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The Healthy and Happy Garden

Julie Houghton Keith

A Thesis

in

The Department

of

English

**Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts at
Concordia University
Montréal, Québec, Canada**

July 1989

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ABSTRACT

The Healthy and Happy Garden

Julie Houghton Keith

The Healthy and Happy Garden is a collection of five stories in which my chief concern has been to explore relationships between characters, especially as they are affected by differences in nature between men and women and by their consequent, sometimes lifelong misreadings of one another. Within these explorations I set out to develop my themes: pain, power, parenthood, the desire for love, and, by implication, such opposing notions as the death of illusion, loss, entrapment, the euphoria of revelation. I have attempted to employ a disinterested, knowing voice whose syntax and vocabulary have deliberately reflected the characters' own language and mentality. I have also made extensive use of imagery in order to inject a sense of inevitability into the events of each story and to suggest, at the same time, the power to deal with these events that each character does possess (whether she or he knows it or not).

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Slightly different versions of the story "Falling" were published in The Fiddlehead and later in Souvenirs, edited by P. Scott Lawrence.

* * * * *

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THE HEALTHY AND HAPPY GARDEN

Elizabeth pauses at the lookout. The view, almost the whole of the harbour and the city on the near side of the island, still dazzles her. Lately, she has stopped often to savour it. Because she knows their time here is growing short. And because there is something addictive about such an offering, such spectacular beauty. Incredible. The word has been used so often, it has no meaning. But think of San Francisco, think of Vancouver, Elizabeth has said many times. And make it steeper. Tip up the hills ten degrees until you can hardly believe the whole glittering impossible city won't go sliding into the water. Whether from the island or from Kowloon, to face the harbour is to stare down and down. The view is incredible. The buildings shine. One is actually golden.

Now she accelerates and wrenches the car into the hairpin turn. The next curve affords another fabulous view, but Elizabeth is too busy, feet pressed on the clutch and brake...she almost stands on them, as though she personally

were holding the car against the side of the mountain. The houses up here are all new. A development which has made some enterprising Chinese entrepreneur rich. Three hundred million is the figure they have heard. The entrance sign is in English and Chinese. Hong Lok Yuen - The Healthy and Happy Garden. Place names here in China are often sweet and slightly comical; sometimes they are beautiful...the sun moon lake, the silver leaf garden... Rodney's company owns this house. It leases an apartment on the island too, but the house is for men with wives when they come out for the obligatory year. Sometimes it is longer, but for Elizabeth and Rodney it will be just this one year. The company needs him back in Montreal.

And the year has been perfect. The things left behind - her masters in clinical psychology, her lover who is dumber but nicer than her husband and nearly as handsome, the running club and the squash league - all of it can wait a year. The exile has been a relief, almost a pleasure in itself...the sense of unreality here, of being out of time, which will of course begin to tick again a couple of months from now when they return to Canada. Here they go to the races, a scene in which the sport is entirely subservient to a display of frenzied gambling. Here they play tennis at a friend's club, since squash is for men only. At home she would be wild about such an exclusion. Here it doesn't

matter. None of it matters...and besides there is always the intoxication of the view.

Elizabeth parks and jams on the brake. She gets out of the car and leans back into it for the first load of packages. The maid, the older one who is always eager to help, will come rushing down soon enough. Elizabeth finds this obsequiousness embarrassing, that she, tall and strong, should be waited upon by the tiny, tea-coloured old lady. Trying to forestall some of this service, Elizabeth makes a point of carrying the packages up the steeper part of the steps, almost to the door. The yellow steps crisscross twice, zippering up what passes as their front garden but is in fact only a small, straggling hedge of flowering bushes that more or less lines the steps. Elizabeth has made a point of not learning their names, these bushes with the big cerise flowers that bloom and fall in a day. She hates gardening. It is all the English women here talk about. No, that's not true. They talk about servants and schools and how soon they will travel back to beloved England. The Canadians and the Americans are better. Though at first stunned by the heat, the humidity that in summer presses down like death itself, they rally. They're not quite so conceited, Elizabeth has decided. Some of them try to learn Chinese. She herself studies Mandarin down at the university. She knows about sixty characters now. She cannot,

however, talk to the maids, who speak only the language of Canton.

Up the first flight, she feels her heart rate pick up. She is still fit in spite of much less exercise, no place to run. The maid has appeared at the top of the stairs, hustling to relieve Elizabeth. There goes the white man's burden, she thinks handing over the first set of packages. She is starting back down when Mr. Chen's chauffeur-driven Datsun wheels around the final bend into the Healthy and Happy Garden. The top of a round, black head barely shows in the rear window as the Datsun passes Elizabeth and pulls into the driveway of the house next door. Mr. Chen is their neighbour. He is unfailingly pleasant and polite, fluent in a mad sort of English that has no articles, definite or indefinite, and is all expressed in the present tense. "Street very high here. You drive fast-fast, climb hill..." The Datsun is large, heavy, ominously silent. Mr. Chen is rumoured to have underworld connections. His car, she is sure, doesn't whine in the steep curves the way her car does.

"Hello." She waves and smiles. Mr. Chen bows. Elizabeth bows back. It is impossible to resist the impulse.

They have never seen the inside of the Chen house, she and Rodney. They never will. Chinese society is closed. Everyone has told them this...how Hong Kong is a series of parallel worlds...how a gap unbridgeable runs between them.

At the beginning Elizabeth tried, as her American friends tell her they too have tried. "Come to dinner," she said one afternoon to Mrs. Chen. They were standing in the street at the time. Mrs. Chen was a small, lacquered woman, younger by far than Mr. Chen. At the moment she looked very surprised...but surprised in a neutral way, not as if Elizabeth had said something remarkable, but as if there had been a flash of light or a sudden loud noise. Then she shooed her little boys toward the steps.

The two came scampering directly toward Elizabeth. She could see the ironed pleats in their matching red shorts, the stitched cuffs, the designer insignias on their miniature red and white rigger shirts. The elder, who was perhaps five or six years old, ducked his head politely as he passed. But the littler boy appeared not to notice her presence at all. Hustling to catch up with his brother, he actually lurched into her leg and then stumbled and fell at her feet.

Bending to collect him, she felt immensely pale and tall. A foreign guardian angel bending to rescue the little Chinese boy. And what a very little boy he was. Flickering and fragile in her hands...his cowlicky hair a crown of black flames...his elfin arms no more than willow wands in the soft jersey. Yet, as she set him on his feet, he sprang strongly from her grasp and flew toward the stairs. His wild dash continued to the first landing. Then, as sudden-

ly, there he was peering back down at her through the railing, his small face split into a gummy, impudent grin. She gave him a quick wave, but already he was scrambling up the next flight of yellow stairs.

Mrs. Chen gazed after him with anxious eyes. She still had not moved from where she stood, and she looked, in her white linen suit and platform sandals, both perfect and untouchable.

"Next Wednesday," said Elizabeth turning to her. "Or Thursday. What about Thursday?" Mrs. Chen stopped gazing. She blinked as though Elizabeth had wakened her. Then she nodded her head and smiled. The smile made her eyes disappear. The oval green stones at her ears quivered. She said nothing. "Yes?" persisted Elizabeth.

Mrs. Chen smiled some more. Her poppy-coloured mouth slowly closed, then opened, then closed and opened again. "May...be..." was what she had said. The syllables stood apart like separate words.

"With the Chinese, yes means maybe," said Rodney that night. "Maybe means no." He was cleaning his pipe and paused to glance up at her.

"Well, it s maddening," replied Elizabeth, who had been stalking around the living room while she pondered the incident in the street. She could still feel the frail arms

in her grasp. "Their little boy must have bones like a bird's," she added. "Tiny, tiny...I picked him up."

"They're a very small people," said Rodney. "The southern Chinese are a very small people." He set his pipe on the table beside him and took a swallow of his drink. Then he laughed and shook his head. "They're nuts too, you know. The staff brought in the Fung Shui man again today...for that new office we're setting up. We had to move the sofa to an inside wall; the joss wasn't good..." He shook his head again. "Speaking of small, he was the smallest guy you ever saw...about three feet tall...and he had a ton of incense with him. He said there were monsters in the board room..."

"You'd think she'd know I wasn't a monster," said Elizabeth grumpily. "I mean, I was nice to him. I picked him up..." Rodney shrugged then. The Chens were out of reach...for whatever reasons of cultural disjunction. Elizabeth knew that. She went on complaining for another minute, but she knew Rodney was right. There was nothing to do but give it up.

Now as she continues her descent, kicking a fallen pink flower out of her path, Mr. Chen has reached his own front door, which is almost as high up as Elizabeth's. The door slams a second later. Is the interior filled with the smell of incense and dark, heavy furniture, carved wooden cabinets

and chests, inlaid tables, enamelled brass vases more beautiful than jewels? Elizabeth can imagine all this. She has seen these wares in the thousands of shops that line the angled streets of the city and cluster under the great hotels that rise along the harbour. The objects are beautiful, mysterious. Elizabeth cannot conceive of owning such things. In fact she has shopped very little, a fact remarkable in a city that is a shopper's paradise. Nothing? Nothing? Her friends say she is crazy. When will she ever have such an opportunity again? The prices! Everything so cheap. "Wery chip," say the shopkeepers, standing in the doorways, holding out the silk, the pearls, the watches with games and computers built miraculously into their flat shells... But Elizabeth says no and no again.

She wants to move through the streets unencumbered. For here in Hong Kong, it is the streets themselves that are her love...the high-up views being almost too much. She cannot be forever gazing in awe. She wanders up and down the streets of Kowloon with Ted, threading through the perpetual crowd, looking around, looking up at the thicket of signs, peering eagerly down every alley and around every corner, breathing in the smell which is sometimes incense, sometimes fish, sometimes just heat and humidity and bodies. Overhead the streets are forested with neon signs. Red and yellow Chinese characters cover the whole street, hanging above the people's heads like branches and leaves, blocking

out half the sky. In the first months when she knew no Chinese, the characters were designs, beautiful arcane symbols. Now she searches among them for the few she knows, so the effect is different though still exotic.

Ted loves these meanderings, says he loves her. Instinctively she knows that the more magical she finds Hong Kong, the more star-struck she is, the more he will love her. Always before she has picked tall, handsome specimens, fastidiously making her choice as though she meant to breed by them or to make some statement about her own taste. But Ted is short, stocky, and grey-haired, though younger than she. His hair curls in tight spirals all over his head and down the back of his neck in two parallel smudges. He says his hair is something else since he came to Hong Kong. He can't do a thing with it. His glasses are thick and dark-framed so that each time when he takes them off, his large, kind eyes surprise her. Each time. There is a kind of pause each time, a moment when everything hovers, the possibilities are uncountable. She feels a shiver of fear then - what might happen if she were to love him back - until he takes her into his arms, and safe again she closes her eyes inside his protective embrace.

Since the top of his head comes up only to her eyes, since he stomps along the frantic streets looking pleased and vaguely surprised at his good fortune, to have her, the tall, the blonde, the perfect clear profile, beside him, she

has never worried about being seen with him. Though they have met acquaintances, even mutual friends, no gossip has floated through their crowd. Elizabeth would know if there were talk. People's behaviour would show it. Sudden silences, eyes that drop and are then resolutely raised to confront one's own. She knows how it is. Perhaps it is Ted's air of innocent enjoyment that protects them, even more than their physical disparity. At any rate she knows, with the certainty of instinct, that they are safe.

Coming into Hong Kong on the last flight from Taipei, she and Rodney had hardly bothered to stare out the window. It was dark, and they were so tired, both of them, that they had run out of thoughts. Surely it couldn't matter what sight they glimpsed first, some disconnected view from the plane. But they had gasped over it, literally. Behind them a woman stifled a cry. The plane swept down the harbour between the great tall buildings, actually below their summits. She and Rodney had peered out the plane's window right into balconies, seen directly into the lit windows of apartment buildings. Feeling Rodney lean across her, press against her breast as he looked out, she succumbed for a moment to hope. The two of them here in this exotic city, extracted from the old life, perhaps... But a glance at Rodney's profile, the lift of his eyebrow, the satisfied

thrust of his lips - he was nodding to himself; probably someone had told him about the flight approach - this single glance chilled her. No, the adventure here would belong to the city itself, to a world of people whose rough black hair was the antithesis of her own, whose eyes hid unknowable meaning behind an epicanthus.

The first week there were cocktail parties. The English-speaking expatriots had their own world, established and apart, but for Elizabeth and Rodney there was a whole crowd of temporary exiles like themselves. They were greeted with open arms and trays of drinks. New Blood. She met Ted at the second party. Someone at the firm had chartered the Rothschild junk to cruise down the islands for an evening. Cold wine and beer were served as they churned through the misty night. In the distance a line of lights marked the edge of the land. Hills, blacker than the sky, rose up against the clouds. There was even a moon shining through the mist. With the warm, wet air blowing through her hair, Elizabeth had sat staring out across the water. She felt placid as a child, perfectly content with whatever might blow out of the mist. The atmosphere was magical, mysterious...yet friendly.

Ted sat down beside her and offered to share his beer since she appeared to have nothing to drink. He asked her when they had come out and the other usual questions. How long would they stay? And where? What did they think of

the life? And then, when she turned to face him, he held up his hand.

"Stop," he ordered and, reaching over, tipped her head away from him. "There." He traced the line of her profile with his finger - forehead, nose, mouth and chin - and sent her heart racing. "There," he said again. "It's perfect. I thought so." His hand cupped her chin for a second and then dropped so that she could turn and stare at him. Her heart was still thudding. "You don't see all that many perfect things," he was explaining quite seriously. "At least not perfect living things. Are you nice too?"

"No," said Elizabeth.

He nodded - she could see the faint light move up and down his face - and then after a moment remarked, as though continuing their conversation, that she would love Hong Kong.

"And love you too, I suppose," said Elizabeth in the same harsh voice.

"I hope so," he told her.

When they reached the floating restaurant a little while later, he handed her up off the boat. Returned her. Her fingers felt weak in his hand, and then she was standing on the pier and Rodney was calling to her, and she was peering at her hand to see...to see what?

It should have been impossible. He was short. He looked like Henry Kissinger if he looked like anyone. She

would never have wanted to have his children. But she went on being bemused by him. Almost dazzled. He was such a surprise. Such a character really. He didn't appear to follow any of the rules. He invoked none of the usual conventions, took none of the usual steps. He was, in a way, absurd.

"We'll get married," he informed her. It sounded like a child's declaration, and he made it, the first time, so soon after they began to see each other that she didn't even believe him.

"It's just my profile," she said, fishing but cutting off the nonsense too.

She has liked being beautiful these last years. It's a way of offering something, of satisfying people, without actually having to do anything.

Ted admitted he loved to look at her. He said he didn't know why he loved her though; the point was he did. He was waiting for her to love him too. To him the issue was simple. Marriage was their destiny, the natural end to their affair. "You'll have to keep your shoes on at the wedding," he informed her and covered her bare feet with his own. "Terrible," he said affectionately, putting his arms around her, and she felt that even her feet, white and bony as fish skeletons, were appealing in his eyes. "Our wedding..." he said with perfect seriousness. He seemed utterly confident that one day this would all come about.

"I just do," he said, explaining his love. "You could do anything, you could cut off your head, and I'd still love you."

"I'd be dead," said Elizabeth.

"You would?"

He didn't press her to tell Rodney. When she was ready, she would. That was all. Nor was she allowed to complain about her husband. "It's better if he's perfect."

"He's not," said Elizabeth. "He's terminally shallow. He's..."

She would have gone on, but he stopped her. "Don't."

From time to time he announced they would be having children. On occasion he favoured all girls, more often a mixture. "At least three."

"I can't! No babies." Clutching comically at her stomach, she felt no need to explain she spoke the literal truth. It was all too fantastic.

He even quoted poetry to her. "Of course, Yeats isn't perfect, but listen to this. 'Remember then...'" And he lifted eyes to her face with an expression so full of love she felt herself sway. Was this how it could have been? Almost she loved him back then, as if by reflex, the way she bowed back to Mr. Chen. The sound of his voice ran all through her. "'...how one man loved the pilgrim soul in you and loved the sorrows of your changing face...'"

"How do you know about my sorrows?" she asked startled.

"I know," Ted told her. But she turned away then and wouldn't look at him.

For several years now, she has been floating. The appeal of the absence of pain has thrived on the memory of pain. The death of the baby. The defection of Rodney. The months of sickness. These events have receded into the more distant and therefore bearable past. And lately Hong Kong, shimmering and unreal, has reinforced this idea, that she can somehow stay out of life. Married to Rodney, privy to the smaller pleasures, she believes she has made her bargain.

Ted's kiss, his hand on her head, were like blessings. She was not to worry. In time it would all come out right. "It's okay," he said and helped her to button her dress.

And this is how he is. Elizabeth can close her eyes any time and feel the warm bath of his confidence, his fingers climbing steadily up her back. He doesn't struggle over the moments. Things will go his way in the end. Such is his credo, his faith. In business he has made a good deal of success on this basis; his acquisitions have been swift, his decisions for the most part correct. The Chinese have told him they can feel his luck.

Elizabeth is standing in the street now, the last of the packages in her arms. Bored with climbing and carrying,

she glances up to see if the maid has reappeared and instead sees Mr. Chen pop out of his own door. Both his arms are high in the air. He is waving them as though they are flagpoles. He is screaming something. The chauffeur leaps out of the Datsun and shouts something back. Mr. Chen screams again. He is really screaming. Not even saying anything, just screaming. The chauffeur goes bounding up the stairs, taking them two at a time, zigzagging up. Mr. Chen starts down, stumbles, picks himself up. He and the chauffeur meet. Mr. Chen speaks, and the chauffeur continues on up and rushes into the house leaving the door wide open. Elizabeth's maid has appeared at the top of their stairs and starts down. Elizabeth watches her for a second and then, compelled by Mr. Chen's frenzy, walks over to meet him. He is plunging down the last steps, practically falling. Elizabeth stops, uncertain what is wrong. Because clearly something is. The man's face is distorted, his mouth wide and curved like a tragedy mask. All his teeth show. He flings himself at Elizabeth and clutches her arm.

"What is it? What is it?" she asks. Her packages fall into the street. He is saying something to her. His fingers hurt her arm. Above them she sees the chauffeur come out of the house. He leans over the railing and vomits. Beside her, more or less into her ear, Mr. Chen is saying something, repeating something. In Cantonese. The syllables are like bells ringing. Her maid has come up to them

and peers at Elizabeth and then at Mr. Chen. She says something to him. For a second he ignores her, then turns and says something in return. As he speaks, her mouth drops. She shakes her head as if to say no, no. She turns and stares at Elizabeth. It is one of those moments between time. Get me out of this, thinks Elizabeth. Don't tell me!

"Dead," says the maid. She hesitates and then places her fingers and thumbs around her neck. She doesn't know the word for strangle, thinks Elizabeth.

There is a sound like a growl or a moan. Mr. Chen is making it through his nostrils which are distended and white.

"What?" says Elizabeth. "Who...?" The chauffeur is coming down the stairs toward them. His eyes are wide and stunned. He wipes his chin with a handkerchief. Elizabeth thinks it's lucky he had one and, then, that none of this can be happening. She hears her own voice, far away, knife-thin. "Dead? Who's dead?"

The maid says something interrogative to Mr. Chen, who nods without ceasing his keening.

"The children too," says the maid in a voice like stones dropping. She blinks, then blinks again. Tears well out of her old, heavy-lidded eyes.

"Everyone's dead?" says Elizabeth to no one in particular. This cannot be happening. Mr. Chen has begun to sway, and she puts her arm around the small shoulders. A

smell rises from his head. Vegetable oil frying, thinks Elizabeth. She will remember this and the rough wool of his suit against her fingertips... Not the children.

"Did you phone the police?" she says to the chauffeur. He stares at her. "Police," she says in Mandarin. Mr. Chen is still swaying in the curve of her arm. "Telephone..." The chauffeur turns around and looks up at the house, then turns again and looks back at Elizabeth. He appears stymied. "My house," she tells him. He nods then and runs along the sidewalk and up her stairs, still wiping his mouth with the handkerchief.

That night there is a party. Elizabeth says she can't go. Rodney says it will do her good. After all there is nothing she can do for the Chens. For Mr. Chen. Which is true. Hordes of relatives have arrived next door. The police are still there. The street is a mess of people. The whole Healthy and Happy Garden has been cordoned off. There will be no more crimes there. Not for the time being. And the party will give her something else to think about.

Elizabeth puts on a great deal of makeup and a silver-coloured dress. It is of heavy smooth silk, bare at the top with narrow straps. With her shining dress and hair and round, unfocused eyes she looks softer than usual, more beautiful in fact. Even Rodney, usually taciturn on such subjects, is moved to comment on this. "Gorgeous," he tells

her. He reaches out and touches her shoulder, as though he's making sure she's real. "Better take a sweater," he adds after a moment. "You know what the air conditioning is in these places."

At the party she leans on the men's arms and laughs at everything they say. Wives are annoyed until word gets around and eventually she is accorded a measure of tolerance. She drinks champagne, at one point spilling a full glass, but the silver dress dries and the streaks barely show. After the cocktail party, she and Rodney and two other couples take a taxi to the Regent Hotel. This is in the nature of a treat and has required some discussion. The Regent Hotel is staggeringly expensive. It is also possibly the most elegant hotel in the world and certainly the most elegant that they have ever seen. Rolls Royces line up outside to take the hotel guests wherever they wish to go. Inside, the entrance lobby is all polished marble that gleams like clear ice. A wide alabaster staircase curves up and out of sight like a certain path to the angels. At the next level down, a long series of picture windows reveals the whole harbour and the illuminated gold and silver skyscrapers of Hong Kong rising out of the water and reaching up one behind the other and behind them the mountains rising still higher.

The hotel is indeed heavily air conditioned. Elizabeth shivers - she has left her sweater at the party - and one of

the men gallantly rubs her arms. Rodney is doing the women in his urbane way, lighting a cigarette and indicating his office building with it. "Fabulous city," he says to the couple who are newcomers. "You'll go crazy shopping," he tells the women. "Everything in the world is for sale here."

They decide to eat in the grill downstairs. Everyone in Hong Kong is forever sick of Chinese food even though it is Cantonese and the best in the world. Dinner will of course be expensive, but this is business promo. The two men are exporters. They will want to get money out of the country, sell goods in Canada, arrange deals. The Hong Kong stock exchange is kaput, one of the men tells Rodney. Rodney nods. He will be able to help them, his expression implies.

The waiter leads them to a table by the window. Another waiter places their napkins in their laps. This performance has always amused Elizabeth; tonight it makes her feel hysterical. She wants to ask if they will help her blow her nose.

