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FORTY-TWO HALF AND OTHER STORIES

ARTHUR T. GIBSON

**A THESIS
IN
THE DEPARTMENT
OF
ENGLISH**

**PRESENTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS AT
CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY
MONTREAL, QUEBEC, CANADA**

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ABSTRACT

In order to satisfy the requirements for an M.A. (Creative Writing Option), herein are three short stories centering on the evolution of a man from childhood to middle age. These stories are set in a coastal village in the Maritimes, where the main character spends his summer vacations. Much of the tone will be nostalgic as the protagonist reflects on past summers and experiences present ones.

Woman Among The Rocks is a straightforward first-person narrative of a childhood romance remembered. It recalls the first strong emergence of interest in the opposite sex and the subsequent one-sided romance it so often entails. The language is simple as the narrator looks back on his summer experience as a thirteen-year old boy, remembering the feelings and perspectives of that age. There is some sense of loss as the narrator realizes he can never enter that age again nor retrieve the precise emotions of that time.

Going On Down, again in the first person, struggles to deal with the tragic death of a sister. The language of the story reflects an adult view of life as childhood adventures with siblings are re-lived. The story reveals tender feelings for the loving sister and a strong bond with the seaside village where the narrator spent his childhood summers in idyllic surroundings.

In Forty-Two Half there is a good deal of reflection about the passing of life as the first-person narrator accepts his wife's extra-marital affair, only to find himself plunged into

one with the girl next door. The language is much more complex, making full use of asides and sentence fragments. The continuous use of the present tense is intended to draw the reader into the on-going immediacy of real life. The story searches for some sort of framework in life, only to conclude that life goes on in its own way in spite of any rules or logic one may try to impose upon it.

These first-person stories attempt to involve the reader intricately in the life and the musings of the protagonist. They are a partial re-definition of age-old aspects of personal evolution, couched in language that grows progressively more contemporary as the narrator moves fabric of adult life and thought.

WOMAN AMONG THE ROCKS

My thirteenth summer, with no such thought as bad luck in the number, brought the family and our two dogs once again to Dalton-on-Sea. We arrived on a breezy warm day, with huge billowy clouds dancing across the sun. A short drive through town brought us to our aging summer residence on Water Street. As we hopped out of the car, there was once again the smell of salt air, and across the street the hard lapping of sea water against the planking and the jagged rocks of the shoreline.

There was the usual excitement of entering the tiny, rundown house - we had nicknamed it The Doll House - for the first time in the summer. Then came the busy unpacking and settling in, which soon gave way to my itching desire for that first swim in Kitty's Cove. My parents said no. It was too close to dinner to drive there. However, I could go for a walk to the Blockhouse, a restored wooden fort just down the street, and from there make my way onto the long spine of red rock reaching nearly a mile into the sea in front of the cannons.

Always it was the same. I would become totally intrigued by the rising tide, watching one rock after another slowly disappearing and seagulls losing perch after perch. Then it would be time to go, although I wanted to stay until the tide chased me all the way back to shore. Daring the rising sea was such fun. Sometimes I tarried too long and my mother's scream would rise above the breaking waves. Then I would nimbly pick my way back, guided by her wildly flapping dress.

With a bit of luck, I was allowed to return to the rock

after supper, sometimes accompanied by my younger brother. It was better without him. Within five minutes I was absorbed in the waves and the rocks, living out adventures on the high seas until dark. It was always difficult to leave. My falling on the rocks or drowning was a fate often on my parents' minds but to which I gave no consideration. As that summer began, I was more convinced than ever of my right to be independent.

The next day we headed for Kitty's Cove in the morning and signed up for three weeks' membership, straining for the excitement of plunging into the salty water once again. After several full days on the beach, it was enough just to spend the mornings there. Then the afternoons could be devoted to the adventure of climbing the rock spine and walking to the very end of it at low tide. A narrow dark channel separated it from an island. Many times I thought it would be easy to swim across, yet some instinct made me hesitate, like a dog looking over a high drop, wanting to go, but whining and pawing the edge.

Often I would gaze out from the spine at the sea and wish I could be drifting on it in a boat, exploring wherever I wanted. Soon I would be. Mr Stuart, a retired fisherman and boat-builder who had become my steadfast friend and adviser in the ways of the sea, helped me build a raft that summer. He had seen me eyeing his pile of lumber when I suggested what fun it would be to build a raft. He coughed, saying he needed that wood, but that there were some logs and boards down by the creek that would do.

The same day we went together to pick out some suitable pieces. He left me to toy away with a design, saying he would check back before any nails went in. When he

later saw my jigsaw puzzle of logs and boards, he rubbed the nubble of his beard, then rearranged the motley group of boards, carefully assuring me that this was only his suggestion, if I wanted to take it. Somehow the boards started taking a more solid shape. Finally, his hammer started sinking nails effortlessly. He let me try a few but the nails bent more often than not. I watched him finish the raft, seeing waves already lashing against it and wanting to hop on, although it still sat on the shore.

My eye caught a figure approaching. It was my mother. Her pace made it obvious she was not happy. Oh-oh. It was half-past twelve. I expected a good scolding. However, when she got nearer she spied the raft. It was mine, I told her. She looked at Mr Stuart and demanded an explanation. He moved over beside her, his eyes twinkling amidst a mass of wrinkles, and explained why a boy needed a raft. He added that he always kept an eye on the sea, especially when someone was out on it. I studied my mother's face as it shifted from anger, to worry, to relief, and finally to that satisfied look a mother sometimes gives her son when she realizes how much he needs to feel he is a man. Happiness and relief replaced all my fears of never using the raft. During the short walk home I backed up Mr Stuart's assurances with promises not to go more than a hundred yards from shore and to always come in when the weather got stormy.

While my mother reheated the soup, I sat on the edge of the armchair by the window, looking for girls walking up the street. I had begun to notice something about girls I had overlooked before. It wasn't so bad to be around them. They were different...and interesting. Here were two now, one in white shorts, the other in yellow.

The shorts hugged the roundness above their tanned legs. They had on halter tops, one navy blue and wide, the other red and white print, little more than a bikini top. Somehow the one with the skimpy top was best, and I elected her. The one in the blue top noticed me, jabbed her friend, then pointed at me. The two of them doubled over with laughter. Totally embarrassed, I let the lace curtain drop from my hand. A few seconds later they had passed. I moved to another window, stood beside the frame, then peeked at them from behind as they continued up the street, talking and gesturing.

My mother called. The smell of soup suddenly broached my senses. My thoughts returned to the raft that I would soon launch. Wait a minute. Maybe I would meet that girl in the red and white. She could go out on the raft with me. I would make her feel safe when she got afraid. I had passed my swimming test, too.

After lunch I ran full tilt to the shore. There was my raft, looking better than I had remembered. It was really mine. Mr Stuart got up from his seat on a rock and headed toward me. After saying hello, he bent down, grabbed the edge of the raft, then nodded at me. We heaved and dragged the raft a few feet into the shallow water. A large wave rolled under the raft and tugging became much easier. Then it floated free. I jumped on it and gave a shriek. Mr Stuart nodded, handing me a pole about ten feet long. Instantly I pushed the raft seaward and it lurched away from shore. I was too excited to remember to say thanks. Another push of the pole and I waved to Mr Stuart, shouting "It's great!" He lifted a hand, smiling somewhere inside his wrinkles.

It was my first ship. How proud I was to push off several hundred feet from shore in the rollicking waves and look back regally at Mr Stuart and other distant figures on the shore. It was just as much fun as I had imagined. Here I was moving around on the sea, up and down the spine of rocks, which had to stay just where they were. The whole town looked different from out there.

Day after day I sailed my tiny craft, proudly looking back at any girls who came to the rocks and at the worried face of my mother, who often came to check on me. It was a secret pleasure to constantly reassure her that I was perfectly safe when I knew she never believed it. Still, she couldn't keep me from my boyish pleasures. Naturally, the best times came when my mother was busy in the cottage and I could go as far from shore as I dared. Of course, I realized Mr Stuart was generally along the shore watching, not far from his boat. It was comforting to have him there, especially when I had to kneel down to make the long pushing pole touch bottom.

That raft gave me my first feeling of full independence. What I wanted it to do, it did. No one else was there to direct me or make suggestions. Of course, little mishaps occurred. Overcoming them made me feel that I was able to look after things, like the afternoon my old anchor rope broke as I tried to pull the heavy stone around the raft's edge and onto the planking. I shot backward into the sea. In three seconds I had hoisted myself back onto the raft, somewhat shaken. Feeling fear alone on the sea was a new experience. By the time I had pushed ashore for a new anchor stone, the breezy sun had all but dried me off. I spied Mr Stuart sitting on an old lobster trap and told him

what had happened. He had seen everything and also had observed that I was able to take care of myself. It was a happy afternoon that took me out for my second cruise that day. I was proud and fearless, in spite of some leftover shivers from my dunking.

It was just after lunch one day as I tore along the shore toward my raft. I had left it nestled among the rocks of the miniature dull-red peninsula, whose jumbled line of sandstone boulders created a god's handful of mini-beaches, where one or two people could comfortably bask in the sun, protected from the sometimes cool, brisk seabreeze.

I jumped off a large rock onto one of those little beaches, hurrying to my raft nearby. There she was, lying comfortably on a towel, her blond hair set off by a bronze tan, a gold-flecked brown bikini hugging secret breasts and a slim waist. I was surprised but pleased, and never thought to hide my pleasure as I stared at her. Her mirror sunglasses flicked toward me as I landed on the pebbly beach, followed by her pleasant, yet cautious, smile. I smiled back, saying hello. She replied warmly, soon relaxing into small talk and feeling no threat from me. I have no precise memory of what she said, only of the attractive smoothness with which it was said. She was on vacation from Montreal -one memorable detail - which impressed me as the kind of place where such women abound. There was no real need for me to know that, though, because almost at sight I knew she was a woman of the calibre that associates only with the finest and the most exotic.

She put her book down after carefully folding the edge of the page. I couldn't help noticing the refined slenderness of her bronzed fingers, set off by the pinkish tint below her manicured finger nails. Just watching her hands move was exciting. She sat up and leaned against a rock to talk. Her voice was soft and full of melody. Smiles started appearing on her face, followed by an occasional laugh. How had I amused her? She listened to the story of my raft, nodding from time to time. Still, I knew it wouldn't work to ask her to go for a sail on it. The occasional vertical movement of her sunglasses told me she was studying me. She reached into her straw purse to get her suntan lotion, then smoothed some into her shoulders and upper back. At one point she hesitated, as if about to ask me to rub some of the lotion into her lower back.

She finished working the lotion into her skin. Her body seemed so perfect, so full of life and warmth, and smooth, curved shapes. She couldn't like me, though, or could she? I was running out of things to say. With no bumbling or any sense of awkwardness, I said good-bye for now, then ran on toward my raft as if she had never been hidden there.

After getting my raft launched, I poled to the vicinity of her mini-beach, hoping to impress her with my manly prowess on the raft. I glanced occasionally toward her to see if she was watching. It was hard to tell because of her sunglasses and the distance, yet a slight turn of her head upward and in my direction told me she knew I was there. Her attention struck me as somewhat guarded, though I didn't know why. I realized there were light years between us in almost every sense, but she was, I had decided on the

raft, mine and mine alone. I had found her there among the rocks and she belonged to me. She had almost said as much in the way she talked.

As the days of our family's always too short vacation slipped away I looked for her each afternoon with a desire that was beginning to outweigh my love for my raft. Some days she was there; others she was not. One afternoon her mother appeared on the beach with her. Her mother was cordial enough with me but I sensed a certain underlying coolness as I struggled to keep our three-way conversation going. I couldn't help noticing the odd glances she exchanged with her daughter and the feeling that my behaviour was somehow out of place.

Until she introduced me to her mother, clad in a flowery beach dress and pompous hat that day, she and I had never used names. For some reason I recall the name Sharon. Up to that point I had expected that Sharon and I would talk and have a few laughs every time we met, just as surely as the tide would roll in. There was something new and uneasy in her conversation that day. Still, she seemed to be supporting me and our friendship while her mother remained aloof. When I left, Sharon smiled and said a pleasant good-bye, but her mother barely nodded when I wished them a nice day and quickly left.

I was always relieved on future days when Sharon's mother was not there. I even dared to think that she, too, was more relaxed without her mother there! Thankfully, her mother seldom appeared, and I felt that lost ground was quickly regained. Some days

I sat just at the edge of her blanket, while she lowered her sunglasses on her nose to peer directly at me with large greyish-blue eyes.

At night I sometimes took a walk along the rocks, watching the tide come in. Usually I had spent enough time with my raft in the afternoon, so didn't bother with it. Besides, my mother was fiercely opposed to my going out on the raft after 7:30. I understood why - the breeze got cool and there was something dark and threatening about the sea after the sun sank below the horizon. Sharon was never there at night, but I was not disappointed since I didn't expect her to be. The pattern became quite simple. I looked for her only on sunny warm days when she came to tan. That was all I needed. She was not on my mind at night, even when I crossed our mini-beach. Only as I headed toward my raft in the afternoon did I start to swell with happiness at the thought of seeing her.

