

TALES OF LIGHTNING
AND OF THUNDER

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by

Victoria Bennett

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Jason is small, a tiny baby. He sucks on his curled fist, and then in irritation with the confines of his crib, shakes his head angrily to and fro, working up to a cry. His fist uncurls and splays itself outward in a taut exclamation of five tiny fingers, exploring, while the other hand waves his crib toy back and forth. He makes a mewling sound like a newborn kitten; one of the big shapes moves closer and hovers, answering his call with some vague and soothing sound. Jason sounds his call again, pettish and quarrelsome, venting the wrath he feels at what seems to him some equally big discomfort, maybe more than one, on the big shadow which stands over him.

He has begun to learn that in his small kingdom he had better be ready to fight with his lungs and tiny flailing limbs for peace once he has initially opened battle, because he will be lifted up, made uncomfortable by being disrobed, cleaned up, and resettled, or perhaps will have a warm something put in his mouth which he mumbles in his toothless gums and obtains some comfort and liquid from. This in turn eases the feeling in his middle for a while, until the next time one or both of these things happen. Then, he will be forced to make his will clear again. There is no real peace in life for a monarch who has to be overcome by his attendants in order for them to carry out what his genuine desires are, if they can guess them. And Jason, almost as with cunning, is good at keeping them guessing.

* * *

Playing with blocks, Jason St. John is growing bored, bitterly bored. He has had a cold all week, and the cold has kept him indoors from the chill wind and the blowing snow, and the fun

of tumbles in it all, which is what he has persuaded himself, in his irritable condition, that he would prefer.

"But Mama, why not?" he again echoes his question of fifteen minutes ago to the kitchen, where his mother is taking her turn at preparing the organic baby food for his little sister, Magda. He knows that sheer persistence will sometimes gain him his goal with her if he wears her down enough, since she has had her second child in five years. She and not his father has kept the majority of the late night vigils with his baby sister, though such was not the case with him. He does not reason to himself as well that Magda, four years and nine months his junior, is also sick with a bit of his cold. In fact, he only offers his harassment of his mother through a kind of instinct, knowing that she is busy and that when she is busy, she is often abstracted and preoccupied with his annoying sibling, and is more likely to give way. For his little sister does annoy Jason, there is no doubt about it.

Just now, for instance, as his mother calls back to him "What's that, sweetie?" his little sister is competing for air space by crying a reedy cry of her own, waiting for lunch time and her puréed vegetables and breast milk.

"I *said*," he yells out angrily, "I don't see why I can't go outside now. I'm well."

Firm but weary, his mother comes as far as the door of the room, blender in one hand and spatulate spoon in the other and answers, "And *I* said 'no,' Jason. It's storming outside today, and you're not well enough to go outside. After all, you didn't go to kindergarten today either. Why don't you read the new book Auntie Julie bought you? What is it? *The Boy with the Magical, Musical Mirror?* That sounds like a good one." She tries to sound encouraging, but Jason is not having any of that.

"Because Dad said he was going to read it to me. He said he was coming back early tonight just so that he could read to me." He glares at the doorway where she has disappeared. Unexpectedly, she surprises him by sticking her head back in the room. He tries to rearrange his expression to something less antagonistic, just in case she is wavering, but all she does is express doubt by looking at him as if she wonders whether or not he is being quite truthful. He apparently passes the test.

"Your father said that? I wonder why he didn't tell me." To herself, as she walks back into the kitchen, she murmurs, "God, that means dinner, too."

Missing this aside, Jason roars, fully in a bad temper now that there is no chance of building a snowman, "Because he's not going to read to you!" Extending first one leg and then the other with a snap, he kicks his blocks across the room and starts to howl, in a louder and stronger version of his baby sister, who has taken offense at the noise and begins to express her own grievances in a like cadence.

"Damn it!" His overwrought mother gives way to the pleasure and comfort of the only expletive which passes even for a moment by her ever active sensor. "I can't do everything! Jason, shut up!" She jerks him up to his feet by one arm and propels him forward toward his room at the rear of the one-story house, and plops him down on his bed. "Sit there! Lie there! Stay still at least until I get your sister fed and asleep, and then I'll deal with you." Since this does not sound particularly promising in the way of a treat or an entertaining commitment, Jason cowers and whimpers as if beaten, and his mother's face jerks awry with guilt. But just as he is almost sure that he has got her this time, the telephone rings. She points one finger at him and says with authority, "Stay there!" then goes to answer.

"Alison. Hello. He said what? Well, but he told Jason he was coming home for dinner and to read to him." She pauses. "Yes, if he's got a minute; if you're sure he's got a minute. Just a second, Alison, my baby is raising a fuss. Let me get her by me; that's better. Yes, shh! No, Alison, I was talking to Magda. Three months as of last week. Oh, okay. Hi, hon. Jason said you were coming home early tonight to read to him, and I guess he thought for dinner as well. Well, *I* certainly thought for dinner, but if not—no, I can eat alone; it's gotten to be a regular thing, hasn't it? Well, it does save me the effort of cooking anything fancy, but it would be nice to have some adult companionship that doesn't revolve around play dates and—no, I can hold." As she is nuzzling the baby's neck to keep her quiet around the phone, she catches a whiff of the fresh, overwhelming, appealing odor of baby skin and baby powder there, and suddenly starts to cry.

Jason, who has disobeyed and crept to the door of his room to watch her at her post down the hall from him, is alarmed by this abrupt transition from disapproving and possibly punitive adult to someone expressing herself in the language of his own world. His lip quivers; melting with wild regret at having tormented her, he runs down the hall, grabs her around the legs, and adds his voice to her own.

"What the hell is going on there?" asks the thrice-bewildered father, as he hears not only his son and his daughter crying now as if attempting each to best the other, but also his wife weeping and trying to stop. "Here, Holly, let me talk to Jason a sec, okay?" Still wiping her eyes with the end of her hand, the arm of which is wrapped securely around baby Magda, she extends the phone to her son with the other, and smiles a weak sort of encouragement at him. "What's up, Jas?" he asks, intending to nip some part of the revolution in its bud, and imagining that his son is the best place to start.

But the former dignitary of the playroom is distraught for reasons that go beyond his own discomfort now, and he can only pinpoint them with a partial accuracy. "Oh, Daddy," he whines in his babyish way, none the less real for being a bit due to his incarceration, "Mommy said 'Damn!' And it's my fault. And Magda's," he adds, not to be entirely self-sacrificing. "But mostly mine," he owns up, handsome in confession as he conceives his father to be on the occasions when he has heard his father apologize.

His mother accidentally allows a stifled sound to escape her that sounds to Jason something like the giggling sound he himself makes when tickled; to his astonishment, a merry sound from his father's end of the line is equally choked off. He looks at his mother, the only one of the two of them whom he can see, with dawning suspicion. But she is watching him with grave attention.

His father clears his throat. "That's what it is, is it?"

Jason at first nods, forgetting that his father cannot see him; then, he says, "Yes, I guess that's what it is." Keeping one weather eye cocked on his mother, he waits for his father's verdict. He is used to the two of them trading off disciplining responsibilities by this time, and knows that an offense against his mother brings his father down on him just as surely as the reverse would be true had he injured his father likewise.

"Well, now what do you think you should do about that?" asks his father in a conversational manner which does not deceive his son. It is still a question of punishment or reprieve.

"Say 'I'm sorry,'" Jason intones dutifully in a sort of droning voice.

"Okay, how about saying so right now, okay? I'll see you later, probably in time for dinner, tell your mom. 'Bye now.' And his father's voice breaks off with a sudden click.

"I'm sorry, Mom. Dad says he'll be back for dinner. Prolly, anyway. I mean, that's not why I'm sorry. I'm sorry because—because—" but Jason has lost the thread of his argument.

"That's okay, Jason. Just try to play quietly while I get your sister fed and asleep. Then we'll talk about what to have for dinner with Dad, okay? You can help me plan the menu."

Jason is a little fuzzy on just exactly what planning the menu consists in, but from other times when he has assisted in this activity, it appears to mean being allowed to mess around with his mother's food and cutlery arrangements on the table. This seems like an agreeable substitute for going outside, so he sits and waits patiently at the table, staring at his little sister while his mother feeds her and wipes her face and hands.

"Why does she do that?" he asks, as Magda sticks her tongue out through her tiny rosebud lips several times and then spits out some food.

"Well, she's tasting the food and learning what she likes and doesn't like. Then, she needs to be burped, and I didn't get to it soon enough," his mother explains as she places Magda against the cloth on her shoulder and gently pats the baby's back.

"Maybe she just doesn't like the food," Jason theorizes. "Everything all mashed up like that, I mean."

"That's the only way babies can digest food this early. You ate it too, and you also spat up food when we burped you."

Jason flushes and says, "No! Bet I didn't!"

"Oh yes," his mother says, smiling at him, "bet you did!"

He ponders this, chin on hand, while his mother and Magda finish up the ritual of early dinnertime and diaper check before bed. Jason watches his mother take the baby to the nursery and lolls his head around the door while she hums the infant to sleep. Then Holly, returning to a

much earlier cup of coffee left sitting on the kitchen counter half-drunk, takes it with her and sits down at the table across from Jason's newly resumed seat. "What shall we fix for your father for dinner?"

"Hot dogs! And marshmallows. Please, Mom, please, can we?" Already sensing that this is not going to be something easy to persuade his mother to serve on a windy, snowy day, Jason revs up his begging mode and twists his expression into the appropriate shape to signify deep sincerity.

"Well—" his mother says. "How would it be if Dad and I had shrimp and pasta with peas and you had franks and beans and a little salad?"

"That sounds great! Well, except for the salad." Jason expends further thought on this as his already weary mother takes a few moments' breather. "What's shrimp?" he asks.

"It's a type of seafood, my love. Dad and I have had it before, remember? It comes in a little shell, which you remove, and you cook it and eat it."

Bearing in mind recent information relating to his own early eating habits, Jason asks with caution, "Do I like it?"

Holly responds, "I don't know. Would you like to try it? You do like fish sticks, although it's not the same thing at all. I guess you're old enough to try a few shrimp. Shall I save you out a few?"

Attempting a negotiation, Jason answers, "If I do, do I still have to have the salad?"
"Yes, I'm afraid the salad is a definite item on your menu. If you want franks and beans, that is."

Jason scowls, but remembering his previous bad behavior which evidently had caused his mother to cry, he says with a touch of bad grace, "O-kay....but if I don't like the shrimps, do I have to eat all of them?"

"For heaven's sake, Jason. No, if you try one and you don't like it, your father and I will finish them. But if franks and beans is your main menu, with or without shrimp you have to have a salad. Now! Our menu is planned. Let's get started, your father will almost certainly be here in an hour. Come and help me set the table. We'll do that first, since none of our items will take that long to cook."

Holly sticks a bottle of chardonnay in the refrigerator door to get chilled, and begins to hand down the dishes and cutlery for Jason to place on the table. He does this haphazardly with regard to the cutlery, and his mother makes a final surreptitious sweep around the table, exchanging the places of knives for forks, and also divesting Jason of the adult-sized spoon which he has awarded himself. His father appears to be the holder of the honor of the child spoon with its ornamented handle, which she restores to its rightful place at the side of Jason's plate. But Jason catches this last move, and shrieks almost loudly enough to wake the baby, which makes his mother hiss "Jason! Shhh! Don't make so much noise!" at him.

"But I want Dad to have that spoon! He never gets to eat with it!" His face puckers up in threat of tears.

"Honey, that's because your father has a bigger mouth than you do. This spoon is too little for him. *Please* be a good boy and don't scream like that. If you wake the baby up now, I won't be able to get her to sleep again for hours."

Jason once more recalls his recent bad behavior, and though he wears a frown, it is more of an abstracted expression than a concentrated one. He shilly-shallies around the table, his finger

trailing absently across the arabesques and curlicues of the patterns on the cut-out embroidered tablecloth, one he especially likes, but which his mother rarely sets out except for special occasions. He knows that something is different about this evening, but cannot be certain what it is.

Holly could tell him, if it were appropriate, that it has been days since her husband got home in time for dinner; that it has been weeks, it seems, since he has paid her any attention barring appeals in bed at night for the most perfunctory sexual activity; that he insists it is work which is so pressing, but she is wondering if his growing family is driving him away instead: this would of course be partly his fault, since she did not bring about the family by herself, and she is getting damned tired of seeming to be held alone accountable for it. Holly could tell him this, that is, if he were an adult in whom she confided and she were able to articulate her emotional anger. As it is, her frustration is compounded of her own unreasoned and unreasonable anger at the father of her children for his share in their existence, and her more justifiable hostility because he seems to be avoiding his fellow inmates in the living incarceration of the household. She is kept even further bottled up and is therefore more explosive because she has no outlet for her fury, certainly not to be vented on her baby daughter or her young son, often though he seems to be inviting a spanking.

