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Hostage, and other stories

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The University of Montana

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HOSTAGE
And Other Stories

by

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B.S. University of Wisconsin—River Falls, 1976

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They were waiting outside her door. She could feel them like an October wind whipping a withered leaf. They’d been there three days now, rearranging the furniture in the living room to make space for their cameras and microphones and crisscrossing snakes of electrical cords that piled up in the entry so that the front door wouldn’t close. Lily felt the icy draft across her ankles when they insisted she sit in Stanley’s old chair, pinning her to it with their wires and their questions.

It had been three days since the first call came. Three days since she saw the television newsman tell the story about her grown son’s nearly two year long abduction, telling it over and over again. They said the picture frozen on the screen was Marty, but she couldn’t find her son in the sullen, gaunt face hidden by a graying beard. More television people came then, and radio reporters, newspaper writers and photographers from cities on the other
side of the country. They filled her farm yard with big, shiny white trucks with satellite dishes on top. Their rented mini-vans ringed the house. They edged her beds of peonies and lilacs with stacks of heavy metal equipment cases, their twist locks like keys in the backs of wind-up dolls.

The reporters were trim men in soft wool suits and nice haircuts, with sincere voices they employed like musical instruments as they rehearsed their lines into handheld microphones. They worked with older, heftier men in golf shirts and slacks who answered grudgingly to the younger. These men worked with cigarettes hanging from the corners of their mouths, dropping ashes onto her floor as they taped their cords to her nice wall-to-wall carpeting. And there were women, many women, young, energetic with clipboards and notebooks and headphones and portable computers and wide smiles that turned on and off like lights depending on where their words were going. Lily wondered if any of them had children.

They dozed in their cars, on the porch swing, beneath the laundry counter in the breezeway. They let her sleep, alone, in her own bed.

For three days now they'd been hanging around, living on coffee and doughnuts that someone had driven out from town. Paper boxes and styrofoam cups covered the kitchen counter and filled the sink. She found more on the tops of
the washer and dryer in the breezeway and on the porch railing. She picked up what she could and put them in grocery sacks in the pantry. She’d burn them later with the rest of her trash in a burning barrel behind the barn.

The second morning, she walked into her bathroom to find a young man standing in the tub, his head poked out the window he’d somehow managed to open -- Stanley had painted it shut years ago -- quarreling with someone on the phone. "I do news, Ian. **Real news.** Remember news, Ian? If you want that homey shit, call in Charles Kuralt. . . ." He didn’t notice Lily and he was oblivious to her need for her bathroom. She retreated to her bedroom for another hour.

Mr. Wadzinski stopped by the first morning to talk and see if there was anything he could get Lily. He published the local paper and ran an artificial insemination service. He was on his way up the road to take care of Malen Plehasack’s herd. He asked how she was doing and set a small sack on the counter. "Marge sent some fresh bread and a couple of days meals in aluminum pie plates. She said you can just pop them in the oven to heat ‘em up." Before Lily could put the food away, someone rushed up and begged her to get into position. "We have a live feed in **five minutes!**"

Seated in Stanley’s chair, she could see Mr. Wadzinski across the room, shrinking into a nook beside the kitchen door. Then the camera lights came on, and she couldn’t see
anything in front of her. But she could hear the questions coming to her through a plug they’d inserted in her ear.

Mr. Wadzinski left sometime then, but not the others. Everyone waited.

Then the phone call came. They rushed her to the chair again. Outside, vehicle doors banged open and then shut. Their footsteps pounded on the porch. Her frontroom instantly filled with people. Lily heard the whir of electronic devices. Blinded suddenly by spotlights, she felt someone bend in front of her, clip a microphone to her dress.

"Okay, go ahead," came a voice from the other side of the blinding light. Someone pressed the phone receiver to her ear. They’d specially installed another phone in the living room next to the chair. She already had a wall phone in the kitchen and an extension in her bedroom that a neighbor had put in after Stanley died, but the television people didn’t like the locations, said they needed more room for all the cameras. Lily worried about who was paying for the extra phone.

"Are you alone?" said the voice on the line. Lily shook her head and though she didn’t speak, the man on the other end knew her answer. "This is better said in private. Go to the phone in your room. That one’s not live. I’ll call back in five minutes." There was a hum in her ear.
They had heard. It was one of the things they could do. A tall, black man took the microphones and earplugs off her. He leaned over her like a shadow. Lily had never before seen a Negro in person. He was closer to her age than the others, with eyes red from lack of sleep. The palms of his hands were almost white. He patted her on the shoulder to let her know it was okay to get up.

The bedroom door closed behind her like a coffin lid. The Virgin Mary on her dresser looked so sad, arms suspended away from her sides, hands open, as though waiting for someone to embrace her. But her bowed head, the way her blue robe hung from her shoulders like limbs of a weeping willow, conveyed the ache. Lily crossed herself and whispered a Hail Mary.

Her eyes fell on the image of herself in the dresser mirror. Her middle was not so wide as other women her age. She could still wear a belted shirtwaist instead of a loose housedress, but she was not so tall as she once was either. Her eyes traveled down to where her hands twined across her belly. Freckled hands, papery flesh over bones that showed through like the feet of a hen. Those hands had once put up six wagons of hay, then whipped egg whites for chiffon pie for the men's supper. The baby, Marty, sometimes pulled away when she caressed his cheek with a calloused palm. Now, those hands were soft, so smooth they hardly left a print.
"... Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen."

What did they want? She had nothing. She knew nothing they wanted -- needed -- to know. But she didn’t know how to send them away. Their numbers alone, and their self-confident belief that they had a right to be here -- that they must be here -- was something she didn’t have the power to go against. So, she would let them poke and watch, look through her bathroom cabinets and photo albums, tramp through the barn that now housed only a couple of wild cats and their kittens. Eventually, something would happen or they would lose interest. They would leave and she would be here, alone, like before.

Lily turned her eyes to the crucifix over her bed. Its presence hovered over her. Marty had been special--the only child to survive after so many miscarriages. She and he seemed one, as if the miracle that had somehow allowed him to survive, physically bound them together in a special way. He grew up perched on her hip and even when he was too big to ride there anymore, he always stayed close enough so that a part of his flesh was in contact with hers. He listened to her. He was her creation.

From the start, he had a hunger for knowing. She and Stanley often grew weary of answering his questions. They felt reproached and then, finally, ashamed when Marty's questions outgrew them.
He was what they were not, dissatisfied with the world, the little world of their farm and Gaylord, North Dakota. There was more out there. Was it wrong for him to want it? he pleaded with her once, angry over his father’s disdain for his desire to go to university.

No. Lily shook her head fiercely at the thought. A wisp of curl fell from its pin. She tucked it back and noticed her forehead was damp with perspiration. Stanley kept silent when the boy stayed after school even when they needed him at home for the milking or the planting. Debate club, Marty told them, and Latin. He said his Latin teacher held study sessions after school two nights a week. Stanley said nothing, just stomped out to the shed to work on a piece of machinery. Marty graduated valedictorian, class of ’55. He was offered a full scholarship to Notre Dame. He planned to become a priest.

That much Lily could tell the news people, and about being first in his class and his love for the writings of religious philosophers. But they already knew these details, flipping through the narrow, spiral notebooks they carried. They wanted something else. She told it again anyway -- about the speech Marty gave and the audience with the Bishop after his graduation with honors. More, their eyes said. "What was he like as a person?"

How could she answer?
So she told them about the fireflies. How on muggy July nights, Marty would go out and collect dozens in a wide-mouth canning jar with a screw-on lid. He took them to bed with him, shading the jar with the sheet, or, when it was too humid, covering it with his pillow. What do you want with that? she’d asked him. I like to watch them light up when I shake them, he’d said. They keep on shining, beating against the glass looking for a way out, even when they’re trapped. He always let them out before they ran out of air.

Five hundred and twenty-six days. That’s what they’d told her. She hadn’t kept track, not like that. The dogwood had come in bloom twice since it happened. And the tomatoes. She had been setting out the tomatoes when the phone call came that Marty had been kidnapped over there. That was the first time the news people came. What do you feel? What do you feel? they’d asked in a thousand ways. She didn’t tell them, although she was afraid they would see it in her eyes. Maybe that’s why they’d come back. Marty wasn’t hers anymore. He had chosen otherwise.

"...there is only one God who created all things. God is a just Judge, who rewards the good and punishes the wicked..."
Lily walked to her bed, let her fingers trace the tear in the chenille she'd repaired those long years ago. The paramedics had done it with their equipment when Stanley had had the stroke just before dawn, Palm Sunday. The ambulance was there in fifteen minutes, but by then Stanley was the color of milk. They attached their machines to him as coolly as Stanley handled the milking machines, but something went wrong. The men were angry. They hoisted her husband roughly onto a gurney. As they started to roll it back toward the door, the end of the bedspread caught in the wheel, ramming the gurney against her dresser. It knocked over the vials of prescription medicine and a single bottle of cologne. The statue of the Virgin Mary broke in two when it hit the plate glass protecting the dresser top. A brown seam still showed where Lily had glued it back together. She was certain that was the moment Stanley had died.

Marty had come to the funeral. He hadn't been home much in the years after university, after he'd told them he'd changed his mind about being a priest. He'd become a professor instead -- a professor of religion. He'd joined a peace march on Washington and some activist groups with long, righteous names. Lily asked him to stay away from such troubles. He said he wouldn't, he couldn't. He was planning his third trip to the Holy Land.
During the wake, Marty took her aside. "I’m not going to the church," he said. "I’m not going to Mass. I can’t do it. I’d feel like a hypocrite."

She must have collapsed then, because the next she knew, she was sitting in a chair and Marty was kneeling in front of her, a glass of water in his hands. "I’m going back, Mamma. To Lebanon this time. I’ve accepted a position at the university."

"What will I tell him?" she kept murmuring. "What will I tell him?"

"Tell whom?" Marty finally asked impatiently. "The old man’s dead."

Lily cupped her hands over her face. Marty didn’t understand. She didn’t mean Stanley.

In the end, Marty came with her to the church, and sat next to her in the front pew. The walnut casket with its inlaid silver cross on the lid, cradling her husband of thirty-one years, stood lodged in the opening between mother and son and altar like a penance.

Marty didn’t answer the Kyrie or kneel for the Profession of Faith. When she stood to take communion, he stayed seated. She took the wafer in her mouth, holding it on her tongue. She knelt beside Stanley’s casket, pressed her face into her hands on the cool, polished wood and recited the Prayer of Thanksgiving.
And may the souls of the Faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace.

Gone. Both of them. Where was the peace in that?

"A bunch of animals, shooting and sniping at each other over some raghead religion." Billy Rykoff had the place a half-mile down the road. He'd been a Marine in Vietnam. His wife Bonnie and their three little ones had come to help out when Marty was kidnapped. "Somebody should go over there and shut their blasted mouths up," Rykoff had told the television crews. "Bunch of women." A couple of news programs had carried Billy's comments. They received outraged calls from Arabs, women and civil liberties groups and even Lily started to get crazy, hate-filled letters, saying that if her son had come from people like that he deserved to be kidnapped. The other newspeople avoided Billy after that, making wide detours around him during the day and a half it took Rykoff to repair the wellhead one of the television trucks had backed over and damaged.

