"Down among the gilly fish"| And other stories

Jeanne Dixon

The University of Montana

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"DOWN AMONG THE GILLY FISH," AND OTHER STORIES

By

Jeanne Dixon

B. A., University of Montana, 1986

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts
University of Montana
1989

Approved by

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Dean, Graduate School

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Date June 5, 1989
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In The Garden Of Approximate Desires

"...could this be it, the thing itself? Is this what it means to be a woman?" Carol had penned this into her notebook in that innocent schoolgirl script I had known her to use through two quarters of Freshman English here at the State U., the round astonished o's, amazed i's, t's with their crosses flying out in her eagerness to see, smell, touch, taste -- whatever -- that life had laid out for her pleasure. You can imagine my startled delight to discover that same buoyant script once again coming in along with the expected assortment of 3 D's: the Dull, the Dogged, and the Deranged, -- those doomed and gloomy souls who have so hounded my teaching career.

Then too, it had been a dark and thankless winter. Along with catarrh I'd developed a limp. The wife complained, she threatened; nothing I could muster measured up. Bag and baggage at last she shipped off to Kentucky. Milk soured on the stoop. Lights dimmed. Sinister strangers kept ringing my doorbell. The rent was raised, my novel turned down. Spring, with its fondness, its turtledoves, its roses, was passing me by. Until, there she was again. Carol H.

In keeping the journal for my spring quarter survey course (Romantics, British: Room LA 304, 1:00-2:30, MWF), she quickly lost interest in such old chestnuts as
Wordsworth, Austen, Coleridge, but acquired the knack for setting down the most secret examinations of her own golden heart. In the three short months that we would spend together, she would far outstrip her classmates in sheer enthusiasm, filling eight spiral bound, 11-in. X 8½-in., college ruled notebooks, one yellow, four green, two blue, and one institutional tan with GO GRIZZLIES!!! emblazoned in scarlet across the cover.

Students' journals were to be turned in to me each Friday afternoon. I would give each a scanty perusal, a quick red check mark, and turn them back on the following Monday, except for hers. Each of hers was lingered over, dwelt upon, savored, returned at last with brave notations: Good! Excellent! Vivid images! Keep up the good work! and so on. In the end, I was tempted to keep all the notebooks so that I could keep hers. I never once showed her journals to Maddox, though I could have. And to my own benefit. At least I have that, my innocence.

Carol and Maddox.

Maddox and Carol.

In spite of all their differences, it seemed as if nothing could ever come between them, according to her notebook. She was from a cattle ranch here in Montana, he from Long Island. She was long-legged, silken-eyed, second-generation Scandinavian, all softly rounded peaches
and cream. He was two inches shorter and a rougish mix of West Country Irish and Roumanian Jew. He had square hands, square feet, and a keen mind for logic, for 18th century 'cello concertos, and for hot sex on warm afternoons.

Maddox was nobody's fool. "It will never work for us," he warned her. And yet, even then he was busy undoing each pearled button down the back of her blouse with his fingers, unpinning that long blond candyfloss hair, nibbling little love bites against that perfect neck. "We haven't got a fireman's chance in Hades," he said between kisses. "You know that, don't you?"

"Um...hmmm."

They were sitting on the dampish grass behind the old Men's Gymn, beneath the April willows. The bell at Main Hall had already rung for her two o'clock class in Technique of the Novel, but neither of them had stirred from the spot.

"We're like apples and oranges," he insisted.

She agreed.

"Cowboys and Indians."

"Um...hmmm."

"We could be Jesuit and Baptist. Classical Greece and Imperial Rome. Carol, listen to me, if you were the Confessions of St. Augustine, I'd be the Nausea of Sartre, or Flies! Being and Nothingness! Why, there's no end! And it's not as if I don't care about your feelings,"
because my god! I do! It's just that I want to be certain you have some idea of what we're getting into here!"

Unperturbed, she had stopped his mouth with her slow sweet kisses, then trembled as he fondled her warm breasts in his hands. Not walking, not running, they crossed through the spring-green air, so seductive with its fragrance of catkins, its rustle of bees, to his rented loft above the river, where they lay like sinners (sic!), lovely of limb and lavish with each other.

They missed all their next day's classes: her Minor Works of Chaucer, his Bus. Ad., her Development of the English Lyric, his Money & Banking in the Coming Bad Times; and she missed mine. According to her notebook -- the first in the series, a daffodil yellow -- they did not crawl out until five on Friday, when they ran a comb through their hair, pulled on their bell-bottoms, and went out into the world to look for pizza. Ever after that, she claimed, she would associate anchovy cum pepper-pepperone with floodgates bursting on tidal plains forlorn, and moonlight over water. In spite of all their differences, they loved each other, loved with such a fierceness and passion it sometimes frightened them; at times it made them cry.

Their differences were very real:

He was Transcendental Meditation.

She had been a Lutheran all her life.
As far as he was able to fathom, God was nothing more than an oblong blur, indifferent to the cries of a suffering world. If that. If it hadn't been for Math and for Music, he would have had no Faith in Order. "Look at Hitler," he directed. "Look at Stalin. Explain me Bangladesh!"

Throughout his earnest admonitions, she was mentally down on her knees in a long white gown, asking Lord Jesus to bless them, and keep them, and to lock them in a wedlock forged stronger than steel. Since it was true that God was love, she knew He'd understand what she was up to with Maddox; she wasn't so sure about Daddy.

That Easter she took him home to meet her folks.

And everything was so beautiful that day!

The sky, which had turned sodden and loutish beneath a blanket of clouds, opened to vibrance and a brilliant sun. The drive south through the valley, with thrusting peaks on his side of the highway, low golden hills on hers, so increased their appetite for one another that Maddox was forced to make an exit onto a narrow frontage road, where they left the car in a grove of quaking aspens, left their new Easter clothes in the car, and raced each other naked through fields of innocent ladies' slippers, shooting stars, and rank after rank of hip-high hay! (Italics mine.)

In her journal, Carol wrote of this experience as, "a dalliance as sweet and green, as moistly flushed as a garden poem by Andrew Marvell, lyrical," she said, "and
poignant, yet all too brief...like youth itself," she pointed out.

And how beautiful the old farmhouse appeared when they finally arrived! How delectable and steamy the aromas they discovered inside! Her mother had spread the big table with a snowy linen cloth, set out her best china and silver, and had placed a crystal bowl of wildflowers in the center of the table to mark the celebration; a sprinkle of yellow pollen had stained the white cloth, portending in Carol's eyes that her sins were known but that all was forgiven.

Her mother came smiling out of the kitchen, wiping her hands on her apron. Tall like Carol, she was a good-looking woman with capable shoulders. She moved well. A man could do worse than such a woman. She wore a soft woolen dress of Swedish blue that set off the blue of her eyes, and she'd braided her hair into a silver coronet, into which she'd tucked a sprig of white lilac from the garden hedge, "a symbol of innocence," Carol wrote in her journal, that her mother wore well.

"Isn't it wonderful?" Carol whispered as her mother led them into the parlor with its gleaming wood and pewter. A fire blazed up in the fireplace, warming the room full of big leather furniture. Sparkling windows of diamond lead panes opened onto apple orchards and fields of far grazing cattle. Maddox squeezed her arm. "You're what's wonderful," he said.
Her father did the gracious things: shook hands, remarked upon the weather. He studied the young man's beardless jaw, his precise white shirt, his vest, his jacket, the glossy black hair that fell below the collar. He smiled wryly. "Enjoy your trip?"

"Very fine," Maddox said.

"You must have taken the scenic route." He tapped his watch. "You're late."

Flustered, Carol started to cut in with some excuse, but Maddox stayed cool. "It took us longer than expected, sir."

"Kom, kom, you two..." her mother fussed, half-forgetting her English in all the excitement. "Such a long drive, you must be hungry. Kom, now... talk is for later. Young people hungry always, that's what I'm thinking, but too much in hurry to eat... how you say?... good hot cooked mile."

"Meal," Carol said quickly. "She means meal."

As soon as they pulled up their chairs and sat down at the table they found they were indeed hungry, hungrier than they could have imagined. Mrs. H. filled their plates from platters of old-country food: thin-sliced veal on a bed of hot buttered mushrooms, Swedish rye baked fresh the day before, churned butter, gooseberry jam, lingonberries with roast goose and chestnut stuffing, dill sauce, and a salad of the freshest tenderest greens
rushed in from the fields express for their enjoyment.

They ate quickly, silently, gorging themselves. They paid scant attention to Mr. H.'s long-winded accounts of early days in ranching: "You can bet things were different then...men were men...we survived by our wit. Grit. No handouts." At ten, he had hopped a freight, heading west to get away from a miserable immigrant childhood. He'd made his way to the plains of Montana, where he went to work herding pigs, later sheep. By fifteen, he'd saved enough from his pitiful wages to buy a small herd of Herefords and had headed into the Rocky Mountains, driving the frisky heifers through Blackfeet country, avalanche and blizzard, into the lushness of the Bitterroot Valley with its slow green river and belly-high grass. He was a strong man, she said, with strong beliefs: right was right, and wrong was not to be tolerated. At sixty-five he still sat as tall in the saddle as any John Wayne.

She wanted her father to like Maddox.

She wanted Maddox to like him.

"A man must set his course and never swerve," her father said, and speared a potato with his fork; her mother cut in: "Ja..." she said, thrusting the platter of veal beneath the young man's nose, "...ja, you will have more of the heistekt kalville, that's what I'm thinking. Ja, I think you are soon making babies. A man must build up his strength to make babies."
"Mother...!

"We're not making babies," Maddox said, gently, "at least not yet. To be honest, Carol and I have some problems to work out before we even start to think about babies."

A silence fell.

Mr. H. cleared his throat. He fixed his eyes on the face of the unflinching Maddox. "In the meantime, young man, just what are your intentions towards my daughter?"

"Ethical."

"Ethical?"

"I love her very much..."

Mrs. H. chose that exact moment to attempt to pass the grönsaksallad. Her husband stopped her with a look. "Not now, Inga. Please."

Her mother turned to Carol and asked her in Swedish if she'd done something wrong, spoken out of turn perhaps. Her English was not so good, she explained to Maddox, the color rising lovely in her throat. She could speak, she said, but did not always understand; at which Carol patted her hand, saying, "Det spelar ingen roll," to forgive her, but the pitch of the moment was lost.

In country fashion, the men retired to the parlor to sip akavit and strong coffee, while the women carried dishes into the kitchen, Carol donning an apron and grabbing up a teatowel, her mother splashing hot water from
the tap into a suds-filled pan. "Ja," she said, scowling, "you're too much in hurry to marry, flicka."

"He's leaving in June."

"So?"

"I'm afraid I will lose him."

"So?"

"Mother, I love him."

"Love? What is love?" Inga settled the tumblers noisily into hot soapy water. "When we are young we are always in love." She pulled the white lilac from her own braided hair and tucked it behind her daughter's ear.

"But if he goes back East without me he'll marry someone else. There's a girl back there who writes to him, I've seen the letters. His parents want him to marry her. She's got connections, they say. Connections. I'm the one who loves him!"

"Ah, the tragedy, the tragedy! The young are always deep in tragedy. The real tragedy is to find the one you love too soon. You marry, you have babies, life is over. Wait, little flicka, hold fast to your dream. Write those stories that run through your head, finish college. Do not give up what you can never regain."

In spite of her serene exterior, Mrs. H. was an intensely emotional woman. Passionately fond of springtime, she grew frantic through the short hot summer, then slid
into grief that developed into chronic depression through the bitter months of winter. Ghosts of two dead children haunted frosted window panes; a plum tree hung with snow became an ogress with a knife who recited cold tales of the Angel of Death, that old hag of Norland whose single occupation was to plunge the stone dagger into the breasts of widows whose Viking husbands had died at sea. Without a man to love her, protect her, support her, no woman should even want to continue with her life; she was no one.

"All through my growing up," Carol wrote in the daffodil notebook, "I never once came home from school in winter to find my mother awake and out of bed. Day after snowy day, she lay with the blankets pulled up to her ears, her hair ragged, her face a mask of frozen grief and rage."

In the margin of this last entry, I red-pencilled in:

Excellent! Wonderful character depiction! Marvelous eye for details! If I'd had the courage, the heart, I'd have suggested that she stop by my office after class so we could discuss the possibilities of a life for her in letters; I knew that this -- if nothing else! -- could bring her around.

Such a common lust; to see one's words in print. And not just in print, but distributed, read. Even when we entertain no illusions that our words/selves are splendid or unique, we yearn to be paid attention to: IN THIS
PLACE, AT THIS MOMENT, I EXIST. It is not unlike the flasher in the park. His perverse desire to show his part in public springs from no fond hope or delusion that his member is superior to that of any other, only that it does exist, and with it, him.

Nor am I a stranger to this very desperation.

My own work lies fallow on the shelf, as yet unread.

No, I made no such suggestion to Miss H. The thought of what might transpire if she stepped into my web was more than my agitated system could sustain. Yet, what if she went with him to New York? What then?

Night after night I dreamed of cold things, and echoes, and rooms within rooms within rooms. I could not fall asleep until the first crack of morning, then could barely struggle free of my nightmares in time for my first morning class. Anxiety wracked me. Appetite fled: how could I even think of taking nourishment with the prospect of this fascinating woman walking out of my life? And towards what? Didn't she know how deadening are the bonds of matrimony? Such weighty chains speak not of Love, but of Love's enemy, Denial. Freedom gone, each gesture shaped and chiseled, not by the Will of the Individual, but by convention, torment...the spouse. Clearly, action had to be taken. But what? My mouth went dry. Nerves shook. Accusations whispered up and down the halls. I could not look my colleagues in the eye, but haunted English
department corridors, a rumpled phantom of my former self.

To cope with the burden of teaching, I assigned oral reports to fill the remainder of my required hours. Carol -- that golden angel! -- chose to "do" Wordsworth's Preface to the Lyrical Ballads, a game attempt, I'm sure, though I did not hear one syllable of what she said; I rewarded her with a grade of A/A+ because of those slim white ankles strapped in leather sandals, because of the delicate crescendo of those blue-jeaned thighs, and because I was lost in the spell of the latest entry in her notebook:

She, as we know, was pushing for marriage.

Maddox insisted they wait.

"No wedding bells, no snuggle buns," she told him.

He was not impressed.

He had only to look at her "in that certain way he had, cutting those jumbuck eyes" at her, showing that dimple she so loved to kiss in his chin, and her knees fell apart. She had no self-discipline at all.

But then, on a Monday, nearing the end of the quarter, her mother telephoned to ask if she would come home to the ranch to spend a few days while she waited for a doctor's diagnosis. She had found a lump. Carol stopped by my office, damp-eyed and out of breath, her long sunlight hair flowing loose about her shoulders. Her red silk blouse had been carelessly buttoned, and the curve
of her breast swung warm against my arm as she leaned over my desk where I sat correcting papers. (I would think of this later and burn.)

She explained her situation.
I expressed my regret.
She was gone.

Painful as it was to accept this -- admittedly temporary -- loss, I determined to use her absence wisely. Instead of churning my sheets to a tangled froth each sleepless night, I sat up in my pajamas at the kitchen table -- one of those chrome and plastic conventions, with the isometrically significant chairs, chosen by the wife during a brief heyday fling at the homemaking arts and there, midst refrigerator hum and cheerful constitution of a perking coffeepot, I devised a plan for winning and keeping my winsome love, my rapacious beloved, my golden-appled-innocence girl.

