Doctor Said and other stories

Margaret Alicia Carson

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THE DOCTOR SAID
and
OTHER STORIES

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THE DOCTOR SAID
Ruth Flexner watched her daughter from the deck. Why wouldn't that girl waterski with Dave and his friend? Dave was at Dartmouth now. You would think that would have raised his stock. And he'd filled out, was handsomer. The weight Marcia had added this year at the U. made her look, from this distance, more thirty-one than twenty-one. Ruth saw now that it hadn't been wise of Marcia to lighten her hair to an almost-white. Up close it was striking, but from a distance, and with that pudginess, she could be taken for a grey-haired woman.

"Marcia, if you're not going to diet, at least ski for exercise," she said when the girl had climbed from dock to deck. Any sign of weight gain in Marcia made Ruth remember and remembering was too much for her. Still she was sorry
the minute she said it, and doubly so when Marcia didn't snap back at her. She had to go easy on the girl, be cheerful, show her gratitude that Marcia had been sensible about that attachment. Manager of a gift shop! Imagine going away to a University and getting involved with a businessman, one who didn't even have a degree.

"I predict this weekend will be the turning point. Things are going to start happening around the lake, mark my word. You'll have an exciting summer yet. And remember, I'm ready to feed as many as twenty-five people at a spontaneous supper, so don't hesitate to bring in a gang anytime. It was a big push to get this place finally furnished the way it ought to be, and I don't want all my work wasted. If you knew what agony it was making all those decisions a decorator ought to be handling!"

"No one would know you didn't have a decorator, mother," Marcia said.

How sweet! Usually Marcia made nasty cracks about phony values. Yes, there were signs this might be the turning point, and she could begin to make use of last winter's efforts—the detailed menus she'd collected, the food prepared and freezer-stored for last-minute get-togethers. All the ground work at cocktail parties and bridge sessions. "We must get together this summer at the lake when the youngsters are all home." The remodelling of the cabin into a real summer home, indoor-outdoor carpeting, the additional
bathroom, the exclusive, artist-designed deck furniture. And all the way bucking James. "A cabin ought to be a cabin." For the first time she could invite anyone, anyone at all, without feeling apologetic. Then after all that, Ruth had never dared invite anyone for fear that man would show up. Every weekend Marcia claimed to have invited him down, and she'd let them squirm all weekend in dread of his arrival, only to admit on Sunday afternoon that she'd been putting them on. She had a cruel streak in her, Marcia did. July Fourth she'd driven off and didn't get back until two in the morning. And all that time Ruth had been sick with visions of them in some neon-bright motel. Whether she had met him or just visited a friend across the lake, Ruth never knew. Marcia told one story one day, another the next, convincing each time. Finally, Ruth, tired of arguments, let him come, and the decision was a good one. Marcia came to her senses. She admitted he was all wrong for her. Ever since, all this week, she'd been sweet and good-natured. Now they could enjoy themselves.

"The doctor and his family arrived. His wife said they'd be up every weekend now." Ruth was anticipating a close relationship with this new young family, just two docks away.

"Oh, happy day! Shall I seduce the doctor and fulfill my mother's dream?"
"Marcia, don't talk like that. I won't have it."

"Well, why else would you have badgered dad so about
not letting the place go to anyone but a doctor? We all
know I must marry a doctor. My dear mother's nineteenth
century dream."

Marcia's sweetness and pliability could disappear
for no reason. These shifts of mood were so inevitable
with Marcia, but Ruth couldn't get used to them.

"Your father wouldn't have had exclusive listing
to that place if it weren't for me. You ought to appreciate
my efforts. The doctor teaches at the med school and if
he invites some of his students up, that'd do a lot to liven
up your summer. I talked to the doctor's wife this morning.
I saw she was having trouble keeping the youngest off the
dock, so I took over that tiny lifejacket from our boat and
persuaded the little one into it. She was so grateful! I
haven't met the doctor yet."

"I have."

"You have?"

"Two years ago. In the hospital." She talked as
calmly as if it had been an appendectomy.

A sudden nausea precipitated that pre-migraine
dizziness. "You don't think he'll recognize you?" Her
voice came out a strained whisper.

Marcia looked frightened. "I was just teasing you,
mother."
To joke about a thing like that! Ruth couldn't hold back the tears. They came easily these days. She wanted to rest, relax, give up the fight, have Marcia off her hands. The girl was too much for her. No one would ever know how that girl had taxed her to the limit, time and again. And the cruelty was that she would never really know whether Marcia had been teasing or not. Every encounter with the doctor would be tainted with the question. So many times these past two years Ruth had told herself that when Marcia was married with a lovely home and family, that she'd finally indulge herself, find a trusted friend and tell her what she'd been through, so she could finally hear the words she deserved, "Only you could have stood up to it, Ruth. You have been the making of that girl." One side of Ruth's face felt drawn. She thought of her own mother in the last years, after the stroke.

She had to get her mind onto something else. "Marcia, when your friends come today—-

"Their names," Marcia spaced each word, "are Alexis and Lisalou, as you have known since we were in the 9th grade."

"When they come—-

"You always call them your friends." Now Marcia ran all her words together. "Bob was always your friend. Earl was always that friend of yours. You never once mentioned
Earl's name. Maybe you've never said Alexis or Lisalou, for all I remember."

"May I finish? I want you to know that I cannot babysit the child. My nerves aren't up to it."

"It would never occur to Alexis to let you babysit her child. For all we care you can go help the doctor's wife get settled."

She had to ignore Marcia at times like this. Those girls! Even the mention of them made Marcia resentful, sarcastic, rebellious. No wonder Ruth disliked them. She had consented to their visit in a moment of gratitude, when Marcia had agreed that her attachment to that man had been ill-advised. But Ruth wasn't so soft-headed as to babysit the child and free the girl to act like a youngster, water-skiing, going off to the marinas, swimming out to the float. She wanted Marcia to see how lucky she was not to be tied down to a child, and that's just where Marcia would have been if Ruth hadn't taken the stand she had.

"It is too bad I loaned the lifejacket, but it would create the wrong impression to ask for it back, even if it doesn't seem to be in use."

"Why don't you write out a script for the day, so we won't make any faux pas."

"The big faux pas is in having them, especially together." Ruth spoke without having realized beforehand
that it bothered her. As if the three of them being together would be a public announcement of what they had in common. Then there was always the danger that Marcia would get confidential with them, if she hadn't already. Marcia swore she hadn't told a soul, but Marcia was not above lying, and Ruth had nightmares that everyone knew but wouldn't let on to her. "I mean in high school there were eight or ten girls in your crowd. Why a reunion with just these two?"

Hate flashed momentarily on Marcia's face but it stabbed Ruth less than the crumpled look that followed. Ruth moved to the arm of the lounging chair in which Marcia was stretched out. She patted her shoulder. "Come on. All this is silly. We've had a good week. We'll have a nice weekend. I'm glad to have your friends. Both Alexis and Lisalou." The names did sound strange on her lips.

"Mother, it was better the way Lisalou did it, not caring if people knew she had a baby and gave it up. It would be easier for me in the end. To be open and honest. Maybe for you, too."

"No, darling. It is better to be strong as we were. She just didn't have the stamina. Telling is weak. It's breaking down."

"But it's all past for her, and it never is for us."

"No, dear. It is not past for her. She lives with the results of advertising her mistake. You still are
accepted, admired, invited every place. All she has is that fringe group. Pathetic creatures. And you know how she's been taken advantage of. I ache for her poor parents. But if a girl acts unashamed of a thing like that, naturally assumptions are made. Unpleasant assumptions you've been spared."

"I have to believe I did the right thing. I have to believe I did the right thing."

The way Marcia said these words, slowly and to herself, chilled Ruth but she didn't allow that to show in her voice. "You'll know you did right some day. You're not cut off from anybody. You're not handicapped by a child and scarred by a divorce." Reminding herself of the facts erased doubt. "You'll get your degree, marry a professional man, have a fine life."

"I hear their car." The sound of the motor was close, then distant as the car wound down the hill to the lake. "Oh, mother. I wish they weren't coming. I wish it could be just you and me today, and we could invite the doctor and his wife for lunch and I'd help with the kids. Remember what a good babysitter everyone said I was. I miss babysitting."

"Now. Now." Ruth comforted. She felt rewarded as she always did when she'd had a difficult time with Marcia. The two of them always came through more united than ever. When Marcia was little, after the recitals, she'd always
come and say, "I'm glad you made me practice, mummy." They could hear the car on the gravel of the turnaround now. She helped Marcia to her feet and patted her. "It's just for the day. You go now. I'll see them later."

Ruth wanted to savor the pleasantness of having come through for Marcia, so she went to her bedroom to lie down for a while. The view made her happy she'd approved the contractor's idea of putting windows in the dormer sides so that the lake fronts of their neighbors were now included in the view of the lake. Fortunately their neighbors were not the kind anyone would want to block from view, now that the Shadbolt place was in the hands of young people of good family. Ruth glanced toward the doctor's dock with satisfaction. She had persuaded James to have it painted along with theirs on the grounds it would make the place sell better, but for Ruth the matched look thus achieved symbolized the order and harmony that would exist between the two places. Luckily the Lindsays in between had never been boaters or swimmers and so had no dock. Another dock would have given a cluttered look to the area, put distance between their place and the doctor's.

Ruth looked at the scene with satisfied fatigue as if she herself had straightened and cleaned and rearranged the furniture of the whole lakefront. From the beautifully furnished deck below her neat white planks led down, then
leveled into evenly spaced stripes that topped the water beside the boathouse, extended solidly into the blue, then right-angled toward the south, pointing to the white pier that was now a partner in enclosing and giving intimacy to the water between. Even the built-in benches of the doctor's pier faced this way. The Lindsay house between them was set back from the lake, giving to the doctor's house and Ruth's own an onshore proximity as well. The Lindsay lawn, magnificently patterned by colorful flower beds, added an air of beauty and permanence that summer homes often lacked.

There was the setting. All ready. And Marcia was ready now, too. "I wish it could be just you and me," she'd said, "and we could invite the doctor and his wife for lunch." In the L shelter of their dock bobbed the new fiberglass inboard they had given Marcia to lure her away from the summer job idea, and hanging under the eaves of the boathouse, the new bright red and yellow water skis, the yellow nylon ropes. Out beyond the doctor's pier a lovely varnished sailboat pulled at the plastic buoy. The doctor's own boyhood sloop, his wife had told her.

Ruth surveyed the scene out the windows as she surveyed a room before company arrived. She nodded approvingly of the lakefront order she had created. She could lie down, take that deserved rest. She slipped out of her shoes and positioned herself on the bed.
In her nasty moments Marcia accused her of scheming, but young people never understood that the best things in life are quietly arranged by people who know what life should be. She couldn't let a girl like Marcia go wrong. Marcia had given them so many reasons to be proud, violin soloist of the big high school concert, lead in the big musical. And not only musical talent. Poems in the school literary magazine, choreographer for Orchesis productions, and a national merit finalist. A bright girl. Ruth couldn't let all that end in tragedy just because she wouldn't be sensible about boys. From the beginning she had refused to go with boys they could approve, used ruses to defy their restrictions. That was why they couldn't let her go away to college. That terrible school counsellor had been determined that Marcia should go to Radcliffe. Ruth couldn't hardly tell her that Marcia was certain to go wild. Even going to a local college hadn't prevented that. Ruth should never have given in her sophomore year and let her stay at the sorority house. That was when it happened. Not when she was living at home. It didn't happen when she was with her family. She was just immature and the boy was no good.

Ruth got up quickly, took the pillow from James' bed, the cushion from the chair and lay down again, now propped so that she could see the doctor's lakefront, the white-painted pier, the sailboat lifting and sinking gently.
The sight renewed her sense of her own strength, tired as she was. She was soothed enough to be able to close her eyes.

She could count on her own strength. She had always met each crisis. Utterly devastated by the shock of Marcia's pregnancy, she had lain on this same tapestry rose spread, which had been in their room at home then, and heard Marcia say she was determined to marry that boy. She had longed for Marcia to go ahead and do it so it could be all over between them, all the tension, so she could finally rest, even if it were in shame, even if it meant giving up her dreams. But she hadn't given in to that longing as other mothers might have. Ruth was made of stronger stuff. She had mustered the strength to rise off this damask-rose spread, go to Marcia who was crying on her own awful Bates plaid and say, "You do, and I'll never speak to you again, never see you again as long as I live." That brought her to her senses. No one could say she'd failed her daughter.

A high piping, "Yes. Yes. Yes," pierced Ruth's mind, startled her to anxiety. But then she realized it was just the company, the child, probably responding to the idea of swimming. She hadn't failed her daughter as Alexis' mother had. Marcia wasn't saddled with a child and divorced before she was twenty-one, and she wasn't living a shameful life like Lisalou. Marcia had risen above her mistake because they had the fortitude to keep silent, bear their
burdens alone. Everything had worked out. Marcia's tendency to gain weight periodically anyway, the fact she'd always talked about going away to school, the due date coming in the late summer. Of course, they had to let her stay away at school after that.

And then another inappropriate attachment. And again she had to give an ultimatum. Just last weekend. She had called Marcia into this bedroom, made her sit down. She had refused to talk while Marcia stood defiantly with her back against the bedroom door. Childishly, Marcia wouldn't sit on the chair, just because Ruth had pointed to it. Sat on James' bed. No one could be defiant sitting on a bed as soft as James'. "Marcia," Ruth had spoken directly. She would not argue. "You know we could never accept that man as a son-in-law. I will not spend the rest of the summer arguing about it. Make your decision. Pack up and leave with him today or break off whatever attachment that ring signifies." She would not, could not, say engagement.

Marcia had been vicious. "I hate you. You can't ever let me decide in my own time, can you? I've always known he wasn't for me. But he loves me, and he knows how to love, and it feels good."

The remark need not refer to anything physical, but it was the typical cruelty of Marcia to make sure the possibility entered Ruth's mind. Every triumph had its strain.
Ruth turned on her side and began to trace the upraised rose design with her finger. I forgot to reverse the spread this morning, she thought, knowing that last week she had traced pink on white, as she silently had begged, even though confident that Marcia was then sending him away, never again, Marcia, never again say you hate me, or I'll stop saving you. There's a limit, Marcia.

Ruth forced her finger to stop tracing, raised her eyes to the window. That was over, and the doctor was on his dock, putting big blue fins on a small pair of feet extended upward by the boy lying on the dock. The doctor had a fine physique. Strong with the strength that came from good exercise and orderly living, not the strength that came from brute ancestors. A fine man. Marcia didn't have to settle for less, a girl as smart and pretty and feminine as she was. And she was growing up, seeing things straight. She had said she was sorry they had come. Eyes on the doctor, Ruth filled in what she could not see, their own dock, the Lindsays' flowers, the float. And just before she drifted off, she peopled the doctor's dock with students of gentle strength who later came trooping to her deck for a gay, spontaneous supper.

Marcia's call woke her up. "Where are the boat keys? We're going to the cove. Have a picnic. Alexis and Lisa-lou went with Rodge in his sailboat an hour ago, and Jennie
and I fixed the food and are taking our boat."

"Rodge? Jennie?" She was now up, trailing Marcia.

"The doctor and his wife. They're great. Not conservative like most doctors. But he's in research."

Ruth had an uneasy premonition things were out of control. "How long did I sleep? Why didn't you wake me? Who arranged all this?" She followed Marcia, who was grabbing towels, sunglasses, cushions.

"Alexie's little boy toddled down the beach to play with their littlest and we followed and got to talking. Jennie and Rodge are eager to explore the lake."

"There are no picnic facilities at the cove. Come back here, and I'll fix a nice supper."

"We want to picnic, and the food's all ready."
Marcia started down from the deck, then turned. "Oh, mom. I didn't think. You wouldn't want to come with us? Dad never gets here 'til dark."

Ruth didn't like going on haphazardly arranged excursions, but she felt she must. Indelible impressions were always made on first acquaintance, and she might be needed to counteract who-knows-what misconceptions Marcia's friends were creating. The doctor and his wife ought not to make the mistake of thinking Marcia anything like Lisalou or Alexis. Neither of those girls thought a thing of exposing their worst sides. She should never have gone to
sleep. But since she had, she must now join their picnic. She'd have a chance in the boat to find out what the girls had told the doctor's wife about themselves that afternoon. That was the first step. After that she'd make use of all conversational opportunities to set the record straight. If she did say so herself, she knew how to drop offhand remarks about Marcia's talents and achievements without crude boasting. The girl never sold herself, never seemed to think she'd been outstanding. That was a mistake Alexis never made. She acted as if everything she did was outstanding. She wouldn't put it past her to act as if being divorced at twenty-one was something to her credit.

Marcia went to the doctor's dock to load up and then came back for her mother. As the inboard edged in Jennie was saying to her boy, "Wait until we're away from the dock, Steve. Then Marcia'll let you steer." She greeted Ruth with, "Marcia's so competent with all this power." Ruth considered both the compliment and the familiarity a good sign. She stepped into the boat and sat in the stern with Jennie, the motor housing between them.

