In the Land of Plenty · *Susan Engberg*

MARGARET HAD BEEN working nine months at the New Life Food Cooperative when her husband came back to town. She hadn't been expecting him; she had been trying not to expect anything from anyone. Simplicity was her desire now: to care for her two children, to get enough sleep, to pay the rent. Her present life was such a surprise to her, so unimagined, that in her abashment she felt ignorant, remote from her own future. Many dozens of faces came up the stairs to the store each day, and it was her job to stay still and let their needs flow through her mind and into her fingertips; when she went to pick up her children each afternoon, joining these streams of people, she tried to keep herself compact, her own needs minimal. She felt peaceful on nights when she was able to go to bed at the same time as her children, especially when she might wake up at midnight and understand that she had already slept for three or four hours and that a full passage of rest remained. As she went back to sleep, the undemanding night would seem to be caring for her, perceptibly, but beyond her knowledge.

The afternoon that Sloan came up the stairs of the co-op, reports had been blowing in with customers of a bitter shift in the weather, a temperature drop of at least twenty degrees and a stupefying icy wind. Margaret had been listening to Mimi and John joking as they stacked away produce in the walk-in cooler about the coming of another ice age, not two thousand years hence, but now, brothers and sisters. Mimi, dressed in her usual plaid flannel shirt, her long hair braided, had been throwing twenty-five pound bags of organic carrots through the doorway to the lanky, down-vested figure of John, astride crates of lettuce and broccoli in the cooler's interior, and in their exuberance they seemed to Margaret exempt from catastrophe. She herself was at least ten years older than either of them, she had children, her father was dead, her education incomplete, her marriage a bewildering disappointment, yet she listened to them companionably. Never, before this job at the New Life, had she felt so comfortable and accepted. She liked the large upper room with its bins of grains and seeds, its shelves of herbs and spices and coolers of dairy products and fresh produce, she liked the section of useful, invigorating books, and she liked the people, Mimi and John, and Carl.

"Yes, it's coming," said John. "This here cooler is nothing compared to what's coming."

"Do you know what's really going to happen?" laughed Mimi. "We're all going to learn to lower our body temperatures and live forever."

"Naw, we'll just change into something else," called John.

Margaret rang up a customer and went back to stocking the herb jars. She heard Sloan's drawl before she saw him.

"Is Margaret around?" he was asking.

"Margaret the True is yonder with the herbs," said John's voice.

She tightened the lid on a jar of anise stars and put it back on the shelf before she turned around.

"Hello, Sloan."

"Stump said I'd find you here." He glanced around the store, and when he turned back to her, Margaret noticed the network of bright red blood vessels on his cheeks and nose, like frail explosions. He smelled of cigarettes. "How's business?"

"Very good," she made herself answer casually. "We're going to open up a bakery." Sloan looked sickly. At the thought of what he might have been eating and doing to himself, she took down a jar of peppermint tea and began refilling it carefully from a large plastic bag.

"Working hard?" asked Sloan.

"That's right. How have you been, Sloan? Stump told me about California. That's too bad."

"Yeah, well, that's just one of quite a few that didn't work out." He pulled out a cigarette.

"No smoking here," she said briskly.

He looked at her hard, and his skin seemed to flare out at her. His blue eyes were watery and bloodshot. Then he eased away the cigarette and looked around again. "Not bad up here. It's pretty damn cold outside."

"That's what we've been hearing," she said. She took down a depleted jar of cinnamon quills with unsteady hands.

"How are the girls?" asked Sloan.

"They're all right. They're in school, of course." She tipped the jar to keep the cinnamon vertical. The quills looked like rolls of brown parchment, curled around secrets.

"I'd like to see them," said Sloan. "I'd like to spend some time with them." His voice had risen slightly.

"When would that be? It's the middle of the week, and they have to have their sleep or they'll get sick. You could have written ahead." She bit down on her lip and lowered her eyes. It was the eldest girl, Helen, who missed her father the most. They had been pals, of sorts; he had taken her places. He was fond of saying that his daughter had saved his life once, when she was only five and he was as low as he had ever been. She had held his hand all night, he said, until the drug wore off, and what a miracle it had been, the touch of that child. It was a story Margaret always heard with a tight heart, for she had never been able to tell what a nightmare it had been to her not to know where her child was, for four hours, six hours, twelve hours.

"I could stop by tonight," said Sloan. "I'll pick up a pizza or something."

Margaret shuddered. "That's all right," she said quickly. "I'll feed them.

You could come by around six-thirty. But they've got to be in bed by eight."

"Hey, look, what is this? I haven't seen my girls for over a year." He spread out his hands and drew out the words as if he had rehearsed them. "All of them," he added.

The jar of cinnamon slipped from her hands and shattered on the floor, quills rolling under the weighing table and against the base of the shelves. *Coriander,* said a jar near her eyes as she bent to pick up one of the larger pieces of glass.

