

S H A D O W P L A Y

a novel by

Lowry Pei

Shadowplay
by Lowry Pei

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This morning I found an extraordinary thing. It is part of a love letter – there is nothing else to call it – addressed to a woman named Jessica. It has no date. Its handwriting, I am all but certain, is Adam’s, or a version of Adam’s in which the awkwardness has been somewhat worn away. I’m trying to think how long it has been since I saw something he wrote by hand. I think this letter could be written by someone Adam’s age, which is twenty-two, but twenty-five would be even more believable. Which makes me picture him sitting in this cabin a few years from now, this place where we used to come, his mother and I, eons ago, before. Where he came when he was a little boy, and I had no idea that the happiness of those years was still the exception and not, as I imagined, the new rule of my life.

I picture Adam, a man in his twenties now, sitting here at the one table writing the letter, stopping between sentences to dream of his Jessica – I want her to be his, at least for a time. The writer of this letter certainly is sufficiently in love to deserve her. Or perhaps they came here, or will come here, together, as a consequence of the letter, living the kind of magical time Carol and I shared here once. Perhaps she brings the letter with her as a talisman, a visible evidence of being loved – but then why would she leave it here? It’s not the sort of thing one forgets to pack. And that’s the least of the things I don’t understand here. This cabin is full of unanswerable questions.

Finding the letter has given me a reckless idea – to write to Adam everything I never told him, everything he needs to know, and leave it here, for him to discover when he and his Jessica arrive, whenever that may be. If that is to happen three, or five, or seven years from now, so be it. To do it at all is dangerous, to say the unsaid, to blurt it all as I have never dared do, for fear of losing the people I cared about most. It's the notion of his being in love that makes me want to; the idea of him on the threshold, now or later, about to start playing his life for keeps. Don't I owe it to him – this gift that parents are afraid to give? Doesn't he need all the truth he can get?

I should write what I can, and leave it in something tightly sealed, so mice won't chew it for nests when no one is here, so rain won't drip on it even if the roof should leak, and put it where he can't miss seeing it. And then at the end I'll ask him to call me, and I'll wait. As I have been doing already for a long time.

Except I can't very well tell him to call me if I don't know where I'm going after I leave.

I could stay here; it's still my cabin, even if I haven't used it much in the last six or seven years. If Adam is using it, or is going to someday, that seems to justify my paying the taxes on it; though in truth, I would do that in any case, just because I couldn't let anyone else own it. It wouldn't sell for much anyway, though I'd get more for it than I paid Arne Lerstein thirty years ago. It was cheap then, and it would still be cheap now. There are plenty of cabins on plenty of ponds in New Hampshire; it isn't like this is the only one, and it's remote, the pond is smallish and the mosquitoes are extra large.

I didn't expect I'd be able to drive in here; the road was never much more than two tracks worn by the wheels of cars in the spruce-needed floor of the woods, even when we came here regularly. It took me a while to find the road at all; branches scratched their nails on the sides of the car, and bushes scraped the bottom of it, but by stopping to cut away brush and saplings with the hand saw from my tool box, I was able to drive all the way in to the cabin. Just like in the old days, I was worried that if I got here and then it started to rain I'd be stuck in here until the ground dried out. I used to get Phil Bouchard to come with his bush hog and clear the road and put a load of gravel on it, but to tell the truth I don't even know if Phil is alive anymore.

Staying here isn't a real possibility anyway. I'd never make it through the winter. If I were going to try, I should have already started patching the cracks, figuring ways to insulate, cutting firewood; and if I were a farmer like Arne, I'd have a vegetable garden and a root cellar.

But it's too late for all that, and there are other things I must do before I leave.

I spent the night worrying that I might be handing Adam an unnecessary burden, and one that he could never be rid of, if I tell him everything. But about five a.m., when the sky began to lighten, I decided that was only an excuse, like all the other rationalizations I've used throughout my life to justify lying by omission. Then I finally went to sleep, and when I woke up I hadn't changed my mind.

So let me begin, before I do. Adam, this is for you. Now that you're older, now that you're ready to hear it all, these are the things I perhaps should have told you from the start, though I think you'll see why I did not. I'll try to keep it short, if I can, and stick to the important parts, and although some of this might sound like advice, it won't be. You'll see that I am the last person who should give it, and most advice is futile anyhow. Your life is yours; I want to tell you, at last, what mine has actually been. Surely I owe you a confirmation of what I imagine you must always have unknowingly known.

Some of what I have to tell you may not seem to make sense, and it isn't a tale for children with an easy moral. But it is the life I have actually lived – the secret life, the truth. Anomalous beads on the string of the ordinary.

That means I have to start, and it isn't easy.

I have to start right away before I have time to imagine what you'll think of me.

Once I had a brother.

You never knew him, of course. He wasn't the average brother, who would have played ball and learned to drive and gone on dates and later on would have gotten his master's degree in whatever. He was what they called, when I was young, an imbecile. Or a moron. One of those. I don't say this to be deliberately brutal; there used to be – it's hard to believe now – an official ranking of those terms, in medical parlance. I can't remember if a moron was smarter than an imbecile, or the other way around. But my brother, anyway, wasn't like other people. He was retarded, feeble-minded. He never learned to read or write – never could have, even if he'd been taught the way you might teach such a person today. And no one did try to teach him for long, though someone, some time, managed to get him to learn how to print his name: Aaron. That was the one word he knew on paper. It wasn't too easy to read, when he printed it, but you could.

Aaron was older than me by six years – which tells you, I guess, how long it took my parents to get their courage up to try again after they had him. I'm surprised now that they ever had another child, when I imagine how hard it must have been for them to have Aaron.

I wish I knew how much you remember, Adam, of what I told you about my father. I don't want to bore you. But it's been a long time since you asked me what your grandfather was like; it's been a long time since we had the kind of conversation where you might ask such a thing. I remember you used to ask me how come we got this name,

Kaiulani, when we weren't Hawaiians. Even my father wasn't, really – his parents came to Idaho when he was a little kid. His mother was Chinese, and there was Portuguese and Polynesian and English in there somewhere too. By the time I was born he lived in Springfield, Illinois, which you must remember, from visits to your grandmother much later on. The home of Abe Lincoln. My father looked different from other people's fathers, but people didn't say much about that. There was only one of him in Springfield – not enough to constitute a threat to anybody, but I'm sure he knew he was an outsider. I looked a little different from the average kid, myself, in grade school, and they teased me because they thought my face was too flat; but they teased Richie Flynn too, because he was fat and shy. It's impossible to get through your childhood without being teased about something.

My mother wasn't always the white-haired old woman you knew, who used to offer you treats and then scold you for taking too many. I know you didn't like her; I didn't like her much either, by the time you were born. But she was different when I was a child. She was a redhead – pretty, I think. One never knows if one's own mother is pretty or not. I wonder how you think of yours, what image of her you carry inside. I remember that as a kid I saw some old pictures of my mother, taken around the time she and my father got married, where I hardly recognized the young woman on his arm, whose calves were round like doves. None of those pictures exist anymore. She got skinny after Aaron was born, and that is how I remember her.

When you were born, Adam – one of the unforgettable days of my life – the only thing she wanted to know was if you were normal or not. I told her you were better than normal, and she made a scornful or impatient sort of noise – we were on the phone, but I could see her lips tighten – and said, "I want to know if he's like Aaron. You can tell immediately." That name had not been mentioned in years.

"He's not like Aaron," I said, with some difficulty.

"That's all that matters," she replied. "I'm sure you have to get back to Carol. I'll say goodbye."

It isn't all that matters to me, I wanted to say, but her tone didn't allow me to say anything but "goodbye" in return. If I had gone on talking any longer, I would have been remiss in my duty to my wife. That was the message. Whenever I talked with my mother, some opportunity to fall short of my duties was usually ready to hand.

So she must have known from the first moment that Aaron wasn't right. I don't know how she dealt with that knowledge, the first week, or month, or year – a great deal must have happened that I don't

know about. I remember being surprised to hear that Aaron lived with my grandmother for a couple of years, before I was born and a while after; in my memory he was always there. Hanging over me, you might say, the way a thundercloud hangs, or a cliff, or something that might fall.

In childhood Aaron was more like an old man. It wasn't just his mind that came out different; his bones seemed too big for his skin, his teeth too big for his mouth, his nose too much nose for a child to have. He looked chronically uncomfortable in his own body, he stumbled into the furniture and dropped half the things he tried to pick up; he grimaced a lot, muttered to himself, pouted darkly and then burst out swearing at someone or something: "You goddamn goddamn!" My mother would reprimand him, every time. When he was more under control he'd mutter "You old D.O.D.," which I guess was his version of "S.O.B." His speech wasn't easy to understand, even for us; it was slurred and nasal, the inflection didn't necessarily go with the words, and sometimes if you made out what he said, it still didn't make any sense. He would be telling you something about his endless day that was always the same, and you'd be following it – uh-huh, Aaron, uh-huh, yeah, go on – and then suddenly he'd be talking about something that never happened and never could. How the mayor called him up and said get the police and the fire truck and go downtown and...then you stopped listening. He had no conception of time; it was no use asking him when anything happened, and if you said Christmas was coming in a week it was no more interesting to him than if you said it would come in a year. I always thought he resented us all for being normal, for having it so much easier than he did, for being able to read, to play with something without breaking it, to get through the day without a hundred frustrations and failures, without being reprimanded, without making other people look away. No one ever liked eating with Aaron; no one could ever enjoy a meal who had to look up and see him chew. The smell of him, which I have never been able to bear in later life except when you were a baby, was the smell of half-dried saliva.

I have a feeling that he resented me the most, because, after all, I started off as an infant: probably the only time in his life he was more capable than someone else. And then I had the nerve to grow up, right under his nose, and be better than he was at everything. To say that I was the favored child doesn't even come close; I was the compensation, the consolation, the replacement for him, and by the time I can remember him clearly, when I was five, he must have known exactly

how it was and always would be – because in a way that I can't explain, he was retarded, but he wasn't dumb.

Nothing I say explains Aaron – possibly nothing even gives you the right idea. He wasn't a regular person trapped in a peculiar situation, like someone with cerebral palsy. If you knew Aaron, you realized you couldn't imagine being him, no matter how hard you tried.

Of course, I didn't want to try; I fell a long way short of compassion where Aaron was concerned. What I mostly wanted was for him to go away. At least I had the excuse of being a child and a younger brother. My parents had nothing to shelter them from the judgments they must have passed on themselves when they couldn't bear him, but nobody could have lived with Aaron without wishing once in a while that he would just disappear. I know it ate at them; I knew it even then, and now that I've been a parent myself I can make a better guess at the hell that it must have been to live with love and hate in one heart. Maybe "hate" is too strong a word. I hated him at times; I don't know what they did, but I can remember how hard it was for my father to look at him sometimes, and the way my mother clamped down on her impatience. She had to clamp down her whole self, some days. There's no knowing what they might have been without him. They might even have been happily married – but they weren't. That is the fact. And I would like to deal in facts, few as those are, whenever I can.

As I write this, Adam, I'm sitting on the screen porch, and whenever I stop the pond is always there, waiting for me to give it my attention. I was going to say it never changes, but it does, of course. I can watch puffs of wind travel across its surface, watch the sky change in it. Somehow, no matter how bright the sky that is reflected in them, its waters remain dark beneath the brightness, both dark and bright at once, no color I can name. Painters must spend years learning how to paint something like that.

I know there's a point of land across from us, but the darkness of its trees melts into the trees on the shore behind it, and sitting here you'd never know that behind that point is another arm of the pond, ending in a marsh choked with water lilies and reeds. The rocks that I know are halfway out to the point cannot be seen, unless perhaps certain ripples I notice are caused by their presence just breaking the surface. I remember you standing on those rocks with nothing visibly holding you up, waving your arms to me on shore and yelling, "It's a miracle!"

"Be careful!" I yelled back. I knew how slippery they were, I was afraid you'd slide off and hit your head.

When I came here, I was thinking the shore might have gotten built up, but if anything it's less populated than it was years ago. Maybe it's too small and ordinary to qualify as a vacation spot nowadays. Only once since I have been here have I seen another person, a fisherman in an old metal boat, chugging steadily along in a northerly direction. But I never saw him come back. The herons and loons have all the fishing to themselves.

Bug sounds come in waves, night and day; cicadas send out their loud rasping in all directions, and when the sun is hot at midday I

can smell the tall weeds baking in it, along with the dark, greenish scent of the pond's margin. Since I first came here years ago those things have never changed, which makes me feel, sometimes, as though life were still able to begin.

Perhaps we could have endured living with him despite everything, if Aaron hadn't started to grow. At the age of fourteen, when I was eight, he began to become the size his bones had always predicted he would. And worse, he entered puberty. He didn't just grow taller and wider, he sprouted hair. Black hairs grew from the backs of his hands and along his shins and forearms. Hair under his arms. Hair on his face. Pubic hair. His penis grew obscenely and so did his interest in it. If he had been offensive before – say, at mealtimes – that was nothing to how revolting he became. I'm sorry to burden you with this disgusting stuff, but it's important. Only with the greatest difficulty could my parents teach Aaron not to take out his penis whenever and wherever he pleased and begin playing with it. It seemed to become hard the instant his finger touched it. Or before. He tried to feel up a girl walking home from school and only the fact that she was the daughter of someone who knew my parents kept Aaron from being locked up. After that, the word got around and girls crossed the street when they passed our house. Sometimes just seeing a girl out the window would give him an erection and if a chair or sofa was handy he would press himself against it and groan. I swore to myself that I would never get the way he was; I tried to stay out of his way at all times, because his moods were unpredictable and when they got dark enough he would try to hit me. I was quicker than he was, which probably saved me from getting really hurt, because he didn't know enough to hold back his strength.

He still felt he had to obey our parents, but when he was a teenager they had to yell at him until he flinched. Sometimes I thought I saw him start to raise his hand to strike, but he stopped himself; he must have known that without them he'd have nothing. He was

subject to terrible surges of anger for close to a year; he destroyed most of his favorite possessions – his record player, his toy piano, the Brownie box camera that my father gave him when it broke. As a child he would carry it around with him, and sometimes he'd point it at us and say "Smile." At fourteen he took it down in the basement and smashed it with a hammer. His bed was a tangled heap that smelled of semen and him. I was almost as afraid of him as people outside the family were. Hardly anyone would set foot in our house, no babysitter would watch Aaron, my parents never went out because they couldn't leave him and taking him anywhere ruined the trip. I could go to school, and my father could go to work, but my mother had to stay home with Aaron, and no one dared ask how her days were. You could see in her eyes that the two of them were locked in a struggle, and it wasn't a civilized one.

Aaron had the advantage because he cared a lot less about civilized behavior than the rest of us; yet my mother prevailed. Aaron's rage retreated into sullen stubbornness and muttering; he stopped masturbating in front of us; he could even, after a couple of years, be allowed out of the house alone, told not to leave the yard. That was when we got the fence put in – not that he couldn't climb over it, or open the gate, but it seemed to make him understand.

He spent a great deal of time in the yard after that. I think he was as glad to get away from my mother as she was to get him out of the house. Luckily the back yard was deep, and he could go away and swear to himself back there without our having to hear. At times, there was even an eerie semblance of normal life; my father taught him how to mow the lawn, and when the mood struck he would push the mower back and forth for hours, continuing long after the grass was mown, then forget about it for weeks. My father built a tree house, which he said was for me, but he made it strong enough for Aaron to clamber up into, and it turned out to be Aaron's hideout from the world. When it became clear that he would sit out there even in the rain, my father made a shingled roof. My parents told each other they were glad it made Aaron happy; that was instead of the things we didn't want to say.

When Aaron was eighteen, and I was twelve, he was a foot taller than me. He was the biggest person in the family, bigger than my father, with black scowling eyebrows and imperfectly shaved whiskers and heavy shoes that scuffed against the floor and kicked the doorjambs. He seemed too big for the narrow upstairs hallway in our old house; his shoulder rubbed against the wallpaper and wore a shiny

streak along the wall between his room and the bathroom door. His room was closest to the bathroom; then my parents, then me. There was a set of French doors connecting my room and theirs; there were curtains over the glass, but I never felt that either they or I had real privacy. I could hear them talking to each other in the night sometimes, but if they kept their voices down I couldn't make out the words. They probably didn't like it any better than I did. Aaron had the biggest bedroom all to himself; I had shared it with him once, but that had been years before. It was the best we all could do, because no one wanted to sleep in a room next to Aaron.

I think maybe the bane of Aaron's life was that he never had enough to do. He got another record player and this time he didn't break it; he listened to 45's until they were so scratched you could hardly make out the words; he kept the radio on all day, even when he was playing records. We had a TV, but he never watched anything for more than a few minutes. He talked to himself a lot in a nasal growl, living some fantasy life where he was a radio announcer or a train conductor or working in a store, telling people where to find things. Usually nails and screws. Things he knew the names of. From time to time he would go out in the yard and dig pointless holes and get yelled at by my mother, and then if his feelings were hurt enough, he'd run away. Sooner or later he was bound to run away because he was always being told not to do something and the frustration would get to be too much for him. He never went far. Everyone in the neighborhood knew him and left him alone; most people were unwilling to get too close to him, because he was big and had a perpetual scowl on his face. He'd go to the local elementary school and watch the kids play if they were at recess, but he'd stay outside the fence; he knew there were things that would get him in worse trouble than just running off. The teachers would tell him he should go home. But he wouldn't; he'd go to a place down the street called the Dari-Ette, where older kids hung out and drank ice-cream sodas, and where there was a pinball machine. Aaron couldn't get enough of that machine. He'd stick a nickel in it (they were only a nickel then, if you can believe it) and shoot a ball up, and then he'd put his hands on the flipper buttons and start flipping as fast as he could, in a frantic, palsied, St. Vitus dance sort of way. He never stopped flipping as long as the ball was still in play. It didn't matter if the ball was anywhere near the flippers or not, he just kept hitting them as fast as he could, snuffling with

concentration, making the flippers go ratta-ratta-ratta-ratta, on and on till it would drive you crazy. As often as not it worked, the flippers caught the ball and sent it back up, lights flashed, bells rang, the score mounted by thousands. Then finally that ball would sneak through. "Damn," he'd say mournfully; then he'd shoot the next ball up and the flippers would start again. Sometimes he'd hit them so hard the machine would tilt and stop working, and he'd mutter "You old D.O.D.," and the owner would say from behind the counter, "You're gonna have to quit playing that thing if you don't stop banging on it like that." No one ever paid any attention to him, including Aaron. By then I'd have been sent to find him. "Gimme nicka," he'd say, and I'd have to decide if I should or not. Meanwhile high-school kids would be watching out of the corner of their eye, waiting for him to leave, trying to pretend he didn't exist because he was too big to push around.

"Gimme nicka."

"Mom says it's time to go home."

"Gimme nicka."

"If I give you a nickel for one more game, will you go home with me?"

"Uh-huh." He would nod in a parody of obedience. I knew he'd balk when the time came, but I'd give him the nickel anyway, and stand there with my back turned and look at car magazines and try to pretend I didn't exist in front of those big kids, either, or if I did, I wasn't Aaron's brother.

I guess what no one ever reckoned with was that some other kids might not be afraid of Aaron. Or at least not afraid enough to leave him alone. When he was little, normal kids wouldn't play with him because he couldn't understand their games, or was too clumsy to master them, and for years he was someone every kid knew about but hardly ever saw. Or if they saw him, he was an appendage of my parents, which made him as good as invisible – until he was a teenager, hanging out in the yard. Every once in a while, there would be some other kids out back, saying something to Aaron over the back fence, and when one of my parents went outside to see what was going on, they'd leave. Everyone knew they were teasing him. Aaron wouldn't tell us what they said. "What were they bothering you about?" my mother would ask, sharply, and he'd just shake his head and look at the ground.

"Show me what's in your hands." But when his fingers uncurled, there would be nothing.

We didn't know it, but he became the subject of dares for teenage boys. Maybe they saw him masturbating. I'll never know. But somehow they got the idea that they could torment him with sex. They'd dare each other to get his attention and show him pictures of naked women they ripped out of magazines, to see if they could make him pull down his pants and beat off in front of them – and of course they could. A long time afterwards, some guy, who had once been one of those boys, confessed to my mother. He said that once, in the ultimate dare, they brought somebody's girlfriend along, to see how she'd react when he took out his penis. He said she screamed and when Aaron heard it he started to climb over the fence, with his pants down around his ankles, and they all grabbed him and pushed him back so he fell down, and then ran for it. I would have been afraid to tell my mother that story, if I'd been him. I think he was afraid. She said he kept his hands in his pockets to stop them from shaking. He must have had a lot of guilt, all that time, to make him finally come and tell it.

We didn't know what had happened, that afternoon when the kids came to tease him for what turned out to be the last time. What I remember is that it was springtime, dusk, a beautiful evening, we had a lilac in our yard that was in bloom and I could smell it as soon as I stepped outside. I stood under the tree house and told him to come in, it was time for dinner, and Aaron didn't reply.

"Aaron! Are you up there?"

I could hear him shifting around, his feet scraping against the boards, but he said nothing.

"Come on, it's time to eat."

"Go way," he growled in a teary-angry voice. I wasn't about to climb up there after him.

"Mom's gonna get mad if you don't come in."

"G'way."

"Look, Aaron, it's getting dark pretty soon, come on."

"Unh-uh."

My mother, in the middle of draining something, shook her head in a cloud of steam. "I can't go out there and argue with him now," she said. "Dinner's almost ready, your father will be here any minute."

My father's days were long and regular; he left the house at six-thirty in the morning and walked back in the door at six-thirty at night, and we ate as soon as he came in. He was a quiet and meticulous man. He made furniture of the kind that showed you were a solid citizen,

massive mahogany sideboards and china cabinets with doors that locked, ponderously carved, built to last generations. I believed he could build anything that was made of wood. I think now that though he was only forty-eight years old, life had exhausted him. Aaron had. And being married to the ferocity of my mother's disappointment. But when I was twelve I desperately wanted to be as in control of myself as he was, and as good at something. I was always hoping he'd take me to his shop with him when he had a job to finish up on a Saturday, but whenever we went there together I was nervous that I'd do the wrong thing and fail to measure up. I loved the smell of his shop, the linseed oil, the pungent sawdust, the smell of ozone crackling off the electric motor that ran the table saw; I loved the silent, self-contained way he worked, the way he never wasted words there, out of respect for the job; I loved the depth of his arcane knowledge and the easy courage with which he ran the power tools that could cut your hand right off. In the shop, there was a right way to do everything, and he seemed always to have known it; I watched every move he made, waiting for myself to grow up into that magic knowledge and be a man.

