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DRAFTS

By

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Date
IT COULD BE THIS WAY

In 1969 Elaine was just starting college. She was also a virgin. She had smoked pot a few times, owned a pair of moccasins, and wore a necklace of small blue beads. She had a blacklite poster in red and green of Socrates and listened to the Beatles, Simon and Garfunkel, and the Jefferson Airplane. Elaine also knew the words to several of her mother's Frank Sinatra albums. She did not think of herself as a hippie, although she had been to a love-in. She did not think of Rob as a communist, although he told her he had been expelled from high school for being one. She had been alive then, during the McCarthy Era, but she was only a small child whose father brought home a new fluoridated toothpaste to keep her baby teeth from getting cavities. She grew up in the suburbs; Rob had grown up in a two-room shack.

"We had two pictures, though," he said. "One of Karl Marx and one of Rudyard Kipling. The Kipling was over the head of my bed. I looked at the one of Marx. They were the only two pictures in the house."
Elaine knew a little about Kipling and not much about Marx. She also knew that Rob had no mother. Perhaps there would have been fresh flowers or embroidered pillow cases. Elaine did not exactly know what difference that might have made. Neither did she know why, as she saw Rob walking towards her in the school snack bar, they spent so much time together. Today was her eighteenth birthday. Rob was thirty-four.

"Here." He pressed a small package into her hand.

"Happy birthday, kid."

Elaine flushed. He shouldn't have gotten her anything; she knew he hardly had any money. The GI Bill paid for going to school. Once she wondered how he could be a communist and still get drafted. Maybe the Army didn't care. She never asked him, but just now there was something else she wanted to know.

"I must have told you a couple of months ago about this. How did you remember, Rob?"

"It's a secret."

"No, come on . . . how?"

"Well, if you really want to know, it was easy. Your birthday's the same day as my little girl's."
That was something else that confused Elaine. Rob had been married and divorced. He had a ten-year-old daughter he hadn't seen in years. Perhaps he didn't want to see her mother. Perhaps her mother didn't want to see Rob. Maybe she got married again. Elaine didn't quite understand about how people got together and then went away again.

"Aren't you going to open it?" Rob asked.

"Let's sit down," she said.

They sat at a table, and Elaine began unwrapping the newspaper around the soft package.

"You take forever," he said. "Go on, rip it open. It's nothing special."

Elaine tore the paper off, the ink smudging her fingers.

"Hey," she said. "This is nice." It was an orange cloth money bag. **Downey National Bank** was stencilled on the front.

"Where'd you get this?" Elaine asked.

"Where do you think I got it?" Rob had a smooth, deep voice. Elaine always thought of hot chocolate when he spoke.

"Uh . . . at the bank?"

"Sure enough," Rob nodded. "I liberated it one day when no one was looking. You didn't get one just like it, did you?"
She shook her head. He was teasing her again. He was making fun of the things other people would have given her—and what he called middle-class things. Elaine didn't much like being teased, and she didn't like middle-classness particularly, but she still lived at home, so she felt there wasn't much she could do about it. Rob had a cheap apartment and no TV and sometimes no money for food. How would he understand about middle-classness?

Maybe that was why he hadn't kissed her yet or held her hand, there was that difference between them. But then, he wasn't really dating her. Rob never called her at home. He just met her in the snack bar every day. They spent afternoons sitting in the sun on the school commons or driving out for ice cream. Then he had taken her to see Bela Lugosi's Dracula two weeks ago. Now there was this birthday present. It all had to add up to something, Elaine thought.

"Thanks, Rob." She smiled at him. "I don't know exactly what I'll do with this, but it's really a nice present."

He shrugged. It was nothing. He thought how young girls were easy to please.
Elaine skipped her history class. The mid-March California sun was inviting. Rob wanted to go to the beach.

"Hey, Elaine." Rob spoke without looking at her as they drove down the coast highway. His driving was one of the things that fascinated her. He had raced for awhile, and although he had an old Volvo, she knew it was well-tuned and would clock off the speedometer. "Elaine ... I want you to know I appreciate having you with me."

She didn't know what to say. It was the first time he had actually mentioned liking her. "Well ..." she paused and her face reddened, and she cursed having been born a fair-completed blonde, a blonde who blushed easily. "I like it."

"Like what?" he prompted.

"Like running around and doing things."

"Doesn't it matter with who?"

"Well, of course. I mean ..." She felt as though her face was going to burn off. "I like being with you, too."

He laughed at her blush. "Well, since you're so easy to please, maybe this thing'll be OK after all. I'm always
broke, but I've got a car, and I usually have gas for it, and you . . ."

"I am not so easy to please," she countered. I . . ."

"Sure you are. It takes so little to content you."

She was stung. How could he say he liked her one minute and all but call her simple-minded the next? Did he think she was just like those empty-headed sorority girls? She knew she was not.

"What I mean Rob," Elaine said, trying to control the hurt edge of her voice, "is that I really do like driving. Being on the road. Moving. Whenever I'm bored or lonely, I usually get in my car and go for a ride. Sometimes I even get up early--like four or five in the morning--and go down the coast to a beach I know. I do that, really." She put her hands up to cool her face. She had been upset, but she was regaining control. Everything seemed to happen so fast.

"I believe you." He spoke more softly now. "Do you set the alarm to get up so early?"

"No." They were stopped at a light and he was looking at her. Elaine was shaken. His eyes were eyes she had seen in movies, deep and dark, eyes that knew what she knew, but she was too confused to know what she knew. How could he?
She had to keep up the conversation, before he found out. "What happens," she said, "is that I've been up and I can't get back to sleep."

"And then are you lonely? Or just bored?"

The light changed, and they moved forward. It was easier for her to talk then, when he wasn't looking at her. "I don't think there's much difference between the two."

Rob was quiet for a few minutes. Elaine looked out the window. He wondered who this young girl was, sitting next to him, or maybe who she would be. Finally he said, "Sometimes I sleep on my sofa."

"On your sofa?" she asked. She didn't say anything else.

He shrugged. "Sometimes I don't go into the bedroom. I just fall asleep on the sofa."

Rob didn't like the bedroom because it was always cold. It was cold and there was a double bed and he only slept on one side, even though the last woman had been gone over two months. It was easier for him to fall asleep on the sofa while he was reading than to get up and go into the bedroom. Going into the bedroom at two in the morning
when everything was airless and still was the hardest part of the night.

They parked in the lot at the beach and walked out to sit on the bluffs. After a few minutes he asked her, "Do you like the beach—other than at five in the morning?"

"Yes."

"Why? What do you like about it?"

"I don't know. I guess I like it because it's always there."

"You mean because you grew up near it?"

"Probably."

She grew up by it, he thought, and she was young. And when you were young you liked to watch sunrises and sunsets. You thought it was romantic. The movies had seagulls flying against the waves and young girls walking alone at sundown. When you were young and saw those movies, you liked the seagulls, and you didn't think about what they dropped when they flew over you.

"I don't like sunbathing, though," she added. "I burn too easily. There's too many birds. I just like to sit here and watch the sun on the water. Sometimes I go down and get my feet wet."
What did she know? he asked himself. Anything? Nothing? He looked at her. Her skin was even more pale in the light, and he could see hints of strawberry in the corn-silk of her hair. If she got sunburned, he thought her nose would peel. He touched her cheek with a finger. Her skin was warm and dry. "Do you ever get tan?" he asked.

"Not really." She sat motionless, as though his finger, having just traced the outline of her cheekbone, was no more than a wisp of hair.

"Do you have a one-piece or a two-piece bathing suit?"

"A two-piece. A bikini." She closed her eyes in the sun. He had asked because he was trying to imagine what she looked like in it, Elaine thought. None of the boys she knew ever said things like that. What was she supposed to do? What did Rob want to know? That her body was cream-colored? That her skin was nearly transparent and the veins on the inside of her arms made delicate patterns? That she had a flat tummy and dimples at the base of her spine? That her breasts were small, but nicely shaped? What did he want to know? Elaine blushed in her silence.

* * *
"We'll go on a picnic," Rob told her. "Saturday. Way above San Pedro."

"I'd love to," she said.

Elaine knew she'd have to get up early and do whatever it was she was supposed to do in the way of housework to placate her parents. She'd have to tell them, "I'm going out with Rob. We'll be gone most of the day." They wouldn't like it. They could ignore it when it first started, when she came home late from rehearsals because a group of them from drama class went for coffee. They could ignore it when she was late coming home in the afternoon because they'd gone from school to the park or the parts store or the bank. It was harder to explain that a man only five years younger than her mother was taking Elaine to the movies. He was thirty-four and wore blue jeans. And he was taking their daughter away Saturday. They wouldn't like that at all. But Elaine would have her way.

The hills were green and there were early April flowers. Rob was driving fast. They'd been on the road for an hour, and they were almost there.

"Rob, aren't you afraid you'll get a ticket?" She shouted over the noise of the engine.
"Do you think they have cops up here? Besides, I'm only doing fifty."

"Well, if I was driving, there'd be one. And I'd get a ticket."

"They can't do anything to me anyway. Did you know I used to race cars?"

"Yes. Why can't they do anything to you?"

"I don't have a license."

She was stunned. Driving without a license. How did he dare? In Elaine's mind, one just didn't do things like that. It was illegal. What if they got stopped? What would happen? She couldn't imagine--she'd never been stopped before. She had a license; would she be responsible? She was completely confused, and Rob laughed at her.

"Don't worry about it," he said. "They can't do anything to me anyway. Slap my wrists? Take my license away? I've been driving without one for about a year and nothing's happened."

"Did they take it away or did it just expire?" she asked timidly.

"They took it away."

"What for?"
"What do you think?"

"I don't know." What did they take licenses away for?

"Speeding, of course. I got three tickets in a year. The last one was down the road from here, as a matter of fact. I more or less asked for it. I was speeding and the cop was parked at the curb. I passed him at about 100. By the time he turned on the ignition and pulled away from the curb, I was a mile down the road. If I hadn't stopped and waited for him, he never would have caught up with me."

"He might have gotten your license number though."

Rob reached over and put his hand on her leg. "At a hundred-an-hour? Not likely." He grinned. "Besides, due to a technicality, the car's not properly registered. They could never trace me. You know how I always park where you're not supposed to?" he asked.

"Yes."

"How many tickets do you think I've gotten this year?"

"I don't know." She reached down and touched his finger.

"About fourteen."

"What do you do with all of them?"

"Tear 'em up."
They parked the car on a steep hill and walked down through the grass to a narrow trail. It ran along a ridge and emptied into a green field. Below them they could see more fields and houses with swimming pools. A few feet up from the trail, they spread a blanket on the ground. Elaine had brought some sandwiches and some lemonade. Rob brought some plums and potato chips. They settled back and ate and talked and listened to the planes when they flew overhead.

