# George and Vivian

# John Updike

## I. Aperto, Chiuso

“There’s one—it says *aperto!*”

“Where?” Allenson asked, knowing perfectly well. There was a tense gullible nerve in his young wife that it amused him to touch.

“Right there! We went right by! Mobil, just like at home! I can’t believe you did that, darling!”

“I didn’t like the look of it. Too many ugly trucks.”

Vivian explained to him, with the complacency of a knowing child, “You’re just nervous because you don’t know how to say ‘Fill ’er up.’ But if we don’t get gas soon we’ll be stuck by the side of the road, and then what’ll you say?”

“I’ll say, ‘*Scusi*,’ ” he said.

In the several years of their secret affair, Vivian, George Allenson’s third wife, had had ample opportunity to observe how little, in relation to his second wife, he was to be trusted; but he had not expected her, once *they* were married, to perceive him as untrustworthy. He was twenty years older, also, and he had not imagined that this superiority in time spent upon the earth might be regarded as a deficit—in eyesight, in reaction time, in quality of attention. Throughout their vacation trip to Italy, Vivian was vocally nervous in the car, sitting beside him clutching the map while he, with growing confidence and verve, steered their rented subcompact Fiat through the Italian traffic, from one lovely old congested city to another. He was even mastering the Italian trick of turning a two-lane highway into a three-lane by simply passing anyway, right into the teeth of the oncoming traffic. Whenever he did this, she shrieked, and now she was worried about their running out of gas, and kept urging him into gasoline stations. Far as they had driven, from Venice to Ravenna to Verona, they had not yet replenished the tankful that came with the car.

“I’ll turn gracefully to you,” he elaborated, in the mellow baritone that even a smidgeon of Italian brings out in the male voice, “and say, ‘*Mi scusi, mia cara*.’ Actually, honey, we’ve got plenty of gas. These little Fiats go forever on just a liter.”

He was nearly sixty, and she nearly forty, and as these irrevocable turning-points approached, both of them, perhaps, were showing their nerves. They were headed toward Lake Garda on a day’s trip out of Verona. Their Veronese hotel room was not merely expensive but exquisite, provided with real antiques and a balcony view of roof tiles and *campanili* whose various bells rang the hours in a ragged procession of tollings. The Allensons had developed a daily routine—two continental breakfasts in the room, delivered with much waiterly fussing and musical clatter, followed by a walking excursion to a church or two, a Roman amphitheatre, or a castle converted into an art museum, and then their return to the room and a lunch of fresh fruit bought en route and some thriftily saved breakfast rolls, the elemental economy of this lunch suggesting an even less expensive entertainment, in the languor of the sunny hour, on one or the other of their little Empire-style beds. This routine was intimate and strict, so it was with trepidation and potential irritability that they had set out, this morning, in the neglected car to brave the narrow unmarked streets and the helter-skelter of buzzing, thrusting Italian vehicles.

On their last excursion, which had brought them from Vicenza to Verona by way of the S-11—an inescapable green line on Vivian’s map—Allenson had managed almost immediately to take a wrong turn that headed them up into the hills, through pastel flocks of villagers attending mass, between flowering hedgerows and fields dotted with sheep, on a winding upward road that offered, it seemed to him, no place to turn around. Her resentment of his failure to follow the route so clear and plain right there on her lap became shrill, and he risked their lives by angrily ducking into a dirt lane and backing out into the road. On their descent back through the village, which she retrospectively identified, on the map, as Montecchio Maggiore, Vivian confessed, by way of making up, how pretty it all was. And it was true, his blunder had in a minute uncovered a crystalline cisalpine charm bared by none of their mapbound excursions, including one in the very next hour, to Soave, at the end of a little spur that crossed the A-4.

Soave, hitherto to them merely a name on a bottle of cheap white wine, was an old walled town; they parked outside the gates and walked along the main street. Outside the town’s main bar, a crowd of men had gathered after mass, and one of them abruptly presented Vivian, as she passed, with a red carnation. Allenson, a step behind her, was startled to see his wife accept the gift with an instantaneous broad smile and the appropriate gracious gesture of bringing the flower to within a few inches of her chest. “*Grazie*,” she said, managing nicely that little flirted tail of an “e” which Allenson always had trouble pronouncing.

Perhaps women are biologically conditioned to accept flowers, even from total strangers on the street. Vivian was dark-haired and somewhat stately of figure; but for her chunky, practical running shoes, she might have been Italian. Allenson reflexively reached toward his pocket to pay for the flower, but no charge was exacted. The man, in a suit but unshaven, matched Vivian’s smile with an equally broad one of his own and responded, “*Prego, signora*,” ignoring her husband.

Allenson quickened his step to place himself by her side. When they had put behind them the crowd of loitering, chattering men, Vivian asked him, “What did it mean?” For all her criticism of his driving and deportment she expected him to know everything, to be wise.

“Damned if I know. Look—those little girls have carnations, too.”

“Does it mean I’m a Communist or something?”

There were election posters all over Italy, and some of them did show a carnation. “Left of center, at the worst, I would think. Communism’s had it, even here. Maybe it’s just something they do for tourists.”

“I think we’re the only ones in town.”

It was true, entering the walled town at Sunday noon felt as if they were trespassing in a large living room full of happy families. Allenson’s eyes, moving on from the little preadolescent, carnation-carrying girls, had received the equivalent of a flower: seen from behind, a father and daughter strolled with their arms about each other’s waists, the gray-haired father, in his possessive fond grip, apparently unaware that his long-haired daughter had grown to be as tall as he and voluptuous, her mandolin-shaped bottom just barely contained in a leather mini-skirt. These skirts, taut swatches exposing the full length of thigh, had been all over Venice, moving up and down the stepped bridges that crossed the canals. As a child wants to reach out and pat balloons, to verify their substance, Allenson had mentally reached out. Perhaps Vivian was right, he was not trustworthy; he wanted to be forever a young lover. He had left his anti-hypertensive pills at home, and she—rather chemically, he thought—credited to that his rejuvenated sexual energy. But, broken loose from the routines of work and old friendships, one is, as a tourist, immersed in youth, unable to ignore how the world’s population is renewing itself. Even Vivian was old, relatively.

Allenson really couldn’t understand why, after these many kilometers in which he had not crashed into anything, she seemed still not to like his driving. The car’s five gears (six, with reverse) did sometimes still jumble under his hand, so that he tried to start in third or to move straight from first to fourth, but within a day he had satisfied himself that, in Italy as elsewhere, a subtle camaraderie of the road mitigates the chances of collision. Amid an incessant buzzing of motorcycles, and between onrolling walls of double-van trucks, understandings were being reached, tolerances arrived at. Even at the most frantic mergers, he felt a Latin grace and logic; the drivers of Italy, though possessed of a gallant desire to maximize the capacity of their engines, were more civilized than the Calvinistic commuters of Westchester and Long Island. “Relax,” he told Vivian, on the road to Lake Garda. “Enjoy the scenery.”

“I can’t. You’ll take some crazy wrong turn like you did outside Vicenza.”

“What if I do? It’s all new to us. It’s all Italy.”

