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Summer Past Love| Four chapters from a novel-in-progress

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The University of Montana

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THE SUMMER PAST LOVE

Four chapters from a novel-in-progress by

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THE SUMMER PAST LOVE

Table of Contents

Chapter 1 .................... The Pallbearer

Chapter 2 ..................... Locust Grove America

Chapter 3 ..................... Silent Movie

Chapter 4 ..................... The Summer Past Love
Spring 1990

Somebody said Raney, just take the big moral moments in your life and lay them out one after another, see what they add up to.

Not a bad idea. Grandiose, maybe. Artificial. But a place to start. I need a place to start because I'm forty, grieving, alone, and in my dreams, which I consider a kind of Bible, familiar persons look on me pityingly, or their eyebrows lift as if asking, given my record, do I really dare reach for that plum?

Well, yes.

I want the plum of piety, that true American greed. I want to feel righteous. As in "the righteous will enter the kingdom of heaven." As in "that's some righteous weed, man." Both uses of the word. Pious and sensate. But where are the models for that combo?

Certainly not my Granny Kate, whom I just helped bury, and whose death, for reasons I fail to understand, has unleashed
a storm of old ghosts.

In my youth I tried everything, religiously. Sex, drugs, rock and roll, street politics, astrology, institutional politics, communes, organic gardens, homemade music, marriage, etc. Those were the materials at hand.

(And what happened to that experience? What theories were derived from it and how were they applied? Who bought the patents and how many vulture capitalists did it take to screw in the lightbulb before the real bill came due? To whom does the liability pass and can we design a service industry to help make these questions more expensive?)

Obviously, I'm still trying to shake the Eighties out of my head. They're almost as vivid as the Sixties, though poles apart. It's the sneaky black hole of the Seventies I have trouble with, the out-of-body decade where weariness and denial and the sticky reasons for same operate.)

Once I even joined a church. A liberal one to be sure, though I did the traditional things: Tithed money, taught Sunday School, sat on the finance committee, made new networkable friends, got a lover out of the deal. But it wasn't religious, somehow, all that elaborate churchiness. It lacked a moral core. Only the loosely affiliated gospel
choir felt right.

What the hell is a moral core? I don’t know. Given my dreams, morality must start with family, the familiar mysterious creatures I inherited or blundered into. Given my politics, it must go beyond family, take a stance on difference qua difference. Like a democracy has to. As men and women must. Is difference my enemy, for instance. That’s a worthwhile question. Also, can people change.

I hope I can change because I’m tired of myself. Tired of selves that block the doorway to bonding. Tired of being alone in a loneliness that feels like shame and pretends to propriety.

My neighbor Arlette says "Loosen up, Raney! You’ve got that ‘circled wagons’ look. Everything bunched in the center and baked white on the edges. Nobody but marauders’ll approach when you look like that. They know they’d get fried." No doubt she’s right.

Maybe this quest is a vanity, a spiritual vanity. I wouldn’t be the first in my family -- or my country -- to indulge it.

* * * * *
There I was sitting at my computer on a recent spring day, noontime, modifying dBase report formats for a client with an insurance agency. The radio -- on low and out of the blue -- announced "Today is the fifteenth anniversary of the fall of Saigon."

Well I hearrrd that, as we used to say, and woke from my binary stupor.

Fifteen years? More like fifteen generations.

Restless, I stood up and stared out the window. It was snowing of all things. Large white snowflakes plopped through the sky like leaflets. Hit the greening landscape with a subversive, out-of-sync message. Acting like winter when the time clock said spring.

Montana's cold as Russia, I thought, and suddenly remembered the movie, "Doctor Zhivago."

The ice palace, its intricate fractured light sheltering doomed lovers. Thick yellow-threaded carpets of daffodil waving in the birch forest outside somebody's dacha. And then Yuri, the large-eyed doctor hero with his family, pushing through desperate crowds to catch the last train out of Moscow. The scene at the train station, shot from inside
a disappearing boxcar, seemed to herald the rush to a Saigon embassy rooftop some years later, where too few helicopters waited, rotors slapping the air, for the many friends of a falling regime.

Desperate hands reaching, reaching.

(Naturally Randall, my Sixties' lover, wouldn't have remembered it that way. He'd been to Saigon. He had his own movie of the war.)

Meanwhile, in late April of 1990, a white line crept down Mt. Sentinel's west slope, advancing on balsalm and service berry, driving hungry cougars into suburban yards where they'd pick off dogs and small boys.

In a way, that's what I came here for: to spend my middle years among wild animals and bad weather. These things keep something, a certain kind of vanity maybe or an appetite for the easy, in check. Or maybe I just need extremes in my life -- and with the climate here providing that, some of the pressure's taken off me. Also, these outdated frontier givens remind me of my grandparents' lives, the elements they faced. I feel I can't understand my own story without acknowledging theirs.
One time my Granny Kate told me a tale about her grandparents. It began "Grandpa went to The Dalles for supplies that winter and never came back. Maybe he got lost in a snowstorm. Or the river carried him off. Maybe it was Indians. We never found out."

The rest of the story chronicled twice-great-granny's sufferings alone with her babies on Ahtanum Creek, how she married the neighbor, Mr. Deacon, outlived him, married Mr. Harris, outlived him.

The principle being when one husband goes, get another. Come her turn, Granny Kate followed it too. Me, I broke tradition. No jumping in the same ditch twice for me. Shouldn't even have done it once.

Stretching myself out of reverie, I eyeballed newly potted annuals on the porch. Little green leaves of bleeding heart cupped the unseasonal white stuff. Too cute, I thought, and dove back into dBase reports.

Just after four the phone rang. My mother, inquiring after the health of my car.

"It's parked," I said, instantly nervous why she asked.
Last time we talked, I'd been whining about my car even as I put off fixing it. It'd had moved me north some months before and seen me through the worst of winter. Then after a road trip in March, it sickened horribly and I left it untended. After all, I had feet, a bike, and no desire to shark all over Montana at top speed drumming up more consulting business. Hadn't I vowed to put the yuppie life behind me? Wasn't I going broke in a one-horse town to prove it?

Now I worried Mom would tell Dad about my still-crippled car and he'd take my inaction as a sign he should drive the 500 miles over here and negotiate repairs. I almost wished he would, as car innards do not interest me and it would be nice to have wheels before summer. But then I remembered my old Dad shouldn't have to bail me out, so I added "I'm taking it in tomorrow."

"Good, Raney. That's good." Mom's voice, unnaturally flat, seemed to perk up a little. Then it broke on the news. "Your grandmother's passed away. Just now. We're at the hospital. We think the funeral will be Friday."

My free hand flew by itself to my throat. I choked out "Oh Mama," and began pinching, pulling the flesh. "What happened? She was fine last month, a little frail..."
It all went sudden, she said. A belly ache got worse fast. Granny became disoriented, a thing that never happened. Then Bang! she was gone.

We agreed Granny would have preferred it that way. No lingering. Just the quick failure of one essential system and the general tiredness of many others.

"How's Dad?" I asked. It was his mother, the last of her generation in my family.

"In shock. But he was there when she died. So that's some comfort."

I wondered. Would I have been better comforted to see Randall drive straight where the road curved? To watch while the car rolled over and over in winter wheat stubble? To lean over the broken body and touch his cheek one last time?

Mom kept saying how many more calls she had to make, but seemed reluctant to hang up. Finally she spit out the sympathy she was afraid to offer. "I only wish you didn't have to be alone tonight."

A wet clot of something lodged in my throat, and like my
favorite presidents, I denied everything. "I can call somebody!" I squeaked through that clot. "I have friends I can call."

She was ready, voice suddenly syrupy, soothing. "I know you do, honey. I just mean it's better to be with your loved ones. At a time like this."

"Right," I said. "Right."

That evening I examined my closet. Should I wear black? That would be classically correct, and Granny cared about propriety. But the only black dress I owned was an off-the-shoulder affair, left over from efforts to entice a previous paramour. Too sexy for a funeral. How about navy blue? Maybe I could put together a suit ...

Then my eye fell upon yellow, a pale yellow silk, too tender to wear very often, and hardly the standard for a funeral, but lovely. I felt stabbed by my desire for a non-standard color. What would people think? Yellow's for cowards. Certainly I've been one, been guilty of saving my own hide no matter what. But yellow's sunny too. Once, in a book on auras, I read that yellow meant "hope, and the refinements of heat." And wasn't it the mascot color for women's sufferage?
Besides, I married in yellow. (Not Randall. I’d have married him in darkest indigo to match his full-dress Marine duds. Or red, for the passion I felt.) Yes, might as well remember the handmade yellow wedding dress out of place in a grey justice of the peace office. Ben beside me tense and elastic as a young willow whip. The jolt that went through me when our vows became law.

Yes, yellow. A color of record in my life. A personal statement in the face of cold spring, cold death. I grabbed the silk and began packing.

The second I climbed into bed, lust flooded me. I think the soft flannel cabbage rose sheets did it, cuddly as baby blankets, as the sweet beginnings of something. I wanted a second skin, another human smell, wrapped around my own. I wanted to suck, bite, ride, give thrust for thrust, be filled. But there was no one to call, not for that. Unlike the grannies, I’d walked away from the last one and not looked for another. (Except for the March encounter, but that was a complete anomaly. A grandfather for chrissake.)

Mom was right. Solitude was bad at a time like this. I began to cry, stuffed a wad of flannel in my mouth, took it out so I could breathe, howled for my own loneliness.
Toward dawn I fell asleep and for the first time in many years dreamed of Randall. Randall wearing jungle fatigues and then the civilian shirt I made him just before his run to Canada. Naked in the dream, I wrapped myself around him like a monkey, drew him into me like a spider. He stayed stiff, a good soldier. I woke with my jaw hung open, panting.

Why Randall, that half-forgotten mess of a man? Why not Ben, the exploding husband? Or the others since -- calmer, more stolid, respectable men? Because Randall came first? Because we kissed before we talked? Because there weren't enough choppers to get us both off the roof? Because he died and I should have saved him?

Wind rattled the window frames, woke me from desire and regret. I lurched out of bed, splashed my face, ground coffee beans. It was a bright cold day. Snow hung on in shady spots, lay packed against lilac buds outside the bathroom window and in the cupped leaves of the bleeding heart. The cat twined through my legs, insinuating breakfast.

"Meow," he said. Let's get this show on the road.

I called my insurance client and put him off. "Death in the
"family," I said. "A regrettable delay." My neighbor Arlette agreed to take care of the cat and the plants. After a few more phone calls and several false starts, I coaxed the jerky, powerless car into a shop. Mid-afternoon, several hundred dollars poorer and stoked by a piece of cherry pie from the sympathetic Arlette, I headed west to Granny's funeral.

Over the passes a wet fitful snow fell but didn't stick. My thoughts stuck, oddly and bitterly, on sex. One thing about it: In my family, people didn't offer cherry pie and look on kindly when your virginity died.

