# The Other

# John Updike

HANK ARNOLD met Priscilla Hunter at college in the Fifties, and the fact that she was a twin seemed to matter as little as the fact that she had been raised as an Episcopalian and he as a Baptist. How blissfully little did seem to matter in the Fifties! Politics, religion, class—all beside the point. Young lives then, once Eisenhower had settled for a draw in Korea and McCarthy had self-destructed like a fairy-tale goblin, seemed to be composed of timeless simplicities and old verities, of weather and works of art on opposite sides of a museum wall, of ancient professors, arrogant and scarcely audible from within the security of their tenure, lecturing from yellowing notes upon Dante and Kant while in the tall windows at their backs sunlight filtered through the feathery leaves of overarching elms. In those days Harvard Yard was innocent of Dutch elm disease. And in those days a large and not laughable sexual territory existed within the borders of virginity, where physical parts were fed to the partner a few at a time, beginning with the lips and hands. Strangely, Hank and Priscilla had been traversing this territory for several weeks before she confided to him that she was an identical twin. One of her breasts, clothed in an angora sweater and the underlying stiffness of a brassiere, was held in his hand at the time. Their faces were so close together that he could smell the mentholated tobacco in the breath of her confession. “Henry, I ought to tell you. I have a sister who looks just like me.” Priscilla seemed to think it slightly shameful, and in fact it was an exciting idea.

Her twin, the other, was named Susan, and attended the University of Chicago, though she, too, had been admitted to Radcliffe. Their parents—two Minneapolis lawyers, the father a specialist in corporation law and the mother in divorce and legal-aid work—had always encouraged the girls to be different; they had dressed them in different clothes from the start and had sent them to different private schools at an early age. A myth had been fostered in the family that Priscilla was the “artistic” one and Susan the more “practical” and “scientific,” though to the twins themselves their interests and attitudes seemed close to identical. As children, they had succumbed simultaneously to the same diseases—chicken pox, mumps—and even when sent to different summer camps had a way, their conversations in September revealed, of undergoing the same trials and initiations. They learned to swim the same week, in widely separated lakes, and had let themselves be necked with in different forests. They fell in love with the same movie star (Montgomery Clift), had the same favorite song (“Two Loves Have I,” as sung by Frankie Laine), and preferred the same Everly brother (Don, the darker and slicker-looking). Hank asked Priscilla if she missed her twin. She said, “No,” but to have said otherwise might have been insulting, for she was lying entangled with him, mussed and overheated, in his fifth-floor room, with its single dormer window, in Winthrop House.

Hank was an only child, with a widowed mother, and asked, “What does it feel like, having a twin?”

Priscilla made a thoughtful mouth; prim little creases appeared in her pursed upper lip. “Nice,” she answered, after a long pause that had dried the amorous moisture from her eyes. They were brown eyes, a delicious candy color, darker than caramel but paler than Hershey’s kisses. “You have a backup, seeing the same things you do. A kind of insurance policy, in a funny way.”

“Even when you’re sent to different schools and all that?”

“That doesn’t matter so much, it turns out. Suzie and I always knew we weren’t the other and were going to have to lead different lives. It’s just that when I’m with her there’s so much less explaining to do. Maybe that’s why I’m not much good at explaining things.” She added, a bit challengingly, “*Sor*ry.” Her face was still pink from the soft struggle they had been having on his bed.

“You’re good enough,” Hank said, and dropped the subject, for it had interrupted this slow journey they were making into one another. She had, Priscilla, a lovely athletic figure, long-muscled and hippy and with wide sloping shoulders, yet narrowed to a fine boniness at the ankles and wrists. His pleasure at seeing her undressed disconcerted her, at first, in its intensity, and time passed before she could accept it as her due and, still a virgin, coolly give him, in his room, in the narrow space between his iron frame bed and standard oak desk, little one-woman “parades.” Though they could not, for all those good Fifties reasons (pregnancy, the social worth of female chastity), make love, he had talked her into this piece of display. She held her chin up bravely and slowly turned in mock-model style, showing all sides of herself; the sight was so glorious Hank could scarcely stand it and had to lower his eyes, and then saw how her bare feet, fresh from chilly boots and rimmed in pink, looked as they slowly pivoted on the oval rug of braided rags his mother had given him, to make his room more “cozy.” When his minute of drinking in Priscilla was up, she would scramble, suddenly blushing and laughing at herself, into bed beside him, under rough blue blankets that Harvard issued in those days as if to soldiers or monks. They would try to read from the same book; they were taking a course together—Philosophy 10, “Idealism from Plato to Whitehead.”