A year after Stanley's death, Marty wrote to Lily from Beirut. He announced he was getting married. Fahdja was her name, he wrote. She was beautiful and intelligent and open minded. She was a doctor. They were very happy. In small writing near the bottom of the letter, he added that he had taken her religion. He would have a new name, but
Lily could still call him Marty. Nine months later, there was a daughter. Then a son. He called once a year, at the New Year's, never Christmas. Once Lily had spoken to her daughter-in-law, but it had not gone well. The connection was noisy and with her poor hearing Lily couldn't understand the younger woman's accent. Beside, what had they to say to each other? Lily gave up hope of knowing her grandchildren. They were strangers, foreigners. Two years ago, Marty sent pictures of the four of them. His beard was so full and dark Lily hardly recognized him. His wife was tall and held her head high. There was a challenging, almost defiant look on her face. The children were cherubs. Dark, sloe-eyed cherubs.

Marty sent Lily a birthday present each June. The first had come soon after his departure to the Middle East. She couldn't bear to be reminded of where he was, how far he'd gone from her, so she put the package in the basement, in the fruit cellar next to the summer before's stewed tomatoes, made the way Marty liked with onion and a bit of dill. There were dozens of jars, more than she could ever eat, but how could she send Marty the extra? Over there.

The next year, when another birthday present arrived, she put it beside the first. And the next and the next. Now there were years of crushed boxes, unopened, unwanted, frightening to her because of what they meant, their strange stamps and indecipherable writing fading with time.
She might have told the reporters about them, but she dare not. They would have gone down to the cellar and brought them up. They would have asked why? What kind of mother was she? They might even make her open one of them, right there in front of the world, spilling our her entrails like a butchered chicken.

She almost told one of them. Ellen, the woman who'd slept on Lily's davenport. A girl really, with soft curls and light green eyes. She'd come ahead of the rest, had said "please" and "thank you" over the coffee, had admired the crocheted lace on the back of the stuffed chairs. Her grandmother crocheted, too, she'd said.

Lily had taken Ellen into Marty's room and showed her his scrapbooks, his medals from debate club and the award from the Knights of Columbus. Ellen smiled and sat down in the middle of Marty's single bed. She told Lily not to let the others frighten her, not to answer the private questions unless she wanted to, no matter how hard they pushed. "Be careful," she said. "If you're not used to this, we can be a treacherous lot. We steal souls."

"Souls?" Lily asked.

"Well, not really," Ellen laughed, and patted Lily's hand. "Not to worry. I only meant that some of us don't know how to deal with real people and their hurts. We behave as though it's all a commodity. We trade on emotion. The bigger the emotion, the better the paycheck."
Lily hardly heard. She stood and walked to the wall which she had covered with framed photos of Marty as a young man. "I've thought about souls," she said. "I believe we have them. Can they be lost? Yes, I think so. But, now this you say, stolen. Can souls be stolen? I hadn't thought about that." She straightened a small stack of newspapers containing stories about Marty's abduction and attempts to find him. Friends, neighbors, even complete strangers had sent them to her, as if they imagined she might want to keep a scrapbook of such things.

"I'm not much for this religion stuff, if you don't mind me saying so," Ellen said, hopping up from the bed. "My parents weren't into it. I never got around to it."

"Whose responsible?" Lily murmured. "Whose to account for the lost soul? For a stolen soul? How much can a moth--"

A beeping sound from Ellen's shoulder bag stopped her. Ellen took out a portable phone and after a few words, trotted out into the front room. Lily heard the porch door bump shut.

The phone rang. Lily waited for the second ring. "Mrs. Berenson?" "Yes." "Stewart Medcaff with the State Department..." She took the words in like air on a frigid January night. Her eyes roamed upward, to the neatly contained red stain on the Savior's palms, on his feet, his side. She drew a neat little circle around her own pain.
In a moment, the questioning would begin again. The words coming all at once as though from a single voice so that she couldn’t understand any of it. Their questions. The same question.

Finally, she would answer with the words they wanted to hear, words they understood. Inside herself, she searched for safety, redemption, forgiveness. *Mother of Mercy, blessed is the fruit of thy womb.*

She opened the door and stepped into a gaping hole of ravenous cameras and microphones. "Mrs. Berenson, CNN just went with the bulletin. How do you feel about your son’s release?"

"Wait! Get a microphone on her. Get her in the chair. The lights are set up over there."

"Neal, sound? You got sound?" "Got it!" "We’ve got audio!" "Rolling. On the air in three, two. . ."

"This is Mark Bradin, live from the Berenson family home outside Gaylord, North Dakota. Mrs. Berenson, your son’s been released. How do you f--"

"--ann Harris. . .What are you feeling at this moment?"

". . .Tell us how you feel. . ."

Tell us, us, us. . . "Mrs. Berenson?"
DOCTOR’S CHOICE

I still wonder what happened to Ron Cole’s boots. The thought comes to me mostly on winter days, after an especially taxing day of office exams or hospital rounds, when I’m kicking the snow off my boots before entering the house. The sharp, hollow sound takes me back to that particularly long and cold winter.

For the three months I made house calls on Ron Cole, the boots stood just inside the screen door on the back porch—the screens Ron hadn’t had time to replace before the cancer beat him down.

One pair were heavy leather workboots, high-topped lace-ups with steel shanks he used to climb power poles. Ron had been a lineman for Uniontown Power and Light for thirty years, his wife Virginia told me. He could have retired the year before, she said, but he kept saying he wasn’t ready to be put out to pasture yet. "Then this..." is how Virginia always referred to his illness.

The second pair of boots were army-green hipwaders. They tilted precariously toward each other, propping
themselves up, the balance point so tenuous that I always expected the vibrations of my footsteps on the old wooden porch to topple them. But they continued to stand, stolidly, imperviously defying the currents that swirled through the house that winter. Until my last visit. On that trip, both pairs were gone. Moved? Discarded? Given away? Hidden? I hadn’t the nerve to ask.

Now, I wonder.

Virginia had me come to the back door of the house because the front door was blocked with boxes and furniture. From the outside, the house was a plain, non-descript affair in a working class neighborhood. Not that the place was rundown, but the flat, boxy structure was so unadorned with architectural features it was painful in its dreariness: inelegant, perfectly symmetrical front windows framed by dull strips of aluminum trim, no trim or shutters or flower boxes or gracefully curved flower beds. Just a pair of indifferent fir shrubs poked carelessly into the hard ground on either side of the featureless front door.

But all the creative energy that might have been directed outdoors had been orchestrated inside the house. The interior fairly chattered with objects. Cluttered, at least by my standards, but it didn’t have the air of the compulsive unable to throw away last month’s newspaper or yesterday’s plastic food containers. Rather, I sensed I was witnessing the evolution of an individual life with its
starts and stutters, experiments and samplings. It wasn’t until after I’d made several visits that I realized the individual life under examination was Virginia’s not Ron’s. Clearly not Ron and Virginia’s.

Pastel ceramic figurines reposed on little shelves stuck wily-nilly to the walls. Salt and pepper shaker collections sprinkled the ledges of corner cabinets. The living room was a riot of needlework: knitting, crocheted afghans, stuffed dolls, quilted chair coverings, needlepoint pillows. A framed, embroidered picture of a Hansel and Gretel-style cottage hung in the hallway. The slightly crooked lettering along the bottom read: January 16, 1942. Their wedding day, Virginia later told me.

The complexity of the handiwork said to me that Virginia was an industrious woman capable of sustaining long and difficult projects, but the sheer variety of the projects implied a woman still searching for her ultimate form of expression. The only signs of Ron in this environment was a straight-backed armchair covered with brown and orange instead of the dominate pinks and greens. I assumed Ron’s universe revolved elsewhere, out of public view. Hand tools, fishing gear, in the basement or garage, I supposed, but I never saw inside either.

Virginia had been my patient first. She had come to me a dozen years earlier with arthritis in her left wrist. Over the years, I’d removed a cyst, given her flu injections
and treated her for a mild case of hypertension. She seemed relatively happy and contented, good-natured although reticent, up-to-date with modern medical trends according to the standards of popular magazines. But I must admit that I didn’t really know her, or try to know her. She came to me for specific treatment. I gave it to her. We were polite and cordial to each other in keeping with a professional relationship, nothing more. But two months earlier, she had come to my office asking me if I would take on her husband’s treatment.

By that time, Ron had already spent three months in the local medical center under aggressive treatment by the specialists for a metastatic small cell cancer. They finally discharged him when it became apparent he was a treatment failure. I would do the home follow-up. I arranged with Virginia to make regular visitations since Ron’s mobility was declining rapidly. By the time I was brought into the picture, he was pretty well confined to bed, the cancer manifesting a painful bony spread—any weight-bearing activity produced recurrent pathological fractures of the vertebral bodies. I was direct with Virginia. "All we can do at this point is mediate the pain. Beyond that--"

She nodded. "He doesn’t complain, you know. But I can see it in him. You don’t live with someone forty years and not know these things."
Ron was sixty-two and judging by the size of his boots, he had been quite a good-sized man. He always wore a flannel-shirt for my visits, even though he was less and less able to sit up in bed for the examinations. Over the weeks, I watched the shirt enlarge, growing into a tailored canopy suspended over a stick structure instead of a workshirt that once fit snugly across broad shoulders.

His medical records—stretching back only a couple of years before this last illness—recorded his height at seventy-five inches, weight two-twenty-five. He now weighed barely half that.

The bedroom was crowded with the addition of a table for medical supplies and Ron’s pain medication infusion apparatus. A single bed for Virginia had been squeezed into a corner. To make room for it, the two dressers had been moved into the hallway. I noticed that in the process several of the ceramic trinkets decorating the top of one dresser—I supposed it was Virginia’s—had fallen over. No one ever stood them up all that winter.

The first time I attended Ron at home, I was disturbed in a way I didn’t understand at first. After I got home, in my own room, I made the connection. It was the bristle-brush of grey hair, the flat working man’s hands, and mostly, being confronted by a dying man in his own bed instead of a hospital bed. My father had died that way the year before. In my bed, not his. I’d brought him to my
home after his cancer had become unmanageable. I could afford a live-in nurse for the day and when I was on call, but other than that, I cared for him. To me, he'd been such a masculine man—the stereotype of the self-controlled, controlling personality—on sure ground with machines, dogs and tools, shaky when it came to affection and physical weakness.

He'd trained his hunting dogs with what Mother always considered unreasonable firmness. I never saw him physically abuse any of the retrievers, but the reprimand in his voice when they disobeyed him made even me cringe. Yet, his dogs were devoted to him. I guess there was some of that in our relationship.

I recall only two occasions of physical affection between us after I entered my teens. The first occasion was my graduation from medical school. After the ceremony, when the family was all gathered round excitedly deliberating about where to go for dinner, Dad came up from behind and swung his arm across my front in a one-armed bear hug. "Good work," he whispered in my ear. He squeezed me tight and released me with a little shake. I was startled, not only by the unusual gesture, but by the strength in his arm. He could have overpowered me easily.

The second, and last time he embraced me, was at my mother's funeral. Then, it was merely a move guiding me
into the limousine, a kind of church usher motion, but this
time, the arm was soft, limpid--an old man’s grasp.

