



Meeting Julianne

BY ROBERT CRAIG

Cover: *Light in the Forest*, by Barbara A. Lussier

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Pennies. On my desk, sagging my pockets, on tables, floors, the driveway, the hall, my drawers, on rugs—for months, they’ve been there, everywhere, without letup. Every time it rains it rains. I have not chosen this, but just the same, it is coming. I know it is, like nausea; the knowledge of its coming, fearing its arrival, anticipating the relief; the restoration of warp and woof; fabric of a new sort, of an older sort, but now stretched to tearing.

What is there to be done? It interferes with everything—my every thought. How am I to function? When would it be done? I find little sleep, and even then sleep is punctuated with dreams of it. What it would be like; how it would look? Could it last? Was it forever?

And now there are red skies. Red skies at morn, this morn, not to mourn—not any more, for the foreseeable future, maybe never; the entire sky, from horizon to zenith—flaming scarlet. Sometimes the sky glows rose at the horizon, but now it is bleeding, hemorrhaging—a difficult birth. My truck glows red from it. It glints from pennies on my floor. I’m driving into red. Red skies, red skies, nothing but red skies.

Does it take this much—a river of it, an ocean? Darkness in daytime or no daytime at all. It gives my stomach a knot. Black magic, white magic, no magic, providence, divine intervention, just nature, just chance—what?

Work. The parking lot. Pulling in, stopping the engine. I can do this; fake my way through it. It’s Friday. Good Friday? I must get hold of

myself; walk up the steps without stumbling; no one must know. Oh, dear; oh, god; oh, Pop. Are you aware of this? Do you know what’s coming? Are you behind it, part of it, are you nothingness, is she?

Steps, the hallway, my door—open it, close it, sit down, hold my head, brace myself—fifteen minutes to curtain call. Fourteen, thirteen, twelve, eleven, ten....

Rrrriinnngggg!!!

“Good morning Dr. Maxwell!”

“Good morning Goody. Ready for today?”

“Dr. Maxwell—it’s not even 7:30. My bagel’s cold, my coffee’s bitter. Do I look ready?”

“You should have gotten donuts. Boston Crème, chocolate sprinkles—the breakfast of champions.”

“Did you stop for us?”

“Tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow’s vacation.”

“After vacation, then.”

Rrrriinnngggg!!!

Loudspeaker: “Please stand for the pledge of allegiance. I pledge allegiance, to the flag....” Loudspeaker again: “Please remain standing for a moment of silence...”

“How about an hour of silence.”

“Behave.”

Silence. Seconds of it; at least five.

“So what’d you guys think of that sky this morning. Creepy? Ooooooohhhhhhhh.”

“Dr. Maxwell.”

“What?”

“Nobody’s awake yet.”
“Did you see it Goodman?”
“Dr. Maxwell, I can’t lift my eyes up that high this early.”
“You guys are no fun first period.”
“And you are?”
“It’s my other middle name. Name one thing more fun than first period physiology. Come on, corpses—one thing.”
“Sleep.”
“All right, all right—two things...”
“Does Chicken Little get up this early?”
“Chicken Little needs her beauty rest, especially at her age.”
“How old is she?”
“A hundred and six in doggie years.”
“Well, I need my beauty rest too.”
“Hester, it’s not working.”
“Do you want to live to winter vacation, Goodman?”
“Guys, be nice or death.”
A chorus: “We choose death. Bring it on.”
“How about something worse than death, like homework?”
Chorus again: “Homework over vacation? Come on, Dr. Maxwell.”
“Okay, okay, let’s get down to business then. I have an interesting topic for today.”
“Only if you tell us how old you really are.”
“Back to that? What does that have to do with the price of eggs?”
“Everything. Tell us. I think you’re fifty. Am I close?”
“Nope. Twenty-two. I told you.”
“Dr. Maxwell, you’re such a liar.”
“Would I lie about a thing like that?”

“Yes. How old’s your son, then?”
“He’s twenty-seven.”
“How can that be?”
“It’s a miracle.”
“You’re a miracle, Dr. Maxwell.”
“Be nice. Slow torture is another option open to me.”
“You’re so funny, Dr. Maxwell. So what’s your interesting topic? Poodle anatomy?”
“Now, now. The poodle happiness zone will be discussed another day. For right now I have something else. Remember we were talking about the temporal lobes of the brain? Well, here’s a think-about to carry with you over vacation. Let me ask you this: what is the seat of your you-ness? What do you think? Anybody.... Be brave; Faith, tell me what you think.”
“The brain?”
“Ah, the brain—a reasonable response. Let’s examine it. What about the brain makes it you?”
“It’s where you think.”
“Except in Goodman’s case. He sits where he thinks.”
“How’d you like to sit where you think, Hester?”
“Do I detect a budding romance, or is this simply why you’re considered my honors class—because you make the smartest wisecracks? Okay, what is thought? What permits you to have thought?”
“Like nerve connections, chemistry?”
“Hmmm. Like chemistry. Thought is a biochemical process, isn’t it? So is that what makes you you? Molecules? If you could excise the brain from the body and keep both alive, which would be you?”
“It has to be the body. Look, Hester has no brains, and we still call her Hester.”

“God, you guys. Am I going to have to spank you?”

“Can’t do that, Dr. Maxwell.”

“Ah, just a pleasant thought. But what do you really think?”

“I think it would be your brain. You wouldn’t have thoughts without it.”

“So your thoughts are what make you you? Anything else? Let me put it this way—thought appears necessary for your you-ness. Is it sufficient? And is thought necessarily confined to the brain?”

“This sounds like philosophy and not science.”

“Plato would have argued that science is simply an aspect of philosophy. So Why can’t I get you to be this quiet when we’re taking notes? Answer now or homework torture will descend upon you Silence still? These are hard questions, aren’t they? People have been asking them for a long time.

“So, let’s get to the crux of my story. This will not be quite what you expect. Serious time, now. Let me begin: when my father was very old, I spent his last day with him. He laid in bed, drifting in and out of consciousness, but when he was awake he was still lucid. At one point he wanted to get up, so I helped him to his feet and he stood for the last time. Hours from death and there he was, standing on his own feet. Then he laid down again and slept restlessly, on-and-off. He told me when he woke that when sleeping he was surrounded by wounded soldiers. He had served in Europe during World War II, and most everyone he knew had been killed in action. He himself had been wounded again and again—and even to that day had Nazi shrapnel next to his heart—so for whatever reason that’s where his mind went. As night came he drifted off more steadily, so I moved to just outside his doorway where I could lay on a couch. I drifted off for a while too, although I couldn’t really sleep. Then along about two or three in the

morning as I lay staring toward his bedroom, I heard a sound—a sound I knew well; as well as my own name. It was a hummingbird. It flew with those buzzing, halting wings of hummingbirds, from the direction of his bed, through the open door, to perhaps three feet from my head, and it then continued on and up to the kitchen where it disappeared at the wall. I looked right at it, but could see nothing.”

“A hummingbird inside at night? Could it have been an insect?”

“No. I have this facility for sounds. My science acquaintances will tell you that. I’ve been studying natural sounds for twice as long as you’ve been alive and then some. I’ve tested myself a million times; even at great distances I don’t make mistakes. Ever. I heard a hummingbird or, more precisely, something that sounded exactly as a hummingbird sounds; not moth fluttering, not anything else. I even got up and checked the kitchen, although I didn’t need to. I knew my father had left, and indeed he had.

“So, back to my question: what makes you you? The Greeks separated the concepts of body and spirit. Which one was Pop? The physical presence that was left—the body *and* brain that had ceased functioning—or the essence that appeared to depart? What do you think?”

“You think he turned into a hummingbird?”

“Oh, probably not that simple, although your predecessors here, the Indians, thought that such things might be true. Pop, his name was also James, by the way, was a good man. The best I ever knew. I told him that once. It took all my courage, but I did. So if we suppose there are souls, then we could hypothesize I observed, or heard, a soul rise to heaven that night. Perhaps this is even why I have this odd ability with sounds—so that I could know this. ‘Fly my heart on golden wings’ is a phrase that comes down to us. Or, alternatively, I might have heard the wings of goddesses, who in Norse legend swoop to Earth to carry off the fallen heroes. Is that

who those wounded soldiers were? And, of course, there is the magic thinking option—the tendency of the brain to link the unrelated or willfully misinterpret events. It has to do with the brain’s capacity for making snap judgments. It’s so typical for people to do, in fact, that there is some thought it may be an evolutionary adaptation—a coping mechanism. Alternate hypotheses—a hallmark of the scientific method. But how can we know what the truth is? It is not a repeatable observation, not a replicable experiment.

“In any event, let me expand my original question: are body and spirit one and the same? What is it that we are—a fleeting biochemical illusion; solely the chance event of natural selection? Nothing more? In our brains, by the way, the temporal lobes act as our center of spirituality. If you artificially stimulate them, they produce spiritual feelings. Have we been purposefully endowed with a spiritual sense so that we can know that there is something more, or does this sense exist simply as a perceptual artifact—a byproduct of other essential activities of the temporal lobes?”

“Did you make that story up, Dr. Maxwell?”

“Did I seem to?”

“So what do you think, then?”

“I told you.”

“It’s really true?”

“This time, yes, but time’s just about up. Funny thing about time. So that’s what I want you all to contemplate over vacation. Meditate... And just think guys, during this period, you’ve all aged an hour, Chicken Little has aged six hours, but a light beam, not at all.”

“How about you, Dr. Maxwell?”

“Well, of course, in my case I’ve gotten an hour younger.”

“That explains a lot, Dr. Maxwell. Going anywhere over vacation?”

“Oh, I’ll be busy. Off all over the place.”

“Good. Take pictures. Ice cream party and slide show when we get back, okay? See you after vacation.”

“We’ll see. Better get yourselves together. Have fun; be safe. See you then.”

Rrrrrriinnnnngggg!

“...this is your NPR station. It’s five o’clock.” Click.

Uh. Ohhhhh. I’m too old for this. Five days in a row already. Ah. Leg’s asleep. Sit at the edge of the bed for a minute. Pins, needles, swords; hobbling like an old man in the dark. Dull, thudding ache spreading down my thigh, into the calf, across the shin, dissipating in my ankle. Foot barely works. More pins. Oww. What’s that? A penny. Shit.

Here we go. Contact lenses. In. Mouth tastes like a dungeon. Toothpaste. Brushing. Rinsing. That’s enough. Feeling my way down the hall. Where are they? Ah. Thermal socks. Maybe another pair inside these too. Long underwear. Shit, it’s so hard to get these on. Stretch, pull, fifty million buttons, ahhh. Thermal shirt. Flannel shirt. Tuck it all into lined pants. All right. Sweatshirt on top. Now ski pants, pulling them up over the bottom of the sweatshirt, and slipping the straps over my shoulders. God, I can hardly move my arms in all this. Let’s do it. Backpack, machete, GPS, binocs, note case. What am I forgetting? Watch. That would be a drag. Okay, down the stairs, not breaking my neck.

“Good morning Miss Chickens. Want chicken tinkle time? Come on you little noodle. Come on...” Squeaking open the kitchen door. “Hurry up, it’s cold out. But you could get off the porch. Chico! Okay for you, you bad chicken. Nice. You are the worst chicken ever. In history. Come on. In. Want some chick feed? How about a little of this to tide you over?

Okay? See you later. Go back to sleep.” Orange juice. Eye vitamins. Glug, glug. Yuck. Time’s not standing still. I must do this.

Boots, coat; barely fits over all these clothes; pennies falling out of the pockets. Hope this is enough. It’s going to be brutal.

Open the door. Oh, that air; it could make your face fall off. Why do I do this? Hoarfrost on everything; wait till the sun hits it. The snow is too cold to crunch: slippery, greasy, powdery. I know what this will mean. To the truck... Great. The door’s frozen. Where is that machete when I need it? Let’s try this; slide the blade along here. Creeeek! What’s this on the seat? Goddamn pennies. Fling them on the floor. Sorry Big Guy; just kidding. Settle in. All right, crank, crank. Come on, you can do it. Ahhh. Thank, you, God. Give it a minute to warm up. Why does the temperature always fall through the floor the minute winter vacation starts? It was beautiful last week. These gods, what a sense of humor. Snapping, popping, crackling out the driveway. All right, here we go.

The highway before dawn: silent, black, brooding, sleeping. Peaceful. I like driving before dawn. I can never go very fast, and I need to. I’ve got an hour and a half before me. Donut would be good. I must resist. Time is of the essence.

Mile, after mile, after mile, after mile; empty ones; no traffic on the road; under an inky, star spangled sky. No ice this morning. I hate those mornings when every black spot in the headlights is suspicious. Nerve-wracking. Hope the deer stay put.

The feeling behind my ears—icy fingers, stupefying. Back again. I don’t like it. It’s been growing for days. I can’t pretend it’s not there anymore. It turns my stomach. Maybe it is my stomach. Don’t like it. I shouldn’t take those vitamins on an empty stomach. I feel like retching.

How about some radio? I like the quiet. Radio anyway; just for a minute; just the weather.

“Traffic and weather in just a moment, but first...”

Great. Click. I don't need to re-grow my hair; well, I do, but... don't need an ambulance chaser, no hospitals, no diet supplements, no whole chickens, no oriental carpets, no loans, no cars, no adjustable mortgages. Sixty-six percent of the time. How do they squeeze in news, if you can call it news, between all that? I could try public radio, and learn about the plight of activists for homeless, handicapped ex-convicts in need of a new program to promote victim awareness. How about weather awareness? Try again.

“... with news time coming up to 5:57. Clear and cold across the tri-state area; frigid this morning, with temperatures in the city now coming in at six degrees. Areas north and west of the city could see temperatures well below zero, particularly in the protected valleys. Temperatures will rise slowly through the morning hours, barely reaching twenty by mid-day and perhaps only ten in outlying areas. This last day of the year will also be the coldest. Look for more of the same tomorrow, with temperatures plummeting into the single...” Click.

Great. I love blue fingertips; burning ears, dripping eyes, dripping nose, ice tears sticking to my cheeks, nose drips freezing to my upper lip in my least favorite flavor. Like I'm not sick to my stomach enough already. Hope I brought tissues. I pray. Binoculars will be useless this morning; fog right over and freeze the first time I look through them. I love taking off my mittens in this, too. Here we go.

Mile, after mile, after mile.

Ah. Here it is. Exit thirty-five. Where's this road? Look at this dump. Just what the world needs: another quarry; another gaping wound. Ledge Road; here it is. Okay, big left. Sunset Rock. Crescent Lake. Right along

here somewhere... here it is, and none too soon. The ink is lightening; fading quick. Got to hustle. Look at it now. No more red. Crystalline blue-white diamond; transparent, clear, innocent, pure, perfect.

Time to pull over. Park. Out we go. God, is it cold. Ears are ringing already; they're going to be screaming in an hour. This climb is going to be something. Wonder if I can do it? Got to. Today's the day. No other day to do this. Backpack feels like it's made out of plastic. Crinkle, wrinkle, trudge, trudge. The time has come, the walrus said. Oh, boy. The first station shouldn't be too bad, anyway. Come on, GPS, wake up! Doesn't matter. I remember where the first station is anyway. Right through the low spot and past the sapling woods to where the trees are mature. One thousand five hundred sampling stations, and I remember this one. Why? God, it's slippery.

Okay. Here it is. Mark time: 6:58. Just right; barely light enough to see. December 31, Sunday. Take off my mitten. Ohhh, that feels good. I love pain. Press the stopwatch. Time: begin. Put that mitten on. Eight fun-filled minutes of this. Let's see. What do we have? Silence. Give it a minute... Ah, here we go. Blue Jay, eighty meters, more or less. Silence again... Chickadee. One? No, two. Three. Forty meters, forty-five, another forty-five. Good. Cardinal. Where is he? Oh, okay. I'll say seventy meters. My fingers are so numb my writing's hardly readable. I'll fix it later.... Cripes. I dropped my note case. It's covered in snow. Don't have to worry about getting anything wet, I suppose. Just brush it off; blow on it a little. Good as new. Silence. One minute, two minutes. Ah, here we go. Nope, just the same ones. Anything else? Concentrate, concentrate. Crow. Boy is he far away. Guess: six hundred thirty meters. Anything more? Seven minutes fifty-seven, fifty-eight, fifty-nine, time's up.

Now I'm really cold. Car warmth has worn off. The cold's seeping in and the trail gets steep. This is going to be like walking on butter crème icing. The struggling will warm me. Fourteen stations to go. How far, GPS? Two hundred twelve meters. This could take a while. Shit. There's no footing; I'm sliding back already; six inches of grease on everything. Snow squeaks under my boots. Kind of pleasant. The joys of sub-zero. When it gets to ten degrees, if it gets there, the squeaking will go away. But for now... Slogging, holding onto branches, pulling myself up the smallest incline. But, I'm generating heat, breathing heavy, making my chest burn.

Jeez. Ten minutes to walk two hundred yards. It should be three minutes. It's going to be a long morning. 7:16; sun's up in a few minutes. I'll see it hit the treetops, turning them shiny against the brooding recesses of the understory, glittering from their hoarfrost; jingling, jewel-laden branches waving in the first breaths of morning.

So, who cares what birds live in the woods in winter? Nobody. Nobody cares. Why would anyone? No tracks on this trail. Eight minutes, slogging, eight minutes, slogging, eight minutes, slogging. My neck's getting worse. Icy, sickening, straining to lift it under the weight of clothes and back pack can't be helping.

Station five. One third of the way there; at the summit, along the spine that winds above the white lake below. God, look at this. Frigging Plainville, Connecticut. Look at it—powdery, arching, bouldery slopes slipping upward, past straining trunks, leaning, groaning, sparkling in ice needles; sinewy, serpentine knife-edge summit, flooded in light; photons dancing, extending outward in bell blue atmosphere to alabaster fog, hugging the ground, ice fog, hanging in the valleys, coating the lowlands. The ridges rise above bathing in the feeble December sun.

The scene is set; my stomach churns, my ribs rise tender through multiple layers with each inhalation. The sickly fingers extend down into my shoulders. I must focus. I hope I'm not too sick to walk back—a long walk for an ailing body.

Ah, what's that? Something different. Heavy flapping. Ah ha. Croaking—a raven. Wrong symbol, or is it? He's right over that ridge. Let's look at the map. How far? How about that; eight hundred forty meters. Even from here that voice is like nothing else. Hmm. He's all alone. There should be another somewhere. We'll see. Time to plod along.

Boy, things are sparse up here. It fits, I suppose, everybody's down at the coast for the winter. Well, we'll see. Still a way to go, along this ridge, past the lake, descending into the valley below, ending up way over there by the next lake. I wonder if the ice is thick enough for fishing yet. No signs of anybody down there. If it stays like this it sure will be. The hoarfrost isn't fading at all yet. Probably by the time I finish; it usually doesn't last much past ten o'clock.

Okay, eight minutes. Silence. Nothing. It is dead. I wish it would liven up so I weren't focusing on the weight spreading down my shoulders. I feel like my neck is shoving a knife into my brain. Temporal lobes feel like they're going to explode out sideways, leaving the top of my head to flop down onto my teeth. I'm too sick to be doing this. What is wrong with me? It's not flu; I'm not run down. It can't really be that; fantasies can't be this organic. Oh, boy; it's just growing and growing. It would not be good to pass out here. I could freeze to death. Nobody'd find me till next spring. What a sight. Wrens using my hair to make nests; worms coming out my eyeballs... Stop it! What am I doing this to myself for? Who will take care of Chicken Little? Come on, mind. Stop this.

Eight minutes. Two stations with zero birds? Not the first time, I suppose. But cold mornings are usually active. You have to eat a lot of food to keep from freezing. Frozen bugs. How appetizing can they be? There's just nothing here. Here we go—kinglet. Right here. Where is he? Oh, I see him. Five meters. Here they come. Chickadees—one, two, four, five; titmouse—first one all morning. One, two; Downy Woodpecker, nuthatch—two. Now it's jumping. And there they go. Well, not quite yet. Here's another wave—chickadee, another titmouse, kinglet, kinglet. Ah, creeper. Isn't it? Yes. Call's too long to be a kinglet. Zeeeeeeet. There he is—I see him. Fifty meters.

Think I'll measure this guy. Got to keep my eyes sharp. Okay, where is that tape measure? Such a pain in the ass taking off the backpack with all these clothes on. Turning makes my ribs ache more. I wish I could throw up or something. Get it out of me. All right. Attach it here. Ten meters, mark; ten meters, mark; ten more, ten more. What have we got? Forty-six meters. Good. How big are these trees here, anyway? Let me check while I've got this out. Twelve inches. This one? Fourteen. Another fourteen. That's about it. What I guessed. Let's see, that makes them thirty to thirty-five centimeters. Okay; continue. Fingers are thawing out, anyway.

Eight minutes. Slogging, sliding, plodding. Eight minutes. Drifting back to silence. That flock sucked the woods dry. Eight minutes. Here's more. Another jay. How did the Indians ever survive here? All these nuclear powered clothes and I'm still not having fun.

Oh, look at that—owl, like a ghost; right through the trees. Not even a sound. What is he? Let's see—yeah, he's pretty red—Great-horned. God, is he big. Owl, what do you know that I don't? Sitting on babies yet? Soon? Don't like me being here? Me either.

Okay, we're getting there. Two more. Eight minutes. Goldfinch. Where have you been all morning? Here's another, and another. Robin. How about that? I thought they might be here. Where is he? Can't see him. Over there somewhere. Seventy meters. Just flight calls.

I've got to be done with this before I split in half. Today's the day; it is coming. It can't be, but it is. I can feel the hairs on my legs standing out beneath all this; on my arms, on the back of my neck. It's rising up; I can't control it. Why should I even think this?

One more. Eight more minutes. Let me be done. Seven minutes, six, five, four, three...

Okay, got to make it back. There's a big log I passed a few stations back, right out on the ridge where I could sit with the sun in my face. Just let me make it to there. Then I'll rest.

Here we go: foot in front of foot. Just do it. The snow's squeaking is gone. It must have made it to ten. It's the magic number, when it becomes bearable, pleasant even on a day like this, were it not for the pulsing ache extending to my fingernails. Foot in front of foot.

I'm sweating. At ten? No, really sweating. Unbutton my coat. Keep walking. And walking... I see it. Just to there. Come on, keep going. One, two three. Come on. Just a few more. What did Pop keep saying? "Oh, god; oh, god; oh, god." Sit; close my eyes. All right, just do it. The air wreaks of open soda bottles, so just do it. Sweet, sugary, syrupy thick treatment for pounding ribs. Do I need to say it three times? Please do it.

I can't stop my eyes from rolling upward into the sockets of my swimming, reeling, swaying, circling, roller coasting head. Hold it up with my hands; just keep eyes closed and sit like this. See if it passes—passes out through wrenching ribs, out of ears crackling to thunderbolt crescendo, until it's all white, fluffy, angelic, virginal; not bad, just soft and feathery, on

dreamy fresh sheets, lemony delicious, comforting safe; all at once clean, crystalline pure, in honey silence. Not bad, not bad.

Nothingness, timelessness, spacelessness, infinite perfection.

Gasping in.

Forged steam rises billowing—a newly minted penny, bronzy, glistening in rivulets, falling, cascading, waterfall brooks, joining, parting, anastomizing braided streams, ending in showers from beaded ringlets. She stands erect, arms extended down, palms out, with head bowed and eyes closed in the torrent rushing from her lashes. Growing puddles form at her feet, spreading as ink spots out into the snow, trickling off exposed shoulders, in sheets across uncovered abdomen, ultimately pouring from bare legs to where all combine, curving and wheeling, toward the river rushing ankleward. Gravity.

She is fresh and dewy sweet, like leaning blooms of snowdrops on their first morning—heady with hyacinth scent wafting in soda sugar waves, but remaining as silent as early March before the cacophony of spring. She is serene, ageless, untroubled and free, standing in a state of flowing symmetry.

My own pains have subsided, being released into contented exhaustion, blissful that this had come, relieved from the shuddering uncertainty of what might be. I sit back on the log, eyes fixed on the rigid maiden. Vapor dissipates, the river ebbs. I rise to inspect her. Should I touch? Speak? I draw up to her face and whisper, “Can you hear me? Are you okay?” Nothing. Statuesque she remains, unmoving, unbreathing. My index finger reaches across and touches hers. She is steamy tepid, amidst the frigid landscape, in this bracing, heatless air she is warm. How long can this continue? Should I prod her, shake her? Is she here just for this? There must be...

She stirs, from everywhere, shivering and rising upward until convulsing bows her, leaning, gulping, with choking gasps. Her head rises, matted, dripping hair parting and falling back, with eyes languidly open, fixed on mine, drawing me into the bottomless lake, to Venus’ looking glass. She moans, barely audibly, “ohhhhh,” and goes limp, shoulders slumping, knees buckling.

