Distances

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DISTANCES

by

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Contents

a story and a novel

Going/1

Shade/26
Kaley Jacobs’ grandmother had been dying for a year, and now she
was finally gone. Kaley sat on the couch in her father’s ocean-side
condo sipping a small glass of whiskey and ice while her father talked
on the phone in the bedroom. He had the door closed, but whatever he
was discussing—she assumed it was funeral arrangements—wasn’t going
well. He kept raising his voice, then lowering it as if remembering he
had company.

The room was packed with flowers—roses in dimpled green vases,
carnation-trimmed wreaths, baskets with somber ribbons—but oddly the
apartment didn’t smell like much. It was only cold from the air-
conditioner and a little stale from cigarettes. Handfuls of flowers
covered the bar, where Kaley and her sister Diane had started
rearranging them for something to do. They couldn’t agree on what
looked good, though—Diane lived in LA and had weird taste—and then
she’d left to go shopping with their mother. Kaley had abandoned the
flowers, not knowing what to do with them.

She leaned forward on the couch and peered out the sliding glass
doors. On the balcony, her eight-year-old daughter, DJ, was doing plies,
using the railing as a barre. She was taking ballet this summer, though
she’d missed two classes this week since they’d had to drive down from
Virginia for the funeral. DJ was wearing a one-piece swimsuit that
Kaley's mom had given her. The bathing suit had a row of sunflowers where DJ's breasts would someday be. DJ was as flat and thin as a blade of sawgrass. Kaley wished lately that she looked more like her daughter. That brown skinniness, the peachfuzz on her arms and legs. She looked like a twig you could snap, but she also looked like she had no problems. Earlier, at the beach, DJ had done a running grand jete across the sand--un-self-conscious, legs perfectly scissored through the air. It made Kaley's heart sing. There wasn't enough room on the balcony for her to do more than a little stretching.

Kaley suddenly smelled cigarette, and her father, Ned, came out of the bedroom. He was tall and still fit--every inch the retired airline pilot, the captain--but his hair had gone increasingly white since Kaley had last seen him, only six months ago. He strolled into the kitchen and started fixing himself a drink.

"When's Teddy getting here?" he asked her across the bar. He glanced at the mess of flowers but didn't say anything.

"I'm not sure if he's coming tonight or tomorrow. You know Teddy," Kaley said. She had no idea where her husband was, but she knew he'd show. Teddy was never on time, always off doing something you couldn't guess beforehand, but if he said he'd be somewhere, eventually he'd get there. He had promised to make it to the funeral, even though he and Kaley weren't living together just now.

Her father wandered out of the kitchen holding a drink in one hand and his cigarette in the other. He sat on the loveseat across from her and rested his feet on the coffee table.

"Your Uncle Carl wants to throw your grandmother into the river,"
he said.

"Come again?"

"He wants to toss her in the river. Let her be free, he says. Just chuck her."

"You had her cremated?" Kaley asked.

"Yup. She’s in the closet."

"In the closet," Kaley repeated. She thought he might be joking, but his face told her otherwise. She looked over her shoulder toward the bedroom.

"Well, where was I supposed to put her? They just give you a box. She’s on the top shelf." He sipped his drink. "So Carl wants to chuck her. Throw her in the water."

"Why?"

"How do I know? I keep saying--Carl, we’re pretty conservative at heart, you know? We’re a nice, normal family. We don’t throw our dead away. We don’t sprinkle them. But Vicki likes the idea. She thinks it’s nice. I don’t get it." He jangled some change in his pocket.

"What do you think grandma would want?" Kaley asked. She was looking at her father’s hair, at all the white in it. She was almost 30, which made him nearly 60. She reached over and stamped out his cigarette where it rested in the ashtray. She saw a flicker of annoyance, but he let it go. He had bigger concerns.

"I don’t know what she wanted. She never discussed it," Ned said. "Carl seems to think she was tired of her body. He says she shouldn’t be shut in a box and locked up in some vault. He says she deserves her freedom."
Kaley got up to make herself another drink, just a little one. It was true her grandmother had lived in a nursing home with Parkinson’s for almost as long as DJ had been alive. Kaley had never gotten used to it. She couldn’t imagine that her grandmother had, either.

“It’s not really for grandma, though, is it?” Kaley asked from the kitchen. “It’s for Carl and Vicki. It’ll make them feel better. I bet grandma doesn’t care.”

“That’s what I told them. It’s not her in the box. She’s gone. It’s just a gesture, whatever we do.”

“How’d they react to that?”

“You know Carl. All he wants to do is make his point. He never really listens.”

Kaley came out with her new drink. Ned was watching DJ on the balcony. DJ was standing with her feet on the bottom of the railing, swaying back and forth as if maybe she was singing. Her head just reached over the top. She was due for a growth spurt soon, Kaley thought.

“Is DJ coming to the service?” Ned asked.

“You mean the toss?” She gave him a clowny smile.

“Don’t be smart. Any service we have.”

“I don’t know. Does she have to?” Kaley asked.

“I think she’ll want to. It’s her grandmother. She’ll be sorry if she misses it,” Ned said. “No matter what hare-brained, dumbshit thing we end up doing. It’s still important.”

“It’s traumatic is what it is.”

“People go through trauma,” Ned said. “Part of life.”
Yes, Kaley thought, sipping her drink. But can’t I protect her from some of it?

In the last year, ever since Kaley’s grandmother had started her slow, clear decline toward death—and just after Kaley turned 29—she’d started thinking every so often that she might need to scream. It only happened when Teddy was around. They would be sitting innocently on the couch, and the feeling would well up inside her out of nowhere, a tidal wave from her gut heading for her throat, triggered by nothing she could name except a deadly, general malaise. She would find herself thinking, *If you don’t get the fuck away from me—this, in the middle of the Jim Lehrer News Hour.* But she never did it; she never screamed. She’d go see what DJ was up to, or take the Discman into another room, put in some Bach and slip off into a Baroque haze. Sometimes she’d shut the back door quietly, and just sit on the step there, watching the yard and breathing.

This anger was a phase, she thought, like any other. All relationships had them, she knew that much. She waited it out. But the phase went on too long, or Teddy started feeling it, too. Maybe he just got worn down by her sadness, or by the quick flares of unexplained anger in her eyes. He could sense it all, she knew. Who wouldn’t be able to?

Sometimes, usually lying in bed before they turned the lights off, they’d look at each other sadly, miles between them, both seeing only the distance clearly—everything that caused it confusing, jumbled, a big mess, really—their distance the one understandable,
knowable thing. It made Kaley want to cry, how their faces got stuck in these sad, knowing, frowny smiles. But like the screaming, she didn’t actually cry, either.

Then Teddy came home one afternoon and said he’d asked Melanie, up the street, whom they knew—a regular customer at their yard sales and DJ’s lemonade stands—if she would rent him the in-law apartment behind her house. It was a tiny bungalow, just a bright main room with a single bed tucked into the wall, a bathroom, and a kitchen. It had been a ceramic studio once. Melanie said sure, why not? She didn’t need money, particularly, but she didn’t mind the company since she was disabled and didn’t get out too much. And it was nice and close, Teddy said, just down the block.

So he moved some things over there and everything shifted suddenly in one quick jolt. It was like those mini-earthquakes in California Kaley’d heard about—you’d come home from work and half the photos would be off the walls, their glass lying in shards on the floor, but that would be the only evidence. They never talked about divorce or dating other people, nothing like that. Teddy still came to the house all the time. Sometimes he’d stay for days that felt like a reprieve, all of them sitting on the couch eating popcorn. Like old times, except they’d never done that before.

She wondered when he was going to ask for a legal separation, or if he was. It was the one thing she prayed about, besides DJ’s well-being. Over the sink, watching robins in the yard—Dear God, if you are out there, don’t let him go any farther. She kept waiting for signs he’d ask, a sign this was the day—coming through the door in a paint-
splattered T-shirt, needing sugar for his coffee, cup in hand--the day he was going to say something. Mention lawyers or court dates, or drop some woman’s name. It had only been two months now that he’d had the bungalow. Surely, Kaley thought, it was still possible to fix things. She just had to figure out how.

When Ned took DJ out for a hamburger and a shake, Kaley called Ollie Dutcher. Ollie was Kaley’s closest friend from high school. Sweet Ollie. They’d dated as teenagers, but let it go when they went to different colleges. He’d been at Kaley and Teddy’s wedding, and they still talked on the phone. It was one of those friendships endlessly on hold, in exactly the same place as they’d left it. Only their lives were different. Ollie’d been a poet in college--even gone to graduate school for it--but now he was in real estate with his dad.

“Did Teddy come down with you?” Ollie asked.

Kaley stood in the kitchen, mixing herself another drink. Why did she have to answer this question over and over again? She almost said something nasty but stopped herself, realizing she was very nearly drunk. Ned would have to drive her and DJ to her mom’s house, where they were staying.

“Teddy’s on his way,” Kaley said.

“On his way,” Ollie repeated.

“It was easy for me to get time off, but he had to wait until the weekend.”

She sipped her drink, testing its strength, and heard Ollie take a drag on his cigarette.
"How's DJ?" he asked.

"She's good. A little quiet."

"It's got to be hard for a kid."

"The funeral? Yeah." She walked out to the living room, past her ugly flower arrangement.

"All of it. Death, impending divorce--"

"We're not divorcing," Kaley said with as much indignation as she could muster.

Under the lamp on the endtable she noticed an old picture of her mom and dad with Diane and her when they were just little girls. They were all at the beach. Kaley and Diane were the focus of the picture, wearing shorts for some reason rather than bathing suits, and her mom, Emily, and her dad--this was before the divorce--were in the background, just blurs on a blanket. You wouldn't know it was them unless you knew.

"If you're not divorcing, what are you doing then?"

"We're just taking a little break. He's giving me room to pull myself together." This was how she explained it to everyone.

"Is it working?" Ollie asked. "Are you pulling yourself together? Do you feel more confident about the marriage now?"

She sighed. "Shit, Ollie. I don't know."

"You do know," Ollie said. His voice was insistent, almost angry. "In your heart of hearts, you know. I always think people are copping-out when they say they're confused. We always know. We're just often too wimpy to admit what we know. We don't want to deal with the truth because it's hard."
Kaley looked out the window of the condo. It was getting dark. “Are you analyzing me? I can’t deal with that right now.”

“I’m not. I’m just trying to help.”

When they hung up, Kaley stepped onto the balcony. The apartment was on the tenth floor, and the view was nice, all fading sky and ocean past a ribbon of sand. The heavy air smelled of salt and seaweed. She remembered to pull the drapes closed behind her. Loggerhead turtles came up on the beach to lay eggs and got distracted by the lights of the condos. The baby turtles, when they hatched, thought the lights were the moon. So now everybody had these heavy black-out drapes they used during turtle season. Ned left his up year-round, which was probably just lazy, but Kaley thought it was sweet.

She sat on a patio chair and gazed at the darkening ocean, listening to the waves. Maybe Ollie was right. Maybe she did know what was going on between her and Teddy, but she wouldn’t look at it, wouldn’t admit it. But how could it be too late between them? Didn’t that mean she was just giving up? She might be blind, but she wasn’t the type to give up.

Down on the beach she could just make out the edges of three warning stakes arranged in a triangle of orange ribbon marking a nest of turtle eggs. Kaley figured she was like the turtles. They didn’t give up just because things got a little confusing. They kept going up on the beach, digging around and doing their business. If something startled the pregnant turtles, they’d just come back the next night. It was the baby turtles who got screwed. When they hatched, all they knew was to follow the light, one pinprick of thought driving their bodies,
and they tried, even if it left them in the parking lot or on the shuffleboard court in the paws of some condo cat.

DJ, Kaley, and Diane were eating breakfast at Emily’s the next morning when they heard a car in the driveway. Kaley and DJ both recognized it as Teddy’s truck. DJ jumped up from her cereal and ran out to the portico. They’d all been swimming earlier and were still in their damp bathing suits. Kaley had been flipping through one of her mom’s catalog’s while she chewed her toast, looking idly at the guys’ clothing, thinking of how things would look on Teddy.

Teddy carried DJ into the kitchen. Teddy’s mother was Venezuelan, and Teddy had her dark eyes and hair that curled at the ends. He was wearing a T-shirt, shorts, and flip-flops. Even so, he seemed to fill up the room. He’d always reminded Kaley of a light bulb, perpetually on. Kaley knew she still loved him. When had that become a question? Teddy set DJ down and kissed Kaley on the cheek. Then he kissed Diane.

“How’s everybody?” he asked.

“We’re managing,” Kaley said. She looked at DJ. “It’s sad, but we’ll make it. We’re thinking about grandma a lot.”

DJ nodded solemnly and stuffed her spoon back into her cereal.

“How’s Ned doing?”

“He seems OK,” Kaley said. “He’ll be glad you’re here.”

Kaley’s mom came in from the laundry room carrying a basket of clothes. She was in her early fifties, thin and blonde, and she moved and spoke with a quickness that Diane had inherited but somehow Kaley had not. She stopped when she saw Teddy.
Teddy kissed her hello; Emily put up with this, but just barely.

"You look great," Teddy said. "So does the house."

"Thank you," Emily said. "Nice of you to join us. Where’re you coming from?"

Teddy crossed his arms over his chest and strolled to the sliding glass door where he looked out over the screened-in pool.

"Mom--" Kaley said.

No one in Kaley’s family had ever understood Teddy’s personality or why Kaley put up with it. They liked it when he was around—he was fun to be with—but after Kaley and Teddy had been married a few years, it was as though everyone expected him to change. Kaley hadn’t expected it. It was part of why she wanted him. It saved their lives from dull routine, from the numbing rhythms of repetition. He was always bringing stuff home—old furniture, someone else’s home movies, bucketed shrubs to add to a maze he was designing in the backyard, phonograph records coated with dust. DJ had six twenty-dollar bicycles Teddy had fixed-up and painted. Now when her girlfriends came over everybody had a bike to ride. Teddy was king of overnight trips planned on two-minutes’ notice. He’d pack up the tent and strap the canoe to the top of the car and off they’d go to cook dinner by the side of a river. Sometimes they’d just drive into the mountains until they got tired, then look for a motel. Periodically he did disappear without warning for most of a day, but if it got real late, he’d always call.

Teddy turned away from the window. "I stopped on Amelia Island," he said, putting his hands on DJ’s shoulders.

Kaley knew he wasn’t going to say anything else. She got up from
the table and went to the coffee machine, mostly because she wanted to be standing for anything that happened. She was afraid of her mother’s further questions and Teddy’s lame answers. His non-answers.

But her mother just nodded, probably because of DJ.

"It’s pretty there," Emily said, picking up the laundry basket and heading for her bedroom.

Teddy got a mug out of the cabinet for coffee. He put his arm around Kaley’s shoulder as he poured himself a cup. She felt a sudden, intense relief at his touch. Normally she’d ask what he’d been doing on Amelia Island, but she didn’t want Diane or Teddy to think she was asking for the same reason her mom had asked, out of anger or resentment. She was used to it. It was as much a part of him as anything. She put her head on his shoulder. Teddy stroked her hair. She couldn’t remember the last time they’d touched each other this way. Probably he was being nice because her grandmother had died, but Kaley didn’t care why it was. She only wanted it to last.

"Daddy, watch me in the pool," DJ said, heading out the sliding door.

"OK," Teddy said. "I’m watching."

"Come out and watch me."

"Hey, you just ate," Kaley called. "You’ll sink like a rock."

"I can see you from here," Teddy said. "I’ll be there in a sec. Just let me get some coffee."

DJ ran across the porch and cannon-balled into the deep end. Kaley winced.

"Mom’s just stressed," Kaley said. "It’s the funeral. Diane, are
you watching her?"

Diane nodded. "She's swimming. She's fine."

"She'll get cramps," Kaley said. "All the blood's at her stomach."

"Your mom's never liked how I am," Teddy said. "But you know how I feel about that."

She did. He didn't care what anybody thought. As long as he and Kaley understood each other, that was all that mattered. He'd always said that.

She noticed some yellow paint on his shirt. When she scratched at it with her nail, Teddy gave the top of her shoulder a little squeeze and let go.

"That's from last week," he said, smiling. "New project." He'd done some painting in college, but only picked it up again after he moved out, so Kaley didn't know much about it. "I'm just starting to remember some things. Technique stuff."

Kaley nodded. As far as she was concerned, this painting felt almost the same as if he had a mistress--she didn't want to know. And also, she did want to know but felt she couldn't ask. The questions seemed almost too important: Why this? Why now? Are you changing, or have you always been a painter, and I didn't know? That was the question that killed her. It was the thing that made her think maybe he was different now, maybe they didn't know each other so well, even after nine years. She knew it was unlikely that he was radically different all of a sudden, but was it possible? What else didn't she know about him?
Later, Kaley and Teddy took DJ to the beach. Kaley wanted to keep DJ away from as much of the funeral preparation as possible. There were too many heated phone conversations at Ned’s about what constituted a proper burial. And Teddy seemed to want to get away from Emily and her judgments, which Kaley couldn’t blame him for.

Kaley sat on an old blanket, watching DJ comb finger marks in the sand. She was writing some big word. Kaley couldn’t read it. It was upside down and too far away. Her eyes weren’t that great. *Do a grand jete,* Kaley suggested telepathically. She’d love to see those little legs flying through the air. She considered clapping her hands briskly as DJ’s teacher, Miss Debbie, did in ballet class to get the girls moving. Miss Debbie, the wanton sexpot. Some ballerina. She had this tangled hair and eyes that turned up at the edges, and she pinned her leotards into a plunging vee over her non-existent chest. She was skinny like no other skinny, and looked ready to kick the shit out of somebody in a street fight. She had the longest legs Kaley had ever seen. The longest, hardest legs. But she looked trampy. The mothers complained among themselves. Like a courtesan. Not much of a role model. But Christ, could she dance.

Teddy was swimming, walking, swimming. He couldn’t sit still. She wanted him to come over and sit with her and talk, but she was afraid of breaking their delicate balance. She remembered his arm around her shoulder that morning. They were being nice to each other, and she didn’t feel so angry here. She supposed it was because of her grandmother, the loss taking some of the pressure off, getting them
both thinking about different things. It was amazing how a few days
could open your eyes, re-arrange your priorities.

She watched Teddy dive into a wave. As he pulled himself out of
the water, she called to him. He came up and sat on the blanket with
her, dripping.

“How’s it going?” he asked.

“DJ’s getting hungry.” DJ hadn’t actually said it yet, but Kaley
could see it in the way she moved. DJ literally slowed down as she got
hungry. Her movements became choppier, and she stopped what she was
doing a lot.

“We forgot to bring lunch,” Teddy said. “Let me dry off, and I’ll
be ready to go.”

“No big rush,” Kaley said. “What’s she writing? Do you know?”

Teddy shook his head. DJ moved away from her word and started
scouring the beach again, looking for shells. She’d tried that earlier,
too. There wasn’t much. You could find almost anything on the beach
except a shell. Still, it was pretty.

“When I was in high school I found a raft washed up on the beach
here,” Kaley said.

Teddy looked over at her, shading his eyes. “What do you mean?
What kind of raft?”

“I think it was from Cuba.”

“Really?” He lay back on his towel and folded his forearms over
his eyes. “Jesus,” he said. Teddy had beautiful skin, a perpetual tan.
Kaley wanted to kiss his exposed tricep but stopped herself, startled
by the idea. She hadn’t felt like doing anything like that in a long
time. Was this her grandmother’s influence?

“There was a lot of activity from Cuba right then,” she said. “It tended to come in spurts, or at least it was reported in the paper that way. It was only part of a raft, actually. It had broken up. But it was totally handmade, fence posts lashed together with vines. I’d never seen these vines before. They were nothing that grew around here. Incredibly tough, like green rubber.” She pictured them in her hands. She’d been alone that day, just out for a walk, and there it was on the sand.

“The leaves were still attached. And the fence posts had nails sticking out of them. The vines were what blew me away. How could they think it was going to be so much better here that they trusted vines and old fence posts on an ocean?”

“Vines and fenceposts that broke apart,” Teddy said.

Kaley nodded.

DJ ran up to the blanket, holding a stick.

“You shouldn’t run with sticks,” Kaley said reflexively. DJ made an eye-rolling, exasperated face and dropped the stick.

“You hungry?” Teddy asked her.

DJ nodded, circling her foot in the sand.

“Hey, is that a ballet exercise?” Kaley asked.


“Why don’t you show daddy some ballet?” Kaley asked. Jete, she thought.

“Yeah,” Teddy said. “Let’s see it.” Ballet class was new enough that Teddy hadn’t been living with them since DJ started it. Like his
painting, Kaley realized. What was happening to them?

“No,” DJ said. “I don’t want to.” She looked over her shoulder to where her bucket lay capsized on the sand.

“Want to build a castle?” Teddy asked. “I’m an excellent architect.”

“I want a sandwich!” DJ cried, twisting her body in frustration.

“C’mon. Get your bucket,” Kaley said. “Jacobs family’s going for sandwiches.”

DJ ran off. Kaley felt Teddy watching her closely as she shook out her towel and grabbed DJ’s sandals and shovel. She’d started to sweat. She knew what she’d said.

She turned to him. “What?”

He shook his head.

DJ was coming toward them but was just out of earshot. “We’re still a family aren’t we?” Kaley said, low.

“Yup,” Teddy said. He stood and lunged for DJ’s waist.

“Yup, what?” DJ asked. Teddy lifted her over his head. DJ squealed.

“Yup, it’s absolutely sandwich time.” He put DJ under one arm as if she was a football and started running for the car, dodging invisible players. DJ screamed the whole way. Kaley gathered up the rest of their things slowly and followed, listening to the beautiful sound of DJ’s happy cries.

That night after everyone was in bed, Kaley sat by the pool in a T-shirt and underwear, drinking a Cuba Libre and thinking about the
refugees. The night was warm, and bugs clicked in the bushes around the porch. She hadn’t thought about that raft in such a long time, but recalled its power on her as a girl. Those vines!

It was late. Diane was staying at their dad’s, and Kaley’s mom had gone to bed hours ago in her side of the house. Kaley sipped her drink, watching the motorized sweeper flap lazily along the bottom of the swimming pool. She didn’t know why she’d turned the thing on. The pool wasn’t dirty. She just liked the noise it made. Thup, thup, thup, thup. It was relaxing, the sound of something being accomplished.

Had there been such tremendous mystery in Cuba or mis-information about what life would really be like for the refugees once they got to the United States? Sure, refugees had been treated well in the 70s before the Mariel boatlift, almost welcomed as a symbol of Castro’s failure. But all that changed under Reagan and Haig. She’d seen pictures of the over-crowded detention camps in Miami. If the issue was not life-and-death, was it only that hope obscured things, not allowing them to see the truth clearly?

Kaley got up to check on DJ, who was asleep in her old room. From the doorway, Kaley could hear her breathing. It was dark in the bedroom; she could see her own shadow in the dresser mirror, the dark blur of framed photographs on the wall. She glanced down the hall to Diane’s room, where Teddy was. The light was off, but the door was open. She wondered if Teddy expected her to sleep in there with him. She didn’t know what she’d do. Sometimes they still slept together, sometimes not. It always made her sad now when they did. Tonight they hadn’t talked about it. He’d kissed her lightly after reading books
with DJ and gone to bed.

She went back out on the porch, taking one of Emily’s catalogs with her and the phone. She’d seen a shirt that would look great on Teddy. She suspected he needed some new underwear, too. She dialed, told the customer service person what she wanted, and recited her credit card number.

She watched the pool sweeper while she finished her drink. Then she went inside, mixed another one, and came back out. Next month she was 30. If it were she, could she take DJ out of the country on a raft? No, of course not. She shot the thought down the moment she had it.

But if it were just she and no DJ, would she go? She sat at the edge of the pool and stuck her legs in, almost up to her knees. The water felt good. Sure she would go, why not? She was still a strong swimmer and kept in pretty good shape. She lay back against the cool concrete and sat soaking her calves and feet, imagining the raft trip from Cuba. Ninety miles across the Straits of Florida--could you make it in a single night? She stayed that way a long time, trying to imagine what people thought about as they floated.

The memorial was scheduled for 9 a.m. The idea had been that it wouldn’t be too warm yet at that hour, but it was already 80 degrees and climbing under a bright, hot sky. Kaley felt as if she’d been kicked in the head while she slept, and she’d forgotten to bring water.

They’d gathered on a city-owned patch of lawn a few blocks from Rose’s old house. There was a tree and a bench, landscaped hedges, the river. They stood arranged in little pods by family. Ned had
intentionally kept the numbers down. He said he didn’t want a big group of people attracting any attention. No one was sure if what they were doing was legal. Kaley had suggested posting a look-out, but no one had laughed.

Ned read from I Corinthians in the Bible. It was the kind of passage people used indiscriminately at weddings and funerals, as if there was no difference. A tractor-trailer passed on the road behind them, and Ned raised his voice over it. “Without love,” he read, “I am nothing at all.”

When Ned was done, Uncle Carl led a prayer, then Aunt Vicki read a poem, something about birds.

It turned out there was a lot of Grandma Rose in that black box. Clearly more than Ned and Carl knew what to do with. They took turns shaking the bag. It looked to Kaley like they were spreading fertilizer. They’d realized at the last minute that they would have to do it low, almost right at the water, since if there was a breeze she’d go flying everywhere. After Carl had shaken a bunch out, he tried handing the box to Vicki so she could do some too, but she wouldn’t take it. She held her hand over her mouth and shook her head.

Kaley shot a glance down at DJ, but she seemed OK, only a little misty. It was sad, shaking somebody out into the water like you were adding flour to a big cake mix. It was crazy. A really dumb idea, Kaley could see that now. She wondered if anyone else was thinking the same thing. She hoped Ned wasn’t, but she was pretty sure he was. Oh, Grandma, Kaley thought. She looked away from the action, out to the river. A big boat headed for the inlet. She watched it until it grew
small and disappeared.

