

## FIRST AND LAST THINGS

by Lowry Pei

OLD FOOL SEEKS NEW LOVE. Fifty-something in search of Real Thing once more before succumbing to resignation. (I mentioned being a fool, didn't I?) Passion, devotion, romantic illusions, impulsive presents all a possibility. Wife, now otherwise occupied, used to find me reasonably attractive. Judge for yourself: ask and I'll send photo. Ripe for plucking by young woman of 35 or 40, can be had by convincing simulation of love, desire, acceptance, tenderness. Reply to Box # . . .

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Wilson received one voice-mail telling him he should go buy *Playboy* and masturbate, one reminding him that marriage is a sacrament of the Lord, one from a dominatrix, one from a woman who said he could sleep over once a month if he would pay for a year's lease on a one-bedroom apartment, one from a man who told him he should leave younger women alone and go die, one from a woman who said she was only a little over forty and her husband couldn't get it up anymore and could he? and then got flustered and hung up without leaving her number.

Wilson was sorry he had ever placed the ad. Then he got the seventh voice-mail.

"Hello.

"Oh. I should have thought of what to say. Listen, I can't simulate anything convincingly, can you?

"How did you get up the nerve to run an ad? Was it desperation?

I would never have. I never answered one before, either.

“Tell me about the real thing. You said the real thing ‘once more.’ You’ve been there before?”

“My name is Joanna. I got a post office box, just for this, it’s wonderfully clandestine, isn’t it? Here’s the address . . .”

That was the end of the message. Wilson played it over a dozen times, continuing after he knew all the words by heart.

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Dear Joanna,

I can’t tell if it takes more nerve to run a personal ad, or to write this letter. At least before you run the ad you don’t know if anyone will read it.

I’m sending you a picture of myself. It’s two and a half years old. I hope it’s truthful enough. Actually it’s half of a picture of me and my wife; I cut her off. Is that a terrible thing to admit? You didn’t ask, but I should tell you that she has taken up with another woman. My wife and I thought we had the real thing, years ago, but let’s leave her out of this for now. Are you married? You haven’t said, as I’m sure I don’t need to remind you. Maybe that’s why you got a post office box, or maybe you’re just cautious. I’m not a stalker, but how would you know?

Anyway, the real thing. I’ve been there, but it didn’t last. Can we all say that? Maybe not. Better to have loved and lost, and so forth. I have. That still doesn’t answer the question. But one thing I’m sure of is, the real thing is where hope comes from. I still have some. Maybe because it, the thing, desire, beauty, is a mystery and can’t be explained.

I hope this gives you a good enough reason for renting a post office box. I took a lot of pleasure in hearing your voice in that voice-mail.

You didn’t tell me your last name. I’ll have to gamble that with just Joanna and the box number this will reach you.

Wilson

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“I don’t want to hear any more about your wife. I didn’t ask about her. She’s your problem. This is separate from all that. And you

haven't really told me about the real thing yet, have you?

"Don't worry, you can tell me how you really feel.

"My name is Joanna Spark. S-P-A-R-K. Just like you'd think. I'm thirty-nine years old.

"Look, here's a phone number you could call if you want . . ."

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With rapidly beating heart he dialed the number; it rang four times and then an answering machine came on the line. "Hello," it said. "This is Joanna. You know what to do."

Wilson began to clear his suddenly constricted throat and realized he didn't know what to do at all, so he hung up.

He looked her up in the phone book and found no listing in that name. But the number was in the same area code as his own; that narrowed it down to a million people or so.

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Wilson:

I thought you were going to call. But maybe it's better this way. As long as you are just some words in a post office box, it's easier. I don't want to write like this to someone, but only to no one.

You would have us meet much too soon. I know your whole fantasy, from meeting at the bar of a fancy restaurant until we go to your house or mine, and then so forth and so on. But possibly one look and your first thought would be, How do I get out of this? You're an adult, you know that could happen, though you won't admit it.

I know you probably have caller ID, and when I leave a voice-mail I take that into account. The answering machine is not on my home phone, the P.O. box is not in my neighborhood, and anyway the name on it is not mine. I will not lie to you, but I will not tell you everything. You won't find me unless I want you to.