I reach forward to steady her shaking form and speak: “There’s ice on you. You can’t stay like this. Understand?” She stares through me, not resisting. “Here, sit...” I balance her with one hand and pull a raincoat from my pack with the other, placing it across the log and then grasping her arms to seat her. “Can you sit up?” I ask. She begins to keel left. I hold her shoulder and wriggle from my coat with my free arm; I then push down the straps from my ski pants and let them fall below my waist. I sit next to her, holding her body up with mine, leaning forward to untie boots and pull off the overlying thermal socks. Ski pants slide down with a tug from my ungloved fingers.

I take her hands and brush ice crusts from them. “I’m going to dress you,” I say. Her eyes are closed and she leans limply, fading from any semblance of consciousness. I grab her chin and lift her face to mine. Her eyes flutter open and closed. “Are you with me?” I ask. I struggle out of my thermal shirt and long underwear, and sit in t-shirt and underpants, leaning her forward to my chest to pull the underwear up her legs, and lifting her at the waist so I can slip arms in sleeves and bring the top across her back. I button buttons and pull the sweatshirt over her head. Her feet are losing their color. I hold and rub them with my bare fingers before pulling socks onto them. Now ski pants, now my coat, my mittens, my extra woolen cap, pulled low over her ears.

I stretch back on my thermal and flannel shirts, my lined pants and boots, lacing them more tightly to account for the lost socks. My rubber raincoat fits easily over these. Now my backpack. I turn to her: “Can you stand? We have two miles ahead of us. Are you warming up?” She leans forward and rests her forehead on my chest, with arms lifeless at her sides. I inspect her face, which seems pink enough. “All right, then. I’m praying the footing’s getting better, because you’re a long drink of water and I’m a little, skinny guy. We’ll do it, though. It’ll take a while, but we’ll do it.” I lift her in my arms and step silently into the tracks I left on my way up.

We trudge in two hundred-yard increments. I find fallen logs and snowy boulders to rest on, checking her hands and feet each time I stop, rubbing them to ensure they are warm. She manages to keep her arm about my neck as I walk, and elicits a weak groan each time I set her down. Still, she appears well enough, save for a few wheezing coughs. Her breathing is steady, the pulse in her neck rhythmic and strong. Any sense of cold has departed from me in straining labor, and I hope my warmth sufficiently transmits to her.

Three hours evaporate in the slippery climb down the mountain, but saplings come into view and I force myself to make the last segment with no more breaks. I cross a frozen creek and the forest canopy at last gives way.

There it is—the truck, as I left it. Other cars drive by witnessing me carrying the bundled woman to the passenger door. None stop. I stand her up against the open door and fold her into the seat, lifting her legs and pushing them in as well. I strap her in, jog to the driver’s seat, switch on the ignition and turn to her, again lifting her chin. “Do you need anything?” I ask. She focuses on me and feebly reaches her mittened hand to my knee. I turn onto the road, and we begin our silent journey back.

“How are you doing? Here we are. I’m going to come around and get you, okay?”

The warmth of the car seems to have rallied her. She still appears dazed, but lifts her head and follows me with her eyes. She fumbles for the door handle, which she attempts to turn.

“Ready? I’m going to lift you out,” I say, opening the door and standing before her. “Want to try standing?”

“Mmm,” she says.

I lift her by her forearms and lean her against the car. “If I hold you up do you want to try taking some steps?” She pulls her leg up but falls forward on me. “It’s okay; you’re making progress. You can hear me, anyway. I’m going to carry you in, sit you down and look you over. Ready?” She extends her arm over my neck as I place one hand behind her back and the other beneath her knees. I lift her worryingly light frame and carry her to the door, which I brace her against while I unlock it. I step through and carry her to the kitchen, where I deposit her into one of the cushioned parlor chairs that are kept by the windows.

“Let me get you out of some of these,” I say. She leans forward while I pull her arms out the sleeves of the coat and slip the straps of the ski pants from her shoulders. I pull off the pants, which leaves her sitting in long underwear and a sweatshirt.

The commotion rouses my elderly poodle from her bed by the radiator. She shuffles over and places her nose on my guest's bare ankle. "Say hello to your new auntie," I say.

"I never had poodles," a feminine voice murmurs.

I look up from my kneeling position: "The first thing you say is I never had poodles?" The bedraggled face attempts a smile. I grasp her hands and say, "You're fine," and run my fingers from her ankles to thighs, then stand to continue feeling with fingertips along her ribs, up to her shoulders, and across the back of her neck. "You seem fine to me, as far as I can tell. Do you want to see yourself?" I grab a round mirror lying on the adjacent table and hold it to her face. Her eyes narrow into focus, and her lips part as they do. She sits silent.

"Your beautiful, Julianne," I say.

Her head sways back. "My name; I'm Julianne."

"You are." Her eyes close, and her lips curl in a weak smile. "Do you want food; something to drink? Or how about I bathe you and put you into something warm you could wear to bed? You probably should sleep. I'm going to let Chicken Little keep an eye on you while I run a tub, okay?"

She remains still, eyes closed in near slumber. "Chicken Little—I love it..." she sighs, drifting off.

"Okay Chico, give me a minute. Want to go out first? Come on, quick; it's still really cold." I open the kitchen door and usher her out, glancing at the thermometer. "Fifteen degrees. Oh, boy. Get your chicken self out and back here fast." A poodle with snow-powdered paws re-enters and I run upstairs.

I let the water run into the tub of my wife's bathroom, which is immediately adjacent to our bedroom, and say thanks for no frozen pipes. When I judge the temperature to be elbow warm, I place in the drain plug

and run back down the stairs to the sleeping maiden. I gather up and carry her to the bedroom, where I lay her on the unmade bed, with sheets turned back as I left them a lifetime ago. She is unresponsive as I undress her and perform a more critical examination of her bare skin. I pull her legs down over the end of the bed to test their reflexes. I take her temperature, her pulse, place my ear onto her sternum and listen to her heart, press fingers into abdomen and sides. She passes my more detailed exam. I then rummage through an adjacent bureau to find a sphygmometer—a gadget my wife uses to keep track of her blood pressure. I slide her arm into its inflatable sleeve and pump in air. While listening through the attached stethoscope, I open the pressure valve, which lets the air escape with an audible hiss. First a lub-lub-lub reaches my ears, and then as more air escapes the sound stops. I read a blood pressure of 110 over 60—pretty much the same as mine. She is running like clockwork; bony, to be sure, but her muscles are supple and toned. What manner of miracle this is I care not to fathom.

I lift and carry her to the tub, where I dangle her legs into the water and set her in. The warm water revives her, and she opens her eyes when I rest her back against the rear of the tub. She acts drunk, sitting up and giggling as I pour cups of water onto her shoulders and hair. She looks at me but does not speak. I take a washcloth to spread soapy water down her back, and soap the lengths of her legs to her toes, where I again inspect for any signs of frostbite. There are none. She sits obligingly, allowing the bath to proceed. Regina has thankfully left a bottle of shampoo next to the tub, so I pull her lower into the water so that I might wash her hair. When I complete this I sit her back up and her hair streams drips that plop to the water below, breaking the silence that otherwise has come to fill the room. I contemplate her sitting there, in my wife's tub, this imagined and now real figment—this

tender thing that occupies the space before me. I pull the plug, allow the water to drain and blot her dry before bundling her into a towel and carrying her to the bed.

She lies flat while air completes the drying. I search drawers for something to dress her in, and find a long, flannel nightgown that I bunch up and place over her head. I lift her to sitting and pull the nightgown down her torso, and then I lay her back down so I may search for a brush in the adjacent bathroom. I find none, so walk to my own bathroom to retrieve my hairbrush, which I clean and wash. While she lies with head resting on my favorite pillow, I place my hand behind her neck and proceed to draw the brush through her wet hair. I raise her head up to complete the process, which makes her smile. “Do you want me to part it on the middle or side, 30’s style?” I ask. She opens and closes her eyes, appearing giddy, but does not answer. “This is a Dexter brush,” I continue. “Remember them? Back when Americans made things and they actually lasted? I’ve been using this same brush for fifty years. How many people could say that? I mean, don’t worry, I made it all clean before I let it touch you. And look at this—it still works.” I choose to part her hair on the left side, and brush down the hair that extends to her shoulders. She reaches up and places her hand on my neck. “I’m done carrying you for now,” I say, and she settles back. I pull blankets over her, tuck them up to her chin and kiss her forehead. She drifts off, smile still intact on her faultless face.

Now what? It’s mid-afternoon and she’s sound asleep. Go back to life as usual? What’s usual now? Sit here and work? And concentrate? Call my wife and say, “Gee, it’s good you’re away. Your side of the bed is taken up?” How about eating, neatening up? I’ve got a houseguest. Or should I just sit here and watch her? Nap. I could lie next to her and nap.

Sleep.

She wakes. It is five o’clock under a starry sky. She pulls herself up, waking me. Her arms stretch down behind her and she looks about the room. “This isn’t my room,” she says dully.

“It’s not,” I reply, turning my face to hers. “How do you feel?”

She rubs her eyes and tentatively runs her fingers through her hair. “Don’t know... Funny, being able to talk to you, and hear you.”

“Funny being able to hear you too. Your voice—it’s girlish and high-pitched. I’ve heard it like that before.”

“So have I, a long time ago.”

“A long time ago. Could you eat something?”

“I can’t feel my stomach.”

“It’s there; I checked. Suppose I made you something? Soup, tea, anything?”

“Milk.”

“Ah, good idea; that might be a way to start. I wish they had sent an instruction manual with you.”

“They?”

“The storks. Maybe I should warm it up a little. Would you like that?”

“Yes, I think.”

I press the back of my hand to her forehead. “Your cheeks are rosy, your eyes are clear. It will just take a few minutes. Don’t try to get up without me, okay?”

“Okay.”

I descend the stairs, holding onto the railing, and shuffle into the kitchen. Luckily there is milk—never a sure thing in this household. I heat some in a pan and pour it into a lidded, plastic baby cup used for grandchild visits. I climb the stairs with milk and a box of animal crackers I find in the cabinet.

“We can take the lid off this if you think you can drink from it okay; otherwise you can sip through the top, okay?” I show her the crackers. “I thought these were bland enough that maybe you’d want to try one of them.” I hand her the milk. She leaves the lid on and sips from it.

“What year is it?” she asks between sips.

I stare vacantly while opening the box of crackers. I hand her one, which she raises to her lips and bites into. “The last day of 2007,” I say.

“I’m ninety-nine.”

“Are you?”

She swallows the cracker. “These are good,” she says.

I hand her another, which she gingerly bites into and sips more milk.

“Does it seem to be going down okay?” She brings her focus to me and nods yes, but her eyes have become glassy. “Feel all right?”

“Yes, just so tired.”

“Understandable, I suppose. You can go back to sleep soon, and we’ll assess where we go from here tomorrow. Are you sore or uncomfortable anywhere? Anything I should know about?”

She shakes her head no.

“I thought I should stay with you tonight, if that’s okay. If you have any troubles I want to be here next to you.”

“How did I get here?” she asks.

“I carried you up the stairs.”

“Before that.”

“I drove you here, or do you mean...”

“I knew I was coming.”

“So did I, but I don’t know how. I just knew.”

“I’m young, aren’t I?”

“Yes. I’m the old one now. Is that what you wished for?”

“It’s how I think of myself. Am I pretty?”

“Like an angel.”

“I liked being pretty and important. Am I an angel?”

“You don’t have any wings. Aren’t angels supposed to have them?”

“I feel like I’m floating.”

“Well, if you’re not an angel I don’t know what is.”

“Do you like me, then?”

“Since the day we met.”

“At my house?”

“Yes. I knew you were there.”

“I knew you knew.”

“You overwhelmed me. The sadness was unbearable and I couldn’t understand why.”

“I knew you were sad for me. You’ve gone there several times since.”

“I was working on a natural history book. Doing research. You were with me?”

“You talked to me.”

“I did.”

“But showing up in a storm at night—kind of gothic, don’t you think?”

“You know about that. You’ve been with me every day?”

“Yes, maybe.”

“Why?”

“I just was. You were the only person I...”

“I could smell you.”

“What was I like?”

“Soda.”

“Soda. When I was whispering in your ear?”

“Yes; that’s what I thought you were doing. I even said that to someone.”

“You told?”

“It sounded metaphorical; I don’t think they realized I meant it.”

“Who would believe?”

“Who?”

“I didn’t believe at first; I didn’t know…” She slumps her head forward and rubs her hands over her face, saying nothing more for several moments. “James, I’m very tired,” she manages.

“You said my name.”

“And you mine.”

“It’s nice.”

“Yes. I like knowing you’ll be next to me. I like it that I can touch you. I’ve wanted to.”

“I kept trying.”

“So did I.”

“So now we can. I’ll keep you safe tonight. Promise.”

“Is this what a miracle is, James?”

“It would seem to be, wouldn’t it? But is it? I don’t know.”

She lays back down and I pull the covers up to her chin.

“I have to close up. Can I leave you for a minute?” She does not answer, but already appears asleep. I take care of my duties and return shortly to slip under the blankets with her. It is only early evening, but considering the day I know there is nothing more for me to do. I have not eaten myself and do not care to. I switch off the bedside light and turn to my left side. We sleep.

Morning. It streams through the window on shafts that illuminate my face, waking me. It’s late for me: 7:30. I should be in the field. I’m wasting a ...

Oh, god. Burning flashes. She’s here. Real. Sleeping, innocent Norman Rockwell girl. She breathes evenly, chest rising and falling rhythmically. Is she twenty-nine, thirty? That’s what I think of myself as being. Regina would make me dead if she saw us here. “I could explain,” would not suffice. Explain what? If I move I could wake her. Watching her sleep—why would I rush it away? She’s peaceful; happy, even.

She stirs. I roll to my right side and face her, propping my head with my hand. Her eyes open; she stares at the ceiling and turns groggy to me. “Happy new year, Julianne,” I whisper.

She rolls to her side and faces me, staring in a half-conscious daze. “You see me,” she murmurs at last. I smile. “Hold me,” she says, reaching her arms to me from under the covers. I pull her close and press against her. We say nothing. I feel her hands spread wide at my back and concentrate on her slight frame; how thin she seems even compared to me. Her face wets my neck; drops trickle to my arm. “I’ve been so afraid,” she whispers. “I couldn’t breathe, I couldn’t feel, couldn’t touch anything; no one could hear me—only you seemed to know.”

My nose is buried in her russet hair—the color my wife’s turns when she is in prolonged sunshine. “It’s okay now; we made it all better. You and

me, together.” I pat her back and kiss her hair. “I’ll take good care of you. You can be part of the family. I’ll do whatever you need. Everything will be okay.”

“Promise,” she says.

“I do.”

She releases me and stretches her arms. “Air is so wonderful; smells, taste. I’ve wanted this.”

“And you have it. Sit up and let me look at you.” She places her hands beneath herself and pushes back to the bed’s headboard. “Do you remember yesterday?” I ask.

“A little.” She lifts her heavy eyelids. “You gave me a bath.”

“I did.”

“You saw me.”

“You’re perfect.”

“Even my skinny bottom?”

“Your bottom’s just fine.” She smiles, wiping the wet corners of her eyes with her fingers. “Why don’t we get up and I’ll try feeding you. Want to try walking? I’ll help you.” I pull back covers and walk around to her side, where I take her legs and pull them so they dangle to the floor. She steadies herself with her hand on my arm, rises and begins to take steps. I clasp her waist and we head to the stairs. “Start with baby steps” I say.

“Think you can do this?”

“Yes,” she answers. She grasps the banister and with me at her side she descends, step by step, and we walk to the kitchen together. I help her into the same chair she sat in when I first brought her into the house.

“Do you remember sitting here?” I ask.

“Yes; I think so.” She surveys the room, squinting to focus on its details.

A sleepy poodle saunters over to greet us. “This is Chicken Little,” I say.

She leans toward the dog and reaches out to pet her. “Hello, Chicken Little. I’m your new friend.” The dog allows herself to be scratched beneath her chin.

“I’ve got to let her out for a minute. Come on Chico. It’s chicken tinkle time.” She waddles out the door, takes care of her duties and waddles back in, shaking snow from herself.”

“Why do you keep her in the kitchen?”

“She is a very senior dog, and her bladder control is not what it used to be.”

A frown grows across her face and she again stretches her hand toward the dog, which she again pets. “Oh, Chicken Little, I didn’t like being old either.”

“I hope you didn’t get crotchety like her.”

“I did. There was a lot to be mad about. You don’t know.”

“I have some idea. I took care of my father. He told me that whatever I do, I should not get old.” I walk to the refrigerator. “So what can I make you? Maybe we should start with something bland, like oatmeal or something like that. You did okay with cookies and milk last night. Or do you want to dive right into bacon and eggs?”

“Cookies and milk?”

“Yes. Low fat milk.”

“Oh, bacon. That sounds divine.”

“You sure you’re up to it?”

“Why not?”

“I have no good answer for you. I’ve been guessing since yesterday.”

She takes her fingertips and touches her cheekbones, and then cradles her face in her hands while her eyelids droop to closing. “What was it like?” she asks.

“You, you mean?”

“Yes.”

“I think it was the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen. Like Gabriel spreading his wings.”

“Will you tell me everything?”

“Yes, if you’d like.” I take a package of bacon from the refrigerator and pry apart strips, which I place into a pan.

Her eyes remain closed. “I don’t remember much of anything until the bath tub. There I was, in a tub, with a man very carefully washing me.”

“I was treating you like you were the most precious thing in history. Maybe you are. I had to carry you two miles down a mountain, you know, and it was absolutely frigid.”

“Really?” she says, struggling to open her eyes.

“Yes, really. I dressed you in my clothes to keep you warm.”

“What did you wear?”

“I had enough. But I was getting so tired I thought my arms would fall off.”

“Even with a lightweight like me?”

“Good thing you are. I’m not so big either. Maybe we should go back there some day—some day when it’s springy and warm. It’s very pretty. Unexpected. You can see Meriden and Hartford.”

“Home.”

“Home; yes. But this is home for now.”

“Where are we?”

“My home.”

“I’ve never been.”

I flip the bacon strips in the accumulating grease that crackles in the pan. “No? Well, you’ve been now. Let’s fatten you up a little. Do you want to do home fries, onions and the whole bit?”

“Why not?”

“All right, then. You sit right there and I’ll cater to you. Cooking is not my greatest skill but I can manage. How do you want your eggs?”

She glances up and then back to me. “Over easy.”

“Okay, then.” I retrieve a carton of eggs from the refrigerator and place it on the countertop next to the stove.

“We’re so matter-of-fact about this, aren’t we?” she says, resting her head on the back of the chair. “As if it happens all the time.” Her eyes follow me as I busy myself searching for ingredients and cutting up potatoes and onions.

“I’ve been thinking,” I say. “This can’t be the only time this has happened; maybe it’s just that no one ever tells. How could you? Who would believe it?”

“I’ve known it was going to happen almost since I met you. I should be surprised, I suppose, but I’m not.”

“So how are you?”

She rises and takes tentative steps on her own, placing her hand on the island in the center of the kitchen to steady herself. “I feel good; better and better. Can I come and watch?” She takes more steps unaided. “I remember how to do this,” she says.

“You are doing well, aren’t you?”

She smiles. “I am.”

I return to cooking and soon have plates ready for us. “Coffee, tea, juice?” I ask.

“Whatever you’re having,” she answers.

“Suppose we sit in the breakfast room? I’ll fix a place for you in there. There’s a radiator; it will be cozy. Why don’t you go sit and I’ll bring it to you?”

“All right.” She walks unsteadily but under her own power to the small room off the kitchen.

I bring in tea, juice, and two plates. “Just let me get utensils and napkins,” I say.

“This is lovely,” she says when I re-enter, placing knife, fork and spoon adjacent to her plate. “The view out your windows is beautiful.”

I sit. “The garden is designed to be showy at all seasons—even winter. My wife designed it. See the way the conifers and fruiting shrubs are arranged? She’s a master at that kind of thing.”

“I would say she is. And these paintings on the walls—they’re wonderful.”

“They’re my wife’s too.”

“She’s very good. I liked to paint, you know.”

“I do. And you’re not past tense.” Her eyes brighten and I reach to her and pat her back. “I’ve seen some of your paintings. They’re also quite good. I was impressed.”

“You saw them?”

“Yes.”

“How?”

“With the internet anything is possible.”

She stares out toward the garden and tentatively lifts her fork. “Oh ... I don’t know much about that. Didn’t own a computer; couldn’t become part of the modern world.” She takes a bite of egg and swallows. “When I was young, I wasn’t afraid of anything. I felt like I could do anything. But then,

little by little...” She furrows her brow. “I don’t want to think about that. Tell me about your wife. Is she a professional?”

“You aren’t young?”

“Am I?”

“You are, I think. But what do I know?”

“Tell me about your wife,” she repeats.

“Okay. She’s an art celebrity. She left the day after Christmas for Texas. She’s spending some time there painting for her gallery in Austin. When she gets back the two of you can go off painting together.”

“Are you going to tell her I’m here?” She continues to eat, slowly and with small portions passing between her barely opening lips.

I raise my eyebrows and smile. “I haven’t figured out what I’m going to say yet, but I will have to tell her something. She is likely to notice when she comes home.”

“Do you think she’ll mind?”

My eyes involuntarily open wide and I examine intently the face that remains fixed on the landscape beyond the window. “I can’t imagine what she’ll think. In any event, we’ll deal with that.”

She stops her nibbling and contracts her focus until her gaze meets mine. “What’s she like, your wife?”

“After all the time we’ve spent together you don’t know?”

“It wasn’t like this, James; not at all. I just knew you.” Her lips turn down and I again lose her eyes as they drift toward the frost-framed window.

“She’s something like I imagine you to be—passionate, tempestuous, driven, focused, obsessive, difficult. Does any of that sound familiar?”

“Yes. All of it.” She crunches a slice of bacon.

“And you think you’re a drama queen? I’ll show you a drama queen. You have more in common than you know.”

“Such as?”

“Well, she had a brief acting career once. Not like you, I mean, but still... And she’s also a beauty like you—a different kind, but quite a beauty. Men can’t leave her alone. Young ones, old ones, single, married; it doesn’t matter. Even now as we approach sixty it continues—at an only slightly reduced pace.”

Her eyes turn back to mine. “Does it bother you?”

“Oh, sometimes. She is a flirt, or she used to be.”

She smiles, lifting another slice of bacon to her lips. “I could be a flirt too.”

“That must have been something.”

“It was fun.”

“What guy in his right mind could resist you?”

“None.” She laughs.

I lean forward and make note of her rosy cheeks. “Humor even; you are doing well.”

She leans back in her chair and sips tea while her eyes explore the recesses of the tiny room. “I am. I love sitting here with you,” she says softly.

“So, how’s it going down?”

“Just like ever. Like I never left. Thank you.”

“Well, you’re welcome.”

“How can all this be?”

“If I knew, it would be quite something. I can tell you that the anticipation was enough to split me in half.”

She slides her hand across the table to me. “Don’t go and do that. Who would look after me?”

“You could send feminists into orbit with a line like that. But, in any event, guys will be lining up for that privilege.”

“You think?”

“Yes, I think.”

A smile spreads slowly across her face, which she lifts so she can fix her gaze on me. “But, under the circumstances, it’s not quite so simple as just charging back out into the world, is it?”

“Not for you, or me, for that matter.” I take some sips of tea and lean back. “We’re going to have to do some shopping for you today. You need to have some things to wear, and personal things. You know, your own toothbrush.”

“A toothbrush.” Her smile renews. “Am I presentable enough to be seen in public?”

I shake my head. “You’ll pass.”

Her head tilts forward and she examines her plate. She furrows her brow, raises back up, and again surveys the room, from ceiling to floor, and then looks through me to the window at my rear.

I touch her hand to bring her back. “Let’s get you up and walking; see if we can get your legs steady enough to go on an outing later. Ready?”

With slender arms grasping the table she pushes back her chair and begins to rise. “Yes, I want to get back to life,” she says.

“Let’s do it, then. Leave the dishes here; I’ll deal with them later.” We rise and she takes my arm. We walk together to the stairs, and I hold her elbow while she ascends them. We reach the top of the stairs and I notice that her expression is fading to vacant.

“James, something’s not right,” she says.

“What?”

“I’m feeling funny.”

“Light-headed? What?”

“I’m going to be sick.”

“Right now?”

“Yes.”

“Come on.” I lead her to the bathroom. “Kneel down and I’ll hold you. I lift the toilet seat. She becomes white and begins to reel, but I hold her from behind. “I’m right here; just hang on,” I say. She is sick, again and again. She leans back and I support her with my legs and abdomen. We stay motionless and minutes pass. “Are you done?” I whisper. She nods yes. “Let’s rinse your mouth out and then I’ll lay you down.” I turn on the faucet in the adjacent sink and fill a cup with water. She takes a mouthful and rinses into the toilet.

I pick her up and carry her to the bed, where I prop her head on several pillows and sit next to her, holding her hands. “Is it passing? I ask. She nods yes, and stares dully at the ceiling. The corners of her eyes fill with tears, and several escape down her cheeks

“This isn’t going to work,” she says to herself.