My father walked in the back door at six-thirty-one and my mother said, "Aaron's out in the tree house and won't come in."

He made an unsurprised grunt and his eyebrows raised slightly. "How you doin', Nicky?" he said to me, laying his hand on my head and wiggling my scalp. I crossed my eyes and pretended to be made dizzy by this treatment. "Okay," I said.

He kissed my mother, who was spooning peas onto plates, on the cheek, and she pursed her lips to signify a response.

"Better go get him in," my father said, and went back out the door.

A minute or two passed; my mother served the food and put the plates on the table. I was hungry. No doubt everyone was, including Aaron, who ate more than anyone. With an annoyed look at the clock, my mother snatched open the back door and stuck her head out. "Lou!" she called (my father's name was Louis). "Tell him it's on the table!"

There was no response. Then I could hear my father yelling at Aaron, something he hardly ever did. "Don't you swear at me, do you understand me? Not now, not ever!" My father did not get angry often, but when he did you had the feeling that there was plenty more where that came from.

"Get down out of there NOW!" There was a growl in his voice that scared me, and I was sure Aaron would never stand up to it.

Silence. My mother, leaning out the screen door, watched the back yard, and I watched her watching it. The back of her neck was rigid and tense. Nothing happened, and then there was a kind of thump, and she said "Lou!" and darted out, letting the screen door slam behind her. I followed her in time to see my father picking himself up from the ground under the tree and Aaron stooping over him, still holding on to the ladder, bellowing "Daddy, Daddy" in a way that made me want to scream for him to shut up. My father straightened up and with complete deliberation slapped Aaron in the face, which shocked my gut and made my own head spin; I had never imagined he would do such a thing. Aaron began to blubber; my father seized his arm in a grip whose strength I knew, and led him toward the house.

"What happened?" my mother said, meeting him halfway across the yard. He didn't answer; he seemed too angry to talk. "What happened?"

"He pushed me off the ladder."

"Tryna go down!" Aaron bawled, his face red and full of tears. "Didn wanna push you!"

My father's lips were set tight. He marched Aaron past us, up the back porch steps, into the house, my mother and I following them into the kitchen. But they didn't stop there; he kept going, with Aaron crying and stumbling in his grasp, up the stairs, and we heard the door of Aaron's room close.

My father went into the bathroom and I could hear water running in the pipes. My mother and I looked at each other guiltily. If we had gotten Aaron in, this never would have happened.

After a few minutes my father descended. We were sitting at the kitchen table waiting for him to come before we began; my mother leaned over and patted the seat of his chair.

"Sit down and eat, some dinner will help."

He put his napkin on his lap and took a deep breath. "I won't have him swearing at me," he said.

"I don't blame you," my mother said.

"It was deliberate," he said. "He put his foot on my shoulder and shoved me off." His face was grim. None of us wanted to look at each other.

"I tried to get him to come inside, but he wouldn't," I said, to break the silence.

My father looked at me and seemed to soften a little. "It's not your fault, Nicky," he said. But what seemed to hang in the air was whose fault it was. No one's. It had been said too often that it wasn't

Aaron's fault he was the way he was, and it wasn't my parents' fault, and it certainly wasn't mine – so whose, then? And if no one would take responsibility, was it God's fault, or did even He fold his arms and look the other way? And if He did...you see, that was the world we lived in. So no one said anything, because there was nothing to say.

After dinner, when my father was sitting in the living room reading the paper, my mother let Aaron come downstairs and eat. I didn't actually see him, because I was doing my homework, but I heard my mother talking to him in a low voice and some sullen muttering from Aaron. He went back upstairs, talking to himself, after he finished eating, and my mother washed the last dish and came into the living room and began reading the paper too. There was near-silence except for the occasional vibration of Aaron's voice upstairs, saying indistinguishable words. From time to time my father would clear his throat as he read, and when he did, I tried to gauge whether he had calmed down yet.

At nine-thirty my mother went upstairs to make Aaron brush his teeth and get ready for bed.

"Time for you to go pretty soon, too," my father said to me as I went to turn on the TV.

"Can't I just watch for a while?"

He shrugged. "Harder to stop halfway through," he said, but since he didn't say no, I left it on. I don't know what I was watching; the name of the show wouldn't mean much to you, anyway. And I don't know if my father was watching the TV with me, or not. All I'm sure of is that we sat there for about fifteen minutes and didn't talk, and then I went up to bed. I'm almost certain that before I went we both said goodnight.

My mother's voice woke me up in the middle of the night, cutting through the dark: "Aaron!" It sounded like a command. I was confused; I turned over in my bed. No lights were on. Then I heard Aaron make a kind of grunting noise and my mother screamed his name, the hair stood up on my neck and I started to sit up. Before my feet hit the floor I heard my father say "God damn it, God damn it," and there was a slam as a heavy body hit the French doors, and then another. Something wooden creaked as if it almost broke. My mother was screaming their names through all of this. "Get out of here," my father said in a terrible voice. My heart was racing and I stood up, I knew the French doors were locked but I tried to open them anyway. I could feel some kind of silent straining going on inside me

involuntarily. There was a sound of hissing breath, another loud creak, someone fell against the door rattling the doorknob in my hand, and there was a flat crack! sound without resonance, a sound I had never heard, and yet I knew what it was. I let go of the doorknob and ran out of my room and through the hall, into the open door of my parents' room, into my mother's scream which was no longer a name or a word but only a constantly widening O. In the light of a streetlamp coming in the window I could see that the bed was empty, and in the shadow between the bed and the French doors, on the floor, some kind of struggle was going on. My mother in her white nightgown was hitting someone hunched there, either Aaron or my father, and as I realized it must be Aaron because she would never hit my father that way, he tried to push her away and awkwardly started to get to his feet. He had something in his hand that I had to have. My father was lying on the floor in the dark. My mother was panting, bent over, alternately hitting and pulling at Aaron – pulling him off my father, I suppose, but for a moment she seemed to be helping him to his feet, and I inexplicably had time to wonder if she was in league with him somehow. She didn't know I was behind her. I had to take away what Aaron had; I went straight for it, past her, and she grabbed at me, trying to pull me back, screaming "No," but I got my hand on it, and Aaron was trying to keep it, bellowing "No" too, she was dragging at my pajama top from behind, choking me, and something complicated happened with our fingers, Aaron's and mine, and my finger found the trigger and pulled. That same sound again. And Aaron lost his grip. I was holding the gun.

There was a revolting wet sound. I realized that my mother was no longer screaming. Then my stomach came up in one long heave that brought me to my knees, and even while I was throwing up my mother was dragging me out of the room.

We crouched on the floor of the hallway outside their room while my stomach stopped convulsing; my mother held onto me as if I might try to escape.

"Where is it?" she said, when she thought I could talk.

"What?"

"The gun."

"I don't know." I wasn't holding it anymore. It wasn't on the floor with us.

She stood up, but I couldn't. I knelt there, doubled over, with my forehead on the floor, and heard her go in their room.

The light went on, then off.

"Oh God," she said. "Oh God." That was the deepest prayer I ever heard.

The light went back on, and it stayed on for what seemed like a long time before she switched it off again. I heard her take a few steps, but most of the time she was stock still.

She came out of their room and shut the door. "Don't look," she said. Then she picked up the telephone that was in a niche in the hall, and dialed once, and said, "I need an ambulance right away."

When the police came she gave them the gun. It was a big old revolver that I had never seen in my life. She told them what happened: Aaron came in the middle of the night and attacked my father while they were sleeping, my father pulled the gun out of the drawer of the night stand, and Aaron took it away and shot my father. Then he turned it on her, and while she and Aaron were struggling over it, the gun went off again. There was blood on the hem of her nightgown that showed below her robe. She told them I was in the next room the whole time. The policemen, white-faced, never questioned a word she said. They knew about Aaron. I could see they felt terribly sorry for us because her husband, and my father, was dead.

Aaron died in the ambulance on the way to the hospital, while the police were talking with my mother. The doctor there called and told her the news, and I could see her throat constrict. She held out the phone to one of the police.

"Ma'am?" he said.

It took a moment for her to get out words. "They want to speak to you."

My mother sat down heavily – we were in the kitchen – and pulled her chair next to me and took my hand. "Nicky," she said, "There's no one but you and me."

I nodded and felt my face crumple up, and I started to cry. I was embarrassed to be crying in front of the policemen, and I cried all the harder because the tears had not come when they told us my father was dead, but only now, when Aaron was gone too. Aaron who should have died, who murdered my father, whose life ruined my parents' lives, Aaron whom I had killed.

Days later, after the funerals, and after the relatives left, I asked my mother what my father was doing owning that gun.

"He just had it," she said tiredly. "He got it from his father. People in Idaho have guns."

"But why was it loaded?" I said, even though I knew I shouldn't.

She allowed her gaze to rest on me for a long time. I squirmed under it. But I had to understand, if there was anything that could be understood. Finally she said, "Nicky, do you think I know the answer?"

"I'm sorry," I said.

She drank some coffee and stared blankly out the window of the kitchen at the back yard. "We have to get somebody to come and tear that thing down," she said. I knew she meant the tree house. Half of me wanted to object that we couldn't touch it because my father built it, and half of me wanted it gone.

"If you hadn't shot him, Nicky," she said, "I would have had to do it myself."

Surely you know that I'm afraid to tell you all this, Adam. You must know that. All my life I've been afraid to tell anyone. Even your mother didn't know. No one ever knew it but my mother and me.

It's being here that makes the telling possible. And finding that love letter which may be yours, and other things since I found the letter, which I'll get to, but before I do, I have to tell you some more facts about me.

I must not allow myself to dwell too much on what you will think or feel when you read this, or it will never be written. I keep telling myself this: think as little as possible. Just go on telling what has to be told. And yet I know it must be difficult to find out that this is how your grandfather really died, that you had an uncle and he was Aaron, that your own father shot him. That this is your family. But all this stops with me, the sins of the father are not visited upon you, your life is a new beginning. I don't wish these things, I know them. I believe you know them too. That's another reason why I can tell you now. But that, good as it is, is not the first reason, which is (and I should know it) that the truth always beats a lie.

Meanwhile a jay is screeching in the woods, wind is blowing through the tops of the spruce trees. I can see them nodding. And just now a crow is playing his game of crow, trying to land on the very tiptop of a spruce, the single wiggly growing tip of the whole tree that's waving in the breeze and too flexible to support his weight, flapping his wings as he tries to touch down there anyway, and then when he does succeed for a moment, cawing out to the other crows as clearly as if I knew their language, "Look! See! I did it!"

After you do such a thing, no matter how secret it is, there is no protection for you and it feels as though anything can happen. Years can go by in an outwardly unremarkable way, and still every day bristles with danger because you know that nothing is really unthinkable, nothing is impossible.

I went back to school and everyone was very nice to me, for quite some time, because I was the unfortunate kid whose crazy brother killed his dad. I became a teenager, I lived through the whole soap opera of adolescence, I went to college, I had friends and girlfriends, but my life was not about those things even when I thought it was. My life was about a secret. No one had a clue that there was anything about me that made me different from everyone else and set me apart. I became so good at keeping the secret that I almost kept it from myself, for months at a time, and then without wanting to, I would remember what I had done. It would seem for a moment like an outlandish story that had happened to someone else, and then it would come back to me that this was my only real life: I murdered my brother. It could come at any moment – I might be lying on a bed with my girlfriend, caressing her, wanting her and knowing she wanted me, and even then it could come and I would be back in my parents' bedroom with the smell of blood, and my fingers and Aaron's tangled together around the gun and I knew that even though he was so much bigger and stronger than me, he didn't have a prayer. I was a hundred times smarter, I was the one my parents loved and I had always gotten my way; ever since I was born he had submitted to me, come second to me, and besides I wanted him gone. I knew he had always wanted me to love him, to forgive him for being himself, but it was hopeless because my heart was closed to him, and that, too, was why at this

moment his strength wouldn't matter, he would give in to me because he always had, and I would kill him.

My girlfriend would be watching me with hurt eyes when my vision cleared, and she would say, "What's the matter, Nick?" But I would say nothing. Only go back to touching her and leave Aaron dead on the floor yet again.

The next bead on the secret string comes when I was in my twenties. A few years older than you are today.

I was sitting in a coach seat on the Southwest Limited, a train that used to run from Los Angeles to Chicago. It was 2:30 in the morning, and the train was standing in the station in a medium-sized town in the middle of Kansas. I looked down and saw this: the woman I had been talking with for several hours, earlier, stepped out onto the platform, took a few steps, and then began to glow through her clothing as if she was about to burst into flames.

The sight constricted my breath, and I watched in a state of terrible suspense, waiting for something worse that I was certain must be about to come. It crossed my mind that she was radioactive and would kill us all, that everyone on the platform and the train was already under death sentence from being in her presence.

Her old parents (I was sure it was they who were only a few steps away) stopped in their tracks and watched this happen; the few other people on the platform stopped to look as well. So I thought at first. But then, even though I couldn't move my eyes from her, I began to realize that the others on the platform were frozen in place. I realized I could hear no one in the coach sighing or shifting in their seat, no one stifling a yawn or a groan in the effort to find some comfortable way to sleep. No one around me was even breathing. Time had stopped. Only I continued to breathe, shallowly and rapidly, and I deliberately sat up straighter, to prove to myself that I was awake and alive in this moment outside time.

She was too; or it was – whatever she had become. The glowing pulsated, its surface fluttered red and orange-white like a bank of coals in the grate of a wood stove. I could no longer see that she had

clothing, which was far from an erotic moment; it was terrifying. I thought that what appeared to be her body was not actually something present on the station platform but a hole in this world, an opening into some burning space that I could not imagine. For some reason that opening pretended to be the outline of a body, it maintained the semblance of a human being and either that made it bearable to see or it was still more disturbing that an alien presence took the trouble to maintain this simulacrum, this golem, as if it knew I was watching. The scene took place in silence. What if someone were to fall through the opening, what if the outline should seize one of the frozen children next to it on the platform and fling her through the gap...but I didn't want to think about that too much, I was the only one awake and alive and what if the figure turned its attention to me? What if it had come to get someone and decided I was the one to get? I told myself not to think this. It was too much like an invitation. Waves of glare and shadow rippled on the walls of the train station and the faces of the bystanders and on my own hand gripping the metal sill of the train window. I could feel its attention come to me exactly as I had dreaded, and some part of me just below the navel was wrenched with queasy violence, as if I were in a plane that suddenly dropped hundreds of feet in the empty air. My mouth opened involuntarily, and I felt hurled somewhere even as my body sat on the Southwest Limited – and then ruthlessly flung again, like a child's paddle-ball on a rubber band that would surely snap, but it did not and the rubber band was my gut that seemed to be yanked over the horizon and then indifferently let go. Stop it, I howled inwardly, what are you, I can't do this – but it would not stop, and again and again that pull on my belly came before I could even breathe.

Finally I thought the glare of the outline was lessening, I snatched at hope that it would soon flicker out, but the glowing flew into my eyes before I could duck and blinded me temporarily with a ferocious burning behind my eyeballs. And when I could see again, the people on the platform were again in motion, and the woman I had spoken with, surrounded by her four children, stepped forward and gave her parents a hug.

How did they dare to embrace her?

But I could see that no one knew. She herself did not know. No one had been aware of what had happened but me.

All through the middle of the day, I had been sitting in the club car talking with the woman I watched getting off the train. Her name was Jean; I never did find out her last name. The Southwest Limited was passing through northeastern New Mexico – the high plateau, the land of violet earth dotted with yellow chamisa and purple-gray sage. The earth was open to the sky, the horizon a hundred miles away.

I knew as I sat in the club car that the air outside would smell of mountains and sage, and along the railroad tracks, creosote. Inside the train it smelled of air conditioning, hot metal, upholstery, and deodorizer from the bathroom. The rhythm of the rail joints beneath the wheels had been steady for hours. It's a long way between stops in that part of the world.

Jean was traveling with four children, three girls and a boy. The eldest was ten or eleven; she was the deputy mom, the second in command. Her name was Ilana and she had heavy straight hair flat against her head and a calm, serious face, the face of a girl who has attained the full maturity of girlhood. Do you know that specific moment? It doesn't happen to everyone. Maybe you (and Jessica?) will have a daughter, and you'll see it in her. It comes when a girl is complete and whole, all of a piece and perfectly at one with the fulfillment of her girl self, just before she goes over the precipice and becomes unformed woman. Maybe one can never again attain such purity of essence. The same can happen to a boy, but in my experience it rarely does; the heroic quality is too easily contaminated by having something to prove. But I recognized what I was seeing in Ilana, though she didn't look at me with her green eyes or speak to me once during her mother's long talk with me, and I wondered if I had once

been at such a point in life. Maybe the one who is never knows it at the time, or can never remember.

People have always told me things, because I had the gift of hearing without judgment – who was I to judge anyone else? Besides that, we were on a train and there was nothing else to do. Jean was seven or eight years older than me, and older by a marriage and four children and other things I couldn't imagine. She told me about her life in San Diego with her Navy husband away for ten weeks at a time. Alone with four small kids in a tract house in Clairemont Mesa and all the rest of the neighborhood kids at her house, unable to stay away even though she was strict about how they had to behave. Once, she said, when she was at the end of her rope she told them all to go home and one kid didn't follow orders and stayed behind in her yard; after a few minutes he got bored and began throwing a ball against the side of her house, and she ran outside and screamed, "If you don't stop that right this second you better give your soul to God, because your ass is going to be mine!" I've never forgotten the way she told that with guilty pride. She had stood up for her sanity. Pride, too, because out of the whole neighborhood full of moms, it was her house that the kids wouldn't leave. Somehow I could tell – though this was a long time before I had you, long before I even met your mother – that while she was in the midst of scolding them, she simultaneously fed them and put mercurochrome on their cuts and Band-Aids on their scraped knees and told them the rules of games, and when she raised the kitchen window and yelled out to them never again to hit a ball in the direction of the house, they knew in some way that she loved their being there. Or maybe the attraction was Ilana.

The whole time her husband was away she wouldn't sleep in their bed; she slept on the couch instead. She didn't seem to feel a need to explain that; she expected me to see it was what her honor demanded. Just like when her girlfriends, other Navy wives with husbands at sea, finally managed to pry her out of the house to go out for a few drinks with them, she would never talk to any man who tried to speak to her in a bar. Never even open her mouth. That's what she told me. What's the harm, her friends would say, and the men would say it too: what's the harm in a little fun? But she knew where it could lead. And it had led there, for some of her friends. There was only one way to handle it: you didn't begin. But it wasn't for her to judge them. She was trying to learn not to do that.

She confessed that she got so angry sometimes, she could make her husband cry, even though he was a chief petty officer with fourteen

years' service. They had gotten married when she was nineteen. He was seven years older, and had been her boyfriend when she was in high school in Halstead, a Godforsaken town where the only option was to get the hell out. Her parents forbade her to see him, but she did anyway, until he joined the Navy, and when she was nineteen she didn't drive the twenty miles to McPherson College one day but instead got on a bus and several buses later got off in San Diego, where he was stationed, and married him. She never finished college but she planned to someday, when the kids got older. She had been in therapy; she said it shamefaced. I knew she thought it was a sign of weakness.

If she had known how inconclusively my love affairs wandered off into a feeling that someone had terribly misunderstood, she would have judged me in a second; she would have regretted telling me anything at all. Who was I to hear any of this – this life without one moment off duty? I knew nothing about strength like that. Nothing about every day alone with a house full of small children. Certainly nothing about staying with someone no matter what – even though you got so angry it broke them down to tears. Nothing about honor that never even made an opening for temptation. After a while I understood why she wouldn't sleep in the bed when her husband was away. It was big enough for two. But the couch was not.

I, on the other hand, could be tempted at almost any time, or made to start dreaming.

"Ilana, don't let Corey fall off that chair," Jean said. Corey was the boy; he looked about three, and he had climbed up on the slippery naugahyde of a club car chair to look out the window. Ilana, reading a book, absently pulled her chair closer to him and put her hand against his bottom without having to raise her eyes from the page. I tried to see the title of the book but couldn't. If a woman my age could be like Ilana, I thought – but maybe it wasn't possible. I had never known anyone that self-possessed, that calm. The women I went out with were more like her mother in a way – they had something eating at them inside – but they were utterly different from her too, or they wouldn't have been willing to go to bed with me. And if they had been like Ilana grown up, surely they wouldn't have needed anything from me.

No, it was I who needed. If I had been able to say what it was I needed, it might have helped, but I couldn't. The only way to express it was to stay awake and watch out the window of the coach when Jean and her children stepped off the train in Newton, Kansas. And the impossible transformation happened. When it was over, for me (I was sure they noticed nothing), she hugged her parents – she had said that

they were getting older, especially her dad, and she brought the kids to see them whenever she could so they'd remember their grandparents before they got old and feeble. The children, stumbling in their half-sleep, lined up to hug too. I thought the old folks must be in pretty good shape if they could come out and meet the train at 2:30 in the morning. I pictured the family driving down a night road between dark fields, then trooping into the grandparents' house (I was sure it would smell like our old house in Springfield) and the kids being put down to sleep in beds freshly made for them that day. The lights in the windows would tell any neighbor who couldn't sleep that something special was up. Maybe Jean and her parents would sit around a metal-topped table in a yellow kitchen and talk for a while after the kids were in bed. The hatchet buried a long time ago about how they wouldn't let her see that boy, their son-in-law, forty now, provider for their grandchildren. A homely, alien life I would never know.

But I didn't want to be any of those people, really, and I knew it. I couldn't have even if I had wanted to. It was too late for that.

The Southwest Limited slid into motion; the family on the platform were picking up suitcases and turning to leave. The last person whose face I saw, as they turned away, was Ilana, her serious look and her blond hair lit for a moment by an overhead lamp as she gave one last glance at the moving train.

