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*Above the Houses*

Your fingers test from the smoldering, plum-colored center of impact down to the eyebrow, the swollen lid. It's just a bruise, one more thing. Reaching for your toothbrush, you grimace at your mirrored self: shiner, spiky new haircut, the shocked face of upheaval—in short, a sight.

He appears behind your image. Even now, in his gray sixties, your husband's face is fresh, like a precocious child just up from a nap. "My God, what happened to you?"

Two weeks ago, just before the move, he said the same thing about the hair.

You decide not to dwell on damage. This is his first morning on the new job, and you feel how his thoughts are already pulled elsewhere toward new colleagues, new corridors, physics in yet another academic hothouse. For you, for now, gravity is made of boxes and more boxes, a locksmith, the plumber's return, a carpenter if you're lucky.

You tell him you walked into a wall in the night. You shrug. The bedroom was dark, the door wasn't there; your body forgot you'd changed houses, that's all—nowhere near the end of the world.

"Oh, poor head." He places a gentle, salubrious kiss. "What was that story about someone's visiting relative who fell downstairs?"

"Sally's uncle."

"Terrible."

"I suppose I'm lucky."

As you bathe you are gentle with the contusion, gentle with yourself in this context of extreme change, but you are too smart to complain. You argued your case months ago; now you have agreed to do this with him. Yes, you have left behind an intact, harmoniously functioning life—city, job, friends, neighbors, doctors, stores, garden, buried pets, the works—but presumably not your wits. Your eyes widen lopsidedly at yourself in this different bathroom mirror.

Sally's old uncle got up in the night in his daughter's house; he stepped toward what he must have expected to be the same level

but fell through what was not, never regained consciousness, and three days later passed on.

The bruise throbs.

“Tom, do you think the heat is more humid here than at home?”

“This is home now.”

“Please answer my question.”

“Yes, all right, maybe. But pretty soon it’ll be cooler.”

Then you remember your dream: a job offer, to be editor of a magazine, called—was it really?—*Core and Correlative*.

You tell him.

“Joan.” He looks searchingly at you, holding your shoulders. Then he tells you that you will become reestablished here; you will find a new life, he promises you will; it’s only a matter of time.

You are supposed to be reassured; perhaps you are.

A few minutes later, clean, you sit beside him on the bed to meditate, each at your pillow station, not touching yet locked like molecules. Together you have raised two sons. Together, you are living on earth now. You close your eyes, breathing alone, yet with everyone.

Your litany of losses is a useless scrap of grocery list on a table somewhere else; you’ve already bought that food, eaten it, *moved on*. Shelters change, you tell yourself. Everything changes but what does not. What does not is why you both sit, like this. One must be ready, you have been told, *to take the final leap*.

Nearby a crow gets riled up, then another and another, flaps of sound.

It’s too early for the barking of the shut-up dog next door on the north, but the woman across the street is calling her cat again—*Nammo*—something like that. Houses here are so close the outdoor spaces feel almost like communal rooms. After only four days, you’re already wondering about the neighbors, their lives, why this woman, for example, calls her large yellow cat so many times a day. *Nammo, Nammo, Naam-mo!*

At breakfast your husband looks stoked with anticipation. The different city and house, the boxes, the nighttime wall, your promises, your children, the never-ending education of your heart are some of the consequences of loving this man. From him today you extract a promise to get the name of a good carpenter. Without more book-

shelves, you insist, neither of you will be able to survive. The fervor of your small request makes you feel somewhat better.

When his car backs out the narrow driveway between houses, the crows start cawing again, out there in the busy world rooms where you may or may not still have a part to play. In the kitchen is a hot skewed stillness, everything stationary but out of place, and nothing will be set to rights without your energy. It is a chaos you have ordered five times before, for him and for the advancement of Physics into ever more subtle realms, which funnily never changes what is always left to do, here in the kitchen where the molecules appear so big and adamant.

In your former kitchen you argued that you didn't know if you could do it again. You said to him that after a certain age trees were too old to transplant.

He said humans had legs for a reason. This was a calling.

For *him*. For you, everything would have to be put together all over again.

He said you were being called: he was calling you.

Then you looked out the window, not this present one cheek to jowl with the people next door, but into that former modest vista of flowers, linden tree, honeysuckle hedgerow. You saw the cardinal's flying flash of red to the sunflower seeds. You were crying by then. You saw Sally helping Jim, home from chemotherapy, walk from the car to their back door. Tom came up behind you and wrapped his arms around your waist, his face in your hair—the long hair you recently had. You were crying for all the lives you had learned to live nearby over the years, who made the great web that held you to your task, some for decade after decade, others only for a moment, like that baby who had been toddling alone down the sidewalk in diapers in May—how it was you, you who rushed out to him, scooped him up, saw the small handprint of blood on the bottle of juice. You covered his ears as sirens ripped the sky. It was for him you were crying that day in your old kitchen, and for his murdered grandmother, and for the students who every night all summer pushed themselves who knows where on the porch swing of love across the street, and crying, too, for the new widow with the light burning all night in the window of the upstairs room, and for Sally and Jim, good friends, good neighbors, and their long ordeal.

Welded against your husband, you were splitting apart. You were everywhere. You were missing your own children as if they had only left yesterday, a raw, wrenching loss; you didn't know how you had ever managed to part with them. You grieved the gone cat who had slept like a sandbag across your feet and the setter whose ashes had felt like an atomized replica of the old living dog, bones and silk. You were crying for the young bird, flashing back and forth like a red shuttle in the air, and for you yourself, who had moved over and over to new places, new people, each time locating yourself all over again in the mesh of life, from which someday you will necessarily be released. There was nothing left of you that day but feeling, and it had lost all of its containing walls.

You said to him, your husband, the one who was asking you, again, to do it all over again that, all right, if you were going to go, you were going to scoop up the whole compost pile and have it taken along in the moving van; you'd worked on it too long to leave it behind. Did he hear you? This was non-negotiable.

Without more than a face-down nod to you at the back door, the burly plumber from yesterday heads straight for the basement. Over his shoulder he tells you damn if he didn't lie awake all night over your venting problem. What a mother. People want to do all these fancy modern things upstairs no one ever heard of when the house was built, and then he's the one who's got to make it happen down below. Maybe he's getting too old for all this.

You follow his squat figure down the cellar stairs into cooler air. The last time you were his height might have been in sixth grade.

Yeah, he says, he's getting too old to take the headaches, they didn't used to keep him awake like this; the old houses are the worst, and the inspectors! they don't give a damn what you're up against. But anyway he thinks he's got this one worked out in his head, and he's going to be pretty proud of himself if it looks the same in the light of day as it did in the middle of the night.

He purses his lips and breathes heavily through his dark nose hairs as he shines his flashlight up along the cobwebbed network of ceiling pipes, angled every which way among the rafters, a rough filthy grid that supports the whole enterprise above where in trust you slept, where you showered, where you sat on your pillows and closed your eyes, holding to nothing, assuming you were upheld.