"Yes, it was awful," she replies to one of the women who has solicitously asked about the events of the afternoon. And then gradually she becomes aware - she can hear her own voice going on and on with a description of the stairs and the three Chinese people and herself climbing and descending - she becomes aware that she feels nothing at all

about what she is saying. It is like waking up dead. She hears these people, she sees them, but they are not really here. Or she is not really here. She rubs her arms. Tomorrow, of course, she will read about the deaths in the English language paper. She will know how they died, the mother and the two little boys, will know who killed them perhaps. And then, surely, she will feel what any normal human being would feel.

Fingering the edges of her napkin, she sits up straighter in her chair. Across the harbour the skyscrapers appear to have receded; the sheet of water has darkened to a greenish bronze. The colour of storms. Somewhere near the bottom of her stomach, which is pressed against the tight waistband of the silver dress, the knowledge exists, the fear and the sorrow... She knows this. Yet the essence of her remains on the far shore, protected, she would say, by the rift inside her. Once more she sees her maid with hands around her own neck, the chauffeur wiping himself, Mr. Chen swaying in the street...

"Please," she says to the waiter who is pouring out the wine. "More." Rodney glances at her. "Right up," she instructs the waiter, who manages not to look either surprised or disdainful.

She lifts her brimming glass to the others, then drinks and raises the glass to them again, gazing over the rim into their eyes in the Chinese way. She looks from face to face

as if trying to identify them. "Oh, yes," she says coming around to her husband. "You."

"Elizabeth," he says warningly.

They all have steaks, big juicy sirloins. Dead meat, thinks Elizabeth, giving hers a poke. She eats very little and continues to drink. During dessert, which is a fluffy, beige pie that tastes like a brandy alexander, she turns to the man on her right. "I plan to leave Rodney," she tells him by way of conversation.

"For Christ's sake, Elizabeth," says Rodney across the table. "Don't take it out on us." He is being patient, but he looks as if he knows what he'd like to do to her.

Taking his cue from Rodney, the man on her right decides to laugh indulgently. "Sure," he says. "Leave the son of a bitch." The women look taken aback, but the men all laugh. Then the women laugh too.

On the way back to Hong Lok Yuan, Rodney says nothing at first. Before their departure from the Regent Hotel, Elizabeth spent a quarter of an hour throwing up in the marble ladies' room, so perhaps he has put her behaviour down to an excess of wine. Finally, however, when they have broken through the traffic of downtown, he clears his throat. "I wish you wouldn't pull stuff like that," he tells her. "I mean that crap about leaving me. I mean I know you've had a hell of a shock and all that, but..." He

shakes his head and then glances over at her. The headlights of an oncoming car flash over his high-bridged nose. She catches the glint of his eyes as he glances briefly in her direction. Then his features glide into shadow once again. Only the immutable line of his jaw remains visible as a faint, metallic gleam. Like a bronze casting, she thinks, cold to the touch. "...Even though you don't mean it," he says. He has been in the process of changing lanes. Now he guns the car into the first of the upward curves.

"I don't know what I mean," she says.

He glances over at her again. "I hardly see why I'm to blame for some crime that happens next door," he says.

"You're not..."

"Then what's the point of pulling something like that? I mean, if you were trying to make me look like a chump, that was as good a performance as any."

"Sorry," she says then. "I'm sorry." But her voice is flat. She can't remember really how she felt when she said those things in the Regent Hotel. The urge to say them has disappeared. It was the presence of near strangers that prompted her, she is pretty sure, the possibility that their reaction might tell her something she needed to know.

When she married Rodney she loved him, she is sure. She has thought a lot about this question, concluding finally that her emotions at that time were in the range of normal, her reasons for marrying him no more immature than

the average. The two of them seemed right for each other. They were young, full of the usual expectations, ready to marry. They made a handsome couple. That was all.

When the baby died, the grief itself animated her...the pulse of pain through her body, the pulse of anger at fate, and at Rodney. She remembers certain scenes. The flesh-coloured mask of Rodney's face hovering above her as she lay in the hospital bed. His words like lines from a poorly-written play. "Listen...these things happen. The thing is not to let it get you down." The face, his face, nodding at her. His voice descending. "We'll have another one. Don't take it so hard. Maybe next time it'll even be a boy..." She remembers the heat of her rage, how it rose through her neck into her face, how his voice petered out...and later the fever, rising like another, further anger through her body. And finally she remembers the quiet winter afternoon - there had been no visitors that day; snow drifted against the window - and the doctor explaining, in a careful voice, that her adhesions were too extensive, she must never try another pregnancy.

"Not even any little girls," was what she said to Rodney that night, before she turned her head away and tried to weep.

For the breakdown, they gave her more drugs, and counselling, of course, and then a kind of group therapy. People in bathrobes sitting around on metal chairs, the

arguing and crying, the ardent justifying of small cruelties, the silly arrogance of the group leader. This last experience - by its very ineptitude, she has decided since - prompted her first interest in clinical psychology.

When she got out of the hospital, Rodney was living with a trainee from his office. The girl came of unusual parentage, an Egyptian mother and a French father. She was small and dark-haired. Her perfume hung in the air. Elizabeth remembers the smell of it from the afternoon the girl made a pass at her in the back seat of a taxi...this after the three of them had met for a long lunch of the carefully civilized variety.

Oddly enough it was that incident, the incredible moment when the girl's hand came creeping up the back of her neck, insinuating itself like a thief into her hair, that decided Elizabeth. If things were this absurd, why not take Rodney back? What did it matter what he had said, what he had done...what he was, or wasn't? He would be glad enough. She knew that. He thought of the two of them as a couple. He had said that. He was a conventional person. Probably, too, he wanted rescuing. He might even have been ashamed of himself.

Later, when she and Rodney were living together again, Elizabeth laughed about the pass, about the girl's determined seductiveness. But, in another way, she envied the girl her greed. Her lust for contact. Rodney said it was

simple craziness, the girl was a screaming sex maniac. The scene in the taxi had been just more of the same for her. For him, on the other hand - and he had, he said, come to understand this - for him the affair had been a kind of reassurance, an interlude in which to get used to the idea of no children, to make his adjustment so to speak...to get, moreover, through the period of Elizabeth's breakdown, her departure from reality. She ought to understand it had been hard for him too.

The car has committed itself to the last and steepest climb, the hairpin curve up to the very brink of the Healthy and Happy Garden. Suddenly weary, Elizabeth leans her head against the window. Her hair slides across her cheek. She feels its caress like the whisper of someone lost...herself perhaps, or the baby, or the little boys... She thinks of the persistent flame that was the smaller one's body, of his spiky hair and spindly arms... She never touched her own baby. The baby died, tiny and wrinkled, in the incubator. Elizabeth never touched her.

At home, despite her fatigue, she moves restlessly about the house, striding into rooms as if something awaits her there, drifting out again moments later. Rodney gets up to complain that she is keeping him awake and states once again the incontrovertible fact that there is nothing in the world that she can do.

"I know that," she says.

"You're making it worse," he tells her. "You won't let things go..."

"I'm not making it worse," says Elizabeth. "It happened. A horrible, horrible thing..."

He makes a gesture of irritation and retreats to the bedroom. Ten minutes later he is back.

"Look," he says to Elizabeth. "Look, if it really bothers you, we'll move. For these last months. The firm can handle it." He glances at her to see if she is responding and adds that this arrangement will take a week or two to implement.

"To implement?" Elizabeth repeats.

He looks sharply at her, but she makes no sign. "You know what I mean," he says. "The apartment's not just sitting there empty. Not with the rent the firm's carrying on it..."

On paper, Elizabeth is thinking, Rodney still looks good. He really does. Even his height seems an attribute especially directed at her. "It doesn't matter," she says suddenly.

"You're sure?" he asks. She sees the relief smoothing his handsome features. Probably he can't help coming in at the level he does. She ought to remember that. Probably it's the way he's put together. "I mean," he is saying, "I

don't mind. I'll just tell them..." He bends to kiss the top of her head.

"It doesn't matter," she says again and begins to shake her head. "Go to sleep. It wouldn't make any difference if we moved. Dead is dead."

"True," he says agreeably. He has already turned on his heel. A moment later the bedroom door clicks shut.

Feelings are the truest means of knowing. Ted has said this to her many times, that he trusts his feelings. They are the source of his hunches, the secret of his famous, so-called good luck.

In the dimness she smells the incense she bought last week with him in Kowloon. Only one stick of it has been burned, but the faint cinnamon aroma lingers. Finally just before she gives up and goes to bed, she decides to say a prayer for Mr. Chen and his family. Kneeling beside the sofa with her forehead bowed to touch the glass top of the coffee table, she prays to an unknown Chinese god. Help them.

Help me, she thinks of adding. But the enormity of their tragedy is too great to intrude upon. Instead she tiptoes across the carpeted hallway to turn off the lights and feels suddenly in her bare feet and long nightgown, with her prayers said and unsaid, like her own child.

Though they have spoken on the telephone more than once, it is three days before she sees Ted again. They meet for lunch in a restaurant behind the Wing Kowloon Theatre. The ceiling of this restaurant is arched, the interior space marked off by screens, some of these gleaming black, some a milky green inlaid with mother-of-pearl. The black ones give back reflections and, sometimes, reflections of reflections, so that it is impossible to tell which surfaces are real and which will alter or even vanish as they approach. Twice, crossing the room, she catches sight of herself, taller than everyone else in the restaurant, her hair like a shaft of light moving across the flat panel. These fleeting views make her feel safe, as though she has the choice of disappearing at anytime. The owner of the restaurant is a friend of Ted's. He has just bought the place and, part way through the meal, comes over to sit with them. Ted introduces him as C. K. Ng. C. K. comes from a Singapore family which has recently bought a hotel in Hong Kong. Prices of such real estate have dropped drastically since the Thatcher visit, C. K. explains, but his family is confident for the longer run. His older brother is managing the hotel. The restaurant is C. K.'s baby. At the end of lunch, he summons a waiter and speaks to him in a language Elizabeth doesn't recognize. Glasses and a green, lantern-shaped bottle are brought to the table. "From San Francisco," C. K. tells them. He unscrews the top, sniffs at the bottle, and then

pours out three glassfuls. "My mother brought it in last week. Terrific stuff." Elizabeth sips at hers. The flavour is fruity, but she can't decide what it is.

"Melon," says C. K. when they have failed to guess. He leans back in his chair and laughs. "My mother's nuts about sweet liqueurs, especially the bright-coloured ones. She's always bringing some crazy drink back for the restaurant."

C. K. doesn't look to Elizabeth like the usual Chinese businessman. That is, he is not short and round with glued-down hair. Instead he is very slim. Even his face is narrow, and his black hair flops over his eyes when he laughs. He has to brush it back each time with his thin fingers. "What part of the States are you from?" he asks Elizabeth.

She shakes her head. "Canada. Montreal."

"Ah," says C. K. nodding. "McGill. I have two cousins there. One in engineering, one at medical school."

"McGill's where I'm doing my degree," she says. "Or, rather, where I was doing it."

"And now you are in Hong Kong." C. K. nods again. He himself, he goes on to explain, went to Stanford.

"Overseas Chinese," says Ted. "Anywhere you can think of C. K.'s been...or he's got a cousin studying there."

C. K. grins. "But we all come back to Hong Kong now. Like you." He pushes back his chair and gets to his feet. "Listen, I've got to speak to those guys over there before

they leave." He indicates with his head a corner table surrounded by men in dark suits and once more brushes the hair from his face. "You call me later, Ted, say about five. I have news coming from Taipei, okay?" Ted nods, and C. K. turns to Elizabeth. "This guy...I like doing business with this guy. Very lucky."

"Since I came to Hong Kong," says Ted.

C. K. nods. Then he smiles at Elizabeth. "You come to my restaurant again, okay? Come with or without this guy." He glances at Ted. "You call me, okay?"

"Right," says Ted. He and C. K. shake hands.

The restaurant is emptying out now. The businessmen are leaving in groups of two and three, all bowing, all seemingly talking at once. Ted's expression has grown serious. Now he lays his hand over Elizabeth's. "I've been thinking about you."

For a moment she is actually able to imagine what it would be like to lay her head on his hand and weep. Might she even tell him how she has been wondering where and in what sort of place her baby exists? She draws in a breath, but already the impulse is disappearing. Then she shakes her head. "Don't worry about me," she says. "It doesn't bother me. It doesn't matter."

Behind his glasses Ted's eyes open wide. "Of course it matters."

"I mean...that it happened next door doesn't matter. I didn't know them really..."

"You knew them." He looks sad, as if he too remembers standing in the street, the little willow wand arm, the hair like black flames. "You know," he says, "whenever evil surfaces, all kinds of people are shocked and surprised. But you're not surprised. You just can't stand it." He shakes his head. "Some day, you must tell me why."

"Maybe I don't know," she says.

For another moment he holds her hand in both of his. Then he places the hand, her hand, down on the table cloth as if he is giving it back to her. "Come on," he says sounding like a father. "We'll get the bill and take a walk. I have an hour or so, and there's a little jade cat in Wu Ling's window that you have to see." Obediently she unhooks her purse from the chair back. Maybe, she is thinking, maybe the mother of the little boys will watch over the baby now, sing her something Chinese when she cries. Ted pushes his chair back and gets up. Across the room C. K. Ng flashes a smile at them. His sheaf of black hair flops forward as he bows.

During their walk Ted again holds her hand. In spite of the heat, she is glad to feel the warmth against her skin. After a moment she glances sideways at his face. Sweat glistens along his hairline. She thinks of rubbing it away but doesn't.

Just before C. K. joined them at the restaurant, Ted was talking about an apartment he wanted to buy on Hong Kong Island. "...Not brand new like a lot of them. The kind of place we could live in, enough room..." C. K. came over to the table before Ted got any further. At the time, she welcomed being let off the hook. Now, though, she should probably bring up the subject again, tell Ted once and for all that she is incapable of making such a move. They dodge around a crowd of teenagers in the middle of the sidewalk, and she opens her mouth to speak. But the reasons she ought to give him escape her.

Ted looks over at her now. "This jade cat we're going to see," he says. "It's like you, shiny and beautiful and the light doesn't go through it." He nudges her arm with his shoulder. "You're looking lost. Wu Ling's is around this next corner."

"It's nice you know everything," she says. Ted nods, and she catches the edge of his smile before, involuntarily, she glances up at the next cluster of signs. Which of the characters, and how many, will she be able to decipher?

They are all packed, she and Rodney. The door is locked. Their year in the orient has ended as it began...in a welter of baggage. The bigger items have been sent back ahead of them. Now these suitcases cluttering the road are

all that remain, their whole Hong Kong life pared down to these few possessions. Elizabeth carries in her purse the little jade cat. It is her only true memento of the year. She has never gone on the shopping spree as everyone told her she must. Toward the end, Rodney pressed her to buy a few souvenirs - why not, the price would certainly have been right - but she refused. Twice she has told him she wants a divorce...both times, it must be admitted, at parties, so he doesn't really believe her. She has been strange anyway since the murders. He has told her this, and she knows it's true. Especially when she drinks. It's part of a reaction to the tragedy, no doubt...although sometimes she thinks it is Hong Kong altogether. The absence of a common language, the excessive, exotic atmosphere, everything so tall and grand or crowded and teeming. A city out of her ken...and growing more so. Sometimes she is convinced she can't see the shore of Hong Kong Island any more...as though the city has slipped away. Although more likely it is simply that it cannot now be for her what she meant it to be. Yet, in another way, doesn't it suit her better for the enigma it has become? A place where she cannot possibly fathom reasons. A place where, in a way, beauty has been able to take the place of happiness.

At the end of the street, just before the taxi sweeps them around the bend, away from the Healthy and Happy Garden forever, she turns and looks back. The two houses, theirs

and the Chens', seem to lean toward one another, straining to touch...as if they are offering comfort to one another. Then, abruptly, the taxi dips into the hairpin turn. The houses slide across the car window and disappear. Elizabeth's brake foot stamps the floor. The taxi, unaffected, picks up speed, then slows again as its tires squeal into the next curve. Rodney gives her a distrustful glance but says nothing.

Curve by curve they weave down the mountainside until they hit the main road and are swallowed up by the traffic. Now, as if to celebrate this triumph, the driver snaps on the radio. At the first syllables of the announcer's voice, Elizabeth sits forward again, hoping - as she always does - to catch a few words from the program. But it's no good. She still doesn't know enough to make sense of the announcements. Beside her, erect and handsome as he watches over the driver's shoulder, Rodney, too, seems utterly foreign. She could almost say, as he turns to glance at her now, that his features jog no memory in her.

"What?" she says after a moment. He has been speaking.

"Your ticket," he says with some exasperation. "Here." He hands her the travel agency folder. "In case we get separated. You have your passport?"

She stares at him. "Of course."

"Well," he says defensively, "You're very forgetful lately."

Without replying she pushes the folder into her purse. The rift inside her is still there. She could explain that to him, tell him that it may always be there, that she cannot otherwise bear the existence of such sorrow. But there would be no point; he wouldn't get it.

At the end of Nathan Road, the rows of red taxis have jammed together more tightly than usual, if that is possible. The light turns green, then red, then green again without their progressing more than half a block. The driver turns off the radio as if he may then be able to concentrate more effectively on getting them out of this mess. Beside her Rodney's lips have compressed into a white line. But, in fact, plenty of time remains. She glances at her watch. Yes. They will certainly make the flight. Rodney, with his usual attention to such matters, has wisely allowed for Kowloon traffic.

She imagines the airport, their suitcases being trundled across the sidewalk, the crowds and the counters filled with blue and white Chinese vases, scrolls and fans and little embroidered purses. She thinks about standing in the middle of the floor there staring up at the great black sign that lists outgoing flights. It is the kind of thing she and Ted could do. Chanting the names back and forth to each other. Dakar, Singapore, Bangkok, Bombay, Taipei, Tokyo.

When they said goodbye, Ted cried. The tears ran into the creases of his cheeks while Elizabeth stood transfixed.

Had she ever seen a man cry? She couldn't remember. The end of his nose and the skin around his mouth turned a pitiful, childish pink. His heart was broken. He actually said that. "My heart is broken." But then he put his hands around her shoulders as though he still could shore her up.

"It isn't right, love," he told her, as though he and she, Ted and Elizabeth, were a decree of fate. She faced him in a sort of trance. I can't make the jump, she might have said, thought of saying. I can't make any jump. Help me. But the words stayed locked inside her like the enforced silence of a dream.

And yet there is something of him alive in her - the rough shape of his head beneath her hands, the exuberance of his particular faith, a faith which may now be broken - enough so that several times then and in the next few days, she has thought of going back to him, of putting her arms around him and saying that she has changed her mind, that she will stay. Benevolently she has pictured his happiness, the joy spreading over his plain and pleasant face. Then why hasn't she let it happen? Because she is afraid? Because his wish that she love him is not enough to make it happen? Because there is some other issue at stake?

Now, suddenly, she thinks there was something she meant to tell him. Twice she has dreamed about Mr. Chen. Though she knows that the case will probably never be solved - everyone says it was an underworld matter - though she tells

herself the children and their mother are dead forever, still a strange, unbidden thought is loose in her mind. She has dreamed of the return of Mrs. Chen and the two children, children whose names she doesn't know, whose faces she is beginning to forget. In her dream they are brought back by Ted. There has been a miracle, he explains. And together they climb the stairs and deliver the children and their mother to the welcoming arms of Mr. Chen.

Ahead of them the light turns green again, and, without warning, tears begin to slide down Elizabeth's face. The sensation fills her with surprise. The taxi still hasn't moved.

Rodney is gazing at her with shocked eyes. "You never cry," he says. "What's the matter? There's enough time. We'll make it."

More tears...the long salty wash of them. "I'm crying for Mr. Chen," she says tentatively, "...and Mrs. Chen and the little boys. I'm crying for the baby..."

Rodney shakes his head. Then he tries to hand her his handkerchief. "Here, come on," he says. "Don't. You're going to snap again if you're not careful." She takes the handkerchief then and mops her face. Their taxi begins to inch forward. She looks up and sees that they are almost to the intersection. The exit onto the highway is nearly in sight. They will be there in no time now...no time... Without warning, panic sweeps her. Death. Death is waiting

at the end of the journey. This taxi is a tumbrel. No less. Wildly she looks around, stares for a second at Rodney's intent profile. Any more life with him will kill her. She feels the truth of her sudden fear. It's not just the death of the baby, this rift inside her. It is the decay that spreads in the absence of life. She is disappearing from the inside out. Her stomach tightens. Quick. This moment, this red light, may be her last chance.

She ignores a sensible, Rodney-like voice within her which says that she is being a trifle dramatic. Instead she drops the handkerchief and reaches into her purse. Her fingers brush the hard paper edge. "Here," she says pulling the ticket folder out of her bag. "Here." She hands the folder to Rodney, who is so astonished he takes it. His mouth opens, but she holds up one finger...as though he can be silenced in this way. "Leave my bags at the airport," she tells him and sees that the light has turned green once again. "No, don't!" She opens the car door and thrusts her foot out onto the pavement.

"What in hell...?" Rodney begins.

"Have the driver deliver them to someone's flat," she interrupts. "I can call around..."

By now she has climbed out and is standing in the street and leaning back into the taxi. After the car's frigid air conditioning, the outdoor heat is like a blow. Behind the taxi, horns begin to honk. "Elizabeth, for

Christ's sake...!" shouts Rodney. "Get in the fucking taxi!"

"I can't," she tells him. "I'm sorry."

"Are you out of your mind?" he shouts. "Why do you do these things? We don't have that much time..." He looks ready to cry himself, and for the first time in years she feels sorry for him. "I can't just leave you here," he is saying.

"I'm leaving you here, Rodney." She takes a backward step, out of his reach. "I'm going to stay." She nods at him and then adds soothingly, "Go on. You don't want to miss the plane." She shuts the door and, slipping between the cars in the next lane, reaches the sidewalk. Then she swings off in the opposite direction, shouldering her purse and snaking between the people, breathing in the hothouse air as though it were her first moment on earth. Her long, athletic strides cover the distance quickly, but not until the end of the second block does she risk looking back. There is no sign of Rodney. She is sure she would see him above the throng. He is so tall.

Perhaps the taxi is already out of sight. For once Rodney is on the highway, won't he proceed to the airport? And once at the airport, ticket in hand, won't he be carried on by the completeness and precision of his various arrangements? Won't he board the plane and be gone? Maybe... She'll find out soon enough at any rate. It will not of

course be the settling of everything if he does leave, but at least there will be nothing more to say. She hurries through the next intersection with the sense that she is crossing some final divide. Which of her friends will she go to? Not someone connected with the firm. Someone at the university then. Or Ted. No, not Ted. All this has nothing to do with lovers.