Another afternoon I took our two dogs to the seashore for a walk, hoping Sharon would get a chance to see them. The raft would wait till later. The dogs tugged at the leashes, tails thrashing and noses going everywhere. She was tanning herself in the usual place. The tide was in, not ten feet from her legs. It was with some pride that I showed her our four-legged family members. They frisked about in the salt water, rolled in the thick reddish sand, then proceeded as if by mutual consent to shake themselves off within two feet of Sharon. She was fully splattered before she could jump up and back away.

I roughly pulled the dogs back, scolding them loudly and worrying about her being upset. She laughed merrily and told me not to be angry at the dogs, her bronzed hands softly brushing the specks of sand off her smooth body. I laughed, too, and the dogs joined in the fun with a great wagging of tails and snuffling in the sand. Her laugh drew back to a steady smile. She didn't move for a moment. I stood there helpless. My insides were in turmoil. With a jerk I bent down to pat the dogs and to hug them. When I looked up, she was back on her towel and composed. I left a few minutes later, catching from her a new, soft good-bye.

The next day was brilliant, with not a cloud in sight, so once again we met among the rocks. I had with me my Kodak Brownie camera, the sort that invaded almost every household in those years. My idea was to take some photos of the shoreline and of special rock formations along it. I told Sharon this as we chatted. Then it suddenly struck me that I should take her picture, too. My asking her was shy and uncertain, but she didn't mind at all. She even posed in several different positions, once lifting her blond hair like a mane. That was the photo I most wanted to see - it made me feel like a professional photographer.

A week later the photos were back, all blurry and too distant, except for a couple of our dogs. I decided to not show Sharon the pictures of herself, then hid them under my mattress, afraid of what my mother would say if she saw pictures of a woman in a bathing suit with the straps dangling. Several days later an urge to study the photos

came over me. They were not there. I didn't dare ask my mother or my brother if they had seen them.

Finally, it occurred to me to get copies from the negatives but my allowance went quickly for other things. By the time I had saved enough money, even the negatives could not be found for the moment. All that had to be done, I thought, was to take some more pictures of Sharon, which naturally would be better than the first ones. Somehow my camera was never with me whenever we met again and the negatives never did turn up.

Our friendship that summer was precious, yet I instinctively knew it would end. Just the same, she was mine while we spent those short days on our tiny private beach. My heart would race whenever I jumped down beside her, and after sitting with her a while I would master my raft as if a whole navy were under my command. She enjoyed our chats and she enjoyed me, I was sure. There was a confidence in my relationship with her, and a certain serenity.

One night, as the sun slowly yawned into the sea, a baritone red sustaining the last note of day, I was strolling downtown - a mere three blocks of tourist shops and restaurants. Suddenly, tires screeched beside me, making my head snap around. It was three college guys who worked at the big hotel for the summer. The guy in the front passenger seat yelled out to me, wanting to know if I had any older sisters. They were all taking turns raising brown bottles to their lips. A roar of laughter erupted when I said "No!" with as much disgust as I could muster. I thought of Sharon meeting these awful

guys and having to put up with their aggressive antics. Probably they thought they could kiss anyone. My fist clenched and I looked straight ahead. Come on, get out of your car, I thought.

With another chorus of guffaws and a belch of smoke from the exhaust, they blatted down the street in search of more fun. You won't get my girl, I thought, not as long as I can help it. Besides, she wouldn't even talk to the likes of you... As I walked smartly to the centre of town, a spontaneous smile blazed across my face and a warmth moved across my chest as I imagined her seeing how I'd handled those guys. For the first time I hoped I might meet her downtown, in one of the shops, but she was nowhere to be seen.

The next day she was there in the sun, reading. She took off her sunglasses and smiled when I arrived in front of her. Her bright greyish-blue eyes glittered in the sunlight. I wanted to say something, do something. Suddenly I dropped to my knees right on her blanket, just at her feet. I looked at her and smiled, with no fear of what I had done. For just a moment I felt on a par with her. She quickly pulled up her legs to her chest, her head leaning back, baring her slender, graceful neck. I stood up and announced I was going rafting. On her face was a look of surprise and relief. She said good-bye, then added "Be careful." It was not the way my mother said it. From the raft I waved, seeing her book turned down on her stomach. She waved back, a wide graceful wave. The wind was up that day, and by the time I worked my way to shore she was gone.

For the next two days Sharon wasn't at our usual spot, although the weather was beautiful. On the third day it was the same. I even looked downtown for her in earnest. At week's end our family was packing to leave. A last run to the tiny beach among the rocks yielded nothing. I left Dalton-on-Sea without seeing her again. The dreams of growing up fast, becoming especially suave and finally embracing her in a distant Montreal, faded with the end of summer. I seldom thought of her as more years and younger girls filled up my life, yet waves still wash upon that tiny secluded beach where we met. She is forever there among the sovereign stones that turned up along the seashore of my thirteenth summer.

GOING ON DOWN

I don't want to know the exact spot. Too many fine memories of this drive. Still beautiful but marred for good. Why was she going to Dalton-on-Sea? And in that torrential rain? The next day she had an appointment at the garage to get new tires. The old ones were as smooth as paper.

I have to go back through Dalton-on-Sea to try and settle my feelings. It was pretty terrible this afternoon. John and I kept back the tears at the funeral in Alberton but when Susie was lowered into the ground the sobbing started. Her poor kids. Maybe her husband will find someone else but no one like Susie. Mom and Dad will never know how all our exquisite summers in Dalton-on-Sea came to this...it won't be long now. It's always a thrill to drive back to the old village by the sea. Maybe it will help me to get over the look on the face of Susie's husband. Totally crushed. It crushed John and me, too. Only brothers now. No sister.

Darling Susie. All those summers she, John and I came down this same road to our vacation...she ended up living just twenty-five miles from Dalton-on-Sea, but seldom went there. Why that day? I've got to look around the village for an answer, useless as it is. Something drew her here. Was it connected to the old days?

What did we always say as kids? "Going on down." Dad used it first, so we kids picked it up. "Just two weeks till we go on down to Dalton-on-Sea." Then at last, "Tomorrow we're going on down!" Next best thing to Santa Claus. Packing like fiends half the night, only to have Mom come in and re-pack everything right. The three of us

would lie on the big bed and watch her, talking about Wesson's and the double-scoop ice creams that were so big they melted down onto your hand before you could lick them around. Then we would lick our hands, like three cats working on their paws....

Here's the S-curve. Now the sea will show just around the bend...there it is, a long shimmering slit. The first invitation. We always looked for it, exchanging a few celebratory punches in the back seat till Dad growled at us. The smell of salt air opens the nostrils while the sea disappears momentarily, then reappears, and continues to do so in ever larger bits. A slight jag inland takes the car flitting past an emerald golf course, blocking the view of the sea on its lower side. Susie, John, and I used to talk about caddying for a summer job, but never had the nerve to approach the dazzling white exclusive clubhouse, whose large sign blared: "MEMBERS ONLY!"

Once John and I got caught trying to steal golf balls from the fairway. Susie looked on from the woods in fear and amusement as the grounds-keeper bawled us out in the early morning mist. We slunk back into the trees as she preached victoriously, "I TOLD you not to touch those balls! They're not yours." We wanted to wrestle her to the ground and rough her up - a sister better not be right in such cases - but we knew she'd tell Dad about the golf balls if we did anything to her. As we moved away from the golf course, Susie pulled a couple of candies out of her pocket, gave one to each of us and said, "Let's go to the Magic Birch!"

The Magic Birch, that glorious tree in the field beside the Doll House...say, Dalton-on-Sea isn't far now. Around the edge of the golf course in a smooth curve, down a

canopy of hardwoods with cute summer houses and guest homes tucked in behind them, and up to a three-way stop. To the left is the glistening white tower of the village's grand hotel. John and I used to walk around the tower at its base, dreaming of spending a night at the very top, peeking down at the comings and goings of the rich in their limousines. Susie would shake her head and say, "You don't have enough money to stay there. Besides, the tower is probably full of spiders." John and I would run our fingers lightly over her head and face, saying "Spider bite! Spider bite!" while she shrieked and struggled to get away. "Yeah," said John once, "they'll keep you away from us for a night...."

I take the right turn toward the center of town, the street sloping gently toward the sea, waiting like a mother's arms. At the bottom I turn right on to Water Street. Two houses in, and there is the Doll House, the paint still peeling off, the tiny back porch heaving toward one side and the tin roof just as rusty and bent as it was twenty years ago. It was always that old and shabby - it just can't get any older. I can picture our station wagon arriving, the two dogs bounding out to sniff around and the three of us running into the house to claim our bedrooms, until Dad settled who was staying where. Then we would unpack, not too happily, since the sea beckoned so seductively. Finally it was time for our first swim of the summer in Kitty's Cove. Of course, we had to stop for an ice cream on the way...I wonder if Wesson's is still open.

Ah yes, there's the Magic Birch beside the Doll House. Wait a minute...there's something tacked on it, a pad or a notice. Wonder what it is...I'll check it out when I

finish my tour around the town. There's a big mound of earth near the tree, with weeds and new grass growing on it. What was that all about? Looks like the start of an excavation.... I don't believe it - the same old rusty oil drum on the same bent stand at the back of the house. My parents thought it was a fire hazard twenty-five years ago.

Time for an ice cream and a look at the town, then down to Kitty's Cove - all the old rituals of our vacations here. The McIntosh Street sign is still bent, covering some of the letters. Susie called it McOsh St, so it became known as that, even to Mom and Dad. Clever girl. McOsh St leads up to the corner just beside the dairy where we got our milk and cream. The dairy's gone now, but for me it's somehow still there. We're still there somewhere too, the three of us, walking up to the dairy for a couple of quarts of milk, pausing, arguing or laughing as we went. Maybe that's heaven, just having been somewhere in full delight.... Susie wouldn't go into the dairy, but John and I loved to see the clanking bottles and the spurting milk filling them while we waited to be served.

The old houses of Water Street, some fine, some not so fine.... All there still. Even the paint is mostly the same colour. Wesson's on the right. There's a parking space in the only three places available. Nothing changed there. Mr Wesson sitting in his wheelchair out on the little porch. Will he remember me?

"Hi, Mr Wesson."

"Hi, sonny."

"Remember me? Al. Al Johnson. Our family used to stay up the street."

"Oh yeah. You're the carpenter, ain't ya?"

"Not really, but it's nice to see you again." I give him my hand. He takes it with the effete reluctance of old age. How many ice creams he handed us. When Susie was turning into a woman, he wanted his son Bill to go out with her. Susie sure got a lot of free ice cream, but didn't care two hoots for Bill.

The white screen door creaks open and slams behind me, the weather stripping dangling to one side. There's Bill, taking on the form of a scoop of ice cream himself, his belly poking through the missing buttons on his shirt. Buttons probably gave up the fight to tuck it all in. Stains everywhere on the shirt, a Picasso in ice cream splashes. Then again, chocolate ice cream is magnetic, as Mom always used to say. Those other colours seem to be doing just fine, too.

"Hello, sir. Can I help you?"

He doesn't remember me. Just as well. He must know about Susie and I don't want to talk about her. Too awkward. Too close. There are a lot of tears still left in me.

"Do you still make triples?"

"Sure do, on special request," he says, looking at me closely.

"Give me a triple chocolate walnut, please."

"Sorry," he says, with an apologetic crease forming across his forehead. "They took the walnuts out a couple of years ago. Too expensive, I guess."

"That's too bad. Just chocolate then."

"Guess you've been here before, huh?"

"Yeah, a number of times." I can't mention my name. "Have to keep coming back to this town."

"Know what you mean. Margie and me could never leave this place. There you are, sir. One twenty-five, please."

"Thanks. Hope I can eat it all." The "sir" means he hasn't the faintest idea of who I am. After his brother almost beat me up one summer, we became great friends and had all kinds of fun together. And what a price for ice cream! In the city this would cost \$3.50 - if they would make a triple at all. "See you later. The ice cream is super."

"Thanks... Bye until the next time."

He looks at me closely again, just as I turn. Trying to pull my face out of his memory banks. The screen door slams. Mr Wesson smiles toothlessly and lifts his cane as I nod at him. Back in the car. Why couldn't Susie be here with me, eating a triple ice cream, like the old days? We should have come here together these last few years.

Down the street slowly. There's Doone's grocery, nicknamed "Goon's" by John and me. Susie would insist, "No, Doone's!" I see Wren's Drugstore a bit further along on the other side of the street. And on the corner, its competitor, Burnside's Drugstore, under the shade of a huge elm. The old black sign with ancient white neon letters still hangs at an angle above the door. Burnside's was our favorite, somehow more special than Wren's. At least until we got caught stealing candy.... Old Burnside was red-faced and fiery, threatening to call the police, even though they were twenty miles away. We didn't know that, so were sweaty with fear. However, what we did know was the pain of

Dad's hard hand on the behind and the shame of a week of evenings in our tiny bedroom. Susie saved the day by taking out three weeks' allowance, her entire fortune, saying,

"I was going to pay for it...it's John's birthday, you know." Her eyes rolled around in an unconvincing circle while John and I stood as silent, but not as guiltless, as tombstones.

