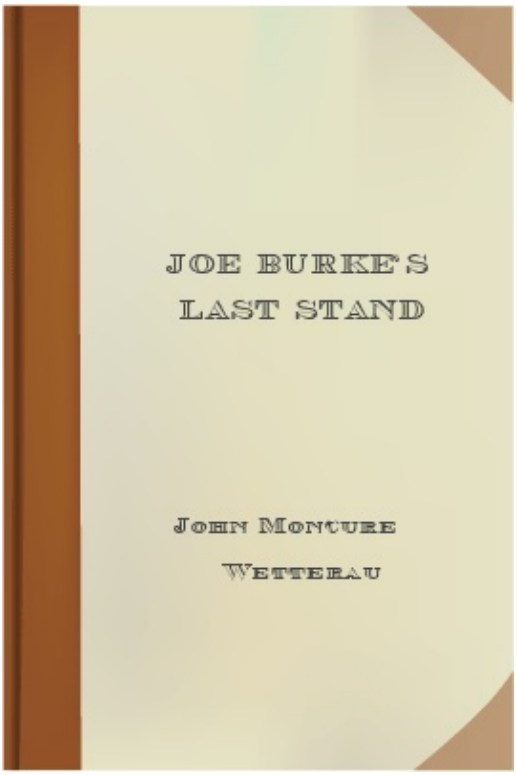

Joe Burke's Last Stand

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This book is for Rosy

Joe Burke's Last Stand

1

"My rig's a little old, but that don't mean she's slow−−Batman−−that don't mean she's slow." Joe Burke was singing, driving south. His rig was a blue Ford pickup with a battered cap on the back. Batman, all six inches of him, was propped upright on the dash.

Joe followed signs to the Weston Priory, climbing through woods and out onto an open plateau. A cluster of wooden buildings stood near a pond. A monk was raking leaves from a path that curved around the pond like a trotter's track. Joe got out, stretched, and entered a gift shop by the parking lot. A middle aged woman seated next to the cash register closed her book.

"Where is everybody? Rehearsing?" She smiled slightly and remained silent. "Lovely day," Joe said.

"Yes, isn't it."

He bought a cassette made by the monks. "A bit stagy, Batman," he said climbing into the truck and closing the door. "We must continue to seek truth and contend with the forces of evil." Batman stared resolutely ahead.

Joe cut over to the interstate. When he reached the highway, he played the cassette: resonant voices and a single guitar, encouraging. "Sappy," Ingrid had declared impatiently. Joe smiled. She was free of his taste in music now−−had been for a year and a half.

At Brattleboro, he turned off the highway, rented a motel room, and walked into town. He found a brew pub where he sat at a corner table with a pint of ruby brown ale−−cool and fresh, the malt veiled with lacy astringent hops. He had another and watched the bartender talk on the telephone, her elbows and breasts on the bar, a vertical worry line dropping between her eyes. She was about his daughter Kate's age. The room began to fill, the nasal sound of New York mixing with flat New England tones. The Connecticut River valley narrows in Brattleboro, a gateway to upper New England for New Yorkers. He was going through in the other direction, trying to figure out what to do next. What do you do at 52 when the kids are grown? The same things all over again?

He took out a notebook and remembered the drive−−the blue sky, the red and gold ridges, small fields tilting greenly in their arms. On such a day, one could almost be forgiven, he wrote.

A blonde woman with a wry smile, an experienced charmer, sat down at the next table. He considered having another ale, making friends with her and starting a new life in Brattleboro or over the mountain in Bennington, but he knew that he was fooling himself. It was too familiar; he might as well have stayed in Maine.

"Gotta go," he said to her sadly. She raised her eyebrows, acknowledging the human condition, and he walked back to the motel. At the edge of town, trees were dark behind a body of water that was platinum and still. Fish broke the surface with soft slaps in the centers of expanding circles. Ansel Adams might have caught the many shades of silver just before the lights went out.

The next afternoon Joe was across the Hudson, driving through the mountains on roads that were more crowded than he remembered. There were many new houses and the trees were larger. He stopped on the hill by his grandparents' old house in Woodstock. Captain Ben had retired during the depression to that rocky hillside and made a homely paradise of gardens and fruit trees. A slow silent job. Emily was beside him, canning, cooking, and mothering. They said you couldn't grow pears around there. We ate a lot of pears, Joe thought. And plums, apples, rhubarb, strawberries, asparagus . . . The house smelled of geraniums from the solar greenhouse that his grandfather built onto the dining room long before anyone ever heard of a solar greenhouse.

Captain Ben was a son of an old Virginia family who in better days had owned Monticello. _Lee's Lieutenants_ lined a living room shelf. Noblesse oblige came with mother's milk. You are born privileged; you have an obligation. He had a company garden when he was serving in the Philippines−−men who got out of line did time weeding and afterwards ate fresh vegetables. Once a year he would go to town and whip the touring chess master who was playing 20 people at once. "Pawn to King's four," he taught Joe, "control the

center." Joe opened with pawn to Queen's knight four, bringing a smile. "Learn the hard way, huh?"

He died when Joe was in seventh grade, and Joe spent his high school years with his grandmother, well cared for, but living more or less alone. She remarried about the time Joe graduated. The new husband moved _Lee's Lieutenants_ to the attic and Joe moved out. The house that Joe remembered had disappeared inside a gaudy renovation, but the mountains hadn't changed. What is it about land, Joe wondered. It gets inside you, deep as your loves, maybe deeper.

He ate dinner in town. He saw Aaron Shultis across the street, but Aaron didn't recognize him after twenty−five years. Joe drove back into the hills and parked by a narrow lane across from the one room schoolhouse where he had gone to fifth grade. He fell asleep in a cradle of memories: fucking Sally in this very spot . . . apple fights, BB gun fights, the sound of the schoolhouse bell calling them out of the woods after a long recess.

A steady rain was bringing down the leaves when Joe woke up. He drove over to Morgan's house and pounded on the door. When Morgan opened, Joe could smell breakfast cooking.

"Joe, well, well. What brings you out in the rain?"

"Hey, Morgan, bacon! They say you're cooking bacon."

"They're right. Come on in."

"Remember that time you were hitching to Florida and you met those guys heading for Georgia because they'd heard that a Salvation Army cook was serving meat?"

"Some trip that was." Morgan was grayer but still powerful. "So, what are you doing?"

"Starting over. I've been saving since Ingrid and I split up. I put a bed in the back of the truck, got rid of a bunch of stuff, and here I am."

"When did you leave? You want some eggs?"

"Three days ago. That's affirmative on the eggs," Joe said. "I've had it with computer programming. Jamming all that stuff in your head messes you up. You wake up at two in the morning and start working."

"Good money," Morgan said.

"For good reason."

"Did you sell everything?"

"Just about. Kept my tools, a couple of boxes of books, some clothes. Kept the cat, Jeremy, but he jumped ship on Deer Isle at my father's. Oh yeah, my notebooks, a footlocker full−−I was wondering if you'd stash them for me. I'd hate to lose them; they go all the way back."

"Sure. Maybe you'll write a book one of these days."

"I don't know; all I ever do is look at things and try to describe them. Should have been a painter like my father. No talent, though. Anyway, after I took off, I went up to see him and Ann on Deer Isle. He gave me a painting for Kate."

"How is he?"

"Going with his boots on. Just before I left, he gave me a drink from his stash of Laphroiag in the barn. We had a country music toast. 'Younger women, faster horses, older whiskey, and more money,' he said. I asked him if 'children, old dogs, and watermelon wine' wouldn't cut it."

"Tom T. Hall songs," Morgan said.

"Right. My father just laughed. I think he was trying to tell me something but didn't know how."

"Hard to communicate at this point, I suppose," Morgan said. "What's next?"

"Drive out and see Kate. Me and Batman−−he's riding on the dash." Joe gave Morgan the cassette from the Weston Priory. "Try this some stormy night."

"O.K.," Morgan said. "The damnedest thing . . . I bought a tape of Chesapeake Bay sea chanteys a while back. One of the voices was familiar. I looked on the picture of the group and there was Jason! I hadn't even noticed."

"Best banjo player I ever heard," Joe said. "He disappeared into the world of big biz. What a waste. I thought he'd given up on music."

"Why don't you take it? I'll pick up another."

" Good deal, a trade. So, how's Daisy doing? I was thinking of dropping in and saying hello."

"She's in France. She's fine." Morgan took a piece of bacon. "She and Wes have stuck together. Of course it helps if you can nip off to Provence whenever you feel like it. Their daughter, Yvonne, just got married. Jake is in New Zealand, I think. Nice kids."

"New Zealand? That's where Max is, Ingrid's son." Joe hesitated. "I remember when Daisy was choosing. She said, 'I feel happy and excited when I'm with you, and I feel warm and safe when I'm with Wes.'" Joe shook his head. "Knowing what I do now, about women that is, I'd say she made the mainstream choice. She'd have had rice and beans with me."

"Red beans and rice aren't bad," Morgan said.

"True. We could have gone the distance, though. Strange how you know these things . . . Not that I haven't had good relationships since. I mean, Sally and I had Kate, and then I had the chance to be part of Maxie's life. I wouldn't trade that for anything, but . . . So, how's your love life?"

Morgan's eyebrows raised. "Prospects are bright," he said.

"Prospects, plural?"

"Singular," he said.

"Yok, excellent. And the book, how's that coming along?"

"Slowly. My publisher's annoyed, but he's used to delays."

"And *The Houses of the Hudson Valley* aren't going anywhere."

"I wish that were true," Morgan said. "They're going downhill. On the other hand, if they weren't, I wouldn't have any work."

"Rot," Joe said, "your enemy."

"Neglect," Morgan said.

They finished breakfast and hauled Joe's footlocker to the barn. "I'm going to have a book shop when I retire," Morgan said.

"The fortress and the cork," Joe said, putting down one end of the footlocker in a room filled with books. "Two good strategies: strong walls or travel light, bob up and down in the heavy weather."

"You always did travel light," Morgan said, "but you probably don't bob as well as you did." Joe hopped on both feet to demonstrate his buoyancy.

"Thanks for the reminder." Departures required gallantry. "Good eggs. Listen, if you get a chance . . . give Daisy my love. Tell her nothing's changed." Morgan nodded and they walked out to the truck. "Take care of yourself," Joe said. "Hang in there."

"Good luck," Morgan said.

Joe drove down the mountain in the rain. When he reached Route 212, he turned towards Phoenicia. His old high school district covered a thousand square miles; half an hour later as he crossed its western boundary, he felt a twinge of nostalgia and relief. It was like graduating again; his mind was free to drift forward.

At tech school in the Air Force, he used to spend Friday and Saturday nights in the BX with a guy named Shannon. The BX was always jammed with G.I.'s drinking cheap beer and eating French fries. One man tried to keep up with the empties and the dirty dishes. He was bald, slow moving, friendly, and particular. His cart was organized to hold as much as possible on each trip. It seemed like the original dead end job, but he did it well, never flustered, taking pride in his cart and the tables that were clean for moments. He told Joe once that he was saving money to buy tools so that he could help in his friend's garage.

As Joe drove, the rain and fog lifted, revealing lonely bays and wooded hillsides. Route 30 curved endlessly along the banks of the Pepacton Reservoir. Joe had the highest entrance score they'd ever recorded in that Air Force tech school. Sergeant Quimby told him, reading it, unbelieving. Joe was an athlete, a most likely to succeed guy; yet there he was every weekend in the BX with Shannon, fascinated by the aging bus boy loading his cart. And Shannon? He was from Ten Mile Creek, south of Pittsburgh; what had happened to him? Joe decided to cut through Cat Hollow and over to Roscoe on Route 17. He followed 17 west, taking his time, enjoying the October colors. He had lunch in Hancock and stayed overnight in a motel outside Painted Post.

The next afternoon he was in Ten Mile Creek, coal country. A black hill in the distance, the highest point around, turned out to be a slag pile. Containers suspended from cable were hauled up the pile, tipped over, and returned upside down. The top of a silo, last sign of a buried barn, waited a few feet above a spreading shoulder of slag. The air was gritty and had a sulfurous tang.

He stopped outside an American Legion hall and walked into a dimly lit bar. In one corner a fat man sat upright before a video poker machine. Only his right hand moved as he inserted quarters, one after another. Joe sat at the bar, three stools down from a short guy who was staring over the top of a half empty glass of beer. The bartender moved a step in his direction and waited.

"I'll have a beer," Joe said, putting a five dollar bill in front of him. The bartender was about forty. He had a

blonde crew cut and a face like a poker chip, Robert Redford run into a door. He set the beer down, made change, and resumed his position. It was oddly as though he hadn't moved at all.

"I was in the service−−with a guy named Shannon. Long time ago. Said he was from around here." Silence. Friendly place.

"Which service?" Shorty didn't turn his head.

"Air Force."

"That'd be Bobby," Shorty said.

"Yeah," Joe said, "Bobby."

"Jacky, he went in the Navy."

"Bobby was a good guy. He around?" Shorty glanced at the bartender. They had a committee meeting.

"California," the bartender said.

"California," Shorty confirmed. "Stayed in and retired. He's out there cashing checks with eagles on 'em."

"Shit," Joe said. "Would'a liked to seen him."

"Two more, Floyd." The gambler said, putting a twenty on the bar.

The bartender laid two quarter rolls soundlessly next to the bill and asked, "You come around just to look up Bobby Shannon?"

"I, ah, well, got sick of working. Had some money saved. Thought I'd take a break, look around." Shorty shook his head. "I mean, what do you do after . . . " Joe meant, after you'd done pretty well, at least compared to these guys.

The bartender said:

"Beware of gnawing the ideogram of nothingness:

Your teeth will crack. Swallow it whole, and you've a treasure

Beyond the hope of Buddha and the Mind. The east breeze

Fondles the horses ears: how sweet the smell of plum."

"What!?"

"Mitsuhiro, 17th century," the bartender said. For an instant his eyes came at Joe like horses jumping the gate.

"Who are you?" Joe asked.

"Pretty Boy Floyd," said Shorty. "Best athlete ever come out of this town." There was a blaze of sound from the poker machine followed by a crash of quarters. Shorty turned his head. "I'll take some of that, Earl."

"Can't win if you don't play," Earl said.

"Used to pitch for the Pirates," Shorty said. The bartender's expression didn't change. Joe noticed that he stood balanced on both feet.

"Why aren't you teaching in a university somewhere?" Joe asked him.

"You know Bob Dylan's line about the difference between hospitals and universities?"

"No."

"More people die in universities. Also . . . " He did a quick soft−shoe shuffle. "I drink, so be it." A trace of amusement crossed his face. Mitsuhiro, Dylan, and Mr. Bojangles; one, two, three. A silent ump pumped his right fist. Joe was gone.

"Let me buy a round," Joe said. About four beers later he got into the truck, blinking. "Jesus, Batman, Ten Mile Creek, hell of a place!" He made it to a motel and called it a day.

The next morning he had a big breakfast. The grip of the Northeast was loosening. Driving all day was beginning to seem natural. "Roll 'em, Batman," he said, "Bach first. Then, we'll move on to Gabby Pahinui, get into Willy Nelson, and The Grateful Dead. We've got a delivery for Kate." The truck was running great. Traffic was light. Ohio went by, and Indiana, like a dream.

2

Madison, Minneapolis, Fargo, the long run over to Missoula, Spokane, Seattle, finally. Joe parked by Ivar's and stretched, tired but satisfied. He was meeting Kate for lunch where they could look across Puget Sound.

A few minutes later, Kate appeared from behind a group of tourists. They had a reunion hug.

"How was the trip, Dad?"

"Pretty good. Took the northern route, right straight across. Let's eat." They were in time to get a window table.

"So, long drive," Kate said.

"I was up for it. It's nice to see the country that way once in a while−−you forget how big it is. Those high rolling plains in Montana are something else. They'll have snow in a couple of weeks. I could use some new tapes and a book or two."

"You know the place: Elliot Bay Book Company."

"Yeah, I thought I'd check it out this afternoon. I'm going to get a room at the Edgewater and be Mr. Luxury for a couple of days."

"You could stay with me. Audrey's on a trip for a week; it wouldn't be any hassle."

"Thanks, but I don't want to be in the way . . . I'd take some home cooking, though."

"How about tomorrow night? You could meet Jackson."

"Sounds good. What happened to Rolf?"

"Oh, Rolf. We have lunch. I love Rolf, but he doesn't really want to live in this period. That's what he calls it, 'This period.' He's happier in bookstores reading about early Scandinavian immigrants."

"I was just reading about a Swede who was making cider with a hand press he bought for a quarter when he was 12. It was in the paper this morning. He'd been married 50 years. Said his wife was Norwegian but she was taking pills for it." Kate laughed, a full wraparound laugh. She had her mother's coloring−−chestnut hair, light brown eyes, and rosy cheeks.

"You'll like Jackson; he's very different."

"I'm sure I will. I liked Rolf−−he was appealingly gloomy."

"Jackson's an artist. He gets mad when I say that; he says he's a craftsman. You should see the things he makes: jewelry, furniture−−he can make anything."

"Speaking of art, your grandfather gave you a painting. It's in the truck."

"Oh! Is it good?"

"I like it. I don't know if you will."

"Oh, Dad! Don't be such a parent. If you like it, I know it's good." The fish sandwiches arrived, and Joe watched the toddler with an ice cream cone in Honolulu, the girl veering her bike into a Maine hedge, the teen−ager leaving home, the Seattle executive as she took a large bite. "Mmmm," she said with her mouth full, "mmm−−Ivar's."

"Have you heard from Maxie lately?" she asked.

"Not for a couple of months. He's still in New Zealand."

"I had a card from Auckland in August," Kate said. "Sounded like he was having a good trip."

"How's your mom doing?

"Fine. She's got a new job working for a mineral exploration outfit. Have you seen Ingrid?"

"Not recently," Joe said. "She's doing well, at least she was the last time I saw her. She's been selling her jewelry, and her classes keep her busy. Same as ever. She has a new boyfriend."

"Oh good. I love Ingrid. She always sends a Christmas card and tells me how Maxie's doing." Kate had known Max since he was eight. They had become brother and sister even though there was no blood relationship. They had been especially close when Kate lived with Ingrid, Max, and him during her high school years. Kate had been lucky, Joe thought, to have had two mothers, or a mother and a half. His own mother had died when he was seven. It was long ago, but he could remember well enough that he'd never liked her very much.

After lunch Joe watched Kate walk with long strides toward her office, hair bouncing on her shoulders. Strong, he thought proudly. He checked in at The Edgewater, lay down on the bed, and didn't wake up until four.

The days were getting shorter. A salty breeze drove layers of cloud across the sound as Joe walked down

Alaskan Way to the Elliot Bay Book Company. The ocean was to his right, but he was headed south instead of north as he would have been on the east coast. It took days in Seattle to stop thinking that he was going the wrong way.

The bookstore was well lit and cheerful. A tall woman with dark hair and hammered silver earrings was browsing in a corner. She wore a caramel colored T−shirt that showed a black elongated figure above the name "Caffe Ladro." Her shoulders were wide; the cotton draped comfortably around high flat breasts and fell a distance to her hips. She appeared to be in her forties. Joe hoped that she didn't have blue eyes.

Two types of women got to Joe immediately. One was black Irish, blue eyed. He looked into those eyes, something slipped, and he was calling for fire, night, and Vikings to ax. The other was blonde with translucent skin, full breasted and silent. The blondes were anima projections. When he was 24, he'd had a disastrous affair and afterwards discovered the explanation in a book by Jung. A man loses touch with his female side and then sees an unlucky woman who resembles the inner image of his lost self. POW, he is on her, has to have her. Irrational trembling, dry throat, pounding heart, out of control−it's an anima projection. Women do it too, of course, the other way around.

"Yes?" the woman asked. She had brown eyes.

"Oh, God," Joe said. "Excuse me. I was thinking about anima projection."

"Psychology's in there." She pointed to another room. "This is cooking."

"Ah, yes, well . . . " Joe turned away. The floor was slick with banana peels. He made it around the corner and took a breath. Too old for this, he said to himself.

He drifted through several rooms and found *Economics in One Lesson* by Hazlitt, a book he'd heard about for years. He was interested in the economy because his small savings were mostly in the stock market. He picked up a copy of _Trader Vic −− Methods of a Wall Street Master_ by Victor Sperandeo. By the time he chose a tape of slack key guitar by Cyril Pahinui, Gabby's son, it was dark. On his way out, he averted his eyes from the cooking section, but he needn't have; the woman was gone.

The Edgewater Hotel bar has floor to ceiling windows on the water. Joe ate a sandwich and watched huge ferries slide through the night, brilliant against the black water. They made the Portland, Maine ferries look like life boats. Joe went to bed early, slept fitfully, and spent the next day walking, reading, and exercising. His back wasn't what it was−−too many years in front of a computer monitor. If he kept at the yoga exercises, it didn't bother him, but a real day's work would be the end. For a long time he could do whatever the kids could, and then he couldn't. It made a divide between them and even, sometimes, between the past and present. Memory was suspect; did he really do that?

"You did, Dad, you really did." Fortunately, Kate was there, confirming the past, regaling Jackson with stories from the old days. They were eating seafood linguini in her apartment. Jackson listened as he twirled pasta with his fork and spoon. He was tall and thin, pleasant. His hair was dark, pulled back into a short pony tail. He drank a lot of wine without seeming to be much affected. His eyes got brighter.

They considered Kate's new painting which was propped up on a side table. A young woman stood in a barn door looking out at a rainy morning and an apple tree in full white bloom. Her hair was long and brown; her bare feet interacted with paint splattered floor boards. She seemed to dance without moving.

"Lot going on," Jackson said.

"Lot of life in there for an old guy," Joe said. "What do you think for a frame?"

Jackson considered. "Simple, but with relief−−to give it a little more depth, be more inside the barn."

"Definitely simple," Kate said.

"I see what you mean," Joe said. "That will be my part, Kate−−getting it framed."

"I could do that," Jackson said.

"Hey, great. Let me know what it costs . . . "

Jackson lifted a hand. "No problem. I've got a friend with a frame shop."

"That's quite a chess set," Joe said, pointing to a low table by a bookcase. The pieces were hand carved and had a warm waxed shine. They were slightly larger than usual and looked as though they were meant to be handled.

"Jackson made those last winter," Kate said. "He just makes this stuff−−like knitting or something." Jackson looked embarrassed. "Dad, how long are you going to be in Seattle?"

The question had been floating in the back of Joe's mind. The answer crystallized, "Not long." They waited for him to continue. "I don't know what I'm going to do, really, but I'm feeling jumpy. I'll let you know. You've got my e−mail address; I'll check in every so often." He wanted to keep his uncertainty away from Kate. It wasn't so much that he wanted to shield her, but more that he needed to confront the future unhindered by old patterns of relating and response.

"Stick around," Kate said. "The longer the better."

Jackson smiled neutrally. A good time to leave, Joe thought.

"Very nice to meet you, Jackson," he said. He hugged Kate and left, feeling that they were a good match.

On the way off the hill, he noticed the Caffe Ladro and remembered the woman in the bookstore. The next morning, he thought about checking out of the Edgewater, but he had no plan. He registered for another night and drove back to the Queen Anne district. He had a latte and a bagel in the Caffe Ladro and bought a T−shirt. He was hoping the woman would come in. Her name would be Moira; they would have an animated discussion which would reveal his fate. She didn't show. Must have been busy, probably making a lemon meringue pie.

He went back to the hotel and stared at the ceiling in his room. Filson's was in Seattle, he remembered. He looked for the address in the phone book and found that it was a short bus ride away. He had a wool Filson jacket that he'd worn for 12 years. Every so often he sewed a button tighter. Filson stuff is understated and invincible; it would be like a visit to the temple.

A temple angel, slim with long blonde hair, asked if she could help. "Not just yet," Joe said and wandered down aisles of tin cloth pants, wax impregnated jackets with wool liners, vests, and virgin wool sweaters. He stood a long time in front of the duffel bags and assorted luggage. He was tempted by a carry on bag with a heavy leather handle, but in the end he bought a bag that reminded him of his Air Force AWOL bag−−flat bottomed with a humped top and a single massive brass zipper. The canvas twill was doubled around the sides and bottom; the handles and the shoulder strap were made of dark bridle leather; it was the Fort Knox of AWOL bags. While he was at it, he bought a belt made of the same heavy leather. "Might as well have the best," he said to the angel, repeating the Filson motto.

When he was back in his room, he unsnapped the new belt buckle and replaced it with the one he had worn for twenty years. The words he had scratched on it with a Dremel power tool were nearly rubbed away: "Eating a plum, hearing/ the roar of centuries−−Kokee." Once a year, the islanders are allowed to pick plums in Kokee, in a park on the rim of a deep canyon. The trees are old with thick limbs. He remembered a young Hawaiian woman on a low limb, stretched out, reaching for plums−−brown skin, black hair, dark green leaves, fruit, the ocean gray and blue for thousands of miles in all directions. Echoing silence. It was like being in a shell or a giant's ear.

Joe put on his new belt and went down to the hotel bar. He ordered an ale and watched a boxing match on a large TV. Pit Bull Salvatori was wearing down a fighter named Fanatuua. He was sagging, his body blotchy. The bell rang and Fanatuua collapsed back against a padded corner post. A trainer squirted something into his mouth and rubbed his chest while his manager talked in his ear. Fanatuua nodded once.

The bell rang again, and Pit Bull was on him, lefts, rights, uppercuts, trying to end it. At some point in life, Joe thought, how people lose becomes more interesting than how they win. Fanatuua wouldn't go down, seemed calm, almost as though he weren't there. He was covering up, weaving slowly from side to side. Maybe he was fighting the clock, not the man. Maybe if he made it through eight rounds he would have earned his money. Maybe he was out on his feet. The Philly crowd yelled for a knockout; the referee watched closely.

Fanatuua stepped forward, moved Pit Bull back, threw a combination that did no damage. Maybe he was fighting for his family, Joe thought. Maybe he was married to one of the Samoan women who come to Hawaii to work in the Polynesian Cultural Center and study at the Mormon school in Laie. They walk slowly across the grass, books in their arms, flowers in their dark hair. He ought to make fifteen or twenty thousand from this fight. Maybe he'd give it to his father, the Chief, who was proud of him, who would know what to do with it. His hands dropped. Pit Bull drove him into the ropes with an overhand right. The camera zoomed to Fanatuua's face, sweat, a small cut. His eyes were bright. His mouth was set in a slight smile. He was not afraid.

Pit Bull smashed him four times. The ref jumped in and separated them. TKO. Pit Bull ran around the ring, fists in the air, and hugged Fanatuua. Fanatuua tapped him twice on the back and walked to his corner. Maybe he was thinking that Salvatori won, might be the champ soon, but couldn't knock him out. Maybe he was thinking about home.

Joe leaned back in his chair and remembered his new bag. He pictured himself packing it and realized that he was going to Hawaii. That was why he bought the bag, although he hadn't known it at the time. There were complications: the truck, what to bring, what to do when he got there. But that was where he was going.

3

As the plane banked over Diamond Head, green at that time of year, tears came to Joe's eyes. Hawaii is so beautiful, so far out to sea, that he felt lucky just to be there.

When he stepped from the plane, the light perfume of plumeria and the warm breeze were like old friends. He had credit cards and a few bucks in the market, but he might have been thirty again, driving a cab, hoping for a load to the Kahala and a big tip. He rode the city bus into Waikiki, the Filson bag on his lap, and rented a room for a week on Kuhio Avenue−−a concrete block room with a four foot lanai, a tiny refrigerator, and a hot plate.

An hour later he was beneath the banyan tree at the Moana beach bar. Gilbert was still tending bar. "Gilbert, you haven't changed a bit." Gilbert was from Honolulu, medium sized with dark hair and dark eyes. He could have been from anywhere. His square features were professionally neutral; his smile was quick and ironic,

under control.

"Your eyes going," Gilbert said.

Joe ordered a mai tai for old time's sake. Sunset is a three hour show in Waikiki. Joe stayed until the end−−the last high smudge of crimson snuffed out in darkness, the Pacific reduced to the sound of waves collapsing along the beach.

On his way back to the hotel, a woman in a mini skirt asked if he wanted a date.

"Not tonight. But if I did . . . "

"I'll be here tomorrow." She had large teeth, a big smile. He didn't want a date, let alone that kind of date, but he felt a rush of warmth; it's hard not to like someone who is willing to hold you, even if only for money. The warmth followed him into bed and softened the sounds of car horns and distant sirens.

In the morning he had a solid hangover. He trudged out of Waikiki to the shopping center and ate breakfast in a coffee shop that served the best Portuguese sausage on the island, made, he was told, by an elderly couple whose identity was secret. He bought a bus pass valid for the rest of November. The Honolulu bus system reaches around the island, across the island, up the ridges, and deep into the separate valley neighborhoods. Workers and students commute by bus. Kids give up their seats to the elderly.

Joe quartered around the city like a hunting dog. Twenty−five years earlier the State bird was said to be the crane. Now, it was an endangered species. The city was quieter. He found himself returning to Makiki, a neighborhood of low rise apartment buildings and condominiums on a steep hillside, half an hour's walk, in different directions, to the university and to the Ala Moana Shopping Center. It was beautiful there at night, the buildings lit above and below each other like modern cliff dwellings. A week after he arrived, he rented a one bedroom apartment on Liholiho Street, telling the realtor that he had a degree from the university−−which was true−−and that he was retired, which didn't sound right. "Semi−retired," he amended.

It was a bare bones apartment on the third floor with a lanai that faced mauka, toward the mountain. Joe bought a plastic chair, a round cafe table, and an hibachi for the lanai. Batman made himself comfortable on the table. Joe constructed a table in the kitchen/dining room from pine boards and milk crates. He bought a foam camping mattress, sheets, a light comforter, a pillow, and a reading lamp for the bedroom. For the kitchen, he bought a toaster, a tea kettle, a pot for cooking rice, and a wok. He set up a minimalist home: one plate, a bowl and a mug, chopsticks. He splurged on an eight inch chef's knife. After a week of moving the plastic chair in and out, he bought a straight backed wooden chair for inside. He bought an exercise mat which he left spread out in the main room.

It was fun to start over in this way, owning only what he needed for his new life, whatever that was going to be. After some consideration, he bought a compact sound system and a TV for news and sports. He ate rice and fish, bought vegetables at the farmers market, and walked on the beach. The beach belongs to the people in Hawaii; it cannot be owned or sealed off. He bought a few aloha shirts and spent days at the university, the main library downtown, the shopping center, and occasionally, Waikiki. In a month he had a tan, and his pidgin had come back. Kate had learned to talk on the island; she spoke pidgin from deep down. Joe's pidgin was only half way there. If the locals are in doubt, they will ask anything in order to hear you speak−−in a few words they know how long you've been around. Joe didn't mind the test. Usually he got points for trying.

Kate wanted him to visit during the holidays, but he decided against it. He was just getting used to the island and he didn't feel like traveling. The day after Christmas, he was at the Moana leaning back with a beer and thinking about Sperandeo's book on stock trading when someone asked, "Caffe Ladro?" The woman he'd seen in Seattle was standing a few feet away, looking at his T−shirt.

"Ah, Moira." he said, standing up. She was trying to place him.

"Winifred," she said.

"I saw you in The Elliot Bay Book Company," he said. "Last month. Moira was a guess."

"Oh, yes . . . something funny . . . you had a projection."

"Very funny," Joe said. "Winifred, my name is Joe, Joe Burke. Why not come sit? Talk story . . . "

"I've given up on men," she said to someone listening in the banyan.

"Very sensible," Joe said.

She hesitated and sat. "I love this tree," she said, placing her sun glasses on the table between them.

"Didn't someone write about it? Or under it?" he offered.

"Stevenson," she said. "Or was it Mark Twain?" Her eyes were intensely brown with radiating streaks of garnet.

"It's a literary banyan," Joe said.

"So, what brings you to Hawaii?"

"I used to live here," Joe said. "I stopped computer programming, and I stopped being married−−again. It seemed natural to come back."

"Hawaii gets to you," she said. Winifred lived in Manoa. She was a photographer. Joe would have bet that she was some kind of artist; he found them wherever he went. Her sister lived on Queen Anne Hill in Seattle, close to Kate and the Caffe Ladro. Her father, Arthur Soule, was a professor, retired in Vermont.

"Lot of Soules on the Maine coast," Joe said. "And a Coffin clan. The line is: 'For every Soule, there's a Coffin.'"

"So my father has told me."

"Win, Winifred . . . what do you prefer to be called?"

"Either works. 'Winny' is what horses do. My father sometimes calls me Freddy."

"How about Mo?"

"No one calls me Mo."

"Excellent! I shall be the first." She had large features, a wide serious mouth that turned slightly up or down at the corners. Down in this case. "I thought of you as Moira," Joe explained, "mysterious Celt, born for the luck of the Burkes."

"Born to be bad," she said. "You can think of me any way you like, Joe Burke. I must be going. Bye." She twirled her sun glasses, smiled once, and left. He watched to see if she would swing her ass a little for his benefit, but she didn't. Her eyes stayed with him−−large and sensitive, clear. She was nearly six feet tall and

broad across the shoulders. Her hands were as big as his. Not the happiest of campers, he said to himself.

He went back to thinking about Victor Sperandeo's book. As a teen−ager, Trader Vic made a living playing cards in New York. Then he moved into the big casino on Wall Street. His book was straight exposition, written without pretense. Joe had read other books about the market. There were many different approaches and specialties: day trading, intermediate and long term investing, stocks, bonds, currencies, and commodities. Sperandeo was someone he could relate to personally, a maverick.

There were other market gurus who made sense to him−−John Train and Warren Buffett, especially. They espoused a long−term strategy: think before you buy, and then, once having bought, continue to buy on dips and hold unless the company changed fundamentally for the worse. Sperandeo was more of a trader. Joe was torn between the two approaches. Discount brokerages had just become available on the Internet; one could trade without having to actually live in New York. On line discussion groups argued about stocks 24 hours a day. He decided to buy a computer.

Three hours later Joe paid the cab fare and carried his new system up to the apartment, one box at a time. He had it working in an hour and went to bed pleased with himself.

The following day he opened an account with a service provider for Internet access. There was an e−mail message from Kate waiting at his old address in Maine. Joe had agreed to pay Kate's mechanic $30 a month to store the truck and had asked him to go over it, change the oil, and do whatever needed doing. Joe replied that the check would be in the mail and wished her a Happy New Year. The Internet is amazing, he thought. The message was in Maine; Kate was in Seattle; he was in Honolulu and could be anywhere.

"Damn, Batman, we're global!"

On impulse, he found a number listed for W. Soule and called her on the old fashioned telephone. After a recorded message and a beep, he said, "Mo, this is Joe Burke. I'm having adventures. Want to have lunch?" He left his number and hung up. When he returned from a walk, the red message light was blinking.

"Joe, thanks for asking, but, no . . . I'm not an adventure." She made an amused sound. "Call me again sometime when you've grown up." Click. Joe called back immediately.

"Hi, I grew up," he said when she answered. "A woman on TV just explained it to me. You have to transcend the grieving child within."

"Hmmm," Mo said.

"Pie," Joe continued, "what's the name of that place on Hausten Street where they have great pie? The place with a fish pond. The Willows. Back in time."

"I'm afraid you'd have to go back in time to eat there; they closed two or three years ago."

"Damn. How about Keo's? Tomorrow, 12:30 or thereabouts?" His best offer. You'd have to be seriously repulsed by someone to turn down Keo's.

"Ulua with black bean sauce−−I'm going to regret this," she said.

"Great. No. I mean, we'll have a nice lunch. See you there," Joe bailed before she could change her mind.

Joe put down his fork. "Lemon grass," he said with satisfaction. Mo was eating rapidly; she raised her eyebrows.

"So, what have you been up to?" she asked, breaking off a piece of spring roll.

"I bought a computer."

"Ughh."

Joe laughed. "I hate them, really. But they're good tools−−I bought it for the Internet, so I can trade stocks."

"I'm remembering," Mo said between bites, "what they say about how to make a small fortune on Wall Street."

"How's that?"

"Well, you start with a large one."

"Ha, ha. That's one method I can't use."

"I should have eaten breakfast," she said. "What is the damned Internet anyway?"

"Mo, I have to warn you−−the last ten people that asked me questions like that are lying face down."

"I can take it," she said.

"It's a way of moving information around," Joe said, "that doesn't require a dedicated phone line. The telephone system works like a string stretched between tin cans. Two people monopolize the string until they're done. The Internet is different. Info is coded and split into small packets. Each packet is numbered and addressed; it heads toward its destination by any route that is open; it doesn't have to travel with its sister packets. A program at the receiving end collects the packets and reassembles them correctly. No need to dedicate one string to one conversation at a time." Joe paused for breath. "The Internet is a lot of fat strings with packets zipping through. Each year the strings get fatter and the packets zip faster."

"Where did you learn this stuff?"

"Right up the road at the university. I actually have a degree in it."

"You don't look the type," Mo said.

"You say the nicest things. The Internet is here to stay. Twenty−some years ago, when I was a student, I typed an algebra equation into a computer; it was beamed from an antenna on top of the engineering building to a satellite and then down to an antenna at MIT in Massachusetts. A few seconds later, blak, blak, blak, the answer came out of the printer, back from MIT. That was state of the art, a marvel. Now, my God!" Joe paused. "I'm going to make money on it."

"Is that what you want to do, Joe, make money?"

"Some, anyway."

"What do you really like to do?" Mo took a mouthful of rice. Her eyes were wide open, looking directly at him.

"Uh . . . I like to write about things."

"Aha," she said.

"How do you get by?" he asked.

"I do all right with photography, commercial work. I teach a couple of courses. When I get the chance, I do my own stuff; I have a show every couple of years if I can."

"The only photographer besides Ansel Adams and Cartier−Bresson that I can remember is the Hungarian guy, Kertesz." Mo looked at him sharply. "His pictures of New York are so still," Joe said, "like etchings, but they're awake. There is always something−−tracks in the snow, a falling leaf, something that echoes time."

"Wonderful," she agreed. "I love his early Paris shots. You know about Kertesz? You're full of surprises."

"My father is a painter."

"So you grew up with it?"

"Actually, I was raised by my grandparents. My mother died when I was a kid. Did you ever hear of Franz Griessler, the painter?"

"Yes, I've seen some of his work."

"I met him once. Want to hear about it?"

"Sure. How about dessert?"

"Absolutely." They ordered.

"I used to drive a Charley's cab. A woman flagged me down in the shopping center one day. She was holding a flat package in both hands, wiggling her fingers. She was slim, intense, in her late thirties, with high coloring and black hair pulled into a bun. She was damned good looking−−hapa−−Asian, French maybe. She lived nearby, just behind The Pagoda, but the package was clumsy to carry. It was a drawing of hers. We got to talking, and she asked if I'd ever modeled."

"Had you?"

"Nope. She talked me into it. The next day I drove her to Franz Griessler's studio, way up the mountain on Round Top Drive, and sat for her drawing class."

"What was he like?"

"Short. Square. Close cut gray hair. Powerful guy. Lili−−that was her name−−told me afterwards that he was 82. Hard to believe. I was very tense at first. I thought for a few minutes that I couldn't do it, couldn't just sit there with people looking at me. Drops of sweat started to form over my eyebrows. I wanted to run away. But something happened. I began to enjoy listening to the charcoal scratching and the small noises people made as they concentrated. The sweat disappeared. I felt part of a tradition. I felt that I belonged."

The waitress brought dessert and cleared the table.

"At break time, Franz showed me his studio. He was working on a portrait, a seated matron−−silver hair, a lot

of greens, sage, purple lilac colors. Her hands were partially sketched, folded in her lap. A diagonal grid of pencil lines mapped the unpainted portions of the canvas into large diamonds.

"'Ach, the jewelry. Always the jewelry. I hate it.' Franz said, looking at indications of bracelets and rings. 'Ach.' I asked him what the pencil lines were for.

"'Structure. Composition. Always I start with them.'"

Joe stretched and finished his coconut banana dessert. Mo looked thoughtful. "What became of the babe?"

"I saw her across the street, a few weeks later. I don't think she noticed me. Every so often I look at the mountain and remember that studio, especially at night. You can see a couple of lights way up there. You know what I keep seeing?" He answered his own question. "Those diagonal pencil lines."

"Mmm . . . " Mo pushed her plate away. "Thank you, Joe. It was a nice lunch." As they left the restaurant she put a hand on his arm. "When the going gets tough, the tough get going, right?" She was looking at him as though he were a sixth grader.

"Right," he said, and they went in different directions on Kapahulu Avenue.

Joe took the long way home, around the zoo and through Waikiki. He didn't know what to make of Mo. She was a good listener. She didn't seem to be involved with anyone. It was a shame to let that body of hers go to waste.

Joe had started the day at 4 a.m. to catch the market opening on the East Coast; by the time he got back he was tired and already anticipating the next day's trading. Precious metals were hot. He was making money. He had made the acquaintance in cyberspace of Claude Ogier, a knowledgeable gold bug from Quebec who issued a constant stream of communications about the latest mining developments. Claude was preparing to launch a newsletter, working into it. Joe was up $3000 in six weeks by following his advice.

Southwest Precious Metals was attracting a lot of interest. They claimed an area of desert basin that was filled to a depth of 400 meters with material eroded from an adjacent range−−a mountainous area that had been mined for gold in the last century. The deposit, known as 'desert dirt,' contained gold, silver, and platinum in small concentrations. Small, that is, by the ounce. By the square kilometer, Southwest was sitting on the find of the decade. The problem lay in the extraction. There's a lot of gold in the Pacific, too, in the salt water, but no one has figured out how to extract it economically.

Arguments raged on the Internet. Gold and platinum are rarely found in the same deposit. Conventional fire assay methods are ineffective on desert dirt. The samples could have been fraudulently salted. A prestigious independent auditor was engaged to evaluate the deposit. Various explanations were advanced to counter the objections. Seasoned investors said that these companies were scams nineteen times out of twenty, so why bother at all? Optimists brought up investor resistance to heap leaching, an extraction method that had made fortunes in the 80's. Several mutual funds bought big positions after sending their mining aces to investigate first hand. The price was beginning to rise on larger volume.

The day after Joe had lunch with Mo, he bought 1500 shares of SPM at $4.75. The next morning, the price was $5.75 bid / $5.94 asked. A press release announced that an experimental extraction technique had yielded results that were higher than expected. Tests were continuing with larger samples. Joe jumped on the ask and bought 1500 more shares. "Damn it, Batman! We've got a live one." The price spiked to $6.75 before profit taking knocked it down. It closed at $6.25 after heavy trading.

For several months the price continued to move up, as larger samples processed with the new technique

yielded consistently higher results. He bought 1500 more shares at $10.50. When the price rose over $11, Claude shocked the online bulls by selling most of his shares. "But Claude," Joe wrote, "if the extraction method is as cheap as most people think it will be, shares will go to $100, easy." ($450,000 to him.)

"Don't worry, mon ami," Claude answered. "I still have a position if that comes to be. I have my original investment returned with a profit. And my heart keeps the normal beat."