"Oh, I love this lake," Jennie said. "All those little islands, and without people on them! It's too much. I'm glad we're not wasting any time getting to know all the fun spots. Your girls are great."

Ruth knew that Jennie's your girls did not mean your
daughters, but misunderstanding created an opportunity.
"Only Marcia is ours. The others are just high school
acquaintances of Marcia's. They like to see each other once
a year. They've traveled such widely different paths."
Already she had established the looseness of Marcia's con-
nection with the others and the difference in their lives.
That would lessen any reflection the girls' activities might
cast upon Marcia.

"Isn't that Alexis amazing? And only twenty-one!"
"Yes, it's a tragedy."
"Tragedy?"
"She's divorced. Only twenty-one and divorced, and
there's the child. Typical case of how a nice girl can get
messed up when a mother doesn't put her foot down from the
beginning."

"She seems so non-messy to me, at ease with herself
and her little boy. Has she always had that lovely sense
of just being about her?"

Ruth was taken back. She had no idea what Jennie
meant by a lovely sense of just being. She did not like
vague language and felt Jennie's question was unfair in some
way. But she did not hesitate to answer. "I never noticed
it." Her tone sounded harsh, so she added, "Perhaps trouble
has sobered her considerably." Ruth did not for a moment
believe this. Alexis had always been an aggressive girl,
constantly competing, trying to match Marcia in everything, and Ruth didn't doubt that she still had that aggressiveness. Look at the way she had lost no time impressing the doctor's wife. "I suppose she is to be admired for going after what she wants the way she does, like returning to Radcliffe in spite of everything, but I can't help but think of that poor little boy. He's the one who'll suffer."

"He must have had good care. He's a delightful child. It's obvious she enjoys him."

Jennie seemed to be such a kind, sweet person, and yet she was countering Ruth's every remark. What on earth had made her so loyal to Alexis when she scarcely knew her? Could she have thought Ruth was too down on the girl? If she did, it was nothing that Ruth herself had said, but something she'd been told by Alexis. Exactly the return for hospitality she could expect from that girl.

"Well, I am eternally grateful that Marcia has had the good sense to wait."

"We learn by our mistakes," Jennie said thoughtfully. Ruth's throat tightened. Was she referring to Marcia's mistake? What did she know? Why did she say it just after mention of Marcia? It could be a coincidence. She could be referring to Alexis. Ruth did not want a pause in the conversation to reflect her confusion. Fortunately, Jennie moved forward just then to make the girl sit down. The
child had been leaning over the edge of the boat. Settling back again, Jennie continued, "I sometimes wonder why parents want so much to have their children succeed in everything when it's our failures that make us better human beings. I wonder if I've ever met a girl who wasn't a better person for having made a mistake in a too-early marriage."

Ruth could not believe such nonsense was coming from a doctor's wife and the mother of three children. "Oh, my dear, if you only knew! I've met hundreds. I've known hundreds of ruined lives."

"But I don't mean your generation. They lived with their mistakes. There's the ruin. We admit our mistakes. I'm going to let my children make mistakes."

Ruth made her voice good-natured. "You didn't allow your daughter to make the mistake of falling out of the boat."

Jennie laughed. "You're right. I didn't. I wonder if I should have. She has a lifejacket on. We would have turned the boat and picked her up. But tumbling out of boats is dangerous."

"So is tumbling into one marriage after another."

"I wonder."

"You wonder?"

Jennie laughed. Ruth smiled pleasantly and looked out over the water to give herself time. Ruth had lost
control of the conversation somewhere along the line, and she did not know why. Jennie seemed forthright and simple, but she was slippery. Still there was no need to feel upset. Ruth had wanted to make sure Marcia wasn't tainted by association with Alexis, but she had assumed the doctor's wife would not think well of Alexis. If she did, then there was no problem, nothing more than disappointment in the doctor's wife.

Marcia called back to her, "Want to scramble the rocks, mother, or wade in?"

Here already. Ruth moved forward on each side of the boat and flipped the foam protectors to the outside. "I'll take the rocks, but they won't reduce your mother to scrambling."

"That's the spirit, mother."

"It's out of the 19th century." Ruth could rise to the occasion with a little wit now and then.

While the others swam and explored, Ruth sat on the beach, magnet for towels, thongs, float cushions from the boats, sunglasses, tanning lotion, discarded shirts. The others gathered around her periodically to dry off, warm up, snatch sandwiches, pour lemonade from the thermos. Much of the time Marcia sunbathed beside her. Alexis monopolized the doctor and Lisalou trailed Jennie.

"Don't feel obliged to stay with me," Ruth said.
"Swim out to the sloop with Alexis and Rodge."

"I couldn't catch up now," Marcia said. "You know, mother, I don't know why it is. Rodge must be thirty-five. Yet Alexis and Lisalou can both talk to him as if he were their own age, and I can't."

"That's to your credit. He's not your age." Why did Marcia always think other people had all the assets? It didn't make sense in a girl with so much talent and beauty and intelligence. "Friends have always commented on how easily you talk to older people. You don't realize what an asset that is, it's so natural to you."

"Oh, yes. Gracious with the big-wigs--the social poise bit. But Alexis and Lisalou can talk person to person."

"What is this person to person nonsense? You're creating --"

Marcia jumped up rudely in the middle of Ruth's remark and ran down the beach without a word.

"Marcia!" Ruth reprimanded, but Marcia was already too far to hear. Ruth watched her join the doctor's older two to help them push a heavy log across the beach and into the water. Her attitudes were so uncalled for. Tears came into Ruth's eyes. To be hurt instead of indignant. That wasn't like her. A mistake to have come. Stuck here in the twig infested sand without even a beach chair. No wonder
her reactions were thrown out of kilter. Marcia looked no bigger than the eight and nine year olds she was playing with, Lisalou looked as motherly as Jennie idling down the beach trailed by the two toddlers and Alexis diving off the sailboat looked like a lithe, about-to-blossom innocent instead of the too-early jaded divorcée.

Jennie and Lisalou sat down in the sand beside her. Ruth was unreasonably uneasy.

"We were discussing," Jennie explained, "how hard it is to know what's right for us."

Ruth did not want to be included in their talk, this person to person business. It was perverted exposure, the way Lisalou revealed her personal life to someone she had met only that day, and in front of Ruth herself when she knew Ruth disapproved. There was no shame in the girl. She was glad Marcia couldn't do this sort of thing.

"It bothers me terribly that daddy can't understand my living with Gary."

Marcia said the girl had the kind of face that would make any man want to take care of her. No doubt that was the effect she aimed for, the way she used those big brown eyes to appeal, even now, with Jennie.

"Fathers usually don't," Jennie said. "He's afraid you'll be hurt. He wants to protect you."

"I understand how he feels. I understand it perfectly. I don't expect him to feel otherwise.
should it bother me? I can't not have a thing going with Gary because of daddy. That wouldn't be right, when everything else says it's a good thing."

Ruth felt her shoulders draw in, her nostrils retract upward as her neck elongated. She swung her head away in disgust. That her daughter should pick such a girl for a friend!

"Maybe you're not really confident it's a good thing." Jennie said.

Nothing could be more inappropriate than the gentleness with which Jennie spoke.

"How can I be?" Lisalou admitted. "With everybody thinking I'm a mixed-up kid going down the drain. When I know nothing is more valuable than what two people share. It's been good for me. I've got love to give. Gary's got love to give. Why not give? What can be wrong about that? Just because we can't say it's forever."

"You've got to have faith in what your own experience tells you. As long as you're honest with yourself. Know if you're doing it for yourself—or to get back at your father."

Ruth could hardly believe her ears. Given the opportunity to set the girl straight, Jennie was doing the opposite. It was Ruth's duty to speak up, if not to Lisalou, at least to Jennie. You're an adult, a mother. How would
you feel in a few years if someone encouraged your daughters in such behavior? But what was the sense in making this her business. Soon Lisalou would be out of Marcia's life for another year and Ruth must keep relations good with her new neighbors. Marcia needed to meet some nice young men headed into good professions, and Rodge and Jennie might be the means. Ruth had made inquiries. Their own lives were above reproach. It was a disease of the times, this tolerance.

"But can I be sure I'm honest with myself? I mean how do you know?"

Ruth could stand listening no longer. She would say she needed to exercise a bit. She was on her feet and down the beach before she realized she hadn't excused herself in any way. It was not like her to be rude. No matter what, she had always maintained the amenities. A strange day, this. The sight of Marcia out riding the log with the children, looking like one of them, half shamed, half comforted Ruth. It was impossible, looking at Marcia now, to believe she had been through what she had.

Ruth had not gone to see her when she was pregnant. That would have left a picture in her mind that she'd have to be erasing constantly. Not that she had deserted Marcia. She ran up astronomical phone bills and wrote daily. At the time she thought it was more than Marcia deserved. Now, on this beach of glaring sand without a single beach chair
or gay umbrella to remove its harsh unfriendliness, with the jutting rocks cutting off even the sight of the familiar shoreline, with these unpredictable people for whom she had no comfortable reactions, now, here, nothing mattered but that pudgy towhead out there. Alexis swam over and joined Marcia and the children on the rolling log, but Rodge waded to shore pulling exhausted legs through the shallow water with effort.

He dragged up to Ruth. "Guess who needs to get in shape." The two of them walked together back toward Jennie and Lisalou.

"Marcia's majoring in microbiology. She'd benefit so much from talking to you, doctor."

"Not right for her, that field," Rodge said.

"Oh, how can you say that?" Ruth protested.

"I can't, of course. But I trust my snap judgments." His tone took on a kind of intimacy, as if, but Ruth couldn't identify what it was like. "I noticed when microbiology was mentioned, she was detached, objective. Her major, nothing more. When she talked about politics, ah, then she came alive."

"Politics? I've never heard her mention it. Surely you're not suggesting." She should not have shown such surprise, but she recovered. "Oh, the other girls, that's what interests them, so naturally---. Marcia never forces her own
interests on others."

"Maybe. But she sounded up on not only politics but political science. And she got excited. Great to see girls excited about what's happening in the world."

Could Marcia be involved in things she never mentioned? How could Marcia be so cruel to her, but maybe Rodge was mixed up. Did he even know which one was Marcia?

Rodge stopped and shaded his eyes to check on the log rollers out in the bay. Ruth stopped and shaded her eyes. Which one was Marcia? She couldn't tell now. The doctor's boy was on the end, the doctor's girl was swimming in to shore, but was Marcia up by the boy, or was that her bouncing the other end of the log? Ruth couldn't tell. Because of the sun behind them, she assured herself. But she was frightened.

Rodge yelled, "Time to sail off." The two of them walked on. Ruth had the impulse to say things to Rodge that made no sense. What'll I do? Nobody knows how it is. She felt impossibly confused. She had to get back, recover herself.

As they came up to Jennie and Lisalou, Rodge said, "Let's finish the food. I'll take the bigger kids back with me. Lake's a bit rough for the little ones now."

Alexis rose out of the water just as her Randy stepped in Ellie's pile of sand. Ellie jackknifed herself up and pushed him backwards. Alexis passed by without
Neither moved to teach either child how to behave. "Ellie needs a playmate," Jennie continued. "You have to come next weekend, Alexis. I'll bring the extra crib, make it easy. I'm not going to let Brock get back to Cambridge without introducing you. Once you meet each other I know you'll get together there, but I'm not going to trust the two of you to do it on your own. You'll both be too busy and not know what you're missing."

"You don't know," Alexis laughed. "I'd chase down an opportunity for free medical advice for Randy any day. I'm always wasting time at the clinic and then I find out I've missed classes for nothing."

This was too much, the thought of Alexis coming back again. Hard enough to get through this visit. And the hurt of Jennie doing for Alexis what Ruth wanted her to do for Marcia. Not that Marcia would be in Cambridge, but it was indicative. Alexis was so lower class. Marcia would never make a crude remark about free medical advice. Two years at Radcliffe had done Alexis no good. Jennie was a queer one for a doctor to have married. Now she had ruined Ruth's summer. She could see it, Alexis the doctor's guest every weekend for the rest of the season, queening it on the dock with all the males who would carry Randy on their shoulders, and Jennie would say it was easier to take care
of two toddlers than one, letting Alexis go off, free as a bird, and Marcia not seeing what a terrible handicap a child could be. Alexis had a way of pretending her liabilities were assets, and it was hard on Marcia. Last year Alexis had said, "Randy adds so much to life, takes the edge off that need to love and be loved, lets me settle down to learning, and he's fun. You can't get down with a child around." Marcia had gone sentimental and moody for days after that. "If Alexie can feel that way--she never paid attention to children, didn't think about them. I've always wanted a baby, every time I'd see one, even before, and now --" Ruth found such moods difficult to manage, but she had rallied all her resources, no matter what the cost and had made Marcia think straight. If Marcia got into that mood tonight Ruth wouldn't be able to face it. Not today. She wasn't up to it. This silly haphazard excursion had gotten her down. As soon as she got back to the west shore in familiar surroundings she'd be herself, able to cope.

Ruth suddenly realized she was just standing there stupidly while the others gathered up the paraphernalia. She picked up a towel, shook out the sand, folded it, Jennie put it on the colorful piles.

It was Jennie who had put her off balance in the first place, the way she undermined any rational direction a conversation might take.
"Doctor, it's years since I've been in a sailboat. Is there room for me on the trip back?" Jennie would go in their boat with the little ones.

"Sure thing."

She was ridiculous to let Jennie bother her. Ruth was older and should take the lead, be an influence on the younger woman, obviously a bit immature for her role as mother and doctor's wife, probably in one of those dangerous periods that hit women. No doubt looking back with longing on youthful ways. Ruth could be useful to the doctor if she helped Jennie keep her eyes on the rewards ahead of her as her husband grew more prominent and her position in the community more important.

The happy thought of helping this fine young man by influencing his wife pulled Ruth together, made her feel herself again. She could lay the groundwork on this trip back across the lake. A few subtle remarks could set him to thinking that maybe he ought not to encourage his wife's interest in Alexis and Lisalou. Even with the children there she could manage the conversation discreetly. She felt much better as the doctor himself handed her small items to carry and said, "We'll give you a good sail."

Only when the inboard bobbed beside the sloop and she was expected to leap from one boat to the other as all hands tried to synchronize the pitching of the two crafts,
did she realize how much she disliked sailing. She hated being off balance. But she was over, and the sloop was tossing in Marcia's wake before she had a chance to voice her change of heart.

Once under way the doctor said, "This lake is going to do something for all of us. We're lucky your husband got in touch with me about it. I've worked too hard too long, and Jennie's been tied down too long. Now we can live a little."

Here was the opportunity to lead into her ideas about Jennie, but the boat heeled abruptly and her thoughts slid away from her. She had to brace her legs against the starboard seat and hang tight with her arms on the gunnels behind her to keep from plunging into the rushing water. She didn't dare let up on the muscle tension. Her ribs tightened up so that she had to keep her breathing shallow and quick. She didn't dare take her eyes off the run of the lake along the varnished edge opposite and below her. Nothing but her stare kept the speeding water from spilling into the boat, for it raced by well above the boat's outer rim. She would never have suspected sailing could be so dangerous on a clear day.

From the corner of her eye it seemed as if the boy had been arrested in a fall backwards. Defying gravity his whole body was over the water, only his toes seemed to catch
the boat. He must be hanging by a rope. She flicked her eyes for just a second in the doctor's direction to alert him to the danger. He was lounging, feet extended, hand lightly on the tiller, watching the boy without concern. The girl was stretched out on the starboard seat so that when the water washed in, as it surely would in a moment, it would inundate her upturned face. They were relaxed. Only Ruth had to hang on for dear life. There was a hard lump in her shoulders at the base of the neck, the size of a baseball, which seemed to hold upright a painful blade whose point quivered just below the top of her skull. If she did not hold rigid the blade would slice into her brain, which was so silly Ruth forced herself to lift her head, look out over the water. The blade sliced. They were racing back to the cove.

"I don't want to go back." Her voice was too loud. She had thought the water or the wind or something was making a great noise.

"Neither do I," the boy laughed. "Let's keep going, dad. Marcia's mother wants to."

Ruth saw now that they were not going back to the cove. She had lost all sense of direction, all perspective. Sailing was like this. She must relax, flex her knees, turn her head, but as soon as she did, the jib flapped noisily, the boy scrambled, the girl whirled up and lunged toward
Ruth's side. She sensed the doctor behind her grabbing desperately at something. Suddenly Ruth was no longer bracing her feet against the opposite side. Her feet were above her and she felt the water rushing over her hands clenched on the gunnels.

"Okay?" the doctor asked. He signaled instructions to his son.

"Aw, come on, dad," the boy complained.

"Okay?" the doctor asked her again. "We'll point up. Take it easy. You worried about my seamanship?"

Ruth managed to shake her head. The boat was back on an even keel now and sailing more slowly. But the doctor kept watching her. She must look sick.

"Take the tiller, Steve," he called to the boy, who secured the ropes and scrambled back. "But no shennanigans," the doctor added. He slid over to let the boy sit by the tiller. He put an arm around Ruth's shoulders.