Instead let me tell you about where I live, as much of the time as possible, omitting which zip code it is in. I don't mean my house, though I own one, I mean my piece of land. My woods are not old growth, but if you came there you would not say to yourself that the farmer left just yesterday. You can't drive in very far, not that I would. The trees are tall, it smells of leaves and bark, there are so many layers of old leaves underfoot they are like baklava. There are some old stone walls, mostly fallen now, or more interesting, cairns of stones that I

always think must have marked something that mattered, but I'll never know what. A bygone civilization. Or clearing a garden, or burying a pet. Or a memory. Or a stillborn child. I suppose one does not mark the shallow graves of the murdered, unless one's goal is to get caught, certainly a possibility. Not that people seek punishment for itself but there is something in human beings that will take the most perverse route in the dim hope of being forgiven and known.

I will not run out of things to do on this piece of land. Keeping my trails open and making new ones would last the rest of my life, and I have much more to do besides that. I do work, don't misunderstand. But if I tell you too much about that, it might give you clues to where I can be found.

This will interest you: in the summertime, after a night of rain, I know that I will get soaked by wet leaves trailing on me from all sides. So here's what I do. I get out of my car and take off all my clothes, put them in a knapsack and walk in naked except for my shoes and hat. And when I get to my destination I'm wet and chilled through, halfway to hypothermia, but my clothes are dry. Then I lie down in the sun and let it warm me and dry me off, and when I'm dry I put them on. Or maybe I don't. It depends on whether I already have a sunburn. I like to be naked under the sky. Even the thought that someone might be on my land and see me is part of the enjoyment. But nothing like that has ever happened. The land is mostly fenced and all of the boundary is posted with No Trespassing signs.

So take your hand off your penis. I haven't invited you to come see me that way.

At times, though, I can't help thinking there are others here. Once I found a dress. It was not old, had not been lying there for years, but how did it get there? Taken off in passion, or by violence? And why never put back on? I never leave clothes behind me, but what if the wearer of this dress had no choice? There was no evidence of struggle; the dress was in good shape, just a little dirty. I had it cleaned, and I keep it in my closet. You can't throw away a mystery.

The top of the dress was unbuttoned all the way down, more than might have been necessary in order to take it off. That made me think of seduction, or a rendezvous planned and carried out knowing what would happen. I've been naked in my woods but I've never made love there. Nonetheless I have an imagination.

The dress is a bit too small for me. What if it belonged to a twelve-year-old, what if she was abducted, forced to change clothes in this remote spot, hair cut off to make her less recognizable, shoved in the back seat of a car that accelerated the moment the door slammed

and kept accelerating, ripping her away from everything you talked about in your ad: tenderness, acceptance, love? And put rape in their place?

Well, you explain it to me. Go ahead.

Joanna

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Joanna –

I see that I should dispense with “dear” and other forms of politeness.

This letter of yours. I don’t have an explanation for that dress, and why ask me about it, as if I were an expert on the abduction of girl children? Is that what you think of men? And if it is, why write to me?

You planted some thoughts I’d rather not think. I have a daughter, and she’s old enough to make her own mistakes with men. I know what can happen.

It is now 3:11 a.m. Where I am is the den, between the kitchen and the front door, so any minute now I can either eat and drink, or leave home like my wife. She moved in with her “friend.” This would be a good opportunity to get nasty. I suppose I can say anything to you. But the truth is, I’d just as soon have someone else be responsible for my wife’s happiness and unhappiness. She’s gone off to find out if a woman can do a better job. Probably can. I don’t care as long as I don’t have to do it. There: is that blunt enough?

I hope so.

I should be resting now, recovering from a bad case of marriage, if only I could sleep worth a damn. Actually, I sleep a little better now that she’s left. I was dreading how the leaving would go down.

You might like my yard (this is not what I had in mind to write when I got out of bed). It’s not as big as your woods, but it is on a hillside and the trees are full-grown. I was not planning to end up living deep in the American suburbs, but there are some advantages, including old trees and the fact that your neighbors don’t know what you’re up to and leave you alone. I don’t know if my wife is going to try to get the house or not. I’ll survive if she does, but I like it here. I’d like it better if – well, you know all that.