"Oh, I see," said old Burnside, smiling at Susie's determined look as she counted out dimes and quarters. "I think a dollar will do." Both tins were marked \$2.49. John and I thanked our sister, then walked contritely out of the store with the tins held gingerly in our hands.

Once up the street we gave Susie a couple of the hard, fruit-flavored drops but no more. "It's my birthday present, you know!" said John in response to Susie's hurt look. She never told Mom or Dad. However, Mom made us share some more of those candies with Susie, against our strenuous objections. We kept the tins buried under the Magic Birch long after the candy was all gone.

Front Street displays a few more gift and china shops, through which Mom never tired of browsing, then reverts to residences. Just before the railroad tracks, a grand old residence, once an inn, rises a full three storeys, boasting a glassed-in verandah, little balconies and a hexagonal tower with look-everywhere windows. Over the tracks and around a bend the sea races away off Headless Point like a vast field, its borders a disarray of huge red rocks following the curve of the road. The fishing weirs look

wretched and alone in the uncaring waves, which flatten in the distance and lead the eye to distant headlands and finally to the hazy outline of an island, all but lost in the now open sea.

Another curve, and the road bumps over the tracks once again, heading back into town and leaving the sea behind. A neat collection of new houses is punctuated by old estate mansions peering regally but guardedly through the tree tops. We never used to walk here, only drive, because the seabreeze off the point was usually cold and the temperature of the water forbidding. When our parents stopped our car at the lookout on the point, the three of us fidgeted and asked when we were going back to Kitty's Cove, where we could luxuriate in the warm sand and swim in water that was not frigid.

On up a slight rise and out of the trees' shade, there almost explodes into sight the grand hotel, flashing white stucco under the summer sun and crowned with a deep red tile roof. Any other colours would have been heresy, like a minister dressed in flamingo pink. With numerous, careful paint jobs over the years it remains the same, as fresh-looking and uncluttered as it was in my childhood. The dining room in the left wing has a long wall of small-pane glass, above which rooms rise up for some six storeys. To the very right is the dominating white tower, the tiny windows at the top always prompting John and me as children to conversations about pirates, buried treasure and stowing away on a brigand ship.

On one side of the hotel is a large lawn, strangely empty beside the grandeur of the hotel, but it was not always so. Years ago three elegant wooden houses sat there.

and, for a very high price, were rented to hotel guests who wanted their own home yet demanded all the services of a hotel. Now the houses are gone, torn down some time ago, although I never knew why. Susie and I couldn't manage to buy one, as we had planned to do one day, scheming beneath the Magic Birch. Our mutual investment from allowances was spent less gloriously but much more ardently on the carnival in Alberton.

A passerby might guess that the hotel is no longer "special" except for the high prices, that the interior is getting old and that almost anybody can stay there. Thirty years ago, the room rates were almost the same as they are now, putting them in the astronomical zone then. As scoop children, the three of us would marvel at the manicured lawns, the scurry of bellhops around the elegantly self-assured and the long line of spotlessly clean and freshly waxed cars that spoke clearly of their owners' wealth. From time to time a lowly Chrysler 300 would sneak into the metal-and-chrome ranks, but glistening black Lincoln Continentals and Cadillac Fleetwoods, upstaged occasionally by a Rolls Royce, were the order of the day. Today people with that kind of money fly anywhere in the world for their vacations. Now the hotel is less expensive, less upkeep, yet a certain regal aura persists.

One day I will stay there and once again eat in the glassed-in dining room, trying to recapture our one meal with Granny. Susie had been taken there a few times. One day Granny decided to take us boys as well, much to her lasting regret. Without Dad there, we trotted around the huge dining room like junior hooligans, made faces at snobbish guests we didn't like, and finished with a napkin fight. Susie refused to join us

and tried to calm down Granny, who was nearly in hysterics, increasing our enjoyment. Afterward Granny had a few words with Dad, ending each remark with "those bad boys!" John and I thought that was very unsporting of her. He and I suffered through our spanking and solitary confinement, but all subsequent pleas and apologies to Granny would not convince her to take us to the hotel again. Susie went, of course, but we never failed to torture her later for her good fortune, even though she smuggled a few fancy cakes home to us each time....

A left turn leads down a sharp hill and onto a gravel section, which opens shortly into the parking lot at Kitty's Cove. Behind the high hedge and metal fence lies the small cove, cut off from the cold open sea by a floodgate underneath the railway trestle on the far side, freeing it from the vagaries of the tide, and allowing the water to warm considerably as the rays of the summer sun beam on it day after day. Now the town operates the cove, maintaining a lifeguard service and the two remaining buildings. In those summers of the past, when the three of us lolled away the carefree summer afternoons of childhood, the cove was owned by the hotel - everything was kept spotless and all structures were freshly painted summer after summer.

Rows of change houses, since torn down, were bright white with light green trim. The office building matched these change houses outside, but inside there was dark wood slatting and a polished wood counter. From here attendants served out bundles of thick, white, clean-smelling towels. Opposite this was the teahouse, where older ladies and sighing husbands could have an afternoon lobster roll and enjoy peering out at the

youth that covered the beach. From time to time a guilty-looking child would run into the teahouse with sandy feet, bathing suit and towel, going to the counter where a small, tight fist released change for a Coke. The little face would stare about for a moment, wondering where so many important people came from, then take a drink of Coke and quickly walk out. Once in a while Granny would invite us to her table to have some ice cream as she finished her meal. Then the three of us would race back for another swim, hoping to show Morn and Dad how much we had improved.

There used to be three rafts beyond the U-shaped jetty. The first two were simply white squares of painted wood, but the third and furthest one had a diving board and a slide. How we begged Dad to take us to that third raft, once we could swim proficiently. Finally, after we'd gone to the second one a few times, we got our chance. Dad was alongside the three of us. Susie slipped ahead, but John got scared and had to go back. I went back to the second raft with John and Dad, who asked me to stay there with John, now shaking from cold and fear. Dad went to join Susie, who was just approaching the third raft, near which sat a lifeguard in a boat. Soon Susie was screaming with delight as she soared down the slide and splashed into the water. That was a day of shame for John, and for boys in general, but Susie didn't rub it in. A year later the three of us were swimming directly to the distant third raft....

No time for a swim today. Out the exit road, two hard left curves, then up a hill and past the far side of the hotel and back down into town. Eternal vacation circle. Now for a closer look at the Doll House.... I'll just park and have a little tour around it....

Good God, the curtains look like the same ones as when we were here! Too bad I can't go inside. I can almost hear John and Susie's feet tapping on the tiny narrow stairway, leading up from the miniature living room, where the two armchairs and small couch almost prevented any movement. Upstairs we played in both of the undersized bedrooms on rainy days, but our favourite upstairs room was the bathroom, with its huge tub on cast iron legs and the ancient skylight. We would stare out of the skylight at the moon and the stars. Dad warned us not to open it because the wooden sill around it was rotten, but we boys did not listen. Rather than see us lose our balance on the edge of the tub, Susie, who was the tallest, would reach up and gingerly open it so we could listen to the crickets and frogs and the occasional passing car instead of sleeping, as Mom and Dad downstairs at the TV supposed we were doing....

There's the Magic Birch, bigger than ever, Susie's greatest gift to our summer fun...she discovered it, although it had always been there. She'd been reading a fairy story about magic trees one rainy afternoon. White birches were reigning monarchs, so she proclaimed this our Magic Birch. Whenever plans were afoot in our children's kingdom, we immediately consented to a council meeting under the Magic Birch. At first John and I scoffed at Susie's idea, saying it was girl's stuff, yet it became an intimate part of going on down. The three of us gathered under the Magic Birch time and again, and John and I took part in Susie's incantations beneath the mystical tree.

On clear moonlit nights the three of us would sneak outside and watch the moonlight filter through the leaves of the Magic Birch. A breeze would lift the leaves and

the moon's silver disk would glare at us. An eerie chill would creep over the humid coolness of a seaside July night. We would glance at each other and one of us would ask, "Are you scared?" "No! Are you? Then why did you ask?" was the reply. That would keep us for ten more minutes before we scampered back to the warm safety of our beds....

Wait a minute.... There's the large pad on the other side of the Magic Birch. Looks like an electoral list. What does it say...? Look at that. A petition, asking for the town council to refuse a construction permit and to keep this lot and the Doll House as part of the town's conservation effort.... Lots of names I recognize. Oh Christ, there's Susie's name. Susie Winston, Alberton - in small, neat writing... Here's a date for a general meeting of conservationists last Monday afternoon, the day she died. So that's it.... I might never have known. Even her husband didn't know why she was headed here. He never liked Dalton-on-Sea. Why didn't I invite her to come here with her kids on one of my visits? Better ask John this summer...at least it's not too late for him.

Time to get going but I'll be back...maybe it's time to try and get a place here. The Doll House? Probably not for sale, but I can at least look into it. The breeze is getting cool. Good to get back in the car.... What's this? Kids coming across the field to the Magic Birch. Two boys and a girl, about nine or ten years old. Of course, it's 3:30...they're just out of school. Starting to play some sort of game, marching around the tree. I watch them for a while. The kids are oblivious to the middle-aged man intently

watching them. Maybe that's because they are Susie, John, and me, caught in the tiny forever of a child's world, still going on down with the welcome of each new summer.

FORTY-TWO HALF

What is the half-life of U-238? About ten thousand years. What is the half-life of a human being? Just wait until you're dead and divide by two. Maybe it will be twice as much as you deserved. Or twice as much as you wanted. Mathematics forgets the pain of some days and the ecstasy of others, not to mention the infinity of the final calculation. Funny how any discussion of life, if long enough, brings you around to death. A vicious circle, but what other inheritance is there?

Here I sit, yards from the tumbling sea, holding the welcome warmth of a mug of coffee. Still, my mind is in the city, watching for Sally, trying to see her in a coffee shop there, so unlike this one - different figures, different clothing, different movements. Yet the same human geometry works beneath all surfaces.

No doubt she is sitting in a cosy corner with Alex, telling him of her latest read, as if he would care. No doubt warming up for more cosiness. Just don't let it be in our bed. Not after twenty years of marriage. Her last kiss yesterday, "until two weeks from now", had a strange freshness about it. Amazing how a little sex on the side snaps your attention to what you really love, sometimes too late. It happened with Anne, my one extra-marital go. Remorse drove me to making the best love to Sally in years. She loved every second of it - until she found out. She wouldn't believe my denials. Sally was never one for revenge but this Alex must be partly that. A bartender, to boot. Of course, it's a matter of equality. "If you can, so can I." She's right, but it still gets me.

At a slightly different angle I might be able to see this affair as good for Sally. Why not? That's what the brain says, anyway. So what is all this possession in marriage? Anne made me happy and so did my wife. A little taboo-breaking, a little spice for the pecker. Thought I was eighteen again. Now it's Sally's turn. No point in getting divorced. She forgave me my affair. Besides, we have a pretty good thing, in our own comfortable way. What's real courage after all? Does it mean fighting a bitter divorce or swallowing a little hurt for the good times and the two kids in eighteen years?

The tide's almost in, beating frantically against the rock ledging and retainer walls. Billowy clouds. Steady hard wind whipping the waves to an energetic froth. This old cottage is safe across the street from the shore. Shangri-La, minus all pretensions. Built on mood and being there. The kids will be here in a couple of days, complaining about their imprisonment, but one day they'll love it, too. Anne was crazy about the sea and seaside villages - that's what I liked best about her, after the sex turned normal. So many things to do. Just like death, the ordinary is out there waiting for you....

So, those mutton-heads brought the lumber. Good. New heights of efficiency in Dalton-on-Sea. I ordered it only four days ago, and by phone, no less. I guess I'm almost a local now, after twelve years of listening to their crap. They hate the city boys but love their money. Like with so many women, the smell of gold is the only true aphrodisiac. Brings hard attention and fast service. That's why these guys jump for the Allawassit Hotel. It radiates the aura of power and the easy confidence of the rich.

Anyway, I'd better have some semblance of a new porch hanging onto the cottage in one week, or Sally will give me my walking papers. This time, though, it's going to happen. Not like that attempt about fifteen years ago, when the lumber sat there for five summers untouched and had to be carted away. Sally had even saved up a couple of hundred dollars to hire someone for the porch that fifth summer, but it was too late. Then we spent the money on an overnight cruise with lobster and champagne for supper. No squeezing out of it this time. Porch it will be....

It's almost time for supper. Afterward I'll get the tools and rip apart as much of the old porch as I can, unless a good wind takes it away. We haven't dared to sit on it for years. Hope it comes down easily. The work crew is supposed to come by tomorrow with a truck to see if I have something to cart away. I'll have something, by God, if only my tired and worn-out body. Wait...maybe I can get the roof off before supper. It's better to eat later anyway. That way I won't end up at The Seagull too early. Arrive late, drink less. Now, where's that crowbar...?