Perhaps that’s what made tending for him in his last
illness so difficult--this lack of a history of physical
touching. Now he was touched all the time. By doctors,
technicians, nurses, me. The first time I bathed him, we
both kept our faces averted. I have examined hundreds, if
not thousands of men, in my practice, but it was an
emotionally wrenching experience to undress my father and
give him a sponge bath. It wasn’t just modesty or some fear
of violating a taboo about intimate contact between father
and daughter, it was the admission of helplessness. My
father was powerless, and displaying that fact to his
daughter--especially his daughter--hurt him more keenly than
his cancer. In his last days, he could no longer lift his
hips to accommodate a bedpan and he began soiling himself.
When I rolled him to his side to clean him, he buried his
face in the pillow, and lay rigid and mute.

Ron Cole did not physically resemble my father, but the
wallpapered room, the smell of antiseptics and plastic
tubing mingling with the faint smell of coffee from the
kitchen, made it impossible for me to think of anyone else
during those visits.

Ron, too, remained stoic, answering my questions with
single syllable answers. Perhaps he might have felt more
comfortable with a male physician, an older man, at that. I
don’t know if I reminded him of his daughter. I don’t know what his daughter was like. There were high school graduation pictures of a boy and a girl on the wall beside the bed, but judging by the hairstyles and the faded color, the photos were twenty to thirty years old. Virginia never mentioned her children, or grandchildren.

She hovered in the background during these visits, often providing an answer when Ron refused or seemed incapable of responding. He asked no questions, and when I stood to leave he remained motionless, staring off into a corner of the room until I left. Then through the partly closed door, I could hear his rustling as he struggled to slide down in the bed. His breath came in audible gasps, and now and then I could hear a moan.

Virginia remained impassive. She led me back along the hall through the living room and kitchen. There was always coffee perking on the stove and she made a point of offering me a cup, then seemed relieved when I refused. Not that she didn’t want to extend me the hospitality, but I sensed that she felt she could only keep her emotions in check for so long. To have me stay longer, even a cup of coffee longer, threatened the possibility of her endurance failing.

So we stood on the back porch while I gave her instructions on dosages of morphine and offered her suggestions on how to make Ron somewhat more comfortable. I wrote out prescriptions, digging the pad out of my purse, my
fingers numb with cold from the few moments together on the unheated porch. Most of the time, we stood side by side, she looking out into the frozen back yard. At the far end, where a clothesline attached to the garage, a man’s handkerchief hung frozen in the sub-zero air. "I should put my boots on and bring that in," Virginia always said. I became mystified by her incapacity to accomplish such a simple task, for every week when I returned the piece of cloth, as stiff as an icicle, still hung there.

The boots were still there, too.

They commanded my imagination, standing there, oblivious to the cold, ready for Ron to slide his feet inside, shaped and molded by his sweat to exactly match the curves and peculiarities of his feet after years of close adhesion. Work boots and play boots--the two ends of his life, waiting for him now at a time when the predominance of one end should be giving way to the other.

I imagined what it would be like to climb power poles, the sure-footedness and confidence required to haul yourself twenty feet above the ground. The manipulation of wires and cables and connectors intrigued me. They seemed to me purely inanimate devices, yet coursing through them was this invisible stream of electrons that provided light, heat, and comfort as I knew it. Yet even as Ron had the skill and capacity to control, alter and repair that lifeline, he also confronted its potential to take his life from him.
I should have just gone home. The winter storm was bad and the car radio warned that more snow and heavy winds were still on the way, but I'd had to do a minor surgery at a community hospital twenty miles out and the Coles' place was on the way home. Ron was withering away. It was clear to me that he was losing ground fast. But while Ron was disappearing, Virginia was gaining in stature. She was putting on weight, growing wide and solid, new muscles showing in her forearms. Her stout calves were encased in thick support hose, although I knew she had no evidence of varicose veins. She wore thick-soled rubber shoes designed to ease tired legs.

By the time I was done with Ron, the storm had blown itself in and there was no possibility of my braving the roads. For a change, Virginia seemed pleased about the company and she bustled about the kitchen putting together a supper for the two of us. We talked then, about the new commercial construction edging into her neighborhood and how all the young couples were moving away because they wanted to find a better place to raise their kids. All the time she talked, she moved about, never sitting down, even standing over the kitchen sink to eat her sandwich, while she placed a plate of eggs, potatoes and quick biscuits in front of me.

"Things used to be nice here," she said. "Real nice."
"You’ve lived here quite a while then?"

"Never lived anywhere else. I was born in this house. Ron and I married right after Pearl and then I stayed here with my mother while he was off in the Pacific. When he came back, there just seemed no reason to go anywhere else."

Still we danced away from real intimacy. For although I was as familiar, perhaps more familiar, with their bodies than probably any other person aside from each other, there was an unspoken reluctance to "know" each other. I wanted Virginia and Ron to remain my patients, professional challenges. On Virginia’s part, I believed she thought I possessed some secret insight on the future that she wasn’t quite ready to hear, like believing in fortune-tellers but afraid to hear their prophecy.

However, as I watched Virginia stride restlessly around the room, unable to settle down, nibbling continuously from a bowl of salted nuts, my concern for her health began to rise. "How are you doing?" I finally asked. She stopped then, pausing between mouthfuls, looking me directly in the eye for the first time that evening. "I’m good." She finally answered.

"You look tired. A little help might be in order. I could arrange for a home nurse to come in for a few hours every week."

She shook her head and turned away, opening a cabinet door and then shutting it without taking anything out.
"There are programs to cover the expense--" I tried, treading gingerly.

"I’ll take care of Ron. As long as I’m able, I’ll do it."

"And you do an incredible job. But you have to have a little time for yourself, too--"

She switched on the radio, drowning out my words. "Better see what the weather’s doing." We could see and hear it howling through the kitchen window, but we listened to dismal weather reports and accounts of a chain of storm-related accidents throughout the city.

"Well, you’re not going anywhere in that," she finally announced and left the room. I heard a closet door open and shut and then through the kitchen door watched Virginia return to the living room with linens and blankets.

"I’ll just make up the davenport," she said.

"I can do that. I know this is an imposition, but I think you’re right, Virginia. I’d rather stay than try to make it home under these conditions." She let me take the bedding from her and then she disappeared into the bedroom to check on Ron.

"I told Ron you were staying," she said when she came back. "He thinks it will be all right." I wondered what she meant, but before I could ask, she had trotted down the hall to find a nightgown and robe for me.
"Can I use your phone? I better make a few calls," I said when she came back. While I called the hospital and my answering service to leave the Cole's number, I watched Virginia move from living room to kitchen to bedroom in a ceaseless round of motion. She would pick something up, walk a few steps, put it down, then pick something else up. At one point, she dropped into a chair, opened a magazine and then immediately set it aside to rush into the bedroom. I now knew why she was wearing support hose. She never gave her legs a rest. I was beginning to fear her life was as much at stake as Ron's.

Later that evening, I managed to induce her to sit down for a few minutes when I suggested to her, as her family physician, that we had a few matters to discuss. She threw a glance to the half-open bedroom door, but she didn't make a move to close it. Still, I kept my voice low as I said: "You know the prognostications for Ron's condition are not favorable?"

"I'm not stupid," she said. The surprising sharpness of her remark told me that I might have been jumping to conclusions to assume that Virginia was going under from the pressures of caretaking a dying husband. "How long?"

"I can't say. A month or two, maybe only a few weeks. I never like to predict, the life force varies so much from person to person. We are often surprised at the resiliency of such cases."
"So he might make it?"
"No," I said shaking my head and looking away. "I don't think so."

"Few years ago, Ron went out west to fish with some buddies. He came back all worked up. He'd hooked this trout, played it for all he was worth. He stood in that river for three hours, back and forth with this fish. Back and forth." Her head was swaying back and forth, imagining the scene, her eyes on the bedroom door, but seeing river and mountains. "Jack, his buddy, said Ron played that trout like it was a musical instrument, played it like a violin. Ron doesn't play no violin, but he said it was magic...how that fish never gave up, even though it knew Ron was the stronger one. It just kept trying to get away and it used all its smarts to try to do it. Finally, Ron cut the line. . .said it was the right thing to do. It had been an honor to fight that fish and he would honor it by letting it go."

During the night, I woke from a restless sleep on the sofa. An icy wind rattled the windows. In the kitchen, illuminated by the stove light, I watched Virginia pace back and forth across the linoleum, hands moving anxiously from peanut bowl to mouth.

A few days later, I was surprised to see Virginia's name on my appointment book. Her skin was pasty and bloated. She sat on the edge of her chair. "We're going to get somebody to help you, Virginia." I reached for the
telephone. She shook her head and stopped me. "It's time."

"I don't understand."

"The pain medicine don't work anymore. He can't sleep. He can't move. I don't know what to do anymore."

"That's why I want to get you help. Maybe round-the-clock nursing care. Maybe...maybe we should just move Ron to an in-residence hospice."

"No."

"Virginia--"

"No. Listen, you're a doctor. You've seen people die. But not like this, not inch by inch, minute by minute. You come in, spend your few minutes and go on to the next patient. I'm not faulting you, that's just the way it is. But I--" she dropped her head, gripped her purse a little tighter and sat back in the chair. Then she looked up and held my eye for a moment. "Ron can't go on."

"So what do you suggest we do?"

Her body relaxed in the chair, but her gaze never left my face.

I agreed to visit him later that day. He was curled fetus-like on one side of the bed. His skin was pallid with the yellowish cast of jaundice, suggesting liver involvement along with the cancer. He opened his eyes when I positioned myself by his bed, stethoscope in hand. He blinked to
acknowledge my presence and then winced as I pulled the covers down. He shook his head ever so slightly. "Don’t make me move," he said.

Virginia was wrong. I did know what it was to watch someone die inch by inch. Father took eleven months to die. I was incapable of doing anything about it.

I laid my hand gently on Ron’s shoulder and kept it there. His eyes opened and held mine. Finally, ever so slightly, he nodded.

I adjusted the rate of flow of the infusion, upping the delivery of morphia. I looked for something useful to do, but there was nothing. I left the bedroom and found Virginia on the porch. She had her boots and coat on. The red handkerchief in her hand was already starting to soften and drip onto the floor.

I took out my prescription pad and scribbled magic symbols on the page. I handed her the paper. Looking her directly in the eyes, I said: "Whatever you do, be careful not to give all of these at once." I watched her to see that she understood. She nodded.

That’s when I noticed Ron’s boots were gone.

The call didn’t come until the next evening. Ron had died in his sleep, Virginia advised. "The funeral home can’t take him away until you sign the papers." I went. I did what was required. As I left, Virginia pressed my arm, but didn’t speak.
And now I am not sure. I did none of the things my training taught me. I sought no counsel, followed no prescribed ethical conduct. I simply did as I was asked, by the spouse of a conscious and presumably competent patient. But who did I do this for?

And what about those boots?
Kathryn was overdressed as usual. The taxi's air conditioning didn't work and the desert heat was suffocating. She leaned out the window to catch a breeze, but the outside air, fired by clouds of exhaust from the stalled traffic leaving the airport, was torrid.