"I'm all right," she said, trying to wriggle up straighter and shift away from him but prevented from doing so by his arm, which maintained an easy, natural encirclement of her shoulders in spite of her movements. His hand patted her forearm, then gripped it with an affectionate pressure.

"Safe to breathe again," he said. And after a listening pause. "Come on, pull that good fresh air in
deep. In, two, three, four." His voice was playful.

Ruth laughed nervously. "I'm all right."

"I know that, but you haven't convinced your hands yet. Look how they're clutching the boat." He moved forward, turned and took her arm from the boat's edge behind him. When he reached behind her to remove her other hand from its grasp on the gunnels she hated to give up her hold—but the arm around her pulled her safely against him. His right hand took hers and wiggled first one and then another of her fingers. "Now the wrist." He pressed his fingers into her wrist and jiggled it until it flopped up and down. "Now here." His hand moved up to the muscles of her forearm. "That's better."

Ruth laughed again, a little less nervously. "Oh, for goodness sakes! You must think I'm awful."

"Not at all. I just want to enjoy relaxing with a relaxed companion. After jibing like that, I want you to show me you trust me." He stretched out his legs, slouched a bit.

"Oh, I do trust you," Ruth said happily, stretching out her legs spontaneously and slouching with him, released from all self-consciousness, all tension, by words that warmly flowed through her, a companion, want to enjoy, want you to trust.

He responded. "Ah, this is more like it."
Ruth dared not let herself agree openly. His arm around her seemed to transfer the relaxation of his body to hers. She had not felt such a sense of well being in years. It must be all right. His children were right here with them. She wished that the wind would die completely and they would be becalmed for hours. Eyes closed, she silently soaked up the sun.

"Ruth," he said after a time, and she could feel his face so close to hers that she hesitated to open her eyes. "You're as pretty as Marcia when you're relaxed. Why do you worry about her so?"

At the moment she didn't know why she worried about Marcia. Poor girl, she was always at her. It was no way to show her love. She should let her alone.

"I'm really very proud of Marcia."

"I know--but better for you both if you'd just enjoy her." He took hold of her wrist again and flicked it.

"I'm not going to tense up. I see the difference." She moved the round of her shoulder into the hollow of his armpit with such pleasure she was shocked. What would he think? She looked up at him to explain, or apologize, or counteract, whatever was needed. He smiled. It was all right. Nothing was needed. He liked her. She couldn't imagine why. She'd done nothing to deserve it, but he liked her. She smiled.
"You're doing great, skipper," Rodge said to the boy, and put his head back and closed his eyes so he could feel the sun on his face.

Whenever she felt the muscles in his arm as he moved a bit a good feeling surged through Ruth. The boy was letting the boat heel a bit more with each tacking, but now the tilt was pleasant. The water slid rapidly past the gunnels, free, unimpeded, smooth. The girl up front on the deck was throwing a yellow coil of rope out into the water to watch it stream out before winding it back in. "If I let go, you grab it," she said to Ruth.

Too soon Rodge had to leap forward quickly and grab the dock, but he had kept his arm around her all the way, even managed a quick squeeze on the round of her shoulder just before he jumped up.

Back on the deck of her own place, Ruth thought, "I should have had a son." Lying in the contour chaise, she was still scudding along, relaxed by an arm. Marcia brought the boat back from the doctor's dock about dark. Her voice and Lisalou's coming up from the boathouse beneath barely penetrated the insulation Ruth's mood wrapped her in. "Come on . . . a trip's not a commitment . . ." How could so short a trip be so lovely? "Hang lifejackets over the side . . . never forgive mother . . ." Nice that he knew that she was worried and what about when they'd only just
met. "... in my own time ... just to bug her ..."
He had flicked that cramp from her arm so easily. Relaxed
and pretty go together. "... need a change ... guys
you honestly go for ..." He wanted her to trust him.
"... activists ... can't let go ..." She'll
forgive me in time, a lot to forgive, but in time. "... had it ... no matter what ..." Her shoulder had
fit right under his, and she hadn't needed to explain.
"... no laughing matter ... my father ... your
mother ..." He had smiled.

There he was now coming across the Lindsay's lawn,
Alexis' boy asleep in his arms, Alexis beside him. Rodge
liked Alexis, too. He took the child directly to Alexis' car, and Alexis came up to thank Ruth. Alexis did well.
She must have good stuff in her. Marcia came out with her
overnight case. "I'm going back to town with the girls,
mother." When Marcia was determined she braced her feet.
The stance had always disgusted Ruth because it was so
unladylike. Now she thought, I should be ashamed she has
to brace herself to talk to me. "We would wait until dad
gets here so you wouldn't be alone, but Randy is less likely
to wake up if we're driving and Alexis wants to get going."
She was warily waiting for Ruth's reaction. Ruth thought,
I must have made her life hard.

"I don't mind being alone."
Marcia gripped the deck with her feet. "I don't know when I'll come back up. Would you rather I stay with Alexis or at home alone?" When Ruth said nothing, she added, "I could see if I could stay with Linda or someone else."

Again Ruth felt the doctor's young arm around her. All these restrictions she'd made so much of in the past! "It doesn't matter. Do what you like."

"But you always -- I was only trying --"

Ruth said, "You're twenty-one, and I'm older myself. There comes a time." She could see she was upsetting Marcia.

Alexis took Marcia's suitcase out to the car. "Mother, I won't go if you're not feeling well. I'll go in with dad tomorrow night, or not at all."

"I feel fine. It's been such a lovely day. Have fun. I'll see you whenever you get back."

"Mother, what's wrong?"

Maybe she should say she was sleepy from the day on the beach, but whatever she said, Marcia would be uneasy. She owed the girl an explanation, but she didn't have one. It would take time for Marcia to trust her. "I had a talk with the doctor sailing back, and he said I ought to let you make more of your own decisions, and he's right. I can't keep on. I've done my job. You're raised, for better or for worse. And I'm sure it's for better, Marcia. At
least I could only make it worse now. That's what he said, and I see it that way now." The lie was believable. Marcia would think it in keeping with her old reverence for doctors.

"Oh, Mother. I can't believe. Oh, thank you, Rodge. Oh, thank you, Mother. You mean it? I'll phone you tomorrow morning. To see if his influence has lasted. A great guy, that Rodge." She kissed Ruth enthusiastically. From the deck stairway she called back, "Don't worry that you've been too drastic or anything."

She had made Marcia happy. Nothing drastic about that, or was there? The sound of gravel spitting from Alexis' car tires as she took the hill ceased abruptly. Either they had topped the steep part or had to let the car coast back to get another run at it. Ruth listened but heard only the sound of water slapping the hull in the boathouse beneath her. They were on their way. She had no reason to move, could close her eyes and enjoy the sensation of drifting made possible by the sounds below, the rhythmic flow of the lake into and out of the boathouse. Ruth could just lie loose in the canvas curve of the deck chair, unlocked at every joint, her fingers falling free at the end of the arm rest. No need to grab hold. No need to open her eyes and fasten those docks securely to her shore by planning their happenings. Tomorrow was now free. She
didn't open her eyes until she heard James' car braking slowly down the steep part. He'd been good about having his cabin changed into a summer home. She'd make it up to him. Maybe it wasn't his fault he never put his arm around her. The lake was now dark, the night moonless. Even the white docks did not show themselves. She could not see anything between herself and the square of light at the doctor's.
MOTHER SWING DAUGHTER SWING MOTHER
She is sitting on the steps just outside the kitchen door, expecting the phone to ring, but not expecting it to ring, knowing it doesn't matter one way or the other. It is after midnight and she has her raincoat on over her pajamas for protection. Not against the weather. It isn't chilly.

The sound of her husband flinging back the covers violates her sorrow. His thick bare feet are emphatic. Down the halls. Through the kitchen. This resting in her sorrow will have to wait, this being quietly sad will have to give way. She must calm down his guilt. No good ever comes of his being upset.

The irritation in his voice is not directed at her. "This is silly. Why don't you phone?"
She shakes her head, not looking around at him in the doorway, behind the screen. If only he would leave her alone, let her feel it, think about it, live with it, be sad about it, whatever it is, a loss, a regret, she doesn't know.

"She doesn't care a damn about you. She told me she would phone you, but she doesn't care a damn. I've always said."

Always trying to prove Alexis is no good. She leans forward so that her breasts are protected by thighs and arms. She lifts her stare into the dark jack pines.

"She was just itching for an excuse. I always told you she was just biding her time until she was eighteen. One day after her birthday and she's off."

Earlier, this afternoon, she'd answered him . . . But it was our focus on eighteen. We always said, until you're eighteen you're our responsibility. After that you set your own rules. It was like a promise, so naturally . . . And he'd answered . . . but not while she's living in this house. As long as she's under this roof . . .

She must get up, make him some toast and tea, assure him he's right to have standards, that Alexis will come to her senses. You can't refuse a tourniquet to a bleeding man. But she sits, silent in her longing to be alone with her ache.
"I didn't tell her to leave. I told her to wait and talk to you. But no, she packed her bags. Just couldn't wait."

All afternoon she'd answered with loyal assurances. Now her unnatural silence is erasing the effects.

"What time is it?" she asks.

Just this much brings him hope. Eagerly he moves back into the kitchen to look. "Twelve twenty-five. Why don't you phone?"

All she has to do is repeat . . . Don't worry. They have to rebel at this age. No matter what we do. She'll be all right. It's normal. Nothing you said. Don't take it seriously . . . .

Instead she says, "I'll come to bed soon."

"Damn kid. Never thinks of anybody but herself. Love them. Give them all the security they could possibly have, then they turn around and kick you in the teeth. There's no reason for her to act this way. When I think of all the kids from lousy homes who have some excuse for behavior like this!"

His words are coming strong and angry as if he were saying them to Alexis. Alexis always stood up to her father. . . . Psych-man, you can't have it both ways. Other kids act up, no wonder, they've got lousy parents. I act up, I'm a bitch. Make up your mind . . . . She never has to work at winning. She knows she has him. It wasn't the logic
that burned into him. It wasn't the words that made him explode. It was Alexis herself, no longer a child, nothing like her mother. How did she ever come to have such a daughter? She never ceased to wonder at the gift.

He moves out onto the porch and paces behind her. "Why did she have to pick that girl to stay with? Tell me that. With a mother like you, where does she get her taste for vulgarity? Why won't you see, she's kicking you in the teeth, too. You can't tell me that girl's mother is even married to that back-slapping salesman. Are you going to let her move in with that sort? Our daughter!"

If she keeps on being silent what will he do with all that violence in him? She ought to phone, persuade Alexis to let her come get her. The long ropes of the swings out in the jack pines are twined lines of lightness in the dark. If she could get him to bed, she'd move out there, sit, swing gently.

"If anybody had told me when that child was young!" His anguish is terrible. She can't let it go on. What is the matter with her tonight? "If anybody had predicted this, I wouldn't have believed it. She had everything, social poise, a good mind, and talent. People still mention the ballet performance." So proud. The big thing about being a father. "Now, look at her. Her girlfriends, vulgar chippies, her boyfriends, pseudo-intellectuals, filthy
opportunists. I could have kept those young puppies away. If I'd had my way. But she sensed your attitude. Oh, yes, you understood why she liked them. Character didn't mean a damn. Anything far out, experimental, oh that was great. Naturally, what I had to say meant nothing. Not when she sensed your tolerance." Always when the pain gets unbearable, he blames her.

"Please," she says softly.

He stops pacing, stands behind her. He's confused. Usually she does not say, please. Usually, she explains Alexis to him, how normal it is for a child to act as she does. A child. She turns Alexis back into a child for him. But she was eighteen yesterday.

"I see red when I think of her doing this to you. So, she kicks me in the teeth. Naturally. I'm demanding she behave herself. But to kick you in the teeth! Who have been nothing but indulgent! It would only take a few minutes to phone. But has she done it? No, damn self-centered brat."

She must get up, go in and make tea and toast, show him she's not worried. He's afraid he's gone too far in the row this afternoon. But will anything short of phoning Alexis and getting her back calm him down? She will not phone Alexis.

She does not get up, but says, "Look, just one night."
It isn't important where she sleeps this one night."

"Is it of any importance that we don't sleep at all? Not to her, it isn't. Damn right, it isn't. It doesn't make a bit of difference to her."

He's feeling better in his anger because she has said a few words. He needs the familiar pattern, her defense of Alexis, his righteous indignation, her placations. Get rid of the hurt without disastrous effects. She mustn't deny him that. That's what a wife should do, make it safe to hate.

The sight of the swing ropes out there in the dark draws her forward. Her buttocks tense. She mustn't. Not yet. Her muscles relax. Repeat familiar words. Make him think this is just one more natural spat. "We've raised her to be independent. Now, we've got to let her be."

That does it. He swings into the pattern, settles into his stride. He's at ease with his stand. "I never went along with fostering all this independence. It went a bit too far for my taste. There's a limit." His fear is subsiding. He thinks she's going to take over.

Her next line is . . . . for better or for worse, we did it . . . Then he can prove it was she who had done it, not he. He is waiting for the cue, tapping on the porch post with his fingers. He repeats, "Yes, there's a limit." He's confident she'll come through now.
A slight breeze is stirring the swing ropes. She would hook the ropes in her elbows, toe the ground just enough to set herself in motion. That's all she wants, a gentle movement, back and forth. As soon as he goes to bed. As soon as he goes to bed. Quiet promises that hum in her head make longing patient. But suddenly the volume goes up, hum becomes screech. . . . When are you going to bed? blares through her mind. Why don't you go to bed? Don't wait for me to phone. I won't do it. I won't do it. Bleed to death, I won't do it.

She jumps up, moves into the kitchen decisively, controls her tone. "Would hot milk be better than tea?" Gentle. Considerate.

He follows. "It doesn't matter. I can go to sleep on six cups of coffee if Alexis is in bed. Nothing does any good if she isn't."

"Yes, that's true." She holds the kettle under the faucet too long so that the water pours back out the spout for several seconds before she notices. He never touched her, never let her touch him, if Alexis weren't in bed. "It's only normal." She wishes she hadn't thought, normal. "I mean for a father to worry the way you do." Only it wasn't worry. No, nothing mild like worry. She sets the kettle on the stove, punches the high button.

"I can't understand. With a mother like you. Why couldn't she grow up like you?"
No admiration for her in that, only anguish about Alexis. "I'm not sure I'd want her to." Her throat goes dry and her chest gets tight. Her back is to him. She is getting cups and sugar and tea. She hears him stand up, feels his glare.

"What do you mean by that?" He breathes heavily when he wants to threaten her.

"Nothing. I guess. I don't know. What did I say?"

"Catherine. You have to be firm with children. If we don't stand together. That's the trouble. She senses you don't stand with me. The slightest crack. These attitudes of yours, these vaguenesses, she uses them as a wedge. Can't you see?"

The volume inside goes up without warning. The words blare through her head. . . . Fight your own battles. Leave me out of it. . . . She forces herself to turn, nod. "Yes, I know." It's incredible how ordinary her tone is. "I should stay out of it." She is out of it, anyway. So many times she had thought, when the three of them were together. . . . I don't count at all. What's between him and me is all on the surface compared to what's between those two. She longs to be close to Alexis. If she had been loyal to Alexis, instead of to him, perhaps --

When the tray is ready she moves toward the comfort of the family room, but he says, "Here," indicating the
breakfast bar. "Don't you want to be near the phone?"

She stops. "We don't have to sit next to the phone to hear it."

Shd goes on, sets the tray on the dining table. She is not going to phone. They drink tea, but neither touches the toast. A light flashes onto the wall for a second. A car turning into the driveway.

"Was that . . .?"

"Listen."


"I'm going to bed." He's all relief. "It's up to you. Whatever you say, that's up to you. I've had my say and if you don't back me up, that's your responsibility."

The moment she sees Alexis she feels freed, released from the responsibility Henry imposes on her. She can never quite believe this is her daughter, never quite get over the beauty of those great green, dark-lashed eyes, the long dark hair, the way she moves her arms, her legs, her neck. She comes in ready for the joy she creates.

Catherine has met Duncan before. Nice-looking, older than Alexis' other friends. Maybe twenty-five. The times he'd come for Alexis, she'd assumed without allowing herself to think about it that he was a cover-up, a presentable young man who came to pick her up for dates with boys
"Oh, the bags." Alexis says, touching the young man's arm. Immediately Catherine knows there is something between them.

"We can get them later. After I've talked to your father. And mother." He's taking hold, playing the manly role. He's not at all the kind who appeals to Alexis.

"You think you'll have to talk them into taking me back?" The idea amuses Alexis. She looks up at him, seems to be telling him, you're great, really great. It couldn't be real. She must be playing games.

Alexis hugs her mother. "I'll get dad. He couldn't be asleep."

Catherine waves the young man into the family room. "We were having toast and tea. What would you like? Donuts and coffee? Fudge bars and milk?"

"Anything's fine." He sits down while Catherine goes to the cupboards. He looks in command of himself. He wouldn't if he knew Henry. What is Alexis planning? Catherine feels protective toward him. Alexis lets the chips fall where they may.

Henry has pulled clothes on over his pajamas. "Well, young man," Henry says with clear hostility.