"Hi!"

Eh? Girl's voice behind me. "Oh, hi. You surprised me."

Soft open face. Honey blond hair, shoulder length. Small, even teeth in broad smile. Slightly turned-up nose and dimpled cheeks. Sixteen, maybe seventeen. White shorts over muscular tanned legs. T-shirt loose but breasts making themselves noticed.

"I'm Dawn. I'm a live-in babysitter for the Field kids. You probably know them."

"Yeah. Known them for years. We don't see them that often, though. They like to get away in summer, seeing how they live here all year round. Oh, I'm Ralf. Ralf Corde. This is our summer place, falling apart though it is."

"It looks okay to me. I've seen it lots of times before, going by or visiting the Fields. Just thought I'd say hi. What's all the wood for?"

"A new porch - the one I'm about to start building, with a little help."

"Hey, that's neat. Doing it yourself. You must be pretty handy with tools. It'll be fun to watch it go up," she says.

"You certainly can keep an eye on things, but it won't be too exciting. The work crew will be here for a few days, starting tomorrow."

"It won't take long with a whole crew. Maybe I can come and sit on the porch when it's done," she says, gesturing toward the old porch as if the new one were already there.

"Sure. Come over any time."

"Thanks. I'd better go now - there's a lot of cleaning to be done. Nice meeting you."

"Same here...bye for now, Dawn."

"See you later...."

I like that toss of her hair. Woman caressing man's sight. Is it bred in the bone? Dawn's a sprightly lass. Not much older than Tammy but seems more mature. Then again I don't see Dawn spending hours in the bathroom and screaming for this and that,

like Tammy...those shorts fit Dawn well. No doubt she will be strutting her stuff for the village boys when the heat drives girls into the skimpiest shorts and halter tops. I guess Tammy is starting to do the same thing, but fathers don't like to notice.

Up the ladder and onto the roof. Here goes. RRRIIPPP! Five shingles in one blow. Say, this is fun. Oh-oh. Those planks underneath look pretty solidly nailed...better get the crowbar for them. Then the hammer will clear the shingles easily enough. That'll put me at about supper time....

There. Twenty-five minutes and I have a pile of half-rotted shingles and some small boards. Time for some grub. There's also the rest of that Beaujolais - that must NOT go to waste. Otherwise the wine-growers of France would choke with rage. A fine wine insulted by a barbarian. The guillotine for sure, just for starters....

Hey, the drapes moved in the Fields' house. Was she watching? Can't be that much of a thrill. She's probably just playing with the idea of a man, like my daughter. No action yet. Still, you never know these days. Tammy has been in some pretty gluey embraces on the veranda.

Did that curtain move again...? Come on, she's probably just checking to see if some boy has arrived to pick her up. I'm sure those legs bring them for miles around.

It gives me a thrill though, just to think she's looking. She'll probably fall for some guy who has ten women on a string, while the nice guys stand helplessly in line, holding bouquets of wilting roses.

She's outside on the stairs now and definitely looking over here. Laughing at my pile of shingles and the brown skeleton of a porch. No respect. Here she comes...Look at those pale yellow shorts! She sure knows how to turn a piece of cloth into a work of God.

"Hi again. That's quite a mess you've got there. And boy, are you sweaty!"

"Right. Two messes for the price of one. It all better be cleaned up by the time my wife arrives next week, or she'll have me committed. Hmmm, what's that smell? Been doing some cooking?"

"Sure have. I just made a chocolate cake. I came over to see if you'd like a piece."

"I would, but I was just about to get some supper. Look, why don't you bring over some cake and we'll have a picnic on the lawn?"

"Sure. I'll be right back."

"Okay. I'll get some things together."

Soft scrunching of her loafers in the crushed stone driveway... Better get the tools away, then get together some chicken, cold cuts, bread and the Beaujolais. That should do it.

Got the stuff...the stump on the back lawn makes a perfect table. Besides, people can't peer at us from the street. Town gossip has a way of becoming truth in the hands of the malicious. Now if I can just put these things down without dropping anything....

"Here, let me help you." Dawn's voice again.

"Back already? That was fast. Thanks. I was scared I'd drop everything."

God, she's even changed her top. Shows more cleavage. And no bra. Smell that perfume. What do I have on my hands here - a young seductress...? She's probably just practising for the real thing.

"Well, Dawn, let's dig in. I'm starved. Care for some Beaujolais?"

"Sounds great, even if I never had it before. Are you one of those wine experts?"

"Hardly, except for the effects of the stuff - they all work well on me."

"That's cute. I don't know much about wine. Usually I drink gin, or sometimes a couple of beers."

"You're a bit young to drink, aren't you? I really shouldn't be giving you any wine."

"No problem. All the kids around here drink. Anyway, I'm eighteen and at bars they think I'm nineteen."

"You look younger...at least to me."

"Thanks, but I prefer to look older, at least until I hit twenty-five. Hmm. That wine is good."

"It's Beaujolais, one of the best."

"It's not like Baby Duck, that's for sure. They serve Baby Duck at all the weddings. This is much better. I may have found a new friend."

"Unfortunately friends like that don't stay around for long!"

"Ha! I'll have to remember that one," Dawn says, taking a bite of chicken. "Mr Corde, this is good. Did you put ginger in the chicken?"

"Well, my wife did. And please call me Ralf - I'm not your school teacher."

"Ralf, what's your wife like?"

Nothing like directness. My wife's not like you, that's for sure.

"Well, Dawn, she's kind of cute...black hair with a hint of red, and in pretty good shape for thirty-eight. Usually she's pleasant and easy-going, unless she gets in a stubborn mood."

"I'd like to meet her. You seem pretty easy-going yourself and I like that."

"Well, thanks, but I have my rough days. Do you want some cold cuts?"

"No, thanks. I'm pretty full already. Have to save some space for the chocolate cake."

"Okay. I'll grab the coffee pot and bring it out - the coffee's all made."

"Ralf, I forgot the plates. Could you bring out a couple?"

"Sure, but do we need two? Back in a minute...." Hope she laughed at that one.

Things are mighty cosy. Or is it my imagination...?

"There we go, Dawn. Forks as well as plates...wow, this cake is delicious! Do you want to marry me - I mean, if I can get rid of my wife?"

"Now, the cake's not that good, but thanks for the offer. I was just looking for a husband last week...oohhh, I can feel that wine all the way down to my toes."

"Don't worry - the coffee will straighten you out."

Her teeth have a deep burgundy tint and her face is really flushed, even through her tan. She's staring at me. Better get some coffee into her....

"Thanks, Ralf. That coffee sure is strong. Just what I need. This has been quite a meal. Invite me over again some time." Dawn gets up from the grass, brushing a few crumbs off her shorts.

"Sure will. Are you on your way?"

"In a few minutes. I have to get ready for my date tonight. He's coming at seven-thirty. Hope toothpaste will cover the smell of the wine - oh, he's probably at the tavern and won't notice anyway."

"Is he your boyfriend?"

"No, not really. I've known him a long time but we only started going out last month. Guess I better get going."

"Well, have a good time. Drop over any time."

"Thanks for everything, Ralf."

What's this? A kiss! I'll be goddamed. And a hell of a good kiss, too.

"You're welcome, Dawn. See you later."

"Bye!"

Look at those legs run. Effortless with youth. Wish they were running toward me instead of away. That supper was fun. The kiss was even better.... Well, back to work. Maybe I can get down a few timbers before dark. Have to pick up these dishes first.

What's that? A light green Parisienne roaring into the Field's driveway. It must have a Thrush muffler. Muffler in name only. Christ, what a noise! Guess that's him. Yeah, there she goes to the car. I'd better move this crowbar around so it will look like I'm doing something. Oops, she's looking back at me and smiling, quickly so he won't notice. Little vixen. He'll probably have those tight shorts off before the night is out. Hard driving, hard drinking, hard fucking country boy. None of that city-slicker propriety. Nature yielding in the midst of nature. Great.

Look at that joint in the timbers. Better use an axe... With Sally it was a major campaign; every time we had sex before we were married. Didn't change that much after, not for a long time. She should have married a minister. Please forgive me for what I'm about to do.

Grab that axe and don't chop your foot off. One good slam for the first beam.
BASH! There, you bastard. A few more like that and the job will be done. Exit porch.

Nine-fifteen. I don't believe it. One more beam to go. Heave that axel I'm getting better with practice. Or is it the lumberjack genes of my forefathers? Either way, it looks like blisters for breakfast. WHACK! All done. I'll make a pile in the morning so they can cart it away. Go and rest thy soul, my son. A wee drink to see darkness in. Then a long sleep under the seabreeze.

There. Dishes done. Junk away. Teeth brushed. And a sweet jigger of Grand Marnier down the hatch. Forget The Seagull tonight - probably would mean drinking with the locals till 1 a.m. Time to hit the hay. Ooohh, feels good to lie down. I pledge my head to this sweet pillow....

Jesus Christ! Listen to that screeching of tires! What time is it...one-thirty. The car is spinning into the Field's driveway. Oh, Dawn and her boyfriend. He's probably in a rage because he didn't get any tail. Started an argument to hide the real reason he's mad. Serves you right, you country hick. SCRRRRREEEECH! Good. He's gone. Now back to sleep.

What the hell? Someone's knocking at the front door. Who in God's name is that? Wait a minute, wait a minute! I'm coming. Let me get my dressing gown on. Easy on the stairs.... What? It's Dawn!

"Hi, Ralph. Can I come in? I'm sorry to bother you this late but Jack and I had a terrible fight."

"No problem...." She's been crying. Looks like deep-kiss marks on her neck....
"Would you like some coffee or something?"

"Do you have some more wine?"

"Sure. I think I'll have some myself."

"Pour me lots. I feel like getting drunk. That asshole Jack thinks he owns me."

"What happened...I mean, if you want to tell me."

"Oh, Ralf, he wanted to lay me two minutes after we stopped to park. He practically tore my top off. What a pig! Then he got really mad when I told him to stop. He called me a slimy virgin and said I was the creepiest shit in town."

"There's nothing wrong with being a virgin."

"I'm not. Well, I mean...my last boyfriend and I got it on a bit. At least he was gentle, like you."

"Me? Oh, I'm...."

"I can tell by watching you. You'd be slow and gentle."

She's through that wine already...should I give her some more? This could get serious.

"Ralf, come and sit beside me, please. Right here. I need to hug you."

Her arms soft and warm around me. Hint of perfume. Her lips on mine. How long has it been since I felt a kiss like that, all freshness and enthusiasm? Eyes dilated and relaxed from crying. Another kiss. She's pushing hard against me, her hand caressing my neck. It's too good to be true.

How long is this going to go on? It's been close to half an hour that we've been kissing and fondling. What does she really want? It's hard to stop from going further.

"Ralf, let's go to bed."

"But..."

"Don't you want to?"

"Of course I want to...a lot. As long as you do."

"I need to be with you, Ralf."

"I'm surprised...and flattered. Should we bring the wine?"

"Sure. I'm really getting to love that stuff."

What if Sally finds out? She would leave me for sure. And Dawn's boyfriend. He may come back looking for her. To hell with it. Pick her up in your arms. There. She likes being carried. Now she'll have to go upstairs by herself - too bad the stairs are so

narrow. In my arms again and into the bedroom. Gently down. Ouch, those blisters hurt. Then again, they'll slow me down. I didn't think I could get this excited anymore.

"Ralf, it's funny...how I feel happy with you."

"I know what you mean. Wild but wonderful."

Her kisses take me by storm. Coolness of our bodies touching turns to warmth. Her arms go over her head so I can slip off her halter top. Ski jump breasts. Nipples grow hard in my fingers. Kisses move around the aureole. Her chest heaves as each nipple slides across my tongue.

Zipper of her shorts down. Slide them down tanned legs. Skimpy yellow cotton panties with little flowers. My hand slips up between her legs. She spreads them to let my hand massage her. Then we work each on a side to slip off the panties. I almost rip my underwear off, then feel my erection against her leg.

My hand slips against the opening of her vagina. A finger teases into the wet inside. Her hands alternately rub my back, then rake it with fingernails in the other direction. Shivers run from my neck down my back. Our kisses are so hard it seems our front teeth might break.

She pulls me on top of her. My erection finds the entrance, guided by trembling fingers. An easy push and I start inside, then feel resistance. Dawn moves her hips up and her opening yields, swallowing me in little thrusts.

Her hips undulate as I move in and out, in and out. There is a barely audible whimper as her deep exhalations accelerate. She stares at me, mouth open. Eyes like

a child who has just woken up and found life still waiting. Her back arches and she begins to pitch. Fingernails biting into my shoulder.

Oh Christ, I'm losing it. She's coming, too. We grasp desperately, yet slip hopelessly into our own pleasure. The world spins, then all is quiet. We slip gently apart, ordinary once more. Now it is sleep that takes us...under the blankets of our separate lives.

