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### Diving into nonsense

Paul Hoornbeek

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DIVING INTO NONSENSE

By

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Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

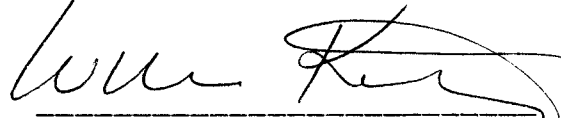
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1988

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## There is no Sun, There is no Lake

The window had always been better than television. After fifteen years she had not tired of the view out over the city; she knew when the sun would shine in every day, and waited for it the way she waited for the newspaper, the mail and her soap opera. Although the biggest window in the apartment was in the living room, the new building next door had eclipsed the view long ago, so the small kitchen window was best. It was fun to invite people in for coffee and watch them discover the kitchen clock. Few people ever came, but those who did would glance up to check the time with the human instinct that says every kitchen has a clock. This kitchen's clock was halfway across town, on the tower of the old Women's Prison, framed perfectly in the kitchen window. Joan loved to watch people find it, hear them praise her view as though she had something to do with it.

Today the clock told her to finish packing, to call her sister, to call Mr. Spankovitch's lawyer, but the view wouldn't let her go, and she sank into her accustomed position, kneeling on the big pillow below the window,

resting her arms on the wide sill, watching her world for the last time.

On the fire escape landing across the street a woman tended a garden in boxes of dirt thirty stories above the ground. In windows all around Joan could see plants--hanging, perched on sills, growing in flower boxes outside windows it was safe to open. Plants in private soil high above the ground: less pathetic than twisted, stunted trees clinging to a crack in a cliff where some wind had decided a seed should grow, like the Jeffrey Pine in the photograph Keenan had sent her from Yosemite, but still out of place. Joan preferred cut flowers. Dirt had no place in the home of a sick man; she wouldn't allow pots of it through the door. But today no delivery boys had come to the door with fresh flowers, and yesterday's flowers and the flowers of the day before were fading fast in their vases all around the apartment, their petals shrivelling and falling and losing their perfume to decay like the sad ending to some South American novel.

Flowers weren't cheap, but relatives and friends of Mr. Spankovich had kept the apartment overflowing with them since the day sixteen years ago he had turned his head and sneezed and stopped moving forever. She seldom saw the relatives who sent the flowers, but after all these years she knew most of the delivery men from the florist shops around town, messengers of good will that



was not good enough to present itself. The flowers always had nametags identifying the donors, though, and every day she would tell Mr. Spankovich who had sent the gladiolas, who had sent the irises. In the early years some people had sent potted plants, hoping perhaps to extend their good wishes for the life of a plant rather than renewing it weekly or monthly, but Joan had soon discouraged live plants. They were just more invalids to feed and bathe and watch die. Joan was proud of the care she gave Mr. Spankovich, but she was not good with plants. Some died from the top down, others from the bottom up; some erupted in swarms of tiny flies or turned overnight into dried arrangements. Mr. Spankovich was a bit like a plant himself: he couldn't move, and she poured his food and pills into him through tubes. She poured measured amounts of fluid into his NG tube and later measured what came out his catheter to see the amounts were nearly the same. But she never compared him to a plant when he could hear her: even as a quadriplegic he commanded enough power to maintain his apartment against all the relatives who wanted to take it from him and put him in a home somewhere, and Joan treated him with respect. She had spent so many hours talking to him, providing him with responses and interpreting his eyeblinks, reading him the Latin authors she had spent her college years studying, or telling him of the peccadillos of her soap opera

characters, that she knew she would miss those conversations more than the window, more than the flowers.

When lights began coming on in the streets below she stood slowly, straightening her stiff knees, and began collecting flowers from the vases around the apartment, emptying them into a plastic garbage bag. She made mental notes of which vases were hers and needed to be packed. She remembered she would have to take down the photographs Keenan had sent her, and was dismayed to see the light patch on the wall when she tipped the hawk picture aside to look. At noon the people from the hospital had come and removed the equipment that had done the work Mr. Spankovich's body had refused to do for so long. They took away his mouth, his nose, his penis, rolling up the hoses while Joan sat in the kitchen talking to her sister, Evelyn, on the telephone.

The first cigarette she had ever smoked in the apartment became the first pack of cigarettes she had smoked in a day since college, and by four o'clock she had called down to the store for another pack. When she couldn't wait any longer she took another librium before it was time, and she telephoned the drug store for a refill, though she had fifty left. The pills were more soothing than her therapist, that fat man with thick smokey glasses who spoke as though reading cue cards, and she felt a small burst of happiness when she realized that

she would have a new therapist when she moved to California.

She walked with her bag full of wilted flowers into the bedroom, and sank into her chair beside the stripped and empty hospital bed. She pressed a button on the remote-control console and raised the head of the bed, pressed another button and elevated imaginary knees. She spoke to the undented plastic-covered pillow. "You know, you really started smelling pretty bad near the end, Mr. Spankovich. I don't know where the smell came from, but it started more than a week ago. I knew you were going this time." The room looked different without the stainless-steel trees supporting hoses, without the oxygen tank and the cart with the thermometer and box of sterile gloves. These appurtenances were so much a part of Mr. Spankovich it seemed to Joan they should be buried with him, like the riches of a pharaoh. But then she, too, would have to go with him to tend him in the afterlife. "I'm not going to the funeral," she said. "I'll go to mine if somebody makes me have one, but that's it. I'm moving to California, Mr. Spankovich. Evelyn wants me to live with her, and Keenan is talking about he and I getting a place together. He has a house in a little town, Blue Lake, he always calls it Sunny Blue Lake. Right now they're both out at her place working on their magazine, High Tide Slash Low Tide, remember I read it to

you? Maybe I'll live by myself, but Keenan has always been sweet, maybe he could help me get started. What do you think?" She knew what he thought. That she had slept with Keenan once five years ago when he was high enough to pretend she was her sister, when she was drunk enough and lonely enough it didn't matter. Mr. Spankovich always saw things in their worst light. He thought Keenan was just a drunk who only courted Joan to have a place to stay on the east coast, to curry favor with Evelyn. Joan had argued that they were old friends, that what might have been false once could turn into something true later, but Mr. Spankovich wasn't swayed. When blinking eyelids are a man's only form of expression, they can say a lot. Joan had become Mr. Spankovich's interpreter, his voice and thoughts, just as the NG tube had become his mouth, and he didn't seem to object to who he had become through Joan.

Evelyn had come to visit a few times, and embarrassed Joan by talking about Mr. Spankovich as though he couldn't hear her. "You've lived with a dead man longer than most women stay married to live ones," she had said.

"He's not dead, don't talk like that."

"Well how do you know he wouldn't rather be? Isn't there some plug you can pull or something? You're giving your life to a dead man, Joan, can't you see that? And you're forcing him to live beyond his natural span, are

you sure that's ethical, for him or the rest of the world either?"

Keenan hadn't been sympathetic with Mr. Spankovich, either, when he had last visited five years ago. He was a long-time suitor of Evelyn's, a childhood friend who had unsuccessfully followed her around the country for so long he had become like a member of the family. He was willing to adopt any role that would let him be close to Evelyn. Keenan had stayed at the apartment for nearly a week, and Joan had felt little resentment when he forgot and called her by her sister's name. He had been in low spirits: Evelyn had just taken up with some poet, and Keenan seemed to see his hopes finally as utterly futile. Joan had been low then, too, had just begun seeing the counsellor about her depression, and it had done them both good to have a brief romance.

Just as when they were children Evelyn had chosen Joan's wardrobe for her when she knew it would become hers when Joan outgrew it, Joan's boyfriends were in a way determined by reflection: she wasn't Joan, she was Evelyn's older, duller sister. Keenan was a photographer, a Southern boy transplanted to California. He believed in karma and spirits and vibrations and sour mash and sinsemilla. Like Evelyn, Keenan was worried about Joan, thought she should quit her job, get out of the city. "Unless you're travelling on opium, this apartment's got

you trapped," he had told her on the last night of his visit. "By the way, can't you call the hospital and tell them Mr. Spanky's in pain, get them to send over some morphine or something?"

Joan sat beside the bed as the apartment grew dark, the garbage bag full of flowers sending up a perfume which mingled with the disinfectant reek that hovered around the room. As far as she knew, she was the only person in the world who was sad that Mr. Spankovich was dead. Outside the window which was no longer hers, Manhattan continued on as though nothing had happened.

In Manhattan, ground was a button in the elevator, what the subway ran under, and how she bought her coffee beans. Now ground was where Mr. Spankovich was finally allowed to sleep after fifteen years of lying down. Grounded was what her psychiatrist told Joan she no longer was, what her sister in California promised to help her become. Since Mr. Spankovich could neither move nor speak, his needs had been few, and they had gradually become Joan's needs as well. Even now, her body felt urgent promptings to mash up pills and pour them down his NG tube, to roll him into a new position, to give him a sponge bath and massage his unused flesh. She needed to check his vital signs, to read to him, to tell him about her soap opera, to play music and watch its effect on his

pulse rate. Her schedule had been reinforced by a timer she set every morning, which would buzz only if she didn't punch its button in time; the memory of that buzzer hovered at the edge of her thoughts like the dread of an alarm clock to a semi-conscious sleeper: afraid the alarm would go off, and equally afraid it wouldn't.

What Mr. Spankovich hadn't needed, Joan hadn't needed, either. She hadn't needed to know how to drive a car, or how to serve as a hostess, or how to be a forty-year-old woman, which she had become while Mr. Spankovich's heart beat and his lungs breathed and his liver and kidneys and intestines imitated life. So on the day Joan punched Ground and rode the elevator down for the last time and let the subway take her to the airport where she bought a ticket for a long flight across the continent, she wore an orchid on her breast and a bright, interested look on her face that she had practiced in the mirror. In her handbag she carried pills to fight depression and tissues to catch the tears that made it past the pills.

She hadn't intended to fly, had never flown, had never wanted to fly. What little thought she had given to accepting offers of a new place to live--always contingent on Mr. Spankovich dying or getting better, neither of which seemed likely--had meant taking the subway to a

train, carrying something longer than the newspaper to read on the way. But the train station closest to Evelyn's was a hundred miles away and the road between the coast and the mountain had washed away in a landslide, so the only connection was a narrow, winding road neither Evelyn nor Keenan was willing to drive, despite Joan's tearful pleas on the telephone. Joan was ashamed of all the crying she was doing these days; the depression that had grown in her over the past several years usually stayed private, but since Mr. Spankovich had died she found herself weeping for no reason, and the quieter despair was with her more often, too, despite the librium. She was glad to have somewhere to go, people who cared about her, but she wished she didn't have to fly to get to them, feared they would treat her like an invalid.

She had shipped most of her clothes and books ahead, and had put everything else in storage, so she carried only a suitcase and an overnight bag with her. In the airport she didn't know who or how to ask for help, so she carried her heavy suitcase all around the terminal, afraid someone would steal it if she set it down. All her books were packed away, so she bought a murder mystery in a gift shop, and was surprised to find she enjoyed reading about the discovery of a corpse, the long look at how it was murdered, and the beginnings of the oddly irrelevant search for the murderer that made up most of the book.



After the takeoff panic she realized how calm everyone else was, took another librium and settled back in the seat. The hiss of air from the little valve over her head sounded like the oxygen she used to give Mr. Spankovich, the attention the stewardess gave her was somehow familiar, as though she was her own extended care attendant. She was glad her seat was on the aisle, so she didn't have to look out the window and see how far away the ground really was. She was surprised when people unbuckled their seat belts and walked up and down the aisles as though they weren't flying as high and fast as the Captain had told them they were--impossible heights, impossible speeds. When her neighbor with the window seat got up and edged past her knees into the aisle, Joan slid across the seat and glanced out the window. Nothing but white, nothing to confirm she was really in the air. And if that dull solid whiteness against the window was what the inside of a cloud looked like, the only reason she had ever imagined for flying was now lost.

As soon as she thought about the clouds she knew it would happen, and sure enough, there was that old song about clouds jingling in her brain and she knew she wouldn't be able to get rid of it. She tried reading her book, but found she no longer cared who had done it, could see no reason to read a hundred pages to find out the answer when she could just turn to the last page.

Everything in the middle was just there to slow her down, just rows and columns of words moving her eyes back and forth and up and down. And the snatch of song ran an endless loop in the back of her head and she felt sick in the air that hissed at her through the nozzle, but she couldn't get up to walk to the bathroom, and she wouldn't vomit into a bag and hand it to a stewardess, so she shut her eyes and tried to calm herself down. But with her eyes closed she could feel the motion of the plane; opening them, she looked at the window to see it streaked with rain, drops torn across the thick glass proving the plane was moving, and she thought what a surprise it was that it could rain inside a cloud, not just below it, and there was that song again. She slid back the cuff of her silk blouse to look at her watch, dug her ticket out of her purse and checked her arrival time, saw that she had come nowhere at all, really, no matter how fast she was moving. There was still too much time, too much continent between her and where she was going, and she couldn't just flip to the end, she would have to wait and the time wouldn't be short until it was past and she was looking back at it. But she could look ahead, project herself to the end of the trip, then she would be there already, so she thought about Keenan. He would be there to get her, at a little airport by the ocean.

He had looked so much older when she saw him last, it had made her see the age in herself that had been so gradual and private she hadn't noticed it until she saw his snagged yellow teeth, his nicotined fingers, his hair changing from brown to grey and trapped in a color which was neither. And his hair was disappearing over the top of his head. His high forehead was wrinkled, his eyebrows arched, as though he was constantly surprised.

Until Keenan's visit Joan hadn't seen the deep lines jerking the corners of her mouth down like a sad-faced clown. She wondered where the lines had come from. They seemed connected to cords that stood out in her neck as though she held up her body with her chin. Her eyebrows seemed to follow the same slope of sad resignation as her mouth: she could no longer frown convincingly, though she could remember a time when her eyebrows had sloped toward the bridge of her nose, making her look alert, determined, skeptical: now she looked sad and resigned.

The smell of Keenan had lingered after he left, surprising her from closets where he had hung his coat or tossed forgotten socks. Though Keenan was declining, wasn't the boy she remembered writing poems to her sister, he had made her see Mr Spankovich differently, as a lump of pink breathing flesh, less than a man. She resented these thoughts, fought them, but they had begun to grow. And Keenan was still sweet, still dedicated to lost

causes, still believed in life as a work of art. And now he seemed more willing than ever to see Joan as someone besides Evelyn's sister, had invited her to live with him, to figure out what she wanted, to discover, perhaps, that what she wanted was him. She really didn't know. It was something, though, and better than the cold, white, wet nothing outside this window.

## II

By the time Keenan had slipped and jumped and shuffled down the winding, washed-out cliff path to Agate Beach, the mist that had made him wish for an Intermittent switch on his windshield wipers had turned into a drizzle and finally a downpour. The sussurus of the rain was quiet static beneath the roar of the ocean, the gusts of the wind, wet sounds. But he had worn his rubber boots that flapped around his legs with a noise like a frog, his wool shirt would soak up a lot of rain before he noticed he was wet, and his watch cap would keep his head warm as a boiled egg.

Tall waves rolled in by a storm offshore crashed hard on the beach, echoing off the cliffs and shooting foaming

water hissing far up the sand and shingle. A buoy hooted somewhere out in the swells, and the horizon crowded close to the tideline as the clouds lowered.

Keenan liked to kneel in the wet gravel at the edge of the waves, scrabbling at the momentarily revealed shining rocks that tumbled in the foam and sand and weeds. When he could he snatched, before they could tumble away or be covered by sand, beautiful rocks which, at least when wet, revealed themselves as select and shiny things in a background of dull grey sand and cold dirty foam. His hands turned white from the shocking cold, except for the yellow stains like bruises around the first two fingers of each hand where he held his Camels. He grabbed for pretty rocks like a miner for nuggets, enjoying the futility of mining for something no one would buy. The foam swept up the beach and surrounded him, sucked back hard into the ocean that had thrown it, clawing up pebbles, tumbling them up for an instant where Keenan could grab them. He liked to feel the beach receding from beneath his knees, dragging him into the sea, liked to sink into the earth like Rumplestiltskin stomping his feet.

He remembered pictures in childhood storybooks that showed two versions of that story, one where Rumplestiltskin had stomped his feet into the ground and sank out of sight waving his fists, another where he had been

carried away kicking by an eagle. He couldn't remember what Rumpelstiltskin had done to deserve such a fate, but neither did he doubt the justice of it. Keenan was ready to sink out of sight or be carried away, any day now, by some unnamed power greater than the Police, some moral arbiter angered enough by his abuses--more serious than the legal ones and having to do with his soul--to remove him from life for good.

Death was something Keenan knew he wouldn't inflict on himself with extreme prejudice, by scaling cliffs, or driving cars faster than his Volkswagen would go, nor would he ever put a real gun to his head and pull the trigger the way he pantomimed with his fingers at least ten times a day. The booze and cigarettes and pot would speed his erosion, but they were more a prison term than an execution. He was a lifer, self-administered punishment, taken orally all day, smoke and spirits, each puff, each sip shortening his life sentence infinitesimally.

