

The Cabinetmaker · *Daniel Humphrey*

FOUR DAYS AFTER JACOB cut the Andalusian's mane and made the sawdust brush from it, the police chief took him by surprise, wanting to know if he wouldn't mind leaving his workbench for a moment to discuss the vandalized horse that was around back.

In the clearing between the house and the stables, the thawing path yielded beneath Jacob's wooden clogs. The woman who owned the horse was already there near the stable railings, picking up stray horse hair from the cold grass and arranging the bundles in her palm.

"And you didn't notice anything different about the horse?" the chief asked.

Susan, in her sawdusty apron, had followed Jacob outside and was sitting on the steps drinking coffee and twirling the new horsehair brush by its thong. Jacob lay his palm flat against the Andalusian's neck and looked out into the darkening spruce and hemlock to calm himself a little.

"No. Nothing drastic. The horse looks okay to me."

If Jacob had suspected the owner would go to the police first, he might have prepared himself for this. Instead, he had planned to confront the long-haired woman when she came, to lecture her for not grooming the sticks and burrs from her horse's mane.

"Maybe your friend saw something," the police chief said, motioning toward the steps.

Susan lifted the cup to her lips. The woman with the long brown hair was getting together with Susan on the porch.

"She works inside. And she's never here at night," Jacob said. "She would have told me."

Susan had brought the sack of hair from the back of the closet a few days before. "Why are you hiding this?" she had asked, holding the sack to her chest and drawing out a bundle of hair. "Did you steal it?" Her eyes were bright with discovery and assumed an intimacy that made Jacob uneasy in his own workshop. Instead of satisfying her, he told Susan he got the horse hair a long time ago—from a catalog, where he got special things that he couldn't make or find in the small Southeast Alaskan town.

"It's your job to know what goes on here," the police chief said.

"I take care of the stables. That's all," Jacob said, looking not at the

chief, but at Susan and the horse owner on the porch, at the brush dangling from Susan's wrist as she talked.

The police chief walked a few stalls down to check on his own mare. Releasing the bridle it had worn for a week, he said, "Jake, it's the worst kind of bastard that abuses a helpless horse."

Susan smiled again and put her hand on the woman's shoulder.

The next morning, Jacob was poking birch scraps into the woodstove to percolate the coffee when Susan came in from the dark and pulled off her boots. Neither one had turned on the shop lights yet, but already she wore the thong of the horsehair brush around her wrist and was playing its bristles against her bare foot with fascination.

Except for the grey hair and native birch, there was nothing to distinguish the dust brush from the ones he had ordered from Spain. Alone at night, he had doubled back the hairs, disguising them as bristles, and anchored the twisted bundles with hide glue in the sixty-four evenly spaced and angled holes. Another handle, already drilled, lay on the closet shelf.

Susan held strands of the speckled hair between her toes and dangled the brush before the stove as she warmed her feet. Jacob watched her face for mischief, but she did all this privately as the coffee boiled. Then according to habit they drank together and nibbled on sweetcakes. They always ate together as professionally as they worked. When they did speak, it was barely a whisper, and only to say something important.

So Jacob began the day, adjusting the jointer fence and instructing Susan more gruffly than usual because of her playfulness. Cutting the mane was hardly any different than picking up tools and pieces of equipment from back yards and old buildings. Jacob had salvaged these, had told Susan their stories when he had put them to good use, and she had not shown anything but idle interest, certainly not disapproval.

When Susan bent to sand the round-bellied bureau, Jacob noticed her dusty feet in the clogs, her brown heels and grey-spotted ankles. By putting on her apron every dark morning and trading her boots for the Swedish clogs, Susan became part of the tiny shop.

Catching Jacob looking at her, she said, "Last night I took an order for a showcase cabinet."

Susan was always bothering him with things her friends wanted, furniture she wanted him to teach her to make. "What kind of front?"

“Bowed like the one you’re building now, only convex and some glass.”

“Then none of your friends will want to pay what it costs,” Jacob said. “We have too many big jobs already.” Jacob shipped out most of his furniture, to collectors who surrounded themselves with his furniture and even more expensive antiques they hoarded and wasted.

