

The Gaudenzia · Gwen Head

THE KISS had not gone well, remained a yearning, clumsy meeting of alien skin and membranes that refused to become anything more, arousing only that loneliness it had been intended to alleviate.

She had disengaged herself gently, letting her lips skim his cheek as if reluctantly, then shifted the strap of her big bag heavily up on her right shoulder again, and walked firmly away, neither looking back, nor letting her shoulders sag.

In the front hall her husband waited for her, seated on a small hard bench no visitor ever used, flipping through the pages of an old magazine as if she had been a dentist and he a suffering patient callously kept waiting. *Husband, yes, still*, she thought, astonished at seeing the strange man with the tight mouth and complaining voice, who began at once to upbraid her.

"It's nearly eleven."

"I wasn't aware I had a curfew."

"I assumed you'd be back earlier."

"You *presumed*, you mean."

"Where were you?"

"Out. With friends. *Plural* friends." The exact way in which *they* had become *we*, and then only *I* again was no longer any right concern of his, if it had ever been.

He stood up, confronting her by the door. She stepped aside, but he made no move to go. Instead, "Sarah called," he said, staring hard at her before he moved unexpectedly back toward the living room.

"Sarah who?"

"Sarah Medford. You remember Sarah. Abigail's teacher."

"Sarah! What on earth for? They're not having another of their horrible potluck dinners to raise money, are they? Not in the middle of the summer? I can't, I simply can't, make anything this time. I doubt I can even go, not with Abby's camp starting Sunday, and my trip—"

"Not that. She's calling all the parents. Bobby O'Day died."

"Oh, *no!*" Rocked by the first horrible assault of it, she could still notice the small satisfied upturn of his lips.

"I didn't know what I should tell Abigail, or when. And I couldn't

think of much else after Sarah called. It was hard doing the Daddy bit all evening. I'd hoped you'd be back before Abby's bedtime."

"Just as well I wasn't, then. That would have been an awful time to tell her. She'd have stayed awake all night."

"You *will* tell her, though?"

"Of course. Tomorrow, I guess. I need some time to myself first. When—?"

"Last Tuesday, Sarah said."

"I can't believe it. He looked so *well*. He did everything the other kids did. He even had *hair*."

"Apparently they knew it was coming—had known since April. Sarah said they had one last drug to try—"

"His *shots*! Abby told me that Bobby had shots every Friday. It didn't even occur to me—"

"It got him through the end of school, at least. After that things apparently went downhill very fast."

"God, oh god."

She sat down abruptly, covering her face with both hands; from the hot reddish darkness behind her closed lids she could hear her husband's footsteps, going into the next room, pausing for a few seconds, returning.

"I wrote down the information about the services. Bobby was cremated. The remains will be buried tomorrow afternoon. There'll be a graveside service. Then there's a memorial service tomorrow evening. Seven, at Saint Patrick's. Sarah asked me to have you call her back and let her know if you and Abby can come. Apparently she's doing all the calling for the kid's parents, what are their names?"

"Ida is the mother, I think. The father's name I don't know. Of course we'll go. Bobby was—I don't even know what to call it, at ten. He was a special friend of Abby's. She really, *really* liked him."

The sobbing began then, a clenching at her deepest core, not far removed from nausea, rage, or terror. With her eyes clamped shut, she reached out, and found him standing above her, knew the familiar textures of cloth and skin, the little hairs of his forearms, so much thinner and wirier now. She rose up only high and long enough to draw him down beside her.

"Tomorrow I think we should all be together," she managed to say.

“It’s so hard for Abby. First us. And now this. Now Bobby.”

He held her then for a long time, in a way no longer sexual, but still personal and intimate in the extreme, their bodies falling together with thoughtless accuracy as they had always done. Her crying, the agonized grinding of her forehead against his collarbone, the grip and release of her hands on his shoulder and sleeve, came and went; and in their final, depleted ebb, she felt confusedly how pain had come to be their strongest bond, more final, perhaps even — the thought loosed a fresh swell of silent tears — more permanent than the child they so uneasily shared.

They were nearly late to the service because of the flowers.

All day long, in a way that made her think of a dress rehearsal, they had walked through the activities in which years of weekends had passed, producing a composite Saturday, a brief history of Abby’s childhood performed again. Perhaps, indeed, this was no rehearsal, but rather a revival, a command performance to divert and solace their child.