“That’s the problem.”

“I thought you loved it here.”

“I do, when we stop moving.”

“You know, Vivian, I could start to resent all this criticism. Elderly men have feelings, too.”

“It’s not you, you’re doing great, considering.”

“Considering what?”

“Considering,” she said, “you’re driving on an empty gas tank.”

Sirmione, even in early May, was full of other tourists. “The kids are here,” the couple said, continuing a joke that had developed in Venice and continued into Ravenna, where every basilica and baptistry seemed crammed, beneath the palely shimmering Byzantine mosaics, with packs of sight-sated, noisily interacting schoolchildren. Even the vast Piazza San Marco wasn’t big enough to hold the boisterous offspring of an ever more mobile and prosperous Europe.

The small fortress at Sirmione offered views of the lake and, most fascinatingly, of the process of laying roof tiles. Three men labored gingerly on a roofed pitch beneath the fort’s parapets. The oldest stood on a dizzying scaffold and guided onto his platform each wheelbarrow-load of tiles and cement hoisted by a crane in the courtyard; the youngest slapped mortar along the edge where roof met parapet; the middle-aged man crouched lovingly to the main task, of seating each row of tiles on gobs of mortar and tapping them, by eye, into regularity. “Doesn’t that seem,” Allenson asked his wife, “a tedious way to make a roof? What’s wrong with good old American asphalt shingles?”

“They’re ugly,” Vivian said, “and these roofs are beautiful.”

“Yeah, but acres of them, everywhere you look. How much beauty do you need? The cement must dry up and then everything slips and slides and cracks. I wonder when this roof last had to be done like this. Probably last summer.”

Catullus had summered here, a monument down by the dock informed them. A hydrofoil from Riva hove splashily into view, and they ate two toasted *panini con salami* at an outdoor café. When Allenson closed his eyes and lifted his face to the sun he had a dizzying sensation of being on the old workman’s scaffold, suspended at a killing height, thousands of miles from home, on a small blue planet, and soon to be dead, as dead as Catullus, his consciousness ceasing, his awareness of sun and of shade, of the voices of the excited kids around them. His brief life was quite pointless and his companion no comfort. She was a kid herself. He opened his eyes and the tidily trashy, overused scenic charm of the lakeside washed in, displacing his dread.

“What are you thinking?” Vivian asked him, her voice on edge, as if they were already back in the car.

“How nice it is here,” he answered. He added, “And what a dreamboat you are.”

“Why do you lie?” she asked.

He felt no need to answer. People lie to be merciful.

They drove west to Decenzano, then north to Salo and along a road that twisted high above the lake. “Do you *have* to accelerate around the corners?” she asked.

“There’s a guy pushing me behind.”

“Let him pass.”

“There’s no place to pass.”

“Then let him go a little slower. He can see you’re not Italian.”

“How?”

“From the haircut. Why do you feel you have to pretend you’re an Italian driver?”

“*No comprendo*,” he said. “*Sono italiano. Sono un ragazzo*.” In a lavatory in Venice he had studied a graffito that read HO FATTO L’AMORE CON UN RAGAZZO VENEZIANO E STATO BELLISSIMA.

“*Con mia cara*,” he added. “*Con*,” with its coarse meanings in other languages, turned out to be an indispensable Italian word. *Cappuccino con latte. Acqua minerale con gas. Panini con salami*. The little Fiat emitted a satisfying squeal of tires as Allenson surged around a hairpin curve. The grille of the tailgating Ferrari switched back and forth in the rearview mirror like an exasperated beast in a cage.

“I’m getting sick to my stomach,” Vivian said.

“Stop looking at the map. Look out the window. Enjoy the beauty you’re so crazy about.”

The most beautiful moment, for him, had occurred in Venice, as they were walking back to the hotel, up over a little bridge, past a place where the long black coffinlike gondolas waited in the canal while their drivers gloomily played cards. The dollar had become so weak that Americans were timid of gondola rides, and the Allensons had contented themselves with hearing, as they walked around after dinner, the astounding male voice of a gondolier, as open and plaintive as that of a woman, but enormous: it would swell from a distance into an operatic climax only a few yards away as a line of gondolas slid and tapped past and then slowly would subside, still audible long after the gondolas, with their burden of swaddled passengers, had vanished between the high, angled house walls. The water in the canal would tremble into stillness. The passengers were usually Japanese. This evening, as the Allensons crossed a little piazza and approached the passageway to their hotel, a tall Japanese girl cried out, “No! Wait!” The two syllables of English, somehow like a cry in a language Allenson only half understood, brimmed with a sweet anguish that electrified the air and arrested all motion but hers. Tall for her race, glimmering in a white dress, the young woman, her straight sleek hair utterly black in the half-light—that stagy indoors-outdoors atmosphere of Venice—raced across the flat stones at the canal’s edge while the gondoliers called to one another like awakened birds. She had lost something, Vivian speculated at Allenson’s side, and indeed the contralto cry had been as of someone violated, fatally penetrated. But, no, she wanted to give something, to a mustachioed young gondolier who, to receive it, gallantly made his way back across the narrow canal by stepping on other gondolas. The two of them reached out each an arm to touch hands, while imaginary music swelled, and in her strangely electrifying, passion-filled voice the Japanese girl said, in this language that belonged to neither her nor him, “Your mon-ey.” A tip. Some yen disguised as lire. The Japanese were flooding the world with money, as once Americans did. The Japanese had become rich and, with it, sexy. So beautiful, so far from home, her voice rising like a Madame Butterfly’s in this echoing stage set of a city. Her cry vibrated in Allenson’s bones until he at last fell asleep in the hotel bed.

“Darling, you *must* stop the car,” Vivian said, in a voice drained of all flirtation and wifely tact. “I’m about to throw up.”

He looked over. She did look greenish, under the tan she had acquired drinking cappuccini in sunny piazzas. Within a few hundred yards he found a space by the side of the road, beside a steeply descending woods, and pulled over. Other cars whizzed by. A few wrappers and empty plastic bottles testified to previous visitors. The lake showed its sparkling green-blue through the quivering tops of poplars. On the other side of the road a high ochre wall restrained the hillside. Vivian sat still, eyes shut, like a child trying to hold down a tantrum. Feeling unappreciated, Allenson got out of the car, slammed the door, and inspected this unscenic piece of Italy—the litter, the linked fence, the flowering weeds. Such unpampered roadside nature reminded him of America; his stiff old heart cracked open and peace entered, and with it, for the ten-thousandth time, a desire to reconcile with his wife, whoever she was. Vivian had opened the car window a crack, to permit communications. “Want to come out for some air?” he asked.

She shook her head curtly. “I want to go back. I want to get off this fucking twisty road.”

“What about Riva?” They had intended to drive to Riva at the head of the lake.

“Fuck Riva.”

“Honey, your language,” he said, slightly stirred, along the lines of the Japanese girl’s thrillingly pitched exclamation in Venice. He loved it when women *let it out*. “Would you like to drive?”

“You know I’m scared of the gears.”

“Then just relax and let me drive.”

“O.K., but don’t be so macho.” Her voice softened on “macho.” “I beg you,” she added. “*Prego*.”

