

Promise of Rain

Section 1

At some time in a man's life he must stake claim to a decade of his history, must plant his flag and be done with the antic world of progress. It's only an endless renaming of things anyway, this meticulous disaster that passes for human advancement. A man has to find a period where enough of what he needs has been provided, and enough of what he wants is handy. Then he should forfeit the rest. It confuses things. For me, my decade is one of my own construction. It begins in 1966 and ends in September 1976. 1966 because that was the year I met Beth, my wife, or rather, as she was to become, my ex-wife; and 1976 because that was the year our daughter was born. I can say it, on the late night of her birth on September 15th, I stopped caring if anything was ever made faster, or smaller, or lighter, or more manageable. It didn't matter if my clothes were brighter, or my carpet more durable, or my car more luxurious. Today, what I read in the paper, see on television – none of it is of any interest to me. Somewhere about that night, progress quit its race as far as I was concerned. I had found my place to stop. Every man needs one. The place from which you tell your story. The place where you scrawl your name on the wall. It's what we use to see with, and it's how we know the false things from the true. This is all to say that I'm just now eating breakfast in a time that is not mine, and for which I pretend no ownership and begrudge no allegiance. And so I do so alone.

Today is Saturday, and Rose's is busy. It's a diner I come to often as it's near my apartment and I can walk. This is important, as I don't own a car anymore. Plus it's cheap, and familiar, being of a style born in my generation: the simple vinyl booths, white Formica counter tops. It reminds me of the days before it was a crime to have a cigarette with your breakfast, and when coffee was just coffee and not whatever they're calling it now.

I'm sitting in a booth at the window looking out on the street and sidewalk, watching the people that pass. I pretend not to notice those just inside the door who are waiting for a seat and looking at me disdainfully for being one person occupying a four-person table. They too seem to think it's my fault that I'm alone. Finally, Rose, my waitress, a short, slim, mechanical woman, approaches me, coffeepot in hand. I've come to know her a little over time, not well, but a little. I watch her hands as she pours my coffee. They're older than she is, as worn and loose skinned as cold chicken. Yet, as things that are both old and strong often are, they also seem wise, and capable, and as such, intimidating.

"All ready?" she asks. Her nose is small and shaped like a bud, and her lips the thin creased variety of a long-time smoker.

Still looking at her hands, I order a cheese omelet with hash browns and wheat toast. She writes none of it down and with a nod moves on to the other tables near me to collect empty dishes, fill empty cups. I'm not a man who likes to be bothered, but today, crowded into this window seat by a life of ragged misperception, I'm disappointed when she turns so quickly and leaves. Something might have come to me if she'd just lingered a moment, maybe a flash of wit, a joke, perhaps even a compliment. About her hands maybe. Today I feel like a blind man who has for years been speaking freely, confidently, imagining an audience silent and rapt, sitting cross-legged before him, only to learn, upon having his sight restored, that it is only to furniture and dirty dinner plates that he's been lecturing. I might have told her something she didn't know. She might have told me.

Stories like this — lives like mine — never start this way. They don't start with cold coffee. That's where they end, in a diner, with the clink of breakfast silverware in the hands of strangers. They end while we wait for a plate of eggs and potatoes. They end in such a way as to suggest it was always thus and always thus shall be. That those memories of better times and better days are in fact fevers, dreams, things seen in movies and adopted and scripted to ourselves. And if you buy them as truth, then you can't help but feeling like your own life has been against you from the very start. But I know I've been happy. I've made good choices in my life. Not all of them have been good, of course, but many, some. And no matter why I'm here this morning and not getting ready for my daughter's wedding, which is set to take place a few hours from now at the Cherry Park Presbyterian Church, I will always consider both my wife and my daughter examples of my best. My baby, she must be nervous and excited, my little bird, just as I was. It's a grand thing, marriage. The gesture of it, the declaration of love shared with all who will listen. Will she think about me today? I don't know. But I will be there in my way. I will be the empty spot at the altar, the draft beneath the door. I will be the stammered word and the promise of rain. Without a name, I will be constituent in the meaner bits of the day, apportioned into its frailties and shortcomings, contributed to its very edges, where the dirty outside world is kept at bay on wedding days. That is where she and

her mother will put me. But perhaps too, I hope, when my Molly is alone and closing her eyes just before being led down the aisle by someone other than myself, I might be a fleeting subject of her thoughts: *My father, who has done more than his share of wrong, and who has been guilty of dreaming too much, and then living too like a coward, I love him still even after all of it.* Who knows, if I'm a lucky man, maybe she will even shed a tear as she touches the sleeve of my proxy. These are the ambitions of a desperate man.

Looking back on 59 years, I think what rankles most is this sneaking suspicion that my own life was complicit in some traitorship against me. Things went wrong somewhere. But then what am I saying "somewhere"? I know precisely their locations, and their times. I have a madman's memory for such things, and what can't be remembered is burnished into shape by my imagination. I can plot those somewheres with a mapmaker's accuracy. I can see them just as easily as I can see the man at the bar there picking his teeth with his fork. The problem is my life did not proceed as they do in books, where adventures and tests of will steel the hero, or, if wounding him, give him grace and character. I was not, in short, made better by my failures. I was permitted no lessons from them, the kind from which wisdom can be drawn. My errors have been too selfish for wisdom, too borne of weakness, and so they have left nothing behind in the end but their varied parts, which cannot be fashioned into any truth. As a young man, it was all possibility, rich and deep and inexhaustible. What's more, I had time, which is the currency of youth. But this possibility became, in the sorcerer's silk hat, a kind of sprawling mess of blunders and bankruptcies. I must admit, I suppose, that I inherited my father's vision, which did not allow him to see his feet as he walked. His eyes always looked out beyond the first step, beyond the second and third. It was a vision that remained transfixed by distance and the gambler's prospect that gold lay just behind that far hill. Thus, of course, he was a man prone to tripping. Do not, as my mother once said, let such a man carry your valuables. Other things I have been given, too. A mother's abiding love, the love of not one, but two women, and the gentle, sweet, perfect love of a daughter. Who is today getting married, and to a man I've never met. The truth is, stories like this — lives like mine — they all start somewhere. They must. There must be a beginning to every end, somewhere—

But to hell with all that! To hell with it. I'm tired of it. I'm not going to concern myself with that anymore, the excavation of my derelictions, my shortfalls, my failures to live right and fly straight. To hell with it. I'm old and it's no good and I'm too damn tired. Today is the conclusive piece. I am done caring about what has passed. I am done apologizing and attempting amends. No one will forgive a man who has been weak, and so my only choice now is to be strong, to volunteer a great fuck you to the world and go on about my business. Here again for the last time I say, I am sorry. Now I'm done. That's it. Plus, what difference does it really make in the end? When something's burned what matters if it was started by a cigarette or a blowtorch? Burned is burned and here I sit. So I'm just going to wait for my breakfast and then I suspect I'll go get drunk. I'll do what I do. I'll drink my beer, read my books, smoke my cigarettes, and that'll be that.

An old man passes my window, stopping for a moment to scratch an ankle with the tip of his cane. When done, he stands there for a moment, as if waiting to see if the itch will return. To me he looks to be Vietnamese. He's short of stature — but even with the cane far from fragile — and his face is calm without being serene. I work with many Vietnamese at the warehouse where I'm paid seven dollars an hour to inventory pet supplies — dog leashes, chew toys, collars, etc. — and they all have about them that patience unique to Asian peoples, the implacability and grace, the tenderness. This man has seen things, I can tell. *Qu'avez-vous vu?* I imagine the small apartment he lives in, decorated simply. There is a picture on the bookcase of himself as a young man wearing the serious expression of young men and those not accustomed to having their picture taken. He has plants, but they die as his daughter, unconvinced of his ability to take care himself, let alone a plant, insists on watering them during her weekly visits when he as already done so himself. I imagine him, in a chair dragged from the kitchen table, sitting expressionless before the television, watching things that even after 30 years fail to be familiar. I see how quiet things are for him, how he methodically cuts vegetables for his dinner in the kitchen in his undershirt, how he shuffles about the floor scratching his bald pate speaking in Vietnamese to the cat who mews at his ankles. And what of his wife, I wonder. In this story, she's died, having lived long enough to reach the U.S. and give birth, but not long enough to really get to know the country or the child. So now, in the living room, an old housecoat of hers is draped over a chaise lounge in memory, the chair made more a monument than a serviceable piece of furniture. Then there are the long walks. He takes them come rain or come shine. He plans for them the minute he awakes, checking the weather, and is always faintly sad when returning home.

Then the man moves on. As he exits the small frame of my window I wonder about the daughter I've imagined for him. I can hear her speaking to him through the closed door of his apartment. "It's me, Baba," she says, smiling at the peephole and holding up a small bag of groceries. Inside, I can smell her perfume which is lilac and light and immediately restorative to her father. She kisses him on the cheek then wipes away the lipstick mark with a thumb. As she removes her shoes, she tells him a plant would be nice in the foyer.

You see, this has always been my skill. People can say what they will about my judgment, but I have imagination. I am full of stories. At age eight, for example, I skipped school and, when it was uncovered, explained with a musician's precision how it had happened. I told my parents I had heard yelling as I passed a house along my route to school. "Boy!" a man's voice had shouted. "Hey there, boy!" I explained how upon following that voice, I found an old man sitting scared and half naked on the floor just inside his screendoor. He wore dentures that were not well adhered to his gums and so slipped into his mouth as he spoke. This, and his extreme agitation, made it difficult to understand him. I told my parents a long and detailed story about how that man could not walk and how upon awaking from a nap he had become crazed when he could not find his wife. I took the story point by point. It unfolded that I had, by setting him on a blanket and pulling him, helped the man, small and withered by age, to his bed. This I described as being very soiled and without coverings. I talked to him and told him it looked like rain, but that he shouldn't worry. I used a calm voice, the one I use with our cat, and that, I told my parents, soothed him. "Don't go away," he had said. "My wife ... I don't know where ... please stay." I told my parents what I found in the house and went into specifics, down to the cupboard doors hanging open, the stacks of newspaper, the tattered furniture, the TV, which was on and showing a baseball game with the sound turned down. It all spilled out of me, that we had talked and how I had asked him about his kids and that he had related to me in brief the recent history of his two daughters and one son. I even added that he did not care so much for one of his son in laws, calling him "Dr. Skinflint." Then I explained that I'd poured us iced tea and that we'd sat and watched the baseball game together and talked now and then but not much because it seemed frustrating, hard work for him. I closed it all up by having the wife come home from the grocery store and her giving me a piece of gum from her purse to thank me for staying with him, "the old bullshit artist," she called him, which I didn't understand.

The miracle of this is that everything I said had been a lie, a story that came from me as naturally and easily as telling the truth. (I had that day actually gone with my friend Jeff Tamland to shoot our BB guns on the plains.) It was also, even at eight, a complex and intoxicating pleasure, the storytelling. It was better than telling the truth; it was better than caring about the truth. In fact, what did truth serve when the world was in surplus of untold stories about, among other things, infirm old men and bad dentures? It could not compare. My rendering was always infinitely richer. And as I grew older, and realized that often as not, the truth offered little that could compete with what I could create, I made a habit of bettering life this way, one-upping it. And when I really discovered books not long after, the pattern was even more firmly established. Life became for me more merely the frontispiece, the *dramatis personae*. My imagination spun out my own creation of the world without my trying, without my pressuring it or even naming it. I told everyone stories. But mostly I told them to myself because I did not care about commerce with things as they were, but only as they could be, or more specifically, as I could make them. Take our mailman, for another example. He limped and wore glasses. So I imagined him living with his mother, and being fond of magic and ham radios and being very lonely and sometimes thinking, after his mother had gone to bed, about taking a handful of pills with his evening soda. Or our neighbors, the Paleys. They were a quiet pair of middle-aged people, who had an RV in their driveway but never used it and never lifted the shades from the windows of their house. In my creation, they had lost an infant to disease and now cared little for going out and instead remained inside and read magazines and barely spoke and went to bed and kissed once then turned their backs to each other.

In the end, that's who these people became for me. I spoke of them and treated them as if these concoctions were true. Some say this a good thing. That it benefits a child to exercise his imagination because by doing so he finds that there are no limits to what he can do. But for some, there is only the dreaming. The plains of eastern Montana, where we lived at the time, were a place for such dreaming. But being endless, they brooked no action, for there was nothing to be done on that desolation but walk and imagine.

But what the hell am I going on about? My life's come to collect around my ankles like a tattered pair of pants, and I'm off on some fucking flight of fancy! It doesn't mean anything, any of it. It never did. They ate my guts from the inside out, those stories. Like a bacteria, they devoured everything. Who cares about this Vietnamese man, for example, with his loving daughter, his wife's housecoat, his dying plants? I don't know him. I have no idea who is, and there can be no purpose in creating something that lives alone in your mind and has no place in the real world. It is a hallucination, a distraction. But here's the worst part: I don't really give a shit about that man at all, no matter who he is. He could continue down the block and stumble in front of a bus and be crushed, it means nothing to me. He's no different than anyone. His story is the same as every story; they're all the same in the end. There are people, and those people meet other people and from those meetings love is learned, and sadness, and hope and desperation and regret and all the rest of it. And then, at some hour before any of it makes any sense, those people die. This is what happens every day and there are no stories to save life from itself.

This reminds me again of my Molly. Right about now she must be all busy nerves, looking at her dress laid out on her bed. I remember how her mother was. Beth, her mother, my wife, now long since ex-wife. We met in San

Francisco when I was still a young man. I had just moved there from my boyhood Montana at the urging of a friend. I was employed as a carpet cleaner while trying to get real work writing or editing. Beth went to nursing school at night and waited tables at a restaurant near where I lived. It was a place I went to often; it had great soup and was cheap, which was a key then as I was barely getting by. She would sneak me soup in a coffee cup and give me extra rolls. There was even then a quality to her that I have not found in many people. All I can say in description of it is that she was present when you were with her. Nothing wavered or turned away. When you looked at her, when you spoke, she looked you in the eye. She listened and asked questions and was, it seemed to me, never distracted. With her, I could speak with an unusual ease. I told her things I'd never heard myself say aloud. I even stored up ideas and thoughts and questions to bring to her, as if a scavenger collecting my varied finds for her expert appraisal. In that way, among others, I was made better by her. My own secrets came out and were organized. And this made all the difference. Mostly, I felt I could be honest. It was her face that allowed it. I told her about how my father had walked out on us throughout my childhood, but always with the intention of coming back the conqueror. The problem was, I explained, he didn't have the stomach for conquering and, perhaps realizing this, he finally just never came back at all. I told her about how my mother's hopes for me made me fragile. I remember even betraying once that I believed myself to be of a good heart, but that my constitution did not permit me to act out against evil. In a war, I don't know what I would've done, but my suspicion is I would've run. She said there was courage in that, too.

The point is I fell very much in love with her. I don't understand all the talk and nonsense about the mystery of love. There is no mystery; it is simple. Beth talked to me, and she listened. What she said, she said in a way that made sense, and when I spoke to her, I felt better for it. All we want is to tell the world who we are, and for the world to listen and know us. Love is when we find that person to whom to reveal it. Then, finally, we relinquish some custody of ourselves and are made so much the freer by it.

But then I don't know that I believe any of this. Maybe I feel guilty. I have done what I can; I have tried. And maybe this is a bunch of bullshit.

Molly, my dear, be strong, be as strong as your mother.

The bell above the door rings as a man and woman exit. I wait for them to turn left once outside and then move past my window. But after a few seconds they don't appear and I conclude they must have turned right instead.

"More coffee?"

"Huh?"

"Coffee?" Rose asks. She stands smiling beside my table.

"Sure, sure." I slide my half-full cup toward her. Rose's is a worn-out smile, but because it seems to fit her personality, manages still to be warm and real. I try to think of something to say. I even feel an odd kind of urgency about it.

"Little distracted this morning are we?" she asks. She is a petite woman, whose head seems slightly out of proportion to her frame. All lean muscle, age has had to satisfy itself with reclaiming only her skin, which is tough looking and wrinkled. Her step and balance and comportment all seem that of a woman half her age. There is this great unhurried quality to her that bespeaks a kind of weary confidence that is not without its effects.

Before I know exactly what I'm saying, I say, "My daughter's getting married today."

"Getting married? Your daughter? Is that right?" she answers. "Well, congratulations. You must be very happy. No wonder you're distracted. I didn't even know you had a daughter." What I like is that she stops pouring coffee and checking the ketchup bottle.

"Happy, yeah, you could say so," I say. And I am, happy for her, but I can think of nothing further to add, and in fact feel immediately uncomfortable as I know little of the specifics should Rose ask.

"So are you nervous?" she asks, with an inquisitive tone more befitting a question like, "Are you alright?" or "Are you lost?"

"Nervous?" I say.

"I was a wreck when my son got married. A complete wreck. I told him this better be the only one or I'd kill him."

"When was that?" I ask.

"I guess, well, it must have been ... 19 ... 86? 85? Whichever year it was that that team from Parkland won the little league world series. That's how I always remember it."

“And did you have to kill him?” I ask.

“Kill him?”

“Because he got married again? I assume the marriage, they still together I hope?”

“Oh right. Well, I don’t want to jinx your daughter’s situation. Nevermind that. Sometimes you just can’t wish things better, you know?”

Before she can go on she is interrupted by Claire, the diner’s other waitress, a younger woman with a round, dimpled body and bleached blonde hair pulled into a sprout on the top of her head. Claire is calling her from the cash register where she stands with an elderly couple who appear to be unhappy.

As Rose walks away, her narrow hips worn of most hint of sensuality from years on her feet, I imagine her before her vanity mirror. Sitting there nightly, she looks at her face and as she does so she travels into the dust blue of her own eyes and over the whole vast collection of her days, all the time carrying the dried red roses of her youth in her hand like Chinese princesses their singing crickets in delicate bamboo cages. Sometimes, Rose, you must be able to wish things better. Too often, and especially at our age, that’s all there is. The world’s just too goddamn foul a place. “If you’ve no imagination, dying doesn’t matter much,” said Celine of a France of years ago.

When I was child, 10 maybe, maybe younger, I would sit on our garage roof, which was just below my room window. On nights of the full moon, I would convince myself that the moon was no moon, but the top of a large bottle inside which we were all kept like specimens. That that small white circle of light was not a solid thing but the glow of some enormous room in a giant’s house. Lying on my back, I kept waiting for a huge eye to appear and, blinking and curious, peer down on me from above. To this day it’s hard for me to shake that feeling. The point is, it goes both ways. We can think things into life that do not exist, such as love, success, innocence, forgiveness. We can make them out of nothing, or out of any cheap materials at hand. But it can also work the other way around; we can also ignore those details to which we would rather not give residence: guilt, failure, ownership, responsibility. Both are frail truths.

At one time I imagined I was my job. I convinced myself that my work would define me, rather than the other way around. I imagined love could be strengthened in silence, and years later, that bridges between people could be rebuilt on promises alone. I imagined time and attention were my allies, no matter what I said or did. I imagined a lot of things.

A bus clatters by on the street outside, filling my window. About 20 feet further on, it stops. I see three people queuing at the elbow of the bus driver, then alighting as the doors sigh open. The first two include a middle-aged woman with an ageless hairstyle and sunglasses, and a man who seems too young for the cane he carries. (It is clear after a few short steps the cane is the guide not for some enduring infirmity, but for a temporary injury of a kind. Curious that even by simple sight we know so quickly the difference between the two, between the crippled and the recovering.) The two diverge immediately as if conspirators adopting different directions to avoid suspicion.

The third is a woman, young, perhaps 30, but likely younger. There is a vigor to her, a keenness evidenced in her face and posture that catches the eye. With dark, cropped hair and lightly freckled cheeks and nose, she manages to give the impression of both worldly inexperience and acute yearning. But evident too in the way she looks both ways as she exits the bus is a certain fickleness of heart. This too attracts the eye. Once the bus has moved on, she removes herself from the bus stop and returns to the letter she is holding in her hand. This is what I imagine it says:

Section 2

Dear Celia,

Today I took a walk with Amazon down toward the dilapidated old barn we found. It's been sunny and warm since you left on Saturday and I wanted to see if I could still see our footprints in the red dirt of the road. I was disappointed when I found they had disappeared. In the barn though, over by where we sat, there they were, untouched, perfectly in tact. Two sets of shoes. Like the steps for some strange Anasazi dance. Even your cute diagram remained untouched, the one of the house of your high school boyfriend, where you explained where you'd 'become a woman'... X still marks the spot. It's like an Indian mandala. I wish there was some way I could protect it all.

It was the red dirt of a road in northern New Mexico. Turned that color by the high desert sun, the ruddy dust blowing off the loping spine of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. In fact, it was not really much of a road at all, cobbled in spots by jutting rocks, pitted and gullied by rain and wind. But by its very insignificance, it seemed to give a kind of praise to the broad sky above it. Plus it was a road that being mostly forgotten in the ocotillo and prickly pear, could be owned by those few who trod it. Especially if, as with Celia and the author of the letter (Ken), the road is stumbled upon in the course of a long, unhurried walk. The kind of walk that is a meditation on walking, where for once it matters not where you are going, only that you have company while going there.

They had set out early, not out of design even, but because the sun shone early through the bedroom window in Ken's small adobe house, making the ochre-colored clay of the walls glow as if illumined from the inside out. Ken, a creative and effective cook, managed, from the onions, green peppers, the potatoes and tomatoes, the corn, the mushrooms, most of which came from his garden, to put together for them a hearty breakfast. They ate at a table in the back yard, still the slightest bit chilled by the grip of the cool desert night. As the sun climbed, they drank their coffee, still in their pajamas, wrapped loosely in warm smelling Indian blankets, and enjoyed the sweet fragrance of the long grasses drying in the fields about them. The first morning they'd awoken this way, Celia had been overwhelmed, repeating again and again, "Oh, this is so beautiful. So perfect." By this, the third day, she said nothing, more content now to share the quiet with Ken and the lengthening morning, accepting finally that all things of such a perfect cast are better enjoyed without review.