When I first took to slipping in at 5 a.m., my mother pulled out a general lecture about the wages of sin and how poor people have poor ways. But in those days, February 1968 to be exact, how could her threats compete? They were nothing, emptiness and wind, meaningless vapors next to the solid facts of flesh, of blood stomping its desire through delicate veins and meaty tubes.

As spring 1968 approached and I got more secretive, Mom tried another tack. "This will kill your father," she said, "when he finds out." He was away on a construction job in Texas. Apparently she didn't tell him everything.
"You mean he'll kill ME," I said, thinking how much he distrusted my friends, especially if they showed any chance of being male.

But Mom was right about the stakes. Your mortal soul. If somebody can make you die to yourself through them, you end up confused, addicted, blissed. Yet also in mourning. That's what happened to me with Randall. Probably Ben, too.

Maybe something like that also happened to Granny Kate and her first husband. Some terrible grief that came on the heels of important sex. She wouldn't ever talk about it, of course. Not in those terms anyway. But you could look at the facts and guess: A sheltered girl from a prosperous farm family, she was sixteen when they met and married. He was ten years older, a hired hand, a brooding Welshman who carried poppy seeds from Flanders Field in his greatcoat pocket waiting for his own land to plant them. Their names rhymed, Kate and Nate. He had black curly hair, flat eyes that had seen something.

* * * *

I arrived at the folks' just after midnight and parked under an old cottonwood whose outline seemed wrong. Bags in hand, I stumbled toward the front door. Mom opened it and the
first thing out of my mouth was what happened to the tree.

Her eyes looked terrible. She answered without thinking. "The wind broke a branch and Dad cut it..." The last two words rose in a wail and she hugged me to her, crying. My father greeted me, silent for once. Then poured a stout belt of Canadian whiskey, watched me toss it back, and said we'd talk in the morning.

Mom'd redone my old room in baby blue, with a ruffle-skirted doll on the satin spread. Had that ever been my own style? I didn't think so. Sleep fell like a heavy curtain. Again a dream of Randall. This time in a fleabag hotel, strung out on needle drugs. In the dream two leeches pulsed like red neon on his cheek. Somehow, one of them was me.

After breakfast Dad made his report. "I have no regrets," he said. "Our relationship was as good as it ever was. Better. We saw her at least once a week. Talked to her more often. Shampooed her rugs, mowed the grass. Helped her stay independent the way she wanted."

I agreed with him that he need not feel guilty. He'd done his duty. Even so, he repeated that litany over and over again in the days following. As he sat at the kitchen table with a bottle of whiskey, sorting his mother's papers. As
the far-flung family showed up one by one.

Dad made lists of everything. The contents of Granny Kate's safe deposit box, everything in her house. He took notes regarding each phone call to her stockbroker, to her minister. Everyone must know that he, the executor, had acted properly, fairly. He insisted I go with him to the bank, the lawyer, the funeral home. "You have a business," he said. "You know how these things work."

The funeral home director, a pale-faced young woman in a grey suit, led us through service options. "We can provide the pallbearers if you like," she said. "Or friends and relatives can do it."

On impulse I asked if women were pallbearing these days. "Oh yes," she said, turning her large kindly eyes on me. "It's being done quite a lot."

My father seemed fidgety at this revelation. Sat back in the chair, rolled a batch of papers in his hands. When I looked at him, he would not meet my eyes. Maybe he thought female pallbearers would somehow dishonor his mother's memory. I said I definitely wanted to be a pallbearer.

"Perhaps some of the other grandchildren would like to do it
too," suggested the funeral director. I agreed to ask around and left my father with a fait accompli.

Twice before the open-casket funeral, I "viewed" my dead Granny Kate. Each time, walking into the room, my stomach knotted and I thought "Oh-oh, it's about to become real." But it didn't. The figure laid out in pink satin resembled Granny Kate only as a wax Toussaud resembles the live Lincoln, the real Janis Joplin. The figure was a symbol of Granny Kate, granted. The real Granny Kate, dead she might be, existed in my mind, a half-visible force that could still disrupt, still connect vital elements.

Before Granny's service began our funeral director gave each pallbearer a white carnation boutineer. Not wanting any more difference than gender assumed, I pinned mine to the fragile silk just right of my breastbone, where a lapel would be. The white flower's frilly edges disappeared into yellow.

The minister eulogized Granny Kate's piety, her love of the Bible, the fierce orderliness and propriety of her person. Then a mediocre baritone, a stranger hired by the funeral home, sang her favorite hymn, "Precious Memories." All the flowers save the grandkids' tribute -- ordered by me -- were in Kate's signature colors, mauve, pink, and white, heavy
with hyacinth and lilac. I chose jonquils, freesia, sunny
daffodils wired in a circle to indicate that life rolled on.

All through the service I sniffed carnation spice, thinking
dust, pollen, memory. For a sixteenth birthday present
Granny gave me perfume, Blue Carnation, which stayed on the
shelf because it reminded me of her prissy oldlady scent.
And me the would-be earth mother, runty but all natural,
hair unbound, face aggressively naked, sans makeup.

Now Granny lay aggressively dead, face masked over by people
who'd never seen her alive. They had her mouth too long,
curving in a downward crescent she never would have
permitted. The jaw thrust up as her bones suggested, but in
life she tucked her chin, held it level to preserve dignity
and a long neck line.

Ending the chapel service, the minister suggested we think
over our own experiences of Kate. Around the graveside
then, he said, we might share stories and memories of the
dear departed.

Everyone who wanted to filed by the effigy for a last look.
My mother and father, twisted together in grief, were last
in line. Then the funeral director, somber in grey, closed
Granny in her box forever. We six pallbearers each grabbed
a handle, lifted the white casket (pathetically insubstantial!) and walked it to the door, to rollers that slid it in the hearse's open maw.

In the pallbearer's limo, searching for something worthy to say about Granny Kate, all I could feel was a harsh, hostile disappointment. How she married a rich man two minutes after Grandpa Nate died. Their fancy house where I was allowed to visit only occasionally and carefully. And that silly dog she got when her second husband died! It yipped and danced around, useless and noisy. Once when she visited cousins in the Ozarks, she left it with Dad. He wanted desperately to kill it. Among old friends, I still referred to her as "my poodle dog granny."

Then I remembered one conversation. Sometime in the Seventies after my divorce. The family, relieved I'd shed myself of a sick misfit but angry about broken vows, pretended I'd never been married at all. The country enjoyed a similarly forgetful mood, and so did I. Vietnam -- what was that? Marriage -- an antique idea! I worked then on a psychiatric ward and was running through men like disposable lighters.

Granny and I sat on the stone hearth at the folks' house. To make conversation I'd asked about her early days with
"Grandpa. "How did you live? What was your first house like?"

"Why, all we had was a tenthouse," she said. "And a cot."

"A cot?" I repeated. The word conjured an image of single narrow canvas discomfort. Hardly honeymoonish.

"Yes," she said. "A cot."

She turned to me and suddenly I saw the snappy sixteen year-old she must have been. Her faraway deepset eyes glittered with a kind of naughty pleasure I'd never seen in her.

"You know honey, if it's wide enough for one, it's deep enough for two."

We both laughed -- a gutty, knowing, womanly laugh.

* * * *

Our second duty as pallbearers was to walk Granny's closed white casket from the cemetery drive to the family plot. We did not hoist the casket to our shoulders; perhaps that isn't done anymore. I bore my share of the newly dead with a lowered grip middle left. A small ambivalent woman
sweating inside yellow silk, with a wing of white in her hair.

New spring grass covered sinkholes along the row of gravestones and I stumbled more than once. But my tall brother, my tall male cousins (perhaps they bore the weight all along) hardly seemed to notice; Granny’s casket remained steady.

A fresh breeze carried jubilant bird song, and I thought to bear Granny further up the valley toward Mt. Adams. To splinter that fussy white casket and lay her remains on a platform in a sugar pine, where some think a dead body belongs. Here’s fodder for falcon and raven, they say, old flesh, close to the bone.

Raptors of religion though, picked at Granny’s life once the coffin was situated under a green canopy. "She claimed God’s promise as her own," said the minister.

"Never a hair out of place; always clean and decent in her person." The Bible study teacher shook his narrow head with admiration and sorrow.

I kept my mouth shut, thinking of the letter she once wrote me: "We were afraid of the Indians. They were our
neighbors of course, but we pretended they weren't. Not that far back we'd been deadly enemies."

Denial always has its purpose.

I kept my mouth shut thinking of the time, after months immersed in frontier women's diaries, I dreamed Granny reaching to me across a raging stream, just offering a hand, one generation to another, nothing personal.

One day after the funeral I sat at the breakfast bar with my father. We were discussing the baritone hired by the funeral director. "He butchered 'Precious Memories'" I said. "And that's such a pretty song."

"He sure did." My father sipped coffee. A barrel-chested man, he looked as if one of his staves had been kicked in. "I don't think Mom would have appreciated him."

"Granny would've had words about that baritone all right. He just didn't get the rhythm. Or the pitch, for that matter." Tipping my empty coffee cup I stared into the grounds. "Too bad we couldn't have Emmy Lou Harris sing at the service. She does that song."

I slid off my stool and swung around to get the coffee pot.
My robe caught on the cupboard handle, ripping another hole in the faithful old peach chenille. I said "shit." My father didn't notice. Presently, I placed a hand on his shoulder. "Want a warm-up? I'm gonna build another pot." Dad held his cup. I poured, saved a dribble for myself.

Then, inspired toward some musical ideal, I tried a phrase the baritone especially botched. Raised a finger, a conducting baton, and with it climbed the air: "'In the stillness of the midnight/ Precious sacred scenes unfold...'"

I broke off before it got bad, hoping my small soprano hinted at a proper rendition without in any way suggesting I myself could have performed Granny Kate's favorite hymn. For my father's sake I hoped to manage at least a ladylike rhythm. I looked to him for approval.

But thunder was moving across his forehead. I recognized the look from our sparring days. He was suddenly mad about something, and didn't want to be. His mouth worked a little but nothing came out. The tension energized him. He gazed at the yard, his yard, daring the wind to knock loose an old twig or the neighborhood cat to slip through the fence. Why he was just as quick with a rake or a gun as he'd ever been ...

... He sat up straight -- barrel staves stiffened -- and
swivelled to face me.

"I liked Emmy Lou Harris a lot," he said, voice soft and mean. "Until she started sleeping with those draft dodgers. Then I just couldn't listen to her voice anymore."

I felt an evil grin coming on. He could act so prissy, just like his mother. All the time looking like a buffalo or a bear -- shaggy, mealy, mean.

"Well you listen to my voice," I drawled, "And I slept with draft dodgers. Deserters too."

His head swung in a tight circuit back and forth, the park bear working out whether to charge or beg. He laughed a little. "But you've changed," he said. "You've switched sides."

"Is that so?"

