Up on the sidewalk, glancing down through the high wire fence at the playground and the mothers on the benches, he recognized her by the way she bowed her head over her knitting as she used to bow it over her radical magazines—engrossed and eager to do somebody some good with what was in the print. He went down the concrete ramp and across the tanbark and spoke to her over the children in the sandbox.

She lifted her basket from the bench to the ground, hastily, to forestall, he knew, any embarrassment there might be for them in the curious stares and glances of the other women because he was a black man approaching a white woman, and he went around the sandbox and sat down where the basket had been.

"You haven't changed much," he said.

"Don't tell me that!" she laughed.

"You got kids you're watching?" he asked, searching among the ones in the sand for one to resemble her. A little girl with light hair was watching them. She turned away with solemn shyness, when her mother introduced her, and resumed her digging.

"I have a boy, too," she said, looking out over the playground to the baseball formation. "He's older. He's eight."

It was as if she had even closer allies now, allies she herself had created to reject him with, some other man's children. "That's a little army," he said. "I got a little army, too. I got three in mine, two girls and a boy. The other day the boy climbed up to the medicine cabinet and swallowed the iron tablets and had to go to the hospital to get pumped out. They're out of their minds," he said, laughing with her.

As the laughing waned she pushed back her bangs, a gesture he remembered that hid her face for a second. Her hair had darkened, and her eyes, glancing at him from under her hand with a flash of shyness, seemed less blue, faded to the color of a dim sky. He knew that she saw him as better-looking than he'd been twelve years ago. Then he'd had a skinny, agitated

look; now, at least, he was a little heavier, a lot calmer, his expensive suit the reward and requisite of a publicity man for a big insurance company. If one of them was at a disadvantage it was she. She was nobody to be possessed by, anymore, to be saved by, to beg from. Up on the sidewalk he had seen that she was less than she had been and it was this lessening that had enabled him to approach her.

"That's what they'll do, scare the wits out of you," she said, and sighed, laughing. "I guess every joy brings a burden along with it. You don't realize that so much until you've got kids."

"That's true, that's true," he said, disparaging with a smile her ready wisdom. In the past she had given out her left-wing maxims but this had the sound of religion or domesticity. "You can reverse it, too," he said, mocking her homily, its simpleness. "Like, every burden brings its joy."

"That's so," she agreed, taking him seriously. "A burden can make you more humane, more compassionate"—her voice fading out as it used to do when she had tried to help him with her aspirin kind of radical remedy for a disease that had got him by the throat.

"I can't hear you," he said, bending his head toward her.

"I was just agreeing with you," she said.

"If they don't kill you."

"Who?" she asked. Her irritation was with herself, not him. He knew the sound.

"The burdens, the burdens. Weren't you telling me about burdens?" he said, keeping up his smile to make a joke of their conversation, which was going awry, sooner than in the past, as if they were making up for lost time. "You never used to talk that way," he said. "When you were always deploring burdens there wasn't any compensation that came along with them."

"But I still deplore them," she said.

"That's good," he said drolly. "That's good. And are you still on the right track? About how to get rid of burdens? Though the way I heard it, that track collapsed."

She was not cornered, he saw. "What we learned from that," she said, "is there are more answers than one."

"Ah, yes, ah, yes," he said, nodding, engaged, clasping his crossed knee. "And what are you doing with all the answers?"

She glanced at him to see his purpose. "They're taking the struggle into their own hands now," she said, and glanced at him again. "I still use the same old cliché words, don't I?"

"It *is* a struggle," he said.

"I mean, they're on their own," she explained, flushing.

She's all melted down to a spoonful of owlshit, he thought. He had refused her politics in that year he had known her, he had argued with her for hours, but now he found himself contemptuous of her for getting melted down in the heat of lost battles. The men she had introduced him to, those men who had cornered him with their barrage of knowledge until he felt like a criminal in his ignorance—were they all melted down? Though he had opposed them, he felt now that they had deserted him.