Jacob started a beveled edge on one of the long boards. Glued together with the narrowest strips on the outside edges of the coopered door, the pieces would form a curve that tightened nicely near the hinges and lock.

Susan moved away from the chips flying from the knives and yelled over the noise of the machine. “I told her I would do it. I have a down payment.” She pulled money from her pocket.

Why hadn’t she given it to him over coffee, first thing? “Well, give it back to her,” he told her. “I’m too busy. If you have the time, do it at home.”

“Jacob, you know better than that.” She crammed the money back into her jeans. “This is special to her, the only good thing she’ll have.” Susan had never defended a project so firmly. She pointed to where she had been scraping the traces of Jacob’s plane from the bureau side, but let her hand fall. “Jacob, won’t you trust me with some real work?”

Susan’s talking was making it hard for Jacob to keep track of which side of the planks took the inside of the bevel. Her eyes looked wet. “You are doing real work,” he said when she took up the scraper again. She was always careful with the furniture he made, the only woodworker he’d met since coming from Sweden that he would have in his shop.

He gave Susan coffee at mid morning. In her hands the brush had become sad and dusty, an imitation of the horse he had made it from. She kicked her feet out of the clogs and brushed them off, but the playfulness was gone.

“Leave the money in the chisel drawer,” Jacob said to cheer her up. He couldn’t have her breaking down and confessing the money was her own. She was at least as good at lying as he was, and in time she’d come up with a way out. “I might have time for the showcase this winter.”

“It’s not your project,” she said. She slipped the bills beneath the chisel case. “You know what I’m asking of you.”

Susan was asking for time. He pictured himself putting aside everything to show her the special joints, the tools. Jacob wouldn’t let himself imag-

ine further, not to the image of Susan's hands finally mastering her own wooden plane, just as he now tuned his longest one to finish the bevels. Just positioning the iron and pressing in the wedge had once taken all his concentration, and hardly ever on the first try could he bring paper-thin shavings whispering up from the wood as his grandfather had. When Jacob tapped the back of the plane to ease up the thin cutting edge, he still compared himself. He could see the old man sighting from the front and swinging the plane to and fro, playing the light against the thin, glinting line. Even his father had handled the plane less naturally. Some things you never get right, you get too old to stand at the bench and you're still practicing and screwing up a lot of good wood.

Susan was in the other room, going through the wood stacked against the wall drying. "There used to be some nice pieces of pear in here. Some spalting. Wouldn't that look interesting?"

Her voice echoed to him. He wouldn't answer.

Horses, so quiet in their stables, shook the ground outside his window as they trotted by and lurched, riders standing, down the bank to the parade grounds. The light Andalusian jostled in the middle of the dark horses. The woman's curved thigh muscles tensed as the horses sprang onto the field below.

The five men, active club members, came by all the time and sometimes called him out to talk about the hay barn or the stables. They knew him as Jake. In their newsletter, the horsemen's club called him the stablemaster because he occupied the stablemaster's quarters of the old fort and took care of the place instead of paying rent. But none of them knew him as a cabinetmaker, not really. He had quit bringing them into his shop and sometimes wouldn't even answer the door in the evenings. Last night, one man had come by to invite him to the Halloween party.

From the window above his bench Jacob watched the riders, dressed in tweed and white silk, run their horses across the mustering grounds and stop abruptly where the wilderness began with alders and tall weeds. The woman let her own dark hair fall from under her riding hat and swing like the horse's tail as she rode. She had been riding more since Jacob had cut the mane. At the field's edge, she tucked her hair back up into her cap. They all talked there, rotating around the woman and the light horse, beheading the tall fireweed with their riding crops as the animals flinched.

Jacob and Susan made a lunch together of sour cream and fish sand-

wiches in his kitchen. He was thinking about gluing dog hair to his face and hands and getting some black lipstick; she kept interrupting his thoughts with questions he wouldn't answer about the coopered doors.

"But I'm your apprentice," she said when he told her to leave him alone.

"There are no apprentices any more, not even in Sweden." He pulled a book from the shelf and handed it to her. Inside it were all sorts of show-cases, none like his own.