Kaley tried to think of her grandmother playing the piano or walking the block briskly on one of her daily four-mile stints, but she couldn’t think of those things without thinking also of the Parkinson’s, the wheelchair, and the uncontrollable shaking that went on for years and years while she shrunk down to nothing, lost in a haze of disorienting drugs.

They stood afterward in silence. A few seagulls twirled overhead. A soft breeze came up, but everyone was still sweaty. She’s nowhere now, Kaley thought. All scattered, just out in the wind. She pulled tissues from her pocket, trying to be discreet.

When people started talking and moving again, Ned came over and hugged DJ and gave Teddy’s arm a squeeze, then steered Kaley away from them. Kaley noticed Emily watch them go from the bench. One of Aunt Vicki’s grandkids was over by two toys Kaley hadn’t noticed before, animal-shaped seats on big springs that rocked back and forth. Little Jenny was on one shaped like a jumping dolphin. DJ was climbing up on the other one, a sea turtle with its head and legs out for swimming. Ned stopped in front of his car. He reached through the window to the dash for a pack of cigarettes and lit up.

“Why don’t you and DJ stay?” he said. “We’ll get you a nice place.”

Kaley watched DJ, rocking on the big turtle. The spring made an awful, rusty-donkey noise. She knew Ned meant he wanted them to stay permanently. But how could she move? They had a house. Teddy was living down the street. DJ had friends, a good school.
"I don’t think Teddy wants to live here," she said.

Ned nodded. "You know it’s not that I don’t like Teddy," he said.

"I know." DJ and Jenny had slid off their animals and were both standing next to Jenny’s dolphin, crooning and petting it.

"You going to try to make it work?" Ned asked.

"Yeah, Dad. I’m going to try." She folded her crumpled tissue into quarters.

"Good. OK. I just offered." He scratched at the back of his neck.

"If you change your mind, that’s OK. I could use DJ’s help with a few things."

Kaley smiled. "What things?" she asked.

Ned shrugged. "Just a few things. I’m having a little trouble with my taxes this year."

Kaley laughed and put her arm around him. They studied the little grass park, where everyone looked normal all of a sudden, as if they were just a bunch of regular families doing normal Saturday things.

An hour later, Kaley and Teddy went for a drive while DJ napped at the house with Emily. Teddy bought a bottle of rum and two Cokes at the Circle K. He poured out part of the Coke in each can and replaced it with rum. Kaley took them to the beach, her favorite one. It had a narrow, steep access and no name of its own, no sign, just a mile marker. In the parking lot, they finished their drinks sitting on the hood of the car. A tractor-trailer crept up the road, towing an empty swimming pool on its bed. The pool was kidney shaped, and lying on its side. Teddy laughed. It did look odd up there--huge, empty, and out of
They strolled the beach in silence, their bare feet sinking into the sand, letting the wind have them. Kaley loved this place--its rockiness and spraying surf--and she wondered if Teddy could sense how special it was to her. She also wondered if he were going to say anything about a girlfriend or divorce papers. He would talk to her about anything first, wouldn’t he? For her to bring any of it up seemed to say, I don’t trust you anymore. I don’t know you anymore. Who are you, again? She couldn’t start a conversation like that. She couldn’t ask.

They passed a lone sneaker, resting half-buried in the sand. How did you forget just one shoe? It almost made Kaley smile. You could find anything on the beach: shoes, tampons, forgotten vials of medication. Anything except shells. All the shells were up in the condos in clear glass lamp bases or decorative jars. Everything was confused. The turtles thought those same living room lamps were the moon. The real-estate agents wanted to be poets. Then there were all the people who couldn’t quite decide what happiness would look like. Or did they know, as Ollie said, and they were just fooling themselves because it was hard to face?

They came to a row of grey, wooden beach houses. Kaley scanned them, counting. Then she took Teddy’s hand and led him through a sand dune and up onto the porch of one of the houses. She looked down the beach behind them, then lifted the key from inside the bell that hung next to the back door. Teddy followed her inside.

It was hot in the house, stuffy. No air. Kaley liked that Teddy
was just following her, not asking questions. She felt they could go on
this way forever, but there wasn’t that much house to explore. She
loved it, though, him behind her, quiet, letting it happen. Kaley led
him upstairs, past a series of photographs of teenagers hanging out
under a pier. The heat grew worse, suffocating and still. She picked a
room arbitrarily and opened the window, then sat on the bed.

This was her surprise. She felt a flash of panic and hoped Teddy
didn’t think she was renting it for them. Well, he knew what she could
afford. They were just borrowing it. Ollie had told her where the key
was.

“Kaley,” Teddy said. He was standing in the doorway, watching her
with a little smile. She patted the bedspread next to her and slipped
off her shirt. “What are you doing?” he asked.

“It’s OK,” she said. “Nobody’s here today. It’s a rental.”
He nodded and looked around behind him, appraising. “Great,” he
said.

She took off her shorts. “It’s sort of hot up here,” she said,
smiling at him.

Teddy nodded. “It sure is.” He took off his shirt and sat next to
her.

She wanted this to say, Listen, I love you. See how good I can
be? See what I’m capable of? Exciting sexual rendezvous, impulsiveness.
But she didn’t know how to impart this information. She wished she’d
had a little more to drink in the car, so she could be as lighthearted
as she felt Teddy would want her to be. So she could be playful, sexy.
Not thinking of death. She imagined DJ’s ballet teacher, Miss Debbie.
What would she do?

Teddy started to kiss Kaley's neck. His hand moved to her thigh, just below her bikini bottoms. He was going too fast. Why had she thought it would be slow? She had imagined a moment like those they'd had so many nights on their bed back at home, those sad moments before they turned out the lights when they smiled at each other with heartbreaking smiles that were frowns--only this time, she could fix that moment, make it right. She had imagined they would move delicately, talking nonsense and getting used to each other again, acting shy even if they didn't really feel that way.

She wanted to make him understand that she was someone he could still love, that he could help her get through this, whatever it was, that it could be good again between them. But he was going too quickly. He held her head back by her hair, kissing her like a man drowning. She couldn't figure out how to slow him down without making things awkward. And there didn't seem to be any way to get them looking in each other's eyes. She couldn't think of how to let him know all the things she wanted this moment to express. Well, she thought, maybe Ollie was right. Maybe Teddy would know what was going on, in his heart of hearts, the same way she did. But there was no way to be sure. She was afraid that instead he would think it was only what it seemed to be--a poignant fuck in an empty house, the kind of thing people do before they say good-bye.
Ann Davis, alone by the hotel’s third floor wading pool, gazed at the spires of a nearby church visible just over the parapet. She felt alone in the strange city, abandoned—though she was at her own hotel and her husband, Steven, was surely only somewhere in the blocks nearby. The couple had flown from California to Cancún the previous day, slept in a cheap hotel far from the mega-resorts, and taken the bus out this morning. They’d arrived in Mérida earlier that afternoon and had already split up for a few hours, Steven wanting to stretch from the bus ride, which had bothered his back.

The flight from California had been long and disorienting for Ann, filled with tourists getting drunk on airline cocktails and older Mexicans who crossed themselves each time the plane took off. And then there had been the landing at Guadalajara, during which the man in the seat behind Ann had shouted, “That’s not a runway, it’s just a field!” By the time they’d gotten to their new hotel this morning, Ann just wanted to relax. They were not certain how long they would stay here before boarding a bus to another town—they had decided they liked the idea of uncertainty—and it was Ann’s habit in any new hotel to fill the drawers and cover the counters with her things, hoping to cloak the room’s anonymity. But already she was bored, restless.

Their hotel had once been a convent, though now it had a roof-top
pool, rooms with showers, purified water dispensers on each stone-tile landing, and a patio restaurant on the ground floor. The rooms of the hotel were arranged in a long rectangle around an atrium garden. On the floor below Ann’s, a maid in a white skirt moved quietly in and out of the rooms carrying armloads of bed linen and spent towels. Another person—a man—stood at the railing at some distance from the maid, looking up to the pool where Ann lay in her bikini. The hotel was quiet, with only the sound of traffic drifting up distantly over the side of the building.

Ann stood from the lounge chair and slipped her dress over her head. She couldn’t stay in the hotel any longer. She would just go for a quick walk, she decided. She glanced over the railing as she headed for the stairs, her bag slung over one shoulder. The second floor, where she’d seen the two figures a minute before, was empty.

The restaurant at the bottom of the hotel was quiet, and Ann walked among the empty tables and chairs, then stepped out through the hotel’s iron gate. Outside was crowded, the air a tangle of sickening exhaust fumes. Ann shaded her eyes, trying to get her bearings. She considered, briefly, going back inside but thought better of it. She could do this, couldn’t she? It was only two blocks.

Their hotel was positioned on a cobbled mini-square with restaurants, a cinema, and a church. Tables topped with Corona and Cinzano umbrellas lined the walkway. Men selling hammocks and hats wandered back and forth, working the passing crowd. One began calling to Ann in Spanish, moving slowly in her direction. She knew it wasn’t really she he was yelling at—-it was the color of her skin, her exit
from the hotel. What could she possibly need with a frond hat? Still, it unnerved her to be shouted at. She shook her head and was relieved when the man turned deftly away, still calling out, not even breaking the flow of his sentence. She chided herself for not knowing more Spanish--any, hardly--not even enough to explain politely why she didn’t want something. She’d naively thought she could get by with a few memorized phrases from her guidebook.

From studying a map earlier on the bus, Ann knew the general direction of the plaza, only a few blocks south. Her only question was which way was south. Not wanting to give away her confusion, she started down the street.

The afternoon was hot and the sidewalks dense with shoppers. Fast-moving traffic sent up wave after wave of unregulated exhaust. Past the hotel, people eyed Ann curiously. Women with packages, old men in guayaberas. Not knowing quite how to respond, Ann kept her eyes forward, her walk purposeful, her bag securely under her arm. She’d never traveled much--she’d been to Canada and Hawaii and around the States by car--but this was different, truly foreign. Sweat trickled down her back.

The plaza wasn’t where she thought it should be. Two blocks. Three blocks. Four. She turned around self-consciously and headed back to the hotel, looking for someone she could ask directions of. No one seemed approachable. They stared, but she didn’t believe they would speak. The afternoon sun baked her bare shoulders. And God, the exhaust. Arriving back in front of her hotel, the same hat seller spied her and called out, smiling widely. She waved her hand as if to say,
No, not now, and hurried across the uneven cobbling, avoiding his eyes.

Finally she found it, the main square. It was dominated on one end by an enormous plain brick cathedral. A leafy park centered the plaza, and the three other sides were bordered neatly with colonial buildings, the lower levels of which held restaurants and small shops. Ann found an empty cafe and hesitated, looking around. She wasn’t sure she should sit down alone, unescorted—she didn’t know the custom. The waiter didn’t seem to care, so she sat.

Ann had bought postcards earlier that afternoon on their walk from the bus station to the hotel, and for something to do she began writing on one between sips of coffee. The waiter wiped down a table nearby, called to someone out in the square, stuffed the rag in his back pocket. Ann returned to her postcard. She’d described their bus ride but hadn’t addressed the card yet, or even decided who it was for.

A young group of tourists took up the table beside Ann’s. They ordered beer. She heard Spanish, French, then English. Someone laughed, a woman. Next to the woman sat the man who’d spoken English. Smoke from his cigarette wafted by. He looked at Ann and smiled, sort of, an acknowledgment. Ann went back to what she was writing. At the next table, they began playing cards. She heard the slap of the deal and little disappointed sighs and grunts. She was glad to have these people beside her.

She was staring off idly when she noticed her husband, Steven, crossing the plaza. He came from near the cathedral carrying a plastic bag of sliced fruit and a book. A few heads turned as he passed, cutting across the tree-shaded grass. Her instinct was to stand and go
to him, but something else took over while she watched him—curiosity and a touch of annoyance. It was so strange to see him from a distance. Had he even gone back to the hotel for her? He found a free bench under a laurel, sat, bent over to read. His back was to Ann.

She lifted the camera out of her bag and set it on the table, pointing it in Steven’s direction. She wondered if he would know weeks later looking at the print that he was in it—whether he would recognize the distant back of his head. She also wondered how long he would sit there. She waited for someone to pass, then depressed the shutter release.

“That’s an interesting technique. You practicing to be a spy?” It was the man who’d smiled at her. He had light-colored eyes widely set apart, a thin but aristocratic nose, dark hair. Handsome. Ann pivoted the lens of her camera in his direction, at his chest, it seemed, but she knew better. He’d make it all the way in the frame, and the angle would be interesting, collecting the things on the table between them, her coffee cup in the foreground and whatever else happened to be in between. She depressed the shutter carefully, still looking at him.

“OK,” he said, the smile not quite leaving his face.

“How do you know I speak English?” she asked. Was she so obviously American?

“Doesn’t everyone?” he said, feigning innocence.

She allowed herself a smile.

The French woman glanced uninterestedly over her shoulder at Ann, then nudged the man with her elbow. He set his cards down on the table without turning away from Ann. “I’m out,” he said.
Then: "I think we're at the same hotel."

"The convent?" she asked, snapping the lens cap in place on her camera.

"Exactly."

They talked across the two tables while the card game slowly unraveled. Travel, hotels, where they were all going, where they'd been. Ann ordered a beer and drank it. The cafe started filling up slowly. A few tables, then a few more. Derek—that was his name—was from Texas. During high school—10, 12 years ago—he'd spent a semester in the French woman's town in France. Her name was Pauline. They'd kept in touch. Pauline was traveling with a boyfriend. A Swiss. He was off somewhere, the market, they suspected. He'd busted a sandal that morning. She and the Swiss were going to Bolivia, Chile, Argentina. They wouldn't be home until August.

"We are not staying at the convent," she said.

"They're being economical. Staying in some trash place," Derek said.

Pauline laughed—a light, flashing sound. "Trash," she repeated and clicked her teeth with her tongue. She shook her head. There was a gap between her front teeth you could stick a nickel in. Somehow, it only made her prettier. Ann wondered, despite the mention of a boyfriend, if Pauline and Derek were lovers. There was something there. The two other men, Nathan—tall, blonde and also American—and Claude, a friend of Pauline's, played cards quietly by themselves and smoked cigarette after cigarette, only occasionally glancing up to comment on the conversation.
A boy in a wheelchair made his way among the tables. He didn’t seem to say much, he just presented himself, and people dropped money in his outstretched cup. He turned to their tables, and Ann saw him fully: nine or ten, jet black hair, amused eyes. The wheelchair was much too large for him. His torso was normal, but below it, on the seat, rested two thin and undeveloped legs of different lengths, both bent at the knee. Neither reached off the seat. They were like frog legs on a boy. He smiled, a charmer. His friend waited behind an arch, barefoot and shirtless, every so often sticking his head out to check the wheelchair’s progress through the crowd. Ann and Derek handed him a few coins. At the end of the row of tables, the boy behind the pillar popped out and grabbed the handles of the wheelchair, starting off at a run.

Ann glanced over at Steven’s bench. Watching the boy, she’d forgotten to keep an eye out for him. The bench was empty. She scanned the square until she found him, walking almost directly toward her, book in hand. Ann waited until he was close to the cafe, then called to him. He stopped and looked over the crowd, smiling hesitantly. When he spotted Ann and her companions he looked surprised, and she felt pleased that he should find her with these people. He stood next to the table a minute before sitting.

“Derek, Pauline, Nathan, Claude. This is Steven.”

Everyone nodded, exchanged pleasantries.

“Where’re you coming from?” Derek asked, lighting a cigarette.

“I’ve just been reading,” Steven said. “Out in the plaza.”

“While your girl waits alone?”
Steven regarded Derek with new interest. "My wife," he said.
"Yes," Derek said.

Ann smiled evenly, careful with her expression. She always became a little nervous whenever their marriage came up. It was still new—the ceremony just last month—and they’d told almost no one, not their families yet, and only a few friends. Though both spoke regularly with their parents, they were estranged from them in some critical way, but not in a way either could identify clearly. Perhaps it was the physical distance, or just the years away from home. Back in California, they’d both taken a Friday off work and gone to City Hall, then wandered in and out of bars in the old Italian section of town feeling charmed and official. Now, watching Steven pull up a chair, that day seemed to Ann strangely remote, part of another life. Traveling even small distances had always had this effect on her, making only the present seem real.

"She seems to manage on her own all right," Steven said, indicating the group. His tone was light.

Steven ordered more beer for everyone in his best Spanish. They moved the two tables together; Steven sat between Ann and Pauline. He took Ann’s hand under the table, gave it a little squeeze. The sun was low, already behind the buildings on the plaza. All the tables of the cafe were full, the sidewalks crowded.

Ann stood and excused herself from the table. Her legs were stiff from sitting. Working her way carefully between tables and chairs, she moved toward the one bathroom, a toilet in a cramped closet with a tile floor and an eyehook for a lock. She shut herself in and leaned for a moment against the door. The smell around her was ripe, but not so
strong as to push her immediately back into the cafe. She straightened under the bare bulb and gazed in the mirror. Its reflective surface had peeled off at the corners of the glass. Perhaps, she thought, vanity never went away, married or not. She combed her hair with her fingers, wondering what Derek thought of her. Pretty enough? She used the toilet, then fled the room.

The wash stand was outside near the entrance to the kitchen. As she turned back toward the table, she noticed Derek watching her. She smiled at him and looked away, then back. Too late, she saw Steven watching her as well, and realized in an instant that what she'd just done—her embarrassment and pleasure at being watched—would be interpreted as flirting. Steven glanced at Derek then back at Ann. She felt her face go hot. As she sat down, Steven gave her a chiding, raised-eyebrows look and shifted his focus to Pauline.

The table was a swirl of conversation. Cuba, South America, America’s hypocritical political positions. In ten minutes Steven didn’t once turn to include Ann in his conversation. She put her hand on his leg, but it just sat there, so she retracted it. A mariachi band walked by, middle-aged men dressed in cowboy boots and rancher shirts studded with mother of pearl buttons. One carried a trumpet, another a guitar strung by a bright strap over his shoulder. Ann watched Steven while he talked to Pauline, his back almost to Ann—her husband—and she realized his moods and motivation could utterly elude her. It was as if she knew everyone at the table equally—not at all. Ann felt a cool touch of panic along her windpipe, an internal coldness despite the lingering heat, as if she were coming down sick. She rubbed
absentmindedly at her throat, her collar bones. When her eyes fell on
Derek, he smiled at her, as if sensing her distress.

"Feel like moving along?" he asked. "Some dinner?"

She nodded.

They left the café as a group and walked to Pauline’s hotel, a
two-story colonial building with peeling paint. It was similar to the
convent in style but smaller and more roughly used. They entered from
the street under an impressive arch with flung-open high wooden doors
and stood in the center of the silent, dusty courtyard where a few thin
palms darkened one corner. A broken chair rested in front of a dry
fountain. There was a faint smell of garbage. Pauline disappeared down
a hallway. All the windows on the courtyard were covered with shutters
painted so green they were almost black. Several of the shutters had
slipped partially from their hinges and hung at precarious angles.
Steven crossed the courtyard and leaned against an arch. Derek, Claude
and Nathan lit cigarettes. Ann remained where she was, near the
entrance, her arms crossed in front of her as if she were cold. Steven
wouldn’t look at her. Traffic noise—tires, brakes screeching, a
single, high horn. A bicycle passed just outside, its chain rattling as
it crossed an unevenness in the road. A church bell, signaling the new
hour.

After a while, Pauline returned with the Swiss. He was blond and
wore a new pair of sandals but seemed unnaturally pale and weary. He
wasn’t feeling well, he said, though didn’t elaborate. The rims of his
eyes were red.

The streets as they walked farther away from the plaza became
less crowded. The afternoon continued to fade. Dim lights appeared in shops and houses along the street. The air was thick with the scent of frying meat. Above, the first pale star pulled out.

A gaunt, filthy dog stood as they passed and fell into step beside Ann. Ribs shown clearly through his coat. The mongrel walked along with them slowly for a block, before collapsing without warning or ceremony in a heap on the sidewalk, setting his head on the ground.

"Poor perro. Such a rough place to be a dog." Nathan had stopped walking and bent over the animal, his hands braced on his knees. He looked younger in this light, his blond hair hanging in his eyes like a teenager.

"I wouldn't touch that if I were you, Nate." Derek had paused, Ann beside him.

Nathan straightened up. The street was empty behind him. "I don't see why they have dogs at all if they can't take care of them."

"Maybe it was a rogue. Not fit as a pet," Derek said.

"Yes, it certainly has rogue characteristics. Wouldn't you say?" Nathan looked at Ann. He shook his head in disgust.

"It seems harmless," Ann said.

"As do all the starving," said Derek. "Nathan has a wonderful dog, don't you Nathan?"

If he nodded, Ann didn't see it.

"Casper," Derek continued. "Fine animal."

"Like 'Casper the Ghost'?" Claude asked.

"The same. It's white and was very shy as a puppy. Spent quite a bit of time under the couch the first few weeks Nathan had it. Do you
miss Casper, Nathan?"

"Oh, shut up, already," Nathan said.

Ann wondered what this was about. It seemed only mindless teasing, a quick streak of nastiness, but it was a thing she always found distasteful in people. She wondered if their companions were not so nice, after all.

The restaurant was a place Claude had heard of, though he wouldn’t say from where. Claude seemed to possess endless knowledge of the area no one else had. Earlier, when Ann had mentioned wanting to visit the ruins at Uxmal and Chichén Itzá, Claude discussed the complexities and problems of the Mayan calendar. When Steven mentioned his concern over swimming in the caves near Valladolid—what if they contracted something strange from the water?—Claude offered a quick geology of sinkholes. He knew of restaurants and bars all over the peninsula.

“How do you know all this?” Steven asked him finally.

“I forget nothing,” Claude said. “Once something is here,”—he tapped his temple—“it remains.” He shrugged.

On the back patio of the restaurant a band played, fast and full with percussion. The division between the indoor dining room and the outdoor portion of the restaurant seemed vague, though it was not—the ceiling and the walls simply stopped at a certain point; there the patio began. Bougainvillea lined the deck’s high wooden fence and curved over it, brushing the backs of chairs. It seemed the rear of the restaurant had been cut away, that it had once been there but now was
gone. They sat inside at a big table, looking out. It was like being in
the mouth of a cave, dark and candle lit. They had trouble reading the
menus and held them up in front of the candles to see better. Ann kept
looking out toward the patio, to the odd space where the interior
stopped and the outdoors began.

Their waiter appeared with a tray of rocks margaritas, and passed
them one by one down the table. Over his shirt he wore crisscrossed
sashes like bandoliers. Ann, seated next to Derek again, smiled
gratefully as she accepted the first margarita. She sensed Steven’s
gaze lingering on her from the other end of the table, even as she
heard his conversation continue with Claude. She sipped the salty edge
of the drink. The ice began melting immediately. Fine, she thought. He
hadn’t even given her the benefit of the doubt, just assumed she was
flirting. That he could turn on her in a group of people amazed Ann. It
was something new.

Two Mexican businessmen ate together at a table against the far
wall. The man Ann could see best through the dimness was perhaps fifty,
thick and barrel-shaped under a broad chest, with a handsome, serious
face. The other was younger, thirty-five or so, with narrow features
and a practiced, predatory look she didn’t like. They regarded Ann
frankly as she regarded them, then said something to each other.

For dinner they shared orders of lime soup and poc-chuc, a
grilled, marinated pork, faintly sweet. There was pibil, barbecued meat
wrapped in banana leaves and papadzules, tortillas stuffed with chopped
egg and covered with squash sauce.

Leaning over to bite into a tortilla, Ann realized her knee was
touching Derek’s ever so slightly. She couldn’t say who had moved to
make this happen, or how long their knees had been that way, they just
were. She moved her leg out of the way and kept eating. Outside on the
patio, young couples, primarily Mexican, were swirling confidently in
time to the music, which was very fast. Colored lights flashed over the
band. The volume seemed to increase gradually.

“Do you dance?” she asked Nathan, raising her voice a bit over
the music.

“Not to this, I don’t.”

“Do you?” Derek asked. He’d finished eating and was leaning back
in his chair, smoking a cigarette.

“No, but I’d love to try.”

Derek exhaled a stream of smoke. “We might need a few more drinks
for that,” he said.

“And a few lessons,” Nathan added.

Ann glanced again at the businessman’s table. The older one’s
look this time was longer and more penetrating. She wondered if he
danced. He didn’t really look the type. She had the urge to go sit with
him, to leave the politeness of the table, and Steven’s strangeness, to
walk out with these serious, mustachioed men. What then?

Steven was leaning over her shoulder. She hadn’t seen him come
up. “What did you say?” she asked.

“I asked if you really wanted to dance. I heard you mention it.”

Derek was gone off somewhere, for more drinks or cigarettes, but
Steven didn’t sit, he just rested his forearms on the back of the empty
chair. Nathan was watching them. Ann was sure he was aware Steven had
been ignoring her. It embarrassed her to think of it.

She followed Steven to the patio, where they positioned themselves in the only free space, near the farthest edge of the crowd, almost against the fence. They repeated the few simple, modified salsa steps they knew. Whether this was appropriate for the music, they couldn’t say. It seemed to work all right.

“You’ve been ignoring me,” Ann said after a minute.

“I’m dancing with you. You have my complete attention,” he smiled down at her. She could tell he wanted her to forget it.

“You know what I mean,” she said. “Since the cafe you’ve been ignoring me.” She knew she shouldn’t start an argument now, after so many drinks. Still, she felt completely sane and lucid.

“I was just getting to know those people,” Steven said.

“You haven’t said anything to me once.”

“You’re the one that got involved with them. I was just being polite.” They had stopped dancing.