I take hold of her shoulders. “Yes, it is—you were just going too fast. My instincts told me you shouldn’t eat anything that rich yet. We’ll go back to bland and ease you into other food.”

She lies silently, closing her eyes and becoming motionless. Moments pass, and then she begins to speak: “James, who are we kidding? I can barely walk; I can’t even eat. None of this is right. It’s not natural. Even the great Julianne O’Neill can’t cheat death.” Her face sinks into her hands.

I sit frozen for a moment, but then pull her hands away and cradle her face with my own hands. “Julianne, you didn’t cheat death, so stop it, and we don’t really know what natural is, do we? If you want to get back to life you’re going to have to live with the hard parts, too. You did before, didn’t

you? You did fine with what I gave you last night; there’s nothing wrong with your stomach. I promised you everything would be okay and it will be.” I pause and smile. “You are right about one thing, though.”

She slips her face back into her own hands. “What?” she mumbles, with face covered.

“You are great; you certainly can deliver a line.”

“Damn right,” she says through muffling fingers.

“See, you are okay.” I laugh and rub the top of her head. “You just went too fast. You didn’t come all the way back to give up that easily, did you?” I study her face. “Your color’s coming back already.”

“Okay doctor.” She dries her eyes with the edge of the sheet. “Why should I trust you so much, anyway?”

“Oh, because you can.”

“You really think I’m okay?”

“Yes, you’re okay. Look at you. Women would die to look like you.”

“I already tried that.”

“Look on the bright side—it worked.”

“Very funny.”

“Never mind that. You lay here and I’m going to make some oatmeal. You’re going to eat a little and see that you’re just fine. Then maybe we should take you to the doctor’s office and have him tell you the same thing, just so you’ll be sure.”

A trace of smile returns. “Okay,” she manages.

I raise myself to leave but turn back to say, “God, you’re cute when you pout.” She pulls a pillow up to her abdomen, and presses her face to it. “Christ, Julianne,” I add.

“Watch what you say,” she says from the pillow.

“I guess we don’t want Big G mad, do we? I’ll be back in a few minutes.” I run downstairs and prepare some oatmeal, using low fat milk and no butter. I also brew more tea. All these I arrange on a tray and bring to the bedroom, where I place the tray on the bed and say, “This is more like it; breakfast in bed, right?” Julianne’s eyes are closed when I first sit, but she opens them and slowly pulls herself to sitting. “How are you feeling now?” I ask.

“Better, I think; a little cold. What are you doing?”

I lift a spoon from the bowl of oatmeal. “I’m going to feed you. Listen to your doctor.” I bring a spoon to her lips and she opens her mouth. “I guessed you liked sugar on it. Was I right?” She swallows and I feed her a second spoonful. “So?”

“Not as good as bacon.”

“We’ll try bacon again in a few days. If that works, I’ll make you bacon three times a day if that’s what you want. Chicken Little will celebrate. She’ll be catching every scrap you drop. Come on, open wide.”

“I feel like an infant.” She opens her mouth.

“I suppose we could make that argument. Here comes another one.” She opens again. “How are they going down?”

“Just fine. But so did the bacon.”

“Well, let’s give it a few minutes, and then maybe I’ll even let you feed yourself.”

She swallows and presses her lips together. “Why couldn’t I have known you before?” she says.

“You could have. I keep asking myself that. Do you know how many times I stood on that beach right next to your house? It never even crossed my mind that you were right there. I’ve been there a million times, a hundred yards from your door. It was a standard bird-watching spot for me.

All that had to happen was for you to walk over and ask me if I was seeing anything interesting, like a zillion other people have. Or anything—some chance event that never happened. We could have been friends, for decades. I’ve wondered if I couldn’t have filled up your later years with a new interest—infected you with my passion.”

She lies back on the pillows. “I was secretly floundering during those years. I needed a new direction and couldn’t see what it might be. I still can’t.”

“I have wondered that. Strange that I should, I suppose, but I have. So why do you think you were floundering?”

“I suppose it was because I realized that, for all intents and purposes, my leading lady years were behind me. And I didn’t want them to be. Oh, god I didn’t want them to be. I had gone and grown old. How many leading roles are there for old ladies? I had all this energy and I needed to be putting it somewhere, but I couldn’t see beyond the model I had created for myself. What else could there be? I had this sense that there was something more, but I just couldn’t fathom what it was.”

“Well, you know, we box ourselves in; we don’t see the possibilities. I’ve kicked myself a hundred times for not seeing something until it was too late. I’m so sorry we didn’t meet. We might have been good for each other. It’s so obvious when that happens. When I met my wife, it was like it had been pre-ordained for us to be together from the first instant of time. We both knew.”

“So, we’re making up for it now.”

“When I stood that winter day in your empty yard discovering that you were gone, I knew we had lost still another opportunity. It was as plain to me as if you had just spoken it into my ear.”

She smiles. “I was trying to,” she says. “But James, how will this fit into your marriage?”

I pull myself further onto the bed so that I am sitting cross-legged next to her. “I’ve thought about that, too. We’ve each had our mates, right? Our soul mates, you could say. But one can have friends who are that too, don’t you think?”

“Yes.”

“Do you think we are that? Soul mates?”

“Do you?”

“The evidence would support it, wouldn’t it?”

She places her hand on my knee. “Yes,” she says.

I pick up her hand and squeeze her fingers. “You were not the one I would have picked to have that with. Why should we have anything in common? I’d barely ever thought of you before; didn’t know anything about you and yet there I was, liking you. Then I kept thinking that all you had been was in the past. Everything else was the same—your door, the bricks, the view from your house—all those things were there, but you were not, so even though I discovered I had a bond with you I couldn’t reach you. No matter what I did I couldn’t change that.”

“But you did.”

“We did.”

She turns to her side and supports her chin with her palm. “Yes, we did. But that’s the way it is, though, isn’t it? When we form a bond with someone, it can happen so quickly, based on the subtlest things—how someone says a word, what kind of expressions they make—looking into the soul of a person, you could say. Do you think we have one—a soul?”

“I didn’t used to, but now I am inclined to think so. Do you?”

“There is more than I thought there was, but that much? I don’t know.”

I dip the spoon into the bowl of oatmeal and lift it. “Ready for more oatmeal? It’s settling in just fine, isn’t it?”

She lies back on the pillow and speaks softly: “Yes. You’ve cured me, just as you said. My hero.”

“My heroine. I’m returning the favor. You cured me, too.”

“You mean getting you writing, don’t you?”

“See? You are my soul mate. You know what I’m thinking before I say it. After meeting you I was so filled with this drive. It was suddenly so easy. I would look at a page and it would fill with words as fast as I could write them. I felt possessed.”

She swallows a spoonful of oatmeal. “You were.”

“By you.” I bring another spoonful to her open lips, which she again swallows.

“It’s been all that whispering in your ear. So, between the two of us…”

“Pretty good.”

She sits up. “When you first came walking toward my house I was a little annoyed, you know. Who was this person invading my property, I thought. But I saw you knew I was there. I had been there all alone until then; just me, the surf, the wind, and the empty, old house. It’s all I was aware of. I didn’t know if I had been there a hundred minutes or a hundred years. I couldn’t tell. But then you were there and there was a connection between us. You understood me—and I you.”

I place the oatmeal on a nightstand and take both her hands. “It has been very rare for me to have that with anyone. Most people run the other way when I let them know what I really think.”

She furrows her brow. “It’s rare for all of us, don’t you think?”

“I suppose, although most people I’ve known simply don’t want to think too hard about anything. They’re happy to be superficial friends—it’s enough for them.”

“That’s okay too though, isn’t it?”

“I guess that’s true, but it is the other type of friend I really cherish.”

She again lies back, allowing the pillows to cradle her head. “Well, I think I agree with you there and about most things, for that matter.”

“So what had you been doing before I arrived?”

“Just sitting; looking out to sea. Well, not really sitting. I had nothing to sit with. I remember being very ill, and lying in bed in a kind of muddled state. Nothing was very clear, or intelligible—lost my marbles, you could say. And then I was out there, facing the ocean, forever and ever and ever. I don’t know that I was even thinking—just looking. Unaware. Then at some point I became aware. It was the first time I had thought clearly in a long time, freed from that worn out body. The house was empty and there I was, wondering if I was dreaming. I couldn’t look at myself. There was nothing to see. I couldn’t touch myself, or anything else. I was there waiting, for what I didn’t know—God, maybe, but he didn’t come. You did.”

“It had been six months, you know.”

“Since I had died.”

I study her expression, which, however, has not altered from its already troubled blankness. “We’ve finally gotten around to saying it,” I say.

She sighs. “I suppose it’s time we did. Were you with your wife that day?”

“I was. But no Chicken Little. She was already too old to take on long walks by then.”

“I never saw your wife; have not seen her. Seen isn’t really the right word, though, is it? I had nothing to see with, nothing to hear with. Yet, I

could see, you could say. I could tell your lips were moving, and I knew what you were saying even when they weren’t moving, but it wasn’t that I could hear you—not like now. I didn’t know what your voice sounded like.”

My focus drifts off to infinity, and my voice comes out more weakly than I would wish. “Never seen her even after all the time we spent together…”

“How long?”

“Three years.”

Her eyes move about beneath shut lids, in the fluttering kind of way that eyes do during sleep. “It’s not a state like this,” she also says weakly. “I don’t know how I could describe it. Dreamlike, I suppose. I so longed to leave it—and feared I never could. An eternity of just existing.”

“Well, you have.”

“Until it comes to claim me again.”

I pat her hand. “Maybe not. I don’t think it was that way for my father.”

Her eyes open and she squints, focusing on me. “What do you mean?”

“It’s my guess, kind of. An educated guess, you could say—a hypothesis. He had purpose. He was going somewhere. You don’t seem to have had that. You needed to be here, with me, maybe. Definitely, I suppose. For some reason that we’ll learn, maybe?”

“Why do you think it was different for him?”

“I just told this story. Were you with me when I told it?”

She shakes her head no. “I have no recollection. How would I make memories, by the way, without a brain and all that? You know, physical things.”

“Obviously you have made some. Anyway, I was with him on his last day. He told me he was seeing wounded soldiers around his bed. He had

been in front line combat for the entire Second World War and that's where his mind went. Not too surprising, I suppose. His kidneys had failed; as toxins accumulate in the body people hallucinate. But then, a few hours later when he died, he just flew away. I mean, I heard him. Flew right past me. And that was that—he was gone—quite deliberately and directly, up and out, so I started expecting he knew where he was going. Maybe those soldiers were there to help. But with you it was different. You overwhelmed me. I knew you were right there. So, maybe there was simply no one who could show you what you were supposed to do, although it could be that you had something else to do yet. Like this, maybe. And there was this bond between us. You were someone I knew and understood so well, and why should that have been if you had somewhere else to be? I'm guessing, of course, but ..."

"I had no sense of there being anywhere else I should be. I was home—where else should I be? I began to wonder if I would evaporate a little at a time, so after a while there simply would be nothing left—that that's the way our consciousness is—not entirely confined to the body, but without a body we just fade away to wind. I suppose even that possibility surprised me. I didn't think there could be anything outside the body. That shows how much I know. But it didn't happen. I stayed the same, and that's when I started fearing I could be imprisoned like that."

I shrug my shoulders. "What do any of us really know? We can be as passionately spiritual as we wish, but what do we really know about what comes next? You can't conduct an experiment, can't gather data in any kind of repeatable format. There are just these tantalizing clues—things we may be wildly misinterpreting—but there's nothing to base a judgment on."

She rolls toward me with brow furrowed. "You have other clues?"

"Well, there's my grandmother. I had dreams about her where, after she died, she would show up at my bedside, at seven-year intervals, in fact. Three times. She'd tell me something I hadn't known before—something about my father—and that I shouldn't worry about him. Then, the next day my mother would call and tell me he was in the hospital, but not to worry."

She raises her eyebrows. "I can't say I ever had any experiences like that. Not until now, anyway. Anything else?"

"Well, it's just something curious, now that I think about it."

"What?"

"My father. Dreams about my father. We do things like paint cathedrals together, high on ladders. He's young, like you, like I remember him being when I was little. We work long and hard and then we sit together, shoulder to shoulder, on a little wooden bench where we talk—just like this."

"About what?"

"About painting—about how to do it. It's like he's still teaching me, like he used to, like he still has a few more things to let me know about before he gets completely to where he's going. You know—postscripts."

She pulls herself to upright and leans her forehead on my arm. "Is that what we're doing?"

I lean toward her as well and kiss the part in her hair. "I hope not just that. I want you to stay; need you to even."

She looks up. "And him?"

"The same. I want him to come back so we can continue on together. I'm not complete anymore."

"That's just how I felt when my father left me. Never the same—a gaping hole in a place that was filled by him. It was from him that my strength flowed. I could go out into the world because I knew I had his

foundation beneath me. I could dance on the high wire, you could say, because his safety net was beneath me. Then, suddenly, he wasn't there. Who would catch me when I fell? Who would reassure me that my bruises were just that; that I could recover and continue forward? So, I suppose, it's something about generations. We struggle to become ourselves, independent, but we need all the help we can get. Once that special class of help is gone, we just make our way as best we are able but we never really recover from that loss. Not us—and not them before us.”

I smile. “My Julianne, you are lucid.”

“I like it when you say my name,” she says.

She again leans against me and I encircle her with my arms. “Well, in any event you're back, good as new, it would seem, and I am very glad you are. You get a second shot at being the best. So, why don't we go and verify that everything's working properly? Do you think you're up to it?”

“Can I try walking more first? I can't be hobbling around in public.”

“All right. Let's get your legs in shape. We're going to have to dress you, too. I'm not sure how well any of my wife's things are going to fit you. Her proportions are different than yours.”

She places her hands beneath herself and begins to negotiate to the edge of the bed. “How about your clothes? We're exactly the same size.”

“You could if you want. You wouldn't mind?”

“No.”

“Okay, then you can.”

“Can I see your closet?” She pulls her legs out of the covers and lets her bare feet rest on the floor. She then rises and tries walking unaided, but after a few steps she grabs the bedpost before trying again.

I rise and stand beside her but let her proceed. “Pretty good for only one day old,” I say. I walk her to the guest room where I keep clothes in a

closet, and she thumbs through the shirts and pants. She selects gray dress pants and a blue, pinstriped shirt. “Want some of my underwear?” I ask.

“I guess.”

“In a pinch it will do.” I retrieve a t-shirt, briefs and socks and say, “Can I leave you to do this or do you need help?”

“Let me try,” she says.

“Okay; I'll stay outside the door if you run into trouble.” I step from the room and close the door. Inside I hear her fumbling about, a chair being moved as she sits, and her pulling on clothes. The door opens from her side, and she stands dressed before me. “You did it,” I say. “You fill them out a little differently than I do.”

“I would hope so. Your shirt's baggy on me. I like them like that. It hides how flat I am.”

I shake my head, suppressing a smile. “You're just fine. You look great, even. You can look in my wife's closet for a blazer if you want.”

She stands in front of the mirror on the closet door, looking up and down her frame. “Let me fix up a little first,” she says.

“Okay, you can use Regina's bathroom. That little bureau has some girl stuff in it, I think. Use whatever you need to.”

“Girl stuff?”

“You know, that stuff you put on your faces; I don't know what it is.”

She walks unsteadily to the bathroom, grasps its door, and turns back to me. “Do you think I need anything?” she asks.

I sit on the floor, leaning against the wall and looking up at her. “We're getting into dangerous girl questions already? Of course not—you'd be a goddess no matter what you did. Is that the right answer?”

“It will do,” she says. She closes the bathroom door and does whatever it is that women do in bathrooms. I remain close by, just in case. I hear her

urinating. Check off another organ system working properly, I think. She emerges fresh faced, with twinkling eyes and rosy cheeks.

“Is it starting to seem real?” I ask.

“It is. Too good to be true.”

“Way too good. Want to go?”

“Okay. I’m still a little wobbly, though.”

“I’ll just hold your arm.” We descend the stairs and stand in the great hall, where she inspects the rooms off it.”

“Your house is beautiful, James,” she says.

“Thank you. It’s hard on us, though. It’s so expensive to live here—and so much work. We’re putting you to work here, you know; I need an assistant gardener.”

She steps upon the oriental rugs of the oval parlors and touches the deep mahogany furnishings, peering through icy windows to the yard beyond. “I’m game. I love to dig in the dirt.”

“Brace yourself. It’s three acres of garden.”

“That much? It’s a full-time job keeping up that much.”

“Tell me.”

“Well, I do relish challenges.” She continues her tour, entering the burgundy-draped dining room. “Wow, James,” she says. “The dining room is stunning.”

I lean against the wall, looking up to the layers of crown molding that jut from the ceiling of the half-octagonal room. “It took months to do,” I say.

She turns back to me, with fingers running along the dental work of the fireplace mantle. “You did it?”

“These hands right here. It was a challenge. In an old house like this nothing’s square. Regina designed the drapes and stripped the mantle. We had no idea it was oak underneath.”

“It reminds me of where I grew up,” she says. “It wasn’t as big and grand as this, but it was of the same vintage, with lots of deep oak woodwork. It is comforting somehow to be surrounded by it.”

I step toward her, surveying the oak baseboard and chair rail. “I’ve often thought that; I grew up in an old house, too. We’ll have dinner in here tonight, okay?”

She pushes me. “More oatmeal?”

“I was thinking thin gruel and crusts of dry bread.”

“I can’t wait,” she says.

She holds on to a chair and begins to make her way toward the front door. I place my hand about her tricep to steady her. “We’ll find something good that’s easy on you,” I say. “Let’s go see what the doctor says.” In the entryway I find my wife’s overcoat hanging by the door, which I help her into. “What do you want me to call you,” I ask.

“My friends call me Julia, as you must know.”

We exit and close the door behind us. “Would Julianne be okay? It’s so beautiful.”

She pulls the collar of the coat up around her neck to shield herself against the frigid air. “My father used to call me that sometimes, especially when he was feeling tender. He’d sit next to me and very softly say my name when we had some big talk.”

“So it’s okay, then?”

“Yes. I like it.” We reach the car door. “So where are we going?” she asks.

“There’s a walk-in clinic right down the road. I thought it might be the simplest and most anonymous way.”

I help her into the passenger’s seat and we drive the short distance to the clinic, where we walk together to the reception desk.

“Have you been here before?” the receptionist asks.

“No,” she answers.

“Can you fill this out then, please?” The receptionist hands her a clipboard with a form to fill out. We walk to the waiting area and seat ourselves.

“James, what do I write?” she whispers. She stares at the form and struggles with the pen.

“Coordination’s not so good yet?” I whisper back.

“I’ll manage,” she mumbles, focusing on the clipboard lying upon her lap.

“Want me to do it for you?”

She does not lift her eyes from the paper. “No. I want to.” She scrawls out her name and begins filling in the boxes on the form. “I used my real name; is that okay, do you think?”

“I think so. Just fill it out truthfully, more or less. Let me look at it when you’re done, though.” She struggles through the form and then hands it to me. I inspect it and make one alteration. “I changed your birth date from 1908 to 1978,” I whisper. “That makes you twenty-nine. Good idea, don’t you think?” She widens her eyes, remaining silent.

“What should I say if the doctor starts asking me questions about my history?”

“Act. You know how to do that. Just tell him you’ve been having trouble keeping food down and have been feeling a little unsteady on your feet. Let him check you over.”

A door opens and a nurse calls, “Ms. O’Neill?” Julianne rises with clipboard in hand and walks gingerly toward the nurse, who adds, “My, you have a famous name. Any relation?”

“Distant,” she responds, disappearing into the examination rooms.

I sit staring blankly out the window, trying to convince myself that everything that is happening is real. “Oh, god,” I keep saying to myself.

She emerges about a half hour later, carrying a scrap of paper. She walks up to me. “The doctor says I probably have the stomach bug that’s going around, and gave me this prescription to settle my stomach. Otherwise, he says, I’m in perfect shape.”

I stand up and we walk together to the reception window where I pay with a credit card. “Let’s get out of here,” I say, and we step out the door. “Are you game for a little shopping? We can go to the mall. I think there’s ladies’ stores there. Getting tired out?”

“I can do more,” she answers.

“Just don’t get too carried away,” I reply. “We’re doing this on a school teacher’s salary.”

She turns to me. “Is that what you do?”

“Yes. You didn’t know?”

She looks down at her feet, concentrating on each step she takes through the slushy ice of the parking lot. “No,” she says. “I knew you were a scientist, but how you made a living I didn’t have any sense of.”

We pick our way to the car and I open the door for her. “And I’m supposed to go back to work tomorrow. I’m going to have to call in sick.”

“Is that all right?”

“It will have to be. I don’t like taking days off, but under the circumstances...”

“I’m causing you trouble.”

“Oh, well, we’ll just have to send you back.”

She tilts her head toward me. “Do you want to?”

I raise my mittened hand and pat between her shoulders. “I think you should get in the car.”

“Yes?”

“I told you I’d take care of you.”

“You are.”

“I hope you’ll stay forever. Every time we start getting too old we’ll do the steam bath trick.”

She suppresses a laugh and reaches her hand to my arm, which she leans against.

We seat ourselves in the car and drive to the interstate highway, where we head north, about fifteen minutes from home. “There’s a great steak place nearby,” I say as we drive. We’ll have to go there when you graduate from bread and water. Do you like steak?”

“I’m not much for eating out, you know.”

“Well, we’ll have to change that. We have our favorite dinner hangouts where we can go on double dates.”

“You’re going to have two dates?”

“I was thinking you could bring along someone your own age. I’m too old for you and, in any event, I come with a date.”

She raises her eyebrows. “If I find someone my own age he’s going to be in a wheelchair.”

I shake my head. “I mean your new age, which reminds me I have something to show you when we get back.”

We exit the highway and fight through a sea of stoplights and traffic to reach the mall entrance. We pull into the parking lot and negotiate more icy pavement to the entryway, with Julianne’s walking growing steadily more

assured. She explores a series of shops and outfits herself in several sets of clothes. My credit card gets a workout. With her purchases, we return back to the car and travel down the interstate to home, where we crunch into the rutted driveway and I park as near the house as I am able. I carry the bags from the car, and insist she hold onto my arm while we wade through the snow that has blown into the walk leading to the door.

Just before the first step to the door I drag my foot repeatedly across a chunk of cement to uncover it. I point to it and say, “See that?”

Julianne looks down. “It says 1937.”

“Yes. I found it under an old studio building I was renovating, so I incorporated it into the patio. I always wondered why it was there. You were 29 in 1937, weren’t you?”

“I was.”

“So, chance or prophecy? I like standing on it barefoot in the summer. I can imagine I’m in 1937. You’re 29 and Pop is 24.” She steps onto the date and lose her focus.

We ascend the porch steps with Julianne remaining silent, although her brow appears knitted. The door creaks open through the ice that has formed at its saddle. We enter, stomping our feet on the entryway rug. This, we note, does not disturb the snoring Chicken Little from her comatose slumber. We climb the hallway stairs and turn left to the guest room, where I lay the bags on the bed and say, “How do you like having shoes that actually fit you?”

She looks at her feet. “Better than your sneakers.”

“This can be your room,” I say, but she has already strayed into my adjacent office.

“I like this room,” she says, poking through the decorations and examining photographs on my bureau.

“Everyone does. It’s my inner sanctum. Regina designed it and I executed the design. My father was so proud of how well I hung the wallpaper. It’s extra difficult hanging a big pattern like this. It took me days. He teased me, of course, because it would have taken him a few hours. The room that will be yours was his when he lived with us.”

“Is this him?” She lifts a photo. “My, he was dashing in a uniform.”

“That’s him in France, in the field.”

“I see; revolver and all.”

“You would have liked him. He was something. Like you, I guess.”

She steps over to a wall where a glass-covered case lined with maroon velvet hangs. “And what are these?” she asks.

“His medals.”

“A lot of them. A Purple Heart.”

I point to the one in the center. “This one above it he got for maintaining communication lines. See, it says it right here on the citation. He was climbing telephone poles during artillery barrages.”

“Oh, my.”

“And this little silver star on this one? He said it’s the one that really meant something. It was for making the landing at Salerno, I think. Most of the guys he landed with didn’t survive. Many never got off the beach—eighteen, nineteen-year-old kids.”

She steps away from the case, photo still in her hands, which she stares at. “And here I live to a ripe old age and now I’m back for more. Selfish of me, isn’t it?”

“Who wouldn’t if they could?”

She holds out the photo in front of herself. “Who?” she says.

“Don’t you think some people should be given a pass on mortality?”

“Like maybe your father? And I’m to stay in his room?”

“Is that okay?”

“I suppose I should be honored.”

I examine the photo in her hands. “I never knew anyone like him. Braver, stronger, more of everything than anyone else I ever knew. Once I saw him, just a few years after he had come back from Europe, break up a mugging. I was only five. Two men were taking a third’s head and bashing it into the street—cobblestone streets back in those days.”

She silently nods, not removing her eyes from the image.