She wasn't sure if Sloan helped clean up the mess or not. John appeared with a broom and dust pan. Several more customers came in, and an elderly woman asked her where to find the bran.

"I'll be around then," she heard Sloan saying, and he was gone.

She looked up and saw the wooden ceiling fan at the head of the stairs wheeling slightly.

"So that's the old man?" asked John as he gave a last sweep.

"Flesh and blood," she answered and held out her hands for the broom and dust pan and bag of glass. "I'll put these away if you'll mind the register for a few minutes."

"Take what you need," he answered.

In the partitioned office at the back of the stock room, high above the sloping alley, Carl was still working on the books as Margaret slid into the old school desk by the corner window. A gull rode by on a blast of wind. Roof tops down the hill and towards the center of town seemed in this weather to be turning human life in upon itself. The fear of what she might have done or was still doing to deserve her husband bore down on her. She lowered her eyes to the scarred surface of the desk.

Carl turned a page and she felt his eyes on her. "You're quiet," he said.

"Speechless," she agreed.

"And you look a little peaked."

"My husband was just here."

"You didn't know he was coming?"

"No, I've been trying not to think about him at all. He never writes, I've told you that." She looked across the shabby room at Carl, upright now above the ledger book, his eyes intent on her.

"Why aren't you divorced?"

"I'm not sure how to go about it. I haven't any money. I thought maybe he'd never come back."

"You're afraid of him."

"What do you know!" she suddenly exclaimed. He sat composed and solitary in the grey light; he lived in two rooms; he had no responsibilities other than to himself, and these he took seriously indeed: he was going to

medical school; he was going to transform the profession with ancient wisdom; he was going to teach people how to eat, how to exercise, how to be quiet. He glided in and out of the co-op, performing his job, helping with policy decisions. "What do you know?" she repeated, but less angrily. She felt her spirit draining into the afternoon's bluster.

"Not too much," he said finally.

She drew an uneven breath and looked out again over the town. "I'm tired," she said. "One of my children had bad dreams last night. I was up more than down." Then she was silent, because what she was not saying was that she herself had also dreamt, had wakened from the dream, and had not been able to sleep again: she had been nursing a child, a baby adept and ravenous in suckling, and her milk had been instantaneous, prodigal, a miracle of abundance. When she had wakened, and the pleasurable flush of the dream had given way to the realities of her life, she had sat up with confusion in the cold room, wondering who in the wanton recesses of her mind could have been the father of this child. Its infant desire had been so strong and so easily fulfilled by her! The action had been so simple!

"Why don't you go home then?" asked Carl.

"No, I've got to wait until my children are out of school anyway."

"So. What about your husband? Does he stay with you?" Carl had taken an almond from a bowl on the desk and was cracking it with his teeth. He lifted out the kernel and chewed thoughtfully.

"No," she said firmly. "No, he does not."

He will not, she repeated to herself later that afternoon as she pushed her way through the weather to the grade school where Helen and Sarah were waiting inside the glass doors, behind circles of breath frost.

"I have a stomachache," complained Helen.

Thoroughly chilled, Margaret stood for a moment inside the door, working her feet up and down on the rubber mat and shaking life into her hands.

"Can you walk home?" she asked her eldest daughter.

"I'll try, but why does it have to be so cold?"

"I wish I knew," answered Margaret as she bent to tie little Sarah's scarf.

"How bad is your stomachache, Helen?"

"I just don't feel good."

"Well, let's get on home. You might just be hungry."

The wind drove against them a biting, granular snow. Bending into it, Margaret felt her energy reaching out to encircle her children. She wanted to gather them to her, to spread her arms and sweep them home, to have them instantly warmed and fed and safely at rest. The cold on her forehead was like a mark; she bore it; she was their mother, she told herself, their mother. Then she remembered that she hadn't told them about Sloan. The

mark of cold seemed to concentrate itself, to radiate from her head into a zone of defiance. When men like Sloan chose to default in the care of their children, then there had to be certain forfeitures; there had to be.

Her fingers were so numb she was barely able to unlock the door. The children collapsed onto the couch. "Get your boots off," she said. "Here, wrap up in this blanket until the place warms up." Her own voice returned to her in the sparsely furnished room. She went to turn up the heat. She hung up her coat and put on an old sweater, and then she came back to the couch and began rubbing the girls' cold feet.

"Your father is in town," she said.

"Daddy!" shouted Sarah.

"Yes, he'll be stopping by tonight to see you."

It was almost too much, she saw, for Helen especially. She sat silently, her eyes full of tears, looking at her mother, and then she overlapped her coat carefully on her knees; she knotted her fingers; she pressed her lips together in an expression so unchildlike that it frightened Margaret.

"How long is he going to be here?"

"I don't know. I only saw him for a few minutes this afternoon."

"Mother, are you going to get a divorce?" The child's body remained rigid.

