Sandra and I broke up very slowly. It was a function of distance and time, the distance being mostly mine, and the blame, too, if there was any. I am living alone on the Oregon coast now, in a borrowed house, where I am writing a play about Thomas Edison. This dubious project, commissioned by an easily bamboozled theater in Eugene, fills my days. I have money saved up from two years' teaching in Eugene, and I pay no rent; this house belongs to my aunt, who has moved to Jamaica. It's a big cedar-shake house on the mouth of a river, and moss grows thick on the roof, and the gallant fir trees drip and scrape against the windows. Occasionally I see woodpeckers going after the eaves. My aunt has most of her furniture in Jamaica, so many of these rooms are empty, the carpets gone, the white walls naked, and I sweep spiders off the bare floors and down the long echoing halls. It's the sort of ramshackle house Sandra always talked about, though if this were her house it would be packed to the rafters with things.

I work, if you want to call it that, at the dining room table, with a desk lamp. I have a stack of relevant books on one of the chairs beside me, and I have a rubber pad for my typewriter. I am here at the table eight or nine hours a day, typing and typing, so by most measures I have a boring life; and because I don't know anyone down here on this windy stretch of beach, I see no living people unless I go up to Eugene. As a result, I occasionally feel as if Thomas Edison is actually living in the house with me, prowling somewhere in the upper
rooms, a secretive and silent boarder. It is a useful sort of delusion, and sometimes I actually leave a door open for him or leave a light on in the hallway. It’s not an obsessive thing; these actions just help complete the illusion.

I have a few of his biographies open on the table before me now; in these books are photographs of his wives and children. He had three children, two boys and a girl—here they are standing obligingly in the garden, hands behind their backs. I find myself thinking of these as acquaintances; I am familiar with their striped outfits and cascading ringlets; but I feel a little uncomfortable with Edison himself. He is grumpy and ill-mannered, irritated by his deafness, impatient with people, and I have the idea that he puts up with me grudgingly, as he would put up with his doctor, or his mother. But he doesn’t have a choice, does he? He is at my mercy, and the mercy of the Rue St. James Theater Company, which, believe me, is bad news for him.

Edison’s wives were both beautiful women. His first wife, Mary Stilwell, looked quite a bit like my own Sandra: big round cheeks and long dark hair. Mary, when she married him at sixteen, had already in her eyes a look of rich experience, of amusement. You think, She cannot possibly be sixteen. You think, She is far too wise. But in another photograph she wears a girlish black choker and the front of her dress is elaborately ruffled and bowed and spangled with black buttons, a girl’s extravagance.
In act one, Mary Stilwell meets Edison when her sister Elizabeth, on a whim, visits Menlo Park. They’ve heard stories about the inventor and his strange habits; it is a rainy day, and by coincidence the three of them end up caught together under an awning in town. The girls giggle into their wrists, and Edison, affected by Mary’s beauty, offers her a job, which she accepts. She was a woman driven by curiosity, and she was drawn, she said later, by the acrid smells and violent bangs and booms coming from the long wood building in Menlo Park—we can picture the building shuddering like a bad engine in the grassy field. Visitors to the wizard-works were encouraged, and common, being good for business and Edison’s growing reputation, and on some especially busy days his men strung ropes to keep people out of important or dangerous rooms.

In a letter to her mother (act one, scene three), Mary remarks upon his dirty hands and matted hair and the gloomy shadows slung like hammocks beneath his eyes. He appears like a ghost behind her as she works, and he breathes on her neck. When Edison proposes to her in the grease and clutter of his workshop, she is shocked, and looks down at her folded fingers, embarrassed, in a demure gesture common to the times. Though to be honest, he isn’t that romantic:

**Edison:** Tell me, little girl, what do you think of me? Do you like me?
**Mary:** I—
**Edison:** You can be honest.
**Mary:** You frighten me, Mr. Edison.
**Edison:** What?
**Mary:** You *frighten* me.
**Edison:** Well, that doesn’t matter much. Unless
you'd like to marry me.

At least it's not a musical, which is what they wanted at first. Oh, in-can-desc-ence!

Mary Stilwell died unexpectedly of typhoid in the summer of 1884. In eight years she had borne him three children, and Edison had to wake them all in the night and tell them their mother had died. The biographies reveal no great history of feeling for her, but he is described as crying and shaking. He could hardly talk. We can imagine him wandering through the halls of his big house in Menlo Park, lost and disoriented, coming as if by accident to his children's bedroom doors. Do they hear him approach? The shuffle of his feet, his sobs? Some nights in this house I imagine him coming down the stairs in his big boots, stepping heavily, mourning, inexorable in his approach, all the while hoping somehow things will return, magically, to their rational course.

