**Rabbit Remembered**

John Updike

Chapter 1

JANICE HARRISON goes to the front door when the old bell scrapes the silence. Decades of rust have all but destroyed its voice, the thing will die entirely some day, the clapper freezing or the wires shorting out or whatever they do. Whenever she says she wants to call the electrician, Ronnie tells her it’s on his list of home improvements, he’ll get to it. He likes to do things himself. Harry was all for letting other people do them.

A twinge in her hip slows her progress out from the sunny worn kitchen, through the dining room, whose shades are drawn to keep the Oriental rug from fading and the polished mahogany tabletop from drying out, into the front room, where the reproduction cobbler’s bench in front of the gray cut-plush sofa causes a detour that has worn a pale path in the carpet. A big brown Zenith television, its top loaded with her mother’s dusty knickknacks, blankly stares where her father’s Barcalounger used to be. They don’t sit out here and watch on the sofa like they used to. Ronnie likes the little Sony in the kitchen for the evening news, watching while he eats, and Nelson when he’s stuck at home after work has the computer upstairs that he says is more fun than television because it’s interactive. He wasn’t so interactive with his wife that Teresa didn’t move back to Ohio with the two children over a year ago. He and Roy, who is fourteen now, do a lot of e-mail, mostly rude jokes (one especially shocking joke this summer went *Remember when the Kennedys used to drown only one woman at a time?),* as if e-mail was as good as having a real father under the same roof.

Often Janice doesn’t hear the bell at all, even when she’s in the house or the backyard garden. She finds pinched in the door these notices from deliverymen who had to go away or cards from salesmen who didn’t get to make their pitch. She’s grateful for that but still it makes her feel isolated; suppose somebody rang she was dying to see? She doesn’t know who that would be, though. So many she cared about are dead.

The heavy walnut door with its tall sidelights of frosted glass patterned in floral arabesques, the door that she has been going in and out of most of her life off and on, has been swollen and sticking all summer with a humidity that never produced rain. Now it swings open more easily, with a dry crack, fall crispness being in the air at last. The girl—woman, really, close to Nelson’s age—who stands on the front porch looks vaguely familiar. She has a broad white face, her eyes wide-spaced with some milk in their blue and middle-aged crinkles at the corners beginning to develop. Taller than Janice by a bit, she fills her beige summer dress well, the cotton taut across her bosom and lap. She wears a navy-blue sweater draped over her shoulders like the young women at the Pearson and Schrack Realty office do, manning their glowing computers, giving a businesslike air. She asks, “Mrs. Angstrom?”

Janice is taken aback. “I was,” she allows. “My husband’s name now is Harrison.”

The girl blushes. “I’m sorry, I did know that. I wasn’t thinking.” The girl’s milky-blue eyes widen and Janice feels this stranger is actually trembling, her body aquiver in its careful quiet clothes, a creature somehow trapped on the welcome mat, in the rectangular shade of the brick-pillared porch.

Behind her, cars swish by on Joseph Street with a fresh dry sound. A shiny-new, brick-red Lexus stands at the dappled curb, under the still-green maples. A cloud passes overhead and the shadow is almost chilling: that’s how you feel the new season, the shadows are sharper and darker, and the crickets sing under everything. With the terrible drought this summer the leaves are turning early, those of the horse chestnuts curling brown at the edges, and the front yards where no one has watered have turned to flattened straw, a look Janice remembers from childhood, when you are closer to the ground and summer is endless.

“My mother died two months ago,” the girl begins again, taking a breath to steady her trembling, both her hands holding a small striped purse in front of her belly.

“I’m sorry,” Janice says. Nelson deals with crazy people at his work all the time and says they’re not to be afraid of. She deals with people trying to buy or sell houses, the most money a lot of them will ever have to think about, and they can get high-strung and irrational, too.

“I’ve never married, she was all the family I had.”

So, despite her respectable clothes, this is a beggar. “I’m sorry,” Janice says again, in a harder tone, “but I don’t believe I can help.” Her hand moves to swing the heavy door shut. Nelson is off at the treatment center and Ronnie playing golf at the club with some other retirees so she is alone in the house. Not that the girl looks violent. But she is bigger than Janice, bigger-boned, with a dangerous fullness to her being there, as if defiantly arrived at the end of a long wavering, like a client taking the plunge of offering thirty thousand more than she can afford. Her eyes are set in squarish sockets showing the puffy look of sleeplessness and her hair, cut raggedly short the way they do it now, is mixed of light-brown and darker-brown and gray strands.

“I don’t think you can either,” she agrees. “But my mother thought you might.” “Did I ever know your mother?”

“No, you never met. You knew each other existed, though.”

Janice does wish Nelson were here. He could tell at a glance if this person were over the edge, and give it one of those names he had— bipolar, schizophrenic, paranoid, psychotic. Psychotic, you see and hear things, and can murder without meaning it, and then in court seem so innocent. The varnished grain of the door under her hand calls out as a potential shield and a slammed end to this encounter, but the something pleasant and kind and calm about the girl, who is these as well as troubled and trembling, holds the door open. The dry warm air of this early-fall day in southeastern Pennsylvania—children tucked back into school, the mid- morning streets quiet, the vegetables in the backyard gardens harvested or gone to seed—lies on Janice’s face as a breath from the past, her visitor having come from this same terrain.

“I nursed her at the end, she didn’t like hospitals, they made her feel penned up,” the light, considerate, shaky voice goes on.

“This is your mother,” Janice says, in spite of herself entering in.

“Yes, and of course being a nurse I could do that, administer the meds and see that she was kept turned in the bed and all that. Only it was strange, doing it for your mother. Her body had all these meanings for me. She didn’t like being touched, as long as she had strength. Though she could come on free and easy with some people, she was really a freak about her privacy, even with me. She didn’t like telling me anything, except then when she knew she was dying.”

The girl as her nervousness eased has skipped a stage of her story without being aware of it. “What did you say this had to do with me?” Janice asks.

“Oh. I guess—I guess you were married to my father.”

A mail truck coasts by, one of those noseless vans they have now, white with a red and blue stripe. They used to be solid green, like military vehicles. Mailmen used to be men; now theirs is a mail-lady, a young woman with long sun-bleached hair and stocky tan legs in shorts who pushes her pouch on a three-wheeled cart ahead of her along the sidewalk. It is not time for her to go by yet, but across Joseph Street, another young woman comes out on the righthand porch of the semi-detached house opposite. For years and years that address was occupied by a couple that had seemed old and changeless to her. Then they went off to assisted living, and a young couple has moved in, with hanging plants on the porch they fuss at, and music that booms out over the neighborhood through the window screens, and two small children who go to pre- school.

“Maybe you should come inside,” Janice says, stepping back invitingly, though admitting to her home this piece of a shameful dead past disgusts as well as frightens her.

Inside, the girl, her face and arms as white as if summer had never been, hangs in the dim-lit living-room clutter like one more piece of furniture that time’s slow earthquake has jostled out of place. She seems, as Harry used to, a bit out of scale. Janice is used to her house with average-sized people in it, herself and Nelson and Ronnie, though Ronnie’s Alex is big, when he visits from Virginia, and Judy and Roy when they lived here took up plenty of space with their music and games and sibling competition. Though with one a girl and the other a boy and over four years between them it wasn’t as bad as it could have been.

“Would you like any coffee?” Janice asks. “Or tea—that’s what my husband drinks now, for his blood pressure, and now I’ve got the habit.”

“No, honestly—I couldn’t take anything on my stomach right now. I’ve been thinking of what I’d say for so long, and then it came out all backward. My name is Annabelle Byer.”

Janice is used to hearing the word as “buyer.” For every seller there is a buyer.

“Like I said, I’m single. I’m going to be forty next year. I’m a practical nurse, at St. Joe’s for thirteen years, and these last five I’ve been in home care, those that need an L.P.N., though the number that can afford it is going down, with the tightening up of what Medicare will pay for.”

“Do sit down at least,” Janice says, to reduce the interloper’s radiant, unsettling bulk. The girl sits on the sofa, where like everybody else she sinks down lower than she expects, her bare knees brightly upthrust. A few hasty tugs on her skirt reduce the amount of thigh that shows. Janice takes the green wing chair, with the matching arm doilies, folding her hands palm-up in her lap as her mother used to do, setting herself to listen, if the thudding of her heart lets her. Her heart is caught in a net of calculation as to how this innocently disgusting intrusion will affect her life and disturb her peace. With Ronnie being so steady compared to Harry, she has known peace.

“My mother worried that I hadn’t married,” Annabelle tells her, from her relaxed voice already more at home than Janice thinks is quite seemly. “She wondered if it had been her fault, making me distrust men, or sex or something, out of her own experience. I would tell her, That’s silly. Dad, as I called him, was a wonderful man. He died when I was sixteen, but still I grew up with this good masculine image. He would toss me all around, even when I was eleven or so, and taught me to ride the tractor and whatever all else a child can do to help run a farm—pick apples and strawberries and feed the chickens and whack back the bushes and poison ivy. We even did carpentry together and he taught me to shoot his gun. I had two brothers, Scott and Morris, I always got along good with—being country children, we did a lot together. And then I had boyfriends, normal enough, though I guess compared to city boys they were shy, but after high school I got a job as a nurse’s aide in a nursing home called Sunnyside, out toward the old fairgrounds—?”

She is checking to see if Janice is listening. Janice nods and says, “I’ve heard of it. Sunnyside.”

“And then I went for a year’s degree and passed the boards and after I entered service at St. Joe’s the boys weren’t so shy, some of them were even married doctors, but some weren’t, and it all seemed normal to me except, you know, lightning never struck, the question never got popped. Maybe I didn’t want to hear it. I’d tell my mother, It’s no big deal, if it happens it happens, you’re still a person, but it worried her sick, somehow, that I stayed independent, as if she were preventing something, especially after she sold the farm and I asked her to move in with me, we could manage a larger place together, over on Eisenhower Avenue—”

Janice’s heart jumps. She once lived on Eisenhower Avenue, with Charlie Stavros, at number 1204, back in the Sixties, when everybody was going crazy. But it shouldn’t surprise her; the stately street, fallen away from its heyday of one-family mansions staffed by black or Irish servants, was where the better, safer rentals were, for misfits like her and Charlie or then this girl and her mother.

“—she would be so afraid of being in the way, she’d tell me she’d stay in her room if I brought back a man, but actually I had lived alone in Brewer enough to be wary of bringing men back, they can get rough, and I was in my thirties by then and the good men were married to somebody else. When she saw she was dying— by the time the tumors were detected, oat-cell carcinoma of the lung, the cancer had spread to the lymph system and the bones—she told me that I had more family than I knew. She told me that Dad hadn’t been my real father, that he had loved her enough to take her with somebody else’s baby. I wasn’t a year old, my grandparents in West Brewer were taking care of me while she worked in this restaurant over toward Stogey’s Quarry, where she met my—where she met Frank Byer. He moved fast—I guess his own mother had died not long before and a farm needs a woman.

Not that he wasn’t crazy about her—he was. He was in his forties and she in her twenties and I could see when I got to be, you know, observant that they still had a lot going between them. He kidded her about being fat but then he was fat himself.”

Janice hates hearing about these very common people. “Didn’t you wonder,” she asks impatiently, “how you were born before your parents married?” Through the semi-transparent curtain across the front-room picture window—glass curtains they call them, though they’re just cloth—she can see that the woman across the street is still out on her porch, fussing idly with a long-nosed watering can, as if she is listening. But at this distance she can’t be. The girl’s being here seems shameful to Janice. Shameful and shameless.

“Well, they were vague,” Annabelle tells her. “You know how it is to be a child, you assume everything around you is just naturally the way it is, you grow into it. Scott was only a year behind me in school; the cut-off date came in February and I was born in January and he in November of the next year. I was always the youngest in my grade, maybe that’s one of the reasons I always felt, you know, so innocent. The other kids always seemed to know more than I did, and did things. I was always the good girl who went straight home when the school bus did.”

The girl is beginning to talk to Janice as if she’s an aunt of sorts, if not her mother. Janice doesn’t consider herself a great success as a mother and doesn’t want to try it again. She asks, though, “Are you sure you wouldn’t like to have any coffee? I must make myself a cup of tea, there are so many questions buzzing around in my head. This is quite some news you’re bringing, if it’s true.”

She stands up, but then so does Annabelle, and follows her into the kitchen, when Janice had hoped to put a little distance between them, to think in. It’s like the Jehovah’s Witnesses you let past the door, they seem such poor pasty souls, yet get you so entangled, one Bible quote after another, all these headlines that prove something in Revelations, YOU feel you’ll never get free of them. She doesn’t like being crowded in her own kitchen. She has never been very clever at household tasks, it used to make Harry sarcastic (not that his mother had been any Martha Stewart or that he was Mr. Handy himself, unlike Ronnie or that nice Webb Murkett they used to know), so for Janice it has been a relief to switch with Ronnie, after his doctor advised him, from coffee to tea. She never used to get the amount of grounds right, whereas with tea you put the bag in the mug and the mug in the microwave and that’s all there is to it. She uses plain old Lipton, it used to sponsor some radio program she listened to as a girl, the drip-drip song, or was that Maxwell House? Doris Kaufmann and others keep urging her to try herbal tea, or jasmine or green tea that is now supposed to be so good for you, preventing everything from hiccups to colon cancer, but Janice can’t see the point of a drink with no kick in it at all.

It takes two minutes and twenty seconds to heat. Annabelle watches the electronic countdown for a while and then moves to the back windows, looking through the sunporch. “What a nice sunny back yard,” she says. “The front of the house is so dark.”

“The maples. They keep growing. We’ve lost some trees over the years. There was a beautiful big copper beech shading the side that I miss. Are you sure you wouldn’t like a drink of something?” Janice can’t bring herself to use the girl’s pretentious, storybook name. She is thinking that what she herself really wants, to cushion this shock, and get her through this strangeness, is a glass of dry sherry.

“A glass of water would be lovely.""Just water? With ice?""Oh no, not ice. You’d be amazed at the amount of microbes that live in ice.”

Harry had always made her feel impure, even when he was in the wrong. She hands the girl her tumbler of clear liquid. Fingerprints on fingerprints. Now they use DNA—not that O.J. didn’t go free anyway. That long- legged prosecutor outsmarted herself, and that black lawyer was slick. The girl seems minded from the way she faces to go out the back door and sit on the sunporch with its view of the vegetable garden and the old swing set, but Janice firmly heads back to the living room, gloomy and little used. It’s on the way out. She has the girl go first and lags behind her enough to snatch the Taylor sherry bottle from inside the dining-room sideboard and unscrew the cap and tip a little into her tea. The hearty, tawny tang of the liquor arises and erases the antiseptic scent the girl trails, a kind of cool mouthwash, from the back of her neck and her bare arms. “So I expect you’ve told me about all there is to know,” she says when they have settled again, on the same furniture.

Annabelle does not concede this. She resumes, “I was saying about my parents, as a child I never knew when they got married, and when I grew old enough to be curious, my mother allowed that maybe I had come before the wedding, since Dad’s mother was still alive but ailing and a marriage might have hastened her death. This seemed to figure, it being back in 1960, before things got liberal.”

*What got liberal?Janice* asks herself. Abortion, she supposes. And young couples living together. Rut these things happened then too, only deeper in the dark. The year 1959 seems very close, as close as the beating of her heart, which beat then too, back in the tunnel of time, that same faithful muscle, in its darkness and blood. She doesn’t want to prolong the discussion, though; she doesn’t want to get involved, though there is a tug, back into the past’s sad damp pit.

The girl seems to read her mind. “Yes, my mother described it,” she says, “the, whatever you could call it, affair. She and my—she and your husband, Mr. Angstrom, lived together I guess on Summer Street for three months. He never knew if she had gone ahead and had me or not. I knew him, you know. I met him a few times, without knowing who he was. I mean, his relation to me. He was once a patient when I was still at St. Joe’s. An angioplasty, I think it was. He was a charmer. Full of jokes.”

“He died in Florida,” Janice says accusingly, “not six months later. Of a heart attack. He was only fifty-six.” As if these hard facts, so hard to her at the time, might force Harry and this girl apart.

“He should have had a bypass, it sounds like. They weren’t quite as standard then.”

“He didn’t want it. He didn’t want to have his body meddled with. He was afraid of it.” Janice’s voice startles her by cracking, and her eyes by burning near tears, as if accusing herself of not making Harry’s life worth living. She hadn’t called him down in Florida, when he had wanted her to. He had been begging for her forgiveness, and she hadn’t given it.

“And then before that,” this girl insensitively is going on, “when I was still an aide at Sunnyside, a boy I knew back in Galilee called Jamie and I—we were living together, actually, in a little apartment on Youngquist Boulevard, the building went condo and that broke us up, but that’s I guess another story—went to look at Toyotas over on Route 111. We bought one, eventually, though not that day, when Mr. Angstrom was there. He seemed so nice, I was struck. He paid attention to me, he didn’t just talk to the man, or try to pressure us the way car salesmen like to.”

“It wasn’t exactly his calling, selling,” Janice volunteers. “He didn’t really have a calling, after high school.”

But how beautiful he had been, Janice remembers, in those high-school halls—the height of him, the fine Viking hair slicked back in a ducktail but trailing off in lank sexy strands like Alan Ladd’s across his forehead, the way he would flick it back with his big graceful white hands while kidding with the other seniors, like that tall girlfriend of his called Mary Ann, his lids at cocky sleepy half-mast, the world of those halls his, him paying no attention of course to her, a ninth-grader, a runt. They didn’t begin with each other until they both worked at Kroll’s in Brewer, she behind the nut and candy cases and he back from his two years in the Army, having been in Texas and never sent to die in Korea after all. He often mentioned Korea as if he had missed out on something by not going there to fight and coming back home to a peaceful life instead. Nobody wants war but men don’t want only peace either.

“Yes,” Annabelle hisses, too eager to agree, not really understanding how simple we all were back then, “he was a wonderful athlete, I remember the clippings up in the showroom, and then my mother said. She had gone to another high school, that used to play his. She talked a lot about him, once she got started, before she...went. I know about you, and Nelson, and the time your house burnt down, my mother kept track of all that in the papers, I guess. She was interested. The way she spoke, at the end, she didn’t have any grudge. It was the times, she said. He was caught, what else could he do? Anyway, I was no prize, she would tell me.”

Ruth and her views, beneath consideration these many years, have invaded the living room. “My goodness” is all Janice can think to say, as the sherry moves into her veins and begins to tint this nightmare a more agreeable color. What harm could what happened forty years ago do her now?

“He visited her, you know,” this young woman goes on, her gestures growing freer, her body bigger as she crosses and recrosses her white legs on the sofa, the beige cotton dress riding higher on her thighs. Her hair, too, seems too short, and bounces a bit too much as her head comes forward. There is some vanity, some push, in that hair—its many-colored thickness, its trendy trampy cut, long and short mixed up together. “The year he died, I guess. Somehow he had found our farm.”

“He did?” This is horrible. Harry’s affair with Thelma she and Ronnie have together buried, never mentioning it once they were past the courtship stage of confessing everything. They had triumphed, they were the survivors, Harry and Thelma were shades, corpses, sinking deeper into bloodlessness in their buried coffins, their skins crumbling, drawing tight like that little sacrificed Peruvian girl they found on the mountaintop, unbearable to think about. But to hear now that at the same time he was seeing Thelma he was chasing that fat old slut all over Diamond County is as if Harry from beyond the grave is denying her peace just as he did when alive. He couldn’t just be ordinary, respectable, dependable. He thought he was beyond that. This girl, both shy and sassy, pleasant yet with something not quite right about her, is his emissary from the grave. Janice wants nothing to do with it, with her. She asks, “Why would he do that?”

The girl puts her knees together to lean forward for emphasis but her dress is so short the triangle of her panties shows anyway. “To find out about me, my mother said. She wouldn’t tell him. She wanted to keep me pure from him. Then I guess when she saw she would be, you know, leaving me, she had second thoughts and wanted me to *know.”* The girl’s eyes are less milky now, here in the muted living-room light, and flash with importance, the importance her story gives her.

“*Why?”* Janice cries, fighting back a pressure. “Why not let the past lie? Why stir up what can’t be helped? Excuse me,” she says. “I must refresh my tea.” She doesn’t even pretend to go into the kitchen, she pours some more dry sherry into the cup right there at the sideboard, where the girl could see if she turned sideways to look. But back in the front room Annabelle sits staring across at the heavy green glass egg, with a bubble inside, on top of the dead television with the other knickknacks Bessie Springer had collected as a sign of her prosperity as Daddy’s car business took hold. Mother and her fur coat, Mother and her blue Chrysler—it was a simpler world back then, when your pride was satisfied with such things. The girl, with all that leg bared by sitting low on the sofa and her navy sweater fallen off her naked arms, has a sluttish way of putting forth her body that must be her own mother living in her. And there is a blandness, a fatherless blankness, her face in profile taking the light as mutely as the egg of green glass.

She senses Janice’s eye on her and turns her face and says, “It’s so embarrassing, isn’t it? My turning up like this. Embarrassing to me, embarrassing to you.” She has a plump upper lip that gives her smile a childish, questioning quality. She looks easy to bruise.

“Well,” Janice pronounces, back in her wing chair with a fortified mug whose healing tang settles her more broadly in the pose of authority. She vowed years ago never to let herself run to fat like her mother did but she did admire the way in her last years, her husband gone, her generation dying off, Mother took charge of things, keeping a grip on the family pocketbook, standing up for her notions of decency and propriety. Living here in this house, Janice feels still surrounded by her—Bessie Springer’s adamant unchanging furniture, her fixed sense of her own worth. Koerner mulishness, Mother would call it when being funny at her own expense. “Maybe that was your mother’s idea, to embarrass everybody,” Janice tells the girl. “What earthly good did she think telling you all this would do, at your age? Make mischief, is the sum of it. And who’s to say it’s true, any of it?” Though she feels it is—a whiff of Harry, a pale glow, an unsettling drift comes off this girl, this thirty-nine-year-old piece of evidence.

“Oh, she wouldn’t have made it up, it *poured* out of her. It wasn’t her nature, to make things up. She used to say of these detective novels she was always reading, 'How do they make all this up? They must have a screw loose.' And she showed me my birth certificate, at a hospital in Pottstown. 'Father unknown,' it said.”

“Well, that’s it, unknown,” Janice presses on, like a lawyer urging a case she knows is bad.

“You asked why,” Annabelle says. “I think she thought"– suddenly tears reflect light in her eyes, the plump upper lip quivers out of control—"you people could help me, somehow.” She laughs at her own tears, quickly swipes at her face with expert hands, hands used to giving—rubbing, holding, patting, seizing— a nurse’s care. “I was so alone, she must have thought. I haven’t had a serious relationship for years. And my brothers, Scott went to Seattle and Morris to Delaware—he was the angriest when she sold the farm and moved in with me in Brewer. He had thought he could work the place and live on it but it wouldn’t have been fair for her to have left it all to him. Not that a farm that size could support anybody any more. Even my dad—even Frank—had to run the township school buses to make ends meet.”

“Is this about money, then?” Janice asks, alert now, the muddle showing its nub. Money is something she has a feel for; it’s in her Springer veins. She acted as accountant for her father, and then for Nelson as best she could, until he had so much to hide. Ronnie has his own savings and pension but she handles her inheritance still, when the CDs come due and at what interest and how to keep capital-gains taxes from biting into the mutual funds: the managers of some run up gains just to make their annual reports look good. This girl won’t get a penny from her. Janice sips from her mug and looks at the interloper levelly.

Annabelle considers the question, rolling her eyes upward. “No-o, I don’t think so. I clear twenty an hour from the agency and often work twelve-hour shifts. My mother left us a fair amount, even divided by three. The farm had only a tiny mortgage on it, in terms of today’s money. And she held down a respectable job, the last fifteen years, with this investments advisory firm in the new glass building downtown. She used to laugh at herself, putting on heels and pantyhose every morning, after being such a country slob. She got her weight down to one fifty-five.”

“It’s wonderful to work,” Janice concedes. “Women of our generation came late to it.” It disquiets her to link herself with Ruth, Ruth the unspeakable, holding her husband captive on the other side of Mt. Judge, Ruth the treacherous mucky underside of everything respectable.

“No, it’s not about money,” Annabelle says, edging herself forward on the sofa preparatory to getting to her feet, readjusting the sweater about her shoulders, and regripping her little purse, striped yellow, black, and red. “It was about family, I guess. But never mind, Mrs. Harrison. I can see you’d rather not get involved, and that’s no surprise, to be honest. It was my mother’s idea, and she was half out of her head with the medications. Dying people aren’t the most sensible, often, though you’d think they should be. I did this for her and not for me, because she asked me to.” She stands, looking down on Janice.

“Well now, wait.”

“You’ve been patient, actually. I know what a shock it must be.” Those deft, solid hands fiddle with her hair, its artful tousle, as if it were she who had felt the shock.

Janice says in her own defense, “You can’t just show up and drop a thing like this on a body.”

“I didn’t know how else to do it. It didn’t seem the sort of thing to put in a letter or over the phone.” Trained to move fast, she takes the few steps it needs to the door, and puts her hand on the doorknob, an old- fashioned one with a raised design worn shiny with the years, like brass lace. She tugs the sticky door open with a snap that leaves a little reverberation in the air, a cry that dies away.

There is a poignance in this strong female body, the way it moves almost like a man’s, like those women soccer players who beat China this summer. Janice keeps losing daughters: Becky, and then Teresa leaving Nelson after nearly twenty years, and Judy at nineteen secretive and surly, living entirely within her whispering Walkman headset, shutting out her grandmother. She begins, “Annabelle, I’m sorry if I seemed stupid—”

“You did not seem stupid. I seemed stupid. You seemed suspicious, and why not? Thank you for the glass of water.”

“I need to think, and talk to Ronnie and Nelson.”

“Nelson. That’s right. My brother. I think of him as a little boy. My mother said how, those months they were together, your husband was always talking about him, upset about him.”

Now the girl is out on the porch, standing on the coco-fiber welcome mat, thin late-morning traffic making its whisper behind her, the dusty tired nibbled maple leaves throwing sun-dotted shadow down on the new red Lexus parked by the curb. Bought with her inheritance, Janice guesses. The nosy young neighbor across the street was off her porch at last. “How can we reach you, if we need to?”

Annabelle’s feet, in low beige heels, drum on the porch boards, then stop. She turns to say, “I’m in the book. B-Y-E-R. I’m listed as 'A.,' the only one with just that letter. Don’t call after nine at night, please. I get up at five-thirty.” Her mother’s toughness shows. “But you don’t have to call at all.” Then her bright round face is a child’s again; she smiles the way children do, in sudden blurred forgiveness. “I won’t expect it. It was nice to meet you. I had thought you’d be shorter.”

“When I was married to your father,” Janice says, high enough on the sherry to attempt a joke, “I looked shorter.”

It feels then that she is sneaking through the rest of the day, flickering through the parched September brightness in her black Le Baron convertible, with gray cloth interior, a 1995, the last year they made this model. She wonders why Chrysler discontinued it. Janice loves this car, the way it handles, the way she imagines she looks in it, her head in a fluttering headscarf and her DKNY sunglasses. Buying the Le Baron five years ago was the most extravagant thing she ever did for herself, as a widow at least. Not that she was still a widow after she married Ronnie. She was a second wife and he her second husband. There is a kind of racy glamour in a second marriage, though it can never be like the first, so solemn, both of you so serious with the vows and the being together all night every night and nobody saying no, and all your parents still alive and watching if you make a mistake. She had made a mistake, a terrible one, and others besides, if you consider Charlie a mistake, which she never could, really. He freed her up and restored her sense of worth. And the strangest thing was he kept Harry’s friendship and even on her mother’s good side—he knew how to get around Bessie Springer. Dear Charlie died two or was it three years ago, living alone in an apartment in the southwest section of Brewer, the old Polish and Greek blocks before the Hispanics moved in, they found him on the sofa dead with an unfolded newspaper on his chest, just closed his eyes for a nap and slipped away. Charlie was like that, understated in everything, his poor weak heart that she was always worried about straining during lovemaking just coolly decided at last to stop. Like the death of your parents it leaves you with one less witness to your life when a man you loved dies. Looking back from this distance, she can’t think any more that Harry was all to blame for their early troubles, he had been just trying life on too: life and sex and making babies and finding out who you are. Second marriages were lighter. You just expect a little companionship, a little fun that harms no one else. Nelson kids her about the convertible, calls it her Batmobile, but she knows it’s just his disappointments talking, his own marriage such a sad fizzle, not even a real divorce. He says he can’t afford it, and Teresa doesn’t want it until Roy is eighteen. Or until, Janice thinks, the right man comes along, out there in Akron.

Odd, after all those years of Daddy’s Toyotas, she has gone back to American cars. Ronnie never left. Married to Thelma, he drove a succession of an insurance salesman’s drab, safe cars, modest but adequate like the benefits your loved ones reap when you’re out of the picture as they say, she can’t remember the makes, Chevrolets or Fords. Just thinking about those years, Thelma having an affair with Harry almost right up to when she died, gives Janice a hollow sore feeling. Now Ronnie drives a new Taurus, a silvery gray like a Teflon skillet, with the 1999 styling turning everything into oval blobs—the taillights and headlights and recessed door handle shaped alike, and the back, where the trunk lifts up, a continuous blob across, like a mustache or a roll of pre-mixed cookie dough being squeezed in the middle. Cars used to have such dashing shapes, like airplanes, back when gas was cheap, twenty-five cents a gallon.

At noon she shows a house over in a new development south of Maiden Springs to a young couple who had hoped for something smaller. They don’t build new houses small any more, Janice has to tell them, land is too expensive and people have too much money. And yet this same couple looks horrified at a perfectly nice and well-kept-up row house on the north side of Brewer, with a terraced front yard planted in English ivy and a third floor converted to an apartment (outside stairs) for some additional income until they need the space when their family expands. “Is it a,” the young man asks, “a mixed neighborhood?” He may be in his mid- twenties but already looks overweight and soft, and fussy and potentially irritable as fat people are, being pinched by their clothes and strained by lugging their bodies around. So many young people now, even the girl this morning, have a sunless indoor look. Janice has always taken a good tan, one of the few things she could always like about herself. That, and her legs never being piano legs.

She tells him cheerfully, “There may be a few upwardly mobile minorities living a block or so down, but it’s basically upper-middle-income families, perfectly safe for you and your children when they come along. It’s an area that has kept its corner groceries and little service shops, a lot of people now are moving back from the suburbs to enjoy the convenience of city life, the stimulation of it. They *want* the ethnic variety, for their children as well as themselves. Trendy restaurants are opening up around here, and some new boutiques coming into upper Weiser Street, where the buildings have been boarded up so long. Believe me, inner city is *in* now.”

“I can’t imagine myself pregnant climbing all those steps,” the female prospective buyer says, looking up the long terraced slope, with its concrete steps and pipe railing painted a swimming-pool greeny blue to match the gingerbread porch trim. As these blocks, with their industrial repetition of steps, retaining walls, porches, fanlighted doors, and shingled steep gables, passed from the ownership of the Pennsylvania-German working class to that of a more varied population, the trim and window frames and doors were painted more festively, in carnival colors—teal, canary yellow, purple, a pale aqua like some warm remembered sea.

*Generations have,* Janice restrains herself from saying. *The exercise would do you good, Miss Prissy-pants. “*Some people build carports out back,” she says. “You need a permit but it’s legal. If you don’t want even to walk up and look, let’s see what new listings come in next week. The ones in your range get snapped up pretty quickly. It’s hard to believe, considering all the hard times the region has known, but there’s a bit of a real-estate boom on in Diamond County. To be safe buyers offer over the asking price. People from Philadelphia retire here now. They say they love the slower pace, the friendliness.” And yet, she does not add, Brewer all the years of her growing up was considered a fast, crummy town, a town run by gangsters and crooked cops and the enforcers for the steel and coal and textile companies, a town where children could buy numbers slips at the cigar store and so-called cathouses filled the half-streets around the railroad station.

It queasily occurs to her that from where she is standing, here on the high side of Locust Boulevard with its big view of densely built blocks—bricks and asphalt shingles and treetops—falling away down to the curving river a mile away, a descending view pierced by the county courthouse with its boxlike glass annex and the other glass box across from where Kroll’s used to be, she is only a few streets above Summer, where that girl this morning was conceived, if you can believe her story. The thought makes Janice feel sick yet at the same time exalted, as if she stands on the lip of a canyon that only she can see. She lives; those who had worked her humiliation in that far-off season are dead.

She doesn’t go back to Mt. Judge for lunch, where the mail-lady will have left bills and advertisements in the foyer, and the afternoon sun will be swinging around into the living room, inserting a wedge of golden dust moles behind the Zenith. She doesn’t want to go back to the house, it’s been spoiled by that girl’s visit, the past rising up like that. Instead she has a tuna-salad sandwich and Diet Coke at the West Brewer Diner, which is open twenty-four hours a day. They used to come over here after dances in Mt. Judge, and the place has changed owners and generations of waitresses have come and gone, but the layout, the low booths along the windows on two sides and the long counter backed by quilled aluminum with the slot where the cooks serve the orders up and even the little individual jukeboxes with pages of pop and country classics, is unchanged.

A slender dark-browed girl of startling beauty waits on Janice, such beauty among the middle-aged and pudgy pimpled teen-age other waitresses that Janice’s eyes sting. Dark hair, dark eyes, straight nose, firm round chin, soft mouth. Greek, Italian, Armenian even: Janice being herself dark-complected responds to such looks. When the girl speaks, the county’s comfortable dragged accent—"So, hon, what can I bring ya?"—tumbles out and with it a vision of her sad future: the marriage, the pregnancies, the heavy meals, the lost looks. The blazing beauty dwindled to a shrill spark, a needle of angry discontent lost in these streets lined with row houses and aluminum awnings and little front porches where the patient inhabitants sit and soak in the evening heat and wonder where it all went. The television slowly goes from selling you perfume and designer jeans to selling you Centrum and denture adhesive as used by aged movie stars. It is a mistake to be beautiful when young and Harry made that mistake but not Janice; she still has what Mother called room to grow, back when she thriftily used to buy her daughter’s clothes two sizes too big. She leaves the waitress a dollar tip though the sandwich and Diet Coke came to less than five dollars, counting the quarter she put in the jukebox to hear Patsy Cline’s “Crazy” one more time before she dies. Patsy Cline, dead young in a plane crash just like that poor Kennedy boy. And then it’s not Patsy Cline’s version but that of some young pop “diva,” so that’s a quarter wasted.