"What's this?" she asked. "This is in Swedish." After looking at the pictures, she put the book down. "It's not in here." And she watched his eyes as if they were panes of glass and the plans for her showcase lay on one of the shelves inside.

Jacob finished the last of the bevels feeling warm and vigorous. After dusting the workbench with an old black brush, he arranged the pieces on the clean beechwood top, then went outside in his thermal undershirt and walked around the stables, picking up trash and hanging ropes and tools on the wall. In the hay loft, he turned over some of his fitch-cut planks to see how they were behaving. Last fall, he and Susan had cut the slabs from trees on his hillside lot and had hauled them in his flatbed the twenty-seven miles back to town. The curing birch was still cold and heavy.

The tall horses nearby looked as if they had been in the forest, but they had accumulated burrs and sticks without leaving the outside pen. They bent their necks over the railing and nibbled on the willow and alder, sometimes lifting their heads to chew with wet leaves clinging to their faces.

The spotted Andalusian had shivered the day Jacob cut the mane. He rubbed the horse and covered it with a dry blanket before he brushed out the twigs. The woman who owned the horse must have gotten bored with it, now that the fairs and horse shows were over. Dark grey streaked inside with silver and gold, so Jacob tied the mane in bunches to hold the pattern while he cut. The horse bowed its neck and prodded Jacob's shirt with its velvet nose, taking the hard rectangles of flatbread in its lips. Jacob had left the mane square and bristly like that of a Roman war horse.

When Jacob got back to his workbench, the pieces were gone. Susan had them on her low sanding table in the other room and was writing down their measurements and angles. She had never before taken anything from his workbench.

“I was getting ready to glue these together,” he said, surprised that he had said it so calmly.

Trying to help him gather the pieces, Susan bumped his hand and dropped one onto the concrete, where it picked up grit that would nick a plane iron. “I was keeping them in the right order,” she explained.

There were exactly eighteen variations that would work, and only one of them was right. “I’ll find it again,” he said.

“You’re angry with me,” she said.

“You’re getting in my way.”

“Maybe you would rather work alone.”

There were some things like gluing that could only be done without interruptions. Any shift or uneven pressure would cause the curved door to buckle under the clamp and leave him a sloppy glue joint to be sawn apart and done over.

Susan stood at the doorway to watch the complicated thing he was putting together. A little glue, watered down so the joints would settle faster, and heavy spring clamps to squeeze the wood between the two pairs of steel arcs—his invention. Only two hands and dozens of things to push together. One bar clamp in place, another. He needed a block between the clamp and the wood, had to have a small piece of wood. Where he kept blocks beneath the bench, his fingers touched only sawdust. Susan was always taking them for sandpaper and who knows what else. “I’ve got to have that block,” he yelled to her.

She was down on her knees near the bandsaw, going through the pile of dust there for a scrap of wood.

At that moment, Jacob picked up a clamp that was clogged with glue. “What in hell are you gluing with clamps?” He threw it to the floor and picked up another, which he used with the little blocks Susan was bringing him in her shaking hands. His own face was hot. “Calm down, why don’t you,” he said, taking the scraps from her sweating palms. His fingers had some trouble placing the blocks, but the invention was working, the joints were tight on both sides. He wiped the glue away with a damp cloth and began thinking about his curved planes.

“It’s time to talk,” Susan said. “I need to be real straight with you. And probably you have some things to tell me.”

“Forget it.”

She took a rag from his bench and folded it. “Why did you lie to me about the horse hair?”

“The goddamned horse hair! There’s nothing to say.”

She turned away. “There’s no use talking to you, if you can’t even tell me that.”

At two they finished off the coffee, dipping sweetcakes she had made from a Swedish recipe. But they hadn’t turned out right. Susan was quiet. Jacob wanted to tell her it didn’t matter.

It seemed there was less and less lately he could talk to her about. Once, in the beginning, they had talked about tools, about wood and grain, the pieces he made. Jacob had wanted her to see what the grain and texture of the wood can give to a straight line or a perfect curve. The newly opened wood had always talked to him like that, but recently it had been showing him Susan, and Jacob’s days were filling with things he needed to say to her. What her hair meant to him, her smell, her many moods, how he waited by the coffee for her voice—he didn’t have words for things like that. He worked instead, pushing his chisel against the curves, and the sentiments stored up in the furniture Susan finished.