Is that so? I kept asking myself that on the way home to Montana. Through the tender green patchwork of Palouse wheatfields, the rising Bitterroots, the multiplying wilderness: Have I switched sides? Is it that simple? And what are the sides anyway?
Randall said something like that the last time I saw him. We’d been apart six years by then. In the interim I’d married and divorced Ben. Watergate was history. Saigon had fallen. I was finally sampling college, a Comparative Religion class. One night while studying I picked up the phone and a familiar voice -- one that made me feel sad and sexy at once -- sang a lonesome Gram Parsons’ ballad: "Some of my friends don’t know who they belong to..."

We met in a Denny’s at the freeway interchange. He’d grown quite fat and his teeth were bad. Nevertheless Randall’s eyes, coke-bottle green and bountifully lashed, lured me in. He took my hand and said softly, "You’re going up and I’m going down."

I wept and gripped his hand, believing what he said was true and that no effort of reasonable people could change it. I didn’t tell him about my marriage. How it ended. I might have pulled closer, been kinder, more human.

But I was terrified -- of the chaos he represented, of the chaos I’d seen in Ben, in me, the streets, etc. Perhaps I still am.

Maybe that’s why I love science so much. Heartless rational science. Chaos theory. Fracture mechanics. Artificial
intelligence. As if Kali, the magnificent destructo-derby queen rampaging through our blood, would stand for measurement’s nonsense.

Two days later Randall drove a Canadian Ford out Eureka Flats Road, and doing ninety the patrolman said, held it straight where Starbuck Turn hangs seriously right.

Randall Sykes was thirty-three at the time, his Jesus year. And I didn’t even know he died until it came out several days later in the paper. The news jacknifed me, punched me in the gut. I was twenty-five and making a square corner. I threw up over and over. But there’s still something indigestible about the whole thing or he wouldn’t be showing up like this, in my dreams, at Granny’s grave.

* * * *

Did I tell my Granny Kate memories as we stood in the bright spring sunshine facing her light (I helped carry it!) white coffin? No.

No. But my mother, who seldom speaks at occasions, said a wonderful thing as we all stood around the casket waiting for someone in the silent deceased’s silent family to speak.
"I don't worry about Kate like I might," Mom said, struggling with her hankie. "Because of a dream I had."

She tried to clear the boulders from her throat, then moved half a step toward the casket. "Kate was in the open. On a kind of rocky path. She stumbled. Several times. I saw her, and reached out my hand. But she was far away. Alone."

My father's face in that moment loosened and drifted. It caught finally on something, perhaps the picture of his mother on a faraway path.

Mom's voice got stronger. "Kate went on a while. She'd stumble and pick herself up. Stumble again. Then a light gathered around her head. It seemed to steady her."

I could just picture it: Granny hitching first one shoulder then the next until she was tall and straight. The light on her, milky and golden. A gospel choir swelling in the background. Her strong face lifted toward beatitude.

Testifying now, in the rhythm, Mom said, "I saw God was in that light. I saw God was pleased with his daughter. He truly helped her along. After that blessing, I didn't worry so much about Kate. I knew she was in God's hands."
My mom stepped back, blew her nose. Several of us did. In the silence that followed I couldn’t think of anything to add. So I laid my pallbearer’s boutonniere onto Granny Kate’s casket and bid her 88-year-old body goodbye.

If I had Randall’s dogtags, or my wedding ring (and if I believed it would work), I’d have buried them too in the quiet family plot under the catalpa tree.
Chapter 2: Locust Grove America

We couldn’t have lived together, Randall and I. We’d have killed each other in short order. I’d want some place nice and would work for it. He wouldn’t care or wouldn’t know how. I’d need a life safe enough to dream in. He’d want edge city all the time, be anxious to erase his dreams.

Am I making this up? Excusing myself? There’s no way to prove. Even slogging through old memories, the best one can hope for is a likely story.

What’s likely? That depends where you come from, who your people are, and what you make of all that. Even then, random factors influence things. Or factors so unpredictable at the time, and mysterious, they might as well be random. Virtually random realities. That’s what we’re faced with.

For instance. I know certain things happened and do not doubt my vision. But I see them aslant, as if the recording eye were on a gyroscopic movie dolly, not just a runty earthbound biped. Or I see things upsidedown, like a young monkey playing trapeze with vines, like the Hanged Man in a Tarot deck. Some things I see from above or afar like distant tableaux, and can neither blink nor really take them
in. Other things I don't see at all until years later. Maybe never. Some things are behind memory -- my first two or three years, say -- and I can only imagine them, almost as if they were the future. Hexing, coaxing, waiting for a vision that's in the neighborhood of what I want.

* * * *

The neighborhood of my story. Warriors march through it, sometimes on a grand scale. And when they aren't marching or cutting obvious swaths through the material, they're engaged in covert maneuvers that influence the currents of power. Grieving, maimed, and alone, warriors radiate through my story. And me the peacenik. Perhaps I need them, like religion in a foxhole.

Where I grew up the community owed its livelihood to a cold warrior's dream arsenal, nuclear weapons. We had a facility for building them: "the reservation" we called it, as if it were Indian Country; or "the area" -- a job site that might be measured but not named.

There are females in my story too. Grandmothers. Mothers. Disobedient sisters. Females who, for a long time, do not make their voices heard above the ruckus and industry of postwar America -- above, for instance, the everlasting
winds of Locust Grove.

I'll name it myself, like God or Adam or my furthest foremother -- half-ape Lucy in the Great Rift Valley, the first frontierswoman. Locust Grove. For the dry brittle hard-to-love trees that twist slowly up wherever the merest hint of moisture exists. For the suggestion of plague.

Locust Grove wasn't always a science town. For 10,000 years the landscape supported nomadic tribes. But by 1900, the nomadic tribes, mostly decimated, had been corralled elsewhere. In their place, a few desert rat farmers interested in peach groves, asparagus, the heavy autumn musk of concord grapes.

Then came World War Two and atomic energy. Within months sleepy Locust Grove swelled from 500 to 50,000 people. It became necessary to invent another culture, and quickly. The War Department oblidged, mandating secrecy at all levels of public and private life: No one must know what anyone else was doing. Neither co-worker nor neighbor nor spouse nor children. No one could be allowed to put two and two together. No one except that handful of elite scientists at the top, and the generals who sometimes came to visit them.

In a poem I love Marge Piercy says "The work of the world is
common as mud." I believe that line. It applies to my father, a carpenter who built houses, bowling alleys, scaffolds for cooling towers anchored in wet sand and basalt bedrock. And to myself now, kludging dBase code, or gardening -- herbs, rue and sweet woodruff; flowers whose names sound like ideologies -- bleeding heart, lily of the valley. But does it apply to my schoolmates whose fathers sat in think tanks, exuding equations, hatching nuclear fission experiments? Is their work "common"?

They made special contributions to the god of science, these think tank fathers. They were a force to be reckoned with in community life. They sat on the PTA making sure our science curriculum was up to snuff. They helped our single newspaper's editor chose the right stories: stories of development and progress, stories of patriotism and hidden menace behind the Iron Curtain, stories of football and state gymnastics titles. If there were stories involving accidents in "the area" we did not read them in our newspaper. Certainly our community was not forewarned about the "controlled release experiments" conducted by its resident Nobel Prize winning scientists.

Ah yes, radiated material. That was the commodity our local fathers dealt in. Radiation futures. As if we would choose such a thing: A radiated future.
I am not faulting them, finally. No more than I fault myself for trying in my turn to ape them. We may all be named co-conspirators yet.

But sometimes I wonder, wonder about the family down the street from my childhood home, four out of five with wacko thyroids and astonished eyes. Or about myself, hatched with so many allergies it took a year to pull past birth weight. Such things happen in many families, many communities. Still.

* * * *

National security secrets weren't the only thing dividing Locust Grove from itself. A river and a bridge neatly split the town in two.

For much of their youth LaSalle and Michael, boys I tutored during the Great Society, would not have crossed Jessup Bridge when they came to it. Not without thinking pretty hard. Their community was separate. On our side of the bridge cops had the right -- no, the DUTY -- to come out at sunset, sweep the area of leftover different-skinned persons and send them back across the river.

At a certain point people started crossing Jessup Bridge on
purpose after dark to prove something. Then it became too
costly to enforce the Sunset Laws, as they were called.
Finally, or perhaps too quickly, many people found it more
agreeable simply to forget such laws ever existed. To erase
painful history.

The first time I risked open warfare with my father it was
over this bridge. At sixteen I wanted to cross it, help
kids on the other side with their reading. He flat out
forbade me to do so. Always before, I'd done what he said,
or sulked and pouted, or snuck around practicing the
forbidden in secret. But this time, God -- as well as a
kind of adventure -- was on my side and I knew it. So I
brought it up again one night as he sat with the paper and a
beer. "Dad, I still want to work in the tutoring program."

He lowered the paper an inch and barked, "I've told you my
decision. Now don't bother me about it."

"But it's a good thing to do!" I said. "It's supervised.
It's in a church. It's a religious activity!" Granny's
voice inside my head was the model; I could just hear her
telling Dad in no uncertain terms what was religious and
what was not.

Dad sagged a little. "Look," he said. "We keep them over
there for a REASON. Bad things happen. You don't know."
His eyes glittered, warning me off dangers he was unwilling
to specify. "It's just not safe. They're different."

A kind of confidence, cautious but real, took hold of me.
If he'd just talk, respond to my questions or provocations,
then eventually his true fears would come out and I'd be
able to counter them, one by one.

"Maybe they're different because we make them stay over
there," I said. "We don't even know. It's not fair."

"Whoever said life was fair?"

"Well YOU want it to be!" I blurted, suddenly mad at his
blithe self-contradictions. "You're always talking about
the bosses and unions and how they get in bed together and
screw the worker..."

Saying the word "screw" was taking a chance. Dad held all
the rights to blasphemy in our family. But he just stared
at me a minute, then laughed and shook his head. Again
forbade me to go into colored town.

That wasn't the end of it, though. Something had shifted
between us. So over the next six months, carefully choosing
the occasions, I brought up tutoring many times. Finally he wore down and gave his reluctant consent. As well as the car. My first public victory over the powers that be. It was sweet.

* * * *

Not much later I met Marta, my sister in disobedient appetites. She was fairly new in town, and we had several classes together. One day while I rummaged in my hall locker, she approached me. "I've been studying you," she said. "I think we should be friends."

"What for?" I asked. Why should Marta, rapidly establishing herself with the most popular clique, be friends with me -- a loner more comfortable with books and family than peers?

"We'll go for a walk in the canyon after school," she said, ignoring my question.

"OK," I shrugged. "But I go tutor at four o'clock."

"That's fine. I have a car."

"So do I."
High school was Marta’s element. Tall, leggy, and deep-breasted, she wore her wheat-colored hair in a crown of braids. No one else would have dared Brunhilde when the height of fashion was a vinyl miniskirt and go-go boots. Marta wore Peter Pan collars, smocked fronts, pale cotton dresses with little flower prints.

