

Michelangelo's Shoulder

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John Moncure Wetterau

Fox Print Books



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For w.cat

1 Patriot Ghosts

“Pango never bit anyone.” Carver bent over slowly and rubbed his dog’s ears.

“Do you want Girl Scout cookies?” A mini-van was parked near the entrance to the driveway, probably driven by the girl’s mother, pressed into service.

“Last year I had peanut butter. And mint, I think. Mint chocolate.”

“We have those. Here’s the list.”

“I’ll just have the same again. Two boxes of each would be nice.”

She recorded his order carefully. “It will take three to five weeks. You can pay now or when we bring them.”

“Later will be fine.”

“Thank you.” She walked, nearly skipped, up the drive. Carver waited until she entered the van and was driven around the bend. No sign of Robert, who was late. Carver had come to expect, if not accept, this. It was troublesome that his son could not keep to his schedules. A gray squirrel ventured onto a corner of the lawn, and Pango chased it off, tail wagging happily. Spring. The new leaves completely screened the main house from view. He preferred it that way, although in the winter he could barely see its outline through the trees. He’d sold it for a handsome profit

after building the studio. *Retreat is the most difficult maneuver*, Von Clausewitz said.

Carver was a slight man with thinning hair. His face was narrow and smooth with impenetrable light blue eyes. He'd become used to an orderly solitude, lightened by Pango and an occasional dinner out. Libby now lived full time in Palm Beach, visiting in July. He went south for ten days at Christmas. They had settled into a de facto separation without much discussion. She had her bridge club and gin; he had the War of 1812.

Robert came up from Boston for lunch several times a year; Kaylie called now and then, usually in distress. She didn't ask, but he sent her small sums to help with car expenses and apartment deposits. Each year at Christmas she seemed thinner. She was good looking, but her relationships didn't last. Apparently, neither she nor Robert were inclined to have children. "Chacun à son goût, eh Pango?" They had their own lives now.

As he moved to enter the house, he heard a car approaching. He waited and watched Robert turn in, too fast. His car skidded to a stop by the door.

"Hi, Dad."

"Robert. Good to see you. Did you bring your appetite? Robert's jaw was more square than his father's. He had a salt and pepper three day stubble and dark darting eyes.

"I did. Hello, Pango. And a thirst to go with it."

"We shall accommodate both."

Inside, Robert took a deep breath, smelling. "Old books and fried onions."

"Scallions," Carver said, watching his son's eyes scan the main room.

"That half-model is new—the Resolute, isn't it?"

"Indeed it is. The Saltonstalls had it made for me. They took the lines from her while she was out of the water. Rather generous of them."

“You did give them a good price.”

“Yes, well, I wanted to be sure that she was looked after. They are proper sailors, the Saltonstalls.”

“I remember when you tossed me overboard to learn how to swim.” Robert’s mouth twisted downward. “I hated you for that.”

“You learned,” Carver said mildly. “Ale? Whiskey?”

“Ale.”

Carver opened a bottle and prepared a short whiskey for himself. “Sláinte.”

“Sláinte.”

“The Resolute’s hull could be reproduced from that model, Robert. Use and beauty married.” Carver turned the flame up under a skillet of crab cakes. “What do you hear from Kaylie?”

“She ditched that loser, Leo.”

“Ah, Leo—the interior decorator. I met him briefly in Palm Beach.” Carver lifted the corner of a crab cake, then flattened it with his spatula. “Quite a presentable fellow, but lacking a certain mettle.”

“She got a big contract.”

“More lighting work?”

“Yes. A museum. One of the smaller ones in D.C., I don’t remember which. She can be a pain in the ass, but she knows what she’s doing.”

“There is something to be said for staying in one line of work,” Carver said, “although at times I wonder about all that graduate school.” He turned the crab cakes.

“I spared you that expense, anyway.”

“You’ve always been most independent, Robert.” The smells of browning crabmeat, capers, and mustard spread through the room. Carver put a vinaigrette dressing on the salad and brought the bowl to the table.

“Speaking of work,” Robert said, “I’ve been doing some

reading about the C.I.A. involvement in Latin America, Chile, the Bay of Pigs. We knew you were in the government—national security is what you told us. I never realized you were a big part of all that.”

Carver took a baguette from the oven. “You didn’t need to know. One of the first principles of security. The cakes are nearly done.”

“Jesus Christ, you were killing people! For what?”

“Freedom,” Carver said. “Our family has fought for it for generations. Shall we eat?” He set the skillet on a wrought iron trivet in the center of the table.

“It’s one thing to fight for your own freedom, risk your own neck; it’s another to send people on some kind of crusade to other countries, killing for a goddamned idea.”

“At times you have to make hard choices,” Carver said. “Maybe we made mistakes. We meant well. In any event, history will judge.” He took a bite of crab cake and chewed contentedly.

“History *is* judging. The American Empire was defeated and rolled back in Vietnam.”

“I wouldn’t say we were defeated, quite yet. Although, the signs are dismaying.”

Robert frowned and ate quickly. He got up and helped himself to another ale. “I’m just figuring this out,” he said. “Mom is buried alive in Palm Beach; Kaylie is a nervous wreck; and I’ve been on the run as long as I can remember. You’ve always been calm, in control, at the eye of some weird storm.” He shook his head. “Nightmares. They never stop. Always people hunting me down. You know what? They want justice, revenge. I’m haunted by these friggin’ patriot ghosts.” Carver listened with his head tilted a bit to one side. He broke off a piece of bread as Robert went on.

“Lying. Collateral damage. *We’re* the collateral damage—me, and Kaylie, and Mom, the whole damn country.”

“I am sorry if you’ve been hurt, Robert.” Carver pushed his plate slightly forward and wiped his mouth with a napkin. “Excuse me for a moment.”

Robert took a long drink of ale and leaned back in his chair. Nothing changes, he thought. How could his father be so completely unruffled? Carver returned and sat down. He was holding a small black container, metallic, shaped like a tiny football. He held it up, squeezed it in two places, and twisted. Robert heard a snap. His father twisted in the opposite direction and squeezed again. The container came apart in two pieces. He shook a red pill onto his palm.

“When I was—active—I had this with me always. I’m required to take it if captured. Supposed to be an immediate painless death.” He paused. “If it will satisfy the ghosts, rid you of them, I will take it now.” He put the pill on his tongue and picked up his whiskey. He looked at Robert, raising his eyebrows.

Robert leaned forward. “No! No! Don’t take it!” Carver put down his glass and carefully took the pill from his mouth. “I don’t want you to die, for Christ’s sake; I want you to understand.”

Faces long forgotten appeared before Carver. “I will try,” he said. “I have an easier time with the War of 1812.” It was as close to an apology as his father could come, Robert realized.

“Maybe it’s not a bad thing that they hang around,” Robert said.

“They?”

“The ghosts. Forcing us to remember.” They finished eating in silence.

Robert left an hour later with a bag containing the remaining crab cakes and half a baguette. He opened the car door and then turned and went back to his father. He hugged him for the first time in twenty-five years and was surprised at how small he was.

2 The Great Bob Marley

Age had bent Grant slightly; there was a suggestion of the longbow about him as he walked through the village, tall and thin, thinking. Newcomers thought that he probably taught at the college; he seemed too independent for the commuter crowd. When Francie passed him on the sidewalk, she asked her friend, Janey, "Who's that?"

"Grant Kavanagh. Local boy, played on all the teams in high school. Been married a couple of times. He writes about art, art history."

"He reminds me of someone I knew who made stained glass windows. Any kids?"

"I don't think so. There was a stepson in his second marriage, but there was an awful accident, a car wreck. The boy died. Grant's been single quite a while. Pretty buttoned up, hard to reach."

"I like tall men," Francie said.

"What about Fergus? He couldn't have been more than five foot three!"

"He was an exception."

"Exceptionally rich."

"He was."

"God, Francie, how could you leave him? Your life was so

pleasant.”

“Fergus was sweet. But he was such a good dog, you know, wanting to please everyone. He would stumble, jumping to his feet when anyone entered the room. He leaped to open car doors.”

“You are a cold and heartless woman. If Nick opened a car door for me, I’d faint.” Francie threw her arms in the air, fingers spread to the sky.

Grant, a block away, had turned to look at them. Her movement seemed good humored, and he smiled involuntarily. He’d seen her before with Jane Mavroulos. She was leggy with long black hair and blue eyes. She seemed deeply familiar to him, same DNA or something.

An attractive woman was usually followed in his imagination by a crowd of parents, sisters and brothers, old friends, ex-lovers, children from a divorce, uncles and aunts; he would have to know them all. This woman seemed more alone. Her arms lowered. He shrugged and continued around the corner to the post office where he signed for a special delivery.

“Looks like my passport, Axel.”

“You taking off again?”

“Guess so. Couple of months. Patsy will collect my mail.”

“O.K., I’ll tell Bart. Where you headed?”

“India.”

“Good time to go; we got us a warm one today, but you know it won’t last.”

“I know it.” Grant shook his head. “Keep ’em flying, Axel.”

He walked home enjoying the first signs of spring, reddening buds on the trees, small streams rushing. Axel had retired from the Air Force, what, ten years ago? People like Axel helped make sticking around worthwhile. People who knew you when. You knew them when. A little conversation went a long way.

That night he went to a party at Sharon Stinson's. He was pouring himself a drink when Jane Mavroulos held out her glass beside his.

"While you're at it. How are you, Grant?"

"Jes fine, Jane. How are you and Nick doing? How's that shoulder?"

"We're good. Shoulder's better. Body's getting to the point where if something doesn't hurt, it doesn't work. This is my friend, Francie." Grant put out his hand.

"Grant Kavanagh."

"Frances Killian." She regarded him calmly, not needing to strain to look him in the eye. Her fingers were long.

"Excuse me," Jane said. "Nick seems to be wanting something" Once again, Grant faced assessment. He felt like a lion who had dashed from one line of beaters to another. This beater was unusually good looking. Grant forgot to let go of Frances's hand and was embarrassed when she raised her eyebrows and opened her fingers.

"I'm sorry. I was staring. Your eyes—they're like horses coming over a gate. I wish I could paint."

"Janey told me you write about art."

"I do. Or, I have. I don't know what to do next."

"Get small," she said.

"What?"

Frances extended her right arm, palm up, fingers together. Her fingers began to close slowly as her wrist bent toward her and the angle at her elbow increased. Her knees bent slightly, and she began to turn, gathering inward, wrist coming to rest on her breast, head tipped slightly forward and to one side, eyes lowered. She was still for a second, then straightened.

"Something like that," she said. "I've got to slow down before I can feel what's next. Not that it's easy; it's like dying, almost."

“I’ll think about that. When I’m really stuck, I take a trip. I’m going to India on Friday.”

“I love India. Will you be traveling around or staying put somewhere?”

“I like to go to one place and mostly stay there. I’ll be in Dharamsala.”

“I had a good time in Dharamsala.”

“You did?”

“I went for a week and stayed two months.”

“Really? What were you doing?”

“Hanging out with the monks, mostly. I was interested in their ceremonies. I’m a dancer.”

“I see that.”

“Hello, Grant.”

“Hey, Nick.”

“Look, Grant, one of these days let’s get together, talk about your woodlot. I have some ideas that can make us both happy.”

“Always ready to talk, Nick. But, when I get back.”

“I heard you were heading out. Watch it! Don’t get married this time.”

“Not this time. I’m staying in a monastery.”

“I remember those pictures you took. Very scenic. Get back in one piece.”

“Do my best.”

Frances had moved away with Jane, and Grant decided to go home. He thanked Sharon and waved at Frances on the way out. She didn’t notice.

Saturday morning, after an overnight to DeGaulle, Grant boarded an Air France flight to Delhi. His seat was next to an Indian man, middle-aged, with bright dark eyes. The Indian, whose name was Udayan, was returning from a literary conference.

“They love me in Paris. The plane is full of writers.”

"I've written a couple of books," Grant said.

"Ah. When I saw you, I thought—he's either an artist or he has been to India many times."

"Some of each. Not so sure about artist. I like art, write about it, in fact."

Udayan was in a good mood. "I was up very late last night eating Chinese food, drinking wine. Talking and talking."

"How was the conference?"

"Very big. I was a keynote speaker, and they asked me what I liked about France. I said it was easier to tell them what I didn't like. Two things: the food—it is so bland and tasteless."

"Jesus!"

"Then I said, *The Eiffel Tower*. It is ridiculous! It is a toy; toys should fit in the hand of a child."

"You're lucky they didn't throw you in jail."

Udayan chuckled. "My interpreter said I was disappointed by the tower, but that I saw it in bad light in the early morning. I think he was saving me. Do you know Hindi?"

"No, I'm sorry to say."

"You should really try to learn it. English is too pale for India. We are a pagan snake-charming culture, damnit all! You know, I am thinking we writers are all talking to each other, all over the world. It is good."

Udayan wound down and fell asleep over the Black Sea. They passed above the Caspian Sea, Afghanistan, snow covered on the mountains, the Karakorams, and Pakistan, flying away from the sun into onrushing dark and, finally, over the subcontinent, world within a world, and down at Delhi. Udayan said goodbye and shouted cheerful exchanges in Hindi with security guards.

Grant stood in the customs line for foreigners. This was his fourth trip. Between visits, he forgot the heat, the intensity, the press of the people, the vivid colors, the sense of how muted he

was by comparison, a walking island surrounded by life that he could see and hear and smell but not quite touch.

Usually he stayed two nights in Little Tibet adjusting to the ten and a half hour time change and getting ready for the long bus or train and cab ride to Dharamsala, but a new airport had just opened in Kangra. He had reservations for a flight the next morning, so he stayed in a hotel near the airport.

The flight was a revelation—barely an hour, lifting off from Delhi and over the baking green and gold fields of Punjab to Pathankot, a nine-hour trip on the train. He remembered the tens of thousands living along the tracks in cardboard and tin shacks, tattered tents of cloth and plastic, or just sleeping in the open. Didn't see them at all from the plane.

A quick hop to Kangra and a forty-five minute taxi ride took him to McLeod Ganj, home of the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government in exile, at five thousand feet, fifteen hundred feet above the town of Dharamsala. Full summer. Flowers blooming. Curving terraces of wheat. Alpine meadows above them on the last highest foothills. Gray rock, the sharp snow capped ridges and peaks of the Dhauladhar, ten thousand feet higher, bear and leopard country, a band that stretched more than a thousand miles across northern India and Nepal. Grant remembered an Indian making a sudden throaty call, sharp and then constricted. *You hear that at night, you know your dog is gone*, he'd said.

The five streets of McLeod Ganj were crowded with trekkers, monks and nuns in burgundy robes, tourists from Australia, Japan, Israel, and Europe, Indian shopkeepers, Tibetan children, cars, scooters, Suzuki van cabs, three-wheeler cabs, cows, and load packing mules. Monkeys peered from rooftops. Kites circled overhead. Good smells from food stands reminded him that he had to be careful about what he ate.

"Mister, Mister, your shoes are very dirty, sir. You need shine."

“No, maybe tomorrow.”

“Very dirty, sir. Please.”

“Maybe tomorrow.”

“You promise?”

“O.K., maybe tomorrow.”

“You promise?”

He bought a bottle of water and descended a long set of steps and a steep path to the monastery where he had reserved a room. The noise of the town faded above him. The valley below stretched green and sunny into a hazy distance. He stopped and put down his bag. Bees moved from flower to flower.

At the front room of the main building, he presented his passport to a short monk with chubby cheeks. “*Tashi delek.*”

“*Tashi delek.* How are you, Mr. Grant?”

“Good. Hot and tired.”

“You must relax after your long trip, Mr. Grant.”

The monk led him to a yellow cement building at the lower edge of the compound, where they climbed steps to a row of small rooms with wooden doors that overlooked the valley. There was a shared toilet in a nearby building. Grant thanked the monk and lay down on the single bed.

He awoke thirsty and disoriented in the late afternoon. Images from the trip careened around his mind. He walked back up to town and ate dinner in an Indian restaurant, dal and rice, chai, safe food. He’d forgotten to bring his flashlight, so he returned down the hill before dark.

Besides the bed, there was nothing in his room but a standing metal wall locker, a small table, one light, and a plastic chair. He brought the chair out in front of the door and stared over the low cement wall into the twilight. He seemed to be the only one staying there. Birds called, settling in for the night. A half moon rose over the ridge to his left. He went to bed and fell asleep immediately.

At three in the morning he was wide awake. It was too early to get anything to eat in town. He lay there picturing his kitchen at home. “The farm,” his father always called it. The field was still hayed, but it had been many years since there were cows in the barn and chickens behind the house. His father had done a good job converting the barn and two outbuildings into living space. “Your grandfather and great-grandfather are probably shaking their heads up there, but this land is too valuable to farm.” Grant had helped off and on for twenty years, weekends and between his father’s building jobs in town. After his mother died, his father just worked harder. Now there were five good apartments with nice light, views of the field, plenty of space.

His father had connected with Milly Planetree after her divorce. “O.K., Grant,” he’d said one day, “it’s all yours. I’ve been taking care of this place my whole life; it’s time for something different. Milly and I are going to Florida. It’s your turn.”

“What are you going to do down there?”

“I can still work. Milly’s got some money. Social Security. What more do I need?”

Gave him the whole place. It was a fair amount of work to keep things up, but he had the freedom to do what he wanted most of the time—as long as he kept expenses down. Beat hell out of working for someone else.

He fell asleep again and woke to birds singing. He walked through the monastery, listening to the buzz and drone of chanting coming through an open door. He met no one on the path. In town, close to the temple, he found an open café. It was small, run by Tibetans, nearly filled with westerners and monks. He asked an American if he could share his table.

“Sure.”

“I’m Grant.”

“Ted, here.”

Ted was a Nam vet with sad eyes. He was burly, good hu-

mored on the surface, a regular at the Tenyang Coffee Shop in the early morning. He had retired from a computer programming job and come to live in India. During the next week, they exchanged stories. Grant told him about a girl he'd seen.

"She was about seven years old, standing in the doorway of the refugee place on Jogibara. She was watching me with big eyes. I wanted to pick her up and tell her everything was going to be O.K. She had her mouth set against disappointment; she knew I was going to keep walking. I felt terrible. Maybe I should adopt her."

"I know," Ted said. "I got friendly with a Nepali family. They have a daughter who is beautiful and really smart. They live just up the hill in a little shack. I used to sit around with them in their yard. I tried to help out with money now and then. We bought clothes for the girl. They'd ask me for help with this or that emergency. Only it turned out they were lying; they were making things up and drinking the money. I wanted to help the girl, see, but the money went through them. I had it out with them a couple of times, said, 'Look, you can't lie to me, or I can't help you.' But they kept doing it, and they wouldn't let me see the girl." He was upset.

"Too bad," Grant said.

"Yeah. It's tricky." Ted considered. "There's a lot of phonies around here, but there are good people, too. People you can learn from."

"I love the faces," Grant said. "The old people walking *kora* around the temple early in the morning—some of them barely walking—so open and radiant."

"Some of the young ones have it too," Ted said, "but a lot of them are into Hondas, hot bikes."

Across McLeod Ganj, visitors were having similar conversations, comparing experiences, sharing opinions. Grant had met Daisy that way and ended up married in Melbourne. They'd

parted friends after two years.

He took long walks, letting memories float to the surface and move along. There were no pressures on him here, no phone ringing with needs to be filled. He was generally silent, apart from restaurant conversations. As he lost his winter weight and became rested, he began to sense something knotted or lodged in his chest, a heaviness, a constriction. The weeks passed, and he felt steadily worse.

Late one afternoon, when he was feeling particularly oppressed, he stopped by an eroded gully on the Jogibara Road. Large gray-brown stones balanced irregularly on each other in their slow tumble toward the plains. On the flatter surfaces, mantras were chiseled and painted in prayer flag colors. Weeds with tiny flowers of a brilliant blue edged the rocks and dirt. The immediacy of the flowers, the presence of the mantra carvers, thousands of years of Buddhism, the erosion of the Himalayas, vibrated together in different time scales. As he stood there, his inner weight lightened. Twenty minutes later he walked on, ready for a meal.

Once or twice a day, he stopped at a cyber café to check his email and browse the internet. Frances Killian wrote to say hello and that his book was being used in a course in one of the schools where she taught dance. He answered immediately:

“I’m glad to sell a few books, but it makes me feel strange. I was just trying to figure out what makes great art great, what is lasting. I hate the idea of people using my words to be—I don’t know—politically correct, reducing works of art. I should have put a warning in the book.

“I’m going to stay here another month at least, maybe two. I was just in a café where a waiter was wearing a T-shirt that said, *You’ll never guess who I was*. Whoever I was, I don’t think I am anymore. Want to have some coffee when I get back? Where do you live, anyway?”

He was descending the path to the monastery, the day he heard from Frances, when he felt a sudden need for a toilet. It became urgent and he went behind a bush. He hadn't gotten his pants down before a rush of shit poured out, half on the ground, half down his legs. He pulled up his pants and walked slowly back to his room. Luckily, no one stopped him for conversation. He cleaned himself and washed his underwear, pants, and socks.

For two days he stayed in his room, making regular trips to the toilet. The monks brought him water, tea, and rice. He was depressed. No matter how careful he was, India got him sooner or later. A few days in bed weren't so bad, but he felt old and out of place.

Four days later, he was fully recovered. He bought a pair of hiking boots for a Tibetan baker named Achi who had taken his mother's money and fled over the mountains without saying goodbye. After seven years, sadness and guilt had overtaken him; he was going to try and sneak back into Tibet that winter, when the rivers would be frozen and the Chinese patrols fewer.

