

SHELTER

DURING THE WEEK there's a very bad storm. After a few days I work up enough courage to go over to my mother's house. My heart almost stops. A huge tree has crashed down across the roof. The place is in ruins. "Mom! Mom!" I shout, clambering frantically in the rubble. "Hello?" a voice calls from out back. "Mom?—" I shout. I rush around past the battered flowerbeds. Another leafy behemoth has toppled across the backyard. Beside it stands my mother. "Are you all right?" I cry, running up to her. "Oh, a little flung about, but surviving," she says gamely into my chest, as I hug her. "And how are you, my darling?" "But what's all this?" I ask, turning from her and staring. A primitive but highly decorated shelter has been rigged up under the massive branches. My mother's telltale, inexorable hand shows—in the awful colored-glass knick-knacks strung among the leaves, in the crocheted cushions plumped about, the ribbon-cinched twigs, the frilly rocking chair beside the frilly, much-repaired tea cart. "You can't possibly be *living* out here," I protest, flabbergasted. "I most certainly am," says my mother. "I'm not going to be penned up with a herd of perfect strangers in some high school gymnasium." "But Mom—" I protest, taking in the full horror of the inventory under the branches. "This is all so—so eccentric—and—*shabby*." "Excuse me," replies my mother haughtily, "shabbiness and eccentricity are in the eye of the beholder! A very blind and stupid beholder," she adds. I hear her morosely. "You couldn't get the neighbors to help out?" I ask in a lame way. "The neighbors have enough worries of their own," she says. "As do you." "Yes, I suppose," I admit. "But under the circum— Now wait just a minute," I burst out. I march a few steps in the grass. "What in hell are these doing here?" I demand, gesturing savagely at where, like ghouls resurrected from the remotest, most lugubrious pit of my childhood, my last pair of dolls sit against the case of my mother's sewing machine, grinning with shiny sentimentality. "They're lovely," says my mother. "They're keeping me company. They give me someone to talk to in the gloomy hours." "They give you someone to talk to!" I repeat, pronouncing the words with appalled amazement. I put my hands to my

head. "Mom, this is monstrous," I tell her. I bend and snatch the dolls up. "Put those down this minute," my mother demands. "Mom, if anyone should see these out here—" I protest. "They're mine, I shall do what I want with them," she replies. "Mom, these are my old, hideous dolls!" I plead. "They *were* yours, they're mine now," she says. "I've lovingly fixed them good as new, and don't you dare harm a hair on their pretty heads. Put them back." "Jesus, Jesus . . ." I mutter. I drop the dolls into the grass. "That's not how you found them," my mother says. I roll my eyes. I give the dolls a rearranging shove with my foot. "*Not* like that," she says. I throw my hands down in exasperation, and slouch off towards the house. "I don't know why you're entitled to such dramatic moods," my mother declares, stooping and propping the dolls back in their place. "I'm the one who should be sitting howling in despair." I don't answer. I stand contemplating the torn roof beams and crushed walls, which had once been home, before the storm. "What an unmitigated disaster . . ." I mutter. "What's that?" says my mother. "I said: what a disaster," I repeat somberly. "Yes, of course, but we learn to keep going," my mother says. "I happen to be a hopeless optimist. I believe *everything* has a bright side, if you learn how to look for it. I've even found beauty in that mass of horror there," she declares, gesturing at the house. "And if you ask me nicely, I just might extend you the privilege of showing you some of the very beautiful drawings I've recently made." I turn from considering the ruins and come back slowly towards her, staring. "I don't have to show you," she says. "All right," I protest. "All right, I'll see them. But since when have you started making *drawings*?" "Never mind," she says. "I certainly wouldn't want you to do me any favors." "Mom, I would like to see the drawings," I tell her, slowly and fiercely. I watch her stoop back into the brocaded depths under the branches. With a pang of despair I note the carpet slippers she wears, festooned with pompons by her own hand. She comes out with some sheets of paper. "Nothing but compliments please," she instructs me. Helplessly I look at the drawings. Each one provokes an ache of poignancy and utterly unique horrors. "They're masterpieces," I tell her, flatly, quietly, handing them back. She shrugs. "For my humble part I think they're rather beautiful," she says. "I love them," I murmur, wandering off down the tree trunk. I step over the dolls and lean with my shoulder against a branch, my arms folded. I sigh, in long stages, staring off at the eerie, rippled agitations left over above the horizon. "So young

