’re incredible.”

“Enjoy,” she said. “But once you look *into* them, then you’ll see the part of me I don’t owe to genes. See what you think then.”

“Might like that, too,” I said. “And, yes, it is pretty. I was just thinking of what a primitive and ancient experience it is, you know? That we’re doing something people have done for thousands of years, and having the same experiences, more or less, that they had.”

"It's one of the two things about living in Crondoc that I appreciate," she said.

"Yeah? And what's the other?"

"Uncle August feeds me."

I laughed. The creature who looked out through those luminous eyes was no ordinary girl.

"They're going to start logging up here next spring," she said. She pointed. "On that ridge over there, that whole slope. They say it's the best way to maintain a variety of ages among the trees."

"It'll look like shit," I said, not trying too hard to imagine it. "But on the other hand, in the olden days a little fire would take out a ridge or two or maybe even the whole place now and then."

"Yeah, every few centuries. And a fire leaves a much different ecology behind it than a clearcut."

"A better ecology," I supposed.

The others had returned from their dip in the lake. Lucretia and Bridget stood on either side of us, toweling themselves and shaking their wet hair over us for effect. Billy stood behind Marie, fluffing a spray of water from his thick curls onto her back.

"Can you build a house out of ecology?" he asked. "Do you think people will go back to living in tepees?"

Lucretia answered, "Well, what if somebody offered you a hundred bucks to borrow your car for the day? You're grounded from driving it anyway, so what could you lose?"

"No fuckin' way. What's that have to do with anything?"

I noticed a distinct lavender cast to Bridget Bubby's ice-blue eyes as she directed an impudent question my way.

“You an eco-freak, Ashcan?”

“Well, if it touches my life I’m pretty particular about it. But if it’s outside my personal experience, that’s more abstract. Maybe a lot more abstract.”

“And a lot less interesting,” Lucretia said.

As he hunkered down beside Marie, Billy laid his hand on her shoulder to steady himself. When it lingered there she reached up deliberately and shooed it away. “No overtime parking,” she said.

“Hey, Ashmead,” Billy asked me. “What’s with that pair across the road from you? I saw ‘em yesterday at Hudson’s. Brother and sister, he says. C’mon. They don’t look anything alike. He’s got black eyes and looks like an Indian. She has green eyes and looks like a gypsy. And kind of like a guy, don’t you think? You should see the arms on her. Or him. Whichever it is. I hear you’ve been cozying up to them.”

“No cozying,” I said. “But I do like them.”

“So, are they fags?”

“I don’t know. Why don’t you ask them?”

He shrugged. “I don’t really care,” he said.

Things proceeded pretty much in this vein throughout the weekend. Every time I tried to get close to Marie, Billy was soon hovering nearby. When Bridget and Marie enlisted me to paddle them thither and yon one afternoon in Bennie’s rubber raft, Lucretia and Bennie and my mom sunned themselves placidly on the beach while Billy surreptitiously hiked halfway around the lake so he could surprise us when we put in to a little shady cove on the opposite side. Bennie and my mom held hands sometimes and on Sunday evening as we sat around the campfire they disappeared into the cool mountain darkness for a half-hour or more, looking at the stars they said, and that seemed to be as far as it went.

8

Under the Surface

Around midday the following Saturday I walked again up the Kredes' long gravel driveway to the big two-story farmhouse. Wagger came out to accompany me the last third of the way. Aunt Krede and Lem Roy had just finished their lunch and Lem Roy excused himself to prepare for a few hours of solitary meditation in his sensory-deprivation tank.

While he was upstairs, Aunt Krede showed me a tennis-ball-sized chunk of translucent Baltic amber, almost the color of Marie's eyes, that contained not one but two ants, one of them a winged queen. Although it was hard as a rock, the amber felt soft and warm.

"This glob is over thirty million years old," she said. "Hardened tree sap from the time of saber-toothed tigers. Not as old as the dinosaurs, but mighty old. And the ants in this amber are exactly like ants today."

I held it up to the sunlight. "It's beautiful," I said.

Lem Roy had put on loose black trousers and a shirt woven with intricate abstract designs in brilliant colors. We accompanied him outside to his sensory-deprivation tank, which sat on the ground between the back door and Aunt Krede's vegetable garden. The heavily insulated tank was round, about four feet high and seven or eight feet across, and half-full of warm water. A large circular pad floated on the water and remained several inches above the surface even when he lay down on it, which he did with a grin. "I feel like a frog," he said. Once he'd lowered the thick lid and latched it in place he could no longer hear or see anything. He'd even placed the vent for his air pipe far up the side of the house so he wouldn't be distracted by the odors of the flowers and fields nearby.

As we walked over to the myrmecorium Aunt Krede pointed out a long-

handled iron pump that stood under the maple tree beside the old flatbed truck which still bore the two giant ant crates.

“Best drinking water in the valley,” she said. “That’s mostly all we use it for. Mose prized this water so much he drilled two other wells, on the far side of the barn and down by the house. They’re a lot deeper and more productive, but the water’s really not quite as tasty.”

She pumped up a cupful for me to try. It was like water from a deeply shadowed, moss-covered limestone spring, sweet and clear and cold. Wagger barked excitedly at the water’s appearance and seemed to enjoy its taste as much as we did.

“How are things with your mad romance?”

“Sad,” I said. “I write to her all the time, poetry and stuff, but I haven’t sent any.”

“And she?”

“She doesn’t either.”

“Maybe you should take a shot.”

“Well, but now there’s Marie.”

She guffawed at that one.

“August Kuntzler’s niece. She went camping with us. The first night I was lost in empty longing for Hanna, because I’m still in love with her, but pretty soon I was churning like a thunderhead with lust for Marie.”

“So it isn’t only women who are fickle, eh?”

Before we went into the shop to work on the myrmecorium Aunt Krede pried open one of the crates and showed me the intricate ant palace inside. It was an octagonal set of truncated glass-walled wedges, like a thick pie with a two-foot hole in the center. Visible through the outer glass were sinuous tunnels and nests, a carefully crafted subterranean environment crawling with busy ants.

As we labored over the complex framework into which the ant cage segments would fit, Aunt Krede told me about the ants. "I have five kinds," she said. "Honey ants with repletes, arboreal mushroom growers, slavers, fire ants and parasitic raiders."

She explained the castes—queens, males, workers and soldiers—into which all ant society is rigidly divided. The queens, workers and soldiers are all female, and all come from fertilized eggs. If they have sperm receptacles, they're queens; otherwise they're workers or soldiers. Males arise, by a process called parthenogenesis, from the unfertilized eggs of a queen or from the unfertilizable eggs of the workers. A male has only one function—to fill a queen's sperm sac. Then he dies. The ant world is a radical matriarchy.

"Ants feed their larvae," she said, "and each other, because as a byproduct of digestion the fed ant secretes a prized food, like candy-flavored diarrhea, which the feeding ants love to lap off it."

This was important, she said, because it illustrated an elemental quid pro quo of communal assistance: first they feed you, then they lick you.

"Every individual embodies the whole common experience of life," she said. "That's what the expression 'ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny' means."

"But," I objected, "it doesn't mean that human life reflects the life of ants."

She laughed. "No, but it does mean there's a deep pattern in individual development which comprehends living experience far back into the primordial past. This is genetic memory and the root of instinct. For ants, it's all there is."

Finally, we put a second coat of paint on the walls and Aunt Krede called it a day.

"Tomorrow we'll bring them in," she said.

The sun was low now and the autumn grass flamed golden yellow among the long shadows of the trees. We paused again at the well, and Aunt Krede

reminisced about Mose McMorey.

“He was our uncle. Uncle Mose. My dad’s half-brother. Lived here all his life. I visited him once for the summer when I was a kid. Thirty years ago, at least. He must’ve been in his mid-sixties. They had a small herd of dairy cows they milked by hand. He seemed ancient to me, but he worked like a mule. Except on Sunday. He was a diehard Presbyterian.

“He had another niece, my older cousin Willa Mae, who at that time lived in Artesia with her two young children. She was sort of temperamentally condemned to hard times, and every Sunday after church Mose and Bess would have them out for a big midday dinner. Afterward we kids would play outside and they’d retire to the parlor to talk while Mose enjoyed a cigar and a snifter of brandy, and Bess would unobtrusively open all the windows. After an hour or so he’d say his goodbyes and go for a long walk. Sometimes he didn’t come back until dark and I’d have to milk the cows.” She laughed at the thought of it as we walked on toward the house.

As we came around the barn we saw Lem Roy in the upper pasture, flattened over and seemingly fastened to the back of a frisky young steer that galloped erratically through the emerald grass. Wagger followed at a lope, barking occasionally but clearly unsure of the protocol. Lem Roy rode the steer like a jockey in the homestretch, except he had his bare feet crossed on top of its loins, and he held its neck just forward of its shoulders with his small nut-brown hands. He still wore his black trousers and brilliantly colored blouse. He clung to the steer like a wet saddle blanket. We leaned on the rail fence to watch.

The steer would stand still for a moment after Lem Roy mounted him and then it’d snort and buck and weave and go gamboling across the meadow and suddenly stop, with its head down, and Lem Roy would somersault off. And then they’d face each other and Lem Roy would butt the heels of his hands

against the steer's head, and they'd shove each other, and the steer would duck and paw and snort and make a feinting charge, and then Lem Roy would do the same, then they'd tussle some more and then the steer would stand still so Lem Roy could remount and start the whole sequence over again.

"Animal play hour," Aunt Krede said, chewing on a stalk of green hay.

"Even ants do it."

I chuckled. "Seems like an ancient ritual," I replied.

She was quiet for many minutes. Then she went on with her story.

"Long before the summer I came out here, Uncle Mose got himself into a knobby pickle. Somehow he seduced a fourteen-year-old girl out there in the barn one afternoon. Or vice-versa, who knows. Anyway, she told somebody and they told somebody and he spent two years in the state prison. But Aunt Bess stood by him and eventually they got through it. As far as I know, he stayed on the straight and narrow after that.

"But after Bess died, about ten years ago, Mose went into a decline. He started dressing up in women's clothes. He claimed he'd seen what he called a blue oak wasp, a critter unknown to science, living up in the Amaraingy under a rock somewhere. He tried to have the EPA declare it an endangered species so nobody could ever log the valley. But he never produced a specimen. He only had drawings, which he'd copied from the encyclopædia and embellished. Besides, people thought *he* should be living under a rock somewhere and nobody put much stock in his say-so. He told me he was terrified of wasps and couldn't get close to one, let alone capture it. Everyone thought he was daft. Well, he *was* daft, but a year later the Forest Service sprayed the whole watershed with an experimental chemical supposedly designed to get rid of bark beetles. Not that anybody gave a hoot, but Mose figured it also killed wasps."

Lem Roy patted the steer, which followed him like a puppy as he walked

down the hill toward the barn. Aunt Krede and I waved at him and continued our stroll toward the house.

“Anyway, it was defective. It killed all kinds of bugs. There was a scandal and some expendable heads rolled, most of which rolled their way over to Meerson’s or the sawmill or Elmore Bubby’s far-flung timbering operations which were dissolved in bankruptcy after he admitted embezzling a few million dollars from the company.”

“It never ends,” I observed.

“The bizarre turning of events? Of course not,” she said. “It’s the spur of evolution. You want to stay for supper?”

“Let me check in with my mom.”

Bennie was already there when I got home. He and my mother were standing down by the river, watching the gathering sunset maybe an hour away, the high clouds already tinged purplish and orange. “Bet you wouldn’t mind if I had supper with the Kredes,” I said as I approached them, having by due stealth got a bit closer than they might’ve expected.

My mom looked and laughed but Bennie didn’t turn around. “We’re going to the café later,” she said.

“I know; you told me.”

“Anyway, sure. We’re just having potato salad.”

Bennie turned as I came up to them and shook my hand with a smile. “You know,” he said, “we like being alone, but you’re always welcome to eat with us.”

“I am?” I felt speechless.

“He means it’s your house and you can eat here whenever you like,” my mom said.

“Oh.”

“Isn’t that what I said?”

"It's okay," I said. "I misunderstood. But I appreciate your offer. For tonight at least I think I'll go with the Kredes. Besides, you guys'll want to focus on fiddling."

This time he smiled sincerely. "Shit-kickin' fiddle music," he said.

"Dancin' music," my mom agreed with a smile, shuffling a two-step.

I shook my head in mock amazement. "Okay, buckaroos," I said. "Have a good time." Then I shook hands again with Bennie and kissed my mom, who I was just beginning to realize had a side I'd never before encountered, or even considered.

Aunt Krede also had made potato salad, with a little more mustard, a little more egg, a little more celery and, to top it off, chopped sweet gherkins. With this we had iced black tea from Ceylon. It was delicious. We sat in candlelight in the parlor and watched the sun set while we ate.

I asked Lem Roy about the sensory-deprivation tank. He laughed. "Try it yourself," he said.

"Do you have hallucinations?"

"That can happen."

"I fall asleep," Aunt Krede laughed. "But you really should try it. Ain't nobody in there but you. Nothing to do but be."

"Or fall asleep," Lem Roy teased her.

"What do you do?"

"I listen to the hum of the cosmos."

"Isn't that like hearing the sea in a shell?"

"Think about it," Lem Roy said. "Each star is a million nuclear warheads exploding every second. Must make quite a roar. And while it might seem like the rushing sound of the sea, a souging chaos, perhaps if you consider certain groups of stars it's music—a song, or a symphony."

"But sound can't travel through space."

"But sound can be encoded on a carrier wave that can travel through space."

"On light waves?"

"Let's say."

"And you can decode it? The brain can decode it?"

"Maybe. Maybe some natural phenomenon decodes it."

"I never heard anything," I confessed.

Lem Roy grinned. "Maybe *you* never listened," he said. "Maybe you've only listened with your ears."

"What should I be listening with?"

"Your mind."

By this time we were repairing to the living room, where Aunt Krede uncovered the large canvas on her easel, a landscape, she said, mostly unfinished with large areas of white and gray, stippled here and there with blues, greens and browns but lacking any recognizable shapes.

"Doesn't sound very scientific to me," I said.

"To me neither," Aunt Krede said. "But here's the history of science: you make a theory that ventures into untested territory, you invent an instrument to test it, and you discover a totally new phenomenon."

"Like walking to the next ridge," Lem Roy said.

While Aunt Krede selected an opera for the CD, Lem Roy went to a cabinet in the pantry and brought out the chess set.

"Care for a game?" he asked. We'd played twice before. He was very good and I wasn't. "I'll spot you a queen and both rooks."

"Sure," I said.

We sat down at a small table and set up the pieces. Lem Roy snagged both

queens and held them behind his back, one in each hand. I chose white.

“Think of it this way,” he said. “The opening is science. You know the moves, you know the countermoves. But at some point, if you’re lucky, you’ll be in new terrain. Almost anything might be the optimal move.”

He smiled as the speakers shuddered and a thick tapestry of sonorous horns and muffled tympani commenced the opera. “Ah,” he said, “an evening of intrigue. Passion, humiliation, sacrifice, betrayal, murder and death. The perfect environment for chess.”

We all laughed. Lem Roy’s black eyes sparkled. “Once you’re in the thick of the game, like Tosca, no science can help you. You must think with your protobrain, try to lose your driven self and hear the music of the board.”

“Easy for you to say,” I said.

“Nobody knows what goes on in the brain of an ant, or a cow, or even a human. You can explain, logically, how a computer works, and you can explain how switches and circuits work and how transistors work and how electrons tunnel through cold junctions and experience quantum effects, but that persistent ‘why? why? why?’ always takes you to the edge of understanding, and there you must invoke the shades of wild speculation and surrealistic fantasy to speak for the dark vastness of your ignorance.”

“I worked in a steel mill once,” Aunt Krede said slowly, without turning away from her work, “when I was a wee lass.”

I smiled and looked at Lem Roy, who smiled back. Somehow I couldn’t imagine she’d ever been a wee lass.

“They had a whole lab filled with high-priced spectrometers and metallurgists to make sure each batch had the exact chemical composition of carbon and iron and alloys, chrome and tin and molybdenum and whatever it was supposed to have, before they poured it into ingots.”

I had a pretty good attack going on Lem Roy's center. He was playing even more deliberately, I thought, than he usually did.

"They used to let me take the metallurgical reports down to the furnace sometimes and I discovered they had a guy down there who couldn't read or write, but who was like a master chef of steel. He'd sample the melt with a long steel pole that had a little ladle on the end. Somebody'd tell him what the metallurgists' analysis said, and he'd tell them to throw in a few more sacks of this or that, or he'd grab a shovel and toss in a few shovelful of this or that, and then finally he'd peer into the molten steel and say okay, pour it, just like that.

"So after the sophisticated space-age science had done its part, they had this illiterate ferro-mystic with his long steel rod poking around in the soup who made the final decision, who threw in another handful of titanium and gazed into the fire and chose the moment for the million-dollar gesture: to tip the furnace and pour the heat."

As we entered the middle ground of our game and Tosca's tragic predicament dove deeper toward its denouement I noticed something emerging—I cannot say it in any other way—from the canvas in front of Aunt Krede. A blob here, a stroke there, seemingly senseless, almost random, and then suddenly there's a tree, a little shed, a shadow, as if it were all pushing out from a fog, ghostly at first, faintly hinted, barely perceptible, and then—well, there.

"It's just like chess," Lem Roy said. "What does a naive person see? Sixty-four squares. Half that many pieces scattered around. An elemental chaos. Yet to us it's full of meaning, rife with subtleties beyond our grasp. And it's just a simple game."

Then he made an odd move with his bishop that put so much pressure on the support structure of my attack I had to back off to defend myself, and when I did that he mated me.

“Unlike Socrates,” he said, “I’m sure of a great many things. But in the end it’s all the same because, like him, I don’t really understand any of it.”

As Cavaradossi’s cries of anguish awakened the hapless Tosca to Scarpia’s cruel scheme, we were setting up the pieces for another game. Kansas seemed as far away as the armies of Napoleon.

9

God’s Art

A soft chilly rain was falling a few days later when I walked in the graying afternoon up to Hudson’s. I’d been composing an ode to Hanna’s violet lips and the secrets they did not speak. I bought a candy bar from her mother and felt when she gave me my change and her soft pudgy fingertips seemed to linger on my palm that somehow she was approving my obsession with her daughter which I didn’t know for sure whether she knew about or not.

August Kuntzler was on his porch, in the chair beside the sofa. Instead of a nod, which was his usual greeting, he called out to ask how I was doing in school.

I sat down beside him. “Care for a cigarette?” he asked, tapping one from his pack.

“No, thanks,” I replied.

“Mind if I do?”

“Nope.”

He lit it. “So, how’s school?”

“A little boring, but okay.”

“No challenge, eh?”

“Yeah.”

“How’s Marie doing?”

"Fine, I guess. I think the teachers like her. She works hard."

His hand shook a little as he separated the cigarette from his lips. "It's this art class she takes out at Guillemot Community College."

He picked up a sheet of paper from the table beside him and turned it over for me to see. It appeared to be a robust young nude woman emerging from a large boulder, the front half of her body in finished relief, the aft half still hidden in the rough stone. It had an obvious heroic, maybe even triumphant quality.

"Looks good," I said.

"Well, she has a talent. But art's not the road to riches. And she's been riding out there with Billy Hill. And I don't think he's on the road to riches either."

I laughed in agreement. "But Billy's grounded, isn't he?"

"Only for the moment. Today she went out with Lucky because I need the truck later. But that Billy bothers me. He's always looking for shortcuts."

He took a long drag on the cigarette and then let go most of the smoke, which curled around his brow and clung briefly in his hair like an ephemeral garland of ancient nobility. "She's a good girl. Strong-willed. But she likes to have fun and sometimes she takes bigger risks than I'd like."

"You think Billy might lead her astray?"

He chuckled. "Well, he might if he could." He finished his cigarette and stubbed it out in the ashtray, exhaling the smoke through his nose. "No, I don't. But I worry all the same."

I didn't, for some reason. "I don't, either," I said.

He got up and motioned me to follow.

August's porch had a railing which served as a perch for many of his smaller creatures. The flowerbeds just beyond were planted with azaleas and vigorous coastal fuchsia, now lightly populated with blossoms. Morning glories

traversed the fretwork that supported the railing and shinnied up occasional strings to the eaves, from which the leafy vines hung like chartreuse lace curtains that framed our view of the motionless wooden beasts endlessly pursuing their momentary tasks across his timeless yard. The trim green grass spread from the porch to the edge of the road, and back around the side of the house, where we walked while August talked.

“Guess I’m just like the old Indians,” he said. “I figure your neighbor is never going to come running up to your house bearing good news. So a good neighbor is one you never see. Like Frost said, ‘Good fences make good neighbors.’”

“Everybody knows his place.”

“Yes, and stays there.”

“What if your house catches fire?”

“If he was a friend of mine, he’d put a blanket in his barn. Or on the couch if he didn’t have a barn.” He chuckled at this modernism.

“Wouldn’t he help you put it out?”

“If your house catches fire,” he said, “you don’t put it out.”

“How would you get to be friends?”

“Well,” he said, his face wrinkling with amusement, “maybe like we have, eh? Just sitting around telling tales.”

Under the thick canopy of a buckeye tree stood his newest acquisition, a twisted piece of tree root in which he’d perceived a tufted crane. It was quite remarkable, really, in its resemblance to a crane, or at least to some long-legged, ogee-necked, spear-beaked bird with a row of hatpins crowning its head. It even stood on one slender leg, with the other one tucked up under it, like the blue herons often do.

We stood for a while, protected from the lightly falling rain, and he

explained to me that the embankment on which we were standing, which sloped down five feet or so to a flat meadow that separated us from the river a few hundred yards away, had been the edge of the stream when his father had built the cabin some seventy years earlier.

“McMorey’s was the only house here then,” he said. “Their place went all the way to the river, which ran right next to the road. It was still a dirt road. The land where you live now was *in* the river then or maybe even on the far side.” He paused for a moment, remembering. “A year or two after the Thrall dam was finished the river changed course here. It moved in lots of places. And Meerson, who seemed to have known what would happen, laid claim to this whole strip of land that used to be in the river, or on the far side of it. We all raised hell about it, but you know how the law is—the money takes home the marbles.

“Once the courts gave him clear title, Meerson tried to sell it back to us. Personally, I didn’t give a damn, because it was easy enough to walk down there and during flood season the water was that much farther away. But Mose was furious because he’d used that water for fifty years, for his cattle and irrigation, and I’m sure he spent more than a few nights contemplating murdering the sonofabitch. But he didn’t. I don’t know why. I think I would’ve. Mose just drilled wells instead.

“Then Meerson sold the whole strip, and a bunch of others like it, to the Hills. Then they put Bennie in charge and moved to California.”

Just then a great blue heron, a gray ghost of primordial time, croaked a bony complaint into the silver mist by the water’s edge, and, dangling its leaping black legs beneath it, curling its sinuous neck into the effort of its huge broad wings, fussed mightily upward into the mist and the silhouetted trees.

August put his palsied hand on the wooden back of the tufted crane, which steadied it. “These characters don’t speak,” he said. “But they don’t fly away,

either.”

“I think you need both kinds,” I said. “And I really like this one. One of your best, I’d say.”

“Well, I don’t make them. I just find them. Oh,” he chuckled, “and sometimes I do spruce them up a little. But they’re there when I get there. Nature makes them. I call them God’s art. I’m just the museum keeper.”

“Isn’t it all God’s art?”

He laughed. “It’s all God’s work,” he said. “But it’s not always art.”

“That’s in the eye of the beholder.”

“Maybe. Look at this place. A lot has changed. The river. The people. The old days of more money than anybody knew what to do with, and no end to it. Some people say change is all there is. But I say, only the silence endures.”

We began to walk back toward our perch on the porch.

“Know what I mean, Ashmead? It’s vainglorious pride to struggle against fate. I try to paddle in a backwater, even stay on shore. I watch the world go by. It doesn’t touch me, nor I it. It drifts and rages, glides and swirls. My stillness lends it an illusion of motion, but in the end only the past is faithful.”

“I understand young folks like you and Marie want to put your marks on the mist. I was young once myself, although nobody remembers it.” He laughed aloud. His blue eyes glistened in the gray light and his long white hair, in damp yellow strands, tumbled askew. “Hell,” he said, “I used to have *live* pets. Dogs, mostly. And a horse or two.”

“Well,” I observed, “these critters eat a lot less.”

“Yep. Easy keepers.”

We gazed out toward the road, among the oblivious time-shackled guests at Noah’s cocktail party.

“Only when you come to rest are you finally free.”

"If resistance is futile," I said, "then why not just go with the flow?"

"Oh, I'm already there, where everything is going," he laughed. "I'm just waiting around for the parade to catch up. Until it does, I'm free!"

I laughed with him.

10

Pawning the Queen's Bishop

Bobby Bubby and I were in the advanced physics class together, and when Bridget answered their door a week later, just after church, Bobby was upstairs trying to calculate the escape velocity from the earth's gravitational field.

As Bridget and I approached the stairs I noticed Pastor Beezle and Miz Bubby sitting out on the veranda having a tête-à-tête over sandwiches and coffee.

"He doesn't waste any time," I said.

"They have tea and crumpets every Sunday almost," Bridget confided as we started up the steps. "Actually it's egg salad sandwiches and apple juice. I think they're plotting the return of the Bubby monarchy. She'll be the queen and he'll be the archbishop. Queen Jenny and Archbishop Dingleberry."

The women of the Bubby line are distinguished by their expansive butts, and although she's two years younger than I am Bridget's no exception. Hers was on the way. I wanted to reach out and brace my palms against her levis as we climbed the stairs. I wanted to cup those magnificent globes in the span of my hands. But of course I didn't. Besides, such Rubenesque butts are more matronly than sexual.

Bobby was sitting crosslegged near one of the speakers. He looked up and smiled as we came in.

"Hey, Ash."

"Hey."

"Did you see the true believers?"

"Yeah."

"Discussing affairs of state. If she blesses charismatic Christianity, he'll bless the Bubby monarchy. You think I'm kidding, I know, but I'm not."

Bridget agreed to an African percussion CD after we rejected her first choice, which was something spasmodic, irrhythmic and irritating.

"I've been trying to calculate the escape velocity for Earth," he said.

"It's about twenty-five thousand miles an hour," I said.

"Yeah, but can you calculate it?"

"You throw something up," Bridget offered, "and if it doesn't come down you made it. If it does, you didn't. Since it always does, you can't. So why bother?"

"Good question," I said. Bridget and I drummed while Bobby completed his calculation of the initial velocity required for a free body to escape the pull of the earth's gravitational field.

"Twenty-four thousand, nine hundred and eighty-four miles an hour, more or less."

"Good," I said. "You're a genius. But answer me this. We look outward from the solar system and we have the galaxy and then clusters of galaxies, and clusters of clusters, and then what? Looking inward we have molecules, and then atoms, and then protons and electrons, and then what?"

"And then quarks."

"Yeah, and then what?"

He shrugged.

"Do you think quarks are the end of it? The observable universe is the end of it?"

"I don't know."

"But what do you think?"

"I don't think so." He reached for his chessboard. "Want to play?"

"Well," Bridget said, "I think the universe is a light coming on."

We set up our pieces for the game.

"Do you think we create things by looking for them?" I asked. "Or do you think they're there all along, simply unseen?"

"Well," Bobby said, picking up the queens, "quantum mechanics would suggest that things unobserved exist as probability waves and only exist spatiotemporally when they're observed."

"So the wall is impermeable to my body only when I hurl myself at it? Do unperceived things exist in a lesser sense than perceived things?"

I chose black. "In a less-perceived sense," he said with a little grin. "*En garde.*"

"So existence always has a context. Ideas exist inside the mind. They're transmitted by language, broadly speaking. But, so far as we know, they don't exist outside the mind. Buildings, which appear to exist outside the mind, in any case are not dependent for their existence upon the existence of ideas."

"Dogs have ideas," Bridget said. "So your whole premise is bullshit."

"You know," Bobby said as he took a pawn at the center of the board, "characters exist in fiction. Reputations exist in history that may or may not greatly resemble their departed reality. Dreams exist. Without mind, none of these things exists. Without brain, mind doesn't exist as far as anyone knows. So maybe you're right. Maybe that's it. The probability wave exists in conceptual space and the particle exists in perceptual space."

"You guys are pathetic," Bridget said from her perch on the couch where she was reading a book.

"That's probably why we don't have girlfriends," Bobby said.

"Ashcan has a girlfriend," Bridget demurred. "He's in love with Marie."

"Actually, I'm in love with— um, nobody," I said. I'd almost said, "with Hanna *and* Marie," but something had saved me.

Bobby relieved me of a knight and I him of a bishop.

"So why does Pastor Beezle come here?"

"I'm not kidding you," Bobby laughed. "She has a strategic perspective on power politics, like an eighteenth-century European monarch."

"So does he, I guess."

"Yeah," said Bridget, "but with him it's more like wooly metaphysics."

"When our dad lost his business," Bobby said, "and they took off for Alaska, we lost a lot of property, too. Meerson got some and so did the Hills."

Bridget sneered at the mention of Meerson's name. "Meerson and his little prancing minions," she hissed. "Authore, and Bennie Hill, and that oily Lester Black at the Forest Service. And Beezle, of course."

"Meerson pays for everything at the church," Bobby said, lifting my other knight from the board. I got only two pawns in exchange. The squeeze was on.

"And now he wants Granny to pony up, too," Bridget laughed.

"So," I speculated, "then you guys'll be royalty again?"

"It's all about the timber in the Amaraingy," Bridget asserted knowingly. "If Meerson gets what he wants, maybe we'll get in on the contracts when they mow the sucker down."

"So then your folks would come back from Alaska?" I asked.

"Maybe," Bobby said.

"Would that be a good thing?"

"Maybe."

Bobby Bubby's face was covered with acne scars and his pale skin was always florid. Yet he had a kind and generous smile that made him look soft and

easygoing, which is how he always presented himself: good-natured and unflappable. Still, I sensed in him some private reservoir of stiff resolve. His chess, I knew, was pretty steely.

“Check,” he said.

Pastor Beezle, whom we’d heard climbing the stairs, knocked on the door frame. “Knock-knock,” he said. “I just came to bid you all farewell.”

“Where are you going?” Bridget asked innocently.

“Oh,” he said, “up to my monastery, Casa Beezle, where I’ll pray for those souls whose sinful bodies seem never to be in church on Sundays.”

We all looked at each other.

“Sin-ful baw-dies?” Bridget mouthed to us incredulously.

He smiled at his own humor. “If your grandma didn’t honor the Bubby tradition in the community, who would?” he asked rhetorically.

Nobody volunteered.

“You’ll discover someday,” the pastor said somberly, “that many people are assailed by fears and doubt. They look to others, like your grandma and me, to comfort and guide them. And that’s what we do. When they put their faith in us, it nourishes them. It’s true. When people seek your help, the Christian path is to respond. Anyway, enjoy your afternoon. May God welcome you in His bower.”

“Bye, Pastor Beezle.”

“Bye.”

“Bye.”

He grinned as he pulled a round gold watch by its fob from his vest pocket and flipped it open. “Bobby, you and Ashmead should come sing with us. Time’s a’wasting!” And then he left.

“Mate!” cried Bobby triumphantly.

“I was distracted,” I said.

An hour or so later, when it was time for me to go and we all went downstairs, Miz Bubby assailed us in the foyer. "It really wouldn't hurt you children to go to services once in a while," she said. And then, propelled by this notion, she added: "It wouldn't hurt either if you'd spend more time with those Hill children."

"Okay," Bobby said brightly. "I choose Lucky."

"Yeah," Bridget said, "quantum mechanics and chess are her favorite things."

He shrugged. "Okay, you take her then."

"You hush!" Miz Bubby remonstrated. "I'll have none of that talk in my house."

Bobby shrugged. "Just a figure of speech," he said, smiling.

"Well," she huffed. "I don't think it's funny. You young people live in a fool's paradise. All you know is this humanistic garbage you get from TV and the schools and all the rest of it that has nothing to do with real life. You'll learn one of these days there's a hell on earth at the end of your blind life of impudent ease."

"Darn," Bobby said under his breath.

"Don't you sass me, Robert. I know you think I'm just a dried-up old coot, but you should ponder sometime where this house came from, and the food on the table, and your clothes, and all those books and records and electric gewgaws you have. It sure isn't my government pension that I don't get, or the pittance your father sends me from Alaska. It's from the sacrifices your grandparents and my grandparents made here – and don't you forget it."

"I'm willing to work for a living," Bridget said.

"Don't be too rash," Bobby cautioned.

"If your father gets a few contracts on the Amarainy it'd help us all a great

deal.”

Bridget didn't like this at all. “Does Pastor Beezle hold the keys to the throne?”

“Pastor Beezle is a decent man who works very hard to provide comfort and succor to all the folks around here who turn their souls to God and their lives to Jesus. That includes us, in case you didn't know.”

Bridget's face got red. “You mean if you feed him and pet him he'll tell Meerson to give Dad a job?”

Miz Bubby pulled herself erect to her full stooped height of about five feet. “I most certainly do not mean that!” she said indignantly. “You should have your mouth washed out with soap, young lady. Pastor Beezle is a fine man.”

“Sorry,” Bridget said with a shrug. “That's just what it sounded like.”

“It *does* sound that way,” Bobby agreed.

Miz Bubby took a different tack. “The people who care about this community take care of this community,” she said. “God appoints some of us to be stewards of the community, shepherds of the community, and we must do our duty both wisely and well. Otherwise, God giveth, and God taketh away.”

She'd had enough of this, and of course we had too, so we stepped outside.

“Come up to Krede's with me sometime,” I said to Bobby. “Lem Roy's an incredible chess player.”

“Are they weird?” he asked.

I laughed. “Very,” I said.

“Okay.”

Bridget sidled over, looking up at me confidentially. “I saw you looking at her when we were camping,” she said. “More than a few times. I thought she'd undergo spontaneous combustion from all the heat you were lavishing on her.”

“You also noticed she seemed uninspired to reciprocate it,” I said.

She laughed a little leprechaun laugh. "I know," she said gleefully. "She was totally cool. It was comical."

11

Art Barbarian

It was early October and the brief chorus of foreshadowing rains had abandoned the stage again to warm and sunny days spangled with hues of eggplant and pumpkin. Lem Roy was stringing a barbwire fence through the field behind the barn so he could move the cattle to one side while the grass grew on the other. My job was to drive the slender steel posts, eight feet apart, eighteen inches into the ground. I had a pile driver, in the form of a pipe, weighted at its closed end, that fit over the post and prevented it from flexing under the blows I delivered with fierce nonchalance. Lem Roy strung the sharp-toothed wire and, from rocks we gathered on the hillside, assembled cairns around some of the posts to buttress them.

We talked about Aunt Krede.

He told me she'd had an unusual life. Older than he, she'd left home at seventeen, the day after she graduated from high school. She'd breezed through college, a few husbands and some strange jobs. He knew little about the life she'd lived for most of those twenty-five years before he and she had linked up again on the farm in Kentucky about four years earlier. He himself had studied anthropology at San Marcos and Columbia but found he preferred raising cattle.

"You get to live on the land, and you don't have to pry into anyone's affairs," he said wryly.

"So what brings you guys here?" I asked.

"Well, this is a pretty place, suited for what we do, and we could afford it thanks to Uncle Mose, who made it easy for us to buy. The farm in Kentucky

wasn't ours. This place is ours. For me, it's roots. I like being in one place."

"What about Aunt Krede?"

"Listen, you can call her Mary Ann. I do."

"She asked me to call her Aunt Krede."

"That's her formal name. She's Mary Ann to her friends." He chuckled.

"When she has any. Anyway, she's here because she hasn't gone somewhere else. For now this life suits her. Maybe tomorrow she'll pack up and go." He laughed again. "Or just go, without bothering to pack. Who knows? She likes that kind of uncertainty in her life."

He eyed the work we'd done and prepared to extend the four strands of wire along to the next anchor post.

"Social presumptions drive her nuts. She's devoted to her own weird inspirations, to the support of her kids, who seldom need it nowadays, and in her own strange way to her friends. But social mores limit freedom. That's their nature. The social contract is a commitment, whether you agree to it or not. You don't think it'll bar you from the garden of your desires, but sometimes it does."

"Some people just aren't impelled to leave the groove," I said, pulling the wire taut while he fastened it to a post immobilized by rocks.

"Yes, exactly. And she hates the groove. Know what we drink to on New Year's Eve? 'One more for the road.'"

"Meaning what?" I asked.

"Meaning we hope for another good day at rest, at peace in the bosom of Abraham. But the harvest we gather from it seems regenerative of the wanderlust, especially for her, just as life on the road might in turn regenerate the impulse to settle and be still."

"I always hated that line from Eliot: 'Teach me to be still.'"

"She hates it, too. It's abject, she says."

"It's a lot easier," I observed, "to balance on a bicycle when you're moving along."

"Sure."

We worked back over the posts we'd just spanned with the wire, securing its strands to each of them.

"How a certain stricture curtails the liberty of a particular person depends on the person," Lem Roy said. "A. F. C. Wallace thought a lot about this. Whenever society asks the same thing of all its members, to that extent some of its members will be hard-pressed. A constraint may fall easily on most people, but for some it'll be very difficult. When I was a kid we used to give up martinis for Lent. Know what I mean? It was easy. For James Bond it'd be harder. Nobody gave up sex, as far as I know. 'Course, nobody had any, either."

Aunt Krede, attended closely by Wagger, approached us from the house, carrying in one hand an easel, a canvas and a wooden box containing her paints and brushes, and in the other a folding chair and a small wicker basket full of food.

"Lunch time," she announced as she laid these things on the ground. Then she walked over and gazed critically at the fence. "You do good work," she said to us. "But wouldn't five strands be better?"

"Only if we had really tiny cows," Lem Roy replied.

While we ate our sandwiches we talked some more about the virtues of stillness versus motion. The older she got, Aunt Krede said, the more she appreciated connections, especially to the land. Connections to people were harder, she said. Connections to society were always the hardest.

"What does society give you?" she asked. "What does it take away? I'm very skeptical. Look at the way societies treat their minorities anywhere in the world. And you're a minority of one. In the end it's going to get you. It has a

longer life than a corporation or a government and it can be even less considerate. It can enrich you or hang you. It has lots of sanctions and uses them all. But you can live unentangled by it for a long time, maybe all your life, because at bottom it's a committee, and you're a man, or a woman, and you have a free and independent mind whereas society operates through this somewhat dimwitted collective intelligence.

"After awhile, though," she continued, "you get old. You lose your edge. You get barnacles. The old hull creaks a little. Heading out to sea isn't quite the 'what the hell' experience it used to be. Still..."

Lem Roy laughed. "Still, as long as the old tub floats—nothing personal—the open sea is a mighty lure."

"Yep."

"Do you think," I asked, "that as society becomes more complex and invasive, and older, humans will become more and more like ants?"

"Ants are as individual as atoms. They're totally interchangeable. There are no really unusual ant individuals. There are few social roles and the one you'll fill is decided before you hatch. I don't think that's possible in humans."

"Well, there are unusual cow individuals," Lem Roy said, "even though most people would never notice it. Maybe there *are* unusual ants but nobody's noticed."

She looked at him, laughing. "They'd be hard to miss," she said.

"Maybe humans could be bred to exhibit more compliant behavior," Lem Roy speculated.

"They already are," she countered. "And be glad it hasn't worked any better than it has." She turned to me. "Look at us. We have the same father and mother. One looks like a Scottish Hungarian gypsy and one like an Incan refugee from Machu Picchu."

"That's what *they* looked like," Lem Roy said.

She grinned wryly. "That's what they *were*," she said. "Except he liked farming and she liked traveling. He liked poetry and chess and she liked dancing and music. She believed fate could be ridden, and he believed it was riding you. Anyway, my point is that breeding humans would be messy and probably fruitless."

"What about children?" I asked.

"I never had any. But I was with a guy for a few years just after college and we adopted a couple of strays. Cherokee's a doctor, married and pregnant, and Ian's a *bon vivant* climbing a mountain somewhere in Southeast Asia. Men seemed to find my lifestyle inimical to their concept of relationship. Truth is, no matter where I was or who I was with, after awhile I got cabin fever."

Lem Roy looked at me and cocked his head toward her. "When people asked her where she'd been and what she'd been doing, she used to say she'd been climbing mountains in Kansas."

"The rockpile at Leavenworth, probably," I said.

"Well, we checked there but they claimed they'd never heard of her."

Aunt Krede laughed. "I was there under my *nom d'pinceau*, 'Grandma Krede.'"

She began setting up her easel. She was dressed in levis, a blue work shirt, and boots, a costume she often wore, but today she'd added a white linen scarf that circled her neck. One end of it, which was considerably shorter than the other, kept falling over her shoulder and down in front of her. Finally she loosened it enough to equalize the ends, and as she pushed her hair up in back I noticed something strange about the scalp at the nape of her neck. I couldn't comprehend it at first but then I realized it looked like the edge of a wig. I tried to compose a picture of her bald head, but the effort seemed vaguely

disrespectful.

Lem Roy finished his sandwich and lemonade and picked up an apple as he prepared to go back to work. Aunt Krede packed everything back into the picnic basket and unwrapped a long black cigar, savoring its aroma.

"Your painting's a lot more interesting than Grandma Moses'," I ventured.

"I don't know," Lem Roy said as he pulled on a glove. "I kind of like those cookie-cutter objects and the raw color. They're charmingly naive."

Aunt Krede puffed on her cigar.

"Grandma Moses was a primitive. She had no training, or if she did it didn't do much good. I'm not a primitive, though. I'm a barbarian. I've seen sophistication and I've gone back. Like Gauguin. But he kept doing it for *them*. He wanted Europeans to see life in the South Seas as he did, but when he was seeing that world as it was, from the inside, he couldn't paint it, and when he painted it, he couldn't see it. The sun was too high, too hot, too bright. It dazzled him. He walked through the eye of the needle, but he couldn't enter the kingdom of heaven because his vision was incoherent."

"Huh," said Lem Roy. "I thought it was because his camel sank into the sand from all the golden daydreams his little girls had spun out of straw."

"Was it," I asked, "because he tried to translate it into the European paradigm, or because one can't inherently participate and portray at the same time?"

She grinned. An appreciative, almost seductive grin, but warm and humorous. "To portray something you have to put it in the past, even if it's totally imaginary. But participation is all about the future, and superficially about the present, which is actually just the boundary between time and space. Nonetheless, one can bounce back and forth very quickly. It's not so easy to go back and forth between two different cultures. That's more complex, like

segueing back and forth between two women – a trick you may be familiar with.”

“Which means,” Lem Roy interjected, “that the only way you’ll succeed is to always present the same self to both of them.”

She laughed that throaty laugh, like the mocking caw of a crow. “But you know what? You can’t. Because the nature of love is to alter you. And no two women will ever alter you in quite the same way.”

“So Gauguin the Frenchman couldn’t really be Tahitian,” I summarized floridly, “and Gauguin the Tahitian couldn’t paint.”

“So I see it.”

“Okay, so what?”

“So I’m trying to span that abyss, to paint what I see here as who I am here.”

“Uh-huh.”

“As I live on this hillside, I join in its life. I observe its qualities. I know it. Hypothetically. That’s part of the task. The other part is to understand how to translate that onto the canvas.”

“Without destroying it,” Lem Roy said.

“Yes, exactly. I want to do that for myself, as myself, as I am now, a denizen of this place. Not as anyone else would paint it, not as I would paint it if I were elsewhere. This takes time. I learn about new things by opening myself to them, relaxing with them, commingling with them. I’m not a prober.”

“I’m a prober,” Lem Roy said with laughing eyes.

“Well,” she responded, looking at him, “I can be too, but there’s a time to probe and a time to exercise probity.”

“I’m shocked,” he said.

“Anyway,” she went on, turning again to me, “surrendering to experience

works great for me but sometimes it leaves me unsure of who I am, because, as I said, love changes you, and sometimes you have to wait awhile before you discover all the damage. For instance, here in Crondoc aren't you occasionally reminded that, in some ways, you're still Ashmead from Kansas?"

I had to grin sheepishly.

"So," she said. "That's so what."

"So if I wanted to portray Crondoc I'd have to become entirely Ashmead from Crondoc."

"If you look at Crondoc as Ashmead from Kansas then your perspective will reflect that distance, won't it? It'll be distorted and blurred and cold."

"But Kansas is part of my past. It informs my being. It's an integral aspect of Ashmead from Crondoc."

She smiled. "And ultimately you can't overcome that," she said.

"And why would you want to?" Lem Roy rejoined. "Is naive portrayal artistically virtuous? Do only the natives see the truth? Why shouldn't Gauguin have painted Tahiti from a European perspective? He was a European. Malinowski didn't marry a Melanesian child and renounce Polish society. Margaret Mead didn't procreate with the Samoans."

I shrugged.

Aunt Krede laughed as she settled herself on her folding chair. "Maybe they should've," she said.

Lem Roy and I went back to work. For some reason, as I swatted those fence posts into the ground I thought about Hanna, the marvellous topology of her supine form wrapped in iridescent rose mesh, and that one sudden brown eye that fixed so knowingly upon me, as if it had discovered my hungry soul, and now the thwack, thwack, thwack of the pile driver answered its curious gaze.

12

I Kiss the Lilac-laden Zephyrs of Your Memory

We got home early from school one afternoon, about three o'clock. It was a hot, sunny day, too luminous for the drab brown shadows and ragged tree limbs of late autumn.

The bus route went up Dingle Creek, so I got off at the corner, only about a quarter-mile from Hudson's. Today, like most days, I stopped in at the store and bought a candy bar. Mr. Henry Hudson was in town shopping for supplies. Mrs. Hudson had purchased a new TV on the sly for his birthday, and she asked me to help her get it into the house. It was in a huge carton in the storeroom. We put it on a dolly and wheeled it slowly out the back of the store, across the small yard, and up the steps to the door of their narrow, rambling quarters. Then into the kitchen, through the hall, and into the living room. We moved the old TV aside and unpacked the new.

She went to get me a cookie and asked me to put the old TV in Hanna's bedroom.

"It's down the hall," she said, gesturing.

"Sure," I smiled.

Hanna's bedroom! It was easy to identify. There were racks of CDs and several shelves of children's books. A pair of elegant blue suede heels stood primly in the shadows beside her bed, its down comforter plumped high and adorned with pillows. A white teddy bear with eyes the color of Marie's sat on a sapphire-blue plush cushion and offered a mute embrace. Behind the half-opened louvered door of her closet I saw a blue satin gown with a deep blue boa fringe, draped easily over a black plastic hanger. I wanted to reach in and caress it, but I didn't. I heard Mrs. Hudson return to the living room and retreated.

“Macaroons,” she said, handing me three of the chewy morsels and a glass of chalky-white milk.

I wished I’d pressed its silky coolness against my face and inhaled its blue fragrance.

“Thanks,” I said. They were delicious. And then, my heart bounding like a spring lamb, I took my leave.

I walked past August Kuntzler’s without really looking to see if he was there on the porch; I didn’t feel much like talking and Marie was hardly ever there, and when she was she was always leaving. It struck me, just as I was passing the white temple of Pastor Beezle’s tongue-tied God, that I’d never once seen her coming home. A car horn blared two quick licks behind me and Billy’s mallard green Corvette flew by, headed toward town. Marie’s freckled, muscular arm, hoist from the shotgun seat window, waved hello and goodbye.

I waved back. I was obviously missing a tempo in this game. Hell, I wasn’t even *in* the game. Yet it seemed much too nice a day for laying out a king. At the end of the driveway I paused, noticing that our mailbox was seriously smaller than the Kredes’. Then I flipped down the door and drew out the day’s mail. I sorted through it as I walked toward the house. There was a letter from Hanna.

I sat crosslegged on a large gray table rock that extended from the riverbank eight or ten feet into the stream, its surface almost a foot above the placid late-summer water. Her letter was written in tight purple flourishes on a sheet of rough-edged lavender paper that smelled faintly of lilacs. “Dearest Ashmead,” it began.

“I’ve started several times to write you, but with classes and the social whirl here I’ve never until today had time to savor the memory of your lanky self that afternoon, oh, so long ago, when we met in the intimate embrace of Solitude Cove.

“It made me very nervous—could you tell? did you know?—lying there beside you with nothing on but a tangle of pink strings. Probably if you’d plucked one of them the whole thing would’ve come unraveled. I could tell it made you nervous, too.

“Life here is overflowing, with schoolwork, new faces, and endless social events each more lavish than all its predecessors. Sometimes I actually miss the peace and quiet of Crondoc.

“How’s the tiger hunt going? Write and let me know.

“Love & kisses, Hanna.”

I held the paper against my face for a moment, sharing her fragrance, and then gazed out over the sparkling stream that slued softly between banks of riparian foliage into the afternoon sun. She’d confessed a prurient interest in me. She’d offered me something more. She’d asked me to write her. What should I do with this precious gift?

Answer her, of course.

“O Naiad:

“I too have filled many pages with pithy *bon mots* and tendentious prose, with the silent whisperings of anguish that echo from the wind-scoured moors of your absence. That magical afternoon, the seductive terrain of your mind, the pink glow that encased your mystery all have haunted my existence since you climbed back up the embankment and, with a wave and a smile, turned away from my life.

“Had I only known I needed but pluck a string to unravel you, I surely would have. You won’t be surprised to know my eyes accomplished what my fingers dared not do.

“The tiger’s eyes still glow with their coruscant light, but not for me, nor do I search for them among the shadows of Crondoc’s sleepy jungle. My lonely

quest envisions other eyes, Naiad – dark maple-syrup eyes framed in a black-satin sheen, playing their lambent light across a wry smile that stirs the sweet sauce of my loins.

“Sadly, no such eyes are seen hereabouts these days, and my life is consumed with all the stuff and nonsense of school, which is more or less an exercise in absurdity, and an occasional chess game with Bobby Bubby, and the pleasant hours I’ve whiled away with Lem Roy and Mary Ann Krede who live across the road in the old McMorey place.

“Are you coming home for Thanksgiving? Christmas? Will I see you? O, I’d like to see you again, Naiad, here by this gently gurgling river of slippery silver, aglow in the ruddy warmth of the day’s dying emptiness. I would pluck so sweet a tune on your pink strings that, like Eurydice restored to her green life, your heart would swoon in lavish rapture to my happy song.

“Love to you, too, Ashmead.”

I lay back on my elbows and gazed westward again down the broad glistening avenue of the water’s course. The light of this day would soon be gone. Only the night would remain.

Like a maraschino cherry sinking slowly through a flute of thick tangerine liqueur, the scarlet sun paused for a moment atop the western mountains, as if reluctant to say farewell. Something skittered behind me and I turned to see Aunt Krede.

“Oh,” she said softly, “Sorry, Ashmead. I didn’t know you were here.”

“No problem,” I said. “Glad to see you.”

The light along the river became dramatically yellower as the rutilant sphere slipped lower, its flattened bottom gnawed by the flaming peaks.

“Mose and I fished here a few times,” she said. “There weren’t as many trees then, nor many sunsets like this one, but the fishing was better.”

"Probably so," I agreed. The water slurred like black velvet over the mossy rocks in the vaguely purple shade.

"Writing a letter?"

"Mm."

She laughed. "The haughty one."

I nodded. "I was in her bedroom today. Then I got a letter from her."

"She wants you?"

I laughed. "Maybe. Probably not. I don't know. I'm just addicted to love."

"But you don't have any, do you?"

"Well, my mom loves me, I think."

"Ah, but you need girl love, Ash. Volitional love, like you get from your friends. The world's grudging honors, and the good will of your kinfolk, a lot of that's there for the taking and you don't have to do much to get it. But the love of strangers, that's the sweetest fruit of all."

"Always at the edge of the abyss," I said.

"A journey of discovery, and drama, and ecstasy, and loneliness."

"Yep."

She placed her hand on top of my head, gently, as a gesture of compassion and encouragement. "Get all you can, Ashmead. It doesn't last forever. Life's a short slide from the warm lagoon of the womb to the cold embrace of the clay."

I thought about Hanna's teddy bear.

"You know Dylan Thomas's *Fern Hill*?"

"Huh-uh."

"I'll tell you the last lines: 'Oh as I was young and easy in the mercy of his means, Time held me green and dying, though I sang in my chains like the sea.'"

I pondered this in long silence as the lavender shades of the zenith sank earthward and dissolved the fiery hues that lingered above the horizon. The last

sliver of alizarin light flashed and flickered and was gone.

And so was she.

13

Pasquinade

“The ones with strings are marionettes,” Lem Roy said as he shaped the jawbone of his newest creation, a head about the size of an ostrich egg. Aunt Krede had told me we’d be welcome, so Wagger and I had come to visit him in his shop. He had hand puppets, too, and some highly stylized stick puppets, but the marionettes were my favorites.

“Marionettes are the most expressive, I think,” he said. “And the whole enterprise is vaguely subversive.” He was making a new set of characters for *Petrouchka*, Stravinsky’s story of a fool in love.

He said he was also trying to devise a portrayal of the Incan people, but he didn’t want to focus on the destruction of their empire by the Europeans. He wanted to focus on the challenges they faced living outside their cultural habitat, alone in their perception of the world.

“I think you should do one about Crondoc,” I said.

He grinned. “Where would we live afterward?” he asked.

He told me their mother had been a Quechuan Inca, born in Cuzco, who went on a scholarship to the Eastman School and became a renowned concert flutist. Their father, who had descended from “Scotsmen and other barbarians,” as he put it, had been a math professor and sheep rancher in upstate New York.

“He was in the ground, and she was on the road,” he said. “He was a rationalist and she was a mystic. They were isolated from each other by so many things. But they shared a deep passion for both the pastoral life and the spinning of intricate webs. I think when he bought the llamas it eased her a little, but

maybe it was just age."

"Are they still alive?"

"No," he said, looking down at his work bench. "She died of a brain tumor and one night a few years later he drove his car into a tree. It was very hard. That's when Mary Ann came to live with me on the farm back east."

"I'm sorry."

"A wanderer is at home nowhere and everywhere, as the song goes. But a displaced person is by definition not at home and unable to get there. It's kind of like Gauguin's dilemma. He can't see the reality of Tahiti unless he abandons his French self, the painter."

"Aunt Krede is a displaced person?"

He shrugged. "So long as she stays in one place, yes." Then he laughed. "She's at home in the rhythm of her dance."

"She must've inherited it," I said.

Lem Roy picked up the head he'd been working on and held it up and away from him in the manner of Hamlet regarding the skull of Yorick, contemplating its character. "This is going to be Petrouchka. He's a wanderer, too, a sojourner in a strange world, because he's a puppet in the land of the quick. He's a puppet and a clown and a fool. He loves a beautiful dancer who scorns his affections for the glamor of a dashing Moor, who I suppose represents the hotblooded barbarian. When this familiar tragedy befalls Pagliacci, we weep for him, we agonize with him, reliving our own despair, as we would in the presence of any tormented creature. But Petrouchka's misery is greeted with laughter, not compassion, for at the denouement his master, the magician, who'd filled him with human feelings, declares the poor clown's suffering ridiculous, because he is 'only a puppet.'

"This is the fate of pioneers, who are, so to speak, voluntarily displaced.

They find themselves living in foreign lands. Their common senses are unreliable. Their interior lives are misperceived and unshared. They appear as caricatures to their indifferent hosts. Their suffering seems absurd and even ludicrous."

"God," I surmised, "says never mind them, they're only wooden dolls."

"They're in a skew reality, incommensurate with the *real* reality. God, of course, is always on the side of the biggest battalions, as the saying goes, and the reality of place, even if you're the only one there, is a communal reality."

His black eyes shone when he talked, and his smile was very subtle, something he did with his cheeks. Once I'd noticed the telltale tiny crinkles that played around his eyes I realized he smiled a lot.

"Do you like it here, Lem Roy?" I asked.

He grinned. "I do," he said. "My sense of things is different from Mary Ann's. I like living in foreign cultures. I enjoy competing to see whose version of reality will prevail."

"Do you think it's because you look so much more like an indigene?"

He laughed aloud at my using his word. "Probably so. I seem much more peculiar to people than Mary Ann, even though in fact she's far weirder, in my humble opinion."

"Well, an Incan Indian with a Ph.D. who floats in a sensory-deprivation tank and rides his steers around the pasture and plays with puppets would be fairly unusual almost anywhere, I'd say," I said.

The tiny wrinkles danced at the corners of his onyx eyes. "Far weirder," he said again, raising his black eyebrows.

Aunt Krede was reading in the parlor. Vivaldi's *Seasons* swirled softly through the room. Wagger was less reserved.

"Well?" she said, looking up as Wagger pressed her for recognition of our

presence.

“He says you’re far weirder than he is.”

She laughed. “It’s just a clever trick the natives use to fool the tourists. It’s an innocent act. I’m a perfectly normal person. Just bear that in mind and you’ll see things the right way.”

“Oh, I believe it.”

“You’re so kind. Would you do me a favor, Ashmead?”

“Sure.”

“Bring us some cookies and milk?”

“Sure,” I smiled. As I walked to the kitchen Hanna’s feather-fringed teddy floated over my mind and turned everything blue.

“How are the ants?” I asked as I sat down in the chair beside her.

“The ants are dandy. As long as their climate’s controlled and they get fed now and then, they usually do fine. Diseases get them sometimes, but that’s really rare. They’re very hardy.”

“How long have you had them?”

“I’ve had them four, almost five years. Our dad started with them maybe ten years before that.”

“Lem Roy told me a little about your folks.”

“What about your folks, Ashmead? I see your mom now and then at Hudson’s. I gather your dad is out of the picture.”

I shrugged. “He has his own picture.”

“This is agreeable to everybody?”

“Yeah, I think it is now. To us, anyway. He wanted to step out and we wanted to move on.”

“Some people aren’t made for staying at home.”

I smiled at her. “You should know I guess.”

"You like physics, don't you?"

"Uh-huh. Physics and English. And math."