At this juncture, I have to state that I was not what I might, to some, have seemed. Back in those turbulent years of the late '60's, early '70's, I was not altogether unhandsome, undashing. It was not this finely-veined and bulbous nose I confront in the glass these frosty mornings, not this once-dark I Ching hair -- "Snow On the Mountain, No Shame" -- but a poet, young and lean. If misunderstood, if unread, if in angst, yet a poet to the bone. I held to
my dream. I pulled my walls about me. Nothing could penetrate the armour of my Will.

-- Good effort!

-- No need for this just now!

-- Try us again in the spring!

(And I would! I did! Again. And again. I never gave up. Never!)

My approach to the tender sex embraced the same determination, the same close attention to detail. I swam, I fenced; I kept fit. Fresh fruit and roughage. Bought a waterpick, flossed six times a day. Showered around the clock. And I dressed well: Harris tweeds, a bicycle cap, rich-looking shoes, a maroon and violet aviator's scarf made of silk smuggled in by a priest out of China. If Mother had lived I'd have done her proud.

It was over some comical misunderstanding that the wife and I fell out. And for the better. Three years of marriage and it was no wonder that casual strangers mistook us for partners in one or another of the sexless communions: "father-daughter?"..."uncle-niece?" Her niggling demands, her lack of romance, her continuous invidious presence in my life, began to rob me of my creative powers. It is significant that I still cannot summon her face, but lumps, bumps and bunions, her sub-erotic toes -- springs instantly to mind, along with the warm onion smell of her sex. How hard to believe that we were once lovers, that we had shared
secrets, sweet contrivance, in the dark.

Through the starred spring nights of my new darling's absence, with the moon in her splendor peeking in through the window above my kitchen sink, I scribbled madly into a notebook of my own. Ah, but not my own! Mine, yet not mine! Let me explain: I need to explain. I need to clear this whole thing up.

I had chosen, deliberately chosen, a tan-colored notebook with GO GRIZZLIES!!! flashed in scarlet across the cover, and had blotted it, blotched it, splotched it, to look exactly like the notebook that Carol had left with me when she went to comfort her mother. If she came back and picked it up instead of her own, would I be to blame? Into this pseudo-diario I poured forth an excess of emotion. Again, mine yet not mine.

Into the notebook would go the thoughts and imaginings of a certain Miss Andrews, an entirely phantasmal Miss Andrews (in such a large survey class, this ruse was feasible), Tiffany Andrews, a name suggestive both of whimsy and of wealth that is carelessly spent. To throw off suspicion, I left my car in a lot on the south side of town and taxied out to the north side to purchase a palette of colored Flair pens -- felt-tipped, Extra Fine, 79¢ each -- in brilliant blues, fervent greens, passionate vermillions, tender-lipped fuschias, flushed pinks; I created a garden of unruly desires, at the center of which shone a single golden name:
Maddox.

Maddox, who delved into logic and Italian Baroque; Maddox, whose every whim I'd been made intimate with; Maddox, who loved sex before and after sex: Maddox.

"...our lust-mad nights together...his loft above the river...that dimple in his chin...his insatiable oral appetites..." Yet, not everything I wrote was plagiarized. I invented what I believe any trembling young thing might feel in the presence of the beloved: "...prickly burn of his stubbled chin...his satin breath, panther desire...how it was to turn and find him in the night...to love and to be loved, to be one with one another..." Page after page, my genius flowered, flowed.

I felt a clean cool sense of emptiness inside, a stillness I had never known before. In the absence of turmoil, I slept eight hours through, woke up fresh as a baby, went out to a cafe to treat myself to a breakfast of waffles and strawberries with heaps of whipped cream, sausages, fried eggs and potatoes, coffee, buttered toast and five kinds of jam, all of which I ate in a leatherette booth against a plate-glass window, sitting in a flood of morning sunshine, a figure who had long dwelt in shade.

A state short-lived.

Maddox had stayed on campus while Carol went home to comfort her mother. I'd counted on this, and had actually spotted the young man lurking in hallways, once glimpsed
him darting around the corner from the English department coffeepot, styrofoam cup in hand, glossy hair burning in the sun, bookpack flying away from one shoulder. Then on the Tuesday evening before Carol would return, I found him loitering in the shadows of the ramshackle hedge that fences my building, and I took fright at the thought that he knew -- knew.

He turned and caught me watching him, so sick with guilt. He asked me a question which I cannot here repeat. When I had no answer he moved beneath a canopy of trees, turning as if to go away. In the summer twilight, his eyes, I think, were green.

"What is it?" I demanded. "What's wrong?"

He laughed a knowing laugh as his figure faded into the twiggery of hedge, young, lean, alive with that panther spring I'd once treasured in myself. Gobs of silver moonlight dripped from the trees. "Take care!" I called. "It's late!" I thought of killers, rapists, scum. But he had gone.

I'm not naive. I know my Freud: Where id was, there shall ego be. I have tramped these snake-infested woods. I know what's in the underbrush; I've risen above it.

Shaken by what I'd seen, I pulled myself together and went inside to put the finishing touches on the Tiffany text. First I made myself a cup of cocoa. In a state of nerves, fright, I spilled the cocoa. The notebook was
ruined. Right then I could have given up, quit.

But no.

I went out in dead of night to buy a second notebook twin to the first, into which I could re-create my masterpiece, my approximated life. No time for grief. Nix recriminations. I would have the journal finished before my class came for their notebooks on Monday. Pens flew. I worked at fever pitch. Everything depended on it. Love, life. Honor.

Mad?

Yes; but not entirely.

Miss H. would pick up the notebook, thinking it hers, would scan it for comments, catch the name of her beloved, recoil. What was written there would not have been written by her. As she reeled in jealous shock, I would approach her, gently, gently, gently inform her that she would receive a grade of Incomplete because of her recent absence, that she would have to come up to my office (where one thing would lead to another: I'd have her to lunch, have her to dinner, have her up to my apartment, and have her). Headhunters hunting on the Congo could not approach their prey with greater wariness.

With the last of the MasterCard I got ready: bought 2 white shirts, 1 red tie, 1 suede jacket with imported buttons; bought caviar, champagne, beer. Bought English cigarettes (menthol and plain), bought a silver lighter,

Wednesday she was back in class, leaning against my lectern in a pair of short short-shorts, hot pink, asking for her notebook. She wanted to catch up on her entries so she could turn her work in with the rest of the class on Friday. So, while one of the Dog-eared and Dreary launched into a class report on poor Jane Austen and her "limp-wristed" style, (sic), I went to my office to dig out Carol's journal, which I bore back to the room and handed to her, my every fiber confounded by her, and she so blaze. Four days left in which to win her.

Friday her notebook came in with the tide.

Maddox had gone out to the ranch to drive her back into town. On the way they'd made love in the woods among fallen logs, river mint, and the scent of wild roses. "I'll die," she had written in the notebook, and had unscored the words, "if he goes away without me."

"We'll talk tonight," Maddox said.

Maddox was feeling mellow because he'd pulled up his grades to meet his father's expectations. Carol couldn't comprehend his feeling good when it was possible they might never be together again.

They went to the movies at the Crystal to see Sundays and Cybèle. They ate popcorn with Pepsi, ate carrot cake with coffee, then took their time walking home in the rain, not minding the rain, holding hands. They talked about
"the hand of man," about reason and passion, about seduction as they'd watched it in the film, about their love for one another, how wise they were, how they burned.

Snug in the loft, Maddox put a record on his stereo while Carol undressed. When the rain had stopped she opened the window to let the moon shine in. "For what could have been the last time ever," she wrote in her journal, they lay down in the dark together, side by side on the lumpy mattress, not speaking, not sighing. For as long as she lived she would never forget the musky scent of river willow, the warmth of his naked body -- close, but not touching -- the whiteness of hers. A 'cello concerto rose out of the dark to strain against the tension of the room.

"You must be cold," he said.

"I'm okay."

He got up on one elbow. "You're shivering. Here, take this blanket."

"No. Please, don't" She was shivering, but not from want of a blanket.

"Let me close the window then." He half-started up. She stopped him, one hand on his shoulder. She said, "I want to watch the moon."

"The moon? Carol...you're loony, know that? Loony."

"Loony? Loony?"

First they laughed, then he was crying. He wept softly, alone, his face to the wall. She did not try to comfort
him but stared up at the ceiling, at the shadow the moon made in transit, and she started singing their song, lightly, against the background of classical 'cello, singing lightly, as if it were a joke: "I've got tears in my ears from lyin' on my back, a'cryin' over you..." It had been characteristic of their relationship that only one of them would break down at a time.

He said, "Well, this is it," and cleared his throat.

"Ja..." she said. "I think so."

"You sound like your mother."

"And why shouldn't I sound like my mother? Is there any reason that I shouldn't? You never did approve of my parents, did you? Don't lie, don't tell me you did."

"That's not fair."

"I don't want to live without you, Maddox."

When he didn't answer, she turned on her side and touched his damp face with her fingertips.

"Carol, don't. You know what that does to me. It wouldn't be good for either of us, knowing it would be our last time."

She pressed her fingers into his hair.

Half-heartedly, he brushed her hand away.

"How will I manage?" she asked him. "What will I do...?"

In secret she selected a handful of his longish black hair from where it lay against the white pillow and divided
it into two equal plaits "...we've been so close..." and she separated two equal plaits of her own "...two bodies, one soul. Where do I leave off and you begin?" **Over one, under three...over one, under three...** forging her bonds, casting her spell. "Maddox, I could learn to love the life you lead there in the city. I could adjust to Long Island. Maddox, I could change. Please, let me try."

"Marriage isn't trial, it's commitment."

"I commit myself to you."

The music in the room diminished, stopped. A radiance of moonlight struck him like a nimbus as she started up to change the record, yelped, clamped his hand to his head. "Carol, what are you doing to me? Carol, you're killing me, know that? Killing me! I want only what's best for you, you don't even think about me! And what about your mother? Your writing? Your college career? My parents have their own plans for me. I've told you and told you how they feel, and I wished it was good-damned-otherwise, but it's not. So accept it! That's how it is!"

He tugged at their inter-braided hair to loose it and in doing so drew her face down on his. She kissed the tears from his eyes; he licked the salt from her lips with his tongue.

"Maddox," she whispered, when at last they pulled free. "I don't know how to tell you this..."

"My god," he said, "you're pregnant."
"No."

"What then?"

"If you won't marry me, I'll kill myself." She could be calm when she had to be. Reasonable. "I'll jump off Higgins Street Bridge. I'll take poison, slash my wrists. I'll shoot myself with Daddy's twenty-two. I'll leave a note, tell them to let you know what's happened."

"Jesus."

"I mean what I say."

"Jesus H. God."

"I will."

With a sense of deepening sadness, I marked this last entry A- for style, C for content. Clearly, though she did write well, she lacked a sense of moral vision. Style without content -- like Faith without Works -- is dead. Kaput. And what of my own moral vision? Am I to be called on the carpet for what I'd planned? Don't you see, I had no choice but to continue: to awaken that secret, inner, shimmering flame that could prove the fact of my personal existence. Without this flame we are dead, you, me. Pleasure too long deferred is a coach and four to the madhouse.

Monday. Fatal Monday. The day to give the notebooks back, forever. I carried Tiffany's brilliant "mock epic" in my arms with the others, warm weight of love that is was, put them all down on the rectangular table that faced the
class, spread them out for better viewing. The class was short, no lecture. Carol came up with the others, the warm spring sun spread like a mantle across her silken shoulders, lighting that mass of gold hair.

She smiled, manufactured some common pleasantry.

I pushed her notebook to the bottom of the pile; then, as her white hands flew, seeking what was rightfully hers, I eased my own dear opulent opus to just within the periphery of her vision. See it! I willed. She didn't. "Oh, damn..." she muttered half under her breath. It was at that very moment that I detected the tell-tale clue that tipped me off: the faint sweet odor of shallots.

"...oh, here it is!" She gave her little cry as she reached for that faux cahier, that Venus trap; but then I thrust, almost savagely thrust, the correct tan notebook into her anxious little hand. Yet in doing so, my wrist touched hers, tender flesh mounted tender flesh, and in that starburst moment I let my secret out: "Miss H.," I whispered into that cornsilk hair, that Aphrodite ear, "I want you."

"You what?"

As looking is prelude to passion, I looked and found those ice-blur orbs looking, if coldly looking, looking into mine so hot for hers. "I want you."

You're a dirty old man, she said.

You're a lewd old man, she said.
You're a disgusting old man, she said.
I know all about you, she said, all your filthy secrets.
I'm going to scream, she said.
She screamed.
And screamed.

"I want you. To keep on with your writing," I said.
"Have a good summer," said she.

Spontaneous combustion of the human body is not a myth but is a fact of ordinary life; a face can burst into flame, nerves ignite in fiery flux, bones glow and flare and split asunder. Within the square and sterile room, departing students ignored the spectacle of my conflagration. They bottlenecked as always at the doorway, laughing, chatting -- ah, splendor-winged youth! -- making plans to be together, but not with me. I stood apart, a column of flame, the Tiffany report turned to ashes in my hands, and I was left with the realization that it was never the girl...it was her notebook I desired.

They were married in mid-July. The bride dressed in white, the groom in regulation black. Her mother probably cried, her father looked stern. His parents appeared small and dark and foreign, standing in her mother's flower garden, deep in fire-blue delphiniums and Shasta daisies, with the burgeoning willows like young green clouds above them. The wedding pictures were featured in the Sunday edition of
the local paper only months before the news of Inga's death. For both, I wept as though I'd known them all my life.

Today, a Saturday in dull November, these many years since, Carol's first published novel was reviewed in a little-read but pretentious journal. "The saga of one woman's life, however fascinating its turns and reversals may seem to the author, must have something more substantial to offer the discriminating reader. I cannot recommend this."

Far better to have published nothing than to publish to bad reviews. Nevertheless, I'll buy a copy of Carol's book, if only to search for myself in whatever mask or disguise she may have chosen to hang on me. I have nothing, nothing whatsoever, to be ashamed of. Nothing.
In Lovee Thompstone's Jungle

Things far stranger than rats bred in the jungle behind Lovee Thompstone's house. The rats were bad enough. Big, bold, sleek as satin cushions, they propagated freely in the tangled roots and knees of the flowering oliana which belonged to Lovee's neighbor, Mr. Aloha J. Awahi, and to Aloha's one hundred percent Hawaiian wife, a direct descendant of King Kamehameha I, himself -- and she had the papers to prove it.

When Lovee finally dug up the courage to go over and tell Aloha about the rats, how by rights he ought to cut down the oliana, he rubbed a large brown hand across his large brown stomach and laughed, showing a quantity of good-natured teeth. Lovee had caught him sprawled on his bamboo lanai, fanning himself with a palm leaf fan and drinking "somet'ing cold and da kine."

"Eh?" he demanded, looking down at Lovee. "Eh? Wa'? Wa' you go talk? You tryin' to cockroach me, Grandma?"

In spite of all the years she'd spent teaching them not to, Big Island people spoke five different versions of pidgin. Lovee tried to be patient, but when her nerves were all jangled and tied up in knots, she could not abide such confusion and babble. "You know good and well what I'm talking, Aloha. What I'm talking about, is rats!"

Aloha replied with a roll of soft laughter, then
called to his wife to bring out some refreshments. "Eh, Grandma," he shouted down to Lovee, "come on up heah. Set you'self down, right heah by me. Life too short to get a cricket in your neck lookin' up." So she climbed the stairs, and he helped her into a stout cane chair on his seaward lanai where she could catch the cool breeze blowing in off the water. He mopped at his face with the back of his hand and fluffed out his kinky black hair.

"No fuss you feadahs 'bout da rats, Grandma. Da mongoos eats rats like popcorns and pupus -- dat's what for da mongoos is heah." He grinned to show he had no hard feelings.