After they finished, they cleared up and lay back on the blanket in the grass. They closed their eyes against the bright sky. Elaine wondered what color it was that the sun and blue made through her eyelids. Her skin was warm in the light. She could hear insects buzzing in the grass. Rob was a nice man, she thought. It was a pretty place for a picnic, he was right. How did people get to know places like this? It was amazing that he didn't care about getting tickets. Was that what being a communist did to you? But he said he wasn't one anymore. What was she? Her cheeks were hot. Was she getting a sunburn? She should have brought some suntan lotion. She opened her eyes.

"Elaine?"
Rob was propped on one elbow. He had been watching her. He moved closer and his face cooled the sun. He kissed her forehead. He kissed her closed eyes, her cheeks, the end of her nose. He tilted her chin and kissed her mouth. Little kisses. Soft kisses. She moved her hand from behind her head to rest in the hair at his neck. It was silky and hot in the sunlight. He had a small tongue, a gentle tongue. Not like Jimmy, whom she'd been seeing on and off, who always kissed as if he was trying to swallow her. So maybe you didn't need to hold hands; maybe if you knew how to do it, you could just wait for the right moment and it could be this way.

His fingers moved down her neck to her throat. How could they be so cool? Then he was touching her breasts. She trembled. He was touching her breasts. Yes, she had let Jim touch them. She had even taken her bra off. But Jim was a virgin like she was. Rob wasn't. He had probably known a lot of girls. He had been married before. He was kissing her breast. She couldn't feel anything through the cloth of her blouse—just a gentle nuzzling. His hand was on her waist, and then on the curve of her rear. She took
his hand, kissed it, and rolled on her stomach. Rob lay back 
in the sun and said nothing. She was breathing quickly. 

* * *

They sat in the snack bar eating lunch. A woman walked 
up to their table. She faced Rob directly, as though Elaine 
wasn't there. From the back Elaine could see the woman wore 
tight pants that were too short. Her ankles showed above 
her tennis shoes and needed shaving. Her hair was long and 
badly split. She spoke to Rob. "I thought I'd never find 
you in all these people."

"You found me," Rob answered. "You always seem to 
know where to find me."

"I can't stay. Will you call me tonight?"

"Tonight? What for?"

"I want to talk to you. So will you call? Or do you 
want me to come over?"

"I'll call."

"OK. I gotta go now." She turned and left. Her 
purse hit Elaine in the shoulder.

"Who was that?" Elaine looked at him.

"Just a woman I know."
So he had another woman, or maybe it wasn't just one. Elaine suddenly went cold in the stomach. You didn't think you were the only one? she asked herself. Yes, she did. She hadn't thought about it. Of course if you were thirty-four and a man, you weren't serious about eighteen-year-old girls who were afraid to make love. You went with . . .

"Don't worry." Rob reached across the table and squeezed her hand.

* * *

Rob took her to the movies again. _Easy Rider_ was playing. As they walked back to his car after the show he said, "Well, I'm broke as usual. But I have some chocolate and a quart of milk at my place. May I offer you a cup of cocoa?"

She went. The chocolate was good, and they sat on the sofa drinking it. Her parents had thrown out a sofa like this.

"I fell asleep here again last night," Rob said.

"Because . . . you . . . let yourself, didn't you?" she ventured. "Are you . . . are you very lonely to do that?"
"Kid's catching on," he said. It wasn't sarcastic. It was soft and appraising. "I'll tell you something, Elaine. I've been sleeping on it a lot lately."

She couldn't think of anything to say.

"Please," he said. "Just hold me."

She slid one arm behind his back, the other around his waist, and laid her head on his shoulder. He lifted her face to look at it. Yes, her nose was peeling a little since she'd been out in the sun, and she had no wrinkles. Maybe tiny ones around the eyes. Why did he keep seeing her? She was so young. Trusting. But she'd never join a protest march, live in a sixty-a-month hovel, eat sardines or canned ravioli. Sleep on a sofa. Her mouth was so soft. She felt so good in his arms.

He was lying next to her. He had taken off her blouse and bra. Her breasts looked small when she lay on her back. The nipples stood up and were wet where he'd kissed them. His head was on her shoulder and neither of them moved. She could only hear the sound of their breathing. He moved his hand to her breast, and with his finger, circled the nipple. It tickled. He rolled on her, his face near hers. She could feel his erection through the material of their pants. His
voice was low when he said, "Will you let me make love to you?"

Trapped. She felt trapped. He was heavy on her. He would be angry. There would be a fight, the struggle. But somehow that seemed wrong this time.

She wanted him. She knew it. She wanted to save movie stubs and know cafes and throw away parking tickets. And she wanted him to make love to her. But now? Was it time?

"I . . ." her voice was muffled and weightless beneath him. "I want to . . . . But wait. Please."

"OK," he said. "I understand. Another time." He sat up and pulled her with him. He had to be crazy to want her so much; she was so different from him. "Just let me look at you a minute more."

Free, she thought. She was free. It didn't have to be now. He didn't say, "I can't wait. Please, Elaine, you've got to let me," like Jim. It was for another time. Next time.

"Hey," he said as he wrapped her blouse around her shoulders. "Is that wet stuff on your face?"
"It's nothing." She was embarrassed. "You're just very nice, that's all."

"I'm nice?"

Someone knocked on the door.

Rob went to open it. Elaine could hear a woman's voice, but she couldn't hear what she said. Rob told the voice that he had a guest.

* * *

A week later, after seeing Rob only at school, Elaine was drinking coffee in the snack bar. He came in and sat down with her. "I have something to tell you," he said finally.

Elaine waited.

"I can't think of any nice way to put it. What it boils down to is: I'm not going to be able to see you anymore."

She was astonished. "What did I do?"

"Hey." He put his hand on the table. "You didn't do anything."

She couldn't think. She couldn't ask him about it, it was so sudden. She felt sick, like she was going to throw
up, but her knees were too shaky to stand. "You . . . it's not me?"

"No, it's not your fault."

"Then . . . why?" She looked down at her coffee cup. There was some coffee left, and she picked the cup up. Her hand shook.

"I know this is sudden," he was saying, "but I couldn't think of any other way to tell you. I thought I'd better get it over with."

She looked at him. That was the way it was going to be. Sudden. Over. He meant it. She wanted to be angry, but he had not told her why he was going. She wanted to fight, but he was already the winner. She raised her head a little.

"Well, I guess you don't owe me anything." She cleared her throat. "I appreciate your telling me." She stopped. "Some people . . . don't ever say anything. You just never see them anymore."

"Elaine." She thought Rob wanted to reach across the table to her. He remained still. "I really don't know what's going to happen to me." The words came then, all at once. "Do you remember the woman who came in here that time?"
Elaine nodded.

"She and I lived together for awhile. There was trouble and I left. And now she wants to try again. She's moving to Oregon. I'm going with her."

"Is it because I . . ." Elaine couldn't finish the sentence.

"Oh, Elaine, don't you understand? Judy—she's like me. We're both living in nooks and crannies, eating . . ." He put his forehead in his palm and looked down at the table. "But we didn't make it before." He looked up at Elaine. "I know this may not work. If it doesn't, I'm going on—farther north—to Washington."

She looked at his face, which seemed both tired and old then. She sighed. There was nothing she could do now. He was going. Not just refusing to see her, but going. Far away.

"What are you going to do?" he asked.

What do you care? she thought. What did it matter to him what she did? "What am I going to do, Rob? Well, the truth is . . ." She didn't know what the truth was. She felt sick, a kind of sickness she had never known. How, she thought, could she want him so much? The color drained
from her face. "I think . . . I'll just go home for awhile," she said finally. It was barely a whisper.

Rob reached across the table for her hand. "Don't be angry. Please."

"Angry's not the word, Rob." Elaine pulled her hand away and looked up at him. His eyes seemed flat and glassy in the fluorescent light. Her chest tightened. She ached, but something else told Elaine there would be other men; it could get worse. Slowly, she stood up. One of them would have to leave. This time it might be easiest to go first.
"You know any other places to go to here in town?" he asked.

She'd been looking the other way down the bar. There were three stools between them and she didn't know to whom he was speaking.

"Excuse me." He leaned over and touched her arm.

"You know any other places to go to here in town?"

She started. "Were you talking to me?"

He looked at the empty stools and smiled. "Sure was."

"Do you mean bars?"

"Yeah, like this here one."

"No, I'm sorry, I don't." She turned to her drink and sipped it. He was still looking at her, waiting. She didn't want to talk to him. She hated bar conversation—it was always so trivial. Yet some nights the silent staring emptiness drove her from her new apartment. She went some place to have a drink and to listen to other people talk. A look or a smile from a man was enough to get her by for the night. But when someone tried to start a conversation
with her, a kind of depression set in. The questions they asked bored her. The answers she gave bored her. They talked, but nothing important was ever said. She got nothing substantial from it. Only felt more empty. She'd rather fantasize about a look or a smile than be disillusioned by the banalities of everybody's dreams, and picking up a girl in a bar was banal. Who needed that?

"Are you new here?" he asked. "Or don't you want to talk to me?"

She sighed. "I happen to be new here. That's why I don't know any other places to go."

"I thought so." He stirred his drink with his straw. "Me, I just come in from San Francisco. I'm delivering a load of wash basins to Denver."

For the first time, she turned to face him. "That's where I come from, San Francisco." That was where she knew things, where her friends were.

"Why actually I picked the load up in Oakland."

She smiled. "That's just a few miles from where I lived. I'm from Berkeley." It confused her a little still, wanting the familiarity of Ashby Street, Telegraph Road, the Cafe Mediterranean, the clatter of the people against one
another, the same thing she didn't want: the noise and confusion that made her stale, that made her think there were better ways to live.

"So what are you doing in a dinky old Colorado town?"

"Oh, I don't know. It just got to be too much, I guess. Chinatown, the Panthers . . ."

"How long you been here?"

"Five weeks."

"And you don't know no other bars?"

"I don't go out much. I hardly know anybody."

"Well I'll tell you what," he said, "I just come from old Golden Gate Town. I left yesterday morning and got three hours' sleep last night. I been driving all day and this here drink tastes real good. And you know what?" he added. "If I had another one, my head should just probably fall on the counter. But it won't. I don't even know where I am yet."

She understood. She had spent a lot of time on the road. There was the extension course one summer at Washington U. She had driven with a friend to Kansas, vacationed one summer in Vancouver. A boyfriend had taken her to Mexico. And then there was this most recent haul to her
new home—a place she had spent the night in on the way to K.C. She knew how a person could drive, mile after mile, meals taken with cups and cups of coffee, and she didn’t usually drink coffee, stops planned around points where endurance was about to break. The feeling of motion even when you were seated in cafe booths. Dreams of pavement rolling through you, the white lines breaking just over your left shoulder.

"Are you a full-time truck driver, then?" she asked.

He nodded. "You having another drink?" He signaled the bartender. "Another one for me, and one for this lady—if she'll have it."

"I will." She turned to face him. "Shall I tell you something silly? I wanted to be a truck driver once, when I was younger." She wasn't worried about telling that to him, a driver. There was a calmness in his bearded face, a clearness in his eyes, which should have been bloodshot and glazed. She felt better about him.