I sat back, curled myself down in my seat, put my feet up on the footrest, closed my eyes. It was my second night on the train, and I had hardly slept. My stomach felt on the verge of nausea. My peculiar sentimental gesture, staying awake to watch them disembark, was done and no one cared. Why did I act as if someone were watching me and would give me points for – what?

Self-indulgence. You never get any points for that.

If you find what happened on the platform hard to believe, Adam, you have to understand that I did too. Already, as the train pulled out, I didn't believe what I had seen. It didn't fit anywhere; easier to forget. Easier to decide my mind played a very peculiar trick on me because I was tired. Easier to let it slip away like a dream that I wouldn't remember even if I tried, anyway. Although a sinking feeling stayed with me for a week or so that something truly weird had recently happened – truly weird and not at all reassuring.

Then even the sinking feeling went away and I remembered none of the strangeness at all.

But I never forgot my talk with Jean on the train. It was one of those things you remember without noticing that you remember.

When you remember a love affair its title is on the marquee of the theatre of memory and you know that you are going in – and sometimes when you get inside you find that the title is all that's left of the show; but this, which I never set out to remember, refused to fade. It's peculiar that life can be shaped by something that seems a passing encounter, a way to fill an empty afternoon. Those hours on the train never came to mind when I tried to think of the shaping moments, until decades later when I saw what had fallen away and what had stayed, and then I realized that moment was more important than some that I thought at one time had changed everything, like falling in love with someone – only the falling in love didn't last, but this thing did. I never thought it at the time, but she became my hero. She stood up to life. She was steadfast. What a man should be. In some part of me, I dared to hope, without admitting it to myself, that I could be that too.

2

My only real hope, as a young man, or the only one I admitted to myself, lay in the possibility that I might someday love someone enough to make up for all that I had done and not done. If only I could open my heart. And the only power that could open my heart, it seemed, was the beauty of women, which was somehow – and this is all that I can offer you by way of explanation or justification – a remedy for all the unbeauty of Aaron’s life and death. I wasn’t just attracted to women’s beauty, I believed in it. I still do believe in it – along with other manifestations of the divine – though I’m not sure anyone else could know what those words mean to me.

I can’t help imagining they sound shallow to you, Adam, but people have to be allowed to find the Presence where they can. We aren’t all going to go live alone at Walden Pond, or tend the poor in Calcutta, or devote our lives to the study of sacred texts, or get rich and then give all our riches away. I’m trying not to think about how you’ll react to all this, but it’s hard all over again each day I sit down to write.

Still I will say this, because it’s what I believe: I was always sure, and I’m still sure, that beauty is far more serious than most people realize. That it is a mystery, not to be explained, not to be denied. As much of a mystery as evil, the countervailing force.

I am no philosopher. Who am I to say what Beauty is, with a capital B? I know this, though: it isn’t a product. A few months ago I saw a magazine cover with a picture of a movie star on it, posed as if the photographer had surprised her sitting naked on the edge of a bed and she had then covered herself, just enough, with the sheet. Next to her was the legend, “More Evidence that God Is a Man.” I have to say I saw no evidence of God in her image; she was a gorgeous product, a

human BMW. One might want to own that car, but the desire excited by the beauty I am talking about is another thing altogether. You know what I mean, don't you?

What you don't know, perhaps, is...but I am in no position to say what you know or don't know. Let me remember not to assume, even though you are my son. It has been too long since we were together as we should be. I will speak for myself alone and try to assume nothing.

I've spent my adult life around college students and their professors, I've read the student newspaper and the college literary magazine, I've heard the speeches at Commencement, I know how glibly people talk about inner beauty. Only when we get beyond the superficial, the skin-deep, the tyranny of body image and personal appearance, and see the inner beauty shining through, only then will this be a fairer world, etc. And there's truth in that thought. But only some. I, of all people, know what's wrong with it: what's inside isn't always beauty. What about the inner cowardice, envy, confusion, malice, jealousy, deadness? What of the possibility that what's inside is evil?

These, too, shine through. All you have to do is pay attention.

Or else a person learns to let nothing show. As that movie star learned before she posed for the cover of that magazine. And perhaps I too have learned, since my life, as I said, is about a secret.

How can I say what no one has been able to say? Beauty is in the body, is the body, is physical; it is a creature-magic. The same body that coughs and pees is the home of beauty, afflicting me with longing to see and to touch; and yet it is invisible, untouchable, you cannot point to it, you cannot say it is this attribute or that. There would be no point in my describing to you, inch by inch, any woman I have found beautiful; all you would learn about would be my personal preferences, but her beauty would remain undescribed. To say her eyes were like this, her breasts shaped this way, her waist was just so, and so on and so on would just be to build another human sports car, you would be put off or even disgusted to read it, and you would be right.

It is absurd, in any case, to try to make words do any of this. I'm asking them to do what can't be done. But what else have I got? Perhaps if I had spent my life learning to draw, learning to paint...but it's far too late for that.

The beauty I mean, the real thing, is transparent. It lets everything show, and what shows is invisible; call it magic, call it hope. As soon as I have said those words, I hear some voice inside mocking

them, and they collapse at its touch. I think that voice is the voice of fear, afraid to hope, afraid to dream, but I am trying to keep pushing fear of all kinds aside, long enough to write this. A woman is beautiful on the day when her dream of her own beauty is not hidden. She exists in the perfection of not yet. She knows that others will see it, if not at this instant, then soon; if not today, then soon enough.

I sense, from being around professors, that to think this way is considered retrograde nowadays. But I am beyond their moralism. And nothing I say here is any sort of advice.

We men...but I mustn't talk about "we." I know well enough that others are not like me. I, then – perhaps alone among men, perhaps not – have never been aware of beauty of this kind in myself, have always felt myself incomplete and fallen short of magic; and thus the longing which rightly or wrongly I refer to as love.

Oh, that word. There, you see, it tumbled out. Got loose and won't be put back.

So let me tell you some things about love, because I am utterly unqualified to speak. Allow me because I come to you admitting from the start that I know almost nothing and have no standing to tell you how to live. Allow me because in matters of love, my ignorance and shortcoming is all that I truly can say I know after this much living of life.

On the secret calendar of my life, eras were marked off, one from the next, not by degrees or accomplishments or jobs or where I lived, but by falling in love and breaking up. Living was about the women I might meet and whether one of them might turn out to be the one. It never seemed to work, and yet, amidst all the repetition and longing, the dream lost none of its power from year to year.

Some women seemed to know about me at once – that through my eyes they could see themselves incandescent. I could give them that if they would let me. And some did, and then I was always a little too willing to use that word, to lob my heart like a slow, fat softball down the middle and hope that someone would hit it over the fence. I lived for that moment, and these were the old days, when Yes was a language that people spoke more fluently.

God, what naked flights of bliss transpired when all was new and right! Women taught me how to give pleasure, showed me how it

should be taken...all that never to be recaptured, never to happen for me again, that is what is hardest for me to accept, even now.

But I never knew how to live forward into the “and then”; I thought there shouldn’t even be one, shouldn’t be any time that felt different from the glorious beginning, wouldn’t be if she were really the one I was forever searching for. Until your mother finally came into my life.

I'm sorry if my writing about how I fell in love with her makes you uncomfortable, but without it I might as well not write this at all. Years may pass, in any case, before you read it, although I hope they don't. There's too much to tell to quit now, too many truths that I have had no practice in telling because I thought the happiness of people (myself always selfishly included) depended on their remaining hidden. And I have another problem besides being out of practice: the word "love" means too many things. If it means desire – I used to talk as though it did, and I might again – if love means desire, then when two people full of need collide, is that love? And does love end as arbitrarily as waking up one morning and thinking, She doesn't excite me anymore? How easy it is to desire a woman without knowing anything about her – the one you "love"...how dare I have used the word so often when I was young? Yet that's exactly the plan, I sometimes think: sex is the Creator's bait-and-switch scheme to lure us into far more difficult things. Like love. Like trying to live with one other human being day after day, knowing that you're not allowed to say "I give up." Like trying to be a good parent. The real Mt. Everests in life, next to which climbing mountains is just a distraction.

Where else is there for love to begin except in ignorance and desire? And in the unexplainable certainty of perceiving beauty, the moment that feels like knowledge and excites longing. That moment has always felt to me like proof that love is, after all, a possibility in this life. One is not in charge of these things, one does not control them, one bows to something transcendent and unexplainable, and then, when it doesn't last, it is profoundly embarrassing and undermining to have to take back the sacred word, to have to admit that one bowed to the trivial, the transitory. I suffered this secret humiliation over and over,

till the repetition was humiliation in itself, and yet I couldn't stop. I kept dreaming the same old dream but almost hopelessly, and as it were furtively, for fear of ridicule and scorn – my own scorn worst of all. But dreams have a life of their own; they won't go away because for a time we lack the courage to dream them to the end. Mine never did, even when I couldn't speak of romance without irony; the dream knew, if I didn't, that one day Carol would walk into the Registrar's office and stand at the counter asking for an add-drop form, and there would be a kind of glow over her head, a glory I could feel.

She was twenty-seven years old, a fourth-grade teacher working course by course on her M.A., and I was thirty-two and a mid-level administrator at the University of Massachusetts. It wasn't my job to wait on people who walked up to the counter, but I was passing by when Carol came and spoke to the woman who worked there. "Are you a graduate student?" I said over the clerk's shoulder – I had to say something – and she raised her eyes to me and I still don't know where that clerk went. She disappeared. Carol used to tease me that I elbowed her out of the way, and maybe I did. I saw at once that Carol's eyes were the color of Abyssinian cats and her look entered into me and I felt as though, with the utmost joy, I was falling down a flight of stairs without hitting anything. I felt like Duchamp's *Nude Descending*, every single one of them, all at once. When I landed and more or less managed to fit back into myself, we were still looking at each other, and she was saying something about registering for a course but that was not what we were talking about. Already. And I wasn't the me I had been before she walked in. A minute before, I had not known what the rest of my life was going to be about; but now I knew. I didn't know that I knew that, not just yet, but I knew that I did not want for one moment to look away from the woman speaking to me. She told me her name, for official purposes of course, and I told her mine and the corners of her mouth curled up in a little amused smile as if she stood aside watching the two of us and knew exactly what was up. I pulled up her record on the computer and there were her address and telephone number, information of the greatest importance, and seeing it made me try to picture where she lived and then with whom. I looked for rings but she was not wearing any. I dragged out as long as possible something that could have been fixed in ten seconds, I kept inventing questions to ask her so I could hear her say one more thing. I could have listened to her read the dictionary; every word she used was remade. Her voice was clear and self-possessed, it rose and fell laughingly, it was a grown-up woman's voice, not the flat adolescent

voice of the typical student. I ran out of official questions and asked her how she liked teaching and for a bad moment I thought she was growing impatient and trying to figure out a way to leave. Someone else came up behind Carol, a guy who looked primed to interrupt and complain. She glanced at him over her shoulder, turned back to me and the clarity of her gaze surprised me all over again. "Maybe we'll have to talk about that another time," she said.

"Yes." That was all I could say. She smiled the little amused smile and turned away, and in a second she was out the door taking my changed life with her.

She was a woman and therefore quicker. I had been so busy trying to find a way to ask her out that it took me a moment to realize she had told me we would be seeing each other again. Which meant she wanted to, which sent Fred Astaire gliding across a gilt-spangled ballroom floor and rendered me useless to perform my official duties.

In my twenties I might have become a Buddhist, if it weren't for their wish to eliminate desire. Without desire I knew I would be lost; it organizes things, like gravity. The physical world an illusion, desire the source of all suffering – those noble truths are not for me. For that matter, I have respect for the impulse that drives Christians to eat God, eat Christ, but I couldn't do it myself without feeling like an impostor. If you believe, then it makes sense to put God inside yourself, where the Bible tells you His Kingdom is; eat Him and He is where He belongs. Those who do it in such a spirit, real believers, must be made happy thereby. But I am not one of them.

So if I couldn't become a Catholic either, eat God and find happiness that way, what then? The beauty of women. For better or worse, it's the truth: that was God's image for me, from which it was impossible and even wrong to tear my eyes away. It's the hope of salvation that lurks alongside desire, less obvious and even more powerful, which makes the wound from which there is no recovering. I say perhaps too dramatically. Please excuse me.

I had learned this, though, by the time I met your mother: women didn't want to know that salvation was what I saw in them. It made them uncomfortable, or angry, and I kept it to myself if I could.

The first time we kissed, her kissing me back seemed such a miracle that I didn't dare stop for fear she might think too much about how it felt and change her mind. We were both too old not to know

what was happening. After a while she pushed me away gently. "You have to let me breathe," she said.

"I'm sorry."

"No you're not."

I kissed the curled corner of her lips, and she turned toward me, her mouth opening to meet mine.

"Stop a while," she said later, taking my hand away. "This is going too fast for me."

She was about to leave; we had been kissing by the door. "It felt good when you touched me tonight," she said without raising her eyes to mine, as if she had reminded herself to tell the truth.

The words fell into a silence; she had already told me she couldn't stay. "You could change your mind," I said.

"I know." She kissed me, briefly, as if we were already used to kissing. A kiss from the future. "But you might get the wrong idea if I did."

"What – " would be the wrong idea, I wanted to ask. But she put one straight-up finger against my lips and sealed them.

"Good night," she said. "Call me soon."

I called so soon that her phone was ringing when she walked in the door of her apartment. I tried to get her to go out with me the next night, but she said she had to work.

The next day she called and said she'd changed her mind.

A week later she invited me to dinner at her place, and that night she led me into her bedroom and closed the door on the outside world, and we were together for the first time. When we made love I exploded like a teenager, helplessly. No such thing as control. We lay breathing together in a trance, exchanging kisses, until she stopped kissing me back and turned her eyes away. "I'm a little scared," she said, and then so was I. I watched her breathe, waiting. She put her hand in my hair and drew me to her. "Not scared of you. But just hold me, okay?"

When Carol came into my arms, my own soul came to me and trusted me and accepted me and I was one with myself for the first time in my life. I held her, in the dark of drawn shades, in the silence of

deep into the night, and willed that nothing ever frighten her, most of all that nothing of me ever frighten her, that I might be always the one she wanted holding her when something threatened. The distinction between her body and mine melted away. The world we'd been in before we shed our clothes no longer existed; perhaps there was nothing outside her room – certainly nothing I needed – or we had travelled somewhere and if I raised the corner of the shade to peek out the window I would find not Northampton, Massachusetts, but some other landscape that I had never seen but would recognize. My palms lay between her shoulder blades, holding her to me, and her willingness to be there, her giving me the trust of her nakedness – the Creation itself giving me the trust of this, its greatest glory – was a new sky into which I rose amazed, that I of all men on earth had been chosen to receive this gift. I knew already that if that sky went dark there would be nothing left for me, and at the same instant I realized that it was already too late to tell her about Aaron, too late to tell her what I had done, that I would have to keep this secret because to tell it would be to risk too much, and that that part of me, even now that the miracle of her had come into my life, would remain forever alone.

We fell in love in the winter, and when it got past mudtime and the blackfly season, we came up to this cabin for the first time. The drive up our road was slow and interrupted as usual. When the cabin and the pond finally emerged from the spruce trees, which always happens suddenly despite one's expecting it, Carol said "Oh" to herself in such a way that I understood I had bought this cabin for her to come to, and I picked the right one. When she walked in, it wasn't mine anymore, it was ours. Everything in it was a present to her: the Hudson's Bay blankets smelling of mothballs but somewhat eaten anyway, the chipboard paneling, the spigot that dripped, as always, once I turned on the water pump. Within ten minutes she found the broom and started knocking down cobwebs; within an hour I knew we were going to have indoor plumbing before the summer was out.

I dragged the canoe out from under the cabin. "Shall we?" I said.

"Of course."

We put on some of the ancient, mouse-gnawed sneakers that served as water shoes and slid the canoe into the water's weedy margin. She knew how to get in without tipping. In a stroke we were no longer aground, gliding over the waving underwater weeds, then onto darker water. I watched her strong back and her hands as she paddled; she knew exactly what she was doing, better than I did I thought. There was the faint slap of water against the bottom of our boat, the occasional knock of paddle against gunwale. As always, the canoe felt alive. I said, "Did you go to summer camp when you were a kid?"

"God, yes. I was even a counselor."

"I might have known."

"I think that's when I figured out I wanted to be a teacher."

Slap, knock. A crow cawed in the woods on the other shore.

"Why is this a pond?" she said. "This isn't a pond. If you put it in Wisconsin it'd be a lake. Anyplace else, it would be."

"These Yankees think they have to be different."

"We used to go to this place about an hour north of Madison called Green Lake. Which was nice enough. But this seems more peaceful. Do people ski here?"

"Ski?" What did that have to do with it? "Over at Crotched Mountain they do."

"No, no, *water* ski."

"I sure hope not. No one ever has yet." I felt we were not far from the dark rounded backs of the rocks that barely show above the surface, though I can never be quite sure where they are until I'm on top of them. I turned us so we were looking back at the shore and the cabin. Already it seemed tiny among the trees. Up and down the shore a few other cabins were thinly scattered, most with docks and aluminum motorboats tied up to them. Fishermen. They would go out again around dawn, or even before. But we would stay in bed. "Shall we explore, or go back?" I said.

"Anything," she said. "Anything. As long as we don't have to leave."

We paddled back, watching the cabin become more than a generic detail of the landscape, acquire its own identity, a path from the shore, a door by which to enter. A room in which to kiss and drop our clothes on the floor, a bed on which to lie together. Our bed, now that we made love there, knowing we would again many times.

Later we got up and I hooked up the propane I brought from town and we made some dinner and sat in the little screen porch, drinking wine until it was time to go back to bed. She told me stories about summer camp, flashlight tag, sneaking out to meet a boy – the same boy her best friend liked, which made it doubly complicated – I wanted to have been that boy who kissed her secretly, swatting mosquitoes between kisses. I wanted to have been every boy or man she ever liked, or loved, but the wanting was without jealousy. I knew she could not have shared with any of them what we shared.

Once, on another visit to the cabin, we were in bed in the afternoon. "We should pull the curtains," she said, "someone might peek in."

"Who? There's nobody out there. Come back here."

She closed the old curtains and as she was straddling me there was a knock at the door. "Damn," I said. "Nobody's home."

The knock came again.

"Answer it," she said. "Then they'll go away."

I pulled on my shorts, opened the door to find two boys about thirteen holding fishing poles. The expression on their faces told me I did not look pleased to see them. One visibly got up his nerve. "Mind if we fish over here?" he said. It crossed my mind that the fishing poles were only an excuse, they had come to see if the cabin was empty and they could sneak in, to look for things to steal or just poke through someone else's stuff. Little did they know what private things there were to see inside – or maybe they guessed. "Go ahead," I said. "But I don't think it's a very good spot."

"Thanks." Awkwardly, almost bumping into each other as if they couldn't manage their own feet, they turned away, and I locked the doors front and back.

"What was it?" Carol said, as I came back into the bedroom and closed its door for good measure. She was sitting up in bed, cross-legged, naked, but had in her hands a shirt she could have thrown on, just in case.

"A couple of kids. They wanted to fish, or so they said."

"Are they gone?" I nodded. She dropped the shirt on the floor and my shorts went there too.

"You see? I know these things. Just think what a show we would have given them."

"How did you know?"

"I'm a teacher, I have kid radar," she said, lying down. I knelt there, over her, and as we kissed I remembered being a boy like those boys and how I could not even have dreamed what it would feel like when she pulled me down with her and wanted everything we could do together in the freedom of love.

Once, a different time, we were here and went for a walk, out to the road and down it a ways to a place where it hugged the shore of the pond, because there was no way to walk along the shoreline near the cabin. I suppose we wanted a different view, and there was a bit of sandy beach where it was more fun to swim. When we walked back there was a road crew, all men, tarring the road. It was a hot day – of course, because that's when the tar will melt the best – and as we passed them they glanced at us, and then away, in what I was sure was resentment that they were working in the heat, sweating, tar-stained,

breathing the stink of it, and then we had to walk by them and rub it in that they would not be going anywhere that afternoon, or maybe any afternoon, with a woman like Carol. It wasn't fair. Of course not. I understood that. Maybe I had never spread hot tar on a road but I knew what it was to feel that.

But now that I've resolved not to hold back, let me not seem to write that for years my life with your mother was one long dream of romance. Though God knows I like to think of it that way. I was afraid of her, to put it bluntly. Afraid of her judgment of me, afraid of her knowing too much of who I really was. I was terrified of losing her and yet at times I felt trapped under the all-seeing eye of her being so much better a person than I was; I grovelled and then I threw fits of rage because she held the upper hand in our relationship. Her father had left her mother when she was eleven years old, and before he did he confessed he'd been seeing another woman for five. Half of Carol's short life up to that point had been, as far as she was concerned, a lie; she never fully got over that moment. Her standards were too hard to live up to; considerate, civilized half-truths and white lies weighed on her conscience. I'm sure she knew that there was something hidden between us. She could never finally give up poking questions at me as if she might catch me off guard and at last discover the very thing she never wanted to know, that she had married a man unworthy of her trust. And wasn't it true? You do see, don't you, how our demons were made for each other? How my fears made me do exactly that which justified hers, how each of us, in the effort to console our own night terrors, would render the other's worse? And do you see what's darker yet – that we must have married, in part, so that these very things would happen?

That too is love. And that's what I didn't know, and didn't want to hear, and refused to imagine, and rejected with outrage every time it came near me – until Carol. That was the "and then." All I know about love, maybe, is this: the thing that deserves to be called love is that which enables you to live through it.

And one other thing. The way the writer of that love letter felt about Jessica, the amount that he (was he you?) wanted her – that’s how it was with me and Carol. Until.

For a certain number of years we were entirely together, but just what that number is will never be clear.

So tempting to put “happy” there, in front of “years.” But didn’t I just admit that would be less than the whole truth?

Certainly of the years I’ve lived, those made the fullest use of what I am. We got married a year after we met, and you were born two years after that; it’s hard to remember that for those three years we didn’t know that you would be you, that at the beginning we didn’t even know we’d have a child. Once you were born, nothing else could ever have been possible; so how could we not have known? You complicated everything, in a good way; you’ll find out what I mean when you have a child of your own. You’ll have mixed feelings beforehand – everyone does – and you’ll have mixed feelings sometimes afterward too, but if you’re like me, it will feel like this is the one thing that life can never take back. I know I was put here to be your father; it’s the rest of this life that I find hard to understand.