"Aren't you afraid of getting shot or thrown in jail?"

Achi had spread his arms and smiled—a smile that accepted death and the injustices and follies of life with a depth that made Grant feel like a child.

India reveals you to yourself. As the days passed, Grant felt increasingly barren and alone. He hadn't lived with anyone since Shelley and David. David was a good kid, big-hearted, a little wild, what you'd expect from a teenager. They'd had their battles, but Grant had held his ground, given him room, been fair. They'd come to respect each other. Even to like each other. Wiped out in a stupid crash. Bad company. Bad luck.

Shelley had crumbled, left her job at the end of the semester, gone back to California and never returned. Her first marriage was a disaster, and her marriage to him was mostly about David, as it turned out. It was good for five or six years. They did

things together on weekends and in the summer. David grew. And then—gone. He pushed the memory down.

One morning he was standing on Temple Road wondering whether Santosh, a young painter he had met, would open his tiny stall earlier or later. A light mist was lifting through the pines. Someone was looking at him. He turned and saw first the smile, then the blue eyes and black hair, Frances Killian.

“Hi, Grant.”

“Hey! What are *you* doing here?”

“Getting out of Dodge. I’ve got a few weeks off.”

He was so surprised that he forgot to be defensive. “Amazing! Let’s have chai or something.” They walked to Moon Peak café.

“I can’t believe it,” he said. She hung a beige pashmina scarf on the back of a chair and sat down comfortably. She was wearing a dark blue silk shirt over loose cotton pants. Flip flops. “You look great, right at home. When did you get here?”

“Day before yesterday. I thought I’d run into you. I was going to send you an email if I didn’t.”

“Where are you staying?”

“I’ve got a room at the Snow Lion.”

“I’m down the hill at the monastery. Very nice there. Peaceful.”

“I live in Stamford. I didn’t answer your email.”

“Oh. About forty-five minutes from me.”

“You’re looking very brown,” she said.

“Haven’t done much since I got here but walk around.”

“So fun,” she said, “just to look.”

“There’s a lake I’ve never seen, past the Tibetan Children’s Village. Want to walk up there one of these days?”

“How about tomorrow?”

They talked for an hour about themselves and about Dharamsala. When they parted, Grant was surprised at how relaxed they

were with each other.

The next morning at nine, they met at the bus stop. They walked out of town past a line of taxis and tourist jeeps and along a narrow road cut into the mountain. Half an hour later, they could look across at McLeod Ganj, colorful in the sunlight, silent at that distance. It was cool in the forest. There were few cars. One elderly Tibetan passed them, walking in the other direction, fingering wooden beads. The road bent around the face of the ridge where fields had been cleared. They walked past another road that led down the ridge to a several clusters of buildings. They saw a line of identical large trucks and heard orders coming from a loudspeaker. "The army," Grant said, "same everywhere."

Two guys came by on a scooter and turned into the TCV grounds. Grant and Frances continued up a hill past several Indian shops and then a closed storefront that advertised *espresso* on a hand painted sign. "Too bad," Frances said.

The lake was a quarter mile around, fitted neatly below steep wooded slopes, a pond, really, created by a small dam. A ceremonial path led around the quiet water. Half an hour later, they were headed back down the hill. The espresso shop was open—three bare tables, a counter, no one visible. They walked in and waited. A young Tibetan with bright eyes emerged from a back room and made coffee for them. He put on a CD, and the room filled with reggae.

"The sound of Jamaica," Grant said, "all the way over here."

"It's universal," Frances said, tapping her fingers on the table.

"It's true—the other day in town I saw a Tibetan teenager wearing a T-shirt that said, *No woman Nuh cry*. It was pink with white lettering." He paused. "David listened to reggae all the time." The obstruction in him got larger.

"He was my stepson. Killed in a car accident. He played

bass. You would have liked him. Kind of a clumsy kid. He had these eyebrows that dived down between big eyes. You looked at him and you knew he was always doing his best.” Grant’s eyes suddenly filled with tears. He swallowed and tried to talk. He swallowed again. “I’m having trouble here.” Frances put a hand on his forearm. She was calm, knowing, satisfied, even.

Grant breathed deeply a couple of times. “I miss him.” He choked up again and tears rolled down his cheeks. He couldn’t remember the last time he cried. He swallowed his espresso, and smiled helplessly at Frances. “More coffee?”

“Sure,” she said.

He went to the counter and pointed at the large speakers. “Very good!”

“It is the great Bob Marley,” the Tibetan said, eyes gleaming. Grant made a fist the way David used to and then returned to the table.

“Sorry. The reggae. And this guy—he reminds me a little of David.” When the waiter brought the coffee, he asked if the music was too loud. “Cannot hear it,” Grant said. The Tibetan grinned and turned up the volume. *No woman, nuh cry ... I remember when we used to sit in the Government yard in Trenchtown ...* Everyone, anywhere, who ever remembered being with someone special, was there in Bob Marley’s voice. Something lifted in Grant’s chest. He felt a living rush, heart and mind merging.

Frances’s head moved with the beat. The rhythm spread to her shoulders and back. She danced herself upright, and Grant followed stiffly. Bit by bit he relaxed and let the sound move him. He wasn’t showing off, the way he used to. Neither was Frances. She seemed completely free, although she danced in a small area. Later, outside, he would hold her and, for the first time in many years, if not ever, surrender, trust totally, his head hanging over her shoulder, but now they danced on the plywood

floor, between a framed photograph of the Dalai Lama, adorned with a white silk scarf, and a *FREE TIBET* slogan painted in red on the boards of the opposite wall, . . . *Buffalo soldier; dreadlock rasta* . . . renewing, honoring, celebrating, letting passion burn them clean.

3 The Maroons

Diego watched a pigeon pick up a twig with its beak, balance it, and fly away in a straight line. Instinct? How could they be born knowing how to build a nest? Big Ben chimed, and Diego reached for his cell phone. He straightened on the park bench. “Hola.”

“Max L., here.”

“Sentient,” Diego said. The code word.

“Nine, tonight. Base camp. Don’t be yourself.”

“Nine tonight, base camp. Full stealth. It’s a loss to the world.”

“For everything there is a season,” Maximum Leader said, hanging up.

It was a cool morning in early spring. Diego stood, rolled his shoulders, and walked with a slight limp across the cobblestones. He was medium sized, squarely built. A close black beard partially covered a birthmark on his lower jaw. His eyes were light blue, almost gray.

“The calling,” he explained to the bronze sculpture of a kneeling lobsterman. He could wear the orthodox outfit—the hat brim, dark glasses, and extravagant beard hid his face completely. The long coat was warm, but it wasn’t made for running. Max sounded intense. When wasn’t he? Better to be the Celtic

wanderer.

The Celtic wanderer usually appeared in warmer weather, but he could wear a turtleneck under the T-shirt, long johns under the patched linen pants. Everyone was going crazy with the cold weather. The wanderer had made a mistake, that's all, come north too soon.

Diego kept his disguises in separate bags at the bottoms of other bags in his closet. He had different sunglasses and different shoes for each. In a nylon belt pack, he kept cotton gloves, a small flashlight, alternative ID, and his savings account—a roll of twenties that fluctuated in value, sometimes decreasing to zero.

Base camp was at the corner of Gray and Park streets, a neutral neighborhood two blocks from Dogfish Market. He was there five minutes early wearing a plain blue jacket, leaning against a tree, facing away from cars coming down Park. Max was strict on procedure. He'd drive around the block until he could make the pickup unobserved. A white Toyota passed and turned left down Danforth. Shortly afterward, the van pulled to a stop. Diego got in quickly.

"Rations secured," Max said. He parked a block from Commercial Street and opened two bottles of Gritty's Best Bitter. "Support your local brew pub."

"No piss water," Diego said. He unwrapped a roast beef Italian. "Dogfish?"

"Of course."

"Good place." One thing about Max—he fed his troops. It made sense; you can't think on an empty stomach.

"I'm going to miss it," Max said.

"What?"

"I'm out of here, Buddy. This is my last mission—at least for a while."

Diego chewed in silence. "The calling, Max."

"I'm getting married."

"No shit! Congratulations."

"Thank you. I was going to say something last time, but you know the procedures. The less we know about each other, the better."

Diego raised his ale. "The few, the proud, the Maroons!" They clinked bottles. "Max, I've been wondering—how do birds learn to make nests?"

"They're hard-wired, born that way."

"How can that be? They could be copying other birds, but some bird would have had to be first. I don't know." He brightened. "Anyway, congratulations. You're going to raise little Maroons. Where there was one, there will be many."

Max sighed. "Yes. But, it will be different." He handed Diego an envelope. "Severance."

"Much obliged." Diego folded the envelope and put it in his pocket. This was serious. "So, what's the mission?"

Max pointed at a large box in the back of the van. "Illumination," he said. "You know those new hotels in the Old Port—the one by Dewey's and the one going up by the ferry terminal?" Diego nodded. Max lowered his voice. "Fake brick. The outsides are fake brick."

"I hate that shit," Diego said.

"You know what they call it? *Thin* brick. Thin brick. Jesus. They actually mortar the little fake bricks, bricklets, thin bricks," Max was sputtering, "you have to know what you're doing to tell the difference. You start out with all these beautiful old brick buildings; you add fake brick buildings; and pretty soon you don't know which is which. They're all fake or might be. You've lost the old brick." He stared through the van window. "Little metal ears. Little ears stick out of galvanized strips. They glue on the fake bricks and then mortar the cracks. You know what holds the metal strips to the building?" Max was

winding up again. “Staples! They staple the strips to the cement board. Can you believe it? The whole wall is held on by staples. Somebody might ask: if you can’t tell the difference, what *is* the difference? Well, come back in a hundred years, Goddamnit!”

“I hate that shit,” Diego said.

Max finished his ale. “I have alerted the media,” he said.

Diego retrieved the red wig and the headband from his pack, put them on, and adjusted his sunglasses. “Ready,” he said, although he wasn’t, quite. It was strange thinking that he wouldn’t be seeing Max again.

“Target: Hilton,” Max said. His voice was deep, musical, at odds with his stiff frame, all angles. “Another projector raid.” He pointed to the box. “There’s two in there, both lasers.”

“Spare no expense,” Diego said.

“I put them together from parts. They are tested at 150 feet. I’ve got them labeled ‘L’ and ‘R’ for left, right.”

“Where do they go?”

“Top deck of the ferry terminal parking garage.”

“What about power?”

“There’s an extension cord in the box. Also a sign that says, *Danger — Electrified — Do Not Touch*. You need to tape the sign on the cord right by the projectors.”

“Tape in the box?”

“That’s a 10-4, buddy.”

“Just checking,” Diego said. “Where’s the outlet?”

“There’s an exit door by Commercial Street—on the right. The outlet is just inside the door.” Max took a business card from his shirt pocket and handed it to Diego. “In case anyone asks what you’re doing.”

“*Jerry Geraldson, Hilton Productions*,” Diego read.

“Probably won’t be anyone up there, but you never know. I’ll drop you by the side of the terminal. The elevator is out of

sight from the toll booth. Go up to the top, and walk across to the exit door. You can unpack inside the stairway. The door's hung badly; there's enough room for the cord to go under it on the handle side. On the front facade by the street, there's a flat copper top where you can set up the projectors."

"Exit route?"

"Down the same stairs. There are four wedges in the box. On the way down, jam each door from the inside. The street door is locked and only opens out. That ought to delay them a few minutes, anyway."

"Sweet," Diego said.

"When I see the projectors come on, I'll call in the strike, tell the media where to pick up the handouts. I'll place them after I drop you." He gave Diego a key. "The van will be in the Ben-Kay sushi lot. You can change inside. Leave the key under the mat on the driver's side."

Diego followed procedure and repeated the instructions.

"Where do you want them aimed?"

"I'm thinking—over the main entrance. But do whatever looks best once you're up there." Max started the van and drove down Commercial Street. He pulled in by the terminal. "I won't be seeing you for a while."

"Good luck," Diego said. He put on his gloves, went around to the back doors, and dragged out the box.

"Mock on," Max said.

"Mock on, man." Diego closed the doors and carried the box to the elevator as Max drove away. He rested one edge on his belt, pushed the button for the top deck, and waited as the elevator rose. The harbor appeared suddenly, startling him; he hadn't realized that the back wall of the elevator was made of plexiglass. The water was black, reflecting streaks and sparkles of light. Two offshore drilling rigs under construction floated silently, welders and riggers gone for the night.

The elevator door slid open. Only a few cars and trucks were parked on the top ramp; no one was around. The sea air was more noticeable at that height, soft, muddy smelling.

Diego walked deliberately down the ramp and across to the exit door. Turning sideways, he got one hand on the handle and pushed the door open. A dim light inside showed the stairs. The outlet was where Max had said. He put the box down and took a deep breath. His heart was beating faster. It wasn't as though he was committing a murder, but he didn't want to get caught. Not at this point. One or two Maroon expeditions had gotten out of control; damage had been done, the authorities mocked. They were pissed. They would throw the book at the first Maroon they caught.

Diego opened the box. The projectors were less alarming than the orange extension cord, so he carried them out first, setting them on the façade next to where the wall rose vertically in a false front. Used to be funny to see false fronts in west-erns, propped above the dusty street, overlooking the gun fight—endearing, almost. Now the whole culture was going that way. Car lights swung up onto the deck. Diego stepped quickly into the stairwell and held the door open a crack.

Two guys got out of a Cherokee and rode down in the elevator. Get this over with, he said to himself. He plugged in the extension cord, passed it under the door, and unrolled it along the wall. It reached with six feet to spare. Max knew his stuff. Diego taped the phoney warning sign on the cord and against the wall, facing out.

He turned on the L projector and pushed the target button, looking across the street for a disk of white light. He didn't see it. He lifted the projector and swung it slowly, picking up the movement about three stories high. He adjusted down until the spot was just above the entrance. Perfect. He did the same with the other and looked behind him. The ramp was still deserted.

Diego flipped the main switches and moved behind the false front. He looked around the edge and saw a bright comic book corona around the words, FAKE BRICK. A few feet to the right, blinking slowly on and off, were three lines:

ANOTHER PUBLIC
ANNOUNCEMENT
BY THE MAROONS

“Mock on,” Diego said in a low voice. “Time to go.” Once inside the stairwell, he moved fast, jamming each door on the way down. He paused at the bottom for a moment, pushed open the door, and sauntered away. He didn’t look back. He was the Celtic wanderer, heading for sushi.

The van was in a corner of the lot. He let himself in and stashed the sunglasses, headband, and wig in his pack. He put on his jacket and left the key.

He walked back on Fore Street, avoiding the Hilton. Why take chances? Max had the media jumping through hoops. They would be down there with cameras. Cops. His job was to get in and get out. Professional all the way.

Adrenaline pushed Diego along. He was almost to Dewey’s before he slowed down. He passed the other fake brick hotel and walked into familiar sounds and the smell of beer and smoke and french fries. He took a seat at the end of the bar.

He ordered a pint of Guinness and sat quietly, glad not to talk to anyone. It had been an interesting couple of years—temp work and service with the Maroons. He opened the envelope Max had given him. \$500. Good old Max. He didn’t know where Max got the money, and he didn’t ask. It was over now. Max—getting married. Diego felt a rightness about it.

His mind kept drifting back to Honolulu, the Ala Moana shopping center. He’d think about other things—Maine, his room with the view of roofs and Portland harbor—Kiersten, too

alcoholic for him, probably playing pool right down the street—and then he'd be back in Hawaii at the cab stand on the lower level of the shopping center. A rainy day, warm and gray. Two Japanese men in their 60's, nylon jackets, baseball caps, were waiting for a bus, talking story, laughing about their drinking days. "I cut way back, now," one said. The other made a deep-in-the-throat sympathetic sound. The bus came, and as the two men boarded, in Diego's mind's eye, he remembered the pigeon flying away with its twig, making a nest as warm and secure as the one it remembered.

Time to go back to the islands, he said to himself and felt peace entering between his shoulderblades. He patted the envelope in his pocket. At the cab stand in the shopping center, there was an old driver with an artificial leg who used to limp around his white Chevy to open the door for passengers. He had a smile that was total, free, like the universe. Be good to see him again. You can only do so much, and then you've got to reconnect—you know—get centered. Be thankful for awhile.

4 Waiting for Happiness

Spring comes late in Maine. Snow changes to rain; branch tips redden; you can see your breath. Not a whole lot different than winter until the daffodils, crab apples, and forsythia bloom. The sun skips off the water, impossibly bright, impossibly blue. You can almost almost hear the cracking of seeds, buried and forgotten.

Charlie Garrett was as hardnosed as most. He kept going, did what he had to. “Ninety percent of success is showing up,” Woody Allen said. Charlie repeated that in dire times—before medical checkups or visits to his brother, Orson.

Orson knew a lot about success and never hesitated to pass it on. “What you need, Charlie, is a Cessna. You aren’t supposed to spin them, but you can. That’ll clear your head, Charlie, straight down, counting as a barn comes around—one time, two times, three times—correct and pull out nice and easy.” Orson dipped his knees, lowering his flattened palm. Or a catboat: “A solid little Marshall, Charlie. Putter around, take some cutie coasting. You’re in sailor heaven, man, all those islands.”

“I know some cuties,” his wife, Miranda, had said.

“Last cutie took my silver garlic press. Well, she didn’t take it; she borrowed it and never returned it.”

“Call her up and get it back,” Orson said.

“That’s what she wants you to do.” Miranda was the best thing about Orson.

“I got another one.”

“Where the hell did you find a silver garlic press?” Orson was impressed.

“It’s aluminum, I think, or a composite material.”

“Oh.”

It was always like that; motion was Orson’s answer to everything. Charlie stretched and checked his watch. The ten o’clock ferry from Peaks Island was edging to the dock. Soon a few dozen passengers would walk off the ramp, carrying shopping bags, slipping day packs over one or both shoulders, holding dogs on leashes. Margery, short and polite, would be toward the end of the line, one hand on the railing, blinking as she looked up at the city buildings and around for him.

They were similar physically and recognized each other as related, not lovers, not brother and sister, but distant cousins perhaps or members of a tribe—the patient, the witness bearers. “There you are,” she said. Charlie stood and they patted one another’s shoulders.

“You look very well, not a day over forty,” Charlie said, standing back. “Here, let me take that.” She handed him a stout canvas bag. “Jesus! What’s in here?”

“Rocks and books. You’re looking pleased with life. How’s the world of architecture?”

“All right. Still looking for the perfect client.” He rubbed his stomach with his free hand and pointed across the street to Standard Baking Company. “Croissants,” he said. “A croissant a day keeps the doctor away. Are you hungry?”

“No. Let’s get on with it.”

Charlie led the way to his car, an elderly red Volvo. “Rocinante,” Margery remembered.

“As good as ever.” Charlie lowered the bag into the back

seat.

“Could we swing by the library? I need to return these books.”

“Sure. What have you been reading?”

“Tolstoy. The Russians. Dostoyevsky, Chekhov.”

“That’ll get you through a long night.”

“There’s no one like Tolstoy,” Margery said. “So serene. Cosmic and down to earth at the same time.”

“I wrote a novel once,” Charlie said.

“What happened?”

“It wasn’t very good.” Charlie stopped by the library book drop.

“At least you finished.”

He watched her slide three souls and twenty years work through the brass slot. “There’s a story I love about Chekhov,” she said, getting back into the car. “He paid a visit to Tolstoy. Late in the evening, on his way home after a certain amount of wine, he cried out to his horse and to the heavens: ‘He says I’m worse than Shakespeare. Worse than Shakespeare!’”

“Wonderful,” Charlie said. “Chekhov—didn’t he die after a last swallow of champagne?”

“It was sad,” Margery said. She turned and stared out the side window.

They drove out of town in silence. The cemetery where Margery’s father and son were buried was an hour and a half up the coast and midway down a long peninsula. The drive had become an annual event. Margery had no car. Charlie drove her one year and then had just continued. This was, what, the fourth or fifth trip? He couldn’t remember.

“Margery, did you see that picture of President Bush on the carrier deck, wearing the pilot get up?”

“I did.”

“The little son of a bitch went AWOL when he was in the

National Guard. I read that it delayed the troops their homecoming by a day and cost a million dollars.”

“Light comedy,” Margery said. “The Emperor Commodus fancied himself a gladiator. Romans had to watch him fight in the colosseum many times. He never lost. His opponents were issued lead swords.”

“Nothing’s changed,” Charlie said. “Commodus?”

“Second century, A.D. We’re not a police state, yet. Things get really crazy under one man rule. Have you not read Gibbon?”

“The Decline and Fall—never got around to it.”

“Good for perspective,” Margery said.

“That green!” Charlie waved at the trees along I-95. “Only for a week.”

“Yes.” Margery settled into her seat. Perspective was a good thing, Charlie thought. Even keel and all that. But there was something to be said for losing it. If he could have his choice of cuties, he’d just as soon have one of those dark-eyed Mediterranean fireballs—breasts, slashing smile—someone who spoke with her whole body.

They arrived at the cemetery in good time. Margery declined his offer to carry the special rocks, wanting to bring them herself. They were intended to protect the base of a rugosa she’d planted the previous year. As usual, Charlie accompanied her and then returned to the car. She would take as long as she needed to arrange the rocks and to say or hear or feel whatever she could.