He paces slowly, beaming his light here and there, face tilted to the heights, an astronomer kept awake by the myriad problems in his dirty heavens.

“Well goddamn, Ernie,” he mutters, “if you don’t still got what it takes. Okay, missus, we’re in business. I’ll go get what I need outa the truck—hey!” He holds the flashlight out to the side of your face. “What happened to you since yesterday?”

You tell him about the wall.

“And that’s it? I don’t need to worry you’re in trouble, do I?”

Gratitude spills to your eyes. To be cared for by Ernie—astronomer, gnome, squat god of wakefulness on your behalf!

Music rises in your mind as you fill the kettle and several pitchers with water to tide you over while the main line is cut off: Bach, phrases of girding order. Yes, what this house needs is music, music to tell its bones who’s living here now, music to tell yourself you can be alive anywhere. So the boxes you’ll open first this morning will contain player, speakers, discs, but now do it *adagio, adagio*: the swollen eye is reminding you to be deliberate in your work, girded with order.

With your good eye you catch a glimpse of the chunky nine-year-old from the house next door to the south as she comes again through her gate and across the shared driveway, fourth day in a row, this morning in a pink leotard, feet bare. Why has she apparently attached herself this way to you and your boxes? Her name is Lily. She disappears alongside your house.

Only last week, from your former window, you watched Jim sitting in his bones in this same late August sun, in the backyard no deed of ownership will be able to save him for now, his legs folded one over the other like useless parallel walking sticks, his stick fingers lifting a cigarette to the purple crack in his cadaverous face. One of these mornings Sally will call you long-distance to say the medics came again in the night, but this time there wasn’t a cell of remaining space into which breath could be pumped.

You set the containers of water on the counter and cover them with a clean towel.

Lily arrives at the back door just as Ernie returns from his truck with some lengths of pipe.

Lily says, “Here I am again.”

Ernie says, "Can you get that door for me, sweetheart?"

After he disappears down the basement stairs, she asks, "Why did he say *sweetheart* to me?"

"Well you must be a sweetheart. Is that what you want to be?"

"Yes!"

This child is sweet, though with her thick little body and gappy front teeth and one droopy-lidded eye, she hardly seems to belong to her mother, Margot, who is startlingly, casually, opulently beautiful.

"What's that on your head?"

As you tell her, she puts a hand reflexively to her own forehead, above the droopy eye. Lily has already told you she is to be operated on for her "defect." Any opulence she has inherited from her mother shows, so far, in her cascading brown hair and the luxuriantly lashed eyes.

She comes closer. "Can I touch it?"

"All right." You bend toward her.

The tips of her fingers are like hot sunshine. "Does it hurt?"

"I'm living with it."

"I have dancing today."

"I see you're dressed for dancing. Do you like it?"

"I don't know. I guess. Mom says I have to do it for grace."

"Really! Well. I've heard it's good for that."

"What's this thing?"

"That? It's a sweet red pepper. You have peppers at your house, don't you?"

"No. All my life I've wanted to eat a red pepper."

"Well! That's a long time. Do you want a little taste now?"

"Okay. Please. I go back to school on Monday."

You watch her biting into the first red pepper of her life—can it be?—her wide-open eye surprised, her drooping eye secretive.

"Do you like the taste?"

"Yes," she says, determined.

"If you don't want it all, you can put the rest in the sink."

"Mom says Dad eats like a cowboy."

"Oh? How do cowboys eat?"

"They only eat what has legs, nothing with roots."

"Pepper plants have roots," you say.

"I knew *that*."

Lily's father, Larry, the first day you met the family, let his wife manage the conversation while he stood wide-legged and conspicuously masculine beside her in the driveway, allowing his insistent daughter up onto his back, like a good-humored horse for an overgrown rider, evidently an old game. Margot, you've been told, is in the art department at the university, film, video, something like that.

"Look!" says Lily at the sink, standing on tiptoe. "You can see right into our kitchen!"

"I know. When you're in your house, can you see into ours?"

"Yes."

"Weren't you ever in this kitchen before we moved here, Lily?"

"Nuh-uh. But I wanted to all my life."

It does seem as if she has been waiting a lifetime for your arrival, you and your boxes and red peppers and who knows what else. What are you going to do with this spontaneous trust?

"*Romeo and Juliet*," reads Lily as she takes another disc from the box. "I've heard of them."

"That's ballet music. Shall I put it on for you?"

Off goes Scott Joplin, on goes Prokofiev, and the expression on Lily's face gets more complicated.

"What have you heard about *Romeo and Juliet*, Lily?"

"I don't know. Was he her brother?"

"No, but they loved each other very much."

"Why?"

"Well . . . because nothing was more important than that, I guess. It's a sad story, though, because their parents didn't want them to love each other."

"Why?"

*Why.* How to tell a story that is so much larger than the size of itself it seems as if it could contain at least one way to look at all of history? Meanwhile, Lily's arms are lifting away from her torso, which is like a stubby piece of pink pipe, her heels are lifting, she's pointing her toes for one step and then another. In the welter of the living room you have only, it seems, begun to live in today, Lily now makes a tiny leap and thuds to the maple floor. Your heart lurches. She is like yourself. You're nine, you're fifty-nine. For you she's dancing, stepping off into air, smiling a gap-toothed smile. Her arms come together and again extend, her face collecting itself, as

she leaps once more and lands in a heavy graceless barefooted slap. Young Juliet at play, before the great love of her life.

The music continues, but all at once Lily stops. Then you see what she has seen, the beautiful woman on the other side of the front screen door, her mother, who is shading her eyes, peering into the room.

“Hello, hello? Lily, is that you? Come right away please, or you’ll be late for your class. Hello, Joan, how are you getting along? I hope you don’t mind your helper—she insisted you needed her.”

“And so I do, it seems. Come in, Margot.”

“I’m sorry to be in such a ridiculous rush. You wouldn’t believe the kind of day I’m having. Hurry now, Lily, here are your sandals.” She slides the shoes across the floor to her daughter.

You press the button that sends Prokofiev back to Moscow, Leningrad, St. Petersburg, back to the years before the war, the war that in taking your father shot away part of your own childhood, which in its absence feels sometimes like the loss of one of your own dancing feet. You became what people called a somber child.

“I got tied up on the telephone,” says Margot, her glance circling your mess. “It was Berlin. These international calls, you’ve got to take them when they come, there are so many other obstacles as it is—oh please Lily, don’t make this one of your dawdling days!” Margot is wearing blue jeans and a linen jacket whose sleeves she now scrunches higher above her silver bracelets.

Lily has sat down on the floor to buckle her sandals. Her cheeks are almost as pink as her leotard. She’s taking her own sweet time, you’re pleased to see, but you’re also anxious for her.