At any rate they had heeded her every whim, perhaps even demanded whims where none existed, for their own grieved satisfaction as well as Abigail’s. First came an hour of family bicycling, although Jed, who had come by car, had to take turns using hers, while whichever of them was without the bicycle trotted along beside Abby like a faithful dog, grinning and panting encouragement. Then an hour of collapse on one of the park’s wide lawns, an exhibition of children’s art, and finally, after hastily consumed hamburgers, the market.

Abby fidgeted while her mother bought, from sheer habit, the gallon can of olive oil, the frozen *pesto*, the pounds of real Parmesan cheese and bulk pasta, the rice, kasha, and exotic sweetmeats of apricot and pistachio that the two of them, light eaters and now near-recluses as well, would never manage to use up, but throw out finally, rancid, cracked, moldy, or shriveled to leathery sweetness. Meanwhile Abby nibbled the skin around her fingernails, or sucked at a strand of long, wheat-colored hair.

Jed took the heavy shopping bags uncomplaining, but bent to Abigail to ask, “What would you *really* like to do now, Abs?”

“Can we go to the Stamp Act?”

“Can you afford to buy anything?”

“I think so. Mom owes me my allowance.”

"You're right, Abby. I forgot. You get another dollar for sitting yourself, too."

Jed's eyebrows shot up; determined to maintain their truce, she forced herself to explain. "Just a couple of hours in the afternoon. I had to go to the drugstore, check on my visas, get a typhoid shot, stuff like that."

They descended a ramp of gray, undulating planks, part boardwalk, part stationary roller coaster. On each side, tiny glassed-in shop fronts flanked it, fanning out along its leisurely curve of descent. Old books, records, clothes; shops for preserves, shops for soap, cheeses, candy; shops full of forlorn, ectomorphic plants, force-fed to a dense greenness as unhealthy as the pallor of newborn veal. At the Stamp Act, Abby lost herself at once in a world not of geography, tariffs, trade, or boundaries, but simply and blissfully, of horses.

This passion had begun almost in her infancy. When it became impossible to add more stuffed horses to the dozens that grazed on her bed all day, more model horses to the pens and stalls of her toy breeding farm, more volumes on horses to her bookcase, more news photographs and clippings of horses, or more exuberant drawings and paintings of them to the Scotch tape and thumbtack scarred walls of her room, the child had turned finally to stamps, seeing in each frail, exotic paper world only the flashing hooves, the wild eyes, the tossing manes and streaming tails, of horses. Her favorite stamp was a large, poorly printed commemorative, inscrutably captioned in Cyrillic letters, on which, in the extreme background of a mob scene of such turbid colors and careless registration that it could have represented anything from a coronation to a revolutionary riot, the dim and tiny figure of a stone horse, surmounting what appeared to be a triumphal arch, could be barely discerned, rearing wildly against a livid sky.

Now Abigail was admiring in miniature the park of some great country estate, where an elegant Polish lady, in a full black dress diagonally sashed with red, sat sidesaddle on a composedly cantering white horse. Next she fingered, coveted, marveled at an Italian stamp, depicting some golden mosaic in which a Roman centurion looked down from his prancing dapple-gray horse as Jesus was led to his cross; then a stamp of celestial blue across which two racing Arab colts exploded like silver comets; and, finally, most wonderful of all, a stamp depicting Eohippus, the primal

First Horse, with his gourd-shaped head and body, small laid-back ears, delicate legs, and tasseled, donkeylike tail.

It was the Polish lady in the mournful green park who reminded her of the flowers. Too late to call a florist; and in any case the stiff perfunctory sheaves of dyed carnations, scentless roses, and unyielding gladioli seemed all wrong for the memory of a child. Above her, near the market entrance (for the market buildings, on many levels, were terraced into a hillside so steep as to be almost a bluff) she remembered a flower stall, capricious, seasonal, full of unfamiliar, constantly changing marvels.

Leaving Jed and Abigail to correlate the aesthetic and equine merits of the stamps with their prices, she climbed a half-hidden flight of cement stairs, crossed an alley rumbling with truck traffic, passed a row of fish and seafood counters, and found herself in a small, stylized jungle, where tiers of green gallon cans arranged in pyramids rose on either side of her, their varied burdens of flowers and foliage exploding, cascading, twining, catching at her hair and clothing as she moved, so that she felt herself a giant, sterile, goggling insect among them. At her feet were cyclamens, hairy-leaved, bilabial, in astonishing shades of lavender and pink; huge blue alliums whose globular heads reminded her of dandelions gone to seed; gray lacy Dusty Miller; the kaleidoscopic foliage of tuberous begonias. Above dangled the shiny-leaved sprays and porcelain bells of fuchsias, and on either side were lilies: not mere day lilies, but lilies for each hour, each minute of light, from the first pale rose of morning to the deepest black-throated mauve, russet, and wine of approaching night.