She slipped her arm out of the sleeve of her tan suit jacket. Through the rear window, she could see a rust-red monolith of rock looming over the scene. If only she could get up there, out of the heat and the crowds.

"First time in Phoenix, Señora?" the cab driver asked. His fingers tapped a rhythm on the seatback. His nails were long, the half-moons edged with grease like misplaced eyeliner.

"Yes."

"Business?" She'd noticed his inspection of her at the terminal -- expensive tailored suit, attache that doubled as a purse, figure good, but starting to lose its firmness across the middle.
"Not really." She paused deliberately. "We live here."

He peered at her in the rearview mirror. Thick, bushy brows angled downward like daggers, the tips pointing to a wide flat nose. The disapproval in the upper-half of his face was overpowered by an impish grin. "Si, and you never been here before?"

Kathryn cocked her elbow on the window and lifted her hair up off her neck. Her hairline was wet and the metal window trim seared the tender skin of her underarm. She didn't remove it. "Transferred. Husband's been here a month. I'm--considering."

"Hmmmph."

They crept forward a few feet. A shaft of blinding sunlight flared off the bumper of the car ahead.

"Where from?"

"Seattle."

"Washington, si? My brother and his family live up there. Yakima. He says is nice. Sunny. Is not sunny in Seattle, no?"

"Sometimes. Not usually."

"Rain. I hear about rain. Not for me. Like living in a cave."

Exactly, thought Kathryn. She loved how the rain and clouds brought the edges of that world in tight, shutting out distractions, focusing the eye inside.
Phoenix had been Nick's idea. She wouldn't deny her husband a chance like this. The last several years, her career had been the one nurtured and coddled. The M.B.A., the shaky first year of freelance consulting, and then the blossoming success of private partnership with Margot. Lately, Kathryn had been thinking about cutting back to only a handful of clients so she could work on a book. Margot talked about bringing a third consultant into the business.

Throughout it all, Nick had been Kathryn's touchstone, her mentor and her disciplinarian. Sometimes, he seemed more obsessed with her success than she herself. So, when the spotlight turned finally on Nick, she couldn't say "shut it off."

Yet, in the month he'd been gone, she'd felt an increasing and unexpected exhilaration. Without realizing it, Nick's intense interest in her now felt stultifying, even cruel, like a lover of exotic birds who cages the objects of his affection.

She didn't tell Nick this, of course. Even though the talked nightly on the phone, she couldn't have contained these flickering sparks of suppressed emotion in something as concrete as words.

"Let's get out of here. We're going nowhere!" She lunged forward, her hands gripping the front seat. "Can we get up there?"
The cabby scowled in the direction she pointed.
"Papago Park? Sure, I can take you up there, but I thought
you wanted to go to the Fountains. That’s up north, off the
freeway."

"I’ve changed my mind. Can you do it?"

"Sure." He jerked the wheel hard to the left and they
pulled out into the center turn lane, passing a half dozen
cars, squealing through a solid red.

Kathryn fell back into the seat. The knot in her
stomach loosening. She hadn’t wanted to go to the hotel
just yet. Nick was tied up till six. She wasn’t going to
wait for him in their suite all afternoon like a princess
pining for her prince. She wasn’t quite ready to tell him
the rest either, how their furniture wasn’t on the way south
as he thought. Kathryn had put off contacting the moving
company until just before she left. Of course, it was
impossible for the company to schedule a crew on such short
notice. She had a plausible explanation--too much to do
with tidying up the arrangements with the partnership, bank
accounts, clients--Nick would just have to understand.

She planned to fly back to Seattle in a week or two and
make the final arrangements--whatever they might be.

A light breeze snaked through the car window. She held
the collar of her blouse away from her neck. The coolness
slid down her collarbone, across her breast and under the
curve of her arm like a familiar, caressing hand.
They turned onto a sinuous one-way lane lined with cactus and low bushes. Kathryn instructed the driver to top in front of a picnic table shaded by a trellised awning. She got out and looked up at the giant red rock that jutted out of the tawny earth as if it had been transplanted from the moon. "Can I go up?"

The cab driver had already deposited himself on the table, elaborately tooled boots with silver edged tips propped in front of him on the bench. He shook a cigarette out of a pack. "There's a trail round back somewhere."

"I won't be long," she said, and then wondered why she felt compelled to be deferential to the man. She reached through the window and plucked her purse from the seat. She felt the driver's eyes on her and walked away with as little body motion as possible. She didn't relax when the trail twisted out of view. Kathryn had never been in the desert before and it frightened her somehow. She was accustomed to the teeming richness of the Northwest rain forest. There was something honorable about the fused, almost submissive communality there--mosses draped across supple branches of big-leaf maple, ferns sprouting from furrowed trunks of giant cedars. In the rain forest, Kathryn wrapped herself in down vests and wool hats, as if her own individuality was inconsequential and what mattered was the cohesiveness of the whole.
It was immediately clear to her that the desert was different. Here individualism reigned. Every bit of life stood alone, isolated, its very existence threatened by any encroachment upon its own small hoard of resources. Kathryn recognized only the prickly pear and saguaro. Everything else was foreign and formidable.

She undid the turquoise scarf as she walked and tucked it in her purse. The trail was well worn, easily discernible, and yet, identical to the surrounding hard pack. It wound upward, around the backside of the rock to a flight of shallow steps tramped out of the rock. The path ended at a vault-sized hole that cut through to the frontside. She stepped through. The city was framed by the overhang of rock like a painting. She was struck by the flatness of it, as if she could see it in its entirety in a single glance.

A small cluster of high-rises marked the city center. From there, straight, perpendicular streets radiated outward until they were stopped abruptly by clumps of rocks plopped haphazardly along the periphery, disintegrating, outgrown parapets once intended to protect a new-born colony.

Nick always had an urge to get above things. In time, Kathryn had adopted the instinct, too, as one does an innocuous habit. She had decided to come up here the moment she saw the odd rock pillar from the cab window. "Sometimes I worry I’ve influenced you too much," Nick had said one
night. "I don’t mean to." "You couldn’t make me into something I don’t want to be," she had answered. But was it true? Could a woman be wholly her own person and be with a man too? How much of Nick was in her? How much of her, if any, in him?

The air was thick with heat, even in the shade of the grotto. She moved to a low ledge against the back wall. The ground was covered with shards of green and brown glass. She scraped clean a spot with her shoe and then slipped her feet out of her low pumps. Reaching under her skirt, she slid her pantyhose down her legs, rolling them into a little ball and stuffing them into her purse. She sat down on the ledge, her legs slightly apart and pushed her skirt up high on her thighs. Her shoulders sank into the rest of her body.

Nick could talk for hours, about his feelings, his love for her, his dreams and his anxieties. She listened. She couldn’t help but believe, in some dark, old-fashioned recess of her mind, that it was the woman who was supposed to be open and giving. Instead, she often felt closed off, incapable of self-expression. The only words she could add to Nick’s lengthy stream of them were, "I love you, too."
A pile of cigarette butts gleamed in their whiteness against the ginger-colored gravel. The driver was lighting another when Kathryn came back.

"What would it cost to have you drive me around the city for a few hours?" she asked.

"You want Gray Line Tours," he said, blowing out a stream of smoke.

"No. I just want to kill some time."

"It's your money."

They agreed on a price and headed north out of the park, away from the freeway.

Kathryn studied the view passing through the frame of the car window. Palm trees lined the streets, their high, brittle fronds no protection against the blistering sun, a cruel hoax of a tree. The sun bleached the color out of everything. And the shape. Despite the boxlike contours of homes and apartment buildings and shops, there was no mistaking the flatness of the natural terrain, as if the earth was somehow incapable of maintaining a three-dimensional countenance against the assault of heat and parched air. No room here for the hungry, searching soul, Kathryn thought. Instead, one had to be resolute and forthright, had to dare to stride boldly across its face, defying nature.

When they were first married, she and Nick had scraped together enough money to buy two acres of salal and Douglas
Fir-shrouded land on a narrow thumb across the Sound. There was a tiny, one-room cabin on one edge of the place. A narrow path snaked through a trellis-like overhang of himalaya berries and down to a gravelly beach where orca whales and fiberglass sloops sometimes passed.

Kathryn had imagined that someday she and Nick would arrange their lives so they could live there permanently. They'd build a woodframe house, not too big, but with a second floor, the east and south walls of which would all be glass. There she would set up her desk, her books and research notes and a soft chair. She would look out over the tops of the vegetation, through the columns of hundred-year-old fir and cedar to the perpetual, soothing ebb and flow of saltwater. Lately when she indulged in the fantasy, Nick faded into a misty, distant figure and it was she who stood alone in the tall window.

They drove herky-jerky through the streets of Phoenix, long stops every few blocks at traffic lights where the heat of the pavement engulfed the cab. Kathryn felt as though she were melting against the vinyl seat, the loss of fluids leaving her parched. She asked the driver to stop at the convenience store just ahead. She unzipped the front pocket of her luggage on the seat next to her and took out a pair of khaki walking shorts and a sleeveless pullover. From the end pocket, she removed a pair of flat sandals.
"I'll be right back." She went into the store, found the ladies room in the rear and went inside. Goose bumps ran up her bare legs as she stepped out of her shoes onto tiles chilled by the store's air conditioning. She changed clothes, the loose cotton deliciously liberating.

On the way back, she bought two ice-cold soft drinks. She gave one to the driver. "Gracias. My wife used to do that," he told her when she climbed back into the car."

"Do what?"

He threw the lever into drive and they shot out into the street inches ahead of a much-dented utility truck.

"Bring me something. Whenever she go someplace, she come back with something for me. Little things. Free stuff, you know? One time she come back from paying the electricity. We had gotten a little late, you know? She comes with this little pin, like a lightning bolt. She comes home and pins it to my shirt, right over my heart."

Kathryn looked out the car window, part of her wanted to know what this stranger thought of a woman who spent so much energy on pleasing him. "Did you like that?"

"Oh, si. It made her happy. But she don't do it no more."

"Oh?"

"Immigration found her. Sent her back to Hermosillo. I kept the babies and the three-year-old."
"Oh." Kathryn studied the heat waves radiating off the pavement.

"She be back. I send the money." He cocked his head over his shoulder so she could see his broad, gap-toothed smile. "I keep driving you, señora, I be as rich as the President."

"I don’t do this as a rule, believe me." She smiled back and then quickly looked out the side window. For a moment, she had the frightening feeling that they hadn’t moved at all. The convenience store looked to be the very one they’d just left. The sandwich shop beside it, the same. In every direction, dusty brown stucco shops with blue tiled roofs and neon window signs crowded the edges of the street.

She scooted forward and lightly touched the driver’s shoulder. "What’s your name?"

"Eduardo."

"Eduardo, I’m Kathryn. Can we get out of this traffic?"

"Sure. I thought you like to see this. Grow, grow. Boom, boom." He looked at her pained expression. "Sometimes is too much." He took the first right and within a half block, the noise, the exhaust fumes, even the heat, dissipated. They drove along quiet residential streets. Rows of one-story family homes, each set exactly the same distance back from the sidewalk, indistinguishable from each
other except for the color of the trim, the arrangement of the windows, the angle of the front entrance. A scattering of homes had resorted to natural landscaping, cactus and gravel, but most still insisted on demonstrating the power of man over nature as thick green moats of grass protected the homes. Sprinklers ticked away.