“That doesn’t mean being rude to me. And what do you mean, ‘got involved with them’? You left me by myself all afternoon. I didn’t know if I could walk around alone. I didn’t even know if it was safe.”

Steven flicked his eyes briefly to the side, which made Ann want to strangle him. “You didn’t want to go out!” he cried.

“I didn’t want to go out that second,” she said, her voice almost a hiss. “You couldn’t wait an hour?”

“You didn’t say you’d be ready in an hour.”

“You didn’t ask.”

“I’m not a mind-reader Ann,” he said. “You know that.”
As they paused, stalemated, Ann realized that the music had stopped. The percussionist was speaking to the crowd through a microphone. Someone shouted a reply from near the bar, and the man at the microphone laughed. Ann and Steven looked at each other hostily and walked back to the table.

They all stayed at the restaurant until early morning. The band had finished and gone. Empty margarita glasses covered the table. The night air was almost cool now, laced with a bit of wind. Egged on by Derek, Pauline told the story of her brother’s mistress, a friend of hers. They dined together often at Pauline’s apartment. His wife was such a disappointment. She was beautiful, but a bit stiff. He’d loved that about her at first--the brother--wanted to conquer it. It seemed virginal to him, pure. But after a few months of marriage, the brother started going out without her, she never wanted to do anything, the wife. She preferred reading magazines to leaving her apartment, Pauline said scornfully.

It had begun to rain as she talked. At first it was just a few drops, but soon there was a torrent. All the people still seated on the patio rushed into the restaurant for cover, squeezing in at the already crowded bar, shouting and comparing their wet clothes with laughter, begging the bartender for drinks. Ann noticed this only peripherally, her attention fixed on Pauline. She didn’t like the way the story was going. She looked at Derek, but he was watching the crowd and smoking, a faint smile on his lips, only half listening. He’d heard it before.

“My brother and his wife, they did not stop to think, 'We can not
change,'” Pauline said. "They only thought, 'How exciting that this
person is different.'"

Just as suddenly as it had started, the rain stopped. Servers
tipped the outdoor chairs and tables and wiped them down with rags. The
crowd inside dispersed somewhat, though not as many went back outdoors.

"I see my brother more," Pauline said and shrugged.

A slow breakfast. The heat moved up around Ann and Steven,
creeping into the hotel courtyard despite the early hour. They watched
the garden instead of each other. The deadlock of the night before had
held, perhaps because they were both hung-over. Ann felt the residue of
the tequila as a soft, annoying haze that barred her a bit from the
rest of the world.

"You're going to be very brown," Steven said. Ann was wearing a
sundress, and her shoulders, the bridge of her nose, and her cheeks
were pleasantly red.

"You think so?" She'd always been pale. It was a revelation that
she could tan.

"You're doing it right, a little at a time." He sipped his coffee
and grimaced, set it back down on the saucer. "It's instant," he said.

There were fried eggs that had been cooked over too great a heat
so that the edges were dark and crisped, hard bread, slabs of pork. It
seemed impossible to get a meal without meat.

"What do you think of our new friends?" Ann asked. She was only
making conversation as Steven had been but realized too late it was the
wrong thing to bring up.
“Tell me again how you met them?” Steven asked.

“I saw you in the park and was taking a picture. Derek asked what I was doing.”

“It wasn’t obvious?” he asked. He looked up from his plate. “And if you were so upset about being alone why didn’t you come and get me?”

Ann shrugged. “We started talking just as I saw you. Anyway, he asked because it was a strange angle.”

She sat back holding her tea cup in both hands. “I keep thinking of Pauline’s story about her brother. ‘We can not change.’ I got the feeling she was trying to shock us. Or me.”

Steven looked skeptical. “Maybe her brother and his wife are happy. Maybe that’s normal.”

“Why would she mention it if it were normal?”

“Because it’s her friend, and she gets to see more of her brother. It’s ironic. She finds it funny.”

“I think it’s perverse,” Ann said.

“Would you want to be judged that way?”

“You think it’s OK?”

“That’s not what I said. I just don’t think we should judge. It’s not our culture. If we were raised differently, who knows what we’d think?”

“I don’t see how under any circumstances you’d be happy about your husband fucking someone else and taking her to dinner at his sister’s.”

The people at the next table glanced over at them. It was a couple with a young girl. The girl said something to her father and the
couple looked away.

"You won’t agree with me." Ann sighed disgustedly and looked away into the garden.

"No," Steven said. "I don’t think it’s required."

He finished his coffee and set the cup down carefully, then stood and dropped his napkin on the table. "I’m going to American Express with Claude to get cash," he said. "You can charge this to the room. I’ll be back soon."

She sat a while, still watching the garden, wondering how everything was going so wrong.

After breakfast, she walked to an exhibit of murals in a government building on the square, which was finally not very interesting. She didn’t understand the intricacies of the history presented in them and wasn’t in the mood to ferret the information out. The rooms that held the murals were pleasant, empty at mid-day, high ceilinged and long. One had a balcony that overlooked the square. She leaned against the parapet, fanning herself with leaflet that explained the murals in Spanish, catching breeze along with the direct glare of the sun. She had a bit of view of the town, though it was blocked to the east by the cathedral and limited to the west by her capacity to stretch out over the railing. On the whole the town seemed utterly flat, and the flatness, she realized, made her feel trapped. She was accustomed to hills, mountains, places to disappear into. Something about this unbroken landscape—its level, knowable plane—made her feel discontent and afraid.
On her way back to the hotel, Derek appeared beside her on the street. He wore a straw hat, but not like the ones for sale on the square. The weave of his was minuscule. There was a package of cigarettes in his breast pocket. He looked like more than a tourist, like a permanent resident, maybe a journalist or a rogue son watching over a branch of the family business.

"I thought it was you," Derek said. "Have you been to see Christ of the Blisters?"

"Who?"

"He’s in the church." Derek indicated the cathedral behind them. "Apparently, the statue’s indestructible. Survived a fire with only the blistering."

"See those windows?" He pointed. They were tiny, not really windows, just gaps in plain brick facade. They’d stopped walking. People stepped around them on the sidewalk, jostling.

"Gunnery slits. It took a while to convert the Mayans to Christianity, apparently. Poor Mayans."

"You’ve been busy," Ann said.

He smiled. His teeth were incredibly white. "I have, haven’t I? I think I deserve a beer. Do you think you do?"

She checked her watch. It was just past noon.

"Come on, a quick one. Then you can get back to whatever you were doing." He adjusted the brim of his hat. "What were you doing?"

"Just looking around. I saw some murals."

"Oh, God. Murals. You do need a beer." They started walking. "Do the men approach you when you’re alone? Is it terrible?" He took her
arm and linked it though his. "Here, you’re with me now. You’re safe."
He patted her hand. It was almost fatherly, the way he did it. Ann
concentrated on not looking at their arms. It made her nervous. It was
fatherly or it was cheeky; she couldn’t decide.

"It’s not bad, really. Around the hotel it’s mostly fine. If I
went for more of a walk alone, that probably wouldn’t be so pleasant,"
she said.

"Restaurant Express, come on. That way we can see your husband
when he gets back. We’ll just sit there and wait for him."

"How do you know where he’s gone?"

"Nathan saw him."

What a small place they were in socially, when they’d come
knowing no one. She marveled at it. It was true she always noticed
other whites here and assumed, probably incorrectly, that all were
travelers. And it was easy to strike up acquaintances, in light of the
single, overriding commonality of being strangers in a foreign country.
Much easier and more natural than at home. Still, it was odd they
should all know each other’s every movement, having just met the day
before.

When she looked at him, he was smiling as if he were teasing her.
She realized she had no idea how to read him.

The restaurant was across the cobbled square from their hotel. An
American film played at an adjacent theater, it’s title slightly
altered in Spanish. The familiar face of the actor, known for his
ridiculous gags, leered at the tourists eating at the outdoor
restaurants, at the hammock and hat sellers loaded down with
merchandise. They carried the stuff in their arms, on their shoulders and backs, as if they were small shops, brilliantly colored human islands of merchandise.

Traffic surged around the square. The street in front of the cafe was narrow, and the cars seemed incredibly close to their table. Ann kept her legs tucked under her chair. The restaurant was open-air, the kind with a metal rolling door that was pulled down in the evenings to close the place. One stepped up to it from the sidewalk. It resembled nothing so much as a cargo bay. Vehicle exhaust penetrated the place. There were tables of all sizes, tourists and locals sitting side by side.

Two young men sat in the square, arms reaching lazily along the backs of benches. One held a small piece of paper in his hand, that periodically he’d show a woman walking by.

"I’ve seen them before," Ann said.

Derek nodded. "It must be a ticket he’s selling."

Their drinks arrived. Derek pulled a cigarette from his pack and lit it.

"May I?" Ann asked, indicating the pack. She’d quit for six months but felt the nervousness now that always sent her back.

"Of course." He pushed it toward her. "I didn’t know you smoked."

"I don’t any more." She leaned forward, the cigarette held to her lips with two fingers, while Derek lit it.

He smiled and shook his head.

"Look, he only asks blondes." Ann was watching the men in the courtyard again.
Indeed, the man had stood and followed a blond woman in heels, holding the ticket in front of himself. Her dress was blue, her black shoes sharply pointed at the heel. She turned and listened politely for a moment, then smiled and shook her head, kept walking.

“That’s who I’d be,” Derek said.

“The skirt chaser?” Ann asked. She set the cigarette in the ashtray. It was making her dizzy.

“No, not that part,” he said, eyeing her to check whether she was making a joke. “All the rest of it. I’d love to just be sort of lazy, hang around and watch people.”

“You can’t do that where you live. Wouldn’t it make you a bum, more or less?”

“Do you think he doesn’t work?” Derek leaned forward, conspiratorially. Their shoulders were almost touching. Ann sat back in her chair.

“I bet he works at night,” Derek said. “Bouncer, maybe. Or ticket seller.”

The cafe was about half full. A young man nearby read a guidebook and made notes in a small spiral. He looked twenty or so. Ann set down her empty beer. Its coldness had been such a welcome relief to the heat.

“I wish I’d traveled at that age,” Ann said, indicating the young man with the guidebook.

“You’re not so much older,” Derek said.


“Well, it’s harder for a girl.” He signaled the waiter for two
more drinks. "And you're traveling now."

She nodded. "You met Pauline in an exchange program, right? Did she get to visit you, ever?"

"She did. Once in high school as the other side of the exchange. And when I went to college in Massachusetts, she came twice."

"Were you lovers?" It slipped out of her mouth, unbidden. Derek looked at her with faint surprise. "Yes," he said. "Nothing terribly serious." The waiter arrived with their drinks.

"Was that rude of me to ask?"

He shook his head. "I don't think so. I'm not particularly secretive. It just didn't seem like the sort of thing you'd ask."

"Maybe I did because you seem easy to ask."

"Thank you," he said. "I think."

Looking out over the square, Ann thought of Steven with a start. She hadn't been watching for him, and realized he might have passed them and gone into the hotel. Perhaps he'd seen them and kept walking. Not what she needed at all.

The traffic remained constant. She could taste the exhaust even beyond the cigarette she'd smoked, the foul, gassy weight of it coating her tongue and teeth. Her head throbbed.

"This exhaust," she said, rubbing her temple.

"Do you know about catalytic converters?" Derek asked. "I think that's the problem here, that they don't require them the way we do back home."

She had no idea what he was talking about. She needed to get back to the room, to see if Steven was there.
“You can explain that to me later,” she said, rising. “I’ve got to get out of these fumes. They’re affecting my hangover.”

Derek looked startled but held up his empty beer in salute.

“Thanks for the company,” he said.

Ann crossed the square quickly, discouraging the hammock sellers with a quick shake of her head, and slipped into the sanctuary of the hotel’s cool foyer. She had the feeling Derek watched her until she disappeared inside the hotel.

The room was black inside, dark as night from the shutters and chilled from the air conditioner. Ann woke when Steven opened the door, letting a wide shaft of light into the room. He closed the door quickly and sat down on the edge of the bed. She heard his moccasins drop on the floor, his shirt come off, then quiet. Ann reached for the table lamp and switched it on, lingering in the dreaminess of sleep. The pleasantness of domestic habits had not yet dissolved for her, the small, repetitive joys of daily intimacy. She loved to catch a glimpse of Steven shaving, to watch him dress. The rhythm, the constancy of it, soothed her. He was resting on the foot of the bed, elbows on his knees, head down. All she could see was the bare, familiar slope of his back. She wished he would move up along the bed to where she was lying. They could stay there for the rest of the afternoon, moving toward each other from habit and vague desire, retreating into their bodies. She willed him to move toward her.

“Will you come up here?” she asked after a minute.

“It’s so hot,” he said. Then he stood and stepped out of his
pants.

She lifted her eyebrows.

"I'm going to shower. I can't lay down like this," he said, turning away from her.

She kept her eyes on him, trying to disguise her disappointment. She was aware of being misunderstood. Or had he understood and this was rejection? "Is that your third or fourth shower in less than two days?"

"I've stopped counting. I've given up."

Ann lay on the bed listening to the sound of the water. She switched on the small transistor radio resting on the night table. She'd borrowed it from a woman at work who often went to Greece and Turkey and liked listening to local music on the beach. Ann found salsa music and left it at that. The single speaker tunneled it into the room. She could sense the distance the music was traveling to get to her, she could almost hear it—the ground it was covering—behind the faint tinniness. But it began to remind her of the night before, and she snapped it off.

When Steven came out of the bathroom, she asked: "What should we do for dinner? Do you know what Claude's doing, or any of the others?"

"I don't." There was an edge to his voice she didn't like. He rummaged in his saving kit.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing." He'd found his toothbrush and was holding it in his fist. "We don't have to eat every meal with them, do we?"

"No. We don't eat every meal with them. I just thought it'd be fun. Didn't you have a nice time with Claude?"
"How about if I take you out," he said, ignoring the question.

She watched him as he pulled on his shirt and decided to work around his mood.

"I'd love it," she said, finally.

It was early still for dinner, and the restaurant they picked was nearly empty. They happened upon the place walking and took a chance. The walls were paneled in a heavy dark wood, the tables set with cloth napkins and small lit votives, though it would still be light out for another several hours. The air inside was frigid and smelled faintly of ammonia. A young waiter slowly set tables in a far corner of the room. The bartender wiped down glasses behind the bar and arranged them in neat rows.

Steven scanned the menu, then set it on the table. "I think we should go."

"Somewhere else?" Ann started to set her menu down.

"No. Leave town, I mean." This was at least two days earlier than planned.

"You’re bored?" she asked. She sipped her drink, watching him over the top of the glass.

He shook his head. "I’d just like to get moving. It feels a little too settled here. Plus the hotel costs more than I thought. Felix’s price was for a room with only a fan. And they don’t take credit."

"Didn’t we book it on credit?"

"That was just the reservation, apparently. I didn’t understand the whole explanation. But I checked with Nathan. They’re paying cash,
They were sitting in front of a window, facing the sidewalk, an advertisement to potential customers. Across the street was a Jesuit church, built in part with stone from destroyed Mayan buildings. Some of the old Mayan glyphs still remained on the lower parts of the external walls, faint etchings on the rock. A Volkswagen bus serving as a shared taxi stood outside the church at a posted stop. There were already a few passengers inside, waiting quietly for the bus to fill so they could be on their way.

"I was hoping to go to Uxmal." Ann said. She tried, unsuccessfully, to keep the irritation out of her voice. "Or do you want to skip that now?" She finished her drink and set it on the table. "Would you get me another, if you see him?"

Steven nodded, then signaled the waiter.

"I assume we’re not coming back out here, right?"

"No. I’d rather not."

"How about we go to Uxmal tomorrow, spend one more night here and leave the next morning? We’ll be out of the city all day. Is one more day so unbearable?"

He didn’t answer. He glanced at the table, out the window.

"I mean, what’s so unbearable?"

The waiter brought the drinks and took their dinner order. His eyes were rheumy and his hair combed back with oil. Two more passengers climbed into the Volkswagen and it pulled away from the curb with a gassy series of chugs, which made Ann glad they were indoors. When the waiter and the van were gone, they looked at each other again, the
subject of leaving town still present, her last question—*What’s so
unbearable?*—waiting but not necessarily expecting or even wanting to
be answered. They would stay, they both knew suddenly, because Steven
could not answer the question, or wouldn’t. She had asked the question
precisely because she knew he wouldn’t answer it yet, and as a result
they would stay the extra day.

The market: a series of long, dingy, cement block buildings
thronged with people. The road outside was particularly dirty from
overuse. Rubbish flapped against the sides of the buildings. As they
approached, it seemed they were walking into a heavily populated dead-
end street, such was the arrangement of the buildings. It was
incredibly noisy, a din of cars behind them on the street, talk and
shouts and children screaming as they played in the dirt waiting for
their parents. A few men sitting along the walls regarded them with
what Ann interpreted as hostility or contempt, she couldn’t tell which,
maybe both. Steven didn’t seem to notice. He walked just a step or so
ahead of her, never looking back to see if she were still there. In
this way she knew he was still angry with her for making them stay.

In spite of herself, Ann felt nervous, like she was walking a
gauntlet. Dark eyes trailed her, the expressions stony, unknowable,
potentially violent. That was the thing she feared most, perhaps
exclusively. The not knowing—-not understanding what a look meant, what
someone might be thinking.

Steven cut through the crowd and up onto the extended porch where
fruit, vegetables and meat—raw and cooked—were being sold on open
Once inside the market, within a building, Ann’s sensation of fear disappeared and was replaced by something else, annoyance. Shopkeepers called out to them, held things up as they moved past, eager to attract and keep their eyes, loathe to let them pass. Ann didn’t know what to say to them, how to respond to their insistence. The ceiling of this first building was high, the noise echoed and amplified, the air hot and still around them. The stalls and booths were crowded with merchandise. They passed tables of dolls, neatly folded piles of lace, peasant dresses of white cotton bordered with bright red and blue flowers. There were clay figurines, faux Mayan masks depicting the rain god, Chac, and serpents, racks of tire tread sandals and more formal shoes, religious statuary, more hammocks and rugs, colorful needlework of roosters and rabbits. “No,” they said, shaking their heads. “No.” To linger even for a moment was to encourage a swarm of additional attention.

“They think we’re rich,” Ann said, disgusted. “Just because we’re white.” She said this almost to herself.

“We are rich.”

She looked at him over her shoulder.

“We are.”

She’d never thought of herself as rich compared to anyone, not even here. It was after all a city, people lived in houses, dressed well, drove cars. But she recognized immediately that he was right. What she didn’t like was his insistence, his superiority, and she refused, on those grounds, to agree with him.
“Let’s go,” she said. “I can’t stand it. They’re never going to leave us alone.”

They stepped down into the street. Dust rose up to meet them. A group of children in uniforms passed by, calling out. The sun was still too hot, low and flashing in their eyes between buildings. Working their way back the way they’d come, they passed department stores and shops of all kinds, the wares sometimes spilling out into the street. Luggage, lingerie, T-shirts. Some of the places were closed, others just beginning to, clerks dragging merchandise inside for the night, all to be moved back out again the next day. Ann suddenly understood the genesis of the shops in her own neighborhood, arranged, she realized, much like these.

“You can’t admit that you’re rich compared to these people?” Steven asked.

She was suddenly very tired. She knew she couldn’t argue over something she agreed with just to satisfy her ego. “Oh probably,” she said. “Let’s drop it.”

This didn’t seem to satisfy him. “Of course you are. It’s so obvious.”

“I just meant I don’t feel rich. It’s not the way I think of myself. Now, will you drop it, please.”

Steven stopped at several kiosks near the hotel to price day trips to the ruins, but none suited him. He decided to go directly to the ADO bus station and see what they charged.

“I feel like going myself,” he said, walking away from her at the entrance to the hotel. The sky was fading. “I’ll see you.”
Ann woke from a nap, her body heavy, thick with sleep. The room was dark. Her confusion was complete—the time, the day, the place. It was a moment before she realized she was alone.

She snapped on the light. It was just after 10 p.m. Sitting up, she could see every surface in the room. No note.

Outside, the hotel was silent, still. Widely spaced yellow bulbs lit the walkway dimly. She circled their floor in bare feet, imagining Steven under the stars in a chair by the pool, sipping mescal. But there were no stars—only a murky, clouded-over darkness—and all the chairs stood empty.

She went down to the second floor and circled the same way, not knowing which room was Derek and Nathan’s, but thinking she might find it. She paused outside a room where the shutters were bright through the slats and stood there a moment, breathing, listening. Nothing. Plants in buckets and planters along the atrium’s low stone wall cast deep, fringed shadows between patches of weak overhead light. She hurried back toward the stairs.

The ground floor was deserted, too. She couldn’t believe it. All the tables for the hotel’s restaurant had been corralled off to one side, their legs chained loosely together, the chairs stacked in neat piles. The front gate to the hotel was closed, bolted from the inside. They had rung for the night clerk the previous evening, she remembered. Peering through the hotel gate, she saw the square was empty, all the daytime tables and chairs gone, the shops shut tight. A sedan passed quietly on the road. She heard voices and pressed her cheek against an
iron bar to see a couple walking on the far side of the plaza near the church. The room key sat sweaty in her palm.

On the front desk, a little light shone over the empty writing surface, next to a bell. She tapped the bell once, instinctively. Its call echoed sharply against the stone walls and floor. The noise made her self-conscious. What was she going to ask, anyway? Have you seen my husband? She didn’t know Derek or Nathan’s last name. She could imagine the embarrassing conversation. Los americanos. Tall... The attendant’s eyes resting boredly on her, his head shaking slowly.

She returned to the room. Perhaps Steven had run into Nathan or Claude and gone out for a drink that turned into several. She picked up her novel but only stared at it, her eyes moving mechanically down a paragraph she never saw.

At 1 a.m. she woke again, sitting upright on the bed with a start, this time instantly awake. The book on her lap slapped to the floor. All the lights in the room were still on, just as she’d left them. She was, unbelievably, alone. She imagined Steven lying on the street, mugged or beaten, his face bruised, ribs kicked in. She forced the thought down.

She brushed her teeth for something to do and gulped a glass of water before remembering she shouldn’t drink from the tap. Probably he’d gone to a club alone, just for a nightcap, and started having such a good time he stayed. She imagined him sitting at a bar with a drink in front of him, chatting with a woman, someone who spoke English.

It was 2 a.m., then 3.

She had no idea how late the bars stayed open.
She tried to think of only certain things: talking, drinking. But women dodged in at the corners of her mind, languid and seductive. It was easier to think of them than other things.

At 3:30 a key scraped the door. Steven squinted against the light, not looking at her right away.

Ann was suddenly furious. She had not been angry the whole time waiting. It surprised her, the instant, absolute quality of her resentment.

He sat on the bed heavily and started unlacing his shoes.

"I tried to call you," he said, "but I couldn't remember the name of this place." He exhaled loudly and lay back the wrong way across the bed, his legs hanging over from the knee.

"I met some people, and they took me to this little bar where no one spoke English. I had no idea where we were." He massaged the bridge of his nose and his brow, eyes closed. "They had a car, a rental. They kept saying they'd take me back soon. I passed out in the car waiting for them."

He looked over at her with his soft, drunk face. "Say something," he said.

"You're a jackass."

She could see this made him angry, but he just nodded against the sheet, his eyes roving the ceiling. "OK," he said, his voice formal, sober-sounding. "Anything else?"

"Go to hell," she said. She reached over and snapped off the light.
Ann went down to the hotel restaurant later that morning. Everything was back in its proper place: the front gate stood open, tables lined the edge of the courtyard, waiters and guests moved through the room. She was exhausted—she hadn’t slept well the rest of the night, her mind racked by miserable dreams—and she felt tenuous, unnerved by hotel’s easy return to normalcy.

Derek was there, sipping coffee at an otherwise empty table. Ann was tremendously glad to see him. She hadn’t at all wanted to eat alone; she had only wanted to be out of the room, away from Steven sleeping.

“Morning,” Derek said. “Where’s your husband?”
She made a face. “Still in bed. Were you out last night?”
“Nope.”
“He had a big night.”
“And you didn’t?” He offered her a chair.
“No.”
“Myself, I read,” Derek said.
She nodded. “Me too.”
Derek raised his eyebrows but didn’t say anything.
They had a quiet breakfast. Derek seemed to sense her mood and didn’t press for conversation, though he stayed with her long after he was done eating. He seemed content to do most of the talking himself.

Steven came down, tickets and water bottle in hand, hair wet, eyes swollen around the edges. Ann just looked at him over the rim of her cup. A tiny part of her was pleased he hadn’t found her alone.
“Big night last night?” Derek asked.

“Apparently,” Steven said.

“Have a seat. The waiter’s around here somewhere,” Derek said, turning in his chair.

“We should go,” Steven said. “The bus leaves at 8:30.” He was still standing.

“You’re not going to eat?” Ann asked.

“I can pick something up on the way. It’d be faster.” He looked at his watch. “We need to go.”

“Then why didn’t you come down earlier?” Ann asked, getting up. She rummaged in her shoulder bag for money.

“I’ve got it,” Derek said. “My treat.”

“No,” Steven said. “Give him some money.”

“Really,” Derek said. “It was nice to have company.”

She was loathe to let Derek to buy her breakfast, particularly since she’d been so sullen, but found herself accepting, just so she wouldn’t have to agree with Steven.

“Thanks,” she said, managing a little smile. “I enjoyed it.”

She waved as they walked away from the table, Steven a few steps ahead of her to express his urgency and annoyance. She wished she were going instead with Derek. Anybody, really.

At quarter of nine they were pulling out of the ADO station on a crowded bus that shuddered and groaned as it left the lot and swept down the narrow, morning-quiet back streets of the city. The tour would take them to the large ruin Ann wanted to see and also to several
smaller sites: Labná, Xlapak, Sayil, and Kabah—all the Mayan ruins in the Puuc Hills. Steven slept heavily in the seat next to her.