Once she had told him that she was a twin, Hank could not forget it, or quite forgive her. The monstrous idea flirted at the back of his head that she was half a person; there was something withheld, something hollow-backed and tinny about the figure she cut in his mind even as their courtship proceeded smoothly toward marriage. He wanted to become a lawyer; she was doubly the daughter of lawyers and in all things ideal, given the inevitable small differences between two individuals. She had been raised rather rich and he rather poor. Hank’s drab and pious upbringing embarrassed him. He had felt indignantly drowned on that absurd day when, dressed in a sleazy white gown, he had submitted to the shock of immersion, the scandal of being tipped backward and all the way under by the murderous firm hands of a minister wearing hip waders; whereas Priscilla kept in her room, like a girlhood Teddy bear, the gold-stamped prayer book given her upon confirmation, and sometimes she carried it, in white-gloved hands, to services at the old wooden gray Episcopal church across from Cambridge Common. Both young people were for Stevenson in 1956, but she seemed secretly pleased when Eisenhower won again, whereas Hank had wished Henry Wallace were still running. He wanted to become a lawyer for a perverse reason: to avenge his father. His father, not yet fifty when he died of Hodgkin’s disease, in the days before chemotherapy, had been an auto mechanic who had borrowed heavily to open a garage of his own, and it had been lawyers—lawyers for the bank and other creditors—who had briskly, with perfect legality, administered the financial debacle and thwarted the dying man’s attempts to divert money to his survivors.

None of this at the time seemed to matter; what mattered was Priscilla’s beauty and Hank’s ardor and gratitude and her cool appraisal of the future value of his gratitude as she dazzlingly, with a silver poise faintly resembling cruelty, displayed herself to him. The fact of her being a twin put a halo around her form, a shimmer of duplication, a suggestion, curiously platonic, that there was, somewhere else, unseen, another version of this reality, this body.

Priscilla’s parents lived in Saint Paul, in a big, cream-colored, many-dormered house a few blocks from the gorge holding the Mississippi, which was not especially wide this far north. Though Hank several times travelled there to display himself, in his best clothes, to his prospective in-laws, he did not meet Susan until the wedding. She had always been away—on a package tour of Europe or waitressing in southern California, a part of the world where she had been led by some of her racier University of Chicago friends. When Hank met her at last, she had come from Malibu Beach to be Priscilla’s maid of honor. Though it was early June and cool in Minnesota, she had a surfer’s deep tan and a fluffy haircut short as a boy’s. A stranger to the family might not have spotted her, amid the welter of siblings and cousins, as the bride’s twin. But Hank had been long alerted, and as he clasped her thin feminine hand the current of identity stunned him to wordlessness. Her face was Priscilla’s down to the protruding, determined cut of her upper lip and the slightly sad droop of the lashes at the outside corners of her eyes. In a sense, he had seen her undressed. He reddened, and imagined that Susan did, though her manner with him was instantly ironical—bantering and languid in perhaps the West Coast manner. Enclosed within Priscilla’s known body, the coolness of a stranger seemed rude, even hostile. Hank noted what seemed to be a ray or two less of caramel in Susan’s irises, a smoother consistency of chocolate. These darker eyes made her seem more passionate, more impudent and flitting, as she moved through her old home with none of a bride’s responsibilities. And she was, Hank estimated, appraising Susan through the social flurry, distinctly bigger, if only by a centimeter and an ounce.

