

## Glass · *Ehud Havazelet*

EVERY NIGHT they broke glass and Wright Bellamy wanted to hide.

A woman on the fifth floor began it. Wright could see her, wild-haired, crazy, waving a coffee cup against the sky. “Who do you think you are?” she screamed, every night, “Who do you think you are?” and Wright had no idea whom she was calling to. By the time she had thrown the cup hard on the air shaft pavement below, the others would have gathered in their windows, bottles in hand, plates, mirrors. A black man bit the end of light bulbs and lofted them like grenades; a woman in a baseball cap sailed plates like frisbees that arced alarmingly close to Wright’s building. They shouted, they laughed, and Wright watched them, not knowing what to do. When he looked over at Sharon, she smiled, and in her shrug, in the flat upraised palms she offered, Wright saw none of the emotions he was suffering, and that was the worst feeling of all.

They had been roommates three weeks, and Wright considered Sharon and this apartment with the rapt tenseness of a dreamer afraid to waken. She was twenty-two, fourteen years his junior, and of a different generation entirely. She wore exercise clothing around the house, hats with veils and flowers, men’s suits, army fatigues, and she looked born for all of them equally, in constant bloom. She dated college professors, rock guitarists, a utility infielder on the Mets. She might sleep till four in the afternoon, or be up at six, meditating in the early light. Everything she did surprised him. To Wright, she was of that breed of young women you saw everywhere nowadays, who carried loveliness and vigor with such remarkable ease, who seemed more comfortable in their young lives than he had ever been in his. To be living with her, sharing kitchen and bath, was a turn of events nothing short of miraculous. And this miracle had come about, Wright understood, from his finally taking matters in hand.

Wright’s dream—it had always been his dream—was to build his own house. The board over his drafting table at work, the walls of the two rooms he rented from Mrs. Rosenblat in Flatbush, were covered with drawings, sketches, scaled and detailed blueprints of the houses he would someday build. For Cape Cod he had designed a two-story bungalow with a sun porch and a shed dormer for extra light. For Long Island he had drawn a Gothic Revival, all in wood, with church windows, a nave, tran-

sept, even a small rose window at one end. He had plans for re-doing Victorians, landscaping the grounds of a Colonial, modifying a Federal house he had seen on a trip to Vermont. He had designs for a heating and cooling system that could run off solar power or wind; he had houses with live trees growing through them and streams running under glass floors; he drew rooms built onto solid bedrock and rooms opening onto chasms like the ones he imagined the Alps to overlook.

And then he had understood, in a moment of truth, that he would not build these houses. Wright believed in such moments; he paid close attention to eclipses, equinoxes, 11:11 each day and night: moments, he felt, of peculiar balance and revelation.

On his birthday, Bradley and two architects from the firm had bought him dinner, then taken him downtown to see a woman named Angel who could rotate her breasts in opposite directions while she danced. Bradley ordered Wright drinks he had never heard of and passed around a blue onyx bullet filled with cocaine. As birthday boy, Wright had the privilege of going up on stage and receiving a kiss from Angel, but even with all the celebratory rounds in him, he had been timid, and Bradley got the kiss and applause instead. Bradley offered to get Angel's phone number, but Wright declined and went home, where he had been unable to sleep. He showered, tried to work on a drawing. He fed the landlady's cat, and still restless, showered again. He stood naked in front of the full-length mirror, while the cat, surprised by the untimely attention, mewed between his legs for more. Wright saw himself middle-aged, undeniably, with a belly gone slack and thinning hair. He saw the neat grooming, the hopeful shyness, the eagerness to please, even then, in the middle of the night, alone. He saw a nice guy, a thirty-six-year-old nice guy for whom time was not waiting.

In the morning, he had given Mrs. Rosenblat notice. He had sent a memo to Spencer, the architect he drew for, demanding a raise. At lunch he had gone to a singles' roommate service and talked to a young lady who assured him she knew exactly what he needed.

He got the raise and found an apartment on Riverside Drive. A divorced bank teller in her fifties was the first to ask about the room, and after her a switchman for the Penn Central. When a grandmother with two cats and a schnauzer turned up one morning, Wright called the roommate service and told them he wouldn't need their help, but that

afternoon, Sharon knocked at the door.