When Lovee sputtered into silence, having struggled with a rage she could never express, Aloha's voice softened, tuned to the hushed vibrations of wind-rustled leaves. "Mo' bettah you no try an' cockroach da jungle, Grandma." He assumed a lecture-voice tone. "You cockroach da jungle, da jungle gonna up an'cockroach you. An' you know me, Grandma," he said, grinning widely, "ah no talk stink!"

So Lovee did not get her way about the rats that bred unchecked in Aloha's oliana, though God knows she had tried. From her neighbor's perspective, the oliana offended no one at all. Set back from the house, the oliana, with its tangled roots and knobbly knees, bleached to bone, rife with rats, could scarcely be viewed as a hazard. It had grown there by itself, so why should he cut it down?
"It's not healthful," she fairly shouted this at him. "It's an eyesore! Those rats spread disease!"

But he wouldn't listen; he covered his ears, waggled his fingers at her, poked fun at all her insistence. "If da rats spread disease, Grandma, how come we all so healthy? Answer me that, Grandma." He thumped his broad chest to drive home his point. Exhausted, she rested her case, leaning back in the old cane chair as he had requested, made herself at home on the lanai of the Awahi house, a house set on stilts to be safely up from the damp jungle floor, and she sipped at a glass of cold passion fruit juice that Mrs. Awahi set out for her, and she listened with but half an ear as Aloha played love songs on his big guitar so his grass-skirted daughters could dance. And her face numbed to stone as Mrs. Awahi related how she'd been snubbed by the Elder's wife down at Tanaguchi's grocery, how none of the Caucasian teachers at the Keaukaha School understood the needs of Polynesian children, and how she believed all the trouble-making haoles, the ho'o pilikia i ke apuni ought to be crated up in banana crates and shunted back to the Mainland where they came from -- present company excepted, of course.

Of course.

In the end, Lovee had to go home without telling anyone what she'd meant to tell, had wanted to tell, what she needed so badly to tell: that she'd seen that little girl
again. A little haole girl: white skin, pink cheeks, bouncing a red rubber ball and singing a senseless refrain that Lovee herself had sung as a child.

"Four...five...six...O'Leary..."

Lovee didn't even want to think about the little girl; but she'd become obsessed with her presence: sun-bleached braids bouncing up and down among the frazzled branches of Lovee's raintree, rubber ball flying into the hollows and flowers of her African flame, flash of white arm, -foot, -leg, through the tangled vines that enwrapped her cup-of-gold. In sight, out of sight, flicker of smile, snatch of song: that little girl gave Lovee the goosebumps.

She hadn't told Aloha about her this time because the mood he was in she knew what he would say. He'd have scolded her again about the ao kuewa, the homeless ghosts doomed to groves of wiliwili and forced to shred spiders with their fingers, or chase dragonflies forever, because no one had loved them or taken them in. He would have warned her once more about the ancestral skeletons of the po'e kahikio, of their dead bodies sunk in the stagnant water of collapsed lava tubes which spread like veins from a single great heart, running down from Kilauea, makai through the jungle, to the sea.

Or, he might have pointed out that the little girl wasn't what was haunting Lovee at all, that she was just some shape or form of Pele the fire goddess, or one of
Pele's mean sisters set out to cockroach him, him, for cheating on his unemployment.

Not this time, Aloha, Lovee thought, taking the short-cut back to her house, across Kalanianaole Boulevard and around one end of the swimming lagoon with its black lava beaches edged in vivid bottle brush and thickets of white impatiens beneath blood-red ohia. Deeper into greenery, the jungle's moist arms closed warmly around her, quickening her breath with fresh alarm: false staghorn ferns rising fifteen feet high, the walking pandanus humping down to the sea, stiff-bladed pineapples, coconut palms, banana trees (bananas bunched upright, plump and taut, ripe for the plucking), and all the wild fruit trees: passion fruit, breadfruit, papayas, guavas, mangos; plus the foolish baloney trees, well-hung with baloneys (which were proffered free of charge: all pod, pulp, and seed, as harsh to the tongue as the taste of raw wool). No, if anyone's cockroached this time, Aloha, it's me.

The girl had begun her bedevilment one year to the day after Lovee's only friend, a cute "chop-suey gal" (doe's eyes, dove's voice) struck up with a canoe-paddler from Puna, a muscled kama'aina (oh! those children of the sun), and had moved to Honolulu with no looking back. Which had left Lovee all alone in her white frame house on Hilo Bay, five miles out of town, walls cracked, yard full
of trash, doors creaking off their hinges, and the whole place carpeted in roaches, blue mildew, and rot.

Aloha had warned her back then to steer clear of that little girl. "You don' get a hold on you'self, Grandma, somebody else goin' to do the job for you!"

By "somebody else," she knew he meant ghosts, spirits from the past, bones of the "old ones" crawling up from the cracks in the pahoehoe lava beds where the lava had hardened as it ran hot and steaming into the cool blue waters of the bay. Especially, he had warned her not to accept any gifts that that little girl might leave behind. "Keep any present from Pele," he said, "an' when bad stuffs happens, no blame me!"

But Aloha was always so melodramatic. He installed a back-up bell on his old Dodge truck, then he drove around backwards just to keep ringing that bell. Besides, there was still too much of the common-sense Baptist left over in Lovee for her to swallow all of Aloha's Big Island superstitions. And he had been wrong about the mongoos's passion for rats. True, they would take a rat now and then...if it wasn't too much trouble, but they far preferred scavenging the beaches of the swimming lagoon, where they could nose out bits of crack-seed and won ton chips from among the throw-away cans of Diamond Head Cola and' Primo. So, the rats bred freely in the sweetish bracts of oliana, and Lovee's jungle grew fraught with menace.
"...and that's not all we've got to put up with," she wrote to her brother back in Kansas. "Why, they've got spiders in there, spiders the size of the hat on your head. They've got spiders in there with red and yellow polka dotted stomachs, and eight rows of eyes, pointed stars on their backs big as cardboard boxes. And some are speckled blue on green, bottle green, poison green, green as poison adders. And, now you aren't going to believe this, but they've got spiders in there can build a web tight as cables up between two tall trees -- but not to catch bugs in, oh no! These spiders catch birds. That's what I said, BIRDS! In fact, I've got one of those spiders this very minute, looking in at me through my kitchen window."

This last was not strictly true. She could see the web from her kitchen window, if, she strained her eyes, and if she held her far-seeing glasses out in front of her face. But the spider itself was just a silhouette, high up and off-center of the web, black as an old severed hand, its legs like withered fingers, waiting for a house finch.

Most likely it was not looking in at her at all, but she wrote it the way she did because she simply had to convey to someone the desperateness of her situation. This, in spite of the fact that her brother never once wrote her back.

It wasn't long before she saw the child again. The little girl was out beyond the tallest of the coconut palms,
mauka, inland, from the swimming lagoon. Lovee heard her long before she saw her, the light voice skimming the green shimmer and shine of the morning.

"One...two...three...O'Leary!"

For just that moment in time, the little girl seemed miniscule, tiny, a mere dot against the seascape, pointless as a gnat. Partly occluded by the thick green wings and awnings of the jungle, she could have been a web-strung spider scrambling at the end of invisible rope, a point against the sun-dazzled backdrop of ocean. Or a dragonfly.

When Lovee climbed into her car, backed it out of her garage, down the short paved drive, out onto Kalanianaole Boulevard, a two-lane blacktop (bordered on both sides by warrior koas, green-bladed palms of varying heights, kukui-nut trees, aphrodisying grasses of laupono and manuele, and all this green growth roped and swung with the fat ropes of screwpine, smothered in the lushness of runaway lakana, suffocated in Arabian jasmine, while the thick-fleshed leaves of apeápeá arose and fell back in sweltering tangles of love vines; and all this wanton and unleashed life exuded the warm wet smell of its own boiled-raisin breath into an air so still it could have been glass) she saw that little girl telescoped through a peephole in the hanging of green, and Lovee could have been looking at herself.

The child appeared larger, closer, bouncing the red
rubber ball against the black stone that rimmed the lagoon. Under one arm she carried a big floppy doll, a *haole* doll, *haole* like her.

Lovee waited, foot on the brake, engine running, waited to catch the child's attention, to wave to her and call out, but that little girl did not choose to answer.

In the late afternoon when Lovee came home, she found the girl had come all the way up to the house in her absence. The doll had been left like trash on the tarmac of the drive, its arms and legs obscenely twisted, its head cracked open like an accident victim's. Lovee had to stop the car, get out, pick the doll up, all the while looking around for some sign or signal from that little girl, and halfway put out because of this inconvenience, when the doll's glass eyes jumped open and stared straight into hers. "Wuv..oo," it said, plain as day. "Wuv..oo.."

Behind two rows of teeth, pointy teeth, rats' teeth!...a red felt tongue curled like a worm. "Wuv..ooo." And then the doll made water in her hand. Warm liquid oozed through Lovee's fingers and splashed on her school-teacher's shoes. "Wuv..."

"Oh."

She had not expected that. She had not expected it. She dropped the doll into the stiff green weeds and the "poison grass" on the jungle side of her driveway. Even then she could hear it: "...wuv ooo..."
In her square-heeled shoes she clattered up the steps, into her musty old house, locked the door. She went into the bedroom, got into bed, covered her whole self up with a blanket. She stayed that way, wrapped in her tomb, until hours later when Aloha stopped by to see "if or not he could lawn-mower her yard," and she gave up her pride to pour out the whole dreadful story.

Aloha puffed out his cheeks. "Whoo-eee! Eh, Grandma, eh! Catch numbah one humbug bamboozle! No stink!" He whistled through his teeth. "Pele and sister, they come heah lookin'for me."

Next morning, when Lovee peeked over the wall, the doll was gone.

Then came a doorknob.

The an old alarm clock. Its hands were set for three minutes to midnight. Or, it could have been three minutes to noon, depending how she read it -- whether her life was running out, or (less likely!) running in.

And then came a monkey -- a monkey in a diaper. Lovee found it in her closet, clinging to an old flannel nightie on a day when she'd come home half crazy from trying to teach the Hawaiian English Program to kids that would rather be surfing.

When the monkey grabbed her thumb and sank its teeth in, Lovee went weeping and wailing to Aloha's house, though there came an awful storm of rain, rain that flooded the
lagoon and turned Kalanianaole into a throughfare for eels and maninis and butterfish and angelfish and groupers. She didn't drown, but she thought for sure she was going to drown before she got there.

Aloha, his wife, and his at-home children laughed when she straggled in with yet another tale of woe. "Monkey?" Mrs. Awahi exclaimed. "Wassa mattah you, you go talk monkey? No grow monkey dis' island! Grow shugah cane, grow papaya, grow worl' famous ukelele playahs, but nevah no monkey!" And when the oldest girl suggested that Lovee had been "tippling somet'ing stronger da kine," big Aloha burst into booming shouts of laughter, he was that tickled at the idea of Lovee all alone in her haole-built house, overrun with rats, haunted by ghosts, bitten by monkeys, all the while swigging at the bottle, trying to keep a grip on her sanity -- what was left of it.

With embarrassing clarity, Lovee began to see herself as Aloha saw her: pathetic, forlorn. Unwanted.

Time had gone by since her troubles with the monkey; the trouble with her life continued just the same. She found the ripe occasion to take herself back to the Awahi house, madder than get out, rats on her mind. She'd stumbled over six of them -- six of them! -- copulating in her garage, up on the hood of her car; and they had not run
away when she shook her skirt to shoo them, but had sat back and looked at her, twinkled their whiskers at her.

"You've got to chop down that oliana," she cried out the moment she saw Aloha. "It's an eyesore, a health hazard, and it's driving me crazy! You can't be getting any pleasure from it!"

Aloha clapped his hands to his ears. "Eh, Grandma, no huhu, eh? Bumbye you go crazy house, I go already wit' you, eh? Mo' bettah, no more rat talk, eh? Eh?"

She had found him as always on his bamboo lanai, dressed in hibiscus-print shirt and a pair of hot-pink tiki-god trunks, enjoying the air and sipping fresh pineapple juice with shaved ice and looking out over the silhouette rooftops of trees to see if the moon could rise from the tides of the sea to sail the dark oceans of Heaven. From an islet of light in the jungle below, Moki Kaikawana was strumming a guitar, while Mrs. Awahi and her dancing daughters surrendered themselves to the hula. The acrid scent of burning punk lent the single note of stability to the restless musks of the jungle.

Aloha was kinder when Lovee spoke to him alone. "Grandma," he said to her gently, "whyn't you go back home now? Go back to the Mainland, back wheah you-folk knows you and can call you by name."

"Go back?" The idea astonished her. "But this is where I am."
"You have so much sadness heah."

"I can't go back, never."

"Mainland mo' bettah, eh? Home folk mo' bettah."

What she could not explain was that one place is never any different from any other, that wherever you go you can never escape from yourself.

Since he refused to cut down the oliana that was causing so much grief, she asked a different favor. She wanted him to board up the windows of her house, rehinge the doors, put locks on anything that might get broken into. "Since that darned monkey, who knows what might happen?"

Aloha hemmed and hawed and didn't want to do it. "Dat Pele," he said, meaning the little girl, "she no good. She get mad, she burn me. B'rn us all. Dat Pele, she numbah one pilau news!"

"Fifty dollars," Lovee said.

"Cash?"

She held the money out.

Aloha huffed and puffed and rolled his eyes, but in the end Lovee got her way. It cost her though: "Fifty dollah cash," plus the price of "hammah-nail stuff," plus "plenny kaukau, plenny laulau," plus the price of a "numbah one rascal lu'au pig."

He saw her safely down the steps and onto the path towards home. "No mattah da hammah-nail stuff," he told her, his smile stretching out into the night, "what wants
in, gets in. Mo' bettah no try an' cockroach Ol' Muddah Natcha. Mo' bettah put on holoholo party slipper, eh? Make holoholo. eh?" He moved his hips but slightly.

This blow, so unexpected, stunned her.

What did he know of her and her life?

"You go on into town," he said softly. "Slick you'self up, you be one good-looking wahini, no stink!"

Who was he to judge her? Who gave him the right to tell her what she should do? Did he think he was Dear Abby? Miss Manners of the jungle? Her psychiatrist? She wanted to stomp off in a flare of rage. Instead, she fought back her anger, volcano-like contained it. All the way home, down the path her feet knew so well by now, each slick rock, each sharp-spiked patch of bamboo, each low limb, each snarling tooth and vine, she fought back her indignation. He had been only trying to help her. He had been talking to her as a friend, nothing else. Half-way home, in the darkest avenue of jungle, she heard the very sound she did not want to hear just then.

"...wuv ooo..."

It could have been a night bird, a tiny o'o disturbed in its nest, or a nene...no. She heard it again, that unmistakable baby doll whine.

"...wuv ooo..."

She hardly slept a wink that night.
Next morning when she went out to get her car to go to work, she found the red rubber ball placed squarely in the center of her welcome mat, smack in front of her screen door. The moment she saw it, it stopped her cold. She shifted her pocketbook and all her graded papers from her right arm to her left, and she stooped down and picked that ball up, and she threw it, threw it hard as she could, straight back into the jungle. There.

In the late afternoon, all tensed up and exhausted from teaching, she came back and found Aloha with twenty or so of his "bruddahs" and his "calabash cousins" out in her yard, chasing each other around her house with their shirts off, their brown skins slick with sweat, ginger blossoms stuck fast in each black brush of hair, and singing some nonsense or other about "...the sweet pakololo blossom, oh sweet grass of the rain forest!" Some of them were working on her house.

"Eh, Grandma!" they shouted, grinning and waving, and giving her the sign of Island friendship, thumb and little finger extended, a little self-confident flick of the wrist. "Shaka, Grandma!" they called from the midst of their frolics. "Shaka!"