“Smooth as silk,” he promised. The exchange had conferred youthful status on him; he got back into the car bouncily. “Stop looking at the map,” he told her. “That’s what gets you sick.”

On the way back toward Salo, Vivian cried out, “What a lovely little church! Darling, could you please stop?”

There was a space of cobblestones beside an array of white metal tables, and he pulled in. “See,” she said, in a placating tone meant to match his new docility. “If you go slow enough, we can see things.”

The ancient little church had a patchily Romanesque façade. The rounded front portal was open, and to enter they parted a thick red curtain. Within, they were embraced by the watery cool of village Catholicism—a stony deep scent like that of a well, a few guttering candles, some unfathomably murky frescoes. The hard-pressed tourist couple welcomed the emptiness, the vaulted silence between the entrance and the pale Virgin who was making a gentle disclaiming gesture beside the altar. Vivian was so moved she fed a thousand-lira bill into one of the offering boxes. From the church they went next door to sit at one of the white tables. A girl just barely in her teens came to them shyly, nervously, as if they were the first customers of her career. Allenson ordered cappuccino for Vivian, *limonata* for himself. Both were good, as Hemingway might have said. Dear old Hemingway, Allenson thought—looking for the good life in hotels and cafés, roaming Europe like a bison on a tenderly grassy plain, nibbling, defecating, showering love on headwaiters and contessas.

From the white tables one looked level across the road at the masts of some fishing boats and through them at the glittering turquoise water receding to the misty blue mountains of the far shore. Once again, the best had proved to be the unforeseen. On her map Vivian discovered that they were in Maderno. She found the church in her guidebook, in the smallest of types. “ ‘Sant’ Andrea,’ ” she read. “ ‘Shows remains of Roman and Byzantine architecture, especially in the pillar capitals, doors, and windows. A yet older church,’ it says, ‘seems to be incorporated in the building.’ ”

“ ‘Yet older.’ ” Reading over her shoulder, Allenson said, “We should go see D’Annunzio’s house. It’s just down the road.”

She looked at him distrustfully. “Who was D’Annunzio?”

“You dear child,” said Allenson. “He was just about the most famous writer since Byron. I mean famous-famous, not literary-excellence-famous. I’m a little vague about exactly why. Kind of a pre-Hemingway, fond of big gestures. A great womanizer. Didn’t you see the article on his house a while back in *Art & Antiques?* It looked like a Turkish harem.”

“That *would* appeal to you,” Vivian said.

“And there are gardens,” he dimly remembered. “We passed the sign to it just here”—he stabbed the map—“in Gardone Riviera. We’ll nip in to look at it, and then drive straight back, and be back in the hotel in time to have tea in the bar. Maybe he’ll give us those little English biscuits again.”

“Gas,” Vivian said. “We *must* get gas, George.”

*Con gas*. “There’ll be a station on the way to D’Annunzio,” he promised.

But there wasn’t. The distance was so short he shot past the turnoff, and had to back around, awkwardly and dangerously, while Vivian shrieked and clamped her eyes shut. Once safely parked, they walked uphill, following signs to *Il Vittoriale degli Italiani*. It was two o’clock, and the sun had become hot. “What’s a ‘*vittoriale*’*?*” she asked him.

“I don’t know. Some kind of victory?”

“I thought the Italians never had that sort of victory. That was part of their charm.”

“We’ll see,” he promised.

But at the entrance, with its ticket booth and desultory souvenir stands, the guard was explaining something to a bulky, displeased Italian family. “*È chiusa*,” Allenson heard him say. The ending was feminine. “*La casa?*” he asked, at a venture.

“*La casa, il museo*,” the guard said, and a torrent more, of which Allenson took the drift to be that the grounds and gardens were, however, open. The day was Monday, which presumably explained the split. *Aperto, chiuso:* Italy was a checkerboard.

“You’re in luck,” Allenson told his wife. “The house full of pillows is closed. Only the outdoors is open.”

“Is it worth seeing?”

“It must be, or they would shut everything up at once. Do you want to go in or not, dear?”

Vivian gave her first sign of D’Annunzio-induced panic. Her dark eyes, aswarm with resentments, made an effort to read her husband’s face. “You want to,” she said. “You think it’ll be sexy.”

“I want to do what *mia cara* wants,” Allenson said. He pointed out, “We won’t be here soon again. Maybe never.” Wednesday, they were flying home.

“How much is it?”

Allenson glanced at the *biglietteria* and said, “Five thousand a head. A cappuccino in Venice cost nine. It’s only money; we’re making memories.” *Your mon-ey:* yen passed through the reaching hands, the coffinlike gondolas bumping.

“Let’s see what the other people do.”

The Italian family, with abundant disgruntled dialogue between the husband and wife, while their two fat children reddened in the sun, decided to enter; but inside the gates, on the long paved walks and surreal stark stairways, where the Allensons kept encountering them, the man was heard more than once to be exclaiming in disbelief, as he surveyed the sunstruck *vittoriale*, “*Cinque mila!*”

To Allenson, it was worth it. The views of the lake, of the forest plunging down into the lake, were worth it. The only slightly aged grandiosity was worth it. The place had the feeling of an American sacred place—the home of Daniel Chester French, for instance, or Roosevelt’s Hyde Park—in which history has scarcely had time to cool. One’s parents, in boaters and white linen, might have been guests here, filling the terraces with the clamor of their youthful frivolity. An old scarlet roadster was displayed behind glass—*L’automobile dell’impresa di Fiume*. “The empress of Fiume?” Vivian asked.

“I don’t quite think so. Something that happened at Fiume?” Stairways led upward, past closed house and museum doors, into the surrounding woodland, where a mountain stream had been tricked into forming a goldfish pond. The atmosphere was pampered, enchanted, sinister. The couple came to a shelter wherein a large old-fashioned motorboat was suspended in memorial drydock; around the walls of the boathouse maps and photographs tried to explain the great *impresa* of Fiume, but only in Italian. It was a secret the Italians had among themselves; it involved a number of men, centered about short, bald, goateed, baggy-eyed D’Annunzio, wearing the clothes of an aviator. Maps showed dotted lines heading across the Adriatic and back. “What happened?” Vivian demanded in her impatient, car-riding voice.

“I don’t know, darling. It was a heroic exploit, in the car and then the boat.”

“It feels evil.”

“Don’t be silly. In the First World War, the Italians were on the Allied side, remember? Read Hemingway. They were fighting the Austrians.”

“Then what were they doing in Yugoslavia?”

“It was Austrian at the time, maybe.” History, his fragile knowledge of it, was crumbling under him.

From the boathouse a concrete path led further upward, to a bizarre and solemn structure, a two-story mausoleum. The lower portion, entered through open arches, had the same watery smell as the little Romanesque church, but the only holy objects were graven names, names of *i Tredici*—the Thirteen—and more inscrutable printed information concerning Fiume. Upstairs, in a circle, elevated sarcophagi, blazing white, thrust their pointed corners, like little marble ears, into the blank blue Mediterranean sky. In the center of the circle, on square columns twice as tall as the others, the largest sarcophagus loomed. Vivian seemed bewildered—dazed and lost in the white brilliance, in the angles of unrelieved marble. “He must be in there,” Allenson said to her, pointing to the center.