"Math. Okay, take math. Let me ask you something. Some people can do math and some can't, right? I mean, some people just don't have the wiring for it, isn't that so? Just like some people don't have the wiring for, say, the pole vault, or jai alai, or chess, or opera. Don't you think?"

"Uh-huh."

"I mean, I like the Everly brothers as much as anyone, but if I had to listen to country music all day long I'd go insane. I'm just not wired for things that go twang. Just like some people aren't wired for cigars, know what I mean?"

"Sure."

"I'm not making excuses, understand. But I left home when I was seventeen. I had another agenda. It was a powerful thing, like hunger, like a calling. There's no life where nobody gets hurt. And the only way to avoid the pain of separation is to never involve yourself in the pleasure of association."

"Sure," I said. "I don't begrudge his leaving. I only regret his staying for so long after he wasn't really there. And he did for a long time because when he needed something my mom gave it to him and all he had to do was take me to a ballgame every now and then. A lot I cared."

She pondered this for some time. "You must have learned something from this mistreatment," she said.

"Well, while he was doing his phoney-baloney dance he wasn't there for my mom or me. If he'd just gone off and done what he wanted, fine. But he hung around for years, coming and going as he pleased, sometimes for days or weeks at a time, and he always expected that whenever he touched down at home again nothing would've changed. Essentially, he kept us from doing what *we* wanted. And I guess that's my lesson: nobody's protestations of love or whatever should

dissuade you from doing what you want.”

“Life’s too short.”

“Yes,” I agreed. “And the world’s too interesting.”

She’d harvested two of her prize pumpkins for jack-o’lanterns and after a while we adjourned to the kitchen and carved fantastic faces while we continued our conversation.

“In an ant colony,” she said, “it doesn’t matter much which ants stay in the nest and which go on the prowl. Human individuals seem a lot more complex and differentiable, but the fruits of human venturing are much more varied and obscure, so it’s hard to predict who’ll find the good stuff. I suspect that what you want to do, what anyone wants to do, is as unique as a fingerprint, and as innate.”

“What about your face?” I asked. “I mean, anyone’s face. Isn’t it affected by your life?”

She smiled her gold-flecked smile. “It’s a nice conceit, isn’t it? But I don’t know. What shapes your life? Genetics? Chance encounters? Carefully considered decisions? Successful people are sure they’re somehow superior to the scrabbling masses of failures and also-rans. But they have no evidence of this because there isn’t any. People have similar delusions about their looks. I’d say your life may once in a while affect your looks, for instance if you dive through an automobile windshield, and time changes your appearance in many unglamorous ways, but your looks, whatever they are, are continually, daily, impacting your life.”

“Your good looks and your outlooks,” I punned.

“Oh, sure, and your whole psychological makeup is genetically predispositioned, whatever that means.”

“Do you like it here? In Crondoc and all?”

“Oh,” she said, leaning back a bit to admire her ghoulish artistry, “it is beautiful. Almost idyllic. Maybe even idyllic. This farm, the river, the hillside. Very pretty. The soil’s tolerable and the well-water’s excellent. I love the quiet and I do sleep well. And of course it brings back memories.”

“But?”

“Well, it’s far from the storm centers of ideas and art. It’s isolated from history. Its image of itself is hazy, which helps to hide its distortions. It has no concept of itself in the context of the outside world. And all this taken together seems a lot to sacrifice for pastoral serenity.” She leaned forward. “I’m just glad I have you and Lem Roy to keep me from lapsing into a stupor.”

We took our jack-o’lanterns out onto the porch and lit the candles inside them and turned off the lights. They looked like a couple of gargoyles. She’d given hers a huge smile and outlined all the teeth, whose edges glowed faintly orange, and then she’d cut away the skin over the left front incisor so it glowed a bright yellow. “I think it’s me,” she said, obviously pleased with her handiwork.

“I invited Bobby and Bridget Bubby to stop over with me sometime,” I said as we cleaned up the kitchen. “I hope you don’t mind. I’m sure you’ll like them. Bridget especially. She’ll spice up your day.”

“I look forward to meeting them,” she said.

Before I left she gave me, for my mom, some little peat pots containing several varieties of winter-blooming pansies, and for Bennie if we didn’t eat them first, a small sack of freshly roasted pumpkin seeds.

I didn’t notice it in the morning, probably because I walk the other way, but when I stopped after school the next day to pick up the mail our mailbox was smashed beyond repair, half-ripped from the post I’d nailed it to. The Krede’s box was gone altogether. I found it a few seconds later in the ditch across the road, crushed almost flat, missing its little red flag.

14*Vote for One*

After school on Tuesday my mom and I strode down the road to vote at Beezle's church. The day was slightly overcast and chilly enough for a jacket. It was a minor election featuring unopposed fire board candidates, but there was also a request from the school district for more money and we were going to support that.

Pastor Beezle, wearing a red shirt with white preacher collar and white cuffs, offset with dark blue suspenders holding up his ample gray slacks, was standing outside in the parking lot ostensibly trimming the rhododendrons. We exchanged greetings and walked to the door.

Going inside was a little spooky. Everything looked perfectly pedestrian. It was simple and white. The windows were just regular glass windows. No scalloped circular things made from thousands of pieces of colored glass. We voted in a bare ancillary room, probably where they held Sunday School, but afterward I unobtrusively peeked through a doorway into the main church. There were no pews, only folding chairs. Over the altar was a huge painting, copiously enriched with gold flecks, of Jesus reaching out to the multitudes. He had odd, riveting eyes. You could see the white conjunctiva all around his dark irises, which made him look a little like John Brown at Harper's Ferry or an outraged Moses attacking the golden calf of Baal.

Just as we stepped outside again, Bridget and Bobby drove up in Miz Bubby's old Chevrolet. "'Afternoon, Reverend," Bobby said as we all converged near the bottom of the steps. Pastor Beezle turned to face us and acknowledged Bobby's greeting with a prissy smile. I noticed there were two deep fissures that isolated a column of skin as they swept up his forehead from either side of his

nose, which was itself long and cleft at its tip like his chin, and athwart this strong narrow vertical motif lay those effusive winged brows and strangely herniant eyes, so that in his visage I saw, odd as Madonna's smile on an eggplant, an image of the cross.

"Well, we're here," Bridget said to me in an aside. "And I can't even vote."

Bobby went inside.

"You probably came for the religious experience," I said, smiling.

"Hey," she said. "You think that's funny. But Bobby really might've. He's going to sing in the choir. I know for a fact he can't carry a tune, but he says he's gonna do it anyway."

We walked away from my mother and Pastor Beezle, who were trading flower talk.

"Why?"

She shrugged. "Can't say. Maybe his brain's been overwhelmed by quantum."

Lem Roy and Aunt Krede walked up the driveway then. "Well, Ashmead," she said, "whatever you did in there I'm here to undo it."

I introduced them to my mom and Bridget. Pastor Beezle stayed in the bushes. "Whatever *she* does," Lem Roy added as they headed inside, "I'll undo that."

"Ah, democracy," Bridget sighed.

Bobby wanted to stay for a while and talk with Pastor Beezle, so the five of us walked west along the road toward our place and the Kredes'.

I hadn't replaced our mailbox yet because they'd been trashed a few days before Hallowe'en which, as it happened, had fallen on Sunday, and I'd figured putting it back up just then was like taunting a pit bull. But I'd bought a new box over the weekend and Miz Bubby was once again acting distraught at having to

see us every day in her sanctum.

"I see you haven't put your mailbox up again," I said to Aunt Krede. "Want me to do it when I do ours?"

"We haven't got one yet," she said. "Her postalness says she prefers not to handle our mail because there's too much of it. She wants us to get it in Artesia."

Lem Roy laughed. "I'm telling you, it was the merkins."

"Nah," she demurred. "She thinks we ship bull semen through the mail. Hudson told me. She thinks it'll get loose and..."

"That sounds like her," Bridget said.

"Anyway," Aunt Krede went on, "I called a friend of mine in Washington yesterday. I expect by tomorrow she'll change her mind. And thanks for the offer, Ash."

My mom had to go on to work, so we parted company with her at our driveway, where the headless posts that had borne the mailboxes stood naked in the pale November light.

"We're having an open house on Saturday, Priscilla," Aunt Krede said to her. "I hope you'll come."

My mom smiled. "Thanks. I wouldn't miss it."

As we approached the Kredes' house Wagger came down to greet us and Bridget became fascinated by the large octagonal glass-walled cupola that rose up through the roof of the myrmecorium and housed the above-ground biosystem, which contained mosses, flowers, herbs, and even some small treelike shrubs whose roots Aunt Krede occasionally pruned back.

"What's that thing?" she asked.

"The myrmecorium," I said, laughing.

"Yeah," she said, "but what *is* it?"

"It's a solarium for my ants," Aunt Krede said. She and Bridget and I

walked in to look at them while Wagger and Lem Roy went to do a little work in the barn.

Ground level, inside the myrmecorium, was about six feet above the floor, and one really had an ant's-eye view of the plants, which were in subtly segregated areas just like the ants. The observation windows through which we watched the little critters in their subterranean nests and galleries were about two feet square and at a height convenient for a person sitting on a chair. Aunt Krede opened the door that covered one of them.

"These are honey ants," she said. "See the big puffballs hanging from the ceiling? Those are called repletes. Their abdomens are full of honey."

"They look like they'd explode," Bridget observed.

Aunt Krede laughed. "Sometimes they do," she said. "And everybody races to lick up the spilt milk, as it were. But they're interesting because this distention shows you the structure of the exoskeleton, those bony plates like little continents afloat on a thin elastic substrate."

"That'd be the Moho," I said.

She glanced at me. "Yes, except this substrate has reached its elastic limit and has a specific and predictable shape."

"Little honey bladders," Bridget said.

"Exactly," she said. She liked to say that.

"How long do they hang there like that?"

"Forever," Aunt Krede replied. "Until they die."

"So they're slaves, right?"

"In the polite world," Aunt Krede said, "we call it indentured servitude, which spreads the sheen of civilization over it. But in fact when the nest needs another replete one will always volunteer, so to speak, by dint of receiving more and more droplets of honeydew, which she obtains by going around and making

touchy-feely contact with other workers who respond by feeding her. Then she crawls up on the ceiling where she hangs forever after."

"The bad girl's imprisoned in a kissing booth," Bridget laughed.

"But she's forever full of honey," I pointed out.

"Yes," Aunt Krede agreed. "So, I ask you, is she enslaved, or is she enraptured?"

"Maybe both," Bridget said.

Aunt Krede looked at her. "But she's no more enslaved than when she was hatched, yes? She's an ant. An ant is like one of those old player pianos with the paper rolls. You put in a roll from the honey ant's repertoire and the ant executes the instructions *ad infinitum*. Being a replete is just a short but neverending loop in the honey-ant program."

We pondered this as she closed up the window. "The question is," she said, "whether an ant's acceptance of the replete role is volitional. Where does the individual end and society begin?"

We gazed through another window where large black ants were tending little fungus buds growing in a mat of spongy green glop from chewed leaves which they regularly harvested aboveground.

"I have five kinds," Aunt Krede answered Bridget's question. "They're completely separated from each other. And I have three free compartments for more ants or to mix two species so one can raid the other."

"Neat," Bridget said.

We heard the old Chevrolet crunching to a stop outside. Aunt Krede restored their soothing darkness to the fungus-growing ants. Bobby joined us as we sauntered over from the shop to join Lem Roy on the porch.

"I wonder what it'd be like to experience the world through the mind of a dog," Lem Roy said, scratching Wagger's broad forehead.

"Probably doggish," Aunt Krede replied.

"How about through the mind of an ant?" Bridget offered.

"Does an ant have a mind?" Bobby asked.

"The world," Lem Roy persisted, "would look completely different, wouldn't it? You'd sense and not sense different things. You'd think of the way you were, and the way you lived, as perfectly natural and normal. You'd think of the world you lived in as the natural world."

"Well, why not?" Aunt Krede interjected. "That's what people do."

We made our way to the kitchen for some cookies and then into the living room, where a small fire burned lazily in the large stone fireplace. After we'd eaten the cookies, Lem Roy snared Bobby for a game of chess. Bridget and Aunt Krede and I sat around the fire and talked. Mostly they talked.

Although both were chunky, substantial women, blonde Bridget, with eyes that reflected hues like Chinese *clair de lune*, was soft and pink and cheerful, quite unlike Aunt Krede, who was coarse and tan and solid and green-eyed and cinnabar-haired, or possibly even bald. Yet they seemed to get along easily. Certainly they shared an extensive cynicism about life and the world.

"What do you think," Bridget asked, "about a plausibly sane person who decides that the answer to all his cosmic perplexity lies in religion?"

"You mean the resolution of all his unhappiness?"

"What do you mean?"

"Does he seek an explanation for the facts of life or respite from the storms they inflict on us?"

"Why?"

"Well, if he seeks an explanation, every religion has one. If he seeks happiness, no religion I know of values, offers or produces it."

"What if he seeks peace through the acceptance of mystery?" Bobby

inquired from the chess board.

“There’s a certain charm in just taking the world for whatever it seems to be,” Lem Roy agreed.

“Yeah,” said Bridget, “but that’s not the same as taking the world for whatever that loony Pastor Beezle thinks it is. It’s crazy to replace the evidence of your own perception with the beliefs of people who’re demonstrably stupider than you are. I can’t believe you’re gonna do this.”

Bobby laughed. “Do what? I’m going to sing in the choir. I’m going to see things for myself and experience them for myself.”

“Check,” said Lem Roy.

15

The Cauldron

“Having a party is like making soup,” Aunt Krede had said. “It takes some disparate ingredients, heat for the broth, a little stirring, and a certain amount of time.” She’d asked Bridget and me to be stirrers, and so shortly after noon on an overcast and drizzly Saturday afternoon I bestirred myself into the shower and some clean clothes while my mom kept an eye on the slowly cooking applesauce she was brewing as a housewarming gift.

“I hope they like it,” she said.

“You make great applesauce,” I replied as I bade her goodbye. “Everyone will like it.”

She seemed small to me in that moment, and vulnerable. Perhaps I was only seeing the reflection of my own strength and independence. I didn’t make applesauce for anyone, and I didn’t worry whether they’d like it.

I paused at the edge of the road to consider the two new mailboxes, theirs now twice as big as before, waiting stoically for their next meal of mail. The

silvery airplane aluminum glinted vividly in the subdued grayness of the winter sky. I had a vague feeling of apprehension.

A sour whiff of the wet asphalt as I crossed the pavement bouyed my spirits. Industry after all was stronger than vandalism. The great flywheel of existence was hardly perturbed by occasional tantrums of the flies.

It was a pleasure to feel my bootsoles grinding in the gravel of the Kredes' driveway. My walking legs felt lean and strong. The falling mist that slowly dampened every visible surface swirled fresh and cool through my lungs like the sweet water under the maple tree. I felt somehow more at ease, even hopeful. By the time I reached the house, with Wagger trotting by my side, I was eager to begin.

Bridget and Aunt Krede were in the kitchen and the house was rife with the odors of food, particularly bread. They'd made beef Stroganov and a huge salad featuring split tomatoes stuffed with tuna and sprinkled with dill.

Aunt Krede was in her usual duds except for a flowery puff-sleeved blouse and a soft leather vest and more bracelets than she had rings, and she had rings even on her thumbs. She was in a good mood.

"This is the best thing there is about living in a house," she said. "You can gather a whole bunch of people together and make them bump into each other."

"You didn't tell me I'd have to bump them," Bridget said. Just then Lem Roy made a grinning entrance from the outer hallway. Bridget saw him first. "Oh, my Gawd," she exclaimed, covering her mouth in mock incredulity.

Lem Roy had on a closely cut black suit and black cowboy boots. His lapels were decorated with intricate woven patterns of the same brilliant colors that had adorned the shirt he wore that afternoon when I first saw him enter the sensory-deprivation tank and play with the steer. This day his shirt was a plain white camisole with a straight, narrow collar. His skin was burnished like oiled

walnut. His black hair glistened almost blue.

“Expecting company?” Aunt Krede asked, smiling wryly.

He grinned. “Either that or we’ll have a Saturnalian feast,” he said.

The dining table in the center of the living room might rightly have groaned under all the food arrayed upon it but it was sturdy and made no complaint, even when I added a second tureen of braised beef and sour cream to its gustatory offerings.

“Are you excited, Ashmead?” Bridget asked as she joined me to make a few last-minute adjustments in the order of things.

I shrugged. “It’s a party,” I said.

She grinned. “Oh, right. I forgot. Life’s just an endless parade of parties for you.”

“Pretty much.”

“Must be kinda boring.”

“Yeah, but somebody’s got to do it.”

A black diesel pickup with a black camper in its bed crunched slowly up the driveway, befouling the air with its sooty black exhaust, and parked outside. Right behind it came another, tappets clicking like steel balls spilled in the bathtub, a maroon super-cab with a back seat and dual rear wheels and six or seven antennae of various lengths combing the air above it.

First Mr. Meerson and then Pastor Beezle emerged from the passenger side of the black truck. Lester Black, whose it was, got out the driver’s side. From the stretch pickup Mr. Authore, natty as Lem Roy in a snug gray three-piece suit and gray Italian shoes, stepped out gingerly then went round to the other side to help Miz Bubby down.

“The Mafia has arrived,” Bridget said as we watched them from the hallway.

Lem Roy joined us. "Doesn't anyone travel alone around here?" he marveled *sotto voce* as he opened the screen door to greet them. "Welcome!" he said, introducing himself to the others after Miz Bubby shuffled past him as though he hadn't been there. We took their coats. Other cars and pickups began to arrive. The rooms soon milled with people, greeting one another in loud voices or awkwardly gawking at things as if by the mute testimony of its objects one might learn the secrets of the house.

Wagger regarded Authore, in particular, with suspicion. Perhaps it was his manicured nails and the gelled appearance of his thinning but jet black hair, its waves swept back in rigid synchrony. Most likely it was the sweet odor of talc that hung in the air around him.

"He has to cover himself with baby powder so he can move around inside that suit," I said to Bridget as we hung their coats in the hall closet. Wagger growled softly and Lem Roy admonished her with a glance.

Aunt Krede asked me to start the CD player, which she'd set up earlier, and the annunciative opening of *Carmina Burana*, a thunder of drums and a shout of voices, enlivened the atmosphere behind me as I returned to the kitchen where she and Bridget were talking with Pastor Beezle, who seemed a little flushed and whose beady eyes urged noticeably from their sockets.

"Tell me something, Pastor," she said, "if it's not disrespectful, and I don't mean it to be. Ought a particular style of worship or set of beliefs consider itself correct and the vast remainder of the world in error, or are those things personal, and local? And if so, is there a universal truth?"

Pastor Beezle's brows knit together and his eyelids seemed to slide forward, as if from the exertion of thinking, and when this happened his bulging eyeballs receded slightly into his skull, making them look almost normal. He folded his arms. "You're asking me?"

"I'm asking you as a spiritual representative and as a man, so to speak," she said.

"Well," he half-smiled and shrugged and gazed for a moment at the floor. "As a man of God, which I am, I have no existence separate from God. So there is only one me, and I'll answer you from both perspectives."

Bridget glanced at me. I flicked her a smile of acknowledgment.

"There is a universal truth. That's God. And Christ said to let each man worship God in his own way. That's how I think of it."

Aunt Krede smiled a big gold-flecked peasant smile. "Okay. Good. I like that. But surely Jesus didn't mean a man could worship by conducting arbitrage at the temple, eh? I mean, there are limits, no? What if I worshiped by turning up this music full blast and rolling around naked on the floor?" She picked up a small platter, bristling with toothpick bandilleros stuck in peach slices arrayed in rows on Romaine lettuce leaves, and held it out to him. "Sorry," she said. "An unappealing image perhaps. Care for a peach?"

"Peach porcupine," Bridget said.

"Pectoral fins," I replied, taking one.

He smiled wanly and shook his head, waving his hand dismissively.

"People," Pastor Beezle said slowly, "who practice uncommon rituals, like we do, are used to a certain amount of skepticism, and worse, from people who don't, and who, as you say, make up the great majority of mankind. Because we live in a glass house, so to speak, we don't cast stones at our neighbors. We keep our eyes on our own experience and on our own relationship with God."

Just as he said these words his lids relaxed and his eyes popped forward again. It was really just a tiny motion but it had a startling effect. He looked like a chameleon scoping out a fat fly. I bent over the peaches, taking another, so I could look again at Bridget without being seen. She had to look away.

"Well said," replied Aunt Krede, laughing, as Mr. Meerson entered the room. He was tall and angular, formal in posture like those southern gentlemen who like to call themselves *Colonel* something-or-other.

"I understand you raise Angus," he said to Aunt Krede in a firm, deep voice.

"Mr. Meerson," she replied, greeting him. "I'm Mary Ann Krede and this is Ashmead, and you probably know Bridget here."

"I surely do," he said, winking at Bridget. He nodded to me and I reached out my hand, which he shook perfunctorally. "Pleasure," he said.

"Lem Roy raises the cows," Aunt Krede replied. "I try not to fuss with them. You never know when they might try to bite you."

"He breeds them?"

"He seems to do very well at coaxing good qualities out of their genes," she said. "Once you get beyond that, my expertise is exhausted. And you?"

"I try to keep things flowing," he replied.

She laughed. "You're much too modest. They say your work flows through every valley between here and the desert."

"Not every valley," he demurred, smiling. "But a *lot* of valleys."

"Mostly logging work, is it?" she asked.

"Mostly," he agreed. "But wherever people need to move equipment into tough terrain, we build the roads."

"What happens to them after the trees are gone?" Bridget asked.

"Well, people still have to get in to burn the slash and replant the land and run fire patrols and so on, so usually a road's there for a long time," Mr. Meerson said.

"Forever, in other words."

He smiled. "Well, I have to be careful about using that word in front of

Pastor Beezle, but, yes, basically.”

Bridget was silent for a moment and Mr. Meerson went on. “You know, Bridget, everybody around here – well, almost everybody benefits in the long run from projects like the Amarainy, because they go on for many, many years and provide incomes for many families just like yours, sometimes for generations. I think the issue isn’t whether we should do things, but how we should do them. When logging and site management are done responsibly, the way they are nowadays, there’s very little damage and it lasts only a short time. That means you and your kids will always have the Amarainy and there’ll always be trees there, and clean water and forest creatures and all the rest. But at the same time the families of Crondoc and Thrall will thrive and grow. So this is good, don’t you think?”

“Well, it sounds good,” she said. “But look at the lower Dingle valley. It’s a mess, wouldn’t you say, and it’s been a long time since the last tree came out of there.”

The lower Dingle valley was steep and sinuous, and the loggers and their fires had cleared everything off the slopes – trees, vines, bushes, even grass. Deeply scarred ravines and hillsides of ocher and rust-colored clay stretched up and away from the road for miles. Only near the watercourses had the native vegetation begun to reassert itself. Here and there along the streambanks were clumps of birch and alder, perhaps twenty or thirty feet tall. The rest was a wasteland.

Mr. Meerson sighed. “Well, Bridget, I agree with you. But those were the old days. Your dad and your grandfather, and all of us, followed the law and the practice of the times. Nobody knew what would come of it, and frankly few people cared. But things have changed. Logging nowadays has gone ‘way beyond that.”

Aunt Krede changed the subject. "Pastor Beezle," she said, "I hear Bridey's brother's going to be singing in your choir."

"Yes," he said. "I'm hoping so."

She looked at Meerson. "Pastor Beezle's been telling me he has a pretty open attitude toward those of other persuasions, so I'm hoping he'll let Lem Roy and me come to services some day and hear this choir sing."

Meerson tilted his head back a little and smiled down his long patrician nose. "I'm sure you'd be welcome," he said, raising a silver eyebrow.

"Of course," said Pastor Beezle.

I looked at Aunt Krede, her rusty toupee and emerald eyes, her silver earrings, the bangles and bracelets that accented her sinewy arms, the rings—I counted thirteen—and the gold tooth. What's more, on this celebratory day, she was already dressed in her Sunday best. Somehow I couldn't imagine her sitting serenely in Pastor Beezle's church while some citizen rolled his eyes and babbled incoherent messages that only Pastor Beezle could understand. For that matter, I couldn't imagine Mr. Meerson or Miz Bubby there either. I wondered if they participated in the glossolalia.

Just then, laughing and raucously blowing her horn as she approached the house, Lucky drove up with Billy and Bobby. Bridget and I excused ourselves to go greet them.

"Hey, babe," Bridget called out to her, "park that tub."

"Let the party begin," Lucky shouted, laughing as she climbed out of her baby blue convertible. The rain was falling harder now and she turned back to check that the windows were rolled up.

"Hey, guys," I said.

"Hey."

"Hey, Ash."

Mr. Authore had come out on the porch, looking as though he felt utterly out of place. "Spiffy duds, Mr. A.," Billy said admiringly.

"Uh-huh," said Mr. Authore, relaxing just a little. "And where have you been for the past week or so?"

Billy laughed and shrugged. "In school," he said. "Where else?"

"Funny. No one's seen you."

"I'm quick, Mr. A.. I can get in and out of a place faster than any man alive."

Mr. Authore curled his fingers and idly admired his nails for a moment. "Come here a second," he said as he walked away from us toward the back of the house. Billy went with him. Both of them stared at the porch deck while they talked. Then both looked up. Authore reached out an immaculate hand to give Billy's cheek the love pat of the godfather. Billy shrank back, glanced pointedly at Authore's outstretched palm and fixed a look upon him. Authore wagged an ominous finger as he withdrew. "You keep your word," he said.

August Kuntzler and Marie arrived on foot. She was carrying a small but substantial package wrapped in white paper with a blue ribbon. It was half the size of a concrete block and seemed to weigh as much.

"What have we here?" I asked her.

"Not for you, nosy one. It's for the Kredes."

Mr. Meerson came to the door as we congregated on the porch, waiting for Billy. "Afternoon, August," he said. "Don't see you out much anymore."

"Well, I spent many a long day up here on this hillside when I was a boy, you know, wanderin' along the ridge, or huntin' grouse with old Mose. It's nice to come back now and then and visit the old memories."

"Yep. I haven't seen this place since just after the war. Doesn't seem quite the same, but then maybe we aren't either."

"Nope."

Mr. Authore and Billy returned from their little talk. The older men went inside with Marie, followed by a chorus of hellos. The Hill twins and Bobby wanted to see the ants. Bridget proposed I take them over and she'd go in and get Marie.

We were still looking at Lem Roy's puppets when Bridget and Marie came in. "So have you ever seen him use them?" Billy asked.

"Huh-uh," I said, looking for Petrouchka. "But I watched him make this one. Look at this—the corners of his mouth move separately from the jaw. Pretty amazing, huh?"

"Sure, Ash."

"He's going to put on a show over at Thrall School some day."

"I'll be sure to get stoned first."

"You mean," Lucky asked, "Authore'd let him do that?"

I shrugged. "Why not?"

"I don't know. They had a local writer over for an assembly one day last year and after he'd said 'fuck' six or seven times Authore went ballistic. Some state cops came in and shut the whole thing down."

"Oh, I remember that," Bridget said. "Granny said he was trying to get the kids hooked on sex."

"She'd know," Bobby said.

"I know this story," Marie said. "It's like a play within a play."

"Right," I said.

"Let's see the ants."

The breeze outside had picked up and squalling rain began to pound on the steel roof of the shop building as we passed through the doorway into the myrmecorium. The sky was pretty dark and not much light filtered down through the terrarium tower. I switched on the small red observation lights that

were located inside the chambers and tunnels. The ants sometimes became understandably agitated when their supposedly subterranean world was too brightly illuminated.

“Spooky,” Lucky said. “I like it.”

The ants went blithely about their business. Everybody found the different behaviors of the different species interesting. Billy liked the slavers. Marie liked the mushroom growers. Lucky liked the honey ants. So did Bridget.

“Why does she keep them?” Bobby asked.

“I think she can come in here and just kind of lapse into a reverie,” I said. “She’s trying to understand the relationship between society and the individual. This exposes her to that in a natural and unhurried way.”

“Seems like a lot of trouble for a reverie,” Billy said, clearly sated. “What else is there?”

“Cows,” I said.

“I’ve seen cows.”

“I’d like to go over there,” Marie said.

So we all walked and ran to the barn in the rain and looked at a couple of young bull calves. The damp, warm fragrance of the barn seemed rich in ease and comfort. Marie asked me if they never had horns and I said no, as a rule they never did.

“So what are they worth?” Billy asked.

“I have no idea,” I said. “But Lem Roy’s been doing this for years and he still drives around in an old Peugeot.”

“Do they grow any pot?”

“I don’t ordinarily ask people whether they grow any pot. I figure that’s between them and their God. That’s like asking them what they do in their bedroom.”

“Well?”

“I doubt it.”

“And I hear her name’s Mary Ann.”

“Yes.”

Billy had unraveled a mystery. “Mary Ann. Marian. Get it? Marion, like John Wayne. Marion. A man’s name, get it? She’s actually a guy.”

“I’m sure she’d be willing to demonstrate otherwise,” Bridget said.

“Of course,” Marie joined in, “you’d have to go upstairs and get naked first.”

“Yeah,” Lucky said, “and then wait for her in the dark.”

“Fat fuckin’ chance,” Billy said.

“What about Billie Holiday?” I asked.

“What about him?” he said. “Never heard of him.”

We were heading back toward the house, through a light but chilly mist, when I remembered the sensory deprivation tank.

“Want to see Lem Roy’s sensory deprivation tank?” I asked. Marie took my arm. “Yes,” she said. The other four continued on to the warmth and society of the house.

There were at least fifteen cars and pickups parked around the periphery of the driveway and the house was abuzz with talk and occasional laughter. Willie Nelson had replaced Carl Orff on the stereo. The weather had settled again into a small, gentle, windless drizzle.

“Ever been in it?” Marie asked as we gazed down into the tank. Her tawny eyes looked at me with warm mischief.

“No.”

“Let’s do it.”

I glanced at the house. “We’ll have to take our shoes off.”

We lay down side by side on Lem Roy's giant lily pad. I pushed the lever and the top slowly settled over us. It was pitch dark and utterly silent. Reaching up, I could barely touch the roof.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Touching the sky," I said.

"Shh." I felt her hand against mine between us and I clasped it gently. I realized I'd never been so close to a woman in such a private place. A wave of desire flowed through me and burbled in my entrails.

"Shh," she said again.

I tried to be still. Her hand felt warm in mine, soft but strong. A creeping physiological reaction in my jeans prompted me to reach in slowly and deftly with my free hand to reposition things.

"Ashmead, are you playing with yourself?"

"No," I whispered. I turned to face her. Even though her head was only a few inches from mine, I couldn't see a thing, but from the sound of her voice I could tell her face was oriented upward.

"That'll make hairs grow on the end of your nose," she said teasingly.

I placed my extricated hand over her firm abdomen, her shirt damp from the rain. "See?"

A faintly warm zephyr of sweet air wafted over my face.

"Ashmead," she whispered softly. Now she was facing me.

"Marie."

"Ashmead."

I rolled slightly toward her, increasing the pressure of my hand on her belly. I wondered how near her lips were to mine. Centimeters at most.

"Ashmead." Again her warm breath caressed my face.

"What?"

"I'm not feeling sensorially deprived."

"Me neither." My hand slid upward to the hard margin of her ribcage.

"We'd better surface."

"Maybe we'd be more comfortable if we took our clothes off," I said.

"Okay," she whispered conspiratorially, intercepting my hand on its costal excursion and returning it to me. "You first."

"Okay," I said, wriggling, and then we both started laughing as if we couldn't stop, and during this paroxysm we were embleached like Mr. Kuntzler's green-eyed snake until our lips met in a long, warm, wet, breathless kiss and our pelvises yearningly ebbed and flowed against one another.

"We should go, Ash," she gasped.

"Marie."

"Shh. Let's go."

As we climbed out into the bright gray light I felt everyone in the house staring at us, but I saw no faces at the windows. I lowered the lid again.

She grinned at me as she laced up her boots. Her eyes sparkled. We held hands briefly as we walked back toward the front of the house. "I want to show you something," she said.

"I want you to," I replied.

"Not that, you moron. Something I made."

"August showed me one of your drawings. It was stunning."

We went inside. Aunt Krede was in the hallway, as if she'd been expecting us. She held Marie's package in her hand. "Did you like the ants?" she asked Marie.

"I like the way they stack up the little fungus balls," she said.

"This is from you?"

"Uh-huh."

"You didn't have to bring a gift. That's sweet of you. May I open it now?"

"Sure."

It was a pair of white marble bookends, each featuring in prominent relief a lion's head, one male, one female.

"They're beautiful," Aunt Krede said, admiring them carefully. "Amazing. Did you make them?"

Marie nodded. "Carrera marble," she said.

"You're a very talented young lady. Thank you."

"I see you have lots of books."

"I love books. And I'll find just the right books to stand between these two." She regarded the carvings again. "These really are exceptional."

"Thanks," Marie said. "I'm learning. I understand you make paintings."

"Well, I'm a dabbler," Aunt Krede said.

"I'd like to see them sometime."

Aunt Krede described the way to the spare room upstairs where she stored her work.

As we started up the broad staircase the Hudsons arrived, bearing between them a four-foot shrub in a huge pot. "It's a french lilac," I heard Mrs. Hudson tell Aunt Krede. Even at a distance Mr. Hudson's white socks were prominent beneath the cuffs of his trousers which for some reason were always several inches too short.

I thought of Hanna's lugubrious lilac perfume and then of Marie, climbing the stairs beside me, who wore no scents at all and yet possessed a surpassingly evocative fragrance.

"Your in-laws are here," she remarked.

"I'm a free man," I boasted, continuing my upward pace.

"You and Uncle August."

In the largest of three large bedrooms was Aunt Krede's art depot. It smelled wonderful, like warm oil and shellac. There were dozens of paintings, maybe hundreds, large and small, mostly landscapes, and a few portraits.

"They all seem sad," she said after awhile.

"'Poignant,' I would have said."

"Lonely."

"Alone."

"Alone is something you are, Ash. Lonely is something you feel."

"Being alone and wanting not to be."

"Yes."

"So by bringing an image alive, she creates company."

"A connection, I think."

"Your sculpture really is fantastic."

"I'm learning to cast in bronze."

"That's the other way around, isn't it? Building the image up rather than peeling something away."

"I don't know," she said. "I think it's just a different perspective. Winnowing an image out of stone, or wood, is really like building your imagination of it up toward the surface you're on. I don't know. It's hard to explain how it feels."

"There's something special about bronze."

"Yes. Its colors. Its plasticity. Its surfaces. Its majesty."

"Like your eyes sometimes."

She looked at me. Her eyes were smoky. "Sometimes, Ashmead?"

Her breath was hot against my upper lip. "Like now," I said, kissing her gently. "But I noticed in the sensory tank that they didn't glow in the dark. That surprised me."

She pouted a little smile and turned away coyly. "But sometimes, Ashmead," she said, "sometimes, they do."

She melted into my arms. I melted into her arms. We both melted into some far-off, fog-shrouded English country landscape. But then a bright shaft of sunlight illumined the blue-knickered boy hurtling to his doom. "My in-laws are downstairs," I said.

She laughed as she pulled away from me. I was hard as a rock and the damn thing was jammed down my trouser leg. "It won't be that easy," she said. "I make things that last. And I'm really good at it."

I smiled. "You're really good at it," I agreed.

"So, Ashmead," she said, coming close again, "what about you? You don't seem to have any real allegiance to anything."

"I'm just a rolling stone," I said. "From Kansas."

She laughed. "Seriously."

"I don't know. I like physics. And chess."

"And women."

"Yes. And the river."

"And?"

"And I like writing, although I'm not very good at it."

"How do you know that?"

"Well, I just write fantastic things. You know, florid, turgid, labyrinthine things about love and stuff."

"You have some such things?"

"A few."

"I will see them?"

"Sure."

Her hand brushed my crotch. "Oh, good," she said, smiling. "You're ready

for your in-laws.”

“I’m ready to fuck you right here,” I said.

“How rude! Ah, but I’m going to circulate.” She took my arm and we started toward the door. “You’re not the only fascinating person here, you know. And you must nourish your violet fantasy. I don’t mind, by the way. I enjoy a contest. Especially where I have total control over everything.”

“You sound like your uncle.”

We were going down the stairs now.

“I do, don’t I? Well, maybe that’s *my* fantasy.”

“I love you.”

“You’re smitten.”

“Smitten.”

“Get over it.”

I touched her waist as we parted company at the bottom of the stairs.

“Call me,” she said.

The Hudsons were sitting in the parlor with Lem Roy and Mr. Authore and Miz Bubby. Lem Roy was showing them his puppeteering scrapbooks. Apparently he’d made marionettes for performers all over the world and staged his own shows in schools and at fairs around the country for many years.

“You should put on a show for the kids at school one of these days,” Mrs. Hudson suggested brightly as she and Mr. Hudson, with the frail but feisty Miz Bubby seated beside him, pored over one of two fat leather-bound volumes of photographs, design drawings and newspaper clippings.

“I’d very much like to,” Lem Roy said.

“I think we might arrange it,” Mr. Authore said. “It would have to be something appropriate for our kids, of course.”

“Of course.”

“Apparently they had one local fellow who couldn’t keep a civil tongue in his head,” Miz Bubby said. “It was disgusting.”

“Well, we have lots of stories to choose from,” Lem Roy said, “although I’m especially interested in doing *Petrouchka* again. Or if you like we could make up characters for a local story.”

“What kind of local story?” Mr. Hudson wanted to know.

Lem Roy shrugged. “A history, maybe.”

Mr. Hudson looked at his wife. “That could get touchy,” he said.

Lem Roy laughed. “All right, how about a history of the state? Early pioneers and so on.”

“That might work,” Mr. Authore agreed.

“Nobody anyone knows,” Mrs. Hudson said, peering at Lem Roy over her glasses. “Something generic.”

“Okay, nameless pioneers.”

“And,” Mr. Hudson inquired, “you’d make all the puppets and the scenery and props and everything and do the show too?”

Lem Roy grinned. “That’s what I do,” he said. “But I’m not promising you this; we’d have to talk some more about it. Tell you what. I’ll sketch out a story and we’ll pass it around and see if anyone likes it.”

“Great,” Mrs. Hudson said.

“I think you should write a story about your people,” Miz Bubby offered. Mr. Authore shuddered visibly and his left eye started to twitch. She glared at him. “Oh, take a powder, Francis. Gramps didn’t care for them much but Papa Ben always said they were good people. They just didn’t like to work is all. Because they weren’t brought up to it is all.”

“Actually, I’ve thought a long time about doing that,” Lem Roy said, smiling at her. “But my people aren’t from around here.”

"No," she said. "I thought not."

Shortly after this the various members of the Meerson gang assembled themselves in the hallway, spoke their goodbyes, and, after Mr. Authore had maneuvered his rolling communications center alongside the porch for Miz Bubby, headed off into the drizzling, dying late afternoon light.

Bobby and Lucky and I were standing on the porch so Lucky could smoke a cigarette. I didn't have the heart to tell her she could smoke in the house. Mr. Meerson had smoked his pipe in there, but Aunt Krede was foregoing her cigars.

Before the stench of the diesel fumes had dissipated, Bennie's patrol car, its overheads flashing, came up the driveway and stopped with a whoop of the siren. "I guess we're here," my mom said as she got out.

"Let the party begin!" echoed Bennie. "The cavalry has arrived!"

"Great," said Lucky, who was hanging over my shoulder at the door.

"Nothing says party like the sheriff."

"Well," said Bobby, who was hanging over *her* shoulder, "We've had the pastor and the *patrón*, and that didn't stop us."

"And the fastidious fascist."

"And him. So Bennie'll fit right in."

"Pretty soon we'll be clog dancing."

Bennie and my mom came up the stairs and went inside, and a few minutes later Billy came out.

"Dad says we can split," he said. "Except," he admonished his sister who looked just like him, "I'm not going with you if you're smoking."

She recoiled in mock disdain, her long black hair tumbling away from her shoulders like a waterfall blowing in the wind. "And who the hell are you, shorty? You smoke."

"Yeah, but not in public. And not that crap."

"Oh, pardon me. I've selected inappropriate crap. Listen. Live your own life. We're not joined at the hip."

Billy crossed his arms. "I'll wait," he said.

Bridget and Marie joined us on the porch for a respite. The rain was heavier now although it didn't seem quite so chilly. Darkness was barely an hour off.

"We're going to a party at Icky Morgan's," Bobby said. "Want to come?"

Bridget, Marie and I declined. Lucky finished her cigarette and off they went. "It stinks up your car," Billy said as he let Bobby clamber into the back seat.

"So walk," she said. Then as they drove away he flopped out the window to his waist and pretended to be puking on the driveway. The car slid to a halt and after a few seconds he got back in. Then they drove off down the road toward Thrall.

I tried to get started again with Marie but she and Bridget were on a mission or something. Bridget actually kicked me, good-naturedly of course. Other people began leaving and soon the party had acquired a more relaxed tempo. It was much quieter. The music came back. Something soft and stringy, like metallic mozzarella. People seated themselves. It was a kind of settling-in of evening and intimacy.

Aunt Krede, Bridget, Marie, Bennie and my mom were sitting around the big round table in the kitchen, drinking coffee.

"Hi, Ashmead," Bridget said. "Your momma's calling you."

"I know. That's why I'm here."

"Oh, Ash," my mother said. "The perfect person."

I did my best to blush. "You needn't mention it," I said.

"Take us on a tour of the grounds," she said. "Bennie and me. I want to see the ants."

I looked at Aunt Krede. She smiled and nodded.

"Is that all right, Mary Ann?" my mom asked.

"Perfectly," said Aunt Krede.

We toured the barn and the puppet shop and the myrmecorium. Wagger accompanied us to the barn and then trotted off on her evening rounds. After the barn Bennie looked at his watch, but he seemed fascinated by the ants, which not everyone was. "Just like little people," he said. "Going about their business."

"They don't need a sheriff," I said. "If somebody gets out of line, they just eat him. Her, I mean."

"They're all hers? Shes?"

"Antoinettes," my mom said.

"When they need to fertilize a new queen, they make some males."

"Of course," he said proudly.

"But it's one pop, then you drop."

"Damn." He watched them for a few moments more. "That's it?"

"Yep. He gives her all he's got, and then he's lunch."

"Damn."

"Well, nobody gets bored," my mom said perkily.

"You're not bored, are you, Pris?"

She smiled at him. "I'm not an ant," she said.

"Besides," I reminded her, "once she's fertilized, so to speak, she just sits in one place for the next ten years and exudes larvae."

"Ewww," she responded. "That makes boredom sound attractive."

When we got back to the house Bridget met me at the door and, by way of excluding me from the kitchen, invited me to go sit by the fire in the living room. "Marie will be out soon to rub your, uh, leg," she whispered with an exaggerated wink.

“Really?” I effused like a child offered a meal comprised entirely of desserts.

“Sure, Ashcan.”

August Kuntzler, Lem Roy and the Hudsons were in the living room sitting around a cozy fire when Bennie and I joined their circle. The fragrance of the burning alder was cheerful and reassuring.

“It’s a story Stravinsky invented for a ballet,” Lem Roy was saying, gesturing with his graceful hands. “It has two levels. On the outer level, there’s a puppet show along the midway of a big carnival. As curtain time draws near, a crowd forms around the little theater. Then there’s music. The footlights come up, the red velvet curtain parts and the inner show begins. It’s a simple tale. The clown Petrouchka, who’s a pathetic buffoon, falls madly in love with a young ballerina. She, of course, is swept off her feet by a dashing and arrogant military officer. Petrouchka, feeling rejected and humiliated, becomes insanely jealous. In his torment, he attacks his rival, who promptly and rudely strikes him dead.

“Then the puppeteer emerges from behind the curtains and reassures the audience that, although the character of Petrouchka, overwhelmed by wretched loneliness and despair, has stumbled to an ignominious end, the real Petrouchka himself is but a lifeless doll of wood and strings and rags and thus has suffered no ill effects.

“But this is a lie, because before the show this puppeteer – who’s something of a Merlin – had endowed Petrouchka with human desires and feelings, perhaps to improve his acting. So Petrouchka has felt everything in his ordeal, and continues to feel it, and, to the horror of the assembled crowd, his ghost appears on the parapet above the stage to denounce the puppeteer’s cruel game.”

“This would be a little much for the wee ones,” Mr. Hudson opined.

“Yes,” said Lem Roy. “It’s an adult show.”

"Not that kind of adult show," Bennie ventured.

Lem Roy smiled. "No, not that kind of adult show. But kids over nine or ten, let's say."

"It's very deep, I think," Mrs. Hudson said.

"And yet," Lem Roy said, "it's also great fun, and kids love it. It's kinetic, romantic, slapstick, and a bit of a puzzle, which you can think about or not."

"I liked Punch and Judy when I was a kid," Bennie said, laughing.

"Wasn't that long ago," August said. "I remember you were about Timmy's age."

"Yep. We moved here when I was five."

"How long have you been the law in these parts?" Mr. Hudson asked, exercising his country vernacular.

"Twelve years this June," Bennie said.

"Is it easier than it used to be?"

"Well, I don't get into fistfights anymore like I used to," Bennie said. "Most folks hereabouts seem to respect my work. But I'm more wary of getting shot by some idiot. And crime, like everything else, is more connected and organized, which is a real pain in the ass."

"Henry says the school board's always trying to deal with drugs around the school," Mrs. Hudson said.

"It's worse than anyone knows," Bennie said. "Sometimes you'd swear every kid in the valley's on drugs. Especially on weekends or after a football game."

"It used to be whiskey," Mr. Hudson observed.

"Or corn likker," Mr. Kuntzler said.

"What's the answer?"

"Work," Bennie said. "Work, jails and church." He laughed. "That's it."

Nothing but work, jail and church.”

“Not more enforcement?”

“Well, you’d be putting hundreds of kids in jail. What’s the point? The problem isn’t that they’re smoking pot and sniffing glue, it’s what they do after they do that.”

“And what happens to them if they don’t do it,” I added.

“What would that be?” Bennie asked.

“Nothing.”

“I feel like I’m chasing my tail,” Bennie said. He looked at his watch again.

“Speaking of which, I’d best get my tail on the trail.”

He said goodnight to us and to the ladies’ contingent. He and my mom stood in the hallway for a long time talking before he left. She returned to the kitchen.

Lem Roy put another log on the fire. Mr. Hudson adjusted himself on the couch and crossed one leg over the other, putting his ankle on his thigh and revealing in addition to his white cotton socks a nearly hairless calf, almost as pale.

“Well, August,” he said. “I guess you’ve had your social life for the next ten years.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Mr. Kuntzler replied, laughing. “I might change my ways and take up dancing.”

“You’re no better than he is,” Mrs. Hudson said to her husband. “If you didn’t go to school board meetings your whole social life would be with the produce guy.”

“Oresta.”

“Oresta, who barely speaks English.”

“Yeah,” said Mr. Hudson admiringly, “but he sure speaks lettuce and

apples and lemons, and every other week he always has a nice piece of fish he's been hiding somewhere."

She smiled. "He does that," she agreed.

"Besides, it's just one never-ending social event, all day long while we're in the store."

Mrs. Hudson sighed. "We've got to pull the kids out of school and make *them* do it."

"Sure you don't want the store, August? We might be persuaded to give it to you."

"Only if the kids come with it, and only if they do all the work."

"See, he's already got the best of all possible worlds," Mr. Hudson said. "He gets to play with the kids and he doesn't have to feed them. The store's right beside his door and he doesn't have to run it." He put his hand on his wife's knee. "But we do."

"Yes," said Mrs. Hudson. "We should go."

Darkness was fast approaching. The Hudsons said their goodbyes. The Kredes thanked them again for their gift of the lilac. They'd offered Bridget a ride home and Marie went along.

August Kuntzler wanted to finish his coffee and said he'd prefer to walk. Aunt Krede got out an old brandy and some little black cigars and the two of them smoked while each of us sipped a snifter of the pungent amber liqueur. An hour or so later, on the porch, Lem Roy shook his hand. "Your niece's sculptures are truly gorgeous," he said.

"She has a talent, doesn't she? But I can't take any credit there."

"You've given her a great deal of yourself, I think," Aunt Krede said. "You deserve a lot of credit for that."

"She thinks so, too," I told him.

He smiled. "First I heard of it," he said.

Aunt Krede held his hand with both of hers. "Thank you for coming, August," she said. "I really enjoyed reminiscing with you. By the way, I've been admiring your tufted crane. Would you care to sell it?"

"Well, I'm sort of fond of it. I don't know really."

"Well, if you ever decide to sell it, I'd like to buy it."

"What is it you fancy about it?"

She pondered this for a moment. "Its serenity, I think," she said.

"Yes," he replied, smiling, stepping down the stairs. "Maybe I'll leave it to you in my will."

"Do you have a flashlight? It's pretty dark out there."

"It's not far," he said as he ambled off toward the road. "I walked this driveway 'most every Sunday night when your uncle was away. Bess baked cookies for him and we'd eat a few cookies and play checkers until nine or ten o'clock sometimes. I could walk home with my eyes closed."

"Well, there might be a few new chuckholes since then," Aunt Krede called after him.

He laughed and waved his hand without turning around. "Yep, but I bet they're all dug by the same old chuck."

"Goodnight, Mr. Kuntzler."

"Goodnight, Miss Krede."

My mom was in the kitchen finishing up the dishes and putting things away. "You're going too far, Priscilla," Aunt Krede said as we joined her.

"All done," Mom said, wiping the countertop.

"Thanks."

"It was great fun, Mary Ann."

"Well," I ventured. "Your house is warm now, eh?"

"Toasty," Lem Roy said.

"Thanks to you and Bridey, too," said Aunt Krede. "You stirred well."

My mom and I held hands on the way home. The rain had given way to a fine mist that more or less hung motionless in the heavy air.

"Did you have fun, Ashmead?" she asked.

I laughed. "Yep. And you?"

"Sure was a peculiar combination of people," she said.

"Uh-huh," I agreed. "A tasty broth."

The waxing half-moon had already set and the sky was thick with clouds, but there was still light enough to see by, vaguely, although you couldn't really discern anything except shapes and shadows, the colorless denizens of the night who saw us safely home.

16

Whisper in the Mist

The darkness makes you focus on unknown things. It makes you rely on those other senses that vision stultifies, senses with which you aren't so conversant, whose meanings aren't so clear, like hearing and smell and taste and touch and intuition. By the same token, it can carry you far away, out of time and space, into a world of imagining. Sometimes these effects make nighttime seem foreign, a place unilluminated by familiar light and easy understanding. For me, the night has always seemed romantic, evocative, sensuous and intimate.

Darkness comes early in November, even when the sky is crystal clear, as it was the following Friday when my mom was having Bennie over for a candlelight birthday dinner. She and I had agreed that she could have the house if I could have the car. Bobby and Bridget were throwing a party, and I was eager to go. I'd told her I'd stay out 'til two. She'd reminded me it wouldn't be Bennie

cruising the road tonight. I thought to josh her about being cocky, but then I thought not to.

Bennie isn't a handsome man; his features are plain and rounded. He's only an inch or two taller than my mom, but he's dense and compact. His irises are very dark brown and it's hard to see their pupils. He slicks his hair back with something; I don't want to know what. And he has a beautiful white smile that seems almost mechanical, like a mask he could put on as easily as he puts on his hat. I'm sure his body's a sight to see, especially if you're into short, swarthy, muscular men who glisten in low amber light. I figured my mom was having sex with a centerfold model, sort of, and more power to her. Bennie wasn't someone I yearned to spend time with, but he treated her with kindness and respect and she seemed to enjoy it. I don't know that otherwise she enjoyed much in general. Not that she was unhappy, but she seldom exhibited any real enthusiasm for anything. Bennie was different. You had to have enthusiasm for Bennie or you couldn't endure him. And she did.

Bennie wore an olive green flannel cowboy shirt with tan slacks cinched by a silver belt buckle and piped over snakeskin cowboy boots. He arrived in his Land Rover, which I thought was a gesture of great informality for him. As usual when he was coming for dinner, he brought a bottle of whiskey and a white rose.

I wished him happy birthday. We shook hands. I gave it all I had, and he let me be his equal. He and my mom hugged and kissed. I couldn't look, so I went and got the card I'd bought him. The outside portrayed a Roman charioteer standing in his chariot, gripping the reins, flicking his whip as his galloping warhorse sped off the page. "You're making great time!" it began. On the inside the charioteer had braced his feet against the prow of his chariot and was nearly horizontal, straining back against the reins. The text concluded: "You're halfway to eighty!"

Bennie laughed the laugh that went with his marionette smile. "Whoa. Slow down. Hey, it's a thought. Thanks."

"Guess you get there just as fast, whether you run or walk," I said.

Bennie shook his head. "Yeah, I guess. But if you go too fast you don't see much."

"On the other hand," my mom interjected, "there's nothing like a good gallop now and then."

"I'm leaving," I said, and I left.

I drove with the side window open. The air was cold and damp, but it felt good against my face. Fog was forming along the river. I took the long way around.

I thought about the human mating dance. Bennie was looking for someone to keep a candle burning in his pumpkin shell. Mom was looking for someone to make her daily exertions seem significant. Besides me, I mean. A man. It eludes me how the wellspring of meaning might reside elsewhere than in one's self. I do understand that society and one's friends will exert their contrary claims, and I realized that night, on this intimate scale, that somewhere in the evolution of the romantic fantasy the claims of the participants will always be made. Bennie didn't seem to me the sort of person in which my mom would vest her sense of proportion, when she eventually got some. And I felt pretty sure the role Bennie had in mind for her was not on my Mom's agenda.

The fenceposts along the driveway up to the Bubby estate were topped with tiny lights. The house itself glowed. Only the windows of Miz Bubby's bedroom on the second floor were dark. I had to park along the driveway, at the end of a line of a dozen cars and pickups, and before I got inside two other cars had eased up behind mine and closed their caprine halogen eyes.

As soon as I walked in the door I knew I didn't want to be there. Bobby

greeted me with a sign of the cross, despite my protestations. He said he was blessing all the guests whether they liked it or not, now that God had taken up residence in the house. He told me Billy and Marie had stopped by briefly to drop Lucretia off and had then departed for town. He told me the Kredes were around somewhere. He offered me a glass of ginger ale. I took a beer. I told him he'd gone off the deep end. He laughed. I thought about Marie. Without her it'd be a long night.

I found the Kredes in the kitchen and we talked for a little while. They'd just stopped in to say hello. They felt a little overwhelmed by the frenetic antics of so many teenagers acting out their histrionic awkwardness, and, although I'm fully one of them on any given day, this night I felt the same. It was like coming sober to a party after everyone's already topped up.

A big kid with a shaved head wearing a black leather jacket and carrying two plastic cups of beer in each hand pressed his way through the crowd. As he approached Lem Roy he made a beeping sound like the roadrunner bird in the cartoon. Lem Roy stepped back a little to let him through. The kid remarked that, in its endless skirmishes with the wily coyote, the roadrunner always wins. Lem Roy countered that, once the roadrunner lost, the game would be over, and in the meantime it had to keep running forever. The kid pressed on to wherever he was going, and the Kredes left soon afterwards.

Lucky Hill was talking with a group of people kibitzing a pool game downstairs in the recreation room, where the lights were low and the music had a softer edge. She was toying with a laser-eyed guy who played linebacker for the Thrall Thrusters. She turned up her dewy eyes to gaze at him. She laughed at his jokes. Once she reached out and touched his arm, then she walked over to the bar where I was standing, pumped up the keg and tapped him some fresh suds. She smelled like a wet tropical night perfused with the fragrance of gardenias

and sweet, loamy soil.

I asked her where Billy was, as if I wanted to see him. She said he'd taken Marie to town and might be back, although she doubted it. He had fatter fish to fry, she said.

Bridget came down the stairs just ahead of the big kid with the shaved head, who was earnestly entreating her about something. She glanced toward us but attended to his words. As he filled their glasses she sidled up to me and rocked her hips and surreptitiously bumped my butt. Out of the corner of her mouth she spoke to me but continued watching him. "It's not what it seems," she whispered. "Trust me. I know things. I'm a sibyl."

The party seemed oddly absurd, and remote, as if it were a foreign movie without subtitles. I felt disconnected from everything. It seemed as though the people I knew had sent their doppelgängers, so that I recognized them but not they me. The fog outside had thickened. From the porch I couldn't see my car, despite the lights that trailed away along the fenceposts. Without those little lights, I thought as I turned onto the Thrall road, I might easily have driven into the ditch beside the Bubbys' driveway.

Like a shiny bubble shimmying through the liquid darkness of a cola, like a tiny pupa riding the rails with its bright cocoon glued against the window of the club car, I wandered through time along the winding road, seeing nothing but the strip of pavement just ahead, shrouded in a barely translucent silver mist that parted in the beams of my headlights only enough for the car to slip through before it closed again behind us.

It seemed to take forever to reach the ridge overlooking the Thrall Dam reservoir, high above the wooly gray surface of the motionless sea of fog that blanketed the whole valley. I pulled into a small clearing among the firs where I parked beneath a cold bluish-white moon that glared down from the glittering

black southwestern sky. Before I'd emerged from the fog's upper reaches into the glassy night air I'd felt as if I were back in an earlier century, in molasses-dream time, moving no faster than a solitary old trapper wending his way with his mule over the mountain, and as alone in the wilderness as was he. It made me think of my father.

My father was a man of fundamental contradictions. He wanted to be a writer, an artistic pioneer, a carefree rover on the frontier of ideas, a master of woven webs of words, but it seemed he'd mastered the art of bedding women so easily that somehow his pen never dallied long enough on a page to leave any impression behind.

He was a pioneer, he said, who had to keep moving in order to feel alive. The frontier, he said, was itself always moving, and he was driven by some irresistible force to follow it. A rolling stone gathers no moss, he said, and it seemed an admirable thing. It wasn't a painless process when my mom and I were the moss he left behind, but then we left him behind too. Guys who had fathers, like Billy and Bobby, had their own problems.

