# More Stately Mansions

# John Updike

Its webs of living gauze no more unfurl;

     Wrecked is the ship of pearl!

     And every chambered cell,

Where its dim dreaming life was wont to dwell,

As the frail tenant shaped his growing shell,

     Before thee lies revealed,—

Its irised ceiling rent, its sunless crypt unsealed!

*—Oliver Wendell Holmes*,

*“The Chambered Nautilus”*

ONE OF MY STUDENTS the other day brought into class a nautilus shell that had been sliced down the middle to make a souvenir from Hawaii. That’s how far some of these kids’ parents get on vacation, though from the look of the city (Mather, Massachusetts; population 47,000 and falling) you wouldn’t think there was any money in town at all.

I held the souvenir in my hand, marvelling at the mathematics of it—the perfect logarithmic spiral and the parade of increasing chambers, each sealed with a translucent, curved septum. I held the shell up to show the class. “What the poem doesn’t tell you,” I told them, “is that the nautilus is a nasty, hungry blob that uses its outgrown chambers as propulsion tanks to maneuver up and down as it chases its prey. It’s a killer.”

I sounded sore; the students stared, those that had been listening. They know your insides better than you do, often. The shell had reminded me of Karen. Karen Owens, former wife of the late Alan. She had loved Nature—its fervent little intricacies, all its pretty little survival kits and sexy signallings. There was a sheen to the white-and-pale-orange nacre, here in the staring light of the tall classroom windows, that was hers. As I diagrammed on the blackboard the spiral, and some up and down arrows, and the dainty siphuncle whereby the nautilus performs its predatory hydrostatic magic, I was remembering how she, to arouse me in the brightness of the big spare bedroom at the back of her house, would softly drag her pale-orange hair and her small white breasts across my penis.

Arousal wasn’t always instant; I would be nervous, sweaty, guilty, stealing time from the lunch hour or even—so urgent did it all seem—ducking out of the school in a free period (classes run fifty minutes in our system) to drive across town to spend twenty minutes with her and then drive the fifteen minutes back again, screeching that old Falcon Monica’s parents had given us into the high-school parking lot under the eyes of the kids loafing and sneaking cigarettes out by the bike racks. They may have wondered, but teachers come and go; kids have no idea what it takes or doesn’t take to keep the world running, and though studying us is one of their main ways of using up energy, they can’t really believe the abyss that adult life is: that what they dream, we do. They couldn’t know, no matter what their lavatory walls said, that Karen’s musk was really on my fingertips and face and that behind my fly lurked a pearly ache of satisfaction.

She and Alan lived in the Elm Hill section, where the mill-owners and their managers had built big Victorian clapboard houses. The high school, new in 1950, had been laid out on an old farm on the other side of the river. With less than the whole dying downtown between us, we might have had time to share a cigarette afterwards or talk, so that I might have come to understand better what our affair meant from her side, what she was getting out of it and where she saw it going. My father had worked in those empty mills. He had me late in life and had coughed and drunk himself to death by the time I was twenty, and a kind of rage at the mills and him and all of Mather would come over me when, in a panic to be back to my next class, I would get stuck in the overshadowed streets down in the factory district. The city fathers had made them all one-way in some hopeless redevelopment scheme.

My grandfather came over from Italy to help build those mills, brick by brick. My oldest brother is a former auto mechanic who now owns a one-third share in a parts-and-supplies store and never touches a tool except to sell it. Our middle brother sells real estate. They had me set to become a Boston doctor, but with the lint’s getting my father’s lungs so early I was lucky to get through college. I picked up the education credits and an easy master’s and now teach general science to ninth- and tenth-graders. A while ago I was made assistant principal, which means two classes a day less and afternoons in the office. I had hoped originally to get out of Mather, but here is where our connections were—my father’s old foreman was on the school board when they hired me—so here I still am. Fall is our best season, and in recent years some high-tech has overflowed Route 128 and come into the local economy, giving it a shot in the arm. It needs it. But cities aren’t like people; they live on and on, even though their reason for being where they are has gone downriver and out to sea.

Alan’s father, old Jake Owens, had owned Pilgrim, one of the smaller mills and about the last along the river to close down. That was the late Forties, long after the bigger outfits had all sold their machinery south. Some in town said Jake showed a touching loyalty to Mather and its workers; others said the Owenses never had had much head for business. They were drinking and shooting men, with a notion of themselves as squires, at home in their little piece of industrial valley with its country club, its Owens Avenue, its hunting and skiing an hour or two north in New Hampshire. When his father died in the mid-Sixties, Alan came home from the West Coast with his Stanford law degree and his red-haired wife.

Karen was from Santa Barbara, thirtyish, pretty, but parched somehow. All that Pacific sun was beginning to produce crow’s-feet and little creases fanning out from her quick, maybe too quick, smile. She was small, with a tight cute figure that had been on a lot of beaches. She had majored in psychology and had a California teacher’s certificate and put her name in at the high-school office as a substitute. That was where I first saw her, striding along our noisy halls, her hair bouncing between her shoulder blades. She was no taller than many of the girls but different from them, a different animal, with the whippy body and seasoned voice of a woman.