and so sad," says my mother from behind me. I give a listless, melancholy snort of amusement. "Tell me," I ask her, not turning around. "Honestly. Do you understand what goes on with the sky at all?" "In all of my sixty-seven years," she says quietly, "never. Never once. . . ." The two of us stand gazing out at the unfathomable, remorseless, yellowish grey heavens. "Did I tell you," I ask, "that last evening, over my way, the wind or something had pushed the clouds into the shape of an elaborate dirty joke?" "What?" says my mother. She turns and stares at me. "You like to pull your poor old mother's leg, you nasty, nasty boy. . . ." she says after a while.

CEMENT

I am at the beach with my mother. I bury her up to her neck in sand. "All right, now please let me out," she says finally. "It's hard to breathe." "Only if you pay me a tremendous amount of cash," I inform her, teasing. I start to dig her out; but I can't. The sand is like stone. It's turned to cement. "Please, stop joking, get me out," my mother pants. "I can't breathe." "I'm not joking, something's wrong," I protest. I scratch at the cement desperately. I pound on it with my fists. The surf surges around us, splashing my mother in the face. "Help me, help me" she bleats wildly. "I'm trying, I can't do anything!" I cry. "I'll have to get help!" I rush down the beach, waving and shouting, frantic. Some men are drinking beer by a pickup truck. They run back with me with shovels and pickaxes.

I wander about holding my head in my hands. They smash up the cement, their pickaxes swinging high and low, violently. "Careful, oh please be careful," I plead, walking back and forth, helpless. One of them crouches by my mother, cupping her chin out of the water. Her eyes are haggard with terror. "Can't breathe . . . can't breathe . . ." she keeps bleating, through clenched teeth. "You'll be okay, you'll be okay," I promise her desperately.

Finally they have her out. The seawater gushes and foams into the rubble. Other, different men appear; they bear my mother over the dunes, carrying her high in a litter. An oxygen line runs into her nose from a cylinder. A catheter bag sways from a litter handle, its hose running up under her pale thighs.

I follow behind in a distraught daze, plodding through deep sand carrying our sandy beach towels, my mother's much-ornamented beach bag. "How did it happen, how did it happen?" I moan, over and over again. A small plane flies low over the beach, dragging a long, fluttering sign. I give out a sobbing cry, imagining the sign bearing her frail name, the helpless dates and particulars of her obituary.

THE VISION

My mother isn't in her room. I go outside to the dark driveway. She's curled up in some blankets in the back of my pick-up truck. "Why on earth are you out here?" I demand. "I was having a vision," she says. She stares up fixedly at the crescent moon, the scattered silences of the stars. "What was it this time?" I ask, trying to keep patience in my voice. The metal rim of the pick-up bed is cold under my hands. "Dogs," she says, her gaze drawing inward. "Many, many dogs . . ." "Any particular breed?" I inquire, and I regret this wisecrack as it leaves my mouth. But she is oblivious to it. "I don't know breeds," she says. "They were very large and thin. Their bones showed through." "Were they friendly to you?" I ask, after a pause. "You know me and dogs!" she says. She laughs, so I have a glimpse of unadulterated fright. I feel a stab of panic. "But now it's over?" I ask her. "This vision?" "I hope so," she says wanly. She swallows. "Please, drive me somewhere." "Now?" I ask. There's silence. "Please," she says. "But you'll get pneumonia," I tell her. "Not if you go slowly," she says.