She wore a black dress under a red sweatshirt, a fedora and running shoes. Her hair was held back with large barrettes in the shape of paper clips. She carried a shopping bag full of peaches she had bought from an African on a blanket near the subway. He also sold incense, Sharon said, but she didn't have the cash. She stood in the hallway eating a peach. She offered Wright one. Wright took the bag from her and asked her to come in. She apologized for not calling, but she had been in the neighborhood looking for work and it seemed the easiest thing to do. Did Wright mind? The apartment was great, Sharon said. How long had he been living here? Was there a napkin she could borrow?

They sat on boxes and talked. She was from Colorado, originally, but had set out for New York as soon as she was able. She was looking for typing work now, but really had plans to design her own clothing and open a boutique. She had designed this outfit. What did Wright think? Wright told her he very much admired it. They talked over the rent, the utilities, but Wright would have given her the room immediately, without discussion. Giddy with the recent upheavals he had brought about, Wright watched her wrap the peach stone carefully in the napkin and knew he would not of his free will allow this woman to walk out of his life.

They carted his furniture from Brooklyn, her suitcase and rocking chair from Teaneck where she had been living with an aunt. Wright bought rugs and claimed they were cast-offs from Mrs. Rosenblat, paid for paint and tools and told Sharon they would work it out later. He built a new counter in the kitchen, a coat rack, a platform for Sharon's bed. He sanded floors and stripped woodwork. Sharon painted the kitchen carnation pink and put clouds on the blue ceiling over her bed so she would have something to look at in the mornings.

Everything seemed easy. Wright showed Sharon his case of drawings, afraid she would laugh. She loved them. She got thumbtacks and hung blueprints in the hall, over Wright's desk. She took one of the Victorians to hang in her room. Wright told her of his plans for the apartment, the lighting he would install, the bay window he had in mind for the living room. He told her he had wondered if he would have the opportunity to try any of his ideas. "I'm thirty-six," he said. "I wasn't sure I'd get the chance." And when they were done, with the plants hung and the carpets down and all the furniture in place, Sharon came home with a bottle of

champagne. "It's perfect," she told Wright. "I don't see why we'd ever leave."

She cluttered the sink and medicine chest with bottles and tubes of lotion which Wright couldn't bring himself to complain about. She used his razors and shaving cream, and Wright made certain there would always be enough of each in the house. In the mornings, she came out to make coffee in a T-shirt only, and when she saw Wright hesitating on the threshold, too shy to come nearer, she laughed at him and went into his room for his robe.

Wright was in love with Sharon and he realized she knew it. It was not an untoward passion, did not leave him breathless or fumbling for words. They were pleased in their apartment together and Wright expected nothing. One night, after drinks at the university jazz club, she took him to her room and they made love. In the morning Wright watched her sleep, careful not to make any noise. When the alarm sounded, she kissed him happily on the cheek and went to shower, and Wright understood that nothing had changed between them. They did not discuss it. He was home when she returned from dates, and if he heard a man with her he would close the door to his room and pretend to be sleeping. If she were alone, they might share a bottle of wine or catch a late movie. Sharon told Wright he should get out more; she teased him about his habits, but Wright didn't mind. He felt they both knew how happy he was, and would have remained, if not for the glass.

They had heard sounds from the street, of course, voices, random city noises. One night a drunk on the corner had kept them awake singing the score to *Fiddler on the Roof*, and occasionally, Wright thought he heard some commotion from the building across the air shaft. On the whole, though, it seemed a quiet street, lined with trees and make-shift gardens, as pleasant a street, Wright thought, as one could expect to find in New York.

The first time was the evening Wright made stir-fry shrimp. He was serving rice from a steaming wooden bowl when a woman shouted in the street, a horrible sound. They went to the window expecting to see an accident, an assault, but could see nothing. Then Wright spotted her on the top floor of the building opposite. She screamed again and threw something. She waved her fist and spat, and then, as Wright and Sharon

watched, windows throughout the building opened. Glass began to fly, from all directions it seemed, people shouting as if the world had gone mad on some secret signal. A woman in a Yankees hat threw teacups. Two red-faced men in stocking caps tossed soda bottles. Some were full, and the men leaned out their window to see the bottles explode on the pavement below. The smaller of the two looked up and saw Wright and Sharon watching. He was wearing a lumber jacket, green and black squares, and his cap was pulled nearly to his eyebrows. He waved. He nudged his companion and the two of them waved, exuberantly, like children.