He worked as a traveling salesman for a chemical company. He sold flavors. Flavors and colors, often of garish hue, derived as byproducts from the manufacture of plastics, fuels and other exotic substances. He called himself "the candy man." He believed these additives were improvements over the insipid choices offered by nature. But he had no idea what might be offered by nature, at least not by any nature unsullied with the abominations of man. One year when we lived in the country he'd begun his garden chores in the spring by tucking quarter sticks of dynamite into holes he'd prepared in eight or ten strategic locations and then simultaneously blowing them all up. Instant plowing, he said, but most magma doesn't fall back into the volcano and most of the uprooted dirt had flown from the garden, so he'd had to truck in stuff from the nursery to fill

up the craters and then he had to plow anyway. His crops did grow exceptionally well that year in those rich patches of imported soil.

The role of Candide didn't suit him, of course. As he grew less discriminating in his personal behavior, his affinity for artificiality seemed to deepen. When he started staying out 'til the wee hours on business calls with bakery girls we couldn't help noticing almost at once that he reeked with aftershave when he left and stank of it when he returned. He'd go out smelling musky as the butt end of a stag, and we'd just know there'd be no waiting up for him.

Actually, my mom had had a tough time of it for a while, gazing out the window for a long time after he'd leave, worrying at two and three in the morning about his well-being, trying to comfort me by keeping me busy and apprised of her affection. I finally realized his presence didn't matter to me. I liked him—you had to like him because he was a schmoozer, friendly but insubstantial, for whom reality, like God's mansion, contained many rooms, not all of which one was obliged to visit. But because of this, because he had eschewed responsibility for the conduct of his life on any higher plane than is aspired to by a leaf in the wind, because his arrival was never more than the brief stirring of a breeze which as it subsided would carry him off—because of this, in the end, I found his absence immaterial.

He was a ghost who sought by his ghostly chains to bind us to his own incomprehensible suffering. But as soon as we recognized his nature we were free. He was like a fog that enveloped us, always able to dazzle us but so insubstantial we could walk right through him, a man whose days were spun up from endless iterations of a long-lost dream in a self-referential house of mirrors.

Below me I couldn't see except by inference the vast extent of the reservoir, many miles long, with its bare terraced mud walls, the raw unhealing scar of

human arrogance and greed that had transformed a beautiful forest valley into a giant cistern. That this desecration lay entirely hidden beneath an unbroken blanket of impenetrable gray seemed a modest mercy. I didn't want to see it. Except for the few small firs and shrubs in the shadows nearby all I could see was that cold fluorescent disc and its million attendant stars, the barely undulant surface of the fog, and a few insular shadows that protruded through it, the tops of high hills as black and nearly lifeless as the mountains along the horizon, themselves streaked here and there with glistening patches of early snow.

I turned on the radio. They were playing one of my favorite pieces, the Sibelius *Violin Concerto*, a wrenching paean of affirmation rising from lamentations of unspeakable sorrow. The brilliant passages of the violin were exquisitely crisp and poignant in the cold night air. This rendition was powerful, fluid, precise, and bursting with passionate sensuality. Spivakovsky, I guessed. The music of genius. Lovemaking of the gods.

I pondered my own materiality. My father didn't want to be a writer; that would've entailed too much work for which he had not the time. He wanted to be a *great* writer. That seemed to him much simpler, because greatness, if it came, was bestowed upon you, as if by magic dust. Thus while sufficient success might be mostly the result of hard work, the transcendent glory of fame and fortune resulted from luck, accidents, genetics, and other influences beyond human control.

He had a point. It did seem that all the legendary musicians had written a symphony or performed at Carnegie Hall by the time they were my age. All the mythical novelists had published. All the sublime physicists had ascended to chairs at leading universities. Sure, there were exceptions, but I wondered what was left for me. I felt sure I wasn't destined to rise to the pinnacle of anything, including physics. Given this, I knew that for me, even writing would always be

a struggle.

Physics makes eminent sense of the senseless exterior world. It doesn't have much sense, though, of the sensed interior world. It doesn't deal with that any more than chessmen deal with a player's mood or intentions. The useful generalities confirmed by measurement that form the structure of physical understanding have no relation to the existence or non-existence of man, not even in quantum physics.

Over the last year or so I'd gradually begun to consider whether the really fascinating stuff of life might be within our minds, inside us and outside of physics. Even to perceive the exterior world required us to leave physics and pass into metaphysics. Understanding this transition is the touchstone quest of philosophy, penetrating the veil – or is it an abyss? – that separates us from the not-us, seeking to find in the physics of the brain the surrealistic dawning of the mind. A fascinating grail, doubtless more elusive than defining the boundaries of the universe.

So I was drawn again to the messy world of ordinary experience. The world of ingenuous human consciousness. It's far more complex than the physically idealized world, far more apparent than the world of spirits and hobgoblins, always dynamic and perhaps better fitted to my modest ways and means. Besides, for better or worse life as I know it is embroiled in pleasure and pain, hunger and lust, fear and dreaming, in the whole tapestry of the human journey. The spectre of my father both beckoned and barred the way to my departure from the orderly intellectual edifice of physics for an endless wandering through the metaphoric worlds of words.

Like him, I hadn't yet written anything. So far, so good, he would've said. I had my journals, a few overwrought supplications to Hanna, and some jejune verses. In my journals I'd kept a pretty detailed accounting of my life in Crondoc.

But what did that matter? An accounting of life is not, in general, a story. In all those purple importunings to my distant goddess, the fountainhead of incorporate lust, I had surely swirled and spun like a tailless kite in a blustery wind through a thousand facets of emotion. And what did that matter? Uncounted galaxies of feeling pulsed and seethed unseen beyond my tethered dance, the soaring blue vault of hopeful yearning, the black chthonian labyrinths of despair. I had much to learn, about writing and about life.

What does it matter, he often asked, if no one else knows about it? Knowing as I did that for him it wasn't actually a question but a rhetorical, and hence non-attributable, philosophical premise, I put the question to myself: what *does* it matter? What would it matter whether I did anything or not?

One cannot disagree with John Maynard Keynes that in the long run, we're all dead. In fact, if nobody else ever knows about us, about the "it" of our lives, we are dead to begin with. There's something crucial to life in the matter of interaction with other beings. Still, what about a particular act, of omission or commission, that can somehow be contained sufficiently to prevent anyone else's ever becoming aware of it? What then? In other words, what is owed to one's conscience? I believe it's for every man to decide. And if one chooses to live in accord with some *a priori* conceptual design, how is this best done?

Of course it's all pretty easy until you reach a moment of truth, a choice whose consequences are imminent, extreme and irremediable and whose making will test your mettle. You don't want that crisis to come before you've ever flexed your moral muscle, because if it does, you're probably doomed. So it's essential to practice conscientious behavior in small things.

That's why my father couldn't rein in either the pace or the scope of his meanderings, and why he couldn't write. The oftener he forgave himself, and the oftener he excused himself, and the oftener he exercised his growing confidence

that nothing he did would have any critical impact, the further he strayed and the less anyone cared and the more his demon flayed his bloody haunches. What does it matter if *you* know about it? That's really the question. And the challenge it poses is every man's mortal struggle.

For me, the pristine clarity of elemental physics was a siren song that echoed like Spivakovsky's violin through the dark corridors of the starry universe. But I realized too, in this splendid isolation, that the damp blind fingers of the silent fog feeling its way among the mysteries of the earth, the river and woods and fields and all the works of man, perhaps knew more of music.

I switched on the car's interior lights and checked the clock on the dashboard. It was just after two. I felt as if every nerve had been drawn out from my body like so many reluctant worms tugged from their burrows by early birds.

I started the engine and let the car swoop lazily down through the crystalline night air, noticing repeatedly after some long sweeping curve another spectacular moonlit vista on the calm gray sea embracing those strange black islands, some bearing tiny lights like glowing eyes. A few wisps of mist portended my re-entry into the lower world, and then in an instant the fog swallowed me up. Unable to see much beyond the nose of the car, I slowed to a walking pace. Every few hundred yards seemed like a mile, and pretty soon I'd completely lost track of where I was.

That's when I hit the bridge.

17

Gravy Day

My accident was minor, as accidents at five miles an hour tend to be. It did crush the fender a little and smash the headlight, and it put an ugly red streak on

the white crash-railing inside the Dingle Bridge. But Billy knew a guy who'd fix the car for a hundred bucks, and my mom had had an enjoyable evening, and Sheriff Bennie, after having surveyed the scene the following day, decided not to write me up for defacing a historic structure. Months later a county work crew restored it with some wood putty and a paintbrush.

On Thanksgiving Day, my mom and I went to the Hills' for dinner. The turkey had roasted all morning at our house, stuffed with bread and celery and chestnuts, quietly plumping and browning and exuding the sweet aromas of toasted wheat and fowl fat. While I drove, feeling a little abashed about the wrinkled fender rising like a mountain range in relief above the absent left headlight, my mom cradled a bowl of Waldorf salad in her lap and gingerly braced the hot roasting pan on the floorboard between her feet.

Lucky had made cranberry jelly and peach ice cream the night before. When we arrived she'd been pulverizing a huge quantity of parboiled russet potatoes with a power mixer that had flung more than a few potato specks onto the bib of her apron.

"I could brush those off for you," I volunteered.

"You could die trying," she responded.

Bennie and Billy called hello from the rumpus room, where they were watching a football game. My mom busied herself preparing the turkey for its last half-hour in the oven. On the stove, with puffs of indignant steam spluttering from the quivering lips of their lids, were a pot containing nearly a dozen peeled ocarina-shaped sweet potatoes, already nicely orange, and a smaller saucepan brimming with fresh-snapped green beans.

"Out of the kitchen, Ashmead," Lucky said, goosing me as I sampled a bean. "Thanksgiving dinner is not for amateurs."

"Boil them beyond *al dente*," I advised her. "I like my food cooked."

"The Café's open."

A wide end was open, too, inside the endzone, and just before halftime Bennie's team forged ahead of Billy's for the first time in the game.

"Told you," Bennie said as I entered the room. "Hi, Ashmead."

Billy laughed. "Hey, Ash," he said. "The game doesn't end at halftime."

"Why not?" I asked. "Then you'd get two for the price of one."

Bennie shrugged. "Well, the Tarheads were ahead by thirty-one to nothing, and the Hucksters came all the way back in the second quarter. So what does that tell us?"

"Tells me the Tarheads should get on a bus," I said.

Bennie laughed his approval. Then he got up and headed into the kitchen to say hello to my mom.

"Who gives a shit," said Billy once his father was safely out of the room.

"Not I," said I.

"Me neither. But he conned me into betting him ten bucks, like he always does, so I have to act interested. Like I give a rat's ass about ten bucks."

"Should've made it a hundred," I surmised.

He laughed.

Before the halftime prattle had concluded, Lucky and my mom announced the serving of the feast. We all held hands when Bennie said grace, which meant I had to hold hands with Lucky and my mom, and Billy with her and his dad, and Bennie went on and on, seeking the blessings of the season for each of us, then for each of our two families, and finally for the group as a whole. By the end of it I felt as though we'd all been married.

The food looked and smelled and was delicious. Bennie carved one after another perfect slice from the proud breast of the bird. He and Billy ate the drumsticks. He offered the wishbone to my mom but she demurred in favor of

Lucky.

"Don't believe in superstition, Mrs. H.?" Lucky asked.

"Sure I do," my mom said. "That's why I'm giving it to you."

"But I'm *named* Lucky."

"So much the better. Wish for something good for all of us."

"Dad already did that," Billy said.

"You do the wine, women and song," I suggested.

"I do men, Ashmead," she said, and then she blushed crimson. "I mean..."

"How are the Kredes doing?" Bennie asked, speaking pointedly to my mom. "I heard somebody took out your mailboxes."

"Oh, that was a month ago," she said. "They've been up ever since."

"I heard they were at the Bubbys' the other night." We nodded, all three of us, remembering. "What do you make of them? People your age I mean."

We looked at each other. "What *do* you mean?" Billy asked.

"Well, they were kind of out of place at that party, weren't they?"

"Bobby and Bridget invited them," Lucky said.

"What'd they do there?"

"They stood around for a while and talked and then they left. Why?"

"Are they Commies?" Billy asked sarcastically.

Bennie smiled. "No, I'm not intimating anything, I'm just curious as to why adults would want to hang out with teenagers."

"Maybe they like us," Billy said.

"Maybe we like them," Lucky added.

"They're really seem very pleasant," my mother offered. "Self-contained and good neighbors."

"Some people were concerned about why they'd be hanging around all those drunken kids," Bennie said.

“Well, those people should’ve come to the party,” Billy said. “Nobody was drunk, at least not while they were there...”

“It’s Miz Bubby, of course,” Lucky interrupted him. “I don’t even want to talk about it. I don’t think we should talk about it. She’s insane, Dad, really; you know that.”

“Oh, I know all kinds of things,” Bennie said, nodding his head as if to confirm the truth of it. “That’s my job. Knowing things about people makes them easier to deal with. Did you know Mose McMorey was their uncle? Did you know Lem Roy was born in Peru and graduated from Columbia? His mother was an Indian princess or some such thing. Strange thing is, there’s all kinds of information on him but hardly any on her.”

“Do they have the same mother?” I asked.

He shrugged. “Don’t know. Like I said, most of her records are sealed up. Even her driver’s license. Apparently she worked in some super-secret government program. Before a few years ago there’s just nothing in her file.”

“So,” my mom interjected, “what kinds of things can you find out about people?”

Bennie laughed his gotcha laugh. “You don’t wanna know, babe,” he said. “Trust me, you don’t wanna know.”

We were all as stuffed as the gobbler had been, but Lucky’s peach ice cream was sweet and creamy and richly textured with yellow morsels of fresh ripe peaches. It was not possible to refuse.

“Better than sex,” I said.

Bennie smote me with a smouldering glance.

Lucky laughed. “How would you know?” she said.

“Young lady,” Bennie began. Then he wiped his mouth with his napkin and looked at my mom and sighed audibly.

“Old Mose, their uncle, didn’t like Meerson,” Bennie said, beginning again. “He thought Meerson stole all that land along the river. And there was something personal between them, from what I’ve heard, but I don’t know what. One time my dad and I were drunk – well, we started drinking out in the woodshed one evening after his prize mare’d died and we’d got done burying her, and the thing about Mose came up and he made me swear never to ask, to let it die a natural death. So I never have.

“Meerson came here just after the war. From the beginning he made a lot of money. People thought of him as the valley’s benevolent dictator and he never tried to deny it. But Mose considered him a carpetbagger. Whenever one of Meerson’s projects got to be a topic of local discussion, Mose would say, ‘If he’s for day and night, I’m against it.’

“I remember one of the few times we ever talked, just after I’d become sheriff and got myself stationed out here. He’d made some comment and I asked him why he was so set against Meerson. After all, Meerson’s done a lot of good hereabouts over the years, employing people and helping people and so forth. Not to mention he made my dad a rich man.

“But Mose said, ‘He’s a thief. A liar and a thief.’ And I said I thought that’d been a long time ago.

“Mose had steely gray eyes and he locked them onto mine. They were hard as stone. I’ll never forget it. After a long pause, he said, ‘I’m not talking about what he did, Bennie. I’m talking about what he *is*.’”

For some reason I saw in my mind ancient artisans with chisel and graver painstakingly scribing graceful glyphs into marble and granite. “And that was it?”

“Yep. He just walked away. Mose didn’t believe in pressing anyone to his views.”

By the time we'd finished eating, Bennie's Hucksters had treated the hapless Tarheads to a long luncheon of turf salad. Billy paid up. My mom and Bennie undertook the cleanup, shooin' even Lucky from the kitchen.

"Man," she marveled as she joined Billy and me in the rumpus room for a few rounds of hearts, "you guys sure live right."

"Great ice cream, Lucretia," I said.

"Yeah," echoed Billy. "But no cake. Couldn't you have gotten up at three in the morning and baked a cake?"

"Only if I could've shoved the entire thing up your ass," she replied, shuffling the cards.

We played until Bennie came in with a beer and switched on another game. "Pandas by two," he said.

"Touchdowns?"

"Yeah."

"You're on."

Before I left, the twins and I smoked some of Billy's bud out behind the garage.

Lucky said that Bobby had written an article in the *Thrall Thrush* about Guillemot Community College that praised, among other things, the substance of its course offerings, calling them steak and spinach compared to a diet of styrofoam and twinkies at Thrall, and Authore had suspended him from school for a week. Apparently the Bubbys had been invited with Pastor Beezle to have Thanksgiving dinner at the Meerson's.

"Dinner and a little talk," Billy observed. "Meerson doesn't like boat-rockers."

"Why should he?" Lucky said, sucking air, "He's the captain of a ship that springs from his own mind."

"The Ancient Mariner of Dingle Creek," I suggested.

"Right, and the sailors are all zombies. And if it's becalmed, that'll be it; they'll never get it going again."

"Well," Billy said, "what would happen if he wasn't here? Half the people in the valley work for him, and the other half live off that half."

Lucky looked at him as she carefully held the roach between her lips. "Everything that happens in this valley," she said, "could happen just as well without him."

"Yeah, could," Billy responded. "But would it?"

"I don't know" she shrugged. "But somebody ran the school before Authore, and somebody sheared the sheep before Beezle, and the people who lived here made a living before Meerson. And I say, who needs them?"

"Well," Billy said, "I think Dad does."

"Maybe so," she said, looking at the ground. She nudged a rock to one side with her foot. "Maybe not."

"He's not going away in any case," I observed.

Lucky looked at me. "Well, eventually he is," she said. "Eventually the whole place is going away. And in the meantime, you can't say anything about it, no matter what happens."

Billy laughed. "It's good for business," he said.

She glanced at him but said nothing. It seemed she was so full of things to say she couldn't decide where to begin. I decided to take my leave. My mom made me take the car. I went to visit the Kredes.

The night before, in an elaborate ceremony, Lem Roy had slaughtered his calf. "The way I look at it," he said, "is that I made friends with his spirit, and the spirit bequeathed us its immanence. The flesh nourishes us and the spirit is nourished by the honor we do to its sacrifice."

"Some people might call that a rationalization," I said.

"Nothing rational about it," Lem Roy replied, grinning.

"And the steaks are terrific," Aunt Krede added. "Rationalize that."

"Some people," Lem Roy went on, "see the earth as humanity's plaything, and some as a sacred temple people can only besmirch. Some think meat is created in shrinkwrap packages and some think killing animals for meat is akin to cold-blooded murder.

"But neither science nor morality is advanced by pursuing questions into the tenuous vapor of their most metaphysical formulations. That's like sharpening a pencil to a needle's point. As soon as you try to use it, it breaks. In science at least, knowledge is found in new questions, which must always be answered with something less than mathematical precision."

"It's a vast web of approximations."

"Yes, good approximations. And that's precisely its power."

"So science is really the opposite of religion, in the sense that religion goes directly to the source and admits of no approximations."

Aunt Krede picked up this thread. "Yes," she said, "and art blends the two because art encompasses the unutterable in all its purity and the commonplace in all its banality. Even the axioms of mathematics have to pass a test of usefulness, but in art some form is tossed out there as experience, like raw meat, and in each case you have to decide for yourself what it is and what it might mean. As for the mundane, its metaphors cover experience like an aphoristic collage. A new broom sweeps clean and you should dance with the one whut brung ya. A stitch in time saves nine and out with the old, in with the new. Any circumstance you name, there's a popular wisdom about it. Therefore people can understand it. Rightly or wrongly. Think about writing, Ashmead. How *do* you write about anything? Only by slathering it with metaphors. That's how an invisible idea is

made visible.”

“Tarring the form with reality.”

“Exactly,” she said. “With pigments, or words, or deeds.”

18

Night Rainbow

I hadn't pursued Marie's invitation to call, despite the glowing amber ghosts of her eyes and the prickly temptation she'd aroused in me, because of my still vibrant hopes for a letter, a sign, a sigh, a sweet surrender from Hanna. This was idiotic, of course. If a love affair is a little homologous lifetime, this one had spent all its vital days that afternoon at the Cove. It'd been almost two months and I hadn't heard a thing. She seemed a gossamer dream adrift in forgotten space.

One afternoon in mid-December, when howling hyperborean gusts flung tiny wasps of sleet from the gray skies, Mr. Hudson slid a lavender envelope toward me across the counter, face down, taking care not to put his fingers on the faint violet lipstick impression of puckered lips that crowned its flap like the waxen signet of a wanton queen.

“Came in our mail,” he said. His ears wiggled from the strain of suppressing a grin.

I looked at the front of it. *Ashmead*, it said, in large, florid, purple script. A heart was scribed behind it, pierced by an elaborate arrow.

“Must be from Hanna,” I said. I knew it wouldn't be seemly for me to rip it open, read it, kiss it, smell it, or stuff it down the front of my pants right then and there. But I was powerfully tempted.

“Coming home tomorrow,” he said, grinning his big grin with his big teeth and his ears as florid as her flourishes.

My eyes must've lit up.

He handed me my change. "I hope it's good news, whatever it is," he said. "But remember this, Ashmead. Sometimes when people travel far away and come back again they go through a time warp. Sometimes they're not the same people you remember. Sometimes you're not the same people they remember."

"You can't go home again."

"Well, you can go there, but it won't be there."

"And from its perspective, somebody came there, but it wasn't you."

He smiled.

"I've changed, too," I said.

"You're still a guy, aren't you?"

"Yeah."

"Be careful."

During the walk home through the stinging winter squall Hanna's missive stayed safely dry under my shirt, tucked in the waistband of my levis. Yet the letter itself turned out to be something less than the faintly fragrant envelope that had tantalized my eager senses. She'd be home soon for Christmas vacation, just as Mr. Hudson had said. There was to be a party Friday, and she wanted me to take her. Love and kisses, etc.

I picked her up at the appointed hour. She radiated all the sultry confidence I'd remembered, her long dark hair a sleek cowl beneath which eyes of burnt caramel and lips of Tyrian purple glowed. Her upper torso, more zaftig than in my memory, was sheathed in a rich blue satin basque which flared over her hips. From beneath it flowed a blue velvet tapestry fluted in Corinthian grandeur that extended to just below her knees. She carried a silver-framed indigo clutch bag that matched her heels. Just before we stepped outside she draped her bare licentious shoulders in a shimmering shawl of glossy fur as black as the irises of

her eyes.

I wondered if she felt embarrassed by my outfit: jeans and dress shirt, absent even a tie. "I didn't know it was formal," I said.

"It isn't," she replied. "You look fine."

But when we got to the car, she said, "Same old car, eh?" And with somewhat ostentatious effort she gathered the soft folds of her flowing blue skirt into a heap upon her lap.

I may have looked fine but I wasn't dressed like anyone else in the sprawling house of the host, who wore a gray pin-striped suit and an old-school tie pulled slightly askew. Mostly the males wore sport coats and slacks and many of the females were only slightly less regally attired than Hanna. The buzz of conversation was loud and accented constantly with nervous, obsequious laughter. Hanna seemed to know everyone, and conversely.

Before long I was standing in the kitchen, sipping a beer from a dark green bottle, gazing thoughtlessly at the vacant space in the next room where I'd last seen Hanna as she meandered from greeting to grasp among the milling crowd. The host, whose name I'd already forgotten, approached me with an iced drink the color of tea clinking in his hand. "Hey," he said. "Abandoned already?"

I shrugged. "Just resting," I said.

"Yeah," he said. "Have you...what's your name again?"

"Ashmead."

"Ashmead? Know where Hanna is, Ashmead?"

I shrugged again and pointed toward the adjacent room. "Nope. Last I saw her she was wriggling her way through the crowd."

He laughed. "She's a slippery bugger, eh?"

"Too slick for me," I agreed.

After about a half-hour I decided to slip off myself. I looked around for

Hanna but at first I couldn't find her. It was a big house. I was upstairs inspecting what appeared to be an imitation Jasper Johns alphabet-block painting when she and four or five other people emerged from the bathroom.

"Wanna blow, Ash?" she asked me, her eyes a bit glazed.

"I was just checking out the art," I replied. "But as a matter of fact I was thinking of rolling on down the track."

"No? Okay, then, I can get a ride from somebody I'm sure."

"You'll be okay?"

"Hey," she said, extending her arms palms up with a shrug and sweeping the gesture toward the others, who were rapidly disappearing down the stairs.

"These are my people, babe. I can ride all night if I want to."

"Sorry," I said. "It's just not my kind of scene."

She took my arm as we walked toward the staircase. "It's the high road out of Crondoc, Ash," she said.

I had to admit, as I drove through the rain and the darkness beside the Perpend, churning, tumbling, almost palpable in its café-au-lait cascade from Crondoc down to Artesia and beyond, that I was on the low road, and what's more, that I much preferred being there. When I turned into our driveway I felt strangely serene. Waiting on the little porch, her silhouette faintly illuminated by the light from inside, her limber lower torso tucked into the old wicker rocker Mr. Kuntzler had given us, her boots on the railing and hands folded behind her head, was Marie.

The thundering of the river, not a hundred feet away, was muffled by a thousand veils of softly falling rain.

"I need a ride," she said. "That is, if you're not too depressed."

I laughed as rivulets of water dripped from my eyebrows, nose, lips and chin. "Never felt better in my life," I said, and I was a little startled to realize that

that was true.

I checked in with my mom, who seemed unconcerned at my leaving again after ten o'clock, and Marie and I returned to the night for a half-hour journey back toward Artesia and then off onto a spur road that ran beside another creek to a small clearing where there were several large, open sheds behind a small cottage, dimly lit and evidently unoccupied. In one of the sheds, attended by several figures and their dancing shadows, a warm yellow light leapt and flickered against the sodden darkness.

It was a foundry, she'd told me. She introduced me to her teacher, a bearded sandy-haired Swede named Svet Thuremein, and two younger students, a man and a woman. Marie bantered easily with them as she rolled up her sleeves and donned a long, heavy leather apron. She and Svet discussed briefly the mechanical properties they expected would result from the bronze ingots and scraps with which she was preparing to charge the crucible.

The crucible was a large egg-shaped bucket made of refractory clay, suspended in a removable steel collar from an overhead trolley by heavy chains strung through pulleys. As it sat on the floor near the fire pit Marie carefully filled it with the metal she'd selected. When she was ready the four of them raised the heavy vessel in its sling, pulled it slowly along the overhead track, and lowered it into the pit. Then the fire, fed from a huge tank of propane, was pumped up in earnest, augmented by a roaring torrent of impeller-driven air, engulfing the crucible and its contents.

They examined her molds, which had been built up over the original wax figure, itself separated into parts for the casting, with a quick-drying slurry of fireclay about the consistency of pancake batter and now hard as stone. Finally satisfied that each piece had adequate drain and chimney vents, they pulled on their gloves and lowered their plastic face shields, and, using long steel tongs,

carefully placed the molds on the floor of a large ancillary oven, already so hot its firebrick lining glowed orange, in order to melt and expel the wax.

While she and Svet, faces aglow in the ruddy light, watched and talked and waited beside the inferno, we other three stood by the edge of the platform, twenty feet from the two-thousand-degree air, glad of some relief provided by the cold air and softly falling rain. Now and then Marie stepped aside to check her thermometers or peer into the oven. The molds as well as the bronze had to be at just the right temperature to ensure a smooth flow. Once or twice she skimmed some slag from the top of the molten metal in the crucible.

The molds, now hollow, were removed from the oven and arrayed in a row on the sand near the fire pit, their throats agape like the eager mouths of hatchling birds. Shortly afterward the bronze was hot enough, fluid enough, a bright yellow liquid radiant as the core of autumn's evening sun, almost painful to look at, and Marie was ready to begin pouring the new sculpture which she'd been preparing for more than two months.

It was exacting work which had to be completed before the bronze cooled too much, and with Svet's help she guided the crucible along the steel tracks from which it was suspended like a rufescent hummingbird, pausing over each opening just long enough for its lambent yellow tongue to penetrate the delicate hollows within the mold, and Marie's sweat-streaked arm rippled with a sure effort against the tipping bar, pouring the fiery metal as quickly and intently as if she were filling coffee cups at a buffet, seldom spilling even a drop.

Finally it was done. "A perfect pour," Svet said, and Marie grinned. The four of them spent most of an hour cleaning everything up while I looked over the sketches she had shown me. The central figure was a sleekly muscular, notably feminine angel, its great feathered wings beginning their powerful downward sweep as it rose aloft from tiptoe, cradling in one sinewy forearm the

limp and wounded body of a young man, and holding out defiantly, in the other, a broken sword. The newly cast pieces, of which there were about a dozen, would be left to cool in the molds overnight. Then they'd be released and all their sutures joined by welds and smoothed away.

It was almost two o'clock by the time Svet and the other two students loaded their tools into his pickup, said their goodbyes, and were gone.

Marie removed her leather cap and shook her long hair down, her face wreathed in an impish grin. "C'mon," she said, reaching out a grimy hand. "I need a shower."

She fished a key from her jeans as we walked through the whispering mist to the little cottage under the firs.

19

Humpty Dumpty

A cold snap, punctuated by periods of freezing rain, settled on Crondoc the following day. Welding the bronze in icy temperatures would be a tricky business, so Marie decided to wait for warmer weather. One evening, shortly after a late supper, I walked gingerly down the dark and ice-caked road toward Hudson's store. Marie had gone to her sculpture class at Guillemot with Billy, but she'd said she'd be back by ten and she'd invited me to stop by.

I didn't know, of course, as I made my way carefully along, that the frail but still-feisty Miz Bubby, who seldom left her house after nightfall, was at that very moment creating her own brand of treacherous footing in Mr. Hudson's store.

According to Bobby, whom she'd impressed as her chauffeur on this improbable night, she'd been in a foul mood all day, complaining of an irreducible headache in response to which she'd consumed her entire supply of analgesics, which she apparently believed him incapable of properly

replenishing without her personal oversight.

As she'd stood at the counter, counting nickels and pennies from her change purse to pay for the medications, she'd begun sniffing the air, as if she'd gotten a sudden whiff of dog pucky. She'd inquired, or perhaps better said she'd demanded of Mr. Hudson to know what "that disgusting stench" was.

As it happened, Mr. Hudson had newly stocked, at Aunt Krede's request, a box of hand-rolled Costa Rican cigars, and, shortly before the Bubbys had arrived, he'd been sampling one in the back room. This he revealed and made effusive apologies for his inadvertent olfactory offense.

But the mention of Aunt Krede's name, Bobby told me later, had launched Miz Bubby into a dithering tirade about the moral disintegration of Mose McMorey, "that awful man," whom she considered a pervert more repulsive than maggots, and the furthermore dubious ancestry of the Kredes, their general unsuitability as residents of a decent community, and the very questionable character of anyone who catered to them.

She'd counted coins all the faster and more emphatically as these insidious charges had cascaded from her wizened lips, and then suddenly, as she'd reached the requisite total, she'd smacked the counter with her cane, making a sound like a gunshot.

Outside, just thirty feet away, I'd heard that sound clearly, and its shot-like timbre startled me, but just then she bolted out the door, waving her cane, scolding him over her shoulder. "We aim to save this community, Henry Hudson, and you'd best not get in the way." Then the screen door had slammed behind her and she'd taken perhaps two steps toward me when she slipped, pitched sideways, and more or less somersaulted off the low porch onto the frozen black gravel where she landed with an audible crunch. I figured she was dead.

At the very moment Miz Bubby had been exiting the store, flinging her vituperative spittle at Mr. Hudson, Aunt Krede had driven up in Lem Roy's battered old peasoup-green Peugeot. She got to Miz Bubby, who was lying on her back sputtering and writhing like a turtle, before either Bobby or I could. In a way, this was just as well, because, as Aunt Krede knelt down to assess the old crone's situation, Miz Bubby smacked her across the cheek with that cane, which made a noise almost as loud as the counterstroke had. Aunt Krede's wig flew off and she seemed suspended in space for a moment before she sat down very hard and rolled onto one elbow, shaking her head, holding her free hand against the side of her face.

I retrieved her wig and Bobby rushed to his grandmother's side, which I thought was a bit foolhardy under the circumstances but she only shrieked at him, "Get an ambulance! I'm dying!" while Mr. Hudson, in the doorway, looked worriedly out at the whole bizarre scene as if space aliens had fallen from the sky onto the glistening black parking apron outside his store.

Aunt Krede assured me she was all right as she settled the wig again onto her bald head, which was not easy because of the pain, and Mr. Hudson went over to check on Miz Bubby, who welcomed his solicitation by ordering him to get his "damn dumbo ears" back in the store and call 9-1-1. As it happened, Mrs. Hudson, who volunteered as an EMT with the fire department, had already done this and was able, after a few minutes, to bring Miz Bubby under some semblance of control. Mr. Hudson brought blankets and they made her as comfortable as they could while we waited for the ambulance. Aunt Krede and Bobby and I congregated on the porch and then Mr. Hudson brought a towel full of ice for Aunt Krede's swollen cheek and rapidly blackening eye.

"Pardon my saying so," Aunt Krede slurred to Bobby, doing her best to smile, "but that old broad damn near killed me."

“Ah,” said Mr. Hudson. “I thought she was knighting you.”

Billy returned with Marie shortly after ten. Bobby had taken Miz Bubby to the hospital after she’d refused to get in the ambulance. Aunt Krede had gone home. Once again all the stories were told. After Billy left, Marie and I said goodnight to the Hudsons. When she invited me upstairs, Mr. Kuntzler rose to retire to his room on the first floor and informed me there was a pot of hot cocoa on the stove if I wanted some. In the dimly lit kitchen I found and filled two cups, topped each one off with marshmallows, sprinkled on some nutmeg, and carefully carried them up the narrow staircase. Marie was sprawled face-down on her bed in her stocking feet, fast asleep.

A few nights later, in the wee hours, a softball-sized rock was thrown through one of the store’s front windows. Nobody heard a thing.

20

Santa Krede

A few nights before Christmas, my mom and I had set up the tree in the living room and strung the lights, and she’d hung a wreath of red-berried boughs and bows on the front door. She lit some candles, tacked a sprig of mistletoe over the entrance to the kitchen nook, and busied herself making eggnog while I judiciously distributed a wild congeries of shiny ornaments among the green branches of the noble fir. Christmas music echoed through the house and neither of us noticed the Kredes’ Peugeot sputtering to a stop outside. We both jumped when the doorbell rang.

“Omigod,” my mom laughed as she opened the door, “it’s Santa Krede and the green elf.”

Aunt Krede was dressed in a classic Santa suit, complete with a silky white wig and beard. Although the beard hid most of her face and she’d used a fair

amount of pancake makeup, the skin around her eye was obviously a purplish-yellow color. Lem Roy, his dark eyes dancing impishly, the delicate wrinkles of a grin playing across his bronzed countenance, wore a green cap and a carmine-red wool frock, as capacious as a poncho, that hung over dark green pantaloons and bright green elfin booties.

"Merry Christmas!" said Santa Krede through her wavy white beard, and we, laughing, returned the greeting and welcomed them in.

I turned down the music while they exclaimed politely over how cheerful our tree looked. Lem Roy shed his cap and cape, revealing a red flannel shirt. They said they'd been to the orphanage in Artesia, where Lem Roy had staged a puppet show and Santa Krede had listened attentively to the kids' Christmas wishes. After the children had gone off to bed, the Kredes had stayed awhile with Tom and Sally, who more or less ran the place, and helped wrap some of the presents.

"I don't know Tom and Sally," my mom said, retreating to the kitchen to finish the eggnog so she could share it with our unexpected guests.

"They live up Dingle Creek road," Lem Roy said. "They've lived here forever. They don't socialize much."

"They had two kids of their own," Aunt Krede continued. "Twins, I think. They were killed one night by a drunk driver while they were walking home from the store. This was a long time ago, before the Hudsons came. Anyway, they've worked at the orphanage ever since. He makes toys for them and she bakes birthday cakes and stuff. The kids adore them."

"Listen," she said, turning to me. "You don't mind if I switch hair, do you? This damn thing is hot."

"Sure," I said as she pulled off the red cap and the beard.

"I guess my bald head's no secret around here anymore," she laughed,

pulling an auburn wig from her pocket, fluffing the hair out a bit, and tugging it snugly over her bumpy cranium.

The bruise on her cheek was now more evident. "How's your head?" I asked.

She shrugged. "Fine. As you can see, it's pretty bony."

"That wig saved your ass," Lem Roy grinned. Then he got up and went to help my mom pour the eggnog.

"What happened to your hair?" I asked. "If you don't mind my asking."

She smiled, flashing that gold tooth. "Oh, I got caught in a little industrial accident," she said. "After that, it just never grew back."

"A nuclear accident?"

Lem Roy interrupted to inquire whether she wanted rum in her eggnog. "Well, sure," Aunt Krede replied. Then, turning again to me, she asked, "How'd you know that?"

I shrugged. "Bennie told me," I said. "Well, actually, he didn't say nuclear. I just guessed."

"At first I thought I'd just let it be," she explained. "Bald is bald. But too many people mistook me for a guy. It was very insulting, me being as gloriously feminine as I am and all, so I went with the wig."

"Right," Lem Roy laughed as he brought in two giant snifters of nog and handed her one. "Now they think you're a guy in drag."

My mom followed with nogs for herself and me.

"Hey," I complained, "mine's not amplified."

"We figured you were amplified enough all by yourself," Lem Roy said.

"Cheers," said Aunt Krede, and we all hoisted our glasses.

"Feel free to smoke if you want to," my mom offered, setting an ashtray on the coffee table.

"Your gentleman friend might object," Aunt Krede said. Then she glanced at me. "I mean, your *other* gentleman friend."

"I don't think so," my mom countered. "He knows which side his bed is buttered on."

"Uh-huh. Well, I see where Ashmead gets his sense of humor."

I looked at my mom. "I didn't know you even owned an ashtray," I said.

She smiled knowingly as a pinkish tinge swept through her cheeks and disappeared. "Go ahead," she said to Aunt Krede. "I like the fragrance of it. And Lem Roy, tell us about the puppet show."

Lem Roy laughed. "It was nutty," he said. "We did *A Child's Christmas in Wales*. Mary Ann designed the set, which is really clever because the scenes jump all over the place. Then the action has to happen in time with Dylan Thomas's reading, which was playing on tape. And of course it was never meant to be performed. We had Dylan as a child and his buddy Jimmy Prothero throwing cotton snowballs and plastic snow falling and Mrs. Prothero and Mr. Prothero and the postman knocking and children skating and the uncles nodding off and even Saint Bernards. It was pretty hectic trying to get the right things going at the right time, and after awhile the kids were laughing their heads off, as much at me as at the story. Mary Ann managed all the sound effects: the fire gong and the wolves and the bells and the fiddling."

"The singing was the worst part," Aunt Krede said.

Lem Roy turned to her. "You sounded just like a half-snoekered Welsh washerwoman. At least the kids thought so."

"I'm sorry I missed it," my mom said.

"Well," Aunt Krede began, lighting her cigar, "it was really quite delightful, except for the singing. And by the way, I'd like to invite you to join a little group of women I'm gathering to go spend some time painting outdoors, once the

weather's agreeable."

"Sounds like fun. But I don't know anything about painting."

Aunt Krede smiled a big smile and withdrew the cigar from her lips with fore and middle fingers extended, sparkling with rings. "I don't, either, Priscilla. I just enjoy doing it. Sometimes something comes of it, sometimes not. My theory is, if you put down enough paint, sooner or later something will show up."

"I'm not so sure."

"Well, Etta Hudson's coming with us, she says. And Annette Authore's going to do it, too, I think, although she claims to be deathly afraid of the outdoors. Look, we'll play it like Marie Antoinette. We'll wait for a perfect weekend, when it's warm and sunny, and we'll pack some food and go up in the Amaraingy and find a nice meadow or something and have a picnic and spend a few peaceful hours enjoying ourselves. If you'd rather, you can knit, or read. If you want to paint, I'll supply everything."

"Well, sure, I'd love to."

"Good. Well, we should be going. What'd you make your very first cake out of?"

My mom thought about this for a moment and then she chuckled to herself. "Mud," she said.

"Me, too," Aunt Krede said, grinning broadly. As she rose she held up her empty glass. "Excellent nog," she said. She rinsed out her glass in the sink and as she returned she noticed the mistletoe dangling over the archway. She reached up to touch the little green berries. "Local harvest?"

"Yeah," I said. "It's in all the old oaks. Just knock it down with a rock. I've got more than I need if you want some."

"Sure. The old-timers used to make birdlime out of it."

"What's birdlime?" I asked.

"It's a paste you make out of the berries. You spread it on twigs and branches and the birds get stuck in it and then you can catch them."

I took some sprigs from the refrigerator and put them in a sack for her.

"Thanks."

"Sure."

"The druids believed it had mystical powers," she said as we walked toward the door.

"Yeah," said Lem Roy, shrugging into his vivid red cape, "but what did they know?"

"They knew where the sun would come up."

"Did they think they'd get kissed if they stood under it?"

"The sun?"

"No, the mistletoe. And we're beside the sun, not under it."

She smiled. "I don't know, but they made tea from the berries and drank it. Maybe *then* they got kissed."

"I doubt it's worth the trouble," Lem Roy said as my mom opened the door. Scintillating in the amber porchlight a swirling horde of tiny snowflakes tumbled through the soft night breeze.

"Hope it snows on Christmas," I said.

"Well, it's snowing now," my mom said, "and Santa's here. What more do you want?"

I laughed and shrugged. "Snow on Christmas," I replied.

But it rained instead.

21

Lest Auld Acquaintance Be for Naught

The weather turned colder in January but the drizzling rains, reprised as

snowfall in the higher elevations, continued unabated. The Perpend was in full voice, in its "bright bass prime," as Dylan Thomas might have said, a fulvous fury up to the gunwales of its banks and roaring like a tornado.

Christmas and New Year's had passed uneventfully and Hanna had returned to college without my having seen her again. I'd taken Marie to the foundry on New Year's Day to see her finished sculpture; it was magnificent. But she'd already moved on to other projects. For her, she'd said, lust was worthy in its own right and neither a prelude nor an adjunct to anything else. I respected that although I didn't really understand it. It made me self-conscious again about having come from Kansas.

When I arrived at the store it was a few minutes before ten, the Hudsons' usual closing time on a Sunday evening. Mr. Hudson unlocked the door to let me in. Mrs. Hudson and the children had gone to grandma's house for a few days and he and Mr. Kuntzler were planning a quiet evening of cribbage, cigars and rye whiskey in the back room. To my delight, they invited me to join them.

"Hi, Ashmead," Mr. Kuntzler looked up as I came into the little storage room, where a small almost-square oak table sat among huge plastic bags filled with empty aluminum cans. A carton of blackening bananas sat open on the floor and maybe a dozen braided ropes of garlic hung from the ceiling. Mr. Hudson brought me a chair and set another double shotglass on the table.

"Hi, Mr. Kuntzler. Happy New Year!"

He poured me a shot and we all clinked glasses. "August," he said.

"Or Au-gust," Mr. Hudson said, emphasizing the second syllable.

"Right, and he's Awn-ri."

I tossed back my shot and was gripped by an involuntary shudder as the fiery liquid spread through the tissues of my mouth and throat. "Whee-ew," I grimaced. "So, who's winning? Au-gust or Awn-ri?"

"Serve yourself," Mr. Hudson said as he dealt, gripping his cigar between his large square teeth. "He's slaughtering me."

Mr. Kuntzler picked up his cards as they fell in front of him. "You staying dry down there?"

The roar of the river was audible, I suddenly realized, although I hadn't been hearing it until then. "So far," I said.

"If it gets in here, it's all over," Mr. Hudson said. "We'll have to go live in a packing crate."

Mr. Kuntzler threw two cards into Mr. Hudson's crib. "It won't," he said. "Not this time, anyway."

"So you say."

"So I say." He lay down a card. "Fifteen for two."

I poured myself another shot. Mr. Kuntzler pushed his glass toward me across the stained oak tabletop. I refilled it. Mr. Hudson waved me off. "Want a cigar?" he asked.

"Sure."

He pointed out the box. Mr. Kuntzler's cigar lay cold in its ashtray, a long ash betraying the time it had smoldered there.

"Might as well go for the gold," I said.

Mr. Kuntzler completed his annihilation of Mr. Hudson, who punctiliously paid him twenty-three cents. "That's for your birthday," he said.

Mr. Kuntzler laughed. "That's probably the best present I'll get," he replied, relighting his cigar, his hand trembling slightly as he held the match to its truncated ashen end.

We decided to switch to hearts so I could play. Mr. Hudson shuffled the cards while I sipped at my whiskey. Mr. Kuntzler cut and I started the deal.

"So what is it this time, August?" Mr. Hudson asked. "A hundred?"

"Seventy-three," Mr. Kuntzler said, picking up cards.

"Jeez. I'm twenty years younger than you are and twice as old."

"It's the sex."

I tossed the extra card face down into the center of the table.

"*What* sex?" Mr. Hudson inquired.

"See, I just think about it. Well, not even that. I think when I was young I got fixated on the wrong thing."

"You got fixated on driftwood animals?"

Mr. Kuntzler smiled.

"No, I got fixated on young women. Then when I got old they didn't want anything to do with me."

"Which way are we passing?"

"Left, right, across," Mr. Hudson said.

I passed him three cards. "There's no across," I observed.

"Young people are such smartasses," he commented with a grin.

"Yep," Mr. Kuntzler agreed, passing me three. "You grow out of it, though."

"We're right, too," I said.

"Uh-huh," said Mr. Kuntzler, examining his cigar. "Youth is when you think you are who you think you are."

"When you think everything is what you think it is," Mr. Hudson expanded.

I had a great hand. After a few leads I started collecting hearts. Mr. Hudson poured himself another shot. Mr. Kuntzler tossed the queen of spades onto one of my tricks. The two of them had only four hearts left. I had the top three and a few losers in other suits. I led the ace and Mr. Hudson played the deuce. Mr. Kuntzler played a club.

"Shit," I said. Mr. Hudson had the jack and two. I was screwed. He gave the jack to Mr. Kuntzler and led a small one back to me.

"Youth eats the big one," Mr. Kuntzler observed, his blue eyes twinkling.

I chomped on my cigar and wrote down the score as the smoke swirled across my eyes: Mr. Hudson, zero. Mr. Kuntzler, one. Me, twenty-five.

Mr. Kuntzler shuffled the cards and pushed them to me. "Seen Marie lately?"

I cut for Mr. Hudson. "We went up to the foundry a week or so ago."

"Not since then?"

"Huh-uh."

Mr. Hudson glanced up at Mr. Kuntzler as he dealt. "I thought you were hot for Hanna," he said.

"I am," I said. I believe I may have blushed. "Platonically," I added quickly.

There was a long silence. They looked at each other and then at me. "Marie knows how I feel about Hanna," I said. "And Hanna's only interested in getting out of Crondoc. Marie and I are friends on a practical level, and Hanna and I are friends on an imaginary level, which mainly exists in my mind."

"Gives me a new appreciation of old age," Mr. Kuntzler said, sliding three cards toward Mr. Hudson.

"Even marriage," Mr. Hudson agreed.

"You guys are merciless."

Mr. Kuntzler told a funny story about the time, shortly after her husband Eli died of liver failure, Miz Bubby had suggested marriage to him. "She still had a few petals of youth hanging on her in those days," he said. "But I'd been a single man all my life. And she had a lot of burrs under her saddle, which we saw the other night."

"Bees in her bonnet," Mr. Hudson added.

"Bats in her belfry," I chimed in.

"Well," Mr. Kuntzler began, cocking his head to one side as if to remember, "the crazy part I could live with maybe, but I thought she was kind of mean-spirited, too, as if the world could never bow low enough to suit her." He chuckled. "I could've been King of Crondoc. That's what she said: 'Marry me and you'll be King of Crondoc.'" He laughed again and knocked off another whiskey.

"The kingdom came," Mr. Hudson summarized, "and you missed it."

"Yep, and damn glad of it."

We all drank to that, whatever it was.

"So," I inquired as I dealt the cards, a bespittled stub of unlit cigar burning its way through my tongue as I bit down on it, "what's her problem with Aunt Krede?"

"Beats me," Mr. Hudson said.

Mr. Kuntzler regarded his cards. "It's all about money," he said. "There's enough timber in the Amarainy to keep the wheels turning for another ten years. That means roads and rents and a ride in the rumbleseat for the right people."

"And groceries," Mr. Hudson observed.

"But a lot of the terrain is tough and the good timber's sparse and scattered, so the deal's still up in the air." Mr. Kuntzler discarded a heart onto a trick of Mr. Hudson's, whose ears grew rosier whenever he was about to try to shoot the moon and seemed pretty rosy then.

Two tricks later Mr. Kuntzler unexpectedly gave me the queen of spades. He grinned at me. "Well," he said, "somebody had to stop him."

"Sacrifice me for the common good, eh?"

"Yeah," he said. "Something like that." Then he expelled through his nose a long susurrant sigh. "Everything for them depends on keeping the community in

line. They have a united front and they have the human resources they need. Most people's livelihoods depend on them some way or other, and most people understand that and accept it. It's always been that way. Always. For a hundred years, at least.

"The Kredes don't fit into that. They don't come from here and they're not tied to here. I'm sure they must remind her of Mose. Mose fought them tooth and nail over that dam, which if it weren't for, by the way, we'd all be under water tonight. Anyway, I think that scares them."

"The ghost of Mose," Mr. Hudson said.

"Yep. The ghost of Mose."

The curse of the cards, and my subduction under Mr. Hudson's crafty coups and Mr. Kuntzler's persistent disinclination to personal sacrifice, ground inexorably on. The whiskey ran out and Mr. Hudson remembered another pint which he'd squirreled away somewhere, and then *it* was mostly gone. Mr. Hudson had another cigar but Mr. Kuntzler switched to cigarettes. In the tiny room, laden with blue smoke, tinged with the odors of whiskey and tobacco, ripe bananas and garlic, we began to see one another as vaguely as we were seen. The evening was winding down.

"I got drunk in here one night with the guy I bought this place from," Mr. Hudson said, flicking a card in the middle as he dealt the last hand.

"Flowers," Mr. Kuntzler said.

"Yeah, Flowers. He said Meerson built an addition on the house where that girl lived, and then they built a fenced yard that was really a pen where they kept her, even at night."

"So I heard."

"Was that true?"

"I heard."

“And the old man and the old lady were both drunks?”

“He was a maniac. But he was a hell of a catskinner, and he was a deacon in the church. I saw this girl a couple times. She was shy as a whipped dog. She wouldn’t look at you, but she had great big wide eyes like a wild animal.”

“How’d she get here?” I asked.

Mr. Kuntzler passed me three perfect cards. He shrugged. “Want to know what I think?”

“Sure.”

“I think they figured they could use these people as servants, and maybe concubines. Of course, they claimed they were rescuing her, giving her a Christian upbringing, making opportunities for her kind and all that. Somehow they got money for this from some church organization. They had big plans, I think. They were going to get more. I think that was the idea. Of course the Mose thing queered it all and there never was another one.”

“Thank God,” Mr. Hudson said.

Mr. Kuntzler shook his head slowly, as if to say, I thought, he still couldn’t believe it’d all ever happened.

After the first few leads I had every trick, cold, and I shot the moon for the only time that evening. I still lost, of course.

We poured the last of the whiskey, maybe three fingers each, and once again toasted each other and the new year. I was pretty surprised at how difficult it was for me to maintain my balance when I stood up.

As I walked home along the road from Mr. Kuntzler’s house, to which I’d accompanied him, or he me, I thought about the line Aunt Krede had quoted me that autumn evening by the river, about time holding me green and dying, maybe because that was sort of how I felt. At a low place in the road, near the driveway that went up to Beezle’s asylum, I inadvertently slobbered through a

pool of icy water.

A few minutes later, when I got home, by the pale gleam of my flashlight I could see the water's reflection in the grass all across our yard. It lapped idly against the concrete stem wall of the house. I stayed awake most of the night so my mom could sleep in peace. By morning's light it'd receded a little and, although the Thrall School was closed due to high water on the roads, she went to work. I lazed around most of the day, groggy and enervated.

22

Lilliputian Devils

The crocuses appeared, first the yellow ones and then a few purple accents among the green spikes of the incipient daffodils. The weather got colder and colder although the clear blue sky admitted a flood of sunshine which, when it cloaked you in its warmth, made the advent of spring seem ever so near.

The river, so much in the thrall of its dam, settled quickly back into its accustomed channel. Soon another front moved in and for a day or two it snowed, and afterward the world resembled the interior of a great pastoral cathedral portrayed in tinted blacks and white. Then one day a ponderous atmospheric amoeba of arctic air crept down and settled over Crondoc. The thermometer plummeted to fifteen below zero and stayed there. I remember waking at first gray light one icy morning with a strangely ominous sensation: the silence was immense. I went out on the porch. An eerie calm suffused the valley, as if the flow of time itself had been stilled.

The river was frozen over. I walked through the crusty snow in my bare feet down to its edge. I heaved a boulder the size of my head out into the center, maybe thirty feet away. A spray of water spurted up but the offending stone sat proudly on the ice. The Perpend was a glacier.

After breakfast my mom and I walked and skidded across the ice and then turned our attention to augmenting the mounds of straw and manure we'd spread over the water line that ran from our well to the house. We were in the midst of this when Bennie's cruiser drifted past our house and its tires slowly traced a twin path up the Kredes' frost-encrusted driveway. Wagger's barking seemed to crystallize in the icy air.

Bennie'd been up there more than half an hour when curiosity got the better of me and I called, ostensibly to see if I could help. Aunt Krede said, "Nope," but invited me up.

Wagger led me to the three of them, standing among a chaos of tools and paint and wounded puppets strewn across the floor and benches of the shop of the myrmecorium.

"Didn't the dog bark?" Bennie wanted to know.

"She was upstairs, in Lem Roy's room," Aunt Krede said. "And it doesn't look like they made a lot of noise."

Bennie wrapped the carrying strap around his camera and took a last look around the myrmecorium itself. "You're sure nothing weird escaped?" he asked.

"I'm sure that half the ones that were exposed to the cold have died," Aunt Krede said. "I may lose all the raiders. None of them can survive these temperatures in the open. So, yes, I'm sure."

Bennie looked at her. "Sorry," he said. "Sure as hell, somebody'll ask me."

She shrugged.

The four of us, with Wagger trotting in the lead, walked over to Bennie's car. Aunt Krede apologized for bringing him out in such frigid weather.

"I'll keep my ears open," he said.

Aunt Krede had hot cocoa on the stove. She wanted to paint for a while and decompress, as she put it, before she went back out to finish cleaning up the

mess. Lem Roy had carefully gathered the pieces of Petrouchka into a shoe box. He carried them into the house with us and spread them out on a cookie tray.

"The river's frozen over," I said as she poured hot chocolate into three large mugs.

"If I had my ice skates it'd be a good time to skate out to sea," she responded. "Except of course I can't skate and it's no day for the beach."

"What do you do for music when you're on the road?" I asked her.

"Are you kidding? With CDs, music is easy. Painting is easy, unless you're lugging your past around." She looked at Lem Roy, who sat hunched over the big oaken table, carefully reconstructing Petrouchka's splintered head with tweezers and crazy glue. "I imagine cows would be hard."

Lem Roy smiled. "Getting 'em across the freeway is the hard part," he said.

Aunt Krede cued up *Aida*. "People choose such minuscule fiends to bedevil themselves with nowadays," she said. "It must be because they have such wishy-washy gods."

"Sure," Lem Roy said. "Big muscular gods always have big muscular opponents. Christians have to make do with Satan, whose most notable characteristic is his delitescence. He's like a mirage. Only experts with more eyes than flies can tell whether he's there or not."

"I think it's because they have adumbrated minds," I said.

"There something oddly inhuman about the whole idea. It's both cryptomystic and naively mundane. It's very Old Testament. Good and evil are both beyond characterization and yet the struggle between them has a concrete, physical quality. A golden calf, a pillar of salt, a parting sea. It's like superstition portrayed in the objective universe."

"Outside the life of the mind."

"Exactly."

"That's why they're so eager to manage the assets of the state."

"Sure, because they need worldly power to fight corporeal demons."

"I thought we'd walked that road in the Dark Ages," I said.

Aunt Krede contemplated her canvas as she slowly and repeatedly drew the soft bristles of a sable brush through a cloth soaked in turpentine. She laughed contemptuously. "But they were dark, so who knows? And obviously even people who do know aren't necessarily convinced."

As Aida and Radames swelled and swooned to their glorious denouement in the tomb of forbidden love, while I followed along in the libretto and Lem Roy painstakingly reconstructed his tormented clown, Aunt Krede began a Kirchneresque Guernica of twisted and broken puppet-people staggering in labor beneath the leering visages of vague gray forms with long, gnarled sticklike fingers. Then, seeming both sated and dissatisfied, she set her brushes down and went into the kitchen, where she heated some soup and made sandwiches and invited us to eat.

Lem Roy took a look at her canvas before he sat down again. "Giacometti meets Fellini," he said.

She laughed. "I'm not so sure," she said. "Maybe I have it upside-down."

After lunch we strode through the crystalline air beneath the brilliant afternoon sun, over the crisp, hard earth to the shop building. Although the temperature inside the myrmecorium was nearly restored to the requisite seventy degrees, it was still eight below zero outside.

"I don't understand why anyone would do this," I said, gathering the scattered tools and puppet pieces from the floor.

"Well," Lem Roy said, "they were here first. That means they're the Indians and we're the *other* Indians, if you know what I mean."

"Yes," I protested, "but there aren't millions of you and a mere handful of

them.”

He smiled. “It only takes a sudden sound, a whiff of smoke, a flash of light to waken the dreamer and shatter the illusion.”

Aunt Krede wasn’t buying it. “Life here’s not that fragile,” she said as she swept up the glass in the back room.

Lem Roy held the still-unattached jaw in place beneath Petrouchka’s crazily sutured skull. He walked mischievously to the doorway where she could see him and wiggled the puppet’s mandible as he affected a stage voice of chiding reproach.

“Easy for you to say, tsigane woman. Your head’s still in one piece.”