After all, Holly and her husband and their friends with whose children their children share play dates all remember spankings. Their own children are benefiting, they feel, from a gentler and more tolerant ethos which rejects corporal punishment in favor of reason. That does not change the fact that Holly's hand has often itched to give Jason a swift swat just where it counts to set him straight about who's boss, and she envies her parents, who seemed to feel no qualms about the justice of the cuff like that which a lion might give a cub who was out of line, just as a

reminder. Holly knows, of course, that at Jason's age reason is not his strong point, except when it can be bent in a truly Machiavellian way to serve his own interests: *that* he is good at. She regards this as the "touch of the apple" in him, since he has always seemed to be good at using his mind in ways which defy justice and his parents' comfort. For this reason, she misses the basting of the bum with her open hand all that much more, which after all did not seem to do her or her husband much harm in their own childhoods. She is uncomfortable about her gesture of half-lifting, half-propelling Jason down the hall to his bedroom today, however, because she is fearful of her husband Aaron's disapproval. Easy for him to object, she thinks. Still, there's always the possibility that in his eagerness to see his father at home, Jason will forget about reporting in his frequent blow-by-blow manner, connected by the everlasting words "and then."

For some reason, complaining in the parents' circle, a group of mostly women, two stay-at-home dads, and one married female-male outwardly gay couple who attend in turn is not the same as having a partner to complain to. Oh, they all tell horror tales of misbehaving children and toddlers, and commiserate and have social time together while one or two of them take a turn at minding whatever children are there. But out of necessity they must strive to maintain a lighthearted façade before the other parents, because no one wants to seem like a drag or take unfair advantage of their mutual bitching time. So, they have fancy cocktails made without alcohol and eat tiny sandwiches guaranteed to put the pounds on people who already cannot get time for enough solitary exercise. And they do this twice a week, in the early afternoons, unless several people have to cancel for other engagements. This involves the annoying problem of having to get in touch repeatedly, especially in the winter or when the children are passing some bug or other around in the group or at preschool or kindergarten. The best times they have as a group happen when for some reason or other the children are all in school and the adults can get

together and really behave like adults, joking with their joyful innuendos instead of having to use them as a sort of needful code against being overheard. So by and large, other parents are no help.

While she is mixing up the cheese sauce for the pasta and cutting franks into Jason's pot of beans on the stove, Holly thinks of these things, trying to marshal her arguments and laments in a reasonable order with which to face Aaron. She tells herself on the one hand that she does not want to make his first evening home in a week unpleasant; on the other hand, she rationalizes, after Jason goes to bed she might have her husband's full attention. And he does make the odd suggestion which, though odd, is often of some practical value.

"Dad's here!" Jason crows, then as Holly winces at the volume and he sees her, he says "Sorry." He dashes to the front door to greet his father.

"Tell him the baby's asleep, and you two try to play quietly," she cautions, hurrying to put the pasta in the boiling water, since everything else is nearly ready. Quickly she stirs the shrimp which she has shelled, cleaned and washed into the bubbling cheese sauce along with the frozen peas. Setting the timer for seven minutes for this and the small pasta shapes, she angles her cheek up to one side for the usual kiss when she hears Aaron approaching her there, his briefcase held up in the other hand.

"That smells good! What are we having?" he asks, putting his arm around her waist for good measure. It is this perpetual good mood of his, this complacent and happy good mood, tired and neglectful of her mood as it is, which helps to keep her on the simmer, but she stuffs down the emotion and answers him in a pleasant manner.

Not willing to be left out, Jason darts into the kitchen, nearly upsetting one of the dining room chairs, and throws himself on the affectionate scrum going on there, putting one arm around his mother's legs and the other around his father's.

"So, Jas, have you been a better boy recently than you were earlier today?" His father is jovial.

"Ye-es." Jason responds with some doubt, checking his mother's expression. She is putting things on the table, however, and does not respond to his look.

"Okay, you two wash up; we're ready to eat," she says. "And keep as quiet as possible; Magda is asleep down the hall."

"Yes, Jason said so. How's her cold today, any better?" asks Aaron over his shoulder as he pilots his son down the hall toward the bathroom.

"Better than it was last night. Jas's cold is clearing a little, too. Our major row today was because he wanted to go outside."

Holly wearily plops down at the table without waiting for her husband and son. As she does, she hears Aaron say, "Now, you know better than to tease your mother about something like that when she's concerned for your health, my lad. Here, put your hands all the way under the water then soap them up a lot. Follow the rules and you'll get along in life." But she only half hears the second part of this; the directive to put his hands under the water stirs in her a sudden recollection of the previous night, when she dreamed that her children were some of the few blessed by drinking The Magic Water. The dream is hazy and indistinct now, with only the emotional feeling of a rainbow fountain and a land something like that visited by the Good Ship Lollipop, except an adult version, with adult goals and aspirations reached and given reality. Then her analytical brain kicks in again, and she wonders what the mystical touch of The Magic

Water has to do with the following of rules, which her husband has just advocated to her son.

Maybe Jason's few problems are there because they're jerking him in two different directions, she thinks. The next instant her dinner companions are in their places, complete with joking reproaches about Mom starting without them. Her husband raises his glass of chardonnay to her, she responds by habit, then he sips and they start the meal.

She forgets about the dream entirely as they go through the evening at their usual pace, Jason kicking up a fuss about every mouthful of salad, his father insisting firmly, she just glad because she finally has some backup. Then, it's time for bed, for Jason at least, and they tuck him in and say good-night once his father has read him the prescribed amount from the book of his choice, which ("of course," thinks Holly) turns out to be different from the one he'd been shouting about during the afternoon. Both tired now, Aaron's weariness only having hit him after a generous amount of wine at dinner, they trail along to their long bedroom at the far end of the house, to one side of Magda's nursery. There, as they are sitting in their armchairs on either side of the gas fireplace, she looks at him quizzically.

"What? Do I have something of Jason's in my hair or something? A couple of his stuffed animals are shedding, you know."

"I know." She pauses. "I had an odd dream last night."

He is not really interested, but is too tired to resist the pressure and makes the standard response. "Do tell."

"Well, I can't remember all of it. Only, Jason and Magda—and Magda was just as she is now, only she stuck her head under the spout like she knew what she was doing—"

"Back up. What spout?"

"There was a well, or a spring, or something, called The Magic Water. You know, remember that place we went in France on our honeymoon, where the town spring was called 'La Source,' and everyone went there to fill up their jugs and canisters?"

He sighs and smiles. "There are probably a hundred towns in France like that."

"Yes, well I most likely dreamed about that one. Anyway, drinking from it was supposed to make them extra smart and extra gifted, kind and tolerant, and ensure a safe passage through childhood and adulthood to old age, and a calm and peaceful death. But it looked like an idyllic place, really an exaggerated version of that beautiful natural scene in the small town we visited, glowing in the summer sun with gold and green, and bright blue skies with white and puffy clouds—"

Abruptly tired of listening but not wanting to admit it, Aaron says, "Seems to me you recall a lot of it."

"No, I just remember that they both drank from it, and the atmosphere of the scene. Isn't that a weird dream?"

"Not at all. Everybody wants raising their kids well to be easier than it is." He thinks it has been enough to impart some little hint of logic to the story, but bethinks himself at the last minute of something else to say about it, something else to make it clear that he listened. "Maybe that wonderful, beautiful dream, in contrast with the reality of today's snowstorm and crabby kids, was part of what made your day so hard."

It's her turn to sigh. Leaning down to warm her hands before the gas logs, she says, "Oh, you're always so rational. Haven't you ever had a dream that filled you with—oh, I don't know, with—yearning? I mean, in the dream there was no question of *me* or *us* drinking from the well, so there was no selfish angle to it, really; it was just for the children."

"Yes," he pointed out, "but when it's a dream for other people's children too, then that's what makes it really altruistic."

A bit irritated now, she stares directly at him, but he's looking into the fire too, and does not acknowledge her angry look. "Surely you're not calling me selfish? And anyway, who's to say it wasn't a dream about everybody's children? In dreams, your own children can be emblematic of all children, and vice versa." She thumps back against her chair, disgusted.

"Okay, okay," he says in a soothing voice which never fails to annoy her further, "I wasn't insulting your dream, or making light of it. I was just thinking aloud."

"Well, I hope you don't secretly think of me as selfish, either. I suppose if you do, it's better, more honest, to say it aloud, but after all I do here, it isn't really fair. I'm the one who gave up my teaching career to stay with the kids, after all. And I'm the one who can't resume my career until they're both in school."

Now he's pissed off. "Holly, I really don't think such thoughts. But it would be easier to give you credit in my own mind as well as aloud for 'all you do here' if you didn't remind me of it so very often. Give a person a chance to feel grateful and appreciative, why don't you?"

After hearing this start to the old familiar argument—or rather, venting of hostilities, since it doesn't really begin or end anywhere, just trails through their days like a limp string dragged in front of a kitten to entice it to jump—Holly is the one who is sudden. She leaps up and goes into the other part of the room, where she grabs her nightgown and heads for the attached master bath. Aaron stays where he is, thankful that at least the conversation is over and he has time to relax before he need muster strength and ingenuity for an apology. For there's no denying that his regrets have to be expressed in an increasingly clever and yet sincere form to win Holly's grudging approval and forgiveness. He cannot think how things have come to this pass: the only

time Holly relents even slightly is when in front of the children. Even in bed at night, when he approaches her tentatively so that she will not wake up fully and be furious with him for wanting sex and affection, he is aware of a certain cold and indifferent quality to her manner. One night the previous week, she had roused enough to assume that he was making a sexual demand when he really only wanted to move closer into her body curve for comforting. She had obligingly but roughly grabbed his penis and started to jerk it back and forth in a parody of the inexperienced hand jobs he had gotten from a girlfriend when he was a teenager, and he had yowled with pain. Holly woke up fully then, but when she grasped the situation as well as his member, she had turned her back on him in a huff and there was no more chance to snuggle that night. They both were doing without adequate slumber, he had tried to tell her, because regardless of whether she went to feed and rock Magda back to sleep or get Jason a drink of water or whether he heated up bottled breast milk while standing in a stupor at the stove, they were both disturbed by the middle-of-the-night interruptions. But she seemed either not to hear him or to disregard his defenses and objections entirely, as if she were the only one inconvenienced. All in all, it had been an especially trying three months since Magda's birth, and he for one had had about enough. He had a cot in his office, which he had used occasionally when Jason was little, on nights when he had an especially important project to complete before dawn. But that had been in the heyday of their exhausted yet triumphant love affair with parenthood, and Holly had been in the cooperative spirit more often and more tolerant of the demands of his job. Now, the most he could do was to stretch out for an hour at lunch and get some rest after a bad night, instead of lunching with his colleagues or going out for a swim or a run. He is asking himself if he can at all possibly broach the subject of important away-from-home work and late nights staying over at the office with her when she sweeps back into the room.

"Okay, I'm ready," she states unexpectedly. She gestures briefly at the full-length nightgown, and Aaron can smell the perfume she uses on nights when they go out, which he can recognize at a sniff for the air of anticipation of a fine evening which it always arouses in him, long ago though the last of such evenings seems now. "Let's get it over with, I need my sleep," she continues in an undertone, as if not even speaking directly to him.

The dam bursts. All the pent-up frustration he has felt for weeks washes over him. "What the hell are you talking about?" he asks, as fierce as if he were a naïve believer and she had insulted his gods or his homeland.

"If you don't know, then why are you so defensive? C'mon, you've been at me in the middle of the night for weeks now when I'm trying to get some sleep, let's get it over with. Then maybe we can have a few restful nights for a change. Until the next time your horny devil rears his ugly head."

"Thank you for that clarification!" he snarls. "You've never made it so clear that you find me repulsive before! And thank you for the mistrust and the insult. Why doesn't it occur to you that I'm losing sleep too? That I'm tired at night too? That maybe all I want to do sometimes is get close to you and hold you?"

"Because it always seems to wind up with you getting your jollies while I'm trying to keep awake. I need more sleep!"

"So do I! But I need to touch you and get close and express affection too! And yes, some nights I want to make love to you. You're my wife, the only woman I can make love to, what do you expect?"

"I didn't realize that you were so eager to be out among the women! By all means, take your pick! Why not Alison, your model secretary? She always seems available, even when you're

not! Maybe she's up for it all the time, maybe that's why half the time she can't seem to find you, or says you're in a conference."

"I didn't mean what you're implying, and just you get your shrewish tongue off Alison! She's doing what she's supposed to be doing and taking my messages. Sometimes I'm out on a project and I *do* have meetings, and as long as you're going to take credit for being the mainstay of the household, you might as well do the job. I'm there for you when I can be, but tonight I really can't be; I deliberately took off so that we could have a nice dinner together and fall off to sleep together in a charitable mood, but I see that's all been a waste of my time. I'm going back to finish up what I was working on, and pray I can get it finished before nine a.m. tomorrow. The sooner I can get it in, the better for all of us. Maybe what you really need is some alone time in a bed that doesn't have another person in it bouncing around and tossing and turning."

"That's your idea of helping, leaving me alone with the kids all night and you not even in the house? And better for all of whom? Is that your childish idea of retaliation?"