I make my way around to the cab of the truck. The plastic seat is cold and stiff. I start the engine and let it idle. I look over my shoulder through the rear window. I can see the top of her head, the wisps of grey hair—white hair—lifting in a stir of wind. I have to turn away. I hunch over, squeezing my hands between my legs. My eyes feel prickly and swollen from interrupted sleep, from emotion that threatens to be almost unbearable. I stare numbly at the dashboard. After a while, I bring my hands up, and put the truck in gear, and start slowly down the driveway.

BLOOD AND FLOWERS

I have a drink on a hotel terrace. The bay is at my elbow. Bougainvillea overflow their railings. The sun is on its way down, but still strong. My mother appears, dressed sleek and informal, sunglasses up in her hair. She orders a drink from the white-jacketed waiter. I light her cigarette, then my own. We blow the smoke into the breeze. "Where are you shooting next?" I ask. She shrugs. "Somewhere hot and tropical," she says, looking off at the bay. "Somewhere with tigers and giant snakes, and flowers like severed heads." She taps restlessly on the table with her cigarette holder. "You know, I thought your last film was sensationally marvelous," I tell her. She turns back and smiles at me, dazzling, dark carmine. "You say the sweetest things, my darling," she says, reaching up to take her drink from the waiter's tray. A photographer seizes this moment to spring up beside her and start snapping with his big black camera. My mother hisses at him. "Will you have the bare manners to leave us some privacy!" I shout, but he's already scurrying off with his booty. "Scum!" says my mother. "*Salaud!* Come on, let's go for a drive." She throws down her drink and snatches up her purse.

Outside the hotel, there's a red sports car, brand new, a blood-colored beauty. "Where did you get this from?" I exclaim admiringly, getting into the passenger seat beside her. "Don't ask silly questions," she grins behind her sunglasses, knotting a leopard-skin pattern scarf under her chin. She starts the engine. It thrums powerfully. We jolt backwards, swerve forward, and go roaring out through the hotel gates, spraying a great shower of gravel. We take the coast road. The sea flashes off to our right. Pine trees skim past. "Jesus, this is some car!" I shout, over the din and the wind. "What?" my mother cries. "The car!" I shout. "Yes, isn't it a marvel!" she shouts, the wind tearing at her scarf. "I've only taken it up to a hundred kilometers, that's nowhere near its limit! Who knows how fast it will go! Faster, faster!" she laughs, and we surge forward. I glance with concern at the speedometer. It's well over one-twenty. The road hurtles at us like a furiously untangling line of rope. "Easy, easy," I call out, hanging on. We throb through a bend. The road veers inland. Mimosa blur past on the hillsides. I look at my mother. The famous profile is grinning, intent, almost wild with life. The road bends sharply ahead in the distance. "Careful of this little bridge up here!" I shout. "What's

that?" she shouts. "The bridge! Careful—" I shout. I flinch back, staring horrified. "The bridge—watch out—turn—turn the—!"