He grinned. "Some of the best drivers I know are women," he said. "But I'll tell you what. I been doing this for twelve years, and there ain't nothing fancy about it."
She told him she didn't really want to do it any more, it had just been an old daydream. "I wanted to be a truck driver I guess, because I liked the idea of traveling. But I've traveled enough since. And I figured out you don't have to haul a load of something to be wondering how far you can make it tonight."

He laughed and slapped his thigh. "Gal," he said, "I like you. My name's Bill. What's yours?"

"Lee."

"Lee? Why I got a friend named Lee, but he's a man."

"Well," she said, "I can't help that. My name's Lee and I'm not a man."

"Nooo. I can see that. Tell you what, Lee, have you eaten?"

"Yes," she said quickly. The moment could stay. She didn't want to think about even an hour from then.

"Well," he said, "I got to get me a motel room and shower up, and then I got to find me a place to eat."

"Now that's something I know about," she volunteered. He would go off and she could leave him with the name of a restaurant or two. He was just a traveler, a truck driver, somebody in a town where he'd never been before. Could find
a restaurant with or without help. Made everything easier. Take it or leave it. He'd been in a hundred other towns before, met people and gone on. And so had she. And that was OK. People being easy with each other. Lee was for gestures, style, feeling, but only for what came naturally, what grew out of the situation, what was easy, so long as it rolled as smoothly as that white line up the highway.

"Well if you know the eating places around here," he was waying, "you know a bar called The Ranch? You can eat there, too. That's all I heard on the radio coming up here. Got to go to The Ranch, they said."

She had heard of it, but she didn't know where it was. A man in a three piece suit, plump and firm like a cooked Christmas turkey, sat down on the other side of Bill. "Why don't you ask him?" she said.

"Yeah, sure I know where it is." He settled on his chair. "Just a block on the other side of the old bridge. But if you go there, I'd recommend sticking to your drinks and staying away from the food."

"Why's that?" Bill asked.

"Kitchen's not very clean, if you know what I mean. You'd be taking your chances of getting sick."
"And what do you know about it?" Bill took a pull from his glass. Lee had seen him look the suit over. The man in it spoke with an easy familiarity, as though he knew them. He seemed to have a drawl, but he didn't really. Bill hadn't asked the question rudely; he had just asked. He was curious. The man reached inside his coat, took out a card, and spun it at Bill. "My name's Roy Talbut," he said. "I'm a doctor. I was on the Department of Health team when they inspected the place three months ago. It was unsanitary then and I've treated people who've eaten there since. But don't let me stop you, friends," he drewled. "Worse that usually happens is a bad bellyache and a case of the runs. If you want to take your chances, take your chances. But don't come running to me." Then he laughed. "If you get my meaning." He rapped his knuckle on the bar. "Charlie," he said to the bartender, "Chivas for me and whatever these two folks are drinking."

Lee didn't say anything. Bill was reading the business card. He laid it down on the table between Roy and himself. He raised the fresh glass first towards Roy and then towards Lee and drank. When he set it down he said, "So you're a doctor, huh?"
"Sure am."

"Well then let me ask you something, Doc."

The doctor was silent, his fat cheeks tensed for the inevitable professional question.

"What I want to know is," Bill went on, "how come them doctors keep old folks alive in hospitals so long. Why don't they just let them die natural?"

Lee was surprised the question was political. The doctor sighed and acted like he hadn't, like it was a fresh question and to be treated seriously. His voice sounded vital, but Lee thought it rang false, as though he felt he was talking to idiots or the mentally insane. "What do you mean--'why they keep them alive'?"

Bill said, "I'm asking how a human being could do that to other human beings--could plug them into machines and give them medicine after there was no hope left. And just keep on doing it. There are thousands of old folks like that in hospitals today."

"I don't see that it's of any particular concern to you."

"Of course it is, Doc. I'm going to be old one day. And so are you. And I don't plan on turning into no
"And you would have us not try to save the patient."
The doctor sipped his drink.

"I'm not talking about saving, about something that can be fixed," Bill said. "I fix my truck all the time. You guys are just like mechanics—only fixing folks up instead of equipment. I'm talking about old people, people whose lungs or kidneys want to quit on them. You go and put them on a machine."

"You're simply saying that you don't believe in what is called, in the vernacular, 'miracles.'"

Bill grew quiet and stared at his drink. "When it's time, it's time, Doc. That's all there is to it. Miracles are something I happen to know about. I could tell you about the time my brakes locked up and the old boy I passed had to jump on the radio to tell me I was on fire. Had never happened to me in ten years of driving. But by the time that guy told me, I was going too fast to gear down, and it was eight miles to the bottom of the valley. I just knew I was going to die. But a miracle happened. There wasn't nothing that got in my way for the whole time. The
old boy radioed ahead and I just rode her out. It wasn't
time yet."

"Well, if you think you can tell when it's 'time,'
as you so quaintly put it, then you must be God."

"No, I ain't God, Doc. But then I ain't trying to
be." Bill turned and smiled at the man. "But if I was, you
can bet families of old folks wouldn't be having to pay for
it up the ying-yang either."

The doctor turned to Lee. "I'm sure all this must be
boring the little lady."

"I'm not bored at all," she said. "I was just won­
dering--when you get old, if something like that happened
to you, what would your own choice be?"

He was obviously irritated. "Look, miss, I'm not
old yet. And neither are you. So let's not worry about
it." He finished his drink. "I have to be going now, but
can I get you folks something else before I leave?" Lee
thought the only way he might be able to deal with people
was to buy them drinks.

"Not for me, Doc," Bill said. "I promised my friends
I'd have one for them at The Ranch. Lee, you think you'd
like to get me to it?"
She was too aggravated with the doctor to just leave and go home. Turkey. Bill had asked him a reasonable question. He had treated them like children incapable of understanding the intricacies of the real world. Blowing up the mystique of the great white doctor. Wouldn't talk about it, even when asked. Sounded like some sort of soap opera doctor. Wouldn't see him if she ever got sick. Screw it. She couldn't sleep now. "Sure," she said to Bill, sliding from her stool. "I think I can find The Ranch."

"That's just fine now," the doctor said in his hearty voice. "You kids go on and have a good time."

"We will, Doc, we will," Bill called as they were leaving. Outside he said, "Come on, we'll take the truck. I don't have the trailer on." As they walked out into the parking lot, Bill added, "That guy was sure full of beans, wasn't he?"

"Sure was," she said.

Bill helped her up into the cabin, the floor of which was taller than she was. The dashboard looked like the cockpit of a plane with all its controls. Bill climbed up on the other side and threw a baseball cap to her across the table-like deck that separated them. "Now Lee, you
want to be a truck driver, you got to wear a truck driver hat. That's my hat."

She tucked it on her head. He started the engine. The CB and a buzzer went on simultaneously. "You probably won't want to hear any of that," he said as he turned the radio off. "You see that red light? That means I'm low on air. Got to wait till it builds up. When it does, that buzz'll stop." The light clicked off and with it, the buzzer, and he put the truck in gear. As they entered the street, he turned to her and was about to ask directions when he saw her wearing the hat. "Hot damn," he laughed. "That hat looks real good on you. Real good. Yeah, you look real cute in it."

Lee felt good. She was relieved to be out in the night air, away from the doctor stuffed into his suit and the dim, close bar. She liked the idea of going to a new place, of moving on, and it was OK that it happened like that. "Turn right," she called over the engine, "and when you get to the light, go right again."

"Can do," he called back, turning. "Yes, that hat's all right on you, gal. And let me tell you something else—you got a nice ass."
Lee laughed. He had said that because he was trying to embarrass her, to throw her off balance. It took a little more than the directness of his compliment. "Thanks," she shouted back at him. "I know."

"You know, huh?"

"Yeah, I know."

"You know the rest of you ain't so bad, either?"

"You're damn right I know," she said. "I spend a lot of time keeping it that way. You get older, and you need to."

He grinned at her. "Yep, I like you, girl. You're something else all right."

"OK, just turn left at this corner and we'll be over the old bridge. He said it was on the other side."

They parked and she took the hat off and threw it on the deck. He helped her out of the cabin. As they were walking towards the bar he said, "Here we are and you ain't even said nothing. I bet you ain't even grateful." He was teasing her, but she didn't know about what.

"What should I be grateful for?"

"And you don't even know. It ain't just anybody that I let ride in my truck."

"I'm grateful."
"I bet." He opened the door for her.

It was a well-lit place with sawdust on the floor. They sat at the bar and ordered their drinks. "I take it you're not going to eat," she said.

"Naw. I'm not really hungry anyway. I'm a mite tired, but it's OK." He looked around him. "This is just a fancy truck stop, that's all. The place is all right, but I hardly ever go to truck stops."

"Jeez, I go to them all the time. Food's usually good—I like them."

"Well I don't." He stuck his face close to hers. "Cuz all I ever hear is 'What kinda rig you got?' 'I got a Kenworth.' Nanynanyna. Just who the hell cares? You drive what you got to drive."

She smiled. She liked him. Half of him was just what she expected a truck driver to be, and the other half was . . . she didn't know what. It kept her interested.

He was looking at the floor behind her and she turned to look too. "You're going to have to turn a long way around, if you're going to look at what I'm looking at," he said. "How'd you like it if I just bit your ass?"

She giggled. "Oh, Bill, I wouldn't recommend it."
"You wouldn't, huh? And why not?"

"All your teeth would fall out."

"They would, huh?"

"Yeah, they would," she said suddenly solemn, teasing.

"I'm a real hardass."

He turned back to his drink. "Lee," he said.

"There's something I don't understand. How come you got to be so independent?"

"I'm not. Not really."

"Sure seems like that to me. Talking up to that doctor. Going out alone."

"What do you want me to do, Bill? I'm not a feminist or anything, if that's what you mean. Some people live with each other and some people don't. And I don't. If I don't say and do what I think, well, to me that's not being independent, it's just doing what I do."

"OK, OK," he said. "Didn't mean to get you riled. Hear that song they're playing now? Makes me think of a gal I knew. Don't know what made me think of it really--I heard that song a hundred times without thinking of her. Damn dumb story. If I told you, you wouldn't believe it."

"Why don't you tell me and let me make up my own mind?"
"I will. You won't believe it, but it's true." He paused. "Seems I met this girl once. And she and me were messing around, and she asked me if I'd like to stay with her. The night. Well, I told her my ma always fixed me breakfast—this was a long time ago. And she said she reckoned she could do that. And, I said, she always packs me a lunch, too. 'Well, don't worry. I can fix that up too.' So the next morning we have oatmeal for breakfast, and that's all. Well I don't particularly like oatmeal and I'm used to having a mess of eggs, and a thick old slice of ham, and toast and all, but I don't say nothing. And she fixes my lunch. And then I get to work and it's lunchtime and all there is in my sack is a piece of bread, and some crackers, and some cheese. And I just hate cheese. But you know I ate that cheese, and when I got to her place after work I didn't say nothing. And she had supper all fixed and everything. That was real good. And you know that went on for three days, oatmeal and all, and I never did say nothing. And that's the truth. That really happened."