"I'm not retaliating. If you recall, I sometimes worked at night when Jason was small. Until we have the money to build me a home office, I can't get much done here, and our evening hasn't worked out according to plan, so why not get my mind off it with work? I can at least do what I'm paid to do. Which is better for me and for you and for Peter at work and the team there. I have to be a team player, whether you do or not."

"Then go! Just go! And be damned to you! Not a team player—I like that! You don't know what goes on around here during the day."

"And you don't know what goes on around the office during the day, either. Too bad we can't change places for a few days and get some of the other person's perspective, just like we sometimes do in some of the departments at work. C'mon, Hol, let's not fight. We—"

Just then, a drowsy whine catches their attention. They both freeze; no fighting in front of the children, they have always agreed on that. A second later, the doorknob turns, and Jason walks in, rubbing his eyes and scowling at them. "Why are you guys yelling? You woke me up and made my cold worse."

"Honey," his mother envelopes him in her arms soothingly, all her anger seeming to evaporate, "we're sorry. Mommy and Daddy are trying to get our work schedules sorted out. We're sorry we woke you up. But why do you think we made your cold worse?"

"To punish me for being bad today?"

"No, Jas, we wouldn't do that. You know that's not how we discipline you. And anyway, what your mom meant was: why do you *think* your cold is worse? Are you hot, or thirsty, or what?" His father comes over now too, and puts a hand on Jason's forehead. "He is a little warm, Hol."

"My nose keeps running and then getting plugged up, and then running again. And I don't feel good."

"We'll see what we can do to make you feel better, sport. Hol, maybe some of the other medication this time."

"What did you give him at bedtime?"

"Nothing, just a drink of water. But last night, I gave him the cough syrup."

"So the fever reducer this time, then. I guess so. Jason, honey, here—blow your nose hard." His mother pulls several Kleenexes from the box and holds them close to the middle of his face. Obliging her, he blows several times. "Better?" she asks.

"Yes," he admits. In an effort to stay up longer with the grownups, he says discouragingly, "But it won't stay that way."

"Now, Jas, you've got a box of tissues in your own room, and you know how to use them," his father points out. "Your mother needs to get some sleep. And so do you. Let's go, m'boy, to the cupboard with you for some medicine, and then back to sleep." His father sweeps him up in his arms and prepares to carry him back to bed. Jason giggles. "Hol, don't wait up, I'll get him back into dreamland. I guess I won't be going anywhere else tonight."

"That's okay, take off when you get him tucked in. I can manage." He looks at her warily, as if distrusting this sudden about-face, but she leans in and kisses first Jason's shoulder where his arm is wound about his father's neck, and then her husband's cheek. "Truce. After all, I can get *some* rest here; you're the one proposing to lose a whole night to work. And I have parents' group tomorrow, and it's not my turn to watch the kids, so I'll get some adult contact."

He meets her eyes, smiling at her with gratitude, then says, "So you *are* a team player. Let's hold it together, Hol, school's coming up sooner than you think." He pauses. "Do you really think Jason is well enough to go to the group with you tomorrow?"

"Yes!" shouts Jason, interrupting his parents' colloquy. He prefers the days off from kindergarten which he can spend playing with younger children and awing them with his older child's tricks, especially since it so rarely occurs. He by and large is a healthy child who roisters his way through kindergarten politics and teachers' prohibitions with ease, and so goes there most of the time. The only time these days that he gets to go to the occasional parents'-group play-dates with his mother is when he is convalescent and no longer contagious, or during the summer.

"We'll see, Jas. Remember—don't pester your mother tomorrow, okay? I'm counting on you, son. I'll put you in the corner myself when I get home if you've been a problem." Aaron returns

his wife's salute on the cheek, and then the two males of the family head off down the hall together, the younger cozily perched in the elder's treetop-like embrace.

Holly watches them from the doorway. As they disappear into Jason's room, she hears Jason ask in clear, ringing tones, "What's truce, Dad? And adult contac'? And teen player? Is that something I get to do when I'm a teenager?"

"Shh!" his father responds. "Don't wake Magda up. You can ask questions tomorrow."

Holly rolls her eyes at this delay of annoyance, since it will fall to her lot to answer if it comes up again. She steps a few paces farther down the hall to eavesdrop on the rest of the conversation.

"But I'll forget by tomorrow," Jason wheedles. "C'mon, Dad, tell me what stuff means."

"If you forget by tomorrow, then it wasn't very important," his father unhelpfully answers, preventing Jason from clinging to his presence. Holly wonders at the dutiful "Okay," which follows, and wonders also why it is that her son will accept this treatment from his father, but rarely from her. Though it's 1985 and she is a thirty-year-old woman who thinks of herself as a fairly good feminist, she cannot help but speculate whether or not it's the male authority influence over a younger male which helps her husband, unequal though this seems.

She continues to idle near the boy's room, listening to his attempted but useless manipulations of his father. This, for some unknown reason, soothes her, much as she wishes that her son displayed less of the politician and more of the innocent. Yet every moment, she is touched anew by his eager faith in his father's reassurances, which is certainly naïve enough. Again for a motive which is unclear to her, when she hears Aaron preparing to leave his son's room, she backs off quietly, back to her own bedroom door. It could be because she is expecting to round their earlier disagreement off with some more approachable and affectionate exchanges, or it

could be because Jason sees so little of his father that she does not want to appear to hog that time too. She always promises herself to think these things through on her own, so that at least her own failings and insights do not become words-as-weapons in her tussles with Aaron. She likewise always intends to do better, and not to have fights with him over things they have already agreed about beforehand, or about things which neither of them can prevent or help. Her thinking time, however, seems to flee away strangely even when Jason is in kindergarten and she only has baby Magda to attend to, and the washing and the cleaning and the cooking. She has found that meaningless though these tasks are except as a sacrifice she more or less willingly makes for her family (barring the occasional revolt when it's all too much), she cannot most of the time both think straight and occupy her hands with them. She needs time and peace and quiet to do any productive thought, and there has been precious little of these in her life of late.

Tiptoeing out of Jason's room as the child's head turns wearily into the pillow and Jason begins the soft whuffling noise that represents his breathing with a cold, Aaron shakes his head to himself at the way his son tries to get his own way so often. He suspects that Jason, fresh and new to life as he is, frequently plays his tricks off on his mother, and that that is what has made him so proficient. He wishes that Holly would be sterner with their son, whose mental acumen makes his father fearful as well of his son's future course. But whereas Holly concerns herself with the harm to Jason himself if he learns to manipulate people well, Aaron thinks of his son's standing in any eventual community which finds him a rascal and an attempted cheat. One is a moral issue, the other is a societal one, though when they discuss this, which has become a more and more common activity lately, they also discuss how these concerns dovetail into one. They are waiting to see if any of his teachers at kindergarten notice this trait, but Jason's "cover" seems

safe with them, burdened as they are with the many, though the many in this case consists of the relative few to be found in a better private kindergarten.

Holly turns toward the gas fire, and waits with her back toward the door, as if to assure Aaron that he has had his private time alone with their son. He takes the opportunity to approach without fear of rejection this time and place his arms around her waist from behind.

"Okay, Hol," he says. He nuzzles her neck gently for a moment, short enough in duration not to get anything started, but long enough to reassure her of his continued love for and attraction to her. For her part, she leans into the caress and places her hands around him, squeezing his buttocks toward her once swiftly, then letting him go.

She turns and says, "Head out, sweetheart, before it gets much later. And try to sneak a nap in at the office if you get a chance tomorrow. Maybe we can have an early night tomorrow night; or maybe later this week." She kisses him full on the lips, suddenly not being willing to make do with a quick peck on the cheek. He kisses her again, then pulls away and picks up his briefcase from where it has been lying, propped against the armchair in which he was previously sitting. He thinks to himself in passing that it's lucky Holly's aggravated attention had overlooked the prominence of the briefcase in their bedroom; he had had a plan to sneak back downstairs and work at the kitchen table once she had fallen asleep, unsatisfactory as that workspace is. This is now an unnecessary stratagem. He feels a little guilty because he has succeeded in clearing the needed time for work, but is sensible enough to acknowledge that the family's budget depends on him, and he needs to finish the project. No time for regrets about something that has turned out basically for the best.

"Do you want me to pack you a quick breakfast and lunch, or can you grab something? Be sure to eat something, anyway." It's been a long time since Holly took enough interest in his career to offer to pack him a lunch. She pats his arm.

"No, it's okay, I can get a quick meal or two in town. I should be able to finish this project by tomorrow evening, so if you want I can pick us up something at that good Chinese place, the one we tried about a month ago. Give me a call around four, okay?" He chuckles her chin. "And don't let Alison's professional manner discourage you—just tell her I told you to call."

"Oh, wonderful! I really liked that place, and so did Jason—thank goodness he isn't a picky eater. It's not that I mind cooking usually, it's just a bit tricky with Jas under the weather and being so demanding. And there's always Magda. Oh, that would be perfect!" She follows him slowly as he makes his way down the hall to the living room closet, where his boots, coat, and other winter gear were left. With some hesitation and not wanting to lose their sudden accord, they part, hugging one more time at the door before Aaron steps outside into the frosty winter night.

* * *

Holly St. John looks at herself in the mirror. She and Aaron are at odds more often than not these days, especially since Magda is now eight and in the second grade and Holly has still not gone back to any form of work outside the home, which she had always told Aaron was what she longed passionately to do. She has in the past made him quite miserable (and herself as well) with her longings for the days before the children came, when they were both well-employed and bringing in a salary which allowed them to buy their house. She thinks it is the longing for an earlier self which must have driven her; it is certainly that which drives her now, as she looks at her ungainly figure and tells herself that it cannot be as hard as all that to lose a little weight.

Over the intervening years between the days when Jason was in kindergarten and the present, the desserts in particular have come to mean more to her than Aaron's caresses: the flans, the shortbread cookies, the trifles, the truffles, the fudges, the puddings, the pies. Actually, it has not been so much that his caresses did not matter, as that they were not accessible at the hours when she became most nervously self-aware and likely to need something to fill her time. It could have been a hobby, had she been so inclined, or a sport like jogging or aerobics: unfortunately, it had been something which regularly struck when she was downtown near the cafés and restaurants. She could always persuade herself that her short walk could work off the calories from some lavish dessert (or two) and a coffee or cappuccino.

She says to herself that thirty-seven isn't so very old these days, and men still give her occasional glances on the street when she isn't slumping along in her casuals and walking shoes. Even then sometimes some men look, but some men, she tells herself to restore the balance to reality, will look at anything. What they usually seem to be noticing is her still attractive facial features and her lovely auburn mane of hair, their interest gliding away a bit as their vision glides further down past her torso. She thanks her father's mother for the inheritance she passed on of a nice bustline, since Holly's mother was flat-chested and her maternal grandmother at a young age ample but droopy. Yes, the bust is still mainly in shape. And to be perfectly fair, she also tells herself, her butt is big and round, her thighs hams, but shapely still.

When she first started getting bigger, Aaron had remarked on it in a friendly, affectionate way which annoyed her and later soothed her, as she got bigger still. She managed to persuade herself it was just baby weight she had not taken off yet. The occasional resolution to lose weight has resurfaced now and again, but has never lasted for this long so far. Now for a week at least she has been having her coffee black with Splenda at home, and forgoing the pastries and

delights of a walk downtown. She hopes someday to be able to go back into some of the little cafés and order just fancy coffee and maybe a fat-free, sugar-free cookie, which they do have, but which she finds tasteless and dry. After all, it's boring and depressing to spend so much empty time at home. Once Magda has been dropped off at school, which is only two blocks away (in a safer time, she really could have walked), Holly starts the household chores and since she keeps them up regularly, they are soon done. At least she has not gotten lazy. But for some reason, even though all the diet books say that household chores count as exercise, they never seem to do her any good as a weight loss maneuver.

When Aaron first brought up the question of her returning to work, he had suggested that she get together with her old group of friends at the high school to discuss what possibilities were available, try to network with them and find something through a friendly recommendation. She had gone so far as to call Fionna Bracey, her one-time best friend at work who had taught the other English literature section. They got together over coffee, predictably at one of the coffee shops in town nearest the school, and Holly told herself that since she was exploring job opportunities, it was no time to hold back on the hospitality. She bought both Fionna and herself chilled lattes with whipped cream and mud turtle brownies. But all Fionna wanted to talk about was "the canon," which according to her was on its way out, and good riddance. As she pointed out, it was fine to teach some of the standard literary masterpieces, as long as they were generously and contrastingly supplemented with works by women and minorities, which had been too long neglected. Since Holly agreed with this remark wholeheartedly, she expressed her concurrence, only to find she had let loose a flood of misdirected hostility and rage. Fionna was having trouble with the school board over some of her choices. Not standard enough. Too mature for teenagers. Inappropriate for sexually mixed groups.

"For example," said Fionna, "that school board is still stuck on T. S. Eliot. The modernists, for godssake. Not that I wouldn't teach him at all, but I would add Zora Neale Hurston to the list, and they're sticking at that. She is a bit later, but straddles the modernist-postmodernist period nicely. And you know what I don't like about T. S. Eliot? His 'but.'"