She had taken the vacation on the spur of the moment. Due to some reorganization at the ad agency at which she worked, she found herself with a few days off. By a circuitous line of thinking that now seemed like the inveigling work of destiny, she'd set on Taos, or, rather, a few miles northeast of Taos, driving the ghost towns there and seeing where the long flat highway took her. That's as far as she had planned. A plane ticket to Albuquerque, a rental car. It was by its very spontaneity the kind of adventure of which she'd always believed herself capable but to which she'd never before actually mustered the courage to take on. Only Celia, and perhaps her husband of two years, Seth, knew that a life of reading had made it difficult for her to quite distinguish between thinking and feeling a thing and actually doing it. If at a cocktail party she rhapsodized on the necessity of seizing the day, sucking the marrow out of life, and if her quotations of Thoreau were accurate and delivered of a concentrated reading, the idea became for her twin of the actual act, the act itself in the end existing only in the words used to describe it. In her life, it was only in desolately private moments, mornings after having had too much to drink, for example, or during the grim inky days of a Northwest winter, that she would come face to face with the reality that the ideas she cherished and tended to like herbs in a garden were in fact the stories of someone else's life. They were plotpoints in books she'd read, the overgrown flowering of too many aphorisms tacked to the wall above her desk. She'd borrowed them, stolen them, and in the end deluded herself into believing they were hers. At those times of truth, she knew herself for who she was, and knew in her own wingless arms the word "flying" to be wholly different than that thing enjoyed by the gulls outside her window.

So, when she found herself picking up and with little planning deciding to visit northern New Mexico, a place she'd never been, and doing it all on her own, it was like a transfusion of blood. It made her feel invincible and tireless. It confirmed her honesty in a million things she'd said. Where in those uncertain moments she'd been tempted to believe herself a sucker and maybe even a coward, this simple act had proven the promise she'd invested in all the things she'd read, the choicer bits of which she'd underlined in her books and transcribed into her journals like girls half her age the names of favored boys at school. She'd even called and reserved her ticket before speaking to Seth about it. Once she'd decided to do it, she could not help herself.

"Seth," she'd said, "what would you say if I said I'd like to just take off and spend a few days?"

"Spend a few days?" he answered.

Seth had been working on a puzzle, a hobby to which he devoted himself with great avidity. Before him, parted and evasive, were disparate portions of the Taj Mahal.

“Well, now that I’m between clients, I thought I might like to get out of town for a couple of days.”

“That sounds great, honey. I’d love to, but the next couple of weeks are going to be a mess for me. I just don’t know how I’d swing it right now.” He hunched over the nearly finished border, blended blues and greens mostly, barely distinguishable in shape and hue. Nearby, and propped up on its side, sat the box, depicting the stark and magnificent building.

“Oh, I know. I know your schedule is grueling at the moment.”

She began to rub his shoulders, then stopped, guessing he was likely too preoccupied to fully appreciate the gesture.

“I was thinking I might just, you know, I know we’ve never really done it, even though we’ve talked about it, but I was thinking I might just go somewhere by myself for a couple of days. Get away and give you some peace and quiet.”

He vainly tried the piece in his hand in a particular spot. “Go by yourself?”

“Well, I don’t know, I thought I’d pass it by you and see what you thought.”

He lifted his head and turned and looked at her. There was a quizzical look on his face, indeterminate and distant as if the roles in this dialogue were reversed, he asking the question, she uncertain.

“Do you want to do that? Go by yourself?” he asked.

“Well, yeah, I guess. It wouldn’t be the same as doing something together, of course. But I just thought, you know, I have a chance and I figured what the hell.”

She fiddled with an earring, turning the post around and around in its hole.

His face was familiar, so familiar its charm had become its very reliability, absent gesture or distinction she had, not long ago, tagged and recorded. With his tongue he absently toyed with a chapped corner of his mouth.

At length, he nodded. “I think that sounds like a great idea,” he said, as if he’d thought this all along but had felt it necessary to wait the requisite number of seconds to invest it with the drama he believed she expected. “Why not? Get out of town for a couple of days, you know. Take a few books. Take your notebook you never have time to write in.”

She instinctively sunk her hands in his hair, wanting immediately to draw them away again for how transparent it made her.

Even though he did not yet know where she’d decided to go, for a few moments just his knowing that a trip was planned leached it of some of its color. It made her wonder, are things by their very nature better imagined than lived? Better beggared close to our hearts and secret than shared with the world? She also felt a flash of guilt, as if she were obscuring an indiscretion of a sort, a lie. Why had she felt it necessary to undertake these minor machinations? She had not come right out and told him the thought of the trip was from the inception meant to be a solitary undertaking. Nor did she relate what she might have related in a different circumstance, that this trip was very important to her, not because he wouldn’t be there, but because she would be alone. The guilt was surely the result of her own inability to place her motives. For a reason she couldn’t identify, but which she remained certain had nothing whatever to do with her love and commitment to her husband, she had for the first time stepped outside their intimate connection.

As for the question of living vs. imagining, she believed the answer to be no. There are only the dimmest replacements for action in this life. It’s all in the doing; it’s forever in the doing. In the week preceding her trip, she had countless times been carried away by the dull demands of her work, by her routine at home, only to have deliciously triggered by one thing or another the reality of her impending adventure. Prior to leaving, she read up on the area, plotted spots on the map that looked or sounded interesting. And once the initial and minor deflation of sharing her plans with Seth had subsided, she found immured beneath her quiet, practical love for him, the younger more penetrating love of the early days of their relationship. There was a rapaciousness to it, that desperation invented by the young and forever exalted by the old. She did things that while feeling slightly out of time nevertheless thrilled her. She treated him one evening to a long, voluptuous backrub, her little kisses on his neck meant to surprise and pique him. Another time, she called him at work only to hear his voice

And so it had gone. On the day of her departure Seth sent her sunflowers. For a moment, as she read the card, she contemplated canceling the trip, postponing it until which time as they could go together. How nice that would be. But so much energy had been spent writing herself into the story, moving herself about the high New Mexico desert, she found it impossible to put Seth there, too.

Now, as she walks blindly down the block, the trip behind her, she rereads the first two words of the letter again, forcing herself to trace every infinitesimal particular of the typeface. *Dear Celia*. As she does so, she imagines the words being uttered in his head and concentrated on as he begins the letter. They resonate in his imagination like hard, vital things, curiosities, like two bees beneath an overturned bowl. She rereads it many times and for various reasons. Foremost, she rereads it because of how she'd devoured it too quickly on the first reading, wholly unable to savor its elemental pieces. She'd not been able to help herself. Alone, the words were too much like individual pearls and too easily scattered, and she wanted only to stitch them all together into a complete thing, something whole she could wear. After finding the letter in her mailbox earlier that morning, she'd enjoyed with an excruciating precision placing it unopened in her purse and carrying it next to her ribcage. On the bus, it sat on her lap like something living, like a hooded peregrine. But it had not taken long before her resolve had turned in on itself, transforming in her mind from an impulse into a necessity masquerading as reason.

I left the marks behind of course, for future generations to excavate and ponder. They tell a story. Like a set of hieroglyphs. I should come back and cordon it off with velvet rope, like the Mona Lisa. As I was out wandering around today, I remembered how you said you didn't know if you could ever again set foot down here. That all this, the mountains, the Rio Grande, the colors, every dusty inch, that it would all just be too much. And it's true, even for me. There is an ache in the wind here now. As it passed over the grasses and into my shirt, over my naked toes, it was almost too much. But it's even more than that, it's about the ache of not being able to wrap around it and possess it all. It's like something has been opened and this whole landscape has poured out of me and I can't retrieve it and return it to its place. It's gone and free and galloping off in so many directions at the same time; all I can do is stand here and watch. And the house, I don't even want to talk about the house.

She'd followed him all the way from Albuquerque in her rental car, through late afternoon, a ruddy dusk that strangely for such a dry place smelled of well water as the sun collapsed, and then on into the night. At Sante Fe, the bloody back of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains joined them, following at the periphery like a solitary wolf at wood's edge, quiet and keeping its distance, but persistent and curious, even protective. It was the direction she'd planned on heading, north toward Taos, and it was an adventure, and so it was on these grounds she'd accepted his invitation. Ken had been on her connecting flight out of Denver, though they'd not discovered this until leaning in side by side to grab bags at the luggage return. At first, she'd not recognized him. Looking at him as she retrieved her bag, she had had an intuition, but so remote was it she thought it might perhaps have something to do with an oversight in her packing, or a task at work she'd possibly forgotten to complete before leaving. His hair was shorter, cropped close to his head and quite different than when she'd known him almost fifteen years earlier. He also wore a beard and glasses, neither of which he'd had before. The beard especially struck her, but deeply and untranslatable like the intuition, so that it was not until stroking it a few mornings later, the two of them sleepy and warm and just awaking, that she realized what it had done to her.

He had said her name, hunching his shoulders slightly as if attempting to see through a murky window. In fact, perhaps it wasn't exactly the beard, but, rather, the way the dark of his beard framed his eyes, making them unusually crisp and clear. He seemed to speak out of them and not his mouth. Lean, in a pair of baggy jeans and sweater, his body differed little from how she remembered it. She had known him as a boy, a teenager, the older brother of a girlfriend. A few years later, she'd seen him again, on this very street, Gilley Street. They had run into each other, speaking briefly, if easily, before he had had to leave, she trying to hide the fact she could no longer remember his sister's name.

Ken dragged his backpack from the conveyer.

"So what brings you to New Mexico? You still live—" He grunted, hiking his bag onto his back, "up in Seattle?" He articulated his body such that the pack righted itself on his shoulders.

"Yeah. Just down for a visit. Never been to the southwest U.S., so figured why not."

"Ah, good for you. It's really beautiful down here; I think you'll fall in love with it. Very different from what we grew up around."

"What about you?"

"I'm just getting back from Denver, and I wish I could say it was relaxing and restful."

"So do you live here, then, in New Mexico?"

"Yeah, yeah. I'm up near Arroyo Tejos, outside of Taos."

She was not nervous. There was nothing to be nervous about. But then she could think of nothing more to say, and so nodded and moved her suitcase about with her feet.

“What did you think of the flight?” he asked her.

“Not bad,” she said, wondering if this was an invitation to complain or praise.

He nodded.

Maybe it was arriving at her destination, putting herself finally in the palm of this trip she’d invested no small amount of expectation in imagining, but she felt now a certain pressure, a trepidation. What might it mean if upon returning home she finds she’d acquired but the meagerest of experiences? That she’d been lonely, when she expected exultancy, felt fear when she expected courage. She had not thought much about this prospect. To think such a thing didn’t make any sense. Perhaps it was this that generated the anxiousness she felt standing there next to the glut of travelers scrambling for the revolving luggage, fearing any minute he might say goodbye and turn and walk away.

“So how long have you lived here?” An eavesdropper might have thought by the tone of her voice she knew but had forgotten the answer to this question. It was a cliché question and she wanted instantly to retrieve it from the air.

“Oh ... I’d guess about three years now. I came down to do some skiing and just sort of ended up staying.”

“Really? And you just stuck around? That’s great.” Another flat, insipid remark.

A woman nearby said, “The small one, Jack, right there!” Her voice was loud and sounded like dry wood being splintered.

“That’s how good the skiing is,” he said, tugging on an earlobe.

She looked around the baggage claim area, the webwork of people, all hurrying, a portion smiling, a portion grim-looking and tired. “I’ve never been to New Mexico before,” she volunteered. “But I’ve heard — and read — some great things about it.”

He hiked the pack higher onto his shoulders, and looked about the room as if just now coming into an awareness of his whereabouts.

“You don’t have a watch do you?” he asked.

“It’s ... five after seven,” she answered.

“Is your car here then,” she blurted, immediately aware of how that sounded. “I mean, you heading home or are you staying in Albuquerque tonight? Isn’t Taos a few hours from here?”

“No, I’ve got my car in the extended parking.” He shrugged a shoulder toward the electric doors. “But I’m not looking forward to hoofing this bag over there though. I work at a nursery outside of Taos and I can never find any good horticulture books, so I bought about 10 in Denver.” He repositioned the pack again, like a father a child on his back. “Do you need a ride somewhere? I’d be happy to drop you off.”

She said no, she had rented a car, and then, without realizing she was going to do so, she launched into all her reasons for coming. The experiment of living her words. Of mining from the vast reservoir of her imaginings something hard and real and literal. She explained it in a way that made sense and this invigorated her, inspiring her to say more. There comes a time when thinking about things, even good things, begins to make you sick unless you act, she said. They ripen and go bad and seem like illusions contrived not to bring about action, but rather, to serve as an explanation, a crafty stand-in. And after awhile there are no more explanations, and all that’s left are the lines that lead on into some unexplored distance, their secrets relegated to oblivion. She said it was like whatever had been seeded by daydreams and sunned by this or that book had been left to riot, limbs and vines growing unimpeded, twisting about into a tangled briar of which she’d totally lost control. The trip, it was a modest move, she understood. It was not a skiing excursion that had turned into a new life. It was small. But it had potential. If she just took her time, and only asked questions without concern for answers, who knows what might be made of it. That was her thinking.

Ken took off his pack and sat it at his feet.

“Well, come north,” he said. “Head up north. There’s a lot to see up there. Bandolier. Some great pueblos. The Anasazi stuff is really fascinating. A great mix of cultures. I think you’d really love it. It’d be a great place to start.”

She lied and said she hadn’t quite decided which direction she was going move. The power had shifted and she wanted to feel what it felt like to exercise it.

“You’ve got a car,” he said. “If you get bored, you can always move. You might as well start in the north and work your back down. You can stay at my place tonight, and tomorrow I can show you some stuff on the map. There’s some great camping at Bandolier.”

The luggage was by now a trickle, and the onlookers, a group of just five or six. They looked weary and dejected, people for whom travel had long since become tiresome. One woman staggered by, a small dog propped on one shoulder, the strap of a bag around the other. She pulled a suitcase behind her on squeaking wheels.

“What? I would just follow you?” Celia asked.

“Yeah, just follow me.”

There had been a moment while she was getting her rental car that she considered thanking him for his offer, but passing. It was meant to be her trip. A solitary wandering free of restrictions or niggling considerations. But then she’d planned on that part of the state from the beginning, and having a place to sleep the first night, plus someone familiar with the area, all these were positives. In the end, she agreed and they headed north, up Highway 68, out of Albuquerque and the wide parched plain that weary pioneers had settled on in lieu of pushing on to the sun-bedecked waters of the Pacific, where they had unhooked their beasts and dug furrows in the dry earth and built simple homes and raised families. Out the window of the car, the air was hot and dry. Celia listened to a Spanish-speaking radio station. How different it already seemed.

Maybe it was the rental car, perhaps the company, but the drive went easily. Every few miles or so Celia would speed up or Ken slow down to make indecipherable faces to each other. To laugh, to do nothing but smile and shrug their shoulders. Now and then he would point to an area of interest off the highway and attempt to mouth to her his meaning. She would nod, failing to understand him most of the time. Once or twice they even scribbled notes, holding them up to be read by the other.

“Your blinker, you old man!” Celia wrote.

“Can’t keep up?” he wrote.

They had seen little traffic out of Albuquerque, which by this point was perhaps thirty minutes distant. Save for the occasional truck or stray car, the road was theirs. Beyond Sante Fe there had been little to see out the window, except for the shadowy outline of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains to the east. The road was very flat and after a time Celia found herself lulled into the deep thrum made by the car tires on the asphalt. Now and then she would roll down the window to hear the racket of speed, and feel the cool air on her face. Absent was the familiar smells of pine and evergreen, of rain and wet earth. This she took as a good sign, as it proved things would be different here. Here things smelled like cooling stones and well water, and also dirt.

It got darker and they drove on, past little villages and small clusters of ramshackle buildings that seemed not even to belong to a name. A dog came out to bark at their cars as they passed a general store. At different places, people, mostly Mexicans, blankly watched from the roadside as they zipped by, looking as if they had long ago grown accustomed to the different speeds people travel. Their faces were inscrutable and ancient, and Celia thought it was like they were more than people, they were moments in time being eclipsed, one after the other, by her and Ken. Some distance beyond Sante Fe, she saw what looked to be a fire up ahead. As they approached, the flames growing in size, she enjoyed, for the split second it took to roar by it, the image of half a dozen group of men off the highway, some sitting on the hood of an old truck, pitching items into a robust bonfire. She watched it in her rearview mirror until it disappeared. There was a decidedly otherworldly effect to this, the long stretches of complete darkness and then a brief splash of human-engineered light. She wondered at the quiet of these people’s lives. What did they do? Did they have any thoughts at all about her as she sped by them, and if so, what? Would they understand what had pushed her to come here, to conceal her reasons from her husband? She thought they likely would not. The thought made her feel both lonely and energized.

And then there was a darkness, which was deeper and richer than that with which Celia was familiar. It made the towns and cities, their lights now and then brazenly dotting the landscape, look impermanent, like settlements or camps. At the city perimeters, which you could distinguish at the final orbit of lights in the distance, the dark of the night waited. It sat there, and looked down on the immodest and ultimately puny display with a well-worn, uncompromised suspicion. The cities especially were made to seem willful and arrogant in the face of the depth of night at their edges. Humankind, and all its industry, the buildings and network of streets they passed, even the freeways on which they drove, it was all so breathless and fragile and ultimately transitory in the face of this patient dark. As a city was neared, its brighter lights would momentarily reclaim the frailer stars that had been following her, leaving only the brightest and bravest among them. Once outside town again, the lights would creep back.

Celia felt as if she'd driven beyond all that was familiar and into a place unlike any she'd known. The night, the dark and its smells of cool dirt and bitter sage, it penetrated her and filled the car like music.

At some point, it occurred to Celia they'd been on the road for quite awhile. It had been a long day and she was getting tired. It was past ten and they'd not yet even reached Taos. She began to look for signs. The drive had become mechanical, Ken and his car now oddly more a feature of her own vehicle than a companion. They had each settled into the rhythm of the trip and had stopped communicating. Few other cars were on the road now. The stars blinked like a blanket of fires from a far-off encampment, burning in a chain of mountains that never seemed to get any closer. It went on this way for many miles. Celia's mind wandered and she let it go where it would.

In time, they reached the outskirts of Taos. By now, its streets were dark and quiet, the adobe from which many of the buildings were constructed glowing a faint dark orange beneath the streetlights. Ken honked his horn. Celia honked hers back. As they drove through the mostly sleeping town, Celia tried to place landmarks she would look for the following day. A corner with a trellis of creeping vine crawling up the side of a squat building. Another building with a large mural painted on its side. Yet another, its windows displaying a dozen or more saddles and its door decorated with drying chilies. She would find these buildings tomorrow and they would look different but familiar, like something from a dream. It gave her a funny feeling to know this. Moving through this unfamiliar place at night, its inhabitants at home and unaware, seemed vaguely sneaky and indiscreet. It also reminded her of what it was she was doing: following a man she hardly knew, deep into the night to who knows where. The idea very quickly looked like an inordinately bad one, one made with little forethought or consideration; a stupid decision. What would Seth think? His wife, whom he trusted, willingly following a stranger, more or less, agreeing even to sleep at his house, in a place she couldn't probably even locate on a map, if it was on a map! It made her instantly sick to think about it, the blandishments and intrigue. She imagined him, Seth, at home, in bed, dressed in his loosefitting pajama bottoms, a magazine open and flat across his chest as he snored. He was a sweet, loving, delightful man. He wanted this trip for her as much as she wanted it for herself, though ignorant perhaps of its real meaning.

And where was his house? How far hidden and off the beaten track? Arroyo Tejos? The least she could've done was ask the rental car agent about the place. Its size, its distance from Taos. What had she been thinking? Little would be lost if she were to simply take a quick turn and lose him, veer down a dark sidestreet. She could find a hotel room for the night and worry about what to do next tomorrow. At each intersection, she felt a whetted magnetism pulling her off the main road, and back into her solitary trip, where she knew no one and no one knew her. Still, some inert mechanism pushed her forward, Ken's fuzzy red taillights before her as they had been for the last few hours. When they finally exited the edge of the city, it seemed too late and impossible to turn back. Even the radio station she'd been listening to lapsed into static. She had committed, and she would follow him.

They continued on for a short distance beyond Taos. Then, at a poorly lit and, as she would find out, a poorly paved road, they turned right. The lights of their two cars were the only lights to be seen, save for the moon and stars, which cast the entire landscape in deceptively dreamy shades of blue and black. Then it occurred to her what it all reminded her of Montana, especially the nighttime sky. It was the competition between sky and land to exceed the other in simplicity and vastness. Perhaps it was this that had convinced her to continue following him.

After a few hundred yards, the asphalt gave way to dirt road, and still they drove on, Ken's taillights now staggering up and down as if the car were bowlegged. Celia bumped and bounced her rental over jutting rocks, ruts carved from rain and snow runoff, into and out of little dips and potholes. She watched the derelict beam of her headlights. The whole thing made her laugh. The entire crazy idea to come, and meeting Ken, and following him, and not knowing anything about anything, and now stumbling over what was barely a road and more a historical artifact left over from the days of horse-drawn wagons. How had any of it happened? It felt strange to smile in the dark. There was no way to verify it. She tested it, touching the corners of her mouth with her fingertips.

They followed this road for probably half an hour. Slowly navigating this bump and that, Celia attempted to keep Ken's line like someone in the snow the footprints of the person before them. The landscape, or what she could discern of it, was beautiful. Since turning off the main road, they'd passed but one house. Otherwise, it was only space and darkened desert. It was, she thought, oddly like being deep underwater, their headlights momentarily trained on single spots, bringing them into crisp, bright focus for a moment before finding another. Outside the shafts of light it was only shapes and distance and an augury of things to come that she could not identify.

Finally, after driving through a short corridor of sage and juniper, they came out at the abbreviated driveway to Ken's house. Even mostly hidden in the dark, it captivated Celia, overcoming her suspicion she'd made the wrong decision in coming. It was just one-story, small, simple, and sat by itself in a field that stretched uninterrupted in all directions. It was so quiet she could hear a dog barking inside. She felt again the same feeling of loneliness and

excitement. Ken turned off his car, got out and walked to the passenger door of his car. There he stood, his foreign-ness made all the more manifest by suddenly entering the beam of her headlight.

“A long way getting her, but here it is,” he said. He opened the passenger door and bent to retrieve his pack from the seat.

Celia turned off her car but could not yet get out. She busied herself pretending to look for something in the glovebox. Then, before she was quite ready, she too turned off her headlights.

Ken whistled. “Amazon!” he yelled.