West Brewer is on the way to bridge at Doris Kaufmann’s in Penn Park, where the streets get curving and expensive, off the Brewer grid. Her name was Kaufmann when Janice first knew her and then Eberhardt, and a few years ago Eberhardt died and Doris managed to land Henry Dietrich, the grandson of the founder of Dietrich Hosiery, which didn’t close its doors until after the war. To get there Janice has to drive on Weiser past Emberly Avenue, which would lead to Emberly Drive and then to Vista Crescent, where she and Harry and Nelson had lived until the house was burned down by racist neighbors because of what was going on inside. She could hardly blame them, it was terrible what Harry permitted to go on, for whatever selfish reason. How utterly selfish he was she had never realized before marrying Ronnie, who was so responsible and methodical. Some men don’t think before they jump, and others do. And now this thirty-nine-year-old showing up, acting just like him, cocky and innocent.

Janice likes bridge for the socializing and hearing what real estate is doing in Penn Park but today it gives her a slight headache at the back of her skull. First she overbids, and then in compensation underbids, stopping at three spades when they should have been, it turns out, in small slam. Doris, her partner in that round of Chicago, is not pleased, though with pointed good manners she tries not to show it. “With twelve points in your own hand,” she says, shuffling with that ripping sound expert shufflers make, “after I opened, showing at least thirteen in mine, and with four spades including two honors, you might at least have gone to game.”

“Your shift to diamonds confused me. I had only two.”

“I was showing you a second suit *in case.* That’s called communication,” Doris says, slapping down the made deck and picking up a red-filtered Newport she left smoking in her ashtray. She is one of the last women Janice knows who still smoke, though she is close to seventy if not quite there yet; she won’t say.

Janice defends herself: “I thought it might be a convention I didn’t know.” If she has let Doris down in this hand, Doris has let her down lately by becoming *old:* wrinkled even in the flat of her cheeks like Clint Eastwood, her eyelids drooping down on her lashes, her long brown hands like two claws scrabbling at the cards. Doris’s thick bejewelled rings, accumulated residue of her husbands, sit loose on her bony fingers; her bracelets clatter on her wrists. Janice used to admire her knowingness on all subjects but Doris has betrayed her by becoming an irritable, half-deaf know-itall hag. Now she snaps, “I would scarcely be going to a weak two after opening one spade.”

The two other women at the table, which is set up in the Dietrichs’ huge living room like a little life raft at sea, are Amy McNear, who also got into real estate after her husband passed on, and Norma Hammacher, whom Janice when she gets to know her better will ask if she’s related to Linda Hammacher. It was Linda Hammacher, a girl she worked with at Kroll’s, whose apartment and bed over in Brewer with a view of the gas tanks along the river she and Harry used to borrow when they were both at Kroll’s and first going together. Things had happened to her since she was a silly freshman adoring him in the halls. She had let her boyfriend in junior year of high school, Jerry Nagle, feel her up and come against her stomach in his father’s Packard, and then in senior year Warren Bixler used to French-kiss her and use her hand to jerk himself off after the movies, it was gross but really helped her understand what *happened,* and then the summer after graduation Daddy had rented for a month a Methodist camp-meeting cottage in Rehoboth, Delaware, where being in a bathing suit all day and taking a tan deep as a Polynesian’s made her feel loose and free. She fell in that summer with a pack of Washington, D.C., kids raised wild in homes with their fathers off in the service or the diplomatic corps. They would cruise the boardwalk and Baltimore Avenue all day and at night head in cars up to Whiskey Beach, where a big pink house had been owned by a du Pont and slit-eyed tall towers stared out to sea as if still watching for submarines, and the college boys would make something called Purple Jesus with grape juice and vodka in galvanized garbage cans, it was the first time in her life she had drunk anything stronger than beer. She had decided as the weeks wore on that it was time and she let a wide-shouldered boy with a narrow ass from Chevy Chase do it to her, there in the dunes on a sandy blanket, the bonfire just over the shaggy profile of the next dune. She saw the gleam of light on the rubber of the Trojan he put on: that was prudent and considerate of him but probably made it hurt more than it would have with their natural lubrication, it hurt but it was done, she was a full woman as of August 1954, his first name was Grant, how horrible that she had forgotten his last name, but he had to go back with his family the next day, or the day after, and she wouldn’t have let him do it to her again, she was too sore and scared at herself.

“Janice. Your bid,” Doris was saying.

“Pass,” she says, though there are some aces and kings peeping up from the fanned cards. She and Grant wrote for a while but she didn’t like her own handwriting and thinking of things to say and let the correspondence die.

Even then, woozy on Purple Jesus and embarrassed to think somebody from the bonfire party might come up over the dune to pee, she had liked being on her back, supporting the world in the form of this boy’s hard- breathing body, knowing she was built to take it, his painful thrusts, his whimper as he came. Men are surprisingly touching when they come, so grateful for a minute. There had been a boyfriend or two after that, while she worked in the office of Daddy’s used-car business, filing and keeping accounts, before he got the Toyota franchise and anybody had heard of a Japanese car, but away from the beach sun she seemed to lose something, what little glamour she had, which was why she had liked Florida eventually. To get away from her parents, she was turning twenty and nothing was happening, she took the job at Kroll’s, behind the nut-and- candy counter, the white smock they gave her had “Jan” stitched on the pocket when her parents had always called her her full name “Janice,” pronouncing it juicily, decisively, their only child, prized, protected. At Kroll’s there turned out to be, working at the most menial job, in shipping and receiving, this tall beautiful guy she remembered from Mt. Judge High, where he had been the star of the basketball team when she had been a runty freshman with skinned-back hair bangs couldn’t hide. He also ran the 440 and the mile relay for track but it was for basketball that people remembered him by then, those that did. He seemed lost and funny, apologetic almost, after his two years in the Army and a few dead-end jobs. It was with him for the first time, thinking about it all day behind the counter, that she knew, just as certain as falling asleep, as plain as taking a meal or inserting a Tampax, that she was going to make love, fuck and be fucked, instead of just letting it happen against her better judgment the way it usually was. With everybody else on the street doing everyday things, they would drive down Warren Avenue in Harry’s old Nash toward Linda Hammacher’s pipe-frame bed, which squeaked and jerked back and forth so much they got to laughing sometimes and had to finish on the floor, her back pressed on the threadbare carpet and all the dust mice under the bed a few feet from her face, plus a single flesh-colored forgotten slipper. Harry was less methodical and steady a lover than Ronnie is, less big, not that it matters the way men think, but she was so excited by his shining torso naked above her and her memory of how heroic he had been on the court gleaming with sweat that she would come, pushing up shamelessly once he was rooted inside her. It helped to be down there in the floor grit. She was slow at some things but not at coming. Even now at the age of sixty-three she gets compliments from Ronnie. She smiles to herself at this secret of hers.

Everybody passes. Doris glances around suspiciously and says, “There must have been some points out there. I had only three, a jack and a queen.”

While Norma redeals the cards Janice dares ask her, “Norma, are you by any chance a relation of a Linda Hammacher? She and I worked at Kroll’s together, back in the Fifties.”

Norma pauses, the cards freezing in her hands. “I had a second cousin Linda.” “Where is she now?”

“She died.”

“Oh no! Well, I guess we’re getting to that age.”

“It was years ago. She was young, relatively. It was rather mysterious.” “How so?” Janice asks.

“Some said of AIDS, though the paper said just of a long illness. Her family didn’t like to talk about it. She had been married and divorced.”

“Oh dear,” Janice says, truly shocked; a piece of remembered happiness has been poisoned.

“It was very tragic,” Norma pronounces. “Damn. Count your cards. I should have the last one, and I don’t.”

As if to comfort Janice for having distracted the dealer, Amy during the next deal fills her in on the latest twist in the saga of a great parcel of land in the east of Diamond County, six thousand acres once held by Bethlehem Steel for its low-grade iron content and now sold to a Canadian developer who, tired of battling his farmer neighbors on every proposed development, had, all legally, turned this bit of William Penn’s woods into a borough, with forty voting citizens, all but three of them company employees. Already they had voted in a managed landfill that would take four hundred tons a day of Philadelphia’s garbage, trucked up the Turnpike in caravans of garbage trucks, and a water park involving a pool the size of a football field and a hundred-fifty-foot-high rubber-raft ride and an illuminated par-three golf course. “Now they’re talking of a ten-story retirement-home complex and a half-mile racetrack for these little miniature racing cars that apparently are all the rage in Maryland,” Amy says.

“Well,” Janice says, “I guess it’s the future.”

Doris didn’t quite hear and crabbily says, “Are you talking about the Y2K bug? Deet says it’s all been overblown, to whip up more income for the computer companies.”

Norma says, “Two clubs. At least I think that’s what I’m supposed to say when I have a powerhouse.”

Janice from her hand sees she will not have to bid, no matter what Doris bids, and in quiet celebration eats a few sugar-toasted peanuts from the pale-green porcelain bowl Doris and Deet had bought in China when they took a tour there last fall, set on a round-topped carved table they also bought there—the Chinese love to ship, even stone lions weighing as much as a boulder, in fact they will even ship boulders, they see a lot of beauty in boulders, Doris has told them—and which matches another carved table at the corner opposite for the other two players, to hold Waterford crystal water glasses and these bowls and Doris’s ashtray (you can’t complain since she’s the hostess, blowing smoke into all of their lungs), while she thinks of how Harry used to love nibbly things, to the point where it killed him, and of how women like Doris are so fanatic about keeping a home up, a place for everything and everything in its place. She could never be like that, making a false religion out of your furniture. Even her mother hadn’t been like that, though she liked nice things once Daddy began to make money at the lot. It’s a kind of bullying, all these expensive shipped souvenirs of their expensive foreign trips on display, stacking up like the jewelry on Doris’s hands from her previous marriages, cleaning ladies coming in to dust them like museum attendants.

For the last two rounds Doris offers them vermouth in little glasses with rose-tinted stems from Venice, and by the time she is at the door saying goodbye and see you in a week Janice wonders how she could ever have been so down on dear old Doris, who has had her to her lovely home so often and gave her so much good advice during those harrowing years with Harry.

Harry, Harry, he was the problem, Janice decides, that girl showing up claiming to be his daughter, no wonder she couldn’t concentrate on the bridge, losing a dollar seventy cents and going down two on a three-no-trump bid Doris explained to her she could have made easily if only she had kept her diamond stopper. He made these messes but never cleaned up after himself, even now, dead, ten years, leaving it up to the living.

Brewer pours by her in her Le Baron, a river of bricks and signage. People use that word in planning-board hearings as to whether or not there is too much of it; real-estate values shoot up when a community cuts down on signage and buries its electric wires. Janice halts at stoplights and then the flow resumes, a stream of sights deepened by a lifetime’s familiarity. She crosses the Weiser Street Bridge, with its cast-iron light stanchions and its plaque naming some dead mayor whose name never took. As a girl she always wondered why the bridge didn’t arch up in the air like the Running Horse Bridge a half-mile to the south did, or slant down to the Brewer side like the Youngquist Boulevard Overpass to the north did. The river was shallowest here. A ford in this spot started the settlement in Indian days. In her girlhood the river was solid black with dunes of coal silt. They cleaned that up decades back so that now motorboats use the water and some people swim and even the fish are back. Nineteenth-century industrial cities, she remembers sad-looking Mr. Lister telling them in the realty class on Property and Development Law, made a big mistake by turning their backs on their waterfronts. Now soon it will be another century yet, with its own mistakes, no doubt. She drives straight up Weiser past the white brick sprawl of the Schoenbaum Funeral Directors, it used to be a single small office, with gloomy conical evergreens out front. She wonders how much longer she can stay out of their clutches, with Mother’s long-lived Koerner genes fighting Daddy’s shorter-lived ones. On the west side of Weiser Square the new four-story shopping center with its glass-enclosed atrium for concerts and civic affairs still hasn’t attracted the shops and eateries the planners promised. Along the east side the buildings are much as she remembers them from girlhood; though the facades have been changed over the years and a number have their plate glass boarded up or whited out from the inside, she can recognize the broad windows of what had been Schaechner’s Furniture and the narrowing shape of the entrance to Arnold’s Footgear, where her mother would take her for patent-leather party shoes and where at a machine you could see the bones of your feet move in a ghostly green light that it turns out gave you cancer. These buildings, two whole blocks of them, above the first floor have windows with decorative brick frames and arches and elaborate overhangs at the top, like castles of a kind. The biggest, Kroll’s main rival as a downtown department store, still has its name enduring in painted script a story high on the side that shows: *Fineman’s,* where the cool basement restaurant was such an attraction for weary shoppers and the teen clothing on the fourth floor was a little more “New York” than in Kroll’s, a little sharper and more frisky—tight angora sweaters in ice-cream shades, broad cinch belts in shiny fake leather, slinky nylon blouses, wool skirts that came down almost to your socks and tugged on your hips with their swaying weight, making you feel more feminine. “New York” was a way of saying “Jewish” but even Mother with all her prejudices admitted the cut and fabric of the dresses at Fineman’s was better, and she could never resist the butterscotch sundaes in the basement restaurant. As a child Janice was enchanted by the open-scrollwork elevators and the vibrating wire tracks sending money and receipts rattling around on the ceiling. All that, all that fragrant luxury of appetizing goods, gone, just a fading name on an empty building, *Fineman’s.*

Across Weiser Square a little up from Fineman’s still stand the four great pillars of Brewer Trust, now absorbed into something called MellPenn, a great green sign lit from within blocking out the old name carved in granite. She and Harry were so lucky that time, the bottom fell out of gold and silver a month or so later. Above the Square, between Sixth and the railroad tracks, where the downtown movie theatres had been, a row of palaces you could escape into, mirrors in the long lobbies and paper icicles hanging from the marquees, there is just nothing—an asphalt parking lot on one side and a great dirt hole on the other, where some developer of an inner-city mixed-residence housing complex, shining towers on the billboarded architect’s projection, has run out of other people’s money. There had been a pet store here, and a music store run by Ollie Fosnacht, Chords 'n' Records. Janice can scarcely believe so much is gone and she is still here to remember it.

Daylight drains from this dry September day. The street is half in shadow. Above Mt. Judge some high thin clouds are fanned like a hand of cards. The car clock says five-twenty. The homeward traffic north on Weiser and along Cityview Drive makes as much of a rush as you ever get, now that the stores and the middle class have deserted the downtown. Just the poor are left, white old ladies and young male Hispanics spending pennies at the Rexall’s and the McCrory’s, the last surviving five and ten. Nelson deals with these people, the less fortunate, at the adult treatment center, they call it Fresh Start, a few blocks west of where she is now, this side of the old coughdrop factory. Strange, how cheerful working with these hopeless people makes him. It’s his family that depresses him. She hopes he gets home after she has had a chance to tell Ronnie about the girl. Nelson will get too involved.

The man on the car radio is excited about some multiple killing in Camden, a man shooting his estranged wife and the three small children, the oldest having made it as far as the back yard but gunned down there against the wire fence. How can he be so excited? It happens all the time now. Cornered by police a mile away, the man shot himself in the head. The suspect was white, the announcer feels obliged to say, since around here with violence you think of blacks first. For months there have been mass murders on television, the schoolchildren in Colorado and then the man beheading women in Yosemite Park and the man in Georgia who had lost a hundred thousand dollars at day trading on the Internet and blamed everybody but himself. He left a long pious note asking God to take his dear wife and little ones whereas the teen-age killers in Colorado mocked and killed the girl who said she believed in God. Either way, you killed them dead, sending them straight to Heaven or to nowhere, to an emptiness like that big orange hole in the middle of Brewer. It makes you wonder about belief, if just a little isn’t enough, too much makes you a killer, handing out tickets to Heaven like that terrible man Jones in the South American jungle. Janice has never not believed in a God of some sort but on the other hand never made a thing of it like Mother or in his weird way Harry. They felt something out there, reflecting back from their own good sense of themselves. Exalted. Eternal. The yellowing memorial plaques along the wall at St. John’s, the stained-glass Jesus above the altar, His hands out in a gesture of embrace or despair. You need something. Harry could joke about religion himself but didn’t like others to, it had been a grief between him and Nelson. Nelson had learned to scoff to get Harry’s goat. And then he became a do-gooder laying his life down for others as they say. Another slap at his parents. The whole late summer was soured for Janice, even the two weeks in August at the Pocono place with Judy and Roy visiting their father from Ohio, by the Kennedy boy’s having fallen from the sky with his poor wife and sister-in-law, they must have been screaming, screaming, hitting the water like a black wall. The news analysts said it took just seconds but what seconds they must have been, how can you keep believing in a God that would let that happen, it took you back to his father’s being shot, so young and leader of the free world even if it was true he had prostitutes brought into the White House, it took her back to the baby’s drowning, little Becky, such an innocent, well who isn’t an innocent God might argue. All those Turks in the earthquake, tens of thousands sleeping in their beds at three in the morning. Even these men waiting on Death Row are mostly schizophrenics, Nelson claims, and all child abusers were themselves abused, so they’re just passing it on, honoring their father and mother.

She is up past the park now, getting free of the city, rounding the mountain. The viaduct is off to her right, its arches and the houses scattered in the valley at its feet sharp in the low afternoon light, shingles and shrubs, and in the distance blue hills whose name she will never know. Halfway to Mt. Judge, part of a mall that never really took off and now is a failing antique, the four-screen cineplex advertises BLUE EYES BLAIR WITCH SIXTH SENSE CROWN AFFAIR. She leaves 422 and turns off, at the brownstone Baptist church, into her town, going up Jackson Street and after three blocks right on Joseph.

She navigates without thinking under the Norway maples that she can remember half the size they are now, small enough a child could reach the lowest branches with a jump. She climbed into one once that had a hornet’s nest, and couldn’t climb down fast enough to avoid getting stung. Now the maples are grown so big the sidewalks in some sections of town are buckling. Joseph Street used to be sunnier, in her memory—more open above the telephone wires and streetlamps, which used to be yellow and not blue in tinge. The houses were full of staid older people instead of these young families that hang these meaningless banners from the porches, as if every day was a holiday. She slides the Le Baron to a stop along the curb, too worn-out and worried by her day to drive around to the garage in the alley and come up through the back yard. That awful couple who wouldn’t even look at the row house on Locust Boulevard. So snobby, without any basis. If no woman was willing to climb steps pregnant the human race would have died out ages ago. She gets out and stretches muscles stiff from too much sitting. The big stucco house at 89 Joseph has not looked quite right to her eyes since the big copper beech came down. Harry used to say the place reminded him of an overblown ice-cream stand. And there was a bareness, without the tree. It seems an age since this morning and that girl— like a dream except it wasn’t one. She lets herself in between the two frosted sidelights— a little clutter of delivered mail scrapes under the door—and inhales the living room’s still air, the air of her life, apparently unchanged.

Poor Ronnie, he is so good. He still has some clients from the old days, people who wouldn’t buy insurance or take investment advice from anybody else, who want to up their property coverage as values rise or to rejuggle their Keogh-plan nest egg to include a bigger slice of the stock market the way it has been going up and up, but basically since Schuylkill Mutual took Ronnie’s cubicle and phone and company car from him he has little to do, and almost never complains. He has set up a tidy office for himself with computer and fax machine and filing cabinets in that little front room overlooking the street that Mother used to sew in and that then they had a single bed in for a time, when Nelson began to bring his girlfriends home from college in Ohio. After pecking and squinting and fumbling away for an hour or so’s business in this crammed little room, and checking stock quotations and the weather on the Internet, Ronnie goes off in his blobby silver Taurus as if there is work for him out there somewhere, somebody to sell to. All summer he plays golf at the Flying Eagle three or four times a week even though he never had the passion for it Harry did —he is too realistic, and his knee hurts. He has stayed active in that low-class church he and Thelma belonged to. And, what Harry never had the patience or focus for, though he did have a little vegetable garden out back for a time, Ronnie makes projects for himself around the house, painting the exterior trim and puttying windowpanes that have been sunbaked and putting all new galvanized mesh on the sunporch screening. Despite his bad knee, from an injury in high-school football, he gets up at full extension on that aluminum double ladder Harry always hated to lift and cleans out the old galvanized gutters. He talks about tackling the chimneys, repointing the bricks, next. It is a cause for conflict. When she says she’s afraid he will fall and kill himself he tells her the house is her main asset and has been sorely neglected until he came onto the scene. Her former husband was a cop-out as a householder, he says, and her son was and is no better. Didn’t they know they should be protecting their investment in this place? Ronnie has a workshop in the cellar that sends the whine and rasp of power tools up through the floor and sometimes so much fine sawdust that it coats the cups and saucers in the kitchen cupboards. When he put up drywall partitions in that storage room off the kitchen, the plaster dust got into everything, into the dining-room cupboard with Mother’s hand-painted Stiegel tumblers and genuine Chester whiteware. The dust even got into the refrigerator, making the food all taste like the calcium pills Janice takes to tend off osteoporosis. She is still getting used, after eight years, to a husband who is so unambiguously *here,* on the premises, and not always tugging to be out, running in his mind toward the horizon.

As she hopes, he comes home before Nelson, so they can develop a position, which Nelson is bound to oppose. “I won three bucks and only hit two duck hooks off the tee. On the seventeenth I sank a putt you wouldn’t believe,” he says, having come in through the back door to put his golf clubs and clothes in the tidy golf closet he made with all that plaster dust. The space smells, now, of him, of his sweat on the club handles, in the spikeless shoes, even the sour inside of the hats he wears. Each hat hangs on its own hook, and there is one where the glove hangs like a bat drying out, upside down. She likes Ronnie’s neatness, but on the other hand feels scolded by it, the same as with her mother. He moves with a certain sluggish pained quality, limping back into the kitchen. “How was bridge?” he asks politely. Maybe there is usually in second marriages a little stiffness, a certain considerate wariness.

“I kept wondering why I was playing,” Janice tells him. “I did something that irritated Doris terribly, I forget exactly what. She’s getting old and crabby. Deet spoils her.”

“What’s for dinner? Did you remember to defrost anything?” Ronnie has learned what questions to ask. Thelma was a clever cook and a zealous housekeeper, along with all else she did, teaching school and raising three boys. Janice at first had tried to give Ronnie real meals, but something always dried out or was underdone, and her attempts at seasoning, though she thought she followed the recipe exactly, miscarried into a funny suspicious taste. With the yuppifying of greater Brewer, all these vague industries coming in that didn’t make anything you could handle or drive or put in a box really—"the information industry,” they said—there were more and more pleasant and not very expensive restaurants to eat out at; you didn’t have to go downtown any more as Daddy and Mother used to for a little celebration, usually in one of the two big hotels downtown, the Conrad Weiser or the Thad Stevens. And otherwise the supermarkets sold wonderful frozen meals and sealed salads.

“Well, I forgot, if truth be known,” Janice confesses. “I just got back five minutes ago. I’ve been doing so much else, and this morning, what a shock, Ronnie, this girl shows up at the door—”

Ronnie is not listening, he is opening the refrigerator door and peering in. “There’s still some chicken salad from two nights ago, I don’t suppose it’s turned yet. And those Japanese noodles Nelson likes. Oh, yeah, and way back behind the wilted lettuce a container of three-bean salad we never got to—should it have that cloudy look? I guess we can make do. They say eating less is better for you.” He moves to the counter to turn on the Sony. “Lemme just catch the news, for the weather. The radio wants rain tomorrow, I’ll believe it when I see it. La Nina has screwed up the jet stream so it thinks we’re the Sahara.”

“Ronnie, *please* don’t turn on TV. Pay attention, this is serious. This girl—'woman' I should say, Nelson’s age more or less—rang the doorbell, which still needs fixing by the way, and said she was Harry’s daughter. Her mother died this summer and told her before she died. Ruth sicced her on us.”

Now she does have Ronnie’s attention. He has lost thirty pounds since Janice first knew him, and he has that deflated, slumped look of people you remember as fatter. His hair, which was kinky and brass-colored, is almost all gone, even over his ears, so they stick out as rubbery red flesh. His pale eyelashes are almost invisible now, which makes his eyelids look pink and rubbed. Like Doris Kaufmann’s, his face has become pruny, but the wrinkles aren’t as deep as in her leathery skin. Ronnie, though Harry always spoke of him as a crude plug-ugly, in fact has thin babyish skin that makes physical contact with him a little silky surprise, which is something Harry couldn’t have known. Now the man fastens on what to Janice had been the least interesting of the morning’s revelations. “So Ruth Leonard is dead,” he says.

Janice remembers that Ronnie knew this Ruth back in the period when Harry did, that he had fucked her in fact, which Harry always resented, which seemed strange to Janice since in this period a lot of people evidently had. Janice had never met Ruth but there had been this slutty kind of girl in high school, their names got written on lavatory Walls, SUSIE PETROCELLI SUCKED MY BOYFRIEND'S COCK, and CAROLE STICHTER IS A MORON WHORE, from bad families on the lower side of town usually; no special looks, overweight and quiet in class, they had existed even under Eisenhower when everybody was supposed to be so pure. She cannot believe a forty-year-old fuck could mean much to Ronnie but from the stunned, slumped way he stands there in his sweated-up knit polo shirt and plaid golf pants it does. “On that farm of hers,” he says. “The drought killed her.” He is trying to joke away that trance men get into trying to remember what it was like entering a certain woman’s space. Now that space is nowhere on earth and he will never get back into it.

“Wake up, honey. According to the girl she hadn’t lived on the farm for years, she lived in Brewer with this daughter and worked for some shady investments outfit in that glass building across from where Kroll’s used to be. Anyway, why do you care?”

“I don’t, much. It was Rabbit that got stuck on her. To me she was just a hooer. What proof did this girl have that she was his kid?”

“None—just some confusing facts only she would know, about how her mother lied to her about when she and this man Byer were married so it would seem he was the father instead of somebody earlier. There’s more of that went on than we think, back before abortions were easy.”

“They’re too easy, if you ask me. These black and Hispanic kids have one like an annual check-up. Nobody cares.”

“Ronnie, that’s not the point! We need to discuss this girl before Nelson comes home!”

Harry always thought Ronnie was terribly obtuse—called him an enforcer, a deliberate-foul artist—but Janice doesn’t find him obtuse so much as on occasion having a quality of *being in the way,* of not letting anything just glide past if he doesn’t absolutely agree with every detail. He has sat in too many living rooms refusing to leave until the man of the house sees the necessity of buying insurance, it’s that blunt thereness he has. Harry was fascinated by Ronnie’s big prick and it *is* big, flat along the top as if you could rest a wineglass on it at half- mast, but what struck Janice the first time was the relatively little difference between it erect and not. Whereas with Harry it was like night and day, between being curled asleep like a baby and being wide-eyed and six feet tall and up and at it.

“O.K.,” Ronnie says in his plodding, relentless voice, “the point is

Ruth did a lot of screwing back then—who’s to say it was Hotshot that knocked her up? Did the girl look like him?”

She tries to be honest. “It’s awful to say this, but I’ve forgotten exactly what Harry looked like. There was something about her, a kind of, I don’t know, pale glow, and a way she couldn’t quite sit still, that rang a bell, I thought.”

“You thought. You’ll have to do better than that before you owe her anything.”

“She didn’t say I did owe her anything. What she did say was her mother told her to come see us because she’d be alone in the world.”

“We’re all alone in the world, it turns out,” he says. Janice doesn’t know quite what he means but it hurts. Harry may have felt it but he would never have said that to her. She wonders sometimes if Ronnie married her just to score somehow on Harry. His lashless, pink-lidded eyes shift in embarrassment past her face, which she knows looks shocked, toward the clock on the microwave, worried about dinner or Nelson arriving home. He tells her, “There’ll be money in it at the end, believe me, if you have anything more to do with this bimbo.”

“She works as a nurse, and her mother must have left her something, there was all that money from selling the farm.”

“I bet. How’d you leave it in the end?”

“We’d get in touch with her. She won’t with us.” “Good. Don’t. To me, it smells like a scam.”

“But I was here. When you were a child, did your parents ever tell you the stranger at the door might be an angel in disguise?”

“No,” he says. “They never said that. They said the person at the door probably wants to pull a fast one. Suppose you concede that old Fuckbunny *was* her dad, she may figure she can sue us for hundreds of thousands in back child support.”

Janice takes a step forward to touch his shoulder and to offer herself to be touched. “Ronnie, honey, why are you so rude about Harry? He’s dead. He can’t bother us now.”

“He bothers me. He screwed my wife. Twice he screwed my wife,” he adds, meaning Thelma then and her now, as a softening joke, and she rests her body against his, its comforting blocky golf-sweaty hereness. His hands find their habitual places on her. She would never have believed in her teens what an innocent homely comfort it could be, after sixty, to have your bottom groped. He weighs her two buttocks as if they are precious. It occurs to her they should do more in bed, while they’re still alive. But at their age there is so much to do, all these errands going nowhere, all these little commitments.

Footsteps sound on the back porch, the screened sun porch. Nelson must have parked his car, a '94 ivory- white Corolla he traded Janice’s Camry in on—she had given it to him when she married Ronnie and wanted to rid herself of her last link with the Toyota franchise—out back in the garage, seeing his mother’s Le Baron out front. Guiltily she and Ronnie break apart in the kitchen. Nelson sees that something has been up, his stepfather has been pawing his mother. To cover her embarrassment she tells him, Ronnie interrupting to correct where she tells it differently the second time, about the strange girl’s—woman’s—visit this morning.

Nelson’s deep-socketed, distrustful eyes dart back and forth as he listens. Listening is part of what he does for a living, and he lets them talk while he fishes a Coors from the refrigerator. He is forty-two. He has put on weight, but nothing like Harry did; Nelson learned the lesson there. His thinning hair, dark but with his father’s fineness—Harry’s blond hair would just lift off his head when it dried from being combed—is cut so short his skull and face are naked in their angles, like a convict’s. He wears a kind of social worker’s uniform— khaki pants and a white shirt with necktie but no jacket. A jacket would overstate the distance between him and the clients at the Fresh Start Adult Day Treatment Center at Elm and Eighth Streets. The clean shirt and tie establish his authority, as one of those who guard the gates of Medicare and Medicaid, which compensate the day-treatment centers that have arisen to replace the Gothic institutions that used to house what were called the insane. His title is mental-health counsellor; his salary comes to twenty-seven thousand a year. His qualifications are a bachelor’s degree (major: geography) awarded by Kent State in Ohio and a counsellor’s certificate earned ten years later in a year’s (1990—91) course of study at the Hubert F. Johnson Community College, in new buildings along the river in South Brewer, while living, he and his three dependents, at 89 Joseph Street courtesy of the new widow. Still here, he sits with his mother and stepfather at the round kitchen table with their makeshift meal and their beverages. Nelson has the Coors, Ronnie a Miller Lite in deference to his weight and blood pressure, and Janice a continuation in an orange-juice glass of the New York State sherry she nipped on returning home, to wash away the sour aftertaste of the bridge with its realization that Doris was a failing friend, a haughty old half-deaf crab. Like Ronnie said, we’re alone. All we have is family, for what it’s worth.

Nelson asks, “Mom, did *you* think she was conning you?” Ronnie in concluding the story had given his opinion that this was the case. Nelson generally avoids conflict with his stepfather, though when Janice first announced she might be marrying him he sounded just like Harry, putting Ronnie down.

“Well, I wasn’t sure,” she says. “She seemed sincere, but then it was kind of brazen, you could say.”

“Con artists can be sincere,” Ronnie says. “That’s what makes them good con artists. They fool even themselves.”

“What’s worth conning about us?” Nelson asks with his professional mildness, making a question of everything. “We’re just scraping by, in a house too big for us, that we ought to be selling. You’re retired from the insurance con game and Mom and I work at shit jobs, for not much.” His eyelashes, always long for a boy’s, flutter in his deep sockets. His haircut makes him look like a Marine or monk.

Ronnie’s thin-skinned face flushes. He says, “For a guy who snorted an entire car agency up his nose, you’re one to talk about con games.”

Janice intervenes, “As I told Ronnie, she seemed to have enough money. Her clothes were good quality.” “What kind of car did she drive?” Ronnie asks.

“You know, I was so rattled I forgot to look. No, wait.” She tries to remember the morning—the maple shadows on the street, the mail truck passing."A Lexus,” she announces. “A lipstick-red Lexus, brand new.”

Nelson flicks a triumphant glare at Ronnie. “A step up from a Taurus,” he says. To his mother he urges, “I think it’s *great* that she had the guts to come around at all. Not that anything that happened back then was her fault exactly. Did she look like Dad?”

“Oh Nelson, I keep being asked that. It seemed to me so, in a way, but then I was looking for it. You know how these resemblances are, something you can’t put your finger on. She had a round pale face and solid long legs.”

Ronnie says, “That could fit anybody, for Chrissake.”

“Her eyes—they were pale blue and had a little droop toward the outside corner, like Harry’s.”

Nelson’s eyes, brown like hers, widen with interest. It pleases his mother to see him engaged. He must be like this at work. He comes home drained and irritable and untalkative. “I think we should have her here,” he says.

Ronnie is firm. “That’s a mistake. Give her an in, you’ll never get rid of her. Why should we all get our lives disrupted because"—he gropes for a non-insulting name—"Nelson’s dad screwed this dead cow back in the dark ages?”

“I thought you went with her, too,” Janice says, herself quicker than usual, alert. “Was she such a cow then?”

“She was a big Brewer broad,” he states, after blinking, “who would put out for anybody.”

“Not those three months,” she says. “As I remember, Harry moved in. It was a kind of honeymoon. Me pregnant with poor little Becky, and my husband was on his honeymoon.” Putting it like that makes her furious, almost to tears. Ronnie is right, of course. The girl is an alien invader, to be repelled.

“I *forbid",* Ronnie says, putting down his fork and forgetting the amount of chicken salad in his mouth, “anybody getting in touch with this twat.”

“Ronnie.” Nelson almost never uses his stepfather’s name, and says it now softly. “This twat may be my sister. Dad used to hint sometimes there might be a sister. Here she is, come to us, putting herself at our mercy.”

“But what does she *want,* Nelson?” Janice asks. She feels better, clearer in her mind, finding herself now on her husband’s side.

“She wants money,” Ronnie insists.

“Why, she wants,” Nelson says, getting wild-eyed and high-voiced, defensive and, to his mother, touching, “she wants what everybody wants. She wants *love.”*

Ronnie turns to Janice conspiratorially. “He’s as off the rails as his old man. Remember how Rabbit took that Black Panther and doped-up hippie in?”

“Love does seem a bit much,” Janice allows.

“I’ll go look her up myself, then,” Nelson threatens. “A. Byer. You say she’s the only one in the phone book.”

“Nelson, believe me,” Ronnie says, trying to act the father, “there’s nothing in it for you but heartbreak. You’ve been a victim of Harry Angstrom since you were two, why look for more agony?”

“It wasn’t only agony,” Nelson argues. “There were positive elements in the relationship.”

Janice chimes in, “Harry loved Nelson, it frustrated him that he could never express it properly.”

“Oh come *on,* you bleeding hearts,” says Ronnie, in an exasperated voice strong and angry enough to end the conversation. “I knew Rabbit longer than either of you. I knew him since we were kids in knickers snitching penny candy off the counter at Lennert’s Variety Store. That conceited showboat never loved a soul outside his own thick skin. His mother had spoiled him rotten.”

Chapter 2

“Hello?”