“Do you believe this?” Sharon said, and she looked at Wright and laughed.

“Something must be wrong,” Wright said, and he tried to laugh himself. “Don’t you think?”

Sharon looked back out the window. The two men still waved, their excitement almost mechanical now, like two dolls in a toy shop display. Sharon giggled. She raised a hand and waved back. Wright tried to keep a smile on, though he kept his hands firm in his pockets.

The episode lasted five minutes and was over as abruptly as it began. Wright slid a window open and stuck his head out. No police cars. Below, a cat picked its way among the rubble and broken glass. Somewhere a game show played on a television. No one else, as far as Wright could see, had been disturbed by the commotion.

Sharon was back at the table. “What was that all about?” she said.

Wright put his hand over the bowl of rice to test its heat. “I thought somebody had jumped from the roof,” he said, “or the building was on fire.”

“Maybe it was a celebration,” Sharon said.

“A celebration? Of what?”

“I don’t know.” She held her chopsticks in the air as Wright doled shrimp onto her plate. “Like when they brought in the astronauts, remember? Or the hostages. Like that.”

“Should we do something?” Wright said.

“What can we do?” Sharon said. “Let’s eat.”

They watched the eleven o’clock news but no mention of the incident was made. Wright wondered if the police had come and Sharon assured him someone must have called. After she had gone to bed, Wright stood a

while at the window. The building across the way was like any other, quiet, almost serene in the moonlight.

At work the following day, Wright checked every page of the Post and Daily News but could find mention of it in neither. He took it up with Bradley. Bradley was a student at NYU doing an internship with the firm. He was twenty-four or -five, wore expensive shirts, suspenders, seemed to have a limitless supply of pastel-colored shoes. He spent most of his time reading spy novels with his feet propped up on his drafting table. Wright was certain he would never last the semester, but Bradley seemed unconcerned.

“You’ll never believe this one,” Wright said, trying for a note of amusement. Bradley’s book cover showed a syringe dripping blood. The blood pooled in the shape of a naked woman. He did not look up. “We were eating,” Wright said, “you know, a romantic dinner for two? I’ve got the table set, the food’s nearly on the plates, and there’s this horrible scream. Like someone being attacked. Murdered, maybe. Right outside,” Wright added, trying to get Bradley’s attention.

“What did you make?” Bradley asked. He turned a page.

“Shrimp,” Wright said. “Stir-fry shrimp with rice. Anyway, you can imagine what we thought. We go to the window expecting the worst, but we can’t see a thing. Then the building across the way goes nuts. Screaming, throwing glass, absolutely nuts.” Bradley looked up a moment. “Sharon was very upset,” Wright said. “We both were. You hear about it on the news?”

Bradley put the book down on his knees. “Listen,” he said. “Have you heard about this guy up in Pelham? The subway executioner? This guy sneaks in the train shed every night and executes an IRT local. With a shotgun. Only the locals. The cops think a disgruntled employee, maybe, or a long-suffering commuter.” He picked up his book. “I ride that train,” Bradley said. “Now *that’s* scary.”

That evening was Sharon’s turn. She’d gotten a recipe from one of Wright’s books, and they were having a glass of wine, waiting for the clam sauce to simmer. Wright had put some Billie Holiday on the stereo, and Sharon didn’t seem to mind. The wine went warmly to his head, and he was thinking of asking Sharon to dance, right there in the living room,

when they heard the shout from outside. Sharon rushed to the window.

"There she is," she said.

"Who do you think you are!" the woman screamed. "Son of a *bitch!*"

Wright joined her and they witnessed the entire scene, exactly as it had been the previous evening. The woman shouted, leaning so far out her window, Wright was afraid she might fall. Two dogs had gotten into the air shaft somehow, and they barked at the building, dodging the falling glass. Somewhere in the din, Wright heard singing. The two men in caps were there, and they noticed Wright and Sharon immediately. "Who do you think you are?" they called, waving. "Who do you think you are?"