Amazon wanders around it looking for you. He sniffs at the rocking chair where you would read and carries around the doll you got for him, looking pitiful. He looks at me as if to say, “That person, the one that smelled good and gave me cookies, where is she?” We both feel like the house, which never seemed especially small before, is now precisely that. There isn’t enough space now. It’s like I’m forgetting some room and the only reason I can’t find you is because that’s where you are. I understand there are things, difficulties, whatever you want to call them. And I know there is nothing earned in discussing impossibilities. But I can’t help from wanting to say so much. Everything seems electrified here. Like how I imagine phone lines buzzing with voices. Maybe that’s it. It’s your voice, it’s animating every little thing. Each room of the house. The side of the bed you slept on. The slippers of mine you wore that are still sitting where you left them. Everything. And especially the breakfast table in the back. That’s the hottest spot almost. I had coffee there this morning and I could feel it emanating from the chair into my back, from the tabletop into my arms.

They entered through the creaky screen door of the place and dumped their bags. As they did, the dog, a mutt with a greater portion of spaniel in him, wide-eyed and excited, nuzzled Ken, then Celia.

“This is Amazon,” Ken said, rubbing the dog’s head. Ken barked and the dog answered.

“Amazon. . .” Celia called to him. He ambled over sheepishly, head down, tail wagging madly, as if shy due perhaps to a life of country breeding.

“Remind me, I’ll tell you the story some time about how I got him.”

Ken took her on a brief tour of the house, explaining that it had been previously occupied by a friend of his, a baker at a small wholesale bakery just outside Taos. When the bakery folded a year or so ago, she’d decided to return to Michigan where she was from and suggested he take over the rent. He said it was only at strange and unpredictable moments, when perhaps the light was just right or there was some unusual fragrance in the air, that he remembered that this house — his house — had once been occupied by another. Amazon followed them as they shuffled from room to room, occasionally stopping to sniff at Celia’s foot or at some lingering scent on the floor.

The small lamps gave the place a warm ancient feeling, as if it were more a cave or the primitive dwelling of a bygone people. The slate floor, the rough adobe walls, the curves at thresholds and ceilings where in most homes one would find sharp angles. This and the fact that all was dark beyond the garden made it seem to Celia that she too had found a temporary refuge from time. It was the quiet, made all the more palpable by the click click click of Amazon’s claws on the floor, sounds uncorrupted by the turn of days or generations. It was an impenetrable quiet, and there was the sense that the outside world, the world of cities and cars and industry, was not great enough to gain entry to this place. That this house and this field, that it was of another scale, another reality, and that the world of commerce and noise knew the boundary and knew, what’s more, that it was too small and too weak to approach.

“Before we do anything, let’s get a beer and sit outside for a minute and unwind,” Ken said. “I’m not sure when, but that started seeming like a damn long drive there at the end.”

“A beer sounds perfect.” Celia heard herself say this, but from a distance.

Ken got the beers and then turned off the lights in the house.

“You’ve got to see the stars out here,” he said.

He led the way through the greenhouse to the table in the back yard. It was a simple wooden table, dry and cracking, with two equally simple wooden chairs. The air was cool.

“Oh my god,” Celia said, breathing in the breeze, which smelled of strange allurements she could not place and so suspected were part of her mood and company.

They sat, each silent for a long moment, taking in the country, the rustling of the long grass, the whispering of which seemed a secretive appraisal of the two just arrived. Overhead and encircling them, the sky was littered with stars. Seeing the dustings and specks of light beside those larger and brighter stars gave Celia the same feeling

she'd get when, as would happen every once in awhile, she spied some old woman that bore in feature or aspect a certain resemblance to herself. It hushed her and threatened her with her own innocence. But where that feeling was always tempered by a sense of imminent danger, of fragility, she was made to feel safe and calm by the stars above, both the large ones she knew and the clusters of small ones she'd not before seen. It was funny to think of them this way, but they seemed like wilder stars than those she knew.

"This is just beautiful," Celia said. She closed her eyes and inhaled the mesa into herself.

"Yeah."

The dog, who had been standing at Ken's knee, looked off at the field, sniffed at the air, then circled three times and lay down at Ken's feet.

Celia opened her eyes again and shook her head.

"It's amazing. I can actually see why certain constellations have the names they do. In the city, the bear is just a couple of haphazard dots."

Ken nodded, staring upward, taking a drink from his beer.

"You know, just about every night I come out here before I go to bed. And I just look around, at the stars, at the hills, and I wonder how I ever got here. I couldn't have even dreamed it, I don't think."

"It's like the breeze moves right through your skin and into the inside of you." She closed her eyes again.

"In the winter, you should see it in the winter. Everything covered with snow. It's really something."

"Let me ask you this. You said you wonder how you got here. Do you think you got yourself here, or do you think things just happened and circumstances simply worked out that this is where you find yourself? Do you know what I mean?"

"Yeah. I don't know. I'd like to believe that it was me. That I created this opportunity for myself. But it's only in looking back that I can put the pieces together so that it seems to look that way. I mean, I had no idea I would love doing something as much as I love working with plants, or that I would be pioneering it out on the high desert of New Mexico. Those things are total surprises. So I guess even though maybe now I can look back and line up events one way, I'm not really sure I can take any credit for it."

"But you're not still at home, getting by, and contenting yourself with grand plans. You're doing something."

"I suppose. I read a quote somewhere once that I think is really true. It said something like 'Fortune rewards the bold.' I actually think that fortune rewards the curious. I don't know how bold I've been, but I've been curious. And open. I mean, when Dan, the friend of mine who was teaching skiing down here, called and said I should come down, I figured what the hell. That one little decision is what made the rest possible."

Celia took a drink from her beer.

After a long pause, she said, "Do you ever regret that you did it, came down here? You know, leaving your family and friends?"

"Do I regret it? No. I miss them, but I don't regret it. I mean, the beautiful part is I can leave whenever I want. If I feel different tomorrow, and I want to, you know, go back home and get a job in the city or whatever, I can do that."

"But when does that kind of thing cease to be curiosity and become just wandering? You know what I mean?" She takes another drink and the cold of the beer feels good on the hot of her throat.

"I don't know. I suppose it becomes wandering when you're either no longer really looking for anything, or when you're looking for something you know doesn't exist." He shrugged.

Celia rubbed her foot on Amazon, watching him. The dog raised his head, stared placidly at her foot, then lowered it again to his crossed paws.

The two of them sat a long time without saying anything, sipping their beer. They settled into the quiet of the plateau, their hearts and breathing matching the subtle accents of the night.

"Look," Ken said, interrupting the silence, pointing with the mouth of his bottle, "can you see the bats?"

"Bats? Really? Where?"

"Right there."

“Those are bats?”

“There are a lot of them tonight. Must be the mild weather.”

With no identifiable order, like a fleet of windup planes, their dark shapes darted and dipped in the air above them. They seemed dumb, brainless things, like creatures given to one night of life only to spend it reeling about without apparent order or aim.

“They don’t attack you do they?” Celia asked.

“I don’t know. You got any bugs on you?”

She could see his teeth in the moonlight.

“They don’t do they? Seriously.”

“No, you’re perfectly safe. I’m pretty sure anyway.”

She playfully slugged him on the arm.

They watched the bats for a time, transfixed as if by the restless snapping of a flag in the wind.

Later, after they’d finished their beers and gone inside, and after Ken had told her he was glad they’d run into each other and had retired to his room, Celia brushed her teeth and thought about the bats. She thought about their blindness, and what it must be like to orient yourself not by sight but by the relative distance of solid objects.

On the couch in the living room, nestled under the heavy Mexican blankets Ken had given her, she told herself she wanted to dream about her husband. She’d read that such things were possible, that one could dream what one wanted if their mindset was right.

Still at the bus stop, Celia looks up from the pages of the letter. Things are suddenly bright and phantasmal. She feels as if just awoken from a trance. And here she finds herself, in some other place than the one she thought. People march by her. A teenage girl and her father pass and the girl turns around to stare at Celia with a look of concern and recognition. Celia folds the pages of the letter but does not return them to the envelope. For a moment longer she stands this way, the letter and envelope in her hand. Then, as if restarted by an unseen hand, she carries on down the street. Seth will understand if she’s a bit late. They have time. She passes people and storefronts. He’s so solid, Seth. The thought gives her a satisfaction in a deep, quiet quarter of herself. It’s the satisfaction of having just eaten after having been very hungry. A man at the newsstand she passes looks up and watches her walk by, before dropping his nose once more into the magazine before him. A feeling of confidence swells in her as she walks. Step by step, like a crank winding out the melody of a song, she feels more and more that she is beautiful and that there are no solid objects in her way. But it is a sense of beauty that most dominates. She can feel her hair on her neck and it feels smooth and soft. A strand or two drops into her eyes and she likes the thought of how natural it must look. All the way down her body an intoxicating sensation of power, of sensuality and femininity, warms over her.

Down the block and across the street is a short wall about three-feet high, protecting a patch of grass on the opposite side that leads up to two-story gray building. The building, the sign for which identifies it as a public utilities facility, doesn’t quite fit the design and style of those around it. Squatting with their back against the wall are a handful of people selling modest crafts, bracelets and cheap jewelry. Their wares are exhibited on pieces of fabric they’ve laid there for that purpose. Some are peddling an inexplicable array of unrelated items. One has Christian iconography, a pair of shoes, a few tattered paperbacks, an old telephone and a half dozen watches. Celia finds a spot opposite the vendors, on the grass, and sits and leans her back against the wall. Opening the letter, she starts at the beginning. *Dear Celia.* And reads recklessly and quickly through the bits just read. When she finds where she’d earlier stopped, she closes the letter again then just as quickly reopens it and begins once more to read.

I’ve got to get out there and mow the yard. I should have had you do it while you were here, in payment. (I’m forwarding your bill under separate cover. Luckily for you, the rates went down during your stay...) But if I cut it now, my guess is it will probably be the last time I’ll need to do it for the year. The season is changing, right under my feet. Ever since you left you can feel the pinch of winter in the air. Winter comes first in the morning and evening around here. It sneaks in inconspicuously, while you’re not paying attention. Without really realizing it you find yourself sleeping under the blankets the whole night, and wearing a sweater in the evening. You also move just a bit quicker to the shower in the morning. I’m not ready for the fall to be over. It’s such a beautiful time. This high desert. Pretty soon the tile floor will be cold to the feet and I’ll have to start chopping wood for the stove. It’s cozy in here I guess. But it can get pretty claustrophobic, not being able to get outside as much.

I get a sense for how the first settlers must have felt. Even though I don’t have to salt the meat for the winter or stock up on provisions, there is a kind of weird anxiety just before the winter, like a crew that knows its ship is about to enter rough seas. There’s really nothing you can do about it. You strap stuff down and just sit and watch the horizon and wait. It’ll be even worse this year. I can tell. Having had you here and sharing my little

mesa, the colder months will be like putting some valuable keepsake away in a memory box. I've got to pack it all up, this landscape and everything, and store it away for the season. I don't want it to be a way you can't imagine it. I want you to be able to know perfectly what it looks like down here. The thought of the new season, makes me kind of feel like you won't be able to find me. Do you know what I mean?

So I've been thinking. What say you come down for a bit of skiing in December or something? I mean it. We'll hit the mountain, do a bit of hiking in the hills around. I'm not kidding. It's beautiful down here when everything's all covered in white. If you come, that way you can be winter too, and then when you leave and go home, I can look out, at the tree in the distance with the swing, whose seat will be still and covered in snow, at the fields (which I'm looking at right now as Amazon is chasing something. A mouse probably.), I can walk outside in the months to come and know what it looks like with you there. I'll be able to see you high-stepping through the snow, all bundled up and everything. Then sitting before the wood stove, rubbing your hands together and sniffing. You've got to leave me something. Winter is too long.

And how strange is it that just as I wrote that a bird landed on of one of your wire women on the fence...

Those first morning sounds are real and indelible items to Celia. They're like pieces in a collection. The click click of Amazon's claws on the tile. Ken's hushed, lowered voice talking to the dog and the shuffling sound of his slippers like the understated percussion in a jazz song. Shoosh, shoosh, shoosh across the floor. Then there's the birdsong she can hear from outside, muted slightly through the walls of the house. And the chopping sound of Amazon's jaws as Ken feeds him a small treat. That first morning, Celia lay on the couch for a time, listening to these sounds. Being in a foreign house, with a near stranger, and having arrived at night, the corridor of dreams, she felt both present and not present, as if invisible, or a ghost. Ken was, by the sounds of it, tending, with no apparent distraction, to his morning regime. Had he walked through the living room, Celia had the sense he would walk right past her, altogether unaware. In his boxer shorts and a T-shirt, he'd carry a bag of garbage to a spot beside the driveway, mumbling to himself the song on the radio in the dining room, and never notice her. And then she would move about him, witness to the private mundanities that in their particular peculiarity and practice are as secret as anything we own. This made her feel a sympathy for him that was also somehow sexual. That he was unadorned and natural, naked in a more profound way than were he to be without clothes. She heard the water running. The refrigerator whisper open, then *thunk* closed. There was the sound of dishes and silverware, more hushed discussion with Amazon. She had no idea the time and didn't want to get up to retrieve her watch for fear of being heard. It was an odd and pleasant feeling that she had, unbeknownst to Ken, sneaked in late the previous evening, to sleep, with the plan of sneaking out again at first light. Every time she heard him move in kitchen, and ever interval between such sounds, made her heart begin to race with the expectation he might at any second wander into the living room and find her there, laying on his couch. At every new clatter or klunk or hiss, she would quietly exhale, still safe. She was a stowaway, who having intended to return to shore before the ship set sail, had instead fallen asleep on a pile of nets only to awake long after the ship was out to sea.

She listened as their six feet traveled across the tile floor to the back door. Once open, sound that before had been a muffled background came into focus: birds, insects, perhaps even the dry and brittle song of the grasses in the sun. She relaxed. It was a warm morning, she could tell. And it would be a hot day. It also did not feel early; it felt late, past 10 maybe. And what would she do? she wondered. How would this start? She had no idea. All the previous evening's proceedings seemed, as things often did for her, like a strange hybrid of the real and the literary. As if happening in a book, lovingly put to shape and color in her imagination, they had jumped the wall to share space with the conservative particulars of her real life. And she had let it remain, like a bird having entered a window is let to flit from mantle to bookshelf.

The heavy blanket was warm and Celia kicked out of it and enjoyed the feeling of the air reaching all the skin exposed by the long T-shirt she'd worn to bed. She would get up while they were out. When they returned they would hear the shower and see the blanket folded and laying on the couch. This would be a simpler way to start. They would be on equal ground then. Showered and in her clothes, there would be no evidence remaining that she had slept in his house. But before she could move, she heard the front door and quickly lay back down, stiff and startled. With her eyes closed to slits, and trying to accommodate her increased breathing with a closed mouth, she saw Ken standing at the door, shadowed by the screen and the backlight, Amazon at his side. He put his finger to his lips and said shh to the dog. They stood and looked at her. He petted Amazon's head. Celia felt the short hairs on her naked legs tingle and her nipples harden. She wondered if he could see this from where he stood. They remained there for what seemed a long time, dark outlines like the scorched shapes of bodies once present now combusted and disappeared. Her own body felt like liquid. In her imagination she turned onto her side, but only in her imagination. In her imagination, her legs are spread just far enough apart. In her imagination it's his gaze that is paralyzing her. A secret power. It's hard to breath naturally and she's sure he can see the rapid rise and fall of her chest. Then Ken moved a rock over to prop open the door and left the doorway. She saw him walk from

shadow into bright color as the sun hit him. Amazon did not move. As Ken vanished around the corner of the house, Amazon remained, his nose now and then touching the screen door. The two of them stared at one another for a few long moments before Amazon too turned and shuffled into the light and then out of sight.

Then he made her breakfast with items taken from the garden. She'd told him she liked spicy and spicy it was.

They ate outside at the table in the yard. It was only just nine and earlier than she'd thought. They talked about incidental things, small things about their lives, the lives of those they knew, all with the ease of two strangers sharing neighboring rooms at a hotel. He told her about the surrounding area, the mountains in the near distance and how the Rio Grande came up on you without any warning and was just there all of a sudden, this perfectly sharp and jagged gash in the earth. There's something about severe things like that, he said. They're unequivocal. They take your breath away. He explained that Taos itself was not much after the third or fourth visit, a clearinghouse of uninspired faux-Indian art and senior RVers, the women bedecked in their Georgia O'Keefe hats and the men their cowboy boots and turquoise and silver rings. It was like a deception concocted out of the desert to lure the innocent and the lost. As such, it was just slightly too garish to be genuine. It was Hollywood, he said. That's what it was. Even so, it was true there was something about the light. Whether a product of the minerals in the stone and soil, or, what did he know, maybe, as he'd been told, the swell of spirits both animal and human, the light of northern New Mexico really has no equal. It has a body, a richness, and a kind of clarity that undoubtedly gives all but the most talented painters fits in attempting its duplicate. She would see. It made the rest of the world seem made of cheaper stuff.

They ate their breakfasts in small unhurried bites, as if not hungry at all. Celia found herself concentrating on the smallest things, innocuous things, things accidentally made the subject in a bad photograph. The bit of revealed arm when Ken scratched a shoulder beneath the short sleeve of his T-shirt. The way his hand rested on his thigh at times almost making the "O.K." sign. The slight leftward curvature of his nose when he smiled, hooking like a comma in the middle of his face. They were puzzle pieces. Clues in a mystery. She wondered when she'd last looked at a person's face so closely and been able to so clearly see not only these discrete elements, but approach the relationship of the pieces one to the other. She credited it to a great night's sleep. A dumb, dead, heavy sleep that had been, as far as she could remember, free of dreams. It all made her want to do something for him, make visible to him a portion of herself. It need only be a small thing, but one that was both part of her and separate, an artifact he could take with him and look at again in private and in so doing know her the better for it.

The breeze, it entered at her shirtsleeves and collar and stirred her.

It was Wednesday and Ken had to work. He would explain away his lateness. It did not occur to her to say goodbye, and if Ken considered it, he did not let on. Perhaps they could meet for a beer after work, he said. There was a new place that had only just opened up in town and he'd been meaning to try it. At this, Celia imagined him, living alone, working, visiting new places, alone. She didn't know what else he did, how he filled his days, but she imagined him doing it alone. I don't want to impose, she said, noting that staying until evening meant remaining in town another night. She could camp, she said. Don't be ridiculous, he said. See Taos in all its forged glory and then we'll meet later. He scribbled the name of the place – the Atom Pub – and its address on the back of an envelope for her.

Celia left as soon after Ken. Despite the comforting knowledge she would be staying a second night, the thought of remaining in the house without him made her nervous, as if his things, all his belongings, as if they had eyes with which they would watch her, and with a keenness perhaps greater than their owner, spy into her gross innerworkings. In this she would be made transparent, and it was too early for that. It was crazy. Plus there was something about getting into town, seeing other people, that would confirm what to this point seemed to her mostly unreal. And Seth too was a part of it somehow. Leaving felt like a gesture of love made for him. It would take the pressure off.

The road into town ran through a landscape different than the one she'd fabricated out of the darkness of the night before. It was drier and hotter, even with the window rolled down. She held her arm straight out, turned it this way and that like the flaps of a plane. But the distance, all that land devastated by sun. Some must surely hate it, but she felt restored by it. Before she left, she knew she would have to walk out into it until she stood in the dubious center of all that nothing.

Taos was not a surprise. She had read a few books on the city before leaving home. For this reason, it had a charm for her that had either never existed for Ken or had in time and with familiarity been denuded of consequence or beauty. Celia appreciated and enjoyed the uniformity of it. Each gallery owner and shopkeeper had bought into the idea: red adobe buildings, bleached beams and posts, drying bunches of chilies. She was willing to play along. She let the manufactured sense of authenticity understudy for the real thing, and real or not, it felt good.

At a bakery down a sidestreet, Celia bought a cup of coffee and a scone. The counter person, a desultory teenage girl, asked if her name was Anne. Celia shook her head and said that no, that that wasn't her name. The woman squinted at her suspiciously as Celia fished in her purse for change.

During the day, Celia covered a good part of town, wandering without direction or intent. By mid-afternoon the city center was busy with people, the curbsides lined with sleek charter buses. On the sidewalk maneuvered the tourists, dressed nearly to a one in pastels, merchant's bags swinging at their sides. At doorways, people exited or entered, letting escape snatches of the music playing inside and gusts of cool air-conditioned air. When they joined the street, they would merge like cattle, muttering or silent, and move along in the current, some looking up at the sky, holding their sunglasses in place.

An ambition to find a good Mexican restaurant failed and Celia lunched at a brightly lit deli that could just as easily have been anywhere else in the world. She sat near two older couples. One of the women, very slight with large sunglasses, stepped outside three times during her meal for a cigarette. While smoking, she continued to communicate with her friend inside via gestures and by exaggerated charades. Their husbands, meanwhile, bickered about how best to grow champion tomatoes.

The afternoon that followed was spent without notable occurrence, unhurried and to a suitably relaxing result. Late in the day, after the sun had passed over, she recriminated herself for having not worn sunscreen; she could feel with her fingertips the emblazoned crescent of burn at her collar. She thought of Seth, thought of calling Seth, but instead put it off.

As the time at which she and Ken had planned to meet approached, she discovered few people knew of the place. At a central corner, she approached a store selling basketry and handmade clothing, meeting the owner just as she was backing out the front door and locking up.

Celia asked the woman's back. Straightening herself, and turning to face Celia, the woman appeared distracted and confused.

"I'm sorry, what, where are trying to go?"

Celia consulted the note. "The Atom Pub...?" She handed it to the woman.

"Atom Brew Pub. ..." the woman whispered. She fetched a portion of her long black hair and with her thumb, hooked it behind her ear. It was of an unusually fine color and luster, falling straight and without impediment nearly to her hips like a royal's diadem. The woman looked up from the note and right, up the street to the north.

"The Atom ... the Atom. ..."

"Oh, don't worry about it," Celia said. "I'll find it. Thanks."

The woman hesitantly lifted an arm and began to point, then slowly returned it to her side. For her part, Celia admired the woman's skin, which was without a blemish and tight on her high cheekbones and delicate, rounded features. Dark-haired and dark-eyed, she was of an indeterminate age and of uncertain origin and Celia found herself mapping the contours of her face plotpoint by plotpoint.