A bearded assistant wearing a green canvas apron over his plaid shirt approached her. Wordlessly she pointed out her choices: the alliums, a selection of lilies, some narrow-leafed pink and purple flowers whose name she could not bring herself to ask, a flat white flower like a pin-cushion stuck full of tiny stars, a few gold and coral snapdragons, sprays of red and white honeysuckle for fragrance.

Later, at home, pushing their dinner plates aside unscrapped, she thrust as many and varied flowers as she could into a common kitchen glass, not wanting Bobby's parents to have the trouble of returning a finer vase. She added only enough water to cover the stems, hastily twisted and torn to the right lengths. Then, crying "Abby, Jed, put on your coats," she rushed into her own garden, the disheveled bouquet in one hand, and as

they passed out to the car, impulsively snatched up a few handfuls of daisies and some spires of orange montbretia. These, while Jed drove, she tucked into edges and bare spots, indifferent to their imperfections, and to the litter of leaves, torn stems, and fallen petals on the car floor.

The street in front of the church was full of cars but nearly empty of people. Across the street from their parking place she saw the church door just closing. She jumped out and began clumsily to run, leaving her family to follow, feeling her skirt spattered with drops of water shaken from the bouquet she clutched with both hands to her wet breast.

No one had thought to turn on the lights in the church entry hall. At seven, in summer, it was still mid-afternoon outside, and even after she had removed her sunglasses and begun to take in the constantly reforming lines and knots of large and small figures in the dimness, she saw few faces that she knew. Sarah, the children's teacher, embraced her, weeping; murmured "Lovely, lovely," brokenly over the flowers; and waved her toward a guest book on an ugly oak table, where she signed each of their three separate names. Briefly she thought of leaving the flowers there. Jed and Abby had already brushed past her, past Sarah, past the constantly changing group gathered around the small, pale, stunned-looking O'Days; and she would have joined them immediately, in spite of the rapid unseemly clicking of her high heels on the marble entry floor as she ran to catch up, had not Sarah deflected her, placed a hand on her shoulder, steered her past Bobby's parents, to whom she mumbled brief, fragmentary greetings and words of sympathy, and propelled her through the double oak doors, and into the center aisle of a nave glaringly high, stark, and flooded with ruthless late-afternoon light.

In all this space and clinical brightness, down the great length of varnished pine pews she passed, there could not have been more than forty people. Nor were there any flowers; instead the altar was dominated by a large, flimsy-looking easel displaying a portrait in brown chalk, evidently drawn from a photograph, of the dead Bobby, crew-cut and wearing a T-shirt, relentlessly smiling.

She placed her flowers on the altar rail beside it, then rejoined Jed and Abby, who moved over, leaving the aisle seat to her. She had not entered a Catholic church, nor attended a mass, since the gilt, marble, and jeweled-glass cathedrals of her junior year in Europe, dark, mysterious, and

grand, heady with incense, reverberating with organ music and chanted Latin.

Now only the uncomfortable length of the service remained. Except for herself, in a printed silk dress normally reserved for luncheons with friends, the mourners wore everyday clothes, shirt-sleeves, cotton frocks, even blue jeans. Rendered in language as bare and, to her ear, graceless, as the plain pews and high white walls that surrounded her, the magnificent words of grief and consolation, the tremendous promises of rest, resurrection, and triumph had become small, shopworn, and trivialized; so that time and again, as she glanced from the dead child depicted before her, to the delicate pale profile, inquisitive, tearless blue eyes, and fine, freshly brushed, light hair of the living child at her side, tears sprang to her own eyes, not at the truth of the words, but at their bald, evident, hopelessly flimsy and yearning falsity.

Walking between them back to the car, Abby turned first to Jed.

"*You* don't believe it, do you?"

"Believe what?"

"All that resurrection and life after death stuff?"

"I don't necessarily *dis*believe."

"Then why were you making jokes?"

"Yes, why were you, Jed? Whether *you* believe or not, simple respect for the child's parents—"

"No one could hear me but you and Abby. I was just trying to lighten things up a little for the kid."