Susan came in as he cleaned up. She rested against his bench, allowing him a glimpse of a worn brocaded undershirt that he had seen before in better condition. She had been sweeping up around the machines, and bits of wood clung to her shirt. “Eat supper at my place,” she said. “Will you?”

“I have plans for tonight.” He opened the wood vise holding one end of the metal arcs. “Please move. You haven’t finished yet, have you?”

She went back to sweep the other room. “You’ve never seen the inside of my house, Jacob.”

What would she want from him there? With him on the opposite side of the table, the other end of the couch, they would fall into orbit around the something she always expected him to tell her.

He ate supper alone, then drank Canadian apple beer, which wet his full lower lip between his mustache and beard. His hair, still damp from washing, was parted in the middle, its damp ringlets lying against his thick and wrinkled forehead. He painted fish glue on his face until it held the layers of dog hair. Brushed flat, it was as dark as his own beard.

Jacob took the trail through the woods. The dog hair on his hands glossed in the moonlight against his white cuffs. He picked his way deftly through

the dry devil's club and raspberry bushes that lined the trail, taking care not to catch his long black coat and vest, a suit his grandfather had bought in Vienna. Of all the disguises at the party, he was sure his would be the most authentic and convincing.

Jacob emerged from woods above the row of remodeled houses surrounding the parade grounds. In one of the windows the satiny curve of one of his pieces, a secretary, bent toward a green curtain. The fellow who had bought it had Jacob show him how to polish the surfaces and wax the drawer guides. The man had told him: "When I'm sitting at this desk I feel like Thomas Jefferson, even if I'm only writing a letter."

The hedges in back of the man's house were pitiful; trash had been scattered from a barrel. One guy in the same row of houses had added on a back porch that had already begun to slump. Once the frost came, the boards would spring loose. The houses had been neglected too long to be remodeled. The owners should have paid attention to the widening gaps in the rockwork and torn the two-story Victorians down.

He had never been to a party at the Hotel Halsingland, but they had hired him to build bookshelves in the lobby to match the ones in the smoking room. He had even enjoyed working in that style, though he had refused to apply the wrought-iron water lilies to the doors and have the inside mirrors etched.

Light spilled from the tall rounded windows and laid a grid on the entryway, dwarfing the costumed people entering. Jacob straightened himself into the stiff shoulders of his jacket as a breeze stirred the evergreens lining the dark fjord. Near the Halsingland, he felt conspicuous in the light. He touched his face and neck nervously, but the fur was tight and smooth, and this relieved him. He had forgotten the eyeliner and black lipstick for touch-ups, but he wouldn't go back now.

The light and noise of the party held him at the doorway for a few moments, then he realized the girl was asking him if he wanted to give her his coat. He shook his head and went in. She was looking at his face, trying to discover if she knew him. He would have to find a mirror to check his lipstick. The lobby was full of people and streamers. A woman dressed in balloons squealed and backed up, squeezing a green balloon to her chest.

He stood in the corner against the dark paneling, watching people dance. The farrier, Jacob's friend, was there wearing a horselike hat and had been going around the room shaking hands with men in tough dis-

guises; he was looking for Jacob. Eventually he got to the corner and gave Jacob's furry hand a solid shake. "Great disguise," the farrier said through his teeth.

The farrier appeared again moments later, pulling a woman to Jacob. "Wolfman, meet Mary Poppins. Dance."

She led him out, but when he looked in the mirror he saw himself as awkward and disjointed, knees and wrists poking out from his long jacket. His skin itched with sweat. People looked at him and laughed. The others had only decorated themselves with cardboard shirts and hats, masks and spraypainted hair. The girl touched his nose and teased his hair as she danced. She didn't know him and took his accent as part of the disguise, but he recognized her from the post office. He felt like a fool for going so completely overboard with this disguise. He slipped away from her after the song and went to the lounge. Damned mirrors were everywhere.