It's 7:45 in the morning. Dawn is still sleeping, not a line of care on her face. Heavy fog outside, soundless but for a far-off foghorn.... I'd better get her up before the fog lifts and the whole town starts rolling past my door. No fear of the work crew arriving late today, just when you don't want them around. Wouldn't they love to find Dawn and me in our love clothes? One sighting of her slipping out of my place and even the town dogs would be howling it by noon. Well, let's get moving.

"Dawn? Dawn, it's morning."

"Uh-ummm."

"We have to get up. The construction crew is coming soon."

Her body turns. Light green eyes open slowly, fully. Deep yellow sunburst in the iris. Mouth slightly open, still inviting and kissable. She's not sorry.

Dawn turns a bit toward me. One breast pops out of the sheets, touching my hand. The nipple grows erect as I fondle it. Skin velvet smooth, clinging slightly to my fingers. More like the skin of a baby than a mature woman. An easy smile slips across

her face. No calculating in her mood. Lost in the spontaneity of new womanhood. A long languorous kiss. My throat starts tightening with excitement. Another kiss. And another. Mounting fury.

She struggles with the sheets, tossing them away with her legs. Not a word. I am inside her. Our hands meet in their passages over each other's body and clasp a moment. The bed does not squeak as we undulate together. I'd forgotten how solid this bed is. Why didn't Sally and I take it to our room? We were going to move it downstairs once.

How beautiful this is to be in caring arms and see caring eyes rove your face and body. I'd forgotten the pleasure of waking into another's sex. The real breakfast in bed.

Suddenly Dawn writhes and tosses, all the while clinging hungrily to me. I thrust down and down, the fabulous roundness of her buttocks locked firmly in my hands. Then utter release. Spiral of peace. Kiss of the Buddha.

A breeze full of sea-smell pushes through the window, cooling our glistening bodies. With a long gentle sigh she rolls on top of me. Her fingers caress the hairs of my chest as she looks at them studiously, as if there were some answer there. Those green eyes roll up to my face, then across my eyes. Electric jolt.

"Ralf, that was too much. I feel spoiled."

"You're not the only one."

Again the shining eyes into mine, like the sweep of an airport beacon, coming around slowly, but there just for a flash.

"I guess I better get going," she says, sliding to a sitting position on the edge of the bed. "God knows who's going to come looking for me." For a moment she stares blankly at her clothes strewn on the floor. Her taut breasts, guided by pert dark nipples, rise slowly then drop with her breathing.

"Well, it is that time, Dawn, much as I hate to say it. Unless we want to stay here forever."

"If only we could." She stands up. I watch her smooth, tight bottom as she wriggles into her panties. I'm ready to start all over again but there is no time. I stand up beside her, kiss her on the shoulder, then get dressed. The ceremony of separation into our own worlds.

The fog hasn't lifted at all. Good. The bellow of another fog-horn, appropriately bleak. Reminds landlubbers of their safety and their warmth. The smell of sea rolls into the room as I swing the hinged window wide open.

"BRRRR! It's cold!" says Dawn. She moves up behind me and hugs me for warmth, the fabric of her halter top contrasting with the warmth of her skin. She slips away, pulls on her hooded sweatshirt, then arranges her hair with her hands.

"Glad I'm not out on a fishing boat," she says, hugging herself and hunching her shoulders.

"Could be dismal," I say, but am enjoying the pleasant coolness down my chest and back. There is no sound, but there will be soon enough. I look from the barely

visible red outline of the Fields' place to a ghostly telephone pole, struggling for bare identity in the heavy mist, where once a road and full green lawns lay.

"I better go, Ralf. That phone'll be ringing soon."

"Yeah, Dawn, it's time to skidaddle, or we'll be caught in the act..."

She smiles and pulls me to her. Short-stop kiss. Caught on the fly. We shuffle and kiss our way to the stairs. Then her long fingers gently pull me down the stairs after her. I watch her taut behind as the descent rhythmically changes its shape. It looks so tantalizing, so alluring. Already I forget what it looks like naked, what it feels like moving in my hands. I want to find out. Again. Right now. Strip the shorts and panties off, then review. Review and review again. My Grade 4 teacher never tired of saying it. Keep at it. Review until it stays with you forever - love to keep Dawn forever.... I can't believe the resiliency of the sex drive, moving once again in a fever after a steady deadening by eighteen years of marriage. Nagged into the impotence of resistance.

The kitchen smells of bread and wine. The baguette is dry and hard - fresh for a day, then stale for eternity. Outside to the birds with it.... There. Bon appetit, my fine-feathered friends.

"Lucky thing we have the fog, eh?" says Dawn as she gingerly pulls the kitchen door wider open, inspecting the whitish yard and straining to see the street. There can't be more than twenty feet of decent visibility.

"Lucky it is...in more ways than one. Dawn, it's been...great, unbelievable," trying to say it the way it feels. Never works.

"Yeah, sure has....," she replies, pushing into me for another kiss. She moves away slowly, letting her hand trail down my arm and into my hand, tugging at my fingers as she pulls away, a restless boat against its mooring rope in a growing breeze.

With a squeeze of my hand, she says, "Bye."

"Bye."

Our hands are still entwined. She cocks her head to the side, her lower lip catching under her upper teeth. Little girl look. It disappears in a smile. We laugh. Her hand and mine start to release simultaneously, then fall apart. Last unspoken words. She turns and runs five or six steps, then slows to a normal walk as the fog begins to swallow her.

Her white sweatshirt is almost invisible as she works the key into the lock at the Fields' place, but her yellow shorts reach across the misty yard. Her head turns toward me. Try as I will, I can't see her eyes. Then she melts away into the black hole in the eerie reddish white shape of a house. The door clicks. The mist is again complete and soundless....

Time for a coffee and toast. Those pale-yellow panties with the little flowers keep dancing in front of my eyes. That soft golden ass, hypnotizing my brain into numbness, except for the lowest functions. Lowest but best, while your capacity for thought is on hold. Men are prisoners of women for life. They hold you still by some invisible umbilical cord.

I hope Dawn and I make love again, though we shouldn't. My wife would go insane. My kids would freak. Still, it seems so natural. It is natural, if you can just stop calculating the long lines of "ifs" and "shouldn'ts".

Only 8:40...I wonder if those guys will make it by nine.... Probably not. More like 9:30 or quarter to ten, now that Dawn is safely out of here. Just in time to take their coffee break. Talking of coffee, I better grab a cup. Toast's ready. A little of my dear wife's jam. Yum. Tried to get her to sell it one time. Wouldn't hear of it. Beneath her intellectual stature. Better to be poor and proud. Always reading magazines about starting a business - never enough time to start one.

Well, here come the crew. Almost ten o'clock, just as I thought. Probably they had coffee down at the Seaside Cafe. Of course, my wife would insist they have another cup before beginning to work. There's a knock. It's Jed.

"Hi, Jed. Glad you could make it."

"Yuh. How're ya, Mr Corde? Sorry we're a bit late but we hadda put a few finishin' touches on the town wharf. Big job, that."

"Well, we can get a good start before noon. You can see where I pulled a few things apart last night."

"You done all that? God, we'll make a workin' man of ya yet!"

"Quick coffee before we start, Jed?"

"Naw, we just had some at the Seaside on the way here. Now, if you was to ask me around lunch time, I might be of a different mind."

"Uh-huh. I'll keep that in mind. Let me grab my gloves." Outside we go.

Jed always refuses coffee - not like his crew - but it pleases him to be asked. The crew is gathering around me. Want to give me the impression I'm the boss so I won't notice they're doing exactly as they please. The indulgences one pays for. Just the same, they may be shamed into some real work if I'm busting my butt. Lead by example. There's my wrecking bar by the house - wondered where it went.

"Guess we better get the old porch hauled away first," says Jed, dubiously watching me smash the wrecking bar into a couple of persistent, half-buried timbers saved last night by oncoming dark and my waning desire. "Okay, boys," continues Jed, "let's look like we mean it! The man's payin' us good money and doin' all the work himself."

Things are flying along. The old post-holes for the porch have been cleaned out and enlarged. The two guys who took the old posts and other scrap to the dump are using a tamping machine after Jed lowers the new posts into the holes. He looks like an elephant lifting a teakwood trunk. Slow but powerful. The results are pretty professional, I have to admit. It's kicking for noon but we'll probably get all the posts into their holes, if not levelled, ballasted and tamped by lunchtime. Christ, I feel like a pharaoh....

"Hi!" The high, honey-edged voice cuts across the grunts and mumbling of the men like a violin across grumbling trombones. Dawn is picking her way around the debris, her white shorts and sandals brandishing sunlight in every direction. Burgundy halter-top. Matching burgundy ribbon, holding her light brown hair in a pony-tail. All work stops. All hearts stop. The ribbon, flitting with each movement of her head from side to side, fights to draw the men's gazes away from her legs and hips.

"Why, little Dawn! What're ya doin' here?" asks Jed warmly.

"Hi, Uncle Jed!"

Dawn had said he was really just a distant cousin, but in Dalton-on-Sea, he is an uncle, by reason of the Illustrious Order of Uncles, so often found in small places. The other men say hello. She knows them all. This does not stop their tiger eyes from ravishing her body. Those shoulders! How did I miss them. Stunningly square and full.

"Dawn, dear, this is Mr Corde and that there's his house. This HERE'll be his porch - I hope!" says Jed with a broad smile and a grunting laugh.

"Yes, I know. We met last night, when he was pulling the old porch down. He's a good worker to have on your crew." She smiles and her eyes rivet on my face. Jed seems a bit jealous. They're all jealous as her smile lingers on me. Hope they don't get any ideas. "I'm baby-sitting full time next door, once the monsters arrive. Just thought I'd come over and say hello."

"Glad you done it, dear, glad you done it. Well, you can watch but we've gotta get movin' before the boss fires us all," says Jed, with another grunt and a smile in my direction.

Like a slow-motion machine the arms of the crew lethargically pick up tools and their bodies numbly turn to the work. Dawn has moved beside me. This is what makes men hate bosses.

"Wow, it's hot with that fog gone," she says, frowning against the sun.

"Like some water? It's right here." I look at her, smiling.

"Sure, Mr Corde. Thanks. " Dawn turns her head sharply toward the water pail, whipping the eyes of the crew with her pony-tail. They love it. Good chance to lust from behind. Can they smell her perfume? I want to touch her, caress her, right here. And she knows it. I kneel beside the pail and ladle up some water. Her face moves toward mine, peering.

"There," I say, handing it to her. She winks, then smiles wildly. She can't keep back a giggle. My answering laughter surprises me. Surprises the crew, too. They look up, curious. I know what's on their mind - "Boss thinks he's sexy. Imagine flirting with a young girl like that. It's just his money." If they only knew. Dream along, guys, and think that I'm just dreaming, too.

Dawn is walking away, saying good-bye to each man by name. They grunt back, with a nod of their head, pretending not to love the attention. She slips across the lawn

and the driveway, then disappears inside, the screen door slamming and signalling her exit.

Now the work starts moving at full throttle. They're really packing stones hard around the posts before the gravel goes in and the tamping starts. The power saw is lobbing off lengths for the porch frame. Hammers pounding everywhere. God, that tamping machine is loud! Probably the muffler is finished. One bam-a-bam like that with wifey dear around and that machine would never see this property again. The posts are perfectly level and the beams are the exact length. Jed really knows what he's doing, even with his careless manner. The house may blow away in a gale but the porch will remain, steadfast and unscathed.

"Okay, boys," growls Jed out of the blue, "time for lunch - an old Spanish custom, ha, ha! Let's not starve to death for Mr Corde here." He pats his solid ample pot reassuringly with both hands, then looks over at me. "Comin' down to the cafe with us for lunch, Mr Corde?"

"Uh...sure...thanks. Be right with you." I'd been hoping to stick around in case Dawn came back during lunch. Then again, this is a social honour. One of the boys. I'll be rated as just half a snob - something human in me somewhere. My wife would never go to the Seaside Cafe - too much of a greasy spoon and too many men to ogle her. I'll bet Dawn has warmed every seat in the place. Probably had Coke and fries there with her first boyfriend.

Say, Jed has the passenger door open and an empty seat for me. The rest of the crew is piling into the back of the pick-up. Off I go.

That lunch was tasty. Have to go there again. The crew is going back to work with hardly a word, as if talking ruined their digestion. That cool breeze off the sea is making the sun tolerable. Things are going quickly. The guys don't seem to be moving much above a snail's pace, but things get done.

Good God, it's four o'clock. Hardly seems possible...but the posts are all firmly installed and tamped and are disappearing under the porch frame. The end supports are going up and two men are anchoring the joists to the house. Sally's going to like the result.

"Yup, she'll look just fine with a few more boards and some shingles. Fit right in with the house," says Jed. He turns his head to the young blond guy cutting the frame for the steps, points at him and says, "Best stair man in the business. May get him to build my steps to heaven." The man glances up for an instant, then lowers his face out of our sight, but around the corners a smile shows. His tanned hand looks resplendent on the new pine plank.

The smell of baking hangs faintly in the air. A window goes up in the Fields' house. Now there is the unmistakable odour of chocolate chip cookies.