"Let's sit down," Alexis says. She pulls her chair close to Duncan and looks directly at her father. She must
be playing a game. Maybe not.

"Well, sir," Duncan begins, "Alexis and I have been talking about this business. Her feeling she can't live at home any longer, but I tell her these things can be worked out."

Catherine sees Henry's neck muscles tense with hostility. The gall of this upstart, mixing in his business. The young man doesn't flinch in the face of it. "Just from the little I know I can see she's got a good home and parents who love her. She's lucky." Catherine thinks . . . he doesn't know such luck has its shadow.

Henry replies. "It's to your credit that you see it. But what business is this of yours?"

Alexis links arms with the young man and her fingers play with his ring. Is she assuring him? Is she flaunting her relationship with him? Or is she unable to keep her hands off him? Duncan removes her arm.

Once in Henry's arms before they were married she had said how nice it would be without clothes to keep them apart, and he had abruptly dumped her--there was no other word for it--dumped her out of his arms. "I don't know about you," he'd said. How does Alexis feel, her hand removed with such deliberate control? Does she notice that pride in control? Henry had never apologized.

"Well, maybe it's not my business, and maybe it's very much my business. But for one thing, since hours has
been part of the trouble, I'm partially responsible. I've kept Alexis out late." Determined to act manly. Alexis now puts her arm around his neck and fingers the far side-burns. Duncan removes her hand to his shoulder and holds it there with his own hand. He's been taught the rules. Public display of affection is vulgar. He isn't of Alexis' direct stripe. She ought to be reacting.

Henry said, "And you think it's all right for a girl of eighteen to stay up until three or four in the morning? You're here to help her convince me that I should tolerate such hours against my better judgment?" Henry speaks in an ordinary tone. The controlled anger behind his first words is gone now.

"Not at all. I don't think a girl her age should stay out that late regularly, but if she does a time or two, I don't think she should have to leave home."

Alexis watches her father. Is she beginning to be wary of something? Henry leans forward. "Alexis did not have to leave home."

"I know. I realize it was her choice."

"And if you don't think a girl her age should stay out half the night, why did you keep her out half the night? And it's been more than a time or two."

"Not with me it hasn't."

"So, if there are others, then that's good reason
to put this matter back where it belongs, between Alexis and me."

"Except that I've told Alexis if she wants to develop a relationship with me, she will have to drop the others." He says it formally, as if he is asking for Alexis' hand in marriage.

Maybe now Henry will react, charge forward to lock horns. Instead, Henry speaks in a near-friendly tone. "Oh, and if she does, can we assume the hours she keeps will be respectable?"

"I'll certainly try. I can't afford to burn the candle at both ends myself. But occasionally, when two people are getting to know each other, being together can't be broken off by the clock, and I hope you'll understand that."

He never flinches. It bothers Catherine, but it seems to go over with Henry. "We'll see," Henry says.

Strange. Henry is not reacting to the young man as a danger. Catherine doesn't know what's going on. She should think it would give him a stroke. He even seems to be feeling content, as if he and Alexis had kissed and made up. Catherine is disturbed.

Alexis jumps up, gay, triumphant. "Hey, let's have food. Let's celebrate my return to the nest. Mother, have we got any frozen pizzas? Any enchiladas? Any cheap wine
we can guzzle? Daddy's little girl is home.

Catherine thinks . . . she'll do it for me . . . but she has no idea what she means by this. "Good idea." Catherine wants to be alone in the kitchen with Alexis. Alexis stops behind Henry's chair, puts her arms around him, rests her cheek on his head. Her hair falls over his face. Henry gets up abruptly, but Alexis has anticipated his reaction and moved smoothly away.

"Catherine, I think you've forgotten the hour. Let these young people say goodnight. Tomorrow will be worth nothing if we don't get to bed." Henry is feeling fine now. Alexis is home, and he thinks he's carried it off, this encounter with the young man, been firm and approved for it. Yes, that's it. Duncan flatters Henry in some way. They're lined up together. Against what?

Back in the bedroom Henry asks, "Did you tell her not to be long?"

Catherine takes off her raincoat, has it partially on the hanger. He speaks again, from the bed where he is already pulling the covers up. "You better stay up and have a talk with her. It's your responsibility to know what's going on."

Catherine thinks, why me? All the action's between you two, but he doesn't know any more about Alexis than she does. All either of them knows is that she's a woman and
nothing like her mother. It quiets Catherine, but it riles him up. Catherine puts her coat back on.

She sits in the family room waiting for Alexis to come in from the yard. She wants to be with Alexis. Alexis would say little and Catherine would talk more than she wants to, but it is what's between them. Not like the current between Alexis and Henry, but not nothing.

She begins to wonder if the two of them could have left, could have hoaxed Henry, but Henry has an unerring sense for what threatens him. He would have known. She gets up and goes from window to window in the darkened house. The car is still there, empty. Then she sees them moving past the swings into the unmowed grass beyond. Alexis is carrying a blanket. She flips it into the air and down onto the ground. She dances on it to beat down the tall grasses beneath, enjoying her own movements and his watching. He stands beside the blanket in a pose of masculine indulgence. Catherine thinks he is telling himself that her spontaneity is little-girl charm. Catherine knows. He fell in love with her as she folk danced with verve and abandon. But later in the apartment when she put boogie-woogie on the player and responded with the same verve and abandon, he turned his back, looked through the pile of records and said . . . I never thought I'd be interested in a girl who liked this stuff, but with you it's a case of sheer innocence,
a child reacting to the rhythm. She gave the records to her roommate.

But this one won't have it so easy. Alexis is nothing like her mother. Catherine moves away from the window. She is too restless to crawl in beside Henry. Now in the kitchen she puts water on for tea, though she does not particularly want a cup. She goes to the screen door to breathe the cool air. Though she cannot see them without stepping out onto the porch, she feels too close, and turns back into the kitchen. Their voices stop her. They are no longer out in the field. Alexis is whispering loudly, "Brace your feet against the tree... get around further... push off when I say three..." They are in the swings, playing the swing game Alexis had delighted in as a child. Alexis would pull one swing behind and around one pine tree, her partner would pull the other in front and around the other tree. By pushing off and away at the same time the swings would hurtle diagonally toward each other and past, the ropes would cross and wind together, sending each swing in circles, angled out like the airplanes in an amusement park, each time the circles became smaller and the swings higher off the ground, until the two were tight together, suspended high in the exact center of the space between the two big trees. "Now," Alexis would squeal the signal for each of them to take hold of the other. Alexis
always held them suspended high and thrilled for as long as she could, and when they released each other and the swings unwound in ever-widening circles, she matched the dying down with a unique hum of satisfaction. And when the swings once again hung straight and parallel, Alexis would smile at her playmate and say, "Oh, that was a good one."

Catherine had been so eager when they bought the place to have an old-fashioned swing put up for Alexis, there between the two biggest pines. In her own childhood she had relished swinging in just such a swing on the yearly visit to her grandfather's, and in between visits she had longed to swing quietly, without fear that some rough, tough boy at the city playground would take her from behind, run under her with a great thrust and trap her into moving back and forth at a frightening height and momentum which she helplessly had to endure with pounding heart until it died of its own accord. The need to swing would well up periodically. Often she went to the playground but couldn't chance it. She had to choose her times carefully, and even then couldn't relax.

Catherine wanted her child to be able to retreat to a safe swing anytime she wanted. But from the beginning Alexis had no interest in swinging quietly, gently, alone. She had been ecstatic if anyone surprised her with a great running push that sent her to dizzying heights. She wore
out all comers with cries of *Do it again*. Almost immedi-
ately she had insisted on having a second swing hung. She
was wildly imaginative about the uses she made of the swings,
the roles she played in them, the games she devised.

But why now? What had happened on the blanket?
Had Duncan said he didn't think nice girls danced like that?
Alexis would have laughed. She wouldn't trade being alive
for being nice. Not Alexis.

Catherine turns back to the door and goes out onto
the porch. The swings are hanging straight and separate
and Alexis is whispering the final comment of appreciation.
The screen door shuts with a click. They get out of the
swings and move toward her, hand in hand.

"We're sorry to worry you," he says. "Tell your
mother, Alexis."

Alexis comes up beside her, hugs her, pulls her down
to sitting side by side on the steps. She hugs her mother
again. "You're a great mother. You really are." She says
no more.

Duncan has to talk. He stands below them, one foot
two steps up. He leans on his upraised knee. "Alexis was
going to pull a dumb kid trick tonight. She was going to
let a friend pick her up in the middle of the night, three
o'clock, and they were going off to the coast."

Catherine turns to Alexis, slides back to look at
her more closely. It is impossible. Alexis is too young, too mature. But how would Catherine know? Of course, it's possible.

"Rudy." Alexis utters the taboo name that carries all those memories of Henry's rage.

"But - " It's all Catherine can say. It's hard to remember the boy himself, or that she had once liked his naive intensity, hated the selfish egotism that kept him from valuing Alexis.

"Been going with him all summer, Mom."

The shift of Duncan's foot comes to her ear, and then his voice. "Until it happened with us, that is. But don't worry. Alexis isn't going through with it. Only she hasn't been able to get in touch with him."

"I had no idea." It comes out a wail.

Alexis understands her anguish. "You know it wasn't because I wanted to keep it from you. I couldn't put you in that spot."

"Oh, Alexis. That's what's wrong." She had deserted Alexis to stand firm with Henry. Now stinging her are each of those moments when Alexis might have wanted to say . . . What do you think, Mom? . . . know what happened last night . . Rudy says . . . do you suppose Rudy . . . all those moments that had never existed for them, all piled up, paining her.
"I understand," Alexis says.

"That isn't right. It isn't you who should be understanding." Her failure seems monstrous. Her child has been motherless. "I didn't realize I was deserting you."

"That's silly."

"Don't be upset, Mrs. Nelson. I talked it all out with Alexis. She sees how silly she's been, that there wasn't anything there. Now, us, we've got something going for us."

"Oh, Alexis. I know you so little. It makes me feel terrible."

"It shouldn't. Why should you know anything about me? I know a lot about you, mom. That's the important thing."

"Is it?"

"Yes."

"I'm not sure," she says. Alexis is so beautiful, so assured. It must be she knows.

"Look, you two," Duncan laughs indulgently. "The important thing is Alexis isn't going off. She's back home where she belongs, for a while. And I'm going to be the one. You haven't let me finish. Alexis has to meet this guy, explain it's off for good. I'm sticking around while she does it. I would have explained to Mr. Nelson, but I can understand how a father would feel about a guy like that. I wouldn't let him near my daughter, either. But no sense
"You all right, mom?"

"You don't have to stay up," Duncan says. "I'll take care of things.

"Alexis, all I've ever done is admire you. That isn't natural."

"I like it."

"I should have been helping you."

"You might not think I know, Mrs. Nelson, but you've set a good example for Alexis."

"I deserted you."

"I feel you're with me."

"When Alexis gets older she'll be just like you, Mrs. Nelson."

"I'm not sure I'd want her to." She thinks she must have said that once before to him.

"Well, I want her to. And I'm not just saying that." Someone has told him . . . never marry a girl without a good look at her mother. She thinks . . . I love her so much. And I don't know her at all.

Duncan says, "Alexis thinks her father hates her. She doesn't understand that it's only because he loves her that he's so strict. What seems like hate can really be love. Alexis doesn't understand that yet."

Alexis understands what she's up against. Alexis
understands the real thing.

"You like Dunc, mother? He thinks you're great."

She speaks in the tones of the little girl who used to stand at the sink when they were doing dishes and say . . . talk to me, mother . . . tell me something . . . That's the way it was with them, her talking and Alexis listening, listening, listening. She always let it be the way Alexis wanted.

Duncan laughs indulgently. "Alexis, you embarrass people."

Catherine tries to be light. "Does it matter what I think?" But the remark comes off in dead earnest.

"Sure it does. We're going to get married next week."

"Next year, she means."

"No, next week."

"Alexis, you do give your parents a bad time."

He began to explain . . . don't expect other people to be as sure as we are . . . in time . . . know she's young . . . some growing to do . . . not as if I were her age . . . provide what she needs . . . give her guidance . . . sets the right relationship, pattern for the future . . . didn't plan, but after it happened . . I'll be teaching . . . Alexis can go to school . . . don't consider a young wife a handicap.

Surely Alexis would not let him clamp this little-
girl mask onto her. Alexis lived up her little girlness years ago. It's driven Henry mad.

Catherine says, "Alexis?"

"Yes?" Alexis watches her mother expectantly.

"You're not afraid to make mistakes . . . only don't . . . we're not alike."

Duncan continues, or maybe he has never broken off.

"I promise you, Mrs. Nelson. It won't be next week. Alexis is impulsive. Delightfully so. I love her for it. And I consider it my responsibility to see that the consequences aren't harmful."

Their eyes are all drawn to a car without lights that slowly moves along the road. The clump of young spruce now blocks it from view. It does not come into view again.

Alexis gets up. Catherine catches her hand. "Darling, you - "

"I know - " She looks at Duncan intently, pulls her long hair back with both hands, holds it tight at the nape of her neck as she questions. Him? Herself? She looks now like the portrait of her great grandmother in the gilt oval frame in the basement. Alexis laughed every time she saw the picture. A woman like that should have been Alexis' mother. A silly thought. Catherine doesn't know anything about the woman with her hair parted in the middle and drawn back.
"You still want to do this alone?" Duncan asks. 

Alexis nods, drops her hands from her hair. He kisses her quickly, and she moves across the yard toward the spruce.

"Oh, the kettle - " Catherine rushes into the kitchen. She has let the kettle boil dry. The copper bottom glows.

Duncan follows. "We talked this over earlier and I said I'd explain to the guy, but she wanted to do it herself, and I thought, well, I wouldn't want it to be like I was pushing her."

Catherine can't sit down, wanders between kitchen and family room, picks up a newspaper from one chair, sets it on another, stacks the used cups, goes out to the kitchen without them, gets out two tea bags but doesn't heat the water.

Duncan eats the donuts left on the plate. "I've known a lot of girls, but Alexis is different. Her impulsiveness. It makes her, well, exciting. But she isn't scatterbrained. I don't like silly girls."

"She's not easy to know."

"On the contrary. That's just what's so great with us, why I know it's for real. She's been so easy to know, so open."

A feeling of inevitability takes hold of Catherine.
Everything predetermined. Mothers and daughters. She wasn't a bit like her own mother, but every year, she hates to admit it, some turn in her life parallels an event in her mother's. All of the same stamp. The colors on the cards don't matter. If the notches and slits are the same, they're programmed the same. But there's that great grandmother. Sexual vitality, even in daguerreotype, in spite of that middle part and straight hair severely drawn back. Alexis could have got her notches and slits from her, couldn't she?

Duncan tells her how much he loves Alexis, what a good arrangement it is for the man to be older. His thoughts aren't out there beyond the spruce trees at all. It bothers her. Like his not flinching with Henry.

"I need some air," she heads for the door. "Why don't you get yourself some milk? To wash down those doughnuts. I should have offered. I don't know where my mind is."

She doesn't want him to follow, knows she shouldn't go out for that very reason, but tonight she can't seem to listen to her better judgment.

He jumps up. "You mustn't worry. I'll go out and put an end to this. It's been long enough. He's probably arguing."

"No, don't."
But he moves decisively past her, hurries on toward the spruce clump. She follows, down the steps, out toward the waiting swings. She sees him disappear into the blackness, then is stopped by the sight of his car. The trunk of Duncan's car stands open!

Alexis has done it. No muss. No fuss. No signal from the oval frame. Stepped right out. Extricated. Free. Catherine has a hard time straightening her expression as Duncan comes hurrying back through the trees and directly to her.

"He's gone. She must have slipped in the front door. He's upset her. Probably crying, poor kid. I should have — " His voice is too loud. Henry is not a heavy sleeper.

She puts her finger to her lips in warning. She points to the car.

He says, "She must have gotten the bags out. Listen, is it all right with you if I go into her room? I want to talk to her alone. Do you mind?"

She has to grab his arm to keep him. "Duncan, she's gone."

"She got her bags and went in the front door." But he doesn't move. They stand in the night, looking at each other, there in the center. Back there the dark spruce clump through which she disappeared. Over there the Volkswagen with its front gaping empty. And in there, the room
where Henry sleeps unaware that the unflinchingness he trusted has disappeared. Catherine looks away, embarrassed to joy in what pains him. She stares at the rough bark of the jack pine, fingers the swing rope.

"I think you should look in the house."

She nods. If he no longer wants to go look himself, he must be accepting it. She walks slowly, through the kitchen into the living room, then back into Alexis' bedroom. She takes her time. He needs it. She wants it. No need to worry. Alexis knows how to skirt an abyss. Perfect balance. She always had it. No training wheels on her bike. Never fell off the swing. You ought not to let her, they said, but she always came through unscathed. In Alexis' room Catherine feels a joyous power, as if she, too, could move like Alexis, unencumbered.