"Maybe she doesn't want things lightened up. Maybe she needs to understand."

"Does anyone understand?"

"Mommy, do *you* believe it?"

"I don't know, Abigail. I guess deep down everyone *wants* to believe it, or something like it. Nobody can prove it *isn't* so."

"Nobody can prove it *is*, either."

"I can't argue that, Jed. But Abby, the world can be a hard place, as well as a joyous and beautiful one. And I think it's wrong to make fun of anything that gives people some comfort, some strength."

"Even if it isn't true?"

Abigail, in the front seat between them, looked again from one to the other.

"Even if it's true only for them. In their hearts."

Jed corrected her. "In their imaginations, you mean."

"I suppose so."

And then, thinking of their remote idolatrously loving past, she added, "I don't think anyone lives life as it is, Jed. I don't think anyone is strong enough."

"You believe in delusions, then, and in deliberately lying, even to children?"

"I believe in whatever I need to believe in to keep on living."

"But Mommy," Abby said, looking up at her perplexed. "You cried. All the way through the service. And Daddy didn't."

"I still don't believe it," Abby said over their special Saturday breakfast of French toast, bacon, and the fresh orange juice it was Abby's task to squeeze.

"Well, you don't have to," her mother said wearily, wondering how other parents managed to skim so lightly over the sheer drops and hidden quicksands of their children's lives. "Neither your father nor I has ever tried to sell you on religion. His *or* mine. But it doesn't do any harm to know what other people believe, then decide when you're older. You can believe whatever you want, Abby, and that includes not believing anything at all."

"That wasn't what I meant."

"Then what—"

"I mean I just don't believe Bobby is *dead*." Abby put down the gnawed rind of a slice of French toast.

"That's one thing you *do* have to believe."

"I didn't even know he was sick!"

"I was surprised too, Abby. Shocked, really. I didn't know he was *that* sick either."

"Did you know he was going to die?"

"I knew he might. I knew he had been very, very seriously ill. But I guess I thought—at least I hoped—that he was cured. And not just in remission."

"What does that mean?"

"Remission? It means being better, even almost well. Sometimes for quite a long time."

"I thought he was cured. I saw him at school every day, and I played with him. He was the only boy in my club. We drew pictures for each other, and wrote stories together, and traded horse stamps."

"Oh, Abby!"

What could she do but open her arms and gather in the lovely, awkward, mysteriously changing body of her daughter, letting the lengthening legs dangle over her own rounded knees. "Abby, Abby, I'm so sorry."

If the body altered so visibly each day, what went on in the invisible mind and spirit of this, of any child beginning to grow up? Her eyes began to prickle with unshed tears, even as her arms tightened, and her back bent to the timeless familiar rocking. But the child, still a child, slipped away from her.

"It's only been a couple of weeks since I saw him. My *brain* believes it. But —"

"But what, Abby?"

"But I keep wanting to call him up. To tell him what's happened. *To tell Bobby he's dead.*"

Now Abigail was in motion, even in flight, circling the dining room table again and again, a habit she had had, when angry or bewildered, since infancy. Abruptly she stopped, confronting her mother across the full width of the table, clutching a sketch pad and pen she had picked up while she prowled as if they had been a small shield, a short sword.

"Mommy, that's crazy, isn't it? Isn't it?"

Her mother waited a moment for the right answer to come, letting the words collect in some hidden hollow of her mind, as if seeping one by one from a cold subterranean spring.

"I don't think so, Abby. I've felt the same way myself."

"When someone died?"

Again she considered. "Not so much then. Perhaps because when people close to me have died, my own mother for example, they've been very old, or so sick it was obvious they could never get well. And when it's that kind of death, as it usually is, the personality, the mind, the spirit—whatever it is you really know and love—goes long before the body. But Bobby—"

"Then when *did* you feel that way?" Abby asked again, urgently.

"When your father and I—" she began helplessly.

"*What?*"

"When we decided we couldn't live together any more."

"When you decided to get divorced!" Abby said, a new brutality in her voice.

"Yes. Abby, you know the reasons. You know I didn't want it to be this way. But still I kept wanting to call up Jed because he was the only person who could understand how sad I was. And why."

"I know, Mommy. I'm sorry."

Abby came round behind her chair, gave her a quick, hard, choking hug, then sat down before the sketch pad, a little girl again. Her mother tried to return to her reading, but instead found herself watching covertly as a form of great intricacy, lightness, and speed took shape on her daughter's sketch pad, half hidden between the soft side curtains of light hair that trailed over the page as she bent to it.