23

Two By Two

The polar air mass lay over the valley as if it were a soporific beast that had hunkered down in its subterranean den to hibernate the winter away. The Thrall School closed for a few days because of frozen and burst water pipes, but as soon as these problems were fixed Authore was adamant that it should reopen, despite the fact the heating system was no match for the frigid air outside, and two days later, amid sparse attendance and constant complaints, it closed again.

My mom wakened me one morning exclaiming the weather had suddenly warmed up.

“How warm is it?” I asked groggily.

“Come see,” she said.

A warm, dry breeze blew persistently from the east. Even though it was barely eight in the morning the thermometer read fifty-two degrees. Tree branches that had been encased in snow for two weeks gleamed bare and black as the last of it fell from them in tumbling clumps that disintegrated in midair.

The snow that had lain six inches thick on the roof now had separated into islands that slipped downward and overhung the gutters until they broke off and thudded into the shrubbery below. Although the surface of the river was still frozen, I could hear the water's hollow cry like a thousand bassoons beneath the ice.

The phone rang. It was Aunt Krede. This was a föhn wind, she said, which rhymes with rain but is bone-dry and is hereabouts called a chinook. They'd noticed it just before midnight. "It's been blowing through the high valleys for hours," she said.

"Everything's melting," I observed mindlessly.

"Yep," she said, "and before long it'll all be arriving at your house."

I was speechless, but I had seen the river in its stampeding madness and I could form the image that seemed imminently to overtake us.

"We're just sitting down to breakfast," she continued. "If you and your mom should decide you'd like to evacuate some stuff, give us a call and we'll bring the truck down and help you load it up, okay?"

"Okay, thanks, but..."

"Talk it over and buzz me back."

My mom and I pondered the situation for about two minutes. In the half hour or so before Aunt Krede and Lem Roy arrived we packed up the blankets, clothes and linens, took apart the beds, rolled up our carpets, moved our food to higher shelves, and filled some small boxes with whatever seemed precious or necessary. In another half-hour the four of us had packed most of our vulnerable little house on the broad back of their truck. My mom had put some kitchen and personal things, including our sleeping bags, in the car. Then we all drove slowly across the road and up their driveway, much to Wagger's delight.

We decided that, because we had no way of knowing what might happen,

we'd just leave our belongings on the truck, covered with a tarp. Aunt Krede and Lem Roy insisted we stay with them as long as might be necessary and I was looking forward to that.

After we'd covered the load, we four and Wagger walked back down the Kredes' driveway and turned up the road toward the store. The Perpend had unzipped its ice jacket like a plowshare ripping through salt crust, and now the urgent turbid water raced erumpent, leaping and plunging with vigorous abandon but still mostly contained within its channel.

Three pickups were backed up against the store's low stoop, near the door, which was propped open, and a half-dozen guys from Thrall, some of whom I recognized from school, were ferrying boxes of produce, fruit juice, beer, canned goods, toilet paper – whatever they could get their hands on – from the store to the trucks as fast as they could shuffle under the burdens Mr. Hudson was preparing for them. I noticed they distributed the beer carefully among themselves. Just as we arrived, so did another truck, kind of a junker, the driver of which was the bald guy with the earring I'd seen months earlier at the Bubby party.

"Need a hand?" Aunt Krede asked Mr. Hudson, who was standing inside his walk-in cooler, perspiring and red as a tomato, packing its treasure into boxes.

"Well, not with this," he puffed. "These guys are cleaning it out as fast as I can pack it." In fact, they were cleaning him out a lot faster than he could pack it. "Maybe," he suggested, "you could help inside the house."

As he said this two guys lumbered by us lugging his brand-new television, a great hulking black thing. "No need, Mr. H.," one of them said. "We've got the house covered." He looked at us in a most unwelcoming way.

"Meerson sent them over," Mr. Hudson said, shrugging a shoulder toward

them as another few cartons disappeared toward the front door. A truck started up outside as the bald guy and his passenger hurried in, past the cooler, mumbling perfunctory hellos and ducking out the back door headed for the Hudson's soon-to-be-empty house not ten feet away.

"Well, then," Aunt Krede said, "you can expect to see some of this stuff again."

We were in the way, so we walked over to Mr. Kuntzler's. He was standing on the porch watching the scene at the store and he beckoned us over. "Staying dry?" he asked me and my mom.

"We moved most of our stuff up to Kredes'," I replied.

He shrugged. "It's not going to do anything," he said, "except bankrupt Henry."

We watched as another of the pickups pulled away and yet another backed up to the door. An older guy with stringy hair and a black grizzle, one of the ones who'd been carrying the TV, came out with a woman's jewel box and placed it in the cab of his truck. His companion said something to him. "Well, keep them out of here," the grizzled guy said.

"They'll steal him blind," I said.

Mr. Kuntzler shrugged. "Sure. But Meerson'll make it good."

We strolled along the front of Mr. Kuntzler's porch and around the corner so we could see the river. "Look how low it is," he said. "Still a good foot from the top of the bank."

Aunt Krede looked at him, then at the river, finally at Lem Roy. "It wasn't that low a little bit ago," she said, and just as she said it a two-foot surge of water, churning with chunks of ice the size of refrigerators, welled up and erupted from Dingle Creek. It swept across the field in a long arc and slammed into the line of poplars that hid our house from Kuntzler's.

"It's jammed at the confluence," Lem Roy said, discerning it almost at once, and now a seemingly endless torrent, as if Dingle Creek had been liberated for five miles upstream, rushed across the field bearing an incredible collection of debris, ice, logs, tree limbs, pieces of plywood, writhing steel cable, parts of structures, rocks, and old tires that caromed into the swaying poplars, forming an impromptu dam that stretched from the road down to the river, and behind it swelled an enormous lake that climbed quickly up the berm behind Mr. Kuntzler's house.

Everyone knew in an instant what we should do. "Stay on the porch," Aunt Krede said to Mr. Kuntzler as the four of us, with Wagger providing additional enthusiasm, quickly scooped up one, two, three, four wooden creatures at a time from his menagerie and carried them up to the porch, its floor perhaps two feet higher than the yard. Then as the muddy water topped the berm and spilled across the grass Mr. Kuntzler and my mom began moving some of the pieces inside.

We saved almost everything. Aunt Krede had begun with the tufted crane and I'd made a point of grabbing the beaver with the boot-sole tail. Some of the smaller critters swirled away unseen. The cryptic snake, at one time ensconced safely on the railing, Mr. Kuntzler had laid in the grass to, as he said, "discourage tourists," and somehow it disappeared. As the water receded, I thought, it would eventually end up deep in the riparian woods, where someday it'd startle the hell out of someone with its glittering green eyes.

The water was almost a foot deep, spread across the road and still rising noticeably when, suddenly, it changed direction and sped back toward the river. The debris dam had burst, and within a few minutes the entire lake was drained.

"Huh," said Lem Roy. "We never got a chance to name it."

"Dam Lake," my mom suggested.

“Lake Mayfly.”

“Lake Hasflown.”

At Mr. Kuntzler’s chuckling behest we agreed that the name of the lake that had existed for about a half hour that balmy winter day should be What Lake.

Water from Dingle Creek roared into the river with unaccustomed ferocity for another hour or more, creating standing waves taller than I was and spewing clouds of mist high into the air. Soon the Perpend was several feet above flood stage and roaming far inland, where it caroused throughout the night.

The wind heaved against the trees and thumped on the side of the old McMorey house for most of the rest of the afternoon. At four o’clock the thermometer on the Krede’s porch read sixty-four degrees.

The water had reached a depth of nearly a foot inside our house. We supped and slept at the Kredes’ for four days while Bennie helped us get the floors dried and the carpets replaced. At first the pungent scent of new carpet perfused the house, but within a week it had faded like the vivid edges of our recollections. Even now, though, we’re sometimes transported back for a moment to that frozen silence and its sudden release by the sour odor of an efflorescence of mildew.

24

Funny Valentine

Valentine’s Day was a Saturday and one in a series of those strange kinds of February days when summer is reprised and prefigured, as a promise and a tease. Sunshine and shirtsleeve weather. Just enough to keep you – and everything else – motivated for the last major assault of winter which is yet to come.

I perused carefully the odd-sized envelopes in the morning’s mail. I had one

from my mom and she one from me. I had one from Aunt Krede, one from Bridget, and one in a hand I didn't recognize. I guessed it was Marie's. There was none from Hanna, although I'd sent her three.

"You got one," I said as I entered the kitchen. She seemed vaguely annoyed until she wiped her hands and looked at the envelope.

"Oh," she said, feigning ignorance. "Who could it be from?"

I shrugged. "Bennie, maybe."

She laughed. "I think not," she said, opening it. She read it and thanked me with a kiss. Then she gave me a box of one of my favorite candies, chocolate-covered cherries, and yet another kiss.

"You guys are on the outs?" I surmised.

"We're on the far-outs," she replied, returning to peeling chunks from the chicken she was disassembling. "Bennie has strange ideas about the proper state of society and the roles of various people in it."

"Including you, I take it."

"Well, let's say he has no doubt as to the gender of the Almighty. Actually I could almost tolerate that. It's easy to bamboozle a man on a personal level because men tend to be blind to such things. But he believes that certain people are the masters and certain people are the dorks, and if the master class commits crimes they're written off with a wink to the eccentricity of the powerful, whereas if the dork class commits indiscretions these can be magnified into serious charges for various purposes."

"What brought that on?"

"Nothing, really. Everything in general. There was a mixup at school. When I inventoried my drugs after Christmas break it seemed some stuff was missing. Acetaminophen caps with codeine. Later on they mysteriously reappeared. In the meantime, Bennie ran hot and cold, from hahaha to endless jail time, depending

on who might've done it."

"Who *did* do it?"

She shrugged. "A member of the mandarin class, evidently, because officially it never happened."

I pondered this for a moment.

"Anyway," she smiled, "not to worry. We parted friends. I just decided I liked him better at arm's length."

"He didn't give you the 'you *must* pay the rent' routine?"

She laughed. "No, he never did that."

"Good."

As I walked through the crisp clear air toward the store I thought about Hanna, whose nonexistent attentions I keenly craved, and Marie, toward whom I felt, outside of her presence, almost indifferent. It was crazy. With Marie it was pheromone chemistry, her feline impudence, those lambent golden eyes, a wry grin that made my jasper blush. Love with Marie was hot as the furnace that transformed her bronze ingots into citrine blood from the heart of the sun. It was warm as the cherry-red metal glowing in the molds, translucent and genuine.

But with Hanna it was all an intricate skein in the vastness of imagination, her voluptuous temptation straining against iridescent pink mesh or richly wreathed in warm blue velvet, her eyes the color of coffee in a glass, that saw through me even when they were closed, and her languorous violet lips that never quite promised what they insistently intimated, glistening with nuance, their pouting provocation pressed through coy veils of laughter and facile *bon mots*.

Marie was present in the present; Hanna was fate. Marie was practical and straightforward; Hanna was flamboyant and labyrinthine. Marie was an independent and accomplished artist, Hanna was, well, *je ne sais quoi*. Marie was

nutrition; Hanna was flavor. Oh, I was greatly fond of nutrition, but my mind was ravaged day and night like Prometheus' liver by a shrill, gnawing obsession with flavor. It was crazy.

Mr. Hudson shrugged his narrow shoulders and smiled his big-toothed smile as if to say the vagaries of women are inexplicable. "We didn't get one either," he said, "and we pay the bills. I hope she's working so hard she didn't have time for valentines. Her grades last semester weren't so good."

I must've looked a little glum.

"Cheer up, Ashmead. If she's changed her mind, it's not the end of the world. Just hang in there. Tomorrow she'll change it again."

This was small comfort but I managed a smile as I turned toward the door. His eyes softened with compassion and his ears seemed to embrace it.

"A wise man savors what he has," he said.

Mr. Kuntzler hailed me from his yard, where he was rearranging his retinue. After we'd exchanged pleasantries he asked if I'd gotten any valentines.

"Some," I said. "Did you get one from Miz Bubby?"

He chuckled softly. "Thankfully, no," he said. "She didn't do that even when she was eyeing me for the marriage bed. It wasn't her style."

I granted I couldn't imagine it.

"She was more like a big old spider," he went on. "Once she got you stuck in her web she just spun silk around you until you were immobilized. The more I cared for her the more she presumed to mold my manners, my opinions, my comings and goings. The more I admired her the more she elevated herself into the role of a queen. That's her fantasy, you know, strange as it sounds, to be the Queen of Crondoc, to be regarded as a divinity, to be worshiped by people, not really personally but for her station in life, for her ancestry, for her birthright. She's burned-out now, but twenty years ago, I promise you, she was a handful,

and twenty years before that, when she really was a princess at least, she was hell on wheels. But fortunately for me she chose her cousin Eli.”

“Eli Bubby?”

He looked up at the sky, as though the memories could still be seen there, and the thoughts he’d had at the time. “Her father’s brother’s son. I think she did it to preserve the empire. They’d made a lot of investments in the twenties and the Depression hit them hard. Her dad Ben Junior was killed in a logging accident on Christmas Eve and Uncle Vesper kind of took over the family. When the war started Uncle Vesper enlisted and became a big cheese in the Corps of Engineers. This was five or six years before the dam was built, but Vesper knew what he was doing. And so did Genevieve. She married the dam, so to speak.” He chuckled softly to himself. “Poor Eli. He was taller than I am and weighed maybe a hundred pounds. He fathered Elmore one night and gave out.”

“Genevieve?”

“You never heard me say that.”

“So how did Meerson get to be the guy instead of Uncle Vesper?”

“Vesper died on a project in Utah about two weeks after the wedding. Slid sixty stories down the face of a dam. Eli took it hard and washed it down with booze. He really wasn’t up to it. Meerson was a road engineer for the Army. He was crafty. He came here and told everyone he’d keep Vesper’s dream alive. He made the dam sound like a pot of gold we’d all share. So just about everybody except my dad and Mose McMorey and the few families that lived upstream of the dam site all let Meerson talk for them. And when the dam was finally built it was his pot and his gold.”

“What a surprise,” I said.

“Genevieve tried to cozy up to him during the construction years. But Meerson’s no fool. He could see her situation was pretty grim and he realized

how much she prized her fantasies of royalty. He played her like a violin. He lost no opportunity to crown her Queen of the May but he steered the timber contracts to more useful friends.

“Hundreds of people moved here to work on the dam. They paid rent or lived in tents, which a lot of them did. He built houses for them. He hired them. He built roads for the project, and then for the Bubbys, and then for the Forest Service. Finally, Eli died and not too long after that Elmore got in trouble and eventually lost most of their holdings. It didn’t matter much; Meerson already called all the shots.”

While he was telling me this we moved a family of cedar burl foxes closer to his porch where he could keep an eye on them. They were remarkably lifelike in long swooping shapes and ear tufts of leather he’d tacked on with copper nails. The flood, he said, had left behind a cornucopia of gnarled roots and twisted limbs.

“You get a valentine from Marie?”

“I think so. She didn’t sign it.”

He glanced at me. His eyes took on a grandfatherly quality, a gentle sadness they didn’t often display. “She’s separating herself from me, you know. From Crondoc and Thrall and the whole shebang. She’s like me in a way; she doesn’t get involved in the local goings-on, such as they are. But she’s very cynical. She thinks nobody in Crondoc knows anything about anything that matters. Especially about art.”

He chuckled again. “She’s probably right about that. She spends a lot of time on her sculpture. Sometimes she works up at that foundry ’til late at night with Billy. He takes her over to her classes at Guillemot.”

“Bennie lets Billy out sometimes on the condition that he’s with her,” I said, giving up a family secret.

"Yeah, I know," he replied. "And while I may not agree with it, I guess I trust her judgment."

"What about her folks?"

"Ah, that's a long story. My brother Karl when he was past fifty married a young girl not much older than she is. They had Marie pretty soon after; nine months and a hop, we always said. A few years later he got cancer of the pancreas. It was nasty and quick. Once he was hospiced and the money'd run out his wife hit the trail. I promised him I'd look after Marie. I've raised her since she was a pup."

"Well, in a strange way she seems much more focused and self-assured than any of the other kids around. So I'd say you've done a good job. But she is kind of stubborn."

He stood one of the kits up on its hind legs, as if it were looking around, alert among its playful siblings. "The old have to vacate the earth so the young can flourish. My view is my view. If she had my view she'd be me. One of me is enough."

"Maybe," I said, "she's involved in part of the community you don't see so much, and maybe your perception of the community is a more historical thing."

He sighed. "Yeah, maybe. I don't mind that she's making a life beyond Crondoc; that's as it should be. I do worry that she's developing such a critical attitude toward the community, because, to me, that's an entanglement."

Whatever she was doing, she wasn't there, and after awhile I walked on over to the Kredes'. Wagger met me halfway up the driveway, as if she'd known I'd be coming along.

Aunt Krede was in the living room, awash in the poignant bathos of *La Traviata*, painting what appeared to be a farming scene, a grim, ashen-faced man casting seed on freshly tilled soil and behind him greenish heads emerging from

the ground, grotesque and misshapen, and farther back the full-grown stalks, like dust-shrouded asparagus, pulling their feet from the earth and walking away.

"Hi, Ashmead," she said, her green eyes full of light. "There's hot cocoa on the stove; help yourself."

I held the warm cup between my hands as I surveyed her newest work.

"I'm going back to landscapes," she said. "Abstract allegory isn't my bag."

"Somehow the pastoral mood seems to have fled," I noted.

"Well, perhaps. Bridey's here. She's out in the barn with Lem Roy."

I inhaled the oily fragrance of the paint, vaguely reminiscent of a pine woods on a hot day. She worked quickly, the ribbons of silver and gold that adorned her strong dark hands glittering in the pale winter light. As always she daubed here and stroked there, patiently coaxing the image from the dull canvas.

"The old crone thinks she's possessed," she said.

"Bridey?"

She wiped her hands and pushed her chair back a bit from the easel, turning to face me. "She's gay, you know."

"I figured."

"Grandma wants to have Beezle exorcise her."

"I think Beezle and Grandma should exorcise each other."

"Yeah. Well, anyway, things are kind of touchy at Castle Bubby."

"I wouldn't think Grandma would know a gay person if she fell over one."

"Of course not. But she was ragging on Bridey to go to some church social or something and Bridey told her to stuff it."

I could easily imagine that. The Bubby house had always seemed to me a place where uncommon license had coexisted with morbid rigor.

"Apparently," Aunt Krede continued, "her wackiness had had a tête-à-tête

with Authore and he'd told her there'd been some kind of incident with Bridey in the locker room after gym class and that he thought or somebody thought she might be perverse, which of course meant to him she was disrupting the delicate order of education in Thralldom. So when Bridey snapped at her the old crone just blurted out all this crap about insanity in the family and evil demons and so on."

"Great," I said.

She dipped her brush in the turpentine and wiped it clean. "Time for lunch," she said, laying it down thoughtfully. "You know, when people get up against it, sometimes they just shed their options, like she did when she smacked me with that damn cane. They revert to ritual, as Lem Roy would say. They become like ants who know only one thing, only one way, never mind whether it's useful or appropriate, and they do it because their innards are screaming for action and it's all they can do."

She got out the sandwich fixings and I made sandwiches slathered with mayonnaise and mustard and bursting with lettuce and slices of baked ham while she took two plastic quart containers of thick navy bean soup from the freezer, warmed them under hot water and eased them into a kettle.

I wondered aloud whether she and Lem Roy had somehow become implicated in all this. She supposed, she said, that the whole community was a little strained by the prospect of the Amarainy hanging before it like the grapes of Tantalus, just beyond the grasp of an increasingly desperate desire stirred up by the keepers of the flame.

"It's the way things are, you know. Nobody invented it, nobody decided it; it just is. It's unquestioned fate, like received dogma or revealed truth. Then here come we, Lem Roy and I, not wearing the village costume nor observing its timeless customs, yet settling unbidden on its land and in its life, and we say, by

our very appearance, that the traditional view of things here is an anachronism, an illusion, a mere happenstance. We ourselves obviously don't believe it and ultimately won't accept it. We're an anomaly in the consensus, a hole in the metaphysical dike.

"Things have been tough here in recent years, not that they were ever really easy, but who remembers that? Now the dream of logging the Amarainy seems a patch of blue sky penetrating a backdrop of endless gray days. And the realization of the project depends on the smooth operation of the structure as a whole, guided by the great movers, energized by the faithful. Everything seems to depend on the Amarainy, and the Amarainy depends on the myth of creation, which says that everything depends on the vision of the gods. Understand?"

"This or nothing," I ventured.

"Exactly."

"The loss of imagination."

"I doubt it ever existed," she said. "Not since Mose and Julius Kuntzler anyway. It was pointless. The good times rolled and timber rolled them. Nothing flutters your moral compass like easy money. And after all it's the plain truth: the Dingle watershed is barren. If the Amarainy thing founders, the community will change forever, and the world of the community's common understanding will evaporate into the thin air of history."

Just then Bridget and Lem Roy stomped onto the back porch and Aunt Krede stepped over to open the door for them.

"I smelled food," Lem Roy grinned.

Bridget and I exchanged greetings. "We were talking about the demise of Crondoc," I said.

Aunt Krede laughed. "Crondoc's not going to die," she disagreed. "It's too beautiful. But if they can't log the Amarainy, there won't be all those jobs. Some

people will move on. And some people's dreams will die, as dreams do. But Crondoc itself, I think, will be reborn."

"In a new illusion."

She shrugged. "Exactly."

"Sounds like a plan," Bridget said brightly as she washed her hands at the sink. "Boy, this soup smells good."

"I like change," Aunt Krede continued. "I appreciate the value of continuity, too, but the only continuity without change is death, wouldn't you say?"

"It's time some things changed around here," Bridget said. "I love Crondoc, but it seems to me we're sort of stuck in the mud."

"Well," said Lem Roy, "we've plenty of mud."

We all smiled at that. "I think the Amara deal is sewed up, though," Bridget went on as we seated ourselves at the table. "The high muckety-mucks have busted their butts for a long time to make sure it all happens as advertised."

"Yeah," Lem Roy said, "but fate's a trickster. She always comes in disguise, or like Andy Warhol, she sends a doppelgänger. The voice from behind its mythical mask says, I am fate. I'm Andy Warhol. And people shudder. But I say look closely for the fine Italian hand of the actor. Look that pretender in the eye and say, no, *I'm* Andy Warhol."

Bridget laughed. I halved the sandwiches and passed everyone a plate. Aunt Krede ladled the thick hot soup into our bowls. Lem Roy smiled at Bridget, his smooth face with its high forehead and chisled cheeks framed by gleaming black hair seemed youthful, supple and vigorous, but behind his prominent hawkbeaked nose, deep in the caverns beneath his brow ridges, his black eyes were ancient, mysterious, and serene.

"Well, you're fate as much as they are," he said, tasting and savoring the soup. "The gods have appointed you to care for the Amara as much as they

have Meerson. Man may ordain otherwise, but God hasn't. That's all I'm saying. It's the will of men, not fate. And because it's merely man's will it can be opposed, upended, and overcome. And then your will will be fate and you'll be Andy Warhol."

"For fifteen minutes," she noted skeptically.

"That's long enough."

"Granny really would have a fit then."

"Granny's displeased with you?" I inquired.

"I'm in deep shit with the queen mother because I won't make nice with some bozo whose dad's holding up the dream train of glory."

"You wouldn't fuck for old glory?"

She laughed that infectious delighted laugh that always makes you think you're the funniest person she's ever met. "I wouldn't fuck for new glory, either, nor for morning glory or the glory of Christ."

I chuckled. "Guess that covers it."

She dipped a corner of her sandwich into her soup and bit it off contemplatively. "Authore told her I was perverse," she said.

"I'd take that as a compliment."

"Well, I did, but she knew what he meant. They all talk like that."

"They're all a little perverse themselves."

"It's not that I'm gay – that doesn't shock you, does it, Ashcan?"

"Not me," I said, my mouth suddenly full of bread and ham.

"See, what really offends him is that I disrupt his little mechanical toyland where everything runs like a Swiss watch, with all the parts ticking and clicking in some intricate rhythm and where he always knows exactly what time it is."

"He gets migraines, doesn't he?"

"He *is* a migraine," she retorted, laughing.

After lunch Bridget and I went out to the myrmecorium to feed the ants and as we paused in Lem Roy's shop, where some of the injured puppets still lay on his workbench awaiting reconstructive surgery, she said, "I really can't describe to you how much this whole thing pisses me off."

"Pretty shitty," I agreed. "Know who did it?"

"Sure, the droogs," she said. "The headless horsemen. Guys without faces or brains. Genetic misprints."

"There seem to be a lot of them around."

"Well, they're useful for cannon fodder. And stuff like this. And they breed like flies."

"Think Bennie knows?"

She shrugged. "Sure. They're all Billy's customers. But who can prove it? And the real question is: who sent them?"

"We could guess."

"I guess."

"You okay?"

"Yeah, thanks. I'm fine. I hate all this crap. It's so sneaky. It's betrayal. These people are jackals and hyenas. But it's like I told Lem Roy, they're not going to get rid of me, and I sure hope they're not going to get rid of the Kredes, either, or you, Ashcan."

A cold chill went down my back, a frisson of shame. I'd never considered that I could be a target and the realization suddenly scared me. Bridget read me perfectly. She put an arm around my waist and tugged my hip against hers.

"Don't worry," she said. "I'll protect you."

Shortly afterward she and Lem Roy went back to whatever they'd been doing in the barn. Aunt Krede, I knew, wanted to return to her painting. The temperature dropped noticeably as the sun descended through the pale

southwestern sky and a gentle flow of cooler air pushed in from the north. I walked down to our house, leaving Wagger looking disappointed in the driveway before she trotted back to the barn. I reviewed again my trove of valentines, including the one that wasn't there, and put on a coat and walked upstream along the riverbank, intending to think of her. But I wound up thinking of my dad instead.

What was love to him, that he had always to be in the throes of it, in love I think, whereas my mom regarded that as an illusion and the aftermath—what my dad regarded as the aftermath—as the real thing, so that what she felt for me was love and what she felt, or used to feel, for Bennie was just an excursion into cheap thrills. My father wanted to be consumed by love, by excitement, to be surrounded by a firestorm of feeling to the exclusion of the mundane world for which he had so little use. Perhaps for him love was an escape and for her it was an engagement. For him, settling down was a wet blanket on love, anathematic to love, a wearing and wearying of love that symbolized the inexorable gray deconstruction of life. He found meaning on the crumbling edge of things, in soaring crescendo, in the energetic vibrato of passion, and she found it in the quiet center, in deeper rhythms so ponderous and profound he could not discern them. To her, his fancies were quirky and juvenile, he a fickle wren flitting from field to twig, ill-suited to the quiet dignity of warm hearth and comfortable slippers and sturdy affection, and to him, her passions seemed muted and still, she a soporific duck, fluffed over her eggs, oblivious to the world, the leaping flames of desire that had attracted him now banked and cold within her breast. But this seminal dichotomy was so antithetical to what seemed the almost universal view, the long view of place and order and connectedness. Love draws the man to an act of impregnation, then drives the woman to bear and nurture its consequences. It was like ant life. It didn't seem possible, it didn't conform to the

unspoken myths everyone accepted, and yet I had to admit, thinking of my own life, of Marie and Hanna, it rang as true for me as I supposed it did for him.

During this brief foretaste of spring most, but not all, of the flowers and shrubs that had been savaged by the big freeze recovered their bearings. My physics studies seemed somewhat the less entrancing as literature carried me into wider worlds of imagination unrestrained and immeasurable. My teacher, of course, had nothing to do with it, nor did the readings he gave us, so fraught were they both with the virtues of swashbuckling action and breathless cascades of crisis and precious niceties of detail, the dull legacy of popular journalism, as if these formed a luminous core of artistic truth. But I read beyond the list: Hesse and Nabokov, Kundera and Didion, Vonnegut and Marquez. During the long hours I could read a book as easily as I consumed a box of chocolate-covered cherries, without thinking about it, without looking up, lost in its distant reverie until the denouement, when the word candy ran out and nothing was left but silent white space and pleated brown cups emptied of love.

25

Feeling the Love

The wet, gusty winds of March dueled from day to day with the warm spring sunshine that broke through between squalls and coaxed a proliferating variety of new growth from the slowly wakening plant kingdom. Daffodils and grape hyacinth bloomed beneath tiny silver-bottomed green leaves that uncurled from the tender, tinted new twigs of the trees.

Aunt Krede and Lem Roy had engaged me to sit with their house, and with Wagger, over the weekend while they undertook a walking trip through the Amarainy. Their aim was to track the far southeastern reaches of Dingle Creek and perhaps, if they could, climb to a high point on the rim of the Amarainy from

which they might glimpse the valleys of the Perpend.

“That’s his aim,” Aunt Krede had said, nodding at Lem Roy. “I’ll be happy if my sleeping bag stays dry.”

It’d been a sunny day on Friday when they’d left and it didn’t rain that night although I knew from experience it’d probably been cold, freezing the leftover coffee in their cups, where they’d planned to sleep, ten miles east and a thousand feet above our summer campground by the lake.

Saturday dawned slowly, overcast and chilly, so that the first gray light became gradually brighter but remained achromal, without the yellows and pinks and blues of the clear morning before, and the position of the sun was betrayed only by a pale glow in the dull undifferentiated cloud that stretched across the land.

Five calves had already been born in this spring and sixteen more were on the way, but Angus typically have an easy time of it and Lem Roy had asked me only to keep an eye on things and to call the vet if I thought there was any problem, which, with Wagger’s enthusiastic assistance, I soon determined there was not. The big bull Atahualpa watched warily from his adjacent pasture as we walked among the cows, many swollen with ninety-pound pregnancies, but he was too busy stuffing himself with the rich grass to bother about us.

It was an ideal day to explore the McMorey ridge and after breakfast Wagger and I set out again up the hill. The Kredes had described the path for me, including the great boulder at the western end of it that marked the corner of their land. Above the fenceline, and spreading upward for another quarter-mile or so to the ridge, stood a swath of huge firs, some easily a hundred and fifty feet tall and several feet thick, which Mose McMorey had stubbornly refused to harvest and beneath whose canopy the earth was cool and damp and soft and silent in the gray morning air. Eighty acres of cultural dissonance, Lem Roy

called it.

The trail lay mostly on the far side of the ridgeline and afforded an occasional view of the valley north of us. Wagger was more impressed with the odors she detected here and there of various rodents, which she stalked with great patience and cunning, and upon whose ostensible hiding places she'd finally pounce with graceful alacrity, albeit without success. Finally we came upon the lichen-covered boulder the Kredes had rightly said was too big to miss. Its rounded crown was higher than my head, and it took me a few minutes to find a way to surmount it. With the aid of a downed tree limb that afforded me a precarious ramp, I clambered up rather ungracefully and stood upon this monadnock with an exhilarating feeling of conquest. Wagger barked appreciatively at my idiocy.

There was a shallow spoon-shaped depression at the crown of the rock in which neither moss nor lichens grew, worn smooth perhaps by many sitters, although every contemplative rump in the western world would've been consumed in the process. It beckoned me to sit, which, thinking of Hanna, and sure she'd sat here many times, I did.

She'd sent me a pair of her panties, diaphanous white bikinis, neatly folded and tucked into a small plastic bag about the size of a deck of cards, with a note that read, "I'd sure like to see you in these." They were spotless and smelled faintly of potpourri, although I persuaded myself her scent still lingered on them.

Now, in the green-filigreed catbird seat of this huge boulder, I could feel her. I looked out, just as she had, over the shallow valley that stretched off far to the northeast. It was a little broader than the valley of the Perpend, and although the land swept down gracefully from the ridge where I sat to the stream below, it was steeper on the far side, where the ubiquitous trees, mostly firs and cedars and an occasional gnarly oak or two, gave way here and there to irregular

patches of meadow, spring green, or pale umber, like the color of Marie's softly lustrous eyes.

Surely she hadn't sat here thinking of Marie's eyes. It was something else she'd seen, the things one sees when one has walked a path many times, in many seasons and moods of mind. It seemed this lofty, intimate place must've been a shrine for her, a place that had embraced her secret thoughts and absorbed in its vast presence the feelings that troubled her, a place that always soothed her fear and loneliness and longing. Despite how odd it seemed that she had had such existential passions, I felt sure she could never have hunkered down on this dark rough crag and stared into its silent, timeless panorama without having had them. I knew what she'd found on her frequent forays into this long solitude: herself. And I knew it was here she'd said goodbye to Crondoc.

I thought about her panties. Somehow they represented her, and represented our relationship which in reality was truly, as I had coyly claimed that wintry night at Hudson's store, little more than a figment of my imagination. Maybe Hanna's underwear, which mayn't even have been her underwear, I now realized, was all that was left of her, was all of her I'd ever see, was all of her we'd ever be. Carefully I fished them out of my pocket and out of their little plastic envelope and unfurled them between thumb and forefinger of either hand, holding them out as if she were standing before me, inches away, her snow white crotch delicate, dainty, deliquescent in the fine silver mist. I pressed them to my face, tasted their sleek, smooth, spicy emptiness. Marie didn't wear panties like these. Marie wore cotton panties, or sometimes none at all. Marie didn't send her panties; she proffered the real thing, cowled with silky hair, sopping with anticipation, redolent with pheromonal lust.

I folded their soft sheer substance again, slowly, sadly, as if it were a dream, and tucked them back into their little packet. This bit of diaphanous cloth, and a

few scraps of paper festooned with purple swirls and flourishes, were all I had of Hanna Hudson. God, how I longed for her!

Wagger had been waiting patiently, curled on the moist earth, lightly napping. When I stood up she did too, shaking herself so vigorously she almost flipped off her feet. She stretched languidly and then, gesturing her approval, wagged tail, rump and haunches as I slid down the side of the boulder to the ground. No panty dreams for her. No elaborate billows of emotional tapestry flung out across the continuum, no struggle for understanding or meaning. Surely she felt as I felt, surely she knew love and longing and even despair, but she dealt with the world as it presented itself. I envied the simple immediacy of her animal consciousness. It seemed a mysterious gift. And like a mirage, like a dream, the harder I tried to grasp and comprehend it, the farther it drifted away.

We walked for a while among the great trees, the soft rain falling even softer through their lacy net of narrow leaves until at ground level it was barely a mist. The undergrowth was thick with ferns and mosses and we were often obliged to follow the meandering trails of the deer, but eventually we crossed the ridge again and began our descent back to the house. As we came near the edge of the woods I stopped for a moment to survey the scene that lay spread out below us: the green pastures, the hip-roofed barn, the old McMorey house and Aunt Krede's myrmecorium, the confluence of the mighty Perpend and its companion from the Amarainy, Dingle Creek. I could see Lem Roy's tank of solitude and our little cottage nestled next to the river and the sweeping skyline beyond, far south of Thrall and the valley of the Guillemot.

I thought about the Kredes, who sometime this afternoon might be on another ridge, looking in the same direction I was but many miles to the east, much higher, much colder, much nearer the treeless mountains laden with snow. As it was for me, this panorama would be but a moment in their journey,

because the journey itself, and the discoveries it inspired and heralded, was their real aim as much as mine. This realization surprised me and made me feel closer to them than I had ever felt before, as if there were some mystical link between us.

Lem Roy's prize yearling bull Quetzal, who was in a corral near the barn, greeted the moment with a long wailing bellow, seemingly aimed at nothing in particular and creating no apparent effect either among the cows or upon Atahualpa, who was resting regally under his buckeye tree and didn't even look down at his younger cousin. It must've made Quetzal feel better, though, like a lusty primal burp, because afterward he ambled over to his feed trough and began eating.

For some reason I felt the warm sweetness of the barn, sensed its soft light, savored its generous, almost mythic odor, and thought of Mose McMorey that fateful day, taking in his rough arms the lithe, sad young girl who had devoted herself so eagerly to him and Bess, holding her, sharing his love with her large brown eyes, love born of compassion and sympathy and – well, I didn't know. Nobody knew. Nobody would ever know. Only the barn, only the warm, brooding silence within its cathedral spaces, only the mystery every man takes to his grave could ever embrace the truth of what happened that day.

My gaze was drawn then to the silvery surface of the river, which I'd never seen from such a height before, stretching far upstream to the south until it became lost in the greening trees along its bank. Closer to me were the curling ripples of Dingle Creek, most of it hidden from me because it flowed perpendicular to my line of sight, as its pristine waters entered and commingled with the Perpend above the sand bar where I sometimes fished and sometimes just stood and listened to the rushing of the water and the scolding awk-awks of the herons as they protested my presence in their timeless sanctuary.

I tried to visualize the river as it had been before the dam, as Mr. Kuntzler had described it, meeting the Dingle farther downstream, running alongside the road, right through, it seemed, the land where our little house now stood. I thought of Mr. Meerson, the architect, the engineer, the fixer, the trail boss of this mindless herd, who'd seen it all coming and kept it all going, the huge shifts in the river and its behavior, the enormous volumes of timber bequeathed us by the primordial past and never to be replaced, the vast networks of roads that carried men and machines to the valley's hillsides and its logs, once legendary but nowadays often little more than phone poles, to mills and markets around the world. Mr. Meerson, the anointed overseer of the rough economies of Thrall and Crondoc and the valleys above them, who understood how it all worked, who managed the flow of money from burgeoning urban capitals and the counterflow of timber to their endless appetite, who wove among the warp threads of law and profit the weft of human muscle and agony. Mr. Meerson, who plotted now to take the Amarainy, the last great prize remaining hereabouts, thus far untouched because its useful firs were scattered among many lesser species, cedars and hemlocks, oaks and maples, and because its terrain was steep and rugged and remote.

Mr. Meerson was not unique in his ambition, of course, and according to Mr. Kuntzler Elmore Bubby had tried to open up the Amarainy during the last years he'd held sway in Crondoc. The effort had proved too extravagant for his already overextended operations and it crushed his business under a mountain of debt, much of it owed to Meerson.

Far to the south, along the ridges of yet other valleys beyond the Guillemot, a thin sliver of pale blue sky shimmered at the edges of the gray blanket that covered us as far to the east and west as I could see. I'd once jumped in the car and chased such a promise of sunnier weather back in Kansas, but it had fled as

fast as I could drive and after a hundred miles I'd seemed no nearer to it than I'd been to begin with.

The horizon, like quantum particles, or my father, or Hanna, could be appreciated, or not, but never grappled with, never engaged, never understood. And unlike Wagger's mind, such things seemed unapproachable partly because they had no definite place in conceptual space, in the fixed context of the world, so that what they were didn't merely *appear* to depend but actually *did* depend on one's observational vantage point, so much so that one could entertain the idea that, in the absence of anyone's looking, they didn't really exist.

As we made our way through the pale afternoon back down the long sloping pastures to the house, through the sweet odors of the new grass and past the pungent, steaming warmth of greatly gravid black cows serenely chewing their cuds, I found myself once again in awe of nature's ease. The cows didn't care which bull got them pregnant, and Atahualpa, lying under the deep green foliage of his bower, looking as imperious and blasé as Wilde's fool Herod at a bacchanal, certainly didn't care which cows he vested nor how often nor in what order.

Cows, I ruminated as Wagger loped on ahead, had very little sense of love. They'd protect their young, and the bulls would protect their harems—especially aggressive bulls, like Jerseys and Guernseys, but like other bovines they were pretty uninvolved in it. And dogs, who seemed greatly attached to their people, seemed equally unattached and even indifferent to their mates. It seemed, then, perhaps, that love, as distinguished from mere tick-picking affection or old-shoe sympathy of rhythm, was another of those human concepts that arose from the animal world of feelings but had its fruition in the uniquely human metaworld of the intellect, and when one chased it from one side or the other one inevitably came to this abyss between the worlds, just like the abyss between the

presumptive world we experience and the experiences we have of it, between a cloud of probabilities and the perceived event within it.

I loved Marie. I lusted after Marie. I loved tugging Marie. I loved laughing with Marie. I admired her. I respected her. But how could I compare them? Marie was tawny and compact and bronze and kinetic and artistic. Hanna had tan lines, baby fat, slinky lingerie, a penchant for sophistry and a taste for fashion. It wasn't cerebral with Marie. It wasn't abstract with Marie. I didn't waste away in spirit from the absence, certainly not from the rejection, of Marie. And the assumption that crept into these feelings was that one of them was love and one wasn't, or that one was more in the nature of love, at least, than the other. The thing was, I didn't know which was which.

I spent the evening listening to some of Aunt Krede's symphonic music, Tchaikovsky's Third and Seventh symphonies among them, and reading Anaïs Nin's *A Spy in the House of Love*. I slept that night in the sitting room, on the big leather couch, with Wagger stretched out beside me. Aunt Krede had offered me her bed, but I felt awkward about the idea of sleeping there. I went up to her bedroom and looked at her bed. She'd changed the bedclothes and turned them down but I wasn't tempted. Too far off the ground, I told myself. For some reason this reminded me of our shared penchant for the big, rollicking, libidinous melodrama of schmaltz, and her saying she liked it because she was shallow.

The next morning I left Wagger at the house — she was remarkably agreeable to this — and walked down to get the Sunday paper and stop by Hudson's store for a cigar. I don't know why I wanted a cigar; it just seemed I ought to smoke one while I put my feet up and perused the news.

"Sorry," Mr. Hudson said. "I'm out."

"Well, when will you be in?" I asked jocularly.

"I don't stock them anymore," he said, handing me my change.

I withdrew the heft of the paper from its tube below the mailbox and lugged it like a football to the top of the driveway, where Wagger waited to greet me as though I'd been gone for years. As I patted her broad head I realized I hadn't thought at all of Hanna during my excursion, not even while I was at the store.

26

Vandals at the Gate

The weather had lifted a little during the week but by the following Friday a series of gray storms was coming through from the west in alternate peaks and troughs like a barometric washboard. During the windy phases the rain fell in torrents, sideways as much as downward, and the trees swayed and twisted in the chilly gusts. During the brief pauses between fronts a fine silent mist descended vertically in drops so small they barely disturbed the leaves.

During one of those rainy reprieves, after an early supper of bean soup and peach salad with cottage cheese, after my mom had settled down to watch the evening news which I regarded as impossibly irrelevant, I made my way up the Kredes' driveway at a hasty pace, my boots leaving depressions in the gravel as it sank under my weight into the soft mud below. It was like walking on a thick, wet carpet. Wagger watched and wagged but waited for me on the porch, greeting me with soft whines and licks as I climbed the steps.

Aunt Krede was sitting on a couch on the porch near the back door, a cigar in the ashtray beside her, a glass of brandy in her hand, her booted feet up on the wooden railing, watching Lem Roy and another person, hooded against the rain, who were up on the hillside fixing the fence he and I had strung not too many months before.

"Hi, Ash," she said as I rounded the corner preceded by a trotting Wagger

whose demeanor had no doubt told her who I was. "There's coffee on the stove."

"Who's that?" I asked before I went inside.

"Marie."

I brought my coffee out and sat down beside her. "What happened to the fence?"

"Some asshole cut it," she said. "Last night. Seems they were trying to get Atahualpa in with the cows. Lem Roy spooked them off."

Whoever had cut the fence had also pulled up two of the posts, which Lem Roy and Marie had just finished resetting. The wind gusted up with a whoop then and the rain pelted down in earnest, and the two of them yelled and laughed as they redoubled their efforts to get the strands of barbwire spliced and restrung.

"You have enemies," I observed.

"I was just thinking about being up on the Amaraingy," she responded, "where all you have to worry about is avoiding an occasional bear and not trusting your footing to something that might be slippery or rotten."

She offered me her glass. "Want a sip?"

"Thanks," I said. The fiery liquid made me shiver and I felt my skin flush with a sudden warmth.

She took a big draught of it and relit her cigar. She had half a dozen silver bracelets on her wrist that tumbled part way up her forearm as she raised the cigar to her lips. The sleeves of her blue work shirt were rolled up onto her biceps, as usual. She had muscular arms like Marie's, only denser, more swarthy, with just a hint of incipient wattles.

"Don't think of them as enemies," she said in a way that left me unsure whether she meant she didn't or I shouldn't. "If you stick your hand in an ants' nest they'll swarm all over it and attack it because it's something foreign. They're

not attacking you; they're attacking this thing that's thrust itself into their anty world. They're not your enemies; they can't even conceive of you."

I laughed nervously. "But they sure can bite you."

Aunt Krede turned a big gold-toothed grin on me. "They have such little teeth," she said, her green eyes dark and dancing in the fading light. "And after awhile they'll give it up because it doesn't get them fed or bred, and they'll just accept it."

A new squall introduced itself with an exuberant hail of giant drops that played a roaring tattoo against the rooftop as Marie and Lem Roy, finally finished, made a beeline for the barn.

"Kind of makes me want to hit the road," I said.

"Not today, though," she replied wryly.

I laughed. "No, not today."

"The road's just another place, Ashmead. Another milieu. With all the same kinds of people."

"Yes, but you can always move on."

She looked at me. "Don't get things turned around, Ash. The point of doing whatever you do is to enjoy it, and the point of the road is leisurely discovery, to see new places and meet new people, not to run away or hide from things."

She took another gulp of the brandy and passed me the almost-empty glass. "Finish this up and then go put a log on the fire, okay? They'll be in soon and I want to get supper ready. You're staying, aren't you?"

"Sure," I said, draining the glass.

She smiled. "So's Marie." Then she stood up, replaced her John Deere cap over her auburn hair, and strode toward the back steps as I went into the kitchen. Through the window I watched her hesitate and then walk out into the rain, accompanied by Wagger, going up to inspect the work on the fence while I laid

some new wood on the fire in the living room.

Aunt Krede soon returned, and then Lem Roy and Marie, having shed their coats and boots outside, came in, soaked and laughing.

“Hi, Ashmead.”

“Hey, Ash.”

Lem Roy released his hair from the ponytail he usually wore and squeezed it into the sink. “Jesus, Lem Roy,” Aunt Krede said.

He smiled. “I’m going to take a shower,” he said.

“Yeah,” Marie agreed. “Me too.”

I swallowed my tongue to keep from blurting out, “With him?” and the effort made my face turn crimson. Aunt Krede noticed and raised an eyebrow at me.

“Want to join me?” Marie continued coyly, heading for the front of the house where, as it turned out, her suitcase was, as well as, I now remembered, the big downstairs bathroom. I felt like an idiot.

“No, thanks,” I said, although I’d’ve liked to.

As soon as they’d both left the room Aunt Krede asked quietly, with a little chuckle, “Having a bad day, Ashmead?”

“Sorry,” I said.

“Well, it could be,” she went on, “but it isn’t.”

I was chagrined.

“Whatever the goddess does, you don’t care, right? She’s not real, anyway. The less you see of her, the less she shows you, the more you cleave to her. But look at yourself now. The real woman flips your switch over nothing at all.”

“Yeah.”

“Uncle August is mad at her because she attracted attention. He’s running away from his feelings too.”

"It's a guy thing," I said.

"It's a fear thing," she demurred. "He can live on Jupiter, nobody cares. But you're too young to leave the planet, Ash. When love's calling you, you should melt, not freeze up and spike through the roof."

I sighed and stared at the ceiling, as if to see the hole I'd left as I shot skyward. "I wish I knew how I felt," I said.

Aunt Krede took a chocolate chip cookie from the cookie jar and laid it in front of me. "Eat," she said. "Don't think."

Its sweet goodness slurried over my tongue, suffused my palate.

"How is it?"

"Great," I said.

"My point."

One thing I've always regretted is my penchant for not asking one last time, not probing one more possibility, not descending one more level, not crossing one more divide. But this time I took the plunge. "I don't get it," I said.

"Feel what you feel. Be who you are. Live 'til you die, Ashmead. Live 'til you die."

"Well, I still don't get it. I'm physically mesmerized by Marie. She seduces me just by being in the room. And yet Hanna, my dream of Hanna, pursues me in all the secret crannies of my solitude, enchants me, consumes me."

"So? What's the problem?"

"I don't know which is real. So I don't know what to do."

"Obviously, they're both real. Marie's a factual person who's fond of you but she's much too independent to belong to anyone. Hanna's a hollow vessel who cares little about you and is dying to sell her soul to someone who will give her substance. And I'd guess that in your fantasy that someone is you."

"Can I have another cookie?"

She got the clown and put him on the table with a smile. "Have all you want."

I bit into another one. The crisp dough crumbled and swelled into a chewy wad, then dissolved in a sugary flood. The syrupy chocolate clung to my teeth and gums and swirled in myriad braided strands through the saliva on my tongue, bathing it in a luscious burnt umber warmth.

She poured a glass of raw milk and set it in front of me. "Will you be wanting some Spanish rice?"

"I ate already, thanks," I said. "This is dessert."

During supper Marie told us about her troubles with her uncle. She'd written a story about aliens, "the borers" she called them, who had big round mouths full of grinding teeth, and big round butts, who ate everything in their paths and were so ravenous, and so efficient at it, that they'd soon devoured the surface vegetation and reduced it to the pulp that was their excrement, which they'd been burying. So they bored underground, like pocket gophers, and continued their habits there, until they'd consumed not only their huge stores of buried excrement but also all the roots and seeds and earthworms, at which point they took to eating each other until they were all dead.

She'd submitted this fanciful tale in a class at Thrall and her teacher had presumed, rightly or wrongly, that it was an allegory about logging, and, thinking it clever, had showed it to some other teachers, and of course word of it had reached the ever-vigilant ears of Mr. Authore, already smarting from the jibes of Bobby Bubby and probably indisposed toward the upstart students who were pursuing advanced work at Guillemot. Mr. Authore had called Mr. Kuntzler to complain that Marie was making fun of the people of Thrall and Crondoc, not least by calling them "boring," and Uncle August, taking this to heart, had suggested she leave the house until she'd adopted a less nettlesome

posture toward the local culture.

"I don't see how I can do that," she said, "since I just meant it as a goofy story to begin with that had nothing to do with Thrall or Crondoc or loggers or anything, no matter how boring they are."

"There's no accounting," Lem Roy opined, "for the meanings people read into things."

Aunt Krede supposed that Mr. Kuntzler would calm down in a day or two and realize this, but Marie wasn't so sure.

"Well," Aunt Krede said, smiling, "in the meantime we have the pleasure of your company, and you're welcome to stay as long as you like."

After we'd eaten, Aunt Krede and Marie and I washed the dishes and put everything away while Lem Roy went to his shop to do some work. It was dark outside and the rain had slacked off but still it fell in a silver haze through the eerie chartreuse glow of the yard lights.

Aunt Krede cued up *The Flying Dutchman*, turned the volume down a bit, and sat herself before her easel to work on a painting. Marie and I went back out on the porch and sat on the couch and smoked a doobie while we watched and listened to the raindrops falling through the haunting strains of ghostly seamen tossed in the dark storms of mythic fate.

"Maybe you should've had their poop piles spontaneously ignite and incinerate them all," I suggested.

"I considered it," she said, "but then it would've been chance that did them in instead of their own insatiable appetites."

"Maybe they're just living their own art."

She turned around on the sofa, tucked her feet underneath her, and lay back against my legs which were propped on the railing. "I think life is not art," she said. "Art is free of life. Otherwise it'd be as fleeting and puny as life is."

“What about ice sculpture?”

“What about it? It only speaks to its own milieu, in its own moment. You can do that in person.”

Her index finger slipped idly under the flap of the fly of my levis and traced its seam from bottom to top, where it joined forces with her thumb and flipped the top button. She looked at me. Her smile was as subtle and enigmatic as the Mona Lisa’s. Her eyes were the color of caramel.

“Your eyes are the color of caramel,” I said.

“And yours are the color of sapphire dust floating in whiskey,” she replied. “But actually I can’t see that because it’s too dark and the light’s behind you.”

A rising breeze swept through from the west, out of the misty blackness, and caressed us with its cold damp fingers, reaching in under our clothes, under our skins, into our souls. As I bent forward to kiss her our eyes grew large and liquid, their pupils black as opals, deep as the torment of innocent passion fraught with shrieking flames of ancient fear that hurls itself against the insistent gale. Of the wind-whipped rain that soaked us we knew nothing. Of Lem Roy’s footfalls on the stairs we knew nothing.

“Did you know a dog has a bone in its penis?” he asked as he pried off his muddy boots by the door. Suddenly sentient, we looked at each other and then at him. “Sorry,” he grinned. “Stormy music always reminds me of the perils of detumescence.”

Then he opened the door and went inside, leaving us gasping, quaking, laughing.

about a mile downstream from our house. There are numerous trees, mostly adolescent firs almost slim enough to reach around and maybe eighty feet high. Most of the undergrowth has been removed and some of the lower limbs have been trimmed, and the flat earth is carpeted with grass. The lawn is seeded, fed and mowed. The picnic tables are worn but sturdy, their gouged and rippled surfaces saturated with lacquer. Every spring the owner, Marcel, and his wife hold a public picnic there to raise money for the orphanage where Tom and Sally serve as universal parents, allies of the unbefriended.

It's a tradition that on the last Saturday in March, when the community gathers for this event, the weather will be warm and sunny and clear. Warm for March, that is. Shirtsleeve weather. Warm enough, and dry enough, that people will sit outside at the tables. It doesn't always happen, and then the numerous hardy souls who've braved the elements will jam themselves inside the restaurant and dance hall, more or less like the "clowns in the Volkswagen" routine at the circus or an inverted variation of the apocryphal loaves and fishes. But that's a little less elbow room than Crondockers prefer, and when tradition is blessed by the vagaries of the weather as many as several hundred men, women and children, from as far away as the other side of Thrall, will at some point in the high afternoon be walking, talking, playing, eating, relaxing by the river or swaying on the sward in the unaccustomed sunshine. "A goodly crowd," as Marcel says.

The tradition was feted this year; it hadn't rained for four days and it was so warm that I'd gone for a swim in the icy morning water off Keystone Beach, and Marcel did have a goodly crowd. All the few anybodies and most of the many nobodies were there and only a keen eye could distinguish them. Marcel had enough haunches of pork and beef in his firepits to assuage their hunger, but even with cheek-to-cheek seating at the tables many had to sit on the ground,

which was comfortably dry, to eat.

Lem Roy had donated a steer which he'd slaughtered and dressed a few weeks before with dubious help from Marie and myself, and the Kredes were there when my mom and I arrived shortly after noon. They'd secured a table near the periphery and we joined them. Aunt Krede had brought her easel and spent much of the afternoon making a panoramic painting of the scene that was reminiscent of Seurat's park along the Grand Jetty except nobody had a parasol and Aunt Krede was not a pointillist. As for bustles, some of these derrières would've burst bushel baskets.

Bobby Bubby was hunkered down on the sloping bank of the river, almost out of sight of the great buzzing soiree behind him. He didn't like crowds, he said. He didn't like going around saying hello to people he barely knew who hardly cared but who, despite this, might seize upon his attention and cling to it like hitchhiker weed or even, if they persisted in discussing the affairs of every one of their relatives and all their children, stick in his hide like cockleburrs. "Who gives a shit?" he asked, and I couldn't think of anyone who really would.

"So," I inquired, "how are things going with the choir?"

"Don't ask," he said. Bridget's claim that he couldn't carry a tune had evidently been borne out in practice. But Beezle had instead appointed him chief altar boy. His duties in this capacity, beyond serving as general factotum, specifically included caring for what is called the consecrated host.

"Don't you think it's weird," I asked, "pretending you're eating the flesh and drinking the blood of someone who was ritually murdered two thousand years ago?"

Bobby stared out across the softly flowing water. "It used to be so peaceful here," he said wistfully, "before you came along."

I thought perhaps he was mad at me; after all, I'd been trying to get his

goat. But then he daubed at his face with the back of his hand and I noticed the tears coursing down his pocked pink cheeks.

“What’s wrong?”

He looked at me with those pale ice-blue Bubby eyes. His lips quivered. “I’m...I’m losing my faith,” he stammered, and then he started sobbing in earnest.

“That’s all to the good, isn’t it? I thought you had faith in physics.”

“Pastor Beezle’s going to be so disappointed. He believed in me. That’s the worst part.”

“Personally,” I started to say, and then I thought better of exclaiming my opinion of Pastor Beezle.

“He’s helped me so much – understanding my feelings about Jesus, explaining God’s meanings – and now I’m letting him down.” He wiped the tears from his eyes with his sleeve and sniffled away the last of them, finishing with a sigh.

He stared again across the river, into the far away. “He’s been helping me discover my true self, bring the love of Jesus into my life, live according to God’s will.”

“I didn’t know you had these problems.”

“I was just lost, you know? I didn’t know who I was. I didn’t know what was right or wrong, and Pastor’s helped me find the way.”

“I see.”

“But now, now I’m slipping downhill again. I just can’t center myself; I can’t rid myself of cowardice and skepticism. I’m afraid I’ll be right back where I was, only worse.”

I consider skepticism a healthy approach, and fear, too, in appropriate circumstances, but I didn’t say so although I was beginning to feel as if someone

were regaling me with the banal life histories of all his relatives. "Where were you?" I asked.

"What?"

"Where is it that you're afraid you'll go right back to being?" I wished I hadn't begun this conversation.

"Pastor says Lucifer had lured me to the brink of death. That's what it felt like. I doubted everything, and everyone."

It didn't make any sense. Gentle, clever, funny, rational Bobby Bubby was talking about devils, lauding moral certainty, snapping angrily at people's commonplace foibles.

"I just feel like I'm on the edge of the abyss."

"Well, actually, you're at the edge of the river. Why don't you just jump in?"

"You don't understand."

"No, I don't."

"Nobody understands except Pastor, and Jesus."

"Jesus is dead. And Pastor's an idiot. He's as crazy as you are."

Bobby burst into a renewed fit of weeping. "You're mean, Ashmead," he said. "I thought you were my friend."

"I thought you doubted me," I replied. "You said you doubted everybody. That includes me, I suppose, and Bridget too, yes?"

"I know," he sobbed. "I'm an insect. I'm nothing. I'm sorry."

"Jump in the river, Bobby. I mean it. It'll do you good."

"Sure, what is it to you? It's just a joke. You don't understand me at all."

I stood up. "Okay," I said. "I don't understand. You're right, I don't. But that's my advice, for whatever it's worth. Jump in the river. And if you feel like it, come sit with us. We're at the Kredes' table, under the old walnut tree."

