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### A Map of the World

Sharman Apt

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A Map of the World

By

Sharman Apt

B.S., University of California, 1976

Presented in partial fulfillment of the require-


ments for the degree of Master of Arts

University of Montana

1980

Approved by

  
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## Table of Contents

### A Map of the World

TRACKS.....	1-17
A MAP OF THE WORLD.....	18-35
THE GARDEN.....	36-49
THIS PART OF THE COUNTRY.....	50-58
DEER PARK.....	59-90
(Chapters of a children's novel)	

## Tracks

Jenny Marshall meant to be at the barbecue on time this year. It was Friday and she went home early, made the carrot salad, and stacked the children's papers to be graded over the weekend. Because of the barbecue she planned to walk only as far as the arroyo, a fifteen minute hike from her front door. She didn't bother with a canteen, though at the last minute she picked up her quiver and bow, not expecting to use them, but liking the swing of arm and weight of wood.

It was April. In certain washes and gullies flowers were blooming, small daisies and the occasional poppy. At four o'clock it was hot and Jenny weaved slowly through pricklypear and yellow-tipped cholla. Her knot of hair, slightly greyed, loosened from its pins as she followed the line of an old jeep trail. No one she knew owned a jeep. It was an artifact of the copper boom, thirty years ago, when the holes were scooped from the mountains north of town. Jenny remembered walking under the high pink walls that smelled of chalk; in the dry desert air they were eternally preserved, like this trail, unlike the copper which soon ran out. It was in her third year of teaching that the miners left for Phoenix or Texas--and took half the town with them.

The trail humped over a bank into white sand. Jenny hummed Maria, the tune her sixth-grade class was to sing that night. At a bend in the arroyo she saw the tracks: six inches across, oval, and split like a goat's.

Jenny stood over them with her legs apart and a hand on her hip. After a moment or two she touched the sand with the end of her bow, leaving another mark. The tracks were deep and overlapped. She stepped around the area and saw that they led off, further up the arroyo. She squatted and fingered the miniature ridges, the muscles in her thighs jumping. It took her some time to think that there was only one animal, perhaps running, skidding to a stop, pausing and turning back, south toward the hills. She lifted one hand to look at these hills, five miles away, volcanic remnants cut east and west by high-ridged canyons.

An ungulate. Thirty years of teaching prompted Jenny to put the word in simpler terms: a mammal with hooves. She rose, keeping her eyes ahead to the flat desert and gravelly slopes. In her jeans and yellow shirt she felt unusually visible. Solitarily human. She tapped her cheek as a kind of reference and followed the tracks to a large pile of droppings, round and still warm. The animal was as big as a horse. Not a deer. A camel? Jenny knew about camels, brought by the Army in the 1800's and left to go wild. There hadn't been any sighted here since the turn of the century. She shook her head, sucked in her breath, and bent closer. The droppings contained bits of grass and orange-seeds. A cactus wren flew into a saguaro. Jenny jerked up. She stared at the scenery, as one stares at someone who is speaking gibberish.

Through the library window Nell Crowley could see them setting up the tables outside: the principal in his Hawiaian shirt and the doctor struggling with a long green bench. There was a crash, a shout, and Linda Mason called out angrily to one of the teenagers. Another car drove into the parking lot. Nell hoped her jello would keep cool. She had packed the container in ice, but in this weather it was always a worry.

On tiptoes, Nell lifted up a copy of Anderson's Fairytale, its binding broken and the cover chewed away at the edges. Nell remembered reading this book when she was a child in this very room. Once in third grade she checked it out, and Jenny wanted it so badly she stole it from her desk. Now Nell put the book between the Red and Green Fairytale, then changed her mind and put it next to the Blue. She touched her permanent, tucking in a white curl. She was thinking that just this once Jenny might have come early. The barbecue was the school's biggest event. Every year the children learned a new song, and later there would be a tour for the parents. Nell herself had gone through all five of the classrooms, taking down the paper snowflakes and putting up new spring tulips.

Nell gave the library a last sweepoof her eye. As always, the room pleased her: a neat little square, crisscrossed by shelves and then again by the rows of books. Opening the door, she stepped out of air conditioning into a blast of heat.



In the parking lot the principal's wife hurried toward the baseball field carrying a red bowl. Behind her, Ruben Perez balanced a slab of beef over his shoulder. The barbecue was an hour away. Already, Linda and Steven Mason were setting up the grill by second base; Nell thought suddenly of her own husband who had died of a heart attack a few years ago. Her hand went up to touch her hair as she stopped to look at the blue hills in the distance. They shimmered above the field and the green line of smoke trees. She heard John Woodsworth call her name. His voice had a pleasant timbre, with the authority of a small-town doctor, and an old friend.

Jenny followed the tracks for an hour. The sand rolled beneath her boots and she moved quickly to where the wash met the hills and became a small canyon. The hills seemed browner this year, the ridges more angular against the sky. As the wash narrowed into a thin streambed the tracks disappeared. Jenny turned for reassurance to the prints behind her. The ground was rockier here, the sand washed down by the occasional flood, so that it was difficult to find the spot where the creature had swerved out of the arroyo. Bent at the waist, Jenny traversed the bank until she found again a faint imprint. She followed it, and headed up the canyon side.

The difficulty of the climb made her concentrate. The tracks circled wide around clumps of Teddybear cholla, and the sweat slid down her forehead to fall into her eyes. Jenny listened to the sound of her breathing. The ridge, she knew, flattened at the top, the highest point in these hills.

The first time she had climbed this she had been with her father. That was the day he gave her the bow, a beautiful arch of yew that when stood on the ground came up to her waist. It was her father who taught her how to hold it, how to hunt, track, and skin a rabbit. He taught them both, she and John Woodsworth, when they were twelve years old and pretending to be Apaches. Jenny would paint her face with clay and John chipped arrowheads from the obsidian they bought in tourist shops. Together they hiked through most of these hills, carrying knapsacks of nuts and tortilla sandwiches, something bloody tied to their belts. John could shoot like a real warrior. Jenny would always hold that memory of him, his skinny legs spread and the arm a brown vertical line.

It ended, Jenny thought, in highschool, at the Wilcox cafe, when John told Nell and Nell told the others.

Stopping to take out an arrow, Jenny notched it to the bowstring. She pulled back slightly with two fingers. With her other hand she held the wood of the bow. It slowed her down, but she felt safer, facing the line of ridge and sky. A pile of rocks marked the top. When she reached them she straightened uneasily.

North, behind her, she could see the town: the grade-school hidden by tamarisk and Main Street a thin short line. Ruben's gas station glittered by the highway. Farther north were the mountains that gave the town its name. Jenny shaded her eyes as she walked along the crest of the ridge. A warm breeze fluttered her shirt and she plucked at the cloth to separate it from the damp skin. The tracks ran twenty yards and ended abruptly, pointing south. She crouched to scan the gravel slope. Then she walked to where the ridge became an overhanging cliff. She stood there a few minutes before turning and scouring the ground back to the hoof prints and the untouched gravel.

Jenny thumped the bow against her thigh. No one knew where she was; no one even knew she still hunted. Now she kept that part of her a secret. Now it was part of the game, to keep a sharp eye and to avoid people, and it secret she bought her supplies, driving to Tucson on days like the first one ten years ago. She was forty-five then, standing in front of the SportingGoods store and angry with the smell of hospitals, the painful tests and fear of cancer. The Amazons, she thought, staring at the display, used to cut off their left breast so as to better draw the bow. She went into surgery a few days later. By the time it was over--and with a cheerfulness her friends admired--she had rediscovered the pleasure of what her father had taught her: of those weekend mornings, solitary,

the flurry of quail in brittle-bush.

Jenny lifted her head and stretched the muscles in her back. She looked down at the slope for some kind of mark. She looked up at the view and looked down at the slope.

What? Did the thing have wings as well?

Linda Mason had taught the third grade for three years now. Her second year she<sup>had</sup> married Steven, a local boy. Juggling her plate so the barbecue sauce leaking through the paper would not stain her skirt, she stood with the others, pushed into a group by a lack of chairs. The principal was lecturing on his favorite subject--jungle gyms. Linda caught Nell Crowley's eye. They smiled at each other. Nell reminded Linda of a too-plump rabbit she had been given one Easter. Worlds away, Linda thought, from Jenny Marshall who really ran the school.

Ashamed, Linda turned her attention to Doctor Woodsworth. A tall man with cropped yellow hair and blue eyes, at first glance he looked to be in his forties, although Linda knew better. She stared covertly at the white stubble on his neck. Behind his shoulder, she could see the line at Ruben's grill, the picnic tables decked with bowls and a platter of corn. More parents and children came in from the parking lot, making the field seem crowded. Linda looked down as the doctor looked up. At one time, he and Jenny had been lovers.

Or no, Linda corrected herself, not lovers. Highschool sweethearts. Everyone in town knew the story about Jenny and John: how they returned from college and he never asked her to marry. Jenny was plain then, a thin young woman with a beaked nose and brown eyes set close together. Linda imagined that woman getting off the bus from the Teacher's college at Tucson. Linda had ridden that bus herself. Not the same one. But the same stop at an empty Main Street.

"The bar's height," said the principal, "Is related to the bicep."

Linda thought of her husband's naked body: its frail blue hollow along the side of the buttock. Steven had been in Jenny's first grade class. He still called Jenny "Miss Marshall" and said affectionately that she was the perfect old maid. The phrase always annoyed Linda. Now she dropped her hand to brush the back of Steven's leg.

The leg stiffened. Linda became aware that Steven was speaking. She nodded in agreement with whatever he said, while Doctor Woodsworth frowned attentively. He had the same expression, Linda thought, when she talked to him about her sinuses.

Jenny slid down the slope, lost her balance, and fell back on her arms. Her foot kicked sideways and brushed a jumping cholla. Clutching at the loose ground, she dug in with her

elbows and came to a stop. A joint of the cactus had attached itself to her jeans. With her pocket-knife, Jenny levered up the embedded thorns and flicked the joint away. She stood up, checked her bow and arrow, and slid again, tasting dust.

As she descended, the view careening south was hidden by the folds of the next hill. Jenny paused to stare at the horizon with its pulse of brown and blue: the Sonoran desert stretching fifty miles to Mexico and two hundred miles beyond that. She looked for a sign of movement on the desert floor, saw nothing and went on, recklessly, into a second canyon greener than the last and blessed by hidden water.

Halfway down she found the tracks again. They came out of nowhere, still huge, and elegantly oval. Jenny didn't waste time wondering as she had at the top, but hardly breaking rhythm followed the prints as if they were gravity itself. Her ankles ached and when she reached bottom she rested near a stand of saguaro. Just beyond the skinny poles was the flat alluvial plain of the desert. Jenny knew that the animal would turn now to the open country where it could move more quickly. She was surprised, then, when the tracks went east instead, paralleling the streambed.

She had hunted here before. It was a box canyon, with a spring trickling at the end of it, the end a rock wall that rose straight up in a series of flinty ledges. A year ago Jenny hurt herself trying to climb that wall and since then

she kept away from the canyon, remembering the journey back with its humiliating pain and tedious stops. Now, as she zigzagged through thick creosote, she felt the setting sun on the back of her neck. The mouth of the canyon faced directly west so that high on the slopes brittle-bush still blazed in yellow and gold and part of the ridge shone burnished red. Jenny guessed she had a half hour of light. Taking a gamble, she cut over to the streambed and began to jog on the flat hard sand. She thought she knew what the animal was after. It was looking for water. It had been driven into the hills and canyons, all for water, and she was sure she would find the tracks again at the rock wall--where the spring seeped from the shadowed ferns.

Jenny stopped once to renotch her arrow. Her limbs felt light. They were light and airy and pumped with adrenaline.

When the conversation turned to the children lost last summer, the doctor stopped eating. He had been the one to tell the parents: the little girl huddled under a mesquite, in the fetal position. The whole town had gone out to search, crawling like flies over the sick desert while he waited behind with the ambulance. It was Jenny, he remembered, who found the bodies and <sup>who</sup> carried the boy back to the cars.