It is at the next corner, when she sees a poster for the Wing Kowloon Theatre, that she thinks of C. K. Ng's restaurant, of his airy invitation that she come by any time. She conjures up his narrow face and body, his merry smile. The theatre is around the corner, the restaurant therefore no more than a couple of blocks' walk. She will sweep, like the tall pale foreigner she is, into the Chinese world...into C. K. Ng's restaurant, that is. She can make phone calls from there, count her money, organize her thoughts...it's the perfect resting spot. She can even take tea there, and a glass of C. K. Ng's mother's melon liqueur. They will let her in, let her do all this, and they will not care whether she has left her husband, why she is there, why she is anywhere at all. Probably they will not care that she is beautiful.

She pushes the hair back from her cheeks and tries to see her reflection in the next plate glass window. For an instant she sees the streak of long pale hair, the shape of her fast-moving body. Then the image, superimposed on a

bolt of cloth, is gone. Like the image of a hoped-for child, here and then gone. A matter of luck. Send for the Fung Shui man...the best anyone can do...and the rest belongs to luck.

The idea of luck makes her think again of Ted. Ted, whom she hardly knows. Ted, who will have to be told she cannot bear children. Perhaps that truth alone will finish him. Or perhaps it won't finish him, and the sorrow, resurrected, will be passed on.

Sorrow...she says this word in her mind, feeling it over, thinking of her younger self and again of Mr. Chen and the death of children. So sad. But all the same it is exhilaration that fills her now. Above her head the forest of signs flashes. Horns honk. The luxuries of Hong Kong - a million gold chains and watches, pens and jewelry, pearls in folds of silk and velvet, topaz, ebony, ivory, amethysts and jade, a veritable garden crystallized out of time and the earth itself - all this stares at her from the shop windows. She stares back, into window after window, not slackening her pace, no longer bothering to seek her reflection in the glass. If asked, she would say she has made a leap and hasn't yet landed. Lighter than air, strong as the earth, she flies along the crowded street. It is all so beautiful.

FALLING

The bowl of flowers sits slightly askew on a pile of magazines. As though someone has abandoned it there, guesses Lil, and some time ago too. The petals of the daffodils have frayed into brown shreds. The crimson tulips are definitely overblown. But they have spread themselves wide to reveal surprisingly opulent centres - the purple so dark it looks almost black - and the contrast is arresting. Beautiful really. Only not like tulips, Lil decides. Not what you'd expect.

She has spent the quarter of an hour since she and Edward arrived in just this manner, trying to keep her focus on inanimate objects - to avoid, that is, the faces of the people around her. Especially the face of Edward's first wife. Joanna's dislike sits like a stone in Lil's stomach. Trying to ignore the weight of it, she has been staring earnestly around the room. By turns she has taken in the walls, the furniture, the curtains, compared their various shades of beige and cream and palest yellow, imagined how

the room would look if someone straightened it up, and generally managed not to hear more than a few words of the men's conversation. Phrases like "sheer expediency" and "the next election or else" have occasionally reached her. But her mind is bouncing crazily around. It's awful to be hated, she thinks now, for perhaps the third time, glancing again at the ravelled edges of the daffodils. Awful. If only someone had cleared those dead ones out, just left the tulips, added water... If only this...if only that... You'll have to stop it, she tells herself.

A comfortable duet of male laughter signals the success of the conversation, and Lil casts an involuntary glance at their host, Colin. He has kind eyes, she decides. And his curly brown beard gives him the look of a minister. Quite unlike Edward's fierce, clean-shaven jaw. Colin, in fact, looks altogether a gentler sort of animal. And, really, doesn't this make sense after all? For Joanna would surely have chosen a softer, more contemplative character as her second husband. At least this seems reasonable - why would anyone risk getting hurt a second time - and Lil rather hopes it is so. She feels the need of a sympathetic type in the room. She wants Colin - as indeed she would want any man - just a little bit on her side. And yet...isn't there something about him that does remind her the tiniest bit of Edward? Her eyes flick to Edward and then back to Colin. No, they really don't look alike. Something in the quick,

positive way they both speak then? Is it possible that Colin, like Edward, prefers at any given time to run the show? He does have kind eyes though...

"Sounds like a double-edged sword to me!"

Colin's remark startles Lil out of her reverie. What does he mean? But then she realizes that it's only a response to some statement of Edward's. And now, as if he is resting on this particular contribution, Colin has leaned back in his chair and is taking a large swallow from his glass. The wine represents his newest find at the liquor commission...a Sauvignon blanc if Lil got it right.

Colin explained all this about the wine in the first cavernous moments of the visit. Australian, he informed them, while pouring out four big goblets, each so full he seemed to be making some further assertion. He was positive they would like it.

"Exactly," Edward is replying. "It won't matter what reason they give. The deed is done." The two men nod knowledgeably at each other, and then Edward too takes a large swallow of wine. In fact, thinks Lil, they seem to have adopted a common tone altogether. It's as if they've arrived at precisely the same opinion as to how this or any situation ought to be handled...and she, therefore, should just relax.

Easier said than done though. Daring to glance at their hostess, Lil sees that her eyes are flickering omi-

nously. Whether from boredom or emotion would be difficult to say. Joanna is not easy to read as her eyes travel from the genial Colin, gently pompous in spite of his good intentions, to Edward's vigorous features, and then slowly drop away. She gets up and moves out toward the kitchen.

It's almost, Lil thinks, observing Joanna's heavy, swaying walk, as if she can't stand Edward's presence. Or maybe it's their collective presence. Not one more instant of the wicked couple.

But no. For a moment later Joanna is back with a tray of cheese and bunches of fresh, dripping watercress. She steps around a pile of newspapers and carefully places her burden on the coffee table. At no time do her eyes lift to glance at Lil, who is seated directly facing the tray. The effect of this is to galvanize Lil.

"What beautiful watercress," she cries as if jabbed. "Oh, cheese! Oh, I'm so hungry!" Sitting up straight she snatches a nugget of cheese and pops it into her mouth.

Joanna says merely in her soft, slow voice, "It grows here." She crosses the room and sits again. Lil slumps back. She will be stuck here in Joanna's living room forever.

"No crackers?" complains Colin putting down his wine and peering over at the coffee table.

"We're out of them," Joanna says.

"Well, then what about that pumpernickel I bought the other day?" he asks. Joanna shrugs and then nods her assent.

Colin turns his head and draws in a breath. "Teddy," he calls. "Teddy! Will you come in here a minute?"

The boy appears almost immediately in the doorway. He is nearly ten, cheerful, slightly impatient and, thinks Lil, in much the same state of disorder as this depressing room. She smiles quickly at him and then glances at Edward. He too is smiling at Teddy. Something brown has smeared the boy's cheek - peanut butter perhaps, or chocolate. The tail of his shirt hangs well below his sweater. Nonetheless he is perfectly at ease, the only person present who is. Colin instructs him to bring the package of bread. "On a cutting board. Don't forget the knife..."

"And hold the knife point down," adds Joanna. "If you fall..."

The boy looks amused at their fussing. "I will, I will," he interrupts.

They can hear his running footsteps, the banging of drawers or cabinets, and then a moment later he is back. He slides the board with bread and knife on it in between the cheese tray and the precarious bowl of flowers. "Okay?" he challenges them and stands back.

Edward, who has been watching this entire effort, lifts his hand abruptly. "Come here," he orders. The boy smiles as though this is some special joke.

As he sidles near, Edward reaches out and makes a grab for him. The boy dances back, then comes forward again suddenly to thrust his arms around the man's neck. In turn, big tweed arms enfold almost the whole of the boy's narrow body. And for what seems a long moment, the two hug. Then Edward's arms drop down. Meticulously he tucks in the errant shirt tail. He pats the boy's rear and then, as if inspecting his person, turns him full around, still in the circle of his arms. "Now then..." He grips the boy between his knees, takes out a handkerchief and rubs off the brown smear.

"There," he says and grins at the boy. "I can see your face."

"Okay, Daddy. Okay, okay," says Teddy, ducking his head. He squirms in the vise of his father's knees, but he too is grinning. Released a moment later, he remains standing by Edward's chair, one hand on the arm. His eyes, skipping from one grown-up to another, taking in every move, are as eager as his father's. His mouth turns up at the corners with the same optimistic curve.

Lil has to remind herself that he is not merely a small, elfin Edward. He has been easy for her to love on this account - he resembles his father so greatly - but, of

course, he has other traits as well. Different traits. Oh, my, she thinks suddenly. Teddy's soft, pale hair must certainly come from Joanna. His wide forehead too, now that she thinks of it. And what else? Many things no doubt. Oh, what a price, Lil says to herself, really feeling it. Poor Edward...what an awful price. And leaning forward, by reflex almost, she takes a piece of the bread and holds it up for a moment in front of her face, as if somehow to hide the glimmer of triumph she cannot help but feel.

* * * * *

Colin, who has decided at this point that all is going rather well, gets up and crosses to the coffee table. Smiling benevolently at Lil, he proceeds to arrange the cheese and bread into miniature sandwiches which he then offers around the group, with varying results.

Lil bounces slightly in her seat. "Oh, thank you," she cries. "I mean...no, thank you. I have some... I can reach it if I want..." and she sinks down again into the sofa cushions. Teddy wrinkles his nose as the tray passes. Edward takes a piece of cheese only, leaving the bare slice of bread abandoned on the tray. Joanna, with the merest shake of her head, closes her eyes as the tray approaches. It's all too much, her expression implies.

His duty done, Colin replaces the tray on the coffee table, appropriates two of the sandwiches for himself, and returns to his chair. Now that the guests have been sup-

plied, he happily eats a sandwich. For one thing, he is hungry, and besides, he loves a sharp cheddar - nothing better, except that it does sting his tongue. He has told Joanna this many times - that for him the taste of cheese is too strong without the alleviating blandness of crackers or bread - but she forgets. Not that she means to be indifferent, he has decided. It's simply that individual tastes do not seem important to her.

Now, settling the second sandwich on the arm of his chair, he takes a large swallow of the wine. Definitely full-bodied. Even with the cheese. He nods to himself but does not say anything for fear of sounding pompous. (He knows he can easily overdo this sort of thing.) He does however like to serve good wine. Full-bodied if possible. And he really is generous. He does like to take care of people. Throughout the visit, in fact, he has been keeping an eye on Joanna, a somewhat solicitous eye, for it is he who has urged her to take this step, a sort of normalization of relations. Also, he admits to himself now, he is guilty of a certain amount of curiosity. The former husband, Edward, appears at the house from time to time, collecting or delivering Teddy. But the second wife, this Lil, has remained offstage, an outline merely, an unseen and therefore oft-imagined character in the drama. Until now. And now he is surprised. This second wife, the vamp, the villainess of many tales, is ordinary looking. Long of

body, dark and unkempt of hair, no more than pretty, she sprawls on the sofa, her legs jammed awkwardly under the coffee table. She is plucking crumbs of the bread off her sweater with angular fingers. If asked, Colin would say she looks pleasant enough, but not glamorous certainly. And no poise either...none of Joanna's pleasing languor, the stillness that hovers about her person. For Colin, wherever Joanna sits, wherever she stands, seems always the quietest place in the room. By contrast, Lil's corner of the sofa is positively aquiver. Of course, the girl is probably a little ill at ease. At any rate she has barely spoken except to produce the burst of compliments about the cheese, which she has hardly touched since.

So where then, thinks Colin, munching his way through the second sandwich, where is the Cleopatra he has been awaiting? The scene-stealer par excellence? For the implication has always been that the theft of Edward was accomplished by means of a physical attraction no less than magical. And yet, he does not doubt the truth of Joanna's perception. The image of "the other woman," the stories of betrayal and suffering through the long affair, have dominated too many late night conversations for Colin not to believe in the history of treachery, in the reality of the pain endured by his wife. They jerked her around. That's the sort of thing she says when the memory takes hold of her. Edward was there, but he wasn't, and she, Joanna,

never figured it out. She just worried. She kept thinking if she got pregnant again... Whenever she reaches this point, her voice slows and she stares straight ahead. Colin knows then to put his arms around her.

He glances over at her now and nods to himself. The need is still there. For isn't it true that in the small, light eyes of his wife, in the blueish tint of her eyelids and the soft bruised look of her mouth which is not now smiling, the suggestion of martyrdom remains?

She is replying to some remark of Edward's. At the same time, Colin sees that Lil is dragging herself up into a more presentable position. Her corner of the sofa seems to provide no leg room, and the coffee table with its burden of magazines, bread board, flowers, and cheese is still jammed up against her knees. But at least, thinks Colin (who likes his women to be womanly), she can no longer be described as sprawling, and she does have one elbow neatly propped on the pillow beside her.

* * * * *

Lil has decided, in fact, that it's time she make another foray into the conversation. For, whatever the larger truth, she has no call to take on the role of guilty party within this gathering. Besides I'm much younger, she reassures herself. As though guilt can accrue only with age.

The cheese and watercress topic having been exhausted, she considers asking either about Teddy's school - isn't there some soccer game or school play in the offing? - or about Joanna's garden. However, the flowers are too decrepit to be discussed, and the topic of Teddy is likewise fraught with danger. Is there anything safe to offer? She glances around without taking in much - at best she could certify that no one is either weeping or snarling, that the sounds issuing from the various mouths fall into normal range - and is tempted suddenly to announce that this whole visit is a bloody farce. She blows in this manner from time to time. Such unpredictable behaviour is one of the things that attracted Edward in the first place. Lil's lean, girlish body, her explosive reactions and energetic triumphs, even her downfalls excite him still. And Lil is not above making a scene to attract his attention. She knows well enough what he likes. It is only consideration of the consequences for him here that makes her pause. Edward has, now and seemingly for all time, a precious hostage in the enemy camp.

"Such lovely flowers!" The high-pitched declaration startles them all. Lil as much as anyone. She has heard her own voice with genuine surprise. The bravery of it enchants her. She hopes that Edward has taken notice. "I saw the garden coming in," she adds by way of explanation and makes a gesture that nearly knocks over her goblet. "I

mean outside...you grow them?" She addresses this last to Joanna, who tips her head slowly to one side as though she is regarding someone demented. "I mean..." Lil chokes back a sharp desire to laugh. "I mean," she says carefully, "are you the one who does the gardening?"

Joanna consents to nod. "The soil here is good," she says quietly. "And spring flowers are easy of course. Later on..." She shrugs. "Working I don't have much time..." Her voice is a dead calm. Colin stiffens in his chair. The "working" remark must be meant for Edward. But Joanna is going on. "Teddy helps me," she says.

"That's nice," says Lil. She looks over at Teddy and then at Edward, who does not immediately see her glance. His eyes appear to be fixed somewhere well above Joanna's head. Lil's eyes move to the painting that hangs on the wall behind Joanna. And abruptly she remembers. It must be the one he has described, the one he chose for its colours - deep stormy blue, slashes of red - the one Joanna wouldn't give back. From time to time he still conjures up anger over the refusal. The painting was his, and indeed, thinks Lil, it does seem out of place in this pallid room. Too rich, too strident. She glances back at Edward hoping to catch his attention. Did he imagine back then the same thing she is imagining now? Yes, she decides, of course. The simile seems so obvious...that here in Joanna's house,

the painting is like an escape route. No less. It is like a window through the pale wall.

* * * * *

Colin glances at Lil glancing at Edward and decides that there is no question - his own wife is definitely the more attractive. Edward must have been out of his mind. Joanna's dove colouring, the slowness of her movements compared to this jerky boy-woman... He sees Lil drain her glass and realizes that his own and Edward's glasses are nearly empty as well. His caretaking, host's nature twitches. However, he has made a promise to Joanna. He will not offer refills. Enough tolerance and civilized behaviour being enough. She does not, quite naturally, want them there all afternoon, and since Colin is the sort who hates to let his guests go, he has been made to promise.

But still he feels chagrined as Edward and Lil lock eyes. Do they sense the hospitality withdrawn? Probably. At any rate they are agreeing with little nods that the time has come. They must go. Rising, Edward places his hand on Teddy's head as though he is memorizing the shape of the crown. Lil gets uncertainly to her feet. She glances around, searching for her purse, wondering evidently if she should clear away any of the glasses or anything else. Once or twice she shifts her weight. Her movements seem unstable, unpredictable even, especially compared to Joanna's

smooth rolling walk as she leads Edward and Teddy out of the room.

Only Colin is left watching a moment later when Lil abruptly pivots, her mind made up, her face fresh with relief, and grabs up her purse. And it is then, at this moment so nearly at the end of the visit, that he sees the sudden grace of her. Like a running animal, he thinks staring at the unfolding body. She seems to be moving too quickly as she crosses the room. Out of control nearly. Her knee has jarred the coffee table, her shoulder smacked hard against the doorframe. There is a sense that she may carom off the face of the earth. As she swings around into the hall, he feels a hunter's urge to chase her, to corner her and make the confrontation last. Eye to eye he would face her down. Her fear, if it is fear, would make him strong.

And yet in the moment he takes to catch up to her, the illusion of flight has disappeared. She is uttering a too effusive thank-you, then fumbling her way out the door after the others, putting one hand on the stair railing to steady herself, starting down the stairs. As he is watching this performance, she suddenly turns her head and glances back, and he is totally unprepared for the smile that streaks across her face. A brilliant, almost hysterical smile. He can hear the ring of laughter behind that smile. And the look she flings at him now, a look clearly meant for him

alone, is both so full of guilt and so confident of his forgiveness that he thinks she would be able literally to get away with murder.

He is still standing there stunned when she misses her footing at the bottom of the flagstone steps and stumbles into his wife's border of daffodils. And without warning the whole of his heart rushes out to her. He wants to leap down the stairs and help her, to right with his own hands that long, kneeling body. And standing there in the wake of his wife's pained cry and Edward's exclamation, forbidding himself to move a muscle, he imagines with absolute clarity just exactly how it would be to fall in love with her.

RABBITS

Every now and then a blast of wind shakes the little Toyota, and Karl grips the wheel to hold it steady. Janey can see the skin around his fingernails whiten. The car heater keeps sending out spurts of heat, dry as the dust that pervades the car. But all the same, the air around Janey's ankles is chilly most of the time. Karl hasn't said anything, about the wind, or the feeble heater, or about anything else for that matter. Nonetheless she can feel his general displeasure, and the silence is beginning to get on her nerves. She would prefer a complaint or a sarcastic remark or two, anything to this martyr's silence.

Janey believes in family outings. In all seasons, on any given Sunday afternoon, she itches to enclose the four of them in the car and head off for some pleasing destination. Even today, from the moment she woke, shaking and with a tongue of cloth, the ride was what she wanted. In her bathrobe she trailed from room to room sipping coffee and picking up toys - clumps of Leggo mostly and Peter's

tiny ubiquitous racing cars (the apartment gets easily cluttered) - and selling the idea of a ride. Karl was unmoved. His head was killing him, he said. But Peter was sucked in with a description of the bridge and the riverside park and little Sally Jane surprisingly excited by the prospect of rapids. And finally, probably for Sally Jane's sake, Karl agreed. So that now, on the whole, Janey feels hopeful.

She has been glancing around every so often, past Karl's grave profile - he is extremely handsome (anyone would have to admit this); in profile his features look carved - past this incomprehensible beauty (what is it for?) to the children.

They have been patient so far. Fastened into the best and safest car seats, they gaze back at her or else steadfastly out the windows, their childish features imbued with a trust so vast and unconsidered it sends a blade of apprehension through her stomach. She often feels like this when she looks at them. Though the pain is a kind of sweetness too. The price of motherhood, no doubt.

Like an addict she resists another impulse to turn. Instead she addresses Karl. "I'm sure it hurts me more than it hurts you!" She follows this with a noisy sigh. When there is no response - his lips don't move; his eyes don't blink - she says in a sharper voice, "Do you suppose you dented that car?"

Now he shakes his head. "Hardly touched it."

"You were high enough," she persists. "I mean you certainly had a good time." He shrugs. "I told Eleanor we had a lot in common. She and I, I mean..."

"Jesus," he says without vehemence. "That needling bitch?"

"I think I meant that you and Jacques were a lot alike." Jacques is Karl's boss. He is also a famous and slightly laughable womanizer.

Karl's profile swivels a couple of inches. His eyes that seem always to have the light of the sky in them swing briefly in her direction. "That's another charming idea," he says after a moment.

She stares at him, and then she hesitates. The band of pain around her own head reminds her. Maybe she is only looking for trouble. Maybe he really does have a bad hang-over, and that's what slowed his response. Didn't she see him off in a corner last night with the one they kept kidding and calling Duncan the Pusher? That...along with whatever he drank...

"Were you smoking stuff too?" she asks. He acknowledges this with a nod. "Poor Karl," she allows. But the rationale she is following is too strong. With her glance still on him, she fires another shot. "Who was that black-haired girl? The one who hung around you all night and did that dance with the lamp?"

His head doesn't move, and she feels rather than sees his instant of hesitation. Then he says quietly. "She's one of Jacques's new assistants."

"Well, she certainly was having a good time with you..."

"Come on," says Karl. His expression still doesn't change, but his voice is stone. "Lay off, will you. She's like that...a party is just a party."

This silences her. He has been telling her the same thing for years, that things don't matter as much as she thinks, that people don't mean what they say...that what she, Janey, calls her instinct is merely a habit of jumping to conclusions. "A party is just a party." The sentence bubbles in her mind. We met at a party, she thinks of saying...but doesn't. Instead she turns and glances out her window.

In the blowing grass along the highway, in the brown fields that stretch to the horizon...no hint of summer green, nothing of softness. All gone, she thinks, searching the landscape, noting the shabby farmhouses, the patches of trees few and far between, sheltering nothing. Typical Sunday in November. She sighs again and rubs her forehead. It's almost too depressing to be real.

The party - not last night's but the long ago one where they met - was the kind people gave in those days. With an

amorphous guest list and the usual offerings...beer and chips and a sticky, powerful punch served in paper cups, cigarettes and records, pillows on the floor, possibly someone with a guitar and a few joints...

Janey no longer remembers what she was wearing. (Though she cared about things like that. Even when she barely had money enough for cigarettes, she always got her hair cut by somebody good. And she wore colours that suited her flushed skin and dark eyes...blues and greens and true reds.) She no longer remembers whom she was talking to either. Karl came in with a group of students, and for a while he stood with this bunch, dropping desultory remarks while his ice-coloured eyes travelled the room. What she does remember is his air of being above it all. She remembers his profile and then, later, the shine of his hair as he crossed the room toward her. Quite simply, he was the most attractive man at the party. For no better reason she chose him that night.

Afterward, of course, she found other things to admire in him. She fell in love with him. And on the first weekend of May that year, she took him up to her parents' place in the Laurentians. Ice still rimmed the lake, but the willows along the shore had sprouted a gauzy veil of green, and even from the car window the woods smelled fertile with last fall's decomposing leaves.