Someday, though, maybe a big wave would carry him away into the sea with his pockets full of shiny rocks, and he would become an agate himself, his bodily fluids replaced by chalcedony rather than cholesterol. Kneeling in the foam, his hands full of dripping sand and his gaze drawn out to sea, he imagined his flesh would become transparent rock, not merely a sheet of gauze stretched

over bursting blood vessels and hardening arteries. His heart, which beat now with a yearning only the ocean and beautiful women could create, would be set in the stone of his chest, and no longer offered up again and again to be belittled, or worse, ignored. Heart of stone at last, what he should have been born with. But in the meantime he could carry home rocks that at the tideline were epiphanies.

He envisioned an art opening at the Ugly Duckling bar, saw himself in a high top hat and a black cane with a crystal doorknob handle, a voice like a carnival barker: "Yes, folks, beauty from the grey void of the sea, Nature's art. Plucked from the grit of the sand and the grip of the waves. Art rounded and polished by the abrasion of existence in the roaring tumult of the great mother ocean." If he had a paper and pencil he would write it down, better yet he could catch it on film--a rock, a wave, the long desolate beach, the agate iridescent even in black and white. A wide angle shot, or maybe a closeup still that contained it all. The best, though, would be if he had someone here to tell it to, an Evelyn who loved him, preferably, but crowding his mind were a dozen women he could love selflessly because he didn't know them. He tried to imagine Joan out here in the rain and the sand, simultaneously planned to bring her agate hunting and envisioned her fear, her unease. He

could not imagine her outside the apartment in the City any more than she could. She was locked there as much by the memories of her friends as by her own.

A wave bigger than all the rest rolled in to crash against Keenan's chest, rocked him back on his heels and seethed around him, holding him down and running up his nose, tearing at his glasses and roaring in his ears. He came up choking, sputtering and elated, his hat floating quickly past him on its way out to sea. He snatched his hat and ran from the next, bigger, wave, slogging loudly in his rubber boots brimming with water. The wave broke behind his heels, the sand sucking from beneath his feet drawing him back as though he struggled on the crumbling edge of a flat earth with swirls of chaos tentacling his ankles.

The sea chased him into the tangle of driftwood near the bluff where he collapsed, gasping, on a big log. He grinned at the ocean, shook his finger at it, tried to speak and laugh but air rasped in his throat and all he could do was cough and fight to breathe. He hawked and spat and calmed his breath, then reached in his pocket for a Camel. His cigarettes were soaked, even the ones in the far back of the pack. The cigarettes fell apart in his hands, and squiggly shreds of tobacco clung to his fingers purple with cold. The heads of his paper matches had turned to paste. He had thought to build a fire, to sit



and get dry and watch the sea until it was time to head for the airport, but now he couldn't, he had to have smoke, he needed a drink and someone to tell this to.

He had been here less than an hour, less time than the drive out from town and the drive back would take, hardly enough time to make the long treacherous walk along the rickety railings down the cliff worthwhile. But he had a couple of handfuls of agates to show he had been here, the memory of the big waves rolling out of the fog onto the beach, all that extra oxygen in his blood from walking so far and going so long without a cigarette, and he was drenched without recourse to dry clothes. He had to get back to the Duckling to bask in it, to have a few drinks to celebrate it, and to be someplace quiet and enclosed and dark. He needed to think about what he would say to Joan when she got off the airplane. Her arrival was one of those fantasies that comprised his future plans, along with the top hat and the cane, and until now had seemed in no danger of coming true.

When people walk into the Ugly Duckling for the first time, they usually stop just inside the door, their better sense telling them to leave immediately before crossing the noncommittal space beyond the door and stepping into the deep murk of the bar, onto the carpet that recedes like a ragged red tide behind the stools. There is art--

often fuzzy, or made from raw scraps of pallets coated with spray paint--exhibited on the wall, lit by tin-can spotlights. But what stops people first and most often completely is the smell. "It smells like puke, like barf, like somebody has been sick in here."

"It's just beer, old beer, in the floorboards behind the cooler, beer from a leaky keg once." This from Steve, a small, slumped figure sitting just beyond the swing of the door. A wool hatbrim is pulled low over his nose, a beard and moustache hide the rest of his face, the ember of a cigarette burns in his mouth somewhere.

"Smoke I can handle, but this air's got lumps."

"Anyone with enough class to notice gets a free beer. Kind of like the Princess and the Pea." He giggles, and a small spotted hand appears on your arm, your shoulder; he's off his stool, you're walking toward the bar.

"You just say that so I'll make a joke about pee. And I don't want a beer, I want a drink."

"A free draft or a well drink, on the house." Serious now, an innkeeper's dignity.

"But I want a Bailey's coffee."

And wherever you go from there depends on who you are and how good you are at it, how well your act plays with Steve. And how long it is worthwhile or necessary or habitual for you to be there, how well Steve's act plays with you.

The Ugly Duckling sits close to a corner near the Town Square, which is all of downtown, and the bar has a slight entryway formed by an angle indented in the front wall. Enough room for two to get out of the rain and into the thought of a rear entrance closer to the Co-op, where sooner or later everyone in town goes at least once a day. This is how Keenan, and many before and after him, found the Duckling at all, dragged backward through a door they hadn't noticed while cowering from the rain, by a small spotted hand at the end of Steve's arm. Keenan's face shows the surprise of many such encounters, his hair drawing itself back over the top of his head, his eyebrows stretched upward in eternal wonder. His eyebrows balance the general droop of his body forward, a collapse his feet struggle to keep up with until they can deposit him, perhaps, on a barstool.

Inside, the wet wool smell of rained-on people cuts the stale beer and smoke stench into a mixture a tobacconist might call Rain Forest. And the hot brandies are served with a single whole clove floating and censing and creating the problem of what to do with it and whether to have one in the next. Keenan's mind has struggled through possible responses: "No lumber" sounds clever, bartalk for toothpicks in martinis, but he likes to keep the cloves, adding a new one on each refill, so he can

count his drinks the way he counts his cigarette butts in ashtrays. A logjam on the surface of his drink will tell him to go home. If the bartender is someone he wants to talk to, he can use the cloves as a springboard for a discussion of the relative merits of drink additives like olives in beer. The one thing he is certain of, having experimented, is that the cloves should not be chewed.

Steve might guide you, especially if you or the bartender buy him a drink. He is neither owner nor bartender, but seems indispensable. He's sitting too close and he's talking nonsense and spitting and laughing and losing his teeth but he knows you, trusts you with information that demands you be his friend; he has adopted you like a sick dog, a wet cat, a drunk.

"I put on a wetsuit once." Steve will tell you, and you'll think that's it, the whole story, but he just uses bigger commas than most people. "And we tore up the floorboards, and dragged the cooler clear out from behind the bar. I went down there with ammonia and a brush, and cleaned it all up, but you'd have to tear the whole floor out." He's talking about the stench in the bar and an abortive, obviously unsuccessful, and perhaps imaginary attempt to get rid of it. Same thing, he'll tell you, with the skylights. It's useless. He's the maintenance man; you name it, he has failed to fix it: the cooler, the ice machine, the leaks. He shows you the tracks the water

has made: "Look, it started clear over there, it ran across, it started to drip down here then it turned and ran over along the wall...this town leaks. Leaks are like ghosts that way, they obey their own logic and it takes something more than science to get rid of them."

Keenan sat in the Ugly Duckling with a hot brandy, watching the cloves--eight of them--floating in his hot brandy, trying to isolate their smell in the alcohol steam rising from the glass while he listened to the Dylan tape he had donated to the bar. The bar was quiet and empty--there were people there, but when Keenan felt empty, everyone was empty, and everything everyone poured inside themselves didn't fill the emptiness. He knew them, they knew him, none of them knew anything the others wanted to know. The elation from the beach was gone; his slow-drying clothes chilled him; his ocean-soaked billfold folded only enough for a pack of smokes and a well drink; he had had to beg for credit from the bartender. Joan would be flying in on a plane in about an hour, Keenan had already been at the bar for two hours, and he could see a significant difference in the level of the brandy bottle the bartender had left within reach on the back bar rather than on the bottom shelf of the well where it belonged, where he had grown tired of stooping for it. Whiskey, Keenan knew, was his sworn enemy, the way tobacco, too,

was his sworn enemy. Pot, though, was his friend, but until the seedlings in the back of his microbus, registered female Indica starts, grew up, he didn't have any.

Steve appeared beside him, insinuatingly close, muttering shifty-eyed. "You got something we could burn in the alley, Keenan?"

Keenan shook his head, watching himself and Steve in the mirror above the bar. Without his watch cap his head looked like a quail's egg. "I had a joint but it got soaked at Agate Beach." He would leave his bus parked in the Co-op parking lot with the seedlings hardly disguised with outspread newspapers, but he wouldn't tell Steve about them. The shoots barely had their first set of leaves, but Steve would convince him to pull up enough to roll a joint anyway.

"Didn't anyone tell you you got to keep your powder dry?" Steve said. Keenan made a pistol of his right hand, raised it to his temple, let the hammer fall. "You look down today, bro, I thought you had a lady coming in from back east." Steve held his coffee mug as though it could heat his whole body.

"She's my sweetie," Keenan said. "My substitute, my compromise. Someone I can fall back on."

"I prefer to fall forward on them myself, Keenan."

Keenan closed his eyes and sang. "'If my baby don't love me no more, I know her sister will,'" He opened his eyes again. Steve didn't seem to be listening. "Jimi told me that. Got any Hendrix for that tape machine? I want to hear some Hendrix." The bartender wandered past, and Steve signalled for a refill of Keenan's drink, to be written on his tab.

"Make it an Irish," Keenan spoke up, though his head drooped toward his arms crossed on the bar. Steve nodded, held up two fingers.

"I see Evelyn is hanging with Drew these days, Keenan." Steve saw everything. "Saw them at the bookstore together. Where does that leave you?"

"I'm a sycophant." Keenan experimented with the word, watching in the mirror the bubble that appeared between his lips. It was better with a P, psycophant. "Always have been. When I grow up, I want to be a sycophant. Drew's my partner, though, I'm happy for both of them. Happy for both." The bartender delivered the shots, spilling over the tops of the glasses, the house pour. Keenan tried and failed to light the whiskey slopped on the bar. Within a few minutes of drinking the shot back all at once, Keenan felt himself sinking, his body slowly folding up as though to climb back inside a cocoon long outgrown. He could not remember having eaten anything recently. Steve hovered.

"What is it, Keenan, you need some blow? The lady say she's not coming?"

"Little Joanie," Keenan heard himself squeaking, his head rolling on his neck like a Mantis's. "Jooooanie, kiss kiss, come to Keenan, Joanie." He saw his face in the mirror, a puzzled look above his mouth which opened while from it poured a grey, gooey fluid that he managed at the last minute to direct onto the floor.

### III

Keenan stood halfway through the French doors to the patio, hesitant, groping for a last word. "I could use some forgiveness, Joan," he said. "It's been three days, I'm sober now, I'm working on the problem, Joan. If you can't forgive me, you could say you understand, maybe. I wasn't trying to mess up your life, I was just drunk."

Joan stared down at her knitting. The simple movements and focus enclosed her; the bag of yarn on the



floor claimed territory, and the growing shape in her lap gave her purpose. Being angry at Keenan gave her control; she was bored with it, but she hadn't figured out what to do with it yet, needed to be alone with him first. She could see from the corner of her eye Evelyn's benignant look from across the braided rug they both had their feet on. Evelyn radiated pity, extended it like a castoff dress she had found at the back of her closet and wanted Joan to try on.

"I have an idea," Joan said, hating the poison in her voice. "Why don't you photograph the auras of your pot plants, Keenan? You could make a photoessay for High Tide Slash Low Tide."

"Joan, I wish you would stop that. It's High Tide/Low Tide."

"But I just don't know how to say it like you do. I swear your eyes do a glottal stop or something when you get to the middle. You have to hiccough to say it right." They want clever, I'll give them clever. Really this is sort of fun.

The top of Keenan's head flushed quickly red; Joan imagined heat waves shimmering from his scalp. His small mouth worked itself into a smile under his moustache; he nodded, made a little half-wave and went outside, closing the curtained doors carefully behind him.

"I wish you two would just kiss and make up or swear eternal indifference," Evelyn said, bored in her beanbag chair, proofreading. "I'm getting so tired of Keenan as whipped puppy, Joan, and you act like that's a shroud you're knitting and you plan to wear it when it's done."

Joan sat with her back to the big window overlooking the ocean. She held her knitting in her lap. "It's nothing, really, I'll probably unravel it soon. I hate to feel like I'm the only one not making something."

"I'm sorry we're so intent on High Tide/Low Tide. Did I say that right? Keenan wanted the slash instead of a comma, you know. So it graphically accentuates the Yin-Yang relationship." Evelyn paused, made a mark on a page with a blue felt-tip pen, glanced back to Joan over half-glasses. "Every issue I wonder if it's worth it at all, but we have our subscribers to think of, and we have a dynamite story this year from Rita Knight. Even though it's not really regional, if Rita sends you a story you print it. And some nice poems from Leslie Manner and Punch Parsley. Punch is a scream, did I tell you about his reading? The clothes that man wears....You know, for a regional quarterly we're doing better than some of the nationals. As soon as we send it off to the printers, though, I promise we'll take a drive down to the Bay, doesn't that sound good? I've wanted for years to show you around out here and I'm so glad you could finally make

it." Again she tucked her chin to her collarbone to fix her gaze on Joan, squinting a little as the two-oclock sun shone through the window. "Of course I am sorry the old man had to die to get you here, you know that, don't you Joan?"

Joan raised her needles, then dropped them again in her lap. She spoke quickly to keep herself from crying. "I'm the only one who's sorry he's dead, the only one in the world. All the relatives and their lawyers are wrangling over the apartment right now. They used to come up and look around, they even wanted to rearrange the furniture to see how it would look the way they thought it should be. His sister brought her designer over with wallpaper samples two weeks after I started caring for him."

"I just covet that kitchen clock." Evelyn said. "I can almost understand why you stayed so long, to be able to live in an apartment like that in the Village. People would give their arms and legs...oooh, wrong analogy." Evelyn put down her papers and padded across the room to Joan's chair and knelt beside her. "How's my sister?"

Joan let herself be drawn into the sympathetic cradle of her sister's arms. "I'm sick of crying for no reason. I'm sick of feeling that I'm forgetting to do something that will kill somebody if I don't do it but there's nobody to do it for." Joan didn't tell her, I'm sick of

looking at you and realizing what a hag I've become. She didn't tell her, But at least now I know why I always wore a bra. She sat up.

"When the nurse interviewed me for the job she told me what had happened to Mr. Spankovich. How he was standing on one leg pulling on his pajamas when he turned his head and sneezed. That paralyzed him instantly, they think, then he fell forward and hit his temple on the corner of his nightstand. I'll never forget the look on her face when I said 'He's lucky it didn't kill him.' I still think so, Evelyn, I can't help it."

"You need something new to think about, don't you? You know, Keenan was looking forward to you getting here all week, he didn't mean to get drunk and leave you waiting at the airport. That's probably why he got drunk and left you at the airport. This reunion has been building for a long time. After all these years I think Keenan has given up and accepted that he and I can be friends, that we're not going to be lovers, and he's ready to be with someone who can love him back. He's modifying his altruism." She looked out the window, cocked her head as though pleased with her phrase. "I think he wants you, Joan, and don't pretend he was just crashing on your floor there in the City. I think the sooner you two screw and make up the happier everyone will be."

Evelyn loved to shock Joan with her blunt language, and Joan hated herself for the little flinch she had made that showed it still worked. She focussed again on the tips of her needles. "I've been thinking I should probably live alone, as soon as I can learn how to drive and get a car."

"If he's too healthy for you maybe we can tie him up. It could be just like your old man again, wouldn't that be a scream?"

Joan felt her face growing hot, her hands shaking. She tried to speak, but could only make a strangled sound. She angrily ground her knuckles in her eyes to stop the tears.

"Oh, dear, now I've done it. I thought maybe we could laugh a little. I'm sorry, I guess I'm just on a different wavelength." Evelyn rose and ran her fingers through Joan's hair. "Let's make sure we remember to take our pills, darling," she said, and went back to her chair by the window. "Oh, look, Joan, a whale. He's breaching, see him?" But Joan had left the room.

Joan carried a lawn chair out to the rocky point below Evelyn's house. The shore swept back on either side; the point was the tip of a larger promontory that extended "as far west as you can go without getting your feet wet," according to Evelyn. Joan set her chair down

as close to the edge of the cliff as she could stand it, with her back to the water. She had decided that the empty feeling like someone had just vacuumed her insides would go away if she just got used to the ocean; Keenan called it "Reestablishing contact with the immensities." The wind, which she had finally decided would never die down, tugged her hair from beneath her bandanna, flipped the pages of her notebook.

Dear Mr. Spankovich,

I'm writing to you because every time I try to talk about you Evelyn and Keenan think I'm depressed. I've been here nearly a week, and they're tired of me already. And vice-versa, I'm sure. Evelyn lives in a house like a barnacle on the edge of a cliff. The windows rattle every time a big wave hits the rock. Evelyn and Keenan like to sit by the windows and pretend to see whales and porpoises and ernes. They call them ospreys, but I've done enough crossword puzzles to know what a sea-eagle is called. You won't catch me by those windows, they make me feel like I'm going to fall right off into the ocean. I never knew what an awful thing the ocean could be. I'm sitting as close to the edge of it as I dare now, though: it can have me. I'm waiting for some seagull to drop something on me. Or a wave or a big black arm to reach up and grab me. I can't look up at the horizon--it bends, it makes me feel like I'm going to throw up. Look, they say, look: didn't you see that spout, that fluke, that whale breaching? Nobody has whales in their front yard, it's just a conceit. They want to see whales so they see whales.