"I think that's a good story." Lee looked down at her glass. "It's fine."
"And you know," Bill finished the last of his drink, "I don't even remember what she looks like. I don't even remember her name any more. Well, what do you say? How about another one?"

She thought. "OK, but just one. I should be getting home soon."

The bartender came with their drinks. "How about it's on you," Bill asked, reaching for his wallet.

"Sure," she said. "No problem."

"Don't be silly. My daddy'd kill me if he ever found out I let a woman buy me a drink."

Lee shook her head. She didn't come from a part of the country where a man would get killed if a woman bought him a drink. There were things she would have to learn. "Bill," she said, "do you want to get something to eat? I know two other places that still serve after ten. You could get to them easily from here."

"Naw," he said. "I'm doing fine. How come you're so nice one minute and don't care about nobody the next?"

"It seems to me like you're making up your mind about a lot of things. You hardly even know me."

"Yeah, it seems that way, don't it?"
"Which way? That you don't know me or that you're making your mind up?"

"Aw Lee, I made my mind up when you got in my truck. How'd you like to take me home with you?"

She tensed. Everything around her disappeared—him, the bar, the glass, the noise of the people. What did he mean he'd made his mind up about her when she'd gotten in the truck? Did he think she was just a bar pickup? Gone to get away from the doctor. OK, so she liked him. That didn't mean she had to take him home with her. She hardly knew him. "Oh shit, Lee," she said to herself. "Who are you kidding?" She'd taken people whom she hardly knew home with her before. So she'd never been in a bar when it had happened. And yes, the implication was that he'd want to sleep with her. She'd slept with people she hardly knew. In fact it seemed like you hardly knew any man until you'd slept with him. But still, something wasn't quite right about this, something bothered her. She didn't want to do it.

"What do you say, gal? You got a TV?"

"Yes."
"Well you just put me in front of that TV. I love TV. And I won't be no bother to you, I promise. What do you say?"

She'd have to say something, sooner or later. If she said no, she'd have to leave right away, to show she meant it. If she stayed, he might think she was a woman who said no and meant yes, and she wasn't that kind. And he might not bother her, like he said. He was awfully tired. The sofa made into a bed. She'd known two other men who'd kept their word. It would be better to have someone there in the morning, to fix coffee for, begin the day a little less drearily. The quiet apartment would be bad just now. Manageable. But bad. He might not be manageable. No. He was tired. He wasn't mean. He was tired. He wouldn't hurt her. It couldn't be too bad . . .

"OK," she said. "I'll get out the TV. The sofa makes into a bed."

"That's just fine," he said. "Let's go now and get your car; I surely am tired."

When they got to Lee's place, he got a beer from the refrigerator and sat down on the floor in front of the TV set. She pulled sheets and blankets from the closet and
cased the extra pillow. She stood behind him by the sofa and didn't know what she should do next. There was a stranger in her house and nothing sat right. He made her nervous.

"Gal," he patted the floor next to him. "Come and set here a little."

"Why?"

He reached back, grabbed her hand, and pulled her down next to him. "Now don't go getting independent on me again. I want to put my arm around you, that's why. Now that ain't so bad, is it?"

"No." Why the hell was she so nervous?

She sat, practically motionless, with his arm around her waist until the commercial. "Yeah, gal," he said, squeezing her a little. "You feel pretty damn nice." He took her chin, tilted her head a little, and kissed her—tentatively, at first—and when she didn't resist, he pushed her back to the floor. She was scared. But why, why, why, she tried to think. This had happened so many times before. Was it just that it had been a long time, and it was a new place? He had undone her bra and pushed it and her sweater up around her neck and was kissing and sucking her breasts. She sat up. Maybe one way to stop feeling like she was a
seventeen-year-old virgin was to stop acting like one. "I hate dangling bras," she said, and she pulled both the sweater and the bra off.

"Well, if you're going to get half undressed, gal, I guess I'm going to have to do the same." He took his shirt off and laid back down beside her, rubbing his chest on hers. He kissed and nuzzled her and pressed his erection, caught in the layers of his clothes, against her thigh. He fumbled with her zipper and inserted a finger into her panties. She was wet. She almost couldn't believe it. And she didn't know what else to believe.

"Hey, babe," he murmured in the soft hollow of her neck. "What do you say you take me to bed with you?"

The confusion wouldn't stop. What was she doing? She wanted to yell, "Stop." This isn't right. Something's wrong. It's not supposed to be like this." But it was like that. The motions were all familiar—all this had happened before. It was too late to stop. Keep your eyes on the white line. She got up and extended her hand. He took it. She turned off the TV and the lights and led him to the bedroom. They finished undressing in the dark.
It wasn't over as soon as she thought it would be. Although he was exhausted, he wouldn't come. He went at her until she had come twice; she went down on him, but he brought her up and stayed on her until she kept on coming, until she thought she would die from coming. Until she thought she would die. And finally he came with a yelp and collapsed on top of her.

They were both worn out. He rolled away towards the wall and fell into a deep sleep. She turned on her side, brought her knees slowly up, and thought it was good that sex had at last made her too tired to think.

Sometime during the night he sat up. Lee awakened at the shifting of the bed. He was sitting slumped over, his head hanging down. She thought he might be sick.

"Bill, are you all right?"

He patted her fanny after a minute and crashed back down into the pillow. She knew he didn't know where he was or who had been talking to him.

It seemed strange to her for it to be light out when the alarm rang. It seemed strange that it wasn't a dream, that it had all actually happened. Lee got up and put her robe on. Did he want breakfast? she asked. No, nothing.
Not even a cup of coffee? All right, if she had instant. She went into the kitchen to make it and he went into the bathroom to shower.

She sat in a chair and drank her own coffee and looked out the window. No, it hadn't gone right. It hadn't gone like the other times—something about it was bad. This would take some understanding, but not now. Maybe she had already done too much thinking. Maybe she should have just said what she felt last night, "No." Whatever it was, it probably wasn't too complicated, she thought sarcastically.

He came from the bathroom dressed and ready to go.

"Here's your coffee." She motioned to the table in front of her. He picked up the cup and walked to the window.

"How do I get to the highway?" he asked.

"Take the street in front and turn right. Any of the streets from there, if you turn left, go to the main road."

"OK," he said. He put his cup, still full, down. "I surely do thank you for your hospitality."

She shrugged.

"Well, I got to be hitting the road. Maybe next time I'm in town, I'll look you up."
"Sure Bill." Could it be better another time? She opened the door for him.

"See you, gal." He walked out to the street and climbed into his truck.

Lee shut the door behind him. The big engine started up. It was over. She looked at Bill's cup of coffee on the table. It occurred to her that he didn't remember her name, even now. She knew that for sure. The sound of the diesel disappeared down the street. He would not be able to look her up again. He knew it, and so did she. Lee pulled her bathrobe tighter around her. She remembered that, though they had slept the night together in her narrow bed, he hadn't held her once.
TELL ME IF I'M WRONG

Kelsey tells me if I come over he will put sheets on the bed.

When I arrive he is lying naked and drunk between the sheets and his sleeping bag. He was drunk when he called me. The apartment is a murphy-bed single. He is watching TV. I sit on the corner of the sleeping bag.

"Get undressed and climb in," he says.

We are not lovers, although we have slept together a few times during the past three months.

"I'm still cold from being outside," I say.

"I'm really drunk," he says.

I know Kel is really drunk. He would not have called me if he was not drunk. The three or four times we've been together, it was tumbling into each other's arms in the parking lot after the bar closed. "Can I kiss you?" he asked.

"I don't know. Can you?"
He is not dumb. He caught it. The corners of his mouth turned down in that indulgent expression. He found me tempting.

My mouth was already dimpled that way. I found it touchingly romantic to be asked for a kiss. I am not eighteen or even twenty-two. I am closer to thirty. I found it sentimental to be in someone's arms in the milky pool of a street light. Ten years ago I wouldn't have been caught dead necking in public, especially under the influence of wine. I have lost no pride, but there are influences I can accept now. Wine is one of them. The moon is another. I have begun to read poetry.

I am holding Kel in the darkness. We are falling asleep. It is the kind of hold, the old "spoons" hold, where every inch of you is pressed tight to his back all the way down. It is impossible to hold anyone closer. It is almost good enough.

Kel is sniffing, breathing sharply, because he is crying. I have very little to say to men who refuse to cry, but I realize no one's ever actually cried in front of me. I can't stand it. I do not know what is wrong with Kelsey, but I know it can not be told in a night, or in three months.
Nor does he care to tell me. I squeeze him tightly. For once, my voice won't work.

"I've never had sheets on this bed," his monotone murmurs in the darkness. "I never had a woman here."

The voice breaks. "I couldn't call you. I couldn't do it. You wouldn't believe how hard it was to call someone."

"You're difficult to talk to," he had said earlier on the phone, "when you're sober."

I hadn't been difficult, but I didn't know why he called, not then. "I could change my state of sobriety," I offered.

"I'm at home. And I can't drink any more."

I wondered if he just wanted to talk or what.

"I could tell you about the time I heard someone trying to pick the lock on my screen and it was four in the morning. I got the butcher knives out. It was only a cat."

"My back hurts from playing basketball," Kel said. "And I'm exhausted because I haven't been able to sleep in three days."

"How about if I tell you a bedtime story then?"

"What's with you and the stories?"
"I'm not exactly sure what to do with a telephone other than talk," I said.

There had been a silence, then a drop in his voice as though someone else had gotten on the line.

"Yeah, there isn't much to a phone, all right."

I was quiet for a moment. I took a chance. "How would you like a backrub and two valium? I could come over for a few minutes."

"No. I don't want you to do that."

I began to understand it wasn't going to make sense.

"You don't want me to do that?"

"No."

"You're sure?"

"Why would you want to do that?"

It was that game. I hate myself, don't do anything for me. But don't hang up, don't leave me. Tell me it's OK.

"I'll tell you Kel," I said, "I got no good reason to do a damn thing for you. We both know that. Now that we understand there's no earthly reason why I would want to get up, get dressed, and go out into the cold at one in the
morning, can we forget about logic? Would you or wouldn't you like a backrub?"

He laughed.

"See, at least I got you to laugh," I said.

"If you come over, I'll put sheets on the bed."

My arms are being stretched tight around him. He is kissing the back of my hand. I can feel where his cheek is wet. "I can't tell you," he says, "how ... glad ... I am you came. I can't tell you how I appreciate it."

The words are plain English. Nothing special about them. You have heard them in movies and read them in books. I am sure they have been said to me before. I have said them myself. It mattered a little that Kelsey never called again. I settled for seeing him every so often at the bar. Sometimes it just works out that way.

* * *

I go on doing whatever it is that people do until they get old. They work, for one thing. I have been a secretary for six years now, although I've changed jobs twice. The first was Universal Ris-Co. My boss was a short man with a pinkish face and grey hair. He had a wife and several teen-age children, and he made a pass at me the first day. After
I refused him, he never bothered me again and never called me by my name. I was always "Slim" or "Red" depending on whether he was concentrating on my hips or face. Because we had another office in Japan, we employed a Nipponese who spoke very little intelligible English and ordered our parts from the Tokyo branch. Shiga would not come out to be introduced until two weeks after I started, and never, in the four years I worked at Universal Ris-Co, looked at my eyes. Then there was a black stock clerk who was always humming songs, and an Indian who cleaned up and never smiled. It didn't seem unusual under those circumstances for an anthropology major to work in the front office. I'd been told long before I graduated that I was studying something which would be of no use to me. I did what I wanted to do.