I meant what I said in that ad about the real thing. Okay, it was ironic when I said convincing simulation. I had to have something to hide behind.

When you said in that voice-mail that you couldn’t convincingly simulate anything, the sound of your voice convinced me you meant

exactly what you said. But now I don't know what to believe about you. I'll bet you didn't write that part about being naked by accident. See, this is the truth, take it or leave it. I can't be strategic at 3 a.m.

So, look: it's easy to be discouraging, but what about happiness? Seriously. Now this is not ironic at all.

Wilson

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He consulted a lawyer about filing for divorce on grounds of desertion; the lawyer made it sound somewhat less inviting than spending alternate days at the Registry of Motor Vehicles and the Planning and Zoning Commission. Every day he wondered if he would find a letter from Joanna when he got home from work. Or if he would again find that his wife had removed something valuable from the house in his absence. He knew she had help when the two comfortable chairs in the living room vanished. While she was at it, she could remove anything that looked like a personal letter to him, read it, burn it, send a vicious reply to it in his name, what was stopping her? Wilson thought about changing the locks, but he wasn't ready for that level of hostilities. He did seem to be getting his mail. Finally Joanna's letter came.

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Wilson –

Maybe you think by asking about happiness you'll get me to talk about sex. I'm sure you think sex is happiness.

My first thought was that I am really under no obligation to answer you at all. Do you think you're going to make me tell you my dreams? My losses, my hopes? What right do you have?

But honor demands that I try to answer. Turnabout is fair play. That is always true. What I owe you I will give; and what you owe me, I expect to receive.

If the question were "what is not unhappiness?" I would be able to answer it.

Maybe happiness is when I am lying in a clearing that I made, in the sun, or maybe it is the hours of work making the clearing. When the saw bites through and the tree comes down, either that is happiness, or it is not un-.

I'm sorry if this does not seem like enough. I fear it is not. I will try to make it up later.

Joanna

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Joanna –

If the only happiness you can come up with takes place when you're all alone, why did you answer my ad?

Of course I think sex is happiness, with the right person. Why shouldn't I? I'm not the Dalai Lama. I'm a man, I still want it to work with a woman, I still think love is possible, I still think kindness is possible, I think I'm slowly shriveling up because I never touch anyone, no one ever touches me, I want it again before it's too late. There – that's what you get when you take all the irony away.

How do you like it?

Wilson

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Wilson:

Kindness? I know about kindness. You would say you are a kind man, but don't – I have been with kind men and the secret is they are as deadly as the unkind, worse in a way because their ruthlessness, their violence, is so mannerly and smooth. Kind, sensitive, empathetic men give your soul a Caesarean and out you tumble before you can defend yourself; they rip you open from guzzle to zatch and for good measure take bites of a few plump, salty internal organs and even then, wiping the blood off their chins, they manage to do it in such a pleasant style that no one at the emergency room believes all that damage could have been caused by them. They even take you there and hold your hand sometimes, while the rip they made from base of throat to pubic mound is sewn up once again, and people look at them damply, because aren't they good to take such care, when in fact once they get you home and feed you soup for a few weeks and you recover a bit they will bite the stitches with their teeth and rip the ones that won't bite through out of the half-healed flesh and deliver the inside-you to the frigid outer air again, still half fetus, blood-covered, shrieking, at the mercy of their empathy, to watch you wiggle and plead, and sympathize until it ceases to entertain them. Then it's over, goodbye. That is kind men for you. Maybe some time I will tell you about my love life, my marriages, my departure from that world.

Maybe you are not kind like that, maybe you would not ask of me what kind men demand. I don't know.

I write to you because I don't know you and you have no way of

finding me. Because you are not my husbands, not the children I should have but don't, not my strangler of dreams, my suffocator of truth.

Joanna

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Wilson read this letter three times and decided there was no reason for him to be writing to Joanna, whoever she was. That he would be better off fucking the woman who needed it because her husband couldn't get it up for her. But of course she hadn't gotten up the nerve to leave her number.

His wife, by now, had taken the big TV from the living room, the stereo, the Cuisinart, the toaster-oven, the good dishes and silver, all the CD's she liked, her computer, and most of the money in their joint checking account. Wilson opened an account in his name alone and got a free toaster.