Evelyn lives here by herself, except when people come to stay with her. She has a poet, Drew, staying with her most of the time, and typically, Keenan has made him his best friend. Drew is where Keenan wants to be--in Evelyn's bed--and he's what Keenan wants to be, a poet. Drew is even more absurd than Keenan, in looks, though he seems to be more talented. We're none of us that pretty, I guess: I let myself get old and ugly all those years with you, Mr. Spankovich. Why didn't you tell me my teeth had black shadows

around the edges, that I should have been chewing gum for the big bag under my chin?

I shouldn't forget they're my friends, my family. Maybe I just want more attention. They're all putting together their magazine about California things. They're intent on saving things nobody needs and preventing things everybody wants. And boring? I never thought I would condone drug use, but unless these people are snorting cocaine they move and speak and think so slowly I don't know how I stand it. It's so quiet out here, but the ocean never shuts up. At night I wake up and think I've left the television on and it's gone off the air. I dream of waves and a long tunnel smooth and white and twisted like the inside of a sea shell; every day I find sand in my ear whether I go to the beach or not.

Keenan wasn't there to pick me up at the airport. I had to call Evelyn and then half the bars in the county to find him. Toll calls. He drove me out to Evelyn's so drunk he was weaving all over the road, and it's not much of a road, either, especially at night. I don't know why anyone would want to live so far from anyplace. And halfway here he tells me he has three hundred marijuana seedlings in the back of his microbus. I didn't

"I brought you some coffee, Joan." Suddenly Keenan was beside her, two coffee mugs in his hands, steam streaming sideways in the breeze.

"I didn't come out here to be an accomplice in a felony, Keenan."

"Coffee, Joan, it's only coffee." He squatted beside her lawn chair, a stick figure of a man, his clothes flapping, the wind making cowlicks with the scant hair left on top of his head. He moved his eyebrows and the wrinkles on his forehead as though this stretching of his scalp could communicate things words could not. His eyes were sad as an old dog's, and Joan felt she should relent, remember they were old friends after all, not new enemies.

The coffee smell cut through the musky stench of the ocean, reminded her of the breakfast nook at Mr. Spankovich's. She took a sip, the steam fogging her sunglasses. "Thank you," she said. "This is very good coffee." She gestured with the mug toward the narrow throat of ocean surging through a channel in the cliff.

"Why are all those plants dead? I thought everything was healthy and alive out here."

"Which ones?"

"Those ones with the big leaves, like rhubarb. They're all limp and greasy. Like bok-choi you find in the crisper drawer a week too late."

Keenan peered over the edge. "They're not dead."

"Of course they are, look at them. I should know what a dead plant looks like, I've killed enough of them. God knows it smells like something's dead."

"I know that's what it looks like, Joan, but look at the ones lower down, when the waves lift them up. When the tide is full the stalks float and the leaves spread out on the water. Down below them the seaweed is brown, see, all the way around at the same level. It's underwater more often so it has less chlorophyll, I guess. And up above are the little plants and shells that just live on the spray instead of going under completely."

"Well aren't we the naturalist though? So what are they called?"



"I don't know. That's the nice thing about the ocean, you don't have to know words. If you just watch it long enough it tells you everything you need to know."

Gentle. Paternal. Therapeutic. Sensitive. "Oh, put it in a poem, will you?" Joan stood suddenly; the wind whipped her lawn chair away, tumbling it clattering over the edge of the rock and out of sight. She felt something like panic, something like rage take her over. "God damn," she shouted, and threw her coffee mug after the chair. Hot coffee streamed burning down her arm, left a spattered black trail on the rock. She staggered, turned and tried to run up the hill. Keenan caught her, held her shoulders while she beat his thin chest with her small fists. "I'm not crazy," she cried, "I'm not crazy. Yell at me, won't you? Argue with me. Don't any of you ever get mad?"

She sobbed against Keenan's scratchy wool shirt until gradually she stopped shaking and her breath grew calm. Keenan held her, one arm around her shoulders, his other hand on top of hers pressed against his heart. His shirt smelled of tobacco and wet wool, his thin body blocked her from the wind that blew all around them, their flapping clothes and the stillness where their bodies met isolating them like a tree on a mountaintop. She watched his cigarette burning quickly in the wind, watched and didn't speak until the coal had burnt down between his fingers.

He didn't loosen his hug. A seagull, wings spread but unmoving, popped up over the edge of the rock from below and hung in the air a few yards away, watching. The gull wavered, tilted, and the wind tore it away, far out over the water.

"Have you ever had a kite, Keenan?" she asked him, looking up at his small head, his wire glasses set out on his pointed nose. His eyes looked down at her under the glasses. "I mean, have you ever gotten one to fly, got it way up in the air so you could stand there and watch it? I never did. That's what I want to do, can we do that?"

"We can do anything you want." He licked the burns on his fingers.

"Good." She took a deep breath: if she could get on an airplane she could do this, too. "I've been thinking, Keenan, tell me about your house in that little town, what's it called?"

"Sunny Blue Lake," Keenan said, smiling. "It's a big house, and there's room in the back for my darkroom if I can get the money together to block the light."

"Are there stores around, people?"

"Maybe not right in Blue Lake, but there's plenty in Arcata and Eureka. They're not Manhattan, but they're real towns."

"I need to live in a town, Keenan, I need to do things about my life, and I'm just a guest here and I'm

too far from anyplace. Can we move to Blue Lake? To your house? You're not really working on the magazine now, are you? I want to be with just you."

He looked at her for a moment, then grinned like a boy. "We'll do what you want. It's time I got those plants in the ground, anyway." He bent to kiss her, his tongue probing, experimentally, at her teeth.

"Can we kind of hold off on that for a while?" she said, and he didn't seem to mind.

#### IV

They drove at night from Evelyn's so no one could see the pot plants in the back of Keenan's Volkswagen. The bus lurched on the mountain road, tossing Joan against the door or into the space between the seats. There were no seat belts, just a handle on the dashboard. The engine roared loud but the car seemed to move slowly for all the brave noise. Keenan hunched over the wheel, his elbows sharp bony angles half-filling the cab. Empty bottles rolled somewhere in the dark cave of the bus behind them, and the flats of seedlings slid on tight corners. Joan's

job was to keep the tapedeck upright between the seats, a portable unit playing Dylan tunes that Keenan sang along with. By the time the road flattened out and grew straighter and smooth, the batteries in the deck were fading, Dylan's voice dragged and deepened, but Keenan stayed in unison anyway. The wind and fog seeped through the doors of the old bus and Joan shivered in Keenan's wool coat, but she was happier, this was movement. She would be near a town, could go to the store, could find a place to take driving lessons, could buy clothes. At Evelyn's, no one thought about going to town, only made lists for monthly supply trips.

It was a long drive. They stopped often for Keenan to piss on the side of the road. From the back of the bus came the smell of moist dark earth from the flats of marijuana seedlings. Keenan wouldn't talk to her. "It takes all my concentration to keep the engine running," he said when she complained of the quiet. "If my attention wavers the motor will stop, the wheels will turn into a ditch. Symbiosis makes the Volkswagen go."

Blue Lake is inland a few miles, far enough that the river water runs fresh during the highest tides, though the air still tastes of salt. The town abuts the mountains that separate the coast from the broad interior valley, so the freeway exit sign warns that Blue Lake is

the last service for fifty miles, although often as not the gas station is closed anyway.

The sign at the edge of town says Welcome to Sunny Blue Lake. Sunny Blue Lake is a slogan, a popular myth and even occasionally true: when it's raining in Arcata, sometimes it's only foggy in Blue Lake, and when it's foggy in Arcata, sometimes people in Blue Lake can see the sun. It is somewhat less futile to try to ripen tomatoes on the vine in Blue Lake than Arcata or McKinleyville. The real sunny weather doesn't begin until Willow Creek up over the pass, but Blue Lake's Chamber of Commerce has had to resort to subtle and perhaps imaginary climate differences with the more thriving local communities to provide an identity for their town.

Joan started awake as the bus slowed down. "We're home," Keenan said, and pointed through the windshield at a post-and-board sign that said "Welcome to Sunny Blue Lake." Among the church and fraternal orders insignia, partially obscuring the Elevation and Population figures, were nailed dime-store 'Sorry, We're Closed' signs. "Town lost its insurance," Keenan said, pulling back onto the road. "They don't have buses, constables, playgrounds, road crews or cooperation with out-of-town fire departments. Closest thing to anarchy we're likely to find. My kind of town."

"What's so good about that?"

"It's freedom, Joan. Just like pot is freedom, poems and pictures and women are freedom." Joan was too tired even to make a face.

When Keenan had driven her past the corner store, the Logger Bar, the old Grange Hall and the post office, he said she had seen the whole town, except for the new laundromat and video rental up by the gas station.

"Which way is the lake?" she asked.

"There is no lake. Hasn't been for ten or twenty years. Used to be a dam on the river, and some tourist cabins, a little resort. But the river washed out the dam and they never rebuilt it. Used to be a sawmill and an asphalt plant, too. It's the perfect town. No natural resources, nothing for tourists, no industry, no cops and two bars."

Their house was only a few blocks from downtown, on a street of small homes, lawns and bushes and occasional segments of sidewalk. The house was designed after a Victorian, with a broad porch and big windows, but asbestos siding and plank trim kept it humble. "The garden's out back," said Keenan, "and a cottage with a couple living in it. I've got some black-eyed peas planted back there, and there's apple trees and a walnut tree, too."

Inside, the house was barren. Joan wandered through the echoing rooms while Keenan wadded paper into the wood stove. "The tallest piece of furniture in here is the fireplace," said Joan. "They say Bohemians are people who live close to the floor, but I didn't know it was this close."

"Are you ready to be a Bohemian?"

"I guess I'll find out. You're not a real Bohemian, you've got a television. I'll make some curtains, and don't you have some of your photographs we could hang up? There must be some lumber we can make bookshelves out of. This is like going away to college, Keenan. Do you have any clean sheets?"

The house was cold, damp. Joan was already cold from the long ride in the bus that had no heater, so Keenan went out to the yard for firewood and she dragged his mattress from a bedroom and made it up next to the stove. The wood was wet and hard to light; they sat in front of the stove shoving newspaper under the kindling, blowing on the orange coals and trying to fan the smoke up the chimney with a paper plate. Joan wrapped herself in a blanket, but felt drafts from all directions. Keenan hung blankets in doorways to hold the heat in the room, and Joan found towels to block the cracks under the doors with. Keenan heated water for tea, and they sat huddled together as the smoke built up in the stove and finally

cleared a way up the chimney. The wet wood finally caught fire, and the heat extended far enough from the stove that Keenan and Joan began edging away from the stove.

Keenan turned on the stereo, searched a long time through stacks of records leaning against the baseboards.

"What is this?" Joan said, almost getting it, trying to get the title before the lyrics began, "I know what it is, it's..." But she just missed, it was Dave Van Ronk singing "Head Inspector", and she laughed while Keenan grinned at her, singing along.

"I never did the thing in an air raid drill and I never took the trouble to write my will. I ain't good looking but I'm hard to kill, dead broke boppin' round."

"God," Joan said. "We were kids then. coffee houses in Greenwich Village. And now look, Jesus, Van Ronk has probably smoked himself to death, and we're playing house in Blue Lake."

"Maybe we should have seen this coming," Keenan said, moving closer, pulling her beside him so her head rested on his shoulder.

"I think we did," Joan said. "I think we avoided it as long as we could." She straightened up. "Let's not make too much of it, OK, Keenan? I've been a bitch, I know. I know you didn't want to abandon me at the airport, I know Evelyn was trying to be sisterly. I'm sorry I'm not ready to be your lover, I thought maybe I



could but I just can't, not yet. This is all new to me."

"It's OK, Joan. I can help you. You can help me. It's a start, I'm glad you're here. I won't molest you, I promise. I'll help you get started, and we can see what happens from there." The Van Ronk record began again. Keenan stoked the stove with as much wood as it would hold, and they fell asleep together still wearing their clothes. In the morning Joan woke up to the sounds of Van Ronk still bebopping from the speakers. The stove was cold, but light came in through the windows, and a big white rose blossom on a long unpruned stalk blown by the wind bumped against the pane, almost in time to the music. Beside her Keenan snored lightly, his glasses askew on his face, a spot of drool shining on the pillow below his mouth.

## V

At Evelyn's house the coastal winds had cleared the fog away from her peninsul most of the day, but in Sunny Blue Lake the fog snagged in the trees like lint on wool. Roses--purple, white and red--collected dew outside the windows, lush fuschias drooped under the weight of their

blossoms. Although the lumber mill in town was shut down, the country surrounding town was owned by a big lumber corporation with its own town, its own mill. When the fog lifted high enough to reveal the skyline, the progress of the cutting could be seen in the lines of trees steadily receding from either side of a pointed hill above town, the stripped hill emerging like a stubbly tumor growing from someone's scalp. Up past those hills, Keenan told her, the sun shone all day; up there it was summer, and there he would grow his plants. Rent was overdue, though, and he needed to borrow some money for potting soil so he could get his plants in the ground. Joan insisted that she should be settled in before his plants, and refused to allow them in the house, the yard or the bus in front of the house, so Keenan drove them into the hills to hide them the next day while Joan walked through the house, around the yard and into town.

Most of the houses were old, some run down; the lawns were tall and wet and patched with dew-covered spider webs. The air smelled of apples. Dogs ran up and down the streets but paid no attention to her; the only dogs that barked were those fenced into yards. There were no real blocks, and some of the roads were dirt. Only a few cars drove by as Joan walked around what seemed to be the whole town, a walk that took less than an hour. The town

seemed abandoned, it lacked a center, she thought there should be an old fort like Ticonderoga somewhere to show that Blue Lake was really more outpost than town, but there seemed no one and nothing to protect. Bushes around the houses bloomed lushly--azaleas, rhododendrons, lilacs already gone by or not yet blossomed, she couldn't tell. It seemed that anything would grow here, that flowers could bloom at will in any season. At least there was no ocean with its constant roar, nor barren sand beaches with decaying weeds and sea creatures. The growth here was rank, but the blossoms reminded her of home, and she wondered if anyone would notice her gathering a bouquet from the rose bushes and rhododendrons that seemed left over from some previous settlement unrelated to this one, in old vacant spaces with broken bricks scattered among the grass.

There was a little store on a corner by the only stop sign in town, a general store that tried to cram in its two narrow aisles everything anyone would need, from fresh vegetables to canned goods to mouse traps and electrical tape, stacks of beer cases wherever there was room for them.

Joan's dinner plans diminished as she trod the creaking floorboards; she began to feel again the constraint she had hoped to escape leaving Evelyn's outpost on the promontory; she needed a town to go to, a

real town, enough people around her that no one would look at each other. She felt so conspicuous in this town, like an uninvited guest: she had fled into the store after passing a group of young girls sitting on an abandoned railroad track, smoking cigarettes they weren't old enough to buy. They stopped talking as she approached, and began laughing when she was past. Now, standing staring at a rack of shelves full of dusty boxes of Hamburger Helper, Rice-a-Roni and Brillo pads, the yellow and blue and brown colors on the boxes were somehow sickening. She felt cold, her breath thinned to a small squeaking stream through her throat, her hands began to shake and tears fought her eyelids for a path down her face. She could realize she was about to collapse on the floor, she could worry that it would be humiliating, but she couldn't stop it from happening. She wanted to run home, out of the store and up the street, but she couldn't move, couldn't think of what way to turn if she could get outside, and the pictures of the food on the boxes began to smell like the dog shit she had seen on the street.

Then behind her she heard the familiar voice of a woman she knew well, a conniving blond with no morals and a drug habit she sucked men dry to support. It was her favorite soap opera, on the tiny television suspended above the checkout counter where the henna-haired clerk sat munching animal crackers and talking to the

television. The familiar voice short-circuited her seizure; she felt she had a mission now, one she could fulfill, she could fill a void, two weeks at least of missed episodes.

The checkout lady was named Gilda. One corner of her mouth turned down in skepticism or distaste, Joan couldn't decide which, and she spoke in a drawl Joan hadn't thought existed anywhere but the deep south. She filled Joan in on the episodes she had missed, pausing to ring up some soda pop for the schoolkids who came in occasionally from the little groups that gathered in the small dirt parking lot outside the store. Gilda dispensed the information as though it was part of the service the store offered: she was older than Joan, she had lived in Blue Lake all her life, and Joan decided it had been a mistake to tell the woman she was living with Keenan, and where. "Oh, I know who he is all right," Gilda said when Joan mentioned Keenan, and her tone implied she thought little enough of him. Once she had recapped the events of the soap opera she didn't seem to want to talk any more, though there was little else to occupy her in the store. "I think I can swing the rent myself," Joan found herself saying, an instinctive defense, a response to an accusation never spoken, a question not asked, a thought she hadn't known she had thought this far ahead. "I spent fifteen years taking care of a quadriplegic, I don't need

to tend an alcoholic now." Gilda nodded, seemed uninterested, unconvinced. But when she left the store Joan had nearly forgotten the seizure, felt somehow better, more directed: ready.