Aunt Krede was sitting behind her easel, working on a canvas whose upper corners she could barely reach without standing. As usual, the early phase of the painting was visually incomprehensible because, as she said, she was just sketching in the variations of light, working from the general to the particular. Recognizable objects appeared only later, when, as she said, they were ready. And when they were ready, if you watched carefully you'd see them, first vaguely and then in sudden detail.

"Mind if I watch?" I asked.

"Not at all," she said.

She seemed completely absorbed in what she was doing. She never paused for long between stirring up a new color on her palette and daubing or stroking it onto the canvas. I was surprised a few minutes later when she spoke again.

"Cézanne couldn't stand to have anyone watch him paint," she said, pausing for a moment to regard her work. Then she shrugged and chuckled the throaty laugh she reserved for things that deeply amused her. "But as you can see, I'm not Cézanne." And even as she spoke these words she was daubing the canvas again, shading the light here, tinting it there, sometimes using colors that seemed to me absurd on their face, violet edges for instance, and fleshly blue tones, that ultimately produced a peculiarly natural effect.

Another tradition of Marcel's Crondoc picnic was a speech by Mr. Meerson, and this, too, came to pass. Marcel ambled out in his sauce-stained apron and stood by the Meerson table and thanked everyone for coming and wished us all a wonderful day, which reminded me of Bobby, who as far as I could tell was still sitting down over the lip of the riverbank lamenting the loss of his holy passion. Then Marcel turned things over to Mr. Meerson, who, looking resplendent in creased jeans that tapered over his black cowboy boots, a sky-blue shirt decorated with dark blue scallops and mother-of-pearl snaps, and a string tie

with knobbed silver tips, stepped up from his bench onto the tabletop to speak.

“Good afternoon, friends and neighbors of the Perpend Valley,” he began. Many, he said, were the blessings of the Lord on this fine day, not least the weather and the food and all the good people in attendance. This, of course, was greeted with applause and self-congratulatory whoops and whistles.

“I hope you’ll pardon me,” he continued, “if I ask you to join me for a moment in thinking about roads. The Perpend I think is God’s road, the water’s road, and all its tributaries including Dingle Creek and all their tributaries are part of that road. It’s a royal road, and has been that for me and for this community. Roads grow like blood vessels, or like an oak tree, from a main trunk that branches outward again and again. From freeways to deer trails. And because God’s creatures travel such roads, for the various purposes important to them, I think even the goat paths are God’s roads too. Without roads we couldn’t see the world. We couldn’t visit or trade with our neighbors. We couldn’t be a community. And there are lots of other kinds of roads too: copper roads that carry conversation and electricity, the mail road, and in Thrall there’s even a piped-water road.”

A nervous laughter rippled through the crowd.

“As most of you know, the Forest Service and various other interested parties have been holding discussions for more than a year now trying to develop a resource management plan for the Amaraing watershed. These talks have included representatives from the Corps of Engineers, Fish and Wildlife, the timber industry, several large environmental groups, and, of course, yours truly.”

He smiled while a brief round of applause acknowledged his role. “The management plan,” Aunt Krede said to me in an aside, “is: you hold still while I shave the skin off you.”

“This has been a long road, too, with many detours and switchbacks, but it’s finally carried us to our destination. Yesterday afternoon all these people came together at the federal courthouse in Artesia to sign an agreement outlining the plan in principle.”

Hats went into the air on this one, the claquish whoops were blood-curdling, the whistles elaborate, the applause perfervid and prolonged. Mr. Meerson, tall, proud, and looking especially silvery, laughed and waved. Finally he gestured for calm.

“It’s not a done deal,” he went on. “It has to be finalized in detail and the lawyers have to massage it. That usually takes three or four months. But we’ll be making preparations throughout the spring and I think before the snow flies we’ll be doing what Americans have always done: pioneering new roads.”

There was more applause and I thought he looked pointedly at us, but I couldn’t be sure.

“I want to say one other thing, if I may. We’ve seen a lot of new faces in our community over the past few years. Some of them may not be quite what we’re used to. But I believe we should welcome all people of good will to the Perpend Valley, no matter what their color or nationality, because they all have a contribution to make to our community.”

There was no approbation for this, and he went quickly on.

“Finally, Pastor Beezle, who’s unfortunately not feeling well today, has asked me to tell you that the children of his congregation raised more than two thousand dollars this year for the orphanage, and,” he reached into his breast pocket for the check and unfolded it for all to see, “I’m pleased to present this check for two thousand two hundred dollars to Tom and Sally Taylor from all the good people of Crondoc Christian.”

Polite applause continued while he stepped down and walked to the table

where Tom and Sally were sitting and gave them the check. Tom Taylor, a lanky, ancient black man with short-cropped snow-white hair and beard, raised himself slowly on his cane and shook Mr. Meerson's hand. His wife, pale as milk but robust as any Brünhilde, glanced up then looked away and said nothing. Rather abruptly, everyone returned to whatever they'd been doing a few minutes earlier.

Mr. Meerson walked over to where Aunt Krede and I were. "I'm as concerned as you are about the things that've happened on your farm," he said. "It's vandalism, pure and simple, and we're going to put a stop to it."

Aunt Krede kept painting. "I'm not the least concerned about it, Mr. Meerson."

"Well, we're going to put a stop to it."

She sat back and put the cigar in her mouth, puffing slowly as she regarded the painting's progress. "Yes," she said, without looking at him. "I'm sure we are. But tell me, what do you think of this painting so far?"

"The only thing I know how to paint is machinery," he said. "But I did see some of the landscapes at your house, and they seemed very nice, very well done."

Bridget joined us. "Can I ask you something, Mr. Meerson?" she asked.

He laughed. "Can I stop you?"

"I just wanted to know whether the hand of friendship is out to everybody, like for instance Jews or Muslims or, uh, gays and lesbians."

"My hand of friendship is out to anyone who makes a positive contribution to the community," he said. "I don't think people's personal business is my business. If they don't disrupt the community, I don't object to their being here." He shrugged. "It's that simple."

"Do you think a gay teacher should be able to work at Thrall?"

“Have you taken up journalism, Bridget? Ask Mr. Authore. I’m sure he’ll tell you the same thing I will: if I don’t know about it, I don’t care about it. I don’t inquire as to the private conduct of the people who work for me and I’m sure Mr. Authore doesn’t inquire as to the private conduct of his teachers.”

“But suppose somebody came along and said, ‘Mr. So-and-so is gay.’ What then?”

Mr. Meerson smiled and seemed to stiffen a bit. “Well,” he said, “each case has to be taken on its merits. And again, you have to think of the welfare of the business or the school or the community as a whole. But let me ask you this: why do you ask?”

“Well, I’m thinking of becoming Jewish, and I just wondered if I’d still be welcome in Crondoc.”

He laughed. “You’ll always be welcome in Crondoc, Bridget. Your family’s lived here longer than I have, and I believe I’ve known all your relatives since grandfather Vesper and we’ve always gotten along. But if you want my advice, a normal life is a much easier life.”

Aunt Krede made a subtle snorting sound but continued her painting without a word as Mr. Meerson sauntered away toward his table.

“I think Bobby’s not having a normal life,” I said to Bridget.

“Well,” she looked at me with those powder-blue eyes edged with lavender, and with a puckered, impish smile, “who is?”

“I think he’s having a crisis.”

“He *is* a crisis.”

And just then we saw Bobby coming up the slope from the river like a ship appearing on the horizon: first his head, then his shoulders, then his torso, as if he were rising out of the ground, and he walked across the green grass toward us, threading his way among the kids playing frisbee, past the picnickers and

their pumpkin butts clad in denim and pastel, through the sunshine and the shade, his blond hair hanging down, his wet clothes clinging to him, his shoes in his hand. An incipient smile wriggled its way through his lips as he drew near us.

“Damn, that water’s cold,” he laughed.

“Welcome back,” said Aunt Krede.

28

Remembrance of Things Past

“April is the cruellest month,” T. S. Eliot claimed, because each springtime blossoms with a splendid promise of hope which the ensuing year will somehow never fulfill.

This April began even sunnier than most, and hence with greater cruelty, the cool earth bursting with the bright variegated colors of primroses, the deep, saturated reds and yellows of black-anthered tulips, the fresh rich greens of new leaves on the hardwoods, a profusion of lush emerald grasses in every yard and field.

I met Lem Roy one Sunday morning when I stepped out amidst this emergent effulgence to the mailbox to grab our copy of the Sunday *Artesia Announcer*. He was doing the same and he invited us, my mom and me, to come up for the afternoon and stay for supper. My mom said she had things to do but would be up later, and so I went by myself after I’d read the funnies and finished some math homework which I’d put off because I’d been reading a book of poems by Robert Burns. His poetry is rich with a dark, bemused, compassionate awareness of the inherent tragedy of life, while at the same time he is full of courage for bucking the odds and defying the gods. He sees the irony of life’s dogged persistence ensnared within such a capricious and even hostile milieu. It

is the fate of weak things to suffer the indignities of their immateriality at the hands of the strong. Yet, they can, and do, and will endure it. Moreover, the strong will suffer the same oblivious scorn at the hands of the stronger, and they at the hands of fate itself, for that is the nature of the universe.

The calving season was in full swing. They had seventeen calves out and four to go, and Lem Roy had moved one of the pregnant cows, whose fetus appeared to be oriented strangely within her, to a stall in the barn, where he and Aunt Krede were busy trying to help her get comfortable and discussing whether they should try to manipulate her heavy burden into a more normal position. They decided to wait.

As we walked back toward the house, Mr. Authore's gray diesel king cab, bristling with antennae like some prehistoric predatory insect, turned onto the driveway and slowly made its way toward us, munching gravel as it came. Lem Roy and Wagger and I waited on the porch while Aunt Krede went inside to make some iced tea.

Mr. Authore affected not to look at us but raised a casual hand of acknowledgment in his window as he turned the truck toward the myrmecorium and brought it to a halt. After a rather long pause, the door opened and he stepped out, again wearing those pale gray Italian shoes that made him look like a fop. He was fresh from the morning's church service, looking corseted and natty and radiating the beatific innocence of the recently cleansed.

"Afternoon," he said, striding toward us, carrying a slim black leather attaché case against his left hip.

"Can't argue with that," Lem Roy replied, *sotto voce*. But he extended his hand as Mr. Authore mounted the steps. "And to what do we owe this pleasant surprise?" he asked, although he already knew.

"Have you read the letter I sent you?" Mr. Authore inquired. He moved

toward the door but Lem Roy guided him to one of two benches that faced each other across a low table on the porch.

“Please. Mary Ann’s fixing iced tea. Would you care for some?”

“Sure,” Mr. Authore said, his black eyes darting around nervously.

“Thanks.”

Lem Roy asked me to tell Aunt Krede we’d all be having iced tea and sat down across the table facing Mr. Authore.

“Iced tea for everybody,” I said as I entered the kitchen.

“Okay,” she replied. Then she looked at me with a conspiratorial grin. “I’m poisoning his,” she whispered.

“Good,” I said. “What’s going on?”

She filled four tall glasses with ice and put some cookies on a plate. “He says he has a contract,” she said, “signed by Uncle Mose in which he agreed that Meerson could harvest the trees from the ridge in return for some money he gave to Bess while Mose was in prison.”

When the tea had steeped in the hot water she added a few ice cubes to it until it was cool and then she transferred it into the glasses.

“Apparently the deal was that Meerson had to wait until this year to do it, and now he wants to do it.”

“You’re not going to let him are you?”

“Of course not. But we want to see what he’s got.” She pushed a sprig of fresh mint into each ice-filled amber tumbler and straddled its lip with a round slice of lemon. “And I want to know how he got it.”

I carried the glasses on a tray and she followed with the cookies and sugar. She sat beside Mr. Authore and I beside Lem Roy, facing her. Mr. Authore expressed concern about my being present during such a personal conversation, but the Kredes assured him it was all right. He removed some papers from his

attaché case and then tipped spoonful after spoonful of glittering white sugar crystals into his tea as Aunt Krede and then Lem Roy carefully read the agreement Mose had signed.

“Mr. Meerson kept his end of this bargain,” Mr. Authore said, passing some more papers. “And now, according to the lawyers, Mr. McMorey’s assigns are legally bound to keep theirs.”

“Fascinating,” Aunt Krede said while Lem Roy read the letter from Meerson’s lawyers. “So Meerson advanced this money to the McMoreys out of compassion, I guess, eh?”

Mr. Authore raised a hand halfway to his mouth as if to bite some remnant from his deeply gnawed nails and then shrugged his narrow shoulders and spread his hands palm upwards. “I honestly don’t know what the circumstances were,” he said.

“But this is pretty well-compensated compassion, wouldn’t you say? I mean for a little less than four thousand dollars he’s looking to get what? Maybe a few hundred thousand dollars’ worth of trees?”

“I really don’t know, Ms. Krede.”

“Uh-huh. And why are we talking to you, sir, instead of Mr. Meerson?”

Mr. Authore drew himself up straight, which served only to emphasize his diminutive stature. “Mr. Meerson legally assigned this contract to me as compensation for my services in a business transaction. Here’s the letter of assignment.”

She ignored the letter. “Does it seem reasonable to you, Frank, that a man would sign away timber worth a hundred, maybe two hundred thousand dollars in return for less than four thousand? Would you do that, Frank?”

Mr. Authore shrugged. “Well, I assume they needed the money. And that was almost fifty years ago. The trees were much smaller then. And there’s

interest, too." He fished through his papers. "Here, I calculated the interest. Thirty-eight hundred dollars at six percent, for forty-five years, it comes to fifty-two thousand three hundred and..."

"Did you calculate what the trees were worth back then?"

Mr. Authore looked at her blankly. "No, why would I do that?"

"I don't know," she said with a smile. "I just wondered if you had."

"Tell me, Mr. Authore," Lem Roy broke in, "would you settle for the fifty-two thousand?"

Mr. Authore sipped at his drink, then tipped his head to one side and flicked his eyes back and forth as though he were considering this. "I really don't think I could do that," he said finally. "I'd lose a great deal of money. It wouldn't be fair."

"Well, how much would you settle for?" Aunt Krede inquired.

"Well, I don't know, Ms. Krede. I'd have to think about it. I'd really prefer to just carry out the contract as it's written."

Aunt Krede and Lem Roy glanced at each other as they drank their tea.

"We'd like to begin on June first," Mr. Authore said. "We'll bring the road in from the other side so we won't bother you too much with the equipment. The fallers are set to go on the fifteenth. They say we can get everything down and out of there in about a month."

The Kredes said nothing.

"We'll leave some smaller trees," Mr. Authore said expansively, "and I've even arranged to have planters come in and reseed it for you, so pretty soon it'll look good as new."

"We'll have to have our lawyers look at these papers," Lem Roy said.

"Of course. I've made copies of everything." He passed these around. "I'm hoping we can avoid wasting a lot of money on lawyers."

"Yes," Aunt Krede agreed, rising, "I'm sure we can."

I stood up and Mr. Authore, after gathering his papers again into his attaché, did, too. Lem Roy waited for him and rose when he did.

"Thank you for stopping by," Lem Roy said, extending his hand.

Aunt Krede and I walked with Mr. Authore to his truck. He seemed to step tenderly on the gravel. After they'd shaken hands he paused and offered an afterthought. "I hope this'll help reduce some of the unfortunate tension around here," he said.

"I don't think I follow," Aunt Krede said.

"Well, some folks thought you and your husband might not honor Mose's commitment," he said.

"Lem Roy's my brother, Frank, not my husband," she said, smiling, pulling a cigar from her breast pocket.

Mr. Authore turned crimson. "Oh, I'm sorry."

Aunt Krede smiled broadly and spat out the end of the cigar. "That'd be incest, wouldn't it?"

He reddened again and I thought I detected a momentary shudder. "I misunderstood," he said.

"It's okay. We don't look much alike, do we?"

"I'm sorry," he said.

She lit the cigar. "He is kind of cute, though."

Mr. Authore said no more but got in his truck and drove slowly down the driveway in the warm spring sunshine, exhaling diesel fumes into the afternoon breeze.

"What an asshole," she said.

"I felt like Atahualpa greeting Pizarro," said Lem Roy as we returned to the kitchen for more tea and some cookies, of which no one, until then, had partaken.

I'd no sooner bitten into my second cookie than another car crunched to a halt on the driveway apron, and this time Wagger, who had barely noticed Mr. Authore, began an uncharacteristic yipping fuss.

"Tell 'em we don't want any," Lem Roy said to me.

"It's Miz Bubby," I called as soon as I saw her car, which was parked in back of the myrmecorium, out of sight of the road.

Lem Roy was right behind me. "Huh-uh," he disagreed. "Wagger doesn't like her that much."

But as we stepped out onto the porch we saw that it was Miz Bubby's car, and we heard Wagger's still-excited voice coming from the barn. Lem Roy's brown face broke into a singular spectacular grin that vastly surpassed his usual smile made up of subtle tiny lines and made his great gull-winged nose flare to twice its normal span.

"It's Bridey," he said, and sure enough she and Wagger emerged in the next instant from the barn and she waved at us while Wagger's tail spun around like an eccentric single-bladed propeller.

Lem Roy went down the steps to greet her and they met in a friendly embrace that surprised, then shocked, then pleased, then surprised me again as they walked toward me with his arm over her shoulder and hers around his waist.

"Hi, Bridey," I said.

"Hey, Ash."

I held the door for them. "You have a driver's license?"

"Hey, Bridey," Aunt Krede called in greeting.

"Hi, Mary Ann."

I felt a twinge of jealousy that quickly turned to curious amazement: she knew the Kredes better than I did. "Not better," Aunt Krede demurred later.

"More intimately, perhaps. She's irrepressibly effusive, Ashmead, and you're, well, more Kansan." I knew what she meant.

Bridget had a story to tell. It'd begun the night before, as the three of them had sat down to dinner. Miz Bubby had had a headache all day, and neither Bridget nor Bobby'd had a peaceful moment. During the preparation of dinner the old woman had buzzed about the kitchen kibitzing and bellyaching about everything. The milk wasn't fresh. The refrigerator stank and the food was probably poison. The beans were being steamed, not boiled, and would never be tender. The meat should've been fried. Bobby's hands weren't clean. Bridget let water run in the sink while she peeled the onions. She'd gone right over to the sink and slapped down the handle that shut off the water and Bridget had had to overcome an urge to "slug her in the chops," as she put it.

Bobby'd had a date with Lucretia and wanted to borrow the car. Miz Bubby had countered with a criticism of Lucky's morals which she'd heard from Beezle. Bobby had cast aspersions on Beezle's character that would've been uncomplimentary to any man, and Miz Bubby had imperiously declared that Bobby was grounded for uttering such infamy of his elders and not only could not have the car but would not even be permitted to leave the house.

I knew all this because I'd met him at the end of his driveway, and picked up Lucky, and the three of us had gone to a party and had a good time.

Once Miz Bubby realized Bobby had gone, her dudgeon had turned to fury which fell upon Bridget in the form of a prying accusation she'd heard from Mr. Meerson that Bridget was going to convert to Judaism, and forsake Jesus, and Bridget, exasperated by her grandmother's incessant carping attacks, had told her that although she was most decidedly not going to become Jewish she was in fact already a lesbian. This had propelled Miz Bubby into a towering fit of despair, self-sympathy and denial in which, among many other things, she'd

indicted the Kredes as the cause of it and begged aloud to know why God had thus abandoned her."

And then she'd collapsed.

Bridget had called 911 but Miz Bubby had had a massive brain hemorrhage, a fatal stroke, and she died shortly after she got to the hospital. Bridget had followed the ambulance in Miz Bubby's car and had still been there when I'd dropped Bobby off about two-thirty at the end of his driveway.

So now Bobby was at home sleeping. Their parents were planning to return from Alaska. Neither she nor Bobby welcomed this prospect. In the six years since their parents had left, they'd been back to Crondoc only for a few days, at two Christmases. Bobby had gone to Alaska once for a week and his father had spent the entire time in the woods, hunting and half-drunk.

"One thing you can say for the old plowshare's topsy-turvy effect is that suddenly it's a new day," Aunt Krede observed.

I noticed the bright sunshine outside had been replaced by an ominous gray cast. A breeze rippled through the planters that hung from the eaves of the back porch and a curtain of silver rain swept across the hillside.

"Or a return of the old days," Bridget said.

"It's an opportunity," Lem Roy said. "A reprieve from the flow of cause and effect. And because it's only a local event, the usual patterns will persist in the world around it, but within the capsule of chaos a whole plethora of new choices exist, and in such times you can move mountains by will alone."

"Or mountains may rise up and fall upon you," Aunt Krede said.

"Well," said Lem Roy, "there's nothing unusual about that, mountains being so much bigger than we are. But the unusual aspect of times like these is the sudden opening of the panorama of options."

"Yeah," said Bridget, "but how do you know what they are?"

"It's just like when Mary Ann tours the countryside, she frees herself from the entanglements of settled civilization and she's able then to perceive and develop a fresh perspective. Last night your grandma freed you of the constraints of living in her presence, and I'd bet you'll see, as time goes on, that certain things will flow out of this moment that simply couldn't have begun elsewhere or otherwise."

"That still doesn't tell me what to do," Bridget observed.

"No," he agreed. "But it tells you to be alert, because possibilities exist now that didn't exist yesterday – good, bad, and indifferent. And decisions that didn't matter yesterday, because the momentum of the great coherent mass of life denied them any palpable effect, today may shape the future because that mass is temporarily incoherent."

"And you can be pretty sure," Aunt Krede added, "that the old days will not return, even if many of their accoutrements do. Your folks are not going to come back to Crondoc and pick up where they left off, because where they left off isn't here anymore. You and Bobby are different people than you were six years ago. Crondoc is different. Your dad's mother is gone, for instance, and that's going to be a major force in changing things."

"Yeah," I said. "For instance, who'll deliver the mail?"

"Omigod," Bridget said, stifling a laugh. "I hadn't thought of that."

"Don't think of that," Aunt Krede said. "The mail will take care of itself. Think about taking care of your self. The externals will quickly settle back into their accustomed ruts. That's the great joy of social life. But it's you, and Bobby, that can change now, and suddenly grow in new directions, and that's what I think you'll see later on, when you look back on it."

A few tears streamed down Bridget's face. Aunt Krede reached across the table and took Bridget's hands in her own. A tear slipped free of her own eye and

dribbled down across that leathery cheek, and then they both laughed.

"I'm going to miss her," Bridget said, wiping her face on her sleeve.

"Everybody's going to miss her," Aunt Krede sympathized. "Well, except maybe me."

Lem Roy refilled Bridget's glass and put his hand on her shoulder. "Just remember, Bridey," he said, "whenever you want that feeling of being cared for by someone who knows everything about everything, you can always come here."

"Thanks, Lemmie," she said, smiling through a snuffle.

The Kredes invited her to bring Bobby back and have supper with us but acknowledged in the same breath that she probably wouldn't want to and oughtn't feel obliged. They inquired as to her mother's arrival, which was scheduled for the following day, and offered to help in any way they could.

I walked with her out to the car, which now seemed truly an ancient relic, and I realized as she closed the door and cranked down the window that, short as she was, she was a lot taller than Miz Bubby had been. I stood there with my collar turned up against the rain, getting soaked anyway and realizing that an odd hole could be left in the fabric of our lives by even so small and offensive a person as Miz Bubby. Bad as she'd been, worse things might replace her.

"And no, Ashcan, I don't have a drivers license," Bridget said, smiling. "My birthday's in June." And with that she backed up, leaning out the window with practiced aplomb, and drove off toward the road with a merry wave of her hand.

The April sunshine had coaxed a host of waxy, salmon-colored blossoms from the quince that grew beside the myrmecorium and now the brisk rain pelted them incessantly, scattering petals on the ground and reminding me again of Eliot's plaint. Perhaps the recurrent hope of each new day is, as Jean Sheperd later caricatured it, "a come-on, like all the rest of life."

29

Arsenic & Black Lace

They held a funeral for Miz Bubby in Artesia and all the notables, so I heard, turned out but I didn't go. I've never understood how you pay homage to a person by gawking at their made-up corpse lying like so much sculpted bologna in a box. I mean, if you want to spend a few moments in reflection near the grave or the ashes, fine. If you want to spend an afternoon with a bottle and a friend and a few smokes, chatting up the olden days, fine. But the dead are gone; if they liked you, they'd've preferred a life visit. If they didn't like you, indeed, if they weren't intimate with you, why would they want you staring at their bloodless body dressed to the nines, cold and stiff and supine, as if you were watching them asleep in their beds? Besides, I wasn't that crazy about her when she was alive.

The Saturday following dawned rosy and cool, the earth still damp from the rain that had sifted continuously through the gray skies during the week. It was a new day, and a lovely sunny day, but as I stood by the river in my bare feet with a piece of toast and a glass of orange juice it seemed withal the same old place, the same old people, the same old prospects. I telephoned for Marie but Mr. Kuntzler said she was at the foundry.

When I'd finished my breakfast I walked upstream past the Keystone Beach and into the little woods that opened out onto the gravel bar. The gently sloping crown of the bar was only a foot or two above the spring flow, and had it not been for the dam a few miles upstream the whole bar at this time of year would've been under water. Indeed, the side of it nearest Dingle Creek *was* under water, and a profusion of willowy shrubs choked the shallows along that edge, a thicket, really, of slender yellow-sheathed branches bearing long, slim

green-and-silver leaves. It seemed to grow a foot taller every few days. For a while I skipped stones across the slow water into the opposite bank. The gravel was rich in perfect skipping disks, some with dimpled centers, that would yield eight, ten, even twelve skips before they slowed and sank beneath the glassy black surface on the far side.

Beside the willows a dragonfly, its long body an iridescent blue, darted, hovered, alighted on a narrow blade of marsh grass, its transparent veined wings pulsing. Then, in a wink, it disappeared.

"Today," a hollow baritone voice intoned above the river's rushing roar, "you will be with me in paradise."

I turned, startled, to see, who else, Pastor Beezle, his arms spread to the heavens, his blue eyes tumid with faraway madness, standing not ten feet behind me. "Hi, Padre," I said.

"Hello, Ashmead, my boy, hello, hello."

"You seem to be in an expansive mood."

"I am," he said, rolling his eyes, "I am. It's a beautiful day, and I've come to make supplication for an enormous spring steelhead. Well, that and practice my inspirational Easter sermon, which I hope you'll break with your Godless tradition long enough to enjoy. Oh, and by the way, I'm just a pastor, not a padre; just the humble shepherd of my flock, not its progenitor."

"Sorry," I said. "I was just kidding."

I was tempted to say the devil had made me do it, but I didn't. It would've been too easy for him. And I was tempted to dispute whether the thief to whom Jesus had made this famous promise had actually died that day, but I suspected that wouldn't go over very well either. So I said nothing.

As he hunkered down by the water's edge, selecting a fly and securing it to his line, he told me that his theme for the Easter sermon a week hence would be

“redemption through suffering.” My stone-skipping activities having been so unceremoniously curtailed I felt emboldened to inquire why redemption was necessary.

“Your friend Bobby tells me that your religious instincts have been severely neglected,” he said. “And now I see that might be true.”

“Well,” I shrugged, “I don’t feel any need to be redeemed, if that’s what you mean.”

“Well,” he said, flicking the fly in that long silken arc through the cool morning air, “perhaps that’s because you haven’t yet suffered, Ashmead.”

He waded out into the shallow water, up to his knees, then a little farther, twenty feet from the shore, well beyond talking distance, which I figured was as much a relief to him as it was to me.

I hunted among the pebbles for agates, although I rarely found any and the ones I thought I’d found often turned out to be broken bits of brown or yellow glass. After awhile I moved upstream from him, toward the willows, where the flow of Dingle Creek curved unwillingly into the river, and, already barefoot, rolled up my levis and waded into the icy water to continue my search.

Now and then when I rolled over a big rock a dark eel the size of a small garter snake would dart out and disappear immediately into the smoky cloud of fine debris that roiled up. Finding myself squeamish about the prospect of an eel’s taking sudden blind refuge under my bare foot, I decided to stand upstream of these rocks before I flipped them. The water was clearing again over a rock I’d just rolled, revealing a small treasure of odd pebbles, when I realized Pastor Beezle was standing not six feet away.

“Do you think you could go down to the other side to do that?” he asked rather testily.

“Sure, I guess so,” I said.

"They can smell you," he explained.

I supposed they could detect his rubber waders too, which probably smelled a lot stranger than my well-washed feet, but I realized this wasn't a rational discussion. "Maybe they smell the eels," I said.

"What eels?"

"The eels under some of these rocks."

"There aren't any eels in this river," he insisted.

"Sure there are," I said. "I've scared up a few of them."

"How big are they?"

I spread my hands, exaggerating as fishermen do.

"Big suckers," I said.

"Damn," he muttered. "Well, listen, you want a sandwich?"

"Sure," I said. "What kind?"

We walked across the bar to his creel, in which he had several sandwiches and some fruit, and we sat crosslegged on the rocks while he extracted the food, including a chicken-salad sandwich he gave to me, and blessed our repast even more ostentatiously than Bennie had blessed the Thanksgiving dinner, invoking the mercy of God on himself, his angler's luck, the Bubbys, Crondoc, his congregation, my mom and even on me, which I thought was a generous touch under the circumstances.

He bit into his sandwich, his eyes bulging as he did so, and cursed again under his breath. "Damn eels," he said. "We'll have to get Lester to salt the creek again."

"How does Lester salt the creek?"

"Ah, they dump poison in the water upstream and it kills all the eels. Arsenic, I think. They just did it last summer; at least I thought they did."

"Doesn't it kill the fish, too?" I asked, incredulous.

"Of course," he said. "You're as bad as Bridget, Ashmead. It kills everything. But, as you see, the fish come right back."

"Guess the eels do, too," I said.

He looked off into the trees. "Maybe he only did the river," he mulled. Then he looked back at his sandwich and smiled that prissy little puckered smile and his eyeballs receded for a moment into their sockets before they popped out again. "Now I'll have to get him to fix Dingle Creek too."

This somehow reminded him of his sermon, perhaps because the suffering of the eels would lead to the redemption of the salmon, and he launched into a discussion of the Bubby family by asking me if I'd attended Miz Bubby's funeral and I said I hadn't.

Miz Bubby, he thought, had suffered greatly, and nobly, on behalf of the community and of her grandchildren, for whose redemption he held out little hope although it was his duty to persevere in seeking their salvation no matter what he, as a mere mortal husbandman of souls, might think. Their mother, he believed, didn't grasp the role their ancestors had played, the mantle they had worn, the burden of responsibility the family had borne in the history of Crondoc, whereas Miz Bubby, with her regal bearing and imperious temperament, had understood it perfectly and had struggled to restore the family again to its ascendancy after Elmore's disastrous flirtation with dissolution and madness.

"Bobby and Bridget both have drifted far astray," he said, "and I hate to see it because we're losing a spirit that's ennobled us all. For five or six generations, all the way back to Big Ben, who like Paul Bunyan is as much as a legend hereabouts, the Bubbys in their very being have embodied this community, given Crondoc a focus, a sense of meaning and identity it sorely needs and now may never regain. She understood that, but Thekla..." He paused at the mention

of her name, gathering himself. "She's not cut from the Bubby cloth. She doesn't feel the call. She doesn't have the steel. She only understands her sauce."

I was thinking about the replete ant who volunteers to become a honey depot, to hang motionless from the ceiling forever swollen with sugary fluid, unable to walk or resign her chosen fate, captive until the day she explodes and spatters as tasty wreckage to the floor where her neighbors will quickly devour and just as quickly replace her.

Pastor Beezle sighed and rolled up the white cuffs of his shirt, purple this time with a white collar, in honor I supposed of the season. He had small hands and hairy arms. He'd cultivated a closely-cropped salt-and-pepper beard. On the ring finger of his left hand he wore a gold band with runic lettering, a symbol he said of his union with God, which said, he said, in Greek, "in God's embrace."

"And you, Ashmead," he asked solicitously. "Have you been a good boy?" He'd heard, he said, that my mother'd gotten in some sort of trouble over drugs; I assured him it'd been cleared up, and I intimated that someone other than she had been the culprit all along.

"And who might that've been?" he asked.

Someone else who had a key to the pharmacy, I supposed.

"Surely," he said, "you're not suggesting..."

Surely, I assured him, I wasn't suggesting anything except that my mom had not taken the drugs and someone else had.

"But then they all reappeared," he said.

"Yes."

"Drugs are a scourge," he said. "All the young people use them, don't they?"

"I don't know what all the young people do," I said.

"But they're around, aren't they?"

I shrugged. "Sure. So are fast cars and loose women and whiskey and jojo books. And cigarettes and television and..."

"You have a girlfriend, Ashmead?"

Now there was a déjà vu moment. "Well," I said, "yes, and no. I was in love with one but I'm invisible to her. And one loves me, maybe, I'm not sure, but she's in another universe and I guess in some way she's invisible to me. So I don't know exactly whether I have a girlfriend or not. Why do you ask?"

He had a peach and an apple. He handed me the peach and bit into the apple which he held in his mouth as he packed our leftovers into the brown paper bag he'd had in his creel. Then he took the apple from his mouth, snapping off a bite, which he chewed appreciatively as he stood up. "Well," he said, reaching inside his waders, "since you're a connoisseur of sin, I thought you might be interested in these postcards I confiscated from one of my young parishioners."

So saying, he handed me half a dozen grainy black-and-white postcard-size photographs of pear-shaped women, long-waisted nymphs of Rubens, with big butts and thighs, barely half-draped in togas with hair wreathed in daisies and curled tightly as an old-time aviator's helmet. Then, with a knowing smile, he turned and waded out into the river and lofted his fly across the flowing afternoon toward the amber eye of God's silver devil, this fisherman of men.

I left the photographs there on the rocks beside his creel and returned to my idle pebble collecting, concentrating now on small pieces of jasper, a strangely colored stone with a warm, soapy surface that occurs in varieties of deep green, barn red, and ocher, all in exactly the same shade. I supposed Pastor Beezle was, in some pathetic way, trying to open a dialogue with me on a less-than-spiritual level but somehow, with those pictures, he had revealed himself as a terminally hopeless fuddydud from whom I had nothing to fear.

I had, in fact, completely forgotten his presence when a shout from the river – *God-damn!* I think he yelled – snapped me to attention. He was almost at midstream, the water churning at his back well above his waist, his arms held high as the flyrod bent into a quivering half-circle and the fine glistening thread whipsawed through the surface downstream. “*Yah-hoo!*” he cried, and the line raced toward the shore and then the fish leapt clear of the surface, flailing itself in midair, wet-black and silver glittering in the sun before it splashed again into the cold water, the thin line hissing then across the river to the far shore. Pastor Beezle slowly made his way toward me, calling for his net as he came, the monstrous steelhead running back and forth, breaking into the air again, and yet again, trying to rid itself of the steel barb buried in its tough cartilaginous lip. I ran for the net, grabbed it and waded into the shallows beside Pastor Beezle. When he’d played the exhausted creature into about a foot of water, where its sleek and massive body was easily seen, its great gills heaving with effort, I handed the net to him and, holding the rod taut overhead, he reached down to scoop it up. It was so huge it couldn’t fit in the net, and just as Pastor Beezle attempted to lift it from the water it flung itself upward and backward, striking the pellucid water like a falling torpedo, and then in a flash, like the lightning-blue dragonfly I’d seen earlier, it was gone.

Pastor Beezle eyed between his fingertips the mangled fly, its barbed hook opened into the shape of a scimitar, nearly straight, a tiny piece of translucent flesh dangling from its steel tip.

“Guess this wasn’t his idea of paradise,” I said.

He glowered at me but said nothing. He fished for a while longer but without results. Then he sloshed ashore. I helped him gather his things, including the antique porn and the net that had proved too small and the creel like a woven wastebasket half-filled with crumpled paper.

“Damn eels,” he muttered as he walked away.

After he’d gone I thought about the Greek words Jesus had supposedly uttered on the cross: *Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani*. I wondered if Pastor Beezle was feeling that God had forsaken him. I wondered if he was suffering and whether he’d be redeemed, perhaps by visions of kohl-eyed girls with hottentot haunches and braided horsetail hair torqued like a watchspring and stiff as broomstraw.

I picked up another stone, round and flat as a medallion, and deftly skipped it across the gently flowing ripples of the Perpend, into the quiet pool across the river where first I’d seen Pastor Beezle on that hot August day so long ago, when his fishy covenant with God had so readily delivered up to him a pink-fleshed silvery creature with golden eyes that had reminded me of Marie, she who was as far away now as its feisty cousin, redeemed in the cool freedom of the unknowable deep.

30

Transcendence

I’m not a religious person, but for some reason I always get a hard-on in church. I don’t know; maybe it’s the long periods of sternly seated boredom. Maybe it’s the holy hush that weighs on everything, surrounding even the billow of the hymns with a heavy atmosphere of gloom, the dark matter of psychic space.

It was Easter, and my mom and I were sitting on chairs in Beezle’s Asylum, near the back, just across the aisle from, of all people, the Kredes. Two rows ahead of them, a little farther in, were Bobby Bubby – whose wavering faith had necessitated his defrockment as altar boy – and his mother, Thekla, who was clearly ill at ease, and just in front of them were the three Hills. Bridget was nowhere to be seen. I felt envious of her; she’d somehow escaped this hour of

tedium.

I hadn't really wanted to go, but my mom is of the school of guilty nonbelievers who think their offspring should be acquainted, however superficially, with the institution of religion so that the children can bear their own responsibility for rejecting it, if such is their wont. As a side-effect of this hypocrisy, they themselves are able, by making a surreptitious prayer or furtive genuflection, to ameliorate the wrath they secretly fear they've roused in God Almighty by their lack of enthusiasm for the tenuous tracts and tinsel trappings of His self-appointed, self-anointed earthly minions.

There was a hymn or two and some mumbo-jumbo over the pressed white-bread wafers and cheap port wine that would serve as the symbolic flesh and blood of Jesus, whose gold-flecked picture loomed over the congregation with a strangely dolorous expression as though at the moment of this munificent gesture He'd realized that, in my case at least, all His sorrowing and sighing would be in vain.

And then, with hands folded humbly before him, Pastor Beezle ascended the podium and spread his arms, and, although he was wearing a white suit and a purple shirt, perhaps the same purple shirt he'd worn a week before during the debacle of the fish that got away, I realized that, making allowance for differences of time and place, he and the glistening, rue-riven Jesus behind him bore one and the same face.

True to his announced intentions Pastor Beezle rhapsodized in numbing iterations of shading on his theme of purification and redemption through suffering, beginning with the storied enslavement, screwing and slewing of the ancient Israelites, continuing through an extensive recapitulation of the more mundane psychosocial traumas of modern man, and culminating of course in the excruciating humiliation and subsequent ascension into glory of Jesus, which

supposedly had somehow enabled the salvation of all our souls.

While he was droning on through this litany, which seemed a fitting adjunct to crucifixion, so gruesome and tedious was it, I thought of all the effort men have expended throughout the centuries pondering, and oftener arguing and even warring over such notions as whether God exists, and whether Jesus existed, and whether Jesus was God, or a Titanic half-man half-god, or maybe just a man, and whether the Biblical miracles were acts of God or magic tricks, delusions or lies, and it seemed to me that the real wonder of religion was that anyone could get so worked up about it as so many people obviously did. Then I realized I was sitting with my forearms in my lap, my hands folded between my thighs, hiding the comic shame of inexplicable arousal, and I squirmed in my seat, trying to interrupt my jasper's turgid reverie.

"Sit still!" my mom hissed softly, nudging me.

"Sorry," I whispered back, glancing at her. She looked straight ahead, upward a bit toward the podium, attentive, focused. A little smile flickered across her lips.

"I can't believe you have such thoughts in the house of God."

My face flushed hot and then I smiled too, inside.

Without ever answering my question why souls might require saving in the first place, which I supposed was another lesson, Pastor Beezle finally, mercifully, came to the end of his message and, while the collection plates were passed around, we sang another hymn which for me at least had the salutary effect of washing away all the dead words and half-baked notions that lay heaped on the vestibule of my inattentive mind.

It was at this penultimate point in the service that what I've come to think of as the ritual sacrifice, that is, the consumption of the consecrated host, took place, and it was at this time also that it was customary that those through whom God

chose to speak would give voice to His messages. Among a small, sparse chorus of indistinct mutterings I soon realized one voice was rising above all the rest. It was Bobby Bubby's. Bobby was saying all sorts of things, some arguably verbal, some incomprehensibly guttural. At first he mumbled, as if to himself, and then his voice rose to a conversational level, and finally he seemed to be addressing the whole congregation, or, I thought, maybe he was talking to the giant Jesus on the wall.

At first, as he mumbled, he gazed downward and wrapped his arms around himself, and twisted back and forth like a watch escapement. Then he flung his hands toward the sky, and drooled a little, and as he became louder he grew agitated and kinematic and jigged around, his eyes wide, his face flushed, first shouting then whispering tangled phrases from *Revelations* and maybe *Alice in Wonderland* and indeterminate primal – or perhaps modern – poetry, laughing and crying until he collapsed to his knees, in the aisle by now, while his mother at first tried to pretend it wasn't happening and then looked on aghast.

Bobby bent over backward, his buttocks resting between his feet, and lay almost supine on the floor, raising only his head and arms, reaching out in supplication toward the sympathetic Jesus above him, spittle dripping from the corners of his mouth, tears flowing from his eyes, a sputtering slurry of gibberish emanating from his lips, interrupted only by great heaving sobs and sighs. Then the raven-haired Lucky Hill, slim and graceful in a long white dress of diaphanous organdy, glided toward him, knelt at his side, cradled his head in her delicate arms, and rocked him slowly while she hummed and cooed and comforted and finally quieted him. At length, while the other parishioners went about their prayers and communion as if all this were transpiring on another, imperceptible plane, the two of them rose together and stood for a long time in the middle of the aisle, swaying slightly, arms wrapped around one another, as if

by the molten heat of their feeling they had fused together into one person.

And then it was over, and the bell rang in the belfry and we all filed out into the cool April sunshine. The Kredes and my mom and I, seemingly of one mind, found ourselves walking, as if in a dream almost, savoring the sweet freshness of the air, the cool greens of grasses and leaves, the brilliant colors and subtle shapes of the flowers, exclaiming on the whistles and twitters of the songbirds, of wrens and sparrows and robins and towhees and most especially the warblers, whose lyrical songs were lilting and rhythmic, melodic and delightfully complex.

When we reached our driveway Aunt Krede asked if we'd mind their walking down to the river's edge for a moment, which of course we didn't and the four of us stood for a few minutes and just watched the water flow by while on the opposite shore a blue heron stood on one leg gazing into the shallows, motionless as any adroit hunter knows how to be. Suddenly, with the swiftness of a striking snake, its dagger beak pierced the water and emerged again, dripping, into the noonday sun with a small silvery fish, which, with a single quick rippling of the long gray neck, disappeared, and the heron, croaking its bony primordial caw, fanned its enormous wings and slowly lumbered into the air, its sticklike legs dangling beneath it.

Aunt Krede turned to us and smiled. Then she and Lem Roy, with my mom and me behind them, walked up the little trail to our house.

"It just leaves me in awe of God's creation," my mom said, as overwhelmed as we'd all been with the poignant little vignette we'd just witnessed.

Aunt Krede said later that she didn't believe any supernatural thing existed, and Lem Roy countered that he believed everything that existed was supernatural, which left me in the middle because I simply don't know, and maybe that's what I believe in: the unknowable. I don't know whether the Perpend and the heron and its little silver fish and the green alders rustling in the

spring breeze or even the four of us who saw them that April afternoon are God's creation or just a happenstance. If they are a happenstance I don't know how they came to be or even really what they are. If supernatural conscience made them I don't know whether it was one god or a whole caboodle of gods and goddesses or demigods and wood sprites or even hoary aliens from outer space. I don't know and I never will know, and that's fine with me. As for Aunt Krede and Lem Roy, I agreed with both of them: nothing is supernatural, and everything is. The excluded case, which among us only my mom believes, is that some things are supernatural while others are not.

"Jesus looked sad, didn't you think?" I joked.

"Well, look what they did to him," Aunt Krede retorted.

My mom had an alternate theory. "Perhaps," she said, "he found your responses a trifle misplaced."

31

The End of the Rope

Near the end of April, just before the Thrall School held its annual spring open house, I received a letter from Hanna. She was flunking most of her courses and wanted me to appraise the attitude of her parents toward her lackluster performance.

She said, incidentally, that her father had told her during a telephone call that late one recent moonless night he'd spotted a car, with its lights out, drifting slowly backwards into the field behind the house, down toward the tall grass and tangled scrub that lined the banks of Dingle Creek just above Solitude Cove.

He'd put on his robe over his pajamas, grabbed his binoculars, and stealthily made his way to a vantage point in the field from which he could see that the car was Bennie's sheriff's cruiser. He'd been subsequently surprised to

see its occupants, Bennie and a woman, emerge and walk away from the car with what appeared to be a blanket or a bedroll, and disappear into the woods that bordered the gravel bar at the confluence of Dingle Creek and the Perpend.

Apparently he didn't know exactly what had happened after that because his wife had hissed and beckoned to him to return to the house and mind his own business. But Mr. Hudson was a clever and curious man, and he believed that the business of Crondoc, and especially of its inhabitants, *was* his business.

I decided, as I walked over to Krede's the morning of the Thrall School open house, that I'd broach the subject of Hanna's situation by claiming she'd sent me a letter in praise of her school and its academic atmosphere and saying that I was myself considering going there. I tried to recall how much I'd told the Hudsons of my deep disenchantment with the whole process of education and my coalescing intention to eschew college after I graduated from high school.

The Kredes had devised an original play for the Thrall School open house. It was called *Looking Ahead*. I'd helped Lem Roy make the puppets and we'd spent several evenings hashing out the script. The King and Queen were hollow hand-puppets, more or less conical in their elaborate robes. The King was a big blusterer. The Queen was an even bigger harridan. Their daughter, Princess Tomorrow, and the Prince of Wells, the rude unprincipled son of the kingdom's most powerful noble, were marionettes, as was an odd character called the Wanderer. Princess Tomorrow was gorgeous, of course, red-headed, tall, and svelte. The Prince of Wells was dashing, dark, and devil-may-care. The Wanderer was gaunt, gray, and suitably ephemeral.

Hunched down behind the stage, which was a little counter a few feet above the floor, I operated the King and Queen and spoke the King's lines. By the end of the play my aching arms felt as though they'd turned to wood. Lem Roy, standing on a low stool behind me and hidden from the audience by a curtain,

operated the three marionettes and spoke the words of the Prince of Wells. Aunt Krede, standing beside Lem Roy, changed the scenery and did the voices of Princess Tomorrow, the Queen, and the Wanderer.

The action was slapstick, fast and silly. The story opens in the castle with the King coming onstage in high dudgeon because Princess Tomorrow is refusing to marry the Prince of Wells, whose own father has recently died and whose ancestral lands contain many springs and lakes whose water the King's subjects need because the King's own neglectful *laissez-faire* policies have led to the ravaging by taint and depletion of the water resources on his familial lands.

The Queen follows onstage just behind him, scornfully noting that had he not screwed up his own estate's waters he wouldn't need the Prince's, and were he not such a grotesque fool his daughter would obey him, and were not the Prince of Wells such a jerk he could aid in his own good fortune.

Next, the Prince and Princess are seen together in a little forest glen near the boundary of their lands, on the banks of a stream that flows from his land into hers, or vice versa, depending on what day it is. On this day it flows from his to hers, and it is sweet-smelling, cool, clear, and tasty. It's worth ten thousand pieces of gold, he says. In fact, the water on his family's estate is now worth more than all the acreage of the Princess's family, all the lands of the King.

Although the Princess is secretly in love with the Prince, she finds his attitude repulsive and spurns his advances. He laughs. He will have her anyway, he says, because in the end the King will be forced to capitulate to his demands or else the whole population of farmers, serfs and rentpayers will have to leave the King's land and come to live on his. Either way, he'll have all the King's wealth and he himself will be King. The Princess assures him she wouldn't marry him even if he *were* King because he's an opportunistic, arrogant twit.

Next, after the Prince leaves, the Wanderer shows up. The Princess is

troubled because she dislikes the Prince's impudent analysis yet recognizes the truth in it. She thinks she should perhaps accede to his desires so she can marry the water her family and their followers need. The Wanderer inquires why she doesn't instead attempt to restore the health of the waters on the King's estate, and she explains that this is judged by all the King's experts to be impossible: there are too many people, too many sewers, too many factories, too many irrigated fields, too many hopelessly polluted lakes and rivers and streams and aquifers. Even the rain is not clean.

Next, the Princess appears in the bedroom of the Queen. The Queen is bespattered and furious; she was exposed to the muddy rain when her coachman, weakened by dysentery from drinking the water allotted to the working class, keeled over at the door to the castle and dropped her umbrella. The Princess suggests what the Wanderer said: clean it up. Nonsense, says the Queen, we'll just take the Prince's water. The Princess protests that this will just lead to the same result after a few years. The Queen retorts that by the time that happens the Princess's daughter can find another Prince. The Princess points out that by then, the Kingdom will be lost.

The King then enters, with the Wanderer bound in chains. The Prince, by secret messenger, has informed the King that the Wanderer has been inciting the populace to clean up the mess. To the King, this is treasonous nonsense. To the Prince, of course, it would represent a huge loss of profit. The Wanderer claims that these "experts" are in the thrall of their own expertise and, having never restored anything, don't know how. "They're only experts in decay," he says. "In regeneration they're totally inexperienced. So naturally, they prefer decay and always recommend it."

It is decided that the Prince and the Wanderer should fight a duel to decide who is right. The Princess visits the Wanderer in his cell and the two of them plot

a course of action. The Princess holds a grand party and, using her considerable wiles, keeps the Prince up all night, so that in the morning he is easy prey for the Wanderer, who puts him into a deep sleep (what else?) and leaves him resting in the woods. When he awakens he recalls an epiphanal dream and realizes that a personal kingdom of sick people and despoiled waterways might be less inviting than a union in which his sons would be kings and their people would flourish.

The Prince and Princess meet again in the little forest glen where this time the stream is flowing out of the Kingdom, foul-smelling and rust-colored. The Prince offers to help supply fresh water to the Kingdom but only if the money it's worth is all invested in cleaning up the Kingdom's own lakes and watercourses. He proposes furthermore that the Princess herself should be in charge of this work because she has "more integrity than all the rest of us put together." The King and Queen are livid, but the Princess is delighted. The Wanderer has kept his word, and they all live happily ever after.

Needless to say, I guess, this play raised a few eyebrows in the school auditorium, and querulousness turned to scowling consternation as people pondered its possible allegorical meaning. But Authore didn't call the police, and the kids loved the show, which we performed three times during the long day.

On the way home I stopped by the Crondoc Store and elaborated my duplicitous tale to the Hudsons. I was looking forward, I said, to having a mentor on campus if I decided to go to Hanna's school.

"You've got to be kidding," Mr. Hudson snorted. "She hasn't passed a course since she's been there."

"Really? She said she was doing all right in her classes."

Mrs. Hudson came out from the back room, where she'd been counting empty aluminum popcans into enormous plastic sacks. "Is it love, Ashmead?" she asked with a kindly twinkle in her eye. "Or have you decided to become a

party animal? Nobody with an eager brain has ever attended that school. You tell her if she wants to go back next year she's going to pay for it. We're counting on taking a vacation."

Mr. Hudson grinned at me with that huge mouthful of chiclet teeth and wiggled his ears, deliberately I think. He'd helped put men on the moon. He knew green cheese when he saw it.

"You'll have a mentor in the country-store business," he said. "It'll take her all summer to earn the money."

Hanna had concluded her letter, as an inducement to me to conduct my ill-fated inquiry, by letting the cat out of the bag: the woman Mr. Hudson had seen in the cruiser that night with Bennie, she whose face he'd glimpsed in the glow of the cruiser's interior lights as she got out of the car, was Annette Authore.

32

Soprano

The afternoon was sunny and warm and my physics teacher was droning on about catenary arcs, which he thought illustrated some profound physical principle although he couldn't say exactly what it was. The only profound principles I could discern were that I could sleep without falling out of my chair and that high school teachers often seemed to know considerably less about their subjects than some of their students did.

I was having a fantasy about the catenary arcs in Hanna's underpants when a secretary entered the room and whispered something to the teacher, who seemed relieved to inform me that I was wanted in the superintendent's office. No one is pleased to be wanted in the superintendent's office and I was doubly apprehensive when I saw Sheriff Bennie standing just outside the door, his arms crossed, his jaw working mightily to liberate a pumpkin seed from its woody

pericarp.

The secretary handed me off to him and he took my arm briefly as we walked toward the outer doors. "Don't worry, Ashmead," he said. "You're not in trouble and nothing's wrong. I just want you to help me with something."

Of course I didn't entirely believe him, because cops sometimes say things like that, but I figured it was better than trying to pay attention and nodding off at the same time, and in any case I was now wide awake.

"What's up?" I asked, trying to feel him out.

He opened the car door for me but he didn't answer until we were out of the parking lot and on our way to Artesia along the Guillemot highway. "Billy wrecked his car," he said, spitting a wad of pumpkin husk into the slipstream that sped by his open window.

"Is he okay?"

"Yeah, God knows why. The car's demolished. Anyway, we're going to pick him up."

I thought about Billy's beautiful Corvette, its metallic skin sleek as the iridescent green on a mallard's neck, crushed now like those black-and-white seed hulls Bennie kept popping into his mouth and splitting open with his incisors.

"Did he hit somebody?" I asked. Of course, I meant, "Why am I here?"

"No, he was running from a cop. He overshot a curve and plowed into a small grove of saplings. Otherwise, he'd be dead."

I didn't say anything. But he went on.

"Don't suppose you have any idea why he'd be running from a cop?"

"No," I shrugged. "Speeding?"

He snorted wistfully. "Cocaine," he said. He didn't look at me. He never looked away from the road. He was doing about seventy until we came up

behind some traffic, whereupon he slowed down and just followed along behind it. Then he glanced over.

“You never heard Billy’s a dealer?”

I shrugged again. “Nope. Well, not really. People speculate, you know. But it’s never come up in my presence.”

He was silent then until we parked the cruiser in the hospital parking lot, near the ER entrance. Then he turned in his seat toward me. “I have some things to say to him. It’s not going to be easy, for him or me either. I wanted you to come along because I figured that’d make it easier, him having someone his own age in the car, someone we both know and trust. Understand?”

“Well, not really.” I was a little scared to tell the truth.

“I’m not asking you to do anything or say anything. I just want you to be there, okay? If Billy wants you to say something, or go away, or whatever, then fine, we’ll do that, but otherwise just be there, okay?”

“Okay,” I said.

Billy was in a room near the entrance. A state police officer in a slate gray uniform sat rigidly outside the door, his hands folded over the brim of a campaign hat on his lap. He stood as we approached. He and Bennie shook hands and Bennie thanked him. Then the officer put on his hat and walked off down the hallway the way we’d come.

Billy seemed sullen. Bennie asked if he was okay and Billy said yes. He had a big violet bruise across his forehead and down one side of his face. The eye it bordered was bloodshot. A white gauze bandage covered the heel of one hand where they’d stitched up a gash. He seemed able to walk all right and slumped into the shotgun seat next to Bennie. I got in the back.

“I need to get my car,” Billy said as we turned onto the street.

“Forget your car,” Bennie replied. “It’s history.”

Billy sat almost as stiffly as the state cop had, but hunched a little forward, his hands folded tightly in his lap. "You don't understand, Dad," he said, sounding a bit exasperated. "I *have* to get my car."

Bennie popped a few pumpkin seeds and gnawed thoughtfully on them as we turned onto the Crondoc-Thrall road, just where my mom and I had entered it nine months earlier. "Your car's trashed," he said. "Demolished. Kaput. Scrap iron. Besides that, it's in the impound yard. They're holding it for evidence."

Nobody said another word until we slowed down a mile west of Crondoc and Bennie eased the cruiser onto a gravel road that led up to the Pioneer Cemetery.

"Damn," Billy blurted suddenly, "I just remembered, Arnie Pinkster was in the car this morning. He put some stuff under the seat."

Bennie spat out the window.

"He'll be looking for it," Billy went on. "I don't know what..."

"We're going to visit your grandmother," Bennie said. "She hated lies. Every time I told one she caught me. Damned if I know how she did it, but she always did. She'd say, 'Benjamin, for God's sake stand up like a man.'"

He parked the car beside a broad expanse of bright green grass. After he'd switched off the engine he reached over to the glove compartment in front of Billy and put a key in its lock. "Look," he said as he turned the key. "But don't touch."

The glovebox door swung down. In the felt-lined cubbyhole was a dirt-streaked, slightly torn, rolled-up paper bag that looked as though it might contain a quart milk carton. It was wrapped around its ends with duct tape and had a purple logo of a sunfish stamped on it.

"That's it!" Billy exclaimed.

Bennie snickered and gazed out his window for a long moment before he

returned his eyes to Billy. "Arnie Pinkster's a moron," he said as he closed and locked the box. He looked at Billy and smiled. "Just like you."

We walked up the hill toward Bennie's mother's grave. A jay in a maple tree complained of our presence while Bennie narrated a tale to Billy.

"The guy who was chasing you was a friend of mine, lucky for you. He found the bag in the woods about twenty yards from your car. So nobody could ever prove it'd been *in* your car. He said when he first talked to you, before the paramedics got there, you said you'd thought he was somebody trying to kill you. But when he asked why anybody'd want to kill you, you couldn't think of a reason so you said you thought it had something to do with me, some bad guy's act of revenge. So he called me, and when I got there, after you'd gone, he handed me a rolled-up newspaper and said, 'There may be some parts of the car over there,' and when I went over there I saw this bag, so I rolled it up in the newspaper and put it in my car. The whole time, he stood with his back to me, talking with the tow crew."