"I don't know that, Helen." She tried to speak soothingly. She tucked the blanket around them. "Now I'm going to get supper started. We'll see if that doesn't help how you feel."

"I want Daddy to stay home," said Sarah as she burrowed deeper into the blanket.

Kneeling before them, Margaret looked uncertainly at the package she had made of them, tucked up, mothered. She turned on a light beside the couch and without a word went down the hallway to the kitchen. How had Sloan done it? Without lifting a finger he had their love.

In the kitchen she breathed deeply, measuring her strength. The old alarm clock on the counter ticked metallically; five, perhaps six hours stretched between herself and the release of sleep. She turned on the red-shaded lamp on the table and the light above the stove. She rinsed the alfalfa sprouts and watered the fern above the sink. Gently she shook its fronds. This was her room. Small triumphs bloomed in this kitchen. There were curtains; the cupboards had been painted brick red; more plants grew on the window sill; there was a new toaster; there was Black Cat, who jumped down from the chair beside the radiator and placed himself in her path. Margaret fed the cat. She stood in the middle of the room, staring at his body crouched over the bowl and thinking about the number of hours in each twenty-four that this animal slept.

Sloan was unbelievable. What did he expect of her? She felt confounded by memories.

She cooked an omelet for the girls and carrots and whole wheat noodles, food that they liked. She gave them slices of homemade bread and quartered apples for them and poured their milk and watched them eat. What she longed for were actions simple or humble enough to cleanse away the taint of having lived with Sloan, of having chosen to live with Sloan, of being connected to him still and not knowing what to do about it. Her mother had warned her, but Margaret had taken a last look at that pinched, anxious face and gone away. These days her mother sighed to Margaret on the long distance telephone, or wept; life was out of control, she said, but at least she and Margaret were finally reconciled, there was that, though how it was all to end, who could possibly tell? And those poor fatherless girls, she had added.

Margaret ate a little of the supper. "Can't you eat more, Helen?" she asked, but the child shook her head.

"How long until Daddy comes?" she asked.

"Half an hour or so," Margaret answered. "Why don't you get ready for bed now so you won't have to spend time on that while he's here?"

"I don't want to. Maybe he'll take us somewhere."

"Not tonight!" Margaret swooped upon the words. "It's bitter, bitter cold. You can't possibly go out tonight. You, Sarah, don't you want to get cozy in your pajamas? I'll read to you while you're waiting."

"No," said Sarah as she pushed a last slice of carrot through the butter on her plate. "I want to do cartwheels."

Margaret got up and cleared away the plates. She flooded them with water. She scoured the table with her dish rag and slammed shut the cupboards. She swept the floors. "Out!" she said to Black Cat, "out of the way!" and she swatted him with her broom.

"Mad Meg," her father used to call her with amusement when she was angry, and simply knowing that he was thinking about her, even through the artificial sympathies of alcohol, she would feel some of her frustrations dissipating.

Margaret put away the broom. Wind whistled in the back door. Downstairs was the furnace; upstairs two medical students slept in the rare hours when they were at home; outside stretched a nondescript vista of frame duplexes, a featureless corridor along which the wind had been whirling hollowly when they walked home. Twenty years her father had been dead. She put water on the stove for tea, took her books from the top of the refrigerator and sat down at the table. The idea of death ballooned in her mind.

She could hear Sarah thudding now and then in the living room with her

cartwheels. Helen she imagined to be lying on the couch, with a library book, perhaps, nursing images of the reunion with her father. Margaret opened her book deliberately and ran her hand over the smooth pages. This time she was not going to allow herself to be angry with Sloan. When she looked at him, she was going to remember that this year she had found out what it was like to go to bed with a feeling of innocence, with no regrets for the day; to be on speaking terms with oneself; to close one's eyes like a child.

She bent her eyes to the book. She was reading about the life cycles of ferns, and next fall she was going to take a few classes. Why shouldn't she, Carl had said, since she was always reading anyway. Pressing her breasts against the edge of the table, she examined the circular diagram that was the journey of a fern. Last night in her dream her breasts had been translucent, and she had been able to see the milk streaming down to the child. She had been sitting in a tub of warm water while she nursed the baby, a stout wooden tub in the middle of a warm room, and she had been holding the child securely against her bare body, just above the level of the water.

It had been three o'clock when she woke up from the exotic fullness of the dream into the starkness of her room. In spite of the cold, she had been damp with sweat. She had put on a dry nightgown and gone to cover the girls, stepping over ghostly toys in the night light, bending low over their beds, but the usual reassurance to her of this motherly action was missing. Something seemed to have been cut loose, a connection. Back in bed, she huddled alone, adrift and sleepless on a night that had lost its effortless and soothing progression. Who was this strange child? Where was the source of her abundant milk?

Folding her arms over the biology book, she laid down her head, close to the smells of wool and paper.