She was wild too, sophisticated. Marta forgave herself any curiosity. She never brooded about her love life. She just did it, had it, moving like a roper on a fine horse between any two steers. She could lasso one boy, then another, tie them up separately or together. Cross a room diagonally if what she wanted was in the corner. Sidle next to a drunk football hero sitting on a cold curbstone and kiss him passionately while conducting a pocket-by-pocket search for the whiskey bottle she knew he’d tucked in somewhere.

And Marta wasn’t just a style hero or a party girl either. She kept up with the right crowd and worked her grades, anticipating a good expensive private college.

Meanwhile, as the year progressed, I began walking out of class. For no apparent reason. Not for cramps or illness or family emergency, but for testiness, boredom, an urgent desire to be anywhere but with the Economics teacher reading Chapter 15 aloud just as if he hadn’t already assigned it to
the class for homework. What was the point?

I became an anarchist, assuming that if an entity had no demonstrable reason for power, I was under no obligation to respect it. Ergo, one morning in history class when called to stand, place hand over heart and recite the Pledge of Allegiance, I simply stayed sat and kept my mouth shut.

To Marta my behavior was humorless and short-sighted. "You stupid fool!" she said when I finally got suspended. "You’ll ruin your chances for a scholarship."

"Notice they won’t suspend me for refusing to say the Pledge," I sniffed. "It’s for walking out of Economics again. That’s so gutless."

I was incensed the school bosses wouldn’t put me on trial for treason. Nothing would have pleased me more. I craved a public forum, open combat with words over issues. When we argued the war in Vietnam -- as we did regularly now -- my father said "Raney don’t kid yourself. You’ll never be a pacifist. You like to fight too much."

Marta’s rebellion was reversed. At school she played by the rules. But on the home front, where guns, booze, and weird science prevailed, she flaunted her freedom. One night I
met Marta at her family’s ranchette. Her dad, known as Mr. Plutonium for his work in waste management, lurked behind the screen door with shotgun in hand. I waited in the car while he and Marta argued. Finally she stormed out. He raised the gun a few inches and I thought he might just blast her for insubordination. But then he lowered the barrel and walked out, standing watch at the white picket fence while we drove off. He seemed calmer, though perhaps I saw him through the rear view mirror take aim again.

"Don’t pay any attention," Marta said. "He’s just drunk. Practicing." Then she added "I’m getting out of here."

She did, too. That was the amazing thing. To an apartment of her own on Finley Street, near the river. That area of town was a flood plain really, a place you couldn’t live too long and not experience a washout. Migrants lived there, laborers and waitresses. I thought it was pretty -- the neighborhood lined with cottonwoods, willow, and Russian olive. Loads of birdlife too -- gulls, ducks, Canadian geese, an occasional swan or eagle. Just the place I’d crave to be on a mild February day between ice and high water, enjoying the sun.

Marta’s parents paid the rent and gave her a small allowance. Thus was she able, unlike the rest of us, to
play rock and roll as loud and often as she wished --
Jefferson Airplane, The Doors, The Beatles, The Stones,
whatever. Also, boys came to her rooms whenever she said.

Marta's bold life seemed enviable, but early that spring my
own drama took over. Mash notes began to appear in my hall
locker. The notes were in pencil on grid paper, unsigned.
Apparently stuffed through the metal door vents, they
fluttered out when I grabbed my coat or calculus text.

The first one said "Red glints in your coal hair stoke the
fire in my loins."

Gad.

The second note claimed my breasts were the writer's
"Weltanschauung," adding that I would be well-advised to
"deposit twenty-five cents" and "look up" this important
foreign word. It was German for "philosophy of life." My
breasts were somebody's philosophy of life.

According to the third note, the writer was ready to "rip
through my defenses" as through a thin membrane or veil, and
confront my "naked rebel soul."

Dang. That hotted me up every time I thought of it, ie, all
the time. But whose hand, mind, libido, might be responsible for such declarations? I couldn’t imagine.

For some reason I neglected to tell Marta. Finally one afternoon a note fell from my locker when she was with me and I spilled the whole sequence. Her eyes narrowed. She was interested. Something inside me went limp as I gave myself over to her expertise.

"First we have to figure out who sent these," she said. "Then we plan our campaign."

Who took German and also had classes with me? There were only two possibilities. Darwin Schultz, a stolid pink-faced boy whose mother taught a foreign language; and Joel Bingham who’d once lived across the street from me and was tall, gawky, owl-eyed. Both were in my calculus class and Joel also had the same history class first period, the one I’d refused to say Pledge of Allegiance in.

Marta predicted it would be Joel. "But to make sure you have to stare at each one, see who blushes or stares back."

So I did. Darwin didn’t seem to notice. Whereas Joel both blushed and stared back. I remembered him at eight, the boy who couldn’t get a bike to work, much less a football, and
so was far outside the rowdy neighborhood gang my brother and I ran with.

"You’re right. It’s Joel. Now what?"

"Leave it to me," Marta said. "I’ll go talk with him. We’ll do a double date."

A double date with Marta and one of her cool jock boyfriends? Plus me and the bug-eyed, seething, inept Joel? I couldn’t picture it. I wanted to. I just couldn’t.

* * * *

But picture this: It’s a cold March night, midweek. The weather’s turned back to winter. There’s bitter wind and the stars are ice chips in a remorseless black sky. Whatever buds early warmth coaxed out have frozen on the trees; their limbs clack in the wind, noisy and sharp.

Marta emerges from the back door of her duplex apartment. Instead of a dress she’s wearing a contradiction in terms: demure high neck, floral print, and a skirt so truncated it barely covers her butt. She hugs a short coat tight to her middle and fastens the toggles.
The dog next door, an old shepherd with one milky eye, barks at her. She scissor kicks over the fence and squats down beside the dog, ruffles his ears, buries her face in his neck. The wind swirls her hair, which is down for once. Erratic blond fingers dance about the dog's grey muzzle.

Marta leaves the dog and enters her car, a large sloping post-war sedan heavy as a tank. It does not easily start. Biting her lip, she pumps the gas pedal. The ancient motor finally turns over and catches. At a stately pace, Marta drives her tank across town -- from the flats to the slants to the hills. She searches the street signs, finds the right one.

Her Hudson stops in front of a large single-story apartment complex faced with elaborate rockwork. It's local black basalt, porous and quick-cooled, volcanic. Marta gets out, begins walking west along the units. Like wagons grouped against attack, the apartments run in an apparently seamless circle.

Some distance from her car Marta finds the right number and knocks. A gawky figure opens the door. It's Joel, magnifying glasses perched on blade of nose, legs like ruddy flamingo sticks visible beneath a frayed bathrobe. Joel recognizes his caller, but seems startled by her visit.
"Um, hello," Marta says. "I heard you were staying at your grandmother's."

Joel's head bobs up and down.

Marta's eyes fasten on one of Joel's adams apple, as it appears and disappears under his chin. Many dark straight brown hairs bristle from Joel's face and neck. There might be hair on his chest, she thinks.

Joel clears his throat for an announcement. "Granny's in Europe. I'm watching the cat."

"Hmmm." Marta hugs herself and stamps her feet, warding off cold.

Joel mumbles "Sorry," and stands aside to open the door. "Come in. I was just working up a few calculus problems."

He waves toward the fireplace, a large walk-around affair of the same black rock as the outside walls. A tidy fire burns in it. On the hearth and floor are scattered thick texts, a sliderule, gridpaper and pencils, teapot and cup, a bowl of nuts.

Marta grins. "Can I sit down a minute? I just wanted to talk to you about a friend of mine." Glancing about the
room, Marta selects a hassock and scoots it center, facing the fireplace.

Joel lowers himself onto the hearth, moving slowly as if something -- kneecaps maybe, or the lens in his heavy glasses -- might break. "Would you like some nuts," he says, offering the bowl. "Pecans. They grow here you know. This far north nobody expects it."

Marta declines and launches brightly into the matter of her friend Raney who is so wonderful really, intense etcetera but naive in matters of love. Joel, who already knows that much about Raney, wonders what Marta would be like stripped of her defenses, loose hair haloed by the firelight.

He cracks pecans, two together in his palm, and extracts the meat with his grandmother's curved silver pick. He thinks of the pecan tree, weeping like a willow, and the shell-shaped scales of its bark. In autumn after leaves the nuts fell and you gathered them in burlap sacks. In winter someone would shell the nuts and make a pie. Or you could eat them like this, while studying or with company.

Marta, who must watch her weight, feels relieved when Joel quits nuts and takes up his pipe. She's reached the double date part of her presentation and believes that so far
things are going pretty well.

"Who would you be more comfortable with as a fourth?" she asks. "Bill Conway? Joe Buckwalter? Avery Reese?"

Joel shrugs nervously and begins to fumble with his pipe and pouch.

"Avery, then I think. He has the most imagination."

Joel holds his smoke instead of puffing it and passes the pipe to Marta. "Peace," he says. The word pops out, thin and constricted over the top of the drug.

Marta's a little surprised by this turn of events, but recovers quickly. She cups the pipe bowl and inhales like a pro even though this is only her second time with pot. Then hands it back.

For some moments the two pass the pipe back and forth, peacefully and silently, as if a truce has been declared in their negotiations.

What can be said about the cat who enters the picture at this point? It's a Manx, with tortoiseshell fur and no tail, name of Shelby. Perhaps Shelby has been sleeping on the
mohair throw in Granny's bedroom. Or was hidden behind the rubber plant all along, watching these two. In any case Shelby now targets Joel, the pale thrum of Joel's shin. Against it, the cat's arched spine plays a song of pleasure and connection.

Quick as she sees the cat do it Marta imagines her own spine rubbed against Joel's leg. The idea is too compelling. She drops off the hassock, catlike and careful, onto the sure pads of her knees. She imagines she is hidden by grass as she creeps across the hearth rug, oblivious to the dig of pecan shell fragments. Her yellow eyes never leave Joel's face, which is blooming into a soft oh. She wants him to know she's coming, and be unable to imagine it.

* * * *

Just before we finished high school -- me by the skin of my teeth and with no scholarship offers -- the river flooded. Water crawled up the banks and flared over the land. It closed Jessup Bridge and half the roads. Swamped the old root cellar in Marta's building and etched the walls with patterns of damp.

Shoes in hand, Marta and I one long dusk waded low-lying streets in her neighborhood. Cut off at both ends by
washed-out gullies, the pavement was a shallow sun-warmed pool. We watched the dreamy eddies our feet made and smelled wet cottonwood, fresh mud, ripe green. "If we could freeze one minute of our lives," she said, "this would be it."

I too was intoxicated by the spell of flood water. It ran like metal with all the colors of the sky -- silver, tangerine, smokey violet. It spread over desert, fertile as the Nile 5000 years ago. I understood what she meant about the magic of the moment. But she'd won the high school prizes; she could afford nostalgia.

"Maybe," I said, clenching my teeth and kicking up an arc of falling diamond drops. "Maybe we could freeze this moment and worship it. But personally, I just need to GET OUT OF TOWN."