This was seemingly said to shock, and since Holly heard it as "butt," and wondered at it, it was quite effective. "His 'butt'?" she queried in bewilderment.

"His 'but.' B-u-t. He clearly hates women and women's physicality. Well, just look at how he treated his wife!" This was said triumphantly, as if constituting final proof.

"I still don't quite understand," said Holly passing over this somewhat slanted view of Eliot's private life. In the back of her mind, some made-for-tv movie which took the same tack flew by, and she asked herself if maybe Fionna had seen it too.

"I'm talking about the 'but' in 'The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock.' Eliot says, and I quote, 'And I have known the arms already, known them all—/Arms that are bracelet and white and bare/(But in the lamplight, downed with light brown hair!)'. The 'but' suggests that the women are less sexually available and appealing because they have hair on their arms. A lot of women already shave their pits and legs to appeal to men, now Eliot comes along and wants hairless arms as well! That's what I call the outside of enough!"

Surprisingly, this outburst made Holly laugh, until she saw that Fionna was taking it in the wrong way, assuming that Holly was laughing at her, which possibly she was. But politeness prevailed, and she said supportively, "You tell them, Fi. It'll be a cold day in hell before I start shaving my arms, even for Aaron, whom I dearly love."

Fionna snorted at this collusion with the enemy, but since she herself bounced generously from man to man and occasionally woman, she really could not object. At any rate, all she had

to tell regarding the available teaching positions was their utter dearth in that particular school district. Later, apropos of nothing much, Holly realized that if Fionna had not been so angry, she herself could have pointed out that the poem by Eliot was dramatic, not lyric, in nature, and very unlikely from that perspective to be an utterance of Eliot himself rather than of a character, though critics had historically been uncertain as to what to do with the impassioned and agonizing "I should have been a pair of ragged claws" passage. The next minute, she put the whole thing out of her mind, as being likely to be of use only if she ever got a chance to be in front of a class, teaching Eliot, again.

Having time to ask herself the question, time that she must also in guilt admit now is stolen from the time she "owes" to working for her family outside the home, she asks herself "What would make me truly happy?" But there is no immediate answer to this soul-searching question, though she can relax a little better when she actually clears the space from her mind to think about it. The comforting blank stays there in the front of her brain, in the back of her awareness, in the midst of her speculations, until such time as she reluctantly gets up out of her loveseat or chair or off the bed to do a few necessary chores or pick up Magda or make dinner for the family. If only kids could grow up more quickly, in a year or two, and she had not taken so much time off to see to their development! She and Aaron had agreed ahead of time, however, that they neither of them wanted their children raised during the infancy and toddler years by nannies or daycare workers. It had been one of the several privileges of their relatively high social standing in the middle class to do as they (thought they had) chosen, only to find that Holly's time away had made her a stranger to both the workforce and to some degree to Aaron.

In the eight years or so since Magda's birth, plus the slightly less than five devoted to Jason alone, she and Aaron had held the line, had kept faithful to each other through all the minor,

petty quarrels over Aaron's increasing time away from his family, over his younger and younger, slimmer and slimmer secretaries, over his occasional nights out alone with his workmates (both male and female). The galas and nights out which he took her to rarely seemed to ease her mind. Though Holly never intended to start these fights, if Aaron said nothing about his social evenings without her, she felt slighted and a bit suspicious; if he made casual remarks to amuse her at his friends' expense, or to gossip with her about his day, as often as not she found something in what he said to take exception to. She never meant to start these disagreements, and often it was his nervous jumping away from a subject which he judged to be inflammatory—taking a line from past conflicts—that made her wish she could just punch him in the arm one good time. She by and large is not a violent person, and Aaron is the soul of peace and forgiveness, but in these latter times, they bicker and fuss, and spew words at each other in quick spurts in between attending to their children.

The children, more worldly-wise than their parents know, have a code between them to discuss when the atmosphere of suppressed rage after or before their own presence causes a temporary ban on hostilities, the escalation of which they can hear in resumption as soon as they seem to be out of the way for the time being. Jason started the introduction of the new vocabulary word three years ago, when Magda was five and at least passingly conversable to a nine-year-old boy: he said to her that Mom and Dad were busy "nattling." The word came about as a corruption of understanding when he his mother told him once to soothe him that she was not angry with his father, just "nettled." The two children whisper it to each other back and forth, but have never been caught by their distracted parents, who would be horrified to know about the example they are setting, as if verbal jousting is the worst they could do in their home.

Jason has in fact learned a number of new words, not all of which are acceptable table talk, as he has also learned over the years. For example, when at nine he asked his mother what "nattled" meant, she passed straight over his mispronunciation and to the explanation. She told him that "nettles" were spiny plants with lots of pricking needles on them, like a pin cushion, and that to be nettled was to be annoyed. This word "annoyed" he knew, so for a moment he felt that he had put a foot securely in front of him on the sometimes bumpy ground of life. The next instant, the ground was whisked from under his feet when he asked,

"So Dad pricks you sometimes?"

For some reason, this question made his mother laugh, her bitter tone a mere ghost of the full, rousing chuckle she normally gives when genuinely amused. Though she didn't think he heard her, she muttered to herself, "Oh, sometimes he's a prick all right." Then she said more loudly, "Dad annoys me sometimes, baby, and I annoy him too. It happens. Like with you and Magda, when she wants to play and you don't, or vice versa."

Distracted by the appearance of that term "vice versa," which he had heard before but could never seem to remember the sense of, Jason asked about it, and the terse aside he had heard his mother utter passed from the forefront of his memory. Only, of course, to be resurrected a few days later when his dad started lecturing him for leaving his bike in the driveway. "Oh, don't be such a prick, Dad," he said in a merry, teasing tone of voice, only to feel his erstwhile gentle father's hand clutched in an unfamiliarly hard grasp on his own upper arm.

"What was that, Jason St. John? Where did you hear that word? Don't you ever say that to me, or to anyone, again. Where did you hear that?"

Warned by his own superior mind and experience of parental spats not to put this particular fat in the fire, Jason answered, deliberately vague, "Oh, one of the older kids at school."

"Which older kid? What's his name?"

"It's a girl, Dad," Jason answered, feeling an odd obligation to stick to some part of the truth, even if only this smidgeon of it. "She's the new kid who left again last week, I never knew her name."

"Wait till your mother hears about this, Jason. You really mustn't repeat words if you don't know what they mean."

Wondering how to telegraph ahead to his mother that her secret, whatever it was (which he grew less sure of by the moment), was safe with him, Jason replied, "I thought it had something to do with a plant, Dad. Honest."

"A plant?" His father's hand passed away from its clutch on his upper arm to stroke his own jaw along the beard line. He wanted to question Jason further, but believed from other such lexical and etymological confusions that this explanation was just unlikely enough to be true. "Well, it's not. Grown-ups sometimes say it as a rude and dirty word of insult, but it means a man's penis, Jason, and that's why we don't say it. And don't you go spreading it around school, either. Teachers don't like students who bring filth into their classrooms, and if you show off, your friends won't really like you either."

Having a healthy horror of getting bad grades or alienating people whom, to be fair, he does show off in front of a bit, Jason avowed, "I won't, Dad, I promise. But what does that have to do with the plant?"

His father's brow was wrinkled in confusion. He spread his hands wide. "Got me, son. Just forget it, okay? I guess I don't have to tell your mother, as long as we agree not to use it again."

Jason smiled up at his father winningly, feeling immense relief that this was one of those several things that have happened along that could be kept a secret by one or the other of his

parents. He indeed felt a sense of virtue because he had pulled the strings to prevent yet another fight between them, though he knew he clearly almost put his foot in a trap. But Jason's native cunning, which seems to come neither exactly from his mother nor from his father, is supplemented by a growing mildness in his personality more like his father and his mother when they were younger together; this quality makes him better at hiding and avoiding battles, whereas in kindergarten, he was rambunctious and full of pep. He is well these days, never usually under the weather, and strong for his age physically; still, as his parents continue their periodic battles and rages against one another, something evasive has begun to be born in Jason's personality, an aversion to the direct route.

In fact, it is Magda who has to be warned again and again and schooled in cunning by Jason not to reveal their secret collusions. She never intends to do it, but Jason always dreads seeing her eight-year-old brow knit itself in perplexity and confusion and her rosebud lips open to ask his mother a question. It can come directly out of nowhere, something Magda has been thinking about for a long time which came from conversations with Jason, entailing further explanation *ad infinitum*, it seems. And of course when their mother is not driving or doing chores which involve at least minimal concentration, she is dutifully curious enough about her children to want to know why Magda asks, or who said such-and-such to her. Not as skilled as Jason, Magda often rolls her eyes at him behind their mother's back while he makes frantic signals, which tell her she is on dangerous ground again, though she often seems not to know why. Sometimes, she has resorted to ignorance of the inspiration of her question, or forgetfulness; she may try "I don't know, I was just wondering," or "I read it in a book." Though her studied vagueness usually appears to satisfy Holly when she is busy, Holly once stared her straight in the eyes and asked "What book? What book on earth have you been reading?"

After a few seconds of searching for an answer, Magda pushed her lips out in that way she has when she is preparing to cry. Holly looked bewildered, but Jason saved the day for his sister by hopping in with "Oh, it's probably that red one she brought back from school the other day to show me."

Turning her eyebeams now on Jason, Holly pursued the topic. "What on earth--? What was the name of it?"

"Oh, I don't know, I forget. Just some old book that got put in the second grade bin by mistake." Jason could tell he had hit the lodestone of his mother's imagination, the thing-that-is-too-mature-for-the-children to see, read, touch.

"Well, maybe from now on you ought to let your father or me vet the books that you bring home before you read them." After all, Holly is not above posing distractions of her own, such as using the word "vet" in this sense to rouse Jason's curiosity and cut off further argument about parental censorship.

But for once, threatened with loss of a key source of information, books that are too mature for him to read, Jason sighed, outmaneuvered her, and passed up the temptation to ask for explanation. He said, "That's okay, I told her that it was too old for us, and she took it back, didn't you, Mags?"

After an infinitesimal pause, Magda nodded her head 'yes,' which Holly could not hear, since she was looking at the floor as she mopped. Holly looked up at both of them, and Jason, tired of playing puppet with his sister's responses, said, "Tell her, Mags. She can't see you nod your head if she's looking down, can she? Stupid." This last word was mumbled under his breath, but Holly caught his *sotto voce* this time, and said,

"That's enough, Jason. Maggie is very smart, and she's younger than you. You ought to be defending and protecting her from things."

Repeating a line which he had heard his father utter about something entirely different, Jason said in the same weary tone, "Believe me, I do." But this flicked Holly on the raw for some reason, probably because she in fact heard an accurate echo of his father's manner in him, and was dismayed to know that her son had heard it.

"Don't you answer me that way, Jason St. John! How dare you!"

"What are you mad at *me* about, Mom? I just meant—"

"Never you mind what you just meant. You two go and pick up the toys in your rooms, I want to vacuum in there this morning."

As soon as they were safely out of earshot, Jason hissed at Magda, "Now see what you did, Mags, you idiot? We have to clean up our rooms!"

But when Magda heard this from her adored elder brother, she started to whimper, and he had to throw a brotherly arm around her shoulders and squeeze her in a quick hug to make her stop before their mother could come down on him again. "The things I do for this family!" he said, now half-consciously mimicking his mother's often-overheard lament. For Jason, with all his precocity, has not yet reached puberty psychologically, though he is twelve, almost thirteen. Far from adolescent rebellion, he still reveres his mother and idolizes his father, in spite of their constant differences of opinion; he seems simply to have declared a moratorium upon taking sides, and goes where prevailing winds blow him, back and forth across the battle lines. He knows that he can smooth things over sometimes with his ploys, and when he is feeling confident enough to play a small god does so. Other times, he listens for information and stores it away, and wonders about that word "divorce" which a few of his friends whose parents are no

longer together have boasted knowledgeably about. There are nights when he stays awake long after he is supposed to be asleep, wondering if Mom and Dad are in the process of getting divorced, if frequent quarreling is the way it's done, culminating in the mysterious activities of lawyers and courts, which he has heard mentioned. And of course, there was the experience of Robbie Kaufman, who had to go and talk to a psychologist because he had seen his mother throw a pot at his father and his father slap his mother in the face. Robbie had had to appear in court and answer a few questions about how he felt as well, though this was not a requirement and was only done according to him to show that his parents were getting along well enough to give him a voice in whom he stayed with and how often.