It seems foolish of me to tell you about your own childhood. Either you remember it yourself, or in all likelihood, you don't want to hear about how happy we were then. I think I understand that. But in case you've forgotten, we were. The simplest things bring the most pleasure in the remembering. I remember the way I used to lie on our bed and wait for you to launch yourself at me – you were about four – and I would try to catch you in various tricky ways before you could slam into my ribs. Then I would lift you up on my feet, you balancing on your little boy stomach and waving your arms acrobatically until you fell off. Carol would tell us we were going to break the bed. I still have some of the books I read to you, including a couple I'm glad I'll never have to read aloud again. I remember how, when you were seven or so, you would wake us up about six-thirty on Saturday morning – a moment sacred to sleep or making love – and want us to come watch cartoons with you. Sometimes I even did it, so Carol could sleep a little longer after a week of teaching. I wonder if any of these things seem real to you anymore, or matter, or if all you notice now is how it came out. When you remember your kid life – school and afterschool, dinner, evenings, bathtime, book, bedtime – Little League, learning to ice skate, learning to swim – following the Red Sox, playing Nintendo, going to the cabin in summer, trying to build a boat – when you remember all of it, is it all discolored now, are all the days clouded over?

In my opinion you had a wonderful childhood, but who am I to say? All I have to compare it to is my own. My father would probably have known how to build a boat – or he could have learned easily enough, with the skill he had – but there was no leisure in our life, no time off from Aaron. Nor was there money for something like a cabin on a lake. So he and I never did anything like that quixotic every-summer project of ours, always a new improved plan for the conquest

of the high seas, always telling Carol *This* one will work. The only one that actually did was the first, because it was a raft. Then we got ambitious and had to build an actual hull, but as I'm sure you recall, every one of our nautical experiments leaked and swamped. Did you mind? I didn't. Having a dumb home-grown plan that was all ours, stubbornly working on it together while Carol told us we were wasting our time – that was much more fun than actually finishing a boat that would float. If it had worked, we would have had to keep it up, recaulk it, repaint it, and that would not have been half as enjoyable as trying again.

In truth I think we might have succeeded in the end, if we had kept at it. You were getting to be a good carpenter.

One of my favorite things we did, always, was the bridge. I suppose Carol had every right to be nervous about us hanging out on an abandoned railroad bridge, with nothing but the occasional girder on the sides and big open spaces between the ties and some actual gaps where ties were missing and we could, in fact, have fallen into the Connecticut River. But we knew what we were doing. Didn't we go back and forth across it at least ten times, with stops on the island in the middle? That was the most beautiful spot in Northampton, and I'm not the only person who thought so or who went there, before they ruined it by making it all risk-free with decking and walls so high it's nothing but a corridor. Except for the sky, you can hardly even tell where you are. So now it has a sign and a parking lot and it's part of some official walking trail and there is no experience to be had there. None. But we made good use of it when there was. Remember when we climbed down onto one of the big stone pilings, halfway out to the island, and sat there and just watched the river and the occasional boat go by? Probably nobody in the world knew where we were at that moment except us. It's a good thing we never told Carol about that.

Yes, I know what I'm putting off writing about. I will get there any page now.

3

This, of all things, I don't know how to do. I always promised myself I wouldn't tell you why you should take my side, or favor me, or choose me over her, but then of course you haven't done any of those things. As far as I know you'd just as soon not choose either of us. And I have no idea what Carol has ever told you, or if you've been willing to hear anything from her. Maybe you won't even read this. That's beyond my control.

This is nothing but how it felt to be me.

No, maybe there is nothing as simple as that. I can't help trying to explain.

Did you know that your mother was pregnant when you were four years old? I don't think you would remember. But she had a miscarriage. That was hard on us, especially her. It may not have been a bad thing in one sense, because after all, babies who are going to be like Aaron are one of nature's reasons for miscarriages, and that could have been why it happened. I'll never know. Perhaps you do remember that she had another miscarriage when you were seven; that time, the doctors told her any more pregnancies were out of the question. I don't know if you can guess yet what that means to a woman – I couldn't have, at your age. I don't even know if I understand now. The more I ask myself, the less I think I can imagine what it meant to her when the doctors said her body would never be able to do that again.

She curled into herself for some months. I felt her silently averting her attention even though she kept doing most of the things she had always done. She would not let us down, but she wasn't exactly with us either. Now I think she was having to re-imagine her life, like anyone who gets the news: you are no longer as young as you

think, your possibilities are no longer limitless, some things are forever behind you. When she re-emerged – or maybe the Carol I married never did. Is that too simple as well? No doubt. She seemed a bit brighter and harder and shinier and louder. Only a little bit, perhaps too little for anyone to notice it but me. There are an indeterminate number of chapters in marriage, and you come to understand eventually that no chapter goes on forever, just like it wouldn't if you lived alone. This was one more of those chapters; or, in hindsight, perhaps not.

As for when the affair itself started, or how...I don't know everything, I'm sure. But enough. Perhaps her turning forty had something to do with it, though she was anything but old; it was as if she had almost too much energy and needed something to do with it. Or maybe what I saw were already the effects of falling in love. Anyway, he was a teacher as well, there were opportunities to find time in the afternoons, while you were busy with some afterschool activity and I was at work. It was actually like, I think, a parallel marriage for her after a while. An hour one day, three hours another. Another life, part-time. If what I think bears any relation to her reality. That's what you can never know afterwards – when your world and the other person's stopped coinciding, or if they ever really did. And if they never coincided after all, then you loved in aloneness all that time, or perhaps the word "loved" is misused there, and the one thing you thought was certain knowledge was, in fact, a mistake.

I don't blame you if you want to quit reading, I know you probably hate this, but please try to keep going.

It was a gorgeous fall day the day she confessed. The season of seasons where we lived, I always felt. It was late September, the leaves had barely begun to turn but the air felt different, clearer, as if the upper air, the higher and bluer part of the sky that birds inhabit, came down for once to us who live on the ground. Carol called me at work in midafternoon and asked me sweetly, even shyly, if I could get away and enjoy the day with her for a bit, if the two of us could just take a walk together. I met her at a park near the campus and it reminded me of going on a date when we first met. Strange, to think that our whole life together – yours included – once hung on whether I called her back, whether she agreed to go out with me again. We had been together fifteen years. I felt a little guilty about playing hooky from work, and thoughts of what needed to get done kept intruding on the beauty of the day. God knows how she was feeling at that moment. Terrified and weirdly exhilarated is my guess.

"Stop a minute," she said, and I did. From the suddenness of her voice I thought she was going to point out something exciting to me, like an unusual bird that might fly away if we got any closer. I looked up ahead of us, then at her, and she was staring at me wide-eyed. "What?" I said.

"Nick," she said, and half-reached toward me, as if she meant to take my hand and then thought better of it.

"What?" Involuntarily I stopped breathing.

"I'm in love with someone," she said. The words that can never be taken back. I can't describe what happened. I seemed to fall away from myself, as if I stood and yet collapsed, was upright still but stretched on the ground. This will seem strange, but out the corner of my eye I thought I saw something like a tangle of animal hair – or maybe an actual animal – under a shrub, and it was somehow making my stomach feel sick. Reflexively I completed the gesture she had begun, reached for her hand as if to steady myself, and she took it and held on. Tears were coming in her eyes, welling over. Guilt and relief. The words kept repeating; the sentence was wrong; I'm in love with – someone.

Someone.

"Who?" I said.

"Bill Cooper." I recognized the name, vaguely, as one I had heard her say when she talked about school. I knew nothing about him but that. It didn't matter who he was.

"You're in *love* with him?"

"Yes," she said, and when she said it she looked me in the eye and I saw it was true. I saw the spark of new life, new hope, the thing on which we congratulate people when we find out they're in love, the thing we envy and hope will come to us again. I was still holding her hand, and I let go. Then I wanted not to have let go, not to let her go away from me ever; then I wanted to slap her face, and she would have stood there and taken it, I know, as just and fair. But I did not.

She was in love with him? How could that be? "How the hell did that happen?" Maybe, reflexively, I thought I could deal with it like any other problem.

"It just did."

"When?"

"A while ago."

"A while?" I couldn't look at her. She was what? In love? She was...what? "What are you telling me?" I said.

"I can't stop," she said. "It's too late."

"Fuck – too late?" How the hell could it be too late when I only just found out about it? "What do you mean too late?"

She bowed her head and studied the ground. "I mean it's not going to change," she said.

"You mean you don't want it to," I said. "Don't you? I know what you mean. I know you pretty well, in case you've forgotten. And what the hell are you planning to do about us? What about Adam?"

She looked at me and now she was definitely scared, at the mention of your name. "That's what we have to talk about," she said. I had the falling-elevator feeling in my gut and it didn't hit bottom.

"How long have you been – fucking this guy?" She winced at the word.

"Almost two years."

I turned my back on her and let my head fall back and gaped upward at the blue sky framed by leaves. Two years. Two years? "I didn't know you were that good at lying," I said without turning around. I heard her snuffle, but she didn't speak. "I didn't know you were any good at it. I thought you were the one who was all about the truth. Or shouldn't I have believed that, either?" Muffled crying. I turned around and she had her face in her hands and her knees seemed to be buckling. Next thing she'd be kneeling on the path. What kind of a spectacle was she going to make? I couldn't bear it, that made me angrier than before, if anybody should be doing that it was me, and in the distance I noticed someone coming up the path who might already have seen us. "Stand up for Christ's sake," I said, grabbing her by the upper arm and hoisting her. She didn't pull her arm away from me; she kept crying and wiping at her face with the back of her free hand, crying like a child all snotty and out of control, her mouth a trembling square. "Stop," I said, but she couldn't, and I couldn't bear to see her face, or to let anyone else see it, and the only way not to was to pull her against my chest. I wasn't gentle about it. She cried and made a hot wetness on my shirt and after a second her arms went around me and she held on, she too almost violently, as if for dear life. "Please," she kept saying, "Please," but please what I had no idea and she couldn't get out any more than the one word. Over her head I saw that the other person had in fact seen us. It was a woman. She stopped and watched for a few seconds and then she turned around and went the other way.

Why was I holding her, why didn't I push her away, turn my back and walk off? Because I couldn't. Maybe I should have done it and let her live in fear that I would take you away from her somehow, forever. For an hour or two at least.

"I'm so sorry," she wailed softly, her breath hot against me.

"Shut up. Stop that. And don't wipe your face on my shirt."

"I'm sorry," she said again in a voice more like her own. She let go of me and pulled a Kleenex out of her purse, blew her nose, wiped her eyes on the backs of her hands. For one second in the midst of that, she glanced at me and the glance said Just hold on, I'll be okay in a second, as if nothing had changed between us and all the folkways of our marriage still applied. I could have cut her off that instant, any instant, closed my heart to her and if I had done it right then, it might have stayed done, I could have but I could not.

She took hold of my upper arms as if she knew I could leave and with head bowed she held on.

"How the hell can you be in love with some – guy?"

"I just am," she said to my feet. "I'm so ashamed of lying to you."

What enraged me was how often I had felt I did not measure up to her standard. "*Fuck* you then, how the fuck could you, you – " bitch was not the word, not that I would have hesitated to use it, but it wasn't enough and I couldn't find any word that was.

"Say it, say whatever you want, I know."

"Oh cut it out, don't try to act pathetic, it doesn't work now. When the hell did you find time to fuck him anyway?"

"After school," she muttered.

"Where? In our bed?"

She looked up at me, apparently shocked, and if she was, that was some nerve on her part. "No. Nonono. Only at his place."

"He's single?"

She nodded.

"He have any children?"

She shook her head.

"Convenient for you," I said. She was still holding onto my arms and part of me wanted to break her grip, throw her off, push her down and leave her on scraped hands and knees on the gravel path. And part of me felt I'd die if she let go of me. "What are you going to do about it?"

"What do you want me to do?" she said. There is nothing meek about Carol. I knew she meant that she owed it to me, to do what I said. But I also knew that did not include no longer being in love with Bill Cooper.

For her to maneuver me into using the word "want" was ingenious cruelty. I did not want, never could want, any part of this

except the one thing that would not happen and was not on my list of available choices. For me to say I wanted anything at all was to become complicit in her tearing of all that was precious to shreds. What was I going to say? That she had to be the one to tell you? I didn't want her to. I didn't want you to know. I didn't want to know what she would tell you because it might end with her saying she was leaving. I didn't know how I could live with her if she didn't leave. I didn't know anything.

"Tell me," she said.

"Shut up," I said for a second time – a phrase outlawed in our house, as I'm sure you remember. "I'm thinking. It may take a long time."

"I have to know. Are you letting me come home?"

"Letting you – what the fuck? You think I'm going to say no? Is that what you want me to do? Is it that easy for you to just walk away?"

"No. I won't. I couldn't. I never will unless you make me."

"Oh come on, what are you going to do?" I said, but I couldn't deny the gladness inside when she said she couldn't leave.

"I don't know what I'm going to do now," she said. "But at least I won't lie about it to you anymore."

As if that made it all right? "What do you expect us to do? Just go home and...?" I didn't have to say the rest.

"I don't know," she said again.

"Well, you got us into this, you'd better figure something out before Adam gets home." I think you were playing softball.

"Do you want me to pick him up?" she said. It was my turn, as we both knew. Did she think this would even the score?

"Oh – you don't have somewhere else to go?"

She couldn't look at me. "No."

"Don't tell Adam anything."

"I wasn't planning to."

Unconsciously we had turned and begun walking back toward where she parked her car. We were still married. We kept walking in silence.

"I don't have to go get him yet. We can still talk," she said.

"If anybody has the first fucking idea what to say."

"Do you hate me?"

Of course I hated her. We kept walking and in place of the words we couldn't find, our steps crunched extra loud on the gravel of the path. We were still married.

"I don't know."

There was only one thing I wanted from her, and didn't she know it? I wanted her to say the words I still love you. Didn't she know that? And didn't she know that of all things, I could not ask? Or had she just stopped. Love, then one day no love. Like that.

"Nick," she said. I wouldn't look at her. She grabbed at my hand, held on to it. "Please tell me what you're thinking."

"I can't." We kept walking; she kept holding on to my hand; I could see her car in the distance.

"It's going to be all right," she said. How could she?

"For you." But we were still married.

I don't know how we got through dinner, or the evening, in front of you. But I know that night was spent in muttering and waking silence. I had to know how, and when, and why – especially why, and she said she didn't know.

"Don't give me that. You know. Say it, whatever it is. You've already cut my balls off."

"I like your balls," she said. How did she have the nerve?

"Then why?"

"There is no why, these things happen."

"Oh yeah? And you couldn't help yourself? Funny, I never thought of you as a weak person."

"I couldn't help it when I fell in love with you."

"Oh. So it's all the same."

"No."

"What then?"

"Stop. This is making it worse."

"Don't tell me what to do. Do you think I've never been attracted to anybody in the last fifteen years? Do you think I never wanted to go have sex with somebody else in the afternoon? Go to hell. I know exactly how it is. Don't tell me you never had a chance to think twice."

"Who did you want to have sex with?" she said in a voice I can only describe as playful. I felt as if I didn't know who she was anymore.

"I never did. Not once. I was faithful to you."

"Student or faculty?" she said. "Or staff?"

"This is not a fucking joke, do you understand that? You know what the truth is here? Monogamy is a perverse mistake. I made it. Now I know. Thanks for the lesson."

She turned over in the bed, face down. There was a long silence. I listened for any sign of communication, or love. None came.

"Wake up," I said. I was damned if she'd sleep while I lay there and seethed.

"I'm not asleep." She spoke the words into the mattress.

More silence.

"What?" she said.

"You tell me."

"I'm sorry."

"That doesn't mean anything anymore."

More silence.

"I know," she said.

"Are you going to go on fucking this guy?"

Married people can read each other's minds pretty well. I heard her object to my saying it that way, and I let her know I would say it any way I damn well pleased. And of course if we could do that, how had I managed to not know for two years that my whole life was in free fall?

"Yes," she said. She had guts. I always knew that.

"And I'm supposed to be happy about that."

"I'm not telling you how to feel."

More silence.

"I always thought this was a marriage," I said.

"I am not a prisoner, Nick," she said.

"What the *fuck* do you think you're doing, getting self-righteous on me? Now? Of all times?"

"Don't yell," she hissed. "Adam will hear. I'm human. I didn't sign away my humanity just because I married you and we had Adam. I'm still a person, I'm still living, I only have one life to live and it's not over."

I had to stuff the pillow in my mouth to keep in my wordless roar of frustration. I could feel her fear, but she held onto her courage and didn't jump from the bed. I waited for my heart to slow down somewhat before I trusted myself to speak. My mind was racing. Nothing I could say would hurt her enough. Forgive me for being the warden of your prison all this time. Is this what you call humanity, betraying your family. Nothing would make her hear me, as far as she knew she was right. I realized this was what she said to him, when she

was with him, about how she had only one life to live and not signing away her humanity. She had been rehearsing for this moment with him as her yes-man. I wanted to kill them both, or do what Vulcan did to his faithless wife Venus and her lover – dropped a net of chains on them while they were naked together and made them a spectacle for all to see and comment on. But it was also a tableau of his own humiliation.

She always had the advantage, she still did, she always would. My reaction to the news was a problem to be dealt with, a bump in her road. I had served my purpose in her life and was now on the shelf.

“When did you stop loving me?” I said.

“I never did,” she said. But there was an instant’s too long a wait before the words came, and I was sure she had to decide to say them.

“The truth,” I said.

“It is the truth.” But she didn’t reach over and touch me. *That* was the truth, I thought. Then her fingers landed on my wrist. Neither of us moved a muscle, suspended, waiting. Now, it would happen now, I would pull away or not, I would reject her gesture or not, if I did our life together would be over. But seconds passed and I did not move my arm away.

“You don’t feel any guilt about this at all, do you?”

“I feel horrible about lying to you.”

“But about having a lover.”

“I do, but...” She didn’t have to go on.

“You don’t find it the least little bit ironic that you would be doing this?” She knew I meant coming from her family.

“I know. I do. Believe me.” But she had gotten used to it, I could hear that. After all, she’d had two years. I was the one behind the times.

I could have started over again from How could you, but there was no point in it.

“What do you expect me to do?” I said.

“Whatever you need to.”

So cold, I thought. So cold.

She rolled over toward me, put the weight of her body against me, her arm around me. “I’m still here,” she said. “I swear I am. This is my home. I’m not leaving you.”

But I noticed that she still couldn’t say she loved me.

There were two more nights like that. The second night I brought up what this might do to you; if anything, it was worse than the first. There were two terrible, endless days at work. We reached the weekend. Late on Saturday afternoon I went to our bridge, alone. Downstream to my right, on the highway bridge carrying Route 9 across the Connecticut, the traffic never stopped coming; on ours, who knows when the last train crossed. Even when we first went there, there were no rails. I walked out on the square black ties, keeping my eyes on the gaps between them. The earth beneath me fell away steeply; the river began, swirling and dark. Some of the ties were splintered and worn away, worn down on one end to weathered logs, making the gaps larger, and I was accustomed to this of course, and to the places where ties were missing altogether. I came upon the first stone piling; the tower of rocks climbed abruptly up below me as I advanced, and then was behind me. Featureless river again. I kept going and before the second piling I crossed the first wide gap. It was only a long step, really, but over an emptiness that would be fatal. Not too clear if one would die from drowning or from smashing on hidden rocks, but one or the other seemed inevitable.

Across the gap, I held onto a thin girder and looked up the river. It was my decision to make and I had to make it. We could not go around the same racetrack any more nights. We were both exhausted and out of words and had reached the stage where even the worst ending seems better than none. To my left the west bank was dark, in shadow, and to my right the east was lit harshly by the low sun, hard to see. Too much contrast for the eye to take in. I was forty-seven years old, which I am aware you cannot imagine being. I was starting to have a bald spot and I didn't like the face in the mirror. Also I thought I had some principles, or maybe it was self-respect; there was some excellent reason why I should already have told her to get out. Wasn't there? Except I couldn't seem to say the words. She would have done it.

It was a warm day and the smell of the creosote in the old ties was especially strong. I lowered myself down on the end of one, my legs dangling over empty space and river. The current was not fast but massive. Stay or go. I thought of Jean, whom I met so long ago on a train. What would she do? She would have kicked her husband's ass out of there so fast it would have made his head swim. Or maybe not. Maybe she wouldn't have let him off that easy. Would have made him stay and fought it out toe to toe. She would have gone to the other woman and told her things she'd never forget. And so what, if she did? You can't make someone love you if they don't. Did I want her living

with us, with me, out of duty? The thought was repugnant. I wanted her to love me, that was all I wanted, the whole thing. She was in love with this guy whose name I did not want to think (but could not help thinking), much less say. She went to his house (what did it look like? I did not want to know), she was naked with him, she made love to him. (How old was he? I did not want to know.) My love, my Carol, who was not mine but her own, and that made it doubly amazing as long as she chose me. How could she do this? She could do anything. One could do anything. Maybe as bad as making love to him, maybe even worse, she probably sat in the kitchen with him and had a beer and asked him how his day was. She told him about the kids in her classroom. She probably even sat with him sometimes and said nothing and worst of all, was even comfortable that way. It had been two years, after all. They had passed the honeymoon stage. Or did it go on forever, as long as their affair remained a secret? Perhaps this would be my revenge: now that I knew, their honeymoon would be over.

Pathetic. I couldn't change what she felt. Ever.

We live in a ruthless world where people are at each other's mercy. I, of all people, should understand that. But I had always thought, without having to think, that my marriage to Carol was a blessed exception.

Not so. And what would I do about it?

There were peculiar eddies on the surface of the river, and sometimes what looked like whirlpools. Sunlight bounced off rippled water and made a fiery dancing I could just bear to look at. Some of the trees lining the banks were already bare, some golden, some yellow-green. All this beauty, in a vastness of lit-up space, indifferent to my little problem, or anyone's. Even it was ruthless. Hadn't I always known that?