The jay flew into the high branches of a fir tree and continued its scolding as it looked around for something better to do. Bennie stopped under an old tree near the gravesite. "This is Hill hill," he said to me, nodding toward the slightly convex sweep of land that held a dozen Hill family graves, including one marked with a silvered but still sturdy headboard made of wood. He removed the badge from his shirt and placed his service belt with its automatic under the tree, the badge atop it.

He put his arm around Billy's shoulder as we walked to the grave. The polished face of the thick red marble stone said simply: "Anant Hill, Beloved Wife," and the years of her birth and death.

"Hi, Ma," Bennie said.

We stood there looking at the sod beneath which Bennie's mom lay buried.

Her youth surprised me. In a few years Billy and I would be as old as she'd been when she died. Bennie told us he often came here to talk with her, that he still missed her, that she'd always listened to whatever he had to say, that she'd known he was about to shade the truth even before he did it. He laughed as he recalled what she said: "If you want your lips to speak for you, don't eat flies and don't tell lies."

Billy didn't say anything. He just stood there, staring down at that grave. His mind must've been swirling. He looked bewildered. I remember thinking his brains might've been scrambled in the crash.

"I'm going to commit a crime for my son today, Ma," Bennie said softly. "I'm going to take that bag of cocaine back to the guy he got it from. I know he didn't pay for it, so if I don't do it they'll kill him. And when I do it, I'll have committed a crime, just like he has."

"Dad," Billy began.

But Bennie continued. "Billy's been hustling this crap far and wide for most of the past year, Ma. Maybe because I lacked your loving wisdom, he's become a liar and a thief. Now I have to hope he'll somehow redeem my dishonor with his own upright conduct from this day forward, forever. So I'm asking you to help us, Ma—help me to be a better father and help Billy to quit eating flies."

The three of us stood there in silence for what seemed like five minutes. Bennie stood erect, his hands folded in front of him, his face bowed toward the headstone at our feet. Several times he glanced at Billy, whose face I couldn't see. I wanted to leave but I was rooted to the spot. Walking away would be even worse than staying. If being there seemed rudely intrusive in a painfully private moment, which it did, departing the scene would've seemed dismissive of its spooky significance.

Billy was perspiring, or maybe crying, because he wiped his face gingerly

with his sleeve. Bennie reached out an arm and clasped Billy's shoulder for a moment. "Stand up, son," he said. And then he took a step forward and leaned over and put his hands on his mother's gravestone and kissed it. Raising himself again, without pausing, he walked to the tree and resumed his identity as the sheriff.

"Let's go, gentlemen," he called out, and I began walking immediately. Billy hung back for a moment.

When we got to the car we both got in. Bennie looked in the rearview mirror and thanked me. He put a few pumpkin seeds in the palm of his hand and contemplated them briefly before he raised them to his lips. As Billy walked around the front of the car I noticed the bruise on his face extended down along his neck and seemed much darker than it had at the hospital. Bennie leaned over and opened the door for him. Billy got in and Bennie started the car. "I'll take you home," he said.

It was Aunt Krede's fiftieth birthday, and Lem Roy'd asked Bridget and me to come up after supper for some cake and ice cream. I was still reeling from the afternoon's events as I crossed the road and made the long walk to their house.

Bridget and Wagger came part way down the driveway to meet me.

"I heard Bennie plucked you out of school today," Bridget said slyly.

"I just went with him to pick up Billy," I said.

"Why, was he heavy?"

"He wrecked his car."

"Well, duh, Ashmead; I *know* that."

I shrugged. "Well, you know as much as I do." And then I thought of Bennie's mom. "I mean, it was sort of surrealistic. And private. You know, father-son stuff."

"Were you the father, or the son?"

I grinned at her persistence. "I was the holy ghost."

She cocked her head, raised an eyebrow and looked at me knowingly, skeptically. "Well, thanks for clarifying it," she said.

Aunt Krede was dressed festively in a bright green and gold shirt, huge gold earrings and seemingly every ring and bracelet she owned. Her gold tooth glittered as she laughed in greeting and the sheen of her shirt dueled with the liquid flash of her emerald eyes. She rose as I came in and embraced me in a genteel bear hug.

"Happy birthday," I said, and she thanked me.

The frenetic guitar and clattering castanets of a flamenco dance swirled in from the living room. "Oh, Carlos," she cried, raising her arms and toeing an almost graceful spin or two around her chair, "I always wanted to be a gypsy!"

"Dementia," noted Lem Roy laconically.

Several bottles of whiskey adorned the table and Bridget took it upon herself to pour a few fingers of bourbon into my glass. I was not quite in the spirit of this celebration but I made up for it quickly, and by the time the Montoya CD was finished I was ready to do my own imitation of Jose Greco but, mercifully for all concerned, I did not.

I'd brought her a card, and there were others from Bridget and Lem Roy and her daughter the doctor and her son the bon vivant. Her daughter had written some chatty stuff about the new baby and her career as a pediatrician. Her son had written about a peak he'd climbed and his newfound fascination with Buddhism, which was keeping him overlong in Tibet.

"He thinks he'll be a worldly monk," she said.

"Well, why not?" Lem Roy inquired.

"He wants to cloister his soul while he dips his dong in the salsa of life."

We all smiled. "Sounds like a plan to me," I said.

"Well," she said, "I think your soul should go wherever your body does. I don't think the sensual and the sacred can be separated."

"Yeah," Lem Roy observed, "but you don't think anything's sacred."

"Sure I do. I just don't think it should be isolated and fawned over, any more than the sensual world should be."

"You think the world is essentially sensual and I think it's essentially spiritual."

"I'm not sure that means we disagree," she said.

"But I feel a kinship to the spiritual aspects and you don't."

"Well, I don't talk to trees. I don't feel a need to make peace with the ghosts of the steers we kill. I don't find in every object and event a kindred spirit with which I have a personal relationship."

"But he does," Bridget said. "Don't you, Lemmie?"

"Yes, I do," he said.

"On the other hand," Aunt Krede went on, "I think I have a visceral relationship with the world that you don't entirely share. I don't find my sensual self in any way lacking in virtue. I don't look at the world and say, it's so huge and I'm so tiny, it's so mysterious and I'm so commonplace, I'd better fall on my knees and pray for its succor lest it get piqued and squish me. I figure the whole damn universe is no better than I am. You like to feel yourself in awe of the universe, but I like to feel myself at ease with it."

This conversation seemed odd because, when I thought about it, much of it could've been turned around. I realized, as time went on, that Aunt Krede and Lem Roy, and maybe other people as well, used conversation as a dynamic tool of exploration. There was no necessary logic in its conduct and no truth would emerge at the end of it. The truth of reasoning, after all, is implicit in reason's assumptions, and assumptions are taken on faith, to be judged, perhaps, by the

conclusions to which they lead.

Aunt Krede sought to deepen her understanding of the hillside, to sense the rhythm of its life and the logic of its being, so she could portray its essence on canvas. Lem Roy sought to hear the music of the spheres, to commune with the spirits of animals, in order to hold himself secure in a diaphanous cat's-cradle of reality. Aunt Krede saw herself as a willful stream, shaped and suffused by the hard stuff of reality. Lem Roy saw himself as a humble particle, seeking to integrate himself into a complex web of forces and fields. Each enjoyed describing the other as her or his polar opposite, and these distinctions always seemed convincing at first blush.

But this, too, was an illusion, because however much they differed phenomenally, in appearance and behavior, the subtle essences of their lives seemed strangely coincident. How different is nothing from everything, life from death, night from day, one face from another?

"Well, we had some good news today," she said, passing me a letter they'd received from their lawyer, "apart from the fact that I'm fifty and still here. Authore's contract isn't worth the paper it's printed on."

And that's what it said. They were not Mose McMorey's heirs and there was no lien against the property. The contract was unenforceable.

"They'll be pissed," Bridget observed with a smile.

"You don't suppose Authore got snookered by Meerson, do you?" I asked.

"No," Lem Roy said, "I think Meerson thought he could do it. Even after he gets this news he'll still think so. If he had a chance, he'd take it to court. That's why he wins. He's ruthless. But Authore's his boy, and Meerson'll take care of him."

"He just built that new house up on the ridge in Thrall," Bridget said, speaking of Mr. Authore. "My mom says it cost half a million dollars."

Lem Roy shrugged. "Meerson'll cover it. Meerson covers everything."

"Like that TV Mr. Hudson lost in the evacuation," I said. "Mr. Meerson bought him an even bigger one."

"Sure, and with Authore it's easy," Aunt Krede said. "The school's a cash machine. They'll just fix up some more of those amazingly leaky flat roofs, repave a few parking lots, buy some new buses, and pretty soon, voilà!, half a mil."

"Doesn't it piss you off?" Bridget asked.

"What? That ruthless people run the world? Why should it? I don't want to run the world. And in my own way I'm as ruthless as he is. He's ruthless about being in the center and I'm ruthless about being on the periphery. I can understand his wanting free money. I don't take it personally."

"I kind of do," Lem Roy said.

"Why, Lemmie?" Bridget asked.

"Well, the way he is, that's his business. But when he brings it to my front door, then it's my business, and he's made it my business. He intruded himself in my life with the specific intent of causing me harm, and if I take my life personally I have to take that personally."

"Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord," quoted Aunt Krede. It seemed half suggestion, half admonishment.

"Sure," Lem Roy agreed, "but if an opportunity comes up, you may as well lend fate a hand. Justice is blind, after all, and notoriously fickle, so if she passes you her sword, you may as well wield it."

"Well, I say an offensive demeanor is its own reward."

"And I say I'm not concerned with the righteousness of his personality but with maintaining the independence of my life and the integrity of my sanctuary."

"In other words, burn down all the churches you want to, but don't fuck

with mine.”

“Yeah, something like that.”

“You’re more antisocial than I am.”

Lem Roy shrugged “I knew that,” he said with a grin.

She was a little more vulgar and a little less reclusive. He was a little more stylish and a little less cynical. She seemed to belong among the hoi polloi; he was the single scion of a distant royalty.

Bridget asked her what she’d learned in fifty years.

“One thing I discovered early on in life,” she said, “is that almost everything you plan, almost every perspective you have, almost every hope you hold for the future, will turn out otherwise than what you anticipated. It may be somewhat otherwise or completely otherwise. It may be for the better or for the worse, although it’s seldom for the better.

“The lesson in this for me is that you must continually dream, you must continually struggle for the new, for higher ground, for greater perspective, for redefinition, for knowledge, for discovery, because it’s those things that renew the order which entropy is continually dissolving into chaos.”

Each was variously engaged in life’s palpable daily activities, painting pictures or raising cattle, listening to music or playing chess, studying ants or making marionettes. And each searched assiduously for more in life than presented itself on the surface.

I asked her whether this sense of constant dissolution and reinvention had somehow characterized her life.

“Well, I think it’s made me hard to live with,” she said. “I was married once but married life, to me, was an oxymoron. A single person lives by her own will. A married person has no will within the context of the relationship, where will is a communal thing, subject to and often shackled by continual negotiation and

compromise. So either you don't bring to this merger the aspects of will that are important to you, or you give them up. For me this was an insoluble problem. I either didn't value the practical aspects of marriage enough, or I valued my own perspective too much; I don't know which.

"My relationship with society at large is similar in many ways. If you want to be part of society you must bend to society's dictates. This may leave you with considerable freedom, because society doesn't care about everything, but on any issue society cares about, you'd better go along. And society, like a marriage partner, can be very cagey about its critical concerns, or unaware of its critical concerns, or even fickle in its regard for them. So this totemic sacred ground is always shifting. And to be honest, so is my own."

"And yet," I said, "society is necessary to existence."

"Yes, in a fundamental way I think it is, not just biologically, in terms of preservation of the race, which I can't say I really care about, but also psychically, in terms of preservation of the mind. So my participation in society is very much a fly-and-the-elephant sort of thing. I need society in order to function as a human being because absent some kind of intercourse with other people life would be nothing more than a brief primordial struggle for individual survival. I might as well be the last amoeba. There would be no art or ideas or laughter or love. Yet I know too that I'm utterly meaningless to society and if society's pursuit of its own interest seems to necessitate my extermination, society won't bat an eye."

"So," summarized Bridget, "society is itself among the great natural enemies of individual human life."

"Sure, and perhaps the most dangerous of them all, even though at the same time it provides many amenities, such as sustenance and safety, and most especially that singular and unique opportunity to realize the highest ambitions

of the mind.”

“So in this way it’s like a god, isn’t it?”

“Sure. And very much like a modern god in particular in the sense that it’s so amorphous and so ambiguous. I mean, you may not want to interact with the whole of society, indeed you can’t even define that, but the price of a partner, a coterie, a market, almost any handful of relational sand, is the whole damn desert.”

“You can’t take a relationship outside its context,” I supposed.

“Yeah, maybe that’s it. Have commerce with one other person, and, boom, suddenly you’re in society because that person has commerce with other people, and so on. You get the family and the cousins and the cousins’ families and their cousins. They send holiday cards and imagine themselves related to you. They have reunions where they try to remember each other’s names. The people who’ve been there ten times may know what some of the other people do. The ones who’ve been there twenty times may’ve had breakfast with each other, or played golf. Over and over they get married, have babies, retire, and die. Every time they do this, you’re obliged to respond.

“This isn’t a family; this is a tribe. This isn’t an organization bonded by sexual love; it’s not a parent-child relationship, and it’s not a sibling-sibling relationship. It’s not even personal. This organization is based on tribal ritual and convenient interaction. Neither the ritual nor the interaction is especially demanding, because nobody’d have time for it. It’d be like having fifty children. Things become statistical.

“And that’s the price society extracts from you as an individual – not just *our* society but any society. The more connected you are, the more superficial your social relationships will be.”

“But,” I objected, “it seems to me this superficiality is based in the

superficiality of relationship by dint of family, or place, or belief. Not everyone brings this kind of load to a relationship."

"No," she agreed. "And thank God. But essentially dyadic relationships are asocial, they're beyond society, because as soon as they're expanded they lose their character."

"They're not scalable."

"Exactly. And neither are individuals."

"You said, 'Thank God,'" Bridget observed.

Aunt Krede shrugged. "It's an expression."

"But you don't believe in God."

"I'm not attracted to the reduction of all the mysteries of life, all the mysteries of the universe, into one convenient concept. We already have a word for that: ignorance. And I'm even less attracted to the idea of worshipping it when my whole life, in a way, is a struggle against it."

"God is ignorance?"

"Suppose some believer asks you if you believe in God. If you're like me you might say, ah, well, I doubt it. And they say, why do you think all this stuff is here? And you say, I don't know. So they say, well, why do you think flowers are beautiful? And you say well, because your brain perceives them that way. Well, why does your brain perceive them that way? And so on. And of course at some point you throw up your hands and say well, hell, I just don't know. And the other person, the believer, says, 'Well, that's God!' I mean, what can you say?"

"And they never say, 'Well, who do you think made this nice trash pile, or that lovely clearcut,'" Bridget observed.

"Well," said Lem Roy, "that might be because they're Christians."

Aunt Krede concurred. "The world's full of ugly stuff made by the same

forces that made the rest of it. And what difference does it make in its æsthetic quality who made anything? Form is a feature of the universe as elemental and ubiquitous as gravity. Maybe more so."

"Maybe this form is God," I said.

"Maybe so, if you say so," she countered. "But even so, where my passion's concerned, where the aim of my days is concerned, I prefer to worship art, not gods or gravity."

"I think an object's æsthetic quality is intimately linked to the identity of its creator," Lem Roy said. "The world in all its beauty and ugliness is precisely expressive of the transcendent powers that created it. In fact, wherever you look you see eternity looking back at you."

"See?" Aunt Krede exulted gleefully. "We agree on everything."

"But," I objected, "you admit no gods and he embraces them all."

"Exactly the same," she said, laughing.

33

Shattered Landscape

People who live in a city may notice, even above the cacophonous pastiche of background rumbling, the sudden sound of a gunshot or a car's backfire, but out in the country one hardly does. An occasional distant gunshot, like the growling whine of a chain saw or the thump of a muffled explosion, is part of the auditory rural terrain and passes largely unnoticed. One reason for this is that one's country neighbors, and their noises, are usually far away, and were it not that the daytime air is so much quieter, stirred only by birds and crickets, the rare bark of a dog or fox or coyote, and the wind in the trees, most of the sudden sounds of the country mightn't be heard at all.

One Saturday morning, too late for early-birds, way too early for crickets,

when the doglike critters were curled in watchful midday siesta and the wind was calm, Aunt Krede and her gallant party of wilderness impressionists, as Lem Roy dubbed them, clambered into the old green Peugeot and chugged merrily down the driveway toward their picnic afternoon in the Amarainy.

My mom was among them, outfitted by Aunt Krede even with a paint-splattered smock, and Mrs. Hudson, a seasoned veteran of this *en plein air* landscape painting, and Annette Authore, wearing new boots and a rakish wide-brimmed straw hat that added a dash of devil-may-care to the serious backcountry hiker she had become. The little car, jammed with easels, paintboxes, lunchbaskets and laughing ladies, seemed as eager as they were to be gone.

"I hope Mother Nature's ready for them," I said.

"The sylphs and the fauns and all the retinue of the gods will turn out to greet them," Lem Roy replied, smiling his wrinkled smile.

"I wouldn't think the gods would be too enthusiastic to see Aunt Krede after the way she repudiated them."

"Well," he mused, "as Russell said, I doubt they're much dissuaded by anyone's denials." Then he grinned. "It probably encourages them."

He was engaged this morning in a denial of a different sort, castrating all but one of the bull calves into steers. "It makes them moo in falsetto," he said. The process was simple, swift and bloodless, and once we'd pulled a calf's feet out from under it and I'd steadied it on the straw-strewn floor of the barn, it didn't really seem to mind as Lem Roy quickly set the clamping tool around its scrotum and crushed the vessels inside. It was over in an instant. The calf would scramble to its feet and frisk away toward the open door as if nothing had happened. In a week or two its testicles would be resorbed and its scrotum would disappear.

We finished all ten of them in an hour and I shuddered as the last one gamboled out of the barn into the sunshine. "That's *got* to hurt," I said.

Lem Roy smiled. "Pain's in your mind," he said, "and they have no mind for such trivial things."

I went home for lunch and afterward, as a gray sky loomed in from the southwest, I walked down to Mr. Kuntzler's house. Marie, I knew, would not be there; she and Billy had taken the Kredes' old flatbed truck loaded with crates of her work to a sculpture-fest in San Francisco for the weekend. Billy, she'd confided to me, was a salesman *par excellence* who'd taken considerable pains to learn the fine points of sculpture, her sculpture, anyway, and who seemed to have an uncanny ability to find in a crowd of gawkers the rare bird with money to spend. Marie had anointed him her agent, gave him half of the net after materials costs, and thought that Billy'd found a calling he liked even more than selling drugs. I surmised from the fact he'd gone along that Bennie thought so too.

Mr. Kuntzler's grand-nephew Timmy, who was about five years old and Marie's half-cousin once removed or some such thing, was visiting them for a couple of weeks in the country while his parents went on vacation. Both Timmy and Mr. Kuntzler seemed to feel decidedly ill at ease with Marie gone and they'd both perked up when I arrived. Timmy enlisted me to help him set up a battle scene on the porch with the plastic soldiers Mr. Kuntzler had bought for him. Mr. Kuntzler went inside and fixed some soup.

When Mr. Kuntzler came back and announced the readiness of the soup, Timmy said petulantly, "I don't like soup. I want Marie." And then, sweeping his hands angrily through the battlefield, he scattered the soldiers across the porch.

"Fine, then," Mr. Kuntzler said. "It's time for your nap."

"I'm not sleepy," Timmy declared, surveying the havoc of his ruined game.

“Marie said if you were good she’d bring you something from San Francisco.”

“When’s she coming back?”

“Day after tomorrow. If you eat your soup and lie down for a while I’ll fix your bike for you.”

“Okay,” Timmy said. The two of them went inside while I picked up the soldiers and after fifteen minutes or so Mr. Kuntzler reappeared, smiling.

“Is he asleep?” I asked.

“Yeah. He’s a little moody. I’m not as much fun as Marie. She takes him places. His moods don’t bother her. When you get to be my age you don’t have moods anymore. They don’t make any sense.”

“You don’t have good days and bad days?”

He laughed. “Sure, but they aren’t very different.”

He lit a cigarette. His hands seemed narrower, bonier, shakier. He hadn’t shaved.

“What’s the matter with Timmy’s bike?” I asked.

“Oh, nothing. He needs those outrigger wheels, you know. I got them but I haven’t put them on yet. I’m afraid of him riding out there on the road. People are crazy nowadays. You don’t know who anyone is.”

I supposed that things were a lot different nowadays because older people like to say that and yet as time has gone on I’ve wondered sometimes whether things really are any different and I guessed it was like everything and nothing and night and day where there was some simple difference so you might distinguish one from the other but really, beneath the surface, it was all the same.

“I suppose it’s a lot different now,” I said.

“Oh, yeah. When we came, my folks and me, there was nothing here but this cabin and Mose’s place. Nothing. The nearest store was all the way over in

Thrall. When Timmy's dad was born, which was, oh, thirty years ago, Crondoc was still just a little gas station and a few farms and cabins strung along a dirt road. Everybody knew everybody and everything they did. Now it's like I live in the middle of a city sometimes, full of strangers and strange goings-on."

"Your dad and Mose were pretty good buddies."

"Yep. Mose saved his life once, he said, out in the woods when a log got loose and came barreling down the hillside. My dad fell and Mose pulled him over behind a stump. When the log hit the stump it like to tore it out of the ground, stood it right up on its toes like a ballet dancer my dad said, but the log bounced up in the air and kept on going. My dad said it looked like a locomotive flying over them. Anyway, they were good friends. They hunted elk together a lot. And they fought the government tooth and nail over that damn dam." He laughed at his little joke.

I asked him if he knew Mr. Meerson was trying to cut the old trees on the ridgetop behind the Kredes' farm because he claimed Mose had owed him money.

"Nope, never heard that," he said.

It started to rain. Just a soft silvery mist, falling straight down through the quiet afternoon air.

"Mr. Authore says Meerson helped them out when Mose was in jail," I persisted.

Mr. Kuntzler stared for a moment into the quiet rain and took a drag on his cigarette. His lips pursed. "They wouldn't've needed any help hadn't been for him in the first place," he said. "Him and that damn girl. Well, hell, it wasn't her fault. Cal McIntyre, he beat her like a dog. Beat his wife and kids, too, but he kept *her* in a cage in the back yard. Mose and Bess, they tried to help her, and that's what they got."

"What's what they got?"

"That trumped-up charge he went to prison for. And Bess lost the baby. She went through hell, I can tell you. She had all kinds of medical problems and I guess Meerson helped them pay for it, like he pays for everything. He gives you a buck and takes your innards for collateral. But I never knew that. She never said anything about it. I'm surprised she'd've taken it."

"Mose didn't, um, do anything with her?"

"The girl? I don't know. She wanted to stay with them. Live with them. Bess was mighty fond of her. I think they wanted to adopt her. But Meerson figured she belonged to him. He helped Cal build that pen because Cal was the best catskinner he ever had, and Cal wanted her. He got money for keeping her. Then they got drunk or went away for a few days and the girl got out and they found her hiding up in the hay in Mose's barn. That's what I heard, anyway."

He crushed the cigarette in his ashtray and let the smoke drift out through his nostrils. "Things were different in those days," he said. "There was a kind of vigilante mentality. If a dog killed chickens, or sheep, a guy would shoot it, plant it, and forget it. If it was your neighbor's dog, and your neighbor failed to satisfy you, well, there was the answer."

"I suppose you could beat your wife and children, too."

"Well," he said, raising his eyebrows with a shrug, "people *still* do that." He paused for a moment. "See, death wasn't so remote to people then. Things, animals, people didn't go away so quietly, in some room far away. They died before your eyes, maybe at your own hand. When death is close all the things between you and death are close. The closeness of death makes life worth more to you and less to everyone else. You're much more on your own."

"That's not so bad, is it?"

"No," he said. "I kind of like it myself. It seems more honest, more

straightforward. If you count on other folks for the value of your life, it takes something away from the enjoyment. That's what I think.

"But sometimes it gets out of hand. I remember one fellow moved here during the war, brought his family from back east somewhere. Always had a wad of money. Claimed his father was some big steel tycoon.

"Turned out he was an enterprising sort himself in the stealing business. He'd burglarize three or four places in a day; then he'd lay low for a while. They tried all sorts of things to catch him, but they never could. Finally one night a bunch of them took him out to the quarry and beat him into bloody blue putty. They stripped him and left him there in his BVDs. Then they went back to his place, routed his wife and kids, and burned the house down."

"Frontier justice," I said.

"Yep."

"I don't know whether I admire it or not."

"Nothing to admire about it, but it worked. They left town and the thieving stopped."

"So who did it?"

"Never heard anyone mention it. It was like it'd never happened."

The sky grew darker. The gentle rain continued to fall on Mr. Kuntzler's green grass and all its fanciful denizens, slick and black.

"People knew what Meerson wanted. Mose was a thorn in his side. Mose was writing letters claiming the government had stolen land and given it to Meerson. He showed them to me. He called the dam's effects 'artificial accretion,' according to which he'd still have owned down to the river—you know, if it'd changed course gradually, over a hundred years. Everybody else called it a sudden shift in the river's channel, which it plainly was, and in that case the land boundaries wouldn't move.

“Some folks thought the girl had been spoiled by Mose. She didn’t speak much English. Cal McIntyre was in the courtroom the day she testified. She was terrified. It lasted maybe ten minutes. She said nothing had happened but she was a known runaway, an Indian, and a child. Then came the doctor and the sheriff and some psychologist, and they all thought the circumstances were damning, and a few of the neighbors said they’d seen one thing or other they thought was suspicious and might be evidence of a criminal tendency or at least a moral weakness. Mose never had a prayer. I’m glad my dad wasn’t alive to see it.”

The rain fell harder, still straight down. It pounded on the porch roof, making a dull roar below, and spilled in torrents of shimmering beads from the eaves, the drops playing a staccato melody over the soft soaked earth of his flowerbeds.

A shot rang out. Thirty caliber, from the timbre of it, maybe bigger, sharp but heavy. It echoed off the hillside and bounded up the Dingle. The ripples of sound in its wake seemed to sweep past forever, rending the fabric of the gray sky.

My body went on red alert the way a bomb becomes a blur, a snake strikes, a dog flips into *canis* consciousness—without an intervening instant. The complex rhythm of the conscious mind was lost in one skipped beat, sudden as the collapse of a punctured balloon, quick as darkness chasing the extinction of a light, the cerebrum’s intricate, orderly, rational, world-aware self-consciousness obliterated by the sudden unveiling of the naked protomind, the mind before time, the reptilian mind, the insect mind, the ant mind. The mind that smells trouble.

The concussive crack of a second shot brought me forward in my seat.

Mr. Kuntzler shrugged. “Target practice probably,” he said.

"It sounded close," I objected.

"Over by Krede's, I think. On the ridge maybe."

"Think I'll go see."

"Okay," he said, rising from his chair. "Guess I'll go put those wheels on Timmy's bike."

I walked down the road toward our house. I felt anxious and a little foolish. What was I going to do when I got there? Where was I even going? A car was just slowing to turn up Krede's driveway as I arrived. It was the vet whose place was just a half-mile down the road. "What's up?" I asked her.

"Get in," she said.

Wagger had been shot. Lem Roy had carried her down from the field. He and her hindquarters were drenched in blood. He'd clamped a severed artery with a hemostat. The vet put a smaller clamp on the artery and washed the wound. The bullet had pierced Wagger's thigh but missed the bone. I could've put my thumb through the hole. Wagger seemed alternately agitated and dazed. The vet gave her a shot to help her rest, powdered the wound with an antiseptic and packed it with gauze. "I should take her," she said. "She needs fluids."

Lem Roy nodded.

"I think I can save that femoral artery."

"Good," he said.

We helped her put Wagger in the car, and after they'd left Lem Roy and I walked up onto the slope of the northwest pasture.

Lem Roy had come out of his workshop after the first shot, recognizing how close it was, and seen a sand-colored animal thrashing on the ground. "I didn't know it was her at first," he said. The second shot had come from the ridge just as he'd realized it was Wagger. "The son-of-a-bitch was trying to kill her," he said. He'd caught a glimpse of the shooter retreating into the trees.

We came to the place where she'd been hit, the spring grass pressed down crazily, the ground still marked with blood despite the rain, which continued its soft descent. Neither of us had a coat and we were both thoroughly soaked. We searched for several minutes before I found the bullet about twenty feet down the hill from where she'd fallen. Its nose had mushroomed a little but it was basically intact. Lem Roy looked at it and put it in his pocket. We set three stones where I'd found it and then we walked up to the treeline and found the nest where the shooter had waited in ambush.

We found a brass shell casing. Thirty caliber I guessed, but Lem Roy said it seemed bigger. We looked for a second one but didn't find it. The shooter'd been sitting on the ground and left a pretty clear footprint. Lem Roy went up afterwards and made a plaster impression of it. We looked for gum wrappers, cigarette butts, anything out of place, but found nothing more.

We stood for a few minutes and looked down the hill. We weren't far from the spot where Wagger and I had stood a month or so earlier. The house, the barn, even the river were still visible through the haze, but the far horizon was not. It was all the same, yet everything had changed. Death had stepped a little closer.

Lem Roy put his hand on my shoulder as we started down the hill. "Don't worry," he said. "He's a coward. And a lousy shot."

34

Ant Soup

Aunt Krede was furious, I know, although she said little about it. She quizzed me the next day for a long time about what I'd heard, and seen, or not seen, and when. She asked what was on the grapevine, whether anyone I knew had heard anything, not just about the shooting but the break-in, the mailbox,

anything at all. I didn't know much, but I did tell her what Mr. Kuntzler had told me about the girl, about Mose and the girl and the trees on the ridge. I wanted to tell her everything I knew; I wanted to tell her something useful, but I realized I probably knew less than she did.

The impressionists' adventure, I knew from my mom, had gone splendidly. She and Aunt Krede and Mrs. Hudson had spent the entire afternoon painting. The rain hadn't showed up until they were ready to leave, about an hour before sundown. She'd made several watercolors which seemed too stark and dense but also fresh, adventuresome, and honest. More important, she'd had a good time. Mrs. Authore had taken a sketchpad for a hike and had returned with a beautiful pencil sketch of a small meadow surrounded by huge gnarly oaks, the stern spirits of ages past. The unseen sun is low and the trees cast menacing shadows on the grass. In the foreground a fox trots, head high and ears aperk, across the rough terrain, through a tangle of light and shade.

Having returned to the picnic ground, while the rest of them struggled to portray the world before them as they saw and felt it, she'd made several sketches of ants, which she later gave to Aunt Krede.

"I was pretty impressed," she'd said as she showed them to me. "Annette has an almost fearless relationship with the wild. She not only lets it get into her, she gets into it. She'd watched those ants sashay across her sketchpad while she was drawing the meadow. She made these sketches later, from memory. They're anatomically detailed. She has a sharp eye. But these ants have rather elongated mandibles. Strange, I think. She said that in the sunlight they had a bluish sheen, but I think her color vision's not the best. Anyway, they're beautiful—delicate and sensual."

As for Wagger, a week after the sniper's bullet had punched out a marble-sized chunk of her thigh she was getting around the farm again, gimpy but

game. At first I thought she'd been psychologically unaffected by her experience; she seemed as friendly and mellow as ever. But in time I realized she was more wary of strangers, slightly ill at ease in the west meadow, newly alert to unexpected sights or sounds.

School was out, finally, and we'd all graduated, except Bridget of course because she'd be going into eleventh grade. She had time the rest of us had already spent, although she didn't think so because she was fifteen going on twenty-five. But we were graduates, with or without futures but now irretrievably disconnected from this part of our past that had meant so much and so little. I was tempted to think of it as the summer vacation without end, but at the same time I knew, as we all did, it was just the prelude to the next big thing.

The early June weather was uncharacteristically warm and the receding river had left a soft swath of sand on Keystone Beach. I was down there by mid-morning most days, and until someone else arrived, which was seldom more than an hour or two, I'd read or write or just watch the water, the ducks, the herons, the willows, the changing play of light. I didn't often think about what I'd do next, although my mom asked me almost every day. I felt happy in the present, in the sun, by the river, just being there.

It seemed, though, that most everyone else had plans.

Bobby and Bridget, whose mother seemed to have the irascible temperament, if not the lofty view or vaulting ambition, of Miz Bubby, were frequently the first to join me, and they almost always brought great food, sandwiches and cheese and chips and soda, which meant our sojourn there could last all afternoon, at least until the cool evening breezes would finally remind us of supertime and maybe something to do after dark.

Bridget and I were talking one day about the Kredes, and what had happened to Wagger, because watching Wagger now, she said, sometimes made

her cry, and I asked her if she'd seen the drawings of the ants that Annette Authore had made and she said she had. Which reminded her, she said, that Mr. Meerson and Mr. Authore had stopped over the night before to see when Elmore was coming down from Alaska because they had a business deal they wanted to discuss with him, and she, Bridget, had overheard Mr. Meerson say something to Mr. Authore about keeping his wife on a short leash and Mr. Authore had replied that he would have to do something about her because she was "out of control."

"And Meerson said, 'I feel like that goddamn McMorey's up there again.' And Authore asked him what he meant. And Meerson said, 'He almost screwed up the Strawberry sale with that goddamn bee thing.'"

"What was the Strawberry sale?" I asked her.

"The last big sale on Dingle Creek," she said. "They give them names like that so they'll sound cute. Anyway, he was kind of apoplectic. Mr. Meerson is not the apoplectic type."

"Yeah. So?"

"So Authore suggested Meerson was seeing ghosts, and Meerson really exploded and called Authore an idiot and his wife a cunt, and he said if Annette screwed up the Amaraingy thing he'd nail Authore's balls to a tree."

"What'd your mom think of all this?"

"Oh, she talks like that all the time. But what I'm really interested in, Ashcan, is how Mrs. Authore could screw up the Amaraingy deal, because just between us I think that'd be a wonderful thing, don't you?"

"You think it has something to do with ants?" I was incredulous.

"Ants? No, I thought it was bees. What about the bees? What was that all about?"

"It was some fantasy Mose had about rare wasps. Aunt Krede said he was a

little senile. He tried to get the EPA to shut down the woods because there were endangered wasps or some damn thing in there, but he couldn't produce any actual specimens and they wouldn't do anything and then the Forest Service sprayed the whole watershed with some insecticide. Hell, I don't know."

Bridget chuckled. "Whatever it was, it sure got Meerson's attention," she said. And then her face lit up and the lavender fringes of her eyes twinkled under her blond bangs and she said, "You think they were *ants*?"

I don't know why everybody always thinks I'd know about things; I hardly know which end is up. "I'll ask Aunt Krede," I said.

At this point Bobby waded ashore from a swim, his pockmarked face pink with the cold but beaming, the skin of his belly and thighs pale as milk but lent a purplish hue by the maroon trunks he wore, almost like mine. His days of crypto-evangelical Christianity had ended shortly after the Crondoc picnic and, from my perspective at least, he'd returned more or less to normal. He'd been accepted at a prestigious school back east which was known for its programs both in hard science and in the fine arts. Strange to say, but deeply relevant to them, Lucky Hill was going there, too.

He bent over and shook his head vigorously in the manner of a dog, then he rubbed it briskly with the towel and sat down. "Now I'm alive," he said, grinning.

"I thought you were only really alive when Lucky was around," Bridget teased him.

He laughed. "I didn't say I was *really* alive. Besides, she'll be around pretty soon I think."

"Then you'll jump out of your skin, I suppose."

"I just might," he said.

Bobby and I played gin rummy while Bridget, clad in a black lycra one-

piece bathing suit that made her butt look like the breaching back of a sperm whale, lay prone on her massive violet towel, reading a book. I asked him about the progress of his soul in the wake of his experiences with Pastor Beezle.

"Pastor Beezle has some strange predilections," Bobby said.

"But I know that."

"He likes the boys."

"I'm not too surprised at that either."

"No, but his problem is, if anyone really knew about it they might lynch him. So he has to be careful. When he finds a boy who's carried away by his proselytizing, like me, he tries to persuade him he's favored by God, and that his torment is caused by his resistance to God's effort to enter his soul."

"Uh-huh." I could see the possibilities here.

"He's very clever about it. He treats some of the other kids, girls and guys, in nearly the same way, so nobody can tell which ones are his, that is to say God's, personal favorites. He puts his arm around them, he pats their back, he tousles their hair, he calls them in for private meetings and prayers. The ones he really likes, they get an extra edge. He works on them one-on-one, so to speak. He used to show me these pictures he had..."

"Of naked women?"

"Yeah. He said if God was truly in me, then they wouldn't excite me. The ones he started with wouldn't excite anybody, but after a while they kept getting wilder and wilder."

"The ones I saw wouldn't've excited your grandma."

"Well, sure, because she's dead. But then came the gaping, drooling vaginas, and the sex scenes, and the girls got younger, and prettier, and, well, after a while I sort of looked forward to his calling me into his study to show me his latest acquisitions."

I looked at him. "But you knew what he was doing."

"Oh, sure," he said. "He tried to get me to tell him little stories about the pictures. He said he was analyzing them, but, well, we know what he was doing. Anyway, it was all entwined with faith. It wasn't him, it was God, testing my faith, and Beezle was doing this to prove my faith, to strengthen my belief, and I really wanted to find an anchor in the storm of my feelings, you know."

"Can't say I do," I said.

"He said if I became really pure God would speak through me." He ginned and laughed. "Now and then I talked with Lucky about it. She was in the choir too. One night after he'd demoted me from altar boy we got a little drunk in the basement and I told her everything, about the pictures and releasing the devil and all. She got really pissed, first at Beezle and then at me."

He looked down at the cards he was shuffling. "That night I realized I loved her."

"Hello," called a familiar voice. I looked up, over Bobby's shoulder. It was Lucky, making her way through the bushes and small trees above the bank, carrying, in addition to her beach bag, a huge umbrella, tightly rolled but still the size of a medieval jousting lance. She wore a white suit that emphasized the rich color of her well-tanned skin and the willowy languor of her sinewy frame.

The umbrella was for Bobby, whose fair skin she worried might resent too much sunlight; besides, she said with a shy smile, it made a place to hide from prying eyes. Far be it from me to pry my best friend's girlfriend, I thought as I admired the rosy muscles of her long thighs, and besides, you'd have to peel that suit off. Every ripple of her abdomen, her floating ribs, the matched dimples just above her buttocks, the hollows of her haunches, not to mention those firm little breasts and their hard little nipples, the crests of her ilium like the cantles of a saddle, her proud protruding mons, they all were as apparent as if she'd been

naked, so I tried very hard to look at her eyes, at her face, and when she knelt down to give Bobby a kiss I had to look away, at Bridget's funny wrinkled pink flat feet.

Bobby and I struggled to secure the shaft of the umbrella in the deep layer of river pebbles that lay beneath the soft sandy surface.

"Where's Billy?" Bobby asked.

"He'll be here," she said. "He's with Jake."

Finally, by digging a hole first, we succeeded. We sat back down and Lucky sat crosslegged beside Bobby, her slim arm around his almost pudgy shoulders, her fingers sliding along his neck, tracing his earlobe as he dealt the cards.

"Keep doing that," I said.

Bobby smiled at me.

"Who's Jake?" I asked him.

"You've met him," he said. "He's been over at the house, at parties."

"Shaved head," Lucky piped up, "earrings, leathers..."

I remembered the night I'd seen him come down the stairs with Bridget. I remembered his exchange with Lem Roy.

"Oh, yeah," I said. "The night Bobby put the Jesus hex on everybody and made me crash into the bridge."

"Yep," Lucky said, "and the night Dad found five thousand bucks in Billy's backpack."

"Oh," I said. "I'll bet that was tense."

"Tense. Yes. I think you'd say so. Billy claimed he was just holding it and wouldn't say where he'd got it. Dad said, 'Well, you must be a very trustworthy guy for someone to give you five thousand bucks to carry around.' And then he just walked away, as though he believed it. I was floored."

"He must've known what was up," I said.

"Yeah," Lucky agreed. "I think he had fatter fish to fry."

"Whose money was it?"

"You won't believe it."

"I'll knock for three," Bobby said.

I had seventeen.

"I don't really know," Lucky said.

"Somebody you're glad you never have to see again," Bobby said.

"Jake?"

"No, not Jake."

"You're kidding me," Bridget said suddenly. "Do I have to see him again?"

Lucky laughed. "Maybe," Bobby shrugged.

"Authore?" Bridget shrieked.

"I don't really know," Lucky said, smiling broadly.

Bobby glanced at me with a grin and passed me the cards.

He turned to look over his shoulder at Bridget, who'd sat up so she could see around the umbrella. Her eyes were wide open and she'd clamped her hand over her mouth to suppress her disbelieving delight.

"Couldn't happen to a nicer guy," Bobby said.

I shuffled the cards. Bridget started getting out the snacks.

"They tried to hold up Billy's diploma because he'd missed so much work," Lucky said. "Dad sent Billy over to collect all the work he'd missed so he could make it up, and Authore said he couldn't do it. Dad went over and came back with everything, and Billy eventually did every lick of it. I asked Dad later what he'd said to get Authore to change his mind. He just smiled serenely and said, 'I told him I'd kill him.' I'll bet he did, too."

"Authore was buying drugs?" Bridget asked, still incredulous.

"I don't know," Lucky shrugged. "I didn't ask. I assume it'll all come out in

due time.”

“Great,” Bridget exulted, her freckles dancing around a huge grin.

Our conversation moved on to other things and I was dealing again when Marie arrived. Once again someone asked where Billy was and once again the answer came, “with Jake.” I thought it was interesting that now everyone seemed, as no one ever had before, to know where Billy was, what he was doing, who he was with.

Marie wore cutoffs and a halter top and hiking boots. Her hair was wrapped into a bun on top of her head. She carried a large woven straw bag containing, we discovered, six ham sandwiches, a quart of milk, her sketchbook, and a small rectangular teak pipe with a compartment full of sinsemilla bud.

She herself was sculpted like a classical Roman nymph. She was supple and powerful, elastic and firm. She had curves of distinction where most women barely had features. The muscles in her forearms stood out like Aunt Krede’s. Her body arched and flexed in ways unkenned by human physiology. Her movements were graceful and sure, like a cat’s.

I’d seen her naked, of course. I’d even watched her as she lay sleeping on the bed, as she stretched by a window in the cold dawn light, her breasts taut with goosebumps, as she walked to and from the bathroom for those icy cold washcloths with which she loved to tease my jasper into extraordinary feats of Sisyphusean penance. But until this afternoon, I’d never really seen her.

She’d barely said hello and was still laying out her towel when Billy arrived. Billy’s face was still a little yellowish around his eye, but otherwise he looked happy, healthy, confident. His dark blue eyes were warm and he’d lost that swaggering edge I’d never liked. He seemed taller and more muscular than I’d remembered him only a few weeks ago. I remember thinking he and Lucky no longer looked so much alike as they once had. Tall, slim, sapphire-eyed, crowns

of soft black hair they both wore long, easy smiles revealed by sensuous lips, these they had in eternal common. But Billy's face was more chiseled, his body more dense than Lucky's, whereas she seemed more fluid and svelte.

"How's Jake?" Lucky asked him.

"Full of curiosity," Billy said, taking his shirt off. "And a curiosity himself. We went to see this biker, Scabbard, who carries a combat knife, point up, in a scabbard on his back. Anyway, Scabbard owed Jake a hundred bucks from a pool game and we went to collect it."

Billy folded his t-shirt and dropped it beside Marie's towel. Then he bent over and untied the laces of his running shoes.

"We go to this bar in Artesia where Scabbard hangs out. The place is a pit. It's not even lunchtime and Scabbard's there drinking a boilermaker. He's about six-two and weighs maybe 300 pounds. He's wearing his leathers with the jacket open and his big hairy belly hanging out and his dirty stringy hair hanging down, and he looks like he hasn't slept for a month. Jake swings up on the stool beside him like he's mounting a horse. 'You owe me a Franklin,' he says. Scabbard says, 'Fuck you. I'd rather cut your guts out.' Jake says, 'Yeah I know, but I heard you were a man of honor.' 'More than *you* can say,' Scabbard says, and he lays a hundred on the bar. Then Jake puts his finger on the bill and pushes it back in front of Scabbard. 'You paid me,' he says. 'Listen, it's my mother's birthday. She wants an old carbine, a .38-40 Winchester, the one with the octagonal barrel.' 'Fuck you,' Scabbard says. Then Jake gets up, swinging down off the horse, and claps Scabbard on the shoulders. 'Fun as always,' he says."

"Gee," said Bridget, "and to think I could've been doing that instead of lying here enjoying the sun."

"I didn't think he *had* a mother," Lucky said.

"I think he's in love with you," Billy said to Bridget as he sat on Marie's towel, next to her, and she turned her face toward him and smiled.

"Just my luck," Bridget said as Billy idly caressed Marie's tawny hair and she responded by kissing his knee. I was rapt, I guess. I couldn't help thinking about those golden eyes.

"Deal," Bobby said finally.

"Authore called to offer us five thousand bucks for the winged messenger," Billy said. The winged messenger had been displayed at the school during the open house.

"I thought we agreed he doesn't exist," Marie replied.

Billy shrugged. "That's what I told him."

"You told him he doesn't exist?" I asked, finishing the deal.

"I told him we'd agreed to sell everything through other channels."

"So," I said, turning the card Bobby's cut had exposed, "I heard he used to be a banker."

"Authore?"

"I thought we were finished with him," Bridget interposed.

I shrugged. Bobby discarded and Lucky put her hand on his naked thigh. Bridget returned to her book.

Marie sat up and started unlacing her boots. "I'm going in," she said. She pulled her feet from the boots, stripped off her socks and stood up and lifted the halter top over her head. Billy stood, too, and unbuttoned his levis as Marie dropped her cutoffs and peeled to the buff. She dashed across the sand and dove into the icy water, her round buttocks disappearing beneath the surface as Billy followed in hot pursuit.

"I'll knock for two," Bobby said as they came up for air, laughing and sputtering.

Before long we were all naked, excepting Bridget, and Bobby had crushed me at gin and we'd eaten everything anybody'd brought and smoked most of Marie's dope and the long afternoon sun had drifted almost imperceptibly downstream, leaving the far shore draped in shadow.

A principle of continuity underlies all our thought, even our perception. It underlies our biology. It's the silence between notes of music; the darkness between the stars. It's all the things that haven't happened among the few that have.

Maybe it's an illusion. Maybe that's why "arsis" refers either to syllables stressed or unstressed, why drawings like the crone-mama that fascinated Jasper Johns have no fixed figure or ground but whichever one chooses for a time. Maybe chaos and stasis are the same thing, just viewed from different perspectives, like frames of reference in relativistic motion.

I thought of this while Billy and Marie gathered themselves and said goodbye, the last of the group to go. I'd begun my day by the river alone, and soon I'd be alone again. As I watched them climb the embankment and walk into the leafy woods I waited for her to turn her head and glance over her shoulder at me with those coquettish tiger eyes, but she never did. I figured it was a pretty good sign my nookie days were over.

35

Time at the Gate

First come the explorers, raiders, hunters, and wanderers. They are the spies. Later come the pioneers, settlers, exiles, parasites, and all the retinue connecting them to the hearthland. They are the battalions. The going of the one, if you have what they want, is the coming of the other. To be discovered is trouble. To be discovered in paradise is the end of Eden.

We think of these events in relation to place, where people, like ants, flow from one place, where they have been for a time, to another, where they have not been. But the same thing goes on within the place where people are, within the realm of accepted ideas, mores, work and culture. Even within the most stultified environment, there is always a struggle for renewal.

The essential characteristic of order, outside the context of disorder, is that it is all pattern, it is all rhythm, it is all foretold, so that it cannot bear contact with any other thing. It is completely self-referential. It is, in a word, dead, or, if you like, spiritual. It exists independently of substance. Substance, on the other hand, harbors chaos, binds chaos, represents the frontiers of chaos in a literal sense. Substance is inherently disorderly over time; that is what the Law of Entropy means. The order by which substance becomes emanent is persistently dissolving and reforming, disappearing and, in some perhaps different form, reappearing.

If all the chaos in a system is so fine-grained as to be imperceptible, we perceive the system as patternless, gray, an invariant hum, orderly in the most vacuous sense. That is, any part of it is completely indistinguishable from any other part. And yet every part of it, however small, may be riven with chaos. And on this level, chaos being what it is, no two parts are the same.

It was these thoughts that led me to realize, as I spent a solitary June afternoon beside the Perpend, that although my love life, such as it was, had devolved into a black hole of empty silence, this was simply a different form of chaos, of intensity, of passion, because although the birds had fled, the sky was now clear for bees or butterflies or whatever might come next. Heraclitus said you can't step into the same river twice. But this is a precious nicety. You are not the same person twice. And yet you are, and it is all a matter of perspective. The differences between discoverers and explorers and settlers and dwellers on the

earth are merely matters of degree—how long did you stay, how many were you, stuff like that. The entrainment into love’s embrace was not so different from the separation into solitude, wonderfully exhilarating and exquisitely painful, and in both I found the early stages, of discovery and exploration, far more fascinating and agreeable than the later.

Toward the end of the afternoon, well-washed both in sunshine and the cold waters of the Perpend, not to mention cosmic observations and others too mundane to record, I returned to the house for a sandwich. My mom was sitting down by the flat rock that spread into the river, painting. She’d become instantly fond, she said, of a job that gave her the summers off, and although she’d be attending a summer course at the university, it was paid for, and she prized having time to spend with her flowers and, now, her painting.

I made her a sandwich and we sat by the water’s edge and watched and listened as if it were all fresh and new, as if we hadn’t been beside the river most of the day already, because, of course, that’s how it felt. A flight of wild ducks skimmed upstream, a few feet above the water’s surface, their wings flailing the warm air until they’d got well above us, up near Keystone beach, and then they plunged one after another onto the water, splayed feet first, like boys leaping from rope swings, and swam around aimlessly, preening their feathers and quacking noisily. Then, as if told of the moment’s arrival, they gathered themselves up into a little flotilla and drifted serenely past us on the broad midstream current.

“Now there’s the life,” my mom said.

“Yeah,” I agreed, “but consider what they eat.”

I rinsed the plates in the sink and walked up to the Kredes’. Aunt Krede was in the myrmecorium, feeding the ants. Wagger trotted in ahead of me, her ebullient tail churning in what was still almost a circular motion but now had a

hitch in it.

“Just the person I wanted to see,” Aunt Krede said cheerfully. She told me she was planning a walkabout and asked if I’d take care of the ants for a few weeks. She showed me the current crop of tiny mushrooms tended by the mushroom-growing ants and a new compartment she was preparing so that the slavers could acquire some prisoners.

I told her about my conversation with Bridget and asked her whether the blue ants Annette Authore had drawn might have been the same creatures as Mose McMorey’s wasps. “I thought about that, too,” she said. “But could a farmer mistake an ant for a wasp? And who knows if there even ever were any wasps?” Then her voice fell into a conspiratorial stage whisper. “But blue ants might have possibilities, don’t you think? I have half a mind to go up there again and see if I can find them.”

“Mr. Kuntzler says Meerson loaned the McMoreys money to help pay Bess McMorey’s medical expenses after her miscarriage, when Mose was in prison.”

“That was the timber on the ridge.”

“Must be.”

“What does he think about it?”

“He thinks Meerson buys what he wants.”

“Takes what he wants and pays off the complainers.”

I shrugged. “Something like that.”

“But what does August think about the whole Mose thing? Mose was his father’s best friend, yes?”

“I think so. They were close collaborators over a long time. I don’t know exactly what he thinks about it. He thinks it probably wasn’t fair. He thinks maybe it never happened. He thinks the girl was mistreated. He thinks it was the way of the world.”

"He's unjudgmental."

"Yes," I said.

"He's an observer. He judges authenticity. He records events. But he'd rather not participate, because that would cloud his view, narrow his scope, and force him to become part of the experiment."

"He participated when he came over on Sundays and played cards with Bess."

"Yes, he gave compassion to the victims."

"What ever happened to the girl?"

"I don't know," she said. "I think she was sent home."

"How do you know that?"

"I don't. It's what I heard."

We walked over to the barn afterward and shot the bull, so to speak, with Lem Roy for a while. Lem Roy was re-stacking his hay. It was dusty in the loft. His shirt was dark with sweat under his arms and between his shoulder blades and his face glistened in the heat.

"Damn," Aunt Krede complained when we climbed up there. "How can you breathe?"

"I don't smoke cigars," he said. The whole time he continued his rhythmic hoisting of pale green bales from the terraces of the shrinking butte on one side of the loft and stacking them onto the ridges of the rising mountain on the other. "And this nose screens out dust, pollen, and spores. See, with those little Caucasian noses, as soon as something gets in there, *blam!*, it's in your brain. That's why Caucasians have to enslave other people to do their dirtywork. Caucasian noses are too refined, too inbred maybe, to function in murky environments."

Aunt Krede and I looked at each other and laughed. Her nose was no pert

little button and neither is mine, but clearly Lem Roy's was a nose among honkers, a schnozz to be reckoned with. And the dust that swirled through the sunshafts seemed to faze it not in the least.

"We got a letter from the fire department," Aunt Krede said to him, speaking rather loudly. "Their insurance company wants us to fill out health histories."

He laughed as he walked back for another bale. "Helping people sure has gotten complicated," he said.

"Guess we could lie," she supposed.

He raised the end of a bale from the floor, jerked it upward and ducked under it, standing again with it on his shoulder. "Why bother?" he said. "I'd rather tax their imagination."

As Aunt Krede and Wagger and I returned to the house, Bridget drove up in Miz Bubby's old car. "I got my license!" she effused.

"Great!" Aunt Krede rejoined. "Now all you need is a car."

"I *have* a car. My dad bought a new pickup so he gave Bobby his old one and I got this thing. Cool, huh? Now all I need is a place to live."

"Your dad's back?" I asked.

"Yeah, and worse than ever."

"Come on in," Aunt Krede said, putting an arm around her. "I'll show you your room. You're not allergic to paint fumes, are you?"

Even though I was curious about what the Kredes mightn't want to reveal about their health, it wasn't any of my business and this seemed a propitious moment for me to say my adieus.

I knew that Hanna had come home from school the night before and I walked in a daze down the road to the store. I feigned surprise but I couldn't hide my delight when I walked through the door and saw her standing behind

the counter.

“Welcome back,” I said.

She braced her hands on the counter, far apart, and leaned forward invitingly. “Well, Ashmead Hopcross,” she exclaimed. “You sure do look good.”

“I can’t look half as good as you do,” I replied.

She leaned across the counter and we shared a purple kiss. She smelled like gardenias.

“You taste good, too,” I said shamelessly.

“Unfortunately, I’m now the sole proprietor of the Crondoc store,” she said. “My folks are taking the kids and leaving tomorrow morning for a grand tour of the National Parks.”

The Hudsons had been as good as their word, and Hanna was going to spend the summer running the store, which every day but Sunday she’d have to open at seven and keep open until nine in the evening. On Sundays it’d be noon ‘til six. She’d need help, she suggested coyly, bringing all my hard-won ambivalence back into focus.

“I might not be hanging around myself,” I said.

“Oh.” She seemed genuinely hurt. “I was hoping you would.”

I promised to return the following day so we could discuss it.

Marie was sitting on the sofa on Mr. Kuntzler’s porch while Mr. Hudson and Timmy strolled through the twilight listening to Mr. Kuntzler describe the histories of his unlikely menagerie.

She asked if I’d heard what’d happened to Timmy’s bike, and I said I hadn’t so she told me that earlier in the day some big kid had stolen it from him, had actually pushed him off it in the parking lot of Hudsons’ store and had ridden away on it, up the Dingle road.

Aunt Krede, as it happened, had witnessed the tail end of this as she came

out of the store and had gone to Timmy's aid, as had Marie. Seeing that he was unhurt and in good hands, Aunt Krede, on foot, and perhaps lacking the grace of a gazelle, had run after the thief, by then far up the road and soon out of sight. Her awkward dash had slowed to a trot, then to a brisk walk. Marie and Timmy had watched her go but didn't follow because Mr. Kuntzler was away somewhere with the truck.

"I gave him some cookies and finally got him to stop crying," she said, "and we were sitting out here about an hour later when we heard the tinny bell on his handlebars ringing its tinny little ring and there she was, this giant woman astride this tiny little bike, weaving from side to side, coming down the road pretty as you please."

She laughed. "Timmy was so grateful. He hugged the bike as though it were his long-lost dog he couldn't believe had come home. She beckoned him onto it and helped him get underway. 'Say thank you,' I called after him, and he waved, without turning around, and yelled, 'Thank you, Aunt Krede!' And she doffed her hairpiece and bowed a little as if it were nothing, really, and then she turned to me and apologized for taking so long.

"Apparently she'd seen the kid turn into his driveway and then, realizing she was still coming, he'd fled again and ridden further up the road, so she'd stopped at his house. His mother'd been a little nonplussed, probably at the sight of her and maybe with the idea that her son had been caught stealing a bike. She kept saying, well, he's just borrowed it; he doesn't steal; he's a good boy. So Aunt Krede said well, let me borrow your car until he brings it back. So the mom got in the car and went and brought the bike back."

"Just the bike?"

"Yeah, the boy wouldn't come with her. Then she was pissed at Aunt Krede and said, 'There, take it. I don't know how you got involved in this anyhow.' So

Aunt Krede told her she was the child abuse police and rode away. I could just picture it."

I could picture it, too, her ample aft weaving down the driveway athwart the bike that wouldn't've reached her waist, her auburn hair flouncing in the breeze, the strong bronzed arms that protruded from the rolled-up cuffs of her blue work shirt gripping the handlebars, ringing the bell like a clown, waving goodbye to the hapless mother, taking a toy away from her son and her peace, if she had any, away from her. I could picture it when the son, and then the father, got home.

Billy drove up in his dad's Land Rover. He and Marie and Timmy were going to Guillemot to attend Marie's sculpture class. Marie was helping Svet Thuremein, and in the fall she'd be his teaching assistant. Billy and Timmy spent the time playing around in clay or working on the bust Billy was carving of Marie. "It's awful," he said to me.