“Your hero?” she said.

“He isn’t my hero. Please. Relax.”

“And who’s in all these others?”

“His companions in the thing of Fiume. The Thirteen.”

“You mean *men* are in all these boxes? Where are their wives? Why aren’t they buried with their families?”

Allenson shrugged. Her insatiable questions, like a child’s, were wearing him down, numbing his brain.

She announced, “This is the most hateful place I’ve ever been. I can’t stand it. It’s Fascist. It’s Hitler. I keep thinking of all the dead Jews.”

“Honey, it wasn’t that war. Italy was on our side. D’Annunzio died in 1938, it says right here. The grandeur of all this, I don’t know—maybe it *was* Mussolini who financed it. He wasn’t thought to be all that bad at first—he made the trains run on time. Don’t blame me, I was just a child in Pound Ridge.”

“I can’t *stand* it,” Vivian said. “If I have to stand a minute longer here in the blinding sun listening to you defend this Nazi I’ll scream. I’d like to blow it up. I wish I’d brought a can of spray paint so I could write graffiti all over it. I’m surprised nobody has.”

“Vivian dear, you’re being quite amazingly stupid. He wasn’t a Nazi, he was a poet, a *fin-de-siècle* dandy. You don’t know the details of it, and I don’t, either. When we get back home, I’ll do some research.”

“If you ever mention this hideous man to me again, I’ll ask for a divorce.”

He winced a smile, here in the sun. “You think the judge will find it sufficient grounds?”

She would not smile back. “Think of it—real men in those boxes, their bones. Hideous male bonding, right through to the afterlife.”

“I don’t know, isn’t there a kind of innocent pomp to it? I find it rather touching.”

“As touching as what you did to Claire.”

Claire had been his second wife. Allenson blinked, and said, “What *we* did to Claire, you could say.”

“*Men*, I mean,” Vivian pleaded, desperately gesturing upward, out of the depths of a millennial oppression. “Putting themselves in pompous marble boxes, ruining all this woodland, the lovely view. Oh, I *hate* it. I can’t stand you standing there smirking and loving it.”

“I don’t exactly love—” But his wife, with an angrily shut face, from which tears were trying to escape, dodged past him and through the shadows of the motionless memorials—the Thirteen basking in their indecipherable glory—as if through a maze, and ran down the stairs, where the portly family was with difficulty ascending, to get their *cinque mila*’s worth.

Maybe a baby would calm her down, Allenson thought. She was approaching the age of now or never, as far as pregnancy was concerned. But the concept of one more dependent, its little life sticking out past his into the future like a diving board, made him dizzy.

Vivian was waiting for him at a landing lower down, leaning against a stone balustrade. “Sorry,” she said. “I lost it.” In the cooling sunlight he saw that she, like a real Italian beauty, had a few fine dark hairs on her upper lip.

This vulnerable touch softened him. “You’re right, of course. There is something creepy about this place.”

“There’s still more. There’s a whole navy down there, the sign says.”

“*Nave*,” Allenson read. “A ship. How can there be a ship?”

But there was one, with a mast and cabin and funnels, breasting the treetops, below them. A kind of gigantic centaur, its back half a deck imitated in stone, the foredeck apparently real, and all the tons of it heroically dragged up the hillside to rest incongruously among the poplars and the ink-dark cypresses. It would have helped his marriage, he knew, to forgo this wonder, but the boy in him couldn’t resist heading down the steps, and setting foot on the marble deck, and then the wooden deck, and looking over the rail at the ocean of trees, the poplar leaves flickering like tiny whitecaps. Returning up the stairs, he was short of breath, and his legs felt heavy. “It’s a toy,” he told Vivian. “It’s all toys.”

“Just like war,” she said.

“Oh, come on,” he begged. “I didn’t build it. I’m just an American tourist, like you.” Imitating a dutiful husband, he escorted her down, past the closed mansion with its Art Deco doors, past the red roadster used in the mysterious *impresa*, out of this maze with its dead Minotaur. Yet, at the entrance, he couldn’t resist asking, “Want to buy any souvenirs?”

“Drop dead,” she suggested, and walked away from him toward the car. He bought five postcards, including one showing D’Annunzio *nel suo studio* (*dans son bureau, in his study, in seinem Studierzimmer*) wearing a three-piece fuzzy gray suit, a handkerchief in his pocket, a stickpin in his cravat, the veins in his very bald head bulging with concentration, his little lips pursed. He looked sickly. A rich life was catching up with him. Now his body was back there, pressed against the sky, dry as a flattened lizard.

Vivian stood far down the narrow sidewalk toward the parking lot. Ignominiously, in her furious sulk, she had had to wait beside the Fiat, since he had the keys. “That was fun,” he told her. “Just as well the house and museum were closed, they might have been too much.”

“I’d rather have fun at Auschwitz,” she said.

“Cut it *out*. O.K., the guy had a good self-image. That’s no crime. That doesn’t mean Auschwitz. The fucking trouble with your generation, all you know about history is Auschwitz and the A-bomb, and all you know about politics is you don’t want them to happen again. Oh dear, no, anything but that! I keep telling you, he was on our side. You’ve got the wrong guy.”

“Maybe you’ve got the wrong girl. You *had* a wife just like you, why didn’t you stick with her? Claire would have loved going to Nazi shrines.”

“She might have,” he admitted. Claire had been game, and never quarrelsome. Silence had been her weapon, and a serene, blameless inner absence.

Vivian persisted, her dark eyes flashing. “You want a new woman. Claire and I were a set, we went together. Wife, mistress. I bet you’ve already got her picked out. It was somebody you saw in Venice. You began to act funny in Venice.” Female intuition, he thought, what a nuisance it is. The possibility of yet another woman secretly thrilled him, but the practicalities of it were overwhelming.

“Vivian, please. I’m nearly sixty. I’m ready for my sarcophagus. As my prospective widow, I hope you paid close attention up there. It’s just what I want. Only you can leave out those thirteen other guys.”

She grudgingly laughed, beginning to let the sore spot heal. Back on the main road, she said, “Look, George, there’s an *aperto*.”

He slowed and pulled into the gas station. “How did you say we say, ‘Fill ’er up’?”

“*Il pieno, per favore*. That’s what the guidebook says.”

But no one came out of the little office, and no other cars were at the pumps. Allenson got out into the sun and shrugged at Vivian through her window. “*Chiuso*,” he said.

Another car pulled in, and a small Italian woman in black got out, and looked around. Allenson caught her eye. “*Chiuso?*” he said again, with a more tentative intonation. She favored him with a stream of Italian and did not seem disappointed when his face showed total incomprehension.

Allenson had noticed, beyond the empty office, a boy in gray jeans and a Shell T-shirt washing a car, with an air of independence of this establishment. But now he came over and spoke to the woman, and showed her something about the pump. She smiled in sudden eager understanding, performed some action Allenson could not see, seized the handle of the gasoline pump, pumped, and drove away.