Lovee locked herself in her car, with the windows rolled up, and she stayed that way, though the car was like an oven, until all the work she had asked for was finished on her house and all the workers had gone home.
Through the next few days, Lovee gave herself time to think things over. She'd gotten so nervous and jittery, she telephoned the school, too sick to teach anybody anything they didn't already know. She spent the next three days up on her own second-floor lanai, with her glider turned to just such an angle she could gaze out over the ocean, past the shadowed lagoon to the open water where the currents of the bay swirled out into the body of the great Pacific, glimmering in all the colors of jade, of turquoise, of lapis lazuli, to a point where the colors thinned to a bright edge of silver so sharp and blinding it burned her eyes to look at it.

Beyond this last glare of water she should have envisioned Japan (cherry trees, pagodas), but she saw instead the plains of Kansas, and she was a sunburned girl again, beneath the Kansas sun. Her mother was there...her father...the mop of a dog that had run at her heels...the boy who had loved her and had turned her down. They were gone now, all of them, maybe dead. If they were dead now then so was she, to all intents and purposes she had murdered them with forgetfulness, if forgetting is that serious crime, murder of the self's own heart. She had retired herself to this island of grief and had not been able to free herself of it. Never a native, ever an exile.

By Monday she felt much, much better. It had rained in the night, and the morning sun shone hot. From her open door she could see the snowy cone of Mauna Kea, honed to a
knife-sharp whiteness against the unthinkable blue of the sky. She took its beauty as a sign that Somebody up there cared for her. She felt more like herself, like the person she was meant to be, wanted to be, until she went down to unlock her car to drive herself to work and found that little girl again.

Primly, like a deer from a forest, the child crossed through jagged clumps of green and scarlet ti plants, through vines and ferns, stepping through clouds of white impatiens, no effort at all. She could have been floating. There she was, big as you please, all dressed up in a cheap print skirt with pleats, a cheap little sweater in three shades of red, and a faddish tooled leather visor that read: BIG ISLAN' MO BETTAH, something a tourist would go for. Mainland shoes on her feet, bows at the ankles, taps heel and toe; she made a snotty little tap, tap, ka-tap, tap, up the length of the drive, just as if she owned it. Something large and shiny rested on her shoulder. She steadied it with one languid hand, up the steps and onto the porch. She dropped the thing ka-plunk in front of the door.

What was it?

For a moment or so, Lovee couldn't move. She was all at once too tired to move. The morning sun turned hateful. The girl looked down on Lovee from her place on the porch. "Whatcha goin' to do, Grandma? Call the cops?"

Tap, tap, and down again -- back into the jungle.
Lovee put everything down on the hood of her car. She didn't want to do it, but she made herself climb back up the front porch steps to get a look at this latest development in the sorrow of her life. The box was larger than the washtubs her mother had used on laundry day, and shinier and oblong, sort of like an insect casing, sort of like a shiny metal cover for a dried-up mummy wrapped in rags. The lid was so cunningly fastened she could find no joint, no seam, no hole for a key. When she rapped it with her knuckles it echoed. She wished it would go away. She wished she had never come to this island.

She could have ignored it. She could have gone back to her classroom and pretended the box had never been there. Her principal had already told her he'd be glad to hand her her walking papers, tenure or no, if she didn't shape up. He'd take it to court. The way she felt she didn't much care if the kids ever did learn to speak Standard English. And, if they wanted to smoke pakololo in the toilets, throw firecrackers at each other, frizz out their hair with sharks' teeth, and spend the rest of their natural days surfing in their birthday suits -- well, let them! If she'd had someplace to go, she'd have gone.

Dolls that could talk, door knobs, monkeys in diapers, and now this. What did this signify anyhow? A coffin? Was she supposed to climb right in? Did Somebody think she was as far gone as all that?
She went into the house, checked the windows, shut the doors, bolted them. She lay herself down on the bed, too weak to stand.

Someone knocked at the door.

Lovee would not answer it.

Someone knocked louder.

"Go away!"

The knocking grew insistent, first at the door, then at the windows, and then it wasn't knocking any more, it was rude, rude banging. Lovee knew what it meant: the little girl had come for her.

She didn't have to get up if she didn't want to. No law on earth said a person safe in her own paid-for-house had to go willy-nilly to open the door for any Tom, Dick, or...

Silence was worse.

What was she doing out there?

"...wuv ooo..."

The voice was in the room. "...wuv ooo..."

Flat on her bed with her eyes wide open, she heard the vaguest little sound, like maybe spiders dropping from the ceiling. Or was it rats' feet, just before a storm? Or...?

It was.

It was raining in her room. Queer sort of rain. Fell straight down from the ceiling, as if her ceiling were the real true Heaven. As if the other Heaven had never existed
except as a pretty in a fairy story. As if the only real world took place in Lovee's locked-up house, and she was at the very center of it. Rain dripped steadily onto her bed. It drizzled, monotonous, across the dull furniture. At last she got up and did what she had to do. Went to the door.

The little girl let herself in. The same sweet smile as always.

Together, like family, they went into the kitchen, and there stood the big metal box. The little girl knew exactly what to do. "It's easy," she said, unlocking it, "once you know the secret." Again the smile, the gracious waiting. Two ratty braids swung over her shoulders. "You must, you know. It's time."

Yes, yes simple enough. First one foot, then the other. Would she fit? Oh, yes. If she squatted down, bowed her head, tilt a little sideways, tight, but she could do it if she had the will to...held her breath, oof!, sucked in her stomach. Nope. Shoes. Lovee stood up to untie them, and that's when the little girl pushed her. "Hurry up!"

Well, this made Lovee mad. "I'm doing my best," she said.

"I don't have time for old cows like you."

And this made Lovee madder than mad, burning up mad. "Just you watch out!"

"Shut up. Get in."
The girl's white face floated overhead, her eyes bright blue, vertical openings, shining with a demon light. "You're taking up my time!" she screamed in a high, tight voice. "My time, my time, my time."

"Not your time, little girl!" Lovee screamed back at her. "It's my time. I'm not finished here yet. Not by a long shot!"

She grabbed that nasty little girl around the throat, grabbed her ratty hair, grabbed the cheap little sweater, grabbed her by an arm, a leg, grabbed her and would not let her go no matter how the child fought back. The girl bit her, and scratched her, kicked her with her hard Mainland shoes. "Not me, little girl!" Lovee screamed, having found her true voice. "Not me in the box, not me, I won't!"

All the rage so long contained in her exploded.

It was the little girl who went in. The doll too, darn it!

Lovee slammed the lid down hard and tight, tight all around, not so much as a braid-end sticking out anywhere. She would not have opened it up again for all the tea in China.

It was a long difficult climb up the side of the mountain to the death pit of the "old ones," the po'e kahikio; the path was treacherous with sharp rocks and a film of green slime painted over them. Burned by sun, bitten by
insects, stung by tiny flying things, scared to death of spiders dropping down, scared of rats, and the shadows of rats, and the scuffling of rats racing through the underbrush, Lovee dragged, pushed, shoved, kicked that box and its contents up that jungle path until she got it to the death pit. The pit was long and narrow, a wound in the rocky mountain side so deep she could not see to the bottom of it, where the ancients had left the corpses of their ancestors -- but she could smell it. Sick with the knowledge of what she was doing, but going ahead and doing it anyway, she first tossed a stone and waited for the splash.

When it came, she waited a moment, then pressed her ear to the warm smooth surface of the metal box (for all the thumping inside, it could have been her very heart!), and she thought she heard the whimper of an old life running out. "...wuv ooo..." Fainter then, but clearly: "I-love-you. I-love-you."

What a lie that was. Merciless, Lovee pushed that box the last few feet to the teetering-edge of the death pit ...pushed it. She didn't take time to listen to the splash. Running, stumbling, falling, catching herself on a vine or creeper, making her way back down the mountain, moving through the lime-jello light, she was free.

The day she sold her house and put the final papers
through, Aloha stopped by to wish her well and to give her a garland of sweet-smelling maile with orchids from those that grew behind his house. He kissed her twice in Island custom, told her he would miss her. He told her about the party they would be having that night. "Gonna make one humbug rascal lu'au," he told her, eyes shining. "Make holoholo all night -- whoooee! Stay another day an' you come, too! Make fo' one good time, no stink!"

Standing there in her Mainland clothes, in her high-heeled shoes and stockings, her airline ticket in her purse, Lovee felt her heart go out to him, this man-child of the lofting scented greenery. But she was changing, her secret self stepping out into the light, distinct from the thick green life she'd been lost in, distinct from the tides of the sea. She gathered herself close within herself, alien now and strange as a bus-loaded tourist pressed against the window of a tour bus -- just passing through -- one who did not speak the language.
Dancing In The Dark

Take for instance night before last when the bed catches fire, and I am the only one in it. He's got another woman. I know it. I've become a detective wired on clues. Stray hairs. Wind Song perfume. I've made myself an expert on cigarette butts, movie stubs, you have it. One night he comes home, his shirt inside out. There's a hickey on his neck. "You didn't get that working late at the office!" I yell at him. (And this marks the end of my salad days.) "You've found someone else, I'm not good enough!"

"You're right!" he yells back, and walks out. And that is just a preview of coming attractions.

Every day the phone rings. He's on the other end. "Hello?" I say. Who's there?" And then I get these smacking sounds of him and her smooching. I know what he's up to. He's driving me crazy.

And it isn't just the telephone. I hurry to the door. Throw it open. There stands my Walter with his latest blond. Or else brunette. It doesn't matter. He's got an arm around her waist, one hand at work inside her blouse. Her mouth is dark as a vacant lot, her eyes like searchlights. You'd think you'd plugged into the Playboy Channel, the way they carry on.

Very same thing at the mail. I've rented a box to discourage collectors. Stick in my key, unlock the lock.
I find objects in there no Christian should have to set eyes on. Like once I find a rattlesnake, and am I pissed. I know how it got there. I know what it means. It means: HAPPY BIRTHDAY, MAMA. He always calls me Mama. Right from the very first start it's been Mama this, and Mama that, Oh, how I love you, Mama! I say to him, "I'm not your mama, Walter. I'm your wife." And he says to me, his face all hot and shiny, "You'll always be my mama, Mama:

'Till the sands grow old
and the stars grow cold,
Till the mysteries of the universe unfold..."

I was the chosen one of my chosen one. We took the Slow Boat to China together. We promised away our forevers.

Now I say everything's falling apart. You don't believe me, take a look, take a good look at what's going on around you.

Take Friday, for instance. First of the month. Rent's due. Visa. Car insurance. Penney's Card. MasterCard. Conoco. The Power Man leaves a billet doux swinging on my doorknob. They'll have to shut the Power off if things don't start getting better. Out of milk, out of eggs, nothing to drink but water. And then they spring this blizzard on us: newspapers, t.v., radio. Everybody says it's coming. So I run down to SuperSave to stock my shelves with worry food: Lean Cuisine, pretzels, a gallon of Gallo's. You never know. Nacho chips with hot sauce. Taster's Choice.
Okay, I waltz out of the store and what do I see? The left front wheel of my dinged-up Toyota is missing. Gone. Not just the tire is gone but the whole kitten kaboodle: snow tire, hubcap, bolts and rim. The car stands stout and firm as a three-legged dog at a points match, rainbow decals on the windshield for Hope, GIVE PEACE A CHANCE bumpered on the back. I catch my breath and look around. Something funny is going on. I smell it.

The box boy settles the groceries down in the back. He is whistling a tune, Dancing in the Dark, the old tune, the real one, none of that Springsteen stuff, but our song, mine and Walter's. The box boy slams the door, makes sure its tight. He doesn't notice a thing. Or does he?

"Thanks," I say.

"Thanks," says he.

He bumps the cart to get it up on the curb, and I detect the odor of conspiracy cling to his SuperSave apron. You don't have to tell me, I know what's happening. I wasn't born yesterday. I do plenty of thinking, watch t.v., read the papers. I go back into the store and pick up an Enquirer, or maybe a Midnight, whichever. I know what to do when I'm hexed.

All the way home I'm scared the car will tip over, spill me out, kill me. I'm scared a cop will write me a ticket for breaking the BASIC RULE, but no.

The car stands firm. Walt's good at his tricks, I'll
grant him that. I've watched him juggle five oranges, play Moon River on a silver harmonica, keep a china plate spinning on a stick on the end of his nose, and all at the same damned time. And good china, too. Lennox. Who's watching him spin plates now? Who's urging him on. What's she got that I haven't? That's what I'd like to know. Everything's falling apart, because of him.

To hell with it.

I've got to talk to somebody, God. So, I call up my nextdoor neighbor, who owns two cars, both of them running, plus paid for, plus the big RV they travel around in on weekends, and she says to me: "Oh, my. You have got to be mistaken. A car can't run on only three wheels. A car like that would fall over. And what kind of person would think to take only one wheel? How far would that get him?" she says, all la-ti-da through her Oscar de la Renta and her diamonds, her husband at home and asleep on the couch in the den. "I mean, really? she says. "One wheel? Really?"

I watch Wheel of Fortune and I'm amazed. A woman of seventy-eight in a jumpsuit wins $23,000 in patio furniture, a Mercedes Benz, and an all-expense trip up the Amazon, simply for guessing what I could have told them all along: THERE'S NO FOOL LIKE AN OLD FOOL. Who doesn't know that? Who hasn't lived through it? I used to dance the jitterbug, now I go dancing through space. It's hell, I'll tell you. I'm a Moon Child, July 18th. Walter's a Moon Child too.
Exact same birthdate, down to the same day and year. Which only goes to show: What's old for the goose is still prime for the gander. It's not fair, but just try and change it. See where it gets you. Nowhere.

My hands shake. My brain's on fire. My heart of flesh has turned to stone. My nerves want to shake themselves to pieces. The house hangs awkward, empty, loose as a housedress, ugly as a shoe. The Lazee-Boy is his. It sits hang-dog in the corner and waits for him to come home. The pipestand, the hatrack, empty tenements now, like me. Our grief is awful. I leave the t.v. on for company, night and day, all the lights. I open the Gallo's for the Lazee-Boy. Put the Lean Cuisine in the toaster-oven, make coffee for me. I spread the paper out on the table, turn through the leaves like grave-dust.

EIGHTY YEAR OLD NUN IN KANSAS GIVES BIRTH TO SIAMESE TWINS, a first for that state. DEVIL UNCOVERED IN STARLET'S APARTMENT. I listen for Walter's step on the stairs. If he walked in right now he could have me. No questions asked. I'm his. DEMON CAT MAKES FIRST TRIP TO HEAVEN, SAYS ITS PEOPLED WITH MICE AND PAVED WITH JACK CHEESE. MIRACLE DIET MAKES TIME TURN BACK. Woman of fifty reverts to twenty-five, leaves spouse for boy of nineteen. MOON MAN GIVES AWAY MILLIONS IN SUPERMARKET SPREE. LIZ SAYS END IS NEAR. JOHNNY AGREES. Lean Cuisine is all sawdust and gravy. If you haven't been there, don't talk. I do what I
Tonight we have a two-hour special on sex and disease. Oprah Winfrey talks forever. Dr. Ruth is not that much better. We are cursed if we did, cursed if we didn't. What I'd like to know is, who has a choice? Where is he? I can't think. My brain's burned out. Numb.

Like a voice in the desert, like an inner tube tossed to a shipwreck, smack in front of my face:


"Oh, Sister Esmeralda, you've just got to help me."
"Says, who?"
"Why did he leave me?"
"You ain't got what he wants."
"Sister Esmeralda, I need money."
"Rob a bank."
"I need love."
"Buy a poodle."
"Sister Esmeralda, I've been hexed."