Startling sounds woke her, shouts, the kettle's whistle, footsteps. Leaden, she dragged her head up. It was all happening. Slouched in the doorway, Sloan had already insinuated himself into the heart of the house. The children tugged at his old leather jacket, begging to be lifted up. She saw it obliquely, dimly; she had the sensation of being unable to straighten up or move; her hair straggled against her cheeks; her jaw felt slack, dream-weighted.

"Your kettle's going off, Margaret," he drawled.

She swung her eyes to the stove.

"Helen," she said, "can you get the stove?"

Sloan had entered the room. His eyes roved, taking stock. Sarah jumped up and down at his elbow.

"Not now, babe," he said, blowing into his hands. "Give me a minute to warm up."

Slowly Margaret straightened her back and leaned her head against the wall, her hands folded over her book. She saw him flick the fern and run a forefinger over the new toaster.

"Looks like you're getting a little ahead," he commented. He rocked on his heels. "Looks real homey here." He pulled one of Helen's braids. "You know how to make coffee yet?"

She shook her head. "I can make scrambled eggs."

Helen looked challengingly at her mother. It was all happening. "Go ahead," said Margaret, "we've got eggs." She made herself stand up and go to the stove. She measured tea into the pot. "We don't have coffee, Sloan. Do you want to sit down?"

He hung his jacket on the back of a chair and picked up Sarah. "You're getting big, babe, you know that?"

"I know that," said Sarah. "And guess what!"

"What!" said Sloan.

The child's six-year-old voice giggled, halted, and began again, "You know what?"

"Do you want toast, Daddy?" asked Helen. Her cheeks were flushed.

"Watch the heat under that butter," said Margaret. She returned to the table with the teapot. It was ten minutes to seven.

"You know what?" said Sarah.

"What!" repeated Sloan, leaning back and bouncing her on his thigh. He looked amused, and Margaret felt her own face to be flat, exhausted. Sloan had on a clean, checked shirt.

"What kind of witch rides on a gold broom?"

"Dummy!" cried Helen bossily from the stove. "You've said it wrong."

"No, I haven't."

"Yes, you have. You gave it away. You say, 'who rides on a gold broom.'" She brought a plate of eggs to the table. She fetched salt and pepper, toast and butter and sat down importantly.

"Helen," said Margaret, "that wasn't necessary."

Sarah had hung her head. Now she climbed off Sloan's lap and came to hide her face against Margaret.

"Well, she always gets them wrong," said Helen, shrugging her shoulders and smiling self-consciously.

Margaret felt a panic rising in her. She took a sip of tea and stroked Sarah's head.

"Tell us again," she said. "Who rides what?"

Sarah shook her head and pressed harder against Margaret.

"What's the answer?" asked Sloan, his mouth full of eggs. "Somebody tell me."

"Well," said Helen, "the person is supposed to ask who rides a gold broom, and the answer is—"

"Stop it!" screamed Sarah. "That's my joke."

"Well, tell it then," said the older child.

"No." She was crying now. Margaret gathered her up. She felt helpless, bound to her children, yet ineffectual.

Sloan pulled out a cigarette. "What are you doing these days?" he asked Helen.

"Reading," returned Helen quickly. "I read lots of books from the library."

"You do, huh?" Sloan was squinting at her over his smoke. "You going to grow up to be a reader?"

"I'm going to write movies, like you."

Sloan snorted. He poured himself more tea and glanced briefly at Margaret. Then he took a dollar from his pocket and tickled Sarah behind the ear. "Come here, babe," he said, "I've got a trick with this dollar. Let me see if I can get it right. Come on, get your face out of your mommy so you can see George Washington here. Ok, you see this dollar? Now, I'm going to fold it over once, lengthwise."

Helen leaned close to her father, following his hands. Sarah was watching sidelong, snuffling against Margaret.

"Ok now, you fold it again. Let's see, am I doing it right? Now, what's going to happen to old George is that he's going to turn upside down. See that?"

"Let me try!" shrieked Helen.

Sloan looked again at Margaret.

"You've learned a few new tricks?" she asked.

"That's an old one," he said. "And yourself?"

"No tricks," she answered.

"Ah yes," he said, stretching back, "still the same."

Restless, he surveyed the kitchen again, and Margaret felt her life diminishing.

"What are you reading?" he asked, nodding at her book.

"Introduction to Biology."

"That's a new one, isn't it?"

She shrugged. "I liked biology before I even knew you, Sloan."

"Ah yes," he said carefully.

"Show me again," said Helen, as she held out the dollar.

"Let's go spend it, girl," Sloan said suddenly. He put the dollar in his shirt pocket and slapped a hand over it. "Go get your coat and you can help me spend it."

"Sloan, please, no, don't take her out tonight. It's much too cold. She

had a stomachache this afternoon. You can't do it. Look, it's almost her bedtime." Then she looked at her daughter's face and fell silent.