Why did I offer to take on this project? The money's good, and I like Eugene, and it sounded like fun at the time. I try to take it seriously, but most days I feel like a hack. The subject keeps me interested, though, because I have long been fascinated by the nineteenth century, and, more specifically, by the last half of that century, when things were really starting to roll. I am going to say that this was a simpler time, and I know this is a cliche, but I mean this in a very specific
way: that things were actually simpler—machines, I mean, with their gears and belts, their steel and iron and rubber. There is an attractive geometry to the machinery, its circles and angles and hearty, rational curves. More of the world was superficially apparent. Look at a paddlewheel steamship, or at one of the huge iron locomotives of the day. There is in these things a real objective shuddering power, a power derived from such simple things as coal and fire, water and steam.

This is where most people get off. By this I mean that most people’s understanding of machinery, if they give it a second thought at all, stops around 1880, when Edison perfected his light bulb. Electricity introduces a new element. How exactly does a light bulb work? This is what makes Edison intriguing. Like a wizard indeed, he conjured hidden and mysterious forces. Where is the electricity, exactly? We know the bulb becomes white hot, and perhaps we imagine a light bulb as a peculiar, filamentary ember. But the physics of the light bulb are lost to us—lost visually, anyway, as they were lost to Edison. He was up front about the whole thing. Like any wizard worth his salt, he wasn’t quite sure how things worked either.

My Sandra, long gone now, liked the ornate complications of the nineteenth century. You might say this would have made us opposites, and I wouldn’t argue. The complications she liked had to do with dress and manners. From old library books she read lists of no-nos, her small hands pushing back her hair. Should you lean back in your chair at dinner? Ha! Only if
you’re an incorrigible boor. Never smoke in the presence of ladies. Tip your hat with the hand farthest from the person saluted. Talk while moving the facial muscles only slightly. Do not drink from your saucer. Can you manipulate a terrapin fork? She borrowed one from the museum and used it when she ate spaghetti; and she had a fascination with corsets. Imagine buckling on that steel, she’d say. I’d feel like I was going to war! She’d suck in her stomach and put her hands on her hips, pressing inward. What do you think? Could I sew one myself? Do you find this attractive? She’d turn this way and that, pinched like a wasp, her long black hair pitched over her shoulder.

I, too, like thinking about those dark red parlors with their heavy carved furniture, and their huge velvet drapes, and their flocked wallpaper. There is a certain complicated despair that, at a distance, becomes somewhat attractive, as an all-night drive can seem attractive from a distance. The Victorian rooms are impossibly hot and stuffy in my imagination. Your collar feels like a handcuff around your neck. What can you say to people? What wit is too much? Everything stays on the tip of your tongue. Never cross your arms, or put a hand on the wall. Move with grace and deliberation. There are a thousand absolute rules. There is in you a homunculus, something already born and fully formed, but tiny; this is your truest soul.

Sandra’s favorite artist of the period was Maxfield Parrish. I suppose he’s not technically of the period—he was big in the first and second decades of this century—but Sandra associated him with the ornate aesthetic of the time. Sandra was exuberant in her love of Parrish; she bought the calendars and posters and note cards. Above our stove in Eugene was a huge poster called Ecstasy, a painting in which a pretty girl
stands on a rock above a lake. The girl’s face is lit up orange by an unseen setting sun, and her brown hair is flying in a glorious wave behind her. She is staring at the sky, and her delicate mouth is open in a vaguely sexual way. She is wearing a gauzy white blouse and skirt and these, too, are orange in the sunset. The painting is super-realistic: Parrish has picked out the rocks in their every crease and hollow. The folds in the girl’s clothes weave perfectly in and out of shadow.

All Parrish’s paintings are like this. They have a central object—a house, for example, or this ecstatic woman—that gives off light, and then there are peripheral objects that reflect this light. Often the women are naked (or nude, shall we say), and they recline beneath a tree, every leaf of which has been meticulously, descriptively drawn, and which is orange in the sunset; or there is a white marble fountain, and there are nude boys lounging around it, and they are orange in the sunset; or there is an emir’s palace, upon whose grounds the white walls and dark latticed minarets and veiled women are all stained orange in the sunset.