When we did talk, Karen and I, it was out in the open, on opposite sides of the fence, about the war. There was a condescending certainty about her pacifism that infuriated me, and a casual, bright edge of militance that possibly frightened me. I can’t imagine now why I imagined then that the U.S.A. couldn’t take care of itself. I felt so damn motherly toward, of all people, LBJ. He looked so hangdog, even if he was a bully.

“Why do you talk of people being *for* the war?” I would ask Karen in the teachers’ room, amid the cigarette smoke and between-the-acts euphoria of teachers offstage for fifty minutes. “It puts you people in such a smug no-lose position, being not for the war. Nobody’s for any war, in the abstract; it’s just sometimes judged to be the least of available evils.”

“When is it the least?” she asked. “Tell me, Frank.” She had a tense way of intertwining her crossed legs with the legs of the straight wooden school chair so that her kneecaps jutted out, rimmed in white. This was the heyday of the mini-skirt; female underpants, sure to be seen, had sprouted patterns of flowers. When she crossed her legs like that, her skirt slid up to reveal an oval vaccination scar her childhood doctor had never thought would show. There were a number of awkward, likable things about Karen in spite of the smug politics: she smoked a lot, and her teeth were stained and slightly crooked, in an era of universal orthodontia. Her hands had the rising blue veins of middle age, and a tremor. I loved the expensive clothes that what with the Owens money she couldn’t help but wear. Though her sweaters were cashmere, they always looked tugged slightly awry, so that a background of haste and distress seemed to lie invitingly behind her smooth public pose.

“Maybe you don’t realize the kind of town you’ve moved to,” I told her. “The VFW is where we have our Saturday dances. Our kids aren’t pouring pig blood into draft-board files. Their grandparents were damn glad to get here, and when their country asks them to go fight, they go. They’re scared, but they go.”

“Why does that make it right?” Karen asked gently. “Explain it to me.” The old psychology major. She was giving up the debate and babying me, as a kind of crazy man.

Her hair in its long brushed flower-child fall was not exactly either orange or red, it was the deep flesh color of a whelk shell’s lip; and the more you looked, the more freckles she had. She was giving me an out, of sorts—a chance to shift out of this angry gear that discussion of the war always shoved me into. LBJ had been a schoolteacher, as I was now, and it seemed to me that the entire class, from coast to coast, just wasn’t *listening*. And he was trying to be so good, so suffering-on-our-behalf—our crooked Christ from Texas.

“It just *does*,” I told Karen, in my very lameness accepting her offer, surrendering. “I love these kids.” This was a lie. “I grew up just like them.” This was half a lie; I had been much the youngest child, pampered by my brothers, prepared for something better, out of Mather. “They give us great football teams.” This was the truth.

The peace movement in Mather amounted to a few candle-bearing parades led by the local clergy, the same clergymen who would invoke the blessings on Memorial Day before the twenty-one-gun salute shattered the peace of the cemetery. When the first local boy died in Vietnam, he got a new elementary school named after him. When the second died, they took a street intersection in his part of town, called it a square, and named it after him. For the third and the fourth, there wasn’t even an intersection.

The Owenses’ house on the hill had a big living room overlooking the city through tall, proprietorial windows. It had walnut wainscoting and a maze of ball-and-stick woodwork above the entranceways; the room could easily hold meetings of fifty or sixty, and did. At Karen’s invitation, black men imported from Roxbury spoke here, and white women imported from Cambridge. Civil rights and feminism and the perfidy of the Pentagon and the scheming, polluting corporations had become one big all-purpose issue, and the Owenses had become the local chieftains of discontent, at least in the little circle Monica and I were drawn into. CMC, we called ourselves: Concerned Mather Citizens.

Monica and I had both been raised Catholic. I let it go in about my sophomore year of college, when my father died, but Monica kept it up until she went on the Pill. Our three children had been born in the first four years of our marriage. At first she attended Mass, though she couldn’t take Communion; then she stopped even that. I was sorry to see it—it had been a part of her I had understood—and to hear her talk about the Church with such bitterness. That’s how women can be, mulling something over and getting madder and madder about it, all in secret, and then making a sudden quantum jump: revolutionaries. My impression was that Karen had courted Monica at the teachers’ Christmas party, asking her to come over during the holidays and help address circulars. Monica jumped right in. She stopped getting perms and painting her fingernails. She pulled her springy black hair back into a ponytail and wore sneakers and jeans not only around the house but out to shop. She stopped struggling against her weight. Monica bloomed, I suppose; she had been a jock at Mather High (field hockey, girls’ basketball) and a cheerleader, and now, fifteen years later and fifteen pounds heavier, that old girlish push, that egging-on fierceness, had come back. I didn’t much like it but wasn’t consulted. Somehow in all this I had become the oppressor, part of “the system,” and the three children we had “given” each other, as they used to say, had been some kind of dirty trick. She said the Pill was carcinogenic and I should get a vasectomy. I told her to go get her tubes tied if she was into mutilation and she said that was what Karen Owens had advised. I asked angrily, hungrily, if Karen Owens’s tubes were tied and Monica replied with a certain complacence that, no, that wasn’t the reason Karen and Alan didn’t have children; she knew that much, and knew I’d be interested. I ignored the innuendo, excited to think of Karen in this way and alarmed by Monica’s tone. It was one thing to stop going to Mass—after all, the Church had betrayed *us*, taking away Latin and Saint Christopher and fish on Friday—but this was beginning to feel evil.