“I can still see the blood trickling between the stones. A crowd of people was standing watching, not lifting a hand to do anything. He stopped our car in the middle of the street, got out, and walked through the crowd like Moses parting the Red Sea. He picked up one of those guys with one hand and one with the other and threw them in opposite directions. Two guys, sailing through the air. Then Pop proceeded to stand in the middle of the crowd and scream at them. They were words I already knew; the same words he had used with the German civilians at Dachau. I had overheard him telling a relative about it. Maybe he thought I was too young to understand so he didn’t edit himself in front of me. I understood just fine. Then he walked through the crowd again, back to the car, and we left. The people stood there like statues.”

Her eyes stay with the photo, but she does not overtly acknowledge my words.

I continue: “Let me show you something.” I reach inside the adjacent closet and thumb through the sport jackets, suits and tuxedo until toward the back I pull a khaki jacket from a hanger. I slip my arms into the sleeves and button it in front. “What do you think?” I ask.

“An Eisenhower jacket,” she responds. “It looks like it was tailor made for you. Was it?”

“No; it’s my father’s. I’ve often wondered about the fit, though. Why should that be? Why am I not him?”

“You have issues, James.”

“No kidding.” I slip the jacket off, hang it back in the closet and turn to her. “That same person, with his body failing, lay in the bed in what’s your room now, with me feeding him ice cream every night. He loved ice cream, especially if I was eating it with him, and doing it was helping to keep his weight up.”

Her face rises to meet mine, at eye level. “Will you feed me ice cream every night?”

“I will, if that’s what you need, or if you’d just like it, for that matter.”

Her eyes stay with mine. “I can see you doing that,” she says. She replaces the photo. “I remember you telling me, so to speak, that your father had only one hand he could use.”

“Yes. He had taken shrapnel right through center of his palm. He could close his hand around things, but he had lost his fine control. His hand shook all the time.”

She lifts her hands to her neck, which she kneads with her fingers before stepping into the doorway of the bedroom. “Well, I am honored to stay in your father’s room. The same bed?”

“The same one.”

“Is it all right with you?”

I put my arms around her shoulders. “Yes,” I say.

She lowers her head to my chest, and her voice comes out from my shirt: “So is there some reason for all this?”

“I never would have thought so in years past, but now I think maybe.”

She looks into my eyes: “I’d like to believe so,” she says. She steps back into my office, picks up a photo of a woman and begins to smile. “On a different topic, wow. God, I look like a boy next to her.”

“I think people might argue otherwise.” I answer, “although if women, or men for that matter, have any insecurities she brings them out.”

“Is she ...”

“As hard as it is to believe, yes. Regina; like a movie star?”

She tilts her head. “I guess. No wonder why you didn’t offer to give me her ... My goodness.”

“Why she should be married to me is something like a miracle—maybe on par with the other one I’ve seen this week. I’ll never forget our wedding day. It had been pouring cats and dogs and chickens all morning, but just as the ceremony was about to begin the rain stopped, the clouds parted and the birds began singing. True story. It was as if it were scripted.”

“So you think there was some purpose to it?”

“There certainly seemed to be, don’t you think?”

“You were made for each other, then.”

“From the first instant of time, I’ve said. Of course, others don’t feel that way. Someone actually said she’s too good for me, and I know others think it.”

“Do you think so?”

“Yeah, probably. But other people don’t understand as well as they think they do.”

“Understand?”

“If we searched hard enough among all the billions of people on the planet, we could probably find somebody who looks just like you, but she wouldn’t be you, would she?”

She raises her eyebrows. “No.”

“No. It’s not just about looks. And just like with you, most of her admirers wouldn’t know what to make of her if they really knew her. They couldn’t keep up with her, for one thing. She’s harder working and smarter than they are—class valedictorian in college. I love telling people that. Sound something like you? She went to school right across the street from your other family home, by the way.”

“Not the valedictorian part, but I like it that you think so. I will look forward to meeting her. You do appear to adore her from the way you’re looking at her picture.”

I smile. “Hard not to. And I miss her. I can’t stand it when she’s away—can’t live without her.”

She shakes her finger at me. “Don’t say that.”

“Julianne. I can not live without her.”

“You’re living without her now. Do you really know what you’re saying?”

“I do. And it’s only temporary, not forever. That I can live with, kind of.”

“Oh, James,” she says. She replaces the photo and steps toward my fireplace mantle. “And what are all these silly things about?” She eyes the items placed on it.

“The toys?”

“Yes.”

“They’re things the kids give me.”

“You have children?”

“The kids at school.”

She lifts up a rubber chicken between her thumb and index finger. “They get you these things?”

“Yeah. They buy me toys and games. The most amusing ones I bring home and put here. I keep most of them at school and on special occasions I let them get them out and play with them. They may be sixteen and seventeen, but they’re still little kids.”

She replaces the chicken and picks up a plush, black poodle. “Why all these poodle things?”

“Chicken Little is a celebrity with them. Whenever they ask me what kind of career they should pursue, my standard answer is poodle ranching.”

“Poodle ranching?”

“Poodle ranching. I tell them that’s where the big bucks are. Poodles are the ‘right’ dogs again, you know. So they get me these poodle things.”

She picks up the various trinkets, examining each and replacing them. “They must love you,” she says, with her gaze passing over the mantle decorations.

“It depends on the class—the personalities in it.”

Her hands fall onto a wooden plaque. “Northern Marianas College Achievement Award. What’s this?”

“When we lived in the tropics, that’s where I taught. I organized a research expedition to an uninhabited island. We did all sorts of studies there.”

She lifts the plaque and reads its inscription. “Wow. How exciting. All that was going on while I was sitting at home in Southwick thinking I was at the center of the universe. How am I going to fit into your universe?”

I walk over to my office window and try to look through its frost-covered glass and then turn back to her. “I remember the first time when someone told me you lived in Southwick. We were there, field tripping, back in the early ‘70s. I said something like, ‘oh, that’s nice; what kind of ducks do you think we can find out here?’”

She frowns. “I was a favorite of yours, I see.”

“I had never seen a film you were in. Actors weren’t part of my reality. I rarely watched films. I lived and breathed birds. Movie stars? What did I care? Southwick, the causeway to it—super bird-watching spots. Guaranteed Oldsquaws and Red-necked Grebes in winter, Little and Black-headed Gulls in March. I’ve spent so many hours out there I can’t count that high.”

She narrows her eyes. “You’re on the verge of hurting my feelings.”

I walk back over to her. “Oh, don’t take it that way. It was just me. Besides, you’ve already got a zillion fans. Why should what I was thinking affect you?”

She leans her head on my shoulder. “Because I know you; like you, even.”

“Well, you won me over since then. I do remember one time some years later being out on the causeway with my telescope set up, scanning the flocks of ducks and having you come to mind. Why that should be I don’t know, but you did. I began to wonder if you had ever driven by and seen me when I was there. I remembered from when I was young seeing photos of you and thinking what a beauty you were. As I looked through the ducks I kept imagining what you might be like—whether you wouldn’t like to look at ducks too.”

She parts from me and continues her survey of my office, reading my framed degree and thumbing through books on my bookcase. “I suppose I might have,” she says. She explores further and then turns to me: “You know, I did know you, long before we met. The newspaper ran a feature story about you a long time ago. I saw that article. I had it spread out on my bed, marveling over the color photos they ran of tropical birds. And then there was this intriguing man in field clothes, looking rather like your father

in his photo, I see. By then I was living in Southwick most of the time and saw the Hartford paper most every day. I actually thought of calling you and inviting you down to see my birds.”

I feel my heart stop. “Why didn’t you?”

She sits back against the edge of my desk, with fingers wrapped around its edge. “I don’t know why. I was going to. Life, I guess.”

“Well, since I did meet you, so to speak, you have been my object of scrutiny. Not at first, because I didn’t want to know anything about you. I didn’t want that knowledge to interfere with my sensing you. But afterwards I did want to know. That’s when I learned why you had the world on a string. When I watched your films, you seemed so far beyond your colleagues they were like cartoon characters in comparison. You were a virtuoso in a brand-new medium. There was one, the first one I watched—you were Mrs. Maxwell. Not only did you have my name, you were doing my married life story fifty years before it happened. All we’d have to do is change your name to Regina. She wins awards, she’s everybody’s darling; when we’re supposed to be having dinner, she’s on the phone and I eat alone. Every call is a matter of life and death; with each her career hangs in the balance. It’s all I can do to squeeze in a word edgewise and usually I don’t. I thought it was quite a remarkable thing that you should have done that. It made me wonder further.”

She pulls herself up to sitting on my desk and crosses her legs. “Don’t think I didn’t notice that Mrs. Maxwell thing. We have to wonder whether such things are really just coincidence, don’t we? I remember being struck by your name when I saw that newspaper article years before. I even said to my secretary, I was Mrs. Maxwell once.”

“I read your autobiography, you know, quite recently. It was only the second time I had ever read anyone’s autobiography. The first was Albert

Speer's, by the way. I wanted to know the person who was responsible for me almost never being born. But when I read yours, I was impressed—you were very good—stretching the boundaries of style, going beyond it, really; you were poignant, funny, creative, human, intimate. I wasn't expecting that; it takes a lot of practice to write well, yet it just seemed to flow out of you. I confess I even became suspicious you had someone do the heavy lifting for you, so I got hold of pages from your original hand-written drafts."

"How did you do that?"

"Everything's possible with the internet. The originals required editing, of course; so do my first and for that matter second drafts. But those same qualities were there. You're quite a writer."

"Well, thank you. It didn't seem that hard, really."

"Because you're a natural. Practice does make perfect, but ultimately you have to have the genes. I did find interesting what you chose to leave out, however."

"You mean my love secrets?"

"No. That's private. I didn't want to know about that. I was thinking about your idiosyncrasies. You have a reputation for being difficult. You said little about that. Some, I suppose, but I had hoped for more self-analysis. Why?"

"Oh, I don't know. I think I'm embarrassed by some of that, for one thing, although I don't necessarily agree with that portrayal of me either."

"And how about contradictions? You had a whole chapter in your book about manners. But then I've read about you pushing in front of people in stores because, after all, you were you. How do those two views of you fit together?"

Her eyes grow wide. "Where did you ever hear a... Oh, never mind. Do you want me to get mad at you?"

I fold my arms in front of me and laugh. "I have lots of practice having women be mad at me. I can deal with it. But let me finish. You think you have contradictions? I have this ability—this ability to eviscerate people with a single sentence. I've done it publicly and with relish, and yet an hour before I might have been buying a stranger lunch because he didn't have enough money to pay. How does one reconcile sheer meanness and compassion, all in one person? I was looking to you to explain me to me. You're a complicated being, just like me, with so many of the same traits. You are somebody I know—kind of me, except a better version of me. Much better, even."

She brings her elbows to her knees and cradles her chin with her hands. "Oh, god, James," she says.

"Julianne... I feel like I must be overwhelming you. I've been storing all this inside myself for so long. I've been desperate to tell you everything I've been thinking. It's all flooding out, and it's just our first day. Forgive me."

"For what? You think I haven't been just as desperate to share my thoughts with you?"

"But I'm hogging the best lines."

"I will admit, so far you've been the one with the juiciest part. Quite a performance, I might add."

"I suppose I should be quiet and let you develop your own character."

"Oh, I will. I've never been reluctant to express myself. I think I've just not been up to it yet."

"Anyway, we can talk as much as we want later. The bedroom's all set for you. You can have the bathroom down the hall for your own, too."

“Isn’t that yours?”

“It’s yours now. Want to have some dinner?”

She leans back on her hands. “I can’t wait to hear the menu. Bread and water again?”

“Well, I was thinking about light ice cream for dessert. I bet that would sit well with you.”

“Now you’re talking.”

“Want to go down?”

“Let’s,” she says, grabbing my hand and slipping down from the desktop.

Down we go, and with Chicken Little officiating we make pancakes with blueberries, drink glasses of juice and have large dishes of ice cream.

Chicken Little slumbers on her blanket with a stomach full of pancakes and it again begins to feel like bedtime. “Are you ready to sleep by yourself tonight?” I ask.

Julianne rises from the dining room table and pushes in her chair. “I think so,” she says.

“How far we’ve come in a day.”

She nods. “I’ll say. I even feel kind of normal. Dinner seems to be settling just fine, especially the ice cream. Mocha almond fudge: I’ll have to remember that.”

“Well, if you have midnight cravings you know where it is. Do you want some private time, something to read, anything?”

“Nothing. I’m feeling quite worn out. Hopefully I’ll have more energy tomorrow.”

“All right, then. Why don’t we call it a day and we’ll see where we are tomorrow? I’m pretty tired myself. Do you want me to let you sleep in the morning?”

“Might be good, although I’m usually up early, anyway... well, I suppose I can’t say usually anymore.”

“If you get up before me make yourself whatever you want. I still recommend you be conservative, though. If you need help come get me.”

“Do you want to help me get undressed?”

“If you need me too.”

“Do you want to?”

“Call me if you’re having trouble.”

“Good night, James.”

“Good night. My door will be open. Don’t be shy about coming in if there’s any problem.”

“Okay.”

I begin walking toward my bedroom but turn back: “I’m right here if you need me, Julianne.”

She slips into her room and turns on the light. I retire as well, feeling so tired that I have no energy for anything else. I undress to underwear, pull covers over me and turn out the light.

Sleep. Dreaming.

Not much sleep.

A faint voice drifts to my ears through the dark: “James? James, I need help.”

I sit upright and turn on my bedside light. “What? What’s the matter?”

Julianne stands at the foot of the bed, holding herself up against the bedpost. “I’m cold; really cold.”

“Good grief.” I spring out of bed and grasp her arms. She is so cold she doesn’t feel live.

“I was asleep. It woke me.”

“Get under the covers with me.” I help her into bed and pull her close. “God, you’re like holding an ice cube,” I whisper. I reach across to my nightstand. “I’ve got a thermometer in the drawer; I want to take your temperature.” I fumble through the drawer until my fingers touch a case, from which I pull a glass thermometer. “Here it is—put this under your tongue. Ready?”

“Mmmm,” she says.

“Obviously I don’t understand how you work. It’s only been an hour. You just woke up feeling this way?”

She speaks through the thermometer: “As soon as I walked in the room I started feeling cold, but I was so tired I just got in bed and fell asleep.”

“Maybe we’re pushing things too fast again. I’ll get you in a hot tub if your temperature doesn’t start coming up... Let me look. Cripes. Ninety-one degrees. How are you doing?”

She trembles, pressing her forehead into my shoulder. “I can feel your warmth. I’m so cold.”

“We’ll fix it.” I place the thermometer back in her mouth and wait several minutes. “Let’s look again: ninety-three. Want me to run a tub?”

“No. Just let me stay here with you. I’m scared, James.”

I rub her back repeatedly, generating friction to warm her, and place the thermometer in her mouth. “I’m not going to let anything happen to you. I guess we don’t understand you; you were fine all day. We’ll give it a few minutes... Let me look again: ninety-four. It’s heading in the right direction. Feeling any different?”

“Not yet.”

I again place the thermometer under her tongue. “Want to try taking your nightgown off? Skin against skin; better heat transfer. Physics. Just

stay against me.” She nods yes, so I help her out of her nightgown and remove my t-shirt.

She presses against me. “Your skin feels good,” she says, shivering. Her cold skin gives me a start.

“Just hold on,” I answer. I rub her shoulders and press my cheek to hers. “Let me look again. Ninety-six; feeling any better yet?”

The tremors begin to relent. “Yes,” she says. “That awful feeling’s going away.”

“We’ll just stay like this tonight, then.”

“Oh, James,” she says, bringing her arms up around my neck.

“It’s okay; you’re okay now.” I place the thermometer in her mouth still again.

“Am I?” she mumbles through the thermometer.

I wait, watching the second hand of the bedside clock make a circuit. “Let’s look again: ninety-eight. That’s good; that’s as high as mine ever gets, especially at night. Maybe it’s your thyroid. Maybe you’re not producing enough thyroxin yet—that’s what keeps your motor going. During the day your muscles produced enough heat to compensate, but once you slowed down... It might be contributing to you being so tired too.”

“Is that bad?”

“No. I don’t think so. It will probably go away on its own. I’m imagining your insides are still maturing. Doesn’t that seem logical? At very worst there’s synthetic thyroxin you can take. The levels have to be just right; too little and you run down, too much and you start losing bone density.”

“We’re that fragile?”

“So fragile it’s amazing we survive at all. But, despite all that, we do.”

“You really think I’m okay?”

“Yes. We’ll have to check your blood, too. You may be anemic; you may not have enough hemoglobin. That kind of things could make you feel cold, too. But all those things can be fixed, if they need to be.”

“Hold me.”

“I am.”

“Tighter.” She presses her bony frame into mine. “It’s been a long time since I’ve had someone hold me like this.”

I kiss her forehead. “Do you think you can go back to sleep?”

“Not yet; I’m too scared, but maybe in a while; I’m still so tired.”

I turn over to my side. “Lay against my back and put your arm around me to stay close. Will you be comfortable like that?”

“Let’s try,” she says.

“Better?”

“Yes.” She kisses my back, and despite herself is asleep within moments. I lay awake, checking her every few minutes, until sleep finally claims me as well.

Morning. January second. Julianne has lain against me all night and slept peacefully. I lay awake but do not move, even though my one arm has descended into pins and needles from lying on it for so long. I hold the hand she has draped across my chest and don’t dare let go. I am on a sick day, and lie wondering how I will get myself back to work.

Julianne’s breathing is rhythmic against my back, but she has begun moving her legs and adjusting herself. Before long she stirs, pulling her arm to her and rolling to her back, with eyes opening and closing in a waking haze. I turn to face her. “Good morning, angel face,” I whisper.

She smiles a half smile. “I can’t imagine I look too angelic right now,” she manages.

“You’ll pass. How do you feel—warm enough?”

“Yes,” she says. Her eyes continue their struggle to remain opened.

“Did you sleep the rest of the night?”

“I think so.” She brings her hand to her mouth and yawns with eyes tight shut. “If you had just come and undressed me like I asked, none of that would have happened.”

I pinch her nose. “So it’s my fault.”

“Yes.” She smiles, looking up at me.

“I’ll just have to do anything you say.”

“I think that would be wise. Do you think we’ll have to do this every night?”

“It could get crowded in here.”

She lays motionless for several moments. “Did you mind having me sleep with you?”

“No. Of course not. I expect you’ll be able to sleep on your own soon, anyway.”

“How can you know?”

“Right now, I’m the world expert on this subject.”

She rubs her eyes. “I suppose you are.”

“Well, for the time being we’ll do this. If it stays a problem, back to the doctor we’ll go to find out what you need. Ready to get up?”

“Do I still have to use that bathroom all the way down the hall?”

“No, you can use whatever one you want. I just thought you’d like the privacy. Can I leave you and get myself together? Will you be all right?”

She pulls the covers up to her neck. “Yes, I think so.” She remains in bed while I extract myself from under the blankets.

“It’s easier to take a bath than to shower in that old-fashioned tub, by the way, although you can use the shower if you want. Just make sure the curtain’s in the tub all the way around or I’ll be replacing the ceiling downstairs.” I walk down to my bathroom, where I wash and dress myself, hoping she is able to do the same. When I return Julianne is in the bathroom with the door closed. I knock lightly. “Everything okay?” I ask. I hear splashing.

“Yes. I’ll be out in a few minutes. You can come in.”

I walk to the bedroom and sit on the bed, where I wait. Julianne appears shortly, wrapped in a towel. She is drying her hair with a second. “I feel much better than yesterday morning,” she says. She lets the towel that covers her drop to the floor.

“Miss modesty,” I say.

She continues to rub the towel through her hair. “I am modest.

Usually.”

“I can see that. So do you want me to inspect all your assets or are you just comfortable with me?”

She leans her head forward and blots her hair with the towel. “Some of both, I think. It’s been a long time since I’ve had someone to look at me. People said I was aging gracefully, but I wasn’t. You don’t know, but you will.”

“I told you what my father said,” I remind her. “This mortality stuff;” I whisper in her ear, “we’ve got to do something about it.” I kiss her cheek. “Get dressed so I can feed you. Are you hungry?” She pulls her head back from me and stares into my eyes without speaking. “God, you’re beautiful,” I add.

“Glad you noticed, she says, turning away from me and reaching into a shopping bag for the clothes she bought yesterday.

“How do you get yourself away from the mirror?”

“Only with difficulty.” She picks up the now empty bag and throws it at me. “Not that how I look seems to affect you much.”

“Hey, I’m old,” I say. I begin toward the stairs, but turn to watch her pulling up her new slacks and looking at me with twinkling eyes. I descend to perform my Chicken Little duties and begin breakfast preparations before she comes into the kitchen.

“Good morning,” she says. “What sort of breakfast are we having, Chicken Little?”

“Are you hungry?”

“Yes.”

“That’s a good sign. Do you like peaches?”

She settles herself into one of the padded chairs. “Yes,” she answers.

“I thought I would make us, you included, Ms. Little, some French toast stuffed with peaches and lowfat cream cheese. Sound good?”

She raises herself and smiles at me. “Gosh, do I feel special.”

“I think we could make the case that you are.”

“Do you do all this for your wife?”

I dip bread into a bowl of whisked eggs, milk, vanilla, and cinnamon. “Every weekend. We used to go out for breakfast, but she decided mine was better, so now we have the weekend breakfast ritual. I like doing that for her—and for you.”

“Can I make some coffee?” she asks.

“Civilized people drink tea, barbarians drink coffee. But, help yourself. The water’s just about boiling.”

She rises and walks toward the stove. “I’m going to be barbaric if you don’t mind. I’ll make you tea, though.”

“Okay. Tea’s in the cupboard next to the stove.”

“It seems warmer in here than it was upstairs in the bathroom.”

“It is. I had all the walls off in here to insulate them, so the room holds the heat better. It’s also got those two big radiators that keep it nice.”

She pours boiling water into a coffee-filled filter that sits upon a mug and into another mug with a teabag draped in it. “So what are we doing today, James?” she asks.

“Not the faintest idea. I’ve been thinking this morning, where do you start?”

“How about going for a ride?”

“We can. Did you have anything in mind?”

“I was thinking of something with a Sound view. I think I need to see it.”

“Begin at the end, you mean. Alpha and omega?”

She sips black coffee. “Something like that.”

“It’s supposed to be a nice day today, so we could even get out and walk around. I suppose that could be therapeutic. Are you sure it will be all right?”

“I feel like I need to.”

“Then we will. Ready for some breakfast? Go sit down and I’ll bring it to you.” I bring her over a plate of French toast, stuffed as advertised.

She places the plate on a lacquered Chinese table next to the chair, where she also sits her coffee mug. “Thank you,” she says. Are you going to join me?”

“I am. Just a minute. I have to cut one up for Chicken Little.” I perform the remainder of my doggie duties, get my own plate, and sit in the chair opposite her.

“You do love that dog,” she says.

“We’ve had her almost as long as we’ve been married. She’s part of the family, so I do what she needs.”

“You have a kind heart.”

“Sometimes.”

“More than sometimes, from what I can see.”

“You get a biased view; I act better around people I like.”

“Why should you feel that?”

“After all the years we’ve been friends? Want some syrup, by the way?”

“Friends, yes. I suppose we have been. And okay, I do.”

I hand her a crystal creamer filled with syrup, which she pours around the edges of the toast. “How can you drink black coffee?” I ask. “That stuff is poison.”

“No, it’s not. I like it this way. Do you load it up with sugar and cream?”

“Absolutely. If I drink coffee at all it has to be hot ice cream or I don’t want it.”

“Hmmm. Maybe I should try that, come to think of it. And breakfast is good, James.”

“I hoped I would please you. Want to get ready and go as soon as we’re done?”

“I do. I’ll help you pick up, and then I want to fix myself a little before we go.”

“I thought we had already taken care of fixing you.”

“I mean that special kind of girl fixing. You want me to look my best, don’t you?”

“Oh, certainly. But I’ll clean up while you do that. For the time being, I like catering to you.”

We finish, and as I clean Julianne heads toward the stairs. I hear her bounding up them. Bounding now, I say to myself. She trots back into the kitchen in a few minutes, looking sunny and cheerful.

“I’m bringing you boots,” I say, “in case we want to walk. It’s too cold for shoes today. I have a parka you can wear, and you should have a sweater too, okay?”

“Whatever you say, doctor.”

Julianne and I pull layers of clothes onto ourselves, lock up the house and wade through the snow that has begun to sublimate in the bright sunshine. We kick the snow from our boots and settle ourselves into my truck for our drive south on the interstate to the Connecticut River. The drive takes us nearly an hour. When we reach the river, we cross and exit, negotiating the traffic-clogged main street out toward Southwick and head

across a causeway that bisects a cove of the river. On our left at the end of the causeway is the entrance to the borough of Southwick, the summer retreat of the bluest of the local bluebloods.

“Watch this turn,” she says. “It’s a little tricky.”

“I know, “I answer. I make the narrow left. A row of beach homes lines the north shore of the cove to our left and a golf course extends along the road to the right. “I used to be intimidated to come out here when I was young,” I add.