The bus passed though a suburban area, street after street of closely packed single-story houses in ashen shades of blue, yellow and beige, hunkered behind high stone privacy walls. From the significant height of the bus, Ann could see down into the pleasant domesticity of the lots: laundry on a line, a few carefully trimmed bushes, shuttered windows to keep out the heat. The houses—the sweet routine they suggested—made her feel lonely.

The city slipped away soundlessly into jungle. The bus accelerated, rocking a bit under the new speed. An awful, dense flatness of vine, brush and palmetto crowded the two-lane road under a gray sky. The wildness of it was too much. Ann shifted her gaze back into the bus, carefully avoiding Steven. She hadn’t noticed before the impressive diversity of tourists with them—Mexicans and South Americans, British and European, even a few Japanese. She wondered unpleasantly whether Steven knew any of them from the night before.

The bus driver said something into a microphone, quickly and only in Spanish. His voice sounded urgent, as though he were giving instructions, warnings. Ann caught none of it. Even passengers who understood looked confused. The couple in the next seat consulted. She glanced over at Steven. His face was slack and weighted down with sleep. Useless.

Someone in the second row shouted a question to the driver. He took the microphone again, not looking back. This time he talked longer. A man moved up to the front of the bus, tall, blond, maybe
American. Ann sat up straight in her seat, trying to hear. The man stood next to the driver and spoke in Spanish. A woman had followed him up the isle. She spoke with the driver, too. He answered perfunctorily and waved them back to their seats, then made a final announcement into the microphone.

The bus continued to pick up speed. The rocking, Ann realized, came from a forceful wind sweeping in gusts across the road. She held the armrests of her seat tightly.

Past the window rushed endless, sickly green jungle. They encountered little traffic of any kind. The bus whipped by a single-story, unpainted cement block structure with a tarpaper roof that rose out of a low spot in the brush. It had a place for a door but no door. Ann caught a glint of chicken wire, a white flash of feathers. They passed another much like it before she realized these were people’s houses she was seeing. She knew it was true the moment she realized it, but it also seemed inconceivable.

The bus passed two lonely figures on the side of the road who appeared from nowhere, loaded like turtles with high, framed backpacks. They waved at the bus and showed their thumbs but didn’t seem surprised when the bus blasted past them. They were on the other side of the road, anyway. Ann caught only their bright packs and skinny white legs. She decided, simply, that they were insane.

Finally, the bus slowed and rolled into an empty dirt lot shaded by trees. Steven roused but didn’t speak. The driver called something over his shoulder in Spanish, and passengers began to file off. Ahead of them, a tall, perfect couple maneuvered a newborn in a flat bassinet
Steven asked for aspirin as they waited to leave their seats. He was already wearing his sunglasses.

Ann hadn’t spoken to him since the restaurant.

“I don’t have any,” she said. “And I’m not interested in your hangover.” She said this looking at his sunglasses, which made it easier. The sunglasses looked away, as if she hadn’t spoken.

Just before descending the bus stairs, Ann caught sight of herself and Steven in the driver’s wide rearview mirror. They looked, in that quick moment, as though they were not fighting—just two people waiting, tanned, healthy, on vacation. This is how we look to people, she thought. There is the life people think you are living, and then there’s the other.

Though the bus’s air conditioner hadn’t seemed to have been working too well, as soon as Ann stepped off, she wished she hadn’t. The heavy wet heat of the jungle rose around her. Down a narrow path, at a table under a thatched shelter, they paid a middle-aged woman seven pesos for admission to the site. On the back wall of the hut, a few faded and curled pictures cut from brochures hung tacked to a beam.

They passed under an arch, corbeled and decorated near the top with stone mosaic reliefs. Nearby stood a palace—low, blocky—made from sections of white limestone and several smaller, similar buildings. The thin stream of people from the bus circled the buildings quietly and dispersed across the lot. There was no clear direction to go in next.

Ann extracted the camera from her shoulder bag as Steven wandered
out of sight behind one of the smaller buildings. The sun had emerged from behind broken clouds, and the heat pressed against her arms and scalp. On a corner of the palace, a sculpted serpent gripped a human head. Ann shot the limestone wall up close, just the texture, the color, some grass at the edge of the frame. When she looked away from what she’d been doing Steven was gone, which was fine.

She walked the weathered ceremonial roads that led between a few of the ruins. She kept people from the bus in sight, but as she walked, lost in the strangeness of the buildings, she forgot about them. Several of the places were rubble—a temple collapsed into a heap of stone, its watchtower neatly preserved atop. How did one part remain and the next crumble?

At each site it was the same routine: the full bus disembarking into the oppressive heat, waiting in a short line to pay a few pesos and receive pale blue tickets, then wandering the paths itchy and somnambulant in the sticky warmth, consulting guidebooks or site drawings on the corners of maps. At each site a palace, then a temple, with weeds growing up around them, the earth trodden and sandy, the sky between lingering clouds a startling, hot, blue. Narrow trails moved below thick canopies of trees as they wound from structure to structure. Often there was enough space between buildings—up to a few hundred meters—that it was possible to be alone while walking or at least have the impression of solitude. All around was lushly green and silent, but for footsteps, the cracking of a twig, distant voices, the periodic synchronized whine of hidden insects. The jungle seemed a living presence, waiting to retake the partially cleared lots. The
wildness of it bothered Ann now only vaguely, like a dim headache she'd nearly forgotten.

At Sayil, Ann followed a few others from the bus up the steep staircase on the front of the palace up to the third story roof. It was a wonderful structure, easily the best they'd seen, large and well-preserved on one side, with columns supporting doorways and elaborate decoration. To have stumbled across this in the jungle unaware! The height seemed tremendous compared to the land around it, the flat of the jungle stretching out far below and into the seeable distance, a dense and impenetrable mat. On the roof, grass grew spottily between cracks in the masonry. Ann stood with her back to the ruined city. She forgot for a moment the people around her, Steven, below in the grass, the perfect couple with the newborn in its pram parked under the trees. The jungle stretched to the horizon, nothing as far as the eye could see but green, not a single color, but a thousand shades.

Alone, how easy it would be to get lost here, to panic. She remembered the hitchhikers. Possibly you could stand for hours without seeing a car or a bus. And would anyone stop?

The jungle seemed to be moving, swaying a bit, as if from a breeze. As Ann stared, the circular outline of an old stone-lined cistern showed itself in the near distance--just the ring--an ancient water collection point. Then she spotted another. They were faint impressions, you could miss them if you didn't look long enough. She searched for the word. Chultunes. Out of the endless chaos of the jungle, thousands had lived in these cities, had thrived. It was too easy to forget, standing alone.
Turning, she saw Steven in the short grass in front of the building and began immediately descending the stairs. All of her anger was gone, dissolved by the afternoon, by this history longer and deeper than their own, by the mystery of it. More people were climbing up onto the palace, and the ground below had filled with spectators. It was almost time for the bus to leave. The couple with the pram seemed to be counting the seconds until they could get back on the bus.

Ann stopped in front of Steven. "It's beautiful up there. You could see cisterns a little ways off."

He nodded curtly, as if this annoyed him.

She guessed some sense of decorum was keeping him from going up. She put her hands on his arms— it was the first time in maybe two days she'd touched him in more than a perfunctory way. He stiffened as she did this, as if he were holding his breath.

"How're you feeling?" she asked.

The sunglasses watched her for a minute. "Not great," he said.

"Only one or two more," she said, meaning one or two more sites.

He nodded. She could feel him moving back toward her, slowly, and it was enough.

Without knowing, Ann had walked past the entrance to the artisans cooperative twice. The morning was just perceptibly turning to early afternoon, the faint, sweet, night cool that lingered in the shadows beginning to warm. She was on Calle 67, the correct street, but kept going much too far. She didn't have long. The bus she and Steven would take to Valladolid left soon. But she had heard there were good local
crafts at this guild, and she wanted to see what they were like. Finally she asked two women with a baby—a wrinkled little grandmother in a traditional *huipil* blouse and a woman about her own age, maybe younger. The sign they pointed to hung practically over Ann’s head, making them all smile.

The door was on the left down a narrow hallway. Further past, opened a sunlit courtyard. The room Ann walked into was wide and clean and quiet, filled with serious displays of handiwork. No one paid her any attention. She passed shelves of pottery, Talavera plates, clay animal figurines, toys, inlaid wooden boxes. She had thought to buy something but felt overwhelmed almost immediately by the choices. There was too much she liked. Clear glass goblets rimmed in pale green rather than the typical blue, tiny ceramic flowerpots painted brightly with vines, tapestries covered with embroidered roosters and rabbits that, charmingly, did not much resemble roosters or rabbits. As had happened to her so many times before, she felt herself giving up, making no decision rather than taking the risk of making the wrong one. Rarely could she decide with certainty what the perfect thing was to buy or to do, so often she bought or did nothing, or went along with whatever happened that allowed her not to make a decision.

Something was happening outside. The shop had emptied, and music began. Ann found a set of glass doors that looked into the courtyard from the shop. A line of traditional dancers stood in the sunlight, their white dresses stiff and bright around them, red flowers tucked behind their ears. They began to dance. The women swirled, clapped and stomped, the white of their modestly heeled shoes pressing in rhythm to
the umber tiles of the courtyard, their layered dresses flaring. As the music and the dresses sped up, something inside Ann sped up also. The women spoke to each other as they danced, laughing and tossing back their heads. A crowd of school children punctuated by adults called out enthusiastically, clapping along with the music.

At the end of a piece—Ann didn’t know how long she’d stood there—she checked her watch with a start. She was already late meeting Steven.

Hurrying out to the street, she was not surprised to see Derek coming up the sidewalk toward her. They had walked most of the way here together from the hotel; Derek had been heading to a pharmacy. He’d said nothing much about it, just that he knew of a particular pharmacy he wanted to visit.

“What timing!” he said.

“What timing!” he said.

“Get what you needed?” she asked.

“Sort of. There’s another one I need to visit too. Across town this way. You going to the hotel?”

She had told him on their earlier walk that she and Steven were leaving today.

“I’m late,” she said. “I’ve got to get back.” She hugged her pocketbook to her side.

Derek watched her. “Right,” he said. “You’ve got to go.” He looked at her for a moment, considering.

“Here,” he said. “Hang on a second.” He stepped into the hallway of the cooperative from which she’d just come and pulled out his wallet. He leafed through and slipped out a business card.
"That's me in Texas," he said. She stood next to him in the hallway. She could hear the music still in the courtyard, the shouts and rhythmic clapping. She wanted to go back and watch the dancers again, their effortless joy.

"I don't have one," she said, holding the card between two fingers. She did not read it.

"That's OK. You've got mine." He smiled at her with his perfect white teeth.

"Goodbye," he said.

He leaned over and kissed her on the cheek, and she replied in kind, thinking how sophisticated and adult they were. As he moved away, he kissed her on the mouth, lightly. Two seconds too long.

"Goodbye," he said again and walked out.

She stood there for a moment, her heartbeat transferred suddenly to all the wrong places: her neck, the arches of her feet. She left the doorway and hurried toward the hotel, not quite running. She couldn't remember what time the bus left but knew it was soon. Everyone else seemed to be moving like snails. Then she remembered it was the weekend. No, it couldn't be the weekend yet. What day was it? She'd completely lost track. She counted back to herself, stepping off the sidewalk to circumvent an elderly couple loaded down with bags, hurrying by with an apologetic smile. A car passed very close to her leg and she stumbled in surprise, trying to get out of its way. It seemed nearly as important as getting to the hotel that she should know what day it was. Wednesday? Thursday?

Coming around the corner to the plaza, she half ran into a little
girl, who was also moving quickly. Ann turned to apologize, but the
girl didn’t stop. A flash of ponytail and school uniform, then she was
gone. As Ann turned back, she almost collided with another girl, this
one taller, who’d frozen in Ann’s on-coming path. Ann reached out
instinctively in case she should jostle the girl but retracted her hand
as she saw her clearly. Even then, she didn’t know what she was seeing.

The girl was about twelve, but her face was a patchwork of
seemingly deliberate squares in different baked-looking shades of skin
tones. She looked mummified, the skin hardened, leathery. All Ann could
think was that the girl had been burned and received a primitive skin
graft. Her hair was lank, and her dress was worn. She was staring at
Ann, and Ann stared back. The girl’s eyes were the only moist, alive-
looking part of her, gazing out as if from a mask, a corpse she was
stuck in. But even the whites of her eyes had a tinge of brown, of
unhealth. Ann wondered that this girl should be alive, that it was
possible to survive whatever trauma she’d been through.

The girl was still looking at her, calmly reading the series of
emotions that must be crossing Ann’s face. Then her arm moved and Ann
realized she was holding something. A cup. The girl held it up between
them. Her hand was in the same condition as her face. Her feet were
bare. Ann reached in her bag, pulled out a couple of pesos, and tucked
them in the cup. The girl made a noise through her stiff mouth and
walked past.

Steven stood outside the hotel, their bags just inside the gate.
When he saw her coming, he scooped up the bags and crossed the plaza to
the line of taxis waiting at the curb.
In the back of the cab, Ann was overtaken by a feeling of relief so pure she almost began to cry.

“What’s wrong?” Steven asked.

She shook her head, looked out the window. She was not going to say it.

But Steven pressed her.

“There was this burned girl,” she said. “I was afraid I was going to be late, and I almost knocked her over in the street.”

“Oh, yeah,” Steven said. “I’ve seen her. She begs around the cafes, like that boy with polio.”

“She scared me to death,” Ann said. “Poor thing.”

Steven put his arm around her. “Well, we’re off to another exciting town,” he said. “We’ll make the bus. Don’t worry about it.”

“Yes,” she agreed. She was eager, suddenly, to be completely agreeable. This, she understood, was guilt.

The cenote was seven kilometers outside Valladolid. They held a map. The man who rented bicycles pointed with his arm in the direction: west. His son stood off a little ways, behind the counter, dark eyed, a touch heavy, quiet but watching. It was dark and cool in the shop. The man put their deposit in a metal box brought out from under the counter and patted the lid with the tips of his fingers. They bought soda in glass bottles from his cooler, but he stopped them as they tried to leave. They weren’t allowed to take the bottles out of the shop. The man poured one of the sodas into a clean plastic baggie and stuck a straw in it, binding it with a rubber band. Ann just looked at it.
Steven held the drink in his fist and led her out of the store into the sunshine.

She was tired, hadn’t slept well. In a dirt lot almost directly behind their hotel room, garbage had been burned the previous evening—plastic bottles, wax paper—she hadn’t seen it all clearly from the room’s high back window, just the pile, the red, the smoke streaming up. The smell had been sucked in by the wall-unit A/C. They opened the front windows after the fire died down, but Ann smelled smoke all night, as if it were trapped in the sheets and pillows. She had guilty, fiery dreams. Fires she had caused.

They coasted out of town on the bicycles. Low houses, tightly packed, bordered the streets. The center of town was behind them: a plaza and gargantuan church, their hotel, a few narrow shops. Ann had expected the town to end more abruptly. It didn’t seem there were enough people for all these houses.

“There aren’t any brakes,” Ann announced. It had taken her a while to figure out what seemed wrong about the handle bars.

“Pedal backwards,” Steven called.

She tried it, and sure enough. To brake you go backwards. She’d known that once, hadn’t she?

It was still early, but the day was startlingly hot. Hotter than yesterday, or any day in Mérida.

There was something different about this town, where they knew no one. Ann felt exposed, as though anything could happen. In Mérida they had been comfortable. Too comfortable, according to Steven. But here, the only person they knew who spoke English was a concierge at their
hotel who'd checked them in the prior afternoon. They hadn't seen him since. Now they were riding off into the jungle on bicycles. The old fear rose up in her. Who would know if they didn't come back? They hadn't left their names at the bicycle shop, had they? Perhaps Steven had written them down. The hotel, she thought. Yes, the hotel would know. They'd wonder in a day or so if they hadn't returned the key. They'd check the room, find their bags, their passports, tell the police. And the bicycle man would know where they'd gone.

Now the houses slipped behind them, and the road widened. There was little traffic, but Ann moved up onto the sidewalk. It was bright white, recently laid. They pedaled slowly, Steven out in the road still, the heat pressing on them. The awful flatness was everywhere, the tangled jungle. Ann pedaled faster, wanting the ride to be over, but she only broke into a miserable sweat. She felt something on her calf, a bite or a sting. Slowing, she glanced carefully behind. A little round circle appeared on the back of her leg. She kept moving. Steven was ahead of her now. The sidewalk lay at some distance from the road; she'd have to shout for him to hear. Why was he taking her out in the middle of nowhere on a rickety bicycle? She felt the bite again, this time on her other calf, and looked down to see a horsefly trailing her, zagging murderously around her feet. She pedaled furiously, trying to get away from it. When they finally reached the cenote, Ann had two perfectly centered bites on her legs, one on the back of each calf. They itched like mad.

A group of children swarmed them as they paid at the guard shack. Ann wondered if any of these were the same children they'd seen the
night before. As they had arrived at the hotel, and later as they'd gone out for a walk, children had followed them chattily on the street, some for a few steps, others for a block or two, asking in near-perfect English for a peso, then lapsing into giggles and Spanish. One would rush up and fall into step beside Steven or Ann, pointing to his open palm as he spoke. Beggars haunted the steps of their hotel, too, one a white-haired blind woman, dressed in rags. She moved toward their voices as they stepped down to the street, her hands outstretched, moaning, reaching for their arms. The woman had touched Steven, and he'd shouted with surprise, and also, Ann thought, fear.

But these children didn't just want money, they had a service to offer. They wanted to act as guides. It was unclear how much English they knew, but each spoke the identical sentence. Steven waved them off.

The entrance to the cenote was down a narrow set of stairs into the ground. They hunched over, but the passage still brushed Steven's head. Ann couldn't see past him, just the rough rock walls, the narrowness of the tunnel, the closely spaced stairs. The children's voices faded above them. There didn't seem to be much air. If something happened to strand them here on the stairs, Ann wasn't sure she'd be able to turn around. She dripped with sweat, her shirt soaked clear through in the back. At a curve in the stairs they heard voices farther down, then a woman's surprised scream, echoing.

The stairs stopped abruptly, and they stepped into a wide, natural cave like an amphitheater that opened onto a green-blue pool of water. Stalactites hung massively from the rocky dome overhead. Ann'd
never seen anything like it. Lights had been mounted on the walls, but they were hardly necessary at this hour. A hole in the top of the cave let in a beam of natural light that shot straight down into the water. Several people were swimming, and a young woman stood on the rock ledge in her dripping underwear, a boy tugging her arm, trying to get her to fall in again. The screamer.

Steven undressed, making a little pile of his sneakers, wallet and shirt. "Coming?" he asked.

Ann hadn't thought of going in the water when she dressed that morning. She was wearing a stretchy burnt-orange running bra under her tank top and shiny green nylon underwear with straps at the hips.

"I'm not wearing a suit," she said. "I didn't think of it."

She looked at the water. It was beautiful, particularly where the light hit, showing wakes of translucent green that layered to a murky darkness. But there could be too many things in the water. Too much unknown.

"Who cares if you don't have a suit?" Steven said. "All these people are in their underwear."

She shook her head. He was just saying that because he knew she wouldn't do it.

Ann unlaced her shoes and walked down the wide, flat steps that led to the shallowest area of the pool. She had to cool off from the ride, even if it was just her feet. Twin ropes in a vee stretched across the water to the far wall of the cave. The ropes seemed to demarcate something but precisely what was unclear—the shallowest section, maybe, or the brightest spot to swim. Perhaps they were just
for the wary to cling to.

She walked past the last slab step onto a rocky outcropping. The screamers were shouting and calling to each other, their voices echoing along the cave walls. She thought they might be speaking Portuguese. One pulled himself out of the water and lay dripping on the rock near Ann, catching his breath. Like the rest, he was in underwear, as if he hadn’t known he was coming. Noticing Ann, he beckoned her into the water, smiling. She shook her head.

Steven was swimming slowly toward the spot of light near the back of the cave. She could tell he was trying to keep his head above water, his mouth and ears away from it, but it seemed tricky. He kicked and glided with his arms, flipped over, grabbed the rope. He looked at Ann and bugged his eyes at the effort.

Another group had descended into the cave, a pale, fussy-looking mother and daughter. The daughter was maybe fourteen, all legs like a colt, and to Ann’s surprise she quickly removed her blouse and shorts to expose a racing suit, navy with red trim. The girl carried not an ounce of fat, not even the hint of breasts. The mother stayed behind, on the rocks near Ann, large and pale, matronly. The girl stepped gingerly to the water. On a rock nearby stood the woman who’d been screaming. Her skin was like coffee with milk and her underwear plain and black like her hair—wide nylon briefs and a heavy-duty bra. The contrast to the girl was remarkable. The floppy breasts and rounded hips, thighs.

Ann glanced over at the matron. She realized she was on the wrong team. It was ridiculous to sit miserably while other people enjoyed
themselves. She lifted off her tank top. Then she fixed her eyes on
Steven, stood, dropped her shorts and adjusted her underwear up over
her hips. Steven’s face squinched up with confusion, then he smiled.
The guy on the rock nearby cheered Ann on as she passed him, his hands
in celebratory fists.

The water was cool against her skin, terrific after the heat of
the ride and the mustiness of the cave. She held the rope going down
over the rocks. She passed the girl, who was busy toying with a bathing
cap. Then she dove. She saw Steven opening his mouth just before she
went under, and she knew he was calling out a protest she wasn’t going
to hear.

Ann sat at a table writing, waiting for Steven to come down to
dinner. The tables lined a grassy courtyard bearing flowering trees and
a small fountain, just inside the hotel’s entrance. In the waning
afternoon light a gardener worked slowly, transplanting tiny clumps of
grass. A sprinkler set in one corner soaked a freshly laid patch. The
tables were arranged over cool, wide tiles and covered with white
cloths. Ceiling fans twirled lazily overhead. Ann liked the hotel
despite the neighbors who had burned their garbage the night before.
The wide rooms and fresh, white arches felt safe, familiar. Across the
courtyard from where she sat, a banquet table covered with fresh fruit
stood near the kitchen’s entrance. Papaya, guava, watermelon, orange,
stacked high like jewels.

She’d bought more postcards in the hotel’s gift shop, but they
were so pretty she didn’t want to send them to anyone. In one of the
hotel, she could see the table in the courtyard where she sat. In the picture, the table was empty. She sipped her sangria. She'd bought a pack of cigarettes and was smoking one in little thoughtful drags. It made her think of Derek, that kiss. Surely the kiss was stolen, she'd decided, not her fault. But she nonetheless felt sullied by it, as though she had, in some way, brought it on herself. She had not pushed him away, but she couldn't concentrate on that for too long, it made her stomach queasy. Well, she certainly wouldn't see him again. She resolved against even the most innocent of flirtation, without knowing exactly how she would enact that.

Steven came down, showered and rested. He glanced at the ashtray she'd been using but didn't comment on it.

"I think I could live here," he said.

She smiled, but he didn't seem to be joking. He picked up a menu.

"How do you mean?" she asked.

"I think I could live here for a while. Rent a place, take Spanish lessons, study. Learn to cook this food."

"What would I do?"

"You'd learn Spanish, too. Take some pictures. Turn very brown. Learn the names of plants. Eat exceptional food cooked by your husband. Teach English to the urchins. You could start a school."

"How come I'm the only one with a job?"

"Because I'm rich." He smiled at her over the top of the menu, his eyes bright. She hadn't realized how incredibly tan he'd become.

"You're not rich," she finally said.

"What I have would be enough here, I think. For six months, maybe
nine. Can you imagine?"

She didn’t think she wanted to imagine it. Just the idea made her feel cool inside with panic.

"We’re in the middle of nowhere," she said.

"No, we’re not."

"We wouldn’t know anyone. We wouldn’t have any friends," she said. "It would be so lonely."

"You’re good at making friends. Think of all the Americans that must come here, the British, French, Germans. We’d have new friends every week. You’ve said yourself you wished you could travel more."

She ignored whatever he was implying. "You’re serious about this?"

"I think it would be good for us. Good for you, particularly," he said.

She stiffened. "What do you mean by that?"

"I think it would be, that’s all." He shrugged. "I’m going to try to get some thread and a needle before we eat. My pack’s ripping on one side. Need anything?"

She shook her head.

"You don’t happen to know the words for ‘needle’ or ‘thread’, do you?" he asked.

"No."

She couldn’t help smiling at him. She would never do that, walk into a store without even the words to ask. She would be too embarrassed. His unshakable confidence never failed to impress her. She envied it.
She stared again at the postcards fanned across the tablecloth in front of her. The afternoon was brighter, the courtyard more radiant than in the hotel’s card. Usually the real thing wasn’t better, was it? It seemed to Ann that the postcard was always the perfect sunset you never saw, the better angle on the view, a more beautiful time of year than when you were there. It pleased her to think they’d found the one place where that wasn’t true.

She ordered another sangria from the waiter. The gardener had moved into a shaded area to work. Sipping her drink, she tried to imagine herself living here. Maybe if they stayed at the hotel for a while, just at first, while they got their bearings. But then where would they go? Steven’s money wouldn’t hold out long at the hotel. An apartment of some kind? They’d have to buy bicycles, or a car. There must be a school, at least one, with so many children. She tried to imagine herself at the head of a dusty classroom of little chairs, a dozen lovely small brown faces waiting for her to speak. What would she say to them? And if they couldn’t pay her, perhaps she could work a barter. That might be more useful anyway. She and Steven could walk the streets at night saying hello to people they knew, eat dinner periodically at the restaurant. When it was too hot, they could take the bus to the coast for the weekend, if that turned out to be nice. They’d know soon enough. She could photograph the town, the children, take the film into Mérida for processing.