If only he would be gone when she gets back out there. But he is on the porch sagging against the post. The air has a sweet chill in it, not like earlier at midnight when the heat of the day still came up from the grass and gravel. He makes no move, keeps his head down. She knows he won't go, not yet. He has demands. His silence, his slump, his not looking at her are demanding of her now. That's her role, aid and comfort to the victim. Her joy is slipping. Perhaps if she doesn't look at him she can hang onto it. She says nothing, sits down on the step. Her back
is to him. It is already a little less dark than when the three of them were here. There was something between her and Alexis then, a current, not the sparks-flying, electric current between Alexis and Henry, but the current of water flowing. She smiles again as she had in the house. Beautiful Alexis.

The sudden sound of his fist against the porch post violates her joy. This savoring of her daughter will have to wait. This being secretly glad will have to be postponed. She must respond to his need, be kind. He's no way to blame.

'I just don't pack it.' He's turning the irritation in upon himself. 'I just don't pack it.' This time his resentment comes through stronger than his resignation.

She should comfort him. It'll be easier if he can understand it's not his fault. Nothing he could have done would have made a difference. But she doesn't speak. If he weren't here she could think of her daughter, relish the thought of her, be happy in her escape, hug to her whatever it is Alexis has given her, a fulfillment, a freedom, she doesn't know.

'She did it without saying a word to you, didn't she? Even if I were nothing to her, you would think. She pretends to love you, but to treat you like this!'

So, he's going to convince himself Alexis is no good. Catherine hugs her knees, lifts her stare into the
big jack pines.

"She must have planned to do it all along. Maybe
she wanted me to jump in my car and give chase. Movie
stuff. Is that what she wanted?"

She ought to say something. No danger to Alexis
now. He's the innocent victim, standing there bleeding.
She should be able to think of something that would do as
a tourniquet.

"What time is it?" she asks.

"Does it matter?" His anger meets no resistance,
travels into the silence of the gravel, the swings, the
unmowed field, the clump of spruce. "If there's something
you want me to do, - " It's a kind of apology. She ought
to turn around, make some gesture, personal, motherly. She
used to be good at helping in moments like this. Now only
clichés come to mind . . . You'll get over it . . . you're
better off . . . she's a strange girl, give you trouble . . .
plenty of girls would be happy . . . you're a fine person.
Worthless phrases, but that's all there is. She's else­
where, satisfied, fulfilled, glad. She can't speak out of
that.

She says, "I hadn't realized how early the sun must
come up."

"She must be a terribly mixed-up kid. That's all
I've got to say. This proves it, doesn't it? To say you're
going to marry someone next week and take off with someone else the next hour."

His words are strong and angry, as if she had foisted shoddy merchandise on him when he'd expected the best. What would Alexis say? Something clear, matter-of-fact, nothing vicious or mean. Would he explode anyway. Like Henry. Yes, what she is, Alexis herself, would send him into pieces.

He paces the porch behind her. "You know what I think? That she's the kind of girl who thinks she can do anything she wants with a man. I should have seen, should have thought about those things she said about her father. The way a girl treats her father is very indicative. Very. If anybody had told me an hour ago I'd get kicked in the ass like this I would have laughed at them. She thought she had to get away. Because of the fight with her father. When she told me about this other guy's scheme, I thought she was trying to push me into taking her off, but I'm not that kind of guy. I knew she had a good family, that it was all kid-stuff rebellion, wanting to come in at any time of the night to prove she's grown up. So I talked her into coming back. And this is what I get for it."

His anguish is genuine. How can she keep silent like this? She ought to get him to sit down beside her, or at least she ought to turn around and face him. But she
can't take her eyes off the swing ropes out there.

"Well, a good thing. A damn good thing. I wouldn't marry a mixed-up kid. You can count on that."

If she keeps silent he'll lash out more and more. No matter.

"Don't you care what happens to her? I know that's a terrible thing to say, but you act as if it isn't anything to do with you. Most mothers - "

"Please - "

He stops pacing. He's going to be upset for a long time over this evening. He moves onto the steps, pauses. "I'm sorry. I'm not myself." It will be light by the time she gets into the swing. She mustn't let him dissipate her happiness. He moves on down the steps, turns in front of her so their faces are level. He's himself again. Unflinching, determined. "Mrs. Nelson, your husband has a right to know. I think you ought to wake him immediately."

"No."

"He may want to take action. Tomorrow morning may be too late. He has a right to know."

As soon as he goes she will hook her elbows around the ropes, toe the ground just enough to set herself in motion, swing gently back and forth, savor her secret happiness. As soon as he goes. As soon as he goes. A quiet promise humming through her mind, but when he says, "Mrs.
Nelson, I don't feel it's my place, but someone has to wake Alexis' father," the volume whirls up. It's happening again. I won't, I won't, I won't, screeching through her head. Bleed to death. I won't do it. Again she's shocked. But this time she's not afraid. She moves her feet to the bottom step, rises slowly. Her face is on a level with his. She hisses, "I won't. I won't. I won't."

He pulls back. "Mrs. Nelson!" He takes a step back. "You're distraught. I'm going to wake Mr. Nelson." But his voice is barely above a whisper and he continues to step backward.

Catherine moves after him. She keeps her thoughts attacking . . . "Line up together . . . take action . . . you can't make Alexis into what you want. Alexis is nothing like her mother. Nothing like her mother. And I'm glad, Henry. Glad." Catherine stops by the swing.

Duncan stops backing up, stares at her. "Henry?" He looks appalled. "I think you ought to wake your husband," he says, but he turns. He's getting out. Getting out fast. He'll never understand this night. He pushes down the trunk lid as he passes, gets in, sits a moment before starting the car.

Catherine throws her thoughts hard at him . . . don't you dare honk Henry awake. Don't you dare. He starts the car, backs out quickly, waits to turn the lights on until
he is in the road.

Catherine laughs, lifts her arms in a happy stretch back to the swing ropes. She feels great. She would like to swing high, higher than she'd ever swung. If she had not been afraid of playground boys. If like Alexis --. As she moves back her hands slip down the ropes, the weathered board flattens against her butt, but she does not sit. Alexis. She got through to Alexis. She moves backward, rope in hands, board against her, toward the tree. The long ropes wind around the trunk above her. One at a time she kicks off her shoes so her bare feet can grip the bark of the tree. Sitting in the swing now, her feet against the tree she works herself further around and up the large trunk. She is amazed at how easy it is. The other swing hangs straight and empty. If she pushes off the ropes will not wind together in tension. No sense in pushing off.

Over the hill the sky is lightening, one pink streak. The light that comes from the kitchen door onto the porch is not as bright now. The window of their bedroom is still dark and empty. Henry sleeps confident Alexis is in bed and she is beside him and on call is an unflinching ally. But his ally did not honk him awake, Alexis did not come back through the clump of spruce and Catherine is twirling out and around, hurtling diagonally toward the other twin pine. Leaning back, pulling on the ropes, stretching her
legs out and high, she turns herself and as the swing reaches the end of its momentum her feet catch hold of the bark. Now on the opposite tree, she's in position to propel herself into another swift flight. Then another and another and another. It's easy. She's adept. Who would have thought it. Then as she twirls past the empty swing that hangs undisturbed, she kicks the notched board loose from the slack ropes. It plops to the ground. She keeps on, enlivened by the strenuous double arc swing back and forth from tree to tree.
HASHING AND SMEARING
I laugh now and say, no wonder I lost my head, the mirror cut it off. Though the truth is, I don't laugh now. I'm pained by the memory and I didn't lose my head, I found a mind. You can't look at heads and tails at the same time, though they're both on the same penny, so I'll have to tell it one way though the opposite is true. Now I'm saying I laugh, and I did then, a joke between her and me, the way that mirror cut off my head. The room had always belonged to a child so the mirror was positioned low which she didn't realize when she converted the upstairs into an apartment. I rented it to be near the University for courses to renew my teaching credentials, all of which is irrelevant, but people miss the irrelevant if you leave it out, just as they miss the relevant, if you get it in. As I said, I'd
moved, had plans. No point in my just rotting on the ranch after Sid was gone, died, was killed, killed himself. I still don't know how that ought to be said. But I won't go into that now. I'm telling about the mirror, which figured in our relationship, mine and hers. If we hadn't made a big joke of it in the beginning she wouldn't have done what she did in the end. That was traumatic, I'll tell you. Not because she did it. That was natural enough for a wife. Nor what she did. That was so bizarre I had to admire it in a way. The shock was that he helped her. But that comes at the end, not the beginning. There's no sense in getting confused. Though as soon as I say that I have to admit there's a lot of sense in getting confused, if there's sense in keeping alive.

I'd better get back to the mirror. No matter how far I stepped back—it was a small room—I couldn't see above my shoulders, which really suited me fine, since it was getting harder and harder for me to identify with that dried up look, that grey, frizzled hair, sticking out in wisps that wouldn't go right, that skin flaking, drawn, inelastic. That didn't belong to me. But there was no way out, since I'd had such scorn for women who couldn't accept the facts of life. So I joked with her to show I could face the bitter truth, but at the time I was relieved to only have to face myself from the shoulders down where the bitter
truth didn't show. Some women age with a spread, a thickening all over, but I guess all that horseback riding and hiking and skiing I'd done with my boys left me in shape to resist that.

In the beginning she was good-natured, like fat people seem to be, though you might as well put that stereotype aside right now if you're to understand this story. When I joked about the headless image being great for my morale, she admitted she didn't have a full-length mirror. "That lets me forget I'm not the 110 pounds I was when I married," she said. Together we listed all the idiotic behavior of women our age, together we made our idiocies funny and theirs pathetic. Our humors fit. I liked her. If anybody had told me then how mean and bitter and destructive she could be, I wouldn't have believed them. But she did become mean and destructive. Or was all along. Or I needed to see her that way, later. I never used to list possibilities, but knowing her, and then him, gave me multiple vision, unless it's just part of growing old.

Funny, but at first she seemed so simple and open and a great appreciator. "You've got get up and go," she'd say. "You must be mentally stable. Most women would be brooding guiltily about that accident even if they didn't have a thing to be guilty about." "You must have been a good mother to have such independent kids." "You were smart
to keep your figure." · A generous spirit, or so I thought, in the days when I could have a thought and trust it. Now it seems sinister the way the get up and go disappeared, the brooding began, the independent kids became cruel jokes, the figure a mockery. Yes, she's sinister. I can't hold that thought for long, though I can't get rid of it either. But I'll get to that. Now I'm trying to say how it was in the beginning when I was flying high and didn't have to tone down around her. You see, it wasn't appropriate to be so happy the first year of being a widow, especially under the circumstances, but I didn't have to be appropriate around her. She understood, or was envious, one of the two. My life had been canning and sewing and horses and county fairs and camping and keeping tabs on 4-H projects, and I enjoyed it, but the way I took to lectures, libraries, concerts and art movies I must have been starving. "You talk about growing old gracefully," she said, "but you seem to be growing young. You've got the liveliest step around. I see all these youngsters dragging past the house headed to and from campus and here you come, head up, alert, eager, exuding the vitality they're supposed to have." That's why I say she was an appreciator, until I saw deeper or she slid over the line into critical territory.

Once in a while I'd have a cup of tea with her, but most often it was a short chat as I went up or downstairs.
I had my own friends. Mentioning them to her I called them the growing-old-gracefully girls. She referred to them as my sorority sisters, a good-natured label, I thought. Maybe I couldn't get past the fat person stereotype. Well, anyway, this circle of widows I'd joined never missed a play or a speaker or a good movie. They had the liveliest reactions to everything, and took turns giving elegant dinner parties for each other with gourmet cooking and special wines and each time a little surprise, like chocolate cups for liqueur or a centerpiece of painted weeds. They each had some special hobby and swam twice a week and dressed fashionably—no navy blue suits and white blouses in that crowd—and campaigned for charities, or political parties. They never talked about aches and pains or social slights, never got kittenish with other women's husbands or played up to young men. And maybe I shouldn't give her the credit, or the blame—I don't know which it should be—that all this zest, all this delight in crammed calendars, later struck me as artificial, forced, desperate. She alone seemed real and open and honest and alive, even though by then the good nature had disappeared, if it had ever been there.

"She's for real," I used to think. But being with a real person can be devastating, if it's your first experience. I'm talking now about after the holidays. I'd picked up all the credits I needed in fall quarter so after Christmas
I applied to teach the following year and took a job correcting themes for high school English teachers. I figured it might help me get a job and I could use the money, but it was lonely work, and I took to going downstairs and staying half the day. She was a talker, all right. And she let me into her life as no one else ever had. I had never gone in for gossip. My friendships had been cooperative efforts to get something accomplished, a 4-H project lined up, a bond issue campaign mapped out, drama festival directors trained. And lately, of course, my friendships were with the we're-alive, we're-alive widows. Now, by which I mean that winter, listening to her uncensored feelings I realized all that project-oriented stuff had kept me from knowing other women intimately, and as I said the growing-old-gracefully girls' excitement over some lecturer couldn't hold a candle to her revelations of feeling. I don't criticize anybody for making a death rattle sound gay, but I couldn't do it myself. Once you know what you're doing that's the end of it.

I've got to get back to the devastation, because that's what I'm trying to figure out, how she did it. You don't get robbed and not wonder how it happened, and she literally, figuratively, I always get those two mixed up, sacked me of my past. For one thing, she robbed me of a happy marriage, well, a harmonious marriage, I mean, a good
marriage, or what I thought had been a good marriage, as marriages go. There, that's what happened. I started out assured I'd had a happy enough marriage and I ended up knowing I'd pulled the wool over my eyes, and it'd all been a miserable cheat, and I'm forty-five and it's too late now. I said it was devastating, didn't I. But I'm more interested in why than what. I've got to say whatever will help me figure out how she could do it when she didn't even seem to be entering the area. She never asked questions about my life, never seemed interested when I offered up a tidbit from my past, cut me off in the offering, often as not, to get back to her own preservations, and if she did make a comment, it was appreciative, or supportive, but I always knew her mind was with her own story, not mine. Maybe if I arrange the details in appropriate columns, they'll add up to understanding. Yes, get on to the specifics, as they say. It's the specifics that count, if anything does.

We drank tea every day. She often talked about her husband and her marriage. I was fascinated. Like by how casually she'd said she'd gone after him with a knife. Not because I'd never known anyone who had gone after someone with a knife, which I didn't, or if I did, I hadn't known I did, but because she was a generous person, and intelligent and fat. It's hard to put any one of those with hate. But I learned. Fat people are swollen with resentment against
the prejudices they endure, the stereotype view they have
to accept to cut down the pain.

I'm not being specific. I'd use quotations if they weren't so wordy. She said about her husband, "He's nothing. And he never wanted to be anything. The bastard never even tried. He came here to college and we got married and he got a part-time job as janitor and he's still at it. Silver wedding anniversary coming up and he's right where he was twenty-five years ago, only he dropped taking classes somewhere along the line and edged up to full-time janitoring. Now that's making something of yourself!" I'd seen Arnold often enough, but never for long. A jumpy little fellow who blinked his eyes rapidly, jiggled one arm in his sleeve, jerked up and down in his shoes, and was always edging away toward a scurry. In the beginning I saw him through her eyes and there was never any reason to doubt her view, and even when I saw him differently I still saw him that way, but I'm not talking about him now. I'll do that later. You have to be careful with specifics. They have too many aspects.

I'm trying to track down what happened to my assurance I'd had a good marriage. What I want to get at now is the way it went with our conversations, the pattern. When she said something about her husband it made me want to say something about mine, and how different things were with us.
Sid and me. Sid did try. He was no bastard. And he wasn't right where he started twenty-five years ago. He might not have looked like a big ranching success because we'd put everything into getting the land and not enough into cattle, but as he said, it takes more than one generation to make a success of ranching, and cattle would always be available and land wouldn't. He got the land and the boys could take it from there, make it a big operation. It was too bad the boys all hated ranching, but it was one of those things.

But I don't want to get lost in circumstances. I just want to tell you, so I'll know. She'd say something like, "If Arnie feels, he feels skinny." That was her most generous phrasing of an inadequacy she was determined to establish. Even after I'd found out how feelingful a person Arnie was I still held onto her view of his feelings as skinny because she was fundamentally right. Of course, I was, too. But I'm not talking about what was said. I'm talking about the pattern of the conversation and the results. I'm talking about how in reply I'd say how sensitive Sid was. The opposite of her husband. And maybe I wanted to get across that I was not harsh like she was, but gentle and tender and understanding. I'd say how Sid felt too deeply. Like about the ranch. If he hadn't it wouldn't have festered in him that the boys didn't want to ranch. I'd tell her this and then she'd take her turn and gripe some
more about Arnie, so I don't see how I can blame her, or credit her, whichever it should be, with starting me thinking that Sid was insensitive with the boys, always had been and it was no wonder they learned to hate ranching as they learned to hate him. I'd always thought he loved them as few fathers did, and that winter I began thinking he didn't love them at all except as tools to finish his dream. Now why was she the reason I started to see everything clearly, if it was clearly?

She made me want to talk though it was hard to get a word in edgewise and half the time she didn't listen, so I told her about the last conversation I had with Sid. He was just one big swollen mass of festered feeling when he came in that day. Not that that was unusual in these last years since the boys began struggling to be men. He was forever griping about them. But this time he attacked me. If you hadn't poisoned them against work, he repeated over and over and they were his last words before he went back to cutting irrigation ditches and rolled the tractor. Life crushed out instantly and no way of knowing whether it was deliberate suicide or carelessness from feeling upset.