"Simmer down, Meg. One ice cream with her old pa isn't going to kill her. How about you, babe?" he asked Sarah. "You going to make up to me? You want an ice cream?"

"She does not," Margaret said quickly, holding her youngest child closely on her lap. "She had an ear infection last week, and you're not going to take her out."

Sloan whistled dramatically and shrugged into his jacket.

"Mama, please," begged Helen.

Margaret pressed her lips together and closed her eyes. She was in a corridor; she was being dragged along a corridor of whirling voices, and wind, death-cold. An icy defiance gathered behind her eyes. The stiffened membrane of her lids opened and she looked fixedly at Sloan.

"How long are you going to be in town, Sloan?" she said coldly.

Sloan whistled again and stared at her.

"I said how long," she repeated harshly.

Sarah had begun whimpering again.

"I'm going to get my coat," said Helen desperately. She looked from one parent to the other. "Don't yell at each other. Daddy, don't get mad." She tugged at his hand.

"All right, all right," he said, pulling out another cigarette. "Now go get your coat."

"You can't keep on doing what you're doing to that child," said Margaret in a low voice when Helen had gone down the hall.

"I'm not doing anything to her. I'm still her father. She understands me."

"She does not. She's a child, with the needs of a child."

"Well, what do you want me to do?" He gestured broadly. He dismissed the kitchen with a single fling of his arm. "I couldn't possibly work in a place like this. I can't play your little games. That kid understands me better than you ever will."

"I told you I play no games," said Margaret, her voice rising. "I'm simply trying to raise my children."

She felt Sarah's body tighten in her arms.

"You want me to apologize, is that it? You want me to say I'm sorry I didn't get the money to you? Look, I didn't have a cent, I didn't have enough to eat myself."

"I don't care about the money anymore," said Margaret wearily. Her moment of angry energy had passed and she looked dully across the room at the person she had once willingly followed two thousand miles from her childhood home into a day to day excessiveness that had become more

alarming and enervating than any of the strictures from which she had escaped.

"What do you want me to do?" Sloan repeated in a loud voice.

"I don't know." A blankness was passing before her eyes. She thought of sleeping; she thought of being in her bed, with none of this happening, the night unfolding gently, everyone safe, everyone good.

"You could get her home by eight o'clock," she said finally.

Helen was standing in the doorway. She had remembered her boots and scarf. Her bluejeans and coat were too short, her mittens unmatched. She wore the red hood that Margaret had knitted at Christmas.

"Eight o'clock," enunciated Sloan, snapping his heels together.

Margaret saw Helen put her hand in Sloan's as they disappeared down the hallway. The house shook with the closing door, and Margaret shivered, as if she herself were facing the wind.

Sarah's body had slumped over in her lap. Margaret lightly touched her lips to the soft center of skin and neck curls between her braids. Lifting up the child's face, she kissed her cheek; she kissed the tearful eyes; she pressed her lips against her hair.

"I wanted to go," cried Sarah. "I wanted an ice cream. Daddy likes Helen best. He didn't want me to go."

"There, there, you can blame me about the ice cream because I didn't want you out in that wind. Now come on, let's get you to bed. I'll read to you."

"He does, he likes Helen best. I can't stand it any more. I can't stand being a little sister."

Margaret lifted her up. "You'll feel better when you've slept."

Sarah was almost too big to carry. The motions of putting her to bed seemed to contain all that Margaret had ever done for her children, the countless garments that had passed through her hands, and the dishes of food, the weights that she had carried, the nights alone when she had bent over their beds, constrained by Sloan's vagaries to an austere constancy that she had gradually begun to embrace gladly, as a possible means of separating herself from him, of redeeming herself from her own follies.

"There now," she said, pulling the covers over Sarah. "Shall I read to you? Shall I finish the one about the king and the princess?"

"No," said Sarah, her voice still catching from her tears, "tell me about when you were a little girl."

"I think I've told you all there is to tell."

"Then tell me again." She clutched at her blanket.

Margaret sat down on the edge of the bed in silence. She rested a hand on Sarah's knee. Across the room the covers on Helen's unmade bed were twisted and empty. Margaret had taped many of the children's drawings to

the walls. She remembered the Saturday she had done it, how she had been making soup, how she had washed the girls' hair, how together they had made a board and brick bookcase and straightened up the room.

"I used to say my prayers every night," she said unexpectedly to Sarah. "I used to put my head under the pillow and pray to God to be with me."

"When you were a little girl?"

"Yes. I don't know how old I was, nine or ten, I suppose."

"Like Helen."

"Or maybe I was six." Margaret leaned close to her daughter. Two of her teeth were missing, another half grown in. Her face was quieter now; it looked as if a hand had passed over it and smoothed out the contortions of sadness.

"Did God come under your pillow?" she asked sleepily.

"I don't know."

"Tell me more."

"Close your eyes."

"Tell me about when you were six."

"Every winter my legs got chapped and they burned when I got into the bath water."