Joe thought about buying more but held back. One detail bothered him. The CEO, a thirty year mining pro, claimed to have a degree from an obscure college in the Northwest. Several investors had tried unsuccessfully to verify this. Joe e−mailed the company to inquire but received no answer. Kate had an academic friend in Seattle who checked and was unable to find a record of graduation. The closest any one could come was to determine that he had gone to school there for at least three years. The college had gone through many changes over the years. Degree requirements were different. Records had been moved many times. They failed to pin it down.

Joe didn't care whether or not someone had a degree. It is what one can do that matters. But he cared if someone lied about it; lying is a bad sign. SPM stock broke above $14 and began to correct. The short sellers piled on, selling borrowed stock, driving the price down in order to frighten investors into dumping their shares. The price held in the $10 range for a few weeks and then quickly fell to $8 and then $7. The short position grew larger by the day. The bulls argued that all those borrowed shares had to be bought back sooner or later and that the upcoming positive mining audit would trigger a massive short squeeze that would quickly put the price over $20. The company continued to release good news.

When the audit report was finally released, it verified only the original assay results, a year old, and made no mention of the extraction yields. The company made bland assurances about ongoing efforts to improve the extraction technique, but there were no hard numbers and they were running out of development capital.

Trading in SPM was suspended. When it resumed, the stock cratered to below $3 in seconds. Joe waited for a bounce, clamped his jaw, and sold out at $3.25, just below the high of the day. Over the next few months, the price dropped to a nickel and the company went bankrupt.

Joe was in shock. He had lost $17,160 plus commissions, half his savings. As he thought it over, he realized the mistakes he'd made. He'd broken the primary law of diversity. You should never have all your eggs in one basket. Secondly, he had wavered between the attitudes of the trader and the long term investor, ignoring the safeguards of each approach. If you are trading, you must wait for good entry points and you must exit immediately if the price moves against you. Gains more than compensate for losses, if the losses are strictly limited. Furthermore, Victor Sperandeo had cautioned never to give back more than half your profits−−they are too hard to come by. At one point Joe had been $32,000 ahead. It hurt to remember.

If you are a long term investor, on the other hand, you must know that the company is sound. Joe failed to follow through on his investigation of the CEO. He had been too cheap to go to the annual shareholder's meeting where he would not have found the qualities he looked for in management.

He had been neither trader nor investor. He had been a loser. Not only that, he had spent months staring into his monitor, living on the Internet, reading the Wall St. Journal every day and Barrons every weekend, and dreaming about how he would invest $450,000. He asked himself how he could have been so stupid, so inept.

He went to a Korean bar. Gorgeous women paraded continuously past his table. When he tired of sitting with one, the next slid in against him and put her hand on his leg. "Buy me drink? You want pu−pu's?" The music was loud, hypnotic, non−stop. They danced. They accepted MasterCard. Joe staggered home with further losses.

He was in deepest day−after shambles when the phone rang.

"Ugh, hlo?"

"Hi, Joe."

"Max! How ya doin', buddy?"

"Fine. I'm at the airport."

"Great! Come on over, or are you just flying through?"

"I thought I'd stay a couple of days. Kate told me you were here."

Half an hour later, there he was. "Max, you look terrific . . . growing up, man, getting stronger."

"Thanks, you don't look so great," Max said.

"Nah, long night, never mind. A walk, rice and eggs, it will all be history." Max put his pack down in a corner. "That's not the lightest looking pack."

"It has everything I own in it. Carried it all over New Zealand."

"Yeah? Both islands? What do they call them?"

"North and South," Max said, smiling.

"Right, right. Always wanted to go there, supposed to be a great place."

"The Kiwi's, man . . . awesome!" Max was short with wide shoulders and large dark brown eyes. He had filled out since his school days, but he had the same earnest expression. Max had gotten through the University of Vermont, studying this and that, anthropology mostly, but he'd gone walkabout instead of buckling down to graduate school. Joe had been glad at the time, and now he could see why: Max was calmer, more sure of himself after a couple of years of knocking around.

"Let's go get some breakfast."

"Lunch," Max said.

At the coffee shop on King Street, Joe asked, "Remember that week we spent on Kauai? That was a good time."

"Yeah, the Na Pali coast," Max said.

"Some place," Joe said. "The whole damn island should be a world park."

"I remember that story you told us about the leper who wouldn't go to the colony."

"Koolau," Joe said. "He defeated the British Navy. They couldn't get him. He warned them, too. One sick guy with a rifle against marines and cannon−−he killed, what? . . . three of them before they gave up? He wasn't doing anything, just he and his lover in the valley."

"Yeah," Max said.

"One of the great love stories," Joe said. "Made for Hollywood. She stayed with him until he died and never caught leprosy. A few years later, she climbed back over the pali and started all over again, lived a long life. If I were a drinking man, I'd propose a toast to her−−and all women like her."

"Women," Max said, just like a grown up, holding out his coffee mug. They clinked mugs.

"So, what next?" Joe asked.

"I've been thinking . . . look at this." Max reached into his pocket and pulled out a little wooden box, deep red with a dramatic black grain. He removed a rubber band, placed the box on the table, and lifted off the top. The box was rectangular with an oval center; a thin piece of stone lay in the oval, tawny and flaked. "It's an arrowhead. Found it in Vermont." Joe put the arrowhead in his palm and looked at the indentations near the base and at the rounded but definite point. The slight weight of it shocked him. Whoever made it had felt the same weight; it had been in his or her palm as well.

"I carried it around in my wallet, and then when I was in New Zealand I made the box out of Kauri wood."

"Beautiful wood," Joe said. "The oval is perfect for the arrowhead."

Max nodded. "I'm going to make things," he said. "That's what I want to do. Furniture, maybe."

"Good idea!" Joe put the arrowhead back in its box.

"I'm going to stop and see Kate when I get to the mainland," Max said.

"Check out her new boyfriend, Jackson. He's into working with his hands. Nice guy." Joe had an idea. "Look, Max, why don't you take the truck?"

"Truck?"

"My truck. It's at Kate's, at Kate's mechanic's. I'm not using it. I don't know how long I'm going to be here on the island." Max was starting to look excited. "It's registered and the insurance is good for another six or seven months. Here." Joe found the registration in his wallet and gave it to him. "Just take this. That way all you have to do is put gas in it and go. When it expires, I'll send you a bill of sale. Or you can mail it to me and I'll sign it over to you. It's got a bed in the back, too."

"Really?"

"Sure. Keep the tools. Just leave my clothes at Kate's." Max sat back and considered. He stretched his arm forward and slowly slid the arrowhead across the table.

"Swap," he said.

"Oh, Max, I can't."

Max shook his head. "That's the deal."

"Well . . . O.K." Joe put the top on the box, wrapped the rubber band around it, and put it in his pocket. They walked to Waikiki and hung out for another day before Max caught a plane to Seattle.

At the airport, Joe thought of Mo and asked Max if he'd ever had a professor at Vermont named Soule.

"Soule . . . Sounds familiar. An old guy? Yeah, Soule. He gave a couple of guest lectures in an economics class. I remember now−−he was steamed about the Romans. They had tax laws that screwed everything up. Then the currency collapsed. He was interesting about that."

"His daughter lives here. I met her by accident." Max's flight was announced for boarding. "There it is," Joe said. "Sorry to see you go. But you're headed in the right direction. That's a joke. You'll see a cookie fortune taped to the dash in the truck; that's what it says. But you are, actually. Listen, that truck has two gas tanks−−there's a switch−−you'll see it."

"O.K. Joe, thanks. Take care of yourself, man."

"You too, Max." And he was gone. That's the way it is with kids, Joe thought.

"Damn it, Batman, " he said when he got home much later that day. "You and me. They don't have a chance." That night he dreamt of a campfire and coyotes calling in the night.

5

Two girls with clear Asian faces and long black hair were waiting at a bus stop on King Street. One was about fourteen, carrying school books; the other was several years older, heavier. Joe stopped at Coco's, ordered coffee, and tried to describe the girls in a notebook. They were so beautiful, so similar, sisters maybe . . . yet different. The older was a woman, really. Hours went by like minutes as he searched for the right words.

He wandered into Waikiki and sat on a bench by the beach. A woman with smooth brown skin walked into the water. Her body was like a torpedo in a blue one piece suit. She went out a few yards, waited, and dove quietly under a three−footer, bobbing up on the other side. The locals live in the water, Joe thought, they don't fight it. He remembered a story in The Advertiser about a sampan that sank in the Pacific. A fisherman, rescued twenty−four hours later, was asked by a reporter, "What did you do all that time out there with no life jacket?"

"Wen' sleep when I got tired," he said. He was one of those big laughing Hawaiians who float like buoys, heads up out of the water.

Joe strolled through the zoo. The gorilla was famous. He sat near the front of his cage mugging at tourists, carrying on, drawing them closer as they took pictures. Locals grinned from the sides. When enough people had gathered, the gorilla would sneak one hand behind and below him and without warning blast the tourists with a shit ball that hit the bars and scattered for maximum effect. He would leap to his feet mightily pleased, as the crowd screamed and the locals bent over laughing.

The elephants were patient and knowing. Joe trusted elephants. And dolphins. Sometimes he walked all the way to the Kahala to watch the dolphins zoom around their salt water pool. They came right to him at the edge of the pool, wiggling, excited as puppies.

He walked up Kapahulu Avenue and stopped at Zippy's where he had a bowl of saimin and worked on the description of the two girls. At home, in the mail, there was a card from Mo announcing a show of her photographs. The print on the card was deeply silvered. It showed the base of a banyan tree by a bus stop: high roots radiated out and sank below the sidewalk; a man was asleep, cradled between two roots, a lunch box by his waist, one arm stretched out along the top of a root, fingers dangling, the angles of his knees and elbows blending with the bends in the roots.

"Not bad, Batman," Joe said. "Next Friday."

The days before Mo's opening passed quickly. On Friday, Joe walked down Ward Avenue to a gallery and camera shop, and, for once, he wasn't early. Empty wine bottles, a few pupus on bare trays, a glass punch bowl, paper cups and napkins were scattered across white tables. Conversation hummed and collided around the room. A blues guitar kept time in the background. Mo was smiling down at a bearded professorial type.

"How do you do?" A young Japanese man shook Joe's hand.

"Thanks for the invitation," Joe said, flashing the card.

"Are you a friend of Winifred's?"

"Yes. Joe Burke."

"Wendell Sasaki."

"Nice place you have here," Joe said. A well−dressed couple entered, and Wendell excused himself. Joe drifted along a wall of Mo's photographs. There were several of old sugar mill buildings and one taken of the sky through the branches of a koa tree. There was a large one of the city at night, lights running high up the ridges. His favorite showed two young women walking toward the camera on Kalakaua Avenue. The light was gray, pre−dawn. One had her arm around the other's shoulders. They were bent forward laughing. Their bodies and clothes were used and tired, but their faces were innocent, flooded with relief; the night was over.

Most of the subjects were conventional; it was the detail and the light on them that was interesting. They were all black and white but one−−a close−up of bamboo stalks and leaves. "What do you think?" Mo asked from behind him.

"I like it." Joe turned partially. "How come it's the only one in color?"

"I have problems with color," Mo said. "It's always off. But in this case, there are really only two colors, bamboo and that tender green. They're both off in the same way, so the relationship works. And the color is so much of the story . . . " Wendell Sasaki called her over to confer with the well−dressed couple.

Joe stood in front of the picture of the young hookers, if that's what they were. Looking at them seemed more helpful than talking to anyone. Mo worked the crowd. After a time, Joe thanked the owner, waved at Mo, and left. All artists love light, he thought, walking up Ward Avenue. Mo was no exception.

The next day, he called. "Mo? Nice show."

"Thanks."

"You have won the Joe Burke award−−excellence in photography."

"Why, never did I dream," she said in a Southern drawl.

"Lunch!"

"Joe, honey . . . " She dropped the drawl. "I'm busy today, let's see . . . How about Tuesday? I want to check something out on the windward side. We could eat over there."

"Good deal."

On Tuesday, she picked him up by the sandbox on the lower level of the shopping center. As they drove toward the pali, Joe said, "I'm sentimental about that sandbox. Kate used to play there." He was surprised to see pain flicker on Mo's face. "What's the matter?"

"I had a child, once. He died−−when he was two−−from a condition my husband forgot to tell me ran in his family. His nerves didn't work."

"How awful."

"I don't think about it much," Mo said. They were silent for a few minutes. "So, what have you been doing?"

"Losing money. I got completely involved in the market. I made a major mistake, but I learned a lot."

"I'll show you where I took the bamboo picture," she said, turning onto the old pali road. She turned again and stopped by a weathered concrete bridge. They got out and walked to the other end of the bridge where a tall grove had grown from the bank below. Mo put her elbows on the side wall of the bridge, and leaned out, midway up the grove. Joe leaned out beside her. A breeze stirred and they were enveloped by melodious knocking, a hundred percussionists set free.

"Wow!" Joe said. "A bamboo orchestra. I've never heard that before." They listened for a few minutes and then drove through the pali tunnel, emerging high over Kaneohe Bay−−planes of pure light green, turquoise, dark blue. "Just another day in paradise," he said.

"Kailua isn't paradise, exactly. I've got to stop a moment in town and then we'll go over to Kaneohe."

"Sure." They wound down off the pali, and Joe waited while Mo accomplished her errand. She drove along Oneawa Street past the Racquet Club. Joe pointed. "See that hedge? I planted it!" A tall oleander hedge curved along the club drive. "A hundred small bushes," Joe said, "took me almost all day."

"Your roots in Hawaii?"

"Yok. I used to live there with Sally and Kate. I was the manager."

"How old is Kate?"

"Twenty−seven. Hard to believe. Where are we going?"

"Tops."

"That's pretty exciting. We can eat breakfast again."

"I hope she's there−−a picture I'm thinking about." Mo pulled into the Tops parking lot and they sat at the counter. Joe didn't need to look at the over−sized plastic menu; he'd read it dozens of times in the Ala Moana Tops. A tall woman wearing a cook's apron stood in front of the grill. Her black hair, gathered behind her head, was held by a tortoise shell comb. Her face was long and utterly calm. Eggs, homefries, and burgers sizzled in front of her. She dropped slices of bread into an industrial toaster, flipped and scrambled, stirred and buttered, served and cleaned with untroubled movements of her arms and hands. Occasionally she turned or moved a step sideways without changing expression. She was like a reflection of herself in a still pond.

"Something else," Joe said.

"How am I going to get a picture of that?" Mo asked.

"I don't know."

Mo swiveled on her stool. "I've got to stop staring."

"You could ask her to model."

"I suppose so, but then . . . You mean in some other setting?"

"Yeah," Joe said, "naked in a waterfall−−I'll help."

Mo ignored him. "Part of it is the contrast with the grill. But there's all this other clutter."

Joe shook his head. "How can she be so busy and so serene at the same time?"

"I don't think I can catch it," Mo said. "But I'm going to try."

"Jade Willow Lady," Joe said on the way back over the pali. "That's what I'd call her. I have to admit, Mo, I like looking at things. Why don't we go over to Kauai some time? Day trip. Catch an early plane, drive around, look at things, and be back by dinner? Mo pursed her lips and considered.

" I have a client over there; I could write it off. It would be nice to see the canyon. I have to go to the mainland next week. How about the week after, say Friday? That would give me time to get something done before we went."

"Sounds good. Closest flight to seven o'clock, two weeks from Friday?"

"Which airline?" Mo asked.

"I don't know−−Aloha?"

"O.K. It's easier for my books if I get my own ticket," she said.

"Great. If I don't hear from you I'll see you at the terminal. Good luck with Jade Willow Lady." Mo dropped him off at the shopping center and drove into traffic without looking back.

He took the escalator to the upper level and walked into Shirokya, drawn by Japanese muzak and pretty packaging. The Japanese were incapable of bad design, he thought. It was in their genes or something. Or maybe it was just that they cared. He almost bought a porcelain doll to keep Batman company on the lanai, but he decided that might be pushy. He called Aloha and bought a ticket for the 7:10 flight to Kauai. He and Mo hadn't agreed on a return time, but the 5:45 seemed most likely.

It was nearing pupu hour at The Chart House. He walked over in time to get a table by the open windows, ordered a Glenlivet, and stretched out to enjoy the view of masts in the marina. The trade wind kept up an aluminum chatter, not as nice as the spirit of the bamboo grove, but pleasant in its own way.

At the next table, three boat owners in their thirties were drinking, talking story, and laughing loudly. As the first group of well dressed office women came through the door, one of the men leaned back in his chair. A grin spread his mustache across his red face. "Bogeys, three o'clock," he announced.

The squadron adjusted for combat. Most would become prisoners of war, Joe thought. He'd been one himself, not unhappily. Perhaps it was the habit of being coupled that was pushing him in Mo's direction. She wasn't as natural as Sally, his first wife, or as cheerful as Ingrid; she was more independent, focused, more like him in

some ways. Too bad about her child−−that explained some of the seriousness in her face. She wasn't bowled over by the great Joe Burke, but she was interested. He pulled back on the stick and began to climb.

6

If a globe is turned in just the right way, nothing can be seen but the Pacific and the far off edges of continents. The Hawaiian Islands are specks in the middle of this immensity. Kauai is a hundred miles from Oahu, practically next door. The Aloha Airlines jet climbed and then descended into Lihue before Joe had time to finish a glass of juice. Green sugar cane and red earth swept past lowering wings. A bump, a screech of tires, and they were down, taxiing to the small terminal.

Mo put away a small day planner in which she had been making notes. "Canyon first?" she asked.

"Banana pancakes? Hard to explore on an empty stomach."

"I brought some fruit," she said. They rented a Toyota sedan, and Joe drove into Lihue.

"Too early for saimin," he said. "Too bad. There's a great place−−Hamura's−−biz people from Honolulu have been known to fly over for lunch to cure their hangovers." He parked by Kenny's. "O.K., this won't take long." They ordered breakfast.

"When I lived here," Joe said, "there was only one traffic light on the island, and it wasn't on a highway; it was in the middle of a cane field, for the trucks."

"It's changing fast," Mo said. "Too beautiful not to be discovered."

"If they stop the sugar subsidies, it's all over." Joe pushed his empty plate away. Mo was wearing a black sweatshirt, tan jeans, and running shoes. He had on his Filson bush jacket, Levis, and his all purpose Clarks shoes. They looked good together, he thought, Mr. and Ms. Competent.

"Did you notice the Kentucky Fried Chicken place on the way in to Lihue?" he asked.

"Yes."

"I helped landscape it. Me and Whistling Ed Swaney. He was a sheriff in L.A.; he quit after the Watts riots. He had a whistling show on a radio station over there, fifteen minutes a week."

"Really?"

"Yup. He was a mighty muscle man−−thirty years older than I was. I could barely keep up with him. The good thing about Whistling Ed was that he didn't talk much."

"Giving you free rein . . . "

"Yok. No. I didn't talk either, so we got along well. Anyway, we went from one posh house to the next, cutting grass and trimming trees. The owners treated him with great respect. I finally figured out why−−he was always sweating. I gave it a name: Swaney's Law. If you're sweating, they can't shit on you."

They drove down to Nawiliwili Harbor and along a back road through cane fields that followed a line of mountains. Narrow green valleys cut into the mountains, mysteriously shaded. There was a sense of two cultures, of a border at the edge of the sugar cane that was crossed cautiously, if at all.

They came to the Poipu resort district and then headed up to the canyon rim where Joe had picked plums. They stood at the lookout, above a three thousand foot drop and ten miles of rugged red and gold walls flecked with green. Mountain goats, bits of white, chased each other up and down vertical slopes. "Incredible," Mo said, focusing her camera.

"It looks like they're playing tag," Joe said. "So free."

They drove to the end of the road and peered into the mist obscuring Kalalau valley where Koolau, the leper, remained buried. Clouds swirled and lifted, revealing glimpses of tree tops, steep ridges, and once, a small curve of beach far below. "I almost like it better this way," Mo said, "when you can't see it all at once. Brrrrr!" They piled into the car and drove back down to the sunny fields on the leeward side. They passed through road cuts, hundreds of yards of flaming bougainvillea on both sides, and by small plantation houses painted green, corrugated roofs rusted to the same red tones as the soil. "Stop!" Mo commanded from time to time. Joe stretched while she took pictures.

They drove through the built up area between Lihue and Kapaa and parked outside a medical complex. "Five minutes, ten maybe," Mo said. "The client," she explained when she returned. "Rob Wilcox. He's a fan, buys my stuff for his clinic and for his own collection."

"Great," Joe said. "Is there a Mrs. Wilcox?"

"No." She flushed slightly. They parked by the beach in Anahola, ate bananas and an orange, and decided to stretch their legs. Mo walked strangely on the sand, holding her shoes in one hand. Her pelvis tipped back; she shifted her weight stiffly from one leg to the other in an exaggerated prance that said, "You should be so lucky as to even look at me." But no one else was on the beach. She didn't seem conscious of the change. Joe looked away. Three−footers curled peacefully along the beach as far as he could see.

They sat on the soft sand, and Mo took off her sweatshirt. Joe lay back with his head on his shoes and admired her breasts, high and shapely beneath a gray T−shirt. Steady, he said to himself, the woman barely likes you. Who was she, anyway? She took good pictures; he knew that. He fell asleep for a moment.

Mo took over the driving. They were well around the island, past Kilauea, when Joe asked, "The Tahiti Nui, do you know it? In Hanalei?"

"A restaurant, bar?"

"Yup. With a porch. I want to have a beer on the porch." Mo looked at her watch. "Plenty of time," Joe said. "Which flight are you on?"

"Four−thirty," she said.

"Mine is quarter to six . . . We still have time. Maybe I can get on the early one." They drove over a stream that curved through sparkling green rice paddies. Shortly afterwards, they stopped by the Tahiti Nui.

They sat on a wooden porch and looked across the humpy patched blacktop road to a steep hillside, densely green and silent. "Happiness," Joe said, touching Mo's glass with his. "By some accounts, Hawaii is the most isolated land mass in the world. Kauai is the farthest out of the inhabited islands, and here we are at the end of the road. It stops right over there, can't make it around the Na Pali coast." He drank his beer and waved at the view. "Isn't it great, Mo? End of the road. Can't go any farther. How relaxing can you get? Nowhere to go but back−−when we feel like it."

"At three o'clock," Mo said. She took a picture of the road and one of an orange cat curled on an old sofa next

to the table.

"I had a cat like that once−−'Jeremy,'" Joe said.

She turned and took one of him. "Joe Burke, at the end of the road," she offered in explanation.

"A long way from where I started."

"You were from Woodstock, right?" Joe nodded. "Were you at the festival?"

"No. I was running a laundromat that year. I leased it from an old friend whose wife was sick of cleaning it. I couldn't get away. It was no big deal. There had been little festivals for years−−'Soundouts,' we called them−−music all night, sleep in a field. I had no idea it was going to be so huge. And anyway, it wasn't actually in Woodstock; it was about forty miles away. Did you go?"

"I couldn't," Mo said. "I was in Vienna in a convent school. My father was on sabbatical. It was awful. My sister Beth was already in college. I wish I could have heard Jimi Hendrix's *Star Spangled Banner*."

"A major moment," Joe said. "When Hendrix died, the hot radio station in Honolulu scheduled that piece for twelve noon. They asked everyone to open their windows and crank up the volume. That was when I was driving a cab; you could hear Hendrix blasting all over the city."

Mo looked at her watch again. "It's that time, Joe."

"Damn shame," he said. They said goodbye to the cat, and Mo drove them back to Lihue where Joe had no trouble changing his flight.

"Fun day," he said as they parted in Honolulu.

"Bye, Joe." She smiled.

"I'll call you."

She lifted a hand in acknowledgment. Thanks for the warmth and commitment, he thought.

He had given up chasing women some time after Sally and before Ingrid. A kind woman had taken him in hand after a heartbreak and explained: "Joe, you can't earn love. Love is free. Someone loves you or they don't . . . God knows why." She had been so sad and so earnest that he knew it was true. Shortly thereafter a flashbulb went off. If you can't earn love, then, if someone doesn't love you, there's nothing you can do about it. What a liberation!

He wasn't going to run after Mo. A relationship might be around the corner. Or not. He wasn't all that sure he wanted one, anyway. He'd call her in a couple of weeks.

7

Joe was going to run out of money−−in less than a year. He began reading the Sunday classifieds, an experience that made him sweat and put a knot in his stomach.

On a Monday, two weeks after the trip to Kauai, he followed up an ad for a programming job at a downtown insurance company. The offices were bright and modern; the staff was energetic. He left depressed. He could have done the work in his sleep, but he couldn't pretend to want to be "on board." The woman who

interviewed him was too decent; Joe couldn't bring himself to try and con her. He knew that if he were hired, six to twelve months later he would be out on the street again, unable to keep his head down and his mouth shut.

The next morning as he was taking a shower, replaying the scene at the insurance company, he bent over for the soap. Something split in his back. It was like being hit by an ax. He managed to get out of the bathroom and lower himself to the floor. He lay still for half an hour, getting his breath.

On his side, drawing his knees up, he pushed himself along the floor a few inches at a time. He made it to his mattress and slid under the comforter. Changing positions was painful, he could sleep for only a few minutes at a time.

By evening he was too thirsty to stay where he was. He pushed himself to the front of the kitchen sink and got to his knees, gasping. Holding on with one hand, he reached for his mug with the other and filled it with water. He drank and then refilled it and placed it on the floor. He opened the cabinet under the sink and pulled out an old pie plate. He lowered himself to the floor and rested before he pushed himself back to the bed, dragging along the water and the pie plate. He was able to pee into the plate while he lay on one side. He made it through the night, moving as little as possible.

Music would be nice, he thought in the morning. Forget it. It was all he could do to lie still and not panic. "It's all right, Batman," he called to the lanai. He thought about crawling to the telephone and knocking it to the floor with the broom, but who would he call? When the pie plate filled, he inched along the floor, dragging it into the bathroom, spilling some, but managing to reach up and pour most of it into the toilet. He shoved himself into the kitchen for more water. Holding to the chair by the table, he was able to reach a bunch of bananas. Two bananas and water got him through the second day.

On the third day, hanging on to the bedroom door frame, he pulled himself slowly to his feet. He was able to limp to the bathroom, supporting himself with the sponge mop. He took aspirin and shuffled back to his mattress with bread and a piece of cheddar cheese. He ate like a king, wishing that he'd turned on the radio.

The pain was less intense in the morning. Aspirin had helped him sleep for four or five hours. He was able to stand up slowly, turn on the radio, and reassure Batman. He leaned against a wall and stared at a shaft of sunlight falling on the carpet. He remained there motionless, without words. Pain had emptied him completely.

The disk jockey played a Cyril Pahinui cut. Familiar notes cascaded into the sunlight, ringing and humble, celebrating and accepting the only life we know. It's all right, Joe thought, as his isolation broke down. "For thine is the kingdom," he said to a presence in the sunshine. Thankful tears rolled down his cheeks. Three days later he made it down the hill to the store and back.

He exercised regularly and began to feel stronger. His walks were longer. From time to time he drank too much, but he was generally under control. Fortunately, he had a little time before he ran out of money. He had no idea what to do, but he knew that he wasn't going to program computers for an insurance company. The back pain hell was a clear warning not to repeat his old patterns. In the past, he would drift around trying to write things, run out of money, and then abandon the writing in a rush to join a work group, pay bills, and pretend he was like the others in the group. It never worked out. He had to find another way.

Late one morning, he was at the Wailana Coffee Shoppe when a young woman sat down across from him. She was blonde, lightly tanned; her face was composed, nearly immobilized, with eye shadow, liner, and rich red lipstick. She had an air of sadness that was at cross purpose to her youth and to the perfection of her makeup. She ate breakfast and left, untroubled by Joe's attention.

For the thousandth time he wished he could draw, but words were his best tools. It was more than the woman's appearance that he wanted to capture; he wanted to know how he felt about her. Writing was a way of finding out. For the rest of the day, as he walked in the city, he fiddled with words, starting over and over.

The next morning he returned to the Wailana. The beauty wasn't there, but he could remember her well enough to keep writing. A woman sat next to him at the counter. He paid no attention until she asked him to pass the ketchup. She was having home fries with her eggs. "Nothing like home fries," Joe said.

"Stick to your ribs," she said, blushing slightly. She had nice ribs, large breasts pushed against a white blouse. "What'cha doing, if you don't mind my asking? You look so intense."

"I was trying to describe someone."

"Are you a writer?"

"No," Joe said.

"My name is Alison, Alison Carl. Have you been here long? In Hawaii, I mean."

"About six months . . . I used to live here." She had short sandy colored hair, a blunt nose and a wide mouth. No makeup. She chewed toast with a satisfied expression.

"I'm doing post graduate work at the East−West Center. I saw the Dalai Lama yesterday."

Joe sat straighter. "No kidding? What was he like?"

"Cute. Like a little rock." She was compact, a high energy type. "What's your name?"

"Joe Burke." He took evasive action. "Alison, I'm too old for you." She looked downcast for a moment and then raised her eyebrows hopefully.

"Can you walk?"

"I can."

"There," she said winningly, taking a large forkful of potatoes. "What you mean, I think, is that you think I'm too young for you. It's a compliment, really. Men have trouble saying what they think, sometimes." She seemed pleased, like a teen−ager.

"What are you studying?" Joe asked.

"Buddhism. I have a doctorate in comparative religion. I was a pastor for a while and then I worked at a seminary. I was canned."

"Fired?"

"Yup. They were hypocrites," she said sadly. "What do you do?"

"Nothing right now. I used to program computers, design software. When I lived here I did a lot of stuff: drove a cab, delivered newspapers, managed a tennis club . . . I ended up going to the university." Alison sipped coffee.

"Let's get this over with," she said, "I'm forty−four. How old are you, Joe?" She noted his surprise with equanimity.

"Fifty−three."

"You see," she said. "You're one too: a younger−−than−−you−−looker."

"Alison," he said more firmly, "it has been nice to meet you, but I must be going. Much to do."

"Goodbye, Joe. Thank you for talking to me." He didn't want to wait for change, so he left a large tip and walked up Ala Moana Boulevard, relieved, but with the odd feeling that he was walking toward her rather than away.

At 4:00 that afternoon, the phone rang.

"Hi, Joe, it's Alison. I was bad this morning; I'm sorry. I don't know what got into me."

"What do you mean?"

"You were busy and I bothered you. I've been lonely, I guess. I didn't realize. I don't meet people like you very often." That was flattering. Joe made a soothing noise. "How about dinner, Joe? Dutch treat?"

He was surprised. "Uh, when?"

"Tonight, of course. I want to be high in the air and look at the city lights. I've never been to the Top of the I. Come on, Joe . . . You can tell me stories about the ancient old days. I will wear a skirt. We'll be normal for a couple of hours."

"A long stretch," Joe said, but then he felt bad. "Why not? O.K." They agreed to meet at 6:30. He ironed a pair of pants and an aloha shirt, mumbling to himself about what a pain in the ass it was, but by the time he stepped off the elevator he was feeling better; it was nice to be liked.

Joe was overly punctual and used to waiting for women. He forgave them; it was a genetic condition associated with the willingness to walk slowly in front of onrushing traffic and also−−somehow−−with the inability to have money ready at checkout counters. Alison was waiting for him.

"You're supposed to be late," he said. She smiled prettily. She was wearing a teal colored silk tunic over a chino skirt. Her hair was brushed back; a small opal swung from each ear; something glittered around her eyes. "You look terrific."

"Thank you." They sat at a table with a view of the mountains. "I don't drink much," she said as he ordered a Glenlivet and water. "I do know about Glenlivet. I'm Scots and Swedish."

"Single malt−−wonderful stuff," he said.

"I'll have a glass of Chardonnay. So, Joe, tell me about when you used to live here."

"I was married and Kate, our daughter, was young. I've been married twice." Alison did not appear surprised. "Sally and I were happy to be out of Woodstock."

"Woodstock, the Woodstock?"

"Yes, a small town. It was so great to be in Honolulu where we didn't know anyone. My feet didn't feel the pavement for a year. But we had a hard time. Food stamps and all that, even welfare for a while. Things settled down when I started driving a Charley's cab and Sally cleaned houses. Cleaning houses isn't bad work−−cash−−anybody gives you a hard time you just go somewhere else. Here's looking at you." They touched glasses.

"Sally had a couple of steady gigs where she liked the people and knew what she was supposed to do every week." His mind was moving back. "Some amazing things did happen . . . "

"Oh, good," Alison said.

"One afternoon I went over to Kahala to pick up Sally at a cleaning job. She was disturbed. Sally was a sweetheart, but she didn't talk much; after six years of marriage I knew I had to ask if I wanted to know what was going on.

"She described a scene between her boss, heiress to the Cannon towel fortune, and her boss's daughter. The daughter told her mother that a nice man had come into her room during the night, had sat on her bed and talked to her. The mother explained that dreams sometimes seemed real. The daughter said that it wasn't a dream. They argued. There were tears, and the daughter ran upstairs."

Joe paused. "Sally thought that the mother had handled it badly."

"What did you think?" Alison asked.

"What did I know? Anyway, time flew by. I got nervous; I thought maybe I would never do anything but drive a cab. I got a job managing a tennis club on the other side of the pali−−a good job−−a house, a truck, a pool in which Kate could learn to swim, acres for her to run around in.

"Sally operated the snack bar; Kate went to kindergarten. Mornings, I walked into Kailua to drink coffee and write."

"Just like this morning," Alison said.

"Yes. I was trying to understand Honolulu . . . as though it could be grasped and set, presented, like a pearl." Joe sipped his whiskey. "I became friendly with a regular at the Rob Roy Coffee Shop, an ex−machinist who had fled Chicago to start over in Hawaii. 'You gotta meet Mike,' he told me one day. 'You guys would get along.' I asked him about Mike. 'Mike's the cat burglar. You know, the one they're always writing about in the paper.'"

"I didn't want any trouble with the law, but, as usual with me, curiosity won out. Several nights later Mike and I were seated at a table in Crazy Horse, a topless bar that catered to Marines. He was short and stocky, intense. After a couple of beers, I said, 'So, I heard you were the cat burglar. That right?'.

"'Guess so,' he said. I asked him how that had happened.

"'It's so damned easy,' he said. He had been adopted by a well−to−do couple. The relationship hadn't worked out as they had hoped. He told me about robbing Aku over and over. Aku was a radio personality. Mike said he couldn't stand him. Mike had never been caught, even though the cops, by this time, knew. The island is small; word gets around.

"'One time,' Mike said, 'I was going along an upstairs hallway and I looked through a door: a little girl was sitting up in bed watching me. I didn't want to scare her−−you know how they are, big eyes and all−−so I

went in and sat on her bed. I told her not to worry; I was just doing my job, looking for things at night. I told her that her job was to get a good sleep, have good dreams, and be ready to have a great day when she woke up. She settled back down and smiled, you know . . . I patted the bed and left. Some kind of bird let go with a giant scrawk, and I got the hell out of there, down over the lanai in back.'

"'You're not going to believe this, Mike,' I said. I told him about the six foot bird cage in the atrium of that Kahala beach house and the little girl who stuck to her story."

Alison bounced in her chair and clapped. "Good for her!"

"That was twenty years ago," Joe said. "Mike got caught. The girl probably has her own children now."

"You must tell her," Alison said. "She should know. The truth is important." Alison had a point. Joe had felt guilty about that before.

"The house is still there," he said. "Maybe I'll see what happened to them."

"If they've moved, maybe you could find out where and send a letter."

"Aha," Joe said as dinner arrived. He had gone crazy and ordered steak. Alison bent over her scampi and inhaled deeply. "Garlic," she sighed.

"Garlic!" They touched glasses again. Dark ruby light circled and glanced through his Cabernet Sauvignon. By dessert, Alison had told him that she was from a small town near Madison, Wisconsin, that her father had been an inventor, that her mother was still alive, aging and in need of care.

"My father was hurt in an accident at work. I had to take care of him when I wasn't in school. My mother always had other jobs. He was strict. I couldn't go out like the other girls. I was taken in by our church; they gave me a scholarship."

"So you went from home to the church life−−and you never got married?"

"Never met anyone willing, Joe. Anyone right, that is." She bent over the table and lowered her voice. "I'm a virgin−−can you imagine?"

"What!?" A head turned in their direction and Joe lowered his voice to match hers. "How on earth?"

"I believe in the sacrament of marriage, Joe. Technically, I'm not a virgin because of something that happened a long time ago. But, actually, I am one." He blinked several times as she continued, "I had a boyfriend for five years. He was divorced. He was afraid of commitment, Joe." Joe took a large swallow of wine. "We used to fool around. Nothing below the waist," she added.

"Gurmpph." He cleared his throat. No one seemed to be paying any attention. Alison was still leaning forward. His eyes were fixed on her swelling breast and the curve of black lace that rose and disappeared behind her blue−green blouse. "Coffee," Joe said. "We must have coffee."

It had grown dark gradually, and Alison had her wish to look at city lights. Honolulu lies on a narrow plain between the mountains and the Pacific. Sharp ridges descend toward the water. The ridge faces have been developed; at night they are like jeweled fingers, reaching high, separated by vast darknesses. "Beautiful." Joe swept his hand toward the window.

"Even nicer than I hoped," Alison said. "I didn't mean to embarrass you, Joe."

"I'm not embarrassed. It seems like a waste, that's all."

"That's sweet." They had coffee and took a cab to her apartment, not far from the university. "Was it so bad being normal?" she asked.

"No," he admitted. She leaned over and kissed him quickly on the cheek. He felt like Uncle, thanked for a birthday present.

"There," she said and got out. "Night, Joe."

"Goodnight, Alison." The cab driver remained silent. "Oh, yeah," Joe said. "Liholiho Street."

8

The young beauty with the makeup was not at the Wailana the next morning. Joe ate a waffle and stared across the counter at the seat where she had been. As he reached for his notebook, he realized why she was sad. She was a perfect twenty−two, frozen in time; she would never be younger, more beautiful, or more beautifully made up to answer a man's fantasy. And it wasn't enough. We must begin again, he said to himself, identifying with her−−begin again without shame. Sometimes you have to start over, even go backwards, in order to go forward in a different direction.

He wrote the words down and nodded. It was a poem. He imagined someone reading his words, someone he didn't know. It was a good feeling. Lost mail−−that's what a poem is, he decided. He made up his mind to submit it to the university literary publication. He had tried before to be published, without success, but he'd not put much effort into it. He'd written for himself, really.

He walked home, prepared the lost mail, and left a message for Mo, "Let's have lunch."

An e−mail from Kate was waiting for him.

"Dad, the big step! Jackson and I have decided to get married. We've rented a house on San Juan Island to be a central gathering place, the week of Sept. 14−21. The ceremony will be Saturday, outside at the county park, followed by a dinner at the yacht club. I'm hoping everyone will come−−Mom, of course, and Ingrid and Maxie. The island is beautiful. I'm making a packet with maps, ferry schedules, and info on places to stay. More later. I wanted to tell you right away. Love, Kate."

"Big news, Batman!" It was a good marriage, but nothing would ever be the same. Sally and Ingrid on the same island? Yikes. He didn't have anything to wear.

Joe reeled around the apartment and then e−mailed back, "Congratulations! I'll be there. More congratulations. Love, Dad." He pulled an electric broom from the back of his closet and began pushing it back and forth across the carpet. Jackson was a good fellow. Kate was happy. He had never met Jackson's parents. He was going to have to be respectable. Where was San Juan Island, anyway? Reservations? The last dust crumb had disappeared into the electric broom when Joe stopped pacing. He put the vacuum cleaner away and decided that the sensible thing to do was to take a walk.

The phone rang.

"Hi, Joe."

"Uh, hey there." It was Alison.

"I enjoyed dinner last night."

"So did I."

"Joe, would you come exploring with me? I'm going to rent a car and see some of the island."

"Well, sure," he said, "but I've got a lot to do."

"Me, too. It will be fun, Joe. I'm thinking about the end of the week, maybe Friday or Saturday."

"Saturday would be good," he said, pushing it ahead.

"I'll pick you up at ten. How do I get to your place?" He gave directions and then suggested that she meet him at Tops instead.

"That way I can get some writing done early, and it won't matter if you get held up."

"Tops−−near the Ilikai?"

"Yes."

"O.K. Ten o'clock. Joe, have you written down the story about the girl and the cat burglar?"

"No."

"It's your responsibility,"Alison said.

"Mmm. My daughter's getting married! I just heard."

"Wonderful! You can tell me all about it, Saturday. What kind of car do you like to drive?"

"Something heavy . . . with a machine gun."

"Oh, Joe."

"If they're out of those, get the kind with the bumper tires lashed around."

"O.K.−−if they have them," she said. "See you Saturday."

Joe put a new notebook in his back pocket, and left for the second walk of the day. He found the San Juan Islands in an atlas at the main library. They were small, off the northernmost coast of Washington. He strolled to the Columbia Inn and ate a Reuben sandwich. It would be good to see everyone and to meet Jackson's family. All he had to do was show up in shape and not drink too much. He would buy an outfit that could travel in the Filson bag. A camera. The Edgewater, he thought. Stay there Thursday, stay on the island Friday and Saturday nights, and then go back to the Edgewater on Sunday−−that would break up the trip. He made a list, and then he began to write about Mike and the little girl.

The message light was blinking when he got home. "Joe, are you there?" It was Mo. "No? I'm afraid lunch will have to wait. My sister has talked me into going on a retreat with her. I'm going to combine the trip with work, and then we're both going to Vermont for my parents' fiftieth wedding anniversary. I won't be back until Labor Day." She paused. "Maybe we can get together then. Bye." Damn. Joe had been hoping that she would be a buffer against Alison's attention. He made tea, sat at the computer, and began to enter the cat burglar

story.

The next days were filled with writing and shopping. His money was draining away, but Kate's wedding was important. How could he skimp? The San Juan Islands would probably be cool in September. He bought a silk and wool blend jacket−−olive, gray, and brown in a quiet weave. A pair of lightweight wool pants, neutral gray green, a silvery tan Italian dress shirt, and a dark brown tie complemented the jacket. He bought an Olympus camera that had a sliding lens cover and would fit in a pocket. His shoes had been re−soled twice and were ragged. He bought another pair, the same style, trusty Clarks. The outfit was expensive, but he wanted to dress honestly.

"I want to feel like myself," he told Alison on Saturday.

"I'm sure your daughter will be proud of you," Alison said.

"The clothes should last−−if I don't climb a tree or fall into a vat of red wine." They were headed out of town toward Nanakuli. It was raining on and off; the weather was likely to be better on the leeward side.

"How's your course?" Joe asked.

"Interesting. Zen is so different in its practice−−from Christianity, I mean. It makes me want to go to Japan and visit the monasteries, find a teacher. You need a teacher to learn what counts, to become one yourself."

Alison was so positive that Joe found it hard to imagine her having had job troubles. "Why did you get fired, if you don't mind my asking?"

"It was troubling. I did my undergraduate work at a bible college, but I'm well educated, Joe. I have a masters in communication from Columbia and a PhD. The students were trained to go out and do the Lord's work, but they were only getting one point of view in their education. The books in the curriculum dealt with science from a fundamentalist point of view, presenting arguments as though they were objective and unbiased. The students graduated thinking that they were educated when they really weren't. It made them confident and more able to face the work, but I didn't like it. The Lord is not afraid of different points of view, Joe."