It took several more months -- months I still see in a telephoto dream -- but I managed.
Chapter 3: Silent Movie

A rising full moon shines on the silvered legs and tank of a large municipal watertower. Official black letters proclaim LOCUST GROVE. Spraycan grafitti also crisscrosses the tank. JACK DIGS SHEILA. SHIELA AND BOB FOREVER. 67 RULES. SHIT RULES. THERE IT IS. CAN'T GET NO... A peace sign. A Nazi sign.

A square of fence surrounds the water tower legs, its chain links snipped in several places. Inside the fence and out, low scrub dots the flat ground. Small tufts of dry grass bend in the wind. In the distance, bare hills slump together like sleeping animals, tan flanks whitened by moonlight. Dirt tracks converge on the tower from three directions.

Loosened by wind, a tumbleweed rolls through a hole in the fence. It smashes into a leg of the water tower, bounces in place for a moment, then rolls on, smashing the fence on the other side where it sticks fast.

Several miles away a church social hall gleams in the same moonlight. The hall, perhaps twenty-five by forty feet, sports a utilitarian kitchen at one end and a large riverrock fireplace at the other. Interior walls, cement
blocks painted shiny white, glow almost painfully in the stark florescent lighting. Uncurtained windows frame the night -- black backlit by silver.

Three tables and a dozen or so chairs cluster in the room's center, books and papers strewn on top. More tables and chairs, legs folded, line the far wall. Otherwise unfurnished, the room is also without decoration except for a few dramatic bouquets, dried thistle in large dark urns.

At one of the tables Raney Owen bends over a child. Her sharp-featured white face is without makeup; against this paleness, the bristly black hair and dark eyes seem somebody else's. The child, a boy of about eight with coffee-colored skin and a close-cropped beautifully curved skull, struggles over his reading.

Two other pairs pour over books, black child reading, white adult tutoring. After a time, these two pairs break up. The children leave, the adults stay a bit longer talking, then they too leave. On his way out, a large florid man with a grey-streaked beard stops to bid Raney good night and hand her a key; he pats the boy, a bit awkwardly.

Finally, this last child closes his book. He and Raney shake hands, relief evident on his face, pride on Raney's.
He grabs a coat, delivers a backward wave as he's going out the door. Slow as a dream, Raney douses the lights, locks up the hall.

Raney drives along a narrow rutted dirt track in the moonlight, water tower gleaming nearby. The road dead ends near a clump of small weathered buildings. Raney cuts the lights on her bulletnose Studebaker coupe, and glides it near other vehicles -- a VW bus, a mid-Fifties Ford coupe, and two motorcycles.

She sits for a moment in the car. The nearest building, an old shed, leans slightly to the left. Roof paper flaps in the wind. Not far off, reddish light glows through the windows of a slatboard cabin. A narrow outhouse triangulates shed and cabin. Its door slams and a figure -- adult sized but impossible to tell whether male or female -- emerges, hitching up drawers, then moves through the moonlit yard, disappearing into the cabin's back door.

Raney leaves her car. When the wind hits, she pulls a short coat tighter and walks head down toward the cabin door. Suddenly a tree branch dips, nearly slapping her face. It's a wrist-sized locust limb set just above head height. As if to punish the branch or test elasticity, Raney grabs it with both hands and swings her small compact body vigorously back
and forth several times. Then she drops, still as stone, and hangs dead center, staring through black branches at the moon overhead. After a moment her hands disengage, and smoothing down clothes and hair, she marches to the cabin.

Raney knocks, sharp-chinned face serious, attentive. She speaks into the door, waits, swipes again at her hair. The door opens a crack. A vertical shaft of light falls on Raney, picking up pale freckles, the brassy undertone in her black hair. She reacts as to a spotlight, face instantly widening, eyes and mouth tugged up in a half-goofy smile meant to reassure. Whatever the scrutiny from inside, she seems to pass it, and slips into the cabin.

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Same moon, backside of a derelict two-story apartment building. Overgrown junipers completely hide the lower floors. The shrubs and several large trees sway in the wind; branches scratch and rub against the building like live creatures wanting in. Rickety stairs lead up to a narrow porch crammed with stuff -- a doorless fridge, broken chairs, boxes with old clothes and rags spilling out, and many empty bottles, mostly green wine jugs.

Someone flicks off the outside light. Dimly visible inside
the upstairs apartment, two people approach the doorway. Lance Corporal Randall Sykes, a tall man, opens the door, stands between it and the still closed screen. Though he slouches and his back is to the porch, something in the cast of spine and neck says this man is alert, ready to spring as a watching cat might. His fingers reach behind for the screen door handle, twitch on it. A plump older woman, his mother, clings to him.

She has stringy grey hair, a puffy face; she could be an ill 45, or an ill-used 60. Bleery eyed and weeping, she also looks frightened. She grips Randall's chest, pleads with him, then buries her face against his winter-issue fatigue jacket. He stares ahead with dead tired green eyes, says nothing, strokes her cheek softly with his knuckles. He could be 20, 25, or even 30; has thick black hair -- unlike Raney's his is blue black, raven black, iridescent black -- just long enough to curl a little, a black mustache, and needs a shave.

Randall peels his mother away, holds her at arms' length, and backs out the door. Once on the porch, he pivots -- a swift and efficient motion, knees bent, eyes sweeping the perimeter. Then he picks through the obstacle course, slips down the stairs and is gone.
Randall's mother stands in her empty kitchen as if frozen, mouth slack, eyes on nothing. Finally she passes a hand over her face, wobbles herself loose and pours a water glass of red wine from the half-gallon jug on the counter. With this in hand she edges into the living room. Lit by one floor lamp, it's a small, high-ceilinged square with few furnishings: one yellow-green overstuffed chair, a daybed covered in the same material, a console TV with framed photos on top.

She glances toward the heavily curtained window and tightens her mouth. Puts her glass on the TV next to a portrait of Randall (younger looking, clean-shaven) in his full dress Marine uniform. Then she turns off the lamp, crosses to the window, and opens a crack in the curtains.

Below, a quiet nighttime street of mixed apartments, a few small houses, a warehouse or two, and a storefront grocery on the corner. Two street lamps are out. Under the far dead light pole, parked with its nose sticking out of an alley, is a plain dark late-model Plymouth with two men inside. Moonlight reveals them eating -- sandwiches maybe, or doughnuts, something flatish that can be managed with fingers.

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Inside the slatboard cabin. A bearded man in a white collarless shirt stands with Raney near the front door. Hands on hips, head cocked, he questions her. She answers, an over-solemn look on her face as if she might be mocking him just slightly. Finally he seems satisfied, points to a row of coat hooks on the wall right.

A pot-bellied stove glows redly in the cabin’s main room. Several people, mostly long-haired and male, sit cross-legged in a semicircle facing the stove. The man in white gestures palm up toward this group, then disappears.

Pete, Raney’s brother, some few years older than her and the room’s only short-haired male, tilts his head at her. More Irish than Welsh genes operate in his blood, for his hair is brick red and his eyes golden brown. Similar chin though, a jutting wedge that often as not leads a fist his way. Smirking, Pete tosses a few words in Raney’s direction. She talks back, sticks a cigarette in her mouth.

Opposite Pete a scraggly blond man waves a match box toward Raney. He scoots over, making a place for her. Raney smiles widely, slides in next to him. Blondie lights her cigarette. Their heads bend together; Blondie points one by one to three other long-haired young men in their early twenties, and to one woman in her late twenties with long
dark braids and high cheekbones. Blondie names each one. Raney repeats each name in turn, greets the person.

Pete swigs from a half-full jug of red wine and hands it toward Raney. Just as her hand touches the bottle, he draws it back. Laughing, he takes another swig. Expression suddenly hang-dog apologetic, he hands her the jug again. Raney mouthes an obscenity at him, hesitates, then slowly extends her arm. Ever the tormenting older brother, Pete jiggles the wine jug, then allows her to grasp it. Raney glares at him, takes a deep swig from the jug, coughs, hands it to Blondie.

Blondie demurs, holding up a small chamois bag. He grins, empties its contents onto a tray which has been sitting on the floor next to him. He shakes the chamois empty. Out come a plastic baggie with dry green matter, rolling papers, another box of matches. Raney raises her eyebrows, passes the jug behind Blondie's back to the woman with braids. Braided woman takes a small sip, passes the jug to her right.

Raney gazes around the cabin. Bundled plant matter dangles from the rafters. Heat currents or drafts cause some bundles to twirl lazily overhead. Old framed portrait photos stare from rough board walls: A severe woman in a
black 19th century bodice; an Indian warrior standing beside his paint pony; a man with his hair parted down the middle and a robber baron gaze.

Under one window on a table with elegant turned legs is a jungle of growing plants. One large chair hulks at the far edge of the room, an old brass floor lamp next to it, unlit. Scattered about the room are many lighted candles -- thin ones stuck in wine jugs; fat ones resting in saucers, jar lids, sea shells.

A narrow galley-style kitchen with high cupboards looms in the background, marked off by a strip of old peeling linoleum. Lined up on its one wall are a wood cook stove, a fridge with rounded edges, and a sink with a pump handle. Labelled jars and a kerosene lamp rest on the drainboard. Off the kitchen is a bedroom, its old iron bedstead covered with a quilt. A squat chest sits under the window through which moonlight streams.

* * * *

Randall walks along a two-lane road, periodically lowering his head against wind blasts. He passes houses with lighted windows, fenced fields, some livestock. A few cars go by, mostly large American sedans or station wagons, sometimes a
pickup truck. Surreptitiously, Randall watches these pass.

A VW Squareback approaches behind him, rather slowly. When he sees what it is Randall sticks out a thumb. The Squareback immediately pulls over and Randall hustles to catch up.

It's the man from the church, florid and grey-bearded. In between glances at the road, he appraises the hitchhiker who steadfastly stares out the side window. After a moment he pulls out a pack of cigarettes. Offers them -- and perhaps something more -- by resting the pack and his hand on Randall's knee.

Narrowed and mean, Randall's eyes lead the swing of his head until they rest on the cigarette pack. He takes the pack, stares coldly at the driver until he removes the offending hand. Randall slides out two, three, four cigarettes from the pack, stuffing all into a breast pocket. Then he points out the passenger window to a crossroad coming up. The driver shrugs, swings the wheel.

The crossroad, marked by a stopsign and three ragged wind-bent trees, is empty of other vehicles. A dirt track leads south. Gleaming in the distance, the moonlit watertower.
Randall unfolds himself from the VW. He's about to slam the car door when the driver's hand sticks out, offering a white card. Randall takes it, starts to tear it, then hesitates, touching the card to his forehead in a mock salute. He pockets the card and gently shuts the car door. The Squareback pulls a U-turn, speeds off. Randall wraps his jacket tighter, walks toward the watertower.

* * * *

Back in the cabin Raney's sitting crosslegged, silent and dreamy. Her gaze, snappy when she came in, has gone soft; it aims vaguely ahead at the stove. A small barrel of cast iron surrounded by shimmering heat waves, the stove glows reddest in a band around the middle. Off the back, pipe zigzags to a hole in the wall. Four vertical isinglass bars decorate the stove door; flames flicker behind -- furiously, then slower.