Why do I bring this up? I bring this up because Maxfield Parrish actually painted elaborate magazine advertisements for the Edison Mazda Company in the nineteen-teens. This was no accident. Edison’s homebound lights, golden and gentle, brought Parrish’s dull orange glow indoors—or, you might say, the low angle of Parrish’s sunset light reminded you, vaguely, of a desk lamp. However you like it; the point is, either way, the two of them are in my mind connected. The two men never actually met, as far as I know, but in my play I have blithely made the two of them friends.

Be not alarmed. This is only one of the many ridiculous things I have done. Mark Twain also shows up, and there’s an eclipse, and a train wreck—suffice it
to say it’s a mess, but they love it in Eugene. Good enough. They love the idea of Parrish meeting Edison —The *sets!* they exclaim, clapping their hands—but I cringe when I imagine Sandra seeing the play performed. She would be appalled to see how I have failed to understand the painter Parrish, who remains a sort of flighty and two-dimensional figure to me, someone you can’t take too seriously, someone who, these days, might show up at a Renaissance Fair wearing a long, flowing gown. Grow up, I hear Sandra telling me, He wasn’t anything like that.

I have given Edison, shabby and finger-stained, a vacation to Maxfield Parrish’s studio in the country; Edison is not grateful. He regards with disdain Parrish’s white wicker chairs, and his long sloping lawn, and the tropical birds squatting on the porch rails. Parrish is a small, energetic man with a thin black mustache—in my mind he looks a little like John Waters. It is a sunny day, and when he strides onto the porch Parrish is wearing a white suit and a white hat, and he calls Edison *Edison*. Bring up the yellow lights, stage front, and:

Parrish: My dear man! (shakes hand) How good of you to come.

Edison: (shrugging in wrinkled suit) Mr. Parrish.

And that’s about as far as I get. Edison I can do, I think, prickly as he is. But the conversation seizes up and dies when Parrish comes on, exuberant, flamboyant, ornamental—and I feel I must get Parrish right, as if he has some real part in this idiotic play, and as if he is more than a guilty, perfunctory nod to Sandra, who is far away and still holding her mighty grudges.
The Rue St. James Theater, in Eugene, is close to the university but not affiliated with it. It is a converted bank building, a big gothic high-windowed edifice with limestone crenelations and copper stains streaking from the gutter. The lobby inside has a green-veined marble floor, worn smooth and opaque by a hundred years of feet. After the bank failed it became a movie theater, and on the linoleum floor of the control booth you can still see the rusty ghosts of the bolts that held down the projector. The red velour seats are still there, and the house itself is cavernous, and dark, and the walls are hung with huge red curtains that swim slowly in the air, like large harmless things underwater. The ceiling is high; the movie theater installed a chandelier that tinkles now and then when it spins at the end of its chain.

The theater puts on musicals and children’s plays for money, and by way of its proximity to the affluence of the university, and a rack of grants, it manages to keep itself afloat financially. It is a rather grand place, but a feeling of cheapness pervades. Every possible light is kept off at evening rehearsals, and the coffee pot has a styrofoam cup for your quarters, and the staff bathrooms are cleaned only twice a week. It is damp and cold inside, and when the basement furnace comes on, which is rarely, the big building hums absent­ly to itself, and the curtains become more active along the walls.
I am running out of time. I have three weeks before the director wants a final draft, and frankly it’s not looking good. In an effort to get more done, I have stripped my days down to a few events: at eleven every morning I leave my typewriter and drive two miles to the post office, where I get my mail and buy a newspaper. At five I start a fire—it is dark by then, and usually raining—and at midnight I draw my bath in my aunt’s big blue-tiled bathroom, where I sing “Amazing Grace” or “The Star-Spangled Banner.” I also spend quite a bit of time listening to the radio—the reception out here is very good, and most days I can get Seattle and San Francisco easily, and it seems right and just to listen to the radio while writing a play about Edison, as it seems right and just to have a strict routine and a long, ostensibly productive day. He was a grinding worker who slept in his clothes and went days without bathing. He tended to ignore his wives.

After Mary Stilwell died, and after she was buried beneath a big spreading tree in Menlo Park, Edison spent more time with his children. This is all true—he invited them into his lab, into the barn out back, and in the oil-smelling building they stood enthralled, as their mother had, years before, by the motors that shook and roared and ran their canvas drive belts round and round through slots in the ceiling. He built a small railroad train and laid track around the farmyard; he took his kids on rides back and forth on this train, which ran a hundred yards in either direction. The engine, which he built himself, was electric and
hummed as it sped along. I like to imagine Edison riding it through the grassy yard, clutching it between his knees; his vest is unbuttoned, and his hat is back on his head, and his motherless children are hanging to his waist like opossums, joyous and terrified. But I realize scenes like this don’t play well on the stage, and I have thrown away quite a bit.

