NAEEM MURR

Benjamin

What a dreary morning, the light stagnant beneath a gray vault of clouds. The wind chimes remain silent. The deck creaks desolately under my father's rocking chair.

I set his breakfast on the wicker table beside him.

"So," I say, "what's new in the news? Don't tell me. The Nazis have sent their panzers into Poland. Not yet? Spain's been liberated by Ferdinand and his lovely lady wife. Am I warmer? Rome, then: have the Teutonic hoards gotten round to sacking it?"

I fancy he bristles, but more likely it was just a *frisson*, as if I were the unseen presence of a ghost. His muscular arms seem unnaturally tense as he prizes the brittle, yellowed pages of his newspaper open. The expression on his weathered face—either a grimace or a smile—is, as always, emergent, like that of a boasted carving for a church, a carving that may yet be a gargoyle or a saint. Folding the paper with absorbed, excessive care, he slots it between his thigh and the arm of the rocking chair before settling the tray upon his knees and cautiously examining the food. Sitting on the deck steps, I cradle my coffee and watch him, his right profile, those faded tattoos: *love* on his knuckles, my mother's name *Jean* on his wrist, and a naked woman on his biceps. A vulnerable profile, especially as he eats, that vulnerability intensifying what I feel, evoking in me the vague hope that he might choke.

I look out at the jaded, early-winter field of gorse, goldenrod, and ailanthus that ends at the billboards and Erie Boulevard, listen to him as a light rain scatters about us, the chime and scrape of his fork, the mug lifted to his blind lips, and replaced. Then he puts the tray aside and the foxed pages of that old newspaper start to turn again like a water wheel in the slow and steady stream of his incomprehension. He refills his pipe, plays the flaring match across the bowl, and gently, blindly kisses the stem to release the sweet, heavy smoke. I can watch that smoke for hours as it eddies from his oblivious mouth. The wind stirs; the wind chimes glimmer with sound.

I should leave for work, but without another cup of coffee I'll never keep my eyes open until break. The screen door screeches and bangs as I enter the damp-smelling room that is the sitting room, the kitchen, and my bedroom combined, a habitable core I have salvaged from this vast, decrepit house, in which I exist like a living foetus in a dead mother. I pour some coffee

and sit in my armchair before the morbidly hissing gas fire, my limbs still heavy with sleep, pick up *Red Cavalry* and try to read; but as with every other book in the past few months, I find I'm unable to do more than glide with the cadence of the words, passively afloat in the wake of their meaning.

My father shambles in with his tray, his immaculate little feet outturned and hardly losing contact with the floor. He sets the tray by the sink, goes to his kneehole desk, sits and runs his fingers absently through his haze of gray hair. Glancing askance, he pretends to unlock the top right-hand drawer, the only one still left, with a bicycle key. He pulls out a pen and a dogeared, red notebook and writes intently, his eyebrows sporadically flexing above his vacant eyes, his left arm curled defensively about his work. After a few minutes he jabs the pen with mute triumph into the paper, reviews what he's written, returns the notebook and pen to the drawer, and again makes a show of turning the key in the keyhole.

I've gotten as far as opening the drawer and holding a bundle of the notebooks in my hands. It's not my conscience that stops me, but the fear that they'll bring him to life.

I smell his smoky staleness as he walks behind me, soundlessly up the stairs to his room. The oak rail of the staircase, like the hickory arms of his rocking chair, have been worn smooth and glossy by his hand, this house carved by his habit of life. The thick base baluster has a large acorn finial, the fruit carved from the dead wood. Many of the other turned balusters are broken, some missing completely, but he couldn't miss a step. Even if the house dissolved into dust beneath him, he could still climb these stairs.

Late again. The screen door screeches and bangs; my shoes clatter across the deck, down the four wooden steps, sink into the muddy path that leads through the weeds. I can't believe in a sun behind those dismal clouds. Birdsong drizzles from the branches of the white oak at the end of the path. Almost running, I pass the billboards, continue rapidly along the sidewalk beside Erie Boulevard, the strip, webbed in telephone and power lines. The cars, grouped into small herds by the traffic signals, hiss by. Breathing hard, I walk the same route I've walked almost every day for the past eleven years, since I was seventeen: Clark's concrete plant, that huge white sow from which the Macks suckle before shaking their hard flanks across the pitted roads; Iroquois Used Cars, that sad collection on the gravel lot, the gold bunting, the salesmen in the trailer at their desks, sucking mints beneath the pouting breasts of their calendars; and, just before I turn on Westcott, Kassell Used Auto Parts, the stacked bodies of slaughtered cars, the wire fence hung with hubcaps, like gruesome trophies, over the bindweed and rust. My shoes clank on the iron bridge over the railway track, and below me slides a lethargic convoy of Conrail freight that seems to be transporting emptiness from one end of the country to the other. Finally, I turn left on Victoria Street and into the side

door of the squat, red brick building where I work: the Onondaga County Branch Library.

"TUT TUT, BENJAMIN," says Mr. Stern, the head librarian, glancing up at the clock above the check-out desk. Always a shock of color against the cream and dun backdrop of the library, today he's wearing a sweater with huge yellow sunflowers on the front and back. I apologize, but he's not listening.

"I knitted this myself. What do you think?"

"You're a chameleon's nightmare," I say.

"Damn right; but you're a chameleon's wet dream, so I feel justified."

He pinches his lips into a tight smile, his smooth, rotund face remaining otherwise unperturbed, and then, seeing Mrs. Martin emerge from the back room, walks toward her, his body animate only from the waist down. He balances his upper body as African women balance baskets on their heads.

Mrs. Martin (which she pronounces in the French way: "Mar-tan") is swanning about the tables, her long white neck and narrow head a pedestal for the immaculate blond hair that drapes to her tiny waist and exists purely to attest to her former beauty. The last time she came in drunk and singing Wagner, she showed me her ivory locket. It had a small mirror on the inside of the lid, and in the body, a photograph of herself when she was young, the past maintaining its reputation as that time when all the old were beautiful. Ignoring my admiration, she squeezed my arm and stared directly at me, wine undermining the severity of her gaunt face, her eyes full of passive and astonished inquiry. She panted her warm, heady breath into my face and whispered that this place was a rock pool after a storm, that I should scuttle away before the sea receded too far. "Join the railroad," she said, "see the world."

Mr. Stern deals with these rare occasions very well, gently negotiating with her to allow him to drive her home, never mentioning it the next day when she comes in, her face grimly set, her actions quick and furious; and at some point during the day she brusquely engages each one of us on some business matter, as if trying to usurp what we saw with an image of absolute sobriety.

I go to the back room. Roger is sitting at the desk sticking issue forms onto the inside cover of some new books. I hang up my coat. He looks up at me, his corpulent, red face supporting a smile that he imposes on himself like a penance.

"Benny-boy, Benny-boy . . . ." He shakes his head and sighs. He makes me so sad. The enormous weight of his life is balanced so precariously inside him.

"How's your wife?" I say.

"Chattering like a little sparrow this morning."

"That's good."

"Well, I try the best I can—one bright buoy on the gray and stormy sea of life."

Roger couldn't exist apart from tragedy: his congestive heart failure, his son's recent arrest for assault, the slow spasm of multiple sclerosis in his wife. He pulls a new bottle of Lasix from his pocket and struggles with the child-proof lid before spraying the pills all over the desk.

"They're alive," he shouts, quickly rolling a magazine and swatting the blue pills.

Mr. Stern walks in and glares at Roger.

"Have you gone mad, Mr. Summers? Are you liberating pills from bottles? Is the day ripe for pill emancipation?"

Mrs. Martin floats in after him, the ghost of a ballerina who never danced a lead, that silk train of hair depending from behind her severe, bony face with an existence and integrity of its own. She looks at Roger with an expression of reticent sympathy, her eyes vaguely fearful. Roger's inability to maintain a stable facade seems to affect her most of all. I walk over and help Roger retrieve the pills.

"Benjamin, you can let Mr. Summers extricate himself from his own morass. Plenty of things for you to do," says Mr. Stern.