I could do nothing about her, or to her, only to myself. It was between me and me. As soon as I saw that, I knew what I would do.

You were asleep, and we were sitting in the living room pretending to read the paper. She clicked the TV on and then off again. I knew she didn't care about anything on it. Every time either of us made a sound I'm sure both of us thought, Now it begins. It kept not beginning. We seemed to be trying to wait each other out. I knew it was up to me.

"Come in the kitchen," I said, getting up.

She looked at me as if she would be able to tell what I was going to say by looking. "Why?"

"It's farther away from his room."

Silently we trooped into the kitchen. "So?" she said in a monotone. She was as worn out as I was.

"Just sit down, okay?"

With the scrape of a chair, she sat down at the table and leaned her chin on her hand and looked at me without expression. "What?" she said.

I went in the pantry and got two glasses and an open bottle of wine, poured some, put a glass in front of her. She looked suspicious. I sat down, held up my glass. "To us," I said.

"Is this goodbye?" she said. "I'm not drinking to it, if it is."

"No."

"What is it?"

I still held up my glass. "To us. Yes or no?"

"What are you saying?"

"Is there still anything left for me, or is it all for him now?"

"No," she said sullenly.

"No what?"

"There's still...Nick, you're my husband, that'll never change, don't you know that?"

"You really can't say it, can you? Or is there no more to say?"

"I love you," she said, in a voice that verged on a defiant So there, and yet I thought it trembled too.

"Do you?" She nodded and pressed her lips together. "Why is it so hard to say, then?"

"Because of what I'm doing to you. Because I know this isn't how you want it to be."

"No. It isn't, is it. But it's too late for that. We're not going back, are we?"

She shook her head. I confess that before that I had some sliver of hope, still, that she would say we could.

"All right, then," I said.

"What do you mean, all right then."

"All I'm asking is this. It isn't a whole hell of a lot, considering. But I'm not giving you a choice, okay? Number one, don't make Adam know about it. Number two, show up for dinner. And sleep here. With me, in our bed. Can you do that? Just tell me. Because if you can't, I can't."

She and I held each other's eyes for at least half a minute. "Are you really okay with this?" she said at last.

"Fuck that, I'm not okay with anything. I'm asking you if you agree to my terms."

"Yes, of course I do, of course, are you really sure? I don't know what to say." She reached for my hand but I held mine back.

"And don't ever lie to me about what's going on between you and him."

"I promise, Nick, I swear it. Sweetie, I'll never –" For a second she couldn't go on. Right then I thought she truly did still love me. "I'll never do that to you again."

I still don't know when you found out, or how you found out. Maybe it was nothing but denial to imagine that you could live with what was going on and not know. Maybe you weren't even consciously aware of it, but when you and your eighth-grade friends started smoking pot all the time, I have a feeling that for you it wasn't just the thing to do because they did. You had something to run away from.

She still saw him in the afternoons – I don't know how often, I didn't want her reporting it to me even though I could have made her tell me. She even went away with him on a couple of weekends, which we explained away by some fictitious work obligation. And at some point you knew, and you realized I was letting her. In the world of a thirteen-year-old there is no moral ambiguity. Your judgment came in two different ways: you hated her, but you despised me. I would rather have been hated. It was a sign of how much you loved her, after all. But in your eyes I was contemptible. What I did could never be excused: I was guilty of forgiving her.

I know you don't want me to say these things, but they're the truth. At any rate, they are the truth as I know it. The three of us all have different truths, and we always will. I know it's the human condition, but it became clear to you too soon in life. If all this had happened when you were twenty instead of twelve and thirteen...but we don't get to choose these things. All I can say is, I didn't choose it either. You seem to think I could have made her stop seeing him, I could have turned back the calendar and then faced it to the wall, made our life as a family hold still on its best day, unchanging. And that I betrayed you when I did not.

I believe you have never forgiven me for not doing the impossible. But I continue to hope. One day you'll know that no one can make anyone else love, or stop loving. Maybe you'll even accept that life is sometimes a mess, and it isn't necessarily because someone involved is a moral failure.

Carol kept her promise not to lie to me, but she also said she couldn't leave and that did not prove true. I forgave her for falling in love with someone else, and even for lying to me about it, but I don't forgive her for leaving me. One should not, it seems to me, forgive that – which is how you and I are exactly alike.

4

I could go through all the rest of what happened from my point of view, but it would do no good to put us both through that all over again. I will try to keep from telling you what you already know. Carol was ambitious to inaugurate a new way of life, and though this will probably make you angry all over again, I would rather have seen her succeed in it than lose her. I think she honestly believed she could love both him and me, make it work for two men in two places. I did my best, and so did she, I still think, but there are only so many hours in a day and sometimes it's as simple as that.

There may have been nothing I could do about any of it, from the beginning. I chose not to believe that, and to do what I could, unfathomable as my choices may seem to you. But now I think I missed the essential point: he was her freedom and I was her obligation. No matter what I did, no matter if she did love me, in her way, that was already true and it stayed true. Even in trying to give her the freedom to have it both ways, I could not help being her jailer, because if I could give it to her, didn't that also mean I could take it away? And once you start to see it that way, once a person starts to feel locked in, it's all but over, no matter how long the last act takes. For some people it takes their whole life. That doesn't mean it's a good outcome.

I still don't know where she got the nerve to tell you she was moving out, but some people feel more entitled than others and she must be one of them.

Once she left, I know you felt like there were only bad choices in your world. I know you didn't want to live with her but you didn't much want to live with me, either, and you had to live with both of us, back and forth. I don't know what to say about that. It was the best anyone could do under the circumstances. I probably let you get away with too much when you were with me, in the name of trying to make you happy. What I saw happen was all right, but what I didn't see apparently was not.

I remember your friends straggling through the house, sprawling on the couch watching football games, and watching them get bigger and bigger, turn into huge teenagers who caused vague apprehension, and I would think, were you like them? Of course you were. Seeing them, trying to imagine what they were thinking, what they did when adults weren't looking, probably should have made me wonder if I really knew you. But you and they did act like kids at times, and that was what I still noticed. I remember you and your friends used to cook breakfasts at 1 or 2 a.m. – did you smoke dope somewhere else first? – and you made fried potatoes but of course taking the time to boil them before frying was unthinkable. They always burned before you finished, and I would smell it from upstairs. I remember coming down and finding one of your friends standing by the kitchen door, fanning it open and shut, to try to get some fresh air into the kitchen so the smoke alarm wouldn't go off and wake me. I told you how to do it right but you didn't listen. Should I have made rules? No cooking in the middle of the night, everyone goes home at midnight...I don't know. None of your friends seemed to have curfews. I thought it was better for you to be at home than not, and I was right, as it turned out.

I remember your first girlfriend, though you tried for a while to pretend she wasn't that. I don't blame you for not wanting me to know. A person has to have some room, some margin to become, without being watched all the time – something I never had, growing up under my mother's devouring gaze. What was that girl's name? Candy? No, she came later. Maureen. She was too old for you. I always thought she must have taught you a lot about how to get in trouble. Anyway, somebody showed you how to get drunk, not that it takes much learning. I won't go over your troubles again. We all know they happened. I'm just glad you didn't get in bigger trouble than you did. People get put in jail for stealing, and you could have, too. Which would have been the worst of all, from my point of view.

You won't remember this, but once when you were a little kid, we were at some sort of fair and went to a palm reader, who read both of ours and told me that we were twins in a previous lifetime. And twins, you know – when one suffers, the other can't help but feel it. I suppose that may have been exactly why you needed to get away from me.

After a couple of years, when your mother had the idea of boarding school, and you didn't say no (you didn't say much of anything at the time), it seemed like a sort of answer. More of an answer than I had, at any rate. Without ever quite saying it, the school tactfully intimated that they took kids like you, smart kids who were screwing up, and got them through the part of their life that their parents couldn't handle. I couldn't object, though I wished it could have been somewhere closer than Colorado. You went away. You became a visitor, infrequent and sullen.

The husband-and-father chapter of my life seemed abruptly over, my house had emptied out and into this space things came that you don't know about.

This is the next bead on the string.

It was shortly after you left for school the first time. I couldn't bear the quiet in our house, knowing you wouldn't be coming any time soon, and I thought I could escape that knowledge by coming to this cabin and splitting wood until I wore myself out. Somehow I managed not to be aware of how many reminders I would find here.

What happened came after I worked as long as I could, and then sat by the pond and slapped mosquitoes for a while, and tried to read a book, and ate something and watched it get dark. The evening was cool. I made a fire in the stove with newly split wood, and I was sitting there with the lights out, listening to the stove breathe, and I had a glass of brandy in my hand. It was not the first glass, but it was not the cause.

It was dark but I knew everything in the cabin – the dark, knotty boards of the walls, the bedspread with its pattern of raised nubs forming geometrical flowers, the gleam of the metal rail at the foot of the bed, the Maxfield Parrish print of a nude girl on a rock under a purple sky – I knew every sock and T-shirt in the dresser drawers and the ancient, faded tennis shoes in the closet, that were only worn for wading in the muddy parts of the pond. And I knew Carol asleep under the bedspread in the next room, the rhythm of her breathing, the smell of her, the size of her in the bed, I knew how it felt

to get under the covers with her and take her in my arms, and this would never happen again, I would never touch her that way again though everything in the cabin that was not her, that could not respond, was still there.

The only light in the room was the brightness of the fire that flickered through the open vents in the door of the stove and played upon the metal fender and the sheet of iron the stove stood on. My eyes were closed but I was awake, and I thought for a moment that the stove door must have silently swung open, because a stronger light beat redly on my eyelids. I looked up and the burning woman was outside the window opposite me, the glowing outline of the head and shoulders, hovering there, too high up to be a person standing on the ground outside, and I can't describe the terror. I did not remember that I had seen her before. Small flames came and went over the incandescent surface of the figure, and though it had no eyes, no features of any sort within its outline, I felt it looking at me. It paralyzed me, it stripped me more than naked. I felt the heat radiating from her like noon sun on a bad sunburn. I was fixed in place; I could not turn my gaze away, though watching her was no protection.

I understood, dreadfully, that she wanted something from me and she would not be refused, but I had no idea what it was and I could not imagine myself capable of anything that would satisfy the demands of a being like that. Glare beat in at me, and waves of heat, and I felt that in a moment, if I did not do whatever I had already made her wait too long for, the windowpanes would break and my insides would come to a boil and I would cook until I died.

Unaware, I dropped the glass I was holding and it shattered on the iron hearth. The sound made me look down, reflexively, and when I looked up again whatever was outside the windows was gone.

I remained sitting there for a long time before I dared to move. Nothing happened except that the logs shifted inside the stove. Then I slowly got to my feet, cleaned up the broken glass, and returned to my chair. I sat there for most of the night, still on guard, before I was able to let myself lie down and fall asleep. By the time morning came I had decided to leave Northampton, as if one could run away.

Weeks passed before I remembered, between one step and the next as I walked down the hall at work, that I had seen the burning woman before, from the window of the train at the station in Kansas. In that same second I knew there was no escape, that she could appear anywhere to remind me that I was under a terrible obligation to do something I could not identify and which was probably beyond my powers. The retribution that awaited me if I failed was also impossible to imagine; and yet at the same time I was strangely relieved. I understood that I possessed a secret that was secret even from me, something that was in me, or that was me, and it was, at last, not the old secret, that I had killed Aaron, but something completely other.

As if by sheer luck (but I don't think I believe in luck, or coincidence) I stumbled upon a job opening at a small college in Boston whose registrar had unexpectedly died. I became consumed with selling the house, winding up my responsibilities at the University, finding a place to live in Boston, where I imagined you might like to visit because you would want to be in the city. I had to pass everything in the house through my hands and either pack it or give it away – the artifacts of a vanished civilization. Underneath the dresser I found a pair of Carol's earrings that must have fallen there years before.

The day I left Northampton I was late getting off because the movers had fallen behind schedule; they were supposed to come early in the morning, but they didn't get to the house until noon. So I was held up all day waiting for them to finish loading, and I didn't leave till after it had gotten dark. It was January. When I was about halfway there, after I had passed Sturbridge, I saw her: the burning woman,

standing on the slow lane of the Massachusetts Turnpike, my car almost grazing her as I went by at sixty miles an hour; I even, in that flickering instant, saw the orange light from her pass over the dashboard, and felt the radiating heat. My fingers went numb; I had to think commands to them to hang on to the wheel, to steer, and I could feel her behind me, or not behind me, but anywhere she felt like appearing, at any moment. Waiting.

I stopped at the next rest area, to try to calm down under the orange sodium-vapor lights, but it was no shelter from her.

Perhaps moving to Boston was my great mistake. Putting distance between myself and the life we had lived, making it the food of memory, rather than staying and fighting it out with loss on its own turf. Jean would not have run from such a battle. But I did, and when I moved there, I fell into the habit of...you could call it daydreaming.

After I moved to Boston I gradually came to live, more and more of the time, in a burrow of memory, as if sun and sky were below the earth now, no longer above. I was like a spiritual adept who can plunge himself into a state of deep meditation as easily as jumping into a swimming pool. At every opportunity I secretly unfolded the crinkled leaves and petals of the past; I read only one book, my time with her and you before everything changed, though the pages of the heart's desire would not open. I returned over and over to the passages closest to it that I could find, and plunged in. I could manage not to do this when you were there, but you were not there often.

I think at that time I felt I had no personal future. You had one, of course, and your future was what I had to look forward to. But you were far away most of the time and mostly silent on the phone. My being a father was almost hypothetical; it was a fatherhood of writing checks. I had a new job to learn, but aside from work my own reality was one of constant return, of circling back, a world of memories. Like Carol gesturing for me to come to the door and the two of us looking out in the rain and seeing you, in your yellow slicker and your red rubber boots, standing squarely in the middle of the biggest puddle in the driveway with a beatific look on your face. My hand on her shoulder, her hair tickling my nose. I could go deeper than that: the smell of her hair, the sound of the rain, the sensation of your little boy body squirming on my lap as I pulled on the tight rubber boots, Carol

saying to you, “Don’t sit down in a puddle this time, sweetie.” And deeper yet, if I chose, into the very skin of that day that I took for granted as it actually happened, things I never noticed, like the feel of the clothes on my back and the tick of the mantel clock. Time there was as long as I wanted it to be. There was no limit to the sinking-in; the world of the already lived was as vast as the world of what was yet to come. But it was more than vast: it was perfect. That was what it whispered to me, that was its seduction.

I had long since ceased to resist, although those days I had spent with you and Carol were thresholds I could never cross, open doorways where I could stand and see everything we shared, still going on, but never again enter. Maybe the torment of that and what Aaron felt so long ago were essentially the same. That never occurred to me until I came back to this cabin.

There has to come a time when loss naturally wears itself out, and after I had lived in Boston more than a year, but less than two – a time in my life you know little about, if in fact we ever know much about our parents' lives – I think that time was about to come. It would have come if I had not begun to have new sorts of memories.

At first they were mere glimpses that I dismissed – unaccountable thoughts, the weird flotsam that drifts on distant Sargasso Seas of the mind. Who knows what's out there, amid the forests of trailing weed, or why? And who cares, even. Except that these thoughts kept coming back and they felt more and more like memories, even though they couldn't be. Memories that didn't fit anywhere, memories for which there was no room in the life that I thought I had led. They sneaked up on me, and they were stranger than something flaming outside the window because they were ordinary and yet they were impossible. I remembered standing in the kitchen of the cabin with Carol and we were making dinner and you came in and said did we have any crackers and cheese and told a funny story about how you were out in the canoe and saw a snapping turtle go out on a dock and a family jumped onto their fishing boat to get away from it. You looked to be fourteen years old and everything was utterly unremarkable. And if there was anything in life that I knew, it was that by the time you were fourteen Carol had left me.

I don't think there's a word for the feeling that made it so strange; it's too basic to need a name. You just don't question that certain things happened, you know when memories are memories, but what if they're impossible? And I knew that I was remembering the impossible, because even if I was mistaken about your age, there was a

girl there too who looked perhaps ten years old, and she was your little sister.

I know that all this has to sound crazy to you. But I am trying not to think about your judgments. You can see why I never told you about this other life of mine. Whatever you think of it, I didn't tell you because I didn't see what good it could possibly do, and I thought it would almost certainly do harm. What could you possibly have done with the news that on some unidentifiable plane, there was another you whose family didn't split up? What could you have made of a green-eyed little sister who was somehow real to your father but never to you?

Yet those memories were as involuntary as memories of the days I had actually lived.

Of course I also thought I might be crazy. If you start life by shooting your brother, what can you expect? Something had been wrong with his mind, why not with mine? I could go to a doctor and say look, I'm being monitored by a flaming being in the shape of a woman, and before I knew it I'd be in a hospital taking handfuls of medications. Especially when some shrink heard the rest of my story. But that seemed much too easy in a way. Here, eat these, forget all that. And I had to be in some kind of functional shape, if only for you; I couldn't be shuffling around a hospital in foam-rubber slippers. You'd already had enough to deal with; I didn't want your father to be a crazy man. Which left really one possibility. If I wasn't deluded, there had been a fork in the road, and I had gone both ways: down one road Carol left me, and down the other she didn't. I had been living not one life but two.

In the other life, there was nothing to remember about the first week in December when you were thirteen, the week she left. In the other life, nothing unusual happened that week. The next thing after it that I recalled was that at Christmas the dog (we had a dog there) pulled the roast beef off the counter while we were in the dining room setting the table.

Once I began to remember that other life, I didn't want to do anything else. I still went to the office, I still wrote memos and made phone calls, I still tried to pay attention sympathetically when students came to tell me why they shouldn't be dropped from their classes even though they hadn't paid their term bills. I still shopped, and cooked, and ate dinner. I returned to a faded imitation of a single life I had led long ago, before I ever met your mother; I cooked for myself as I had cooked then, I managed the house exactly as I pleased. I was a lot

neater than I had been before; unlike when I was in my twenties, not only did I know where everything was supposed to go, I kept it there. I knew how much food was in the fridge, how many days it would be before I needed more grapefruit juice, which leftover I planned to eat when and how I would combine two of them into a third thing to make them less boring. I had life under control. Only I didn't. All day I was waiting for the next undistracted minute when I could be alone and go on opening this impossible gift that I had received somehow.

Each day a new period of past time, a week or two, would open up. My memories gradually went deeper into the past, filling it in haphazardly like a crossword puzzle, back towards the fork in the road, which I believe came when Ilana was born; and then as the empty squares became fewer and fewer, memories started coming that were closer to the present.

The peculiarity of my situation only grew deeper. In the other life we still lived in Northampton, I still worked at the University of Massachusetts. In my car I would forget that I was in Boston, start automatically driving to work in Amherst, make a turn and look up and have no idea where I was. Every time I had to tell someone my own address or telephone number I was in danger of getting it wrong and giving myself away.

I lived on tenterhooks, waiting for the memories to come up to the point where I could sit in my apartment and simultaneously recall both the day I had just lived in Boston and the day I had just lived in Northampton. And at the same time I dreaded it. Because if I could remember waking up with Carol just that morning – if I should remember making love with her just that morning – how would I ever bear not being able to turn to her in the evening and ask how her day had been? How could I be both in this life and almost, but never quite, in that one?

Every day there was a new day to remember, a different day of living. But living after the fact, because I was not the I who said the words, who kissed her goodbye as she left the house, who watched you get on the school bus and took your little sister to her school. Whatever that one had done, had felt, I could only live at one remove. I was tormented by envy of the me who actually lived that other day; I hated him at times. Especially when he and Carol argued, when he was complaining and difficult and self-involved and made it harder for her – her life was hard enough with thirty students and two children of her own. The bastard, he had no idea how lucky he was, so unaware I could have choked him. Me. I don't know what pronoun to use. I mean

the other one who had no idea I existed. There was only one of him, as far as he knew, only one life, only one version of his family's fate. His appreciation of his life was feeble at best, his imagination of any other destiny utterly lacking. That me had no concept of what this me went through. After a while I began to see that he didn't even experience his own experience. Stupefied by good luck. I wanted my father's old revolver back; I wanted to hold me at gunpoint and order me to feel every moment, order me to be kinder every moment, to *notice*, for Christ's sake, how incredibly fortunate I was, or else I would happily kill me, and trade places with myself. But I – or he – that other me was on the other side of a scrim, with Carol and your little sister, and though it might have looked as though I could step through and be there, I could no more do that than I could stand in Boston and take one step and find myself in central Massachusetts. I would have to traverse the ground, every foot of the way.

5

The first sign of something amiss in the world of my other life was that people started hoarding; but they didn't know at first that that was what they were doing. Sometimes the other Nick would be at someone's house and they'd show him their cache of something, and it didn't seem to surprise him but it did me. In his world, this new state of mind crept up on people; they would begin to notice some particular thing with special intensity, but they wouldn't notice that there was anything peculiar about their noticing. Some ordinary item would suddenly have unexplainable value. They would stumble across bargains in stores, they would find this favorite thing of theirs at yard sales and say "Well, you never know," and then one day they'd look up and find they had three hundred cans of tuna fish, or twenty bicycles in the basement. Whatever it was, it told a lot about the person. People hoarded winter coats, candles, watches, tools, gloves, makeup, legal pads, No. 2 pencils, car parts, motor oil, pocket knives, toilet paper, bottled water. Homemade beer and wine. Tampons. Jars of mustard. Condoms, diaphragms, contraceptive jelly. Especially anything that was small. A co-worker at the University of Massachusetts told him that she had hundreds of toothbrushes, and he thought this was a peculiar but harmless preparedness until later, when she was able to barter them for all sorts of desirable things. Eventually he traded her a screwdriver for three of them. But at the beginning no one in his world knew that barter was how it would end up. The original impulse was much more primitive, as if a lifetime supply of toothbrushes or moisturizer would guarantee that people would live long enough to use it all.

The other me hoarded tools – of course. Hand tools, mostly for working wood. Because of what he – I – learned from my father,

without knowing I was learning, a long time ago before my father died. Perhaps you're thinking now: What do you think *you* were doing? You hoarded those tools yourself.

I suppose I didn't really have to have three hammers or two dozen screwdrivers, but they were hard to resist. Carpentry was like a meditation for me; cutting a crown molding or planing a board pretty much prevents you from thinking about anything else, and the hell with Socrates. I'll take a day of unexamined life over most of the alternatives – or, even more to the point, a night.