Joe had not met any one on such comfortable terms with the Lord. She was absolutely unaffected. "It's funny," she said, "what triggered the final blow up was an editing job I did on an article for the school publication. The writer−−one of the trustees−−insisted on capitalizing the word 'bible' in places where it was not appropriate."

"Good heavens," Joe said.

Alison giggled. "Really. In the light of eternity, what difference does it make?"

"I think they lost a good person," Joe said.

"I did my best," she said. "I brought lunch."

"Great!" They drove up a narrow rocky valley and ate by the side of the road in the company of two horses. Alison had packed a bottle of wine to wash down sandwiches of red peppers, goat cheese, and watercress. "You went to a lot of trouble," Joe said. "Terrific sandwiches."

"I should have brought glasses for the wine."

"We're roughing it," Joe said, pouring more into his paper cup. "I wrote the cat burglar story," he remembered.

"Oh, good!"

"Yeah, I took it to the house in Kahala. An old guy answered the door and told me that the family had sold him the house and moved to California. He was nice. He gave me their address, so I sent the story. You were right; it was my responsibility. It felt good to drop the letter in the mail. Hope it gets to her." Alison clapped her hands. The horses ears picked up. "I used to work with someone who lived around here," Joe said. "The horses reminded me. Her name was Lovena. Her family took care of horses."

"Where did you work?"

"In a warehouse. She was slim, like a boy, with short black hair and brown skin. She was strong−−beautiful, really. I was falling in love with her, but I was married." Alison sighed.

"Lovena was great, very shy and quiet, hard working. Sometimes she talked to me when the orders were packed and shipped. She talked about horses and barracuda and manta rays. I guess there's one time of year when mantas come into shallow water to mate or lay eggs or something. People can step on them by accident and get hurt." Joe paused, remembering. "When Lovena said 'manta' or 'barracuda,' the words weren't just names; they were respectful. A 'bar−ra−cu−da' was important, important as any life."

"What happened to her?"

"Don't know. I quit. I hated to say goodbye. In fact, the last day there, I asked if I could come see her. She was feeling bad, too. She looked me in the eye and said, 'Yeah−−and you bring your wife and that pretty little girl with you.'"

"Good for her," Alison said.

"Mmm."

"It looks like the rain might be stopping. Let's find a beach," Alison suggested.

"Yes." Joe corked the wine and called to the horses. "Say hi to Lovena for me, will you?"

Alison drove out to the highway, and they spent the afternoon poking around, reaching the end of the road and turning back. Neither was in a hurry to return to the city. At the end of the day, they were standing in a beach park as the sun slipped toward the horizon.

"I think a front just went through," Joe said. "Wow!" A dark cloud layer caught fire, lit from below by the setting sun. Purple and crimson flares rolled across the bottom of the ragged sky. Two hundred yards away, a painted flagpole split the clouds with a brilliant white line. It was like a crack in the universe, a glimpse of the beyond.

Alison moved closer and they stared at the energy that seemed to pour through the crack.

"Too much," Joe said.

"Oh, Joe." They walked to the rental car in the parking lot and got in. He reached for her. It was spontaneous and all wrong. Alison was not the right woman. They hugged, their bodies twisting awkwardly in the small seats as they tried to get closer. As they clung to each other, ordinary as cloth, as dogs in a parking lot, Joe was unexpectedly transported with relief. He was a tiny speck in a universe of stars and specks and emptiness. Nothing kept happening to him like a tap in the head, like shells falling away. He could have howled with laughter or cried in utter gratitude−−if it mattered.

"Would you drive?" Alison asked.

"Sure." They rode in silence back to Honolulu. Joe stopped by his building and got out of the car. Alison opened her door and came around to the driver's side. Joe put his arms around her, and she settled her head against his chest. They stood for a moment. "Bye," Joe said. She turned her face up. He took her shoulders in his hands, kissed her quietly, and turned away.

"Bye, Joe."

He waved and walked slowly inside. _Something is happening here but you don't know what it is, do you, Mr. Jones_ . . . The Dylan line echoed in his mind as he climbed the stairs. It was true. Something was happening. It didn't feel like love, exactly. Or sex, exactly. He was still shocked by the freedom and relief that had overwhelmed him in the parking lot.

Three days later, Alison cooked dinner for them in her apartment. They were sitting on her couch when Joe tried to describe what he had felt during their hug by the beach.

"Sounds like what the zen people call 'little satori,'" she said.

"I don't know," he said. "I think I've been messed up." His eyes were fixed on the front of her blouse.

"Help yourself," she said comfortably.

He undid four buttons, slid down on the couch, and laid his hand on her breast. His mind began to sign off as her nipple responded. Slow spasms moved up his body, stopping his breath and tightening his stomach muscles. Alison tuned right in, moving with him, sighing. In a few minutes they were lying on her bed, marriage considerations and the below−the−waist rule suspended. She came easily and gratefully. They were like two thirsty people sharing a glass of water.

Alison got up some time later. Joe was lying with his eyes closed, arms outstretched, when he felt a washcloth gently but firmly applied. He jumped. "Just cleaning up," she said cheerfully. "Go back to sleep." Joe pictured his apartment. He rolled over on his side.

"Alison . . . " he said.

"Yes?"

"You take to this like a duck to water."

"It must be the Swedish," she said seriously.

"Alison, that was wonderful, but I have to go home."

"Oh." She was disappointed. "Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"O.K., Joe."

He dressed, hugged her, and stepped outside. Widely separated streetlights cast circles of blue light; hedges and trees were dark green in the shadows. He was only forty minutes from home and he wanted to walk in the cool air. Alison was going to make up for lost time. She was in love with him and linking fast. He didn't want

to hurt her.

"Complications," he told Batman, on duty at his post on the lanai. "Nothing we can't handle." But he wasn't so sure.

9

The following Saturday, Joe was on Alison's couch again. Her need to be coupled was stronger than his need to be alone. She must have known that a future together was unlikely, but she didn't care. She was in love. Joe couldn't bring himself to disappoint her. Besides, he enjoyed her company and the small mole below her left ear and her smell which reminded him of a field after rain.

They began eating dinner together every other night, but Joe continued to go home afterwards, often in the early hours of the morning. It was a compromise. He wanted to wake up in his own bed, stick to his habits, take his notebook to a coffee shop and keep at his writing.

The weeks sped by as he wrote a longer story based on Mike, the cat burglar. It was not successful. When he strayed from the facts as he remembered them, he felt false and uncertain. He had the uneasy feeling that he didn't know what he was doing. One afternoon toward the end of August, he and Alison rode the Nuuanu bus to the end of the line and walked to the bamboo grove that Mo had shown him. They stood on the bridge and listened to the rhythmic hypnotic knocking.

"It's so romantic, Joe." Alison leaned against him.

"Yes."

She said, "You know I've got to go home."

"Mmm."

"My flight is Wednesday."

He sighed. "So soon?"

"Are you going to stay in Honolulu, Joe?"

He sensed the proposal behind the question. It was tempting to follow her, to merge lives, to be a normal husband and give up his frustrating search for something he didn't understand. He spoke slowly. The words formed themselves. "For the time being," he said. "This damn story I'm writing isn't any good."

"You mustn't give up." She looked at him seriously, a hint of tear in each eye.

"I can't," he said. "I think it's who I am." He meant: I'm not going to come with you and be your man.

"Oh, Joe." Her tears came and she put her arms around him. They held each other as the bamboo played. "Won't you be lonely?"

"Yes." He squeezed her. "I'll miss you."

On Wednesday, a version of *Aloha Oe* poured down from invisible airport speakers. Joe placed a pikake and ginger lei around Alison's neck. "I love that song," he said, pulling away. "Even Muzak can't ruin it. Did you know it was written by Queen Liliuokalani? Can you imagine any of our politicians leaving anything as

good?"

"Joe, will you come see me in Wisconsin? You'd like it. Madison is very cultural." Alison was going to try until the end.

He hesitated.

She bit her lower lip. "Don't say no, Joe. Just don't say no."

He hung his head. "Take care, Alison." It had been a good time. Sex had continued between them as straightforward and trusting as the rest of their relationship. But Alison needed to be in Wisconsin taking care of her mother, and she needed a husband, not his part time attention. "You aren't sorry, are you?" he asked.

"Oh, no. You are my lover man. And . . . " She smiled because it was a joke between them, "In the light of eternity, what difference does it make?" She threw her arms around him, then turned quickly and left for her departure gate. He went directly to the Moana.

"I need a drink, Gilbert."

"You in the right place."

For the first time since he'd landed in Hawaii, Joe was lonely. Alison had given him something, and he missed it already. What was it? Her directness. It was how to be, a gift. He watched the young and the not so young prowl along the beach, bodies glistening with tanning oil. None were for him. Morgan was coming through for a night, he remembered. And Mo was due back soon. He could talk to them, anyway. He trudged home anesthetized, wished Batman a good sleep, and lowered himself onto his mattress.

The next day his poem was returned in the mail, rejected without comment. The day after that, he reached Mo on the phone.

"Hi, there."

"Oh. Hello, Joe."

"Welcome back. How was your trip?"

"Exhausting. Got some good shots of the boundary waters area, though. And my parents' anniversary−−what a scene."

"Alcohol consumed?"

"Lord! It was touching, really, my folks and their old friends toasting each other and their fallen comrades."

"Ah," Joe said.

"What's new with you?" she asked.

"Oh, you know−−rejection and solitude." Alison's face flashed before him; he apologized silently.

"Why don't I believe you?" Mo asked.

"It's chromosomal; you can't help it. Anyway, I was rejected. By Manoa. They didn't like my poem. They

didn't even say they didn't like it, just sent it back."

"Builds character," Mo said.

"Listen, Mo, now that you feel sorry for me, how about dinner next week? An old friend of mine is coming with his new lady; I think it would be a good time."

"Hmmm . . . what day? I'm free Thursday and Friday."

"Good, they're coming Thursday."

"Fine," Mo said. "Give me a call. If I'm out, leave a message telling me where to meet you."

"Will do."

The following Thursday, the lei stands at the airport were busy. Joe made it to the arrival gate just in time. There was Morgan with a new haircut, looking somewhat larger than life in a short sleeved shirt, wearing chinos rather than jeans, striding along with a small blonde woman. She saw Joe approach and flashed a thousand watt smile. "Aloha," Joe said, hanging leis around their necks.

"Aloha," Morgan said. "Edie, this is Joe."

"Edie Rowantree," she said through the dazzle, extending her hand.

"Joe Burke. How was the flight?"

"I hate flying," she said. "We encountered turbulence in the middle of the ocean. I asked Morgan if there was any hope. 'There is always hope,'" she imitated.

"Baggage claim," Morgan said. A short time later they were in a cab speeding toward Waikiki.

"I thought we might have dinner with a friend of mine, if you aren't too tired."

"Oh, good," Edie said. "We spent last night in San Francisco to break up the flight. We aren't tired, are we Morgan?"

"Certainly not. Where are we?"

"Passing the old cannery," Joe said. "That's where Alphonse showed me the right way to drive a fork lift."

Morgan explained, "Joe was too−−what was it−−delicate?"

"Careful," Joe said.

"Maybe you could write a story about it," Edie said. She made it sound completely possible, like−−why not have it done by dark?

"Maybe I will. Good choice, the Moana, by the way."

"A friend told me that they have windows that actually open," Edie said. "I want to hear surf. Then we're going to the other islands."

"Some of the other islands," Morgan said.

"Molokai, and Kauai, and Maui." They swept up to the front of the hotel and arranged to meet at the banyan bar in an hour and a half. Joe called Mo.

"The eagle has landed. Can you make it, 6:30 at the Moana? I'll probably be there a bit before."

"See you there."

He went over to the International Marketplace and lost himself in wandering groups of tourists. A balding caricaturist with rimless glasses bantered with a line of haoles waiting to be drawn.

"Hobby? What do you do on weekends?"

"Golf." A few pen strokes and a driver curled around the subject's neck, the ball untouched on the tee.

"Tennis." A racquet appeared with strings burst by an opponent's serve. Two or three minutes and he was done, asking each person's name, titling the drawing beneath its over−sized head, signing it and wrapping it in clear plastic. He was magician and entertainer, eyes blue and shrewd, working hard, keeping the crowd alive. It was six o'clock before Joe realized it. He scooted back to the Moana.

"Glenlivet and water, please, Gilbert."

Joe raised his glass in Gilbert's direction. "Here's to friends."

"Oh, you have some?"

"Yok, Gilbert." Mo appeared. "See?"

"See what?" she asked.

"Sorry, I was talking to Gilbert. You are my friend, aren't you?"

"How long have you been here?"

"Two minutes."

"Very pretty friend," Gilbert said. "Too good for you. May I get you a drink?"

"Lillet on the rocks, please." Mo was wearing linen slacks and an open weave cotton sweater. She rarely used make up; touches of eye shadow made her seem especially dressed up. Morgan and Edie walked down the wide back steps of the hotel and across the courtyard beneath the banyan tree. Joe waved.

"More friends," he said. They moved to a table. "Did your window open?"

"Oh, yes," Edie said, nodding. "It was very satisfying." Her face was open and cheerful; her eyebrows curved; her cheeks curved; her mouth curved widely around and up at the corners. Beneath the curves she had a strong head.

"So, Morgan . . . Waikiki, Diamond Head . . . " Joe stretched out his arm.

"Yes," Morgan said in his most approving manner.

"What do you do here?" Edie asked Mo.

"I have a small photography business."

"How wonderful," Edie said. "I am talent−less." One corner of Morgan's mouth twitched. Mo sipped her Lillet.

"Me too," Joe said. "I paid twenty−five cents for biology drawings in high school. My worms looked like accordions."

"I understand you are a builder and a writer," Mo said, turning to Morgan.

"I suppose so," he said.

"Damned good one," Joe said.

"What is your book about?"

"Houses of the Hudson Valley." Mo smiled broadly. That's Morgan, Joe thought. He states the title of his book, a simple fact, and manages to imply that the universe is a lunatic misunderstanding, that we are all waiting at the wrong bus stop.

"Have you been working on it long?" Mo asked.

"Nine years."

"I could eat a mahi−mahi," Edie said.

They ended up at the restaurant, John Dominis, at a table with too many glasses, sea bass, snapper, and mahi−mahi, salads, desserts . . . No one wanted to stop. Morgan told a long story that began with a knock on his door one winter afternoon. A Jehovah's Witness had wandered up the mountain to proselytize. Morgan was so glad to see someone that he invited him in and had a conversation about the Bible.

"Given their assumptions," Morgan said, "I thought I might discuss their conclusions." The following week the witness returned with help. Pots of tea, hours later, the witness and his help left, baffled, promising to return with an elder. By spring, much of the church's energy was directed at rebutting the doctrinal challenge from the mountains. Morgan was invited to headquarters where an informal truce was reached. "They are an efficient organization in many ways," Morgan said grandly.

"Poor bastards," Joe said. "Morgan is difficult in debate, Mo. He got out of the draft by writing so many complicated letters questioning selective service procedures that they finally figured it would be easier to classify him, 1Y."

"A successful campaign," Morgan said.

"Better than mine," Joe said.

"Could have been worse," Morgan reminded him.

"True." Joe explained to Edie and Mo that he'd enlisted in the Air Force and decided, midway through his hitch, that war was wrong, that people shouldn't kill each other. "Vietnam was heating up. The colonel at my courts−martial listened to my speech, smiled at two lieutenants who were doing on−the−job legal training, and

said, 'Airman Burke, you may persist in your attitude and I will sentence you to one year at Fort Leavenworth Federal Penitentiary and a bad conduct discharge, or, you can keep your mouth shut, serve the rest of your enlistment, and I will sentence you to thirty days in the stockade, a five hundred dollar fine, and reduction in rank to Airman Basic. What will it be?'

"He raised the gavel, the son of a bitch. I was twenty; I was stubborn; I had no idea what a federal pen was like. I opened my mouth for another statement of principle, and a voice sounded in my head−−that's only happened to me twice. It said: 'you asshole, people kill each other. They have always killed each other. What do you think you're doing?' The voice saved me. 'Thirty days,' I said. The colonel smacked his gavel and read the sentence for the record.

"'Yes, sir.' I said. 'My car is at the BX; I'll just park it behind the barracks.' Two AP's took me by the elbows and marched me to the stockade."

"A near thing," Edie said. "It was a senseless war."

"It sure was," Joe said. "And it was the poor boys from Kentucky who died in it."

"And the Vietnamese," Mo added. They were silent.

"It wasn't so bad in the stockade," Joe said. "We got to watch TV for an hour each afternoon−−Perry Mason. The guys were always yelling for longer sentences at the end of the show. One of the guys was doing ninety days for swearing at an officer's wife. Stockwell, his name was. He was a bag boy, and she used to give him a hard time at the commissary. He called her a bitch one afternoon and she complained to her husband. Ninety days! They add it to the end of your hitch, too."

"So you had to serve thirty extra days?" Mo asked.

"Twenty−five. I got five days off for good behavior. It cooled me down. I got through the rest of my hitch without any problems."

They settled the bill. Joe put half on his credit card, and Morgan asked what he was doing for money. "Nothing," Joe said.

"You can't spend more than you earn, forever, you know."

"Good point. I'm not quite broke; I'll figure something out."

"Morgan says you're a computer expert," Edie said helpfully.

"Was, Edie. The technology changes every couple of years and I'm sick of learning languages. It was something I did just to get by. I've given it up."

"Oh, good!" she said.

He drew them a map of Lihue showing the way to Hamura's Saimin. "Don't miss it!" They made their way back to the Moana and said goodbye. Mo dropped Joe off at Liholiho Street. Just before they parted, he thought he saw her hesitate. He went to bed and dreamed that she was naked, turning away from him in bed to another man. He touched the base of her back where it curved toward him and rubbed a few small farewell circles.

Morgan was right, of course. Sooner or later he was going to run out of money. Things weren't going well. He wasn't satisfied with the cat burglar story, and he was lonely. He decided to write a story about Alphonse and the cannery.

Alphonse was a slim, dark, middle aged Filipino with a thin straight mustache. He had watched Joe stack empty pallets with a yellow Hyster and then he'd motioned Joe out of the seat. The forklift engine roared; his hands blurred; pallets leaped into perfect piles, ten feet high. Alphonse cut the engine and climbed down, eyes bright. He was somewhere between ten and a hundred times faster than Joe. The cannery whistle blew. Coffee break. Alphonse smiled, nodded, and turned for the cafeteria. Joe followed.

Alphonse was Joe's trainer. Wherever they went in the cannery, people called to him. He lifted a hand, smiled, and kept going. He was universally popular, but he rarely spoke to anyone; he focused on the work−−how to do it better, how to do it faster. Joe was in a welfare job training program. He hated the whistle that told them when they could stop and when they must start. He hated the gray industrial paint and the numbing future−−less work for someone else's profit.

Alphonse had no future. Not only that, he was twenty years older than Joe. He worked Joe into the ground every day, and when he waved with a small smile and walked away at the end of the shift, his head was high and he seemed untouched. Alphonse had his own standards, his own integrity, and somehow he was stronger than the whole gray clanking cannery. Stronger than profit, stronger than loss, Joe wrote.

But the story wasn't any good. It was true, as far as it went, but it wasn't−−a story. What is a story, anyway?

Joe realized that he didn't know.

When Maxie was about fifteen, Joe used to quiz him on "Joe's Maxims."

Joe: "Women?"

Maxie: "Uh, women, women . . . All women are pear shaped!"

Joe (handing Maxie a quarter): "Very good, very good. And now, for a dollar, grand prize−−an educated man?"

Maxie: "Damn. An educated man−−umm−−knows what he doesn't know."

Joe: "Right!"

Joe's position was that educated people know at least one subject well enough so that they realize (by comparison) when they don't know another. This was heavy for fifteen, but Max was game. "The idea is to know when you don't know what you're doing; then you can go ask someone or buy a good book and find out," Joe explained. Maxie nodded agreement, winnings crumpled firmly in one hand.

So, go find out what a story is, Joe told himself. He began reading books on fiction, but they weren't much help. For a change of pace, he looked up Arthur Soule on the Internet and discovered that a book he'd written on Roman taxation was still available. Joe ordered it, and when it arrived he found it interesting and clearly written. There was a small picture of Soule on the book jacket−−patrician with a large jaw and thinning hair. Mo was a chip off the old block.

A few days before Kate's wedding, the phone rang as he was heading out the door.

"Hi, Joe."

"Mornin', Mo . . . That's a snappy opening," he said. "Maybe we should have a radio program."

"But it would have to be in the morning," she said. "When I work."

"Me, too. Good point."

"O.K., that's settled, no show. I was wondering if you might want to come over for lunch."

"Sure."

"I have an ulterior motive−−two, actually. Leaky faucets."

"Say no more. I was born to plumb."

"See you around noon, then?"

"Yup. Wait a minute, where?" She gave him directions to a small street on the Ewa side of Manoa Valley. "No problem," he said putting the phone down. "Trouble in Gotham, Batman. Lady needs help." He rubbed his hands together. This was a test, no doubt about it, a dragon to slay.

He had left his slayer channel−lock pliers in his truck, however, along with the rest of his tools. They now belonged to Maxie and were somewhere in New England. He walked to the shopping center and bought a toolkit cased in aluminum with foam cut out for each individual tool. It looked like a briefcase. He went to Sears for a package of faucet washers and some thread sealer.

"Joe Burke, executive plumber," he announced at Mo's door.

"Well, come right in." She looked rested. He took off his shoes and advanced into a clean living room furnished with a long couch, an armchair, a wooden rocking chair, a gray rug, several expensively framed photographs, and two floor lamps. Orchids hung by a large window. Lush greenery rose steeply behind the house.

"Nice, mighty nice." The house was small, built above and behind a separate garage that fronted the street. Steps led up to a porch and the door through which he'd entered. The air was cool and quiet. The house seemed to breathe in a wooded space just large enough for it and for the walls of vegetation on either side that separated it from its neighbors. A sense of privacy lay in the living room like an expensive gift.

Mo led him into a neatly organized kitchen. "I know who he is." Joe pointed at a photograph of her father that hung above a table.

"Ah yes. My father. Do I look so much like him?"

"Very similar in the eyes and mouth." What else was there?

"Professor Soule," she said.

"I read his book," Joe confessed. "Pretty good writer." An expression both arrogant and helpless flashed across her face. "Clear," Joe added.

"Yes. He's a worker." Her expression neutralized. Joe put a hand behind his ear.

"I don't hear any dripping . . . "

"Let me show you. The kitchen doesn't drip all the time; the bathroom is the worst." Joe leaned over the bathroom sink, thumped it, and listened to its heartbeat.

"Operation iss required." He opened the aluminum case.

"Snazzo, so shiny," she said staring at the tools. "I'll fix the salad."

Joe shut the water off and began dismantling a faucet, eventually reaching the washer, held by a brass screw. He replaced both washers in the bathroom and both in the kitchen.

"As new," he said, washing his hands.

"Wonderful." She carried a dark salad bowl one step down into a dining room that had a tile floor and large windows. "I eat in the kitchen, usually, but when I have company it's nice to be out here. Should we have more light? It's sprinkling again." She switched on a paper globe suspended over the table.

"I don't know . . . I like the natural light." She switched it off and lit a sage colored candle. "There, that's better. We had this end of the porch extended and made into a dining room. When it's clear, you can see across the valley."

"Who we?"

"It was Thurston, really. It was Thurston's house. We lived together for eight years. He ran off with his secretary to Texas."

"Oh."

"Ran isn't the right word. Thurston didn't run anywhere; he was rather deliberate, actually. He gave me a deal on the house."

"That was good," Joe said.

"I didn't want him to go . . . Men just can't keep their thing in their pants," she said angrily.

Joe remembered that silence was golden. Mo reached for a baguette of French bread and broke it sharply. Joe took a piece and investigated the cheese.

"Chevre?"

"Yes."

"Finest kind. Yummy salad." Fresh olive oil, Manoa lettuce, avocado, scallions, a hint of lime or maybe Meyer lemon−−delicious with the crusty bread. "Vino?" She nodded and he poured them each a glass of Sauvignon Blanc from a half empty bottle. "Here's to your cozy place," he toasted. Mo raised her glass and sipped.

"I had fun last week with your friends," she said. "Quite a character, that Morgan."

"I had a card from them in Kauai. They found Hamura's." Mo listened as she chewed salad. "Yeah, we go way back," Joe said. "What did you think of Edie?"

"Dynamite," Mo said.

"She got me thinking about writing a story. I tried, but I'm not satisfied." He told Mo about Alphonse. "I've been reading about fiction. I'm not really getting it."

"Schools can be useful," she suggested. "Sometimes it's good to be around others doing the same kind of work. I like to go to a seminar once in a while−−the trouble is, it costs so much. Have you heard of Goddard, in Vermont?"

"I have."

"They offer MFA programs−−non−resident, or close to it."

"It's an idea. I'll think about it."

Time slipped by. Mo told stories about summers on Nantucket where her grandmother had a twelve room "cottage" on the water. So that's where she developed her beach strut, Joe thought. Mo's father had slyly dominated the family even though her mother had all the money. Mo was ambivalent toward her father. She was proud of his intellect and accomplishments, but she had an inside view of what he had taken from every one around him and the price he himself had paid for academic success. She was looking for a way to be like him without being like him, Joe decided.

Mo tried her new espresso machine. She was having dinner guests the following evening. Joe visited the bathroom and noticed that she had left open the door to her bedroom. The bed was freshly made with lilac purple sheets. A huge white flower by Georgia O'Keeffe waited on the wall.

He thought it would be nice to listen to music, but he didn't say anything. He was tuning into Mo's way of inhabiting her space, her large eyes, quiet, cat−like. He talked about Kate and Max and then fell silent.

"So how's your love life?" she asked suddenly. Her eyebrows were raised. She bent forward, making herself smaller.

"Nothing to write home about−−if I had a home."

"You're a good looking man, Joe Burke. Just the right amount of gray in your mustache. Aristocrat. Rebel. How did your nose get that crook in it, by the way. I've been meaning to ask."

"Oh, that," Joe said, "the rebounding wars−−in high school." She had surprised him. He thought she was moving away from him, and now he sensed the outlines of an offer, the second one in two months. He and Mo could be lovers; he would ride shotgun, do things her way, and she would do her best for him in time left over from her busy life. The lilac sheets beckoned, but as suddenly as it had come, the offer, if it had been one, was gone, swept off the table with the crumbs she brushed with one hand into the other.

She stood and said, "The ladies better watch it. O.K., I still have work to do today. I've got some orders I'm trying to get out by the weekend." Again he was surprised, but he went on as though nothing had happened. She drove him home, his tool case on his lap.

"I'll call you when I get back from the wedding," he said with his hand on her car door.

"Have fun," she said and pulled away with a thoughtful frown. Joe walked up the stairs to his apartment. What did she want? What did he want? He didn't know, he had to admit. Probably that was why the offer vanished. He'd paid attention to the plumbing and flunked passion.

Joe slung the aluminum case across the room onto the mattress. The tools, in their foam cushion, didn't even

rattle. "I kept my Goddamned Thing in my Goddamned Pants, Batman!" Batman maintained a dignified silence.

The next day Joe went to a bookstore and wrote down the addresses of several graduate schools that offered non−resident programs. At home, he hunted around on the Internet and found a writers group that discussed the pros and cons of different programs. Montpelier, also in Vermont, was well regarded.

He polished up his non−story, wrote a long letter explaining why an ex−computer programmer wanted to write fiction, signed a check, threw in some poems for good measure, and officially applied to Montpelier.

He walked to the Moana and watched the sunset. It had been a year since he arrived in Hawaii. Had he really left Maine? Or was this just an extended visit that was coming to an end? Joe liked Maine. Portland was a comfortable little city . . . the Standard Bakery, fresh ale at Gritty's, lattes at a dozen different coffee shops. He remembered the small Hispanic/Indian man who pushed a shopping cart down the street in all seasons, accepting Joe's returnable bottles with a grateful smile, always saluting as though Joe were a superior.

Should he go back to Maine? Or to Woodstock? He had many old friends in Woodstock. Daisy. Morgan had passed along her best wishes. Joe looked down the beach at the lights circling the base of Diamond Head. Did he want to go back east? It felt better to sit under the banyan tree and watch it get dark. It seemed a more forward direction, whatever happened. He decided to say goodbye to Maine and to Woodstock, but he couldn't. No wonder we say, "See you," he thought. Anything but goodbye. "Aloha" is a much better word−−hello and goodbye, gladness and grief, love, all of it.

11

The lobby of the Edgewater Hotel was busy. "My home away from home," Joe said, checking in.

"We try," the desk clerk said, returning Joe's credit card.

Joe walked to the Elliot Bay Book Company and asked a woman at the cash register if he could buy a gift certificate. "For a wedding present," he added.

"We can do that. How much for?"

"A thousand dollars." This would leave him seriously low, but to hell with it.

She struggled with the computer. "I lied. We can't do that; the computer won't take it."

"Two for five hundred each?"

"That'll work," she said.

"O.K., one for Kate Burke and one for Jackson, umm, Arendal. Jackson Arendal." He would explain that he wasn't trying to tell them how to split it.

He walked back to the hotel and began writing a story in the bar where he had watched Fanatuua earn his money. Across the room, a sturdy woman seated in a wheelchair studied him through thick glasses. Two hours flew by like minutes; she was gone when he got up from the table.

In the morning, he put on jeans and his best aloha shirt, walked to the pier next to the hotel, and boarded the Victoria Clipper. The San Juan Islands are a three hour trip from Seattle, north out of Puget Sound, across the Strait of Juan De Fuca, and nearly to Vancouver Island in Canada. The catamaran hummed along while

passengers sunned themselves, took pictures, and moved about the cabins. The captain announced the islands as Washington's "banana belt," free of the rain shadow cast by the Olympic Mountains.

Friday Harbor is sheltered by low pine covered ridges. Joe walked up Spring Street and checked in at the Friday Harbor Inn where Kate had made reservations. The house she had rented was in Eagle Cove, a few miles from town. He went down toward the ferry to look for a cab and was hailed from across the street. It was Max.

"Yo, Max!" They decided to have an ale in a brew pub on the corner. They sat by a window looking out on the sidewalk.

"Here's to Kate," Joe said, raising his glass.

"Kate." Max was cheerful.

"Is your mom here?"

"She's supposed to show up later," Max said.

"Good deal," Joe said, "haven't seen her for a couple of years." He wasn't that anxious to see Ingrid, but in Max's presence he lapsed into old habits. The years might have been weeks, and he might have been just away on a business trip.

"Wait til you see what I bought," Max said. He handed Joe a photograph of a farm at the base of a mountain. "It's near Londonderry, in Vermont. Eight acres at the far corner of this farm." He pointed with his finger. "Just at the end of this highest field, a piece that runs up the hill. One of my friends from school owns the farm. My father came up from Boston and liked it; he gave me the down payment. I made a tent platform and moved out there last month."

"It's going to get cold," Joe said.

"I'll move into an apartment or a room for the winter. There's a town road that ends at the farm. I have a right of way from there."

"Can you get in with the truck?"

"Yep. It will take a while to get anything built, but it's a start. And then−−look at this." He handed Joe another picture. At the top of a clearing, a long log projected out from under a ledge. It was supported by two shorter logs lashed together in an X. Standing upright on the end of the log was a prehistoric figure with straight arms and large rocks for hands. The hands extended out and below its feet. "Stone Man," Max said proudly.

"It looks like a balancing toy," Joe said. "A balancing giant."

"Yep. He's come down out of the mountains to see what man has done." Joe looked closely. Stone Man was made of small diameter logs and had a strong narrow head.

"How did you fasten the head? Is that a rock?"

"It's a piece of slate. I split the end of the log, stuck his head part way down the split, and lashed it−−like a tomahawk."

"Something else, Max! Giacometti goes to Indonesia."

"And Vermont," Max said. "He sways in the wind. The idea came to me when I first saw the clearing. I knew I had to do it."

"Must have been fun getting it up."

"I built the perch first, got it solid, and then I made a temporary walkway out of two by sixes, H shaped. We pulled Stone Man out to the end with a come−along, a couple of inches at a time. It was awesome. Bunch of guys helped. We had a few brews."

"I'll bet. I like this, Max."

"It'll be cool to see him in winter and then in spring. Deer will come. Chickadees . . . "

"I'd love to have one of these pictures."

"I have a bunch of them at home. I'll send you one when I get back."

"Been a long time since I've seen Kate's mom," Joe said. "She's married now. I've never met her husband."

"I got here yesterday," Max said. "Lot of people around, but I haven't seen Sally. Jackson's folks rented a house, too. Jackson's cool."

"I'm glad they're getting married," Joe said.

"Me, too. So, want to come out with me?"

Max drove out of town, through open country, and along a dirt road to a house at the top of a heathery field that sloped broadly down to the water. Hedges enclosed a back lawn where a long table was covered with a white cloth. Several chairs were positioned on the grass by an aluminum keg. Kate was in the kitchen preparing the buffet, directing a small army of friends.

"Dad! Oh, good!" She gave him a hug. "Nice shirt!" She introduced him to Audrey, Jonathan, Monica . . . Names blurred together.

"A great event, Kate." He cut a piece of cheddar and broke off the end of a loaf of French bread. He pointed at a quart mason jar. "What's this?"

"Pear and ginger chutney."

"Yumm." He walked out on the front porch. Jackson was throwing a Frisbee to a border collie−−honey colored, white at the throat−−scrambling and leaping against a background of blue gray water, boats, and a distant wooded shore. Joe could remember nothing in his life as assured and as photogenic. He was happy for Kate and Jackson. This weekend was a parent's reward; he accepted it gratefully. Yet it was hard to relax. He had social duties, and, besides, he was increasingly something other or more than a parent.

Jackson rubbed the dog's head and threw the Frisbee as far as he could. He came over and shook hands. "Congratulations," Joe said.

"Thank you. How was your trip?"

"Fine, that's some ferry! Fast."

"Did you come on the Clipper?"

"Yes."

"She's a hummer," Jackson said. "We drove to Anacortes and took the car ferry."

"Are your folks here, Jackson?"

"They'll be over later. Have you met . . . " There was more frisbee throwing. Joe wandered around the house to the back lawn. Kate's old boyfriend was standing by the keg.

"Hey, Rolf."

"Hello, Joe."

"A great event. Nice to see you. How's the history going?"

"It progresses," Rolf said. "I have written several papers on the early Scandinavian settlers in the northwest. You might be surprised to learn that only twenty years after the first settlement . . . "

"Rolf, you fine driver, you." Audrey, or Monica, came up and put her hand on Rolf's arm. "Cindy and Jake are at the ferry." Rolf nodded. "And Kate needs a jar of capers."

"A Mediterranean condiment. I'm on my way. Small or large? The capers . . . The jar, I mean."

"Better get large," Audrey Monica said.

"Well, I shall look forward to hearing about the settlers later," Joe said, drawing a beer. It was delicious, much like the ale at the brew pub. Jackson came by, filled a paper cup, and told him that it was from the brew pub.

"Good stuff, no?"

"Wicked good," Joe said in Maine speak. "Ono," he added in pidgin.

"Hello, there." It was Sally, happy and more tired than he remembered. She swept up and threw her arms around him, then turned and introduced a stout man waiting at her side. "Gino, this is Joe."

"Hi, Gino. You are the second Gino I've known. Congratulations on your marriage, by the way," They shook hands.

"Thank you. It has been, what, six years now?" Gino turned to Sally. She was rangy and athletic. Gino came only to her ear, but he was solidly built and did not seem smaller. His eyes were dark and rather impenetrable.

"Going for seven," Sally said.

"Can you believe our little girl is getting married?" Joe asked her.

"It's time," she said.

"Maybe you'll be a grandfather, Joe, ha, ha."

"Ha, Gino. I hope so."

"Ha. Come Joe, help me with the wine." He led Joe to his car, and they carried two cases into the house. "One red, one white. Special. I brought them from Denver."

"Kate tells me you have a wine store."

"Small, yes. But we do all right. People in this country are discovering wine."

"Hey Joe, is this one of your father's?" Max was standing in front of an oil painting at the far end of the living room. Gino and Joe went over.

"For sure," Joe said. He hadn't seen it before.

"Wedding present!" Kate called from the kitchen. "We brought it over to make the house seem more like home." It was a Deer Isle scene. An apple tree in full bloom, crowded by woods behind it, leaned over the edge of a field and a stock car that was missing its hood and engine. The car's wheels were twisted strangely in the grass. A large yellow 90 was painted on a blue door. White blossoms lay scattered on the wreck. "'Memorial Day' is the name of the painting," Kate said coming closer. "You like it?"

"Pretty good," Max said.

"I think he's getting better," Joe said. "Is he coming, Kate, by the way?"

"No. He said he wanted to but he wasn't feeling up to the trip."

"Very artistic," Gino said. "And this too." He held up a knight from Jackson's chess set which was laid out on a table beneath the painting. He spun the piece slowly between his thumb and forefinger.

"Jackson made those," Joe said.

"Very nice. Do you play chess, Joe?"

"Yes, but . . . "

"How about a game?"

Joe didn't want to play. He had been too well taught, and he wanted to drink and drift around. "On the porch, yes?" Gino picked up the board and carried it to an outside table. Joe followed reluctantly. "Wine, Joe! Wine for chess! The Merlot." He rubbed his hands together cheerfully. Joe gave up and fetched a bottle and two glasses from the kitchen.

"Corkscrew," Joe said to himself, but before he could move, Gino held up an elegantly curved pocket knife and corkscrew. He had the cork out by the time Joe sat down.

"Families," he toasted. Joe nodded. The wine was soft and bursting with flavor.

"Oh, boy," Joe said.

"A small estate, a good year," Gino said. He held out his fists, a pawn hidden in each. Joe pointed, received white, and opened pawn to king's four. Gino took a sip of wine and began a Sicilian defense. Monica or Jesse was taking her turn throwing the frisbee for the dog. About ten moves into a slowly developing game, Gino reached forward, drove his bishop through Joe's position, and leaned back. Joe was shocked. He didn't want to look at Gino. He didn't need to; the real man was on the board. He cleared his throat and breathed deeply.

Gino had taken his knight. It was a forced exchange; he had no choice but to take Gino's bishop and wreck his own defense. Gino gathered for attack, and Joe went into full retreat, playing for time, hoping for a mistake. Twenty moves later he conceded.

"Ah, nice game, Joe." Gino tossed off the rest of his wine.

"We must have another," Joe said, "after I have a brain transplant and read a few books."

"Ha, ha. Very artistic," Gino repeated, holding up a bishop. Joe retreated to the kitchen for a piece of bread.

"Jesus Christ," he said to Sally in a low voice.

"You lasted longer than most," she said. "I thought I saw him think a couple of times." Rolf appeared and clunked a jar down on the counter.

"Capers," he said. "What for?"

"Crab cakes," Kate said. More people arrived. Kate's friends continued to pile food and dishes on the table in the back yard. One couple brought an enormous smoked salmon. Jackson's parents showed up. Joe was happy to see two more people over fifty.

"Hi, I'm Joe, father of the bride," he said extending his hand.

"I'm Gunnar. This is Bonnie." Gunnar Arendal was wide shouldered, a few inches shorter than Joe. He had a high forehead, blue eyes, a strong nose, and a trim blonde mustache. His hair was swept back, gray at the temples. Bonnie was spare, compact, and deeply tanned. Her hair was dark and short. Fine lines crisscrossed her face. A handsome builder and a power elf.

"Jackson tells me you're a builder, down in the bay area."

"Yes."

"I did a little of that when I was a kid. I couldn't pick up a bundle of shingles now."

"They aren't getting any lighter," Gunnar said mildly.

"What do you do?" Bonnie asked.

"Used to program computers. Gave it up. Now I'm learning how to write."

"Oh, what kind of writing?"

"Stories."

"Bonnie couldn't live without her mysteries," Gunnar said.

"It's true," she said.

"Hi, Dad, Mom. You've met Joe." Jackson put an arm around each of them.

"Hello, dear," Bonnie said.

"The food is mostly out," Jackson said. "Beer, wine, hard stuff−−help yourselves.

Joe could see where Jackson got his energy and talent. People make more sense when you've met their parents. Jackson and Kate would have problems, Joe thought. Who doesn't? But they were a good match and off to a fine start. What more could a parent ask?

He staked out a position by the keg and had a sociable time. He kept expecting to see Ingrid, but she didn't appear. Finally, a couple of hours after dark, he hitched a ride into town and went to bed. He slept restlessly and dreamed that a group of beautiful young people were enjoying themselves on a lawn. He was watching through thick glass; he couldn't hear them.

12

Joe slept late at the Friday Harbor Inn. He walked down the hill and ate pancakes in the midst of an argument about a town construction project. Money. Politics. It was comfortably familiar. He went back to bed and didn't wake up until noon.

His new clothes had survived nicely, folded at the bottom of the Filson bag. The shirt was in its original box. He removed the pins, dressed, and tied his tie several times before he got it right. He took a bus to the county park. The bus sped through shady woods, up and down hills, and past horses grazing in uneven fields. It stopped at a resort by a narrow harbor choked with pleasure boats. Three women boarded. As the bus left the harbor, they told the driver about a tourist who had died of a heart attack pedaling his bicycle up that very hill an hour earlier. "He was in his fifties," one said.

"Too soon," another said cheerfully.

"Grover and Henry are playing golf, but they're walking," said the third.

The driver stopped at the turnoff to the park. Joe skipped out gratefully. The grim reaper was sure to stay with the interested audience. There was a parking lot and a grassy area by the water. Jackson and several friends were carrying folding tables and chairs up a rocky path. Joe took two chairs and followed them to a clearing on a bluff above the water. Chairs were arranged in the traditional bride and groom groups, a center aisle leading towards the edge of the bluff. Rows of champagne glasses covered most of a table set up beside the chairs. Coolers waited auspiciously on the ground behind the tables.

"You guys have thought of everything," Joe said to Jackson.

"Kate could run NATO," he said.

"Probably run it better," Joe said. "Gorgeous view."

"We were camping out here last year, and we thought it would be the perfect place to get married."

They returned for the last of the chairs. A musician arrived carrying a guitar case and a battery powered amp. He unpacked and began plunking away at Bach and Vivaldi. A minister with a neatly trimmed beard stood by a large madrone oak. He was well dressed, quiet, and non−denominational to the point of disappearance. Joe, who was finding himself increasingly fond of people over fifty, engaged him in conversation. He looked as though he'd been created whole that morning in the image of the Northwest, but he admitted to being from Vermont. That was as far as Joe could get. The minister evaded all questions about his youth, as though he had left a bad record behind−−or maybe just an uncouth one.

"Hi, stranger!" Joe turned to the familiar voice.

"Ingrid," he said, opening his arms. She advanced and held him tightly for a moment before backing away with a satisfied smile. "You are looking well," Joe said, "and don't tell me it's because of your happy sex life."

"It's the Mediterranean diet."