"Shoot, I'm sorry. I think I know. But I'd hate to get you lost."

They both stared up the street as if waiting for some bellwether to announce itself. On the corner at the next block, two women and a man stood talking. One of the woman grabbed the man at the elbow to underscore something she'd just said. The other woman watched her, clearly no stranger to playing the part of the listener. While the first woman talked, one time playfully kicking the boot of the man, the second smiled plainly, unsure of what to do with her hands.

"So...I'm sorry," the storeowner said.

Just then Celia realized it was Ken she was watching; it was he standing between the two women on the far corner. "What?" she asked.

"I just said, I guess I don't really know where the place is you're looking for," the woman said.

"Oh, no, that's alright, no problem." She turned back to watch the three. The first woman now had Ken's hand open palm up in her hand, as if to divine a fate made therein clearly evident. The quiet one was laughing now.

The storeowner touched Celia's arm. "Here you go," she said.

"What's that?"

The woman glanced at the spot where Celia had been looking, then handed back the envelope. "Your information," she said.

"Oh, right, I need that," Celia said, attempting a small laugh.

With her hand still extended, Celia returned her eyes to the others. The storeowner took a quick and final accounting of Celia and then moved off down the street.

Ken, his hands in his back pockets, was speaking now, jutting his chin northward, the opposite direction. The talkative woman was very busy, moving her feet, toying with the zipper of the jacket she wore. Then it occurred to Celia that if she could see them, they could assuredly see her. She immediately looked to hide. The quieter of the two women said something and then all three looked from one to the other, nodding. There was very little nearby to offer adequate cover. Most of the storefronts were plain and unadorned, fashioned in the style, many of them, of traditional adobe structures. The best she could do was a truck parked a few steps further up the street.

Celia let them, Ken and the two women, get a few more paces ahead, then followed behind at a safe distance. The quieter one led, while Ken, his hands still in his back pockets, and the other followed a half step back. They walked with clearly a destination in mind, unhurried but certain. The talker undid the sweatshirt tied about her waist. She hung it around her neck, whipped it above her head like a lasso. She snapped it at her friend, toying with her and teasing her, whipping it at the back of her legs. The friend reached vainly behind her, for some reason unwilling to turn around. When she aimed it at Ken, he caught a sleeve and the two tugged at it as they proceeded down the street.

The streets were not as busy as they had been, but still there were people moving both directions, bound for their hotels, a restaurant for dinner. Most carried the bags of area merchants and bore in their uninspired step evidence of a long day of walking, that weary, fractured look of tourists and soldiers. Celia used them as cover. At one window, the talker stopped and bade the others, who'd continued down the street, to come back and look, which they did. The woman said something to her friend, waving at things out of Celia's vision, and then nudged Ken and pointed. Ken smiled. He then pointed at something himself and the other two laughed. They stood for a moment longer, then behind the urging of the friend, began again to walk, the talker throwing her hip playfully into Ken. At the window herself a minute later, Celia found swimsuits displayed for an end-of-summer sale. A dozen headless bodies, chalkwhite and articulated in attitudes of petrified activity. They decorated the windowfront, inattentive to the fact that outside, where Celia stood, the season was changing.

The others carried on for four blocks before stopping unexpectedly. Celia pulled into the conveniently placed doorway of a closed dress shop. From there she could stand unseen. She checked her watch, feeling a bolt of panic at the realization it was later than she'd thought; she was to meet Ken in ten minutes at a place she'd yet to find. But then he too would be late, she thought. Or perhaps, by the look of it, he'd forgotten altogether. The three of them stood around at the corner, talking and shuffling their feet. The one was attractive, the talker, Celia had to admit. Not unusually so, but enough that were you to see her in line for a movie, or at a nearby table in a restaurant, you would be inclined to look, finding each modest element of her face a fitting complement to the others.

The door behind Celia opened, the bell jingling above and startling her.

"Is everything OK?" asked the heavy woman sticking her head out.

"What's wrong?" asked Celia. She had not meant to, but she heard her own question delivered with a sing-songy voice with which she was not familiar.

"I don't know," said the woman. "You just look like there's, like there's something happening. Is something happening?"

"I don't think so."

"I was just in there cleaning up and listening to the radio and I didn't hear anything. But then I saw you standing out here looking up the street. Last week there was a bad car accident on that corner right over there. There were sirens and flashing lights, the whole thing. I didn't hear any of that tonight, but I had my TV on and wondered, you know, if something was going on, the way you were standing there."

Celia shook her head. "No, I don't think anything's going on," Celia said. "No accidents anyway."

The woman stared at Celia for a time, evaluating her. Due the weight in her cheeks and jowls, or due perhaps to a lifetime spent in worry and disappointment, all features of the her face tended downward, as if her face had been poorly tailored for her head.

“Well, we’re closed,” she said finally, pulling her head back into the store and closing the door abruptly. The bell jangled. Through the glass of the door Celia saw her move away gingerly, with her hands at her sides, like she was used to a stability and balance at present unavailable to her. After a few steps toward the rear of the store, the woman turned and glanced again at Celia.

When Celia returned her eyes to the corner, she found the others gone. A bus was grumbling at the corner, depositing a few people onto the street. She quickly scanned the area, but found only the final stragglers of the afternoon, carrying themselves up and down the block. The three were nowhere she could see; they’d disappeared. Celia made her way quickly up the street. She checked her watch again; she would be late. Finally at the corner, she did a 360-degree turn, following each of the four streets meeting at the intersection as far as she could see. It was warm out, the clay walls, the asphalt, the warm wood, they all relinquished what they’d stored during the course of the day in one mild, comfortable breath. As the sun tilted toward the horizon, the light was made very bright and severe. There was already in the sky the presentiment of sunset, expressed most readily in the angle of the light, the depth of the shadows collecting now in doorways, beneath eaves. She felt tired all of sudden, worn at the knees and feet and wanting only to find a place, a quiet place, to sit and not move and just sit and not even think and let everything just ebb from her like the heat from the sidewalk on which she stood.

A young couple crossed from the far side of the street to stand next to her. They waited for the light to change to cross again, this time to the far side of the adjacent street. The man, hair damp and dark and slickly attired, steadied himself with his girlfriend’s hand as he took off a loafer and inspected its insides before smacking it against his thigh and replacing it on his foot.

“And that’s what I told Tony,” the man said. “I told him that he had to kick a little ass. I’ve been telling him that. He doesn’t understand that sometimes you just got to kick a little ass to get results.”

The woman was tugging at and positioning tufts of hair, her eyes rolled upward in an effort to gauge the result.

“Do you know where the Atom Brew Pub is by chance?” Celia asked, just as the walk signal lit.

“Sorry,” the man said. “We’re not from here.”

The woman stopped. “Honey, we just walked by it. It’s right down there. The Atom Pub,” she said. Celia wanted to tell her her hair looked nice, but she didn’t necessarily think so, so she simply thanked her.

At the walk signal, the man hurried her across the street, leaving the woman to catch up on with prancing, overdiligent steps.

Celia proceeded down the block not yet confident the woman had understood the name of the place or in any event accurately remembered its location. She passed a few storefronts, matched step for step by the ghost of herself in the windows, diaphanous and mute. At the end of a line of businesses she found it, set back from the street. It was a modest one-story building that seemed on first glance in no way especially interesting or unique. Her preoccupation with getting there had along the way invested the place with a certain import and quality of which it was, as it turned out, not quite deserving. Walking to the opposite side of the building, she discovered a broad patio outfitted with a dozen or more tables and facing an uninterrupted expanse of sky. At one of the tables sat Ken squared to the horizon, his hand wrapped about a beer, reading a paperback. His back was to her slightly and for a moment Celia didn’t approach. Instead, she stood and engraved him into the scene, convincing herself he’d not been earlier burned into her eyes, making him, like a fleck of dust on one’s glasses, identifiable everywhere she looked. She moved up behind him slowly, uncertain how she should announce herself. With humor perhaps, like a clown, or maybe wearing a face of beatitude after her day of solitary wandering, or maybe with a look of seriousness. And then seeing him later with those women. She could not decide. Should she touch him as she sat, grab his shoulder, muss his hair? This too paralyzed her. What signal did she want to send and how did she want it to begin?

Just then Ken unexpectedly turned around in his seat, like a gunslinger.

“About time,” he said, startling her.

She jumped and Ken laughed, reaching for her.

“Oh sorry. ... Sorry. ...” Grabbing her wrist, he drew her down to a seat at the table. “I’m sorry about that,” he said, laughing.

“Man, you got me,” she said.

He laughed, bowing and shaking his head.

“I’m sorry. I saw you in the window there —” They both turned to the glass door leading into the bar. “I saw you come up,” he told her reflection, “so I thought I’d give you a little scare.”

“It worked,” Celia admitted to his image, which looked odd, and underscored in one brilliant instant how much a stranger this man was to her. She shook her head, clutching his shoulder.

“You need work on your Navajo approach.”

“Hey, you didn’t know I was there until you saw me in the window.”

“I think you need a beer,” he said.

“Is it that obvious?”

“Long day, it’s hot out, who wouldn’t need a beer after that?”

“Ah, I see,” she said, attempting to translate into meaning the angle of his mouth, the peculiar cock of his head.

The waiter came and took Celia’s order.

“So tell me what you did all day with yourself,” Ken said, closing his book and setting it aside.

“What’re you reading?”

He picked it up again. “‘Look Homeward, Angel.’ Ever read it?”

Celia nodded, checking her enthusiasm. “Eugene Gant. A great book.”

Ken sized it up as if a piece of fruit he was testing for ripeness. “It’s a monster.”

“Thomas Wolfe, that guy had an appetite. The story is I guess that when he brought the manuscript to Maxwell Perkins, his editor at Simon and Shuster, there were so many pages he had to deliver it in a packing crate. Perkins apparently loved it but told him it was too long and that he was going to need to cut it by a third. But Wolfe just couldn’t do it, and he ended up adding pages.”

“Yeah, he certainly didn’t seem to leave much out.” He held the book in his open hand.

The waitress returned with Celia’s drink and put it down in front of her.

“I just love the crazy ambition of it all. I read somewhere that he had as a goal reading every book ever written.”

“You’re kidding,” Ken said.

“It’s obviously a ridiculous plan, but I can’t help but just admire the size of it, you know?” She took a long drink from her beer. “Most of our goals are so puny by comparison.”

Ken set the book aside and leaned back in his chair and sighed. Before them, in a matinee of evolving color, the sky twisted the late day into umbers and golds and transitions of the two and all rich and spread haphazardly. A loose flock of birds flew over. The other tables were gradually filling up.

“So tell me what you did today,” Ken said suddenly. “How’d you keep yourself occupied all day? I don’t see any bags so I guess you didn’t buy me anything.”

“Oh shit, I forgot!”

“I was only kidding.”

“No, I was going to buy you a little something, you know, a little memento for your house, and I totally forgot. Isn’t that funny?” Celia also remembered Ken and the two women, and more specifically, the one woman, and though it had retreated some in import, she was very curious to have described for her the nature of that relationship. The scene had in its replay in her head taken on the withering excitement of teenagers, where unpracticed lust appears as tiptoeing nervousness or reckless energy.

“You don’t have to do that.”

“Oh stop it; I know. I just want to. It’s such a ... great little place.”

“You can stay as long as you like.”

Ken always looked like he had a surprise in the works. He had that kind of face. It teased you and seemed forever to be concealing, and only barely and without much interest in concealment, a gift, or a deliciously secret plan. On others, this quality may have been finally discouraging. And perhaps the same would soon be true of Ken, maybe even tonight. But it had not yet happened, and Celia ran her eyes hopefully over his features.

The two of them sat quietly, staring straight ahead at the sky, which seemed now to glow in an atomic orgy of color and light. One could almost feel it on their face, the pale yellows and oranges and reds, as if caught in the beam of a luminous rainbow. It seemed to Celia like a finale of fireworks, a beautiful expiration of a kind, a display that, protected deep in the score of pigments and saved for unusually auspicious moments, was this final and most rare light. Sitting there, Celia found herself bobbing perfectly in the present, in intimate relation to the cool stone smell of the table at which they sat, the bitter taste of the beer before her, the sounds of cars nearby and other voices at other tables, the complex energy of Ken beside her. It was all balanced in proximity to her and she too was part of it, making a web of connections, a lattice, that existed untranslated by time.

“My skin tingles,” she said. She held up an arm as a kind of spurious proof.

Ken smiled and looked at her but said nothing, turning once more to the scene before them.

In profile, and for the first time, he reminded her of his sister, Leslie, who Celia had only known as an 12-year-old girl and had not seen for more than 15 years. The sameness was suggested in the eyes, but most indelibly in the mouth and lips. Celia could remember admiring the way Leslie's mouth looked in lipstick, full and red and so unlike her own. They met, Celia and Leslie, not far into the summer separating their seventh- and eight-grade years. In the perfect delirium of those days, Celia had taken to the semi-daily practice of hitting a tennis ball against the wall of the local junior high. Leslie used the neighboring field to run the family dog. Sometimes Ken would come as well, bringing golf clubs and balls to drive into the woods behind the school. It was the dog's fancy for tennis balls in fact that brought them together, Celia and Leslie, and Ken in a way, when one afternoon the dog made off with one of Celia's. And though they had attended different schools, Leslie at a Catholic school in the area and Celia the local public school, it did not matter for those few months. When classes began once more in the fall, they found circumstance too much to accommodate, growing steadily apart. Now and then, they would run into each other, at the mall, at the movies, and she would always be with a girl Celia did not know. Such meetings always gave her an empty, sad, Sunday feeling in her stomach.

"You two doing all right?" It was the waiter.

Ken tipped his glass back and forth as if ringing a bell. "I'll have another one." He looked at Celia.

She lightly touched her own glass. "I'm OK for the moment, thanks."

They sat and stared.

"Mesmerizing, isn't it?" he said.

"I was just thinking about your sister."

"Yeah?"

"I liked her. I was pretty devastated for awhile after you guys moved away."

He smiled. "She's not going to believe it when I tell her I ... saw you."

At this simple remark, Celia instantly felt this rush move through her, tripped at the strategic juncture of her legs and hips and slowly swamping the calm blood in her. She looked at him and looked at his hands clasped behind his head as he stretched. The lusty reds and yellows of the sunset lit his face and gave it a warm glow.

"What will you tell her, do you think?" she asked.

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know, what will you say about seeing me?"

He seemed to consider the question.

"Well, I'll tell her I found you struggling with your bags in the airport and I came to your rescue."

Celia lightly pinched his arm.

"Struggling. I wasn't struggling. But seriously, what do you think you'll tell her?"

"Oh, I don't know. I guess I'll just tell her I ran into Celia Kaston in the Albuquerque airport. And kidnapped her."

Just then the waiter arrived, setting Ken's beer down and retrieving his empty glass, interrupting Celia's reaction to hearing her maiden name said after such a long time. The waiter eyed her. She paused a beat, then said, "I think I'm ready for another one now," and finished the little bit she had remaining and handed him the empty glass.

"Kidnapped," Celia said, shaking her head.

"Well," Ken said, "it took some convincing for you to follow me. You had your little plan; your little rental car; driving up to Sante Fe or wherever you were headed."

Her husband's face evanesced and disappeared.

"Hey, I had, my plans were always to come this way. I was just going to head north and see what I saw."

"Right, right."

"In fact, tomorrow I think I'm going to head out and drive highway 56 and take some pictures of the ghost towns out there, maybe camp. I also want to see the Anasazi petroglyphs. And Bandolier. I've got plans, so don't you worry about me. ..."

. He lifted his glass and grinned.

"What?"

"Nothing, nothing."

“What’s that look for?” She nudged him, forgetting the beer he held, sending a few large drops to the table top.

“Shit ... sorry...” she said.

He licked the beer from the back of his hand. Then he took a drink and set the beer down.

The waiter arrived with Celia’s drink.

“Oh and hey, who were those two girls I saw you with earlier today? Huh?”

“What two girls?” He didn’t look like he didn’t know which two girls.

“Yeah, you’re a real loner, right. Just out there in your little house, tending your garden and throwing sticks for your dog.” She shook her head.

“What two girls?”

“Real dark and mysterious.”

She was nervous now. But pricked and keen and slightly lightheaded.

“What two girls, the two I saw you chatting up down the street there.”

Celia expected him to turn and follow the direction she pointed her chin, but he didn’t.

“Two girls, two girls ... Was one a blonde, shorter and the other darkhaired with glasses?”

“I don’t know. Two girls.”

He grinned at her.

She took a long drink from her beer. She would wait for him to speak next. This was the game. And the game was the thing. A tussle of tempting invitations, misdirection and bravura. What place save in poetry, she wondered, can single words, chosen with such discrimination, remain at once both inconclusive and provocative? The beer was cold and perfect. And the sun had by now mostly taken its tail of dark red and orange and purple over the horizon, leaving behind still a glow, a vapor of light. She took another long drink.

“I work with Maribeth,” he said finally. “The darkhaired one.”

“Ah.”

She nodded.

He took to toying with the ashtray on the table. Spinning it, rolling on it side back and forth from hand to hand.

Another mouthful of beer. Celia briefly saw over Ken's shoulder a couple in a car, momentarily illuminated by the domelight. The woman was staring intently at the man whose head was bowed, his back bent to some project before him. In that instant before the light was turned off again and they disappeared, Celia saw clearly the look of curiosity the woman wore, an odd, incalculable expression like the kind one has when estimating a stranger on the street who's just asked the time.

"She's working on her Ph.D. in botany. Only I think she's more interested in messing around than finishing her dissertation."

Celia, her mouth full, animated her response mutely, raising her eyebrows

"She knows what she's doing though. Sonya, the woman who actually started the nursery, brought her in at the very beginning – she's been there from the start – because, you know, she just knows what the hell she's doing."

"What do you mean 'messing around'?"

"Oh you know, this guy, that guy, a different partner every weekend. She gets around."

"The darkhaired one?"

"Yeah. You probably couldn't see her, but up close she looks like Jan Brady, only with a botched dye job."

"Jan Brady, sister of Cindy and Marcia? Jan Brady, that's good to look like her?"

"Oh yeah, are you not aware that men, from the age of little boys, have fantasized about those Brady girls. Marcia, yeah, she was your leading lady type, Miss Popular. Of course we wanted her. But Jan, she had secrets and she had to always try and outdo her sister in everything. We all wanted her. Preferably in Greg's attic bedroom."

Celia, her eyes narrowed, "Jan Brady," she said.

Ken waited, then grabbed her arm lightly, "I'm only kidding you. Maribeth, with her, I just mean she's a procrastinator. She'd rather come here for beers, or going skiing, or go hiking. She's taken

Amazon with her a couple times on trips around the area. I had you going. Plus, we all really wanted Marcia anyway.”

“Yes, Marcia. OK. That makes sense.”

“Or Betty Rubble.”

“Now, I knew that. Male cartoonists. They give us an oaf and a dwarf for men for our prehistoric ideals, then give you these voluptuous women with tiny waists and huge breasts. That’s fair.”

Ken laughed.

He clinked her glass with his.

A man a few tables over began a sneezing fit, holding up a hand, apparently to forestall his buddy next to him from coming to his aid. When done, he removed his glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Fucking A,” he said.

They sat silently. Ken sighed. Celia finished her beer. “Bathroom,” she said, getting up. She felt the need all of sudden to stand, to move. It seemed too quiet outside now. And her standing and moving past him and her gripping and squeezing his neck as she did so, they were all deliberate and unprepared, delivered by a faculty of action outside her immediate reckoning. And they were perfect, she thought, accidentally precise and perfect. The goal, forever the goal, in all things, was to touch in action and complement, a tone of naturalness and ease. This was grace, confidence. It was a thing some were better at than others. Celia, she normally looked at her feet when she walked. Hers were usually observed movements, directed at once by her physical impulses, and her emotional and intellectual ambitions, but also by this master director who, standing above her, would look down from the balcony and gauge the dramatic success or failure of her actions. She was the playwright and the player. In this way, she could fail twice over, once as a human woman, and once as an actress. The action was wrong. The line missed its mark. The elusive moment was allowed to escape before having been soaked for its essentials.

For this reason, because of its cliché, she didn’t look at herself in the mirror once in the bathroom. How many times had we seen that? The protagonist dabbing her cheeks with cool water, visiting her

face in private as if to convene a clandestine comparing of notes with another separate person, invisible to all but her. She felt good sidestepping this stock image. Plus, she just felt good. The two beers had relaxed her, and things were comfortable, even pleasantly anxious.

Back at the bar she bought them two more beers. It was loud inside. A muddy mix of voices, rising and falling in exclamations and shouts and bits of laughter, and music that hovered close to the ceiling in the cigarette smoke.

“That’s a beautiful tattoo,” she found herself telling the bartender, as the woman pushed the beers toward her. The tattoo, a line of indecipherable text, wrapped around her wrist.

“Thanks.”

“May I see it?”

The woman offered her wrist. Celia delicately turned it in her hand as if admiring a piece of delicate jewelry.

“It’s Sanskrit,” the bartender said.

“Sanskrit. And what does it say?”

“It’s a line from the Diamond Sutra. It translates to something like, ‘The good law is a raft.’”

“It’s beautiful.”

“Thanks.”

Celia wished she had her journal. She wanted to write something about small things. The simple, little things like asking simple questions of a stranger. And refusing to look at yourself in the mirror. These were acts of living, of concentration. They were the details, the single footfalls in a life moving forward, day by day. They were the riggings of meaning. What opportunity there was, she thought. How many individual steps did she take in an afternoon? And thereby how many things small and large did she pass as she did so? In the course of her day at the agency, how many quiet invitations did she receive to confront the bare heart of things? It was all in the way you addressed it. You could proceed singleminded, or worse yet, preoccupied by a swarming competition of thoughts, addled by this question and that; you could do this, and find at your destination there had only been the beginning and the end. Or you could divest those map points of their significance and

commit to little more than the enterprise of the journey, available to all that you met along the way. It was a question of perspective; you could teach yourself to be conscious all the time, at each step and each interval of step.

She moved away from the bar, enjoying how cold the glasses felt in her hands.