Of course there was an above-ground life as well. I had my work and God knows I wanted a woman in my life – the longing made worse by dreams in which, if a woman should be naked in my presence, if she should allow me to touch her, still I was always thwarted, always forbidden, or worse, ignored; she oblivious to my desire or politely tolerating it, her nakedness meaning nothing about her and me...in any case, the woman I still wanted was Carol, and in an unmentionable way she was almost there. She left no room for anyone else, though occasionally I would make an attempt. But before anything even tried to happen, my half-heartedness would become too clear, to the other party and to me; the elephant in the room would inevitably be acknowledged, with relief that things would not become more embarrassing, more disappointing than they already were.

The boarding school in Colorado delivered on its promise, got you through high school and into a college. An “alternative” college, as it called itself, though I was privately skeptical. Probably no more than a new label on a bottle of the old wine. Marketing is marketing, call it what you want. I’m sure they had the same budget problems we had; it was a college. After you went there, when I dealt with students at school, I thought of you going into someone’s office to get your registration straightened out and I tried to treat our students the way I wanted someone else to treat you. As if they were the you I no longer had. It made me a lot more willing to bend the rules.

The other Nick lived in a falling world, but no one knew what was coming. Nor did I, but I became fascinated by the unraveling; it was plainer to me than to them that something was coming undone. The hoarding reminded me of birds taking cover before a hurricane.

If he, the other Nick, dreaded anything, it was that his own long-ago crime would be exposed – not the things that eventually happened. Besides, most of the things that happened happened to someone else. Parasites killing off the honeybees happened to some farmers who had orchards in Washington, and the depletion of fish stocks happened to fishermen, and some people along the Mississippi lost everything in floods, but most people weren’t farmers or fishermen or didn’t live along the Mississippi. None of those things directly touched him. And for quite a while he didn’t personally know anyone who died of tuberculosis, or whooping cough; he never thought about malaria or dengue, he thought yellow fever had been eliminated before he was born. Bad news about somebody else was background noise,

and no one listened too closely because it made them feel helpless. If the unlucky didn't get blamed for their own misfortunes, they mostly got ignored.

There are always a few students who have administrative problems that aren't their fault; one or two were in my office every week at work. But in the other Nick's world there were so many that it felt as though all he did was correct mistakes; he began to wonder how the system had ever worked right. Students complained more and more to him that courses they had taken were missing from their transcripts, that their tuition was paid but he kept charging them late fees, that they had gotten dropped from class lists for no reason. He found himself in other people's offices on the other end of the same transaction; the value of his checking account would change without explanation, and he wasn't the only person with that complaint, it happened to everyone. He got billed for calling places he could not point to on a map. Stoplights got stuck on one color and wouldn't budge, packages got lost, e-mail would quit working for days, bill collectors hounded him over things he had never bought. But all this happened at a crawl, and part of the trouble with people is that they are too good at getting used to things, too willing to adapt. They keep trying to live with whatever they're handed, no matter how screwed-up and burdensome it becomes. Until they finally realize it has become impossible, the situation is beyond fixing, and by then it's too late to try.

In imperceptible, insidious increments, the system that distributed things broke down, worked less and less until there was only intermittent anything: dial tones, gas stations that pumped gas, electricity that came on, newspapers, water, vegetables, cartons of milk. The stuff that people were used to having was still to be had, somewhere, but increasingly it was elsewhere and not now. The people who were in the worst trouble were those who didn't know how to build anything, or grow food, or fish, or hunt, or sew. A certain kind of city people. Especially those who had no hobbies. It was the skills city people had picked up in their spare time, mostly, that enabled them to survive.

No one knew if the fuel crisis came from trying to drive up profits or a coup in Venezuela or the unintended consequences of a plan to do something entirely different or simply too many people in the world; but it happened. It fed on itself, of course, because once the fuel to power things was missing, they couldn't power what it took to

bring the fuel. The machinery of daily life became as erratic as the weather, but the rich – in his world, they called them *los ricos* – lived in compounds where everything stayed “normal” inside, or as normal as they could make it. They couldn’t make phone calls outside the compound any better than anyone else, but inside they could call their neighbors and invite them for a game of bridge or a barbecue by the pool. They could hire people to scrounge the black market for whatever they wanted. They could run their microwave ovens, their electric can openers, their surround-sound stereos, their weed whackers, their gas grills, their air conditioners, their lawn tractors because they hoarded bigger and better than other people, and they could still get access to fuel and power. They traded favors among themselves like everyone, but they had more to trade, and their own little goon squads to protect it.

Carol taught for a while after she stopped being paid. Some of the parents of her fourth-graders gave her canned goods, or whatever they could spare, so their kids could keep going to school; but it became a losing struggle to keep the building open.

Would-be revolutionaries posted fanatical broadsheets late at night, absolute certainties phrased in the imperative, ordering the erasure of the self, submergence in the forces of History, the collective will...but the overthrow they demanded had gotten ahead of them and was happening faster than they could urge it on, out of anyone’s control. That was no world to grow up in; injustice preyed on your mind from the time you became old enough to realize what it was. What was around you seemed to confirm your darkest moods, your direst imaginings. One day it would be a world of anything goes, as in wartime, for tomorrow we die – the next, of clinging to any promise of peace and safety.

But there was no safety.

Over winter break you informed me that I was a product of capitalism, which in turn was nothing but profiting from injustice and destruction of the environment, and that by selling the ruling class on our system, in every country all over the world, we – that is, people like me – had brought misery to every corner of the globe. I was a functionary of a parasitic industry called higher education, made up of self-serving hypocrites who bamboozled the youth of America into thinking that going to college was so important they should spend the rest of their lives paying for the privilege, when in fact it was set up from beginning to end to turn people into obedient drones who would watch TV seven hours a day and buy whatever they were told to. I couldn't help wondering where you got this analysis and if it didn't have something to do with your having gone to college. But it did hurt, and I'm sure that was the intention. What hurt more was when you left the next morning, days before your visit was supposed to end. You said you were going to your mother's place. That was supposed to twist the knife a little, but all it did was make me wonder what terrible things you would find to say to her.

How did it get to that point between us, where you had to yell at me about capitalism instead of the things that mattered?

Maybe it was because of that disastrous visit that I got involved with Alicia. The timing suggests as much. Probably that's not fair to her; but I wasn't, it seems to me now. We met at work, of course (where else is there to meet somebody?), and for several years before anything happened between us I was not unhappy to run into her whenever I did, to sit in her office and talk when I should have been working, to eat lunch with her. She was in Human Resources – a phrase I couldn't stand, and neither could she; it seemed to be a job she had fallen into by mistake. Originally she had taken it to get a tuition discount on courses toward a Master's in Social Work ("the most foolish career move I could think of," she called it); she hadn't completed the degree, but she still had the job. She wore her hair in a French braid most days; she said it took her so long to learn how to do it, as a girl, that she had never been able to give it up. She had a radio in her office tuned to country music, wretched stuff to my ears; she liked the words, always about something that was going wrong or just plain gone. She seemed to own and operate her life with little need to ask anyone how. At least it looked that way to me when I first met her. Probably I looked that way too, which just shows you what appearances are worth.

Nothing might ever have happened if she hadn't left the college. On her last day, she went around to say goodbye to the people she knew, and when she came to my office to say she'd see me around, I stood up and gave her a hug, and then without either of us expecting it (except how can this be true?), I kissed her. I knew, in the instant before I kissed her, that it would be acceptable to her if I did, but what I did not know was that our mouths would open and we would kiss as would-be lovers do, that my heart would start racing and that I would

forget about the open door through which any of my staff might have seen us kissing. Then we looked at each other. "Oh," she said.

"I didn't know," I said.

"Neither did I."

But now we did.

From one day to the next, life was different behind the scenes. Something was developing there beyond my control. Desire was out in the open, and yet uncertainty hovered in the air between us; we would meet, and kiss, and want each other, but I had to tell her about Carol, and she had to tell me about the man she had left and the husband she had lost, and we had to, in some oblique way, arrive at the terms on which we would – love? There was no way to know if that would be the word. But we were both too old not to know that there might be only so much we could bear to receive. I thought we agreed, before we crossed the threshold and shed our clothes and lay down together, on how much we could ask of each other, and how much we could not. I was wrong.

In the other Nick's world, the Mississippi went over its right bank near Old River, in Louisiana, and started pouring into the Atchafalaya Basin instead of heading southeast to the Gulf through Baton Rouge and New Orleans. A major fraction of the heavy industry of North America was suddenly cut off from transportation, sitting on the banks of a giant ditch of foul-smelling, slowly drying mud.

But the game finally broke down altogether because of something invisible that no one ever explained. It was as if numbers themselves rebelled, after holding still, stable and immutable, ever since people discovered them; as if they demanded their freedom and somewhere in the invisible no-space of electrons in a cable they squirmed out of human control. If numbers came from a distance, they became wrong on the way. But the cables could not be unplugged; everyone knew that. The last stage was hopeless confusion. There were so many lost and bungled transactions and fallacious records and impossible numbers in bank accounts and crazy windfalls retracted the next day and insane demands for millions and refusals to pay in the absence of proofs that could not be supplied, ever, that trust in communication itself was lost and the truth of what people owed or owned or bought or sold or had accomplished could no longer be recovered and most of the money in the world no longer existed. Money itself was not necessarily worth anything, because many people wouldn't take it. In the absence of belief in record-keeping, people's personal histories, their credentials, their abilities, their entire pasts became mere claims, possibly truthful, possibly not. People had what they had, physical stuff they could hold in their hands, and what they could trade their stuff or their work for, and that was that.

Average people started carrying weapons, or assuming that everyone else was. In Northampton, where I always thought people were supposed to be a little kinder than in other places, he couldn't go anywhere without watching his back, without calculating every move, trying to look completely harmless at all times; but I understood why he refused to carry a gun. He almost got shot once by a woman he happened to look at too long while he was in the crowded marketplace that had once been a city park. She could sense that he was attracted to her (and what the hell was he doing eyeing any other woman when he still had Carol in his life?), and by then in his world the worst was always presumed, especially by women, and their theory of self-defense was pre-emptive strike. So when he came face to face with her ten minutes later on the edge of the park, as she walked out carrying what she had traded for, he held up his empty hands and backed away, and even so I think that if there hadn't been others near him on the sidewalk, she might have shot him – me – anyway. I'll never forget the look in her eye. I don't know what had happened to her to make her react that way, but it was something very bad.

The other Nick took any opportunity he ran across to acquire something of value that he could hoard or trade for the good of his family. He wasn't too picky about the law, if there still was any, and he took risks I never would have taken. He was something of a dreamer – like you, Adam. If he took it into his head that his family should have a turkey for Thanksgiving, or Christmas presents when there was no money, he would do crazy things to make it happen. He knew there were people who had what he wanted – *los ricos* in the walled compounds – and he would cook up schemes to take it from them. Hire himself out as yard man, handyman, plumber, anything including jobs he had no idea how to do, to get himself inside their houses and figure out some way to steal from them under the noses of their armed security guards. It made no sense, but defiance mattered more to him than whether it made sense. A guard shot at him while he was sneaking under the fence with a stolen baseball glove – he knew he wouldn't be able to get it past the guard at the gate – and when he told the story to Carol, proudly, she yelled at him first and then wouldn't speak to him for a day. But that didn't stop him.

Perhaps you, in that world, took risks that were as bad or worse. But you hid them from the other Nick, and like him, I could

only guess at what you did when you were out of his sight. You yelled at him when he told you he would carry an empty gun if he had to, but he wouldn't carry a loaded one. You told him he was a wimp; of course he couldn't tell you why he would never fire a gun. The times you lived in were what they were, and you were young. You believed that it was your responsibility to fix every injustice in the world. The other Nick was terrified when you began disappearing for whole days; he was sure that unspeakable things had happened to you, every time. There was plenty of reason to believe that they could have.

In that world you were never young in the way that people were when I was a kid; you went into an ascetic phase and he was afraid you might starve yourself. You must have had sex, or some kind of enjoyment, but how would he have known? You wouldn't have told him. All he knew about your life was pamphlets he found in your room, signed Red Rover, full of discipline, and tactics, and theory, and Robin Hood talk. Rob the rich and give to the poor. Even if a kid's politics are simplistic and fanatical in a way that only a kid could believe in, that doesn't mean he won't get killed pursuing his beliefs. Or that he won't kill. And that, of all things, he didn't want you to have to live with.

I remember how silly I felt telling anyone that I was “dating” Alicia. Not exactly the accurate word. For quite a while it was like this: she came over on Friday night, and we had Friday night and Saturday and Saturday night together, and on Sunday morning after a late breakfast, she went off to whatever she had to do, and I did the same. Were we living together? No; but whatever this was, it wasn’t dating. I don’t remember our ever having said a word about not seeing anyone else. I would have said whatever happened was free to happen, if she had asked, but we had an unspoken pact never to ask.

Not that I was about to go look for some other woman to sleep with on Sunday or Thursday; I was surprised enough that I had a lover at all, that she kept wanting me, and I her. That I didn’t, after a while, secretly wish she’d find reasons she couldn’t come over. That I didn’t think about who she was not. I could write about making love to her, but I don’t think it would be what you want to read. Imagine for yourself; but you won’t be able to imagine what it was like at my age – I can hardly imagine that I’m this age – after years of almost always sleeping alone. All I could be was myself, no longer young, heavier than I liked, but able to give her – I hope it was enough.

When we did touch, it was a silent asking and consenting that started from the beginning. Sometimes the kindest thing in the world is to touch someone else without words; I don’t even mean sex, just touch, the weight of one body against another. Sometimes it’s as though you haven’t breathed all the way in for years until the moment that weight of another’s body sinks into you, and you know it’s that way for the person who’s touching you, too. And if it’s not, there is no use talking about it.

I used to ask myself what I could say to Alicia, as I lay next to her; sometimes I wanted to call her my darling but I could not. I like you so much, I would say, I want you so much, and more would have felt like too much but that was true. Our lost loves said nothing, gave no signs of their presence, knocked no vase off a shelf, no picture from the wall. They were silent, holding themselves apart; they had taken away their breath, their weight, their touch, their glance, they stubbornly withheld from both of us everything breathing life needs, but perhaps one gift remained in their power and that was not to say no. Maybe absence was even the quietest urging: live.

She seemed to be free of both fear and eagerness, and I thought it was because she had already lost something she once believed she couldn't live without. I felt that was the dispensation in which we were together, that loss was the canopy over our nights. Unhope did not make either of us unkind, let me put it that way, and when we did touch, we both knew that the way to touch was as those who love would have touched for the first time, tenderly and without presumption. But we both knew not to say it – only to give without naming – to give each other nights of what it would be like, if love was what this was, and let the kindness of that giving be enough. Be, maybe, the unspoken word.

I remember one Saturday morning not long after we were first together. I got up and went to the bathroom and came back and found her still asleep, her face turned toward me, more unguarded than I had ever seen her, and the sun was inching across the bed to shine on the back of her neck. I stopped halfway to her, to contemplate her as long as I might be allowed to. She appeared to be concentrating on a dream that was trying to slip away; I could see it wrinkling her forehead. Without realizing it, she trusted me in that moment with the face of her youth, dreaming about a life still in the future that would be, at last, hers.

She stirred; her eyelids fluttered. That would have been the moment to tell her I was falling in love with her; or some moment after that, but not too long after, not as long as I did wait.

His last few months at the University of Massachusetts were just a bunch of people who couldn't bring themselves to leave. Little bands of educational improvisers, operating here and there in scattered buildings on the mostly deserted campus whose unoccupied parts were being plundered of anything valuable. The few people left did what they could and what they had to. There wasn't a Registrar's Office anymore; there were no more grades or transcripts. Basically he became a maintenance man; in the hours he had spent hovering on the edges of my father's workshop, watching him work, he had learned more carpentry than he realized. He teamed up with another staff person who knew something about plumbing and heating, and between the two of them they contrived to keep some rooms usable. When they ran out of heating oil, they made a common area out of a couple of fancy administrative offices that had fireplaces; they tried burning broken-down chairs and desks found in abandoned parts of the University, but gave it up as more work than it was worth. The father of one of their students, who had a wood lot, offered them firewood if they'd find the gas to cut and haul it. Every morning they started their fires with the contents of administrative files that would never again be read. At first they'd stop sometimes and pull out something from the sheaves of papers they were throwing in the fire and say "Remember this?" But after a while they just threw them in, to keep warm, to get through the day. He thought it was the best semester the University ever had. Pure learning. At the end, in the spring, he became Registrar, because the real Registrar was long gone, and granted everyone a diploma regardless of how many credits they had. They had a ceremony with whatever academic robes they could

scrounge up, they drank some not very good wine that they found in the President's deserted office, and then they went their separate ways.

When the University finished its last semester, the other Nick rode his bicycle out into the country and found a farmer who needed labor and said he'd work for food he could carry home every few days. That was smart of him; he was one of the first people from in town to think of that. Things had to be done by human power that machines had done for decades; there was no gasoline, no diesel fuel. Or what there was, somebody else got. Kerosene was sometimes a possibility; somebody dredged up the World War II trick of running a car on kerosene by putting moth balls in the tank; but even that stinking and smoking makeshift was only available now and then. People on country roads mostly walked, or bicycled, or rode horses if they were lucky enough to own one. On the days when he rode into town with supplies for Carol and you and your sister – eggs, vegetables, milk, occasionally a chicken – and when the weather was good, and when he wasn't already tired out before he set off for home, he felt himself to be for a magical hour in a world at peace with itself. Everything else fell away except the countryside, the sensations of his own body that had grown stronger from working outdoors, a growing understanding of what was happening in the fields around him, an awareness of going home. A new way of life was taking shape, despite everything; the summer was ahead of him; it was going to work out.

The day that I remember better than any other, he took a new road on his way home. It was one he'd thought of taking several times before because it looked like a possible shortcut, but he was not sure exactly where it went and it had taken him a long time to learn the country roads he used habitually. Usually when he got on his bicycle to ride home, knowing he'd have to be back the next morning, the last thing he wanted to do was risk getting lost and adding a couple of hours to his already long journey. But this day he felt strong, he had awakened unusually early on his day off, and he had the wind at his back. It seemed like the day to try the shortcut.

After a couple of hills and bends the road entered some woods, but the position of the sun through the trees gave him a good enough sense of his direction. The road was not bad. Parts of the roadway itself had deteriorated into broken chunks of asphalt, and if that had been his only choice he would have turned back, but the dirt shoulder was firm and fairly wide, and running down the shoulder was a smooth path that people had obviously been using. On many of the country roads he used such a trail by the side of the road rather than the road itself, because the winter had broken up the pavement.

He continued for half an hour or so before he began to wonder if the map in his head was wrong after all. Maybe this was not a shortcut but a waste of time. Maybe among dense trees he had lost his sense of direction. For another while he climbed a long gradual slope that began to tire him out.

With a sense of relief he came to a frame building by the side of the road which, though it had no sign, had the unmistakable shape of a general store. Somebody would be there who could tell him if this was a good way to go.

He stopped and hesitated in front of the store. Or whatever it was now. The windows were shuttered and the door was closed tight; it was sealed, but it didn't look deserted. The shutters were in good repair, the porch was swept clean, the place looked somehow in use yet every opening was closed up. Not friendly. Maybe it would not be a good idea to hail whoever was inside.

It occurred to him that someone in there might be watching him through some chink or peephole he couldn't see. The place might be guarded. *Los ricos* in the woods. He had been thinking the world had changed when in fact it had not.

The door opened and a boy who looked about twelve or thirteen stepped out, carrying a hunting bow, the kind you use to shoot deer, and as soon as he got out the door he notched an arrow, drew the bow, and aimed it at his chest.

"Don't move," the kid said. He had a crew cut and small incipient pimples on his forehead and he was squinting in his effort to achieve a tough guy's level gaze. The other Nick stood there helpless, as helpless as I was when all this came to me in a form I can't describe, more powerful than any memory of the other life that had come to me before. It all but replaced the world before me. I was building a kitchen cabinet the moment that it came, and I put my tools down and sat down on the floor of the basement and held my head, swamped by horror.

The kid approached, keeping his drawn bow aimed. I – he – it felt as though it was happening to me – could see that the arrowhead was made of sharpened steel and that the power of the bow would drive it through his body if the kid let it fly.

"What are *you* doing here?" the kid said, his voice not a man's yet, not a child's either, putting on a show for himself to fill up a lonely morning, but the show was real and if he shot, the prisoner would really die.

I remember too clearly how he felt at that instant, the sinking sensation, the vision of himself rotting on that road, the cursing of himself for deviating from his accustomed route. He couldn't get words to come out right away, imagining his organs torn by metal.

"I work at a farm up the road, I'm taking food to my family in Northampton."

"Come *on*," the boy said, his voice rising in an impatient whine. "There aren't any. Farms up this road."

"I was trying to take a shortcut," he said, hating himself, trying to hold onto the thought that for Carol and the kids he would survive

this somehow. He thought of saying *I have a son who's only a few years older than you* but that sounded exactly wrong.

"Whaddya got?" the boy said. The point of the arrow didn't waver.

He opened the cardboard box tied to the back of his bicycle and showed him beets, corn, beans, carrots, two jars of milk, a handful of summer squash, a bunch of chard.

"Is that all? Put it on the ground," he said.

"My family needs that, it's all we've got." He didn't want to beg but he heard himself starting to do so.

"That food belongs to my family now," the kid said, and he could hear how proud the boy was of getting off that line. What hard-boiled story was he on the wrong end of, what doomed part was he scripted to play in the kid's head?

"Look, I have two kids, think about it, you know how hungry you get."

"Wanna get shot with this?"

"No."

"Then hurry up."

He had been standing straddling the bike; now he dismounted all the way, awkwardly, trying not to turn his back on the boy and the drawn bow, put down the kickstand and untied the box from the bicycle's rack, and placed it on the ground, thinking about grabbing the shaft of the arrow if the boy should let down his guard, pulling it away from him, turning it on him like a spear before he could notch another. But the kid was probably ten times quicker than he could ever hope to be. He pushed the box of food toward the boy and in the same motion decided to take his one chance, straightened up, mounted the bicycle and leaned into the pedal with all his force –

"Hey!" the kid shouted. "I didn't say you could go!"