"Olive oil," he said. Ingrid had lost a few pounds, although she didn't need to. Her thick blonde hair was cut short and away from her even features. Her expression was practical and good−natured, dominated by eyes the color of transparent jade.

"You don't look so bad yourself," she said.

"Ah, well."

"More serious," she said, "more gray in your mustache, thinner."

"Time's getting shorter."

"Tell me about it. I'm so happy for Kate."

"Yes, this is a good thing. It is so nice for her to have you and Max here. Did you see Maxie's giant sculpture?"

"He showed me the picture. I love it. I haven't been over to Vermont to see his land, yet. So, what have you been up to?"

Joe straightened. "This and that. I'm pretty well settled in Hawaii. I miss Portland sometimes, but . . . I've been writing a lot."

"Good," Ingrid said. "You always wanted to."

"And you?" Joe asked.

"Same old," she said cheerfully. "Selling quite a bit. I'm down to teaching one class."

Joe bent over and looked at her earrings. A tiny woman swung from a trapeze on one ear; an elephant waited patiently under the other. "Pretty good," he said. "A circus."

"A golden circus," Ingrid said. "I made a series. The clown is my favorite, but he's too sad for a wedding."

The chairs were filling. Joe took his seat next to Sally in the front row. Ingrid sat behind them with Max. A bridesmaid, six months pregnant, wearing a light blue flowered dress, stood prettily on the bluff, her hands clasped around lace and a bouquet of white roses. After some minutes of suspense, Kate and Jackson walked down the aisle. Kate was lovely in white; Jackson wore a smashing gray suit. Sally wiped away a tear. The minister smiled gravely. Vows were exchanged. Spectacular rings, made by Jackson and a friend, were pushed on. Kate and Jackson kissed. Cameras flashed. Simple and touching. A rainbow or a pod of breaching orcas would have been too much.

They moved to the champagne table and drank toasts before departing in a convoy for the yacht club in Friday Harbor. Designated cleaners stayed behind; they would join them later.

In the club, a long table took up most of the main room. Vases of flowers were regularly spaced along the white tablecloth. Places were set for at least sixty people, name cards at each setting. In a corner of the room,

band instruments waited by empty stools.

Joe repaired to the bar in the next room. A short intense woman pouted when he ordered Glenlivet. "That's so easy."

"Are you bored? Want to practice something complicated?"

"No, that's all right." She put the whiskey in front of him with a quick smile. One Scotch and then wine. If he didn't go back to the hard stuff after dinner, he'd survive.

Roasted yellow pepper soup was followed by a salad of spinach and scallops, salmon with a thyme sauce, and risotto with wild mushrooms. Wine servers patrolled vigilantly. Joe had a conversation about education with a teacher Kate had met on a vacation in Tibet. There were sentimental toasts, and then the band began to play. He remembered that he could dance, and he took a turn around the floor with the mother of the bride. Sally and he moved easily together out of old habit.

Time went backwards and then into slow motion as the band worked through hits of the 60's and 70's. Joe danced with anyone available, and when no one was available he danced alone. Occasionally, he went outside on a long porch to cool off in a fine drizzle that was drifting in from the harbor.

A group gathered around the wedding cake on a table at the far end of the room. Sally and Ingrid stood together looking mellow and nostalgic. Gunnar and Bonnie were talking with friends. Max was taking pictures. It was time to go, Joe realized. He had told Kate earlier that he would fade away at the appropriate time. He walked through the bar and said to the woman who had served him the Scotch, "Your little girl only gets married once." He went out the door and down the steps.

"Are you from around here? Seattle?"

Joe turned and looked back up at the bartender who had followed him onto the porch. "Hawaii."

"Uh−−what do you do?" She was urgent. He remembered that she had been watching him dance.

"I'm a poet," he said. The words fell through the air like a sentence.

"Oh, a good one, I'm sure."

"There are only a couple of us," Joe said, drunkenly. "I've got to go now." A musician on break, watching from a corner of the porch, drew on his cigarette. The glow lit his face, a witness, someone Joe would never know. "I've got to go," Joe said. He turned and walked into the dark and the rain, leaving the younger generation and most of his life behind.

13

Joe was thirsty the next day, fuzzy, but not totaled. Dancing had worked off a lot of the booze. He caught the Clipper back to Seattle and sat silently for three hours while images and conversations flowed through his mind. The wedding had been a great success−−well organized, yes−−but mostly because Kate and Jackson were a good match and because they and their friends all had the same attitude: let's have a good time; let's do it right. It was a relief after the weddings he'd been to that were dominated by ancient family feuds and personal problems. On the other hand, no flying plates, no loud exits, no sobbing? He wondered if maybe he hadn't missed something. It was too bad that his father and Ann hadn't been there. Probably, he should call and see how they were. Kate would check in, no doubt; she and his father had a warm and easy relationship.

The Clipper docked mid−afternoon, and he checked in at his home away from home. His mind was too busy for sleep, so he took his notebook down to the bar and sipped a beer by the window.

"The writer," a voice said in a husky contralto. Joe looked up. The woman in a wheelchair who had watched him on Thursday was rolling slowly by.

"Hi," Joe said. Her face was sad and intense. Her eyes were large, brown, and circular behind round glasses. Her hair was light brown, shoulder length. Her coloring was warm, slightly flushed, whether from makeup or not he couldn't tell. She wore a light cotton blouse with bark colored buttons down the front. Her lap was covered by a blanket with a Southwestern motif.

She stopped. "I saw you in here the other night. What are you writing, if you don't mind my asking?"

"Oh, nothing," he said, closing the notebook. "Just notes. My daughter got married this weekend."

"Ah."

"Want a beer or something?" He felt like talking. She turned towards the table, and he moved a chair out of the way.

"Thank you." The bartender came over. "The usual," she said. He brought her a glistening martini. "I like a vodka martini about this time. Was it a nice wedding?"

"Very. Out on the San Juan's"

"Lovely. Here's to their happiness." It was what Joe had spent the last two days doing. He drank the last of his beer and ordered another.

"I was working on a story the other night," he offered.

"Have you been writing long?"

"No. Well−−depends. I've always kept notebooks. I've written some poems, and now I'm trying to write stories."

"I used to," she said.

"Write stories?"

"Yes."

"Wait a sec, I'm Joe Burke. What's your name?"

"Call me Isabelle," she said wryly.

"Isabelle! Call me Ishmael. My God, I spent a whole winter reading Moby Dick. I was working in San Francisco. Read a couple of pages every night sitting in a circle of lamp light with my back to a heater."

"Nice town−−great book," Isabelle said, "although no one can really say why." She seemed quite experienced, in her early forties, maybe.

"You want to know the trouble I'm having?" Joe asked. She looked amused. "Writing," he added.

"Sure."

"I can't make the jump into fiction. I use something from real life, and then, if I leave anything out, I feel like a liar−−like I haven't told the truth."

"Quilt," she said, looking across the gray water. "Patchwork quilt."

"What do you mean?"

"The story is the quilt. Made of patches: this person's face, that person's love, a cat you knew . . . You make up the quilt−−the design−−but the strength of it, its integrity, comes from the patches." She finished her martini.

Joe's eyes opened wide. "I have to think about that."

"The quilt's the thing," she said offhandedly. "You have to care about it." She swiveled her chair and held her arm in the air. "Another round," she said. "On me."

He agreed and considered what she'd said. "A patchwork quilt. I can see it. What do you do now? Are you writing?"

"Not much. I've been working on songs."

"Oh great," Joe said. "I wish I could play an instrument."

"I have a keyboard that I take with me."

"Take with you? Do you travel a lot?"

"I keep moving," she said. "Do you live in Seattle?"

"No, Hawaii."

"Long flight," she said.

"I love it there. Have you been?"

"Once. I stayed in the Royal Hawaiian. Sunsets. A woman in white, like a queen, who sang ballads."

"Yeah, Emma−−something, I can't remember. She's famous there. I live in Honolulu, but I don't get to the Royal Hawaiian very often. Can't afford it." Isabelle flicked a wrist dismissively. "You're not missing much."

"You're right about the sunsets. Wonderful." They drank to Hawaiian sunsets.

"So, Joe, you heading back soon?"

"Tomorrow afternoon, Isabelle." He was beginning to like her. "Come on over; we'll have a drink and listen to the Queen sing _Aloha Oe. _" She held his eye for a moment.

"Maybe I'll do that. I'm going to Banff next−−for the music festival. This is a nice time to be in the Canadian Rockies."

"You want something to eat?" he asked. They ordered two salads. Joe switched to wine. Isabelle started laughing more. Apparently she had all the money she needed to live in hotels, traveling slowly around a familiar route. It seemed like an hour, but it was probably two hours later when she pushed back from the table.

"Time to move," she said.

"Hey, it's been fun." He was letting go after the long weekend and was sorry to see her leave. She smiled slightly.

"How about a nightcap, Joe?"

"Sure." She reached into a small bag and handed him a key card. "I really have to go back to my room now. Why don't you come over in about twenty minutes? There's some Chardonnay in the convenience bar."

"How are you going to get in?" he asked.

"I have another one of these cards−−keys−−whatever you call them. Room 336."

"O.K." She wheeled away and Joe leaned back in his chair. It was dark outside. Rain trickled down the windows softening the harbor lights. He was tired of being alone. He stared at the harbor and savored the feeling of companionship, a circle of two in league against a rainy night. Was it Marx who said that the smallest indivisible human unit was two? He couldn't remember.

He knocked and entered when Isabelle answered. The wheelchair was empty at the end of the bed. He walked past the bathroom and stopped by the bed. Isabelle was under the covers, propped up against several pillows. She had changed into a white nightgown and brushed out her hair. "Good timing, Joe. I'm ready for a glass of wine."

"Coming up," he said, embarrassed. He opened the bottle, poured two glasses, and brought one over to her. There was a small table and chair in a dark corner of the room.

"Oh, Joe! Come here so we can talk." She patted the bed beside her as though he were a cat or a little boy. "Take off your shoes. You might as well be comfortable." He obeyed slowly. There was a dream like quality in the room, a scent of honeysuckle. She pointed a remote control and skipped through radio stations until she found jazz.

"Adult music," he said, balancing his wine and sliding next to her.

"All music is adult," she said, "with the possible exception of disco."

"Even country," he added.

"Especially country. 'Take this job and shove it.'"

"Ha. You're all right, Isabelle." They touched glasses. "Is this Coltrane?"

"Yes," Isabelle said.

"Strange," Joe said, "most sax players sound the same. Then one grabs you. What is it about Coltrane?"

"Deep stuff," she said. "So where's Mrs. Joe?"

"Ex−Mrs. Joe. On her way back to Maine, I guess. She was at the wedding. They both were, the ex−Mrs. Joes."

"Two of them? And you survived?"

"Yep," Joe said.

"Marriage . . . " Isabelle said sadly.

"The marriages weren't bad," Joe said, "just not enough. The kids are grown up, anyway, one of mine−−the one that just got married−−and one of Ingrid's, Maxie. He lives in Vermont."

"What does he do?"

"He's working as a carpenter. I think he might be heading into the artist's life."

"Poor baby."

"I'm proud of him."

"Good, Joe."

"And you? No Mr. Isabelle?"

"Not any more. He died in the wreck that messed me up. He was a bad boy," she said, smiling sadly.

"I'm sorry."

"If it hadn't happened there, it would have been somewhere else." She seemed to say the words more bravely than she felt them. "Let's have some more wine, then."

He hunched himself off the bed and refilled their glasses. "You're a handsome guy, Joe. Good manners. Tougher than you look. Episcopal, I bet."

"Right about the Episcopal, anyway. Not that I pay much attention."

"Is it true that Episcopalians are baptized in Harvey's Bristol Cream?"

"It's true."

"Lucky Joe." She took another drink of wine. "I know something about you tough guys."

"Oh, yeah?"

"You're really just bad boys−−and you need to be read to." She reached for a book on the bedside table. "I am revisiting *Anne of Green Gables*, by Lucie Maude Montgomerie."

"Good grief," Joe said. Isabelle opened to the first page and began reading calmly. Joe stretched his legs and looked at the ceiling. It had been a long few days. Despite himself, he was drawn into the story. Her voice was low and soothing. He nearly fell asleep and spilled the last of his wine. Isabelle took the glass from his hand and turned out the light.

"Your hands are cold," she said, "get under the covers." With one arm she pushed him sideways and held up the blanket and sheet. He rolled under and next to her. She took his hand and rested it on her stomach. "That's better," she said. He registered distantly that he was in bed with a woman he didn't know, but her warm body and the soft cotton nightgown under his hand made that unimportant. It was a good place to be. He snuggled closer and she sighed. He began to caress her stomach slowly. She sighed again and moved her hips closer. His fingertips brushed lightly across her breasts. She tipped her head back. "Careful," she warned in a constricted voice.

He continued slowly, turning on his side and pushing his face against her upper arm. He brought his hand down and stroked lightly along the curves of her stomach. Isabelle placed her hand on his and pushed it lower, down over her pelvis. He moved closer and rubbed where she guided. Her body tensed. He stretched out, fully aroused against her hip. Her breath came harder. It was important, now, what was happening. He urged her on. She made a loud animal sound through clenched teeth, and then arched and let out a series of sweet whispered collapses. "Bella," he said into her arm, "Bella . . . "

"Oh−−you are such−−a bad boy, Joe. Such a bad boy." She lay still a few moments, regaining her breath, and then reached down and began pulling at his belt. "Oh, take this off." He slid out of his clothes. "There," she said. "There." He was lying on his back as she began to stroke him. "Bella, you called me. I like that," she said, stroking.

"Bella," he said, now short of breath himself. "Bella." She stopped.

"You like your Bella, don't you?"

"Yes." She started again. She stopped.

"You're a bad boy, aren't you?"

"Yes." He strained towards her hand.

"A very bad boy." She gave him another stroke. "But you like your Bella."

"Yes."

"You want your Bella?"

"Yes." She began again slowly. She leaned over him and stopped.

"Say 'please' to Bella."

"Please, Bella." She started again, bringing him half off the bed straining towards her. Then she stopped. He fell back and began to crack. "Please, Bella."

"Yes, yes?" She brought him up again and slowed.

"Please, Bella." The thick glass inside him shattered. He began to beg. "Please. Please, Bella." He couldn't breathe. His heart was pounding. She stopped. He fell back, groaning. "Please, Bella." She started again.

"You're a bad boy, Joe."

"Oh, God," he said.

"There," she said. "Now, Joe. Now. Now. Now." He cried out and spurted over his chest and neck. "Ahhh," she said as he fell back. She took his hand and pushed it over the warm sperm. She lifted her nightgown and pulled his hand to her stomach. "Make me beautiful," she said, writhing and slippery. She pushed his hand to his chest and pulled it back again. "Make me beautiful," she said in a smaller voice, "all over." Joe tried. He passed out.

In the morning, he awoke to the sounds of animated conversation. He lay with his eyes closed waiting for his brain to unscramble. His head was pounding. Gradually, he realized that he was in bed next to Isabelle and that she was watching TV. He was in bad shape physically, but he felt freer than he had in a long time. "Top of the mornin'," he said lifting his head and opening his eyes.

"I was just going to wake you up," Isabelle said. He had to blink and focus. She was pale and looked upset. Her arms were folded in front of her, shielding her breasts. "I've ordered breakfast. Room service will be here soon, so I'm afraid you'll have to go now. I eat breakfast and then I do my work."

"Oh, O.K., throw me out. All I have to do is−−find my room. Are you all right?"

"I'm fine, Joe."

"O.K." He staggered up and figured out how to put on his pants. Socks and shoes took a little doing. "Picking up speed . . . " She kept watching the TV. "Isabelle?" She turned her head and shushed him with one finger to her lips.

"Just go, Joe," she said tightly. She meant it.

"But . . . " he didn't even know her last name. "Isabelle, I'm in the book. Give me a call." She smiled. Joe couldn't tell whether she was glad that he wanted her to call or whether she was forgiving him for things he didn't understand. He wanted to hug her, but he knew that he shouldn't. She changed channels. He blew her a slow kiss and left.

The room waiter pushed a stainless steel cart past him in the hall as he tried to remember his room number. He thought it was 437. He didn't want to go down to the lobby and admit to the desk clerk that he was too messed up to remember his room number. He took the elevator up one floor. Go for it, he told himself, and slid the card into the lock. A green light flashed. Yes! He entered his room and considered the bed, still made. What the hell, might as well keep going, he thought. He showered and lugged the Filson bag down to the restaurant where he ate a waffle with strawberries, drank coffee and two glasses of water. He assessed the situation.

You're in Seattle, Joe.

Airport.

Take bus?

Save money.

It was a smiley morning. The waitress and the desk clerk were in good moods. The trolley driver was singing. The sun was shining; that must have had something to do with it. He got off the trolley at the end of the line and caught a city bus to SeaTac. He was hours early and had saved thirty bucks by not taking a taxi. He snoozed and spaced out all the way to Hawaii and home.

"Hi, Batman. Where's the party?" Batman maintained a tolerant silence. Joe took two aspirin and slept for fourteen hours.

14

Friday morning Joe walked to the farmer's market and bought onions, bok choy, lettuce, and carrots. The prices were good; the locals were cheerful; it was a good deal for everyone. It was late September, and there were fewer tourists around. A lone conga beat tumbled and surged across Kapiolani Park. The smell of grilling teriyaki drifted across the grass. Small cumulus clouds blew out to sea.

Joe sat on the last beach before Diamond Head, a place where he and Sally and Kate had often come on weekends. An older man−−the age Joe was now−−used to park his car and carry a rubber raft to the water. His dog would jump into the raft, and the man would push it out, swimming slowly, until they were a hundred yards offshore. He would climb into the raft and write in a notebook while his dog rested and kept watch. The deeply tanned man and the black raft floated up and down, a dark silhouette on the glinty ocean. Occasionally the man paddled to keep from drifting too far down the beach. Probably 80 now, if he's still alive, Joe thought.

"Time to get serious." The words appeared like a banner in Joe's mind. To his surprise, he had told the woman at the San Juan Yacht Club that he was a poet. The words were true as he spoke them. He had defined himself, for better or worse. Whether he wrote stories or poems didn't matter−−he could do both. What mattered was to get to work.

Isabelle was on to something with the patchwork quilt. The faces and feelings that he described were important, but−−as patches. He needed to carry his writing further and work on the quilt. Isabelle? He shook his head feeling a slight flush. She was a sharpie, no doubt about it. She got right to him. But she was well down the alcoholic road. She didn't have to work. She didn't have children. Joe couldn't see what would bring her back. It wasn't the drinking, so much, that put him off. It was the lack of pride or purpose or will power that the drinking implied. Just as well, he thought, that there was an ocean between them.

"You could define adult life as the struggle not to drink too much," he said to Mo at Hee Hing's the following week. He was telling her about Isabelle, leaving out the sex.

"There's too much to do to feel awful all the time," she said.

"Quite right. But some people don't get hangovers; they're just a little fuzzy in the morning. Ingrid was like that. I can't take it. Tea, that's the stuff," he said, drinking from a small round cup. "So, what have you been doing?"

"Oh, the usual," she said. "I've been over to Kauai a few times. I got a decent shot of the cook at Tops."

"Jade Willow Lady," Joe said.

"Yes. I'm framing a large one for my next show−−whenever that is."

"I'm anxious to see it. I forgot to tell you: after we talked last, I checked out graduate schools and applied to Montpelier. They accepted me for the semester that starts right after Christmas."

"Congratulations!"

"Yeah, pretty good, huh? Joe Burke, software bum, goes for an MFA. But I'm not sure I should."

"Why not?"

"Pretty expensive," Joe said.

"What would it cost?"

"$3800 a semester, times four." He frowned. "I've got enough to get started, but I'd run out before the second semester."

"There's loan money for graduate school," Mo said.

"I guess. It doesn't make sense from a financial point of view; I'll never get a teaching job. But I think I could learn something."

"You have to make a commitment," Mo said firmly.

"The winter residency is in Florida. For 'housemates preference,' I requested older women of independent means."

"They can be difficult," Mo said. "How come Florida? I thought the school was in Vermont."

"The summer session is in Vermont. I think it was a faculty decision. They leased a hotel in the panhandle." Joe scratched his head. "I don't know. One way of looking at it is that part of the money would pay for a vacation in Florida. It's way over near Alabama. I've never been in that part of the state."

Mo placed her chopsticks neatly across her plate and wiped her mouth with a napkin. She began to fidget.

"Well, onward," Joe said. "You want to go exploring sometime? Look at things?"

"Mmm." She looked out the window. "I'm awfully busy for the next while . . . "

He sighed dramatically. "I'll just have to go myself. Maybe when I get back from Florida?"

"Give me a call," she said. They left, as usual, in opposite directions on Kapahulu Avenue. She was like a figure on a Japanese fan, slowly unfolding, then snapped shut. Let it be, he thought.

He spent the next few days working on a story about the time he and Morgan found a cache of dynamite hidden by the Weathermen, a radical group in the late 60's. He described the lost note that led them to a deserted house at the end of a road, the cold cloudy December afternoon, the shock of discovering a duffel bag in the crawl space under the house, the cardboard tubes of explosive, the tangle of blasting caps, and the ominous silence. But, as he went on to write about the FBI, the local lawyer, and the lawyer's wife, he began to lose focus. One thing led to another. Was he writing a story or a novel? Again he realized that he had a lot to learn.

He was worried about money, but he put off looking for a job. He couldn't decide whether or not to go to Florida? How many hours could he work if he became a full time student? One evening, he swung through his door, stood by the blinking red light on his answering machine, and heard Ann say in a sad voice, "Joe, I'm sorry to have to shock you like this. Your father died−−yesterday. Please call me if you get in by eleven or so, our time."

"Damn!" he said. "Damn."

It was seven−thirty−−past midnight, Maine time. He got a reduced fare to Boston for the following afternoon on an emergency basis and began putting things into his Filson bag and then taking them out. He couldn't feel anything. He gave up packing, lowered himself to his mattress, and waited a long time for sleep.

In the morning, he called Ann to tell her that he would be there the next day in the afternoon. She said that she'd give him the details when he got there. His father had died of a heart attack. He told her to keep her chin up and said that he'd call Kate.

"Kate?"

"Hi, Dad."

"Honey, I've got bad news. Your grandfather died−−the day before yesterday." She let out a small cry and was silent. "I just found out. Ann called. I'm going out there for a couple of days."

"Oh, poor Grandpa. I had a dream about him last week. He was standing by the painting he gave me−−the one of the woman in the barn door−−and he was smiling at me, very loving and kind. Oh . . . " She sobbed, and her voice got farther away as though she had dropped her arms.

"I'm sorry, Honey. He had a good life," Joe said helplessly.

"He pau hana, now," she said.

"Yeah," Joe said. "I call you when I get back, huh?"

"O.K., Dad."

"O.K. Bye, Honey."

"Bye, Dad."

He packed two changes of clothes, a sweater, and a jacket. It was nearly November, practically winter in Maine. "So long, Batman. Hold the fort." It was a relief to trot down the stairs and get moving.

At midnight, Boston time, he emerged stiffly from the plane and walked into Logan terminal. He rented a small car and stopped for the night at the first motel he came to on Route 1.

15

Joe opened his eyes, blinked, and realized that he was in a motel in Massachusetts. He drove to Portland and stopped at Becky's on the waterfront. Several regulars were in their usual seats. One of the waitresses had gained a few pounds. Joe ate breakfast and sat over a second cup of coffee, enjoying the voices and feeling that he'd changed since he left Maine. He felt better−−tougher and more himself. But he was sad for his father, and he had a sense of loss for things left behind, his Maine life, no longer quite remembered.

He left a big tip and hit the road. Deer Isle is out between Penobscot Bay and Jericho Bay. It's a romantic place, softer than the rest of Maine. The light is warmer. Probably that was what attracted his father, Joe thought. He took the fast route through Augusta and Belfast. Three and a half hours later, the Deer Isle Bridge came suddenly into view, high, too thin, an arrow shot gracefully over Eggemoggin Reach. Joe could not drive over it without remembering that its sister bridge in Tacoma shook itself to pieces.

By one−thirty he was bumping down his father's road. The barn seemed empty when he stopped in front. Ann came out of the house to meet him. She was wearing a denim skirt and a black blouse. Her blonde hair was braided and wound behind her head. They had a long wordless hug. Ann had always been nice to him, and he was glad to be there, to be a supportive presence. She sighed and stepped back.

"How nice to see you, Joe. Brendan's here. He flew in yesterday."

"Hi, Joe." Brendan, his half brother, came through the front door. They patted each other on the arms, a compromise between hugging and shaking hands.

"Brendan. A sad day," Joe said.

"Yes." He was eleven years younger than Joe, healthy, blonde like Ann and squarely built like their father. His stylish short haircut, regular features, and white teeth were made for soap opera if his face had been less triangular. His small chin, set in front of a strong neck, gave him a power lifter look. He was wearing chinos and a tight fitting short sleeved shirt with an insignia over one pocket.

Joe stretched. The sky was covered with an even layer of gray cloud. It was unseasonably warm. "Good to get out of the car," he said. "Drove up from Boston."

"I got a flight to Bangor, yesterday," Brendan said. "Mother picked me up." They entered the house and sat in the living room. Something bumped against Joe's ankle.

"Jeremy! Well, well. Jeremy. He looks in good shape, Ann. Thank you for taking care of him." He turned to Brendan. "He abandoned ship on my last visit. I didn't realize it until I was in New Hampshire."

"Oh, he was great friends with your father. And, after a while, he got on nicely with Georgia." Georgia was a fluffy black and white cat.

"Ah, yes, Georgia−−a champion mouser." As if to take a bow, Georgia took three steps in from the hall and sat at the edge of the rug.

"Since we're all here," Ann said, "we might as well have a family conference."

"Mother, Joe has been driving all morning. How can he possibly have a conference without coffee or wine?"

"Yes, of course."

"Joe, what can I get you?" he asked.

"Wine."

Brendan brought out a bottle of Pinot Blanc and poured them each a glass. "Dad," he toasted. They raised their glasses, drank, and were silent a moment.

"I have something to tell you−−or ask you boys." Ann looked troubled. "I found your father in that small clearing in the woods, on his regular path, the walk he took most days after lunch. When he wasn't back, around four, I went to look for him. Well, you know this already, Brendan, and now you're caught up, Joe−−except for one thing that I wanted to tell you both. It was very strange. Your father was lying on that flat piece of ledge. He was stark naked. I knew right away that he was−−not alive. I didn't want anyone to see him like that, so I dressed him before I came back." The memory silenced her for a moment. "Why would he be like that? I thought you might have an idea. I don't understand."

Brendan and Joe looked at each other. It surprised Joe to realize that they did understand, that they were, in fact, brothers.

"Mother, you said it was hot."

"Almost like summer, Brendan."

"The sun must have felt good−−one last day," Joe said sadly.

"He couldn't have taken his clothes off after the heart attack," Ann said. "Do you think he felt it coming?"

"We'll never know, Mother."

"If he felt it coming, why wouldn't he have come home?"

"I'm sure he would have tried," Joe said. She was struggling with being excluded, or not being included, in a final intimacy. "It's such a beautiful spot," Joe said, "maybe he just wanted to lie there and look at the sky."

"Yes, I suppose," she said. She straightened on the couch and pushed the question to the back of her mind to deal with later.

"He was lucky to have you for so many years," Joe said. This was easier for him to offer than for Brendan who had had every nuance and tension between his parents pressed on him since birth.

"Thank you, Joe. Now−−we must talk about the will." She walked to a writing table that stood in a bow window and returned with checks in her hand. "The estate goes to me with the exception of ten thousand dollars to each of you and ten thousand to Kate." She gave Joe two checks and handed the other to Brendan. "This is coming out of the insurance which I'm supposed to get next week, so if you will hold these until the first of the month . . . " She smiled. "There's a stipulation. The money must be spent within one year on something that makes you feel good."

"That shouldn't be hard," Brendan said.

"Thank you," Joe said. "I really wasn't expecting . . . " The money in the family had always been Ann's, although his father's paintings had begun to sell in recent years.

"Additionally, Joe, you are to have this drawing of your mother." She pointed to a framed drawing that was propped up on the writing table. "And first choice of any painting in the barn."

"That's very nice," Joe said.

"Your father always said you should have this drawing. It was one of his favorite pieces from the early years."

"I'll take it with me."

"How long are you going to be staying?" she asked.

"I thought I'd take off the day after tomorrow. I just wanted to see you and Brendan and . . . "

"I'll be here all week," Brendan said, "if anything needs doing."

"We're not going to have a ceremony. He didn't want one," Ann said. She looked down at the floor for a moment and then raised her head. "I'm going to bake something, if you boys will excuse me. Friends are going to start coming by; I want to have something to offer them."

"Chocolate chips?" asked Brendan. She left without answering and they finished their wine in silence.

"Might as well pick a painting," Joe said.

Brendan came with him to the barn. When they were inside, Brendan said, "The old goat!" Joe spotted his father's special stash of Laphroaig and reached for it.

"To the old goat," he said and took a healthy swallow. He passed the bottle to Brendan. "You're all right, Brendan."

Brendan drank and cleared his throat. "Yowsir!"

Joe searched through paintings, mostly oils, and chose a small one, unframed, that had been done earlier that year−−a spring scene of the woods at the edge of the field behind the barn. The leaves were just out, and his father had captured the delicate early green, chartreuse, that is gone in a week. The young leaves were modestly and unashamedly tender. There was nice work with interarching birches among the other trees and in the meeting of the woods and the field, but the light on the leaves was the main act.

"A good one," Brendan said.

"Not too big, easy to mail."

"I'll bet you could carry it on the plane, if you packed it," Brendan said. They rummaged around and found a shipping box just large enough for the painting and the drawing.

"Good idea," Joe said. "Now I even have the money to frame it. How are you doing these days, by the way?"

"Not bad. I'm teaching a course at a community college. Of course, the bay area is expensive. Wheeler's making the big bucks. It's a full time job just keeping him out of trouble, making sure he eats right, and so on." Brendan grinned. "I can't imagine what the house is going to be like when I get back. Wheeler hasn't put anything away since he was born. He just picks things up and carries them to different places."

"Creative chaos," Joe said.

"Great, until you need the garlic press."

"I'm with you," Joe said. "I hate looking for things. Wheeler is an excellent fellow, though." He pictured Wheeler, very tall, hawk nosed, wearing glasses, bent over an architectural drawing, the top of his head seeming to glow.

"Oh, I couldn't survive without him," Brendan said, taking another swallow of Laphroaig. "He was a hard man, our father. Maybe you didn't know, not having lived with him and all."

"I suppose so," Joe said. "Did he give you a hard time when you, umm, came out?"

"No," Brendan said, "he was fine about that. 'Whatever works,' he said. It was the art thing−−that any other way of life was less worthy. Helping in the community, working with people, he couldn't see that as important. It wouldn't have been, for him, I guess." Brendan shrugged. "I can draw, you know. But I never got off on it." Joe reached out and patted him on the back, not knowing what to say.

They went into the house, and Joe packed the drawing with the oil painting. He put the box on the back seat of the rental car and stopped to pick a few strawberries from the patch of everbearing plants by the end of the barn.

"I love those strawberry plants," he said to Ann in the kitchen. "October and they're still working."

"Your father loved them, too."

Joe prowled around the bookshelves and found an Arthur W. Upfield mystery that he hadn't read. "Great stuff," he said later, as they ate a light dinner of soup and salad. "Off to yet another corner of Australia while Napoleon Bonaparte gets his man."

"The keen senses of the aboriginal combined with the rational faculties of the white man," Brendan said.

Death of a Lake is the one I remember," Ann said. "Year after year, the lake shrinking, the birds, the fish . . . " She shuddered.

"More wine, mother?"

"Yes, a little."

The next day passed quietly. Brendan split and Joe stacked a large pile of firewood. Ann went shopping. They took naps. Brendan and Joe went out for dinner to the "Fisherman's Friend."

"Now that's a haddock plate!" Joe said.

"Finest kind," Brendan agreed. "La Nouvelle Cuisine has not reached Stonington." They had coffee and mammoth pieces of pie.

"Ann seems to be taking it pretty well," Joe said.

"She's a trooper," Brendan said. "What was your mother like? You know, I grew up with that drawing. Whenever I saw you, I always felt the similarity."

Joe leaned back in his chair, surprised. "Well, she wasn't a trooper. She was talented, I guess."

"Do you think of her often?"

"Hardly ever−−not very good memories."

"Like?"

Joe sipped coffee. "She was always leaving me places. Once, when I was six, she left me with an old couple in New York. They were very old. They made me stay in a playpen for a week."

"A week?"

"Yeah. It was torture. I was used to having the run of the block. It was summer. The playpen was by a window where I could see the street; that was good, anyway. I remember the dust floating in the room."

"How awful," Brendan said. Memories rushed into Joe's mind as though a lock had been picked.

"I used to listen to radio shows every day at five o'clock. Sergeant Preston of the Yukon and his Great Dog, King. On KING! AroofRoofRoof . . . " Joe looked around the dining room and lowered his voice. "I found a dime on the couch one afternoon and showed it to my mother.

"'Where did you get that?' she wanted to know.

"Found it on the couch.

"'Don't lie to me!' she said. 'You stole it, didn't you? Maggie told me the kids were taking money from little Sean. Tell me the truth.'

"I found it on the couch.

"'You're lying.'

"It's five o'clock−−Sergeant Preston . . .

"'You're not listening to the radio until you tell me the truth.'"

Joe made a face. "I was so desperate to hear Sergeant Preston that I told her I stole the dime." Brendan was silent. "She wouldn't believe me," Joe said. "That was the worst. She wouldn't believe me." Brendan looked at the napkin Joe had crumpled in one hand, and he shook his head.

"I guess," Joe said, putting the napkin ball on the table, "if I wanted to be adult about it, I'd say she was too high strung−−one of these people with major league talent but without the courage to use it."

"Too bad," Brendan said. "We know people like that in San Francisco." He was genuinely sympathetic.

"I'm glad we had a chance to talk," Joe said, on their way out.

"Right on."

Joe made Ann and Brendan promise to visit him in Hawaii. Ann told them that she had decided to stay on in the house, at least for a while; she needed time to adjust. She had friends on the island and money enough to cope with the coming winter. Joe said that he would be leaving first thing in the morning and that they shouldn't bother getting up to say goodbye.

He slept restlessly and dressed at first light. Ann was already up. "You must have coffee, at least," she said.

"It smells great. Thanks." He poured milk from a little pitcher into a mug decorated with a Maine Public Radio logo.

"Just like your father," Ann said, "ready to go in the morning."

"Mmm−−delicious. Goodbye, Jeremy," he said to the cat who was rubbing against his ankle, anxious to be let out.

"Well, get going then. Take the mug. Keep it. Maybe it will remind you of Maine and help bring you back."

"Thanks, Ann. It was very good to see you and Brendan. Take care of yourself." He leaned forward and kissed her on the cheek. She followed him outside and picked up Jeremy, holding him, tawny and orange, against her white bathrobe as Joe drove away.

He bought a doughnut in Bucksport and took the coastal route for old time's sake. He stopped for breakfast at Moody's, in Waldoboro. Moody's hadn't changed much in twenty years; they'd extended the dining room; the non−smoking area had gotten larger. Waitresses ran chattering back and forth to the kitchen, unimpressed as

ever with anyone who did not live in Lincoln County. He ate bacon, eggs, toast, and homefries, taking his time.

The whirlwind visit to Deer Isle was still sinking in. He was having trouble accepting that his father was dead. It was good of him to have left the money, and Joe was very glad to have the painting and the drawing of his mother. First choice. That had been a message of some kind. He, like Brendan, felt that his father had been disappointed in him for not living a more artistic life. Too late to talk about it now. Overboard and gone by, as they said on Deer Isle. "He was a hard man," Brendan had said in the barn. Brendan was right, although you had to know his father well to realize it, what with the big smile, the blarney and all.

Montpelier, Joe decided. The creative writing program. That was the thing to do. It would be carrying on something of his father in him, and the inheritance would take care of his immediate money problems. When he left Moody's, he was still sad, but at least he had a plan.

He stopped in Portland for the night, thinking that there was no telling when he'd be back. He decided not to look up Ingrid; she was off and into her new life. He got a room at the Holiday Inn and walked around the West End, his old neighborhood.

Houses were being restored. Coffee shops had opened all over the place. Popeye's, the bar with the tail of a light plane sticking out from its roof, was just the same. As he walked up Gray Street, Joe saw the small man who used to collect his returnable bottles. He was on his knees in front of St. Dominic's, a large church that had been closed and put up for sale by the Catholic bureaucracy. His shopping cart was beside him, half full of cans and bottles. The day had turned sharply cold. Joe felt a rush of complicated emotion. How could this man with nothing, kneeling on the sidewalk before an empty church, be so complete? Or so−−realized. Joe wanted to salute him as he used to in the old days after he handed over the bottles, but he did not disturb him. He went instead to a coffee shop and tried to describe the scene.

Later, the sun was setting as he passed St. Dominic's. Joe stood for a few minutes and watched a glowing veil withdraw inexorably up the red brick tower of the church. It was as though the bottle saint had gone and the service was over. Joe felt like crying, but he was too cold and alone.

He ate dinner in Giobbi's, a local bar and restaurant with dark booths along two walls. A messy meeting was in progress at tables that had been pushed together in the center of the room. Joe held pizza in one hand and wrote in his notebook with the other while men in late middle age joked and argued. A man at one end of the tables clinked his glass.

"One thing we gotta take care of," he said. Clink, clink. "One piece of business . . . " Clink. The group fell quiet. "Now." He cleared his throat. "Now, you all know Agnes."

"Sure."

"She's been good to us all, right?"

"Yes, yes."

"Agnes."

"Now, some of you may not know the story about her . . . " There were several questioning sounds and the group fell silent. "This is what happened. About seventy years ago, there was a knock at the door of the church. It was a wild rainy morning, and the Father asked one of the nuns to see who it was. She opened the door. No one was there−−only a basket. She brought the basket in out of the rain and said 'it's a baby, Father! All wrapped in a sheet.'

"The Father thought. 'We must take care of it,' he said. 'Is it−−a boy or a girl?'

"The nun bent over, unwrapped the baby, and said, 'A girl, Father, bless her.'

"'She must have a name,' Father said. 'She is a child of God. That we know. Agnes will be her name.' He looked at the window and said, 'It's not much of a day out. We will call her, Agnes Grayborn.' So the nuns took her and raised her, and Agnes has worked all her life for the church.

"And now, boys, we've had to sell the building where Agnes lives. She has no place to go." Voices raised and mumbled. A hand came up, halfway down the group.

"I gotta small place in one of mine. I'll take care of it. Least we can do."

"Thanks, Tony."

"Yes!" Clapping.

"Agnes!" Glasses were held up.

Well, all right! Joe thought. He left and walked toward the Holiday Inn. Every once in a while, things work out the way they should. He felt his resolve to keep going. It was in him like a fist. "I, too, am a hard man," he said.

16

Sunny Honolulu . . . Joe was relieved to be back. He wrote to Kate, enclosing her inheritance check and explaining his father's stipulation concerning the money. "No problem," she e−mailed back, "we're out every weekend looking at houses." Joe paid his Montpelier tuition and put some money in the bank, but he couldn't resist buying 4000 shares of a company that he'd been following on the Internet.

An Italian, whose father was well−known in the steel business, had developed a new type of composite steel. Stainless steel tubes were packed with crushed recycled carbon steel and then rolled under heat and pressure, bonding the whole together. The resulting composite, or cladded, steel had the outer resistance of stainless but was much cheaper. There was a huge market for non−corroding rebar to be used in concrete exposed to the weather, particularly in marine environments and in roads that were salted during the winter.

The Italian joined forces with a British financier who had a good reputation. They entered a joint venture with a Korean firm that subsequently withdrew support for reasons that had nothing to do with the quality of the product. Their venture went bankrupt, but the two hung in there and repurchased the mill that they had established in Wales. They issued stock for operating capital and began to produce test quantities of the new steel. Joe bought the stock at .75, roughly the value of the existing mill and property (if the .75 were multiplied by the number of shares outstanding). His thinking was that he was getting the life's work of the Italian for nothing and that the product was bound to catch on eventually. For a small added expense, the life of a bridge could be effectively doubled. The Brit had a track record of success. He owned a significant fraction of the company, and hadn't sold a single share. The company would either license the process to a steel giant or be bought outright. Joe was fairly sure of this. The question was when. He had learned his lesson with Southwest Precious Metals, and he bought for the long haul, an investment, not a trade. "Definitely fun," he said in the direction of Maine and his father whom he thought of as still being somewhere near the barn.

On Thanksgiving, after his second annual dinner of parrot fish and black bean sauce, Joe returned home and pushed the play button on the answering machine. He heard piano chords, an intro, and then Isabelle's rich low voice. "Joe, where are you tonight?" A few bars of melody followed. "Joe . . . " She broke off with a

strained laugh and hung up.

"Uh, oh," Joe said. She sounded drunk and far away, as though she were trying to sing across an ocean. He didn't think that she was on the island. "Good thing," he said to himself. But he was sad for her. The old Johnny Cash song went through his mind: _You've got to walk that lonesome valley. You've got to walk it by yourself_ . . . She was in trouble for sure. The phone rang. He hesitated and picked it up on the third ring.

"Hello, Joe."

"Jason?"

"Yup."

"Jesus, I thought it was someone else. Glad it's you. Long time! How are you?"

"Fine. I'm passing through, thought I'd give you a call and see if we could get together."

"Sure, great!" They arranged to meet for an early breakfast as Jason was flying out the next day.

In the morning, Joe spotted Jason at a corner table in the Ilikai.

"You're looking good, man." Jason had a strong build when he was in high school. He'd put on additional bulk and projected an air of invincible solidity. His hair was closely trimmed; his clothes were casual and elegant.

"You too," Jason said. His blue eyes twinkled. "What's it been? Twenty years?"

"Close to it," Joe said. "I love that tape of Chesapeake Bay chanteys, by the way."

"We had fun with it," Jason said.

Joe slid into a chair. "It was nice hearing your voice−−got me across North Dakota and Montana last year."

"Just a foc'sle tenor," Jason said and explained that he was on his way home from Singapore−−a conference on Data Protocols for the 21st Century. "We gave a paper," he said. "My colleague flew back the other way; she has family in Amsterdam."

"My, my," Joe said. "I was just an in−the−trenches programmer, designing small systems." Jason nodded sympathetically. Joe was confused. The best banjo player he'd ever heard was returning from an international data conference? In high school, Jason was a football player and a star in the drama club. "I quit programming," Joe said. "It was burning out my brain. I never much liked it anyway."

"I know what you mean," Jason said.

"How did you get into the info game?"

"One thing leads to another," he said. "You pitch in, give a hand, go with the flow." He expanded as he talked. His jaw was set as he carved into his Mauna Kea, half a papaya beneath eruptions of granola, fruit, and yogurt. "Keeps me in toys," he said, relaxing.

"Good deal," Joe said. "I wouldn't mind some toys. I'm on the way to becoming a starving artist−−writing things." Jason shook his head admiringly. "You get back to Woodstock, much?" Joe asked.

"Oh sure, holidays now and then. I got your address from Morgan."