They had two more beers, and hamburgers, and sat until the nine or ten tables were discernible only as faintly glowing entities, barely rescued from total darkness by the lamps posted at each corner of the deck. The streets around them were quiet, accented by streetlights. Celia felt comfortably inconspicuous. And the night air was still mild, with only a passing chill delivered every so often as the presage of winter. Taos didn't have the feel of a town at night, especially one that had endured the numbers it had seen earlier in the day. It didn't have that feeling. Cities at night, at the quietest part of night, seem empty and unnatural, clearly the creation of man and nowhere particular to the earth proper. But Taos, perhaps because of the adobe buildings, and the absence of structures taller than a couple stories, felt part of the land around it and not wholly the work of human hands. It was probably also the vastness of high desert around them. It seemed a participant in the temper of the town, patiently watching.

They drove back with the windows open and the radio on. First the highway out of town, then a right turn at the gas station that took them onto dirt road, then the portion rutted and scarred by water and wind and time. The air outside smelled like fresh water. It didn't feel the same as the night before, but Celia didn't say so. It was new, just as the night before had been new. The rich, velvet blue of the sky, the darker patches she knew to be trees and mountains but the configurations of which she could not conjure in her imagination. It was beautiful country, day or night. And very unlike what she was familiar with: her evergreens from home, the real mountains of the Northwest, great rippling ruptures of land. It was not nearly so busy here. There were touches of color and size, not the overabundance she was used to. Maybe she preferred things simpler, not nearly so cluttered. It helped her to think.

As they eventually pulled onto the gravel drive of the house and turned off the radio, both sat quietly and listened.

“There he is,” Ken said. And Amazon’s barks could be heard from inside the house.

As they stepped out of the car and closed the door, the dog’s claws could be heard scuttling about excitedly on the tile floor inside. Celia admired how sharply she could hear things out there. The sounds of his claws, the crunching of the gravel under their feet, they were single units of sound, hard solid independent things.

“Amazon,” Ken said, opening the door and screen door. The dog bolted out. Tail keeping double-time, he hurried back and forth from Ken to Celia, back to Ken, and so on. When they entered, he followed, as if eager to hear the account of the evening.

They all three stood there a moment, in the dark, Celia and Ken with their jackets still on and Amazon looking from one to the other expectantly. She felt as if there was something she was meant to say that she’d forgotten, that this was her line. Nothing came to her. The dog’s claws on the floor. Ken put his hands in his jacket pocket as if he and Celia were outside, at the front door.

“If you want to get us a couple of beers, I’ll get the fire started and warm this place up a bit,” Ken said.

Celia nodded and said, “Beers, beers, yes” and stepped over the dog toward the small hall leading to the kitchen and dining room. She didn’t want to turn on a light. The natural light was flawless, rendered in dark versions of the real colors of the table and floor and kitchen counter by the moonlight coming in through the back door and greenhouse. Plus, there was an indelibility to this darkness. Within it all possibilities seemed to coexist, as if the multifarious choices one has at every given moment are all made naked and visible, each as present as the other. So as she shuffled into the kitchen, she knew that in parallel truth she and Ken were in the other room, kissing, innocently and tentatively, the dog staring up at them.

“And pick some music too if you want,” Ken said from the front room. She could hear him in there talking to the dog as he wrestled with the logs next to the fireplace.

“OK,” she said. She wanted to say more, to cement something. “Do you have any wine?” she asked.

“Uh, yeah, there should be a bottle of white in the refrigerator. Red ... look on top of the refrigerator.”

“You don’t mind if I open it?”

“Of course not! What are you saying? Take whatever, use whatever. OK?”

She heard the snap of a match.

“OK.”

The open refrigerator cast a bright lemony light on the floor, making her feet and legs, which stood in the rectangle of light, look disembodied and strange. She grabbed a beer and closed the door.

“You want a glass,” she asked.

“What’s that?”

“Do you want your beer in a glass?”

She was looking at the beer label as she spoke and listened.

“Nah. Bottle’s fine.”

She twisted open the bottle.

From atop the refrigerator she took the bottle of red. She inspected it briefly before searching the closest drawers for and finding an opener. In the dark, all her movements were sure and fluid. She pulled out the cork and, finding a glass in an upper-level cabinet, poured herself a drink. With the bottle still in hand, she sipped the contents of her glass, then took a longer drink, then replaced that and more from the bottle, before re-corking it and putting it on the counter. The first cracklings were now coming from the other room. Stepping into the dining room, she could see Ken crouched before the fireplace, his jacket still on. He was prodding the logs with a piece of kindling and his face and front were warmly illumined, showing the flickering beginnings of the fire. Amazon turned and looked at her, and wagged his tail. Ken was quiet and calm as he stoked and cajoled the fire, and this fit him, Celia thought. She put his beer on the edge of the dining room table and proceeded in the luscious dark of the room over to the stereo. Part of her wanted it to stay quiet like this; leave everything just as it is. But music would be nice, too. She sipped her wine and, slightly bent at the back, reviewed his CDs, not sure what mood she wanted to create. The gauzy light coming in the window seemed a creature of night, skittish and only comfortable when let to wander about ignored, like a cat. Too much attention would drive it away, back into the sweep and swale of hills, and back into the long grasses and empty dirt roads, back into the golden leaves of the few trees thereabouts, twitching in the breeze. Celia grabbed Ken’s beer and brought it to him in the front room. He still sat, knees bent, before the fire, now more meditatively poking at it, making the flames jump. She stood behind him as the dog nuzzled her leg, and touched Ken’s shoulder with the butt of the bottle.

“Oh, exactly what I was thinking about,” he said, looking up at her and smiling.

Celia sipped her wine, realizing a second later how that remark might have been interpreted. She took a place on the couch and watched him. He could not break himself from the fire, which he continued to nudge and tempt.

“It’s hard to stop once you’ve started, isn’t it?” she said.

He prodded it a time or two more then turned and looked at her. “It gets you, doesn’t it?” he said. “You can’t take your eyes off it.” He poked at it again then tossed the kindling into the flames. “This is one of the best things about this place.” He stood and hung his jacket next to the door and brought himself to the couch. “In the winter, you’d not believe how cold it gets in here – because of the stone floors. I love to get one going in the morning. Then come out here with a cup of coffee and a book, with the smell, and those first few waves of warmth.” He shook his head.

But Celia was lost in the primitive rhythms of the flames, the syncopated but somehow still orderly peaking and diminishing spikes. She sat, holding her glass of wine balanced on the high knee of her crossed legs. She began to see foretold and retold in the fluid movement of flame both what she had lived and not yet lived. The fire became

the negative of her life. Sustained in its very essence was evidence of all that she had done and all that was yet waiting for her. She could see the images playing in the shifting reds and oranges, glowing, moving in the fluid dynamism of color and shape. There was her father bringing into her childhood kitchen the model of a Piper Cub he'd built. His face showed the wrinkle of charm he would on occasion let penetrate the look of indeterminate restlessness he normally wore. And then in close succession, there was her mother, sitting with her legs crossed in a manner not unlike her daughter now, bent slightly at the waist and working on a latch-hook rug, her arm making a slow, metered, shoveling-like motion. What a curious pair they made, Celia had always thought, sure that were she not their child she would think them an utterly unbelievable combination. As time passed, it seemed ever more a fantasy that they had shared a bed, had a child, and conducted their lives in some reasonable accord one with the other. They were now two characters from two different books written by two different writers.

"How's the wine?" Ken asked.

"Fine. Good."

"Good."

"I'm so comfortable," she said.

"Warm enough?"

"It's perfect." She untied and took off her shoes and wriggled her socked toes.

The music from the other room could be heard in low murmurs.

The dog stared at them for a time, wagging its tail, then turned itself about twice and lay down before the fire.

"It's not often that I can do this and feel good about it," Celia said.

"What do you mean, not feel good about it?"

"Well, I sort of feel like stuff like this can't be enjoyed until you've made something of your day, until you've learned something or done something or figured something out. Even then, I usually can't help but think of all the things I haven't accomplished that day."

"You've got to take it in manageable bites," Ken said.

"Oh I don't even mean work so much. I mean, what do I become? What am I doing with what I have? How much time am I giving the things I think about?" She felt the heat of the wine and the heat of the fire warming her cheeks.

"I know what you mean."

"Sometimes I think there's something wrong with me, that I can't seem to take moments like this and, I don't know, just let them do whatever they're going to do. That seems like a better way to be anyway. I mean, who knows what kind of opportunities are missed because we're too busy mapping stuff out."

"But you're relaxed now."

"Yes. I'm relaxed now."

"You're not preoccupied by the fact we're just sitting here, watching the fire, having a drink and not doing a damn thing?"

She took a deep breath and exhaled slowly, teased by a cool lightheadedness.

"Not a bit."

You know what we should do? We should meet in San Francisco. That's what we should do. I know this great hotel in North Beach called the Seville. Great spot right in the middle of everything. You'd love it. They have these black and white pictures up from when the area was a meeting place for the local writerly types. And at night, they even put sherry out for the guests! A very nice touch. Doesn't that sound like the perfect way to spend a weekend? We could go and see the sights and gorge ourselves on Italian food and good wine. I love that city. Didn't you say you lived there for awhile once? You could show me the town. The more I think about it, the more it seems like a great plan. Plus, I could stand to get out of here for a few days and let things settle down..

Funny how New Mexico was mine until you came. Now, with you gone, it seems borrowed. I almost feel like I'm staying in someone else's house. Strange. Maybe it's like the night when we had that adventure while taking our walk. I think about that but it seems more and more like a dream.

"What we're going to do," Ken said, "is take a little walk." Before Celia could respond he added, "Just a little one, not too far."

Just then the image of Seth shot over the scene, arched vaporously and indistinct and in the same moment as it appeared cascaded away like a shooting star. It made Celia look harder at Ken's face. She studied it. No matter how she concentrated, it remained unfamiliar. There was nothing she knew in it. The face of the boy she'd known was gone and had anyway been crafted from frail girlish memories. This man was a stranger, and everything he did was a surprise, equipping each new movement and remark with a keen novelty. His voice was no one's that she knew, nor the eyes that flashed at her, the hand that touched her knee as he stood. She took a long drink.

The room was all scents of wood smoke and beneath that the smell or the expectation of the smell of the vast outdoors just beyond the adobe walls: the crisp night air that suggests water and minerals cool in the damp grass and too the almost human smell of rich dark soil. Amazon raised his head, growled deep and resonant, then dropped his jaw again to his crossed paws on the floor.

"What is it, Amazon? What do you hear?" Celia asked.

"Ghosts," Ken said.

"What?" Celia said.

"Ghosts. This area has a lot of ghosts. Some are the ghosts of settlers who lived and died here having never seen the Pacific. They're gloomy and lost. But mostly its the ghosts of Indians. Generations of them. Wandering about the high desert here just as they did in their earthly lives."

"Uh huh."

"It's true. Amazon will get freaked out and there's nothing around. He'll just start barking and get this look on his face like a dog will get when it sees something it's never seen before. You know what I mean, that kind of wide-eyed, backing-up kind of thing? And there will be nothing there. And he'll look at me and I'll look at him."

Celia looked down at the dog sleeping placidly on the rug before the fire.

"There's a lot of room out there," Ken said.

They both listened to the quiet between two songs on the stereo. It was benign and depthless. It did seem to Celia to be a thing of great and enormous dimensions, a quiet uninterrupted by anything more profound than itself. Then the music started again.

"O.K., let's go," Ken said. "Finish your drink and let's go." He upended his bottle, standing as he finished it.

The dog rose when Ken rose.

Celia emptied her glass in two long draughts. She busied herself finding and putting on her shoes and coat. The wine and beer had smoothed the edges of her vision, replacing discrete shapes with color and movement, warming the peripheral world. She felt confident and sure and played with the idea that this was her home and Ken her visitor, happened upon in the airport and now giddy and uncertain about her intentions and her desires.

Ken went to the kitchen and returned with two more bottles.

"For the road," he said.

"I was going to suggest that," Celia said.

Ken put the bottles on the table, got on his coat, put the bottles in his pocket then said "Oh" and bent and moved the wood about in the fireplace, spreading the pieces to the corners.

"It should be fine," he said to no one in particular.

He stood and for a moment they remained at odd angle to one another, both standing inside the door looking at each other as if waiting for a third person or some universal cue to bear on.

"O.K.," he said, reaching around and vaguely embracing her to get to the door knob.

Amazon squeezed out between them and ran a short distance up the driveway then stopped and looked back.

Ken led Celia around the side of the house to the strip of tended yard where the table and chairs sat. The air was mild and fragrant of the long grasses that began a few short feet away and carried on for some distance. Beneath her jacket and shirt her skin reacted to the cooler air and tingled. The delirious lethargy of the fire and the alcohol translated in the night air to exhilaration. Plus, in the darkness, which was not so dark but rendered in the silver-gilt of the moon and stars, there was room for broad imaginings. Your mind could build things in the shadows, like wolves and other secretive beasts, and lonely trees, and maybe even ghosts of bygone peoples, roaming from hill to hill, still learning from the walking itself the story of the earth beneath. There were everywhere movements almost caught by the eye, but which remained unapprehended and secret. There were things to be discovered every direction one turned. Things to be seen in imprecise shapes, as if not really things at all but things potential, an

early gestative state of what in daylight and confirmed by human eyes would become “tree” or “bush” or “dog.” Here was the womb of things, where bred by the mystery of life and nurtured by dark and quiet, the world was erected and delivered from shapelessness to shape. It made Celia feel hopeful and optimistic, and engendered in her as well the comforting suspicion that she as much as anyone imagined life into things. She the architect of bush and tree and dog and woman.

Ken had gone to lean on the post of a now absent fence.

“The light is perfect,” Celia said.

Ken turned and looked at her and smiled.

Amazon came loping around the corner, slowing momentarily to lift his nose to the air, before proceeding to where Ken and Celia stood. Celia stroked his head. The dog looked up at her then revised his gaze to match that of his owner, off over the milling tips of the grasses.

Celia reached into Ken’s jacket pocket and retrieved a beer. A bit startled, Ken’s eyes followed Celia’s arm to his pocket, then met her eyes and grinned.

Celia twisted off the cap and took a long drink, then offered the bottle to Ken. He took it and took a long drink himself and returned it.

“That way we only have to carry one opened one,” Celia said. She took another drink.

“Good idea!” Ken yelled loudly. Both Celia and the dog jumped, Amazon taking a step back, his ears down.

Ken laughed. “Listen,” Ken said. “No echo.”

She slapped his arm. “That scared the shit out of me.” She laughed. The unexpected noise had jostled her insides, had even affected her vision, which was now temporarily blurred and distant and jumbled. She looked down at the dog, who was still not quite sure what to make of the noise.

“And look at Amazon,” she said.

Ken smiled and mussed the fur on the dog’s head.

“But isn’t that amazing, no echo. Celia!” he yelled again.

Celia slapped his arm again, looking around. “Ken!” She laughed.

Ken glanced about. “There is no one for miles. Not a soul can hear us. Except for the ghosts, of course.”

Her heart was pounding. “Christ. ...” She put her hand to her chest.

Ken put his arm around her, squeezed, then let her go.

“Not even an echo, isn’t that amazing? We’re not even here, we’re so small in comparison.”

He grabbed the beer from her hand and took a drink.

“O.K., so are you ready?” he said, handing back the bottle.

“Ready for what?”

“For a little walk, a little adventure.”

“Yes,” she said. “I think I’m ready for that.”

Ken took her straight into the meadow, its countless blades of grass adorned with moon-dipped tips and looking in the frail light like water. It was something to walk through them, the nearly human *hiss hiss* as stalks were plied and passed. Amazon ran ahead, his head just visible like a periscope. To the left, the field went for another fifty yards before ending in a small grove of thin spindly trees. To the right, there seemed no end; the grasses marched on in regiment to where, as far as Celia could tell or remember from the light of day, they met the horizon and now the pattern of stars of the night sky. The distance straight ahead was harder to gauge. At some point farther on the field seemed hemmed in by a handful of dark patches that Celia guessed to be large, leafy trees. They looked in silhouette like great disembodied lungs. The sky above was vast and abundantly jeweled in stars of such a variety of size and constellation as Celia could not remember having ever seen before. Looking up gave one a taste of vertigo, as if too long concentrated on the heavens, the viewer would find herself falling up and into the endlessness of it all. There were whole clusters of stars frozen there like paralyzed fireworks. She walked for some time staring down only when she needed to and otherwise never taking her eyes off the canopy of night above. The ground was springy beneath her feet.

Ken walked ahead with the dog and there was only the sound of their collected footsteps and the hushed brush of the grass stalks as they passed between them. Celia could feel the coolness of the night in her nose like menthol. It occurred to her she’d not read nor desired to read since arriving. She’d brought three or four books. But even now she felt no pull to open them. They seemed foreign somehow, and old.

After about a hundred yards, Ken turned, outlined and faceless in the blue-black.

“Look at the house,” he said.

Celia followed Ken’s pointing arm to take in the small house they’d just left. Squat and almost incidental on the landscape, it sat alone like the temporary lodging of a wanderer. It appeared as well in its darkened windows and design to have been built by long ago.

When Celia caught up with Ken, she said, “How old is your place, do you know?”

Ken, who’d somewhere picked up a stick and was brushing the tops of the grass with it like a dull scythe, stared at the house as if for a clue, then said confidently, “It was built about 25 years ago by a local painter. I guess he had another house somewhere, but would come out here for quiet.”

“It is quiet,” she said, taking in everything around them.

They both stood like fetishes in the middle of the field.

“Cold?” Ken asked, moving to her and putting his arm around her.

“Not really,” she said, exhilarated by how totally alone they were.

“You’ll have to come back in the summer; the air is so warm and the breeze so perfect, we’d walk out to the, to where I’m taking you, and go swimming at least a couple times a week.”

Celia wanted to ask the question about who was “we,” but resisted, preferring to leave it there where it could beat like a heart just removed from a warm body, animate and separate from them.

He sniffed the air. “I love the cool smell of the fall and winter, though, that damp smell, you know?” He sniffed again. “It’s a rich, dirt smell. It smells almost like an animal and not soil and plants and earth.”

Celia evaluated the smell.

“But in the summer, maybe it’s just because it’s warmer, but the air is light and things are perfumed almost.” After another minute, and before Celia could respond, he added, “You know what I can’t believe, what’s occurred to me? That we have determined how to record sound and images, but not smell. Isn’t that strange? That we can walk out here and record the sound of the grass and the dirt under our feet, the flutter of bats and whatever. And we can bring a video camera and record it all. But there’s no way to transport or save the smells.” He took the beer bottle Celia had forgotten she was carrying in her hand. He surveyed, extending all 360 degrees, the land around them, taking a drink as he did so then extending the bottle. She held it up like a specimen glass to the moon and then finished off the small amount that remained.

“One down,” she said. Ken put the empty in his pocket. Celia felt slightly chilled and crossed her arms.

“We’ll open the other one when we get where I’m taking you,” he said.

Celia nodded and pulled the zipper on her coat up a bit higher and shrugged her shoulders.

“So tell me,” she said, “I mean, you don’t have to tell me if you don’t want, but who were you talking about a little bit ago?”

“Who was I talking about?”

“When you were talking about going swimming in the summer at the place you’re taking me.”

Ken seemed to think about it. “Oh,” he said.

““Oh,”” Celia mimicked, and poked him in the ribs.

“That would be Emily,” he said. “She worked on the mountain last winter and over the summer.”

“She did? What does she do now?”

“Well, last I heard she was doing some marketing something in San Francisco. Her family’s from the Bay area.”

“So she moved to San Francisco?”

“Yeah.”

“And you don’t keep in touch?”

“No, we do, but it’s infrequent. We did a lot at first, but you know how it is, after awhile, you just kind of figure what’s the point.”

Celia looked at her feet. The new boots she’d bought for the trip were slightly muddy but otherwise betrayed the sheen of their newness, embarrassing her.

“And you didn’t follow her there, huh?”

“Me? No, it wasn’t really that kind of situation. These kind of places, like here or Sun Valley, or wherever, people come to ski, do their thing, for a season or so usually, and then they go somewhere else.”

“You stuck around.”

“Yeah, true.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know — well, yes I do, I guess it’s because I don’t have to stay, you know what I mean? I mean, one of the other things about places like this is even if you live there there’s always the sense that you can leave at any time. No geographical claustrophobia. I know I can go whenever I want. There’s nothing really holding me here. I could pick up tomorrow if I chose and move along. I like that.”

“That’s a pretty rare feeling.”

“Yeah, I suppose. Especially at my age. Most people have a family, a career. It’s much harder.”

“If not impossible.”

“If not impossible.”

“You’ve got Amazon,” Celia said.

“That’s true. I’ve got Amazon. And whenever I do decide to haul out of here, he’s the one thing I’ll take with me.”

They both looked about for the dog. They appeared themselves, gazing off in differing directions, like two people at a crossroads of their own, desiring distance and attempting to set on some destination.

“Where is that dog?” Ken asked.

Celia craned her neck as if looking over the top of a wall. “I don’t see him,” she said.

“Do you see him?” Ken asked.

Celia watched him. No, she didn’t know him, but nor did she think him a stranger. There was a familiarity to him exclusive of that originating in their modest connection of nearly 15 years before. Her relationship with his sister those few months had provisioned for her a small education in the opposite sex, if only by the sheer proximity of his room and his things. She had never before had a friend with a brother of that age. It had been a tentative, halting investigation, serviced primarily by her senses of sight, smell and touch, but it had been meaningful nonetheless. Those first innocent expeditions into his room had given her things to take with her, ideas stored now so submerged in the tendons and matter of her being they no longer bore his name and were irretrievable as evidence.

“Amazon,” he tried again. “He’s not over there, is he?”

Celia scanned what of the area she could see lit by moonlight and stars. “No,” she said. “Amazon!”

Ken called again and took a few steps forward. “Where are you, you crazy hound?”

Celia traced the tops of the stalks for his bobbing head. There was no dog, only the gentle swaying of the grass and the unreal sense of movement entitled only to night, when shadow and imagination conspire to give to the landscape a sense of perpetual and mysterious activity.

“He probably caught a scent of something,” Ken said.

“Does he do that, just take off after something?”

“Amazon! Not usually. And he’s normally pretty good about coming when I call him.”

Ken continued on toward the bank of trees some distance off.