“Few people other than residents do. There’s not much reason other than the golf course for non-residents to be here. Back in the old days even the golf course was private.”

I make a right turn onto a road that heads due south toward the Sound. “Usually I’ve come out here in winter, though, so there’s hardly anyone around. The golf course can be pretty good for birds in winter, and there are a few places to look over the water, like this little park right ahead. I had no idea I was just about in your back yard when I was standing there. The best bird I ever saw in winter was right in your yard, in fact.”

“What was it?”

“Something called a Magnolia Warbler; a summertime bird, except there it was, hopping around in a clump of shrubs just at the edge of your yard, in the dead of winter. I had to keep looking at it to make myself believe I was really seeing it.”

“What was it doing around then?”

“It’s not unheard of for warblers to do that. Some of its cousins, a Yellowthroat and some Myrtle Warblers, were flitting around in the same group of shrubs. They congregate in coastal thickets in winter.”

“How come they do that?”

“Well, the mildest winter climate is right at the Sound’s edge, so it doesn’t cost so many calories to get through the winter. Thickets are what some of them like best in the winter, too. In the case of the Myrtle Warbler, they actually eat the myrtle fruits. Do you know that shrub, bayberry?”

“The one with those clusters of waxy white berries all over it? We used to collect them when we were children. They smelled so nice. Did you know the colonials used to use them to make candles?”

“I had heard that, I think. I read you were pretty astute about those sorts of things.” We turn right and head down the main road to the water.

“I’m sure I’m not like you, but I know my plants pretty well. My father used to have us out looking for wildflowers every weekend. I loved doing that; never lost the interest. I loved admiring all those delicate little forms.”

We park by tennis courts, which peek out from under wind-blown piles of snow. I begin to unbuckle myself to get out.

“Why are we stopping here?” she asks.

“I don’t think the new owners of your house would be too enthused if we pulled into their driveway.”

She becomes silent, staring off south across the golf course fairway that lies between us and a frozen salt pond beyond. Just visible past the reedy borders of the pond is the roof and upper floor of an expansive brick house that sits just yards from the ocean. She unbuckles as well, and I come around to open the door for her. She takes my arm and we step between ice ruts toward the beach.

“I’ve walked out here a thousand times,” she says, watching where she places her feet among the slippery crusts below us. “A thousand and one.” We descend to the beach, which has been scrubbed free of snow by a relentless but feeble surf. She scans seaward, with her mittened hand above her eyes to shield them from the glare of water-reflected sun. She then looks

left, where her eyes settle on the windows and bricks of the house beyond, which she observes motionless while minutes pass.

I reach my arm to her shoulder. “Are you okay,” I ask.

She breaks her trance and turns to me. “I was remembering old times, and good times, and not so good times.” She pulls away and walks toward the low, cement sea wall that surrounds the property. “Come on,” she beckons back to me. I hurry to catch up to where she climbs upon the wall. “There used to be steps here,” she says. I climb up as well and we walk along the wall to where we face the house.

“Doesn’t look like there’s anyone around,” I say.

She steps onto the sodded lawn and walks through spotty snow toward the entryway. “Looks like they’ve really gussied this place up,” she calls back to me, peering into the windows and running her hand along the bricks and freshly painted windowsills. “They must have dropped a million.”

“Yeah, so they can come here for two weekends out of the year.

“How do you know that?”

“Just being cynical.”

“Why?”

“I have a problem with the super wealthy. They need to be reminded we chased out the ruling class, and if need be we can do it again.”

“Don’t kid yourself.”

“I’m not.”

“You’re an activist.”

“Not really; not yet, anyway.”

“I had my moments, you know.”

“I do and I admire you for it.” We reach the end of the sea wall and descend boulders to the cobbly beach beyond.

“This is the way it all looked when I was young,” she says. “There was hardly any sand at all. When the breakwaters were built they changed it.”

“How are you doing, Julianne?” I ask.

“Oh, I’m okay,” she sighs, glancing back at the house once more while we make footprints at the water’s edge.

“It’s funny,” I say. “This is about as unremarkable a stretch of shoreline as you can find. I can think of a thousand places more beautiful than this, yet it’s here I’ve wanted to walk with you.”

She turns to me and narrows her eyes. “Oh, come on. It’s beautiful here.”

“It’s very nice. But compared to the beaches on Long Island? Did you ever see Chase’s paintings from Long Island? Or the Cape? Have you ever been out to Block Island?”

“Well, it’s also about history. This was where we could easily get to back in the old days; it became our little piece of heaven.”

“Is that where we are?”

“Maybe it’s on the way.” We reach the breakwater at the mouth of the Connecticut River. “Want to walk out to the lighthouse?” she asks. “I haven’t been able to make it out there in years.”

“Let’s.” I answer. “I’ve never been.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. Let’s do it.” We walk along the flat surfaces of wet boulders that are splashed by wind-blown waves and pick our way among them to the jetty’s end where a small, automated lighthouse sits at the entrance to the river. A shipping channel is just riverward. Although in some years icebreakers must keep the channel open, the duration of cold this winter has not been sufficient to freeze seawater. We approach the squat, rusting iron building in need of scraping and a fresh coat of white paint.

The sea breeze picks up the hair from Julianne’s bare head, blowing it sideways. She climbs underneath the chain that surrounds the lighthouse and stands on the damp cement walkway that surrounds it. “Why are you such a slow poke?” she calls to me.

“I have a banged-up knee,” I call back. “I have to watch where I put my feet.” I sit down and ease myself across boulders that have slipped from their once level position. Julianne had hopped across these, but I choose this more judicious approach.

“I thought you told me your middle name was macho,” she calls again.

“It is—macho, not stupid. You don’t want to be carrying me back from here, do you?”

“Good point,” she shouts to me.

I reach her. “Boy, you look happy,” I say.

“I am.” She surveys the view with a grin that exposes her white teeth.

“Is that coat keeping you warm?”

“I was a little chilly when I first got here, but now I’m fine.”

“So, what’s got you all bubbly?”

“I was remembering being out here when I was a little girl, on a day just like this. It seems not so long ago. It looked just about the same here then, and I can remember exactly what I was thinking. It was such an adventure land for me. I could tell you stories, James—it’s so part of my soul here. Oh, god, it’s hard to imagine all this time has gone by. Where did it all go?”

“Ah, yes. Time: the troublesome quantity.”

“Why can’t things just stay the same?”

“Why?” I stand on the cement next to her, watching the seaweed attached to the rocks bob in the surf and noting the tops of trees visible on

distant Long Island. “You just reminded me of something. You took physics in college, didn’t you?”

“My worst subject. Yes. Not something I want to remember.”

“But you took it, and maybe it is worth remembering. Did you learn about the photoelectric effect, the quantum, any of that?”

Her eyes fall upon the bobbing seaweed as well. “God, how would I know? It was eighty years ago.”

“You just told me you remembered in detail things from even longer ago than that. But eighty years ago—it was a magical time. It was all new then. Uncertainty lay at the heart of everything; nothing was as it seemed to be. Time was simply a dimension, and a malleable one; not Newton’s constant.”

“Newton—I remember him. Gravity.”

I stand and take hold of both her mittened hands. “Good. See? You do remember. Gravity was certainly not what it seemed to be. Did you know that’s what I think about much of the time?”

“Newton?”

“Not quite—the ideas that undid Newton. All the stuff that exploded eighty years ago—which lead to this realization.”

“Which was?”

“The Big Bang.”

“The Big Bang.”

“The idea that time had a beginning; that an infinitely tiny point could become everything—predicted by theory, supported by observation, and suspiciously like a creation event—far from definitely one, but suspiciously like one. Grand design; purpose—the breath of the creator blowing on the primordial ember. Or not? Did you know, by the way, that if I could have been anything I would have been a physicist?”

“Why didn’t you become one?”

I shake my head. “You have to be a math prodigy; I wasn’t. Writing was easy but math was an effort. The only one I know of who could do both was Galileo—my hero.”

“Are you going to bring him back next?”

I pinch her nose. “He’s not as cute. I think I’ll stick with you. Besides, I can’t do that. I didn’t bring you back—you did.”

“You had a role,” she says softly.

“How would we know?” I ask. I begin walking away from her to circle the lighthouse.

“How would we?” she calls. “So why do you think about physics so much, anyway?”

I stop to face her. “Because it is my principal dilemma. Time especially. I mean, look at us. Here we are with some semblance of a solution to this issue of being stuck traveling one way through time.”

She looks away from me. “This is getting too deep for me, James.”

“Don’t be dumb. There’s nothing dumb about you, so don’t be. You wouldn’t be here with me if you were.” I walk back to her and lean against the lighthouse.

She leans next to me. “Would you throw me into the water?”

I focus on her face. “Stop being silly. I’d carry you out here and back if I had to, and only because it’s you. I’ve certainly proven that to you, haven’t I?”

She reaches forward and grabs my arms, and we stand facing each other without speaking further.

“So, how’s day three going?” I ask at last.

“Better than yesterday,” she replies. “I needed to come here; put some demons to rest, you could say; smell the brine in the air, see all of what I know so well.”

“It’s not making you sad?”

“I’m not mourning the past. It’s hard to fathom that it is past, but I feel no regret. All that was wonderful, but now there’s what’s next.”

“Does that mean you’re thinking about getting back to it?”

“Maybe,” she says, turning away from me and pressing her back against the lighthouse’s wall.

“Going to move in a new direction?” I ask.

“I’ll have to think more, yet. I don’t know what to tell you.”

“What will tomorrow bring, do you think?”

She turns her head toward me. “I guess we’ll find out tomorrow. How about you? Are you going to work?”

“I ought to. Did you want to drop me off in the morning and go do something?”

“Well, actually I thought I’d come with you, if that’s okay. It would be fun to see what it’s like.”

I examine her face and she becomes blank as I do. “Are you afraid to be on your own?” I ask.

She looks down. “Maybe, a little.” A wave splashes the rocks below us and sprays us with some of its mist. Droplets form on Julianne’s hair and eyelashes, which shine in the bright winter sun. She wipes her eyes with her mittens, and a second wave splashes high enough to wet our boots. “There’s one more big one coming yet,” she says. “You know they always come in threes.”

I nod yes and smile. “It’s okay,” I say. “There’s no rush. You can come in with me for the rest of the week if you want. When you’re ready

we’ll go to the next level. But if you decide you want to, you could take off and explore around in the truck. You could establish a new, trucker babe identity.”

The third large wave sprays us and she shakes her head. “I’m not really a trucker kind of girl, James.”

“No? You could cruise through town with the window down shouting yahoo!”

She squeezes her lips together but a laugh escapes. “It’s a little cold for the open window thing, don’t you think?”

“It was just a thought. I’ll give you some cash if you do want to go off; you could take yourself to lunch, do whatever you need to do. It’s up to you.”

“We’ll see. For right now I think I’ll stay with you and get my bearings.”

We step away from the shadow of the lighthouse and stand on boulders that allow the sunshine to bathe us in feeble but detectable warmth. I pat her back. “All right. I just don’t want you to feel confined by what I have to do. If you get bored, I’ll give you the keys and you can take off. You can have my phone to make calls. Anyway, I’ll call later and let them know you’re coming. Seen enough here?”

“Yes. Let’s go back.” We hop across slippery boulders until we reach the ones that lay askew. I again ease myself across them while Julianne waits. “How did you do hurt your knee?” she asks.

“Bicycling, so now I don’t have as many ligaments as I used to, and it’s just loose enough to give out when I least want it to.”

She grimaces. “I had a knee like that; once I injured it, it was never the same. I couldn’t make it out here anymore. It damaged me in multiple ways.”

I lift myself back onto the level boulders that form the pathway back to land. “You’re reminding me. The summer I hurt my knee I thought I was invincible; I was biking back and forth to my study areas—about a thirty-mile round trip. I thought I could go as fast as I wanted with no consequences. Then I fell off and wound up not being able to walk for months. My wife at the time was wonderful; she would load me into the car and take me off bird watching. She was and still is, I presume, a kind soul.”

“What happened to her?”

“I moved out on her. Pretty cheesy of me, huh? Guilt. You know that feeling? I tried to convince myself to stay, but I couldn’t do it.”

“Another woman?”

“Not quite. It was a drawn-out thing, although, as it turned out, I did meet my present wife near the time all that was happening. Once we met, I knew I had found my soul mate for life, so there was no turning back. Still, though, the guilt is always there, and I wonder if someday I won’t have to pay for what I’ve done.”

“Pay? Who would make you do that?”

“Oh, I don’t know. The fates, maybe—they could make my wife take up with someone else so that I spend old age alone.”

She takes my arm and we walk side by side. “Well, James, I had a husband once too and the story’s not much different. I knew even before we were married he wasn’t really the one for me. Finally, I made myself get out of it. Guilt? I have that, and shame, when I think about it, so my strategy has been not to think about it.”

“I’ve used that approach too, I suppose.”

“You still come out ahead of me, you know. You found the one who’s right for you, and it sounds like the feeling is returned, am I right?”

“Oh, you are.”

“Well, I never found the right one. What I wanted to have I never found with anyone. It was a disappointment I carried with me.”

“This time we’ll see that it works out better, all right?”

“We’ll see, James. Maybe it’s more me than I can admit.”

Our pace slows until I stop to face her. “What do you mean?”

“Oh, I think I probably sabotage things because of the way I am. I pretend I’m above having personal needs—that I’m so busy and important I don’t have mortal frailties. So, how is anyone to know that I’m actually a weakling?” She turns away from me and faces the river. “Do you want to hear this?” she adds with her back still to me.

I step toward her. “If you want to tell me. I mean, I don’t want to tread on ground where I don’t belong, so you’ll have to decide.”

She looks at me with a frown growing across her face. “Funny hearing myself spill my heart out to you—and even wanting to.”

“Why?”

“Because I never let anyone know what really goes on inside me. I’m too private; too embarrassed to let people know. Yet it seems natural to tell you—like I’m having a conversation with myself.”

“Something like that, perhaps.”

We resume walking and step across several more boulders in silence before I notice that Julianne’s expression has become vacant. I let her see that I’m looking at her. “Is this hard for you?” I ask.

“Yes,” she answers, barely audibly.

“You don’t have to say anything.”

“You’re just seeing the secret me—not so self-confidant, not so brave, not so aloof from the rest of humanity.”

We continue down the jetty side by side, with heads down contemplating the jetty beneath us. “See, it’s always easy to find fault in ourselves,” I say.

She replies without looking up. “James, it’s more than just faults; I’m telling you I can be hurt, and I have managed to get myself much more damaged than I ever let on,” she says, not allowing her eyes to meet mine.

I grow uncomfortable at her words, sensing I am hearing what is not for my ears. “What?” I manage to say.

“What a mess—and one of my own creation.”

I stop and rest my hands on her shoulders. “Julianne, we all make messes—and if we had it to do over, we’d make new messes. I just told you about one of mine. Don’t conclude you’re somehow unique. But whether or not we do, your feelings do count. How could they not?”

“I wanted them to count,” she says, with lips appearing to quiver. “I wanted them to so badly. I pretended that I didn’t, but I did.”

I pull a tissue from my pocket and blot the glossy tears welling in her eyes.

She nods. “But still, it left wounds that never healed, and there was nowhere to turn for comfort.”

“But do you really think your feelings didn’t count at all?”

“No, I suppose that’s not true—just not like I needed them to be. Do you think I’m overreacting?”

“Oh, no. I didn’t say that. That part of your life may not have been all you needed, but the fact is life is like that. My own list of messes is likely to be every bit as long as you think yours is. Sometimes we simply need a separate set of eyes to point out the whole panorama to us, don’t you think?”

“I suppose so. Still, I wish I’d had someone sensitive to me like you are.”

We resume walking. “Hey, stick around. I’m sure I can do something to tee you off.”

She smiles through wet eyes. “Oh, thanks,” she says.

“Does this mean you’re okay?”

She reaches her arm around me. “Yes, I am. None of that is news to me—it’s just that I never let it out. And you do have this effect on me; making me feel that everything is all right, that there is a safe place for me to be where what I need comes first. I hope I’m not over-interpreting.”

I pull her toward me as well, and we continue walking, arm-in-arm. “Oh, I think you’re pretty safe with me,” I say.

“Really?”

“Yes, really.”

When we reach shore Julianne stops suddenly, sits down on an angular boulder and looks up at me. “By the way, James, if I took your phone who would I call?”

I sit next to her. “Who would you?”

“Should I call my sister and say, ‘Hi Sis, this is Julia. Guess what?’ I don’t know any directors anymore. The ones I knew are all dead. Most of my friends are dead, come to think of it. Maybe, ultimately, that’s even what did me in—the weight of all those losses, more and more every year. Who could stand up to that? Maybe that’s what does us all in.”

“I have wondered that, Julianne.”

“Well, obviously, so have I.”

“So, in any event, you’ll have to start over.”

“Yes. Completely. With no family.”

“You have a new family, but I suppose we could judiciously work on the old one.”

She folds her hands and settles her elbows on her knees. “No one will believe this,” she says. “They’ll think I’m an imposter after something.”

I glance toward the brick house at the end of the beach and then turn to her. “Julianne, we’re three days into this. Give me a chance to figure it out. You have a whole world of possibilities open to you. We will choose prudently.”

She raises her eyebrows and smiles. “You are analytical about this. You have this confidence.”

“That’s supposed to be your trait. Believe you can do it and you can.”

“If only it were that simple.”

We stand and begin walking back down the beach. “Simple I suppose it isn’t,” I answer. She does not reply, but continues walking with eyes focused on the orange cobbles of the narrow beach. “On the other hand, you don’t want to start defeated. It doesn’t fit you. Look at you; you’re about the most magnificent thing on two legs. We’ll just do whatever we need to.”

She stops and turns to me. “James, I can’t decide if you’re a father figure, a big brother or a boyfriend.”

“How about friend?” I answer.

We continue, with the old brick house drawing nearer with our steps. “You’re as cool as a cucumber about all this,” she says.

I shrug my shoulders. “About some things I am. It runs in the family. My father’s war pals used to tell stories about him napping during artillery barrages. The shell would be raining down and there would be Pop, snoozing in his foxhole.”

We reach the house and walk along the low seawall that borders it until we are again on the sandy beach that leads to where the truck is parked. This time we do not stop to inspect the house. We follow our footsteps in the snow that covers the upper beach and retrace our way through ice ruts to the

truck. I open the door for Julianne and help to seat her. I then settle into the driver’s seat and we begin the journey home. “Seen enough?” I ask.

“I think so,” she replies.

We negotiate the road past the desolate golf course and turn right onto the main road. “Let’s stop at the grocery store on the way home,” I say. “We need to pick up some stuff for tonight.”

“Like what?”

“Things for dinner and for tomorrow morning. What are you in the mood for tonight?”

“Oh, let’s see. How about some leaves and bark?”

“No gruel?”

“Oh, yes, that too. Yum.”

“What do you really want?”

“I don’t know; what do you think I’m ready for?”

“Want to try some chicken? I bet that would be okay.”

“Chicken,” she says.

We continue through town until we reach the interstate, which we take east across the Connecticut River. We both silently turn our heads south toward the lighthouse in the distance. Julianne closes her eyes and begins drifting off, with her head nodding until it rests on my shoulder. She does not wake until I pull into the supermarket parking lot near home. She stares blankly for a moment and lifts her hand to my arm. “I fell asleep,” she says.

“I noticed,” I answer. “Walking in the cold does that to me too. Do you want to stay here or come in?”

“I’ll come in,” she says sleepily, rubbing her eyes with her palms and then stretching.

We depart the truck and enter the store, where we pull a grocery cart from a stacked line of them. We begin wheeling the cart through the door

but stop before a deeply wrinkled, silver-haired woman who stands in front of us. She focuses first on Julianne and then on me. “Hi James,” she says. “Haven’t seen you in a long time.”

“Hi Phoebe,” I reply. “I been working outside the area for years now, so I’m out of touch. Let me introduce you to my niece, Julianne.”

“Hello, nice to meet you,” she says, eyeing Julianne from top to bottom. “Are you here visiting?”

“Yes,” Julianne answers. “I just got here a few days ago.”

“Where are you from?”

“Originally Connecticut, but I’ve been away for some time.”

“Well I hope you enjoy your stay.” She smiles a crinkly smile and turns her attention to me: “How’s Regina?”

“Fine. She’s away on business.”

“Tell her to give me a call and that we all miss her, will you?”

I nod. “Sure; as soon as she gets back.”

She begins walking away and calls over her shoulder, “Good. I’ll let you go, then. Nice to have met you, Julianne.”

“Nice to have met you too,” Julianne replies, lifting her hand in an aborted wave to the woman who’s back now faces us.

“Your niece?” she says to me.

We begin walking through the produce section, stopping at the bananas. “You’re family now.”

She whispers, “Does she think we’re having an affair?”

I lift a bunch and place them in the cart. “Oh, I hope so. It will give her something to gossip about.”

“We do sleep together,” she says, elbowing me.

“There you go. See? You’re my bimchette.”

She raises her eyebrows. “I beg your pardon?”

“I take it back,” I say, with a broadening grin. I squeeze her shoulder and pull her toward me, and we walk arm in arm toward the vegetables. “Boy, though,” I continue. “If she ever knew about that she would be banging on her phone until it exploded.”

Julianne’s eyes twinkle. “She’s the local busybody?”

“One of several around here without enough to occupy their minds. She’s a member of the blueblood set; I don’t always fit well with them.” We reach the meat department where I place a package of boneless chicken into the cart.

“How come?” she asks.

“Oh, when we first moved here we got the rush from them; inviting us to everything, going out three and four times a week. Some of them smelled that Regina had some money, I think, although some also liked basking in her glamour, not to mention that one or two of the men did their best to romance her.”

“James,” she says.

“The truth remains the truth,” I answer. “It was okay for a while, but I don’t do well with all the small talk, hour after hour, night after night, and god forbid I try talking about anything that actually interested me. Eyes would glaze over and the frantic search for someone else to talk to would begin.”

“So, what happened?”

“Just lost interest, I guess—me in them, them in me. Drifted apart. What kind of soup do you like?”

“Tomato. Tell me more. You’re not telling me everything.”

“So do you like tomato because you are one?”

“Damn right,” she says, pushing me. “So?”

“Nothing more to tell, really.”

“I don’t believe you. Did it affect you?”

“It did, in some ways, I guess. It appears that I am a reasonably fragile creature. Yes.”

She groans. “I’m afraid I am only too familiar with not fitting. My family was involved in the wrong causes, taking the wrong views, in the eyes of the powers that be, that is. And with me the issue was that I said too much too loudly. People would get offended. They thought I was opinionated, which I suppose I was. Am, I should say. I could see people just wishing I would shut up. My solution was to stay within my family. It was safe and we were close—forced to be in the early days. Not that everything always ran smoothly, but we were family, so we could even out the rough spots.”

I turn and allow my eyes to review her flawless profile. “Wise choice,” I say.

“There was a film I made; one of the first ones I did. I played someone who society snubbed. I doubt you ever heard of it; I did it back in the early ‘30s. It was an easy role for me; I hardly had to act. Growing up snubbed was a way of life. I knew exactly how it felt; I didn’t always fit well in real life—didn’t make friends easily.”

“We didn’t seem to have much trouble.”

“That’s different.”

“Why?”

“It just is. So what are your wife’s other friends like?”

“Oh, I like them: artists, writers, actors. You know, bohemian types.”

“Ah, my kind of people; people headed in one direction, with some purpose.”

“Indeed.”

“I remember some of the people I knew growing up. If they weren’t telling you how blue their blood was they were telling you about their impeccable connections and how privileged their children were. But then, when I started meeting actors and directors, I thought I had found heaven—people with ideas, people creating things—beautiful, substantive things.”

“See why it’s so easy for me to like you?”

We reach the checkout counter. I load my purchases onto the conveyor and take out my wallet. Julianne bags groceries and arranges them in our cart while I pay. We wheel our purchases out and make our way across a slippery parking lot to the truck, into which we place our bags.

When we return, we are able to carry everything into the house in one trip, although I keep an eye on Julianne’s progress up the treacherous walk to the back door. She negotiates it with ease, however, and as we enter she takes over putting groceries away, scrutinizing cabinets to determine what should go where.

I settle myself into a chair next to the kitchen phone and say, “Give me a minute. I’m going to call school and let them know you’re coming in tomorrow.” I dial and when the call is answered I say, “Mr. Dimmsdale? Hi. It’s James... No, everything’s fine. I just had some family stuff to deal with. I’ll be in tomorrow. I had a question, though. Would it be all right if I brought someone in to observe my classes? My niece is thinking about going into education and wants to see what it’s like.... It would? Great. You’ll like her—she’s an angel. I’ll see you tomorrow, then... All right. Bye.”

Julianne loads the last of the perishables into the refrigerator and says without looking up, “You’re sure I’m your niece, now.”

“Without question.”

She smiles. “Okay, Uncle Jim.”

I place my elbow onto the chair's armrest. "What did you want me to say? Oh, by the way, Mr. Dimmsdale, I picked up this naked woman in the woods last week and I've been sleeping with her while my wife is away. Mind if I bring her in?"