Still, I went to the meetings with her, across town through the factory district and up Elm Hill. Support the Blacks, Stop the War, Save Ecology—Karen often sat up beside the speaker, entwining her legs with the chair legs so her kneecaps made white squares and, in a kind of V for Victory, resting the tips of her middle and index fingers at the corners of her lips, as if enjoining herself not to say too much. When she did talk, she would keep tucking her hair behind her ears, a gesture I came later to associate with our lovemaking. Sometimes she laughed, showing her engagingly imperfect teeth. She hadn’t been born rich, I deduced.

Alan would sit in one of the back rows of the chairs they had assembled, looking surly and superior, already by that time of evening stupid with booze but backing her up in his supercilious deep voice when she needed it. As a lawyer in town he had already taken on enough fair-housing and draft-resistance cases to hurt his practice with the people who could pay. It was hard to know how unhappy this made him; it was hard to decipher what he saw, slumped down in the back, watching with sleepy eyes. He had great long lashes, and hardly any eyebrows, and a high, balding forehead sunburned in summer.

I disliked him. He took up my oxygen when he was in the room. He was tall, tall as the rich get, plants with no weeds around them. When he looked down at me, it wasn’t as if he didn’t see me, he saw me too well; his eyes—with their lashes like an ostrich’s and a yellowish cast to the whites—flicked through and away, having taken it all in and been instantly bored. Whatever had happened to him out there on the West Coast, it had left him wise in a way that made the world no longer very useful to him. Yet he also had Karen, and this Victorian mansion, and golf clubs and shotguns and tennis presses in the closets, and his father’s deer heads in the library, and a name in the town that would still be worth something when this war and its protest had blown over.

In fairness, Alan could be entertaining, if he hadn’t drunk too much. After the meetings a favored few of us would stay to tidy up, and Alan might get out his banjo and play. As a teenager, off at private schools since he was eleven, he had been a bluegrass freak and had taught himself this lonely music, fashionable then. When he got going, cracking his voice and yowling, I would see green hills, and a lone hawk soaring, and the mouths of coal mines, and feel so patriotic that tears would sting my corneas; all the lovely country that had been in America would come rushing back, as it was before we filled the land too full. Tipping back his head to keen the hillbilly chorus, Alan exposed his skinny throat as if to be cut.

While Monica and I would sit enthralled, joining in on the choruses, Karen would keep moving about, picking up the glasses and ashtrays, her determined manner and small set smile implying that this was an act Alan saved for company. First it had been her turn to howl; now it was his. When his repertoire ran out, she took over again, organizing word games, or exercises to enhance our perceptions. She had brought these games and exercises from California. One Saturday night, I remember, all the women there hid behind a partition of blankets and extended one hand for the men to identify, and to my embarrassment I recognized Karen’s, its blue veins, and couldn’t find Monica’s—it was thicker and darker than it should have been, with a hairier wrist.

In many ways I did not recognize my wife. Her raised consciousness licensed her to drink too much, to stay up too late. She never wanted to go home. The Owenses, the times, had corrupted her. However my own heart was wandering, I wanted to have her at home, raising the children, keeping order against the day when all this disturbance, this reaching beyond ourselves, blew over. I had been attracted to what was placid in Monica, the touch of heaviness already there when she was seventeen, her young legs glossy and chunky in the white cheerleader socks. She had an athlete’s slow heartbeat and fell asleep early. When I came to sleep with Karen, in the bright back bedroom of her big ornate house, I had trouble accepting the twittery fervor she brought to acts that with Monica possessed a certain solemn weight, as of something yielded. Monica had once confessed to me that she held back out of dread of losing her identity in the sex act; Karen seemed to be pushing toward just such a loss. Her quick, dry lips, kissing mine for the first time in the hazardous privacy of the teachers’ room, took their style (it crossed my mind) from the adolescents thundering all around us. I couldn’t be worth, surely, quite such an agitation of lips and tongue, quite so hard a hug from this slender, overheated person, whose heart I could feel tripping against my own through my coat and shirt and tie, and the wool of her sweater, and the twin cages of our ribs. Even in this moment of first surrender I observed that the wool was cashmere. It crossed my mind that she had mistaken me for a stud, an obediently erect conscript from the working class. I was a little repelled by the something *schooled* in her embrace—something pre-readied and too good to be true. But in time I accepted this as simply her metabolism, her natural way. She was love-starved. So was I.