Maybe he was right. Maybe this would be good for them. They’d be isolated and dependent on each other. Everything had seemed to be moving so fast lately. One thing would spin a bit out of control or get
past her and she seemed powerless to right it before something else spun off in a different direction. Maybe here they could slow down.

In Playa del Carmen, Ann searched the stores on Avenida Quinta for a wrap she’d seen several women wearing as they strolled the beach. It was a long sheet of batiked material with a tasseled edge. The women wore it wrapped around and knotted, either above the breasts or down on the waist. The material soaked with water instantly if your suit was wet but was so light it dried quickly. The combined modesty, usefulness and strange sexiness of the thing appealed to her.

Their motel was on this same street, a block from the beach and the Caribbean. The town was all about tourism, but its scale was small and it was populated by a young, funky crowd. There were tons of Americans, some even working in shops along the strip.

She flipped through a stand of wraps outside a store with fluorescent bikinis hanging in the window on brown paper cut-out bodies. Bright colors assaulted her from the rack. She caught herself reaching for the most muted one, pale green with beige etchings. But now that she was tan, the colors were all wrong. She flipped back through and pulled a deep blue off its hanger. She felt silly buying it--she might never wear it--but also strangely happy.

She was walking back when she saw a familiar shape move out of the frond-shaded entrance of a motel at the beginning of the next block. Nathan? Her heart slammed violently once in her chest, then picked up again at a quicker rate. Was it possible he and Derek were here? She and Steven had told them they were coming before flying out,
but Derek and Nathan had never said anything about it. Surely Derek wouldn’t follow her. That was absurd.

She was on the opposite sidewalk and lost sight of the figure as a van passed on the road. She had to know. She hurried across the street between cars, the paper sack that held the wrap and a new bathing suit rattling and crinkling at her hip. She stopped at the entrance where she thought she’d seen Nathan. Past a row of baby palms, a glassed-in lobby stood empty. She stepped between the fronds and looked around. A graveled path led to a stairwell and a bank of rooms. No one.

A few steps past the motel, she walked almost headlong into Steven.

Something passed over his face she couldn’t read. He didn’t look particularly happy or surprised to see her. But then the place they were staying was only down the block.

“What are you up to?” he asked.

She lifted her sack. “I bought a new suit,” she said. She assumed he hadn’t seen her come out of the motel’s entrance since the sidewalk was crowded just then with a large group leaving the restaurant she and Steven now stood in front of. She hadn’t seen him coming.

“Where’re you headed?” she asked.

“I’m going to see about diving trips,” he said. “I want to price them before we go to Cozumel.”

He’d been talking about scuba diving for weeks. The island was a short ferry ride from the town, and its Palancar Reef had a great reputation among divers.
"I was on my way back to the room," Ann said.

He nodded, kissed her perfunctorily on the cheek, and walked off.

She stepped into the restaurant they'd been standing in front of. It was dim inside under a thickly thatched roof of fronds. Still, it seemed a good wind would wipe the place out. She felt every eye in the room on her as she walked up to the bar. She scanned the tables as though she were looking for friends she fully expected to find, as though she were meeting someone who simply hadn't arrived yet. Neither Nathan nor anyone who might be mistaken for Nathan was there. Yet Ann felt she couldn't walk out, now that she was three quarters of the way inside. It would be admitting to all those eyes that she had no business in the restaurant, and she didn't want to do that.

She took a chair at the wrap-around bar next to a group of Americans, two men and two women. As she sat, she smiled and said hello to them. The woman she was next to looked Ann over and smiled ever so slightly—the kind of smile that was not a smile—then turned her back to Ann.

As she ordered her drink the bartender leered at her. It was never good to be a woman alone here, even in these towns that seemed more contemporary, she knew that. It made you a target. She'd had this same experience in her neighborhood back home. Men standing on the street corner would say things to her in Spanish they'd never say if she weren't alone. She didn't know most of the words, but the inflection was clear. If she were with another woman, they would only look. With Steven there, it was as though she did not exist.

The margarita she ordered arrived incredibly strong.
The bar was unoccupied except for the Americans and herself. Some of the tables in the restaurant proper were also populated by tourists, one of whom she recognized from somewhere, the bus or the restaurant the night before. She began to believe she hadn’t seen Nathan after all. There were plenty of tall, blond men vacationing in this town, and she’d been more than a block away.

She finished her drink quickly. The bar hadn’t looked so bad from the street, but now she realized it was dismal. These places are nothing when you’re alone, she thought. All the empty tables, the ridiculous om-pah-pah of the music, the stupid talk of the drunks. She stood, leaving a few pesos on the counter.

Winding her way through the chairs toward the entrance she realized she’d left her bag at the bar and went back for it. The bartender stared. Turning to go a second time, she faced Nathan, Claude and Derek.

“Oh!” she said with surprise.

“How’s that for a way to say hello,” Derek said to Nathan.

Claude leaned forward and kissed her on the cheek. Then Nathan. Then Derek. They were all a blur in front of her, the hellos finished before she knew it. Derek’s smile was simple, friendly, as though there were nothing strange between them. She felt on her back the eyes of the bartender and the group she’d been sitting near. She flushed with pleasure at the attention now, feeling oddly vindicated. Her handsome friends had only been a little late. Let the bartender grin at her now.

“How long have you been in town?” she asked.

“We just got in,” Derek said. “It was a bitch getting a room. Are
you here for a while?"

"Please, sit!" Claude urged. Ann let herself be ushered into a chair he held out for her.

"Steven wants to go diving, so we're here at least another day or two," she said.

"I just saw him," Nathan said. "We'll probably go together tomorrow."

"You saw Steven?" she asked.

Nathan nodded and signaled the waiter. "He's getting prices for two," he said.

Ann accepted a cigarette from Derek. He was watching her across the table, and she was having difficulty meeting his gaze.

"What?" she finally asked him, while Nathan was explaining the mechanics of the diving regulator to Claude.

"It's just nice to see you. It got so dull after you left."

"You hadn't said you were coming here," she said.

He shrugged and shaped the ash of his cigarette speculatively on the rim of the ashtray. It made a perfect point.

"Nathan felt like diving," he said. "I thought the beach would be nice. Claude didn't care."

They drank a round of margaritas, then another. The alcohol whisked through Ann blissfully. She settled into a state of hypercontentment. It was as though the world had suddenly righted when she hadn't known it was off-kilter.

After the second round, Nathan suggested a swim. "You in the mood?" he asked Ann.
"I’ve got everything I need with me," she said, lifting the bag onto her lap.

He looked at her quizzically.

"I’ve been shopping," she said.

"You want to meet us down there?" Nathan asked.

She hesitated, desperately not wanting to be alone again. It was not any good being alone here and drunk it would be worse.

"Why don’t you come up with us." Derek had his hand on the back of her chair. "We’ll just be a minute."

Ann waited as they changed one at a time in the bathroom. Both chairs were covered with luggage and bags, so she sat gingerly on the bed nearest the door. The room didn’t seem as though they’d had it less than an hour. Clothes were scattered everywhere, backpacks flapped open and shirts strewn out, damp towels draped on every surface to dry. Derek came out of the bathroom in boxers, holding a pair of trunks.

"I can’t wear these, Claude. They don’t fit."

Claude shrugged.

Derek dropped the shorts on the nearest bed.

"Here," Nathan said. He lifted a pair of green shorts from a backpack on the foot the bed where Ann rested and held them out. "These are 34s."

Derek stood at the edge of the bed. Ann didn’t let her eyes move below his waist, but could tell his boxers were a sea of dark paisley, all swirled mutely together. Cotton. Her eyes roved his chest helplessly then ditched down to the floor. He walked back into the bathroom.
“He lost the pocket on his trunks playing football,” Nathan said. “Left a bit of a hole.”

When Ann went in to change, the men walked onto the balcony wordlessly, leaving the door cracked open. Ann stepped out of the bathroom with a corner of the new wrap in each hand. She stood at the dresser mirror and knotted the ends over her bikini top. Her reflection, so tan, so exotically wrapped, did not look like the person she understood herself to be, and it pleased her. She left the bag filled with her T-shirt and shorts on the dresser.

It was late afternoon, still tremendously hot, and the beach was crowded, so they had to walk a bit before finding a satisfactory spot to leave their towels and shoes. Ann watched as a three-story ferry, out of all proportion with the landscape, approached the landing. The sensation of being on display had not left her, and she was aware of being observed by each little group of sunbathers they passed. She kept her head up, her eyes fixed on the water. If she looked away, into anyone’s eyes, she might see hostility again, or aggression, and she preferred to assume all the eyes were either curious or admiring, Derek’s included. Nathan and Claude talked of reef development. Ann heard none of it. Derek walked quietly beside her, then behind her, then beside her, as they navigated blanket after blanket of shiny, tan bodies. The sea was a wash of a translucent greens and blues dotted with the dark heads of swimmers. The ferry eased up to the dock impressively, its horn bellowing. Ann could not imagine what Derek was thinking, following them here. It was ridiculous. Flattering, but ridiculous. The colorful line of those waiting to board the ferry
stretched far up the dock, past where Ann could see.

The water was warm and perfect. They waded past the first sand bar, talking, then spread out, swimming and making shallow dives. Ann had never swum drunk before, and it proved at first easier than she might have thought. The water seemed almost current-less, the waves barely perceptible, safe. She swam and flipped over, kicked on her back, watched the sky and the shoulders of the men. She turned over again and dove, and without realizing what was happening, gulped a swallow of water as she splashed down into the dive.

She coughed underwater—or opened her mouth inadvertently to let the water out, she wasn’t sure—and surfaced frightened and gasping. She tread water, coughing through her stinging sinuses, and felt for the bottom with her toes but couldn’t find it. She held her head up away from the water, and the blueness of the sky--its absolute normalcy--made her heart clutch. This is how people drown, she thought, on calm, sunny days.

Nathan called out was she OK, and she waved him off, embarrassed. She kicked her way ferociously toward the shore and finally felt the sand beneath her. She was still coughing and sniffling as she made her way up the beach, adjusting her bikini. She lay back on one of the towels with an arm up over her eyes and concentrated on getting her breathing back to normal.

By the time the men came up she was recovered and felt almost sober. Derek sat back on a towel next to her, dripping, while Nathan dried off.

“I always wonder what makes people marry,” Derek said, shifting
onto one side to face her. "Did you have something particular in mind you were looking for?"

"Not really," she said.

"Would you have married me, for instance?"

"Oh, God," Nathan said, folding his towel.

"I am married, so I don’t suppose it’s relevant," Ann said. She didn’t smile.

"I know. But would you ever?"

"Ever?" Ann asked. She loved this brazenness about him but didn’t know quite what to do with it. Flirting for Derek seemed mechanical, as it was for her. She had thought she could just avoid it by deciding to do so, but felt herself slipping easily into it, the odd comfort of it.

"Don’t answer him," Nathan said. He turned and looked up the beach.

"It’s a hypothetical," Derek said. "Put it this way: Am I a sort you would have married? A guy like me?" He looked at Nathan. "You going off somewhere?"

"I think I’ll catch Claude and walk awhile."

"OK. See you."

Derek turned back to Ann.

"I don’t really know you at all, so I can’t say," she said. He inspected his fingernails.

Then he smiled charmingly. "Did you find it easy to say yes to Steven?"

"I did."

He nodded. "You wanted to be married, then."
“Of course.”

“So it sounds like it could have been anyone.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“But you didn’t have any particular type in mind. You wanted to be married, and there was Steven—he seemed suitable, you loved him—and there you went.”

“No, that’s not—”

“I’m only teasing. What are his parents like?”

“I just met them. I haven’t decided yet.”

“You hadn’t met them before you got married?”

“No.”

“Had he met yours?”

“No.”

“How did they all respond to that?”

“We haven’t told them.”

“You what?” He’d leaned forward on his elbow, his face a mixture of disbelief and pleasure. Ann felt awkwardly that she was gossiping about herself.

“We haven’t told them,” she said again.

“That’s outrageous. Your own parents? You got married without them?”

She shrugged. “It felt like a private moment. We didn’t want to be stymied by everyone’s expectations. It’s not really about them, anyway.” She hated the defensiveness in her voice.

“Well, no, of course not. But—”

“We’ll probably have a ceremony next spring and invite everyone
to that. No one will know the difference."

"How odd you are," he said. "I would have never thought."

"I feel badly about it, now," she said, by way of shutting him up.

And she did. But she could not imagine having done it differently. She had never wanted anything as she had wanted Steven’s certainty the afternoon he asked her to marry him. How did he know, so clearly? No one had ever been that certain about her. She had thought—had hoped—his capacity for conviction would be transferred to her—not just about marriage but about everything. She thought she would learn it, how to know the things that she wanted, and how to reach for them. She had been so happy.

"I’m going to rest just for a few minutes," she said. "Don’t let me sleep."

She turned onto her stomach and shifted her head away from Derek. But even with her face buried in her arms, she could not drift away, knowing he was there, next to her, thinking.

They were all on the way back to the room to get Ann’s things when they met Steven coming over the dunes to the beach.

"I was looking for you," he said, stopping in front of them with his hands resting lightly on his hips. "I figured you might be down here."

She was pleased to see him, in part because she wouldn’t be tempted to go out to a bar after she changed.

"We went swimming," she said. "Have you been?"
“Not yet. I scouted trips. I didn’t find anything that seemed
like a particularly good deal. What are you wearing?”

“Don’t tell me if you don’t like it,” she said. “I’m just getting
used to it.”

He put his arm around her. “It’s nice,” he said.

They all made plans to meet early the next morning for the ferry.
They’d get rooms in Cozumel, and Steven and Nathan could scout the dive
shops before noon, maybe securing an afternoon trip.

At the motel, Nathan told them to wait and he’d go get Ann’s
things. They were all standing in front of the restaurant.

“What things?” Steven asked.

“I changed at their place since I had this with me.” She
indicated what she was wearing. “I met them right after I saw you.”

Steven was looking at her with an unpleasant expression. Derek
watched them intently.

Ann slipped her arm though Steven’s. “I’m so tired from
swimming,” she said. “I think I need a nap. Do you feel like one?” she
asked.

“No,” he said, quite distinctly.

“Please?” she asked quietly.

He looked down at her.

Nathan came back with the bag. Steven took it. “Thanks,” he said.

Ann was still holding Steven’s arm as they said goodbye. Derek
waved as she and Steven turned to go, but he was not smiling. Ann
couldn’t figure it out. Of the dozens of single women here—in every
bar and restaurant--any of which he could easily spend time with, why
was he so interested in her?

"So you didn’t find a boat to take you to the reef?" Ann asked as they walked toward their motel.

"I found plenty," he said. "But it’s more expensive than I thought. I’ve heard of a couple of good places in Cozumel to try."

"Good," she said. She rested her head on his shoulder.

He looked down at her again. "You are tired, aren’t you?"

"Yes," she said.

"Could we take beer back to the room?" she asked.

"Sure."

She stood alone on the sidewalk as he went into the little store for beer. The afternoon was still warm, but the slightest ocean breeze moved the tops of the trees along the road. She was sober and exhausted and glad to be with Steven. She thought again of Derek’s expression as they’d walked away.

Their room was cool from air-conditioning and the vinyl-tile floor was icy. Ann heard Steven arrange beer bottles in the sink with some ice while she rinsed off in the tepid shower. Their room was awful, the drapes and bedspreads ridiculous shades of sky blue and hot pink, and the few adornments—the print over the bed and the mirror over the dresser—were nailed down for safety.

She sat on the stiff mattress next to Steven. She was glad he’d changed his mind and lain down. She sipped from one of the open bottles arranged on the night-stand, which was also secured to the wall. The garishness of the room had annoyed her the day before, but now, with the lights out and the drapes closed, it seemed manageable. They’d be
gone tomorrow anyway. She nurtured a small growing feeling of excitement, of possibility, the hint of newness once again inside her. She slipped out of her towel and deposited it on the floor, then pulled back the bedspread, and slid naked between the cool sheets. She reached over and stroked Steven’s temple, his hair, the shell of his ear, until he roused, rolled over and moved warmly against her.

The next morning they left the motel, carrying their bags. They kept to the edge of the main street, walking just within the last of the morning shade. Already it was hot. The waterjet had not yet arrived at the dock, so the line of travelers that stretched up the road away from the pier seemed to be waiting for nothing. Ann scanned the line as they approached. She spotted them in order of height--Derek first, the tallest, wearing his Panama hat and sunglasses, then Nathan, then Claude. They were at the center of the line.

“How long do we have before it gets here?” Ann asked.

“Fifteen minutes, you lazy bums.”

They smiled. Steven dropped his bags and went to get tickets.

“We didn’t see you out last night,” Derek said.

Ann shook her head.

“We were everywhere. Even up to the bar at the big hotel,” Nathan said. “We danced with all the honeymooners’ wives. They have some kind of package deal up there. All your food and drinks, one low, low price.”

“We didn’t go out,” Ann said. She looked past Derek as she said this, keeping her expression neutral. It was like admitting they lay
around and had sex all evening. Or fought, she thought. It could sound like they fought, too. Why did she care what it sounded like?

"Did you sleep well?" Derek asked.

"Like a rock." She smiled at him.

Claude raised his eyebrows. "What is this?"


"Like I might never wake up," Ann said.

"As if she were dead," Derek said, fishing in his shirt pocket for a cigarette. "'The sleep of the dead.' Don't we say that too?"

Ann looked at him quickly.

"I've never heard that," Nathan said.

She watched Derek another few seconds, but he gave no impression of meaning anything by it.

She wanted to get out of the sun. She left her bags and walked off in search of a bathroom. The only place open close by was an American-looking bistro-cum-beach club. Inside, the bar was quiet and the floors shone lightly, smelling of ammonia. Scouting discreetly for the restroom Ann spotted a tall glass of orange juice sitting on the bar and ordered one from the bartender by pointing. When she returned, it was waiting for her. Of course there was alcohol in it, though that hadn't occurred to her when she ordered. She paid and took the drink from the bar, wandering with it in her hand through the restaurant.

Past the back deck, the place had its own roped-off section of sand and rocks and a few precarious umbrella-covered tables. She could see the people waiting on the dock and the ferry approaching, its bulk cutting smoothly though the flat water. Most of the few people on the
restaurant’s deck were watching the crowd on the pier over their morning drinks and omelets. She could see Derek and Steven, talking. It was strange to watch them from a distance. She couldn’t imagine what they might be saying. A feeling of possessiveness swept over her—possessiveness, oddly, for both of them—and she felt she should be present to moderate their conversation. She finished her drink quickly and went back up to meet them.

On the boat, they took an exposed second-story bench at the stern like a bright white church pew. The five of them only took up half the bench. Other passengers filtered on, and the empty seats filled quickly around them. They moved their bags to the floor to make more room. The huge paddles below the boat thrummed nosily in place. Ann was a little drunk. The vodka on an empty stomach had had a jubilant, transforming effect on her. Everything looked brighter, even with her sunglasses on.

“You know, Nathan says you can go diving without being certified,” Derek said. He had to raise his voice to be heard above the noise of the boat. It had started to back away from the dock.

“I can’t imagine many people would do that,” she said.

“I don’t think they take you very deep,” Nathan said leaning forward. “If you dove snorkeling you could probably get down just as far.”

“You’re not considering it?” she asked Derek.

“It’s just a thought. I imagine it’s like taking a lesson but at a gorgeous reef rather than in a swimming pool.”

A breeze picked up from the movement of the boat. Derek removed his hat and rested it on top of the satchel at his feet. His hair, a
little long on top, leaned east, en masse, in the wind. Nathan’s was short enough that it just flattened. Ann lifted the camera from her bag and snapped their half smiles. There was something here she wanted to remember. Two heads with sunglasses, collars of their shirts, a wash of blue sky. The lightness of the drink in her stomach, the easy freedom of the boat, the possibility of the island ahead, even the possibility still of the place they were leaving, barely explored. The glorious, sun-drenched morning all around her.

“Want to look over the side?” Steven asked. He was leaning just over her shoulder.

At the railing, wind pushed against their faces. The sea below the boat was mesmerizing—the green-blue ripples, the dark spots of submerged rock, the expanding length of the receding shore behind them—a low mat of green with a chalk line of sand. The tiny town, becoming smaller and smaller.

Ann searched the southern shore for Tulum, another set of ruins she was curious about, but couldn’t find it. Perhaps it was farther south. Only a kilometer north of town, the beach was supposed to be fantastic, narrow and deserted, backed by jungle and carved into a series of clear, protected lagoons. She didn’t think now that they’d ever get there. They wouldn’t have enough time. There were only a handful of days left until they flew out. Three, four at the most. There was so much left to see, and when would they ever come back? She hadn’t forgotten Steven’s idea of returning to live in Valladolid. But as the town became more a part of the past, the idea receded as well. Since they’d been traveling, the present seemed more and more often
like the only real thing, the only part of her life Ann could actually get her hands on, the only thing she knew for sure. She reached for Steven’s hand along the railing.

A seagull soared beside the boat, then faded back, scooping at the wake with his bill. Another gull skimmed alongside, this one closer, almost so one of them could lean over and touch it. Ann backed up, taking the camera from her shoulder. Steven’s head, the gull, water.

Derek joined them. He held two beer bottles hooked between his fingers, a third open in his other hand.

"Amigos?" he said, offering two of the bottles. They all leaned over the side quietly for a moment, sipping. The peninsula shrank behind them.

"So I never found out how you decided to come to the coast," Steven said, looking over at Derek. "It's quite a coincidence we ran into you again."

Derek smiled at him for a few seconds, long enough for Ann to begin to worry that he wouldn’t answer.

"It is a coincidence, isn’t it? It was the diving. After you talked about it, Nathan had to go, too. I thought the beach would be a relief after how hot it was in Mérida, but I think it’s hotter here." He smiled neutrally, then took a long swallow of beer.

"Weren’t you traveling with some other people?" Steven asked. He turned away from the railing, then leaned against it with his elbows behind him. His T-shirt rippled and flapped like a flag in the wind.

"The woman and the Swedish guy, what happened to them?"
Ann was watching Steven, but he didn’t look over at her. He seemed completely at ease. She couldn’t tell what he was doing, with Derek or with her. It occurred to her he might be grilling Derek to get to her.

“They went farther south,” Derek said. “They don’t much go in for the resort life. They’re probably in Belize or Guatemala by now.”

“She’s an old friend of yours?”
Derek nodded. “Yes.” They watched the water for a moment.
“How long are you staying in Cozumel?” Steven asked.
“Just a couple of days, I guess. I don’t think there’s much to do.” Derek held up his empty beer bottle and looked at it for a moment.
“Anybody want another?”
Ann let him get inside before she said anything.
“That was like an interview,” she said. She was faintly annoyed—she detested anything that smacked of overt rudeness—but also amused. She couldn’t help smiling.

Steven shrugged. “I’m just curious what they’re doing. Suddenly they’re on our honeymoon.”

“They’re not on our honeymoon,” Ann said.
“Seems like it.”
“I’m just relieved I’ll have something to do while you’re diving.”
He looked at her blankly. “I thought you were coming with me.”
“To do what?” she asked.
“You could snorkel.”
Ann looked over the side of the ferry into the sea. She thought
she wouldn’t be able to do it if the water looked like this, the same
as it had looked the afternoon before when she’d begun swallowing
water.

“Is snorkeling difficult?” she asked.

“Not at all.”

“Dangerous?”

“Only if you do something to annoy a barracuda.”
She glanced over at him.

“But they have bad eyesight. The guides warn everyone to take off
their watches and rings, anything shiny that might seem threatening.”

Derek returned to the railing with Nathan and more beer.

“What else is there to do in Cozumel besides diving?” Ann asked
Nathan. Glancing over her shoulder, she noticed Claude was still on the
bench behind them, talking to a dark-skinned woman with a boy’s
haircut. Ann watched them for a minute.

“I’ve no idea what else there is to do, if anything,” Nathan
said.

“What’s happening over there?” Ann asked, indicating Claude.

“Just Claude being Claude. He can talk to anyone. If someone
doesn’t want to talk to him, he couldn’t care less. If they do want to
talk, great. He’s got an ego of steel.”

“Does he meet many women?” Ann asked, sipping her new beer.

“Tons. Almost too many.”

“It’s always nice to have company when you’re traveling, though,”
Derek said.

“Yup,” Nathan said. “Otherwise we’d get too sick of each other.”
"It breaks up the monotony," Derek said.

Ann laughed. "If you get so tired of each other, why do you travel together?"

"Oh, I think it’s inevitable, isn’t it, even among friends? Don’t try to tell us it doesn’t happen to you," Derek said.

Ann shrugged. She regretted teasing them. Steven was glancing over the side of the boat.

"It is your honeymoon, more or less, right? Maybe you haven’t gotten to that stage yet," Nathan said.

"That’s right. How long have you been together again?" Derek asked. Ann looked at him sharply. They’d just talked about it yesterday, he couldn’t have forgotten already. He could only be bringing it up to needle her, or because he thought it might bother Steven.

"A year or so?" Steven said. He looked over at Ann, and she smiled at him.

"So you got married fast," Nathan said.

"Why does everyone say that?" Ann asked.

"Sometimes you just know," Steven said, returning his gaze to the water.

"Yes," Derek said, nodding. "I absolutely agree with that. Sometimes you do just know."

"You’ve never even been close to getting married," Nathan said.

"No. But I’ve met women before and immediately thought--OK, this is going to be something. And I was always right."

"Maybe it happened because you decided it would happen," Ann
Derek seemed to consider this. "Maybe. Or maybe it was just going to happen."

The ship's horns were bellowing. They were close to the island. "Let's go down," Steven said. "Let's get our stuff."

The island seemed to have only one town, and its gray, sparsely populated square sat directly across the street from the ferry dock. The afternoon had grown overcast, which didn't help the looks of the place, and disembarking from the waterjet Ann could see no sandy shore at all down the coast, only jutting black rock lapped by a seaweed-laced tide. She tried not to let her spirits sink.