Brakes screeching wildly, we spin sideways and crash through the wooden railing and plunge out into the air. Screaming, I am torn loose, and flung twisting and tumbling in slow-motion headfirst into the shock of the stream, and blackness. I come to with my face pressed into the weeds. My head is thudding. Stunned, I push myself up and look about. The car rests upside-down, brilliant red on the sloping flowery bank. Its tires continue to spin in the silence. My mother protrudes from it near the bottom. "Mom, Mom—" I blurt out, clambering through the water towards her. She lies with the back of her head and a shoulder in the stream. A dark hideous stickiness shows on one side of the scarf's leopard skin. I crouch over her in the water, gaping, beside myself. She smiles up at me. "I'll get you out!" I tell her frantically. I set my weight against the bright red metal and strain, but nothing happens. "Don't . . ." my mother murmurs. "It's no use . . ." I look about helplessly, at the pink masses of oleander, the wild white roses crowding the dark under-carriage of the car, the slowly spinning tires. I fall to my knees. "I'm afraid . . . my back . . . is broken . . ." says my mother. She laughs slowly, falteringly. "You'll be all right, we'll get you to a hospital, you'll be fine," I tell her desperately. "Is my make-up . . . still on?" she asks. "Yes," I tell her. "Good . . ." she says. "Give me . . . a cigarette . . . please . . ." I fumble in my wet jacket and bring out the pack. "They're soaked through," I tell her. "Never mind. . . . Put one . . . in my mouth . . ." she says. "At the side . . . please . . ." I place the sodden cigarette in the corner of her dark red lips. Wild roses frame the action with their creamy blossoms. "Thanks . . ." she says, the cigarette bobbing. "Now wipe . . . my brow . . . please . . ." "With a trembling hand I wipe away the thread of blood trickling along the edge of the leopard-skin pattern. "Mom . . ." I blurt softly, turning away. "I was . . . great . . ." she says. "Wasn't I" "Mom, you were the greatest!" I assure her, in tears. "The greatest!" A smile flickers, half-smile, half-wince, on her lips. "Yes . . ." she murmurs. "You tell them . . . how well . . . I went . . ." "I will," I whisper. The smile flickers again, one last, painful time. "Such a . . . pity . . ." she murmurs past her cigarette. "Wrecking . . . my lovely . . . wild car . . ."

WINDING SHEET

"What time is it?" asks my mother, turning just her eyes. "Mom, you keep asking," I tell her. "I don't know. It can't be more than an hour since we got here. Please—try to relax." "I'm trying," she says. "I'm trying." But her brow is deeply furrowed, and her eyebrows pull down exaggeratedly, like a caricature of despair. She keeps shifting about on the pallet, crossing and recrossing her gnarled feet. "Oh when are they bringing me my sheet," she moans. "Mom, they said soon," I plead with her. "They didn't give an exact minute. It won't be long—please." I get up and go over to the door. "I can't see anyone," I tell her, turning back into the room. "They're very busy. . . ." "Do I still look all right?" she puffs. "You look fine," I assure her. "I told you, very Plantagenet." I come over to the pallet and stand beside it, making a show of mildness and quiet. I smile down at her. "How do you feel?" I ask quietly. "Do you have any signs of rigor mortis?" She winces. "Don't use that awful word!" she puffs. "I'm sorry—" I apologize. I try to go on evenly. "Are you feeling any immobility, in your extremities—can you move your hands and fingers—Mom?" "Yes, I think so," she says. She manipulates her fingers dutifully. Her hands lie close to her sides, looking absurdly thick-fleshed and huge at the ends of her gaunt wrists. "You're lucky," I tell her. "I would think most people in your position wouldn't be able to do that." She doesn't reply. She stares up at the ceiling, puffing. She twists about. "Oh I wish this hadn't happened, I'm so frightened," she moans. "Mom, it'll be all right," I protest. I make myself pat her hand, which is startlingly cold. Her face looks like a frail, stricken animal's. "Really, believe me," I plead. "There's nothing to fear. They're coming in a minute." Her black, shining eyes look up at me, clinging. "I'm so sorry you have to go through this. . . ." she murmurs thickly. I shake my head. I can't speak for a moment. "Nonsense," I whisper. Her eyes linger on me. They brim with panic and drift away. "Please, why don't they bring me my sheet!" she moans. "Where are they!" "Mom, I'll go get someone!" I tell her. "Just try to relax!" I implore. "I can't," she puffs.

I come out into the hall. It's empty. I hurry along it. I turn a corner, into another corridor. It's empty too. I go down it. A sense of frenzy starts to mount in me. "Hello!" I call out. "Hello!" Finally I stop, and turn back. My heart is beating wildly. I turn the corner and see the figure of the

chaplain standing in my mother's doorway. I rush towards it.