Almost as soon as they arrived, she took him out for a walk. They followed the path around the lake, stopping occasionally to test the shoreline ice. On the way back they traversed a series of neighbouring fields...all this without much in the way of conversation. She noticed that he picked his way with caution on the slippery lakeside path but, once out in the open, strode swiftly across the unplowed fields. He moved as if he were familiar with the layout and the contours of the land, almost as if he were pacing out the dimensions of his own property. In her heavy country boots, she could barely keep up.

At the end of the walk, as they neared the big house, he proposed one last foray. He wanted to climb the hill, he said. He liked high places. She stared off in the direction he indicated and saw that what he meant was a ridge of Pre-Cambrian granite which rose out of the earth directly behind the house (the bones of the earth, her father called it, implying that his house was thus the more solidly placed).

This ridge had once been "the mountain." Janey and the other children around the lake conducted elaborate search-and-destroy games on its rocky slopes. And during the short warm nights of July - after the black-fly season had run its course - she was allowed occasionally, with one or two friends, to haul sleeping bags up to its crest. Janey could hardly believe her own memory of those diamond-lit nights,

the overhanging, overwhelming presence of the sky...though the feeling of things unbearably near and yet unreachable still swept her from time to time.

At this moment only the crest of the ridge still caught the slanting rays of the sun. Maybe it was this illumination that had inspired Karl. "Come on," he was saying now while she looked around uneasily at the shadows mushrooming among the trees. "The sun hasn't set up there. There's plenty of time."

And, of course, he was right. Climbing, they regained the light. On the summit they stood glazed in sunlight once again, while below them, like an offering, lay the big half-timbered house and, beyond it, the stretch of winter-blackened woods sloping off toward the lake. She let her glance slide around to Karl's face and saw that the rather soldierly mien which so often stiffened his expression had fled. Perhaps it was only the bronze light, but it seemed that pleasure lay soft and glowing on his features. He looked revealed. He caught her glance, and the hand that had been resting lightly on the back of her neck tightened. For a moment she thought he was going to bend and kiss her. But his face came no nearer. Instead he nodded, as if he were agreeing with something she'd said or done.

"It's a great place." His voice came out thick, and he had to clear his throat. "I'd love a place like

this...land...a real mansion... You must love coming back here."

She stared at him and then slowly, compelled by something in his face, nodded back. Her mouth remained poised for the kiss. For a long time she could feel the imprint where it should have settled on her lips, and the disappointment made a tiny, empty place inside her. Yet the words were for him so personal that in another way she was touched...and surprised too. Wasn't he showing himself to her really, by exposing a wish, by admitting something that he longed for...? She studied his transformed features. What she didn't want was his envy.

"It's not in very good shape," she told him suddenly. "The house, I mean. My father doesn't have much...time to, you know, keep the place up..." She made a vague explanatory gesture in the direction of one corner of the roof.

Her father's precarious finances were an undiscussable fact of life. As long as she could remember, they (and he) had been like that, a sort of black sheep or streak of madness in the family. A reference to any one of a hundred failed investments could trigger an outburst of rage from him and then, immediately after like an echo, her mother's collapse into tears. Pointing out the ragged shingles now did no justice to all this. Janey knew that, but it was the best she could do.

"The structure looks pretty sound," Karl was saying seriously. "A little weathered..." He went on to list various repairs that might be made.

"I meant to sort of tell you," she blurted a few moments later, interrupting his summary of the roof's basic condition. "About my father, I mean. Sometimes he's a little rough on people...a little noisy, I mean. And my mother cries at the drop of a hat. But it doesn't mean anything or anything..."

Karl stopped this incoherent speech by reaching around her waist and pulling her back against him. "You worry too much," he said into her ear. "Don't worry."

"Cold," she protested as his hand slid up under her jacket. The sun had left them once again, this time for good.

When she opened her eyes a few moments later, the scene before her was subtly changed. Off in the distance the stretch of woods had fused into a monolith of darkness. Against it the house loomed, man-made and somehow comforting, the big oblong windows of the kitchen faintly aglow.

"So relax about your father," he was telling her. "I'll survive him. People don't bother me..." With his free hand he pointed over her shoulder toward the furthest section of the house. His leather sleeve brushed her cheek. The quality of his voice remained solemn. "That wing," he said. "It does look like it needs work. Look. You can see

it's out of kilter...the foundation must have shifted. Was it built at the same time as the main part?"

She tipped back her head to look at him. He was staring over her head toward the house. "Your hand's pretty warm now," she told him. Then she reached up and cupped the side of his face with her hand.

She believes she can still remember that single touch. Among the thousands that have followed it. She can still feel, she is sure, the twin ridges of jawline and cheekbone. From that particular twilight moment she can pull it all back, even wince again at the sudden scratch of stubbled skin against her palm.

She recalls, almost as well, the next evening...her father drinking pre-dinner scotches from a shot glass, rattling the pages of the newspaper, occasionally looking up to command their attention with some caustic remark about a columnist or politician.

Her mother dealt with these conversational jabs by the expedient of little nods and placating sounds. Her freckled hands meanwhile leapt and weaved like frenetic birds above the pile of knitting in her lap...their rhythm known perfectly, subliminally, to everyone in the room except Karl. Minute by minute the bulky green folds acquired new dimension.

At the other end of the room, the fire was in danger of breaking up. Embers flared, then tumbled to tiny deaths on

the flagstone hearth. Her father rose to get a log from the woodbasket. He tossed this onto the glowing remnants, then for some moments stood prodding the burning ends of wood until he had coaxed a flame around the new log. When he returned to his chair, his face bore a look of satisfaction, as though he had proved some heavily contested point. Ever alert for signals Janey saw this look and allowed herself to relax. As he sat down, she turned to ask her mother a question.

"Non-stop handouts!" The sudden roar made them all jump. Janey's drink sloshed over her hand. Her father sat leaning forward in his big armchair. Poised for the kill. But what had set him off? She stared at him for a second, and then she realized his glare was focused on the coffee table. Of course! He had spotted her university grant application. Not three feet from him. Oh, the carelessness of it. She couldn't believe her own stupidity. To leave the form lying there like that, in full view. To remind him of her need... For the war cry about "hand-outs" was one she knew well. It categorized offenses related to the dwindling of his capital, a shrinkage which proceeded directly from one or another manifestation of the welfare state. That was the thesis. So, of course he would be furious, outraged that such bursaries existed, ashamed that his own daughter needed one. And here she was - this time with her new love as witness - helpless as ever to stem the

flow of rage, suffused once again with the all-too frequent wish of her childhood, that she might somehow erase her mistake, back up in time, get out of this room and out of this moment.

Her father, loose now, ranted on - Canada had evidently done no right for decades - while her mother shrank further into her chair until she and her knitting seemed no more than a stain on the upholstery. Janey herself opened and then shut her mouth. The thunderous voice brooked no interruption.

Eventually he reached the stage of repeatedly smacking the coffee table with his newspaper. The sound was infuriating...as if he were slapping each of them. And at this point two things happened. Her mother began to cry into the bulky green sweater. And Karl stood up. He rose in a single, athletic motion, accompanied but seemingly untouched by the mingled sounds of weeping and shouting. His gaze swung around to rest on the congested features of her father. Janey watched, stiff with embarrassment. As usual she could think of nothing to do or say. Karl looked as if he were observing a demented zoo animal. Her father was now in the act of crushing the front section of the paper. "No hypocrite on God's earth like a rich socialist!" he roared, glaring from one to the other of them as if they had each in turn argued otherwise. "This country's got herself a panty-

waist prime minister who can't... Where are you going, young man?" Still glaring, he paused for breath.

Karl's cool voice filled the sudden space. "I'm going for a walk. I'll be back for dinner." This latter statement he addressed exclusively to her green-shrouded mother.

From her misery Janey watched him turn and cross the room. Not until he was almost in front of her own chair, did she realize he wasn't simply leaving the room. His eyes flickered once as he gazed down at her - no further expression crossed his handsome face - and then he held out his hand. She stared for a second at the outstretched fingers.

"You're coming?" He spoke softly, but to Janey the words rang like a declaration. Without further thought she was on her feet.

All down the darkening path to the lake, she felt magically, dazzlingly female. Rescued. He had rescued her. Her whole body felt warm. They picked their way over the rocks and slid on their heels down the packed wet leaves, and all the time she was sure that her life would not be the same again. In that terrible, wonderful moment - when he held out his hand to her, and she reached up and took it, and the crying and shouting were reduced to background static - she had felt the change. She had felt something of herself fuse with him. She wanted to tell him this but could think of no words that could encircle and deliver whole such a glorious feeling. Ahead of them a rabbit

skittered across the path. Without speaking she squeezed Karl's arm. A faint friendly rustle sounded from the woods, then nothing but silence.

At the water's edge they drew together. Her body sighed and bent into his. Over his shoulder, before she closed her eyes, she saw the light gleam gently off the surface of the lake. It was that twilight hour of evening, the same hour as yesterday's moment of truth up on the bluff. And now, with the last vestige of observational power left in her, she recognized the moment, this moment, as the most perfect of her existence...more perfect than any time in the past...more perfect, as it came to happen, than the hour she spent in his bed that night...more perfect, she would say now, than any moment since.

What she cannot tell about that moment or any other is why he chose her. It's the sort of question she didn't ask herself back then. Now she supposes that, in a larger sense, it may have been merely a matter of timing. She was there at the precise point when he was ready to marry, and, one way and another, she was acceptable. She knows he was genuinely attracted to her in a physical way. And probably too, in spite of their foibles, he was impressed by her family, by their air of establishment, by the fact that they appeared to have money. These days she takes a certain

comfort in this last thought. It frees her. If his motives were ignoble, then what if anything does she owe him?

She glances at his profile now, notes the shadow around his finely carved nostril, the hollow engraved in his cheek. "I talked to that man Robert for a while," she says casually. "Sort of pompous..."

"Oh, he's okay. Just the kind of guy who goes after things." Karl's voice, since he doesn't look at her, sounds disconnected, as if he's dropping the words somewhere between them.

"We should have a party," she announces. "We've been to Eleanor and Jacques's a million times."

"Sure," says Karl. "Why not?"

"Some of your office people," she suggests and waits, still watching him. "I mean, some of the ones I've met at Eleanor and Jacques's...the black-haired girl, for instance..." She sees his lips part for the quick intake of air, catches the slight lowering of his eyelids.

"Francine?" he says now. "Sure, she's good fun." His voice is smooth, noncommittal.

"And that man I was talking to...Robert..."

"Why not?" Karl says again. He gives her a distracted glance as though he can't understand where she is heading. His hands, both of them, remain on the wheel guarding against the vagaries of the wind. His hair - and she decides this almost vengefully - his hair is less bright than

it used to be. Duller. Flatter. But his profile still cuts the grey sky and the frame of the window as precisely as ever. What has changed is that it no longer seems part of him. It simply *is*.

Occasionally Janey studies Peter and Sally Jane to see if he has bequeathed this particular beauty to either of them. Such an inheritance for her children would make the betrayals less painful, the price of marrying this handsome man less bitter.

Karl had an affair the year after Sally Jane was born. Janey figured it out from certain evidence. She thinks the affair was, if not serious, then at least intense, though Karl has never admitted this. Nor has he ever named the woman. His reasons for having an affair had nothing to do with Janey, he said. He had simply been bored at work, at an impasse so to speak. The woman, Janey is pretty sure, was one of his customers, the young widow of a wealthy and much older man, a scion of one of Montreal's first families. But Karl has never said.

During what Janey eventually identified as the period of this affair, Karl looked wonderful...shadowy of eye and often weary, yet somehow aglow as if the sunlight had settled permanently this time on his features. Though he had always, of course, been handsome, he became magnetic. Even after the affair, strange girls went on asking him to dance

or to light their cigarettes. Women turned in the street to look at him. Karl shrugged all this off. He had, after all, already ended the affair. The residual effects would no doubt fade too. He was sorry to have hurt Janey. He said this in a severe way, as though it pained him...to admit such a thing, or to have hurt her? Then, as if to affirm where his heart lay, he began to bring home presents for the children. A series of racing cars for Peter. A jack-in-the-box and a giant yellow bunny for Sally Jane. The bunny, which has huge floppy ears, is as large as Sally Jane is. She drags it around, bossing and scolding it, and at night she insists it sit at the foot of her bed. (It's too large to put under the covers with her.) For Janey, Karl produced a ring. He found it in a jeweller's atelier, he explained. He'd talked at length with the jeweller, met the designer. He told her all this in a rather startled way as if he'd surprised himself. (His usual habit was to shop at the last minute.) The ring has a smooth blue stone set off-centre. Light shines through this stone, though only at certain angles.

About the same time as the ring, Janey began to grow her hair. She lost ten pounds and took to wearing eye makeup and flirting heavily at parties. She also began to see a psychologist who specialized in counselling troubled spouses.

To this man she said things like..."I'm not sure he ever loved me," or... "There's a dead space between us; I'm not sure it was ever different."

"What would you say are the understandings between you?" The psychologist seemed confident that his questions would produce some meaningful assessment.

But Janey shook her head. She was always doing this. "I don't know. He doesn't look at me. I don't think he ever did." She stated this uncertainly, as if the psychologist might know more about it than she, as if he might some day tell her what it meant. "He's terrific with women he doesn't know. The girls at his office...I think the woman was there...a customer actually. She's..."

The psychologist held up his hand. Other people, even other women, were not the issue. He had been firm from the beginning about this. "But you don't know," he said now.

"I do know. I just don't know who. He won't tell me...I hate him for that..." She heard the tremor in her voice. The psychologist nodded and made a note on his pad. A gust of wind blew in through the open window behind him. His Venetian blind clattered - he had the old-fashioned, horizontal kind - and a sheet of paper flew off his desk and floated to the floor.

While the psychologist moved to retrieve the paper, Janey shook back her new long hair and stared around the high-ceilinged room. Usually she was concentrating too hard

to see anything except the scenery inside her own head. Now she decided she disliked the colour of the walls. ("I hate him for that..." Had she ever used the word "hate" before?) The walls were wood-panelled but painted a lifeless shade of grey, and the blinds looked dusty. At that moment, as if in agreement that all lacked promise, the weary screech of bus brakes rose from the street.

"And why," said the psychologist, sliding the piece of paper under his notepad, "why do you think you ask him questions that you know he won't answer?"

Later on, when Karl came to a session, progress - if, indeed, there had been any - came to a complete halt. Karl talked for a while alone with the psychologist. That was the deal. And by the time Janey was allowed to join them, the psychologist was tapping his foot like a dissatisfied patient. Karl, on the other hand, sat leaning back in the corner of the sofa, a look of faint surprise on his face...as if the psychologist were a performing animal or a comedian telling jokes in bad taste. It was a pose, this look of Karl's. She knew he adopted it when he was ill at ease. But it seemed to be working.

Poor psychologist. Janey began to feel sorry for him and less and less respectful at the same time. His oh-so probing questions were being dismissed, dealt with rather than answered. And Karl countered with questions of his own. He requested definitions - "'Passive aggression'?"

Isn't that an oxymoron?" - expressed tolerant disbelief at the responses. Finally he rose and shook the man's hand regretfully...as though he, Karl, had just finished conducting an interview and decided not to hire the man. When they got outside, there was a parking ticket on the little Toyota. Avoiding the bus stop, they had parked too close to the corner. Karl ripped the ticket out from under the windshield wiper as if it were the final commentary. As, no doubt, for him it was.

"You know," he said then, jerking his shoulder in the direction of the psychologist's office building, "for the price of this and him, we could have had dinner at the Ritz." He jammed the ticket into his wallet, and in the blue-white glare of the street light, his features were as austere and uncompromising as an angel's. "That guy was an idiot. You know that, don't you?" he told her.

"You'd say that about any therapist I went to," she protested.

"I repeat. That guy was an idiot. He was just spouting jargon." He put his arm around her shoulders and, with his free hand, opened the car door. "Come on," he told her. "Get in. It's easy to be happy; just ask me. First you pretend this is a Porsche..." But when she turned to look at him, he was staring somewhere over her head, waiting presumably for her to get into the car, and she couldn't tell if he had meant to be funny. Nonetheless, his face

bore an odd, weathered look. And it occurred to her as she bent to get into the little car - uncharacteristically, he was waiting to shut her door - it occurred to her then that the evening had been hard for him. He looked, in fact, as if he had passed through some crisis.

A vision of the flummoxed psychologist came back to her a moment later as they were pulling away from the curb. His earnest face. His unanswered questions falling foolishly around him. It was as if Karl had defeated him...on behalf of both of them. She felt certain of this suddenly, that Karl had been defending them, protecting some fragile arrangement of forces, strong yet ephemeral, that held the two of them in connection. She felt certain, too, that the continuing existence of their coupledness depended on just such moments...and would again..for it could fail. She understood that now. It could fly apart or disappear at any time. So, of course, Karl had meant to be funny. He must be relieved. And besides, the whole thing was funny.

Her new party girl laugh sounded theatrical in the darkened interior of the car. "Then take me to the Ritz anyway," she told Karl's blue-white profile. "Just do that, will you?" And, of course, they did go to the Ritz. It was Karl's way of trying, his thank-you to her for giving up the psychologist. She understood that too.

What they said at the Ritz, what drinks they ordered, what happened after that, she doesn't remember. The effects

of Karl's affair - serious or otherwise - seeped in, became part of what they were altogether. In her new thinner body, Janey could feel the curve of her ribs, the jut of her hipbones through her skin. A leaner stripped-down character was how she perceived herself. Not so much of a girl...though she still looked girlish enough. With her mother's deep-set, tragic eyes and the new curtain of dark hair, she still looked woundable. She still felt woundable too, but in a different way, as if her children's vulnerability had become hers, her particular responsibility really, now that she herself understood how things could go wrong. Perhaps the psychologist had done his work after all.

All this happened less than two years ago. Yet it seems farther away than that. Since then, Janey's father has had a series of minor strokes. He has lost a good deal of his hearing too, and encased in semi-deafness he has withdrawn from all of them. He no longer flies into rages. Indeed, he seldom evinces any reaction at all, and each person in the family has wondered aloud at one time or another whether he won't die soon, and in fact whether death wouldn't be preferable to him. Janey wonders as much as any of them. She certainly doesn't miss her father's dragon performances, but the quality of his silence seems worse in

a way...as if the rage is choked up somewhere inside him, as if he is being tortured in some soundless way.

As a consequence of his sickness, the old house in the Laurentians has become too much for Janey's mother, and Karl has more than once mentioned that they should consider buying it if they can dig up enough cash. As in the early days, he can still list, with considerable enthusiasm, repairs and even improvements that could be worked on its aging frame. He is skilled with tools and speaks of doing some of the carpentry himself. This sort of ambition used to endear him to Janey...a sign of what he hungered for but couldn't talk about...a symbol, in a way, of what she could do for him. But lately, when he mentions her parents' place, Janey's stomach contracts as if he is physically pulling something away from her. It's mine, she wants to tell him - though of course it isn't - you can't take what's mine.

A hard wind lashes the long brown grass of the park. It slaps back the folds of Janey's coat and shakes the bushes - no more now than bunches of dried sticks - until they chatter. Janey calls back over her shoulder to Karl, who's hauling Sally Jane out of the car. "It's too late in the year. We're too late." (She nearly has to scream to be heard.) Then she takes Peter's hand and hurries him on through the bushes toward the river itself. Directly ahead,

they can see for the first time how fast the water is moving. Little waves writhe between the smooth-running ridges of water. Streaks of foam mark the actual stones.

"Imagine the Indians trying to get through all that in their canoes," Janey says.

"Are the Indians gone?" asks Peter. He tilts his head back to look up at her, and she sees that his tuque has slipped to his eyebrows. It's the new red one, slightly too large, that Karl brought home from the Canadiens' game.

"Here, love," she says reaching down to him. "How can you see anything?"

"Are they?" he insists as she adjusts the ribbed band.

"The Indians gone? Mostly. And the ones who're left have changed." We should have come a month ago, she is thinking. Back when the grass was still fresh and leaves shuffled and whispered in the trees... She is still recalling to herself how the park would have been when she hears the shout. In the next instant Sally Jane's little body comes flying past them and then, before Janey can do more than open her mouth to scream, Karl too is past them. Janey's scream disintegrates in the wind. But already Karl has caught the runaway.

Janey sees him bend down to speak to Sally Jane. Her own heart is thudding inside her chest. "Don't you ever do that," she tells Peter. He shakes his head.

"She's crazy," he says smugly as they come up beside Karl and the still struggling Sally Jane.

"...Never again, honey. You hear me?" Karl is speaking directly into Sally Jane's ear. But still she strains against his grasp, oblivious to warnings.

As Karl stands up now, his eyes, wide with shock, meet Janey's. "Christ!" he says, "What's got into her?" The wind slices between them as he speaks, and Janey feels the impulse to hold his glance across the blast. The instant of fear, the possibility of loss...all of it so mutual... Isn't there something for them to say to one another now? Something parental and affectionate about their wild little girl. Something... But, even as the thought shapes itself in her brain, Karl's eyes are sliding away toward the moving water and he is shrugging. What can we do, says the shrug, except what we have already done?

"Is this the park?" Peter tugs complainingly on her hand, and she lets her eyes drop to his affronted gaze. His tuque has descended to his eyebrows once again.

"Yes," she says. "Yes, darling, it is the park. But it's a little colder than we thought, isn't it?"

He nods, and the four of them move forward then to the river edge. Still held by Karl, Sally Jane leans out over the water. She stares intently into the flashing waves. There is no question that if he were not clutching her arm, she would fall directly into the water.

Suddenly moved by this quixotic struggle, the little body that believes it could fly if only the big hand would let it free, Janey squats down and slides an arm around her child. She spreads her hand over the convex midriff. "Listen, love," she says, speaking into the flimsy child's hair that blows across her face. "You can see. Really." With her free hand she points toward the foam. "The rapids come from stones that are just underneath the water. You can tell where they are by the little white waves. See the little white waves?"

Sally Jane nods, but still she strains against their hands. Then she glances up at Karl. "Daddy?" she says. Janey can barely discern the thread of her voice. "Daddy, get 'em?"

Karl bends over her. "Daddy can't get them," he says shaking his head. His expression for an instant is tender. "The rapids aren't something you can have. They stay in the water." He straightens up. "You've got her?" he asks Janey. She nods, and he lets go Sally Jane's arm.

Janey blinks. The cold is bringing tears to her eyes. Here at the very brink, the wind comes straight off the river, stripping the heat from their faces, slashing against their bare necks. They won't last long here. "Ugh," she says now. "Horrid wind."

Sally Jane looks back at her for a second. "Horrid wind," she repeats and then, her face full of hope, "Where the rapids?"

"Rapids, love. They're right there," Janey assures her. "Come on. It's cold. Let's go." As she pulls the child back from the grassy edge and stands up beside Karl, she is thinking of the coming of winter, the snow and the dark frigid mornings, the short days. How she will be cold all the time.