"Niece sounds better. But you also could have said you rescued a damsel in distress, and now you're looking after her with great and tender care." She turns to me and places her hands on her hips.

"Damsel; I always wondered what one would look like. Now I know. Want grilled chicken tonight?"

She takes a soapy washcloth and wipes down the counters. "You mean a cookout?"

"Why not?"

"In January?"

"Yes; nothing to it. I'll wheel the grill out of the barn and throw the chickens on, and I'll just run over and turn them when they're ready."

"Then later we can roast marshmallows?"

"If you'd like. We can get out the beach chairs."

"Maybe that would be going too far."

"I wouldn't recommend it, but you do have this thing about standing outside naked in the snow."

"Well, maybe not today."

"Okay, we'll stick to grilling. Why don't we get started?"

We prepare dinner, attend to Chicken Little's needs and sit in the kitchen and talk until we are tired, at which point we head upstairs to our respective bathrooms. I settle myself into bed before Julianne emerges. When she does, it is in a white nightgown. She stands in the dressing room facing away from me with arms hanging limply and eyes cast toward the floor.

"God, you look like a scared little girl," I say.

She looks up and turns toward me. "Well, I'm only a few days old, so I'm allowed, aren't I?"

"I suppose so, although I think of you as being fearless."

"Sorry, I'm quite human," she replies.

I turn to my side to face her. "So, do you need to stay with me?"

She takes a step toward me. "Is that okay?"

"Yes, it's okay. Get yourself settled. I have an early day tomorrow, so sleep is going to have to follow shortly. Tired?"

"Very." she says, entering the bedroom and walking to the other side of the bed. She slips in, pulling the covers up to her shoulders and fluffing her pillow. As I turn off the light she slides herself across to press against my back. "Is this okay," she whispers.

"Yes," I say. I pull her hand to me and kiss it. "Good night, stay warm, pleasant dreams. Comfortable?"

"Yes," she answers, adjusting her knees up to mine.

We lay like that for a time, but she then rolls to her other side. She already appears asleep. I turn over as well, and lay against her back as she has done with me. It is how Regina and I often end our day together, although my thoughts are not of Regina or Julianne as I do so. They are of my father; of how I leaned my head against him when I was very young, of how I laid holding him during his final hours.

I do drift off, albeit in a troubled state. Dreams take me to a place I know well. Once our house had been owned by a spinster who had spent her whole life on this property until she died in the very room in which Julianne and I now lay. Sometimes over the years this lady and I have had lively discussions as I sleep, and sometimes she takes me to rooms in the house which during my waking hours are not present. Some of these are in the

attic, although others are in the basement. They are filled, Tut-like, with treasures left over from earlier days. It appears these effects somehow managed to escape detection when the house had been emptied. I have searched the house during the day just to prove to myself that these rooms do not really exist, although at night they become vivid enough that I find myself believing they are somewhere.

On this night the old lady is nowhere to be found, but I am again in front of a basement window looking into a brightly lit room that has no other entrance except through that opening. It is off a section of basement still present when we first moved in, although it has since been filled with soil and the land over it converted to a garden. Tonight, however, the basement is back and the room is as bright as ever. Its contents are coated in a layer of talc-like dust.

I have in the past only looked into this room and never tried entering it. The thought of doing so has left me with some uncertain sense of fear. Tonight, however, I muster courage and squeeze myself through the narrow window to the cement floor below. The room is lined with shelves that are packed with various bits of personal memorabilia: childhood toys, scrapbooks and photo albums of images from a world now gone. All sit beneath the pervasive dust that shows no sign of any disturbance. On a ledge I spy a stack of envelopes bound in a faded scarlet ribbon. These I take down, shake clean and note the handwritten salutations to “my love” and “my dearest.”

I walk through the room and find it opens into another similarly bright room with a source of light that is unclear, there being no windows present. Perhaps it is from a lamp, although I notice none. The room is also lined with shelves, but these are neatly packed with heavy volumes of wide, gilt-edged books. At the room’s center is an old, oak desk stained with inky

black spots. Behind is a matching swivel chair at which sits a smooth-skinned, wan sort of man dressed in overalls. He sits ashen and bony, like a Dickens character, with legs crossed and a book open across his lap. At my entry he looks up and smiles, greeting me with a “Hello.”

“Hello,” I say. “You’re the gardener, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” he answers.

“The one to whom these letters are written.” I show him the bundle.

“Right again.”

“So where is she?”

“Oh, she’s gone. Gone for good, I think.”

“Don’t you want to try to get her back?”

“No, not really. We had quite a fling, but by and large she was touchy and irritable, so it’s nicer just to sit here and read. Nobody ever bothers me.”

“I hadn’t experienced her like that,” I begin to say, when I am awoken by the clock radio announcing it is 5:30. I lay in the dark, feeling grimy from the dust in which I have so lately been standing, and disoriented from the sudden change of venue. I click off the radio and peer through the dark toward Julianne, who lays undisturbed, breathing evenly and lying motionless. “It’s time to wake up if you want to come with me,” I whisper in her ear.

“Just another minute,” she replies softly, with voice muffled by her pillow.

I rise and head down the hall to my bathroom, where I turn on the bathtub water that I hope will wash away the grit I feel permeating me. As it fills, I scrub particles out from my teeth with toothpaste and brush. Down the hall, I hear Julianne rise and enter her own bathroom to begin the same ritual. We dress ourselves amidst her complaints that she has become cold

and soon we are off, with bagels lying on napkins spread across our laps and cups of tea and coffee, respectively, secured in holders in front of us.

6

“So, James. If you don’t mind my asking, why are you a schoolteacher? I would have thought you’d be working for the government or something like that.”

Julianne’s question rouses me from my early morning trance, which is enhanced on our drive by the darkness that still bathes the landscape and cab of the truck. “No,” I reply. “This is what I do.”

“Why not at a university? You’re qualified, aren’t you?”

“Oh, yes. I did, for twenty years, in fact. But this is how it worked out. Life is hard, by the way, and disappointing, and not fair, and from what you tell me the alternative isn’t so great either.”

She lays her head back on the seat. “Interesting how fuzzy all that’s gotten so fast, like it wasn’t real. I suppose I’ve said some things about how hard life is, too. It’s too hard, sometimes. Most people wouldn’t expect me to say that, but just live for a while—anyone—and they’ll see. So how did you wind up where you are?”

I take a bite of bagel. “I started out in government—my first job out of college. I hated it—too much politics, too many mediocre minds, not enough science. One year we were supposed to be studying wintering eagles, but my colleagues couldn’t manage to get themselves out from behind their desks. I just forged ahead and did a study alone. Six months later I had an article in press and they hadn’t yet managed to extract their thumbs from their rears. Ass covering and sniping soon followed. I just

wanted to do science and not waste my time with nonsense, so I went back to academia with all the rest of the oddballs. I wound up with a glamorous job in the tropics, but when reality finally caught up with me and I had to come home, I found I had become too old and too expensive to get another position. I actually was offered one appointment—a department chairmanship—but magically, just like that, the position disappeared before I could take it. It's more than that, of course. There's not much demand for what I do. So, I went to the next level, and here I am."

"Any regrets?"

"How high can you count?"

"But you still do science."

"Oh, yes, as much as ever; although the passions have cooled. Did that happen to you?"

"Cool off? No. I stayed driven and cantankerous right up to the end; selfish, self-absorbed. Just my nature, I guess. And I could get away with it."

I shake my head. "It is the baggage that comes along with creativity, you know, so don't criticize yourself too much."

We settle into quiet while we drive along country roads, past barns, through forests. When we reach the edge of town, Julianne re-starts our conversation: "James, this really is quite nice to ride in; not at all what I imagine when I think of a truck."

"It's held up well for an antique in the making."

"It's old? It looks new, and it's like a car—very comfortable."

"Oh, it's moving on toward 200,000 miles, but I do keep it up. It still runs like it did the day I got it. When it was brand new I used to drive my father around in it. He liked going out to breakfast with me. It will be hard to part with."

We enter the center of town, weaving then through side streets until we arrive at the school parking lot. It is just 7:00 AM and students are trickling into the building. We stop at the office, where Julianne gets a visitor's pass, and we climb the stairs to my room. There I arrange my papers for the day, taking care of last minute photocopying and lesson planning. I direct Julianne to seat herself at one the lab tables toward the rear of the room.

Seven twenty-five arrives quickly, too quickly, as always, and students begin filing in.

"Good morning, Dr. Maxwell. Stretching out vacation?"

"Good Morning Goody. I just couldn't bring myself to face all of you. So, do you have your term paper?"

"We missed you too, Dr. Maxwell. What term paper?"

More students come in.

"Oh, you know. The one I assigned just before vacation. Just pile them right here."

"Dr. Maxwell! What term paper?"

"You didn't not do it, did you?"

"Dr. Maxwell!"

"Come on. Fifty pages apiece; right here in a pile."

"Fifty pages!"

"Indeed; get them up here."

Two girls stand by their desks wide-eyed. They huddle together conferring in excited whispers. "Is he serious?" they ask.

"When is he serious?" Goody calls across the room to them.

Rrrriiiiiinnnggggg! "Please stand for the pledge of allegiance." We perform the morning rituals.

"Okay guys, welcome back to your favorite class. I have someone I want to introduce you to. Meet Ms. O'Neill. Is that right, Ms.?"

“That’s fine,” Julianne says from the rear of the room. She rises partly from the lab stool upon which she has settled and waves to the students.

‘She’s going to be observing our classes for a while. And she’s really mean, so if you get out of line I’m turning you over to her.’”

“Hi Miss O’Neill,” several of the students say. “Hold on to your hat. We’re pretty wild. What’s your first name?”

“It’s Julianne,” she replies.

“But you can call her Ms. O’Neill. Manners, manners.”

“Us? Manners? Do you like ice cream, Miss O’Neill? Don’t you think Dr. Maxwell should let us have an ice cream party?”

Julianne suppresses a laugh. “Sounds like a good idea to me,” she says.

“We can. Tomorrow. We’ll do slides of my winter studies. I want you to see what I’ve been doing.”

“Yes! Ice cream party. What flavors?”

“Chocolate,” someone says.

“Definitely mocha almond fudge,” Julianne chimes in.

“Oh, that sounds great! What else?”

I raise my hand. “Okay guys, later, later. Let’s get down to business.”

“Julianne O’Neill. Didn’t there used to be a movie star by that name?” one asks.

“I think there did,” another says.

“Are you related, Miss O’Neill?”

“Actually, yes,” Julianne answers.

“Hey, let’s check the internet.”

I tap on my desk top. “Come on ladies and gentleman, we have to get started.”

“Oh, just for a minute. Pleeese?”

“Okay, one minute.”

Goodman and another student get up from their desks and walk to the classroom computer, where they begin exploring the internet. “Hey guys,” Goodman says. “Check this out... Here she is. Hey, Miss O’Neill. Come here. You look just like her.”

Julianne rises and walks in halting steps to the computer, where she inspects the image on the screen from over their shoulders. “My, the family resemblance is strong, isn’t it?” she says.

“Amazing. Wow. You look like a movie star.”

“Okay, okay, enough.” I say. “We can all agree that Ms. O’Neill is very cute. Now back to the brain. Notebooks!”

“Oooh, Miss O’Neill, Dr. Maxwell thinks you’re cute. Wait till Mrs. Dr. Maxwell hears that.”

Julianne resumes her seat in the back, bracing her chin with her palms and unsuccessfully suppressing a wide smile. We settle into classes, which go by with their usual unnatural speed, until the clock ticks down to 10:20: lunch time.

“You go to lunch now?” she says to me.

“Uncivilized, isn’t it? I bet you’re hungry by now, though, right?”

“Come to think of it, I am.”

“Well, brace yourself for cafeteria food. It may not be quite what you’re used to.”

“I’ll take my chances. Lead the way.”

We struggle through the crowds of students to the stairwell, where we descend to the basement cafeteria. I hand her a tray, and we get in line with the students to sample the delicacies of the day. “It’s all fried, all the time here,” I say, “unless you’d rather do the soup and salad bar.”

“How bad can it be?” she says, pushing her tray along and selecting like me carrot and celery sticks from the stainless steel counters before us.

“You’ll soon know,” I say.

A student taps me on the shoulder and asks, “Dr. Maxwell, you have an extra fifty cents?”

I reach into my pocket and hand over two quarters. “Do I look like an instant teller?” I ask.

“Yes,” he replies.

I reach the hot lunch counter and choose a grilled cheese sandwich and tomato soup. Julianne opts for pizza and salad. “The pizza’s not too bad,” I tell her.

We weave through braided lines of students back into the hallway and from there head to the teacher’s lunch room. We sit shoulder to shoulder with the rest of the staff at one of the long folding tables that fill the room. I announce to my colleagues, “Ladies and gentlemen, say hi to Julianne. She’s observing my classes.”

“I’m his niece,” she says, kicking me under the table.

“You can see she inherited my good looks,” I add. There are “Hi Juliannes” all around, and with quantum speed we descend into the usual conversation fare:

“You know that course I took last semester? The best thing I got out of it was using pivot tables. Have you ever used them?”

“Beatrice Rappaccini was so sound asleep first block that the kid who sat at her desk second block had to shake her to wake her up.”

“Have you had your prep yet?”

“No. Do you have Roger Malvin in your class?”

“What a piece of work. He’s one of the kids who will be left behind. I looked at him in class today and he was sitting there with a blank piece of paper in front of him twenty minutes into the period. I told him start writing or you’re out of here.”

“I just let her dig her own hole for herself. Within five minutes she was half way to China.”

“They let you extract data from a spreadsheet. It’s so cool; powerful tool.”

“Is he one of the speds?”

“How about Faith Brown?”

“I took the first test for my night course last night. When are college professors actually going to be expected to teach?”

“No, no, he’s actually quite bright; he just never does anything. When you confront him, there’s always an excuse. He’ll go to the bathroom and disappear, and then we’ve got half the front office out searching for him. You know…”

“Julianne nudges me and whispers, “What’s a sped?”

“Special education; very politically incorrect to be heard saying it,” I whisper in reply.

“It’s strictly chalk and talk. They have no idea what teaching is about, and have no motivation to learn.”

“There’s a way on the school web site to keep your grade book now. I was experimenting with it last week. Once I got the idea it really wasn’t that hard to use.”

“What bug does Dr. Heidigger have up his ass this week? Did you see that e-mail from him this morning?”

“So, what’s the difference between a tenured professor and a terrorist?”

“What?”

“We were out ice fishing that day during vacation. You know, right around New Years? It was so cold our hole kept icing over. You must have had fun that day, James.”

“You know, I tried using it last year, but I decided it took more time to enter all the grades than to just keep them in my grade book.”

“You can negotiate with a terrorist.”

”I haven’t seen a single piece of paper from her yet this quarter.”

“Oh, yeah. I thought my contact lenses were going to freeze to my eyeballs. It was a unique kind of day.”

“But then you have to do the math by hand. It’s too easy to make mistakes when you’re entering columns of numbers. This way the computer does all the math for you, and you only have to enter the numbers in once.”

“You mean the one about re-certification? If they add one more requirement, I’m going to have to give up sleeping to keep up with them.”

“I don’t know. It just seemed harder to me.”

“Next week we’re going to start the acceleration lab. We’ve got it set up so there will be three photo gates. We’ll get an initial and final velocity for them to calculate with. Can you let me have the kids in the tech lab all period?”

“At first it was, but once I got used to it, it was better. You still have to enter the numbers once even if you’re just putting them in your grade book. The best thing is that at the end of the quarter, and even for progress reports, all you have to do is click send and the grades are reported.”

“Sure. No problem. We’ll just meet at the beginning of the period in the tech lab.”

“That in-service next week is going to be still another exercise in edubabble. Did you see the horse crap on the agenda? I may be sick that day.”

“I just did it online last summer. It took me about fifteen minutes. All they’re really worried about is getting their thirty-five-dollar fee. They’re so understaffed they audit something like one in a hundred. Just make sure you

have a file with all your professional development so that if you are audited you have it.”

“Mental health day?”

“What about weighting grades?”

“Oh, you can do that too. There’s a setup environment that lets you specify all that stuff.”

“Could we do a demonstration at the next department meeting?”

“Why not? It will only take about ten minutes. Once you know how to do it it’s really easy.”

“Add thirty minutes to that. Remember, I’ll be there.”

Laughs.

I lean over to Julianne. “It’s like a symphony, isn’t it? Did you ever hear of Charles Ives? He was from Danbury.”

“No. Who was he?”

“Composer; turn of the century. He worked as a banker, or lawyer, or something like that, to make a living. The composing he did on his own.”

“Like you.”

“I wish.”

The bell rings. “Fun’s over,” someone says.

Julianne sits wide-eyed. “That’s your lunch hour?”

I stand up. “No, that’s our lunch twenty minutes.”

We follow the herd from the room, throwing our styrofoam trays in the trash and squeezing our way through the stairway back to my room.

“...this is your NPR station. It’s five o’clock.” Click. Silence returns. Saturday morning is already here, and it is hard to consider moving from the warmth of the bed to the chill that lies beyond. I gaze to the frozen black that blankets the world outside the bedroom windows, and consider in my waking daze that I have now shared this bed with Julianne for nearly a week. She lies next to me, just stirring in the darkness. Have we tampered during our week with the fabric of being, I wonder, or is this simply an inevitable outcome of the nature of being? I hear her breaths and faint groans, so I whisper in her ear, “Are you sure you want to do this? You can sleep if you’d rather.”

“Mmm,” she says, rolling toward me. I begin extracting myself from the layers of covers. “Wouldn’t you rather just lie in the dark and wake slowly,” a weak voice calls from across the bed.

“Yes,” I reply with my own as yet barely used voice, “but there will be time for sleeping late—lots of time, more than I’ll ever want.”

I walk from the bedroom toward my bathroom, stumbling in the hall over a pile of unwashed clothes I have yet to deal with. “Jesus H. ...” I begin to say, but catch myself and go silent while I feel my way down the rest of the hall to where I can switch on the bathroom light. I muddle through my morning duties and come back washed and shaved—things I usually do not concern myself with when going into the field.

Julianne is standing at the bedroom doorway in a nightgown when I return, with arms crossed in front of her. “God, I’m cold,” she moans.

“I’ll dress you warm,” I say, walking toward her so I can rub her shoulders. “Does that help?” I ask.

“Yes,” she whispers, clasping her hands behind my back.

“Come on. I’ll give you long underwear and warm things to put on.” We walk together to my dresser, where I hand her an armful of clothes. We dress in multiple layers of flannel, sweaters and sweatshirts, double layers of insulated socks, lined boots, parkas, woolen hats and mittens. I grab my backpack, and by 5:25 we head to the door with toasted bagels and steaming coffee and tea, respectively, in our hands. “You really want to do this?” I say.

“I do,” she replies, sipping coffee in the doorway and looking toward the crystalline truck that gleams in the reflected light of a setting gibbous moon. We strap ourselves into our seats and let the motor warm, silently praying for heat to begin flowing from vents, although we do not yet dare turn on the fan, which would bathe us in an icy blast. We sit silent and huddled in our layers, waiting for the idle to slow, and we then begin crackling out the driveway and onto the thankfully bare road.

“I know you don’t really remember,” I say, “but you’ve done this trip with me before.”

“So you’ve told me. Where are we headed?”

“I choose the site I visit on any particular day at random. This morning I picked Puritan Hill in Wethersfield. You know it, don’t you?”

Some seconds pass before she responds, “I do.”

“I’ll tell you, it didn’t seem like random chance to me. I thought of picking again to spare you, but then I concluded I should let what is be.”

She stares straight ahead into the incandescent shafts made by the headlights. “It’s okay, James. I still want to go.”

“We’ll be out in the woods anyway; you really can’t see anything from there.”

“Why did you choose that spot in the first place?”

“The sites have to be areas with public access, and they have to be extensive enough for me to fit in fifteen sample points. Near Hartford, this is the only one that qualifies, so I had little choice. As it was, I used every square inch of it. You’ll see.”

We settle back to sipping in groggy silence, with the black road yielding before us. We dodge deer and peer into the dark for patches of ice in our path until we reach the interstate highway that heads to Hartford. Carrying on conversation at this hour is difficult enough that neither of us manage more than an occasional sentence before disappearing back to our own thoughts. In any event, I feel little motivation to speak despite how much I want the company of this being beside me.

We approach the Hartford skyline and Julianne wakes from her reticence. “Get on the left and take the Charter Oak Bridge,” she directs. I do and she adds, “Stay on the right and take this exit.”

We descend into the town of Wethersfield and head north briefly until we are near the Hartford city line. We turn left onto a side road that parallels Puritan Hill Cemetery—a pastoral place of mature trees and sweeping lawns, which echoes in its snowy expanses the peace of rural landscapes. Here we can park even though the main gate is not yet open. We sit for a moment in the warm cab, knowing what awaits us on the other side of the door. “Ready?” I ask.

“Okay,” she answers. We open our doors and step into the crusty snow of the roadside. I stretch the straps of my backpack to fit over my layers of

clothes, hand Julianne my extra pair of binoculars, the pair that once belonged to my father, and we start off to the first station. It lies along a frozen stream surrounded by a maple woodland punctuated with the massive, furrowed trunks of white pines. The openness of the landscape has permitted vines and shrubs to proliferate, particularly clothes-tugging roses and briars, so our progress is halting even at this season of no leaves. Above us a breeze rustles treetop branches, and I know that within a few hours a current will descend to find us at the forest floor.

In the half-light of 6:50 AM I turn on my global positioning device so we may re-occupy the point I first established on a very different morning the preceding July. By 6:55 we have found the point and I press my stopwatch. We stand silently and wait. Julianne has my clipboard and I say, “Write down the point number and time.” She fumbles with her mittens but manages to control a pencil well enough to record the data.

Minutes pass in silence before the first chatter reaches my ears. “Chickadee,” I say. “BCCR in capitals, then leave a space and write eighty, for eighty meters.”

“Does that mean it’s that far away?” she asks. “How can you know?”

“I’ve been doing this for thirty-five years; it’s amazing how good you get.” She struggles more with the pencil, but manages to record all I recite. “Another BCCR,” I say. “ninety meters. “And a Downy Woodpecker, DOWO, ninety also.”

“Is that the whinny kind of sound?”

“Yup. Nuthatch, WBNU, seventy. Hear that ‘eh-eh-eh-eh’? They’re waking up.” These birds move toward us, but eight minutes end without my hearing any additional species. “On we go,” I say. “We’ve got about two hundred meters to the next spot.” I use the arrow on the global positioning device to direct us through tangled brush. We fight through it, pushing down

snapping branches until I count down the distance to the next point.

“Staying warm?” I ask.

“I’m fine. This is fun, James,” she replies.

“I think so, although I’m skeptical most people would. But tell me how you feel when we get to station fifteen; it gets wearying, physically and mentally. Ready? Eight minutes starts now...” We fall silent and listen. I look at Julianne’s cheeks, which peek out from under her knitted hat, and which have become rosy in the biting cold. Her eyes strain as she stares into the stark forest, looking with an intensity I know well.

“Kinglet,” I say. “GCKI; thirty. It’s that high-pitched “zeet-zeet-zeet.”

“Oh, yes; way up above us.”

“They like these pines.”

“Ah; creeper; BRRCR, twenty-five. See him right there?” I point toward a maple trunk, and she lifts her binoculars, scanning the trunk until she finds a bird working its way head first down the bark.

“Yes,” she says, following the bird until it disappears around the back of the tree. “But James, it sounds the same as the last bird. How do you tell them apart if you can’t see them?”

“With difficulty. It takes practice.” Time’s up; let’s go.” We again begin trudging through the diamond snow that in places now intercepts the first shafts of morning sunlight.

Julianne’s nose drips onto her upper lip and she sniffs repeatedly. I reach into my pocket and pull out a tissue, which I hand her. She wipes her nose and says, “You’re prepared for everything.”

“I’ve done this before,” I answer.

She smiles and blots her nose again, focusing on the rubber-coated device that hangs from my neck. “That toy you’ve got is quite something,” she says.

“Global positioning? Indeed. It certainly beats the old days of compasses and counting paces. I still bring the compass with me, though. When all else fails, like batteries, the compass still works. George Washington technology.” I hand her my compass. “Try it out. If you turn the dial to north and sight through the little V, you can tell what direction you’re heading to within a few degrees. Tie it to your jacket so it doesn’t drop into the snow.” I show her how to loop it through her zipper. “It’s an heirloom; I’ve been carrying it around with me since I was in my twenties.” We begin to ascend a hill where young trees stand like poles in snow that thins to a less exhausting depth. “Twenty meters, fifteen, ten, five, here we are. Ready?” Julianne nods and sets her gaze back out to the trees beyond.

“Red-bellied Woodpecker; RBWO, one hundred twenty.”

“That rattle way out that way?”

“Yes. Goldfinch overhead. AMGO, twenty.”

“That’s more than twenty yards above us, isn’t it?”