"Well, now we're getting someplace. Send me off a money order first thing tomorrow morning, then we'll see what we can do. Make that ninety-nine dollars and forty-seven cents. I'll toss in a Lucky Hand to boot. Now," says
Sister Esmeralda, "what's the news on this hex?"

So I tell her all about it, how we met. How I found him in a Christian Science Reading Room, dozing over a copy of PROVIDENCE AND YOU! I tell her how I took him home and shaved him, showered him, bought him his first matched socks. How I found him a job in an office, bought him a suit, tied his ties, starched his shirts. But how do I tell her he's driving me crazy. How do I tell her I wasn't enough.

When I fall asleep at night, my head pillowed on his arm, I dream of sugar hams. Cold nights like these, we fit spoon-to-spoon, frontside-backside, toasty as barbarians wrapped up in pelts. And little things: how his ears are tiny flags flat against his head, how he always studies the sky and says, "Be the Good Lord willin' and the crick don't rise," before he states his plans. He loves Neapolitan ice cream straight out of the carton, no other kind. Eats Oreos for breakfast, if I'll let him, likes Nabisco's honey Grahams before he goes to bed. He dunks his crackers in his coffee, and when he kisses me goodnight, he's all cracker crumbs and sweetness. "Goodnight, Mama," he says, with his little coffee peck.

"Let me get just one thing straight..." cuts in Sister Esmeralda on the phone. "You say you want this dim bulb back?"

Ninety-nine dollars and forty-seven cents...still no
relief. My Lucky Hand is apple green and guaranteed. Four green fingers and a stiff green thumb cut from poster paper, with Sister Esmeralda's name and number stamped across the palm. The Hand is fixed to a rubber suction cup by means of a lively wire spring. I've suckered the cup to the window of my rucked-up car, and the Lucky Hand catches all the unkind hateful thoughts my neighbors think, and it shoots those thoughts right back at them. I know it works, I've watched it. Still, when I think about Walter and what he's up to, and who he's up to it with, I can't help myself. I get mean.

And don't talk psychiatry to me, I've tried it:

Dr. Hearts: And what does getting mean mean to you?
Me: I can't sleep. Can't eat the way I used to. I drag through the day in bathrobe and slippers. Never touch a comb to my hair, why should I. Half the time I don't remember who I am, the other half I do. I write my name on bandaides, stick them up around the house, but that's no good. I've got a fifteen-gallon fish tank balanced on my head, and when I climb the stairs at night the fish go with me. I hear them whispering. I know what they're up to. They swim through my dreams.

"Hmmm..." says Dr. Hearts. He writes this down. "Now, what's the cause of all this trouble?"

"It's my husband, doctor. He's out chasing women."
He tugs at his beard, crosses his legs, pulls his socks
up...sighs. "And how does this make you feel?"

"It makes me feel like I'm not even here. Like I'm window glass, invisible. And it's not my fault. I've done my best. And it isn't as if I couldn't have had somebody else, I was some good-looker in my day. Betty Grable legs, Greta Garbo eyes, and I had a voice like Deanna Durbin, if anyone asked me to sing. I could have had any man I wanted. Armies, if I'd wanted them."

"Hmmmm..." he says. "Hmmmm..." He lights his pipe with a match, stares at the window. "What you seem to be saying is that you could have had me. Perhaps you think that is still a possibility?" A spark from his pipe flies into his beard. He beats it out with his hand. "Perhaps you've been dreaming of me?"

But no, "Thanks just the same. I've got enough on my mind what with Walter." For the magician there is no magic, that's part of the great design, one arm of my cross. The other arm is Walter, but I'll survive. Wherever I go my clothes fall off. Buttons pop, zippers flag. Double-sewed seams burst asunder. The bank I used to keep my money in collapsed last week in a snowstorm. I would never have planned it this way, but who asked me? Nobody.

Flies read your thoughts, they really do. They know what you're thinking. Did you ever fix your mind to swat one with a rolled up magazine, or with a book? Notice how he'll lift and light on something fragile the moment he's
got your attention. He'll settle on the one thing you most don't want to get broken. Your favorite cup, a piece of crystal. Then he'll sit and clean his eyeballs with his leg, thumb his nose. He'll see how far he can push you before you let go.

I've got myself a giant schnauzer. I bathe him, clip him, keep his whiskers neat. Summer evenings when the air is cool, I drive around in my three-legged car, my Lucky Hand waving to the neighbors. My schnauzer sits by my side. He gazes out the window, at all the frisky dogs out there running around and sniffing each other. The breeze ruffles his coat. His eyes are large and glad.

We stop off at Burger King. Or else Wendy's. We don't much mind which. One is as good as another in our opinion. I tried to buy a robot, and then a vulture. These would have been my first and second choice above a dog, but don't tell him. There's enough hurt going around in this old world as it is. I used the Visa to pay for him. As long as that and the gas card hold, I'm all right.

He doesn't have a name yet. I just call him Dog. We think we might keep it at that. After what I've been through with Walter, I've learned a thing or two: when you can't dance with the music, dance against it. The course of love never has run true. Walter hates dogs, they make him break out. Still, if he ever does decide to come back, I'll let
him. No questions asked. I wouldn't be able to help myself. Love's like that. Cruel.
Before they let her have her clothes back so she could go, they reminded her once again -- in the gentlest, kind­est, most compassionate voices -- that she could not see him again. Not in the way she claimed she had. "Oh, in the next life, surely, if you're of that persuasion," one of the doctors supposed, "but not in this world. What you see is what you want to see, a mental projection. This happens sometimes to those in certain circumstances." What she saw was her true heart's desire, and she understood this. Doctors are very scientific in their explanation. The dead stay dead. Buried is buried.

And yet she saw him close up this time, standing in the full light of the mid-morning sun, which made a dazzling halo around his good familiar head and shot a line of silver across his shoulders and down the arms that must have been cold in spite of the sun. There had been a frost the night before, and he really should not be out like this, in the chilly air at the edge of the freeway up-ramp, wearing nothing but those Penney's blue jeans and the black FOREIGNER t-shirt with the sleeves ripped off the way kids do.

The car she was riding in slowed to stop.

She gasped and waved. Her whole face liquified with happiness to see him. She would never have thought to find
him on this verge of grass beside the freeway. He'd been gone fourteen months -- if this was September -- and because of this she'd learned to hate the summer, hate the sun. He looked up at her and smiled, and she could see there'd been some reckless mistake on somebody's part: he'd never died at all. His eyes met hers, and his face too was full of joy, exactly like hers. It matched exactly. He waved an arm and started down the grassy slope toward them.

Her husband Will was driving, and though he slowed to stop, he didn't stop.

He had only slowed to enter freeway traffic. She could see this now, and she couldn't find her voice to make him stop. No, not voice. Words. She couldn't find the words that would make him believe her.

In the back of the wagon, their schnauzer panted and whined. "The dog wants out," she said, in a voice too shrill to be hers. But a hornet was raging against the tinted windshield, and Will swatted at it with a glove, making such a commotion she knew he hadn't heard her. He let the window down and the hornet blew out. By now they'd climbed the up-ramp, accelerated into the first lane of traffic out of Missoula, and were switching to a fast lane behind a White Express truck. The boy in the t-shirt was gone again, forever.

"You okay?" Will asked. He was wearing dark glasses and a plastic cap pulled down on his short sandy hair.
Like her, he was greying.

"I'm okay."

"You sure?"

"Why shouldn't I be okay?"

"You're quiet, Glenna."

"Is that an accusation?"

He sighed. "Observation."

"The dog wants out," she said. She'd been gripping the edge of the leatherette seat with such tension her fingers had frozen in their curled position. "Better stop," she said. "Frodo has got to go out."

"Frodo has always got to go out."

Like her, the dog was a relic from happier times, from the years when the children were young and she had read them *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, when they all had believed love lasted forever, that no harm could come if they loved each other. But harm had come. Frodo whimpered and whined, as if the harm were her fault.

"Dog's got a problem lots bigger than bladder." Will tugged at the visor of his cap, stared straight into the heart of the traffic.

"It's just that he doesn't understand," she said.

"Understand what?"

He flicked the signal light, glanced into the mirror, and started back across two lanes of travelers. "You got his leash?" he said.
"Somewhere."

What if it was too late? What if she looked back, and he wasn't there? But what if he was? Then what should she do?

By the time she'd found the leash and Will had pulled off the road, she was terrified. What if she'd been too slow, too stupid, too blind to save him? She might never get such a chance again. What if she'd lost him all over again?

Will waited, engine running, as she snapped the leash to the collar, hauled the dog out on the passenger's side, then stood shivering in the ratty old cardigan she had pinned together with a safety pin, stood on the pink and grey gravel at the edge of the tarmac, too scared to turn around and look -- then looking back anyway. She could just see the up-ramp with its blot of verge, a landscape snipped out of tin: postcard mountains, stiff blue sky, traffic grown sluggish with distance; but she couldn't see him. Even so, she knew what she knew. She knew what she had seen. She hauled the dog back into the wagon and they were on their way again.

They were on their way to meet their daughter Lisa at the family cabin on Flathead Lake: cherry trees, a boat dock, timbered mountains. The property had been in her mother's family for generations, since her great grandfather
bought it from the Salish for three spotted horses, a Monkey Wards Catalog, and a gallon of bootleg with a rattlesnake in it.

"It'll be good to see Lisa." Will said.

"Yes," she said. "Won't it."

She hadn't seen her daughter since June when the girl had won a fellowship and become involved in some sort of graduate research at Yellow Bay Biological Station, across one arm of the lake from the cabin. Lisa had written, in that firm unflappable script Glenna had always admired, that her car was on the blink, that she'd asked a friend to drive her to the cabin, and hoped they wouldn't mind that she'd asked him to dinner. Nothing to get excited about, she'd said, "just a friend," a young man who worked with her at the lab. "...it'll be nice to see you both." She'd added, "I've told him everything, and he says he understands..." Glenna read those words over, to get the deeper meaning of them: "so just act natural, will you? For my sake? Please?"

It was strange how if a thing or situation went on long enough it would get to feeling natural, so that any other way of seeing got pushed aside and was not remembered anymore. You learned to find happiness in a new way of seeing, with no familiar landscape, no faces you could count on to stay the same; what ought to be familiar had no more substance than some lurid and dazzling dream.
It was like that now. The circle was broken; they would be three, not four.

Frodo want out, again.

He paced the back of the wagon. He thrust his cold nose against Glenna's neck, then Will's. He glared at them through fierce brows. He whimpered, whined, grieve. He lay on his side and tore the upholstery. When Glenna reached back to stop him, he snarled.

"If he hadn't meant so much to the kids," Will fumed, "I'd take him out and shoot him."

"How you talk."

"Well, I would."

"You wold not."

"I'd throw him out the window, then. Let him go live with the coyotes, like Snoopy's brother...what's his name?"

"Do, and you throw me out with him."

"Hogwash."

"No," she said. "Truth. He and I are just the same."

They passed through the town of Ravalli -- two bars, a Buffalo-Burger Cafe, water tower, boarded-up church -- and were starting up the long steep hill out of town, when she saw the three metal crosses that marked the site of a car-crash. Someone had wired plastic carnations and roses to the white metal crosses, the flowers now faded and ragged with wind.
"What are we going to do with him?" Will said.

Glenna didn't know.

"Damned dog's like part of the family. Why do we do that? First to last, nothing but trouble. Eat like a horse, vet bills to pay, and they yap all night, chew things up, get the neighbors mad, and you've got to keep them clipped or they look like hell, then they threaten you, tear up your life, bring nothing but grief..."

He stopped short, shot her a look. "Hey..." he curved an arm around the steering wheel, placed a warm hand on her thigh. "Hey, look, Glen...sweetheart, I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking. Damn...now I've done it."

"You worry too much."

He took his hand back. "You know how I am."

"It's okay."

They had to stop twice again to let the dog out, each time a false alarm. Then Will wanted to buy gas in Ronan, a weedy reservation town, with nothing to recommend it except that he knew a gas pump where he could get premium for three cents cheaper than anywhere else. He asked if she'd like one of those Indian fry bread things they'd always enjoyed at this point on their journeys to the lake. He'd take the dog, he said, so she wouldn't be bothered.

"Fine," she said. "Sounds fine."

"Be right back," he called over his shoulder, then added, half-teasing, "Don't go away."
She could of course, go away. She had her freedom. Clouds in the sky could not have been freer. The plastic identification bracelet they'd sealed at her wrist was gone; she could be anyone she wanted to be, go anywhere. "It's up to you," they'd told her. "It's your life, you choose." Was this what she'd chosen? This life? This way of seeing?

Alone in the car, she grasped the door's curved handle. Children were playing in the street beneath the river willows along an irrigation ditch that bordered a frost-killed garden. Their yelps and shouts burst on the air like balloons. Past the willows, in the shade of the mothering trees, an old man swung his sickle against masses of vegetation, which he threw onto a bonfire. She watched him through the thick of smoke: husks, cobs, excess, vines, all of it into the fire. The smell gagged her.

She knew this garden from dreams: dead stuff, smoke, the flame. Oh. The children were playing with a goat, pushing it up into a wooden wheelbarrow. She could see their shapes through the smoke: two held the goat's horns to steady it, one snatched at its beard, two more pushed the goat up, lashed it to the wooden slats with a rope...or chain. Laughing, shrieking, beating on a drum, they marched the goat in procession toward the fire.

Jump...run...save him.

She could not move.

Something, someone, hidden in the sheen of smoke, in
the willows, hidden in the shade, someone moved, startled her, willow limb across his chest and face: an eyebrow, mouth, chin, then eyes again, in and out of dappled shade and sun, making a puzzle of his good familiar face, waiting to see what she would do. The goat's cries rose piteous in the smoking air. It was out of her hands.

Will was climbing in beside her, happy, excited, out of breath, letting the dog in first, then handing Glenna the brown paper sack of fry bread with hot butter soaking through, a handful of white fluttery paper napkins. He leaned against the gear box to kiss her, missed, knocked her with his glasses instead. "Oops..." he said, laughing, smelling like beer. He held up a Coors. Want one?"

"Makes me dizzy."

"Oh, yeah, medication. I forgot." He put the unopened can in the back.

Frodo growled.

Will slipped the ignition, slid into reverse. As he glanced back in the mirror, she explained she wasn't really hungry. He hadn't mentioned the smoke, the fire, the bleating goat. With him beside her the air shone crystal. The gentlest breeze stirred in the willows. "You're smart," Will said, pulling onto the street. "All that grease, that can't be good for you. You don't mind about the beer?"

"Of course not."

He gave her that grin that always used to warm her, but
nothing warmed her now. What she'd witnessed in the garden, her part in it, would stay with her forever.

Will opened the sack one-handed, got himself a piece of fry bread, wrapped one end of it in napkins to sop the butter, and waved the sack in her direction, but she was firm. The brownpaper racket brought Frodo lunging against the back of the car seat, snapping, snarling then yipping as if someone had hit him.

"Jesus H.," Will said. "What's with him?"

"He can't help himself."

Frodo lowered his head. He growled, rolled his eyes at them, sank back, chest rumbling.

"One thing I can't stand," Will said, "is a dog that threatens its master." They were back on the freeway, picking up speed.

"I can't think of anyone who likes it," she said.