On the way home Janey doles out the cookies and the cans of juice she has brought with them. "For Christ's sake," says Karl as she pops open the cans for the children. "We'll be home in half an hour. That stuff makes a hell of a mess." He dislikes mess. Besides, he's probably still feeling lousy. Janey's hand hesitates. Of course, he's right. The car seats will get even stickier. Crumbs will work their way into all these cracks in the vinyl. But still...why shouldn't she do it her way? Robert tells her she is spontaneous, that he enjoys that quality in her.

Handing back the cans of juice, she glances nervously at Karl. But he is no longer paying attention. They are passing a row of elaborate old river houses, estates that once belonged to Montreal's rich and may still do so. Karl keeps glancing to his left. It's as if his eyes are sweeping up each precisely curved driveway, assessing the value

and substance of each house. He nods now as if he's agreeing with himself. "If I get that wholesale marketing account and you go back to teaching next year, we could think about buying an old house," he tells her. His glance swings around to her, then back again, away toward the river. The house they are passing now is an old Tudor-style mansion, half-timbered like her parents' place. "Ask your mother...and your father...what they think."

"They're going to sell the house." Her voice cuts through the air between them...the new hard voice she has been practising. "They're selling it to my cousin...the one who lives in Europe. He wants a place to come to in the summers. My mother wants to keep it in the family. She can't..."

There is a slight, rigid movement in the muscles at the corners of his mouth and in the cords of his neck. "She would have told us," he says.

"She did...I mean, she told me. Last weekend. She asked me what I thought..." Janey pauses, but the next words are already in her throat. "I said I thought it was better like that...if she needed the money...to keep it in the family and all..."

"In the family?" His voice is soft, whether in fury or defeat she can't tell. Little patches of pink mottle his face and neck. "That's what you said?" She sits very still for a moment. Something will shatter or tear if she moves.

The blood will burst forth from his skin. Or the very air will come apart. She waits, almost not breathing, for what will come next.

But what comes is...nothing. Nothing at all. He doesn't speak, and she doesn't, and after a while she finds herself thinking of what she will feed them for supper and of how, first, she might walk down to the milk store. (They have a pay phone there, behind the ice machine.) Inside her, a kind of emptiness reigns and with it, a touch of something else, an odd feeling, something like relief. Surely, the worst that can happen has happened. Nothing so terrible will need to be said again...

Ahead of them the steel girders of the Jacques Cartier Bridge arch into the paler steel of the sky. The highway has become crowded with cars, and Karl negotiates the lanes with fierce concentration. He hasn't spoken since they left the old road and crossed the Richelieu River. The children have finished slurping up their juice. The rattle of the heater is the only noise inside the car. This is the moment to reach over and lay her hand on his arm. It's what usually happens. She rails at him in one way or another, and then eventually some worn but familiar spirit of reconciliation takes over, and in spite of everything, she reaches out to him. This is that moment. She could touch him like that now, admit that it isn't yet altogether true about the

house, that selling it to the cousin is just a possibility her mother mentioned...

"I'm hungry." Peter's voice is a bleat. "I want a hot dog."

"You can't be hungry, darling." Janey speaks automatically, in her soothing, mother's voice. "We'll be home soon. See the big bridge?" Her hands have not moved. She looks down at them - they huddle motionless in her lap - and knows that the impulse for mercy is not in her any more.

She is still staring at her hands when the sound of snuffling reaches into her consciousness. She turns her head to glance at Peter, but he is gazing out the window with peevish concentration. It is Sally Jane's face that has crumpled. Tears are sliding down her beautiful cushiony cheeks.

"Why, darling, what is it?" says Janey. She unfastens her seat belt and twists around to reach into the back seat. Surely the child cannot have understood the import of what has taken place. "Don't cry. Tell Mummy."

"I cou'nent see the rabbits," whispers Sally Jane.

"What rabbits?"

And then Janey realizes. Her stomach curls around the knowledge. As she stretches out her hand to stroke Sally Jane's tear-wet face, she looks back over her shoulder at Karl. His pale eyes swing toward her. The hint of some recognition gleams from them.

Does he see, then, what she sees? For in her mind has sprung the vision, as clear as the bridge ahead, of rabbits. Grey rabbits and white ones. A whole colony of bunnies hopping about just beneath the icy surface of the water. She can see their ears and their quivering noses, their alert foolish tails. She can feel how it must be under the water, there in their magic summer world. The wash of sunlight on summer grass and the warmth of the fluff that lines their nests, the unearthly softness of their fur...

She stares at Karl for another instant - nothing more is forthcoming from his expression - then turns back to her child. What she wants at this moment is to take the little girl into her arms, to hug away the image that is so compelling and can never be. She wants not to say what she now must say. Sally Jane...there are no rabbits.

AFTERNOON AT THE BELLERIVE

The Baronesa pauses at each apartment door, then moves on with deliberate steps. The light from the chandeliers is so faint she can barely make out the numbers. Still, she finds the atmosphere reassuring. This hushed and spacious corridor. That splendid antique brass cage of an elevator. Even the dimness. It's as if here, in the old wing of the hotel, some of the fine old things have remained as they were in better days. (And God Himself knows that is a preservation most rare and desirable.) Pausing once again, she peers at a number. Ah, yes. This is the one. She raises her hand and knocks.

A moment or more of silence - the Baronesa is too reserved to knock again - and then the rasp of a bolt. The door opens only wide enough to reveal the meagre figure of Nanny. Over her shoulder, in the room itself, another woman can be seen moving about among the furniture. The Baronesa has an instant to recognize the predatory curve of her aunt's back (the women in the family are prone, alas, to

dowager's hump), before Nanny, beginning slowly to nod, pulls the door wide, and a dazzle of light from the window at the far end of the room overwhelms the scene. This window opens onto the light-filled mist that has been hovering over the lake all morning and seems here to hover at the very window sill. In the glare, the aunt's bowed figure as she pivots on her walking stick is no more than a silhouette.

The last of that generation! The Baronesa feels the weight of this truth even as the figure begins to rock toward her. The very last.

"Nanny!" The old voice, at least, is still strong. "Nanny, do stand aside! My dear, how splendid..." The walking stick thumps the rug.

"Yes, yes...do come in, dear lady." Nanny's voice too...unchanged. (Did not their father swear the bleat of Nanny's voice gave him a headache?) "Do come in..."

Speaking, Nanny has let go the door, and now she backs abruptly into the room. In the next instant the two old creatures have collided. Nanny staggers sideways; behind her, the aunt's hands fly out for balance. The walking stick bounces once on its tip, then swings over against her hip and slides to the floor. The Baronesa takes a horrified step toward the tangle of them (they will break each other's bones before her very eyes), but already the two have stepped sharply apart and are glaring at one another.

"Donkey!" The aunt sounds irritated but unsurprised.

"Well!" Nanny's hands clasp together in front of her chest. (The gesture is one of bony petulance.) "Well, excuse me, I'm sure. I'm sure I *meant* to bump you like that."

The aunt makes no reply. Her hands, which a moment ago were grasping at air, have recovered themselves. They brush now in slow disdain the seams of her dress, as though Nanny's touch has left some residue.

The Baronesa stoops to retrieve the fallen stick. Surely, the two old creatures weren't this contentious at her last visit. nor, come to think of it, were their bodies this unreliable... Sad. In the old days, the aunt was a character of such strength, a source of such good advice. To see her now bent, with powers diminished...sad indeed.

And somehow disappointing too. The Baronesa feels selfish dwelling on such a thought. But it is certainly true that not an hour ago, setting out in the taxi, she felt herself in the grip of an old expectation. Winding down the streets of Lausanne, she began to ask herself whether this visit might not secure some benefit to herself. Might not her aunt still provide the sort of counsel that she has produced (and with such good result) at crucial moments in the past? Indeed, the whole of the Baronesa's adult life can be seen to be the result of her triumphant marriage, and that marriage, in turn, a blessing conferred by her aunt.

Twice widowed before her fortieth birthday, the aunt lived for a time with the Baronesa's family. The first husband, brother to the Baronesa's father, had died in a yachting accident, the second in his Bughatti on the Haute Corniche. To her shy, plain niece, a girl of eighteen as the Baronesa then was, the aunt's rooms became another world within the house. A world where every event, every hope, was lit with glamorous new possibility.

And now, suddenly, bending to kiss each papery cheek, the Baronesa feels again that glow of borrowed confidence. Lily of the valley from her aunt (that old, luxurious scent from Patou), mint and mouthwash from Nanny... It is as if some magic (the combination of their scents, the sound of their voices?) has placed her back in the care of these two, her nanny and her aunt. As she straightens up, a vision of her aunt's dressing table comes into her mind, the objects scattered over its mirrored surface...crystal powder box poised on silver legs...silver brush and comb...perfume bottles like miniature decanters, brown-stained around their stoppers, exuding the aroma of lilies.

Yes, that was how it happened...the young niece seated at the dressing table, the aunt, like some sophisticated angel, grooming her protégé for the meeting with the eligible young Barón, the niece enthralled, hypnotized, seduced into confidence almost, by the resonant voice, which even now is ordering her to a seat.

"...Over there, my dear. On the sofa. You will have a splendid view if this tiresome fog will lift. No doubt it will... Nanny, do be of some use. She does not wish to hold her coat all afternoon." (*"Who has allowed you to butcher your hair in this manner? Nanny have you been at it with your shears...?"*) Then as now, the bleat of protest cut short by the voice. "No matter. We will do what we can...so...with this barrette." The sensation of hands lifting her hair from her neck, the unfamiliar weight of it piled high on her head. "*There, do you see? Hair, my dear, is an aphrodisiac. And perfume, my dear...it is important to understand...perfume is not a crime. Nor is mascara. With a nose of such character, one needs eyes... Nanny, bring my cosmetics case, the white one, from my dressing room. And my jewel box... Those poor naked lobes! Earrings, my dear. You must wear earrings...*") Without her advice, without the loan of those seductive accessories and the allure they implied, would the Barón have believed? For that crucial evening hour would he have believed...whatever it was that he needed to believe in order to choose her? That she was a prize. A girl not only well-born but confident in the offering of herself. A girl ideal in her naiveté for a man of thirty (himself even more well-born) who had decided for one reason or many to take on the blessings of marriage.

As she seats herself a moment later - an imperious wave from the aunt has indicated a sofa near the window - the Baronesa thinks of her lifelong inability to understand people whose inner workings are more complicated than her own. If only the aunt were not so old now... Not actually senile, they say, but no longer fixed by day to day concerns...she confuses the generations...

In the opposite corner of the sofa, however, the aunt does not look the least bit confused. She has been settling herself, patting a sleeve, plucking at a ruffle. Now she glances toward the window and shakes her head. "On a fine day, my dear, you would be looking straight across the lake to Evian. A pretty view...though the town is become a dull spot these days; they have closed the casino, you know. But today..." She waves a dismissive hand in the direction of the window. "Fog and mountains. You must imagine the rest."

Nodding, the Baronesa gives the view her attention. Above the layers of mist piled in the hollow of the lake rises a range of snowy peaks. Alps. From this angle she can see several of them. Magnificent, despite the mist. She would certainly say so if asked. And yet even in such grandeur, isn't there something she does not wish to behold, in that fierce, unreachable height something...?"

"Aunt?" Her voice sounds sharp to her own ears. "The curtains, Aunt. The glare, do you not think?" She waits

out the slow rotation of the old head. "It is quite impossible to see within the room as it is."

"The curtains," says the aunt and then begins to nod as she gets the point. "Yes, yes, of course. You are not accustomed to the light. Nanny! Will you draw the curtains then?" Nanny hangs her head for a second, as if considering the difficulties inherent in such a request, then veers toward the window.

In the pause which follows, the Baronesa holds her eyes resolutely away from the view. He will not leave her. She knows that. And yet... She fingers the gold buttons on her suit jacket, glances down at her skirt. Such foolish thoughts chase through her head...how the folds seem almost to have arranged themselves...how this surely is the value of a good house...how perhaps the girl will die...

The aunt's voice summons her from her reverie. "Well, my dear, it is good of you to find the time to visit me. I know you and the Barón..."

"Us," says Nanny from the window. "Visit us." She releases the inner set of curtains and then the outer. The heavy layers of satin and velvet fall together, banishing the dazzle. All three women blink and glance around as if awakened from a spell. The interior of the room has leapt into view. It is possible now to appreciate the ornate old furniture and fabrics, the lampshades with their rows of gold braid, the collection of Sèvres plates, the profusion

of plump little cushions covered in flowered petit-point designs.

"That will certainly do, Nanny," says the aunt. "Now do settle yourself." She inclines her head toward a wing-backed chair. Nanny, after one rebellious glance which the aunt doesn't appear to notice, tucks around several laden tables and makes for the chair.

Although the Baronesa and her aunt are native Catalán, the conversation will continue to be held in English...for the sake of Nanny. The British do not speak other languages. Moreover, both aunt and niece have spoken English from their respective nursery days...other languages being as much *sine qua non* as good manners and couturier clothes. By languages, of course, are meant the tongues of western Europe, though in the recent generation there has been a flurry of interest in modern Greek on account of the young Queen and her brother. But in the Baronesa's day, the conquest of French and Italian came first, then German and English. The Baronesa, indeed, learned her first English from this same Nanny. Much later (by then their Nanny-tinged accents had been corrected), she and the other children were made to read widely in English...poetry and even novels. At one time, back then, Hemingway was said to be a friend of her father's, although the Baronesa doesn't remember him ever coming to their house...so perhaps the

famous American writer was merely an acquaintance. Such stories from the past are often, she knows, distorted.

"Would you like your tea, dear lady?" Nanny is lowering herself into her chair as she speaks and rounds her inquiry with a sigh.

"Of course she doesn't," says the aunt. "She has barely arrived; she hasn't..."

"I asked," retorts Nanny. "No more than simply asked." She lifts her gaunt face within the shadow of the big chair's wings and sniffs haughtily. "Some people..."

"Now then!" interrupts the Baronesa in a voice she normally employs with small grandchildren. "Tell me news from the family. I am a terrible correspondent myself. Even my children complain."

Both old women pull themselves erect. "Now let me think..." says the aunt.

"There was that letter from Lucia," offers Nanny. She leans forward out of the chair.

"Yes, yes, the dear child's daughter is marrying the grandson of Murillo-Raña. That is quite right."

"A good family," says Nanny judiciously. "Though not a patch on what you married, dear lady." She beams at the Baronesa, who in turn glances at her aunt. So, it is true...what they say. Nanny does imagine the concerns of the family, even such delicate dynastic ones, to be her own.

"The English uncle...?" the aunt says now as though they have been speaking of him all along. "What was his name...oh, yes, Broadfoot. He has died of a heart attack...some months ago, I believe."

"That was two years ago," says Nanny.

"And young Ferrer had a frightful car crash," continues the aunt. "Now what was his name? Juan Franco? Juan Antonio?" She adjusts the scarf at her throat and tips her head to one side. "He recovered, I believe, or...no, that was the other one." She nods to herself.

The Baronesa, who knows neither of these individuals and does not particularly wish enlightenment, merely nods and waits.

"She doesn't know them!" Nanny pounces. "That's not her side."

"Nonsense," replies the aunt. "They sent me more of the furniture and silver from that estate. I can't use it, of course. And lace. I have never worn lace. But she was a good child." She tips her head again, this time in the direction of her niece. "You knew Estella. You spent summers with her children more than once."

The Baronesa smiles. "Yes, of course. Estella. Certainly."

"Your father always liked to have the extra children. He said it made your mother happy," the aunt tells her now.

"Did he?" says the Baronesa amiably.

"Kept *her* busy," says Nanny. "That's what he was after."

The aunt turns on her. "You!" she says. "You knew nothing; your business was with the children."

"I knew a lot," sniffs Nanny. The Baronessa stares from one to the other. Both old faces gleam with malice.

"Nothing," repeats the aunt. "Nothing at all."

This is an ongoing quarrel evidently...but when did Nanny get so out of hand? The Baronessa settles back as best she can in the rigid settee. Cushions press into her back like little fists. "Tell me, Aunt," she says, interrupting another barbed exchange. "Do you find the climate here suits you?"

The aunt looks startled. Like a well-chosen hobby, the wrangling has absorbed all her attention. With obvious reluctance she relinquishes her battle position and glances around at her niece. "The climate?" she repeats. "Ah, yes. It does suit. Always fresh...really quite agreeable..."

"Too damp," says Nanny and begins to rub her wrists.

The aunt's head swivels back. "And why do you not return to England then? No doubt the perpetual fog would suit you."

Nanny's head withdraws turtle-like into the shadow. Her voice darts out from the depths of her chair. "And who would run about for you and do your messages?" she counters.

"Those chocolates you like so much...and what about Pedrito? Who would take him out then, I'd like to know?"

"Pedrito?" asks the Baronesa. Surely they haven't got a child here. She glances around. Since her last visit, there seems to have been an explosion of objects in the room. Besides the sofa where she sits, there are six armchairs, each choked with cushions, and over by the wall yet another sofa of the Empire style, this one covered in an opulent purple and gold striped brocade. There are Chinese Chippendale tables and bamboo étagères crammed with glass animals and royal Doulton figurines...surely no child...?

As if in answer, the aunt raises her hands and claps them several times. "Ven, Pedrito!" she cries in her rich voice. "Ven a Mamita."

There is a scratching at one of the side doors and then a single high-pitched bark. Nanny gets up and clumps across the room. "Useless creature," she says to no one in particular. When she opens the door, a black poodle of the toy variety dances into the room.

"Aquí!" cries the aunt, and the dog quick-steps across the room and springs sharply into the old woman's lap. His curly head settles into the folds of her stomach. His pom-pom tail beats wildly.

"Mi pequeño," says the aunt fondling his ears. "Mi pequeño niño."

"Ah," says the Baronesa. "Pedrito." She notices when the dog lifts his head that his muzzle is quite grey.

Nanny shuts the door so hard the Sèvres plates rattle in their stands. She sniffs in the direction of the dog and then glances meaningfully at the Baronesa. "Gets worse every year," she says. "Your father...now he would never have allowed a mangy little creature like that into the house. Never. A fine hunting dog, those big German ones...that was the kind of animal *he* liked."

The aunt pays no attention to Nanny's remarks. Her faintly yellowed features have taken on an expression which is nearly coquettish. "Qué bonito," she croons. Her crooked old hands travel from the dog's head down his neck. Hungrily, she strokes his back and shoulders.

"Your father," says Nanny. "Now he was a gentleman...the old school." Her smile reveals ragged brown teeth. "And you begin to look like him, my dear lady. The nose and the neck, the same black hair, I do believe."

The Baronesa, whose nose is large and aquiline and whose neck is beginning to wrinkle alarmingly, is not amused. "Yes, indeed," says Nanny agreeing with herself. The Baronesa closes her eyes momentarily. Nanny undoubtedly means well; she was, after all, utterly infatuated with their father. All the children knew. It was a joke... Nanny always gazing after him, quoting him, sighing as he strode away after a visit to the children's quarters.

Ah, their father. She can see him...not the features of his face, but the shape of him...standing in the street while men loaded the trunks into the first taxi. He was a presence then, their father, stiffly tall, with a cigarette in a holder, the smoke rising around his face. And beside him their mother in a pale travelling suit, a soft hat shadowing her already shadowed eyes. At the last moment, while the driver of the second taxi stood holding the door, her mother turned and came quickly back up the steps to kiss each of them goodbye. The Baronesa can feel again the fuzzy hat brim brushing her cheek, can almost recollect the smell of her mother's hair as she whispered her goodbye, the inevitable admonition to be good. But all the while, over her mother's shoulder, the image of Father so regal and dark, giving orders to the men, master of everything and everyone, moved across the horizon.

Lately, as the rumours of her husband's flagrant self-indulgence have impinged more and more on her serenity, she has thought back to her father. He would never have conducted himself in such a manner, never have placed their mother in such a position.

"Do you remember the time he went to America?" she asks her aunt suddenly. "The year before I married, the year they took the train? My mother had never seen that country. He described to all of us where they would go. You remember?"

"Yes," says the aunt. "Yes. Across the breadth of that continent. It was a long trip for those days...the trunks of clothes, weeks and weeks of..."

"I went with him," interrupts Nanny. Her avid old face emerges from the chair. "I caught the next train and met him in Paris. We took the ship from Cherbourg."

"My father?" asks the Baronesa, her voice rising on a note of disbelief. Has Nanny gone mad?

The aunt makes an exasperated face. "Pay no attention," she tells her niece and then begins to laugh. Her face cracks into the thousand broken lines of a puzzle.

"You didn't know!" crows Nanny. Her long cheeks quiver with triumph. "No one did. I said I had to visit my family in London. He was mad about me."

"It was nineteen hundred forty-eight," says the aunt. "I am excellent with dates. The Americans were holding their presidential election..."

"Six days to New York," says Nanny. "I had a new coat..."

"A Mr. Truman," continues the aunt in the tone of one conducting an eminently reasonable conversation. "He was a haberdasher, I believe, quite unsuitable...and a Mr. Dewey..."

"He bought it for me...a beautiful new coat, big as a cape..."

"You must stop this," orders the Baronesa. "I will not have my father spoken of in this manner."

The aunt glances at her niece in surprise. Then, after a few seconds, she begins to nod. "Tiresome," she agrees. "Yes. Do go ring for tea, Nanny. You are annoying us."

The Baronesa uncrosses and then recrosses her legs, in the process turning exclusively toward her aunt. Nanny gets up and goes muttering to the telephone.

"She cannot help herself, my dear," says the aunt. She smiles and strokes the sleeves of her dress. "But my...I do remember those days so well. Your father was a great traveller. What they called an adventurer..."

"Tea," insists Nanny into the telephone. "Apartment three-one-seven."

"He always needed to know more..."

"No scones?" complains Nanny. "We always have scones..."

"He wanted more." The aunt's hand stroking her own sleeve has grown limp, her expression thoughtful.

When the tea has been consumed, the Baronesa asks Nanny to reopen the curtains. As in the opening moment of a play, the parting of the heavy folds of drapery catches each of them. They hold their breath and wait. A blade of light slices open the room. The gash widens, and in an instant, before the three women can register the change even, reality

has transferred its seat to the scene outside. The room where they sit has dimmed to an afterworld. The Baronesa rises to her feet; she must get outside.

In another minute, as if by the same compulsion, the old aunt has struggled to her feet as well, and together, while Nanny goes to fetch coats and leash, they stand staring out the window. The mist that earlier hovered at the very windows of the hotel has retreated to the centre of the lake. Directly below them, the garden beckons. Precise shadows trail from the stunted trees and underline clumps of bushes. Flowers tinted with new light glimmer along the base of the garden wall. The sun has very nearly broken through.