"How's he doing? He was out with his lady a while back−−Edie. She was nice."

"I met her," Jason said. "Good things come in small packages." He frowned. "I saw Daisy in the village. I know you and Daisy were tight."

"True," Joe said.

"I guess Wes isn't well. Could be bad."

"Oh?"

"Daisy wasn't optimistic."

"Damn," Joe said. "My father just died."

"My mom died," Jason said and looked like himself for the first time.

"I liked your mom," Joe said.

Jason sighed. "Yeah. It's a crap shoot from here on, guy."

Joe was sorry to see him leave. Jason had carried his talent for theater into the business world. He had taken on the role of front man and image projector. His job was to walk the walk, talking the talk, while his colleagues fried their brains in the midnight hours. No doubt he'd done it with his usual wholeheartedness; he'd earned his toys. And if the banjo was in the back seat, took second place, what difference did it make so long as he was contributing and doing his best?

Too bad about Wes, Joe thought. Daisy was strong. "Hang in there, Babe," he said. He sent them a Christmas card, a beach scene by a local artist. A large Hawaiian woman in a flowered dress lay on her side in four inches of water. Three small children, playing on her, held fast as a tiny wave broke before them.

Joe kept to his routine, writing each day. The steel company dropped to .62 on light trading. He thought about buying more, but he held back. For his father's painting, he chose a linen mat and a natural cherry frame. He hung the painting over his table and watched the light moving from outside the frame onto the green leaves and into the woods behind. "Might as well have the best, Batman," he said.

He put the drawing of his mother above an unfinished pine bookcase that he bought to hold the books that had accumulated on the floor. He bought two towels, a set of 300 count sheets and pillow cases, and a Le Creuset saucepan. He stopped short of buying a real bed, although it was no longer unthinkable.

He received a package of stories from Montpelier, written by the ten students in his assigned workshop group. One account of a young and world−−weary gay woman was sweet and clear. Most of the students seemed to be in their twenties or thirties. His back gave him a scare one morning as he bent over to tie his shoes, but he stood up slowly and the pain went away. He bought a yoga book written for people with back problems and began to exercise.

He spent the holidays alone. Kate and Jackson were visiting Jackson's parents. Max was busy. On Christmas Eve, he strolled through Waikiki exchanging ironic smiles with other missing persons. In one of the hotel lobbies, a Filipino with a deep tan sang, "Roasting chestnuts on an open fire . . . "

Two days later, Joe slung the Filson bag over his shoulder. His apartment was clean, festive even, with Christmas cards taped to the kitchen door frame. "Back soon, Batman," he said.

17

Joe flew to Florida and spent the night in Tallahassee. He rented a car, and took the coastal route through Apalachicola and Panama City toward Fort Walton Beach. Apalachicola was a sleepy Caribbean place−−palm trees, dirt alleys, low concrete buildings built for hurricanes. He munched fried shrimp and sipped a glass of beer at a restaurant by the slow moving mouth of the Apalachicola River. A solitary pelican waited on a sunny piling. A hundred writers in one spot. I don't know, he thought. He envied the pelican. Learn as much as you can, he told himself.

The school had rented space in a community built on a barrier island that separated the Gulf from a wide bay. "You're a day early. Let's see−−your unit is ready. We can let you in." The woman behind the registration counter gave him a key and a paper pass. "Show this at the gate," she said.

"Gate?"

"Across the highway, over there." She pointed through the front windows.

Joe drove across and held the pass out the car window. A security guard motioned him through, and he followed a blacktop road along the edge of a golf course, passing clusters of houses that had been built at the same time from the same ten designs. Expanses of grass were broken by strips of pine trees and mounds of tended shrubbery. He stopped and checked the map he'd been given. Two older men bounced low drives down a fairway. They followed their balls silently, dragging golf bags behind them on two wheeled carts with long curved handles.

Joe's "unit" was empty and impersonal. First come, first served, he decided. He hung his shirts in the master bedroom closet, spread the rest of his stuff on the bed, and fled.

He walked past landscaped ponds and drainage canals to the conference center where they were to eat and attend readings. Joe introduced himself and was told that meals would begin the following morning at 7 a.m. Books written by the faculty were for sale in a room arranged as a temporary store. He picked up copies of writing by each of the other workshop groups.

His preference for housemates was not honored. Walter, a lawyer from California, and Jamie, a newly retired military officer from New Hampshire, arrived the next day. Walter had been expensively educated, but his mother was a singer and he had inherited her talent. After graduation, he toured for years with a rock band before settling down to appellate work and raising a family. He was determined to write a novel, to lead another life. Jamie was a sensitive type who hid behind a thick layer of masculinity. "We call him 'Leather Man,'" one of the women later told Joe derisively. She was good looking. The good looking ones didn't trust Jamie.

Jamie was masculine. He had been shot in Vietnam, had trained for Special Forces dirty missions, and had flown carrier jets. He was good at games, in shape for his forties, dressed for a magazine cover at all times, and endlessly charming. He was also drunk for the entire residency, but he managed to get through it without being thrown out. Montpelier's administration was no challenge to Jamie after the Pentagon where his final assignment was to impress members of Congress with new weapons and the military "can do" attitude.

"One look at the toys and they would come in their pants. Never lost an appropriation. Ha, ha, ha." His glance drifted out the window to the wetlands behind the house. He told Joe of a tracheotomy in the jungle, a soldier shot and dying in his arms. "He died happy. He thought I was going to save him."

Joe had no wish to compare masculinity with Jamie. Joe lived in the reverse disguise, his strength hidden beneath layers of sensitivity. He spent more time with Walter. Besides, Eugenie, one of the faculty, had fallen for Jamie and was with him as often as she could find him.

The students were divided into two groups, fiction and poetry. Joe was in fiction and glad of it as he came to meet more students. The poets were high strung; they tended to lapse into proud and delicate silences. The fiction writers were gregarious, given to loud laughter. Round tables in the dining room usually filled with one group or the other.

On their second day, the students were scheduled to meet with faculty members. Joe and Walter traipsed about the development and talked to half a dozen of the most interesting teachers. Joe asked whether they considered themselves artists, and, if so, what they understood that to mean. One rubbed his forehead and said, "It was a good morning." He had at least thought about it. Generally, yes, the faculty members considered themselves artists, but, mumble, mumble. They accepted the status and the authority, but they were confused about the responsibility that art did or did not entail. One of the more widely published professors had read a story the previous night. Joe asked him if he felt that it was good enough to write a story which posed questions but made no attempt to answer them. In this manner, over the course of two days, Joe pissed everybody off. As a reward, he was assigned to Roland, the most intimidating faculty member.

Joe had always identified with artists. But art meant painting. In what way were writers artists? He didn't intend to annoy the faculty; he was trying to get his money's worth.

Workshops were carefully choreographed. Each student's writing was scheduled for uninterrupted discussion, led by two faculty members. The writer was not allowed to speak until the discussion was complete. Everyone else in the group was expected to contribute. Day after day, Joe's group analyzed and explored stories, avoiding judgments about their quality. Did developments in the story make sense in terms of earlier events? Which characters were convincing? What was the story about?

The faculty was good at this, and the new students improved as days went by. Students who had been there a few semesters set a good example. Joe thought hard about what to say in each session. He became more aware of "story" as a form or structure independent of the characters and setting. He still didn't get it; he didn't know what a story was, but he wasn't discouraged. He had learned from designing computer systems that there was always a period of absorbing information before he could see the big picture.

His own story was praised for the occasional good sentence and criticized for its lack of structure. The best part of it was a description that Joe copied from memory, a late evening with Daisy. "Don't hold back," she had said. He had begun to shake in her arms, deep uncontrollable shaking that took him all the way back to some wordless time when he was a baby. Daisy held him until he was reborn as a man, clean as the sun, beyond fear. No one in the group mentioned this scene, but several of the women looked at him thoughtfully.

One night Joe heard voices in the living room and stumbled out half asleep to see what was happening. Eugenie and Jamie were close together on the couch. He excused himself and went back to bed. Two days later, he came back after a reading, and there was Jamie in the center of the living room, weaving slightly, holding a tennis racquet. "You have to−−feel it," he said, flexing his wrist. "Like a friend."

"Oh, I understand," Eugenie said, her face flushed and happy. "Like my cello." Joe slipped by, closed his bedroom door, and put his head between two pillows.

The days blurred together. Jamie was more and more out of it. When it came time to leave, Walter and Eva, a cheerful recovering alcoholic who had been in Joe's workshop, helped scrape Jamie's stuff together. After a tearful farewell from Eugenie, they assisted Jamie into the rental car.

"Eugenie is facing major heartbreak, the stuff of literature," Eva said.

"Eugenie thinks I'm Joseph Conrad," Jamie explained apologetically, sprawled against the side window. As they passed Eglin Air Force Base, two F−16's thundered up, up, and away. "Looka those beauties, pulling 6 g's," he said.

When they parted at the terminal, Eva surprised Joe with a kiss. She had a long−time lover in Vermont. Or didn't she? It was too late for Joe to figure it out. He boarded his plane feeling that, in his single−minded pursuit of fiction, he had missed a good person.

Roland had assigned him a long reading list of contemporary stories and French criticism. "Some of this is a little esoteric. You can handle it," he said. Roland was impressed that Joe had made a living as an independent computer programmer. Joe was to mail in a criticism of each book along with short stories of his own.

There was a lot to sort through. Cleo, who had written about the gay woman, had impressed him. She had short black hair, deep brown eyes that were intelligent and sympathetic, and a clear spirit. She reminded him of Maxie's arrowhead in its Kauri wood box. "Am I missing something here?" Eva had said in Joe's ear one afternoon. "Is she friggin beautiful, or what?"

"Friggin beautiful," Joe said. "Like her writing."

"Jesus," Eva said.

"It works that way sometimes," Joe said. "I've seen it in paintings. Beautiful people can do beautiful work; they aren't afraid of it; they're used to it." Eva looked at him. She was good−looking herself, although not in Cleo's league.

Joe's head was spinning from two weeks of conversation at breakfast, lunch, dinner, and points in between. It was a relief to be in the plane, seated next to an elderly woman who had no interest in writing. He had scheduled a stopover in San Francisco, but, when he arrived, he couldn't bring himself to call Brendan. He was too tired to socialize. He spent a day walking about the city and was able to buy almost all of the books on his reading list. He wouldn't have to wait for any of them to be delivered to Honolulu.

After an uneventful flight and a satisfying view of Diamond Head, Joe climbed the stairs to his apartment, a cloth shopping bag filled with paperbacks in one hand, his Filson bag in the other. "Yo, Batman! New books!"

18

Mo swirled special noodles around in her bowl. "So, did you find out? What's a story?"

Joe handed her a manila envelope. "Here's one," he said. "A story is about change, is of change. It's obvious, I guess, but I couldn't see it. My instructor, Roland, finally said, 'Look, Joe, for God's sake−−in a story, sooner or later, something has to happen to somebody.'" Joe shook his head. "I kept trying to stop time, like a painter. I've got it now; stories model, take place, in time. The meaning is embodied in the movement−−like a dance−−you can't separate them." He sipped tea. "The school has been good, but I'm stopping after this semester. Too expensive. Diminishing returns. I just have to do it now−−the writing."

"It has been good for you," Mo said. "I have news."

"Aha," Joe said.

"Rob Wilcox. You remember? On Kauai? He's offered to go into business with me−−a gallery and a fine art

print shop with enough space to teach classes. He has a building on Queen Street. He'll supply the space and the money for equipment. I'll take care of the rest."

Joe's cheeks flushed slowly. So that was why she had been so hard to reach.

"Rob and I have known each other a long time. Did I tell you that?"

He tried to remember.

"We've become−−closer," she said.

"Lucky fellow."

"I hope you'll come to the grand opening. When I have a date I'll send you an invitation."

"Of course I will. It's a terrific idea. You'll do a great job."

"A lot of work," she said into the middle distance. "But . . ." she shrugged and smiled. "Can't wait to read your story."

They split the bill and left Hee Hing's, promising to get together soon. Joe went straight to the Moana.

"Gilbert, I've got trouble."

"What's her name?"

Good old Gilbert.

Joe was upset. He had thought of Mo as a possible partner, or lover. He had leaned on her without realizing it. It wasn't to be. Wilcox. Was it always about money? No, that wasn't fair. He had another drink and began to feel freer. "We're all grown up, here," he said in the direction of the beach. He ordered one for the road and toasted, "Your problem now, Wilcox." To hell with it. He declared the day over and ambled up Kalakaua Avenue smiling at strangers.

When he got home, he found a letter with three British stamps and a London return address. It was from Sarah, the girl who had stuck to her story about Mike, the cat burglar. She had married a Brit and had two children of her own. "I read your letter to my daughters and told them that parents sometimes make mistakes. I can remember it as clearly as if it were yesterday," she wrote. "I hope Mike has found another way to make a living. Please do thank him for being nice, if you should see him." The thought of Sarah reading his words to her children filled Joe with pleasure. He immediately wrote to Alison, thanking her for encouraging him to write and deliver the story.

A week later, a square envelope arrived from Madison, Wisconsin. It was a wedding announcement.

Oh Joe, how nice to hear from you! I was just thinking about you. I am marrying another Joe, Joe Jurgens, next month. He is a wonderful man who lost his wife two years ago. He has a fourteen year old son and a twelve year old daughter, so I have a lot to do. I think of you often. Keep writing. You have a lot to do, too. Love, Alison.

Well! Joe knocked on his wooden table top and wished her luck. He sent her a lavish congratulations card.

A month later Joe finished his last school assignment. "We're on our own, Batman," he said, carrying the

packet for Roland out the door. He kept writing and submitted stories to The Paris Review, Manoa, Ploughshares, and The New Yorker. Things happened in each of them. He was making progress, but he wasn't satisfied. The stories were rejected with form letters, sometimes not even form letters, form scraps.

Fortunately, there was more in the mail than rejection slips. Kate and Jackson found a house in the Ballard section of Seattle. Mo sent an invitation to an opening party for her new business. Max sent pictures of Stone Man watching over the valley. Joe taped the pictures on the wall near his father's painting.

His steel company stock fell to .50, down by a third of his original investment. Buy more, he thought. But he was afraid of running out of money and being forced to sell at a loss. He kicked himself for buying so much at .75. If he'd bought half as much, he could have picked up some of these bargain shares. Remember that, he told himself, you don't have to buy it all at once.

Joe settled more deeply into his routine. One morning in a coffee shop, he looked up and realized that a young woman was watching him from a corner table. He had seen her before, sitting in the same corner, sketching. She was in her late teens, slightly built. Her hair was shoulder length, a fresh mahogany brushed back from her face. She had artist's eyes, open and steady, similar in color to her hair but lighter. She caught him looking and smiled−−a knowing smile for someone so young. Her teeth were so white and her look was so proud and gentle, so female, that he felt a sharp pain. It was like being pierced by a thin hot wire. He smiled back as best he could and left quickly.

The next morning, the young woman looked at him calmly from her usual seat in the corner of the coffee shop. "I did a drawing of you. Would you like it?"

"Sure." Joe rose from his table and walked over. She handed him a pencil drawing that showed him sitting, head forward, looking down. The lines were simplified but intense. His head was like a hatchet about to strike. It embarrassed Joe to realize that this maniacal stranger was him, or her perception of him. There was life in it.

"It isn't very good," she said.

"I like it . . . Thanks. I'll trade; I'll give you some writing." She seemed pleased. She had signed the drawing in one corner. "Rhiannon, that's a beautiful name. I've never heard it before."

"It's Welsh."

"Oh. I'm Joe Burke−−Irish." He meant it as a joke, but it sounded in his ears like a warning or an acknowledgment of kinship. "So, you work around here?"

"Club 21, the clothing boutique on the corner. I don't start until ten, but I like to get up early, get out of the apartment." That explained her stylish outfits. She put her sketch book, her pencils, and her CD player into a backpack and waved goodbye.

The next day he gave her four poems, handwritten on heavy stock that he bought in the art store next to the coffee shop. "Awesome," she said, putting them carefully in her pack.

"I'm starting a novel," he said.

"I could never write a book."

"Do you live around here?"

"My mother has a place on Wilder Avenue."

"Not far from me−−on Liholiho." She smiled her unsettling smile and began drawing. Their conversations were short; each felt the other's need for privacy. The back tables of the coffee shop became their studio for an hour or two nearly every morning. Gradually, Joe saw that Rhiannon was beautiful. She had no spectacular features; it was the whole combo working together that was beautiful−−hair, eyes, mouth, clear skin, proud compact walk. Feeling flickered on her face like firelight. She was stubborn; Joe could see that. But, at the same time, she laughed at herself. They were a lot alike, and she knew it. That was why her smile troubled him−−to deny her was to deny himself.

The coffee shop was cheerful in the early morning. Many of the customers were young and worked in the surrounding shops. Rhiannon joked with them but maintained a friendly distance. Once, a young man came over to her table and said, "I've been watching you draw." He was important about it, as though he were a well−known judge of drawing.

"Yes," she said.

"Hobby? Or are you a student or a professional or something?"

"Hobby," she said and went back to work. The judge bent over her table.

"Nice," he said.

Rhiannon said nothing, and he retreated. Joe avoided her eyes. He could feel her glance, and he was starting to grin.

One morning she asked for the bathroom key. The gal behind the counter tossed the key toward the bathroom door. It was attached to a large key ring and crashed loudly on the floor. "One of your most valued customers," Rhiannon protested, bending over for the key. When she emerged from the bathroom, she drew herself up to her full five foot three and threw the key back on the floor. Joe couldn't help laughing−−she was so intense and funny about it.

She had said "Her mother had a place," so he guessed that her father wasn't around. Her parents were probably divorced, maybe not so long ago. She was too self possessed not to have been well loved as a child.

On the day of Mo's business opening, Rhiannon announced that she had the afternoon off. Joe had the invitation to the opening in his shoulder bag and showed it to her. "She's a terrific photographer," he said. "Want to go?"

Rhiannon looked down at her black cotton pants and touched her T−shirt. "I'll have to change."

"It's not until four o'clock. She's a working gal; it won't be fancy." Rhiannon looked at him as though he were retarded and agreed to meet him there at four−thirty. Later, Joe went home and changed into one of his better aloha shirts. He waited for Rhiannon at the bus stop nearest to Mo's, but she surprised him by getting out of a Charley's cab in front of the door.

"Yo, Rhiannon." He trotted up. "I thought you might come on the bus. God, you look great." She was wearing white linen slacks, huaraches, and a close fitting top with three quarter sleeves and a high neckline. The top was silk, purple with subtle golds and browns. Flat, black, oblong earrings hung partially obscured by her hair. Lip gloss and touches of eye shadow sent the "I know how" message. "You should be standing in a gondola, holding flowers," Joe said.

"Thank you."

They walked into the store and were greeted immediately by Mo. She gave Joe a quick hug, saying, "How nice of you to come." She stepped back and he introduced Rhiannon. Mo's eyebrows lifted as she looked down at her. "I'm glad you could come," she said, extending her hand. "I hope you find some things you like." She indicated the photographs hanging on the walls. "There are more in the next room. Rob?" She beckoned to a portly man with rimless glasses. "Rob, you must meet Joe and−−his friend, Rhiannon. Joe and I are old buddies."

"How do you do." They shook hands.

"So," Joe said to them both, "this is where you're going to make a stand−−gallery and print shop?"

"And classes," Rob said. His smile broadened as he considered Rhiannon. "Help yourselves to wine and goodies."

"Hi, Wendell," Mo said. They stepped away from the door. Joe recognized the gallery owner from Mo's show the previous year. People began arriving in numbers. He and Rhiannon made their way to the pupu table where he poured them wine.

"I'm going to look around," she said.

"Good, good. See you later." Joe stayed close to the kim chee and the shrimp. There was a platter of spanakopita, veggies, watercress and sour cream dip . . . Mo appeared. "Art can wait," he mumbled around a mouthful of sourdough roll.

"So, where did you find PrettyLocks?"

"Just around the corner from MoneyBags," Joe said, straightening. Mo tossed her head. "Look," Joe said. "Pax. I like being your old buddy. Rob's a nice guy, actually."

"You can tell?"

"Guaranteed. Joe Burke's seal of approval."

Mo thought. "She is pretty."

"Mmm." Joe never knew what women meant when they discussed looks. "Dynamite kim chee," he said.

"Stay in touch, Joe." Mo patted his arm and turned towards the crowd. Rhiannon was standing in front of a large photograph, head tipped back, absorbed.

"Isn't Vermeer a painter?" she asked as he moved next to her.

"Yep, Dutch, sixteen hundreds−−I think. Not many paintings survive, but they're all great."

A tag on the wall beside the photograph read, Jade Willow Lady / Vermeer. She was wearing a white cook's jacket. Her glossy black hair was pulled back and pinned up behind her head. She held a spatula in front of her. Her free hand was palm up, ready to reach. It was as though she had seen Mo with the camera and had paused as she was turning toward the grill. Light fell on her face through wisps of steam. The print was taller than it was wide, cropped below her forearms. The background was distinct but shaded. The light was all on her face as she considered her balance in the act of maintaining it. She was magnificent. She rose above time

by letting it go, holding nothing back.

"He, uh . . . painted a girl, a young woman, in much the same way, although she wasn't cooking anything."

"Awesome," Rhiannon said.

"Jade Willow Lady."

"Who?"

"She cooks at Tops in Kaneohe. Mo and I went to look at her once. That's what I called her."

"So beautiful," Rhiannon said. Joe went for more wine.

As he maneuvered to the table, he noticed a man, about seventy, with a familiar profile. Joe realized that he was Mo's father. "Excuse me," Joe said, reaching for a bottle of Sauvignon Blanc. "I was just thinking about taxes during the reign of Caesar Augustus. Would you have an opinion on that?"

"Ha, ha. A lot depended on who was doing the collecting. Are you looking for a system to replace the I.R.S.?"

"It's time, don't you think? I'm Joe Burke, a friend of your daughter's. I read your book."

"Arthur Soule," he said, shaking hands. "You've got endurance."

"I enjoyed it."

"Actually . . . " He took a sip of wine. "I've come to believe that systems matter less than the people who run them." He had a dapper air, amused and ironic.

"I couldn't agree more," Joe said.

The two carried on, getting into the stock market and economics in general. Arthur seconded Henry Hazlitt's argument that selective tax breaks were almost always counterproductive when seen in the context of the society as a whole. From time to time Joe looked for Rhiannon. She was moving slowly about the main room, studying each picture and talking with men who were circling her like bees. When he and Arthur ran out of conversation, he caught her eye and pointed questioningly at the door. She nodded, and they slipped out into the early evening air.

"I'll walk you home, if you're headed that way," he offered.

"I suppose I am," she said. "That was fun."

"You looked like you were having fun. I noticed Wendell Sasaki paid you a lot of attention."

"He's nice."

"He has a gallery, did he tell you?"

"Yes. He said to come by any time."

"I bet he did," Joe teased. She pulled a light cotton sweater from her bag and put it on with lithe movements.

"It's cooling off," she said.

"Good pictures, huh?"

"I liked them," Rhiannon said, "but I don't know anything about photography. Winifred is very nice."

"Mo−−that's what I call her. She is."

"Is she your girlfriend?"

"No," Joe laughed. He was going to brush off the question, but he saw that Rhiannon was serious. "Almost," he said. "We are too much the same, I think. Too pigheaded, or self−centered, or something. She's connected to Rob, the guy we met when we first went in." Rhiannon brightened. The afternoon cumulus clouds had dissipated in a pale blue sky. Pink wisps of cirrus trailed to the west. They walked down Kapiolani Boulevard and turned up Keaumoku.

"Did you go to school here?" he asked.

"Roosevelt. I graduated last year."

"You don't sound like you've been here all your life."

"Five years," Rhiannon said. "My parents got divorced and I came out here with my mom."

"Oh. Where's your father?"

"He's in New Haven. He's a chef in a great Italian restaurant. I'm going to see him soon; I've been saving up. I mean, he's paid for the ticket, but I want to have my own money when I get there."

"Right," Joe said. "I'm from Maine and upstate New York, originally. I've been in New Haven. I love those old Yale buildings."

"Awesome," Rhiannon agreed. "My father doesn't think much of Yalies."

"Good man," Joe said. "So, what does your mom do?"

"She works in marketing," Rhiannon said abruptly.

"What's wrong with that?"

"Oh, nothing. We're not getting along right now. I don't like her boyfriend."

"Uh, oh. That's hard," Joe said.

"He's such a creep. I'd get my own apartment but I'm leaving. I've never had an apartment."

"It's fun," Joe said. "Do what you want. But you have to buy a lot of stuff−−beds and toasters and things. Actually, I don't even have a bed. I sleep on a camping mattress."

"I wouldn't mind that," Rhiannon said. "Would you show me your place some time?"

"Sure."

"People should do what they want to," she said fiercely.

"Damn right−−although, it's not so easy sometimes." The more they talked, the more comfortable he felt with her.

"Well," she sighed when they reached her apartment building, "good night, Joe."

"Good night, Rhiannon. See you in the morning?"

"I'll be there."

19

Summer was almost gone. Joe and Rhiannon crossed the boulevard at the Ewa end of Ala Moana park and walked toward the beach. The weather was warm and overcast, for a change. Rhiannon chattered about her upcoming trip to see her father in Connecticut. Joe made his standard suggestion to pack only one carry−on bag. He offered the use of his Filson, but she wanted her own, and, besides, she wasn't sure when she was coming back. They were relaxed with each other−−Joe from habit, and Rhiannon from instinct. Sometimes love is easy, he thought. It's just a given, just there. Why deny it? Even so, he was afraid to touch her, to open the door to pain and loss and sexual inadequacy. Old age was coming soon enough; he didn't have to have his nose rubbed in it. An admiring whistle cut through his thoughts.

Three young men were standing by a tree in front of them and to their right. Joe nudged Rhiannon to the left, changing direction, but she would have none of it. She kept her direction and held her head high.

"Right here, Baby!" One of them was slim and tense; two were heavier. They were eighteen or nineteen, Rhiannon's age. They moved to block the walk. Joe and Rhiannon stopped.

"Fucking haole," one said coming up to them. He pushed Joe hard. Time slowed. Joe sensed Rhiannon reaching into her bag. As Joe stepped back from the shove, the slim one slipped to the side. I'm going down anyway, Joe thought. He held the shover's eyes, smiled slightly, and jammed him under the chin with the heel of his hand, driving him back and turning him. He grabbed at Joe, but Joe drove him face down into the gravel. Joe scrambled sideways and was spinning toward the others when the lights went out.

He came up from a deep hole and opened his eyes. He closed them and opened them again more slowly. Rhiannon was looking into his face. Far above her, a cop was looking down. Joe remembered the young guys. He lifted his head.

"It's O.K., Joe, they're gone." He put his head back down for a moment and then rolled to his side. He stood up with help from Rhiannon. He was bruised and bleeding from a scrape on his cheek, but nothing seemed broken. He let out a breath.

"What happened?"

"I called 911 on my cell phone."

"I was just going by," the cop said. "You lucky."

"They ran when they saw the cruiser," Rhiannon said.

"My partner too fat to catch them," Officer Watanabe said. "You going to be all right?"

"I think so," Joe said, touching the back of his head. He looked at Rhiannon. "Are you O.K.?"

"Yes," she said.

"Did they take anything?"

"No."

"You want to come down to headquarters and try identify them?"

"Kids," Joe said. "I guess not. I should have stayed out of this end of the park."

"Up to you," Officer Wanatabe said. He wrote down their addresses.

"Thanks," Joe said.

"That's what we're here for. We'll hang around, ask a few questions."

Joe and Rhiannon crossed over to the shopping center. He congratulated her on having a cell phone. "I should have had pepper spray," she said angrily. "I'm getting some today."

"I'm going home," Joe said.

" You sure you don't want your face looked at? They kicked you after that one guy hit you with something."

"The little one?"

"He wasn't so little."

"The skinny one?"

"Yeah," Rhiannon said.

"They're the ones you got to watch," Joe said. "I'll go home and clean up, take a couple of aspirin, take it easy."

"I know!" Rhiannon said. "I'll make you dinner." Joe couldn't talk her out of it.

At five o'clock, she was standing at his door holding a grocery bag. She was wearing square cut black cotton pants and a maroon sweatshirt pushed up on her forearms. Her hair was brushed back. Joe was shocked again at how untouched and beautiful she was. He smelled freshly baked bread.

"Smells good."

"I didn't know how hungry you'd be. I made a quiche. You can warm it up tomorrow if you don't want it."

"Are you kidding?" He led her into the apartment, and she took possession of the kitchen area. "I've got something for you," Joe said. He handed her a book on Vermeer.

"Oooh," she said.

"My contribution to your education."

"Cool. Thanks." Within minutes a meal appeared on the table. "How do you cook without pans, Joe?"

"A pot and a wok−−what more do you need?"

"Really, Joe." She sniffed his olive oil. "I knew I should have brought some," she said.

He uncorked a bottle of Chianti and gave her the house glass. "I'll use the mug. Happy days."

"Happy days, Joe."

They began on the quiche. Joe put down his fork after the first bite. "This is damned good!" Rhiannon nodded calmly.

"I love this," she said, reaching for Maxie's box. She opened it.

"It's an arrowhead from Vermont. My stepson, Max, found it." She weighed the arrowhead in her palm, as he had.

"Max made the box. He was in New Zealand . . . It's a special wood from there. Kauri, it's called." Rhiannon placed the arrowhead back in its oval and turned the box around, looking at it from each side. Joe pointed at the picture of Stone Man. "He did that, too." Rhiannon leaned over the table and looked closely at the photograph. Her eyes opened wider.

"Awesome."

"He balances there and watches over the valley. His hands are weights. 'Stone Man,' Maxie calls him."

"Looks like New England."

"Yup, Vermont. Londonderry."

"I know where Londonderry is," she said. "My father took us skiing there."

"Good old Maxie. Max Mueller, you should look him up when you go back east."

"I will," she said.

"When are you going?"

"A week from tomorrow."

"Oh."

"Yes, I've had the ticket for two months." He poured them more wine. Rhiannon leaned back in the plastic chair, looked at the painting over the table, and then studied the drawing above the bookshelf.

"My father did those," Joe said. "He did the painting last year, not long before he died. The drawing is of my mother. She wasn't much older than you are."

"She was beautiful," Rhiannon said.

"Not as beautiful as you," Joe said factually.

"I could do that," she said, pointing at the drawing. She indicated the oil. "But I couldn't do that."

"Color ups the ante," Joe said.

"Awesome," she said, still looking at the oil.

"Takes time," Joe said. "There's about fifty years practice between the two."

"And then gone, all that experience gone," Rhiannon said.

"Gotta do it while we can," Joe said. "God, what a good dinner. I hate to see you go, Rhiannon."

"Don't you get lonely?" she asked. An appealing smile spread across her face. Joe imagined her clothes dropping away, saw her naked, her clean tight skin, touches of private color at her breasts, the subtle curve where she would swell with pregnancy. He shook his head, more to clear it than to say no.

"Batman," he said. "Batman keeps me company. Although I do worry about him sometimes. He's younger than I am."

"Joe−−could I stay? For the week? Until my plane?" She spoke quietly and held him with her large dark eyes. He should have seen it coming, but he was surprised.

"Umm, with me?" She nodded. "Oh, Rhiannon."

"You think I'm too young," she said.

"No, that's not it. Rhiannon, you are not too young." He searched for words. "It's not you; it's me. I'm too old." He swallowed a mouthful of wine. "There was a time when I would have crawled around the island for you on my hands and knees. Let me see if I can explain."

She stood, turned once around, and sat down again. "You don't have to. It's all right. And besides, you're wounded." She pointed at the Band−Aid on his cheek.

"I'm not that wounded. I'm changing. Did you ever see a chameleon change color?"

"No," she said.

"I had one on that branch, right out there." He pointed through the glass of the lanai door. "It was brown. Each time I looked, it was a little less brown and a little more green. You could barely see it change." Rhiannon looked impatient. "When it was completely green it jumped onto a leaf that was the same color." Joe paused. "It's writing I want to do now; I'm ready to jump. I'll probably kick myself for the rest of my life," he said, "but I'm calling a cab to take you home."

Rhiannon gathered her things. They rode the elevator down in silence, but as they waited for the cab she sighed and leaned against Joe. He put his arm around her. "You have to take love where you find it," she said. "My father told me that."

Joe squeezed her tighter. "Your father's right." The cabbie pulled in. Joe gave him the address and double the fare. "Keep the change, huh."

"Thanks, Brah." Rhiannon rolled down the window and turned her face to him. She held his eyes until the cab turned out into the street.

Joe walked up the stairs, feeling heavier with each step. Rhiannon's scent lingered in the apartment. He didn't want to bother Batman with his troubles, so he put on *La Traviata* and finished the Chianti. He felt terrible. He had denied love in order to protect himself and his precious writing. He was a selfish asshole with one foot in the grave. It was a good thing that he was out of wine.

In the morning, he returned to their cafe. If Rhiannon wanted, she could see him there without making a big deal about it. She did not appear. A week later, he arrived home in the afternoon to see a box by the door. He knew immediately that it was from her. He opened it and found an object wrapped in white tissue paper. He unwound the paper and found a doll. She was dressed in a kimono and had Japanese features, an eternal bittersweet look. She was gorgeous. A note read, "Her name is Sumoko. I made her for Batman. I'm leaving today. Love, Rhiannon." Joe took the doll and a Napoleon Bonaparte mystery out on the lanai.

"Batman, someone is here to meet you." He laid the book on the table and put Sumoko and Batman next to each other on their backs, with the book as a pillow, looking towards the mountain. We'll see what happens, he said to himself and to Rhiannon, who was probably at thirty thousand feet. What a sweetheart. He slid the lanai door closed and made himself sit at the computer and enter what he had written earlier. As he worked, he forgot about himself and Sumoko. He was pleasantly surprised, later, to see her with Batman. They seemed to be getting along.

Morgan's father, an historian, once told Joe that habits are a writer's best friends. Joe stuck to his practice of writing all morning in coffee shops and then walking home and entering the words into his computer. By mid−afternoon he had a clean printout ready for the next day. He exercised and spent quiet evenings reading, watching the news, and thinking about the next day's work. He stopped going to the cafe where he had met Rhiannon.

A month went by, and he made progress. He was feeling good when he happened to meet Mo one day at the shopping center. He asked if she wanted to have lunch. She consulted her little red book and turned over a page. "A week from Friday?"

"Too long. I can't live without you. How about a drink−−under the boardwalk?" he said, bursting into song. "Under the banyan tree?"

She sighed and gave in. "Tomorrow?" she offered. "Five o'clock? A little after?"

"Good deal."

Joe arrived early and had a congenial visit with Gilbert. It was September and the beach was uncrowded. Joe felt, as much as a haole can, that it was his island, that he had a right to be there.

Mo showed up and ordered a Lillet on the rocks, happy to have closed shop for the day. "Slow, but promising," she said of her business. He complimented her on the Jade Willow Lady picture. "I was lucky," she said. "It took some darkroom work to get it right, but I was lucky with the shot. I only took four; I was so afraid of disturbing her. I gave her a print. She was surprised, pleased, I think."

"I'd love to have one. I'd put it up in my apartment and be reminded to eat out once in awhile."

"Of course," Mo said. "You named her. Do you need reminding to eat out?"

"Homey Joe," he said. "I'm working my ass off."

"I loved your story, by the way," she said. "I could see that balding bus boy carefully loading his cart. But I wanted more."

"Yeah," Joe said. "I can't tell you how many times I've thought of that guy. Did I tell you that I started a novel?"

"No," Mo said.

"You're right about the stories. They aren't enough. It's a new experience for me−−a novel. It's taking everything I've got."

Mo nodded and clapped slowly. "Juggling," she said.

"Huh?"

"I was remembering a story Jung told about a juggler who was feeling bad because he had nothing to offer the Virgin Mary at a festival. He asked the village priest what to do. The priest told him that he must juggle for the Blessed Virgin. So he did and was filled with grace."

It was Joe's turn to clap.

"My nephew actually does juggle," Mo said. "I want to dress him in a red and yellow medieval costume and take pictures. He uses long sticks. They extend his arms and make him seem more like a dancer than a juggler. So fluid and precise at the same time . . . "

"All you need is the costume," Joe said.

"And my nephew. He's going to school in North Carolina." She drank and smiled to herself. "You've changed," she said. "You look calmer. What happened to PrettyLocks? I can't remember her name."

"Rhiannon. She went back east to see her father." He changed the subject. "Speaking of fathers, how is yours?"

"Rolling along," she said. "We're going to get together at my sister's over the holidays."

"I'm planning to visit Kate," Joe said. "Maybe we should get together at the Caffe Ladro . . . " Mo smiled noncommittally, and they parted on a friendly note. She hadn't said anything about Rob Wilcox and he hadn't asked. He and Mo were going to connect with work and art, it seemed. The personal, or the intimate, would stay in the background. Nothing wrong with that, Joe said to himself as he walked home.

Several days later the phone rang. Joe picked it up on the second ring.

"Hi, Joe."

"Max! Hey, how are you?"

"Good. The reason I'm calling is: I got a call last week from a woman asking if she could come see Stone Man."

"Rhiannon," Joe said.

"Yeah, Rhiannon. She said that she saw the picture of Stone Man at your place."

"So, what happened?" Joe asked.

"She showed up. She was great. She made a drawing of Stone Man and hung out for awhile." Joe heard familiar music in the background.

"What's the music?"

"Chesapeake Bay sea chanteys−−the cassette was in your truck."

"Ha, ha. That's what I thought. The banjo player is an old friend of mine. I listened to that tape all across the country. There's a song on there about how you're counted a lucky drudger if you ever get your pay." He sang the words.

"Right," Max said.

"So, did you like her? Rhiannon?"

"Yeah. She said she'd come back in two weeks and cook me a decent meal if I wanted. She was critical of the kitchen−−like a little countess or something."

Joe laughed. "Her father's a chef, I guess. You lucky drudger! You remember my maxim about what to do when you're really attracted to a woman?"

"Tell her," Max said, and added, "where's my quarter?"

"I'll invest it for you. She's the real thing, Max." Joe paused. "When you see her, tell her Sumoko and Batman are spending a lot of time together."

"Cool," Max said. "Who's Sumoko?"

"She'll explain." Good old Max. Maybe he and Rhiannon would get together. Impossible to predict, Joe thought, but he could keep his fingers crossed.

20

A month after Maxie's call, two years after he had left Portland, Joe made coffee and read the beginning of his novel. He squared the pages and leaned back. It was the best he could do−−given what he knew about the story so far. When he finished the first draft, he would start over and add things to better frame the questions that the story answered, and he would take things out that didn't matter. The phone rang.

"Joe?" The voice was husky, like Isabelle's, but it turned up at the corners and had Texas in it.

"Daisy?"

"Yes. I'm in San Francisco . . . Wes died in July."

"I know," Joe said. "I'm sorry. I just heard. I was going to write."

"I'll be in Honolulu tomorrow. I wondered . . . "

"When will you be here?"

"In the afternoon. I'm on my way to Auckland to visit Adam−−my son Adam. I thought I would break up the trip and maybe get to see you."

She was staying at the Moana on Morgan's recommendation. They agreed to meet at five. Joe was in a mild state of shock when he put down the phone. There was no unfinished business between them. He had offered her everything he had, and she had chosen Wes. It had been clean and terrible, honest and final. Now, thirty years later, here they were again. Here, where? Deep down, he knew. His face was still buried in her hair, his lips by her ear.

"Do you know how many of us there are in the world?"

"Not very many," she said, would always say.

Joe worked the rest of the day, out of habit, but he did not sleep well.

He was half an hour early at the Moana, wearing his best blue aloha shirt, his mustache trimmed, his fingers drumming on the bar. Gilbert brought him a Glenlivet and left him alone. At five minutes to five, Daisy walked out of the hotel and down the wide steps. He knew her first by her walk, tall and careful, and then, as she approached, by her face which was fuller, more deeply lined, but still good humored and direct. They embraced beneath the banyan. She fit in his arms and against his shoulder as comfortably as ever. Joe could think of nothing to say that wasn't sappy, so he said nothing.

She stepped back and looked closely at him. They exchanged compliments, sat at a round table, and began to catch up. She told him about Wes, how he had refused to quit smoking and had succumbed to lung cancer. Her daughter and granddaughter were back living at home, recovering from a divorce. Adam was working on a timber plantation. Joe told her about Kate, Max, and his two marriages. No regrets, they agreed. How could you regret a life which produced your children? Joe told her about his writing and how he would face running out of money when it happened. He didn't need much−−as long as he could keep writing. He could drive a cab again or work in a bookstore. And besides, he brightened, remembering his steel company, he was four thousand dollars ahead in the market.

Daisy's hair was light brown and streaked with gray. Her eyes were grayish blue. She smiled often. They drank and then ate sandwiches, occasionally pausing in their conversation to watch the Pacific grow dark. When they were done, Joe walked with her up the steps and into the lobby. "I love the Moana," he said. "Once, when Ingrid and Max and I were on vacation, Maxie disappeared in there." He pointed to the men's room. When I went in to check on him, he was on the floor, pushing his toy rifle ahead of him, crawling out from under the last door in the line. He had locked them all from the inside." Joe laughed, stalling.

"What did you do?" she asked.

"Told him, 'retreat is the most difficult maneuver−−let's get out of here.'"

"I don't think I'm ready for sex," Daisy said quietly.

"It's overrated," Joe said. And then, "It's not as if we haven't been there." Disappointment hovered. "How about a back rub?"

She read his eyes for a moment and said, "That would be nice."

"Oh, good." They entered the elevator relieved to be still together. He took off his shoes in her room and lay down on the bed. Daisy slid next to him and turned on her side. He rubbed her shoulders and upper back for a long time, but she did not relax. He reached over and turned out the light. She said nothing. He continued and then, without thinking, he put his teeth on the muscle above one of her shoulder blades and shook her slightly. She winced and he bit harder. She cried out and spun around, drawing him tightly to her.

"Hold me," she said. "Hold me." He put his arms around her as she began to shake and sob. She beat softly on his back with her fists, and he held her more tightly. Gradually, her shaking eased and she breathed more evenly. Without speaking, they undressed and lay side by side. She had helped him once in a similar way. How strange, he thought. And how right.

"I've been brave," she said.

"I'll bet you have." Her hand moved down his stomach, almost as an afterthought. She urged him over on top of her and guided him into her. They lay complete. Sometime later, out of no particular necessity, he began to move slowly in and out. It was better than talking. Reassuring. I am right here, he was saying. I love you. He went on and on.

"Oh," she cried. "Oh . . . Oh . . . Oh . . . " Her head fell back on the pillow. "Oh . . . " And then, "Joe?" She put her hands on his buttocks and pulled him deeper into her. "Joe?" He gave in. Near the top of the wave that picked him up, he put his mouth on her open mouth and felt her calling, drawing him over. He poured into her, tumbling, giving her everything.

"My hero," Daisy said. She was leaning on one elbow and looking into his face. It was morning.

"Nah . . . " Joe said.

"I thought I'd forgotten how."

"No way," he said, waking up. "Don't you look great! You look like a little girl."