Roger looks up at me, nods, winks, and suffers his smile. I follow Mr. Stern and Mrs. Martin out and take my place at Mr. Stern's desk, where I've been spending all week typing authors and titles into the database of the new computer system. The axiom for today on his desk calendar is *I inhale love and exhale fear.*

Tony Vinelli ambles in, a sinewy old man with a hawkish face and iron hair, heavily greased and rakishly swept back. In thick, white letters on the back of the blue nylon jacket he always wears, it says:

Tony Vinelli

Italian war veteran

As he walks by me, I catch his eye and we nod, a ritual it took me almost four years to achieve, four years of trying to thread his elusive eye. I remember that first time he did it, I felt like a naturalist who had, at last, managed to convince some rare and wary animal to take food from his hand.

As always, Tony picks a book randomly from the reference section and sits at a table by the window with the book open in front of him while he looks around the room, his shrewd eyes fixing expectantly on anyone who

walks in or makes a significant sound or movement. He waits, an eternal blind date, eternally stood up.

At quarter to ten, the door makes way for a clamorous pack of veterans, who come in here whenever the weather's bad to wait for the Community Center across the road to open at ten. They gather in a boisterous clump at the center of the room, each in his habitual position. Mrs. Martin, who was sitting at the reference desk locating and biting off her split ends, gets up and drifts Cassandra-like around them. Finally, Mr. Stern flutters his brightness into their midst, puts a finger to his lips and lets out a soft shush. I have to admire Mr. Stern: he's fearless, trembling the web these men cast between themselves from eye to mocking eye.

Mr. Stern is a curious man, a man I despised for so many years, a spiteful man who, it seemed to me, had inverted his shallowness to create some vague contour, some relief, of personality. But he's trapped in the panoply of his affectation, his eyes recanting his condescensions almost at the moment they are uttered. Last Thursday, the day after he had lectured me excessively for my tardiness, he bought me a shirt to apologize for what he described as his "overzealous admonition." I was astonished and touched. The shirt itself had obviously been designed by someone gifted, someone who had not only managed to clash each of the shirt's myriad colors with its adjacent colors, but had also created a kind of gestalt clash.

As always, as soon as the veterans come in, Vinelli dunks his head into his book and doesn't come up for one breath of air until they leave. One of the veterans, Saul Hersch, a born gossip with eternally startled eyes, told me that a few years back, Vinelli had come into the Community Center with that jacket on and had insinuated himself into their company. A few of the men vaguely knew him as a boy, a dark horse with no real friends; and from what other people knew of him, he was a bachelor who had spent all his life in the neighborhood working for Crouse-Hinds Lighting, illuminating the world. For a while, Vinelli remained unobtrusive, seemed content just to adapt himself to the veterans' affectionate and formulaic camaraderie. Then he began to talk about the war, about his experiences in the 1st Marine Division in Guadalcanal. At first, he seemed reserved, talking for brief periods about mundane aspects of his army life, but his volubility expanded rapidly, and soon he was recreating with meticulous and studied detail the hostility of the South Pacific: the scum-crested swamps and crocodile-infested lagoons; the sapping heat and body-rotting humidity; the tree leeches, scorpions, fist-sized spiders, and rats; the man-high and razor-sharp kunai grass; the men stricken with malaria, dysentery, and dengue fever; nights spent under fire from the fourteen-inch guns of the Japanese battleships, the men whimpering, sobbing, clutching their rifles, their faces white, a wet sheen over their glassy eyes, the

flesh around their ears and mouths shaking as the shells burst around them; and after the bombardment, the eerie silence shattered by the screech of the jungle birds as crabs scuttled over their bodies; and then the enemy whispering from the darkness: "Come here please.... Come here please...."

He spoke with a strange objectivity, never really placing himself in that context he resurrected with such morbid and macabre vividness. Many of the men were unnerved by these evocations, so some research was done. It was discovered that the only Tony Vinelli who had served in the 1st Marines had been killed in action. He had a younger brother, Angelo, who had been dishonorably discharged just before the war (Saul refused to tell me why). Vinelli denied the accusation, but never went back to the Community Center.

"Telekinesis with computers. What an interesting experiment." I turn my head into Mr. Stern's bright sunflowers, then look up at his face, which is tired and abstracted. He hunkers down and whispers:

"Is Roger all right?"

"He's fraying badly."

"Fraying? He's a pile of loose fibers, that man. Damn him. Why can't he hold himself together?"

Mr. Stern's eyes are a little bloodshot and blink erratically. Glancing away from me, his face infuses with irony. Abruptly, he stands, lifts my hands as if they're something precious and fragile, and rests them gently on the keyboard.

"There, Benjamin. Why don't you see if you can wiggle your fingers meaningfully for a few hours. I'd be so grateful."

As if a bell had rung, the veterans all stand up and drain out of the main door. Tony looks up from his book at the tail end of that old, shambling animal, and then resumes waiting for his blind date.

MR. STERN HAS EMPLOYED another person, Elizabeth Barratt, a young woman from South Carolina. She's to start on Thursday. When he told us, some unconscious resolve in me became undermined by a sense of anticipation. I felt the foundation of some edifice, which I must have constructed to contain my desire, shift inside me. This then struck me as being so pathetic that I slipped into a restless self-pity until the library closed.

Free from that dull fluorescence, those vents blowing out their ennui, I stand for a moment on the library steps, breathe the cold, metallic air, the storm clouds now gathered into the west to unveil an immaculate blue sky. Not wanting to go home yet, I head to the water tower in Bronson Park to watch the sunset, the nightrise. As I walk, abstract sparrows rattle the spindly structures of hedges while clusters of real sparrows, the bevelled light cutting through their wings and tails, scatter in front of me.

The last person who came to work at the library was a girl called Chloe. Chloe Rice. Her room was pink: pink carpet, pink bedspread, pink curtains, pink tissue box, pink tissues, pink garbage can, pink garbage, painting of pink flowers in a pink vase in a pink frame, pink smell, blue telephone. Just out of high school, she worked in the library for that summer—five years ago—before she went to Boston College. Her body, like her hair, was bell-shaped, her face fat and impish. Often I would walk her home, accompanying her short, bouncing strides, my stomach weightless. I had never slept with anyone, never dated anyone, never kissed anyone. Chloe wore tight, bleached jeans, and I felt a blackness inside me whenever I looked at the cloth cutting smoothly between her broad thighs, cloth curving like light into dense space.

The lunch hour of her last day at the library, she took me back to her pink room. She switched on a tape of George Michael, and went downstairs to make us a cup of soup. On the wall above a shelf populated with figurines of children with large, tear-shaped eyes, she had taped numerous photographs of her boyfriend, a football player then at training camp in Michigan. Her girlfriends, arm in arm, drunk, beaming and boisterous, had been consigned to the wall at the foot of her bed, while her parents stood upon her dresser in white porcelain frames decorated with pink and pale yellow ribbons. Her life crowded about me, explicit and bright, pinkness and perfume, and George Michael.

After the soup, we sat on her bed and watched each other through our transparent words. The silences lengthened and intensified. Cold drops of sweat trickled down my side, my body tremulous. Suddenly, as if we had both simultaneously lost our balance, our lips fell together.

Her small breasts stiffened under my touch. I kissed and sucked them because it made her moan, kissed and sucked them until she laughed and said ouch, and asked me to take my clothes off. *You're so skinny.* I thought of her boyfriend. She placed her hand flat against my chest, on my smooth, dark nipple, as if she were trying to feel my heartbeat. Like a vulture, I tugged and tugged at the cuffs of her membranous jeans, which suddenly slid, as if her legs had burst, into flaccidity. She lay inert, presenting her small, burly body to me. On her chest emerged a faint mosaic of blood, her skin now tacky from the heat. I eased off her tight white underwear, surprised by the coarseness and abundance of the hair that she'd shaved away over her hips. The scent was heavy and sour. Crouching, I removed my own pants, wishing the day wasn't so light, then pulled off my underwear while I lay on top of her. As if she had been cued, she started breathing hard. I pushed and pushed, unable to enter until she reached down and guided me in. I could smell the apple shampoo in her hair. From every angle we were observed: her girlfriends, her boyfriend, her parents, those faces smiling, consenting from celluloid. As I began to move my hips, she suddenly shifted her body so that I was entering her almost

vertically. I froze, holding myself up with my trembling and aching arms as she moved her own hips frantically, her eyes closed, her mouth open as if she were going to bite something. And I just held myself, the pain burning in my arms, my penis softening until it fell out. Angry, she pulled me down on top of her, managed to insert it again, and started grinding and grinding as I looked through the window, watched a jet make a clean incision in the blue sky. It slipped out again so she flipped me onto my back and sat astride me, rubbing herself hard against me, so hard it hurt, her eyes tight closed, while I watched helplessly those compact, unswaying breasts, and the mottled blood expanding over her chest.