"Oh, do look at the swan!" Nanny's breath is warm and unpleasantly damp in the Baronesa's ear.

The three women have commandeered a bench near the low stone wall that marks the shoreline. Now, with the dog lashed to one of the slats of the bench, they sit in a compact row facing the lake. Flaps of Nanny's tweed coat and the aunt's loden cape reach like restraining hands across the Baronesa's lap. Trapped, like a little girl, between her nanny and her aunt, she sits very still, staring

straight out at the lake. Speckled with birds, it undulates gently before her troubled gaze.

"Yes, indeed," says Nanny, agreeing with herself. "Just look at him. Swans are the finest bird..."

"Snakes in feathers," says the aunt in a tone that indicates hers is the final word.

Directly opposite them a few feet out from shore, a particularly large swan has cleared an area of water. The other birds - ducks of many varieties, a number of smaller white birds, and gulls as well - have moved off to less disputed territory and are swimming about and occasionally diving alongside the stone jetties. The swan paddles in circles before his audience. Alternately he picks at feathers on the back of his neck and plunges his head into the water. Once in a while he glances toward the three shore-bound women as though he knows he has entranced them. The black mask around his eyes gives him the look of a bandit.

"And how is the Barón, my lady?" Nanny's voice, like one of the gulls, circles out over the water. "Did he come with you to Lausanne?"

"He is at this moment giving a speech, I believe...at his conference," replies the Baronesa still gazing outward. "I came to Lausanne with him because I wished to see you both." Usually uncomfortable with a lie, she utters this

partial untruth calmly. She has already used it on her husband.

In fact, though she is truly happy to see her aunt, and Nanny too, she has come along primarily to prevent the Barón from bringing with him his current mistress, a young woman of uncertain and, therefore, undoubtedly déclassé background. Informants have not been lacking. He has taken up dancing and nightclubs again. He refers to the girl, when travelling with her, as his nurse.

The Baronesa has never until now doubted the true substance of her life. As a husband, the Barón has been willful but seldom unkind. Where she has been inclined to gravity, he has been light-hearted, sometimes shockingly cynical, yet always indulgent of her concerns. He has chosen, with taste and decision and occasionally with surprising perspicacity, schools and companions and even spouses for the children, clothes for himself and for her, the furnishings and paintings for each of their dwellings, not to mention the dwellings themselves. Though he has conducted other affairs of the flesh, and though she has suffered pain and the special sense of inadequacy that comes of knowing herself to be no beauty, still as the Barón's consort, as the mother of his children, she has felt herself secure, through all her adult life, in a position of honour...like her mother before her.

But not like her mother now. The thought is a bitter one. Not like her after all. For the Barón has done what her father never did. He has been crude and obvious, and people know. This is the horror of it. They know, and they are all talking; so that now...what is she now? An object of pity, or of scorn. Shame rises like nausea in her throat. A nurse indeed! And travelling with him openly!

Dark thoughts choke the Baronesa as she gazes out at the swan...the wish that the girl should drown. Or no. Let *him* suffer. There would be justice. Let him sustain a crippling blow, a stroke or a heart attack. Let him have a real nurse.

"Ah, the young Barón," says the aunt warmly, having caught up evidently with the conversation. The Baronesa, jarred from her own grim reverie, glances at the aunt in some surprise. "The young Barón" is at present sixty-six years old.

"Not so handsome a man as your father, of course..." the aunt is adding. "Still...the same sort of man. Appealing to women...a man like that can hardly help himself." She pushes out her lips and gives her niece a look which is both shrewd and sympathetic. "Your mother, fortunately, understood him well."

"She never knew about me though," says Nanny, leaning across the Baronesa's lap toward the aunt. The dog, disturbed by her motion, shifts position.

"Donkey," snaps the aunt. "There was nothing to know."

Defeated, the Baronesa glances from one to the other. The two old creatures have switched generations without missing a breath. But still, what they say - her aunt's implication, Nanny's delusion - carries no weight. Nor are the two malicious. They merely cannot resist dramatic interpretations. They long, no doubt, for the things that have passed them by.

Out on the lake, a light wind flickers over the water. Streaks of black and blue and grey mottle the swaying surface. The swan stabs his head into the swell. The aunt gathers the green cape about her shoulders. Stiffly she shifts her weight and straightens her back. The bench quivers with her exertions; the walking stick slides to the pavement. It has already done so twice before, and automatically the Baronesa bends to retrieve it.

"I am quite chilled," says the aunt, taking back the proffered stick. "Thank you, my dear." She smiles at her niece.

"Thin blood," says Nanny, whose own nose has turned rosy above her tweed collar.

At this point, just as the aunt has drawn breath to reply, three little girls rush shrieking past their bench. The aunt transfers her attention to the flying trio. "So young," she remarks, staring after them. Her tone is not one of envy.

"We should go back now." The Baronesa punctuates this statement by rising. "There is a reception at the conference...for wives as well. I do not wish to keep my husband waiting, naturally."

"Why ever not?" says the aunt. "You are too humble altogether. Especially for one of our station." She leans forward and, smiling up at her niece, plants her stick firmly between her feet. "Your hand, my dear. The chill has stiffened my knees."

When they return to the apartment, a waiter is clearing away the tea things, gathering scattered napkins and cups, dusting crumbs from the table tops. Pedrito issues a series of sharp barks and rushes at his ankles.

"Stupid!" cries the aunt turning on Nanny. "You have let go his leash. You know he cannot bear finding a man in these rooms..."

"Filthy beast," says Nanny trying to step on the trailing leash. The hotel servant shakes his foot at Pedrito, who backs up shrilling his disapproval.

"Shut him in that bedroom!" orders the aunt.

Nanny stoops and manages then to kneel on the leash. Pedrito interrupts his barking to snap at her outstretched

hand. The aunt looks over at her niece. "He is such a spirited creature," she explains happily.

"But come!" She turns her back completely on Nanny and the furious dog. "As you have said, you must not be late for your husband. Though I cannot imagine why you should believe that. It is far better for the men if they are kept waiting; the tedium refines their appreciation." She smiles, and her parchment skin crinkles. The Baronesa smiles back. Her aunt, she feels suddenly, is a true friend, and there are few enough of those.

Leaving the two, servant and semi-servant, to deal with the still yapping Pedrito, aunt and niece walk slowly back down the hall toward the elevator.

Wall sconces have been lit along the corridor and in the sitting area around the elevator. And although the hallway still suggests the lofty grandeur of a ballroom, certain flaws nag at the Baronesa's sensibilities. She is not so satisfied this time with her surroundings. The new, interlocking circles of light illumine worn patches along the centre of the hall carpet. Alerted, she looks carefully around. Further sins catch her eye. The brass of the sconces is stained, the fluting dented. Here and there on the wall, panels of embossed paper have peeled at the edges, and strips of plaster show through. Wordlessly she studies these offenses. Her aunt, seeming smaller even than before, moves crab-like beside her. Finally they reach the eleva-

tor. A worn patch mars the carpet here too. Beside the elevator door, a red "Occupé" light glares rudely at them.

"It is still properly run, this hotel?" asks the Baronesa. "You are quite comfortable?"

"Yes, yes," says the aunt frowning distractedly. "You know, my dear, you were the best of his children." She reaches out and takes the Baronesa's hand. "Not an ounce of guile. But you never could laugh. And really, you know, it is not altogether convenient to live one's life without a dishonest act. The art of dissembling, my dear, the occasional well-placed lie..." Her crooked old fingers grip harder. "But that is not exactly what I wished to say... At my age, one doesn't know which time is the last, and I wished to..." She pauses once more, works her mouth as if pressing into shape the words she wants to speak, and then begins again. "The men have always done things in such a way, you know, in our family, among our sort of people... It is not a thing of importance. They have so little to do, most of them. They play out their men's games..." The Baronesa closes her eyes. Who does not know then? "One should never suffer by the men, my dear," continues her aunt. "They are animals running in the forest. They cannot help what they are. It is better, if you are so inclined, to play your own game. There is considerable amusement to be had, you know."

The Baronesa feels the heat of tears press into her eyes. "But he..." Her voice sounds to her own ears like a child's. Helpless. "But he is making a spectacle. People know, many people; they feel...sorry for me."

"Oh, well, my dear, but still... Not that sorry. It is not you after all who are playing the fool. My own husband had a number of such amusements. Your father...more amusements...and people knew. They always know." She lets go the Baronesa's suddenly rigid hand and stabs a finger in the direction of the apartment. "Nanny is of no importance, of course. It is merely that her tongue has come loose with old age. She was always a silly woman, even young, and now..." She stops. The Baronesa has stepped backward and thrust out her hand.

"My mother went on that train trip!" she tells her aunt fiercely. The sensation of imminent tears has disappeared from behind her eyes. "My mother! It was Nanny who stayed home with us children. Naturally. My father would never have done such a thing."

The aunt peers quizzically at her niece. "Child," she protests, "but of course he would have done such a thing. He did do such things." She smiles to herself. "Although not with poor Nanny, I do agree. You are quite right about that time." She says this last soothingly, as if being "right about that time" will restore the Baronesa to perfect equanimity. "It was your dear mother who went to America.

They had a most amusing holiday too...so many tales to tell. He brought back a buckskin jacket. She found jewelry to buy, silver and turquoise and some orange stone..."

"Coral...from the Indians," murmurs the Baronesa, speaking through the tumult in her brain. My mother, she says to herself, closing her eyes and calling up the fuzzy hat, the goodbye kiss. But once again it is her father's form she sees. Opening her eyes, she addresses her aunt. "Everyone knew? That is very hard to believe...what you say..."

The aunt looks taken aback for a second before she shakes her head. "Well, my dear, I suppose one tends not to know one's parents' amusements. But in any case, it simply was not so important a thing." She shakes her head again. "And as for your husband, my dear...you make far too much, really far too much. You will become obsessed...like poor, dreadful Nanny...now there is a case..."

"Whatever *is* the matter with Nanny then?" asks the Baronesa suddenly. She feels breathless, as though the oxygen has been sucked from the air. Is it possible that her husband's performance can be so easily dismissed, like the behaviour of a naughty boy? "Even if my father...even if Nanny knows things...why must she be vindictive? A fool really...and inventing such a story about my father, pretending...?"

The aunt looks surprised once again and then laughs. "Why, the poor woman was madly in love with your dear father. For years. And now that she is a trifle addled..." Behind her the red "Occupé" light goes out and then flashes on again. "Such an infatuation. Your mother was always amused...poor Nanny. Surely, even you little ones knew?"

The Baronesa nods. "We imagined it a great joke. But now that I think of it, she was quite pitiful really. She must have known well enough then that he had no time for her?"

"Indeed," agrees the aunt. "But, of course, she was young and she had nothing else in her life. Those English nannies..." She pushes out her lips and frowns, as if over the follies of all who lack her particular wisdom. "They used to come to us in Barcelona...to teach the children English. They never managed to learn Spanish themselves, you know. And not one word of Catalán. It was comical...how they prided themselves on their ignorance really. As this one does still. There was a community of them, but no men..." Again she points in the direction of the apartment. "I doubt she ever had a man, you know. Nanny was no beauty." She says this complacently.

"No, she was no beauty," the Baronesa hears herself say. Her heart closes hard around the words.

The aunt is blinking vigorously, as though she is trying to focus on some distant object. "Still," she muses

after a pause, and she seems now to be speaking more to herself than to her niece, "I wonder how she guessed about the train to Paris."

The Baronesa studies the shrivelled face but finds no malice in it. "My mother was the one who went to America," she reminds her aunt gently.

"Of course, my dear, of course. The trip to America...she did go," says the aunt. "But I was thinking of Paris, you see. In those years Paris was wonderful, the centre of the world. Such a rebirth of spirit after the war, such excitement... The time we managed to meet there he bought me a coat at the house of that new young man, Christian Dior... Poor Nanny must have been jealous. A great voluminous thing it was. The New Look. My..." she sighs, "It was all so long ago." And, while the Baronesa is still watching her, the aunt's short upper lip lifts in a smile that seems, for the moment, utterly unselfconscious and even - can it be - sensual.

It is a smile the Baronesa has never felt on her own face. Yet she recognizes it instantly. It is a smile that tells the delicious and particular joy of being desired. And the light that shines out of the ruined features is the pure, exultant light of youth.

"Did my mother know about you?" she asks her aunt softly.

"Your mother? Oh, perhaps." The aunt pushes out her lips, thinking this over. "You know, my dear, it was all so lighthearted. I'm sure she didn't brood on such things. She was a graceful woman, truly graceful. Even in her death. She died gently. Something broke in her brain and pouf..." The aunt flutters her crooked fingers to indicate, presumably, the delicacy of this mode of departure. "Really, my dear. The harder fate is to be the one left behind...as I am. And trapped in this dreadful body. I'm sure God is a perfectly dreadful individual..." She leans toward her niece, and her face in the chandelier light takes on a gossipy, confiding expression. "But I will tell you, my dear, though I am still glad to have taken my pleasures where I found them, I did envy your mother. From time to time I truly did...as some may envy you."

"Envy me?" The Baronesa is shocked.

"I should imagine so, my dear. After all, it is you who truly have him, and you are much the same as you were then. The same lack of artifice, so girlish... It was that which attracted him, you know. Dressed up in borrowed finery...that suit is Chanel, is it not?...you looked so innocent..."

Again that sensation of breathlessness. "But it was you who enabled me to...to attract him. I have always been grateful...even now. I could not have..."

"Nonsense, my dear. Of course, you *could* have. You did. He was, as you know, something of a roué when he married you. The most attractive ones often are. And that sort tends to value innocence."

The Baronesa blinks at her aunt. "But he has never... desired me. I am afraid he..." She stops. The words she cannot say fill her throat. I am afraid he will leave me.

But the aunt is making another of her dismissive gestures. "Even if he had once desired you madly, my dear...even then today it would all be ashes." A grimace of amusement drifts across her face. "I can assure you of this, my dear. The memory is pleasing of course, but passion is not a thing which endures. One cannot even keep it alive in oneself. Sooner or later one prefers the children or the dog or those wonderful truffled chocolates..." Her voice slows. "Nanny buys them for me, you know. She has found a splendid little shop...in the avenue du Théâtre..." She pauses - the expression on her face has grown distracted and greedy - and then peers at her niece. "Now where exactly was I?" she asks irritably.

The Baronesa draws breath to answer, but already the old face is clearing. "Ah, yes, husbands," the aunt says, nodding as if the question has been well answered. "Husbands indeed. Yes, I do think, my dear, that you have done an intelligent thing in travelling here with him. Perhaps you are learning." She reaches out suddenly and draws her

finger down the Baronesa's cheek. "You do know, of course, that he will not leave you?"

The touch is dry and warm, the pressure fleeting. An angel's hand, thinks the Baronesa...mysterious. "I am afraid that he will," she says. The sensation of being touched stays on her cheek.

"Of course he will not!" says the aunt. "The girl is a mere servant, is she not? Or something of the sort...a nurse? He knows well enough who you are and who he is. He chose you after all. But all the same, as I was saying to you, I do agree with what you have done. There is no need to make his banal little diversion easier for him. And the people at his...what do you call this speech he is making...a conference, yes? The people there will see that it is you who are with him. Very intelligent." She nods and then, in the face of the Baronesa's uncertain silence, shrugs one loden-draped shoulder. As you wish, the shrug implies.

As she turns away, the little red light beside the elevator flashes off, and she jabs the call button with the knob of her stick. "Dreadful apparatus," she remarks. "I cannot think why they have not simply got rid of it. A new, silent one. Modern..." The Baronesa barely hears the words. Staring at the cantankerous and yet humorous old face, she thinks of her husband...and of her father...and

then again of her husband. Is it all the same...or is it all new?

"Well, my dear," her aunt is saying now, as the elevator rises clanking in its brass cage, "it is splendid to have seen you...so refreshing to be with the younger generation. Now do try to have a good time..." The old head has lifted imperiously, willing the listener to heed, and the Baronesa nods. The rattle of the elevator gate is loud in her ear.

CROSSING

"Why do you suppose it is," he puzzles, "That the minute we hit the Quebec border, everything turned to lead? I mean, there were all those beautiful hills, and now this is nothing but prairie. And the buildings..." He makes a splayed-out gesture with his hand, flattening the buildings.

In fact they crossed the border some minutes ago, and his outburst refers mainly to the town they are passing through now. A flashy town, and cheap, it suggests the kind of crass mentality he hates...a mean, inferior gloss, indifference to beauty... All of these characteristics he reads in the neon signs and unprosperous little store fronts, the trash blowing along narrow sidewalks.

The street itself is wide, six lanes at least, but this width seems to have nothing to do with the town. It is like an uncrossable gulf between the grim little lines of stores. Further along, the squat, clapboard houses squint across its vastness. Where is the cool grace of the Vermont towns, the Greek revival houses, the slim and modest steeples pointing

into the sky? Only at the very edge of town does an aspect of gracious dimension appear in the form of a large, grey-stone Roman Catholic church and its accompanying greystone mansion. These two edifices rise grandly, almost insultingly, from the crest of a large sloping lawn. But they too, he sees as they swing past, they too are essentially ugly. And, like this wide road, they seem to have nothing to do with the town itself.

Mark knows himself to be a man inordinately affected by his surroundings. He shifts his hands on the wheel now and tells himself to lighten up. So the terrain is ugly. It's not a big deal.

Beside him, Anne lifts her serene and slightly severe profile. "All the towns up here are like this one," she says, not answering or even addressing his question. "Just don't look," she tells him and then smiles and shakes her head.

Leaving the town he slips around a truck and then guns the little Pontiac up to speed again. "Nice not having to trundle along at fifty-five though," he allows. She glances at the speedometer but makes no comment.

"You're sure you wouldn't like to stay at a hotel tonight?" he asks a few minutes later. "I'm pretty flush; I've been travelling all week, living on the company." He has spoken this time without turning his head. Traffic has

been growing heavier, and the middle lane of the highway belongs equally, as far as he can tell, to cars travelling north or south. He has the uneasy sense that any one of these speeding cars may, at any time, leap across the white line and nail him.

"It's because I haven't seen Perry for such an age," she explains. "If we stayed in a hotel, she'd be hurt. She's the kind who likes to have people around, lots of noise..."

"Sounds relaxing," he says, but Anne goes on in the same pleasant, voice as though he hasn't spoken. Although she doesn't normally have a lot to say, it's hard to shake her loose from a subject once she's got hold of it.

"Last time I came up," she tells him, "She had this great big party. For me to meet people. I was feeling pretty terrible. It was just after Tyler moved out, and they were cheering me up. You remember...I told you?" She glances at him, and although he isn't sure what the question consists of, he nods. He has heard a lot about Tyler, Anne's former lover. Tyler left, more or less in the space of a single weekend, to live with a nineteen year-old dancer. His defection seems to have puzzled Anne as much as it hurt her. The dancer has, apparently, the kind of taste that runs to multi-coloured hair, to pearlized eyeshadow and rhinestone studs in her fingernails. She has had dozens of lovers. She is further encumbered with a load of debts and

the declared ambition to "make it big." The besotted Tyler can have no chance of hanging onto her. Anne has seemed rational enough in this assessment. But even so - and she insists on this - she, Anne, does not want him back. Never ever. The features of her delicate face harden with distaste whenever such a possibility is mentioned. She looks, at these moments, as though she has just learned that her former love has acquired an unclean disease...which of course, reflects Mark, he may well have.

"...She made hundreds of tiny meatballs in a special sauce and a huge chocolate mousse. Their little boy was just a baby..."

"I hate children," he offers facetiously but doesn't dare look to see how she is taking it. A truck, left-turn signal blinking furiously, is bearing toward them down the ambiguous middle lane.

"He put his fist into the mousse...but he's three years old now, I think."

"The age of reason," he says. The truck is almost upon them.

"Well, I don't know," she says doubtfully. "She said he hasn't..." He misses the rest of her sentence. A massive wall of steel looms above his window. The little Pontiac shudders inside the roar.

"...Still likely to be rather chaotic," she is saying when the roar subsides.

"The traffic in this country is insane," he says accusingly.

"Dreadful," she agrees. "Perry says it's the French-Canadian mentality; they drive with their emotions, the way Europeans do. She thinks it's great. She's pregnant again... You'll like her husband, I'm pretty sure. He has a sweet accent."

"A sweet accent!" Ahead of them, he notices with gratitude, the road splits into a divided highway. He loosens his grip on the wheel and is aware of Anne glancing curiously at him.

"Not exactly an accent," she says after a moment. "More an intonation, I guess. He stresses different syllables; he calls her 'Peh-ree.'"

"How does he say Anne?" he asks.

"Anne," she says seriously and then, as he turns to look at her, frowns. "I never get your jokes," she complains. And he reflects, not for the first time, that this is true.

After this they don't say anything for a while. Faded fields drift past; traffic, now that the road is committed to normalcy, seems less threatening. Her absence of small talk is one of the things he likes about Anne...that she is comfortable with silence. He glances over once at her small, straight nose and rounded chin. Her dark hair hangs

without a hint of curl to her jawline, the only way she can wear it, she has confided. The hair is over-fine; it has no body.

They work, he and she, for the same company. It is a little over four months since they met, at a sales promotion meeting. Several people there, and more since, have asked if they are brother and sister. Their looks - dark, even-featured, unobtrusive - are that similar. The meeting was one which she had helped to organize. Her department is Public Relations. His at the time was Systems Analysis. Since then he has been promoted into Forward Planning.

Gradually, in the time he has known her, it has occurred to him that if he does want to marry, she is the sort of girl he should choose. With that prospect in mind, they might, he has supposed, consider living together. He thinks she would be willing, though no declarations have been made. More immediately, he has in the offing a business trip to Italy, and it has crossed his mind to invite her to join him there. The trip is scheduled for December; he proposes to add to it a week of skiing in the Dolomites; she has already mentioned that she is fond of skiing. And yet somehow, in spite of all these felicitous coincidences, the moment has not yet arrived when he has been moved to speak. He keeps forgetting. Or he is unsure - about flight routes or snow conditions or about something else, the heart of which he

doesn't know himself. He's not normally an indecisive man; he assures himself of this whenever he recalls his dilemma.

As they near the river now, the towers of Montreal rise on the far shore. The city's profile cuts across two hills and then descends gradually into the shoreline itself. The view lifts his spirits. To find a city here...so many miles to the north. It seems miraculous, like a myth come true, Brigadoon in the new world. And this river, he thinks a few moments later as they approach the bridge. He would like to open his arms and embrace the grandeur of it. The mighty St. Lawrence. It sweeps before them, grey and silken, a wide band of silver light. This is what Quebec should be. Tales from grade school history run through his head - canoes and explorers, great river ferries - and then they have climbed above the river, onto the bridge itself. The city disappears behind iron railings; the water below slides, invisible, beneath the bridge; and, bereft of his view, Mark concentrates on maintaining his position in the lanes of speeding cars.