Charlie had no children; it was hard to imagine what she felt. Her son had skidded on a slick road and been wiped out by a logging truck, a stupid accident, pure bad luck. Her father had died later the same year. Margery had been on hold since, he supposed, although he hadn’t known her when she was younger. The lines in her face seemed to have been set early. We were all

full of hope once, he thought.

He leaned against the car and watched a man approach. The man was carrying a shovel. He had a white handlebar moustache and a vaguely confederate look. "Hey," Charlie said.

"Yup," the man said. He stopped and leaned on his shovel.

"Nice day," Charlie said, after a moment.

"Yessir. Black flies ain't woke up yet."

"Don't disturb them."

"No. Jesus, no. I guess we got a couple of days yet." He tested the ground with the shovel and looked into the cemetery. "Margery Sewell," he said.

"You know Margery?"

"Since she was about so high." He gestured toward his knees. "Used to go smelting with her father, Jack."

"I'm Charlie, friend of Margery's."

"Tucker," the man said. "Tucker Smollett."

"That's an old name."

"Smolletts go way back around here. Smolletts and Sewells, both." They stared into the graveyard. "You from around here, then?" He knew that Charlie was from away; he was being polite.

"Live in Portland, born in New York. Family came over in the famine."

"Well, then." The world divides into people who have been hungry and those who haven't. Charlie felt himself grandfathered into the right camp. It was strange how some people you got along with and some you didn't. "I'll tell you one thing," Tucker said, "there weren't nobody smarter than Margery Sewell ever come out of here. She got prizes, awards—some kind of thing from the governor, even. Whoever he was. Can't recall."

Charlie nodded. "She's a professor—classics—Latin and Greek."

"It don't surprise me," Tucker said.

They talked, from time to time glancing into the graveyard. Tucker was waiting for Margery, Charlie realized. When she appeared, she was walking slowly. Her head was up but her attention was dragging, as though she were pulling part of herself left behind. She was nearly to them before she focused. "Hello, Tucker."

"Hello, Margery."

"Good to see you," she said. "It's been a while."

"Yep. Since the service, I guess." Tucker straightened. He seemed younger.

"Tucker lived up the road from us," she said to Charlie. "He made me the most marvelous rocking horse. I think that was the nicest present I ever got. When William—" She swallowed. "When—I'm sorry." She turned away. "William loved it too," she said in a low voice.

There wasn't anything to say. Margery gathered herself and turned back to them.

Tucker cleared his throat. "I was—thinking you might come over for a bite to eat, for old times sake." Charlie expected Margery to decline, but something in the old man's tone had caught her attention.

"Well, that's nice of you. You have time, don't you, Charlie?"

"Plenty of time." A few years earlier, she had shown him where she lived, not far from the cemetery. "Ride or walk?"

"Ride," Tucker said. "I'll just put this shovel in the shed."

Tucker's house was a weathered collection of gray boxes that were settling away from each other. A reddish dog got down from a couch on the porch and came to meet them. There was white around her muzzle. "Company, Sally. Margery Sewall and her friend, Charlie." The dog received Tucker's hand on her head and greeted them, sniffing each in turn. "Sally don't see as well as she used to—do you girl?" Her tail wagged as she

led them to the house.

“You’ve got bees.” Charlie pointed at four hives that stood on 2x4’s at the end of a narrow garden.

“Yep. Good year, last year.”

“The lilacs are even bigger than I remember,” Margery said.

“They keep right on going.” Tucker took them through the house and kitchen to a screened back porch. Charlie and Margery sat at a large table while he brought bread, cheese, pickles, salami, mayonnaise, mustard, a bowl of lettuce, and a smaller bowl of radishes. He set plates and three glasses. “I’ve got beer, water, and—a little milk.”

“Beer,” Charlie said.

“Margery?”

“Beer.”

“Three sodas coming up,” Tucker said.

He and Margery reminisced. “Jack had a taste for the good stuff,” Tucker said. “Five o’clock, regular. Never minded sharing, did Jack.” Charlie ate steadily and accepted another can of beer.

“Not bad, Tucker,” he said. He had noticed a small wooden horse on a shelf when he first entered the porch. During lunch, as Tucker and Margery talked, his eyes kept returning to it. He got up and walked over to the shelf. “What’s this?”

“Something I made.”

“Do you mind if I look at it?”

“Nope.”

Charlie carried the horse back to the table. It was carved from wood, light colored, about five inches high, galloping across a base of wooden grasses and flowers. There was an air of health about it. It seemed to belong where it was. “Nice,” he said. “What kind of finish is that on there?”

“Nothing much. Linseed oil, thinned some.”

“Mighty nice.”

"It's beautiful, Tucker."

"I made it for your mother." It was a statement of fact, but it carried something extra, like the horse. "You probably don't remember Mesquite, Margery."

"Mesquite—" Her face began to open.

"Must have died when you were about four or five."

"I'm remembering, now."

"Mr. Randolph brought him back for your mom—Helen," he said. "Got him at a show down south somewhere. He was a quarter horse, Mesquite. From Oklahoma originally, if I remember right. Damn fine horse." Tucker tilted his glass for two swallows. "I used to take care of him once in a while—when the family was away, you know. Well, one day Helen was out riding and I was walking along. It was in June. The flowers was all out. Mesquite got to cantering and I run along to keep up. Never forget it. The flowers all different, blurring together and flowing along like I was running through a river all different colors. And Helen sitting up tall—she had hair just like yours, Margery, short and thick, straw colored, went with her blue eyes." Tucker slowed down. "Well, I had to do something. I made the horse."

"Mesquite."

"Yep."

"Why didn't you give it to her?"

"It's a long story, I guess. Took me a while to make it. Your mom took a fancy to Jack. What with one thing and another, I went in the Navy. When I got out, I guess you was three years old already."

"Oh, Tucker."

"How's she doing? She still in Florida where they went?"

"St. Augustine. She's down to one lung. She lives in one of those—assisted living places, they call them. She has her own space, but there's help if need be. She gets around on a walker." Margery paused.

“Tucker, why do we cling so to life?”

“Guess we ain’t done yet.”

Margery looked at him for a long moment, and they exchanged what could be exchanged in small smiles. Tucker went inside the house and returned with a heavy cardboard box. “While I’m at it,” he said and began taking out carvings and putting them on the table—more horses, deer, squirrels, birds of all kinds, a woodchuck. Charlie held up a fox and looked at it from different angles. Its tail was full, straight out behind him, level with his back. His ears were sharply pointed, his head tilted slightly, all senses alert. Charlie was sure it was a he; the fox was elegant and challenging, superior.

“Damn near alive,” Charlie said. “You could make money with these.”

Tucker shook his head negatively. “Only do one a year. In the winter, not much going on.” He looked into the back yard. “Try to get it done on February 15th.”

“Mother’s birthday.”

“We used to talk about them a lot—animals and birds. Walk in the woods, talk.”

“Tucker, does she know about these?”

“Nope.”

“But she should see them!”

“She’d like them, you think?”

“Of course she would. They’re beautiful.”

“I’m not much for writing.”

“I could mail them to her if you’d like.” He looked at the carvings, rubbed his chin, and inclined his head. A *why not* expression crossed his face. He pulled a twenty dollar bill from a scarred black wallet. “Tucker, for heavens sake!” He insisted that she take it.

“Ask her, if she don’t mind—I might take a ride down, say hello. Probably get a train down there.” He looked at Charlie.

“Amtrak,” Charlie said. “Or you could fly.”

“I like trains.”

They finished lunch and put the box of carvings on the back seat of the car. “I’ll wrap tissue paper around them so they don’t get banged up. I’ll mail them tomorrow,” Margery said. “Tucker, thank you so much for lunch. It was so good to see you.”

“I thought I’d be seeing you again one of these days,” Tucker said.

“We’ll keep in touch,” Margery said.

“Take care of yourself,” Charlie said. “You want a ride back?”

“I’ll walk.”

They drove away slowly as Tucker and Sally watched. Tucker lifted one hand in farewell.

“You just never know, do you?” Charlie said.

“Tucker Smollett,” Margery said. “Good old Tucker.”

Halfway back to Portland, Charlie looked over at Margery and asked about her husband. “He cared for me,” she said. “He just cared more for someone else.”

“Damn shame,” Charlie said. Margery brushed the fingers of one hand through the back of her hair. Charlie thought she was going to say more, but she didn’t. At the ferry, he helped her with the box and said goodbye.

The next morning was again bright and sunny. Charlie returned to the bench near the ferry and sat, savoring his coffee, croissant, and the salty air. His brother Orson came to mind again. Orson was a pain in the ass, but he had a point—sometimes you have to make a move.

Two men wearing similar clothes—pressed jeans, T-shirts, white running shoes, and sunglasses—walked up and took benches closer to the water. One was older, softer, beginning to put on weight. He sat with his elbows on his knees, looking across the

harbor. The other, fitter one, stretched full length on his bench, arms out flat behind his head, and stared into the sky. Neither looked happy. They remained unmoving, as though they were waiting for a delivery.

That is not the way, Charlie thought. He stood, dropped the empty bag and cup into a trash can, and lifted his arms wide. The spontaneous move cleared his mind. He made a tentative dance step, arms high, and then a spin, unfurling.

5 Manzanita

Herb came back from the Air Force with a wife and a young daughter. Elena was new to the mountains, new to snow, but she was willing. Three or four years later even Mary Lou would put in a good word. “They’re happy,” she’d say. “Elena’s a quiet one, a little on the thin side, maybe, but she keeps a good house. Manzanita is *so* cute.” Mary Lou and Herb had split up after high school, but she still held a certain primacy in the town view.

Herb worked hard and developed a beer belly. Elena tended a large garden. Her dinners had a southwestern flair. Manzanita grew, filled out, and became a cheerleader, mostly to please Herb. She got her share of attention from the boys, but she stayed unattached. The town tried and failed to settle on a preferred mate.

One day she was gone. “Out west,” Herb said and changed the subject, hurt in his eye.

“Is puzzle,” Manzanita said.

“What is, Baby?”

“Happiness.”

Rod reacted the way men usually did. He brushed his blonde hair back and let her in on the secret. “It’s right here,” he said,

meaning—with him. Behind him, the sun was dropping below the sea horizon.

“This isn’t going to work,” she said. “I’m sorry.”

“What do you mean?”

“You and me, I mean. Don’t worry—you won’t be hurting for a date.”

“Goddamnit, Nita.”

“It’s not your fault,” she said.

“What are you looking for, anyway?” Blood rose in his cheeks.

This one wasn’t dangerous; he was too soft. “I’ll tell you when I find it.” Him, she meant. Annoyance constricted her voice. Why did they always want to own her?

“You never really liked me,” he said. He stood and threw a bill on the table. “See you around.” She handed the twenty to him.

“I’ll get it. You’ve been wronged.”

Indecision flickered in his face. If he took the money, he was a jerk. If he didn’t take it, he was a jerk. Less of a jerk. He laid it on the table and left. “Bye, Rod,” she said to his back. He waved one hand and merged into the flow of men moving away from her.

She made a quick calculation and ordered another glass of wine. The server cutey had a neat short haircut. Things would be easier, or simpler, if I weren’t so damned straight, she thought. Cookie in Seattle. What a disaster. Poor Cookie had done her best. Nothing there. Just not wired that way.

She sipped wine and watched vast bands of cirrus turn pink and slowly darken. The farther west she went, the better the sunsets. But she needed a passport to go any farther. She wasn’t ready for Japan; Hawaii was far enough. Anyway, Japan was the land of the *rising* sun. I am not a morning person, she said to the beach. The last banner of crimson disappeared into the night, and she gave herself to the sound of waves crashing softly

along the beach. In her imagination, an iron bound locked chest rolled back and forth with the surf, sometimes floating, sometimes stranded on the sand.

“Would you like another?” She shook her head, no. There was the check to pay, the walk home, tomorrow.

The studio was stuffy when she got back. She slid open the lanai door and let cool air fill the room. Eight stories down, a few cars moved slowly along Ala Wai Boulevard. House lights glowed high on the mountain. The lanai was Manzanita’s special place. She spent hours rubbing in Japanese skin conditioner, brushing her long black hair, looking up at the mountain ridges, letting the tension from work drain away. Wherever she worked, her friends invited her to share their apartments, split the rent. She could never say no without feeling snobbish. Still, she said no. It was expensive, living alone, but worth it. She saw enough of people in the restaurants.

She slept late, waking from a vivid dream where she had climbed a ladder to the top of the iron bound chest. She brushed sand from a shipping label that was unreadable except for, *Mill Valley, California*, and a line of larger letters that spelled: *Thousand Steps*.

She took a cup of coffee to the lanai and stretched her legs. Mill Valley. Where was it? Her parents had mentioned it. She remembered being in the bathtub when she was little. Her mother was washing her hair.

“Where did we come from, Mama?”

“The Thousand Steps.”

“Where’s that?”

“Far away.” Mama was sad. “Never mind, I made a cherry pie for dessert.” Manzanita could feel her mother’s fingers on her scalp.

Must have been fifteen years ago. She sipped coffee and watched clouds billow over the ragged mountains. So white

against the green. Expanding. Like bread rising. Her mother never mentioned The Thousand Steps again, and Manzanita never asked; she didn't want the sadness.

The decision found words: I don't want to stay here. It's great, but—no future. Next month. I'm leaving next month when the lease ends. She shook her head. It was a good thing that she'd signed for six months, not a year. Is this crazy? It was too late for it to be crazy. Where is Mill Valley?

She looked it up in the bookstore at the shopping center. It was in California, just north of San Francisco. "I'm psyched," she said at the restaurant, "I've never seen San Francisco." Her grandfather in Seattle talked about working on the fishing boats out of San Francisco Bay. He hadn't said anything bad about the area. Her mother hadn't talked much about that period in her life. The family had moved around, following the work.

Manzanita saved as much money as she could and packed two boxes—kitchen stuff, an iron, her radio, several sketch books, charcoal, pastels, and watercolors. She mailed the boxes to herself, care of general delivery in Mill Valley. Time accelerated as her flight approached; then it seemed to stop as she walked off the plane into the San Francisco terminal. At the baggage carousel, other passengers talked excitedly, friends and families together again. What am I doing here? she wondered. If she thought too much, she'd get scared; she collected her back pack and headed for the information desk.

San Francisco was pretty—sunny and hilly. The Golden Gate Bridge was spectacular, a high iron thread suspended between the bay and the Pacific. She found a bed and breakfast in Mill Valley, slept restlessly, and began to get organized in the morning. Usually, she looked for work first. But she wasn't sure that she wanted to stay. She decided to see if she could find out about the Thousand Steps, whatever they were.

"The Dipsea steps," her waitress said. "Must be the Dipsea

steps.” Manzanita followed directions and came to a set of wide wooden steps that started by the sidewalk and disappeared above her in thick greenery. Now what? She began climbing. Hundreds of feet higher, she looked up at a shaft of sunlight slanting through the trees to the steps. Someone was sitting in the dazzle. As she approached, she saw a middle aged man reading a book. He smiled at her and kept reading.

“Excuse me,” she said. “Are these the Thousand Steps?”

“Some call them that,” he said.

“Oh, good! My mom said we came from here.” He raised his eyebrows.

“Really? What’s your mom’s name?”

“Kelly. Elena Kelly.”

“We’ve been here three generations, four now. Don’t know any Kellys.” He looked at her more closely. “What’s your name?”

“Manzanita.” He closed his book.

“Elena,” he said. “Is Kelly your mom’s maiden name?”

“Cruz.”

He put the book down. “Elena Cruz,” he said. He looked much younger.

“Did you know her?”

“Yes. Manzanita! What a good name!”

“After the bush,” she said. “My mom says it’s strong and happy.”

“You look like Elena,” he said. “Dark. Intense. She was a little thinner than you.”

“She’s still thin.”

“So long ago,” he said. Manzanita, I am—Marcos DeLeon.” He stood. “I’d like to talk with you, but I have to make lunch for my mother. Are you staying in town? Would you have dinner with me tonight?”

She hesitated. “That would be so great!”

“How about The Dolphin at 6?”

“Sure. Where is it?”

“Right off Main Street. It’s easy to find.”

“O.K.”

“See you at 6, then.” He started toward a path that led to a house, barely visible through the leaves.

“Don’t forget your book.”

He came back for the book and left without saying anything.

Mama. He knows Mama. She climbed until she emerged on a road where she walked for an hour looking at sweeping slopes of grass, surf far below, the Pacific blue into the distance. On her way back down the stairs, she met several runners chugging upward, concentrating fiercely. The spot where she met Marcos seemed familiar, almost homey. She had an urge to sit there, but she continued down.

She had lunch, located The Dolphin, and returned to the B&B. She lay on the bed and wondered about Marcos. He had been kind, not coming on to her at all. Her best blouse needed ironing. She tried to remember which box the iron was in. At the post office she asked if she could leave one box until the next day. Half an hour later, she was back. “Wrong box,” she explained. “The iron’s in this one.” She carried it back to the B&B, spread a towel on the bureau, and ironed everything she had.

At 5:30, she put on silver earrings and a touch of eye shadow. She inspected her teeth and shook her head, watching her hair spread and settle on her shoulders. She had a wide mouth and a strong chin, a good tan from the islands. Not bad for having just gotten here, she thought.

Marcos was waiting at a table inside the restaurant. He stood to greet her. He seemed nervous.

“Do you drink wine?”

“Yes.”

“Red or white tonight?”

“Red.”

“Your mother brought you up right.”

“My father’s more of a beer drinker,” she said.

“Nothing wrong with that.” He ordered a pricey bottle of Rioja, and when the waiter had poured them each half a glass, they toasted her mother.

“So—how do you know her?”

Marcos adjusted his chair so that he could look at the water or at her. He fiddled with his wine glass.

“She worked for us,” he said. “I was in love with her.”

Manzanita’s eyes opened wider, even though she’d been expecting something like that because of the way he had acted earlier. “Worked for you?”

“In the house by the steps. Mother always had a maid.” The thought of her mother as a young woman, as a maid, sent small waves of shock and resentment through Manzanita. “She was beautiful, just like you. I knew there was something about you when I saw you this morning—the way you came up the steps.” He looked at the water, considering, and then back at her. He let out a deep breath. “I’m your father.”

Silence spread around them. She knew it was true. Not because there was any bad feeling at home or because of the unexplained tension that happened sometimes when friends of her parents were visiting, but because his eyes were quick like hers and because he was kind and lonely in the way she was—not blaming, just looking for a place to rest.

“What happened?”

“What happens?” he asked the bay. “Two people fall in love. They make each other happy. They don’t care. They are careless. And a good thing it is.” He drank and sighed. “I went to my parents when your mother told me she had missed a period. I said, ‘I need to talk to you about Elena.’

“‘We’ve been concerned,’ my mother said. ‘We’ve decided

to send you to your uncle's in Madrid before it's too late.'

"'It *is* too late,' I said.

"Mother ignored me. 'You can enroll in the university and pursue architecture if you still care to. We've spoken with Fernando. It's all arranged.'

"My father always sided with Mother. He knew which side his bread was buttered. But this one time, he said, 'Perhaps we should think this over.' He gave me the most sympathetic look. He was very sympathetic, my father, your grandfather.

"'Nonsense,' Mother said. 'These women are beautiful for a year, and then they are common. Our son will not be ensnared. You will go to Fernando's,' she said to me. 'Do not be concerned for Elena. *If* she is pregnant, we will see to her.'

"My father got another drink, and I was on my way to Madrid two days later. I tried to see your mother, but she was on a trip to see one of your relatives in Sacramento or somewhere. I wrote many times, but she only answered once. Don't worry about me, she said. You must live your life."

Manzanita made a small sound and lowered her eyes.

"My parents wouldn't talk about it," he said. "Years later, our lawyer told me what happened. We were buddies. We used to sail together. He was sent to offer money for an abortion, and your mother told him to go to hell. Said she'd have the baby under a manzanita bush if she had to. This morning, when you said your name was Manzanita, I saw your mother looking at me and my heart stopped."

"It's about time," Manzanita said.

"That my heart stopped?"

"No. I always knew something was strange. I just didn't know what it was." He was looking at her calmly, but his eyebrows were raised. She knew that what she said would be important.

He said, "You don't have to say anything. I'm sorry to have

shocked you,”.

She spoke slowly. “Now I have two fathers. A daddy and a father.”

Marcos smiled a half smile and said, “Tell me about your daddy.” She felt her heart twist at the longing in his voice. She straightened her chair and looked out at the bay as he had.

“His name is Herb. He’s a contractor. He’s big. He loves—” she began to break down. “Me and Mama.”

“I’m so glad,” Marcos said. “For you. For him. For your mother.” He was proud. She understood and felt herself aligning in the same direction, a natural shift that eased a tension of which she had hardly been aware. She would be grown up too.

“And you?” she asked. “What have you been doing?”

He told her about his twin sons and a marriage that hadn’t lasted. His wife lived across the bay in Burlington, married to an oral surgeon. “My father died years ago. Mother isn’t well. I moved in to help take care of her. I haven’t been much of a success, really.”

“Do you have a job?”

“I work for myself,” he said. “I make stained glass windows. I fix ’em. I make ’em.”

“I love to draw,” she said.

“I’m not surprised.”

And so the evening went. What he said was interesting, but the way he said things was more important. When it was time to say goodnight, he hugged her gently, with feeling. It was like a blessing, like being given back her virginity.

“*Que vaya bien*,” he said.

“*Egalmente*.” She walked away proudly, head high.