"Tourists." The principal shook his head. "A nice family

on vacation, from Iowa."

"We have phamplets all over town," said the doctor.  
"There's a big rack of phamplets in my office." He had had them printed up at his own cost: "What to Take with You out in the Desert," "What to do If you see a Rattlesnake."

"My cousin," Nell Crowley fluttered her hand. "Almost died of a heat stroke in her own yard!"

The mayor joined them, holding a bowl of ice-cream. He recounted the day he had been lost in the Superstitions.

Dr Woodsworth poked at a cold rib. "And Jenny?" he turned to Nell. "Where's the old woman?"

"Old!" Nell protested.

"I'm sure she's on her way." Linda said.

Steven put his arm around his wife's shoulder. The doctor excused himself and went to the table laden with dessert. There were circles of pie and one large chocolate-layered cake. A young child in overalls stood patiently beside it; Doctor Woodsworth helped her cut a piece. He thought of the dead child, who had resembled Nell as a girl, with blonde hair and delicate skin. It happened every year, because people wouldn't read, because people weren't careful. The doctor thought again that Jenny shouldn't live so far out of town.

He chose the lemon chiffon and went back to the group.  
"Nellie!" John Woodsworth winked at Linda, drawling the words out incredulously, "Did you make this?"



It was years since he tried to make Nell blush. His blue eyes on her face, he concentrated, until as in highschool a warm pink began at her neck and crept up the powdered cheeks.

Jenny was thirsty--annoyed she hadn't brought the canteen. She thought of it with that part of the mind that needs no supervision, but ticks and nods and babbles lovingly: sand, sweat, water, hurry, canteen. With high steps and swinging arms, she ran, her mouth pasty, her hands slippery on the bow so that she had to change grip and wipe the palms on her jeans. As much as she could she kept her head up, scanning the canyon sides to the left and right.

She was looking to the right, to where the canyon was already patched in shadow, when she rounded the bend and saw something moving across the streambed.

She saw first the haunches of a horse, the heavy chestnut-colored buttocks and stringy black tail. She saw the four legs corded with muscle and the dull grey hooves larger and thicker than a horse's hooves. She saw the smooth arc of a belly, feathered with hair, and the slightly swayed back with the ribs showing in parallel curves. The animal was walking backwards. She could smell the odor of sweat and manure. She could see, on the animal's side, how the brown horse's

coat merged into a human chest, with leathery tan skin and a white scar on the upper shoulder. The arms were long and heavily muscled. They stretched out in a strained position, the hands barely reaching the ground as they covered with an awkward sweep of sand the animal's own tracks. The head was down, the human back bent over its task. Behind the creature was the darkening canyon, red ridges in ragged outline and above that a triangle of sky.

Jenny saw all this in bits and pieces. An arm. A hoof. A flank. It was hard, at first, to put it together.

As the sun dropped behind the hills--a curve of red glowing and then gone--they turned on the softball lights. At the farthest end of the field a group of children played tag. Linda talked with the parents of her worst pupil, Davey Stearn. She used one of Jenny's favorite phrases.

"He has a good heart, Mrs. Stearn."

Even as she spoke she could hear Davey's over-excited voice, louder than the rest. The boy's head popped out suddenly from behind his father's back. Davey grinned. Standing on top of a picnic table, the principal roared and clapped his hands. For a second everyone at the barbecue froze. Then the principal began to organize the children into three rows: the tallest in the back, the smallest and most tired sitting cross-legged on the grass. Mrs. Stearn took a comb out of her purse

and grabbed her son's arm. Nell Crowley waved at Linda.

"She's supposed to introduce the singing." The principal's wife stood by Nell and looked annoyed. "We'll have to start without her."

"She's getting later every year." Nell turned to Linda.

"She may have had car trouble." Linda said.

The children had a fit of giggling as the adults gathered together in an expectant crowd. On lawn-chairs and benches, they arranged themselves, plates of pie still in their hands.

Nell smiled disarmingly at Mrs. Clark, the principal's wife. "She'll be here for the tour. There's no use worrying over Jenny."

The softball lights gave a greenish glow to the principal as he stood in front of everyone and said a few words. The children rustled. The principal's wife lifted her baton.

Almost as soon as Jenny saw it, the creature saw or sensed her. It reared, its front hooves in the air, its buttocks swinging around so that she faced the head and chest. Jenny already had her bow up and the string pulled. She sighted along it, the point of the arrow directed to where the human heart would be. She was surprised at the strength in her arms, the steadiness of the fingers that held the plastic arrow tip. One eye closed, as always she had that sense of the world

bisected, the line of the string cutting her in half. Her hand brushed her cheek and her legs straddled the earth, heavy as iron.

The creature did not charge. Jenny held the arrow poised on the string. Above the chest, she glimpsed a face that was bearded and dark, the eyes glittering with an opaque emotion. In the silence she heard the swish and slap as the tail hit the brown flank. The animal made no other movement. Jenny wondered about that, until she felt in her fingers how close they were to letting the arrow go.

She looked quickly to the left and right. She stood in the middle of the arroyo, the sand at her feet mixed with granite rock and dotted with plants no higher than her knee. A few steps either way the bank of the stream rose two feet, showing layers of clay and crumbling gravel. A palo-verde teetered on one bank, the roots exposed where the water had cut away at its support. The trunk was smooth and olive-green, the branches of the tree like thin swords. Above the tree, sitting on the ridge, was the first sign of the moon, dim and white in the still blue sky.

Jenny stared at the creature. For a moment she couldn't bear the loneliness of it. She thought of Nell.

Then the animal spoke.

Jenny started and the arrow slithered off the bow. At the last second she jerked her hand down and the arrow whistled harmlessly through the air to disappear into a

brittle-bush. Moving faster than she thought possible, Jenny notched another. The animal yelled in a Spanish dialect she did not understand.

Impulsively, Jenny dropped her bow to the ground.

On the edge of the baseball field a bleacher stood in outline against the sky. The children's voices rose, thin and out-of-tune, but growing stronger as they relaxed and let the song carry them. The hills to the south were rimmed with turquoise and the tamarisk darkened to a shapeless mass. A breeze touched Nell's hair, mingling in it the smell of the desert and of the trees. It was so beautiful, Nell thought, with the young voices singing in unison and the evening growing black around them.

Nell felt the pinprick of tears. It was John's fault, flirting with her as he hadn't flirted since highschool. Nell allowed herself a warm feeling, thinking of the night John put his arm around her in the backseat of a car. He was trying to make Jenny Marshall jealous. Nell could feel again the weight on her shoulder. Jenny, of course, hadn't noticed. She had never really cared for John. Poor boy, Nell thought, with an old sympathy that finally brought the tears to her eyes. She often wept in public and knew that her friends would not mind. She had cried for them, too, at a funeral or wedding,

cried as she did now, not unhappily, but with a feeling of peace and a sense of tradition.

Jenny remembered the day she had ridden into town, thirty years ago, from the college at Tucson. A girl in her graduating class drove her on the then dusty highway. When they pulled into Main Street, the friend stopped the car, stared out, and asked her why she was coming back. Jenny hadn't known, except that she loved the town, and the hills nearby. She had never thought of living anywhere else. For a second she didn't want that to change. Then she moved closer, until she could have reached out to touch the sweaty flank. The forelegs shuffled, and the black eyes looked down at her.

Not much later, the moon high above the ridge, Jenny picked up the bow and slung it over her shoulder. She and the animal glanced nervously at each other. In the streambed the rocks and plants of the desert looked strangely metallic. Jenny felt tired, her legs weak. The creature took her hand with its own and lifted her off the ground. She flung herself up and onto its back. Instinctively, the animal reared. They danced there for a moment-- a strange shadow on the silver sand.

A Map of the World

## 1

It was the first time her husband had hit her, the first time anyone had ever hit her. Linda felt her head snap against adobe to make a thick noise. Steven stood motionless in the arch of the living room door. It had happened so quickly, the way he came in, and the way she stepped toward him. At two a.m. his face looked yellow in the hall light. With a shrill voice Linda asked what was wrong. In a second he had hit her; thinking, he said later, that he was still in the bar; confused, he said, because she was screaming like that. When he saw her hit the wall he sobered up fast and would not let her sleep until she forgave him. Until she said it out loud. It was a scene as ordinary as that of the blow: Linda on the couch in a flowered robe, and Steven sitting beside her as close as he dared.

He loved her, he said, very much. His large shoulders hunched with embarrassment. On his neck Linda could see the shadow of a beard. Its growth always surprised her.

Steven covered his eyes.

She had never seen him cry before. Startled, Linda touched his arm. She loved him too, she said, feeling love as something hard lodged in her body. He held her hand and vomited over the floor and rug.



"We won't talk about it." Linda said. She began to say that over and over. "It wasn't your fault. We won't talk about it."

They had been married a year.

Next morning Linda dreamed she was driving to the school where she taught second grade. In class the children stood in straight lines as she led them in the Pledge of Allegiance. When the Pledge was over the children would not sit down and she had to call Jenny Marshall who taught the third-graders next door. Jenny came in cautiously, sidling along the walls of the room, her face averted. Linda realized that none of the children would look at her, that they were filing out, being taken away...

Awake, listening to the sounds Steven made as he dressed, Linda decided not to go to work. She lay in bed and felt the kiss on her forehead. When she heard the car drive away she sat up to touch the swollen belly of her lip. Through the open bedroom door she could see into the hallway. She looked for the place where her head had snapped back, and imagined a spot on the white plaster. The alarm rang for a second time. Linda pushed reluctantly at the warm covers, shutting off the noise with a sharp click.

In the living room camping gear lay piled against a chair. As she dialed the gradeschool, Linda sniffed at

the faint odor of bile. When she spoke to the secretary her lip cracked and in the pulpy wound she felt her heart-beat. Through the window the sun made a patch of yellow on the floor. Linda replaced the receiver on its black hook and lay down, half on a Navajo rug, her chest in shadow.

Even in the sun the December air raised goosebumps on her bare legs. She stared up to the jut of mountains twenty miles from town. A big range, dusted with snow where the elevation reached ten thousand feet, it was known for a series of climates stacked like blocks, so that you moved up through cactus to piñon and oak scrub, rough yellow grass, juniper, groves of spruce and pine. Outlined against the peaks was the hoary top of a saguaro and the tip of a catclaw from their front yard.

Linda remembered the first time she had driven through the desert, three years ago, her teaching credentials brand new and locked in the glove compartment. She had never been so far south. The expanse of brown unrolled in a sea of frozen swells and rock crests; the mountains were men --fathers and brothers--and she had felt herself fill up with happiness, entering straight into color, the wind blowing and the highway empty but for the occasional truck. In her mind the highway she was on began in her hometown Philadelphia, on a congested street lined with maple trees.

Here it was a black line past buttes, mesas, and plants you couldn't touch. Someday, she had thought, it would run across the Atlantic, through Europe, to China, and the rest of her life.

On the living room floor, Linda opened her eyes. A cactus wren banged into the glass pane, dropping to the ground to hop dazedly on the gravel. Behind the mountain range the sky rose from pale blue to deep turquoise. The window hummed with the shock of the bird. The window was a wedding present; it had taken Steven a week to knock out part of the wall and trim the ragged hole into a perfect rectangle. He was very proud of the view. Linda stared up at it now, neutrally, as if reassessing its value.

## 2

At the gradeschool, Linda stood beside Jenny Marshall in the shadow of the cafeteria wall. They watched the children play on the field, some alone, others in packs that scuffled good-naturedly.

"Thank God for Christmas," said Jenny. She jabbed at her knot of brown hair, pinning it against the wind. She was in her fifties, once thought ugly, but past that now--tall, sharp, knotty as a twig. Linda admired her independence, the way she lived alone on the outskirts of town.

"What are your plans?" Jenny asked. "You know mine." she laughed, "To read the last twenty years of National Geographic."