As they moved, both continued to yell out the dog’s name, scanning the area for movement.

“He probably stumbled onto a rabbit or something,” Ken said. “Crazy dog.”

They walked, generating a hushed, musical whisper with each stride, and Celia wondered, wandering afoot in the dark, about all that might be unseen, eyeing her as she passed.

“Amazon!”

“Do you see him?” she asked.

Ken called for him again. “No. He’s around here though, I know he’s around here. He’s just ignoring us.”

They walked on for another 50 yards more, yelling after the dog, searching the area, which was scantily illuminated, washed only by a delicate buttery light.

Suddenly, there was a bark in the distance.

“There he is,” Celia said.

“Amazon!” Ken said.

“Do you know his bark? Was that him?”

“I think so,” Ken said. “You saw him?”

“No, I didn’t actually see him.”

“Amazon!”

“Amazon!”

There was another bark.

“Sound like he’s over there in those trees,” Ken said. He began to move more quickly toward the cluster of dark shapes that were the trees. “But that’s not a regular bark.”

Ken said this almost to himself and straight ahead.

“What?” Celia asked, moving faster herself through the grass to keep up.

“That doesn’t really sound like him,” Ken said.

“It doesn’t?”

“Shit, I wish we had flashlights,” Ken said.

“Do you think it was another dog? Are there other dogs in this area?”

Ken threw his hands to the side. “I don’t know. Other dogs, you said? I don’t know.”

They heard the bark again.

“There,” Celia said. “That bark, is that him?”

They were now slicing quickly through the grass. Ken stayed about ten steps ahead of her. The ground was rocky and hard in spots and soft and forgiving in others and Celia had difficulty keeping up. The alcohol gave what her eyes apprehended a phantasmal kind of aura, a rich peripheral red. Though Ken had said as much a moment earlier, it finally occurred to her they had no flashlights. They had no light at all, matches, lighter, and the closer they got to the trees, the darker it got, the grave shapes of the grouping blanketing a broad area in shadow.

“Amazon!”

They continued to hurry forward.

“Do you see him yet?” Celia asked.

A succession of barks came from the near distance.

“He’s got to be in those trees there,” she said. Ken was already moving that way and made some gesture with his hand that from behind Celia couldn’t decipher.

“Is it really safe, do you think, to get too close?” Celia asked.

Ken didn’t slow.

“Ken,” she said. “Do you think it’s safe to get too close, I mean, who knows what he’s found.”

Celia was a bit winded by now and the question came out like the recitation of line of poetry.

Ken stopped and for a moment remained facing the trees, his back to Celia.

“OK,” he said. “OK.” He nodded, then began searching the ground nearby. “Pick up some rocks,” he said. “Or sticks, whatever. Anything you can throw.” He bent, disappearing in the grass.

Audible now was growling. It was a rough, resonant sound in the nearest copse of trees.

Ken stood upright, his hands dirty in the slim light and full of rocks and smaller stones. He put them quickly in his pocket. There was a clink as they collected around the empty beer bottle already in one side.

“There are coyotes around here,” he said, pausing to look at Celia. He pronounced the word “ky-yote,” with a short “e” at the end.

“Coyotes? Shit, I don’t know, Ken. I’m not sure this is such a good idea.” She continued to breathe heavily.

“Just pick up some rocks. We’ll be fine. Nothing’s going to happen. We’ll scare off whatever it is and then it’ll be fine.”

They filled their pockets.

Celia wanted to remind him that at the threshold of the cluster, and inside, where she had no desire to go, it would be nearly impenetrably dark. Instead, she filled her jacket pockets with ammunition, curiously protected from fear by the meditative rhythm of her own breathing. When she stood from collecting her last stone, she found Ken, a rock in each hand, staring at her, grinning. For a flash, he was a childhood friend with whom she would catch gophers, and they were standing not on the plateau of the high desert of New Mexico, but on the sweeping back of another set of plains, vacant and desolate and home to its own nation of specters.

“Ready?” he asked.

Celia pinched the top of her coat around her neck. “I don’t know, Ken.” Her own hands were dirty now too from rooting about in the earth.

Before more could be said, a thrashing came from the woods, and their wheeling high-pitched sounds almost like whining.

“Fuck,” Ken said, and made off for the trees. He began yelling unintelligibly, waving his hands in the above his head.

And without order, Celia found herself doing the same, adding her own more delicate wavering screech to the air. She and Ken bore through the field like uprooted scarecrows. The dark, the daring beat of her heart, the alcohol, and the unknown from which all these constituent elements came, replacing the real world of moments earlier with something simpler and more immediate. She ran and as she ran she felt a kind of untethered joy in the running, and in the screaming. Her voice sounded strange to her but she also knew it to be her own. It was a mad caterwaul and suddenly, where once they were spectators, they were now participants. As if she and he and Amazon and the trees and the grass and the moon and the stars and whatever creature growled in the brush all were complementary and familiar.

Celia expected Ken to stop once he reached the trees, but he didn't. He kept on going, disappearing into the dark, still yelling. A dozen or so steps behind, Celia felt the impulse to stop herself when she got to the place where the field stopped and the real dark started. Instead, she also kept moving, trying to keep Ken as close as possible in front of her. It seemed oddly like there were many things running, like in addition to her own crashing strides were those of many other creatures, all joined in this spontaneous migration. She could hear, in between the yelling, twigs breaking, the thud of footfalls on the undergrowth.

In the trees, the moonlight was partitioned in delicate strands, disclosing select portions of the ground in textured grays. It was not easy to see but nor was it as dark as she had expected. As she ran, the rocks heavy and bouncing in her pockets, she dodged what she saw, grazing other things she didn't, a tree trunk here, a low-hanging branch. She stumbled a time or two on a rock or root, but she kept Ken in sight, he too making his own unpredictable jutting progress forward.

After moving an uncertain number of feet into the trees, Ken slowed and then stopped.

When Celia caught up, he said, breathing heavily, "Do you see anything?"

Celia shook her head. "It's too dark." Her voice was dry and brittle sounding.

"Amazon!" Ken yelled, though somewhat reservedly, as if raising one's voice there was taboo. He threw a rock into the distance to no effect.

Looking up, Celia could see fragments of sky between the tree limbs, like a mosaic, or a stained glass of deep blueblack.

"How you doing?" Ken asked.

"Fine, fine." She smiled, attempting to meter her heavy breaths.

He stepped to her, and pulling her close, kissed her at her hairline. "Good," he said. Then he started walking tentatively forward.

She ran a finger under her nose and sniffled, resisting the very real temptation to touch the spot his lips had just touched.

"What now?" she heard herself ask.

He motioned for her to follow him.

"We'll just go in a little ways and if we don't find him, we'll head back. How does that sound? I just want to make sure he's not hurt or something."

Celia estimated their surroundings, which in the dusk of refracted moonlight had unreal depths and peculiar contours and shapes. It was not a tight collection of trees, and she could not name their kind. The branches overhead were in the process of sloughing their old leaves to fall but most had not yet made it to the ground. Their trunks were the size of telephone poles and haphazardly regulated, as if a bygone traveler had simply disseminated the seeds willy nilly as he passed. They were not like the trees she was used to, the broad muscular pine and evergreen of home. These were trees that were cowed by the size of the sky and the evergoingness of the high desert about them. They had, even at night, and maybe especially at night, a kind of weakness to them, a note of fragility and decrepitude that made it that much eerier to be navigating between them without benefit of a flashlight.

Ken moved slowly forward, checking over his shoulder frequently.

"The smells," Celia said.

"What's that?"

It seemed suddenly a ridiculous thing to say so Celia waved it off. But the cool, autumnal smell of the limb-canopied grove was as rich and complex as a liquor.

"I don't think we should go too far," Ken said. "I just want to..." and then he interrupted himself and held up his hand.

Celia listened and didn't move. She heard nothing. No birds or bugs. No bats. No secluded animals making at unverifiable distances their scratching and scrambling sounds, their otherworldly trills or barks or burrs.

In another moment, Ken motioned them forward again. "Just a bit further this way and then we'll —" and then there it was, as if transported that moment from some other realm. It was an animal of light coloring and lean build, nose in a sharp point forward for speed, and it raced by not more than 30 feet away. From where they stood, it seemed to pass right through the trees. In three heartbeats it was gone, into the deeper dark beyond. Not far behind followed, and at only a slightly slower clip, Amazon, his body heavier but as fit to the stride as the other. Neither Ken nor Celia said anything and the dog didn't slacken its pace nor turn its head toward them, and in then he too was gone. Behind Amazon, in quick succession, sprinted at least three others, collected in loose formation. Zip, zip, zip. None took notice of Ken or Celia.

"Amazon!" Ken yelled after them after all had disappeared into the trees. He turned at the hip in the direction they had gone.

It had happened so fast the image in Celia's mind decayed rapidly into uncertainty, like a strand of film on a hotplate, bubbling and melting away. Had she just seen a pack of coyotes or wolves? Amazon with them? Had it happened, the string of them? She had seen it. She fancied she could even note lingering in the air the faint suggestion of their musky funk. But she couldn't be sure. She realized immediately the almost sexual fervor at her heart, beating madly just above her pockets full of rocks. And it stayed, that feeling. Being looked at and assessed didn't diminish it or drive it out. Nor in being plumbed did it seek another name, one simpler or more mundane. It didn't qualify itself and become "fear" or "envy" or "anger" or "guilt." Her heart rattled away and the strange light left by the animals replaced the actual animals and it was this that ran again and again across her imagination, and the tight powerful feeling it gave her remained free of influence and complete. She traced over and over again the area where they'd run, as if making room for their return. It was a kind of devotion, the way she stared upon the site. Dumb before it, she committed the pieces – the rocks, the trees and angles of slim light and shadow – to a memory she knew was incomplete, but which satisfied her nonetheless.

"Celia. You OK?" Ken faced her.

She nodded.

"They were pretty close, weren't they?"

"They were pretty close, yeah," she said.

It took them some time to find their way out of the bank of trees, and when they finally exited they discovered they were not where they'd started. Rather than a field of swaying grass, they found only parched land little populated by anything but scrub, and a few yards beyond, a dirt road. Without a word as to direction, they joined the road and followed it, putting the moon behind them. Looking back at the trees, their number and size didn't seem fit to house the world within them. It was hard for Celia to believe they'd had such difficulty getting out. It occurred to her they must have walked in circles. And then it occurred to her that perhaps by some miracle unique to the dark of woods, the elements had in fact transfigured themselves at each pass, that rock turning to a bush, that bush turning to a tree, as if the place were a kind of nexus of creation, fluid and everchanging as a whirlpool.

Outside the overhang of limbs, it was brighter and the light dirt of the road was made luminous by the moonlight.

After they walked in silence for a time, Celia asked, "Are you worried about Amazon?"

"Worried? No. I don't know, not really."

"He didn't seem ... scared or anything as far as I could tell."

"Part of me is nervous in a weird way, and part of me, I don't know. It was ... strange."

"He wasn't hurt or anything, was he that you could see?" asked Celia.

"No, I know." He threw a rock from his pocket into the distance. "It was just strange to see him like that. It was him, but not quite him. What's weird is I'm not sure how I feel about it. I'm not even sure why it is I don't know what I feel. They're all kind of mixed up. Does that make any sense?"

"I think I know what you mean."

"I mean, it was really something to see him running with them, amazing. I've had him since he was a pup and it's easy to forget □ and I did □ that he's a dog, and bred into him still are the same impulses that rule the coyotes around here and the wolves, you know?"

"I'm sure he's fine. I'm sure he'll wander back home later on when he gets hungry." She smiled.

“Yeah, I’m sure he’s OK, but. . . . It was just, well I said it, strange to see him like that. It makes me wonder how often that happens.”

“That’s a good question,” Celia said.

“I would assume it’s probably not the first time. Every once in awhile he’ll bug me to get out at night and will be gone for a few hours. It’s not very often though and I just usually assume he’s off doing his business then gets sidetracked by a mouse or mole or something.”

Celia nodded. She didn’t know what to say and part of her wanted to change the subject. Things were finally beginning to quiet and find their place, settling, and she didn’t want to disrupt it. They walked unhurriedly and Ken threw the rest of the rocks in his pocket one by one. After a time, he said, “And you know what else, I think I was □ am □ a bit . . . jealous, though that’s not the right word really.”

“Jealous? Jealous of what?”

“This is going to sound funny, but I don’t know exactly. Maybe jealous isn’t the right word. Maybe conscious is better, conscious that there’s a part of me that identified with him or at least recognized something in it. I don’t know.”

“In the coyotes, you mean, something familiar?” She adopted his pronunciation, “ky-yotes.”

“I guess so. I don’t know; I can’t really explain it.”

Celia realized at that moment, like one woken abruptly from a reverie, that Ken no longer looked a stranger to her. The configuration of bones in his face, the style of his hair, his shuffling stride, they were all familiar now. It was unclear to her if these things had changed in accord with a change in herself, or if Ken were now fully revealing himself to her. Either way, it didn’t matter.

They walked on, sometimes falling into rhythm with each other’s stride, their shadows lean and straight, looking each like the armature of some ancient measurement device that could read, in relation to their bodies, something of their direction or their destiny. All about them it was quiet, save for the crunching of dirt beneath their shoes, which were soon coated in a thin matte of soft dust kicked up from the road. They didn’t talk much, but it was a comfortable silence, as if in a way each was crafting a gift for the other, constructed out of the events of the last hour. The land around them was mostly flat, though undulating in spots on gently rolling hills.

“There it is,” Ken said, and there about a hundred yards ahead sat the small adobe, dark and simple, looking puny harbored between the double immensities of sky and plain. They were somehow approaching from the side opposite of their earlier departure, the side opposite the greenhouse and field of grass. To the right a short distance, curving off from the front door, was the road that led eventually out to the highway and into town. And there in the middle of the gravel drive, square and resolute, stood Amazon.

“There’s Amazon!” said Celia.

“Amazon!” Ken yelled. “Come here, boy!”

The dog took off at a gallop to meet them, ears flapping.

At their feet, he bowed his head, his tail wagging madly, and took without restraint the loving attention paid to him by both of them.

Inside, the fireplace was dead and black. Celia’s wine glass still sat where she’d left it on the table next to the couch. It seemed they’d been gone days. Celia felt that pleasant sense of collapse one feels upon returning home after a long absence, where things like chairs and couches and tables seem imbued with a kind of human understanding and patience. She dropped immediately onto the couch. Amazon looked at her, then followed Ken through the living room and down the hall out of sight. There was a click and a banana-yellow light spilled down the short hall. Celia lay back with her coat still on. She wondered what time it was. It felt late.

“You want anything?” Ken asked. There was the sound of the refrigerator opening.

The question sounded strange to her and she thought about how to answer.

“Me either,” she heard Ken say, shutting the refrigerator.

In another moment, Ken returned to the living room, his jacket and shoes off. He sat down opposite her. From the other room came the crunching of dog food and the scratching of a metal bowl on clay tile.

“You’re going to sleep in my bed tonight and I’ll sleep in here,” Ken said.

“What?” Celia said, raising her head to look at him.

“I’m going to give you my bed tonight.”

“Oh. Oh, no, no, Ken, the couch is fine, the couch is perfect. Look at me for Christ sakes.”

“No, I’ve got to get up early tomorrow – I don’t even want to know what time it is – to go to work and everything. That way I won’t wake you. Plus, you’ll be much more comfortable.”

They argued about the sleeping arrangements for another few minutes before Celia finally relented and thanked him.

“Just let me get a thing or two out of there.” He made no hint toward moving after having said this and both laughed.

They wove around each other in the small space between the bathroom and the bedroom, employed in a choreography of delicate distraction. Ken retrieved his alarm clock and wallet from next to his bed and laid out an extra blanket for her. They said nothing to each other and communicated instead by expression and gesture as strangers might who find themselves in close quarters sharing private habits.

When done, they said goodnight and Ken squeezed her arm as he passed her on his way to the living room. It was all simple and natural and right in temper and timing.

In bed, Celia, dressed in a long nightshirt, closed her eyes, taken in by the simple cessation of movement and the introduction of privacy and real quiet. She rubbed her naked legs together, luxuriating in the soft bed, the soft sheets. Only a day since having shaved her legs, there was already the slight abrading of new-growth stubble along her calves and ankles. But it felt good to experience her own skin; to have herself to herself. She ran her hand from knee to ankle, the texture and temperature of her own legs foreign to her. She traced with her fingertips, which were still cool as a dog’s nose, along the outside of her thigh, envisioning its shape, and then across the band and fabric of her panties, to follow her hip stomachward. There she admired the warmth of the flesh and the chill her own touch gave her. The delicacy and softness of this part of her body bespoke a fragility and youth she’d not for some time considered. The skin retracted slightly at her touch and she opened her hand and laid it full over her navel. Opening her eyes, she froze, startled to find fixed on her as if by some carnality brought in from the woods, Amazon, his blank expression one of apparent surprise and mild consternation. Celia didn’t move, slightly embarrassed, her hand still flat against her stomach, and the two watched each other until Amazon turned and clicked his claws down the hall to the living room.

“Now you lay down, now, and leave Celia alone,” she heard Ken say.

The juxtaposition of the tactile extravagance of her skin, the surprise voyeur, and Ken’s voice all made for a kind of clenching somewhere close to her diaphragm. Celia lay back, pulled the covers to her chin and felt the generating warmth settle onto her like snow.

“You got everything you need?” Ken asked from the other room.

“Perfect,” she said.

On the bedside table, there was a dish with change, a small pile of what looked to be crumpled receipts, a candle and book of matches, the remainder of a roll of mints, a stained coffee cup bearing the words “Mutual of New York,” a pen, Ken’s I.D. from the nursery, a year-old issue of the New Yorker and an abridged copy of Edward Gibbon’s *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. She picked up the book, thumbed it pages, catching for a second the unmistakable must of old books. Then she put it down and ran her hand over the balance of the detritus as if a clairvoyant plumbing for clues. She closed her eyes, then opened them again. For a long time she lay there, or so it seemed, her adjusting eyes turning the deep dark to a fleecy gray. And then as naturally as were it a daily exercise, Celia climbed out of the bed and walked the cold tile floor through the dining room, down the short hall and into the living room.

“Ken?”

“Celia? Is everything OK?”

“I want you to come into the bed with me. Will you come into the bed with me?”

Ken gazed at her, clutching for a second the blankets he wore. Then he merely stood and followed her to the bed, Celia leading like she’d made a discovery that needed corroborating.

It was the first thing that greeted her upon waking, before the sun that washed in from the greenhouse door and spilled into the bedroom; before that, and before hunger, before thoughts to the day’s plans, which was her habit, and before even opening her eyes. It was the flat physical reality that was not an ache but rather a presence, a kind of memory in her thighs and into the lips and interior of her vagina. She let the idea cross her mind, waiting to see what would follow, guilt, regret, the flagellation of a misspent impulse in a dark night. But they never came. Nothing came, save quiet and peace and when she let them in finally, the decorous light and buoyancy of morning in the high desert. Soon, like an amnesiac come finally to her senses, other things followed, tentatively at first then generously and eagerly. Pride and satisfaction and hope and strength and a curious order of related but different

sentiments. Still, like a person long in a wheelchair unsure of that first step, she approached these feelings slowly and with an eye toward possible retreat.

They had fumbled at first. She had wanted to appear confident and sure when she wasn't, and this had translated into her making bold first moves, like pulling his T-shirt over his head the moment they reached the bed. But once completed, these efforts left her uncertain as to how to proceed and she looked at him like a puzzle she was attempting to solve. Ken too, no doubt confused by Celia's saying, "I don't want to ... have sex, is that OK? I just want you to be with me. OK?" moved awkwardly, like a man blindfolded. Their kissing was nevertheless unreserved, lips tight against each other, searching for some elusive fit, then in time, as Celia too shed her shirt, to the chin and ears and neck, mapping each other like creatures sightless and desperate. His hands were cold and sent over the continent of her skin arching shocks that brought fantastic colors to the darkness behind her closed eyes. Ken's movements seemed new and untried to Celia, or perhaps it was that each place he touched, once touched, was made raw and living again. There was a quality to his hands that made them feel at once both strong and gentle, a quality she credited to his working with flowers. His body as well read to her touch like a thing familiar but different, as if crafted out of an unlike material to any she'd known.

It was the quiet that committed her to it. That and the absence of all but grasses and coyotes and bats and stars outside. This had pressed her to him. It helped her hold him and pull him to her. It breathed into her. She'd not intended to let it go as far as it did, or at least she was not prepared to admit that had been her intention. In truth, as she now lay in his bed, she could not recount what it was that had prompted her to go to him at all. But she didn't regret it. It had been a restorative and she felt now oddly a union of whole pieces, as if every limb and ligature was aware of its connection to every other. He'd found the places, the arch on her shoulder where in dim light it shines like an apple, the divot of her neck, the bend in her knee. It had been natural, as if these secrets were written there in a script easily translated by Ken to action. She liked that they had kissed for a long time first, introducing themselves to each other from moment to moment and inch by inch. It gave the act that followed a kind of shape and order. It was like they were patiently and artfully building something, body to body, like a piece of ornamental furniture, a chair, say, or a table, the function of which was second to its decorative beauty. And she'd had an orgasm, which she'd not for some time experienced, less due an inability or lack of commitment on Seth's part, and more from a lack of confidence on her own. This she put out of her mind as it presaged thoughts she was not yet even prepared to consider the necessity of considering. There would be time enough for that.

She got up and let Amazon out and sat at the table outside eating a bagel and drinking a cup of strong coffee. The sun was distant and fragile. It was warmer than the day before, but it was not a summer warmth, the kind that has behind it the weight of like days to follow. Instead, it felt like the tail of some enormous thing that having mostly passed by is soon to take itself entirely from view. Celia sat at the table and watched the dog bound through the field beyond. Innocently at first, she began twisting a piece of coiled copper wire she'd found in a loose roll beside the house. It warmed in her hand with the bending and took to shape easily. She worked it about in her hands and in time the outline of woman in cotillion dress seemed almost to insist on its design: smallish head leading to a thin neck, extended arms, rounded bosom and small waist spreading into a full skirt. Celia went inside and found a pair of pliers. With these she further manipulated the wire, revising a spot here or there. When satisfied with the result, she bent the end until it broke from the roll, leaving enough to mount the figure to one of the nearby metal fenceposts, which she did. There it stood, like a talisman of uncertain meaning, an icon to a faith yet without order. Over a second cup of coffee, she made another, then a third. One a ballerina on tip toes, another an ice skater maybe, depicted on one foot, arms extended to her sides. These she added to two other nearby posts. Then she stood back and admired her work, both for the unexpected facility she'd displayed in creating them, as well as the spontaneity of their creation. They were simple unobtrusive adornments, things she could imagine remaining frozen in their selective poses for as long as the fence shaped the field beyond.