Elaine had come expecting to meet her friends from the horsemen's club, and others who were coming up on the ferry from Juneau. But the crowd was disappointing. She was sitting alone at the bar, wearing a tight corset and pantaloons because it was too hot to sit there dressed in seventeenth century. Her elaborate dress lay draped across an adjacent table. The bartender had raised his eyebrows when she slipped out of it, and after filling her glass he smoked discreetly near the doorway and smiled when she looked at him. Elaine sipped the burgundy and imagined her neckline turning pink with a blush.

Elaine was under the impression that the party was for the horsemen's club, but the two horse owners sitting at a small corner table were the only people she knew. It would be just like everybody to meet someone else first without letting her know.

The townspeople were out there, spilling beer over their cardboard costumes and tossing rubber masks onto the dance floor, not hurting anything, except maybe the furniture. It was the lack of respect that bothered her, another side of the same cruel disregard that led them to whack off her horse's beautiful streaked mane. She was angry with herself for coming in the first place, but she would have a drink or two before she left. The bartender wore a tuxedo and was formally congenial and bored; he could understand why she was alone, and she would let him enjoy her underwear for a while.

When the wolfman came in, Elaine noticed his period costume before anything else. The man had taste. Even the glossy black fur on his face had a grain to it like the face of a real wolf. She must surely know him, she thought, but when he ordered beer, she detected an unfamiliar accent, one she would encounter perhaps in Northern Europe. He had the coolness that frustrated her so when she traveled, the understatement she admired. She nodded to him as he sat down.

“Good evening,” he said quietly, and she thought he smiled, but it was hard to tell with the black lips that made his teeth so large and white.

“You look very striking,” she said. “Did someone help you put the fur on?” He had large eyes which met her own without flinching.

“Nobody helped me,” he said. “I cut it from a dog. Maybe it’s too much.”

“Not at all,” she said. She had a dollar ready for the bartender when the beer came and paid before the wolfman could fumble his wallet out of the vest.

He nodded toward the table. “Your dress is French,” he said.

“How do you know?” She was right about him. At least here was somebody she could talk to.

“Well, at least it is Louis the Fourteenth. But maybe it’s not French.”

“I bought it in Paris,” she said. “I should have worn my leather riding gear for this place, though.” The wolfman looked up from his beer, his eyes wider and his lips pinker than before. “Shiny black boots and jacket, spur-necks the size of your thumb, a bone-handled riding crop.” Elaine laughed and finished off her wine boldly, and tried to catch his eye again, but he held his beer in both hands, smiling faintly into it. “Really,” Elaine said, “I don’t actually use the crop on my horse. He’s such a baby.”

The man had grown sullen, or maybe it was just her. She couldn’t think about the horse without getting tense, her poor horse that she had neglected since the fair. He really ought to have been exercised every day and had his blanket changed. She had come at night to feed him, and the horse had tossed his head. She ran her hand over the mane, and it had bristled. It was her horse, and nobody else had the right to touch him.

If she could just call the werewolf by his name and find out more about him, they could talk a little longer and she wouldn’t have to go home. “I’m Elaine,” she said and moved to the stool beside him. She wanted to shake his furry hand.

He said his name was Jacob. Beneath the hair, his wide hands knew things, connected flesh to muscle, sinew to a friendship of bones. As her fingertips nestled into the hair and glue crust, she imagined her own hand as smooth and fragile prey.

“Are you an expert on horses too,” she asked, “or just French history?”

“I’m a cabinetmaker. It takes all my attention. I know hardly anything about horses.” He finished his beer and, after some trouble, succeeded in catching the bartender’s eye and requested another beer and more wine for her. She nodded when he ordered burgundy, but she was in the mood for something stronger. When it was her turn she would order Scotch for both of them.

“I don’t know why it bothers me so much, but one of my horses was vandalized last week. Not that I’m rich or anything, but I think there are some in town who hate anyone who believes in maintaining a little refinement here.” He had the most sympathetic eyes, so large, especially with the black eyeliner. She leaned toward those eyes. “Jacob, they chopped off his mane and wrote on his side, the filthy bastards.”

“They did that?” He sounded as if he couldn’t believe it. She had a hard time believing it herself.