"Yeh, they're on their own," he agreed. "They were always on their own," reminding himself, with that retaliation, of their last meeting. She had called it quits and he had gone to hell, and he had begged her to come back, one time more. She had come up with a hamburger in a paper bag, trying to make it seem that all he required was food in his stomach so no more could be asked of her. He had been drinking for three days and he was sick, vomit was on his shirt and sour whiskey on his breath. He had wanted to reveal himself to her in all his obnoxious misery, and he had wanted her to love him in spite of all and because of all. He had taken her face in his hands and covered it with kisses from the mouth that had cursed her, telling himself it was what she had come for. She had stayed with him from noon to midnight, but it was the end.

A boy was coming across the tanbark, gazing at them, a kid with a wondering, bored look. He stood up and shook hands with the boy, who found a sandwich in the basket and walked away, eating.

“Do you want a sandwich?” she asked the little girl, who was watching, and the girl hung her head. “Come on,” said the mother, and he heard again that sweetness in her voice that he remembered from their beginning, when he had telephoned her every evening and talked with her for hours, always with his radio turned up loud with a symphony so that she could hear in that background music the possibilities between them, the young social worker with her unmistaken politics and the young reporter with his unmistakable intelligence.

“She shy?” he asked. “Mine is shy, too. The littlest girl. Always hanging out behind her mama.”

“They grow out of it,” she said.

“They do, they do,” he said, laughing indulgently.

She looked around for her knitting and found it beside her. “You got thin,” he said.

“Oh, maybe,” she shrugged.

“You well?” he asked her kindly. Her hands were working the needles, her head bowed again. In among the darkening hairs were gray ones; no polish on her nails; socks instead of nylons; and old tennis shoes. He looked at her closely and thought: Was it just the way some women age fast? Or was it that her substance was gone, her certainty gone. That certainty that in the past had infuriated him and he had attacked by attacking her politics. That certainty, that control over her own life, over all her choices of acceptance and rejection, that certainty she herself would have denied but that he had been as sure about as he’d been about her heart beating in her breast.

“Aside from the usual winter colds,” she said, “I haven’t been sick a day. And you?”

“Not sick a minute,” he said.

From the sandbox rose a chorus of wailing and screaming. One child stood pouring sand over another’s head, and a third tossed sand over both contestants. She got up to go for her child, who had covered her face with her hands and was crying, and something about the way she moved that was no

longer the way she had moved up the stairs ahead of him on the way to his apartment, with his hands on her hips to feel their movement, something about the change brought on the memory that he had held off since the moment he sat down beside her on the bench. He remembered the time just before the end, when, lying in his bed, she had covered herself with the blankets because she had a question to ask and she wanted to disappear before she asked it. They had got honest with each other again, maybe because he had begged her again to marry him. I have to ask you, she had said, *because how can we know each other if I don't ask you?* and she had asked him if he loved her because she was white. Simpering up his face to imitate her, he had hurled newspapers and clothes around the room until she got out of bed and got dressed, frightened by his tormenting mimicry of her question and by his answer—that if there had to be truth to cement the damn thing together, then the truth was that he hated her, she was too goddamn much trouble. He watched her now, taking the child by the hand, leading her away from the melee and with the hem of her skirt wiping away wet sand from the crying mouth, and knew now, watching her, that more was in that question she had asked him that time, more than the desire to be rid of him, more than the desire to come at last to the core of their love and find no core.

"Never a dull moment," she said, sitting down on the bench, laughing, her short hair falling across her cheek as she bent to the basket to find something to appease the child, who sat on the other side of her.

"Oh, God, never," he agreed.

For a few more minutes he sat with her, leaning forward to say a few words to the child and leaning back to laugh with the mother. When he stood up, she lifted her hand to shade her face from the sun, smiling up at him. She was relieved, he knew, to see him go. He walked briskly, with the step of good health, up the concrete ramp, and on the sidewalk again, as he leaned against the fence to pick a scratchy piece of tanbark off his sock, he saw that she was lifting the girl's hand and waving it at him, but he pretended not to see them. He could not bring himself to wave back at them,

because his pity for her, the pity that he had failed to experience in the time of his love, forbade him small and amiable signals.