Since there were no taxis at the ferry and only a few vans marked with the names of resorts, Steven and Ann headed on foot for the dingy blocks south of the main square, where their guidebook indicated they'd find the least pricey motels and dive shops. They left Nathan, Derek and Claude gathering their bags in the belly of the ferry. As they walked, they were passed by one of the vans they'd seen at the dock. It took off up the island past the blocks of open-doored trinket shops and moped rental lots and disappeared.

The streets were nearly deserted, as if it were siesta time rather than mid-morning. Steven carried his bag and Ann's large one as well. After being with crowds in line and on the ferry, Ann felt suddenly and profoundly alone in the empty town. The pressure of the ugliness was almost overwhelming. At least in the last place, the crush of other travelers filled in the awful blankness of the tourist shops
and bars. Here the emptiness, the exposure, was too much. One could see the failure in addition to the desperate hideousness.

They borrowed keys at a few of the cheapest motels—all of which had vacancy—and looked into the rooms. The places were smaller and more expensive than what they were used to, one room entirely windowless, another with a clogged toilet running noisily. They weren't talking, not because they were fighting, but because it seemed wiser not to risk it.

Consulting their guidebook under the awning of a garish jewelry shop, they moved up to the next level of motel, designated by higher prices that were considerably more than they wanted to spend. The next lobby they walked into, the clerk offered them a suite for the price of a regular room. It was a big chamber with three more beds than they needed, one set of bunks and a daybed arranged with pillows like a couch, in addition to the king size bed over which a large figure of a fish stood out in relief on the wall. The room possessed no serious flaws they could spot right away. Each knew the other felt like they were giving in by taking it. They took it anyway.

Steven went out looking for a dive shop he'd heard of, while Ann read their guidebook on the daybed. The room was silent except for the wind outside knocking periodically against the shutters. To her dismay, the entry in their book for the island was brief and had little good to say. Diving, apparently, was the only reason to come. The beaches were either rocky or pounded by dangerous surf and riptides. The only place she found within walking distance that seemed worth exploring was a
small strip of beach to the north of the square and ferry dock was described only as “usable.”

A bit of sun had made its way through the juncture of the window shutters. Ann tossed the book on the bed and got up to pull on a bathing suit. She didn’t think she could stay in the room. It was too cavernous and dark and seemed under-populated with all the extra beds, as if it were a room that was only supposed to house raucous parties, or large groups of life-long friends. Half the light switches did nothing when flipped on, and the bulbs connected to the rest were so weak they cast only a sickly pallor around the edges of the room. She didn’t want to go outside alone much more than she wanted to escape the room, but if the town was empty, how bad could it be to go around by herself?

Their door opened onto a narrow, second-floor walkway that wrapped around the exterior of the building, and from their doorway Ann watched a group of brown children just across the street lined along a short, crumbling jetty jump one after another into the sea. An older boy was with them. Their shouts punctuated the air over the noise of the surf and the wind, which had picked up and was flapping flags and wooden signs on hinges all down the block. Ann watched the tops of palm trees along the road bend and sway. A few grey-tinged clouds obscured the sun, then released it.

The wind gusted as she walked, taking her hair behind her then into her mouth and plastering her shirt against her breasts, more exposure than she wanted. Underneath long shorts she wore her most modest bathing suit. She kept to the sidewalk on the north-going side
of the road, in front of the stores and bars. It was almost lunchtime, and there were more people about. Two men spoke to her suggestively in Spanish as she crossed the square, but she ignored them and kept walking.

The businesses petered out quickly, and after a few blocks Ann was alone, crossing in front of the wide, heavily windowed facade of an abandoned club or school, she couldn't tell which. It was a pretty building with chipping green paint, spooky and intriguing, and she thought briefly about scaling the fence to explore it. It was the kind of thing she only thought about, never did.

Then the buildings were all gone, just sandy sidewalk and a litter-strewn tangle of bush and vine. She kept looking ahead and to the left, anticipating the beach. The heat was draining her energy, and she felt herself moving more and more slowly. The wind was driving her crazy, taking the only fraction of control she felt—the exterior impression of her body—away from her. Two boys passed on a moped and one called out, though it wasn't clear it was to her. A portly dark-skinned couple walking at some distance ahead of Ann turned at the shout. The woman noticed Ann for the first time and regarded her with interest. They were the only other people on the sidewalk. Ann had been keeping them in sight as she walked, staying as close as she could without seeming to follow.

The moped swung around at a break in the median and cruised by in the opposite lane. Again, the shouting. The boy on the back looked directly at Ann as he yelled. Ann looked away casually, as if being shouted at were so normal she hardly registered it, and saw the couple
she'd been following leave the sidewalk and saunter across the road.
Now she was alone on a road heading out of town. Next swing around, the
moped boys would stop. Then what? She wanted to run after the couple.
Then she realized she could. They were at the beach.

To Ann's astonishment, the place was packed. The entire beach, a
meager strip between the road and the water, couldn't have been more
than twenty feet wide. Brown bodies on bright towels covered all
patches of sand between the rocks. Chairs and coolers perched on the
flattest sections of stained limestone. Nearly every available space
was taken up. Without all the people, Ann certainly wouldn't have
thought she was at the right place. They were families, mostly, lots of
children--locals, she guessed. Who else would use such an awful beach?

She was so hot she was tempted to stay--to at least step into the
water to cool down, no matter how weedy it was--but she couldn't do it.
She felt ridiculous. She couldn't stand the thought of the attention,
the stares she knew she'd receive--looking for a place set her bag,
undressing, wading out. If it had been more touristy, more of a mixed
crowd, with cabanas and maybe a drink stand, then she could have done
it. The irony of this--that she should need tourism--antagonized her.
But the pressure here--a locals' beach, a foreigner, a woman, young and
alone--it was too much. Some man would undoubtedly try to talk to her.
Maybe a persistent man she wouldn't be able to shake.

She didn't even cross the street, she just turned around and
started walking back. She was always trying to be braver than she was,
and it always seemed to get her into dumb situations. When was she
going to learn? There were just certain things she couldn't do.
Exploring Mexico by herself was one of them. It wasn’t her fault she couldn’t—it was only because she was a woman—and yet she harbored the suspicion that if only she were more charismatic or lighthearted, a little more “fuck you”, something, the situation would be different. She knew she should be happy she was here at all. Still, it depressed her.

The walk back was dull, hot, repetitive. The scooter boys didn’t come back by. The sun stayed out the whole way.

Steven was waiting when she got back. He lay across the big bed, propped on one elbow reading brochures. His posture nearly mimicked the position of the fish hanging above him on the wall.

“Everything OK?” he asked.

She nodded.

“I thought we were going diving. Where’d you go?”

“You didn’t see my note?” She looked at the table where she’d left it, but it wasn’t there.

“I saw it. I just thought you agreed to go diving.”

She checked her watch. “We can still, can’t we?”

“So you do want to go?” He looked exasperated. “You could’ve been at the beach for hours, for all I knew. I didn’t know if you’d changed your mind or what.”

She pulled off her shirt and sat in a chair. Her one-piece bathing suit was soaked through with sweat in places.

“I don’t know what I was doing,” she said. “I had to get out of the room.”

“If you hated the room, you might have said something before we
paid for it. We could have gone somewhere else.”

“I don’t hate it. Just alone, it wasn’t so great all of a sudden.”

Steven’s expression was grim. He clearly didn’t understand, but how could he? How could she explain feeling trapped in a motel room that’s only real flaw was poor lighting? How to explain the need to escape the immediate dismalness of the room pushing against the fear of going out alone? And frustration that propelled her to do something she knew she’d hate even as she did it? All because she couldn’t stand feeling trapped, helpless.

“If you want to, and you’re ready to leave right now,” Steven said, “we can still go diving.”

Sometimes this was the best thing, she knew, the easiest, anyway, to let him take over for a little bit, let him steer her around.

“OK,” she said. “I’m ready.”

The boat was larger than Ann expected, with a walkable upper deck instead of a tuna tower. A rectangle of painted benches at the center of the craft guarded oxygen tanks and other equipment secured in the middle. Steven and Ann and half a dozen other couples all sat facing the water, back to back, rocking gently as the boat shifted on the tide. They were waiting for the final passengers, Derek and Nathan, who were still up at the dive shop. While they waited, one of the diving assistants offered near-constant instruction to Steven and the other passengers, and none to Ann. Everyone else was diving. She wondered if he were going to tell her what to do at all. There were three diving
assistants on the boat, besides the captain and the mate. Couldn’t someone stop and talk to her?

Most of the divers were American, early-thirties, well-off, Ann thought, by their jewelry. One Australian couple was significantly younger. The two people closest to Ann were a bit older than the rest. The man was in his forties, the woman a little younger. All Ann could see of the woman was her reddish hair pulled back in a tight French braid. Both the woman and her partner seemed experienced divers. They asked a lot of questions, but Ann could tell they were smart questions.

She watched seaweed drift around the boat. The water had a particular fetid smell here—different, she thought, from the beach at Playacar though this was the same water, only a few miles away. She wondered if the stench were from the seaweed or something else. She wanted to ask Steven about it, but he was listening intently, so she touched him instead, lightly on the knee. She wondered if he were nervous.

At the sound of footsteps on the dock, everyone in the boat looked up. Derek and Nathan approached with a third man Ann recognized from the dive shop. He wore a cowboy hat and boots, and Ann thought he might be the owner. He leaned in the window of the cabin and spoke briefly in Spanish to mate. Then he asked Derek, in English, if he had any questions. Derek said no. They shook hands.

The owner gave a little speech over the boat from the dock, slow and serious. He went over the dangers of dehydration and the risk of the bends (“If you have diarrhea, do yourself and us a favor, please don’t dive.”)
The boat tilted as Derek and Nathan climbed in.

Ann’s stomach twinged. She was suddenly conscious of her body. She wore sneakers, her bathing suit and an orange life vest. The rest of her clothes were in a dry area under her seat. She smiled hello to Derek as he made his way to their side of the boat, then feigned interest in the dive captain’s instructions while he and Nathan found the dry boxes and got settled. She didn’t look at him again until she heard the sound of his life vest clicking into place. Too many arms and legs, too much bare skin, suddenly, everywhere.

“So you decided to come,” Derek said, worming around in the vest and adjusting it’s straps.

She watched a white gull land effortlessly on one of the dock posts and take off again almost immediately, and she wished suddenly that she could leave the boat. Her stomach felt weak, almost hollow. She didn’t know if that was her anxiety about swimming after yesterday or if it were only triggered by Derek. She was relieved by his presence in some unexplainable way, and almost felt she needed him to be there—but sitting next to him also made her feel crazy. She knew she shouldn’t feel anything. How did people manage it? It was as if there were a mechanism, a switch she was supposed to turn to off once she was married, but she hadn’t been able to find it.

She looked out over the water, anywhere but in the boat.

“Are you really going diving with a tank?” she asked.

She felt Derek nod. “I’ve been getting a briefing up at the shop. There was even a video to watch. And they’ve assured me the tourist doctor has a decompression tank in his clinic. Just in case.”
"I think you’re crazy,” she said. He seemed completely calm. “How is it men are always so crazy?” she asked.

“It’s not as if I’m just strapping it on without any direction and plunging down 70 meters. Why is it women are so squeamish?”

“If not taking a lot of unnecessary risk is “squeamish,” I’m OK with that.”

Nathan leaned around Derek. “Maybe it’s the eggs,” he stage-whispered.

“The what?” she asked.

“The eggs. Women need to protect all their eggs, don’t they? And later their children. Whereas men...They just need to get around.” He smiled a small, self-satisfied smile, which Ann understood was meant to annoy her.

“But what’s that got to do with going cliff diving, or race-car driving?” Ann asked. The red-haired woman was listening their conversation, Ann could tell.

“Are we going race-car driving?” Derek asked.

“Maybe it’s hormonal,” Nathan said. “All that testosterone pumping things up.” He wiggled his fingers.

“Oh, God,” Ann said. “Give me a break.”

“All right, guys. Listen up.” It was the dive captain.

Nathan shrugged, casting a last glance over at Ann.

She just shook her head and turned to Steven.

“What was all that about?”

“I said men are kind of crazy, and we got into this whole biological rigmarole. Why we behave the way we do.”
“Why do we?” Steven asked. He picked absently at a tag on his shorts that showed a Technicolor sunburst. Sometimes when he did little things like that, or when he was reading or concentrating, Ann saw in his face an expression she thought he must have had as a boy. It was like seeing a flash of him as a seven-year-old, guileless and sweet.

“I don’t know why we behave like we do,” she said. “There’s no good explanation.”

One of the boat’s engines sputtered on for a moment but died before it got going. Steven looked up. That fast, the seven-year-old was gone. The mate and one of the dive captains shouted to each other in Spanish.

“When do you think we’ll go?” Ann asked.

“Not until everyone’s had the safety talk. It’s not that far of a trip, I don’t think,” Steven said.

“My stomach’s not doing so great,” she said.

“You’ll be fine.”

She nodded.

“Are you nervous?” she asked.

Steven frowned and shook his head.

The engine started again, coughing and gassy, and an oily sheen appeared in the water beside the boat. There was more checking of equipment, further questions. Ann stared into the weedy green of the sea, thinking of the previous afternoon at the beach. Was it only yesterday? Traveling was doing such strange things to her sense of time. She had managed to keep the near-drowning to herself. She didn’t know why it felt so critical she do so. That it was embarrassing had
been the initial impulse, certainly. A clear day, calm water, a few
drinks. It was ridiculous, like someone drowning in a bathtub. There
was no good way to describe it to Steven. He would believe she’d felt
she was in trouble, he would believe her concern, her fear, her
description of the physical sensation—her lungs and nostrils burning,
the relentless gasping and coughing, the violence with which she could
not catch her breath, as if her body were no longer her own, under some
alien power, and about to be taken away. But he would tell her, trying
to calm her, that three men had been right there in the water nearby,
and probably a lifeguard on shore, too, countless others around who
could’ve helped. Hadn’t Nathan noticed right away something was wrong?
He would tell her that even if things had gotten worse, she would’ve
been fine. But she didn’t need to be consoled, or talked out of
thinking about it. She’d keep it to herself.

The boat puttered away from the dock. The afternoon had not
changed. The sky remained cloudy but unthreatening, and every so often
the sun broke through to warm their shoulders. One of the dive captains
shouted that it was better than a fully sunny day because they wouldn’t
get so burned, especially her, floating on top.

The wind from the boat felt good. Ann watched the water shift
color as they moved over it. She thought of Derek on one side of her
and Steven on the other, and suddenly the possibility of plunging into
the sea didn’t seem so bad.

When they arrived at the reef, other boats much like theirs were
stopped not far away, their red flags, “diver down,” flapping in a mild
breeze. The sun was lost behind a wide mat of cloud as they anchored.
The assistants set up all the divers except Derek and helped them tumble into the water in twos; where they bobbed for a minute, adjusting their equipment and talking. Steven waved to Ann before he went under. The guide turned to her.

"Know what you’re doing?” he asked.

“No,” she said.

He showed her how to fit the snorkel in her mouth and told her she should breathe deeply. He was young like the rest of the guides, twenty or so with easy English. He gave her drops for her mask and told her if it fogged up later, she should spit in it. He described kicking techniques, and how to get on and off the boat.

She stepped into the flippers, feeling like a fool.

“Beautiful,” Derek said.

He was going last, and the final dive captain was going with him, as his “buddy”. Everyone diving had a buddy.

She tried to jab him with her webbed toes.

“You are,” he said, his voice low so the guide wouldn’t hear.

She started to say something, to ask a question— it began with "What--" but nothing came out. She expelled a breath instead. “Good luck,” she said, standing.

From the ladder at the stern of the boat she slid into the water and was buoyed immediately by the life vest. The ocean floor opened clearly through the window of the mask, like a stage curtain being drawn back. The bottom was not so far down as she’d expected, though it was not exactly close, either. Her breath came loud and ragged though the snorkel, and her heart pulsed violently. A bright, silvery fish
passed below her legs, and she heard herself laugh into the snorkel, a
tinny sound full of echo. She remembered to breathe deeply and felt
herself relax. She floated past a taut rope that stretched from the
back of the boat to an anchor wedged in the sand. She kicked and her
legs moved in slow motion under the strange heaviness of the fins. She
left the boat’s side, transfixed by the watery view, the sand,
scattered rock and lumps of coral below. Lifting her head out of the
water momentarily, she adjusted her bearings and headed straight back
from the boat as directed, toward a shallow part of the reef. The mate
waved and gave her an OK sign.

Stretching in both directions not far to the west she could see
the dark of the reef and a small group of divers swimming low to the
ground, slick and black, part mechanical and part amphibian. A burst of
perfect bubbles rose above them. She couldn’t tell who was who, much
less whether Steven were among them. Then she noticed another set of
divers, farther off to her right. All sign of the boat behind her had
disappeared. She knew it would be easy still to spot above the water,
so she turned back toward the reef and kept going. A yellow fish passed
close to her head. She glanced to the side to see if there were others.
A small school was following her. She stretched out her fingers toward
their sleek bodies, and they shot away neatly as if controlled by a
single mind.

The reef stunned her. The brain and star coral; the bright,
darting tropical fish; the water plants of all kinds extruding from
chinks in the rock and waving in the soft current. She floated over the
Shallowest parts, careful with her fins not to scrape any formations,
to touch as little as possible. She didn’t mind or even much notice that the sun hadn’t come out. For a long time she hung in a dead-man’s-
float, swaying gently with the current over a spectacularly deep area that started with a plunging coral wall.

When she tired, Ann found the boat and swam over to it. Some of the other charters had already left. Theirs had moved closer to the reef. On board, Steven, Derek and the red-haired American woman were talking and sipping from bottles of purified water. Ann avoided Derek’s gaze as she towed off and applied more sunblock to her shoulders.

The woman’s name was Evelyn. She and her companion, Roger, were from New York and on the island two days more, then going inland, toward Mexico City. Steven put his arm around Ann and asked her about snorkeling. While she described what she’d seen, Ann watched the others talk. Derek stood near the center of the boat, steadying himself with a hand along the edge of the upper deck. He’d put on a shirt. Evelyn leaned against the side of the boat, her legs stretched in front of her, one foot crossed over the other. A strand of small, dark shells circled her ankle. Their conversation was casual, unconstrained. It made Ann uneasy, and she felt for the first time a growing dislike for Derek. Nathan and Roger climbed on board. It was decided on the ride to the next spot that they would all have dinner together that night in town.

When they got back to the hotel, Ann and Steven quickly changed and went out for something small to eat and a beer. They had a few hours still before dinner. Both were ravenous. They crossed the square
diagonally and headed into the densest part of town, away from the water. As they walked, Steven described caves he’d explored diving. Ann tried to hold onto the feeling she’d had in the water, but the town crept in around it.

She paused in front of a store with a display window of narrow glass shelves dedicated to jewelry fashioned from black coral. Inside, a man was arguing with the clerk. His skin was pale but his face was florid. His enormous waist touched the counter. He was holding a lighter cocked in one hand and trying to coax something from the shopkeeper. The man behind the counter held his fist closed in front of his chest, a look of outrage on his face. Steven had stopped next to Ann.

“I read that fake coral burns,” she said. “It’s black plastic. I think he’s trying to test it.”

“Who’s worse?” she asked. “The rude and suspicious tourist, or the coral merchant?”

“If it is plastic, that’s better than actually harvesting coral,” Steven said.

“But then to lie about it?”

“So it’s a failure of marketing. He should admit it’s plastic and encourage people to think that’s cooler than the real thing. More ‘green’.”

“But plastic isn’t ‘green’! Plastic’s practically the anti-Christ,” Ann said.

“Hemp, then. Genuine hemp coral.”

A second man had appeared beside the tourist and was trying to
turn him out of the store. At the same time, the man behind the counter
had noticed Ann and Steven at the display window and beckoned them into
the shop. Steven waved back to the man, as if the shopkeeper were only
saying hello. He put his arm around Ann, and they moved on.

They found an open lonchería and ordered what seemed more or less
like fish tacos. It was happy hour, so they were given four beers
instead of the two they ordered.

“Well, these’ll certainly help cut the heat,” Steven said,
unloading the beer bottles from the crook of his arm. They sat on
benches across from each other at a long table. The restaurant was warm
enough that both of them were sweating.

“You know,” Ann said, taking a piece of fish between her fingers,
“I don’t think we’ve gotten lost yet. Isn’t that amazing?”

“We’ve been confused, though.”

“That’s certainly true,” she said, smiling. She watched some
people pass on the sidewalk in front of the restaurant’s open door.

“I was lost that one night,” Steven said. “When you were at the
hotel.”

Ann frowned at the memory of it.

“I’d almost forgotten about that,” she said. “Let’s not talk
about it.”

“I bet if we went to Mexico City we’d get lost,” he said. He
sipped his beer speculatively.

“It’s funny how you tend to forget things here,” she said. “Each
day seems like a week. Each week a completely separate existence. For
me at least.”
He nodded. "I haven't thought of home at all."

She hadn't, either. She imagined their apartment and was disturbed by the thought of their living room as it probably was at that moment—quiet, dark, still.

"It's like our other lives don't exist. This is the only real thing." She tipped her beer in his direction.

They ordered another set of beers, drank them, and walked dazedly back to their motel. They had more than an hour still before dinner, so they stripped and lay on the bed under the fan. They had unhurried sex after which Ann fell asleep for a few minutes. She woke to the sound of the shower. She lay quietly imagining her empty apartment, her empty desk at work, each place where she spent time erased of her presence. She wondered how long she could sustain the feeling that her life had slipped into a long, waking dream.

The restaurant where they were to meet for dinner was on the main square. It was still early evening, not yet dark out, and warm enough to make Ann and Steven take their time walking. As they approached, they noticed several platforms in various stages of being erected, at the center of the square. There were more people milling about than usual but no indication of what was being prepared for.

The others had arrived at the restaurant just before them and were standing under the awning, talking with the maitre d'. Ann could see the back of Derek's head above the others. She suddenly craved a cigarette.

They moved as a group to a table inside, where ceiling fans kept
the air circulating, if not cooler. They were, for the moment, the only customers. Claude had come with Nathan and Derek, and the seven of them felt like a much larger crowd than they had on the boat, Ann thought. Maybe it was because they were all wearing clothes.

She asked Derek across the table if he had a cigarette.

"Do you mind?" she asked Steven. He shook his head.

She asked Evelyn and Roger the same thing.

"Just smoke the damn thing," Derek said.

"What's so upsetting about being polite?" she asked, accepting a light from him.

"Why do you need to be 'polite'?" Evelyn asked down the table.

"You're within your rights."

"It's a way of being respectful of other people," Ann said slowly, wondering who this woman was. She sat back in her chair and crossed her legs. "But if I don't need to be polite here, I won't." She smiled blandly at Derek and wondered whose side he was on.

"You misunderstand," Evelyn said. The metal bracelets she wore on each arm shifted audibly as she gesticulated. "I just tire of hearing women ask if things are all right or hearing them apologize for things they don't need to. Men don't do that at all. An example: A woman-friend drove us to the airport the other day, and she drove the car maybe a foot off the road, just into the emergency lane; it was nothing. We hardly noticed. And she apologized. 'Oh, sorry,' she said. What is that? I don't know any man who'd apologize for that sort of thing. But so many women seem to."

Ann tapped her cigarette on the edge of the ashtray, a small
cereal pot. Into the pause that ensued, Roger asked if they'd all been traveling together.

“Not exactly,” Ann said, looking up.

“Feels like it,” Steven said. He laughed a genuine laugh. Ann noticed he was sipping tequila. She smiled at him.

“I was thinking as we came in,” Ann said, looking down the table at Nathan and Claude, “it feels like I’ve known the three of you much longer than I have. I guess it’s because we’ve seen you so many places.”

“Traveling does that,” Nathan said. “The people I met in Europe I sometimes feel closer to than the people I see every weekend.”

Steven turned back to Roger. “My wife and I have been traveling together,” he said, indicating Ann, “and they’re traveling together. But we keep meeting up.”

“It’s a small place,” Evelyn agreed.

“Mexico?” Steven asked.


“And people do tend to have the same ‘great ideas,’” Derek said. “‘There are no original thoughts.’ My father used to remind me of that all the time.”

“We went to this little town,” Ann said, “after the city, and there were people at our hotel we recognized from a bus tour we’d taken days before. They’re probably at the beach right now, where we just came from.”

“Or at the restaurant next door,” Steven said. Ann wondered if he were getting drunk.
“Perhaps we should go get them,” Derek said. “The more the merrier.”

Claude mentioned he’d met some people during the day who were going to be at a disco later, if anyone were interested in that.

“Claude’s always meeting people,” Nathan explained.

“The opportunity is there for everyone,” Claude said. “I just take it.”

“Yes,” Evelyn said. “That’s right. Good for you.”

“Now, what if women were like that?” she asked Ann.

“God, that would be great,” Nathan said.

“We’d never be left alone,” Ann said.

“Who wants to be alone?” Evelyn asked. She smiled at Ann like they were old friends.

After dinner it was clear a festival was gearing up. The square was filling with people, most talking in little groups. The series of platforms all remained empty still except one, where a band had begun to play. Those waiting in front of it swayed to music filtering hollowly through decrepit speakers.

“No one looks very excited,” Ann said.

Evelyn was standing next to her. “Maybe they do this all the time,” she said. Her bracelets shifted as she reached to brush something off the back of Ann’s dress.

“What do you say we go have a drink and come back?” Derek asked. He stood surveying the square with his hands on his hips like a proprietor inspecting his land. “We could go to the Tex Mex place, I
bet they have different drinks, at least," he said.

"Tex Mex?" Steven asked.

"We walked by it today," Nathan said. "There's a nice patio."