When I told her she was back to Arnold immediately. "You wouldn't catch Arnold caring enough about anything to kill himself, least of all what his kids did." That was the kind of thing she said and I can't see any connection between
that and what happened to my memory of Sid's last day. But the next time I took the picture out the white had changed to black and the black to white. I'd been glad we hadn't messed up twenty-five years harmony by fighting at the end. I'd been understanding, knowing he had to blame someone because of the pain. If the boys didn't want to ranch, his last twenty years would disappear as if he'd never done a thing. I could feel the tragedy of that. "I taught them branding, calving, breeding, how to drive a tractor," he yelled at me. "They trailed me everywhere, worshipped the ground I walked on. Then you got them hooked on excitement, lured them into pack trips and hiking and camping every other weekend, spurred them on to building that ski tow with a tractor that could have been used in the corrals and time and energy that could have built a barn. You don't care about this ranch. Don't think I haven't noticed. You can't find time to run to town for feed or fencing, but if the boys need a ski binding you're off in a flash. So now one's planning to be a ski bum, and the others aiming to play their lives away in the park. You did it. You did this to me." I didn't care about his abuse of me. I was strong enough to take it unless I was indifferent enough to take it. I tried to help him see things realistically. "You can't expect worship from teenagers." "The mountain trips were 4-H outings." "Boys need excitement. Building a ski tow is
better than stealing cars." "Being a park ranger's not play and that ski bum talk is kid stuff." I did all I could to calm his mind, so it doesn't seem fair that he stayed riled up.

I've been trying to put the *before* picture beside the *after* picture so you could see, though it's more important for me to see. But this isn't like the remodelled house or woman who's dieted, because the after picture, the picture that came after her insidious influence or her enlightening effect, whichever it was--I've other things to decide before that will fall into place, if it ever does--the after picture wasn't clear and positive like the before one. After it was like looking at a negative instead of the print. No, that isn't the right analogy. It was more like multiple vision, like she'd scrambled my brains, and I saw everything from too many angles all at once. No, that doesn't do it either, because you won't think it's a good thing to fuzz up a clear picture, to be unable to see anything neat and definite, to pollute the clear, but it is good, though I wouldn't go so far as to make that kind of judgment. Still, it's a truer thing, and that makes it more good than bad, which sounds like I'm an incurable optimist or an inveterate pessimist, if you see that it boils down to thinking seeing pollution is seeing clear.

I'm making sense now, but you aren't following me.
You think it isn't worth it. You're bored, disgusted, so I'll go back, set things up the way you like them, with scenes, and descriptions of things, and quotations, because there's no point in my doing better if you aren't with me. I value your good opinion, or else I can't stand talking to myself.

I'll give you the scene in the kitchen, his last day. He's by the door, with yellow strawish manure rimming his boots between soles and uppers and dirt texturing the grease spots on his jacket and the dacron stuffing hanging out the square cornered rips and he's steaming from hours of stewing and he's ignoring the cup of coffee I've poured and creamed for him while he ranted as if his three fine sons were worthless delinquents, and I was to blame. I'm holding out the coffee mug, handle toward him, until the heat comes through to my fingers and I set it down on the cabinet, where the bread is rising in proof of my efficiency as a good ranch wife. I'm not angry. I've told you already what he said and what I said. Now why after knowing her, did I look back on my understanding words as icy little cubes useless to bring down a swelling that called for something warm like spit and spleen.

I've sat at the big table with my red pencil correcting themes--this is another scene now, another place, another year, another woman--and I'm thinking he wouldn't have rolled
the tractor if I'd been nasty, mean, yelled back, "You bastard, if you had made work satisfying for them, if you could take a little normal criticism from them, they might prefer building a barn to a ski tow. Don't blame me for taking a few camping trips, doing a little skiing. I have to have some fun. I'm married to a man whose idea of companionship is me driving the pickup while he shovels manure into it."

The more she called Arnie a bastard and a coward the more I thought Sid lucky to have me for a wife, which doesn't explain why she robbed me of a past I could live with and left me more bereft than I'd ever been by Sid's death. Though there's no reason why I should have been bereft by his death. She understood that, envied me, wished Arnold were dead. I wonder if he would be dead if she had been as kind and gentle and understanding as I was.

"Sure, I'm bitter," she'd say to me over tea. "Sure I feel cheated. Not because I missed out on the great romantic love. Because I missed out on all the decent compromises. I'd have settled for any kind of give and take between a man and a woman as long as it was real." When she'd say a thing like that I'd say, "Well, at least, Sid and I respected each other, never pushed each other to being what we weren't." I'd start out such statements confident enough that it was a good marriage because I'd never bugged Sid to go to church
with me, or the movies or square dances or even visiting, and he didn't complain about how I dressed or what I served for dinner or about 4-H or skiing until that last day. But before I got through that short sentence I knew we'd never had any relationship at all. We'd managed a sterile harmony by going our separate ways. She cleaned me out. Nothing left.

Now maybe you think she was so honest with herself that she forced me to be honest, but you'll see when I get there that she was a master of distortion, or maybe a master of the clear focus, or else you'll see it depended on what I needed to see in her. My own focus is fuzzy, but I'll get on with the story and maybe you'll see it all clearer than I do, though I'm not likely to take your print of it.

I stopped going downstairs for tea. Her conversations were too boring. I stayed at the big oak table with the themes to be corrected in piles all around and incident after incident out of the past would come at me, demanding a recount, a fairer trial, a pardon. I couldn't find topic sentences, no longer knew what coherence meant, thought unity was stupid, saw no sense in inductive or deductive reasoning. The oak table was by a bank of windows that had replaced most of the back wall to make old bedrooms into a studio living room. I felt exposed, though nobody ever looked up from the alley. I moved a small desk into the
corner of the bedroom because it was warmer there, true, but not significant. I wanted to stop the disintegration. Jammed under the eaves I was safer, holed up with my pain, though it wasn't a pain. It was heaviness, a vague massive regret, an accumulation of feelings I'd ignored, pushed down. Incidents no longer came at me. Particulars were gone and forgotten though they left their emotional weight behind.

I have worked hard to keep this depression in mind. It must be a permanent part of the record, so I can refer to it when I feel the need, erroneously, of course, to excuse myself for what happened. It must be definitely established that I had gone under, that she had given me a big push down, that she didn't hear my cries for help. Under such conditions I am bound to understand.

Seated there, corner-eye glimpses of myself in the mirror obtruded. My head was no longer cut off. I saw it all, hair, grey and dry, neck sagging, face drained, and the body sluggish, a middle-aged lump. Sometimes I jumped up so my head would no longer be visible, my body unlumped. I'd pull my dress from the back so that it fit snugger at the waist and hips, I'd turn to see the curve of my legs. I'd tell myself I was no different than last fall. It was only the job, too lonely, and that stupid woman I hated because she was smart, smart, smart. If I'd just go active
again, rejoin the sorority sisters, never have another cup of tea, get out. I phoned the most gracefully old of them all. My hysteria was quiet. She didn't notice. "Oh, you missed it," she said. "Hearing him was an experience. No doubt about it. That young man will emerge as a leader, and we'll be proud to have recognized it. We've missed you. Next week there's the art show and the over-the-top luncheon for some of us and that new film. We're having a get-together at the Blue Eagle before the film." The enthusiasm sent me pell-mell downstairs. Downstairs for the real. She was for real. I'd be for real. I poured it out. "Sid never gave me any companionship and now it's all piled up. All the loneliness I didn't know I felt all those years." She said, "If I had your looks. If I had a profession like you do. If I were free." She closed her eyes. She closed her ears. For reasons of her own. She wouldn't let go of last fall's person. She tied me hand and foot, bound and gagged me with, "If I had a profession like you do. If I were free. If I had your looks."

I stayed upstairs after that and went under, though if you've never gone under you won't know what I mean by that, and there isn't any way to describe it because that's what going under is, having nothing to describe. Days, maybe weeks, no way to know, went by and I only moved out of the cramp of the bedroom to get toast and coffee. Tears
stayed in my eyes for hours at a time. I brooded but couldn't recall two minutes later what I'd been brooding about. I never seemed to be fully awake or fully asleep, night or day.

Maybe I should invent here to fill in the gap. A nightmare perhaps, to make nothing exist. Yes, that's it. She's putting a mask on me and it doesn't fit and I can't breathe. As a child I had a dream of smothering. Or I'm on stage and she's at the piano, deliberately forcing me to sing an aria in a key I can't manage, and then she's the ballet teacher, praising my lightness and grace, as I clump around in old ski boots. No, nightmares are too easy. Hallucinations. I'll invent hallucinations. Sid coming back from the grave, saying I murdered him, put my sons up to choking him because I'd read a magazine article that it was the natural thing for boys to do. But that's not a hallucination. It's not an invention. It's real. I remember him saying, "Just because you have no feelings don't think I don't." He accused me of that the way she accused Arnie, which may have had something to do with what happened, but I mustn't get beyond myself. "You and your magazine articles," he had said. "The boys are supposed to rebel, rise up and choke the old man. You read it, so that's it. Well, it doesn't feel so good to be choked to death, no matter how the damn magazine articles explain it. I'm a
human being with feelings, feelings too deep for magazine articles to touch. But you don’t understand feelings. Ideas. Ideas. That’s all you know.”

Maybe I brooded on this. I don’t know. I don’t know about that time, except when it ended. That I remember. Late one evening I had a thought. The first recognizable thought in days. “I don’t exercise enough.” Finally, something concrete, particular, had broken away from the mass and identified itself. I knew I had to grab hold, hang on. If I put my boots and coat on, went for a walk, then I could say, “I took a walk from eleven to twelve.” Definite, specific, prosaic. That’s what’s needed for sanity.

She heard me going down the stairs and opened her kitchen door. "You going out, take my car. Night like this." I said I wanted to walk. I sounded normal. She said that was the joy of being in shape. "Now with me," she said, "it's an effort. I should have gotten off my duff and walked to the campus. That stupid husband of mine. Forgot his lunch again. Hasn't eaten since noon and goes off without his sandwiches. His problem, not mine." I was still fighting to stay with it. I said I'd take his lunch to him. Not to do her a favor, or him a favor, but to stay conscious. I mean, it helps to say you took a walk from eleven to twelve but it's even better if someone else can say you took a walk between eleven and twelve. I was
reluctant to leave her. I wanted conversation. To prove that the inner despair wasn't showing, or else I wanted desperately to have her see through to the despair. One or the other. I told her I'd been depressed, which would indicate I wanted her to know. She said, "Who hasn't? It's a weary world. We all get down. You'll make it. You're lucky. You've got a profession, you're attractive, you're free." I was relieved it didn't show through. I was frustrated the way she refused to give up that first picture she'd taken of me. She told me he was in the arts building and there was a bell to ring by the main door. She was cold and wanted to close the door.

The snowflakes floated down large and separate, nobody else's tracks marring the snow. I was in pain, a kind I hadn't known since adolescence. It seemed as if I were coming to after years of numbness, instead of after a few days' depression, as if maturity itself, marriage and motherhood and all that was some kind of anesthetic which had now worn off so I could feel the sting again. I fantasized like a teenager, too, only not about the romance I would have, but of what I wished I'd had. I thought how it would have been if I'd had a companionable husband, had lived in town, had had friends who were lively, responsive, talkative, only it wasn't just regret. I visualized myself in one companionable scene after another.
Now that I'm up to the point of ringing the bell for Arnie to come get his sandwiches I'll have to backtrack and tell you what I knew about Arnie, because it must be significant that my preconceived notions didn't interfere. What that signifies remains in question. I'd seen enough of Arnie to make all she said about him plausible. A nervous little man who never measured up. I had a picture of him sitting in a broom closet on a pail reading a paperback, because she said he would be content with any stupid job as long as he could read a book a day. Not that she pictured him as an intellectual. He read to play a role, the only janitor who could spout ideas, surprising people with his knowledge of everybody from Aristotle to Heidegger, a shoddy way to win status when he could have gotten a decent job if he cared about her or the girls. I'm giving you her picture now, the one she handed me. She said, "Does all that reading help him educate his kids or understand his wife, or get him a decent job? Oh, no. He just files stuff in his head to pull out later to impress some professor or student in passing. Not that he hobnobs with professors. He wouldn't dare. They'd find out he was a phony. Just an escape from reality, that's what his reading is. Whodonits would be as good, except that any janitors might read who donits. He'd have no distinction." She despised him so much I sometimes felt sorry for him, but she claimed I
didn't need to waste my sympathy. "He feels no pain. Doesn't care a damn what I think. Other people don't exist for him. They just aren't there. You have to recognize other people to be a human being yourself. I nearly died laughing when I saw him reading a book called On Becoming A Person. Would you believe it? I laughed, but I hoped, too. No use, he didn't become anything." I protested, "Everyone's a person." "You'd think so," she said, "but there must be lots like him. If there weren't, would someone write a book about it?" I felt sorry for her being married to him, but I wasn't thinking that, the night I rang the bell. I wasn't thinking of him at all. I was dreaming like a silly teenager of having a nice husband.

I rang the bell and nothing happened in the empty hall beyond the glass door. I figured he might be on the top floor of the building and I turned around to watch the snowflakes flutter past the lights that lined the mall. Big pines alternated with the lampposts around the square. I'm told details like that help create understanding. I didn't hear him come out but then he said, "Well, would you look at that?" And there he was, not jiggling or bouncing, not surprised to see me. I had a habit of taking things in without reacting to them at the time. I save them for later, when I need them.

He said, "It doesn't look for real, does it?" Which
was exactly what I thought of the scene. "No, it seems too old-fashioned," I said. He said, "You think the Chamber of Commerce is planning one of those romantic re-enactments? Relive the old days." I laughed and said it was a horrible thought and I'd prefer to stick with my adolescent fantasies. "Reliving the old days?" he asked, and I said, "No, wanting something good right now. Thinking if I had a husband I'd get him to walk all across town with me, and we'd end up in an ancient coffee house with heavy, carved furniture from another century, and round tables where we'd meet good friends and talk for hours." I'd never in my life gone on like that but the words just floated out onto the mall as harmless as the snowflakes with which they mingled. I came to when he took my elbow. It registered that I'd been talking to a person I hardly knew and didn't like what I did know. The most positive emotion I'd ever had toward Arnie was pity. So I removed my elbow and held out his lunch to him.

I'm taking the easy way now, telling it as if it was what it seemed to be, though in view of what happened later, I'm forced to wonder if I didn't invent Arnie to thrust out a helping hand as I surfaced momentarily. Imagination comes to the rescue more often than people do. Desperation devises, they say. I don't care for that line of reasoning--desperation-imagination-invention, though it's a sequence that
works forward and backward. But I'd prefer to erase that. I may still need the feeling that I can connect with someone else. If I can believe it happened once I can hope it will happen again.

To go on, I had just set up that nice romantic scene, husband, walk in the snow, coffee-house friends, and I was holding out his lunch. He ignored the lunch and took me by the shoulders and headed me into the building. It is nice to be touched. I'd spent a lifetime avoiding it. Arnie said, "You've already had a walk. I've got a round carved table and a cup of coffee and I'm a friend who can talk for hours. It's not the whole bit but it sounds good to me." Now it's an amazing person who hears every word someone else says. I doubt if I could have invented such a person in the wildest flights of my desperation. We walked through the empty halls, his step springy and quick, not jittery, and I walked light and quick myself to one of the rehearsal rooms. At one end a grouping of furniture sat on a Persian rug, reds and blues in intricate designs, worn but still rich. The furniture had red plush crafted to dark, thick hand-rubbed wood whose nicks and scratches had been cared for rather than camouflaged, which I must have thought of later. For all the formality of the design the grouping gave off human warmth, unless it came from him, or my imagination. My mood at the time was not to be trusted,
though that's just when I'm most trusting. Usually I'm inner tuned. What's out there is seldom that vivid, but at times something switches on and my eyes and ears function with extra speed and efficiency. Everything registers. That's why I have these details in mind--though my reaction still takes precedence over everything else. I thought I'd feel exposed, incongruous sitting there, drinking his thermos coffee and looking at the emptiness around that little island of furniture-laden carpet, but I didn't feel silly or see the emptiness. Arnie's words held me. What he said was unexpected. I can quote him verbatim. Peak moments groove deep. He talked about his luck in having the job he did. "I've got the best buildings on the ground to clean. Fine arts and library. I get here at five while the kids are still around. Up on the top floor they paint the damndest, craziest stuff. It's really something. And they talk as crazy and true as they paint. Down in the basement they're slapping the clay into wild shapes. You'd never believe how free they are to let go. It always hits me fresh, every time something new appears. And on the drama floors in between, they throw their raw emotions around like the paint and clay is thrown above and below them. On stage and off. They're great, these kids. Talking to them is something. They're not all rusted over and scarred up. I help them with their sets and lights. They put my name on
every show program, acknowledge something crazy and trivial. They've got joy, these kids, like my youngest. I get my work done in half the time of any other janitor, partly because I'm quick moving, partly because I think up shortcuts. They've no complaints about my goofing off. I do the library, too. Supposed to get off at 3 a.m. but I never leave until 7. I read like mad. And here I am lucking out with something special, like you bringing me my lunch. First chance I've had to enjoy you."