When Keenan came back from the hills the next day, dirty and smelling like smoke, Joan didn't tell him she was planning to take over the house for herself. She hadn't done much to it yet, some makeshift curtains, some antieque decor in the windows--just a few old bottles she had found in a shed, but it was beginning to feel like her place. Keenan was exultant, though, praised her work, told her of the sunshine on the hill where his garden would be. "I'm a gentleman farmer now," he said, and really seemed to believe it.

Keenan had stopped at a store in Arcata on the way home and bought a kite. Joan was touched that Keenan had remembered she had mentioned wanting to fly one, and pretended to be excited, even though she had to cover up the fact that she herself had forgotten.

When Joan thought of kites she envisioned the flimsy paper and stick constructions of her childhood, remembered the wispy string tangled in endless knots she and Evelyn tried to get their father to untangle for them. But this kite was a wonder of modern technology, a bright nylon

wing with fiberglass rods that stretched it into a tight arc, grommets holes for the nylon twine to be tied through, a slender multicolored carrying pouch and a price higher than Joan was accustomed to paying for shoes.

They didn't discover there were no instructions until they got to Clam Beach, a flat expanse of sand so long that Joan despaired at the thought of walking along it: it would take an infinity to walk to the end of the beach if it had an end, but that was what everyone at the beach was doing, walking, dwindling in the distance, though it was obvious enough from the parking lot that whatever lay off in the distance could be little different than what was right in front of the car. The ocean seethed and roared at eye level; loud cars roared too fast on the wet sand; people looked small, skinny, but cast impossibly long shadows. Even as she felt herself shrinking, though, a tiny stick figure on the long strip of sand beside the eternal thrashing sea, Keenan seemed to grow, to stand straighter, talk louder. "Let's walk," he said, taking her arm.

"Can't we call a cab?"

Keenan selected a spot suitable for kite flying, a spot distinguished, as far as Joan could tell, only by the long trail of their footprints that led to it. They fought the wind and each other to assemble the mysterious array of kite parts, arguing over their recollections of

the assembled model in the store, about aerodynamic theory, and how to tie a square knot. First they had the crosspieces on the wrong side of the skin, then they couldn't agree if it was the wind that would make the kite fly or the vacuum behind it, and for some reason they couldn't continue until they had discussed it. Keenan insisted that it was the string holding it down to the ground that made the kite fly, Joan was sure that it would fly forever if they let go of the string. Finally the parts took a shape that struggled to be airborne, and the tension of the flapping thing they had created was as exciting as anything Joan could remember.

There was no need to run to get the kite in the air; it burst from Keenan's hands while he was trying to tell Joan how to hold the string. The kite demanded string, more string, and Joan rolled the spindle over and over in her hands while Keenan tried to explain how to let it unspool. They were both laughing, stretching their necks, trying to turn to keep the sun from their eyes while the kite backed into the sky in angry flapping jerks, pulling them down the beach stumbling over driftwood. Joan kept letting out string; an airplane flew overhead on its approach to the McKinleyville airport, and Joan wondered if she could make the kite fly high enough to surprise a pilot. She was dizzy, giggling with the excitement, losing her breath.



The string broke. One moment the cord in her hand was tense and electric, her spirits high as the kite; the next moment the cord snapped, the string drooped useless to the beach, the kite sailed free. The kite no longer struggled or tugged itself into the sky, but wafted in drunken arcs, sliding and falling then surging upward, running as though towed, then sinking before being caught again. It sailed across the grassy dunes, hovered over the freeway, crossed the fence and the slough. It seemed high as the clouds until it sailed to the bluff where trees sloped away from the salt air like a stiff, backswept crewcut. There the dense mat of foliage absorbed the bright blue and yellow of the kite. The kite that had seemed so large and bright was gone as surely as if it had sunk in the sea.

Joan sat hard on the sand, the spindle of string in her hand, and cried. "We didn't have it long enough for it to be ours," she said. Keenan stood in the wind, his finger-gun at his temple, the hammer of his thumb falling, falling and falling.

## VI

Keenan set the round of yellow driftwood on the cratered chopping block, turning it until it stood straight. He lifted the six-pound splitting maul, its long handle taped at the throat. He had to choke up on the handle with one hand to raise the maul over his head, but he brought his hands together on the downswing, and the maul easily split the round, burying itself in the chopping block. The maul was a little heavy for him; it felt like it would lift his feet from the ground on the downswing, and his wrists ached after splitting only a few logs. He slapped down on the end of the handle a few times to loosen the maul from the block, then struggled a larger round into position. It was a rare sunny day in the back yard, though fog hovered just beyond town, along the river. He paused to peel off his wool shirt and mopped his forehead with his bandanna. Joan was inside, writing in her diary or whatever it was. He shot himself in the head with his finger. Whatever he had been thinking would come of this wasn't happening. Joan was helpless without him, but she wouldn't admit it; she tried to provoke him constantly, as though she wanted him to leave, but couldn't even go to the store alone without some sort of crisis.

His seedlings were sitting in dense manzanita a few hundred yards from an abandoned logging road on forest service land far up in the hills above Blue Lake. They would be outgrowing the flats he had transported them in, he needed to plant them in soft potting soil to free their roots, fertilize them, fence them out of reach of the deer, camouflauge them and set up a drip irrigations system. He needed money to do it, and Joan had plenty. He would be able to repay her at harvest time, Hell, he could buy a house if all his plants produced the pound and a half of buds he expected from them. Twenty plants, thirty pounds, twenty-five hundred dollars a pound: his calculations disappeared in zeroes and commas. But he would have to leave her alone, and he had implied, both to Joan and to Evelyn as well, that he wouldn't. He was sure, after watching her operate for a week, that Joan couldn't survive on her own.

The round he had set up to split looked a little rotten--the center was orange, the growth rings were blurred, and only the outside diameter for an inch or two looked like solid wood. He tapped the edge of the round with the blade of the maul where he wanted to hit it, swung the maul high and brought it down with all his might, feeling his heels leave the ground, and pressed the head home with an added twist of his wrists. The head thunked into the pulpy center of the log; he had missed

his mark. The handle stopped hard against the solid wood surrounding the center, and no split lines radiated from the head of the maul. Water that smelled like urine oozed up around the buried blade.

He slapped down on the handle, tried to tug it up, but the maul had become an intrinsic part of the round of redwood, and would not budge. He tried to heave the maul and the round up in the air, but staggered under the levered weight. He wanted to swing it over his head to come down on the chopping block with the hammer head of the maul, so the round would split itself over the wedge, but he couldn't raise it. Finally he turned his back to the block, got the handle over his shoulder and levered the whole assembly onto his shoulder. He turned around and swung the weight up over his head, trying not to roll his wrists. He missed the chopping block completely, and the weight staggered him forward, slammed him into the shed. He stood leaning against the shed a moment, stunned, until his anger goaded him into an all-out attempt on the log, trying to use the adrenalin of his anger to swing it all at once over his head and onto the block.

He dropped the round and the maul handle whacked the inside of his knee; the pain dropped him to the ground fighting for breath. At last, after grinding his teeth and scrunching his eyes and gasping, aware of the melodrama but helpless to overcome the pain, it subsided

enough he could light a cigarette.

At least Joan smoked, now. He remembered visiting her apartment in the Village, and having to go out on the fire escape to smoke, how she would close the window so the smoke couldn't come back inside and bother the old man. Still, she had been in better shape back then. Now, maybe it was those pills she took--he would have to swipe a few before he went to live with his plants, so he could see what kind of a buzz she was living under--her sentences came out all in a rush, after a pause, as though she had to formulate what to say, then say it all at once before she forgot it. She seemed always curious, but defensive about asking questions, so she had to phrase things combatively. And though they slept each night in the same bed there was nothing intimate about it. At first Keenan had tried to include her in his warmth under the blankets, draping an arm over her shoulders, but she would always just remove his arm, without a word, and edge a little further away. She wore a nightgown to bed, changed in the bathroom with the door closed, but seemed to care not at all about Keenan's nakedness, as though her nurse's objectivity extended readily to him, as though he was just another patient.

His cigarette smoked, he renewed his struggle with the firewood. Instead of trying to swing the maul and the round over his head, he now held the round and used it to

beat the maul against the chopping block. He raised and dropped the round until he couldn't raise it again, then rolled it over to see what he had done. The hammer end of the maul was now flush with the pulpy, wet, orange heartwood of the round. The handle had mashed into the firmer wood around the edge, but the wood showed no inclination to split. He set the log on the chopping block and sat down to smoke another cigarette.

He was accustomed to no sex. He spent much of his time alone, much of his time with Evelyn and her boyfriend out on the peninsula, much time drinking in bars staring at women who didn't stare back. There were occasional one-night stands which often ended with waking the next morning in his bed or hers, wondering which question to ask: "What's your name?" or "Did we do it?" But now he had this shadow, Joan, who to all appearances was his woman, whose presence would discourage any woman interested in him from pursuing him. And now it seemed there were interested women, where there had been none before: he caught glances in his direction he hadn't noticed before, he felt he was at the peak of a cycle, like his long celibacy would end. After all, if Steve at the Duckling could have as many women knocking on his door every night as he bragged about, if he had even half of the women he claimed to have, Keenan saw no reason why he shouldn't be able to also.

Keenan got up and searched the shed for something to pound the maul through the log with, but could find no axe, no sledge, only a rusty sixteen-ounce finish hammer, its head loose on a wooden handle. Only last night, at the Duckling, Steve had sketched on a bar napkin the apparatus he had built to protect his mangled shoulder, which, depending on the day he told the story, had been destroyed by a grenade in Viet Nam, or by a point-blank shotgun blast in some apartment building in Chicago after the war. Steve's invention was like a small, sort-legged table, with a deep notch cut out of the carpet-padded tabletop which, he said, allowed him to resume his favorite sport of cunnilingus without the crippling pain he had been suffering. The tinny ping of the light hammer on the maul rang throughout the neighborhood as Keenan patiently tapped the stuck wedge, in infinitesimal increments, deeper into the log.

Joan sat crosslegged in the sunlight that poured through the window onto the cardboard box she used for a writing table. Outside, out behind the house, loud thuds echoed from Keenan's firewood chores.

Dear Mr. Spankovitch,

There are times when I forget you entirely, sometimes for hours on end. Then suddenly I panic,

like I've slept through an alarm, like I've slipped off into some selfish world of my own and left you to fend for yourself. I know I have to forget, but I'm the only one to revere your memory. If I forget you you'll really be dead, buried, forgotten, and I don't think that's fair. And what else is it worthwhile for me to be faithful to?

I'm building a life of my own out here, though. I'm living with Keenan, but we're just roommates, really. We go to town together and he disappears into his bar and leaves me to find my way around town. "It's too small a town to get lost in," he says, but I find ways. I've lost three umbrellas already: it's never raining when you leave your car, but as soon as you get halfway to where you are going, down comes the rain. So you have to carry an umbrella all the time, but I can't remember it unless it's raining, and I leave it places. I feel like a town character--the town is small enough everybody knows what you're doing, I know they see me walking around and around looking for stores, my support group, my umbrella, my car.

I've bought a car. It's small, it's silver, it's foreign, it's an automatic, which means you don't have as many pedals to push. It's dangerous, and I let Keenan drive it most of the time. I've tried to let him teach me to drive, but I think I need to hire a professional. He never tells me anything until the last minute, and if I don't know what he means it's too late, we've gone past it. It's hard to learn anything while you're moving.

I belong to a group called Women in Transition. Mostly we do aerobics. There's more, but I don't know if I really want to be a dynamic member of the community, a leader of crusades, an entrepreneur. Maybe I should quit taking these pills. Maybe I should live alone.

Who am I kidding? I'm helpless. I can't be responsible for an umbrella. I get lost in a town with two streets going places I've been twenty times. I cry in grocery stores. It seems I must once have wanted something, but I don't remember what it could have been.



## VII

Evelyn and Drew came to town for the printing of High Tide/Low Tide. They were waiting with Keenan at the Duckling when Joan finished with her aerobics class. Keenan and Drew sat head to head over a tiny round table, mumbling to each other. Joan had figured out they were partners in the marijuana seedlings, registered female something-or-other, whoever heard of registered female plants? that they had paid fifty dollars apiece for. Keenan had driven out to the hills to tend the plants, still in their flats, twice since dropping them off, but he had been bothering Joan to lend him money for potting soil and drip irrigation equipment for a week now. He wanted to move out into the woods to be with his plants to help them grow. She wasn't sure she was ready to be on her own yet, so she had not said if she would lend him the money or not.

Drew was a bony man, with a long flat nose and round glasses that stood out far from his face. He moved his hands so much when he spoke, in gentle karate chops or as though stretching a piece of string out in front of him, or emulating the rolling of a wheel with a motion of his wrist, that he looked professorial even when he spoke of trivial things. Today his shirt was too small and buttoned tight around his neck so his Adam's apple looked

like something large he was trying to swallow but couldn't get past his collar. To Joan he and Keenan looked like two old birds like some Keenan had showed her at the beach. They waved absently at her when she walked in, but went on talking until she walked up to the table.

"Keenan," she said, interrupting Drew in one of his drawing-out-the-piece-of-string gestures, "what was the name of those birds we saw on the beach that day? You know the ones, the tall ones, they were black, they had big yellow feet."

"Cormorants, Joan. Evelyn is at the bar. We've got some things to discuss here."

"You look like two old cormorants, that's all I wanted to say. I'll be at the bar." Say what you think, her group had advised her. She just wanted to make sure she used the right words.

Evelyn sat at the bar talking to one of the regulars Joan recognized but had never spoken to. Evelyn wore a white long-sleeved blouse under a tight corduroy vest, and pleated brown wool pants. Her hair, darker than Joan's, seemed to wave itself into just the right windswept look to accent her tanned face. "Oh, Joan," Evelyn gushed. "You're looking marvelous, really, rosey-cheeked and I just love that sweatsuit, you must have been much larger when you bought that, and now just look at you. Keenan tells me you've bought a car, you must have been so busy

since I saw you last, was that from your part of the estate, the money for the car I mean?"

Joan and Evelyn had both inherited about ten thousand dollars from their father when he died ten years ago. Evelyn had used hers to furnish her house on the coast, but Joan had simply put hers in a high-yield savings account since she had no need for the money. She had bought the sweatsuit only last week, under the impression that exercise clothes should fit loosely enough to move freely in.

"I paid cash for the car, some money I had saved. It's not a new car, but Keenan thinks it's a good one. I'm really not that confident driving it yet, but I guess I'll get the hang of it. I can't be relying on Keenan's old bus, he has to park it on hills wherever we go."

"We're going to have a party, isn't that exciting? It's the High Tide/Low Tide party to celebrate pasteup. How does Keenan's house look? Do we need to hurry out there and put things in order before all the people start showing up?"

The lack of furniture presented no problem to the party. People began arriving at dusk, and small clots of people formed in the few rooms. The television played without sound, the picture accompanied by the stereo. Keenan and Drew argued over the records to play. The

refrigerator couldn't hold all the beer; someone brought a keg, creating an emergency expedition for ice and a search for an appropriate container. Joan retreated to the quietest corner of the quietest room and wondered how to get away entirely. She hadn't been to such a party in years, didn't know how to act, what to say, and neither Keenan nor Evelyn seemed willing to help her, introduce her or acknowledge her.

The air grew heavy with smoke, trash cans overflowed. Joan saw her hand mirror being passed around with lines of cocaine drawn out on it. The demand for the bathroom made it impossible to get inside. Occasionally people would approach Joan and extend some small talk, some conversational opener, but she found herself easily flustered, could do little but identify herself. "Do you know Drew? He goes with my sister. They put out the magazine. I'm from New York. I live here, this is Keenan's house. Yes, it's very nice here. It rains a lot." Soon, she found, she grew invisible, people's glances sliding smoothly away from her, allowing her to circulate among the guests. After a while she no longer had to refuse the joints or the lines offered to her. She recognized many of the guests from her trips to the Duckling to pry Keenan away from the bar to take her home. The doorman from the Duckling, Steve, she saw often, watching her from beneath someone's arm cocked up holding

a drink. She tried to step out of range of his unblinking stare whenever possible, tried to eclipse his view behind some group of people, then wander into a different room.

She saw no one she recognized as being from Blue Lake, and she wondered what would have happened if she had invited Glinda, the clerk at the store, the closest person to a friend she could think of. She would not have come, of course, but it helped Joan to invent someone she could have talked to about something if she had been here. The conversations she overheard seemed somehow narrowly local, focused on issues she knew little about: whether the Co-op parking lot should be a nuclear-free zone; how to combat offshore drilling; who had broken up with whom, who had been busted for DUI. Joan saw no opening she wished to speak into. A few people, already very drunk, approached her as an old friend, and she resorted to telling them she was a nuclear power plant supervisor, a Republican, a temperance league activist, protecting her invisibility. Occasionally she overheard conversations about her.

"She has quite an accent," a white-haired man was saying to Evelyn. "Where is she from, Brooklyn?"

"Oh, no, she and I are both from Georgia, originally. Keenan, too, though we all moved away from there ages ago. She's been living in Manhattan for years, of course, but mostly it's those pills she takes, I think, that make her speak strangely. Oh, yes, antidepressants. You'll notice

how there's an odd rhythm to her sentences. She's really quite bright, though, she reads ravenously."