"Eduardo, pull over," she said a few blocks later. "Over there." She pointed to where a card table stood on the sidewalk, a hand-lettered sign propped against it. "For sale--Citrus. Home-grown."

Plastic bags of fruit slumped against each other on the table and on the grass beneath it. Kathryn waited for someone to come out of the house, but after a couple of minutes, when no one appeared, she discovered a small cardboard box with a slot cut in the top. "$2 a bag," read the crayoned note. Kathryn shoved two dollar bills in the slot and then picked out the heaviest bag. She brought it back to the cab, setting it on the hood against the windshield. She took out a grapefruit and offered it to Eduardo.

He made a face and shook his head. "Too sour."

"That's what I love." She began peeling the fruit, dropping the bits of rind into the bag. She stripped off as much of the white membrane as she could. "This is the part that makes it sour," she explained to Eduardo leaning against the fender. The juice stung a tender spot near a
nail. She pulled off a segment and put the whole thing in her mouth before biting down, holding the juice in her mouth, savoring the burn, feeling the flush come over her face, the heat behind her eyes.

She thought it ridiculous to eat grapefruit the way she’d been taught as a child--cutting it in half, separating the segments by slicing along both sides of the membrane with a special knife and then dousing it with sugar.

There some something sensual, even courageous, about eating grapefruit undoctored, undiluted. She bit across the end of the quarter section in her hand. Juice spurted out, a drop stabbing her in the eye. She bent over at the waist and let the juice run down her chin, over her wrist, and onto the unnaturally green grass at her feet. It was like eating fire, liquid fire. She laughed.

She finished the first grapefruit and then a second. Eduardo watched warily. Kathryn looked down the street and saw what she hadn’t noticed before. Every yard had one, two, sometimes three, straight-trunked trees, yellow and orange fruit speckling the leafy foliage like polka dots. "People grow these in their yards," she said admiringly.

"They grow too many. No one wants them all, so they just fall on the ground rotten."

"Mine won’t," Kathryn said softly, the words coming out before she knew it. What was she saying? She’d come down to convince herself she wasn’t staying. To tell Nick.
She'd suppressed the admission of that thought even to herself. But now, at almost the same moment she was able to acknowledge it consciously, another part of her was already fashioning a life here.

She wiped her hands and chin with a clean, blue handkerchief Eduardo handed her. She tied the plastic bag shut. "I'm ready to go to the hotel now, Eduardo." This time, she crawled into the front passenger seat, the grapefruit on her lap.

Her fingers still felt sticky as the bellhop let her into the suite Nick had reserved at Fountain Hills. The youth gingerly fingered the coins she tipped him, dropping them into his starched trouser pocket with a faint air of disgust.

Kathryn set the bag of grapefruit on the coffee table in front of the sofa. On the table was a cactus garden arranged in a low pottery bowl glazed in soothing pastels. A card on a plastic stick poked into the mounded gravel bore her name. "You won't have to worry about the slugs ruining these," said the message inside, written in Nick's precise penmanship. Their first spring together, slugs had eaten $50 worth of primroses that Kathryn had planted along the front porch. She had cried in frustration and then promptly gone out and purchased junipers to plant instead.

"Check the refrigerator," the note went on. "But don't start without me. I'll be starving when I get there. More
than you know. I love you so much." Inside the little refrigerator were two bottles of champagne, fluted glasses and a quart of Haggen Daz French Vanilla ice cream. Funny how food was so much a part of their love life, Kathryn thought, as if these two appetites were inseparable.

She went into the bedroom and opened the drapes. The viewed looked onto a courtyard so thick with flowers and shrubs it belonged in the tropics. A fountain in the center shot streams of water two stories into the air. Kathryn slid back the glass door. Cool, moist air brushed her cheeks.

"Kath? Kath!" The hall door clicked shut and Nick rushed into the room. He threw his briefcase on the bed and wrapped her in a bear hug, lifting her off her feet and twirling her around. "God, I missed you."

In spite of everything, she felt a tingling warmth come over her. The muscular tautness of his back felt solid, comfortable. He could hold her here up above him for hours it seemed. She noticed several new strands of gray hair arching over his ear.

He eased her down his front, keeping her pressed firmly to him. Her shorts caught on his belt and bunched up against her crotch. He kissed her. A cloud kiss -- his lips barely touching hers, the tip of his tongue tracing the outline of her lips, holding back, painfully, exquisitely.
His self-control could infuriate Kathryn. His ability to contain his urges implied that somehow this was something she couldn’t do. This time though it roused a different emotion in Kathryn. One that she, in her own way, had spent her life containing. The more Nick held back, the more she wanted him. Wanted to overpower him. It wasn’t passion she felt boiling up inside, but something quite different. Something far more frightening.

She pulled back, tilting her face away from his. Their bodies were still pressed together, but they were once again two separate people. A puzzled look came over Nick’s face and then one of concern. Kathryn was stunned. There was no arrogance in his eyes, no air of self-possession or possessiveness. The new sensation in her sputtered. With dismay, she realized that she had put that expression on Nick’s face during their weeks apart. She had felt suppressed in some way and in her solitude had assigned the role of jailkeeper to Nick. But now, face to face, he refused to play the part. His finely sculpted cheekbones and crisp jawline jutted harshly against pallid skin, suggesting not strength, but frailty.

"I thought you’d be toasty brown by now," she said in the self-conscious way strangers speak to each other.

"Not unless fluorescent bulbs work as sunlamps." His voice was weary, but his eyes were locked on hers.
She shifted her gaze a fraction away, to his forehead. She rubbed her finger over the furrows etched there, erasing their message.

"Oh, Kath!" He buried his face in her neck. The moment of restraint was gone. They made love passionately, fiercely, like two people coming together for the first time. Or the last.

They lay together for a long moment. He on top, her face nuzzling the soft hairs on his shoulder, his buried in the pillow beside her head. "Hey, you’re going to suffocate," she said, giving him a squeeze, his weight making her own breathing difficult.

The spasm raked his entire body. His belly rose up away from hers, air chilling the sudden gap between them. His shoulder jabbed her face and then a groaning sob escaped through the layers of pillowcase and down. He cried like that for several minutes, with a grief she had never seen in him before. All she could do was hold him.

After awhile, he slid off her, making himself small along her side, his face nestled in the hollow of her arm, hidden. She could feel the wetness of it. She had to strain to hear.

"I’m so scared," he said hoarsely.

"Scared?" she whispered back. "Of what?"
"Everything. That I'd screwed up. The job, the move, what I was doing to our lives--" His voice cracked like a hiccup. "--that I'd lose you."

She wrapped her other arm around him pulling him tight to her. She lay there, her head above his, staring at the ceiling. The fiery acid of yellow fruit burned in her throat. It radiated down her body, through her chest, her middle, the place between her legs still wet with Nick. She could feel the hot tingle in the soles of her feet. Then, she was far away, naked, the noon sun spattering its rays over her like raindrops. Head up, back straight and supple, she was striding across the desert. Alone, in partnership, she couldn't say. It didn't matter. The hot sand seared the bottoms of her feet and the uninvaded circle of space around her. Her course across the desert's perilous face seemed no less real for it being unknowable.

She bent her face and kissed the smooth line where Nick's dark, straight hair met his forehead. The skin was soft and tender. "I saw something today," she said.

"Mmmm?"

"Neat little houses with rows and rows of citrus trees in the front yard. Orange trees. And grapefruit." A breeze rippled through the open door, passing like a feather over the pale skin of the two joined bodies. "The place we get has to have grapefruit, Nick. I'll plant them myself. And Nick? We're not going to let them rot."
DESPERATE ACTS

CHAPTER ONE

The octopus sat in the open, balanced over the rock like a model posing for a centerfold, all limbs and angles and seductive twist to the torso. Its mantle quivered when Rainey’s flashlight caught it full beam through the haze of the Sound’s murky winter water. For a moment, the octopus froze, as though immobility would somehow make it invisible.

Rainey locked up, too. His last kick carried him straight toward the octopus. Close. Too close. His heart raced; his draw on his diving tanks too rapid. All his nerves tripped up a notch, like a point man sensing an unnatural break in the jungle mosaic. Still, it wasn’t fear that had put his body on alert, but anticipation.

He’d been scouting for just such a giant for almost three months. "Something six feet or more," Davidson had told him. The new director at the Seattle Aquarium wanted "impact," something to wow the Japanese and seduce them into unloading their wallets.
Davidson made it clear he wouldn’t pay for anything less than spectacular. Had to be a full-grown adult, the bigger and more ominous the better. Davidson wasn’t above exploiting popular mythology and Rainey wasn’t above pocketing the hefty check Davidson promised, not the way things were going in his life right now.

This guy could be it, Rainey thought. The big one--maybe 150 pounds, fifteen, sixteen feet tip to tip, easy. He’d never seen one this big before. Suddenly, the matter of a live capture took on a whole new perspective.

Specimen collecting for live exhibition always required special handling. Not too rough or you’d lose a piece of the creature. Too long a stalk and the animal might die later from the stress. Then, there was the whole matter of a safe induction into the aquarium environment. But that was Davidson’s problem.

Rainey’s problem had been finding the damn thing. He’d seen dozens of octopi over the past couple of months. None as big as this one. Even so, it was a matter of getting to them. All those legs and sucker-laced tentacles weren’t some genetic miscalculation of nature. Wedged snug and sure between junk heaps of scabby granite, half its tentacles suctioned onto rock, a tidal wave couldn’t move it. Rainey’d seen divers squirt ammonia in the octopus’ gills, hoping to roust it from its den. But he’d always thought
that bully-boy stuff and preferred learning how the creatures lived, figuring out how their minds worked.

That’s what had brought him out tonight--in the dead of February on a moonless night, in an hour when only owls and octopi roamed. Mating season. And when the hormones are secreting, male octopi can be aggressive, garrulous and, like most men, a little careless in their amorous pursuits. This fellow, thought Rainey, was putting on quite a show, its nubby, globular head swaying in the current like a despot at a military review. Funny how he just assumed this particular octopus was male. Size, he supposed. Male meant big in his book. But he knew there was no way to tell whether this beauty was male or female, not unless he’d found one guarding a pearl strand of eggs. Either way, male or female, capturing this sea spider was going to be work.

As Rainey watched, a flush of crimson swept over the octopus. He tensed. The octopus was getting ready to move. Languorously, its mantle filled with water until it resembled a master chef’s toque. Without any visible tensing of its leg muscles, it glided up and off, evaporating in the darkness.

Rainey swung the beam of his divelight right, then left. Nothing. He arced it up across his body. At about one o’clock he saw a ripple of kelp where the octopus had passed. A couple feet higher, he spied the tips of the disappearing tentacles. No time to check whether any of his
gear was sticking out around his body. He had to follow into the kelp forest and hope he wouldn’t get tangled in its quicksand maze.

He needed this capture. Rather, he needed the dough the capture would bring. He and Christine had managed to live for years on his subsistence wages as a seasonal park ranger, hovering on the knife edge of real poverty, but feeling content and somehow safe because they were planted on the right side of the chasm. Anyway, that’s how Rainey’d felt. He’d figured wrong about Christine. Or maybe it was just the years. Too many of them. And the prospect of many more down the road. She’d wanted out and the court judgment had cleaved the earth away from him until he felt like he was scrambling to stay atop a growing avalanche.