In the absence of the music you hear banging from the basement, metal against metal, and now that muffled barking again from the house on the north side, same as yesterday and the day before and the day before, starting about this time and continuing off and on for the rest of the day, the dog that is evidently shut up alone. You’re about to ask Margot about this other neighbor and the poor dog, but she is stirring the air with her hand to hurry the stolid pink child on the floor.

“Seventeen minutes, Lily, that’s all we have.” Then she notices your face. “Whatever happened to you! What a nasty bruise—are you all right, Joan?”

You tell the story with utmost swiftness.

“How unfortunate for you—not exactly something you need, right? Lily! I’m telling you this is not the time for the slow-motion game.” Margot slides the sunglasses down from the top of her splendidly messy mane of hair. “By the way, your haircut is fabulous,” she says. “I should do something radical like that—not that I believe it would actually simplify this frantic life of mine.”

*Adagio, neighbor, adagio.* You’re remembering Jim and his sucking breaths, the baby with the bloodied bottle dangling from his mouth. You breathe in. Out. What is your job to be now in this world?

Up from the basement come heavy steps, and in a minute Ernie in his work boots, wrench in hand, is peering in from the threshold of the kitchen. “Could you come take a look, missus?”

He looks down to Lily. “You leavin’ us, little lady?” Then he nods awkwardly toward beautiful Margot in her sunglasses.

Lily quickly finishes buckling. She scrambles up and plants herself in front of Ernie and demands of him in a bold, excited voice, “How come you didn’t say *sweetheart* to me this time? Did you just forget?”

Several hours later, the locksmith is telling you a story about folks one street over who didn’t think to change their locks when they moved in and one morning someone calling himself a carpenter turns a key and walks right in with some fancy excuse about coming back for his ladder and a few lengths of board.

“But I desperately need a carpenter right now!” you’re saying as the telephone begins ringing, ringing.

“Not like that you don’t,” says the locksmith as you get up to answer, remembering that the murdered woman hadn’t changed the locks either; the estranged husband still had a key. The baby must have seen it all.

It’s not Sally on the telephone, as you guessed, but Margot again, still rushed, also perhaps a bit apologetic, with an invitation for tonight, a very informal, very last-minute gathering that she is throwing together. You run your fingers through the strange harvested field of your hair. You thank her. You say you’ll call and ask Tom.

“Oh, and I’ve been hearing such marvelous things about your *Tom!*” She says his name as if it were the title of the latest blockbuster. “What a treat to have you with us!”

After her call you wish the plumber and the locksmith would get out; you don't even want any carpenters to show up now; you don't want neighbors to appear; you don't want to be nice to anyone's children. Alone, you want to be alone.

Before long the locksmith is indeed done, then Ernie. From their efforts the laundry machines stand ready to be loaded; the dishwasher fills and flushes; the refrigerator belches ice, a piece of which you slide now and then over your bruise; and you are the only one possessing workable keys to this house. Just let anyone try to intrude: you're locked safely in, you here with strewn possessions and over there next door—yes, there he goes again—the barking dog, a deep imprisoned *boof*.

Who would keep a dog locked up alone from so early to so late? Well, you've met him: Willard, a lawyer, and he appears perfectly sane, except of course that he seems to be working insanely long hours.

You go back to knifing open boxes, pulling out wadded papers, things and more things. This box says Table Lamps/ Living Room.

Boof! boof! Let me out!

Look at your hands, so nimble and quick, so admirably industrious: boxes today, who knows what wonderful job tomorrow!

Boof! boof! boof! boof!

You sink down onto your knees. The next box must have been labeled by a zany twin: Various Useless Objects. What a joke, who but yourself did you think would unpack it and be amused?

Boof! boof!

Folded over now in child's pose, head to knees, you are just an object, washed up with other junk, listening to the tide going out, feeling dry, feeling everything, waiting for the next wave of your small life, which seems as if it might never, this late, come again.

What? You're crying? Boof! and yet again boof! Oh, come on, don't pretend you're crying for that dog, the dog you may think is barking for you; he's not, he doesn't know you exist. You're separate. All you want is for the unhappy sound to stop. You're not responsible for that dog over there. You cover your ears, and now the barking comes as if from a far-away tomb. How compact you've made yourself—why, you could be packed into this very box! Pragmatic Female Object / Various Useful / Pack Last / Open First.

*Buried alive.*

All at once you're in motion. That dog is suffering. You stride over lawns to the neighbor's door. What are you doing? You know he's away at work. You ring the bell, wait for nothing, open the screen, try the latch on the inner door. Ah! for an instant the barking stops; then it returns, not with the steady, beaten-down anguish of before, but in hopeful frenzy, and the dog appears, clawing frantically at a window near the door. Woof! Woofwoofwoofwoof! You've made things worse!

He's a black and white mongrel, with a fringed, upturned tail. You've seen lawyer Willard, still dressed in his dark suit, release him at night into his backyard. You think you've heard the dog called Harry. Hairy? You lay your hand on the glass, over the nose of the undistinguished dog.

He scrabbles his front paws against the slippery surface. Look, he's smiling at you! Oh, there, there Hairy Harry.

You glance around, see no one, not even the woman calling Nammo the yellow cat. The next logical step, now that you've taken the first leap, is to try the back door, and you are of course logical and thorough; your calm attention to sequence and detail was praised in the Office of Admissions, your last job, in the last city, the last life, where people appeared to consider you perfectly competent and sane.

The back door is also locked. Harry, who must have raced through the house, sounds as if he is hurling his whole body springily against the inside wood panels. Next door, beyond the fence slats, your own house presents to the afternoon sun an innocent domestic rear, and the four very large galvanized steel garbage cans of hauled compost are lined up neatly at the edge of your new, very small yard.

Lawyer Willard's house has the same kind of outside basement access as your own, slanted metal doors over a sunken hatchway. Only a few days ago yours were pried open so the movers could trundle down your washer and dryer. Afterwards you had to struggle to slide shut the rusty, misaligned inside bolt, but you finally got it—all battened down to do the same old laundry in a brand new place!

Now Harry moans and claws as if his nose were at the bottom crack of the door, snuffling for a whiff of rescue from your shoes. Then he howls, Ow-woooo!

You back away. Boowoowoowoof! Oh, the outrage of being almost, but not helped!

You feel like howling. You go over and yank the handle of the cellar hatch, which should be bolted as yours is from the inside, but it comes up easily. Sunlight rains down wooden steps. You descend into a smell of rodents, dank stones, earth. You'll have to tell Willard about his unsecured hatch. No, maybe you won't. You step down *adagio*, remembering Sally's old uncle. Are you in your right mind? You turn the knob and push against the inner door to the basement, expecting firm logical resistance, but it swings toward the dark nether interior.

In you go, past washer and dryer, stacked firewood, boxes, then up and up stairs to a door behind which Harry sounds so excited he's probably peeing all over. Self-abandonment, both of you.