Linda smiled experimentally; the end of the week and her lip still felt sore, her mouth crooked, underlining the bruised cheek. She was aware it looked the color of egg-plant.

"We were thinking of camping in the mountains." Behind her Linda felt the gritty brick wall. "Steven wants to reach the top."

Jenny nodded. "Watch for birds. A lot of them come up from Mexico. At one time there were parrots in the pine trees. Thick-billed birds..."

Jenny stared hard toward the middle of the playground. Across the winter grass a third-grader ran with his eyes shut and arms flailing. In a tilting windmill rush he careened into an older boy and knocked them both to the ground.

"Green and orange." Jenny finished, as she left the wall.

The older boy got up with a stiff surprised anger. "You dummy!" he screamed, "You dummy!" He tackled the smaller child.

Linda followed Jenny and Tom Skarland, the principal, was ahead of them both. Twisting the boy's shirt into a

fat handle, he hauled the one on top to a standing position. Linda recognized the boy as Tom's son. Jenny lifted up the third-grader and knelt to study his bloodied nose. The principal began to scold. Linda could hear the strain in his voice as she shooed the other children away. Tom was nervous around the younger grades. He had said so himself, her first day at the school.

Across the concrete area for basketball, Linda steered a group of girls to the four-square court. She could see Jenny comforting the hurt child. Tom's son had broken away and stood alone, facing his father, his head down and legs apart. At the far edge of the field the cyclone fence reflected the sun in a bar of silver. Jenny took the third-grader's hand, leading him in the direction of the first aid kit. As she passed Linda she shook her head with a slight, almost imperceptible, motion.

Linda was startled by the way Tom stood, his hand clenched as if still holding the twisted shirt. The boy's face was blurred. Linda knew that like the father's it would be pale and thin, the eyes pouched with faint blue circles. The boy looked up. Tom gestured in contempt and denial. The boy beat his fist against his thigh. Tom straightened, holding himself rigidly still; the boy continued to beat at his leg. Tom said something. The child turned as if to walk away. In a single stride Tom was in front of him, clamping

the small arm. Faintly Linda heard the sound of the blow, and stepped forward. The slap should have sent the boy back and stumbling. Instead, held in his father's grip, he bounced loosely like a rubber doll.

Linda took another step, not looking at the boy, but trying to see the principal's face. Tom began to shake the boy's thin shoulders, snapping the neck and head back and forth. When the shaking stopped and the child brought his hand up in a certain way, Linda knew that he was crying. The principal pulled his son in to rest against his stomach. Smoothing the boy's hair, he looked up to see Linda staring at him.

Linda realized that the playground was too quiet. She turned; behind her the four-squarers had abandoned their game and were huddled into a group. One girl held the ball in front of her like a fragile globe. Linda's movement caught their attention and they transferred their stares from the principal and his son to her. Linda looked back at Tom. He stood out strangely, isolated on the green field. With a sudden awkward jerk he swiveled, checking the borders of the playground. The children were still there. Some played unconcerned on the swings, others posed stiffly by the jungle-gym. The principal took the boy's hand and walked very quickly toward the classrooms.

Linda smiled, holding out her arms for the rubber ball.

When it was bouncing again from square to square, she went to the swingset to lean against its silver pole. The pole vibrated as one little girl, instead of swinging, chose to bump violently and vertically in her seat.

"No, no!" Linda's mouth felt dry.

The child stopped abruptly. Then she tucked in her feet and pushed hard at the ground, frowning as her legs shot out in bored flight.

## 3

That afternoon, the day before Christmas vacation, Linda had a party in her homeroom class. She let the kids play Bingo and passed out Baby Ruths for prizes. The climax came when she unloaded her drawer of confiscated toys--water pistols and comic books. Linda filled the pistols before giving them back. She had to mop anyway and enjoyed, this once, the wild shrieks and desks out of line.

On her way home the brown desert made her feel small. She avoided looking too much out the car window. In the hallway--a habit now--she licked her lip. The house smelled of frijoles; Steven came out of the kitchen clowning, flapping his arms like the cook they once saw in an Italian movie.

"Hallo." He smiled and led her into the living room.

Heavy green topo maps lay scattered on the couch. "I've found our route."

They were to start in the morning, backpack up the canyon, and be gone a week. Steven spread the maps on the floor, kneeling over them and tracing a pattern on the delicate contours. The black hair on his chest spilled out where the workshirt was unbuttoned. "Here," he said tenderly. He followed with his finger the blue of a stream. "Paradise Creek."

When Linda looked down the thin lines blurred into green waves. Steven pulled her to the floor. Softly he bit the back of her neck. Hesitant at first, he kneaded her shoulder and ran a cheek down her arm. She touched his leg. He brought in blankets from the bedroom to spread under her. Linda felt nothing, but pretended that she did. At the crucial moments her mind drifted off--to the camping trip, to school--while her hips continued to move and her fingers to caress the small of his back. Out the window the mountains were purple against pink and yellow clouds; Linda tried to find their route on the outline of granite ridges. Steven's mouth pressed hard on hers. She felt a great impatience for it to be over.

"Get off!" she screamed, her voice high as she thrust him away.

Then she realized she hadn't cried out at all, she



hadn't said anything at all. Steven's mouth slackened and pushed down soft and wet. Mistaking her emotion, already he was pulsing inside her.

## 4

They parked at the mouth of Sabado Canyon and took the path of soft white sand, walking along the arroyo, under rock ledges. Linda felt good, liking the weight of the backpack against her shoulders. It had rained recently and the smell of creosote was strong in the air. Above them on the slopes ocotillo sprouted, tall thorny sticks feathered in lime green. They climbed steadily, the vegetation changing to grass and sotol as the path grew steeper, with jutting rocks that cut at their leather boots. After a late lunch they hiked without break until they reached the stream: boulders pink-grey like the backs of salmon, water mixed with sunset flicking up in points of gold. Cottonwoods guarded the stream's bank and patches of oak filtered the light. Further up the stream they came to a clearing with a circle of charred wood. Steven unloaded the packs, while Linda gathered kindling.

She built their fire on top of the old one, hovering over it with a pot of freeze-dried stew. Steven tied the end of some rope to a rock. There were bears in the area,

though he was thinking mostly of skunk and raccoon. He threw the rock over the highest bough of the cottonwood nearest the stream. It hurtled over the branch and hung in the air above his head. He caught it and pulled so that the rope was chest-high, swinging like a pendulum. Later he would use it to hang their supplies.

Linda moved a log closer into the fire. The heat burned her face and she shifted away, watching the tiny hell at the center of the wood: the devils there made of twigs and sticks, flaring and collapsing, cracked in two. Steven called to her, but she pushed his voice away. He called again and she looked up, distracted.

Crouched by the stream, Steven raised his arm, his finger pointing to a small blue bird with a heavy bill.

"Do you see it?" he whispered.

The bird perched on a boulder and cocked its fluffed-up masculine head.

Linda thought of Jenny's parrots green and orange in the pine trees. That day, after the Christmas party, she had gone to Jenny's classroom. Jenny sat on the windowsill, looking down now and again at a pile of papers. On one wall Jenny had tacked up a map of the world so large it filled two bulletin boards. Linda spoke in a normal voice and followed with her eyes the outline of the Brazilian coast. Jenny swung her legs back and forth above the floor. For

a moment Linda had felt protected, had felt safe surrounded by construction paper and bright colors. She told Jenny about Tom and the scene of the playground. When she finished, Jenny said only that the boy was high-strung and that the principal had his faults. Linda traced the flow of one long river through an orange country. She wandered about the cheerfully-decorated classroom. On the back wall block letters spelled out a list of mythological creatures. Centaur. Griffon. Halcyon. Linda studied the board. Associated with the kingfisher, the halcyon is fabled to nest at sea and to calm the waves during incubation. A picture showed a bird with human eyes sitting between two high ocean swells. The waves rose fiercely in a pincer shape of water.

"Do you see it?"

The kingfisher gave out a loud challenging rattle.

It was not so much the bird Linda remembered, but the vision of a storm with raging hills and frothy white tips.

"Do you see it?" Steven cleared his throat and asked.

Later in the night Linda jerked awake, feeling her heart beat in her chest and ears. There was the drizzle

of rain on her face. She snuggled deeper in the sleeping bag and pulled at the cloth hood to cover her. She felt again the trickle of liquid. She was confused and then realized it was not the rain that had caused her to wake, but the release of menstrual blood down her thighs. She sat up. The top of the bag was wet and she swore out loud. It had been clear that night when they decided not to put up the tent.

The blood on her legs made her anxious. Linda fumbled and yanked impatiently at the metal zipper. There was no moon and the clouds covered the stars. Wiggling out of the bag, she patted the ground for the flashlight Steven had left there between them. Soon she began to look in earnest, careless of the mud as she crawled on her hands and knees. She touched the edge of Steven's ground-cover and groped hurriedly around and under him. Finally she stood up, took a few steps and staggered, caught in her own bag. The Tampex hung from the cottonwood with their packs and other supplies. Linda listened for the sound of the stream. She thought that if she walked straight toward it, she would find the tree.

She started off in the socks, jeans, and thermal shirt she had worn to bed. In a few seconds she was fully awake, her feet cold, flinching from the rocks and sharp stubble. The rain was cold: not hard, but thin and con-

stant and invisible. Not even the tree trunks stood out in the darkness, and she had to feel her way with hands held in a timid defense. After a while the blackness seemed to close around her, pressing her chest, and pushing from behind. When her foot bumped against something that made a noise and crumbled, she bent to touch a mixture of slimy ash and dirt. She was standing in the middle of the cold fire. Linda listened again for the stream, turned, and went more carefully: until she felt at her fingers the bark of a cottonwood.

A line of rope angled up from the tree trunk to a high branch, the bag with their supplies tied to its end and hanging above her head. Around the trunk the rope was tied into a knot that the rain had swelled to a solid mass. Linda pulled and pried, but could not find an opening. She pulled until her fingers hurt. Then she clutched at the rope that angled up and pulled on that. The rope scraped over the branch and the bag began to move. It came to the top of the limb, stayed there, and she could not bring it over. She pulled, sagging her weight down, bending her knees, pulling with her arms. The limb creaked and swayed toward her. The bag stuck. Linda gave a final wrench, let the bag fall, and went back to the knot.

Warm blood slipped down her thighs. For a second she clenched her legs together to make it stop. She had always

been regular. It was unusual--to be surprised like this-- and she tried to calculate how many days since her last period. But her mind would not hold on to the numbers. She could not count, though she tried again and even stopped picking at the knot to think. Her fingers were cold and she closed them into a fist. The creep of blood began again, creeping down her legs and falling on her face and hair. Her mind was not working at all. She could not count and she beat at the knot in frustration. Why had Steven tied it so tightly? Linda muttered, her words muted against the rain and darkness.

When she turned finally away from the tree, the sound of the stream seemed to be everywhere. She hardly knew now whether she headed away or directly toward it. Sometimes she thought the next step would send her over the bank into the hard jagged rocks. She would falter then, and plunge on, bent against the darkness as if it were something holding her back, like the heavy socks that began to ball with mud. It was the socks that made her trip and feel with one arm the edge of her sleeping bag. Linda wormed forward until she felt the thick bulk under her. The bag was too big and at the bottom she kept her hiking boots. She put these on, leaving the laces untied. The sleeping bag she wrapped around her shoulders.

There was a burst of thunder, far away. Still asleep,

but restless with the rain, Steven mumbled her name in a complaining voice. Linda touched him once and jerked back as if burned. Her hands slid along the ground-cover into sudden pools of cold water. Brushing against something hard she grabbed it with stiff fingers: one of Steven's boots. Inside it she felt for the leather scabbard of the hunting knife.