I look up. “Yes, but we’re measuring horizontal distance from the point. That’s the way the math works.” My voice trails off and I whisper, “Let me concentrate. Only a minute left...” We spend the last minute in silence, straining to hear anything in the extreme distance. I click through saved coordinates until I find those of the next point and we are again off, swishing through leaves that frost has pushed through snow to the surface.

“There’s really not much around, is there?” Julianne says.

“Not in winter, especially not in northern Connecticut. There’s more toward the coast.”

“Why?”

“I think it’s because temperatures average milder, so it’s not as hard to make a living. I told you about this didn’t I? It costs a lot of calories for

little animals to stay alive in winter. They have to find all their own food, remember.”

“How do they do it?”

“I don’t think they all succeed. But did you notice we’re seeing birds together instead of just singly? A lot of them flock in winter. They help each other out, you could say. More eyes looking …”

“Are we flocking?” she asks.

“I suppose you could argue we are.” We trudge on to the next station, and to the next, making an extended arc through the modest ribbon of forest that borders the cemetery. When we approach the final stations, we climb a ridge that forms the precipice of an active quarry. “Did you know this was behind here?” I ask.

“No,” she says. “The trees give the illusion of the forest just going off into the country. I suppose I should know there’s no country left in these parts; not since I was very young, anyway.”

We occupy the fifteenth and final station, with backyards just visible through the trees in front of us. “BCCR thirty, another thirty-five, another forty, and another sixty.” Julianne copies out what I say, in script I see will be difficult to decipher later. “Handwriting is not your greatest talent,” I observe.

“It’s not so bad,” she protests while peering at me from the corners of her eyes.

“Listen to how they’re communicating with each other,” I say, “and see how the titmice are joining them? So, TUTI forty-five, forty and fifty; WBNU at seventy also.” The multi-species flock loops its way through in waves of chattering, and continues past toward the quarry rim behind us. The woods fall silent, and we count off the final seconds until eight minutes is upon us. “Done,” I say. “How are you doing?”

She smiles. “Good; a little tired, but not too bad.”

“I’m glad, because we have a long walk back.”

“Are we going to go the way we came?”

“We can, or we can cut across the cemetery if you’re inclined. It’s shorter that way.”

“Let’s do it,” she says. We walk the hundred or so yards to the edge of the forest where trees give way to a snow-covered lawn that slopes toward rows of headstones shining in late morning sun. Further in the distance, on a facing hill, we see a mature grove of trees, such as those that sprinkle through the older parts of the cemetery. We head in the direction of the front gate toward this hill. Our path is marked by our footsteps in the snow—two tracks, parallel, curving in an arc down one slope and up the next. “I suppose I should go see it,” she adds. “It’s right along this road up ahead, you know.”

“You want to?” I ask.

“I’m curious. Wouldn’t you be?” We reach the narrow, paved road and turn right to walk along its icy surface.

“You know where it is?”

“Oh, yes. I’ve been there several times.”

“Recently?”

“I suppose recently, although I’m not so sure of that. Do you know what I mean?” She steps carefully along the road. “I’ve been there to see off parents and siblings.” We pass statuary and formal plantings. “It’s pretty along here, isn’t it?” she says.

I nod. “It is, and good bird watching too.”

She smiles. “Well, I’m glad to know that.”

“Are you okay?” I ask.

She takes my arm and continues looking ahead. “So far.” We stop in front of a quiet spot with a sweeping view. It would be pleasant place, I think, to sit and watch the world go by some summer afternoon. The snow here is untrodden, although a vase with some manner of artificial flowers pokes above it in one spot. “That must be where it is,” she says, pointing to the flowers. Our boots sink into the snow as we walk together toward them.

“Do you want me to scoop away the snow?” I ask.

“No. This is enough. It’s as I imagined; nothing remarkable; nothing I haven’t seen before; it just is. It’s not really me, you know.” She stands concentrating on the snow at first, but then lifts her eyes to survey the immediate surroundings. “It’s none of us, really,” she adds. “Just handfuls of dust in the ground.” She reaches her arms out to me and I hold her there in silence for some minutes. We then return to the road where we continue walking. I keep my arm about her shoulder, squeezing it as we walk, although we exchange no words. At length she breaks the silence with, “Well, that was different.”

“Different; yes,” I agree. We continue walking until we approach the wrought iron gates that mark the entrance. They are open at this hour and we continue through them into the bright sunshine beyond.

The sun has headed toward its highest point of the day and its presence in the clear sky is defrosting the landscape to just above freezing. With our long walk we have also warmed ourselves, so when we reach the truck we remove layers and throw them to the rear of the cab.

“Hungry at all?” I ask.

“Maybe a little,” she replies with a sigh.

“The standard ritual is to stop for a late breakfast after censusing. There’s a place right up the street. Want to?”

She pulls off her mittens and holds them. “Do you need to?”

“I wouldn’t mind. What do you say?”

“Okay, then. I’m game.”

“Come on; it will be good for you. Bacon.”

“You think?”

“I think. Let’s do it.” We drive the few blocks to a stainless steel diner that sits back from a sanded parking lot. I pull up to its door and step out. There I wait for Julianne, contemplating as I do a great, imponderable mystery: why exactly it is that women take so long to get out of a car?

She steps out, with woolen cap off and hair shining in breezy sunlight. We climb cement steps and I open the framed glass door for her. We choose a booth next to a window and settle onto red plastic, cushioned seats. “Your kind of place,” I say.

“Most definitely,” she answers.

A waitress brings over a pot of coffee, which she offers to us. We turn over our cups and she fills them. Julianne picks up a menu, as do I, although I study her serenely reading its pages before I turn any attention to my own. “How are you?” I ask.

“I suppose I’m kind of weary, like you said I’d be.”

“Julianne,” I repeat, “how *are* you?”

“Okay, James; really.”

“Sure?”

“Yes. Stop worrying.” She reaches her hand across the table and grasps mine. “Bacon and eggs,” she says while turning the page of the menu.

“Bacon—my favorite flavor.” We sit sipping coffee, both of us involuntarily turning our heads to contemplate the bustling highway outside the window. “Want to do some exploring when we’re done?” I ask.

“What did you have in mind?”

“I don’t know. Anything you want to see?”

“I start reminiscing when I’m out this way. Maybe there are a few places I can show you.”

“Whatever you’d like.” We order, and as the waitress leaves I say, “I wouldn’t have picked you as a bacon and eggs kind of girl.”

“I’m not, really. Just once in a while, as a kind of indulgence. What kind of girl would you pick me as being?”

“I would have said warm fruit and crepes with orange sauce, and maybe a little powdered sugar.”

“Mmm. That sounds good, too. Next time.”

“Okay; there’s a place near the coast where they might do that for you. If it doesn’t rain maybe we’ll be down that way tomorrow.”

“The forecast on the radio didn’t sound too good, you know.”

“No. I’m a little skeptical we are going to get a census in. But we could go down there anyway.”

“Just for breakfast?”

“Maybe we can explore there a little, too.”

“All right. This being out and about has been good for me; resolving a lot of unfinished business.”

“Such as?”

“I don’t know if I could explain in words—it’s more just dissipating internal stresses.... Sorry if I’m not making any sense.”

Breakfast comes quickly, and we sit crunching on strips of crisp bacon, sitting back in our seats and focusing intently on each other’s eyes. It is a very pleasant sensation to do this, although I am uncertain why this is, or at least I am unwilling to consider why.

Julianne breaks our silent staring. “Why do you do this censusing, James?” she asks.

“It’s valuable for land planning. You know, knowing where your resources are. And it tells us things about how natural systems work.”

“Does it generate interest?”

“Some, but not as much as I might have guessed considering no one’s ever done anything like this. But, in any event, I have to do it now. My ears have begun ringing, so there’s no time for second guessing.”

“Ringing? That doesn’t sound good.”

“It’s not. It’s the first sign my hearing is going to fade. I only have a few years left before I’m too old. You saw how important hearing is to doing this kind of thing.”

She raises her eyebrows. “I remember things fading too, like looks. In my field, losing looks is like losing hearing is for you.”

“Do you know how odd that sounds coming from you—the knockout of the century?”

She crosses her arms on the table in front of her and leans forward. “The last century,” she says.

“I told you the first time I saw you on screen you were already pretty white-haired. I remember sitting in the theater and saying out loud to someone, ‘god, she’s still beautiful.’ How exactly is it that you thought you lost your looks?”

“Oh, I think I looked okay for someone that age. But it’s not like leading lady looks—not the kind of looks young women have.”

I examine faces at nearby tables. “I hope no one’s listening to this,” I say.

She laughs. “I’m sure it would turn some heads.”

“Well, in any event, you’re doing that now.”

We finish breakfast with few additional words but many intent looks across coffee mugs. After second cups of coffee, we rise and I leave cash for

our bill. I open the door for Julianne and we descend the steps back to the truck.

“So James, what are you going to do when you can’t do this any more?” she asks as we get seated.

“Poodle ranching,” I answer.

“In addition to that.”

“You think I’ll have time left over?”

“James.”

“I’ve been taking math classes. I’ve been thinking I could move into theory—armchair biology.”

“Ah, math—my other specialty,” she says. She buckles herself in.

“Losing hearing didn’t happen to me that much, you know. Some, but not as bad as it seems to get in most people.”

“My father never lost it either. My mother, on the other hand... I fear I will take after her. It makes me think of the retired professor of ornithology I knew when I was a student. He had joined the faculty in 1913—the year my father was born. He was still active into his nineties, but his hearing was completely gone. His ears were supposed to have been like mine when he was young. In any event, I will miss being out here; having the alone time.”

“Doesn’t being out with me take that part of it away from you?”

“Having the choice of being alone or being with you, I choose you. It’s that way with Regina, too. You’re the only people I could say that about.”

She turns her head to me and squints. “Why?” she asks.

“Well, you’ve opted to be with me pretty much continuously too, so why?”

“I like your company.”

“Oh, come on. Why?”

“Because I’ve needed your company; because it makes me complete.”

“There you go,” I say. We pull away from the lot and enter the road heading north toward Hartford.

But I’ll tell you,” she adds, “you have made me think about aging. I didn’t like it; you’ve reminded me about things that were hard for me.”

“And hard for me. So where are we going, by the way?”

“Just go straight here.”

We travel toward the city center, past Hartford Hospital, past Bushnell Park and the capitol, and then out toward West Hartford. We continue until we reach a historic neighborhood—one of the city’s remaining landmarks from its heyday in the waning years of the nineteenth century. She directs me to turn left onto a street where we pass a series of freshly painted Victorian homes. After these, the landscape becomes increasingly shabby, with old homes in varying states of disrepair interspersed with modern, rectangular apartments. Once, I gather from the way these apartments are situated, they were the sites of grander buildings and sweeping lawns, but they have since become cement landscapes lined with trash barrels and parked cars; not squalid, really, but not what they once were.

The snow at this central portion of the city is dingy and sparse. It covers patches of lawn and forms blackened crusts along the streets. When we turn left again onto a largely houseless street above train tracks and an interstate highway, it forms a sullen coating on a vacant lot that lies to our right. Julianne directs me to stop along this street.

“Let’s get out. I want to walk a little,” she says. We exit the car and walk on the surface of an uncleared, untrodden sidewalk that borders the lot. She points to a single ramshackle house across from us that appears abandoned. “I had a girlfriend who lived there,” she says.

“This is home,” I answer.

She nods. “Yes; when I was very young. It was a lovely old neighborhood.”

“Yes, I assumed that. So which house was yours?”

“It’s been torn down, a long time ago.” She stares at the empty lot. “But I can still see it and the yard—a big yard, with big, old trees. It extended all the way down the hill to a park, like a piece of the country tacked onto the city. It was a wonderful place to grow up.” She kicks her boots at the ground, uncovering a place in the pavement where there are remains of a driveway entrance. “It was right up here,” she says. We step off the pavement along the imagined route of the driveway, walking up an uneven hill through which shards of bricks and cement protrude from grimy snow. “Our front yard was here somewhere, beneath all this. This is what I think of as my real home, James. You know, the childhood home—it has an importance beyond all other houses one could ever live in. It was flat here then, although I see someone’s now made it a trash hill.”

We continue walking back through a grove of weed trees that has established itself on the rubble and continue down a slope toward a railroad bed. She points to her right. “It was this way, somewhere.” We walk some dozens of paces toward the lower corner of the lot. “There was a stream here. It’s long gone too, buried in a pipe somewhere, I imagine. In the spring there were daffodils along here. The park we used to play in is beneath the interstate over there.” We wrestle through weeds and vines that protrude from the snow. She looks about, inspecting the ground for some trace, talking less and less. She stops and stands upright, with arms hanging and eyes focused out toward some missing place. “Let’s get out of here,” she says.

We pick our way out among the weeds and rubble until the road again comes into view. We step onto the sidewalk, our pant legs covered in last

fall’s crop of beggar ticks, which we brush off before heading toward the parked truck only yards from us. She surveys the ruins and asks, “Why would people take something that was so pretty and make it so ugly?” She turns and begins walking, adding, “So what am I doing here? It’s all in the past.”

“Not all,” I say. “Suppose I told you I walked around here in the early spring and found there were still some daffodils down by the railroad tracks. I wasn’t sure exactly where you lived, but I had narrowed it to some place around here. I’ll come pick you one next spring, or we’ll plant one from here for you in our garden.” I look back and study the view. “Weren’t you with me when I did that? It sure seemed like you were.”

Julianne smiles a half smile. “I hope I was,” she says.

“Should we go?” I ask as I unlock the truck. “Any place else we should stop?”

We both occupy our seats. “Let’s take a ride through the park,” she says. “I’ll show you.” We turn left and drive north through block after block of tired houses interspersed with thoughtless new construction until she directs me to turn into a park. “This doesn’t look so different,” she says. She breathes out and lets her head be cradled by the headrest of her seat. We travel slowly on the deserted and nominally plowed park road, past ribbons of woodland and sloping fields that in their scale simulate pastures, even though they are in the heart of the city. The snow is still white here, with streaks descending hills where children have ridden their sleds. “It was more stately back then,” she continues, “but it still looks pretty much the same. I used to ride my bike here with my brothers and sisters.” She smiles and closes her eyes.

When we reach the end of the park I turn left onto the main street and head north toward Windsor, a town like Hartford with roots in the earliest

years of the seventeenth century. “We can get on the highway toward home up here,” I say.

“I know,” she replies.

“Are you ready to do that?”

“Yes.”

We make the grueling trip home, always doubly difficult after a too early morning of physical exercise, mental strain, and burning calories to stay warm. We are largely silent, and Julianne nods off to sleep, not waking until we exit the interstate highway onto a local road. “Feel better?” I ask when I see her head rise.

“Yes,” she answers softly. “I needed that.”

“I do too. I usually take a nap when I get back from one of these outings.”

“Can I lie next to you?” she asks.

“If you want. This wears you out more than you think, doesn’t it? We can rest for a while and then go out on a date tonight, or stay home and watch TV, or lie in bed and read; whatever you’re in the mood for.”

She leans her head toward mine. “A date?”

“Yeah, like to the movies; you like movies, don’t you?” She smiles, and we drift back to silence for the rest of the journey.

When we arrive, she and I shed our boots and some of our layers and head quietly to the bedroom where we began our day an eternity before. We lie on the bed, pull a quilt over us and nap for over an hour.

I rise before Julianne, who languishes beneath the covers watching me put on sneakers and a sweatshirt. “What are you doing now?” she asks sleepily, with most of her body still safely beneath a quilt.

“I’ve got to be the maintenance man for a while. Regina will be back sometime next week and I have to start getting the house reasonably

presentable. This is a big place; it takes a while.” I walk down the hall toward my bathroom, where I enter the adjacent laundry room to retrieve a vacuum and some dust rags. I turn to head back and find Julianne in the hall, standing before me in rumpled clothes and stocking feet.

“What are you doing?” she asks, yawning with stretched arms.

“I’m going to clean the upstairs.”

“Don’t you have a ...”

I stroke my chin. “I do, in fact. Here.” I hand her the vacuum.

“Me?”

“Yes.” Her eyes are wide and her lips part.

“Do you know how to operate one of these?” I point to the brush.

“This is the thing you put on the floor. When you push this button on the handle, any dirt magically goes up the hose and presto, the floor’s clean.”

“You don’t say,” she says, taking the vacuum from me. Her wide eyes remain fixed on mine. “I also understand you can use it as a weapon, like, for example, to whack you with.”

I laugh. “I was just thinking about that Mrs. Maxwell movie thing. I have this vision of you making that godawful dinner.”

A grin lights her face. “It was just a movie, James; I’m not really like that.”

“You were awfully convincing. Are you sure?”

She stands before me glaring.

I pinch her cheek. “I’m just kidding, you know; and you really don’t have to help with this. It won’t take me all that long.”

“I don’t mind helping.”

“Want some tea first?”

She pinches my cheek as well. “Okay,” she says.

She leans the vacuum against the wall and we walk to the stairs. “I could show you how to make waffles,” I say as we descend them.

“I could show you how to make them better,” she answers. “Got a waffle iron?”

We sit with a snoozing Chicken Little and have tea together, and then clean for an hour or so, vowing to complete the job tomorrow. We then make waffles for an early dinner, which Julianne takes the lead in doing. As she has claimed, she performs admirably.

While we are cleaning up, I remind her of my earlier suggestion: “So, do you think you’d like to see what’s playing at the movies?”

“I don’t know; I don’t think I have enough energy to do that,” she replies. “How about something more subdued?”

“We could go to the video store and bring something back to watch.”

“All right,” she says, so we pull back on our coats and head to the local video superstore, where we circle the perimeter examining the new releases. Julianne looks them over, passing by the teenager and horror films and focusing on the dramas. She picks up case after case, reading their backs. I do much the same, and we talk about the titles and what might be interesting. As I finish reading the back of one, however, I notice she has walked a few isles away to a section of older films. I step to where she stands in front of shelves devoted to actors with last names beginning in O and watch her scrutinize each release. She reaches the end of them and then repeats the process while I stand next to her. When she completes her review she says softly, “I can’t find my name on anything.”

“Suppose I go ask at the counter?” I whisper.

She continues staring at the cases before us and says, “No; it’s not important.”

I put my arm around her shoulder and we begin walking. We pretend to continue looking at other isles but, ultimately, we leave the store with no rentals and return home.

Along about eight o’clock PM, we slip into bed under layers of covers, much as Regina and I do on cold winter nights. Julianne appears to have left behind the thoughtfulness that took hold of her at the video store, and now lies reading newspapers. I lie next to her with a red pen and piles of papers in need of correcting, although I have trouble focusing on them. I instead watch her reading, feeling relief that she seems to have shaken off the events of our day, which I feared might be traumatic on many levels. “What are you so fascinated with?” I ask. “You haven’t had your nose out of those.”

“I’m catching up,” she says.

I uncover myself and stand up. “I’ve got to make some calls before it gets too late. Will I disturb you? Should I go into the other room?”

She leans her head back on a pillow and looks at me. “You won’t,” she answers softly.

I get back into bed and dial my mother, whom I haven’t spoken to in over a week. The phone rings. “Hello Mother. Hi.
..... Mother, it’s only been a week. Really. So, how’s everybody? Make sure you tell them I said hi. I’ll try to get out in early spring, so maybe I can see them then.
..... So what have you been doing?
..... Are you getting over it?
..... Yes; six years already.
..... I know; I miss him too
..... That’s just the way it is
..... All right. I’ll call again soon. Promise. I love you too, Mother. Bye.”

I next dial Regina, whom I have also not spoken to in days. Ringing ...
“Hi Dear Come home I miss you too. How much longer are you going to torture me? Next week? It’s about time. Chicken Little is herself Yes, I gave her a bath. Once in a while she wakes up and eats. No, she’s not minding the cold at all; I think the evidence is mounting that she’s immortal. Just the usual; I was out censusing today, and pretty much every day that I haven’t been at school. You know...
..... Having any success? How many? That good; very good. So you’re satisfied.
..... It was worth your while then.
..... You have six thousand phone messages, by the way. No, I didn’t listen to them; you can plough through them when you get home.
Okay, Dear; I’ll pick you up on Tuesday then. What time? I’ll see you then. I love you, too.”

Throughout this latter conversation, Julianne abandons her newspaper and pulls herself to sitting with legs crossed in front of her. “Didn’t you leave something out?” she says when I hang up.

“You, you mean? What should I say? Don’t worry about me being lonely, Dear. I’ve been thinking, by the way, that we should invest in a king-sized bed. Why? You’ll see...”

Julianne laughs, picking up her pillow and hitting me with it. “What do you think she’d say?” she asks.

“You do like to clobber me,” I answer.

“I only hit people I like.”

I kiss her forehead. “Most of my friends have always been women, so that part won’t surprise her. My disposition fits better with them; I have more in common with them than most men, with the dick measuring contests, bank account size derby, etc., etc. Of course, it’s never been like this, so we’ll have to see. I’ve been trying to imagine how I’d feel if the situation were reversed.”

“So what do you think?”

“Uneasy.”

“But?”

“But, I don’t know. You know, though, for that matter most of her friends are men, and that’s okay. Most of her colleagues are men, and the females can be nauseating. If she paints a red sky, suddenly all the women artists have red skies—not the men, but the women. It drives her crazy. Copying—I think there’s some genetic thing that makes females more prone to that. Now, to be sure, over the years more than one of the men has followed her around like a puppy.”

“Does that bother you?”

“Sometimes.”

“But women don’t follow you around?”

“No, except for you, of course.”

“Do I?”

“You don’t?”

“So have you liked it?”

“I like you. I usually don’t have that effect, nor do I try to. I like married life the way it is. Not that it’s perfect. Wait till you see what happens when she gets home. She will walk in the door and suddenly there will be piles. She is catastrophically disorganized. When I first met her you

couldn't even get down her cellar stairs she had so much stuff piled on them. You're different than that, I've noticed."

"I'm pretty orderly, more or less, although I've also been your guest, so I've been on best behavior. I have noticed, though, that you do try to keep me organized. It's been kind of sweet, having you look after me. But does it bother you that she's like that?"

"Oh, it does, but I keep her somewhat organized too. And, ultimately, it's not that important. Marriage is a complex formula, not addition and subtraction—a differential equation."

"A what?"

"Never mind. She lives with my idiosyncrasies and I with hers; perfect is not an option available. So how about you? Why didn't you do that—marriage, I mean?"

"In a lot of ways, it wasn't practical for me and as it turned out it wasn't possible. I've wondered how possible it is for anybody, in fact. I wonder if it is as possible for you as you claim. Are you brave enough to tell me the truth? What am I doing here, for example?"

"You think I'm in denial?"

"Only you can answer that. I know I could be quite adept at denial, going through all sorts of convoluted logic to convince myself that everything was what I wanted it to be."

"So you're asking if am I masking some fatal flaw that I don't want to see, because it will shatter my whole world."

"You might put it that way."

"You're being tough on me."

"I'll stop if you want."

"No, no. It's okay." I pause and reflect before replying. "We do have our difficulties, to be sure. My time seems to be simply less important than

her time, for example. It's fine for her to interrupt whatever I'm doing but not fine for me to interrupt her. And there are the feelings of inadequacy, the feelings that I should be married to a waitress and not to someone like her; that she should be with a corporate executive rather than someone who can't adequately provide for her."

"Do you tell her that?"

"Oh, yes. She says if she wanted to be with an executive she would be; that no one other than me could understand her, that no one else ever has. So, it comes from me, but just the same I can't shake it. She surrounds herself with all these people of great material success, so how am I supposed to feel?"

"Why does she?"

"Business, in part. Who do you think buys paintings? It's much more than that, of course—these are the people with the sophistication to grasp what she does; the ones who she can communicate with."

"You don't think you do well enough?"

"For a school teacher I do fine, but what kind of status or prestige do you think comes with that?"

"Is it important for you to have that?"

"Are you kidding? I'm not interested in any of that, but having the high performance model as a mate makes it an issue. What I want for me has nothing to do with wealth."

"So how do you deal with it?"

I again pause, contemplating how I might form into words the thought I feel building. "What would you think if I told you that for a long time I've had an imaginary female friend, known only to me?"

She raises her eyebrows. "I'd say that this time you've outdone yourself."

“With you, you mean?”

“Who else?”

“You’re not imaginary, as far as I can tell. You’re you—with a separate identity.”

“But why do you have that?”

“Because I’ve needed to. Dialogue works well at thinking things through—things about me, about life, so I create someone to have that with.”

“Why don’t you do that with your wife?”

“Oh, I do, but it’s different. Real people have their own personalities with their own needs. Sometimes I want it to be just about me, and an imaginary dialogue frees me from considering competing needs. It’s never been about physical things or romance if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“Are you sure?”

“Reasonably sure. And I can create this individual to be as sympathetic and understanding as I need her to be, with my concerns and cares of utmost importance to her.”

“You don’t get that from your wife?”

“Well, yes, I do by and large, but you’ve got somewhat of a point. She allows me no weakness; she requires me to be a granite monolith. It’s her weakness—she needs to know that she has her solid rock to lean on. In the real world with real people with real needs of their own, I can’t afford to think only of myself. It’s not even in my best interests to do that.”