His impressions, Priscilla told him when they were alone, were wrong: Susan had expected to like him and did, very much. And though she had been the firstborn, she had never been, as often happens, the stronger or heavier. Their heights and weights had always been precisely the same. Priscilla thought that, indeed, Suzie had lost some weight, chasing around with that creepy crowd of beach bums out there. Their parents were up in arms because she had announced her intention to do graduate work in art history at UCLA, where there really wasn’t any art, when there was that entire wonderful Chester Dale collection at the Art Institute, along with everything else in Chicago. Or why not go east, like Priscilla? Their parents had hoped Susan would become a physicist, or at least a psychologist. Hank liked hearing Priscilla, not normally much of an explainer, run on this way about her sister; being near her twin did seem to embolden her, to loosen her tongue. He enjoyed the profusion of an extensive, ambitious family, amid whose many branches his own mother, their guest for the weekend, seemed a wan, doomed graft. The big house was loaded with overstuffed sateen furniture and expensive vacation souvenirs; his mother found a safe corner in a little-used library and worked at a needlepoint footstool cover she had brought with her from North Carolina.

In church, the twins, the one majestic in white tulle and the other rather mousy in mauve taffeta, were vividly distinguishable. Hank, however, standing at the altar in a daze of high Episcopalianism, the musk of incense in his nostrils and a gold-leafed panel of apostles flickering off to the side, had a disquieting thrill of confusion—the mocking-eyed maid of honor might be his intimate from Winthrop House days and the mysterious figure on their father’s arm a woman virtually unknown to him, tanned and crop-haired beneath her veil and garland of florets. Susan’s voice was just a grain or two the huskier, so he knew it was Priscilla who, in a shy, true voice, recited the archaic vows with him. At the reception, amid all the kissing, he kissed his sister-in-law and was surprised by the awkwardly averted, rather stubbornly downcast cheek; Hank had reflexively expected Priscilla’s habituated frontal ease. And when they danced, Susan was stiff in his arms. Yet none of this marred her fascination, the superior authenticity she enjoyed over the actual reality as the wedding night untidily proceeded through champagne and forced cheer to its trite, closeted climax. Susan was with them (her remembered stiffness and silence in his arms, as if she and Hank had had too much to say to dare a word, and her imagined slightly greater size) during the botch of defloration; she excited him, urging him on through Priscilla’s pain. Though he knew he had put an unfortunate crimp in this infant marriage, and had given his long-cherished ardor a bad name, he fell asleep with happy exhaustion; his guilt seemed shifted onto the body of a twin of his own.

Hank was not accepted at Harvard Law School; but good-hearted Yale took him. It was all for the best, for if Cambridge in those years was the path to Washington, New Haven was closer to New York and Wall Street, where the real money was. After a few years in the city, the Arnolds settled in Greenwich and had children—a girl, a boy, and a girl. Having married a San Diego builder of multi-unit dwellings, Susan kept pace with a girl, a boy, and then another boy. This break in symmetry led them both, it seemed, to stop bearing children. Also, the Pill had come along and made birth control irresistible. Kennedy had been shot, and something called rock blasted from the radio however you twisted the dial. The twins, though, had their nests safely made. Susan’s husband was named Jeb Herrera; he claimed descent from one of the old Spanish ranching families of Alta California, but in joking moods asserted that his great-great-grandfather had been a missionary’s illegitimate son. He was a curly-haired, heavy, gracious, enthusiastic man, a bit too proclaimedly, for Hank’s taste, in love with life. His small, even teeth looked piratical, when he smiled through the black curls of his beard. He was one of the first men Hank knew to wear a full beard and to own a computer—a tan metal box taller than a man, a freestanding broom closet that spat paper. Jeb had programmed it to respond to the children’s questions with jokes in printout. His office was a made-over wharf shed where dozens shuffled paper beside canted windows full of the Pacific. None of his employees wore neckties. Though the twins, as they eased into matronhood, might still be mistaken for each other, there was no mistaking the husbands. Susan, it would appear, had the artistic taste, and Priscilla had bet on practicality. Hank had become a specialist in tax law, saw his name enrolled in the list of junior partners on the engraved firm stationery, and forgot about avenging his father.