She drew the blade--half a foot long, made of dull steel--and stood up, holding the knife away from her. The trip back to the cottonwood was almost familiar. She stumbled through the clearing, found the wrong tree, and then the right one. Touching the rope, she did not cut at the line that went up to the branch, but hacked at the mass of knot. When she heard the branch give and break, when the rope whistled over the branch and the bag thumped to the ground, even then she did not stop. Her hands clenched around the knife and she continued to slash downward into the living trunk of the tree. The outer bark shredded and tore, and she struck with strong arms at the wood inside.

At some point the rain stopped.

Linda sat in the mud, wrapped in the wet sleeping bag, shielding her face. She shivered, but not so much as before, so that she could rest her cheek against the

trunk of the tree. Not always sure when her eyes were open and when they were not, she dozed in and out of a semblance to sleep.

Slowly the texture of the night changed. Linda was surprised when starting awake she saw two humps rising out of a lighter darkness. She moved her hand to touch them and thought, unbelieving, that the humps were her knees. She moved her hand again and could almost see it, a dirty paleness waving back and forth.

She pressed closer to the damp tree. A squirrel, or a bird, rustled in the branches above her. Jenny, Linda thought, had once brought a squirrel to school, darkening the cage and letting the children look one at a time. The branches rustled again insistently. The air was pale grey, promising yellow. Linda's head throbbed and when she shut her eyes she saw the desert, a sheet of brown paper with undulating swells. Her hands hurt. Her face felt large and hot. Holding on to the tree trunk, she got up in a series of stiff movements: she couldn't let Steven see her like this. Painfully she wrapped the sleeping bag around her throat and rested against the rough bark; the sap, she guessed, already filling the cuts she had made. The wet jeans flapped at her ankles as she began to walk toward the stream.

Through blurred air the water showed white and



silver. Along the bank, Linda followed the dirt trail they had been hiking, going further up the mountain. The stream rushed beside her and made a pleasant noise; she thought of it on the map, a <sup>thin</sup> blue vein. The path curved around a slight bend and she turned to look behind her. She could no longer see the clearing. The birds were singing, in the treetops, by the stream, everywhere. Linda stopped once to bathe her face. Steven, she thought, wouldn't mind if she went on ahead.

The Garden

June 15th

The rickshaw darts, clatters on three wheels, guns its miniature engine, and stops short behind a bus. A leprous woman displays her hands and the asymmetrical beggars crowd my window: half a foot, half an arm, and a wrinkled face falling away as we lurch forward to graze the wheel of a cart. I hold tightly to the metal side, the rickshaw swaying, teastalls blurred in a dizzy clutter--rows of banana and the glitter of market goods. From a mass of oleander leaps the sign Indian Government Tourist Hotel. I reach out to tap the driver's shoulder. Through a torn sleeve I touch skin. We pull to the curb.

Two rupees. He holds up his palm.

Two? The charge is one. I always pay one.

Two, he says. We argue bitterly as I give him a single note, tired of the hustle, of the heat, and the dark eyes. He garbles English with a clipped British accent. I throw up my hands and walk away. In the dirty hall that leads to my room a man drags himself along the floor--the woodwork on the wall painted blue with pink and green striping. A hotel clerk runs after him, clutching a small broom. Beggers aren't allowed. I look quickly in my purse to avoid their eyes. I unlock my door, lock it again behind me, and lie down stiffly on the big four-poster bed.

June 20th

Varanasi. They say if a man dies in Varanasi he goes straight to heaven. Paul reads this out loud as we take our boat ride on the Ganges, in the sunset, when the sadhues come out to bathe. Like great gold flies they come out, the water thick around their ankles. The water, says Paul, is not very real: none of it is quite real, this muddy flowing along bathing ghats and stone steps, half phantom, half emotion.

I do not listen to him, and look instead at the sky. Pink, blue, and white, it reminds me of that other river, north of here, at Rishikesh. Fast-moving, with timber logs that slapped against the shore, it was a pretty thing, pretty like any American river with its white rocks and sandy beaches winding through the hills. That was the Ganges too, Paul tells me. That was the Ganges near its source, a thousand miles away, before it became this brown weight of worship. Of mind, Paul says. Look, he says, you can see the sadhues putting it to their lips, pouring it over their hair, praying to it sliding down their clothes: pure mind.

Our boatman grins. He doesn't understand a word, but he sees Paul pointing and puffs with pride. His muscles strain against the current (of mind) as we pass a burning ghat where men languidly pile sticks of wood. They stop their work to

watch us float by. The air is hazy with smoke and it is true, I think, we are ghosts to each other: neither of us real. It is far enough away so that I look for the corpse, a bundle on the ground, wrapped in red.

Paul explains that red is the color for women.

June 24th

But Paul is a tyrant, dragging me along on one more railway trip! Traveling at dawn, we watch the farmers defecate in their fields, acres of rice that stretch monotonously to a green horizon. I fidget at the window as we chug like a great insect through interminable stations. We ride to the very end of the line. People stream from the train; Paul stands up with triumph.

It is a town of mud houses, markets, and temples. It is a town of temples like peppermint candy, pink-striped, and curly-cued, for here, of course, the big blue god was born: the birthplace of Lord Krishna. Smiling, and with fleshy knees, His pictures decorate trees and market stalls. Little altars, laborious signs:

Here is where the Lord Krishna stole a pat of butter.  
A mischievous child, He ran laughing through the streets.

Here is where the Lord Krishna defeated His evil uncle,  
while the universe rumbled and stars blinked.

Here is where the Lord Krishna danced with His gopi-

girls in the sultry night, the voluptuous Prince of princes.

Here, here, here.

Naturally we have a guide. An adolescent with a grating voice and crooked teeth, he eyes us possessively as we stroll beside him.

Would Madam care to buy some brass pots at the market-place? Would Madam like to purchase a colorful silken sari? Would Madam prefer some carmine rouge for the lips?

Please, do not call me Madam, I say.

No Madam, he replies, leading us to a scene of pure poverty, to a narrow street where the last rays of afternoon copper the houses and illumine the thin trail of the river. He is taking us to a sacred garden.

Oh, this is a very special garden, he says.

It is the size of a dirt lot and fenced on all sides with a low mud wall. We enter it carelessly, leaving our shoes at the gate, and sneezing as a family of monkeys patter across the path. Darting into the trees, they watch us with their cold brown eyes, secretive monkey-mothers and anxious monkey-children. There are not many places where they can hide, for the plants along the edge are small and tattered, and the mango trees in the center stunted and spaced widely to show big blocks of sky. A single red path follows the line of the wall. A few flowers are dead on their stalks. A few insects buzz torpidly. And the place is strangely dull, so that we

inspect it with indifference, wanting our dinner.

The guide, who has been watching us, takes Paul aside. At night, he whispers, at night all the monkeys of the garden leave. You can see them at sunset as they climb over the wall.

He waits expectantly.

Where do they go? asks Paul.

Oh, the boy is surprised, I do not know. That is not important. They sleep in the alley or in the street. At dawn they return. They dare not sleep in the garden at night. Everything that lives must leave the garden at night! For at night--he lifts a finger--the Lord Krishna comes to dance!

I am looking at the gawdy figures of the altar. Brilliantly dressed, Krishna and His paramour, their feet are covered with offerings: small yellow bananas, wilted flowers.

Once there was a man, the guide raises his voice and speaks insistently to Paul. Once there was a man from Bombay, an educated Indian who came to the garden and who said, Pooh, pooh, there is no God, there is no Krishna. He thought he was a big fellow and one night he crept over the wall. He wanted to prove it, you see, he wanted to stay in the garden all night.

The boy pauses dramatically and points to a spot. Look. The next day he was found lying here. And he was dumb. He could not speak.

Paul looks at the spot. What happened to him?

Oh, the guide is solemn. In a few days he died.

Ah. We nod. I put my hand on Paul's shoulder.

Shouldn't we be getting back? I ask.

A monkey drops from a tree and hangs by its tail.

Of course, I add, looking at Paul, we might stay longer to watch the monkeys leave. It must be near sunset.

Our guide frowns. No, no, he exclaims, but you must be getting back. He shepherds us out, muttering to himself. The monkeys, he says loud enough for us to hear, do not leave exactly at sunset.

Hurrying past me, he begins to talk in a loud voice and with great authority. It is very late for your dinner, he says. All Americans must eat their dinner exactly at six o'clock. I know this for a fact, from my many American friends.

June 25th

I smiled then, behind his back. I mocked his thin back, a stick figure dressed so decorously in cotton shorts and marching ahead of us with betrayed bravado.

Lying awake, I listen to the noise of the propeller fan and think of the afternoon without wanting to, seeing, though it is dark, the poster on the wall. The poster is a drawing of Krishna. Cobalt blue, He is dancing against a background of stars, His arms muscular, His lips half-hidden by the silver flute. Everything in the poster is dancing. Objects twirl and Krishna's eyes are big and tilted in His



smiling face. Seeming to nod, He lifts His feet even higher.

This ridiculous country.

Overhead the propeller fan whirs and labors. I listen to the creak of the bed, to a low snore. Paul sleeps soundly. India, he said, is everything he had thought it would be. On my legs and breast the sheet feels heavy. Finally I sit up to push it aside, dipping my foot on to the cold of the stone floor. Quietly I stand and fumble for my clothes. Carefully I open the door. It will lock behind me and I find something--Paul's shoe--to wedge between it and the jamb.

Our hotel is large and old; we are, I suspect, the only guests and have the best room, set far back from the market-place. With the night air warm on my face, I hurry through the inner courtyard, past a fountain filled with dry leaves and across a lawn that crackles under my feet. A pink metal gate guards the hotel. I lift the latch and am surprised, absurdly, to find myself on the other side.

The moon is nearly full. Although there are no lamps, I can see enough to walk in the narrow street--hedged like an alley with low shapeless buildings on either side. Across from is the bundle of a man or woman in a doorstep. Down the street other shadows, servants or animals, line the mud-brick walls. I walk past them slowly, the ground pocked with holes and pats of fresh cow manure. I remember the way, and use as

landmarks the temples we saw that afternoon. They are easy to find, rising above the low world of the alleys, a skyline of pyramids densely sculpted.

Only once am I afraid: when I hear the steps of a man behind me. He is even more alarmed and sidles by with a bent head and a clucking noise. In the hatred of his stiff neck I almost turn back. I stand still to watch him turn a corner, his dark skin blending into shadow, his white dhoti gleaming. When he is gone I continue, defiantly, until I see the entrance to the garden, shut now and barred with a wooden door. The sky above the garden wall is empty and silent; the moon suddenly seems unnatural. Odors of urine and incense mingle in the air. It is what, I realize, I have been smelling all day.

I pretend to be disappointed. I had daydreamed a Krishna larger than life. I had imagined a giant whose head could be seen above the mango trees and whose jangling would be heard for miles about. A luminous figure like a cartoon animation! I move closer to stare up, the wall a few feet above my head, unimpressive and patterned with cracks.

The noise, at first, is nothing but a slight scratching. An eerie pfft, pfft. Spinning around I see that it is true: the monkeys have left the garden and are sleeping in the street. They come out of the corners to chirp fearfully, and it is minutes before I can turn away from them, feeling still the

pinpricks of their eyes. I hold my heart. It surprises me. It bucks inside my chest, and suddenly I am leaning against the wall.

I do not want Him not to be there. I do not want to smile to myself, to walk alone to my hotel in this strange hollow country. I want to see Krishna dance. I want Him to dance, cobalt blue (why else would all the monkeys leave? why else have a garden?) and stretching up on tiptoes I curve my arms around the wall's arch. The gritty adobe, still warm from the sun, presses into my skin as I hang suspended, afraid, remembering the boy and how he pointed to the ground.

Look, he said--and I can see the crowd murmuring with awe. I can see myself found mute and unconscious, the educated fool trying to prove herself the big fellow.

Dropping back to the street, I bend over to take off my shoes. The monkeys rustle behind me. Perspiration runs down my back and side. I should leave, I am not myself, I should leave. I repeat this--like those chants they sing day and night--as in bare feet I lift up my arms once again. Elbows splayed, scraping one knee and banging the other, I pull and straddle the wall half on my stomach. I feel tremendously light. I am light and athletic, and a secret voice advises me. Yes, it says, your innocence will protect you. Act like a child and your innocence will protect you.