I want to tell this part straight through so nothing that came later will get in, because it does me good. It gives me something even now to think it happened the way I thought it did then. So, when he said, "First chance I've had to enjoy you," I said, "I come, you scurry off." And he said, "Oh, well, there. That's the place for hashing over the past and smearing up the future. Here's where I latch onto right now. You know what I mean? The only joy is in the moment at hand, that's for sure. Could I enjoy you for what you've been, sincere, capable, vibrant, whatever you were? Could I enjoy you for what you're going to be, even if you'll be the loveliest, kindest, most understanding person in this town? No, but this moment, ah, this moment I can enjoy. The way you respond. No pulling back. No junky overlay when I asked you in, and when I talk you pick up more than words. And my eyes can rest on the curve of
your leg above your boot top. It's nice for a woman your age to be healthy, have muscles. You know? The sandwich is good and the coffee hot, and the feeling that something is beginning, ah, that's warming." I said, "What's beginning?" And he said, "How do I know? We can feel beginnings before we know what's beginning. Right?" I said he must have picked up that kind of talk from the kids who threw around clay and paint and raw emotions, and he laughed and said, "Didn't pick it up around home, did I? But don't start pulling back to take a hard look." He poured more coffee into my cup and put his hand over mine. "Get right back in here where you were," he said. "You don't need perspective. You need life." How could he have known? I asked him if she had said I'd been feeling dead lately and he said, "I don't think she's noticed." So that confirmed what I thought, that she was closing her eyes and ears. I said, "How could you notice in the few glimpses we've had of each other." He said he was a noticing person.

I've told enough for you to see how different he was from what she thought, or how different he was when he wasn't with her, or how I saw him as different, out of my need. Testing it out by telling it hasn't eliminated that possibility. Walking home I felt I had found the key to all I'd missed in life, a silly joy that welled up out of nothing, as adolescent as my despair had been earlier. I wasn't
used to wholehearted reactions in myself. I tried to pull myself down, to superimpose her view on what I'd experienced. I told myself I was over-reacting because of the unstimulating life I'd been leading and the surprise of finding out that Arnie, scurrying, jittery, despised Arnie, had found the good life within the confines of janitorial duties. I told myself he was a ridiculous figure, a clown latching onto enthusiasms appropriate for college kids. The kids themselves probably laughed at him, imposed on him, played around with him as a mascot. I decided he must be a phony, a good actor who saw his chance to counteract the image of him which she had passed out. But the strange thing was I couldn't get these thoughts to weigh down on what I was feeling, this joy that someone had made it, against the most terrific odds, that I, too, might make it. He'd told me not to pull back and take a hard look, which was what I was doing, but it didn't temper my hope. Hope of a beginning? Something new? A kind of living not yet experienced? I tried to get some distance, but it didn't work, so I dismissed all thought of keeping my reactions in check with Arnie's own words. "Just junky overlay." Why shouldn't I feel good. He had listened to me, noticed my legs, been aware of each little shift of my feelings, and he'd talked, assumed my openness to what he was in spite of the indoctrination he must have known I'd had. He wasn't dumb, that
janitor. Saying she hashed over the past and smeared up the future. First time in my life I'd got the feel of living in the moment. Nothing more stimulating than experiencing a cliche. I'd been responding, picking up more than words, as he said. I'd been alive and I wanted to keep on being. I pranced upstairs and whirled in the living room for a few turns, a snowboot in each hand, and when I closed the bedroom door and saw my headless figure I said, out loud and gay, focusing on the curve of my leg which Arnold had made part of his moment. I said, "It's not such a bad thing to lose one's head. Not such a bad thing. And I just might do it."

As I said in the beginning, I found my mind rather than lost my head, or because I lost my head. The next morning I woke up eager, dressed quickly in a skirt and sweater I hadn't thought belonged together but now, with a leather belt, had a stylish flair. I cooked eggs and bacon and opened a can of mandarin oranges, read a book review that excited me and wrote out a check to the publisher immediately. In no time at all I sat down to my overdue student papers in the living room by the big windows. I ignored all the sentence fragments and the misspellings and the dangling modifiers and instead wrote notes about the possibilities that popped out of every paper: "This'd be good humor in parable form. By using Biblical language
you could--"; "The irony in paragraph three is great. Why don't you make each paragraph end with an ironic twist"; "Line eight is poetic. Anyone who can see that concretely can make other lines live. Try to--"; "By all the rules this paper shouldn't be good but the hackneyed phrases capture the ordinariness of the experience." These kids only needed the signal and they'd break out, let go, like Arnie's fine arts crew. The papers were ready to return by noon and the teacher said, "Thought you had the flu but you look as if you've had a vacation." On the way home I passed all the other walkers, couldn't seem to slow down my pace, which was no mean acceleration, after all those days of dragging through the morning, pushing myself to dress, prodding myself to paper correcting, resisting the urge to drop to the floor, slumping in the chair and letting hours pass without even a coherent thought to mark them.

Arnie had an effect, I made that clear, but whether he was the cause is still muddy. I was in an affectable state. Depression softens one up for dents which may be the reason she dented me, too, and when her dent went in his came out. I'm not without substance. That afternoon, still high on his dent, I mentioned to her I'd talked to Arnie the night before and I'd been surprised to learn how much he enjoyed his work. She said, "Oh, enjoy. That's Arnie all right. Nothing touches him. His family could be disintegrating and he'd enjoy. Out of sight, out of mind with
Arnie. Like with the feebleminded. They say no brain no pain, but Arnie has a brain, so tell me how can he be so oblivious to the way he's deprived his children, deprived himself, too, settling for a janitor's job." I said I thought there was something admirable in staying psychologically high in circumstantial lows. I complained that Sid had let things get him down too much. She said, "Which in itself takes a certain amount of sensitivity and maturity. Arnie reminds me of a little boy sneaking out to the back yard to play when there's trouble in the home. Getting some fun in when mama isn't looking." Such descriptions of Arnie stuck, no matter how I worked at erasing them. Coming out of her neuroses, such distortions couldn't be as apt as they are.

Back in my own apartment I felt tired, lay down but couldn't sleep, wondered if Sid had done it deliberately, couldn't find anything I wanted to cook for supper, worried that my reactions the night before and the happy burst of energy this morning, combined, signaled serious instability, coming as they did after the first long depression I'd ever suffered. I could no longer get last night's Arnie in mind. I stayed in the bedroom, tried to read at the little desk, couldn't avoid seeing in the mirror the lines from the bridge of my nose to the corners of my mouth, lines that edged cheeks beginning to sag. I slipped into time that
doesn't move as the clock hands tick around.

Then the phone rang. Arnold saying he wanted me to whip over and see an act that was in rehearsal. Immediately last night's feelings recaptured and she was wrong, wrong, wrong. Still that little boy sneaking out to play must have put some caution in me. I said tentatively I could use some fresh air. He said I'd get more than that. The kids were sending out for Mexican food and he'd ordered for two because he wanted me to see what he meant about the kids. My own eagerness to get there frightened me, too much of a leap from my mood of five minutes before. I said, "but" and he said, "but what?" and I said I'd feel silly with all those young kids, when I didn't have any purpose there. He said I had a purpose but nobody would ask me for it. I wasn't sure. I was getting more cautious. I said, "If she asks where I'm going is it all right to say?" I was remembering she had come to the door the night before to offer the car. He said, "What's the point. Might complicate the future." I couldn't trust my own judgment and I couldn't not trust hers. Despite her hate and resentment she was a smart woman. I was too vulnerable, and even if the night before wasn't all in my head, its joy was not likely to be repeated. I teetered on the edge, finally said with the control of a drunk determined to sound sober, "I don't think I better." He said, "Where's the joie de vivre you felt a few minutes ago?" I said it was buried under good common sense. He
said "What's better common sense than letting joy loose."
I said, some other time, when I'd had a chance to think.
He said, "You'll never make it that way. Damn it, I'd like to have you here." He meant it, and that did it. I was ready to go, but wasn't quick enough in saying so. "Okay," he said. "I'll tell them I've been stood up." That did it, flipped me over to the other side. Making it sound like a date.

As soon as I replaced the receiver my circulation stopped. My lungs, my heart, my stomach, each loop of intestine suddenly made itself known, its position, its size, everything, as if each separate organ were protesting the weight that filled them when motion stopped. Only my brain wasn't heavy. There the electrical currents buzzed out eulogies: Had the intelligence to recognize a pitfall when you saw it, didn't you? Didn't fall in the trap like other women your age. Maintained your perspective, your dignity. Not blinded by emotion into believing your superficial judgment superior to the time-tested evaluation of a wife. How silly it would have been of me. I congratulated myself. If I'd followed my impulses. The other night, all right. No one was there. But to join him around students! So maybe they had a great fondness for their lovably absurd janitor who ran their errands and championed their excesses. An intellectual custodian. Who can resist a paradox? It's
easy to be fond of the ridiculous. But I didn't want to be ridiculous. Ho. Ho. Who's your girlfriend, Arnie? I'd be humiliated. And I could imagine how I would sink in her estimation. She'd be less mad at Arnie than disgusted with me.

I'd made the right choice, all right. That put all this dead weight in my lungs, in my stomach, in my bowels. Lucky I'd asked if it was okay to tell her. That cued me, told me what future he had in mind. If I hadn't been alert I might have gone to the theatre, made a fool of myself to be with someone who listened to me, who caught all the feelings behind my words, who wanted my responses, who pulled me into enjoying the moment. I'd learned--though I didn't know it--that the price of feeling alive is humiliation.

But the congratulations died out and keening began. If I'm so smart, so lucky, why are my lungs, my stomach, my bowels stiffening into dead weight. Inevitable, of course, doing the right thing naturally gets rigor mortis going. But I wailed, if last night was so foolish why was this morning so fast-moving, creative, richly-packed? Oh, Arnie, you pulled me up, set me moving. And I said, no more, thank you--I'm wailing now--I preferred depression and the respect of your wife who bogged me down. I believe her view of you when I know her view of me is all off. I'm too afraid of a little ridicule to go see for myself what I think of you.
I could stand it no longer, the high-pitched whine of my thoughts. I rolled onto my stomach and cried wrenching sobs such as I had not known in years. And when I lay exhausted my vagina pounded. That hadn't happened, not without stimulation, since adolescence. Something was happening to me. I put myself to sleep by droning over and over, I'm a mess. I'm a mess. I'm a mess.

In the days that followed I would wake at dawn, but wouldn't get out of bed until late, never able to remember what I'd been thinking all that time. I'd stand in front of the closet, unable to locate anything I could slip into easily, and would soon forget why I was there, and back into the chair to rest. If eventually I mustered up enough will power to get into a pair of jeans, the energy didn't last long enough to exchange pajama top for blouse. One seemed as good as the other. When I pushed myself to the kitchen for breakfast, cooking eggs was not worth the effort, and getting bowl and sugar and milk for cereal from three separate places was too much of a chore, and I could never wait for the coffee water to heat, but went back to the bedroom, sometimes with a box of cereal flakes which I sprinkled into the palm of my hand and shoved into my mouth. I sat at the desk and doodled red designs on the edges of the students' themes.

By afternoon, terror at what was happening to me
would generate a desperate energy and I'd force myself out of the apartment, rack my mind for some plausible person to visit. One afternoon I made a list of things I needed and when I got downtown there was not an item that was worth the effort of buying. On the street I ran into one of my old neighbors who babbled at me, "I was telling Connie the other day, I wish she'd take after you, have your poise and dignity. That was the thing about you. Even at the horse barns out to the fair grounds, you had that look. Never at loose ends. Never coming out at the seams like the rest of us. I said when Sid went, there's one woman'll be able to handle it. You won't see her going to pieces. And I hear you're doing marvelous. I knew you would." She believed if people held together death was more dignified. One afternoon I stopped at the doctor's office, begged the receptionist to let me see him for a minute. "I'm so depressed I can't function," I complained. My voice sounded too vigorous for my words. "Normal, normal," he said. "To have the blues the first year after a loss. Essential, a period of mourning. It'll pass." He didn't know anything.

I'm going along great, sounding as if I know what I'm talking about, so I must be lying. All this coherence gives me away. I'm refusing to acknowledge something. I would if I could. I'm not cowardly. My longing returned to that one evening of communication, that one morning of
effective activity that had broken the dead days. I no longer cared to figure out whether she was right or wrong about her husband or what ending a beginning would have. I was sorry I had not gone to the rehearsal that night. A drowning person can't be fussy about the hand that's extended.

I thought he'd never phone again, but he did. "Dress rehearsal tonight. Why don't you drop by? I'd enjoy your reaction. The kids are glad to have some audience. Come on." I didn't hesitate, was out of the house in five minutes, at the theatre in another five, buoyed up by this chance, as grateful to Arnie as I had been to my obstetrician, the one who can help when no one else can.

I'm not going to think about what happened later when I tell about this part. I don't want to spoil it. I need it, still. He said, "Oh, great. You came. I'll be in and out. Tell us who's coming through as the heroine. That's the big argument, whether Katrin should be allowed to be all she can be. Brecht called it Mother Courage. He must have meant her to be the one. But he wrote Katrin's lines." To get going with Arnie you never had to review the past or summarize where you were. With Arnie you were participating in the present before you knew it. I'd never seen a Brecht play. The kids didn't question my right to be there, talked to me about stage problems they'd been
bugged by. I warmed to their acceptance. When the play was over I had no thought of going home. I trailed Arnie up onto the stage where he fixed a wagon wheel, and when he went off to work at his cleaning jobs, I stood listening to the director's comments to the cast and ate the hamburger someone gave me. When Arnie came back I told him I wanted to read the play and he took me up to one of the offices, pulled a thick book of Brecht's plays from the shelves, flipped through it, commented on each one, wrote a note to the book's owner only when I insisted, talked about theatre myths and wearing masks off stage, whether lack of identity made better actors. He pulled me off the desk where I had been sitting and into his arms. If I go fast enough on this I won't be impelled into rearranging it. He said, "We have something to give each other." I said I couldn't believe a pair of arms could feel so good. Maybe you never get over wanting sex. He said, "Amazing, isn't it? Just a pair of skinny arms." And only then did I realize I had been amazed that I could respond sexually to a man so small and thin. He wasn't put off by it, and having it brought to my consciousness didn't temper any response when he kissed me. I was quickly moist, breathy, aware the undulations inside were about to break into visible movements. "I'm not for getting involved in anything," I said between kisses. It was impossible that I was roused to pulsation so quickly.
Even when I was young — . He said, "You're all for it, and so am I." I said I was just sexually starved, that's all. He said reasons didn't matter. "You'd exploit a poor starved widow?" He said, "I'd enjoy a poor starved widow, if that's what this female warmth is." It's a pleasure to remember stuff like this if I don't think about it. I'd like to keep it this way despite what happened.

We left the office for a room stored high with theatre furniture. He removed a lamp and a couple of end tables from a couch. I lay down eager for his weight, afraid he might perch like a pecking bird upon me but he came down full length, surprisingly hard and heavy. "It won't all come tumbling down if we let go?" I eyed the haphazardly piled furniture stacked around us, knowing he couldn't see what I referred to, but not caring about our precarious position by the time I had finished the sentence. I was ready to come quickly, but a strange thing happened. When he went into me I could feel nothing, only knew his orgasm had taken place when he said, "You didn't after all, did you?" I said, "I don't know what happened. All of a sudden I wasn't feeling anything." And of course he was sorry. I was perfectly sincere, in a classic sort of way, saying it was good to feel as much as I did. After so long. I was strangely content instead of frustrated, as if the climax had taken place physically, but news of it hadn't reached
my brain. The sounds of the night watchman in the building didn't bother me. Nor Arnie asking me to stay there until he came back at 3:30 or 4. "We'll walk across the bridge and get breakfast at the all-night diner on the highway."

The effect was the same only longer lasting. I whipped through my layreading speedily. I began to attract luck, found just the right clothes for spring without shopping around, ran onto paperbacks I'd wanted to read, found a buyer for the ranch, was asked by a professor to write up a project for a grant, which led to other jobs. Once again I was a full-functioning person. Every few evenings I got a call. "Want to see how that thing Sam was doing turned out? The metal and rod thing by the guy with the fuzzy beard." "Hey, director's stuck tonight for someone to hold the book. Why not come over and do it?" "Got this book of poetry I want you to read. You can use Kelly's office, comfortable chair, place to put your feet, and I can be in and out to get your reactions." I liked listening to the students, sitting in the empty theatre at rehearsals, or sitting on an upturned five gallon bucket in the pottery, or standing around in the mess of the painters' coffee corner. They threw my opinions into the pot with all the rest, unlabeled by any age tag. Sometimes students dropped me off on their way home. Sometimes I stayed long after the building was empty of students. Arnie always acted happy to have
me, responded to my moods, reacted to my thoughts, assumed my liking, was unpredictable in his enthusiasms. It was worth the effort to keep certain thoughts at bay, her pictures of Arnie, my own of women my age making fools of themselves, my fear she'd turn to capturing me in devastating phrases as she did him. I managed easily enough. I'm good at mental management.