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Dear Wilson,

I'm sorry. I apologize for my last letter. Honestly, I thought I knew better than to play the victim. There is no such thing as innocence, this far along in life.

All that has nothing to do with you and there's no reason you should have to hear it. I'm really sorry.

I hope you won't stop writing to me.

Joanna

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Wilson reflected that after all, all relationships have their rocky passages, but people do get over them. Maybe it was not such a bad thing to have one before the fact. Get it out of the way.

One down, how many to go? But he did not want to think like that. He told himself it was crucial to maintain hope.

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Dear Joanna,

We've all had bad experiences. I'm not sure what yours were, but



I know they happened, and so have mine. What are you going to do? You can't unlive your life, all you can do is keep going and try to do a new thing.

I filed for divorce the other day. And I changed the locks on my house because my wife keeps coming over and carting stuff off. She's already got more than her half. Luckily my daughter is in San Francisco and doesn't have to watch all this happen. God knows what my wife is telling her. But I hope she won't take it too literally.

It's past time for me to stop calling her "my wife," isn't it?

Life goes on,

Wilson

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Joanna (who was known to the rest of the world as Shelby) began watching Wilson in her spare time. She was a real estate agent and spent much of her time driving around in her black Lexus, showing houses or talking to prospective clients or making phone calls. She knew the area Wilson lived in, having sold a home within a mile of his, and if he had known her name and profession he would have been able to find her picture any day on the web page of her Century 21 office. She was a million dollar producer, and the price of houses was only going up. At the end of a day she would drive by and see if his lights were on, or she would hope to catch him arriving, getting out of his car. She knew he drove a dark green Taurus. She knew that she could park at the far corner of his lot, in a spot nearly hidden from his house by the curve of the hill, and walk up along the property line without coming close to his house or his neighbor's. Once she was at the top of his back yard she could look down on the back of his kitchen and living room.

Apparently his story was true. No one came home with him, no one came over except once a Volvo was parked in the driveway and she decided it belonged to his wife. No doubt they were inside having some horrible negotiation. She didn't stay to see the wife depart. Joanna would have wanted to watch her walk out of the house at the definitive moment of "I'm leaving," but the aftermath was of no interest to her.

She made a kind of nest out of fallen leaves among some weedy, unpruned mock orange and spirea that was growing along the back of his property. She was accustomed to sitting on the ground for long periods of time, and in the trunk of her car she kept a pair of sneakers, and a navy blue parka which saved her from getting wet and chilled. From the top of Wilson's lot she could watch him sit at his kitchen

table and eat, then push his plate aside and read the papers. Drink wine and pour himself more. Move to the living room and watch a TV that was out of her field of view. He was on display in his suburban diorama: White American Male, Middle-Aged. He didn't look broken down to her, but she couldn't get close enough to decide if he was attractive. For that she would have to be close enough to smell him. Wilson was not handsome but she didn't like handsome men, overdogs who believed they deserved their unfair advantage.

She was disappointed that his daughter was grown and gone; she would have liked to see if the daughter was able to be in the same room with him. But then it was good that he was alone and unequivocally available, waiting for his life to end or begin. Periodically she imagined walking down the hill and entering from the back yard through the sliding glass doors, as if they already knew each other, joining him on the couch to taste the bland sweet pastry of ordinary life for a few moments. The rest of the time that she watched, she waited for the ordinary to shatter, for something to burst or erupt, as if he might suddenly fall to his knees and roar at the heavens, or tear off his clothes and set them on fire, or pick up something heavy and throw it through the glass doors. Something sufficiently expressive of loss and loneliness and anger, not this stoic facade. She saw that unaided he could not make it happen.

Wilson was not an overdog. She knew she would be able to do with him whatever she would decide to do. She would have walked down the hill and straight into the house if she had thought he would know how to respond to her arrival.

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One night, after watching Wilson leave his kitchen and settle down in the living room, Joanna walked down to her car, turned on her cell phone and called him. She was surprised by her own nervousness as she sat in the dark and listened to his phone ring. Around the next streetlamp she could see a light October rain falling.

"Hello?" he said.

"Hello, is this Wilson?"

"Yes."