Quickly, in one jerk, my legs swing over to hang in the

garden and my eyes roll to the side in a backward glance.

Centerstage in the moonlight there is a man standing on a patch of soil. Naked to the waist, His head bent, He lifts a hand to His mouth. A trill of musical notes break the stillness. The sounds of a wooden flute, I hear them once before my sense leap and recede, leaving an abrupt white terror. I am dead. I am lost. I am frozen. Clutching at the wall, I slip off its round arch, struggling for a hold, and trying to dig fingers into the hard mud. My legs pull me down. My arms lock straight, so that I push away and let go.

The bushes break my fall. I keep my eyes closed until the pain in my ankle causes me to groan and sit up. Huddled against the wall, my vantage is low and servile, like the animals in the alley. I hold my ankle and stare out at the garden, the light of the moon filtered through the grey trees. The walls are full of shadows, making the square of dirt seem larger and smaller than it was that afternoon. The fragrance of crushed leaves rises in the air. The dancing figure is gone.

Gone?

No, it is flat on the ground, breathing harshly in gulping half-sobs. For a second it is still and then it begins to sob again. I cry out. At the sound of my voice the figure heaves up on one hand. Peering through the dense watery air,

we glare at each other, the young guide and I.

Jihan! I say his name with enormous relief. He is terribly shaken, struggling to right himself while I babble desperately in little-girl effusions. Jihan! I hope you don't think! I'm not like that man from Bombay! I didn't come here to do anything wrong! I only wanted to!

Jihan gets on his knees, picking up the flute and crawling to where I sit in the broken plants. He wears a lungi around his hips, his eyes have been darkened by kohl, his skin smells of perfume. Squatting close so that our knees touch, like me he tries to push himself into the wall.

In the filtered light his face looks drawn, his cheeks bony as they will be when he is old. Are you hurt? he asks, and does not wait for a reply. He looks at me reproachfully. You did not believe me this afternoon. I could tell. You did not believe me. I thought, maybe it is not true? Maybe the Lord Krishna does not come to dance?

My ankle throbs. Aimlessly I reach for the flute in his hand. It is made of bamboo, pale and insubstantial.

You were playing? I whisper.

He coughs and speaks in an almost normal tone. To show Him that I love Him. That I have come only to worship.

We are quiet for what seems to be a long time. Behind me I feel the gritty wall, the taste of dust on my lips. Neither of us looks toward the center of the garden.

I don't think that He is coming tonight, I say.

He may, the boy sidles up the wall, come at any moment.

I try to stand. Though my ankle is sore, it bears my weight.

I know, I whisper. But I am tired. I think I want to go back.

Yes, yes, the boy exclaims. He shakes his head vehemently. You must go back.

The bushes crackle. I grab the boy's arm.

I will, he says with dignity, see you to your hotel.

July 1st

Agra. We bathe in this white light, tiles, and marble: the Taj Mahal. Its reputation has prejudiced me. Like a Barnum and Bailey poster, it was too exciting, too fictitious! Although now I see, the thing itself is real.

Lazily, wandering with Paul through the large crowd, I watch a young man strut between two sari'd women. They are dressed in their Sunday best--silver and rose, turquoise and gold--and he is dwarfed in their effulgence, in these yards of shameless cloth. There is something in the way he stops to smooth his hair, and I am reminded of Jihan.

Paul! I say, that's not?

No, it isn't. Paul eyes me as if to wonder, so that I smile and take his hand, bound by a vow of secrecy. It is

for no particular reason. It was only after we had reached the hotel that night--that something had been required.

Something is required, Jihan said. Weak with excitement and hilarity, we stood before the hotel gate. Halfway in returning we had begun to laugh. The memory was too much! Our poor hearts. Jihan giggled. Our faint-hearted hearts swooning at the sound of a tourist in the bushes, at the sight of a young boy posturing under moonlight. It was too comical and there on the street we began to laugh, to clutch each other's shoulder as my stomach muscles protested and we walked arm in arm, like I have seen the young Indian men walk arm in arm, in the briefness of a natural grace.

Paul spots an empty bench and hurries to take it. He pats the place beside him. We sit together and stare at the tremendous white building, huge and clean. It is made of marble blocks sculpted into flowers and trailing leaves. I try and think about that: marble leaves and the two Ganges mixed in my mind.

The Moslems, Paul begins.

But I watch instead <sup>the</sup><sub>^</sub> young man and women being joined by a second group. There is a yellow sari now that pales the sun. There is a purple and a red and a torrid pink, and what a flower-bed of color! What a mass of outrageous hue, as the women talk loudly and shriek with joy. The young man scowls and shoves his hands into his carefully-ironed Western pants.

He is taking his relatives on an outing? Rather, he is being taken, and he sighs with universal adolescent despair.

Look, I say, nudging Paul. Look.



This Part of the Country

For eleven at night, the bus station was crowded. A stale smell of cigarettes hung in the room lit by lines of half-green fluorescent bulbs. Helen rubbed her feet and slipped them back in her shoes. She felt uneasy. She was using a seat for her coat and luggage, while in the row across a mother held on her lap her little boy. The boy was about three. The mother was young, sharp-featured, with lank blonde hair.

"Don't you ever shut up?" the mother said. She stared at the child, who stared sullenly back. He had the better face for it, with dirt on both cheeks and a wet nose. The mother shifted him from one bony knee to another. As the child slid toward the floor and whined, the mother caught Helen's eye. Helen looked away. Against the back wall were two machines for candy and soda, a pay-phone, a scale, and a pinball game. A line of people waited at the ticket counter; another group stood by the Baggage Claim.

"Don't you ever shut up?" the mother repeated. Her hands jerked the boy back, his stomach showing briefly under the soiled T-shirt as his elbow hit the plastic arm of the chair. His mouth opened in a breathless moment of silence. Then air was pushed from the lungs, and he began to scream.

An old man with a bag marked Kansas City clicked his teeth and brought his bag in closer. Helen touched the

cold sore on her lip. Children often made her feel uncomfortable; she had never regretted not having any of her own. Against her legs she felt a draft from the door that led outside to the buses. She plucked a kleenex from her pink box, and stared across the aisle at her husband.

He was slouched in a TV chair, one leg straight out. Putting in another quarter, he slid deeper in the seat to watch the screen where tiny players ran from base to base. In the same row the little boy sobbed, his chest heaving as the mother patted him on the fleshy thigh and behind. Her cheeks flushed with embarrassment, the girl looked even younger now: a teenager with a pimpled forehead. The boy recovered quickly, his eyes closing, the tears still shining on the lashes. A thread of saliva hung from his mouth and swayed against the T-shirt. The mother looked disgusted and pulled up a blanket in an attempt to protect her blouse. Absently she continued to pat one plump and exposed leg.

"...for Wichita, Salina, and Denver...Bus Fifty-seven for..."

The announcements were in a metallic voice that Helen rather liked. This time they announced the number she had memorized and she stood up, signaling to her husband in the TV chair. Without a word he gave her the tickets. Unhurriedly he went to the Men's Room, while she waited in line.

In line the man ahead of her smelled of onions and bumped along two cardboard boxes with his foot. Everyone was happy to be finally leaving. Just as the driver helped Helen up the steps, her husband returned. Together they shuffled down the aisle, trying to keep their elbows in.

Helen wanted to sit toward the rear of the bus. The seats were upholstered with scratchy nylon, but she was delighted, grateful to relax and let her head fall back. Already her husband was folding his coat into a pillow and fixing it against the window. Helen fiddled with the air blower overhead. Idly she opened the ashtray on the armrest: inside it was a ball of black hair. As the engine warmed up, the bus shook until it seemed they must move or explode. Helen heard the doors open in a complaining squeak, and a last passenger got on.

It was the teenager--the mother. Helen sat up. The driver said something and the girl laughed. Helen turned to watch as the girl hurried past her, clutching to her chest a large leather bag. At the end of the bus the girl rested and put a hand against the thin steel wall. Then, more slowly, with a flick of her eyes, she walked up the aisle to one of the few seats left: not a window seat, but the seat across from Helen. She sat down primly, her knees together, as the bus lumbered out of the station.

In the dim light the girl's hair looked darker. She

combed it with her fingers, hooking the strands carefully behind each ear. They had hardly gone a city block before she began to rummage in her leather bag. She studied the man next to her, and then turned to the aisle.

"Have you anything to read?"

Her voice was low and surprisingly attractive. Helen, startled at being questioned, shook her head no apologetically, though in fact she did have a book in her purse. The girl shrugged, her eyes to the side of Helen's face. She asked if there was a toilet and then seemed to remember that she had seen it herself, at the back of the bus. She stood up and swayed in that direction. Helen plucked another kleenex from the box on her lap. She wondered what had happened to the child. She imagined that children were difficult to care for on such a long trip, and she tried to think who had sat beside the girl in the bus station. She remembered a man with dark hair and a newspaper.

Out the window Helen saw a BAR sign blinking unevenly. When the bus stopped at a light she turned toward her husband. His shoulder was hunched to cover most of his face. Though she bent close enough to touch her lips to his ear, the engine was so noisy she couldn't hear him breathing. A few others had turned off their overhead lights and were trying to sleep, and the inside of the bus was patched with darkness. The bus lurched forward and Helen leaned back, smelling must and hair-oil, and feeling the vibration of

movement in her arms and legs. The steady hum was comforting, but she wasn't very tired.

She closed her eyes and thought of the little boy's flannel blanket, embroidered with daisies in big clumsy stitches. She thought that perhaps the child had been sick, so pale and cranky, and she remembered the first time she had been sick as a child, really sick. They had put her in the far bedroom, where after dinner her father would come in to kiss her goodnight. A tall fussy man, he held a white handkerchief to his mouth, bending quickly over the bed with his face hidden. It had frightened her. When he was gone she would cry and make up terrible stories: that her father had died and there was an imposter in his place, or that behind the handkerchief was a long red scar. She got so excited that finally he stopped coming. For her own good, they said.

Helen felt depressed. She touched her sore lip. It's much better, she thought, to be sick when you are an adult.

From the back of the bus there was a muffled bump and the sound of voices. Helen shifted her head so as not to be jostled. She heard the girl sit down and say, "Jesus." Helen opened her eyes, adjusting them with difficulty to the half-light. The girl had begged a magazine from someone and was flipping through it with a practised jerk of her wrist. From what Helen could see the magazine was about golf. The teenager jerked through it twice, stopping only at an advertisement for women's clothing. Finally she let it fall to her lap, while

she stared at the back of the seat in front of her. Helen noticed a wedding ring on the girl's hand and felt vaguely relieved. She thought of the book in her purse--a Harlequin romance--and waited a few minutes before reaching across the aisle.

The metal armrest pressed against her stomach as she touched the girl's sweater.

The girl started. "Yes?"

Helen hesitated. She wasn't very good at talking to strangers. She cleared her throat and said, too loud. "It's a long ride tonight."

"Yes." The girl stared.

Helen bent closer. "Not a very interesting magazine?"

"No." The girl wrinkled her nose. "I hate sports."

Helen smiled at that. She pressed confidently against the armrest. "Are you from this part of the country?"

The girl smiled back. One of her front teeth overlapped the other. "No. I'm on vacation."

"Oh." Helen nodded, somewhat confused. "And the little boy? Can your husband manage alone?" She laughed.

There was a long pause.

"Excuse me?" The girl's voice rose slightly. She straightened and looked Helen over. Then her face set in a pleasant mask. "Yes. Why not?"

The girl tilted her head inquiringly. Her foot tapped the floor with a nervous rhythm. Down the aisle, a man's

arm came up to touch a suitcase on the rack above. A red light from the driver's dashboard blinked on and off. Helen saw herself suddenly from a distance: a fattish woman, an old busy-body.