"Just like mine. What happened?"

"Someone would put cream on them."

"Your mother or your father?"

"I don't remember. Now go to sleep. You're almost asleep."

"Stay here with me."

"I'll stay until you're asleep."

"Go get Black Cat. Please. Make him sleep with me."

"I don't know where he is. I'll look for him in a little while and bring him in."

Margaret turned out the light and sat for a long time on the end of the bed, listening to the wind outside and the sheltered breathing of her child. Where was Black Cat, she wondered. She had hit him with the broom, and where had he gone? Her face tightened with the pain of her own weakness, her mistakes. Noiselessly she began to get up from the bed, but Sarah said, "Stay," from a deep layer of her sinking consciousness and so Margaret felt herself assuming again the shape of a mother, waiting. The image soothed her a little.

Once at the age of twelve or thirteen she had had a friend whose mother she had loved. This woman had passed into her like a light, sometimes over the years forgotten, brightly to reappear and remind her of a value possible perhaps even for herself. As a girl, locked in the bathroom, she had caught her own profile in two mirrors and pondered the seldom-seen contours, looking for a similar distinction.

"It's that damn way you hold your head," Sloan had gibed one night with his hands around her neck and his thumbs overlapped lightly on her throat. "Don't tell me you're not like the rest of them," he had said.

Margaret knotted her hands. The room was growing colder. This time when she stood up, Sarah was silent. Out in the hall she blinked. "Black Cat?" she said at the door of her own room. She snapped on the light, but bed and chair were empty. In the living room she pulled the make-shift drape, a bed spread, across the street window and folded the blanket on the couch.

Sometimes he slept on the rug in front of the bathroom radiator, sometimes he went to the furnace room and scratched in the dirt where the old well had been filled in.

At the head of the basement stairs she called his name again, and her voice met the low breathiness of the furnace that was like a faint, steady underground wind. "Black Cat?" She went halfway down the stairs. The furnace labored hypnotically inside its box. "Here, kitty, kitty," she said, sitting down and resting her forehead against the railing.

"You can't tell me anything," Sloan had said. "I know you too well."

She seemed to hear his voice laughing in the upstairs hallway, as if it were all happening again. "Good girl," he was taunting, "good girl, good girl, good girl," and she hadn't known whether to laugh or cry because the worst part hadn't come yet, the worst nights were still to come, and she had let him push her up against the wall because she was still listening for something else, a softening from bravado, an inflection she could trust, a moment of clarity that would explain the power he had over her.

Without sound or color the cat came to her out of the darkness and jumped into her lap. "Here you are," she said vaguely. She put a hand around him and felt the way his breath swelled and sank.

Upstairs a door seemed to blow open, but there were no footsteps. "Helen?" she called. "Sloan?" She ran up the steps and through the kitchen. It was nine o'clock. Wind cut along the hallway. The front door was open, and in the light from the street a million brilliant particles of snow swarmed expansively. Gripping her sweater over her throat, Margaret looked up and down the vast night before shutting the door.

In the freezing cold of the hallway she covered her face with her hands and was startled by her own substantiality. Sloan was uncanny. Like a shadow he had returned and in a moment the walls of her life had been displaced. What was she doing wrong that she should be so far from home?

At ten o'clock she rose numbly from the couch and walked the strange spaces to the telephone in the kitchen and dialed Stump's number. She knotted and unknotted the cord as she waited for his inscrutable, wheezing, corpulent voice. The phone rang again and again. Sloan had no other

friends. Finally she put down the receiver and whirled around to face her own vacuous kitchen and gaping hallway.

Once before she had called Carl about a meeting at the co-op, and now she found his number without trouble. His voice answered immediately, a full, intimate vibration near her ear.

Not to worry, he answered. He'd take a look downtown. They were probably in the Pizza Palace or someplace like that. Red hat? All right. Yes, he knew what she looked like.

She thanked him in a deadened voice. She thought of his rooms where she had gone once with Mimi, their spareness and order, the bowl of oranges.

Hey, he said, hey, she was to take it easy, all right?

All right, she heard herself answer. Her shaking hand clattered down the receiver.

A moment later the front door opened, and Helen came in alone, muffled, frosted, her face barely visible.

"You walked!" Margaret rushed to her. "Where is Sloan? You're frozen! Where is he? Come to the kitchen."

Margaret led her along the passageway. She turned on the oven, and before its open door unwound the child's scarf and began to peel the stiffened garments from her.

"Helen, Helen, where did you walk from?"

"From the drugstore." She was crying. Tears had frozen to her cheeks. Her lashes were hoary.

"But where is Sloan? Why isn't he with you?"

"He was."

"But where is he now?"

"I don't know."

"What do you mean you don't know!"

"I don't know!" the child wailed.

Margaret said nothing more. She fetched a blanket. She warmed a cup of milk. She took her daughter into her lap and sat until her shaking had subsided.