"I've got a favor to ask," she said. "I want to remember you like this. I can get myself to the airport."

"Uh−−when will I see you again?" Joe asked.

"I'm going home through France," she said. "You know, I have a studio on the property in Woodstock."

"Woodstock," Joe groaned. "Maybe you'd like to spend some of the winter out here?" They were too experienced to let the future spoil the moment. They smooched. Joe took a shower. He dressed, and they talked for a few minutes before he hugged her.

"Goodbye, beautiful," he said.

"Goodbye, Launcelot, Lochinvar . . . " He started toward the door and turned back a step toward her.

"Strider," he said.

"Strider," she drawled, smiling. They let go of each other with the total release that binds across any space or time.

Joe walked along Kalakaua Avenue. It was still early; most of the tourists were in bed or eating breakfast. Daisy. How unexpected! How great! He wasn't going to live in her studio. She had her life, and he had his, now. But he would see her again, he was pretty sure of that. What was between them was real and had remained this long; it wasn't going to go away. He sang "Scarlet Ribbons" several times and was good and hungry by the time he reached the shopping center.

Portuguese sausage. Coffee. Ah. The waitress, fiftyish, smiled at him as though she understood perfectly where he had just been. Life was so fine, in fact, that after breakfast he put off going home and wandered over

to Fisherman's Wharf. He sat with his feet dangling over the water and watched a man fish. His line went out between two high−bowed sampans, the San Carlos and the Woniya. He had short grizzled hair and a round head with compact Asian features. He was sitting on his heels, motionless. He could have been 55 or 75. A small cardboard box on the ground next to him was neatly packed−−a can of soda, a knife, a bag that probably held his lunch. The sound of traffic on Ala Moana was muted. The sun was full but not yet hot. The straight dark fishing line met the end of its reflection wavering on the green harbor water. He fished in silence for nearly an hour.

Joe finally stood up and stretched.

"Three days now, not biting," the man said.

"You get 'em, huh," Joe said and watched him turn back toward his line. He would never give up. The image of his bony head, his quiet eyes on the water, stayed with Joe.

He wrote it down when he got home, and in the morning, after he ate a bowl of cereal, he crossed out words and added a few, holding the fisherman in front of him. While he was imagining the fisherman, the aging bus boy appeared with his cart. Alphonse jumped off his fork lift. Whistling Ed Swaney walked over, sweating. Jade Willow Lady turned toward him from the grill. The bottle saint kneeled. They watched him with interest and concern. My teachers, he realized with a rush of feeling. My teachers. All this time and I didn't know.

He heard a noise at the door.

"Never mind, Batman. I'll get it." But no one was there, not even a baby in a basket. The morning air was vibrant. Doves called. His teachers and so many before him had done their best.

He bent his head.

"Aloha," Joe Burke said and took his stand beside them.

Every Story is a Love Story

1

A red MG came racketing around the corner. It passed, stopped, and reversed, one front fender swinging freely.

"Where you going?" The driver had wild eyes and a two day growth.

"Woodstock."

"Get in, get in." Patrick lowered himself into the small seat, holding his AWOL bag on his lap. "Whisky in the JAR," the driver sang to himself shifting through gears. "Musharingumgoogee . . . WAK for the Daddy−O . . . " He turned and shouted over the engine, "Where you coming from?"

"Wiesbaden."

"Germany?"

"Yes," Patrick shouted back.

"WAK for the Daddy−O . . . Good beer, the Krauts." They flew off bumps and jolted around curves for five or six miles. Conversation was impossible. They passed a golf course, rolling and open before a dark wall of mountain, then climbed a hill by three gas stations. "Woodstock!" the driver shouted, stopping at a narrow triangular green.

"Thanks for the ride."

The sound of the MG diminished in the distance as Patrick looked around at trees, a neatly painted white church, and a row of stores. He walked in the direction that the MG had gone until he reached a field about a mile from the green. He turned back and stopped at a house that had a large porch and a sign announcing "ROOMS."

An older woman answered his ring. Her hair was white, elaborately piled above her head.

"I'd like to rent a room−−if you have any vacancies."

"Hmmph." She was shorter than Patrick but seemed to be looking down at him. "This is a quiet house."

"Yes, ma'am."

"No smoking."

"Yes, ma'am."

She opened the door and showed him a corner room with a matching bed and bureau and a small rocking chair. "Bathroom down the hall." He paid for a week and signed the guest register. "O'Shaunessy?"

"Yes."

She handed him two keys. "I lock the front door after dark." Patrick nodded and retreated to the room. He unpacked his clothes and a paperback copy of The Origin of Species which he placed on the bedside table. He lay on the bed a few minutes adjusting to his new home, then left, closing the door silently behind him.

In town, he decided to try the Cafe Espresso. He walked down wide stone steps, crossed a patio, and entered an open door. Two people at the end of a small bar leaned towards each other, laughing and talking in lowered tones. At the other end of the room, a young man was practicing on an upright piano.

Patrick sat at a window table and waited until a tall woman emerged from the kitchen. She wore bead necklaces, a tight gray jersey, and a wrap around red and orange Indian print skirt. A thick blonde braid hung to her waist. Patrick ordered rice and vegetables and watched her hips move to a gentle repeating melody from the piano. The player varied the tempo and the emphasis, working further into the piece, exploring its edges without losing its rhythmic heart.

A man in his thirties with a round face and curly hair came in and sat at the next table. He placed black and white stones on a Go board, studying each move.

"That is Go, isn't it? I've read about it," Patrick offered.

"Go is an ancient Japanese game," the player said without looking up. "It requires intelligence and concentration."

"That leaves me out," Patrick said. The couple at the bar walked out. As the woman passed through the door,

she looked back at Patrick and smiled. Her eyes were gray, her shoulders half−turned, her weight evenly balanced. She was about 21, his age. He smiled back, surprised.

Women didn't usually pay attention to Patrick. He was compact, medium sized. He had reddish−brown hair and a square face with high cheekbones and traces of freckles. His blue eyes were set deeply behind thick eyebrows. He had been called "cute" a couple of times. Mostly he got sympathetic smiles as women pushed past him, going for the tall, dark, and handsomes, or the ones with money, or the major losers. It was a mystery to him how people got coupled up.

"My name is Eve," the waitress said in a luxurious voice as she bent forward with his plate. She had goddess breasts and smelled of patchouli.

"I'm Patrick," he said and choked. "King of repartee," he added, regaining his voice. She smiled as if she had known him deeply in another life, and then she swayed away into the kitchen. The Go player remained immersed in study, an air of relief emanating from his face. Perhaps he was recovering from the attentions of dark beauties with trust funds. Don't be jealous, Patrick told himself. When the gods want a good laugh, they give you what you want. "Try me," another voice in him said. "Long dark hair."

He ate dinner and began to confront the next problem. He had a few travelers checks in reserve, but he'd always found work before he had to cash them. He had paid for his own flight back to Wiesbaden.

"Come on, Pat, let me pay," his father offered.

"Nope."

"You're a hard case, Patrick."

It had been a good visit, but Patrick was ready to go after a week. "I thought I'd try Woodstock, New York," he told his father. "You used to talk about it."

"My old stomping grounds," his father said. "I have a friend there, Heidi Merrill. Haven't heard from her since her husband died. She has a son. Look her up for me, Pat−−give her my best."

"Will do."

Patrick checked around the cafe for a pay phone, wondering whether there was a listing for his father's friend. No phone. On his way out of the cafe, he changed his mind and ordered a beer at the bar. The room was filling. A Van Morrison album had replaced the piano player. Attractive women crowded around guys who wore hammer hooks and Stanley tapes like jewelry on their belts, totems of a better way.

"Feels good to stand up," he said to the guy next to him. "This is a happening place."

"You just get here?"

"Yep. Any work around?"

"What kind of work?"

"Wash dishes, construction, paint houses . . . "

"Hey Parker, you need anybody?" A heavyset fellow came over. He had a pleasant ironic expression.

"For what?" There were white paint stains on his button−down blue shirt.

"Says he's looking for work."

"Patrick O'Shaunessy." Patrick extended his hand.

"Parker Ives." He looked Patrick over as they shook hands. "Ladders, Patrick. Wasps," he said.

"No problem."

"Good. Meet me in the News Shop at 8; we'll see how it goes."

"Tomorrow?" Patrick asked.

"And tomorrow and−−yes." Parker drained the glass of beer he was holding. "Tomorrow." He put his glass on the bar and left.

"Parker's all right. My name is Claude, by the way."

"Aieee, Claude! A thin blonde with green eye shadow and exaggerated cherry red lipstick put her arms around his neck.

"Excuse me, Patrick."

Two young women entered and came over to the bar. One of them bent over, removed a sandal, and shook it. She had waist length dark brown hair and was wearing Levi's and a blue chambray shirt. She had long legs and long arms that made interesting angles out from the crouching curve of her hips. "There," she said, straightening. The top three buttons of her shirt were undone. Sensitive, Patrick thought. Her eyes were unusually clear, light hazel with flecks of gray and green. Her blonde friend was shorter, narrow waisted, and well built. The blonde caught him looking. Patrick, reddening, thought he saw a flash of understanding. She was a thinker, might even have read a book lately.

In Patrick's second year at Florida State, a biology professor named Ted Williams had turned him on to science. Patrick was an Army brat; he had lived in Florida, the Philippines, Panama, and Germany. He spoke passable Spanish and German. His parents were readers. Patrick had been around books all his life and felt as though he were ahead of the other students. Once he found a direction−−that he wanted to learn more about science−−he decided to go right at it. He didn't have to be a university student to read the books. It would be cheaper, and, besides, people were on the move. Work was easy to come by.

His father, raised in the depression and caught up in World War II, had stayed in the army. "Never underestimate the importance of a good billet," he had told Patrick more than once, an edict laid on him by Sergeant Donald, a mythic presence from the days before Officer Candidate School. Patrick's father never tired of quoting Sergeant Donald as they moved from base to base.

His parents were patient and generally good humored about military life. They escaped into books. When Patrick announced that he was dropping out, his father seemed to think it was fine. "Don't burn any bridges, Pat. You can go back to school later, if you want. Or come work with me." His father was about to retire from the Army and was planning to settle in Florida and work for himself as a handyman. When his father wasn't reading, he enjoyed fixing things; he looked forward to becoming a sort of anti−hero−−Major O'Shaunessy to the rescue, the tools, the truck, the little boxes of washers and screws and finishing nails, the retirement checks punctually in the mail.

Patrick's mother fussed about Patrick's eating habits, but she wasn't really worried. Patrick's sister, Molly, had earned a commercial pilot's license before she settled down in Atlanta to teach English, married to a hard working good old boy. Patrick, his mother felt, would find his own way if he ate right and got enough sleep. Both parents suggested books for his reading list.

Patrick was well along in the list. When he finished books, he mailed them to Molly for safekeeping. Building the library, he would tell himself as he doled out postage money. Another few days and he would send the Darwin.

He was still looking at the blonde. She smiled slightly, and he said, "I'm Patrick."

"Amber," she said. "This is my friend, Willow." Patrick nodded at them both and moved a step closer.

"I like this place," he said.

"First time in the Depresso?"

Patrick laughed. "Is that what you call it?"

"That's what everybody calls it," Amber said. "How long have you been in town?"

"About four hours."

Amber touched Willow's arm. "We're old timers."

"We've been here a month," Willow said in a low voice. There was a brief drop in the noise level as the piano player crossed the room with quick steps and went out the door. "There he goes," Amber said.

"Who's he?" asked Patrick.

"Dylan. He's Willow's hero."

"Dylan?"

"Bob Dylan," Willow said.

"No shit," Patrick said.

"He's one of the reasons we're in this whistle stop," Amber said. "Willow heard he was here."

"And Joan Baez and Van Morrison," Willow said.

Patrick snorted. "Where's Beethoven?"

"He's watching, maybe," Willow said.

"My man," Patrick said. "He sure rattled his cage." Willow flushed.

"Van Morrison rattles my cage," Amber said, and Patrick forgot about Beethoven.

"So, what do you do?" he asked her.

"I go to Stanford. We both do."

"I went to Florida State for a while. What are you studying?"

"Pre−med, I guess. My father's a doc."

"I'm reading a lot of science," Patrick said. "Just finishing Darwin."

"Yeah, Darwin," Amber said. "I was in the Galapagos Islands once."

"What! What were they like?"

"Kind of rocky. Foggy in the mornings when I was there. Nothing to do."

Patrick was impressed. "Darwin was good. He kept track. He thought about what he was seeing . . . those finch."

"Yeah," Amber said. She looked around the room. "The usual suspects," she said to Willow. "Long−tailed carpenters," she added for Patrick. It had been a full day. Things were happening too fast; Patrick wanted to slow down.

"Look," he said, "nice to meet you. I'll see you around. I've got a job−−start tomorrow."

"Bye, Patrick," Amber said. Willow lifted one hand.

"Amber!" Patrick said to himself, walking back to his room. Frieda had gone to bed with him a couple of times during his last summer in Germany. He'd gotten lucky once at a party in Tallahassee. That was it. No one like Amber. His eyes opened wider as he remembered her. He put his hand on her shoulder, imagining the warm solid body under her white blouse. His mind spun out, and he cleared his throat. He shook his head, got control of himself, and walked faster.

A man playing a blues harp passed him on the other side of Tinker Street. The blues pulsed up into the evening sky, mournful and elaborate, a peacock tail of sound. Feelings stirred for which Patrick had no words. He pumped one fist in the air like a brother and turned aside to the rooming house.

2

He likes you, as usual," Willow said. "And of course you don't care. You are such a bitch, sometimes."

"I am not. I can't help it if he likes me." Amber made a tiny swaggering move with her breasts. "Anyway, he likes you just as much."

"Well, why doesn't he look at me?"

"If you'd wear something besides jeans and work shirts . . ." Amber's pants and short skirts clung to perfect legs. Her blouses were tight. She was averagely good looking. Her face was open and energetic; her hair was chestnut tending to blonde, shoulder length and wavy. Men found themselves looking at her, talking to her, and then−−the more they looked, the more they saw. She was faster than they were; she adjusted effortlessly in flight, becoming more serious or more carefree, more cerebral or more passionate under their gaze.

"Men are SO stupid," Willow said.

"Don't you think they're cute sometimes? Even AhnRee with his tan and those big white towels he wraps around his belly at the pool. He's old−−God, do you think he's fifty?−−but he has those big round dark eyes." AhnRee had picked up Amber the second day they were in town.

"When I see someone so special, I know! I must paint you. My name is AhnRee," he had said with great dignity.

"AhnRee?" Willow asked.

"As in Matisse," he said. "It is an honor, such a name. A curse . . . But never mind." He smiled gallantly. Gigi, Willow said to herself. No one should copy Maurice Chevalier. They get the eyes and the teeth, but they don't have the engine. No fire engine inside the doors.

"No fire engine," she said to Amber. "Huh?" AhnRee had said something to Amber and Amber was asking why they shouldn't try living in his studio.

"You will find it most private," AhnRee said. "It is some distance from the main house. In return, a bit of modeling, say, once a week? Say you will," he pleaded.

"Only if it is all right with Willow," Amber said, kicking Willow in the ankle.

"Ah, Willow," AhnRee said, wrenching his eyes from Amber who was becoming ever more elusive, more of a muse.

"Where is this place?" Willow asked.

"A short drive up the mountain. An easy ride on a bicycle. In fact, I have several bicycles−−if you don't mind the old fashioned kind with baskets on the handlebars."

"And what do I have to do?" Amber kicked her again.

AhnRee considered. "You may mow the lawn around the studio. And, if you wish, attend a little to the flowers."

Willow had given in, and it had been fine. AhnRee had left them alone. And Amber seemed to enjoy modeling. "It's not so bad, being admired," she told Willow.

"Well," Willow said, coming back to the present, "you knocked Patrick out with that bit about foggy mornings on the Galapagos Islands."

"Can I help it if my father is a Darwin freak? He practically made me go with him."

"Christ," Willow said.

"He likes you; I'm telling you," Amber said.

"Gee, maybe he'll let me hold his hand someday, comfort his broken heart." She smiled to soften the edge in her tone, and they pedaled toward home in the early evening light.

Willow liked Patrick. He thought for himself. And his eyes were cute, a penetrating blue that changed from hard to soft. He was the right height and looked strong underneath that funny European work shirt. Her imagination slowed at his belt. She had shared sleeping bags with Aaron at a sing−out, but it had been dark. It

had been pleasant enough, I mean, O.K., she wrote in her journal, but men's bodies were basically terra incognita. What she knew of sex was a fuzzy blend of Michelangelo and the diaries of Anais Nin. There were plenty of men around−−it wasn't that−−it was just that none of them turned her on. She tired of their talk and endless competition. She'd rather listen to the Beethoven quartets. That was another thing about Patrick. What did he say? "Rattled his cage," that was it. Exactly. Her perfect brother, David, said he liked Beethoven; David always said what he was supposed to. But he never listened to Beethoven. He liked the Beatles, for God's sake. I mean, yes, they wrote some catchy melodies, but really. They were a long way from Dylan, let alone Beethoven.

Willow's indignation carried her to the top of the last hill before AhnRee's driveway. She got off her bike and waited for Amber. They walked up the bumpy dirt road, one on each side of the grass strip in the middle. As they passed the main house, they got on their bikes and pedaled to the studio along the edge of a small steep hay field rich in clover and wildflowers, surrounded by trees. The studio was made of dark weathered wood. It had a deep glow to Willow, perhaps because it was the first time she had lived anywhere other than home or the university.

She slept on a screened porch that looked into the woods behind the house. Amber had the bedroom. The central room had a cathedral ceiling and a skylight that faced north. It was furnished with an old couch, a coffee table, and two armchairs drawn up by a stone fireplace. They ate at a large table in the kitchen, the room through which one entered the house.

AhnRee explained to Amber that skylights faced north so that the light for painting would be more even, the changes more gradual. Painters had been settling in Woodstock for generations. There were many such houses−−hard to keep warm in the winter, but, AhnRee pointed out with a shrug, "If one is in San Miguel d'Allende . . . "

"Mexico, right?" Willow asked Amber.

"Right. I guess he goes there every winter." Amber had spent her time meeting people and going to parties. She already had one guy chasing her, showing up unannounced and hanging around. Willow usually excused herself and read on her bed. An outside door led to the porch; the door was solid and blocked most of the noise from inside the house. When she wasn't reading, she took walks and rode her bike into town for groceries. She was learning to cook. You would have killed a robin if you hit it with her first loaf of seven grain bread, but she was getting the hang of it. She had developed a wicked lasagna. Mornings after, the lasagna pan was as empty as the Chianti bottle or bottles.

On this particular evening, she threw a salad together−−avocado, feta cheese, a few scallions, red leaf lettuce, lemon juice, and a yummy Portuguese olive oil that Ann−in−the−deli had recommended. Ann was middle aged with a red face and a bad leg. She sat behind the cash register, talking loudly with customers, denouncing the government and its stupid war. She liked young people and extended credit when they were short of money. She had a metal box with 3X5 cards in it, alphabetized by name. Willow watched her accept payments and cross out numbers at the bottom of little columns while customers waited proudly with bags containing six−packs, cigarettes, potato chips, and quarts of milk. If someone was charging, he (usually a he) would mumble thanks and pick his way out guiltily while Ann added another number to his column.

"I've got to get a job soon," Willow said, taking another bite of salad.

"What for?" Amber's father made a deposit every month to her account. While you're in school, he told her.

"I want to. I mean, I don't want to keep living on your money."

"It's not my money. I didn't earn it."

"Yeah, but . . . " They had taken a bus to Sacramento and caught a train east, the day after finals. The idea swept them off their feet. They were just now, a month later, realizing that they were actually somewhere else. After a day of walking around the Village in New York, they took a bus to Woodstock. They got out in front of the News Shop, and here they were. Their parents weren't thrilled, but Amber convinced her father on the phone that she was having a good time and was in control of herself. Willow resorted to a stream of postcards−−maple trees in October, scenes of the Ashokan Reservoir, and one of the tiny Old Catholic Church peeping out of the trees. "Father Francis built it himself with the help of his boys, I mean, acolytes," she wrote. "A kindly old fraud who presides over his two acres with tottering good humor, dispensing advice and tea to wanderers. Amber and I went to a wedding there last week. Lots of flowers. Lousy cake. It's halfway up a mountain called, 'Overlook.' Love, Willow."

"What would you do?" Amber asked.

"I don't know. I don't think I'm waitress material. I mean, God, I wish I were. I like food, but I'm too dreamy. I mean, I want to do something well."

"You don't want to work at night, anyway," Amber said.

"No." When it got dark, Willow would just as soon go to bed with a book. She was an early riser.

"Go with the flow," Amber said. "Something will turn up."

"I guess." Willow collected the dishes, washed them, and went out to the porch, to her comfortable bed, a warm safe cave. She undressed and snuggled into her pillows. Darwin, she thought. She imagined Patrick aboard H.M.S. Beagle. "Your muffin, Sir." She presented him with a gorgeous cinnamon apple muffin on a tin plate. "Aye, aye," someone said as she fell asleep.

In the morning, she went for a walk, gathered wildflowers for the kitchen table, and mixed a batch of bread, placing it to rise in the sun, covered with a dishcloth. She made coffee and ate a bagel. Amber appeared, yawning and rubbing her eyes. She poured herself a cup of coffee, and they discussed the day's possibilities. Art wanted Amber to help him prepare a barnwarming party; he had just bought a barn that he planned to make into a house. Willow was invited. Art was considerate and rather handsome, Willow conceded. But she thought she'd stay home. "How are you going to meet people that way?" Amber asked.

"I'm already meeting people," she said. "I'm bored with people."

Amber shook her head. "Do you think I ought to let my hair get longer? This coffee is so good."

"Long hair is a pain," Willow said dismissively, although she was proud of hers and brushed it thoroughly every day. "With your body, who needs distraction?"

"I don't know. I look so−−conventional." This was dangerous territory. Amber was, in fact, conventional. She was a little wild, maybe, but she was on the pill and she didn't get attached for long; she kept her options open. Her grades were surprisingly good. Willow's own record at Stanford was ordinary. The courses were all so canned, pre−digested, just right for her perfect brother who was a year behind her and practically in law school already. Willow did the minimum, but she wasn't into it. There had to be more to life than the accepted opinion about George Eliot. Christ, you were lucky if you got to read James Joyce, never mind Henry Miller. Willow adored Henry Miller.

"All right, I am conventional," Amber said, breaking into Willow's reverie. "And I'm going to have a damned good time while I'm at it." Willow poured the last of the coffee into their cups. Amber wasn't really awake, Willow knew. At ten or eleven, her eyes would open the rest of the way, slightly startled, slightly pleased to

have survived the transition. Amber's eyes were a dark Mediterranean brown. If I were gay, Willow thought, I could go for Amber. She's so fierce underneath that easy chameleon surface; she knows what she wants, and she gets it. Amber stretched and went back into her room, emerging when Art honked the horn in his pickup. Willow waved at Art and watched Amber skip into the truck, elaborately casual, a barnwarmer's dream. Willow punched down the bread and left it to rise again. Amber would get fucked tonight, she thought. Or not. But she'd have the choice.

Willow washed the few dishes and dried them as she tried to think about sex. It was becoming a more persistent question or urge or need, these days. She wandered out to the porch, kicked off her sandals, and lay on the bed. She imagined Art standing by the door. He melted down and changed into Patrick. "Oh, to hell with it," she said and took off her pants. She ran her fingers lightly back and forth between her legs while Patrick watched. She drew up her knees. She let them fall open. "What are you looking at?" she teased Patrick in a low voice.

"I'm a romantic," he said earnestly.

"Well, if you're a romantic, why aren't you naked with a rose in your teeth?" Patrick left, as she continued to play with herself. In a moment, he was back, naked, a long stemmed red rose held carefully between his teeth. He was nicely muscled with a flat stomach. She motioned him closer with one hand. He approached slowly, and she held out her hand for the rose. He gave it to her. "Good, Patrick," she said and struck him lightly across the stomach. Thorns left three tiny drops of blood. He gasped and drew in his stomach. His eyes opened wider and softened. "What do you want?" she asked.

"To please you." She looked at the rose, weighed it in her hand to get the feel of it, and looked back at Patrick. He did not run away. He was willing to suffer for her. His mouth was slightly open and he had a large erection. She indicated the end of the bed with the rose and slid down, pulling a pillow with her for her head. Patrick moved around in front of her. She pointed at the flagstones of the porch floor.

"So, please me." He got on his knees and she placed her heels on his back. Willow's knees were slowly opening and closing as she rubbed harder. Her long slim back arched. Patrick. "Ahhh," she cried softly. "Ahhhhhhh, ahhhh, ahhh." Her feet slid out and her legs collapsed on the bed. She was warm and wet and out of breath. She opened her eyes. The air was bright, almost vivid. Patrick had disappeared. She would reward him another time. Laundry, she thought cheerfully.

A crow called twice. She rolled over on her side and watched a squirrel jump onto the trunk of a maple and wait, tail curled, listening. "Squirrelie," she said. "Yes." She sat up, swinging her feet down to the cool flagstones. "Yes," she said. "Shower." Squirrelie ran up the tree out of view.

Willow made a pile of clothes on the cotton coverlet and took the bundle to the washing machine in a corner of the kitchen. She pulled off her T−shirt and walked into the bathroom where she regarded herself in the mirror before getting into the shower. Her breasts were too small, she thought as hot water ran deliciously down her back; but they were pretty. Her long waist and long legs gave her body a flowing athletic line. I do have an adequate ass, she said to herself, soaping it. She was continually unsure as to whether she should throw it around or wait until The Right One discovered it for himself.

"You are so beautiful," The Right One said, unable to lift his eyes. She swayed modestly.

"I have these three tasks," she said and burst out laughing in the shower. The bread, God. She washed her hair and went on with the day.

Amber returned mid−afternoon and was unable to convince her to go to the party. Shortly after Amber left, Willow considered the house (clean), her hair (brushed), and the rest of the day (free). She put a paperback

copy of *Big Sur and the Oranges of Hieronymus Bosch* in her bag and rode out past AhnRee's. He was drinking something by the pool, accompanied by a placid looking blonde in her forties. Willow waved and then bumped down to the blacktop road where she picked up speed and breezed downhill into town, her hair fluttering nicely behind her.

She was early enough to get a table on the patio in front of the Depresso. She ordered a cup of coffee and read her book, looking up now and then to watch the regulars gather and the tourists walk uncomfortably back and forth. Her porch, the clean house, and the baked bread were satisfyingly present.

"What are you reading?" God! Patrick was standing a few feet away. She held the book so that he could read the cover. "I've come for my reward," he said. She dropped the book. "A cold one after a day of scraping paint," he continued, reaching down and handing her the book. "Henry Miller−−I heard he was good."

"Yes," Willow said, recovering. "Well, don't let me keep you from your reward; you deserve it."

"Right," Patrick said uncertainly. "Willow, right?" She nodded. "Where's Amber?"

"She's at a barnwarming party breaking hearts." This was definitely disloyal.

"Aha," Patrick said, "talk to you later." Willow smiled and went back to her book. I hate him, she thought. Amber, too. She drank the rest of her coffee. Time to leave. But she couldn't bring herself to get on her bike and pedal home.

She went inside and ordered a beer at the bar. Patrick was in deep conversation with a rugged good looking regular named Wendell. They seemed to be talking about chisels. Jesus. Bob Dylan was sitting with Bernard and Marylou, the owners, at a round table near the kitchen door. They were laughing loudly. Bernard has a handsome mustache, Willow thought. Dylan looked like he was winding up for an intense night. He was SO intuitive; he always caught her looking and usually ignored her. Once, he gave her a quick little shake of his head−−it's a fucked up world, we gotta do something, he seemed to be saying. He was on the edge of control, major chutzpah.

Willow couldn't get her father to understand Dylan. Her father was a Brahms expert; how could he? "A generational difference," he suggested. Willow had snorted, angry with him for evading the argument. "Far be it from me to suggest that he is a nihilist, simultaneously outdated and immature . . . not to mention noisy," her father continued. Well, at least he wasn't treating her like a child.

"He is writing American masterpieces," she said.

"God help us." Her father was grinning, and they left it at that.

Claude came in and gave her his big smile and automatic wink. He was handsome and could get away with anything, she thought. Damn him. But she had to admit that she liked him. I mean, he liked himself; everyone in the place liked him; how could she not? Claude began talking to Sue, a painter who was usually with a sad charmer named Jim. As she was thinking about Jim, he came through the door. He and Sue exchanged smiles and private greetings, but they did not hug. He seemed more interested in getting a drink as fast as he could. Problems, Willow thought.

Wendell introduced Patrick to a guy named Joe. The three sat at a table and began talking about the war. Patrick waved Willow over. "You know Willow?" he asked the others.

"Seen you around," Wendell said. Joe nodded. He had looked Willow over on previous occasions in the Depresso. He was tall and alert, in his mid−twenties; he had dark hair, blue eyes, and a mustache. They had

never spoken, but Willow had the feeling that he knew more about her than she did about him.

"What do you think about Vietnam?" Patrick asked Willow as she sat down. They waited while she considered.

"I think we ought to take care of our own problems before we start telling other people what to do. And we should be dropping food and medicine, not bombs; I mean, we're killing people." Joe held up his glass in agreement.

"The fucking government is bullshitting us," Wendell said.

"My father's in the Army," Patrick said. "He says we can't win in Asia; look what happened to the French."

"They're bullshitting us," Joe agreed. "But, they believe some of the bullshit−−that crap about communism; they want to keep winning the World War. They aren't too bright."

"That's for sure," Patrick said. "My father's getting out."

"The last year I was in," Joe said, "we lost our clerk. The Major made me the clerk because I was the only one who knew how to type. We had this guy, Captain Sampson, who went by the book. He used to send guys back to the barracks if their socks weren't right. He was O.K., really; he thought it was what he was supposed to do−−keep the troops sharp, good for morale, and so on. He didn't know any better." Joe took a swallow of beer.

"One day I got an emergency message addressed to Captain Sampson. Why hadn't he reported for his plagu shot? They left off the 'e' in plague. I knew right away what had happened. His Nam orders had gotten lost somewhere. I took the message over to him and watched him turn pale. Bye, bye, Sammy, I said to myself. They were just grabbing people for Nam when I got out."

"I had a college deferment for a while," Patrick said. "I hope I don't get drafted. I'd probably leave the country."

"Canada?" Wendell asked.

"South America or Europe," Patrick said.

"I'd never go," Wendell said. "I wouldn't do their dirty work, the assholes."

"They don't want old men, anyway," Joe said.

"I may be old," Wendell said, "but I can put you on your ass, Joe Burke."

"So could Willow," Joe said, grinning.

"It's a female thing," Willow said to Wendell who might or might not be accepting this.

"Female thing," he said looking at her breasts. This was comfortable territory. "Ha, ha. There's male things, and there's female things."

Joe held up his glass. "Right on, Wendell."

Willow finished her beer and left. They were a pretty decent bunch, she thought as she pedaled home. They

treated her like one of the guys, almost. She was getting used to conversations full of fuck this and fuck that. It was a relief after the cautious academic world of her parents. When she arrived home, she was flushed from the ride. Amber was still out. She made a sandwich and went to bed with Henry Miller who was dependably self−involved, hip, sexy, and good humored.

3

The next morning, in the News Shop, Parker Ives introduced Patrick to Wilson. "Willy, you and Patrick get started on the Van Slyke house." He rubbed his forehead. "She's intense about her roses; better cover them. The lilacs, too. I'll be around later with more primer."

"Ya, Boss. Let's go, Patrick." Wilson was short and muscular, balding, with a thick black mustache and a glass eye. He drove at top speed up the mountain, stopping several miles from town in the driveway of a white Colonial. Purple lilacs leaned out from each side of the front door; rose bushes extended to the ends of the house. They covered the roses with drop cloths and tied a tarpaulin around each lilac. A woman wearing linen slacks and a cafe−au−lait blouse appeared at the corner of the house. Her hair was blonde, short, and well cut.

"Good morning. Is Parker here?"

"He will be, later," Wilson said. She nodded and drove away in a station wagon, tires crunching on gravel.

They worked on ladders, scraping a section and then priming it. "Willy−−is every woman in Woodstock good looking?" Patrick asked.

"Depends how long you look," Wilson said. Parker drove in, and Wilson jumped from the fourth rung of his ladder. "Break time." They walked over to Parker's aging blue Mercedes.

"How you doing, Patrick?"

"He's having a little trouble with the pace," Willy said sitting down, placing his coffee on the grass.

"Up yours," said Patrick.

"But for what you're paying . . . "

"Jesus," Parker said. "What's got into you today?"

Wilson bounced like a monkey, scratching under both armpits. "Or, or. Grick. Grick."

"This is what happens when he gets to bed early," Parker said to Patrick. Mrs. Van Slyke returned.

"Parker?" He rose to his feet balancing his coffee, assumed a good humored expression, and approached Mrs. Van Slyke.

"Her husband's a bad dude," Wilson said. "Nothing you couldn't handle." His live eye gleamed. "He did a good painting of a boxer, once. They got married."

"He married the boxer?"

"Smart ass." Wilson shook his head. "Then he slowed down−−know what I mean?" They considered Mrs. Van Slyke who had Parker more or less pinned against the lilacs. "My woman gets in the way . . . " He snorted. "I don't even have a studio, paint right in the living room."

"You a painter?"

"All the time, man. What do you do?"

"Read a lot−−science. Trying to find out what's true about things."

"I'll tell you one truth," Wilson said. "It don't count until it's on the wall." He leaped back on his ladder and attacked peeling paint, banging his scraper on the siding to keep time. Sweat dripped into a bandanna rolled and tied around his forehead. Patrick got to work.

At four−thirty, Wilson gave him a ride home. Patrick washed and walked into town where he had a few beers and talked about the war with a guy named Wendell, a guy named Joe , and Willow, the friend of Amber's. He left early and slept well.

The week passed quickly. On Friday afternoon he cashed his first check at the Bank of Orange and Ulster County and walked over to the Depresso.

"Hey Patrick."

"Sam. Hot one." Sam worked for Parker on another job; he was part of the morning gathering at the News Shop.

"How you getting along with Willy?"

"Good."

"Crazy bastard," Sam said. "He was in Korea; his father or grandfather was a general or something."

"My father's in the Army."

"No shit. Yeah, well, Willy−−his job was to go out and bring back North Koreans for the intelligence guys. Told me they went out at night. Said the North Koreans were supposed to be alive, but it was easier if they were dead."

"No wonder he's crazy. Hey, Claude."

"What's happening, Patrick?"

"I got paid."

"Don't tell him that," Sam said.

"Mon ami . . . "

"Hi, Claude." A young woman stepped next to Claude and took his arm.

"Who's your friend?" she asked, looking at Patrick.

"This is Patrick."

He remembered her gray eyes; she was the one who had smiled at him on his first night in town. Up close, he noticed tiny freckles and a gap between her front teeth.

"I'm Sue," she said.

"Hi."

"Claude is a famous ski jumper, did you know?" She was grinning widely.

"You ski, Patrick?" Claude asked.

"A little."

"I'm from the U.P., did 300 feet at Iron Mountain."

"Yo!"

"No more. Now I go one time a year to the Bear Mountain meet. Little jump."

"You won last year," Sue said.

"Year before, Cher."

"Claude, have you seen Jim?"

"Not today."

She frowned. "Bye, Claude. Bye, Patrick." Patrick watched her leave.

"So who's Jim?" he asked.

"Her boyfriend−−alcoholic dude, a nice guy. She likes you." Claude drifted along the bar; he knew everyone. Patrick was beginning to feel at home in the Depresso. Amber had come in twice during the week, once with Willow and once with a builder named Art. She had smiled at Patrick, but she wasn't available−−although her smile seemed to indicate that any day she might be. I'm on her list, Patrick thought, smiling back.

He finished the Darwin book and started *An Introduction to Mathematics* by Alfred North Whitehead. One evening in the Depresso, Sue came over to his table and asked what he was reading. "Listen to this," he said.

"Operations of thought are like cavalry charges in battle: they are strictly limited in number; they require fresh horses; they must be made only at decisive moments."

Sue wrinkled her nose. "Too much." She sat down.

"I mean, this book is a classic. What is math, anyway? Right here," Patrick said, patting the cover. "Lays it out. You can learn anything you want from books."

"Why aren't you in school somewhere?"

"I was; I quit. It was just a place where they put you in a box−−a lawyer box, a doctor box. I didn't want to be in a box. Besides, it was expensive." Sue giggled.

"So, where are you from, Sue?"

"Michigan, same as Claude−−except he's from the U.P."

"What are you doing in Woodstock?"

"Art Students League. I model and take classes."

"Should have known," Patrick said, "everyone I meet is an artist."

"You seen Jim: tall, cute?"

"I don't think so."

"He's a reader, too. He gets a pile of books and a six−pack, lies on the couch and reads all day." She looked around and sighed. "Later, Patrick." She left, relaxed and alert, like a fox on the move.

The next night she sat at his table again. "It's hot," she said.

"Want a beer?"

"No thanks."

"I get thirsty staring at white all day," Patrick said.

"You want to go swimming?"

"Sure." Patrick surprised himself. "Where?"

"I know a place."

"I don't have a car."

"I've got my roommate's for the night."

When they got into the car, Sue twisted and reached past Patrick to arrange something on the back seat behind him. She was sweating slightly, and he was astonished by her sweet rich smell. "That's strange," he said, "we've got the same smell. How can that be? Same genes? I'm mostly Irish. What are you?"

"Half Polish, half Ojibwa," she said. She drove to Shady and followed the Sawkill creek to a spot where she could pull off the road. She led Patrick through trees and down a steep path to the stream. It was nearly dark as they walked over rocks to a bend where a deeper pool curved along the outer bank. Sue crossed below the pool to a shingle of rocks and boulders and kicked off her sandals. "Here," she said.

Patrick noticed the orange glow of cigarettes on the opposite bank, but he couldn't see the faces behind them. He forgot about them when Sue pulled her T−shirt up over her head and stepped out of her jeans and underwear. "C'mon, Patrick." Her body was compact and tanned; one curve flowed naturally into the next. He stripped awkwardly, thinking that there was a first time for everything, and followed her into the icy water. She swam up and down, diving and surfacing, blowing water, black hair sleek behind her ears. Patrick did a few somersaults and floated, feeling the heat of the day drain out of his body.

"Oooh," she said, walking out of the water and onto the rocks. "Let's build a fire." They broke dead branches, took a few pages from Patrick's pocket notebook, and started the fire with her lighter. Patrick stood in front of the small blaze; Sue sat on her jeans, her knees drawn up to her breasts.

"Hey TURD face. Where d'ja come from? UNDER A FUCKING ROCK?" Patrick spun around. He saw a

white face in the dark, a man standing behind a low line of boulders, fifteen feet away. "FUCKING IDIOT?" The man's voice was twisted, nearly screaming; his eyes were distorted. He was beefy, too big to mess with. "FUCKING QUEER!" He took a step forward. Patrick became oddly calm. There was a rock by his ankle, the size of a grapefruit. He slowly flexed his knees and looked into the man's eyes. Scoop the rock and smash his face, one motion. The man yelled again. Patrick held his eyes. Time slowed. A stick snapped behind Patrick, and the hair rose on the back of his neck. Sue hadn't moved. He was trapped. He didn't dare turn his head.

"Let's get the hell out of here," a voice said behind him. "Fuck him, let's get out of here, go get a beer."

"He's an asshole!"

"Yeah, fuck him, let's go get a beer."

The white face hesitated and turned away. The two crashed through the woods, swearing and shouting.

Patrick put his clothes on as fast as he could. "I was going to kill him," he said, in shock. "I mean, I knew how. It was already in me." Sue smiled. "Get dressed, Sue! What if they come back?" She got to her feet and stood naked on the rocks as though she were in her bedroom, firelight flickering up her body.

He put out the fire while she dressed. His heart was still pounding as they climbed up the bank and walked quickly to the car. "Did you see the other guy?"

"He was in the dark," Sue said. "I couldn't see him."

"He sounded local," Patrick said. "He saved the scene. That guy was flipped out, gone! Sounded like he was from North Carolina or some place down there. He was gone."

It was a relief to be on the road.

"I need a beer," he said when they reached town.

"O.K., Patrick, see you," Sue said, stopping in front of the Depresso.

"O.K." He paused. "You are really beautiful." She made a wry smile that said, "I already know that."

"Night, Patrick."

The next day, during coffee break, he told Wilson what had happened. "Chicks," Wilson said.

"I never knew I could kill somebody," Patrick said. "I mean−−I'm not the violent type. But it was all inside me, like it was pre−wired or something. I never looked at that rock, but I knew it was there."

Wilson sighed. "Knife comes in handy sometimes," he said. Patrick took a folding Opinel out of his pocket. "Too small," Wilson said. His hand brushed the black handle of the hunting knife he wore on his belt. "Bad shit," he said. He stood up. "Gotta put the paint on the wall, Patrick."

That night, Sue did not show up at the Depresso. A week later, she came into the bar with Jim, laughing and having a good time. She waved at Patrick like an old friend, but she didn't say anything to him. He felt less isolated, seeing her. He hadn't touched her, but he knew her smell and what she looked like underneath those clothes.

On Saturday, Parker invited him to a party at his house. When Patrick arrived, the downstairs was full of

people talking loudly and drinking steadily. He learned that Parker, too, was a drop out−−from Harvard−−and that the Mercedes had belonged to his mother. "You know," Patrick said to him after a few beers, "when people talk, I get the feeling I'm missing something. It's like they're saying one thing but really talking about something else. It's like there's another layer underneath everything."

"You're learning," Parker said. Desperation crossed his face. He looked as though he might get in his car and drive away forever. Instead, he smiled helplessly and went for another drink. Patrick met Wilson's wife, Elaine, a short cheerful woman with a plain face and an extravagant body. Wilson was making pronouncements about the paintings on Parker's walls, mentioning painters Patrick had never heard of. Parker's two sons were running about having a great time. Parker and his wife, Hildy, were both stout blondes with fair complexions and blue eyes. Their boys were stamped from the same mold. Patrick could see them someday hauling ladders, driving elegant old cars, and charming well−to−do housewives.

Joe Burke showed up and introduced Patrick to his lady. "Sally Daffodil," he called her. She was tall and athletic with a grace and coloring that was like the flower. They were a good pair, Patrick thought, funny and open, yet . . . He sensed reserves in them that ran deep.

Patrick wasn't used to the company of so many sharp people in one room. Gino Canzoni came in, the foreman of Parker's other, larger, crew. He was tall and ironic. He had a rep on the crew for fearlessness at great heights. "My wife, Cree," he said to Patrick. She was dark with slender intelligent features. She had a blinding smile. The charm and pain and hint of wildness in her smile obliterated Patrick's defenses.

"Hi," he said. She accepted his surrender.

"Welcome to town," she said gaily. He felt included. Gino and Joe had grown up in Woodstock and were old friends. The group stood around telling stories. "Before Gino took me to meet his family," Cree said, "he told his mother that he had fallen for an older woman from the Midwest."