I have had a year to finish the play, but for the first nine months I was a little distracted. For a long time last summer I made a special effort to stay in Sandra’s good graces. I was a fool, and I remain a fool, though I am now a different fool than I was before. This special effort of mine involved spending a lot of money on flowers wired to San Francisco, and priority-mailed books, things she accepted gratefully but with a definite lack of enthusiasm. I was often driving long distances in order to find some new present that might excite her, though in my heart I understood that these motions of mine were cosmetic, and that as a couple we were doomed.

On one of these summertime trips—this one down the coast—I came across a little antique shop set by a river, near Gold Beach. It was a beautiful day; the windsurfers were out kiting themselves over the water. The river, among its reeds, smelled green and warm. I felt wonderful, and, despite everything, full of hope for the future. I had a mind to buy something very special for Sandra, who, of course, liked old things.

The antique shop was a charming disaster. On display in clouded glass cases were old paper fans, and ancient flat irons, and green potion bottles, and little Indian reed baskets; and here and there around the shop were lacquered desks and tables, and old overstuffed chairs, and there was a profusion of tiny things climbing the shelves—the rooms were cluttered thick with
things, and the air seemed thick, too, full of dust and the
smell of old books. I wandered in, unnoticed. I found
the proprietress, Flora Holloway, behind the cash
register. She was smoking and tipping her ashes into a
porcelain mug—she was an old woman in blue sweat
clothes and short curly gray hair. “Well hello,” she
said. She had a sly, smart look about her, a cynical
smile, as if she had just gypped an old man out of his
Chippendales.

“I’m looking for a gift,” I said. “Something
romantic.”

“Illustrations,” she said.

From beneath the counter she pulled two old
bound magazines, library volumes with the leather
covers pried off and the signatures unsewn—an atro­
city, difficult to look at. The yellow threads were
tangled and loose. “There are some very rare illustra­
tions in these two particular volumes,” she said.

“Oh really.”

“Are you familiar with Maxfield Parrish?”

“Well, yes,” I said, surprised. “Mr. Orange
Sky.”

“These are different,” she said, pointedly.
“You’re talking about his posters. Here,” she said.
“Look at these.” She turned the magazine around on
the counter. Two drawings, on facing pages, showed a
desert scene; the colors were easy and diffuse. There
were some far-off sandy mountains, and a weathered
wood-and-wire fence ran into the distance, and though
the pictures were only page-high I felt in them a sense
of light and distance. Far away a stand of cottonwoods
peeked out of a ravine.

“Well! They’re very nice.”

“Aren’t they? He took a trip out west and
painted.”
“They’re not so meticulous as his others.”
“No, they’re not.” She settled a pair of black glasses on her nose. “I’ve got some more.” She opened the other volume and found four more paintings. *Verdant Pastures* was the caption of one that showed a sea-green hillside. In another, *The Flock*, a shepherd stood in the middle distance, his sheep milling around him like children. “Aren’t they beautiful?”
“They are,” I said. “My girlfriend would love them.”
“Of course she would.”
“She loves Maxfield Parrish. They’re for sale?”
“Well, not yet. I’m going to have them framed first. I think I’ll frame these two together, one on top of the other, and then I’ll do these four all sort of side by side, like a panorama, see?” She held them up to demonstrate. She seemed girlish in her pleasure. “What do you think?”
“Looks good.”
“I might put them aside for you.”
“That would be wonderful,” I said. And out of politeness I found an intact library copy of The Century magazine, leather-bound, which I bought.
“Very nice choice,” she said.
I gave her my phone number, which she scrutinized.
“You’re not from here?”
“Well, not right here.”
She seemed satisfied, and I drove off with the Century magazine. I felt happy and beneficent; I had lucked into the Parrishes, and framed to boot—certain to win Sandra over, finally. The Century magazine sat on the seat next to me, brown and heavy, and gave its thick, nostalgic odor to the car.
Back at the house, I put the Century on the
dining room table. I had the windows open, and a grassy summer wind blew through the house. The curtains waved and billowed. The Century looked perfect in my aunt's warm, expansive room; it distracted me with its loveliness. It shone in the summer light. Leather crumbs dusted the table. So instead of working, I opened the Century and read about The Dangers of Small Talk, and Four Confirmed Lincoln Conspiracies (about the assassination), and I read a story about a nun and a foundling, "Sister Catherine's Own." Sister Catherine was young and pretty and walked daily in the cloister's sunny gardens. The foundling was four or five years old, a little boy with curly blond hair. The two of them were bound by isolation and an innocent beauty, though the boy was often in trouble for stealing potatoes or picking the wrong flowers. Sister Catherine eventually gave the foundling up to a family in a nearby village, though not without some sorrow. On that summer day I thought of Sandra in sunlight, a hopeless romantic, full of hope and actually believing we would eventually be happy again.