“Yes?” Wary. Single women have to be, the world full of phonecreeps."Is this Annabelle Byer?""Yes.” Slightly reassured to be named."This is Nelson Angstrom.""Oh! Nelson! How nice!"A pause; he had thought from her enthusiasm she might go on a little more. He says, “My mother described your visit.""Did she? I wasn’t sure it went very well.""Oh, yeah. She liked you. She just isn’t sure what to make of the general situation. It took her by surprise.""Me, too. I mean, I was surprised at first, when my mother told me. It shouldn’t matter, my being a grown woman and all.""Oh, but it *has* to matter.” He feels more secure, as the conversation tips toward the therapeutic."How do *you* feel about it?” she asks."I feel good,” he says. “Why not? The more the merrier, isn’t that what they say? Listen. I was wondering if we could have lunch sometime. Just to look each other over.” That was one sentence too many, but then he might as well get the curiosity issue on the table.

She hesitates. Why would she hesitate, when it was she who had come out of the woodwork? “I think I’d like that.”

“Tomorrow? Next day? What’s your schedule?” he says. “I work at Eighth and Elm, there’s a little restaurant opened up in the block on Elm toward Weiser, it’s called The Greenery, but don’t be put off, it’s decent enough, soups and sandwiches and salads, kind of neo—New Age, but they have booths for a little privacy.”

“Sounds cute,” she says. That slightly puts him off. This may be an airhead, sister or not. After all, what does she have for genes? Nothing that promising. She asks, “Would you mind not until next Thursday? Until then I’m on day duty, it’s an Alzheimer’s patient who needs round-the-clock.”

“Great,” he says. “Thursday the sixteenth. Twelve-thirty O.K.? I’ll be waiting outside. Medium height, short haircut these days.”

“I’m,” she began to say, then giggled, not knowing how to describe herself. “I’ll be in fat white shoes.”

Wouldn’t you know, they have picked the one day in September when a hurricane called Floyd is supposed to hit. All sorts of wind damage and heavy flooding in North Carolina, and then predicted to come right up the Chesapeake into southeastern Pennsylvania. But these forecasters are paid to whip everybody up, and though the wind kept him awake last night, rattling the window sashes Ronnie had painted last summer and swishing sheets of rain across the asphalt-shingle roof that supposedly ought to be replaced if they want to keep their equity in the house, the morning isn’t so bad that cars aren’t moving on Joseph Street, slowing down to go around a medium-size maple branch that broke and crashed last night in his sleep. He didn’t hear the noise; he slept better than he thought. The branch lies in the center of the asphalt like a big piece of road kill, its leaves’ pale undersides up and already wilting.

Nelson thinks of phoning Annabelle to cancel but he doesn’t want Mom and Ronnie to know he has this planned. Instead he phones his boss, Esther Bloom, who lives in Brewer, and she tells him the Center will be open at least until noon. “These people have nowhere else to go, Nelson. A weather event like this brings up survival issues they may need to process.”

On the way into town he sees two highway crews, with flashing lights and cops in orange slickers directing traffic, cleaning up fallen trees with chain saws—an old willow that had sunk its roots in the roadside ditch by the failing mall with the four-screen cineplex and, on the other side of the viaduct, where 422 enters Brewer and becomes Cityview Drive, a gorgeous big tulip poplar at the edge of the park. The park has always struck Nelson as sinister, slightly. Tough minority kids hang out among the trees, and there is a dim association with the time his father had left home and lived not far from here in the city, on Summer Street. The World War II tank near the tennis courts has been recently taken away, and a pretty little white-and-green bandstand built, as part of downtown renewal, though it serves mostly to collect graffiti and to shelter thugs from the weather and has never held a concert that Nelson can remember. The car radio is full of this gunman, one more straight-shooting psychotic, who killed seven and then himself in some Texas Baptist church, and terrorist blasts in Moscow killing dozens, and an interesting item which he doesn’t quite catch about cocaine addiction linked to a build-up of certain proteins in the brain—it hadn’t been his fault, it was brain chemistry—and then another medical item, which interests him less, about how hot tubs may help diabetics. The Phillies beat Houston eight to six in ten innings, but they still aren’t going anywhere, not in the middle of September. As he drives across the park’s most open stretch, wind shakes his car so hard that he tightens both hands on the steering wheel.

In Brewer around Eighth and Elm the buildings cut down on the wind somewhat. It’s an older area, where commercial meets residential. A former hat factory stands empty but for one little photocopy-and-offset- printing establishment named *PRINTSMART* in a lower corner. The treatment center occupies the basement floor of what used to be a three-story elementary school, grades K through six. The parking lot consists of a strip of diagonal places at the side of the building where the neighborhood residents stick their rusty heaps at night, right across two spaces, neglecting to wake up in time to take them away. The neighborhood is shabby but not dangerous, like most of the clients.

As Nelson gets out of his Corolla he sees a sky darkly bruised in patches above the brick cornices, the clouds layered and shredding as they slide swiftly sideways, but the rain appears to be stopping and the air brightens as if to clear. People on the sidewalks, especially the young women who work in the glass courthouse annex a block away, hugging themselves in short sleeves and not even carrying umbrellas, don’t appear to know they’re almost in a hurricane. Across Eighth Street a cheap big orange facade saying DISCOUNT OFFICE SUPPLIES has been attached above the doorway to an old stationery store that Nelson remembers still smelling of gum erasers and ink eradicator before everything was bubble-wrapped and packaged for bulk sales; the sign makes a shivery noise as a spatter of bright raindrops sweeps by. Farther down Eighth an old- timey, routed, gold-lettered Tavern sign swings back and forth. Maybe he should have suggested that as the place to eat—a little racier and more cavelike, with a liquor license —but he obscurely wanted to keep his meeting with his sister sober and pure: a solemn occasion.

The radio said Governor Ridge was considering declaring an emergency and sending all state and local workers home, but inside the Center the staff has shown up, all but Andrea the art therapist, who lives beyond Pottstown, almost on the Main Line.

She commutes up to Brewer because funds for art therapists are drying up nationwide and the job she had in Philly was eliminated. To snotty, pouty, twice-divorced Andrea, a henna-tinged brunette with big rings she makes herself on nearly every finger, Brewer is a hick town with too many religious cranks and dumb Dutchmen.

As the morning wears on, the rain with renewed vigor whips at the basement windows so hard that water begins to dribble across the wooden sills. Years ago, before Nelson was hired, the floor was gutted and partitioned into suitable spaces—tiny offices for the staff, larger group rooms for the clients, a reception space, a kitchen where the clients make their lunch and a dining area, with six round tables, adjacent to the sofas and upholstered chairs of the milieu. In the milieu the clients not doing a group or having a consultation can read, knit, play games, and hopefully interact. When this was a kindergarten the five-year-olds learned to tie their shoelaces and fit pegs into holes but social interaction, socialization, sitting in a circle and learning to share, was the main lesson; for these dysfunctional adults it still is. There are thirty of them, theoretically present from nine to four, and a staff of eight, headed by Esther, a doctor of psychology. Nelson has resisted suggestions that he go after an advanced license or degree; he doesn’t want a private practice or, after the mess he made running the Toyota agency, any administrative responsibility. He learned his limits.

Some clients straggle in, drenched and exhilarated about a hardship they are sharing with all the residents of Brewer, and others have chosen to stay at home with their delusions, anxieties, and television sets. Because of low attendance Nelson’s three-times-a-week group on Relationships is absorbed into Katie Shirk’s group on Goals and Priorities. Nelson uses his downtime to catch up on paperwork—progress notes, intake forms— and goes around mopping up windowsills with paper towels. Left wet, the paint peels. The rain has intensified again.

The DiLorenzos show up, though, all three of them, hurricane or not, at eleven sharp. They are desperate. Their world has come crashing down because of a few misfiring neurons. In the waiting area they give off a powerful damp odor of bafflement—graying patriarch, swag-bellied but still powerful in the arms and shoulders; mother, a touch of peasant drab still in her plain dark suit though money talks in her shoes and the silk scarf at her throat; and son, twenty, slim and good-looking, with an almost feminine delicacy, bright-eyed, wavy-haired, but going soft and pasty with inactivity, and the fear of his own strangeness giving his dark eyes an anxious bulge. His eyes fascinate Nelson with their helpless beauty—dark but not black, paler than his thick brows, an ale color, or like the dark jelly bees feed to their queen, freckled with light, life in them like a squirt of poison. He decides to take the boy first, and asks the parents to wait.

“Well, Michael. How are you feeling?” he asks when the door is closed and he is settled at his desk. His desk is of minimum size and with a fake-wood-grain top. The young man folds himself into the one-piece molded- plastic chair, orange in color, opposite. He wants to slouch to show how lightly he takes all this but the chair in its flimsy, scientifically determined form does not permit much of a slouch.

“O.K. Good. The same.” “Voices quiet?”

Michael licks his lips as if abruptly aware of a dryness. “Yes.”

He is lying, Nelson knows, but he keeps his eyes down on the young man’s folder, opened six months ago. “Taking your Trilafon consistently?”

“Absolutely, sir.” This is another lie, Nelson can tell from a certain retraction in the young voice, a telltale flattening, but Michael wants to believe it, he wants to be cured, of an illness that seems to be nothing less than himself, a rot of his most intimate ego, that voice within, where it was nestled supposedly safe in his skull.

“Any side effects from the Trilafon you want to take up with Dr. Wu?” Howard Wu is the Center’s M.D., here three half-days a week. Golden in color, stocky in form, he is much beloved, for his hearty Chinese pragmatism and large convex teeth. He is their jolly Buddha.

The boy readjusts his position, perching on the chair’s edge and jerking forward. “I feel plugged up. At both ends. It’s like a cold in my nose all the time. I feel sleepy all day, and then I can’t sleep at night. I feel shitty,” he says, and titters, as if to disown his feeling. A fission, a scatter, in his young face makes him hard for Nelson to look at.

“Do you want me to write down, 'No voices'? If I do that, Dr. Wu will see no reason to adjust the medication.”

Nelson’s deliberate gaze elicits from Michael a flutter of avoidance, a batting of lashes under the shapely black brows, which have that touch of a built-in frown Italian men have, a thickening toward the bridge of the nose. He must have cut a tidy swath at Brewer High, not to mention summers cruising among his peers in the convertible his parents had bought him, proud they could afford it. He peaked too early, like Dad in a way. There is still a little bravado, mannerly but dangerous, in the boy’s smile, and in the slick way his bouncy black hair was tamed by the comb. The grooming is a positive sign. Or did his mother comb his hair for him today, for this appointment, and see to it that he shaved? “There *were* some voices,” he admits, huskily, then smirks as if to dare the world to make much of it.

“What did they say, do you remember?” No answer.

“What did the voices say?” “Nasty stuff.”

Nelson waits.

“They tell me what a miserable fuck-up I am. They tell me to kill myself. Or maybe I think of that myself, to shut them up. It might be worth it.”

“Michael,” Nelson said, loud and urgent enough to make the boy, whose eyes sidle and flutter, look at him. “If you ever, for a moment, think you might follow through on these impulses, you must do what?”

A long pause. “I don’t know.”

“You must get in touch with the Center. At any hour.”

“Yeah, well, shit, I’m not apt to be calling any center at four in the morning.”

“The recording gives the number for Emergency Services. Call it. Here’s the number in case.” He writes it out on a Fresh Start memo pad and rips the sheet off. A renewed surge of rain slashes against the window at Nelson’s back. He pictures the leaks venturing, trembling, lengthening, out onto the windowsills of this old school, the paint flaky from previous soakings. “Do the voices say anything else?” Nelson can hardly hear the answer against the noise of the rain.

“They tell me to kill my parents.”

This is delivered with a mumbled huskiness and yet with some defiance, a twitch of teen-age swagger and a smirk that hangs on his face forgotten. “How does that make you feel?” Nelson asks.

Michael surprises him with a surge of affect: “Horrible. I *love* my parents. They’ve been great to me, giving me everything I’ve ever wanted and not putting any pressure on about entering the, you know, fucking dry- cleaning business.” His voice is hurrying, to keep up with his brain. “They sent me to college when a lot of parents would have had me go straight into the business. My dad’s getting older and hasn’t been strong for a while. They sent me to Penn, the finest university in the state. So what did I do? Hey, I fucked it up.”

“You didn’t, Michael, you got sick. We’re trying to make you better. You’re better now. You dress yourself, you’re no longer violent—”

“I can be violent at home.” He begins to brag, to someone imaginary sitting where Nelson sits. “My mother, what a naggy bitch, honest to God. She says to stop watching the old movies on TV, get up, get out, do this, do that. I don’t see the use.”

“The use is what we call normal psychosocial functioning. It doesn’t come without effort. Let’s look at your graph. You have not been in to the Center for a week, and then only twice the week before. That’s why I’ve asked your parents to come in with you. They, and Dr. Birkits, and all of us want your attendance to improve.” Birkits was the Brewer psychiatrist the DiLorenzos had taken him to on the advice of the Penn psych service after his break. Birkits, one of these demoralized post-talking-cure shrinks, referred this hot potato to Fresh Start. They don’t get many clients with an intact home, and who can afford a private psychiatrist.

“I bet you all do,” Michael sneers.

“We do, Michael. We want to improve your functioning, and we offer here at Fresh Start a safe environment for you to practice in, with the groups, the activities, the counselling. But you must attend.”

“Hey. Sir. O.K. Can I be frank?” “Of course.”

“I can’t stand these people. They’re fat. They’re queer. They’re ugly. They’re not my type.”

“What is your type?” Nelson asks, and instantly regrets the hostility he hears in the question, which popped out reflexively.

“Loser,” Michael responds, and laughs, a barking abrupt noise that doesn’t belong to his frightened face. “Loser is my type.”

“Not so. You or anyone here. We’re human, which isn’t always easy. The other clients are kind people, here to help each other. They care about you, if you let them.”

“They wouldn’t if they knew what’s inside my head.” He jerks forward in the straight chair. His complexion looks a little clammy, moist at the hairline. The poisoned eyes swarm with shame and yet with an excitement that something transformingly strange is happening to him. “The voices whisper to me about girls I see on the street. This one and that one. They tell me to picture her shitting.”

“Shitting?” Nelson has been betrayed into confessing surprise. Perhaps Michael intended this. He wonders how much of an enemy the boy sees him as. Does he sense, within his mental-health counsellor, some ethnic enmity, with envy of his easy slender build and dago good looks? When Nelson tries to picture what a schizophrenic sees he remembers Howie Wu telling him, *Their sense of distance has broken down.* Things up close look far away, is how Nelson has framed this—there is no clear depth in which to locate yourself. The gears that notch us one into another fail to mesh, maddeningly, meltingly. Trying to think his way into Michael’s head plants a sliding knife inside Nelson, a flat cold queasy sensation below his ribs.

“They show me her squatting down. I want to rub her face in it. I want her to eat it. Does that shock you?” “No,” Nelson lies.

“Well, it does me.” Michael slumps back as far as the chair allows him. His affect is flattening; his eyes narrow as he recalls, “Thirty thousand bucks a year, think of it, plus extras and my own car. Pussy everywhere. Hot-shit professors. A bunch of frats rushing me. And I fucked up. I couldn’t hack it. I didn’t even know what courses I was supposed to be taking. I hid in my room with the shades down until my roommate complained to the dean and they got the psych service on me. They tell me I told the dean or somebody he was the Whore of Babylon. I never heard of her.” He snickers a little, testing the face opposite his.

“Michael,” Nelson says in firm conclusion. The boy was bragging now, bullying. *When you feel uncomfortable,* Howie has told him, *trust your gut. Get off the horse. “*I can’t emphasize enough how important it is that you are faithful with your medications. I’ve made a note here to Dr. Wu to reconsider the Trilafon dosage.”

“I drank beer and tequila at Penn,” Michael tells him, uncertainly standing, sensing he is dismissed and being relieved yet not, unsatisfied, uncured. “My parents didn’t know it, but I would get fucking blasted. I think that’s what screwed up my brain.”

“I don’t think so. The human brain can take a lot of beer. Michael, this is not your *fault”* Nelson says, coming around his desk so that in the tiny office the boy—tall when he stands up, his girlish mouth sagging, his face glimmering in the rainy light, begging to be understood—has nowhere to go but out, to the waiting room, where his parents are eager to come in.

“Such a gorgeous child,” says Mr. DiLorenzo, when a second chair has been pulled up for his wife in front of Nelson’s desk. “Bright, good, A miracle boy. To have this boy after his three sisters and Maria over forty, it seemed to us a miracle.” He speaks carefully, with dignity, as one who remembers when he spoke English less well, the child of immigrants who spoke it hardly at all. His hair, brushed straight back, is going white but his bushy eyebrows are still black.

The wife speaks up: “Even as a little boy, though, he stood apart a little. He would play with others, but then wander away and come inside. I’d say, 'What’s wrong?' He’d say, 'Nothing.' As if he didn’t see the point of people. He was quiet. He never had a tantrum.”

“My wife imagines things in hindsight,” Mr. DiLorenzo says, sitting back erect, his eyes enlarged by thick spectacles, eyes frayed to death from closely inspecting fabric. “He was a perfectly normal boy. Got top marks, too, all the way up through senior year. Gave the salutatorian speech about how we should help Russia keep democracy and capitalism. Never any trouble to anybody— teachers, me, nobody.”

“A little trouble would have been more normal,” his wife says. “At the time I wondered if having all those older sisters hadn’t taken something out of him. My daughters and me, we had too good a time, always laughing, always busy at the house, always telling each other things. Michael was like a little prince, detached.”

“Don’t listen to her, Mr.—” “Angstrom. Nelson if you’d rather.”

“Don’t listen to her, Nelson. He was fine. He played sports, got the good marks, ran for student council. Said no to drugs, booze. An altar boy, too, until he was fifteen, and we didn’t push that. In America religion becomes your own business. Likewise I told him, 'Michael, listen, you want to forget the dry-cleaning business, be some kind of professional—a doctor, lawyer, whatever, sit behind a desk using your smarts—that’s O.K. with me, and Mamma too. Whatever makes you happy. This is America.' But no, he wanted to learn dry-cleaning, summers, after school, it was what he loved. From me there was absolutely no pressure.”

“There *was* pressure,” Mrs. DiLorenzo tells Nelson. “Joe needed him to carry on and he knew it. That he didn’t come out and say it made it worse. The girls, they married and got out of here. They’d had enough of it, the chemicals, the presses, the hours until seven, eight. Only one of them even stayed in the state, and she’s way out near Pittsburgh, a nice suburb up along the Allegheny. Their husbands, what do they care about dry- cleaning? It was all on Michael, and he knew it. He snapped. Men don’t want their whole lives mapped out for them. They want adventure. Isn’t that right, Mr. Nelson?”

“She’s crazy,” Mr. DiLorenzo confides. “He didn’t want adventure. He wasn’t like these young hoodlums these days, their heads full of, what do they call it, hip-hop, grabbing guns and going off to shoot their classmates to make the evening news. Shooting their parents, no respect for anything under the sun. He wanted to carry on the family business. There was no pressure. At Penn he was taking chemistry to be on top of the best, the newest solvents, the most environmentally sensitive as we say now. Disposal of used cleaners is the number-one headache in this business; a single cancer lawsuit can wipe you out—defending against it, even if you win. I love America, but not its justice system.”

“Joe, there was pressure.” To Nelson Mrs. DiLorenzo explains, “My husband, he slaved to build up Perfect. He began by doing dirty work for this old Jew in South Brewer, just a basement in a row of houses, a little dark slot, his equipment crowded into the back, a shed built illegally, fifty cents an hour if he got that, Joe was always being chiselled. When the Jew died Joe borrowed to buy the business from the widow and named it Perfect Cleaners himself.”

“It’s prettier in Italian, *perfetto”* Mr. DiLorenzo said, drawing out the word, “but this is America. Things want to be perfect here. Don’t mind Maria—Jake was good to me, he taught me the trade. Had me out on the vats first, breathing in carbon tetrachloride before the switch to petroleum solvents, then had me as a finisher, on the steam presses, and then a spotter, that takes skill—you can ruin a silk blouse, a fine wool suit. After a while it was going so good I opened a branch in West Brewer, and then one up in Hamburg, and two years ago this industrial acreage came up for sale in Hemmigtown. For a long time I’d been wanting to build a bigger plant, with summer fur storage and equipment to take anything, to take even old lace tablecloths, they get yellow with age, very fragile, and big velvet curtains where you could choke on their dust, some of these mansions in Perm Park and up along Youngquist, the owners never—”

Nelson has heard enough about dry-cleaning. “And you were counting on Michael to take all this over someday.”

“Someday, not now. Maybe ten years, maybe less. We have a little place in Florida, the winters here aren’t so good for Maria—”

“Don’t blame me if you want to go to Florida and stick the poor boy with all these plants, all these employees and their benefits—”

DiLorenzo takes this up enthusiastically, telling Nelson, “It’s socialism without being called that. It’s putting everybody smaller than Perfect out of business—the benefits, the insurance. There used to be a cleaner every other block. I shouldn’t complain, it’s good for the bigger outfits that can absorb it, but still you hate to see it. Setting out the way I did back then, with no assets to speak of, I couldn’t do it now.”

“He *slaves”* his wife says, “and he wants to lay it all on Michael. He wants to go to Florida and look at the girls on the beach and make himself dark as a black.”

“The boy was eager, I mean it, with no pressure from me.”

“Joe, the boy *felt* pressure. Even his senior year, he was drifting away, into his own world. He was bringing home B’s.”

Nelson intervenes, to stop their love feast. They love each other, and the child of their hearts is Perfect. “Michael is very angry with himself,” he tells them, “for what he calls letting his family down. But, I keep trying to tell him, it’s not his fault. It’s not your fault either. It’s no one’s fault.”

“What is it then?” Mr. DiLorenzo asks simply, of this invisible invader, his son’s destroyer.

Good question. “It’s a,” Nelson says, “it’s a disorder of the nervous system, having to do with dopamine flow, with the chemical control of the synapses’ tiring.”

“I often wondered about that,” Michael’s mother breaks in. “When he was so young, thirteen, fourteen, working with his father summers, inhaling all those poisons.”

“Get sensible, Maria,” her husband says, hoarse from his talking. “Look at me, inhaling all my life.”

“It’s not that kind of chemistry,” Nelson says. “I’m no doctor, I don’t really understand it, brain chemistry is very complex, very subtle. That’s why we don’t like to assign a diagnosis of schizophrenia without six months of following the client and observing his symptoms continuously. What we do know about the disease—the disorder—is that it quite commonly comes on in young men in their late teens and early twenties, who have been apparently healthy and functional up to then. Michael does fit this profile. A breakdown early in college is pretty typical.” He looks down at the yellow pencil still in his hand. On the upper edge of his vision, the faces of the parents before him, it seems to Nelson in a little hallucination of his own, rise like balloons whose strings have been released, but without getting any higher.

“What can we do?” Mrs. asks, her voice fainter than he has heard it before.

“Is there no hope?” Mr. asks, heavier, the chair under him creaking with the accession of weight, hopelessness’s weight.

“Of course there is,” Nelson says firmly, as if reading from a card held in front of him. “These neuroleptic medications *do* work, and they’re coming out with new ones all the time. Michael’s hallucinations have diminished, and his behavior has regularized.

Now—where YOU can help—he must learn to take advantage of our resources here, and to assume responsibility for his own medications, the prescribed daily dosages.”

“He says they make him feel not like himself,” his mother says. “He doesn’t like who he is with the medicines.”

“That’s a frequent complaint,” Nelson admits. “But, without nagging, without seeming to apply pressure, remind him of what he was like without them. Does he want to go back to that?”

“Mr. Angstrom, I know you don’t like to make predictions,” the father says, manly, ready to strike a deal, “but will these medications ever get his head so right he can go back to work— keep a schedule, pass his courses?”

Another good question. Too good. “Cases vary widely,” Nelson says. “With strong family and environmental support, clients with quite severe psychotic episodes can return to nearly normal functioning.”

“How near is nearly?” the father asks.

“Near enough,” Nelson says carefully, “to resume independent living arrangements and perform work under supervision.” To have a room in a group home and bag groceries at a supermarket that has an aggressive hire- the-handicapped policy. Maybe. “Keep in mind, though, that many tasks and daily operations that are obvious and easy for you and me are very difficult for Michael at this point. He not only hears things, he sees and smells and even touches things that get between him and reality. Yet it’s not oblivious psychosis—he knows his thoughts aren’t right, and knowing this torments him.”

The two wearily try to take this in. Their appointment is winding down. They hear the rain lash at the loose- fitting elementary-school windows in a tantrum, in a world unhinged.

“It’s a heartbreaker,” says Mr. DiLorenzo. “All those years since the boy was born, I thought I was building it up for him. Building up Perfect.”

“Don’t look at it so selfishly,” his wife says, not uncompanionably. “Think of Michael. Suddenly, where did his life go? Down the drain into craziness.”

“No, no,” Nelson urges, almost losing his therapeutic poise. “He’s still the child you raised, the child you love. He’s still Michael. He’s just fallen ill, and needs you more than most young men need their parents.”

“Need,” Mrs. DiLorenzo says, the one word left hanging in air. She pushes herself up, holding on so her black-beaded purse doesn’t slip from her lap.

“What we need,” her husband amplifies, rising with her, sighing through his nose, “is peace. And a vacation. And it doesn’t look as though we’re going to get any. Ever.” Like jellyfish changing shimmering shape in the water, their faces have gone from fear for their son to fear of him, of the toll he will take.

Nelson doesn’t argue. The interview has shaken him but he thinks it was healthy that some of these facts were faced. Schizophrenics don’t get wholly better. That movie starring the Australian as a pianist who keeps playing because some dear good loving woman has taken him on: a sentimental crock, mostly. They don’t relate. They don’t follow up. They can’t hold it together. It makes you marvel that most people hold it together as well as they do: what a massive feat of neuron coordination just getting through the dullest day involves. These dysfunctionals make him aware of how functional he is. They don’t bother him as normal people do. There are boundaries. There are forms to fill out, reports to write and file, a healing order. Each set of woes can be left behind in a folder in a drawer at the end of the day. Whereas in the outside world there is no end of obligation, no protection from the needs and grief of others. Disorganization takes its toll: a flopped marriage and two fatherless children in Ohio, Judy at nineteen defiant and estranged and Roy at fourteen trying to keep in touch via e-mail and Pru up to who knows what, the bitch has shut him out, him still living with Mom and Ronnie like some agoraphobic mental cripple himself. Here at the treatment center, he has his role to play. The clients respect him. They sense in this short, neat forty-two-year-old in his striped tie and clean white shirt a pain that has been subdued, sins that have been surmounted, absorbed, brought into line. When he has a free moment, as he does today after the DiLorenzos leave, he joins the clients in the milieu—he partakes of their society.

This central gathering space, with its sagging upholstery and skinny-legged card tables and rickety floor lamps that yet give off light, smells of coffee and cough drops and unfresh bodies and of the meal—baked beans and ham, with Dutch-fried potatoes, from the odors—being cooked in the kitchen a room away. At one of the card tables Shirley, a fifty-year-old morbidly obese depressive, is playing dominoes with Glenn, a suicidal, substance-abusing homosexual of about thirty-five. Glenn is flagrant. He wears fake diamond studs in his earlobes and another above his nostril wing; he blues his eyelids with a vivid grease and rouges beneath his eyes like a geisha girl. His pigtail always looks freshly braided. Nelson doubts that anyone who takes such pains with his appearance would be truly suicidal; Glenn just knows that the surest way to get official attention, with benefits, is to claim suicidal impulses. This pseudo-Christian society will knock itself out to keep you going, whatever the taxpayer cost. Esther Bloom disagrees. Gays are gay but they are also men, she says. Women flirt; they make emotional noise. When men get serious about suicide, they *do* it, not just futz around with inadequate doses of barbiturates or showy but shallow slashes on the wrist. The most successful group of suicidals, statistics show, are men who have suffered business reversals. Next best are men who feel dead already.

But Glenn is alive now, and in a good mood. He and Shirley— whose massive body, bales of dough-colored flesh, emits from its unwashed creases an odor that seems terrible until it surrounds you completely—clack down the white-dotted black tiles with a vigor that punctures the milieu as if with gunshots. A few other clients have gathered to watch. Nelson stands there puzzling at the patterns being made. If he ever played dominoes, he’s forgotten it. At the Mt. Judge playground, the pavilion sheltered checkers and Chinese checkers, and he and Billy Fosnacht used to play marbles in a circle in the dirt, in that year or two before Billy’s estranged parents got him a minibike and the boyhood phase of innocently modest consumption ended. Nelson feels forlorn, watching Shirley and Glenn cackle and stymie each other, extending and halting the speckled snake that winds its angular way across the metal card table. “Back to the boneyard, sap!” Shirley cries, her mirth sending sympathetic eddies through the onlookers, an idle ring transfixed within the orbit of her familiar BO.

“I’ll boneyard you, you little sweetheart!” Glenn says. “Take that!” He slaps a double five crossways at one end of the domino snake.

“What does that mean?” Nelson asks. “Putting the double sideways?”

Glenn squints up askance, one blued lid half lowered, his nostril-stud catching on one facet the fluorescent light overhead. “Didn’t you ever play dominoes, Nels?” he asks. For all his gay makeup, he has a rough voice, a Brewer street voice, deeper than you expect, and pugnacious. His tone suggests that Nelson is having a boundary problem.

Maybe so. The other clients are listening, alert as children with nothing else to do. But he has been trained to be frank, direct, and fearless, within the therapeutic persona. “Well, if I did, I’ve forgotten. The objective is what?”

“To kill time,” Glenn says.

“You poor baby,” says Shirley to Nelson. “Were you an only child?”

Nelson hesitates. Watch those boundaries. “I had a sister. She died as a baby.”

This shocks them, as he knew it would. They have their own problems, that’s what they’re all here for, not to hear his. Shirley offers, “We’ll teach you, dearie, when this game is over.” Her vast face holds a trace, a delicate imprint like a fern in shale, of the face she had as a young woman. There is a small straight nose and a pointy chin—a triangular bit of bone in the fat.

“Morons can play it,” Glenn says in rough encouragement.

One of the likable things about dysfunctionals is that they don’t hold grudges. They don’t stand on any imagined dignity, they are focused on the minute or two of life in front of them. As he sits there for twenty minutes taking domino lessons from a mountain of a woman in a stained muu-muu, and being coached by a rouged pervert with three glass studs in his face—a fourth, brass, sits on the upper edge of Glenn’s plucked eyebrow—Nelson feels his inner snarls loosening, including the knot of apprehension about his lunch date, crazily enough, with a girl out of nowhere who claims to be his sister.

Outside the Center, the rain still comes down but is thinner; it is swirled and rarefied by the wind into a kind of white sunshine. There is no point in putting up an umbrella, it would be popped inside out. Instead, he runs, slowing whenever he feels his shirt getting sweaty inside his raincoat, staying close to the brick buildings, and the facades redone in Permastone, on the south side of Elm Street. Plastic store signs bang and shudder overhead, tin mailboxes swing by one screw beside the front doors of four-story town houses turned into apartments, empty aluminum Mountain Dew cans rattle along in the gutter, leaves swish overhead as gusts plow them like keels through upside-down waves. The elms lining this street died long ago; the Bradford pears the city replaced them with have grown big enough to need cutting back from the electric wires. There are fewer people out on the sidewalk than usual but those that are are oddly blithe. A black couple in yellow slickers stands in a doorway smooching. A skinny Latina clicks along in high square heels and blue jeans and a pink short-sleeved jersey, chatting into a cell phone. Is this a hurricane or not? The weather is being snubbed. People are in rebellion at having it hyped on TV SO relentlessly, to bring up ratings.

He runs past one of those few surviving front-parlor barbershops, where two old guys are waiting their turn while a third sits under the sheet to his neck, all three thin on top, and the barber makes four. Dad didn’t want to wait around and become an old guy. He didn’t have the patience. The wind traces oval loops through sheets of rain. The clouds above the roofs and chimneys trail tails like ink in water. The odds are less than fifty-fifty, he figures, that his date will show up on such a wild day. He hopes she doesn’t; it will get him off the hook.

But there she is, waiting outside The Greenery *(Salads, Soups, and Sandwiches)* under a sky-blue umbrella, wearing not fat white shoes as she promised but penny loafers with little clear plastic booties snapped over them, like bubble-wrapped toys. “Hi. I’m Nelson,” he says, more gruffly than he intended, perhaps because he is panting from running. “You shouldn’t have waited outside, you’ll get soaked,” he goes on in his nervousness, starting their acquaintance on an accusatory note.

She doesn’t seem to mind. Her mild eyes, their blue deepened by the blue of the umbrella, take him in as she defends herself: “But it’s so exciting out. Feel the electricity in the air? I heard on the radio driving here the eye is over Wilmington.”

“I bet it’s soon downgraded to just a tropical storm. North Carolina is where it really hit. Pennsylvania never gets the real disasters.”

“Well, that’s good, isn’t it?” Annabelle asks.

Their heads are at the same level. He is short for a man and she is slightly above average for a woman. He wonders if a Passerby would spot them as siblings. “Come on, let’s go in” he says, still breathless.

There are six or so other customers, and the last of three booths is free. The interior has that cloakroom scent from long ago of wet clothes and childish secrets. The tidy, self-reliant way Annabelle takes off her white raincoat and red scarf and hangs them up on the peg-hooks by the unmarked door to the restrooms touches Nelson; she is an old maid already. But the bright-eyed flounce with which she sits down and slides her way to the center of the table in the booth suggests that she is still hopeful, still a player in whatever the game is.

The waitress, too middle-aged for her short green uniform, comes over from behind the counter and hands them menus prettily printed with leafy borders but already smudged and tattered by many hands. “Also,” she tells them, “we’ve added hamburgers and hot dogs.”

Nelson says, “I thought those were against your principles.”

She is lumpy and sallow but not above being amused. “They were, but people kept asking for them. We still won’t do pizzas and French fries.”

“Way out,” Nelson says. Laconic responses have become, these eight years, his professional habit, but this occasion will demand more: he will have to give, to lead. To be a provider.

“I love healthy food,” says Annabelle Byer.

“Do you know already?” the waitress asks. “Or would you like a few minutes?” Nelson has been coming here once or twice a week since the place opened last spring, but she is showing him new deference now that he has appeared with a companion. Annabelle is a little round-faced and bland compared with the narrow-hipped Latina in high heels and jeans, but she is not an embarrassment as a date; she could be a colleague at the Center, like Katie Shirk.

“I know,” he tells the waitress. “A cup of that broccoli soup you make—”

“It’s not a cream soup,” the waitress interrupts. “It’s a clear soup, some of the customers call it watery.""I want it,” Nelson insists, “and then the spinach salad, with raspberry vinaigrette, and don’t go easy on the bacon bits.”

“That’s just what I want,” Annabelle says, more gleefully than Nelson thinks she needs to. The waitress is writing. “You said *do* go easy on the bacon bits, or don’t?”