I sit below the water tower on the severed bole of a tree and watch the sun descend through a long tear in the fatty gray tissue of clouds gathered into the west, emerging red and liquid and ripe above a ragged silhouette of hills. The wind's breath is redolent with the rain-sodden earth. From the brittle black trees that stand frayed and frozen about me break crows like brutal facts declaring themselves hoarsely into flight. Above me, a streetlamp, etched starkly against the faint luminance of the sky, clicks and hums before it splutters and expires into light, leaking my weak shadow down the hill. I imagine my father on the deck now, looking out over the dry weeds, watching the last sunlight flash from the cars, watching the soft, pearly pink dissolve. The chimes break their small sounds into the air above him, and the slow smoke wheels and tumbles from his mouth until it stills like a sudden, elusive memory, and is gone.

I KILLED MY BROTHER.

We used to live in a town on Lake Michigan called Saugatuck. My father renovated buildings, and my mother worked in Coombs Bakery. Our house stood right on the north bank of the estuary. We could walk to the beach in ten minutes, up a small, wooded hill to the water tower and the platform that looked out over the harbor, then down a wide, sandy path through the pines, cold and littered with needles and cones. In the summer, out of the shade of the trees, the sand was so hot it would burn our feet, so Pete and I would take off our shirts and use them as stepping stones, both huddling on one and throwing the other until we reached the cooler sand nearer the water. Of him, I remember only that he was bigger than me, much stronger, a year older. He would throw the shirt too far, and I wouldn't be able to make it. The only face that comes to me now is some amalgam of both our faces in photographs that have been lost.

My mother didn't like us to go to the lake in winter because she was afraid we would walk on the ice floes that accreted at the shore. We did. We played hide-and-go-seek on the thick, fluctuant ice, hid behind the frozen crests

or in those mysterious deep square pits, like graves. Closer to the fluid water, the ice became as soft as snow in patches, and we would start to sink. Pete liked to hide close to the lake edge because it frightened me. I would end up sitting on the cold sand crying, shouting that I wasn't playing anymore, and watching for him, that small black animation, to emerge from some dangerously distant pit of ice. When we got back to the house, I would tell Mother that Pete had been on the ice floes, and she would scream at him, inventing the deaths of countless young children, until I came to think of the lake in winter as something predatory, with a vast salivary maw. Pete never denied my charges or told Mother that I was with him on the ice floes, nor did he ever exact any revenge. Mother belonged to me. He seemed resigned to that, resigned to the solitude and responsibility of the older child.

Playing on the ice a day before New Year's, I cheated and saw where he hid, so close to the water that was getting rougher, the waves shattering against the banks of ice, the gray-blue lake thick with white crests. Following the hard, high ridges of ice, I made my way toward him, shouting that I knew where he was, hoping he would come out. But he didn't emerge, must have been sure I wouldn't go any farther once I'd started shouting. All along the shore, the malign lake hurled claws of spray onto the ice. I was angry and afraid, afraid for myself and for him. I called out that I wasn't playing anymore. Twice, as I approached him, I slipped into the slushy ice and had to pull myself free. I started crying and my voice became hoarse with shouting. Just as I came to the crest behind which I had seen him hide, he stood and ran toward the water. I told him to stop, to come back, kept imagining one of those white claws getting hold of him. He didn't respond, his bundled body standing right at the edge, hunched a little, his dangling hands swollen with mittens, a small blot against the pale, marbled sky and the vast, shearing surface of the lake. I scrambled my way up to him and held onto his coat, tugging it. He reached back without turning his head and pulled my hand free. For a few moments, he watched the waves farther on, past a thin skin of formative ice, the reflected waves butting the incoming waves head on, the waters frantically clambering over themselves into height. Then he turned toward me, standing a pace behind him, snuffling and miserable, reached his strong arm behind my back and pulled me toward the water, an act of pure and vital cruelty. In me was all of his fear and all of his weakness. At first I was silent, thought he would just let me go, but he kept inching me inexorably forward, until, almost at the edge, I began whimpering, sullied his cruelty. He released me and looked back toward the water. I screamed that I hated him, and punched him twice on his shoulder, but he didn't move, and it was then that I pushed, pushed him with all my force, my palms striking flat and low on his back. He flung his hand toward me, that bloated mitten reaching so close, but I went rigid. At that point, I might have saved him, both of us huddling

breathlessly at the edge, our minds evacuated by the incomprehensible possibility; or I might have been lost with him, our two bodies frozen instantly together. But he was gone, and two became one, and as I ran toward the snow-covered dunes, that steep climb and descent to my home where Mother would be doing her jigsaw and Father reading his newspaper, the thin ice healed itself, its small wound.

Though I vividly remember the event itself, I can recall nothing of that moment I told my parents what I had done.

MY MOTHER'S FACE was small and narrow, the skin pulled tautly over a jagged structure of bones. Most of the time, Mother pulled her hair back very tight, revealing a high, domed forehead, tense and white. Exposed, her forehead became something quite independent of her face, like another face, a face unable to emerge from the tense skin.

Shorter than my mother, my father, despite his muscular physique, was prettier and more elegant, with neat little feet and hands, and thick, wavy black hair that was almost as long as Mother's when she let hers down. He was very unlike those coarse men that he knew from his years in the merchant marine; indeed, his muscles and tattoos seemed the only remnants of those years, his manner exacting and almost affectedly refined.

Of that time and place, I remember most distinctly those blended evenings: my mother doing a jigsaw while I helped her by finding edges and pieces of the same color, my father reading his paper and smoking while my brother read his comics and rolled my father's cigarettes.

AFTER PETE'S DEATH, my father didn't seem to be reading his newspaper anymore; he would often forget to buy a new one, so he would pick up the old one and hold it in front of him, as if he were trying to reset the days. Mother left her hair down more often now. It shrouded her face. I would often look up from my toys to see her staring at me from behind it. Her jigsaw puzzle remained unfinished on the coffee table until Father cleared it away.

A few weeks after Pete's death, I was woken by my mother screaming at my father, who never raised his voice. *I won't have another one! I'm never going to have another one!* A door slammed, and then my mother plunged into my room. I lay still, pretending to sleep, but she put the light on and made up Pete's bed. Her ragged hair obscured her face as she pulled and tucked with her quick, jerky movements. I called to her, but she ignored me, switched the light off, and got into bed. I could hear her breathing heavily. I got up and slid in next to her. Her body froze. *Get to your own bed.* I put my arm around the smooth nylon of her waist. Her unwashed hair smelled like

the hair of a dog. *Do you know what you've done? Do you know?* She pulled my hand off and turned around to me, the odor of tea on her breath. *Do you know?* She got out of bed. *Get dressed.* She left my room and went back to her own. I remained in Pete's bed, smelling the new sheets. I would often sleep with my brother, though he'd started pushing me out because Father told us that we were too old to be in the same bed. She came back in, thickly dressed, her hair pulled tight back. Father, in his baggy red long johns, followed her in. *Jean. Jean. Get dressed. Let him sleep. He's crying now, look. Get dressed. He doesn't understand. He's nine years old. How can he understand? I said, get dressed!*

I kept falling into the cold sand; she was pulling me too fast down the incline. On the ice floes she slipped and banged her knee. *Shit.* She took me to the edge. It seemed she took me over. It seemed we stood on the loose ice where my brother had sunk, the sky black and starred, the water black and white, the ice luminous. Going down on one knee, she held me by my arms, her eyes searching, penetrating not me but something intangible: memory, time, death. I couldn't look at her, scared of her forehead, Pete's face emergent as if from beneath the ice. *Do you know what you've done? Do you understand?* She required something from me, some specific action, some particular words, but I didn't know what. Her grip tightened as I struggled, her face implacable. I pulled my arm free and struck her on her bony cheek. She let me go. I ran off the ice floe, but became frightened at the mouth of the abrupt path through those dark woods, so I waited for her on the beach, watched her squatting at the edge, looking down into the slick, black water. After a few moments I heard my father's voice calling my name and looked back to see him emerge from the darkness of the trees. As if this was some benign and often repeated ritual, he winked and touched my cheek, wandered slackly across the ice floes, with his hands in his pockets. Squatting down, he put his arm around her; but I could see, almost feel her tensing in his embrace, and then I heard her voice ring out across the ice.