Joan eased away from that conversation confusedly, sure it was about her but seemingly about someone else: she had no mirror to tell her how she sounded to other people. She felt a hand on her arm, a steady pull that drew her into an open doorway and turned her around.

"I'm glad to finally meet you, I've heard so much about you, I'm Steve from the Ugly Duckling, an old friend of Keenan's, a close friend." Joan had seen him a dozen times sitting on his stool inside the Duckling, but though she had often felt him staring after her, he had never spoken to her before. His head came up to her breasts, and he spoke for the most part to them, but finally looked up to her eyes and offered his hand, still holding her arm with his other one.

"I'm Joan," she said, though he knew that. She shook his dry hand, but he wouldn't let go of hers until she grasped his wrist with her other hand and pulled their hands apart. Steve made no sign that he had noticed, and watched her, waiting. She instinctively knew there was no way to insult this man. She could find no alternative to talking to him, none that didn't involve shoving him aside. She talked. "I don't do much. I go to a Women's Group and we listen to women tell us what a dynamic bunch of women we are and how we're about to embark on the most

meaningful parts of our lives. Then I come home and watch television. I'm learning how to drive a car."

"I hope you don't think I'm being rude, but it seems odd that a woman your age doesn't know how to drive." His voice came from deep in his throat, quavered with a sort of laugh, like water about to gurgle from a hose. "Not that I'm saying you're an old woman, but you're not the age you generally see in driver training cars, either, you know what I mean?" He spoke slowly, swinging her hand, which he had somehow recaptured, in time to his words. Joan knew what he was going to say long before he had finished speaking, which made it doubly difficult to listen to the end.

"I'm from New York City. I never needed to drive, you can't have a car in the city anyway. Even if you could drive it, there's noplac to park." She had practiced this speech enough it dripped with boredom, contempt for triteness. Steve didn't seem to notice.

"There's a big step now, the Big Apple to the Pacific Ocean. You come for the Women's Group or to learn how to drive?" He was so small and spoke so quietly, slurring the words--she couldn't tell because of booze or missing teeth, decided both--that she had to lean close to hear him, and he trapped her there with his hand on her shoulder. "I was in New York once, in the VA hospital, getting my shoulder put back together. They left a pin in

there, screwed it all up, here, feel this, put your hand here." Joan found her hand inside his shirt, palpating his shoulder, which felt like a shoulder, a small one, nothing more. Holding her wrist so she couldn't remove her hand from his shirt, Steve continued. "What did you do in New York? A woman of your talents, let's see, I'd say you published an art journal."

She extricated her hand. "You're thinking of my sister, Evelyn. I've been taking care of a quadriplegic for fifteen years. He died. I came out here to see my sister."

"It's a crushing blow, a crushing blow. It can take a long time to rebuild from something like that. A devastating blow. After fifteen years the center of your life drops out, you have to recover, rebuild. You're in a good place to do it here, beautiful country, soothing country. You'll have friends here, good friends. You're going to stay?"

"I think so. I came to see my sister but I think I'll stay for awhile. I have noplacel else. I'm here. I'll stay until there's someplace to go."

"Then you must live with Keenan? Doesn't Keenan live here?"

"He does now, but I don't know how long." It felt good to be putting this into words, and little Steve seemed harmless enough to be a confidante. "I think I can



swing the rent myself, I may ask him to leave. I took care of a quadraplegic fifteen years, I don't need to take care of an alcoholic now."

"Oh, you don't mean that. I mean, I know Keenan well enough, he's a regular at my bar the Duckling. I'm the Steve of all trades there. Sure, I've cleaned up his puke a couple times he got too much Irish whiskey in him, but he's a man you clean up his puke once you've got a friend for life, know what I mean?"

"I'm not certain I do."

"Say, I know where I can get some coke you want to snort some, just take a phone call I can get it delivered. Much better than the stuff circulating around the room now, this is just baby laxative and baking powder here, I can get some real stuff, keep us up for a long tme, know what I mean?" She realized that she was all tangled up with Steve now, that he was clinging to her, practically had his hands in her pockets, that her ear was moist from listening too closely to him. She pulled herself away, holding the window ledge for support. "Excuse me," she said. "I have to go to the bathroom. Don't go away, I'll be right back." She edged her way around the crowd, found her pocketbook in the hall closet, sidled to the back door and slipped out.

On the porch the fog touched her face and smelled

clean after the cloud of smoke inside the house. She stepped quickly outside the range of light from the windows, felt her way around the garden to the back gate and let herself out of the yard. The loud music from the party began to fade as she hurried down the unlighted street toward the soft glow of downtown Blue Lake three blocks away. As the party music faded behind her she began to hear the muted thud of jukebox music from the tavern over the edge of the hill. A sound Keenan had told her was called a Jake brake farted long and loud from the bypass coming down off the mountain. Above her she could see stars through gaps in the fog, and from the yards along the street she could smell lilacs.

She strode through the soft fog that made a nimbus around the streetlight at the corner and made dew on her wool shirt, walked toward the thumping sound from town. In defense against the cold and the wet she had bought hiking boots in Arcata at the store where they had bought the kite. The soles rapped solidly on the pavement, one foot clicking at each stride from a pebble caught in the lugs; she hurried a bit so her hair wouldn't get too wet, and enjoyed breathing deep the moist clean air, enjoyed the empty old buildings and the big trees in the yards, enjoyed having the street, which had no sidewalk, to herself.

Having a place to run away from was as good as having

someplace to go; she shivered as much from the thought of little Steve wrapping himself around her as she did from the fog and the cool night. Perhaps this was the feeling of freedom Keenan liked so much to talk about. And her conscience was clear, she had told Steve the truth, mostly. She had to go to the bathroom, and it was probably as easy to go to the bar as try to get into the bathroom in her own house. Her pocketbook flapped at her side, the strap creased her shoulder, and she felt in control, prepared. She descended the little hill into the tiny center of town, and the lights and noises of the party disappeared behind her.

She had to pass a big warehouse-sized Grange Hall that covered half a block of downtown. It was covered with tiny shingles and moss and its roof was swaybacked as an old horse. Upstairs, a tiny woman in a black leotard danced in front of a dormered window. A sharp voice called commands, someone clapped time with something loud and wooden. Across the street, in an entryway between two bay windows covered with plywood, a fat man in a red Mackinaw and a stocking cap stared up at the dancer, his mouth agape. As Joan passed in front of him he brought his gaze down to her, but didn't close his mouth. Young people, but apparently old enough to drink, leaned on an iron railing above the creek that ran under the town in a concrete bed. They smoked and laughed, and she smelled

pot and sweat.

The town had once offered a choice, but tonight For Sale signs blocked the doors of Walt's Tavern. Across the street was the Logger Bar, with dark windows like a limousine, false neon beer signs. The door was open, leaving her no time to linger and reconsider going inside, where it was brightly lit and smoky. Joan, feeling her courage slipping, was glad no one was dancing to the jukebox. She walked straight through the bar, past the two pool tables, trying not to look at the people while desperately searching for a sign above the restroom door so she wouldn't have to stop and look confused.

As she came out of the bathroom, the low babble of voices in the bar and the steady bass thump of the jukebox and the empty booth in the corner by the door gave Joan an option she needed. She didn't want to return to the party, she had no place else to go, and she wanted to sit and collect herself, so she headed for the booth.

A knot of men in billed caps stood leaning on the bar by the beer taps, the stools shoved out into the floor. In the middle of the floor was a pool table, and most of the bar seemed involved in the game. At the near end of the bar, alone, sat a buck-toothed woman who waved when Joan glanced past her. The bar was called The Logger, and many of the men wore suspenders, heavy boots and their caps had patches embroidered with chainsaws on them. Joan

searched the few women for Glinda, but she wasn't there. She realized there was no cocktail waitress, so she walked to the bar and ordered a glass of Burgundy from the bartender, who said Hello but seemed anxious to get back down the bar for something. The bucktoothed woman at the end of the bar smiled and nodded happily at her, but said nothing. All in all, the bar was a little friendlier than the party at her house: these people seemed more interested in enjoying themselves, less interested in political statements.

She sipped her wine and began to relax. She wasn't supposed to drink much while taking her librium, but she hadn't had a glass of wine in ages. The wine didn't taste very good, too sweet, but she liked the tingle on her tongue. She pulled a small spiral notebook from her purse and dug around for a pen. It was a luxury to have a table and a chair to write at instead of the floor and a cardboard box at Keenan's house.

Dear Mr. Spankovich,

I've been thinking about becoming a failure. A noble failure. I live in a failed town, that's why Keenan likes it. Once you're a failure you don't have to try any more, just talk about used-to-be and might-have-been and should-have-done, while doing what you swore-you'd-never. Keenan hangs out in a bar called the Ugly Duckling. It's full of failed poets, failed journalists, failed artists who hang their work on the walls from time to time, just like Keenan hangs his photographs there and his poet friends read their poems. They're not all failures, of course--some are fledglings, anxious to find

something to fail at. Tonight they're all in my house.

Since I arrived here I've been drawn by Keenan into being his accomplice in the crime of growing marijuana. It's an honorable crime, according to Keenan. It's how the common man can become a gentleman farmer. He and his friends are the new landed gentry (unlanded--he's going to grow his crops in the National Forest), with a touch of Pancho Villa. Gentleman Outlaw growers, Pancho Villa and his sinsemilla, only they don't say it right. No seeds in their pot and they're into vasectomies, too. A touch of guilt about removing themselves from the gene pool, but it's politically correct. Faded revolutionaries become failed artists, old Bohemians with their mattresses on the floor, artist activists. The party in his house has forced me into the streets. But Keenan hadn't paid the rent on this place for two months before I got here, I've paid it up, so I figure it could be mine now, I could ask him to leave. If only I was sure I wanted to stay. He wants more money from me now, for supplies for his pot farm in the hills. He has helped me, I can't deny that, maybe I owe it to him; we can give each other the chance to get started.

It's pretty here. Everything is blooming all the time. There are roses and fuschias all around the house, the apple trees are blooming, people have rhododendrons and magnolias in their yards. It's as flowery as our old apartment, but nobody has to deliver fresh ones daily.

The town is surrounded by redwoods, where the loggers have left them standing. The next sunny day I'm going to explore the woods. There's a garden behind the house, and sometimes I look out there and see the neighbor woman working in it. She's brown as a nut, and she has more hair on her head than there's room for. It's not just long, it's so thick that even when she splits it into four braids each one is as thick as my arm. She wears shorts and halter tops and plays in the mud while sit in the house stuffing wood in the stove. I think I envy her, and I don't go outside when she's there, so I can't talk to her and find out she's nice. She's like the heroine of an Amado novel, out in the lush flowers and the fresh smells, singing. Keenan must be the corrupt cacao grower, then. I guess I'm one of the old virgins in the window, one of the old whores in the alley. I don't want to think like this any more. I'm going to quit taking those pills, start drinking wine--at least I know what it's made of.

Someone jabbed her shoulder. She turned; it was the buck-toothed woman from the bar. She was smiling, making noises in her throat, offering Joan a scrap of paper from a pocket notebook. The buck-toothed woman smiled and walked back to the bar. She wore tight pants, a tight blouse and high-heeled boots; she left behind her an odor of cheap deodorant soap.

"Hi," the note read, "I'm Kiki. I'm deaf and dumb, but I like to talk. Your pretty. You can write to me." That was all. Joan looked over her shoulder, smiled widely, nodded, waved. Kiki waved both hands: Wait. She made motions--you, scribble, me. Joan began planning her escape: the bathroom, a back door, but where to this time? She turned Kiki's note over, wrote.

"I'm pleased to meet you. I'm Joan. I just stopped in for one drink." She looked over her shoulder, saw Kiki's huge grin, crossed out the last sentence thoroughly. "I am from New York City." She couldn't think of anything else to say, signed the note and walked around the man setting up his shot at the pool table. "Nice butt," she thought she heard him say, but he didn't look up. Kiki accepted the note, grabbed Joan's wrist before she could go back to her seat. She mouthed slowly through the words, then stood up from the table, released Joan's wrist to be able to shake hands. Kiki was effusive, her hand was strong. Joan finally pried the

fingers loose, wrenched her face into the most exaggerated smile she could make, and returned to her booth.

The fat man from the street, still wearing his Mackinaw, had sat down in the booth behind hers, his back to hers. He turned his head around to eye her sideways from behind glasses that sat far out on the end of his nose, nodded and turned to concentrate on his beer.

The pool game was the main attraction, and Joan turned to watch. She decided that all the men by the beer taps had been beaten by the man walking so smoothly around the table, or they had lost money betting against him. He seemed to enjoy being watched, and he talked loudly as he stroked the balls into the pockets. He tucked his chin down on his neck when he talked, his cap parked far back on his head. He chalked his cue with pinky extended, and kept the chalk curled in his pinky while he made his bridge and shot. He never touched the cigarette in his mouth, talked loud and laughed so everyone was in the party and he was the center of it.

Some shots he barely tapped, and immediately walked around the table after touching the cue, so he was waiting for the cueball in just the right place long before the object ball fell in the pocket or the cueball came to rest. As Joan watched he ran the table, keeping up the patter, talking about how to make some shots you had to hold your face just right, and displayed a complex network



of wrinkles on his face as he lined up the next shot.

He stopped talking for a moment, and Joan realized he was about to shoot the eight ball. "A hundred bucks on this shot," he said, over his shoulder to the other men. Then he stretched himself along the rail to shoot, and Joan wondered why he had left the cueball in such an awkward place to reach, since most of his shots seemed so well set up. The room was silent; Joan saw the man looking directly into her eyes, and it seemed that only the two of them were in the bar, that he knew all about her. His body twitched while he held her with his eyes, and she heard the sound of the eight ball slamming into the pocket like a rifle shot. The man winked, grinned, and only then took his eyes from hers, stood up from the table to turn back to the moaning crowd of men tossing money on the bar.

The fat man in the Mackinaw turned to look at her across the back of the seat. His full lower lip hung loose, exposing brown lower teeth, the gaps between them mortared closed with tartar. Unlike the pool player, this man's eyes said nothing, just watched her calmly through large round glasses. Joan raised her eyebrows as a way to challenge him, get him to speak or leave her alone.

"You might be the one I'm looking for," he said. His words were a bit slurred, though he didn't sound drunk--it was more of a lisp.

"I doubt it."

"I hope not. I would have to kill you."

"Then I hope not, too." Somehow it didn't sound like a threat. She was watching the pool player.

"Don't worry. I'm not programmed for violence." He seemed quite sincere.

"But you said you might have to kill me." The pool player disappeared into the bathroom.

"Only if you're the one I'm looking for. I don't think you are. Are you from Earth?"

"Yep. You?"

"I'm from Uranus."

"These days people say Uranus, I hear. It's become a popular enough planet to be on the evening news, so they had to do something about the pronunciation."

"It doesn't matter what you Earthlings call it. You couldn't even say it in our language."

Again the jab in her shoulder. This time Kiki was already gone by the time Joan turned to find the paper on the bartop. "I've never been to New York," Kiki had written. "But I used to ride around on the back of a motorcycle with my boyfriend. We had lots of fun. And never wore helmets! It's fun to talk to you." Joan turned, smiled. The smile she had invented for Kiki hurt her face almost as much as Kiki's taps hurt her shoulder. Kiki waved back with her whole body.

"Is she from Uranus too?"

He looked contemptuous. "On Uranus we have no sickness or suffering. On Earth you do not develop until you are twenty-five or thirty. On Uranus you know all you will ever need by the time you are three."

"Is there just less to know on Uranus?"

"It is how we teach there. Full development by age three; no suffering, no sickness." He turned away, seemed to require no response. A glance at the bar told her Kiki definitely did. She sipped at her wine, wondered what to say to Kiki, wondered whether she was better off here or at the party. "Wow," she wrote, "a motorcycle. Were you in the Hell's Angels? I'll bet you were the terror of the highway in your day. Did you know this man in the red jacket is from another planet?" She dropped the note onto the bar from a respectful distance, out of Kiki's reach.

As soon as she sat down at her booth again, the bartender delivered a glass of wine. He tipped his head back toward the bar. "The man has bought you your wine," said the bartender; Joan looked up to see the pool player smiling at her from a stool, raising a longneck beer bottle in a toast. She was surprised to feel herself blush, raised her wineglass and mouthed "Thank you."

The pool player touched his cap and grinned widely; Joan felt she couldn't look away from his eyes until he

let her. His cap said something about logging on it, and his face was deep brown. Most of the other faces Joan saw here were like her own, winter-pale. This man must be from up in the hills where the sun shone. He seemed so assured Joan decided he was a foreman, that the men down the bar were his crew. She awkwardly turned away, her mind making up stories about this man. If he told someone what to do, they would do it. He wouldn't ask them to do something that wasn't right.

This time the jab in her shoulder was truly rude, and when Joan turned angrily she was surprised to see Kiki's face even angrier. Kiki slapped a paper down on the bar, spun and stomped back to her table. Joan unfolded the paper nervously. "I am not a Hells Angel. I am moral woman. Why do you say bad things about me? I thought we were friends."

Joan decided to put a stop to this correspondence. She tore a page from her notebook and wrote quickly.