"What are you drawing, Abby?"

"Nothing, Mother."

But a few moments later, without looking up from her work, Abby began to speak, one of the long strangely learned monologues she sometimes offered spontaneously on any matter that had been the object of her impassioned curiosity. Most often, lately, these lectures dealt with horses: their breeding, lineage, training, or legendary exploits.

"Do you know what a gaudenzia is?" Abigail asked.

"No, Abby."

"But you've heard of the Palio? In Siena?"

"Of course. I've even been in Siena, Abby. The square isn't really a square. And the color of the brick —"

"Gaudenzia," Abigail interrupted impatiently, as she often did when intent on her own thoughts, "was a mare, a beautiful white mare who won the Palio three times, three years in a row, more than any other horse ever. When she was a filly, she was playful and wild, and her owners called her Farfalla, which means Butterfly, because she was so silly and lazy, and they thought she wouldn't ever amount to much.

"But then they broke her, and began to train her, and she changed. She learned to run, really run, and to love running; and they entered her in the Palio and she won it. She was the first and only mare *ever* to win it. And she won again and again."

"Why did they change her name? I think Farfalla is a pretty name."

"It's all right, I guess," Abby said. She lifted her head, looking past her mother, her blue eyes wide, her nostrils dilated. "But after she learned to run, she needed a new name, a great name. So they called her Gaudenzia."

"Meaning?"

"Joy of Life," Abby said softly, bending to her paper again. "The joy of being alive."

They were silent for a few minutes, the mother turning again to the photography magazine in which a recent exhibition of her own work was featured, noting with irritation, but without real interest, that several of her best photographs accompanying the article had been quite poorly reproduced. Some larger, elusive question, however, stuck at the back of her mind, something she restlessly sidestepped, shied at, returned to against her will. Finally she recalled the one word Abigail had left unexplained, as troubling as a small stone that could not be dislodged.

"Abby," she said, "you told me all about Gaudenzia. But didn't you say you were drawing *a* gaudenzia? What is that?"

"I'll show you," Abby said, coming round to her mother's place at the table holding her finished drawing, which she laid on top of the magazine with the perfect assurance of the loved. Before her the mother saw depicted a wondrous, airborne horse with an elaborate mane and tail, and an assortment of fluttering decorations or streamers whose meaning was obscure.

"Explain it, Abby," she said. "Tell me what I'm seeing."

"This is a gaudenzia, of course," Abigail said, speaking at first in the superior, teaching tone she reserved for well-meaning but slow-witted adults.

"A gaudenzia is an enormous white horse that flies through the sky forever. A gaudenzia has huge dark eyes like mirrors, a mane and tail of albino peacock feathers, and a forelock made out of the eyes of peacock feathers. There are tiny wings on each hoof. And these—" Abby pointed to what seemed a pair of long banners, or a double train flowing from the wonderful horse's shoulders, "—these are streams of water, pure sparkling water, bubbling up and out into the sky like fountains, or cold, icy springs, or a trail of shooting stars."

Now Abigail stood erect, looking away from her mother, fingers

alternately crumpling and smoothing one corner of her drawing.

"When I die," she said, in a small, resolute voice, from which all trace of conceit or pedantry had abruptly vanished, "I will be a gaudenzia. Bobby is a gaudenzia. There are many angels, I think, but only a few gaudenzias. Bobby and I are both gaudenzias."

Then she was gone, and in the speed and suddenness of her going the drawing fluttered to the floor like a feather of spun silver.

Preoccupied and tired—her plane from Bogotá had finally come in nearly five hours late, leaving no time at all for sleep—she twice took wrong exits from the freeway. She had forgotten the map included in the camp literature, and although Abby was a second-year camper, she realized that Jed must have driven last year to pick Abby up, for she had only a general sense of direction and distance, and a vague recollection of the low, rambling suburban school building of glass and yellow brick, sprawling the length of an enormous parking lot.

When finally she found the place, it was already nearly a half-hour past the scheduled rendezvous. But although the baggage truck had come, and trunks, sleeping bags, backpacks, suitcases, and an odd assortment of miscellaneous unmarked pillows and stuffed animals had been unloaded on the wide sidewalk, the camp buses had not yet arrived. She considered a narrow but shady parking spot at the far end of the crowded lot; but then, remembering the weight of Abigail's trunk, she reconsidered, and as another car pulled out, slid immediately into a vacant space almost next to the baggage truck.