“You’ve probably noticed this,” she said, “but people here act like you don’t know anything unless you’ve been here for decades. Don’t you think?”

“Maybe they’ve seen too many people come and go.”

“The economy is bad, but I’m staying,” Elaine said. “Are you visiting? You seem to be a man more accustomed to culture.”

He looked at her, smiling vaguely, then he burst out with a laugh. She didn’t blame him for not answering. What a stupid remark she had made. But this had released something inside him, and he laid his hand on hers and squeezed it. She turned her palm to his.

“What did they write on your horse?” he asked.

“Something about killing the horse, but it rubbed off. It was in charcoal or something.” She wished now she hadn’t made up that part about the writing. The truth was bad enough.

“I’m very sorry. You’re a nice lady.”

The bartender brought them short glasses with a full inch of Scotch whiskey. She asked for ice and water, but Jacob was drinking his straight and fast, looking over the edge of the glass at her. He grinned at her after

drinking it all. She caught her reflection in the bar mirror and became aware of her corset again. Jacob looked into the mirror at the same time, and they held each other's eyes for a moment.

"My ex-husband had a fit when I bought this dress. It's really beautiful. You might like to see it."

"You seem comfortable like that," he said. "I'll see it when you leave, I suppose."

"Nobody ever gets to see the underwear, anyway. Do you like it?" Elaine twisted a strand of her hair around her finger and draped it over Jacob's shoulder.

"You look lovely." He got another whiskey. His eyes sparkled.

She pulled slightly on the fur near his eye and found it was stuck on tight. Her gentle tugging exposed the pink underside of the lid. "Sorry," she said, laughing. "But I think this is incredibly sexy." Black came off when she rubbed his nose with her finger. A smooth piece of ice fell from her lips, and the cold, shining bead ran down her chest into her corset. The busk was holding the cold against her. She glanced at Jacob's reflection and swivelled to turn her back on it.

She drew the long ivory slat from between her breasts and laid it on the bar. Without the busk, her breasts were free. She felt she was floating out of her clothes. "I don't really need that," she said, leaning back against the bar and nodding to the bone.

"They would do anything for fashion," Jacob said.

"I suppose they had their reasons," she said. It was unfair that he should get such a good look at her and still she didn't know what he looked like. She didn't know anything about him, really. "And what do you look like?" she asked. "I mean underneath." She loosened his white silk tie and peeked at his neck. He chuckled.

"I don't know. I'm not so different than what you see, I think."

She knew he was nervous, maybe aroused. The bartender was at the far end, serving some other people who came in for refuge. She used her quiet voice, her most sincere, and kept her eyes on his. "I mean, well, what do people say about you?"

"My friends used to think I was always too practical . . . too reserved."

"You are." He had a nice build. She took his furry hand and turned it over. "Strong." She felt the calluses and inspected the cherry-colored stains around his fingernails that she had taken as part of the disguise. For

the first time, she realized he really did work with his hands, and he was probably a local. She blushed when she thought that he might have been living right beside her for months or years. "Who are you?" she asked, rubbing his calloused palms. She pulled his hand to her and leaned dangerously into his arms. "I'll find out who you are."

He bent and kissed her. His tongue sliced her lips nervously. A confusion of scents came from his beard. His hand slipped into her corset where the cold ivory had been and hard fingers lifted her nipples. Beyond Jacob's wild hair, she saw cigarette haze floating around the rich woodwork and wrought iron of the doorway.

He had turned his face from her, started to say something. She smiled and reached for his neck. She almost fell when Jacob stood up.

He said something she didn't understand.

Elaine turned her back to him to replace the busk. In the etched mirror, she was a timid sword swallower. She grabbed up the dress and followed him out onto the porch, where she leaned against a pillar and groped her way into the dress.

"Where are we going?" she asked. In the dark, Jacob seemed perfectly wild.

"Home."

"I'm ready." She straightened her long dress and followed him into the dark.