Wright left the window to finish his wine. He shut off the stereo, switched on the television, went in to try the clam sauce. He added garlic without asking Sharon, tasted it again, and finally, when he could no longer stand it, went into his bedroom and phoned the police. Sharon was still at the window when he came out.

"They're coming," he told her. "The police are on the way."

The riot had died down but still the two men were there, arms flapping idiotically in front of grinning faces. Wright measured them with a look of pure hatred.

"Why do you stand there?" he said.

"They're so funny," Sharon said.

"Insane," Wright said. "That's insane, not funny."

"They won't stop," Sharon said, and there was no comfort for Wright in her laugh. "Should I wave back?"

"Let them wave at the police. They've got places they can wave the rest of their lives."

Sharon looked at Wright. Her expression was patient, slightly amused. The same expression, Wright thought, with which she had been looking at the two men. He didn't know what to say so he apologized.

"No," Sharon said. "You're upset. I apologize."

She turned down the television and sat by him on the sofa. "I'm sorry," Sharon said. "It's nothing to laugh at, is it?"

"No," Wright said. "It's nothing to laugh at," and he took hold of one of her hands, then let go. "We live here," he told her. "All this doesn't bother you?"

She looked at him, still smiling, he thought. Her hair was pulled back with blue and yellow clips that looked like clothes pins. She adjusted a

blue clip and put her hands in her lap. "Yes," she said. "It does."

Wright had more he wanted to say to her. He felt for a moment that he might do anything, say anything to her. Instead, he went into the kitchen where clam sauce was bubbling onto the stove.

Over the next two weeks, Wright phoned the police nightly. He did not believe such a thing could be allowed to continue. There were laws, after all, and there were taxes. What else were they for? But he did not seem able to make anyone at the station understand. Still he called, until he thought he could detect recognition, even annoyance in the police operator's voice.

"Good evening, sir," she said. "What is the nature of your complaint?"

"Look," Wright said. "I know you're busy. I'm not a complainer, not usually. But this is right outside my window. How am I supposed to live with this?"

In the ensuing silence, Wright thought the operator was considering his question. He had gotten through. He envisioned himself going down to the station, after the whole thing was over, and thanking her personally. After thirty seconds she said, "Are you there, sir? What is the nature of your complaint?"

He continued calling, but as far as he could tell, the police never arrived.

At first, Wright refused to go to the window. He rearranged the furniture, upsetting the balance of his design, to face away from the offending wall. He was grateful when Sharon didn't object. She took him to an Italian place on Amsterdam one night, and another night, put the six o'clock news on so loud Wright could feel it in his teeth. They ended up slumped over with laughter. Sharon had gotten work with a one-man law firm and was working late many evenings. Wright and she had dinner twice a week regularly, but he was alone in the apartment much of the time. He tried working on his drawings. He sketched in a fieldstone fireplace for Sharon's room, though there was no chimney there. He tried music to counteract the noise, Duke Ellington, Mozart, Vivaldi. Beauty over chaos, he thought, but the music was simply ruined. He tried Mahler then, for the volume, and was disgusted to find that Mahler complemented the tumult perfectly.

He tried going out. He went to early movies, and took Loretta, a friend of Bradley's, to dinner. But all he could talk about was Sharon and the



glass, and before long the girl had gone strangely quiet and Wright realized she was embarrassed. He stayed in again, did his best to ignore it, to be cooking or vacuuming or on the phone when he thought he could feel the first scream gathering. He refused to allow himself near the window at first, but nothing worked, until, many evenings, he found himself sitting in the dark, his ears pricking at every sound in the street like a man frightened from sleep by an intruder.

Wright pulled back the curtains. Through the condensation of his breath on the glass, the building across the courtyard pulsed and refracted light. He checked his watch. He had begun timing them, but the lady on the top floor was erratic. Yesterday, Wright had watched the black man—the one who bit light bulbs and sang—push a half-size refrigerator through his window. The crash it made had been so tremendous that Wright had jumped backwards, knocking a pepperomia out of its hanger onto the floor. The refrigerator lay on its side now, hugely white and obscene in the clutter of glass, a cat perched on its sprung door.