You crack open the door to a kitchen—linoleum tiles, table legs, a stack of newspapers, a pair of running shoes.

You're here! Harry barks, wags, whines, moans, runs in circles, barks again. You've come! Yes, it is you he's been waiting for.

But the thrill is too much, too much, he's all over the place, he'll have a fit, oh you'll never be able to handle him.

"Harry, come!" you say in a sane and commanding voice and start back down the stairs. He races past you so fast he nearly knocks your legs out from under you. At the bottom he lays nose on paws, wags hind end in air, and moans up at you. You catch hold of his collar. "All right, Harry, come along." Crouched over, you walk him across the basement and keep him restrained as you climb to the outside. The yard gate, you see, is closed. You let him go.

Flying joy! Bounding relief! Pee here, pee there, back to you, thank you, thank you, off again, pee smell pee, race with joy.

You keep yourself mostly hidden in the hatchway, dog's-eye level. Willard's yard is a baked, scruffy mess. He could use some of your compost and a few sturdy, dog-proof shrubs.

Harry's over in a far corner, digging energetically at the base of the fence. "Harry!" you say in a hoarse whisper. "Harry, come!" He keeps digging. You whistle; he turns to look at you. "Come, Harry! Come! Come here!"

All at once he's alert to something else, and a moment later you hear the siren. By now Harry is racing back and forth along the fence, stopping to howl, ow-woooo, again, again. The windows of

your new world peer down. Who on earth are *you*? Just act as if you belong wherever you are; climb out of the dungeon; walk calmly across the yard; pretend you know exactly what you're doing. That's the way. No one else needs to know how you have improvised your entire life as a woman.

The point is, the point in the potent momentous present, which is all you've got, is that, well, right now you've to get the dog back inside.

You're close to him now. He throws you a companionable look: isn't this fun? Actually it is, now that you're in the open, just doing what needs to be done. Come on, boy. You take a few playful running steps toward the hatch opening. You pick up a little stick and waggle it at him. An odorous bone would have been better, but this is what you've got, and haven't you always been given enough right at hand to put together a life?

Harry is undecided, but you're focused; you're powerfully patient; you have full attention and a magic stick, which, at the charmed moment, you throw a short distance in the direction of the open hatch. Success! Harry bounds toward it, you run after and slide your hand under his collar. Teeth clamped on the stick, tail wagging, snappy eyes watching you for what comes next: he's Harry, your new friend.

You're careful with yourself on the stairs: apparently, there's going to be more after all for you to do in this interesting world. You release neighbor Harry back into his kitchen with the magic wand still clenched in his grin.

The lips of your husband touch your forehead, just shy of the bruise. "Sorry I couldn't get away sooner." His energy feels like—well, like his energy—or, no, not quite; there might be a slight static.

For now, you only nod to him from your pillow station; eyes closed, you're already on your way, going nowhere, doing nothing, taking care of everything you can.

*Nammo!*

But, listen—no barking from a discontented dog! You smile to yourself.

Tom eases himself beside you on board the creaky bed that has borne you both through all your adult changes. He sighs, his breath-

ing slows. His energy adds to your energy, each of you now heading to the same core.

When you think again it is to think that sitting together like this, agreeing to be quiet, agreeing with the quiet, is like another way of being married.

Now clothes flap fleetingly across your mind, what to wear tonight, a thought with a tail of quick imaginings, and then adornment fades, silky even in its passing.

*Nammo! Nammo!*

With what sweet longing the woman calls for the yellow cat, over and over, calling him home.

In Margot and Larry's entrance hall you're waylaid by the glossy oak dresser at the foot of the stairs, its drawer pulls of carved curved oak leaves, on it a brass lamp with glass lampshade stained in blue irises and a rather large black and white photograph, matte finish: it's Margot against an ornate headboard, shoulders bare except for her dark shawl of hair, bed sheet loosely gathered in her right hand just over her breasts. She's looking directly at the camera. On her lap is an open book. There are other books and newspapers at the foot of the bed. Tucked against her left side in the chiaroscuro of her arm is a diminutive Lily, at the age of three or so, her eyes trained up on her mother.

"That was out near Missoula," says Larry's voice over your shoulder. "Where Lily was born. And conceived. Up there in the mountains."

You turn to face his considerable height, barrel chest, thick dark hair, large handsome face.

"That seems like a lovely beginning."

"Great air."

"You miss it?"

"You bet I do. I'm working every day on getting my girls back there."

Already he has spoken twice as many words as he did the day all of you first met in the driveway, when Margot seemed to be talking for everyone.

"So tell me," he says to Tom, "how did you get this lady of yours to follow you around?"

Tom can almost always be counted on to be amiable in company, courteous, equable, even though you're pretty sure he would be just as happy, or even happier, to be alone and undisturbed in the refreshing universe of his mind. "Well," he says pleasantly, then looks to you. "How exactly did that work, Joan?"

Probably only you can hear the slight interference in his energy tonight. You look back at him steadily. "This time the deal maker was the compost pile."

For having made it easy for both of them you are rewarded with laughter.

"Well, come on and meet some folks," says Larry.

You glance to your left down a little hall where people gravitate around a candlelit table. No children. "Where's Lily tonight?"

"Somewhere in the corral, upstairs most likely." Larry leads you to the living room where Margot's voice spikes above others.

As you draw closer to the group gathered around Margot in her red-orange summer dress and recognize the story she is telling, you hope that Lily is not only upstairs but safe in her room with the door closed and her head clamped between earphones full of her favorite music. Margot has come to the moment when Lily demands that Ernie call her *sweetheart* again.

"Will someone please explain to me how I could have produced such a retrograde daughter? I mean, what is this? What is the point of revamping womanhood no pun intended if your own girl child can't wait to trash all your efforts? Does she think I'm going through all this for *myself*? And then on top of everything she tells us tonight that she wants to be Juliet when she grows up. Juliet! Please, will someone tell me what's happening here?" Margot is laughing. Her face is flushed, shining. With both hands she rakes up her hair, shakes it out as if to cool her neck, and lets it fall again.

Then she catches sight of you and Tom. "Well, here's Joan, she was there, she'll tell you—Joan and Tom, everybody, our new next-door neighbors—who was that gorgeous ugly man anyway, Joan?"

"Ernie, the plumber." Heads turn to you and you feel even more the burn of your naked bruise, the prickly gamin shortness of your hair.

"My progressively raised daughter, romanced by Ernie the plumber!" Margot pretends to sigh. "Is this a chaotic world or what? Help us, Tom, you're the scientific expert. Should we reformers just throw up our hands?"

“Well, no,” says Tom, and you feel him struggling to repack what he knows into the party-going moment. His gaze shifts slightly above heads as if he were at this very instant formulating the equation that would roll up his beloved ten dimensions into a recognizable four. Then he takes a deep breath, perhaps, yes, a slightly tired breath. “Aren’t we all a bit like the blind people trying to understand the elephant? Even what seems like chaos could be just a segment—”

“Oh, don’t you just love it—a cosmic elephant!”