"Can you sleep now?" she asked.

Helen shrugged.

"Do you want to tell me more?" Margaret pressed, frightened by the child's downcast silence.

"I don't want to talk about it," she answered theatrically, and Margaret winced. She shuddered with an unspeakable impulse to hit her child; instead she picked her up, long legs dangling, and carried her to the bedroom, where in silence she helped her into pajamas and tucked her in.

"Helen," she began, sitting on the edge of the bed, but she found no words.

Across the room Sarah sighed in sleep. Margaret bowed her head with her own fatigue. Helen had turned her face to the wall. "May I lie down with you?" she asked.

Within her embracing arm, Helen's body felt elongated, stretched far beyond its solid babyhood into a new condition of bones and hollows. The bed was close to an outside wall against which the wind continued to moan and thud. Margaret pulled the covers higher and lay breathing on the pillow close to Helen's hair. There had been other nights when she had slept with her children, in one narrow bed or another, when their bodies had seemed like islands of comfort and goodness in the turbulence of her marriage, nights too awful even for anger, when she had locked herself in the nursery and laid down her own destiny alongside those of her children, wherever it was that they slept cradled, and she had dreamt of beginning again, herself rich, abundant, at peace. Some nights she had almost stopped being afraid.

Helen's breathing was gradually slowing. Margaret felt herself loosening into sleep; she felt pieces of her mind returning home, sinking down.

There were footsteps, and she dreamt of being asleep and trying to wake. She heard voices. The door might or might not be closed. She was slobbering. Dragging herself up, she explained in a drugged voice that she could barely see her visitor because her eyes were still sleeping. In response, a wave of joy engulfed her, then another and another. A presence was appreciating her; miracle of miracles, she was loved. Everywhere there was dimness and snow, and now she was searching for a place to sink down with this new presence in the light of an eternal understanding, almost within reach. You can do it, said the voice, come where I am, and for an instant she did, weightless, bathed in an expanding stillness of delight. And then she had to go hurriedly down some wooden steps to slog through a heavy snow. The truck was leaving.

When the doorbell rang, she started up instantly from the bed, her body pulsing with alarm.

"Yes!" she cried, "yes, who is it?" She ran in stockinged feet down the hall. The lamp still burned in the living room. She had no idea of the time.

The door was opening.

"Any luck here?" asked Carl's voice.

"Carl!"

"I've looked in the most likely places." He kicked his boots against the sill and stepped into the gloomy hall. Inside the hood of his parka his face was barely visible.

"She came home."

"That's good! No worries then?"

"I've troubled you." She peered into his face. "I'm so confused tonight. I fell asleep just now."

"That's good. Go back to sleep, that's what you need."

"I don't know where Sloan is."

"Where he's staying?"

"He didn't bring her home. I don't know where he is."

"Wait a minute. What does the kid say?"

"Nothing. She couldn't talk. She was crying, and then she turned stony."

Carl loosened his hood and drew her into the light. "Now step by step," he said, but there was little more that she could tell. She huddled ashamedly inside her baggy sweater.

Carl was silent a moment and then he began to unlace his boots. "I'll sit a little while and warm up, if you don't mind."

"I'm sorry to be troubling you!"

He shrugged. "You've got some idea that you're not worth it, don't you?" He shed his parka and began blowing into his hands. His eyes were on her.

"It's just that all of this, tonight, before, it's not the way I want to be living."

"I know that." His eyes seemed to be taking her in.

She straightened up. "I'll make some tea," she said and motioned him towards the kitchen.

It was a quarter to twelve. He stood beside the stove and held his hands close to the kettle.

Would she tell him about her husband, he asked.

What about? His past? Their marriage?

Anything.

Carefully she was warming the teapot and readying the mugs. She felt a need to be deliberate, accurate, to think about what she was doing. Heat for this water came from the gas that also fed the furnace that warmed the water that coursed through the two apartments that were formed of walls, separating outside from inside.

Her husband was not easy to talk about, she answered. What he said, what he did, what he appeared, were not the same. He hated domestic life. He had had two complete families, two wives, two sets of children, both abandoned now. He was suspicious of anybody whose life wasn't at least half sordid. Oh, what could she say? She measured the herbs precisely and set the tea to steep, keeping her hands around its warm belly. Persuasive, that's what he was, amazingly persuasive. He was very good at getting you just where he wanted, and you never realized what pressures there had been until afterwards. And he liked to experiment with himself. He couldn't

stand for things to be the same. What more could she say? He was almost completely unreliable, that went without saying. He was cruel. He was kind. He was very good with children, when he wanted to be. He hated women, probably, she wasn't sure.

Her eyes were staring into the slow emission of steam from the pottery spout, and then she shifted quickly to Carl.

Well, she asked him with a strained laugh, was she a fool?