In Eugene, the part of Mary Stilwell is being played by a drama teacher from the college. This is intimidating, and I have tried to provide her with some good scenes. She is an attractive woman, perhaps in her middle thirties, and she even looks a little like Mary, and therefore a little like Sandra. We see in each other a sort of kindred cynicism, and she's good for a
snappy line or a dismissive roll of the eyes.

She and I went out for coffee after rehearsal last week, and the bright, fluorescent cafe I saw the shadows under her eyes and the pink tinge around the rims of her nostrils, like a rabbit. She is divorced but she has no children and does not want them, and in fact she curled her lip when I mentioned them, and stubbed out her cigarette, and gave me a look meant to drop me dead where I sat. “Kids give me the willies,” she said. “Course I know you’re nuts over them. Teacher.” She spat the last word at me.

“Huh,” I said, rolling my eyes.

“You were probably the kids’ favorite. You probably made them laugh.”

“Oh, you bet,” I said.

Often sitting with her I have considered asking her back to my place, an hour away, or even asking her to invite me back to her place. She wears black turtle-necks and tight black jeans and has a tiny red purse from which she takes lipstick, cigarettes, and gum. But I don’t want her to think badly of me, and I have the feeling that if I went home with her I’d say her name rapturously, or look at her secretly with love, and, somehow, I’d end up showing her how uncynical and hopeful I really am, and she would loathe me for it. Some nights I want to tell her about my Century, but I’m afraid I’d speak of it with too much love, and she’d become suspicious. “What the hell is this place? What books are these?” she’d say, stepping critically through my aunt’s house, her arms folded. “Ever heard of furniture?”

Her name is Janine Richardson. We end up walking the nighttime streets of Eugene, me back to my car, she back to hers.
When Sandra and I lived together in Eugene, I taught fourth grade. Sandra worked for the city, doing restoration work in the pioneer museum near the university. We had an apartment downtown, above a movie theater. I would get home from school in the middle of the afternoon, and I'd grade some homework or draw up a few worksheets, and in the spring we could open the sliding door onto the balcony so bustling street noises would float up into the apartment. Starting around six we could smell the popcorn from the theater. Sandra and I had a good, stable life, and a few good friends. We were busy, and we were happy.

Sandra loved her work. She roamed the basement of her museum—an old remodeled train station—where the old farm machines and gingham dresses stood labeled in their wooden crates. Old store signs leaned against the walls. In one room they were preparing an exhibit on Japanese internment, and there were boxes full of censored postcards and sad photographs of desert camps. At night, once in a while, Sandra led me by the hand through the maze of underground rooms. We would choose one, dark and empty—we kept blankets and pillows stashed in the boiler room—and when we laid ourselves down, all sorts of things happened. She became loose and flexible and warm in my hands. She smiled the whole time, a huge beatific smile, as if she were being blessed. Her skin grew smooth and beautiful. Her hands became strong and confident. She sighed in brilliant colors. She talked and made a complicated progression of sounds, each breathier than the last, and more exhilarated, as her
body twisted and pushed against me, and as I counted multiples of elevens, and of eleven elevens, over and over. We were perfectly matched; we pulled each other back and forth, a simple, powerful machine. Afterward she would gently try on the pioneers’ clothes. She might poke her hair under their carriage bonnets or slip her feet into their tall, narrow shoes, and when I saw her dressed like this I believed I had known her in former lives, in simpler times.

And I was happy with my work, too. At school I was Mr. Organization. We had charts for homework, and good behavior, and books my kids had read, and tests they’d taken, on and on. I had one whole wall of charts; my classroom looked like a bookie’s office. The kids liked me, more or less, because I kept things running so smoothly. You might say my trains ran on time. But I was fairly unaffectionate.