The growing families visited back and forth; there was something concordant about the homes, though one was white clapboard set primly on watered, terraced lawn, and the other was redwood wedged into a hillside where fat little cactuses intricate as snowflakes flourished among studiously arranged rocks. Both houses were cheerful for children, offering back stairs and odd nooks and a certain sportive airiness. The Arnolds had a long sunroom with a Ping-Pong table and, above it on the second floor, a sleeping porch with a hammock. As soon as they could afford it, they crowded a composition tennis court into the space between the garage and the line fence, where the lawn had always been scruffy anyway and the vegetable garden had gone to weeds every July. The Herreras’ La Jolla house, which overlooked the fifteenth fairway of a golf course, shuffled the indoors and the outdoors with its sliding glass panels and cantilevered deck and its family-sized hot tub out on the deck.

Hank first saw his sister-in-law naked one warm evening in Christmas vacation when Susan let fall a large white towel behind her and slid her silent silhouette into this hot tub. Hank and his wife were already in, coping with the slithering, giggling bodies of their small children; so the moment passed almost unnoticed amid the family tumble. Almost. Susan was distinctly not Priscilla; their skins had aged differently on the two different coasts. Priscilla’s was dead pale this time of year, its summer tan long faded, whereas there was something thickened and delicately crinkled and permanently golden about Susan’s. With an accustomed motion she had eased her weight from her buttocks into the steaming wide circle of water. Her expression looked solemn, dented by shadow. Hank remembered the same resolute, unfocussed expression on Priscilla’s face in the days when she would grant him her little “parade” in the shadows of his narrow college room. Both sisters had brown eyes in deep sockets and noses that looked upturned, with long nostrils and sharp central dents in their upper lips. Both were wearing bangs that winter. Their heads and shoulders floated side by side. Susan’s breasts seemed the whiter for the contrast with her year-round bathing-suit tan.

“How much do you do this sort of thing?” Priscilla asked her twin, a touch nervously, glancing toward Hank.

“Oh, now and then, with people you know, usually. You get used to it—it’s a local custom. You sort of let yourself dissolve.”

Yet she, too, gave Hank an alert glance. He had already passed into dissolution, his vapor of double love one with the heat, the steam, the abundant dinner wine, the scent of the eucalyptus trees towering above the deck, the stars beyond them, the strangeness of this all being a few days before Christmas. Immersed, their bodies had become foreshortened stumps of flesh, comical blobs of mercury. Jeb appeared on the deck holding a naked baby—little Lucas—in one crooked arm and a fresh half-gallon of Gallo Chablis in the other. Early in his thirties, Jeb had a pendulous belly. He descended to them like a hairy Neptune; the tub overflowed. When the water calmed, his penis drifted under Hank’s eyes like a lead-colored fish swimming nowhere.

The families stopped travelling back and forth in complete units as the maturing children developed local attachments and summer jobs. The two oldest cousins, Karen and Rose, had been fast friends from the start, though there was no mistaking them for twins: Karen had become as washed-out and mild-faced a blonde as Hank’s mother (now dead), and Rose was so dark that boys on the street catcalled to her in Spanish. The two older boys, Henry and Gabriel, made a more awkward matchup, the one burdened with Hank’s allergies and a drowsy shyness all his own, and the other a macho little athlete with a wedge-shaped back and the unthinking cruelty of those whose bodies are perfectly connected to their wills. The girl and the boy that completed the sets, Jennifer and Lucas, claimed to detest each other, and, indeed, did squabble tediously, perhaps in defense against any notion that they would some day marry. The bigger the children became, the harder they pulled apart, and the more frayed the lines between their parents became. Once little Lucas became too big to hold in one arm and strike a pose with, Jeb’s interest began to wander away from families and family get-togethers. There were late-night long-distance calls between the sisters, and secrets kept from the children.