He carried me back, though I was too big to be carried, an arduous journey up the steep sandy dune. I would have preferred to walk, especially after he stumbled a few times toward the top, but even at that age, I had some comprehension of the idea of atonement.

MOTHER, IN A PAST FIT of domesticity, had designated the attic as the family craft room. She bought a potter's wheel, a box of oil paints, and an old Singer before losing interest. The only thing she used the room for now was to frame and hang her jigsaws, but after that night on the ice floes, she moved Pete's bed up there and made that her room. She never let me come in, would pull the door open just enough to wedge her narrow, angular face into the

gap. Attentive and polite, she treated me as an adult, as if my sin had matured me. Often she would even seem nervous, fearful, as if I were a danger to her, infected with memory, time, and death: contagious but unafflicted, innocent but deadly.

Mother spent all her free time in her room, or reading in the glass conservatory, reading fiercely as if furious for all the time she had lost. She began taking long walks, bringing a thick, hardcover notebook with her. Mostly, she would just disappear, but if I caught her leaving she would let me come, or at least she wouldn't tell me that I couldn't. While she walked in a gentle trance, I tumbled and climbed, did all I could to get her attention. Sitting high on the dunes, she would watch the sunset and write, culling pages, pressing her pen hard into the paper, a small violence, while I hurled myself from higher and higher precipices into the arms of the soft sand.

Mother bought herself a typewriter. She filled notebooks at sunset and typed all evening. Eventually, I became so used to the clacking of her typewriter above me that I couldn't sleep without it. Mother and Father barely talked anymore, not that they had ever talked much, but before Pete's death, they had moved about each other with some deference and common measure, dancing distantly, but with a certain fluid ease. With my mother's change, my father's stagnation, they lost their timing, would bump into each other to and from the kitchen, would say *excuse me*, like strangers. Father couldn't look at Mother anymore; whenever she addressed him, he became an admonished child, would press his lips together and look doggedly away.

The weekend before my tenth birthday, my mother attended a writer's conference in Kalamazoo. I woke up late on Saturday night, my legs cold and wet. I had done it quite a few times before, but hadn't been caught yet. I gathered my sheets to take them to the basement to wash and dry them. As soon as I stepped out of my room, I saw the light leaking from beneath the bathroom door at the end of the hall. The toilet flushed, and in a second the door was open. Standing framed in the doorjamb was the tallest, thinnest woman I had ever seen. I could tell she was younger than Mother, much younger, but her face seemed haggard, and her breasts hung like tennis balls in socks. The bones of her pelvis jutted, and she seemed to have no hair between her legs at all. I clutched the damp sheets as she walked over to me. She placed a finger against her lips while motioning toward the door of my father's room with her young, careworn face. Her white and frizzy hair seemed unreal. I put my hand out and ran my fingers across the stretch marks on the skin of those narrow, pendulous breasts. She stifled a laugh, and held my hand still against her chest. *Like father, like son. What are you doing with your sheets? Going around like Casper the ghost. Listen, you mustn't tell your mom about me. Do you understand? You mustn't tell her. If you tell her,*

you'll never see your dad again. You don't want that, do you, Casper? Secret. And I won't tell anyone about these sheets. Okay? Okay. She put her arms around me. She smelled of sweat and smoke, and her hair felt like nylon.

The night after the detente of my birthday, lying in bed, listening to my mother typing, I heard my father climbing the short flight of stairs to her room. He knocked softly and called her name. They whispered on the stairs, my mother's voice becoming louder and shriller. *No. Go away. I'm not anything. Not yet. No, I'm not. Fuck! Well you shouldn't have had your hand there. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. Is it cut?* My mother's voice mellowed, became solicitous, but was suddenly cut off. A tremendous crash shook the floor above me. I pulled myself to the edge of my bed and stared up into the thundering ceiling. My father remained absolutely silent, while my mother issued weird, guttural yelps in gruesome synchronicity with the violent tremors. I felt strangely glad, relieved, and in the ensuing silence, an abysmal silence, I fell into a complete, a dreamless sleep.

My father bought her a huge bouquet of flowers the next day. He cried and begged her to forgive him while she stared at the flowers, her face livid, swollen out of all recognition, her arms stained with bruises. His right hand was bandaged. She took the flowers without a word, held them for a while as if they were a baby, then arranged them in vases around the house, their beauty existing not because of him, but in spite of him.

While autumn hung thick and brilliant, my mother was out every free moment, writing in her notebooks. She often attended conferences and workshops, and during those weekends and weeks, the spindly, haggard young woman, whom I'd since seen in town working at Dairy Queen, would come and stay.

One day toward the end of that autumn, I saw my mother putting her coat on to go for one of her walks, a notebook and a pen in her hand. I sat rolling cigarettes for my father, who was wedged behind his old newspaper, his eyes straining introspectively as if into a hopelessly turbid mind. I ran to her and pulled my coat from the rack in the hall, my father peering at me from the brim of the yellowing sheets. *No, Benjamin. No. I want to go alone today. Let him go. He's your fucking son. You stay here. I've brought you some broken cakes back. They're in the bread bin. You're such a bitch. And you're the ideal father, I suppose, sitting there, reading a month-old newspaper, having your son roll those foul cigarettes, thinking about the next time you can sneak that skinny little tart in here! Better than getting it off on a pencil. You're so sad if you think I care, if you think I give any thought to you at all. Any thought. No. You're not coming with me. Let go. Take your coat off! Why don't you slap him around a little more. You haven't drawn blood yet.* I held my hand to my stinging thigh as the door closed behind her. My father

stared at me curiously over his paper. *She's a bitch to hit you. She didn't have to hit you.* He put his paper down and came to me, kneeling and looking intently at my face. Then he smiled. *Come on, let's go and make a fire in the garden.* We gathered leaves into a huge pile and made a fire. Then my father went into the house, returning a few minutes later with an armful of my mother's notebooks. Stacking them close to me, he went inside again, until eventually there was a pile of notebooks almost as big as the pile of burning leaves. *Ben.* He was trembling, and kept bowing his head to cover his face in his hair. *It's not your fault; she's got to learn to care about us. She's got to snap out of it.* Like Mother's, his desperate, lonely eyes looked not at me but at something intangible. He ruffled my hair, an action not natural to him. I pulled his hand off. It was unnecessary. Solemnly, he handed me two of the notebooks, staring alternately at them and at the fire. When I threw them in, he seemed horrified. This galvanized me. I flung one after another into the fire in rapid succession. He put his hands out as if to stop me, but I was the fire itself. His look must have been the same as mine in those interminable moments my brother fell. I was inexorable. I was exultant. Book after book, sunset after sunset, day after day. I was burning her new life. I was burning her.

I didn't know how long she'd been standing there at the entrance to the path up the hill, slouched against a tree, pondering the situation. My father stood catatonic, merely a prop, the tree from which I would hang myself. Jerking herself upright, she glided toward me, her face beatific. She had worked it all out, how she and I were to act, how I would stand as inert as if I were already hanged, how she would sink to her knees and hold me to her, returning my kiss with one of forgiveness. I continued flinging the books into the fire. Her pace quickened. She held me as she had done on the ice. A gust of wind engulfed us in smoke. No kisses. The bones of our cheeks clashed, her embrace tightening as I struggled to get hold of the few books left.

The next day, another bouquet of flowers became mine by default. She was already gone, had taken her clothes and her typewriter and had left in the night.

I went to her room. On the walls hung posters of paintings in places like the Metropolitan Museum of Art, while stacked in the big collector's drawers under the bay window lay all of her jigsaw pictures. I took all the jigsaws out of their frames, and meticulously dismantled them, placing every one back into its box. I had made them with her; I had found the edges and gathered together the pieces of the same color, the fragments of sky and sea. I dismantled the puzzles while the wind dismantled the trees, the leaves melding on the damp earth. I dismantled all those evenings in the sitting room, the mensural pages of my father's paper, my brother trying to spit out strands of tobacco, while I found edges and surfaces for my mother to integrate. Time between Time.