Arnie never made arrangements to make being together convenient. It was catch-as-catch can. We began meeting for breakfast and she noticed how often I went out early. She complimented me on having old-fashioned self-discipline, said she didn't know anybody went in for morning constitutionals these days. That assured me she didn't know, and convinced me she knew everything. I never felt I wronged her. I began to enjoy her again, her genuineness, her acceptance of her own hatreds and resentments. I recoiled when her festering hostilities against him came out. It bothered me that I was betraying a friend. You couldn't say I was having an affair. He always thought I was her at the crucial point. Yes, at the final moment his gift for sensitive response deserted him. That saved me, the way nervous desperation took over as desire moved to possession. Dignified phrases are necessary since I'm not used to talking about such things. The first time we were together, had intercourse, loved, nothing is natural here, that first time
I thought I had become numb because that kind, any kind, of letting go was a violation of what I'd been and had wanted to be as I grew old, though I was no longer committed to dignity. Depression had released me. I put my faith in time. My responses, always poised to quicken, his affection, always eager for expression, expanded simultaneously at the least opportunity, overcoming all sense of separation. A good sign, which didn't indicate where we were going in the least. His sweet intensity always turned frenetic, suddenly driven to get through with it. I'm not one to judge such a delicate affair, but as I said, our delicacy didn't make it as an affair. The shift from lover's intensity to rapist's frenzy and the sudden cessation of all my sensations were perfectly synchronized. That's compatibility for you. It wasn't my fault. When it registered on Arnie that our affection wouldn't be cut short of fulfillment—no, that's too stilted—when it registered that we were going all the way—that's no better—as I told you, I'm not used to talking about these things—anyway, at a certain point, he was pushed by the fear that if he didn't hurry, potency wouldn't last. She had emasculated him. That's a respectable defense against any failure on my part, unless at that point it got through that I was using him for my own ends. Hardening under exploitation has its softening effects. As soon as ejaculation occurred, Arnie of the first
time was back, sensitive, affectionate, responsive, intel-
lectually alive. Unless desperation switched on my imagina-
tion. Each time, I'd think, never again, he's hers to the 
core. Thwarted desire makes one bitterly astute. After I 
tell you what happened you may think he was saying never 
again, but I've warned you. I'm not likely to take your 
view. When it comes to clear-eyed vision I can take it or 
leave it alone.

And now that I'm up to that last day, I may not be 
up to it. On the mornings before Arnie's night off he'd 
go home for the car, pick me up a few blocks away on my 
"morning constitutional" and we'd drive to some nearby town 
for breakfast, stop to enjoy the country on the way back. 
The weather was getting nice, then. He didn't have to go 
to work the evening of the day she pulled her little mirror 
joke. Little is hardly the word. I thought we would be 
together all morning and he did pick me up in the car but 
we went to a local place, one he knew I didn't care for. I 
wish I hadn't noticed that. He said she insisted he do some 
things for her that morning. I said it was clear then that 
she knew. And he said, "She doesn't, but it'd be good for 
her if she did," which was another remark that clarified a 
bit too much. I said, "But not good for me." And he said, 
"You've got the spirit to make anything good for you. You've 
got everything going for you." I worked at not translating
that phrase, you've got everything going for you, into her refrain about professions, looks, freedom. He said his last words naturally, lightly, "I'm off to hash over the past and smear up the future. And I wish I didn't have to." His tone had been anguished, his eyes beaming love right into me, as if he knew I'd need the memory of that. Or else his voice had the jitters and his glance flicked furtively, guiltily, which gave me a terrible sense of loss right there. Remembering is not easy, when I haven't decided what to remember.

She made sure I wouldn't be home that morning by asking me what my plans were for the day, under the pretext of wanting my company on a shopping expedition. I've never been good at spotting pretexts, though I'm a natural at camouflage myself. Once I'd said I had editing work to do on campus, I had to stay away all morning. I got back to the house well past noon. She called to me as I started up the stairway, wanted me to see her purchases, led the way to her bedroom. A giant mirror with two side wings, each a yard wide, all on a chrome stand was triplicating the room. "That dress shop going out of business," she said. "Got down early and had my pick. I know the manager. What do you think?" This was no innocent purchase, except by comparison with what I had found upstairs, but I can't get to that just yet, if I ever can. I thought of joking
about what that mirror would do to her morale, because this all ties back to the beginning. Circling back is the only acceptable end. The frustration is satisfying. Instead of joking I wondered if Arnie was asleep in the basement. I said, "But why do you want it?" My tone was flat. It always happens when thoughts and words won't harmonize. She chattered about it being providential, getting a chance to buy just at the time she'd been reaching some conclusions. Reaching conclusions is a peculiar way of saying finding out what's going on, but no one is honest 100 per cent of the time. She said they were conclusions about keeping up her morale by not facing reality. "Not seeing what others see when they look at this repulsive heap of flesh I drag around with me." That was the way she phrased it. "At our age," she said, putting the stress where she needed it, "at our age, we should be ready to face reality, don't you think? I ought to be able to look at the whole of me, and say, okay, is this the way you want it? Accept yourself, hate yourself, do something with yourself, but know you're making the choice. Don't kid yourself."

I thought it best to joke about her deserting the escapists to live the hard way, a return to the old days when friendship began with joking about mirrors in the middle years. I said something about it being the biggest mirror I'd ever seen in a bedroom. She said, "My reality's
pretty big. If I'm going to face it, I have to see it."
To many meanings for that word it. Anyone who uses it is trying to cover up. You can be sure of that. Her mood was high all right as she showed off how the wings could help her see what other people saw from left, right, front and rear all at once if your eyes flicker. I said, "You talk as if everyone's watching you. Thinking of moving into the spotlight?" My jokes come out flat and meaningless. As I've pointed out before I don't have control over how I sound. I was wishing she'd come right out with it. I was grateful she was telling me obliquely, since operating on the level always tips the scales. Her answer to the spotlight bit was, "That's what we escapists don't realize. Everyone is watching. We're in the spotlight when we don't know it. Nothing escapes anybody. We think we're hiding in our little dark corners, sneaking in and out when the world is busy elsewhere. Why should anybody pay attention to us? Who are we? We're not worth glancing up to see, but they do glance and they do see. I may be a fat slob. I may be a bitchy wife, but I operate in the open." She knows how to raise pictures to sting the mind. I didn't let it show, so it was obvious. She let up a minute by pretending she was talking about herself. "Never been one to hide things from other people, so why should I hide all this fat from myself?" I said, "You going to diet?" I played the game natural enough, heading for the door and
saying I had work to do. But a trap's not a trap if you
can walk out of it. "You can't leave without trying it out.
Take a look at yourself," she said, as if that monstrous
mirror hadn't been reflecting multiple images of the two of
us all the time. She took my purse and books from my hands
and put them on the bed. She pushed me forward and held me
in position with her hands on my shoulders. My eyes focused
on her reflection, not mine. By sounding kind and friendly,
she spared herself some guilt. I have the words of her
story. They're no trick to recall. Her fingers gripped my
shoulders. She spoke to my reflection and I listened to
hers. "You know, mirrors are good for reflecting more than
the physical. Don't you think? I found that out at six­
teen. I was at a dance. I was slim and pretty then, and
I was known as a nice girl. A lot of fun, but a nice girl.
I had a good reputation. I valued my reputation." She
stressed reputation. "Well, I was at this dance, and I was
upset without knowing it. I'd just lost a boyfriend and I
was afraid no one would ask me to things that year, every­
body paired up for the season, the way kids do. At that
age, of course, the rest of the year might as well have been
the rest of my life." You see how well thought out this
was. "Well, this night at the community center dance, I
started to flirt with this skinny little punk." Her paral­
lels were too obvious. "I don't know what got into me. He
wasn't a bit attractive, and he'd been going with a friend of mine, a shy girl who didn't like him, but couldn't do any better. I went all out as if he were the captain of the football team. Had a great time. Never entered my head how it looked to others until I went to the girls' room. To comb my hair and stuff. When I looked in that mirror I saw I'd been making a fool of myself, an absolute fool over a little nothing." She often described him as nothing. "And everybody looking on. Yes, if we looked in mirrors often enough we'd improve more than just our appearances. Take right now. There I am, sticking out of both sides of you, with my hair badly in need of another dye job. I see the slob, all right, but I see something else, too. Maybe you can't see it in me, but I see it. I look and it sticks out as wide as my fat, as messy as my hair. My damned bitchiness. If you had asked me last week if I nagged I would have denied it, but in this mirror I can't deny it. I say, to myself, you're bitchy, bitchy, bitchy. You bulge with bitchiness." At that point I said, "Don't be ridiculous," but she went on. "What do you see? Besides the face you can't think is yours? And the nice legs and the trim body?" When I got the note of hostility I felt relieved. I jerked out of her grasp. I had had enough. "What do I see?" "Well, that's your problem," she answered but her tone became placating, a response to my anger, a useful cue if you
can make use of cues. "You ought to feel set up by the physical comparison anyway. You certainly have the edge over me. I blame Arnie for all this grossness. He isn't man enough, and I have to eat my way to satisfaction. He isn't really masculine. There's no denying that." She pushed that point. I told you she was smart. If she had stopped there my own reaction could have been more clearcut. But she had to go on and let it show, that honesty I liked. "But if he's to blame for my fat, maybe I'm to blame for his lack of ambition. Neither one of us is much, I guess, but we're necessary to each other. For the girls' sakes, and it looks like we might have the responsibility for three grandchildren for a while. I couldn't handle it without Arnie." "I better be getting on up," I said. I picked up my purse and books. "Before you go. Have - ? Do - ? Maybe - " she dropped each thought. "Compulsive talker that I am, I know talking doesn't get anything across. Only actions do the job, even if they aren't so kind. But then, maybe I'm not a kind person." We had that in common, being victims who admit our guilt. As a victim it's easier to go on. Though the secret of going on is putting the past in its place. There's no future in having a past that keeps popping up, though I may have to accept it since I'm giving up the practice of fixing the past in colors I can live with, though if that were true I wouldn't be talking. Now that
I'm on the subject I see I'm off the subject. The issue is not what I do with my past, but that she had the honesty to trespass on private property and desecrate it without even seeming to walk through it, a subtle hypocrisy, unless without knowing what I was doing I was the one with the nerve to trespass and desecrate, but I couldn't be profane this late in life.

But if I do not stop trying to get to the core, I'll lose you. You're impatient to know what happened, what was said and done, in what surroundings. No, any impatience on your part is only wishful thinking on my part, and I'm not accusing you of indifference to what's central. I realize it is just that you do not want me to spell it out. You think you're capable of that yourself, and believe me I'm not trying to foist my sense of it upon you. I'm just trying to put some sense into my own head. Stay with me for compassion's sake. I'll get on. I was at the part where I get my head put back on my shoulders. She had just shown her true colors with that mirror, made all those accusations about my losing my head for a bit of morale, and I had gotten away finally, but not before those unexpressed admissions. She smeared up my future with a kind of love as she smeared up his with an unkind hate.

As soon as I opened the door of my apartment I saw my head secure on my shoulders, staring me in the face. At
least that's one way of seeing it. A band of mirrors ringed the room, a narrow band, just the width and at the exact height to reveal my head and shoulders only. Two mirrors on each end wall, four on the long wall, narrow mirrors meant to hang vertical, now positioned horizontally, end to end, held in place with little gold clips, six to a mirror. A lot of screws. A lot of careful figuring. Wherever I looked I saw that I had a head on my shoulders.

My first reaction, if reactions ever have an order, was admiration. Being stunned is undeniably admiration. No one could expect me to react to my own reflection before I reacted to the mirrors being there. Such a grand gesture. It would have been magnificent enough to have thought of doing such a thing, but to do it! No mean achievement. Not that I'm implying it was a kind achievement. But definitely preferable to that sneaky story she told downstairs, as she well knew and said. It is kinder to be mean when you mean to be kind. For both our sakes I will color that story out of my past if I can get away with it. I've even lost confidence in what I can get away with. I couldn't get over how cleverly those mirrors were positioned. Seated or standing, near or far, always the head, never my figure. Denied my only consolation, reflectively speaking. I didn't just stand there. I did something. I sat down to take a break from seeing myself. I only eliminated the shoulders so my
motive must have been to reflect on the mirrors. I also walked around on tiptoe trying to see more of myself, but couldn't. Unless I didn't try hard enough. I remember touching the gold clips, marveling at the work and expense. I was impressed. It takes guts to accept your own hostility long enough to carry out a gesture like that. And it takes a good sense of values to spend the money she did and put screw holes in good walls. Most people value walls more than gestures. To do all that just to give a good friend and betrayer a slap in the face. A magnificent slap. But my admiration knew its bounds.

If only I could hold my contradictions together the way she held hers together, with her sense of balance I could let loose my admiration. The selfish bitch, using a husband she despised, wanting my friendship but letting me sink without extending a hand. Oh, she was human, all right. I'll say that for her. She'll stand out in bold colors in any picture of my past, making him pale and shoddy by comparison when he was the bright spot of my life that winter. I resent her not letting me paint my past in the hue and cry I want it to have. She displaced my past with Sid, sent me sliding into the pit, and then wouldn't hear my cries for help. If he hadn't sneaked away from trouble in the home to have a little fun when mama wasn't looking, I'd have drowned for sure. And now, she's rearranging more of
my past, getting him to hang the mirrors.

Of course he hung the mirrors. I knew because I looked out the window, either to get away from having a head on my shoulders, or because I heard their voices. I had a good view of their shoddy play, though it may have been no play at all, but honest work, such as it takes to keep a marriage going—planting rose bushes according to her detailed directions, clinking together the drinks she had brought out on a tray, not looking up to wave me down to join them, though they must have known I was in need of a drink more than anyone. Or else they knew I was lost to them and were facing it together. He wasn't bouncing in his shoes, or jiggling his arm nervously or edging into a scurry. I didn't expect that loss, though any wife would pull in her scorn under the circumstances. First chance he'd had to enjoy her in some time, I imagine. Arnie was not one to pass up a moment, naive as he was. Or wise, or pathetic. Such judgments are never certain. I'm not so naive or wise or pathetic as to need certainty.

I said I was shocked that he was willing to help her win back my friendship, and I wouldn't deny anything I've already said, but the truth is anything else would have been out of character. If she was willing to drop hashing and smearing, he would naturally be willing to latch on. He couldn't enjoy her for what she'd been, and we know what
that was, and he couldn't enjoy what she was going to be. He'd traveled that circle many times. But those moments of screwing while she holds, junky as the layover might be, that he could enjoy. I wouldn't expect otherwise. They were picking up more than screwdrivers together. The words must have been something to hear. When something begins again, it's warming. Nothing rules out that possibility. I'm a noticing person, and I have a habit of taking things in without reacting. It cushions the shock.

During the performance—shoddy play or honest work, whatever was taking place in that yard—I divided my time. For a while I'd watch the action—he was quick and light with the spade, a joy to be tolled, and then I'd turn my back on them to see the head on myself, giving a chance to the imaginative after all that real. One cannot deny that to watch actual people in actual places is to see reality and to look at one's own image is to see the fantastic. If however, watching and seeing are one and the same, forced as they are to share eyes and mind, then denial is possible. But these considerations have limited vision. I was about to say that when I watched them in the yard I knew their effect on me had been real, the way her reality had stripped me of my illusions and the way his had rejuvenated me. When I looked in the mirrors I knew that my own imagination pulled the wool from my eyes, and my own imagination had devised a
joy to pull me out of the depths. No, the opposite is true. When I watched them in the yard was when I knew that I had simply found them handy puppets to act out my interior monologue, and that when I looked in the mirror I saw that under her influence and under his weight, light as it was, I had become real myself, able to face up to being no better than I am and a lot better than I was. Or perhaps these vacillations of vision had nothing to do with them or their mirrors, but I cannot speak of all the possibilities. I'll have to speak of them if I'm to find out how it was, or how I want it to have been. I'll have to tell the story many times to get down to the truth, or to get away from the truth, whatever my motivation.

Right now I want to tell the story with a laugh at the way I lost my head, beginning with one mirror and ending with that blaring band of them, but it does not come natural to me to stay with laughter. I feel cut off. I seek painful possibilities I can't handle. My talent--I guess it is more than a talent, it's a fault--lies in looking at two sides of the coin at the same time. I have to tell it both ways at once. All that's relevant becomes irrelevant. Or is it the other way round? There is no point in my going on. The affair is over--no, it was never an affair--the story, I mean. The story is done, overdone, done to death, done in by me. I don't know how to say it. I'm through talking
about mirrors and relationships. It's all been traumatic. Not because I've failed. That's natural enough for me. But because it wasn't bizarre enough to admire. The shock of that is finding out in the end what was obvious in the beginning. In getting down to the sense of any experience, my confusion knows no bounds. Though as soon as I write that, I have to admit there are limits to the amount of confusion anyone can experience, especially when you get down to, by, no, I mean at the end.