"Sumpin' good cookin'," notes Jed, his eyes rolling toward the window.

A few minutes later the screen door at the Fields' bangs and out on the steps stands Dawn, a large plate of still-warm cookies in her hands and a happy grin on her face. She has on a white apron, completely obscuring her shorts. Visions of a French maid coming to serve the master. Still, she's the one with the mastery.

"Here are some fresh cookies, everyone." Dawn heads to Jed and I, offering us first taste while the others drop their work.

"Now ain't that sweet, Dawn darlin'. Just what we needed," says Jed taking a couple of cookies and ramming a whole one into his mouth. I take a cookie as Dawn slips me a proud-to-please-you smile. Jed hands the plate to one of the fellows, then sidles close to Dawn, moving the cookie inside his mouth hastily to one side.

"Seein' Billy tonight?" he asks, repositioning the cookie so he can chew it again.

"Maybe. I don't really know," says Dawn, moving her shoulders uncomfortably. "I haven't heard from him."

"Well," says Jed, swallowing the chewed cookie, "I thought you was the perfect couple. Tastin' this cookin', I'd marry ya myself."

"We're just friends, you know. Besides, he's a wild guy," says Dawn uneasily. That seems to satisfy Jed and the long ears of the crew, who have been making suspiciously little noise. Dawn picks up the empty plate from a saw-horse. She moves toward me on her way back to the house, then throws me a smile as she passes and says a soft "Bye".

"Bye, and thanks for the delicious cookies," I say.

Jed gives me a funny look from the side. "Thanks, darlin'. Come with yer cookin' anytime," he says. Thanks echo all around.

"Bye, guys! See you tomorrow." She scampers across the driveway and the Fields' lawn, the empty plate at her side. Then she is inside, followed by the muffled bang of the screen door.

"Might as well go to six, boys, alright?" asks Jed. Everyone nods or murmurs. "Could get this done by tomorrow noon."

We all work on, not talking. Ten cars go by in three or four minutes. The five o'clock rush. Pieces of porch are fitting together like magic. The entire frame is up by six and most of the cedar shingles nailed on the sides and front. Boy, it looks good. Is Sally going to be happy!

With a grunt Jed picks up an old sheet of plywood and heaves it across the two-by-sixes that will support the porch floor, then coaxes it into position in front of the door. "Drop those steps over here, will ya, boys?" Three of the men bring the steps over, plunking them in front of the plywood, which extends six inches past the edge of the porch border. Jed rocks and heaves the steps single-handedly until they settle solidly into the bare earth and remaining bits of lawn.

"Gives you somethin' to get in and out with. Never know when a fire will start, ha, ha," says Jed with a look of satisfaction. "We'll have 'er proper by this time tomorrow."

So, finishing by noon tomorrow was just a mirage. No doubt intended to comfort my wallet for the short term.... Still, I'd figured a good three days, not two. Not such a bad deal, and not such a bad bunch of guys.

"Back about nine in the mornin'...unless we get caught in a good pool game down at The Seagull. Comin' down for a beer later, Mr Corde? Before the wife gets here?" He gives me a big wink.

"Probably not, but thanks anyway. I've got to clean up around here - you know women....expect all kinds of construction to be done without a speck of dirt."

"Oh, do I! Say no more." He grimaces and shakes his head.

"Look, Jed, maybe tomorrow night after we're all finished we'll hit The Seagull. Beer will be on me."

"Yessir, Mr Corde! Your wallet better be full! Well, see ya in the mornin', bout the same time as today," says Jed, turning and lumbering toward the old pick-up. The crew is already seated in the back, as if they'd been there all afternoon.

"See you guys. Thanks," I say, waving.

"Beer time!" shouts one of them, followed by a hoot from the rest. The worn-out pickup lurches and bounces down the uneven driveway onto the road, while the men in the back weave and bob from one side to the other. Jed makes a bad shift and the gears grind. "Shit!" bellows Jed from inside the cab. The crew guffaws in unison as the pickup wheezes off down the street.

I feel left behind. The yard is empty and quiet. No one to have a beer with. What about Dawn? Why not? Beer and talk. The substance of life...for some of us.

There she is! Goddess in the goldening sunlight. Why can't a wife look like that? Maybe Scilly did - once. I can't really remember. Reality demands forgetting when the polished lacquer has worn off and the exquisite becomes the ordinary. Sanded off by the grit of everyday arguing. Was it her youth and vigour that changed, or my own? Of course, twenty years with Dawn might come to the same thing, although if I were her age I could never believe it....

Those legs. Striding artlessly across the lawn. No need for indoctrination or studies in the methods of how to arouse. Dawn doesn't think about how to be beautiful - that is precisely her beauty. When you spend hours before the mirror and hundreds of dollars on clothes, it is only a contrivance against time and the skin you were born in. More self-concern and less love. Christ, she's brilliant. All a-dazzle with life. Did I really make love to her last night?

The burgundy halter-top is gone. Now a pale-yellow cotton blouse. Slip-off style, with little patterns of holes inviting you to peek through. Shadow of nipples directing the bounce of breasts. Happiness carries her across the lawn. She hasn't seen me by the pile of cut lumber.

"Dawn! Hello!"

"Oh, hi! There you are." Her legs angle nimbly toward me. Her newly enlarged smile shreds my insides. Delicious moment between long waits. And all waits for love are long.

Marry me, Dawn. Love me like this always. Come radiant across lawns summer after summer into my arms. Never become common-place in the mash and grind of everyday living. There she stands, the image of all my desires...the love you find when you cannot have it....

Dawn starts into a slow run, her steps pattering on the loose gravel. Would Dawn keep me at this same high edge if she were my wife? If we had two kids and ten thousand arguments under our belts? If our bodies had grown ordinary to each other? Maybe it always ends that way. Some a bit better than others but no eternal fireworks. Still, I'm enthralled.

Go away, sense. Leave me alone, reality. Believe again that love will lead to more than accepted attachment. Go for it. Death won't mark you on prudence.

"Ralf, darling." Her lips press into mine. Perfume dancing up my nose. Sunlight on emerald in her placid eyes. Warm body shivering into mine. I shudder. Don't listen to the little voice, "When it's over...." Give the moment all you have. It is all you have.

Unexcellable kiss. I caress the back of her legs just below her shorts, then her tight behind. Her lips move to my neck, softly, longingly. We slip apart, looking around. From her deep breathing starts a laugh. I join in.

An elderly couple appear on my lawn around the side of the house. We laugh harder. They are sizing up the new porch.

"Evening," I say loudly, regaining myself. "Nice job, eh?"

"Yup. She'll do," he says, smacking his lips. His wife nods and they start off. They look back briefly, having no idea why Dawn is still rocking with laughter. When their heads turn up the street, Dawn slides her hand down my arm and into my hand. Her laughter trickles into my ear. "Mmmm!" she says, squeezing my hand and landing a kiss on my neck.

"Come over for some scallops, Ralf. They're fresh and really tasty."

"You're kidding. Sounds wonderful. Seafood dinner...but just a hot dog with you would be great."

She's blushing, and a bit startled. Have I gone too far? Eyes dancing in leprechaun green. Smile easing onto her lips. Clear summer night and a light seabreeze. Grass in carnal green on which we make love without touching. Faint wisp of perfume....

"Everything will be ready in ten minutes, Ralf...darling. Oh, you don't have any other plans, do you?" Slight cloud in her voice.

"Gods and goddesses do not have plans!" Her head is thrown back as she laughs. Caught-in-the-cookie-jar laugh.

"Great. Come over as soon as you're ready," says Dawn softly, backing away and turning. One arm jerks out good-bye, like a railway crossing signal. Then an anxious

look over her shoulder, as if ten minutes were ten years. How hard it is not to be greedy for every moment when time with someone is this precious.

"See you in a few minutes, Dawn." I stride into the house, run upstairs, yank my T-shirt off my still sweaty chest, drop my pants and underwear in a single motion, then step into the shower. Afterwards a close shave and my best cologne. Cotton tank-top and loose shorts. I hope Sally is having a good time so she won't call. On the other hand, too good a time means guilt, means phone call. Sorry, Sally, but I have to get back to bed with Dawn....

All set. Here I come, Dawn, ready or not. She must really feel something for me. But we can't let it go too far. She has something solid with her boyfriend. And I have a wife - according to my marriage licence. Dawn and I can't keep sneaking a lay out the back door until we get caught...Oh well, enjoy the scallops. Enjoy Dawn's company tonight. Don't look for the happily-ever-after.

I walk furtively across the lawn, knock once and slip inside the door. Dawn runs from the kitchen. Arms around me like an overjoyed child.

"Now, darling, or after supper?" she whispers in my ear.

"Now AND after!"

She clings to me harder, exhaling deeply.

"Maybe we better eat before it gets cold," she says, stroking my face lightly. "Besides, Uncle Jed or someone else could drop around. They'll know I'm not in bed this early. To sleep, that is."

"Good thinking. Anyway, the scallops will get tough if they stay cooking too long."

We kiss greedily. Then she takes me by both hands, leading me into the dining room. Good God, what a feast! Lobster bisque with homemade rolls. Scallops in wine sauce, with wild rice. Table set for a king. I am a king. Look at the china. Where did she learn all this?

"Some wine, my dear?" she says, holding the bottle between her smile and me.

"I'd love some, sweetness. Thank-you. Did you do all this, Dawn?"

"Yes, with some help from Mrs Field's cookbook and her china cabinet. And a cooking course I took last year."

"It's magnificent."

Face of a little girl looking over her first birthday cake. She leans toward me. Deep stab of lips into mine. She leans back slowly, picks up my wine, then giggling holds the glass to my lips. A long sip of a Spanish red. In her slender tanned hands it outmatches a Rothschild '41.

"Let's dig in, Ralf. Then you can give me a massage - if you still have the energy." Dawn's eyes narrow. She tugs me gently to my place and sits me down. Feather kiss on my cheek. "Bon appetit, cherie."

"And to you, too, beautiful." Now for a taste. "Dawn, this is marvellous. I'm stunned." Rip-tide of emotions. This is being with a woman. Abandon the world, that den of logical assessments.

Dawn has just put a match to two candles and the light dances in her eyes, while the tablecloth and walls faintly glint red from the setting sun. We eat with barely a word. How few people you can be silent with.

With a little smile to each other, we postpone dessert in deference to our carnal appetites. Will this be the last supper of our short love? Don't see it that way. Don't think away from this moment.

"Upstairs, Dawn?"

"Ralf, why don't we go to your attic? It's such a neat bed."

"Sure. Let's go."

In the near full dark we scamper to my back door, then slip upstairs to the tiny attic. In the bare light from the skylight, we study each other's eyes. Then our embraces begin and the night's moments become the facets on an exquisite jewel.

A Hollywood muffler blats from a sidestreet. Two in the morning. Dawn's eyes pop open, then almost return to sleep. Her languorous mouth tries to form words. The muffler hits a crescendo just outside the house. Then the shift of gears and the inevitable chirp of tires. What did these young heroes of their own mind do when they had horses?

"Him...it's him...Jack...looking for me." Dawn's words struggle with sleep. "That poor baby. I'll have to go."

Something in those words causes a twinge of jealousy. I want to stay sole king in those arms, but she has some sort of love for him. Maybe it's the righter love, one that meshes better with her world.

"Dawn...."

She kisses me, again and again. Soothes my fear, which she feels. It has to end. One last kiss. But everyone comes to a last kiss. Dawn slowly slides out of bed and dresses unsteadily.

"I've got to go, Ralf. He'll be back looking for me. Sorry."

"It's okay. I guess you're his girl."

"Maybe." A slight smile appears as she looks away.

I stand up beside Dawn. She hugs me with uncanny strength. Then I lead her down the dark stairs and to the back door. She checks from behind the screen door, kisses me quickly, then is gone. No noise as her door closes. Might as well go back to the same bed - it's still warm.

There. Now for some sleep. RRRRMMMMM! That asshole hot-rodder. Here he comes. Is that Jack? Probably. Horrendous screeching of tires. Must be sliding around the corner at Maple. Good. Hope he loses it...No such luck. Christ, he's coming into the Fields' yard, moving stealthily like a cat, but the engine throbbing. He gurns it. Blat-a-

blat! Drum roll to announce himself. Engine shuts off with a belch. Car door slams.

Should I look? Why not.

Jack is banging the Fields' door, as he tries to stop from weaving. The outside light's on now. Here's Dawn. What is he saying?

He's shouting "Now!", and other words I can't understand. They're arguing. "Jack, no-oi!" screams Dawn. More negotiations. He's holding her hand. She doesn't seem to mind.

She's gone back into the house but Jack is still lingering, not too steadily. She's back, wearing a sweater. She's going with him. They get in the car and both doors slam. The car starts, then eases down onto the pavement. It takes off with just a chirp of the tires. What a gentleman. The six blue lights in the back window fade slowly down the street. At the second corner, the car swerves left. The engine roars and the tires shriek, filling the still night. A lone tail-light wiggles in the distance, then disappears up the lane. What is Dawn thinking?