NOW, BENEATH THIS monolithic water tower, I watch a sun that always sinks ingloriously: in winter, tangling in the ragged trees, foliating them red and orange, another autumn; in summer, hoarding its last light in the goldenrod, abstracting a brilliance that is never quite tangible, another spring. It seems easy to love while the fallible sun sinks, while the dreamless wind turns in the trees, easy until space descends and the stars emerge amassed but too small, bright but too far, evident but too late.

SHE HAS SKIN like a plucked turkey, flawless except for a black mole on her neck; small, cynical eyes behind plastic-rimmed granny glasses; a broad, belligerent jawbone. Painted a glaring crimson, her large, fleshy lips stand out like a fresh bloodstain on a white sheet. Her expression is one of sensual contempt.

"A new myrmidon in our midst. Elizabeth Barratt. Hates Beth; can put up with Lizzy." Mr. Stern flashes his eyebrows at us. "Roger Summers—one of our most invaluable assets . . . ." Roger afflicts his face with a smile, and ducks his head as if to avoid the flight of Mr. Stern's irony, which is usually flung a little higher. "Benjamin Tyler, a sweet boy with the most remarkable telekinetic powers, so don't be concerned if you see him sitting in a trance." She tilts her head back and assesses me from behind those old-fashioned glasses. "Clarissa Martin. Mrs. Martin. The amaranth in the briar patch." As if a brief breeze ruffles Mrs. Martin's pall, a grim smile appears and is suddenly gone.

Mr. Stern instructs Elizabeth all morning, his bright body sprightly beside her magisterial poise, his sardonic wit blunted against that bold, contemptuous chin. When Vinelli walks in, Elizabeth, disregarding Mr. Stern, who's showing her the card catalogue, watches him, turning her body to face him as he moves. She stares blatantly and, because of her general disposition, seems affronted, tilting her head back slightly and rolling her gaze down the incline of her face; but her gaze is enigmatic, at once abstracted and intense. She watches Vinelli take the reference book, sit down, and then, at the expense of the open book, subject the library to his pathetic expectancy. Mr. Stern girds himself and pouts at her broad back. "Elizabeth, honey, I can appreciate your interest in the local fauna . . . ."

Unhurried, she turns to him, turns not just her head, but her whole body, brings her whole considerable being to bear upon him. He remains silent, caught in the mesmeric sensuality of those bright lips, a violent and defiant sensuality as if she had smeared them with her own menstrual blood. Then she turns away again, turns the single beam of her perception to the door as the pack of vets ambles in. She watches as some of them greet me with coarse, strained joviality, as they all gather in their usual places in the middle of the room, stage whispering and stifling their laughter histrionically while Mrs.

Martin drifts like a benign shark among the tables. She watches as Vinelli's hands grip the edges of his book, and his eyes adhere to the text as if his life depends upon it. And yet, she doesn't seem to be watching anything exactly.

Mr. Stern asks me to show her how to input data into the computers. I let her sit in the swivel chair and stand beside her, leaning on Mr. Stern's desk. She doesn't look at me, but points to the axiom for today: *I express anger openly and appropriately.* She wears no perfume, and a warm odor drifts up from her body, quite pungent, but not unpleasant. Without turning to me, she asks about Vinelli. I tell her everything, including my own embellishments to the bare facts I heard from Saul, trying to affect her, trying to make her swivel her attention toward me, but she listens to me as if I'm a radio, looks at Vinelli, or at something that now exists where Vinelli had been.

She tells me to have lunch with her.

We both squint as we step out of the library into another brilliant, cold day. White breath leaks in a steady stream from my mouth and billows in gusts from hers. We pause for a moment to regard the day, look through the scarred white branches of a silver birch at a sky definitively blue, marred only by a lingering fragment of the moon.

I'm nervous to eat in front of her, but she's uninhibited, eating her pizza with manifest pleasure, getting tomato paste on her lips and licking it away. After finishing, she scrapes her mouth roughly with the napkin, digs through her teeth with her tongue, then tilts her head back and rolls her gaze down at me. Averting this, I end up looking at her breasts, which are huge, and which she carries, or rather wields, formidably.

"I'm flattered by the attention. I'm afraid they don't do much more than they're doing right now."

"I'm sorry."

"I wish they were attached to my forehead. At least then it might appear that men were genuinely interested in what I had to say."

My cheeks burn. I finger the cold pizza on my plate.

"How long have you been working here?" she says.

"Eleven years."

"You and the three benign sins."

"What?"

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-eight."

"Libra?"

"Pisces."

"I thought so."

"How old are you?"

"Thirty-two."

She looks away from me, at a skinny chef scraping the grill plate. She

watches the pistoning of his elbow as if it reminds her of something in a dream. That's it; that's the way she regards everything new, as if she's trying to recall some past context, some elusive and personal meaning. Looking back at me, she exhales as if she's bored.

"How do you put up with Sunflower and Madame Morte?"

"They're not too bad."

"Is he gay? They both seem tight as an athlete's butt."

"He married and divorced twice. The same woman. Mrs. Martin lived with her sister, but her sister died last year, so she lives alone now, listens to opera and drinks wine until she can sleep."

"How do you know?"

"I've been here for a long time."

"Still...."

"She comes in drunk once in a while. If you're here long enough you'll see it. She sings opera, mimics the Italian or the German or whatever, really performs it: stands up stiffly, drifts her hands through the air, contorts her face...."

"How does Roger put up with Stern."

"That's Roger's vocation, to put up with things."

"I don't like Stern."

"He's not so bad."

"He's an idiot."

"He's very educated."

"That's worse. Educating an idiot is like arming a psychopath." She reaches her cold hand out and places it on my neck.

"Eleven years and you still have a pulse."

I feel a surge of anger, and remove her hand from my neck, but she doesn't allow me to release it, her fingers gripping my thumb as she watches me, her expression bemused and quizzical.

"What are you doing here?" I say.

She releases my hand, speaks abruptly.

"Moved here with a friend. Things didn't work out. Listen, let's go out tomorrow night. Let's go to the movies."

WE RETURN TO THE LIBRARY a few minutes late. Mr. Stern, who's standing behind the check-out desk with Mrs. Martin, doesn't acknowledge us, but squints up at the clock obtrusively. Back at the computer with Elizabeth, I watch Roger shelving some books in the children's section. He looks drugged, his eyes shallow and extinguished, his smile flickering weakly. A book slips from his hand and he steps back, shocked, staring at it on the floor. Mr. Stern transports his bright upper body over to him, and stands examining

the book also, his face parodying Roger's expression of wonder and fear before withering into scorn above the naive blare of his sunflowers. It suddenly occurs to me that it might be his heart. Roger looks up at Mr. Stern, stares at him for a few moments in the same way that he stared at the book, and finally bends over to pick it up. Mr. Stern gives him a brief round of applause and walks back toward Mrs. Martin who does not reward him, as he expects, with her grim, evanescent smile, but confronts him with implacable admonition. Elizabeth turns her body in the swivel chair and inclines her face to level her eyes against him, Mr. Stern now caught in the crossbeams of their mutual disapprobation. Roger shelves the book and then walks quickly, his head ducked, into the back room. Still worried about his heart, I wait a few minutes, and follow him in. As I pass Mr. Stern, our eyes meet, and he seems helpless, his eyes repudiative, shrinking.

Roger is sitting slumped over the desk, his head cradled in his arms, crying, his breath a rapid staccato, his back shaking. He looks up at me, his eyes puffy and ringed red, his fat cheeks glistening wet.

"Benny-boy, this buoy's sinking."

"What's wrong, Roger?" I hear my own voice. His swollen, wet eyes examine me as if for the first time.

"I tried to commit the old hurry-curry last night."

"What d'you mean .... Why?"

"Because I'm clever enough to know exactly how stupid I am. That's why," he says, then leans farther forward and whispers, "that's the secret of misery, Benny-boy. And I'm giving it to you for nothing." He laughs, the first real laugh I've ever heard from him, a laugh that lives in itself. He blinks slowly and a tear draws a clear line from the corner of his eye to his jaw. "Shall I tell you what happened? Shall I tell you why I'm still here?"

"If you want to." I look back at the frosted glass of the door, see a shadow linger and then pass on.