Some nights, Jason fantasizes in a possibly unhealthy way about his own required appearance in court to answer questions, but since he has no exact idea of what the questions are likely to be, his imagination runs wild, and the theories he usually generates end with a satisfying family reunion and remarriage of his parents to each other, by way of a television movie he watched with his friends on the sly on a sleepover. It was not the sort of movie to attract pre-teen boys especially, since it was far too sentimental and oozing with emotion to pass the test as exciting and forbidden and seemed only silly. They all joined in making fun of it, Jason among the rest. But when he is alone at night, he is the star of the show, and brings tears to his hostile mother's and father's eyes, forcing them to admit on the witness stand that they really do love each other and want to stop the divorce and rejoin. There is also a sympathetic though shadowy lawyer in the internal movie who helps Jason and Magda, for Jason is not arrogant enough to deny his little sister a role, albeit a small one, in his private musings. She is usually reduced to crying piteously, because Jason has already recognized in society the unfair ban on male tears. He uses her in the mental fiction as a voice for his own anxious and lachrymose mourning over parental

fights and squabbling. He does not want these to increase to thrown pots and slaps, however, so most of the time that he spends with his entire family, he spends in realistic servitude watching, nervous and unselfish, for ways to calm things down. Occasionally, he is caught out by one or the other of his parents, who returns to his attempted intervention or appeasement an irritable "Jason, don't interrupt, your father/mother and I are talking." This occurs when they are in the car or other close quarters and are feeling pettish with each other and are therefore unaware of more than their son's voice breaking in, neglecting to notice what he is actually saying. Otherwise, they are such careful and considerate parents even in their anger that they try their best to hide quarrels from their intelligent children, worse though the spats have become. It's just not working particularly well, because a bitchy tone of voice from either of them immediately calls up a sense of ill-usage from the other, and there are many such sounds in these later days.

* * *

Now Jason is thirteen. As a foursome, the family members are struggling through a sustained "rough patch" in their relationships, though little Magda seems to be most confounded by it all, and sometimes in her private reflections to Jason, introduces what seem like metaphysical speculations from his point of view, all about magic and the gods, and elves; he is largely pragmatic. In his mind sticks a sentence into which he suspects he may have introduced some corruption, for when he asked the school French teacher to confirm his translation, the man glanced down at the paper, frowned, looked him squarely in the face for a moment, then turning the paper over to the blank side as if he expected to see something written there, asked, "Where did you get this?"

"Out of a book," answered Jason half-truthfully. He had looked it up, but he had first heard it spoken by an actor in a movie of *Becket ou l'Honneur de Dieu* by Jean Anouilh, with subtitles,

which he had watched with his friends, again on a sleepover, when the host parents were sleeping an exhausted sleep after watching ten early teen boys eat their way through twelve pizzas and sixteen hot dogs, and guzzle what seemed like gallons of Gatorade, enough to keep them hopped up on sugar for the remainder of the long evening of entertaining. The boys had made it all the way through the drama, whose promise of a bloody murder in a cathedral was what had originally lured them on; once again, it was something inappropriate, whose high drama they found uncomfortable enough to encourage much mocking. But the actor playing Becket had said something that Jason finally tracked down in an upper level French book of quotations. He had borrowed this book from his best friend at the time, Eliot Anderson, a fifteen-year-old boy: *"La seule chose qui soit immorale, mon prince, c'est de ne pas faire ce qu'il faut quand il le faut."* "The only thing that is immoral, my prince, is not doing what is necessary when it is necessary."

It stays in Jason's mind because his father once said to him, "My dear little prince, go to sleep" when he was restless. From this, his mind had naturally leapt to titles involving royalty. He had found in the school library for his grade *The Little Lame Prince*, which seemed boring to him, and which he suspected by its title and sentimentalizing of disability that the adults had overlooked in their careful adoption of political correctness on their children's behalf. Then there was the wholesome though annoying moralizing of the cheery *The Prince and the Pauper*, whose tricksy democratic turns Jason suspected, for reasons he was not quite sure of. He had run into *Le petit prince/The Little Prince* by St. Exupéry next; he at first felt an uncertain sympathy with this book because the author's last name also began with "St.," but it did not last to the final page. He was exasperated by finding a hidden allegorical form concealed in the book, whose terms, though uncertain in the modern manner, yet pointed toward some vague heavenward

locale; in Jason's nascent though cynical opposing belief, people did not really go there. The bits about the rose particularly frustrated him because love in any form other than the familial did not yet appeal to him. The utmost he could reach in that direction was occasional hero worship of his friend Eliot for his superior age, which was not always possible anyway because Eliot was less mature than the younger boy mentally, though sexually mature enough to have an interest in girls and psychologically ahead as well. Jason decided that St. Exupéry was too quizzical if you were not in a desperate spiritual bind: the practical was what he had as a requirement. Finally, though, Jason ran into Machiavelli and his valuable book called simply *The Prince* in its English translation, which he discovered by accident in the public library, far beyond his reading level. Its advice that a ruler must be like the lion in strength and the fox in cunning appealed to him, as did its words of wisdom to the effect that a ruler must learn to allow people to counsel him, yet must keep them in awe of him at the same time. Now there was a fox, that Machiavelli, living by the side of the lion! Turning his very own position into something transparent by warning a ruler against his own counselors! This irony was the sort that Jason was intelligent and mature enough to appreciate, variations of which he worked at playing off on his parents, alternating the prince and the counselor in his own character.

For example, there was the time (the hundredth time or so, actually) that he had half-forgotten, half-neglected to put away the garden hose after being asked to do one of his weekly chores, watering the flower beds. It had been looped around one of the garden chairs on the patio, and Jason's father, tripping over it, swore under his breath and started to chew Jason out. When Aaron stopped, Jason performed what he considered a double play, going Machiavelli one better, or at least acting in his spirit. Not only did he point to himself as the source of the mistake, thus counseling his father to beware of counselors, but he hid his true qualities (his

manipulativeness and his practicality) and claimed to be something he was not, but which his father had often made the mistake of seeing him as. "You know how dreamy and unfocused I am sometimes, Dad." This with a smile and a confiding manner. His father gave in, smiled back, tousled his hair, and answered, "You have to try to concentrate on other things the way you do on your books and games, son." Though this was tolerant, it was uncomfortably close to certain truths about where Jason's priorities were when he was not trying to intercede between his parents, so he kept a tactful silence. No confirmation, no denial, just the reward of a friendly walk around the yard with his father's arm on Jason's shoulders as they checked over the job he had done.

It has taken all Jason's ingenuity, however, to keep his own small boat of hope afloat upon the querulous sea of his parents' differences. Maggie he does not worry about, as she is very often oblivious to the tension, wrapped up as she appropriately is in things for children her own age. He rarely feels the need to enlighten her with more than their childish word "nattling," which warns her sufficiently to stay quiet and out of sight, or at least off their parents' radar: Maggie can be as silent as a small rodent, who ceases in the bouts of noise from outside even to nibble its corner of wainscoting. During a tense if restrained dinner table conversation, increasingly in evidence, her little eyes peek up from under her fringe of bangs as she revolves her gaze from speaker to speaker, tacit and obedient to Jason's guidance. When invited to talk on a more social evening, her eyes check with Jason first, and he smiles back quickly so that his parents will not cue in to the collusion between himself and his sister. But more and more, he finds that he is tired and wrought up by the stress of constant monitoring of his parents, and also aware that he cannot be there all the time to interfere with their antagonisms, especially not after his bedtime, when, awake in bed for several hours, he hears the rising and falling murmur of conversation

from their bedroom. If he hears laughter and shushing, rarer and rarer these days, then he falls easily asleep, confident that things are well at last. He is never disappointed in this faith, for things then usually do go along well for a few days. Even more importantly for our hero's ultimate salvation as an individual not generally embittered, the bad times are a matter of half-heard words and guesswork. He is not mature enough to guess what his parents might be quarreling about; he knows that sometimes it has to do with rules and regulations which prevail over the children, and then he wisely stands aside and pretends to know nothing, though he is not above playing on their vulnerabilities if the roll of the dice produces an unfavorable edict. The rest of the time, he assumes from stray words he hears that his father stays too long at the office; his mother does not like his father's fellow workers; his mother is just the slightest bit lazy about finding a job; his father is too exacting in wanting his mother to work inside and outside the house both; and that his father is at least suspected of finding his mother too fat. What he does not hear is the weariness of two well-meaning people who are devoted to finding their way together, and who instead are being driven apart by the natural pressures of a suburban existence. And that is the source of the real energy with which they argue and dispute, trying to find a way which suits both of them to ease the exhaustion and indifference to positive stimuli.

As time passes, however, they cool off a little. Holly stubbornly continues fighting her weight, which has some good effect in that it gives her a number of small goals reached to feel better about. And when one of the adults feels better, the other one breathes a sigh of relief and feels better as well. Aaron, spending long weekdays and some weekend days at work, is by contrast acquiring a very small roll of extra weight around his middle, and his hair is starting to thin, but as Holly soothingly points out when he mentions these defects, a little weight is soon gotten rid of by exercise, and at least he has no obvious bald spots. In fact, she feels more

affectionate, almost *because* he is not as likely to be appealing to all the young women in the office around him, or so she tells herself when she is being what she thinks of as the most honest. He has after all gained the weight and lost the hair in the service of their family, which proves his ongoing love for her and makes her think of him less as a cheetah on the hunt with a rush of impossible-to-keep-up-with speed on his side, and more of a father bird of prey, mated for life and helping to guard the nest. Sometimes, it even seems as if the final storm has broken open from the heavens, and in its wake left a tranquil and freshly dewed world behind it: they stop their quarreling, resolve their differences, and then go on from there. And more and more these days, they are resigning themselves to "going on from there," not finishing their disputes and trying somehow to drain themselves of the lingering resentment which so easily used to be divided from the actual cause and which remained with them for days. Though in fact they do not really look much older, they feel older, and resigned to what life has done with them, accepting of their own limits and except for a few occasions of each other's. Some nights, there is even passion between them, when the more subdued bickering and fussing over trifles subsides and they actually look at each other.

Of course, Holly tells herself what she cannot tell Aaron, there is always the rôle Daniel played. Daniel the barista, at the little place where she gets her caffé grande with skim milk now, Daniel who made up to her, courted her, seemed to be about to ask her out. She had found herself dressing as much for his smile as for Aaron's more scant attention, putting on makeup again, trying to resist the sweets which Daniel seemed not to care if she ate, even seemed to encourage her to eat. Then, with the fourth week of playing to his lead and still not hearing anything more than outrageous flirting, she happened to catch sight of her own backside in the café mirror side by side with some girls who were model slim, and she blushed with shame.

Daniel was working for tips, after all, and she had always given generously to pleasant waitstaff. And she still had a good ways to go in order to be her once shapely self again, if ever. She went home that evening to Aaron, apropos of nothing ruffled his hair affectionately, and kissed his forehead when he looked up at her. From then on, she kept the encounters with Daniel in proportion, and treated the puzzled Aaron to an unprovoked sort of kindlier treatment which he did not understand, but much appreciated. That was the actual start of their rapproachment. And it was lucky that they managed to learn to get along again in early middle age, because soon after this, in spring of '95, Uncle Theodore and his two daughters descended upon their household, at first to park their deluxe camper in the driveway and be constantly in the way, later to be at all hours except the very midnight ones in the house itself, borrowing food and other things and seldom thinking to return them.

There is of course more room now; the new house is palatial beside the older one from which the St. John family moved when Jason was thirteen and Magda nearly nine. But it does not change the fact that the scrounging Theodore is an embarrassment to them in the neighborhood, since it is not the kind of neighborhood in which people live for extended lengths of time in a camper, however spacious. There have been several conversations in which, unexpectedly, Holly herself has proposed allowing her husband's younger brother and his twin eight-year-old daughters to move into the two large guest rooms the house has in its basement. Unlike Aaron, she has not been exposed to a lifetime of Theo's Micawberesque theories that "something will turn up soon." His wife Nancy's death early in the '90's from a brain tumor seems oddly only to have fed this belief, as if after so much bad luck, some good must come. But Holly knows him only slightly as the talented impresario of their wedding who planned and executed the perfect wedding for her and Aaron in 1978, when Aaron and she were twenty-three and Theo and his

wife Nancy were twenty and still not out of college. The spirit of youth had animated them all then, and happiness and bravery were more intimately linked than they seem now, when contentment is more what they strive for and do not always find.

Aaron is slightly less eager to have his brother's presence ratified into that of a semi-permanent guest in his house and he knows full well from Theo's earlier ingenuous letters that he has lost his own house and managed to save only a small amount of capital, some of the family's personal possessions, and the camper. Aaron cannot imagine his brother finding a job and doing his part in helping to support the household. Letting him stay in the camper in the driveway at first seems to promise that he will tire of this soon and just go away, seeking greater adventures and taking his two hapless daughters with him.

Holly, however, knows how to play on Aaron's soft and gentle side, and points out that it must have been his deceased wife's medical bills, honorably paid, which put Theodore in the scrape he is currently in.

"What was it he did for work, anyway, hon?" she enquires, thinking that maybe they can help out in this respect.

"He owned and managed a trucking company which he inherited from Uncle Bob. He didn't do that terribly well, either, not as far as I can determine from what he says in his letters. C'mon, Hol, you know we can't buy a trucking company just to give him another play-hobby job. Nancy steadied him while she was alive, but she's gone now, and he's still trying to ride a wave which is long gone. Once he worms his way in here, we'll never get him out."