In the morning, she knew that she had to go home. She wrote a note to her father and mailed the two boxes to Broadkill. Except for a short visit one Christmas, she had been away four years.

It was foggy when the plane took off, but most of the flight was clear. The mountains passed below and then the plains and the green of the midwest. She and her father were alike in deep ways. The feeling was new and comforting. She didn't know what to do next, but she knew instinctively that it was going to take time to adjust.

Herb and Elena were waiting at the Albany airport. She and her mother had a long hug, and then Herb swept her up against him. Her breath went out and she began to cry.

"What's the matter, Pork Chop?" he said.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Tell you what?"

"About my father."

"Oh," he said. He drew her to him again and patted her back. "*I* wanted to be your daddy."

"You'll always be my daddy," she said. "But no more secrets. No more secrets!" Her hands flew out and pounded his chest.

"No more secrets," he said.

"It's my fault," her mother said. "I thought it would be better for you."

"It doesn't matter now, Mama," Manzanita said. It did matter, but they would get over it. The town helped, relieved to have Manzanita back for as long as she would stay and glad for Herb. He maybe should have married Mary Lou—opinion was divided—but he'd done his best. He deserved a little happiness.

6 Guayaquil

At the sound of wooden blocks struck together, Arthur adjusted his sitting position and emptied his mind. The echo diminished to a memory and changed to a tree. A palm tree. Not this again. An expanse of empty beach curved to a familiar headland. Sometimes his grandmother would appear, coming toward him on her fitness walk, legs moving quickly, scarcely bending at the knees, like the birds that chased and retreated at the water's edge. She never noticed him.

This morning Penn appeared, stepping from the water and approaching, his long thin body tanned ivory brown, his eyes blue-green, clear as a cat's. Things came easy to Penn. Arthur exhaled the past and inhaled it again. Not that way, he told himself. No struggle. Let it float away. He straightened and followed his breathing. Penn disappeared as casually as he had twenty years ago.

Arthur put his cheek against the palm tree. The bark was like cloth, raspy and flexible, wrapped around and around the heart of the tree. Someday, years of balmy weather would be violently interrupted. This tree, which grew in sand, would have to bend horizontal or be uprooted.

Arthur exhaled the satisfaction that attended this insight. No attachment.

When the blocks sounded again, he stood and walked with the others around the zendo, careful not to look at Martin for approval. He wasn't sure why Martin was hard on him. Martin was enlightened, but wisdom hadn't erased narrow lines in his face, resentful lines. Arthur was respected in the scientific community, well paid. Martin had been an insurance adjuster or something before he found his vocation. He had shaved his head, but the cheap haircut remained.

The blocks signalled and sitting resumed, the group settling into a shared breathing. A quiet euphoria rose and faded, replaced by an edgy pre-verbal clarity. Kwok! Over. Arthur re-joined the world of choice and demand. He felt that he was making progress.

"Excuse me." The elderly woman who had been directly in front of him as they walked around the room was blocking his way. "Are you Arthur Wells? Dr. Arthur Wells?"

"Why, yes." He raised his eyebrows modestly.

"Forgive me for intruding," she said. "My niece insisted that I ask. She saw you last week when she picked me up. She thinks she had a seminar with you once."

"Oh dear. I hope I wasn't difficult. What is your niece's name?"

"Pookie."

Arthur's mouth filled with the taste of anchovies.

"Pookie," he said. "Really? Your niece. Some time ago, I think." The woman waited. "Pookie, umm—her last name?"

"Willet, now. It *was* Kennecutt."

"Yes, of course! I remember now," Arthur said, falsely triumphant. "I thought she had great promise." He tossed his hands. "But—life—who knows?" He smiled acceptance.

"She married an idiot."

"Ah," Arthur said. She hadn't married Penn, at any rate.

"On the positive side, they have two wonderful children."

He was an only child and would never be an uncle. “Lucky Auntie,” he said. “Do give her my best. There’s biology and then there’s *biology*.”

“Yes,” she said. “Well, I must be going.” Arthur watched her leave, wishing for a drink of water. He was fifteen years older than Penn, and Penn was a lot older than Pookie; it was absurd to be jealous. They did make a handsome couple. At least they had the one time they’d driven by in an old Porsche with the top down—Penn talking, his head turned to Pookie. He was still youthful. If anyone could manage a relationship with a big age difference it would be Penn. No doubt he worked in a hospital or a clinic surrounded by women. I forgive myself for giving her a B, Arthur thought. It should have been a C, but he had been unnecessarily cold with her in class. Let it go.

He emerged from his thoughts, too late. “Chop wood, carry water,” Martin said and launched into an explanation of the latest fund drive.

“Of course,” Arthur said. “After the I.R.S., my gambling debts, the Sierra Club, and Psi Upsilon, you shall have everything.”

“Thank you, Arthur. We know we can count on you. You have been a great help to the zendo.”

“Chop wood, carry water,” Arthur said, unable to remember where he’d parked the Land Rover. He walked away trustingly and turned at the corner. There it was, by the bodega near the end of the block. He lowered the car windows and sat listening to mariachi music pouring from the store.

The beat was attractive, maddening. It made him want to be a part of things, to dance in the town square. He worked hard. But. He never had any—fun. The word caught in his throat, emerged, and hung before him like the coast of Antarctica. He gripped the steering wheel. Mother had been on him about that earlier. *You ought to go out and have a good time, Arthur. Never*

mind those science trips. Have fun! Mother specialized in good times. Her round of social events would drive him crazy. He was content to see her alone at their weekly breakfast. Quite content. In fact, meditation was helpful after breakfast with Mother. He remembered to exhale, and he loosened his grip on the wheel.

Trumpets blared above guitars. It was a sunny day, a good day to be outside. He started the car and drove away. When he reached the intersection where he normally turned toward home, he steered right and then impulsively left, veering back into the traffic going straight ahead. Someone leaned on his horn and passed him, too close. The driver turned his head. Arthur could see his mouth moving but couldn't hear the words. Fucking something something something. It hadn't been that dangerous. Amazing how people need to get angry and be righteous.

"Get a life," Arthur said. The man cut in front of him. A bumper sticker declared: "My Kid Beat Up Your Honor Student." I could knock him right off the road, Arthur thought. His mood brightened, and he floored the gas pedal. "Don't mess with honor students," he said, roaring past. He reached for the radio and found a Spanish music station.

Gambling debts—what a laugh. He had been to two conventions in Vegas and never gambled once. Give your money to a casino? Stupid. The flow of traffic carried him to the edge of the city. He kept going and then turned toward the mountains. The higher he drove, the better he felt. He had lived entirely in California except for business trips and visits to his father in Hawaii. His life spread out behind him, below him, as he climbed toward Nevada. He stopped for gas, looked at the stands of Douglas fir, and decided to spend the night in Tahoe.

He was pleased when he coasted into town. The lake was clear blue. The streets were impersonal and commercial; he had credit cards; he knew the rules. He signed for a room and

strolled down the main street, his small notebook and pen secure in his jacket pocket. The air was sharper. Winter was coming, very different up here. He looked around for a place to eat.

“Got any spare change?” The meaning of the words and the sound of the voice were like light blows to opposite sides of his head. He turned, disoriented. “Hey, Art,” Penn said.

“Is that you, Penn?” Arthur struggled to reconcile the young man in his mind with the man in front of him. Penn’s hair was thinning. He needed a shave.

“Indeed so. You are looking a bit crazed, Arthur. You need a drink to acclimatize.”

“I just got here.” Penn seemed to know that. “I—maybe you’re right. Will you join me?”

“I will.”

“Lead the way. It’s good to see you, Penn.” They sat at the end of a polished bar in one of the smaller casinos.

“Feels strange to sit on a bar stool,” Arthur said.

“You get used to it. As an ex-doc, let me toast your health.”

“Thank you. And yours.” There was a moment of silence—appreciation for the Glenlivet and a chance to think back.

“I’ve seen notice of you in the papers now and then,” Penn said. “Distinguished career and all that.”

“Same old stuff. I untangled a couple of mysteries about smells and flavors.”

“Chip off the old block. Your father was a biologist.”

“Still is,” Arthur said. “Marine. He got fish; I got plants.”

“Could make for conversation at a seafood place,” Penn said.

“If we ate out. If we talked.”

“I remember that trip we took to Hawaii. He didn’t say much. Nice guy, over on the windward side in—what was the name?”

“Lanikai.”

“Right, Lanikai.”

“So, what about you? I guess you gave up medicine.”

“Yeah. It was a cruise, learning, but when I got to doing it—I don’t know—all that misery. I ducked into management. That was worse. Boring. I chucked it for the business game, the market.” He paused. “You know how they used to say: sometimes you get the bear; sometimes the bear gets you.” He flashed the old Penn smile.

“Where are you living these days?”

“One of my buddies has a boat on the lake. He’s not using it right now.”

“Getting cool, isn’t it?”

“Just right,” Penn said, “for another couple of months.” Arthur didn’t want to ask: then what?”

“Then what?” Penn said. He finished his drink. “It’s O.K. to ask. I don’t know.” He leaned toward Arthur. “Do me a favor, Arthur—try saying, out loud: I don’t know.” Arthur hesitated. “Come on now.”

“I don’t know,” Arthur said and found himself smiling.

“You see,” Penn said. “It’s not a bad state.” They had another round.

“I saw you once—driving by with one of my students.”

“Pookie,” Penn said. “I should have gotten in touch, but I thought you’d disapprove.”

“She wasn’t the brightest,” Arthur said. “Attractive, though.”

“Pookie could drink! Loved to swim, good dancer. How’s *your* love life? Any little Arthurs around?”

“No.”

“Me neither. I did have some step-kids for a while.” Penn’s expression lifted. “That was a good thing.”

“When was that?”

“Let’s see—about four years ago, now.”

“Where are they?”

“Oakland. Sergio, Consuela, and Esperanza. What a crew.”

“And their mother?”

“Gorgeous. Constanza. I met her on a bus in Guayaquil.”

“Guayaquil?”

“I was just back from the Galapagos. Remember, we talked about going there sometime.”

“Blue-footed boobies,” Arthur said.

“Exactly,” Penn said. “And the tortoises. Amazing! I was in the money. I took a couple of months to go down and check out some of the places we lived when I was a kid. My Spanish came back. Had a good time. Anyway, I was on a city bus when Constanza got on with the kids. The bus was full, so I gave her my seat. The kids were crawling all over her. She had that long black hair, you know, red cheeks, bright eyes, one of those solid bodies for the ages—we started joking around, made a date to meet at a park the next day. Have you been there?”

“Never have.”

“You can imagine—hot, steamy, crowded, flowers everywhere. We had fun, the five of us. She turned out to be smart, full of life. She’d just come from Quito and was trying to find work and a place to live. She was staying with a cousin and running out of money.”

“The father was in Quito?”

“Yes. A hell of a thing. He was from a family that had been there for centuries. I guess he and Constanza got into it when they were very young. The family allowed her to stay on one of their properties, paid all the bills. She kept having babies. The situation changed, and she was let go. I don’t know whether the guy was tired of her or whether he married or took a position in the family empire that wouldn’t allow the arrangement or what.”

“Terrible,” Arthur said.

“Constanza was sad, but she wasn’t bitter. She loved him.

She was from a poor family, and she had a good life for a while—that's how she looked at it. When she told me the story I thought, for once in your life, be useful. I married her. In a couple of months we were all set up in California, kids in school learning English, the whole trip."

"Incredible," Arthur said.

"It was fine for a few years. I got restless. The kids kept us going, but the relationship was out of gas. I didn't know what to do. I had cash flow problems. But I got lucky and made a good call in the market. I figured I'd better change things while I could, so I told Constanza that we were going to take a vacation in Quito. Took her and the kids, and, as soon as we got there, I explained that I had to leave the marriage. I gave her all the money I had, enough for her to buy a house in Ecuador and get started. You know what she said? 'No way! We're going back to California.' She took the money, and two weeks later she and the kids were back in the city. She rented a place in Oakland. Still there, I'm pretty sure."

"Are you in touch?"

"Not really. She's got a new life. It would confuse the kids. I worry about them sometimes. Not Constanza, she's strong, good looking—she'll do fine. But the kids—I used to take Esperanza to school on a bike, pulled her behind me on a little cart." He looked at Arthur and shook his head. "Maybe later on, when I get ahead a little bit."

"They're better off for what you did."

"I hope so. I guess so." He held up his glass. "Another?"

"Let's get something to eat," Arthur said. Penn pulled out his wallet. "On me," Arthur said.

"Good man. You got something to write on?" He took a worn business card from his wallet and copied into Arthur's notebook an address written on the back of the card. And the names: Constanza, Sergio, Consuela, and Esperanza. "It's a

hell of a favor to ask," he said, but could you check up on them sometime, for me." His voice dropped. "See if they need anything?" He looked up helplessly.

"I will."

It was as close as they had come to acknowledging the bond between them. Arthur took a deep breath. "How will I reach you?"

"I'll look you up at the university. You'll be there—adding to the body of scientific knowledge."

"I suppose so," Arthur said. "Trying anyway."

"Good old Art, slow and steady wins the race."

They had a couple of steaks, split a Caesar salad, and drank wine while they talked about old times and the state of the world. Penn explained craps and convinced Arthur to try his luck. People who play with me get the rolls, he told Arthur. They bought two hundred dollars worth of chips. Penn insisted that Arthur place the bet, but they waited until the dice were passed to a middle-aged blonde. "She's lucky," Penn said.

The dice skittered and rolled to a seven. Loud cheers. Arthur was forty dollars richer. They played for nearly an hour. Arthur was instructed to bet lightly unless Lucky was throwing. He was six hundred dollars ahead when the food and drink and the long day began to get to him. "Time to turn in," he told Penn.

"Where you staying?"

"Harrah's."

"How about coffee in the morning?" They arranged to meet in the café at ten.

"Here," Arthur handed Penn his chips. "A stake."

"Right on. What do you say, Lucky, want to look around a little?" Lucky shrugged agreeably and Penn put his arm around her shoulders. "You get half the winnings in the morning," he said to Arthur.

"No need," Arthur said. "It's on the house."

“No, no. See you at ten.” He and Lucky walked away. Penn looked back once and smiled. Same old Penn.

The night air was clear and crisp. People on the sidewalks seemed to be enjoying themselves. Arthur went to his room and fell asleep immediately, but he did not sleep well. He kept waking and seeing Penn’s smile—amused, helpless, oddly gallant. He had a premonition that he might not see him again.

In the morning, Arthur waited an hour, but Penn didn’t show up. He walked back to Harrah’s and checked out. The desk clerk gave him five casino silver dollars—“Our way of saying thank you, Sir.”

Arthur stopped at a slot machine near the exit and dropped the dollars in, pulling the long handle and waiting after each one. He looked down the rows of machines at other gamblers with their arms in the same position. Sometimes you win; mostly you lose. In the end you lose.

Sure, you can quit when you’re ahead. But then you’re out of the game; you’re not playing. That’s what I’ve done, he thought. But he would lose too, in the end. Maybe the best strategy was to pass along the winnings, if you had any, the way he had last night. Penn had done that in Guayaquil—a good thing, as he’d put it—although he hadn’t finished the job. Probably wouldn’t, either, the way his life was going. Arthur felt for his notebook and Constanza’s address. That was at least something he could do, for himself and for Penn—he could help those kids.

Bells and sirens exploded in the next aisle. Jackpot. An elderly woman stared at flashing lights, bemused, a bit bewildered. Arthur realized that tears were running down his face, that he was both sad and grateful, and that it was time to leave.

7 Savage Eden

Tim Pattison liked to paint sky. He lived outside Chicago on land that had been flattened by corn fields and suburban development; he preferred looking up. On his 52nd birthday he quit his job at an architectural firm. Two months later, having sold his house and sent a large check to his daughter, he flew to Hawaii.

He explored the islands for several weeks before renting a room in Hawi, on the northern tip of the Big Island. He bought a Jeep and settled into a routine—coffee in the morning at Nanbu Courtyard in the neighboring village of Kapa’au and then painting for most of the day, using the Jeep as a traveling studio.

The Courtyard was a patch of grass and flowering bushes surrounded by low yellow wooden buildings. A dozen tables were scattered beneath awnings and back porch roofs. A lane led to a side street; otherwise, entry and exit was through the businesses fronting the main street—a small café, an art gallery, and a bookstore. A window in a rear building advertised Chinese traditional medicine. One Saturday, as he walked across the grass with his coffee and sticky bun, a tall woman at a nearby table said, “We haven’t seen you before.” Dark eyes. Tanned olive skin.

“I’ve only been here a month.”

“Oh. What brings you to Kohala?”

“Didn’t want to be in Chicago. The midwest. Too flat.”

“Not flat here.” She waited, sizing him up.

“I’m a painter,” he explained.

“Ah,” she said, “one dreamer.”

“I’m sorry. I’m not used to talking so early.” He took a large mouthful of bun.

“No need talk.” She gathered her cup and napkin and carried them into the café. She was slim for her age—late forties, fifty? *The Beauty of Nanbu Courtyard*, he labeled her.

A small cardinal with a bright red head, gray body, and black tail flitted about searching for crumbs. Cardinals mate for life. So do some people, he thought. For better or worse. Slack key guitar music came though the door of the café, a rolling bass with arpeggios that fell like sun on fields or water tumbling down a cliff. Get the paint on the canvas, he told himself. Suzannah, the owner of the café, smiled at him as he left. “I’ll be back,” he said.

He drove up the mountain road and stopped on top of the ridge. From there, the land dropped three thousand feet over humps and swales to a semi-arid coastline of black lava. Horses and cattle grazed in distinct groups. Blue water stretched to a distant horizon. He set up his easel and sketched the main outlines of the land. By lunchtime, he had failed completely to catch the feel of the place, ordered and primitive at the same time. His sky was artificially dramatic. His cows looked like bushes. He drove down to Hawi, discouraged.

He ate a slice of pizza at the bakery, went back to his room, cleaned his brushes, and took a nap. When he woke up, he stepped outside. Across the road, three people were doing T’ai Chi in the shade of a banyan tree. Their bodies turned and dipped, arms slowly advancing and retreating. Aerial roots hung like brown strings from an expanse of dark green leaves. He got

a drawing pad and a pencil. In two minutes he accomplished more than he had all morning.

Joe Rodriguez, a young guy at the café, had talked about a surfing spot by a lighthouse, “Only kama’ainas there.” When he asked Joe what kama’ainas were, Joe said, “Locals—people long time on the land.”

He drove out of Hawi, past Kapa’au, and turned down a blacktop road that matched Joe’s description. After a mile, it changed to dirt. He followed it to a gate where he left the car and continued on foot. The road, deeply rutted, descended through pastures and hedgerows to a grove of ironwoods on a narrow peninsula. Waves rolled against a forty-foot headland, a soft black color speckled with bits of green and brown where life had taken hold.

A cylinder of white cement, thirty feet tall, overlooked ocean unbounded to the north and east. Twenty miles to the northwest, Haleakala rose ten thousand feet above Maui, a sister swimmer in the Pacific. The coast was rocky and rugged. Inland were green fields and trees, darker green mountains, and a single main road with a few clusters of plantation cottages, mostly hidden. The wind, funneled through the V-shaped gap between the islands, was strong and insistent. The trees were permanently bent, as though bowing westward.

No one was around. A few cans and bottles were heaped near one end of a gray wooden bench that had been knocked together out of scrap wood. Tim was uneasy. Something savage roamed in Eden. He walked back to the Jeep and drove to his favorite sunset spot on the ridge. The darkening mass of Haleakala rose above flying cumulus clouds that changed from white to pale gold to a pink bronze, to lavender, and finally to dove gray, touches of fire at the tops. Night fell abruptly; twenty minutes and the main show was over. He had tried to capture it in one painting after another, one failure after another. Too

pretty. No movement. The land beneath was lifeless, dragging down his best skies.

A week later, *The Beauty* was sitting in the courtyard when he arrived. She looked at him carefully. "Good morning. I saw you painting by the side of the road."

"Trying, anyway."

"Are you a serious painter?"

"I've been doing it for thirty years. I'm not famous, if that's what you mean."

"You don't look famous."

"Thanks." His head swung around to the other tables. "How about if I sit down?"

"Sure." She gestured toward the empty chair with one hand, palm upward. She had wide wrists and long fingers.

"I'm Tim. Tim Pattison."

"Maria Soares." Her eyes were large below a rounded forehead. Glistening black hair spread to her shoulders in tight curls. She wore lipstick that was unapologetically red and alive.

"Nice name."

"Maria Ka'ipolani Soares, actually."

"Better yet. My middle name is Scott. I'll trade you."

"My grandmother wouldn't like that."

"You still have your grandmother. That's good. My grandparents are all gone."

"No, she died right after I was married."

"Oh."

"Too young. She was waiting for grandchildren."

"I'm sorry," he said. "Too bad for you and your children."

"My daughter," she said. "Yes. You have any kids?"

"A girl. A woman," he corrected. "Married in North Carolina."

"My daughter is married, too." Maria sighed. "I miss her. She's on the mainland. She's a photographer."

“What’s her name?”

“Colleen.” That surprised him. “I married an Irish tenor,” she said, forgiving herself.

“Well,” Tim said, “I married a Kansas cornflower—blond, blue-eyed, heart as wide as the plains.”

Maria laughed. “So, what happened?”

“Things went along O.K. No complaints. Then, one morning, she told me that she hated our life and was going back to Lawrence. Basically, I bored her to death. If I wasn’t working, I was off somewhere painting. I don’t blame her. I bore the crap out of myself. God, these lilikoī sticky buns! World class!”