Everything is eventually taken back by the land around here. It doesn't matter what it is — a fence, a dog, a man, whatever — it reclaims it in the end. I like that, that with time there would be no physical record of our having been here. But it also means I guess that you lose things too. I've been thinking about that night and I wonder if some day if Amazon will leave and just not come back. In a way, it took you too because I can still see you out there, walking in the tall grass. See? Ghosts, the place is great for ghosts. It's so old. It all makes me wonder how much longer I can stay here. Maybe it's about time I move on. I don't know.

Hey, the other possibility is I could come up there. I need to get up there one of these days anyway. I've not seen my Mom or my sister since probably Christmas two years ago. I could take a bit of time off from the nursery. It's pretty slow in the winter months anyway. Amy would love to see you again. We could drive out to the old neighborhood, play some tennis even. That actually sounds great right now. It's beautiful here, but cold. Cold like a car bumper gets cold, or the post on a basketball hoop. The snow is at least a foot deep now, and we're told to expect more. It makes an impenetrable silence, especially out here. The echoes are gone, migrated south I

guess. If you yell into the fields, nothing comes back. It's like the sound of your voice travels only so far as the fog your breath creates. I've got to come up with a project for the house or I'm going to lose my mind by the spring. The spring! But the truth is all I want to do is sit in front of the fire with a blanket and Amazon and read the days away. You should send me a list of books. Your favorites. I could start a season of study at your instruction. Devote myself exclusively to it until the thaw. One title after the other, as if building you in pieces, one added to the next. That would actually be very interesting for me. It would be like one long night, and in the morning, you'd be here.

Later, after showering and straightening up the house, Celia decided to surprise Ken at the nursery and take him to lunch. She put the dog in the house and drove the long drive that led to the main road, the same road that had seemed the night before like something from a dream. It was strange to now see completely exposed in the light the landscape that had been hidden in darkness, and by being hidden, had felt less of this world than some other unknown world. But it also seemed more vulnerable to her too, as if every stunted jackpine and every rock and every wizened patch of hardscrabble earth had, like her, been unsure and slightly scared in the night. That like her, their imaginations could get the better of them until morning.

The nursery was between the house and Taos. It sat in an area more suburban looking than Celia would've guessed, on its own symmetrical plot of land flanked on one side by a kid's gym and daycare and on the other by the small local fire station. In front of the building were displayed clay pots of varying sizes, some quite large; stacked bags of potting soil and peat; racks displaying various small potted plants; and a short line of riding mowers and rototillers.

She walked through the store, her eyes adjusting to the dim interior light, scanning for Ken. She saw him framed in the square of light made by the two glass doors at the back of the small store. He was outside, spraying a hose on a bank of small shrubs. A voice came over the loudspeaker; it said, "Customer service in perennials." From inside the store, Celia watched Ken, aproned, in cumbersome rubber boots. His face was blank and his movements easy and slow. The lot was ordered into a grid, each quadrant housing a particular plant or flower or a family of plant or flower. A half dozen people were wandering the tight alleys, stopping here and there to kneel and inspect a given item. She noticed all were pairs, men and women, women and women, and she wondered if there was something about flowers and plants that did not fit single people.

When she stepped through the doors into the sunshine, she realized the glass of the doors had deadened the glare; it was very bright and for a moment she had to squint her eyes to near closing and shade the sun with her hand.

"Hey! What are you doing here?"

As she opened her eyes she found Ken standing before her, hose in hand.

"Hey. Came to surprise you. Take you to lunch."

"I was going to give you a call."

"You pick the place."

Ken, water still running, took stock about him the way one might if he's about to do something better done in secret. But he did nothing.

"Let me put this stuff away."

They went to a small taqueria that had been converted out of an old gas station. It was plain inside, mostly white and white turned bleak by age and use. A heavy Mexican man wearing a baseball hat at a cockeyed angle took their orders. Celia noticed a long burn scar on his right forearm. It ran the length from elbow to wrist and wrapped about the arm, slick and raised.

At the table, they said little. The screech of the chair legs on the floor, the Spanish trickling in from the kitchen, they resonated like hard, individual things. All the sounds were this way, crystalline and discrete. Ken looked at the backs of his hands, then at the palms.

"I hope it was OK that you come out, go out for lunch."

"Oh of course. The job's pretty flexible that way. Especially now, too, as things are slowing down."

A different man, this one younger and very thin, brought them their drinks and set them on the table. He waved at someone on a motorcycle outside the window, then turned and left.

"You have a nice morning? I hope I didn't wake you when I left," Ken said, drawing up the bottom of his T-shirt to wipe about the rim of the can in front of him.

"No, not at all. I was out. I barely heard you leave."

“Celia, I was going to call because I feel ... I don’t know, but I don’t want ... I know how these kinds of situations can be. They can be awkward. And people can bump around each other as if they’d seen something neither is sure the other saw and is too nervous to ask. I mean, this is the thing, I don’t want you to leave, you know, to not stay at my place for as long as you like, but I would understand if you wanted to take off.”

Celia said nothing and looked at her own can in front of her, unopened. It made her feel little to have it sitting there directly before her and not reaching for it and opening it. But it seemed suddenly unreal, an image conducted out of light and mirrors.

“You know, I don’t think either one of us expected what happened to happen. And I just don’t want things to be uncomfortable or for us to pretend anything or, or feel there’s, you know ... I don’t know... . Celia. This is the thing. I was thinking about it all morning, and that is that ... you’re married, Celia. And I don’t know Seth, but I’m sure he’s a nice guy. ...”

“Yes, he’s very nice,” Celia heard herself say.

Ken nodded. “And this morning, I’d ricochet from feelings of, you know, like when you wake up on a Saturday and think it’s a work day and then remember it’s not? That feeling of happiness that just sweeps over you. I mean, I’ve sort of been just wandering around this place like an idiot today. Thinking about you, curled up in bed at home. Out in my little house out there. But you’re married. Then I think, ‘She’s married.’ Married and—”

“Ken, stop. Can you just stop? I get your point.”

Just then, the thin man walked over and set their plates in front of them as if simply returning items to their rightful place.

“Celia, I just want you to know—”

“Enough. I’ve got it. There’s no need to keep kicking at that spot. I understand. I get it, Ken.” Celia picked up her knife and fork and began to eat. But it was wrong. The movements were articulated like ordered steps taken from a book, gestures she’d practiced as the poor do the satisfied gait and speech of the rich.

They ate silently and then Celia drove Ken back to the nursery. They sat in the car, the motor idling, and Ken said, “I’m sorry if I said something wrong. But I think you’re being unfair. I was only trying to talk about the situation here. That’s all. You may think you know what I’m thinking, but I don’t think you do.”

When Celia did not respond, Ken touched the dash, and then exited the car to stand in the bright sun.

Celia stared straight ahead. She was watching a woman in a colorful sweat suit place tray after tray of small potted flower into the canopy of her truck. Ken drew his hand across his forehead and glanced at the nursery door. Then Celia got out, rounded the front of the car, walked up to Ken and kissed him. It was not a passionate kiss, but it was familiar, like that between two people who have slept together. “Don’t worry about it,” she said. And then she returned to the driver’s side, got in, put the car in gear, and left.

Ken looked after her, and did not have time to wave before she pulled out onto the street.

Celia drove straight to the house, packed up her things and left. On the refrigerator she placed a note that read, “Ken, off to see the ghosts. Thanks for everything. It was an unexpected joy. Love, Celia.”

Back in the car, crunching out the gravel drive and over the long knotted road to the highway, she decided to head south, rather than northeast to the ghost towns from her books. She would just drive. The roads were flat and unending and the sky was cloudless and had about it all the promise of palest blue in late summer. With the window rolled down, the sound of movement and speed doubled her strength. This and the Mexican music on the radio set her apart from the world. It swept out a place for her to stand by herself and not talk. No more of the disaster of putting pieces together, of stitching the random ordering of things into a whole that never covered her anyway. Straight roads, flat roads, are simple and perfect, without second thought or incidence of fraud. Forward was forward, backward, backward, and neither beggared any less of the world than the other. She would drive. And while she drove she would sing with the radio and count the towns she passed. She would reward no greater ambition than this.

In Espanola, she stopped for gas. She also bought a six pack of beer, a Styrofoam cooler, some ice, a few sticks of jerky, a loaf of bread, a slab of cheese and a pack of hot dogs.

“Is there a good place to eat around here?” She wanted only to hear the voice of the woman behind the counter.

“There’s a Wendy’s off Hermosa,” she said. Young and heavybreasted, eyes dark with eye shadow and skin smooth and brown as saddle leather, she had the voice of a person much younger than she looked. She kept one hand on a cigarette smoking in a nearby ashtray.

“Do you mind if I use your phone?” Celia asked.

The girl pointed at the wall just at the end of the counter behind which she stood.

“But it’s only just over there,” the girl said, pointing toward Hermosa Street.

Celia nodded and walked over to the phone and picked up the receiver.

The girl watched Celia as if her kind were unusual and prone to irregularities of behavior that bore witnessing.

Celia dialed the number. The phone rang three times before the answering machine picked up. She knew he’d not be home.

“Honey, it’s me. Surprise, surprise. Sorry for not calling last night. I camped and the place I stayed didn’t have a ranger station with a phone. But I just wanted to let you know I’m alive. And having a great time. Hope all’s well there. I’m heading back to the park right now and probably won’t be able to call again for a day or two. It’s so beautiful here. I miss you and love you. Bye for now.” And then she hung up.

She said “thanks” to the girl, but the girl said nothing and only watched her leave, six pack in hand. And she didn’t stop watching as Celia emptied the ice into the cooler and then mixed the beer, the cheese and the hot dogs in the ice.

On the road again, she continued south. Upon seeing signs for Bandolier National Park she abruptly changed course, turning the car west. Soon, the number of towns fell off and it was only land, dry, desperate ancient rolling land. It lay wrecked in heat and wasting to dust. But there was beauty in its austerity, as well as a kind of wisdom. Perhaps it was because it reminded her of some Biblical setting, the miserable desert empty of all but the presence of God. Or maybe it was the simple fact that such terrain gave no quarter for hiding; that it brokered no truth save for that apprehended directly and without disguise. But it was the light too. There was that light, luminous and fuller than light at home, looking almost as if painted into the air with lemons and golds.

The car climbed and descended a bit, then climbed again. At times, she shared the road with other cars, other trucks. Other times, she found herself the only vehicle anywhere. But either way it was perfect. She tapped out the beat of a song on the radio on her steering wheel and considered in a whirling patchwork of images the mix of possibilities. So many places she’d never been. Not so many years earlier, such were the certainties of her future, this life of exploration and discovery. She’d quilted together all that was to come, one thread at a time, and she had done so in good faith, with determination and a certain exactitude. At dinner with a friend in college, drunker on sangria than was wise, she disclosed her belief that her name would outlive her; that pretense aside, she was confident a level of achievement and distinction waited for her. What this would be she was not sure. A book perhaps. A series of books maybe. A discovery. In any event, it would amount to some wrestling with at least a small part of history. Celia did not count herself among that variety of people who fail to dream. In fact, her planning had been immaculate for its breadth and flexibility. Once she had finished her college degree in literature, she would move to Paris. That much she knew. There she would let the winds commit her to this direction or that, confirmed by acquaintances and inclination and overseen by destiny. Unfortunately, she had mistaken her will, and even more, her imagination, as duplicates for the commerce of action.

Time had separated her from her plans. How had it happened? she wondered as her car continued to climb. This thought was followed by a feint anxiety as well as a generous kind of intoxication at the seeming new proximity of these possibilities. Seth, Seth, Seth, Seth. She would think about it more later. Perhaps just a bit of quiet would answer something. And then she thought of Ken and it was a confused, fugitive feeling. She tried likewise to relegate this to later consideration, but it would not be ignored. It was as if having been with him, having closed her eyes and given herself completely to him, she had made him part of herself. And now, having done so, he drove with her and looked out the selfsame eyes she did.

Entering Bandolier, Celia quickly found a site. It was the 12 o’clock spot in a small cul-de-sac of sites, each of which had a slip for the camper’s car and an area of relative privacy designated by a portion of flat ground and a periphery of small bushes. The only other occupied spot was the one two sites over at about two o’clock. The owners’ tent was there, as was their car, but they were nowhere to be seen. Celia hoped this was it for visitors. It was hot and dry and she sweat behind her ears, on the backs of her hands and between her breasts as she unloaded her tent and began to set it up. This was no easy task. She’d been camping in her life, yes, but never alone like this. She remembered the cold beer and the cooler, and the enterprise took on a quality of romance, each step □ installing a brace pole in its proper sheath □ invested with a level of satisfaction and even joy far outweighing its

difficulty. In this way, the tent went up piece by piece, albeit slowly and with no shortage of revisions in approach and confidence.

Finally, Celia stood back, one leg on the seat of the picnic table, and admired the finished product. Wet at the armpits and in a triangle at the “v” of her v-neck T-shirt, she cared little about the modesty of her creation, only that there it stood and that it had been her hands that had set it there. She toasted the moment with her beer bottle and then finished off what remained. From her bag she pulled out her journal and sat a moment to record the event. For some minutes, she held her pen above the journal page and contemplated the tent, the buzzing of heat and bugs, the wholesale freedom she felt. Snatches of sentences came to her but turned color before they could be completed and dedicated to the page. She scribbled the date at the top of the page, then traced it again. Then she closed the pen in the notebook and put it back in the car, along with the cooler and the tent bag. There were a few hours of light left; she would take her camera and go for a hike.

Equipped with a sweatshirt tied around her waist and a camera over her shoulder, Celia walked out the back of her site and across a patch of rocky ground to a nearby trail post. She took the longer of the two trails marked there, a three-mile walk that led west, into the afternoon sun. After only a short distance she could feel the sweat traversing the slim channel charting the division of her back, collecting in the band of her panties. The tickle felt good, as did the crunch of her boots, which were covered first in the dried mud of the evening before (had it just been the night before!), and now in the dust of the trail. They no longer looked new but displayed now evidence of real use and movement.

On the plateau of Bandolier, there were few obstacles to interrupt one’s view. The few trees that endured stood blanched and gnarled, dwarfs, looking in design as if the limbs had attempted each to find shade behind the other, twisting about its neighbor in a failed effort to elude the sun. Celia took pictures of them, hoping to capture something of their vulnerability and resolve. She also took pictures of the cacti, which she imagined were the disguises of the disappeared Anasazi. Companioned to the land, and eager to escape the will of more aggressive peoples, they had delivered an incantation and been remade in the cacti, born a second time in barrel and saguaro to stand sentry to the passing of time. And when all was right again, in a peaceful future, word might be given for their return.

How incredible, Celia thought, that on a landscape so devoid of animation, that she could feel so nearly overwhelmed. Each turn or dip in the trail offered yet more subjects: a lizard sunning itself on a flat rock, a perfect palette of yellow to dark brown in one patch of ocotillo and grass, an odd-looking bug the size of her thumb. There was nothing to think about here, only things to witness. At different times, she felt even as if she could see the sounds she heard or hear the sights she saw. Sensations traded places and in so doing disclosed their singularity and completeness. She could see with her feet, it seemed. Hear with her eyes. And best of all, none of it attempted to right itself, and nor did she attempt to fit it to its place. She just walked, and took pictures and let the rest go.

The trail was mostly flat and progress was made easily. In time, she reached the end of the trail, which trickled out over a precipice approximately 150 feet above the ground. To the left in the near distance rose sheer and planed as if by a lapidary’s hand, a wall of rock built by the deliberate aggregation of one age atop the next, and decorated in a remarkable survey of reds and lighter reds. Unlike all else on the landscape, it did not seem undone by the sun above. Directly below, Celia found herself looking down on a small parking lot, dotted mostly by RVs and campervans. A cluster of people at the far end hung loosely about each other. Now and then a laugh would reach her, having been made fragile and alien by first ricocheting off the rock wall. They were quite small at this distance and Celia fancied it was not space that separated her from them, but time; that she and the sun-vanquished lot of earth on which she stood were of a long past history, and those below, they and their vehicles equipped with TVs and swivel chairs and flushing toilets, they were garish and loud and relative only in form. Celia sat for a long while watching them.

It grew cool. Celia didn’t know the time, but she could see that the shadows made by the people below were leaning ever-more in diagonal apposition to their owners, as if maybe here too the Anasazi had taken up residence, in the adumbration of visitors, pointing them back toward the mesa. She began to work her way toward camp. She was getting hungry and was glad that she’d thought to pick up a thing or two for dinner, but disappointed at what she had chosen. Something hot, and spicy, would be nice. And the beer too she thought of. It would be icy cold by her return. What lies we admit to tell ourselves are meant as stories about our other lives, the ones undelivered and dry as an arroyo, and as Celia walked she enjoyed the tale of her life of wandering, where camping alone was familiar and traveling on an unpeopled and darkening landscape was no cause for fear.

It seemed to get later quickly. Had she been stupid in not watching the time? she wondered. She was moving away from the last of the sun and the eastern sky had already turned a soft plush color. It made her move briskly up the trail and around its numerous and indistinguishable turns. No one else was about. And there were no sounds but

those made by her boots. She talked aloud to herself. She said, "In infinite spaces, we are infinite, and in finite places we are made finite. It's true. I know I'm weak. I'm not the person who could live in captivity, as a POW or a political prisoner, doomed to reciting snatches of childhood songs and rhymes and singing Christmas carols. I would collapse and fall inward through my guts and disappear. I know. I have to admit it. Because once you admit it, once you say out loud that you are small and that you are empty and that words are nothing but butterflies then you can start again. Here I am, look at me. I'm nowhere."

She passed a thicket of mesquite she recalled from earlier. A large rock she was sure she'd seen from before. By a coordination of temper, she managed to keep fear, which filled her shoes like cold water, at bay. Thoughts to the possibilities for danger followed her and the setting of the sun. She might have thought that seeing the coyotes as she had the night before would have doubled her fear, but instead the thought proved oddly reassuring, as if they'd had a conversation, she and the coyotes, and they had reached an understanding. As it got darker, and the inhabitant bush and cacti and rock receded, the sky turned a lush Prussian blue and the stars blinked on as if arriving like a team of workers, each one commissioned to illumine their designated section to its designated brightness. At one point, Celia heard thrashing sounds in a nearby thatch of bushes and froze. She waited for the creature to show itself. Then the noises stopped and when they didn't return, she moved on, staring over her shoulder.

She proceeded along the straights of the path and down its narrow corridors, buttressed on the one side by a rock wall and the on the other by a drop of twenty feet or more to the bed of a departed river. Soon there were more sounds. Clicking sounds and far-off calls and the flapping of wings and the unknown things darting rapidly overhead. Her skin prickled with fear and she felt cold from it. The summary of shadows concealed all sorts of unknown dangers. Worse, whatever watched her pass could plot her movement and knew her steps surely better than she did. They would pounce or lunge or creep or whatever it was in their way to do and she would not know until it was too late. She shivered slightly and drew her hands down her naked arms. She said aloud, "To make it work, to really make it work, to be powerful, you've got to be totally honest with yourself. Admit that you are what you are, that you still have a lot of child in you. It's got to be a lean, unabridged connection to the world. Where the thoughts you have are discrete and hard as gemstone because they're cut from more enduring stuff than your are. I am not that person. But the truth is, it's never what you think, never; it's always what you do. I know that. I know that the thinking is nothing; it requires no courage." She continued to walk.

Back on a flat portion of the trail, in direct correspondence to the stars, a strange thing happened. Due the proximity of the sky and developing darkness, or the desolation of the landscape, Celia felt as if her mind and the heavens had coalesced into one thing, one limitless continuum of space. The division had, like the walls separating the audience from the play, come down and the constituent elements flowed into one another. Stars and space filled her like water from an uncorked dam, while her own thoughts flickered above, small and distant. She let her feet take her the rest of the way to camp, unhurriedly, calmly. She was no longer scared. The fear was gone. By the time she stood again next to the signpost, she could not clearly remember how she got there.

Her neighbors had returned. They had a large fire going now and were busy about it, the man organizing wood, the woman readying pots and utensils for cooking. Celia's camp was by comparison cold and inhospitable, her picnic table barren and uncovered, her tent empty and quiet. She had not thought about a fire. The realization chilled her, but the prospect of changing into long pants and a sweater seemed too troublesome to undertake. She'd also neglected to bring a flashlight. For a short time, she simply sat at the table in the now near complete dark and watched the man and woman. They looked, as people do beside such fires, not quite of this world, but of some other gone to song and pottery shards and wall paintings. The two of them spoke to each other but the night somehow turned the words to smoke and Celia could not make them out. On their picnic table sat a red metal cooler, some pots, a burning candle, a small cassette player and small cardboard box, and two cups from which they sipped when their duties took them nearer to table.

The woman was petite with straight flax-colored hair that hung nearly to her waist. Now and then she would, with a magician's dexterity and without so much as a single prop, reconfigure its length into a bun on the top of her head. Then she'd carry on with what she was doing. Celia wondered at her age. The man was heavy at the torso but had uncommonly skinny legs sticking out of his shorts. He wore glasses and a crumpled rain hat, its string dangling loosely to his throat, swinging as he moved. They seemed a good pair to Celia, if only because their movements were complementary and natural in relation to one another. As one moved one way, so too did the other in a kind of dance, as if engineered by a Swiss clockmaker. At one point, when the woman unzipped the flap to the tent and climbed in, the man stopped and watched her, pushing his glasses to the bridge of his nose. When she re-emerged a moment later, they said something to one another and both smiled.

Finally, Celia retrieved her pack from the car and carried it to the tent. She unzipped the entrance and stepped in. Inside, it was dark and cold and smelled dank like humus. There, without aid of sight, she found and changed into

a pair of pants and changed shirts, adding a sweater as well. She could see the glow of the fire next door through the thin skin of the tent.