Six-thirty. Thrub-a-dub of a car engine in the Fields' yard. They're back. A car door closes. There's Dawn's voice, silky through the morning fog. Good night, darling. Sleep tight.

Damn! Ten-thirty. The noise of the crew didn't even wake me. Better get down there and see what's going on. They'll have a good laugh. At least I'll be rested for Sally when she gets here.

Maybe we'll go out for lobster. Always works like an aphrodisiac with her.

Looks like another magnificent sunset tonight. It's just after six. The porch is all done, glistening in fresh white, and the crew is gone. They were almost as pleased as I was at the result. Should have gotten someone to do it years ago, although I won't tell Sally that. Dawn dropped over to take a look - we just said a few words. She looked tired but relaxed, and now her wards are here to keep her busy. There was one slightly hurt smile as she said good-bye.

Hey, there's the Ford wagon with Sally alone in it. Where are the kids? Steve's waving and smiling. Good sign. Staring at the porch as she comes into the driveway. She's really pleased.

"Ralf," she says out the car window, "that porch is wonderful. What a great job you did."

"Well, I had a little help - from eight men. But it is the ticket. What happened to the kids?"

"They're with Aunt Margaret. She's taking them on a whale-watching cruise in the morning, then will drive them here. Isn't that nice?" says Sally, sliding out of the car and pulling a bag of groceries after her.

"Fine. Looks like we're all alone. Are you in the mood for lobster?"

"Sure. I'd love some lobster. Maybe with a little wine and some candle-light, too."

"It's a date, then, dear."

"O-oh, I'm so excited. What a nice way to start the summer vacation," she says, craning over the groceries in her arms to kiss my cheek. There is something in that kiss.

Is Dawn watching?

"I hope there are more where that came from."

"Just treat me right, Ralf, and you'll see. Can I walk on the new porch?"

"Better not. The paint is still sticky. The second coat goes on tomorrow for the final touch. Then we can buy a couple of rocking chairs and sit there every night. Of course, that'll make us rocker-fellas, eh?"

Sally mixes a groan and a laugh, heading to the back door. I pull out her suitcases and follow her into the kitchen. Already she has the fridge door open, surveying the contents like a trained hawk.

"Oh," she murmurs, "a German Riesling! Nice."

"Would you like some right now?" I run my hand slowly across her shoulders.

"Umm, feels nice, Ralf. A glass of wine would be great."

I slip the bottle out of the fridge and uncork it. Sally has brought two wine glasses from the china cabinet. The wine cascades invitingly into the crystal. We clink glasses.

"Here's looking at you - and wanting to kiss you." I raise my glass. Oh Christ, those wine glasses Dawn and I used are still in the attic beside the bed! How'll I get them...?

"You haven't said that to me in a long time. What's up?" says Sally, sipping a little wine and looking at me over the top of the glass.

"Just glad to see you."

"That's nice, Ralf." She sidles up to me. We kiss. Funny how it sometimes seems strange kissing your own wife.... I've got to get those glasses before Sally notices.

"Ralf, dear, do you want to take a walk upstairs?" Sally presses hard against me.

"You mean, me first and lobster later?"

"Sounds like the perfect menu to me." She smiles.

We walk upstairs in a leisurely way but undress quickly.

She's hot. So am I. What's this bit about absence and the heart? It's all between the legs. This is going to be good. Even if Sally is a bit flabby, she can throw it around when she wants. She isn't giving my body any special looks of lust, though. Tired old wheezy vacuum of a husband. But it still cleans the floor.

Once in bed our bodies follow their long-established patterns of caresses. Nothing creative. Just apple pie with vanilla ice cream. Still, it's a dessert steeped with tradition. Sally has a lingering air of suspicion - as if there was never anything suspect in her behaviour - but it melts as our sexual foray begins in earnest.

It's all over in twenty minutes. Both satisfied. Both back to business as usual, as if sex was something to be done and gotten out of the way. No lingering like with Dawn. It always seems there isn't enough time to just lie there with Sally, but there was plenty last night in Dawn's arms.

"Back in a minute." I hop out of bed almost too quickly and head for the bathroom, forcing a piss out as quickly as possible. Now for the attic. Up the stairs in a flash. Wine glasses into a hatbox filled with worn-out towels. Good. Saved. Just don't forget to take them out later.

"What're you doing up there? Scared of a young lady beside you in bed?"

Dream on, dear...God, she's coming up!

"The bed's not made, Ralf. Have you been keeping guests here?"

Thank God she's not serious. How did she get up here so fast? Has to know everything.

"Not quite. I slept up here the other night. Nice cool breeze from the sea into a warm room. I came up now to check that the windows aren't open too wide. They say rain for tonight."

"Hmm, looks comfy up here. Funny how you can forget about a room in your own house. Want me to make the bed? I'll get some clean sheets." Sally starts toward the stairs, then turns. "Maybe we should have used that bed for ours. It was your grandparents', wasn't it? We have to do something with it - it's just being wasted here."

"Yeah, you're right. I'd almost forgotten about it. It just needs some refinishing. Probably fetch a good price."

"But Ralf, it's better to give away something from the family than sell it. That way your family lives on somewhere else."

"I suppose you're right, Sally."

"Back in a minute."

"Why don't you just toss the sheets upstairs? I'll do the bed while you're taking a bath."

"I don't mind...but whatever you say, darling. It will mean getting to our lobster sooner."

"Right on. I'll grab a fast shower after you're finished."

"Okay, Ralf," comes from the bottom of the stairs.

Schlump! The sheets land on the second step from the top. No home run here. Now get those dirty sheets off fast. Check for stains. Sure enough. No monk slept here last night. Still smell Dawn in the sheets a bit. Would Sally have noticed? Anyway, they're off to the basement and into the wash. Suddenly, doing laundry seems appealing.

Bath water running hard downstairs. There's the click. Sally still locks the door after eighteen years. Scared I'll see her pussy? Now for the wine glasses. Just the chance I need. No clinking, now! I'll wash them in the basement, then zap them into the kitchen cupboard and that will be that. The perfect crime....

It's 2 a.m. The lobster was superb, not to mention the wine, the cheesecake and the Spanish coffee. Now they're all talking back to me, discussing which one will leave my stomach first. Sally's as dead as the sphinx...there's Jack's car coming down the street, moving slowly, victoriously. Just enough noise to let you know it's him. No more sex drive in overdrive. Raw pulsing cock subdued by Dawn. The beastie within is calmed.... Car into the Fields' driveway. Thrubba-thrubba. Long kiss good-night. A kiss from me too, Dawn, my love. The car door closes. The car eases out of the driveway, the headlights penetrating our window and licking faintly across the ceiling. Car moves away, throbbing. One block. Two blocks. Screech! Demon loosed again upon the world. Slash through the sleep of the townspeople. Spurn your lady love, now that you've enjoyed her. Off to find the boys and have some more beer. Then race into the night. Wheel of life.

It's just past noon. Sally and I at lunch in the kitchen. The second coat is going well. She's leaving the poor bastards alone. Amazing what a little timely sex will do. I painted the lattice work myself while she slept and read. The porch will be fully dry by tomorrow. Then we retire in porchly grace.

It's Dawn...coming this way, her movements blurred through the kitchen curtains. Peek through the slit. Halter-top, with lacey vest, both in baby blue. White short-shorts

and sandals again. My wife's looking at her now. Curious and jealous, automatically. Dawn's on the back veranda, knocking.

"Hello," says Sally, her voice pulled inside the limits of politeness.

"Hi! You must be Mrs Corde. Is Ralf here? I'm Dawn, the baby-sitter next door."

"Oh, come in. Ralf, you've got a visitor."

"Hi, Dawn. This is my wife, Sally. Would you like some tea?"

"Hi, again!" Winning smile, almost enough to make Sally smile. "I'd love some tea, thanks."

Dawn moves further into the kitchen but doesn't sit down. Good move. Not too familiar at first.

"Have a seat, Dawn," says my wife more cordially, her eyes checking the trim body, the fresh untinted hair and finally the clear face, fully coloured without make-up. Sally does look rather old and washed out alongside Dawn, but she still has something special, even if she works against her own charm at times.

"Milk, Dawn?" I look at her and smile, training back a huge grin.

"Yes, please. Can't stand black tea. Say, what are you doing inside? It's another beautiful day. You missed a great morning at the beach, Mrs Corde," says Dawn, stirring the milk into her tea.

"It seems so...and apparently that's not ALL I missed!" says Sally, her mouth pinching. Dawn can hardly finish her mouthful of tea. Her eyes bug out as she swallows.

"Yes," continues my wife triumphantly and with a released smile, "I missed all the banging and hammering, and of course, the foul mouths of the local workmen. What a shame!"

"You're right," says Dawn, laughing. "You get to enjoy the porch without living in the mess first. Your poor husband was out there working with them like a slave. I came over to see my Uncle Jed - his crew built the porch. That's when I met Ralf. I came over to meet you, too - it's good to know your neighbours."

"So that's how you met Ralf. I never know about him when there's a pretty young lady around."

The two of them laugh. Dawn takes the compliment effortlessly. No qualifying apology. No skittish embarrassment. Men have such a tough time with compliments. They can laugh off little insults and jibes but lose all confidence when a compliment hits them. Sally and Dawn are nattering along like old friends. I feel left out. How did that happen?

"Another cup, Dawn?" asks my wife, lifting the teapot.

"Thanks, Mrs Corde," says Dawn, extending the cup across the table.

"Please call me Sally. This isn't a formal tea!"

More tittering

"Well, ladies, I'm off to do some painting. They're a little slow with that second coat."

"Yes, Ralf, do go out there and get a slice of the dignity of human labour," says Sally, shooping me away with her hand. Dawn enjoys it all with a helpless smile. "We two will have a little lady-talk, then may come out to watch you sweat. Right, Dawn?"

"Right...Sally."

I shake my head in mock disgust, showing none of my real surprise. Funny how they get along so well. That sure would change if Sally knew the truth, or even suspected it.... Should be able to finish the painting in two hours. Then I can send the men home. Of course, Jed will be humming and hawing about coming tomorrow for "touch-ups" - the last chance to grab a few more dollars. He is fun to have around, though.

The painting's all done. The guys are about to leave and the paint brushes are all soaking in varsol. Just two-thirty. Not so bad. Time to check on the girls. They're just at the door.

"Hi, girls. I'm all done."

The two of them smile, then laugh. Ghoulish red on Sally's teeth. Dawn's, too. They've been into the wine. Acting like school girls at their first dance.

"Well, how is our overworked Ralfie? You look so tired and we're so fresh!" Sally does a little dance step, almost careening into the stove. The two of them start howling.

Calming down, Dawn moves to the door. "Thanks, Sally...and Ralf. It's been fun. Time to do little work...but just a little."

More laughter.

"It's been very nice, Dawn. I better fix a sandwich for my weary worker. Say, Dawn, why don't you come back for dinner? We have lots of scraps...I mean, leftovers!"

They're at it again. I should have had some of that wine.

"I...I can't, Sally...my boyfriend is picking me up at six o'clock and I have to make soup for the family."

"Your boyfriend, eh?" Sally smiles. No single girls within twenty-five miles of her husband will do just fine, thank-you very much. "I've got a great idea. Why don't you bring your boyfriend over on Saturday for a barbecue. I'd like to meet the lucky young man. Okay with you, Ralf?"

"Sure. We can make it an occasion and officially open our new porch."

"Thanks a lot. I'll ask him tonight. Food is usually a winner with him. See you later. Thanks again for the tea...especially that last kind!"

We all laugh. Dawn pushes out the screen door, glancing toward the porch as she moves toward the driveway. Her head turns back toward us. "Bye, Sally. Bye, Ralf." Sally has already turned back into the kitchen. Dawn smiles hard, then winks before her head snaps around.

"Bye, Dawn." I try to say it as flatly as possible. Back into the kitchen.

"Ralf, that was a cheeky little smile she gave you on the way out. I think she has a soft spot for you. To which you have no intention of responding, of course."

"Who, me? The girl's young enough to be my daughter!" The truth, for what it's worth.

"Just remember - I'm your one and only queen."

"Yes, your majesty."

"Shall we take a nap before dinner, Ralf?"

"My queen, your slightest wish is my command." I bow deeply.

"Off to the royal bedroom, or off with your head, peasant!"

We kiss our way upstairs, squeezing up the narrow steps. Why don't these sexual riptides come in more often? I'm a seastorm man at heart.

It's October 16th, just three months to the day since I met Dawn. Sally and I haven't been to the cottage for a month, though we still need to close it up for winter. Autumn and city life have pushed summer by the sea into a dream cocoon. It's always over too fast and too slow coming again.

Lots of mail today. Anything interesting? Hey, something from Dawn. Can't miss that handwriting, after the thank-you note for the barbecue - small, fine, immaculate hand.

"Sally! It's a letter from Dawn."

"Oh, let me see. Looks like something official.... Ralf! It's a wedding invitation! Dawn and Jack are getting married! Please, Ralf, let's go."