The man in white, guru of the scene, unfolds himself from his station near the stove, walks through the bedroom. Shortly he returns with an armload of wood. Kneeling gracefully, he unrolls the wood onto the hearth. It thunks to a stop against stove legs. He removes a long narrow stick from the kindling box and slips it into the stove's door handle. As if he knows all eyes are on him, he turns
to the group, smiles beatifically, and swings open the fire
door on fantastic coals -- red, orange, yellow, heat waves,
white ash. He selects three logs, stacks them neatly, with
breathing room, on the bed of coals.

Just as he shuts the stove door, something -- a sound
outside? -- distracts him. He glances quickly at Pete,
Blondie. They shrug. He gets up, lights a stick of
incense, blows the smoke into the room. Several people
including Blondie and Raney light cigarettes.

Finally, Guru goes to the front door. He leans against it,
listening, asks a question. Apparently satisfied, he opens
the door.

Randall steps in, stamping his booted feet as if to dislodge
invisible snow or mud. Or perhaps only to show that he
understands the difference between outside and inside and
will act accordingly.

Blondie hails the newcomer, tosses him a cigarette pack.
Randall grins, pulls a smoke from the pack, tosses back the
rest. Guru shows him the coat hooks.

When he takes off his padded fatigue jacket, Randall’s
extreme thinness is apparent even under a heavy sweater. He
moves over to the stove, strikes a match off the side. Black hair falls over his forehead.

Braided Woman slowly rises to a standing position, balancing herself with a hand on Blondie's shoulder. She is hugely pregnant. She moves off toward the kitchen, dark braids trailing to her hips, long fringed skirt gently flapping against her legs.

Raney stares intently at the newcomer. It seems she's the only person in the room who doesn't know who he is. She leans toward Blondie. He whispers something. Lips bunched, considering, Raney nods. When she looks up again, Randall is smiling at her. His eyes close once, lazily, as if signalling her, and open again.

Raney ducks her head, stretches the short skirt toward her knees. It doesn't reach. She drops her hands into the hollow of her lap.

Braided Woman brings a bowl of something, offers it to Randall. He thanks her, takes it. Hunched on the floor perilously close to fire, Randall rests his cigarette on a nearby saucer, alternately smokes and eats.

Directly across from him Raney frowns, tugs at her earlobe,
fidgets. She turns toward the jungle of plants growing at the window. Through the glass a single tree outside dips frenzied in the wind.

Back in the circle, Blondie passes a rolled joint directly to Randall who takes a deep drag, then another, then a third. When he passes it, the joint's all but gone. Pete studies his truncated share, smirks, pulls out a roach clip.

Blondie passes another fresh joint to Raney, holds a lighted match to the tip. She takes a quick hit, passes it, and turns again to stare at the tree outside. A pained, preoccupied look settles on her face, though occasionally her eyes flick back toward the group, toward Randall.

She gets up. Without looking at anyone or saying anything she leaves the circle and walks rather stiffly toward the kitchen's linoleum track. Then she turns into the bedroom, passing through a shaft of moonlight, and finds the back door.

The yard's small, shed to the left, outhouse dead ahead. Above, the moon -- round and white in a bitingly clear sky. Without a coat Raney hugs herself, shivering on the cabin's back step. She sniffs deeply of the night air and unfolds arms from her chest. Clasping hands together, she lifts
them overhead in a strong stretch. She holds the pose a moment and then arcs her clasped hands downward, spine unwinding until her fingertips graze the ground.

A tumbleweed rolls through the yard just in front of the step. Startled and released at once, Raney straightens, grinning, then steps down and walks briskly toward the outhouse.

But instead of going in, she detours around, drawn by the watertower -- silvered octopus in the desert night -- and the distant line of hills. A hundred yards or so beyond the outhouse, something, perhaps an owl's muffled wings or the call of a coyote, makes her stop and listen. Shivering again, she lifts her skirt, wiggles tights out of the way, and squats to pee.

Vegetation here is the same as in the yard, the fields, the whole prairie -- sagebrush and clumps of dead grass flattened by gusts of wind. The wind also plasters hair across Raney's face and she lifts her chin skyward to free it from the tangle. Black hair streaming back, she grins and opens her mouth to howl.

Randall stands on the back step shielding a cigarette. He's wearing the fatigue jacket again. Suddenly his head tips
sideways, listening. He smiles, a secret satisfied smile.

Raney turns away from the watertower and hills. She approaches the rear of the outhouse but once again veers away, walking fast until she reaches the shed. Pausing at its open doorway, she looks inside.

Dropped toward the top of the hills now, the moon streams light from behind her. It falls on rotted hay bales in the corner. Her shadow darkens the center of the small building. She steps in. More light. More objects: Hayrake, plowshare, old wheel, bench with anvil, horse collar hanging on one wall, wood boxes scattered about the dirt floor.

Raney moves around touching these things. Her movements -- and the wind's -- stir up a dust as particulate and visible in moonlight as it would be in a shaft of noonday sun. Only the scene is pared to black and white, the colorless, evocative basics.

Suddenly the scene goes all black. Standing in the center of the shed, Raney swivels toward the doorway. A tall figure in a thick padded jacket blocks it. He takes a step forward and stops. Moonlight flares into corners again.
Raney moves backward, centers herself in darkness. Randall moves forward again, then stops, narrowing the band of black, testing.

Without taking her eyes off him, Raney continues cautiously backward. Her heel hits something. She darts a quick glance over her shoulder: A large overturned wood box. She throws up her chin, cornered but not subdued.

Randall's shoulderline softens slightly. Perhaps he shakes out his fingers, like a diver who readies himself on a platform, loosening, concentrating his energies. He moves carefully forward again, pausing to see what she will do.

At once Raney steps back and up, plants both feet on top of the sturdy old box. This makes her slightly taller than Randall. He resumes his slow advance, narrows the gap, broadens the span of moonlight in the shed. A bemused grin grows under his mustache.

Raney reaches up both hands, finds a rafter. She grimaces at the accumulation of dirt, spider webs, mouse turds. Grabs on, waits, watches. With Randall close enough to reach out an arm and touch her, she bends her knees and hangs plumb. Weight now in her hands, she's ready to spring, to kick.
But she doesn’t do either of those things because Randall suddenly cocks his head to one side as if listening, listening for some wordless speech her body will make. Does she hear it too? Neat and catlike, he licks his lips. Is he preparing to make a meal of her? Kiss her?

Slowly Raney hoists both legs perpendicular to her trunk, a gymnast on still rings proving iron control. Randall’s flat belly comes to rest against her shoe soles. He seems gently surprised by this blockade and raises his hands to investigate. They rest for a moment on her ankles, then slide up dark tights to her calves. Softly he cups each one.

Raney’s knees tremble. To calm her Randall rests his hands there, on the kneecaps. When they’ve spoken to jumpy bone, his long fingers slide underneath and lift until her knees bend. Spreading her legs just enough, he steps inside.

Now his hands slide again to her ankles; reaching behind, he encourages them to hook together along his beltline; they fall quivering into place. She could scissor him in half if she had the strength, the edge. But she is shivering all over now.

His hands slide up her tights, along the outside of her
thighs, past the bunched skirt until they rest on her waist. His eyes just inches from her mouth, he licks his lips again and kisses her, experimentally. Then again, with more assurance.

Raney's eyes stay open. Suddenly Randall hoists her whole body up. With pressure off her hands, she drops them from the rafter to his neck. Plastered to him now like a monkey or a child, she closes her eyes, kisses him as he kicks away the box, waltzes her in slow dizzy circles around the freed and waning moonlight.

* * * *

Some weeks later, inside the church social hall at dusk, windows and doors thrown open. Wearing short sleeves, Raney and the boy with coffee-colored skin bend over a book. The print's smaller this time and the book has no pictures. The boy reads fast in dimming light. His finger races along the page, legs pump furiously back and forth under the table.

Raney beams at his progress. She settles back in her chair, hands laced together on her belly. Her face seems softer, slightly fuller, and her hair has been cut short into dark cap.
The boy finishes, closes the book between both hands. A satisfied smile lights his face. Raney takes the book and with an air of exaggerated nonchalance begins to fan herself with it. Bending over suddenly, the boy reaches into her lap and stretches the loose shirt over a slight bulge of belly. Raney winces. She lowers the book and looks toward the door, the deepening night outside. The boy lightly taps her belly with his reading finger. She lifts her arms and flaps them to show that something's flown the coop.

*       *       *       *

Broad daylight now. Raney drives alone along a two lane road in a cherry red 1951 Studebaker Champion. The car is piled high inside with her worldly possessions: Boxes, pillows, rugs, bedclothes, a needlepoint stool, a old wicker birdcage.

The distant hills shine with new tender green. Lambs, colts, calves tumble or sleep in the fields. A bright sun winks among high puffy clouds.

At a crossroad marked by a stop sign and three trees in new leaf, she turns up a dirt track. Dust smokes behind her. She pulls over near a derelict grey shed and gets out. She’s wearing tight black pants, sneakers, khakki shirt with
a long tail.

Heading out across a field studded with yellow-tipped sage, she does not glance at the shed or its companion buildings or at anything to the right or left. She's after the watertower, that silver-legged desert lifesaver.

When she arrives at her destination, Raney is not dismayed to find the watertower fence repaired, its top strung with new unbroken barbed wire. She simply removes wire cutters from a pocket and sets to work.

A spring thunderstorm threatens. Black clouds boil up from the hills and spread over sagebrush flats. Once, as she strains to bend wire, a gust of wind flattens the shirt against her rounded body. She leans like a sail, wind pulling everything taut.

Finally, she's created a hole large enough to crawl through. A few fat raindrops, spattering dust rings when they hit, fall as she approaches the watertower. She ignores the weather, pulls out a spray can with a red top. Then vertically, from the tip of her reach to the spattering dust on the ground, she spraypaints two accurately spaced words on the nearest leg of the watertower. On the second leg, she reverses herself, painting from the bottom up, the same
two words. Legs three and four echo one and two.

Red on silver, the unofficial four-legged story.

Semper fi. Semper fi.
I did lie a little bit about the rounded belly, and about the car, which wouldn’t get me 50 miles past Locust Grove, much less 500.

I wasn’t pregnant. Not provably so. But maybe I can be forgiven the stretch marks on my story due to the fact my best friend deliberately seduced my high school sweetheart, and after several months of practice, WAS provably pregnant. Even though I marched right into a much more glamorous affair with the outlaw Randall, poetic justice says that baby was mine. Marta must have thought so too, because two months after I split Locust Grove she showed up on my new city doorstep, belly out to here.

Or perhaps I was pregnant, just barely, and the heavy painful period which marked my arrival in San Francisco was a provident sweep of the incubating system. A lucky thing, given my age and the problems Randall, a Marine deserter, would have encountered discharging his duty as father.