He had no answer beyond his steadfast gaze, and her voice rushed on as she carried the honey pot and tea to the table. She wasn't used to talking like this, she said, he shouldn't let her go on because then there'd be no stopping her. A couple of years ago in Texas she had had a girlfriend and she had been able to talk to her about all sorts of things, it had been such a relief, but Sloan had put an end to that; he had done that friend, sure enough.

"Done her?" asked Carl.

"So that she hadn't the face to come back," Margaret rushed on. "He hated to see women together. Witches, he called us. He never let me answer the telephone first when he was at home."

She stopped, exhausted, and dropped her forehead to her arms. "Have you heard enough?" she asked.

"Have your tea," he said, pushing the mug close to her hand.

"You haven't heard the worst part," she broke out. There was no holding back now this cataract of words. "The first time was after Helen was born and I was sitting in the bed nursing her and he brought this guy in—he said he was an old friend, but I had never seen him before—and he sat on the edge of the bed talking to me and then Sloan went out and left us, and the whole time the baby was beside me on the bed." Her head dropped again to her arms. She rolled her forehead against her sweater. "There was another time, too," she cried. "And what could I have done? Who was I to tell? I had no strength."

And then her voice changed. She heard its stridency but was unable to stop. "Aren't you sick?" she asked fiercely. "Aren't you sorry you've come this far? Aren't you just sick? Don't you want to walk right out of here?"

"Hey," he said, "hey, I'm here because I want to be."

"I'm sorry," she said. She brought the mug of tea to her lips with both hands. Her body was sustaining deep, internal twitches, as if nerves were being jammed. Now and then she shuddered. "I don't think I was brought up very well," she said shakily. "Sometimes I look at people who know how to act, and I feel so desperate, I can't tell you. I've kept thinking all this year that maybe if I could just stay quiet long enough, I might learn how to live."

"That's a possibility," he answered.

"Talk to me," she implored. "Why do you just sit there letting me make

a fool of myself? Tell me something. Where were you born? Did you have parents? What are you really interested in? Let me hear the sound of your voice."

He laughed. "What am I really interested in?" He poured more tea for both of them and slowly spun a spoon of honey for himself, and then he looked at her directly. "What I'm interested in is perfection. Perfectability."

"Perfection?"

"That's right. The richness of us all. We don't know it yet."

"Some people are richer than others."

"No, not absolutely." He smiled at her, and she felt suddenly cleansed by a gush of relaxation. The warmth of the tea had spread to her cheeks.

"I've had the strangest dreams the last few nights," she murmured. "But you keep on talking. I like hearing your voice."

"You're getting tired, I can see it."

"That's the doctor in you."

"Anybody could see it."

"I've got one more thing to tell you. Something just made me think of it," she said. "Once when I was about twelve I got sick at a friend's house in the middle of the night. My fever went terribly high," Margaret continued dreamily. "My neck was so stiff I couldn't move. It was pneumonia. All the rest of that night the mother of my friend sat beside my bed. She had turned on a little light, and she sat in a chair close beside me until it got light. My parents were gone somewhere, I don't know, maybe my mother had to drive my father to the hospital again. Every time I came to myself and opened my eyes, there was my friend's mother. I was very frightened of my delirium, but I could always come back to her face. It was a life line, it was, I can't tell you what it meant to me. I felt as if no one had ever been so good to me." Margaret rested her jaw in her hands. Her eyes were beginning to close.

"She kept watch," said Carl.

"Yes, she kept watch. I'd never had a gift like that before, at least it seemed that way."

"That's a beautiful story," said Carl. He finished drinking his tea in silence.

"I'll tell you what," he said, fitting the lid back on the honey pot, "you go on in and go to bed—you're halfway there already—and I'll stay a bit in the living room. I'll stay all night if you like."

"That's too much for you. You've got classes tomorrow."

"Never mind. I want to see what it feels like to be the mother of your friend. Now go ahead, I'll turn out these lights."

All her weariness was rushing to its conclusion. "All right," she consented, "I don't know what else to say."

"Nothing more now."

He led her down the hall and left her at the door of her room. She heard him running water in the kitchen. She heard the basement door closing. She heard the footsteps of the upstairs dwellers, coming home. She got in between the covers and lay floating downstream in the half-light from the hall. A shadow layered her course. "I forgot to cover the girls," she said aloud. "And I promised Sarah she could sleep with the cat."

"I'll do it," said Carl from the doorway, and the shadow moved.

Then it passed over her again and Carl came in and sat down beside her.

"They're covered," he said. "Do you want anything? A drink of water?"

"No. Thank you."

"I'm going to pull up that chair and sit for a little while."

She acquiesced, already asleep, and then she swam back and opened her eyes. He was sitting with his legs outstretched, his arms folded over his chest. The light was on his forehead.

"Carl?" she said heavily.

"Yes?"

"I want to say something."

"All right."

"I hope nothing has happened to Sloan."

She saw him nod reflectively and lower his gaze, and then she was given the blessedness of rest.