"He *is* in, Aaron, and he's living in our driveway. I think it would be a little less of an entertaining spectacle for the neighborhood if he actually moved in. Surely you can make it

provisional upon his finding a job doing something that will allow him to pay rent, say in six months or so. Can't you? He's your only sibling, after all."

The sudden addition of cousins, a subsidiary kind of new sibling, is different for the two children. The twins, Hallie and Callie, show only a passing interest in Jason, who celebrated the grand age of fifteen in February. Only when they can entice Magda into some maddening mischief with respect to him are they happy with him entirely. With Magda, the case is different: though as she often reminds them, she is going to be eleven in November, and is thus their senior by nearly three years, involved in slumber parties and diaries and long intricate phone conversations with other pre-teen girls of her acquaintance, they are not quelled. They continue to haunt her footsteps, and try to find her diary on the rare occasions when she accidentally leaves her room door ajar (there are rules about closed doors).

Finally, Holly gets her way, and Theo and his girls are allowed to dance their way into the house, all smiles and thankfulness, on condition that the camper is parked in a rental lot downtown, where they will presumably pick it up whenever they leave to go elsewhere. Aaron has made it clear that they are welcome to stay in the house only on the condition that Theo contributes to the financial fortunes of the household, which Theo has cheerily agreed to do in the best of faith, as he sees it. That is, Theo always has faith in himself, and a generous belief in the generosity of others, which people for most of his life have interpreted as having a bright spirit. While this may in general be true, the loss of Nancy has caused a lack of faith in the fortunes dished out by circumstance, so that whereas he still trusts other people by and large to do the best by him, and still subscribes to the idea that he himself is trustworthy, the concept of fate has suddenly made inroads into his thinking process. It is not so much that he doubts whatever he nebulously thinks of as God, or suspects others of attempting to cheat him: rather,

he eyes misfortune askance in a way he previously did not, since in the days when fate was kinder to him, misfortune was simply something that other people believed in. To give him credit, Theo has often helped persuade others to lose their own faith in bad luck, so gleeful and boyish was he before the loss of his wife.

He has his own older model computer, so during the day while Aaron is away and the children are all playing in the yard or on play dates with friends, or just fiddling away rainy days in the house, Theo makes the motions of searching for a job. Really, he spends most of the first few weeks following Holly around the house and talking about looking for a job, what kind he should have, how hard it is to break into professions these days, *et cetera*. She gradually starts to be averse to these monologues, however, and vigorously goes on with her own schedules, only adding his twins to the children's routines whenever possible so that he will not have any excuse to renege on Aaron's and Holly's agreement with him. He re-situates himself in the kitchen with a pot of coffee and whiles away the day surfing the Internet and looking at the newspapers, of which they now take three.

One day, when his brow is looking particularly furrowed, Holly says to him, "Why don't you try to work your way back into the trucking business, Theo? Surely they could use someone in management or office work with your experience."

He grimaces. "I have to be honest with you, Hol." (He has picked up calling her by Aaron's pet name for her, which bothers her in passing rather like an aimless fly drifting by in the room, refusing to be killed or to land where it can be swatted.) "I was only in trucking because I was at loose ends and that's the business my uncle left me. I've often thought I would make a good book and movie critic, though. It's just that you have to break into that as you do with everything else, and I'm a little old to start. I've sent some letters to *The Cromeley Regional Herald*, and as

you can see, they printed part of one of them. See, it's right here." He pointed to two paragraphs in the "Our Readers Respond" column. "They left out the best parts, though—probably due to space restrictions. I need the room to really extend myself, you know? None of this part-time stuff. I need a full-time job and salary."

Dutifully, Holly reads what Theo has written. Her reaction, truly, is mixed. On the one hand, it is very intelligent and articulate criticism of a book which was recently made into a movie, with notices of both forms in its analysis. And she can see also that an impatient editor has impeded the flow of logic by chopping off what she surmises must have been the telling points Theo was striving to make. Some of them are at least implicit in his writing as it remains. On the other hand, she somehow doubts that there is much money in newspaper work these days, and feels that unless Theo gets a full-time position on a newspaper or at a magazine, there is little hope for such a career. She tries as tactfully as possible to communicate these things to Theo, but once she has given him praise, he can apparently hear nothing else.

"But Theo, I'm not an editor! I can't give you a job; nor can Aaron. We know you're smart and willing to work hard. But you may not be able to work hard at what you want to do. You may just have to settle for something else while you're waiting."

Theo smiles wryly. "As you may have noticed, Hol, I'm not a settler. Well, did I do that with your wedding? No! I persisted until I got just the kind of irises and orchids I wanted for the tables, and fought my way through the hordes of supposedly professional wedding planners at all the events where I could get anything I needed for you guys. That's the way I've always been. I keep fighting until I get what I want."

Holly turns away and smiles to herself. She forbears to point out that that statement would seem to insinuate that he meant all along from the time of his wife's death to land himself on his brother's family and mooch until they forced him to look for a job.

Another provoking quality Theo has, which Holly and Aaron discover only after eavesdropping curiously on many an animated conversation between Theo and Jason, is that Theo seems to be consciously or subconsciously attempting to deliver their son up into the same sort of indeterminate existence which he himself now has. Their first clue was one day when they overheard Theo say to Jason, "Reach for the stars, Jason. The sky's the limit." They smiled at each other as they heard this, but then the next moment, Theo was saying to an attentive Jason, who was watering the potted plants while Theo stood by him pontificating, "After all, this is not a bad life I have here now with my family, with you guys and my girls. Some people seek all their lives for the meaning of perfection and never get as close as that."

Jason, with a cautious dignity all his own that his father was quite proud of in him, and with an evident intention not to offend his new-found uncle, asked, "Yes, Uncle Theo, but don't you miss having a career of your own? And a house, and a car, and all that? And what about enough extra money to take the girls special places?" Aaron nudged Holly knowingly and smirked. But Theo's response to the thoughtful Jason made him frown again.

"Poof! What's a career? Have you never heard the saying, Jason, that status is like watching monkeys: the higher they climb, the more you can see of their behinds?"

Jason laughed, even at fifteen not above a joke about buttocks. "St. Bonaventure," he identifies the quote.

Theo continued. "And as to all the trappings of suburbia, I've sometimes thought that I would like living in a yurt, off the products of the earth. Only of course, I can't easily be enough in

contact with civilization to write a newspaper column if I do that. As to the girls, they're far better off not coming in contact with the deliquescence of society. They're more unspoiled that way."

While Theo was explaining the terms "yurt" and "deliquescence" to Jason, Holly and Aaron were huddled in the kitchen in concerned conference. "Yurt!" snorted Aaron. "And there's a flaw in his logic: if civilization is so very deliquescent, then why does he want to write a newspaper column for and about it?"

Another day, only the already irritable Aaron was home, lying on his chaise longue and soaking up rays. He heard Jason and Theo playing basketball at the outside court behind their house, their words punctuated by the pock-slap of the ball against the pavement. When he began to tune in to the dialogue, Theo was saying something that seemed, again, flatly to contradict things he had said before, while still not constituting any better advice for a maturing boy.

"You've got to get some kind of a job, Jason, enough to go to Paris on. And Yorkshire! And Italy! There are places you've just got to see! It's worth the sacrifice to have the job, if only for a while, and then travel your heart out! You'll never be sorry you spent the money, even if you come back penniless and down-at-heel. Or better yet, maybe your dad could help out with some money."

"Like hell!" Aaron muttered. "Little sod had better do something more worth doing than his uncle has done." The next moment, he felt contrition for calling his son a "little sod," realizing that he too had often idolized inappropriate men other than his father at the same age. Still, now even his sunbathing was disturbed, because he was too busy straining his indignant ears for some further offense on the part of his erring brother.

Day after day, Holly too is beginning to regret her generosity in allowing Theo to stay, because she finds one day that not only Jason is being affected by Theo, but also Magda, and of less concern to her, Hallie and Callie. On this day, she has had to go to the grocery store, having shortsightedly run out of a number of things she needs to finish up the week's menus. When she comes back, she hears a loud, raucous, familiar tune coming through the open living room windows where the main entertainment center is. But when she gets inside, to her great dismay, she finds Magda and the other two pre-pubescent girls in some of her old clothes from the attic, riotously dancing and slack-hipping their way around the room to Theodore's lead, to the tune of Paul Butterfield's "Shake Your Money Maker." How Theo managed to find it, hidden away as it had been in their copious old cassette catalogue, she does not know. Now, however, she is beginning to wonder if she can put any form of public or private disorder beyond him.

She strides into the room, and unseen by the gyrating group until she has managed to cut off the music and assume an appropriate stance of righteous anger, yells out "Theodore St. John!"

He whirls around, startled, says, "Hi, Hol! Come and dance!" Then, appearing finally to notice that dancing is not on the agenda she so obviously has planned, says, "What's up? You look like a thundercloud! Music too loud? Sorry, I thought since it was during the day that your neighbors wouldn't mind. Too snobby and ritzy for that around here, though, huh? Well, I hope you guys get *some* chance to play your tunes. Need help with the groceries?" He approaches her, only to spring back, startled, when she puts both hands against his chest and shoves him backward.

"What I need is for you not to turn my home into a carnival side show! Why do you insist on doing things and saying things that are not for the children to see and hear? We are trying to raise them well. How you raise your own is up to you, unless you are here, and living with us,

and then you have to try at least to compromise your bizarre free spirit mentality by adding a little ordinary common sense. This music is not suitable for young girls!"

"Oh, c'mon Hol, look at all the little made-up dancing girls on those sugary Saturday morning shows the girls watch! This is at least quality music! Don't you want them to have any musical taste at all?"

"Theo, I can't believe you! Do you even listen to the lyrics? There's a lot of difference between unicorns and fairies and elves and rainbows and—and what Paul Butterfield is singing."

Pulling her bangs down into her eyes busily but appearing to have followed the conversation, Magda intrudes into the speech. "What do you mean, Mom? Who's Paul Butterfield?" Severely, Holly retorts, "Magda, go up to your room and get into some normal clothes. There's to be no discussion."

Feeling too old to cry but not too unemotional, Magda gives her a long, steady look, then drags out of the room, the hanging beads around her neck tripping her up at the stairs. Since they have not been reproached, Hallie and Callie, wide-eyed, sit side by side on the couch, almost in exact concert, which because they are identical twins supplies an odd image in the corner of Holly's eye and awareness. Theo frowns abstractedly, as if considering some abstruse theoretical problem. Catching his attention, Holly rolls her eyes towards his girls with meaning. He frowns even harder, swallows, then says, "Hallie. Callie. Go on downstairs to your room now, girls. I may be wrong, but I think your Aunt Holly wants to continue our discussion further."

Unbeknownst to Holly, when Theo says he intends "to continue this discussion further," to his girls it usually means the most severe form of punishment with which they are acquainted. They glare at their aunt, as if in disbelief, and Hallie, the eldest, says in protest and intent to protect her

father, "But Aunt Holly, we were only dancing and having fun. It wasn't that loud! Honest! Dad turned it down once."

"Hallie, it's all right. I'll be fine. Just you girls get a doughnut and some milk or something out of the kitchen and go on downstairs. We'll go out later to the park." Again, this is a sort of code between the three of them: doughnuts and the park are historically their special treats, and Aunt Holly, in her apparent eagerness to chew their father up and spit him out, is temporarily overlooking the ban on eating in the bedrooms, since she still stands with her hands on her hips, saying nothing, just waiting.

As soon as they are out of earshot, Holly says to Theo, "Are you really sure, Theo, that being overindulgent, lawless, and at the same time neglectful with your children is the best way to raise them? They don't need doughnuts during the middle of the day. And giving them a snack and offering to take them to the park later gives entirely the wrong message: it divides the adult authority in this house. It hardly matters whether the adults are only Aaron and me or Aaron, myself, and you. We should give solid, consistent, easily understandable messages about what is acceptable and what is not." She waits for his self-defense, partly curious in spite of herself to see if he will come up with anything that sounds even half reasonable.

He shrugs. "You seemed to want them out of the room, so I was doing my best to think of something they wouldn't be in a hurry to question. I mean, I don't know how you raised your kids up till now, but I have raised my girls to think for themselves. Why, right now they may be wondering at your bad mood and trying to figure out whatever happened to you at the market to put you in such a foul mood."

"Don't put words in their mouths, Theo. That's your insinuation, not theirs."

"What do you mean, insinuation? Don't you and Aaron often play rhythm and blues music after the kids go to bed at night? And don't they sometimes get up for a drink of water, or to cuddle, or something? And do you think that if they hear the lyrics of those other things, they don't wonder about them too?"

Holly swallows. She had not expected Theo to say something so apparently rational. She tries to remind herself that he started out college as a student of law, logic, rhetoric, disciplines all apparently far beyond his scope; but then, some remnants of cunning might remain, despite his unfitness for the general territory. "It's not the music itself, Theo. Children who are getting up sleepily out of bed for something that concerns only themselves don't pay much attention to what adults are doing, and Aaron and I instantly switch to focus on them and their problems as soon as such a situation occurs. We turn the music down, for example, or shut it off until they get back to sleep, or sometimes for the entire evening. But you—you not only paraded the music *and* the lyrics in front of them, but encouraged them to dance to it. I feel fairly sure I'm going to face questions later from Magda about what a 'money maker' is and why it's called that, as well as whatever else she understood of the lyrics."