“Poor Cornflower,” Maria said.

“She’s fine. Remarried. Reclaimed her social position in Lawrence. It’s a university town, lots going on.”

“I’ve been in Lawrence.”

“What! Oh? What do you do?”

“I make guitars.”

“No shit?”

“I used to play the cello. I still do, but not professionally any more. My uncle, he makes guitars and ukuleles. He taught me.”

“I thought ukuleles were all made in China or somewhere.”

“Not the good ones, da kine—koa wood. They used to be made from turtle shell backs. You know what my uncle does when he make one and the sound not right?”

“What?”

“He smash ’em with a sledgehammer.”

“All right! Do you play guitar, too?”

“A little. I grew up with slack key.”

“I love slack key,” he said.

“I cannot play like my uncles.”

“What got you interested in the cello?”

“We had a good music teacher in high school. I was a music

major at U.H. Manoa.”

“I can’t play anything. No talent.”

“You’d be surprised what you can do,” she said, “when you open yourself.” Her voice deepened on the word, *open*.

“I’d be glad just to make a decent painting. This island is the most beautiful place I’ve ever seen. I left everything to come here—job, house, the works. And I can’t paint it. Nada. Worthless stuff, except for one little drawing in Hawi.” He stopped. “I’m not complaining. I had to change. Start over. Paint what’s beautiful.”

“Beauty can be deceiving,” she said. She was completely present, calm, nothing left behind. If she were lonely—so be it; to be vulnerable was to be alive. He was staring.

“Time to be going,” she said.

“Oh.”

She stood and paused. “I can show you a place if you’d like. But you have to meet me here early—on Friday, six o’clock.”

“Six in the morning? That’s early. O.K., I’d like that. Can do. Six o’clock, Friday.” She looked over his head as though consulting someone and then looked down, pleased. She nodded and left with long definite strides.

He got nowhere with his painting that day and the next. He thought about writing to friends, but what would he say? *The Big Island is spectacular. My work is pretty good for a fourteen year old. Forget it. Better to send a pineapple or macadamia nuts at Christmas.*

On Friday, he bought breakfast to go at the Kohala Diner and waited by the Nanbu Courtyard in the gray dawn light. The cloud tops were pink above the mountain. Maria stopped in a white Toyota pickup.

“Morning,” he said, crossing the street.

“Good morning.”

“Good thing the Kohala Diner opens early,” he said, holding

half a fried egg sandwich in one hand, coffee in the other. “You want some?”

“I ate already.” She drove out of the village toward Pololu, the wild valley at the end of the road.

“Where are we going?”

“A special place. Every year I go to honor my grandfather’s birthday.”

She parked a quarter of a mile from the trail that led down into Pololu. She took a day pack from the back of the truck and climbed over a gate.

They walked in red dirt wheel tracks past watchful cows and calves, higher and higher. Forty-five minutes later, they stopped and looked back at a shoulder of Haleakala, scattered clouds, an isolated rain shower far out to sea. He shook his head. “Too much. The higher you go, the bigger the ocean.”

“So beautiful, early,” Maria said. She turned and pointed to a line of trees at the edge of the field. They went through a small iron gate and followed a level trail that wound in and out of narrow gulches eroded into the steep valley wall. The bottom was a thousand feet below. They came to a larger gulch where water cascaded through overhanging bamboo and under a wooden bridge. He stopped on the bridge and read names scratched into a square of tin nailed to a timber.

BLD K. HINOKAWA
 HELP T HIDANI
 D TAKAHASHI
 N ITO
 L SHITAKI
 JULY 20 1922

“They used this trail to maintain the ditch.”

“The ditch?”

“The Kohala ditch. Water for the cane fields. They dug it all by hand.”

“Where is it?”

“It’s in a tunnel, here. Some places the water is in flumes, over gulches; some places—right through the mountain.”

“I didn’t know.”

“Where I saw you painting on the mountain road? Just below there, the road crosses the ditch.”

“I thought that was a stream.”

“You ever see a stream go across a hill?” She laughed.

“Good point.”

The sides of the valley became increasingly steep and the trail narrower. Half an hour later, he looked up to see a waterfall dropping five hundred feet down a sheer green cliff. He stopped, amazed. The trail edged along the cliff and disappeared behind the water, emerging on the other side, following the opposite wall. The trail was less than three feet wide, less than two in stretches where the lava rock had crumbled or been washed out.

He looked past his feet into the emptiness and felt dizzy. Maria opened her pack and began placing things on a small rock shelf in the cliff behind them. “Here you are, Grandpa. Good Portugee sausage. Rice balls.” She unwrapped the food onto a wooden plate and filled three small wooden cups from a pint bottle of rum. She put one cup by the plate and handed one to him.

“What I do now is sing *Happy Birthday* and then I drink and throw the cup for him.” She faced the valley and sang: “Happy Birthday to you.” He joined in.

“Happy Birthday to you.

“Happy Birthday, dear Grandpa,

“Happy Birthday to you.”

She held up her cup, drank, drew back her arm and threw the cup high in the air. He swallowed his rum and hurled his cup near hers. The cups tumbled and fell, down and down. No sound.

“Now I go behind the water,” she said. “Do you want to come?”

“I don’t know. My eyes go out over the edge—it’s like there’s nothing under me. I think I’ll stay here.”

She walked carefully to the falls and disappeared behind them.

White water, green cliff, blue sky. The air was soft and clear. He smelled guavas. A butterfly flew out over the edge of the cliff and descended casually. The rum was hot in his throat and stomach. If he took two steps forward he would die.

Maria appeared from behind the waterfall as freshly as though she had just been born. She waved. He waved back and watched her move toward him. When she reached him, she bent over, closed her pack, and lifted it to her shoulders.

“Have to go—must work. Aloha, Grandpa,” she called. “I love you.” She blew two kisses into the valley, looked back at the offering, and walked away.

When they came to the wooden bridge, they stopped in the middle.

“Why do you come here—to this place—for your grandfather?”

“He died here, we think. We never found his body. Only his horse came back.” Her face relived the shock, and Tim put his hand on her arm for a moment. “Other men have fallen. Horses, mules, too. Our ancestors lived in the valley more than one thousand years before the British came. How many fell?”

“How old were you when he didn’t come back?”

“Nine. Strange thing was—the next day was Grandpa’s birthday. I was going to sing him a song. He was always sweet to me.”

Tim shook his head. He looked down at the bridge and at the names of the men who had built it, all dead now. He saw the men, indistinctly, and then he saw Maria step from behind the

waterfall and her grandfather plummeting down. Their bodies merged and faded into the green cliff. He understood all at once. “I see it.” His eyes were wide open. “The land—the land is alive! It breathes us in and out, you, me, the butterflies, the trees, the cows.”

“The aina,” she said. “Yes.” She glanced over his head and smiled as she had in the Nanbu Courtyard. “Maybe you meet my uncles.”

8 What's Ugly Cannot Last

Porteous Clancy was looking for a cab, but when the #18 stopped in front of him, he thought he might as well take the bus. He sat behind the driver, across from a blind woman holding a white cane. Her head was high and her shoulders straight. She wore a plain short-sleeved dress. Farther back, a baby in pink howled with frustration as two teenagers tried half-heartedly to quiet her.

Sugar, he thought. They took the easy way an hour ago and now look, I mean, listen. The mother was barely old enough to go out on a date, let alone raise a baby. Behind them, a stout man with red cheeks stared forward. A man with a hard face dozed, head against a window.

The bus bounced and jolted along First Avenue, passing Federal Army & Navy Surplus. He'd wanted to go there for a long time but had held back, feeling that he didn't belong there, that he would look ridiculous.

The baby changed pitch, picked it up a notch. Nobody said it would be easy, Honey. He remembered John Lennon's line: "*Christ you know it ain't easy ... living in the Amsterdam Hilton ...*" Now there was a complaint.

The blind woman was listening to the baby with an expression of disapproval. Her face was sensitive, prim, unlined, un-

used. Her mouth was wide and level, lips inward. No kids probably. All that love—where to put it? Tucked against the seat beneath her legs was a folding stool and what looked like a music case made of cardboard. Maybe she played on the street somewhere.

His eyes traveled up along the cane and along her forearm. A half inch strip of thick dark hair grew from her wrist to her elbow. It was shocking, feral. He looked away and then back. She couldn't see him staring. The hair contradicted her neat, somewhat Christian, appearance. Her expression seemed to shift in his direction, though nothing in her face moved.

The baby caught its breath with a series of shorter cries, was handed from one lap to the other, and howled again. Porteous leaned forward, his elbows on his knees. He began to sing in a low voice, "*Hush little baby, don't you cry ...*" The cries, in the aisle between Porteous and the blind woman, were tempered by his singing. "*Papa's going to buy you a mocking bird ...*" He thought he saw the woman's expression soften.

The bus stopped and the teen-agers got off, one of them hauling the baby like a bag of groceries. The blind woman faced straight ahead. Porteous conducted a silent conversation with her about the resilience of babies. They did, mostly, manage to grow up in spite of their surroundings. But how thoughtless of him. She knew all about adversity.

In the center of Ballard, he followed her off the bus and found himself standing beside her at a traffic light. "Would you like a hand with that case?"

"That's kind of you. I'll manage. Thank you." She did not turn her head. Her voice was throaty and practical, midwestern.

"O.K."

The light changed. Porteous crossed the street ahead of her, stepped into a store entrance, and watched her walk by, arms full, head up. He recrossed the street and bought a bottle of

Pinot Noir to bring with him to Jack's.

Several blocks down Ballard Avenue, he rang and waited until the door opened. "Jacko!"

"Porteous, punctual as ever," Jack was short and square with a trim Van Dyke beard and deep set brown eyes. His voice was mellow over a gravelly undertow.

Porteous handed him the wine.

"Ah." Jack read the label. "Fine."

"Supposed to live longer if you drink Pinot Noir," Porteous said, "more resveratrol or something."

"We probably shouldn't wait," Jack said. Porteous sat in a rattan armchair in the living room while Jack brought glasses and a corkscrew. Late afternoon sun filtering through hanging bougainvillea cast an intricate pattern on the sounding board of a grand piano and glowed in the Persian carpet.

"Damned pleasant in here, I must say."

Jack poured. "Something to be said for staying put. *Salud*. So, how are the ill-gotten gains?"

"I've avoided the recent carnage," Porteous said.

"I expected as much. Engaging your—attention—has been one of my happier decisions."

"Yes," Porteous said. "I thought I'd check to see whether you are still comfortable with your conservative / aggressive balance."

"What is your opinion?"

"Times are changing. I'd favor a small shift toward the conservative, say another ten percent. Nothing abrupt, a few moves as prices warrant."

"Very good." Jack stretched his legs. "Times *are* changing. Not for the better. How's your love life?"

"I had to run for it the other day in the Eliot Bay Bookstore. A tall thin woman was glowing at me. I suppose I reminded her of someone who had once been kind."

“More likely your blue eyes, the gray at the temples. Really, Porteous—you should go on offense. A good attack is the best defense, anyway. More fun.”

“Had a good attack lately, have you?”

“Quite successful,” Jack said. “A redhead with a clothing boutique, absolutely enthralled with making money, works all the time.”

“I took the bus over,” Porteous said. “I saw the damnedest woman.” He described the blind woman.

“Careful,” Jack said. “Passion. The exotic. Storms at sea.”

“Yes.”

“I was once unaccountably attracted to a woman with a back problem. Very bright, she was. I tried to make things right for her. Can’t do it.” He added, “Much as you’d like to.”

“No,” Porteous agreed.

“And there’s the work that must get done.” Jack had been writing a book about Chopin for decades.

“Yes.”

“If one lives long enough,” Jack said. “Thank God for resolve—all.” He drank with pleasure.

Porteous took a cab home. He’d given up his office and now worked at home. He had never had more than two dozen clients; how many Jacks could you deal with on a regular basis? He liked Jack, and his clients were all different, really. But it was still he who adjusted to them, not the other way around. Better to stay small. He made enough money. The woman on the bus could live for a year on what he made in a few weeks. He could see her clearly across the bus aisle. She affected him strangely; he had never sung in public that he could remember.

He stayed up late watching the Mariners, checked the Asian markets, and went to bed.

Two days later, he yielded to an impulse and waited an hour and a half in Ballard at the stop where he and the blind woman

had gotten off the bus. He was about to give up when she arrived. He crossed the street beside her without saying anything and then followed her along an avenue and into a service alley that ran between rows of houses facing opposite sides of the block. He thought he saw her open a gate five or six houses down, but his view was obscured by overhanging trees and hedges. A dog barked excitedly and then was quiet.

“Time for the old stalker to go home,” he said. For much of that evening, he saw her walking, now slower, now a little faster, up the gradual hill beyond Ballard, no different—but for the cane—than anyone else. Her dress was loose, ginger colored, similar to the white one she wore the first time he saw her. Worn running shoes. Unfashionably long socks. She carried the stool and the case under one arm. Once, she rested against a stone wall, placing the stool and case on top of the wall and leaning the cane next to her. She crossed her arms and tilted her face slightly toward the sky.

That was the image that kept coming back to him: the woman resting against the wall. She looked grateful, almost happy.

The next day, after lunch, he again got on the #18, feeling like a dog making his rounds of the neighborhood. In Ballard, he bought a cup of coffee and waited near the bus stop. The cup was warm in his hand, reassuring; it explained his presence.

When the bus stopped and the woman stepped down to the sidewalk, it seemed natural to move beside her at the traffic light.

“Are you following me?” His mouth opened.

“Uh, yes—please don’t be alarmed.”

“The man on the bus,” she said, “the singer who offered to carry my case.”

“Yes,” Porteous said. “How did you know I was following you?”

“You have a nice smell—old-fashioned.”

“Bay rum,” Porteous said.

“What do you want?” The light changed and they crossed.

“I don’t know.” She was silent. “Would you mind if I walked with you, as far as the wall where you stop?”

“Only to the wall.” She handed him the cardboard case and kept the stool.

“Thank you,” Porteous said, “for not being frightened.”

“God works in mysterious ways.”

“True.” He wasn’t entirely happy with this answer. “I’m Porteous Clancy.”

“You do not know God, Mr. Clancy?”

“Porteous, please.” He considered while they walked. “Not by name,” he said.

“God has many names.”

“Perhaps you will introduce us.” Her head dropped, and sadness crossed her face like a cloud. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it like that.”

She looked up, cheerful again. “I feel that you have faith. Who do you believe in?”

“Ichiro,” Porteous said.

“Ichiro? The baseball player?”

“Right fielder for the Mariners.”

“This is wonderful. I knew it.”

“Knew what?”

“That you had faith. Pastor Murch watches baseball on the TV.” She skipped ahead, pleased, and stumbled on a lifted edge of pavement, falling heavily to her knees and dropping the stool.

“Are you all right?” Porteous bent over her and touched her arm. She took a breath and got to her feet, moving slightly away from him.

“I am fine. That was careless.” He picked up the stool. “We are almost to the wall,” she said.

“I’ve got the stool.”

“I knew that was there. I wasn’t paying attention.” She took a deeper breath and walked steadily to the resting place. “Would you put the things here?” She patted the wall. Porteous balanced the case on top of the stool.

“Are you sure you’re O.K.?”

“Yes. It was nothing.” He felt that she wanted to be alone, but he couldn’t keep from asking her about herself. She was from Madison, Wisconsin. She lived with Pastor Murch, his family, and several children who had been abandoned. She cooked and cleaned. Most days she sang on the street, accepting donations for the church. She put her hand on the cardboard case. “I bring the autoharp for accompaniment.”

“I wondered what that was.”

She straightened. “I must be going. Bless you, Porteous Clancy.”

“Would you come to a baseball game with me?” he said quickly.

She smiled and shook her head, no. “I have to work.”

“It *would* be work. I will make a contribution to the church and you can spread the word at Safeco Field—hand out brochures or whatever. I’ll help. It would have to be soon, though. There aren’t many home games left.”

“I’ve never been to a baseball game.”

“I need to find out when,” Porteous said. “I’ll check tonight. Can I call you?”

She hesitated and decided. “It would be better if I called you.” He told her his number, asked if he should write it down, then realized that she couldn’t see it if he did. “I’ll remember,” she said.

She turned, and he walked in the opposite direction so that she would know that he wasn’t watching or following her. His mind spun. He needed to find tickets. They were going to be expensive at this late date. He rode the bus home feeling friendly

toward the other passengers.

The next evening she called, and, after some persuasion, agreed to meet him at Safeco Field. On the morning of the game, it was raining lightly, but it cleared before noon. The dome was open when he arrived.

She was already there, standing to one side of the crowd, holding her cane lightly, a small open bag by her feet. "Hi," he said. "Good to see you."

"Hello."

"Where did you get the Mariners hat?"

"Pastor Murch gave it to me."

"Excellent." The crowd nearest the entrance was dividing into lines that filed past ticket takers. "We have to go inside, one at a time, and find our seats. How shall we do this?"

"Stay in front of me or beside me. I'll know when you're stopping or changing direction." She agreed to let him carry the bag, and they walked inside, moving deliberately, her hand touching his back or arm occasionally. Her expression remained calm when people bumped into her. Sometimes they apologized when they noticed her cane. She would nod and smile, a fresh smile each time.

At the top of their section, he stopped by the steep concrete stairs. About 20 or 25 steps, nothing to hang on to, he told her. She held the back of his arm with her free hand, and they descended slowly. After the first steps, they found a rhythm, a careful dance to the noisy music of the crowd, the shouts and greetings, the cries of, "Hey, get your cold beer." The plastic seats were more comfortable than he remembered.

"I don't know much about baseball," she said. "Pastor Murch has explained it, somewhat. One team hits while the other fields, and then they switch."

"Right," Porteous said. "The ball is small. The pitcher throws it really hard, almost too fast to see. I should have gotten

a ball, damn.”

“I know about the ball. The boys have one at home. So smooth, but you can hold it easily. I like the stitches that keep it together.”

Porteous explained his contribution idea—\$200 plus \$50 a run.

“How exciting! The church can do so much with the money.”

“We’ll hope for lots of home runs.”

“Those are the big hits,” she said.

“All the way into the stands. Don’t worry, nothing will come where we are, except maybe a foul ball.” He explained foul balls and promised to catch any that came close.

Oakland got a hit in the first inning but scored no runs. When Ichiro came to bat, the crowd chanted his name. Porteous told her how he stood at the plate, straight and quiet, how he drew his hand levelly across his chest after his feet were settled, a ritual, acknowledging, respecting the moment and the challenge. “It’s hard to stand in there. The ball comes right at you before it dips away. It makes a hissing sound. Scary. They wear plastic batters’ helmets for protection, but it’s still dangerous.”

“He is brave, Ichiro,” she said.

“Yes. They all are.” Ichiro beat out a grounder, advanced on a walk, and scored the first run on a long single to right. The next pitch was driven deep to center. At the crack of the bat, the crowd roared and then quieted as the ball was caught at the warning track.

“Oh,” she said. “The crowd—it’s like a great beast. I wanted to yell, myself.” Porteous described the game as it went along. Oakland scored three runs in the fourth, quieting the crowd further.

“I’m going to get a hot dog. Would you like something?”

“Yes,” she said. “I’ll have one with everything. Pastor Murch often has a hot dog when he watches the game. That’s

the way he likes them.”

“Do you want anything to drink?”

“I have water.”

He brought back two hot dogs, a pint of beer, and a pocketful of napkins. It felt good to return, the provider home from the concession stand.

“Mmm, chili,” she said. “Were you married, Porteous?”

“Twice.”

“Do you have children?”

“A daughter and a stepdaughter. My stepdaughter, Alicia, is a lawyer in San Francisco. Emma’s in New York. She just started teaching.”

“How wonderful!”

“I’m lucky. How about you? Have you had any—involvements?”

“I learned all I ever want to know about sex from my stepfather.”

“Oh, no.”

“I forgive him. But the thought makes me sick in my stomach.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“We all have troubles.”

Ichiro tied the game with a double down the right field line that brought the beast roaring back. Oakland scored another run in the top of the ninth. The Mariners couldn’t answer and lost, 4-3.

Porteous added two fifties to the envelope he’d brought, losing his private bet by a hundred dollars. He put the envelope in her hand. “Ichiro did his best.”

“You are very generous. This will be a great help.” She slid the envelope to the bottom of her bag, and they made their way slowly out of the stadium.

On the sidewalk, she stopped and began offering handouts. Porteous stood beside her, one in each hand. A few curious

people took them. "Thank you," he would say.

"Bless you," she said. A heavy young man stopped and leered at her, pointing at the strange strip of hair on her arm.

"Fuckin' freak," he said loudly. "Fuckin' freak."

Porteous stiffened and stepped closer to her. Her face became calm and her lips moved. She looked in the direction of the man and began slowly to sing, "*Oh, Danny boy, the pipes, the pipes are calling . . .*" Her voice was clear and sad. She sang more loudly, slowing the crowd. "*I'll be here in sunshine or in shadow . . .*" Her voice soared up the walls of the stadium. The man put his hands in his pockets. There was scattered applause when she finished. A few more people took handouts. The young man walked away.

"How can there be such ugliness in the world?" Porteous said.

"Don't worry. What's ugly cannot last."

"That was great singing."

She smiled. "When you sang on the bus, I felt sorry for you. Your voice was so tight. I thought: two lost people on the bus, one a baby and one grown." Porteous made a surprised sound. "I'm turned around," she said. "Where is the bus stop?"