"Um – this is Joanna."

"Oh." There was a brief emptiness. "Well. I mean, hello."

"Hello."

"I didn't think you'd be calling me."

"I know."

“Well – how are you?” What he had read in her letters made him feel as though there could be no small talk between them, but without it he didn’t know what to say.

“Listen. I was thinking I might come over and see you tomorrow night. Would that be okay?”

“Would it? Of course it would,” he said, bewildered. “Um, tomorrow, sure. I’ll be home all evening.”

“Good.”

“Let me tell you how to find my house.”

“I know your address, remember?”

“Of course.”

“See you then.”

“Okay.”

“Goodnight,” she said, and hung up without waiting for him to reply. In his kitchen, Wilson looked at the phone as if it could explain her call to him. Then he hung it up. “So,” he said to no one.

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Joanna drove home by way of her land, as if to ask it a question or receive some reassurance.

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In bed, Wilson could not sleep for asking himself what she wanted, why she was boldly coming to his house if not to then do something bolder still. The prospect made him feel profoundly alive for the first time in years. He tried to remind himself that this was not an assignation, that the two of them had never met, that there was no guarantee he would be the slightest bit attracted to her, but the excitement he felt could not be turned away. He slept only a few hours, but got up and went to work as a man refreshed, beginning a new life.

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Joanna, as Shelby, showed two houses, talked about points, closing costs, and earnest money, walked through a prospective client’s home, recommended an inspector, looked up recent transactions, and all day she was elsewhere, outside her body, in the past and the near future. When she spoke to anyone the words seemed to come with no act of will on her part.

At home, she ate a cracker and some cheese and found she had

no appetite. She drank a glass of wine. She couldn't sit down or watch TV or read the paper. She wrote a note to herself. She walked through every room in her house and saw that it was clean and everything was put away in its place. She turned off the lights as she left each room, except for those that were on timers, which would go off later by themselves.

In her bedroom Joanna took off her clothes and examined herself critically in the mirror. She was, in fact, forty-three rather than the thirty-nine she had told Wilson, a futile vanity by which she was embarrassed. She felt her midsection: softening toward what would become sag. But she could still keep it a secret from others, if not from herself. Her breasts getting a little too hammock-shaped, the skin on her elbows chicken-like, her neck visibly straining toward the day, not too far off, when it would be an older woman's neck. But still a woman, she thought. Which should be enough for him.

She dressed in black underwear, wool pants, cashmere sweater, flat shoes. No jewelry except the simplest earrings. She put the note in her pocket. She took care not to make herself look made-up. She opened her mouth at herself in the mirror, widened her eyes, shaped a smile.

She locked the door behind her and got in her car.

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The note read:

I will finally act, I will live fully.

It's a win-win situation, whether I leave or I stay, because it is my decision.

I know how to give and how to take.

Everybody gets what they want.

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Wilson had cleared away the dinner dishes and cleaned up his kitchen, straightened his living room, and was waiting, asking himself what he was going to say first. He heard Joanna's footsteps on his front walk and so he was approaching the door when she rang the bell. Opening it, he received under the yellow porch light a confused impression that she was not as tall as he had imagined, her hair shorter, her eyes on him making him feel she saw everything he had been imagining. "Come in, come in."

"How do you do," she said, holding out her hand. She seemed

solemn to him.

“Fine.” He took her hand for a moment. Now he saw her more clearly and was awed by her otherness, the unknown stepping into his house. “It’s good to see you finally.”

“Yes, and you,” she said with a hint of a smile. She took off her wool coat, he took it from her and hung it up (“You don’t need to do that,” she murmured). When he turned back from putting it in the closet he saw her shape and she felt him look.

“Would you like something to drink?” he said.

“Why not? What do you have?”

“I was having a glass of wine.”

“That would be wonderful.”

He poured it – a glass for her had been waiting on the counter – and handed it to her. “I don’t know what to say,” he said.

“Invite me to sit down.”

“Please.” He led the way into the living room; they sat down on opposite ends of the couch. She put her purse on the floor beside her. A fire, lit for her visit, was burning in the fireplace.

“I guess you must have decided you could trust me,” he said. “You know what they say about meeting for the first time in a neutral location.”