Now Theo looks triumphant. "Ah-hah! So it's your own dirty thoughts that are troubling you, huh? Just what are you assuming a 'money maker' is, Hol?"

Distracted by a side annoyance, she exclaims, "Don't call me that! Only Aaron calls me that! My name is Holly."

He is really self-satisfied now. "So you're not even able to answer the question."

"Don't be ridiculous, Theo. It should be obvious to the meanest intelligence—the meanest *adult* intelligence, I mean—that a 'money maker' which a male voice is requesting someone to 'shake' is the backside."

"Maybe. In fact, that is certainly one interpretation," he answers from a lofty philosophical distance. "But it could also be telling a woman to shake her husband down, or a man his wife, for money. Admittedly it's a class issue about the form of expression, but you two didn't use to be so stodgy."

"And you think the second explanation is any better than the first?" she explodes at him, not caring for the moment how loud she gets. "Honestly," she hisses in an undertone, "I really think your head is up your ass, sometimes, Theodore." She takes a deep breath.

"Now, isn't that better than yelling, Hol? Just saying something honest yourself, something angry and spiteful, and clearing the air?"

Having raised her voice, lowered her voice, and been struck speechless by Theo's question, Holly plumps wearily down into the nearest chair. "And stop talking to Jason," she concludes ineffectively, her head resting on one hand.

"Huh?" Theo answers, genuinely at sea with this latest remark.

"Try, if you know how, just to make small talk with our son. He doesn't need advice from you, doesn't need to know about your adventures or your philosophy. For chrissake, Theo, show some sense, and some respect for our life. And if you have any of your scattered concentration left over, try to have some concern and respect for your own children, though it's really not my business to tell you about that."

"I thought your points about the music applied to all the children equally," he says, as if now in reproach of her.

"I realize that I can't control what you do to your own children. But as they are now in the same household with mine, I expect you to take some responsibility for maintaining a healthy,

happy relationship with the state of childhood for them, because how they see things affects my children as well."

"Oh, all right!" Theo spouts back, suddenly angry himself. "No more fun, then! No parties with the kids! No snacks! No joy, no light, no happiness!" This outburst makes Holly despair even further, since it causes her to wonder if Theo even understood the points she has been trying to make.

"Just try to remember that you are an adult—I think—and they are kids, and what is appropriate for you is not necessarily appropriate for them. Surely it doesn't take so much thought. Now, I've got to go put up the groceries. Why don't you go take your girls to the park, since you promised them? It's a nice day, and the kids probably shouldn't have been inside all day anyway."

"I thought you didn't want me to take them to the park."

"Don't be such an imbecile, Theo," she begs earnestly. "Once you've offered a treat, you either have to make good on it or give an explanation. In this case, I think the explanation would be a little hard to grasp even for the twins, who know you better than they know me. Just get out from underfoot for a while, okay?" Sighing deeply, she heads for the pantry, where the bags of groceries sit waiting for her, right where she dropped them when she came in from the car and found Theo's "party" going on.

On his dignity, Theodore sniffs haughtily, wipes his nose on his pocket handkerchief, and then goes down the stairs to where Hallie and Callie are having their doughnut feast. A few minutes later, all three of them creep out the front door in a subdued manner, shutting it behind them with a certain crisp retort. Still in the kitchen loading up cupboards, Holly sighs and drinks some ice water from the pitcher in the refrigerator, taking cool sips in between items. How dare

that Theodore! Yet she remembers that Aaron had said Theo was overindulged as a child and had little sense of responsibility; what she wonders is why Aaron did not seem to remember these facts until after she had already pressured him to let the three wanderers live in the house and there had been transgressions of hospitality like today's.

At that moment, Jason's voice calls out from the stairwell. "Mom! Can you come up here a sec?"

"What's wrong, Jason? Can I just finish putting up the groceries first?"

"Well, suit yourself, Mom, but Magda's crying and insisting you're mad at her. If it's over those old clothes she has on, don't you remember that you let her play in them last summer too?"

"Give her some love, Jason. You're her big brother, after all. Tell her I'm not mad at her exactly, but I will have to talk to her about—well, about what happened today." To herself she adds, "And how I'm going to do that beats me."

Coming down the stairs to the dining room, where he sits and eyes his mother speculatively as she opens and shuts kitchen cabinets, Jason asks, "So what did happen?"

"Didn't you hear it?"

"I heard Theo playing with the girls, and some music, and then after you got home, everything seemed to get quiet."

"Theo was playing them 'Shake Your Money Maker,' and they were all dancing to it." She shakes her head meaningfully at her son.

Unable to stop himself, Jason guffaws. Even he by this time has begun to realize that Theo is a bit of a loose cannon.

"Jason! It's really not funny! How do I explain that song and its meaning to a girl Magda's age, which is still shy of eleven, and why the whole incident was inappropriate?"

"Oh, Mom, don't be such a prude! All the little pre-teen girls her age get together at each others' houses and shake their fannies to music. Don't give her a complex!"

"Oh, Jason." But that's all she says. She sighs again.

"Boy, Uncle Theo knows which buttons to push to get you and Dad mad at him, doesn't he?"

"Oh my God, you're not thinking it's deliberate, surely?"

"Well, maybe half-deliberate. I think he doesn't have a mischievous bone in his body, but at the same time, he's like an old-time preacher on a radio show, who thinks everyone needs to live the same way he does. He probably was just spreading his own private gospel of freedom and what-have-you."

Momentarily diverted by this very old-fashioned expression "what-have-you" from her own son, Holly reaches over and ruffles his hair, then says, "There's lemonade in the refrigerator if you want it. And take some up to Magda. Tell her I'll be up to talk to her in a few minutes, and that I'm not angry. Or at least, not at her."

Holly makes her way up the stairs a few minutes later, and explains to Magda only the most basic details of Theo's moral *faux pas*. She points out hesitantly that the girls are welcome to dance to their own music, and to wear her old clothes, but that the adults' musical collections are off limits. When Magda tries to probe further, her little eyebrows furrowed up under her blonde bangs and her lips pursed, Holly simply answers that it's what she and Aaron expect of Magda and Jason, to listen to their advice and suggestions and not necessarily to Uncle Theodore's, unless it's something as basic as his helping her safely cross the street. On top of that, she suggests that any time Theo comes up with his own plan for the girls' entertainment, that Magda check it out first with one or other of her parents, just to be on the safe side. Magda still looks so doubtful when Holly leaves her room that Holly begins to suppose that maybe Jason is correct

and she has overreacted a trifle, or at least handled things in a less tactful manner than she could have. But she has an evening meal to plan and a few chores to do, and tells herself that at least she has solved the problem temporarily. Aaron will doubtless have something to add, and she often feels that he can deal with his brother more effectively from having known him longer.

This is the last major incident that they have to worry about for quite a while, however. Improbable as it seems, within another three weeks, Theo has located a weekly paper willing to let him write advertising copy, the odd book or movie review, and an occasional editorial. At last, it looks as if the coin tossed has turned right side up again for Theo, and he has a chance to shine.

* * *

It is February, and Jason's sixteenth birthday party is a week away. Though Jason has a few assorted friends that roam through the house with him now and again on their way to play computer games in his room or to watch a tv movie with him in the den, he by and large does not go in for large groups of people. He has what his mother over-coyly refers to as "your little girlfriend Deirdre," but Deirdre is out of town with her family for skiing in Vermont, and so will not be at the party. There's nothing little about Deirdre, at least not in the flamboyant drama queen category, though she stands only five four to Jason's now weedy five eleven, just under his father's six two. In a way, Jason is glad that she will not be there, because he can be off-hand and casual with the three male friends he has coming, Eliot Anderson at his superior age of eighteen, ready to go to college in the spring; Jack Hamilton and Bill Trachan, who have already attained the magical learners' permit age of sixteen; and his one close female friend, Anna Marie Doherty, with whom he discusses the sorts of emotional issues so pertinent to girls and popular with them, and which he feels awkward and embarrassed discussing with his male friends.

So with the addition of his four friends to the party, Jason has begged Holly, not with entire success, for a simple family meal of pizza and salad, with ice cream for dessert. He does not want to "make a big thing of it," as he has told her, and she, while agreeing in principle, has set and reset the dining room table in her own mind, complete with the best tablecloth, dishes, and flatware. Her menu, known only to herself and Aaron, does include pizza, but it is not the take-out pizza parlor variety, nor yet the frozen kind. She instead has dragged out the best of the old pizza recipes she used to make for herself and Aaron years before, and has searched through menus on the Internet for new and complementary salads for her dishes. As well, kept carefully secret from the children and from Theodore, whose overall probity she is beginning to trust more, but whom she fears might drop an incautious word, she is making and freezing quart after quart of different flavors of homemade ice cream, storing them in the padlocked freezer in the basement's laundry room. Aaron tolerantly watches and occasionally, on the weekends when he is home and Theo and the kids are out, offers to help. But his secret feeling, more or less in line with what he knows of his son, is that Holly is going a little too far in the right direction to make her son happy, and may instead cause him to breathe a sigh of relief when his friends are gone home.

The evening finally comes, and to Aaron's and even Holly's great surprise, Jason is not only not embarrassed but is even elated to share the table with his four friends and his family, the awkwardness ebbing as soon as Holly has offered them all a beer, a special consideration which she took great trouble to clear with each set of parents first. She had been a little taken aback by the other parents' air of easy acceptance, though Anna Marie's mother specified that she did not want her daughter to have more than one. The gentle tolerance and this acknowledgement of their nearly adult status makes the group treat the St. Johns with a paradoxical extra dollop of

respect, and luckily neither Holly nor Aaron—nor even, oddly enough, Theo—makes the mistake of trying to get the kids to treat them as pals.

As soon as the repast has had a chance to settle on everyone's stomachs, and before another light winter storm starts to dance across the big backyard, Aaron turns the spotlights onto the scene, and they get up two teams to play a thrown together game of coed softball in the snow. Eliot, Jack, Hallie, Jason, and Holly play against Theo, Aaron, Callie, Bill, and Anna Marie. While they are a few people short on each side, at least the rule of two women on the field at all times is observed. Magda offers to be the umpire, since she has been playing pickup sandlot ball with children in her neighborhood even when she was a lot younger, and tonight she insists she wants to sit out. But because otherwise the two teams do not have even a single outfielder each, they insist that Magda be the pitcher for both teams as well as the umpire, which works well enough since her pitches are more equally erratic than her judgements, which are usually even-handed. Because they are just out to have fun and make a lot of noise anyway, it all works out for the best. In fact, sliding into snowdrifts that aren't on the tromped-out baseline and tossing snowballs instead of the softball prove to be more or less the activities that the game degenerates into. Afterwards, they go in for the traditional warm-up of hot chocolate with graham crackers and peanut butter.

Along about eleven, the hour agreed upon for the party to end, Anna Marie and Eliot say their goodbyes and he gives her a ride home. A little later, Jack and Bill, who live closer, offer up their thanks to their hosts and head off together down the block, leaving a happy Jason with his sister and his cousins helping to clean up the kitchen, though Holly has told them it's a holiday and they are not obliged to help. Even the usually stricter Aaron is feeling an extra innervation of spirit, and invites Theo into his study to have Scotch on the rocks with him. This is a drink

which brings out mixed feelings in Theo that Aaron is unaware of. While Theo is happy to be socializing with his brother on what seem like equal terms (and the usually locked liquor cabinet is giving freely of its wealth), he would far prefer a sweeter drink such as JD & Coke, for example, or maybe a tropical mixed drink of some kind. Having to get tipsy on the taste of Scotch is something he tolerates purely for the luxury of being friends with his brother instead of being at loggerheads with him. Thus, all in all, the day ends well for everyone, though some mild discomforts and irregularities have had to be borne.

"So, how's the writing job going, Theo? All settled in at the new situation?" Aaron naturally speaks of the thing that is most on his own mind about Theo, his becoming a responsible (paying) member of the household.

Theo sighs. When they were teens, Aaron had once scolded him for "being like a woman," always ready to complain when asked, even if there was nothing much to complain about. At the time, Theo had privately wondered how Aaron came by this comprehensive assertion, until he encountered one of Aaron's temporary friends, whom Aaron had injudiciously modeled his conduct upon. The friend, David Temple, was one whom their parents regarded as a smart-mouthed roughneck from the wrong side of life, never mind the wrong side of town—he lived in a slum district fairly far away from the cozy middle-class rabbit warren of streets with trees and bushes and modestly manicured lawns which they inhabited. David had filled Aaron's ears with this sort of talk about women, men, children even. His every remark was calculated to offend someone. On the rare occasions when he was in their house, his smirks and loud behavior had so outraged Aaron's and Theo's parents that they finally prohibited Aaron from bringing him home, and gave him a good talking-to about role models. Though in his bad moods as an adult Aaron occasionally feels the spirit of David Temple speaking over his shoulder as he surveys the

wreckage of yet another discussion with Holly, or puts up with the kids when they are being particularly difficult, or feels extreme cynicism with Theo's high-flying schemes, he finds that the parents in his superego always deliver a solemn rebuke, and the shadow of David T. fades quickly into the background. When Theo sighs like this, David's warning about carping women resurfaces momentarily in Aaron's head, only to flow out the next minute in astonishment when he hears what Theo has to say. It is actually not a sigh of complaint, apparently, but a sigh of longing.