Past Polson, they followed the gleaming curve of the lake. Traffic had thinned to a farm truck, a pickup full of Indians, one or two cars pulling boats. Farmland, ranch-land, shortgrass hills; a herd of horses -- manes flared against blue sky, running heedless, wheeled and disappeared behind a flat-topped butte. Where bare golden hills eased into juniper and twisted pine, Will left the freeway for the dirt road that led down into lodgepole, jackpine, spruce, darker and cooler than what they'd passed through.
A stranger's yellow Mazda stood under the pines in front of the cabin. Glenna steeled herself as Will slowed and parked in the usual spot beneath the old pine with its treehouse and tire-swing. She opened the door, breathed in the cool sharp air, climbed out -- stiff and achy from sitting so long -- and there was Lisa, sprinting up through the terraced juniper.

"Mom...?"

Glenna waited for the shock of embrace.

"Mom...you're late." The girl's voice edged on tears. "I was so afraid." She threw her arms around Glenna's waist, her pale hair shaded to green in the slant of forest light. Blue chambray workshirt, Banana Republic shorts, an appealing combination for young legs, slim waist, firm breasts. "Mom, I'm so glad you're here, so glad you're okay."

Will got out on his side slammed the door. "Hey? What about me? Got a hug for Papa Bear?"

Lisa ran to him, pressed her face deep into his shirt.

"Matt's here," Lisa said, as Will grabbed her and held her, rocking her in his huge embrace. "You'll like him, I know. He's down at the dock, netting up fish. He's really into fish," she said, laughing, red-cheeked. "He's an ichthyologist, you know what that is?"

"It means he's really into fish," Will said, and they laughed and hugged each other again, as Glenna stood feeling
heavy-armed and empty, separate and apart, like the Great Stone Mother holding up the sky.

"Mom," Lisa said, "he knows. I've told him everything. So just be yourself, okay?"

"I'll do what I can," Glenna murmured.

Lisa was wearing her yellow hair longer and fuller. She looked older; her face had lost its girlish shine.

"Just act natural."

"Natural?"

Will moved to Glenna's side. "Natural?" he bantered. He lifted his cap and settled it down tight on his head.

"What's natural?"

"Dad, you know."

He slipped an arm around Glenn's waist, drew her close.

"So who's not natural? Don't you know your mother and me? We're the original box of granola, we were buying oatmeal before it was chic. Bean sprouts, date-bran muffings, we led the pack. Don't worry about your mother, here. She'll do fine."

Lisa stepped back, abashed. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean..."

"It's okay," Glenna said.

"I really am glad to see you, Mom. Really."

Glenna waited through this, the fussing, the compliments, the protestations of love, and then Lisa said brightly, "Where's Frodo? Didn't you bring him? I thought for sure you'd bring him."
Will made a face.

"We brought him," Glenna told her.

"Where is he?"

"Off tormenting squirrels," Will said, "or maybe a grizzly."

But Lisa was rushing on, taking Glenna's hand, clasping her arm. "Mom, I've been so worried. What do the doctors say? Are you okay now, for sure?" She mopped at her damp bright face. "I felt so left out when you didn't want to see me."

Above the girl's shoulder, between her shirt and the farthest dark boughs of pine, Glenna watched the flat metal surface of the lake, watched how the tiny dock moved up and down, and she saw the boy there, a tiny figure, on the dock, fishing. She looked down at him, but she did not call.

Will put his arms around her and Lisa to guide them across the forest floor, over pine needles, sharp and brown, to the cabin in the juniper, dark pines stirring overhead. A flock of birds on quick bright wings flew out across the water, wheeled in the sun, and returned. Will searched for a key on his key ring, as Lisa dug her fingers into Glenna's arm. "Mom?" she said, in her little girl voice, "Aren't you even glad to see me?"

"You know I am."

"You don't act like it."

"I'm sorry, I'm tired, nothing more." She drew the girl
close, taking in the clean woodsy scent of her, trying to recall who she was, what the girl had meant to her, all the small attachments that had held them in place these twenty-odd years, and failed. In the cabin window, spidered over, dark and brittle, the tire-swing looked back at her, chickadees flitting from limb to limb. She could not remember the girl at all.

Will said: "She's fine, Lisa. Couldn't be better."

A young man, dark-haired, dressed in white, was making his way up the juniper terrace from the lake, coming up out of the lake, moving so smoothly through the slant of forest light that his feet did not touch the ground. "Matt," Lisa called, rushed and breathy. "Over here." She turned, pink and trembly, to Glenna: "Mom...please?" The young man raised an arm in greeting, and at that moment, Glenna saw exactly who he was. Nothing could disguise him.

"Mom, Dad," Lisa was saying, "this is Matt...Matt Ryan. He works at Yellow Bay with me. Minnows, freshwater ecology."

Will shook the boy's hand, greeted him warmly. Glenna stumbled through the introductions, not hearing what anyone said, because she couldn't stop staring at the boy, taking him in. He wore an old white lab coat, grass-stained, patched, pulled over a t-shirt, with a neat round hole where his heart ought to be. He gave her his hand, cool, not cold, and she leaned forward, slightly, smiling, slightly, and
whispered: "I know who you are."

He winced. "You do?"

"Yes."

He was wearing green-gold contacts to fool her, but she didn't mind. Always considerate, he wouldn't have wanted to frighten her. He had loved her, this child of hers. And she had loved him. She watched his eyes for a sign. One lower lid twitched, left eye. She saw it, and her entire light-filled being -- inner organs, skin, and bone -- could have resolved into jelly out of happiness. Yet, she had to be strong, not give him away.

"I heard about your son," he said, his words crisp and even. "I know how hard it's been for Lisa, it must have been even more painful for you. Please accept my sympathy."

She sucked in her breath, could not let it out. She hung where she was, without any bones, suspended in air by the touch of his hand. "Yes..." Her lips numbed, would not hold a shape. "...it was, is...we tried, but I couldn't..."

Will's arm was at her waist.

"My wife," he said, "has not been well."

The boy jumped back. "Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to..."

Glenna wanted him not to jump back. She wanted him to listen. She wanted him to hear her out. She wanted to tell him that they would do everything differently, now that he'd come back.
But Lisa wanted to drag him off to find Frodo. "You're going to love him," she said. "He's like a little goblin, funny, and so adorable."

The boy excused himself, and they left.

"How like him," Glenna said, to Will if he was listening, to herself if he was not. They were airing out the long-neglected cabin, opening those windows which had not been painted shut, letting in the sharp breath of evergreens, pulling the dust covers off the wicker furniture her mother had bought for a song in the forties. "How like him to apologize," she said, plumping a cushion that went to the lounge chair. "And to us," she said. "Imagine."

"He's a kid, Glen. He didn't think."

Will went into the bedroom. She heard him rummaging, then an "oof!" as he struggled with a window that wouldn't budge. She went in, still thinking about the boy, how glad she was that he was here, a lightness lifting her step, a loosening of the dread that had made her so stiff and silent. Will was sitting on the bed, his glasses folded on the dusty nightstand, the cap beside them. He yawned, stretched, pulled his shoes off. "I don't know about you, but I could use a nap."

"I wonder what he'd like for dinner."

"Who?"

"Him. The boy."
"Oh."

She perched on the edge of the mattress, wanting to talk about the boy, but not too much, not to give him away. "We've got those huckleberries I canned that summer," she said. "You know, when we had so many bears? I thought I'd make a pie."

"Pie?" He looked blank. "Oh, babe..."

She'd said the wrong thing.

He said, "I brought you here to rest, not wear yourself out baking pies. We need a break, Glen. We've been through a lot. And, we've got those grass-fed steaks in the cooler, they ought to be good. I'll do them on the grill, the way we planned." He lay back, his head on the pillow. "And we've still got that wine...you know."

"The birthday wine?"

"It'll just go to waste."

"Wine might be nice." She sat beside him on the bed, smoothing the hem of her skirt with her thumb, and he laughed that gentle laugh he used when he wanted to make love. "You're always a surprise to me, Glenna. All these years, and I never know what's inside your head."

Her weight with his drew them together like magnets. She felt this and started up. He pulled her back. "Stay with me, will you? I feel sad today," he said. "The drive, all the memories, I don't know. It's been so long since I've had you to talk to, and I've missed you." His hands
were large and warm. "Just talk, that's all. You're all I've got left, just let me hold you."

Around the eyes, his skin shone new and white, with two small red marks his glasses had left on either side of his nose. This was not the face of anyone she knew, had ever known. "Please," she said, "they might come in."

"Come in here? Who?"
"You know, the children."
"I'll latch the door."

His body tensed to get up, long legs, knees knobby as a boy's; his warmth flowed out from him, flowed around her, yet he stayed a stranger, a man she did not care to know. People you know are so easy to lose. She didn't want to lose anyone again. He jumped as if he'd heard her thoughts.

"Hear something?" he said.
"You."
"Something else?"
She heard Lisa, screaming.

Lisa stood in the yard beneath the trees, her hands clasped in front of her face. "Ohhh...!" The boy had thrust himself between her and the stationwagon. Frodo was in the back of the wagon, barking, his cropped ears flat to his head, his teeth bared. "What's wrong with him?" Lisa cried. "We looked for him everywhere, but he was still in the car, hiding. Look at him, he acts like he hates me!"
Will ran to her side, still barefoot. "You okay?"

"No..." She sounded unsure.

Will approached the wagon, reached for the door that stood slightly open. The schnauzer flew at him, and the boy shouted a warning. Froth stretched from the dog's jaws, across his chest, down the fringed coat of his forelegs. Will slammed the door in the animal's face. "Damned dog, I knew we ought to get rid of him."

"Dad, don't hurt him."

"He's probably rabid. What if he'd bitten you? What then?"

Glenna watched, transfixed. Danger made her feel slow, sleepy, like a watcher in a dream. She watched Lisa run to her father, grab his arm, and she heard Lisa cry, "Where are you going: What are you going to do?"

"Neighbors...borrow a gun. You and Matt take your mother inside."

Glenna felt a surge of strength. "No," she said. "No, I will not go inside." She heard her voice rise like a power too long submerged. "I won't go inside, and I won't let you shoot Frodo."

"The dog's crazy," Will flung at her.

"So am I."

"We don't know what he will do."

"Then shoot me, too. I'm no better than Frodo."
Will's fists clenched at his sides. Light through the boughs played across his face. "Well, institutionalize him then. I've had it. I'm through."

They waited; neither moved.
"So," she said at last, "that's how it is."

He stood spraddle-legged, trying to straighten his shorts, pushed back his mussed-up hair. "Damn it, Glenna, you don't have the franchise on grief."

"What does that mean?"

"It means you're damned unfair."

But Glenna was watching the boy. He had gone up to the wagon, was looking in the window at the angry dog. Slowly, he reached toward the door. He whistled through his teeth, tuneless, spoke gently to the dog. "Good boy...good old Frodo...things getting you down?" Soothing, gentling him with his quiet voice, the boy clasped the handle of the door Will had slammed shut, pulled it back.

"Matt."

Will pulled the girl back to safety, held her.

With infinite patience, the boy opened the door, a fraction, an inch, opened it to the width of the schnauzer's muzzle, to the width of his chest, a fraction more, and the dog jumped for his hand, snarling, teeth snapping on air. The boy grabbed the dog by the scruff of the neck, snaked him out, threw him to the ground. Frodo squealed, kicked, clawed at him, but the boy would not let him go. He pinned
him to the pine-needled floor, held him with his weight, fought the dog as if the schnauzer were a demon, or contained a demon. He pryed the dog's jaws open, let out a spume of froth. The dog gagged. He whimpered, lay still.

Lisa stared, white-faced. "You killed him. You killed my dog."

The air grew static with silence.
A flock of small birds fluttered in from the lake.
"Well?" she said. "Didn't you?"

Glenna took Will's hand, but they didn't speak.

The boy lifted the schnauzer's head, opened its jaws again, and this time drew out a shapeless bloody object. He showed it to the dog. Frodo sniffed it, pushed it with his nose. The boy looked up and grinned.

"What is that?" Will demanded, greenish in the forest light. "What did you do?"

"It's a miracle," Glenna said. "He's brought the dead to life."

The boy stroked the dog's rough coat. "It was nothing, a splinter of bone stuck in his throat."

Frodo licked the boy's hand. He jumped to his feet, shook himself, tried to climb onto the boy's lap, put his front paws on the shoulders of the boy's white coat, licked the boy's face and neck and hair, until the boy burst out laughing. "Hey, Frodo...enough is enough!"

And Lisa was kissing the boy, too. She pressed her face
to his, kissing his mouth, his eyes, his mouth again, kissing him as if she could not kiss him enough. The boy put his arms around her and Frodo, held them close. Then he got to his feet, helped the girl up, as Will looked on, bewildered. "If it was just a bone, why didn't I see it? I looked, I didn't see anything."

"It was nothing," the boy said. "Maybe it was in too deep, you didn't look far enough. I don't know."

"Whatever it was, it was a miracle," Glenna claimed. She felt new life, a new supply of energy, watching Frodo running in circles, barking. The dog jumped a dead fall, jumped a boulder, sailed over a clump of juniper. He treed a squirrel and ran back to the boy. He leaped into the air, twisting like a circus dog, stood on his hind legs, jumped into the boy's arms.

Will stared at the ground, made a circle in the pine needles with his foot.

Lisa said,"It's always easy to think the worst."

"I'll drink to that," Will agreed.

"The birthday wine," Glenna said. "Run and get it."

While Will went to get the wine from his cache in the cellar, Glenna changed into a long full skirt she'd kept hanging in the closet, a peasant blouse, dime-store earrings, a paisley scarf to toss across her shoulders to honor the occasion. She pulled her hair to the top of her head and
pinned it there with a butterfly comb.

Lisa wanted to go down to the lake to watch the last of the sunset. Frodo ran ahead of the party, wheeled around, came racing back. Will filled their glasses with wine and he carried the bottle. Glenna spilled some of hers, but what did it matter? The boy held her arm to steady her so she wouldn't fall into the juniper. Anything anyone said made her laugh, and she made them laugh, too. They were all together, exactly as they ought to be, friends, forgiven and forgiving, winding down through the trees, beneath the slant of changing light, single file, or two by two, arm in arm, helping each other watching their step. At the edge of the dock, in the cooling air, they toasted each other, drank to the mountains, drank to the lake. They listened to the shush-shush-shush of the wavelets' splash against the pilings, marveled together at the weight and mystery of the water beneath them, at the great bowl of dark water rocking with stars.

"Scary, isn't it?" Lisa's voice sounded softer than the little waves. The moon had come up and made everything shine.

"Not scary," the boy said, "interesting."

Glenna did not want to disagree. "Mysterious," she said. "There are things down there we will never understand."

"I will," the boy said. "At least some day, I will. It's my job to understand them."
Glenna lifted her glass. "To you, then."
Will's breath rushed warm against her ear. "Maybe you shouldn't be drinking."
"Maybe I shouldn't be happy," she said.
"Glen...
She tossed her glass across the body of water, whose darkness and depth included them all. The wavelets caught the glass and rocked it. The moon filled the glass with light, as if the moon loved it and would hold it forever. Glenna watched in astonishment until the glass began to slip below the surface, and she felt her heart sink with it. Lisa put both arms around her, cradled her, as they watched. "Look," Lisa whispered, "here come the gilly fish."
A cloud of incandescence rose to form a ring around the glass, encircled it, a vision of balance and beauty.
"Gilly fish," Lisa said more loudly. "That's what my brother and I always called them. Make a wish and it'll come true. We always wished summer would go on forever, that we'd never have to leave, that we could stay here at the lake forever. We loved it so."
"Gilly fish. That's lovely," the boy told her. "But they're really just minnows, silver minnows." He kept his arm across her back, affectionate, but insisting on the truth. "I netted up some of them this afternoon, along with some little zambesi."
"We called them gilly fish," Lisa insisted.
"Call them what you want," said the boy.

"We called them gilly fish," Lisa insisted, her voice showing more strength than Glenna had heard from her in years. "We called them that because they were gilly fish, and they were ours."