“*Don’t,"*Nelson and Annabelle answer in unison. Nelson adds,"And, to drink, in view of the horrible weather, a cup of hot tea. Not herbal, caffeine. Lipton’s if you have it.”

“Me, too,” his sister says. He is beginning to see the downside of having one.

“Don’t you have any ideas of your own?” he asks her."Almost nothing but. If you’d have let me order first, as you should have, you’d be seeming to copy *me. ”*

“I’d have thought of something different. Their lo-cal Caesar with strips of range-fed chicken can be terrific.""I love healthy food.”

“You said that.""Well, I’m nervous. This is *strange,* meeting your brother at last, and it was your idea.”

“Yeah, and showing up giving my mother the scare of her life was your idea. Sorry about your mother, by the way.”

“Thank you. She didn’t seem scared, yours. Almost feisty, you could say. She thought I was after her money.”

“Well, what else? Not that she has that much.” He feels, what he had not expected, at ease enough with this person to be combative, as if they had rehearsed their competition years ago. “You and I met, by the way,” he says. “Twenty or so years ago, at a party in an apartment along Locust Boulevard. The hosts were a couple called Jason and Pam and a fag they lived with called Slim.” He wouldn’t say “fag” at work—he has worked with a number of gays, on both sides of the client-caregiver divide, and has no problem with it, once he outgrew the fantasy that they were going to grab his crotch —but being with this girl brings out an older, less

p.c. self. “I was with my wife. She was very pregnant, and got drunk and fell down the stairs.” The memory still shames him: he had given Pru the bump that sent her off-balance, and the image of her skidding down the metal-edged stairs, with the legs of the orange tights she had on splayed wide like a sexual invitation on the

edge of disaster, has stayed with him as a turning point in his life. *I must do better than this,* he had thought at the time.

“I don’t remember any of that,” Annabelle says with her annoying, faintly defiant blandness.

“I remember you” he accuses, “and thinking how nice you were. I admired your ear. You were going with a boy called Jamie and worked at some old people’s place out around the old the fairgrounds.”

“Sunnyside,” she says. “My ear?” she asks. Self-consciously she touches her right ear, exposed by the fluffy short-cut hair there. Her hair, a touch damp from waiting in the rain, is brown, with auburn highlights that seem natural and a fair amount of gray sprinkled in. Time is pressing on her though her face pretends not to feel it.

“It hadn’t been pierced.” He doesn’t say it reminded him of his own. He had also liked the way she bulged toward him in certain places, her plump upper lip and the fronts of her thighs when she stood. Some would say she is heavy now but in this county the men are accustomed to that. How had she avoided getting married?

“My mother wouldn’t let me,” Annabelle was saying. “I guess it was superstitious of her, she said she liked me natural, the way I had been born. Boy, I wonder what she would say with some of the girls now. Even the young nurses, the body piercing, navel, nipple, you name it. I ask them, how can it be sanitary, and they say their boyfriends like it. One more thing to play with, I guess.” She blushes and lowers her eyes.

The soup comes, the flowery thin soup The Greenery cooks up with broccoli florets and frothy bean sprouts and slices of water chestnut so thin as to be transparent. Nelson and Annabelle bow their faces into the heat of the soups and realize that their time together is being consumed. “I’m sorry,” she says, “I don’t remember that party better. Maybe I was stoned.”

“No, no, it was me who was stoned. Stoned or wired, that’s what I usually was back then. After my father died I got religion, more or less, and earned the certificate to be a mental-health counsellor. Don’t you think it’s strange, by the way, how both you and I are caregivers?”

“Not if we’re related,” she says. “I believe in genetics. And health care is an expanding field, as the world fills up with people that would have been dead a hundred years ago. Everybody winds up needing care, pretty much.”

“Yeah, you wonder if it’s worth all the effort. I mean, you’re keeping these Alzheimer’s wrecks going when they don’t even know enough to thank you, and I knock myself out to keep a bunch of depressive loonies from killing themselves, when if they did it it would save the government a fair amount of money.”

She looks at him, her mouth prim until she swallows the spoonful of soup, and says, “*Nelson.* You don’t mean that. In the abstract, you can feel that way, but not when you’re face to face with the patient. I go on these teams Hospice sends around. Even at the very end, there’s something in there, a soul or whatever, you have to love.”

“Especially when you’re being paid to love it,” he says, wondering if one of the water-chestnut slices has gone bad. A specialty place like this, you don’t get the turnover to keep the produce fresh; they give it one more day than they should. The other customers here when they entered are one by one leaving, though a small cluster hangs this side of the door, waiting for a sudden sideways squall of rain to let up. The ceiling lights glow as if evening is coming on, though it’s not yet one o'clock.

“Tell me about him,” Annabelle demands. “Who?” Though he knows.

“Our father.”

Nelson shrugs. “What’s to say? He was narcissistically impaired, would be my diagnosis. Intuitive, but not very empathic. He never grew up. It occurred to me just now, passing a bunch of old guys in a barbershop coming over here, that he died when he did because he wanted to. Those of us around him were begging him not to die but he wouldn’t listen.” Nelson has rephrased Pru’s sleeping with his father just out of the hospital as a way of begging him not to die. Not a bad reframe, he thinks.

“Why didn’t you want him to die, if he was so awful?”

“Did I say he was awful? He was careless and self-centered, but he had his points. People liked being around him. He was upbeat.

Since he never grew up himself, he could be good with children, even with me when I was little. The smaller they were, the better he related. He was a better grandfather than a father, since he could clown around and have no direct responsibility and not give you a sinking feeling. Me he kept giving a sinking feeling. I mean, he *did* things, too. He ran away from Mom to shack up with your mother. He got involved with a megalomaniacal black guy and a masochistic runaway while girl and got our house burned down. He had a crush on this nitwit young wife of a friend of my parents when they were in a country-club phase. Then he had a long secret affair with his oldest friend’s wife. I say friend, but in fact he and Ronnie always hated each other. I mean, this is not a constructive personality we’re talking about.”

“Yet you didn’t want him to die.”

“What do you want me to say? Hell, he was the only father I had. What am I supposed to do, wish him dead?”

Annabelle smiles. Her soup bowl is empty. “Some would say that would be normal.”

“That Oedipal crap, you mean? Freud is fun to read, but in the workplace he doesn’t hack it. Nobody in the business uses Freud any more.” But he is more stunned by her saying that than he shows. *Would be normal.* He had wanted his father to live, to continue to take care of him, to be a shelter however shaky. There is a louder scream of wind outside, old tropical storm Floyd. The ceiling lights flicker and then go out.

At the same moment, the waitress brings their salads. “Oops,” she says. “Can you two lovebirds see to eat, or shall I hunt up some candles?”

“We can see enough,” Nelson says. In the gloomy light, flickering as the wind outside lashes the trees, Nelson leans forward and softly explains to his sister, “He was tall, about eight inches taller than me, and had an athlete’s nice easy way of carrying himself. It pained him that I wasn’t more like him. He had been a wonderful basketball player in high school, back when it was still a white game.”

“That doesn’t exactly make a life, does it though?” Annabelle asks, lifting the first forkful of salad to her face. She has a slightly eager way of eating, keeping her mouth closed in a satisfied smile as she chews, her upper lip shiny with salad oil.

“That’s what everybody kept telling him all his life,” says Nelson. “But I don’t know. At least it was something, to remember about yourself. I have nothing like that to remember about myself.”

“What about your family?” she asks, before taking the next bite, being careful to keep the bacon bits balanced on the piece of spinach.

“They left me. My wife, Pru, who you saw pregnant that time at the party that you’ve forgotten all about, left me over a year ago and took the kids. Back to Ohio, where she’s from. Akron. I met her when I was a student at Kent State.” He doesn’t say she was a secretary, and older than he; he is embarrassed about that. “My girl, Judy, is nineteen, twenty next January, and off everybody’s hands except a bunch of boyfriends', and the boy, Roy, and I keep in touch by e-mail. He’s fourteen and knows more about computers than I ever will.”

“Why did she leave? Pru.”

“I don’t know. I guess I disappointed her. She thinks I’m a pipsqueak.”

She waits to finish chewing and says urgently, “Nelson, you’re *not.* You’re a caring, intelligent man.”

“Yeah, well. You can be that and a pipsqueak too. I can be frustrating. Pru always wanted us to get a house of our own and I could never see the point, my mother sitting on all those rooms over in Mt. Judge. I didn’t want to leave her alone. My mother.”

“But now she’s married.”

“Yeah. But then I didn’t want to leave her alone with my pretty awful stepfather. Hey—do I sound normal, or do I sound sick? When I’m over with my sickos I don’t have to listen to myself. I just let *them* talk. Boy, do some of them babble! Everybody thinks their little story is the story of the universe.”

The waitress comes back from the kitchen and puts an unlit candle in a pottery holder on the booth table and lights it. “You didn’t have to do that,” Nelson tells her. “We’re about to go.”

“Why go?” The waitress saunters to the door and looks out its half-window at the whipped, glistening city. “Pitch black in the east,” she says. “Over behind the courthouse.” A cardboard sign tucked into the molding says on this side in Day-Glo letters CLOSED. She takes this sign and reverses it so that CLOSED faces the street. The couple in the booth hear the lock click. “The stove and grill are out,” the waitress explains.

Nearer, Nelson hears this other female voice, as soft, as transparent as the voice inside his head, say, “Tell me more about your father, as you saw him.” The girl is trying so hard to be sweet. Maybe she is sweet. But Nelson dislikes talking about his father. It pulls something too obscure and precious out of him. When he tries to think back to what it was like growing up he keeps getting a picture of his father and him in the front seat of a car, both of them having nothing to say but the silence comfortable, the shared forward motion satisfying. Nelson is being driven somewhere. To the piano lessons that gave him butterflies because he never practiced enough during the week, as Mr. Schiffner with his lavender shirts and tiny Hitler mustache always detected. To soccer practice when he was in that weekend league of middle teens and had hopes of being a star, small but agile. To Billy Fosnacht’s or some other friend’s, there weren’t that many, for a sleepover. Meanwhile his father’s big head was happy with his daydreams and his hands were light and pale on the steering wheel, with big translucent moons on the nails, usually one hand while the other absent-mindedly patted and stroked the back of his head in a gesture that maybe went back to the days when teenagers had wet ducktails, like Sal Mineo or James Dean in the old rebel movies Nelson could watch on TV. His father had been a rebel of a sort, and a daredevil, but as he got older and tame he radiated happiness at just the simplest American things, driving along in an automobile, the radio giving off music, the heater giving off heat, delivering his son somewhere in this urban area that he knew block by block, intersection by intersection. At night, in the underlit ghostliness of the front seat, their two shadows were linked it seemed forever by blood. To Nelson as a child his own death seemed possible in so perilous a world but he didn’t believe his father would ever die.

“I saw him, eventually,” Nelson says, “as a loser, who never found his niche and floated along on Mom’s money, which was money *her* father made. Mom-mom—my grandmother on my mother’s side, the Springers—would always say how I resembled Fred, her husband. He was on the shortish side like me, and sharp at business stuff, and bouncy. But being a loser wasn’t the way my father saw himself. He saw himself as a winner, and until I was twelve or so I saw him the same way.”

“I loved my father, too,” says Annabelle, “the man I thought was my father. He could fix anything—you know how around a farm everything is always breaking down, he never let on he was flummoxed, just would sigh and settle down to it. He had this wonderful confident, calm touch—with my mother, too, when she’d let her temper fly. Whenever the excitable of my patients get to acting up, I try to think of him and act like he’d act.”

Nelson’s inner ear tells him there is something wrong with this. He is being sold something. But it may be that his ear is jaded, hearing all day about families, dealing with all the variations of dependency and resentment, love and its opposite, all the sickly inturned can’t-get-away-from-itness of close relations. If society is the prison, families are the cells, with no time off for good behavior. Good behavior in fact tends to lengthen the sentence.

“He sounds great,” he grunts. “Every time my father tried to fix anything around the house, it got broken worse.” He hears these words and wonders if they are fair. He remembers his father digging in a garden he had made in the back yard, even building a little wire fence to defend the vegetables against rabbits. He remembers his father on one of their car trips somewhere pleading with him not to get married, not to get himself trapped in marriage, even though Pru was pregnant and the wedding day set: he shocked his son by suggesting an abortion and offering to pay her off. *I just don’t like seeing you* caught, you’re *too much* me.

*I’m not you! I’m not caught!*

*Nellie, you ’re caught. They’ve got you and you didn’t even squeak.*

He had fought his father off, accused him of being jealous, denied the resemblance the old man was pushing. *You don’t necessarily have to lead my life, I guess is what I want to say.* Well, he hadn’t, exactly, and marrying Pru hadn’t worked out, exactly, but what pains Nelson now is seeing that his father had been trying as far as his narcissism allowed to step out of his selfish head and help his son, trying to shelter him from one of those disasters that most decisions entail. He had tried to be a better father than Nelson could give him credit for, even now. He says with an effort, “But he wasn’t all bad. We used to have great games of catch in the back yard. And he’d take me to Blasts games out at the stadium. Once we even drove down to Philly for a Flyers game, somebody had given him tickets.”

“I met him, you know. At the car lot. He seemed nice. Of course I had no idea he was my father, but he acted fatherly, And funny.”

“What did he say funny?”

“Nelson, how can you expect me to remember?” And then it comes to her. The bright June day, the Toyota agency tucked over on Route 111 across the river, the drive with Jamie at the wheel, and the heavy tall middle- aged salesman with his pale fine hair in the front. He sat in the death seat, Annabelle in the back. She says, “It was the time of the gas shortage. He said all the hardware stores in Brewer were selling out of siphons and soon we’d all be standing in line for everything, even Hershey bars, I forget how that came up. It was like he didn’t really care if we bought a car or not.”

“He didn’t. The only job he ever gave a damn about was operating a Linotype machine like his own father. Then Linotypes got obsolete.”

“That’s sad,” his daughter says.

The waitress is standing there in her green apron. “Could I interest either of you in any dessert?” Nelson said, “I thought you closed up.”

“Yes well, I did, but the cook’s still out back, he thinks the power may be coming back on. For dessert we have tofu, honied oatcakes, puffed goat cheese baked in little ramekins, and lo-cal frozen yogurt. That’s lo-cal, not local. And lately we’ve put in some home-baked pics, since people kept asking. They *are* local. Let me see—shoo-fly, lemon meringue, and apple crumb. We may have a piece of the rhubarb still left. We can’t warm them, though, as long as the power’s out.”

She is the mother, it comes to Nelson, that he and Annabelle have in common. The waitress is pure Brewer, her face squarish and asymmetrical, like a bun pleasantly warped in the oven. Good-humored suffering—sore feet, errant sons, daily complaints— radiates through her uniform. And yet, though this woman feels old to him, she is possibly not much older than they are— somewhere in her forties.

“The apple crumb sounds good,” he says, not wanting this lunch to end. For what happens next? It’s not like a first date, where a second or third leads to fucking.

“I shouldn’t,” his sister declares, “but let me try the honey oatcake.”

The waitress says, lowering her voice confidentially, “It tends to be a little dry. My advice would be to have it with a scoop of the frozen vanilla yogurt. On the house. If the power stays off, it’ll all be melting anyway.”

“You’re wicked,” Annabelle tells her. Her plump face beams, her eyes shine like a birthday child’s as she assents. She still has, after living twenty years in the city, a country-girl innocence that, if she is taken as his date, embarrasses Nelson. In his embarrassment he studies the wall above the booths, whose theme is greenery—ferns and bushes and overhanging branches, brushed on in many forest shades. What he has never noticed before, all those noons grabbing a bite at the counter, is that a pair of children are in the mural, in the middle distance with their backs turned, a boy and a girl wearing old-fashioned German outfits, pigtails and lederhosen, holding hands, lost.

“So,” he says. “I don’t think I’ve told you much about my—our— father. Mom has a lot of photos and clippings back at the house— would you like to look them over sometime?” He wants to give her her father, his father, but when he holds out his hands the dust pours through them, too fine and dry and dead to hold. Time has turned the spectacular man to powder, in just ten years.

“I don’t think your mother wants me in the house again,” says Annabelle.

“Of course she does,” he says, knowing she doesn’t, and adding, “It’s my house, too,” when it isn’t, yet.

“I thought one of you said green tea,” the waitress says, putting down two cold desserts and two steaming cups. “The water was still hot, and they all claim it’s good for you. The Japanese live longer than anybody. They had on *Sixty Minutes* last Sunday these two female twins, over a hundred years old each, that are like rock stars to them.”

“Green is great,” Nelson says, to chase this motherly woman away. When the siblings have their privacy back, he says to his sister, “This is great, meeting you. I just wish my father could have known you. He hated not having a daughter.”

“That’s unusual, a bit. Weren’t all men his age male chauvinists?”

“He wasn’t crazy about males, me included. I think he saw other men as competition. For the women. He was very scared of his homoerotic side. He suppressed it. His only male friend, really— do you want to hear this?”

“Oh, yes.”

“—was a car salesman who was screwing my mother for a while. That made it all right somehow, to have a little male intimacy. Charlie, that was the guy’s name, he died too, a couple years ago. Another lousy ticker, though unlike Dad he went the full route— triple bypass, pig valves, pacemaker, God knows what all. It worked for a while, but not forever, as you would know, being a nurse. My mother kept in touch with him, even married to Ron. That generation, once they"—he rejects the obvious verb—"once they went to bed together, they didn’t get over it.” This has taken him a long way sideways. It’s true, what the psych instructors at Johnson Community said, if you let somebody talk enough, everything comes out, underside first. “So Dad and Charlie are up there in Heaven,” he ironically concludes, “seeing us get together.”

“When will we get together again, I wonder,” Annabelle says, unironically. She has this frontal mode, part of her innocence.

How innocent can you be, at the age of thirty-nine, in the year 1999?

“Soon,” he promises. He wonders what he has taken on. “I want to work something out. You should meet more people than just me.”

“Oh?”

“Sure,” Nelson says in confident, big-brother style. In the same style he signals to the waitress, who has been standing behind the counter, looking out at the storm through the window beside the tall aluminum urns of cooling coffee and hot water.

“I keep waiting for branches to fall,” she tells them, “but they don’t, quite.”

“Pennsylvania can’t afford a good hurricane,” he kids her. “We should all move to the Carolinas.” He hungers for a hurricane, he realizes—for an upheaval tearing everything loose.

The twilight gloom in the place does seem to be lifting. Nelson cups his hand behind the flame and blows out the candle. The waitress brings their bill handwritten on the back of a menu card torn in half: S11.48. “I hope you have the right change, because with the power out I can’t get into the cash register to make any.”

Nelson looks into his wallet and has one one and the rest twenties. The MellPenn ATMs only dish out twenties, encouraging consumers to spend faster. New bills, too. He hates how big Jackson’s face has gotten, and the way it’s off-center. His expression is more wimpy. They’ve turned this old Indian-killer into a Sensitive New Age Guy. It looks like play money.

Annabelle sees Nelson hesitate and asks, “Do you want some money from me?” “Absolutely not.”

The waitress may have been motherly, but he’s damned if he’s going to leave her an $8.52 tip. Nor does he want to take Annabelle’s money: it would give the whole encounter a pipsqueak flavor. He is trapped, pinched, squeezed between impossible alternatives: dysfunctional. He could put it on a credit card but that, too, takes electricity. “You could owe me to next time,” his sister mildly says. He ignores her and stares into his wallet at the edges of gray-green money as if a miracle will sprout.

And it does: the lights come on. The machinery of the place begins to hum all around them. “I’ll have to open up again,” the waitress complains. She taps off a dot-matrix slip and he takes a five and two ones out of the change. “*Thank* you, sir. You two have a nice rest of the day, now.”

Brewer is still a place where a tip of more than ten percent wins some gratitude. “Good lunch,” Nelson tells her. “Good and healthy. Lots of crumbs on the pie, like my grandmother used to bake.”

“Come again,” she says, but automatically, moving on sore feet to wipe their booth table and reset it with paper placemats.

Outside, the wind is bright again, whirling the droplets off the Bradford pear trees. Annabelle’s booties glisten; she ties the red scarf beneath her chin, making her face look graver and slimmer. A spattering hits it, and she winces, then smiles. She doesn’t know what to expect next. He wants to hand her the world but doesn’t know quite how. “That was fun,” he tells her. “We’ll be in touch.” And he kisses her on the cheek, tasting the rain, imagining her skin as half his, thinking, *My sister. Mine.*

*“*She’s Dad’s, all right,” he tells his mother. “That same weird innocence, that way of riding along.”

“She wasn’t just riding along the day she came here,” Janice says. “She was determined, that little scruffy hairdo and showing off her legs right up to the crotch.”

“How would you like to have her here again? Invited this time, with some other people.”

“What other people? What am I supposed to say—this is my dead husband’s bastard daughter from forty years ago? It was humiliating enough at the time, that whole nightmare, Nelson. I don’t see why I should put myself through it again. I can’t believe you’re asking me—aren’t social workers supposed to be so sensitive?”

“Not to their own families, necessarily. Mom, she’s *family.* We can’t just ignore her, now that we know she exists. Just a family dinner, maybe with Ronnie’s boys.”

Of the three sons Ronnie and Thelma had, two are presently unmarried. Georgie, the middle one, lives in New York, though his dreams of being a chorus-line dancer are faded. Alex, the oldest and nerdiest and most successful, lives in Fairfax, Virginia, he and his wife having divorced. Alex is no Bill Gates but he has done well and is about Annabelle’s age. Ron Junior, the youngest, dropped out of Lehigh after two years and is settled in as carpenter for a local construction company. He married a local girl; they have three kids under ten. Nelson doesn’t see that much of his stepbrothers except when Georgie, escaping from the stresses of the Big Apple, has to crash in the big front bedroom that until Pru pulled out had been Judy’s room. But they generally gather for Thanksgiving, a meal that Thelma always put on in grand style and that Ronnie insists Janice continue with, though she will never be the cook Thelma was. The first Mrs. Harrison had been a schoolteacher and brought to her housewifely duties a sense of order and measure and respect for the holidays, and also a flair, a flourish of excess. It must have been this excessive part of her that latched on to Harry, loving him to her own disgrace. Janice dreads the turkey—how big to buy it, how long to cook it, at what temperature—and never gets it right. Either the breast is so dry that the slices crumble under Ronnie’s carving knife, or the joints are bloody and the children at the table make noises of disgust. Family occasions have always given Janice some pain, assembling like a grim jury these people to whom we owe something, first our parents and elders and then our children and their children. One of the things she and Harry secretly had in common, beneath all their troubles, was dislike of all that, these expected ceremonies. Mother had been a great churchgoer and Daddy Lagged along but Janice always felt uncomfortable, on the edge of crying when the organ blasted in, especially after Becky died and God had done nothing that terrible time to help. She and Harry were happiest, really, when they were in Florida, just the two of them in Valhalla Village, golf for him and tennis for her and separate sets of friends and most meals taken at the perfectly adequate and pleasant restaurant there, Mead Hall with its modernistic Viking decor.

Janice’s brow wrinkles. “I don’t quite see it, Nelson, as being anything but forced and awkward. Just because this dead slut wished this girl on us—”

“Mom, she’s my *sister.* Listen. If she can’t be a guest in this household, maybe the time has come for me to move out. Pru always said I should anyway, for my self-respect.”

“She did? Pru said that?” Janice had imagined that she and her daughter-in-law had shared the house pretty well, all those years after Harry died and they agreed to sell the Penn Park house Harry had loved. She had been off most of the day doing real estate, and Teresa had had to be home with the children and naturally had cooked the meals and did housework and some light outdoor work. It was only right, instead of paying rent. After Ronnie came into the household, it was never so easy. There were currents. Ronnie had his own ideas about how things should be done, in the kitchen and everywhere else. The way Thelma had always taken care of him, he was particular. Thelma spoiled men: it was a kind of malice, and lasted after her.

Poor Nelson. He has this bee in his bonnet—doing something for this girl nobody knows. It clutches at Janice’s heart, to think that he always wanted more of a family than they could give him—a bigger, happier one. He had loved her parents because from them descended this sense he craved of a clan operating in the world, this big stucco house a fort of sorts. The boy had wanted her and Harry’s happiness so. When they quarrelled even without much meaning it his little face would go white with worry like a bubble trying not to burst. And all this healing he still wants for everybody, it makes her heart gripe to think of how they must have hurt him.

“I don’t know, Nelson.” Janice yields. “Maybe at Thanksgiving. She’d get lost in the crowd.” “Mom, that’s forever away.”

“Close enough for us to get used to the idea. I’ll have to approach Ronnie. I know he’ll be dead set against it.”

But when, that night or the next, in their bedroom, she describes to her husband Nelson’s silly sad desire, and puts forth her Thanksgiving suggestion expecting it to be knocked aside, Ronnie says, his voice dragged into a more youthful, thuggish register, “Well, I guess it wouldn’t kill us. I’d be interested to see how Ruth Leonard’s daughter turned out.”

He pronounces her name, which Janice always has trouble remembering, so easily; it brings home to her that Ronnie and this slut had been lovers, some weekend down at the Jersey Shore, back before Harry got to know her himself, which had always galled him, though Janice could never see that he had the right to mind. But Harry had been like that: he thought he had a lot of rights, just by being his wonderful self.

Chapter 3

From: Roy Angstrom [[roy](mailto:royson@buckeyemedia.com)s[on@buckeyemedia.com]](mailto:royson@buckeyemedia.com)Sent: Friday, October 22, 1999 8:04 PMTo: [nelsang.harrison@qwikbrew.comSubject:](mailto:nelsang.harrison@qwikbrew.comSubject) Happy birthday jokes

Dad have a great party with whoever!!! Heres an oldie but new to me and it struck me as pretty droll. President Clinton was visiting Oklahoma City after the may 3rd tornado and a man whose house was demolished put up a sign: HEY BILL HOWS THIS FOR A BLOW JOB? The Secret Service made the man take it away. I guess this is a true story what do you think?

Nelson, sitting in the little upstairs front room staring at the computer screen, shifts in his swivel chair, pained. If this is the only way his son can communicate, it’s better than nothing, but he wonders how much the kid knows about blow jobs. Though after this Lewinsky business even kindergarten kids know about it, it’s right at the top of the news hour. Pru used to do it to him at first, especially before they got married, but as the marriage went on did it less and less, even when both were high on something or when he went down on her, her fuzzy little redhead’s pussy, skimpy compared to, say, curly-haired Melanie’s. One such time he got into position for her to reciprocate and she confessed outright that she hated the smell. *What smell?* he had said, feeling himself beginning to wilt. I *wash.*

*You can’t help it,* she had said. *It’s a smell that won’t wash off. It’s kind of acidy. Anyway, I’m afraid you’ll come in my mouth.*

*Why, honey? Why are you afraid? That’s so nice, once in a while For you it is. You used to like it.*

*I don’t remember that. I just said it because I knew you wanted me to. You lied to me?*

*People can get AIDS, you know, that way.*

*Well my God. If I have AIDS you’ll get it anyway. How could I have AIDS? I haven’t been with anybody but you for ages. So you say. What about those coke whores, before you got clean?*

*Coke whores, there are no coke whores. There are just women who aren’t as uptight as others, is all.* It was true, back before he was clean, when he was a regular at the Laid-Back, the girls who hung around there looking for drugs and action liked to give blow jobs because it was a quick way to bring a guy off and less fuss and muss for them. They didn’t even have to take off their pantyhose in the car. Their mouths did smell afterwards and when he was stoned he liked to kiss them even though they resisted and said he was sick, basically queer. Those girls for all their being whorish had very little imagination, very narrow parameters. If I was *going to get AIDS it would have showed up by now.*

*Not necessarily. I read where the virus can be dormant for fifteen years. It hides around the base of the spine. Well my God. And this is supposed to be a marriage.*

*You can fuck me though.*

*Now there’s a rational woman for you. What about AIDS? Nelson, I said you can fuck me. Take it or leave it.*

*I’ll leave it. I’ve lost interest.*

*So you have. What a baby.*

And it *was* lovely to have a woman’s head down there, all that hair under your hands, the tips of her ears and back of her neck, you can’t see her face but her shoulders tense up when you come, and some have said it excited them too, but according to Pru they were lying because they wanted something else. Women lie the way blacks lie. If you’re a slave face telling the truth gets you very little. They forget how. He sees that all the time at the Center. Only for the powers that be does knowing things pay off. Only they can afford to know the truth. He doesn’t like Roy knowing what a blow job is. The boy is fourteen, masturbation should be enough. The lightness of it, the newness, the feeling of leaning up against a tall white closed door, the sensation Nelson used to get of standing on his head for a second, the tiny muscles going into spasm: the sensation moves you into another world, up and out, chilly like ice cream, private like thought, a metallic taste in the mouth afterwards, the taste of having been somewhere different. But he wants the images in the boy’s head to be innocent, bridal, the girl who sits next to him in an Ohio classroom lying under him all lace and crushed flowers in his mind as he comes in his bed’s safety. Not this juvenile filth off the Internet. Who would have thought the Internet, that’s supposed to knit the world into a shining tyranny-proof ball, would be so grubbily adolescent?

And Dad heres another one. A guys wife on there honeymoon begs off making love and she- goes to sleep and gets up at 3am to get a glass of water and sees hes still awake and asks why. He says his dick is so hard their isnt enough skin left to close his eyes with.

This is more like it, Nelson supposes. Straight married sex, at least. Judy has gone off the deep end with boys, he doesn’t know when she lost her virginity, it must have been in Pennsylvania, when they all still lived in this house, Judy in the front bedroom, there were some pretty late dates, he remembers, coming in that sticky front door, whose pop woke him up, footsteps slithering up the stairs, when she was just sixteen, seventeen, and still had her freckles. Pru would know. Pru would't talk about it with him. *Well why not?* she asked back one time. *Your Aunt Mim’s a tart, all you Angstroms are like rabbits.*

And she herself, with Dad, in this very room he sat in now, his face lit by a computer screen. He could never quite wrap his mind around it. Which was healthy. There is such a thing as healthy denial. Children use it to keep the image of the caregiver benign despite abuse. Pru when he got after her about it would say she didn’t understand it either. *It just happened, Nelson. Things just happen. Not everything happens for some deep reason, like you were taught at social work school.*

*Oh, is that what I was taught?*

*Yes, and to keep asking questions, instead of trying to give answers. I should have answers? What’s your question?*

*Why do you keep bugging me about what happened once between me and your father, when we were both half out of our minds, me with your druggy stunts and him with his poor beat-up heart? He’s dead, Nelson, your father is dead, he and I won’t do anything again even if we wanted to. Which we don’t. Didn’t.*

Nelson looks out across Joseph Street at the neighbor’s second-story windows, hoping to see the woman of the house undressed. There are three windows, the middle one holding a plastic pumpkin with a light bulb in it, the two flanking it dim-lit, the one on the right probably a hall landing but the others giving on the bedroom, which he guesses is a child’s bedroom. That semidetached house for years was occupied by an elderly couple who lived toward the back of it, in the kitchen and TV den, but this young couple with their two little children have different living arrangements and once in a while you see the wife moving around in her bathrobe or underwear, black bikini pants and two beige cups as snug as skin, the kind of bra advertised in the Brewer *Standard* illustrated by models, names like Secret Shaper, Seamless Charmer, Lace 'n Smooth, Nearly Nude. Pru used to wear bikini underpants but as her bottom broadened she went in for old-lady white cotton panties with enough fabric for a truck-driver’s T-shirt. *You can fuck me, though.* He needs a woman. Doing a job and coming back to his mother and stepfather and TV comedies made for twentysomethings in New York City isn’t a life. He sleeps badly: not enough skin left to close his eyes. But at his age as of today forty-three he would feel silly in single bars or the party circuit, if he could find it. The action that used to exist at the Laid-Back up at Ninth and Weiser was ages ago—other lifestyles, other drugs in fashion. Cold War worries, Japan worries. With the century ending all this is sinking into the history books. And he’s afraid getting back into circulation might get him back into coke, or Ecstasy if that’s the thing, or the ever-cheaper heroin; it’s so easy to slip back when you don’t feel you have much to lose. Talking to the substance abusers at Fresh Start, he can’t much argue when they argue for it. Happiness is feeling happy. Maybe it shortens your life but when you’re dead what’s the diff? Living to the next hit, the next scrounged blow-out, gives their lives a point. Being clean exposes you to life’s having no point.

Things are pretty cool here Dad. 10th grade is organised not much differnt than the 9th except that you are a sophmore and get more respect then lowley freshmen. There are a lot of American African students at North High but you can get along if you mind your own busness and don’t make slurs and the courses are pretty easy. First quarter I got four As and a B in biology but the biology teacher Mr. Pedersen says he knows I can do even better.

Judy is driving mom crazy out most nights and some mornings her bed not even slept in but she is thinking of signing up for training to become a flight attendent for USAirways, there hub is in Pittsburg. Mom is working longer hours for this lawyer Mr Gekoppolos (spelling close) downtown on Buchtel Ave but says to tell you we still need your check and its late.

Thats pretty much it for now Dad I want to play one game of TOMB RAIDERS and then study hard for a biology quizz. TTFN (ta ta for now) luv u :-) ROY.

Nelson’s eyes sting, reading this in the tiny print the Windows 98 gives you. Even the print and tiny icons are made for very young eyes. The boy is smart, if the grown-ups over him don’t fuck up his head. And Judy, maybe she knows what she’s doing. She has evidently no fear of flying, though doesn’t like the idea of his daughter in the sky all the time. Dad used to be nervous about flying too.

From: Dad [[nel](mailto:nelsang.harrison@qwikbrew.com)s[ang.harrison@qwikbrew.com]Sent:](mailto:nelsang.harrison@qwikbrew.com) Sunday, October 24, 1999 9:31 PMTo: [royson@buckeyemedia.comSubject:](mailto:royson@buckeyemedia.comSubject) paternal affection

Roy—Great grades, congratulations. Keep it up. Great jokes, though don’t they ever have any clean ones? Sex can be funny but it’s also damn serious, about the most serious thing we do. It’s good Judy is meeting lots of people but tell your sister not to cheapen herself. Other people tend to take us at the valuation we put on ourselves and a woman is always more vulnerable to a bad opinion. I’m glad she is thinking of a vocation even if it’s not the one I would have chosen for her. Our family has been pretty earthbound up to now. Tell your mother I will get the check off but Ronnie thinks I should be contributing more to the household expenses since he is retired and on his pension plan and Social Security, meanwhile the cost of everything including real estate taxes goes up.

The big news here, in my mind at least, is that you have an aunt none of us knew about—a girl your grandfather had by another woman when I was a tiny child. Her name is Annabelle Byer. Nobody knew about her until she showed up some weeks ago and told her story to your grandmother. I took her out to lunch last month and we got along very well. We talked as if we had known each other all our lives. She is a nurse just like I work in mental health—how’s that for a coincidence? Grandma is going to have her here for Thanksgiving and maybe you can meet her when your mother brings you east for Christmas. I can hardly wait to see you all. August in the Poconos was nice but it was too long ago.