"Well..." The girl shrugged, as if amused or faintly puzzled. "Nice talking to you." She turned and settled back in her seat.

For the first time Helen heard the radio, a country-western tune, then the sound of liquid being poured into a glass, a jingle for Seven-Up. Helen's stomach hurt, pressed to the armrest. She moved back abruptly to stare at the metal seat in front of her. It was patterned with white scratches, some accidental, while others formed obscene words. Helen hadn't expected music, and she simply listened, all through one song and into the next.

When the driver complained, the music shut off. Helen watched as the girl reached up to turn off the overhead light, sitting back with her arms folded around the magazine and leather bag. Deliberately, as if for someone else's benefit, the girl yawned and stretched her neck in a luxurious circle. Then she snuggled down in the seat, her legs splayed, her face turned away from the aisle.

A drop of sweat tickled Helen's underarm and ran down her side. She knew now how it was. How the girl had slid out of the plastic chair, quietly, so as not to disturb the



child. Wait here, the girl whispered, wait here for Mommy-- and with a bold strategy, not looking at anyone and not looking back, she ran to buy the ticket. She had done, perhaps, as much as she could. She had stayed with him, wiped and bathed and fed and slapped, and been alone with him as long as she could. Until finally, sitting in a crowd, it came to her. It could be so simple.

Helen shifted her thighs, the backs of them damp and prickled by upholstery. Against the window rose the lump of her husband's shoulder. The terrible part would be waking up. The terrible part, Helen thought, would be when the child, sleeping fitfully, finally woke and pushed with chubby hands at the plastic chair. He would not immediately begin to cry. He would remember that whispered "Wait, wait here" and he would rub his eyes and watch the people, content to be warm and comfortable and unattended. The terrible part, Helen thought, would come later as he began to suspect. As he began to resist, pretending not to be afraid, pretending even that he was not yet awake: that she was coming, that she was coming, that she was.

Helen looked down and saw her hands. She made them relax and lie naturally, one on each armrest. The terrible part would be the rising of truth through the flesh of the body. Helen looked out the window to a black world. She knew that they were in the country now. It would be cold there, with the trees and sky sewn together. She looked at her husband

and listened again for the sound of his breathing. With a flick of her eyes she could see the girl's back, rounded and dim in the half-light. Everywhere in the bus people were sinking lower in their seats. Helen's fingers began to curl in toward her palm. She wondered, even now, why this had happened to her.

Deer Park

## Chapter One

Sarah and her mother came in a bicycle rickshaw. Attached to the bicycle was a wooden cart where they sat with their luggage. In front of them the rickshaw driver pedaled furiously. All Sarah could see was his back and one thin brown leg going up and down. She felt sorry for the man and half-wanted to ride the bicycle herself.

It was a long ride from the airport in Varanasi. For the last quarter mile they followed the line of a high pink wall.

"Is this it?" Sarah asked.

"Yes," said her mother more calmly. "This is the village of Sarnath. There's the museum where I work, and behind that wall is Deer Park, where the Buddha came after He was enlightened. No, driver, to the hotel!"

Their rickshaw had stopped at the entrance into the Park. Through an iron gate Sarah saw a red dirt path that led to the steps of a small temple, curly-cued and with a pointed roof. Other paths led off to the left and right, over a green sweep of lawn and through rows of flowers. In the distance she spied a tower, monstrous and lumpy against the sky.

"No, no, to the tourist hotel!" Her mother scolded the driver. He shrugged and began to pedal. The pink wall ended and they bicycled down the main street of Sarnath. Tiny

wooden shacks lined the road--tea stalls and stores with their goods piled on the floor. In a few seconds they rounded a corner and were at the front of a long building with a neatly-lettered sign: The Indian Government Tourist Hotel. Sarah craned her neck backwards. It was her first day in India, and her first look at Deer Park.

It's so big, she thought. Her mind filled with the curve of an iron gate and the glimpse inside.

"What about the deer?" she asked her mother.

"What?" Mrs. Woolf stepped down from the rickshaw.

"The deer in Deer Park."

"That's only a name. Two rupees." Her mother paid the driver. A clerk dressed in white, with a thin black moustache, came out of the hotel and waved happily.

"Sarah!" said Mrs. Woolf. "You stay with me."

They walked together through the hotel dining room into a small back courtyard. Mrs. Woolf was an archeologist and had lived in the hotel for six months. She gave Sarah the key to their room; when Sarah opened the door she saw a huge propeller fan hanging from the ceiling, directly above a four-poster bed. The grey walls were bare and there was hardly any furniture except for a desk littered with books.

"We'll be crowded," said Mrs. Woolf, unpacking Sarah's suitcase. "But it's only a few weeks."

Three weeks, Sarah thought: fourteen days to Christmas and seven days more until school starts again. She fingered the mosquito netting that draped the window. Then she peeked into the bathroom. In the corner was a black hole where the toilet should be.

"I hope your aunt sent along some warm clothes." Her mother fussed. "Everyone expects India to be broiling hot. Full of elephants and rajahs. But this is the north and it's cold in December. Sarah? What are you doing?"

"I'm looking at the bathroom, Mother."

Sarah stood by the sink, watching a centipede crawl on shower wall beside her. She thought of her aunt in San Diego. She had lived with Aunt Laurie ever since her mother's divorce, three years ago. Usually her mother came to California at vacation time when her aunt scrubbed and polished the house until it was too clean to live in. She even dusted at the back of shelves. Sarah wished Aunt Laurie could see the dust in here! It was engrained in the cracks of the sink, patterning the porcelain with dark lines. It filmed the walls and lay in little piles on the floor.

"Sarah." Mrs. Woolf came into the bathroom. With one practised swoop she knocked the centipede off the wall. Using a kleenex she picked up the insect and dropped it into the black hole. When she straightened, Sarah could see her in the mirror: a tall woman with blue eyes and

blonde hair pulled into a bun. Sarah decided she liked her mother better in California, where she smiled often like a polite guest.

Mrs. Woolf put her hands on Sarah's shoulders. "I'm afraid you've come at a bad time. I'm here on a government grant, you know. There are deadlines. I have to go back to work tomorrow."

Sarah looked at her own reflection, which was small and brown. "That's okay."

"But I wanted," Mrs. Woolf went on, "for you to come to me this vacation. I want you to see how I live and what I do. To understand why I am away so much."

Sarah felt uncomfortable. "Why did the rickshaw driver have red teeth?"

"Teeth?" Her mother frowned.

"When you were arguing about what to pay I saw that his teeth were red."

"Well." Mrs. Woolf went into the other room. Sarah had to follow to hear what she said. "His teeth are stained because he chews betel nut, which is something like smoking cigarettes. Only you chew the stimulant; you don't smoke it. And we were not arguing." With a click, she shut Sarah's empty suitcase. "Tomorrow." She sounded cheerful. "We'll go to the museum where I work. You'll like that."

Sarah picked up one of the books on her mother's desk

She tried to think of things she and her mother both liked. She stared, puzzled, at the book in her hand. It wasn't written in English. She wished her mother hadn't thrown away the centipede.

The museum, Sarah thought. What on earth will I do there?



## Chapter Two

Sarah had forgotten her mother's habit of rising every morning at dawn. Sleepily she dressed and followed Mrs. Woolf into the hotel dining room, where they were served a breakfast of fried eggs and toast. The eggs tasted funny.

"Coconut oil," Mrs. Woolf explained.

Afterwards they walked--as Mrs. Woolf walked every morning in Sarnath--down the main street, past the ramshackle shops and dimly-lit tea stalls. The tea stall owners were just beginning to brew up the pots of tea that would last all day. Mrs. Woolf pointed out the rows of bananas and packages of cookies they called biscuits. It was a British word, Mrs. Woolf lectured, for Britain had once ruled India for many years. Sarah tried to listen, but saw instead the skinniest yellow dog in the world, its ribs showing like the parts of a musical instrument. A woman in a purple sari picked up a stick to drive the dog away. The woman had long black hair and her sari fell to her feet in a simple line of cloth.

"There's the Tibetan monastery," said Mrs. Woolf.

Sarah was watching the ground, stepping carefully over pats of fresh cow manure.

"And here's Deer Park."

Sarah looked up. She had a shivery feeling as they

walked beside the high pink wall. Soon they came to the iron gate, open now, for "open at dawn and close at sunset," that was the rule. Once again Sarah saw the temple, the sweep of lawn, and the radiating paths. She wanted to stop, but her mother hurried her on. On the other side of the road there were rice fields in patches of emerald and chartreuse green. Above the fields the sky turned slowly to a perfect blue.

But Sarah thought only of the pink wall beside her. The wall rose sternly, enclosing and protecting the Park. Sarah tried to imagine what it would be like, to be inside.

Mrs. Woolf quickened her steps. Ahead, sitting between two rice fields, stood a low ugly building without windows. From its steps a stone lion stared out of sightless eyes. On the dry lawn was a bare flagpole. Sarah followed her mother across the road. Now she could read the sign on the lawn: The Indian Government Museum of Buddhist Studies and Archeological Research. A woman sat in front of the sign, holding a wooden tray.

"Buy Madam?" The woman was young and the color of mahogeny. She jiggled her tray and caused the round yellow fruit on it to roll lusciously and bump against each other.

"Guava Madam?"

Mrs. Woolf shook her head. Sarah stopped to smile.

"Buy Missy?"

Mrs. Woolf came back, took Sarah's hand, and led her up the steps. With an old-fashioned key she opened the museum door and flung it wide.

It was a dusty, musty, and gloomy place, Sarah thought, full of statues that crowded against each other and filled the inner rooms. They were old stone statues, so broken and worn-down they looked like the beggars she had seen on the streets of Varanasi--beggars who hopped about on a single leg, or who held a can in their teeth if they had no arms. Like many of the real-life people, the statues had an air of sorrow, still longing for that piece of them lost centuries ago.

Mrs. Woolf spent a long time giving Sarah a tour of the museum. The museum, she explained, wasn't ready for the public yet, although it would be soon.

"Which is why," she said, "I have to work fast. These statues here--look at this, from Gorakphur--come from all over northern India. It's my job to say how old they are, and to catalogue them in some orderly fashion. Here, Sarah, over here! From Darbhanga." Mrs. Woolf caressed the stone. "Thirteenth century."

When she had led Sarah through all four of the rooms, Sarah's mother looked longingly over at her desk, a wooden table set in a corner. Crumpled paper bags lay casually amid the papers, and from one of them spilled the tip of

a banana peel.

"Well," said Mrs. Woolf. "I suppose you could...read?... while I look over this inventory."

Sarah took a chair into the next room, to sit by a stone Buddha with a round moon face and a dimple in His chin. She had once seen a picture of the Buddha, tall and stately and dressed in an orange robe. The statue's robe--like everything else in the museum--was a dusty grey. But Sarah imagined it as it would be in real life: the color of apricots. She closed her eyes and saw the arched iron gate of Deer Park, the pink curly temple, the red dirt paths and the flames of flowers: poppies, snapdragons, marigolds. In her mind's eye she saw the Buddha floating over the Park--ten feet tall, His head above the mango trees. His orange robe billowed in the wind as He floated across the lawn toward the temple.

Sarah opened her eyes, her heart beating a little faster than usual. She reached into her knapsack for a book. But before she began to read she closed her eyes again. Again she saw the Buddha, His toes pointed gracefully as He skimmed over the grass. All that day, whenever she closed her eyes, she saw Him: a tall figure sailing through Deer Park. His robe was vivid against a blue sky and His lips curved in a half-smile. It made her feel strangely excited.

But the excitement lasted only for a moment; <sup>and</sup> the rest

of the morning she was simply bored.

At first Sarah tried to read her book, a murder mystery she had begged Aunt Laurie to buy at the airport. Her aunt had said no, then yes, then when the book was bought and tucked away she changed her mind and wanted it back again. For that reason Sarah thought it would be interesting. But it wasn't really--and began, Sarah saw with disgust, after the murder. Bored, Sarah squirmed on the hard museum chair. Bored, she drummed her feet against the wooden legs. Bored, for the fifth time she checked the pocket watch in her knapsack. Her mother had forgotten her.