Margot is more drunk than you realized.

Then you notice Larry, his broad stance, his look that says *steady now, we’ve handled this before*, like a man with a lasso, possessing his wife with his eyes, gauging, playing the rope. You can almost see these two in their love-making, grappling with questions of hierarchy, a little roughly perhaps, then his hand coming down over her mouth, all her bravado reeled in, under.

Now Margot’s audience is dispersing into buzz. A moment later a predacious nasal voice nips at your side, as if singling you out as the most vulnerable ruminant on the edge of the herd. “And so what do *you* do to justify your existence?”

You turn to a stubby man with popping eyes, a wide toothy mouth, a shirt of bilious green, three pens in the pocket, bulky arms akimbo, stubbornly squared up too close to you.

“Right now I’m listening to you—does that count?”

“Ha, ha,” says the man, neither laughing nor backing off. “Seriously, though.”

Where’s courteous Tom when your life needs saving? Over there, involved; he’s involved. And tonight he does look—well, older. You try to catch his eye.

You take a breath, but amazingly it’s your smoldering bruise that speaks out. “Seriously? Seriously I’m exhausted because we’ve just moved and also right now I’m seriously parched. I must get something to drink.”

Your knight stays on the other side of the room.

The short man edges closer. “My wife’s not here tonight. She says she can’t stand to go to parties with me anymore.”

Your astonishing bruise speaks again. “Then why don’t you come in two cars in case she needs a fast get-away?”

“Ha, ha. I can tell you’ve thought this one out.”

“Not seriously.”

“What happened to you anyway? Who did you knock heads with?”

“I can assure you it is not an exciting story.”

“No? Well, I’ve been teaching public high school for twenty-seven years. You can’t surprise me with anything.”

“Twenty-seven years, that’s dedication.”

“My wife should hear this. Dedication sounds better than insanity. I’m walking out the door tonight and what does she say to me? She says I’d be better off in general if I didn’t open my mouth. What does she know? Let me ask you something. Are you aware that democracy does not I repeat does not work in the classroom? I challenge you to prove that it does. And you can’t tell me it works in marriage either.”

“Democracy? Democracy. I’m afraid I really must have a drink of water before I can talk any more. Do you suppose you could point me in the direction of the bar?”

“Ha, ha, very clever. Don’t worry, you have not succeeded in offending me. I only give offense. Go through that door. You are hereby released.”

Abruptly he lurches away, he who must also be part of Tom’s immeasurable cosmic elephant, along with you and everyone else. For one moment you imagine calling him back, lonely, narcissistic little man, salving him with kindness, but you really must head first toward saving your own life.

At last you have it, water lovely water; you drink and drink and then hold the glassy coldness against your battered brow. No, not *battered*, come on, you whose man has never lifted a hand against you, whose only failings toward you have come from preoccupation and partial sight.

The grandchild of the murdered woman wasn’t even crying. His teeth were clenched around the nipple of the bottle. His eyes told you nothing, everything.

Across the congested dining room you now notice the keeper of your hairy friend Harry, lawyer Willard, gesticulating, his brow furrowed, as he makes a no doubt very important point. Oh, the cares of the world, and who looks out for the elephantine whole of it, who remembers the mongrels shut up alone while the public work goes on?

You sidle out of the possible line of Willard's vision. You graze on some green and purple grapes and then attach yourself to what appears a benign group. You're missing your old friends so much you could weep, those dear friends in all the places you've lived who are not here, who knew you, who know you.

It was Sally who helped you with the toddler while the bodies were carried out and the lights flashed and the yellow tape was pulled from tree to tree. The crowd grew. Word passed from mouth to mouth. He shot her, he shot himself, restraining orders don't restrain, he was crazy, she asked for it, he used his own key, incredible.

Listen to this, you should have told the locksmith today; listen, citizen, and weep.

Someone is asking you how you like it here, in their fair city—but isn't it daunting to move in during the dog days?

"Dog days?" Your pulse skips. "I haven't heard that expression in a while." You glance across the room at the back of Willard's head.

Just wait a few weeks, you are told, September and October are often the nicest months of the year here.

A light flashes peripherally. A woman in tank top and overalls is taking photographs. She approaches your group, not talking, just clicking adjusting clicking, a young woman, tan strong arms, streaked short hair, coming closer, clicking. Now it is you she is focusing on, the side with the bruise, the flash coming nearer and nearer, no questions, just documentation.

All at once your hands fly to your face.

"Sorry," she says, touching your shoulder. "I get carried away. That's a beauty you've got. I'd love to back you up against the wall and take it straight on. Would you let me do that?"

"It was a wall I walked into in the middle of the night."

"Really?" She's thinking about her photograph. "Over there. Please, it will just take a minute. Do you have any idea how marvelously dramatic you look?"

She's about the age of your beloved sons; she's just trying to make her way in the world, seeing small things and wanting to show something larger. You shrug. "All right." You let her line you up against the white wall of the hallway.

"Beautiful, beautiful." She clicks again and again. "Now turn your head just a bit that way, that's it, that's it. Wonderful. Let me tell

you I hope I look as great as you when I'm old. So, a wall? Then you haven't learned to walk through them yet?"

"No! Is that something old ladies are supposed to know how to do?"

"Sorry. I've got some far-fetched ideas about the age of wisdom, I'm afraid. What is your work, by the way? You look as if you've done interesting things."

"My work? Ah, yes. My work." But now your willful bruise has nothing to volunteer. It's up to you: self-characterization, which feels impossible.

"Hey! Sophie!" A woman calls from the other end of the hallway. "Hurry, we've got something for you."

"Oh, I'd better run see." She holds out her hand. "I'm Sophie. Obviously."

You say your name, you shake her firm young hand.

"Joan," she says. "Thanks so much. I'll try to catch you later. You could walk up Margot's stairs if you want to see some of my prints—tell me what you think."

Black and white, minimal, rising by steps as the stairs rise, the photographs frame close-up bits of the vegetable world in contiguous harmony with cropped segments of man-made objects, natural and crafted, arranged to go together but also revealed as if discovered for what they are. Stem, thorn, leaf, frond, petal and petal, flower; spindle, knob, mullion shadow, mirror, spoon, leaf of book, book: a few pieces; enough.

They're very good photographs. You don't care any more about having been used. Anyway, what better for old ladies than to be found good for something?

You're eye-level now with the upstairs hallway; obliquely across, sitting splay-legged on the floorboards of a bedroom, still dressed in the pink leotard, is Lily, her hair wildly half-up, half-down. She's not listening to music, but making her own vigorous singsong.