“That doesn’t explain why this person you invent is female, does it?”

“It’s my other half; you know that all males are half a female.”

“And what does she look like?”

“I don’t know, really. Maybe like you. I’ve never gotten that far with my thinking.”

“Tell me more about your wife. What else is there between you? I need to understand this.”

“Okay, okay. There is more. My wife and I are both intimately acquainted with obsession, with imagination, we share the same black depths, we hold the same key to giving the outside world a busy signal, with being pierced through by the sword of intensity. We feel the same internal upheaval, understand each other’s demons. Our conflicts? Small potatoes—very small potatoes. People who think they understand our internal workings don’t know—and they can’t know.”

Julianne falls silent and still, with her eyes intently locked onto mine. It seems a full minute passes before she utters, “I see.” She resumes her silence but finally continues, “How does the imaginary person fit into this picture?”

“The muse? Ultimately, she has little to do with my marriage—predates it, in fact, by decades. I can remember being ten years old and sitting on a rock in the woods having conversations with her. I can remember her when I was four. Most people discard their imaginary childhood friends. I never did. I’ve kept her around all these years, in one form or another, because I’ve needed her. I have someone to talk to whenever I want, who will listen attentively to me, consider what I have to say, evaluate, advise; someone who never gets sick, never has a personal crisis, has no bills to pay, who comes and goes as needed. Do you know any mortals like that?”

“People would argue it’s a selfish friendship.”

“Julianne—she’s not real; she’s a construct of my own mind who helps me work through my thoughts. Is that a bad thing? I don’t do that with real people.”

She lies back in the bed and lets her head settle onto her pillow. “Well, James, I needed to hear your logic,” she says. “I needed your input, because I have been wondering if my traditional view of men and women together is less than complete. Life was so exciting when I was young I could ignore all that. When I was young there were plenty of admirers to keep me amused, but as I got older the truth started seeping in when I wasn’t quick enough to shield myself from it. The trick seems to be having it mutual; that’s the hard part I couldn’t seem to get right although, maybe in hindsight I got it more right than I’ve given myself credit for. I have to think more about what you’ve said, but I will tell you I have liked playing house with you like this, having my affection for you returned, really returned, and having you lie against me all night, protecting me.”

“You need protection? It doesn’t fit your image.”

“We all need protecting. Life is not for the faint hearted, to be sure, but a little help is nice.”

I lie back, pull covers up and lie quietly for a minute before I ask, “So, Julianne, should we call it a night?”

She pulls covers over herself as well and turns on her side toward me. “I guess. I’ve had a wonderful day with you.”

I switch off the light. “I’ve had one too.”

“Thank you, James. I’m glad you think so. Sweet dreams.

“Good night.”

Morning returns: Sunday morning, in half light, a shadowless, leaden light, the kind that seeps through windows on days when rain is imminent. I lay beneath multiple covers, emerging from a dream netherworld that evaporates faster than I can chronicle its events. I assume Julianne remains sleeping, as she has every morning since her arrival, so I turn to watch her. She indeed lies motionless, on her back with arms above the covers and hands folded. Her eyes, however, are open and fixed upon the ceiling, which causes my insides to start. I sometimes find Regina like this after one of her fitful nights, but for the youthful, unblemished form beside me I find this view troubling. “Good morning, Julianne,” I whisper. She does not move at first, nor does she acknowledge my words. Only slowly does she turn her head to me and reach for my hand with hers.

“I didn’t sleep,” she whispers back.

“Are you okay?”

“Yes, I think so.”

“Did yesterday keep you up thinking?”

“In part; I have been thinking of a lot of things.”

“Reality is setting in? You know we work that way with big things; it takes a while.”

“Reality has set in. I’ve been lying in the dark seeing clearly; more clearly than I ever have.”

“So what do you see?”

She rolls toward me and extends her arms. “Hold me, James, will you?” I reach for her and pull her toward me, placing my hand behind her head and pressing it to me.

“What’s the matter?” I ask.

“Nothing is wrong. I just want you to hold me.”

“What do you need?”

“Just this.”

“No blues or anything?”

“No, really. We can talk when we get up.”

“Are you ready to do that?”

“In a minute. Just hold me a little longer.”

I press my nose into her hair. “I’ll hold you as long as you want,” I say.

“I know you would,” she answers.

We lie together for some minutes more, without further words. When we arise and descend to the kitchen I begin the breakfast ritual, asking Julianne what she wants me to make her.

“Nothing,” she says. “I’m not hungry.”

“Not even for bacon?”

“Not even bacon. But go ahead; I’ll sit with you.”

I pull a stool next to her and sit. “Okay Julianne, tell me what’s going on. Guys are notoriously bad at the women guessing game, so just tell me. It has to do with brain function, you know.”

“What?”

“The guessing thing. Intuition. The part of the brain that deals with that in women is larger. You can do subtleties better. So tell me, in direct words I can understand.”

“I’ve got this hummingbird feeling,” she answers.

“What?” I say.

“Oh, James; it’s been right in front of our noses and we’ve been choosing not to see it.”

“What?”

“Us. Me. I’m here because of you; I emanate from you. I’m made right from your rib, you could say.”

I take her hands. “I would have reversed it, and said I come from you.”

“James; you’re the mathematician. Equals is equals. They’re the same thing. Different sides of the same coin; not the same picture on each side but still, ultimately, the same.”

“So, what are you getting at?”

“It’s time, James.”

I lean my head to her shoulder. “No it’s not; not for a long time. You’ve got a whole life in front of you. Why would we go through all this just for you to have a short visit? What would be the point?”

She lets her head rest on mine and places her arms around me. “I’ve done much more than just visit. And haven’t you noticed? I can’t even take a few steps away from you without growing cold; farther than that and I start fading away. You are my life.”

I shake my head no. “Julianne; my life comes from you; isn’t it obvious? It’s nature. We can come up with a technology to fix what ails you. You can be independent; have the world at your feet.”

“James. Nothing ails me. I am you. I’ve already had my separate life, and a wonderful one it was. But it was. You have your separate life now. This is your turn, so it’s time for the other side of the coin. It’s simply a different role for me, and I’ve got to get to rehearsals.” She kisses my head. “James, I couldn’t have gotten to this without you. You showed me the path.”

I lift up, find her hands and squeeze them. “Well I lied. Your path is right next to mine.” I can feel tears building, but they won’t come.

She smiles into my eyes. “I don’t disagree with that at all. We’re always together. I realize that all you’ve ever had to do to see me is look in the mirror. And you want to see your father? You can definitely see him in the mirror. It’s kind of a relief to know that, isn’t it?”

My head rests back on her shoulder. “Not really,” I say.

She stands and smiles broadly; taking both my hands and shaking them. “James. Let’s get dressed and go. We’ve got to walk to the lighthouse.” I stand motionless, inches from her face, not wishing to let go of her hands. “Please?” she whispers. “This is a part I must play.” We step together, hand in hand, heading toward the kitchen entryway. Julianne bends over to pet the sleeping Chicken Little, who looks up at her. “I’ll be seeing you, Chicken Little,” she says. We walk up the stairs where we part to wash and dress.

We meet at the head of the stairs. “What can I say to change your mind?” I say.

“Nothing. I’m not making the decision. It just is, and really, it’s quite all right; it’s what it should be.”

“What brought this on so suddenly? Everything was fine yesterday. You told me you had a wonderful day and we were looking toward the future. Why?”

“Everything fell into place. I knew something more was coming, and as I lay awake last night I found that yesterday fit all the pieces together. I understood.”

“Understood what?”

“It’s one of those things you have to know for yourself. You’ll see.”

We descend the stairs together, put on boots and coats at the door, and step out into the lingering snow toward the truck. We drive south toward the coast. I try to make conversation but can’t imagine what I might say.

Julianne glows peacefully, reaching across to hold my hand repeatedly as we journey toward the coast. Her quiet confidence removes my dread and makes me believe for the moment we are headed in a direction that is a good one. I park where we had during our previous visit—at the empty tennis courts just above the beach, which we see is also deserted on this dreary, wet Sunday of cold drizzle.

Julianne’s demeanor is one of good cheer, she appears in her springing steps pleased by my company and pleased as well by the prospect of what we shall do together. For her the sullen skies are absent; dissolved in the exuberance that fills her. It is rather as if we were taking a walk from one lovely spot to some equally lovely one she knows just up ahead. Her manner infects me with the same anticipation of what is yet to come.

“Julianne, do you know how much your friendship means to me?” I ask. We stop at the entrance to a little park and scan the horizon and front lawns of the gray shingled, rambling beachfront homes.

“I do,” she answers, “and I hope you know I value yours the same way.” Her eyes turn west to a sidewalk that extends along the shoreline in front of the homes. In the distance one other solitary figure, apparently female, stands facing out to sea, bundled up like us in a parka. “I bet I know who that is,” she continues. “She’s about the only other person who would be out and about today. She’s a bit like you; a real thinker, for one thing. I think you’d like her. You should look her up some day. You’d have a lot to talk about; could become friends, even. If you head down this way you’ll find her house.” She motions to one of the side streets that crisscross the area.

“Do you want to walk down and say hello,” I ask.

“I do, but shouldn’t,” she answers. Instead, we walk east out toward the lighthouses. I find a knot of increasing proportions growing in my chest, although Julianne continues on as a bright beacon in the otherwise dull pallor that weights the landscape.

“What’s it like?” I say.

“Not bad, not scary; kind of exhilarating.” She continues on, with the light, damp breeze on her face, which condenses to translucence on her hair, giving it a silvery incandescent sheen.

I grab her arms and turn her toward me. “Julianne, I’ll do anything you want if you stay. I’ll never make you clean house again.”

She reaches to me and closes her hand around a fold in my coat. “I love being with you,” she says.

We reach the breakwater and stand facing the outer lighthouse, which sits awash in the steel blue of Long Island Sound. Julianne turns to look at her old home in the distance and then back toward the light.

“Hold me, James,” she says. “And you’d better kiss me too. I love you, James.” I reach for her and we kiss, the way that friends do, and we press to each other again, holding on as tight as we can.

“I love you too, Julianne,” I whisper in her ear. I release my grip to look at her angel face, but she is gone. Just like that. No inkling, no murmur, no telltale sweetness. I still feel the pressure of her hands on my back, yet the space she occupied is empty. Not even clothes are left; not even shoes. Who would have thought that, I ask myself?

I become blank, feeling no more any of Julianne’s serenity, but instead the same sort of emptiness that fills the space before me. I allow my arms to drop, sensing already the time passage that I fear separates us ever further. I begin walking back, vacant, staring at the gaunt form of a distant, listless tree

and then at patches of soiled white that punctuate the gravelly sand beneath my feet. A familiar old feeling finds me, a sensation bitter as ever. I endure it, without tears, as I endure all losses—those losses that shape my being and define for me who I am.

I walk back to the car, to where I am greeted by the cold, empty, scentless seat that situates itself next to mine. I look for the distant figure, someone with whom I could share this time, but she has similarly evaporated. Just as well, I think, as I might say something preposterous to this person whom I don’t know. I start the engine, which has itself grown cold in my absence, and begin to drive. I head toward Hartford, to a place that for no good reason I know I will go.

In under an hour I pull into Puritan Hill in now driving rain, and follow its main road past monuments and leaning trees to where I can look across to the hillside opposite. Through the gloom I see it has lost all evidence of yesterday’s trek down its slope; erased in a slurry of compacted, saturated ice. I find Julianne, or at least the place where there is a stone bearing her name somewhere beneath slush. There’s no solace or relief here. It is just what I presumed it to be; no miracle, no magic, no her. This was a poor idea, just like I knew it to be. It is time to go.

Home. Creaking open a sticky door, swollen with damp winter sadness. The empty house; silent, cold, dull in the waning light of what has quickly become late afternoon. Better check on Chicken Little; see if she's moved since this morning.

"Hello, Chico; how are you? Are you sad, too? Want to go out? Come on; let's do this while I still have my layers on." Opening the door; out she goes; a trickle spreads between the now visible stones of the patio and back in she comes. "Keep that up, Chico; it keeps you sane." She makes a brief stop for a drink, sniffs at the food dish, and heads back to her blanket before it has even lost its warmth.

What now? She's gone. No trace of her; no scent, no clothes, no anything. Where did her clothes go? The bed is unmade; the cradling depression in the pillow where her head had been just hours before has softened to a rumple. It is cold. The whole bed is cold. What of the things she left in the bathroom? A wet towel, soap. Where are they?

Field notes. Are they in the pile behind the desk? Inside the clipboard? One paper, two, blank; nothing. Where?

What to do? I need to go downstairs and look around. I'm not hungry, although I have not eaten; how about Chicken Little? "Want some chick feed, Chico? Here; want this wet, yucky stuff? Mmm, beef chunks in gravy. Yummy. There you go, you chicken, you. Live it up."

Schizophrenia. I have schizophrenia. Not at my age; it doesn't just come on. And if I did, why has it gone away? It doesn't just come and go like that. But suppose it hasn't? There's been little signs; the telltale feelings of someone watching; an episode, maybe. No. People saw her; they talked to her; I bought her things. There must be some recollection; some record.

Field notes. Briefcase. I always put them in my briefcase. I remember... Here; here they are. "You forgot something, Julianne!" Look at that scribble; not my handwriting. Where on my shelves? Notebooks, notebooks, which one? Ah; last winter's. The mittens and stiff fingers, but? No. Not mine. Not mine. Not like this.

Wait; I have her writing on the computer. Let me see... Switch it on; come on... my documents, my photos, miscellaneous ... Here. Look at that. It's her. Look at how she makes her l's, and m's. It's her. Right? Schizophrenia. Delusional. I did this. I copied her style. None of this is real. Look at this. It's her. She knew she couldn't take this; this was important regardless. She had to leave it.

A photograph of her; I have one I can bring up on my computer. "Julianne! Why couldn't you stay? What would have been so bad?"

Regina. I must get ready for Regina—and work. I have to go to work. How do I do this? I'm an afterthought, an ornament. How can I compare to her? How am I worthy to follow her? What is the point to it, of even trying? All I can do is consume oxygen until final expiration. Why bother?

But why should she have gone to that trouble for me? What am I missing? She said she loved me. What's to love? How can I be worthy of that? It's my father all over again. I served my one purpose; eulogizing him, my one duty practiced since childhood. Now what's left to do; what of any consequence?

Sleep. Dawn. Getting bathed, and shaved; contact lenses in. Dressing, coat; here we go. Out the door, rain has turned to ice on the walk and driveway; this will be a challenging ride in. To the truck, let the engine churn. Driving.

School. I'm going to work. How can I be doing this? Will they say anything? Do I dare? Walking up the steps, unlocking my door, sitting, blankly. Fifteen minutes to curtain call. Fourteen, thirteen, twelve, eleven, ten....

"Good morning, Dr. Maxwell!"

"Good morning, Goode. I thought you were bringing me Boston Crème."

"I thought you were bringing us Boston Crème."

"Did I say that?"

"Yes. Good morning, Dr. Maxwell."

"Good morning, Hester. So, what's good about it, anyway?"

"You're cheery. Can I go to the bathroom?"

"No."

"May I?"

"No."

"Dr. Maxwell, you're so mean!"

"It's my other middle name. Hurry up."

"I'll be quick."

Rrrriinnngggg!!!

Loudspeaker: "Please stand for the pledge of allegiance. I pledge allegiance, to the flag...." Loudspeaker again: "Please remain standing for a moment of silence..."

"How about an hour of silence."

"Behave."

Silence. Seconds of it. At least five.

"Anybody absent?"

"In body or spirit?"

"I already know the answer to the latter. Any missing bodies?"

"Hester's missing her body."

"Here we go. Welcome back, everybody. Anybody do anything interesting over the weekend? Any movies to report about; actors, actresses?" Silence. "Any current events?" Silence. "Any anything?"

"How about you, Dr. Maxwell. Did you do anything interesting?"

"I was at the beach."

"In winter?"

"Yes; it's easy to find a place to put your blanket this time of year."

"You were sunbathing? Working on your tan, Dr. Maxwell?"

"Well, as it turned out, there wasn't too much sun yesterday, was there?"

"It was pouring yesterday. What were you doing out?"

"We don't have an eternity for me to explain. In any event, today we start the urinary system, so notebooks, texts; let's get to it."

"We're going to talk about pee?"

Laughs throughout.

"That's one way of putting it. Just be glad you do, all. When that system breaks down, like it does in old age, the body no longer cleanses itself, and your sense of what is real goes away with it. So, with that as my opening thought, let's begin."

Regina. Today's the day. The airport: late afternoon with fluctuating crowds streaming and standing, turning and greeting; shops and slush and kinetic energy rising and falling, growing and dissipating. Any minute she should come down the stairs. It seems like forever since I've seen her. Waiting, waiting Here she comes; the top of the escalator, descending slowly, in an ocean of hats and gloves and coats. Descending, descending; she sees me and waves. There is everybody else—and her. She is dressed in her signature black, filling her clothes in ways that mere mortals cannot.

“Hi Dear,” she says, dropping her bag at the base of the escalator and wrapping her arms around me. “Did you miss me?”

“What do you think?” I press against her and she leans her forehead to my neck.

She smiles. “I missed you too. I was getting so depressed. I needed to come home.”

“I needed you to.”

“Come on; let's get out of here. I've been on a plane since seven o'clock this morning. Take me home!”

We struggle through crowds to the escalator that takes us to baggage claim, where we stand in the gathering throng waiting for suitcases to begin appearing. Regina stands limply next to me, waiting with shoulders drooping and eyelids heavy. I feel a weight descend across my own shoulders as well, sensing fully for the first time all that I have lost, and

sensing too that all future pluses cannot fully compensate for the accumulation of negatives time has brought.

A buzzer sounds, the conveyor lurches, and bags thrust past sheets of plastic into the overcrowded room. I jockey with others seeking their bags, praying that Regina' will appear soon so we can exit this stifling place of distracted travelers on phones. I watch, and watch, until recognizable olive bags pass on the conveyor. I squeeze past an immensely obese woman who stands next to her cart piled with luggage and stand firm despite the jostling by one who could crush me. I snatch the bags and retreat from the direction I came.

Regina stands wearily next to her one carry-on bag, looking neither at me nor at anything else recognizable. I squeeze past luggage and passengers and she turns wordlessly to me as I reach her. We depart out glass doors toward my truck in the parking lot beyond, where I open the passenger door for her. She sits, leaning her head back. I stow the luggage and we begin our journey home.

“The truck smells,” she says. “Why didn't you bring my car?”

“Smells of what?” I ask.

“Like something died in it. You need to run that disinfectant through your air system again.”

“I don't smell anything.”

“You never smell anything. Is the house going to smell like pee when we get back too?”

“I tinkled Chicken Little before I left, bathed her, washed the floor with that stuff you like, and gave her a fresh blanket. I doubt she's moved since I left to get you.”

“I hope not,” she moans with closed eyes.

“So tell me about your trip.”

She opens her eyes and stretches her arms. “Oh, god. I worked seven days a week; morning to night. I made gallery calls, politicked. I didn’t stop from the minute I got there until the minute I left.”

“So how did you make out?”

“I told you a little on the phone. People liked my work. I sold six pieces. It’s so different there; people actually spend money without crying about it. They saw it, they wanted it, they bought it; no agonizing, having to go measure, checking with the wife/husband/daughter/decorator/astrologer—you know.”

“Yes Dear; I remember. I’ve had enough cheap Yankee Puritan unworthy crap to last me the rest of my life.”

“So, anyway, I did well; you should take me on a date this weekend so we can celebrate.”

I pat her knee. “Sounds good to me, baby,” I say.

“Oh, and the weather was so beautiful. It was in the sixties and seventies a lot of days. I was not looking forward to coming back to this.”

“You don’t like dreary, miserable cold rain, ice and snow?”

“I like to paint snow.”

“Well, you should have your wish. They’re talking about a huge storm later in the week; maybe a foot coming. Get out your snowshoes.”

“I’ve got to bring some new pieces to the New Hampshire gallery. Maybe I can do a series for them.”

“How about a few days off first?”

She laughs. “Oh, yeah; when was the last time you took a day off?”

“I forget.”

“See? You’re not going to miss being out into the field this weekend are you?”

I shake my head. “I can’t. Time is of the essence. So, never mind.” We travel through descending darkness onto the back roads that lead us home. “But did you notice the days are already getting longer? It’s after five o’clock and there’s still some glow in the sky.”

“Don’t tantalize me. I know it’s still a long time to spring.”

“Not that long; in a few more weeks the winter aconites will start peeking through in the front.”

“Oh, I can’t wait. Spring is the best season.”

“It should be better than ever this year with all that work I did out there last summer.”

We settle into exhausted silence until we pull into the driveway and barking commences from inside. I retrieve the bags from the back of the truck and we begin our way toward the house. “Chicken Little’s not that deaf,” I say. “She knows we’re here.”

We open the door and head toward the kitchen, where Chicken Little is up circling the kitchen’s center island.

“Hi, Chico,” Regina says. “How have you been, you old noodle?” Chicken Little waddles over to greet her, and she reaches down to pet her. “You better get out quick,” she adds.

I unlock the kitchen door and usher her out. “Come on, Chico,” I say. She makes the rounds of the patio and re-enters the house, stopping at the water dish to refuel and then at the food dish, where I empty a package of moist dog food. “Want anything to eat?” I ask Regina.

“No, she answers. I just want to get into my bed.”

We ascend to the bedroom where we begin to change. “Who have you had in here?” Regina asks. “It smells kind of feminine.”

I stand behind her and put my arms around her waist. “It’s been babe city while you were gone. I don’t smell anything. What do you smell?”

“It smells sweet. You never smell anything.”

“Not my fault. Anyway, it’s been just me, the dogs, and the ghosts, of course.”

“The ghosts? Are they female?”

“Yeah, you know; those pesky women ghosts; they always come bother me when you’re away. They just can’t leave me alone.”

“Have they been eating ice cream or drinking soda or something?”

“I hope so. If they have any extra maybe they’ll leave it for us. Mocha almond fudge; doesn’t that sound good?”

She settles into bed, pulling up layers of covers and placing an art book across her lap. “Well, the bed smells nice and clean, anyway,” she says.

“I just changed it.”

She pushes her book aside and rolls to face me. “So do you still love me?”

I get beneath the covers and allow my head to sink into my pillow. I turn my head toward her and say, “I do, even though you keep abandoning me.”

“As much as ever?”

“Yes.”

“As much as Chicken Little?”

“Yes.”

She smiles. “Wow, as much as Chicken Little.”

I arrange pillows behind me and again turn to face her. “It’s a good thing you’re so cute,” I whisper.

“Not bad for an old bag?” she replies, looking up at me from the book she has begun to leaf through.

“As bags go, you’re good, even for a young bag.”

“You think?”

“I think. So did you have lines of guys mooning over you while you were there?”

She rolls her eyes. “No one even notices me anymore.”

“Lies, lies, lies.” I begin pinching her beneath the sheets, which prompts her to push me away.

“Quit it,” she says, turning pages of her book. “Well, there was one gallery owner who was getting a little silly. It was funny; this old goat following me around.”

“See; now you admit it. And who else?”

“Nobody. I only attract the geezers now.”

“So you didn’t have a fling?”

“James, I’m old. Nobody’s interested in me anymore—and I’m interested in you.”

I pull up close to her again. “Want to have a fling right now?”

“Maybe tomorrow. I don’t have any fling in me.”

I lie my head on her lap. “How can you resist me?”

“Exhaustion, stress, old age.”

“Oh,” I say, sitting back up.

She leafs through more pages of her book, examining each image briefly before going to the next. “So what did you do while I was gone?” she asks.

“The usual—work, field work, house work.”

“No fun?”

“I explored around a little.”

“See anything?”

“A chicken.”

“A bad chicken, I bet. Want to see what I’ve been working on?”

I begin pinching her again. “I thought you were exhausted, stressed and old.”

She slaps my hands and slips out from under the blankets to retrieve her suitcase, which I had carried upstairs for her. She opens it and unwraps three small paintings on boards, which she brings over to me. “What do you think?” she asks.

“The horizon’s drooping in this one,” I say.

She holds the picture in front of her, leaning toward the lamp next to my side of the bed. “I know; I didn’t fix it yet. But what do you think?”

I reach out from under the covers and pull her toward me. “They’re like everything you do—great.”

She shakes her head, continuing to stare at the painting. “Oh, you just say that because you’re married to me. What do you really think?”

“That they’re just like everything you do—great. So you’ve gone completely tonal, huh?”

“I have to; they sell better. But that’s where my mind is right now, anyway.”

I study the picture in her hands, which she holds close to me. “They’re very appealing—and there’s not such a glut on the market like there is with the impressionistic stuff. They’re more interesting in a lot of ways; all the dark makes you wonder what’s really going on, doesn’t it?”

“They’re mysterious, aren’t they?”

“Just like you.”

“Am I still a mystery to you?”

“One of many mysteries I can’t solve.”