But it didn’t feel lucky. It felt like death, as cramps -- which I never had -- slowly tore and expelled the womb’s inner swaddling. Writhing and weeping, I lay in the back room of the San Francisco Quaker house my English teacher, a
radical in his way, sent me to. "You've got to leave town too," he said, when the FBI closed in on Randall and his sidekick Babb, and my brother drove them north for a run across the Canadian border.

I'd quit coming home nights and when my father, grim-faced and furious, asked where I was, I told half-truths: "I've been with a sick friend."

"Well who?" my father would demand. "And what was wrong?" I couldn't say, sure that if he knew, my father would take out his shotgun and at the very least kneecap Randall before tossing his carcass at the cops.

"If you don't leave soon," my teacher said, "there'll be a showdown with the family none of you will get over." So with a cramping belly, a single suitcase, and $35 in cash, I arrived at the San Francisco airport. The Quakers put me right to work in their draft counselling agency, which was a salvation. And soon I had my own apartment.

After Locust Grove's open spaces, the city was strange indeed. Claustrophobic -- its trollies packed like cattle cars, and the neighborhood boundaries so exact one side of the street to the next. Black/white, rich/poor, Irish/Jewish, hippie/everything else. San Francisco seemed
enormous and miniaturized all at once. So many people, each with a story stamped on their forehead, putting out auras, taking up space, clamoring for recognition. They competed for my attention -- competed with the polished bronze image I carried of Randall, my outlaw warrior.

At first, coming home from my job at the Market Street peace office, I'd board the trolly like a good little commuter but get off halfway, smothered by the plot fragments of 70 packed lives. I wasn't privy to their real stories, I'm sure, but the trolly air was quite different from my windy desert plateau. Learning to breathe it took some time.

By the time Marta arrived, I was good for the entire ride up Market Street in a J Church car. At the transfer point I could wait for the bus or walk as I saw fit. I'd developed options. One evening she was waiting on my doorstep, an old blue suitcase tucked close to her feet like a faithful dog. She lifted a hand to wave and her short flowered smock pulled tight over ripening baby. For some reason I laughed out loud and ran to hug her.

* * * *

Butcher paper covered the stairwell of our Haight Street flat. It was for graffiti, we said, and left messages on it
about household matters. "Appointment at Welfare tomorrow." "Get toilet paper NOW." "Your mother called AGAIN."
"**Flash** Country Joe in the Panhandle Saturday!"

Also, we invited other people -- party-goers, social workers, insomniac speed freak crashers -- to leave their mark. Many chose to. Easily the most distinctive graffitists were speed freaks. 1968 was their heyday on the Haight: After pot and before heroin. After flowers and before assault rifles.

Speed freaks had doodling down to a science. They started with an idea and stuck to it. A line or an accidental swirl became an experimental patch they got logical with, did a bunch of operations on -- mirrored, inverted, multiplied, intaglioed, color coded. Voila! Proof of evolution. The cell structures of paisley.

But these swirling clots of color and line were usually all the speed freaks left, since they needed a steady supply of hockables. We'd have turned them out for thieving, Marta and I, if we hadn't liked them so much, or if her cousin Gwen hadn't been one, or if we hadn't lived on Haight Street the summer past love.

Marta's case worker, a bearded half-bald giant interested in
more than her health, finally signed his name on our
graffiti wall just as he left for boot camp: Earl John
Callahan, MSW, 1-A-0. Maybe he did make love to her, hugely
pregnant though she was. After all, she looked like a
statuesque Nordic goddess with those breasts and that thick
sunlit hair.

Too bad he never saw the baby. I barely did. Its mother
barely did before an adoption agency whisked the little tyke
away to sanitary suburbia. If I ever make it to the Vietnam
Memorial I'll look for Earl John's name. The odds weren't
great for in-country medics. Joel Bingham didn't make it.

Here's a party night that produced some graffiti: Marta's
cousin Gwen and some of her buddies from the cast of "Hair"
showed up. A sophisticated show business bunch, they
brought their own Boone's Farm. Also, they had drugs:
Speed, naturally, which for medical reasons (the sore
heartwall syndrome) I wasn't interested in; and hashish,
which for political reasons, (i.e., its terrorist tradition)
I was.

Sixteen and wild, a runaway from Oregon whose parents chose
not to pursue her, Gwen added speed to her hash. So did Ben
Reel, a quiet and unobtrusive co-worker at the peace office.
We three spent all night on the roof in full lotus, talking
until the sun rose on our glistening whitewashed neighborhood and shut us up. Who knows what we said. I recall the moment silence descended, not the talk.

Last to leave, Gwen grabbed a marker from the coffee tin at the top of the stairs. Her blond corkscrewcurl head tilted at a sad angle, I remember, as she wrote two fat green words on the butcher paper, swirled speed doodles around them, and left. REEL GONE. Like the whole scene, I thought. Like the entire weird groovy trip.

My most famous contribution to the graffiti wall was a drawing. I made it the morning after a vivid dream in which Randall reappeared from his Canadian exile. With him was his sidekick Sgt. Babb.

They’d served two tours in Vietnam. Then, maybe because they suddenly remembered nobody survives a third, Randall and Sgt. Babb walked away from Camp Pendleton, took a bus north, and floated beyond their leave. I met them in the floaty phase. Last time I saw them they were on their way to an obscure border crossing in my brother Pete’s ’56 Ford.

In the dream I was at the office, the backroom table, pecking out our all-important mailing list on the black upright Underwood. Hearing a funny noise, I poured my head,
slow and deliberate as syrup, toward it.

Framed in the backroom doorway was tall dark Randall and short blond Babb, both terribly thin. I knocked over my chair and ran to them, waking up before the instant of touch.

So that morning I drew it on the butcher paper of our Haight Street flat. Two narrow figures of differing heights in a doorframe. The upended chair. Midway between, myself from the back, hair scattered in flight.

Marta leaned over the rail watching me draw. Her pregnant belly pressed against the old turned banister poles.

"You'll dent the baby," I said, pointing a pen at her midsection.

"It's marked already." Her cheeks bore a red flush, but her neck and the skin under her eyes were ghostly pale. She pitched a narrow hand into the air like a dove from its cote or caution to the wind. Suddenly, high terrified giggles burst from her mouth, multiplied in the still morning air.

I thought the baby must be just about ripe, making her nervous, and asked had she drunk her milk yet and would she
put water on for coffee.

She scuffed off toward the kitchen, sulky, swollen. "Be careful what you dream," she muttered. "It just might come true."

That's what I hoped.

* * * * *

Whenever we needed more, I stole a fresh length of white butcher paper from the big roll at the office. It didn't bother me to steal from the peace agency, though as its bookkeeper I knew exactly how poor we were. I had an immediate worthwhile purpose for my thievery and a handy ample supply. Share the wealth. That was one of my mottos.

Marta, who'd begun to study herb lore, claimed certain kinds of magic or healing worked only if you stole the components. The herb rue, for instance, worked against scorpion or snake bite only if you stole the leaves from a neighbor's garden. If you plucked them from your own, the cure failed. (What was Joel a cure for that she had to steal him from me?)

Butcher paper wasn't the only thing I stole that summer. I
also pinched nightgowns from the Emporium on my lunch hour. It was dreadfully easy. I liked yellow and pale green, sometimes peach but never pink, silk if I could get it, no prints, and nothing in red or black. The week before Randall showed up for real, I managed six -- three in one bold Wednesday noon heist that took exactly ten minutes.

Picture it thus: Raincoat tails flying, Raney Owen, Young Liberationist, strides through Perfume, Belts, and Scarves to her target area, the outer fringe of Lingerie. A rack of new knee-length gowns awaits integration with the rest of the stock. A pale yellow with chiffon overlay immediately catches her eye. Also looking good next to it is a simple satin number, available in two shades, ivory and seafoam.

Raney grabs all three and stashes herself inside the nearest cubicle. She feels rushed but entitled, like any busy sexy career woman in the market for beautiful nightgowns on her lunch hour. She removes the price tags, shucks her clothes, dons the gowns individually and twirls to see how they move, then piles them all on one after another and slips her clothes over.

The nightgowns' filmy layers flatten to nothing under her plaid skirt and chocolate brown sweater, though she feels
them agitating the fine hairs of her skin like a secret lover. Ivory, seafoam, yellow. She exits gracefully through Men's Shirts, the small moue of a disappointed shopper on her face.

* * * *

Randall and Sgt. Babb came just like in my dream. I was in the back office typing, heard a noise, turned toward the doorway, and for a protracted moment saw only swirling dustmotes in the late afternoon light.

Then the upturned chair and their thin bodies, the smokey smell of clothes and hair. I brought them home to Haight Street, sent them one after another through the tub, and fed them -- steak, tomatoes, bread and butter, coffee. My heart clanked as if driven by a wretched dose of speed. Or fear. Or desire.

They ate in silence. After a while, careful of his full belly, I sat on Randall's lap, leaned my disturbed heart against his. I tried to remember how the blood in our veins had synchronized only months before, how it sparked and danced like static in an electricity experiment. I kept seeing the words he'd written once on a fogged up bathroom mirror "the soles of my feet I swear they're burning."
Randall was lost in his own memories. Then gently, his hand cupped my ear, fingers tracing the shape. And with a sigh I still hear, pulled my mouth to his.

When I looked up again, Babb was gone. Randall and I kissed in the Haight Street kitchen, perhaps for hours. At some point Marta came home and turned off the lights.

A few days later Randall was restless, silent. He came and went without explanation. One evening he brought back opium and we smoked that into the wee hours, making love and listening to records -- Janis' "Ball and Chain" maybe, or that long guitar solo on County Joe, "Porpoise Mouth." Or maybe he sang, in the clear direct baritone I loved so much. "Lay Lady Lay," that usually worked.

Finally I'd had enough, and when he lit the pipe and passed it again, I said no. I could feel the world shift between us, the synchronicity explode. One direct refusal was all it took -- as with a number of decisions in those days -- to change things completely.

But I couldn't go all night again. I had to file quarterly taxes for the peace office next morning. I needed rest, lights out, a separate peace. And I took it. He left the next day while I was at work. I don't know why even now,
but I wasn't at all surprised when he disappeared, nor that he didn't come back.

Sgt. Babb did though, and THAT surprised me. He showed up the morning after Marta had her baby. She was in the hospital, resting, or signing the papers to relinquish that little red-faced boy she'd worked so hard to deliver. I was in the clawfoot bathtub at home, sobbing my eyes out. I'd been up there all night, watching the little guy harden her belly, ripple like a cat circling its nappy home, and push push push at the slowly opening door.

Marta was brave and I tried to be her comrade, because it was only the two of us, two radical girls, all alone in the belabored night. I held her hand, placed my palm on the base of her contorted belly as if to smooth and encourage the work of those incredible muscles, that birthing gate.

But I kept thinking of Randall, gone long enough now to achieve deserter status. And if Vietnam were a legal war -- maybe even if it weren't -- guilty of a capital offense. Why didn't I have a watermelon belly, a baby, to keep him alive?