"Good girl, Dolly. Now you can eat; eat this Dolly. Chompy, chompy, chomp. All right! That's enough, you'll get fat. You'll get too fat to jump! Stop now, *bad girl*. Go to the stable!"

She doesn't notice until you lean in the doorway and speak. "Hello, Lily. What's your horse eating tonight?"

"Oats and cookies."

“Did she go over all those jumps?”

Lily nods. The obstacle course is made of Legos. A dozen or so plastic horses are nosed up against the bed skirt. As you come closer you scent warm child skin and hair, redolent little girl crotch.

“How was your dancing lesson?”

“Okay, I guess. I don’t like it very much.”

“Oh? Well, that’s important, how you feel.”

Lily is looking at you more intently. “Did Mom cut the cake yet?”

“I didn’t see a cake, Lily.”

“I’m supposed to get a piece. She said I had to wait—she always says that.”

“I see. Well.” You pick up a horse. “What’s the name of this one?”

“Brucey-boy. I’m going to get a real horse, did you know that?”

“You are!”

Lily nods. She rests her head sideways on the bed. Fiery-cheeked, she looks exhausted. “Dad says when we go back out West I get to have one of my own.”

“Oh! You’re moving away? When’s that going to be?”

“I can’t know that.”

“Well, I would miss you, Lily, if you went away.”

Are you telling the truth? You miss your own children. You miss those fecund, packed years, the bliss of sleeping that close together, the clarity of the work of keeping everyone together under one roof.

You smell the living heat of this child. You hear party sounds rising through the floorboards, up the stairs.

All right, what’s your job, right now, with this child of another man and woman?

All at once Lily bends her knee toward her chest, flexing her toes upward, and then, glancing toward you, slides her heel quickly, too quickly, along the floor and into the row of plastic horses. Sideways they fall, each into the next, clattery, clattery, clack. The bed ruffle flounces over some of the heads. Then, like a battle, it’s over.

Again she rolls her eyes up to you, one pupil almost lost under its droopy lid. Her look tells you everything, nothing.

A man laughs at the foot of the stairs, and a woman—yes, Margot—keeps talking.

It's as if Lily has challenged you. All right—but—you step to a window where, in front of a nighttime view of houses and trees, a gauzy curtain panel has been gathered into a knot in the center of the glass. The fine white material falls into a knuckle of itself, loops back into hiding and spills out again like the end of a sash girded around a waist.

The call comes from outside the window, away from the party.

"Oh, Lily, listen to that. Have you ever made friends with the cat across the street?"

"No," she says, not diverted, not moving—she has already made her move; now she's waiting. You see now how difficult a child she can be, how needy. Shouldn't this family be left to itself?

Once more you face the window. Directly across the driveway is one of the guest rooms where Eric and Andrew, perhaps soon with wives, will sleep when they visit. The very names of your sons recall you to their essence, but the day-by-day stories of their lives, which once you and Tom thought you knew so well, come to you now in dribs and drabs, like books with pages, even whole chapters, missing.

"Where do you think that cat hides, Lily?"

Lily does not move. The horses lie where they have fallen.

*Nammo!*

The flow of love toward your children is as native to you as the simple flow of your own blood, more natural, in truth, than the long cultivation of love for your husband.

"Well, I think the cat hides under the porch. I'm guessing he has a secret place where he goes in and out."

"Why?" demands Lily, and as you turn to her you see she has picked up the horse called Brucey-boy and is walking him, clop, clop, across the floor to her lap, which is a start anyway, a new beginning.

But all at once Margot's voice is calling *just a sec*, as if to someone below, and footsteps are hurrying on up the stairs, and then she is bursting through the doorway of the bedroom like a flower made of hair and skin and jewelry and red-orange cotton with a plate in her hand, a plate of cake. "Okay, Lily, here is—Joan, you, too!—I should have brought more—oh, God, my head." She slides the plate onto the nightstand and then in one motion collapses sideways on the bed.

“These parties. Why do I think I have to keep putting together these everlasting *occasions*? What do I expect—something *life-changing*? Dream on. God, I’m dizzy, I’m swimming, I’m falling apart. What heaven it is up here—so quiet!”

For a moment you are all held in the quiet. You see the awkward beauty of the child on the floor and reclining behind her the full-blown beauty of the woman.

Then Margot props up her head in her palm. “Lily, you’re not in your pajamas yet, what have you been doing? Phew! You need a bath—do you know that? Doesn’t your mother take care of you?” She takes out Lily’s hair clip and begins to stroke the back of her head, playing with the disorderly mass.

“Can someone please tell me what this thing is about parties? Why do they always seem so redundant? It’s like they’re over before they even start.” Margot’s not looking at you, but talking as if to no one, or to her daughter’s hair. “Not that they’re not dangerous anyway. I don’t know why I put myself through all this. I’ve got no skin anymore, I’m losing my nerve—me!” Absently she lifts a handful of Lily’s hair and lets it fan downwards. “What a waste.”

You feel like no one, just a stranger at the nighttime window. You don’t know if you can do it again: city, neighborhood, lives and more lives, your own, again.

“Don’t think I don’t know what they’re saying about me,” says Margot. “I do, but I simply refuse to identify with what other people say.” She draws a veil of Lily’s hair over her own face, dramatically. Lily does not resist.

Then all at once Margot brushes away the hair and sits up. One foot knocks aside the body of a horse, but she doesn’t seem to notice the tumbled stable. “Well, all right—what they’re saying is that I don’t really know anything, that I’ve just taken *their* materials and sexed them up. Can you imagine anything so silly? As if the idioms aren’t there for the taking! It’s hardly stealing, and it’s not just rearrangement, either: it’s alchemy. They have no idea what it takes, the heat—”

She snatches the plate of cake and begins to eat, one frosted forkful and then another. “I use the vocabulary, I submit it to the fire, call it whatever you want, the point is they’re afraid of it, I’m not the same kind of player they are so they think I can’t play at all—”

“Mom! Mommy!”

Margot is eating cake with a vengeance: sugar, sugar, and to hell with everything else. Her legs below the froth of red-orange skirt are spread out like slender tanned bridges over sleeping or dead cavalry, her sandals are slipping off.

"They say I'm merely suggestive," she says with her mouth full. "Well, of *course* I'm being suggestive, that goes without saying, that's the *whole point*."

You are nodding. You open your mouth to speak.

"Mom!" Lily is knocking her horse against her mother's leg.

"Up to now," Margot goes on, "I've always thought that what I had inside was so much stronger than anything that could happen to me from outside that all I had to do when the going got rough was use my own strength on myself first, get juiced up all over again, but now it's like I'm losing my nerve, I can't get to what I need to get to anymore—*what* Lily? Stop it! Damn it! Why are you pounding on me?"

"Mom, you ate all my cake, you ate it! Brucey-boy and I are *mad at you!*" Holding the horse by a rigid foot, she bounces his head up, up, up toward her mother's face. "We are very, very *disappointed* in you!"