She loaded the smaller items first, amused by Abby's sloppily rolled sleeping bag, her half-empty pack, and the pillow in its flowered case, marked as Abby's by the green felt frog in the pillow case, blunt nose, white button eyes, and front legs protruding as if he had been tucked in-to bed there.

The trunk was another matter. She squatted, hot and sweaty in the many-pocketed designer khakis she wore when traveling on assignment, and tested the weight of it. Too heavy to carry any distance, unless she hefted it onto one hip; and then she would risk aggravating her old, tedious back problem, perhaps being laid up for days, even weeks. No, she would drag it; damage to the trunk's scarred blue paint was definitely a

secondary consideration. But the noise of heavily weighted metal rasping over rough concrete was startling even in the crowded parking lot, filled with the sound of automobiles and shouted greetings, and she had taken only a few hobbled, breathless steps before she found one of the junior counselors who had ridden ahead with the baggage truck at her side, offering to help. She unlocked the car's trunk and raised the lid, pushing aside a jack, tools, safety flares, a blanket, some clothes she had forgotten to take to the cleaner. Then together they tipped Abby's trunk over the car bumper and into the tight but adequate space she had cleared.

Slamming the lid, looking up to thank him, she saw the first of the fat-tired, battered yellow buses pull in at the far end of the lot, heard the camp songs break up into a shower of greetings and cries of recognition, and an instant later saw Abigail running toward her, and felt the surprisingly large, solid, and vigorous body land hard in her outstretched arms.

"You've grown," she said, joyfully aware of the immemorial banality of the statement, "and you must have gained five pounds."

"Nah. You're just getting old and decrepit, Mumsy."

She held the child briefly at arm's length, studying the mobile sun-burned face, the blue eyes and the light hair under the lacy shadow of an openwork straw hat with blue ribbons that tied under the chin. Jed had bought the hat for Abby in the Caribbean; she noted with pleasure the oddity and charm it lent to a costume otherwise consisting of a sweat shirt, tattered cords, hiking boots, and an unseasonable goosedown vest. No marriage, she thought, no love that had made so beautiful a child could ever be said wholly to have failed.

"So how was camp?"

"It was fine. Mommy, I can dive now, and do the elementary back-stroke, and float on my stomach *and* my back! And Annie says my breathing on my crawl is getting really good."

"That's wonderful, baby. What else? What about your riding?"

"Well, Pogo isn't there any more."

"Oh, he was your *favorite*! What happened?"

"He got thrush and they had to sell him."

"Thrush! I thought that was a bird, or some dumb thing babies got."

"It's a horse disease too. He'll be okay, Georgie says, but he can't

work as hard as a camp horse has to, so they sold him."

"Do you have another favorite horse, then?"

"Oh, maybe Rainbow. She's a palomino, very smooth-gaited, and I guess she's a little nervous or something, because she's never tied up in the pasture. They let her wander around loose, but she's a troublemaker. She likes to nip at the other horses, and then back away very fast before they can kick her."

"She sounds too wild to ride."

"She needs a good, strong rider, Georgie says. *I* got to ride her twice."

"That's terrific, Abby. I'm very proud of you."

They were driving now, along wide, almost empty streets without sidewalks, bordered by rough cedar and redwood fences, or uneven hedges of laurel or juniper. Behind lay low, sprawling houses, only their roofs, television antennas and utility lines clearly visible. Now and then she steered toward the center line to avoid children on bicycles, or bored, wildly barking family dogs idling away the Sunday afternoon in the suicidal pursuit of passing cars.

"Do you think you want to go back next year?"

"Oh, yes! Could I go second term too?"

"Well, we could think about it. You know most of the kids will be different?"

"Oh, that's okay. Susie will be staying, and so will Rachel. And Annie's going to be our counselor again, she says she's almost sure of it."

"Well, that's great. I'd miss you, of course, but I don't see any real reason you couldn't go both terms, if you still feel the same way when it's time to reserve a place for you. I'm glad it was so much better than last year."

"Oh, it was."

"You weren't homesick?"

Abby shook her head.

"Well, *I* was. Or maybe just Abby-sick. I really missed you. I kept waking up in the middle of the night in these weird hotel rooms with strange plumbing and lizards crawling up the walls, and wishing I had someone with horrible sharp elbows and big feet to hug."

Abby giggled dutifully.

"So there wasn't *anything* you didn't like? Not even the food?"