"It's all right," the chaplain says, smiling peaceably. "It's all right. It's over." I step past him and stare into the room. The mortician looks back over his shoulder as he finishes wrapping my mother's feet. "I'm sorry we were so long," he says quietly. My mother lies wrapped in a dazzling bundle of cloth. All that shows is her face, which is inert, exhausted beyond all endurance, her eyes half-lidded, her jaw slack. She looks like a tallow mask, the features pinched, almost as if about to drip.

A great soft sob erupts from me, and I hang my head. The chaplain's hand presses my shoulder. "Yes, yes, it's all right," he says softly. His arm comes around me, making me feel its pressure. "I'm sorry," I sob, shaking my head. "It's just — she suffered so much — she was so frightened —" His arm holds me against him. He smiles at me. "Be consoled," he murmurs, smiling. "If you could only have seen how joyful she was — the look of joy on her face when she saw us come in with her beautiful sheet, and spread it wide open for her, so white and radiant."

GRASS

I go to the graveyard after dinner. My mother's ghost stoops beside my parents' headstone, pulling a weed. "Hello, dear," she says. "Just tidying up a bit. I don't know why they bother to pay the people here, they don't do a thing. How are you, my darling?" I give her a kiss, pressing my lips to her flickering cheek. "Looks very nice," I tell her, indicating the paired graves. "It's a handsome site, and a handsome marker," she says. She considers the gravestone. "It's what a gravestone should look like: simple lettering, very elegant and plain. You chose well," she says. "You did right for your poor old departed mom and dad." "Thanks," I tell her. I look about. "Where is he? I brought him some pickles, at least to sniff." "Oh how sweet of you," she says. "He's turned in already. But you can leave that right over there. He'll be sure to pounce on it when he wakes." I put the jar down in the grass. "Yes, that worm is still giving him hell in his ear, poor thing," she says. "You don't think we could get a doctor to come and look at it?" "Mom, doctors don't really like to make house calls to cemeteries," I point out. "I suppose you're right," she says. "I'm afraid there's nothing for him to do but put up with it," I tell her. I shrug. "I'm

sorry. It just goes with the general condition.” “Is that so?” she sighs. “My, what a knowledgeable young man you are. Well, just wait, one day you’ll be buried six feet under with the worms gnawing away at you, and we’ll see what wise things you have to say then.” “I won’t say a thing, because I’ll have myself cremated and stored away in a silver urn,” I tell her. “My, what a clever clever lad you are,” she says. I give her a smile at all this bantering. “So tell me, how are you, Mom?” I ask gently. “Are you getting used to this?” “Oh, you know me, I’m fine,” she says. “Fine. Very peaceful. The worms don’t seem to like me at all, which offends me greatly. Oh, it’s a bit startling now and then,” she says, looking down at a flickering hand, “to be able to see right through one’s mouldering body. But we have to take things as they come, and make the best of them.” I nod, contemplating her bare, crooked feet, which never did have the hammer-toe operation they needed. I can make out the darkness of the grass through them. “I’m sorry,” I say quietly. “Nothing to be sorry about,” she replies. “All part of the grand scheme.” We fall silent. I look off at the graveyard, and then up into the night. The night sky is shot through with the benevolent plenitude of the stars. “When I get low,” my mother says beside me, “I just lift up my eyes.” She indicates the expanse of the heavens. “I gaze up there for a long, long time every night,” she says. “The stars are my friends. Each one of them has a soul, you know. I’ve given them names.” “I believe they already have names,” I murmur. “Not my names,” she replies. “That one over there, shining for all it’s worth, that’s you. That big gleaming greenish thing near it, that’s your father. . . .” “And which one are you?” I ask. “Oh, I haven’t quite made up my mind,” she says. “I’m up there all right. But it’s a very special one, my particular star. Very special indeed, you can bet your boots on it.” Together we scan the constellations. My mother exhibits a hand, wavering and pale. “I’m a star already, just look at me,” she says.