The cloud of light hung like a galaxy around the wine glass, balanced, burning in the water; the glass slipped deeper, taking the gilly fish of memory, lovely as they were, down into oblivion. Glenna felt the urge to jump in, go after them, bring them back in her arms, hands, the lap of her dress like a sack full of gilly fish, her stockings, her shoes, whatever would hold them she would fill full of gilly fish.

Will's arms held her. "They're still there," he said, "Just because you can't see them doesn't mean they don't exist."

"Of course," she said, calm again. "I know that."

The glow of celebration stayed with them as they returned to the cabin. Will and the boy donned chef's hats and did the steaks on the grill, charred on the outside, raw inside. Glenna and Lisa swore that was exactly how they preferred them. The foil-wrapped potatoes were perfect, hot and mealy, drenched with butter, like the rolls Lisa had brought, dripping with huckleberry jam. They devoured everything greedily. Even Frodo put on a performance: he sat up, begged for chunks of steak, rolled over, played
dead when the boy told him to, jumped to his feet at the boy's command. Whatever the boy asked him to do, Frodo did it. He loved the boy more than anything on earth. He would die for the boy, over and over.  

"You'll have to take him with you," Glenna said.  
The boy frowned.  
"He loves you so."  
"You mean the dog?" He looked ot the others seated at the table. "You're kidding," he said.  
"No," she said. "I'm not kidding."

The porch light was turned on to combat the coming dark. They had watched the moon make its way across the lake, watched it climb over the mountain. Now the air smelled of lake water, charcoal, and starter. "You saved his life," Glenna said. "You came here, you made him love you. Don't you think you owe him something?"

"But it was just a chop bone."

"To him it was life."

"Well," he said, "it is nice of you to offer me your schnauzer, but I'm afraid I really can't accept."

"Can't accept?" Glenna rose, trembling, to her feet. "What do you mean you can't accept."

"Glen --" Will started up, too late. The light that had filled her was turning to rage.

"What do you mean you won't take him?" She heard her own voice rising. "What kind of son are you?"
The boy was on his feet, glancing around, looking for the quickest way to get around the table, out the door, into his car. She could see this. She could see his face grow close with fear. His fingers curled at the edge of the table, and she thought of her own, how they'd freeze to anything solid. "You came here," she leveled at him. "You let us love you. Look what you have done to us."

"Mom," Lisa cut in. "Matt lives in Chicago, he's got an apartment there. They won't let him keep a dog."

Frodo jumped up to stand at the boy's side, head cocked, fixing the boy as if willing him to stay.

"See," Glenna said, her voice pitched so high she might never bring it down. "He knows you don't want him. You're breaking his heart. He knows you're talking about him."

Lisa said, quietly, "Come on, Matt. Let's go. She'll be okay. You will won't you, Mom? It's all the excitement, and...and all." She looked to Will. "Dad?"

Will held Frodo so he couldn't go with the boy and the girl when they left. "Run along, you two. It's been wonderful having you here, both of you. It's been great. Thank you, both of you." He paused behind them at the door. "We love you," he said.

Boy and girl stepped out of the light and into the dark of the forest. Two car doors opened, then slammed, one behind the other. Glenna heard the engine spark,
sputter, turn over, hum. Headlights struck the porch, struck the old pine with its tire-swing, struck the window of the cabin; the glass caught the light, flared with the momentary quickness of every living thing, and was gone. Will waited at the door, the dog in his arms, then settled the animal gently to the floor at Glenna's feet. She let the man take her in his arms, let him wrap his arms around her and hold her in the warmth of his body. She reached for the wall switch, turned out the light. She felt drained of a rage she hadn't known she'd held back. Together she and the man wept, let the grief go, shared this grief as they had never been able to do before.
The Hunter in Heaven

She had never wanted to travel. Lost tickets, baggage gone astray, standing in line to look at monuments when she could have been home basting a turkey. Or waiting for the phone to ring. Or cleaning the silver. She could have been watching the sun go down over flower beds of babies’ breath and larkspur, sitting in the shade of those trees she'd set out as seedlings and everyone said they'd never grow. They'd grown. The horse in the pasture -- the old blind hunter the children had ridden around and around, in and out among the apple trees -- had turned vicious with age and should be put down. She'd found a home for the cat.

"Homesick, Laura?" Her husband sat beside her on the plane, aisle-seat.

"Yes," she said, "a little."

She squeezed his hand.

He kept his collar up, his hat turned down to hide the illness in his face. The awful politeness that had come between them appalled her more than disease. She stared out the window at the silver tip of wing, below it the glittering sea.

"What if they won't let us see her?" he said.

"They have to let us see her, she's our daughter."

How could they not let us see her?
"They may not."

"They have to."

He made that peculiar sound he'd begun to make in his throat; then, "Well, what if she's the one...you know, what if she doesn't want to see me, the way I am now. What if...?"

Laura cut in, cross for no reason, "Of course she'll want to see you, you're her favorite. Cathleen always loved you best, you know that. Don't forget how much you mean to her, Stan. You shouldn't put yourself down."

"Still," he said, in a pliant tone, as Laura turned back to the window, "she might not."

That same afternoon, in a misty rain, rainbows dancing on the waters, they had to change planes in some nameless little jungle town off the coast of South America, boarding a twin-engined crate that would fly them to the Island where their daughter had said she'd be staying. Comic and crumpled, pathetic in transience, they did not know what they would find.

"No more chubby-cheeked bubblehead," Cathy had written them. "No more freckle-faced prom queen, smack-star, rah-rah flunk-out." She had died to the world, she said. She had descended into Hell and had risen again with the Children of Bliss, "a true resurrection," she said, "none of that Sunday School stuff. Bliss will never let me go,"
she said, "so don't come looking." She had found her place, her peace, her sacred mission, "as concubine, mistress, as lover of Bliss." Wild horses couldn't drag her away, she said. "So don't even try."

They had left at once.

"Tomorrow around noon," Bliss's representative informed her, smooth-mannered and gentle, when Laura called from a booth in the hotel lobby, parrots screeching overhead, monkeys swinging from the drenched green fringe of palms. "If all goes well," he said.

"If all what goes well?"

"If Bliss wills it, ah-men."

"Listen," she said, growling into the phone, the air so hot and humid it clung to her skin like a second skin, "my husband isn't well, he's dying. First he wanted to see the world -- Egypt, the pyramids, Bethlehem's manger, the Great Wall of China. He was looking for a sense of a firm foundation, something not to slide beneath his feet. Now he wants to talk to his daughter." They had thought that she was safe in college, running to classes, taking exams, becoming a grown-up, independent of her parents. "Her father is ill, can't you understand? He didn't want to tell her until he had to. The man," she said, "has reached the end."

Silence like a wall, then: "I am very sorry to hear
that."

"I need an answer."

A lesser silence. "We'll be in touch."

"Thank you."

"Por nada."

Now that they were here, safely checked-in, baggage delivered to the room, nothing to do but wait for some message from their daughter, Laura had decided to go out again, secretly. Secretly, she was going out into the night, and she was taking the Moroccan leather valise that held all the snapshots, all the boxes and boxes of slides, all the small plastic cannisters of undeveloped film they had shot on their journeyings: sunsets in Samarkand, trekking in Ireland, him on a camel, her on a camel, looking at Lenin, laughing at the Sphinx, relaxing on an altar stone in bloody Aztec Mexico.

And she was taking the travel log, that too, taking the journal they both had been keeping, keeping as fervently as dream fanatics keep their dreams, waiting for some bright design to show itself, to make things clear. But this had not happened. Beyond dates of departures and arrivals, what they'd had for lunch, how much they had paid, no design appeared. She had to get rid of this evidence, the last thing to do before the end.

¡Isla de Los Ojos de Dios! hotel brochures exclaimed,
Paradise on Earth! But what kind of paradise would claim a couple's only child, never let her go? And what kind of paradise, Laura asked herself now, would let a wife sneak off like the worst kind of thief, her husband of twenty-six years locked in the bathroom, throwing up? She heard the sounds of his sickness, toilet flush, the circling quiet.

"Is it bad?" she called, her head against the door.
"Disgusting."
"Old stuff?"
"Coffee grounds."

He was a large man, powerfully built, reduced to skin the color of masking tape draped from bones. Even as she dug through the luggage to get at the Moroccan valise, as she hauled out the big suitcase, unzipped it, searched around for the cotton sarong she'd bought that day in Fiji; as she threw the garment across the bed, dug for her big floppy rain hat, found the rubber thong slippers to replace the tight shoes, she could picture him there on the bathroom tiles -- his tourist shirt, khaki slacks, his socks and sandals.

On this zigzag trip around the world, most of his hair had fallen out. The dusky blue lump had risen even higher on his upper lip, roots like tentacles digging down into the sheetings of sinus, its blue-humped shape shoving his nostrils up like an animal's snout. He kept his head down in public, sported a wide-brimmed hat. He couldn't
kiss her. With this object like a chaperone between them, they spent these last nights together, side by side, arms entwined, two rag dolls staring at the ceiling; this, in spite of new longing, the warm familiar comfort of his body a new-made mystery, too fragile for passion, past all understanding.

She called again against the door, "May I come in?"
"No...please."
"Help in any way?"
"No, don't."

He sounded like someone already crossed over, calling from another shore, hollow, like a drowned man, like a man found hanging in a well, no hope.

"When you can," she called, cheerful, "come out and lie down. Such a pretty room this time. Wallpaper, a nice big mirror, clean white drapes across the windows. Cool, too," she said. "Air-conditioned."

She rubbed her goose pimpled arms with her hands, turned herself around in the room, a sense of wonderment arresting her, an amazement that she should be here at all, staring at the emptiness of such an empty room.

"Laura...?"
"Yes?"
She heard his groan, hardened her heart.
"You still here, Laura?"
"I'm stepping out to get some air," she said, loud
enough that he could hear. "I won't be long."

"Laura?"

"Yes."

She pulled off the pink suit, crumpled white blouse, her panty hose and bra. Naked, trembling in the dimly-lighted room, rain gusting at the window, refrigeration switching on against the Island heat, switching off again, she confronted herself in the mirror: silvered-blond, housewife elbows, stretch marks, skinny ribs, love handles. That face was not the face she'd called hers, those eyes not her own. She dropped the sarong down over her head, adjusted her breasts to the bodice, smoothed the cool fabric across her hips. The woman in the mirror did the same. Bitch, she said, softly. The other agreed. Laura settled the rain hat firmly in place. The other did the same. They watched each other slyly, made no sudden moves.

"I'm going now," she called to Stan.

He made a sound like her name.

"I won't be long. We can order room service when I get back, something soft, easy to swallow. Beer always helps after these attacks. And we've got a t.v. this time, we can watch that. It'll be like old times, remember?"

"Laura."

"I'll double-lock the door as I go."
She turned the television on for him, grabbed up the Moroccan valise, slid her feet into the cool rubber sandals, went out the door. She waited a moment for the click of locks, one, two, then turned and hurried down the darkened corridor toward the slant of greenish rain and light of the courtyard. Down rain-soaked steps lighted by sputtering torches, down through the hot sweet stench of vegetation, past tables with platters of strange exotic fruit, her sandals slap-slap-slapping down the shadowed terrace, along the gravelled path that followed the curve of a stagnant lagoon. Lanterns, white as winter moons, swung in the rainy wind. Rattle of palm fronds, rustle of reeds and waist-high grass, a hissing and sighing arose around her, cutting her off from the lighted hotel. A voice cried out -- man? woman? She could not distinguish. A band started up, tinny in distance, a chorus of drunkenness:

*En dónde está mi amor...los brazos perdidos...ay, ay, ay...* a blood-curdling sweetness, crash of crockery, microphone squeal.

The wind blew her hat off, sailed it out across the dead water. Ooze, mud; mud pulled at her sandals, swallowed her feet to the ankle. Barefoot, bare-headed, face streaming with rain and tears, her dress soaked through to the flesh, she made her way down to the edge of water, looking for the exact place to leave the valise. She had determined to leave it where it could never come back to
her again, except by the intervention of miracle.

She had known such a miracle once. She and Stan had found a suitcase on a storm-littered beach at Santa Monica, back when he'd been so strong and tanned, legs like tree trunks, and both of them so fierce with their desire they did not believe that either one could ever grow cold. They'd dug the suitcase out of the sand, stripped the fly-clustered seaweed free, broke the latch, and had found a small spotted puppy inside, alive. A terrier-mix, wrapped in paper, its chest barely moving with the throb of its heart; it opened its eyes and looked at them, loving them instantly.

She gripped the handle of the leather valise, lifted it, swung it back, back. Throw it underhand, let it swing forward by its own weight, by the weight of all they'd seen and been and done. By the weight of the slides and snapshots and cannisters of film, by the weight of the journal and the daily travel log, let it fly out across the skin of black water, let it go.

In the lantern light, the valise hit the surface, balanced up-right, and rode the top of the water in small astonished circles. In a gust of wet wind, it fell over. Water creatures skittered around it, masses of gelatine bodies moved up through the shadows, through the scrim of rainy light, turned the valise, over, around, dragged it under.
All at once the rain stopped.

Steam issued up from the ground.

From under the moons afloat on the water, frogs appeared. Black frogs, frogs the size of Pomeranians climbed up out of the water to hunker in the rounds of light, flicking party-popper tongues into clouds of flying insects. Smaller frogs fell from the trees. They hit the ground, thunking around her, then flying up like whirlagigs of croaking and gribbet...gribbet. They flew against her arms and legs. They tested her face with their little frog-hands, kissed the backs of her knees with their tongues. They clung to her shoulders, tangled themselves in her hair, though she slapped at them, flailed at them, cursed them and wept. They did not go away until the wind sprang up again, and a small hard rain began to fall.

Time froze into a single instant.

All action stopped in this watery place. As the world waited motionless and shocked, like a train that's jumped its tracks, Laura pulled herself together and went on: around the lagoon, back through odors of punk and kerosene, past tables of fruit, through the palms in the court, up wet steps set with flickering lights. The band had stopped playing. Nobody sang.

When she unlocked the door and went into the room, she found her husband asleep, t.v. on, sound off, his face
to the wall, his shirt and slacks hung over the bedside chair.

"Laura?"

He didn't turn around, just spoke her name softly, as he'd always done, knowing she'd be there.

"Yes," she said. "I'm back."

A shower, a change of clothes, and she would be her old familiar self again. What she'd been through still frightened her and she didn't want to frighten him. She started for the bathroom, reached for the light.

"They called," he said, before she'd turned it on.

"Bliss called. We can see Cathy tomorrow, not a long visit, but he said she's willing to see us. What the hell does that mean, willing?" He still had his head down, his words came out muffled. "Bliss said they're holding some sort of fish fry, we can see her then...if we behave. They'll send a car to pick us up, drive us to the compound, didn't say when. Said he didn't want to commit himself to worldly time." Stan made that queer little sound in his throat that Laura had come to hate. "And how was your walk?" he said. "Enjoyable?"

"Yes, it was very nice."

"You went alone?"

"Of course."

"I wouldn't mind you know..."

She stood in the open doorway, staring into the dark.
"Mind? Mind what?"

"You know." That odd little croak, then: "I just want to say, I'd understand...that's all."

In black and white, on the small t.v. on top of the varnished bureau, a woman held out a box of soap, presented this to them like knowledge. An instant's flash, and a second woman took her place on the screen, this one serious, sobered, seated on a dark-colored hunter, gauging the distance to the first rail jump. She urged her mount into a canter, sailed him over. A crowd looked on, but nobody cheered.

"There's only one channel," Stan said, as Laura turned the light on in the bathroom and made to shut the door. She could see him on the bed, propped on one elbow watching. "That's all that's on," he said, "the Olympics."