Then Davidson came along. Bucketloads of sea stars, anemones, green and purple urchins and the occasional wolf eel put canned soup on the shelves, but not much else. This octopus could earn him four months’ salary and a chance at hanging on to Tchimose.

Rainey plunged into the kelp, a half-dozen strong kicks behind the scurrying octopus. He was relieved to see the animal wasn’t heading for cover in the rocky bottom. Rainey calculated that if he could just get under the octopus, he stood a chance of capturing it. Down on the bottom, the octopus was home free.
Hunting at night had given Rainey the advantage of finding an octopus in the open. But it also meant that there was no illumination from above. He could only see where he pointed his light and the octopus was just as anxious to stay out of it.

Rainey'd heard that octopus could be attracted by the bright strobelights underwater photographers favored. Attracted but not amused. One story spread around the Ranger Station poked fun at a spoiled photo school grad planning to set National Geographic on its butt with his underwater shots. "Fuck their middle America cliches." The kid had set up enough strobes to make John Travolta blink and sparked a nasty call from his father, an investment banker, when the American Express charge showed up on his statement. The lights brought in the greenlings by the dozens. Good for dinner, bad for magazine covers. Then, the octopus showed up. It took one pump around the lights and spurted straight for the gawking photo artist. Before the kid could get off a single frame, the octopus ripped the $2,000 Nikonis from his frozen mitts and disappeared into its lair.

Rainey's octopus, on the other hand, didn't show the faintest interest in the light. Several times Rainey had to stop and sweep the beam back and forth through the opaqueness, trying to catch another glimpse of the elusive mollusk. Usually, a fluttering of kelp would put him back
on the octopus’ trail. Even so, it was slow going. Swimming through the kelp bed was like negotiating a gauntlet of rubber jail bars. From their holdfasts anchored on the rocks below, great hoses of waterfilled stems snaked to the surface thirty feet above, their long fronds massing overhead like a cemetery canopy over a fresh-dug grave. Rainey kept his kicks shallow so as not to tangle his fins in the strands. He positioned his BC hose closer to the middle of his chest. The protruding tip had been sticking out past his arm, tagging kelp and knocking off the aim of his divelight.

For a moment, he thought he had lost the octopus. But his prey had slowed, too. Quick in the sprints but with little staying power, the octopus was ready for a rest. Its route had taken it up and away from the bottom, maybe four fee ahead of Rainey and about that much overhead. Now, if he could just get under it.

Rainey flicked his foot and skimmed forward half the distance. He brought his knees under his torso, tipping himself upright. His hands smeared figure-eights in the water as he tried to position himself beneath the octopus that was now sinking like a deflated balloon. Rainey stared upward, transfixed by the membrous web that was about to envelope him.

He considered what his best strategy would be for locking onto the octopus. He’d have to grab it high, up on
one of its legs near its mouth, then pull it in close to his body without damaging a tentacle. If he misjudged and clamped onto a tip, he stood the risk of having it come off in his hand. The octopus could regenerate another one, but Davidson wouldn't be pleased with damaged goods. More likely, such a fumbling move would lose Rainey the octopus altogether. His reflexes were no match for a creature who was little more than one tingling web of nerves.

So he'd grab high, gently reel in the octopus and let it wrap itself around his midsection. That would be the only way he could manage to swim back to the surface and haul the hefty animal up the rocky beach. Rainey had used the tactic once before, when he was a boy tagging along with his Dad on a Park-sponsored research project. That octopus had been a youngster, too, about three feet across from tip to tip, more like a giant sea star than the proverbial demon of the sea. But he could still relive the nerve blast that shot straight to his gut when the tentacles lashed around his body, tacking themselves down his back and legs like coffin nails.

Rainey pressed the button on his buoyancy compensator, dumping some air and letting his body settle a little more firmly onto his knees. As he did so, the beam of his light swung down from its near vertical tilt to a spot straight out in front of him. What he saw there sent a jolt of adrenalin through his limbs. Months of SEAL training and
two tours in the Delta told him to drop for cover, but underwater all he could do was thrash out with a survival stroke, flinging himself out of his last known position. Without thinking, he snapped off the light.

In the darkness, he felt the octopus' tentacles drape themselves over his shoulders. He'd kicked himself right into line beneath his quarry. Still shaken by the image in front of him, Rainey fumbled for an invisible leg, but his hand glanced off the broad, flat mantle. At the unexpected contact, the octopus bolted. Rainey felt a powerful force against his torso like a blast of wind. The octopus shoved off Rainey's chest and then dropped. Then he felt nothing and he knew his "big catch" had disappeared into some rocky crevice beneath his knees, now just another fish story.

But if his mind hadn't been playing tricks on him, Rainey guessed he might have another kind of story to tell. By now, the thinking part of his mind had taken hold again and he felt a bit ashamed for panicking like a seal pup. No VC here, you dumb jerk, he thought. But then he wasn't expecting to run into another human at thirty feet under either. He flicked on the light.

In twenty years of diving he'd never yet encountered another diver underwater other than the buddies he'd gone with in the first place. He got wet so he could get away from people and he'd always vowed that if that day came, the waters would be too crowded for him and he'd hang up his
fins. But as he looked at the guy in front of him, he knew he wouldn’t have to honor his vow. No diver this one. Just a sinker. A stiff. Another one for the body bag. And Rainey’d be the one to get him there.

Ten yards ahead of him the man kneeled on the sea bottom. He was smallish, maybe 150 pounds alive. Depending on how long he’d been under, he could weigh upwards of 200 pounds now, Rainey guessed. Long, thin strands of sandy hair fluttered around his head, swaying in the surge like strands of spaghetti in a kettle. Rainey dumped a shot of air, enough to lift him clear of the boulders between him and the dead man. Rainey wondered which one hid his missed meal ticket. He swam slowly toward the body. He wasn’t in a hurry to get there. A couple of strokes and he and it were eye-to-eye.

Not exactly, Rainey quickly discovered. Young kelp crab had eaten their way through the soft tissues of the eyes, nose and lips. He saw pulsing movement under the cheekbones and knew the scavengers were working their way through the layers of muscle beneath the skin.

The guy wore a red-checked flannel shirt and jeans. Rainey figured him for a local. The tourists these days all dressed straight out of an L.L. Bean catalog. For some reason, the notion that the guy was local saddened Rainey more than if he were an outsider. Not that he was likely to know the dead man or his family, but there were problems
enough in these parts--mills shutting down, salmon and big
trees either gone or locked up, too few jobs and too many
bills. Too much booze.

No surprise then when someone got too much of a load on
and hopped into his runabout planning to blow off steam by
burning up fifty horses. Could have got himself caught in a
tide rip, tossed around a bit, maybe flipped the boat and
panicked. Or maybe he'd headed out with a case of beer in
the hold, polished off the lot and then, either deliberately
or accidently--shaking that last drop off his dick--took the
big one over the side. Happened all the time. Six out of
ten stiffs had their fly open, Rainey's Coast Guard buddies
told him. But suicide or fucking dip-shit bad luck, when
they hit the 45-degree water, the survival instinct kicked
in. Thrash around in a kelp bed and the straplike fronds
tangle themselves around arms and legs like a straight
jacket. Icy saltwater fills the boots, saturates the socks
and the jeans, soaks the underpants. The balls climb
inside, the cock shrivels up like a belly button. It gets
harder and harder to hold the drunken head above water. The
cold creeps up the body, stiffening the feet, the knees, the
elbows, the fingers. Fifteen minutes maybe, if he was
unlucky and kept fighting it.

Finally, the water worked its way inside, filling him
up until he sunk, foot by foot, a lifeless lump of tissue,
to the ocean floor. Sinkers, Coast Guard Rescue called
them. Watching the guy dressed in red and white flannel bob up and down in the light current reminded Rainey of the fishing bobbers he and Dad used years ago up to Seven Lakes. Peaceful. Harmless.

Why not leave him here? To be so negative, the guy'd had to have been here awhile. Rainey hadn't seen any sign of a search above, hadn't heard anything in the last couple of days on the scanner. The parking lot at Spit Point had been empty. There wasn't anywhere else on this part of the coast for searchers to get close to shore.

What were the odds of someone discovering the body like this? A few feet either way and Rainey would have missed seeing the guy altogether. Sooner or later, he'd bloat up and he, or parts of him, would float back up. Why not let it happen naturally? Maybe a winter storm would blow in and the undertow would haul the body out to sea, depositing it on some island beach up the Passage, protein for brown bears, ravens and gulls. A better use for a dead human than sticking him in some satin-lined box.

But there was the family and Rainey didn't like the thought of somebody, some kid, spending the rest of his life wondering what happened to Dad. He considered leaving the body and sending the officials back to make the retrieval. But he'd never be able to send them to just this spot, in a kelp bed that stretched for miles in either direction. He'd
be in more trouble for reporting a body he couldn't produce than just swimming away from it.

No, there was no getting out of this one. The only thing to do was to haul him in, get him high enough on the beach so the incoming tide wouldn't drag him back out and drive in to Neah Bay to report the discovery. He checked his gauges. Down a hundred pounds. He had about thirty minutes of air left. He hoped it would be enough.

Rainey felt sorry for the family member who'd have to ID this one. He was starting to feel sorry for himself, too. He'd handled more than his share of shrapnel-blasted bodies, but he wasn't so certain that this guy was going to come out all in one piece. He'd better look this over. He had no stomach for making a couple of trips after body parts.

The guy was younger than Rainey had first assumed. Mid-thirties, maybe. A stringy, thin mustache curled down over the guy's top lip. He'd had a bad case of acne as a teenager. There were plenty of scars. The shirt buttons were undone, ripped off in the fall out of the boat perhaps. There were some frayed threads fluttering around a small hole in the stomach area. He was glad to see the guy was wearing a belt. He'd use it to tow the kid in.

Postponing the moment of actual physical contact as long as possible, Rainey drifted around to the side, playing his light down the length of him. A gold watchband glinted
in the beam. Expensive and not waterproof, the kind of foolish extravagance he’d seen too many indulge in. Spend their money on new pickups loaded with every option, a big-screen TV back at home for the wife and kids, and not two nickels in the bank. Now they were out of work and blaming environmentalists for their hard luck. Rainey wasn’t crying with them.

He panned the light down the thin legs wondering if he’d have to undo the boots. The first clue Rainey wasn’t dealing with your usual drunk-drowning was when he got a look at the guy’s feet. He was wearing caulks, heavy laced-up workboots with steel spikes protruding from the soles. Loggers depended on the bootnails for traction clambering over slick timber. Every now and then, some asshole would wear his caulks into a bar or corner market, but Rainey’d never heard of someone fool enough to wear spiked boots in a boat.

The lengths of steel haul chain wrapped around his ankles wasn’t the sort of thing a guy’d arrange for himself either. Rainey sighed, blowing out a long stream of bubbles. He’d been laying low lately, what with the divorce and the court case and the sheriff threatening repossession of his boat. The last thing he needed was to get mixed up in some mess like this, even if only around its edges.