Everybody’s health here is good. The drought this summer has been washed away by a lot of rain this fall but it’s too late for the farmers. The only thing close to a joke that I’ve heard is from one of the black clients at the Center, who has a lot of “Yo momma’s so fat” jokes. The only ones I can remember are: She can sell shade, she puts mayonnaise on aspirin, and when she goes to the movies she sits next to everybody. We have a very fat lady at the Center and he never tells these jokes around her.

I am very proud of you, Roy, and love you very much. Dad.

P.S.: Notice how when I use a contraction, I put in an apostrophe. Haven’t they taught you that yet at school? Also, “there” is a location and “their” is a possessive pronoun.

He pushes the SEND key without rereading it. He sounds like the kind of prissy father he never had but didn’t especially want, either. His father used to say, *Whenever anybody tells me what to do, my instinct is to do the exact opposite.* But order and organization must be kept in the world. Ties of affection must be expressed, or nothing holds. Nelson shuts down the computer, gingerly. Sometimes the machine for no reason freezes, with a rebuking message: This program has performed an illegal operation and will be shut down. The only glow from across the street now is the electric pumpkin grin. The time he did see the woman across the street in her underwear, her stomach looked stark white, and wonderfully long, dented by its belly button, deep like the doctors do them now.

“Aunt Mim? It’s Nelson. Your nephew.”

“I know you’re my nephew, doll—how many others you think I got? Sweetie, what’s up? How’s life in the old country?”

Her voice is dry and crackled, parched by cigarettes like the desert from the sun, but nice, with family warmth rushing into its old veins at what she takes to be an emergency. Otherwise, why would he be calling? She is six years younger than Dad so she would be sixty now, not old for some professions but in hers ancient, long out of it, even with face-lifts and ass-tucks and the marvels of modern dentistry. Nelson wonders when she turned her last trick. You get the occasional sex-worker at the Center and some of them keep on with a few old customers almost like a marriage. Now, without her brother or her parents to link her to the region, Aunt Mim never comes back. The last time was Dad’s funeral. There wasn’t a body, just a square, lidded urn made of a composition substance like pressed bran flakes. Mom had him cremated down in Florida because it was easiest transportationwise. She and Nelson, taking turns at the wheel, brought him back north in the slate-gray Celica in which he had made his last run. Pru had flown down with the kids the day after he and Mom had caught a night flight from Philly but by the time she landed Dad was already gone. Gone and his body, six foot three and two hundred fifty-five pounds, whipped from the hospital to the crematorium. Pru was in disgrace because of having confessed, having been raised as a Catholic to confess everything, that she and Dad had committed— what would you call it?—double-barrelled adultery. Incest of a sort, one night only. She and the kids were scrunched into the two-door sports car’s inadequate back seat, and the thick composition box, like a Styrofoam cooler but smaller and dense with its distilled contents, rode in the trunk among all their suitcases. It had been a tough tight packing job to get everything in and Nelson had not been especially gracious when little Judy, who was nine then, burst into tears, their first night’s stop at a motel outside Savannah, because she couldn’t bear to think of Grandpa all alone out there in the cold dark trunk. The two motel rooms didn’t have too many high safe surfaces for such a sacred and ominous thing— surprisingly light, baked bone flakes, Harold C. Angstrom concentrate—so they settled on the top of the mock-wood cabinet holding the television set that slid in and out. Mom and the kids slept in that room, and she had to keep talking them out of climbing up and opening the box and looking inside. He and Pru were so upset with each other they couldn’t sleep and finally fucked in an effort to get relaxed, which made them both madder and sadder than ever. The next night, in a Comfort Inn beyond Raleigh, Mom and Pru took one room and he and the kids the other. They fell asleep before he did, they were watching *Roseanne* on television, but in the morning he was still groggy, and after he and Pru had some words at breakfast that left everybody feeling they were tiptoeing on broken glass they all drove off leaving the ashes in their big square bran-colored cookie jar on the spare-blankets shelf of a Comfort Inn closet.

It was Judy who remembered, about two exits up the road. Though Nelson floored the accelerator, it seemed to take forever getting to the next exit and reversing their direction on 95. His whole body went watery with guilt and hurry. The black desk clerk, who had just come on duty, looked dubious at Nelson’s panting explanation, but let them have the key again. It was strange to be let back in, as if into an empty tomb—as if they all had died or been abducted. The beds were still unmade, the towels wet outside the shower stall. They found a child’s toothbrush in the bathroom as well as Grandpa’s remains sitting docilely on the cabinet shelf, the square urn blending in like one of those combination safes motels sometimes give you. Nelson felt this tremendous rush of reunion at the time, taking the canister into his arms, a bliss of wiped-out sins. Afterwards, with schooled hindsight, he saw that there had been a certain unconscious vengeance in their leaving Dad behind, as he had more than once left them behind.

Nelson doesn’t remember if they all laughed about it, forgetting the head of their family like that, but he does remember that Aunt Mim wore too much black at the funeral, *all* black, gloves and hat and big sunglasses, more a style statement than a proclamation of mourning. She stood out like a swish vampire among the quiet orderly rows of the hillside cemetery, on the back slope of Mt. Judge, where Earl W. (1905—1976) and Mary R. (1904—1974) Angstrom rested beneath a rose-colored polished double headstone one grassy stride away from the smaller, older, duller dove-colored stone saying.

REBECCA JUNE ANGSTROM 1959

His sister. He has always blamed himself somehow. If he had been more pleasing to Dad he wouldn’t have left and Mom wouldn’t have gotten drunk and it wouldn’t have happened. At Dad’s funeral Aunt Mim seemed an animated, irreverent slash of black among the dowdy mourners (there were some aging male strangers, even, who showed up, having worked with the deceased at Verity Press or the Toyota agency or played with or against the dead man in his teen-age prime and who felt enough connection to take a morning out of their own remaining lives) but Dad had loved her, and she him, with the heavy helplessness of blood, that casts us into a family as if into a doom.

“The funniest thing, Aunt Mim,” Nelson says over the phone. “It turns out Dad had a baby by the woman he lived with that time and she’s showed up. It was a girl baby, and she’s thirty-nine, and a nurse living right here in Brewer. She grew up on a farm. I had lunch with her. She looks a little like Dad before he got really fat but when his face was turning round—kind of, you know, sleepy-eyed, with very white skin. So as well as a nephew you have a niece.”

“Damn,” the phone crackled after a pause. “I’ll have to rewrite my will. How come she showed up now? Did Harry know she existed?”

“He guessed, I guess, but didn’t know for sure. Her mother wouldn’t tell him. She died this summer and told Annabelle before she did. She came to us.”

“Who’s us?”

“The family. Me and Mom and Ronnie.”

“I bet Ronnie’s just thrilled. And Janice even more so. I think it was you she came to, Nelson. So what’s your thought?”

“Well, it’s not as if she’s not managing, she makes better money than I do, but she seems awfully alone. I think she should get to meet some people. But I don’t know so many people since I kicked coke, except for the clients at work.”

At her end of the line, Aunt Mim considers. “How long since you’ve known about this girl?” “Since September.”

“And you’re just calling to tell me now?” “I’ve been sitting on it, I guess.”

“You’re embarrassed,” the woman concludes. “Don’t be embarrassed, kid. Your father didn’t understand birth control. You were born some months early, as I remember. It’s not your funeral. Want some advice from your old aunt, whose life is no model for anybody?”

“Sure.”

“This little nursie’s not your problem. At thirty-nine, everybody’s their own problem. You have a family— how are they?”

This is getting to be a disappointing conversation. If there was anybody he thought would see with him the wonder of his having a sister it was Aunt Mim, his father’s sister. “They’re good, I guess. Pru finally had enough of me and a year and a half ago took the kids back to Akron. She works for a Greek lawyer downtown, near the old Goodrich factory.”

“Oh, those Greeks,” says Aunt Mim. “They invented democracy,they’ll tell you.” “And Judy’s out of school and thinking of becoming an airline stewardess.”

“flight attendant, they like to be called. Some of them, the way they carry on is legal only in Nevada.” “I know. She worries me. She’s kind of wild.”

“You worry too much. Life is wild. When it isn’t a total bore.”

“And my little boy, Roy, is almost fifteen. We communicate by e-mail. He’s bright, it turns out.”

“You sound surprised. Your father wasn’t stupid, he just acted stupid. So. And now a sister to fill in the gaps. You’re quite a family man, Nelson, I don’t know where you get it from. The

Springer side, I guess. They were good Germans. The Angstroms never quite fit in.” “I thought you might have some ideas.”

“Ideas about what?”

“What I should do, about having a sister.”

“Well, your father used to hold my hand crossing the street, and he liked to watch me pee, but maybe she’s beyond that. What’s her name, did you say?”

“Annabelle. Annabelle Byer.” “Who was Byer?”

“Her stepdad. He was the farmer.” “He’s dead, too.”

“Right.”

“More and more is dead, are you old enough to notice? Vegas is dead, the way it was—a sporting town. The people used to come here had a little class—the gangsters, the starlets. A little whiff of danger, glamour, you name it. Class. The guys used to pay cash for everything, off a big roll of fifties. Now it’s herds. Herds and herds of Joe Nobodies. Bozos. The hoi polloi, running up credit-card debt. Gambling is legal in half the states so they’ve built these huge moron-catchers along the Strip, all the way to the airport. A Pyramid, the Eiffel Tower, Venice—it’s all here, Nelson, all for the morons. It’s depressing as hell. Sometimes I think of going back east, but where would I fit in?”

“You’d fit in here, Aunt Mim,” he hears himself saying. “The house is too big as it is.”

She laughs, then coughs, then laughs again. “I never had the figure for it, Diamond County life. I was *skinny,*

the other girls hated me. What shape is your sister in?”

“She’s a little plump, but not, you know, overboard. Some of our clients at the Center—”

“There you have it,” Aunt Mim interrupts. “She’s letting herself go. You can’t afford in life to do that if you’re gonna contend.” He has used up her patience. She can only give so much time to the past. She lives in a hustling world. “Come on out and see me, Nellie. Bring your sister if you want. They’ve got the airfares down to nothing, to keep the moron-catchers booked up. If you want to wait till Judy flies the skies, it’ll be cheaper yet. I’ll keep. I never smoked except for show. Charlie Stavros still above ground?”

So it falls to him to break the news. “No, I’m sorry to say. He had this triple bypass, and there was a murmur or something, a bad valve, and they opened him up again, but this time an infection set in—”

“You’re scaring me, kid. He was a good guy. He had a touch of it. Class. You, you’re lovable. Your Aunt Mim loves you, and don’t you forget it.” And she hangs up, without saying goodbye or seeing if he had a last word. He hadn’t even asked her how her beauty parlor was doing, or if she had a husband.

One night in early November, Nelson dreams he is lying in his bedroom, which is true, although it is somehow smaller, like the little front room where Ron’s computer sits. He gets out of bed when he hears a distant clicking noise. He goes to the window and sees out in the back yard a tall man practicing chip shots in the moonlight. The man is bent over and intent and a certain sorrow emanates from him in the gray-blue light. His back is turned and he doesn’t turn his head to look up at Nelson though Nelson dreads that this will happen—a staring white mask in moonlight. Instead there is just that patient concentration, as if on a task he has been assigned for eternity—the little studied half-swing, a slump-shouldered contemplation of the result, a disconsolate trundling another ball with the face of the club into position at the man’s feet, and another studied swing. Nelson feels indignation that this mournful tall middle-aged stranger, in nondescript trousers and a long-sleeved blue-gray shirt, should have wandered into their yard from Joseph Street and be trespassing so brazenly, making that irritating, repeating noise in the middle of the night. Neither in his dream nor when woken by it does Nelson announce to himself who the homeless man is.

He has passed into wakefulness. The door to the hallway, the latch not quite seated, has been swinging back and forth as if at a ghostly touch, clicking, nudged by the drafts that circulate through the house now that the cooling weather has turned on the furnace. Ronnie is always trying to turn the thermostat down; he says the lousy Arabs are putting the screws on oil again and the price of a barrel has more than doubled in a year.

Nelson forces himself from the warm bed, glancing out the window to see if a tall man is really there practicing chipping, and pushes the door so the latch decisively clicks. The sharp noise rings through the silent house. Not quite silent: the furnace sighs, the refrigerator throbs. His mother in the next room sleeps with a man not his father. It used to be his parents’ room, he used to hear them cutting up some nights, making more noise than they thought. The two front bedrooms are empty, staring out at a Joseph Street bare of traffic. Nelson wonders why, no matter how cheerful and blameless the day’s activities have been, when you wake in the middle of the night there is guilt in the air, a gnawing feeling of everything being slightly off, wrong—you in the wrong, and the world too, as if darkness is a kind of light that shows us the depth we are about to fall into.

Next morning he calls Annabelle at her apartment. She sounds sleepy; he guesses she had been on night duty and he woke her up. Apologetically, he asks her to have lunch with him again, at the same place if that was all right with her. “Oh yes,” she says, “that was a lovely place,” in the overly sincere voice of someone who is groping to remember. Had she been failing to think of him as much as he had been thinking of her?

This time, The Greenery is crowded. They have to wait for a booth, and his head jangles with the angry, forlorn, earnest voices of a Relationships group he had led at the Center at ten this morning. The motherly waitress is not here, replaced by a girl young enough to be a clumsy, overworked teen-aged child of their own. Annabelle wears an outfit, blue jeans and a purple turtleneck, that seems to announce to him a new, careless, on-my-own side of her. Maybe she hadn’t been up recovering from late duty when she sounded sleepy. She has never claimed to have no men friends.

The fall has turned cooler. On top of the turtleneck she wears an embroidered red jacket from India or someplace. No hurricane sweeps Elm Street with its drizzling fringe; the sun shines weakly, a white blur in a hazed sky above the city’s cornices, but enough leaves are down in the Bradford pear trees for a bald light to strike off the macadam, gleaming where the surface was patched by dribbles of tar. The overworked waitress settles them in a front booth that is still uncleared from the last customers, with him facing the window this time. His face feels lit up so that all its imperfections and wormy nerves show. Nelson is used to the Center twilight, the half-windows giving on street level, and the cluttered gloom of 89 Joseph Street. He says, “I dreamed of my father last week. Our father. I think it was him.”

“You’re not sure?”

“I never saw his face. But the, the affect"—she has to know the word, any nurse would—"was his. His toward the end. Before he ran south and died.”

“Is that what he did?”

“Didn’t you know? Yes, basically—he got in the car and drove to his condo in Deleon, that’s on the Gulf side, rather than face my mother.”

“I can see why. She has a mind of her own.”

“Funny, that was just the thing he thought she *didn’t* have.” “What *was* his affect? You started to say.”

Nelson thinks back. “Discouraged. But dogged. Going through the motions. He was practicing golf in our backyard, which was something he never did. There wasn’t room—there was a vegetable garden, and a swing set. In fact he never practiced his golf at all. He just got up on the tee and expected to be terrific.”

“And was he?”

“Not very, actually. But in his mind he had all this potential.”

“He sounds *dear.* Like a little boy who’s always been somebody’s pet.”

“That was him. Do you think it means anything, the dream?” “You tell me, Nelson. You’re the shrink.”

“I’m not a shrink. I keep telling the clients that. They keep looking to me to have answers—all the world wants a guru. A savior. I’m nobody’s savior.”

“Not even mine?” She smiles—he thinks she smiles, her face is in shadow, the big window bright behind her, with the sidewalk trees going bare. “In the dream, did he say anything to you? Did he— did he give you any instructions?”

“None. He never did. Almost never. He didn’t even look at me. I think I made him too sad.” “Why was that?”

“Maybe I reminded him of his other child, the one that died. My sister Becky. Also, he hated my being so short, taking after my mother.”

“Did he, or did you just think that? You’re as tall as I am, and I’m not short. Five seven.”

“Really?” He is thinking about something else; he is rattled enough to tell her. “I tried to run my Relationships group this morning, we discussed how to make it through the holidays—everything goes up in the holidays, suicides, psychotic breaks, acting out; the expectations are too much—and it got away from me, onto the meaning of life. Glenn, this suicidal gay with diamond studs all over his face, gets his kicks telling everybody how there is no meaning, the universe is an accident, a hiccup in empty space, and our existence is a cruel joke evolution has played on us, and he’d just as soon be out of it as not but he has too much contempt for the whole farce even to give it the satisfaction of pulling the trigger. This sends Rosa off the deep end, she’s a bipolar who in her manic phase says Jesus talks to her personally through various systems He has. She tells Glenn he’s going straight to Hell and won’t get any pity from her; she’ll look down at him and laugh.

This gets Shirley, she’s a three-hundred-pound binger with a history' of ECT for depression, this gets her riled up and she says Glenn is a very kind and considerate person and that the meaning of life for her is in small acts of kindness, not in some remote God in Heaven.”

“How did empty space hiccup? Did Glenn explain it?”

“Sort of. Virtual particles, I think he said. Empty space isn’t really empty but full of virtual particles that come and go in nanoseconds. They somehow got together and made the Big Bang. He keeps up with all this stuff.”

“That’s interesting. He doesn’t sound suicidal to me.”

“Me neither! He just says he is so he won’t have to leave us. We’re his family. Then Michael—have I told you about Michael?”

“Just a little. He’s the pretty boy with the rich self-made parents.”

“Exactly.” At times talking to Annabelle is like talking to himself, they are in such accord. “Michael gets very angry and says he’d like to know how people who think they talk to Jesus know it’s not the Devil pretending to be Jesus and that the voices that talk to him use dirty words he would never use, that’s how he knows they’re from outside his head. I’m pleased he can come out with all this, he tends to stay above it all when he even bothers to show up. He was in his first year at Penn when he broke. Then Jim—you want to hear all this garbage? You don’t.”

“Finish, Nelson. I do. But we must get the waitress and order. She hasn’t even cleared the table and I have a dental appointment at two.”

“You do? I never schedule the dentist after lunch.”

“I brought floss and a toothbrush in my purse,” Annabelle says primly, complacently. Her hair with its fluffy ragged cut makes a halo against the window, her face in shadow round like a solar eclipse. She suddenly seems a total stranger, an angel of blankness, and he wonders what he is doing here; she is too much for him to take on. The same gnawing he wakes to at night attacks his stomach and robs him of appetite at the very moment when the waitress, flushed and overwhelmed, comes to their booth, stacks the used plates on her arm, and asks for their order.

“We never got a menu,” Nelson tells her.

But before the girl can retreat to get them one, Annabelle says, “We’re in a hurry. Just bring me a hamburger.”

Nelson looks at the specials blackboard above the counter and says, “O.K., I’ll have the split-pea soup and the half a bean-sprouts sandwich.”

“To drink?” “Coffee.”

“A medium Sprite,” Annabelle says.

He accuses her, when the waitress leaves, “Your teeth look perfect.”

“No, actually they need a lot of care. My molars are full of fillings and may have to be crowned. I’ve always had a sweet tooth. Then Jim,” she prompted.

“Then Jim—Jim is an addict. You name it, he’s addicted. He has a beer belly from booze and yellow fingers from cigarettes and he’s been on methadone for years. But he’ll do uppers, downers, he’d get hooked on M&Ms if there was nothing else.”

“Yum,” says Annabelle.

“Jim decides to tell us, maybe just to rile us all up, that the meaning of life is sex, and he starts to describe a sexual adventure he just had, with all the words in place, in this sort of eye-rolling philosophizing way, a girl he met in a Third Street bar...”

“Go on.”

“She did this, he suggested that, she said why not, dude, the earth began to shudder and shake—I had to cut him off, which I hate to do, but it was pure exhibitionism, Rosa actually walked out, it was SO inappropriate—”

“I know,” Annabelle says. “I get that with my Alzheimer’s patients. They de-inhibit.”

“Your father,” Nelson says, thinking the subject needed a change. “The man you thought was your father. Did he ever look at you?”

Her eyes lose their sleepy look; a stonewashed-denim blue, they widen like a doll’s when you sit it erect.

“I mean,” Nelson hastens to explain, “unlike my father, who didn’t look around at me in the dream, even though I know he knew I was there.”

“Yes,” she says. “Frank did look at me. Especially—” “Especially after you were sixteen,” Nelson supplies.

“He died when I was sixteen. He began to look earlier than that. When I was fourteen.” Her eyes regain their unimpeachable calm. “But, you know, nothing. He was a wonderful, generous man. My mother wasn’t always easy. She had a temper, and wasn’t really a country person. She couldn’t talk to the other farm women, Mennonite some of them.”

More capable than she looks, the waitress brings his pea soup with the frothy half-sandwich and Annabelle’s hamburger with chips and a slice of pickle, cut the long way. The smell of ground grilled meat travels to him across the Formica, reminding him of high school—its cafeteria lunches, its aimless car rides that ended with Whoppers at Burger King. Since his father’s death of sludgy arteries he has been careful to watch his diet; his blood pressure is high for his age, and so is his cholesterol. It was aggressive of Annabelle, he feels, to order a hamburger, just as her outfit is aggressive, the purple turtleneck stretched by the push of her breasts. He wonders if as with the woman across the street her bra is beige, a clinging silky Olga or lacy Bali or satiny Barelythere. Her innocence feels learned, a layer. After two bites of her hamburger she confesses, “I dread Thanksgiving. I don’t know what you expect of me.”

“Expect? I don’t expect much, just you to be yourself and the others to be polite.”

“See, that’s it. Why should they have to make an effort to be polite? A girlfriend of mine from when I worked at St. Joe’s has invited me to spend the holiday with her family, over in Brewer Heights. Wouldn’t that be better? Easier for everybody?”

He goes into counsellor mode; his voice slows, each word weighed. “Easier isn’t necessarily better. You’re family to me and I’d like you to be there with me.”

“Family to you but not to them. To your mother I’m just a reminder of old misery.”

“The misery of the world,” he says, reaching into himself to overcome her resistance. “That’s what I kept thinking during my group this morning—the pity of everything, all of us, these confused souls trying so pathetically hard to break out of the fog— to see through our compulsions, our needs as they chew us up. I got panicky and let it get out of control. The group ran *me.*”

“Several of the old men I look after,” she says, trying to join in his drift, “think they’re married to me. They want to hold my hand. They think I’m the right age for them, they forget how old they are, when they don’t look into the mirror.”

“That Egyptian plane that went down,” he goes on. “One of the pilots decided to commit suicide and take everybody with him. Children and everybody. Because he couldn’t pay his daughter’s medical bills. People are crazy. At times when I’m with the clients I can’t see the difference between them and me, except for the structure we’re all in. I get paid, a little, and they get taken care of, a little.”

“So why do you want me to come with your family to Thanksgiving?”

“The same reason you showed up at the house,” Nelson says. “Without your mother, you’re stuck. You’re not going anywhere. You’re under a spell, and we’ve got to break it.”

“My savior.” She picks up the limp pickle slice with a dainty grip and before biting it with her deceptively pretty teeth gives him a challenging, sisterly look. “Nelson, are you sure it’s *my* spell you’re trying to break?”

He is nervous on behalf of his mother and sister and his own self, but things at Thanksgiving go pretty well until the four bottles of California sauterne have been drunk and people are restless and irritable from sitting so long at the table, the Springers’ polished mahogany dining-room table, two overlapping tablecloths needed to cover it with its extra leaves inserted. The day is unseasonably warm and spotted with fits of rain, showers that come and go. The summer’s drought has been forgotten. They need frost now. Daffodil and crocus shoots are coming up and the lilac buds have the fullness they should have in April. Some cog has slipped in the sky, clogged as it is with emissions from all our heedless cars.

Of the Harrison boys, nerdy, divorced Alex has come up from Virginia, and Georgie from New York, still unmarried and no great mystery why, and Ron Junior with his wife, pudgy Margie, and three children from where they live, in a new development off the old pike to Maiden Springs. That makes eleven with Nelson and Annabelle, but because she owes her so much hospitality and fortifying advice over the years Mom invited Doris Dietrich, as she now is, and her elderly rich husband, Henry, whom Doris calls Deet. Janice never dreamed Doris would accept but she did, loftily saying they had given the cook the holiday off and she was dreading trying to whip up an elaborate meal just for Deet. He is eighty, at least, and even deafer than Doris. Still, he holds himself erect and looks distinguished, a Diamond County aristocrat, a living reminder of the days when the vast old hosiery mills were still mills and not discount clothing outlets. After much dithering and debate, it was decided to put him at Janice’s right and Annabelle next to him and Georgie, in Nelson’s estimation the least menacing of the Harrisons, on her right.

And the old gent did appreciate—the thin red skin on his cheekbones glowed—being seated beside the best- looking youngish woman there. Margie, Annabelle’s only competitor, was one of those local girls who with their chunky sturdy legs in white bobby socks and big boobs in the bulky letter sweater are knockouts as seventeen-year-old cheerleaders but don’t carry it past thirty, sinking into fat with their mothers. Ron Junior had put on weight, too, and a construction worker’s permanent tan. His mother’s mouth, with her slightly shy but welcoming smile, had acquired in his face the stubborn closed set of a man who had settled for less than he might have. His two years up at Lehigh had gone into nailing two-by-fours into tacky house frames, rows of them on half-acre lots. He had become a version of his father, meaty and balding and potentially pugnacious, though without an insurance salesman’s pallor. Alex, the oldest and tallest, now looked most like their mother—stringy and wry, the way she became in her long illness, and intelligent and prim in his wire- rimmed glasses. Was it working with miniature circuits that had made his mouth the size of a tight buttonhole? He had done the best of the three boys, moving out to the West Coast and back, climbing the computer programmer’s zigzag ladder, though since it was a field where the brightest and luckiest made millions before thirty perhaps he felt like a failure; at any rate, he had a slight apologetic stoop, which was also like his mother as her life had wound down.

Nelson does not remember when he realized that his father and Mrs. Harrison were having an affair. He had his own family and problems back then and his parents’ friends to him were a bunch of aging crocks who hung out at the Flying Eagle and thought having a third g-and-t was a real trip and saying “fuck” in mixed company a real break-through. Buddy Inglefinger was the worst asshole, but Webb Murkett and his zaftig little child bride were right up there for repulsiveness. Mrs. Harrison he hardly ever looked at, she was so drab, so quiet, so naggingly ill. Yet, when made extra alert by coke, Nelson could feel currents—just the way the grown-ups grouped when he saw them together, Mom standing next to gawky Mr. Murkett or maybe stocky Mr. Harrison and Dad and Mrs. Harrison just hanging back a half-step together, talking so nobody else could hear, a funny tingling sort of extra peacefulness between them. She was nice to Nelson, too, a little too nice, as if to a much discussed problem child. This sallow, schoolmarmy, calm-voiced woman knew too many things about him, and liked him a shade more than on his own he deserved. It was eerie, the way she was already under his skin. The Murketts split up and the Inglefingers moved away—Buddy had found a woman as flaky as he—but the Harrisons and the Angstroms still would see one another, the six months when Mom and Dad were back from Florida, going out to a movie or a Blasts game, though Dad always said he couldn’t stand Ronnie and never had, not since Ronnie was a tough kid from Wenrich Alley. And Nelson would notice that in this quartet his father was less noisy than usual, less frisky and skittish in the way he put on to annoy Mom, more subdued and contented: he seemed more grown-up. It was hard to associate this different man with Mrs. Harrison, but what else would explain it? And then she died. And his father showed less grief than he should have, even scrapped with the grieving widower at the funeral. What a hard-hearted thick-skinned showboat his father had been, just as Ronnie said.

The fact of the affair has long since leaked out and poisons any get-together with his stepbrothers. Not that they say anything. But they know, and they see him as heir to his father’s guilt, to the pollution of their otherwise perfect mother.

“Alex, it’s great to see you up here,” Nelson lies. “Are you getting a Southern accent yet?”

“It’s infectious,” agrees the former computer whiz, now a middle-management tool. “Virginia’s a funny state—half hillbilly and half megalopolis, at the Washington end.”

“Like Pennsylvania and Philly,” Nelson offers.

“It has a better sense of itself than Pennsylvania. It had all those Presidents, and the Confederate capital, and now the economy is taking off. The skyscrapers they can’t build over in the District are being built across the river in Virginia.” His words issue from his little mouth grudgingly, as if his brain is being made to perform an uncongenial function.

“Have you met my sister Annabelle? Half-sister, actually.” “I heard she would be here. How do you do?”

“Hi,” says Annabelle, wondering if this is the brother Nelson wants her to get to know. It must be: of the other two, one is gay and the other already married, she can see. But why does Nelson assume that if she had wanted to marry she wouldn’t have, ages ago? It’s insulting, for him to think she couldn’t have landed a doctor for herself, back when she was younger. This pale man in bifocals, the pride of the Harrisons, reminds her of a doctor—the same chilly neatness, the same superior air of having mastered a language only a few can speak.

“And what do *you* do?” he asks her, as if everybody knows what he does. “Oh, hang out,” she says, to tease, he seems so prissy, so glassily impervious.

Nelson at her side intervenes: “She’s a licensed practical nurse, in private practice for now, mostly the elderly.”

“Mmm, impressive,” Alex says. “The geriatric is a real growth sector.”

“They’re more lonely than sick, a lot of them,” she offers, not sure whether he is being hostile or merely thinks in terms of sectors.

“You wonder how much dead weight society can carry,” he goes on. “At some point in the next millennium, governments will have to establish a cut-off point. Eskimos did it, when they were a viable population. Native American tribes did it. In Sicily, they used to make a party of it—everybody piled on with pillows, so when the old person smothered there was no single person who had, so to speak, ’done it.'”

He is hostile, she decides. She says, “I don’t know, there’s always something worthwhile there, even when they can’t remember from one minute to the next. They’re easy to make contact with. Maybe the shame they can’t express, about being useless, opens them up.” His mouth tightens, his glasses glint. He has taken her meaning, that he is not open or easy to make contact with. All this probing and grappling we must do, out in society: how much easier, Annabelle thinks, it is to stay in rooms you know as well as your own body, having a warm meal and an evening of television, where it’s all so comfortably one-way.

Seated at the table, she feels comfortable next to Mr. Dietrich, with his handsome long head and little fake- flesh hearing aid and sharp high cheekbones blotched by a stately excitement. He tells her about his travels— the bulky souvenirs his wife insists on buying, the number of times they have been cheated—in Mexico, in Egypt, in Sri Lanka. He conveys his pleasure in being able to support an acquisitive wife and legions of cheats. “Most of these foreigners are rascals,” he says, “but you can’t blame them, since they labor under the misfortune of not being Americans.” And he looks down at her sideways slyly, to see how she takes that, and turns to Nelson’s mother on his other side, asking, “Isn’t that right, Janice? Did you hear what I said to the delightful young lady?”

“No, Deet darling, say it again to me!”

Mrs. Harrison is tense. Her dark eyes—like Nelson’s, but moister, female, and less lashy, shrunken by age— have been shuttling up and down the table, watching all those faces connected to her. With a stepgrandson on her other side, she has lurched at the old man’s overture. They know each other; they have between them that toothless intimacy of the more-than-middle-aged—they can banter without any chance of follow-up.

“I said, my dear, that you can’t blame foreigners for being rascals since they labor under the misfortune of not being Americans!”

Janice puzzles. “I’m not sure I get it. If they’re foreigners, of course they’re not Americans.”

“Of course! Exactly!” Deet in deaf triumph rests his big mottled hand on her forearm and fondly squeezes.

On Annabelle’s other side, Georgie asks her about Broadway shows. He cannot believe she’s never seen Cats or *Miss Saigon.* But he obliges her with a description of a show called *Keep Bangin'* that consists of nothing but men playing drums. He offers to get her and Nelson tickets: “People here really live so much closer to New York than they realize. The drive takes less than three hours, and if you don’t want to bother with a car to park there’s a perfectly usable bus. If you and Nelson don’t want to hear all that drumming I know one of the dance coaches for the revival of *Kiss Me, Kate* that’s going to open next week. The most *amazing* production I’ve seen lately has the rather embarrassing title *The Vagina Monologues,* a one-woman show by Eve Ensler, and it’s really more serious than it sounds. It’s about us and our bodies. All of us. Men, women, and in-between.”

“Nelson and I don’t really go around together like that,” she must point out. “We discovered each other just recently.”

“What a remarkable thing,” he says, eager to follow any lead she gives him. She makes him uneasy, she realizes. A grin is held on his face like a firecracker ready to go off. His face is theatrically large-featured, and sun-wrinkled like a farmer’s—from beaches and vacations, she supposes. He has a marathoner’s unnatural leanness, to go with his mobile full lips, big beaky nose, and long, ropily veined hands. He asks, “You grew up around here?”

“Sure did.”

“And you don’t want to get away? I was always dying to. I wanted to dance and did make a few chorus lines, but never in shows that had long runs, that was just my luck. What I do now, to make ends meet—the city has become ridiculously expensive, even the neighborhoods that used to be grungy—I facilitate sales at a ticket agency. To put it baldly, I take orders over the phone. My brothers and father think it’s a *grotesque* career for a man past his fortieth birthday, but long ago I decided that they and the good folk of greater Brewer weren’t going to live my life for me. My agency sets up out-of-town theatre tours, so there are some executive and negotiative skills involved—really, I don’t see why I should be apologizing, I get free tickets to any show I want and still do my *jetés* and *pliés* for an hour every day. I haven’t given up on dancing; there are more and more good roles for males well past puberty. The producers are waking up to the audience demographics. The graying of America—we’re all part of it.”

Annabelle looks around, afloat in this family simmer. Her own family, in her recollection, took life from her brothers as they grew and brought back pieces of the world—games played, skills mastered, sayings and songs—but her mother was an overweight recluse and Frank stingy with his words, running his buses to bring in cash, like all farmers feeling left behind and exploited. Their holiday occasions had something furtive about them, and half meant. The families of her girlfriends at the regional high school had longer, more exotic summer vacations than she and bigger Christmas trees, more presents, a keener and lighter-hearted will to celebrate. It was a relief to her when this moment of holiday exposure—like the baby Jesus in his manger naked to the starry sky—was over and they could again blend into the safe, laborious routines of everyday, the new year begun. A boy called Jamie, the only boy she really knew for years, asked her to the senior prom, and her dress, peach chiffon with a satin bodice, seemed a piece of her parents’ flesh she was wearing, carved from their scanty budget, hot and sticky on her skin. She felt stiff as a doll, tarted up, even though her mother, in her jeans and flannel shirt, tried to see her off with a blessing: “My beautiful baby girl,” she said. Annabelle had not felt entitled to be the expense her brothers were—their sports equipment, their field trips, their memberships—as if she sensed, in her mother’s ruefully loving touch, the hidden truth that she was only her mother’s child. She watches this other family with interest, her brother a lamb among his stepkin.