"This way."

When a bus came and opened its doors, she asked, "Is it #18?"

"Yes."

"Goodbye, Porteous. Thank you. I will remember this. I had a *wonderful* time."

"Goodbye." His whole heart was in the word.

"Your voice sings now," she said and felt her way onto the bus.

9 Michelangelo's Shoulder

It dawned hot in Georgia. Don rubbed his head and blinked. He got out of bed and paused before a makeshift easel where a drawing, taped to a board, showed a woman sitting on a park bench. She was large, dressed in layers of multi-colored cotton. She reminded him of the Renoir woman in her plush living room, the dog sprawled at her feet, but this woman was smarter. The line across her eyebrows and tapering along her jaw was right. He'd left out a lot, but that didn't matter. If what was there was true, you knew the rest—like a Michelangelo shoulder emerging from stone.

He went into the bathroom and splashed water on his face.

After coffee and a piece of toast, he rolled the drawing and took it to the park where the woman fed pigeons every day. She wasn't there. She wasn't there the next day, either. The following day Don brought a loaf of bread, sat on her bench, and tossed white pellets into the air. Birds fought for each piece. He prepared the remaining bread and scattered it in one throw. "There you go—something for everybody. She'll be back soon."

A week later, she showed up. Don moved aside and asked, "Where you been?"

"Took sick."

"I've been feeding the pigeons."

"I was worrying. Thank you."

"I did a drawing of you. I wanted to name it, but—I didn't know your name."

"Ruby."

"Ruby, ah. I'm Don. You want to see it? I'll bring it tomorrow."

"Sure."

"O.K. How you feeling?"

"Better, now."

"Good." He walked to his usual bench and sat down. The sun beat on the live oak trees and sage-green strings of Spanish moss while the birds made happy sounds in front of Ruby. She had lost weight, he thought, but it was hard to tell, the way she dressed. She was a beauty once. He remembered his bloodshot eyes in the bathroom mirror. None of us getting any younger. He would give her the drawing in the morning and take off. It was time to leave Savannah, past time. Head for Portland again. Look up Lorna.

The pigeons took off in a sudden rush, flapping and swerving around the trees. Don stood and walked slowly across the square. "So long, Ruby."

"Be good, now," she said.

You can survive unloved, but you can't make it without loving somebody—or something. Ruby loved her birds. And who knows who else?

Lorna. The Art Students League. Thirty years ago, but it seemed like last week that she was looking carefully into his eyes and shaking his hand, curious and unafraid. She was different from him in many ways, but similar in that. Painter's eyes, he thought, clear and unblinking. Couldn't tell how good she was, though—eyes are one thing; talent is another. And hard work is another.

She lived in a studio behind her parents' house on a moun-

tain road—what was it called?—the Glasco Turnpike. Her father, Lad Charles, was a painter, a friendly guy who wore bow ties and was well liked in town. Lorna was protected, highly educated, out of reach for Don Delahanty.

He was blocky. She was slim. His neck was thick and turned with his body; her neck was graceful and turned by itself. His eyes were a slaty blue—the color of the sea on a cloudy day. Hers were almond with flecks of green. He was fair skinned. Lorna was tanned. His hair was sand colored, prematurely grizzled. Hers was light brown, sun streaked, thick, and cut short—perfect for small gold earrings. She brought with her the smell of spring. He smelled like upstate New York—dirt, dairy farms, and industrial towns. She was kind. They both were, although he had a bitter streak that dragged at him.

He loved Lorna. Lorna loved Pike, or used to, and Molly, their daughter. Molly herself would be falling in love any time now, if she weren't already.

He turned at the corner and headed toward Cleary's. Round and round we go, getting the job done. Except he hadn't gotten the job done, not unless you counted the paintings as kids. Not a happy train of thought. Piss on it, he'd have a waffle. Tide him over until the big feed.

He and Riles and Kai ate together on Thursdays, because weekends were unpredictable. He walked the six blocks to Cleary's, just around the corner from the house—Riles's house, Kai's house—Don couldn't call it home exactly, although he'd spent more winters than he cared to remember in the basement studio reserved for caretakers or indigent relatives. He was a little of each—an old friend of Riles and useful around the place, watching the gallery several times a week and doing the framing jobs that came along.

The Cleary's waitresses were wearing *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* T-shirts. Not a bad image, from the cover

of the best seller, but it annoyed him to see his friends wearing advertisements.

“Pecan waffle, Don?”

“Yes, ma’am—for my strength. It’s that time again. I’m going north.”

“Take me with you.”

“Can’t afford you.”

“Next year,” she suggested.

“Do my best,” Don said. “Something to live for. There’s not much up there, Jilly, just Yankees, shivering and eating beans.”

“I could stand the shivering. Want some grits?”

“Read my mind,” Don said.

He ate slowly, drank an extra cup of coffee, left a big tip, and got on with packing. By cocktail hour he had cleaned his room and stashed his belongings in a footlocker and a duffel bag. The easel and the painting gear stayed, part of the decor. He packed his best brushes, his watercolors, and a block of good paper. There was no limit to the number of lighthouse and/or lobster boat paintings he could sell, if they were cheap enough. The portraits and the figures were different. Drawn or done fully in oils, they were given away, or nearly. It was hard to put a price on them.

“How well you look, Don,” Kai said.

“Thank you. I’m having my annual burst of optimism. Did Riles tell you that I’m off to Maine tomorrow?”

“Riles never tells me anything.”

“Mother, really!” Riles appeared and put an arm around her shoulders. They were handsome together, short and dark with identical flashing smiles. Riles’s hairline had receded considerably, and Kai’s hair had long ago turned a tarnished silver, but they both were slim and upright and moved with a lack of effort that made Don feel as though he were dragging a wagon behind him. “I only just found out. Don is secretive, you know.”

“Don is not good at planning,” Don said.

“We must count on the turning of the seasons, Mother, the great migrations, to bring him back to Sherman’s Retreat.”

“He is not a goose, Dear.” She turned to Don. “The sooner you come back, the better.”

“Honk,” Don said, embarrassed, and added, “if you love Jesus.”

“I think this calls for a Riles Blaster. Don? Mother?”

Riles Blasters were made from light rum, Grand Marnier, lime juice, and other secret ingredients combined with ice and served, after great roaring from the blender, in sweating silver tumblers. Riles claimed that they prolonged life by rendering stress inoperable and irrelevant. A Riles Blaster, he pronounced, allowed one to focus on what mattered. “What mattered” was left undefined, allowing to each a certain latitude. They toasted what mattered and then “Absent loved ones.”

Blasters were reliable—one brought a sigh; two put a helpless smile on your face. It was best to switch to wine at that point. Another virtue: “A modest red becomes—acceptable.” Riles pronounced each syllable of “acceptable” so lightly and with such pleasure that you had to agree. The dark side of Riles was private. Don understood and left it alone.

“Will you be seeing that attractive friend of yours?” Kai made her innocent face.

“I usually do—at least once. I’ll try.”

“I love that oil of her as a young woman. Would you part with it? We think it belongs in the permanent collection.”

Riles raised his eyebrows, indicating that “we” meant “she.”

“You may have it, of course.”

“We can’t afford what it’s worth.”

“You don’t have to buy it. I’ll give it to you. It’s yours.”

“Don, you must take something at least—for the materials.” She went into the living room and returned with a check which

she handed to him. "I have wanted that painting for *so* long," she said, breaking a silence.

"That's a hell of a lot of materials."

"Good. More paintings! It's worth ten times that."

"Quite so," Riles said.

"Well." Don raised his glass. "Thanks."

"Bon voyage." They clinked glasses and that was that. Riles and Kai were skilled at such things; they had a knack for moving on. It was a part of their youthfulness. Good genes helped, too, Don thought. Not to mention the financial wisdom of dear departed Redmond.

An hour later Don said goodnight. Feeling almost a member of the family, he went downstairs and fell asleep on the bed in the basement.

The next day he made his way to the park. "Mornin', Ruby."

"Morning to you. You late today."

"Going to be a long day. I'm taking the train north."

"Oh, my."

Don pulled the drawing from the cardboard tube and unrolled it, holding it up for her to see.

"Wooo," she said, "I used to be better lookin'."

"You still good looking."

"I like it."

"I signed it here." He pointed.

"Don Dela—hanty," she read.

"An original Delehanty. You hang on to it, maybe it will be worth something, someday."

"What you mean?"

He rolled the drawing and put it back in the tube. "It's for you; it's a present." He held it out. Ruby hesitated and then took it.

"Been a while since I had a present."

"So," Don said, "take care. See you when I get back."

“Lord willing. Thank you. Thank you for the present.” The walls came down and she smiled like a girl.

“My pleasure.” He bowed and walked toward the river. The Silver Meteor was due at 5:50.

Summer passed quickly that year, even though each day was long and intense. It was the year he finally got to bed with Lorna. She wasn't quite it, though he loved her and would never tell her that. He did a portrait of her, his best yet, and gave it to Molly knowing that Lorna wouldn't accept it or would feel guilty for not paying if she did.

Strangely, he was offered a show in New York—his other long time dream—by a gallery owner who was after Lorna. He turned the show down, not wanting to be involved in their relationship, pretending that the requirements were too much trouble. It probably wouldn't have worked out anyway, he thought. Some people have a knack for dangling what you want in front of you; when you reach for it, it disappears.

Late in October he went over to Lorna's and said goodbye. She seemed sad and a bit relieved. Molly had tears in her eyes and hugged him wholeheartedly.

The next morning a cold rain was bringing down the leaves as Don carried his bag to the bus station. The shoulders of his tan raincoat were wet through when he boarded the Greyhound for Boston. Three rows back, he found an empty seat by a window and looked out at the glistening street. He saw a painting, full of light.

10 Bonkers

Bonkers emerged first, dark nose and eyes, sharp front teeth, white patch on his chest. When Molly could see flecks in his eyes, she gripped a corner of the print with tongs and transferred it to the fix, then rinsed it and hung it to dry. Tommy Jack was looking directly into the camera, a slight smile softening his face. He was sitting on the ground, leaning against a guard rail, one hand resting on Bonkers, the other holding a Styrofoam coffee cup on his knees.

Tommy Jack was cute, she thought, but that hair! It was short, ragged, the same length as his beard. He cut it with his knife, he told her. He had a broad jaw and a wide nose. He looked gentle and confused.

“Very good!” Mr. MacLain said. “A keeper.” Molly tried to hide her pleasure.

“I think I should have been closer.”

“Well, maybe. You could crop it at the top if you wanted.” He considered. “This man—he cares.” He rubbed his jaw. “Technique is important, but it’s what you see that counts.” He seemed to be talking as much to himself as to her. Mr. MacLain was awesome for a history teacher. He had a little camera that he usually carried in a case on his belt, and he coached soccer. He was interested in things, laughed a lot. She couldn’t wait to take

his class. “O.K. Molly, time to clean up.”

She walked home through the West End, carrying one of the prints in a manila envelope.

“Hi, Mom.”

“Hi, how was class?”

“Cool. I made an enlargement, my first one.” She pulled the print from the envelope and handed it to her mother.

“Oh, I like it. But—I wish you wouldn’t hang around the Old Port.”

“Mother! Tommy Jack is nice.”

“Tommy Jack? You know this man?”

“Sure. This is Bonkers, his dog.”

“Well, I don’t know. He doesn’t *look* dangerous.”

At dinner, she had a similar exchange with her father.

The next morning was sunny and blue. Molly dressed in cut-offs and a peach colored T-shirt, brushed her hair, gathered it behind her and pulled it expertly through an elastic. She was beginning to accept her looks. Her breasts were not causing traffic tie-ups, but she had long slim legs and she was pretty. Guys were starting to look.

She ate a banana and an Eggo waffle. “Mom, I’m going out,” she called.

“What about the grass?”

“I’ll do it later.” She put her camera in a military issue shoulder bag and walked down the hill, past the brick row houses on Danforth Street. Some of them had wrought iron eyebrows over the windows. The units were painted different colors: cream, pale blue, mustard, red, dark green—side by side, each a different family, a different feel. She liked black and white, but the colors here were important; black and white wouldn’t do it.

She bought two bagels and crossed Commercial Street to the parking lot by DiMillo’s. Tommy Jack was sitting on a bench where tourists waited for cruise boats.

“Morning, Tommy Jack.”

“Morning, Molly. You got a smoke?” It was a joke between them.

“Smoking is bad for you.”

“Not as bad as some things.”

“Like this?” She pulled a bagel from the bag.

He took a bite, made a face. “Slow death,” he said.

“No way. That’s garlic. Garlic’s good. Where’s Bonkers?”

“He’s gone. I ain’t seen him since yesterday.”

“No way!”

Tommy Jack shook his head. “That goddamned guy was giving me a hard time about him.”

“What guy?”

“The one thinks he owns everything—tall bald guy—walks around giving people a hard time. Said Bonkers was a stray. Said he was going to get rid of all the bums and strays.” Tommy Jack chewed on his bagel.

“What are you going to do?”

“Dunno. I have to wait for him.”

“But—he’s always here,” she said. “Maybe the police took him.” Tommy Jack stared at the condominiums on the next wharf and was silent.

“I’m going to look for him,” Molly said, standing up. “Oh, wait, I brought you something.” She handed him the print. He took it, surprised, looked at it and looked away.”

“That’s real nice. Why don’t you keep it for me?” He handed it back.

“I’ll get a frame for it,” she promised. “Someday, you’ll have your own place and you can put it on the wall.”

He smiled.

“Don’t worry, I’ll find Bonkers,” she said. He lifted one hand, avoiding her eyes.

At the police station on Middle Street, a dispatcher told her

that strays were taken to the Animal Refuge League in Westbrook.

“Westbrook? How do I get *there*?”

“There’s a bus, if you don’t mind a walk.” The dispatcher opened a schedule. “The #4, every half hour from Elm Street. Get off at Stroudwater. It’s out past the high school.”

“Thanks.” Molly checked her money—a dollar out, a dollar back—she was all set. Twenty minutes later she boarded the bus and took a seat near the driver who said that he would tell her when they got to Stroudwater. Tommy Jack was so sad. She’d never seen him without Bonkers.

She remembered asking him where the name came from.

“Got to be bonkers to hang around with me. Huh, Bonky?” Bonker’s tail wagged.

“Why? What’s wrong with *you*?”

“Slow as molasses and dumb as a post. That’s what my old man used to say.” He made a smile that wasn’t funny.

“That’s awful. What does he do?”

“He did masonry work. I mixed cement, carried blocks, things like that.” Tommy Jack looked into the distance. “He drank. Died. So did my mother, after a while.”

“Oh.” Molly got impatient with her parents, but she couldn’t imagine them not being there.

“They yelled at each other all the time,” Tommy Jack said. “Then they yelled at me. Bonky don’t yell, do you Bonky?”

She asked him where he lived.

“Right here.”

“No, really.”

He lifted his hand toward the water, upriver from Casco Bay. “There’s places by the tracks. I seen a fox yesterday.”

“Ooooh!”

“Kind of mangy. Yeah, Bonky? You barked and that fox took off.”

“Stroudwater,” the driver said.

“Huh? Oh, thanks.”

Half an hour later, she arrived at a building with several cars and an “Animal Patrol” van parked in front. She signed in at a reception desk and saw Bonkers as soon as she entered the room where the dogs were caged. “Bonkers! Hi, Bonky.” He sniffed her hand and wagged his tail. “Good dog. We’re going to get you out of here.”

“I found him,” she said to the control officer. “Bonkers. He belongs to a friend of mine. He’s the black and white one near the door.”

“Oh yeah. He came in yesterday—haven’t seen him before.”

“Can I take him?”

“We need proof of ownership.” Molly showed her the picture she’d taken.

“We need a license or something from his vet. Or a bill of sale from a breeder.”

“I don’t know if he has any of that.”

“I’m sorry. After six days he’s legally ours. We give him a rabies shot, check him out, get rid of any worms, and put him up for adoption.” She gave Molly a pamphlet. “It’s all in here.” Molly put it in her bag and walked back into town.

A different driver stopped the bus and opened the door. She stuffed a dollar in the slot and dropped onto a seat. She reached for the bagel she had been saving. Tommy Jack probably didn’t have any papers for Bonkers. She’d just have to see; maybe he’d have an idea what to do.

When she got back to the Old Port, he wasn’t there. She poked around the harbor and took two pictures of a cat sniffing a stack of lobster traps. He said he’d wait, she thought.

Her eyes drifted to a garbage can by the tour boats. She remembered Tommy Jack crumpling a brown paper bag and

throwing it at the can.

“Tommy Jack! I wanted that.”

“I’ll do another one.” But he hadn’t. They were talking about dream houses. “Got a pencil in there?” He had pointed at her shoulder bag. Using quick strokes on a flattened paper bag, he drew a small cabin with a chimney on one end and a front porch.

“That’s so cozy.”

“Yeah,” he said, and the next thing she knew it was flying toward the can, falling short. She remembered him bending over to pick it up and drop it in the can.

“I didn’t know you could draw.”

“I look at things. There’s a lot to look at.”

“Like you and Bonkers.” That was the day she took the picture.

She waited an hour and then wrote on a sheet of paper: *Tommy Jack—I found Bonkers. Molly.* She added, *Please leave this note here.* She put it on the bench where he had been earlier, weighing it down with a small rock.

She walked back up Danforth Street. No one was home. Cassie was still away at her father’s where she’d been all summer. There was no one to talk to. There was nothing to do but cut the grass. She rolled the push mower out of the garage and began on the small lawn in front of the house. Why couldn’t they have a power mower like everyone else? “Good exercise,” her father said. But he was the one who needed exercise, and she was the one who mowed the lawn. It did make a nice sound, whirring and clicking, but then a twig would jam the blades, and the handle would ram her in the stomach.

She finished the front and moved to the back, an area twice the size of the house, enclosed by a thick hedge. She kept her lines straight and was sweating by the time she finished. She put on cotton gloves and clipped along the path and the back of

the garage. Clipping was a pain.

Her mother drove in, and Molly helped unload groceries. Molly shucked corn and told her about Bonkers, finding him, and then not finding Tommy Jack. "I'm sure he'll be there tomorrow," she said, but she had an uneasy feeling.

Her father came in the side door. "Hi, ya. Hi, Ducks."

"Hi, Daddy." She gave him a quick hug. "I cut the grass."

"Nice going." He kissed her mother on the cheek and went upstairs to change out of what he called his "bean counter" clothes. Half an hour later, as he was watching the news, he called out: "Hey great! Somebody assaulted Tony Ponzio! Knocked him down by DiMillo's. Thomas Jackson, a homeless person, arrested."

"Tommy Jack!"

"Wasn't that the guy with the dog?" her father asked.

"What happened?"

"They showed Ponzio with a black eye, saying that he'd been attacked by a bum for no reason. Couldn't happen to a better guy; he's been bad news since the day he started buying all those buildings in the Old Port."

Molly collapsed in a chair. "It wasn't for no reason. Where is Tommy Jack?"

"Probably in jail," her father said.

"Jail?" She brought the palms of her hands together and held them close. "How long will he be in jail?"

"Depends. If he can raise bail, he'll be out right away. If not, could be months."

"Bail is money, right?"

"Yep—sort of a deposit. The court keeps it if the defendant doesn't show up for trial."

"Tommy Jack doesn't have any money."

"Are we sure it was Tommy Jack?" her mother asked.

"That's why he wasn't there when I got back from the Ani-

mal Refuge.”

Her father looked at her. “Animal Refuge?”

“Bonkers was missing. I took the bus and found him at the Animal Refuge. Tommy Jack was supposed to wait in case Bonkers came back, but he wasn’t there when I got back.”

“You went out to Westbrook?”

She nodded. “On the bus. Bonkers was sad, locked up in a cage.”

“Probably makes two of them,” her father said.

“We could adopt him,” Molly said.

“Bonkers or Tommy Jack?”

“Daddy!”

He looked at her mother. “Liz, Help.”

“Please, Daddy? I can use my baby sitting money.”

“You were saving for school clothes,” her mother said.

“I’d rather have Bonkers.” She rushed over to her shoulder bag. “Look!” She waved the pamphlet. “Here’s how you do it.”

“Wait, wait, wait,” her father said. “I’m not going to get a dog I don’t like.”

“How can you not like Bonkers? You haven’t even seen him.”

“Well, that’s what I mean.”

“In six days he could be *gone*; that’s what they said, six days.” Molly appealed to her mother.

“David, it wouldn’t hurt to take a look—tomorrow’s Saturday—we could drive over in the morning. It might be nice to have a dog. He’s small; he looks like he has a little border collie in him.”

“Surrounded,” her father said.

“So, we’ll go tomorrow?” Molly asked.

“O.K.”

“Thank you, Daddy.” She ran over and hugged him.

His last words before falling asleep were: “I’m not getting

the damned dog if I don't like him."

The next day, Bonkers was wildly happy to see Molly. Her father watched for a moment and said, "You're going to walk it and clean up after it, right?"

"Yes."

"All right. If you're going to do all the work, I'll pay. That's fair." He turned to Bonkers. "Stay out of trouble," he ordered.

They filled out an application, left a deposit, and returned home in a good mood. The newspaper had a story headed: *Old Port Property Owner Assaulted*. It gave no details but did confirm that Thomas Jackson had been arrested.

On Monday, Molly wrote on a postcard:

Tommy Jack—I found Bonkers at the Animal Refuge. We are going to adopt him before anything happens to him. He has to get a shot! I am sorry you're in jail. I hope you get out soon. Molly.