Susan suddenly had more gray hair than Priscilla. Hank felt touched by her, and drawn to her in a new fashion, when she would visit them for a few weeks in the summer without Jeb, with perhaps an inscrutable Rose and a resentful Lucas in tow. More than once, Hank met the L.A. red-eye at LaGuardia and was kissed at the gate as if he were Susan’s savior; there had been drunks on the plane, college kids, nobody could sleep, Lucas had insisted on watching a ghastly Jerry Lewis movie, Rose threw up over Nebraska somewhere, they had gone way north around some thunderheads, an old lech in an admiral’s uniform kept trying to buy her drinks at three in the morning, my God, never again. As Hank gently swung the car up the lush green curves of the Merritt Parkway, Susan nodded into sleep, and seemed his wife. Priscilla’s skin, too, now sagged in those defenseless puckers when she slept.

As a guest in their home, Susan slept on the upstairs porch. The swish of cars headed toward the railroad station, and the birds—so much more aggressive, she said, than those on the West Coast—awakened her too early; and then at night the Arnolds took her to too many parties. “How do you stand it?” she would ask her twin.

“Oh, it gets to be a habit. Try taking a nap in the afternoon. That’s what I do.”

“Jeb and I hardly go out at all anymore. We decided other people weren’t helping our marriage.” This was a clue, and far from the only one. There was a hungry boniness to her figure now. Like a sick person willing to try any cure, Susan drank only herbal tea—no caffeine, no alcohol—and ate as little meat as she politely could. Whereas Priscilla, who had once appeared so distinctly a centimeter smaller, now was relatively hefty. Broad of shoulder and hip, she moved through parties with a certain roll, a practiced cruiser who knew where the ports were—the confiding women and the unhappy men and the bar table in the corner. Sometimes after midnight Hank watched her undress in their bedroom and thought of all the Martinis and Manhattans, the cream-cheesed celery sticks and bacon-wrapped chicken livers that had gone into those impressive haunches and upper arms.

“Other people don’t help *it*,” was Priscilla’s answer to Susan. “But they might do something for *you*. You, a woman. Aren’t you a woman, or are you only a part of a marriage?” She had never forgiven him, Hank feared, for that unideal wedding night.

Poor Susan seemed a vision of chastity whom they would discover each morning at the breakfast table, frazzled after another night’s poor sleep, her hair drooping onto the lapels of a borrowed bathrobe, her ascetic breakfast of grapefruit and granola long eaten, the *Times* scattered about her in pieces read with a desperate thoroughness. Hank wanted to urge eggs and waffles upon her, and to make up good news to counteract the bad news that had been turning her hair gray. Priscilla knew what it was, but was no good at explaining. “Jeb’s a bastard,” she would say simply in their bedroom. “He always was. My parents knew it, but what could they do? She had to get married, once I did. And all men are bastards, more or less.”

“My, you’ve gotten tough. He was always very dear with the kids, I thought. At least when they were little. And he builds those nice shingled rental villages, with solar panels and wading pools.”

“Not so much anymore he doesn’t,” she said. As she pivoted on their plush carpet, yellow calluses showed at her heels.

“What do you mean?”

“Ask *her*, if you’re so interested.”

But he never could. He could no more have asked Susan to confide her private life than he could have tiptoed onto the sleeping porch and looked down at—what he held so clearly in his mind—his wife’s very face, transposed into another, chastened existence, fragilely asleep in this alien house, this alien climate and time zone. So magical a stranger might awake under the pressure of his regard. He would have trespassed. He would have spoiled something he was saving.

The little 1975 recession gave Jeb’s tottering, overextended business the last push it needed; everything coming undone at once, the Herreras began to divorce amid the liquidation. When Susan visited Hank and Priscilla in the bicentennial year, it was as a single woman, her thinness now whittled toward a point, a renewed availability. But not, of course, available to Hank; the collapse of one twin’s marriage made the other doubly precious.