On the other hand, there were times—at recess, for example, when I could see the kids all at a distance—when I did feel some affection for them. There they were, clambering over the monkey bars, or chasing one another around in the dirt and wood chips, and I thought, well, one day I’ll have one of those, one of them will be mine; and an anticipatory love surged in me, warmly. I imagined my child’s little crib, and the squeak of his plastic pants, and how Sandra would look distended in pregnancy: she would be beautiful, and she would waddle through our rooms smiling, her hands on her stomach. At the end of the day, I imagined, she would take a slow splashing bath, then stand at the steamy mirror and stare at herself. How could she have grown this big? She would comb her long hair and feel the baby’s feet kicking beneath her surface, like a cat under a blanket. This was a pleasant, if strange, fantasy, which I indulged only in the greatest secrecy. I
think it would have alarmed her to know about it.

Then one day in Eugene, in the springtime, Sandra came home, and she took a short shower, and then we went out to dinner, and she told me she might be pregnant. For real? I asked. It was strange, disorienting, to have it come true like this, so suddenly. It had been six weeks, she said. She stared into her food.

The next day we bought a kit in a box. The white tab turned a sudden, decisive blue, a blue like the sky, like a glowing sea, an instant, brilliant color that made us gasp.

Parrish: I wonder about the sources of inspiration. I know mine are almost entirely commercial.

Edison: Well, in the best of all possible—

Parrish: I suppose you don’t like me for that, you find it sort of life-killing to be so practical and self-considering and all that.

Edison: Well, no. In fact, I’m probably more practical than—

Parrish: You quite frighten me, actually, you really do, I don’t know why.

Looking back on this Parrish reads like a woman, or perhaps a very effeminate man, and this is what he’s turning out to be, actually; the man who’s gearing up to play him has an eyebrow ring and long dramatic sideburns and smokes quite a bit. His name is
Kevin Love. Edison is being played by a high school chemistry teacher, Howard Turner, who has a bad slouch and a huge red nose, and in the auditorium the two of them stay as far away from each other as possible, except on stage, and even there they are uncomfortable together, which is fine, I suppose. Everyone’s afraid of Edison; and Edison doesn’t seem to like anyone.

Sometime last summer I was in a telephone conversation with Sandra. I don’t remember when, exactly; it doesn’t matter. Our conversations last summer typically spiraled down toward the question we hadn’t yet asked: Why were we still together? You know how these things go. We felt a certain obligation to our history, as all couples do, and we certainly didn’t hate one another. But we were apart, and we had already become a little foreign to one another. I couldn’t quite imagine her face. She was quickly developing a life of her own in San Francisco.

This summer, on the phone—whenever it was—she said, “I have a new boss, and guess what. He’s going to transfer me to the conservation wing next week. There’s a woman over there who’s very cool.”

“Great,” I said.

“She has the most amazing clothes. I can’t wait till I’m rich.”

“I miss you,” I said.

“Well,” she said, “you know what to do about that.”
“Can I come see you soon?” I asked.
“No,” she said.
“Why not?”
“I don’t think you like me very much.”
This is how these conversations went. “Why do you say that?”
“I think you just like to have me off to the side, so you don’t have to worry about finding anyone.”
“That’s not true,” I said.
“Yes, I think it is. Also, you were mean. You did all those mean things to me.”
“What mean things?” (mystified)
“All those things.”
“What things?”
She said nothing. I heard her shuffle the phone from one ear to the other.
“Hey, guess what,” I said. “I’m going to buy you the greatest present in the world.”
“A new car?”
“No.”
“Well, forget it then. That’s all I need.” (dismissive)
“You’ll love this, though.”
“And you know what? I was reading my journals from last year,” she said.
“Oh.”
“You never wanted to sleep with me,” Sandra said.
“That’s not true,” I said. “You mean afterward?”
“You were all cold and distant.”
“Well, it frightened me,” I said. We hadn’t talked about it in months. “Not any more, though. I’m over that. I’m not frightened any more. I won’t be distant.”
“You just say that because you’re not here.”
“I could move down there,” I said.
“No.”
“I could get a job there. I like San Francisco.”
“Just wait a little while,” she said. “I’m still not sure how I feel about you.”
“Well,” I said. “Don’t go out with anyone else. At least not until I get you your present.”
“I won’t,” she said, but she sounded weary and bored.

After we hung up I ran out to the car and drove all the way down to Flora Holloway’s shop again, understanding that my need had suddenly become immediate. Flora Holloway was there, behind the counter, smoking a cigarette and stacking and smoothing dollar bills. “Hello,” she said. She didn’t recognize me.