Days when she didn’t substitute became our days, set up with sweaty phone calls from the pay phone outside the cafeteria, which the kids had usually clogged with gum or clumsy slugs. The Owenses’ house backed up to some acres of woods that they owned. Bird-chirp and pine-scent would sift through her windows. The abundant light was almost pornographic; I was used to the uxorious dark. She kept an aquarium and a terrarium back here, to take advantage of the sun, and wildlife posters all around: *we* were wildlife, naked and endangered. The bestial efficiency of our encounters had to do for tenderness. She knew to the minute when I would arrive and was ready, clothes off and the phone off the hook. She knew to the minute when I must go. When one of my free periods backed onto the lunch hour, and we had more time, we wasted it in bickering. When LBJ announced he would not run, I told her this would bring in Nixon, and hoped she was happy. I taunted her with this while the happiness of our lovemaking was still in her eyes. She had light-hazel eyes that darkened when we made love. She had a way of looking me over, of examining me as reverently as she did the toad and garter snake in her terrarium, flicking back her hair to get a closer look, or to take me into her mouth. I, with my foreskin and sexual hunger and blue-collar resentments, was simply life to her, a kind of treasure.

And she to me? Heaven, of a sort. When I sneaked in the back, past the plastic trash cans smelling of Alan’s empties, Karen would be standing at the head of the back stairs like a bright, torn piece of sky. Up close, her body was a star map, her shoulders and shins crowded with freckles. Even those patches of skin shaped like the pieces of a bathing suit revealed to inspection a dark dot or two where the sun had somehow pricked.

“You really ought to go, darling,” she would soon say. More practiced than I (I hated to think this, but it must have been the case), Karen was the policeman of our affair. I began to feel disciplined, and to resent it.

At school, when she came to substitute, it drove me wild to see her in the halls, her red hair bouncing on her back, her whippy little body full of our secrets. The Movement was in the air even here now; our young Poles and Portuguese were no longer willing to be drafted unquestioningly, and the classes in government and history, even in general science, had become battlefields. At Columbia and in Paris that spring, students were rioting. Whole masses of rooted presumption were being torn up around me, but I no longer cared. I felt so foolishly proud, linking myself with Karen in those minutes between classes, in the massive shuffle smelling of perfume and chewing gum and bodily warmth.

She warned me: “I love your touch, but, Frank, you mustn’t touch me in public.”

“When did I?”

“Just now. In the hall.” We were in the teachers’ room. She had lit a cigarette. She seemed extra nervous, indignant.

“I wasn’t aware,” I told her. “I’m sure nobody noticed.”

“Don’t be stupid. The children notice everything.”

It was true. I had seen our names pencilled together, with the correct verb, on a lavatory wall. “You care?”

“Of course I care. So should you. We could both be hurt.”

“By whom? The school board? The American Legion? I thought the revolution was on and there was naked dancing in the streets. I’m all for it; watch.”

“*Frank*. Someone could come in that door any second.”

“We used to neck in here like mad.”

“That was before we had our days.”

“Our half-hours. I’m sick of rushing back to the table of elements in a post-coital coma.”

“You are?”

The fear in her face insulted me. “Yes,” I told her, “and I’m sick of the hypocrisy. I’m sick of insomnia. I can’t sleep anymore, I want you beside me. Only you. I thrash around, I take Sominex. Sometimes I cry, for a change of pace.”

She tucked her hair behind her ears. Her face looked narrow, its skin tight at the sides of her eyes, a glaze across the tiny wrinkles. “Has Monica noticed?”

“No, she slumbers on. Nothing wakes her up. Why? Has Alan noticed any difference in you?”

“No, and I don’t want him to.”

“You don’t? Why not?”

“Need you ask?” The sarcasm made her face look quite evil. There was a set of smug assumptions behind it that I hated.

My voice got loud. “You bet your sweet ass I need to ask.” I repeated, “Why the hell not?”

“*Shh*. He’s my husband, that’s why.”

“That seems simplistic. And rather reactionary, if I may say so.”

Betty Kurowski, first-year algebra and business math, opened the door, looked at our faces, and said, “Oh. Well, I’ll go smoke in the girls’ lavatory.” As she was closing the door we both begged her to come back.

“We were just arguing about Vietnam,” Karen told her. “Frank wants to bomb South China now.”

For summer employment, Monica and I were counselors at a day camp in New Hampshire, about forty minutes’ drive from Mather. As if this were not separation enough, Karen and Alan spent a month in Santa Barbara visiting her family. I had been wrong about her not being rich; the parents lived in a million-dollar house near the beach. She would wear a bikini all day long. At night, while Monica slept, I masturbated like a kid. Even during the day, amid the *plockety-pock* of table tennis and the shouts of horseplay from our little brown lake, I could not stop thinking of Karen—her freckled flesh, the sunlight in her room, the way she fed on me with her eyes and mouth. I was weary of children, including my own, yet part of my fantasy was that I would give her a child. A child with her hazel eyes and my black hair: an elf child that would never need to have its diapers changed.

In August the Owenses returned from their month away, and Monica telephoned them the first night, as if she had been missing them, too. She and Karen arranged to have Karen come up to the camp one day to lead a nature walk. She fixed up a bottle with a jeweller’s loupe so that the children could peer into a sample of pond water and see the frenzy of minute life there—little transparent ovals and cylinders bumping around like Dodg’em cars, trying to find something to eat without being eaten. She was honey-colored from the California sun, and her hair had been bleached to the pallor of an orange-juice stain on a tablecloth, but her teeth were still slightly crooked, and her knees bony and intense.