"He's a bastard. That damn sunflower faggot." Roger addresses the door: "Faggot, shit-prodder, sphinter-stretcher, cocksucker. He's a disciple of Isis, Benny-boy, the squinting pink eye." He closes his right eye tight and then opens it, his bitterness suddenly gone, his eyes again shallow and extinguished. "I want her to die so badly. You know, I didn't even love her when I married her. I was a high-school janitor. Never got a chance to meet anyone. Her fur hat blew off in the wind, and I chased it, and I shouted, 'It's still alive!' I remember it so clearly. And I caught it, and she was laughing, and I handed it to her, and we stood against the wind—windy, windy day—and I could smell the coffee on her breath, and life seemed a long time to be alone." He examines his fat hands on the desk, lifts them, and watches the wet imprints of his palms evaporate. I look back at the door, surprised Mr. Stern hasn't walked in already.

"I went up to the Pontneuf Bridge last night. Have you ever been there?"

"No."

"On Route 12. Big old iron bridge over the Sechewan. And I parked my car on the bridge, left the hazards on, climbed onto the edge, stood there for a few moments looking down into the water. There's something about that point there, Benny-boy. One step to test God. Or gravity. My legs were shaking, and I was just about to step when I hear this voice, *Excuse me*, like he wants me to pass the salt, *Excuse me*, so I turn around and there's this skinny little guy with a face like Mr. Magoo standing there with his hands in his pockets, looking up at me. *Can I have your car?* he says—"

"Come on, Roger."

"I swear, Benny-boy. I swear. I swear on my mother's grave. And I just look at him, and I say no, and he says, *You're not going to need it*, and, you know, instead of being pissed, I'm thinking he's right, so I say okay, and I turn around again and look into the water. *Excuse me.* It's him again. What, I say. He says, *Have you got the keys?* So I pull the keys out of my pocket and I throw them to him, and I turn around again—I swear, Benny. I swear. And then he says—real polite—*I'm in a dilemma.* He's in a dilemma. So I turn around, and he says, *I wonder if it wouldn't be too much trouble for you to sign the title over to me.* Too much trouble? Can you believe that? Anyway, I tell him that the title's at home, and it's a twenty-minute drive, so he swears that he'll drive me back, and—I swear—we drive back to my house, and he's trying out the car, and he's saying it's a beauty—my old Bonneville—handles like a cat, and it starts to rain, and I lose the urge to kill myself. I just want to have a cup of tea and the two Mint Milanos that I remembered were still left while I watched Letterman. But I'm too embarrassed to tell this guy just to drop me off—too embarrassed—can you believe that. So I sign over my fucking car to him, and I have him drive me out to the bridge, honk my own fucking horn at me as he's driving away, me standing on the edge like I'm waiting for a train, waving at him. And then I have to walk fifteen miles back home, in the rain." Roger shakes his head slowly and observes his hands again. I could laugh, but there wouldn't be a sound. What's suddenly between us is not a silence, but a vacuousness that remains for a few moments before the silence leaks back.

"Would you have really done it, d'you think?" I say.

"You know, I don't know. But the saddest thing is that I've often thought of doing it, only went out there last night because I knew Stern would have this new girl, so I wouldn't have put anyone to any trouble." Again that vacuousness. "I couldn't even do that. I couldn't manage to take one clean step." He sighs heavily and then reaches over and takes my right hand, grips it tight in both of his sweaty, hot hands. "You know, you're my best friend Benny. Right now—"

The door opens and Mr. Stern walks in. He stares at our hands for a few moments. He's breathing hard. He speaks, his voice oratorical:

"It is said, my friends, that love grants in a moment what toil can hardly achieve in an age, and I have little reason to deny this . . . ." He realizes halfway through his words that something is wrong, but is caught in the momentum of his own eloquence. "But at the same time one has to bear in mind that love in a hut with water and a crust is—love, forgive us!—cinders, ashes, dust."

After a brief, appraising silence, he speaks, his voice sullied with some residue of annoyance:

"Are you all right, Roger?"

Roger looks away, still holding tight onto my limp hand, and after a few tense moments, Mr. Stern exits, closing the door quietly and firmly behind him.

FATHER'S WRITING AT HIS DESK when I come in. He doesn't look up, just huddles closer to the notebook. I make us some corned beef hash. When I put it on the table, he reviews what he's written, inserting what seem to be corrections in the punctuation, and then comes to the table. I try to read my book again, but it's useless, so I watch him as he eats with his automatic brutality, throwing his jaws together, using more food to push down the food in his mouth, his habitual smile-grimace never becoming less equivocal. I'm on his left now: *hate* on his knuckles, and the ace of spades half covered by the cuff of his shirt. As I watch him, the muscles in his jaw flexing, my fury builds coldly.

"I hate you," I say, almost to myself. His jaw doesn't slow for a moment. He doesn't look at me. His eyes are a screen upon which an internal projector, an old fluttering eight-millimeter plays barely discernable pictures of the past, the sound not quite synchronized, the images moving too fast—young boys building a sand castle, a woman rubbing cream on sunburn at the rim of her bikini—and suddenly it flashes and the screen goes white and the film spins and slaps against the projector, and he stops chewing for a moment, and those coarse brows wrinkle.

I reach over to my mug of milk and tip it onto the table, continue watching his profile as the liquid flows toward him, around his mug and plate, and then off the side of the table into his lap. He looks up at me suddenly, and then down to his sodden lap, his face abject, as if this were some incontinence on his part.

After changing his trousers, he sits on the porch and smokes for a while, and I sit on the deck steps waiting for him to go to buy tobacco, which he will do in exactly five minutes, at six-thirty. Clearing his throat, he'll look puzzled for a moment, slap his pocket to check his wallet, and then leave, taking his

old hunting jacket from the chair by the door, putting it on, right sleeve first, as he steps down from the deck.

I watch him go through this, and when he turns onto Erie, I go up to his bedroom, stand in front of his old cheval mirror, the silvering flaking around the edges. I have thirty minutes. I remove my clothes, stand straight and still and naked, thinking of her, Elizabeth Barratt, high density and low gravity, her brutal, blunt, sloping, sensual face, those lips that are a bloody smear, something that is upon her, like her sex, which has become abstracted, has precipitated and surrounds her, opaque and impermeable to me with that soft sac between my legs and that tube of spongy flesh, hanging, a discontinuity, hanging, the fisted nerve, hanged, the purple glans, my heart. My body is white and thin, my ribs like gills. I turn and look over my shoulder at the shallow, split mound of my buttocks, barely standing out from my back, which is flat and spineless. I turn to my front again, skin soft and flawless and white and smooth; then, sprouting from between my legs, from its bed of hair, is that spurious tuber. I touch it, warm and silky, the skin darker. It begins to stiffen, but I push it between my legs and press them tight together, feel the pressure of stretching skin on my belly. Now, I could be a woman. I run my hand through the wiry hair and over my legs, imagine my scrotum splitting, spilling the testes to the floor, becoming my labia, imagine the penis sinking, becoming subterranean, with just its tip exposed, imagine gently prying open the damp, soft skin and feeling inside myself, that warm tube into my uterus.

Often, late at night, I masturbate. In summer, I let the stuttering fan play over me, and my sweat soaks the chair; in winter, in the effluvial orange glow of the old gas fire, my back and arms freeze, and my legs burn. I imagine first being a man, the woman's legs opening while she lies supine; and then I widen my own legs, imagine I am the woman, so that I am pressing myself into myself, so that I distil a drop of pure sexuality that hangs heavy upon a tenuous strand.

I stare at that fraying whirl of black hair above my gaunt, porcelain face, stare into those eyes that are like a young boy's, weary and worried. Stepping up to the mirror, I kiss it, kiss my cold, smooth lips, leaving a breath of haze to obscure my mouth as I split from myself. There's no strain on my belly now. It has gone soft between my legs.

My father stands for a moment in the frame of the door. He runs his hands quickly over his hair to hide his face. I watch him in the mirror as he walks behind me to his dresser and picks up his wallet. He forgot his wallet. I saw it when I came in, registered it, but hadn't thought, couldn't imagine . . . . I don't know what to do, so I just stand rigid and naked before the mirror, wait for him to be gone. Hesitating behind me, his fingers rub the worn brown leather of his wallet as if it's a talisman, his mouth tremulous, making as if to speak. We look at each other's reflections, my form pale and androgynous,

his in absolute limbo, that agglomeration of habits continuing without him, obliviously out of the room and down the stairs, while something else stands reflected behind me, the old, driftwood face undoubtedly sorrowful and desperate, on the verge, it seems, of speech and tears. Then this reflection is gone, and I hear the bedroom door close, and after a few moments the screech and bang of the screen door.