As in other summers, Hank was touched by Susan’s zeal with the children, ushering as many as could be captured onto the train and into the city for a visit to the Museum of Natural History or to see the tall ships that beautiful hazy July day. Rose was not with her; the girl had drawn closer to her father in his distress, and was waitressing in a taco joint in downtown San Diego. And Karen, now stunning with her flaxen hair and pale moonface and lithe dancer’s body, was above everything except boys and ballet. One Saturday, while Priscilla stayed home, having contracted for a lunch at the club with one of those boozy women she called “girl friends,” Hank accompanied Susan on an excursion she had cooked up for the just barely willing Jennifer and Lucas, all the way to New Haven to see the Beinecke Library, with its translucent marble and the three marvellously simple Noguchis in their sunken well. Hank had not seen these wonders himself; they had come to Yale after his time. And he rather enjoyed these excursions with his sister-in-law; all that old tumble of family life had fallen to them to perpetuate. He let her drive his Mercedes and sat beside her, taking secret inventory of all the minute ways in which she differed from Priscilla—the slight extra sharpness to the thrust of her upper lip, the sea scallop of shallow wrinkles the sun had engraved at the corner of her eye, the hair or two more of bulk or wildness to her eyebrow on its crest of bone. The hair of her head, once shorter, then grayer, was now dyed too even a dark brown, with unnatural reddish lights. She turned to him for a second on a long straightaway. “You’ve never asked about me and Jeb,” she said.

“What was to ask? Things speak for themselves.”

“I loved that about you,” Susan pronounced. Her verb alarmed him; “love” was a word he associated with the embarrassing sermons of his youth. “It’s been a nightmare for years,” she went on, and he realized that she was offering to present herself in a new way to him, as more than a strange ghost behind a familiar mask. She was opening herself. But he, after nearly two decades of playing the good husband, had discovered affairs, and had fallen in love locally. The image of his mistress—she was one of Priscilla’s “girl friends”—rose up, her head tipped back, her lipstick smeared, and deafened him to the woman he was with; without hearing the words, he saw Susan’s mouth, that distinctive complicated mouth the sisters shared, making a pursy, careful expression, like a schoolteacher emphasizing a crucial point.

Lucas, in the back seat, was listening, and cried out, “Mom, stop bitching about Dad to Uncle Hank—you do it to everybody!”

Jennifer said, “Oh, listen to big man here, protecting his awful daddy,” and there was a thump, and the girl sobbed in spite of her scorn.

“You make me barf, you know that?” Lucas told her, his own voice shakily full of tears. “You’ve always been the most god-awful germ, no kidding.”

“Daddy,” Jennifer said, with something of womanly aloofness. “This little spic just broke my arm.”

The adult conversation was not resumed. A few days later, Priscilla drove her sister back to LaGuardia, to begin a new life. Susan was planning to take her half of what money was left when the La Jolla house was sold and move with the two younger children to the Bay area and study ceramics at Berkeley.

“I told her she’s crazy,” Priscilla said to Hank. “There’s nothing but gays in San Francisco.”

“Maybe she’s not as needful of male consolation as some.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? You’re not above a little consolation yourself, from what I’ve been hearing.”

“Easy, easy. The kids are upstairs.”

“Karen isn’t upstairs; she’s in New York, letting that cradle robber she met at the club take her to the Alvin Ailey. Wake up. You know what your trouble has always been? You’re an only child. You never loved me, you just loved the idea of sneaking into a family. You loved my family, the idea of there being so many of us, rich and Episcopalian and all that.”

“I didn’t need the Episcopalian so much. I thought I was going to sneeze all through the wedding. Incense, I couldn’t believe it.”

“You poor little Baptist boy. You know what my father said at the time? I’ve never told you this.”

“Then don’t.”

“He said, ‘He’ll never fit in. He’s a redneck, Prissy.’ ”

“Wow. Did he really say ‘redneck’? And fit into what—the Saint Paul Order of the Moose? Gee, I always rather liked him, too. Especially early in the mornings, when you could catch him sober.”