In the aftermath of this visit, this glimpse of her functioning with such sweet earnestness as a teacher, I wrote her on our camp stationery, which was beige, with a green letterhead spelling out the camp name in little birch logs. I came across some stolen sheets of it a few years ago, when we changed houses, and had to laugh. My letter recounted details of our lovemaking and proposed that we break out of our marriages and get married to each other. More a violent dream than a proposal: the surge of writing, in a corner of the picnic pavilion while Monica was out on the lake with a canoeing class, carried me into it, and the fact that I was out of Mather, writing a letter back into it. It was what they call now an out-of-body experience. I could see myself, very small, back in Mather, and I was easy to manipulate, into a life of love with this other doll. I held off mailing it for a day. But on rereading, the words seemed frightening but true, like the cruel facts of pond life.

Once that blue mailbox gathering dust at the side of that three-lane New Hampshire highway had closed its iron mouth, I sensed that I had overstepped. There were limits, and proprieties, like the glass walls of her terrarium, within which Karen had given me freedom. Outside those limits there was danger, and death.

Not that there was much danger of Alan’s intercepting the letter. I knew the mail arrived at the Owenses’ house around eleven, when he would be at his office or still in bed from the night before. Alcohol was worming deeper and deeper into his system and making it hard for him to sleep at night. He and I both, for different reasons, were feeling our lives turn upside down.

Days of silence went by. At first I was relieved. But when camp ended, and we were in town all day as well as evenings, I had expected some message from Karen, at least a social gesture toward the two of us. Late-summer muddle—New England squeezing the last drops of fun out of its few warm months—was all around us, and school would soon begin again. In Chicago, the Democrats had nominated Humphrey while Johnson hid in the White House. The police were clobbering protesters while people like me cheered. That Thursday morning a call from Karen at last came through; she and Alan were having some of the CMC over to watch the riots and Humphrey’s acceptance on television. The convention went on and on, everything sacred unravelling before our eyes, and we kept pace with brandy and beer and white wine. Instead of junk-food snacks, Karen served little saucers of health foods—raisins, sesame and sunflower seeds, even macadamia nuts, which nobody else could afford. Alan concentrated on the bourbon, and somehow around eleven I was delegated to go downtown and get him another bottle. The package stores were closed, but he was sure I could wangle a fifth from the bartender’s at Rudy’s. Rudy’s was the main dive in the factory district; my father had been a regular. I resented the errand—I had resented my father’s long evenings at Rudy’s—but performed it, counting out Alan his change to the penny. He said I could have kept the change. When he saw, foggy as he was, how badly this went over, he tried to cover up with jokes about connections. He told me, “It must be great, Frank, to have connections. My problem in town is, I don’t have the connections.” He meant this to be a joke: the Owenses were well connected and my people were nobodies. But in fact it was true: Mather, sluggish as it was, changed a bit from year to year, and had slipped away from the Owenses.

Around midnight the other concerned citizens began to drift home. Around one-thirty the four of us were left sitting at the four sides of the antique kitchen table, a cherrywood drop-leaf, made in Mather in the 1840s by the Shaker community that had existed here. The night was hot, with a last-gasp heat; along the coast, sea breezes lighten the summer, but in our river valley it hangs heavy until the maples start to turn. Crickets were singing outside the screen door. I had had insomnia the night before, and Monica had to get up early to take our son Tommy to the orthodontist, but we didn’t make a move to go.

“So where are we?” Alan abruptly asked. He seemed to be focussed on Karen, across the table from him. Monica and I sat on his either side.

“Here and there,” Monica said, giggling. She had had plenty to drink and was more mischievous, more wakeful, than I was used to seeing her. Her liberated Catholic hair had a bushy outward thrust that was the coming look—tough, cheerful, ethnic. Karen’s look, the long ironed hair, the nervous vulnerability, belonged to a fading past.

“Let’s talk turkey,” Alan persisted through his blur, his long lashes blinking, his rather pretty mouth fixed helplessly in a sneer.

“Oh, what a good idea!” Monica said, glancing at me to see how I was taking all this.

“Alan, explain what you *mean*,” Karen said. Her voice with children sometimes had a wheedling tone. She was the least drunk of us all, and in a flash of alcoholic illumination I saw her as pedantic. He was being naughty and she was set to baby him, Socratically, as she had babied me about the kids going off to fight. Using her psychology. “Don’t hide behind your liquor,” she went on after Alan. “Explain what you *mean*.” Some old grievance between them seemed to be surfacing while the crickets droned.

It appeared to me he didn’t mean very much; he was just drunkenly making conversation. I was interested in the tremor of Karen’s stringy freckled hands as she maneuvered a cigarette to her mouth and was therefore slow to notice Monica’s plump hand on top of Alan’s. Accustomed to seeing her comfort children at the camp, I dismissed it as more Alan-babying, from his other side.

“He’s a Virgo,” Karen told Monica, smiling now that her cigarette was lit. “Virgos are *so* withholding.”