Over Wright's bed, new drawings had appeared: mounds of rubble rising above the rooftops, bodies being tossed from windows, hands, fingers, eyes. He had not seen Sharon in three days. The other morning, when she came back to get a change of clothes, Wright had made a suggestion to her. A new apartment. On the east side. They had them with views of the river. Expensive, of course, but he had money saved, and what good was it doing in the bank, after all. He'd spoken to a realtor. He could take off work, if she liked. If she wanted, they could start looking right away.

Sharon watched him over a pile of clothing she was taking to the cleaners. She looked ill, frowzy and unrested. She'd been staying at Gilbert's house most nights, and once or twice Wright had heard her arguing on the phone. She looked at him over the clothes and said, "Not now, Wright. Don't talk to me about this now."

He had followed her into the foyer, halfway into the hall. "Will you think about it?" he called after her. "Will you let me know?"

At the elevator Sharon had dropped the clothing into a heap at her feet. "I'm not moving, Wright," she said. "You do what the hell you want," and she walked to the staircase at the end of the hall, leaving the clothes, leaving Wright to come out in his pajamas and carry them inside.

She had called from work and apologized. It was Gilbert, she said, not

Wright. It was a bad habit she had, taking it out on the wrong people. Gilbert had been asking—demanding might be more accurate—that she move in with him, and she had told him she'd think about it. That hadn't been enough for Gilbert. Anyway, that wasn't any of Wright's problem. Could she make him dinner? Could they just have a quiet evening together and talk?

She had gone directly into the kitchen when she arrived and had been there nearly an hour, coming out only once, to ask what coriander was and if they had any in the house. She was just finished. The burritos were on the table, and Sharon, in a simple black dress and with nothing in her hair but a tortoise shell comb, was waiting for Wright to open the wine. Wright knew this. He checked his watch again when he heard Sharon pop the cork from the bottle. He was certain the lady would begin any moment. Once she did, it would be all right.

"I know I'm not the cook you are," Sharon said from the table, "but I really don't think they'll be that bad."

"Of course not," Wright said. "I'll be there in a minute."

"What's so fascinating?"

"Nothing."

Sharon poured wine into her glass and let out an exaggerated sigh. "A lady rushes home to make her roommate a deluxe Mexican meal. She dresses up special, just for him. She buys the wine. She even opens the wine and pours it."

Wright thought he detected movement in the fifth floor window. He couldn't be sure, however; it might be the reflection of passing clouds.

"Wright," Sharon said. "What are you doing?" When he didn't answer she brought her hand down on the table with a sound that made him start. "Wright!" He turned to her. She was standing, her face flushed and tense as she leaned toward him. "What are you *doing*? I came home to see you, not to watch you hide behind the curtains."

Wright walked to the table. Once he was seated, Sharon sat as well. She began filling his glass with wine. She smiled.

"Why do you let it bother you?" she said. "There's nothing you can do about it."

"I wasn't hiding," Wright said.

Sharon paused. The neck of the wine bottle rested on the lip of Wright's glass and threatened to topple it. Wright put a hand out to

steady the glass. Sharon put the bottle down. "I'm sorry," she said.

"I wasn't hiding. I just didn't want your two friends to see me and start their act."

"My friends?"

"Those two men. The ones you find so amusing."

"They're not my friends, Wright."

"This is my living room, isn't it? Why would I need to hide in my own living room?"

He poured himself some wine and they ate in silence. The burritos were good. Wright wanted to compliment her but the words would not form. He had not meant to sound that way. Hurt. Peevish. He had important things to tell her, about the new apartment, about her clothing design idea. He had decided to help her, if she'd let him. But he would never get the words out if he sounded that way. You live here, too, he wanted to say. Why is this just my problem? He did not realize he had stopped eating until Sharon spoke.

"They're dried out," she said. "Don't eat them if you don't want to."

"No," Wright said. "I like them. You can taste the coriander."

Wright tried to eat with energy, but he could tell, from the way she glanced at him and did not speak, that she was upset. And the fact that she was, clearly, upset about him—upset *for* him—only added to his unease. She behaved as if he were overreacting, as if all this were simply moodiness. He feared her concern, and the possibility that she might have begun to pity him came at him like a rebuke, though she hadn't said a word.