"I didn't like the mosquitoes. I've got bites all over."

"So do I, only some of mine are ticks. I'll probably get Chagas disease."

"What's *that*?"

"Not really, Abby," she said hastily, aware that hypochondria could be both hereditary and highly contagious. "Anything else you didn't care for? Especially anything I could do something about?"

This time, somewhat to her surprise, her daughter did not answer; and in the sudden lapse of conversation, she had time to notice that they were passing a small park near the water. Beyond the promenade that meandered along the shore, sailboats dipped and veered like white sulphur butterflies, and in the park itself, part landscaped and part wild, the last fireweed towered above beds of marigolds and zinnias. She slowed the car, noting a small playground at the far end. Perhaps Abby, cooped up in a bus for nearly three hours, might like to stop, interrupting the long drive home with a run. Impulsively she pulled into the narrow parking lot that ran the length of the park, noting, as she cruised in search of a parking place, that except for children Abby's age or younger, there seemed to be no individuals there, but only halves of couples: young couples exuberantly playful or languidly sauntering, deep in animated conversation or deeper still in mute embrace; parents leaning against each other as they bent over the redwood rail of the sand-floored play area watching their children; or very old couples, silent and stationary, who seemed to her own hopelessly single vision not so much exhausted, as valiant, enduring, and enviable.

The full weariness of her travels rose up in her, and with it the pain of reunions that seemed always the prelude to further separations. Above all, she felt rage at the elusive, ineradicable contagion of love that she now saw all around her. Suddenly she realized how reclusive, apart from her work, she had become, how resolutely she avoided such places, places which, for all their loveliness in the ripe golden light of summer's end, might as well have been malarial swamps as far as she was concerned, infected with a pestilential miasma of loneliness.

"Why are we stopping here, Mommy?"

"There's a nice playground, Abby, see? No, down that way. There's a huge climbing rope, and a merry-go-round of inner tube swings—"

"Let's just go home, Mommy."

"Why, are you hungry or something?"

"No. It's just that there are too many families here."

Startled by the exactitude with which Abby had read her thoughts, and by the realization that she was inescapably half, if not of a couple, at least of a pair, it was the mother who now made no reply, but pulled out of the parking lot at the playground end, and moved again into the light fast traffic along the lakeshore boulevard. The park continued for some miles as a narrow border of grass along the water; in its scalloped inlets grew tall stands of cattails, or flat intricate mats of water lilies; and beyond swam an occasional female mallard trailing an obstreperous, insubordinate brood of half-grown ducklings.

"Are you a good dancer, Mommy?" Abigail asked suddenly.

"Okay, I guess. At least I used to be."

"Well, I'm not."

"Abby, that's silly. I couldn't *ever* have done half the things you do in your modern dance class."

"You know that's not the kind of dancing I'm talking about."

"Well, but all dancing is the same, basically. You're light and agile—what's all this about anyway?"

"They have dances at camp."

"They do? For the high school kids?"

"No. For everybody."

"Well, I'm sure you dance at *least* as well as anybody else your age."

"I don't really know," Abigail said, turning to her window to stare out over the water. "I never got to try."

"Didn't anyone ask you to dance?"

"No," softly. "Nobody. And there was a dance every week."

Mindful of Abigail's unpredictable fits of shyness and stubbornness, and the necessity, for herself, of those few unencumbered summer weeks on which a substantial part of their income depended, the mother steeled herself against a too ready sympathy.

"Well, you're a liberated kid," she said. "You could have asked one of the boys to dance."

"I did."

"How many times?"

"Once," Abby said reluctantly.

"And he wouldn't?"

"No."

"Did he say why?"

"He said a horse stepped on his foot."

"Well, it may *have*, Abby. That place is *overrun* with horses. That's one of the main reasons you kids like going there."

"No."

"No, what?"

"That's not why he wouldn't dance."

"Oh, Abby, how do you know?"

"I just do."

Again there was silence between them, an inconclusive silence that unrolled before them like the asphalt ribbon of the road and its green border vanishing into a blind curve some distance ahead.

"What did you do at the dances, then, Abby, if you didn't dance?"

"I brought a horse book along to read."

"Oh, Abigail, no wonder! If you just sat there with your nose in a book and didn't even look at anyone, how did you expect them to know you even *wanted* to dance?"

"Why couldn't someone be interested in my book? And come over and talk to me? And maybe *then* dance?"

"Do you think you really looked like you *wanted* someone to talk to you?"