“Oh, I’m protected,” Joanna said. “I have a gun in my purse.” She smiled at him, thinking How stupidly truthful to say that, willing him not to believe her. Wilson thought she was joking, and laughed. He wasn’t badly dressed, she thought. He wasn’t trying to look twenty-two years old. He wasn’t Mr. Potato Head either. She knew he wanted her already. “Should I be scared of you after all?” she said.

“No way. There’s nothing scary about me.”

“Why do I feel nervous, then?”

He smiled in quick relief. “I do too.”

“Maybe we could both stop,” she said.

“Let’s,” he said.

“How?” Joanna said, looking him in the eye.

Wilson looked back at her and felt something pass between them that justified every moment of anticipation and sent him into the center of himself-as-a-man. He smiled more slowly; he took his time looking her over. “What is your real name?” he said.

“Joanna.”

“Oh. That’s tricky. I thought it might be.”

“And yours?”

“Mine? Please. What you see is what you get.”

“Have you been telling me the truth in your letters?” she said.

“You mean about my wife? I could show you the letter that came today from her lawyer, if you want.”

“No, not her. I told you, I don’t care about her. I mean about you.”

He nodded, keeping his eyes on hers. “And you?”

“Of course.”

“But not everything.”

“Of course,” she said. “But you could ask me now.”

Wilson reflected that he did not want to know everything, after what he had read. “Is this my last chance?” he said.

She half-smiled, to herself he thought, more than to him. “I don’t know, we’ll have to see.”

“Okay,” Wilson said, his heart pumping harder. “You know what I want. So tell me, please, because I don’t understand. What about you?”

“I should just sit here and tell you what I want?”

“Turnabout is fair play. You said you’d tell the truth.” His eyes were not leaving hers.

“But not everything.”

“I know. But how about just enough?”

“Isn’t that your job? To find out what I came for? I made my move already. Most women wouldn’t, you know.” She turned to face him, drawing her knees up on the couch, the glass of wine in her left hand.

“Let me guess,” Wilson said, in delight. “You want to see my stamp collection.”

“Do you have one?”

“No.”

“Then I don’t.”

“You wanted a drink.”

“I have wine at home.”

“You want to do a new thing.”

“Yes.”

“Which is?”

She smiled again and shook her head. “That’s cheating.”

“And perhaps I could help it happen.”

“Perhaps.”

“You came to find out.”

“I came to find out.”

“Have you?”

“I’m not sure yet.”

“What can I do to help you make up your mind?” Wilson could

feel the beginnings of an erection. Joanna looked down at her wine glass, then back at him; she opened her mouth slightly but did not speak. He was lost in astonishment and yet it seemed perfectly plain that she was like no woman he had ever met and could do anything she felt like. She stretched her right arm out along the back of the couch, as if getting more comfortable. Her hand was more than halfway to him. He set his wine glass down on the floor and took her hand; he felt the warmth of her, he pulled her toward him recklessly.

“Wait,” she said, and set her wine glass down on the floor, too, next to her purse. Then she leaned toward him and in a moment they were kissing. He was lost in the kiss, in desire that felt ready to explode, in surprised delight. It felt natural, as if they had kissed before but in some other lifetime, so that it was both instantly familiar and yet brand-new. It felt self-evident that he was meant to raise his hand to her breast and caress her through the soft fuzz of her sweater, and she did not move away from his touch. He continued to touch her and kiss her and her kiss felt so without reservation that he unbuttoned her top buttons and slid his fingers in under her silky bra. She pulled back from the kiss and looked down at his hand and said, “Look what you’re doing.”

“Yes,” he said, fitting his hand deeper in.

“It unhooks,” she said.

“Thank God,” he said.

As he was unbuttoning her sweater she laid her hand on his hard penis and squeezed it gently through the material of his pants. As he was taking off her bra she was unbuttoning the top button of his shirt. As he was pulling down her panties she was unbuckling his belt. As he was caressing her breasts she saw that his erection required no further encouragement from her. As he was kneeling in front of her, licking her vagina and her clitoris, she was aware of his bald spot and covered it with her hand because she knew he wouldn’t want her to see it. As she was pushing him down on the couch, on his back, and straddling him, and guiding his penis inside her and coming down on him, he knew he was the luckiest man in the world. As he came she watched him closely and kept moving until she was sure he couldn’t come any more.