“Ms. Holloway,” I said.
“Do I know you?”
“I bought the Century,” I said.
“Oh!” She tilted her head back and looked down her nose at me. “Right. I remember you.” She reached for her glasses.

“I was wondering about those Parrish pictures you had.”
“Oh. Well.” She looked down at her money again, frowning. She rolled a few bills against the edge of the counter. “Those are at the framer’s.”
“They are.”
“In Eugene. I’ll be going up there this week.”
“Well, I’m still interested in them.”
“You are.” She began counting her money, and I counted along. She waited until she’d finished counting, then said, “Well, come back on Thursday. They’ll be ready then.”
“All right.”
“You enjoying that book?”
“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?”
“It is.”
“I knew you’d like it.”
“Would you call me when you get those pictures in?” I gave her my number again.
She nodded. “Be happy to,” she said. “Thursday.”

When Sandra visited the school that week—the week we found out she was pregnant—for Career Day, the kids were fascinated with her. Why? Her hair? Her sneaky expression, as if she might say something shocking any moment? She certainly wasn’t showing. She was quiet, and she held herself in reserve when she talked about becoming curator; but they gathered eagerly around her in the halls, touching her hands and twisting her silver rings. She was dressed in an antique calico dress, and wore a bonnet, and had flowers twisted into her hair. Is Mr. Pearson your boyfriend? they asked, and she put her sharp chin in the air and said, Children shouldn’t ask such personal questions. And then after a moment she said, Besides I have a thousand boyfriends, at which they laughed and pointed at me. Later, a few very serious boys spoke to me, privately, and said they admired her. They thought I’d made a good choice.

That afternoon, in normal clothes, she was examined by a doctor with a huge gray mustache. She disappeared into the back room. I imagined her walk-
ing uneasily through the white hallways. Did she feel as if she were being blamed? I knew she was terribly embarrassed. I imagined the doctor turning his back as she lifted herself carefully onto the table. When she reappeared she was chaste and distant. What a complica-

tion, she said, finally, in the car, considering things. She was gazing through the windshield, her hands settled in her lap.

What Sandra hated about me, if she hated anything, was this: everything had to be worked out. That is, I had to work everything out. I belabored things. We had to go over and over her decision, though I knew she didn’t want to talk about it, and we stayed up all night that night, a long terrible night during which we both cried quite a bit, and rested in one another’s arms, and gazed out the window. At four in the morning we walked through the empty streets of Eugene, smelling the bakeries and drycleaning shops. And if she had decided to keep the child—if we had taken on this new, unimagined life together—we would have gone over it and over it, at my insistence, in a selfish act designed to remove all surprises.

Last week I stood in the back of the auditorium, in the dark, with the director, a bearded John Lennon type who makes his own ice cream and brings it to rehearsal. His name is Dan Hamann. He wanted a long view.

I said, “I’d want to get as far away from this as I could, too.”

He said, “You’re not kidding.”
In the white depths of Parrish's house Edison was beckoning one of the maids over. The maid was a haggard, chain-smoking college student; she wore jeans and a baggy blue sweater and had huge, perfect breasts. Had Mr. Turner taught her, a few years back? He looked like the sort of guy who'd remember that chest. In blue light he approached her, hunched over, familiar, confident in his status as a great man.

Edison: Where does the man do his painting?  
Maid: (intimidated, but she'll talk about this for years, and in a whisper) Oh, I can't tell you that.

Edison: Oh, now, my dear, he's a friend of mine. And if he fires you, well, I'll hire you on.

Maid: I like it here. (adjusts her baggy blue sweater)

Edison: You'll like it at my place, too.
Maid: (relenting, but knowing she'll get into trouble) Please don't say anything...

Edison: Oh, he seems like a very forgiving man.

Now he is in the man's studio, in the heart of the house, and there's a biting smell of oil and alcohol. Edison sniffs once and wipes his nose. There are imaginary small glass jars near the doorway, full of turpentine, and there are imaginary rags heaped in a pile. Parrish's paintings are propped against the walls, vivid and brilliant. In these paintings Edison sees a thousand things: he sees a forest of autumn trees, and a school of dolphins jumping above the bright green water and piercing the water like needles, and a shining
white city on an Italian hill with the Mediterranean glowing impossibly blue at the base of the frame. He sees a thousand trees and a hundred tiny white houses on islands.