I just spent fifteen years taking care of a sick man. He could not eat, nor drink, nor take his pills, so I poured them down a tube stuck up his nose. He could not roll over to find a better position, so I turned him every two hours. He could not move his arms and legs, so I moved them, each joint in all directions, every eight hours. Sometimes this stimulation can bring back some limited ability to move. Not often, not likely. But I did it the way I always enter every sweepstakes that comes to me in the mail: somebody's got to win. I loved him because nobody else would and now he's dead and I don't have to love him any more.

Sometimes he was mean, maybe because he was bored. He smelled bad and I think he learned to control his urine so he could piss himself when I was changing his catheter. He used to get erections when I gave him

spongebaths. It was the only human thing left about him but I wouldn't help him with it. I could clean him out with my finger when he was constipated, but I couldn't help him with that. I think he always hated me for it.

There was no more room on the little scrap of paper, so Joan folded it in half and carried it across the room to Kiki, who had maintained her sulking pose and would not look up when Joan slid the note onto the table. Joan felt like skipping back to her booth. The pool player had pulled his hat up from the back of his head, and smiled at her from the shadow of the brim. She knew it was her move, that she was supposed to do something, but she wasn't sure what, or whether she wanted to. She felt light and elated, whether from the wine or whatever else, she wasn't sure. The man from Uranus stared somberly at her when she sat down. He was half-draped over the back of her booth now, there was no ignoring him.

"So you live on Uranus," she said, glad of an excuse not to look at the logger at the bar, not to have to act. "But you came down for Sunday night at the Logger Bar in Blue Lake?"

"I live in the ocean. A couple miles off Elk Head, in six fathoms of water. The storm yesterday made the water too turbid, I couldn't see my enemies if they came for me. But don't worry, I'm not programmed for violence."

"Why do you have enemies?"

"I've been sent here to destroy an agent of evil. If I don't find him before next week he could destroy your planet. I have to find him and kill him. Don't worry, though, I'm programmed to hurt him only. You're not him. I thought for a minute you were, but you're not."

"How can you know?"

"I've been programmed."

"Are you a robot, then, an android?"

"No. I'm a Uranian"

"Where's my Geiger counter when I need it?"

"They brought me down in a spaceship. For many of your Earth weeks we were hovering outside the gravitational pull for my training. Training how to recognize and destroy the enemy. I was given a month to find him. There's a week left. If I don't find him there will be a big explosion, bigger than anyone here has ever seen. I was put in a tunnel for programming, given a form like a man, purged of all desires."

"That sounds peaceful."

"Humph. They were supposed to remove sexual urges. I've been here a month now, and sometimes I want to fuck anything that moves, be it dog or otherwise."

The door slammed closed. Kiki was gone, had unpropped the door in order to slam it. Joan turned to find the eyes of the foreman waiting for her.

"Would you two like to come together?" said the

Uranian. He rose gracefully from his booth, took Joan's hand in his in a courtly fashion, and she found herself willingly escorted to the empty barstool beside the logger. The Uranian seated her on the stool, made a sort of bow, spread his arms and brought his hands together, palms up. "You make a handsome couple." Joan found herself laughing as she had not laughed for a long time as she raised her glass to clink against the logger's beer bottle. Then the door swung again and she looked up, dreading the return of Kiki, but it was Keenan, instead.

The pool-playing logger disappeared as soon as Keenan sat down. Keenan looked hurt and angry, but Joan only laughed at his serious face and offered to buy him a drink, an offer he accepted without smiling.

"Why didn't you ever tell me about this place, Keenan? I've had more fun, I met a man from another planet, who introduced me to a nice pool player that you scared away. I'm impressed, I didn't know you could be a threat to anyone, you look so--what's the word--mellow."

"Joan," Keenan said. "Evelyn and I were worried about you, disappearing like that. You should tell us where you're going, what you're doing."

"I thought you were Mr. Freedom, Keenan, anarchy and liberty."

Keenan sipped his beer. "Evelyn is worried about

you. She wonders if you're competent to manage your affairs, your money. I told her about how you had a seizure in the grocery store, how you get lost in Arcata, and she thinks you're having a nervous breakdown. She doesn't think you should drive, she thinks you need a guardian. And when you disappeared tonight she wanted to call the police, but there are no police."

"That's what Evelyn thinks, how about you?"

"I don't know, Joan. I know you're not happy yet, and I don't think I'm helping any. I think she's overreacting, but I don't know what to do, either. What about you?"

"I've decided to lend you money for your pot farm. Beyond that, I don't know. We can go out tomorrow and you can buy anything you need. And if Evelyn tries to take my money away from me, if she can prove I'm insane like she wants to, then at least you'll have your chance to do what you want. But now I want to go to sleep, so why don't we drive to a motel someplace and let that party burn itself out?"

## VIII

When he got to the house Keenan dumped the grocery sack on the porch and walked around the corner of the



house, through the gate to the garden. Joan followed half a block behind, at the edge of the fog. Keenan sat on the chopping block staring at the garden overgrown with weeds.

Joan approached, following Keenan's footprints streaked in the dewy grass. She stood beside him and stared at the garden, too. She pointed to the mulch pile.

"Don't you think it's dangerous having that pile of manure so close to the food you're planning to eat?"

Keenan looked up, the anger still plain on his face. "This is no time to be ingenuous, Joan. You've put everything in jeopardy. I could lose the farm. Why do you think we went to twelve different stores to buy that stuff?"

"I said I'm sorry, Keenan. It's just that's the first time I've ever bought a ton of anything, let alone dirt. I had to tell someone about it."

"You've just told the whole town of Blue Lake."

"Look, I buried my cat in a trash chute on the twentieth floor. I don't know much about dirt, I didn't know dirt could be illegal. I just told Glinda we had bought a ton of dirt, what harm can that do?"

"It's not illegal dirt, just suspicious. People around here don't have regular jobs any more, Joan. They'll work whatever season there is, some of them, whether it's spraying pesticide on apple trees or flying around around in helicopters up in the hills with machine

guns and grubbing hoes looking for pot farms. And a good many more are going to be out at night with gunny sacks stealing buds at harvest time. I don't want anybody knowing I'm driving away with a truckload of potting soil."

"Glinda's the closest thing I have to a friend in this whole town. She's somebody I can maybe talk to. I finally had something to talk about."

"What do you know about her?"

"We watch the same soap opera."

Keenan yanked at the ends of his moustache.

"You parked your bus in downtown Arcata full of marijuana seedlings instead of picking me up at the airport, but you don't think anybody was going to notice that?"

"I was drunk."

"I was ignorant."

"I'm leaving."

"So leave."

The fog hid the bus before it reached the laundromat, but she could hear its engine--knew its sound so well by now that she knew it was overloaded--long after the taillights faded. Alone, she grew restless. The sun broke through the fog in the early afternoon. She began to feel like a character in a German clock, the way she

kept popping out onto the porch and looking around and popping back into the house. The television bored her, sent her into other rooms looking for something to read, to knit, to arrange. She would forget what she had come for, would hear the television quacking from the next room and realize she was acting like a sick person again.

She doubted that she actually missed Keenan, but she knew she felt alone. She was surprised to feel alone. After fifteen years of living with an inert man, being left alone by a live one shouldn't have felt much different. She read over the letter to Mr. Spankovich she had written the night before, then tore it out of the notebook and burned it.

She dropped into the extra seat from Keenan's microbus, their porch furniture. Scattered on the porch floor were his agates, shiny rocks he picked up at the beach that turned dull after he got home. The sun disappeared above the fog again, and the fog, almost a mist, beaded on the fine hairs on her face. In the rose bushes in front of the porch spider webs drooped with dew. Next door an engine roared, died, roared; blue smoke rolled across the road, bright and dirty against the fog. Four boys stood around the open hood of a car, talking loudly and all at once to the boy behind the wheel.

When the sun came through the fog again, she put on her sweatsuit and running shoes, draped one of Keenan's

wool shirts over her shoulders and walked outside. In the back yard she collected firewood and dumped it on the porch in case it rained. By the garden the heap of manure smelled in the moist air; steam rose from it in the sun like the embodiment of odor. "I've got to get used to this landed gentry life," she said. "The Garden. I've got to be able to talk about how you can't grow a red tomato up here. I've got to never, never, mention potting soil in public again. I've got to learn how to drive, split wood, keep the stove going without filling the house with smoke. Hell, I've got to get out of here. Look at that steaming pile of crap right next to the food they're going to cut down and eat for dinner. Is that sanitary?"

She ran, going a new way today, away from town, toward the woods.

The woman might once have been beautiful, her bathing suit and cap in style. Although her profile was faded and pocked, her lips still curved up at the corner, smugly happy; her eye was demurely half-closed, because in those days demure is what you wanted to be as you spread your wings in a full-breasted swan dive. Two bolts ran through her left breast to keep her poised above the rest of the billboard, but the lake, or the pool, the water she planned to breast if the bolts would let her go, was gone, covered over by a For Sale sign, a No Trespassing sign,

and the rain-shrivelled, undemure staring faces of political candidates. All that was left of the original legend was

Eat Gas

Drink Jewelry

near the bottom. She dived into nonsense. Nearby, a fading red Pegasus shot full of holes was losing altitude over uprooted gas pumps, and the tourist cabins with their sagging, mossy roofs were falling beneath ferns and the long-unpruned branches of apple trees, from which hung bright orange apple maggot traps. For an instant Joan thought she saw someone--a flash of red plaid--in the doorway of a cabin, but it was nothing. She enjoyed the nonsense on the sign, remembering one from her childhood: Go Children Slow.

Eat Gas Drink Jewelry, Eat Gas Drink Jewelry became the cadence of Joan's breathing and her walk as she continued up the glistening blacktop and the old resort faded back into the fog. Tall trees closed in again over the road. Her feet squelched in her sodden running shoes, Eat Gas Drink Jewelry, it was like a jingle, a nursery rhyme, and she tried to remember how to skip. Her whole body worked to pick up the step, shoulders leading alternately as the feet remembered what to do, and soon

she was skipping long and straight down the street, holding her breasts through her sweatshirt, thinking "God, thirty years it's been since I've skipped," and she breathed no deeper than her throat, let go of her breasts and swung her arms, her mind trying to find jumprope rhymes. I like Coffee, I like Tea, I'd like Johnny, in with Me.

She stopped, out of breath, put her hand to her throat and panted, looked around for witnesses. She laughed to be spontaneous in public without music, a dance floor, someone to dance with. She immediately wanted to dance, hadn't danced for years, except with Keenan at the Duckling one night, and that wasn't real dancing. Keenan danced like an old man looking for his eyeglasses on the floor without bending over, like a skinny rooster pecking the air as he strutted. She turned the corner with her arms raised to dance, licking fog from the air, hearing a jazz sax blatting foggy and distant from the memory of some night club in the Village.

A crooked iron gate framed the entrance to a graveyard under tall dripping trees. She forgot the inclination to dance. She entered the graveyard, waiting to feel and feeling the breathless air she remembered from empty churches, felt a wave of emotion ripple across her under the mist, as though she was going to cry. The

graves were arranged on uneven ground cleared between tall trees. The earth rolled among the headstones and the slabs; many stones leaned, slabs were cracked and broken. Some grave markers were carved into redwood instead of stone, moss filling the inscriptions.

The graveyard was in a clearing hacked out of the redwoods and covered with brilliant green grass, nourished by corpses below and moisture above, and occasional sun penetrating the clouds and the fog and the redwood canopy for a few hours a week. Joan knew how fleeting sun could be from her years in Mr. Spankovitch's apartment in the City, had learned when and for how long the sun would shine past the other tall buildings and through the kitchen window, and she had learned to wait for it, to bask in its one-hour golden caress, shoving the table in front of the stove for room to lie down, wheeling the television to the door when the sun coincided with her soap opera. These were the only times she had been annoyed by the quadriplegic's calls, when some machine's warning buzzer would summon her to attend that poor man, that dead man, that former man to whom she had given her youth.

That flash of sun across the tombstones had for a moment taken her back, had numbed her, had made her wonder if she had taken her pills this morning, made her remember

the dull feeling this morning that must have been a hangover, that had helped her not take her pills. Sudden rain fell and she was glad, stood in it breathing the wet wool smell from Keenan's coat, thought of him telling her the rain was her friend. She thought about that as she browsed among the tombstones reading inscriptions, the way she had browsed through bookstores in the City.

Near the back of the cemetery, where the clearing disappeared under tall ferns and stumps the size of small houses, Joan found two headstones leaning together, touching. She wished she had Keenan's camera, wished she had one of her own. The couple had died within weeks of each other, when the man was seventy-seven and the woman was sixty-two: he had died first. The earth had long since healed where the stones had lurched together in a marble kiss. Lichen had stained the curlicue script, and the white marble had weathered enough to contrast with the fog which hovered, nearly a mist, around the grave markers as they leaned their heads together. She would have shot the picture several times, once when a stray shaft of light shot through the fog and touched the stones and she felt sentimental; again in the black instant before fat globs of rain fell and she saw the kissing stones as a surface harmony growing from the decay below.

Before darkness could fall completely, she hurried around the perimeter of the graveyard, where unpruned



lilacs, fuscias and rhododendrons grew among the redwoods and stumps of redwoods. She twisted blossoms from stems and collected a ragged bouquet, finding among the tall grass a few daffodils and iris. She wrapped the flowers with the handkerchief headband she had worn around her hair. She placed the flowers on the graves below the kissing tombstones and stood before them, hands folded, head bowed, until the darkness and fog blended the whole scene into a misty grey where no ghosts walked that she could see.

She found her way home in darkness that was thick under the trees, transparent on the open streets. She sat in the dark in the house, listening to occasional windblown rains brushing on the roof of the porch, imagining Keenan up in the hills, humming Dylan songs to a patch of weeds. She fell asleep propped against the wall and didn't wake until the next morning, when a hot shaft of sun shot through the window and woke her from a dream in which the pool player from the Logger bar had kissed her.

## IX

The bags of steer manure weighed fifty pounds apiece, too light to carry only one at a time, too heavy to carry

two at a time, and awkward either way. Keenan had begun hauling before dusk, and had made two trips before it was completely dark, and now concentrated on emptying the bus and stashing the bags deep enough in the brush to be out of sight of the road.

He had spent two days last fall hiking until he found this place, stumbling out of the brush into the clearing, and had had a harder time than he expected finding it again. But it was perfect, a spring he knew he could depend on for water all summer, a green patch in the midst of heavy manzanita near the edge of a steep canyon that fell away into the river far below. There was some flagging tied to a bush nearby, but it was old and faded, and the nearest road was water-barred so deeply his bus barely made it through without high centering. When the bus was empty Keenan drove it far down onto the main road and up another spur and out a skid trail miles from his garden plot, and he slept in the woods without a fire, a renegade.

He woke in the morning stiff and cold, but trotted without breakfast back to his bags of compost and his flats of plants, wiping out the tire tracks he had left the night before. He could carry a lot a long ways once he got it up on his shoulders, but the awkward bags soon tired him out, and before noon the hundred-pound loads began dropping him face first in the duff where he would

lay pinned like a turtle crushed by its shell. For a break he began spading the holes for the plants and uncoiled the drip hoses that would deliver spring water to each plant. He began stringing the camoflauge net between manzanita bushes and found a tunnel under a dense manzanita bush high as a tree that he could hide in, sleep in, rest in and watch the plants from, an invisible lair. He planned escape routes through the brush, finding game trails and practicing skulking down them, breaking off branches that would make noise. He was a guerilla fighter, this was his life in the bush, and he prowled around it undercover.

He stopped to eat lunch from one of the many bags of granola Joan had bought for him. He was stripped to the waist, and felt strong after all the lugging of heavy loads. He had several cartons of cigarettes, but planned to quit while he was out here, planned to grow young by living cleanly, close to life, far from the Duckling. And he was going to write: poems, stories, plays, philosophy.

Walking along the edge of the canyon he approached a silver, twisted snag, and jumped when a bald eagle stepped off a branch just over his head, spread its wings and sailed close enough Keenan could have grabbed its talons. The eagle banked and suddenly was out over the canyon,

then in a broad circle soared, without once flapping its wings, across the river far below, past the long ridge separating the river and a large creek, and within a moment the eagle was across the whole canyon, in the next county, then it was back on its perch over Keenan's head. Keenan had to collapse in the amazement of it all; he knew he had seen god.

It was the next morning that he first heard the beating sound in the air across the canyon and saw sun glinting off the silver helicopter. He worked fast, stringing his camouflauge netting over his plants and supplies, argued with himself whether to run for the bus and abandon it all or stay and pray to whatever divinity might help his farm survive. The helicopter noise disappeared over a ridge, and Keenan decided to get the plants in the ground as quickly as he could, then leave the area. He was carefully placing a seedling in a hole filled with potting soil when the Marijuana Eradication officers surrounded him at gunpoint. An hour later the big silver bird carried him away.

The telephone began to ring an hour after Joan had left the house. Her small car, its trunk stuffed with all her possessions and a new road atlas on the seat beside her, moved erratically over the mountains, headed inland. The note she left at the house only said "Good Bye. I've

gone to live where the sun shines." The telephone rang twenty times, then stopped.