Even as Sarah said this to herself, Mrs. Woolf called from the next room. "Sarah?" There was the scrape of someone standing up. "What about lunch?"

The very word made Sarah hungry. She jumped from her chair and ran, dodging in and out of statues.

"Coming!" she yelled, as her elbow hit against a slender pedestal with a terra-cotta head on it the size of a baseball. The head had hooded eyes and hair sculpted into tight neat curls.

Sarah screamed and grabbed her arm. The pedestal rocked back and forth. As if in slow motion, the head slid across the inclined white surface, its eyes seeming to flicker as it gathered momentum. Mrs. Woolf stood in the doorway with her mouth open. Sarah and her mother looked at each other.

Then Mrs. Woolf bounded across the room and caught the head. The pedestal crashed to the floor.

The rest of the day went badly.

It's hardly my fault, Sarah thought as they walked back to the hotel, if Mother has too much to do and I have too little. She dragged her feet. Mrs. Woolf carried a batch of papers.

"What's that smell?" Sarah asked.

"Urine," said her mother, "and incense and smoke and everything else."

They walked beside the high pink wall. Sarah could feel the Park behind it: the flowers closing for the night, the grass darkening under the winter sky.

"Why didn't you ever write me about the Park?"

"Deer Park?" Her mother sounded impatient. "Of course I've written you about it. It's where the Buddha gave His first sermon."

Mrs. Woolf walked with a quick sure stride. Sarah had a hard time keeping up.

"Have you ever been inside?" she asked.

"Of course. It's a public park." Her mother looked down at her. "Very pretty. It was dedicated to the Buddha by Emperor Ashoka over two thousand years ago."

"And does He visit it?" asked Sarah. She knew immediately that it was a silly question.

"Who?" said Mrs. Woolf. They passed the arched iron gate. "The Emperor?"

"No!" Sarah shouted, stung by her mother's tone. "The Buddha!"

Mrs. Woolf pursed her lips and walked even more quickly. "Sarah," she said. "The Buddha died in the fifth century B.C. You know that. What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing." Sarah's mouth felt stiff.

They came to the end of the pink wall and passed through the market. The tea stalls were still open. Their owners chatted tiredly among themselves, while children slept on the wooden benches meant for customers. Up the hotel drive, through the back courtyard, and into their room, Sarah and her mother marched in unison without speaking. Sarah tried closing her eyes. But the Buddha was gone.

They ate dinner, as they would every night for the next three weeks, in the big grey dining room. Sarah looked about at the empty tables.

"Are we the only people here?"

"I think so," said Mrs. Woolf. "Most tourists go to the bigger hotels in Varanasi. And if they aren't tourists, they're monks or pilgrims who stay at the monastery."

They talked politely about the monastery. Sarah waited until the chicken curry had been brought out; then

she announced her good idea.

"You could take me to the Park every morning at seven," she told her mother in an efficient voice. "Just like at school. And I could leave it every afternoon at four. Just like at school. You could pick me up at the gate on your way from work."

"But Sarah." Mrs. Woolf stared. "This is a foreign country. I can't let you run around loose."

"But I won't!" Sarah said. "I'll stay inside the Park, and I will promise, I will swear, never to go outside it. The hotel could make me a lunch and I would eat it there and never go out the gate until you came to get me."

Sarah picked up her cup of sweet tea. It left a ring on the plastic tablecloth which she tried to rub away.

Slowly, Mrs. Woolf shook her head. She knew that Deer Park, of all places, was a safe place to be--for who ever went there but tourists and monks? From all over the world they came to honor the Buddha. That was the problem.

"But Sarah." She tried to be nice. "Deer Park is an extremely important historical site, full of ruins and temples where the monks go to pray. The government is careful to keep it undisturbed. They even have a fine for any loud noise! It's not a place to play in. It's a special place to many people."



Sarah studied her plate. Then she impressed her mother by acting very calm and serving herself the curry. "But Mother," she said, "I would never disturb it. It's special to me too."

Mrs. Woolf thought about the museum, the piles of papers, the fourteenth century terra-cotta head sliding toward the floor.

"Well," she said thoughtfully, poking at her rice. "It's something to think about."

## Chapter Three

Dressed in a long purple robe, a monk hurried past Sarah, down the path, to disappear into the temple.

Sarah admired his bare feet. But she dared not follow him. The temple was too solemn for her and looked half-enchanted with its tall pillars and painted roof. Up a dozen stair steps the entrance yawned open like a black mouth. Even from here Sarah could smell incense. It was far too serious a place in the early morning and she went up to it shyly, her hands in her pockets.

Only a moment ago she had stood with her mother, outside the gate.

"I'm going to pick you up at four," Mrs. Woolf said. "I'll stop by the gate after work and I want you to be on time. Do you understand?"

Sarah nodded and stared straight ahead, into the Park.

"All right then," Mrs. Woolf hesitated. "If you're sure?"

"Yes, yes," Sarah said. She felt she could scream with impatience. She tried holding her breath instead.

"Well, I'm leaving," said Mrs. Woolf.

Sarah was too excited to turn around and look at her mother.

"Goodbye Sarah."

Standing under the arched iron gate, Sarah took a step

forward. She heard her mother walk away. "Goodbye," she said absently. She took another step. She was inside.

Now, as she went slowly toward the temple, she turned right at the first new path, walking between beds of lilies and lavender irises. The temple was behind her and Sarah began to enjoy herself, to give a little skip with each step. The path led her to a tree with strips of rag and aluminum tied to its lower branches, like an old woman in paper curlers. The leaves and rags and bits of metal fluttered together to make a rustling sound. Under the tree Sarah noticed a sign:

Pipul Tree, the tree of Enlightenment. This tree is believed to be a slip of the Bodhi tree under which the Buddha attained Enlightenment.

Sarah took a notebook from her knapsack and sketched herself a map. The Park was so large and undiscovered; she had to have some way of taming it--of capturing it on paper. At first the page looked rather bare. For there was only the temple, and the tree, and all around the vast unknown.

A gust of morning air blew cold and sharp on her hands. I'm glad I have my sweater, Sarah thought. She felt her ears burn. "I wish I had a hat!" she said out loud. She laughed, thinking of the wooly hats the Tibetans wore: hats, she thought, that looked like buckets of sheep set upside down. She followed the path that made a leisurely loop beside

a dark hedge and a circle of grass. A peacock screamed in one of the bushes. Sarah stamped her foot, making the peacock run and spread its fan of purple and green. Other birds, hens and roosters, pecked on the lawn--while the path, too, seemed to be like a bird with nowhere to go and nothing to do. It wandered by a blue pond. It went over a small bridge. It ambled through rows of flowerbeds. It seemed to be a path that had no end--until, curving around an oleander bush, it brought her to a tall ugly metal fence.

Beside the cyclone fence the path turned and narrowed, slinking under trees that were suddenly larger and full of shade. Sarah shivered. She pressed her face to the metal of the fence, trying to see through to the other side. Behind the cold wire was a woodsy tangle of plants. Even as Sarah watched, a bush moved. There was the sheen of light as big as a quarter. There was a gleaming grey and the blink of an Eye.

A glint, a blink, and it was gone.

Sarah pressed against the fence for more, until the metal pattern showed in red marks on her cheek. Pressing harder, she waited. But all was quiet now and secretive. With stiff fingers she took out her notebook and sketched a fence on her map. The Park, she knew now, was bounded by the fence and the high pink wall. Thinking for a moment, she also put in the pond and the bridge painted with stripes

of red. Behind the fence, at the edge of the paper, she drew a big Eye.

Clumsily Sarah buttoned up her sweater. The overhanging trees were patched with dark shadows; in the air she could see her breath, white and misty. She began to hurry, clutching her notebook in one hand. Far ahead a glimmer of yellow shone on the path, Sarah rubbed her cold arms and set her mind on that bit of light, beckoning to her. In a few minutes she was out of the trees.

The warm sun fell on her face and she shut her eyes in welcome. Looking through half-closed eyelashes, Sarah stood still; finally she saw it. High. Huge. Alive with bits of moss and ivy. She saw the tower.

She couldn't imagine how she had forgotten it! Shaped like a bell jar, monstrous and lumpy against the sky, it was taller than a six-story building and just as wide at its base. Later Sarah learned its name: the Dhāmekh stupa, a Buddhist shrine built sixteen hundred years ago. The bottom part of the stupa was made of stone, sculpted into shallow alcoves; higher up the stupa narrowed and turned into crumbly red brick, covered with a brown creeping plant like ivy. The top of the stupa, like the top of a mudpie, was rounded and bulged in odd asymmetrical places. It was the strangest thing Sarah had ever seen. She ran toward it, flying along the path that led, eventu-

ally to all parts of the Park. Her breath whistled in her throat and her knapsack bounced wildly. When she reached the stupa she had to step back to see it all. It loomed above her--old, older than she could imagine--a mountain made by human hands.

Taking out her pencil, Sarah put it on her map.

A sidewalk circled the base of the stupa. Sarah stepped up on it and walked around the tower, trailing her fingers along the rough stone. At regular intervals were shallow arches, ten feet high, with blurred edges. Sarah walked around the stupa twice, and then sat on the grass to watch.

There were other people about now. First Sarah saw the monk who had gone into the temple earlier that morning. He trotted up to the stupa, bowed low, and began to sing as he walked around it. When he reached his beginning point he did not stop, but went around again--and again and again. Another monk in a brown robe and with an angry face joined him. Hands behind their backs, and both singing, they went around and around like mechanical toys.

Soon a woman came up the path, grinning so hard Sarah felt alarmed by her strong white teeth. The woman's hair hung in two black ropes and she wore embroidered pants that ballooned to her ankles. Bowing and stepping up on the sidewalk, she too began to walk around the stupa. But she was not content with merely walking. On the third step she

fell to her knees and stretched out her arms. Singing, she got up. She took three steps and went down again, her nose squashed to the ground. Again she got up and took three steps. Again she went down. Every third step.

She's pretending to be an inchworm, Sarah thought.

Without meaning to, Sarah spoke out loud. "But why are they doing that?"

"They are praying," said a voice.

Sarah jumped. Sitting on the grass, she couldn't jump far, but her legs uncrossed and she fell over backwards.

"They are praying, not singing," repeated the man who squatted beside her. His feet were flat as pancakes on the ground.

"Where did you come from?" Sarah asked rudely.

"Me?" He squatted there, like one of those pebbly mushrooms that come up in the spring. "I'm the Gardener. Shall I go away?"

Sarah quickly shook her head.

"Do you see behind their backs?" The man waved a thin hand toward the monks. "Behind their backs they each have a string of beads. With each prayer they click a bead and with each circle around the stupa they make a big prayer."

"Are you a Buddhist?" asked Sarah.

"My no. I'm a Hindu." The man smiled and touched his golden chest. He wore only the Indian dhoti, or what looked

like a linen towel wrapped around his hips. "My name is Ji."

"Ji?"

"In English it means yes."

"How lovely," said Sarah. "My name is only Sarah."

"How do you do?" Ji gave her a nod and they shook hands. He had learned this, he said, from watching the tourists.

"How do you do?" Sarah answered. They were silent. Sarah looked sideways. She had never seen such wrinkled toes, cracked, splayed, and in all different sizes. She often judged people by their knees; Ji's knees stuck up by his chin and were badly scarred, more bony than her own. His head was bald and his nose lumpy. His mouth pursed to suggest that it hadn't enough teeth. He was probably very old. He was undoubtedly a very old man. And yet he had appeared so quickly! He squatted there so easily, like a boy her own age--so that this is how she finally thought of him, as a boy her own age exactly.

Sarah noticed with a start that while she had been studying him, he had been studying her.

"Do you like the Park?" Ji frowned at the stupa.

"Oh yes." Sarah was demure.