He looked at his wife with his fishy, starry, stunned eyes and I saw that he loathed the brightness that I loved. Much as I disliked him, my thought was that he must have reasons. He opened his mouth to speak and she prompted “Yes?” too eagerly; her sharp smile chased him back into his shell.

He hunched lower over the table, and Hubert Humphrey’s high-pitched old-womanish voice came out of his mouth. “Let’s put America back on track,” Alan said, imitating the acceptance speech we had heard, interspersed with shots of the violence outside. “Let’s not talk about the green belt.” Karen’s latest project had been to arouse community interest in creating a green belt around our tired little city. “Let’s talk about—”

“Below the belt,” Monica finished for him, and she and I laughed. Across the table from me she looked enlarged, her hair puffed out and her face broadening under its genial film of alcohol. Her mother was fat, with a distinct mustache, but I had never thought Monica would grow to resemble her. Now that she had, I didn’t mind; I felt she would take care of me, even though I had recently flung into the mailbox a letter offering to leave her. Her glances toward me were like holes in the haze that the Owenses were generating, working something out between themselves. She and I and, in his way, Alan were in tune with the crickets and the occasional swish of cars passing, but our camaraderie was weakened by something resistant in Karen and by our common fatigue; watching too much television, we, too, had become staticky and unreal. We kissed one another good night then, Karen and I primly—what a dry little mouth she gave me!—and Alan and Monica lingeringly, like a pair of sentimental drunks. Out on his porch, he did not want to let go of Monica’s hand. A warm drizzle had begun. My wife fell asleep in the car beside me as the windshield wipers swept away the speckles of rain. Downtown was deserted, the great empty factories looking majestic and benevolent, asleep. We lived across the river, in a development a mile beyond the high school.

That was our last evening with the Owenses. Next morning, Karen called the house when she knew Monica would be off with Tommy. “I told him,” she told me.

“You did?” A great numbness hit my heart and merged with my hangover. “But why?” I had answered on the upstairs phone and could see on the curving street below, under the development saplings, a few yellow leaves, the first fallen, lying in spots of damp from last night’s rain.

Karen’s voice, husky from lack of sleep, picked its way carefully, as if spelling out things to a child. “Didn’t you under*stand* what *Alan*”—I hated the slightly strengthened way she pronounced the sacred name of Alan—“was saying last night? He was saying he wanted to go to bed with your wife.”

“Well, something like that. So?”

Karen didn’t answer.

I supplied, “You think he should have asked her in private, instead of making it a committee matter.”

She said, “The reason he couldn’t get it out, he didn’t think you’d accept me in exchange.” Her voice snagged, then continued, roughened by tears, “He’s only ever seen us quarrel. About Vietnam.”

“That’s touching,” I said. I didn’t find Alan touching, actually. But she was enrolling me in her decision.

“I couldn’t bear it, Frank. His being so innocent.”

“How did he take the news?”

“Oh, he was exhilarated. He kept me up all night with it. He couldn’t believe—I shouldn’t tell you this—he couldn’t believe I’d sleep with a townie.”

Downstairs my two younger children had grown bored with television and were punching each other. I said, “But with a non-townie he’d believe it? How many non-townies have you slept with?”

“Frank, don’t.” She hesitated. “You know how I am. He doesn’t give me shit, Frank. He’s *sink*ing.”

“Well, let him.” A coldness, the cold of death, had come over me.

“I can’t.”

“O.K. I don’t think it was very nice of you to turn us in without even warning me,” I said, all weary dignity.

“You would have argued.”

“You bet. I love you. Loved you.”

“I did it for you, too. For you and Monica.”

“Thanks.” The day outside was bright, with a rinsed brightness, and I thought, *When she hangs up, I must open the window and let in some air*. “Did you get my letter?” I asked her.

“Yes. That was another thing. It frightened me.”

“I meant it to be a nice letter.”

“It *was* nice. Only—a little possessive?”

“Oh. Maybe so. Pardon me.” *I’ll never sleep with her again, never, ever*, I thought, and the window whose panes I stared through seemed a translucent seal barring me from great volumes of possibility, I on one side and my life on the other, my life and the naked bright day.

Karen was crying, less in grief, I thought, than in exasperation. “I *wanted* to talk to you about it, but there wasn’t any way to get *to* you; I haven’t even had a chance to give you the present I brought from Santa Barbara.”

“What was it?”

“A shell. A beautiful shell.”

“That you found on the beach?”

“No, those are too ordinary. I bought it in a shop, a shell from the South Seas. A top shell, silvery white outside with pink freckles underneath. You know how you go on about my freckles.”

“Your gorgeous freckles,” I said.

Karen didn’t substitute-teach that fall; she went into Boston and worked long days for the peace movement. Friends of ours who had remained in the Owenses’ inner circle told us that some nights she didn’t come home. If you look at the memoirs of the celebrity-radicals of that time, a lot of it was sex. Liberals drink and smoke, radicals use dope and have sex. Karen and Alan split up finally, sometime between when Nixon and Kissinger finagled our troop withdrawal and when South Vietnam collapsed. His drinking became worse; he ceased to function as a lawyer at all, though the name stayed up in the lobby of the office block downtown where he had rented space. She went back to the West Coast; he stayed with us, like the gutted factories. Though I didn’t see him from one year to the next, I thought of him often, always with joy at his fall. Monica and I had moved, actually, into his neighborhood; we allowed ourselves a fourth child before she got her tubes tied, and, with heating oil going higher and higher, we were able to pick up very reasonably—my brother was the realtor—a big turn-of-the-century house on Elm Hill, with a finished third floor and a porch on two sides. We’ve closed off some of the rooms and put in a wood-burning stove in the living room.