## The Love of a Man for His Truck

The bicycle was ridiculous. It was Corrie's, a woman's bicycle with the pedals somehow too far back for proper leverage. Clayton couldn't fit a wrench to the stripped seat adjusting bolt, so he had to ride standing up. It was two miles of bumpy dirt road to the county road that doubled back up the hill, and Tom Dale's house was another four miles toward Pittsfield. This was the last time Clayton would have to ride someone else's bike, though, or hitch a ride in someone else's car: Tom Dale had finally agreed to sell Clayton his truck. Pedalling was hard work, and he was glad the worst of the summer heat and humidity were over; every morning he looked for the first frost, smelling it in the air at night, coming closer.

Maple trees with only their outermost leaves turning a lighter shade of green canopied the road. The sunlight was blinding where the roadside trees were dead bare skeletons, or where live trees had yellow scars slashed on the trunks where the highway department had cut deadwood away. The maples were killed by road salt in the winter,

the elms by dutch elm disease. Many of the oaks were encased from trunk to topmost branches in sticky web gloves spun by tent caterpillars. The shade was darker where the trees crowded around brooks trickling under mossy rocks, and here the mosquitos hung in thick clouds; Clayton learned to hold his breath to keep from inhaling bugs, squinted to keep them out of his eyes.

The hill was too steep for houses, even in New Hampshire, though old stone walls followed the road and struck off into the woods, marking off former fields long grown over where people had spent their lives moving rocks to make room to turn a plow around, even though the soil was seldom more than six inches deep. Here and there a shiny trailer house sat on a bulldozed pad in a clearing hacked from the jungle-dense woods, and the opening would allow Clayton quick views down into the valley toward the interstate and off toward the ocean fifty miles away before the trees closed him up in the tunnel of the road again. His knee was still stiff from his last car wreck, and though he could see fine from his right eye it was still half-filled with blood from cracking his windshield with his cheekbone, leaving a spiderweb-shaped fracture in the glass.

The night he had crashed the Pinto, a car he had never liked anyway, Corrie had fallen outside the front door of their house and miscarried a child she hadn't told

him she was carrying. The doctor had warned her she might never carry a child to term, considering her sexual history, but that had only made her more determined, and between the accident and his guilt over not being there to help Corrie in her pain, Clayton had come to reassess his life and his goals, had begun to participate in Corrie's domestic plans which before he had left to her alone. Being without a car for two months had slowed him down, had kept him home and taught him how nice it was to be there. But now with Corrie pregnant again, they had to have a car, they couldn't rely on friends for all the trips to the doctor they would have to make.

He pedalled the bicycle enthusiastically despite the pain in his knee: he had wanted to buy the '51 Ford pickup ever since he first saw it, and had been working on Tom for months to get him to let go of it.

Clayton and Corrie and some neighbors had been out cutting dead elm in a drained beaver pond when Clayton first met Tom and Tom's truck. A '51 Ford stepside, painted flat black. The front fenders were wide enough to sit on, flat enough to eat supper on. The grill was badly painted with aluminum paint, and the cursive Ford embossed on the tailgate was painted in with rust-colored red. Under the hood which creaked open like the rusty gate to an abandoned homestead was the original engine, a flathead six, looking rusty and much too simple to move a car, but



it ran. Clayton had immediately wanted the truck, tried to find excuses to drive it. He climbed into the cab when they broke for lunch, breathed deeply the old truck smell, dry and dusty as an abandoned barn. The round dials looked like cartoons in the red metal dashboard; the stick shift rattled loosely through the pattern displayed on the cracked knob twisted upside down on the bent shift lever. The smell was one Clayton recognized without knowing where he knew it from, and its components--burnt wires, mildewed ticking, old leather and oil and dust--didn't explain the memories the mixture gave him, something like sweat after a hard day's work or a woman's hair in the hot sun. The windshield was whole, but the driver's window was gone completely: "When I take it in for inspection I just drive up with my elbow out the window, rain or shine," Tom had explained. "If they can't see it's not there they don't know it's gone."

Tom Dale had spent much of that day underneath the truck, puttering officiously while everyone else cut and hauled wood. He defended the truck--it ran fine, but he didn't use it much, so this was a good time to tinker with it a bit. There was something strange about the transmission--if you kept your foot on the clutch too long the tranny seized in the granny gear, no matter where the stick was, and you had to climb underneath and move the gears with a screwdriver through a hole in the gearbox.

Even out in the woods Tom wore penny loafers, his real estate man shoes. The truck was essential to the operation, but his chain saw was too small, tremendously dull, threw not chips but scorched sawdust, and wouldn't start without more effort than its little engine could justify.

Clayton had spent the morning sharpening saws and adjusting carburetors, the afternoon loading elm rounds into the truck and the trailer, and coveting the truck. Since then he and Tom had become friends of a sort, cooperating on trips to the dump or borrowing wood splitters, and sometimes Tom came to Clayton's house to drink whiskey, play cribbage and complain about his wife when Corrie was out of the room. It was over cribbage a few nights ago they had struck the deal on the truck, a little cash and a lot of firewood cut, split and delivered, with Clayton taking possession now. They hadn't shaken hands on the deal yet, Tom had just told him to come on over and they'd fine-tune the terms. Clayton hoped there wouldn't be any trouble, he didn't want to ride this bicycle back home. Tom liked to get the upper hand and keep it, though, like when it was his deal or his crib playing cards and he would do his mindreader's act or a whole routine--"If I give you this, you could do that," on and on, every hand. Tom was the only person Clayton knew who would take the deal in Cribbage if someone

offered a cut, too. It was the rule, all right, but most people laughed it off. Not Tom.

Tom Dale's house sat above the road on a peninsula formed by a switchback. A granite retaining wall wrapped the yard below a lilac hedge. In the spring yellow forsythia bloomed while the lilacs were still bare sticks. A big maple tree, its trunk bored with holes for FFA sap buckets, suspended a tire swing above an oblong of dirt worn into the weedy lawn. Tom Dale's house was a white clapboard two-story with dormers, less than a hundred years old, with two crooked chimneys painted red scabbed onto the outside walls. The sun was setting behind the hill, and the first dense plumes of smoke were pouring from one of the chimneys. A few big black ghosts of newspaper hovered in the air, and under the smoke was the smell of horse shit. Above the house an attached shed was sinking into the slope, and a small barn on skids sat askew against a maple, as though it had slid down the hill from someone else's place.

The '51 Ford pickup was backed into a space between birch trees, pointing downhill and blocked in place with a cinder block. The truck looked abandoned, permanent, as though a tree could be growing up through its floorboards and filling the cab with greenery like a terrarium. Clayton stood on the pedals and got the bicycle halfway up

the pebbly driveway before he had to jump off and push it to the back door, the only one that was ever used. The front porch was not an entrance but a backdrop for traditional seasonal displays: cornstalks, maize and squash; Christmas wreaths; spring blossoms. This month the props were a churn and an old brass pump.

Janie, Tom's daughter, stood on the concrete slab outside the kitchen door in a Brownie uniform, a curry comb in her hand. She was stretching the limits of the plain brown wrapper she wore, and she was probably too big for the third-grader's desk at school, too. The way she wore her uniform and the way she held the curry comb against her waist made Clayton think about the lady cop in Newmarket who had caught him writing War on the bottom of a Stop sign when he was in high school.

"Why are you riding a girl's bike?" she demanded.

"It's not mine. I had to borrow it."

"Why didn't you borrow a boy's bike?"

"This is the only bike I could find to borrow."

"Whose is it?"

"It's my girlfriend's."

"Well it's a dorky bike. Why don't you have a car?"

"I used to, but I wrecked it."

"Why don't you get another one?"

"Maybe I'll buy your father's truck."

"That truck's no good. It's too old."

"Is your Dad home?"

"I don't know. Why don't you knock on the door and find out?"

"Janie, you mind your manners," came a screech from a window. A moment later the door opened and Margaret appeared, wearing her white nurse's uniform. Her blond hair was braided thick as a boa constrictor and the ends splayed like a whiskbroom. "Clayton," she said. "You know I told you never to come when Tom was home." She rolled her eyes at him and wriggled like a stripper in the tight white uniform, but put her hands on her hips and pouted when Clayton just stood looking uncomfortable. "Well, how's Corrie?" she demanded.

"She's pregnant," he said, the word still unfamiliar, awful.

She threw back her head and laughed, the giant braid bobbing and snapping. "You got caught," she hooted. "No more mister bachelor for you, eh, Clayton? Those little sperm were better swimmers than you thought, weren't they?" She imitated the breast stroke, laughed high, shrill and loud; the shaggy pony beside the tilted barn whinnied an accompaniment. "I bet half the girls in Newmarket are sorry as hell it wasn't them," she said. Margaret always shocked Clayton; he imagined the fear she could give some poor bedridden patient. She stopped laughing, held her stomach as though in pain. "I'm sorry,

Clayton," she said. "People tell me I have bedpan humor. I don't have a bedside manner, I have a bedpan manner. That's me, Margaret Dale, funny as a cold bedpan." She began to laugh again, but broke off. "Janie," she said, "find Frankie and clean out that stall, fill the water trough and brush that horse. If you don't finish before it gets dark you'll just have to work with a flashlight."

Clayton laid the bike in the grass, "Tom home?"

"Don't lay that bike down like that," Margaret said, her voice still pitched as though she was calling through a window. "And don't lean it on my house, either, God knows when I'm going to get Tom to paint it. Put it in the garage, that's where bikes go. Well, hurry up, I'm heating the whole outdoors."

Inside the house was hot, and the sweat Clayton had worked up on the bicycle ride poured out of him. Margaret didn't lower her voice. "You want a beer?" she said, and began rattling a story about work, about a fellow nurse whose last name ended in -ski and the joke Margaret had made while looking for the shoe Polish. Again Clayton could hear the horse whinnying along with her laugh, which bounced off the low ceiling of the kitchen, rang in the pans hanging over the stove. She guided him into the dining room.

"Tom will be up in a minute, he's down in the basement poisoning rats. Sit down, here, this is the best chair, he'll want you to move but don't even do it." She stood in front of him, her hands clasped at her waist. "So, do you want Tom to sell you a house for the new family?"

"Sure, I'd like to, but for now I just want the truck."

She laughed again, throwing back her head; the braid flopped off her shoulder, rapped the edge of the pine harvest table; the swinging weight of it pulling on her head tugged the cords in her neck tight. Clayton listened for the horse again, but there was no echo back, it must have been a coincidence.

"God, I hope you buy that thing," she said. "I shouldn't say it, but it's just one more worthless piece of equipment to have around. Only because Tom doesn't know the first thing about fixing it," she added quickly, lowering her voice but leaning close as well. "You know, if you buy the truck, I get to buy a tractor." She danced in her stiff white dress to a sideboard, and skipped back with a catalogue. "See? A Kubota 916. Tom can put a stinger on it to split the wood, and I can get all kinds of attachments--" here she looked wide-eyed and leered menacingly--"implements, that's what I want." She laughed her way back into the kitchen, repeating those magic words

to the wall, leaving Clayton pressed back into the chair, sweat stinging his eyes.

The room was dim under low-watt lamps. The wainscoting was stained dark, and the Revolutionary War-scene wallpaper seemed to absorb the light. The brick fireplace against the outside wall crowded a window that had been there first. Clayton shook his head: a real Colonial would have a central chimney for less heat loss to the outside, and to heat all the rooms that abutted it. The front of the fireplace was sheeted over to allow the Ashley woodstove the use of the chimney, but the requisite Colonial appliances were displayed around the hearth anyway: the brass-painted bedwarmer with a cheap pine handle, a tiny cast-iron cooking pot, some birch logs stacked in the sheetmetal wood carrier, and a hand-woven cornstalk fireplace broom that looked a lot like Margaret's braid. The pewter plates on the mantle were fake, he was sure, and the oversized black rocker with gilt trim was younger than Janie.

Clayton heard a hollow clatter of footsteps on stairs and Tom Dale appeared through a trap door in the floor. Tom carefully lowered the door into place, slid a braided rug over it and dusted his hands together. He wore his real-estate man clothes, a green pullover sweater with a pink shirt collar neatly emerging around the neck, doubleknit slacks and penny loafers. His black hair was



elegantly wavy, parted by a wide white line on the left side of his skull, and impeccably trimmed moustaches flanked his nose. Impeccable was what Tom seemed to strive to be; even here in his own house he paced rather than walked, did something with his eyelids that made him look like he was appraising something less precious than it aspired to be.

"Don't get up," Tom said, spying Clayton. "It would be the polite thing to do, but being taller than a man in his own home and castle would be entirely too rude."

Margaret leaned in the kitchen doorway. "He's sensitive, Clayton," she said. "He hasn't let me wear heels since we got married."

Tom rolled his eyes to the ceiling, where rough-milled four-by-fours had been nailed to imitate beams. "Since I have a houseguest, Margaret, might I have the keys to the liquor cabinet? We need to talk about manly things. Excuse us a moment, Clayton," he said, and disappeared into the kitchen.

Clayton had only been in Tom's house a few times, but on the nights Tom appeared at his house with a bottle of whiskey and a fresh deck of cards for cribbage, he had learned that Tom seemed to enjoy belittling himself, especially after he had drunk a little, and Clayton often wondered how he could sell real estate to people. Tom was always ready to help out, though, when Clayton needed help

getting wood or hauling a load of trash to the dump, so Clayton was willing to grant Tom his peculiarities. He always smelled of strong deodorant soap or cheap cologne, and the henpecked husband was his favorite role. Margaret was loud and exuberant, but a beautiful woman, voluptuous, with hair Clayton had never seen unbraided but had imagined how it would look falling down her shoulders and veiling her naked breasts. As Tom and Margaret sniped at each other in the kitchen Clayton couldn't help but wonder if it was all for his benefit, somehow, some act the couple contrived in the long winter hours to use when they visited or entertained. Somehow it seemed the most logical end would be an invitation to make love to Margaret while Tom watched.

Clayton began to wish he could have brought Corrie along for protection, began to think of reasons to leave immediately. She would be home by now, admiring the quilting frame he had built for her from plans in her quilting book. They couldn't agree on what quilt design she should make: she liked the one called Wedding Ring, but he wanted the one called Drunkard's Path. Tom brought in a bottle of whiskey and two short glasses and sat across the pine table from him as though they were going to play cards.

"So how's the job going, or have you been fired yet?" he said, cracking open the whiskey.

"No, I'm still working. We're tearing down a nice old Victorian down in Derry. Lots of nice old bricks and bric-a-brac in pretty good shape. If I had the money I'd buy the porch myself."

"So you want the truck to go to work in."

"That, but more so I can get Corrie to the doctors. We're going to have a home birth, but there's still a lot to see a doctor for. She wants to have some of those sound pictures taken later on, so we'll know if it's a girl or a boy, get a jump on picking out a name I guess. I told her it's like peeking at the Christmas presents, but it's what she wants, so we'll do it that way."

"Do you want a son?"

"Sure, but it's not like I don't want a daughter, I'm not like that. Corrie really wants a girl, so she can raise her up better than she was, I guess, but I'll just hope it doesn't look like me."

"We might have some baby stuff left if you need it, cribs and strollers and toys." Tom looked ready to call into the next room to Margaret to confirm this, so Clayton spoke quickly to cut him off.

"Thanks, Tom, but we're going to make a lot of stuff ourselves. Corrie's into making quilts and rugs and all, I made her a quilting frame today, and she's going to knit a lot of clothes and booties and mittens. She's got a lot of friends she figures will come over while she's pregnant

and sit around and knit baby clothes with her and bring remnants for the quilt. I figured I'd try making a cradle and a crib and wooden toys. I've got the tools and I can get a lot of scrap wood from work. Tearing down these old houses has taught me a lot about craftsmanship and what you can do without power tools and even without nails. I want to learn all that, maybe make furniture or something. Having this truck will really help out too."

"So you're going to take good care of the truck if I sell it to you?"

"Oh, yeah, I mean, you know how much I like that truck. I want to keep it all original as much as I can, try to restore it when I can afford it, just do a little bit at a time, maybe. You know, I could keep it as a family heirloom. Maybe, if I have a son he can keep it up on blocks in the garage after I'm dead, start it up on my birthday or something." Clayton realized Tom was laughing at him, and he felt himself blushing. "Do you ever think of things like that?" he said, and choked down another shot of whiskey.

"Not really. I never thought you'd be the sentimental type."

"I guess maybe I am, in a way. It's like these quilts Corrie's making, and these rugs. She collects old clothes and rags from all over and cuts them up for patchwork stuff or for strips to braid, and it's just kind

of nice how you can make new things out of old things, just like my job tearing down houses. If you're going to make traditional-style houses, why not use real materials from old houses, and the old tools, too? It all ties together. Corrie says having a kid is like being sewn into a big quilt, she's excited as hell about it." Tom waved the conversation away, filled their shot glasses again. "Margaret," he called loudly, "Clayton needs another beer."

"No," Clayton said, sliding his chair back, "I can get it, I know where the refrigerator is."

"Sit," said Tom, pointing his finger. Margaret brought the beer, picked up the empty bottle, and ignored Clayton's thanks.

"I really haven't felt much like drinking these days," Clayton said.

"Nonsense," said Tom. "This is a ceremony, drinking is required on occasions like this." Tom watched Margaret leave the room, frowning at her back. "You know," he said, "you're asking me to sell you my manhood."

Clayton set down his glass, realized Tom wasn't going to let this be as easy as he has envisioned it. "I am not. I'm asking you to sell me your old truck. I'm asking you to let me trade you my labor, and firewood for the winter, for your truck." He tried to sound patient,

but firm, the way he would talk to a policeman without a warrant.