Irritably, Margot pushes down the horse and then looks as if for the first time at the plate. Her expression changes. "Oh, God, Lily, I'm sorry, what am I doing—well, look, it's gone, I'm sorry. Be a trouper and go get yourself some more—tell you what, bring some for all of us, we'll have a sweets feast up here, just us girls—go on down, Lily, there's tons of cake—go on, go on!"

With a bared foot Margot tries to pry up her daughter's pink-clad behind. "Go *on!* This isn't the end of the world, and you know it."

Finally Lily hauls herself up and still carrying Brucey-boy by one leg trudges from the room. *Done this before*, says her thickly disappointed body, *done this before and before and before*.

"I'm a maternal delinquent," says Margot, with a kind of shudder. "I should just let him take her and go back out to his everlasting wide open spaces, they don't need me, they'd be better off, the two of them, you can't believe how much alike they are."

"Surely they need you. Of course they do! How could they not?" You realize you are wringing your hands.

"No, trust me, I'm redundant."

No, you're drunk, you want to protest—you don't know what you're talking about! But maybe she does. You are silent. Your bruised forehead pulses. It feels as if the whole world is streaming into you through that most tender place, and you don't know what you're supposed to do with it.

Sitting slumped on the edge of the bed, Margot is like a boneless cloth doll. Her hands lie loosely in her lap. "You want to know something?" She raises luminous, dark-rimmed eyes. "When I was pregnant with her, it was *him* I felt invaded by—honestly! And when she was born, you can't imagine what a shock it was to look at her and see an exact tiny version of his face. How did he do it? I said to myself. I'm erased!"

You do not contradict Margot to say that she appears to be the least erasable of women.

"It's like the two of them were born for each other. Neither of them sees *me*. So I say to myself, all right, I can be independent—I've already had to be incredibly independent in my life—but you know what? It doesn't work that way. I'm so tied up with them I don't know who I am anymore—it's like something essential is being sucked away. My creative work is suffering, and he doesn't care. All that is totally secondary to him. He wants me here when he gets home. And he says I'm getting fat—me!"

As if noticing the fallen horses for the first time, Margot bends over and sets one back on its feet and then another and another until the whole line is back in formation, at their invisible feeding station.

"I'm afraid I'm going to have to live away from him, Joan. He doesn't have my best interests at heart, he really doesn't, and I can't go on losing myself like this. It would mean leaving Lily because he couldn't exist without her, I know he couldn't, but I could adjust if I had to."

Suddenly she stands up and shakes the cake crumbs from her skirt. "This is ridiculous. I'm so sorry. I've got to stop talking and get back downstairs. What on earth is taking Lily so long? Oh, God, I've got to stop drinking, I know I do, I know it weakens me, and I need my strength, I'm going to need all of it."

"Yes, that's true, I feel the same way."

"About what?"

"Strength."

“Yes,” she says, nodding. But does she sound disappointed? Did she want you to say that you, too, even at your age, feel that you must leave your husband in order to be yourself?

Margot goes over to Lily’s dresser and brushes her hair vehemently in front of the mirror. She rubs her front teeth with a forefinger. “All right, I’m out of here.” Then, armored once more, she meets your eyes.

“Don’t look so shocked, Joan. This is not the end of the world.”

You find the bathroom, close the door and try to collect yourself. If only, you think, breathing itself were enough.

Over the wash basin is a broken mirror, a network of random cracks radiating from an off-center point. The kaleidoscope of yourself looks as startled as if the shattering were just now occurring. Once upon a time, maybe like that, the world was created, and now—and now is it really left to itself, the created ones left entirely to the mercy of each other? You run cold water over your hands and press them against your flushed face. No shard of glass, you notice, has fallen; all still are held within the one white frame.

Downstairs the entrance hall is empty. The eyes of Margot in the bed in the photograph do not see you, but only show her with your eyes seeing herself.

Corralled on her father’s lap in an easy chair in the living room, Lily licks up the last bites of a piece of cake. Brucey-boy lies in her lap, his four plastic legs stiffly in the air. Lily’s own dirty bare toes curl up; she holds her plate close to her chest.

Next to Tom on the couch is a space the size of you, to which you home, molecule to familiar molecule; he lifts his arm for you to lock into place against his side. You wiggle your fingers in greeting to Lily and overhear her father say the word *gun* to an attentive young woman on a hassock near his knees, but you know it is not the sort of gun the estranged husband carried when he unlocked that door in your old neighborhood, the old key in the old lock; no, Larry’s gun would be fired legally across a wide outdoor space toward the brain or the heart of a wild animal.

Next to you Tom is listening—patiently, good teacher that he is—to a bearded young man who is tipped forward in a rocking chair.

“Then the dualities you say are like lenses?”

“That’s it.” Tom is nodding. “You look through the math and what seemed different is now actually shown to be the same.”

“That ought to give me something to mull over while I’m working.” Now the bearded man smiles at you.

Tom says, “Joan, this is Douglas, and you’re going to be extremely pleased to know who Douglas is.”

“Okay. I’m ready to be extremely pleased.”

You’re keeping half an eye on Lily, who wipes her forefinger through the last blob of frosting and then holds it in her mouth, sucking. Her eyes are glazed.

“Douglas is a carpenter, cabinet-maker really, and he’s said he can help us.”

“What a godsend! Oh, I am pleased.” You hear yourself describe the desperately needed shelves, while you notice that with no more sugar on her plate Lily now looks slack and combustible.

Larry, trailing his fingers up and down her back, seems as absent-mindedly devoted to her as he might be to a dog: he likes her there in his lap, you think; he likes his lap full of the heavy pink sensation of his daughter while he keeps on being listened to by the rapt young woman on the hassock—guns, whatever. Yes, you are right: his arm tightens around Lily as she starts to get up with her empty plate, he pulls her back, tickling her.

“Where are you going, girly girl, just where do you think you’re going?” he says in a loud voice, tickling her until she collapses back against him.

Conversations around them taper off.

“More cake!” Lily shrieks between giggles.

“Then you’ll have to get some for everybody. You’ll have to bring back the whole goddamn cake.” Larry keeps tickling until Lily is gasping for breath.

As if from air, Margot alights on the arm of Larry’s chair and pulls the plate firmly from her daughter. “Enough, both of you!”

Tom nudges your shoulder. “Aren’t you tired?” he whispers hopefully.

You see the battle that is on its way, the horses just cresting opposing hills, thundering down on the chubby, pink, overwrought princess who is about to be torn limb from limb.

“Just a sec,” you say to your husband, and in that second you’re on your feet with your hand held out to the child.

“Could I possibly borrow Lily for a minute?”

Surprised, Larry loosens his grip. Still balanced on the arm of the chair, Margot holds the empty plate aloft, over all their heads. Lily struggles to get her weight up on her feet, and then, still clutching Brucey-boy, she takes your hand.