The authorities weren’t going to like this one bit. Not one bit. He swam around behind the body and played the
light up its back. The light stopped at a jagged black hole where a hollowpoint had blasted through. Even Sheriff Turnagin couldn’t mistake this one for a drowning. It was going to be a long night.
HUGGING THE SHORE

The surf hissed at me as it backpedaled over the gravelly beach, as if afraid of me and not the other way around.

"Not here," Evan said, the bluff too steep and the spine of rocks jutting into the Strait too treacherous for a put-in. This would be my first time in salt-water and the double-hole kayak we had rented in Seattle too expensive to risk on a hair-brained launch.

We drove around the point to the east end of Crescent Bay, along the northwest shore of Washington state's Olympic Peninsula. The long, sandy beach there is private, but if we hugged the bluff and stayed on the east bank of Salt Creek we could launch from the foot of a wave-scoured seastack.

The sun was gentle, adding to the flush on my cheeks as my hands fumbled with the double and triple knots looped around the boat and through the struts of the pick-up canopy. Mid-September. Crescent Bay was as flat as a saltine--not a hint of rain, but my throat was dry and there
was a twisty sour knot in my stomach, a not uncommon feeling for me when I ventured outside my physically safe world of books and words.

The surf whooshed acrossed the beach as we approached the seastack. I dropped my end of the boat with a thud and massaged the red welts the handle had cut into my palms. I slipped on my life jacket and monkeyed with the suspenders of the oval swatch of coated nylon that hung around my midsection like a barrel. The elastic edges of the spray skirt are designed to stretch taut across the cockpit and keep me dry from the waist down.

Evan coached me on our strategy for getting off the beach. The breaking waves were not big or difficult, but tricky enough that we’d have to carefully time our launch. "You’ve got to keep us perpendicular to the wave," Evan said. "If we get crosswise, we’ll just get pushed back on the beach or swamped." I swallowed hard. Nothing to it, he assured me. Just dig in, stroke hard and fast, ten feet into the bay and we’re home free.

He shoved the boat over the sand until the bow cut into the lapped water and started to float free.

I tightened the grip on the double-bladed paddle and plunged it into the saltwater. "Good job," Evan called as he hopped into the back cockpit and squirmed around to fasten his spray skirt, rocking the boat so that I wanted to put out a hand to stabilize us. Yet, even in this unsettled
state, the buoyant bobbing called up some prenatal instinct in me—the sea, eternal mother.

We coasted around the foot of the seastack, a piece of bluff severed from the mainland long ago by winter storms. Armchair-sized rocks lounged inches beneath the surface, their faces pocked by volcano barnacles. Purple urchins and ochre sea stars cluster in the crevices like discarded bathtub toys.

We glided across the shallow bay, paddling slowly, rhythmically, trying to match our strokes. My right hand went high; I rotated my wrist and the left blade sliced the water. I remembered to use my back, not just my forearm, to pull through the stroke. Then the other side. I carved imaginary figure-eights through air and water. Beads of saltwater trickled down my cheeks from the drip of the overhead paddle.

Tongue Point, the rock reef protecting the east end of the bay, drew closer. The glassy surface of the Strait of Juan de Fuca stretched to my left and right. Ahead lay the pale brushstroke of Vancouver Island ten miles away. We hit the swell with a thud as the rigid hull seemed to move out of the water in segments. The boat rocked up and down. I felt dizzy. The bottom—no longer a foot or two beneath my paddle. It’s—what? Ten feet? Thirty?

Nine, Evan said, recalling the charts.
That knowledge didn’t comfort me. I knew you could drown as easily in one foot of water as one hundred. I struggled to focus on the serenity of the surface, the warmth of the sunshine, but I couldn’t shut off the fear. "Turn around!" The words shot out of my mouth. We curved around and before the sound of my voice died in the still air, we were back in the bathtub and I was ashamed of my panic.

My fear mirrored the loss of control I’d been feeling all summer. That spring, Evan had taken a new job, one requiring constant travel. My winter job had ended and I was waiting to move to Montana where I’d start graduate school in the fall. I thought it would be an adventure to put our belongings in storage while I tagged along after Evan, living in motel rooms at company expense. Freedom with few responsibilities. Lots of time to read and write, new places to explore every few days. But I hadn’t figured on the emotional disorientation of schlepping duffle bags from one standard-issue motel to another, never settling into anywhere for more than a few days. And, unlike Evan, I had no real "work" around which to fashion a regular, daily schedule. So, as the days and weeks wore on, I found myself mired in feelings of insecurity and worthlessness. I had no home, no occupation, no place where I "belonged."

Then Evan was sent to Utah to help finish a project running over deadline. No telling how long he’d be needed
there or where he’d be sent next. I couldn’t get into my new apartment in Missoula for another month and so we agreed it was better for me to stay in western Washington, hanging out with friends and relatives. But, of course, after a few days as a guest, I felt like an intruder and would feign some excuse to leave. I drifted from state park to state park, living out of our van. Restless, nervous, I couldn’t discipline myself to write. Reading bored me. I took short, tentative runs through the parks and along country roads, but the unfamiliarity of my surroundings made me uneasy and I retreated to the safety of my Detroit-made cocoon. I drove.

Back in the bay, we hugged the shore. It gave me a sense of security—a false one, no doubt. Two hundred years earlier, when Captain George Vancouver and his 134-man crew on the Discovery explored this same shore, fixing England’s claim to the Northwest Territory, it was the shore, not the sea that threatened Vancouver’s lumbering, deep-gutted ship. Close in, a barely submerged rock could rip open the hull; a sudden shift in wind could smash the ship against the cliffs. Our little kayak, the "Seascape," drew less than three inches and the clerk at the outdoor center where we had rented it told us that the fiberglass construction ("heavy-duty lay-up for longer wear") was nearly bomb-proof. She could handle the open seas, too. Built like a child’s
punching clown, the modern kayak insists on righting itself. Still, I carefully averted my eyes from the intimidating expanse of ocean ahead of me in the Strait.

There were some who willingly, eagerly, ventured into the Pacific, in little more than coffin-sized boats. Clallam, Makah, Quileute, Nootka. Journeys of sixty or eighty miles over stormy open ocean were not uncommon. Europeans were astounded to meet natives forty miles offshore in plank-sided cedar canoes, sealskin bladders lashed to the sides to prevent foundering.

Later that first day, we drove east to Freshwater Bay, a placid, seamless body of water. No surf there. The launch was smooth and effortless. Rounding Observatory Point, we rumbled over a field of bull kelp like a crate on an assembly line. I tried to angle the paddle blade so it slipped between the tough ropey stems and the inflated bulb bladders, but often I missed and the paddle skidded off like a spade hitting a dance floor. We slipped into a sheltered cove not much bigger than a two-car garage. The bottom soared upward, cleaving through the surface of the water, straining skyward another forty crumbling feet. Snaky red madrones and gnarly yews loomed over the headland, their exposed roots offering a tenuous hold against a plunge into the sea. We laid our paddles across the cockpits and drifted toward shore.
To our left we could see a deep hollow in the bluff scooped out by winter storms. Evan dipped his paddle and we slid soundlessly into the cave. The walls were high, curving off into a fat tunnel paralleling the bluff. The back wall had been undercut by the tide so that a shaft of light came through just inches above the softly lapping saltwater. Encapsulated in the earth itself, the boat swung round so that our view was of the sea. Like the native peoples of the vast peninsula, we'd turned away from the great dark mass of forest and mountains behind us. The coastal Indians distrusted those inland reaches. Their lives and villages seemed threatened not so much by the pounding surf and winter storms, but by the creeping, ravenous tentacles of a green world that could so completely engulf them as to make their very existence invisible. Those who ventured into the forest were considered not brave, but foolhardy.

I sensed that we were not alone in the seacave. A sinuous shadow clung to the sloping wall. A shimmer of movement, and I recognized the distinctive humpback profile of a cormorant. Its name is Old French meaning sea crow. Here along the coast, the big, clumsy-looking black bird rates more scorn than that other clever scavenger, the raven. Even Indian legend paints the cormorant as less than noble. In a Bella Coola tale, Cormorant is tricked by Raven. In a fit of jealousy over Cormorant's superior
fishing skills, Raven bites out the tongue of the larger seabird. The two return to the village where Raven takes all the credit for their fine catch. All Cormorant can do is grunt and gurgle.

But the bird in front of me did not do even that. We exchanged wary glances. The bird was anything but indifferent to our presence, its feet clenched nervously on a crumbling sandstone perch. Cormorant, too, had sought safety within the earth, but now its haven was jeopardized by two creatures with wooden wings. To get out, it must go through. Safety, if it existed, could be found only by flying directly into the perceived danger; a dilemma I, too, had confronted.

After Utah, Evan went to Colorado. I still had a couple of weeks to wait before I could load a trailer and drive the six-hundred miles to Montana. So I wandered the Olympic Peninsula. I told my in-laws I was off to do research for a story, but in truth, my story idea was so vague as to be non-existent.

I drove out to Cape Flattery, but missed the turn-off and got lost in a maze of logging roads and clearcuts. Frustrated and disgusted with myself, I decided to skip the Cape Flattery lighthouse and headed for the hiking trails at Lake Ozette. That afternoon, I packed a lunch and water bottle and struck out on the three-mile long trail across
the narrow coastal strip of Olympic National Park for Cape Alava. At least I couldn’t get lost here, I told myself since the trail was a truncheon boardwalk over a swampy snarl of salal, devil’s club, wild blackberry and marshlands. Sitka Spruce grows so tall here that the sky seemed not to exist. Neither did sound. Not a twitter of songbird nor a whisper of wind penetrated what local writer Aaron Elkins called "the dark place." Usually, I took comfort in this closed-in, interior world. It suited me, confirmed my sense of isolation. But that day, as I hiked along the rolling corridor, alone in nature’s womb, I found the solitude unnerving, and rather than mindlessly daydreaming, I was frantically alert.

I walked faster until my heart rate was elevated to that of a brisk jog. I was alone and the knowledge did not reassure me. Running from my past, I was unable to face my future. Then, on the boardwalk in front of me, I spied a mound of fresh bear scat, still steamy warm, plump with scarlet berries. I ran the last quarter mile to the beach, peering over my shoulder every few steps. I broke out of the forest into the open on a bluff above the beach. Below, the whoosh of surf and a clear horizon marked not the westernmost stretch of the continent, but the eastern edge of the Pacific Ocean. Moments later, down on the beach, I stumbled across the bloated brown corpse of an elephant seal, a jagged hole blown in its side by some fool’s rifle.
On the hike back, I followed on the heels of a mother and her two small children to bolster my courage.

Courage rarely failed the Makah. Too much was at stake. Eight men in hand-carved cedar canoes set out into the rolling surge of the Pacific with a yew-shafted harpoon and four sealskin floats. Not for a joyride. Not to do a little salmon trolling. But to kill a whale.

They didn’t hunt the relatively small killer whale, but the giant grey on its migrations between Alaska and Mexico. I tried to imagine this. What hunger in the belly, what depth of knowledge of the sea and its marine life, what belief in fate allowed them to even contemplate the task—spearing a one-hundred ton giant with a peeled stick from an open canoe some twenty-five miles out to sea.