Laura sat with her daughter on a ledge of black lava stone and stared out across the deep blue water of a swimming lagoon. Behind them the sea rose and fell with heavy motion; above them the sun shone so hot and brilliant Laura had taken her sunglasses out of their case and slipped them on, though she hated the way they smoothed rough edges and falsified the light. Her daughter had not asked about Stan, and Laura couldn't think of any way to tell her.

"I've changed my name," the girl said brightly, leaning back against the lava stone, letting her long
frizzled hair swing free. She was wearing a bedsheets belt at the middle. Laura had never expected to see her daughter dressed in a bedsheets. "My name's not Cathy anymore," the girl told her.

"Oh?" Laura said, polite, "What is it?"

"Harmony." The girl spelled it for her.

"Nice," Laura murmured. "It has a ring to it."

The place where they sat had grown hot in the sun; pieces of the dense black stone glittered around them, sun on the water made water-quaver lights like butterflies dancing around them. Black birds with big yellow beaks swung on a vine above the lagoon. Laura watched them, trying to think how to tell the girl what she had to tell her.

"Harmony," the girl ran on, "so important in its implications, don't you think so? I mean, not just in music, but in life too. I mean, one by one we're individuals, each of us going alone our own separate ways, like we never get to know each other, like we're always strangers. But not here, not with Bliss and my brothers and sisters. United by love we form a wholeness, each with our separate parts to play. Hate divides, love mends the rift. You know what I'm saying?"

The sun was too bright for this conversation. All the colors too garish: primary blue of sea and sky, leaves too green, black and yellow birds, so many unbearable
blood-red flowers. She wanted to take her daughter's arm and run with her, take her back, take her home. She wanted to be young again herself, start life fresh. She felt the words rush up in her throat: Let's go, let's get out of here! Let's go home, home!

"I don't know if you can even understand this," her daughter declared, her chin tilted upward a little, surveying Laura from this superior angle, "but for the first time in my life I'm happy, really happy. Bliss has done this for me, he's..."

"Listen, Cath-

The girl's face tightened with anger. "Moth-er."

"Please, listen..."

"Why should I? You haven't heard a word I've said to you."

Two white gulls plunged into the sea, rose up screaming.

"Mother, you have to accept it, Cathy is dead -- passed away. Cathy is no more, kaput. Get the picture?" She crossed her legs beneath the skirt of the bedsheets. The sea breeze rippled her hair. "We held a ceremony, Mother. We even erected a tombstone with the old name on it. Cathleen Wheeler, Rest In Peace." She wrinkled her sunburned nose. "Want to see it?"

Laura politely declined.

"Listen," she said, urgent, "I've got something to
tell you, it isn't easy to tell you, and I don't know how to start, but...

At that exact moment a bronzed Adonis emerged from the depths of the gold and purple waters. Long-limbed, agile, he clambered up the side of the black stone ledge before easing himself down, naked and shaking himself like a spaniel. "So?" he demanded of Laura, "what do you think of her? Lovely, isn't she?"

"She's always been lovely," Laura snapped.

"But look at her closely, see how she's changed?"

"Mother," said the girl who was no longer Cathy, "meet Lamentation. He looks after us when Bliss is out of town."

Laura did not give him her hand.

"How do you do?" he said, rising up part way, cordial as though they were meeting at a garden party. "How nice to meet you, Mrs. Wheeler." The salt breeze lifted his chest hair, settled it in a smooth glistening patch still wet from the water. He rested one well-shaped hand on her daughter's arm, possessive, confident that his slightest touch could hold her in place, enchanted. Perfect teeth, smooth tanned skin, and with that thatch of bleached hair, he might have stepped from the pages of a magazine, from an ad promoting cigarettes, whiskey, expensive cars -- some attractive way to die.

"It was Lamentation who brought me here," the girl explained. "I was lost, but not any longer. Everything
"Sweetest, dear little Harmony," he crooned, caressing her arm, her hands, kissing her fingers as she sat so primly beside him on the glossy black stone. "In such a short time we've all learned to love her. Bliss is crazy about her, simply crazy."

"Harmony," Laura tried the name out. "Is that what you want me to call you, too?"

"And why not? It's my name, Mother."

The girl sat up sharply. "You don't like it, do you?" She frowned. "I knew you wouldn't like it, I'm almost sorry you came. I'm sorry I saw you at all."

Lamentation lay back full length up on the warm black stone, clasping his hands behind his head, eyes closed, excluding himself from any part of this argument.

"But it's a nice name," Laura insisted, "really. A surprise, but I didn't say I didn't like it, did I? It's very pretty, and it suits you. It has a certain poetry."

"It's not poetry, Mother. It's me."

Laura felt intimidated in a way she would not have expected. The fact that her daughter was dressed in a bedsheets, Lamentation in nothing, made her feel over-dressed and out of place. She'd left the sarong for the maid to launder, and she'd been so rushed when the car arrived early that she'd pulled on the first thing she could find, a pair of grey linen slacks she'd worn on a cool day in
Egypt. Stan had insisted they climb the Great Pyramid, and their guide had stolen their camera, jerked it right out of Stan's grip as her husband was snapping her picture. Robes flapping, tarboosh slipped to one side of his head, the guide ran back down through the out-of-breath climbers, leaping from stone to stone, shouting, "Stop, thief! Stop!"

She wished she could tell her daughter this story. Maybe they could be friends again. "Harmony," she said, "I've got something I have to tell you, about..."

Lamentation rose up between them. He placed one finger on Laura's lips, shook his head in a kindly manner. "Remember our agreement?"

Laura glared at him through her dark glasses.

A group of children burst through the gates of the compound at the top of a gently sloping hill. Tanned, naked in the sun, they came whooping down the incline and when they reached the stone ledge, they dived, jumped, belly-flopped into the water, arms and legs for just an instant all skittered in the sun. They hit the water as one, sent a surge of water high into the canopy of leaves and vines. Macaws scattered, screeching. A golden bird with scarlet wings flew back and forth across the lagoon crying the same two notes, over and over.

The children rose to the surface, paddled ashore, climbed the ledge again, finding handholds and clefts in
the stone. They held their delicate bodies well away from the razor-sharp ridges. Sea birds screamed above them; spangles of sunlight flitted about them, touching them with butterfly kisses.

Laura had met these children when she first arrived: Sunlight and Shadow, Shyly-I-Greet-Thee, Flower Babe, Go-Forth-Shining, Love-Overcomes-Me, and the child they called Star Skirts. With the ease of small monkeys they climbed high into the trees to throw down coconuts, guavas, bananas. Three women came down from the compound, gathered the fruit in baskets and carried it up to the house, and the children returned to their game, racing down the gentle slope, linking arms, throwing themselves into the water, sinking, and rising again.

Lamentation jumped to his feet. "Here I come," he shouted. "Look out!" He dived into the deep swirl of waters, clad in silver bubbles like a suit of beadwork, leaving a silvery trail behind him like a jet stream, before he rose to the surface.

From where she sat, Laura could see the other Children of Bliss gathered around the house in the compound, an old-fashioned Christmas card house with sunlight windows, grey clapboard siding, its red roof pitched and shingled, barely visible through the tangled vines and leaves.

"I love it here," her daughter said.
"It is beautiful."

"Don't ask me to leave, to go home."

"Oh, I wouldn't," Laura promised. "I can't."

"I know that's why you came."

"Oh, Cath-"

"Mother!"

"It isn't that at all, that's not why I'm here." She waited, her eyes on the children swimming through the water. "We sold the house."

"Sold it?"

"Yes," she said, "sold it."

"But you can't." The girl's face had gone white beneath the peeling sunburn. "You can't have sold it, it's our house, our home...home is forever, for always."

"Nothing is for always, Cathy."

In the silence that followed, Laura allowed herself to think how it might have been: driving up the canyon road, turning onto their street, parking in front of the double garage, the dogs rushing out all panting and spotted, the cat in the window, fuschias in baskets. The grass would need mowing, the hedge need a trim, apple trees blossomed or fruiting, the quilt she'd been piecing taken up again, the warm arms of family -- embracing, demanding.

"He still drinking?"

"No. Well," she said, truthful, "a little beer."

"Where is he then? Why isn't he here? And it was
my house, too. You had no right to sell it. I suppose he
got caught in that scam he was running, swindler swindled,
catch like a trap in a trap."

"No," Laura admitted, "nothing like that."

"You don't have to defend him, you know. He didn't
want to see me, did he? Like I'm some big embarrassment,
right? How does he explain me, Mother? What does he say
at the club? Well, I don't care if I do embarrass him,
after all the ass-covering we've had to do for him."

"It doesn't matter any more."

"You're right, it doesn't."

The girl they'd called Cathleen drew her knees up
stiff to her chin, wrapped her arms around her knees,
pressed her face into the bedsheets skirt. Laura reached
out to comfort her, the girl jerked away. "Leave me alone."
Tears smeared her face. "Go away, leave me alone."

Laura drew a long cold breath. In spite of the sun,
she felt chilled. At the compound, a fire licked red and
orange flames from a barbecue pit. Young men and women,
lean, strong-limbed, carried platters and plates to
Tables set out under white-flowered trees. A woman in a
bright blue apron stood over the fire, frying fish. Even
down here, the smell of fish and oil and barbecue flame
lay lightly on the air. Laura said, "They didn't tell
you, did they?"

"They tell us what we need to know."
"Your father is dying."

This sounded so cold, so slow, it might have come from that far-off land of ice and deception, far from this sun, this green and vibrant island. "A lump was diagnosed malignant, he hasn't got much longer. And he did want to see you, that was all he talked about lately, how much he wanted to see you, ask your forgiveness."

"Forgiveness."

"Forgiveness for what, I don't know."

"It's not true," she said, her voice a small cry.

"It is true."

"It can't be true, please say it's not true."

The salt breeze rattled in the palm fronds, fluttered the bedsheets, mussed the girl's heat-frizzled hair. "I won't let it be true," she maintained. Freckles stood out like points of fixity against the paled skin; bared feet curved to the curve of black rock. Behind her, a pelican plummeted into the sea. "Mother," Cathy cried, throwing her arms around Laura's neck, around her shoulders, drenching Laura's face with her tears, "I didn't know, they didn't tell me. I want to go see him, where is he? Mother, please, please take me to see him. I have to see him, now, before it's too late."

"He was waiting to see you, Lamentation wouldn't let him in the car." She clung to her daughter, held her so close, alive and warm.
"They're like that here. They're afraid we'll leave if things go wrong at home."

"He hasn't got much longer."

"Take me to him now, please. I want to go now."

"Yes, let's go." Laura had never felt younger, stronger than at that very moment.

Laura got to her feet, helped her daughter up, and there was Lamentation running toward them, running across the broken lava stones, through the tangled vines and groves of wild flowers, the sky hot and blue above him. He had pulled on a long brown robe, had thrust sandals on his feet, and his sun-bleached hair flew out behind him.

"Hey!" he yelled. "Hey! What do you think you're doing?" He hauled the girl up in his arms, she pulled away, kicking and screaming. "Mother, she cried out, "Mother, help me."

Laura grabbed the man's arm, pulled him around, struggled, fought to free her daughter from his grasp, but he was stronger. "Let her go," she pleaded, weeping, tearing at his robe, "she's mine. She's all I've got left, she's mine. If you've got any love in you at all, let her go, please."

Lamentation began to sing, the more the girl struggled, the sweeter he sang. "Harmony," he crooned, "sweet, sweet little Harmony, we love you here, we need you. Cathy is dead, we buried her remember? You are one of us, sweet
Harmony, you're not of their world, you're a Child of Bliss, and you are beloved."

A troop of young women hurried down from the hill. Strong, determined, they threw themselves between Laura and her daughter. They encircled Laura with their arms, embraced her, sang to her, sang her songs about the love of God and the gentleness of Jesus. They sang of one world, one mind, one spirit over all, how every one was part of One.

Singing, they led her away, away from the light-spangled water, away past the round-eyed children, up to the compound, past house and flame, beneath the fruit trees, out through the chain link gates, out through the shady yard and into the car that waited, its engine started and running. "...the divine will of Bliss," they sang. "Acceptance and faith, that's the only way." Goodness held the door -- or was it Mercy, with the braided hair? They strapped her safely in, locked the door.

Lamentation slipped in behind the wheel.

"She'll be okay," he said. "Harmony's strong, she's got spunk. Look, she'll do fine. Relax, don't look at me that way." He raced the engine, let up on the brake, and tires squealed as he left the gravel drive for the two-lane blacktop that would lead them back to town. They passed a yellow sign with CUIDADO GANADO in bold black paint, a speckled lizard clinging to it upside-down. "We don't like
outside interference," Lamentation confided. "Jesus, but Bliss will be pissed if anything happens. I should have been more careful, watched you closer. Christ, will Bliss have a fit."

"But she's my daughter, my child."

"Not any longer."

"You can't just keep her here."

"Look, she's the one who wants to stay. She came here of her own free will. Everything she's ever wanted is here, right here."

"So you say."

"So does she."

"May I see her again?"

"If all goes well," he said, no need to explain.

"I hate you," Laura said.
He gave her his charming smile. "Most mothers do."

"No, I mean it. I hate you, I wish you were dead, all of you."

He stroked his chin, let up on the gas. "I know," he said, gently, returned his gaze to the road, "and I don't blame you, not a bit."

They rode in silence, past the seawall holding back the sea, over an old stone bridge that spanned the lagoon where she'd left the valise, past an old white-haired woman walking her dog. Lamentation waved to the woman, she did not wave back. "I used to have this problem," he
said, while Laura sat thrust forward, hating him. "I doubted myself, doubted life, doubted the power of love. I felt alien, you know how that is?" He looked at her. "No," he said, "I guess you wouldn't, you're the kind that always fits in, one of them. Me, I was always out of touch. Hungry all the time, you know? Like my folks promised me an electric guitar for Christmas when I was ten, and when I woke up and looked under the tree, hell, there wasn't any guitar, just some kind of concrete stadium seat? By twenty-five I was dead, strung out on booze, drugs, pills, women. Then Bliss found me, and here I am -- happy. You know? I want Harmony to have the same."

"Will it last?" she flung at him.

He shrugged. "Does anything?"

They took the long drive through squat ugly trees hung with paper streamers. A mariachi band was playing for a busload of tourists in front of the hotel. Laura went in through the lobby, took the elevator up. Key in hand, she waited a moment at the door, before she went in.

"Laura...?"

"Yes, I'm back."

She found the t.v. on, sound down, still set to the Olympics and the steeplechase events. A woman on a tall dark hunter lifted her helmet in salute to the judges. She cantered her mount to the first set of jumps, higher, wider, more dangerous than any Laura had ever confronted before.
Room service had come and gone, leaving trays and covered plates, napkins and dinner ware littered on the floor. But there was no valise -- no miraculous return. She saw this, and struck by what it meant, scarcely noticed when the woman on the hunter rose into the air -- stopped on film, hung suspended -- and might have hung that way forever, if Laura hadn't raised an idle hand and shut the set off.

For years to come she would dream of that particular woman. She would dream of her mounted on a stallion, swimming through deep and dangerous tides of the ocean, and she would dream the animal washed up on a tropical island, the woman almost dead. Awkwardly, as horses do, the hunter would thrust its forelegs out into the sand, would draw itself upright, spraddle-legged, trembling and glinting, seaweed in its mane and tail. Nostrils flared, eyes bright with sun, the horse would nuzzle the woman awake.

Sometimes the woman was Laura, sometimes a woman she could not name. Either way, she would wake to the morning wonderfully refreshed. Either way, she would feel no compunction, whatsoever, to write this dream down.