The bike skidded on loose dirt, he hopped on one foot as he tried to pedal with the other and keep his head down, got his balance, thought to zig and weave, to duck the arrow he couldn't outrun, but before he could get up speed his front tire hit a broken chunk of pavement and the wheel collapsed like a turned ankle, he was flying over the handlebars and chunks of rock and grit were driven into his palms. His leg temporarily caught in the bike's frame and when he jerked it free, he felt pain behind his knee that would be very bad in just a moment. He stumbled forward, legs dissolving in weakness – had the kid shot him? He did not dare look over his shoulder as he kept trying to zigzag over the broken pavement, trying to stay low,

trying to call up the image of Carol and the children to give him the power to move faster. He could see the bright sun of a clear spot up ahead. He thought he heard an arrow singing by his head and he tripped again, was on painful hands and knees for a second with the senselessness of it on his back like a stone. What a needless and useless death his would be, Carol would never find his body, never bury him, never know that he had died, like an idiot, for trying to take a shortcut. But even without hope he flung himself tumbling down the embankment into the ditch. He scrambled on all fours into the underbrush and kept going, crashing into limbs and saplings, through vines; trying to run without straightening up he rammed his shoulder against something immovable and pain forced his head down, his legs still moving with no idea of direction until he lost his footing and fell to his knees in the forest.

He tried to listen for the sounds of footsteps moving through the trees. A mosquito whined in his ear, and up in the treetops a couple of crows were cawing away at the top of their lungs sounding like they were announcing his presence to the world. Over here! Over here! Hurry up, shoot him! But they flew off, still cawing, into the distance. Now he thought they were telling everyone to get the hell out of their forest.

He crouched, listening, wishing he were wearing camouflage clothing, trying to think out his situation. There were no rules anymore. If that kid thought it would be fun to hunt and kill a middle-aged human being who happened to pass by, there would be nothing to stop him. He looked around and realized that he couldn't be sure where the road was; he had gotten spun around, probably more than once, in his run into the forest and now he couldn't tell which bright spot between the trees might be the road.

He thought of trying to hide himself where he was and wait for...what? He couldn't hide on this spot forever, he had no way to know when it might be safe to move on. Besides, that kid knew where he was, more or less, or at least he knew where he had plunged into the underbrush...every rustling in the woods made his heart jump, but every time it was only a squirrel scrambling up a tree trunk or a bird flying off a leafy limb. Not a footstep. But he might hear one at any time. He thought he heard a person approaching every other second. He couldn't hold still any longer. He began moving through the woods, but automatically and without a plan, even though he knew that this was not a good idea, that he needed to orient himself, to

choose a direction. But he couldn't seem to stop. The body was moving by itself. Maybe it was doing secret thinking, but did it know anything about how to survive this or would it blunder straight into a trap? Surely it was already making too much noise, anyone within half a mile would know exactly where he was, wouldn't they? And they would find him, and they would – there was a clearing in the trees up ahead. Bright. He was staring at the brightness, trying to see out into it, trying to tell if he had done what he thought he had done, the very thing he didn't want to do, circled back to the road, and he took one more step forward and he was the one who did the finding, the back of his neck prickled before he could even focus his jittering vision on the man on the ground, whose throat gaped open, whose blood was still red on the leaves. He had heard no struggle, no outcries. Death had come without warning. He didn't want to get closer to the body, to look for more than an instant at the face that was so unmistakably dead, that could have been him. Especially not look at the eyes. The soul had gone, leaving an irrevocable emptiness.

There was what seemed like an explosion and he was waiting to feel the pain, and then he realized that the blackness in front of his vision was a crow. It flapped down in front of him, enormous and rusty black, and landed next to the corpse, which it eyed, first with one eye and then the other. It hopped closer to the dead man, its weight on the dead leaves making a sound when it jumped, and then it bent down and pecked at the wounded throat and made his stomach turn. He wanted to back away but also he thought he should drive that bird off before it compounded murder further. The crow leaned forward, grasped at torn flesh of the neck and pulled, tugging at it the way he had seen crows pull out the guts of road kills, and he wanted to scream at the outrage of such a feeding upon the dead. He took a couple of steps toward the crow, thinking to kick it away, but it was faster; it turned and flew straight in his face, another explosion of black, its wings flapping over his head, against his ears, making him turn and run. It followed him, dive-bombed him, its feet grazing his scalp, and now it landed in front of him and turned to look him in the eye. It made eye contact, its wildness looking straight into him fearlessly, freezing him in place. It took a jump toward him and he stepped back. Its black and horny feet looked strong enough to claw furrows in him, its heavy beak seemed ready to peck out his eye. Menacingly it raised its wings partially. "Go away," he said aloud, and it flew up in his face again and made him run again, away from it, away from the dead man, away from the road, anywhere as long as it was somewhere else.

Then he noticed the noise he was making, and stopped and crouched down, but the bird came and sat on his back. He could feel its weight as he waited for it to peck his head or grip the back of his neck with its claws. It cawed – a shattering noise that made him lose all caution, and he jumped to his feet and whirled around, shaking it off, beating at the air with his arms. It only flew up out of his reach and then landed a few feet away. Again the stare. Again it took a jump toward him. “Go away,” he said again, as if it could understand him, but it didn’t move, fixing him with its glittering black gaze. What did it want? It had already driven him away from its prey. He had heard somewhere that crows like shiny things. Had heard stories of crows stealing jewelry carelessly left lying where they could get it. And was there something shiny on him? His wedding ring? He couldn’t give away that. It took another jump toward him and he slipped his belt off, threw it on the ground with its buckle toward the bird. “Is this what you want?” he said. The crow picked it up in its beak, and looking him in the eye wobbled and jerked its head and worked its beak on the silver buckle with the same motions it had made trying to feed on the dead man. It seemed to be pulling at his guts as it did so. Then it stopped, opened its beak and dropped the belt as if it had proved unappetizing. It would not stop staring at him. It opened its beak and another terrible caw came out, louder than before if that was possible, even more insistent, shouting at him, ordering him to move, and there was nothing to do but obey. He turned his back to the crow and began to walk away from it, as quietly as he could, now and then looking back over his shoulder to see if he was being followed. He was.

He walked through the forest this way, feeling the already endless day wear on, slowly stalked by a crow. He could feel its presence behind him, driving him on. He tried to stop once, but it flew up and beat its wings around his head, so he knew that the only way to prevent it from attacking him was to keep moving, and after that he just tried to keep as quiet as he could and hardly even bothered to look around. He knew it was there.

Until, finally, when he took for granted that it was following him, he looked around and it was gone.

That is the last moment I can remember of the other life. Since the instant when he looked over his shoulder and the crow was not behind him, there has been nothing. Not one image of Carol, or you, or your little sister, not one moment lived by that other Nick, and all the memories that had come before it slowly began to turn gray.

I believe my mistake with Alicia was to think that independence was what she wanted. She had it when we met and she kept it; we seldom went to her house except to pick things up, we almost never spent the night there. She lived in the rented attic of a suburban carriage house. Too small, she said, my place was more comfortable; but I was convinced she wanted to keep it hers alone, and I had no trouble understanding that. If anything, it surprised me that I wanted her at my house so often, but I did, and she didn't seem to get tired of me. To me her apartment represented a life I wasn't supposed to intrude upon, wasn't supposed to ask about; what she did when we were apart was her business, and I was convinced she wanted it that way.

I more than liked her separateness: I depended on it, I needed it to make the rest possible; so it came as a huge bewilderment when I discovered she maintained it only, you might say, for defensive purposes, as a foxhole to run back to, and wanted to give it up. To move in with me. To make (she didn't say it, but she didn't have to) a life together. If she wasn't quite young enough to have a child, she wasn't too old to adopt (she didn't say that either) – I saw it all, or thought I saw it all.

What I failed to see was that I loved her. At the crucial time I never said the word, the one I said too often in my youth, and too seldom – I discover too late – in what will soon be my age. It was obscured by fights in which I found myself carrying a flag of cowardice, on which was written *Things Are Fine The Way They Are*. I can't forget her voice quavering with angry tears, but unceasing, breaking over me, unanswerable. God forbid somebody should fall in love with you, then they wouldn't go away, and where would you be

then? It's what happens when you make love to the same person week after week, or didn't you know that? All I ever did was give you everything you asked for, it's unforgivable isn't it...

To disappoint someone later in life is a deadlier thing, not to be forgiven unless the disappointed one is made whole again – should that even be possible, and should one ever get the chance. I tried, not hard enough, by writing her a letter just before I left to come here, telling her that I realized I had loved her all along. And then once from the road I tried to call her; she didn't pick up, and what do you say to an answering machine? I asked if she had read my letter and then I heard myself about to add that I didn't know when I would be back and I thought, You damn fool, you are no good to her and she knows it, and hung up.

Out of all the schools in Boston, it turns out that I bet on the wrong one. By the time you went to college, mine had already started the slow decline that in the end proved to be terminal. Of course we didn't know it at the time, and we kept changing presidents thinking it would help, and each new president would organize task forces and self-studies which ate up my time churning out enrollment data which always said the same thing: we didn't have enough students. Nominally we charged a fortune in tuition; the truth was no one ever paid that fortune because we gave most of it back in scholarships just to get a freshman class to walk through the door. You can only do that for so long. It wasn't a bad school – our faculty was good enough – but it was small, and undistinguished, and unimaginative, neither a party school nor a temple of the intellect – unable to compete with its neighbors that all were bigger, smarter, more fun, more able to confer some kind of prestige. Also the babies of eighteen years before had mostly chosen to be born in the West and the South, and if they went to Boston to college, they went to someplace they'd heard of, and that wasn't us. People were vaguely surprised that the college still existed. Not that we didn't have some good students; all colleges do. But we didn't have enough students, good or indifferent, to keep a college open.

Institutions die slow deaths; or perhaps it's more accurate to say that they totter on in denial, zombie-like, pretending to live for a while after they've actually died. The college was in the zombie phase for three or four years before the trustees threw in the towel; yet it felt as though the end came suddenly after all.

They were decent to me; I got severance pay of four months' salary in consideration of the seven years I worked there.

I've only been inside once since I finished straightening up the academic records once and for all. The trustees have sold the buildings to a neighboring school, and the main college building is being gutted for total renovation. I went there on a whim one day and noticed a hard hat sitting on the steps, so I put it on and walked in as if I belonged there. Mortar and ceiling tile and file drawers and old textbooks and pieces of broken swivel chairs were being hurled out of windows to bang their way down orange plastic chutes into dumpsters below, a crane was taking a chunk out of the second floor wall for some future improvement, there were no windows in the frames (I knew why, remembering how often they had gotten stuck) and the wind blew grit everywhere in the halls. There were no tiles in the old ceiling grids; nothing anymore hid the ducts of the defunct heating system that had never worked right in my memory. Pieces of conduit hung down but there seemed to be no electricity in the wires squiggling at their ends; yellow cable snaked everywhere, hung with emergency lights in yellow plastic cages. Here and there water leaked and puddled, and the wet soles of work boots left prints in the plaster dust that covered the floor. I wasn't sure what I would do next in life, and I still don't know, but I'm not sorry that there is no place for me in that building anymore.

I found myself – I find myself – with no place that I have to be. You have your own life to live, Alicia and I have apparently broken up for good, my job no longer exists; I still hope you'll want to visit me someday, but beyond that I am, shall we say, not required. When I looked around after the college closed and asked myself what I wanted to do next, knowing that it was entirely up to me, I found it was not an easy question to answer.

I really didn't know what I was going to do when I left home; I just stopped the mail and the newspaper, put the lights on timers, locked the doors and left. End-of-summer vacation, if anyone thinks to wonder where I've gone. I stood by the loaded-up car in the driveway and realized I hadn't thought past the moment of turning the key and driving away. Which direction was I going to go? South sounded hot. Illinois was where I came from originally, but I had no one to see there anymore. North, as Stuart Little said in that book which I read to you at least twice, is a good direction. I guess I should have told you I was going to the cabin, once I figured out that was where I was headed. But you might not have cared, and I didn't want to risk knowing that; besides, I felt self-conscious about you knowing that your unemployed father was sitting around aimlessly up in New Hampshire, instead of staying in Boston where I belonged.

6

But maybe I didn't belong anyplace. I had moved to Boston to get away from Carol's absence, but it hadn't worked; the loss of her had followed me in a form I couldn't have imagined. Then that, too, had gone; the silver cord that connected that other life with mine had snapped when the other Nick died in the woods. Nevertheless, I kept toying with the notion that another life still continued in Northampton, that I could slip through a crack between worlds and find myself there for good. Not possible, I knew that, but I started driving west instead of the way I had meant to go. The direction I was driving in made it look as though I was going back and it was hard not to wonder what I was going back to. I wondered if I could find the spot where he died, if I should place some sort of marker there. The day that happened, I might have believed that Carol and you and your little sister still lived on in our old house, abandoned by him, in need of my help, that it was time for me to make the leap across the invisible line and find myself in an America after the Collapse. But I would be no help at all there, to her or myself, totally unprepared for such a life except for a few carpentry skills. That would not be a world for me. So it wasn't that I started believing again in the other life as I drove; but I kept imagining what it would be like if I did.

For about five minutes, when I walked down the block we had lived on, when I saw the house, set foot on its porch, knocked at the door, it was as if I was coming home in the other reality. I knew it was not so and yet the illusion was seamless. Then someone pulled aside the edge of the curtain that covered the window in the front door.

A woman – most certainly not Carol, definitely older than me – peered out warily. I looked back, trying to seem unthreatening. "Hi," I said, holding up my hand, palm toward her.

"Who are you?" she said through the glass.

"My name's Nick, I used to live here."

I saw her frown. "What?"

"I lived here years ago, I just wanted to see the place."

"Arra marna murmla?" she said, with a sour look.

"What? I can't hear you."

She said a name – "Al Goldring," or some name like that.

"Who?" What did she mean, did she want me to say I was him?

"I'm Nick Kaiulani," I said, as plainly as I could.

"I don't know you," she said, and the curtain went back in place. I stood facing the closed door. It was the same front door that I remembered, but in bad shape, with peeling paint and gouges in the wood. Different curtain. I could see a darker area on the edge of the fabric where she was in the habit of pulling it aside to look out.

She did so again, checking to see if I was gone. Not happy that I was still there. "My son will be back soon," she called out through the glass, in an angry voice as if threatening me with him. "You talk to him."

Afraid. Of course. Many people are, and she was clearly alone in the house. Maybe she didn't even have a son.

In the back of my mind there had been a little scene of myself walking around our house, seeing it again from all sides, and this would have been the moment when it would happen. But it would terrify her. The place emanated fear and slow decay. I didn't want to feel that. It was better to get off that porch, off that block, to remember that this was not the destination of my trip.

There was only one place that would not have altered, and that was how I came here, to this cabin, where I sit now writing this to you.

When I first bought this place from Arne Lerstein, it didn't even have running water. Ironical, considering how much water was right at the front door. It didn't have a bedroom or a screen porch, either; it was a one-room cabin. In Arne's day, you cooked on a wood stove, you got water by hand, cranking it up out of the cistern with the chain pump, and your toilet was an outhouse. If you needed to keep something cold, either you went to town and got some ice, or you put it in a bucket in the pond and hoped for the best. His dad built it, and according to Arne, when he went there as a kid, they mostly ate recently caught fish. Arne was a farmer like his dad, but neither fishing nor the cabin appealed to him much; after he sold it to me, he bought himself a camper that had air conditioning, TV, and a microwave oven.

It didn't take me long to figure out that Carol was not an outhouse sort of woman. We had a septic system put in, and ran electricity in from the county road, and bought a stove and a propane tank. And we had a well drilled. But luckily, I left the cistern, and the downspout leading to it, and the chain pump, out of some liking for old ways of doing things, or in case the power went out. Well, the power is out, because I didn't think to call and get it turned on. The pump still works – not very well, but there are still enough of the hard rubber balls left on the chain to pull and push water up the pipe and out the spigot. Otherwise I'd have to carry it up bucket by bucket from the pond. I guess it must be safe to drink; I feel okay so far. Just a whole lot older than I want to be.

When I was in my thirties, I remember people my age would say about someone sixty, "Well, that's not *really* very old." Of course that was a lie; sixty was so old they thought they'd never be sixty themselves. Now I'm practically there, and it surprises me, stupidly enough. Did I think I wasn't going to get older? Or did I think that after everything that already happened, getting older wouldn't matter?

But enough of that. I have no time to waste worrying about how old I'm getting, or writing it down. The summer is short up here, and I have to make the most of every night and day, discovering what I can, and recording it, for as long as it lasts. Did this happen to you, too, Adam, when you were here, or has it only just now begun?

Let me tell you some of what has happened to me here, in this cabin of all possible lives, this cabin of secrets.

Night here is truly night. I found a few candles, but I save them for when they're absolutely necessary; and anyway I prefer the darkness. I never saw true darkness when I was growing up. On cloudy nights here all is blackness, a dark so dark that random nerve firings make little sparkles that you know aren't there, and that's the only thing you see. Then all boundaries vanish, size means nothing, everything is edgeless and undefined. Time stretches into an abyss, stops, slides sideways into parallel worlds. Then I lose conviction that dawn will ever come; why should it have to come, when time curls into a backwater and revolves in slow circles upon itself? If I hear something – a splash in the pond, a creak of branch or the cabin's boards, a footfall – the sound descends without warning, breaks the surface of my mind, and for an instant there is before and after. Then it vanishes again; I am released from sequence, from distinction; I am free. There is no line between waking and sleep and it is meaningless to ask if what happens then is, or is not, a dream.

Once – I'm quite sure of this – the doorknob turned, my scalp prickled, first with fear and then with certainty that it was Carol, and what I'm telling you is: it was. Though she came no closer, made no

further sound, I was sure I felt a presence that could only have been hers. I felt she was watching me, weighing what has become of me since she left, and I was not sure she approved. But she withheld from me any sign, whatever she thought or felt.

Less welcome visitors have come, as well; I felt the burning woman looking at me at least once, though I saw nothing. Sometimes I hear a heavy step, man heavy, that fills my heart with dread. Whatever it has come to do is not benign and it cannot be prevented.

Once in a while in the dark someone touches me, a hand slides into mine – a small hand sometimes, I think it's yours when you were a child. So important then not to make a sound, not to move a muscle, so that the hand won't go away. There's no keeping it when it decides to leave; if I try to hold on, I'm holding air.

The other night – don't ask me when, because all whens flow together here – I lay with my arms around a girl, both of us wearing all our clothes and too young to think of taking them off, loving each other without needing to go ahead and make love. She was on top of me, I could feel her hipbones pressing against mine, her small breasts against my chest, her hair tickling my nose; my legs were open as if I were the girl, taking her into me. But it was enough for us to breathe together; to lie frankly body to body, fully dressed, was as much as we could imagine. My hands, caressing her back, never went below her waist.

One night a woman joined me suddenly who must have been the first real lover I had, long ago; without warning she slid into bed with me, naked, and took me in her arms with an eagerness that I remembered, that startled me the first time and startled me more deeply now, kissing me with desire equal to mine, openly there to touch and be touched, and yet when I tried to enter her, she giggled and slid away from under me as if to tease me, out of bed as lightly and effortlessly as she had come. Three steps on the floorboards and then no more, she was gone. In life, all those years ago, she would have gone to the bathroom to do what were then mysterious female things, and come back ready to make love; but she did not return. I think I know what drove her away: she felt that my touch was not joyful as her touch was; she knew I wanted her so much that I was afraid every moment would be the last. No longer that uncertain and astonished boy she chose for reasons of her own, who believed, once we were lovers, that this secret harmony was the natural order of things.

Another night I was not here but somewhere in the woods, and I was relieved of this body and became so tiny that I could crawl under

dead leaves on the forest floor, which I did; and I am still there where no one, not even I myself in daytime, could ever find me. Another night I was the crow who pursued the other Nick, and I felt the dipping and swooping of flight as I beat my strong black wings and flew to the top of a tree. Another night I lay flat on my back all night, hands at my sides, unable to move a finger, paralyzed with my aloneness.

And all the nights are still going on. How can I explain this, or even say what I mean? Here, once nights begin, they never arrive at an end. Somehow the fact that a day comes does not mean that the night before it is over; the day does not follow the night; the days only follow each other. When light comes into the sky, there is sequence again, time resumes, but I am on to its secret: clocks lie, time is not always the same. The days are a river, that flows in only one direction; the nights are lakes, or one lake, without beginning or end.

On their shores, come morning, things wash up – unaccountable things. Love letters, photographs, a child's sock, a ring. I find them, then I lose them again, and I have stopped asking where they came from, whose life they came from. There are no answers. No one here to answer me. No, it seems that what the others, the visitors, drop as they leave are questions, puzzles, riddles, but never answers. A woman sleeps next to me in the impenetrable darkness, and in the morning I find a toy car on the table – did we have a child in some life together? Or is there no connection at all? I know nothing about how these things work. I make journeys into the unknown, guided by something I can't see. I find things – your love letter, which I cannot resist putting here, so that it won't disappear –

Dearest Jessica,

Some part of me goes along with you all the time, or it tries to. My life has two parts, the time with you and everything else. It's only really now when I'm with you. The rest of the time is only leading up to now and waiting for now. It feels like I must have known it was you I was waiting to be with, ever since I was old enough to start liking girls. But I never could have imagined the way you really are. I never could have known what you were going to mean to me until you came into my life. Now I don't even want to try to imagine life without you. It feels like we've been together all the time without knowing it. Played together as kids. Gave each other our first kisses. We

were secretly together, so if we were lonely, it was only because the waiting was taking so long. Inside we knew one day we'd be together and everything would start fresh, and what we were secretly waiting for would finally begin. I know if I lost you now I'd lose my way in life and there would be no point to it at all. I want to kiss you till we can't feel our lips, I want to make love to you morning and night, and afternoon too if you'll let me. To me your shoulders are like wings...

I didn't find the rest. I know I should not have read it, please pardon me for doing so, but few things have ever made me happier than to know that you love your woman that much. Nothing could be wiser.

I found your report card from the eleventh grade. In Northampton. Which by the way is impossible, because you were in boarding school when you were that age. But impossible is no longer a consideration.