There are other activities. Like eating. Restaurants do not suit me. Hamburgers, cheeseburgers, french dip, fried chicken, steak, and an occasional spaghetti—I've seen all the menus in America it seems, no doubt because I've eaten at plenty of restaurants. I used to go out sometimes just to hear voices and the clatter of plates and silverware. I've eaten lunches with other singles waiting for a table—medical supply salesmen from Portland and an in-town lawyer.
Once, when I was stopped at a traffic light and smiled at the man in the next car, he invited me to dinner. I went.

The company was always pleasant and transitory. I forget what the men looked like, which waitress to ask for water. Now I just eat at home, usually in front of the TV set. Occasionally people like Kelsey or a girlfriend eat with me, or I with them.

Of course there are the auxiliaries. Eating at home means shopping. It means going to the store and pulling a cart from the rack, looking at the cottage cheese and yoghurt, picking up quarts of low-fat milk, poking at packages of chicken, deciding a pot roast will also give you meat for sandwiches, buying tomato sauce and corn oil on sale, and asking for egg bread and half pounds of mushrooms and red cabbage. There is also cooking that stuff, which I don't mind. I daydream a lot, a habit I have never overcome. There are no important daydreams anymore, but the food gets cooked, and I eat, and the dishes get done without my having to pay much attention.

I never pay much attention to sleeping either, although I did at one time. I couldn't sleep so I read a lot about it. For example, there are three kinds of
insomniacs: those who can't fall asleep, those who fall asleep and wake up repeatedly, and those who sleep and wake and don't sleep again. I know about counting backwards from 1,000, word games spelling things the same way backwards and forwards like MADAM I'M ADAM, math games, hot showers, warm milk with a shot of whiskey in it, and of course I know about imagining better places to be: walking among the ruins of the Parthenon by moonlight, rafting down a river on a warm, sunny day, using the clouds as your bed—a hollowed out space in the white cotton to curl up in, a little plumped up for your pillow, a soft, thick white blanket, all made out of the same stuff.

I know about dreaming, alpha and beta brain waves, REM and Stage 4 sleep. I know if people are deprived of their dream time, they go crazy. Too much alcohol inhibits the dream process. Kelsey tells me he drinks for just that reason. He isn't sure about the crazy part, but he's convinced that if you let Somebody Up There know what you love, He zaps it and turns it into a lump of charcoal. Kelsey claims he has seen too much charcoal.

I do not consider myself an insomniac any more because it no longer matters to me whether I sleep or not.
I know when I get tired enough, whether it's in a night or a month, I'll sleep. If I were an insomniac, I'd be the first kind. Kelsey is Type 3.

* * *

There is a party and I go. Two of my friends from work are there, Jill and Alice. There are some other people I recognize but whose names I do not know. Kelsey is there with his friend Ryan. I know Ryan from talking to him at the bar.

There are plates of cheese and vegetables. There are the usual dips and crackers. There is the usual bottle of bourbon and one of vodka and several half gallons of red wine. I stand in the kitchen with a plastic glass of wine and talk to Alice. A man she introduces as Steve comes to stand next to us. He asks me what I do. I answer that I have become a secretary for a company that produces historical films for schools.

"How'd you get hooked up with them?" he asks.

"I'm a secretary," I say, "and an anthropology major."

"Not much work for an anthro major, is there?"

"No, not much."

"Why'd you major in that?" he asks.
Alice excuses herself into the livingroom. The conversation is one I've had often.

"I wanted to major in anthro," I say. "It was something I really enjoyed doing."

"But you've never really put it to use, have you?"

"No," I say. "I've never even seen the Parthenon."

He pauses for a moment; he doesn't know exactly how to take that. "Don't you think you more or less wasted your education then?" he says finally.

"No." I smile. "I don't think I did."

In the livingroom with a fresh glass of wine, I help myself to a piece of cheese. Jill asks me if I've tried the shrimp dip. I say that I have.

"Isn't it good?" she asks.

I agree that it's good. Our hostess comes to replenish the crackers. Jill asks what is in the shrimp dip and I listen to the hostess explain the recipe. It appears the important ingredient is anchovy paste.

Kelsey is sitting over in the corner. It is getting late and I have not had a chance to speak to him all evening.

"Hi." I crouch next to his chair. "How're you doing?"
"Not too bad." He looks at the bottom of his glass of bourbon. "Not too bad."

"Are you getting drunk?" I tease.

"Not too bad," he says. "Only drunk enough to sleep. Another one should do it."

It is late. I am standing in a corner talking to Ryan. Kelsey has gone home, as have a lot of other people. I am tired, but Ryan and I have been talking about things that are not often and not easily discussed. About things like the time you really loved, and nothing much went wrong, but still you left. You don't regret anything except it's been so long since you've felt that way and you really can't feel that way again because somehow that changed you and you're your own albatross. It is a frivolous conversation, but the moon is waning gibbous, we have drunk plenty of wine, and both of us read poetry.

Ryan reaches for my hand, squeezes it, and lets go.

"Your glass is empty," he says. "Would you like a refill?"

I look beyond him through the smoke to the crumbs on the coffee table and empty glasses on the bookcase. "Thank you," I say, "but I should go. It's getting late."
He nods. "I'm tired, too. Wait and I'll walk you to your car."

I am shivering on the cold seat as the engine warms a little. Down the block Ryan starts his car. I pull away from the curb, turn the heater on, and drive down the street. At the stoplight, Ryan pulls up behind me. I make a right turn onto the highway and so does Ryan. I don't know where he lives. When I get to the intersection at Walnut, I turn my left turn signal on and so does he. We turn left, and at the next light, right, and I know he is following me. I pull up outside my apartment and park, and Ryan pulls alongside me. He jumps out of his car and leaves the engine running.

"What are you doing?" I smile, head tilted.

He hops around the rear bumper, grabs me, and kisses me. I am surprised by his arms. He is holding me tight and I feel snug and good. Wrapped warmly like this, I look up at his chin and throat. I don't know what to say. He kisses me again. We are both a little breathless, both swallowing hard.

He lets me go. Holds on to just my hands.
"I want you to know," he says, "that I would try to seduce you. I would try to do that . . . if you weren't Kelsey's girlfriend."

I am stunned. It isn't true. Kelsey and I have never been that close. The only thing to do is laugh, and my laughter trickles down the dark street. "Oh Ryan," I say, "if you think I'm Kelsey's girlfriend, you know more about it than I do."

"No." He kisses me a last time. "I wouldn't do that to Kelsey."

"I wouldn't either," I say, "if there was anything much between Kelsey and me." It has been two months since that phone call.

Ryan gets back in his car, waves, and drives away.

I go downstairs to my apartment. I am amused because I cannot believe what just happened. It is very quiet after the noise of the party, very empty after Ryan's hugs. I pour myself another glass of wine and close the drapes against the blackness outside. I am still smiling. The wine tastes good. I go into the bathroom and wash my face and the cool water helps. I have had too much to drink. I take what is left in my wine glass and go lie on my bed. The sheets are
cool, pretty with a flower print. I think I will call Kelsey. Maybe he would like some company.
I NEVER HAD TO ASK

The evening, up to now, has been good. We used to talk well. The first time, we made love well, too. The next two times, a month later, and three weeks after that, were not what they should have been. But by then, the conversations hadn't been ending right either. We no longer felt good afterwards—the same way we didn't feel good when we woke in the morning. Ryan didn't seem to know what to do.

The last time, he took me out for breakfast. He bought a newspaper outside the cafe and read it until our order came. I stared at the steam from my coffee. When the waitress brought our food, Ryan looked at the eggs and ham for a moment and said, "That's what the kid needs--some of your basic protein and some of your basic carbohydrates. A little real food."

"You know it would help," I said, "if you did eat better."

"You're full of bullshit," he said.

I didn't see how I could be full of bullshit when I had only agreed with him.
He took me back to my apartment and didn't call me after that. And I didn't call him. I began thinking how it had been ending like that. Every time I said "I know," he said "You don't know anything."

He's wrong. I do know some things. The same way you know a kind of heaviness in the air brings rain. I know that Ryan's in a bad way: laid off his job as a roofer and unable to find something else late in winter, unwilling to work at anything he's already done which includes managing the shoe department at K-Mart and mail clerking. His VW threw a rod and he's out of money. He sleeps in a sleeping bag in a one-room apartment.

That isn't the worst. I know there is something still in him that remembers when he was younger and happier, when the woman was there and went with him wherever he moved when he changed jobs. She made his dinner, even when there was only a hot plate, and slept with him in the car when they were moving and couldn't afford a cheap motel. He never told me any of this, but I know.

And I know he's done everything he can to make himself forget. The booze, the almost deliberate bad luck, and the women who wanted things have convinced Ryan that it was all
wrong to begin with, that it never should have been, that it doesn't exist. It may not exist, but Ryan, sometimes late and drunk and looking at me, can't forget it was easy with her, even if it was a dream.

It was easy, but it was a dream, because after five years she said she couldn't take it any more.

He has never figured out what she couldn't take, although if you ask him, he'll make up an answer.

That still isn't the worst, but I don't know how to say it. I don't know if it has words.

I know he was nice to me last week at the block barbecue. We stood drinking beer in the early spring night, and it got dark, and at the end he didn't tell me I was full of bullshit. He walked me home. On the porch, he kissed me, and I forgave him for being hurt by his own life and was angry with myself for not wanting to deal with it, for being afraid or arrogant.

He was already down the steps when I stopped him. "Ryan," I moved towards him in the darkness. "Do you think you'd want to come over for dinner some time next week? Would you like that?"
He took my hand. "Yeah, I think I'd like that," he said softly.

"Will you call me?"

"Why don't you call me?"

And now the lights are low and our dinner plates are in the sink. We finished one bottle of wine and are diminishing another. Ryan has eaten more than I have ever seen him eat, so I guess he's feeling well. He sits in the chair and plays his guitar. The songs he sings are folk songs, quiet music, easy to listen to. We are feeling kindly about each other just now, although the wine could have something to do with it. Ryan reminds me of a time when I was young and a boy sang to me as we sat in front of a campfire. Or the time another boy turned off the lights in his father's apartment and we danced slow, just the two of us alone, pretending we were Daisy and Gatsby. The boys would be men now, and I'm not sure I'd know them if I saw them; the same way I hardly know the girl who was there. It is someone else who sits in the livingroom with Ryan now.

I don't know what he's thinking as he plays. Sometimes he slips away. There must have been other times he sang like this. For her, of course. For a few moments
maybe we become the people we used to be. People who talked and laughed and remembered less.