"Better, I think, than the American sports bar," Claude said.

Evelyn and Roger grimaced.

"What else is there?" Steven asked no one in particular.

Derek shrugged elaborately. No one else answered.

"We can go for one or two drinks," Ann said. "It won't kill us."

"OK," Steven said. He put his hands in his pockets. "Fine with me."

"Tex Mex it is," Derek said.

When they returned to festival, Ann and Steven broke away from the others and penetrated the crowd in front of one of the brightly lit stages, where they began to dance. The entire square was now filled with people. In the bar, Steven had been quiet and promptly after the second drink asked if anyone was ready to go back the festival. He danced now without talking to Ann but gazed at her mellowly from time to time. For her part, Ann watched Evelyn and Roger through the shifting bodies. They stood at the edge of the crowd, Evelyn explaining something to Roger and laughing. Then Ann saw Derek with them. The music picked up speed, and she lost sight of them. Not even a minute later, Evelyn appeared next to Steven with Derek trailing behind her. Evelyn was holding Derek's hand. Ann looked from their clasped hands to their tan, shining faces, then back to their hands.

"I told her I only know how to waltz," Derek said. Ann turned her
head, feigning interest in another couple dancing nearby. She heard
Evelyn say, "I trust you can improvise."

As the music grew louder the crowd swelled around them. They
became so boxed in that at times they could only move in place. Ann
didn’t look at Derek. She watched the rest of crowd instead, the warm
dark faces smiling under the hot lights mounted on the stage. Everyone
was sweating. In a pause between songs, Ann followed Steven out of the
crowd without glancing back. She didn’t know whether Evelyn and Derek
noticed them go.

"How can they dance like that when it’s so hot?" Steven asked
when they’d reached the sidewalk. "It’s nuts." He lifted his shirt away
from his skin and flapped it a few times.

They entered a cavernous store that anchored one corner of the
square. Inside was bright with fluorescent lights and almost empty. Up
front T-shirts and perfume were for sale, but in back was a small
supermarket, where they purchased two cold bottles of water.

They retraced their steps and found Roger and Evelyn dancing
gracefully together near an empty bench. Derek was gone. Evelyn and
Roger seemed completely absorbed with one another. Ann felt a stab of
jealousy at their intimacy. She and Steven sat on the bench under a
tree hung with a lantern and watched the crowd.

After a while, Evelyn and Roger came over and joined them. Ann
handed Evelyn the bottle of water they hadn’t opened yet.

"You dance beautifully together," Ann said.

"It’s all Roger," Evelyn said, smiling over at him. "I just
follow. He makes it easy. I don’t think. I just let go, and he does all
the work. Don’t you dear?” She took a long drink of water.

“If you insist,” Roger said.

“I insist.” She handed him the bottle. “You should dance with him,” she said, turning to Ann. “He’s really quite good. That is, if your husband doesn’t want the next dance.”

“Too hot for me,” Steven said.

“Fine, then. We’ll be right here,” Evelyn said, motioning Ann and Roger out into the crowd.

Ann had not paid that much attention to Roger and was surprised to find herself facing him. There was an awkward moment as they stepped into dance position. They’d hardly begun to move when Ann began perspiring again. Roger eased them into the crowd, looking past Ann to navigate. She kept turning her head to see where they were going, hoping he would stop soon.

“You’re wife’s fun,” Ann said, thinking conversation might draw Roger’s attention toward herself.

“She’s not my wife,” Roger said. “But she is marvelous. You know how to be led,” he said. “That’s good.” He’d stopped moving Ann backwards into the crowd.

“It seems to work better that way,” she said.

“You’re very light,” he said, turning Ann in a little circle.

Ann let out a small, embarrassed laugh.

He shrugged. “It’s a good quality for dancing.”

They danced two songs, during which Ann learned that Roger made furniture and Evelyn had an Australian import business. On their way back to the bench, Derek intercepted them.
“Evelyn won’t dance with me,” he said. “She’s talking to your husband. But she said I could cut in on you. She also said you might need this.” He held up a bottle of water.

Ann watched him skeptically.

“Evelyn’s always the social director,” Roger said. He made a little bow to Ann and walked off.

Ann noticed Steven over on the bench and waited until he noticed her. He gotten a cup of beer from somewhere. He waved to her perfunctorily, listening to whatever Evelyn was saying.

“I thought you had to be roped into dancing last time,” Ann said.

Derek gave a little shrug. “When in Rome,” he said.

She let him take her hand, and they danced a few careful steps, as though testing one another. Ann couldn’t remember the last time she’d been dancing with anyone other than Steven. And though she wouldn’t have wanted Derek to know it, she liked having an excuse to be next to him. A small, guilty thrill passed through her.

“They’re not married,” Ann said after a minute. “Roger and Evelyn.” She thought maybe Derek would say something about Evelyn, but he didn’t.

“No,” he said. “Just you.”

He increased the pressure on the hand resting under her shoulder blade, and they moved back and fourth in place quickly in response to the pounding beat. Ann was certain her dress was damp along her back, but Derek didn’t seem to notice, or mind. Over his shoulder Ann saw the lights from the supermarket and realized that she’d briefly forgotten the town, almost where she was. She felt the impulse to try to explain
this to Derek, but thought better of it and instead closed her eyes and concentrated on following his movement.

Steven stood from the bench when Ann and Derek returned from dancing. Ann smiled at him.

"Ready to call it a night?" he asked.

Ann nodded. They said their good-byes and headed back to the motel.

"I’m sorry you were too warm to dance," she said.

"I’m glad you were able to have a good time anyway," Steven said. She couldn’t be certain whether there was a jab intended or not. It didn’t sound like it.

They passed two dogs rooting in an open garbage sack. The dogs lifted their heads at the sound of Ann and Derek passing, but went immediately back to their task.

"Did you have a nice talk with Evelyn?" she asked.

"She’s an interesting person," Steven said.

This was not exactly what Ann wanted to hear, but since she thought so as well, she could hardly blame him. She supposed she deserved to feel a little jealous herself.

"They’re not married," Ann said. She didn’t know why this idea transfixed her.

"No?"

They were in front of the motel. They walked down the alley to the clerk’s door for their room key, but the door was closed. Steven rang the bell. They waited a long time in the dark for someone to come and let them in.
In the morning, Ann and Steven left the motel early. The streets were warm and empty, the sky free of clouds. Many of the tourist shops they passed were still locked for the night. Extra trash on the street was all that remained of the festival. They were looking for a waffle restaurant that was apparently started by surfers supporting their habit. Steven took Ann’s hand as they walked, a thing he almost never did. He held his own hand on the inside and Ann’s on the outside, which felt strangely twisted to Ann, as though she were his mother. She thought he was possibly trying to make up for leaving her that day to go diving again.

As they turned onto Avenida Rafael Melgar, they spotted Derek and Nathan coming toward them up the block.

“My God,” Steven said. “They’re everywhere.”

A car passed with its windows down and a blast of music hung in the air briefly, then faded. It was the kind of Mexican music that always reminded Ann of a carnival.

“Ready to dive?” Nathan asked as he and Derek approached. They were pleasantly disheveled, as though neither had showered. Derek needed a shave.

Steven nodded. “I’ll be there.”

“And you?” Derek asked Ann.

“I’m going to the beach with Evelyn,” she said. Evelyn had told Ann last night that she was crazy for walking around by herself. How could that be fun here? she’d asked. Paris, sure. But Mexico?

“We’re going to eat,” Steven said, walking around them as
casually as he could. Ann followed, waving briefly. She realized she liked them both, Derek and Nathan. And their friend Claude, too. She was glad they were around, even if Steven got sick of them easily. It made their trip more pleasant to have acquaintances. It diffused the anonymity, the horrible tourist feeling. She only wished she had some way to convince Steven of that.

After breakfast, Steven and Ann walked back to their room. They lay down together on the unmade bed, both holding books. Ann opened the shutters, hoping for breeze. The heat was as palpable as another person in the room. They both had difficulty concentrating, and every few minutes one would set his book down on the sheet with a sigh, trying to find a more comfortable, cooler position. After an hour or so, Steven got up to leave. Although she knew she was being silly, Ann felt she wasn’t going to see him for a long time. She clasped his hand playfully. “Don’t go,” she said.

He sat again on the edge of the bed. “If you don’t want me to, I won’t. I’ll go to the beach with you and Evelyn.”

“I’m only teasing,” she said. She was still holding his hand. “I don’t have to go,” he said. But they’d already talked about this the night before.

“No,” she said. “You to go diving. Evelyn and I’ll have a fine time.”

A few minutes later there was a knock on the door, and a shout in Spanish and in English--telephone--and another knock. Ann opened the door and followed the woman downstairs to the motel’s office. The woman
went in through the half-opened split door, closed it, and set a phone and receiver on the door’s makeshift ledge. She gestured to the phone.

It was Evelyn. Roger was sick with a relapse of Moctezuma Revenge. Evelyn wanted to stay with him for at least the next few hours. Maybe they could go to the beach later; she said she’d call again.

Ann went back to her room, consoling herself with the possibility Evelyn might call back sooner than she’d thought. Ann sat on the bed in the sun. She told herself she definitely wasn’t going to go for another walk alone and tried to feel reconciled with that.

She was reading still, half an hour later, when someone rapped on the door. It was a different knock than before. Ann had forgotten about the cleaning woman. She called Just a minute in Spanish, and grabbed her shoulder bag and book from the bed. She brushed her hair and found her key. When she finally opened the door it wasn’t the cleaning lady standing there. It was Derek. He was freshly showered and shaved.

“Oh, God” Ann said. “I thought you were the maid. I was about to leave so you could clean up.”

“Where were you going?” he asked.

“I didn’t have a plan,” she said. She stuck her head out the door and scanned the hallway for tell-tale cleaning carts. “I never know what to do when cleaning ladies come. I can’t stick around. It’s disgraceful to watch someone pick up towels off the floor you could’ve picked up yourself.”

He smiled at her.

“Steven left a while ago,” she said.
“I’m not looking for him. I’m not going diving.”

“Oh,” she said, trying not to look pleased. “I just assumed you were. Do you want to come in, then? Experience the cave?” She held the door open widely and left it that way after he walked in. He looked strangely out of place standing in the center of their room.

“So many beds,” he said.

“It’s a suite. I’ve no idea why they gave it to us. Steven thinks they saw us coming up the street, ducking in and out of every motel. Maybe they were desperate for business.”

“We could be staying with you.”

She laughed. “I thought of that too when I saw it. Although I didn’t mention it to Steven. He wouldn’t have thought it was funny.”

“You thought of that,” he repeated, as if he couldn’t quite believe it. She wondered if he was mocking her, whether she should be offended.

“Can I offer you something?” she asked, to change the subject.

“Beer?”

“Absolutely.” He sat on the day bed.

She went to the little refrigerator and pulled out two beers, handed him one and sat down. The disheveled bed struck her as tremendously tacky, so she stood again and pulled the spread up over the disarranged sheets. Derek laughed.

“Don’t feel like you have to clean up on my account.”

“Some things you can’t help,” she said.

He took a sip of beer. “I came by to see if you felt like doing anything. Evelyn called. She thought you might like company.”
Something moved past the open window and caught Ann’s eye. When she looked over, it was gone. A seagull, maybe. Some kind of bird. Derek was looking at her, waiting. Evelyn had sent him. She knew she couldn’t say she preferred staying in the room, although a guilty twinge made her consider it. “What’s there to do?” she asked.

He smiled broadly, as though she’d already agreed to whatever it was. “I thought we’d rent scooters and drive around the island,” he said. “Does that sound fun?”

She had the sense that anything would be fun with him, that he was one of those people who could make anything appealing. “That sounds great,” she said. “The only problem is I’ve never driven a scooter.”

“They’re a piece of cake. You’ll see.”

Ann and Derek made their way to a rental lot near where they’d seen each other that morning. Almost all the shops were open now, and they dodged the clerks who stood in doorways calling out to them, eager for their first sales of the day. Derek described the single road that looped around part of the island. There were ruins, apparently, a few badly-crumbled altars. He didn’t think they’d be able to get to them unless they walked part of the way. They’d only go if Ann felt like it, of course.

She was surprised to see Claude standing in the rental parking lot, and suddenly tremendously relieved.

“We have two scooters,” Claude said, approaching them. “Do we need a third?” He looked at Ann questioningly. “They are rather expensive. These two are almost as much as a car.”
“Let’s see them,” Derek said.

They were not new scooters, that much Ann could tell right away. One had two helmets on the seat.

“How does it work?” Ann asked.

Derek explained. “Or you can ride with one of us, if you like,” he said.

“Oh, course,” Claude said. “Whatever you prefer is fine. Or whoever.” His smile made Ann laugh.

“I think it’d be easier to ride with one of you. I don’t know how to use that,” she said, pointing to the handle that seemed to help shift the thing. “And if they’re so expensive…”

“Yes,” Claude said.

Derek handed her a helmet, straddled the scooter and got it started. He stepped off again and lifted the seat, exposing a deep compartment. Ann slung her camera sideways over her chest and handed him her shoulder bag. He got on the scooter again and sat down, as far forward as possible. He looked over at Ann. She liked him wearing the helmet. It looked ridiculous. “Hop on,” he said.

They cut out of town on the little bike, which reacted sluggishly under their combined weight. Ann thought maybe she should switch to Claude’s scooter, since he was much smaller than Derek. But once they got some speed it was fine. And she didn’t want to switch. She liked the width of Derek’s back in front of her, the collar of his shirt.

As they sped up, the breeze offered some relief from the heat. They headed south along the main road—according to Derek, the only road. The town dropped away and familiar jungle rose alongside them. It
seemed to Ann as though she were once again on a trip to the middle of nowhere. How oddly comfortable she'd become with the idea. She wondered about Steven and Nathan off in a boat somewhere, or maybe by now at the Palancar Reef. It was supposed to be the real thing--what Jacques Cousteau had raved about years ago, making the island famous--not the more shallow beginners’ reef they'd been to the day before. Ann was glad now that she was doing something exciting, too.

They passed hotels--Presidente Cozumel, Hotel La Ceiba--with glass-doored lobbies, hundreds of rooms, and shuttle vans parked outside. Derek sped up, and Ann lifted her head to look over his shoulder. Before she realized what was happening, the strap around her chin unhooked, and her helmet flew off. She reached behind her head with one hand and cried out, but it was already long gone. Turning, she watched it bounce on the road far behind them and ditch off into the brush. At least there was no traffic.

Derek stopped the moped on the shoulder and hit the horn. Claude slowed down ahead of them.

"I don’t know what happened," Ann said. "It just came off." She felt like an idiot.

"That doesn’t seem very safe," Derek said, turning the moped around.

He drove past where Ann thought the helmet might have landed and inched forward, hardly moving the scooter, while they both intently watched the brush on the side of the road. She thought at first it was going to be obvious, but as they puttered along, that was clearly not going to be the case.
“Oh, Jesus,” Ann said after a while. “It could be anywhere.”

“We’ll find it. It just might take a while.”

Claude moved past them, looking up ahead.

“I’m really sorry,” she said.

“It’s not your fault.”

She remembered what Evelyn had said about women apologizing for everything and felt like even more of a fool.

Ahead of them, Claude shouted and pulled his bike over, plucking the helmet from the edge of a dense area of brush and vine. He held it over his head in one hand.

When they caught up to him, Ann tried the helmet on again. She latched it under her chin and shook her head. The helmet stayed on. She pulled on one side of the chinstrap, then the other, and the latch disconnected as easily as if she’d pressed the button.

“There you go,” Derek said. “Let’s see it.”

The strap was not of the best design to begin with. A plastic latch on one side depressed to fit into a hollow square frame on the opposite side. The part that squeezed down was soft on one corner. In some positions it would stay hooked, in others, not.

“Want to go back and get another one?” Derek asked. She looked down the empty road behind them. A single car approached in the distance.

“No,” she said, “it’s fine. It’s not as though there’s traffic.”

“I’ll wear it,” Derek said.

“No,” she said indignantly. But he took it from her hands. He handed his helmet it to Ann.
“No,” she said again, more insistently. “I’ll wear it.”

“Take this one. Come on, nothing’s going to happen. But if anything did there’s more likelihood you’d get tossed off the back. I’ve got more to hang onto up here.”

She took the helmet reluctantly, and they started off again. The sun beat down full force, reddening the edges of her shoulders and the skin above her knees. Ann thought she could almost smell the heat in the air. It surprised her to enjoy it, and she realized she’d given herself over to it, that she no longer even tried to counteract it much.

They pulled off the road at a sign for Laguna Chankanab and left the scooters in a temporary patch of shade. The park was built around a lagoon completely separate from the beach. It was fed, they learned, from an underwater cave. A historical exhibit ringed the lagoon with replicas of Mayan houses. Swimming was forbidden.

Ann walked away first. She passed several outfitters and made her way to where the bay opened. The water was bright and pretty but dense with snorkelers. It was surprisingly quiet for all the people there. Bodies hung suspended, only their backs and part of their heads out of the water, the snorkels’ reeds marking their places. Derek and Claude came down from the lagoon. How strange, Ann thought, to be in this place with people she didn’t know really at all. She tried to remember some other way of feeling, but it seemed things had always been this way. She took her shoes off and stood with her feet in the water until Derek and Claude had taken a good look around. Then they all agreed to cross the island to see what lay on the western shore, where none of
them had yet been.

The road curved left, and they headed into clotted jungle. Derek pointed to a sand path rutted with tire tracks and called over his shoulder that it was the road to the first of the ruins. He slowed the scooter.

"Women from all over Latin America came here for ceremonies. They were for Ixchel. Do you know about her?"

Ann had seen the icons in shops everywhere they'd been. There was always at least one of a woman in profile standing with her back hunched, mouth open, her arms around a stone on a pedestal, a posture for giving birth.

"I thought that was the other island," she said, raising her voice over the wind. Without the tire ruts, the path would hardly be visible.

"Isla Mujeres? Maybe there, too," he said, nodding. "I think we'd need four-wheel drive to get down that road."

Ann agreed, and they sped up again.

After what seemed a long time, the road turned and they were on the coast again. The shore was rocky and barren, pounded by a wild surf that sent spray into the air. Gulls careened wildly in the wind. Ann felt loose on the back of the bike, happy. Her arms were a little stiff from hanging onto the grips below the seat, but she didn't mind. Out of nowhere, like magic, a bar appeared, complete with tables on a wooden deck and a place for a band. Claude signaled abruptly and pulled off into the parking lot.
"Who would’ve thought to put a bar in the middle of nowhere?" Ann asked, climbing off the back of the bike. "It’s incredible."

"I’m sure lots of people do what we’re doing," Derek said. "Especially during the season. You can’t go diving 12 hours a day. Do you want a quick lesson on driving this?" Derek asked.

She looked at the bike skeptically, then thought of Evelyn. "OK," she said.

Derek gave Ann a quick summary of the process, and within a few minutes she was cautiously puttering around the parking lot.

"Take it out on the highway," Derek called. Claude had brought him a beer from inside, and they stood watching her.

She got a little speed up to get over the lip of the driveway and buzzed out into the road.

"Nice!" Derek called. "Faster!"

She stamped on the accelerator and took off.

The coast on this side looked to Ann as though they were on another island altogether. The ruggedness and severity of the rocks was so different from where they were staying. With the bar behind her, the whole coast seemed unpopulated, untouched. She felt completely alone for a moment, blissfully so.

When she returned, Claude was holding a cold beer for her. "Nice work," Derek said. "Easy, right?"

"Right," she said. "Thanks for the lesson." She felt ridiculously proud of herself.

Inside the restaurant reggae music hummed mildly in the background. The sky remained cloudless, so they ate lunch along with
the few other patrons at a patio table on the back deck, overlooking a pristine half-acre of sand. The food was simple but good: fresh fish kabobs, meat with rice and tortillas, avocado soup. After eating, they moved to a series of wooden lounge chairs for a sunny siesta. Everyone took off their shirts. Ann was pleased to be able to do so along with the guys. She’d long since made bathing suits a permanent undergarment. The waiter circled regularly, making certain their glasses were never empty.

On one pass, Claude spoke to the waiter rapidly in Spanish, then got up and followed him into the bar. Claude reappeared a while later with the helmet.

"It should hold better now," he said. "It just needs to dry."

Ann asked for a cigarette. She’d had a few margaritas and was feeling light. The next time the waiter came by, she was switching to beer. Past her bare feet at the end of the chair, Ann watched two terns scuttle along the shore, chasing one another. One would stop to nose its beak into the sand for a second—eating, Ann presumed—then take off again after the other. The surf splashed behind them, and they flew into the air for a few feet, then dropped back to the sand.

Ann had taken a few puffs on the cigarette when Derek’s hand materialized from the lounger next to her, his fingers in a loose vee. She looked at the back of his hand for a second before she realized he wanted a drag off the cigarette. It was a strangely intimate gesture, maybe because it required no words. Ann moved the cigarette close to his hand, and he took it from her between his fingers.

Claude stood and stretched. "Feel like going?" he asked.
Ann didn’t want to move. She looked at Derek. He was shading his eyes looking at her.

“Sure, if you want to...” Ann said.

“No, you stay. Catch up with me at the next place.”

“What next one?” Ann asked. She sat up more in her chair.

“We’ll find him,” Derek said. “There’s just one road. The next good one,” he said to Claude. “Don’t stay if it’s lame.”


Ann watched him walk into the restaurant.

“Should we go with him? I didn’t mean we had to stay.”

“He just needs someone to talk to. There aren’t any available women here. It’s hard to keep him entertained.”

The bartender came over and cleared Claude’s area.

“Cerveza, por favor,” Ann said. “Sol.”

“Dos Sol,” Derek said, holding up two fingers.

“You don’t need women to talk to?” Ann asked.

“Don’t be silly. I’ve got you.”

“I hardly count,” Ann said.

“You count. I’m in love with you. That counts.” He smiled as he said it.

Ann knew he was teasing her—that he didn’t mean it—but it still felt like someone had slammed her on the back.

“You’re not in love with me,” she said.

“No. But I could be.”

She shook her head, suddenly angry. “Why do you say things like
"Because I'm a jackass," he said. He reached for a cigarette, which allowed him to turn away.

Ann stood and left the patio, pulling on her shirt while she walked. Inside the restaurant was cooler and dark, and she couldn't see anything for a minute. She waited until her eyes adjusted and made her way to the bar. Several men were having lunch there—they looked like locals—and they cut their eyes briefly at Ann as they ate.

"Yes, lady. How can I help you?" the bartender asked.

Ann ordered another margarita to go with her beer.

The bartender nodded wordlessly and moved toward the blender. She wondered what he thought of a woman drinking so much.

Ann went to the lavatory and locked herself in before she found the light switch. She had to unlock and open the door again and step out into the hallway, then she saw the cord over the mirror. She pulled it and closed the door behind her. She studied her reflection. Her eyes were a little red, but other than that she looked fine. Better than fine, actually. The sun she'd gotten added a nice pinkness to the dark skin along her nose and edges of her cheek bones. She splashed water on her face and into her eyes. She decided they should go catch up with Claude. Then she remembered she'd just ordered two drinks. Well, those would make the ride easier. Right after they finished, they'd go.

Derek had turned onto his stomach when she came back outside. Her two drinks were sweating next to her chair.

"Let's go after these," she said.

"OK," Derek said. "Whatever you feel like."
“That’s what I feel like,” she said.

He looked up at her and shaded his eyes. She was taking her shirt back off. It annoyed her that he was watching her do this.

“Listen,” he said. “Don’t be angry. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“I’m not upset,” she said. “I’m annoyed.”

“I know it’s not appropriate, what I said.”

“No,” she said. “I feel like I’m just here for your amusement.”

“We’re here to amuse each other. What’s wrong with that?”

She was quiet. “Well,” he said. “I don’t know why I can’t say to you, even jokingly, that if you weren’t married, I’d be interested. You know that. I can tell you do. And you’d be interested in me.”

She couldn’t remember ever having heard anyone speak so bluntly before--at least not about something like this--and in spite of herself, it thrilled her. This is how people should be, she thought. Exactly like this. She felt nearly relieved of it to have it out in the open. It was as though all their strangeness had dropped away, now they could be normal. She thought Evelyn would approve. Yet something worried Ann, too. How were you supposed to act when everything was out in the open? She took a long sip of the margarita. Its coldness shot right to her skull.

They settled with the bartender and took off down the empty stretch of coastal road. Clouds had formed thinly over the island, though Ann and Derek remained in the sun as they drove. Ann felt euphoric now on the back of the bike with the wind against her face, as though all of her senses had been heightened from the drinks, rather than dulled. She felt that she was on a new plane of understanding,
both with Derek and with the world. If only Evelyn were with them! She
would understand this, too, Ann was certain. Perhaps this was the way
Evelyn always felt. It was too much for Ann to think of.

They passed a low break in the rocks and the weeds, and an odd
stretch of beach access appeared with a parking area and a boarded-up
refreshment stand. Ann caught her breath. Past a stretch of untended
sand, the shore stretched white with broken coral. Derek looked over
his shoulder at Ann, and she knew he was inquiring whether she wanted
to stop.

“Yes,” she said. “Pull over!”

They parked the moped and left their helmets. A single car stood
nearby, and an older couple with perhaps their grandchild strode down
by the water. The surf was too loud to hear what they were saying. Ann
wandered across the wide washes of coral, picking up small pieces,
discardning some for others. They were like polished stones, perfectly
white and smooth, like no coral she’d ever seen. Ann put a few in her
pocket. She saw something bright and crouched to pick it up. It was a
fragment of a shell, slim with a twist on one end, bright pink fading
to white. The she saw something yellowish and reached for it as well.
There were bits of shell scattered all through, she realized, smaller
fragments, just as broken off and polished as the coral. Nothing whole
on the entire beach. Soon she had a pocket of these shards as well.
Derek watched her for a while, then joined in, offering her his best
finds.