Betty Kurowski’s mother cleaned, twice a week, the Owens house two blocks farther up the hill. It was Betty who told me how bad Alan was getting. “A skeleton,” she said. “You should go see him, Frank. I went in there last week and talked with him and he asked about you. He saw in the paper how you’ve become assistant principal.”

“Why would I want to go see that snide bastard?”

Betty looked at me knowingly, under those straight black eyebrows that didn’t go with her bleached hair. “For old times’ sake,” she said, straight-faced.

I asked Monica to go with me and she said, “It’s not me he wants to see.”

“It was you he liked.”

“That was pathetic, that was his attempt to fight back. He’s not fighting back anymore. Poor Alan Owens. That whole family was just too good for this world.” She sounded like her mother. But Monica hasn’t gotten fat. She counts those calories and is taking a night course in computer science. She’s been working mornings as receptionist and biller for a photo-developing lab that has taken half a floor of the old Pilgrim mill, and they want her to learn to use the computer. I’m proud of her, seeing her go off nights in her trim skirt and blouse. She’s tough. Old cheerleaders keep that toughness. Win or lose, is the way they figure. The truth about Karen and me, when it came out, simply made her determined to win.

Karen sends us mimeographed Christmas letters. She’s remarried, has a son and a daughter, and got a degree in landscape architecture. Alan had been holding her back, but a dozen years ago she was too uncertain of herself to know that. It hadn’t occurred to me, then, that being sexy could be a woman’s way of repressing her other problems.

Nobody answered my knock. The Owens house has a front door as wide as a billiard table, with gray glass sidelights into which a lacy pattern of frosting has been etched, so people can peek in only in spots. The clapboards in the shelter of the porch were pumpkin-colored, but those out in the weather were faded pale as wheat, and peeling. There were dry leaves all over the porch; it was that season again. Advertising handouts had been allowed to collect on the welcome mat. The door was unlocked and swung open easily. The downstairs showed Mrs. Kurowski’s work; indeed, it was uncannily clean and tidy in the big rooms, as if no one ever walked through. The long kitchen, with its little Shaker table, looked innocent of meals. Two tangerines in a pewter bowl had turned half green with mold.

“Alan?” I was sorry I had come; being in their house after so many years awakened in my stomach the sour tension of those noontime visits that would never come again. Sun slanted in at the kitchen windows the way it always had, making the scratched lip of the aluminum sink sparkle, drying out the bar of soap in its cracked rubber dish. She had liked those stained-glass flowers and butterflies people use as shade-pulls, and a few of these were still hanging here, picking up the light. I stood at the foot of the dark back stairs at whose head naked Karen used to flicker like a piece of sky, and called again, “Alan?”

Frighteningly, his voice came. “Come on up, Francis.” He had always had a deeper, more melodious voice than one would have expected out of his skinny, slumped frame, and there was still timbre in his voice, though it sounded frayed and quavery, like an old woman’s. I remembered his imitation of Hubert Humphrey. I climbed the stairs, my belly remembering how my eyes would possess her, her ankles, her knees, her amber triangle, each step carrying me higher toward the level of her fluttering, excessively pleased embrace, her heart through her arched ribs thumping against my classroom clothes, my tie and the coarse cotton of my button-down shirt crushed against the cool-warm silk of her.

“In here,” his voice came, already weaker. I had feared he would be in the bright back room that she and I had used, but he was in the bedroom that had been theirs, at the front of the house, darkened by the mass of the two big beeches outside. And the shades were drawn. The dim room was soaked in a smell that at first I took to be medicinal but that then came clear as whiskey, the flat and shameful smell it has in the empty bottle. Alan was sitting in the center of his tousled bed in striped pajamas and an untied blue bathrobe, in the lotus position, smoking a cigarette. He looked dreadful—emaciated, with a patchy beard inches long. He had lost the hair on the top of his head in a clean swath, but the rest hung down nearly to his shoulders. His skin was as dull and thin as tracing paper; there was something radiant about the blue-white tops of his naked feet. The room was hot, the thermostat turned way up—in this day and age, a bit of swank in that.

“Alan,” I managed to get out. “How do you feel?”

“Not bad, Francis. How do I look?”

“Well, thin. Aren’t you eating?”

He put the cigarette to his lips the way children learning to smoke do, trying to follow the tip with his eyes. Yet the gesture with which he took it away and exhaled was debonair. “I’ve been having a little war with my stomach,” he said. “I can’t keep anything down.”

“Have you seen a doctor?”

*“Aaah.”* A little flip of his hand, all bones now. His gestures had become effete, unduly flexible. “They always say the same thing. I know what I’ve got—a stomach bug that’s been going around. A touch of the flu.”