St. George's Avenue slopes through an aging residential section. Anne instructs him to follow it right to the end where, in the last block of its existence, it becomes St. George's Place, a dead-end lined with nearly identical row houses. These are small and symmetrical, dollhouse pretty with shutters and lead-paned windows. Something like parts

of London, he tells himself. Rather appealing. But in truth the houses give him an uneasy feeling. Shutters hang a bit askew; the brick façades lean slightly to the right...as though they are not altogether real, as though they may at any second fold up or fall over sideways. Anne tells him to park at the far end of the street, almost in the turnaround. The house she indicates, the last on its side, boasts the same self-consciously charming shutters and window panes as its neighbours.

In this case, however, the shutters have been painted, not white or pale yellow or green, not any of the colours in fact that Mark associates with shutters, but a fierce apricot. The colour goes well with the dark purplish brick of the houses - he has to admit this - but it smites his eye nonetheless.

"Some colour," he says. "You must have a lot of trouble remembering which house.,"

"Not really," says Anne in a distracted voice. She is collecting her purse and gloves.

As he turns off the engine and again glances toward the house, the apricot front door opens. A large, blond female figure dressed in voluminous purple appears in the doorway. "Götterdämmerung," thinks Mark. He flinches as the figure, nearly tripping, comes rushing down the steps. Not only is she extremely tall, but she has an immense amount of lion-coloured hair. This hair, imbued with a life of its own,

flies behind her head in separate sections like thick cords. As she crosses the street toward the car, he realizes that under the purple garment she is also hugely pregnant. The term "great with child" comes to his mind along with the further thought that the baby must be either a small giant or a litter and that, in any case, nobody so pregnant should be moving so fast.

The mother-to-be bounds around the hood of his car and pulls open Anne's door. Anne is laughing as she is yanked from her seat, but her voice trailing behind her as she disappears through the open door sounds a trifle nervous. "You're huge," she can be heard blurting. "Ouch. When is it due?"

"Next month...not for eons," he hears before he too gets out of the car and then, while the two women are embracing, removes the suitcases from the trunk.

"You must meet Mark," comes Anne's muffled voice. Her neat, dark head has virtually disappeared into the tawny mass of hair. Freeing herself now from the massive hug, she gestures, a little unsteadily, toward Mark. "This is Perry," she calls.

He steps around the car to shake their hostess's hand and finds himself looking into hazel eyes set deep in a wide, freckled face. These eyes gaze back at him with such directness that he feels for a second like turning aside. Then she smiles, and he feels himself smile back. Every-

thing about her suggests warmth...the dusty gold of her skin, her rounded cheeks, even the funny, flecked green-brown of her eyes. If the unbridled curves of her mouth hint at an hysterical nature, he notes this without condemnation. The shape of her smile seems the more beautiful. The lion species, he decides letting go her hand, not his type, but still...on a grand scale quite splendid.

She continues to stare at him. "Mark?" she repeats, as though he has stated a name from an unknown language. "But you can't be." Her voice lilts girlishly, incongruously smaller than the rest of her. The three of them turn and cross the street toward her house.

"My husband is Jean-Marc," she explains. "It's too confusing. Anne must have told you." They both glance at Anne, who shakes her head. "Don't you have a middle name, something else we can call you?" He stares at her. She kicks a child's toy truck off the sidewalk onto the grass before pointing informatively at the apricot door. "That's us," she says and turns again to Mark. "What about Kenneth? It's one of my favourite names..."

"Kenneth?" he asks, bewildered.

"Good," says Perry. "Watch out for the stairs. The middle board is rotten."

After the brightness of the afternoon, the interior of the house seems at first only half-lit, like a nightclub.

The entrance hall contains a fringed rug, mostly white, and various objects which his startled eyes gradually identify as a rattan chest, a small yellow tricycle, and an ironing board with two cantaloupe melons on it. Perry stops and turns to smile at both of them. Her wide gamine face glimmers at them, a friendly jack-o'-lantern in the dimness. "You guys get the blue room at the back," she tells them pointing upstairs. "Anne knows which one. It's not too gorgeous, but you won't hear Freddy at dawn, and that's worth a lot."

They are half way up the stairs, he and Anne, when the girlish voice halts them. "Anne. Kenneth. Wait." Mark glances back and sees her still standing in the middle of the rug. "Drinks," she calls, clasping her hands together over her beach ball stomach. "I almost forgot. You must be dying after all that awful driving. I'll get out the stuff. Do you still drink scotch, Anne?"

"Yes, but not a lot," says Anne. "You always pour me too much." She shifts her suitcase from one hand to the other.

"I haven't improved at all," Perry announces, still gazing happily up at them, "...Except I throw up if I have more than three drinks."

"Wine doesn't bother me," she tells them a few minutes later in the kitchen. "For now though, I'll just have a

little scotch and a lot of water...ugh! Kenneth, you make the drinks, okay? Glasses are beside the fridge." She takes a knife out of a rack above the stove and begins to chop a bunch of celery stalks into fine dice.

"What a nice big kitchen," says Anne glancing around. "I'd forgotten."

"That's because last time you were here, half of it was the maid's room. From the olden days. The house was built in 1912. We tore down the walls a year ago, just kept the pantry..." She points at a large closet that juts into the room. "That's so I can close the door on some of the mess."

Mark nods at the wisdom of this. He noticed how, on the stairway and in the upstairs hall, toys lay in wait for them in every corner, how piles of folded laundry choked the big, old-fashioned bathroom. Here in the kitchen, preparations for dinner cover the counters. The confusion is impressive in a way...long wooden spoons, bowls and cups, a mound of pastry on a board, little piles of sliced peppers and mushrooms and onions. One counter is smeared with the gluey grey shells of shrimp.

"Oh, slime!" cries Perry, noticing this particular mess. Dropping her knife, she swipes at the shells, first with her hand and then with a paper towel. The latter proves more effective. "There," she says stepping back from the counter and dumping the towelful of debris into the

garbage. Shrimp shells stick to her arm; another has hooked onto a seam of the purple poncho she wears.

"Hold on," Mark says. He picks the shells off her one by one.

Perry stands still for this operation. "Oh, I know," she tells them, "I need a keeper."

"Probably," agrees Mark.

"Oh, but really, she does things very well," protests Anne. "You do, Perry. You're very organized in your way."

"He's just being funny," says Perry. "But you're right, Annie. You're always on my side. And of course I am very self-sufficient really. Here. Grab that basket of crackers. Let's go sit with our drinks."

The living room has the look of a well-worn library. Several large corduroy-covered chairs and a sagging leather sofa form a horseshoe around the fireplace. A faded Bokara rug covers the floor. Its pattern of medallions suggests that it may once have been red and black, but the colours now are as muted and varied as the rows of books that cram the shelves on either side of the fireplace.

Perry puts her drink down and collapses onto the sofa. She props her legs on the coffee table. "Veins," she explains pulling up a corner of the purple poncho to reveal an elastic bandage wrapped around one calf.

"Awful," says Anne. Her nose wrinkles with sympathy and something like disbelief...as if she cannot imagine such a condition, either for herself or for her friend.

"You're telling me," says Perry. "It feels like being old."

Mark has retreated to one of the corduroy chairs. Encased in its cushioned comfort he sits nursing his drink and listening to the two women. The relationship between them intrigues him. Anne, sedate Anne, with this off-the-wall female. They went to the same college, he knows, and they have travelled together more than once. It was during a trip to Paris that Perry met her husband, the as yet unseen Jean-Marc. Beyond those facts, Anne, in her polite way has come forth with very little. Mark watches now as Anne warms to the conversation. Although she is listener more often than speaker, she looks almost animated. Her cheeks have flushed up. She is smiling more often and more broadly than is her habit.

The gist of Perry's remarks implies that in their mutual old days, Anne was more of a party girl, fonder of celebration than he believes she could ever have been. Even more curious to him is the fact that she seems flattered by the implication. She has actually laughed aloud more than once, and now, in spite of the fact that she seldom smokes, she has taken a pack of cigarettes from her purse and is offering one to Perry.

"Ciggies!" cries Perry as though spotting an old friend. "I haven't seen one of those for years."

"They must smoke something up here?" says Mark.

"Canadian brands," says Perry. "They're better...better packed...but it's not the same." She grins at Anne. "Remember those garbage sticks we smoked in Greece...Papastratos? When we finally got hold of some Marlboros, they tasted like heaven."

"Have one." Anne extends the pack again, but Perry has extinguished her initial look of anticipation.

"I can't," she explains. "Not when I'm preggers."

"It's bad for the fetus?" asks Anne.

Perry nods. "But the next time you come," she promises, as if she has somehow failed to be entertaining.

For the next ten minutes she talks about trips she and Anne have taken. The cigarettes seem to have brought them to mind. "Do you remember?" she cries at various intervals, "...the pie throwing contest in Menlo Park?" "...The night all those German students took us to the taverna?" "...That man in Florence who fell in love with us?"

Anne smiles indulgently. "It was you," she says, "...you the man fell in love with."

Perry laughs. "Oh, it was both of us. He just couldn't believe how big I was." She turns to Mark. "In Europe, Kenneth, I was a capital-G giant. The notes that man wrote! He left them on the car...all over the city."

Wherever we parked, we'd come back and find these terrible, mushy notes. It was hysterical!" She swallows the rest of her scotch. "We wrote notes back. Crazy things. We were awful." She says this happily, wiping her mouth with a graceful slash of her long hand.

"You must have been," he says. Her excited face seems exalted to him.

Nodding she pushes back her ropes of hair. "You guys should have another drink, you know. Jean-Marc is playing squash. He has a regular Saturday game. He won't get home for at least half an hour, and I have to collect Freddy from his nap or he'll stay awake all night." She pulls herself sideways from the deep sofa and gets up. A forgotten cracker slides down the side of her stomach and drops onto the rug.

Awakened and fed, Freddy is brought in to meet Anne and Mark. Although they have heard various giggles and cries from the direction of the kitchen, Freddy seems thoroughly abashed now as he enters the living room. Slight and dark of hair, he actually manages to walk within the folds of the purple poncho staring all the while from one to the other of the guests. He doesn't speak, and, when Perry sits down, he lays his head on her knee. She strokes his shiny, child's hair - the jet strands float between her fingers - and speaks to him in a slow, grave voice. After a moment,

reassured by the stroking or perhaps by his mother's voice, he climbs up beside her on the sofa and, from the safety of this vantage point, is able to offer a smile and then a soft hello to the guests.

"That's nicer," Perry tells him. "People get sad if you don't talk to them." She fishes a flat red book out from under a magazine and flips it open. "Don't mind me," she tells Anne and Mark. "This is Freddy's storytime. It's better now than later, in the middle of dinner. Right, Freddy?" Freddy nods. He is sitting up straight now, preparing to attend the reading. Perry begins in her light, trusting voice, "'Joey Beaver had been diving in the lake all afternoon. He was looking for his best stick...'"

The story, a saga of two beavers, has ended, and Mark has made fresh drinks all around when the front door clicks and then bangs.

"Daddy?" asks Freddy and, at Perry's nod, climbs down off the sofa. He races from the room crying, "Papa, Papa!"

A minute later, he makes a triumphal re-entry aloft in his father's arms. The two faces, side by side, gaze down on the guests with expressions almost equally angelic. Jean-Marc sets Freddy down and bends to kiss his wife before turning to his guests.

"So," he says looking genuinely pleased. He has the same sweet smile as his little son, the same lash-fringed eyes. "You have arrived. It is a pleasure for us..."

To Mark, rising now to shake hands, this man who is practically his namesake, this Jean-Marc, with his formal phrasing and his lovely child's eyes, seems immediately and thoroughly foreign. And for the second time that day - the first was in the ugly border town - Mark feels himself to be in another country. Introduced as "Kenneth" by Perry, who then explains and corrects herself, he feels as if the name change is an inevitable result of crossing the border.

Jean-Marc gives him a commiserating shrug. "So she has renamed you? She is an eccentric woman, my wife." As he says this, he draws his finger down her cheek. The look he receives is one of sudden, though indecipherable, emotion. He stands with his hand on her for another second and then moves across the room to Anne. Bending he kisses her on both cheeks. He performs this act with the utmost care, as if she is in danger of shattering, and then devotes himself to questioning her about her job, her health, even the trip up to Montreal. As a form of flirtation it seems so obvious that Mark cannot imagine himself or any American man he knows trying it on. Yet Anne, sensible Anne, seems pleased. For the second time in an hour, her animation surprises him. She smiles and answers Jean-Marc's questions. She does not immediately pull away when he lays his hand on her shoulder. Equally surprising throughout the evening, in fact, is the way that Jean-Marc treats his wife to the same sort of flattery. Only when he speaks to Mark does his tone alter.

Then he adopts a casual and even jocular note, as though they two, the men, are a tougher and at the same time more knowledgeable, or at least more cynical species altogether. And Jean-Marc himself really is knowledgeable, Mark discovers. He specializes in corporate litigation. He has been singled out as a sort of protégé by one of the senior partners in his firm. Jean-Marc travels frequently with this man, to New York, to Hong Kong, to Frankfurt and Paris, and from these trips he has fashioned appealingly self-deprecating stories. His duties, it seems, have not always concerned questions of the law. His English, though not perfect, is fluent and, as Anne implied, only mildly accented. Indeed, the only French heard in the house is spoken between Jean-Marc and the little boy, whom the father calls Frédéric. For his part Freddy/Frédéric alternates without hesitation between the two languages. Listening to the two, father and child, Mark judges his own clumsy American tongue harshly. How inadequate, it suddenly feels, to speak only one language. How facile and even elegant these two foreigners, one of whom is three years old, seem to him.

While Jean-Marc is recounting the first of his tales, this one about a client with two mistresses, Perry departs in the direction of the kitchen. She reappears intermittently and finally, after about forty-five minutes, leans

against the doorframe and demands help. A sheen of sweat overlays her flushed skin.

"No, not you." She holds out a hand as Anne makes a move to rise. "I need muscle, not expertise. We're almost ready, but I need some carrying. Kenneth, could you?"

It is only after he has risen and is following her to the kitchen - striding, with straight loose hips, she hardly looks pregnant from the back - that Mark realizes there was never, not even for an instant, a question of Jean-Marc being the one to help his wife.

"I drop things," declares Perry over her shoulder as she bangs open the kitchen door.

The room's workspace has now been thrown into even greater disarray. A long, green noodle is plastered to a cabinet door above the stove. Several pots are fuming on the stove. Perry instructs him to pour the boiling contents of the largest one into a colander in the sink. "Tagliatelle," she says. "With all the water it's so heavy I'm afraid to lift it." She glances down at her stomach as though it has inexplicably appeared there. "Watch out for the steam," she warns now as he tips up the big pot.

In a smaller pot something that looks like a cream sauce is bubbling lightly. "Shrimps and scallops," she informs him. "With a julienne of veggies...in a cream and pernod sauce. Fabulous. You'll love it." He smiles and then swallows. Something - the smell, perhaps, or her ec-

static description of her own cooking - has made his mouth water.

"I invented it," she tells them proudly at dinner. Mark watches Anne picking the scallops one by one out of her serving. Perry is still explaining. "...I did all the shopping at the St. Hubert market...that's a place sort of like Faneuil Hall. We have wonderful markets here, especially in the fall..."

Mark has a sudden vision of her bigger-than-lifesize figure striding through the crowded stalls, a market basket over one arm (though he knows this is fanciful), arguing cheerfully with the vendors, sniffing into barrels of apples, fingering vegetables. Her smile flashes whenever something she finds pleases her...

It is exactly his vision of a wife. He identifies the image with a shock. A big, golden wife. And he knows at the same time that it is a vision which would infuriate every woman of his acquaintance...including Anne and, no doubt, Perry herself.

At this moment the object of his fantasy is laughing loudly. "It's a matter of greed," she cries and waves her fork. She does this practically every time she speaks. "I always want everything in sight...all I can think of is how hungry I am..."

In the next minute she has stood up, again waving the fork. "The salad," she declares. "Annie, you stay and talk with the prince." She pronounces "prince" in the French way.

"You don't want me to help?" Anne asks.

Perry shakes her head and points the fork at Jean-Marc. "The prince wouldn't have a woman to charm." She collects their plates and heads into the kitchen. They can hear the pile of plates bang onto the counter as the door swings shut behind her.

Jean-Marc smiles his sweet smile at Anne and then at Mark, who is getting to his feet. "Ah, you Americans," he says tolerantly and reaches for the wine.

In the kitchen Mark finds Perry standing on a stool in the pantry. The purple poncho swirls around her ankles. One ragged end of the elastic bandage hangs below the hem. "You shouldn't do that," he tells her. She peers down at him through the ropes of her hair, and he thinks then that his admonition has sounded positively fussy. "I mean," he explains, "you're not supposed to fall, are you? It's not..."

"Oh, but I have very good balance," she assures him. "I teach aerobic dancing. Here. Take this, will you?" She hands down a small bottle of wine. As he takes it from her and turns to put it on a lower shelf, folds of the poncho

brush his face. "It's Hungarian Tokay," she tells him. "Someone gave it to us. I just remembered it." The stool wobbles as she shifts her feet.

"Listen," he says again. "Come on down, will you?" He reaches up.

"I wanted to try it," she says.

"Come on down," he says again. She bends over then and puts her hands on his shoulders, submitting to be lifted down. The sudden weight of her is terrific; his knees nearly buckle. As she drops, they stagger sideways into the doorframe, and then she is standing, eye to eye with him, laughing into his face. He keeps his hands under her arms, holding her in the pantry. What he wants to do now - and it seems like the plan of a lifetime - is to kiss her wide mouth. But something, a scruple or a scrap of fear, holds him back. And instead, as if blessing her and with the same deliberate motion he watched Jean-Marc employ, Mark kisses each of her cheeks. The moment is long and cushioned in silence. She stands motionless, and he feels, as he did when he was picking shrimp shells off her arm, that he is fixing her. He is blotting with his lips the freckles sprinkled over her skin. As he straightens his head, she gives him a pleased, lazy smile. Her long eyes slide closed, then slowly open. "Did you fall in love with me already?" she asks without moving from his embrace.

He says nothing. She has leapt, in a single, probably half-meant sentence, more barriers than he has managed in a lifetime.

"Listen," she goes on, "...men do...if they can stand my size. But don't worry. It doesn't last." She laughs, and then as he stares at her face - they are standing so close to one another he can almost breathe her in - the triumph melts from her eyes. She tilts her head in the direction of the dining room. "It really doesn't," she says and immediately shakes her head, as if forbidding Mark to respond. Her hair swings back and forth with the momentum. "He was so beautiful when I married him," she confides. He can feel her whisper against his face. "You never saw such a pretty man." Her smile is returning. "He's half French too. Did you know? I mean French from France. He has all these relatives in the Loire Valley. I thought it was too exotic for words. I still do sometimes, but it does wear a little thin..." She laughs again. "You're just about the screaming opposite from him, aren't you? You never hang out too far, right? You never just go and...do something?"

"That sounds like 'the screaming opposite' of you," he suggests, not pleased to be so accurately identified, and hears the note of challenge in his own voice. He wants to seem dangerous. She still has not stepped back, nor has he released his hold on her, and now he imagines that the warmth from her stomach and her hormone-swollen breasts is

spreading up through his brain, banishing the New England chill that lingers there. "Someday..." he promises, surprising himself even more.

She smiles now and, lifting her long hands, places them against his shoulders. "Come on, Kenneth," she says ambiguously and gives him a backward push. "Salad time."

Stepping back into the dining room, Mark is grateful for the big wooden bowl of salad he has been assigned to bring to the table. He carries it in front of him like an explanation offered. "Perry's still grating something," he says. The other two glance up at him, but neither gives him the fishy stare he feels he deserves. "She's coming in a minute," he adds.

Anne blinks at him. "We don't have any plates," she observes.

"Perry said she'd bring them. I've been ordered to sit down." He sets the bowl down in front of Perry's empty place and returns to his own chair.

"So," says Jean-Marc turning to him. "Anne tells me she has organized the conference at which you have met." He smiles encouragingly at Mark, as if the story of their meeting ought to have special appeal.

Mark nods. "That's right," he says heartily. "She did. It's her department."

"Well," Anne allows looking pleased. "There were other people too. I wasn't the only one putting it together. It was just that there were extra..." She stops, pursing her lips slightly, as the dining room door swings open. The figure of Perry appears, framed in the widening rectangle of fluorescent light. One of her hands clutches several plates. The other she holds aloft, clenched into a fist.

"Watch out, everybody!" she cries, plunging into the room. "I've grated my knuckles into the carrots." She hands the plates to Mark and then, stepping around Anne's chair, opens her fist over the salad bowl. A wad of something orange drops onto the lettuce. "Cannibal salad," she announces into the silence and plunks down onto her chair.

Jean-Marc laughs. "My little gourmet wife," he says raising his wine glass to her. She makes a face down the table at him and then smiles. Watching them look at one another, Mark feels a sudden release within himself. In this house, with this couple... The thought escapes him uncompleted, but the tension in his stomach, that little twisting of guilt, has eased, and he settles back in his chair.

Perry glances around at Anne and then at Mark. "Don't mind me," she tells them. "It's only carrots...for colour. Just mix it around when you serve yourself. Did I miss anything important while I was out there?" She sucks loudly at the knuckles of two of her fingers.

Anne shakes her head. "You didn't miss anything," she tells her friend, and her expression is both fond and exasperated. "Nothing happens when you're not there."

As the salad and then the cheese and dessert courses progress, Mark is aware of himself growing more and more heady. The encounter in the kitchen has left him warm and excited, and though he cannot resist staring at Perry's big face gleaming in the wash of candle light, the feeling is more comprehensive. It's as if the combination of her and of being called by another name and the parade of delicious food and Jean-Marc's unfamiliar intonations and the still hopeful, though far-off cries of the dark-haired little boy who, after riding a final time through the dining room on the yellow tricycle, has been borne away to bed - as if all this is the furniture and fixtures of another world to which he, Mark, has been transported in an unexpected flash of colliding realities. Matter and anti-matter. And something, though he can't put his finger on what, has been annihilated in the flash.