Nelson sits at the far end of the table, between Mrs. Dietrich and the plump, short, opinionated Margie. Between Margie and Janice the two older children, restless boys, sit and stare with undisguised curiosity across at Annabelle. On the other side of Georgie are his two brothers, Alex and then Ron Junior, in turn next to his youngest child, a girl in a high chair, and next to her her grandfather, who as the wine bottle in front of him empties becomes increasingly cozy with Mrs. Dietrich. Her leathery form is adorned with lots of draggy metal jewelry, as if for some other occasion, a gaudier and more fashionable one than this family observance. The Dietrichs bring to the meal the grace of money, the wealth of honest material industry, its machinery sold south, its employees long dismissed and dead of lint and toxic relaxants, but its invested profits still working for the happiness of the founder’s heirs, to the third generation.

Janice sits at the table’s foot, opposite her husband and beside the courtly Deet, but she has the air less of the hostess than of a guest lucky to be there, increasingly light-headed as her wineglass is refilled and the meal she has struggled to prepare is dutifully consumed. The turkey was dry and the gravy a little thick and cold but the stuffing, mashed potatoes, and cranberry sauce all came out of a box and were excellent, save for that last fillip of taste, tart or peppery, that only a fond and confident cook can impart. Janice’s bearing breathes relief that she will not have to do this for another year. She sits nodding at Deet’s description of the myriad temples of Myanmar, once known as Burma, the country in Southeast Asia least spoiled by Western tourists thanks to its tough little generals, while resting her glazed eyes on the sight of her husband’s head nudging ever closer to Doris’s dangling copper earring. Yet even thus engaged Ronnie now and then darts toward Annabelle a look that feels like a thrust; it makes her uneasy, it touches her depths.

“And now the bitch is going to run,” Doris’s harsh, seldom contradicted voice leaps from her tête-à-tête. “They have no shame, those two.”

The pair of little boys, ten and eight and bored beyond endurance, have been excused until dessert and can be heard banging about in the sunporch beyond the kitchen. Annabelle watches Janice to see when she will get up to clear the dishes away, so she can offer to help her. The hostess makes no move except to sip from her glass, though Mr. Dietrich’s braying survey of his adventures abroad has momentarily ceased. His wife’s voice, overheard by all but him, has stilled the table.

Nelson studies his untidy plate. Cranberry sauce has stained the mashed potatoes. Frowning down at it, he asks, “What does she have to be ashamed of?”

“Well, she’s a crook, for one thing,” Ron Junior volunteers, in case Doris Dietrich has no ready answer.

“And for another she’s no more a New Yorker than I am,” Alex adds with a surprising quickness, punching in his data.

The third brother has to chime in. “What’s a New Yorker?” Georgie asks. “We’re all immigrants there.” “You going to vote for her?” Ron Junior asks him.

Annabelle feels Georgie at her side cringe but muster mettle to reply, “Probably. If it’s Giuliani she runs against. He’s an uptight control freak who really blew it with this Brooklyn Museum flap. He tried to withhold city funds, it’s as bad as art under Communism.”

Doris says, the bracelets on her arm jingling as she props her elbow and pulls a smoking cigarette from her mouth, “The city is safer to visit than it’s been for twenty years. Deet and I used to be scared to go there and now we’re not.”

“Maybe that’s just demographics,” Nelson says. “There are fewer young black men. And thanks to Clinton’s boom more of them have jobs.”

Alex announces, “Clinton in my book gets no credit whatsoever for the prosperity. It’s all due to the American electronics industry. If anything his taxes have held it back. And now the Department of Justice is going after Microsoft—talk about killing the goose that lays the golden eggs.”

“And Alan Greenspan,” Deet announces, having caught some of the drift.

“Nelson is defending Clinton, dear,” Doris calls down the length of the table to him.

“And Mrs. Clinton, too,” Nelson says. He has a defiant streak, Annabelle sees—a disregard that might be their father in him.

“I think they’re both disgusting,” Ron Junior’s chubby wife puts it, having returned from the direction of the kitchen to check on her two noisy sons. “I blame her as much as him for the Monica mess.”

“How so?” Nelson asks.

“Don’t play naive, Nelson. She’s been enabling his affairs for years —without her defending him over Gennifer Flowers he wouldn’t have ever got elected.”

“She keeps him hard up,” their host says at the head of the table. There is a flushed pinkness to Ronnie’s head, in the scalp that shows through his skimpy hair, in the tint of his tender-looking eyelids, in the color that glows through his protuberant ears. “Like they used to do for prizefighters.” It’s another generation speaking, Annabelle thinks. A coarser, more physical, rust-belt mentality. This man knew her biological father—played the same auditorium-gyms, inhaled the same coal-smoky air.

“And what about her and Vince Foster?” Ron Junior asks. “Don’t think that’s not going to come up again if she runs.”

“The king and queen of sleaze,” his wife goes on in a kind of rapture. “I can’t *stand them!”* This is marriage, Annabelle sees, this joint rapture.

“*Yes,"*Georgie breaks in, his voice tense, having been coiled within him, “I *will vote* for her. She has her heart in the right place, unlike all you Republicans. She’s for choice, for freedom of expression, for g-giving the p-poor a break.” He is starting to stammer in his excitement; the other Harrisons narrow their eyes and sigh in an old reflex of pity and contempt; he is not the scapegoat they want today.

“Like the poor Palestinians. Like Mrs. Arafat. They loved that in New York. 'Here, honey, have a hug,'” Ron Junior runs on.

“You New Yorkers,” Alex says to his brother loftily, “you’re all—” He hangs on what seems to be an “f,” and Georgie jumps in:

“Fags, you’re trying to say.”

“Full of shit, I was going to say, and then thought better of it. We have ladies and a little girl at this table.” He pinches his mouth smaller yet.

“He has no coat-tails,” Ron Senior says, still thinking practically. “The jerk should have been impeached and we all know it.”

“He was impeached,” Nelson says to his stepfather. “What he shouldn’t have been was convicted, and he wasn’t, if you’ll recall.”

But Nelson isn’t the scapegoat they want either. His stepfather says patiently, “Nellie, he *lied* to us, the American people. He said right out on television, 'I did not have sex with that woman, what’s-hername.'”

Annabelle feels compelled to speak up. “I think he’s an excellent President,” she says.

Her voice, though shy, is clean and pure, startling. The agitated table, smelling of food eaten and uneaten, falls into a hush. She is their guest, just barely. Who is she, come back from nowhere with her pale round face?

“How so, dear?” Doris Dietrich asks, from the other corner of the table. Her gaudy earrings, strips of copper, twitter as she brings her head forward to hear the answer.

Annabelle fights the blush she feels beginning. She elongates her neck to spread the heat. She loves Clinton, she realizes, from all those hours at the television set, letting his A-student earnestness wash over her, his lip- biting pauses for the judicious word, his gently raspy hillbilly accent. “Oh, the usual things people say,” she says. “He really does make you feel he cares—that he *sees* you. He’s been there, poor in a crummy town, with an abusive stepfather. And his cleverness, knowing all those facts, and being always right. All those experts on television like George Will saying bombing Kosovo would never work and then it did. And the way he went into Haiti. And has brought peace to Ireland.”

“He’s a *draft* dodger!” Ron Junior cannot keep in. “If I was a soldier I’d tell him to stuff his orders. Don’t send me to Bosnia!”

“She was asked a question, let her answer,” Nelson says; he is used to running groups.

She goes on, hating making a speech, blushing hotly now, but— having handled the mortally ill so often, knowing what waits for us, all of us, including all of us here at this table—not afraid of speaking her mind, when after all her President had kept going doing his job with the entire country full of cheap and ugly cracks, “He loves people, he truly does. And he has nerve. He knows when to gamble and when to hold back. And he doesn’t hold a grudge, even against those in the Congress who hated him and tried to ruin him. Yes, it was too bad about—about his needing a little affection, but maybe he was entitled to some. Aren’t we all?”

“A blow job is a little affection?” the host asks, giving her again one of those looks, a thrust from some past where she didn’t exist.

“Well—”

“Of course,” Nelson intervenes. “That’s just what it is.” “That right, Georgie?” Alex asks his younger brother.

“Drop dead, Lex. Go back to the Bible Belt. Though as a matter of fact I agree with Annabelle, I think it’s pathetic that this idiotic puritanical nation reduced its President to acting like a sneaky teen-ager. Any other country in the world, he could have a harem if he does the job.”

Deet has heard enough to know they are talking about Clinton. He says in that commanding deaf voice, “The man may have his good intentions, but he is too extreme, giving all this government money to those who refuse to work. Raising taxes on the rich hurts the economy over all, history shows time and time again.”

“He’s *for* workfare,” Nelson says, almost suffocated by the ignorance around him. “The liberals hate him for it.”

“He makes me ashamed of being an American,” Margie volunteers. Something in her akin to sexual passion has been tripped; her face shows spots of outgrown acne. “He makes America look ridiculous, drowning us in sleaze and then flying around all over the world as if nothing whatsoever has happened.

It’s so *brazen.”*

Her little girl, two or so, is too big to be penned into a high chair this long; hearing her mother’s voice strain, feeling her mother’s blood boil, she begins to kick and whimper. With an irritable backhand she flicks her peas and cut-up turkey off the tray onto the floor. “Hey, take it easy, Alice,” says Ron Junior, who has been hit in his necktie by some of the peas.

“Well,” his father says, “I’ll say this for Slick Willie, he’s brought the phrase out in the open. When I was young you had to explain to girls what it was. They could hardly believe they were supposed to do it.”

Janice thinks Ronnie looks tired—blue below the eyes, his hair just a gauze up top, his ears feverish. Having lost one husband prematurely, she is watchful of this one, with his silky skin, his steady ways.

Nelson says to Margie, softly, between them, “Brazen, he’s still President, for Chrissake,” and to Deet, loudly, “Actually, Mr. Dietrich, fiscally he’s about as conservative as a Democrat can get. We’re feeling the pinch at the treatment center, I can tell you.”

“Face it, Nellie, the guy stinks,” says Ron Junior, while his daughter wriggles in his lap, glad to be out of the chair but not wishing to be confined by her father’s embrace either. “He’s dead meat. He’s a leftover going fuzzy at the back of the fridge.”

Alex opines primly, “He makes Nixon look like a saint. At least Nixon had the decency to get out of our faces. He *could feel* shame.”

“Nixon? I never heard him admit anything except how sorry he felt for himself,” Nelson says.

“It’s the *sleaze!”* Margie cries in a kind of orgasm, visibly quivering. Alice starts to whimper in sympathy. Her mother gestures toward her. “What are children supposed to think? What do you tell Boy Scouts?”

“Boy Scouts!” Georgie exclaims, a big grin creasing his face. “Keep your mind out of the gutter, that’s what our scoutmaster used to tell us. But none of us did. Boy Scouts are no saints. He was no saint either, it turned out.”—“A much-maligned man,” Deet announces, having heard the word “Nixon.” “What he did then would be shrugged off now.”

“Like Reagan shrugged off Iran-Contra,” Nelson says. “Not that he had a clue what they were talking about. Talk about senile dementia!”

“He made the Russkies bite the dust, I’ll tell you. He brought the damn Wall down,” says Ron Senior, lifting the bottle in front of him and finding that it is empty. “Janice, is there any more wine? Is it all drunk up at your end?”

Doris Dietrich beside him also calls down to Janice. “Janice, what do you think? What do you think about Hillary’s running?”

Janice tries to focus. She had been thinking of how much like Harry Nelson was, defending Presidents. Her son has that expression on his face Harry used to call “white around the gills.” Why do they do it, care so about those distant men? They identify. They think the country is as fragile as they are. Her father, who hated Roosevelt to the day he died, would get so excited, saying the Democrats were giving the country away. She tells the expectant table, “Oh...she should run if it makes her feel better. Let her get it out of her system. Ronnie, you’ve had enough wine. It’s time to clear, but everybody except Annabelle stay sitting. She may help me.”

Her attempt to protect the girl fails, for everybody except the Dietrichs and Margie and Alice picks up dirty dishes and crowds into the kitchen. Ron Junior’s two boys, Angus and Ron III*,* have taken Ron Senior’s golf clubs out of his closet to the sunporch and set up a kind of putting course among overturned summer furniture. They are taking fuller and fuller swings, and their father gets to them just before something is broken—the rippled glass table where they sometimes eat in the summer, or a panel of screening he has just fitted with new Fiberglas mesh. “We’re going to have pies, boys,” Janice promises them, and then remembers that she should have been warming the apple and mince in the oven instead of just sitting there listening to them all argue.

There is a milling about at the kitchen counter as the guests deposit the plates and glasses and silver. Annabelle starts rinsing the plates into the Disposall and stacking them in the dishwasher, whose baby-blue interior is new to her. Her host comes over to help, which is his right, it being his kitchen. But it brings him very close, his sports jacket off and his sleeves rolled up so the blond-white fur of forearm hair shows; he lightly bumps her aside and takes the wet plates into his hands. There is a density to him, a fullness of blood that her own veins feel. “We’ll load all the big plates into the lower rack and save the saucers for the next load.”

“I can move away, Mr. Harrison, if you’d like to do it.”

“Why? This works. You rinse, I load.” He is close enough that she smells the sweet sauterne around his red-eared head. “So,” he says, “a blow job’s just a way of showing affection.”

“That’s what I said.” She has dealt in her life with so many older men coming on to her that she feels calm with it, confident she can fend.

“You’re your mother’s daughter, all right.”

“I am?”

“I knew your mother, once. Before she got involved with that jerk Angstrom.”

“Oh?” Fear and fascination twitter together inside her. Her hand trembles, setting the delicate old wineglasses, family treasures with etched designs, into the upper rack. He takes them from her two at time, and rearranges those she has set in place.

“Otherwise, they rattle around and break,” he explains.

“What was she like then?” She asks this but has already decided she doesn’t want the conversation to continue. She half turns away from him, looking for a towel to dry her hands.

Ronnie keeps his voice low, so Janice, putting her pies belatedly into the oven, doesn’t hear. “She’d fuck anybody,” he says softly into the fine hair at the side of Annabelle’s neck.

“Why didn’t you do that before?” Nelson is whining at his mother.

“Oh, it slipped my mind,” she says, “everybody getting so excited about Clinton. Isn’t his term about up, in any case?”

“Not soon enough,” Ron Junior shouts from the sunporch, where he is trying to restore order.

“It must feel funny,” Ronnie murmurs to Annabelle, “being the illegitimate daughter of a hooer and a bum.” Tears spring to her eyes as if at the lash of a twig while walking in the woods. Nelson sees the change in her face, sees her wheel from the sink with her wet hands still up in the air, and in two steps is at her side. “What happened?” he asks, his breath hot, his eyes sunk deeper into his skull.

“Nothing,” she gasps, struggling not to sob."What did he say?""He didn’t say anything.""I asked her,” Ronnie tells his stepson conversationally, “how it felt being the bastard kid of a whore and a bum. I didn’t ask her for a blow job, though.”

“Ronnie!” Janice exclaims, letting the oven door slam."Well, shit,” he says, only a bit abashed, “what’s she doing here anyway, telling us what a great guy Clinton is?”

Nelson squares up to him, though he is a bit shorter and was neveran athlete. “You *told* Mom she could come. You said you wanted to see how Ruth Leonard’s daughter turned out.”

“Now I know. Looks just like her, without the ginger in her hair. And cunt, my guess is.” Buried years of righteous resentment surface in the cool guess.

“You couldn’t stand it, could you?” Nelson says. “My father beating you out every time. Every time you went up against him, he beat you out. That’s how he was, Ronnie. A winner. You, you’re a loser.”

“You’d know,” Ronnie says.

Others have pushed into the kitchen, the older two Harrison sons."What’s going on?” Georgie asks.

“*Mom,”* Nelson asks his mother. “Why did you marry him? How could you do that to us?” The “us,” he realizes, must include his dead father.

Janice looks as though she has had this conversation with her son before, and is weary to death of it. “He’s good to me,” she explains. “He’s had too much to drink. Haven’t you, Ron?”

“No,” he says. “Not quite enough in fact. You drank it all at your end.”

“Please forget whatever he said,” she says to Annabelle. “Let’s go for a walk, some of us. While the pies warm up.”

“The rain has started up again,” Alex points out.

Ron Junior wants to defend his father but doesn’t quite know from what. “You squirt,” he says to Nelson. “This was all your crazy idea, bringing *her.*”

“It’s thrown him for a loop,” Georgie offers to explain, from his New York angle, seeing his father with a detachment the other two haven’t managed yet, as an old man getting older. “She got him stirred up, remembering.” His young-old face with its exaggerated big features reveals, in the tug of a smile crease at a corner of his lips, what he shares with his brothers, satisfaction that at last some sort of counterblow has been struck for Rabbit Angstrom’s leading their mother into adultery.

“I am not stirred up,” Ronnie says, with the oblivious stolidity of the insurance agent who will not go away, who will not leave the house until a policy has been sold. “This is my house and I like to have some control over who comes into it.”

“Well, we’re going,” Nelson tells him. “This is it. Mom, I’ll come by for my things when this pig isn’t here.” “Nelson, you have no place to stay!”

“I’ll find one. Come on, Annabelle. Here,” and he dodges around Ronnie, startlingly, and rips a generous length of paper towel from the rack under the old-fashioned wooden cabinets and hands it to his sister, to dry her wet and soapy hands with.

Numb, heaped with disgrace, she follows him back into the dining room, past the tall breakfront where Ma Springer’s precious Koerner china trembles at their double retreat. Annabelle has to hurry with her choppy small steps to keep up. She dressed for this occasion in a white cashmere cardigan and cinnamon-brown skirt, perhaps a little tight and short for the company. But that’s how skirts come now, from New York via the buyers for the malls.

Only Margie, little Alice, and the Dietrichs are left at the Thanksgiving table. A cloud of Doris’s cigarette smoke lies up against the ceiling, around the brass-plated dome fixture. Nelson stops to bend down and say loudly, “Mr. Dietrich, I’m sorry, but something has come up and we must run before the pies. Happy Thanksgiving. You too, Mrs. Dietrich. Keep being a friend to Mom, she needs you. Margie, I guess we don’t agree entirely about Clinton but that’s a very cute little girl you have there.”

“Goodbye,” Annabelle says to the table in a scarcely audible croak, her throat sore from her choked-down sobs. She dabs at her wet cheeks with the paper towel, held in the hand that Nelson isn’t squeezing as he pulls her along. The two small boys have made their way ahead of them into the living room and have turned on the Zenith television. A football game: green-and-white uniforms deploy on a bright-green ground with a yellow ten-yard line supplied by computer graphics. The top of the set is crammed with knickknacks, including a heavy pale-green glass egg that since his earliest childhood seemed miraculous to Nelson. How did they get that tear-shaped bubble in there? He has no coat and her jacket hangs in the hall. The front door with its thin panes of ornamentally frosted glass sticks in the dampness of the day, but with a screech pops open, releasing them to the porch and its fresh air. It is raining; the air is chilly, alive. As a child he always loved this porch, his Springer grandparents’ porch, where there was a cushioned glider that squeaked and smelled like the oilcloth mattress in his playpen. And there had been an armchair of unpainted wicker. People don’t use their porches any more; the furniture was taken to the Mt. Judge dump, now closed, in some decade when he wasn’t paying much attention. Being adult, it seems, consists of not paying much attention. The wicker smelled to his childish nostrils of its vegetable origin, of a willow tree in a storybook, leaning beside a pond, trailing its drooping branches and feathery leaves in the crystal-pure water. His senses feel clean again, the rain sharp on his face, the patter in the maple leaves overhead distinct, each drop, as he tugs his sister toward the tired white Corolla he brought her in. The house across the street, where the pumpkins and the woman in her bra have shone forth, is dark, empty. The neighbors are away for the holiday, and thus miss seeing the heir leave 89 Joseph Street for good.

Chapter 4

“O.K., O.K., I lost it,” Ronnie admits to Janice. “There was no reason to be rude, people can’t help how they got born.”

“You should call and apologize.” This incident has given her an edge, and anger enough to use it. He had seen in the girl this dead woman he had fucked, and moved toward her, and made an assault in his frustration. This did not speak well of what his wife meant to him. What she meant, she saw when she cleared her head, was a kind of revenge on Harry, and the possession of this house. This is my house, he had said, but it was not, it was her house, the house she had been raised in, the house her mother’s pride had cleaned and polished and her father’s money had maintained. They were surrounded by Koerner and Springer things; the Angstroms and the Harrisons had contributed hardly a stick of furniture, they were nobodies in the county, they would leave nothing behind but their headstones.

“I’m not ready,” Ronnie tells her. “I can’t trust myself to do the right thing. She’s a Clinton-lover, for Chrissake. She must hang around with a bunch of North Brewer weirdos.”

He wanted to fuck the girl, Janice perceives, and is wife enough to feel sorry for him, thinking of his burdensome prick that hangs at such loose ends below his furry pot belly, a prick with a flat upper side, a heavy mournful club, circumsized, unlike Harry’s. Nowhere to hide its head. “Then call Nelson at least,” she says.

“We don’t know where he is, do we?” He is correctly guessing that she knows more than he. A long weekend has gone by since Thanksgiving. Nelson came over while Ronnie was at church Sunday. Ronnie faithfully goes to that no-name fundamentalist church beyond Arrowdale that he and Thelma used to attend. Once when Janice asked him why he bothered, he snapped, “The same reason anybody goes. Because we’re all sinners.” Janice felt this as a slap in her face. Harry would never have said it; he never thought he sinned. She tries not to hate Thelma now that she is dead but she shouldn’t have to share both husbands with her. Janice has inherited Episcopalianism from her mother but without Bessie Springer’s habit of attendance. There has been for years too much to do on a Sunday morning, her women’s tennis group at the Flying Eagle in the summer and in the winter her sessions on the Stepmaster at the Fitness Center at the dying mall on the way to Brewer. She is determined not to get fat like Mother. Her trim little figure is the thing she likes best about herself. Anyway, Mother had friends to go with after Daddy was gone—Grace Stuhl, Amy Gehringer—and Janice has none. So she stays home Sunday mornings with the Brewer *Standard* in all its color-printed sections while her husband communes with the dead.

Knowing this, Nelson called five minutes after Ronnie stepped out the door and was there in his car fifteen minutes later. He took away two armfuls of clothes and said he’d be back for one of the television sets and a couple of upstairs chairs when he had a place of his own. He was sleeping on Annabelle’s floor over on East Muriel Street until he could begin to look for a room on Monday. She was fine, just cried a lot because all of the Harrisons hated her. He had told her that Georgie didn’t hate her, and the others were out of touch with their true feelings. Anyway, it had been his mistake. Another mistake, he realized, had been hanging on in this house so long, for lack of a better idea and having the delusion that his mother needed him. “You don’t need me, Mom. You’re doing fine. Ronnie’s fine, for being a fat-headed bozo. Tell him sometime that he was good to put up with me so long.”

She couldn’t argue, really. She loved Nelson for all they had been through together but she was past the age when she could oblige his neediness. She and Ronnie left alone tended to each other’s needs, one of which, never stated, was getting ready for death, which could start any time now. A pain in the night, a sour number on the doctor’s lab tests, and the skid would begin. They had seen their spouses go that way. She had felt her baby slip from her soapy hands and for some few seconds be unfindable in the tub’s opaque gray water. If there was any truth in what the churches said she would be reunited with her baby, not so far from now. Death had that to offer her.

She had given Nelson a piece of mince pie that she had saved in the freezer for him and said how sorry she was about what had happened. Everybody felt terrible about it, except Deet and the three children, she guessed. “No,” Nelson said, “it was clarifying. It showed me what a pipsqueak leech I tend to be. There was no reason to drag you all in, my sister is something that concerns Dad and me, not you.”

That was yesterday. She tells Ronnie now, “You could call him at work.” He understands it as a command, for his having overstepped.

It is not an easy call to make, but no worse than hounding a prospect into buying insurance. You construct a shell for yourself, and speak from within it. “Nelson, got a minute?”

“A minute, yes.” He has the Relationships group in ten minutes. “Listen, I feel rotten about the way I spoke to Annabelle.”

His using her name offends Nelson, but he listens. “I must have been drunk,” Ronnie goes on.

“Were you *that* drunk? Mentioning her mother’s cunt?” The clients at the Center may be dysfunctional but they have rabbit ears. Through the open door of his tiny office Nelson sees several heads out in the milieu turn, including that of Rosa, who talks to Jesus. She is with a new client, a forty-seven-year-old female obsessive-compulsive. During the intake he was struck by the new client’s hands, so painfully scrubbed and chapped, and the fingernails nibbled down to the pink parts. Pru had had such long red hands, he remembers—gawky in the wrists, tender at the tips.

“Look,” Ronnie’s voice presses on, “I’m calling to say I’m sorry, you’re not supposed to make it harder.” “I’m not? Some would say that you owe the apology not to me but to Annabelle.”

“I don’t trust myself to talk to her. Her being such a bleeding heart for Clinton still pisses me off.” “Was it really Clinton that pissed you off? Tell me, Ronnie, when you looked at her, what did you see?” “I saw a bleeding-heart broad too big for her miniskirt.”

“Anything else? Come on. Help yourself. Think.”

“I saw Ruth Leonard back in the Fifties. She’d fuck anybody.” “More. Who else did you see?”

Ronnie is silent, but his silence conveys less animosity than an attempt to think. This is the best conversation Nelson has ever had with Ronnie. His moving out has done that, in just four days. For the first lime, Ronnie owes him some respect. “You want me to say your father,” he comes up with.

“Only if it’s true.”

“It’s true. She has more of him in her than you do. Stop asking all these questions trying to make me spill my guts. You’re sore at me and always have been because I ball your mother.”

“Are you sure about that? Maybe I like you for it; *I* can’t do it. The fact is, I don’t dislike you, Ronnie. You don’t threaten me the way you did Dad, for some reason. I like you. I like the way you take care of Mom and care about that big homely barn of a house. You’re a caring guy. Insurance salesmen are caring guys, worrying about the loved ones when the breadwinner packs it in. You try to make the dead effective just like I try to make the crazy effective. We’re not hotshots but we’re responsible citizens. What bugs you about Clinton is that he seems to get away with everything. The same with my father. Let me tell you something, Ronnie, something I’ve observed: nobody gets away with anything. Those that escape punishment inflict it on themselves. We all do it. We keep our own accounts.”

Ronnie is silent, weighing this, looking for the hook. “What b.s.,” he says at last. “Nellie, you’ve become a bullshit artist.”

“Another reason I like you, Ronnie,” Nelson rushes on, the insight having just come to him with a force that needs to be vented, “is that you and I are about the last people left on earth my father still bugs. He bugs us because we wanted his good opinion and didn’t get it. He was worse than we are but also better. He beat us out. You look at Annabelle and see living proof that he beat you out— you may have fucked Ruth but he knocked her up and he stares out of her face at you. Right?”

“You’ve lost me,” Ronnie admits. “Tell me, what does this kid do for you?”

“Me, it’s like she’s something my father left me to take care of, and I don’t have a clue how to do it. Thanksgiving wasn’t the answer. Your sons sure weren’t the answer.”

Ron Harrison’s voice becomes pious. “Nellie, I’m going to speak the truth in love. What I say is going to help you. She’s a slick little twat and can take care of herself. Let me tell you something that will shock you. Back in the kitchen, I turned her on. She wanted me to ball her. I felt it, and I had to get ugly, for everybody’s sake. I sacrificed myself.”

“Talk about bullshit,” Nelson says, and hangs up. While he has been on the phone so long, Rosa and the new client have been scared off, horrified by what they have overheard. He ventures out into the milieu after them, to find out what they wanted, and to show them how sane and normal and trustworthy he basically is.

From: Dad [[nel](mailto:nelsang.harrison@qwikbrew.com)s[ang.harrison@qwikbrew.com]Sent:](mailto:nelsang.harrison@qwikbrew.com) Friday, December 10, 1999 5:11 PMTo: [royson@buckeyemedia.comSubject:](mailto:royson@buckeyemedia.comSubject) change of address

Dear Roy—Sorry to let your messages and jokes accumulate. The one about how many Texas A & M students does it take to screw in a light bulb is funny but it seems a little heartless, seeing that twelve young people were killed making that bonfire pile and most were freshmen who had just been told to do this by people who should have known better. Remember when you get to college to trust your own judgment. I wasted a lot of time at beery frat foolishness at Kent State until your mother took me in hand. She was a little older than I and had more of a realistic upbringing.

The reason I have been slow to answer lately is that I moved out of the house where your grandmother and Mr Harrison live, so I don’t have daily access to this computer and am using it now on the sly when they are both out at the mall doing Christmas shopping and then maybe a movie, either the new James Bond or new Tom Hanks. Some rude words at Thanksgiving prompted my departure but I’ve been thinking of it for some time. Your mother and I used to discuss it while you and Judy were growing up there but we never got around to it, the rent was too good ($0.00).

For somewhat more than that amount ($85 a week, so tell your mother I have this new expense) I have rented a big front second-story room on Almond Street, just off Elsenhower Avenue three blocks from the underpass, where you and Judy and Mom if she wants can stay when you come east after Christmas. We can put mattresses on the floor and borrow sleeping bags from the two girls who live in the other half of the second floor here. They are both in their twenties and what we used to call secretaries but have titles like administrative assistant and corporate input organizer. I hardly ever see them but can hear them with their obnoxious dates sometimes late at night.

I have been living on Almond Street only a week but am pretty happy. The apartment comes with a cable television set and other essential furnishings and a bathroom with shower. There’s no kitchen but your grandmother stood me to a little microwave, a 1.2-cubic-ft. Magic Chef, for coffee in the morning and a TV dinner at night. There’s a 7-Eleven just down the street. This used to be the landlady’s daughter’s room until she married and moved away, so there are a lot of frilly nice touches left over.

When you come you must meet your new aunt, a half-aunt if there is such a thing, Annabelle. She is shy but very nice, and knows all about you. Those protests in Seattle reminded me of when I was about your age and people were protesting everything, rioting in the streets. Policemen were called pigs and the President was called worse, just like now. I suppose things move in cycles.

I’m glad your birthday went nicely and I’m sorry it slipped my mind. Let me know what you would like for a present and we can get it when you visit. Your own cell phone seems a bit much even if other kids have them. There is a monthly charge, you know, that you would be responsible for. You can keep using this for your e-mail to me but as I say I can’t answer easily. At work they don’t want you to use the computers for private e-mail. But I have a phone in my apartment: 610—846—7331. Call me when you feel like a chat. Love to you and all those fabulous Akron Angstroms, Dad.

He is not surprised when Pru calls the next evening. Her voice is lighter, more girlish than he remembers. “Nelson, what got into you to leave your mother’s at last?”

“It felt crowded. Ronnie’s a prick, like my father always said.” “This so-called sister—did *she* put you up to it?”

“No, Annabelle would never apply pressure that way.” “Well, she got you to do something I never could.”

“Oh? You were never that clear. You were ambivalent, like me. It was a free ride, with a built-in babysitter.”

She pauses, checking her memory against his. He can picture her lips, drawn back in thought in her bony face, like an astronaut’s when the G’s of force begin to tug. She says, “Maybe it was Pennsylvania I needed to get out of. It’s all very dear and friendly, but there’s this thick air or whatever, this moral undertone. I think Judy is better off without all that to rebel against.”

“And Roy?”

“He’s scary, of course, spending so much time at the computer, but a lot of his friends are like that too. Where you and I see a screen full of more or less the same old crap, they see a magic space, full of tunnels and passageways and pots of gold. He’s grown up with it.”

He is being invited, he realizes, to talk as a parent, a collaborator in this immense accidental enterprise of bringing another human being into the world. “Yeah, well, there’s always something. TV, cars, movies, baseball. Lore. People have to have lore. Anyway, Roy has always been kind of a space man.”

“He masturbates like crazy, though. There’s all this porn on the Internet. And he doesn’t have the housekeeping sense to wipe up the sheet with a handkerchief.”

Nelson sighs, seeing sex loom ahead for Roy as a dark and heartless omnivore. “Well, yes. He thinks it doesn’t show. I thought the same thing, I guess. How’s your life, by the way, in the romance department?”

He wouldn’t have dared ask a week ago, but moving out has given him a fresh footing with not only his stepfather but his estranged wife. Pru is a year older than he and that year has figured in their relationship from the start, making her seem a greater prize when they dated at Kent State, enlarged by adult features like a secretary’s salary and a car (a salt-rotted tan Valiant) and an apartment of her own up in Stow and knowing how to fuck, muscling her clitoris against his pelvic bone and coming matter-offactly as if it was her woman’s plain right. But then once they were married that year’s difference became an embarrassment, as if he had just switched mothers. No wonder she and Dad got together. Then in recent years the year’s difference had swung back to mattering less, a slightly awkward fact like her also being left-handed, once they outgrew the year when she was forty and he only thirty-nine. He was forty-one when she left him, leaving in the muggy heat of August to enroll the children in Akron schools. She had complained for years about living with his mother and Ronnie and about his dead-end job babysitting these pathetic dysfunctionals, boosting his own ego at their expense, caring more about them than he did about his own wife and children, but what it boiled down to in his baffled mind was something she once shouted, her green eyes bright as broken glass in her reddened face: *My life with you is too small!* Too small. As if being a greaseball lawyer’s input organizer and easy lay was bigger. But the size of a life is how you feel about it. Pru was one of seven children and, though her father, a former steamfitter, is dead of too many Buds and her wispy little lace-curtain-Irish-Catholic mother sits in assisted-living housing, she has six siblings and their broods to give her a big noisy theatre to do an aunt act in. Whereas Aunt Mim had only him. And now Annabelle.

“It’s great, Mr. Nosy,” says Pru. “Actually, I’ve given Gekopoulos notice, beginning next year. I’d like something more having to do with people, maybe in public relations. Slapping up injury claims and divorce settlements out of glossarized boilerplate isn’t exactly non-repetitive.”

He suppresses the insight that life as a whole isn’t exactly non-repetitive. “It doesn’t sound as if the job uses all your abilities.”

“Well, thanks, but *what* abilities? somebody might ask. Still I have this crazy idea I must be good for something. I mean, I can be pleasant. People like me, at least at first. Maybe I should enlist with Judy in stewardess school. Except my palms get all sweaty whenever I fly. I hate how long it takes to land, skimming in over all these highways and cemeteries.”

She is spending Christmas with her mother and siblings and then driving to him, all the way across the great Commonwealth, its mountains and quarries, its mills and farms, along the Turnpike for eight or nine hours, Judy spelling her at the wheel, Roy playing video games at every rest stop. “When you come here after Christmas, where do you all want to sleep?” he asks. “I have only this one room. You could stay with Mom and Ronnie and I’ll have the kids here in sleeping bags. Or is Judy too old for that?”

“Let’s think about it,” Pru says. “The basic thing is they see their father.” “Right. But can I say something? It’ll be nice for me to see *you,* too.” “Uh-huh,” she says, her tone Akron tough-girl flat.

“Let’s try to have some fun when you come,” he urges. “Life is too short.” “I’ll put on Roy,” she says. “Judy’s out.”