Jacob led her along the road, past the miserable hedges and the front yards with scattered wood chips around the wood piles. Sweet wood smoke loaded the air. Elaine was lifting her dress and clutching to his arm. Snow was falling and melting to slush on the alder branches that lined the way to the stablemaster's quarters. One foot slid into the ditch, and he kneeled there for a moment with his hands on wet roots. Elaine was laughing and didn't want to hold his hand anymore. Jacob could hear even the horses breathing, their whispers filling that small clearing between the two hills, all around the row of stables where the horses steamed with frost, around the house that wasn't his own.

"I have a key to the barn," she said, and produced a tiny purse from out of the scarf she carried.

He had been too rash. If she had been more reserved, he would have told her how things were. He had expected hard red wine, but her mouth had tasted like water.

"This is it. This is where I work," Jacob said inside the house, waving his arm around the workroom. Elaine still held her tiny embroidered purse. The colors on Elaine's dress—the gold, red, and blue—made it seem as if she were just floating around the furniture and sawdust. The sight of her there by the Louis the Fifteenth secretary made him feel uneasy, as if it belonged more to her than to him.

"Jacob, you are surprising. Are we alone?"

It was too late to be in the workshop. Too dusty to be dressed in the black suit, now muddied at the knees and coattails. Susan's clogs lay beneath a bureau.

"The girl you saw here the other morning just works for me."

Elaine had put her purse and scarf on the secretary and was leaning against it.

"Look at you!" she said. She held his coattail and brushed at the drying mud with her hands. "Why don't you take off your face so I can look at you." Her perfumed hands lifted the coat from his shoulders. "I must have seen you, how many times before when I came here? I can't remember how you look." It hurt when she pulled at the dog hair. Some of it had come loose during the walk and lay dark on his white silk.

"Now that you know who I am, aren't you a little disappointed?"

"Isn't there someplace we can lie down and talk?" She had taken up the horsehair brush and was brushing hair and dirt from his shirt.

"This piece," he said, stroking the smooth flank of the cabinet she leaned against, "I drew the plans from the original in Paris." When he ran his fingertips along the fluted leg, he remembered Susan smoothing the groove with tiny curved scrapers. "My family has always been cabinet-makers. A hard life." He tried to roll up his tight jacket sleeves. "I've got the blood for it. They had to make these showpieces for the upper classes, but they made real furniture for themselves."

Elaine patted the curved top. "You're a very talented man." She pointed to the round-bellied bureau. "That one will be especially beautiful. How much will it be?"

"I haven't given it a price." Jacob took off his jacket and flung it at the bureau. "I can't see anything but drudgery in this."

"What's wrong?" she asked.

Jacob's head felt shapeless and stupid from the whiskey. "What happens when I don't just sink every bit of energy I have into a piece of wood? I'll

tell you.” He wished Susan were there. “One time, some of us from my village stole a boat and then we stole this girl who was hanging up laundry by the shore. We were going to start something new, change some people, do nothing we were trained for. Like tonight. But it was no good either.”

Elaine laughed. “That doesn’t make sense. Come on, let’s clean you up.” She took his arm.

Jacob pulled himself free. He took the sack of horsehair and the wooden brush handle from the closet and set them on the bench. “Here it is.” He had been thinking of this moment for a long time, but the right words had never come to him. “There is no vandal, never was. I got carried away pulling out burrs.”

Elaine handled the bundles of hair, then folded the top of the sack. She looked up. Her eyes sparkled with the fluorescent light. “Tell me. Did you have fun letting me go on like that about my horse? I know I don’t take care of the nice things I have sometimes, but you could have a heart.”

“Things went too far. I wanted to tell you. I was wrong about you.” Jacob picked up Susan’s clogs. “I have to quit these stables, the whole routine.”

Elaine had gathered up the sack and dust brush. “We were both wrong,” she said on her way out the door.

Jacob stood outside Susan’s livingroom window and waited for the courage to go to the front door. Inside the darkened room, Susan put another record on. He had been nothing but a disappointment to her. By now, she was probably regretting leaving her ninety dollars beneath his chisel case. Jacob had seen her put a hundred there, but while he was outside with the horses she must have taken ten of it back.

Susan left the wine bottle leaning against a cold windowpane in the front room near where Jacob was standing. When lone cars turned at the stop sign, Jacob pressed himself into the spruce branches while the headlights projected the green and purple of the bottle against the wall, and shadows chased the color around the inside corners of the empty room where Susan must have once done her woodwork.