“He de*spised* you. But then Suzie picked Jeb, and he was so much worse.”

“That *was* lucky.”

“He made you look good, it’s a crazy fact.”

“Yes, and you make Suzie look good, so it evens out. Come on, let’s save this for midnight. Here comes Henry.”

But the boy, six feet tall suddenly, was wearing earphones plugged into a satchel-sized radio; on his way to the sunroom he gave his parents a glassy oblivious smile.

Any smugness the Arnolds may have felt in relation to the Herreras’ disasters lasted less than a year. An ingenious tax shelter that Hank had directed a number of clients into was ruled invalid by the IRS, and these clients suddenly owed the government hundreds of thousands of dollars, including tens of thousands in penalties. Though they had been duly cautioned and no criminal offense was charged, the firm could not keep him; his divorce soon followed. One of the men Priscilla had been seeing had freed himself from his own wife and was prepared to take her on; Hank wondered what Priscilla did now, all hundred and fifty pounds of her, that was worth the trouble. To think that he had started her off on the sexual road with those formalized, chaste “parades.”

She resettled with the children in Cos Cob. Having fouled his professional nest in the East, Hank accepted with gratitude the offer of a former colleague to join a firm in Los Angeles, as less than a junior partner. He had always been happy on their family visits to southern California and, though a one-bedroom condo in Westwood wasn’t a redwood house overlooking a fairway in La Jolla, old Mr. Hunter had been right: he fitted in better here. Southern California had a Baptist flavor that helped him heal. The people mostly came from small Midwestern towns, and there was a naïveté in even the sin—the naked acts in the bars and the painted little-girl hookers in jogging shorts along Hollywood Boulevard. The great stucco movie theatres of the Thirties had been given over to X-rated films; freckle-faced young couples watched while holding hands and eating popcorn. In this city where sex was a kind of official currency, Hank made up for the fun he had missed while catching the train and raising the children in Greenwich, and evened the score with his former wife. Los Angeles was like that earlier immersion, at the age of religious decision, which coincided with puberty; that bullying big hand had shoved him under and he had come up feeling, as well as breathless and indignant, cleansed and born-again.

One day downtown on the escalator from Figueroa Street up to the Bonaventure, he found himself riding behind a vivid black-haired girl whom he slowly recognized as his niece, Rose. He touched her bare shoulder and bought her a drink in the lobby lounge, amid all the noisy, curving pools. She was twenty-four years old now; he could hardly believe it, though Karen was the same age. She told him her father had a job as foreman for another builder and had bought himself a stinkpot and kept taking weekend runs into Mexico; his dope-snorting friends that kept putting a move on her drove her crazy, so she had split a while ago. Now she worked as a salesgirl in a failing imported-leather-goods shop in the underground Arco Plaza while her chances of becoming an actress became geometrically smaller with each passing year. These days, she explained, if you haven’t got your face somewhere by the time you’re nineteen you’re *finito*. And indeed, Hank thought, her face was unsubtle for a career of pretense; framed by a poodle cut of tight black curls, it had too much of Jeb’s raw hopefulness, a shiny candor somehow coarse. Hank was excited by this disappointed young beauty, but women her age, with their round breasts and enormous pure eye whites, rather frightened him, like machines that are too new and expensive. He asked about her mother, and was given Susan’s address. “She’s doing real well,” Rose warned him.

An exchange of letters followed. Susan’s handwriting was a touch rounder than Priscilla’s, but with the same “g”s that looked like “s”s and “t”s that had lost their crossings, like hats blown off by the wind. One autumn Saturday, Hank flew up to the Bay area. Three hundred miles of coast were cloudless and the hills had put on their inflammable tawny summer coats, that golden color the Californian loves as a New Englander loves the scarlet of turning maples. Berkeley looked surprisingly like Cambridge, once you ascended out of Oakland’s slough: big homes built by a species of the middle class that had migrated elsewhere, and Xeroxed protest posters in many colors pasted to mailboxes and tacked to trees. Susan lived in the second-floor-back of a great yellow house that, but for its flaking paint and improvised outside stairways, reminded him of her ancestral home in Saint Paul. She had been watching for him, and they kissed, awkwardly, halfway up her access stairs.