"Sure. It'll give us a chance to shut up the cottage. Still, I'm surprised. They seemed to fight a lot - like us." Somehow I'm disappointed, as if she was my girl marrying out from under me.

"So what, Ralf? Can't let a few fights stop true love. Besides, there may be another reason for marrying. You know...." Sally extends her hands in front of her belly in a big circle.

"How stupid can I get. That's probably it." I glance at the newspaper to hide the sudden panic inside. Could it be mine? Wouldn't Dawn have told me? Then again, she may not know. Christ, I figured she was on the pill.

"Ralf, are you listening to me? Or are you just interested in your paper? The wedding's on the Thanksgiving weekend. We can make it a second honeymoon...while they're having their first!" Sally's hands wave as she plans the whole event in the air. "Ralf, I have a great idea! Let's give them the old bed in the attic. Then you won't be selling it, and they'll make good use of it."

"Yeah, I suppose. But it isn't in the best of shape and that old mattress is no good for a gift." I wonder just how happy Dawn would be to see that bed on her wedding day.

"Of course, we won't give them the mattress! We'll have just enough time to strip and oil the frame. I know they'll be pleased. Maybe a few flowers to go along with it."

Sally is so excited you'd think it was her own daughter's wedding. Maybe this is a practice run.

"Wait a minute. YOU will have enough time to re-finish the bed. I'm not spending every night for three weeks just to get it ready to give away, lovely as Dawn is. But it would make a great gift...."

"Oh, come on, Ralf. You can give me a hand. We're going to the cottage this weekend to pick up a few things, so we can bring the bed frame back here. I can get most of the stripping done at the cottage. You can get rid of the mattress and help me move the bed. That's not too much to ask, is it? And look, this will be a big start on turning the attic into a little library-studio."

"Okay, Sally, I'm convinced. But I can already feel that sandpaper in my hand."

"Thanks, dear. I knew you'd like the idea." She moves up to me to give me a hug and a kiss. "Besides, it's OUR gift."

A woman always thinks no wedding is complete without her own touch. It's her way of helping to capture the groom. Put the poor beast out of his misery as quickly as possible. Maybe he could resist one woman, but not a scheming flock. Then the whole group breaks down in tears, not that they're sorry for what they've done.

Dawn getting married...I can't believe it. She's just a kid. I'm jealous, though. I wish I were the one going with her down that road, so lovely from a distance. Another taste of those first months. The first delicious mouthfuls. Trembling kisses and the conviction that nothing can change.

Lovely. October 23rd and we've got rain mixed with snow! Hope the all-seasons hold the road..... Sally's arranging blankets in the station wagon so we can protect the bed frame - it IS beautiful. Fine grain maple, soaked with warm oil, then buffed to a satin finish with steel wool. Smooth as a baby's bottom. Dawn's bottom. I wish I could hold it again between the same bedposts. I wonder if she ever thinks of me....

Will Dawn take the gift the right way? Her marriage in our love-bed. Seems odd, but then again, it's nothing that hasn't happened before, in one form or another. The realities of life work their way through the sieve of ritual, as long as the ritual remains undisturbed.

"Please drive carefully, Ralf. We don't want to dent or scratch that bed, after all our hard work." My wife settles into her seat.

"No problem, just as long as we don't slide off the road in this crap. Maybe we should have packed the skis. We unloading the bed tonight?"

"Well, I phoned Dawn's mother. The reception is in the church hall. All the gifts are going to be there, so we can take the bed there and set it up. Dawn's mother arranged it with the caretaker. Isn't that neat? It'll be such a surprise...I didn't even tell Dawn's mother exactly what it was."

"It'll be a REAL surprise for the guests if Dawn and Jack consummate the marriage on the spot!"

"Naughty boy. You just have eyes for the bride. I caught a few looks between you two."

"She just reminded me of you when you were young - and wide-eyed with the novelty of sex."

"Ralf, do you really think so? Was I starry-eyed like Dawn? Of course, she hasn't got a shred of sophistication. Small-town to the bone."

"Maybe, but that's part of her attractiveness. She doesn't need college degrees and cultural savvy to magnify herself." Oops. Said too much.

"Oh, I see. I'm not beautiful, just educated. I'd be nothing without a degree," blurts out Sally, her voice somewhere between anger and tears. She can't stand the slightest compliment to another woman.

"No, that's not it at all. Like you said yourself, Dawn has a simple, direct sort of charm. You have many more facets and ideas that keep life interesting. A relationship can't run on sex forever. I'm still finding things out about you...like the way you organized refinishing the bed. And you still are damned cute."

"Oh, I...I didn't think you felt that way. That's sweet. Thank-you, darling." Sally caresses my shoulder. "What am I doing getting upset over some little country girl with a pretty smile?"

"That's more like it."

Sally settles back in her seat for a snooze while the car noses through the falling wet snow. The tires are holding well.

Saturday afternoon. Ten past three. The old organ finally starts blaring the wedding march. Jack takes a quick, guilty look back from the front of the church. Here come Dawn and her father. Will there be tears on her face? Dawn is passing my row of pews. She looks ahead but sees nothing. Face radiant and flushed. Eyes flashing extravagantly. Her day is already a triumph.

It didn't last ten minutes. Jack and Dawn are outside having their pictures taken with their families. The rest of the people are milling out of the church, heading for the reception in the hall next door. The day turned out sunny and warm, the trees a melody of colours. Chattering and laughter all around as we move in a clumpy mass along the sidewalk. Sally is teary and holding my arm. Won't be long till it's our daughter. Then the tears will flow.... I'm famished. Hope the food is good.... Hey, there's Jed. Looks like a clown with that suit on. Probably feels that way, too.

All the guests are in the church hall now.... What's going on? There's a bunch of women in a half-circle just beside the presents. Is it a choir? And where the hell is the bed? I hope somebody didn't screw up. Here come Dawn and Jack and their families. Jack is being led by his new mother-in-law. Get used to it, son. Still, Mrs Bradford was more than pleasant to us while arranging to bring the bed, wherever it is, and she did produce Dawn. She's beckoning to Sally and me. Wants us over there by the group of women. We walk over, a bit curious. Now I get it.

"Dawn and Jack," says Mrs Bradford, after clearing her throat and holding up her hands to stop the loud murmuring of the guests, "we have a special gift here that couldn't

be wrapped up. It's from Mr and Mrs Corde, who were very fond of Dawn when she was their neighbour last summer."

Curiosity and expectancy cover Dawn and Jack's faces. They look at each other, smiling. A mixture of murmurs and chuckles starts up in the crowd. Sally and I move beside Dawn and Jack. None of us knows what to say. Mrs Bradford nods at the semi-circle of ladies and they peel apart, half to the left and half to the right, with chorus line precision. All eyes are riveted on the bed. The perfect solution. Human wrapping.

Jack and Dawn move hesitatingly to the bed. Jack is impressed. He rubs the fine wood and checks the joints. Probably imagining what he'll be doing on it soon enough. Oh-oh. Dawn recognizes the bed. She just looked over at me. She's stunned. People are waiting for her reaction. Come on, Dawn, do something. It's not an insult.

Her hands move slowly to cover her face. The tears start. Then they abate and out comes a smile. I'm just two step from her.

"Oh, Ralf," she says with a half-sob, "it's beautiful! It's a treasure." She puts her arms around me and kisses me briefly on the lips. Then she darts to Sally. They exchange kisses. Jack comes over and shakes my hand, quick-nodding his head.

"Thanks, Mr Corde. Mighty fine gift." Then Jack moves to my wife and gets stuck. He can't bring himself to kiss her, and shaking her hand doesn't seem right. Sally lightly grasps his hand and kisses him on the cheek. Jack looks relieved as he says thanks.

"Ralf! Sally! How did you think of such a special gift? It...it's...so much," says Dawn, looking back and forth at Sally and me.

"It was Sally's idea," I say.

"Yes, but he did a lot of the work...more than he thought he would!" Sally looks at Dawn and they have their little laugh.

People come up, introduce themselves, shake my hand and compliment the gift, not minding that their plastic cutting boards and Woolworth's place mats are outshone. No sour faces in this crowd.

The gifts have long been opened and admired. The excellent seafood dinner is over. Coffee is just about finished and men are returning to drinking, their table-side bottles peeking out of brown bags. The minister pretends not to notice. Already the band has played a couple of songs. People are moving onto the floor to dance, waiting for the bride and groom to begin. Here they come.

Dawn and Jack are starting a Paul Jones. Hope she gets to me before they stop exchanging partners. With my luck, I'll get stuck with some plump, chuckly country lady, smelling of Lilac Garden perfume and sweaty armpits.

Half the floor is up now. At last, here comes Dawn. Bee-line for me like a guided missile. Radiant and exquisite, the high voltage of life passing through her. My body is tingling and tears are not far away. I want to run to her. Did I miss my chance for real love, the kind that shines incandescent above the rest of life? It was never this feeling with Sally, as far as I can remember. But memory is tricky.

"A dance for me, Dawn?"

"Always a dance for you," she says, her breath trailing out behind the words.

We float onto the floor. Dawn is so perfect in my arms I can't believe she isn't mine. You got the wrong guy, Dawn. My body is rising in furious desire. Her perfume tortures me and the jiggle of her breasts in her low-cut dress leaves me breathless. Her smile and her warmth pierce me. When does all this stop?

Her eyes dance with mine as we whirl about the floor. A tear works its way down one of her eyelashes. She blinks and smiles it away, then pulls me close, her cheek against mine.

"Ralf, it was wonderful with you. You'll always be with me."

"You're...you're not pregnant, are you?"

"No. Not yet, anyway. Oh, I suppose that was worrying you."

"A little bit. It's better that you're not."

"No problem there. Jack and I wanted to get married. Still, it was very special with you. You helped me somehow. Kiss me, Ralf."

We are in a dark corner of the hall. The crowd is either gone, dead tired or dancing off a lot of liquor. Our lips touch, linger a moment. Then we twirl. Back in dancing mode. Her smile caresses me. I feel weak before her joy. I want to say "I love you" but the words won't move in my mouth. Somehow they aren't the right words. I feel like I'm going to split in two. The hall twirls one way, my head the other. The music is slowing to a stop. We slow with it. My hand tightens in hers.

"Dawn..." That's all I can get out. She nods slowly a couple of times. Our hands fall apart. She drops a whispered "Bye", then scampers to another partner. Where's my wife? I need to be nagged back to normal. Love is very exhausting, especially when there is no reality to kick its butt.

"There you are! I thought you'd eloped with the bride! Then I would have been left with Jack for the night," says Sally, coming up behind me. She is happy and relaxed. Just the right portions of wine and social contact.

Come on, Sally. Take me home and give me some loving. Help me forget what I cannot have.... She's nibbling at my neck as we dance the final number. There's something about her dancing I always liked. Rhythm and warmth.

Now the reception line on the way out - for those too slow or too drunk to leave earlier. Nice to meet you, nice to meet you, nice to meet you. Never to be seen again.

Just Dawn and Jack left to say good-bye to, and we're out the door. They look pretty ragged at this point. I wonder what kind of night they'll spend alone.

"Jack," I say, pumping his hand, "you have a fine wife. Take care of her and she'll last a long time, like a good car." We both laugh. Still, he's not too sure about me.

"Thanks, Mr Corde. And thanks again for the bed. Come and see us next summer."

"Will do, Jack." He turns to Sally. I move in front of Dawn.

"Dawn, it was a wonderful wedding...for a wonderful bride. Thanks for inviting us."

I reach to shake her hand.

"Thanks for making it wonderful, Ralf," she says, followed by a faint smile. Then her lips are on mine. Total surprise. Quick tight kiss. Now the all-is-right smile. It is all right. Warmth swirls within me. Sally and Jack didn't even catch the kiss. She's talking his ear off and he's trying to listen.

I move to the door while Sally and Dawn say good-bye, like two sisters whose secrets no one else knows. Sally moves up beside me and slips her arm through mine. We share a happy glance, then slip through the door into blackness.

"Oh Sally! Ralf!" It's Dawn in the doorway. "Don't forget to come and visit us."

"Oh, thanks, dear. We will. Won't we, Ralf? You're such a sweet couple - remind me of my own marriage. Come and see us, too...." I tug Sally by the arm. She doesn't know when to stop. Dawn is already talking to someone else.

"Ralf, you crazy man, I'm coming."

"Finished your speech, dear?" I say, putting my arm around her.

"Yup." Sally throws her arms around me and kisses me, slipping her tongue between my teeth.

"Easy, Sally. We can't do it on the church lawn."

"Let's hurry home so we can snuggle and get warm, Ralf."

"Sure."

Sally lurches forward and we navigate homeward. Sea air cleanses all. As we reach our street, the tide is rolling in. It rolls right through marriages, deaths and births. More constant than any love. More constant than any life.

Something is happening with Sally and me. We've gotten around a corner. Time to have some more great moments together. Like the ones we've had. The ones that are so easy to forget about in the sludge of years.

"Honey, we nearly there?" Face and voice of a tired child.

"Yes, love, we're nearly there. Almost home."