I found a picture of Carol, standing thigh-deep in the pond, right in front of this cabin, in a black one-piece bathing suit, laughing with her arms around a man I've never seen – certainly never seen in the mirror. I gazed at this picture for an endless hour, waiting to recognize that man, to understand – I did, with the greatest reluctance, meet Bill Cooper and I do not think it was he. Who was this, clearly more than just a friend? Did her life branch yet again, and she take every path?

She must have. I say it because I must have myself. Because I found, on a different day, when that picture had somehow vanished, a note that read, "Sweetie – Had to go for one more canoe. Adam's in town calling Erica (WHY NOW????) I told him to get back by 1:00. You & Ilana eat up everything if he doesn't. Out the door by 1:30! Seriously! Me."

You, old enough to drive to town alone, here with us – I don't even care which me it was, that's a world I never heard of before, in memory or dream.

What was Carol doing with her arms around that man, some middle-aged, thick-waisted guy who seems, in the picture, to be of all things humoring her – as if she were much more in love with him than he with her. Unthinkable...and whose was the black camisole with the spaghetti straps that I found on a shelf in the bedroom? Did your Jessica leave that here? Did she leave the crumpled empty tube of contraceptive jelly? Was it you who scratched "I love you" into the windowpane?

Surrounded by love, it seems sometimes, but it's not for me except when in the night world someone without a face comes to me; I never know when she will, or who she is, and even then it cannot quite happen that we make love; she never speaks, never stays, is never beside me when light comes into the sky. This is death, I think sometimes. Everyone else has lived on, but I died that day in the forest, and not just in the other life. Since then, perhaps, I have lived only in the spirit. The end of my job, the end of my time with Alicia, all happening in an illusion of the body, a self-deception of still setting foot on the earth. Perhaps I am a ghost, a soul unable to leave the physical world. Died with too much unfinished. I know now what the burning woman wanted of me and still wants; Jean was the messenger and the message, that's why it was she who burst into flames. But I have not lived up to her example, and perhaps because I have not, the burning woman will not let me go.

So I sit and write to you, Adam – or imagine that I do – and as I write I can hear a fish jump in the pond, the screech of blue jay and crow, a mosquito whining in my ear, my pencil against the paper, my foot shifting on the floorboards. I can smell the muddy boundary of the shore, and sun baking tall weeds and spruce needles. I see a blue heron pass, rowing its way through the air. And I ask myself how I know that these are anything but memories of living in the body, the furniture of the physical world that my awareness, unable to give it up, arranges in an imitation of life.

If this

is the world of my delusion, I thought today, let it be the world I want. Let Carol come canoeing up to this shore I look out at all day long, and let you walk through the door and the three of us be together. For what seemed like an hour or two I focused all my energy on assuming that these things would indeed occur, would be no more than the normal order of things. But of course you and she did not appear, and then I thought, Well naturally – they have gone on with their lives – their spirits are not at my beck and call – who do I think I am, anyway? Since when does a ghost play God?

If I did die, if I am now dead, I realized today that I can't even say when it happened. When I moved over into the world of illusion.

The more I ask myself these things, the harder it is to push one thought from my mind: how would I prove to myself that I am alive, and not merely a spirit malingering here at the exit from a lifetime, unable to accept how much is lost?

I tried cutting myself, to see if I would bleed – and I did of course – but so what? Why is that different from hearing the fish jump or seeing the heron fly?

The only way to prove that I am now alive, it seems to me, would be to die; but this I am not ready to do.

Although to tell the truth I'm not always sure why.

Today I found the strangest thing of all. It is a page torn from a magazine – a slick-paper magazine with big pages, like LIFE or LOOK when I was a kid. On one side is part of a piece about a movie star's brave struggle with cancer, on the other a full-page ad for a Ford Country Squire station wagon, the thing looking about nineteen feet long, sitting majestically in the driveway of a Cape Cod style suburban home, presiding over the yard in which Dad lights the barbecue grill and Mom and the kids play badminton. All of it is scribbled over in heavy pencil strokes, some of them tearing the paper, and down at the bottom in shaky but still legible handwriting is one word: "Aaron."

The paper was crumpled into a ball when I found it; I have flattened it out on the table in front of me, and there is no doubt, it is his handwriting. I am all but certain that the car dates from several years after he died.

All I can do is accept this, say that I understand now (even though I don't) – that every life has happened, is still happening, even a life in which Aaron didn't die. Which means that in some world I didn't begin my life by killing my brother.

And what other worlds are there? I think now there may be no limit to them – one where my mother, rather than me, really did shoot Aaron – and one where my father lived past that night, to see me grow up and stay in Springfield and become someone deeply imbedded in life, with struggles and loyalty and pride and problems, but all unquestioningly grounded on the earth.

Can it be that the Creator is so profligate, so enamored of the act of creation, that the all-that-is never ceases to proliferate, world upon world, with every choice we make?

Can it be that somewhere in the infinity of worlds there lurks
forgiveness?

That is more than I can know or say.

Last night I was thinking of the other Nick, with whom I traveled part of the way on the road to death. And Aaron's name on that torn page, and I thought Of course – that anonymous kid with the hunting bow, in the world of the other Nick, must have been Aaron in a different life. Following me there. Robbing the other Nick of the idyll he might have lived, as I robbed Aaron of what little he might have had, long ago. Nothing's impossible anymore, not even justice.

Even the crow – who's to say that was not Aaron's spirit, stripped of any human disguise? Returned as my unwanted guide, to drive me to the land I sent him to, where perhaps I am today.

In the darkness I spoke to him.

Have I paid the price then, Aaron? Am I finally entitled to ask you to forgive me?

But there was no reply.

Today I was sitting, as usual, at the table, looking out through the screen porch toward the water. It's where I always sit to write this, on an old straight kitchen chair, at the wooden table I got from a flea market long ago. A solid old piece of work. The width of the boards in its top tells you it was made when there were some very large walnut trees being turned into lumber.

I was sitting there, with a piece of paper in front of me, counting how many pencils I have left, when I felt my heart pounding for no reason I could identify. Then I sensed something behind me like the presences I have felt at night. They have never come during the day. I turned; my first thought, as always, was Carol. But no one was there, no one in the room, no one in the doorway. A wave of prickling ran over my body, a cold sprinkling of fear as if death were waiting on me just outside the cabin, giving me a moment to take one last look around before I would walk outside and die. I kept scanning the room as if I could have missed someone standing right there in front of me. I told myself to breathe deeply, not in shallow gasps; I stood up, pushing my chair away, and turned my back on the pond, then had to look over my shoulder but nothing was out of the ordinary, the midday sun was glinting on some ripples made by the rocks just below the surface, halfway across. I turned back, toward the open door that faces the other way, toward the overgrown track that leads out to the county road.

Was someone walking up the dirt road toward the cabin, about to come into view?

I was suddenly embarrassed by the emptiness and dust of the place, by my not having prepared for someone coming, as if I had invited a guest and then had carelessly let that knowledge slip my

mind. I felt caught in rude obliviousness; I hurried to grab the broom and start sweeping up dust and spruce needles and bits of food and dead flies, hastily knocking down a couple of cobwebs, opening the screen door to push my little pile of debris out, no not that way, that was where the visitor would come from. I snatched open the little coat closet looking for a dustpan. No luck. Overwhelming feeling of being too late. I pushed the debris into a corner, left the broom there hoping to hide the sweepings, rushed out the door; the screen door banged shut behind me, much too loud and jarring, and made me feel awkward and unseemly all over again.

No one was there. Cicadas whirred loudly in the trees.

I was facing the dirt road as if the visitor must come any moment; but nothing came. My heart stubbornly continued to race in anticipation for a while, for no reason that I could see.

But after it finally calmed down, and all was quiet inside me and out, I began to think that something was going on after all. I heard something in the far distance, beneath all the sounds of this place that I am accustomed to. Something I haven't heard since I've been here. I shouldn't even say that I heard it; but I felt certain that something was happening over the horizon.

I am still almost certain of it now. I may have to go find out what it is. There is some news, I feel, that I am supposed to know.

I spent the day yesterday constructing a raft and rowing out into the middle of the pond. I found the remains of a rowboat – not one of our attempts, but a real boat almost as old – upside-down in some tall grass, and there were enough not-yet-rotted boards to make something I could float on. I cut three small spruces, ten-footers, chopped off their branches, and used the skinny trunks as an underpinning. Made some primitive oarlocks and rowed with boards. It didn't work very well, but I wasn't in a hurry.

I'm not sure why I wanted to go out to the middle of the pond, only that I had to do it. As if there were something I could only see from out there, something I could learn when surrounded by water and sky. As if – oddly enough – I wasn't alone enough in the cabin by myself.

I had thought it would be hard work to reach a point where the cabin was no longer visible, but I was far short of the middle when I saw that it had melted into the trees. I kept rowing, trying not to get splinters, not to blister my hands. Out into the silence. I disturbed a family of loons who took off with great fuss and effort and flew a couple of hundred yards to the north. Then I was alone with the clouds that rose in depth beyond depth of sky. I lay on the raft, nearly in the water, wet but not caring about that, and stared up till I no longer existed, till I stopped being aware of a me-consciousness making a thin film between water and sky.

A heron flew over, ten feet above me, huge and for a moment frightening, oblivious to me, and landed with a splash not far away. I had drifted near the rocks – the same ones that make the ripples which draw my eye every day as I sit looking out over the water. Now I could see the whole group of boulders whose dark, rounded tops lurked just

below the surface, looming presences like minds thinking in the pond. In my gut, in my chest, they set up a humming vibration of faint dread. The heron had come to fish there, it seemed, but when I sat up he flew off, his fishing spoiled.

The dark presence that was there among the rocks made me want to get away, back to my shore, back to the cabin; what I felt was not quite fear, but I knew it could become fear at any moment, and I began to row back. I started rowing without deciding to start, continued without deciding to continue. Rowing was occurring, my body was making the effort, but I was not the captain. My awareness was taken up with fighting off the dread.

A wind had come up without my noticing it, and I don't know how long it took me to realize I was not getting any farther away from the rocks. For a while I simply registered that fact without thinking about what it might imply.

Then I woke up, I guess. Something shifted. I thought ahead, saw myself blown across the pond to the other shore, where I would land with no food, no tools, no possessions except the shorts and old T-shirt I was wearing. Not even shoes. I would be unable to walk far, unable to make a fire, without shelter, without food...not good, not smart at all. I began to row faster and harder, on purpose this time, really putting my back into it, watching the rocks to see if I was moving away from them, back the way I had come. At first I thought I was making progress, but the wind became stronger and I couldn't move the raft. I kept rowing but I was getting tired, and I found myself thinking about giving in, letting myself drift. I tried to come up with a way to anchor my raft to the rocks, where I did not want to be, but they were round and smooth and I had no rope with me anyway, even if I could have tied up to them. If I couldn't do that, I would have to drift to the opposite shore and wait there as long as it took for the wind to die down, or shift to the other direction. Probably overnight. And then what if the next day's weather was the same?

That was not a chance I could take.

There was only one possibility left, and I took it. I laid down the boards I was using for oars, pulled off my T-shirt and shorts, and rolled off the raft into the water. It was cold only at first. I held onto the raft with one hand and looked around. No telling how far the shore was, but the rocks were nearby. I kicked the raft away from me and swam to the rocks because I had no choice, scrambled around on their underwater smoothness until I found a place where I could sit without sliding off, but the sitting was hardly a rest. I was certain that the rocks

were aware and watching me. I felt that if I did slide off them, and down into the water among them, I would never come back up. The raft without me on it didn't catch the wind; it drifted nearby, useless.

The wind was making me chilly, and I tried to keep as much of me below the surface as I could. At water level I surveyed the world. Rock, water, sky, forest. This would be an appropriate place to die, I thought. And was this the day? Had the visitor that never showed its face come to free me from myself, to give me my ticket to leave this world?

But I thought of you and it wasn't time yet.

"All right, then." I said the words aloud, was surprised to hear myself speak. What did I mean, all right?

I meant surrender. Which meant swim, and what would happen would happen. I eased myself into the water and began swimming toward the shore, doing the crawl, knowing that I couldn't keep it up long enough to get there. Momentarily, getting away from the rocks eased something in my chest.

Soon I grew tired and turned over on my back, paddling my feet enough to stay afloat between water and sky, staring up at all that air, miles deep, enough air for everything on earth to breathe, and some of it was still coming into my lungs and would keep coming as long as my mouth remained above the water that lapped at its corners and occasionally slid in. The same water formed the margins of my vision. Above me I could see the clouds flying slowly and silently, in formation, to the horizon and over it, held up by the air as the water held me up, for now, the clouds never noticing the naked man on the surface of a New Hampshire pond, who might live through the afternoon or die in the course of it, but who in either case would not be an event. Would slip beneath the surface, if he did, with no more fanfare than a loon makes going after a fish. Or climb out on the shore and go on with his day, do what needed to be done, because he would still be living and the living still have needs.

I turned over and began to do the crawl again. So it continued – float and swim, float and swim, in a kind of trance, to the point where both were too difficult, where my limbs were too heavy to move in any position and yet they continued to move, and beyond that, until when I turned over from floating and paddling on my back, I found that I was in water shallow enough for me to stand on the muddy, weedy bottom. I barely had the strength to walk up on the shore.

When I got my feet on dry land my knees went out from under me and I had to lie down in the weeds. I couldn't take another step. I lay there with my hand over my eyes, breathing the dryness of grass, and hearing the breeze pass through the trees above me. It felt as though my body had been poured on the ground to regain its solidity, to jell into its former self, and for a long time I didn't notice the small rocks and clods under my back; when I finally felt them, and adjusted myself to a more comfortable position, that was when I knew that I still survived. I moved a couple of stones out of the way and continued to lie there, aware now that I would get up in a while, and go inside the cabin, and live as if I hadn't almost died.

Gradually, without at first noticing that I noticed them, I realized that every once in a while I heard voices from inside the cabin. Female voices. I could not pick up the words but I could hear the intonation of the two who now and then spoke to each other, one grown up and one a child: a mother and daughter going about their day.

The visitors had come back in the daytime. At last. Who else could they be but who I wanted them to be, what else would make any sense? And yet – your little sister, if she had actually existed in this life, would be a woman by now, and one of those voices was unmistakably that of a girl. If it was she, if it was Carol and Ilana in the cabin, I was somewhere in the past.

I strained to hear their words, but couldn't. Which past was I in? Did I even exist for them, or was this the other world after I died in the forest, in which I would terrorize them by appearing in the doorway, returned from the dead? I remembered I was naked, and any clothes I possessed were inside the cabin – if I still had any possessions – so I

could only come as an unexpected apparition if I showed myself at all. But there was no question that I would; I had not waited years for this moment to let it pass me by. Here it was, the life that I had studied harder than my own, and now that the moment came I didn't know my lines. I didn't even know who they would think I was. I looked myself over, trying to gauge if I had somehow gotten younger, the right age to be the father of that girl inside. If they didn't know me...but I couldn't bear to think about that.

There was nothing to do but plunge forward into whatever life was being lived. I got to my feet unsteadily, my legs still shaky under me, and tried to brush off the grass stems and bits of dirt that clung to my back. How much less auspicious could it get than to appear in the doorway naked and dirty? I thought of taking a dip in the pond to wash myself off, but it was muddy near the shore and I was sure I'd drown if I tried to swim another stroke.

I tried to hold myself straight and pull in my all-too-obvious stomach as I came up the little path worn in the grass from the pond's margin to the screen porch. It's all right, I told myself, they expect you to be here, they take you for granted, though I had no way of knowing if that was true. I had almost reached the screen door when I dimly saw Ilana sitting inside the shadowy cabin, reading an ancient comic book that had lived there forever, and she looked up and saw me approaching. She gave me a look as if I were a misbehaving child. "Dad!" she said, reprovingly. "What happened to your *bathing* suit?"

I entered the screen porch, half-blinded by the moment, thanking God that she knew me, that my nakedness did not horrify her or violate the rules of this family that was mine and yet not mine. "It's in the pond somewhere," I said. "It came off while I was swimming. It wasn't tied tight enough, I guess."

"Dad," she said as if I was completely hopeless.

Carol appeared out of the bedroom in a bathing suit, fastening up her hair in a white elastic. "What?" she said, frowning a little. "Are you okay?"

I couldn't speak right away. It was Carol, in her mid-forties, the age she was when I moved to Boston. Strong and still beautiful; I could see in her the Carol I had first met, my lover, my young wife, your mother, everyone she had been in my life. I saw that by then she had grown undeniable, taking her place in the world, as I had not. I was nothing in particular and she was exactly, even triumphantly, herself.

"I'm fine," I managed. "I just lost my suit." How could she not notice I was too old to be who she thought I was? Did I look this old even then?

"Better get dressed before Carrie and Adam come back." Carrie? I thought. Who in the world is that? Must be your girlfriend, so then how old were you, sixteen? Seventeen? Making Ilana eleven or twelve...and you, when you returned, would be the Adam who grew up with both a father and a mother, a different Adam to whom I would be a different father and perhaps a better one...or perhaps there was a different father – why had I not thought of this? – a Nick-of-this-world, who was out somewhere and would return any minute, perhaps with you, Adam, and all would be plunged into confusion, perhaps horror – I imagined the happy family, implacable in its solidarity, inflicting some savage punishment on me, the interloper, the impostor, invader of the home.

"Don't forget about that corn that Arne promised us," she said, taking a Diet Coke out of the fridge.

"Oh...yeah." What about it? Was I supposed to go get it from him? Or pick it? And how could I find out without giving myself away?

Carol looked at me more closely, pursing her lips in an appraising fashion. "You look like you need a nap, hon."

"I guess I do," I said sheepishly.

"Sweetheart, you want to go for a swim?" she said to Ilana.

"In a minute," Ilana said without looking up.

"Haven't you read that Archie comic a hundred times?"

"It's *okay*, Mom," Ilana said in the voice of one whose patience is perpetually tried.

"Where are my water shoes?" Carol said. I wasn't sure if it was to me or not. "Have you seen them?"

"No, sorry," I said. At least it wasn't another thing I should be expected to know, but they would keep coming up, detail upon detail of shared life about which I knew nothing, and I would be exposed for certain before the day was out, they would know that I was here in ignorance and sentimentality, pressing my nose against the glass of their everyday life, a contemptible voyeur, to be cast out like any other pollution from this life that had no need of me...I began to feel hot with shame. It was a warm day anyhow, but I was suddenly hotter than I should have been indoors, out of the sun. I felt a wave of faintness and thought that the exhaustion of my long swim had caught up with me again, that I might find myself on my knees in front of them, and then I

saw the beginnings of the glow. The heat was coming from Carol and Ilana, or through them, and I saw an orange spark wink in and out of life on Ilana's wrist and I knew who, or what, they were. I didn't want to see them transform, see my comeuppance so thrust in my face, and I turned away but before I could take a step to leave the cabin they were in front of me again, featureless outlines orange in their shimmering heat that beat at me in waves, the orange growing paler as they became still hotter, more deadly, and I was naked and without defense. As I fell to the floor I felt them multiplying, surrounding me on all sides, white-hot, and I knew that in moments I would shrivel like an ant burning in the tiny sun thrown by a cruel magnifying glass.

When I came to myself it was dusk; I was alone in the cabin; every muscle ached, and I dragged myself to the bed and slept.

By the time I awoke this morning the sun was well up; a night had passed without my ever seeing the darkness. I made some coffee and sat down on the screen porch, and out in the pond I can still see the speck which I know to be my raft, with my clothes marooned on it. As if I left myself drifting out there, for good.

This will be my last day here. It's time for me to go home. By the time you get here and read this I should be back where you would expect me to be. I have to look for a job, if there are any for people my age. I have to continue what I will never finish, trying to learn how to love. I have to face Alicia, say what I should have said long ago, I have to take whatever she says or does then, whether it's love or hate, or even, hardest of all, if it's both. If she's still speaking to me, I have to tell her, too, the whole truth. I have to wait for you to read this and hear what you will say then. Maybe I will even have to send it to you to make sure you get it. Because I have to remember to live this particular life as directly as possible, firsthand, from day to day to day.

I'll collect my clothes and my trash, put the shutters over the windows, hide the key under the usual rock, get in the car and crawl back up the dirt road with the branches scratching the paint on each side. I'll feel the pond receding behind me, the loons and the herons, the rocks where I didn't die after all, the trees on the opposite shore where I didn't end up stranded without shoes or a pocketknife. I'll feel the cabin behind my back, lost in the trees almost at once even if I look in the mirror, it too receding into memory or incredulity – did that really happen? The visitors gone, the cabin only in this one world, the

burning woman's errand to me finally accomplished; at last she has driven me, once and for all, out of the past and into today.

So this is for you, Adam. With my love. I know I can't bring back the years that should have been different. All I can offer you is this: I have tried to tell how it really happened, as clearly as I can. There is nothing now that you don't know about me; you know things I didn't know myself, before I began to write this. This is your father's life, which I hope to continue a while longer. Beauty persists in this falling and fallen world, and if there is not forgiveness in it as well, what else could have kept me going this long?

Even now that I'm at the very end, I find myself filled with doubt. I still wonder if it wouldn't be kinder, more conducive to your happiness, to keep all this to myself, and then I wonder if that's an excuse to avoid being judged by you. I think of how terrible it is to be lied to, and how I cannot be sure, after all, if I have managed to unlie at every step of the way. Despite all my resolve, I cannot take you to each moment of the past, I cannot share the experience with you no matter what words I choose, I cannot let you stand there and judge it for yourself, I cannot be anything but myself now remembering, for better or worse. Even if my memories are themselves less than true, who knows anymore the truth of those past moments, and was there ever one? Or was there always only the telling, the way my mother told the police what happened and for everyone but us, ever after, it was true?

All I can hope is that you will understand why I have told you all this, why I have to take my chances on what you'll think of me after you read it. That you will understand how much I don't want my burdens to become yours in some altered form. Maybe they never would have been, but I can't take that risk. For me, the only cure for dreaming is to dream it all the way to the end; and I hope I have done that at last, so that my secret underlife will not live on to dream you. Because you are my real hope: you, and your new life, at the beginning of a new world. It was in that hope that we named you Adam.