When she first saw Jacob’s furniture and wanted to work for him, their mutual acquaintances had warned her that he would be impossible to work with. But she had come to his shop anyway and laid a hollow

wooden halibut on his workbench and asked him to touch it. He had stroked the luminous round belly inlaid with scales, and detecting the seam, he placed a finger in the toothed mouth and sprung the catch. Inside were compartments of yellow cedar that had been sanded so smooth that only a trace of aroma escaped. When he had looked up from the fish, she was kneeling and fingering the fluted leg of his latest bureau. "This is what I've always wanted to do," she had told him. Jacob, for that moment, understood that her coming to him was a natural act, one that had been approaching unseen but felt for a long time.

But with her in the workshop, he learned how solemn he could be, how quiet he could make her be. Him cutting the horse's mane—funny thing—seemed to have pleased her like nothing else, unless it was the trouble the lie had brought him. She would not let him forget, not until he gave her what he had denied her with his silence.

Jacob froze when Susan came close to the rippled window, her eyes as clear and brown as an Andalusian's.

Any day now, if things didn't change, they would smother in the solemn workshop. A year ago at this time, the two of them had cut birch on his lot out at Twenty-seven Mile and had brought it back to the stables to cure. She frightened him in one unguarded moment when she had said, moments after they had laughed together over something, that she was like the air-dried wood that after several years would come alive under Jacob's plane and show its clarity and colors.

Susan left the woodstove door open, and the firelight lay in a flickering trapezoid on the rug. She took off her shirt and put herself in the warmth. Before the fire of her woodstove, the smooth skin of her side curved up beneath her fingers like the soft edge of a coopered door.

Shaking, he tiptoed over and hammered on the door.

"Jacob? You scared the hell out of me." Her finger trembled on her shirt buttons. "Something is wrong."

"There are too many lies between us." He pulled her money from his pocket.

"Come in," she said, "if you want to talk."

The day Jacob was evicted from the stablemaster's quarters, he and Susan stacked drying planks of different colors onto his old flatbed and pulled the straps tight against the bundle.

“You can’t just stack this in the forest,” Susan said, wiping water off with her gloved hand.

“The snow isn’t as deep there.” He would cover the wood with tin to let it breathe.

“You know,” she said, “staying in a tent all winter out on your property isn’t a good idea either.”

Susan struggled with two short planks of pear she had been saving by the steps.

“Keep this in my house,” she said, “for the cabinet we’re building.”

“I don’t want my wood spread around all over.”

“Bring it all then. There would still be room for your workbench.”

Elaine’s pickup was by the stables. The Andalusian was taking her bare-back around the mustering grounds, prancing through ankle-deep powder. The horse glossed beneath Elaine’s woolen knickers. The rider’s long hair fell from beneath an average blue knit cap.

“She uses the brush on her horse,” Susan said.

“All my tools are here and there. So much for my winter. I’ll get nothing done,” Jacob said. Snow filling Susan’s hair was melting down her face as she stood holding the planks. He wanted to feel her short, blond hair. He brushed the ice from her head. Her hair was thicker than he had imagined. “Where’s your cap?” His fingertips twinged with an aftertouch.

She put the pear wood in the front seat. “I’ll show you the fastest way to my house.”

Jacob started the truck. Susan was drying her face with her bare hand. He was glad he had touched her. As they drove down the hill to town, she looked straight ahead through the fogging windshield, wiping her cheeks and pointing out shortcuts and potholes with a fluttering hand. She was smiling. She said the rug in the front room would have to be taken up for his bench.

Evergreens that bent over the roadside were beginning to hold the snow.

Jacob caught Susan’s fingers and held them quiet on his leg. He said, “I left my father’s village at night simply to avoid going in to his workshop the next morning.” She must feel his shivering. He had never told anyone this, and it had been so long ago that he didn’t remember all the details.

She took her hand away to scratch her nose. Her palm returned hard and rough on his arm. He felt like a traveller there on the flat, snowy streets near her house, and he began the story as if they were hours away from their destination. Most of it was true and had nothing to do with wood.