"My face is awful?"

"No, my effort to find your face in that wood is awful."

She looked at him. "Maybe that's the problem," she said. She walked up to him. "Close your eyes."

He did.

"Put your hands on my face."

She helped him.

"Feel my face."

She encouraged him to feel softly, to press harder, to feel an eyebrow, a lash, the bulge of the cornea against the lid of the eye, the shape of her ears, her teeth through her cheek, the line of their meeting, the cleft of her chin.

"It's the analogue of the symphysis pubis," she said.

"Not as hairy," he shot back.

She kissed him. "See if that helps." She looked at the two older men who were gaping, still trying to grasp what they'd witnessed. "It's easy to forget what anything looks like," she said, "especially the details, but your hands can remember for a long time exactly what it felt like."

"But you make faces that don't exist," I said.

"I still have to feel them," she grinned.

After they left, Mr. Kuntzler asked how Wagger was and I said she was fine and Mr. Hudson said he was a little worried about the Kredes because some people in town didn't seem to think they belonged here. I said it seemed to me some people in town didn't seem to think anybody belonged there except them.

"People get mighty attached to their expectations," Mr. Kuntzler said.

Then Mr. Hudson told us the story of how he'd left NASA. They'd been using an onboard barometric switch to sense when a rocket had attained a certain altitude, as a check against the computer's decision to launch another engine ignition sequence.

The barometric switches initially had been made with painstaking care and worked flawlessly, both on the bench and in test flights. Once the rockets had gone into production, though, bench tests had been scaled back and test flights all but scrapped. So Mr. Hudson had run his own tests and discovered that the switches had become highly inaccurate and unreliable. A flight study revealed that no switch had ever disagreed with its computer, and Mr. Hudson's superiors decided to have the onboard software skip the barometric test. Ground control would still be in contact with the rocket at this time, and ground control could abort the sequence. Mr. Hudson thought that was an arrogant assumption and he raised hell about it. So he lost his job. They assigned him to work in Thule. That's how they'd come to Crondoc.

"Two months later," he said, "they lost a fifty million dollar payload

because an electrical fault greased the ground control transmitters right after liftoff and when the moment of truth arrived they were clueless. The onboard computer decided to light the second stage when the rocket had heeled over and was already aimed at the ocean." He cackled gleefully. "That was eight years ago and they still haven't recovered the payload. I doubt they ever will. It must be buried fifty yards into the muck."

He stopped and looked at me quizzically. "What was I talking about?"

"People get attached to their expectations," I said.

"Yeah, well, my point is, the bearer of bad news is always shot. I don't know why. It's some deep need that systems have to make negative feedback pay a price."

"The Kredes are the bearers of bad news?"

"Somebody thinks so," Mr. Kuntzler said.

"I like them," I said. "They're better news than another rodeo, or another drunken hoedown. That's my opinion, anyway. They don't sit around all day watching TV. They don't lack for manners or substance."

"She's against the Amarainy," Mr. Hudson said.

"How do you know that?" I asked. "I don't know that. She's never said that. And besides, a lot of the young people are against the Amarainy."

Mr. Kuntzler mused, speaking with unusual vernacularity. "If there's no logs, what'd people do?"

"They're going to log it," Mr. Hudson said, as if that put an end to the matter.

"I suppose they could knit quilts," Mr. Kuntzler continued.

Mr. Hudson glanced up at his friend and laughed. "I better lay in a big supply of yarn," he said.

But first he was going on vacation. They hadn't been away from Crondoc

for more than a few days since they'd bought the store and moved here. They were going to see National Parks all over the country. They were going to relax.

Mr. Kuntzler observed that they'd be traveling with two young children.

"Portable TV," Mr. Hudson grinned. "I rigged a way to hang it on the back seat. So no more complaining about too much spectacular scenery or the pain of discovering you're in a new state. Endless brain naps. The only problem will be making sure we don't leave them behind at rest stops."

I told Mr. Hudson I'd be helping Hanna in the store. Well, he said, watch out she doesn't get you in the cooler. Apparently he and his wife had found the cooler a provocative environment.

After we'd wished Mr. Hudson a fond farewell, we sat down in the gathering darkness and Mr. Kuntzler smoked a cigarette. He advised me to be careful in my associations. He reminded me that none less than George Washington had warned against foreign entanglements and their threat to national sovereignty. It was no different for men, he said.

"Think about it, Ashmead," he said. "These folks get up at three in the morning and go up there in the mud and the fog and the rain and cut down trees as tall as the tallest cathedral in Europe and buck them up and drag them up hillsides you can hardly walk down and at the end of the day they have a broken back and enough money to keep them alive until tomorrow. It's not like they could all be transplant surgeons or physicists if the woods shut down. They'd have to go find something worse, something they liked a lot less, most likely."

"I still don't see what the Kredes have to do with the Amarainy," I said.

"People are trying to stop it," he said.

I thought about this for a long time without saying anything. A lot of the kids I knew were skeptical. Lucky and Bobby, and Bridget especially, were dead set against it. Bridget had talked about enlisting help from organizations and

mounting a resistance. She thought Crondoc could develop other ways of creating economic value, not least from recreation, and Lucky agreed. Bobby wasn't so sure. But I'd never heard either of the Kredes come right out and oppose the project; indeed, I'd never heard exactly what the project was except that it involved a lot of cutting of large tracts, some replanting, and, of course, many miles of roads.

"What do you think?" I asked finally.

Mr. Kuntzler lit another cigarette and watched the smoke drift away in the dim light that emanated from his window. "I think people shouldn't eat their seed corn," he said. "On the other hand, I wouldn't be the one to tear it from their hungry mouths."

I lay in bed for a long time that night, thinking about my day, about Hanna and the meaning of life, about what I was going to do.

I'd read Herrigel's *The Zen of Archery* just before school was out. Lem Roy'd given it to me, and there'd been little else to do. Besides, it'd been a quick read, and I enjoyed it. The idea of being synchronous with, in resonance with, the forces of nature is a powerful one. One thereby becomes a force of nature. But in order to become a force of nature one must relinquish one's will, renounce one's ego, allow oneself to be joined with nature's chaotic dance of evanescent patterns. It is as if one undulated to the aurora, appearing and disappearing as gossamer sheets of lambent light shimmering in the northern sky.

On the other hand, my self was precisely what I was; it seemed to me the self *was* the aim of life. Life was not, as Aiken once said of Kant's approach, a noumenal cookie-cutter. Life was phenomenal, messy, complex, disorderly, chaotic, and the search for some ultimate pinnacle of perfection sought really the gray nothingness of the great celestial hum, a tune appropriate, from our small perspective, to the stars, or from our grander view to the statistical buzz of the

atom, which was only background, only context to human existence. Indeed, human existence as a whole was only a backdrop for the existence of a single man, a single life, the days of one individual, who is not an anonymous atom, not an infinitesimal speck upon the great wheel of life, but a thing in itself, a glory, a wonder, a spectacle, a single flower in a field of stone, an island adrift in the sea of time. For all the might of the mass of men whose oceanic gravity appealed to the lofty vision of John Donne, for all the swarm of blind and busy ants who populate the graveyards and the cities and the households of humanity, every thing that was not known at the dawn of *homo ludens* has flowed from the daring, the effort, the vision, the madness of individual men and women who hurled themselves across (and often into) the abyss, who repudiated and defied the norm, who leapt from the swamp of probability and struck out toward some unsuspected actuality, however unlikely, however foolish, however fatal, and brought by their anomalous lives the coruscant fire of the gods to the dank and ignorant depths in which other men dwelt.

As I slept, some daring local warriors fell upon Mr. Kuntzler's garden of fanciful creatures and, like blood-drunken dogs in a chicken yard, slew as many as came to hand. Despite a broken leg, the tufted crane survived.

36

Fireball

The night before the Fourth of July Aunt Krede was preparing to leave on her walkabout, which was really going to be a rideabout if you could call the bouncing, rattling, wheezing progression of their battered little Peugeot a ride. The three of them had invited my mom and me up for supper and of course we went.

Bridget and Lem Roy were preparing the meal so Aunt Krede and my mom

and I sat in the sitting room, sipping iced tea. Aunt Krede asked my mom about our lives in Kansas. My mom said she'd come from a dirt-farm family, my father had uprooted her, and although she'd enjoyed being a mother she'd found married life unfulfilling. A few years ago she'd gone to nursing school and a friend on the local school board had opened up a career door for her. Last year that door had closed, along with a lot of other doors in schools in Kansas. We'd both wanted a change, a new beginning. And here we were.

"Are you looking for *a* new beginning or lots of new beginnings?" Aunt Krede inquired.

My mom smiled. "I've had a few since we came here," she said, "and even an ending or two – well, one in particular – and I like that. I think I hoped for a time of exploration and discovery rather than a moment of wholesale transformation. I'm the anonymous woman who walked the Oregon Trail beside a working steer, not Dorothy having hallucinations about the power of love."

"But you *do* have hallucinations about the power of love," Aunt Krede suggested, leaning forward.

"Thank goodness," my mom said. "I'm a nurse."

Lem Roy announced dinner and offered an arm to my mom, allowing me to offer mine to Aunt Krede. Bridget seated us around the table and then took her place with us.

"Chef Lem Roy and I decided," she said, "that we wanted this dinner to remind Mary Ann that we who are weird have nothing against all you normal people. So he who doesn't care for swine put a ham hock in his pea soup and I who am a vegetarian will broil the steaks."

"I think what the Chief Chef is trying to say," Lem Roy added, looking at Aunt Krede, "is that we wish you well and we'll miss you."

"Why, thanks," Aunt Krede beamed.

"No matter how weird you are."

"And thanks again."

Lem Roy had made a salad of pears and walnuts with an avocado paste. "All from Peru," he said. The pea soup was excellent, thick, tangy, succulent, not too sweet. While we slurped, Bridget started the steaks. Lem Roy had explained the process to her. After a few minutes she pulled down the oven door and looked. "What do you think?"

"Another minute," Lem Roy said. "Maybe two."

She stood beside the stove for that long minute or two, watching them as carefully as Marie watched her molten bronze, and then she turned them. "Eat," he said. "Five minutes more, easy."

She finished her soup with the rest of us. Then Lem Roy removed and rinsed the soup bowls and began doling the rice and squash and green beans onto the plates. "Take a look," he said.

She checked the steaks again. "I say yes. What do you think?"

He peered in. "Good," he said. "Turn off the heat, close the door, and after two minutes, lift them."

And, of course, they were perfect.

"Medium rare and very well done," Aunt Krede said with a wry smile, displaying a slice she had cut from hers.

"All a matter of timing," Bridget replied with a grin.

My mom wondered how Bridget's folks were doing and Bridget said as well as could be expected. Her mother was drinking more or less constantly and her father, whom I never met, was seldom at home and when he was at home he divided his time between raging at her mom and sulking in his shop.

"Not a pretty sight," she said.

"I'm sorry," my mom said. "So they don't mind your living here?"

Bridget laughed sardonically. "Do they *know* I'm living here? No, seriously, Bobby keeps me posted about what's going on. And I don't know what I'm going to do once he goes and school starts again. Of course, my dad'll have the Amarainy project to keep him busy."

"He's in on it?"

"Oh, yeah; they're thicker than thieves, he and Meerson. He's right up there with the other big shots like Lester and Authore. They have barbecues at Meerson's all the time now. They're getting it ready. You can feel the machinery gearing up."

"They might be gearing down again if we could find those ants," Aunt Krede said, "and if they're as unique as I think they are."

"The blue ants?" my mom asked. She'd been there, after all, the day Annette Authore had illustrated the ants.

"The Blue Kredes," I said.

"But nobody's found them," Lem Roy pointed out.

"And Annette said she was yellow-blue color blind," my mom noted.

"Well," Aunt Krede said, "they're anatomically unusual." She got out Mrs. Authore's sketches and showed us. "But I spent two afternoons up there hunting for them since she made these and I came up empty. So I don't know."

"Hey," I said to Bridget, "there's something we could do."

"Okay," she said. She turned to Aunt Krede. "Do you think it'd really matter?"

Aunt Krede shrugged. "Hard to say," she said. "We'd have to find them first, and see what they are."

"What are you going to do, Ashmead?" my mom asked. "Besides searching for ants, I mean. With your life, I mean."

"I don't know," I said. "Travel, maybe."

"You should go to school," Aunt Krede said.

"Or get a job," said my mom.

"I have work you can do," Lem Roy offered. "For the rest of the summer, anyway. But I agree, you should go to college while you can."

"Can't I educate myself?"

"Sure," Lem Roy said. "Just look around you here at all these folks who've educated themselves. And consider this. In any good library there are maybe a million books. If you read fast and live long enough you can read maybe five percent of them. So which five percent should you read? And where should you start?"

"And the same thing goes for the whole milieu of life," Aunt Krede said. "But on the other hand, there's no perfect solution, as you've discovered at Thrall. Every school has its biases and its ignoramuses. They're mighty annoying. The question is whether, on average, you'll do better with guidance or without it. And as you become an adult, that becomes yours to choose."

"But I've always enjoyed the books and things I chose on my own more than the things other people thought I should read or do."

"Did your mama ever tell you not to run out in the street in front of traffic?"

"Well, sure."

"And did you?"

"No," I laughed.

"And did someone tell you to read Feynman on quantum mechanics?"

"Yes, you did."

"And did you?"

"No," I said sheepishly.

"Well, you should. And that's another thing, Ashmead, about the university that you may not have enjoyed at Thrall. You have a lot more flexibility about the

work. If you want to shape things a little differently, you can.”

My mom seemed pleased with this line of conversation, which went on for a while until Bridget cleared the dishes and Lem Roy served up the fresh peach ice cream.

“Not from Peru,” he noted with a crinkled grin.

After dinner we retired to the living room, where Bridget built and kindled a small, cheery fire and Lem Roy selected and started, at a barely perceptible volume, a CD of Chopin *Nocturnes*, and in the piquant softness of the atmosphere Aunt Krede talked about her upcoming trip.

“I’m so excited I can hardly stand it,” she said, lighting a cigar. She hadn’t felt up to traveling during most of the past few years and this would be her first long trip since she’d moved in with Lem Roy.

She told us she’d travelled a lot after college, as a freelance writer specializing in art shows. During her marriage she’d honed an aptitude for management, but she’d hated being tied down. She’d taken a government job because it’d offered generous health care benefits for her kids, who were still unfledged, and an opportunity to work at sites all over the world. Finally she’d been assigned to create visual interpretive materials—“PR crap,” she called it—for a secret research project aimed at designing an engine for space exploration that depended on the discharge of high-energy ions generated by a plasma created by a small nuclear furnace. She’d been in the lab one day when a strange accident occurred that had exposed her and several other people to a brief flash of radiation.

“I felt it,” she said. “You can’t feel it, but I felt it. It was like a hot whisper, a zephyr that rushed by and was gone. Except in this case it went through me instead of around me.”

“Like when you get pregnant,” my mom said. “You can’t physically feel it,

but you do. You know the instant it happens.”

“Exactly,” Aunt Krede said. Then she laughed. “Well, I imagine so. Anyway, it zapped everybody. The guy who was closest to it died six months later of leukemia. But I was thirty feet farther away. After awhile I developed some blood abnormalities, so I got transfusions and antibiotics and for a long time I felt pretty crappy. But my blood’s been normal for more than a year now, and I’m finally up to snuff again.”

“Good to go,” Lem Roy said.

“Good to go,” she agreed.

“And where are you going?” my mom inquired.

“Oh, I’m just going to see where I go,” she said. “I’m going to visit with my daughter for a few days and probably tour the museums and art shops. I’ll probably camp in the redwoods on the way there. And I have a bit of business to attend to. Then I’m off to the wild blue yonder, I guess.”

“You don’t have any general plan?”

“Well,” Aunt Krede smiled, “I may hang out for a while in North Beach, just to taste the hip life. Then, I don’t know. I’m tempted to venture back east, mainly because it’s a long way away. I like traveling, you know? It’s something kinesthetic. I just like the motion of it. I get going and I don’t ever want to stop. But of course I do occasionally stop. And if I’m lucky I find beauty, passion, intensity, things beyond my imagining.”

“What kinds of things?”

“Well, that’s just it; I never know. Maybe it’ll be some poignant vignette, acted out before my eyes. Maybe a natural thing, like a mountain, or a meadow, or the odor of mown hay, or crickets chirping along the road, or a flower growing through the asphalt in a parking lot. Maybe it’ll be a book somebody gives me, or a street market, or music in a park, or some person in an all-night

café. Maybe it'll be a feeling of utter solitude or a long digression into the past. I just never know."

"Does it affect your painting," my mom asked, "when you come back? I mean, the things you've seen, and done, do they affect what you paint?"

"Well, this part of the country is – taking nothing away from it, because it's very beautiful – lacking in diversity, I'd say. Not just culturally, although that's a big part of it, but biologically, in terms of flora and fauna, and in terms of climate and soils. Spending time in other places will enrich my experience and imagination, and I'd be surprised if that doesn't affect my painting."

Bridget challenged Aunt Krede's assertion that Crondoc was lacking in diversity and my mom noted that she'd missed the cardinals that used to come to our feeders in the wintertime in Kansas.

"But," Bridget pointed out, "you didn't have blue herons fishing outside your door either, did you?"

"Well, Bridey," Lem Roy interjected, "there's no reason in the world not to choose Crondoc as the place you want to live. After all, we did."

"Yes," Aunt Krede agreed. "It's a lovely place and prettier than most. But, like anyplace else, it's missing all sorts of things. And, truthfully, it lacks a degree of variety that some other places possess and that I enjoy."

"What kind of variety?"

"Well, variety of culture, weather, and trees, just to pick three."

"Well, I don't miss tornadoes," my mom said. "Now and then I miss the sense of space, but I can always go to the ocean."

"I miss the wild weather," I said. "Even the tornadoes."

"You don't remember the afternoon your father and I huddled with you in the basement while a tornado tried to rip the house off its foundations, do you? You weren't even a year old."

"Nope, I don't," I confessed. I'd heard this story many times and always wished I'd remembered the day; it must've been spectacular.

"I'll never forget it. The funnel looked like it was a mile wide. I thought it'd come right over us. The noise was unbelievable, shrieking and yowling and pounding. It felt like the house was coming apart. Things were crashing and breaking it seemed like forever. When it was over there were a few broken windows and stuff blown around and most of the roof was off, but that was it. And then we noticed that the Jenkins' house was gone. I mean gone, as if it'd never been there. And so were Mrs. Jenkins and her baby. It was awful."

"Sounds awful," Aunt Krede agreed. Then she looked at me. "See, Ash, if your folks had left you lying out in the sandbox the day of that tornado, you might've survived just fine, who knows? But experience says, if a tornado's coming, hide the baby."

"I prefer drizzle," Bridget said. "Nobody ever died of drizzle."

Aunt Krede got out her maps then and we more or less wandered around the country with her, talking briefly about the weather and the plants and the music and art and other peculiarities of one place or another, and she made it sound as though you could hardly go anyplace without finding something interesting, although she seemed to have little use for the midwest in general because of its vast sameness, with which, having come from there, I had to agree.

"You're coming back, aren't you?" my mom asked at last.

Aunt Krede laughed. "Oh, sure. Of course."

Lem Roy stretched and yawned and said now that that was settled it was time for him to hit the hay. Bridget concurred and my mom decided she should go, too. Aunt Krede and I walked with her down to our house and then took a long circuitous route around Beezle's church and across an unfamiliar field strewn with boulders before we gained the ridge that ran above the farm.

“Mose must’ve pried a lot of rocks out of his fields,” I observed.

“Yep.”

“Where’d they all go?”

“Take a look at the foundation of the house sometime.”

I’d never noticed, as many times as I’d approached the house, gone inside, walked around it, that it had a stone foundation. I mean, I guess I’d noticed, but I’d never really taken note of it. It’s hard to see, she said, the things you’ve always taken for granted, which, in her view, was another good reason to leave town.

We stood for a while at the edge of the trees and gazed across the valley. The scene reminded me of the foggy night I’d spent high above the reservoir, only now the sky was clear and the rippling water of the Perpend glittered in the moonlight. A light came on in Lem Roy’s bedroom, and she smiled.

“You wouldn’t think we were brother and sister, would you?” she asked.
“We’re so different.”

I said it seemed to me that, in spite of all the obvious differences, somehow they were also very much the same.

“Everything to Lem Roy is animate,” she said, “and vested with the spirit of life. It’s a wonderful cosmology, and I respect it deeply. But it seems part of that view that a person is no more than a clod of dirt, or a tree, or a star. One is captive to fate, one is what one is and that’s the end of it. To me, life means just the opposite. Life is your chance to spit in fate’s blind eye, to dream your own dream of what may be and assert the shape of your will on the world in which you live.

“I want not to be an animal, nor a spirit, but a human being. And not a nameless drudge of the race – that’s inevitable – but something beyond the statistical bulge, outside the path of the swarm, because it’s that queer quality of

life outside the commonplace that potentiates change. You can go along and get along—ants do that, and to some degree you have to—but you can do something ants can't do: you can live rather differently, you can zig when everyone else zags, you can live outside your community and outside the habits and customs of your community. You can be a wanderer and an interloper. You can be free. And all I want, really, in the end, is to be free."

As we walked back down the hill in the chiaroscuro light she spoke of Mr. Meerson and Mr. Authore, whom she disliked and who she saw not as men at all but as cogs in the social machine, men who, for the sake of power to impress themselves on other men had forsaken conscience and sacrificed the power to act on their own.

"There are men who covet dominion over other men," she said. "They are rulers of valleys, hoarders of wealth, lords of families and tribes, owners of armies and killers of their own kind. They're fearful men, I think, but often bold in conflict with other men. If they live long enough, like any man they may become wise. Like any man, they may sometimes rue their fate, but they cannot separate themselves from the system they govern, which makes them all they are. Their dominion in its turn dominates their lives.

"There's another route through life than being one of them or one of their lackeys, and that's being a loner, an independent, an individual. Just remember, Ashmead, although you may sleep in the shadow of their benign influence, or stand with them in battle and think yourself on their side, they are never on yours."

And then we'd returned to the house, where Lem Roy and Bridget had long since gone to bed, and she'd wanted to complete her packing and it'd been time for me to go home.

The nearly full moon had risen some way into the southeastern heavens in

its pursuit of the sun. Its little gibbous face twisted with the strain of its task. I thought about Wagger's lopsided wag. I thought about the stories Lem Roy sometimes told about the planets and the Milky Way. I thought about the night Aunt Krede claimed the ants were dancing in huge fairy circles on their hind legs because there was a full moon at the time of the spring equinox. I thought about one of the first nights I'd ever known them, when I'd witnessed a spectacular pumpkin-colored moonrise as I was making my way home. Then I had a strange premonition that I'd never see Aunt Krede again. The thought passed through me like an icy wind in the warm shadowy stillness.

I walked up the next morning to look in on the ants. Aunt Krede and the little green Peugeot were gone. Lem Roy and Bridget were checking fences high up on the hill. We waved. There was a fresh stack of oak firewood outside the shop and a pale yellow heap of fragrant fluff beneath the sawbuck. I scooped up a double handful and squeezed it before letting it fall again. The palms of my hands tingled with the sweet odor.

Bobby and Lucky and Bridget and I went swimming that afternoon at Keystone. Lucky told us her dad thought he'd found out who'd shot Wagger. It turned out Mr. Hudson had known the key facts, and must've had suspicions almost from the day it happened, because about a week previous the guy had purchased some ammunition which Mr. Hudson didn't carry and had had to special-order. But he hadn't said anything to anybody until Bennie had asked him about it, because, he'd said then, he couldn't be sure.

Towering cumulus clouds piled up in the southwest as the afternoon wore on. Now and then we heard the distant rumble of thunder. As the dark sky loomed nearer and the bright sunlight faded, the icy water of the Perpend, which had seemed all day so stimulating, so refreshing, became more daunting. A cool breeze brushed through the leaves along the shore and raised goosebumps on

wet skin. As always, I took the last plunge.

While I was toweling myself Bobby asked me what I was going to do in the fall. I said I didn't know.

"You got into the university, didn't you?"

"Yeah," I laughed, "but I don't know. Look at this." And I gestured around us, at the river, the sky, the trees. "I'm in a state of nature."

"So?"

"So why would I go confine myself for four more years in the dark rooms of dark buildings scribbling down the hoary notions of ancient subterraneans when I already have this sublime perfection of spirit, this glorious unanimity with nature?"

Bobby told Martin Buber's famous tale of the mountain-climbing sages as a parable about people who were so focused on keeping what they'd already found that they could barely move forward to the next discovery. I pointed out to him that, like most parables, this story could equally be applied to lots of people—even to him—as well as me. The principal difference between us, I surmised, was that whereas my companion was an abstract will-o'-the-wisp, his was a beautiful woman, whose face, as I said this, blushed a deep cherry red.

Bobby and Lucky left to go to town to see the fireworks while Bridget and Lem Roy and Wagger (who shortly preferred the shelter of the house) and I lay supine on the hillside and watched the flashing lights rippling through the clouds and felt the shock waves as they pummeled the night air and bounced among the hills.

About ten o'clock I walked up to Mr. Kuntzler's but he was nowhere to be seen and the door to the store was still open. The screen door was latched, so I knocked. "We're closed," Hanna's voice called out.

"Your door's open," I demurred.

"Come around back," she said. "I'm counting cans."

As I entered the threshold of the back doorway, a huge flash of lightning behind me lit up the sky and even for a moment cast my shadow in pale blue light across the concrete floor. Then, not a second later, as I turned to glimpse the dying glow, an enormous, violent wall of sound slapped my face, stunned my ears, and rattled the walls within.

"La bomba!" I cried, laughing.

"It scares me," she said.

"Want some help?"

We counted cans for half an hour or so, until the inventory was complete. We closed the front door and locked it. Overhead, an unseen spark clawed half a mile across the sky, raising a sound like the ripping of a sheet, terminating in a jolting concussion. "I should check the cooler," she said.

The cooler was as big as a child's bedroom. Rows of cartons three or four high were stacked along the side walls. At the far end was a freezer compartment. In the center of the room was a narrow table. The door closed behind us with an authoritative chunk. She sat on the table's end, her bare legs dangling. "You want to stay?"

"I can't," I lied. "My mom's expecting me."

"You could stay for a while." It took her a while to say "while." Maybe it was because of that coy smile she had to push it through.

I was tempted. But then I was also in the cooler with her. Just where Mr. Hudson had warned me not to find myself.

"I promised her," I said. "Besides, I'm opening for you tomorrow at seven. I'll have to get up at six..."

"If you're already here," she said, "you can sleep in 'til six thirty."

"Well, I need sleep."

"Why, Ashmead Hopcross," she said with an air of sudden indignance.

"What do you mean? You can sleep all you want."

"I'd sleep better in my own bed."

"You can sleep in my bed and I'll sleep on the couch."

I knew this was how it was going to be. The woman I'd fantasized about all year was going to invite me into her bedroom and then walk out and sleep on the couch. This was Hanna Hudson after all.

"I'd better go," I said.

"I'll be scared, Ashmead."

She pressed her hands down against the table and pushed her shoulders outward, up around her ears, and looked at me forlornly. "I just want you to hold me," she pouted.

I stepped closer and wrapped her in my arms. Her long hair felt cold against my cheek. Her hands clasped behind my back. Her thighs gripped my hips. "I'll come back later," I said.

"When?"

"In a couple of hours."

"It'll be midnight."

"Can you stay up 'til midnight?"

Her eyes searched mine. They smoldered with lust.

"Midnight," she said, her fingers toying with the buttons of my shirt.

"Midnight."

When I got home I was so exhausted I decided to take a quick nap. It still hadn't rained, although the air was gravid with moisture and the lightning continued its dance among the turbulent clouds. I opened my bedroom window wide and fell asleep. When I awoke a gale was whooping through the curtains and huge drops of rain were splashing against the sill. It was two o'clock.

I threw on my pants, buttoned my shirt, shuffled into my shoes, and eased myself out the window. I crossed the field in a driving, drenching downpour that soaked me from head to toe in a couple of minutes. The Hudson house was pitch dark. There wasn't even a night light. I stood in the mud outside her bedroom window and knocked on the glass. Nothing. I tapped again. Still, nothing. Forever nothing.

As I crawled back in through my window my mom entered the room and turned on the light. "Having a fire drill?" she asked.

"I, uh, went to work early," I said. "Must've misread my clock."

"Was she awake?"

"No."

"I worry about you."

"Me, too."

"Dry off before you go to sleep."

Around the store the next day I dragged my butt like a duffel bag full of rocks. She slept late, then went to Artesia to have lunch with some friends and returned two hours after she was supposed to relieve me.

"What happened to you last night?" she asked.

"I came back," I said. "But you were asleep."

"I know," she said. "Sorry. I was tired."

"No problem," I said.

"Forgive me?"

"Sure."

"Sorry I was late getting back from lunch."

"No problem."

"Forgive me?"

"Sure. You're going to pay me, aren't you?"

"Pay you? For the overtime? Sure. Want to come by this evening, after I close?"

"Can't," I said. "I'm whipped. I have to sleep." This time it was true.

She turned her face toward the floor and then raised her eyes to look up at me from the shaded depths beneath her dark brows. "You still love me, don't you, Ashmead?"

I took a deep breath. "In ways you couldn't imagine," I said.

"Mm," she murmured. "Come by and show me sometime."

37

Black and Blue

Aunt Krede had been gone a couple of weeks. She'd sent a card from New Orleans waxing effusive over the music, signing herself "Granny," but otherwise we hadn't heard from her. Lem Roy had showed us where she kept her collecting vials, clear plastic tubes a few inches long with screw-off caps and toothed clips that could be snapped onto a fold of cloth or a belt. He explained we should put one or a few queens, or up to half a dozen workers in a vial, add some dirt or moss or something, and carry them under our clothes. "They like to be underground," he said.

Taking a few of these tubes with us, Bridget and I had hiked twice into the Amaraingy, the second time after having talked to Annette Authore, without any luck. Neither Annette nor my mom could describe exactly where they'd been that day. Annette had promised to go with us next time, and we were still hopeful, but we had a new appreciation for the difficulty of the task.

Lem Roy took three of his best animals, including Atahualpa, to the fair. The judging took place on Saturday morning, and afterward my mom and I spent most of the afternoon wandering through the exhibits, riding the ferris

wheel, and eating cotton candy. Atahualpa, handsome beast that he was, won first prize. The big cow, Aida, received an honorable mention, which Lem Roy said seemed puny respect for a cow who'd dropped eight calves in five years and had "a pelvis like the Arc d'Triomphe." And he was a little miffed that his yearling bull Tunapa had been passed over for an award.

"It's his eyes," he said. "Too intelligent. He made them feel insecure, like he was judging them." He laughed. "If I hadn't sold Quetzal, he'd've won because there was nothing in his eyes but empty space."

Hanna had somehow persuaded Bridget and Bobby to mind the store on Sunday and she called Saturday night to invite me to a picnic tête-à-tête at Solitude Cove.

"Great," I said. "What shall I bring?"

"Just your appetite," she said.

The next day dawned in a flame of pink, and by mid-morning the air was already hot beneath a perfectly cloudless sky. I went down to the river behind our house and swam and read for a while but I couldn't concentrate. I stopped in at the store just after noon, mainly to assure myself she wasn't working. Bobby confided to me that he'd heard from Lucky, confidentially of course, that several local yahoos had been rounded up the night before as the result of a long-running undercover drug investigation, and that the guy who'd shot Wagger was among them. I pinned a note to that effect on the Kredes' front door before I gathered myself into a semblance of nonchalance and began my fateful journey upstream to long-awaited Nirvana.

I was a half-hour early, and—so much for nonchalance—I'd forgotten the book I'd been reading, so I stripped down for a swim. Afterward, I lay naked in the sun for what seemed like a long time, hoping, of course, to be discovered. I could feel my tenderest skin beginning to fry so I put my pants on again, and I

was lying there not long afterward, half-asleep in the languid warmth of the sand, when I heard her rustle the bushes above me.

“Déjà vu,” she said, laughing.

And it was.

She slipped from her shoes and, with a smile, slowly opened and shed her robe, revealing the same electric pink mesh suit she’d worn on that swirling, rapturous day a year ago. Her long auburn hair was gathered in a ponytail that reached halfway down her back. I helped her spread her towel, which was not only huge but thick as a carpet, across a swath of soft sand from which I concurrently plucked and chucked several inconvenient pebbles.

She knelt on the towel and untied her hair, looking at me with those deep burnished eyes. Then she patted the area next to her and bade me join her.

“You’re overdressed, as always,” she said.

I blushed, as always. For a moment I wasn’t sure I could breathe. She reached over for the picnic basket.

“Hungry, Ash?”

I grinned. “Very,” I said.

“But not for sandwiches I suppose.”

“Not for sandwiches.”

“Ash?”

“Hanna?”

“How come you still have your pants on?”

“The sun was scorching me,” I said, flipping open the top two or three buttons.

“Aw,” she pouted, her glistening purple lips full and mischievous. Then she took a bottle of suntan lotion from the basket. “Want me to rub some of this on your bum?”

I lay on my side on the towel. "You still have your bathing suit on," I observed, "or I could rub some of it on your bum."

She leaned over until her face was an inch from mine and her breasts seemed about to tumble out of the suit. "Don't you like my bathing suit, Ashmead?"

"I do," I said, reaching out for her, pulling her to me, pressing my mouth upon those luscious grape-colored lips, feeling a warm gasp expelled through her nostrils against my cheek. As we kissed, she shrugged away the thin spaghetti straps that guyed the suit over her breasts and it slumped away under their divine weight. Then she turned slightly and, taking me with her, rolled over onto her back, working the suit downward over her hips, her buttocks, her thighs, and I helped her pull it over her long, tan calves and finally free of her exquisite feet, whose white bottoms I kissed and licked while she giggled girlishly.

I grinned at her. "I like it much better now, though," I said, holding it in my hand, marvelling at how little of it there actually was. Then slowly, as if in a dream, we floated together again, and I felt her nakedness against my chest, her bare toes inveigling themselves coyly up under my pant leg, her abdomen soft and firm against mine, her hair sleek and silky as it slipped through my fingers, her plum-purple lips gaping, gasping, groping, grasping, greedy as my own for the sweet, ripe, dewy fruit of persistent longing now poised so tantalizingly near.

Dingle Creek isn't really all that big, maybe four feet deep and thirty feet across, but when you're right beside it its constant gurgling murmur is a dominant auditory presence, even if you hardly notice it because your fondest, most lascivious dream is about to come true.

I thought I heard someone shout, far away, but it was drowned out in the trill of the rippling creek and the smooth tanned flesh of Hanna Hudson.

I thought I heard a strange crackling sound, like a million tiny firecrackers, like someone walking on a dense mat of small dry twigs, but it was pushed aside by the soft, insistent ululations of Hanna Hudson as I kissed her nipple, stiff and crinkled as a goosefleshed prune perched on a warm pillow of whipped cream.

I thought I smelled smoke, but it was July and maybe someone was burning yard debris, and I could smell on my fingers the sweet prurience of Hanna Hudson, who surged slowly beneath me, her white teeth gleaming as I struggled to get out of my levis.

I thought I heard Bridget yelling, and Hanna Hudson heard that too. "I smell smoke," she said, almost hurling me off her. I stood up. A roiling column of sooty black smoke pushed its way into the blue vault of the northwestern sky. I heard Bridget running up to us, shouting my name.

"It's the Kredes'," she screamed through the bushes as she reached the bank and saw me. "Come on!" Then she disappeared.

Bridget and Bobby had driven over and were busy chasing the animals from the barn by the time I got there. The fire was raging in the myrmecorium and it was way beyond control. I helped them close the big barn doors that led out to the pastures.

There were hose bibs near the corners of each building and, it being summer, a hose was attached to each of them. We sent Bobby over to wet down the house, the porch roof and the upstairs siding. Bridget moved Lem Roy's tractor away from the myrmecorium while I dashed in to grab the hose that was connected to a standpipe near the shop door. The heat radiating from the steel door was stunning. Its paint boiled up in great blisters. I could tell the whole interior of the shop must be filled with flame. Fire leapt from the window and licked up around the cupola greenhouse of the myrmecorium. I didn't bother to open the valve. I knew all I could do was save the hose itself. I unscrewed it for

all I was worth.

Bridget began soaking down the side of the barn that faced the myrmecorium. I added the hose I'd saved onto the house hose at the southeast corner and tried to play water on the myrmecorium's blazing cupola, but it was a mistake. As soon as the water hit the hot glass panes they shattered, exploded almost, and the orange flames roared out through this sudden chimney. I turned to helping Bobby with the house. We decided he'd go up on the porch roof and try to get water onto the house roof. I found a length of rope and we succeeded in getting a hose up to him.

The heat was intense, even from across the driveway. Dark smoke billowed out from every crack and crevice and the fire impelled a huge wind, which sounded like a distant freight train, through the roof around the now engulfed cupola. The crackling sounds were accompanied by bursts of burning sparks that swirled up through the rising column of smoke into the hot afternoon air. The fire had breached the east side of the shop away from us and now threatened the grass, brush and trees we could not get to.

I ran around there to see what the situation was. The dry grass was burning but it'd been mowed and the immediate area was largely free of tinder. The middle third of the building exterior was aflame.

My mom arrived and began helping Bridget spray the tall sides of the barn. I could hear the sirens coming. As I ran back to help Bobby the fire engine from Thrall arrived. They pulled the red pumper up alongside the house.

"What the hell's burning in there?" The fire captain asked.

"Everything!" was all I could say.

He ordered his two helpers to soak down the house roof, and within two minutes they'd put more water up there than we'd been able to do in ten or fifteen minutes with four garden hoses, which were, as had been plain from the

beginning, an absurdly inadequate weapon for such a task.

The wind was easing slightly from west to east and the fire captain worried more about the fire's spreading eastward toward the church than about the barn, which, he pointed out, had a steel roof. He called for reinforcements from Artesia, hoping that with another pumper we'd be able to run a line up from the river.

"It's a hell of a long ways," he said dubiously as he eyed the driveway. I wondered why it wouldn't've been routine; after all, a lot of places were much farther from waterways than this one. I helped one of the men drag a big three-inch hose around the myrmecorium end of the shop and at the far corner we spotted a cylindrical white tank. He released a blast of water onto it and told me to run tell the fire captain it was propane.

The fire captain had directed his second hose directly against the north end of the shop, where the fire had burst through a wide seam above the sagging garage door. I stayed there while he ran back to look at the propane tank. I noticed the lower leaves of the big maple tree on the branches nearest the shop were beginning to wilt and curl in the heat.

The fire captain returned. "How much gas is in there?" he yelled.

"I don't know," I said. I ran over and asked Bridget. She didn't know either.

"I have to get back there," he yelled again, and then he set me to pulling the huge loops of hose off the back of the truck as he dragged it past his man on the south side, circumventing the propane tank. He instructed his helper to keep the tank as cool as possible and try to keep the fire away from it for as long as he could. Then he told me to drag some more loops in that direction while he went to tell the guy near the collapsing shop door what he was planning to do.

"Spray the tree!" Bridget shouted at them.

"What?" the fire captain shouted back. I didn't think about it at the time,

but the scene must've been incredibly noisy, because everyone was shouting.

"Spray the damn tree!" Bridget yelled again.

The fire captain said something to his man and ran back to the pumper to activate the hose he'd just hauled toward the back. "Damn," he said as he looked at the gauges.

"What's the matter?"

He didn't answer me. "If you see those guys from Artesia, run down there and tell them we need a draw from the river up here, pronto," he yelled, leaning in toward me.

"And drag me some more of this hose," he shouted over his shoulder as he raced off to work the grass and scrub on the far side of the shop. I noticed the man near the barn was directing a stiff mist against the canopy of the maple tree as flames roared up beyond the roof of the shop. The fire had burst through the door.

Just then a spray of water from Bobby's hose drenched me. I looked up. "You looked hot," he laughed. Then I noticed he, too, was soaked. "They almost washed me off here," he said, hunkering down on the edge of the roof, nodding toward the fire crew.

"It's just getting bigger," I observed.

"Most of the hot stuff's going thataway," he said, surveying the fiery gray smoke that sprang now through the roof of the shop. The breeze had picked up a little. "The barn looks okay."

I heard the siren coming up the road from Artesia. "Gotta go," I said. It was a command vehicle. I told them what the fire captain had said about getting water from the river, and they used their radio to tell the pumper driver, who was not far behind. "Tell him to park it right here, at the end of the driveway," the commander said, "and we'll pull hose from both sides."

Lem Roy, in the old truck with his prize cattle, was right behind the fire engine. The engine driver pulled up into the end of the Kredes' driveway and Lem Roy parked his truck in our driveway.

The Artesia crew was efficient and well-trained. Two men ran with several long sections of flexible black pipe across our yard, around our house and into the river. Then they ran back, coupling it as they came. The driver and the fourth man, who turned out to be a woman, began dragging hose up the driveway. Lem Roy and I went to help them.

"The animals are okay," I said as we ran across the road, suddenly realizing I had no idea where Wagger was. "I don't know where Wagger is."

We struggled to run with the two-hundred-foot lengths of canvas-covered hose, but it seemed to weigh a ton and it seemed to take forever to carry each segment up far enough and when we pulled off the last one we still weren't going to make it.

The driver and Lem Roy strode, half-trotted, then ran, already weary, up to the engine by the house to pull off another section of hose which, as it turned out, was all we needed, while the woman firefighter and I jogged back down to the truck to get the pumps engaged. We lay a rubber traffic guard over the intake pipe and set flares in the road. As we walked back to the truck she took off her hat. She was a middle-aged woman and oddly attractive. The reddening sun glinted in her hair.

"Jesus," she said, wiping her brow with her sleeve as we waited for the signal from the driver to start pumping water up. "You could've picked a hotter day for this."

The pump that drew water from the river growled to life and then purred throatily. The driver gave the signal. She flipped a switch to start the second pump and opened a valve. The hose that lay flat along the Kredes' driveway

swelled up plump like a pale boa constrictor swallowing half a mile of sausage.

Now they had water, and enough people, and if the propane tank didn't go, it ought to be only a matter of time. There still was no wind. And it was hotter than hell, but it was beginning to cool off.

As we walked back up the driveway, Wagger emerged from the house and came bravely down to greet us.

"This is Wagger," I said, introducing them.

"Hi, Wagger," she said. "I'm Janie."

"And I'm Ashmead," I said. I can dance.

"You live here?"

"No, I live down there. The Kredes live here. Wagger and Lem Roy and Mary Ann. And about a hundred purebred Angus cows. Well, cows and steers and five bulls. And, until an hour ago, about a million ants and I don't know how many puppets."

"Didn't the McMoreys used to live here?" she said.

It turned out she was the daughter of the Artesia woman, only recently deceased, who'd been Mose McMorey's half-sister. "Lem Roy would love to meet you," I said.

"Well, I'm very happy to meet you, too, Ashmead," she said, putting out her hand and shaking mine with sincerity and warmth. Then she held on another moment, and smiled sadly. "I'm sorry things were lost."

"Me, too," I said. "They're great people. So you used to have dinner here with Mose and Bess?" I didn't mention Aunt Krede. I figured it'd make a nice surprise.

"Me and my brother and my ma. On Sundays, mostly."

"They were all young then."

"Compared with now, sure. I was just a kid."

"Want to see the inside?"

"I think Mr. Krede should invite me, Ashmead," she said, touching my arm.

"He'll be delighted," I said.

"What does he do?"

"He's a cattle breeder. And he's a puppeteer. Who just lost all his puppets. He used to be an anthropologist but now he's a Zen philosopher."

We walked up the steps to the porch and surveyed the scene. The fire was smaller but still vigorous. The propane tank had emptied itself into the flames. Already the bitter odor of wet embers was in the air.

"It's evolution, I guess," I said.

"What is?"

"The destruction that clears a path for reconstruction."

"Death and life."

"Yeah."

"Listen, Ashmead, I don't want to go but this is my job."

"Come back for supper."

"It's already six o'clock."

I couldn't let her slip away. "How long will you guys be here?"

"An hour," she said. "Maybe less. Once they can handle it we'll go back to Artesia."

"And they'll stay and mop up?"

"Yeah, make sure everything stays down."

"Well, they're going to have to eat, and we'll feed them. So, look, come back at eight, okay? You don't have to shower or anything."

"I'm going to shower."

I laughed. "Me, too," I said. "This is great. Lem Roy's going to love you, I promise."

"Is that him?"

Lem Roy was leaning against the rails of Tunapa's corral, sucking on a stem of grass, watching the fire.

"Yes."

"I want to meet him."

We walked over. He didn't glance at us.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"It's insured," he said, still nipping at the grass. "We'll replace it. You guys did a good job."

"This is Janie." He looked inquiringly at her and shook her hand.

"Hi, Janie," he said.

"She's one of Mose's sister's daughters."

"You don't say?" He cocked his head a bit and grinned. "And pretty, too."

"I invited her for dinner."

"I believe that's my pleasure. What time?"

"Eight."

"You're cooking."

"Bridget'll help me."

Bridget was sitting on the ground, her arms slung over her knees, crying, looking destroyed.

Bennie's cruiser eased past the fire engine and rolled slowly up the driveway. He got out and waved, grim-faced. He donned and squared his hat, then walked over and talked for a few minutes with the fire commander.

I went over to Bridget, hunkered down in front of her, clasped her shoulders in my arms. She hugged her legs. Then I sat back a little. "We saved the tree," I said.

She looked up at the old maple, singed but mostly intact.

“And the barn didn’t burn down and the cows are all fine. And you did everything you could.”

The fire crews were at the windows now, fogging the interior, or what was left of it, and the scorched vegetation on the east side seemed well-soaked, still smouldering but no longer aflame. Bridget’s tears started flowing again as she watched it. I walked back to the corral fence just as Bennie approached and Lem Roy introduced him to Janie.

“Mary Ann okay?” he asked.

Lem Roy smiled shyly. “On the road somewhere in the Deep South,” he said. “Hanging out with a bunch of rednecks in a honky-tonk.”

Bennie nodded. “I’m glad she wasn’t here to see this,” he said.

Lem Roy raised his eyebrows, revealing the cavernous sockets of his black eyes, set far back from the bridge of his eagle-beaked nose. “I don’t plan to tell her,” he said.

“Have any idea how it happened?”

“Nope,” Lem Roy said. “They think it started over by the propane intake for the heat pump.”

“It was running?”

“We tried to keep it under eighty in there because of the ants. So, yes, very likely.”

Bennie considered this and then exhaled sharply, puffing out his cheeks.

“I’m sure sorry,” he said.

“You’re welcome to stay to dinner.”

“I’ve got another crisis,” Bennie said. “But thanks. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

And then he took his leave, tipping his hat to Janie.

“I’d better go help,” she said, and Lem Roy nodded.

Bobby was consoling Bridget, who seemed thoroughly exhausted. "Damn!" I said unexpectedly, surprising even myself. Then I laughed. "I was right in the middle of something. I should go see how Hanna's doing."

"Okay. These guys'll be out of here pretty soon, and I've got to bring the cows up."

"I'll be back in fifteen minutes."

He smiled knowingly. "Take your time."

"Sorry about your puppets."

"Thanks. Me, too. But we'll start over and it'll all be reborn," he said, as if it were just that simple. "Meanwhile, don't forget you're cooking for my new girlfriend."

Next morning, as Bridget and Lem Roy and I poked through the ashes, we found poor shattered Petrouchka, staring up from the gray rubble, his mouth agape, his eyes open, his steel-wool hair still curly, his face an intricate death mask of fine ash as if he were one of the victims of Pompeii. We stared at him for a long moment, then Lem Roy reached his brown fingers in underneath Petrouchka's ashen head, as if to lift it from the earth, and it simply disintegrated. Bridget uttered a cry of anguish and sniffled. Lem Roy and I exchanged a smile. Each of us had a tear sliding down his cheek.

Hanna told me later that Bennie'd been held up getting to the fire because some unknown person had dumped a truckload of gravel right smack up against the front end of his cruiser while it was parked at a motel far out on the Guillemot highway where he and Annette Authore had apparently been whiling away an off-duty August afternoon in breezy air-conditioned comfort. It had taken him the better part of an hour to dig away enough of it that they could leave.

While she was washing tomatoes for a lunchtime salad my mom lost track

of what she was doing and stared for a long time out the kitchen window toward the Krede's house, her gaze lingering on the charred and ashen ruins where the myrmecorium had been. Tears ran down her cheeks. I put my arm around her shoulder.

"It's over now," I said.

"Is it?"

"Nobody got hurt and Lem Roy says almost everything can be replaced. The only thing left to do now is take a deep breath and soldier on." Bennie would've been proud of me.

"Well, sometimes," she said, "the smart thing to do is cut your losses."

38

Long Shot

Events that have gone on for a while, and the longer the worse but it need not be long, become part of the background, slip out of focus, exist unnoticed until, sometimes, suddenly they're gone, and then their absence is somehow louder than they were. The buzz of a fluorescent light, the chirping of crickets, the roar of a river, the singing of a coal-mine canary become part of our context and when they disappear we have at first a vague unsettlement. Something is wrong, but we don't know what it is.

"Listen!" we say.

"I don't hear anything," our companion replies. And then we understand—the context has changed, and the world has a different coloration than it had a moment before, perhaps subtle, perhaps immensely significant.

Aunt Krede had returned from her journey about three weeks after she'd left. She'd had to forego a walk along the Appalachian Trail in New England because of a circulatory problem in her foot which she said had been aggravated

by walking too many miles along the hard stone floors of the nation's museums, of which she'd visited quite a few.

As a gesture of welcome, and perhaps some condolence for her loss of the ants, upon her homecoming Hanna presented Aunt Krede with a box of the fine greenish Costa Rican cigars she liked, and as a gesture of independence, and perhaps defiance, she'd even restocked them in the store. I'd stood in her stead a few more times when she needed a hand or a half-day off, and we'd talked about meeting again at Solitude Cove, but the time had never seemed quite right. She'd spoken occasionally with her folks by telephone and they'd said they'd be back around the first of September, which now was just a few days away.

She'd told them what she knew of what had been going on and mentioned to her dad that the investigators who'd flushed out the drug operation wanted him to make a formal statement describing the ammunition transaction, and he'd reacted defensively, saying he wasn't sure that had anything to do with drugs and that he might have to consult an attorney and that he was concerned about repercussions, and then her mother'd got on the phone and said not to worry, Mr. Hudson would speak the truth.

A few days after the fire Lem Roy, Bridget and I had cleared the debris and transported most of it to the dump. We'd sifted through it, but most of what hadn't burned had been destroyed by the heat. The biggest thing we salvaged was Lem Roy's anvil. Decisions about the new shop design required Aunt Krede's participation and Lem Roy expected it'd be spring before everything was back in place for a new beginning.

With Lem Roy's counsel and encouragement, Bridget had been talking about the Amarainy project with people in governmental and private organizations and appeared to be persuading some of them that the deal might've been adopted too quickly. Still, she was concerned because cutting was

set to begin in the spring and Meerson's trucks were already hauling mountains of crushed stone for roadbeds and gigantic rocks for embankment stabilization into the upper slopes as road building got under way. The project plan apparently called for the most remote sites to be cut in the early years, so that the loss of roadless regions would occur at the outset, presenting naysayers with a *fait accompli*.

As had become practically my custom, one morning I made my way up to the Keystone beach with my notebook, in which I was keeping track of the historical minutiae of Crondoc and at the same time trying to grasp the elemental principles of dramatic writing, which as far as I could tell consisted primarily in portraying people and events with a sort of insightful abstraction, setting aside the baffling complexity and ambiguous fuzz of real life and focusing only on some ultimate moment of crisis, better known in the writing trade as the denouement, and its necessary precedents of escalation and counter-escalation, all preferably driven by some sense of urgency or madness.

It'd rained most of the night, a steady, warm tropical rain, but the morning sky was clear and blue. The ground was still damp and the air was thick with moisture. Unlike the fields, long since dried into pale hues of sand and straw, the vegetation along the river seemed especially green, ranging from blackish viridian to radiant chartreuse, vivid and vibrant. Still, there were telltale touches of gold and patches of pinkish scarlet in the foliage that presaged the imminent end of summer.

I had no sooner stepped onto the beach and surveyed the beauty of my solitude than I saw Pastor Beezle fishing on the gravel bar a few hundred feet upstream from me. Of course, this changed everything. Stripping to the buff, as was my wont, I knew would be like waving a morsel of meat before a wily wolverine, and he'd soon be fishing on Keystone, and God knows for what. So I

waved and walked back up the bank and wound my way through the trees until I emerged onto the spit with him.

"Hope I'm not bothering you," he said, eyeballs bulging, smiling his little puckered smile.

"Not at all," I lied.

"Today's the day."

"What day?"

"The day we balance the books, right the wrong, exact God's retribution on Jonah's whale."

"The one that got away?"

"The very one."

He lifted the fly from the water and flicked it into the air, his arm wafting it slowly backward and then forward, far downstream through the heavy air, and then backward again, almost silently, and then suddenly it shot forward like a streaking swallow, slowing over the water as the line played out, and settled onto the surface like a tiny leaf, with barely a ripple.

"How's that girlfriend of yours?" he asked.

"Which girlfriend?"

"The one at the store."

"Oh," I said. "She's fine."

"You have a lot of girlfriends?"

"I wouldn't say that," I said.

He jigged the line slowly. "That's what unbalanced your friend Bobby," he said.

"Girls?"

"Bobby was lost long before he came to us. Unbalanced by that Hill girl, I think. Lucretia. Remember his performance at the Easter service?"

How could I not remember? It'd been a spectacle. "Was that God talking?"

He laughed again and lifted the fly. "Did you see the tears? God was struggling to emerge. But God is in life, and that was, well, a performance."

"A devilish good one, I thought," I said, a bit proud of myself.

"I suppose you could say that." He lofted the fly back and forth and flicked it once again into the deep pool downstream. "You see, Ashmead, everything in this world is in a natural balance. Beauty and ugliness, wealth and poverty, good and evil, life and death, even God and Satan. A delicate balance. When things are out of balance there's confusion and pain, and God withdraws from us."

This sounded like gibberish to me. "So Bobby was possessed by Satan?"

"Oh, no; there's a solution for that. The Catholics call it exorcism. Bobby was, well, you might say Bobby was dispossessed. The whirlwind that scattered Bobby's soul was generated by hormones. I don't believe it had a spiritual dimension."

"He thought it did."

"Yes, he was derailed by it, and in that Satan surely had a role, and to that extent maybe we helped him regain his balance."

"Maybe what happened at Easter was good for him."

He shrugged. "Maybe. I'd really hoped we could help him, but I think God found him very remote and unresponsive."

I wanted to ask him other questions, about balance, about the pictures, about glossolalia. I wanted to and I didn't want to. I knew he had an answer for everything. An answer that satisfied him completely but wouldn't satisfy me at all.

This conflict induced me to look upstream, away from this slippery eel of a man, and from the corner of my eye I saw first motion and then the forms of Mr. Meerson, tall, silver-haired, and as unused to the rough, rocky terrain as was his

slipper-clad companion, his lugubrious factotum, Mr. Authore, short, swarthy, balding, skittish as any rabbit outside its burrow.

“We have company,” I said.

Pastor Beezle looked at them and slowly reeled in his fly.

After the greetings Mr. Meerson led off by telling me he really needed someone like me and offering me a job for as long as I liked at the prevailing wage or maybe a bit more and whatever time I needed to go to school if such was my desire.

“Doing what?” I asked.

He said his company did all sorts of things and we could negotiate that. I thanked him for his generosity and said I’d think about it. In truth, I felt offended, but I wasn’t sure whether I should be.

“I understand you’re no supporter of the Amaraing Plan,” he said.

“I don’t know,” I shrugged. “I don’t really understand it. I think people need to understand it better.”

“Well,” he smiled, “come work for me and see for yourself and judge for yourself.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“I wonder if you’d mind very much,” he said, lowering his voice as if he were conveying some confidence. “We’d like to speak with Pastor Beezle.”

“Sure,” I said. “No problem.”

“Just for a few minutes.”

“Sure.” And I began walking across the round stones, choosing my steps carefully, crossing the bar to the upstream edge, near the willows, where I sat crosslegged in the bright sun and opened my notebook.

“Before me is the world of the Perpend, and everything it represents, its lazy late-summer ballad strong and clear and green, and over there, not fifty feet

away, are the ministers of another reality, three whispering fates at the helm of the bark of state, the vapid spinner of souls, the weaselly clipper of minds, the stiletto-straight stitcher of deals. I wonder what it is that has brought them here for such urgent conversation."

Mr. Authore was speaking with sad eyes and Mr. Meerson put a comforting hand on his back. Pastor Beezle withdrew from a shirt pocket under the bib of his waders a silver derringer pistol, which he showed in his palm to the others. Mr. Meerson bade him put it away.

I smelled the odor of her cigar just before I heard the snap of a rock as it shifted under her foot. "Hi, Ash."

"Hi, Aunt Krede."

She smiled as she eased onto her haunches beside me. "I'm worried about the company you're keeping nowadays."

"It's actually sort of an impromptu summit."

"Fascinating, don't you think?"

"Well, Beezle fishes here a couple times a year, but I've never seen either one of them out here before."

"Rumor has it Authore's about to be indicted."

"For what?"

She picked up a twig from the shoreline and idly peeled the bark away from its moist green cambium. "Something to do with public money," she said. "Seems he had trouble keeping track of some of it. Anyway, come up for supper tonight and maybe we'll find out more about it. Bobby and Lucky are coming. It's sort of a farewell for them. And Janie's coming out too."

Mr. Meerson walked over and joined us.

"Beautiful day," he said.

"That it is," Aunt Krede agreed.

"Why does Pastor Beezle have a gun?" I asked.

"Oh, it's just a misunderstanding," Mr. Meerson said.