"Give her something to worry about," Gino said.

"Six months," she laughed.

"Funny thing was," Gino went on, "the same week that Cree was meeting everybody, Vassar degree and all that, she was on display at the checkout counter in the Grand Union−−on the cover of Modern Detective."

"A gun to my head," Cree said. "Forced to open a safe."

"Leg shot," Gino said proudly. Sally Daffodil smiled patiently. Joe looked a bit restless.

"Are you a model?" Patrick asked.

"Was," Cree said and led Sally away. Parker put on a Dixieland album. Vassar? Gino was a Dartmouth graduate. Joe Burke was doing carpentry work but had dropped out of Hamilton College. He and Gino were writers of some kind. Patrick felt that he had stumbled into an alternative world; the more educated you were, the less money you made, or something. He didn't understand this world. It attracted him and put him off. It was free in a way that seemed good. But it was threatening, somehow. There was something overripe about it. He went outside and had a non−alternative hamburger, served to him by the older boy. The smell of meat cooking on the grill was delicious. Smoke rose, drawing Patrick's eyes up the dark green mountain to the ridge line, an hour's walk above them.

"So, how do you like our fair town?" Hildy asked.

"Very fair it is," Patrick said. "Good burger!"

"Plenty more where that came from." Patrick heard a trace of Europe in her voice.

"Are you from Woodstock?"

"I was born in the Netherlands," she said. "We came over not long after the war."

"I used to live in Germany," Patrick said. "Very different."

"Ja," Hildy said and yelled at Alden, the youngest, to get away from the road. She turned back to Patrick.

"What brings you to Woodstock?"

"I heard it was an interesting place. My father lived here for a couple of years, once."

"There are a lot of artists," Hildy said. "Musicians, too. And writers. They're all artists, I guess. Parker likes having people on his crew he can talk to. Are you a painter?"

"Nope. I'm not anything yet."

Hildy looked at him. "Hmmm," she said. "I'm a mother. And a cook."

"I think I could learn to cook," Patrick said.

"Sure you could; it just takes practice−−and you have to love it. That's the secret ingredient. You have to love it. ALDEN!"

Patrick finished his burger, thanked Parker and Hildy, and walked down the road. As the sounds of the party faded behind him, he began to relax. He hadn't realized how tense he'd been. What's the matter with you? he asked himself. Parties are for fun, right? But he had to admit that it hadn't been fun, not really. Interesting, but not fun. What is fun? Is it when you don't care what happens?

He turned down Rock City Road toward town. If you didn't care at all, you wouldn't be interested in what happened; it wouldn't matter. How could that be fun? But, if you cared a lot, you would be too tense to have fun. I guess, he thought, you have to care a little, enough to be interested, but not too much. He tended to be on or off; he cared intensely or he didn't care at all. In this case, he thought, he cared too much. He wanted a woman. He was just as good as Joe Burke or Gino Canzoni. They had women. Beauties. They were citizens or writers or artists or whatever they were. Who was he?

Patrick couldn't answer that question. He just knew that he was as good as they were. That meant that somehow, someday, he would show up at a party with someone like Amber and make jokes and have fun. This was a cheerful thought. But, in the meantime, he had to learn more science. And art−−what the hell was art all about? By the time he reached town, Patrick was singing songs from a Burl Ives record that his mother used to play when Patrick was a little boy. "_How can there be a cherry that has no stone? How can there be a baby with no cryin'? _"

4

Willow lifted groceries from the bicycle basket, took them inside, and set them on the counter with a satisfying thump. Onions, garlic, a green pepper, a red pepper, basil, a can of coconut milk, a can of chicken stock, a small can of curry paste, chicken, lettuce, and two bottles of Gewurztraminer. The wine was

extravagant. No doubt about that. But, for once it was her money. Ann had given her a job mornings at the Deli. Willow took her first pay directly to the Grand Union supermarket. She had been to the library and copied a recipe for curry and the name of the recommended wine. She put the wine in the refrigerator. Amber owed Art a meal, and Willow had volunteered to cook.

It was two in the afternoon, warm, too early to start. She was tempted to lie down and read, but instead she took a straw hat from a peg by the door and walked outside. Bees were buzzing in the roses. The tops of the trees were dark against a bright blue sky. Her feet led her into the pine woods on the far side of the studio where a deep layer of pine needles softened her steps. She walked for five minutes and stopped. In the distance, a chainsaw snarled twice and was silent. The air was still and resinous. Small sounds filtered through the branches above her. A young chickadee flew toward her, pausing briefly on low branches. Willow remained motionless. The tiny black and white bird hopped and flew directly to her shoulder. She felt its thin claws shift as its head turned first one way, then the other. It rested a moment as Willow filled with a mixture of elation and deep humility. A quick whirring of wings and the chickadee was ten yards farther on its way.

Willow remained still, her eyes misty, her mouth slightly open. She let the special feeling spread through to her fingertips and the soles of her feet. No words for this, she thought. As if in answer, the chickadee called. That's it, Willow said to herself−−two notes descending, a major third. She repeated the two notes in her mind. The call and the feeling and the quiet beating of her heart wove together like a shawl to be saved for the future. Hers. Her.

"God," she said. She was thirsty. She continued slowly through the woods, working her way downhill. At some point she would meet the lower road, and she could walk back to the beginning of AhnRee's driveway. She came to the top of a ledge which she followed until she found a place to scramble down. At the base of the ledge, she straightened and listened. Banjo notes were picking their way through the trees. An easy deliberate rhythm drew her along and down the hill, farther from AhnRee's drive. The notes grew louder. Willow could see a clearing and part of a roof line through the trees. Someone was playing in the back yard.

She paused. The player was practicing *Cripple Creek*, getting into it further and further. My day for music, she thought. When it stopped, she clapped with pleasure and emerged from the trees onto a rough lawn. The banjo player was sitting under a birch tree on a wooden kitchen chair. "Right on! Excuse me," she said, "I was walking and I stopped to listen. Where am I?"

"Cripple Creek," he said and smiled. "My back yard. My mother's, actually." He was tall and thin with shoulder length reddish hair and a wispy mustache that was supposed to make him look older. His hands were large. Long fingers wrapped around the neck of the banjo he was holding upright on his lap.

"I'm Willow. I live up there in AhnRee's studio," She pointed up the mountain.

"Ah, yes−−AhnRee. I'm Martin. Lower Byrdcliffe Road is just down at the end of the driveway." Willow couldn't decide whether he was shy or busy. He seemed to be telling her to hoof it. The Devil made me do it, that's what she told Amber later.

"I can play Cripple Creek.

"Oh yeah?" He held the banjo toward her.

"Not on that. Do you have a violin, umm, fiddle?"

"Strangely enough . . . " He stood up, leaned the banjo against the chair, and said, "Be right back." Now what have I done? Willow asked herself. She hadn't touched a violin in two years. He brought her an old violin, nothing special, but the strings and the bow were in good shape. She played a few notes.

"Been a while," she said. She played the first bars of *Cripple Creek*. Such an easy melody. It sounded horrible. She stopped. "Just a second." She took two deep breaths and let the feel come back to her. She played one long slow note, listening. Better. She played the note again. She played two notes. Her body began to wake up. It was surprising how you played the violin with your whole body. I mean, God, she'd been playing since she was three. She began again, more slowly. She had now forgotten Martin. She played it through. Then again, a little faster. Yes, she thought, and took it at a tempo close to the one she'd heard through the trees. Halfway through, she heard a few tentative notes from the banjo. She smiled, eased back, and let Martin lead. They played until they had managed a decent version and stopped. There was another burst of applause. A woman with short blonde hair and a heart shaped face was clapping by the corner of the house.

"Hi, Mom. This is my mother, Heidi, ah, Willow."

"How do you do," his mother said. "Very nice."

"Willow appeared out of the woods," Martin said.

"Ah," his mother said, "a wood nymph. This is the time of year. Although, I must say, musical wood nymphs are rare."

"Well," Willow said, handing the violin and bow to Martin, "I'm off to gather mushrooms, back to my dwelling of twigs and pine cones." She smiled at Martin's mother, the pretty bitch, and walked into the woods without looking back, damned if she was going to go down their driveway. A few moments later, she heard *Cripple Creek*, as if in apology. Or was he just going back to work?

There was something familiar about Martin, an intangible set to his attitude, a stubbornness. She thought back over her friends but couldn't come up with the match. Memory is strange, she thought. It's all in there, but you lose the keys, the entry ways. It's like a city that keeps growing and growing. I mean, you have to go back and back to the old neighborhoods? Lennie Rosenbloom, Mr. Rosenbloom to her, encouraging but firm as she struggled through that Mozart sonata, his hurt smile directing her to feel the music−−he was shorter than Martin and his hair was sandy colored. God, the light on his neck and chest. She was 13, so close to blushing all the time that she had to act like a zombie to keep herself under control. Played like one, too. God. No, it wasn't Mr. Rosenbloom. The road appeared beyond a clump of bushes. She pushed through and turned toward AhnRee's.

She had walked farther than she thought. By the time she reached the driveway, she was worrying about dinner. She planned as she hurried up the hill toward the studio: first, the onions and the peppers, get them going in the large cast iron frying pan; second, the chicken, cut in chunks; then the chicken stock and the coconut milk, the curry and the basil. Whoops, forgot the rice. Start that right after the onions and the peppers; give it time to steam a little and not be so wet. She placed the straw hat on its peg, drank a large glass of water, and played _Highway 61 Revisited_.

"*Like a rolling stone* . . . " she sang along as she cut up onions. "*To be on your own* . . . " Whack, whack. "_How does it feel? _ . . . " Whack, whack. Amber and Art arrived in the middle of *Desolation Row*.

"Listen to that," she said as Bob Dylan's harmonica blew out the pain and isolation.

"Damn," Art said, "that smells good."

"Listen!" Willow said, turning up the volume.

Don't send me no more letters, no−−not unless you mail them from Desolation Row. Dylan's intensity, the smell of curry, Amber's perfect body next to Art's shoulders, and her own unnamed passion coalesced into

another moment she would never forget. "Too much," she said when the piece ended. "Want some wine?" She busied herself with dinner. Earlier, with the chickadee on her shoulder, she was a child of the universe. Now, she felt reborn as an adult. It was so lonely and sad, so−−terminal.

She looked at Amber and Art. They did not appear to be in crisis. Art was lighting up a joint. Willow took a few hits out of politeness. She didn't mind getting high once in awhile, but the smoke in her lungs felt foreign and unhealthy. Amber, who smoked cigarettes occasionally, dragged away with gusto, the little pothead. Art was following her around with his eyes as though he were chained.

She served and poured; they ate and drank. The evening got blurry. Willow told them about the chickadee and about playing *Cripple Creek*.

"Yeah," Art said. "He lives in a house behind his mother's. She's got money, or the family does. Don't know much about Martin; he went to private school, was only around summers. His father was a pilot. He died about ten years ago."

"He plays banjo pretty well," Willow said.

"Yeah, I guess. How come you stopped playing the violin?"

Willow scratched one knee. "I love the old greats," she said. "I mean they are great souls, but . . . "

"They weren't your soul," Art said.

"No. I mean, they are, but they aren't." She put her hands behind her head into her hair and paused, spreading her arms out slowly, letting long dark strands run through her fingers and fan across her shoulders. She shook her head. "I didn't want to be stuck in that scene forever. Doors were closing."

"Willow's father is a music prof," Amber said.

"My mother plays, too," Willow said. "A nice Jewish musical family with perfect children who know how to get along."

"What's wrong with getting along?" Amber smiled meaningfully in Art's direction.

"Maybe you could sing; you look a little like Joan Baez." Art was a decent guy, really. And he had those shoulders. Willow's ears were buzzing.

"I wish," she said.

"You got any Coltrane?" The guy was full of surprises.

"We do." She rose slowly and flipped through the albums that Amber had borrowed from AhnRee. "Night music," she said, putting it on the stereo. Amber was smiling broadly and wiggling her toes.

"Ice cream," she said. Willow remembered that she had to work in the morning.

"Bedtime for me," she said. Amber promised to do the dishes.

"Great dinner," Art said.

She closed the porch door behind her and stepped out of her clothes, feeling the cool night air on her skin. She

stretched, reaching high with her fingers, and then slid her hands appraisingly down her sides and hips. This feeling of aloneness, this new sense of herself, wasn't so bad. Whatever it was, it was real. She pulled a blue broadcloth nightshirt over her head and lay in bed, drifting away from the muffled tenor sax, out toward the trees and the summer night. The quiet lured her, not so much for itself, although it was wonderful, but for what might arise within it.

In the morning, Art's truck was gone; Amber was nowhere to be seen; and the dishes were dry, upside down in neat piles. Willow ate a bowl of cold cereal with milk and then rode into town. The first thing she did at Ann's was to make a pot of coffee. Drinking too much wine gave her a headache, but dope left her head filled with a dull cloudiness that drove her nuts. It didn't hurt, but she couldn't think. It was as if she'd watched a dumb television show all night. "Dumb, dumb, dumb," she sang. "I'm dumb, dumb, dumb−deedoo−dumb, dumb, dumb. Where's my bass man?" she asked the coffee pot. "There we go," she said as coffee began running into the Silex pot. "Dumb, dumb, deedoo."

"So it's a canary I hired?"

"Tweet. What are you doing up?"

"Couldn't sleep−−smelled the coffee. We had a late delivery; see if you can get the stuff out before it gets busy."

"Tweet, tweet." Ann acted grumpy, was grumpy, especially early in the day, but there was no edge to it. The feeling was directed more at herself. Willow did what she was told without resentment, agreeing with Ann's pronouncements whenever possible. Ann wasn't around that much. The whole idea was that Willow would open the Deli and let her sleep.

Ann took a cup of coffee upstairs, grumbling about the Pentagon and Johnson's war. Willow began pricing cans of delicacies. Stocking was easy; it was the little price stickers that slowed her down.

She was in the back room, looking down into a carton, when a voice called out, "Anybody home?" She saw a familiar head of red hair. Patrick, she realized as she came to the front of the store.

"Hi, I was in the back." Now that was intelligent, she thought. Patrick was considering the meat and cheese on display in the counter cooler. "Is it Patrick?" Brilliant. He straightened and turned.

"Himself," he said. "Good morning, Willow. What are you doing here?"

"Working, natch." She saw him start to grin; probably he thought she was a little rich girl.

"Oh," he said. "Could you make me a roast beef sandwich? To go?"

"White, wheat, pumpernickel, light rye, dark rye? . . . "

"Dark rye."

"You want some horseradish in there? Mayo? What?" Patrick rubbed his chin.

"Hell of a decision," he said. He turned his face up to the universe for guidance. "Horseradish?"

"Horseradish," she said firmly. "And a little mayo on the other side. I'll wrap the pickle separately, so it won't get soggy."

"Pickles are supposed to be soggy." He was grinning again.

"The sandwich, Patrick."

"Ah." He was altogether pleased with himself. She made the sandwich, mumbling like a junior Ann, and at the last moment included an extra pickle.

"There," she said. As he gave her a five dollar bill, the edge of his palm brushed her fingers. She put the change on the counter between them, not wanting to touch him again; she was still feeling his hand, pleasantly hard against hers, and she wanted to go on enjoying it. "Off you go," she said.

"Gotta put the paint on the wall. That's what Wilson says." He took the bag and the change. "Maybe I'll see you and Amber at the Depresso." Damn him.

"Maybe." She gave him her best Mona Lisa smile and flicked some hair back over her shoulder. A horn honked.

"Speaking of Wilson . . . " he said. "Thanks."

He's cute, she thought. Her hand was still warm where he had touched her. Like the ocean, his eyes darkened, the deeper she looked.

The next morning, Patrick was back. "Good sandwich," he said. He meant it, and she felt a warm stirring. God, not a blush!

"Let's do that again." She hadn't wanted him to think of her as a useless rich girl; now she didn't want to be Mother Earth. She opened her mouth to speak and closed it. Confusing. Fortunately, he had turned to the drinks cooler. She made the sandwich, including the extra pickle, and took his money from the counter. As she reached toward him with the change, her arm dipped and her hand rested for a moment on his palm. "Thanks, Willow. Have to run."

"Bye." He was out the door and into an old blue pickup before she could think of anything else to say. It wasn't me, she thought. I didn't do that. It was my arm, like a damned dowsing rod.

Two guys came in for coffee and bagels. A steady flow of customers kept her occupied; by noon she was over the embarrassment. But she was on alert. At dinner she said to Amber, "My goddamn arm was out of control." Amber clapped. "Oh, great," Willow said. "I'm groping strangers, and you think everything's fine."

"It is fine. You just need to get laid, that's all. And how can you call Patrick a stranger? You've known him for a month."

"Get laid−−that's your solution for everything."

"No, no. It's a help; it takes the pressure off. And it's interesting, Willow. Men are so different. Now, we're not talking babies, here." Amber took a bite of bread. "Mmm, this bread . . . " She swallowed. "Yumm. You're getting it; those first couple of loaves were kind of a workout. You could get some good men, Willow; they're around. You need a strategy."

"I'll pass out numbers at the News Shop," Willow said.

Amber laughed. "Give number one to Patrick. Maybe number two to that cute Claude. Leave Art out; I'm not done with him. He's got a lot of talent, Willow. You know what he told me last night?"

"Let's see . . . "

"He's buying another old barn−−for its frame. He's going to put the frame against his house barn, end−to−end. He wants to roof it and hang one room in a quarter of the upper level, leaving the rest open. Can't you see them: the finished barn and the design together, sort of turning into each other?"

"Neat idea," Willow said. "O.K., I'll leave Art out."

"Oh, I forgot to tell you," Amber said. "There's a big party, Saturday night. It's going to be on the mountain at a place called, 'Mead's Meadow.' Art says they have it every year. It goes on all night; some people bring sleeping bags. Kegs, music−−why don't you ride up with us?"

"Maybe I will," Willow said. "If I have any numbers left."

5

Patrick held the brush handle between his palms and walked to the middle of the Van Slyke's lawn, rubbing his hands back and forth, spinning the brush until it was dry. "See if you can finish the garage by four," Parker had said. Good deal, it couldn't be later than three. The paint cans were stacked by the ladder and the folded drop cloths. He put the brush on top of the cans, took the rag and the putty knife out of his back pockets, and stepped back. Amazing how much better a paint job looks from twenty feet away, he thought.

"Looks good," Hendrik said from the kitchen door.

"Yes," Patrick said.

"Where your wheels?"

"Parker's going to pick me up."

"Have a beer while you wait?"

"Excellent," Patrick said. Hendrik went into the kitchen and reappeared with two bottles of Heineken. He waved Patrick over to a picnic table and opened the bottles with a pocket knife. He was a strong man with a brooding expression and a flattened nose. He looked like someone who might have painted a famous picture of a boxer. "Happy days," Hendrik said.

"Prosit." There are few things better than the first swallow of cold beer after a day's work. "Yes!" Patrick said.

"Looks good," Hendrik repeated. "Have to keep after these old houses."

"You've got a nice one. Is that your studio over there?"

"Yep."

"Could I ask you a question?"

"Sure."

"What is art, anyway?" Hendrik raised his eyebrows. He took several long swallows of Heineken. "I've met a lot of artists in this town," Patrick went on, "and I realized that I don't understand it."

"Bunch of bullshit, mostly."

Patrick waited. Hendrik looked at him and sighed. He took another swallow of Heineken and indicated the valley with one hand. "Everybody wants to be an artist," he said. "Doctors. I saw a clinic the other day−−said 'Medical Arts Group' on the building." He burped. "It's like this, Patrick: there's art, capital A−−fine art, it's called sometimes−−and there's everything else."

"So what is this 'fine art?"'

Hendrik shook his head. He went into the house and came out with two more beers. "Let's start with everything else," he said. "It's easier." He pried off the bottle caps. "Everything else is commercial art−−calendar graphics or posters or paintings of lighthouses, fall foliage, the streets of Paris−−that kind of stuff, done in familiar styles. Nothing wrong with it. But it isn't art; it's craft." He drank. "It's craft because the painters know what they're doing when they start. Some of the paintings seem magical, but it's trick magic. They know how to get the rabbit out of the hat. An artist−−capital A−−doesn't know what's in the hat or how to get it out."

"Hmm," Patrick said.

"A guy in Vermont came up with that comparison−−Robert Francis. It's like this, Patrick: an artist needs to make a picture that expresses how he feels about something or someone or some place. Since every artist is different, good paintings, true paintings, are original."

"True?"

"Yeah, true to the artist's feelings," Hendrik said.

"True," Patrick said, turning the word over in his mind.

"It's not so easy. What the hell, I'll show you." Hendrik got up and led Patrick to his studio.

"Look there," he said, pointing at a wall covered with charcoal drawings of a nude Julie Van Slyke, fifteen years younger. "Those are studies I made before I did the painting. You can see how I kept circling around the central idea, this line here." He moved one hand through the air as though he were stroking her hip. "Once I got it right, it was mostly a matter of color. Not a bad painting, as it turned out."

Patrick saw what Hendrik meant through a light haze of embarrassment. He took a drink from his bottle of Heineken and acted grown up. Mrs. Van Slyke was leaning forward. She had unexpectedly exotic breasts that hung and then swelled upwards. "The thing is, it can take a while before you get it. Sometimes you never get it. I've been working on this one all year." Hendrik walked over to a heavy wooden easel. A canvas, half painted, half sketched in pencil, showed a young man sitting by a fireplace and holding a guitar. His chair was sideways to the fire. His body and guitar were turned toward the painter. There was a wine bottle on the floor next to the chair.

"No glass," Patrick said.

"He's drinking alone."

"Why is he turned? Who is he looking at?"

"Maybe if I knew that, I could paint the goddamned thing."

"Oh," Patrick said. "I like it−−so far, anyway. Pretty intense."

"Hendrik, are you there with Patrick?" Mrs. Van Slyke's voice came loudly through an intercom. Hendrik made a face, went over to the door, and pressed a plastic button.

"Yes, Dear."

"Parker is here for Patrick."

"Be right there," Hendrik said.

They walked side by side to the main house. Patrick felt himself looking at Mrs. Van Slyke differently; he was seeing her partly through Hendrik's eyes, as Hendrik had painted her. She was more female.

"Patrick asked what art is," Hendrik explained.

"Are you clear on that now?" Mrs. Van Slyke asked as she took the empty bottles from their hands. Parker was grinning on the sideline.

"Umm−−it's over there," Patrick said, waving at the studio.

"Of course it is," Mrs. Van Slyke said without changing expression. "What wonderful crews you have, Parker! The place looks marvelous. I hope you will be able to do the studio next year."

"It will be first on on my list," Parker promised. "Come, Patrick, let's get the ladder on the rack."

"Thanks for the Heineken," Patrick said to Hendrik.

"Good job," Hendrik said.

"Goodbye, Patrick. I hope that we see you again." Mrs. Van Slyke smiled and waited for his reaction.

"Bye," he said. They hustled off. On their way down the mountain, he felt the mood lighten. "Whew," he said.

"Nice going, Patrick. A raise is in order−−$2.25, retroactive to the beginning of this week."

"No shit!"

Parker slapped one knee. "It's over there−−ha, ha−−art . . . "

"Well it was, is," Patrick said.

"Yes, yes, no doubt."

Parker dropped him off at the Depresso. "Thanks for the raise."

"You earned it, Patrick. See you in the morning."

Patrick skipped down the stone steps to the Depresso patio. Willow was reading at a table, leaning back, her long legs stretched out before her, crossed at the ankles.

"Hey, Willow."

"Hello, Patrick. Hungry already?"

Patrick patted his stomach. "You make great sandwiches, but−−I'm celebrating. I got a raise."

"Impressive," Willow said.

"I'll tell you about it, if you'd like. But I've got to get a beer. Want one?"

"No thanks."

Patrick returned with a Heineken, his new favorite. "Yeah, I finished a house and garage up on the mountain. The Van Slyke's. Do you know them?" Willow shook her head, no. "He's a painter, and she's a−−looker. He showed me his studio. Do you know what art is, Willow?"

"God, Patrick," she said.

"What's the matter?"

"You ask the most amazing questions."

"Well, I asked Hendrik−−Mr. Van Slyke−−and he showed me his studio."

"Modest Hendrik."

"He was modest, in a frustrated way. He showed me a painting that he's been working on all year. Said he couldn't get it. He said that art had to be true."

"He didn't!" Willow clapped her hand over her mouth.

Patrick looked at her. "You think I'm a moron." She took her hand away. "I am. But I'm a persistent moron." He took a swallow of beer. "True," he said. "I know about true. In science, what is true can be verified. What is true, is true for everybody. But Hendrik's true is only true for Hendrik."

"Especially true for Hendrik," Willow said.

"So, it's a different kind of true," Patrick finished.

"Different from science," Willow said, "but useful."

"Useful . . . " Patrick thought.

"Like Beethoven or Dylan true," she said.

Patrick watched people on the sidewalk. "There's more," he said, after a moment. "There's more about this art and science stuff. I don't understand it, yet. What's the matter?" he asked for the second time. Willow was wiping tears from her cheeks.

"It's not your fault," she said. She stood suddenly. "I'm going now." She pedaled away with her book in the basket. What did I say? he wondered. He went inside scratching his head. Sue and Jim were at the bar. He thought about his usual dinner of rice and vegetables. To hell with it. Deanie's, he said to himself and went back outside. Willow was gone.

He walked past the News Shop and Ann's Deli and turned down the hill to Deanie's for a celebratory steak, still wondering what had upset Willow. The dining room was comfortably filled, cheerful without being noisy. A bar stretched the length of one end of the room. Sam was there by himself and said hello. Patrick excused himself as soon as he could and sat at a small table on the other side of the room. Sam was always mouthing off about the government and asking everyone where he could score some grass. He was nervous in a way that put Patrick off. Patrick didn't want to hassle with anyone who worked for Parker, so he kept his mouth shut and avoided him. "Meat," he said to Sam. "I've got this craving for meat. Got to have it!"

"Yeah, man." Sam's eyes darted around as Patrick escaped.

"Medium rare," Patrick ordered, and, by God, that's what he was served. Delicious. He ate slowly, each bite a mini−ceremony. Eating out was important to Patrick. While he was working, he worked hard, concentrating. Dinner was a time to relax, to think, and to look around. He enjoyed being in the midst of people without necessarily having to talk to anyone. The Deanie's crowd was straighter than the Depresso crowd. IBM'rs and local business people mixed with musicians and artists. The waitresses were middle−aged. The pies were particularly good.

This was Patrick's third dinner at Deanie's. He was beginning to feel more at home in Woodstock. His landlady, Gert, had become more friendly. Patrick was willing to help with little things around the house, that probably had something to do with it. She was a reader, too, he'd discovered. They talked about books. The other day, he'd asked her what she was reading.

"Every story is a love story, isn't it, Patrick?" She had chuckled comfortably and continued reading. He didn't know what to make of that. Did she mean every story about anything? Or every story a writer felt was worth the effort? She had said it as though it were self evident, as though he shouldn't be pestering her for an explanation. Or maybe he was supposed to figure it out for himself.

"Wonderful pie," he said to the waitress.

"We make a lot of them," she said. Patrick left a big tip and walked slowly toward home. He had an urge for a Hershey bar as he passed Ann's. Ann took his change without comment.

"Willow makes a good sandwich," he said.

"You like her, don't you," she said accusingly. He didn't know what to say. Ann glared at him. "You young people think we don't feel anything. Well, you're wrong. What's your name?"

"Patrick."

"We have feelings, too. You think we weren't young once?"

"Sorry," he said, unsure. "Night." He moved toward the door.

"Remember that, Patrick," she flung at his back. Another upset woman. What was getting into everybody? He looked into the window of the Depresso. Sue and Jim weren't there. The Go player who had annoyed him on his first night in town was sitting on a stool in a corner, playing a banjo. The metallic beat followed him a short distance up Tinker Street, a sort of urban bluegrass. It was a relief to go quietly to bed with his book on mathematics.

The next morning it was pouring. Patrick trudged to the News Shop, where Parker declared a washout. Gino, as senior man, got to work on an inside job. Everyone else was off for the day. The group milled around, joking with a drunk who kept coming in and out, clapping people on the back, breathing beer fumes in their

faces, and saying, "How ya doing, buddy? How ya doing? That good, huh? Ha, ha, ha."

"Good to see you, Billy. Good to see you."

"So who's this?" he asked, putting one arm around Wilson and the other around Patrick.

"Patrick, Billy. This is Patrick."

"Top o' the mornin', Patrick." Patrick found himself laughing along with him.

"By Jesus," he said, "top o' the mornin' to you, too." They were leaving. Billy escorted them to the open doorway.

"Quack," he said, propelling them down the steps into the rain.

"Quack is right," Patrick said. "See you, Willy." Habit took him along the street to Ann's where he hesitated and then went in. "Hi, Willow. Rained out!"

Willow looked up. No one else was in the deli. "Patrick, I'm sorry I left so abruptly last night. I just couldn't . . . "

"That's O.K.; I won't talk about art anymore."

She smiled at him reprovingly.

"Anyway, I can't live without your sandwiches. How about turkey, today?" He stowed the sandwich in a small army surplus backpack that he'd bought after his first week in town.

"What are you going to do today?"

"I don't know," Patrick said. "Go to the library, I guess. I'm reading a great book on mathematics."

"There's supposed to be a party this weekend, Saturday, on the mountain. Mead's meadow, wherever that is. Music, kegs, a big blowout. Art says it's a good time. They do it every year."

"You going?"

"Yeah, for a while anyway."

"Maybe I'll see you there," Patrick said. "Day after tomorrow−−the rain should be over by then." Willow seemed pleased, and Patrick left for the library. Hard to figure, he thought. Last night she wouldn't talk to me; this morning she invites me to a party. He thought he'd go, if he could find it. Maybe Art would fall off the mountain.

The library was pleasant and well lit. The science section was a bit out of date. There were many expensive art books locked in a big case. The children's room was large and cheerful with a painted wooden riding horse in one corner. He read for an hour and thought of writing to his parents, but he hadn't looked up his father's friend. He wanted to do that before he wrote, so he asked for a telephone book. Heidi Merrill was listed with an address on Lower Byrdcliffe Road. There was no pay phone in the library, so he walked over to the Woodstock Laundromat.

Joe Burke was folding clothes, standing at a counter beside a tall slender woman with long hair. She was

teasing him about his folding. He leaned and said something softly in her ear that made her laugh. Her voice was low and appealing; it sounded to Patrick as though it had started in Texas and traveled around the world before it got to the laundromat. The energy between the two was intense and relaxed at the same time. Patrick stared.

"Hello, Patrick," Joe said, turning. "This is Daisy."

"Hello, Patrick," Daisy echoed. She looked at him with calm gray eyes and then picked up her basket of clothes. "Well . . . " she said.

"Onward," Joe said.

"Yes." Their eyes met, and she left, walking as though she were going slightly uphill. Patrick felt suddenly lonely.

"So, Patrick, what's happening?"

Patrick looked back from the door. "Oh. I'm trying to find someone named Heidi Merrill. Do you know where she lives?"

"Sure do, going right by there, if you want a lift." What the hell, Patrick thought, nothing else to do. It doesn't matter if she's home or not.

"Good deal."

They drove out of Library Lane, passing Billy at the entrance to Tinker Street. Joe rolled his window all the way open. "Hey, Billy. Want a lift?"

"Quack. You want me to miss my shower?"

As they drove through town, Patrick said, "I met him this morning in the News Shop. Quite a character."

"Yeah, we go way back," Joe said. "Used to take me pickerel fishing, Billy did−−one of my heroes. He just got out of the slammer."

"What did he do?"

"One of the state cops, Dusty Rhodes, drove his cruiser into Billy's driveway to check him out for something or other, about three in the morning. The way Billy tells it, he woke up with a headache listening to a siren. He looked out his upstairs bedroom window. 'That damn flashing light hurt my eyes,' Billy said. So he shot it out with a 30−30. Dusty arrested him for assault with a deadly weapon, and the judge asked him what he had to say for himself. 'Your Honor,' Billy said, 'Assault? Do you think if I'd wanted to hit Dusty, I'd have missed him?' The judge gave him six months."

"He seems like a good guy," Patrick said.

"He is. That's the Merrill's road, there."

Patrick thanked Joe and walked fifty yards through trees to a rambling house with clapboard siding stained brown. There was a second smaller house, or studio, some distance behind and to the right. A green Cadillac, at least ten years old, gleamed in front of the house. Patrick knocked on the screen door. A woman with a heart shaped face, wheat colored hair, and clear blue−green eyes answered his knock.

"Yes?"

"Good morning. Are you Heidi Merrill?" She nodded. "My name is Patrick O'Shaunessy." She straightened. "My father said that you were an old friend. He asked me to say hello for him and see how you're doing."

"Well! What a surprise. You must tell Brian that we are doing just fine. Come in." She led Patrick to a spacious kitchen where she poured coffee into hand−painted mugs. "So, Patrick, how long will you be in Woodstock?"

"Good question. I think until winter, at least−−maybe longer. I like it here, so far."

"How long have you been here?"

"About a month."

"It is a nice town." A red '52 Chevy with a white convertible top drove past the kitchen. "Oh, there's Martin, my son. He lives in the studio behind the house." She looked at him closely. "You do remind me of Brian, but you must take after your mother. You're shorter, broader across the shoulders . . . "

"Yes, I guess I do."

"Same smile, though. How is Brian? You have a sister, don't you?"

"Yep, Molly, a year older than I am. She's married, living in Atlanta. Dad's fine. He's just about to retire from the Army. He and Mom are arguing about whether to live in Florida or Costa Rica. Heidi went over to the door where there was an intercom much like the Van Slyke's.

"Martin? Martin, can you come over? Patrick O'Shaunessy is here. His father is an old friend."

A voice crackled through the speaker, "O.K., just a minute."

Patrick looked around. "Nice house," he said.

"We've been here many years." There was a defensive note in her voice that surprised him. As he was telling her about his job, a tall man in his late twenties pushed open the kitchen door. He walked directly over, holding out his hand.

"Patrick O'Shaunessy?"

"Yes," Patrick said, standing and shaking hands.

"Martin Merrill."

"Patrick is working in town; he's not sure how long he will stay."

"What do think of the place?"

"The town, you mean?" Martin nodded. "I like Woodstock, but−−everyone's a painter or a musician. Not that that's bad."

"And you are?"

"Martin, really!" Martin ignored his mother and stared at Patrick.

Questions didn't bother Patrick. He thought. "I don't know−−scientist maybe, someday."

"Good deal. I don't know what I am either." Martin clapped his hands together and poured himself a cup of coffee. "But I'm working on it. Lot of good music around town, good musicians showing up. I've got a little recording studio in back."

"Do you play?"

"Very well," Heidi said.

"Not much," Martin said. "Fiddle. Banjo." Patrick imagined him playing the fiddle. He had large hands.

"My dad plays the fiddle." Martin was like a softer version of his dad, tall and thin. Heidi was watching him closely. He began to feel too warm. He rose to his feet. "Well, I'd better be going. It's been nice to meet you."

"Wait a minute," Martin said. "It's raining; I'll give you a ride."

"You just got here."

"No problem, I was just picking something up. I'll be back later this afternoon," he said to his mother.

"Goodbye, Patrick. I hope things work out for you. Do tell your father that everything's fine. And come and have dinner with us sometime, won't you?"

"That would be nice," Patrick said.

Martin dropped him at Gert's and wished him luck. "Oh, yeah," Patrick said as he was half out of the car. "Do you know where Mead's Meadow is?"

"Sure. It's near the top on the other side, after you pass the Mountain House. Right up Rock City Road, up and over. You go down a hill, and the road bends left. You'll see a little logging road on the right−−goes down through the woods a little ways, across a wet spot, and up onto the meadow."

"Thanks." Patrick waved and watched him drive away. Neat car. He said hello to Gert and ate his sandwich on the porch, thinking hard. He started to write a letter to his parents, but he crumpled it after the first paragraph. He went inside. Gert was busy in the back of the house. He hesitated and then picked up the telephone and called home, collect. By good luck, his father answered. "Dad, this is Pat."

"Pat! Where are you?"

"I'm in Woodstock−−great town. I just looked up Heidi and Martin Merrill."

"How are they?" His father's voice sounded far away.

"Fine. They've got a big place. She's nice, makes good coffee. Martin plays the fiddle." Patrick paused. "His hands, Dad, they are just like yours−−like mine. He reminds me of you." Patrick ran out of words. There was a brief silence.

"It's a long story, Pat. I'll tell you about it the next time we get together. Martin is your half−brother."

Patrick let out his breath. "I was wondering. I didn't say anything."

His father was silent for a moment. "Maybe that's best, Pat. We wouldn't want to upset anybody; only a couple of people know. Come see us at Christmas in Costa Rica or Florida−−wherever we end up; we'll talk about it. Basically, Heidi was afraid she'd never have a baby."

"Dad, look, I've got to go. Thanks for telling me. I won't say anything. I'll let you know about Christmas. Say hi to Mom." Patrick hung up softly. He stood for several seconds and then went back out on the porch where he sat down again and watched the rain. I'll be damned, he thought. His father must have been about his age when he was in Woodstock. Patrick saw him in a new way. Heidi must have been incredible; she was still good looking. It was cool to have a brother, but it was strange not to be able to say anything. Martin didn't seem like a bad guy for someone who had it easy.

"Patrick, the window at the end of the upstairs hall is stuck. Could you close it for me?"

"Glad to." Keep it quiet, he thought, climbing the stairs. Maybe talk about it at Christmas. See what happens.

6

Willow followed Amber and Art across a small stream. "Much farther?" she asked. Art pointed through the trees to a small rise.

"Right up there." They emerged onto a shelf−like meadow that dropped abruptly into a narrow valley. Willow could see nothing but mountain after mountain in the distance−−no roads, no houses. An upright piano stood by itself in the meadow, the last point of local focus before her eyes leaped into the space beyond and below.

"Wow!"

Amber and Art chose a place not far from a fire where a dozen people were sitting and standing, laughing, drinking beer. Willow removed her pack. She spread a blanket and weighed it down with the pack which held a bottle of water, two bottles of wine, a paperback copy of Lawrence Durrell's Justine, and a loaf of her best honey walnut bread. Art went immediately to the keg.

"Too much," Amber said, looking at the view.

"I wonder if Patrick will show," Willow said.

"Did you tell him where it was?"

"I didn't give him directions, but guys on his crew would know."

"He'll come," Amber said. "And if he doesn't, that's his problem. How did they get the piano up here?" she asked Art who was back, holding three paper cups of beer.

"Carried it," he said. "Four guys−−one on each corner. They bring it in every year. It's Angus's. He has a band, plays Dixieland and early jazz."

"Oooh," Willow said, "stride piano." She had grown up listening to Scott Joplin, Jelly Roll Morton, and Fats Waller, her father's nod to modernity. Straight from Bach, he used to say. She sipped her beer. Martin Merrill arrived.

"Hey there, Art. Hi, Willow."

"Hey, Martin. This is Amber. Where's your fiddle?"

"Hi, Amber. Fiddle's in the car. Maybe we'll get to a little Cripple Creek later." Willow flushed.

"I think I've retired," she said.

"Not allowed." Martin was having trouble keeping his eyes off Amber who had shifted to ground midway between a barnwarmer's dream and a folksinger's groupie. Here we go again, Willow thought.

"How's that Chevy running?" Art asked.

"Good. I just put new tires on her."

"That's a commitment. Love that car. Have you seen it, Amber−−a red '52 convertible?"

"Not yet," she said.

God. Willow brought out the honey walnut loaf. "Anybody hungry?"

"Sure," Martin said. She broke off an end, the best part, and handed it to him.

"Good," he said, chewing.

"Willow can cook!" Art said. People were arriving steadily. It was five o'clock; the heat of the day was easing. A strong looking man in his thirties with a short beard and dark curly hair began to play the piano, his back straight.

"Yo, Angus!" someone called. Martin went for a refill and returned a few minutes later as Willow was looking around the meadow. She couldn't stop herself; every few minutes she checked again.

"Looking for someone?" Martin asked.

"Yeah, a guy I met−−Patrick O'Shaunessy."

"Patrick O'Shaunessy?"

"Yes."

"I'll be damned. I met him the other day." Patrick, she thought. Martin reminded her of Patrick; that's who it was. More people arrived. A soprano sax joined the piano. A man with gray hair set up a drum kit. Joe Burke stood near the piano with a blonde−−leggy, like me, Willow thought, but better looking. They came over and sat down. Joe introduced her, his wife, Sally. He reached into a paper bag and handed everyone a sparkler.

"It's the 4th," he said. They lit the sparklers and sat, more or less in a circle, waving them and drinking beer.

"My country 'tis of thee," Amber said.

"Old Glory," Martin added.

"Patriots!" A familiar voice. Patrick had come up behind her.

"Hey, Patrick." Martin stood, waved at Patrick, and wandered toward the kegs. Patrick sat down next to

Willow. Joe handed him a sparkler. Willow leaned back on her elbows. The strains of _St. James Infirmary_ and a heavy beat from the drummer mingled with the smell of burning sparklers and the sweeter smell of marijuana.

"It's good to be a citizen," Patrick said. Willow inspected him for signs of irony. None. They talked briefly about the war which they were all against. It seemed far away, a bad dream. "Maybe we should get active," Patrick suggested, "demonstrate or something." Joe leaned forward.

"You want to watch it," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"I had kind of a shock last week," Joe said. "You know Ox?" He looked at the others.

"Sure," Art said.

"He was in school with us; he's a state trooper," Joe explained. "We've had narcs around for a few years now, busting people for the evil weed."

"Shit heads," Art said. "Like we really have a drug problem."

"We spot the narcs," Joe said. "Anyway, I was having a beer with Ox in Buckman's, and he told me to watch my ass. He told me there was a list of radicals at headquarters. Subversives. 'They're watching you; that's all I can say.' " Joe shook his head. "I mean, I'm a veteran, for Christ's sake."

"You're a dropout," Art said.

Joe started to smile. "Look who's talking."

"So, who's watching?" Martin asked.

"Somebody is," Joe said. "Ox wouldn't have told me if he wasn't worried. FBI? CIA?"

"Martin's a commie pinko," Art said. "Is he on the list?"

"Should be," Joe said.

"What about Morgan? And Gino?"

"Subversives for sure. Down the Pentagon!" Joe raised his cup.

"Down the Pentagon!" echoed across the valley.

"O.K., Patrick," Amber said. "You can turn off the tape recorder." Patrick took a paper bag from his pack and held up a block of cheddar. He shook it by his ear.

"Wasn't on," he said.

"Might as well eat it, then," Sally said.

They ate and drank and wandered around the meadow. A washtub bass joined the music. Willow didn't exactly follow Patrick, but she managed to be in his general vicinity. She returned to her blanket and read

until the light started to go. There was a book discussion. Patrick talked about a math book that he was reading, and Joe got started on significant digits, of all things. "You understand the principle," he said.

"Natch," Art said, "but here is Morgan, in case anyone needs a refresher." Willow tried to remember high school physics while she watched Morgan sit down deliberately. He had powerful shoulders and a sensitive expression. "Morgan, what are significant digits?"