“What is it that they always say?” I asked. “The doctors.”

His hands were so emaciated, the hairs on their backs seemed to be growing with a separate life. He turned his head away, toward the dusty frame of sunlight around the drawn shade nearest his bed; dim as it was, the light made him squint, and a cutting edge of bone was declared by a shadow scooped at his temple. He turned back toward me and tipped his head flirtatiously. “You know, you son of a bitch,” he drawled, trying to be pleasant. “To taper off on the sauce. But the sauce has never hurt me. It’s when I taper off that the horrors begin.” His eyes widened, remembering. His voice for a moment was flattened into honesty.

*There must be fear of death in there somewhere*, I thought; but as a gentleman he wanted to shield me from it. The result was a kind of grisly puppetry: so gaunt, with his face spread wide by alcoholic bloat, he looked like a lollipop with a Rasputin beard. Fear was my emotion, mixed in with that thrill of importance witnesses to disaster have.

I found the courage to tell him, “Alan, you can’t keep on like this. You’ll get dehydrated. You really must *do* something.”

It was what he had wanted me to say, so he could spurn it. He sneered and made a soft hawking noise that put me in my place. “I’m not that much of a doer. Let’s talk about you. I see where you got a promotion.”

“It happens, if you’re there long enough.”

“Always modest,” he said. “And you’ve moved in down the street.”

“You mind?”

It wasn’t clear that he heard me. His next speech came out as if it had been recorded on tape; his head wobbled as he drawled it out. “I always knew you’d make it big in a half-ass way. One of those sleek slobs in three-piece suits eating steak every Friday night over at the River House, hopping up from your table to go across and pal it up with some school-board member, everybody jolly, saying sure you’ll head up the door-to-door drive for the new hospital wing, go peddle tickets for the K of C clambake and all that public-spirited crap. That’s what I used to tell Karen, he’ll wind up one of those sleek wop slobs in a three-piece suit. Where’s the third piece?” He whined, “You look so fucking preppy, Frank.”

I laughed. I was wearing a jacket and gray flannels. His twitching head, his eyes oddly theatrical with their big lashes, seemed actually to be searching the corners near the ceiling for the third piece. He wanted me to laugh, really. The atmosphere of this room was rich, with the gloom and bad smells, and there was a certain grandeur in his ruin, none of his scorn for all of us concealed anymore. “Yeah,” I said. “Karen told me at the time you couldn’t believe she’d sleep with a townie.”

“Wop. I think I said wop.”

“No doubt you did.”

“You owe me one for that. You owe me one, brother.”

“It was a long time ago. What happened between you two then?”

He looked toward the window shade again, as if he could see through it. “Karen was … greedy.” The words came out of him as if dictated from behind, by a prompter’s voice he had to hear and then echo. “You owe me one, brother,” he repeated, fuddled.

“Alan, what can I do for you?” My own voice seemed to boom. “I’m not a doctor, but I’d say you need one.” That third piece he mentioned, the vest, seemed to be on my chest, making me thicker, armored, ruthless in my health.

He fended me off with effeminate, flustered gestures. “You can do a little shopping for me,” he said. “This damn flu, I can hardly make it to the john. My legs don’t want to work right.”

“Can’t Betty’s mother shop for you?”

“She drags in loathsome stuff. Breakfast cereal. Orange juice. She doesn’t know …”

“Doesn’t know what, Alan?”

“What’s good for flu.”

“What is? Bourbon?”

He gave me a straight dark helpless look. “Just to tide me over until I get my legs back.”

“On one condition, Alan. You call your doctor.”

“Oh, sure. Absolutely. I know he’ll just say it’s the flu. My wallet’s on the bureau over there—”

“My treat.” As he said, I owed him one. No embarrassing deal with the bartender at Rudy’s this time; I paid $18.98 over the counter for a glass-handled half-gallon of Wild Turkey’s best, 101 proof, at the liquor supermarket at the new shopping mall on the other side of Elm Hill. Back up the hill, back up the stairs: my siphuncle was working overtime. Alan wasn’t in his bed, he was in the bathroom; I listened a moment and heard the noise of dry heaves. I left the bottle in the center of his bed.

Who can say that that was the bottle that killed him? A parade of bottles killed him, going back to his spoiled teens. It was not the next morning but the next week that they found him curled over, stiffened in the lotus position beside the toilet bowl. When they opened the door (Betty’s mother had called the police, guessing what was behind it), his body fell over in one piece, like a husk. Dehydration, internal bleeding, heart failure. Betty told us there were empty bottles everywhere—under the bed, in the closet. I pictured mine in my mind’s eye, drained, lying on its side on the floor, gleaming when they raised the shades at last. Maybe it was that bottle I thought of when the student brought in the nautilus shell. Or the shell Karen never got to give me. Or that big house with all its rooms and this naked freckled woman waiting in one of its chambers.

Thinking I should strike a more positive note, I held up the souvenir again and told the class, “There’s a clear lesson here in this shape. Who knows what it is?”

Nobody did.

“Growth,” I said. “We all have to *grow*.”