She drew a smiley face underneath the words and mailed it to the Cumberland County Jail. She wasn't satisfied, but at least it was something.

She bought a frame for the picture of Tommy Jack and Bonkers and hung it on her wall. She began to think about school, but it was still a couple of weeks away. She took a picture of the empty bench where she and Tommy Jack used to hang out. Mr. MacLain said that if she took a few more good ones, he would try and get a display in the main hall. Every day, she walked around the city looking for images that made her feel things.

On the morning when they were allowed to pick up Bonkers, she and her mother bought a leash, a dog dish, and two kinds of food. The animal control officer handed her mother a form and said, "He's all set, nice and healthy. Here's a temporary. You have ten days to get a license from the city."

Molly rode with Bonkers in the back seat, patting him. As soon as they were home, they fed him on the back porch. "Make sure he has plenty of water, her mother said. Bonkers ate a small amount of food and curled up on the couch out on the porch.

The couch was pretty much where Bonkers stayed for two days. He seemed to be resting, getting used to his new home. Late in the afternoon of the second day, he was inside the house when Molly's father returned.

"Bonkers, my slippers please."

"You don't have slippers," her mother called.

"Christmas is coming—not to mention my birthday."

Molly entered the room. "Daddy, will you come to the jail with me?"

"Hi. What?"

"I have to see Tommy Jack. Will you come with me to the jail?"

He took a deep breath. "You can't just drop in."

"I know that. I called. They have a visiting hour tomorrow, from four to five."

"O.K."

Molly was surprised; she had been expecting an argument.

"She would have gone anyway," David said later. "Might as well be there—besides—I'd like to meet this guy."

"I'm glad school's starting soon," Liz said.

The next day the weather turned cool. In the afternoon, Molly took a shower, dried her hair, and decided against eye liner. She put on sand-colored jeans and a natural cotton sweater. Too much the same. She took off the sweater and wriggled into a light turquoise sweatshirt. She brushed her hair and put it back with a gold scrunchie.

"Don't you look nice," her mother said. Her father was serious when he arrived home, but he reappeared shortly, more cheerful in jeans and a blue and green plaid shirt. "We're off."

At the jail, they signed in and were told to wait. Twenty minutes later a guard took them and three others to a room that was empty except for a few tables and folding plastic chairs. Fluorescent light. Everything was painted a scary navy gray. A door opened at the other end of the room, and four prisoners, dressed in orange, entered in single file, followed by a guard. Tommy Jack was last in line.

“Tommy Jack!” Molly called. He walked slowly over to them.

“Hi, Molly.”

“Hi, this is my dad.”

Her father held out his hand. “Hi, I’m Dave.” They sat at a table in the corner.

“We’ve got Bonkers,” Molly said. “The vet said she was nice and healthy.” Tommy Jack seemed to have trouble talking.

“Good,” he said. “I got your card.”

“Tommy Jack, what happened?”

He thought back. “I waited after you left. That guy I told you about come around. He says, ‘Where’s the dog?’ I said he was missing. ‘Goddamn right he’s missing,’ he said. ‘He’s at the pound, and it won’t be long before he’s missing forever.’ He started laughing. I knocked him down. It felt good. I wanted to knock him down again, but he didn’t get up. Must’ve hit his head on something. I told the parking lot guy, and then the cops got me.”

Molly’s father said, “He had it coming.” They were silent a few moments.

“Thanks for taking Bonky.”

“He’s a good dog,” her father said.

“I was worried about the cold. They don’t let dogs in them shelters. Now he’s got a good home. I done something right.”

“Look,” Molly’s father said, “if you don’t mind, my brother Ed’s a lawyer; I’m going to ask him to come down and talk to

you, make sure you don't get screwed."

"I don't mind."

"So, how are they treating you?" Molly asked.

"Eating good. The view ain't much." They were silent again.

"School's starting next week," she said. Her eyes were beginning to sting. Tommy Jack nodded. "But I'll be seeing you around the Old Port—when you get out."

"I'll be looking for you."

She didn't know what else to say. She didn't want to say anything; she wanted to scream or yell or throw something. She looked at her father. "Maybe we better get going, Dad."

They stood up. "Nice to meet you," her father said. "We'll be thinking about you. Good luck."

"Thanks," Tommy Jack said. He looked at her and raised one hand, palm out, in that gesture of his, like he was taking an oath or something.

"It'll be all right," he said softly. She looked into his eyes and saw that he didn't want her to worry—even though it was not going to be all right, for him.

"Bye, Tommy Jack," she said.

"Bye, Molly."

The guard unlocked the door. She made it outside the jail before doubling over on the top step, crying, her face in her hands. Her father put his arm around her shoulders. "It isn't fair," she sobbed.

"No. It isn't."

She was still upset when she got home. Bonkers met her at the door and began licking her hand. "Bonky, stop." But he wouldn't. He kept licking her until she patted his head and told him he was a good dog, that they'd see Tommy Jack soon.

11 The Damnedest Places

“Well look what the wind blew in! How are you Danny?”

“Pretty good, if I don’t look too close.”

“I could look at you all day.”

She had an urge to hug him but didn’t. When she returned, he was always one of the first islanders she saw, sitting on the stone wall near the landing or pedaling a blue bike through the village, an old basket hanging from the handlebars, a collection of newly woven baskets nestled behind him. He had a face like a lobster claw, weathered hard.

“It’s great to be back, Morris. Hey, I need a basket.”

“I got a few. How big?”

“Not sure. My niece got married this winter. They’re coming out for a couple of days. I want to give them something from here.”

“Big enough to hold a baby, maybe?”

“Funny you say that—she’s due in September.”

“Been saving one at home for someone special.”

“I’d love to see it.”

“Coffee’s always on.”

She pulled her travel bag up the hill, feeling welcomed. Most of the summer houses were still waiting to be opened. A colorful tangle of bikes leaned against Estelle’s porch. Her garden

was in. As Danny walked up the lane, she felt a twist of anxiety; the first sight of her cottage was always a small shock. During the winter her memory of the place tended to revert to the way it was when she was a child. Her improvements hadn't made up for the absence of her grandmother.

The house seemed larger. The yard needed raking. The windows were dirty. Inside, she smelled the wooden walls and ceilings, dry and musty after a silent winter, and a faint cinnamon scent that she associated with her grandmother. She got to work, earning the right to feel at home. By dinner time, the yard was tidy, the windows were clean, and she'd brought a cart load of groceries from the store. She put on a sweater and carried an omelette and a glass of red wine to the table on the porch. She raised her glass toward a glimpse of blue water between trees. "Santé." Her voice was loud in her ears.

"What does that mean?"

A boy was standing motionless by the bird feeder.

"Health, good luck, good living—like that. I didn't see you there."

"I can go anywhere on this road until dark."

"Ah, very good. What's your name?"

"Rider."

"I'm Danny. You want to come on the porch and talk?"

"No. I'm looking for angels."

"Oh. Well then, better get going." He turned and walked away with a long stride for seven or eight years old. She felt a wave of loneliness. It wouldn't be dark for an hour, but it was the time of day when she wished to be with someone. Working alone was fine. She'd rather. But, relaxing, letting go, was different. On the island she mostly kept to herself. Didn't have a boat. Didn't play tennis. The attractive men were married or young enough to have been among the kids she used to teach. She was beautiful, or so she'd been told. *Like the moon rising,*

Peter said once. “Rising over what?” she’d asked. *The desert. Sometimes an olive grove, or an ocean.* His eyebrows were raised, seeing what she couldn’t. She accepted admiration but didn’t really understand it. Her father preferred Denise—her roan colored hair, high cheekbones. That big smile. Peter, in the end, also preferred someone else. She’d almost accepted the single life.

Her winter habits fell away during the next few days. She walked and gardened, painted, recharged. She gave herself to the lilacs and beach roses, lavenders and pinks, the blues and grays of the ocean, spray flung over dark rock, ducks, gulls, crows circling above marsh, the new green leaves. She sketched, adding patches of water color, working comfortably, allowing herself to slow down.

One afternoon on her way home, she saw Rider in front of the gambrel roofed house part way up the lane. He was with a man who seemed to be his father; there was a similar purposeful set to their shoulders. They were looking at a section of tree trunk standing on end, about five feet high. The bark had been removed.

“Hi, Rider.”

“Hi.”

“I’m Danielle Boisvert—Danny.” She extended a hand to the man. “I live in the house at the end.”

“Rory Ruellen. Seen you go by. You’ve met Rider.” His voice was low, pleasant. Did it seem out of practice?

“What are you going to do with that?” She pointed at the wood.

“I’m thinking—torso.” His eyes widened, took her in, and moved back to the tree trunk. “Would you stand over here for a minute?” He stepped toward the wood. “Right here.” He put a foot next to the base. She walked over. “Facing this way.” Without asking, he turned her, strong hands light on her shoul-

ders. He stepped back. "Perfect. Turn your head a little. A little more." He took a thick pencil from his pocket. "Excuse me." He approached and knelt on one knee. "Some hip turn." He reached forward and turned her hips slightly in the direction she was looking. He stepped back swiftly. "Almost done." He was still for a moment and then, "Just a couple of marks." He made a quick stroke with the pencil along one shoulder, then from her waist down and around her hip, and a short curve by her other calf. "Great! Thanks."

"Sure. What kind of wood is this?"

"Maple. Have to sharpen my chisels."

"I paint, but I never tried sculpture—at least not on this scale."

Rory shrugged. "Doesn't matter, long as it feels right."

"I'm hungry, Dad."

"Well, what do we do when we're hungry?"

"There's no more peanut butter."

"That's serious. We'd better go to the store." He put his pencil in his pocket. "Nice to meet you." He walked away before Danny remembered to smile. Rider seemed happy at his side. Nice time of life, she thought. For both of them.

The next morning she knocked at Morris's door. He opened it, and she said, "I smelled the coffee."

"Yessir. Good. Come in." He pointed at a row of mugs hanging from pegs on a board above the kitchen counter. "What color's your mind today?"

"Green."

"Mmm. No green, unless maybe that dark one."

"Oooh, this is nice." She chose a mug that had a comfortable roundness, hand thrown, a sienna color, glazed with streaks of light sky blue.

"Yep, that was a good present. Marj—a widow from New Mexico." He poured coffee. "She might have stuck around, but

she has kids grown up, grandkids out there.”

“Lucky woman.”

“Sure.” Morris had a son in Virginia, career Navy, and a daughter who’d married an Australian and lived in Adelaide, or was it Perth? “Still,” he continued, “there’s plenty to do, kids or no kids.”

“Morris, I love you. Where were you when I was twenty?”

“You don’t want to know.” He went into a back room and brought out a large basket.

“Wow!”

“Hand split ash. Made to last.”

“It’s got such a good feeling. I’ve got just the right blanket to go in it. How much do you want for it?”

“I guess I’ve got to have a hundred.”

“That’s not enough for all the work that went into it.” Love, she meant. She wrote a check for \$150 and gave it to him. He looked at it, smiled slightly, and put it in his shirt pocket.

“O.K., then. They have a boy, they can name him Morris, no charge.”

“Good deal,” she said. She walked home balancing the basket on her head for part of the way.

The weeks went by faster. The sculpture took form in Rory’s yard. She often heard him working in the late afternoon and during the long evenings. Megan and Paul came for their visit. They talked a lot about their jobs and the adjustments they would make when the baby was born. The basket was a hit.

Danny went with them on the ferry when they left, a chance for a last hug and a rub of Megan’s belly. After she waved good-bye, she bought groceries that she couldn’t get on the island, and caught the next boat.

Rory was at one end of the upper deck, reading a newspaper. She sat across from him, halfway down. The sun was bright on the water, a dancing diamond day. The boat horn sounded.

Rory put his paper down and stood to take off his outer shirt. It had a checked, formal, pattern. He looked more himself in the green T-shirt underneath. He was staring over the water and didn't seem to have noticed her. He tucked in his T-shirt, first one hand and then the other sliding down beneath the belt of his jeans. Something inside her tightened and turned over. His hands were her hands. He was utterly natural to her. They might have been married for years or centuries. She struggled to hide her shock. Rory turned and waved to her. She lifted her hand and felt a blaze pass through her eyes. His face softened before he sat down. She didn't look at him again until they were landing. She managed an apologetic smile and left quickly.

She hoped to avoid him the next day, but he was in his yard when she walked by. "Hi, Danny. Didn't mean to be unfriendly yesterday on the boat. I was thinking about Rider. I'd just taken him to camp for two weeks. First time."

"Oh. Was he scared?"

"Not too much. It wasn't his idea. Caroline thinks he needs to be around more kids."

Danny made a questioning face. "Don't you think kids know what they need?" There was a moment of silent agreement. "Maybe he'll learn how to swim."

"He knows how to swim. I guess he'll be O.K."

"Sure he will. The sculpture's coming along."

"Mmm. Caroline will be here next week. I'd like to have it done."

"Caroline's your wife, right?"

"Right."

Was he saying that it was harder to work when Caroline was around?

"You've taken a lot away down low." The figure had a twisting tension, a sense of lifting strength across the shoulders. "I like it. There's something uneasy about it."

He moved beside her and studied the piece. "I know."

"Will you do the face last?" The head was roughed out, turned and angled down as though looking at something on the ground.

"Yes."

"I'm going to make lasagne tomorrow. You want to help me eat it?"

He looked away and then met her eyes. "I like lasagne." His eyes were a clear dark brown. There was an empty room behind them.

"Good. Six or so?"

"I'll be there."

She walked home, pleased. The invitation had just popped out. Of course. Why not? So natural. By evening she had second thoughts. Rory had a perfectly good wife; she had to be, by the look of Rider, anyway. But, he had accepted as naturally as she had offered. It was done now.

She replayed the moment on the boat deck when he had tucked in his T-shirt. Longing, part ache, part warmth, spread through her. He was fifteen years younger, at least. Impossible. Yet when they looked into each other's eyes, they had no age. It was inappropriate. She hated that word. Life was what was appropriate, and this was life, loud and clear. It was midnight before she fell asleep.

The sun woke Danny, shining through her bedroom window. She loved waking—warm, deep in her pillow, reassured by what had happened in dream time. She had slept late, however, and there were things to do. Things to do. Lasagne. Time enough for that in the afternoon. Up. Out.

Rory wasn't around. He had begun carving the face, she noticed; the jaw line was established; rough planes marked the beginnings of cheeks and forehead. The sky was clear, the water a brighter blue than usual. Danny walked until she was settled

enough to draw two crows that were zooming back and forth over an estuary marsh, seemingly for the hell of it. The drawing was dead. She made another. On her third try, she sketched the marsh loosely and then with four black strokes painted the zoom. Flying calligraphy. Air show over the marsh.

By six o'clock, the house was filled with the smell of tomatoes, basil, ricotta, and mozzarella. She made a green salad, escarole. A baguette. Rory arrived with a bottle of Merlot. "Best they had," he said.

"Perfect. Come on in. Living room, kitchen, bathroom over there." She left out the bedrooms. "Let's see, in here—" she rummaged in a kitchen drawer and produced a bone handled corkscrew. "Would you?"

"Nice one," he said. He held it up and looked at it closely.

"It was my grandmother's. Came with the house. I miss her."

"I had a nice grandmother," Rory said. Of course.

"I thought we'd eat on the porch."

"I saw crackers and cheese out there."

"You're my first guest of the summer. I went all out."

They were well into a second glass of wine when they began eating the lasagne. "Good," Rory said after his first bite. He'd met Caroline in Costa Rica on an eco-trip. She worked at her father's law firm in Virginia. "She's a lot of fun. When she isn't working. Her mom's recovering from breast cancer—probably she's going to be O.K., but she and Jack took the summer off, left Caroline to run things. *Carpe diem* and all that." Rory thought he and Caroline might make an offer on the island house. They could summer here every year.

"I love the island," Danny said. "So much to see. Boston's not a bad place to be in the winter—work and all—but I'd rather be here."

"What do you do?"

“Commercial art, mostly illustrations, some graphics.”

“I’ve seen you painting by the shore.”

“Yes, nothing much. I’ll show you what I did yesterday. Whoops, killed that bottle. Just a sec.” She returned with a bottle of Chianti and handed him the drawing. His eyebrows raised slightly.

“Crows,” he said, “the monkeys of the bird world. Something smart ass about them.” He put the drawing on a corner of the table, turning it so that they could both see it right side up. “Pretty good.”

“Third try.” She pulled out the wine cork.

“Nice sound,” Rory said. His eyes were brighter. His face seemed to be strengthening as he drank. She felt herself sliding the other way, looser, softer.

“So where’s Mr. Danny?”

“There’ve been a couple of Mr. Dannys. They are—elsewhere. Permanently.” She considered. “I tried. We tried. Just didn’t work out. The first was one of those opposite attract things, great at first—you learn a lot—but then you go in different directions. The second was harder. I had a miscarriage. He drank all the time.” She took a slow swallow of Chianti. “Not that I blame him. He was a sweetheart, but he was heading down. I guess I didn’t love him enough to share the trip.” They were silent.

“Too bad,” Rory said.

“My dad drank, but I never saw him drunk, really. He usually had a six pack around on the weekends, that was about it.”

“What did he do?”

“He was a builder—new houses, remodeling. When he and my mom split, he cashed in and bought an eighteen wheeler.”

“Good man,” Rory said.

“He drove for ten years. He’s out in Washington now, where he grew up. Still working. Makes furniture. Really nice stuff.”

He gave me a cherry table for my birthday a while back. My sister is his favorite, but we're pretty much past that. I try to get out there once a year or so. He's in Poulsbo, on the Olympic peninsula. Have you been there?"

"Never have," Rory said. "Been in Seattle. Loved it! I could live there. Where's your mom?"

"She remarried, moved to North Carolina, Chapel Hill. She taught in elementary school for years."

"My folks moved south, too. Retired near Daytona. My dad was a pilot. My mom—" His mouth hardened. He refilled his glass. "You know what? I finished the piece in the yard. You want to see?" He was halfway out of his chair.

"Sure. Whoa. What about ice cream?"

"Ice cream." He sank back down.

"Maybe later?" she suggested.

"Yeah, later." He was up again. "Let's bring this along." He corked the Chianti and walked down the porch steps, bottle in one hand, glass in the other. He moved easily, born in his body. So many of the men she knew were driven or ashamed or had given up, trapped.

They walked side by side down the lane as though they had done it a hundred times before. The sun had set; the evening light was clear, the air still. Rory hung back a step as she approached the sculpture.

The figure radiated strength. Danny looked closely at the face, and her hand went to her mouth. What she had taken for a smile was really a grimace, a twisted leer. The eyes were hateful and glaring. "What?" She turned to Rory, confused.

"Mother," he said.

Danny's arms fell to her sides. "Oh."

"I was meaning to make an angel. Rider's into angels. He goes to a Catholic school; it's the best school near where we live. I told him I'd never seen an angel, but maybe if we made one,

they'd come around. Like a duck decoy or something." Rory stared at the sculpture. "That's what happened. Damn her."

He looked at his pickup. Danny didn't know what to say. She felt anger surging around the yard. Rory was reaching into the back of his truck almost before she saw him move. "Get back," he said, holding a gas can. He sprinkled drops on the figure's knees. He ran back to the truck and returned with a butane lighter. He lit it and tossed it. The lighter slid down the sculpture. There was a soft explosion and a ball of flame.

Danny went to Rory's side and reached for his hand. They watched in silence as the flames died back and then began to move up the body.

Rory let go of her. He sank to his knees, and then over on his side, making a low sound in his throat. He pounded one fist slowly on the ground. She waited and then crouched and rested a hand on his shoulder. He stopped hitting the ground. Then he was on his knees, then running to the garage and running back carrying an old blanket. He charged the burning sculpture, tackling it with the blanket held in front of him. The two fell over, and he wrestled and rolled the figure until the fire was out. He rose to his feet slowly.

"Are you all right?"

"Yeah. I am." He pulled the blanket away and tipped the sculpture upright. The face was blackened and disfigured. "Couldn't do it," he said. "Wait, I've got a better idea. Would you help me?"

"Of course."

They lifted the sculpture into his truck and drove to a pebbled beach. Rory pointed out over the ocean and got out of the truck without saying anything. They dragged and rolled the figure into the water. A small wave pushed it back against them, knocking them over. "Might as well be all the way wet," Danny said.

“Right.” The tide was going out. They pushed the sculpture farther into the water and watched as it began to drift away. The last light caught the blackened face, which had rolled upwards.

“Maybe someone will find her,” Rory said. “Take pity. Maybe she’ll have a new life.”

“You couldn’t have put her in the back yard?”

“Nope,” he said calmly. “I’m done.” It was sad. She put a hand on his shoulder and shivered. He drew her to him. They clung together as warmth spread between them.

“We’re a grilled cheese,” Danny said. “Warm in the middle.”

“Cooling on the outside,” he said. “Food—how about the ice cream?”

Her answer rose from deep within her. “I don’t think so—I can’t.” She stepped back without letting go of him. “If we go to my house we’re going to end up in my bed, and it will be wonderful and tomorrow I will want to sleep with you again and I won’t want you to sleep with anyone else and it will hurt too much. It will hurt too much. It hurts right now.” She dropped her hands and joined him in the room behind his eyes.

He nodded slowly.

They drove to his house, and she walked home with fast desperate steps, forgetting the wine glasses.

In the morning, she packed her usual walking stuff and put the ice cream in a bag. Rory was raking his yard where the sculpture had stood. She handed him the ice cream. “You don’t look so good,” she said.