"Ah," Morgan said, "the concept is that in scientific computation, the result cannot be more accurate than the least accurate quantity or measurement involved." There was light applause. Morgan drank deeply.

"Just so," said Joe. "And didn't I have a hell of a time understanding that? I thought you could make an answer as accurate as you wanted. You want seven decimal places? No problem." Patrick was sitting forward, listening intensely. "I finally got the idea, and I never forgot it," Joe went on. "Well, there I was in weather school in the Air Force, and their dew point calculation gave an answer that was more precise than one of the measurements. 'These decimal points are meaningless,' I said to the sergeant. Yeah, right. Next thing you know, I'm in front of the base commander.

"'Burke,' he says, 'you may have a point. But it's a goddamn small one. Are you an airman or a goddamn philosopher, Burke?'

"'Airman, SIR,' I said."

"Airman Burke," Art toasted.

Willow was impressed. She thought about Stanford−−the academic cliques, the gorgeous football players, the socialites. They were good at what they did; they were judged by how they performed in their groups; they lived by accepted rules. These people, in Mead's meadow, were just as sharp, just as physical (in a different way, maybe a better way), and just as easy and confident. They were all of the aboves. They were free. They were alive, or more alive, in a different way. A shiver ran up her back.

She opened a bottle of wine. The band was tighter, into *When the Saints Come Marching In*. As the light faded, the uninhabited range of mountains before them became darker and more mysterious, unexpectedly comforting. The mountains were timeless, or in a different flow of time.

"This is what they saw," Patrick said, "the first people." He pointed across the valley.

"Do you want some wine?" She held up the bottle.

"Change of pace," he said. "Sure."

"Cabernet Sauvigon," she said with new authority. "Your basic meadow red."

The firelight cast shadows; the group seemed smaller and more vulnerable. "The first people . . . " Patrick repeated. They were the first people, now, she realized. She bit down on her lip. Her heart broke open like a swollen peach.

"There's a little bread left," she said. God, she was crying again.

"You cry a lot," he said.

"Oh, fuck you, Patrick." She poured herself more wine.

"I don't mind it," he said seriously.

"Look, do you want to go?" she asked.

"Sure." Amber was over by the band; she was staying all night or going over to Art's. Willow told her that she was leaving, and she and Patrick picked their way slowly through the woods. "I've got to get a little flashlight," Patrick said as they splashed across the stream.

When they came out onto the road, a patrol car was parked in the middle. Two cops were ticketing a long line of cars and trucks that were pulled off to the side. "What's the matter?" Willow asked.

"Blocking the road. Obstructing traffic."

"They are not. What traffic? This is the top of the mountain, for God's sake."

"You want to give us a hard time?" He was threatening. Patrick pulled her away.

"Let's go, Willow."

"Have you been drinking, lady? I wouldn't want to see you driving."

"We're walking." Willow glared at the cops and let Patrick guide her down the road. The band was working on a Dixie version of _America the Beautiful_; the sax floated high over the tree tops into the night. She looked back. One of the cops was answering a radio call; the other was still ticketing. They were trying to ruin everything. "Why, Patrick?"

"Groups," he said, after a moment. "Tribalism. They're afraid of change. When they get their backs up, Willow, you've got to work around them. If you challenge them, they get worse. It's weird, but the more powerful people are, the more frightened they are, usually. You'd think it would be the other way around."

"We've got to fight back," Willow said.

"We do−−by existing." The starlight was sufficient for them to walk down the middle of the road. They were quiet and then they talked and then they were quiet again. One person, who had been at the party, stopped and offered a ride, but they decided to keep walking. Patrick told her about his parents and his sister, Molly. Nice people. She wondered where he got the hard edge she sensed beneath the surface. The Irish? Were his parents closet rebels? Maybe. Probably it was from hard knocks. For what? >From who? For being honest. That was it. From people who cut corners with the truth to get ahead or get along. They were the same that way.

At the bottom of the mountain, they turned down Reynold's Lane to Route 212 and then up the Glasco Turnpike to the Byrdcliffe Road. At AhnRee's driveway, Willow said "Might as well walk me home."

"My mission," Patrick said. At the door, she suggested that they kill the bottle, and Patrick followed her in. She filled two glasses. They flopped into chairs at the kitchen table. She should have been exhausted, but she wasn't. When the wine was gone, Patrick stood. Before he spoke, she asked him for a hug, and before he answered she went to him and put her arms around his neck. His arms went uncertainly around her. She pressed the whole length of her body against him, molding herself to his shape. His shoulders were broader than they looked. As his arms tightened, she felt herself loosen and grow warm. He took a deep breath. They were losing control. "Patrick," she said. "Patrick." She pulled away and took his hand. "Let's go out here." She led him to the porch and kicked off her shoes. Still holding his hand, she pulled him down onto the bed. She kissed him lightly with open lips. He was warm and tasted of wine and beer.

"My shoes," he said. She kissed him again, sliding her lips to the corners of his mouth and back. As he bent forward to take off his shoes, she unbuttoned her shirt and removed it. She stretched full length on the bed, naked to the waist, and held out her arms. She heard his quick intake of breath and felt his palm on her breast.

"Willow?" She pushed up against his hand and began to move slowly from side to side. There was no more thinking, only a rush of feeling. She pulled him into her and encouraged him to take her, fuck her, fill her with his hot hard energy. As he came and collapsed, she hugged him with her arms and her legs, surrounding him with warmth, keeping him safe.

She remained awake, savoring the moments. It was the right time of the month. No worries there. Her own need for orgasm was alive and well, like a promise. She stroked the back of his head, and he mumbled something in his sleep. God, they were together. She was still herself, but now she was something else, too. She had a pang of sadness for squirrelie, alone out there. Squirrelie.

She awoke snuggled against Patrick's back. She reached around and began to caress him. He was inside her before he was fully awake. She held him tightly, and as she began to peak she begged him not to stop. She was driving the train, and Patrick responded. "Baby," she called. "Ohhhh." She opened like an exploding flower. Another orgasm rolled through her, and then another and another. Completions. Irreversible. She cried in wonder and fell back as he came, adding to the warm flood in which she floated.

Some time later, she said, "The Big Bang Theory? I get it." Patrick rolled out of bed and dressed.

"I've got to go, Willow," he said.

She wanted him to stay. She wanted to make a good breakfast for them. She wanted to talk with him for hours, but a deeper voice, surprising her, said, "Bye, Patrick." He looked at her intently for a moment. "Bye, Patrick," she repeated softly.

7

Patrick took a quick step and kicked a pebble into the woods along AhnRee's driveway. It would be fun to practice corner kicks again. Willow was intense. Nice, too. Dynamite in bed. Who would have thought it? He blasted another pebble between two trees. Goal! It was going to be hot later. Breakfast in the News Shop would be a good thing. Coffee. A fried egg sandwich. Willow's legs wrapped around him, and he relaxed for a moment remembering her hair against his cheek and over his shoulders where she had covered him. He felt a new sweetness inside. His head swam. "Too much," he said to the fans in the woods and ran twenty yards to wake up.

Billy Jakes slapped him on the back in the News Shop. "Long night, huh Patrick?"

"Long night, Billy." Just as well he didn't have to work today. He took a bite of his fried egg sandwich and thought about the first people and the view from Mead's Meadow. The green of the mountains was so fresh, empty as one of the new canvases stacked against Hendrik's studio wall. The first people had done well, really; they deserved a celebration. It was a righteous Fourth. Martin was there at first. Where had he gone? Patrick wanted to know more about him. The music was great. And then those cops−−they were really the losers, the ones left out or behind. Why did that have to be?

"Officer Allen, ha, ha, ha." Patrick turned and saw Billy put an arm around one of the cops who had been on the mountain, the larger one. "Gotta smoke? I'm innocent."

"Jesus, Billy. Here, Goddamn it."

"Obliged, Allen. I truly am." Billy took a deep drag.

"I see you drinking on the street, I'm going to lock you up."

"I am much obliged." Billy began to cough. He went outside, and Officer Allen waved his arm as if to clear the air. There was a polite silence punctuated by Billy's coughs which grew fainter as he moved down the sidewalk. Officer Allen left with a newspaper and a supply of Marlboros.

Gert was sitting on the porch when Patrick arrived home.

"Morning, Gert." She looked him over and smiled broadly.

"Good morning. I've a job for you, if you've a mind to do it."

"Well, I was going to work on the Unified Field Theory, but . . . " The Big Bang Theory. He started to smile and found himself turning red.

"Aren't we in a good mood," Gert said.

"What needs doing?"

"The attic. I've been cleaning, and I need some boxes brought down to the shed. They're too heavy for me." She led him up two flights of stairs and pointed out a group of boxes. "Fred is coming to haul them away some time next week. It's time to get rid of things."

"No problem. Is that where you keep your gold?" Patrick pointed at a small iron bound chest secured by a black lock. "Right out of Treasure Island," he said.

"Other treasures," Gert said. "Could you move it over there by those books? Good. Just cover it with the same sheet. Thank you." Patrick made ten trips to the shed, feeling better with each trip. Entering the attic was like going back in time; emerging in the sunlight and walking across the lawn was a return to the present, a promise of future.

"I'll cut the grass before it gets hot," he said.

"Now Patrick, I want you to keep track of your time."

"No need, Gert. I mean−−if you wanted me to paint the house or something, that would be different." He liked Gert, but he didn't want to be on call.

"Very well, Patrick. Perhaps you'll take a glass of lemonade." She often seemed amused by him.

"I will," he said.

He took a nap in the afternoon and walked into town refreshed and hungry. The Depresso was mostly empty. He ordered vegetarian chili, cornbread, and a Heineken. "Thanks, Eve." She smiled enigmatically, her mind elsewhere. She, too, was from Michigan, like Sue and Claude, an odd coincidence. Patrick had never been in Michigan, but he imagined deep woods. Eve swayed like a tall pine as she walked.

She was older than Willow. She had three children. Patrick had seen one in her arms and the others swarming up her legs, outside on the patio. She seemed to pace herself−−energy for the kids, energy for the customers−−somehow remaining beautiful and ready for more. Ready for a different life, maybe. Usually,

Patrick couldn't take his eyes from her long strong body, but tonight he saw her more completely, a woman who had to work too hard.

Dylan came out of the kitchen and began to play a low and rolling melody. Patrick felt an equality between them. Dylan played the melody over and over with simple variations, searching for something. Hunting.

In the charged space between Dylan's music and Eve's beauty, Patrick thought about significant digits. Joe Burke was on to something. The rubber met the road at significant digits. Mathematics met reality. Accuracy, significant accuracy, was limited to the precision of the worst measurement involved. It didn't matter that you could calculate an equation to any number of decimal places. The answer couldn't be more accurate than the wobble, the plus or minus, in the coarsest measurement. To not understand this was to think that mathematics was reality. Mathematics was a tool. Physical relationships that were measurable could be expressed in equations, but the equations were models, not reality. You had to keep the distinction in mind or you would think you knew things more precisely than you did.

Dylan disappeared into the kitchen, and Patrick ordered another beer. Models. The word expanded in his mind. Models. Sue was a model. Amber was a model. Equations were models. Mrs. Van Slyke had been a model. Of what? Herself? Hendrik's lover? Women in general? It was really the painting that was the model. Mrs. Van Slyke had modeled for the model. Patrick's mind began to spin.

He continued his line of thought. Mathematics was a tool for making models. So was painting. Science and art had that in common. They made models−−of physical reality and of a personal, or human, reality. It was all about model making. Got it! He looked around the room. Got it! No one seemed to notice that he had just figured out a biggie. Probably they all knew it already. He finished his beer and went home, leaving Eve a big tip.

The next morning he thought of Willow as he was closing the front door behind him. Chives were blooming by the shed. He picked a handful of purple blossoms and carried them to Ann's Deli. "Top o' the mornin'," he said to Willow who was behind the counter.

"Oooh," she said. "Chives!" She put them in a small glass with water and set them on the counter. She motioned Patrick to the back of the deli where she put her arms around him. "Patrick?"

"Mmmm." The hug was warm and intense, but there was work, a sandwich, breakfast . . .

"Good morning," she said happily, letting him go.

"I need a sandwich−−got to go to work."

"Roast beef?" She made the sandwich while Patrick chose a pint of orange juice and a banana.

"Want to meet me at the Depresso later?" he asked.

"I can't tonight," she said.

"Oh." He was surprised by his disappointment.

"Tomorrow?" she offered.

"O.K., good. Around five?" That was better. "Oh, Willow . . . " He turned in the doorway. "I've been thinking about science and art again."

"I'll be brave," she promised. Patrick skipped into the News Shop feeling much better. Parker put him on a job on the Wittenberg Road, working with Gino's crew. There was a lot of scraping to be done. Patrick rolled a bandanna the way Wilson did and stripped to the waist.

By break time, he was sweating and relaxed, a large section of one side done. Parker passed out cups of coffee. Patrick ate his banana. Talk jumped from the war to cars to women to growing grass to IBM. There was an IBM plant in Kingston. It had become a symbol of the culture moving in a bad direction. IBM'rs made good money−−it was conceded−−but they had to wear white shirts and ties; they were considered sell outs, one step removed from robots. Gino told a story about a friend of his who had struggled through a university degree in engineering.

"He was halfway through, dropped out, and got drafted. He also got married, but he couldn't live off base until he was finished with a training program in Alabama. Cleo, his wife, had an apartment in town, and Eddie stayed too late one night. The main gate closed. He had to be in formation, or whatever they call it, early in the morning before he could get back on base." Gino sipped coffee. "There was a river along one side of the base. He walked into it−−at night, pitch black, snakes, alligators−−and started swimming. He made it."

Gino shook his head. "After he got out of the Army, he went back to the university and got a job at IBM. He was O.K. until one night at Buckman's. Eddie's father is a builder, and some of his crew were in there. They got on him.

"'Hey Eddie, like that neon tan, Eddie!'

"'Jesus, watch it, he'll hit you with his slide rule.'

"So, Eddie had a few beers, went home, and said, 'Neon tan, Cleo−−that's it. Fuck it.' That was the end of IBM for Eddie. He's doing great now; he's building out in California."

"Right on."

"Pretty good catcher, wasn't he?"

"Damned good." Eddie was one of the saved. Patrick was beginning to feel that way, too. It was good to be 22 and not have to keep your mouth shut. Gino got to his feet and stretched.

"What a man!"

"Sit down, Gino."

"No compassion."

"It's lonely at the top," Gino said, trudging toward a ladder.

That evening in the Depresso, Patrick finished the mathematics book. He planned to mail it to Molly on Saturday, when he usually checked the Post Office for mail. His parents and Molly were the only people who wrote to him. They were used to mailing to General Delivery wherever he was living; he hadn't given them Gert's address. And anyway, summer wasn't going to last forever; he wasn't sure how long he'd be around Woodstock. Willow. He couldn't really think about her. She was too new, too big, or something. He felt the sweetness again and was glad that they were getting together the next night.

Patrick looked out the Depresso window and saw a red Chevy convertible passing with its top down. Willow was riding on the passenger side, her hair blowing. Martin. Willow. So that's why she couldn't meet me, he

realized. She looked as though she were having a good time. What do I do now? he wondered.

The next afternoon, Willow was at the Depresso before him, absorbed in a paperback. "Hi, there," Patrick said. She looked up and smiled.

"Hi, Patrick. I brought my largest handkerchief."

"What are you reading?"

"*Balthazar*, by Lawrence Durrell."

"I saw you go by with Martin, yesterday."

"Oh, yeah. Martin took me for a drive and showed me his studio. He has been making recordings."

Patrick looked at her directly and tried to keep his face calm. "Do you like him?"

"I do. He's nice; he asked me a lot of questions."

"He seemed O.K. to me," Patrick admitted.

"Patrick, are you jealous?"

"Umm . . . "

"Tell you what," she said. "Walk me home tonight and I'll show you how much I like him." Patrick started to smile.

"It's a deal." The sun came out from behind a cloud. Willow covered his hand with hers for a moment, and he felt reconnected. "I like you," he said.

"Now don't go overboard, Patrick."

They ate dinner and walked to Byrdcliffe, taking turns pushing Willow's bike. Amber was at Art's; they had the house to themselves. They listened to Dylan and finished a bottle of wine. Patrick undressed for bed with a surprising lack of embarrassment. It seemed natural. They clung to each other and stayed awake late, talking and watching the new moon rise. Willow told him about her parents and her brother and her dissatisfaction with school.

"If you could do anything you wanted, what would you do?" he asked her.

"I think I'd travel and read a lot. Decide what to do and then do it−−somewhere. But, do it right, you know?"

"Yeah," Patrick said. "It's the only way."

"Babies, too, some day. Speaking of which−−if we're going to keep this up, you better get some of those thingies." Patrick grunted.

"That will be a trip," he said. "Trojans, right? E−Z big tips?"

"They don't care at the drug store," Willow said. "Very big tips."

"Only for you," Patrick said.

"Exactly."

They had to hurry in the morning to get to the Deli in time. Patrick took his sandwich to the News Shop, ate breakfast, and rode to the Wittenberg job with Wilson. When he thought of Willow during the day, he felt easy and excited at the same time. He could actually talk to her. She understood immediately his point that science and art were modeling processes. Better yet, she saw that modeling itself was fundamental−−an attempt to understand what was out there and express it with whatever tools you could use. Sleeping with her was so great. Sex. Just the comfort of being next to her. It was such a new experience that he would forget for an hour and then remember with a rush of pleasure.

There was a police car in front of Gert's when Wilson dropped him off after work. "What's happening?" Patrick asked.

"You staying here?"

"Yes."

"Name, please." The cop wrote his name down in a small notebook. "Mrs. Willett's been taken to the hospital," he said.

"Oh, no," Patrick said.

"Sick. Heart attack, maybe," the cop said.

"Where is the hospital?"

"Kingston."

"Damn," Patrick said.

"Hope for the best," the cop said, putting his notebook away. "All you can do. She's been around here a long time." Patrick went inside. The house felt empty. There was only one other roomer at the moment, a middle aged guy who kept to himself, a high school teacher from the city. Apparently, he spent a month in Woodstock every summer. Bob. He wasn't around.

Patrick washed and walked into town. He finished a beer quickly and checked the crowd gathering in the Depresso. Claude was at the end of the bar. Patrick approached him. "Hey, Claude."

"Patrick."

"Claude, I've got to go to Kingston."

"Some people have all the luck."

"My landlady got taken to the hospital. Do you know where the hospital is?"

"Benedictine or Kingston?"

"Are there two? I don't know. Kingston, I guess." Claude gave him directions to both. "I don't have a car," Patrick said. Claude looked at him.

"Can you drive?"

"Yes." Claude reached in his pocket and handed Patrick a set of keys.

"It's that '56 Ford pickup out there−−the black one with the wood rack."

"Thanks, Claude. What are you going to do?"

"Ahh . . . " Claude glanced around the room and smiled. "We shall see, mon ami. Leave it behind Mower's when you're done, why don't you. Put the keys under the seat. I'll get it in the morning."

"O.K." Patrick left and started up the truck. Three minutes later he was passing the golf course, heading for Kingston on Route 375. Kingston hospital was easy to find, but Gert wasn't there. He drove into the general area where he thought he'd find the Benedictine, trying to remember Claude's directions. He was about to stop and ask when he saw it on a hill. Gert had been admitted.

Patrick explained the situation and was allowed to see her, but only for a minute or two. She was pale and looked fragile. An oxygen tube crossed her face below her nose. Patrick went up close.

"Hi, Gert." She raised her eyebrows in greeting and whispered something he couldn't hear. He bent closer.

"Call Ginger."

Patrick nodded and said, "I will." Ginger was her niece. She lived in St. Louis.

"Patrick."

"Yes?"

"That chest−−treasure chest−−don't let her see it . . . Mine . . . "

"O.K., Gert, O.K. I'll take care of it. But, you'll be home soon." She smiled faintly and shook her head no.

"My love . . . " she whispered. For a moment she looked young.

"I'll take care of it, Gert." She nodded and closed her eyes. Patrick left, stepping carefully around monitors. He thanked the nurse and went out to the parking lot. It was still light. An ambulance pulled up to an admissions door. It didn't seem right that things outside should be so normal.

He sat unmoving for five minutes and then realized that he was hungry. The Park Diner was on the way out of Kingston, heading towards Woodstock. When Patrick was upset, he ate to settle himself down. He had a steak sandwich, apple pie, and coffee. He was still in shock. How could someone be running around one day and then be totaled the next? Probably she was older than she looked. Damn. There was nothing to do but go home and call her niece.

Climbing the hill to the village green, Patrick had an urge to drive to Willow's, but he decided against it. He had to call Gert's niece, and it wasn't his truck. He parked behind Mower's Market and walked directly home. He found the number in a small book that Gert kept by the phone.

"Ginger?"

"Yes."

"This is Patrick O'Shaunessy calling from Woodstock. I hate to tell you this, but Gert is in the hospital." Ginger said that she would come as soon as possible. She thanked him and hung up. What else could he do?

He left a note for Bob, explaining the situation, and walked back into town. He kept seeing Gert−−that clear shake of her head, no. Claude had left the Depresso. Patrick reconsidered driving to Willow's and again decided that he shouldn't. He drank a beer and went home. As he settled into bed, he realized that even though he hadn't seen Willow, she had been there in some sense. He could have seen her. If he had, she would have been helpful. Thinking of that wasn't as good as having her next to him in bed, but it was still good, more than he was used to. "Night, Baby," he said and fell asleep.

8

Willow brought home strawberries and made a shortcake. "Real whipped cream," Amber said.

"Of course." Willow reached into the refrigerator. "Trumpet flourish, please."

"Ta da, teedle−oop tee tooo," Amber obliged. "Champagne?"

"A modest vintage, as AhnRee would say. I celebrate. We celebrate."

"You got laid−−that's obvious."

Willow poured two glasses. "Biology," she toasted.

"Fucking," Amber said. "Yumm."

"God," Willow said, licking her lips, "strawberries and champagne . . . Truly, it was a revelation."

"It, Patrick?"

"Patrick, yes. The whole thing."

"It wasn't the first time," Amber said.

"It might as well have been." Willow's face lit up.

Amber took another bite of shortcake. "Art's taking me to Nantucket."

"Far out! Moby Dick."

"Shrimp cocktail, gin and tonic−−a great way to end the summer. Want to come?"

"End the summer?" Willow blinked. "No. I mean, I'm working. I don't want to end the summer. A terrible idea."

"It is." Amber sipped champagne gravely. "It isn't really the end. Art doesn't want to go until he finishes the outside of his barn. Two weeks, he thinks. But after that, it will be the first or second week in August. We might as well see a few things on the way home−−and have a week or so before school."

"School?" Willow twirled her glass. "I'm not going back," she said. "Let this be a formal announcement: I hereby renounce Stanford AND the privileges associated thereunto AND all obligation to write useless papers AND all requirements to be stuck in crowded rooms with people who are dumb, bored, or lying."

"How sweet of you," Amber said.

"Present company excepted, of course."

"I would think long and hard on this one," Amber said. "It's the privileges part. And your family will freak out. What are you going to do?"

Willow put _Highway 61 Revisited_ on the stereo. "That's it," she said. "That's the point. I don't know what I'm going to do. But I'm going to find out. I'm going to do what I want and not what someone else wants."

"Is it Patrick? Has he caused you to lose your mind completely?" Amber smiled as she asked, and Willow saw that Amber had already accepted this new reality and was being a good friend, playing devil's advocate.

"It's about finding my mind."

Amber came over and hugged her. "I'll make enough for both of us," she said.

Willow felt a weight lift from her shoulders. She had been thinking about this all day, but it hadn't felt real until she told Amber. It was as though a door opened; a breeze blew around the back of her mind, and the light was brighter. She began to cry. "Hold that door," she said.

"Hold the bottle−−is what I'll hold," Amber said, squeezing her. They each knew that they had come to a fork in the road, and that the distance between them would inevitably broaden. They talked late into the night. Amber volunteered to reassure Willow's parents when she returned to California, and Willow promised to write letters from the wild world.

Willow went to bed tired but feeling honest and sure of herself. "It's a new ball game, squirrelie," she said, turning her head toward the woods.

In the morning, she waited anxiously for Patrick in the deli. She rehearsed various greetings, but when he came through the door she took one look and asked him what was the matter.

"Gert is in the hospital."

"Oh no, your nice landlady?" Patrick nodded. "Is it serious?" Patrick raised his arms and let out a breath.

"Yes," he said. "I called her niece in St. Louis. She's coming today, I think. I need a sandwich. Maybe we could meet later?"

"Sure. I'll be at the Depresso. If you don't show up, I'll figure you couldn't make it."

"O.K." He looked relieved. She made him an enormous sandwich and wished that she could hug him, but another customer was waiting. This was the first time she had seen Patrick sad. His expression was calm, resigned, almost delicate. The energy she was accustomed to seeing in his face seemed to have drawn back, turned inward, as though it were trained on maintaining his balance. "I hope I see you later," she said. His answering smile included her in his balance, if that's what it was. She felt more certain than ever that she was moving in the right direction.

On her way home, she stopped to talk with AhnRee who was seated in a director's chair on his lawn. He was sketching an apple tree. "Nice day, huh, AhnRee?"

"Mmm, yes, Willow."

"Pretty." She pointed at the drawing. "I thought you only painted women."

AhnRee looked up from his labor. "One must take a break occasionally. It is good for the eye." He selected another colored pencil and rubbed a few darker patches into the ground beneath the tree. "Tone, Willow."

"Yes, tone." Normally, she would have continued on her way at this point. Hell, normally, she would have waved and not stopped in the first place. AhnRee put down his pencil carefully.

"And are you content here, Willow?" A bit surprising, sometimes, AhnRee.

"I am," she said emphatically. "I love the flowers. It is a wonderful place."

"Pour l'amour." AhnRee smiled. God, this blushing had to stop.

"Right. L'amour," she said. "Patrick," she added.

"Ah, Patrick . . . Is he the one with the red hair?"

"Yes."

"Marvelous," AhnRee said, looking back at the apple tree.

"AhnRee?" He looked back at her. "Amber said that you said I might use your piano some time."

"Of course, Willow, of course. Amber told me that you were musical." He rubbed his stomach. "I am often out in the middle of the day. Just let yourself in."

"Thanks, AhnRee. You are a sweetheart−−no matter what they say about you at the Museum of Modern Art."

His face darkened. "Those idiots . . . "

"Just kidding." She skipped away. He was decent, really. She pedaled to the studio, ate a carrot that was getting old, cut up an apple and ate that with a piece of cheddar, and made a mug of tea which she balanced on her stomach as she lay on her bed. She didn't have a violin, and she wasn't sure what she'd be getting into if she started going over to Tom Merrill's. She played piano well enough to fool around, to maybe get at what she was feeling. Her eyes closed, and, without opening them, she lowered the half empty mug to the stone floor.

An hour later, she brushed her hair and put on a slinky black T−shirt. She folded a sweater, weighed it down with a book in the bike basket, and coasted down the mountain. Her favorite table was empty, a good sign. She ordered a beer and put the book on the table, but she did not read it, preferring to watch cars and people pass by, enjoying a feeling of community. I mean, I live here, she thought. I'm not going back. The words still thrilled her.

Patrick arrived 45 minutes later looking pretty much as he had in the morning. "How are ya?" she asked, not wanting to throw herself at him.

"Thirsty . . . Gert died."

"Damn."

"Yeah. This morning. I just called." She pushed her bottle in his direction and watched him take two long

swallows. "Thanks," he said. "Ginger−−that's her niece−−is supposed to arrive tonight. She's staying at the house, so I said I'd be there."

"I'm sorry, Patrick."

"I am, too. I keep seeing Gert lying in that hospital bed all alone." He paused. "Strange thing happened: she asked me not to let her niece have a chest that was in the attic. It was like her last wish. She said the chest was hers. 'Mine, my love,' she said. She was whispering. I could barely hear her. When she said it, her face changed and she looked like a girl."

"Oh, Patrick."

"She seemed almost happy. I think she was happy."

"Maybe she wasn't so alone," Willow said.

Patrick spread his hands, palms up. "Anyway−−I promised, about the chest."

"What are you going to do now?" she asked.

"Thanks, Eve." Patrick took his beer and considered. "Go home, I guess. Wait."

"What about the chest? Is it big?"

"Not very," Patrick said.

"Could you hide it somewhere?"

"I guess I could put it under my bed and pretend that it was mine."

"But, the niece may have seen it before."

"You're right," Patrick said.

"You could put it under the bed with a garbage bag around it−−just to hide it. Then we could figure out how to move it later, bring it up to my house or take it to the dump."

"I don't know about the dump," Patrick said. "It would be like throwing her away."

"No dump," Willow said.

"The garbage bag is a good idea. That's what I'll do. So . . . " He stood. "I'll miss you. Love that T−shirt." He meant what was underneath. She wiggled in her chair, pleased.

"I've got the day off tomorrow," she told him. "I'd love to see you."

"Good deal. Here, after work?" They agreed and she watched him leave, walking slowly. She wanted to tell him about her decision, but he had a lot on his mind. It could wait until tomorrow. Also, that would give her another day to make sure it was for real. She knew it was, but it wouldn't hurt to sleep on it one more night.

In the morning, she wrote to the Dean at Stanford, requesting a leave of absence. Willow (Clara) Brown, she signed it. It's my name, damnit, she said to herself. Every one has always called me 'Willow.' I can't help it if

Dad is a Brahms freak. I mean, there's nothing wrong with Clara, but Willow is my name. She was working herself up to call home. Writing the letter first made the decision more of a fait accompli, even though she hadn't mailed it.

She rode her bike into town and dropped the letter through the slot inside the post office. "That's that," she said and felt better. She called collect from a pay phone and got her mother.

"Hi, Mom."

"Willow, dear!"

"How are you?"

"Just fine. We're all fine. We're worried about you. Are you all right?"

"Never better. Did you get my last letter?"

"The one describing your house and your new friend?"

"Yup. Well−−things have moved on. Patrick is more than a friend."

Her mother sighed. "Oh, Willow, I hope you're being careful."

"Mother! Of course. And I've requested a leave of absence from school."

Silence. "I was afraid of this," her mother said. Willow waited. "Your father will have a fit."

"Don't tell him until after he's had his drink."

Silence. Willow braced for where did we go wrong and what's the matter with Stanford. "Baby, are you sure?" The "sure" came from a deep place that resonated with a similar place in Willow.

"Yes," she said instantly. "I'm sure."

"All right, Dear. I'll break it to your father. But you're going to have to deal with him."

"I will. I'll write and let you know my plans. I'm not sure where I'll be this winter. Probably here. I'll let you know."

"Be careful, Dear. I love you."

"I love you, too." Willow put down the phone amazed.

"I mean," she said later to Amber, "I couldn't believe it. She actually talked to me like a grownup, like a woman."

"Far out," Amber said. "I think we better send her some flowers."

"What a good idea!" Willow jumped to her feet and paced the room. "But my father? I can't send flowers to her and not say anything to him. We haven't had it out, yet."

"Your father's pretty cool, considering." Amber meant−−for a professor.

"I know," Willow said. "I'll send him the new Dylan album. I'll put a note on it saying, 'latest American masterpiece.' Make a joke out of it. He's going to be upset, though."

"He'll get over it. It's not like you're running away with a drug dealer, for God's sake."

"I'll do it this afternoon," Willow said, "before I meet Patrick."

She wrote a short note to go with the album. Her father would be relieved to know that she had requested a leave of absence and would be in good standing at the University. She told him that she needed time to find her own direction. He would think that she was making a mistake, but at least he would hear it from her directly and would recognize that she was serious. She added that there was a guy in town who played piano like Fats Waller. "Love, Willow."

She rode back to the village and ordered flowers for her mother. The Book and Record Shop packaged the Dylan album for her. She slipped in the note and made her second trip of the day to the post office. Not bad, she thought, pedaling to the Depresso. Not bad at all.

"You look cheerful," Patrick said when she arrived.

"It's Pluto," she said, "hanging around Venus again." She bent over and kissed him quickly. "Mercury and Jupiter. You're here early."

"I took the day off."

"So, what happened?" Willow pulled a chair out from the table and sat down.

"Ginger showed up late, around eleven. We talked."

"What's she like?"

"Not bad. Solid. She's married to an accountant−−in St. Louis, I told you. She has a couple of kids in college. She is Gert's only close relative. Anyway, she's taking care of things. The house goes to her; she's going to sell it right away. She asked me if I'd take care of the place until then, live for free. I said I would."

"I bet it sells fast," Willow said.

"It should. I guess Gert told her about me, so she trusts me."

"It's a good deal for her," Willow said. "Houses are more attractive when they are lived in, and summer is the perfect time to put it on the market."

Patrick stretched. "I've been thinking," he said.

"About what?"

"About what to do next." He took a drink of beer. "I've been thinking about maybe spending some time on the west coast. Where did you say you were going to school?"

"Woodstock University," she said, laughing. "Oh, Patrick, you are such a sweetie."

"Not," Patrick said.

"I have news, too," Willow said. "I was going to invite you to Deanie's and tell you, but I can't wait."

Patrick sat up straight.

"I quit! I'm not going back. I put in for a leave of absence."

"No shit?"

"Truly."

"Far out." A grin spread slowly across Patrick's face. "What are you going to do?"

"Buy you dinner at Deanie's."

Patrick was surprisingly formal at dinner. He ordered carefully and ate slowly, looking around the restaurant with pleasure. What a sweetie. Willow couldn't get over how comfortable she felt. This was like, life.

"This is my fourth dinner in Deanie's," Patrick said.

"Impressive," she said.

"I always order apple pie," he said.

"Make that two." She told him that she was going to find a way to stay in town. They agreed that it was a good place to be. "I mean, it might be fun here in the winter," she said. "A lot fewer people, I bet."

"Have to get warm coats," Patrick said. They were agreeing, without actually discussing it, to spend the winter together. Patrick walked her all the way home and then walked back after a long hug which stayed with her as she slipped beneath her covers on the porch. How good is this? she asked herself. Very good. As she and Patrick passed through town, a voice had come out of a doorway.

"Patrick, old buddy."

"Hey, Billy," Patrick said, stopping.

"You got a buck for some cigarettes?"

"Yeah, man." Patrick reached into his pocket. "They aren't doing you any good, Billy."

"There's worse."

"I guess . . . This is Willow."

Billy looked her up and down. "Willow, huh−−now there's a pretty name. You take care of her, Patrick. She's a good one."

"I'm rotten to the core, Billy," she had said. That started him laughing and coughing.

"You're in trouble, Patrick," he managed to get out.

"I know it," Patrick said. "Well, we'll see you, Billy."

"Obliged. Good night, Willow."

"Good night, Billy."

Tears came to her in bed as she remembered. She and Patrick had walked up the street leaving Billy behind. He had given them his blessing, from a doorway, alone. It was like being married. She felt accepted for the first time as part of a public couple. "Obliged, Billy," she said and slept.

9

Fifteen years later, on a November morning, two soccer teams faced each other across a lush green field. San Francisco Bay was distantly visible from the bleachers, blue shading to gray.

"Go, Mustangs!" a dark haired woman in her prime said to a friend joining her. "Hi, Willow."

"Morning, Cree." Willow set down a canvas tote bag and the two exchanged hugs. "Brrrr."

"I know." Cree pointed at the boys who were running together as a whistle blew. "They get to keep warm."

"We do, too. Coffee." Willow pulled a thermos from the bag. "Cocoa. Scones."

"Scones! Willow, you are too much."

"I am the mother of a Mustang," Willow said. "God!"

"We are wild; we conquer," Cree said. "But this team is supposed to be tough. "Go, Bart!" she yelled.

"I'm not supposed to cheer," Willow said. "What do you think? Start with coffee?" She poured two cups. "I couldn't believe it when I saw you at the school."

"It's so weird," Cree said. "It seems like yesterday we were sitting around in Woodstock. And then, in another way, it seems like forever."

"I brought you something." Willow handed a sheet of paper to Cree. "Patrick got in touch with Gino last year, and Gino sent this to him. I copied it for you."

Aesthetic

Muses too are easily bored

and sometimes prefer a tickle

to a grand assault.

You have filled the cathedral with flowers;

organist and choirmaster poised

you stand there expectant

dressed in your best suit.

You may find that

yawning, somnolent with incense,

she has slipped away

around the corner to a restaurant

where a painter

having sketched the

waiter on a paper napkin

uses it to blot the marinara sauce

from his blue silk tie.

Cree read and wrinkled her nose. "That's Gino, all right. I think he's happy in the Maine woods. His relationship is good. He doesn't make any money, but what else is new?" She shook her head. "Well, we got Bart made, anyway."

"Go, Bart!" Willow said. "So, how's your business?"

"Every time I think it's going to die, it surprises me and comes back to life."

"Must be fun going to Italy on buying trips."

"It is fun sometimes. And deductible. How does Patrick like it at the university?"

"He enjoys it," Willow said. "He likes the research best, but he doesn't mind the teaching. The kids love him."

"Of course they do," Cree said. "Now, I'm trying to remember−−weren't you into music?"

"I was. I mean, I am. I love it, but I don't perform or anything."

"Bart is pretty good on the piano. I'm thinking of changing to a better teacher."

"I grew up on lessons," Willow said. "I think I had too many. When I was in Woodstock, I used to go up to AhnRee's and play his piano, try to write songs. I found that I couldn't. It was a great disappointment. It was like I was too grooved in the classical; I couldn't get loose, couldn't get away from it. I guess if I were really talented I would have blown it off and done my own thing." She paused. "I wouldn't push it too hard. Nudge, maybe. Scone?"

Cree's face lit up as she bit into the scone. "Mighty fine," she said.

"That's what I do best," Willow said. "It's a wonder I can still see my feet. I'm starting a cafe in January."

"Spectacular! I'll be there. You look terrific. I'm the blimp. I'll think about the music lessons. Thanks, Willow." They watched the Mustangs struggle. The other team was doing most of the attacking. "What's your little one like? . . . Dylan?"

"Right. After Bob," Willow said. "He's more even tempered than Martin, but he's pretty intense. Quiet. He's got a thing for cats, which I take to be a good sign." The attackers lined up for a corner kick. "What ever happened to Joe Burke?"

"Oh, Joe." Cree smiled. "He was something. He and Sally went to Hawaii to live, then they broke up. He's in Maine. They had a daughter. He's remarried, I think."

"He was interesting," Willow said.

"Yeah. If the situation had been a little different . . . " She raised one eyebrow. "I don't think he ever found a place where he fit in. The good old days," Cree said. "When you showed up in Woodstock, you had a friend."

"Amber," Willow said.

"Wasn't she from the Bay Area?"

"Yep−−she's in Vancouver, Washington, now. She's a pediatrician. She married a developer with pots of money. They have two spoiled kids."

"She was gorgeous," Cree said.

"She's hanging in there," Willow said. "A line of men was following her around in the mall the last time I saw her."

"Men." Cree shook her head. "They come in handy at a picnic−−as my mother used to say. You got the last good one. Patrick is a sweetie."

"As long as you put the pliers back. Jesus." Willow said. There was a great commotion from the attackers as they ran back towards their own goal holding their arms in the air. Mustangs down, one−zip. "Oh, dear."

"We will conquer," Cree said.

"Martin's going to be upset. He's planning to be a World Cup goalie."

"He carries himself like Patrick. Where did the name come from?"

"My father's name is Martin, and also . . . You've got to keep this to yourself." Cree moved closer. "Do you remember Martin Merrill in Woodstock−−lived on the Byrdcliffe Road, played banjo and fiddle?"

"Sure," Cree said. "He was around a lot. He had a glamorous mother, right?"

"Right." Willow sipped coffee. "One night, Patrick and I were in the Depresso−−about a week before we left town. We'd decided to get married and move to Tallahassee so Patrick could go back to school. We were celebrating. Martin came in, and we told him our plans. He was happy about it and said he had a wedding present for us.

"Patrick said to him, 'Wedding present? All right! We don't even have a date.'

"'Soon,' I said.

"'Nobody knows,' Patrick said.

"'My parents already fear the worst," I said.

"'I've got to call my father,' Patrick said.

"Well, when Patrick said that, Martin leaned across the table. 'You mean our father, don't you?' I thought Patrick was going to fall off his chair; his mouth opened and nothing came out. 'Take it easy,' Martin said. 'It's no big deal.'

"'The hell it isn't,' Patrick finally got out.

"'It is and it isn't,' Martin said.

"'How did you know?' Patrick asked.

"'After my dad died−−my other dad−−I heard my mom talking. She and her best friend were drinking. They thought I was asleep. She'd never said anything. I guess she was worried that the family would throw her out or disown her or something.' Martin looked sad. 'You remember things like that. When you showed up, I knew right away.'

"'I thought there was something similar about you two,' I said. Patrick held his hands across the table, extending his fingers.

"'Same hands,' he said. Martin spread his fingers to compare, and then they clasped hands for a moment.

"'I figured you knew,' Martin said, 'because of the way you kept watching me.'"

"I'll be damned," Cree said. Willow finished her coffee.

"So, they talked and decided not to rock the boat."

"You never know, do you?" Cree said.

"The next morning, we got up and there was Martin's car in the driveway with a ribbon tied around the hood ornament. He'd come in silently in the middle of the night and left it. There was a note on the seat that said congratulations and that he used Pennzoil in it. The registration was signed over to Patrick. I mean, we didn't even have a car. The next week, away we went, rocking down the coast to a new life."

"Nice, that was nice," Cree said.

"Patrick was fanatic about the car. He changed the oil about once a month. Jesus. It was a great old car though; we used it all through graduate school. It was still running when we came out to the west coast. Patrick's father loved it. We left it with him." There was a second burst of shrill cries; arms held high moved in the other direction. Mustangs even, 1−1.

"See," Cree said. "Are you in touch with Martin?"

"We talk on the phone every once in a while. He still lives in Woodstock; he's got a recording business. We try to visit every couple of years, but you know how it is. Time keeps flying by."

"Scary," Cree said.

"Remember that guy, Wendell? He was a hunk."

"He was."

"Did he ever show up again?"

"Not while I was there," Cree said. "He nearly killed Sam; he had to disappear. He just did get away."

"Was it the FBI or the CIA that Sam was working for?"

"Not sure."

"The bad old, good old days," Willow said.

"Remember Parker?"

"Yeah, Patrick's boss."

"He took off. Left Hildy and the kids for another woman. Sooner or later, just about everyone split up. What's your secret?"

"The dotted line painted down the middle of the house," Willow said. "Patrick needs a visa to enter the kitchen."

The Mustangs were pushed into their end of the field. A fine drizzle began to fall. The two watched, cheeks glowing, as their sons fought back.

"We were talking about Woodstock last night, actually," Willow said. "Patrick's landlady left him a treasure chest when she died. She didn't really leave it to him; she didn't want her family to get it. Patrick says it was her last wish. We've kept it with us ever since. He won't open it."

"Isn't it driving you crazy?"

"I'm dying to know what's in it. He won't open it, though. He says it's ours to respect and to keep private. He says he knows what's in it anyway."

"What?"

"True love."

Cree's eyes went back to the struggle on the field. "Hang on to it, Baby," she said.

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Joe Burke's Last Stand