I want to sleep with Ryan again. It is nothing as sentimental as his guitar playing. I like him. The night we first met he said, "I've made plenty of mistakes: I may be all wrong. But still I've got to get up in the morning and look in that mirror. And I'm going to like what I see." I like Ryan for that. For holding on through two years after the woman and being nowhere and wanting nothing much more than to be able to smile at himself.

I also remember how we made love: long kisses and hands smoothing my waist and thighs, his full mouth on my breasts, the weight of him in my arms, and the long night afterwards when we slept wrapped in each other and sleep could excuse how we clung.

I want him that way again.

But it has been more than a month, and I have never been good at seduction. All I ever had to do was say yes. Ryan has been sitting in a chair all night. He hasn't moved towards me. No amount of wine will help me say, "Will you sleep with me tonight?" I reason: neither of us is new at this, and we aren't new to each other. Ryan must know
what he's doing. But since we've done this all before, it shouldn't be so difficult one more time. Why does he sit over there alone? Why won't he come to me? Besides, what if I should ask, and he says no?

I look at him and the guitar. Right now I need just to touch him, to know he isn't angry about one of those times I said I understood. He has never wanted me to understand. I have been so tired of walking hand in hand on the beach with boys and then men who rolled like the sea and washed up pretty shells and then went back into the night like the tide. You do not need to understand things like that. These years later, I need to be held and held tight just to stop the rolling for a moment, for an evening. I know not to ask for more than that, and I know it does not happen alone.

I think Ryan might be here for that, but something else tells me he's not sure of himself. And then, a terrible fear comes from deep in my bones. I may have to ask, and I don't think I can. Ryan gets up to pour us another glass of wine. He has left his chair. He is up and moving; I have to try.
"Ryan," my throat is tight and aching, and I know I couldn't get this far if it wasn't for the wine. "Could I say something?"

He smiles slowly. "It's your apartment."

"Would you . . . do you think you could sit next to me?" It is a start. Outside someone's brass chimes rattle in the wind.

My face is flushed and I'm frightened and angry at myself for being frightened. I am afraid because he may say no. I'm making too much out of this, and if he says no, well then, he says no. I have to remember I am no longer the girl who danced in a dark apartment.

"Yeah," he says, "I think I could sit next to you." He moves around the coffee table and sits, and I slide down to the end of the sofa. I put my head in his lap. It is better this way.

"I needed to do this," I say.

He puts his hand to my head and strokes my hair. He looks at my face. I close my eyes. The fear has suddenly made me very sober. I feel, with his hand heavy on my head like this, that I have been forgiven. I do not know for what.
"You're alone a lot, aren't you?" he says finally.

I look up and nod.

He is quiet for a moment.

"That was a good dinner," he says. "I haven't eaten like that in a long time."

"Thank you."

He reaches for my hand and holds it and I hold his. He is warm. I am feeling safe and comfortable and happy. Right now, this touching is enough.

We are together this way for several minutes, both silent as we travel other places in our minds, ending where our hands cradle each other. I think of the three or four times when it turned out so badly I thought I would stop. And of the people who loved me when I would have nothing to do with them. The times when, icy and aloof, someone risked it and held me anyway, and my face hot, and tears because it still felt good. And finally realizing after those times that no matter how I hurt, I can never say no and mean it because even the hard parts are easier than doing it alone. I wonder if Ryan knows that.

Ryan looks down at me and squeezes my hand. "Here's a song I haven't done for you." He reaches for the guitar.
I sit up, for a moment almost not sure of where I am.

Ryan plays. When he finishes he drapes both arms over the guitar. "I'm really tired," he says. "I should be going home."

Somewhere in me something twists and breaks. Here it is—the worst. He is going. My insides cauterize. I can say nothing, when it comes to it. I swallow and nod and watch him snap his guitar into its case. He takes his wine glass into the kitchen, and I stand up and don't know what to do. I will walk him to the door, of course. I will smile and tell him good night. I will thank him for sharing an evening with me. I cannot think beyond that.

Ryan walks to where I am standing. He takes me in his arms. My knees aren't going to last much longer.

"Thanks for dinner," he says.

My arms are tight around him, and I don't want to let go. I don't know what I'll do after that. I am shaking and my skin feels like tall grass in the wind. He kisses me gently, softly, like he did last week, like the first time. And he kisses me again, and I am holding him tight.

Maybe he doesn't know. If I don't say something, maybe he will never know. I clear my throat.
"If you'd like to," it comes in a whisper, "you can stay here tonight."

"Thank you. But I don't think I will."

That's all there is; we walk arm and arm to the door.

"Goodbye now," he says.

"Goodbye."

He steps onto the porch. "Take care."

"I will," I say to the figure fading into the shadows.

I shut the door behind me. For a moment there is the taste of salt water in my mouth. I can't believe I was such a fool. Why did I invite him over anyway; why couldn't I have just let it end the way it was a month ago, because after all, nothing has changed. Ryan is right: I don't know anything.

But even in anger, I can't believe only that. I suspect that perhaps there had to be something else for us. This last evening maybe. Actually, the only bad thing about tonight was I couldn't have the man I wanted.

I smile and shake my head. That's bad enough.

I feel awful. I look at the telephone on the end table. Who could I talk to now? Where could I go? But there's no sense in pretending. Ryan's the only one I want.
I think it would be easier if I could be angry with him, but I am not made that way. I am confused.

Perhaps it would be better if I did something.

The kitchen is a mess. I'll clean it. I run a sinkful of hot soapy water and the dishes go in, the silverware, the pots and pans. There are no leftovers to wrap—Ryan was hungry. I scrub and scour and in twenty-five minutes everything is shiny and dripping in the dish rack.

I walk around drying my hands on a towel. I can put lotion on them. I can straighten the livingroom. It is not yet 12:30. Something is wrong about this. Something is wrong about all the lights on in my apartment and the dark and quiet and calm outside. Ryan should be here. We should be lying together snug and warm in bed. He should know that.

With hands soft from water and lotion, I dial his number. I am frightened and determined at the same time. I'm not sure what to say.

When he answers I manage to mumble, "Were you asleep?"

"Not yet," he says. There is a pause. "What's up?"

"I just called because I ..." Here I falter. How can I say this? I wrap the cord around my finger. "Oh I ... thought it would be better if I talked to you just now."
"You want to talk to me?"

"I think so."

"What did you want to talk about?"

"Oh Ryan, why are you making everything difficult for me?"

"Making what difficult? What do you want?"

I stand here with a phone in my hand, wanting something—he's right. I'd like to giggle, but I can't. "Oh hell," I say into the phone. "I guess I just wanted to say you can't make it alone. Nobody can make it alone."

"Is that what you called to tell me?"

"I guess go."

"Well," he says, "you just watch me."

I cannot believe I just heard that. You just watch me. The receiver grows heavy in my hand. I am exhausted; I want to lie down. In my small room across town, I can hear Ryan breathing as softly and regularly as if he were here.
The lunch rush was over. Kelsey had eaten, left his money on the counter, and was gone when Maggie came out of the kitchen.

Sam, the only other customer in the cafe, watched her stop for a moment and stare at the vacant place; Kelsey's newspaper folded neatly by his dirty dishes. This woman, slender, girlish, four years older than she looked, almost shy when she was not joking with customers, could have been Sam's daughter if he had had one. He would want her for a daughter--almost everyone liked Maggie--if she didn't make them uncomfortable occasionally, looking like she did now. "Still waters run deep," Sam said. "Too deep for me. I swear sometimes I don't think she's the same person."

Later, remembering the pallor of her face as she looked at the place where Kelsey sat, Sam said, "If she closed her eyes right then, I would have thought she was a corpse."
Maggie went towards the counter and picked up Kelsey's check and $2.45 in change, but as she turned to the register, the money fell from her hands and splattered on the linoleum floor. Like leaves, she thought, like autumn leaves coming down from trees. There is no stopping them. She watched the money roll and clank and come to rest. The last dime stopped spinning.

She raised her head slowly and turned to the dirty plates, her hand shaking as she grasped the half-drained coffee mug. Sam saw her eyes go wide and dark. He knew she was seeing nothing in the cafe. She pressed the mug to her chest.

Maggie remembered the wine bottle there. The Portuguese rosé she clutched in her arms when Lee came out on the porch seven years ago. She remembered waiting for the door to open. He was bare-chested. "You wanted to see me," she stuttered then. "You said to come at nine. It's nine."

"Well . . ." he said.

"You have company, don't you?"

"Yes." He paused. "What have you got there?"

She would not let him see the bottle. "Nothing."

The silence was awkward. "I'll go," she finally whispered.
She turned, moving away from the dim porch, the man she loved who hurt her like that. Her knees were weak under her. She forced them. "Do not let him see me stumble," she said to herself. "Don't let me fall. Let me get away where it's dark." She did not know to whom she was speaking.

"Come by tomorrow morning, Maggie," he said. "We'll have breakfast together. OK?"

She wanted to turn, hurl the bottle at him, to smash his face. She squeezed its neck. "No," she told herself. "A man like him isn't worth the waste of good wine. I'll go home and drink it."

"OK," she said softly in the darkness. "About eight?"

In the cafe, Maggie clutched the edge of the counter until her knuckles went white. Her knees were weak again. Suddenly, she hurled the mug as hard as she could at the front door of the cafe. It hit the pane of glass in the door, and the window and crockery exploded into silvery splinters.

She picked up the plate with both hands and pounded it against the counter until the dish shattered. She grabbed the steak knife and dug it across the rubble and formica towards herself. The gouge was deep. The knife slipped from her hand at the edge and clattered to the floor.
Maggie wheeled around and reached for the nearly full coffee pot, a long cry coming from deep in her stomach as she hurled the pot at the painting on the back wall. Scalding coffee splashed her arms, and the pot broke against the wood framing a snow-covered mountain, one small cabin nearly buried in the drifts. Brown liquid splattered the cool white scene, the wall, and the floor. Evelyn ran from the kitchen. Maggie sank to her knees, holding herself, crying so hysterically she could hardly breathe. Evelyn kneeled, put her arms around the woman, and shouted at Sam to call the hospital.

From the waiting room, Evelyn watched the nurse bring Maggie back down the hospital corridor. One of Maggie's hands was bandaged where she had ground glass into it from the mess on the cafe floor. Her smock was splattered, the blood turning brown and the coffee stains worsening the effect.

"Are you a relative?" the nurse asked.

"I don't think she has any folks in Colorado." Evelyn looked at Maggie, who smiled weakly. "She works for me. I'm a friend."

"Can you drive her home?"

"Of course."
"We just gave her a shot of Thorazine. She's in no condition to drive."

"I'm about ready to fall asleep," Maggie murmured.

The nurse handed Evelyn a prescription. "Let me give this to you, so it doesn't get lost. This is for valium, and she doesn't have to take it unless she feels it necessary. Do you know if she has a regular physician?"

"I doubt it," Evelyn said. "She hasn't taken a sick day in two years. And she certainly hasn't ever done anything like this before."

"Let's hope that's all there is to it then." The nurse closed the manila folder she held. "Take care of yourself, Maggie."