The boy approached Allenson. “Is automatique,” he said. “Ten-thousand-lira note, then pump.”

“Ah, *comprendo, comprendo. Molto grazie*.” He explained to Vivian, “You deal with the pump directly. You feed it lire.” He found the right denomination of bill in his wallet, and with a curt mechanical purr the slot sucked it in. Gasoline then flowed from the nozzle into his tank, rather briefly. Ten thousand lire—nine dollars—bought just a few liters.

“More!” she shouted from within the Fiat. “Here’s more mon-ey!” She pushed ten-thousand-lira notes out through her half-open window, and the pump avidly sucked them up, turning money into movement, into married romance.

When he got back behind the wheel, Vivian, momentarily satisfied, said, “It’s strange he had to explain it to the woman, too. She was Italian.”

“It’s a tough country,” George Allenson pronounced, from his height of experience. “Even the natives can’t figure it out.”

## II. Bluebeard in Ireland

“Yes, the people are wonderful,” George Allenson had to agree, there in Kenmare. His wife, Vivian, was twenty years younger than he, but almost as tall, with dark hair and decided, sharp features, and it placed the least strain on their marriage if he agreed with her assertions. Yet he harbored an inner doubt. If the Irish were so wonderful, why was Ireland such a sad and empty country? Vivian, a full generation removed from him, was an instinctive feminist, but to him any history of unrelieved victimization seemed suspect. Not that it wasn’t astonishing to see the eighty-room palaces the British landlords had built for themselves, and touching to see the ruins—stone end walls still standing, thatched roofs collapsed—of the hovels where the Irish had lived, eaten their potatoes and drunk their whiskey, and died. Vivian loved the hovels, inexplicably; they all looked alike from the outside, and, when it was possible to enter a doorless doorway or peek through a sashless window-hole, the inside showed a muddy dirt floor, a clutter of rotting boards that might once have been furniture, and a few plastic or aluminum leavings of intruders like themselves.

Vivian could see he was unconvinced. “The way they use the language,” she insisted, “and leave little children to run their shops for them.”

“Wonderful,” he agreed again. He was sitting with his, he hoped, not ridiculously much younger wife in the lounge of their hotel, before a flickering blue fire that was either a gas imitation of a peat fire or the real thing, Allenson wasn’t sure. A glass of whiskey whose one ice cube had melted away added to his natural sleepiness. He had driven them around the Dingle Peninsula today in a foggy rain, and then south to Kenmare over a narrow mountain road from Killarney, Vivian screaming with anxiety all the way, and it had left him exhausted. After a vacation in Italy two years ago, he had vowed never to rent a foreign car with her again, but he had, in a place with narrower roads and left-handed drive. During the trickiest stretch today, over fabled Moll’s Gap, with a Mercedes full of gesturing Germans pushing him from behind, Vivian had twisted in her seat and pressed her face against the headrest rather than look, and sobbed and called him a sadistic fiend.

Afterwards, safely delivered to the hotel parking lot, she complained that she had twisted so violently her lower back hurt. What he resented most about her attacks of hysteria was how, when she recovered from them, she expected him to have recovered, too. For all her feminism she still claimed the feminine right to meaningless storms of emotion, followed by the automatic sunshine of male forgiveness.

As if sensing the sulky residue of a grudge within him, and determined to erase it, she flashed there by the sluggish fire an impeccable smile. Her lips were long and mobile but thin and sharp, as if—it seemed to him in his drowsy condition, by the gassy flickering fire—her eyebrows had been duplicated and sewn together at the ends to make a mouth. “Remember,” she said, offering to make a memory of what had occurred mere hours ago, “the lady shopkeeper out there beyond Dingle, where I begged you to stop?”

“You in*sis*ted I stop,” he corrected. She had said that if he didn’t admit he was lost she would jump out of the car and walk back. How could they be lost, he had argued, with the sea on their left and hills on their right? But the sea was obscured by fog and the stony hills vanished upward into rain clouds and she was not persuaded; at last he had slammed on the brakes. Both of them had flounced out of the car. The dim-lit store looked empty, and they had been about to turn away from the door when a shadow materialized within, beyond the lace curtains—the proprietress, emerging from a room where she lived, waiting, rocking perhaps, watching what meagre channels of television reached this remoteness. He had been surprised, in southwestern Ireland, by how little television there was to watch, and by the sound of Gaelic being spoken all about him, in shops and pubs, by the young as well as the old. It was part of his own provincialism to be surprised by the provincialism of others; he expected America, its language and all its channels, to be everywhere by now.

This was indeed a store; its shadowy shelves held goods in cans and polyethylene packets, and a cloudy case held candies and newspapers bearing today’s date. But it was hard for the Allensons to see it as anything but a stage cleverly set for their entrance and exit. The village around them seemed deserted. The proprietress—her hair knotted straight back, her straight figure clad in a dress of nunnish gray—felt younger than she looked, like an actress tricked out in bifocals and a gray wig, and she described the local turnings as if in all her years on a cliff above the sea she had never before been asked to direct a pair of tourists. There was a grave ceremoniousness to the occasion that chastened the fractious couple. To pay her for her trouble, they bought a copy of the local newspaper and some bags of candy. In Ireland, they had reverted to candy, which they ate in the car—Licorice Allsorts for him, for her chocolate-covered malt balls called Maltesers.

They had got back into the car enhanced by the encounter, the irritating currents between them momentarily quelled. Yet, even so, for all those theatrically precise directions, Allenson must have taken a wrong turning, for they never passed the Gallarus Oratory, which he had wanted to see. It was the Chartres of beehive chapels. In Ireland, the sights were mostly stones. Allenson found himself driving endlessly upward on the north side of the Dingle Peninsula, and needing to traverse the Slieve Mish Mountains to avoid Tralee, and being tailgated by the Germans on Moll’s Gap, while Vivian had hysterics and he reflected upon the gaps between people, even those consecrated to intimacy.

He had had three wives. He had meant Vivian to see him into the grave, but unexpected resistances in her were stimulating, rather than lulling, his will to live. In his simple and innocent manhood he had taken on a swarming host of sexist resentments—men were incompetent (his driving in foreign lands), men were ridiculous (his desire to see, *faute de mieux*, old Ireland’s lichened gray beehive huts, dolmens, menhirs, and ruined abbeys), men were lethal. Two years ago, out of sheer political superstition, this youthful wife had become furious in Gabriele D’Annunzio’s estate above Lake Garda, all because the world-renowned poet and adventurer had enshrined himself and his thirteen loyal followers in matching sarcophagi, lifted up to the sun on pillars. Men were Fascists, this had led Vivian to realize. She proved to be violently allergic to history, and her silver-haired husband loomed to her as history’s bearer. So he had, for their next trip abroad, suggested Eire, a land whose history was muffled in legend and ignominy. Just its shape on the map, next to Great Britain’s spiky upstanding silhouette, suggested the huddled roundness of a docile spouse.

“You insisted,” he repeated, “and then we got lost anyway, and saw none of the sights. I missed the Gallarus Oratory.”