Even across the room, he could hear the rumble of the lady's window opening, but he didn't move. With the first surge of her shriek, Sharon gave him a quick smile. He acknowledged this, but when the other windows began slamming open and when the glass started to fall, Wright gave no indication he could hear anything at all. It would be over soon, and they would be okay. This was their first evening together in a week. It was early. He had a Nancy Wilson album he wanted to show Sharon. He would put it on the stereo and if it turned out she liked Nancy Wilson, this time he would ask her to dance. There was certain to be a movie on, and if she was not tired, they could sit up late and talk.

Wright continued eating, rigid with composure, and did not move even when a new sound pierced all the rest—not a shout or a howl, but a cry of

real pain — and Sharon left the table. He heard her go to the window and he heard her say “Oh, no,” softly, and only when she called to him did he turn and join her.

The smaller of the two men held a bleeding hand behind a broken window. He and his companion, and across the way, Wright and Sharon, stood looking at the hand, and Wright could see blood streaking the forearm like veins, as if the order of everything had been reversed and the veins now lay outside the skin. The tall man touched the wound lightly, and then looked up at Wright and Sharon. He waved slowly.

Feeling feverish, Wright raised the window. “You’d better get a doctor for that,” he called out.

The men gave no response. The riot was in full swing and Wright could hardly hear himself above the din. He was afraid he would swoon, and put his head down.

“We’ve got to do something,” Sharon said.

Across the courtyard, the taller man still waved, and then the man with the cut hand lifted it and began to wave also. Wright raised his own hand then, not to wave, but to make them stop, to get their attention while he thought of what to do next. Sharon hit him hard below the ribs.

“He’s hurt!” she said. “Can’t you see that?” Wright stepped back. He was afraid she would hit him again. “You’re laughing at them. Can’t you see something’s wrong?”

When Sharon looked back across the courtyard, the men had gone. She left Wright and went into her bedroom. He heard her phone the police and demand an ambulance. She called back twice in the next few minutes, the second time taking down the responding officer’s name and badge number. He heard her arguing with Gilbert. “I don’t want to talk, Gilbert,” she said. She said, “I’m asking you for help,” and hung up.

Wright waited for her. They could not leave it this way; surely, she’d give him a chance to explain.

When she closed the front door behind her, Wright rose to clear the table. He put the rice in an air-tight container and wrapped the burritos in foil. He re-corked the wine. He wiped off the table, put the dishes in their place in the cupboard. He pruned the damaged pepperomia and wiped dust from the leaves of a dracaena. He sat in the half-darkness looking across the courtyard, where evening light played on the windows of the now silent apartments.

At the office, Bradley offered sympathy. He had just received an enthusiastic review from the partners, though Wright had not seen him work ten solid minutes the entire semester, and he claimed Wright's distress was his own. Wright hated revealing his private life to Bradley, but Bradley seemed to know women, Wright thought. At least he was always talking about them.

"You undervalue yourself," Bradley told him. "You sell yourself short. What is this, chicken?" They were at Wright's table, and Bradley was sampling the sandwich Wright had not touched. "This isn't chicken. They tell you it was chicken?"

"It's tuna," Wright said.

"It's not tuna. It's definitely not tuna. You gonna eat it?"

Wright did not respond and Bradley moved the sandwich closer to the filing cabinet where he sat on a pile of Wright's drawings. He spoke between bites.

"What's this girl's name? Shirley?"

"Sharon," Wright said.

"Shirley, Sharon. Fresh out of college, right? Homecoming queen, turtle necks with little teddy-bears, teeny pearl earrings. Am I right?" Wright shook his head, no, but Bradley wasn't watching. Bradley was finishing his junior year at college. That he managed to talk to Wright, and to everyone else, as if he were senior in experience to them all, always irritated Wright, who listened grudgingly anyway. "Chicks that age, they don't have the complete emotional arsenal of a mature woman. Believe me. She wouldn't know she stepped in dog shit unless you told her." He paused over the sandwich, nearly gone now. "This is pretty good," he said. "I think it is chicken. Last bite?"