“What?” she demands in a high, excited voice.

“A project, Lily.” You speak quietly as you lead her to the front door. “I’m going to need you tomorrow.”

Behind you the party buzz starts up again. Someone else is insisting on cake—more cake! Finish it off—Margot’s voice—get that wretched thing out of here!

Glancing back, you see that Margot herself, collapsed red-orange poppy, has slid bottom-first into Larry’s lap. She swings a casual leg close and closer to the hassock where the young woman is still perilously stuck.

What a relief to close the screen door behind you! Outside a warm creamy nighttime light coats the neighborhood. There are stars enough to comment on to Lily, a mango-colored moon in the blue-black sky, and across the street in an upstairs window the large yellow cat, lying like a sphinx beside a lighted table lamp.

“What project, where are we going?”

“Just my back yard. Be careful in your bare feet.”

Together you walk down the shared driveway where only a few days ago you first met Lily and Margot and Larry. You see the heads of people through the windows, then the flare of a flash. Someone laughs loudly, but out here the sound is smaller.

Lily still holds your hand. She makes Brucey-boy gallop through the air beside her. “Do you know what? I could have a real horse back here. There’s way enough room, but they won’t let me.”

“What would you name a real horse, Lily?”

“Romeo!”

“What if it’s a girl?”

“I don’t know.”

“Juliet?”

“No, I get to be her.”

In the dusky yard that is now yours, you lift the cover from one of the garbage cans. A heavenly smell rises. “All right, here we go. Do you know what this is?”

Lily reaches in. “Dirt.”

“Sort of. It’s compost.”

“What’s that?” She reaches in again, sort of dreamily, and lets the dark stuff sift through her fingers.

“Compost is like black gold. It makes a garden do wonderful things—do you want to help me spread it?”

“Yes!”

“All right then. We have a deal. First thing tomorrow.”

“You could have a horse in your yard, too,” she says as you walk together back toward the front of the houses. She’s wiping her hand on the belly of her leotard.

People stand talking on Margot and Larry’s porch and sidewalk. The party is dissolving. All at once you hear a familiar barking, and the dog comes tearing down the driveway toward you.

“Harry! Harry, where are going? Harry!” It’s lawyer Willard, on his tail.

Harry’s nosing all over your legs now, quivering his fringed tail, smiling up at you; he’s all but calling you by name.

“Well, for goodness sake,” says Willard, stopping short.

“Hello there, doggy, how-do-you-do?” You reach down and Harry buries his wet nose in your cupped hands.

There are no messages on the answering machine, no bits of story from the lives of your sons or your friends. This day is almost done. You are alone with your husband, who says, “Aren’t you coming up now?”

“I only need a minute to walk around down here and talk to the house.”

“Talk to the house?”

“Humor me, Tom, I’m new here.”

The objects in the dim living room look mildly out of place, like pieces of luggage in a way station. The music plays without sound. A back window has been left open. As you cross to close it, a breeze pushes toward you, laced with threadlike currents of the coolness to come. Otherwise, the air is still laden with summer’s sweaty work of churning out the end of itself, all that vegetation finishing its cycle, transpiring silently, a great dark animal at night, wakeful, efficient, forever optimistic.

You lower the window and turn its lock. You make sure the back door is locked, and just then a feeling of relaxation spreads through

you: the heaviest part of this move is accomplished now; you're once again in a place, toiling in the present. The house is a good house. You can do what you need to do anywhere.

You turn down the hallway from the kitchen and see that Tom is waiting for you at the foot of the stairs, one hand on the newel post, his thoughtful head bent, his shoulders uncharacteristically slumped. He stands as if in the future, at the end of a passageway, by stairs you, yes you, will come to climb alone night after night. Wait! You want to beg. Not so fast, not yet! But of course it's not yet. The long view is kindly shuttered off. Your mate is holding out his arm for you, and you slide into place. Doubly you climb, in near-unison.

He says, "That was okay, wasn't it, as far as parties go? I'm glad we found a carpenter anyway."

"Mm-hmm. He seems smart. And trustworthy. I liked the beard."

"You did?" Tom's steps are heavy.

"You sound tired."

"Aren't you?" His arm on your shoulder is heavy.

And suddenly you are remembering what Sally confided to you, just before you moved, about the last time—which soon became evident would really be the last time—she and Jim made love, how all the elements miraculously came together, almost as if the illness and any difficulties between them had been left in a different room. Jim even had some moments of thinking that he was going to get well. It was amazing, Sally told her, it was like accepting, so briefly and at such a late hour, the gift of ease.

You say to Tom, as you are undressing, "If it weren't so late, I'd call Sally."

Slowly he unbuttons his shirt. He pulls off a shoe and lets it drop. Then half-undressed, he lies back on the bedspread. He doesn't move; his eyes seem to be fixed on the featureless ceiling.

"Tom?" You lie down and curve yourself around his head. "Something happened?"

"Not exactly."

You wait. You are watching his broad forehead, his eyelids and fine cheekbones, the bridge of his nose, the stubbled curve of his upper lip. Now he rolls to face you. "Tell me you're all right, Joan. Tell me it's all right we came here."

“What are you saying? Is it all right for *you* to be here?”

“Yes, I guess so. Just talk to me a little while. Humor me. Tell me anything.”

“Well, all right, you want to hear a shaggy dog story? Here’s a real one.”

When you are finished he says, “You did that?”

“I confess.”

“You sure had yourself a full day.”

“Now your turn, you talk.”

“I could go to sleep—just like this. You smell good.”

“Not yet.” You nudge him. “Start talking—what happened today?”

He sighs. “I think I must be getting old. Everybody looked so young. And ambitious, so ambitious. Are we old?”

“Yes. No.”

“Maybe I should grow a beard—how d’you think I’d look in a beard?”

“Keep talking, get beyond the beard.”

“Long day, long day. It started when I walked into my new office this morning. I couldn’t believe we’d actually picked up and come here. Everything looked, I don’t know, flat, a little drab, sort of bureaucratic.”

“The people are all right?”

“The people are fine, the set-up is fine. It’s me. It’s as if I’ve pulled back from things. Does this make any sense to you?”

“I think so.”

He’s quiet. His breathing slows.

“Tom, don’t go to sleep yet.”

“What’s happening to me?”

“Maybe at this stage some dispassion is all right?”

“Yes, but why did it have to be on the first day! Couldn’t I have enjoyed a little bit more glory first?”

“You’re a piece of work, you know that?”

“Yeah, well you, too, but you’re a prettier piece.”

You stroke your hand down his cheek, along his shoulder, his arm, you take his hand in both of yours and hold it against your breast.

And just then, as the tips of your own fingers happen to touch, your two hands covering his, there’s a little jump of recognition

between them, like a deep avowal, as if long-estranged beings had been tapping from both sides at once of a door that has simply dissolved, the skin on one side sure now that it is the same as the stuff on the other.