“How’s it going?” he asks his son.

“O.K., good,” is the guarded answer. Roy has always had this strange deep voice that takes Nelson by surprise. Judy he had no trouble loving from the start—her solemn hazel gaze, little square feet, her ankles flexible as wrists, the little split bun between her legs. Roy with his stern stare and upjutting button of a penis had a touch of the alien invader, the relentless rival demanding space, food, attention.

“You got my e-mail, I guess.” “Yeah. Thanks.”

“How’s school going?” “Good.”

“Are you learning anything exciting?”

“Not really. The teacher in Computer Skills showed us some faulty programming in Windows 98. He thinks Bill Gates is holding the Net-surfing technology back at this point and the government is right.”

This may have been the longest utterance he has ever heard from Roy. He says, “Well, you’re way ahead of me. You’re more at home with this stuff than I’ll ever be.”

“It’s easy. It’s all Boolean logic.”

“Is there anything you want to do in Diamond County? Shop at the outlets? Eat at the restaurant on top of Mt. Judge? Go visit that limestone cave again? They may close it in the winter, actually.” As he runs through this bleak list it occurs to him that there is nothing to do in Diamond County—just be born, live, and die.

But Roy’s grave, resonant voice has picked up speed and purpose. “Dad, you may not know this but one of the greatest new biotech companies in the world is in Diamond County. In Hemmigtown, you know where that is?”

“Yes, I know.” Nelson is wearying of being an attentive father. His son is a nerd, he realizes, a bore to his classmates and a nag to his teachers.

“Genomics dot com. They’re famous on the Internet. They’re learning how to transplant genes so you can make viruses that will eat people’s diseases. And counteract the parts of a cell that cause aging. And all this neat stuff.”

“Roy, it sounds horrible, frankly. If nobody dies, where will all the new bodies go? But I’ll check into it. You want to visit?”

“Well, I’d like at least to go look at the outside of the building.” “If you go inside, you might catch a virus.”

“They wouldn’t let you into that part of it.”

“As I say, I’ll look into it. I’m thrilled they’re doing something here that you’ve heard of.”

The boy is warming up. “Dad, did you know that eventually computer chips won’t be manufactured at all, they’ll be *grown,* like bacilli in a petri dish? Single ions will act as transistors.”

“Roy, I don’t want to keep you from your homework.”

“Yeah. O.K. Goodbye.” And the receiver rattles down before Nelson has time to say, “I love you.”

Christmas lights are up in Brewer, from a string of multicolored miniature twinkle-bulbs swagged in the window of the 7-Eleven on Almond Street to the green-and-red-floodlit concrete eagles at the top of the twenty-story county courthouse. Nelson can see this top, with its red-lipped flagpole, from his apartment’s side window if he presses his face against the glass. In the commercial area around the Center, Discount Office Supplies has arranged conical stacks of reams of paper and automatic pencils and boxes of computer disks in its display window and drenched them with tinsel and confetti, and PrintSmart has duplicated a picture of a wreath on one sheet each of all the colored papers it can supply and hung these on a long string like wash, like laundry for a rainbow world. Within the Center, the clients, under staff supervision, have made a brave attempt to keep the holiday blues away with cotton snow and lo-glo electric candles in the windows and a seven-foot tree as overloaded with handmade decorations as a disturbed mind is with inappropriate thoughts.

Nelson can walk home from work now, and enjoys these ten blocks west from Weiser Street past the old cough-drop factory, deserted but still smelling of menthol after all these years, and through the blocks of row houses put up, a block at a time, by workingmen’s savings-and-loans associations in the century before this one, which is down to its last days. Some of the present residents have decorated their little porches and fanlighted doorways and front windows with a Catholic or Pentecostal fervor —doubled and tripled strands of gaudy colored bulbs and thick fringes of tinsel and here and there a plaster creche or an oleograph image of the adult Jesus as if to say this is what the starlit baby came to, the bearded God-Man born to be crucified.

Already they know Nelson at the 7-Eleven, and he knows the people who man the counter and guard the till: the slangy, hefty bleached blonde who sometimes has her little brown boy doing homework over in the corner behind the ten-cent photocopy machine; the frowning white girl with indifferent skin and close-cropped hair and a single tuft dyed green, always reading a fat college textbook and acting annoyed if you say anything friendly; the oldish man with a pleading, watery-eyed look and a very modest command of English, some kind of refugee from Communism’s evaporated empire; the alarmingly big black guy, his head shaved, who has a rap and hip-hop station turned loud on the radio and is usually on the phone talking unintelligibly in Caribbean English; the tiny Hispanic girl with frizzy hair and a silver tongue-stud. They hardly notice now when Nelson comes in around five-thirty and buys his microwave dinner for the night and a half-pint carton of milk for his cereal, to sit overnight on the windowsill. The December nights have been so unseasonably warm, the milk quickly sours.

Nelson finds TV stupid but likes the technicolor fire of it, the way it flares up within a few seconds of his coming in the door and punching the remote. A genie when you rub a lamp, a multitude of genies. He watches until he feels his intelligence being too rudely insulted or his patience being too arrogantly tested by the commercials, which interrupt at an ever-greedier ratio whenever the program gets interesting. Yet some commercials he waits for eagerly. There is the Nicoderm commercial that features this neat-looking woman about his age, with a slight crimp in her chin indicating maturity and experience, in a straight-shouldered dress, telling you what a sensible, efficient method this patch provides for quitting smoking. He loves the level, not- quite-smiling way she looks at you, implying that once you quit she and you will go on together on a purified basis. And he loves even more the younger woman advertising Secret Platinum, “the strongest deodorizer you can buy without a prescription.” She is dark-complected and with utterly no fat on her except in her quite full lips, and as her pitch progresses, and her body jigs and jags across the screen, she sweats in growing torrents and at the commercial’s climax pops a muscle, cocking her arm with a devilish sideways look right out at him. She works out hard and would fuck hard, the implication is. He needs a woman, Christ. Some nights, like in the joke his son e-mailed him, there isn’t enough skin left to close his eyes. He tries to analyze himself: why do these two women in the commercials get to him? Both are strong, he sees. He wants a woman who will take over. The possibilities at work for him are poor: clients are off-bounds and your colleagues should be, even if they were more appealing than plain, earnest Katie Shirk, or pouty, snotty Andrea, the art therapist, or Elenita, the Dominican receptionist, with her hair dyed orange and heaped on her head in woolly skeins like Sideshow Bob in *The Simpsons,* or Esther, who is Jewish and older than he and married to a downtown lawyer and *too* strong. In the bars he used to go to, the girls have gotten too much younger than he, so young they seem silly, like those two on the other side of the wall. They really do say “like” and “you know” and come down funny on the ends of their words like Valley Girls, tucking the “r"s down deep into their throats. He thinks they are putting him on, imitating Lisa Kudrow, but it’s just the way they naturally talk. When one of the two girls on the other side of his wall stops giggling and her voice and the rumbly one of a date entwine with fewer and fewer words into silence and animal sounds, he cannot feel too jealous; it’s like undressing a Barbie doll in his mind, and finding her smooth and stiff, no nipples and the legs don’t bend.

He is waiting for some woman to call. Mom calls, to check on how he is, but there is more and more space between her calls. Local real estate is lively, as if at the end of the year—the century, the millennium, the world as we’ve known it—people are agitated and looking for some sort of renewal by changing shelter. She herself is looking forward to Florida, where she still has the condo in Deleon, once Christmas and the visit from her grandchildren is over. “To be frank, Nelson, I almost dread it, it will seem so peculiar, with you not in the house.”

He is firm. “Ronnie acted like a prick to my sister, and those other Harrisons weren’t much better. You were O.K., but just barely. After all, you were married to Dad for thirty-three years.”

“Well, his having a love child doesn’t sweeten my memories necessarily.”

He smiles at the quaint phrase “love child.” Nelson has always been close to his mother. It was drummed into him that he took after the Springers—little and dark-eyed, and something of a smooth operator like his grandfather, and he wonders now if he shouldn’t let go of that. This sudden sister, this love child, is a chance to draw closer to Dad, the Angstrom side within him.

Yet his third lunch with Annabelle at The Greenery feels like a pullback. Elm Street is bleak in December, and part of the bleakness is the uncanny warmth, over sixty today, wiping out any anticipation of a white Christmas and rousing the same fear of global warming as this summer’s drought. The planet is being cooked. The oceans will rise, the croplands will become deserts. The Greenery seems demoralized. The only Christmas decorations up are some flattened white spheroids of a glimmering ersatz material in the window and against the mirrors behind the counter: not round real Christmas balls but ones in two-and-a-half dimensions, like some computer graphic. Once again he apologizes to Annabelle for his extended family’s bad behavior.

“It was bound to be awkward,” she says. “I never should have gone.” “My mistake. I couldn’t imagine anybody’s not seeing you as I do.” “And how is that, Nelson?”

“As a lovely person,” he says. *A love child.* He has an impulse to put his hands on hers where they rest, short- nailed and broad, on the Formica tabletop. She pulls her hands back as if reading his mind.

“I’m not such a lovely person, Nelson,” she says. “I’ve done things, and had them done to me.”

“We all have,” he says. As the words leave his mouth they sound lamely big-brotherish to him. 'That’s life,” he adds, which is also dumb. But what was she talking about, exactly?

“I think,” Annabelle says, “we should rest easy for a while. You’re living alone and have things to sort out with your family. I’m not really your family.”

Like those white Christmas balls that aren’t really balls. “You *are,* dammit.”

“I’ll be going away before Christmas and some days after. That girl I mentioned, we were at St. Joe’s together, she and her husband have invited me to go with them to Las Vegas, and, you know, I figured why not, I’ve never been there or hardly *anywhere.* They say if you don’t gamble everything else is pretty cheap. There are all these fantastic new buildings you can wander around in for free.”

“Hey, you must look up my Aunt Mim. *Your* Aunt Mim. Your father’s sister. Seriously. I told her about you and she was enthusiastic. She’s a real card, honest. She runs a beauty parlor out there. I don’t know what name she uses now, she’s had husbands, but Miriam Angstrom is her maiden name and I’ll give you her number to call. I’ll call her and warn her. Please do it. *Please.* It won’t be awkward, I know. Aunt Mim is a real sport.” It relieves him to think of Annabelle taken care of on the holiday, so he can sneak over to Ronnie and Mom’s without a bad conscience. He wonders if everybody has a conscience like his, crimped early and always uneasy.

'I don’t want to, Nelson. It’ll be one more thing.”

“Suit yourself,” he says, sharply. She has rejected one of the few things he could give her, a treat and treasure out of his own genes. 'I’ll leave her number on your machine but not tell her you’re coming.” The dispirited atmosphere inside The Greenery is getting to him. He and this half-stranger keep running out of things to say. Finally he asks her, resorting to television news, “So what do you think? Should the little Cuban boy be sent back to his father in that miserable country or kept in Disney World?”

“Sent back to his father.”

“I agree.” It was as uncanny as the weather, the way he and she agreed about everything.

The phone does ring one evening, while he’s watching a *Star Trek* rerun. It’s not a woman but a male voice from the past, Billy Fosnacht. “I got the number from your mother. I heard from little Ron Harrison you moved out. His wife is one of my patients.”

“What a bitch she is. She’s far Christian right.”

“If you knew her jawbone like I do, you’d feel sorry for her. It’s chalk. I’ve done three implants, with my fingers crossed.”

Billy went to dental school in Boston, near Boston, Tufts it was called. He and Nelson, friends in childhood, saw each other around Brewer in Nelson’s bad-boy days, up at the Laid-Back and other local hangouts, but since Nelson got clean ten years ago there’s been a fading away. “What’s an implant?” he asks.

“Nellie, how can you not know what an implant is? It’s what I do. It’s an osseous-integrated artificial tooth. The best ones are made in Sweden. You pull the real tooth, which is rotten by now right down to the root, otherwise you’d set a gold post in the root and crown it, and you open up the gum and insert a titanium screw with an inner thread as well as an outer, and if the bone bonds with it in five or six months you screw a fake tooth into it and the bite is as good as new. Better than new. I do three, four a day. It’s the only time I’m happy, when I’m doing implants.”

“You’re not happy, Billy?”

“Forget I said that. I’ll fill you in later. Let’s have lunch. On me. I’m flush, and no wife to spend it for me.”

Billy has learned a new way of talking—punchy, self-mocking, rapid. In their shared boyhood he had been four months older, a few inches taller, and the one to get the latest kiddie-fad for a present first. His mother and Dad had a little episode in the sexual mess of the Sixties, everybody splitting up back then. Since then Mrs. Fosnacht has died of breast cancer and Billy’s father—a weedy little guy who used to run the music store above the old Baghdad movie theatre on Weiser Street, where the great hole in the ground is now—faded south to New Orleans, where jazz came from. The old playmates’ conversation reveals that, though their clienteles rarely overlap, they both work at giving fresh starts to members of the Brewer population, and that in middle age both are at personal loose ends. “Sure,” says Nelson, of lunch.

They agree to meet downtown, at the restaurant on Weiser Square that was Johnny Frye’s Chophouse many years ago and then became the Café Barcelona and then the Crêpe House and then Salad Binge and now under new management has been revived as Casa della Pasta, pasta supposed to be good for your arteries

while having a little more substance than salads or crêpes. The day they meet, as it turns out, is the one after the day when Charles Schulz announced he was ending *Peanuts* and Jimmy Carter went down to Panama to give them the Canal.

“He got to give it away twice,” Billy points out. “Once when he was President and now when he’s a has-been. You notice Clinton’s too smart to show his face. In ten years the Red Chinese will control it, just you watch. Those spics’ll sell it off.”

Nelson’s father within him winces when anyone threatens to disparage Clinton or any sitting President. Dad had never much liked Billy, complaining about the boy’s fat lips. Yet, seeing him, Nelson cannot but warm: here is a partner in his childish dreams, the conspiracy of imagined speed and triumphant violence that boys erect around themselves like a tent in the back yard under the scary stars. Billy, who used to be heavy like his wall-eyed, doomed mother, has become weedy like his father, though taller. His hair, a curly black like neither of his parents', has thinned back from his brow even more decidedly than Nelson’s straight hair, its convict cut. Billy has a bald spot at the back of his head the size of a yarmulke. There was always something about Billy that kept people from taking him absolutely seriously, and that light something has become Jewish, quick-tongued and self-mocking and hypochondriac, caught from his teachers and colleagues in prosthetic dentistry. Yes, he says, his dad is still alive, filling in on clarinet in so-called Dixieland bands, though being white is a big disadvantage, and making ends meet in various fishy ways. Yes, he, Billy, has been married— twice, in fact, once to a nice girl from Newton he met up there in New England and then to one of his assistants in his practice down here. The second marriage broke up the first and then developed its own twinges. She was twelve years younger and he didn’t want to go out as much as she did and she got tired of his night sweats and yelling out in his sleep and his moods.

“Moods?” Nelson asks.

“Depressed, irritable, could't sleep. Weekends I’d be so beat and bored I’d pray for an emergency to call. Tooth-structure loss I could handle. Wives,” he goes on. “They shut down without even knowing they’re doing it. The fancy stuff goes and then even the basics are cut back to once a week, then twice a month, and then just holidays and trips abroad. Portugal, Austria, Acapulco—all that way just to get a little nooky from my lawful wedded.”

“Well, in my case,” Nelson begins, but Billy overrides him: “And then when you suggest maybe this marriage isn’t working, they act stunned and tell their lawyers to go for all they can get, this isn’t their idea.”

Years of dealing with people with their mouths immobilized has made Billy an easy conversational partner, needing very little prompting. “Yelling out in your sleep?” Nelson asks.

The waitress, who looks just a little like the sweaty olive-skinned beauty in the Secret Platinum commercial, interrupts with the day’s specials. Billy orders bowties with diced shrimp, and Nelson the mushroom ravioli. Both decline wine in favor of water. “Have the sparkling Pellegrino, it’s hyper expensive,” Billy says. “This is on me, remember.” He tells Nelson, “Yeah, awful dreams. In one of them I’m crammed into the trunk of a car, my face right up against the jack, and I can see the car—you know how in dreams you can see things from inside and out both—being slid into a river, like that mother did to those kids in South Carolina years ago. In another dream I’m in one place and my house is burning in another, and I can’t get to it, even though I can see the flames burning through the floor right at my feet.” He pauses. “So—what do you think?”

So—this is why he’s asked Nelson to lunch, to get free therapy. It wasn’t just those good old days tenting out in the back yard. Nelson grudges being a wise man outside the treatment center. He says, “We don’t do dreams much in therapy any more. There’s no time. The insurance companies want fast action—in because of some crisis, 'Here, take these pills,' out. The second dream, though, has an obvious reference. The night I was staying over at your apartment with your mother and puppy and our house burned down in Penn Villas a mile away.”

Billy puffs his lips out suspiciously, and his eyes pop a little, too. “When was that? How old were we?” “Twelve, maybe you were thirteen. Are you serious, you’ve forgotten it?”

“Well, when you mention it, it kind of comes back, but as a news item mostly. Listen, Nelson. Forget the dreams. I have attacks in the middle of the day. I break out in a sweat like I’m on a treadmill, I can feel my heart doing double time. I think about death, about being sealed in a little lead box and the whole universe going on, rotating, exploding, whatever the hell all it does, on and on and eventually pooping out while I’m still in there, totally forgotten. I’m going to *die,* I can’t get it out of my head. You have to wear these latex gloves now and I have the fantasy a little drop of blood is going to seep through from some gay guy’s gums and give me AIDS. All it takes is one little drop from a micro-abrasion. It’s taking the pleasure out of doing implants.”

Nelson has to laugh, his old friend is so self-obsessed, so solemn in his mental misery. Does he want his fingernails, his nostril-hairs, to last forever? “By our age, Billy, we should have come to terms with this stuff.”

“Have you?”

“I think so. It’s like a nap, only you don’t wake up and have to find your shoes.” He is being hard-hearted; there is agony here, even if Billy is a comical old friend. Not only are his lips fat, his nose has gotten fat; it sits there in the middle of his face like something added, its flesh faintly off-color. Nelson advises, more compassionately, “Believe in God and the afterlife if that would help. There’s some evidence—people who’ve gone through an NDE are absolutely convinced and can hardly wait to get back to the other side.”

“God,” Billy sneers. “How can you believe in God after the Holocaust? What did God do to help my mother? They cut off her tits and she still died.”

Nelson remembers Mrs. Fosnacht, her helpless outward-turned eye, her wide-open look and big friendly untidy body with a slip usually showing and shoes that bulged at the sides as if they hurt. She had been nice; she had thought Nelson was a good influence on Billy. “Anxiety disorders,” he offers, “level off, usually. The human organism gets tired of sustaining them and finds a distraction.”

“Nellie, I can’t do *tunnels.* I’m not that crazy about bridges, either, especially the Running Horse, the way it arches up. But how can I go to conferences in New York if I can’t do a tunnel? I have to go all the way up to Fort Lee and sweat it out on the George Washington.”

“You’re lucky,” Nelson tells him. “There aren’t any tunnels around Brewer.”

“No, but there are underpasses. I have to force myself to drive through that one at Eisenhower and Seventh. I have zero tolerance for being enclosed. Even here, you notice, I had to get the chair nearer the exit. Airplanes—I haven’t been on one since Moira and I split up. They’re tin tunnels that go five miles high.”

“How did you handle these fears,” Nelson asks, “when you were married?”

Billy lifts his hands, superclean and with wrinkled tips from being so much in latex gloves, to let the waitress put his mound of bowties and diced shrimp in front of him. “Shoshana,” he answers, “was kind of jittery herself, and I was the stabilizer. With Moira, like I said, we flew all these places to get her to put out, and I would take a couple of stiff belts in the airport lounge.”

The waitress sets down Nelson’s hot ravioli, the steam fragrant of mushrooms, of secretive gray-black fungoid growth, of damp earth, of greenhouses.

Billy talks on: “Maybe I was too young in my married period to think I was really going to die. I mean *really,*

totally—zip—zero. You will be *nada.* I can’t eat.” He puts his fork down.

Nelson picks up his own fork, saying, “It’s a concept the mind isn’t constructed to accept. So stop trying to force it to. Come on, eat. Enjoy. Have I told you, Billy, I’ve discovered I have a sister? No, I’m not kidding.”

Christmas for Nelson feels least phony at the Center. These unsettled psyches and unwashed bodies, burdens to society and to their families, who in many cases have abandoned them to a life of shelters and halfway houses, respond to the dim old tale—the homeless couple tainted by a mysterious pregnancy, the child born amid straw and dung, the secret splendor sensed by shepherds and donkeys and oxen standing mute in their stalls. Glenn, he of the blue eyelids and glittering nostril-stud, can play the piano, a skill left over from a closeted adolescence; he extracts the sturdy standard carols from the out-of-tune upright’s keyboard while obese Shirley displays a small silvery voice and Dr. Howard Wu a brassy, enthusiastic baritone. The doctor’s joining in, with Esther Bloom a conspicuous good sport beside him, singing the Christian words, emboldens the clients: the substance-dependent and delusional, the phobic and borderline, Rosa with her new friend the compulsive nail-biter, whose name is Josephine Foote, and Jim the lusty, swag-bellied addict, who belts out every first line from memory, but then his brain lets go. Nelson is pleased to see Michael DiLorenzo here, letting his cool be thawed, sharing a song sheet with little black Bethleen, a bipolar. The boy’s lips move but his ale-dark eyes beneath their handsome brows are elsewhere, muddled and shuttling out of rhythm; he has not shaved this morning, which Nelson takes as a good sign, that his mother’s nagging is letting up. All in their ragged fashion get *with* it, taking comfort in the organized noise, the approach to melodic unison, the illusion of a happy family here before the tree crammed with artifacts produced in Andrea’s art sessions. There are cookies and cake and ice cream after the sing, and little presents from the staff, all bought at Discount Office Supplies—phallic four-color ballpoint pens for the men and vaginal pocket diaries for the women. In turn there filters up from the clients to this and that staff member shy tokens, enigmatic thanks for care given. Nelson receives from Josephine an intricate collage, mounted on a lacquered black board, of smiling faces cut from magazine advertisements and arranged, bodiless, as thick as flowers in a bouquet. Or is it more of a snowflake scissored together of smiles? Dr. Wu receives a pagoda made of matchsticks, and a lumpy arch of colored clays which Jim explains is a rainbow, pointing to the “pot” at one end. Everyone, onlooking, laughs. The basement floods with the warm faith that the world beyond these old elementary-school walls is friendly, remembers them, wants them to be well and to rejoice.

This is Christmas Eve, a Friday. Next day, Christmas at Mom and Ronnie’s seems perfunctory. Nelson drives over to Mt. Judge in the morning, retrieving the Corolla from the curb on Almond Street, where it sits parked for days. The 7-Eleven is open, even as children are opening the presents brought by an omniscient, omnipresent Santa Claus. Weiser Square and the city park are deserted but for a blowing plastic bag and a vagrant stooped pedestrian studying his shadow on this wanly sunny holy day. The mall before the viaduct is a dead-empty lake of striped asphalt. GREEN MILE TOY II ANNA KING GALAX QUEST.

Mom is hard to give to and always was. He used to give her candy, knowing she’d right away let him share it. As he got older his mind had to keep darting away from dainty things, underwear and stockings for her legs that he knew she was proud of. In his childhood they were held up with garters attached to a girdle and had darker widths at the top that were stirring to glimpse. Pantyhose on the other hand had that darker patch in the crotch, shaped like a big lima bean. Once in his teens he gave her some L'eggs and even they, pulled filmy from their egg-shaped containers, made him blush. This year he is strapped—eighty-five a week for his room, three sixty a month to Pru as child support, extras like the mini-fridge he bought to keep his milk from going sour don’t leave much from a weekly salary hardly four C’s after everybody’s tax bite—so he settles on a dozen Top-Flites for Ronnie, even though Dad always said he had a sledge-hammer swing, and for Mom a Better Your Bridge computer program, imagining her up there using the machine in the little room that used to be Mom-mom Springer’s sewing room. But Ronnie says, here in this living room where everything has been pushed around to make room for the Christmas tree, that he doesn’t want to risk overloading his hardware and crashing the whole memory with all his financial records in it, back to the Seventies.

To ease this rejection, Mom says, “Honestly, Nelson, I doubt if I could use the program, it looks too complicated, I have trouble following even what Doris explains to me, so patiently every time.”

“All right, I’ll take it back,” he snaps, “and get you something else. How about a sexy nightie?” To him she has given flannel pajamas and a cable-knit maroon sweater, as if to keep him warm away from her presence.

Ronnie has come up with a strange gift, some kind of a needle:

*The Art of Happiness,* by the Dalai Lama and an American doctor. Nelson is startled because, in unwrapping, the saintly Asian on the jacket at first peek suggests his late father, not so much physically as in the aura of sly alertness, a tentative tricky lovable something in the guarded smile. Ron explains, in his insurance-selling voice, “I thought since you disdain the Christian religion maybe something along other lines would appeal to you. It’s very important, Nelson, to have a spiritual outlet in our lives. There’s a tremendous, worldwide upwelling of spirituality to greet the new millennium.”

He sounds like he’s quoting somebody. Nelson checks the book for any mark to indicate it had been remaindered, and sees none. Ronnie paid full price for this odd gift. “The Dalai Lama,” Nelson says. How kindly the tentative, watchful face, in its tinted square glasses, smiles out at him: a father he might have had.

“Thanks, Ron,” he says. “I’ll look into it during my lonely nights.” Maybe it’s a peace offering but there’s no need; after that phone conversation after the Thanksgiving blow-up Nelson feels right with Ron, as right as he’ll ever get. Ron is just one more or less well-meaning American bozo, balling Mom or not. Once the testosterone goes, you’re left with a limp and a spiritual outlet.

He wants to get out of the house before Ron Junior and Margie and the three kids arrive for the midday feast. He’s feasted enough with these people for one year. Alex is staying in Virginia with his broken family but Georgie is coming over from New York on the Bieber bus. Ron and Mom tell Nelson again he would be more than welcome to stay, they’ll set another place, but after Thanksgiving he knows that wherever he’s at home it’s not with his stepbrothers.

At the door, his mother says, “Oh, I nearly forgot. Some woman called early this morning. That Esther who runs your clinic. I said to her, didn’t she know this was Christmas morning? She said she did, but she’d like you to call her nevertheless. She was quite short with me; these Jews are so touchy.”

“I can’t imagine why. I’ll call her from my place. Thanks, Mom. Merry Christmas. My love to all those other Harrisons.” He kisses her little dry cheek and thinks how she seems to be shrivelling. Osteoporosis, like they keep advertising on television. Everything leaches our bones. The neighbor couple are out in the side yard with their boy and his new, red-runnered sled, though there’s not a flake of snow on the grass. The sun makes all the decorations on the way back to Brewer, all the lights and tinsel and the plastic Santa Clauses and red- nosed reindeer, look washed-out, leached of joy. He stops at the 7-Eleven and picks up a frozen shepherd’s pie and coffee in a seasonal plastic cup with a holly-leaf-and-berry pattern. They make pretty good coffee, actually. Drawing on his slender social-work Spanish, he says “*Feliz Navidad” to* the frizzy-haired girl behind the counter. She responds with a smile, dazzling in her dusky face, and a ribbon of responding Spanish of which Nelson only understands “*Muchath graciath, theňor, “*the “s"s thickened by her tongue-stud.

Back in his room, Nelson sips the coffee and dials Esther’s home number. He gets the husband—a mellifluous, condescending, lawyerly voice. He is rich; Esther doesn’t need the money; she runs

the Center because she loves mankind. When she comes on she sounds subdued, even shaky. “Nelson, I thought you should know, since you worked with the DiLorenzo boy.”

“Know what?” But the flutter of premonition has already risen in his chest. He just saw Michael yesterday, at the fringe of the crowd around the piano, trying to join in. He had wished him a happy holiday. The boy had responded, “O.K., sir,” and looked away. He had neglected to shave. But he had begun to participate in groups, overcoming his distaste for the other clients. He wanted to get better.

“He committed suicide. In the night. They found him this morning. DiLorenzo himself called the Center. He was in shock but talked about suing us and Birkits.”

That inner space where he had once felt a knife sliding as he tried to empathize with Michael turns more slippery; Nelson feels he is reaching down to bring something back but his hands are soapy and he cannot bring it back, it sinks. *You will be nada. “*Oh my God,” he tells Esther. “No. How did he do it?”

“With a plastic suit-bag. Tied around his neck with a necktie. Sending his parents some kind of message, you could theorize. 'You want dry-cleaning, here’s dry-cleaning.'”

“We lost him. I feel I lost him.”

“Nelson, don’t be egotistical. We do our best, but we can’t do it all. I just wanted you to hear about Michael before it’s in the Sunday papers. Everybody uses Perfect; it’ll be news.” She is brave and crisp but her Center has taken a blow, a black mark.

“How serious do you think the father was about suing?” “Who knows? The man is a doer, he needs to act.”

“He kept an appointment with us the day of the hurricane. He trusted us. I should have spotted something, I did drop a note to Howie about the meds. The Trilafon wasn’t quieting the voices.”

“Don’t do this to yourself, Nelson. It is not your fault.”

That’s what they all say. That’s what *he* said to them. But when she hangs up the boy is still dead. Sealed under black glass, gliding feet first to nowhere. Nelson pictures Mrs. DiLorenzo lying in a darkened room, the daughters flying in from their disrupted Christmases, the girlishly handsome young face smeared on the inside of an adhesive bubble like an astronaut’s helmet. The strength it must take not to rip the smothering plastic with your fingernails, the furious determination to smother the voices and silence their obscenities.

He feels too sick, too sunk, to eat. He needs to call somebody, but Annabelle is in Las Vegas and Pru is in Ohio and should be allowed to have her Christmas with their children and her family. Mom is entertaining her born-again step-children by now. Celebration has stifled all but a little of the traffic noise that usually permeates the city, though out on Eisenhower Avenue a few scoffers and loners roar by. The end of this very short day has begun to darken his windows before he has the heart to microwave the shepherd’s pie and turn on the Oahu Bowl. Hawaii beats Oregon, twenty-three to seventeen, and on the six-o'clock news Jerry Seinfeld has married at last, the Hubble Space Telescope is back in working order, and some Sikhs have hijacked an Indian plane for no clear reason and are jerking it all around the sky. Michael DiLorenzo is not mentioned. He is strictly local news.

“Hi. You’re back. How was Las Vegas?”

“Nelson, it was a blast. It’s the future or something. My girlfriend and her husband talked me into gambling and I won two hundred dollars one night and lost it the next, of course.”

“I bet you didn’t call my aunt Mim.”

“Well—surprise, surprise—I did, and she couldn’t have been sweeter, or funnier. She remembered my mother dimly, from some encounter in a bar that used to be down on Running Horse Street, and had a lot to say about my father. Our father.”

“Yeah? What?”

“Oh, what a caring older brother he was, and how hard he worked to perfect his basketball skills. I mean, it didn’t just come to him naturally. And how supportive and non-judgmental he always was of her, even after she became a hooker.”

“She said that?”

“Sure, why not? She said my mother was never a real hooker, because she wasn’t organized in her approach. She even got us into *O,* at the Cirque du Soleil, if that’s how you pronounce it. It beats anything you could ever see in New York—underwater ballet and bungee jumpers and a boat that rises right up into the air! I was absolutely riveted.”

“Well,” he complains, “while you were having such a great time, I ate Christmas dinner alone and had a young client over at the Center commit suicide.”

“Oh, Nelson, no! How terrible! Was he one of yours?”

“We don’t divide them up that way, but I had counselled him. I thought he was getting better—more engaged, and reporting no auditory hallucinations. Shows how little I know.”

“Well, you shouldn’t blame yourself,” Annabelle went on in her practical, kind, slightly out-of-focus voice. “We’re caregivers, not miracle workers. Just before I went away Mr. Potteiger died. He was eighty-six and terribly frail, with hardly any use of his legs, but such a sharp, frisky mind. He used to flirt! One morning I showed up at his rooms, he was in elderly housing over toward Oriole, and a little Post-it note on the door said he’d passed away. Just those words. 'Passed Away.'”

“It’s not exactly the same,” Nelson begins to explain, but she cuts him short. “How’s your lovely family? Did they arrive?”

“Yeah, sort of.” “Sort of?”

“Judy didn’t come. She wanted to stay with her boyfriend in his apartment, the roommate is off for the holidays skiing in Colorado, and then go with him, the boyfriend, to this big millennial blast in formal clothes in some fancy home the boyfriend knows the son of up in Silver Lake, old rubber money. The guy sounds like a real sponge.”

“I *knew* you’d say ’sponge'!”

“She and Pru had a big fight about it and finally Pru gave up. After all the kid *will be* twenty next month, and she didn’t ask to go to Akron, she’s just trying to make the best of the situation her messed-up parents handed her. She drove all the way herself, Pru, just with Roy; she was *beat* when she arrived, about nine o'clock Monday night, they had kept stopping at what used to be Howard Johnson’ses.” It makes him weary just to think about his aging, uncontrollable family.

“Where are they staying?”

“What’s with all these questions? At Mom’s. It’s too small and crummy here, and the morning traffic out on Eisenhower shakes the place.” He does not tell her that last night, Tuesday night, he went over after work for a dinner Pru had made in Mom’s kitchen and stayed the night in his old room at the back of the house, while Pru took Judy’s old room in front and Roy the little room with the computer, on a cot. They all just fell into place, except that he wanted to be in bed with Pru, or at least see her in her underwear, and had tossed and turned. There were too many people in his head, like that Christmas plaque Jo Foote had made him. Among other things he was afraid if he fell asleep he would see that man practicing chip shots in the back yard again. “That’s *sad,* Nelson,” his sister was saying. “Roy at least should be over with you.”

“Yeah, but I have to work, the Center is shorthanded this week, the suicide has driven the clients crazier. And Roy and Ronnie get along oddly great. They talk about megabytes and RAMs and sit up there at the computer all day, cruising the Internet for God knows what. Filth, probably. Last night Ron took him to a high-school basketball game. I guess there’s this holiday tournament on in the county, a big deal, girls’ and boys’ teams both.”

“And how do you feel about your daughter’s not coming to visit? Are you hurt?” “Relieved, in a way. She’s gotten to be a handful. She’s a redhead, like her mother.” “But she needs to see her father.”

“Pru told her that, and Judy said if he doesn’t care enough about me to come out here why should I go there and miss an event that only comes once every thousand years? She doesn’t seem to think it’ll happen in Brewer, only in Akron.”

“Well,” Annabelle says primly, “it doesn’t sound very satisfactory. When am I going to meet Pru, and my dear little nephew?”

“That’s what we need to talk about. What are you doing Friday night?” “That’s the—”

“I know. The last of the last.”

“I was just going to go to bed and let it all wash over me.”