Against the far wall he sees dozens of beautiful women lost in dappled and shining woods. Edison walks closer. He crouches down and peers closely at the paintings. The women have left their clothes hanging on the branches; vague gray shapes swing like ghosts in the trees. But their bodies are vague and gray, too; their breasts have no nipples, and their loins are shadowed and featureless. Their featureless bodies line the wall. Edison stands and counts the paintings, needing to somehow quantify this mass of work; but he keeps losing count, and goes back three or four times before giving up.

The bearded Hamann says, "You need more words."

"It looked good at the time," I say.

"He's a drunk."

"Who, Turner?"

"He's drunk now."

Mr. Turner is counting nothing, but doing a very convincing job of it; and now that Dan mentions it, Turner does seem to be swaying slightly. The maid is standing at the side of the stage, not quite sure where she's supposed to be, and she peers back angrily toward us; her hair is caught in the yellow lights, and for a moment she is beautiful.

Sandra went to a clinic on a Saturday morning,
and that night we saw a movie in the theater below our apartment. We sat in the dark, and from time to time she cried, but quietly, just sniffing and clearing her throat. What was she thinking? By the end of the movie she had stopped, but her laugh was a little gummy, and she still sniffl ed every so often.

We walked downtown and let ourselves into the museum. The marble halls were dark and cold. She kept a few steps away from me, her hands clasped behind her back. Imagine us in the dark rooms. I felt distant, as if I were only observing the scene. Picture the butter churns and horse plows, and the huge two-handed saws; and in the middle of one room, picture a big lacquered buggy with a leather top. Sandra touched the leather with her palm, though the signs said Please Don’t Touch; it was surprisingly supple and soft. She would not look at me. In the museum that night, in the dark, echoing rooms, I felt a deep and seeping fear, a terror, really, that we had created something, and destroyed it, and had never quite seen it fully, had never quite let ourselves imagine the life we might have had.

Flora Holloway never called back. Did she forget? I looked for her name in the phone book but found nothing, then decided to drive down again. Do I blame her? The pictures wouldn’t have made a bit of difference.

She was up on a ladder, reaching to a high shelf to stow away an ashtray. I saw a white flash of skin, the small of her back. “Have you got the pictures in?” I
asked.

She looked down at me. “I’ve got them in,” she said, “but I don’t think I’m going to sell them.”

“You’re not?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” she said, brightly. “I like the way they turned out. I think I’m going to hang them in my bathroom.” She came down off the ladder. I followed her into a back room. On a worktable lay two falt packages wrapped in brown paper. She picked one up and broke the tape, then unfolded the paper. “They’re just perfect,” she said, holding up the desert scenes. “The guy did a wonderful job.”

“Well. He sure did,” I said. They were matted on green paper and framed behind glass. They were beautiful. There were worlds of light behind the glass. I tapped them. The sheep bleated harmlessly, a distant sound, pastoral, happy. Parrish was, for all his kitsch, a genius at this; his worlds were perfect and original, complete in themselves. You could spend hours walking in those fields, leaning against those trees. “You must be happy,” I said.

“They turned out nice,” she said. She unwrapped the second package and held it up. “Maybe in my bedroom. I’ve got green wallpaper, and that’ll go nicely.”

In the final scene, I have ended up with Parrish standing far out on the sloping lawn, his back to Edison. What’s Parrish thinking of? He’s peering out over the
audience. I imagine he’s looking at his green trees and the far green hillside. Suddenly Parrish sees a balloon rising—we’ll project a slide, maybe, an ornate painted Montgolfier balloon with a wicker basket and three men with telescopes peering over the sides. It is a wonderful, buoyant sight, and to our modern eyes it defies logic: a colorful bulb hanging silently in the air, no motor, no fuss. Sandbags are dangling from the rails. Now we’ll down the lights; and in the dark theater we’ll play a tape of ropes being tugged, and a gas flame whooshing hot air into the bag, and voices: Ho! Below there! And bring the lights back up, and see how we’ve put Parrish in the balloon. We understand, in the empty auditorium, that this is the perfect way for him to travel, aimless but beautiful and actually quite complicated, full of a number of variables. The view from here is quiet and regal, and we imagine him drifting over the landscape like this. Below him he sees his house, white and glowing; and then off he floats, alive in one of his paintings, clutching his hat.

And Edison? Do I still have responsibility to him, to his family? Of course I do; I carry him with me like an extra head. He has lost a wife; and let’s pretend he’s just now recovering enough to venture out. That’s why he’s here, to see the world again. He wanders down the lawn, waving to his painter friend. In the machinery of his mind he sees the balloon sailing off, and, absently, he calculates its weight and lift, and the curve of its dimpled surface, and this, to him, is a matter of beauty, too.