Wright shook his head and Bradley made a ball of the foil wrapper and tossed it, hook-shot fashion, over Wright. "Swish," Bradley said. He leaned closer. "Okay. I can tell this girl doesn't know anything. She's got absolutely no outlook. You, on the other hand, are a mature individual, highly respected in your field. See? What does she take you for, this Sheila? She shapes up or she's out on the street in her Dr. Denton's, *capisch?*"

"I couldn't tell her that."

"Why not? What's it to you some jerk got himself bloody? This is New York. With chicks you need an agenda."

“I could tell her I love her.”

“Yeah, if you have to.”

“I could tell her I was wrong.”

“Good. Chicks love a guy with a conscience.”

When Sharon opened the door, Wright was waiting. The table was set with the previous evening’s meal. He had bought new candles and a fresh loaf of bread so they could start the meal again, exactly as they had meant to. Sharon walked by him, into the kitchen, where she rummaged in a drawer. She came into the living room with scissors, a roll of tape. She put these in her shoulder bag.

“I’m sorry about last night,” she said.

“I am too. I wanted to tell you. I wanted—“

“I thought he was seriously hurt. It looks worse than it is. The main thing is to keep it clean and I’m worried he won’t.”

“You’ve seen it?”

“I took him to the hospital. I wasn’t going to wait for the police. He needed a dozen stitches.”

“I didn’t hear you come back.”

“I went over to Gilbert’s.”

She didn’t say anything more and Wright waited for one of the speeches he had rehearsed to form in his brain. None did. He felt a rushing sensation, as if he had become aware of his blood’s motion. He felt, also, distinct parts of himself, the back of his neck, his fingertips. He looked out the window. He could not let her leave again.

“Look,” Sharon said. “I’m going to change the bandages. I could use your help.”

“I made dinner.”

“Louie, the one who cut himself, is the worse of the two. William’s not much better, though. They’ve been in institutions most of their lives.” She looked at him. “They’re very friendly.”

“Don’t they have a doctor?”

“Of course they don’t have a doctor, Wright. They’re two disabled men living on welfare.”

He thought of touching her, holding her here. “How can you go there?”

“Where?”

“Into that building. How can you go in there?”

She looked at him as if she were about to say something, but thought better of it. “You’d better stay here, then,” she said, starting for the door.

The foyer of the building was dark and covered with litter. Graffiti was scrawled over the walls, and the inner, security door was off its hinges entirely, leaning against the jamb. There was hardly any light. Wright thought he should lead the way, was willing to, but Sharon did not wait for him. He followed her up to the third floor. This, too, was covered with trash, and Wright thought he could hear something rustling low against the wall. Sharon stopped before one of the doors and knocked. Someone touched the locks from inside, but did not speak. “Let’s leave now,” Wright said, quietly. “We can still go back.” She ignored him.

“William?” she said. “It’s Sharon. From yesterday. I came to see Louie’s hand.”

They stepped into a single room, bare except for a table, a mattress in one corner and a pile of bedding in another, two striped lawn chairs. Magazines and food wrappers were scattered on the floor, and what looked to be an entire side of bacon lay on the table, filling the air with the sweet odor of early rot. Louie, one hand in bandages, got up from the mattress. His face was broad and pliant, and he smiled. He raised the hand high and turned it to show Sharon he had kept it clean.

William closed the door behind Wright. “Hi,” he said.

“This is my friend,” Sharon said. “William, Louie, I want you to meet a very nice man, Wright Bellamy.”

Louie approached with his good hand extended and Wright took it, briefly. It was damp and thick and Wright did not want to touch it long. William raised one of his hands and made a waving motion. Sharon laughed.

“That’s right, William. The man in the window.” Louie, glancing first at Sharon, began to laugh also, looking at Wright. “See?” Sharon said to Wright. “They know who you are. Okay, Louie. Let me see that hand.”

Wright remained where he was as Sharon and Louie went to the table. William followed. She put her shoulder bag down and Wright thought she looked up at him, but he could not be certain. His eyes were not focusing. He had trouble getting his breath. Sharon switched on a light overhead and took Louie’s hand in hers. “Do you want to help?” she asked

William. She gave him a package of gauze. "Hold this for me, okay?" Louie brought his shoulders up and made a kissing sound at William, who let out a long thin giggle. Sharon's fingers moved expertly around the hand, nimble and assuring, and Wright wondered where she had learned to do such things. When the soiled bandages were removed, she cleaned the wound with antiseptic and Louie began to weep.