“Yeah, me too, but Pru is as bad as her daughter. She wants to *do* something. I didn’t want you to come to Mom’s house ever again, not after Thanksgiving, but maybe we could swing by that evening and pick up Pru and say hello to Roy and go out to a meal and a movie. I don’t want to go to any dance or anything.”

“You with two women? That’s weird, Nelson.”

“No kidding. I agree. But there’s this guy I used to play with as a kid, my best friend you could say, now he’s a dentist who does Swedish implants, who called me up for lunch the other week and really seems a kind of lost soul. He was married twice but isn’t now. Suppose he joined us? His name is Billy Fosnacht.”

“It still sounds weird. Two people I never met, and you.”

“Listen, do you trust your brother or not? You’ll have no problem with Pru, everybody likes her, she used to be beautiful, and Billy’s a kind of loser—my father used to call him a goon—but it’s not like it’s a date, he’ll just be along. He makes great money, by the way. You have any better plans? Like with that girlfriend and her husband? Or have they seen enough of you lately?” This is cruel, perhaps.

She doesn’t say yes or no. She says, “They say there may be terrorist attacks.” “In Brewer? On what, the pretzel factories?”

“The mayor of Seattle cancelled their celebration today.” “He has the Space Needle to worry about.”

“Nelson, I hope you know what you’re doing.” This is Annabelle’s way of agreeing. “No,” he says, feeling cheerful for the first time this terminal week, “I don’t, frankly.”

“And this is my son, Roy.”

Annabelle says in auntly fashion, “What a tall boy! It’s wonderful to meet you, Roy.”

They are all, including Billy Fosnacht, bunched awkwardly in the living room, crowded in the insufficient space between the cut-plush sofa and cobbler’s-bench coffee table on one side and the Christmas tree and the Zenith television with its jumbly crown of knickknacks on the other. Pru and Annabelle have shaken hands like two big cats brushing whiskers, and Ronnie and Mom have been excessively friendly to this round-faced girl who first appeared at the door in September. Annabelle is wearing a short red dress with a high collar and a diagonal zipper across the bosom, and dark net stockings on her prominent legs—all a little whorish, Nelson thought when he picked her up in his Corolla on East Muriel Street. Maybe Ronnie sensed something. Pru has found a dove-colored shot-silk dress with a boxy jacket that makes her hips look not too wide and sends out zigzags of shimmer; the gray goes from silver to a kind of purple when she moves. She has thickened in the waist and jaw and has crow’s feet and tiny creases on her cheeks and even chin that come and go when she smiles her crooked, dissatisfied smile. Nelson can’t remember if her nose was always so hooked, with so sharp a point. The long-limbed, green-eyed beauty he and his father had both desired is cobwebbed over with a certain gauze of age and disappointment yet those who remember can see through it; he thinks for forty-four she is holding up pretty well. Her hair, once lank and long and carrot-colored, wears a tint now that looks suspiciously even and shiny next to Annabelle’s many-colored shaggy do, which she is letting grow out, making her solid white neck look less naked. Pru sees Billy as one of the gang who nearly ruined Nelson back in the Laid-Back days and greets him coolly, though in fact Billy was never a big user; his parents had crumped out early and he had had to take care of himself. Mom in her nervousness and maybe boosted by some tipple before dinner squeals “Billy Fosnacht!” and embraces him almost in tears, blurting, “I loved your dear mother so!”

Roy is taller than his grandmother and about the same height as Nelson and Ronnie and Pru and Annabelle, but he will get taller; at fifteen his growth spurt has years to go. The dark Springer genes have overruled the Angstrom pallor in the boy’s hair and brows and the long curved eyelashes, like his father’s but without the deepset wary look. His upper lip is fuzzy and his ears stick out and his eyes are bright; the new century is his. He puts his knuckly hand in Annabelle’s competent soft one and tells her, “My sister is sorry not to meet you this time. She had a message I was to give you: your father was a doll.”

“A doll?” Annabelle smiles.

“A neat guy, I think she meant. He died when she was eight so she has a lot more memories of him than I do.”

Nelson interposes, “She remembers Dad’s saving her life once in Florida, in a Sailfish that capsized. Another way to frame it would be that he nearly killed her.”

“Nelson,” Pru says in half-hearted wifely rebuke.

Roy volunteers, “I remember going to visit him in the hospital once, the high white bed and all these tubes going in and out of him. Also how when there was any candy or nuts around you had to compete with him for them—he’d steal a candy bar right out from under your nose.”

This is a success; everyone laughs. Roy gives his mother’s slightly lopsided grin, and Annabelle says, “Thank you so much, Roy. You’ve helped make him real to me.”

“We’ll have to have you over for dinner in the new year,” Ronnie tells her, in a rehearsed voice, not quite looking at her. “I got a ton of Rabbit stories even Janice hasn’t heard.”

“We have a reservation at the Lookout,” Nelson intervenes. To his elders he explains, “That’s the fancy new restaurant in the old Pinnacle Hotel. When I called at first they said they were full up. But Billy got us into the first sitting, at seven.”

“The maître d’s upper-right bicuspid is all mine,” Billy explains. “We had to go back in; the first didn’t take. Some people burst into tears when that happens.”

“Oh, how beautiful you all look!” Janice exclaims, as something in the occasion, the sudden clumping here of strands going back deep into her time on earth, brims over for her. “You all go and have a gorgeous time!” The teariness conjured by remembering Peggy Fosnacht, earnest wall-eyed clumsy Peggy, who had been Peggy Gring when Janice and she were young, blurs her survey of the four adult children, her son among them, and the mother of her grandchildren, all so touching, dressed up to greet this particular calendrical doom, with Harry and Fred and Mother and little Becky all squeezed inside them somehow, the DNA. “Just think,” she says, “the next time we see each other, the year will have all those zeros in it! I can’t stand it!”

“O.K., Mom,” Nelson says nervously.

Ronnie says, husbandly-expansive, covering for her tears, pompously proud of them, “Young Bill Gates here and I are going to have a great time making hotdogs and popcorn and watching the boob tube, watching the future roll our way. It’s been 2000 for hours in Fiji and Japan—no Y2K problems in Sydney or Tokyo as far as they can tell. Paris was spectacular a half-hour ago and at seven it’s going to hit London, Blair and the Queen and their dumb Dome. For most of the world, midnight is already history! Time is relative, as Einstein pointed out. Isn’t that right, Roy?”

“Sort of like that,” the boy says, embarrassed by so crudely approximate a truth.

“It stretches,” Ronnie obnoxiously insists. “Like a condom.” Go to church all he wants, this guy is never going to get his brains out of his pants.

They are de-inhibiting together. Billy announces, “I keep thinking of all those that didn’t quite make it. JFK Junior, Payne Stewart, and the other day the Lone Ranger, poor guy.”

“God bless you, Billy!” Janice exclaims, burbling out of some chaotic reserve of sorrow that Nelson, dry-eyed, sees into as into a dark well at whose bottom his own head in silhouette glimmers in a disk of reflected sky. Under the pressure of the momentous impalpable event almost upon them they all kiss, Nelson Roy and Janice Pru and Billy Mrs. Angstrom (as he still thinks of her) and Ronnie Annabelle, who tries to deflect him to a cheek but is nailed on the mouth—the same cushiony kind of lips, he cannot but remember, that Ruth once sucked him off with, down in a shack on the Jersey Shore, salt air making everything sticky, the odors of sex tossed everywhere like their clothes, she going at it as if leisurely reducing a Popsicle, stopping and starting and giving him the eye up across his bare belly with its sheen of golden hairs. They all kiss, kiss there by the door, the door with its rasping, failing bell and oval brass knob burnished by uncountable hands, by uncountable comings and goings in the twentieth century, at 89 Joseph Street. The house across the street, Nelson sees, is ablaze as if for a party; in the upper front room the young woman of the house passes preoccupied in a glitzy blouse, her mouth moving with urgent words he cannot hear.

Hurry, they mustn’t be late, the maître d' will give their table away; they scramble in an exclamatory tumble into Nelson’s off-white Corolla parked at the curb, as excited as teen-agers to be out and off. The plan is the meal and then a movie, not one of the four at the tired mall on the way into Brewer, though as they pass Billy says wistfully in the back seat, “I’d love to see *Galaxy Quest.* One of my hygienists says there’s a great sex scene where one of the humans makes out with an extraterrestrial female who turns back into, like, an octopus when she gets excited.”

“Nice,” says Annabelle, in the back seat with him.

He goes on, “The most heartbreaking death at the end of this year to my mind, though, was that woman up in a nursing home in Allentown yesterday who was the world’s oldest person, it turns out. A hundred nineteen. If she’d hung on just two more days she would have lived in three different centuries.”

“I guess that’d be worth doing,” Pru says dryly, not quite accepting of Billy yet. She is intent beside Nelson, silently helping him drive. She senses he is stressed. He is thinking of Michael DiLorenzo, another who didn’t quite make it into the third millennium.

“Did any of you *know,”* Billy asks, “that the world’s oldest person was a Pennsylvanian?”

Annabelle waits for Pru or Nelson to say something rude, and when they don’t allows, “I’m not surprised. Old people love this state. Only Florida has more, proportionally.”

The movie Nelson wants them to see is *American Beauty,* cited the year’s best by a number of big-city critics, but assailed by several of Pennsylvania’s defenders of decency, and now playing at a second-run, cut-price theatre called Instant Classics, out beyond the old fairgrounds. And they do see it, getting back into Nelson’s car at twenty past eleven in a state of some coziness after five hours together, sitting through the movie and before that making polite talk at the restaurant, thinking up topics, steering the two men away from childhood reminiscences, the women talking about their career dissatisfactions, each of the four in private scared of the millennial moment, trying to absorb its significance from the air, the tepid snow-free air. The view during the meal, up on Mt., one table back from the windows but nevertheless grand, displayed on reality’s wide screen Brewer’s grid stretching beneath them to the black swerve of the river and the few great holding tanks still not dismantled and the suburbs receding with an everdimmer radiance toward lights that show scattered on wooded indigo hills, the home lights of Diamond County.

Back in the Corolla, the movie uneasily digesting on top of the dinner with its wine and smoked oysters, Pru says, “Well, I didn’t think that was so great. Could you believe that ending? I couldn’t. Stars at night from a field, his grandmother’s hands—that guy never acted like a man who had ever noticed his grandmother’s hands or anything except his own selfish itches and threatened ego.”

From the back seat Billy contributes, “I must say it made me feel better about death. Didn’t Kevin Spacey look happy, dead?”

“He looked spacy,” Nelson says. “He looked like a freeze-frame. That’s what death is, a freeze-frame. Hey, where do you want to go now? I’ve run out of ideas. We have half an hour. There’s stuff downtown, I know. They’ve put a heated tent for a Christian-rock concert in the big hole on Weiser above Sixth, where the housing project has stalled. We could go and mill about.”

“Ugh,” Billy says.

The parking lot at Instant Classics is tricky to get out of, five rows of cars feeding into one exit lane, and Nelson is never very sure of himself on this side of Brewer. They have put in some new bypass highways and mall-access roads that confuse him. He somehow thought they would spontaneously know where to go. Why does everything always fall on him? He says, “I wonder if we could get into the Laid-Back.”

Pru says, “That old druggie hangout of yours?”

“It’s all clean,” Billy pipes up. “It’s changed owners, after the last set got busted and put in jail. No drugs now. No smoking of any sort.”

“Do I turn right or left up here to get back on 222?” Nelson asks.

Annabelle hears him but can only say, “I used to work out this way at a nursing home but everything’s changed.”

“Try right, it’s easier,” Billy says.

As Nelson follows this directive he hears behind him Annabelle ask in a soft sympathetic searching voice she has never used with her brother, “Billy, do you think a lot about death?”

“All the time, how did you know?”

“The way you kept flinching in the movie.”

“I thought that neurotic kid with the videocam was going to kill somebody, maybe the girl he was spying on.”

“Wasn’t *she a* hard-hearted horror?” Nelson chimes in. '"Kill my father. Do it.'” He remembers Michael DiLorenzo confessing that he wanted to kill his parents, and that Michael killed himself, maybe so he wouldn’t do it. Nelson tastes the dead iron at the core of even green planets. No fresh start, no mercy. The headlights are picking up flecks, sparks like mayflies; it can’t be snow, so it must be flying dirt.

“I didn’t like her,” Annabelle announces. “I identified more with the other one, the pretty one who acted like a tramp but then turned out to be a virgin.”

“And the whole gay business made me upset,” says Billy.

“I thought it was very overdone and unconvincing,” Pru states, her profile almost haggard in the strokes of oncoming headlights, as the tangled traffic burns above asphalt hard to see, the arrows and lines obscure.

“Boy,” Billy rattles on, “they sure gave you enough blood on the wall when he got shot.” Annabelle chimes in, “I loved the routine the cheerleaders did with the bowler hats.”

“Pure Fosse,” says Billy. “I was afraid somebody’s house was going to get burned down, either the hero’s or the military man’s next to it.”

“It was a picture, really, when you think about it,” Pru persists, “of cheap shots at everybody. Advertising, the military, blah blah. Oh come *on.”*

*“*That was so nice,” Annabelle continues on her track, “when she is willing but he doesn’t sleep with her and makes her a hamburger instead.” Nelson has never heard her voice like this, free-associating and childishly trusting. Maybe this evening isn’t such a failure as it felt. He has the persistent sensation that there is one more person in the car than the four of them.

“Hey Nelson,” Billy’s voice whines from the back seat. “Aren’t you on this road the wrong way?”

He had been wondering why the traffic was so thin. They have become the only car on the highway, speeding between dark slopes of farmland and distant Christmas lights.

“You’re heading toward Maiden Springs!” Billy tells him. “Brewer is behind us!”

“Son of a fucking bitch,” Nelson says. “I asked for directions coming out of the parking lot and nobody helped.”

“Nelson, you’ve lived here all your life,” Pru points out.

“Yeah, but not around the fairgrounds. I hate this area. The fair always depressed me, the way the school made us go every September.”

“Me, too,” Billy says. “I was terrified of the freaks. And those rides used to do a job on my stomach. I remember once with Belly Majka in one of those that roll you around opposite each other being afraid I was going to throw up in her face.”

“Take the next exit,” Pru says, in a low, sharply aimed wife’s voice. “Go left at the overpass and then right to get you back on the highway going the other way.”

“I know how to reverse direction,” Nelson snaps at her.

“And the animals in cages,” Billy goes on. “I have a nightmare about being in a cage that gets smaller and smaller, like an egg slicer.”

“You poor dear worried thing,” Annabelle says silkily.

Pru says to Annabelle, as Nelson angrily whips the car up and around the exit ramp, “I think that was unrealistic, too. Most men would have just screwed her anyway. I mean, he’d been dreaming about almost nothing else.”

But it is hard for her to break into the cocoon of mutual narcissistic regard being woven in the back seat. From the little overpass road, dark farmland seems to stretch in every direction, broken only by a Gulf station, its towering oval sign aglow, level with the profile of the hills. Nelson asks the back seat, “What do you think, Annabelle? How far would the older man have gone? The father figure?”

Her gentle voice arrives: “Nelson, what are you asking?”

“How far did Mr. Byer go with you? My gut tells me,” he says, recklessly wheeling through the entrance ramp and heading down the highway toward where Brewer’s dome of light stains the sky, “he went pretty far.

That’s why you’re always saying what a great guy he was. He wasn’t. He was into touchy-feely. A good thing he died when you were sixteen, it might have got a lot worse.”

“Baby,” Pru says to her husband, but there is no stopping him, now that he and the Corolla are headed in the right direction. He needs to undress his sister, in front of Billy.

“And your mother was no help, was she? She was a savvy old tramp, she must have guessed. She’d been through the mill, why not you, huh?”

“That’s not true!” Annabelle cries. “She never knew anything! And he never—what’s the word?—” “Penetrated,” Nelson offers.

“Exactly!” she says. “He just groped, all in the name of parental affection, of course.” This bit of sarcasm pries her open; she makes a strange shuddering prolonged sound of upheaved regret, then pours out, sobs making her gasp, “I didn’t dare ask him to stop, he’d handled me since I was a baby, it didn’t seem right, yet how could it be very wrong? It was as if he couldn’t help it, he was, like, sleepwalking. He’d tuck me in afterwards.”

“He knew what you didn’t know,” Nelson points out. “That he wasn’t your real father. And your mother knew it loo.”

“She had no idea what he was doing, I’m positive. But it was so much a relief when he died that I blamed myself. It had got to be a secret between us, as if I wanted it too, when I *hated* it!” Her tears are coming freely now, pent-up, accusing. Nelson squints into the high headlights, trucks and those fucking SUVs, that afflict his eyes from behind and ahead. The traffic is hurrying in both directions toward some disaster, the end of time as they’ve known it. Annabelle goes the next step, crying, “I felt I’d killed him! Good for me!” Her round face flashes in his rearview mirror, one teary eye meeting his.

“Right,” Nelson says calmly. “It really screwed you up with men since, didn’t it? How come, do you think, you’ve never married?”

“Oh *stop* it!” she protests. “Why do you want me married, why do you *care?” She* sinks back, sobbing now with a muffled, burbling quality that suggests Billy is comforting her. Nelson can’t risk turning his head to look into the back seat; his sensation of a fifth person in the car is so strong he needs to strengthen his grip on the steering wheel.

Billy says, “Great going, Nelson. So that’s psychotherapy.”

“It helps to get things in the open,” he sulkily says. “Then you go from there.” He stares ahead. He has always disliked this flat side of Brewer, as opposed to the tilting Mt. Judge side. Serve-yourself gas stations with ranks of pumps, fast-food franchises with plastic mini-playgrounds for obese toddlers, dismal six-store strip malls, carpet and linoleum outlets, vegetable stands boarded up for the winter, cutesy Amish cut-outs beckoning ignorant tourists from the inner cities to *Real Pa. Dutch Cuisine.* He knows where he is now. If he stays on this new improved 222 a bypass will hurl him right around Brewer southwest toward Lancaster and the Turnpike; instead he turns off, by the mattress warehouse with the Aurora Massage Parlor tucked in behind, on old Route 111, which runs parallel to the river, the silhouette of Mt. Judge far to their right, crowned by the distant lights of the Pinnacle Hotel, where they had been, the four of them, sitting and eating and making polite conversation, a few hours ago. Time does wonders.

Pru says, twisting her head to talk to Annabelle, “So you got pawed. So did I. My father was a crumb-bum, when you think about it. It’s not the end of the world.” She is tough. Her nose looks sharp as a witch’s in profile but he senses her bulk, her body in the shimmery silk dress and rust-brown overcoat, as radiating warmth. Her long hands lie idle in her shadowy lap. He reaches down to adjust the car heat, and his own hand and Pru’s knees show similarly pale in the dash-light glow. He remembers how once when she was new to their family she surprisingly comforted him by telling him, *Why, honey. I think from what I’ve seen your parents are quite fond of each other. Couples that have stayed together that long, they must have something.*

In the back seat, his sister is sniffling and Billy is saying, “Easy, easy. We’re talking ancient history.”

The road has stoplights now, and up ahead somebody, a car dealer or club owner, has gone to the expense of renting a bank of spotlights; three of them stir the sky to the limits of the local haze.

“We are passing,” Nelson announces in a tour guide’s droning tone, “the former site of Springer Motors Toyota Agency, now derelict.”

Mom sold the acreage and building to a computer-components company that never took off; a sudden turn in technology left it behind. By inner moonlight Nelson sees the ghosts of his father and himself and Charlie Stavros and Elvira Ollenbach standing at the boarded-up windows looking out at Route 111 for customers that will never come.

“My father’s!” Annabelle says, sitting up with a rustle. “I remember. With Jamie. He bought an orange Corolla, eventually.”

“It was my mother’s, more,” Nelson says. “It’s sad to see. The company that bought it from her is still in bankruptcy proceedings, ten years later. They’ve probably forgotten that they own it. I heard a Barnes and Noble was interested, to make a superstore.”

The spotlights are a little farther down Route 111, in front of what was once a Planter’s Peanuts store and became, added on to, a disco in the Seventies. The tall thin silhouette of Mr. Peanut outside, a twelve-foot billboard, became a nearly nude dancing girl with her naughty parts covered by bubbles, but that was too sexist to last. Now the humanoid shape holds a cowgirl in short white skirt and high white boots advertising PURE COUNTRY MUSIC. Country music keeps coming back. Or is it just slow to go away? The parking lot looks only half full. People with sense are staying home tonight, exhausted by the hype, petrified of fanatic Arabs sneaking in from Canada.

“Hey, Nellie,” Billy pipes up. “It’s getting close to midnight, and we’re nowhere.” “I know, I’m going as fast as I can. If you hadn’t got me lost—”

“Did Nelson ever tell you the story,” Pru asks Annabelle, “how he lost the agency up his nose?” “No, not really.” Her voice sounds dried out, for now.

“Say, thanks a lot,” Nelson complains to his wife.

“Siblings should have no secrets,” Pru says, and makes, he knows without looking, that prudish little mouth of hers, as if sucking on something tart. “Nelson wasn’t always such a saint.”

“He was a pill of a sissy, in fact,” Billy contributes, making the fun rougher. “A real little mamma’s boy, terrified of his father, who was a pretty nice guy, actually.”

“Unlike yours,” Nelson tells him. “What a sleazebag.”

“Very musical, though,” Billy tells Annabelle. “He could play anything, any instrument, by ear.”

“Oh, I’ve always wanted to be able to do that!” she responds, snuggling from the way her voice squeezes down. Does Nelson imagine it, or is there the purr of a zipper being unzipped, that long diagonal zipper on the front of her dress? His sister giggles, and a hand is lightly slapped.

Nelson drives the Corolla through West Brewer. Those new-style icicle lights hang like bright napkins from the little porches of the row houses that slant down to the river and the Weiser Street Bridge. The Bridge has old-fashioned lamp standards, yellow glass balls and iron curlicues going green with age, but the light falls cold and contemporary from tall violet tubes on aluminum stems. At the far end of the bridge sits an upscale coffee bar that used to be a black hangout, Jimbo’s Friendly Lounge, before the blacks were chased out of South Brewer by gentrification. Then there unrolls beneath the wheels of the Corolla Brewer’s main drag in all its Yuletide glory: the trees rimming Weiser Square are looped with necklaces of white lights, scribbles in three dimensions. The square, an open farmer’s market originally, was decades ago blocked to form an ill-advised pedestrian park to revive the downtown, but it turned into a dangerous forest, and by a newer plan has been reopened to automobile traffic. They pass Fourth Street, and the bronze statue of Conrad Weiser in Mohawk headdress in the center of the traffic circle at Fifth Street. Trolley cars used to go east, west, north, and south from this point, to amusement parks and picnic groves. The human traffic thickens; the city fathers have laid on a Millennium Ball in the atrium of the glass-enclosed mall between Fifth and Sixth on the left side of the street, as well as the Christian-rock concert a block up on the right, in the great hole. A dim din penetrates the car windows.

“Hey Nelson,” Billy says. “The Sunflower Beer clock says it’s midnight! Here it’s the millennium and we’re all stuck in this little Jap jalopy! Nothing’s moving!”

“Don’t panic,” Nelson tells him. “That clock never told the right time. The Laid-Back is only up at Ninth, we’ll be there in a minute.”

Then Nelson sees the dire occur: at the intersection of Sixth and Weiser, where Kroll’s Department Store used to be, two cars ahead of them, the traffic light goes out. Hanging high above the asphalt, the light was green, and now is dead. Not red, dead. The sticky traffic halts completely. Revellers, mostly Hispanic kids in jeans and windbreakers, dart among the cars. A shout is going up, but here and there, as if nobody knows exactly what is happening. The cars behind them honk, in celebration or exasperation. The streetlights flicker.

“Oh my God,” Annabelle says, “terrorists just like they said,” and begins to cry again.

“It’s a little glitch,” Billy says, feigning calm, though this must feel like a tunnel to him. “These lights are all on computers.”

“Son of a bitch!” Nelson says. Decades of wrongs, hurts, unjust deaths press behind his eyes. He pushes down on the window locks. Hooded kids with sparkle dust on their faces are crowding around the Corolla, and looking up the street toward Mt. Judge. The city’s fire alarms begin to wail; church bells are dully ringing. At the top of Mt. Judge, fireworks ignite, one slow bloom after another, mingled with staccato gashes, potassium white and barium green, sodium yellow and chlorine blue, dying, blossoming, dying in drifts of dismissed sparks as the dull concussions thud through the windshield. “We’re missing it!” he cries.

The Corolla was the third car from the intersection when the traffic light went out. The first car glided through, unaware of the breakdown, and the next waited for the car on the right to come out and cut across. Sixth is one-way here, so there is no traffic from the left. The cars behind are in the dark, but up this close to the intersection the problem and its solution are plain: take your turn, in democratic American style. The car ahead of Nelson, a little cherry-red specimen of the remodelled VW Beetle, cute as a bug, with oval slant taillights like Disney animal eyes, creeps out and through, and the car on the right, a serious, four-ring, square- cut tan Audi, takes its turn like a good citizen. Then it is Nelson’s turn, his dirty white Toyota’s turn, to pass through the doused light and continue on, up Weiser toward the mountain and its fireworks, past where Kroll’s used to be and where Mom and Dad got together (if they hadn’t, he would not exist, think of that) and on across Seventh, where mile-long trains of coal would drag through from Pottsville to Philly and once upon a time there was a Chinese restaurant, and on up to look for a parking space in the blocks beyond the Laid- Back, around where Dad used to set type for the Verity Press. It will be jolly, to walk, the four of them, out in the air. He has an image of a frozen Daiquiri, or should it be a Margarita, with salt all around the rim?

“Hey!” he exclaims. Tailgating the Audi, a black-and-silver Ford Expedition, a huge SUV with truck wheels and a side mirror the size of a human head, keeps coming, trying to barrel through out of turn, against all decency and order. Some brat of the local rich, beered-up and baseball-hatted, with his smirking airhead buddies, gives Nelson a glazed so-what stare. Nelson sees red. “That fucker,” he says. *This program has performed an illegal operation and will be shut down.* Pru shrieks when she realizes that Nelson’s foot is firm on the accelerator and that nothing short of ramming into the Expedition will stop their forward motion. Its fat high bumper— two-tone, the lower half chrome—reflects their right headlight in a flaring smear; she braces for the bump, the crazed windshield, the crumpled metal, the thud of pain. But the cocky brat in the baseball cap sees with widened eyes that Nelson isn’t kidding; and brakes hard, so his buddies’ empty heads all bounce in unison. The Corolla skims by, still accelerating, missing by an inch. The dig-out smell of hot rubber fills the interior. The couple in the back seat cheer, a bit breathlessly. “I *hate* SUVs,” Nelson explains. “Pretentious gas-guzzlers, they think they own the road.”

High in the tinted windshield, so it looks greenish, a ball of twinkling fire expands. The Christian-rock music thumps away in the vast illumined excavation on their right. Nelson shivers, as if a contentious spirit is leaving him. And now Pru is attacking him, trying to hug him, her nose poking into his cheek, her breath fluttering warm on his neck. “Oh honey, that was *great,* the way you made that asshole chicken out. I think I wet my pants.”

“Me, too, almost,” says Annabelle.

“It’s funny about death,” Billy contributes from the back seat. “When you actually face it, it’s kind of a rush.”

To Nelson Pru says, so softly the others could hear only if they were to ignore each other and listen hard, “Let’s not hang around too long at the Laid-Back. I thought I’d stay at your place tonight.”

Chapter 5

From: Roy Angstrom, Esq. [[roy](mailto:royson@buckeyemedia.com)s[on@buckeyemedia.com]](mailto:royson@buckeyemedia.com) Sent: Saturday, January 8, 2000, 8:29 AM To: [ron.harrison@qwikbrew.com.](mailto:ron.harrison@qwikbrew.com) Subject: Thanking you

Hi Grandma and Ron—Its been a week so its “high time” to check in and thank you for the great time we had together New Years Eve. I really enjoyed seeing all those fireworks around the world moving across all the time zones. It made me feel how small the planet EARTH is. Mom said there were even some on Mt Judge we could of seen. The thing I remember best was on David Letterman the three slobby guys where the one hit a golf ball off the fat ones belly button and the third guy caught it in his mouth. He could of broke a tooth doing that.

The reason Mom didn’t come back to the house at all was that they nearly had a fatal accident when the traffic lights went out and it left them all exausted. She says Dad will be coming out to live with us here in Ohio and thats great too.

Heres a joke—how do you tell when a Islamic terrorist is scared? Answer—he shiites in his pants. Actually it was nice that in Iran they let them go except for the passenger who had his throat cut for looking funny at the one they called the Doctor. What really took my interest in the news is this Tibetan boy just my age who was the second most important lama in the world and escaped by walking several days through a blizzard in the Himmelayas, hes called the KARMAPA. On the same website I read where the Dolly Lama (the most important lama) said of YK2 “Millennium? The sun and the moon are the same to me.” You can look all this up Ron at [www.tibet.com.](http://www.tibet.com/) A lot of jokes are at [www.ohyesyouare.com.](http://www.ohyesyouare.com/) Sample—How do you tell Al Gore from Bill Bradley? Answer one is a bore and one sags badly. ROTFL (rolling on the floor laughing).

Thanx again for a really great time and teaching me 3-handed pinockle. I dont expect to stay up playing pinockle past midnight again until I get to college, maybe to Kent State like Dad. Its the best.

luv u both ;-) (wink) ROY

“Hi? Annabelle? It’s—” “Nelson! *How is* it going?”

“Not bad. Good, actually. Her apartment is pretty roomy, though eventually we might look for a house. Roy would like a house in Stow.”

“He must be thrilled.”

“Thrills at that age wear off in about half an hour, but, yeah, he seems pleased. And Judy is pleased. She says boyfriends take you much more seriously if you have a father on the premises. She’s broken up, thank God, with that creep who kept her in Ohio to go to some very stuffy party, as she described it. She wishes now she’d come to Brewer.”

“Is she still going to be a stewardess?”

“Well, that’s a little, where you’d expect, up in the air—” “I *knew you* were going to say 'up in the air'!”

“But I think so. If one of these jerks doesn’t talk her into living with him instead. But girls now—they’re not so easy to talk into things. They’re, what’s the word, empowered. Judy teases me, the way I keep looking at her, but it’s amazing to me, how beautiful she’s become, even since I saw her last summer. Every tooth, every eyelash, you know, just so *exact.* She has Dad’s and my cowlick in one eyebrow. And there’s a new switchy quick way she moves and does things. She’s smaller than her mother, though her hair is like Pru’s used to be, but she doesn’t have that sort of awkward broadbeamy semi-helpless thing Pru does. Judy is *knit.* She went out for all these sports at high school, and works out at this health club. She lets me feel her biceps.”

“She sounds like *your* mother.”

“Really? Mom’s such a misfit, and Judy’s such a smart fit, but, yeah, maybe in a way. Bonewise.” *Those little Springer hands. “*I love looking at her hands, they’re almost childlike, but have this kind of graceful, what can I say, composure, and long half-tone fingernails. One half purple, the other yellow. I said to her, USAirways isn’t going to let you get away with that. She says, 'I know. It’s a *fling,* Dad. You’ve heard of *flings.'”*

*“*And Pru?”

“Good news. She saw this ad for 'Human Resources Assistant' for one of the big banks down on Market Street saying 'peopleoriented individual' and they liked her; she’s one of three they’ve narrowed it down to. Her experience wasn’t quite what they want but I guess this guy Gekopoulos wrote her a raving recommendation.”

“I meant you and Pru.”

“Oh. Oh. That’s O.K. You’ve met her, you know what she’s like. She isn’t one to make a big show of her feelings, usually. She says having a man in the apartment is as bad as having two untrained dogs. She should talk, we’re surrounded by her relatives out here, they keep calling up and dropping around.”

“You certainly are more talkative, now you’re back with her.” “It’s *you* I like to talk to. Too much, huh?”

“Oh, no. But why do you call her Pru? Your mother calls her Teresa.” “How’d you know that?”

“She called, to invite me to dinner. Just her and Ronnie. And Billy if I wished.”

“Billy. That goon. I’m sorry I saddled you with him that night. He got me lost, in my own county, and then stuck in traffic at the greatest moment in history.”

“Yes, it was terrible the way he did that. He cries about it in his sleep.”

A pause, while he wonders how much he’s supposed to make of this disclosure. “About Teresa,” he says. “That’s her name, but in high school everybody thought she was prudish, and there was another Terry in the class. You’re right, though, it’s nice to be back with her. I love her, I guess.”

“Of course you do.”

“I’ve begun to check around, for jobs in mental health. Akron’s a lot like Brewer except it’s three times as big. It has the same river, and miles of row houses, and abandoned plants turned into something else—they’ve turned a huge Quaker Oats factory into a Hilton Hotel with round rooms in the old grain silos—and no shortage of misery. I was thinking of looking for something in a drug-rehab place. Addicts may freeze to death but they don’t do suicide.”

“That was too bad. I could tell how upset you were.”

“I wasn’t that upset. Esther told me not to take it egotistically. She asked me when I gave notice if that was the reason. I said I hoped not. Hey, Happy Birthday! Forty. Wow.”

“You remembered.”

“How could I forget? I even have a quotation to give you. 'The very motion of our life is towards happiness.' End quote.”

“What’s that from?”

“From a very dumb book Ronnie Harrison gave me for Christmas. It’s on page one, which is as far as I’ve gotten.”

“Maybe you should go on to page two."He has broken the lovely flow they were having. Ronnie Harrison still frightens her. He asks, “How’s the weather in DiamondCounty?"*"Cold.* Winter! Inches of snow, and some more tonight. We all thought it couldn’t do winter any more, because of global warming.”

“I know. Here too. The same weather, basically the sameeverything. But I like it. I like seeing different license plates.”

“Your mother said over the phone she and Ronnie are going down to the Florida condo and thinking of selling the house and moving there for good. They both have aches and pains warm weather might help.”

“For *years* I’ve told her to sell. But listen. If you do go to Mom’s for dinner, take Billy or somebody with you, for protection from Ron. You’re too—”

She waits."Delicious. Sweet. Innocent,” he finds himself saying. “Nelson.”

“Yes?”

“I *have* been seeing Billy.” “Surprise, surprise.”

“You’re teasing, aren’t you, when you call him a goon?”

“Well, he was a *boy goon.* Anyway, in this country even goons have their rights.” “I think he’s darling.”

“In what way?”

“He thinks I’m wonderful. After those horrible things you got me to admit in the car at least I don’t have anything to hide from him. He says when he’s with me his anxieties go away.”

“Well, is that a good reason—?”

“Nelson, *no* reason is perfect. But then neither are we.”

“O.K., I’ll buy that.” Happiness for her is already rising in him, like water trembling upward.

“I have a serious question. Don’t be flip, it matters to me. Ever since I was a little girl I’ve thought if I ever got married it would be in a church, with all the formality.”

Annabelle asks, “If Billy and I get married, will you give me away?” Says Nelson, “Gladly.”