She yawned. "Thank you."

In the car, Evelyn turned the key in the ignition. "What do you say I take you to my place?"

"Oh, no thanks, Ev." Maggie's eyes were flat, half-closed.

Evelyn maneuvered from the parking lot. "I know you're pretty sleepy. I thought I'd put you in the extra room. I'd be there when you wake up."

"I'll be OK. You can take me home."
"You want to talk about it, Maggie?"

"There's not much to talk about."

Evelyn shook her head and laughed. "You pull an absolutely incredible stunt like that and tell me there's nothing to talk about."

"I'm sorry, Ev . . . didn't mean to . . ."

She patted Maggie's knee. "It's OK. It's all OK. You take some time off work. However much you want. We'll get along."

"I think I will." Maggie leaned on the vibrating car door, her head nodding.

"Is it Kelsey?"

"It was," Maggie said. "It is." She held out her bandaged hand and looked at it. "But I'm going to be all right now." She fell asleep.

* * *

The Pot o' Gold was not a particularly memorable bar, but it was a place where Maggie could go alone and have a drink without some cowboy or diesel mechanic hustling her. She knew a few regulars by then, and the woman who tended bar nights had Maggie's bourbon ditch ready by the time she took off her jacket. The first night she met Kelsey, Maggie
was sitting with Evelyn, Sam, and a few other friends from the cafe. Kelsey hardly spoke to her that night, but Maggie had developed a waitress's sense of being observed as she worked; she knew he was watching her. It was curious to her that she was doing nothing but sitting, drinking, and talking, and that Kelsey should be observing her in particular. Her mind stretched back to other men in other bars. Maggie dimly recalled times when that sort of subtle attention excited her. Now that response was nearly alien. She could not afford it. Maggie was twenty-eight.

A week later, Maggie sat alone and Kelsey came into the 'Gold. He nodded at her, went to the bar, and ordered a drink. He sipped it a few times, turned slowly, and walked to her table. "Maggie, isn't it?" he said.

"Yes."

"Are you alone?"

"Pull up a chair." She moved one out from the table. He sat. "Do you come here much?" he asked.

"If I come anywhere, I come here."

"And what do you find especially attractive about the famed Pot o' Gold? Why this place with its Charlie Russell western prints and greasy dust dripping from the rafters?
Surely there are more pleasant places for you to spend your leisure hours."

She laughed. "Are you for real?"

He blinked.

She noticed he had wide eyes. "Are you drunk?"

Then Kelsey laughed, too. He had one of the most magnificent smiles she had ever seen. His face creased like an old man's. He looked worn out, the same way she felt, like there was nothing funny any more, and still they could laugh.

"No, I'm not drunk," he said. "I asked because you don't look like you belong in here."

If Maggie liked his smile, she didn't care for the assumption that he knew anything about her. "And where do I look like I belong?" She taunted him politely.

"You tell me."

She shrugged. "I'm a waitress at Maggie's."

"Maggie from Maggie's."

"Do you know how many times a week I hear that?"

"And before you were a waitress?"

"A lot of things. I was a student."
"Interesting." His voice had a hint of sarcasm in it. "Get your degree?"

"Yes." She sighed. She didn't like these sorts of conversations. It was the trouble with meeting new people. An old weariness welled inside her. England, France, Italy, this Colorado town, all the other places she'd been, the people who'd come and gone on. "I have an MA," she heard a distant voice say to Kelsey. "In art. From the university here in Boulder."

Kelsey said, "Are you from Boulder?"

The exhaustion overcame her. When it happened, it happened fast. Her eyes burned. Maggie was tired of dealing with ham and cheese omelettes and more coffee, all the detective shows on evening television, and the new postman's demand for her name on the mailbox in which she'd been receiving letters for over two years. She was tired of being polite. She didn't think Kelsey cared, but something inside her broke. That thing was always breaking. She wanted to talk to someone. Maggie steadied her hand as she reached for what was left in her glass. "I'm from a place I'll never go back to. Lily," she called to the bartender. "I'd like another drink."
Kelsey motioned for another, too, and turned back to Maggie. She fascinated him, this slim, silky-haired woman who looked calm and controlled. He sensed a quickness about her, an intensity beneath the calm. He wanted to see what she would do. Lily brought their drinks, and he paid for them. "So where are you actually from?" he asked.

"California."

"Oh, California."

She stirred the drink with her straw and threw the white plastic on the floor. "Yes—'oh, California.' Where all the hippies and queers live. Well, I'll tell you, if you haven't been there, I'm not sure that definition is so far from wrong. There is something crazy about that place."

"I have been there," Kelsey said. "It was a long time ago, but you're probably right, as I remember."

"I know I'm right," Maggie said. "Even when I was growing up, I knew there was something screwy about that place. Only I don't know what it is. I'll just never go back."

"So?" Kelsey shrugged. He was enjoying her, she was so responsive.
"So in twenty-one years, I never felt at home there. I finally got enough sense to move away. I moved here. I went to Oregon. I finally went to travel in Europe, only I didn't come back—at least not for a couple of years. And then I came back here. So just don't ask me where I'm from, because I'm not from anywhere. I don't have a home." Maggie drank. She suddenly felt she had said too much; she didn't know this man anyway. "I didn't mean to over-dramatize that," she added.

"You do seem rather upset about something that probably isn't worth the effort."

All the normal motions and movements inside Maggie abruptly stopped. She felt as if Kelsey had somehow betrayed her. Who was this man anyway that things should come from her about which she hadn't spoken in years? She looked at his face. Nothing showed.

"I wouldn't single myself out," she heard him say. "You realize most people in this state are from somewhere else. I'm from New Mexico. It's no big deal."

"I think the way I feel about having a place to live has something to do with Europe." Maggie mumbled at her drink. She felt slighted, but at the same time, she wasn't
sure she wanted to talk to Kelsey after all. Part of it was the way he made her uncomfortable, and part of it was that Maggie believed she didn't have enough words to describe the sound of hot milk spraying into thick crockery coffee cups in Paris cafes, where the truck drivers were having their morning *fines* in thin wine glasses. Or the peculiar smell of diesel in London, and the traffic coming in all the wrong directions so that she had to read the "Look Right" or "Look Left" painted on the asphalt before she stepped off the curb. Or saying words like *cappuccino* and *panini* over and over again because she liked the way they sounded—and she never got tired of drinking the coffee and cream because she could walk into any bar with its polished chrome counter, pick out her morning *dolce* and say it, say *uno* *cappuccino*. It came from a time when there were many things she loved. And a time when there were bad things like the fire, or the accident, or the night she spent in the Alps, but she could still hurt then. Now she was trying to forget about it all.

"What about Europe?" Kelsey asked. He liked probing; it made her uncomfortable.

"You haven't been there, have you?"

"No."
Maggie played with her napkin. "I didn't want to leave."

"So why did you?"

"I didn't want to stay either."

"Well, lady, it sounds like you don't know what you want."

Maggie tried not to let the irritation grow in her. She felt Kelsey had no right to be critical. He didn't know her, why did he gnaw at her?

"I do know what I want," Maggie said succinctly. "I just want a real place, not a suitcase and a forwarding address and not enough plates or sauce pans. I don't know where I'll be a few years from now. I don't even know about next year."

In her bruskness, Kelsey sensed she was drawing away from him. He didn't want to let her go, not yet. It was time to be softer. "Yeah," he said. "I've had that feeling."

Then she felt that he had, that he might understand what she was talking about. "So you can see that a place where I feel good enough to stay would help a lot." It was almost a question.
He had her again. "It may look that way," he said. "Except that you're wrong."

"What?"

"Wrong. You're wrong. No amount of places and staying is going to make you feel any better about things if you don't feel good about yourself."

It was trite, Maggie thought, but true. She picked up her glass and fished out some ice to chew. Why was he so good-looking, she thought, and why did much of what he said pick at something in her? She was ill at ease. Kelsey's idea was not new to Maggie. It was the same thing she repeated to herself each time she moved. But now she couldn't remember why she had forgotten it, or when. Maggie couldn't decide whether she had learned something else since then, or if Kelsey was right, and she used to be.

"Haven't you ever wanted a place of your own, Kelsey?"

He turned his glass upside down on his napkin and leaned his elbows on the table. "I had a place of my own once," he said. "I also had a wife. There were a lot of things I wanted. But that was a couple of years ago. And now there isn't much that I care about. There isn't much worth having."
He moved too fast for her and she didn't understand. He seemed kind one minute and almost inhuman the next. Like a textbook or Zen or a mid-60s rally speaker. She would not be sucked in any farther; it was too confusing. Maggie said, "I can't stand people who have too much to drink and start talking about how rotten everything is."

"I have not had nearly enough to drink, and you have no idea what I'm talking about."

"If I don't, you haven't explained it."

"It's pretty simple." He motioned to Lily for another round. He became almost patient, like a teacher. "There isn't very much that actually matters. Oh, you've got a lot of people running around doing a lot of things—ringing doorbells trying to get you to vote against Proposition 6, buying new cars because the old one was getting pretty tacky, going up in the mountains to log—-but most of what you do is meaningless. It doesn't really matter, except that it's a way to pass time until there isn't any time left. What difference does it make to you that you're a waitress instead of an artist?"

"You have no right to ask me that."
"Rights? What are rights? I have every right. Did I get a little personal, Maggie?"

"Personal? You don't know me; you don't know who I am. I don't need this kind of crap from strangers." Her hand gripped her glass.

"You need something, Maggie."

She stood up, took what was left of her drink, and dumped it in Kelsey's lap. "So do you," she said. She picked up her purse and headed for the door.

"Who the hell do you think you are?" he called after her.

She pivoted. "Who are you?" Then she turned and left. Kelsey stood up, his jeans wet and ice splattering to the floor. "Lily," he called. "Will you get me a rag or something?"

Lily brought a cloth over. Kelsey was one of her best customers. She tried not to smile.

* * *

There was snow on the ground. There was snow and I came from a place where there was no snow. But that was where I lived then, somewhere in Europe. It didn't matter where. It mattered only that there was snow. That it was
early in the morning, the sky was still dark, the snow glowed even in the absence of the moon or morning light. I had been up all night, all night in a hut on the side of a mountain. I had decided to leave. To go home. What was most important to me at that moment was I had not learned what color the snow was when it grew luminescent like that. White? Blue? Pearl grey? I don't know. I thought I never would.

I was tired then, too. Younger, but still tired. Other things have happened since then, but from time to time this old exhaustion comes upon me. I try not to pay attention.

So it was September, the beginning of fall, of winter, when I met him. No . . . that's not exactly true. It only seems true, as so many things seem like what they are not. It was fall, but I had met him, an American like myself, in Vicenza long before. But it was then, when the rains began, that we began to talk. To be friends. It seems strange to begin things just when the year is dying, but we know so little of seasons. Why doesn't the new year begin in spring, as it should?