Outside again, she returned to the car and gathered her sleeping bag and pillow and proceeded to lay them out in the tent as well. Taking the bag from its sack, she found hidden inside, amidst the down, a small flashlight. Likely, Seth had put it there for safe keeping the last time they had used it, which Celia estimated would've been a trip they took to the Olympic mountains more than a year earlier. They had not been married long when they decided to take his spring break and work their way up through the national park to the Strait of Juan de Fuca. The memory of that trip had in time been distilled into her recollection of the photographs they brought home from the trip. A picture of the two of them in beach chairs beside a river drinking bottled beer. Her hair is different, shorter. She should get it cut that way again. One of Seth flashing her from a rock in the middle of a river. Another of herself standing in shorts in the sun on a crude bridge. But it's the thought of the envelope they came in from the developer. This more than anything — the image of that envelope, creased and abraded and marked by use and the shifting of things in whichever drawer it sat — put her in a particularly unwelcome mood.

She tried the flashlight. It worked but its beam was dim and hazy. She turned it off and unloaded the remaining items — the cooler, her coat, a blanket — in the dark.

By now, the couple next door was sitting in squat lawn chairs, their legs crossed, feet suspended before the fire, sipping on their drinks. The man had pushed his hat off his head to hang over the back of his chair from the string around his neck. His hair was bushy at the temples but thin at the crown. Celia took a beer from the cooler and tore open a bag of jerky. She sat on the top of the table, her back to the couple and her feet on the seat, placed the blanket over her lap, and ate the jerky and drank from her beer, which was cold in her hand. Behind her the wood snapped in the fire. She tried to think about the walk she'd just been on, but it wouldn't take. She tried to concentrate on the stars, which were strewn randomly across the sky like a handful of children's jacks. But this too failed to capture her attention. So she sat and it was enormous space above her and the smell of cool earth and woodsmoke and beneath it the smell of something sweeter, while the picnic table conducted a chill through to her skin.

Soon even her jacket could not keep her comfortable and she had to trade her beer bottle from hand to hand for how cold it made her fingers. Shoulders hunched a bit to the night air, she searched the area around her site with the flashlight for what twigs and sticks might be found. After considerable effort she could manage only a small armful of kindling, which, if it burned at all, would do little and not for long. This collection she dumped into the small fire pit, charred black and skirted by large smooth stones. Her discovery that she'd also neglected to bring matches or a lighter doused even that small plan. She had either to go to sleep now or ask her neighbors. She made the short but inglorious walk to where they sat staring into the fire, the man poking its interior with a stick.

"Excuse me," Celia said.

"Hey," the man said, appearing not startled but only slightly distracted.

"Hi. I'm camping right over there, and I really didn't plan too well before coming up here today, it was sort of last minute, and I neglected to bring wood or matches and I was wondering if there was any way I could buy a bit of wood off you just for the night."

"Oh, uh..." The man looked to the small pile of logs beside the fire.

"Oh you don't have to buy it from us," the woman said. "Go ahead and take a couple pieces."

The man glanced at the woman, then at Celia, and smiled.

"Are you sure? I'm happy to, you know, pay something for it, I mean, you guys need it too." She pulled some bills from her pocket.

"No, no," the woman said. She got up from her chair, handing her drink to the man, who held it then set it on the ground. She fetched three sturdy pieces and carried them to Celia's cold fire pit. "You know what," she said as she was about to drop the lot, "you want to just come on over and join us? Why don't you just come over and join us. We've got plenty of food. Spaghetti and there's a lot left over. Potato salad." The logs were still piled in her arms. With a shoulder she bid Celia follow, and returned to the fire and dropped the wood once more on the pile where it made a dull, heavy thud.

"C'mon, c'mon," the woman said, throwing her hair over her shoulder. She lifted the cooler off the table and set it on the ground next to the fire.

Celia grabbed her remaining beers and took up a seat on the cooler and the three introduced themselves. Tom. Sarah. Home the Bay area. Roaming the States. Tom a city planner on leave. City planning is delivering a speech

to rush-hour traffic. So maybe he might not go back but instead plan something else that actually wants to be planned. On leave, a funny expression for deciding whether or not you're tired of a thing or actually hate it. Sarah just finished cooking school. Pastries, tarts, pies, cremes. One of the few things that make people happy. Like a comedian. An artist, Tom says. Beautiful sweets. Eat pie and be happy.

This goes on, and they burn logs in turn.

They ate spaghetti, Celia out of coffee cup for lack of plates. She drank her beer with it and tried to determine how much to tell them. Yes, she was alone. There is a corridor of ghost towns off of highway 56 and she'd come to take pictures of them. Black and white pictures of the derelict buildings, their caving facades, all teetering and blanched and fragile, looking ever more like things not of man's hands, but of the earth itself, like the product of some extraordinary confluence of natural forces.

"I was struck by that," said Celia, "that these old wood structures seemed, with all the people gone, like intrinsic pieces of the landscape, like a strange rock outcropping or an unusually shaped tree."

Tom was standing at the picnic table in the process of igniting a lantern. It came to life making a sound as if preparing to tell a secret.

"Oh, we'll have to drive through there," Sarah said. "Tom, we'll have to make a point of driving that way."

Tom's face was ominously lit by the lantern, garish and pale. "I'd love to see that," he said. He held up a bottle of gin, swinging it slightly like a bell.

"Yes," said Sarah. She held her cup up. "A drink?" she asked Celia.

"Uh..." Celia looked at her beer bottle. "Sure." She finished off the remains of her beer and set it back in the six pack.

"I think that would be really fascinating," Tom said as he stepped to Sarah to get her cup. He put it down next to his own and then produced another from the box on the table. "You know, doing what I do ... did ... will do again, maybe — working in my field — you spend all this time ordering and forecasting, but when it comes down to it, in the end, it all gets reclaimed. By time. It's nothing. I mean, I definitely think of things like that, ghost towns, all weathered and forgotten and vacant, when we're designing a city grid, or killing ourselves over some traffic overflow issue, or whatever. Because none of it lasts. One day, it'll all be gone, replaced by something else, or just gone, like some outpost of the Roman empire. Like Ephesus or Antioch." He dumped ice into each of the cups and poured off a dram of gin. "Then we come to a place like this—" He gestured with his head toward the night, his eyes concentrated on the measurement of liquor and then tonic, "and it makes me feel a bit like, like, I don't know, like a fool, like an idiot." He turns a knife about in each drink, then brings all three fireside.

"He's reading 'The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire,' and it's become a third member on this trip." Maybe a consequence of the flicker of firelight on her face, the shadows redrafting certain angles at the mouth and eyes, but Celia believed she could discern in Sarah a certain unhappiness or resentment about this fact.

Tom hands the others their drinks. He resumes his seat with a sigh and sips off the top of his cup like it's hot.

"So how was it?" Tom asked.

"How was it," said Celia.

"The ghost towns up there?"

"Oh, I haven't actually gotten that far yet. I wanted to make a stop here first and then head that way."

Tom nodded.

"Do you know how long a drive that will be?" Sarah asked.

"I'm not sure. It shouldn't take me too long. A few hours I'd guess."

Celia thought about it and looked at the fire.

"And you're doing the trip alone?" asked Sarah.

"Yeah." She was under the spell of the liquid glow deep in the hottest region of the fire. It seemed that were one equipped with the requisite knowledge, the endless changes in color and configuration could be translated like a strange tongue into a message with meaning. Or maybe it could be rewritten as music, each particular recast as an individual note that when played would reveal the symphony of fire.

"That's ambitious," said Sarah.

Celia shrugged and smiled, then took a drink.

"What did you come to first," asked Tom, "the desire to go, or the place to go?"

Celia considered the question. "That's a good question."

“If I were to guess I’d say the desire to go was the thing. Most of us need a destination before we can convince ourselves to move. You needed to give it a name. Even if it’s a place where no one lives anymore and the wind just whistles through. Destinations aren’t that significant. They’re crutches. You want to find the mouth of the Amazon, the lost city of Atlantis. You’re looking for the fountain of youth, the Pacific Ocean. It doesn’t matter; it’s all the same.”

“You could be right. It’s funny, I can’t quite remember how I came to pick this area.” And she couldn’t. It seemed at the moment a very long time ago.

“Sarah and I were having this conversation the other day. And we realized it’s all about the moving. About the prospects. It’s not about finding gold; it’s about looking for gold.” Tom was sitting up in his chair, looking as if to stand.

Sarah watched him.

“You can see it in the withering of the Roman Empire. Once the emperors stopped traveling to the perimeters of the empire, preferring to stick around in Rome and enjoy the luxuries of privilege □ the food, the drink, the women, the public spectacles □ they lost that sense of momentum that making the trip gave them. And that passion. It represented something, to go out to Antioch and Constantinople. The great ones, Hadrian, Trajan, the Antonines, they mapped the empire by foot. They connected with the people. They took delight in it. Conquest was as much about this abundant desire to move as it was about the expansion of the empire.”

Sarah nudged Tom with her elbow. His drink sloshed in his cup.

“It’s true,” he said.

“So you two haven’t really established any destinations then is what you’re telling me?” It occurred to her that Ken too had been reading “The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire.” “Do you know what time it is?” she asked before either could answer the previous question.

Sarah looked to Tom, who checked his watch. He turned his wrist toward the fire.

“Almost 10:30,” he said.

“It’s hard to tell, isn’t it?” Sarah said.

They both looked at the sky, the stars singularly adamant and clustered about one another as if together in interested witness to the spectacle of the earth below. Celia traced the armature of the dipper, which pointed like a crooked finger in the direction she had come earlier in the day. It occurred to her it would be dark there too and the tall grasses would be silvered in the moonlight, swaying in unison. The little house. The garden. The fire. What things are made to grow not by the sun in day, but rather by the moon and the privacy of night? she wondered.

“You know what,” he said, “I think in the spirit of the unreserved debauchery of Commodus and Caligula, I’m going to have a little smoke. Would anyone care to join me?”

Sarah was in the process of wrapping the train of her hair about with her left hand as if subduing a shimmering creature of sorts. “Yes, yes,” she said, looking at Celia.

Celia, having just taken a drink, shrugged her agreement. It was not something she did often, but it seemed in fitting with the humor of the evening.

Tom disappeared into the tent. The beam of a flashlight appeared, strayed, then settled in a dull nimbus of pale orange in one corner.

“Our evening constitutional,” Sarah said.

When Tom reemerged he had a small pipe in his hand. He returned to his chair and then handed the pipe and a pack of matches he extracted from his shirt pocket across Sarah to Celia.

“Pax Romana,” he said.

Celia, her face warm in the heat of the fire, put the pipe to her lips and lit the bowl, inhaling deeply. Breath still held, she inspected the bulb of the pipe, then handed it to Sarah, before finally slowly exhaling. Each in turn did the same, Sarah, then Tom, who first investigated the bowl with the tip of a pinkie.

They sipped from their drinks and for a short time simply sat and sighed and shifted their feet before the burning logs.

“It is brilliantly dark, isn’t it?” Tom said. “The same dark as the dark on Jupiter and M15 and Ganymede.”

“It is; it’s really beautiful,” Sarah said.

“It’s the same dark as Augustus and C-C-Claudius, and Julian. Do you know that Julian purchased the empire from the Praetorian guard? Isn’t that amazing? They put the empire up for sale. And he was a wealthy merchant so he bought it □ the Roman empire. Bought it and became emperor of Rome.”

“A dynamic that continues today,” said Celia in a voice she knew wasn’t quite her own.

“Today, a Japanese conglomerate would’ve purchased it,” Tom said. “Or Disney.”

“It is something though,” Sarah said.

“What’s that?” Celia asked.

“The dark.”

“The same dark,” Celia said. “That’s interesting.”

“The same dark,” Tom said. “Isn’t that amazing?”

“It’s the same dark □ either one of you ever run away from home?” Celia asked, interrupting herself.

“Run away? For an afternoon, until I got hungry for fish sticks and tater tots,” Tom said.

“Fish sticks and tater tots,” said Sarah.

“I loved those fucking things,” Tom said.

“A girlfriend and I ran away,” Sarah said. “But what’s funny is we got maybe about two miles out of town—”

“Where’d you live?” asked Celia.

“Uh, Michigan. A little city called Papa. You may have heard of it; it’s pretty famous for its apples. Whatever. Anyway, we didn’t get too far out, maybe a mile or two, when my dentist of all people, who was a college buddy of my dad’s, drove by and saw us walking on the road. He stopped of course, but all he did was ask us if we needed a ride. He never asked us what we were doing, or where we going, or anything. Very cagey. But we were too embarrassed to tell him what we were doing, that we were running away, so we just sort of sat there and let him drive us home.”

“You never told me that,” Tom said.

“Yeah. He just drove each of us home and just said, ‘Alright see you later, Sarah, say hi to your dad. I mean, we had little backpacks on and everything. The worst part is I actually remember thanking him for the ride.’”

Tom and Celia laughed, Tom bent slightly at the waist, his hat coming to hang below his chin.

“And why did you try and run away, do you remember?” asked Celia finally, wiping her eyes.

“Oh, I don’t know, I guess for the same reason every kid does.”

“What’s that?” asked Tom.

“Oh you know, boredom, looking for something to do, a desire to just ... I don’t know, to push things and see what happened.”

“Like seeing what would happen if you put an M80 in the mouth of carousel horse at Taverville Gardens in Houston?” Tom said, his eyes red and watering, his voice catching, tremulous.

“What?” Sarah asked.

“I can tell you it blows the muzzle pretty well clean off.” And then he was lost, putting his hands before his face as if to fend off some nuisance, a licking dog, a persistent fly.

“Really?” Celia asked.

“Ugly ... sight,” Tom said, squeezing the words out.

“Tom. ...” Sarah said.

He shook his head, putting the hat over his face as he laughed. “And I would’ve gotten away with it too, if it weren’t for those meddling kids...!”

Now both Sarah and Celia fell into fits of laughter.

Tom fitted his hat to his head, then took it off again, balling it up in his hands.

“You got caught?” Celia said.

“His mother turned him in,” said Sarah.

“Your mother?”

He nodded. “Bitch.”

“Your mother?” Celia said again.

“Got me a bunch of community service for that, too.”

“From city vandal to city planner,” said Celia.

They all laughed at this. Just as it seemed to have run its course one of the three of them would begin again to giggle and this would trigger a new round. At length, amid sighs and lone chuckles, it died down and each of them used a sleeve or the tail of their shirt to wipe their eyes.

In time, Tom stood and walked to the table. “Man, that was funny,” he said, shaking his head. He opened the cooler and took a handful of melted ice water and splashed it on his face. Sarah and Celia watched from their chairs.

“Bathroom,” Celia said. She took a drink from her cup then placed it on the ground and stood. She walked to the perimeter of the firelight, then asked, “You don’t have a flashlight, do you?”

“Yup,” said Tom, and walked it to her.

“Give her the TP, Tom.”

Tom grabbed the toilet paper from the box on the table, and handed that to her as well.

“Yell if you see hyenas or anything,” Tom said.

Celia walked through her own camp, which, cold and silent, depressed her slightly. Near the last site in the line, she found a bush and squatted and pissed, the flashlight pointed at her feet. In the dark, the sound did not seem like one of her own making, but rather that of an animal. When she was done and stood again, she turned off the flashlight and for some minutes did not move. She could hear Tom and Sarah talking, their voices oddly incantatory in rhythm, a mumbling prayer. The night was all about her. It had moved in around her, making her part of itself, she one more panel of dark in the tapestry of like dark. Crowned by icy stars, she admired the size of the night and wondered how, even with the sun, such a patience of dark could be unhinged. For the second time that day she realized she was not scared. And being not scared is the second of heroism. You can become powerful that way, she thought.

She was reminded of her own attempt at running away. Their escape took them out into the collected ruin of the plains of Montana. They had packed bologna sandwiches and chips and pop and cups of pudding and bananas and apples and a pack of cigarettes lifted from Celia’s mother. They also each brought a sleeping bag, which Celia carried jauntily from its sychstring like purse. Her friend, Jenny, pulled her belongings behind her in children’s wagon. Celia also brought a harmonica given to her by her grandfather; a slim, dog-eared volume of Aesop’s fables she favored, though by that point more for the smell of its pages and the familiar wear of its cardboard cover than for its stories; and a broken watch of her father’s. She carried these items in a small backpack along with two changes of clothes. They had walked for a long time.

“You OK out there?” she heard Tom yell.

“Fine,” she shouted back, closing her eyes. She made her way back to the fire in the dark, the earth making a perfect sound under her boots.

They two of them were sitting in their chairs. Sarah’s hair was now wound up in a loose bundle on the back of her head, held in place by a pencil.

“We thought a dingo had got you,” Tom said.

Celia put the flashlight and toilet paper on the table and resumed her spot atop the cooler.

“It’s like a spell out there, the darkness,” she said. “You step into it, out of the light of the fire, and it kind of seduces you. Hypnotizes you.”

“The desert,” Tom said.

“It gets into you. I was out there and just kind of wandered away, and started remembering all kinds of stuff. Like the first time I ran away as a kid.” She looked at Sarah, who, in the process of putting the pipe to her lips, mumbled, nodded and raised her eyebrows in lieu of speech.

“I never really ran away,” Tom said. “I was a pretty adaptable kid.”

Sarah exhaled, blowing a draft of smoke into the circling channels spiraling upward from the fire. “I can’t believe you didn’t,” she said.

“Yeah,” Tom said. He took a drink and stared into the cherry coals beyond his feet.

A knotted log snapped, sending skyward a constellation of sparks.

Sarah turned to Celia. “How far did you get, Celia?”

Celia hesitated, suddenly unconvinced she wanted to tell the story. It seemed so long now, composed of such an infinite number of particulars.

This she must have exhibited on her face for Sarah said, “No, no, I embarrassed myself, you guys laughed at me, so ...” and she made a gesture with her hands like a gambler gathering to himself the winnings of a poker hand. Tom sat hunched in his chair, eyeing the fire and silent.

Celia went into the story. Telling of the reckless provisioning and faulty planning. How she’d brought canned pears, but no opener. And how at lunch, a couple of hours out, they’d employed all manner of tool, real and fabricated, to attempt to get at the contents, settling finally for a small hole and the juice. Then she explained where it was they’d turned to walk, the swollen waste of the great plains, which is wholly flat and unremarkable save for the sheer constancy of both those facts. Celia and her friend, Jenny, unlike Sarah, had not considered the advantages of staying to paved roads, where travel is occasioned with distinct choices: forks in the road, restaurants for meals, homes and passing cars, extravagances nowhere available on the route they chose. They had simply walked out their front doors and onto the expanse of flat land that pinched their little town from all sides. She told them that there had been no planning; that it was of a moment, things hastily gathered and a direction more accepted than chosen. As kids, the sheer size of the land around them had seemed inexhaustible, bound to unroll without stopping until something they could not fathom would mark its end, should it have one. And they had just started walking. Through the late morning and afternoon, when the sun was directly above and followed them like a timid but curious animal, keeping its distance but never out of view. At one point, a couple of gophers, startled by the unexpected intruders had chased the two girls, causing them to drop their bags and run screaming, Celia losing her father’s watch in the chaos.

It was hot and they sweat on their backs in patterns made by their backpacks. They had not thought to bring water. This was an unfortunate oversight as they were thirsty much of the time, the one wanting to conserve what drinks they had brought, and the other recommending drinking it now, and then reversing positions the next time. In the afternoon, they sat and ate sandwiches and apples and pudding. At first, they’d discussed parsing out the food, some for the evening, some for breakfast and the following day’s lunch. But once into the brown paper bags, neither said a word as both eagerly consumed all but the most random scraps. Celia told them how, now full and relaxed, miles from home, they’d laughed and drawn nasty pictures with sticks in the dirt to each other’s mutual delight. And how they’d yelled as loud as they could, words otherwise forbidden and the meanings of which were, in some cases, still hazy and uncertain. Words like “cock” and “motherfucker” and “queer” and “twat.” They’d admired the sound these words made coming out of their mouths and the complete absence of echo or answer.

They agreed to walk for another hour or so or until they found some decent shelter for the night. In retrospect, Celia thought it odd they did not much discuss where they were going. Perhaps both assumed the other shared the same vision of their eventual destination. For Celia, she imagined a place like the summer camp she’d gone to for portions of the two previous summers. It was quiet but for voices of people talking, or laughing, or shouting to one another, one on shore, one paddling a boat in the lake. There were great gatherings for meals and meetings and she had friends to sit beside. There were stories at night, wonderful stories one could take to bed and then wrap and unwrap in the dark like an origami swan. These images were painted on a hand fan that waved before her face as she walked. Jenny’s ambitions were less clear, a distinction in impulse that proved a benign wedge between them when the adventure was over.

They each lit one of the cigarettes in the pack they brought. Each demonstrated different techniques for inhaling and exhaling, adopting different poses particular to different scenes they directed. They both mimicked their parents. But being free to say what they pleased served somehow only to lessen the charm of saying it, and the smoking too. Before the cigarettes were half done they had collected their things, each flicking the cigarettes into the distance, and continued on. It was late afternoon as they began again and the sun was gold on everything. It was an otherworldly, delicious light, almost unrecognizable from that they knew from their neighborhoods and schoolyards and that lit highway interchanges and parking lots. It was the stuff from which mirages are built, Celia thought.

At a distance of some few hundred feet, Celia turned to look in the direction they’d come and found a fire bubbling there in the distance. They watched in awe as it grew and made a curtain of flame about three feet high across the plains. Once seen, Celia could hear it crackling and smell the punk of burning grass.

“We both just stood there, as if witnessing some terrible miracle,” Celia told them.

It spread quickly, sometimes jumping multiple feet to ignite a nearby bush or hillock of grass. At first, it had seemed an illusion, a mirage contrived out of the heat, the flatness of land, the hours on their feet. They watched it as they would’ve watched the unexpected appearance of another human, having appeared from nowhere without greeting or warning. It smelled oddly of barbecuing corn. But also of burning dirt. When the full measure of what had happened reached them, they dropped their things and ran, racing the fire until they rounded its far side. Then they ran parallel with one of its advancing portions and back toward town. Behind them, hissing and black, charred spots of land smoked, sending a screen of soot into the air. Cutting away from the flames, they eventually put ...