"Louie cry," William said.

"I know," Sharon said. "It hurts."

"Louie break window," William said, shaking his head. "Stupid Louie."

"It was an accident," Sharon said. "We'll get a new window and forget all about it. Wright, could you help me now?"

Wright approached the table. The smell here was stronger and he looked at the sagging brown and white ridges of the bacon. There were other smells in the air — urine, mold, something high and metallic that reminded him of hospitals. He breathed quickly, trying to keep the bad air from his lungs.

Sharon said, "He's lost one of the stitches. I need you to hold him while I clean it out."

Wright smiled to show he meant no harm, but in Louie's face he saw only uncomprehending fear. When Wright took hold of the hand, Louie pulled away sharply. Wright continued smiling and grasped the hand roughly, turning it to the light. Sutures crossed the palm in two hash marks, the flesh swollen and pink under the precise black thread. At the base of the thumb, a stitch had worked loose, and in the pucker between the edges of the wound, Wright could see dirt and inflammation. Sharon daubed the area with gauze.

"You've got to hold him better than that," she said.

Wright increased his pressure on the hand and felt the bones move underneath. Louie wept soundlessly.

"I'm sorry," Sharon said. "I know."

"Sorry, Louie," William said.

When she had cleaned the hand, she began wrapping it in gauze. Wright did not look up. It had grown silent enough in the room that he could hear the two men breathing, and through the broken window, sounds from the street.

"I need tape," Sharon said. "Three or four pieces. There's a scissors in my bag."



Wright cut three pieces from the roll. When Sharon asked for a long strip, he put the scissors down to pull out the tape. William picked up the scissors. Wright paused, the tape in the air between them. He looked over at Sharon, but she was busy with Louie's hand. William moved toward Wright with the scissors and Wright shoved him hard in the chest. William staggered backwards and the scissors fell to the floor. Wright grabbed them. He backed away, holding the scissors in front of him. William stood where he was, covering his chest with his hands. Louie licked his lips fast, looking from Wright to the floor. Sharon let go of his hand. For a long moment they all stared at Wright, who felt their eyes on him in the silence and did not dare approach.

"He took the scissors," Wright said, pleading. "It might not be safe."

Sharon looked at him, with contempt, as a stranger might. "Give them back," she said.

"What?"

"Give William the scissors."

Wright put the scissors on the table and went to the windows. He could not get the intact window to open, so he pulled newspaper out of the hole in the broken one. He tried to breathe slowly.

Behind him, he could hear Sharon speaking, not the words but the tone, soothing the two frightened men. She called his name, conciliatory, now.

Outside, the sun had dipped low in the sky so that his building, in shadow, seemed distant, removed. He located his own apartment easily, the drapes and back-lit plants unlike any others. He could see the coleus he had transplanted the other day, thriving, taut with vitality. The bird's nest fern, also repotted, was doing well, so well it blocked the sun from the aloe and grape ivy. He wondered how he had not noticed this before.

Sharon called to him again, but he did not answer. The sun had dipped further; shadow, pushing sunlight before it across the rubble in the courtyard, had reached the building where he stood. Wright checked his watch. From above him, he believed he could hear the first rasp of windows sliding open, the chime-like tingle of glass being gathered. Even the air seemed to alter, preparing itself.

"Wright?" Sharon was at his elbow. "I'm done. We can go."

He concentrated on the windows, searching out details. He could recite every item in the apartment, from the dishes in the sink to the precise

angle of his slippers under the bed. Sharon touched him on the arm and this time he looked at her, but then looked away again.

“Wright,” she said. “Let’s go. We can go back now.”

“No,” he said. “We can’t.”

All around him he heard sounds that signalled a readying—footsteps, voices, objects being dragged across the floor. Checking his watch would do no good; the lady on the fifth floor was often late. But she was always there to start it. It wouldn’t be long. Sharon’s hand was still on his arm and he put out his own to cover it. He looked at her and said, “Just one minute,” and feeling the coolness of her skin under his, he turned back to the window and waited.