"Of course." Ji sighed. "It's not a very grand Park. It is not like the park, oh, in Calcutta. There is a park for you. Big big trees. And famous. They have banyon trees that are world famous."



Sarah thought of the trees by the fence. "These trees are pretty big," she said.

"But the grass." Ji shook his head. "The grass is so dry. The grass is no good."

"Why." Sarah looked around. "What's wrong with it?"

"And as for the flowers. Pffft!" Ji snapped his fingers.

"Oh!" But this was shocking. "The flowers are beautiful."

"And when you put it all together. The Park itself. Don't you think it is, what is the English word? Too prim? I overheard a woman just the other day. It is so neat and prim, she said. Not like a wild Park. Not an exciting Park."

Gracefully, for someone in his position, Ji shrugged his shoulders.

"Not exciting?" But Sarah found herself standing up. "How can you say that in front of..." she gestured at the stupa. She didn't know its name yet, and could only fling out an eloquent hand. "Prim?" she asked. Indeed it was hard to think of the stupa as prim. "Not exciting?" she repeated in an incredulous voice. She pointed to the harsh dome, the strange towering mountain that rose before them. "I think it is the most exciting Park in the whole world!" she exclaimed vigorously.

Ji grinned.

"Of course," Sarah went on, "it is rather neat. There

arn't any weeds, and all the flowers are in lines, you know."

Ji put on a sad agreeing face.

"But I like that," said Sarah. "Because, obviously..."

Ji looked at her with interest.

"There are things..." struggled Sarah.

"Underneath?" Ji suggested.

"Yes."

"Like wildness?"

"Yes!"

"And magic?"

"Yes." Sarah stared, for he had said her own thoughts, what she was afraid to say.

"Good, very good." Ji's brown eyes crinkled. Sarah had to laugh. She had never seen anyone look so pleased.

"So you like the Park," Ji decided. "You are here, I suppose, just for the day? You are, perhaps, taking a walk before lunch?"

"Oh no." Sarah boasted. "I'm here for three weeks. And I have my own lunch." She turned so that he could see her blue knapsack. "I'm not just walking around either."

"Ah?" Ji raised an eyebrow.

Sarah looked away. She didn't want to tell him the truth.

"I'm here," she mumbled, "to find the Buddha."

Ji's eyes widened and his mouth formed a small o. His ears, sticking out from the side of his head, seemed almost to twitch and lean toward her. Suddenly, with a slithery movement like a pretty brown snake, he stood up. They were exactly the same height.

"You know, I have been Gardener here for many years. And I have never yet seen the Buddha."

"No?" Sarah was polite.

"No! Surely it is time. Don't you think?" Ji appealed to her.

"I guess so."

"Then you won't mind if I come along?"

"Well, no."

And Sarah ran after the small brown man, for already he was laughing and skipping down a path.

"Do you know where to go?" he asked.

"No," Sarah said between breaths. "Do you?"

"Ah." Ji slowed to a leisurely pace. "Then it will not be easy. Then it will take time." He pointed to a raven with a worm in its beak. "The Park has many secrets."

"How long," asked Sarah, "have you worked in the Park?"

"Worked in the Park?" Ji tried to think. "Oh my." He held out his hand with its stubby fingers. "One. Two." Ji scratched his nose. "Two, yes. I have worked here for more than two hundred years. I am," he said proudly, "the Head-Gardener."

## Chapter Four

Two hundred years? She didn't believe him.

"Oh yes." Ji was unperturbed. "At least."

It was lunchtime. They sat on the grass by a bed of blue flowers. All morning Sarah had been thinking about Ji's age.

"Two hundred years ago!" she said. "That's ridiculous. Why, that's when Thomas Jefferson was alive and Betsy Ross and George Washington."

"George Washington?" said Ji. "No, he never came here."

"Of course not," exclaimed Sarah. "He was in America."

"Ah well, we knew nothing of America in those days. I was a young man and it was the English who worried us."

From her knapsack Sarah took out the silver tin the hotel had given her as a lunchbox. She was delighted to discover it came apart to make three <sup>e</sup>parate smaller tins, with a bowl inside, and a banana leaf for a place mat. There was no spoon for in India it is the custom to eat with your fingers.

"Were you a Gardener then, too?" she asked.

"No." Ji giggled. "I was a servant in the palace of the Rajah. I was a lowly Hindu, the lowliest of lowly in a Moslem court. Times were hard indeed. Every year my prince, the Cheyte Sing, would give to the English great sums of money, and every year the English wanted more. One day they

came to the palace and put the Rajah in prison. Then the people of the city were angry and began to fight with the English officers. While they were fighting, the Rajah discovered a hole in his prison that led down to the river Ganges!"

Sarah imagined the Rajah with his sleek black moustache and his curved sword. "Did he dive in?" she asked.

"No." Ji blinked. "He was too fat. His attendants made him a rope from the cloth of their turbans. One went down first and found a boat."

"Where were you?"

"I was a cook. I heard shouts and suddenly there were men in my kitchen, pushing and stabbing and falling in the fireplace! I did not like working for the Rajah and took this chance to run away. It was not easy. I had to run through many English officers. They were dead. But still I was frightened. I ran and ran until I came to the Park where I hid in the bushes by the stupa." Ji grinned. "I have been here ever since."

From the first tin Sarah took out her chapatis. Made of rice flour, they reminded her of the tortillas she ate in San Diego. "What did you do for food?" she wondered. She filled one chapati with curried pumpkin and offered it to Ji.

"No, thank you," Ji said. He stared into the distance,

resting his elbows on his knees. "When I first came to the Park I ate guava and mango and even stole from the temple offerings. I took the bananas right off the altar!" He looked sideways at Sarah, expecting her to be shocked. "Finally it came to me--I was sitting under the pipul tree--that this was wrong and not even necessary. I looked at the plants in the Park. They do not steal. They live from the sun. I decided to be like them."

"Like a plant?" Sarah stopped in the middle of a bite.

"Yes." Ji lifted his face to the sun.

The curry burned Sarah's mouth. She ate quickly for whenever she stopped her tongue felt even hotter. When she had eaten three chapatis, she peeped into the last and smallest tin. Inside was a sticky sweet made of ghi and sugar.

"You mean you never eat anything?"

"No."

"I would hate that," she said, picking up the sweet.

"Oh." Ji curled into a ball, his hands under his wrinkled cheek. "It's not so bad."

He yawned. Sarah licked her fingers and settled on her back. She felt tired. They had spent the entire morning walking up and down Deer Park.

They had walked, Sarah thought, to the four corners of the world: from the water tank in the west, to the ruins

in the east, from the Park gate, to the cold metal fence--  
from one flower bed, to the next, and the next, and the next.

"I'm Merriwether Lewis," she had said to Ji. "And you  
can be Captain Clark. We must," she exclaimed on finding the  
rose<sup>^</sup>bushes, "report this to the President!"

And she put the rosebushes on the map.

Ji was an excellent guide. He showed her the hole in  
the pink wall where you could see the road and a glimpse of  
her mother's museum. He showed her the tomb of a famous  
Indian, and the peacock by the temple that had never shown  
its tail. Best of all, he showed her the remains of an  
ancient monastery.

Deer Park, Ji explained, had been the site of many  
monasteries built on top of each other, each one crumbling  
in its turn. Now, all that remained were a few bricks or  
the occasional wall still standing precariously, as if con-  
fused as to why it was up when so many had tumbled down.

Ji showed her a pile of soft grey stone. It looked  
like a chimney.

"An altar," Ji said solemnly.

He pointed to a line of bricks sunk in the grass and  
forming a square.

"A kitchen," he said.

Sarah's favorite ruin was a brick wall which still had  
a small arched doorway. Connected to this wall were the nubs

of other walls, no higher than Sarah's knee. The monks must have been very short, Sarah thought, for she and Ji could just go under the arch without bumping their heads. On the other side was the same blue sky and green grass. But as Sarah stepped through the door she had a strange feeling.

She felt strangely at home. She smelled incense and the fresh odor of straw. She felt as if she were returning from a long trip, to a familiar room. For a second she saw a neatly-swept floor, a pallet, and a burning stick of sandalwood. In her mind she saw the rows of Buddhist monks sitting before their morning gruel. They waited patiently until the warted master of the monastery took his first bite. Sarah saw the master's face, his yellow rheumy eyes blinded with age. In clear detail she saw the other faces too, of all the men with whom she had lived, and quarreled, and worked, and worshipped.

"This used to be a monk's cell," she said excitedly to Ji. "He was just an ordinary monk, but he could read the Brahmi script and he could write and one day..." The memory came to her--she didn't wonder how or why. "He even saw the Emperor Ashoka himself and his guide Upagupta!"

"Really?" Ji marveled.

"Yes, he..."

They stayed in the cell a long time, while Sarah talked about the life of a monk in the third century B.C. When she finished, Ji spoke about gardening and the uses of moss.



"I'm hungry," Sarah said finally. She looked at her watch. It was long past lunchtime.

"We can sit here," suggested Ji, as they walked over to a bed of blue flowers.

Now with a full stomach, lying on her back, Sarah closed her eyes, letting in a sliver of light. She could see the glint of the silver tin beside her. "Ji?" she asked in a nodding voice. "Do all Hindus speak English?"

"My no. I speak English because I have learned it from the people in the Park. So many years I have been here! I speak Japanese too," Ji said this in a modest tone. "And German and French and Chinese and Urdu."

"Ji?" Sarah asked, a few minutes later. "Why are you a Hindu?"

"Because I was born so, Missy."

"Why weren't you born a Buddhist?"

"Ah. Buddhism was once a great religion in India. Emperor Ashoka was a Buddhist, and many other people. Stupas and laws were made to honor the Buddha. Then one day, I do not know why, Buddhism left this country."

"It left?"

"A long time ago. It went to Japan and China and other places."

"But it's still here in Sarnath."

"Yes," said Ji. "But as a guest. A guest in the Park. Outside the Park all the people are Hindus. The woman selling fruit is a Hindu. All the gardeners are Hindu, and the tea stall owners, and the children in the village."

"Ji?" Sarah felt herself sinking deeper into the grass. "Why do they call it Deer Park?"

"Why? Because of the deer. From Buddha's time there have always been deer."

"Where are they now?"

"They are in the Wood."

"Oh." Sarah sat up so that the sky whirled around her like a blue bird. "You mean behind the fence. Is that what I saw?"

"I don't know," said Ji comfortably. He lay in a tangle with his arms over his head, his legs crossed, and one foot sticking up. "What did you see?"

"I saw an Eye, a big grey Eye. Ji, do you mean they keep the deer locked up like at a zoo?"

"No, no." Ji peered at her from under an arm. "It is not to keep the deer in. It is to keep the people out. Besides," he lowered his voice, "when they want to, the deer go where they please."

"They break through?"

"They...melt through. I have only seen it once. They melt."

Sarah lay back and shut her eyes again. How dark it was. How soft and black until she turned to the sun--hard red like the stone of a peach. She covered her face with her arm. "Ji?" she asked. "Do you think we will ever see Him?"

"I don't know, Missy."

"Ji?" she murmured, adrift on a hill of grass. "Tell me the story of the Buddha."

"The Buddha?" Ji answered, just as soft and dreamy.

"There are many stories about the Buddha. It is said He was conceived when a white elephant touched His mother's side. It is said that at His birth a white light flooded India. It is said that the babe took seven steps each in the Four Directions and in each footstep a lotus burst forth. It is said..."

But Sarah did not hear him. Down she burrowed like a mole into sleep, digging and burrowing and shoveling with her nose at the black air. For a long time she tunneled deeper into the rich smells of humus and earth.

Until suddenly, and right beside her, an alarm clock began to ring. It was an old-fashioned clock with big numbers and a gold bell. Sarah splashed up through a pool of cold water and rubbed her eyes. Ji was gone. She fumbled for the watch in her knapsack. It was nearly four. Her mother was waiting at the gate. And she had to run.