"I HAVE ASKED ELIZABETH to come in a little later today, and I have put up a sign to say that we will be opening at ten of the clock." Mr. Stern looks at Mrs. Martin and me, his gaze restless, like a heat-sapped fly, wondering and alighting on us both. "Let us sit down, shall we." We sit at one of the square, formica-topped tables in the middle of the library, where the veterans usually sit. Mr. Stern leans himself over the table and clasps his hands together, his tongue pushing up into his gums as if he's just eaten. He seems to change his mind and sits back, looking above our heads, his brow creased. He exhales audibly.

"I'm afraid I have some bad news. Roger Summers is dead, was found this morning in the Sechewan River." His gaze alights on my chest. "Apparently, the police are investigating, and there may be a suggestion of foul play because his car's missing, so they're trying to trace that."

Mrs. Martin clears her throat and runs her little red tongue over her thin, colorless lips. She clears her throat again, as if preparing to speak, or sing.

And what would she sing, some shrill aria in a language she doesn't understand, this specter, this lonely, voiceless woman, her song hanging precariously above the reluctantly united, heavy-breathing silence of Mr. Stern and me, like a gull over the slow contours of the sea, a requiem for Roger Summers, for his body on the silt, his eyes and his mouth slightly opened, his brittle expression, at last, annealed. We all sit expectant and vaguely fearful, the unwilling participants of a séance. Mr. Stern is looking at me as if I could absolve every compounded regret, and I see for a moment my father's face last night and have to turn away, after which his voice sounds, empty:

"Well, the cure for grief is action."

We stand. We continue.

ELIZABETH IS WEARING BLACK, a thick baggy black sweater, a black skirt that barely covers her knees, and black patent leather shoes. Her garish lipstick glares from her white face, and from her ears dangle two enormous gold angelfish. She brings me flowers.

"Carnations?"

"I don't like them either, but they were cheap."

"Thanks."

"Welcome."

"What flowers do you like?"

"Lilies. My father tried to name me Lily. I wish he had. I would have been a whole different person: slim, attractive, alkaline, gloriously shallow. When Mother decided on Elizabeth, they gave me the arthritic soul of an old woman."

"I'll put them with the rest when I get home. My father had a huge bouquet of flowers delivered this morning."

"Why?"

"I don't know."

"For you?"

"I don't know."

We don't go to a movie, we spend the evening in the Parkway Diner on Erie talking first about Roger, and then ourselves. She lifts her bangs to reveal a long white scar. *I was sitting on his shoulders and he ran beneath a low branch. My father always hurt me—not that he ever meant to. Most of the time he was completely inert, but when he did move it was always sudden and violent, impulsive. Even his affection was the same: he'd just lunge for me and I'd scream—he terrified me. Really. Passion's just how you interpret it, and I suppose luckily he always interpreted it as love—the counterpart of a quick temper, I guess—and he'd squeeze me and scratch me with his rough beard and kiss me all over my face, big open kisses, until my face was wet, and then that spasm of affection would be over. But if I tried to be affectionate with him, he'd never push me away or try to stop me or anything, but wouldn't really respond, would scrunch his face up like a kid being kissed by an ugly old aunt. Really. Men are like that, they want affection to be on their own terms. What? Twelve. But I remember. I think I remember. Not a big man. A bit like you: thin. He electrocuted himself. Always doing botch jobs, rigging everything. The plug was broken on his electric drill, so he lodged the wires into the socket or something. I don't remember. I don't know. Your brother? What happened to him? Oh my God. What was he doing? Skating. Who found him? That is so sad.*

We eat pastries and drink coffee until three. It begins to snow as she drives me home. I ask her if she'd like to come in. She would. I put the fire on and, with her help, shift the couch closer to it. She sits on the couch, eases her shoes off and puts her feet up, rubbing them and sighing with relief. They're marked quite badly by her tight shoes. I take my shoes and socks off also and pull my feet beneath me, sit cross-legged on my chair. I've never sat in this room with anyone besides my father. And it hardly seems the same room with all the flowers. I want to tell her the truth about my brother. It's good to have her here. I think of Roger, and life does seem a long time.

"When's his funeral?"

"I don't know."

"Are you going to go?"

"I don't think so."

"You were friends, weren't you?"

"I don't know if we were friends."

"Funerals are strange anyway. I feel it's like sacrificing the dead to death."

"Yes. I don't really like graveyards."

"Don't you? I do."

"I did when I was younger. I don't mean to sound patronizing."

"You're forgiven."

"I don't even know if I enjoyed them then. They just made me restless and energetic. But they make me tired now. I don't have the same feeling for people as I had then; they didn't seem so finite and comprehensible then."

I glance toward her, my cheeks burning, but she isn't watching me anymore, is looking around the dingy room with that abstracted intensity, trying to pin down the elusive memory of a dream. Embarrassed at what I've just said, I'm suddenly ashamed of my house, this clutter of junk, the smell of mildew from the walls and grease from the old stove. The flowers now seem absurd. The fire hisses its long last exhalation, casting an orange glow over us. She sits rigid, sideways on the sofa, her arms wrapping her breasts, her feet together, her toes twitching periodically, her neck stiffly rotating, bringing that formidable, sensual face to bear. The skin on her naked legs is like some coarse white fabric, and I notice a long scar just below the right knee. It's unbearable being so far away from her, but I feel helpless, my arousal combining with the cold into sweat and tremulousness; that blackness spreads inside me. She turns back to me.

"You must be freezing. Listen, why don't you come and sit on the couch."

I get up and sit beside her feet. I want to touch her. I can imagine myself reaching out and rubbing her feet, doing it naturally, with ambiguous confidence to reduce the risk.

"They don't smell, do they?"

"No."

"Your father sleeps upstairs?"

"Yes."

"Retired?"

"Yes."

"What's he like?"

"I don't know, really. We don't speak much. I mean, there's no animosity, he's just not very communicative."

"Does he have any friends?"

"No. We came here after he retired. It was his father's place."

"So what does he do all day?"

"Read the paper. Smoke his pipe. Write in his journal."

"Write what? What's he got to write?"

"I don't know. I mean what does it matter what he writes?"

"Well, when he dies, what are you going to do with them, throw them away, burn them?" I don't answer her. I look at that single drawer in the gaping face of his desk. She jabs me in my side with her foot, biting her lower lip childishly, tilting her face vertically so her eyes are not looking down at me. She keeps jabbing until I grab her foot, cold in my hand.

"His notebooks are in that desk."

"Let's read them."

She moves her toes gently against my palm. I stare hard into the fire.

"There's a graveyard up on Alapacia. Have you ever been there?" she says.

"I think I have. Once. Where there's a path through the woods?"

"Yes. It's strange because all the graves are really new; it's like the dead are proud of being dead, wear those shiny gravestones like medals on their newly expansive chests. And what would a person have to do to deserve that kind of citation? Certainly not die or come close to death—that's a basic qualification—so I suppose they should live or come close to life. Now, I'm saying this for no other reason than to make you feel comfortable with your previous rather embarrassing outburst and to provide a dramatic context for what's nothing more than curiosity, which is my own vital principle. I can't believe you've never looked. What have you got to lose?"

Releasing her foot, I glance again at those empty drawer slots and the gap where he fits his own body. More than anything, I feel an overwhelming desire to please her, to get close to her, and it occurs to me that she will have to sit up next to me if I get one of the notebooks. I clear my mind by looking back into the confined flames of the gas fire, then find myself moving to the desk, observe my hands pulling out a bundle of the notebooks, taking one, find myself back on the couch with a notebook in my hand. She drops her feet to the floor and shifts herself down to me. Her shoulder bumps against mine. I can smell her now, her warm body smell. I look down at the mole on her white neck below the gleaming angelfish, and then at the pout, the pedestaling, of those bright red lips. I hold the dogeared notebook closed for a while and we both examine it, wary and expectant.

"He could be some kind of genius," she says.

"Yes."