His awakening the next morning proceeds in halting and, to some extent, genuinely painful steps. After backsliding twice into a kind of drugged sleep, he is induced finally by the strong light coming in from the window to abandon a dream in which he is watching Perry ride an oversize tricy-

cle down St. George's Place. As she heads into the traffic of the cross street, he tries to call out a warning. But his voice produces no volume; his cry comes out a thin, nearly soundless wail. She turns and waves gaily to him. At this point he notices a large truck looming ahead of her, and then...and then... But already he has lost it. The light from the window has won out. It is too strong. He rolls over onto his back and, without opening his eyes, pulls the duvet up to his nose. He can smell a faint, dusty odour, something like bath powder. The end of the previous evening begins to emerge from his memory. Somewhat disjointedly he recalls various sensations...the splintering crash of a big crystal bowl filled with something fluffy and yellow, the intense, smoky sweetness of the Tokay, cigar smoke. And was there not a fiery dose of Armagnac as well? No legal substance, in fact, seems to have been left untried. Somewhere along the line someone must have done some cleaning up, though he isn't sure who. He does remember climbing the stairs, stepping around the toys, the coolness of the guest bedroom, and recalls with a start of embarrassment that he went to sleep without laying a hand on Anne. Their relationship is not so old nor so familiar, nor their meetings so frequent, that such an omission wouldn't have appeared odd. On reflection...she may even be angry. Lying in bed with the duvet guarding half his face, he feels suddenly uneasy. But can't he after all just say he was

drunk. And speaking of things he might say, he cannot remember having said anything whatsoever to Anne the previous night. Probably she already knows he was drunk. Probably she thinks he was lucky to get out of his clothes and into bed. The guest room, he notices now, is very cold. His head hurts in two places. He is extremely thirsty. His lips and tongue feel cemented together. He makes a sound that resembles the syllable "Anne." There is no answer. "Anne," he croaks again. Silence. Tentatively he opens one eye, closes it and opens the other. The bed across from his is empty. Anne does not appear to be in the room. His watch, which he is still wearing, tells him it is nearly eleven o'clock. Anne, who tends to be brisk in the morning, has undoubtedly already risen. No doubt she has showered and dressed, in merciful silence, and even found some worthy thing to do in another part of the house. Well, good for her, he thinks and knows he is being grumpy. He swings his feet out of bed and sits up. Pain rolls across his forehead.

In the bathroom he finds a plastic glass - pink, with "Freddy" painted across it in scarlet nail polish - and drinks down two glassfuls of water. He is considering what to do next when the door opens and Freddy/Fredéric himself appears in the doorway. He says nothing, but his puppy eyes stare up at Mark with evident interest. It's clear he doesn't intend to leave.

"Bonjour," offers Mark. He makes himself smile.

Freddy does not smile back but does say, "Bonjour." This greeting is followed by a sentence in French which begins with "Maman..."

Mark stares down at him for a moment and then realizes his fundamental error. "I'm sorry, Freddy," he says, trying not to exhale in the direction of the small face. "I don't speak French like you...only English."

Freddy begins again. "Mommy say...Mommy say brepfes ready. But..." He shakes his head, still solemnly gazing up at Mark. "You don' have to if you are frowning up."

"I don't have to eat if I'm throwing up?" asks Mark. Freddy shakes his head again, presumably in affirmation.

"Pancakes," he says informatively after a short pause. Then he turns and runs toward the stairs.

Coming downstairs a few moments later, Mark wonders how he could ever have thought the interior of the house dim. A brash morning light bounces off sections of floor and wall. The windows glint threateningly. He ducks his head and tries to veil his eyes. Part of the dining room floor, he notices as he passes through, is streaked with a pale yellow substance.

In the kitchen he is greeted with a certain amount of amusement.

"I have some aspirin in my bag," Anne tells him. "You must need a few."

He nods. "Thanks. I already took three. How did you guess?"

"That you'd need them?" says Anne. "Well, you seemed a little odd last night..."

"Odd?" repeats Mark.

"Drunk," says Perry. "She means drunk, don't you, Annie? It was Jean-Marc's lethal Armagnac. It's done in all kinds of guests."

Jean-Marc, who has been stirring and mixing something at one of the counters, turns now and flashes one of his beautiful, sympathetic smiles. "There is no sense to be brave," he says holding out a tumbler full of Bloody Mary.

"Take it," says Perry. "You'll feel more human." She is buttering a pancake for Freddy, who is perched on a high stool at the other end of the counter.

"Do you want a pancake?" she asks after a minute. "I'm making another batch. It's my own recipe...whole wheat flour and..." She stops at the sight of his grimace.

"Thank you," he tells her. "I'm sure you mean well." She laughs, and he feels again a kinship between them. Whatever happened last night, he tells himself, must have risen from some kind of inevitability. A need in him. And maybe in her too. Indeed, isn't there something husbandless about her now as she moves about the kitchen pouring cups of

coffee for each of them, something vulnerable and even helpless? And yet why should he think this? He moves to a corner to get out of the way of her activities. And why should he think, as he does, that in embracing her in the middle of her kitchen he was offering her some sort of support? Anne moves over to his side, and dutifully, feeling like a hypocrite of the first order, he drapes his arm over her shoulders.

Jean-Marc holds up the new pitcher of Bloody Marys which he has been preparing. "Top you, Anne?" he asks her.

She shakes her head. In the curve of Mark's arm, her shoulders feel frail. "One's enough," she says.

Jean-Marc shakes his head at her. "But that is never true," he says cheerfully.

"Freddy want more syrup," Freddy announces to his mother. "S'il t'plait," he adds belatedly as his father glances at him.

Jean-Marc sets the pitcher down on the counter. His labour done, he pivots and leans gracefully against the refrigerator. He has already shaved, and with his drink in one hand and attired in a wine velvet dressing gown, he looks like an ad for some expensive brand of aftershave.

He gazes around now with eyes as clear and untroubled as if there had been no scotch, no bottles of wine, no Armagnac... Mark takes a large, medicinal swallow of Bloody

Mary. "You Canadians are remarkable," he tells Jean-Marc. "I feel as if I spent the night with my head in a bottle."

"It is our training." Jean-Marc gives him one of the beautiful smiles. "For the cold, you see. We must drink."

"That's what he tells me," says Perry. She has syrup dripping from the sleeve of her bathrobe. "It's probably true, actually. Winter goes on forever here." As she swings around to grab her cup of coffee, a fine thread of syrup runs down her hand. "Oh, shit," she says mildly. "Toss me that dish cloth, will you, Anne." And Mark suddenly knows why she seems husbandless. It is Jean-Marc's effortless perfection - his lovely eyes and smile, his self-contained, untouchable charm, his ease with every aspect of the weekend and indeed of his life - that makes him seem unmarried. He has none of the harried concern Mark has noted in his other married friends and especially in those with children. No wonder Perry seems unmarried. There is no one here who looks like her husband.

Some hours later she stands, hair blowing wildly, on the topmost step of a fifty-foot wide cement stairway. Behind her rises the temple-like edifice that houses the Musée des Beaux Arts. Gazing up from the sidewalk below, Mark is reminded of an immense tomb, a mausoleum, hung in this case with banners advertising the presence of Picasso's

works within. The wind slaps these banners to and fro so that their message takes some time to decipher.

Perry cups her hands around her mouth. "It's all going to be worth it," she shrieks. "All, all..." In spite of the obvious shriek, Anne and Mark can barely understand her. "Jean-Marc is just parking," she yells as they mount the first tier of steps.

The two couples have driven downtown in separate cars so that Anne and Mark can leave directly for home from the museum. Mark has decided he doesn't want to face that schizophrenic, three-lane highway at dusk. With headlights in his face, he is sure he would find it even more unnerving.

"We're coming," Anne calls up. She sounds weary climbing the long flight of steps and also as though she hopes Perry will not scream at them again. During the ten minute drive downtown - and all through brunch, now that he thinks of it - she has barely spoken. That brief warming that she seemed to experience in Perry's company yesterday, and in that of Jean-Marc too, doesn't seem evident today. Mark feels a tinge of shame. Was it just his getting drunk and passing out that has cooled her, or has she somehow sensed the connection made between him and Perry? Not that it was so much of a connection, he thinks. Five minutes outside of reality...or in another reality. But still he feels chagrined and, as the day has worn on, somewhat surprised at

himself as well. What has gotten into him? Aside from the major practicalities - Perry being both married and vastly pregnant - Anne is so much more his type. Solicitously now he takes her arm and glances sideways at the thin curtain of her hair.

"Museums like this one always want to exhaust you before you begin," he tells her profile. "You're supposed to be fagged out by the time you reach the door so you'll appreciate the uplift of art more."

"Picasso's not exactly an uplift kind of artist," she says seriously.

As they near the top of the steps, Perry is making circular, hurry-up motions with her hands. "It's just about our time," she announces. "Jean-Marc had better get here soon." The wind catches the man's tweed coat she wears and blows it open. Her stomach protrudes momentarily, like a great kettle ineptly concealed beneath today's poncho, which is orange. In the same blast, her hair sweeps back, and she flings her hands up to the sides of her face as though her whole life is about to blow away. To Mark, gazing up at her, she looks heroic. A Viking queen. He can imagine her standing like this, on the summit of some mountain or temple, staring out toward the great northern river and wondering when, if ever, her man will return.

"What?" he says to Anne. He is aware vaguely, after the fact, of her having spoken.

"I said, the crowd doesn't look too bad," she repeats stoically.

No," he agrees. "Not too bad." There are perhaps two dozen people standing around on the upper steps. Most of them have been intermittently staring at Perry since her first shriek.

Jean-Marc, his overcoat slung over his shoulders like a cape, comes dashing up the stairs behind them. A cigar protrudes from his mouth. He removes it just ahead of Perry's wild grab. "So," he says fending off her attack. "Now, now, my dear... So, you are ready for Picasso." He produces the tickets from his breast pocket. These have been purchased ahead of time. A secretary in his office, he has assured them, his smile illuminating his face, was glad to run the errand for him.

"This exhibition is a very fine one," he tells Mark. "It is lucky to have it in Montreal. We have a new director of the museum who is a friend of Jacqueline Picasso." This is how things are done, he implies, and you and I of course know this. He stubs out the cigar in a brass ashtray stand just inside the great doorway. "Chez Picasso," he announces cheerfully as they enter. His arm sweeps in a wide arc as though all that they perceive about them at this moment - marble columns, more flights of stairs, even the babble of echoing voices - is his personal offering.

For nearly half an hour he leads them from room to room, once in a while telling them something about a particular period. It's evident the paintings fascinate him and that he has studied them. Anne and Perry listen raptly to his comments. "It's more fun with Jean-Marc, isn't it?" says Perry as they stand gazing at a painting of two musicians. And Mark has to agree. He has his eyes so often on his host's face, in fact, that he catches the sudden frown that flickers over the boyish features. Turning, Mark sees what must be the frown's cause emerge with purposeful step from the crowd at the nearest doorway.

"Eh, Jean-Marc!" The voice pierces their foursome. Its owner wears a tight, shiny skirt, possibly leather, and heels so high Mark wonders how she can walk without tottering. But walk she does, straight toward Jean-Marc, as if she means to march right into him. Jean-Marc actually narrows his eyes into a squint for a second before his habitual sweet smile opens his face again. The girl stops a foot from him and lays her gloved hands on his forearms.

"So, Jean-Marc." She speaks in a parody of tenderness, looking up into his face. Her next sentences are in rapid French. The only words Mark catches come at the end - "...jolie femme" - spoken just before she spins around and thrusts her hand at Perry. "So, Mrs. de Valmont. Pleased to meet you." She grabs Perry's hand and shakes it hard but gingerly, like someone shaking down a thermometer. There is

at least a head's difference between the two. The smaller girl a sleek, burrowing animal to Perry's lion. Mark glances briefly over at Anne. An expression of distaste, the one he knows well, has hardened like a glaze on her features.

"You're from Jean-Marc's office?" Perry is asking. She smiles down at the girl.

"That's right," says the girl. "When Jean Marc send his girl for the tickets, I just ask her, get me one too." Dropping Perry's hand she casts a defiant look in Jean-Marc's direction.

"It's a wonderful show, isn't it?" says Perry, but the girl doesn't hear her. She has already turned back to Jean-Marc.

"I think I meet your friends too," she says to Jean-Marc.

"You did?" he asks, clearly amazed.

"I think I meet them now," the girl says. She turns and takes Mark's hand. At the same time as his hand is being shaken, he is treated to a brief, measuring look. Anne gets the same handshake a few seconds later but no look. "Pleased to meet you," the girl says to them and then taps herself on the pendant that hangs almost between her breasts. "Solange Drouin," she states.

Jean-Marc pronounces Anne's name and then Mark's. "They are from Boston," he adds, as if this fact will pre-

clude further discussion. To Mark he says gravely, "Solange is a lawyer from my office." His eyes, restored to imperturbability, rest for a second on Mark's face, and then, to Mark's utter astonishment, one beautiful, fringed eye closes and reopens in an unmistakable wink.

They have left Solange in the exhibition rooms upstairs and are standing near the checkroom door while Jean-Marc procures their coats.

"Pleased to meet you, pleased to meet you," mimics Perry. She stamps from one to the other of them, shaking first Anne's and then Mark's hand with the same vigorous yank the girl Solange used. "I think I meet you now."

Jean-Marc steps around her trying to hand out their coats. "You are a silly woman," he tells her. "Stop this."

But Perry lays her hands on his forearms. "Eh, Jean-Marc," she says in a fake accent and then adds in her own voice, "Those girls take you seriously, you know."

"Solange is like that with every man in the office, my dear," says Jean-Marc. "It's not me especially."

"It's you," says Perry. She turns to thrust her arms into the sleeves of the giant tweed coat which Jean-Marc holds open for her. Over her head now as she struggles, her husband catches Mark's eye and again pulls a humorous face...man to man. Mark feels himself smile back. He doesn't know what else to do.

"I expect she wanted to get a look at me," says Perry a moment later. They are walking across the foyer toward the great door. "Jean-Marc's a terrific flirt. Listen, Annie, don't take three years to come back this time. As soon as I've finished up with business," she pats her stomach, "we'll have some fun."

But Anne, scrupulous Anne, makes no promises. "Good luck with the baby," she says as Jean-Marc pushes open the heavy door.

"Don't remind me!" says Perry. "Lousy old childbirth. It's a rotten way to spend a day." She clutches the huge tweed coat to her chest as the wind leaps at them. Mark thinks suddenly that he has never seen a coat so hideous. He wants to snatch it off her. "Last time I screamed the place down. My mother was disgusted with me. She came all the way from Minneapolis, and then she was disgusted with me. She thought I must be the Italian girl in the next caseroom. She was horrified when she found out all the noise was me. I mean, the poor Italian girl was nice and quiet. It was all me." Perry laughs, but her eyes blink rapidly as though something hurts her still. "I couldn't believe no one had ever told me how much it would hurt." Gazing down at Anne, she looks puzzled and, except for a slight bunching at the corners of her mouth and eyes, very young.

"Well," says Anne in her practical way, "Probably this time it'll be easier. You know...second time and all. Just don't think about it," she advises.

At the foot of the cement stairs, the couples turn to face each other. Their cars are parked in opposite directions, so this is to be the parting. Blades of wind slash between them. Flaps of their own clothing envelop their various embraces. The two women hug first while the men shake hands. Then, as Jean-Marc is placing his kisses on Anne's cheeks, Mark wraps his arms around Perry.

"Thanks for the great dinner...and everything," he says into the lashing ropes of hair.

She leans back and looks into his eyes. Her smile, he thinks, is fond...and knowing too, as though he and she are old collaborators. "You're welcome, Kenneth," she tells him. "Come again." The hard ball of her stomach presses companionably against him.

For another moment he keeps his arm around her shoulders. As if he is fortifying her in some way, his fingers dig hard into the rough tweed. When she turns her head to say something across him to Anne, her heavy hair sweeps like an acknowledgement across his cheek and jaw. On his other side, Anne lifts her excellent profile and smiles at whatever is being said, and Mark, even as he admires once again

the classical balance and clarity of her features, knows that he will go to Italy alone.

"I always miss her," says Anne. "...Him too. After I've been with them..." She brushes back her hair, and Mark glancing sideways sees that her expression is bleak. It matches the sense of deprivation he has been feeling. Indeed, he has already noticed how the interior of the car seems cavernous, the two of them shrunk down to the size of children.

He nods now and shifts his hands on the wheel. "They're quite a pair," he agrees. "Something else."

"That's what everyone always said about her," says Anne. "She did the wildest things... You liked her, didn't you?" Her voice is not accusing but curious, and a little bemused. "I think every man in the world responds to her."

"I liked her," says Mark. He pulls out to pass a car full of women. The middle one in the back seat wears a run's headdress. "This is a much better road," he adds. They have, after a last minute consultation with the map, chosen a different highway, an autoroute that proceeds more or less straight east but promises, in due course, to intersect with another highway, also of the four-lane variety, that will then take them south to the border. Sweeping around the slower car, Mark decides he can gun the car a bit, enjoy a last hour of speed before the border. The

highway has gotten pretty empty. The scenery too, he notices now, has become more appealing. Prairie has given way to hills, a few of them, in the far distance, grand enough to be called mountains. "I liked him too," he adds. "I even liked the little kid. He spoke such terrific French." He turns to smile at her profile and is stunned to see her cheek is wet. The end of her nose has turned pink, the skin around her lips as well. She is fumbling in her purse. "Anne?" he says. "Anne...what's wrong?"

"Nothing..." She has produced a kleenex and is wiping her eyes now.

"Come on." He reaches over and lays his hand on her thigh. A lump of guilt has congealed in his stomach. Does she understand the extent of his infatuation, how warm and bedazzled he has been feeling since the windswept goodbye at the foot of the Musée des Beaux Arts? "You should talk," he tells her gently.

"I always feel this way after I leave Perry...always. I always feel..like something's missing..." She shakes her head unhappily.

"Her, you mean? Because she's so super-alive?" he says curiously.

"Because...yes... I guess that's right...it's hard to explain. But you felt it too, didn't you? I mean, what they're like and all. I mean, I know the house is a mess

and everything's wild, but it's all..." She shakes her head again.

"Yes," he says. "I felt it too." Ahead of them a green highway sign announces the approach of some place called Ste-Justine-du-Lac. "There's a town coming, I think," he tells her. "Want to stop for a hamburger or something? Coffee?" Taking her muffled and monosyllabic reply for an affirmative, he foregoes passing his next victim, a horse van with a tiny rear window through which he has been gazing at portions of a large mahogany rump, and instead signals a right turn.

The restaurant, little more than a diner really, features plate glass windows and a sloping red roof. Along the front edge of this roof runs, like a railing, an unlit neon sign. At night the large script letters must flood the parking area with light, "Auberge du Lac" pouring over its customers. Mark pronounces the words in his mind as he slows the car and glances around. In fact, he has spotted no hint of shoreline, no glimmer of water. But, still, there must be a lake somewhere around...closer to town maybe. On the other side of the road, directly opposite the diner, stands a gas station. Another neon sign, this one hanging above the pumps, advertises "Libre Service." Mark wonders if this means no tipping but decides not to tax Anne with the question. Her lips are still puffy though she is

now studiously applying lipstick. He pulls onto the apron of gravel that surrounds the diner and parks between two cars that resemble, in model and year, the cars of his high school days. Better to skip the gas station anyway. He has, he is sure, enough in the tank to get him across the border, and besides both Perry and Jean-Marc assured him that the price in Quebec would be much higher.

Anne looks over at him as he is unbuckling his seat belt. "Could you just bring me out a coke or something?" she asks. "I feel silly making us take the time to go in and find a table and everything?" The pink has receded from her nose and lips, or else the red of the lipstick has made it less noticeable. She is gazing at him in a way that he takes as trusting, and he feels a sudden burst of pity for her. She is not someone who can make things happen. He reaches over and pushes back the fragile wings of her hair. Then he pulls her toward him. He kisses her first on each damp cheek and then on her newly lipsticked mouth. He feels the stickiness, can almost taste the greasy perfume. The sensation, the very ordinariness of it, is not so much sexual as intimate, like being inside her closet or opening her bathroom cabinet. When he releases her, she bows her head and rests her forehead on his shoulder. "Listen," he says into her ear. Her hair floats against his lips. "It's okay. We can go in and have whatever you want. Coffee. Food. Anything. We have time." He can feel her nod into

his shoulder. The gesture, like the guilt and the warmth inside him, makes him feel responsible. Anne, too, is woundable. She needs him.

Helping her out of the car a moment later, he feels both doomed and oddly triumphant,..as though it may be possible for him to have and do more than he had imagined, as though he has in some way grown larger. "Why don't we find a decent motel and spend the night in this town?" he suggests suddenly. The gravel crunches under their feet. Anne, stopping to pick some out of her shoe, stares up at him in surprise. "There must be a good restaurant over on the lake. We can have a good dinner...no Armagnac...and get up early..."

"We'd have to get up in the middle of the night practically," says Anne. She is still staring at him. "Maybe no one in the town speaks English..." He says nothing. "Well..." she adds, but her face is changing. "Well, I guess we'd manage." She is trying, he guesses, to produce a carefree expression. It's the kind of effort he understands, the kind of effort, to be specific, that he will be making that night. He thinks of this as he pulls open the door to the diner and is greeted with the smell of french fries. He thinks of how he will click off the light in the as yet unlocated motel and take her in his arms...of how, in the dark, he will imagine himself in the dangerous embrace

of the she-lion he has so pointlessly fallen in love with...the Viking queen...his mythical golden wife.

Around them now as they enter, the atmosphere presses, heavy not only with the heat and grease of french fries but with the throatier aromas of cigarette smoke and beer and coffee. Noise, too, fills the place. A drum-enhanced chant throbs forth from the juke box in the corner. But it is the live voices that arrest him. An amiable clash of gossip and opinion, no doubt, the voices rise from the row of customers seated along the wooden counter...and from various booths and tables scattered throughout the room. As he strains to hear the parts and sum of these snappish yet cheerful pronouncements, he is forced to shake his head. For none of them - he is almost certain of this - not a single, busy, excited one of these voices is speaking his language.

Beside him Anne, too, stands motionless. He glances down at her. "You were right about the language business " he says. "Absolutely right." She nods, and he gestures toward an empty table. "You want to sit over there...by the window?" She nods again, and together they work their way through the tables toward the empty one beside the plate glass window.

As they are sitting down, she looks over at him and smiles. "It's a funny feeling, isn't it?" she says. "Not understanding a word anyone's saying." Her delicate hands are extracting a paper napkin from the holder, refolding it,

then wiping her fingertips one by one. "I feel much better though," she adds and smiles again at him...almost, he thinks suddenly, as though she's trying to reassure him. "Could I have a grilled cheese?" she asks now. "Or something like that...and coffee?"

"Sure," he says. "Whatever you feel like. Go crazy." He reaches for the pair of menus jammed between the napkin holder and a plastic ketchup bottle and offers her one.

"Don't you suppose this is good for us?" she says. "I mean, something to shake us up...or something like that?" She takes the proffered menu.

He stares at her earnest features. This is how she will look when she is old...still puzzled, a little out of it in fact, but forever fine, forever sincere. He thinks about this for a surprised moment, and then he smiles back at her. "Something like that," he agrees.