Vivian brushed his resentful memory away, there by the hotel fire. “The whole countryside is the sight,” she said, “and the wonderful people. Everybody knows that. And all day, with you jerking that poor Japanese compact this way and that like a crazy teenaged hood, I couldn’t enjoy looking out. If I take my eye off the map for an instant, you get us lost. You’re not getting me back into that car tomorrow, I tell you that.”

Itching to give the fire a poke, he gave it to her instead. “Darling, I thought we were going to drive south, to Bantry and Skibbereen. Bantry House in the morning, and Creagh Gardens in the afternoon, with a quick lunch at Ballydehob.” Allenson smiled.

“You’re a monster,” Vivian said cheerfully. “You really would put me through a whole day of you at the wheel on these awful roads? We’re going to *walk*.”

“Walk?”

“George, I talked it over with a man in the office, the assistant manager, while you were putting on a shirt and tie. He couldn’t have been sweeter, and said what the tourists do in Kenmare is they take walks. He gave me a map.”

“A map?” Another whiskey would sink him to the bottom of the sea. But would that be so bad? This woman was a talking nightmare. She had produced a little map, printed by photocopy on green paper, showing a pattern of numbered lines surrounding the phallic thrust of the Kenmare estuary. “I’ve come all this way to take a walk?” But there was no arguing. Vivian was so irrational that, because her predecessor wife had been called Claire, she had refused, planning the trip, to include County Clare, where the good cliffs and primitive churches were, and off whose shore part of the Spanish Armada had wrecked.

Next morning, the devil in him, prompted by the guidebook, could not resist teasing her. “Today’s the day,” he announced, “to drive the Ring of Beara. We can see the Ogham Stone at Ballycrovane, and if there’s time take the cable car to Dursey Island, the only such wonder in this green and wondrous land. The blessed roadway meanders, it says here, through mountainous coastal areas providing panoramic views of both Bantry and Kenmare bays. A famous stone circle there is, and just two miles further, the ruins of Puxley’s mansion! A mere hundred and forty kilometers, the entire ring is claimed to be; that’s eighty-eight miles of purest pleasure, not counting the cable car.”

“You must be out of your gourd,” Vivian said, using one of those youthful slang expressions that she knew he detested. “I’m not getting back into any car with you at the wheel until we head to Shannon Airport. If then.”

Allenson shrugged to hide his hurt. “Well, we could walk downtown to the local circle again. I’m not sure I grasped all the nuances the first time.”

It had been charming, in a way. They had driven up a little cul-de-sac at the shabbier end of Kenmare and a small girl in a school jumper had been pushed from a house, while her mother and siblings watched from the window, and shyly asked for the fifty-pence admission. Then through a swinging gate and up a muddy lane the couple had walked, past stacks of roof tiles and a ditch brimming with plastic trash, arriving at a small mown plateau where fifteen mismatched stones in a rough circle held their mute pattern. He had paced among them, trying to unearth in his atavistic heart the meaning of these pre-Celtic stones. Sacrifice. This must have been, at certain moments of heavenly alignment, a place of sacrifice, he thought, turning to see Vivian standing at the ring’s center in too vividly blue a raincoat.

“We’re walking,” she agreed with him, “but not back to those awful rocks that got you so excited, I’ll never know why. It’s *stupid* to keep looking at rocks somebody could have arranged yesterday for all we know. There are more of these supposedly prehistoric beehive huts today than there were a hundred years ago, the nice young man in the office was telling me yesterday. He says what sensible people who come to Kenmare do is take long walks.”

“Who is this guy, that he’s become so fucking big in my life suddenly? Why doesn’t *he* take you for the walk, if that’s what’s on his mind?”

Did she blush? “George, *really*—he’s young enough to be my son.” This was an awkward assertion, made in the sweep of the moment. She could be the mother of a twenty-one-year-old, if she had been pregnant at nineteen; but in truth she had never borne a child, and when they were first married, and she was in her mid-thirties, she had hoped to have a child by him. But he had ogreishly refused; he had had enough children—a daughter by Jeaneanne, two sons by Claire. Now the possibility had slipped away. He thought of his present wife as racily younger than himself but her fortieth birthday had come and gone, and since the days when they had surreptitiously courted, in the flattering shadows of Claire’s unknowing, Vivian’s face had grown angular and incised with lines of recurrent vexation.

The young man in the office—a kind of rabbit hole around the corner from the key rack, in which the Irish staff could be heard scuffling and guffawing—was at least twenty-five, and may have been thirty, with children of his own. He was slender, black-eyed, milky-skinned, and impeccably courteous. Yet his courtesy carried a charge, a lilt, of mischief. “Yes, and walking is the thing in these parts—we’re not much for the organized sports that are the custom in the States.”

“We passed some golf courses, driving here,” Allenson said, not really wanting to argue.

“Would you call golf organized?” the assistant manager said quickly. “Not the way I play it, I fear. As we say, it’s an ungrateful way to take a walk.”

“Speaking of walks—” Vivian produced her little green map. “Which of these would you recommend for my husband and me?”

With his bright-black eyes he looked from one to the other and then settled on looking at her, with a cock to his neatly combed head. “And how hardy a man would he be?”

Wifely to a fault, Vivian took the question seriously. “Well, his driving is erratic, but other than that he manages pretty well.”

Allenson resented this discussion. “The last time I saw my doctor,” he announced, “he told me I had beautiful arteries.”

“Ah, I would have guessed as much,” said the young man, looking him benignly in the face.

“We don’t want to start him out on anything too steep,” Vivian said.

“Currabeg might be your best option, then. It’s mostly on the level road, with fine views of the Roughty Valley and the bay. Take an umbrella against the mist, along with your fine blue coat, and if he happens to begin to look poorly in the face you might hail a passing motorcar to bring in the remains.”

“Are we going to be walking in traffic?” She sounded alarmed. For all her assertiveness, Vivian had irritating pockets of timidity. Claire, Allenson remembered, drove on a motor scooter all over Bermuda with him, clinging to his midriff trustfully, twenty years ago, and would race with the children on bicycles all over Nantucket. Jeaneanne and he had owned a Ford Thunderbird convertible when they lived in Texas, and would commonly hit a hundred miles an hour in the stretch between Lubbock and Abilene, the top down and the dips in Route 84 full of watery mirages. He remembered how her hair, bleached blond in Fifties-style streaks, would whip back from her sweaty temples, and how she would hike her skirt up to her waist to give her crotch air, there under the steering wheel. Jeaneanne had been tough, but her exudations had been nectar, until her recklessness and love of speed had carried her right out of Allenson’s life. The loss had hardened him.

The assistant manager appeared to give Vivian’s anxiety his solemn consideration; there was, in his second of feigned thought, that ceremonious touch of parody with which the Irish bring music to the most factual transactions. “Oh, I judge this off-time of year there won’t be enough to interfere with your easiness. These are high country roads. You park at the crossing, as the map shows clearly, and take the two rights to bring you back.”