So I was tired then. I was twenty-five and I was very tired. Tired of a few years as a gypsy—living the life my friends back in the States thought enviable. They didn't
know. The picture was fading—the young, carefree vagabond, the girl with the *joie de vivre*. The one with the suitcases, moving from town to town, looking for work—something I could do to feed myself. Smiling, always smiling. Tired of the passing of people through my life, the passing of myself through countries and provinces and cities. Through the forests and the wheatfields and the grazing land and the vineyards. I was too tired to think about it then. The Italian summer had been hot, and there had been a lot of men.

I had cared about most of them. One of the last ones, in July, had suddenly asked me one evening what were the three things in my life I was absolutely sure of. It was a sophomoric question, but I surprised myself with my answer, that I had one. I told him: "One. That there is a god, or god-head. Some master plan that is the sense for our existences. I think someone or something knows about all this—even if I don't."

"Two. That I have loved, perhaps, too many people."

"And three. That I will not let that keep me from loving others."

He asked me what I meant by "too many people."
I was too tired to answer. Now, I am not sure what I meant. I don't know what I must have been thinking, whether I have changed or simply forgotten. Sometimes I still think there's a reason for this, a plan. Concurrently, it's hard to believe anything makes any sense at all.

But still, there have been times of contentment, and my moods sometimes insult those with whom it has been good. I insult especially that one man, that man who came with the fall and stayed close to me, by talking about love or even joy. It is there, whether you talk about it. It is just there. Like the sun, even when it's dark. Like the blue of the sky beyond the clouds. Like the people you have loved, but don't see any more. It is there without discussing it, wheedling it, dissecting it. It is only I who fades in and out, changing about what is and isn't, was and wasn't. About how much. My excuse is that suns burn out. That blue is just the color the prism of our atmosphere lets in. That people die. And I will, too.

From that September night when the talk stopped and he held me as we lay on the floor listening to the stereo, I should have known he didn't want any trouble either. I don't think he was tired like me, but we were living in the same
kind of time, that time when the leaves go scarlet and bronze, before the wind takes them from the trees. He didn't fumble with my buttons; he didn't kiss me that night; he just held me close, our bodies touching all the way down, and relaxed with my body, my femaleness, as I relaxed in the strength of his arms, the solidness of his chest. There was something very pure there. Light and simple and natural. It comforted.

There was dinner first, and then he was angry about something and came to talk, then a festival one evening, and finally we lay together one night on his sofa and kissed and fell asleep and when it got cold he asked me if I would like to sleep with him in his bed. I did, letting it be what it was. Two friends making love late on a cold, rainy night. On a sunny, blue morning. After breakfast we were shy about what we had done. I was ready to go home and let each of us be alone, when he asked if I wouldn't like to spend the rest of the day. I have never been able to defend myself against someone who, on a morning after, was not too confused to still want me near.

If this has begun to sound like a love story, it is an illusion. There are no love stories; there are only stories of having loved. There are women who are romantic.
I love. And I am hard. Hard as the frozen ground around me that morning. I am specific, like the fields in neat furrows, grey and unyielding, stark, in that dim December light, winter wheat germinating deep in the earth beneath the shroud of hard snow. I have taken care of myself.

What else that happened is nothing more than what happens to most people. We spent more time together. We walked a lot that fall. We went to good restaurants. There was time spent at friends', movies, drinking red wine. There were Sunday morning breakfasts and cups of tea grabbed on the way to work. There was television on the sofa together. I stopped feeling so worn out.

But what is there to being with anyone? The thingyness of it, the snow that winter, the ski jackets, the color of his hair and eyes, his hand on my cheek. We tell it with nouns, but it's usually not that easy. The photograph album just won't work. See: here the weather was still warm. There are leaves on the trees. We're packing the car to go to the mountains. We had a good time.

And in this picture we are inside the restaurant with two other couples. He took my jacket and ordered wine for me.
Here he has just dropped me off at my own apartment for the evening. The expression on my face is because I am slightly confused. I respect his desire to be alone for the rest of the night, even though we have spent the day together. I went to my empty bed, shrugged, and curled up to sleep soundly until the alarm rang the next morning.

Here I have reached out for his arm because all the streets were iced over. I was slipping.

And this is him coming into the trattoria after a four-day ski weekend. He didn't know where I was. He was exhausted, but he drove around town until he found me.

The pictures don't count. Even the remembrances are two-dimensional. What counts is the mood under the act. The gesture, the motion—not the thing itself. What counts is how very much together we were that weekend, how we thanked each other. How, in taking off my jacket in that restaurant, we wanted to continue, slowly removing each article of clothing until we stood before one another naked and proud. That in going to my room alone, I could give both his and my oneness back and have that not hurt either of us. That from that oneness, from knowing I had walked icy streets alone, and from knowing I would walk them again,
I could reach through the hard edge of self-sufficiency and hold on to someone who made it easier to take care of myself. We were in love.

There was a night when I cried. It was very strange to me. Nothing had seemed worth crying over for a long time. I didn't know why I should cry then. We had just finished making love. I was still cradled beneath him feeling small and soft and snowy white as the eiderdown we lay on. His strength, the muscles around his shoulder blades, the river valley of his backbone as I touched the soft part at the base of his spine, the bottom of his belly, the skin smooth and supple, resting as though forever against my own, the sweet wet warmth below that—all the good things caught in my throat. My whole body hiccuped and in a second he moved away. I turned to the wall. There were tears, tears that flooded my face and cascaded onto the broad whiteness of that pillow, salt water I had no idea what to do with, where it came from, when it would stop. He covered and held me.

"What's the matter?"

"I don't know."
I can see now that I have never really understood anything important about men or my relationship to them until after we've made love. Maybe I'm caught up in that old-fashioned sense of "giving" myself. Lying with a man, afterwards, I am afraid of nothing. I have just done the most frightening thing anyone can do--given myself away. It's far worse than anything I may ever have to do alone. Without the fear, there are things I can know: who he is, who this woman is next to him, why they are lying together like this. If what I come to understand is bad, then of course it's too late. If it's good, if it's right we're together just then, I sleep content, snug, relaxed. It seems there would be an easier way to find out.

It frightens me to think that something may have let me know in advance. Some people say we do it all by ourselves, on our own, and that it has nothing to do with anything supernatural. I do not know how to explain that in the middle of so much fullness, I felt the gaping blankness of incredible loss. The emptiness was overwhelming, and the tears came. I don't know how I knew that night there would be an end. I could almost see it. I felt it.
It was two months later when he drowned while skin-diving in the Adriatic. The day he left, he gave me a small Venetian silver locket. We decided to wait until he returned to put something in it. When they told me, it was as if I had already known. It was easier to take. I would not go to identify the body—somebody else did that. Certainly I would not fly back to the States for the funeral. I had no desire to see the physical aspect of his passing. Loving him made me strong enough.

And in the smallest, most private part of myself, I knew, even at his death, it was impossible to say how it might have turned out. We hadn't been together very long. I am not rationalizing or making excuses. I just want to live. I cried a lot in those first few weeks, late at night, alone in my bed—as if crying would explain what I felt. For two more years, there were other times I did that.

Three months after he died, I kissed someone else. Spring was almost over.

* * *

The Monday after she met Kelsey Maggie was carrying four breakfast specials expertly balanced when Kelsey walked into the cafe with a newspaper under his arm. He
sat down at the counter. She served the specials, took another table's order, called it in to Evelyn, and glanced at Kelsey. He was looking at a menu. Maggie got silverware from the bin, a napkin, and a mug. She laid them out on the counter in front of him.

"Coffee?" she asked.

He looked up blandly from the menu. "If you don't spill it all over me this time."

She reached for the pot and filled his cup, then set the pot back on the machine. "I'll be back in a minute."

She brought a plate of french toast to someone at the middle of the counter and returned to Kelsey. "Are you ready to order now?"

He ordered and Maggie handed the ticket through to Evelyn in the kitchen. Maggie rang up a bill, whisked the plates into the dishpan, and pocketed some change. She made another pot of coffee. When she brought Kelsey's breakfast to him, he was reading the paper. "Pretty busy, isn't it?" he said.

She looked up at the fluorescent 7-Up clock on the wall behind her. "Twenty minutes," she said. "Then the rush is over. Until 11:30."
"When do you close?"

"Four."

"Don't you ever get tired of all this?"

"More coffee?" Maggie asked.

"Please."

In twenty minutes all but Kelsey and Sam had left. Maggie poured herself a cup of coffee, cleared Kelsey's dishes away, and refilled his cup.

"That's a nice painting on the back wall," he said.

"Thank you." She leaned on the counter in front of him.

"Does that mean you did it?"

"Yes."

"It's not bad."

She said nothing.

"I suppose you've also worked with a little clay, maybe gotten into some photography, too?"

"Yes," Maggie said.

"So is there so much difference between throwing a pot and arranging an orange slice and a sprig of parsley beside somebody's eggs?"

"Are you going to start that again?"
He just looked at her, waiting for an answer.

"Let's get something straight," Maggie said. "Number One: I majored in art history, actually—not painting or ceramics or photography. And Number Two: yes, I believe there is a difference between parsley and oil painting."

Kelsey shrugged. "Most people do. But there isn't, not when . . ."

"Look," Maggie interrupted. "I don't like to argue. I'm not into your particular brand of existentialism. I would appreciate it if you didn't try to convert me."

He smiled that magnificent smile. "So I become an existentialist and a religious fanatic at the same time? That's the trouble with labels. I never call myself anything. I have, however, been a box boy, a factory assembler, a logger, a cabinet maker, and incidentally," he added, "a graduate student in art. But I never got my degree. I found things do not add up. Labels do not mean you're getting the packaged goods. A piece of paper doesn't mean anything."

She sighed. "Save it, I've heard it all before. In fact, I admit I've said a lot of it. Ten years ago. I don't mean to be rude, Kelsey, but you know—you're full of bullshit."
"I know." He grinned again.

"Then why are you telling me all this?"

"I haven't the slightest idea." He sipped his coffee. "What haven't you told me about Europe? What happened there? Or after you got back?"

Maggie couldn't decide whether Kelsey was remarkable and understood something more about her than she gave him credit for, or if he was only trying to stir up another argument. The old tiredness came up again. Her hand and arm felt heavy as she lifted her coffee cup to drink. "Kelsey," she said softly as she set the cup down, "supposing you tell me what does matter to you."

What he did not tell her was what he denied: she was attractive to him. It had been a long time since he had had anything to do with a woman.

"Nothing matters," he said.

"Nothing?"

"Just nothing."

"And am I supposed to believe that?"

"You can believe what you want."

"I guess I can." She put her cup in the dishpan. "And you can think what you like about Europe." She turned away.
"If you want to see what I do with my time," Kelsey said, "you can come down to my shop some day."

"Oh I can, can I?" Maggie turned back, sarcastic.

"Sure."

"Why are you doing all this?" she demanded suddenly. "Do you like me or something? Is this some sophisticated way of sticking my pigtails in the ink well?"

"You're still trying to understand."

"And you're still trying to be obtuse. You're also goddam patronizing."

"Whatever." He stood, put his money on the counter, and walked towards the door.

"Kelsey?" Her voice stopped him. "What kind of shop is it?"

"Wood." He smiled and left.