"Ah, the barter system, the greatly overrated barter system." Tom cocked his head, gazed up at the fake beams on the ceiling. "Once you get some money of your own you'll want to do everything with cash, you know, it happens to everyone. Community ideals are only for poor people."

"I don't think you believe that any more than I do. What about all that wood we've cut together? Me cutting and you hauling. It always seemed to suit you as much as it did me. It's just that now I need a truck of my own."

"But what will I do next winter if you have my truck and I need wood?"

"Then we do like we did last year, we go to the woods together and haul wood in the truck, only this time it will be my truck I'm sharing with you." Clayton tried not to sound angry. It was the old story, he had let someone know how much he wanted something, so suddenly he had lost all control of the situation. It was like riding in someone else's car, like riding someone else's bicycle.

"But how do I know you'll be around next year, how do I know you won't be off somewhere else and I won't have a neighbor to get wood with?"

"You don't know that for sure any more than I do, any more than you know anything about next year. But I'm

planning on staying put where I am and that's why I need the truck. Corrie's killed a rabbit and I need a car, it's simple as that." He felt like he had thrown his cards into Tom's crib and could now only hope they wouldn't hurt his hand, wouldn't help Tom's. He tipped his bottle up and eyed the kerosene lamp hanging above the table as he drank. The wick had been replaced with an electrical light fixture, and Clayton could see the cord running up the cast iron hook and along the four-by-four beam.

"I thought she had a miscarriage a couple months ago," Tom said.

"She did. She's pregnant again, though." Clayton wasn't sure how much Tom knew about the miscarriage. Corrie was like Margaret that way, she'd tell anybody everything, even about being raped by her stepfather and having an abortion, all at an age when most girls didn't know there was anything missing on their Barbie and Ken dolls.

"So why don't you go out and buy a car, a good car, one that will run and start and you can get parts for?" Tom wasn't smirking now; he looked like a school principal about to assign detention.

"You know I don't have the cash for that, Tom. I don't make that kind of money even working full time, let alone bidding on house demolitions." Clayton felt the

sweat running down his sides under his shirt, felt his feet itching with heat, saw his knuckles white as he clenched his beer bottle. He took a long swallow of beer. "If you want me to I'll tell you how much I'm relying on your friendship and neighborliness, but I kind of thought we'd talked all this out before. I always wanted that truck and I'm willing to work to pay it off. Beyond that I don't have much of any way to get a car." He had pegged as far as his hand would count; Tom had the crib. He could only hope for an empty crib.

Tom sipped deep from his whiskey, set the glass delicately on the table, made a connoisseur's grimace with his lips and reached for his Molson Beer. Clayton drank another shot of whiskey, gulping it into his mouth and letting it sit for a moment, deadening his gums, burning the roof of his mouth. He waited for the taste to fade before sipping beer from the green bottle.

"Of course you know," Tom said, "I'd be mighty unhappy if I let you take my truck and you drove it through a telephone pole."

Clayton let his impatience show. "That's over with, Tom. That phone pole cost me \$400 and my insurance and ambulance and emergency room fees, and I don't need more reminders. I'm through with that kind of stupidity, I've done that and now I can do something else."



Tom set his glass down again. "But you should know, too, that I would be even more disappointed--devastated, even--if you didn't. Maybe not drive it through a telephone pole, but that truck, as I said, is my manhood, and I hate to see it retired." He gazed off in space again. "When I drive it I'm not the mousey real-estate salesman, I'm a man with a truck and serious business to do; I might even chew tobacco, I might have land holdings beyond my immediate estate to survey. If nothing else, I have a personality, an identity."

Upstairs the kids were playing, their footsteps racing overhead; in the kitchen Margaret sang at the dishes. Tom stood up from the table, drawing himself up to his full height, and began pacing the room. "Margaret," he called, in the voice of a military man, and she appeared in the doorway, wiping suds from her hands with a towel. "My friend Clayton and I would like a treat, some kind of dessert baked by your able woman's hands, and some coffee, strong and black." He stopped abruptly, teetered forward on tiptoe trying to loom over Margaret. Her lips moving as though she wanted badly to speak but wouldn't, she stood beside a picture, a muddy yellow oil landscape: some cows, haystacks, bulky dark clouds behind a hardwood forest.

"It will be a few minutes," she said after a pause,

and Clayton was amazed; he was even more so when Tom failed to resist adding: "A very few, I hope."

Tom arched his eyebrows at Clayton, then paced, hands behind his back, to the staircase. "Frankie," he called upstairs, his voice too high for a commanding call, but rising on the last syllable, peremptory. The rumbling of feet overhead ceased immediately, and footsteps began descending the stairs. "Come on," Tom said. "Hup, hup."

Frankie was a skinny boy with cowlicks on the three corners of his head. He stopped at the foot of the stairs as Tom paced back to the table and sat down. "Come here, Frankie," Tom said, and the boy hurried in his sneakered feet to his father's side. "Say hello to Mr. Dodd, Frankie."

"Hello Mr. Dodd," Frankie said, looking at his feet.

"Louder," said Tom. Frankie repeated the greeting, his face growing red. "Look at him when you say that, Frankie," Tom commanded, and the boy stood at attention, looking at Clayton who by now wanted to run from the table.

"Hello Mr. Dodd, sir," Frankie said. "Welcome to our house."

"Home, Frankie, not house, but that will do. Thank you, Frankie, go back and play. Quietly." Tom reached to pat the boy's head. "And see if you can straighten out that hair, won't you? Try wearing your cap to bed."

Frankie hurried away. Tom poured two fresh shots of whiskey, raised his in a toast, shrugged when Clayton refused to touch his glass. Across the room Clayton caught sight of Janie, leaning over the bannister, sticking her tongue out at him. Tom must have seen Clayton's focus, for he turned quickly and caught sight of his daughter.

"Janie, go back to your room," he said. "If you treat my guest like that he won't buy any of your cookies, will he?" He turned back, smiled and cocked his head. "Pathetic, isn't it?" Tom said. "They love their old Dad, the nominal head of the household, even though he's nothing. I'm Margaret's hobby, she makes more money in a month than I do in an average year of selling people their country squire fantasies. She's an Amazon with the voice of a fire alarm. And look at the son she bore me, he'll grow up to be a flute player. But I could, of course, have had a brilliant career."

Clayton stared out the window at the scattered lights in the valley below, visible here and there through the trees. If the moon grew brighter he could find his way home through the woods along the scar of a power line, the straightest, fastest route home. Tom busied himself pouring out more whiskey from the bottle, the level of the brown liquid falling below the deckled label. Margaret

carried into the room an insulated pitcher of coffee and two mugs, set them quietly on the table.

Clayton took charge of the coffee pitcher, poured himself a cup and left it black though Tom shoved closer to him a tarnished silver creamer. A few silent moments later Margaret set a steaming coffee cake in the center of the table, served Clayton and Tom silently, and turned to leave. "Margaret," Tom said, and she stopped halfway to the door. "You should always serve the guest first." He sounded hurt, but stern. Margaret turned, curtsied--at least Clayton could think of nothing else that slight bobbing of the knees would be--apologized, and left the room, her braid coiled around and around her head and held in place with long pins like a turban.

Clayton looked at his plate, smelled the cinnamon rising up with the steam. "If this is all for my benefit," he said finally, "I can live without it. If you're willing to agree to our deal on the truck that's fine. If you're not, I'll go home."

"Oh, drink your whiskey. You know of course I'll pay for this as soon as you're gone, but I don't often get to play the despot and I can't afford to pass up the chance, can I?" Tom took a quick drink of his whiskey. His impeccable hair had sprung loose over one eye, and he brushed it aside impatiently. "Can't you understand the horror of being loved? Don't you see I hate all of this,

all this fake gimcrackery, the pseudo-gentry touches, the wretched horses I have to maintain for my wife and daughter, the execrable piano and the awful sounds they make on it? And now you want my truck, my truck, my truck." Clayton expected Tom to beat his fists on the table, but he delivered the line deadpan, his eyes blank and staring. Clayton followed his gaze to a cheap pine china cabinet in the corner, loaded with plates painted with barns and covered bridges.

Tom took a bite of his coffee cake and spoke with his mouth full. "Oh, I apologize for the bad theater, but Clayton, you disappoint me. You were always the brawler, the drinker, the chaser of tail, the lifter of large objects, the free spirit that drove his car through telephone poles so I didn't have to, don't you see?" He gulped the half-chewed food down with coffee. "Oh, don't be embarrassed, not for yourself or for me, I'm entirely serious." He sounded jovial now. "I've been cheering for you since I've known you, you were the man who felt nothing, neither love nor pride nor remorse, and now you want to buy into the myth we all fall for, for all of those things you never needed before. So be a friend and tell me where you went wrong, so all this won't have been for nothing."

Clayton had begun to feel the whiskey, always for him a creeping gradual attack that disguised itself as the

urge to embrace humanity, while at the same time creating in himself the image of an anarchist stricken with brain fever walking darkened streets in a Russian city. The whiskey began overcoming his urge to flee this house and its inmates, and as he threw back another shot of the 110 proof J.W. Dant he felt he understood Tom's confusion of self-debasement with honesty, understood the urge to wallow in mutual self-pity in the guise of an open-hearted talk.

In the back of his mind but fading was the memory that Corrie would be home by now, with news for him about the baby she carried inside her. She would want to lay in bed and talk about, make plans, turn it over and over; he would have to help her with her fears of another miscarriage; they would be up all night. But as long as there was more whiskey, being a father was something that could wait another hour. Tom had relinquished the stage, and he felt bound to take it. His urge to leave the house and find his way home through the woods became the urge to talk about himself, and about Corrie.

First he described for Tom, who hadn't asked, his most recent car wreck, nearly two months ago but still showing in the fading red in his left eye, a tide of blood gradually sinking, now splitting his eyeball evenly, white on the top, red on the bottom. He had been drinking, of course, at bars and parties, restlessly driving, drinking

and looking for women. When he was drinking, the woman at home was never enough. Finally he had decided to drive home because everyone at a party was trying to tell him not to. He had been exhausted--from working, commuting for a big construction company to jobs all over the state, and drinking--but took the old stage road home, winding through the lowlands, the road twisting in and out of swamps and around granite outcrops. He had decided to sleep on the straight stretches and wake up for the corners, it had seemed the right idea at the time, but he woke up instead with a telephone pole centered between his headlights and coming fast. "The last thing I remember thinking that night was how I was going to say good-bye to Corrie, how I was through with her," he said. "But when I woke up in the hospital she was there crying beside the bed. She didn't care what had happened or why or how, and I could hardly tell someone to get lost after that, could I?" He felt he was defending her, that somehow it was all right to be here instead of at home because he was justifying their being together.

He chased the whiskey with coffee, the coffee with beer. "I spent two years drinking at every folk-music bar and health-food diner in three counties, ogling women from New York who wore round glasses and were looking for a cabin in the woods to be macrobiotic in," he said. "The first thing they want to know is how long your wood stove

will keep burning on a single load of wood, then if your windows are thermal pane. Mention sex and they talk about companion planting. They drive SAABs so old you have to mix oil with the gas. But I was sleeping with waitresses who talked about tips and bar managers and drove old rusted-out Plymouths. I had to find someone who ate sugar but wanted to live in the woods anyway, and that's where Corrie came in. She's got big round glasses and a big round voice she likes to say OH with."

But it wasn't what Tom Dale wanted to hear. "That truck," Tom said, "was going to be my escape vehicle. I was going to have a '48, because that's the year I was born, but this one was all original but the tires, so I bought it. I was going to drive it to Canada to avoid the draft. Then they wouldn't draft me: a heart murmur, a spot on my lung, fallen arches--nothing serious in itself, but the combination was too much. All the men my age but me gone to war, they thinking I was home with their women, me wishing I could be shot because I still couldn't get any women. I couldn't even be a draft dodger because the draft dodged me, don't you see?"

Tom sipped from his whiskey, pinky extended from the glass. "I fell in love with the woman of my dreams and she destroyed me; I was going to drive West to fix my broken heart, turn it into song and story; I was going to drive into Hollywood like an Okie and be an actor. Then



Margaret, my consolation, got pregnant." He raised his voice and glared angrily toward the kitchen door. "A Goddamned nurse getting pregnant by mistake--figure that one--" his voice fell again, "and I married her. I was going to drive to Canada the night before the wedding, but the truck wouldn't start. It's the only time that truck wouldn't start for me." Clayton knew this was a lie, had helped jump and push the old Ford a few times, but it didn't seem important enough to mention. "And it's been rusting, puttering in humble domestic service, just like my heart, ever since: I haul firewood with it, I drive it to the dump twice a month, but as long as I have it I still think I can just get in and drive to Canada. It's my divorce vehicle. So how can I sell it to a man who wants no more than to drive his woman, not even his wife, to the obstetrician in it?"

Clayton found Tom's story ludicrous, wondered how he could tell it with his wife in the next room, his children upstairs. "So why haven't you done it?" he said. "Why haven't you loaded your stuff up and driven away then?"

Tom looked up at Clayton from under raised eyebrows. "I've sold out, don't you see? I'm subsidized now, I can't give that up. I have damned little honor and even less pride. Now I won't even have a truck."

Clayton found himself telling the story of Corrie's rape by her father, the abortion, another abortion a few

years later when she was still only sixteen, her mistrust of men, her guilt, her overwhelming need to nurture a child, but Tom wouldn't listen.

"You can't hold yourself responsible for the sins of womens's fathers. It's someone else's heartbreak, not your own," he said. "Talk to me when a woman has reduced you to cowardice more petty than suicide, then you can enlist in someone else's misfortune. You're not even in love and you don't even know it. I had expected greater things from you. Take the truck and leave; we have nothing more to taelk about. Consider it your birthright." Tom slid the worn key across the table to Clayton, and scribbled a bill of sale on a slip of his daughter's notepaper, a third-grader's multicolored tablet shaped like an apple: the truck was too old to have a title.

The men stood and shook hands across the table, Tom frowning into Clayton's eyes, clenching his hand hard, refusing to let go. Swaying as he walked through the kitchen, Clayton tried to say good-bye to Margaret, reached up as though to hug her, remembering the coquette, wanting to ask her to let down her hair, but she just said "Good night, Clayton," or "Go home now, Clayton," every time he reached out to embrace her, and pushed his arms back down to his sides. She finally edged around him and went to stand beside Tom, her arm around his waist.

The porch light illuminated most of the distance to the truck, which Clayton found by the gleam on its flat windshield of the moon that hung just above the horizon. He hefted Corrie's bicycle into the short, narrow bed, and climbed into the cab through the groaning door. He sat shivering in the evening chill, breathing the musty smell of old upholstery and oil, burnt wires and dust.

He rattled the stick shift into neutral, turned the key and pressed the starter button; he found by feel and default the choke, the lights, and just as the battery seemed it would turn the engine no more, the spark caught and the six cylinders all began to fire in order, slow at first then louder, faster as the gas ignited and burst out the tailpipe like a bomb. He pulled the handbrake once the engine had settled into an uneasy idle, climbed out of the cab to remove the cinder block and suddenly the truck was rolling, the broad fender brushing him aside as the truck gathered speed, the door he had left open nearly knocking him down, and he smashed his head on the doorframe as he leaped inside and stomped for the brake, grabbed for the wheel in terror. He locked the brakes, gravel grated under the tires, the truck lurched to a stop inches from the lilac hedge. He glanced guiltily toward the house as he punched the starter again and killed the lights. Tom and Margaret stood arm-in-arm in the lighted

doorway, and didn't wave as Clayton backed away from the hedge and rumbled down the driveway to the road.

His heart began to slow down and beat calmly as he negotiated the road that spiralled downward toward his home. The dim headlights of the truck illuminated only enough of the road ahead for Clayton to drive in third gear, a speed he attained only by desperate double-clutching through the loose shifting pattern. Springs from the worn-through seat poked him until he found a dusty blanket on the floorboards and stuffed it under him.

Finally he felt in control of the truck, began to understand the play in the wheel, could intuit what the gauges would tell him if the dashboard had lights. The long night at Tom's, the wrenching discomfort of the dialogue and Tom's theatrics made him shiver as he remembered them, unless it was just the cool night air pouring in the driver's window which was missing its glass. He imagined Tom's tragic face as he spoke of his broken heart, and he forced a loud laugh, a whiskey laugh, and he bounced on the squeaking seat imagining Tom's punishment.

When he thought of Corrie his heart nearly stopped; she would be outraged at his abandonment of her on this important day, she would have rushed home with news of their baby. He was drunk, he was laughing, he was self-indulgent; she was home, alone, her happiness unshared.

The road straightened ahead, and he risked a shift into fourth gear as his sense of urgency increased with his guilt. He clutched out of third gear, released the clutch and clutched again, pulling the lever back to find high gear. The lever stung his hand like an electric shock as gears mismeshed with a snarl like an industrial accident. The shift knob jumped and cracked the side of his knee. The truck picked up speed in neutral, swerved as he fought the lever and pounded the clutch into the floorboards, searching with the stick for any gear it could find. The running gear whined faster and faster, the truck bounced and the bicycle crashed in the bed. The rusty old fenders, wide as coffee tables, began to flap in the breeze like big black wings.