She bent over him and kissed him and he put up his arms and pulled her down. She let him hold her for a minute or two before she pushed herself up on her elbows so she could look at him.

“Is this happiness?” she said.

“Yes. God, yes,” he said.

“That’s good.”

“And you?”

She nodded but didn't speak. Then she sat all the way up and pushed her hair back. She turned around and stretched back to get hold of the shoulder strap of her purse with one finger; she pulled it toward her and picked it up.

“What are you doing?” he said, comfortable and affectionate. Perhaps after making love she needed to look at herself in a little square mirror or put on some lipstick, and this habit of hers would become dear to him. He felt as though they had known each other for weeks. Don't remember what I said, she thought.

She put her left hand into the purse, and without taking the gun out she moved the safety to off and then touched the purse to his middle and pulled the trigger. The bullet tore a hole in his abdomen, passed through his large intestine and tore a larger hole as it exited his back and came to rest in the stuffing of the couch. His body arched convulsively and fell back. His mouth and eyes were open in what looked to her like a parody of surprise. He made a sound, not a loud sound, a squeezed sound; the tendons stood out in his neck; he seemed to be trying to lift his head. A loop of gut pushed its way out of the bloody hole in his midsection and draped itself downward toward the floor, covered with blue veins and pulsing, seeming to move on its own volition, as if it were trying to get away. His eyes focused on her for a moment and then rolled up into his head. He squeezed them shut, and though his mouth was gaping open his lips pulled back still more, exposing his gums, as if he were trying to scream. His hands covered his wound as if to hold himself together there. Joanna dropped the gun and the remains of the purse on the floor and took his hands in her own, gripping them hard through the warm slippery blood. She regretted that she had not shot him higher up, in the heart, or somewhere that would have let him die without all this pain, but it had been important to shoot before he knew what she was doing, so that death would come upon him suddenly and unexplained while he was in the midst of his happiness. That was her way of taking care.

“Wilson,” she said. “I'm sorry it hurts so much. Please forgive me. I love you. Can you hear me? I love you.”

Wilson could hear her, but his mind was on other things. She held onto his hands as she felt the life go out of them, and for a while longer after she was sure he had stopped breathing. A smell of blood and shit filled the room.

Joanna let go of Wilson's hands and stood up, unsteadily. She walked into the kitchen, leaving bloody prints with one foot which had stepped into the puddle on the floor, and washed herself at the sink,



then dried herself as best she could with paper towels. She wiped the bloody footprints off the linoleum. She washed her wine glass and placed it in the dish drainer. She picked up her clothes, which were mingled with his, and put them on, not turning her back on Wilson, but dressing in front of him because now they were intimate. The blood had not yet dried by the time she was dressed, but no fresh blood was coming. She put on her coat; then she returned to the living room and looked at his ruined body lying on the couch. It was already hard to believe that his penis, insignificant in death, had recently been so important to him.

The gun and the shredded purse were still lying next to him; she went and retrieved them, asking herself how she could have come so close to leaving them there. In death his face was not as contorted as it had been, but still not entirely comfortable. "I'm sorry it hurt so much," she said to him again. "It's over now, you're all right now." With her gloves on, she pushed the button in the doorknob so it would lock behind her as she left.

Joanna drove straight to her woods on the dark suburban roads. She stopped at the gate to her land and turned off her headlights, got out and unlocked the padlock that held the chain, drove in, stopped again, and closed and locked the gate. As she stood under the night sky working the key, her eyes became used to what little light there was and she was able to drive without headlights up the usual two-rut track to her parking place among the trees. She got out and stood looking up at the sky through the branches. How beautiful the cold forest air was after the smell of his death. She took off her coat and then her clothes, which she knew were spattered with blood, and threw them in the trunk of her car with the gun. She could deal with them later. She put the sneakers on because she knew it would be hard to walk without them, and she had to keep moving or in her nakedness she would become hypothermic and eventually would be found somewhere, dead in her own woods. That was not the point at all, especially now when she was most alive. The light rain cleansed without chilling, the land and forest silently added their blessing.