“Long night. You look terrific.”

“The miracle of cosmetics,” she said.

“How old are you, anyway?”

“53.”

“Really? I thought maybe 45.”

“Very sweet.”

“45, tops. I’m 37. Look, last night. Thanks.”

“What did I do?” Or not do, she thought.

“Just being there,” he said. “I don’t think it would have happened if you hadn’t been there.” He stabbed at the ground with his rake.

“I love your work. I hope you buy the house.”

“It’s mostly up to Caroline.”

“I’m crossing my fingers,” she said. “What are you going to do next?” She indicated the bare patch in the grass.

“Don’t know. Wally’s got another piece of wood for me, but I think I’ll do something different, maybe smaller. I’ve got a piece of marble I brought with me.”

“Won’t float,” Danny said.

“Or burn,” Rory said. “It’s what we do, isn’t it? Keep working.” *We*. The word spread like a blessing. An angel might have said it.

A phone startled them. Rory reached into his back pocket. “Yo. Hi. What!” He looked at her, sharing his surprise. “All right. Stay there! I’ll be there as soon as I can. No problem. Bye.

“It’s Rider. He’s in a convenience store on Route 81. He ran away from camp—said he didn’t want to be a lion OR a tiger.” Rory was grinning.

“Great kid,” Danny said.

“I can just get the boat. I’m going to run. Would you put the ice cream in the fridge?”

“Sure.”

“Are you O.K.?”

“More than O.K.,” she said. He leaned the rake against the garage, waved, and drove away. She didn’t want to go into his house. She tried not to look around inside and left with an impression of a friendly mess, a kitchen that needed work.

She walked for an hour before she was calm enough to try

and capture the feel of the sea horizon. It looked like a straight line, but it wasn't; there was the slightest curve, a bulge, a containing roundness, almost a pregnancy. Rory was like other artists she knew who looked into themselves for their subjects. She looked outward, but, at some level, it was the same thing. She felt a familiar longing, felt the heat spreading between their bodies. Let go of him, she told herself. But there was no letting go of the *we*—that was for good, a fact that wasn't going anywhere. She rolled the painting and walked home.

In the morning, she fled, catching the early boat. She left a note asking Emmet to hold her mail for a few weeks. She wrote a short message to Rory, putting it in his mailbox on her way by. Taking a trip, she told him. Back after Labor Day. P.S. I hope you buy the house. Hi, Rider. Smiley face. Best she could do. She felt childish, running away, but as the ferry backed from the landing, she began to relax. She needed time and space between her and Rory, not to mention Caroline, who would be there in a few days. No way was she ready for chit chat with the lady of the house.

She retrieved her Toyota from the parking lot and headed for Boston. In New Hampshire, she turned off on 495, away from her city life, as though repelled by an invisible force shield. She drove west on the Mass pike and rented a motel room near Albany. She watched TV, slept, watched more TV, nibbled at a salad in a fast food place next door, and slept again.

The trip turned out well—unplanned all the way. She drove out to Washington taking time to draw and paint. Her dad was glad to see her, although, as usual, he didn't say much. He and his girlfriend, Polly, took her to their favorite spots and introduced her to friends. She stayed four days and drove down the coast to San Francisco. It was going to take all winter to pay for it, but she didn't care.

The island had quieted down when she arrived back, the

week after Labor Day. A real estate sign on Rory's lawn said "Sold." There was a note on her porch table, weighed down by her wine glasses. "Welcome home, neighbor. We got the house! R."

She had expected this. "All right," she said.

A few days later, she baked a cherry pie and took it over to Morris. They sat outside on a bench by a table partially covered with tools and basket materials. The air was sunny and crisp. She told him about her trip, that she was glad to be back.

"I hear you got a new neighbor," Morris said.

"Rory," she said. "And Rider." She stopped.

"And Caroline," Morris said. "We had a talk one day." Danny felt herself reddening.

"I didn't meet Caroline."

"Oh."

"What's she like?"

"Pretty busy, I think. She wasn't here long. Seem like nice folks."

"Lucky Caroline," Danny said. "If he were single and I was fifteen years younger—" She lost a moment as her arms went around Rory. Unexpected tears streamed down her cheeks.

"Oh dear," Morris said. He went inside and came back with a towel. She began to laugh when she saw it, a large scruffy green towel with a singe mark on one edge.

"Thanks." She rubbed her face dry. "I'm not the crying type."

"I saw you together one time." Morris looked into the middle distance. She snuffled.

"Love shows up in the damndest places," he said eventually, "not always where you'd like." He turned to her. "Best take it where you find it. It's not so common. I mean—the real thing, no price tags on it."

His words settled and encouraged her. How can love be

wrong?

“I’ll have another piece of that pie,” Morris said.

12 TIDKA

My hat blew off.

“Someone thinking of you,” Benito said. “Oh! Oh!” He killed a centipede with the broken golf club he used for a walking stick. Toxic red. Legs wriggling on the road.

“Is that what they say?”

“Your friend thinking of you when your hat blow off.”

“Good, I’m glad.”

“Ulu.” He pointed up into a tree. Fruits hung like green grenades. “Ulu.” “Boil ’em. Steam ’em. Slice with tuna. Fry ’em. Good. Little bit egg!”

“Ulu,” I said.

“Where you go now?”

“Kapa’au. Get coffee. Work on my book.”

“Kapa’au? Coffee? Oh. Goodbye, my friend!” Big smile. He crossed the road to his cottage.

I’m always working on a book. I ask questions, get to know people—doing research, you know. It’s hard to spot me as an Undercover Guru Fraud Man. I may well write a book someday, but my main effort is to document and expose guru fraud wherever it shows its face. It is a modest purpose compared to biomedical research, say, but one I stand behind.

The rainy and windy afternoon when I first conceived TIDKA,

The I Don't Know Association, seems long ago. Detractors have said it was from spite. I have looked deeply into my heart and can say it isn't so.

It is true that Jasmine was beautiful. Oh yes. Perhaps I was more vulnerable then, blinded by her flashing and sympathetic smile, than I would be today. She was high-spirited, an attractive quality in the young, verbally quick, well-educated, thoroughly dangerous.

She chose George Caswell. These days I would classify Caswell as an art guru fraud; back then, I just called him phony. He had once won a painting prize. Every five years he had a show that was favorably reviewed by his friends. He lived on an inheritance in an aesthetically spare studio whose comforts were out of sight in back rooms. During summer, he usually wore white pants and a blue chambray work shirt, a combination favoring his blue eyes. He was short with closely cropped thin blonde hair. He spoke quietly, after long pauses, with a fixed stare that passed for intensity.

A succession of aspiring women painters accepted his offer of a spare room, a bit of work modeling, a modest dinner of pasta and salad, a few bottles of a less modest red wine, the chance to get in touch with their deeper selves, the real woman within, the *sina qua non* for brave and meaningful painting. George had adapted to his environment like a reef fish.

"What do you see in the guy?" I asked Jasmine when I learned that she was staying in George's studio.

She giggled. "He's cute, really."

"For Christ's sake, he could be your father."

"You are such a prude, Nathaniel."

"I am not."

"What you don't understand is that George knows what is important in art. He is very critical of my work, but he says that I have promise."

“Oh well, if George says so. The thought of him unbuttoning your shirt makes me want to brain him.”

“That’s very sweet. George says that we must hear the inner Neanderthal. Where are you going?”

“To club a lamb for dinner.”

The Chinese say that medicine should be bitter. Perhaps the experience was medicinal. Jasmine’s words stayed in mind as I drank several beers with lunch at Deanie’s. *George knows what is important in art . . . He is very critical of my work. George knows.* That was the nub of it. That was the scam. It began to pour outside. I ordered apple pie, and TIDKA was born.

By the time the leaves turned orange, Jasmine had disappeared, and George Caswell was squiring someone else around in his white VW convertible. I spent considerable time in discussion with authorities in the art world: critics, historians, two people in charge of acquisitions for their museums, a number of artists with solid reputations. I provided them with reproductions of George Caswell’s work. I bought a small painting of his, the highest priced on a square inch basis, and brought it with me whenever possible.

To make a longish story short, it turns out that one of the glories of art is that no one does *know*. A general consensus is established over time. Michelangelo’s sculpture is well regarded, for instance. George’s work does not appear headed for this sort of approval. Most of those I interviewed preferred not to express an opinion. A few raised their eyebrows. Several snorted outright. If there was any agreement, it was that a person professing certainty about what was important in art was either ignorant or taking advantage of the trust and innocence of others.

I confess that there have been disappointments and long days as TIDKA has struggled to learn and grow. Art, religion, the social sciences, medicine, and finance are ripe for abuse by

people claiming *to know*. Guru fraud resists exposure. There's money in it. The intangibles of ego and reputation are defended fiercely. Undercover guru fraud investigation is not for the faint hearted.

I walked into the village and stopped in a coffee shop to make notes. I'd spotted a portly man performing T'ai Chi movements in a park. I say performing, because his arms waved as though signaling an audience. Nearby, several shops specialized in crystals and assorted enlightenment material. A three fraud area at least, I noted.

TIDKA has nothing against T'ai Chi or Buddhism. No. Such practices can be most helpful; they can be, indeed, enlightening. We object to the use of them as disguise, endowing authority from which to convince people to part with money for objects, media, and services of no discernible value, not to mention the waste of time and energy and the encroachment of despair as another whack is taken at the victim's diminishing capacity for hope.

"Hi, there!" I was so involved in my thoughts that I had failed to notice a slim woman with gray hair and what appeared to be a happy smile. A lot of teeth, in any event.

"Good morning," I said, looking up.

She bent toward me, lowering her voice. "Do octal balance and the spiritual harmonies say anything to you?"

"Not recently," I managed. "But—what a coincidence! I'm researching a book on spiritual practice." She nodded and placed a business card on the table. *Astral Nyhus, C.C.C.*, a local P.O. Box, an email address, a telephone number.

"We should talk. But not now, I have to meet Daisy."

"Yes. What does C.C.C. stand for?"

"Certified Centering Counselor."

"I see. Aloha, Astral. My name is Nathaniel."

"Aloha, Nathaniel." She said my name lightly, optimisti-

cally, and left as though propelled by a sudden breeze. Certified Centering Counselor. Rich territory.

I finished my coffee and drove about, getting a feel for the country—forested mountains, rocky coast, macadamia nut orchards, former sugar cane fields grazed by plump horses and cattle. Steep sided gulches cut through to the sea. The gulches were wildly overgrown with trees and vines and all manner of tropical fruits and flowers. Tarzan country.

I stopped for a chat with Pastor Whidden who was raking the yard in front of the First Evangelical Mission, a low building made of gray cement blocks. I informed him that I was new in the area and learning about the local churches.

“I’m glad to meet you, Nathaniel.” He was tall and thin. His voice was unusually deep, pumped a considerable distance by his Adam’s apple. His hands made graceful movements as he talked about “our small gathering.” I thought him sincere. He wore no jewelry other than a gold wedding ring. An aging Chevrolet rested in the driveway. I almost hated to ask him what he thought about evolution.

“I don’t know,” he said. A smile leaped across my face, and I restrained myself from pounding him on the back. “Darwin made many accurate observations. Much has been learned since. There are arguments against aspects of the theory, but the main lines seem sound. Even so, I believe there is something miraculous, divine, if you will, about creation. Do you not think so, Nathaniel?”

“When you put it that way—miraculous—yes, in the sense of beautiful and complex beyond our understanding.”

Pastor Whidden retrieved his rake from where he had leaned it against the trunk of a mango tree and began to speak:

“And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, Let there be light: and there was light.”

“Nathaniel, forgive me. I don’t have much time this morning. Perhaps you will return to talk story or to worship with us.”

“Thank you.” I left convinced that Pastor Whidden was no fraud. It would perhaps be asking too much to expect him to join the association and occasionally wear the TIDKA button, but his name would not be published for the world to see in the *Not Recommended For Membership* list.

I drove to the village and inquired about T’ai Chi instructors. “Arthur,” said a woman at the corner vegetable stand. “Early.” She pointed across to a banyan tree in the park. “Every morning, he there.”

I thanked her and returned to my room. Jet lag and overstimulation had made me weary. A guru fraud man must be alert. I took a nap, ate lightly, and fell asleep again over my copy of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*.

In the morning, sure enough, a man was doing T’ai Chi on the grass by the banyan, but as I approached I realized that he was not the man I had seen before. He was taller, nearing sixty, wearing loose fitting cotton pants and a white T-shirt. My attention was drawn to his feet which seemed in communication with the ground as he slowly turned and shifted, rose and sank, lion, snake, heron, warrior, priest, in spontaneous succession.

“Bravo,” I called when he was done. I approached across the grass. “I’m Nathaniel.” He waited. “You must be Arthur. I’m inquiring about instruction.”

“I don’t teach,” he said.

“Too bad. You seem very good.”

"I'm just beginning."

"How long have you been practicing?"

"Thirty years."

"Very impressive. Do you have any suggestions for me?"

Arthur bent over and retrieved a baseball cap. "About what?"

"Learning T'ai Chi."

"Find someone to show you the forms. Practice." He began to walk away and stopped. "It's all in your mind. It's about emptiness, paying attention." His eyes twinkled, as though I'd asked how to get rich and he'd advised me to focus on value.

Over breakfast, I noted the incident in my log. Another miss. The *Not Recommended List* was no larger than when I'd arrived in town. I countered growing discouragement with a second cup of coffee. A guru fraud man must keep a sense of mission, maintain morale. Things were bound to improve.

No sooner had I gathered my forces than Astral Nyhus swept in. She ordered coffee, talked to four people, waved at two more, and sat at my table in a continuous whirling motion. "Mornin' Nathaniel."

"Good morning, Astral. Do you ever get dizzy? Spinning around the way you do? Doing several things at once? Amazing."

"I did overdo it in Argentina," she said. "Gauchos." Her smile was infectious.

"Ah, gauchos. Macho. Caramba. Youth." A guru fraud man must know how to empathize.

"Last summer," she said.

"Really?"

"I fell in love three times. I don't know how I got out of there. Thank heavens for the octal room. I think it was a week of deep sessions before I centered."

"Sad for the gauchos." Know when to be gallant.

"I think they were glad to see me go." She had a full but light

way of smiling that did not demand response. I have noticed that those who are unlucky in love often develop self-sufficiency.

“How old are you, Nathaniel?”

“Forty-seven.”

“So young.”

My eyebrows lifted. When I do think of myself, young is not the word that occurs to me. I thought the sadness in her tone unwarranted. “And you? You can’t be a day over forty.”

“A few,” she said. “I’m fifty-one.”

“Well! I must say, you’re a good advertisement for your service.” This was manipulative.

“Thank you. Would you like to experience the octal room?”

“I would. I intend for my book to be widely inclusive. How much do you charge?”

“It varies. Sometimes I accept an exchange of services.” She pushed her upper lip back with the tip of one finger. “I just did eight sessions for a crown. I do some pro bono work. No charge for you, Nathaniel. At least, not for the first session.”

“All right.”

“This afternoon at four?”

“Excellent.” She drew a small map and left, speaking to several more people on her way out. I recorded the contact.

At five minutes to four, half a mile up the ridge, I parked near a stucco house with spreading wings, red tile roofs, and a discrete fountain. A low sign, *Astral*, indicated a gravel walk that curved behind one wing and led to a deck and a paneled door. I rapped twice with a bronze knocker cast in the shape of a dolphin.

Astral opened the door and invited me in. I took off my shoes and entered a large room, softly lit, rather bare—a long couch and two armchairs at one end, cushions stacked in a corner, a large screen monitor, a bookshelf built into a wall, a writing desk from the eighteenth century, if I’m not mistaken. The

floor was astonishing, wide boards of a fiery red wood finished to a deep gloss.

"I've just been tuning," Astral said.

"Some floor!"

"Koa wood. Cooper doesn't fool around."

"Cooper?"

"This is Cooper's house. He is very good to let me use this space for my work." This made sense. Astral was easy in her ways, but she did not act like the lady of the manor. "I think, today, we'll work on the confidence radial." She carried several cushions to the center of the room. "We need to be seated comfortably, looking in the direction of the teleguide." She pointed at the monitor. "Would you like another cushion?"

"I think, yes." She added a cushion. I sat. A guru fraud man must be flexible. Astral stood by a control panel next to the bookshelf and dimmed the lights.

"Think back, Nathaniel. Remember when you were a boy and free to ride around on your bike?"

"I did have a bike, yes."

"Think of a moment when you were happy and confident on your bike. Maybe something good was ahead of you. You were excited but in control." The power of suggestion is remarkable; it is often employed in this sort of thing.

"Yes," I said.

"Are you riding in the country?"

"Not really—just coasting by a field, coming into town." Astral bent over a keyboard and made an entry. A two lane road appeared on the monitor, houses in the background.

"What time of day?"

"Morning." The light in the image softened and appeared to come from behind.

"Are you going fast?"

"Humming along." The foreground sharpened. The room

lights dimmed further, and I became aware of a tone delicately pitched in a middle register.

“Stay on your bike. Open to that good feeling. Let it take over.” She touched the control panel. The image on the monitor gradually changed, becoming more abstract—fields of color, the green of grass divided by a line where the road had been, small dark blocks in the distance, pale blue.

“Can you feel your legs and your arms? Your balance?”

“Yes.”

“Confidence allows us to go forward, to try new things, to work, to accomplish. You know how to ride. You learned. You took a few falls. You earned this feeling.” I heard a second tone and then a third; a chord pulsed slowly as the separate tones subtly diminished and increased in volume.

“I’m going to light an incense that will mingle with your confidence.” A smell of sandalwood spread through the air.

“You have deep reserves of confidence. You learned to walk, to drink from a cup, to run and climb and ride a bike. No matter how difficult life may be at times, you can always move to your center, breathe slowly, and feel your confidence, let it travel to the top of your head, out to your hands, knees, and feet.” Astral sat cross legged on a cushion. We were quiet for some time, although, afterwards it seemed a moment.

She rose and brightened the lights. When I looked at the monitor, the image was gone. The tones stopped. “You look cheerful,” she said.

“Yes. Filled with confidence. It’s very pleasant in here.”

“The eight CPU’s monitor and adjust the energies.”

We stepped out on the deck. Cajun music was coming from the central part of the house.

“*Bon temps roulez,*” I said.

“It’s a going away party for Henry. He’s off to Italy for a year. He’s one of Cooper’s best friends. I’m expected. Would

you like to come? It will be very fun." My guard was down. I felt rather good and didn't wish to break the mood.

"Why not?"

Astral introduced me to Cooper, a sensitive man in his thirties, a bit tired looking. Henry was short and stout, energetic. Well dressed people of various sexual persuasions milled about, half dancing, helping themselves from a buffet table. I was extremely hungry. Chocolate is one of my weaknesses. I ate three brownies, scarcely stopping to sip an interesting red wine. "Pinotage," Cooper explained. A South African variety."

"Delicious," I said. "Very dry and herbal. Good party."

More people arrived, including the lesser T'ai Chi practitioner I had seen on my first day in town. Freedom, he said his name was. "Call me Free." He was authoritative, interested in my well being. He was willing to share *The Six Truths* for a modest fee that included learning materials and lunch by a waterfall. He gave me his card.

I told Astral that I had met Free and that I thought he was a fraud. She laughed. "He's responsible for a good deal of my business. He's so awful that I look good." I started laughing, too, and had some trouble stopping.

"Who's that singing?" I asked.

"Gladys Knight and The Pips."

"My God, what a voice! What a party! Did you have anything to eat? The brownies are very good. I think I'll have another one. Would you like some of this excellent wine? Pinotage, Cooper said." I poured her a glass. Small wisps of her hair were especially attractive; they seemed to glow.

"Nathaniel? Did you notice the little sign with the H and the smiley face by the brownies?"

"I see it now," I said. "HI. Nice touch—a welcoming touch. I *like* this place. Someone forgot the I, but who needs perfect. Astral, your confidence session was remarkable. I feel fine, re-

ally fine.”

“Nathaniel—the H is for hash.”

“Hash?”

“Hashish.” She giggled. I looked more closely at her eyes, fell into them almost. They were light gray with a blue cast and tiny black flecks.

“Your eyes are amazing. So is this music. Do you dance?” Astral’s face went still—centering, I suppose—and then her head moved sideways and one shoulder lifted twice. She watched me, waiting. I raised two hands, palms out. She began to sway, and I don’t remember too much more, other than warm colors, rhythm, and Astral moving in and out as though we were invisibly attached.

We left and drove to a spot where we could look across the water toward Maui and listen to the waves crash. I confessed to being a guru fraud man. Astral found that hilarious and applied for immediate TIDKA acceptance. I showed her the button that I keep in my wallet. She promised to wear it, and I pinned it on her blouse. That led to more complications. She was very affectionate.

We ended up at her cottage. In the morning, she drove me back to Cooper’s to retrieve my rental car. Several days later, I left the island in a state of happiness.

After a period of indecision, I decided against adding Freedom to the *Not Recommended for Membership* list. At the board meeting, I reported my failure to expose fraud on the island. I tried to explain that the place had a magical quality, that the usual norms were less applicable. I offered to pay my own expenses, but they wouldn’t hear of it. They expressed the opinion that it was a run of bad luck and that I would do better next time.

Astral and I have exchanged emails, and she has invited me to visit, perhaps to stay a little longer. This morning, my hat blew off. I had a strong sense that she was thinking of me. I

walked directly home and accepted her invitation. Was it the right thing to do? I don't know.