The apartment was dominated by old photos of her children and by examples of her own ceramics—crusty, oddly lovely things, with a preponderance of turquoise and muddy orange in the glazes. She was even selling a few, at a shop a friend of hers ran in Sausalito. A female friend. And she taught part-time at a private elementary school. And still took classes—the other students called her Granny, but she loved them; their notions of what mattered were so utterly different from what ours were at that age. All this came out in a rapid voice, with a diffident stabbing of hands and a way of pushing her hair back from her ears as if to improve her hearing. Her manner implied that this was a slightly tiresome duty he had invented for them. He was an ex-relative, a page from the past. She was thinner than ever and had let her hair go back to gray, no longer just streaked but solidly gray, hanging down past the shoulders of a russet wool turtleneck sweater such as men wear in ads for Scotch whiskey. Hank had never seen Priscilla look anything like this. In tight, spattered jeans, and bony bare feet, Susan’s skinniness was exciting; he wanted to seize her before she dwindled away entirely.

She took him for a drive, in her Mazda, just as if they still had children to entertain together. The golden slashed hills interwoven with ocean and lagoons, the curving paths full of cyclists and joggers and young parents with infants in backpacks looked idyllic, a vision of the future, an enchanted land not of perpetual summer, as where he lived, but of eternal spring. She had put on spike heels with her jeans and a vest of sheepskin patches over her sweater, and these additions made her startlingly stylish. They went out to eat at a local place where tabbouleh followed artichoke soup. Unlike most couples on a first date, they had no lack of things to talk about. Reminiscence shied away from old grievances and turned to the six children, their varying and still-uncertain fates; fates seemed so much slower to shape up than when they had been young. Priscilla was hardly mentioned. As the evening wore on, Priscilla became an immense hole in their talk, a kind of cave they were dwelling in, while their voices slurred and their table candle flickered. Was it that Susan was trying to spare him acknowledging what had been, after all, his male failure to hold Priscilla’s love; or was Hank trying not to cast upon her a shadow of comparison, an onus of being half a person? She took him back to her apartment; indeed, he had not arranged for anywhere else to go.

She kicked off her shoes and turned on an electric heater and dragged a magnum of Gallo from the refrigerator. She was tired; he liked that, since he was, too, as though they had been pulling at the same load in tandem all these years. They sat on the floor, on opposite sides of a glass coffee table in whose surface her face was mirrored—the swinging witchy hair, the deep eye sockets and thoughtful upper lip. “You’ve come a long way,” she announced, in that voice which had once struck him as huskier than another but that in this room felt as fragile as the pots blushing turquoise on the shelves.

“How do you mean?”

“To see me. *Do* you see me? *Me*, I mean.”

“Who else? I’ve always liked you. Loved, should I say? Or would that be too much?”

“I think it would. Things between us have always been …”

“Complicated,” Hank finished.

“Exactly. I don’t want to be just your way of correcting a mistake.”

He thought a long time, so long her face became anxious, before answering, “Why not?” He knew that most people, including Susan, had more options than he, but he had faith that in our affluent nation a need, honestly confessed, has a good chance of being met.

This being the Eighties, she was nervous about herpes and all those other awful new diseases. She didn’t know what-all he’d been doing in L.A.; she really would have to know him a lot better before sleeping with him. He didn’t argue, but meekly said there *was* something she could do he would be very grateful for. Seeing her undress and move self-consciously, chin up, through a little “parade” in the room, Hank thought her majestic, for being nearly skeletal. Plato was wrong; what is is absolute. Ideas pale. The delay Susan imposed, the distances between them that could not be quickly altered, helped him grasp the blissful truth that she was just another woman.