Abby's eyes snapped forward, and the line of her round chin hardened.

"*Bobby* would have come over and talked to me," she muttered.

Bobby. The two syllables were like two lurching steps interrupting a long untrammelled run through a field suddenly perceived to be full of hidden burrows and sinkholes, each with the potential to maim.

"Yes, I think he would have, Abby," she said slowly. "He was that kind of little boy. I think he really understood what other people were feeling, really thought about them. You know, sometimes when he came over to play with you, he'd get tired after a while and I'd find him down on the living room sofa, just quietly reading a book. And when he saw me, he'd put the book down and we'd have the *nicest* conversations."

"What about?"

"Whatever he was reading, or thinking. What I was doing. Or you. He loved hearing about you."

"He knew all about me."

"At school, maybe. But the rest of your life was—a kind of fairy tale to him. He had to spend so much time resting, Abby. And going to doctors."

Abby was sitting uncharacteristically straight and still, hands primly folded in her lap; and with the same quick glance away from the road that took in these details, her mother noted as well a single enormous tear, jerkily sliding along the faint shadow at the inner corner of Abigail's left eye, down the side of the sunburned nose and cheek, until it hung, mournful and faintly ludicrous, above the girl's upper lip. Always in the past Abigail's crying had been noisy, wholehearted and simple, accompanied by stamping, thrashing, and great, rending, soul-satisfying sobs. The new composure of her grief was chilling, and remained so even when the tear, as she opened up her mouth to speak again, slid over the pink cornice of her upper lip, and dissolved on her tongue.

"Mommy," very quietly, as if from a great distance, "I had a crush on Bobby."

"I know, Abigail. I'm very sorry."

"You *knew*? How did you know?"

"I thought he was so nice, Abby. When I told you about talking to him, what I was trying to say was that it was almost like talking to you. I felt *that* close. He was a fine, a dear little boy. He would have grown up to be a wonderful man. I guess I had kind of a crush on him myself."

Quickly they glanced at each other, the mother taking in her child's matted lashes and red eyelids, and the branching revival of glistening tracks on her cheeks.

"Abby, Abby, I'm so sorry."

"Mommy, it's not just that I'm sad."

"Then what?"

"*I'm afraid.*"

"Darling, please, please don't. You *will* get over it. People get over worse things, things so terrible you or I couldn't even begin to imagine them. Life—"

"You don't *understand!*"

Shocked into silence, she noted mechanically their approach to the free-way entrance, downshifted, checked her outside rearview mirror as she slid the car across two lanes of heavy traffic. In a few minutes they would be home, and she could hold her child, watch over her undistracted, be the saving raft in the breaking storm of her grief. If she had time; for in a soft, ferocious whisper, Abigail went on.

"I *know* Bobby is dead. But I'm still not sure sometimes. At camp, when we went on hikes, there were places on the trail where I thought I could almost see him. Just out of the corner of my eye. But I'd look again, and nothing was there—not even a bird, or a funny shadow in the tree."

I am lost, her mother thought, *we are lost*, although not half a mile away she could see the long arch of the familiar overpass toward home.

Relentlessly, Abigail continued. "And the real reason I hated the dances was that sometimes I felt sure Bobby was there. Not on the tennis court with the other kids, but maybe a little way back, by the horse corrals, watching. And I thought if I sat in the corner where it was darkest, with my book, that he might come talk to me. Oh, I knew it wasn't true, that I was just pretending. But I don't want to dance with anybody else, Mommy. Not ever."

How could she save her child from this grief, reassure her that life was not short, but long, various, rich in the unexpected, when her own life was so channeled and diminished into an unending series of duties, one of which even now held them separate? The car began to ascend the long straight ramp, and for a moment she felt the machine as a living, willful creature in exhilarating motion, rising exuberantly above the noise and brown stench of the freeway.

"Abigail," she said suddenly, desperately, jolted by an awful mingling of terror and relief, but hanging on, barely, "Abby, what about the *gaudenzia*? Don't you believe in him any more?"

"That was just a stupid story, Mommy," Abby said. "I made it up to go with my dumb picture."

But the sky above them was a celestial, an empyrean blue; and the ramp, rising, swept into a wide, perfectly banked curve, sensuously slow and controlled even at the little car's top speed.

Then she knew that their road could never end, nor would either of

them ever again find the words, for what soared tirelessly, watched sleeplessly over them both, their guardian and doom, invisible, radiant with loss.