I wondered if Mr. Meerson had often found himself surrounded by people as inept as Mr. Authore and Pastor Beezle, and I decided he was probably used to it.

"Oh," Aunt Krede said, standing up and taking an ant collection vial from her pocket, "look what Bridey and Annette found."

In it were two large ants with long pincer mandibles and big eyes and somewhat muted but distinctly blue rear ends.

"So?"

She grinned. "They're up there."

"You think this project is going away because you found an ant?"

"I think these critters are all over the place up there, and I think the project should and will be re-evaluated, yes, I do."

He snorted derisively. "You realize that would unravel the life of this whole community."

"Oh, I don't think so. Look, I'm not some defeated Indian. I'm not going to roll down to Oklahoma and turn the whole thing over to the white guys. I live here, I have as much right to be here as anyone else, and I have as much right to control events here as anyone else, within the law."

"Don't you think we have enough trouble around here?"

She chuckled. "You know, when you first came here a lot of people thought it would be the end of life as they knew it, and in a way it was. But life went on. And this is no different."

"People wanted it. And people want this project. This is a democracy, where the people rule."

"You're wrong, though. This is a monarchy, where the law is king. If the

people seize power outside the law, that's mob rule. That's chaos. The only way the people can rule is when the law is king. That's the fundamental deal, the *sine qua non*."

"I think you're a bit misguided."

"Well, I think the Amarainy project is misguided and I hope it gets guided aright, and I'm tickled to say that seems to be in the cards. And I do believe it's not the first misguided thing that's happened hereabouts. But that's water over the dam, so to speak."

"You can't turn back the clock, Ms. Krede," he said, as if mocking her with this formality.

"My name is Mary Ann, Mr. Meerson, and you may call me that. I can't turn back the clock, that's true, and neither can you. Neither of us need ask for whom the bell tolls. Neither of us will drop to our knees, as so many of our acquaintances seem wont to do. The only question is, will we attend vertically or horizontally, on our feet or on our backs, proud or prostrate?"

"But these folks are woods workers, and backhoe operators, and truck drivers. Simple people. Not stupid, for the most part, but, well, in a word, unworldly. And they like that. And they should. It's mostly a happy life."

"Yes," Aunt Krede said, "happy's a relative thing. But what's your point?"

"My point is, if we can't harvest our crops we have no means of livelihood. We're not going to start up a steel mill or a university here."

"Well, the people who lived under the reservoir above Thrall Dam had no means of livelihood, either, did they? And the people in Artesia who live all over the flood plain would have no dwelling place if the Thrall Dam were suddenly gone. My point is, these things happen and people adjust. They do. It's a historical fact. And often they find themselves better off, and that's also a fact. Besides, nobody's talking about returning it to wilderness. Well, actually, I don't

know that. You should ask Bridget; she's sort of become the Amarainy's *de facto* spokesperson; she's been keeping in touch with people."

Mr. Meerson seemed a little angry at this point. "You're talking about the path of people's *lives*," he said, raising his voice a little, emphasizing this word as if its import might not've been clear, "including Bridget's father's, and maybe your own." He glanced at me. "And Priscilla's."

"Yes, and even yours." She smiled at him. "I'm sure you're more familiar with matters of such gravity than I, Mr. Meerson," she said, "but I assure you I understand the importance of proceeding wisely and carefully, considering the interests of all the participants. I'm not talking about tearing down the dam or turning all the roads into goat trails, although I'm rather fond of goat trails myself and was mightily pleased that you included them in your benediction at the picnic last spring. All I'm talking about is preserving a rare species, what I think is a rare species of little ant that Mose McMorey tried to get you to save thirty years ago when you guys drenched the valley with DDT."

"That was an accident."

Aunt Krede and I both laughed.

"For all I know you grew those things in your anthouse."

"I don't have an anthouse, remember? One of your goons burned it down."

"That was an accident, too," he said.

"Yes, I know," she responded, "even Bridey's satisfied of that."

"You know, Elmore wants her back home."

"She's welcome under my roof for as long as she likes. You tell Elmore to carry his own water."

"She's underage."

"He can sue me."

"He might do worse than that."

She looked away, down the river. Then she looked down, her eyes averted, and lightly, absently, scratched her cheek with her fingertips and laughed softly. "Times have changed, Mr. Meerson," she said. "And we'll change, too, or we'll die. Nature doesn't care."

She took her leave then, reminding me again about dinner, and shortly thereafter Mr. Meerson and Mr. Authore, Mr. Meerson choosing his steps carefully while Mr. Authore waved his hands in animated conversation, left too.

"She's daft, if you ask me," Pastor Beezle said as he wafted the fly again across the smooth surface of the pool offshore from Keystone beach. It seemed to me a singularly odd judgment, coming from him.

"It's bizarre," he said as the fly settled onto the black surface. "The works of man don't hang on the convenience of bugs. It'll never happen."

"I wouldn't bet the ant farm on that," I replied.

"They're going to get in trouble for keeping that girl there. Elmore doesn't like it."

"Bridget? I don't think she's concerned about what he likes."

He ruminated. "Thou shalt honor thy father and mother. Thou shalt not lie down with thy own kind. Thou shalt believe on the Lord Jesus. Why do you think God gave us these rules?"

"I thought a bunch of old fuddy-duddies gave us these rules."

He smiled his sour little smile. "Whatever you think, Ashmead, these rules are all that keeps these crazed animals we call humans from each other's throats, and that's a fact."

"You and I are crazed animals?"

"It's a lot closer than you think," he said.

With little more than a slurp on the surface, Pastor Beezle's floating fly disappeared into the belly of a steelhead at least big enough to have swallowed

Jonah's dog. I wasn't even sure it'd happened until he pulled back on the line and his rod arced over almost double. "He's running!" he cried, and I'd've sworn there were tears in his rheumy eyes.

Pastor Beezle fought the monster for fifteen minutes, muttering to himself the whole time, giving himself instructions, encouragement, cautionary warnings, congratulations, a running account of every nuance of the battle until at last, having forgot both his stringer and his net, he slid the fish onto the rocky shore and firmly placed his boot upon it.

The heaving, huge, exhausted steelhead, dark with age, had swallowed the fly, which Pastor Beezle was unable to dislodge. He knelt down and picked up a softball-sized rock, and holding the slippery fish with his other hand, he attempted to smash its skull. The fish flipped mightily just as the blow was coming, and Pastor Beezle missed, smashing his finger instead, and a great spurt of blood shot out from under his fingernail. He uttered a curse that was entirely outside the rules. I thought his eyes would pop out of their sockets. Then he stood up and secured the fish again under his green rubber boot, his foot pressing hard against the shrieking pink gills, and drew from his bosom the little silver pistol. I took a step back. He took aim at the terrified and defiant yellow-rimmed eye and squeezed the trigger.

The fish flinched once and fell still. The bullet, no bigger than a pencil eraser, had done its job. But not before it had passed through Pastor Beezle's foot. Pastor Beezle didn't move. He stared at the little hole in the top of his boot.

"I just shot myself," he said.

"I can see that," I replied.

I helped him sit down and walked back to the house to call 911.

Bobby and Lucky came to dinner, as did Janie, who'd combed out her hair and wore a flowery cotton print dress that enhanced her looks considerably more

than thirty pounds of dirty yellow firefighting gear. She didn't remember having met Aunt Krede that summer, but Aunt Krede remembered her and they talked for a long time about her mother, Willa Mae, and about Mose.

Lucky didn't know much more than I'd already heard about Mr. Authore's situation, but she said that Billy had agreed to give some testimony in return for not having to reveal the worst of it or anything for which he might himself be culpable. Annette, it appeared, was getting a divorce and now spent considerable time at Bennie's house. They all liked her.

Bobby and Lucky were heading east just after Labor Day. Bennie had paid an immodest sum for Bobby's pickup so they could trade the cash and Lucky's convertible for an almost-new minivan. Marie was consumed with constructing a monumental life-sized sculpture, using new techniques with fiberglass, of two men misery whipping a trophy-sized Douglas fir. She already had cash in hand from a generous contract Billy had wangled from the young president of a California foundation.

Aunt Krede treated us to two hours of Wagner's breathtaking *Götterdämmerung* and said she was going to the Amarainy over the weekend on a solitary expedition to look for the ants. She didn't want company. The younger generation of Hills and Bubbys and Marie and I were going on one last campout together by the lake where we'd gone the previous year and we talked about joining up with her there on Monday evening.

Bridget and I glanced through some of the old paintings which had been restacked at the far end of the bedroom where Bridget now slept. Lem Roy drubbed Bobby in chess, but Bobby recovered at the end and salvaged a draw.

Bridget at one point exclaimed of the opera, "Good God! How long does this thing go on?"

Aunt Krede smiled at her, that gold tooth reflecting a flicker of light. "As

long as it takes to recreate the world," she said.

Once when we found ourselves alone on the back porch Lucky asked me whether I missed Marie. I said I did.

"Well, but you have Hanna," she said mischievously.

Janie was loquacious, vivacious and even for an older woman seemed to exude a fragrant, evocative aroma of temptation. I strongly suspected Lem Roy felt this too, but as the evening wore on it seemed to be Bridget who'd captured her interest.

39

Last Words

She walked for several hours Friday into the highlands of the southern Amarainy. Annette and Bridget had told her they'd spotted the latest ants, two workers, crossing the huge exposed root of an old oak tree. So the ants had been twice associated with oaks. She knew where to look. She crossed the low slopes where firs and pines and oaks and alders all grew in some sort of symbiosis, in patches where one or another was dominant, or in a potpourri. She looked at numerous oaks, but after two hours she still hadn't found anything. Where would they be? In the limbs? In a hole in the trunk? Under the roots? In the rain shadow? Annette had drawn them in July at 3400 feet. Bridget and Annette had found them a week ago at 2600 feet. She decided to stay below 3000 feet. It was September, after all. Ants were not fond of cold weather. But fortunately, it was a warm, sunny day.

She paused about four o'clock in a meadow near a small stream and sat on an inviting rock with a flattened top almost as broad, she thought, as her butt. Her foot was killing her. It was swollen and occasionally emitted a yelp of pain. This would be a good place to stop. There was water and firewood. She rested

awhile, reading her maps, drinking in the flavor of the place, its view of the south Amarainy, the land rolling away for miles, the bittersweet fragrance of the oaks, the faint odor of tarweed from the valley. Somewhere above her, a red-tailed hawk's cry was answered by another.

She walked down to the stream and knelt beside it and immersed her face in its icy clarity. She cupped her hands and drank from it. It was exquisite. Then she gathered firewood and set up her little tent, not much more than a cocoon for her sleeping bag, and of course, herself inside.

After supper, in the dark shadows, she sat crosslegged by the fire, rubbing her foot. As the fire subsided, she lay a few more sticks on it and briefly, after a few minutes, the flames leapt higher and the light became brighter. Perhaps coincidentally, she saw a flash, as if from a firefly, on the trunk of the great oak which presided over the meadow. She watched carefully, but it didn't happen again.

She trained her flashlight on the deeply fissured gray trunk of the tree. The pattern of the bark was a mosaic of vertically elongated rectangles, like gray bricks, smaller than dominoes, separated by dark, deep rifts that formed long vertical seams. The whole effect reminded her of the strange deformations of the ocean floor, with parallel ridges running in one direction intersected by parallel troughs running in an almost orthogonal direction.

She raised the flashlight's beam into the branches. As it crossed some of the tree's upper foliage, a handful of blue lights flashed like sequins.

"Got your ass!" she said aloud.

She stood up and walked closer to the tree. In some of the vertical fissures of the trunk strange blue-gastered ants, iridescent in the bright light, scurried about their business. The ants going down carried pale green pearls in their long jaws.

This old oak was host to dozens of clumps of saprophytic mistletoe hanging like antlers of coral on the tips of its high branches. When an oak was no longer vigorous enough to nourish and defend these far places, mistletoe could make a profit there, and this tree, she estimated, was close to five hundred years old.

She returned to her pack for her one-handed mattock and her collection tools and in a few minutes she'd found a nest in the crotch between two roots, about a foot down, and from it she took two queens. Then she carefully refilled the hole she'd dug.

She thought about Mose McMorey, the summer she'd stayed with them when she was fifteen. She'd arrived as a bored, bratty little girl in a big girl's body. Mose and Bess had just smiled and gone on about their business. They'd get up at four in the morning. He'd milk the cows and she'd collect the eggs and make breakfast. After breakfast he'd go out to the barn to harness up the horses for the day's work skidding logs or plowing or hauling or mowing or something. It was always something. Except on Sundays. And, in her honor, they'd said, for the time she was there they both took Saturday afternoons off to do something with her, which often meant a ride to Artesia and maybe a movie. Of course, milking the cows took no holidays, nor half-holidays either. Unmilked cows get very moody. And, naturally, they soon stop giving milk. It was always something, and after a while she'd discovered there was always something fun for her to do too, and after that she'd never been bored.

She'd brought twenty new collection tubes. She'd felt a little silly taking so many, but now she knew she'd need them all. She looked at the queens in the firelight. They did look a bit like wasps. They were very unusual creatures indeed, nocturnal ants. "They're nocturnal!" she wrote in her notebook. "And they harvest mistletoe berries. They look like Myrmicines. They have a sting; I don't yet know whether they can use it."

“They’re much bluer when they’re active, I think. At least these are bluer in the beam of the flashlight. The sedentary queens, like the workers Bridey found, were a more subdued shade. A skittish person could easily mistake the winged queen (and perhaps her consort) for a wasp.”

She remembered a hot muggy morning when she’d dislodged a mud dauber nest from under the corn crib roof. She’d run screaming toward the house, a cloud of angry wasps on her heels, and Bess had come out and swatted at them with her broom and afterward the two of them had sat in the icy cooler, among the milk cans and the rounds of butter, drinking lemonade from tall glasses adorned with wedges of lemon and sprigs of mint while Mose sallied forth on his tractor pulling a gigantic poison-smoke machine and proceeded to lay across most of the hillside a lethal blue fog whose oily odor lingered for days.

She smiled to herself as she fell asleep.

She was still smiling when the first pink-tinged gray light welled up from the east. She lay still for many minutes, listening to the birds, the jays, the blackbirds, the little finches in the brush. It was late by their standards; they were eager to have their fill of breakfast, or if they’d finished eating they sat around in treetop galleries trading the gossip of the day.

Then she remembered the ants. She clambered out of the bag, which it’d been too warm to zip up, and opened her jacket. There they were. Two queens. Still alive. Big. Blue. Bad.

She walked over to the tree. The traffic was much diminished, but some workers still plied the trails. In strong oblique light they glittered like neon tetras. She took three of them and put them in another tube, which, as before, she meticulously labeled. After breakfast she studied her map. Her foot seemed better. She broke camp. The chase was on.

Now she knew it was only old trees, big trees she need look for. And before

an hour had passed she'd found another nest and taken another pair of queens.

By lunchtime she'd found three nests. She had to plan carefully, or she could fill all the tubes in one region of the watershed. She hoped for a distribution of the ants that spanned both of the major valleys of the Amaraingy watershed, the broad southern valley of the Perpend and the narrower, slightly higher northern valley of the Dingle. She would cross the Perpend, which slowly gathered itself and flowed westward out of the southern valley, then work her way northeast to cross the saddle that would take her into the valley of the Dingle, where both the previous specimens had been found.

She realized, she wrote, that she was quite lucky to have found the blue ants already in the upper reaches of the Perpend, because she *knew*, by the evidence of Uncle Mose and her younger friends, that their range extended to the other side. She hoped now to find them in every quarter of the watershed.

She camped that night by a small lake that, gathering several tributaries from the wrinkled slopes rising toward the east, formed the headwaters of the Perpend. She'd found six nests.

The next day she moved west again, high above the river and now north of it; then she turned back on her trail, dropped down to lower terrain, and began the trek to the saddle. She found three more nests before the inevitable elevation gain took her above most of the groves of oaks, where the biggest trees usually were. She stopped early in the evening and made camp in the open, on the gentle crest of the saddle, where she wrote, "I dare to camp here so exposed on this grassy hill only because it's unseasonably warm tonight and the sky to the west is devoid of haze. In fact, the whole dome of the night is utterly clear and black as ink. It's alive with stars. It really does seem you can hear a faint murmur of their far-off thunder, as if there were a pulsing in the night vaster than the whispering of your own blood, and they're so close you think that, if you were

but much smaller, maybe you could touch them.”

There was a ragged smattering of oaks along the north edge of the saddle and in those the following morning Aunt Krede found two more nests, one of which she raided for queens. She found out, too, that the ants arrayed some substance, “not unlike birdlime,” in weblike patterns around their nests, and that various insects, a certain species of beetle in particular, would get trapped in these sticky hedgerows, whereupon the ants would attack and devour them or carry them off.

She was ecstatic. She moved northwestward from here and explored the far northern slope of the Amarainy, finding two more nests and taking prisoners. Finally, it was time to turn to the southern slope of the Dingle, from which she could walk down and into the campground to meet us.

Along the way she found three more nests. “I’m not even looking hard,” she wrote. “I’m finding them on or around one out of every ten or twelve big oaks. If you’re not too high, or too low, they’re everywhere!”

Her vials were finally full, and so was she. Her campaign had been a fine success. But her foot was a disaster. It was badly swollen. She’d skipped a few grommets to get her boot tied. A twisting, pinching pain shot through her calf every time she put weight on the leg.

In the end she’d gone so slowly, and rested so often, that she’d apparently missed a turnoff in the late afternoon shadows and found herself on a course far west of where the lake and our campground were, a course that would take her to the Amarainy Falls, where the Dingle sluiced down a slim, misty spire of moss-covered black rock a hundred feet into the genteel Upper Dingle Valley. Retracing her steps would add easily five or six miles, maybe two or three hours, to her journey, and would take her into the lake camp hours after nightfall. Traveling would be dangerous and slow. If nobody had waited for her, she’d be

far out of her way.

But now, thanks to this miscalculation, she might gain Amarainy Falls before dark, and she could either stay there, and descend in the morning or, if it was light enough, get down tonight. She was eager to get home, to show Lem Roy and Bridey the good news, to take a shower, have a meal in her kitchen, sleep in a bed. Most of all, she wanted to get off that swollen foot.

The path from the rim of Amarainy Falls to the pool below is steep and narrow, in some places only a foot wide, and subject to sloughing. It's hardly a path at all, except maybe for goats, and you spend a lot of time inching sideways with your cheek pressed against the damp rock and your fingers gripping whatever anomalies they find. Bobby and I had watched Billy climb it one afternoon and two or three times he'd had to back down a step or two to position himself differently for a particular traverse across the cliffside, but he was up in twenty minutes. He'd whooped at us from the top and dared us to follow him. His laughter echoed through the little glen at the base of the falls. I dared him to come back down. He said no way in hell would he go down it, that'd be too crazy even for him. We hiked up the regular trail to meet him. It surmounted the plateau several miles upstream from the falls and the climb took the better part of two hours.

The three of us had continued on that day up to the campsite by the lake and splashed around in the cold water by the beach for half an hour before we'd returned, coming down the regular path. For some reason this adventure had emerged from the silt of our memories on Labor Day Monday morning as the three of us intrepid explorers sat on the sand, bright in the glare of a hot autumn sun, with Lucky, Marie and Bridget, eating the sandwiches they'd made, our last little meal together before life would intrude to send us on our various ways.

Janie had joined us Friday and Saturday. She and Bridget had spent a lot of

time together, hiking mostly, but apparently I'd misjudged their relationship because they'd slept each in her own tent, and Janie had departed on Sunday afternoon to spend, as Bridget confided to me, a hootchy-smoochy evening with Lem Roy. Somehow I couldn't picture Lem Roy having a hootchy-smoochy evening with anyone.

"She plays chess," Bridget said with a grin. "And she works as an archaeologist for the Forest Service."

"Aha," I said.

"You don't have sex with every girl you know, do you?"

I smiled. "I wish," I said.

"You're an understanding man, Ashcan."

"I wish," I said.

As the afternoon wore on we all became a little apprehensive about Aunt Krede's absence. Nobody but me thought she'd said for sure she'd meet us. "She said, 'maybe,'" Bridget insisted. She'd known, we thought, that we'd planned to leave early enough so we'd get home before dark or not too soon afterward. Bobby and Lucky wanted to go earlier, because they still had packing to do and loose ends to tie up, and the four of us with some sadness watched them drive out of the campground in their new used minivan, headed as it seemed for another world, and waved goodbye.

As we turned to walk back to the beach, Bridget burst out crying. We gathered round to console her as tears streaked her fair and fulsome face. "He's such an innocent *boy*," she blubbered suddenly. And then she laughed and we all laughed.

"Lucky's not named Lucretia for nothing," Billy said, putting his arm around her as if to reassure her.

Bridget pondered this. "Uh-huh. And what does that mean?" she asked.

"I don't know," he said, shrugging his shoulders. "It means she'll take care of him. Just like she always took care of me. And my dad."

He cast a glance at Marie. "Don't look at *me*," she said. "I have a profession, and that's not it."

The sun had slipped behind the Amaraing crest to the southwest and we'd gathered wood for a fire when Marie decided she wanted to go. Billy wasn't so sure. There was an hour or so of daylight left.

"It won't be dark for a couple of hours," I said.

"Look, she's not going to travel after dark," Marie argued. "It's impossible. There's no moon. She'll camp out and come in tomorrow."

"What if something went wrong?" Bridget asked.

"Well, like yourself," Billy said, "she's no ordinary woman."

"I take umbrage," Bridget said.

"She knows the woods," Marie said. "If something went wrong she'll deal with it. One thing's for sure; you can't look for her in the dark. And if we *were* going to look for her we'd need a lot more than the four of us. Tonight maybe she's late. Tomorrow, if she still isn't back, she's missing."

"Well I think she's okay," Billy said. "I've learned to respect her."

"That's because you couldn't hustle her," Marie said.

"You didn't respect her much when you thought they were, uh, perverts," Bridget reminded him.

"Well," Billy said, "I have a different perspective on perverts than I used to."

"Yes," Marie agreed. "Probably because you've known so many."

"And so many of them are you," Bridget added.

"Yeah," he said, smiling.

"Well, I hate to leave just when the conversation's getting interesting,"

Marie said, "but I think we should go do whatever we need to do tonight and come back, or somebody come back, in the morning sometime."

"She could be home for all we know," I said.

Bridget and I had already agreed to spend the night. I looked forward to it. Billy dallied; I think he half-wanted to stay too.

"I have a tree to grow," Marie said finally. "I don't know how God does it." She hugged me goodbye then she kissed Bridget and then she kissed Billy and took his arm and said, "Come along, Svengali." As they walked toward Mr. Kuntzler's pickup she opened her arms toward the forest around us and skipped along in slow spiraling circles. She had a big smile on her face. "It's amazing," she marvelled. "Really. When you think about it."

"See you tomorrow," Billy called back pointedly.

"We'll be down in the morning," I replied.

She hadn't showed up that night and when we returned in the morning she still hadn't appeared. Lem Roy insisted on going alone to look for her.

By early afternoon he'd found her body at the base of the falls, by the pool, where she'd fallen. Bennie came to the house, where I was with Bridget, and told us and she and I went with him. We went by the school where my mom was getting another year under way and picked her up.

We drove up the Dingle Creek road, past Beezle's house, past the Hills', past the Lower Falls, and slowed to a stop in the trailhead parking lot. The Peugeot was there. Nobody said a word. We walked the mile or so up the trail to the little glen at the base of the falls. Lem Roy was sitting beside her, reading her notebook. Bennie let Bridget and me look at her body and then he asked us to take the Peugeot back to the Kredes' and wait for them. He and Lem Roy carried her to his cruiser and took her to Artesia. Her body, I should say. I can't make myself call it her corpse.

Bridget and I talked to the cows, consoling them, and then took Wagger with us for a walk along the ridge, consoling her too, but we found she was better at it than we were. After awhile we returned to the house. Bridget made cocoa and Lem Roy shared a cup with us when he returned. He helped us install the ants in the little portable ant farms Aunt Krede had used before they'd built the elaborate facilities we'd called the myrmecorium. He showed us the notes she'd made describing her journey. While we sat at the kitchen table reading through her last words he took his ebony flute and he and Wagger climbed up to the ridge, where they spent the rest of the evening.

After we finished reading her account Bridget and I sat for a moment in disbelieving silence.

"Now what?" I asked.

"I don't know," she replied. "What're you going to do?"

"I notified the university I'd be up there at the end of the month," I said.

"But before that I'm going to go walk the Appalachian Trail."

"The whole thing?"

"No, just the piece of it she missed. And I'm going to kick around here and there."

"That's sweet of you, Ashcan."

I shrugged. "I need to get out of here," I said.

I remembered her sitting there at the round table, in the chair where Bridget was, guffawing as she often did, her laugh as big and rough as she was, and that gold tooth always glimmering in the middle of it.

We carried the ant farm containers up to her room.

"What'll they eat?" I wondered.

"Janie's bringing out an entomologist tomorrow," she said. "An 'ant man,' as she says he calls himself."

“Good; he can talk to them.”

I recalled her fascination with the ants, such instinctive and mindless creatures from whose simple lives she’d derived such bewildering insights.

We spent some time upstairs looking again through her paintings, which seemed somehow infinitely more significant than they had just a few days before.

“Do you think they’re good?” she asked.

“They’re very exquisitely made,” I said. “She had a fine eye for color and composition. The detail in the deep shadows is great. On the other hand, they’re almost all landscapes. I don’t think she was interested in being part of the *avant garde* or in making that kind of art. I think she did it just because she enjoyed it.”

“Dali’s landscapes were *avant garde*.”

“Yeah, and she was definitely interested in the mystery of the visual representation, so maybe there’s more there than I see.”

“There’s more to everything than you see, Ashcan.”

“You sound just like her.”

I thought of the day I’d said I couldn’t pass judgment on Pastor Beezle and she’d scolded me that of course I could, that in fact I had to, and did, whether I acknowledged it or not, because making judgments was the key responsibility of being alive. “To pass no judgment,” she said, “is to do a favor for evil, whether it’s in art or human affairs.”

“Have you talked with Bobby?”

“Yeah, they’re coming to the open house Friday and then they’re leaving Saturday morning.”

I relived the comic image I had of her riding Timmy Kuntzler’s bicycle down the Dingle Creek road, knees splayed out, rings and bracelets flashing in the sun, a big grin on her face, jingling that little bell.

"You going to stay here when school starts?"

"My dad's going back to Alaska, where I guess he belongs. My mom wants me to live at home with her."

"She can make you do it, I guess."

"I don't want the combat. Mary Ann had her over for lunch a couple times. We agreed that once my dad left I'd move back over there. But I'll keep my room here and spend time here when I want to. So I sort of awarded myself joint custody."

"And I hear there's already a new superintendent at Thrall. My mom likes her."

I saw her sitting before the easel in the living room, her fingers gripping the brush near its tapered end, as if to magnify her delicate motions, while some opera soared and thundered in the background.

"I loved the operas," I said. "I'll miss them."

"Opera's too deep for me. Everybody's always stressed out and murdering somebody. I like to listen to music I can relate to."

"Chess is sort of the same way."

"Bobby tried to teach me chess. He said it's a matter of being in a zone, melding your mind with the game. Lem Roy says the same kinds of things. A mystical union, he said. Like Michael Jordan shooting baskets."

"Like the zen archer."

She laughed. "I'm more into checkers and pop," she said.

I remembered her bringing the picnic lunch out to the hillside where Lem Roy and I were building the fence, and my noticing her wig and surmising the emerald green color of her eyes was due to contact lenses, but Lem Roy'd told me later it was real.

We turned off the kitchen light, so the room was illumined only by the

hooded bulb over the stove. Carefully, quietly, we opened the back door and stepped out onto the porch. We could hear the soft, clear, hollow sound of Lem Roy's flute from far-off in the darkness. It was a slow, sad, haunting melody, a plaintive cry of anguish.

"I guess you understand that," I said.

"I guess," she concurred.

We sat on the old couch and listened. I thought about the evening I'd spent out there with Marie. How long ago it seemed. Like yesterday.

"Do you like Janie?" I asked.

Her voice got an edge. "What do you mean?"

"I mean do you like her? Do you like to see her at the door? What do you mean, what do I mean?"

"Yeah, I like her. I like her a lot. Don't you?"

"Sure," I said. "I do. I kind of thought maybe you really, really liked her too. You know. What you thought I meant. But of course that's none of my business. And then I heard she was friendly toward Lem Roy, from you I think it was..."

"It was yesterday, you moron."

Like yesterday, the first day I'd met them, at the Crondoc store, and the warm, firm grip of her big hand, and Lem Roy's shyness.

As I walked down the steps from the porch, having said goodbye to Bridget and Wagger, and Aunt Krede and Lem Roy too, as I could, Lem Roy began to play the poignant Irish lament, "Danny Boy," the sad tale of a young lad seduced by war, as we are all seduced by war, returning home on a bier.

I made my way down the hardly visible gravel driveway under a black but starry sky. I imagined her in that instant when she realized she'd done a Chouinard. It made me wince. Probably tired, perhaps carelessly, she'd shifted her weight onto a section of weakened rock that held for a moment then

suddenly spalled away into nothingness, pitching her off the face.

That's what we all thought then, but the next day Lem Roy got a call from Bennie saying the autopsy showed her Achilles tendon had snapped and the doctor believed it had caused her fall. I thought of Stirling Moss at Goodwood, taking comfort at the moment of truth in the realization that the imminent high-speed crash, and the life-threatening, career-ending impact he was about to undergo, were not his fault.

I thought of Fermi at Sandia, Earhart at Howland, Casey Jones at the throttle of the Cannonball. There you are, bopping along, doing your thing, and all of a sudden—oops, the end. It's spectacular, but there's no glory in it. I thought of the little replete storage ant, bulging and heavy with nectar, falling from the ceiling, bursting apart, spilling her honey onto the cavern floor. The indignity seemed almost Promethean. She'd've been amused.

40

Electric Kiss

Fresh breezes, eddying upstream, urged their whisperings on the alders, whose shy silver fans fluttered in reply. A heron waited in the shallows, poised, intent, oblivious to time. Flashing glimpses of the sun played over the rippled surface of the water like dancing butterflies. Along the shore, where my mom and I stood, sipping our coffee in the mid-morning autumn light, the clear water flowed gently over its shallow bed of rounded rocks and pebbles and sand, interspersed with occasional chunks of jasper the colors of brick and butterscotch and spinach.

Heraclitus, I thought, may've been right about time, but he was wrong about rivers. The Perpend, however subtly changed, was in a deeper sense the same river it'd been when we'd arrived. When Mose McMorey arrived. When

the first white man arrived. The first Indian. The first man. It looked the same, smelled the same, sounded the same, behaved the same—just as we were the same, however transformed. Man's mark is borne on the Edenic earth. Our mark. Mine. Hers. But this remains the earth it has always been, and the Perpend likewise retained its character. It had a subtle, primal, vital energy that flowed through me, an energy I knew and understood a little. It longed to be free. It struggled to be free. It asserted its freedom at every turn. At time's long end, perhaps it would prevail. But in the meantime, lustily, sweetly, and always, it sang in its chains, for that is really the only liberation there is.

I told my mom about my plans and she seemed happy with that. I realized she seemed happier now with everything, with life in general, than I'd seen her in a long time, maybe ever. Aunt Krede's death saddened her but she bore her loss philosophically. "I lost a friend," she said. "Lem Roy lost his sister. Her kids lost their mother. I feel sad for them. I feel sad for all you kids who were fond of her, and for some of the other women who took a liking to her. But I feel pretty sure she inspired all of us in one way or another to reconsider the course we were on, and I think we'll all find pretty soon that the way for us to honor her life is to keep on keeping on with it, as they used to say in my day."

"And she changed the world," I said.

"She discovered an ant."

"Yep. And how many people do you know who've done that?"

"Bennie said Mr. Meerson's worried they might put the Amarainy project on ice while they renegotiate it."

"Bridget says they will for sure if the ant's declared unique to the Amarainy. They'll have to conserve its habitat, and that means a much slower process than what they have in mind."

"Won't that be hard for people here?"

"Heartily know," I quoted Emerson a bit flippantly, "when half-gods go..."

"The gods arrive," she said, which startled me. "And what does that mean?"

"Things will be better."

"Yes," she said, smiling, "that's what all the politicians say. It's the great human faith. But what nobody says, and everybody knows, is that first, before things get better, things may get worse. Besides, what if it's my half-gods that are going and your gods who are arriving?"

"It happened to the Greeks, and the Incas."

"It happens every day."

"In my view it's a passage from ignorance to enlightenment."

"And history will say so; that's part of the great idea. The people who pay the price don't write history. Maybe that *is* the price. But you may be sure today's enlightenment will soon be tomorrow's poppycock."

"The gods wear out," I supposed.

"Yes," she said, "I think they do."

A little later we walked across the road and up the Kredes' driveway. I wondered if I'd ever think of it just as Lem Roy's driveway. I didn't want to.

The open house was a sinuous buzz of fragmented conversations, introductions, hors d'oeuvres, walks long and short, odd and awkward moments. I can't recall the precise order in which all of these things occurred. My mom and I were there from late morning until a little after dark. Marcel catered a daylong buffet that featured prizewinning Angus rib roast. I wandered around. I wanted to talk with everybody. Most of all, I wanted to talk with Aunt Krede. I went outside a few times to walk around the barn, just so I could stop somewhere and let the tears flow, and once after dark I walked halfway down the driveway with Wagger and then we turned around and looked at the house

and I tried to make myself realize she was no longer there.

When we first arrived, Mrs. Hudson was sitting at the kitchen table with Annette and Janie, organizing a painting trip to the Amaraingy.

"We're calling ourselves the Fresh Air School," she said. "We're artists of liberation. We're exploring the effects of liberation in our art – which is whatever we say it is. We go to the woods for the afternoon to make art, we have a picnic, we just generally relax and enjoy ourselves."

"How can you resist that?" Janie shrugged, smiling at me.

"You can't," Mrs. Hudson replied.

Bridget had come into the room just then through the hallway from the living room, where she'd put on *Madama Butterfly*, the opening strains of which followed her like the sound of buzzing bees and tiny footsteps. "I'm going, too," she said. "I have to liberate my masculine side."

Marie and Mr. Kuntzler arrived soon after we did. Mr. Kuntzler had brought the tufted crane which he carried under his arm as though it were a goose.

"Ms. Krede very much admired my friend here," he said. "I'd like for you to have it. I'm sorry I didn't give it to her when she was still alive."

Lem Roy looked at it appreciatively.

"That's very kind of you," he said. "I guess it's a heron."

"Well," said Mr. Kuntzler, "it's yours now and it can be whatever you please, but I always thought of it as a tufted crane. I added the tufts myself."

Lem Roy smiled and shook Mr. Kuntzler's hand affectionately, clasping it between both of his own. "A tufted crane it is, Mr. Kuntzler, no question," he said. "One thing I learned from living with Mary Ann: don't argue with the artist about what the thing is."

I encountered Aunt Krede's son Ian on the back porch. He was alone,

dressed in a simple brown monk's robe and cowl. He had a saucer in one hand and a cup of tea in the other.

"How are you, brother Ashmead?"

"Fine, thanks," I said. "And you?"

"I don't think I'll ever attain enlightenment," he said. "I enjoy being high on a mountain, draped over a thousand feet of icy empty space, gasping for air. But I'm attached to the fabric of reality. And no matter where you go, enlightenment always seems to be across the next ridge. Still, it's exhilarating to peel another layer of the onion, to plumb a little deeper into the mystery of the one perfect idea."

"Sounds like God to me," I said.

"Well, is there a difference between worship and seeking?"

I thought for a moment. "Seekers think they can attain awakening, they can become resonant with the universe, and worshippers think God is on the other side of a transcendental curtain, like the puppetmaster."

He smiled at this allusion.

"So I guess," I went on, "that worship looks outwardly for God whereas seeking looks inside the self. Of course, Pastor Beezle thinks God gets into people and makes them rant drivel which he, divining the symbolism of this divine language, can interpret into English. Well, maybe he doesn't think that, but he pretends he does and some of his parishioners believe it."

"And why not?"

"Well, it's Pastor Beezle reading their entrails, so to speak."

He laughed. "Yes, but why not? The church seems prosperous and the congregation must find Pastor Beezle's judgments appropriate to their needs."

"As far as we know," I agreed.

"The awakening that seekers seek is also transcendental; they seek to

transcend the world. This has always been the aim of mystics.”

“And everyone else from time to time.”

“Yes. The journey’s the same for worshipers and seekers: to reach the edge of the transcendental abyss. The question is, when you get there, what do you do? Worship is aimed at transforming the world around you. After worship, you go home and turn on the TV; you go back to mundane life. You remain as fully human as you were beforehand. Seeking is aimed at transforming your self. Rather than sending a message across the abyss, you throw yourself in, and whether you survive it or not, you’re not coming back.

“Still,” he went on, “seeking is itself a form of worship, just as worship is a form of seeking. Maybe God really does inspire these people to speak, and maybe Pastor Beezle does understand it. Is that impossible?”

“With God, all things are possible,” I said.

“You’re pulling my leg.”

“Well,” I grinned. “I just meant that once you suppose there’s a conscious entity pulling the strings of fate, or even that there’s one perfect idea in which all things must culminate, reason collapses. You’re in quicksand.”

He smiled. “Yes,” he said. “Exactly.”

Marie surreptitiously goosed me as she and Lem Roy walked by on their way out back and then she raised her hand to shoulder height, without turning around, and waggled her fingers as if to beckon me to follow them, so, after pausing for a snack, I did. I found them standing by Lem Roy’s sensory deprivation tank, leaning against it like a couple of old ranch hands.

“She’s gone on another journey, is the way I look at it,” Lem Roy said. “One she won’t come back from. Now I’ll have to nurture my own gall and gregariousness, which won’t be easy. I won’t have someone to live with who’s known me for fifty years and knows everything about me. Some part of me that

has had a companionable life, for the past four years especially, will have to return to its former solitude. Perhaps that's for the best.

"I'm going to persevere, and to whatever extent I can, I'm going to do it in style. Of course by that I mean my own low-key style and not necessarily the more flamboyant and sophisticated style of my betters."

"Is Bridget staying here?" Marie asked.

His cheeks crinkled a little. "Bridget has to live here. Who else is going to wear all that jewelry? But she's going back to castle Bubby for the school year. We'll see her on weekends sometimes. That's up to her and her mother. But she's part of the family, just as you are."

"I just want an occasional day in the tank."

"Anytime."

"Ashmead and I tried it once, you know," she confided, looking at me.

"I know," Lem Roy said. "I had to degauss it afterward."

She laughed. "Are you going to rebuild the shop?"

"In the spring, I think."

"Billy and I'd like to help you."

Lem Roy smiled his appreciation. "How's the tree coming?"

"Slowly. I'm redesigning it around a new type of fiberglass that seems to have better elastic properties."

"I'm still not sure it's art," he said, only half-kiddingly.

"It'll be awesome," she said. "Wait'll you see it. It'll be *awesome*." She told me afterward it's going to be two hundred and fifty feet high.

"What color will it be?"

"White," she said. "Almost white."

"I like black better. With a flashing red beacon on top to warn low-flying aircraft. The Darth Vader of trees."

"It'll be installed in a fog forest on the coast. I think of it more as the Flying Dutchman of timber sculpture. A moment of history frozen in time. It's a monument to the people who worked the woods with hand saws and axes. It's a monument to the trees. And in a thick fog it'll look like the ghost it is."

Sometime later I encountered Bobby and Lucky strolling from the barn to the house. We stopped at the ashen ruins of the shop.

"This was a shame," Bobby said.

"He's going to rebuild it," I said.

"The myrmecorium too?" Bobby asked.

I shrugged. "I don't know. I think he has his hands full with the cows."

"Well," Lucky countered, "ants don't take much care, do they?"

"More than you'd think," I said. "You have to feed them, and keep the solarium vegetation alive, which is a chore all by itself. And they get diseases sometimes, and I'm not sure how you deal with that."

"How long do they live?"

"A few years, I think, for most of them, but some of the queens can live ten years or more. And they're really not very exciting."

"Well, this is Crondoc," Bobby said. "Since Grandma died, there hasn't been much excitement around here."

"I thought it was pretty exciting when Authore was indicted," Lucky said. "I figured it was payback for his suspending you after you wrote that article about Guillemot, remember?"

Bobby smiled. "That was a blissful exile," he said. "I spent the whole week reading Richard Feynman. I never had so many ideas in one week in my life."

"And your Easter charade was pretty good," I added, "although Beezle claims he wasn't fooled by it."

We walked toward the house. "That was fun," Lucky laughed, thinking

about it.

“Fun for you, maybe,” Bobby replied. “I had a dream about it the night before where the congregation rose up and stoned me to death, and I have to say I half expected that to happen.”

“Everybody seemed totally stupefied,” I said.

“Beezle came up to us afterward and asked me if I understood what God had said to me there. I said no, I didn’t remember any of it. Lucky pretended she was just awestruck by the whole experience. Beezle said I was shedding God’s tears, that God was weeping because I’d abandoned Him, which was pretty much true at that point.”

“Yeah,” Lucky agreed, “and then later, when Bobby’d gone looking for you guys, Beezle suggested I should come in for counseling so this wouldn’t happen to me.”

“We’d walked up here,” I said. “We all thought it was a stellar performance except Aunt Krede thought you should’ve foamed at the mouth.”

Bobby smiled. “We tried that. With soap. But it made me puke.”

Not too long afterward I stepped out the front door for some air. Mr. Meerson was standing alone on the porch, seemingly lost in thought, his snakeskin boot resting on the low rail, his long leg crooked up in front of him, his forearms crossed over his knee. Despite the fact he dresses like a rancher, he’s always impeccably scrubbed and carefully coifed. His musty cologne reminded me of my father, although otherwise, apart from their both being tall and rangy, they couldn’t be more different.

A fitful breeze plucked a handful of leaves from the trees.

“East wind’s coming,” he said, glancing back at me and then gazing again beyond the myrmecorium pad, toward the little woods that extended over behind the church.

An east wind meant a change in the weather. The end of summer, I guessed.

"Sorry you lost a friend," he said.

"It's been a long year," I replied.

"Yep," he said. "But don't complain. After awhile they'll get way too short."

He stood up then, taking his foot down from the railing.

"A lot of water's gone over the old dam this year, Ashmead. I hope you won't hold it all to my account."

"I don't," I said.

"You kids probably think of me as a junkyard dog," he supposed.

I hadn't actually thought about it. "I think everybody thinks of you as the *patrón*," I said.

"Well," he chuckled, "I think if you think about it you'll find there are lots of *patrones* in the valley, people who organize things, people who help other people get on, people who take an interest of some sort in their neighbors and their community. Lots of them. Your Aunt Krede was one.

"It just happens that the business I've been involved with for the past, well, almost fifty years, is the engine of the local economy, the *sine qua non*, if you know that expression."

"Uh-huh," I said.

"It's kept us alive. It's kept the community alive. Without timbering, without roadbuilding, ninety percent of the people around here couldn't have made a living here. Maybe more than ninety percent."

"I keep thinking about West Virginia," I said, "when the coal ran out. The Mesabi when the iron ran out. Montana when the copper ran out. People survived, didn't they?"

"Some did; some moved on. Those things don't really run out any more than the trees have. But the scale of operations changes. Some people adapt and

some can't."

"The end of these cornucopias is more or less inevitable, though."

"Oh, sure," he said. "Death is inevitable. The only question is, if it doesn't come today, what's your plan?"

"And if the Amarainy project doesn't fly, do you have a plan?"

He laughed. "The Amarainy's a lot bigger than a few ants, Ashmead. There are all kinds of resources up there, and they can all be managed in concert with one another. I figure if the project can't fly it can run, and if it can't run it can walk. And if it can't walk, I'll carry it.

"The plan can include whatever resources anybody's concerned about. After all, this has been happening for a long time. When I first came here, we took single logs out of the woods, not too far from here, that were worth more than a new car. Well, those days are gone but we're still here. And when you're as old as I am, the Amarainy may be a park, but people will still be here, living and working and doing what people do. And if I had to guess, I'd guess life here will be pretty much like it is today – pretty much the same kinds of people with the same kinds of needs for employment and fulfillment."

"A lot fewer logs, though."

"Sure. But I don't figure it's up to me to mourn the passing of time. It's up to me to figure out how to proceed from here. That's what I do. My long-range interest is to see that people are working. If people are working, I'll make money. The economy's based on resource modification. In time that always seems to change from being a big, boisterous job to being a smaller, subtler activity, although it still takes the same kinds of guys to do it."

"There's the feast of the cornucopia, and then the seeds that fell to the ground begin to sprout."

"Very poetic, Ashmead. And, you know, that's a lot like life, come to think

of it.”

“Seems to me you’d want to follow that cornucopia around.” I knew I did.

“Sure. Life’s a feast. But the biology is, you get sated. You get fat. Maybe you become a glutton. That’s a deadly sin. Know why? Nothing’s more important than stuffing your face with another pie.”

“Still, one bacchanalia and then a quiet life in the orchard doesn’t seem very appealing.”

“Ever read *Candide*?,” he asked.

I had, and I smiled. “Maybe a long bacchanalia,” I said. “Speaking of which, let me ask you something.”

“Sure.”

“Was Mose McMorey really guilty?”

His mind drifted into the past. “Well, the court said he was guilty of statutory rape. The girl was fifteen.”

“Was he?”

“I wasn’t there, Ashmead. I don’t know.”

“But it was handy for you, his being in prison.”

“Yes, of course. He was a pesky critter. Sometimes it seemed I had to deal with his shenanigans almost every day. So, yes, I was glad to be rid of him for a while. And after that he was a lot less trouble, except when he started up with that blue bee thing.”

“He said it was a wasp. Aunt Krede thought it was the ants.”

He shrugged. “May be,” he said, smiling. “We just nuked them.”

I laughed, too, a little sardonically I guess.

“Business is business, Ashmead. And those were the times. I didn’t invent them. As far as I know, Mose was convicted fair and square. As far as I know, there never was any blue insect of any kind. But truth be told, it wasn’t a

personal thing with me. I never thought about it. I did feel sorry for his wife, though, losing the baby and everything. It was all pretty hard on her."

A gust of wind whistled and wriggled through the big maple tree near the well and startled another flock of leaves into the afternoon air, where they fluttered for a few moments then spiraled onto the dry earth, onto the old flatbed truck, onto the bare concrete rectangle that had once been the floor of the myrmecorium. I felt the wind on my face. One traveler greeting another. I looked at Mr. Meerson. He was a traveler, too, I guessed, here from another time and place, as familiar and foreign to me as the wind.

The Hudsons were gathered in the sitting room, talking among themselves when I came in. A slight man in a stiff-looking suit and vest, whom I didn't know but who reminded me vaguely of Mr. Authore, was sitting in one of the chairs, present in the room but not really part of the conversation.

"I guess those cigars are a moot point now," Mr. Hudson said.

"Well," Hanna replied demurely, taking one from her purse, "actually, I like them."

"Put that away, young lady," her mother said, so suddenly I think she surprised herself.

Hanna laughed and looked at me and slipped the cigar back into her purse.

"They're quite as toxic as cigarettes," said the man in the suit to no one in particular. The Hudsons seemed not to have heard.

"Ah, hell," her mother said. "Smoke it if you want to."

The cigar reappeared. "Want one?"

"God no. They stink."

The man in the suit arose and went to the window.

Hanna shrugged. "I like the smell of them. The leaf and the smoke. But the butts do smell foul. Part of the mystique, I guess."

Her mother looked at her, as if she were trying to see something hidden behind her head. "I guess I can see you as a sort of fashionable, well-dressed Mary Ann Krede, with a big slimy butt sticking out between your teeth."

"Yeah," I said. I was going to say, "Yeah, naked," but something stopped me in mid-blurb, where I twisted slowly in the *faux pas* silence. Hanna noticed.

"What, Ashmead?"

"What what?"

"You were going to add something to the image of me with a ceegar between my teeth."

"Dealing poker," I said.

"Uh-huh."

"Nude."

"You're a sick person."

"I know."

"I told you to watch out for her," Mr. Hudson said, looking at me askance, wiggling his attentive ears.

"God knows I tried," I said as she lit up.

"Give me one," Mrs. Hudson said.

The man in the suit slipped out of the room.

"Friend of yours?" I asked.

"Her daughter's husband," Mrs. Hudson said. "The rural atmosphere is dulling his mind."

"He has a broom up his ass," Mr. Hudson explained.

Mr. Meerson was leaving then, saying goodbye to Lem Roy and Bridget in the foyer. He took an envelope from his pocket and placed it on the little table where they kept the car keys.

"We used to have an old toast," he said. "May your enemies be your

footstools.”

“I really don’t want to rest my feet on my enemies,” Lem Roy said. “I’d prefer they be toadstools.”

After he left, Bridget picked up the envelope. “What’s this?” she asked.

“The contract,” Lem Roy said.

In the gathering evening shortly after sunset Bridget, Billy and Marie were sampling the water from the pump under the maple tree, near the old truck.

“I wonder why nobody discovered them before,” Bridget mused.

“Nobody was looking for them,” I shrugged. “And they fried the whole place with some insecticide twenty or thirty years ago.”

“Are you kidding?” Billy objected incredulously. “*She* put them up there.”

“Or,” said Bridget, opening her eyes wide as if she were spooking us, “maybe Mose McMorey put them up there.”

“Oh,” said Marie, “Uncle August would like that idea.”

A svelte woman who seemed to be about Ian’s age was standing by the CD cabinet in the living room, looking through the music.

“You must be Aunt Krede’s daughter,” I said. “I’m Ashmead.”

She laughed, an easy, intimate laugh that reminded me of Aunt Krede’s.

“Hello, Ashmead. I’m Cherokee. Dr. Hochstein, if you prefer.”

She was dressed like a doctor, in an expensive dark blue suit of light pinstriped wool at least as elegantly tailored as the three-piece charcoal gray I’d seen on her husband – for I now realized that’s who he was – but much more fluid. She had long straight auburn hair carefully folded into an intricate French roll high on the back of her head.

“Sorry about your mom,” I said.

“You’re the young man who lives across the road,” she replied, offering me her hand.

"Yes." Her nails were short, I noticed, well-groomed and clean. On the ring finger of her left hand she wore a white-gold wedding set with an ostentatious diamond the size of a pea.

"She spoke well of you."

"Thank you. I hope I speak well of her."

"She mentioned you'll be going to the university this fall."

"Yeah." I hadn't actually decided that until the day before.

"We're going to be moving up there at the end of the year. Joel's heading up a research project on bladder cancer. You met him, didn't you? My husband?"

"I saw him," I said.

She continued looking through the CDs. "I believe she has every opera in the known world," she said.

"She loved them."

"I know. I do, too. But I'd rather go to live performances."

"I think she got a little tired," I said, "of living out in the sticks."

"Yes, no museums, no artistic talk, no culture to speak of, I'm sure she did. But she loved the outdoors, too. She was full of conflicts."

"She enjoyed living them all," I said.

Dr. Cherokee Hochstein laughed. She had a charming, simple, almost girlish laugh. I say almost girlish because it had a distinct worldly quality to it, a quite un-childish baritone timbre.

"You laugh like her," I said.

"You mean I laugh as she did, or my laugh is like hers," she said. "Can you tell I taught school?"

"I can now."

"I'm a stickler for details. It drove her nuts. Petty religiosity, she called it when I was a kid. I guess it seems more appropriate in a pediatrician than it does

in a schoolteacher, because after I became a doctor she started saying I was afflicted with *sumpsimus*."

"Is your dad still alive? I mean..."

"Mary Ann and Clifford were our parents so far as Ian and I are concerned. He died a few years ago, just before Mom had her accident at the lab." She sighed. "So now they're all gone. All but Lem Roy, who's really been like a father to us all along, and especially since Dad died."

"Wasn't there another woman?"

"Aunt Tillie, yes. She's still alive. She lives in Boston. She's very, very sweet. She came to live in the house when I was four or five. Mom was constantly traveling, it seemed, and Dad was a homebody. He had a huge extended family. They were always congregating for one thing and another, and he always wanted someone there to be his helpmeet. So Mom took a room at the end of the house and Tillie moved in and eventually slept openly in my dad's bedroom."

"Did that bother you?"

She laughed. "Why should it bother me? It surely didn't bother any of them. They used to joke about it when other people got dazzled as to who was what to whom. It bothered Ian, though. He thought my dad should've accepted who she was into his own life. I think he realized later, after Mom went to work on the ion-engine project and got her own house, which was when we were barely teenagers, that they'd all done the best they could with each other and treated us rather well in the bargain."

"Why shouldn't she just accept who he was into her life?"

"Well, that's just it, Ashmead." She moved closer. I had to fight the urge to step back. Her breath was sweet and warm. She spoke very softly. "See, it was a distinction based upon his taking another woman, and her not taking another man. That was the point. Mom didn't miss him, but he missed her. He had more

contact points for his marital needs, like some people have more taste buds or more retinal cones. It wasn't a problem for her, but it was for him, and he solved it. I know he devoted great care to solving it as gracefully as he did."

She was touching me now, lightly, with her fingertips, stroking the lapels of my jacket as she talked. Standing face to face, her silky black eyebrows are just at the height of my lips, so she looked up at me as she talked. Her eyes searched mine. It was intense, like an invitation to a kiss. I almost answered it. Every nerve in my body was erect and quivering. "I have a similar problem," she said.

I walked with Bennie and Lem Roy up to the ridgeline so we could gaze across the valley in the last light of the day, but before long it was dark.

"Kind of a tough year," I ventured.

"Tough on the hoof, tender on the plate," Lem Roy said.

"What's that mean?" Bennie asked.

"Mary Ann and I had a theory that the most obstreperous steers, the ones that shoved the others aside to get at the feed, the ones you couldn't get close to, the ones that pushed their way through the fences, always made the tenderest steaks. 'Tough on the hoof, tender on the plate.' Then it came to mean, between us, that hard times would produce sweet rewards, because the strength you gain from dealing with them is there for you afterward to use as you please."

"Too bad we don't eat people," Bennie said, spitting a floret of seed hulls. "We'd have a lot of tender chops around here."

"Well, thanks to you," Lem Roy said, "we have a few fewer than we had last year."

"Don't thank me," Bennie said with a shrug. "I almost contributed one of them. Thank Jake. He did the hard part."

"And Billy stood up," Lem Roy said. "You have to be proud of that."

Bennie looked away, toward the southern sky where Antares glittered like a

jewel against the black horizon. "I am," he said. "And watching him do it has made me notice other people who stood up, to one thing or another, and what they went through. And some who didn't, and what they went through."

Wagger curled up with her muzzle between her paws by the empty captain's chair that faced the easel and looked up at me with forlorn eyes. I knelt down and patted her head gently. Her tail thumped the floor once or twice.

"I'll be back," I said softly. She looked away. She knew everything. "I'm sorry," I said. "You'll be okay. We'll be okay." She thumped the floor again.

"Well," Lem Roy said as my mom and I prepared to go, "things happen and life goes on. That's the point of it; it just goes on. When something's lost that's been in your life for a long time it's an eerie sensation. Meaning seems plastic, or it evaporates altogether. You separate from the world around you. You don't recognize what you see. You go through a paradigm shift, a psychological wormhole. You enter a new time, where there will always be a chasm between your life and this thing in the past that no longer exists, that you can no longer touch or check your recollection against. So it slowly slips away. In some sense, you're reborn. The world's different. It's illuminated differently. And so are you."

My mom cried, and he gently put his arm around her shoulder. "Thanks for coming," he said. "And for your friendship. It meant a lot to her, and it does to me, too."

We walked down the driveway. "I feel like an actor standing backstage after the curtain falls," I said. "After all's been said and done and the audience has gone home. The world feels strange, and vast, and empty."

She put her arm around me. "The play of life never stops, Ash. This is just a scene change. And speaking of scene changes, I met a new guy the other day."

"Oh?"

"He's a logger."

"Oh."

"Well, he used to be. Anyway he plays the mandolin, and he writes sonnets. They're pretty good."

"How'd you meet him?"

"He brought his little girl in for a vaccination the other day. Wednesday I guess it was. He's going to Guillemot to learn about computers."

"I worry about you, Mom."

She laughed. "You'll like him. I'm going up to have dinner with him and his daughter tomorrow night."

"Does he like country music?"

"Well, yes and no; he likes old-time country music. Bluegrass music. Hillbilly music."

"You're a hick, Mom."

"Yep," she said. "And proud of it."

I smiled as we crossed the road and I planted a kiss on the side of her head. A few strands of her hair frisked in the breeze and brushed my face.

"And you," she continued, "are an intellectual and æsthetic snob, and a fine boy, and I'm proud of you, too."

An east wind is a strumpet of change, a return of the ancestors, an upwelling of rigor, scouring and cleansing the long-complacent earth. It's blustery, powerful, relentless. On Saturday morning as I urged the old green Peugeot down the Crondoc road toward the freeway, the east wind was still blowing. It blew down the slopes of the Amarainy fan. It swept over Mr. Meerson's sinuous web of roads and swirled across the empty asphalt parking lot at Thrall school, where a worker with a high-pressure hose scoured Mr. Authore's name from his old parking space. It buffeted roofs and walls that

sheltered Hills, and Bubbys, and Hudsons, and Kuntzlers, and Hopcrosses, and Beezle and Jesus and one lone Krede. It rambled down the Dingle and rolled down the Perpend and ruffled all the rivers that flow to the sea.

It blew in from Kansas and lofted our spirits into the world. I heard its whisper still among the brilliant ochers and oranges, the crimsons and cranberries, the lemon yellow and purple plum foliage that graced supple white birches and sturdy black maples in the hills of New York and Vermont, where I ventured for three days and nights along the peaceful and beautiful Appalachian ridgeline, and where once, in a cool golden twilight soon silvered by the moon, I sat on a granite ledge overlooking countless amethyst-fringed valleys probed by radiant rivers of mist and thought about Crondoc and heard the echo of Lem Roy's flute across the jewelled vault of heaven while a pumpkin with a gold tooth glimmered in the embers of my campfire.

The End