And behind him, the faraway Joel from Locust Grove High School, planting a seed in Marta's belly instead of my own.
What was the problem here? Wouldn't my belly take seeds? Didn't anybody want it to?

Finally, in the cooling water of the clawfoot tub, I quieted enough to hear someone pounding on the door. Whoever it was kept it up, three loud knocks, then another three, then another.

But I couldn't move on demand anymore that day. If they kept pounding for the time it took me to emerge from my bath, slip into a dressing gown (pinched of course), drip down the stairs, well then, I would ask who is it and based on their reply perhaps let them in, perhaps not.

Sgt. Babb was an efficient communicator. "Somebody's seen Randall on Telegraph Avenue."

Those were the key words, all right. I opened the door, shaking from fatigue and excitement. Babb had a rodent face, sharp-nosed with pale sparse whiskers. So unlike the lush mysterious catlike features, the dark fur, the listening grace of his point man Randall. I led the way upstairs, conscious of the sergeant animal a few steps back, watching my butt.

"When's the last time you saw him?" I asked over my
shoulder.

Too clever to be rushed once he'd got in the door, Babb merely called up the stairwell after me, "I surely could use a cup of coffee, ma'am."

While I made coffee, Babb relayed his rumors. I didn't ask where he'd been hiding out, or why he'd lost contact with Randall in the first place. Just assumed whatever synchronicity they had hit some wall too. I set out cups, found rolls and jam, plopped shakily into a chair.

"We should hitch across the Bay," he said, stirring three teaspoons of sugar into his cup. He named a hotel on Shattuck Avenue where he had "contacts," stuffed a roll into his mouth, and slurped hot sweet coffee through the wad.

God what an ugly man, I thought. Maybe he's great in the bush. Knows how to get cold beer into a hot zone, arrange an R & R, obtain black market drugs. Is a practical scammer. Maybe Randall saved his life once, or more than once, so Babb owes him undying loyalty. Or Babb saved Randall's life and so is forever responsible.

It didn't occur to me that Babb might be working on his own
behalf, not simply dedicated, in his ratlike way, to bringing Randall and me together again. I didn't grapple with that possibility until later and even then, I didn't believe it.

"From there we can scout around for Randall." Babb leaned forward and stared hard, rabbity eyes glowing. "We should proceed with all good haste, ma'am," he added, "while the sighting's fresh."

I nodded, and stumbling with fatigue, packed a small bag.

Two hours later we sat in a bad Berkeley hotel. I knew it was bad when we walked in the lobby, darkly ornate but filmed over by years of smoke, exhaust, importunate light. Babb held a whispered conversation with the desk clerk, then motioned me to follow. We travelled a stark-lit hall with hideous red-flocked paper. Wraith-like figures listened into the walls as we passed, flicking their eyes at us. Serious speed freaks working full time with needles and paranoia.

The room was just as bad. Two narrow windows looked over black tarred rooftops and another brick wall. Angled into the corner was a scarred chest, a lumpy green armchair. An old iron bedstead occupied most of the room, its threadbare
quilt ancient, thin, sad.

I chose the chair. Babb bounced on the bed, grimacing a little as the springs talked back.

"This could do it, too," he said, chuckling.

I wondered what he meant but was too tired to ask. In my mind a bright picture burned: reunion with Randall. If I had to put myself in the ugly sergeant’s hands to make the movie real, so be it.

As it happened, Babb was good in the bush. He’d panhandled a substantial amount of spare change on our journey across the Bay by patting the pooch of my belly and saying how tired pregnancy made me. A sleazy maneuver, but it worked.

He laid out the money in stacks on the bed, counted it, scooped some into his hand. "I’ll be right back," he said, giving me a long look from the door.

Did the look mean I was supposed to go with him or stay in the hotel? He solved my dilemma. "Stay here and lock the door."

Fear suddenly shot through me -- fear of Babb, the hotel,
the street, my fatigue. What exactly would I do if we found
Randall? Hadn’t the curtain already fallen between us? And
what was I doing with sleezeball Babb if we didn’t find
Randall? I hated such questions. So instead of thinking
about them, I locked the door and pulled out my Quaker draft
law pamphlet, concentrating on the section titled
"Resistance From Within the Military: Options and
Consequences." If nothing else, I could counsel one or both
of them about their legal situation.

Soon enough Babb came back. "No news," he said, handing me
a quart bottle of orange juice. "But take this. It’ll get
your sugar going." He fiddled with an inside pocket. "And
this." He thrust a small square of blue paper at me. I
hesitated. He waggled it under my nose and twitched his
eyebrows, one interested animal to another.

I assumed he offered LSD, which I was a virgin of. Not
wanting to shed myself of any virginity with the likes of
rodent Babb, I shook my head.

Babb licked his acid paper with a great, resounding red
tongue. "I’ve put out the word. There’s nothing to do for
now but wait. We might as well amuse ourselves. I mean
look at this rathole! Who wants to Be Here Now without
acid?"
Glancing about the room, I saw his point. We'd embarked on this quest together, and now we had to wait together for it to unfold. Wait in a dirty confined space. How could we pass the time? Reading aloud my Quaker pamphlet? That seemed too eggheady after all. Why not opt for the unknown?

So I ate the blue paper.

Babb flopped back on the bed to await his rush. And I sat deep in a green chair covered with the bristly stuff that compels grandmothers to crochet white web doiles. Except the doilies in this hotel were long since robbed for hippie camises. The naked chair scratched against my tender young skin.

After a time I wanted something, and reached for my bag to see if I'd brought anything. I had. The stuffed duck my brother Pete gave me when he left for Nam. "Ah," I breathed, caressing the soft silly curves. It floated to rest in my lap.

Suddenly brave and truculent, I spoke up. "I don't feel any different. It's just like always. You're here, I'm here, the room's here, the world's out there like always crushing Randall. So what."
Babb cooed and sat up slow. "Just wait. You'll catch on."
He rubbed thin whiskers between two fingers, actually
twirling them, a sleazy Simon Legree after the deed to my
ranch.

I soothed the duck in my lap, stroking its yellow polyester
fur. He rode a troublesome wave, my ducky, but he was deft
in turbulence, simply cruising the surface, staying on top,
that's all, bobbing, bobbing.

Ducky deserved some sounds, I thought, and pulled out the
rosewood recorder which I'd also (how did I know?) had the
foresight to pack. I stroked it awhile and began to study
the grain. What was the bite in my throat which nothing
soothed like rubbing dark elongate grain, over and over? I
felt lost, sweetly so, in the deep red whorls.

"I believe I'm hypnotised," I said finally, holding the
recorder up level with my eyes. At that moment, all
responsibility for what might follow floated from me. I
liked the sensation. Floating free.

"Yes," said Babb. His voice made a fluid loop in the air as
he reached over with it. "You are. Come along." He lifted
me gently to my feet, turned me halfway round, then lay me
on the bed.
My knees dangled over. My knees were water. The bedsprings were water. There were waterspots on the ceiling. Cardinal water, that's my sign. That's how the logic worked. I was in my element and could not think. Only swim, dream, grow gills in the flutes of my neck, the crook of my knees.

"Ah those knees!" Babb sighed. He knelt down and smoothed back my long dress. "The first time I saw you in that tight brown skirt, and your white knees working the pedals...I knew then." He breathed lightly, kissed the rims of my kneecaps, trailing his fingers like lazy water down my thighs. "I just had to see for myself."

I let Babb see for himself while my mind occupied the halls of past lives. It seemed a reasonable split. Simple and risky, but fair -- some for Babb, some for the gods, and I get to travel.

My favorite reincarnation was the first: A Ming Dynasty courtesan playing a porcelain part, fanning herself against the silks, engaged in nibbling dialogue with a hapless admirer from the Lower Court.

Mystics say sensual dabble always yields a karmic cost, so next came many lives as an animal: Monkey, horse, cat, owl, bear, rabbit.
In human guise again, a Revolutionary War spy, flicking back and forth across a dangerous border for the sake of secrets; hanged finally, but addicted to the edge. Then a lonesome landlocked prairie widow writhing in the corn rows, bringing in the crop herself. Finally, a Victorian virgin from my great-grandmother’s day, clutching a slender book of hymns, popping stays with rage and boredom, determined to wait forever if need be for the pure horn of chivalry to call down her arms.

And now this life, coincidental with my hippie self, on acid in Berkeley, fucking my lover’s best friend.

A treacherous frame. Maybe Marta would understand. I didn’t.

By the time my body stopped moving against Ratman Babb, I was more tired than I’d ever been. Was my tiredness part of a more general phenomenon among women? Beyond the long strange day, I mean? My mind wouldn’t stop so I lay there wondering. All the women in my family complained of tiredness -- endlessly. Marta’d been tired for months of course. And the women at the peace office were tired of something too. They rumbled, didn’t want to sit at the front desk exposed to everyone’s demands, nor in the back room isolated over the typewriter. They wanted to sit
around the very same campfire as the men, breathing
fraternal smoke, sharing fraternal opinions on heroism and
duty, on all the big questions.

"Oh," one of them, Sharon, the oldest, 26 maybe, had said
recently, placing a comradely hand on my shoulder when I
ducked my head and asked her what she was so angry about, "I
didn't realize how young you were."

Suddenly, I had to bathe. I had no idea of the time, nor
was it certain I could stand, walk, or find the door. But
it must be attempted. I found a dank spidery bathroom far
down the hall and sat in scalding water. Again Babb knocked
on the door many times and called my name over and over
before I came out.

Back in the room I couldn't meet his eyes. I withdrew into
the padded chair, pulled at the fluff on my little yellow
duck and smoothed it down, again and again.

Finally Babb hauled me up and out the door for a nice
cappuchino on the Avenue.

Babb couldn't have known, couldn't have planned that Randall
would walk across the street straight toward us, that the
sun would be streaming round his head making a goddamn halo,
that he Randall would catch us, still dilated, steaming, huddled over cappuchino.

Perhaps I should have known.

"Out in the cold again, I see," Randall said. He yanked an iron chair from a nearby sidewalk table and planted it next to us. Sat down, straddling the back.

He looked marvelous, I thought, just stunning. Long elegant limbs, strong feet, elk neck and antler curls. I didn’t have a thing to say. I only wanted animal life with him again. Not decisions, not betrayals, not his sidekick, not Vietnam, not the world. A hopeless and shameful desire, an impossible longing. I lowered my face to hide it.

Randall picked up Babb’s cup, blew delicately on the steamy brew. Just as if he were not on the run from the United States Marine Corps, penniless and practically starving when his comrades like dogs betrayed him.

"Speak up, child," Randall said to me, indicating my slack mouth, the stuffed bird clutched in my lap. "I see you’ve still got your little ducky. That dick Sgt. Babb --"

He swivelled suddenly, eyes arcing in a deadly pivot toward
Babb. It was cousin to a move made in the bush with a gun in his hands.

"What did you do?" he hissed. "Give her some ACID?"

Nobody spoke. Randall stood up. His chair crashed to the sidewalk, a heavy clattering thunk of iron. "Give me your money," he snarled. "All of it."

And we did.