Still, Allenson felt, their adviser felt some politely unspoken reservation about their undertaking. In their rented car, with its mirrors where you didn’t expect them and a balky jumble of gears on the floor, while Vivian transparently tried to hold her tongue from criticism, he drove them out of Kenmare, past a cemetery containing famous holy wells, over a one-lane hump of a stone bridge, up between occluding hedgerows into the bare hills whose silhouettes, in the view from the Allensons’ hotel room, were doubled by the mirroring sheen of the lakelike estuary. They met no other cars, so Vivian had less need to tense up than on the ring roads.

The map in her lap, she announced at last, “This must be the crossroads.” A modest intersection, with barely enough parking space for one car on the dirt shoulder. They parked in the space and locked the car. It was the middle of a morning of watery wan sunshine. A bite in the breeze told them they were higher than in Kenmare.

On foot they followed a long straight road, not as long and shimmering as the straightaways in Texas, yet with something of the same potential for mirage. They crossed a stream hidden but for its gurgle in the greenery. A house being built, or rebuilt, stood back and up from the road, with no sign of life. Land and houses must be cheap. Ireland had been emptying out for ages. Cromwell had reduced the Irish to half a million, but they had stubbornly bred back, only to be decimated by the potato famine two centuries later.

At first, Vivian athletically strode ahead, hungry for hovels and unspoiled views. She had brought new running shoes on the trip—snow-white, red-chevroned, bulky with the newest wrinkles of pedal technology. They were not flattering, but, then, compared with Jeaneanne’s, this wife’s ankles were rather thick. Her feet looked silly, under the hem of her bright-blue raincoat, flickering along the road surface, striped like birds. Where were the real birds? Ireland didn’t seem to have many. Perhaps they had migrated with the people. Famines are hard on birds, but that had been long ago.

The hedgerows thinned, and after the invisible stream the road had a steady upward trend. He found himself overtaking his young wife, and then slowing his pace to match hers. “You know,” she told him, “I really *did* twist my back in the car yesterday, and these new sneakers aren’t all they were advertised. They have so much structure inside, my feet feel bullied. It’s as if they keep pushing my hips out of alignment.”

“Well,” he said, “you could go barefoot.” Jeaneanne would have. Claire might have. “Or we could go back to the car. We’ve gone less than a mile.”

“That’s all? I wouldn’t *dream* of telling them at the hotel that we couldn’t do their walk. This must be the first right turn already, coming up.”

The T-crossing was unmarked. He looked at the green map and wished it weren’t quite so schematic. “This must be it,” he agreed, uncertainly, and up the road they went.

A smaller road, it continued the upward trend, through emptier terrain. Irish emptiness had a quality different from that of Texas emptiness, or that of the Scots Highlands, where he and Claire had once toured. The desolation here was intimate. Domes of stone-littered grass formed a high horizon, under roiling clouds with blackish centers. There was little color in anything; he had expected greener grass, bluer sky. The landscape wore the dull, chastened colors of the people in the towns. It was a shy, unassuming sort of desolation. “I suppose,” Allenson said, to break the silence of their laborious walking, “all this was once full of farms.”

“I haven’t seen a single hovel,” Vivian said, with a querulousness he blamed on her back.

“Some of these heaps of stones—it’s hard to tell if man or God, so to speak, put them there.” Jeaneanne had been a liberated Baptist, Claire a practicing Episcopalian. Vivian was from a determinedly unchurched family of ex-Catholic scientists whose treeless Christmases and thankless Thanksgivings Allenson found chilling. Strange, he thought as he walked along, he had never had a Jewish wife, though Jewish women had been his best lovers—the warmest, the cleverest.

“It said in the guidebook that even up in the hills you could see the green places left by the old potato patches but I haven’t seen a single one,” Vivian complained.

Time passed wordlessly, since he declined to answer. He hadn’t written the guidebook. The soles of their feet slithered and scratched.

Allenson cleared his throat and said, “You can see why Beckett wrote the way he did.” He had lost track of how long their forward-plodding silence had stretched; his voice felt rusty. “There’s an amazing amount of nothingness in the Irish landscape.” On cue, a gap in the clouds sent a silvery light scudding across the tops of the dull hills slowly drawing closer.

“I *know* this isn’t the road,” Vivian said. “We haven’t seen a sign, a house, a car, anything.” She sounded near tears.

“But we’ve seen *sheep*,” he said, with an enthusiasm that was becoming cruel. “Hundreds of them.”

It was true. Paler than boulders but no less opaque, scattered sheep populated the wide fields that unrolled on both sides of the road. With their rectangular purple pupils the animals stared in profile at the couple. Sometimes an especially buoyant ram, his chest powdered a startling turquoise or magenta color, dashed back among the ewes at the approach of these human intruders. Single strands of barbed wire reinforced the stone walls and rotting fences of an older pastoralism. Only these wires, and the pine poles bearing wires overhead, testified that twentieth-century people had been here before them. The land dipped and crested; each new rise revealed more sheep, more stones, more road. A cloud with an especially large leaden center darkened this lunar landscape and rained a few drops; by the time Vivian had put up their umbrella, the sprinkle had passed. Allenson looked around for a rainbow, but it eluded his vision, like the leprechauns promised yesterday at Moll’s Gap, in the droll roadside sign LEPRECHAUN CROSSING.

“Where *is* that second right turn?” Vivian asked. “Give me back the map.”

“The map tells us nothing,” he said. “The way it’s drawn it looks like we’re walking around a city block.”

“I *knew* this was the wrong road, I don’t know *why* I let you talk me into it. We’ve gone miles. My back is killing me, damn you. I *hate* these bossy, clunky running shoes.”

“You picked them out,” he reminded her. “And they were far from cheap.” Trying to recover a little kindness, Allenson went on, “The total walk is four and a half miles. Americans have lost all sense of how long a mile is. They think it’s a minute of sitting in a car.” Or less, if Jeaneanne were driving, her skirt tucked up to air her crotch.

“Don’t be so pedantic,” Vivian told him. “I hate men. They grab the map out of your hands and never ask directions and then refuse to admit they’re lost.”

“Whom, my dear, would we have asked directions of? We haven’t seen a soul. The last soul we saw was your cow-eyed pal at the hotel. I can hear him now, talking to the police. ‘Ah, the American couple,’ he’ll be saying. ‘She a mere raven-haired colleen, and he a grizzly old fella. They were headin’ for the McGillycuddy Reeks, wi’ scarcely a cup of poteen or a pig’s plump knuckle in their knapsacks.’ ”

“Not funny,” she said, in a new, on-the-edge voice. Without his noticing it, she had become frantic. There was a silvery light in her dark eyes, tears. “I can’t walk another step,” she announced. “I can’t and I won’t.”

“Here,” he said, pointing out a convenient large stone in the wall at the side of the road. “Rest a bit.”

She sat and repeated, as if proudly, “I will not go another step. I can’t, George. I’m in agony.” She flipped back her bandanna with a decisive gesture, but the effect was not the same as Jeaneanne’s gold-streaked hair whipping back in the convertible. Vivian looked old, worn. Lamed.

“What do you want me to do? Walk back and bring the car?” He meant the offer to be absurd, but she didn’t reject it, merely thinned her lips and stared at him angrily, defiantly.

“You’ve got us lost and won’t admit it. I’m not walking another step.”

