

diate, but disconnected, like a bright island in a wall of fog, the heightened, unquestioning reality one feels when one is drunk.

The road led through the woods. They left the highway for an old trail that went twisting among the trees across miles of untouched country. There were no traces of human existence around them. Old ruts, overgrown with grass, made human presence seem more distant, adding the distance of years to the distance of miles. A haze of twilight remained over the ground, but in the breaks between the tree trunks there were leaves that hung in patches of shining green and seemed to light the forest. The leaves hung still. They walked, alone to move through a motionless world. She noticed suddenly that they had not said a word for a long time.

They came to a clearing. It was a small hollow at the bottom of a shaft made of straight rock hillsides. A stream cut across the grass, and tree branches flowed low to the ground, like a curtain of green fluid. The sound of the water stressed the silence. The distant cut of open sky made the place seem more hidden. Far above, on the crest of a hill, one tree caught the first rays of sunlight.

They stopped and looked at each other. She knew, only when he did it, that she had known he would. He seized her, she felt her lips on his mouth, felt her arms grasping him in violent answer, and knew for the first time how much she had wanted him to do it.

She felt a moment's rebellion and a hint of fear. He held her, pressing the length of his body against hers with a tense, purposeful insistence, his hand moving over her breasts as if he were learning a proprietor's intimacy with her body, a shocking intimacy that needed no consent from her, no permission. She tried to pull herself away, but she only leaned back against his arms long enough to see his face and his smile, the smile that told her she had given him permission long ago. She thought that she must escape; instead, it was she who pulled his head down to find his mouth again.

She knew that fear was useless, that he would do what he wished, that the decision was his, that he left nothing possible to her except the thing she wanted most—to submit. She had no conscious realization of his purpose, her vague knowledge of it was wiped out, she had no power to believe it clearly, in this moment, to believe it about herself, she knew only that she was afraid—yet what she felt was as if she were crying to him: Don't ask me for it—oh, don't ask me—do it!

She braced her feet for an instant, to resist, but his mouth was pressed to hers and they went down to the ground together, never breaking their lips apart. She lay still—as the motionless, then the quivering object of an act which he did simply, unhesitatingly, as of right, the right of the unendurable pleasure it gave them.

He named what it meant to both of them in the first words he spoke afterwards. He said, "We had to learn it from each other." She looked at his long figure stretched on the grass beside her, he wore black slacks and a black shirt, her eyes stopped on the belt pulled tight across his slender waistline, and she felt the stab of an emotion that was like a gasp of pride, pride in her ownership of his

body. She lay on her back, looking up at the sky, feeling no desire to move or think or know that there was any time beyond this moment.

When she came home, when she lay in bed, naked because her body had become an unfamiliar possession, too precious for the touch of a nightgown, because it gave her pleasure to feel naked and to feel as if the white sheets of her bed were touched by Francisco's body—when she thought that she would not sleep, because she did not want to rest and lose the most wonderful exhaustion she had ever known—her last thought was of the times when she had wanted to express, but found no way to do it, an instant's knowledge of a feeling greater than happiness, the feeling of one's blessing upon the whole of the earth, the feeling of being in love with the fact that one exists and in this kind of world; she thought that the act she had learned was the way one expressed it. If this was a thought of the gravest importance, she did not know it, nothing could be grave in a universe from which the concept of pain had been wiped out, she was not there to weigh her conclusion; she was asleep, a faint smile on her face, in a silent, luminous room filled with the light of morning.

That summer, she met him in the woods, in hidden corners by the river, on the floor of an abandoned shack, in the cellar of the house. These were the only times when she learned to feel a sense of beauty—by looking up at old wooden rafters or at the steel plate of an air-conditioning machine that whirled tensely, rhythmically above their heads. She wore slacks or cotton summer dresses, yet she was never so feminine as when she stood beside him, sagging in his arms, abandoning herself to anything he wished, in open acknowledgment of his power to reduce her to helplessness by the pleasure he had the power to give her. He taught her every manner of sensuality he could invent. "Isn't it wonderful that our bodies can give us so much pleasure?" he said to her once, quite simply. They were happy and radiantly innocent. They were both incapable of the conception that joy is sin.

They kept their secret from the knowledge of others, not as a shameful guilt, but as a thing that was immaculately theirs, beyond anyone's right of debate or appraisal. She knew the general doctrine on sex, held by people in one form or another, the doctrine that sex was an ugly weakness of man's lower nature, to be condoned regretfully. She experienced an emotion of chastity that made her shrink not from the desires of her body, but from any contact with the minds who held this doctrine.

That winter, Francisco came to see her in New York, at unpredictable intervals. He would fly down from Cleveland, without warning, twice a week, or he would vanish for months. She would sit on the floor of her room, surrounded by charts and blueprints, she would hear a knock at her door and snap, "I'm busy!" then hear a mocking voice ask, "Are you?" and leap to her feet to throw the door open, to find him standing there. They would go to an apartment he had rented in the city, a small apartment in a quiet neighborhood. "Francisco," she asked him once, in sudden astonishment, "I'm your mistress, am I not?" He laughed. "That's what you are." She felt the