Only the Makahs and the Quileutes on the Olympic’s west coast and the Nootkas of Vancouver Island undertook this feat. The Makahs were guided by powerful ritual and painstaking preparation, the greatest burden falling to the village chief and his wife. The chief was often the harpooner, responsible for guiding the paddlers in close to the whale and then driving the lance deep into the animal. Back in the village, the chief’s wife would lie motionless in her lodge, not eating or drinking. Her immobility, it was believed, would ensure a docile whale.
Deer as tame as ponies tucked their black noses into the hollow behind their forelegs as they slept in the tall grass alongside the trail. I counted eight pair -- does with speckle-haunched fawns. Three yearlings nipped off dainty mouthfuls of grass as they meandered ahead of me on the trail. I felt like a girl again, bringing home the cows for the evening milking.

About a mile down the beach, a cedar plank house marked the boundary of the Ozette Indian Reservation and Olympic National Park. The Ozettes, a branch of the Makahs, lived here for more than 4,000 years. It was a treacherous life wedged between the battering surf and the steep clay bank above them. From time to time, storms loosened the soil and it would give way, burying the settlement in a flood of clay. But the Makah, like the builders of Troy, would return again and again to erect still another village.

In the 1970s, archaeologists from Washington State University began a dig that uncovered a 500-year-old village and thousands of artifacts--paddles, yew bows, fishing gear, baskets. The scholars left some years ago, reburying the site to protect what remains. The grass there grows thickly now, impossible to tell exactly where the excavation took place. The Makah Indian Nation raised the plank longhouse as a memorial. A bench and fire ring, and a scattering of wooden objects whose significance I did not know, were the
only objects inside. In front of the door was a jumble of bleached whale vertebra the size of end-tables. A roughly lettered plaque read:

From Osett endings have become beginnings
At Osett comes new understandings

When we took our positions in the boat, we did so instinctively, without discussion. I’ve noticed that most couples follow the same pattern: woman in front, man in back. Do we do this out of some predisposition or cultural conditioning? Is it simply more practical, since the woman is often smaller, making it easier for a man to see over? Or is it because the person in back does the steering, controls the rudder, dictates the direction of travel?

We pointed the bow of our boat towards the isosceles triangle of Protection Island guarding the mouth of Discovery Bay. Our navigational landmark, as it was for Captain Vancouver two centuries earlier, was a snowy arrow of glacial ice that hovered in the distance above the island. Vancouver, ever the pragmatic Englishman, named this snow-capped peak after his cartographer, third lieutenant Joseph Baker. But to the natives this "Mt. Baker" was "The Great White Watcher." They believed she was the landing place for a canoeload of children, the sole
survivors of a great flood. It was in the charge of these young people that the Indians put their hope for the future.

As our kayak coasted into the lee shore of Protection Island, what looked like oblong lumps of rock suddenly came alive. Dozens of harbor seals splashed into the water in an unfolding wave, the stench of moldering dung wafting behind. Soulful, wet brown eyes popped up around us so that I felt inspected by a hundred pairs of alien periscopes. When I stared back, there was an affronted slap and the inquisitor was gone. A lone female stood her ground on the beach, thrusting her body between us and the bewildered pup huddled near her flippers. We slipped away from shore.

The island is no longer a protector, it's protected—a national wildlife refuge. Over seventy percent of Puget Sound’s seabirds nest there—tufted puffin, pigeon guillemots, pelagic cormorants, and glaucous-winged gulls. More than half of all the rhinoceros auklets in the contiguous United States, over 17,000 pair, nest on this 48-acre slab of sandy cliff face, one of only two islands suitable for the burrowing sea-birds in the entire, 1,000 plus island Puget Sound archipelago.

Biologists have sectioned off the nesting sites, pounding little numbered signs into the grassy headlands until they resemble barrack assignments at boot camp. Thousands of broom handle-sized auklet and tufted puffin burrows strafed the cliffside. The burrows were empty for
the moment, abandoned like summer camp. So, too, were the few faded A-frames remaining on the grassy plateau atop the island, an enterprising developer’s make-my-fortune gone sour.

Vancouver, too, came pursuing a dream—the Northwest Passage, an Interstate 90 from Plymouth to Cathay. He, like the Spaniards and Russians before him, had been lured by the tales of "theoretical geographers" who insisted the Strait of Amain existed somewhere between the 47th and 48th parallel. The most compelling of these were the stories of a legendary Greek pilot, one Juan de Fuca. His Marco Polo-like story told of a fruitful land, "rich in gold, silver, pearle and other things."

Vancouver found no gold or pearle here. The gem of this wet land was of a different color. "...the land," reads his log, "was entirely covered with trees..." As we rounded the west end of Protection Island, Vancouver’s vista opened before us. The sandy cliffs described in his journal ascended gracefully from the shore to craggy snow-topped mountains, but the undulating carpet of green that so impressed Vancouver showed the passage of too many trammeling feet. Its once velvety surface was threadbare and worn where clearcuts checkerboard the hillsides. On the highways of the Olympic Peninsula, frenzied caravans of loaded logging trucks race from mountainside to dockside. The pungent scent of fresh-cut evergreen perfume the air,
teasing out memories of winter holidays. The smell and memory were fleeting, however, overpowered by diesel exhaust, the whine of chain saws and the growl of massive loaders as Vancouver's successors extract the Northwest's green-gold treasure.

We angled back toward the boat launch at Port Williams, our take-out point, a round trip of about ten nautical miles. My shoulders complained, but I was surprised at how quickly I was adapting to this amphibian form of travel. Just off Travis Spit, fountains of water shot into the air a quarter mile ahead of us. We stopped paddling and drifted broadside to the spray. Then again. One two three spouts--of different heights and irregularly timed. "Orcas?" I wondered out loud. To Evan, I said: "Let's look. Come on!" Suddenly revived, I dug my paddle into the water. Sweat ran down my forehead. My shirt clung to my back. The unpredictably appearing spouts stayed tantalizingly out of reach.

"Faster," I called out. I didn't understand what sudden desire overtook me at that moment. Orcas, more notoriously known as killer whales, can swim at speeds of thirty miles an hour. We couldn't possibly catch them if they were swimming away, but maybe, just maybe, they were circling toward us. It was impossible to tell from where we sat so low in the water.
I was caught up by the chase. I’m still not sure what I expected to happen if we did suddenly find ourselves bobbing above a breaching pod of nine-ton whales. Local kayakers often tell of encounters with the black and white mammals. Their voices are hushed, reverent, as if they’d found themselves on the brink of danger, only to look over the edge and find it filled with cushioning clouds. One kayaking friend described how he was overtaken by a pod that slowed its speed to match his, rhythmically cascading over the surface as man and whale surged forward, the sound from the whales’ blowholes like the whoosh of hot-air balloons. A calf loped playfully beneath his boat, almost, but never quit touching it. "It was spiritual," he said.

"They’re gone."

I lifted my head. My arms sagged, heart settling into a more subdued rhythm. The whales had slipped through the slot between Travis and Gibson Spits into the wide, sandy-bottomed Sequim Bay. By the time we rounded the spit, there was no sign of them. Disappointed, we turned back to the boat ramp. Maybe I was too aggressive in my pursuit of the spiritual experience. Perhaps I too keenly wanted my own Orca tale to tell. I know this: for a fleeting, untested moment, I had no fear of what lay beneath me in those shadowy waters.
The night after I ran away from that unseen bear on the boardwalk to Cape Alava, I tried to sleep in my van, parked alongside Lake Ozette in a crowded campsite. I tried to block out battering thoughts about loneliness, home, purpose. In the darkness, I heard a sound like evergreen needles dribbled across a metal roof, except the sound wasn’t coming from outside, but inside. I flicked on the overhead light. The sound evaporated. Lights off. The titter again.

I rolled over to face the front and turned on the light. There—a flash of gray, a little spaghetti strand of tail disappearing under the front seat. A mouse. As long as the light stayed on, the mouse stayed hidden. The instant I flipped off the switch, the mouse scampered out, scavenging for crumbs on the van floor. I turned the light on, got up and opened the front doors. I stomped on the floor, hoping to scare it outside. The mouse only cowered beneath the dashboard. I wanted to laugh, but I couldn’t.

What was I to do? I wailed to myself. I imagined the little gray creature clawing its way up onto my bed, scurrying across my sleeping bag, across my face. I tried to use reason, but I hadn’t any left. I could go for help, but from whom? The park ranger? Evan? I didn’t even know exactly where Evan was, and even if I did, what then? I wanted to cry. I wanted to go home.
I took my sleeping bag outside and spent a sleepless night huddled on the top of a picnic table.

Our last night on the water. We put in at dusk under a full moon, our destination the far end of Dungeness Spit, a five-and-a-half mile sliver of sand and tangled driftwood that grows off the mainland. Vancouver again, naming it after a place he knew in England. The sky was crystal clear. The water in Dungeness Harbor, nearly cut off from the bay by the pinchers of Cline and Graveyard Spits, as serene as a glass of wine. We slipped off shore, hardly daring to touch paddles to water. By some unexplained fate, the sun and moon were exactly the same height above the horizon, directly opposed to each other on a 180-degree plane like two giant medicine balls balanced at the end of an invisible barbell. Mi, the sun, and Niaba, the moon, the Indians say, each quarreling over who shall rule their children. Since they can reach no agreement, the legend goes, they must content themselves with endlessly chasing each other’s trail across the sky. Their reflections shimmered on the water, inching towards each other like the fingers of two parents longing to capture for themselves the heart of the child between them.

I wanted that moment to last forever, where day and night hung in balance, lightness and darkness in equilibrium, reflecting, revealing. But even as I thought
this, the balanced shifted. The lower edge of the sun touched the horizon, spilling shafts of orange and yellow light across the water surface like a slashed sack of shelled corn skittering across a floor. The globe of silver, the guardian of the dark place, rose in triumph. And then, like a royal herald, a sound pierced the moment. A sound that sent me back in time, through childhood memories of the North woods, on to a far distant unknowable past.

To some, the loon’s wail seems pathetic, the "cry of the deeply insane." For me, the sound loosened the twisted knot I had carried in my stomach all summer. The call of the loon, the most ancient of living birds, harkens to our first days as humans, connects us somehow to those primitive, deep recesses of the human mind. Biologist Sigurd Olson called this racial memory, the ability of a person to recall, however vaguely, the common thoughts, feelings or experiences of ancestors from thousands of years back. I felt this fleeting ribbon of shared memory ripple through me, connecting me to Makah and Clallam, Raven and Cormorant, Orca and grey whale, to Captain Vancouver and a mythical Greek pilot, to the rooted flanks of the Great White Watcher itself.

A second loon echoed the first’s quivering aria.
At that moment, I discovered something I should have known all along. Loon answers loon. Each gives the other its turn—his moment of expression, her moment of reflection. It occurred to me that a loon never calls that it does not expect an answer. "Sister, Brother, Mother, Father," it trills. "Are you there? Hear me."

Evan’s voice floated softly across the water from some distant place, not the arm’s reach away that he was. "Ready?"

I lifted my paddle with a sense of purpose and connectedness I hadn’t known for some time. "Yes," I said, dipping the paddle into the water. Leading the way.