He pictured it, her never moving. Her body would weaken and die within a week; her skin and bones would be washed by the weather and blend into the earth like the corpse of a stillborn lamb. Only the sheep would witness it. Only the sheep were watching them now, with the sides of their heads. Allenson turned his own head away, gazing up the road, so Vivian wouldn’t see the calm mercilessness in his face.

“Darling, look,” he said, after a moment. “Way up the road, see the way the line of telephone poles turns? I bet that’s the second right turn. We’re on the map!”

“I don’t see anything turning,” Vivian said, but in a voice that wanted to be persuaded.

“Just under the silhouette of the second little hill. Follow the road with your eyes, darling.” Allenson was feeling abnormally tall, as if his vision of Vivian stuck in the Irish landscape forever had a centrifugal force, spilling him outward, into a fresh future, toward yet another wife. What would she be like, this fourth Mrs. Allenson? Jewish, with a rapid, humorous tongue and heavy hips and clattering bracelets on her sweetly hairy forearms? Black, a stately fashion model whom he would rescue from her cocaine habit? A little Japanese, silken and fiery within her kimono? Or perhaps one of his old mistresses, whom he couldn’t marry at the time, but whose love had never lessened and who was miraculously unaged? Still, in a kind of social inertia, he kept pleading with Vivian. “If there’s no right turn up there, then you can sit down on a rock and I’ll walk back for the car.”

“How can you walk back?” she despairingly asked. “It’ll take forever.”

“I won’t walk, I’ll run,” he promised. “I’ll trot.”

“You’ll have a heart attack.”

“What do you care? One male killer less in the world. One less splash of testosterone.” Death, the thought of either of their deaths, felt exalting, in this green-gray landscape emptied by famine and English savagery. British soldiers, he had read, would break the roofbeams of the starving natives’ cottages and ignite the thatch.

“I care,” Vivian said. She sounded subdued. Seated on her stone, she looked prim and hopeful, a wallflower waiting to be asked to dance.

He asked, “How’s your back?”

“I’ll stand and see,” she said.

Her figure, he noticed when she stood, had broadened since he first knew her—thicker in the waist and ankles, chunky like her aggravating shoes. And developing a bad back besides. As if she were hurrying to catch up to him in the aging process. She took a few experimental steps, on the narrow macadam road built, it seemed, solely for the Allensons’ pilgrimage.

“Let’s go,” she said combatively. She added, “I’m doing this just to prove you’re wrong.”

But he was right. The road branched; the thinner piece of it continued straight, over the little hill, and the thicker turned right, with the wooden power poles. Parallel to the rocky crests on the left, with a view of valley on the right, the road went up and down in an animated, diverting way, and took them past houses now and then, and small plowed areas to vary the stony pastures. “You think those are potato patches?” he asked. He felt sheepish, wondered how many of his murderous thoughts she had read. His vision of her sitting there, as good as a corpse, kept widening its rings in his mind, like a stone dropped in black water. The momentary ecstasy of a stone smartly applied to her skull, or a piece of flint sharp as a knife whipped across her throat—had these visions been his, back in that Biblical wilderness?

Now, on the higher, winding road, a car passed them, and then another. It was Sunday morning, and unsmiling country families were driving to mass. Their faces were less friendly than those of the shopkeepers in Kenmare; no waves were offered, or invitations to ride. Once, on a blind curve, the couple had to jump to the grassy shoulder to avoid being hit. Vivian seemed quite agile, in the pinch.

“How’s your poor back holding up?” he asked. “Your sneakers still pushing your hips around?”

“I’m better,” she said, “when I don’t think about it.”

“Oh. Sorry.”

He should have let her have a baby. Now it was too late. Still, he wasn’t sorry. Life was complicated enough.

The road turned the third right on their map gradually, unmistakably, while several gravelled driveways led off into the hills. Though Kenmare Bay gleamed ahead of them, a tongue of silver in the smoky distance, they were still being carried upward, dipping and turning, ever closer to the rocky crests, which were becoming dramatic. The sheep, now, seemed to be unfenced; a ram with a crimson chest skittered down a rock face and across the road, spilling scree with its hooves. In what could have been another nation, so far away it now appeared, a line of minuscule telephone poles marked the straight road where Vivian had announced she would not move another step. Overhead, faint whistling signalled a hawk—a pair of hawks, drifting motionless near the highest face of rock, hanging in a wind the Allensons could not feel. Their thin hesitant cry felt forgiving to Allenson, as did Vivian’s voice announcing, “Now I have this killing need to pee.”

“Go ahead.”

“Suppose a car comes?”

“It won’t. They’re all in church now.”

“There’s no place to go behind anything,” she complained.

“Just squat down beside the road. My goodness, what a little fussbudget.”

“I’ll lose my balance.” He had noticed on other occasions, on ice or on heights, how precarious her sense of balance was.

“No you won’t. Here. Give me your hand and prop yourself against my leg. Just don’t pee on my shoe.”

“Or on my own,” she said, letting herself be lowered into a squatting position.

“It might soften them up,” he said.

“Don’t make me laugh. I’ll get urinary impotence.” It was a concept of Nabokov’s, out of *Pale Fire*, that they both had admired, in the days when their courtship had tentatively proceeded through the socially acceptable sharing of books. She managed. In Ireland’s great silence of abandonment the tender splashing sound seemed loud. *Pssshshshblipip*. Allenson looked up to see if the hawks were watching. Hawks could read a newspaper, he had once read, from the height of a mile. But what would they make of it? The headlines, the halftones? Who could know what a hawk saw? Or a sheep? They saw only what they needed to see. A tuft of edible grass, or the twitch of a vole scurrying for cover.

Vivian stood, pulling up over the quick-glimpsed thicket of her pubic hair her underpants and pantyhose. A powerful ammoniac scent followed her up, rising invisible from the roadside turf. *Oh, let’s have a baby*, he thought, but left the inner cry unexpressed. Too late, too old. The couple moved on, numbed by the miles that had passed beneath their feet. They reached the road’s highest point, and saw far below, as small as an orange star, their Eurodollar Toyota compact, parked at a tilt on the shoulder of their first crossroads. As they descended to it, Vivian asked, “Would Jeaneanne have enjoyed Ireland?”

What an effort it now seemed, to cast his mind so far back! “Jeaneanne,” he answered, “enjoyed everything, for the first seven minutes. Then she got bored. What made you think of Jeaneanne?”

“You. Your face when we started out had its Jeaneanne look. Which is different from its Claire look. Your Claire look is sort of woebegone. Your Jeaneanne look is fierce.”

“Darling,” he told her. “You’re fantasizing.”

“Jeaneanne and you were so young,” she pursued. “At the age I was just entering graduate school, you and she were married, with a child.”

“We had that Fifties greed. We thought we could have it all,” he said, rather absently, trying to agree. His own feet in their much-used cordovans were beginning to protest; walking downhill, surprisingly, was the most difficult.

“You still do. You haven’t asked me if *I* like Ireland. The Becketty nothingness of it.”

“Do you?” he asked.

“I do,” she said.

They were back where they had started.