When Ann was satisfied, she straightened and smiled at Derek.
They walked together to the water. Ann found it wonderful to be with
someone she could understand without talking to. They passed the older
couple and the child, who were heading up to their car. Ann waved to
them, and they waved back. The only sound was the crashing of the surf
and the cry of a seagull above them, its call swept immediately away by
the wind.

At the shore, Ann kicked off her sneakers and waded into the
first tongues of rushing water. Derek did the same behind her. She bent
to get her hands wet and pitched forward a little. Derek caught her
arm, but let go fast, as soon as she was stable. She smiled at him
gratefully and kicked at the sea with one foot. Then she felt his hand
again, this time just his fingers on her back for balance, between her
shoulder blades. He was walking behind her carefully though the water,
and came up on her other side, closer to an outcropping of rocks on the
shore. His hand moved to just below her neck, to the skin between where
her T-shirt stopped and her bathing suit strap began. She looked over
at him, confused, as his head moved next to hers.

She broke away from him with a startled shove, pushing herself
backward as though he were holding onto her, which he wasn’t, and the
force of her backward movement sent her farther into the water. She
heard him say something as she fell to one knee in the surf. He was
over to her instantly, helping her up.

"I was trying to show you the dolphins," he said. "Did you step
on something?"

"No," she said, "I don’t--"

"Did you see them?" he asked.

She shook her head. Her shorts were soaked at the cuffs. "You
startled me. I lost my balance," she said.

"It’s too rough," he said. "We shouldn’t be standing here."

They walked out of the water and got back on the moped. Ann was aware now that she was drunk. But she also craved another drink.

Ann closed her eyes as they drove, concentrating on the wind against her skin. Periodically she would look to see where they were and whether the landscape had changed again. She felt a great fondness for Derek’s back and shiny helmet in front of her. She felt like a fool for shoving away from him at the beach. She had only been confused, startled. She resolved to drink plenty of water at the next place they stopped. When they pulled into a parking lot, Ann didn’t know if they’d passed several places or if this were the next one. Derek had stopped because of the mopeds parked out front.

At the bar Ann asked for a glass of water. The waiter stared at her, as if waiting for her real order, and out of embarrassment she requested a beer as well. This place, too, had a patio, but it was smaller and covered with fronds. That was OK, because the sun had moved under clouds. Ann worried it might begin to rain.

They sat at a table on the patio across from each other. There were more people here, but Claude wasn’t among them. Ann drank her water and made Derek ask for more. When she’d finished the second glass, she helped herself to a cigarette. Derek lit it for her.

"Are you drunk?" she asked.

"I’m OK," he said. "You worried about my driving?"

"Your driving was great," she said.
“Thank you. I’m a surprisingly competent drunk driver.”

Ann felt clear-headed from the water, nearly sober again. She didn’t waste much energy on the idea that her sobriety might be only relative, sort of an illusion.

“Earlier,” she said. “When I fell? I thought you were making a pass at me.” She laughed as she said it, waiting for him to see the joke, how silly she’d been. She felt large under the spirit of their new honesty with one another. But Derek didn’t smile.

“I was not making a pass at you.” He tapped his cigarette on the edge of the ashtray and looked away from her, out over the beach.

“Well,” she said. “Before...”

“Before, what?” he said. It occurred to her that she was making him angry. “What are you talking about?” he asked.

She didn’t like the tightness moving across his face, the new crease in his brow. She meant on the street in Mérida, when he’d kissed her goodbye, but she couldn’t bring herself to say it now. Perhaps she’d read more into that than there was, too? She desperately wanted everything back to the way it had been five minutes before.

She stood from the table. “I need more water,” she said, not looking him in the eye. She thought if she walked away for a minute, everything might be back to normal when she returned.

Inside, the waiter was busing a table at the far end of the room, so Ann sat at the bar to wait for him. She was not going to go over and bother him. The room was more crowded than Ann remembered from walking in, but maybe she hadn’t paid much attention. How long had they been here? She thought twenty minutes, at most. Where on earth was Claude?
The door to the bar opened and a large group walked in, several men and a few women. The women took up a table and the men crowded to the bar to order drinks. They made a horseshoe around Ann and her empty glass. She looked at her hands, hearing their voices all around her in a language she didn’t recognize, not the Spanish she was used to, anyway. The waiter returned and gave her a sour look. She asked clearly for water. He said something rapidly to her in Spanish, and she looked at him blankly. Then she shook her head. She asked again for water, please. He said something in Spanish and the men around her laughed. He looked to the man next to her for his order. Ann felt that she was being dismissed, and this made her furious. She stayed where she was. She couldn’t really move, anyway, with the men standing all around her. Someone tapped her on the shoulder. She flinched, but looked up at him. He had a wide, heavily lined face, and very short dark hair. He waved to her. She gave him a little half smile and turned back around. Someone tapped her on the other shoulder. She was afraid, but turned again. How had she gotten into this? The second man spoke to her in English. “Excuse my friend. He only wanted to say hello to a pretty lady.”

“I understand,” Ann said. “I’m just waiting.” She looked at the bartender pointedly, but he ignored her.

“Maybe he does not like your order,” the man said.

“I’m a customer,” Ann said. “Why should it matter to him? I order drinks, too. Excuse me,” she said, trying to get up.

The man nodded and looked over her head, but didn’t move out of Ann’s way. She shoved past him, leaving her glass, and walked as calmly
as she could into the restroom, where she gulped water from the tap. Derek was waiting outside at their table. He looked up as she approached.

"Let’s get out of here," she said.

Derek stood. "What’s wrong?" he asked.

She shook her head, sensing that his reserve toward her was still strong. She noticed he still had a full drink.

"I just want to get away from this restaurant. But after your drink," she said, sitting.

"Want to go for a walk?" Derek asked. "I’m sure I can take it on the beach."

"Yes," she said.

They walked for a while. A steady wind had come in with the clouds. Ann pushed her hair out of her face and wished she had a barrette or a hat. The water was darker gray than it had been before, more aggressive and churning. After a while Ann found a shelter of rocks and sat on the sand between them. She was very tired. She watched Derek pace in front of her, wishing she could be happy again. He was trying to skip stones over the top of the waves. How had she managed to make him angry? She couldn’t even remember properly. It all seemed so stupid. She rested her head on her knees and breathed the salt air. She wanted the sun back, the early feeling of blissful drunkenness. Where had it gone?

After a while Derek came up and sat with her. They looked at each other.

"What’s wrong?" he asked.
"I had an unpleasant experience in the bar," she said.

He nodded and put an arm around her loosely, giving her a small, reassuring squeeze. She felt a great rushing out of feeling toward him. He handed her his drink. It was strong, tequila and something, or mescal, and almost warm. She sipped it and leaned into him a little before he could take his arm away. Then she lit a cigarette and smoked it quietly. They stayed that way a long time, the ocean pulling out in front of them, then rushing back in. Finally she lay back on the sand, her head sheltered perfectly by the rocks. There was just enough room. Derek took the glass from her and set it on the sand. After a minute he leaned next to her on his side and combed his fingers through the tangled hair that spread next to her cheek. She knew she shouldn’t be there, and she also knew that no one knew where she was. No one. She opened her eyes and looked at his face. He concentrated on her hair, not looking at her. She wanted suddenly to kiss him. It wasn’t long before she did.

They were startled sometime later by rain. Or Derek was startled by it, and rolled away from Ann in surprise. Ann blinked, then felt the cold drops on her body. She didn’t look at Derek, but she dressed carefully, as though she were being watched. Everything had flattened around her, gone still. Still, despite the rain that was starting to come down, despite the ocean churning, despite the wind. He was looking at her, she knew it. He held out his hand. She took it and stepped out from between the rocks. It was only then that she looked at his face. He could be anyone, she realized. She didn’t know him at all. She had
already stopped the dismal, frightened repeating in her head, “Oh, God,” over and over. That had begun in their last limp seconds together, during the stunned stillness in which their breathing evened out. She was relieved the rain had stopped those particular words. Derek let her look at him, then tugged her hand gently. Come on, he said. We should get out of the rain.

But she would not let them stay at the restaurant. She couldn’t bear it. They walked around the exterior to the front door, where she waited under the awning while Derek went inside briefly.

“Can you drive in this?” she asked when he came out. The fat drops still fell, but it wasn’t raining hard.

He nodded. “I can try,” he said, putting on his sunglasses.

They reached the turn in the road to take them back to the other side of the island without finding Claude. They had slowed at the hotels and restaurants as they passed but hadn’t seen any mopeds. They hadn’t looked very hard. Ann hung onto Derek’s waist as they drove Cross Island Road. The handles below her seat were slippery with rain, and she didn’t trust herself. When the rain stopped after a few minutes, she hung onto him anyway. It was a cheap comfort but all that was available. The clouds seemed to grow denser and darker, but the rain held.

Just before they reached the north end of town, they passed a road marked for the San Gervasio ruins. Derek pulled over and stopped the scooter. He asked Ann to get off, and he followed. They stood in the dirt, and he put his arms around her. Sweet, but meaningless. Their
clothes were damp yet from the rain, and the air hung heavy and still around them, suffocating. The ground seemed to steam. She looked down the road behind him. What if they’d gone to the ruins instead, she wondered?

At the hotel, Ann found a note from Steven. He’d returned from his diving trip not long before, by the time written on the note, and gone out, famished, to eat. He’d be back soon. The note apologized for eating without her.

Ann was surprised to find their room in the same condition she’d left it. Shutters open, unmade bed, two empty beer bottles next to the sink. She looked at these things like she’d look at items in a museum, things from long ago that didn’t directly relate to her. In the shower, she watched sand collect below her around the drain. She rinsed her bathing suit and rolled it in a towel to get most of the water out, then hung it to dry on the towel rack over the toilet. She brushed her teeth and swallowed several aspirins. She combed her wet hair neatly.

She wasn’t thinking about Derek. She didn’t know what that meant. There would be plenty of time to think of him later if she wanted to. She looked at the note again, and at the clock. Steven would probably have a few beers as well. She sat in a chair and tried, with difficulty, to remember his face. She tried to imagine him walking into the room. She practiced her smile. It came remarkably easily. Then she closed the shutters, turned off all the lights and climbed into bed.

She heard the door but didn’t move. She’d left it unlocked. A
crack of light cut into the room, then widened. Steven sat on the bed and said hello in a soft voice. She heard rain outside on the walkway. She tried to think of what she should say, reaching back to some other time, some other place.

“Hi,” she said.

He lay back on the bed with her.

She felt terror mixed with an utter fondness for him. “Are you tired?” she asked him. She wanted nothing so much as to touch him but didn’t dare.

She felt him nod against the pillow.

She lay for a long time, listening to his breathing, staring into the dark place between the bed and the wall.

She woke again, still dark in the room. Steven was there. She reached to the floor for her water bottle, her head locked in a vise of pain. The shutters rattled.

In the morning she woke to find Steven dressed and on the daybed, reading a book. He was looking at her.

“Morning,” he said.

“What time is it?” she asked.

He told her. “We should get going soon. Feel like breakfast?”

She didn’t, but she agreed.

She took a quick shower.

Her eyes were bloodshot and her face a little bloated, she thought. Otherwise OK. Steven caught her staring.
“You’re really dark,” he said. “You got even more sun.”

They packed. She asked about his diving trip, and he told her. He asked about her afternoon. She told him about Evelyn and Roger. About driving around the island, going to the beach, getting soaked on the way back. She said Derek and Claude. Derek and Claude. Steven nodded unhappily.

“I got a little drunk,” she said.

“You slept like it.”

“I’m still not quite myself,” she said. She thought she might tell him what she’d done, if only to stop the wicked double entendre she kept finding herself in. It seemed there was no way around it. She kept imaging two forms of every conversation. This what Steven thinks I mean now; this is what he’d think about what I just said if he knew.

They went to the waffle place again for breakfast. Ann wanted eggs, French toast, everything. She ate a stunning amount, and immediately felt like sleeping again. Steven told her she could sleep on the ferry and the bus. They were going to Cancun. Their flight was the next evening. It was better, Steven thought, to get to Cancun, so they wouldn’t have to worry about anything happening to make them miss the plane. Yes, Ann said. Yes. They could go to the beach tomorrow, Steven said. Take a taxi out. It was touristy, but some of the beach was supposed to be all right. They hadn’t built resorts there for nothing.

The waterjet pulled away from the dock uneventfully. Ann had not
seen any of them. Derek, Claude, Nathan, Evelyn, Roger. She wondered if it were possible they were on the ferry without her having seen them. She sat on the lowest floor in the shade, sweating, and didn’t move from her seat. Steven roamed around, drinking beer from a can.

The bus to Cancun rolled out of the lot. Out the window, she watched other busses filling, crowds at the ticket counter. She could not believe she was going to get away with this. Nothing should be happening, but still, she couldn’t believe it.

They arrived at the bus station in Cancun by late afternoon. It was the same station they’d left from the week before, and they traced the same route to the hotel where they’d first stayed. The same high school girl with perfect English greeted them. It was unfortunate they didn’t have a reservation, she said. There were no rooms. Perhaps at one of the other places nearby, but there was no telling. It was very booked in Cancun, even this time of year, which was not quite the season. The nicer hotels particularly. Always make reservations. The girl walked into the house to make change for Steven.

"I’m sorry," he said to Ann.

She was sitting on the edge of one of the patio couches, already marking off other hotels in their guidebook. She looked up.

"It’s OK," she said. "It’s nobody’s fault, we just forgot."

The girl returned with change. Steven took the guidebook from Ann and went to the pay phone. Between calls he bought a Coke, took a sip, and gave it to Ann. She wasn’t feeling well again, this time not hung-
over so much as queasy and little weak. She thought maybe it was motion sickness, from the bus and the ferry, though she’d slept a good deal on both.

All the hotels Steven called were full. He began to try more expensive ones. Ann found a flyer on the coffee table with Cancun City hotels listed, several that weren’t in their book. Steven dialed the operator for numbers. No rooms. No rooms.

Ann stood and went to the hotel’s entrance, which looked out over a wide circle of pavement, and several equally wide adjoining roads. They were new but the design was strange. It was hot. No sun, just a blanket of non-threatening clouds and an intense, sticky heat. Bugs were whining and clicking in the bushes. That was the sound of heat, Ann thought, that high whine. She wanted to shower again. Her hair felt limp and she believed she was sweating alcohol. Her skin smelled terrible sometimes when she moved and became aware of it. A seagull poked at something nearby on the sidewalk. She watched it a while but couldn’t decide whether it was a dead animal or garbage.

Steven was still on the phone. The girl had disappeared, left them to their own devices. Ann tried to help Steven, but it was a one-man job. Another woman had come into the lobby and seemed to be doing the same thing. She was on another payphone, but she spoke Spanish. She had a child with her. Ann watched the child, a little boy. He hid behind a potted palm waiting for his mother notice he was missing.

“Yes!” Steven shouted, slamming down the phone. “He said he had one or two rooms, and we should hurry.”

Steven tried to order a cab, but didn’t know the address of where
they were and hung up, exasperated. He rang the bell for the girl. The woman on the adjacent payphone asked in halting English if they knew of a hotel with available rooms. Steven told her the name. The woman grabbed her child and her bag and rushed out the door.

“What if she gets there first?” Ann asked.

“She’s got a kid,” Steven said. He looked at Ann like she was crazy.

“Maybe we could find a cab on the street?” Ann asked.

She rushed out of the hotel. Passing the entrance, she saw the woman and her child slip away in a car driven by a man. There was another child in the back seat.

Ann cursed.

She heard Steven inside talking to the girl again. He came out with their bags.

“She says the hotel’s pretty close. Walking might be faster.”

They pulled on their backpacks and went down to the street. On the next block they saw a cab. Ann waved to it madly. She was pouring down sweat already. The driver waved back, but went shooting past. Ann turned to watch the tail of the car disappear.

“He’s not stopping,” she cried.

But in a minute the cab was next to them.

“He had to turn around,” Steven said. “We’re almost there. Don’t worry.”

The driver knew the hotel, and the cab stopped in front of a large, fancy-looking place near where they’d eaten dinner their first night.
“Yikes,” Ann said, as they entered the faux marble lobby.

The woman Steven had given the name to and her family were also there. “Thank you,” the woman said to Steven.

He smiled at her. They got a room for less money than they thought, two beds. The concierge carried their bags. They passed a bar and restaurant, all enclosed within the hotel. They went up a set of stairs, down a hall, up another small staircase. There were only two doors at the top, perpendicular to one another.

“An old hotel,” the concierge said, shrugging. He fumbled with the key and showed them part of the lock not to use, not even to touch, he suggested.


He stepped into the room with them. He showed them the bathroom, which was enormous, a wardrobe for their clothes, and the proper manipulation of the air-conditioning. He asked how many nights they were staying. He shrugged again when they said only one, and left wordlessly. Ann had the feeling the hotel had tried to be grand once but had failed, undercut by the cheapness all around it.

Ann collapsed on the bed.

“I know this is awful,” she said. “But...”

“You’re tired,” Steven guessed.

“I’m sorry.”

Steven went into the bathroom and washed up. He unpacked a few things and set their swim suits out to dry again. Ann could smell their rankness across the room, from just the day packed damp in plastic bags. After a while, Steven left to get dinner. Ann wasn’t hungry. She
felt tremendous relief the moment the door closed behind him. It was so much easier not to be in the same room with him.

Ann sat on her knees on the bed and looked in the mirror. She rummaged through her bag until she found her hairbrush, and pulled it through her hair, over and over. She got up and washed her face. She put on lipstick, a little mascara. It made her feel better, more in control. More likable. She knew she couldn’t hate herself forever, that it would only make them both miserable. But she didn’t know how to stop feeling the way she felt. That had been her problem all along.

She undressed and climbed in bed between the cool sheets. The air-conditioner was heavenly, and she tried to think only of it.

As far as Ann knew, she slept soundly. Then the room was a mass of confusion, disorienting and too dark. Her stomach and her head throbbed, and she felt a great sense of dread rise up inside her. Steven wasn’t there. She didn’t know how long she’d been asleep. She felt a rush of panic, thinking she might’ve overslept and missed their flight. She groped for the lamp on the night table between the two beds.

Something was different in the room. Their bags. Someone had come in and taken them. But Ann’s purse was still on the dresser. Surely a thief would’ve taken that. Her passport, her money. Then it occurred to her that Steven had left her. Maybe he’d known this whole time what she’d done with Derek and had been waiting for her honesty and repentance. Now she could go home, but he wouldn’t go with her. Or maybe he’d taken the tickets and she would have to stay, fend for
herself. She felt dizzy and lurched out of bed, surprised by her nakedness. She was sweating but cold, too. She stepped into the enormous bathroom uncertainly.

An electric fan came on with the light switch. The fan was so loud she turned the light off and stood in the dark for a minute, but she couldn’t stay that way and flipped it back on. The floor and walls of the bathroom were covered with a sickly avocado tile, and only window was tiny and high, accessed from within the shower. Ann moved closer to the toilet, the sound of the fan oddly confusing her, unsure whether her urge was to sit on or lean over the bowl. Her whole body was tense with dread. She caught sight of her reflection and stared for a minute. Sweat covered her face. She leaned over the toilet and vomited. Ah, she thought, heaving again. I’m sick. Suddenly things made more sense.

When the retching stopped and Ann had cleaned herself up, she found her T-shirt and shorts, and got back in bed. She craved water but also felt uneasy about the idea of it. The body, what a mass of confusions, she thought, suddenly feeling sorry for herself. But being sick at least gave her a project, something immediate to concentrate on. She flipped the pillow to its cooler, underneath side. The door unlocked and opened. It was Steven, with a terribly serious look on his face.

They regarded each other across the bed. Ann didn’t know whether to be nervous or relieved.

“What’s going on?” he asked.

“I’m sick, but not just hung over,” she said. “This is something
else." She pushed herself up on one elbow, considered for a moment, then rushed to the bathroom. "Excuse me," she said, closing the door.

So he hadn’t left her. She didn’t feel the relief she’d expect. She wondered if he could hear her vomiting over the noise of the fan. Then she rinsed her face and brushed her teeth again—though she had the sense that continuing to do so was going to give her bleeding gums shortly. She felt a world better, though weak in her muscles, as though they’d all suddenly atrophied. She noticed a few red pinpricks around her eyes. Broken blood vessels, maybe.

She greeted Steven with a weak smile. He was sitting on the far bed, looking at her with concern. He looked like a little boy sitting there.

“How long’s this been happening?” he asked.

“It started about twenty minutes ago,” she said, easing herself onto the bed. “Right out of a dead sleep. Where are our bags?”

“In the wardrobe.”

She nodded. Everything had a simple answer. You just had to know what it was.

Steven went into the bathroom and dampened a cloth at the sink. He folded it into an oblong and laid it across Ann’s brow. She held it there with her fingers. She wanted to joke with him about how she was a terrible date, but she couldn’t. Guilt stopped her. Everything bad about her was true, she couldn’t joke about it. Was this the rest of her life, she wondered, always cutting herself off, never feeling worthy? She looked at the ceiling, at a water stain by the window, brown and rusty. She fixated on it, on its ugliness. What had she done?
Steven consulted the section on traveler's diseases in their guidebook and decided Ann's sickness was from the eggs at the waffle place. Ann didn't tell him she'd had tap water the day before, too. But by early morning, she was feeling better. She'd slept a few consecutive hours without incident and now sat on the bed and sipped tentatively at a bottle of warm water. Steven had just returned from downstairs with a plate of steaming rice and plantains, and fresh papaya juice. It sat on the night table while Ann wrinkled her nose above it tentatively, wondering if the smell might trigger her stomach. She felt weak, but also pleasantly as though she'd survived something traumatic. Her head hadn't been this clear in days.

Their flight was not until early evening. The day was bright and hot, the perfect resort weather, and Ann insisted she was well enough to leave the hotel. She was starting to feel a little trapped by the room and guilty over Steven's constant ministrations. They found a taxi in the street and rode quietly down the wide, empty boulevard out to the beach, taking nothing with them. Ann sat at one window of the cab, Steven at the other.

The beach was on a long peninsula shaped like the number seven. They asked the driver to drop them at a public beach just past the crook. They planned to swim and walk, and take a taxi back. Then they'd check out of their hotel and go the airport. It was costing them another day's charge at the hotel, but the weather was too nice to miss, especially after the trials of the night before. That, and it was their last day.
They strolled the public beach, which was plain and unattractive, and realized they could get behind most of the hotels by walking along the shore. Surely the stylish places were on the best parts of the beach anyway. Ann and Steven meandered along, swimming when they were hot, floating out in the great, salty ocean. The water stung Steven’s eyes, but Ann was inured to it. As they walked, it was clear from the size and outdoor amenities of the hotels what they were missing. The people who came here did have a completely different experience of the country than she and Steven were having. Ann felt a little superior, a touch pleased with herself, but also awed by the luxuriousness of some of the hotels. She felt certain she’d never stay in such places at any time in her life. She’d always imagined it was a choice of sorts—the option remained open to her—but she realized now that wasn’t the case. She simply wasn’t one of those people.

They came to a wide, flat and rockless spot of beach populated in the distance by sawgrasses and demure private duplexes, none of them too fancy. Steven lay on the sand, while Ann floated in the water. She could not get enough of it. The salt content seemed much higher here than other places they’d been—though it was possible she was just enjoying it for the first time. She floated on her back, leisurely, Steven getting smaller and smaller on the beach. The water was calm, and her face became warmed by the sun. She was overwhelmed with contentment. How odd she should feel this at the most unlikely place they’d been.

Around a curve of the beach stood a hotel under construction. It was enormous and gray—all cement still—the rooms flat and identical,
gaping, one after another. Only the inside had been made, the bare structure of the floors. A fence surrounded the place, but there were no men working, no machines parked for the day, no proud sign indicating what was to come and how soon. She noticed part of the fence was trampled down, some of the lower rooms graffitied. Ann floated around the soft curve of the beach, and flipped over to swim. She was not a strong or effective swimmer, and she didn’t get very far with her strokes. She gave up and moved onto her back again. It was more comfortable, more natural for her to float. And she could stare up at the building, which was all she wanted to do anyway.

Steven was out of her sight now, but he could walk and catch up with her. She was mesmerized by the abandoned hotel, its blank ugliness, its clear display of failure. She’d never seen anything like this at home, a project that ran out of money and stood half-built and ruined. She couldn’t tell how old this was—how long it’d been this way—but grass and weeds grew all over the lot. Months, years—it was impossible to say.

Ann found herself imagining Derek as she floated. She hadn’t been thinking of him much—guilt, fear and confusion had overtaken her the last few days. She let herself imagine his body as it had been above her on the beach, his back and ribs and hips under her hands. She imagined going into this hotel with him, climbing around inside it, until they reached the top floor, where they’d find the room with the most pleasing view. She did not imagine barricades, shattered bottles, snakes or bats living inside. She imagined only she and Derek, the cement floor cool and clean beneath them. Two little figures standing
way up there, holding hands at the edge of the floor, looking out over the ocean, watching its tranquil flatness that met the sky.

Something caught Ann’s eye and she saw Steven, walking along the beach carrying her shoes and clothes, scanning the water, then looking up at the hotel. He seemed to look right at their room, the place she and Derek stood gazing out at nothing. She wondered whether if she could jump down to Steven without hurting herself, landing on her feet in the sand next to him, would she do it? He was waving to her with her shoes. Her empty clothes lay draped across his arm, like her body had just slipped out them. And she knew then that, no, she wouldn’t jump down to Steven, even if she could do it safely, even if she could drift delicately down into his arms like a kite that lost its air. She would stay where she was, the high unknown place, with the unknown man.

Steven continued waving her shoes, trying to get her to respond. She would stay out a little a longer, floating and dreaming. And she knew that soon enough, she would leave him.