I open the notebook and Elizabeth snorts a laugh, which she stifles with her hand. There are no words, just elongated smooth spirals broken off into word lengths, huddled into paragraphs, and meticulously punctuated. We

both stare for a while. I check a few more notebooks; they're all the same. I put the books back and close the drawer.

I must look shocked. Elizabeth stares at me anxiously and rubs her hands hard against her knees. I see his old newspaper neatly folded on the small butterfly table in the kitchen area. I could interpret whatever it is I'm feeling as despair or hope, but I suspend the feeling between both and sit down beside her again.

"I'm sorry I made you do that."

"You didn't make me. Anyway, I don't know what else I expected." I lean toward the fire, can hear her still rubbing her knees.

"I should go soon."

I don't say anything. I can't bear the thought of her gone. I want to touch her, sitting so close, now lifting her feet to the fire. She brings her legs down and places one sole, still strangely cold, on my foot for a moment.

"You didn't tell me about your mother," I say.

"I have to admit I don't like her very much. She's a little strange in the head, has a really cruel streak, liked to tell me frightening stories just before I went to sleep when I was a kid. Really. I don't mean she was abusive or anything, just unemotional and a little peevish. I remember one thing she did though that really affected me. What had happened was that I had found this huge black beetle in the house. Huge."

She makes a fluctuating estimate of its size with her fingers. Her shoulder, which was bumping into mine, is now pressed quite hard against me. I try to catch her eye as she speaks.

"So, I put it in this little can I had, a can for raquetballs that belonged to my father, and I could hear it inside, and I'd feel a kind of tantalizing disgust at the thought of this creature inside that dark container on my windowsill. And every now and then I'd check on it, holding the can away from me, terrifying myself with all the metamorphoses I imagined it could have gone through as the days passed. Then I got bored and I picked up the can one day and shook it as hard as I could." Elizabeth acts out all the motions with an imaginary can in her hand, closing her eyes as she shakes. "And I could hear it being flung from one end to another, and I imagined it in slow motion, flying across space—a space as big as my whole house for me. And then I held the can in front of me and could barely bring myself to open it. I was so scared. But I did open it, and saw this little broken mosaic of its body, wings, legs, head, like one of those plastic models before it's made up. I showed my mother, and she was horrified. Because of what she was like, I think I felt she would be pleased with me. But she told me that life was precious, and more resilient than I knew, that it was tenacious. I didn't know what tenacious meant, but the word stayed with me; it seemed to beg a meaning. I left the shattered in-

sect inside the can on my windowsill and forgot about it until a few days later my mother came in and told me to throw the beetle out, that it was disgusting to keep it in my room, so I took the can outside to the garden and opened it and tipped it out and almost died because out fell this completely intact black beetle. I screamed so hard and dropped the can and ran toward the house, and Mom was standing in the doorway, her arms folded and a look of satisfaction on her face. Really. I had so many nightmares after that, dreams about everything dead pulling themselves together, gathering, reconstructing, that life was a kind of unique magnet for the flesh."

She looks up at me at last, and we both nurture the silence for a few minutes before she throws her hand down on my own hand, patting it firmly but tenderly as if it were a dog's head.

"You should tell me a story now."

I twist my hand awkwardly to take hold of hers, but she's already removed it. I feel foolish and feckless, my hand now prone and limp in my lap.

"Well, I could tell you something that I remember very vividly from childhood. Except that I'm not really sure why I remember it, or why it should be so incredibly vivid."

"A mundane and pointless story, or a *spot of time*. It's just a question of definition."

"Right. It's a *spot of time*, then."

"Wonderful. I'm all ears."

"We were on a family trip in Canada somewhere. Pete must have been there, but I don't remember him. Anyway, we stopped at a huge old stone church that had burned down, except that it hadn't really burned down because all of the stone structure was left. No ceiling or windows, just this huge gray stone structure. I remember grass was growing in the middle, and there were big pots of red flowers, geraniums I think. It was lovely, a church with an infinite vault. And at the entrance, on a stone pedestal, was a bell, the bell that had been in the church tower before it burned down, and half the bell was melted—all this twisted and charred metal—and Father had gone to stand in one of the far stone arches looking out over the graveyard. I remember the names were all Scottish: McFarlain, MacDonald, Teviotdale. And I was standing by the bell with Mother, and perhaps Pete, I just can't remember, and I saw Mother put her hand out to touch the charred metal, and I saw her hand hesitate and recoil, just for a moment, as if that tortured metal could after all those years still be hot. We ate some food in the church—I just can't believe I don't remember Pete—but we had a picnic and then got ready to leave, and I followed Mother to the car and then ran back to see where Father was. He was standing next to the bell, looking at it, and I stood in the big arched entrance. I watched him as he put his hand out to touch the congealed

metal, and I saw him hesitate for just a split second before he touched it."

She looks at me, her head nodding slightly, her eyes abstracted, seeing something else.

"And there we have it, I'm afraid, my little story."

My cheeks begin to burn again and she removes her old-fashioned glasses and rubs her eyes deep and hard. I fear while she's rubbing her eyes that she's deciding to leave. She lifts her feet up to the fire again.

"What did you get that from?" I touch the skin just above the long white scar below her knee, let my hand linger for a little too long.

"Another legacy of my father's love. I was five, I think. My mom told me that he suddenly grabbed me and started hopping me on his knee. I was sitting with my back to him, my legs dangling over his knees, and then he opened his legs and feigned letting me fall. Apparently there was a glass on the floor and my leg crashed right into it." She ran her fingers across the scar.

"I have some really big scars," she says.

"Bigger than the one on your head?"

She nods yes and then looks down at her breasts.

"They're huge, aren't they."

I can't laugh because she looks so serious.

"Well, when I was younger they were absolutely enormous." She holds her hands out in front of her breasts and cups the air. "I was a thirty-seven double-D when I was fifteen. I had to put deodorant under them otherwise they'd start stinking. They were so heavy; and nobody would ever look at my face when they spoke to me. Ever. So I had an operation to have them reduced. It doesn't really look like it, does it?"

"I don't know . . . but they left scars?"

"Yes. They said it wouldn't be noticeable, but it really is, and I'm sure they're much less sensitive."

She looks up at me for a few moments before reaching down and pulling her black sweater up above her white bra, and then unhitching the bra and pulling that up also. Her breasts hang heavy and shapeless. The nipples are sunken, the right one completely inverted. She holds her sweater under her chin and pulls her left breast up a little. I can see the scar, thick, red, and glossy against her flour-white skin. She takes my hand, and releases it over the scar. I run my fingers across its smooth relief.

Then I see him, standing at the base of the stairs, watching.

"Get out," I say.

He's staring at her, his face impassive, his eyebrows knitted, while her face confronts him, indomitable and blunt. I stand up.

"Get out!"

Unhurried, she replaces her bra and rolls her sweater down. She leaves.

He lets my last imperative languish in the air before he turns around and walks back upstairs.

She's waiting for me beside her blue Escort. We stand in a shallow down of snow, flakes funnelling through the streetlight. I give her a lily that I broke from one of the arrangements. She holds it, perplexed and sad, as if it were money. I'm ashamed. I feel so tense. I don't want her to go. Her right bra strap is exposed, pushed up to her neck by the collar of her sweater. We wait, face to face, like strangers standing in some interminable elevator. Our speech becomes desultory and hesitant, the silences precipitous. She says she has to go, and throws her hand out perfunctorily for me to take. Our hands remain precariously together, her eyes reluctant and satirical. I watch the snow gather upon her hair, and think of that tissue of ice forming over the water, my brother throwing his hand toward me, of those moments I might have entered my mother's world, the smoke from her notebooks finally severing us. My father was the intent, and I was the action, and between us lay the vast cold lake into which my brother, his son, and my mother, his wife, had sunk. I tipped them both over the edge, my brother into death, my mother into a new life as she stood in the context of the old. That is what my father and I still are, that shed context, the withered matrix of her new incarnation. A gust of wind blows a mist of snow between us from her car's roof. The wind dies. Merely falling again, the snow is a tangible gravity, a soft contouring, time accumulating steadily upon us. I lift her living, cold hand to my lips and kiss it. Roger and his future wife stood, a bow against the wind, both panting, laughing, holding her hat between them, their cheeks attrited red, and Roger, feeling a bit suave after his quip, looked into her harried, robust face and found himself yielding, thinking that life was a long time to be alone. In the end, he never managed to be anything but right.