"I'm in love with the editor-in-chief of my paper. She has long, naturally red hair, and green eyes. You know, not that caroty red, but a deeper shade. Of course, I know it will probably fade with age, and then like a lot of women, she may try to put something on it. But I think I would love her all the same, regardless of how she looked. Her name is Nancy Bellingcote, and she's a widowed mother of two, a boy and a girl. And she's just about my age. But I can't look at her." He fetches up another deep sigh.

"Why? What do you mean, 'can't look at her?' Too shy?"

"No, I mean, career-wise I just started at the paper, and she's been there since the early 'nineties, when the paper first started. She was just a young thing then, I guess. And she went to school while she was working there. She's got so much get-up-and-go, and even you are always telling me I'm too lazy, or too impractical."

"Still, she hasn't changed careers in all this time. And it's only a small newspaper."

"Yes, but she sketches, and plays the piano in a band, and she's got so much going for her. She'll never look at me."

"Buck up, Theo. Maybe things will happen just the way you would have them to. Why don't you ask her and the kids out for a play date sometime with you and yours?"

"Yes. I suppose I could; if I could keep from blushing. But it would be so much more romantic if we could have some time to ourselves first." His eyes stare across the room into space, his facial expression calling to mind the antique word "mooncalf" to the comfortably married and less-sympathetic-because-less-needy Aaron.

Aaron faces him directly. "Are you trying to maneuver me, us, into babysitting, Theo? If so, why not just ask?"

"Oh, would you? It hadn't occurred to me. I mean, she knows I have kids, we've talked about it before when I was more relaxed around her, before I fell in love. But if you and Holly are prepared to keep the girls for a night...was that an offer?"

Now Aaron expels a heavy breath of air, his brow furrowed like the picture of one of the less friendly winds in a children's picture book, the East or the North Wind. "We have done it for you before, Theo, or have you forgotten?"

"I guess I didn't know if you would approve me starting a relationship while I was still living here." He looks up, a question on his face. As a second thought, he looks down and takes a deep gulp of Scotch, which burns his throat and makes him cough. He just cannot think what Aaron sees in the stuff, though he is trying to be congenial and soothing when he realizes that his brother is miffed about something.

"As long as she doesn't move in, and she's not here socializing all the time when we've got other commitments, I don't see the problem. I'm your elder brother, not your father, Theo."

"Yes, but—I keep putting my foot wrong with you and Holly, Ronny." Theo's use of his early childhood nickname touches Aaron unexpectedly. He suddenly sees that Theo *is* making an effort to fit into the household, and perhaps does not take them as much for granted as it has appeared. Then, something else strikes him. "Say, Theo—are you perfectly sure the coincidence

of names isn't what caught your interest? I mean, it doesn't sound like she looks like Nancy Draper, but don't you think maybe the fact that she has the same first name as your dead wife has caused you to be more interested?"

Theo's eyes widen in surprise. "You know, Ronny, I never thought about it like that." He takes one last sip of his Scotch then surreptitiously puts what remains in the glass down behind the table ornament, a large brass sculpture of some classical-looking personage wrestling a dragon. Every time he sees it, he thinks "Laöcoon," but then corrects himself when he recalls the actual shape of that famous figure. This is something else. His mind returns to the subject. "No, you know, I think I see them as two separate people, despite the names. Well, I mean, I never thought of the names before now. And they are so entirely different. Nancy my wife was so gentle and quiet and giggly sometimes; Nancy Bellingcote is decisive, and firm, and probably just what I need as the antidote to my own waffling and indecision. That's what I thought you would think, anyway, if you met her."

"Oh, I don't know about that. Therapeutic relationships aren't always the best to last."

"I didn't mean to sound as if I thought of her as a treatment; I just meant, sometimes opposites attract."

Aaron restrains a groan at the cliché, wondering why it is that Theodore no sooner stabilizes on one front than he approaches insecurity on another. "Just don't bank too much on it working out, Theo, at least not before anything is said between the two of you about practical issues."

Theo screws up his face in concentration, which looks to Aaron as if he is attempting to memorize whatever advice his brother is about to pass on, a quality almost as irritating as if he were airily ignoring counsel. "How do you mean? Which practical issues? I mean, we can't discuss contraception or anything in a normal way before I know if she feels—"

Aaron breaks in. "That's not what I meant! I mean, after all, the two of you are both the heads of families, and you have certain responsibilities in front of you for a long time to come. If you want to share a life with her, then you two have to come to some understandings and compromises, even during just plain dating, about how things are going to go. Do you understand me?"

Theo for once hits the nail on the head in the expression of his state of mind. "Vaguely," he answers.

"Yes, well, you can't be vague. I'll give you an example. Let's see—okay, let's just take what sometimes happens around here: you don't disapprove of your daughters going to Hale Street park by themselves, as long as they stick together, whereas Holly and I are more cautious about Magda, even when she is accompanied by your girls or her friends. That's the sort of issue we've worked out around here, and it's the same when you're dating someone else with children. You have to come up with agreements about what your children are doing so that the children don't feel that they're being treated inconsistently or unfairly."

Predictably, Theo gets distracted by the example and forgets the overall point, like a dog who hasn't yet learned to look at where the stick is going to land and instead stares at his master's hand after the stick has been thrown. "But I thought Hale Street Park was safe because it's been cleaned up of vagrants by the police, and of rubbish by the Community Park Association. It's really not that far, either; it's much closer than Trellin Park, which you recently gave our girls permission to go to alone or with Jason. And after all, Jason spends his time there skateboarding and playing around with his friends, I've seen him. He's not watching the girls much at all."

"You're missing the point I'm making: first of all, to dispose of your notion that Hale Street Park is okay, they caught another pickpocket there just last week. But what I'm getting at is that

those are the sorts of issues you have to discuss with some other parent whom you want to date. And you won't always agree, any more than we always agree around here. Do you see what I'm getting at?" Aaron is holding on to his patience by main force. He knows Theo has a vast intelligence when it comes to theoretical issues and intellectual points, and he cannot think why his brother is so hapless when it comes to praxis and ordinary life issues, having to have the simplest thing explained to him in words of few syllables. He finishes his Scotch and pours another, but looks at it in doubt. Holly has recently told him he needs to drink less if he is going to stay healthy, and whereas his doctor has been gently pushing him this way for five years now, when Holly confirms it as an inside observer he listens. Opening the bar refrigerator in the study, he puts the Scotch inside impatiently and covers it with a small saucer, which he knows will not keep it pristine, but what the hell. He looks again at Theo.

Theo finally draws and expels a great breath, and says, "Yeah, I guess I get the point, Aaron." He looks glum. "You want me to be responsible again."

For some reason, this makes Aaron laugh aloud; after a moment, Theo grins too, able to appreciate that there is a joke about himself here. The two brothers meet each other's eyes, something they have not been doing as a general rule during discussions of this kind. For the first time in a long time, they are momentarily together as friends, just as they were growing up. Aaron leans over and punches Theo in the shoulder. "Got it in one, champ. I want you to be responsible again."

Sensing that the friendly conference is over, Theodore stands and moves toward the door. Yet unexpectedly, as Theo starts across the room Aaron throws a brotherly arm around his shoulders and proceeds to go with him. They walk together, a little buzzed and rather haphazard in their footing into the kitchen, where Holly is having her own tipple of a glass of Chianti, the

drink she normally prefers with pizza, though she had tolerated beer in the general company earlier.

"Hi, boys," she says brightly, her face shining as if with wisdom or with oil. Aaron gives her a keen look. He knows that expression: Holly is about to suggest some lunatic form of fun which will probably end in comic disaster, such as the night they took turns jumping up and down on the bed until the bedsprings collapsed on them, or the time when single that they went skinny-dipping in a grumpy neighbor's pond and nearly got arrested. It does not happen often anymore that Holly gets these sudden youthful inspirations, which Aaron terms to himself "Holly's exhilarations," and he glances over at Theo to see if he notices anything about her. But Theo is so touched by the general camaraderie that he is merely bathing them with a warm glance and hoping for more.

Holly gives Aaron an arch look, which he knows is preparatory to her suggestion. They have played this game many times, and he knows what happens next. "Say, Aaron," she says, "the kids aren't in bed yet."

He prompts her, which is his role. "And?" he asks. "Get ready for something goofy, Theo," he warns, smiling broadly at his mystified and slightly squiffed brother.

"How about if we take them over to Hazelwood Flats for a late night slide?" Aaron scoffs. "Ah, c'mon Hol, is that the best you can do? I was expecting a raid on the Taj Mahal at the very least."

She sighs, and laughs comfortably. "It's too far away, and I'm a little drunk. I don't think they would let me fly. Anyway, what d'you say? Is it on? None of us can drive, we'll have to walk."

"I could probably drive," says Theo, *sotto voce*, but they seem to ignore his suggestion, until he pipes up again. "I said—"

"We heard you, Theo, but the thing is that Holly is all set on getting out and making noise and waking up the neighborhood, or something like that, so I suppose we'll have to go on foot. And anyway, you aren't a seasoned drinker, and I am a bit too pissed myself to attempt driving even four blocks; and they're long blocks. Well, Theo, are you game? I guess Hol and I will go. Go gather up the kids and their stuff, Hol. I'll find some stuff for Theo and the girls."

"What do you mean by sliding?" Theo asks, as Holly goes toward the upstairs calling to Jason and Magda, and Aaron propels his brother by one arm toward the basement.

"Well, I have all these stiff cardboard tubes, larger than foot size, which I got for some project at work. What we do is cut them open at the top, then fasten them around our feet and slide back and forth across the ice at the flats. It's sort of like a pond there, except the water is frozen most of the winter because it's so shallow: it's really just a level of water about one and a half feet thick which has cattails and pussywillows growing in it during the rest of the year."

"Don't the tubes wear out? I mean, they're just cardboard, right?"

"Well, they're very thickly covered in some kind of finish or other, really slick until you've been across the ice a few times. And we tie them on with wire on the bottom and cord on the top. Your girls will love it, you'll see. But we've got to get extra old pillows to tie around your bums: falling is a part of the fun. Tell Callie and Hallie, and then come into the washroom. Everybody's got to carry something, and I've got to find the extra flashlights."

"You mean, we do this in the dark?"

"Oh, no, there are lots of street lights around the flats; there's a small paved road around them, and earlier this evening there were probably some skaters there. But it's a little too bumpy on the surface of the ice for skating easily."

"Then, why the flashlights?"

"Oh, Theo, it isn't like you to grip up and question everything. This kind of mission is right up your alley. Fun! Remember fun? We have to get between here and there, and for part of the way, it's a little dark. Make sure the girls get warmly wrapped up, too. Don't want any cases of frostbite out there."

They complete their preparations and head out the door, Jason tolerating this freakish touch of fantasy as an ending to the evening, the others caught up in Holly's laughter. Tripping lightly through the snow in the yard and out to the street, the dual family unit is carried away into the night like pilgrim shadows, their noise and pleasure guided in spirit by the carnival mood of the three adults, whose religiosity is that of never growing old.

* * *

"Guess what I've got on under my skirt, Jason," Deirdre teases.

"Precious little, by the feel of things," he says, reaching over to pat her hip where they sit in the back seat of his father's car, parked at the Lamont Reservoir Overlook. The "precious little" is the vernacular of his father, occurring in a situation purely drawn from fact and fiction through the American ages, and which he wonders if he can choreograph to his own satisfaction. Being as aware of historical reference as he is, he also wonders if Deirdre thinks it slightly schmaltzy or clichéd of him to bring her here, where the football players and town low-lifes and other people who are simply comfortable with this tradition hang out. Still, the invitation implicit in her voice and words distracts him from being isolated in his own head, to the point where he does not even want to call her attention to the coincidence between this location and others of like nature. After all, they have been here before.

"I'm not wearing even a thong, Jason," she breathes at him, at the same time rubbing his thigh urgently, and so high up that he gasps for fear of what she is going to do next. Not that he does not want it to happen, but that he would like some of the initiative to be left with himself.

"Deirdre, that's unfair," he protests, at the same time grabbing her long, platinum hair in his hand and tilting her head back for a kiss, supposing that she's trying to evoke the forceful in him.

She submits for a moment, but then says, "Well, you don't have to pull my head off. Why don't we get more comfortable?" Quick as a wink, she shimmies out of her thin summer top and he sees that there is no underwear impediment to his attentions there either. Mentally, he shrugs; she has evidently made up her mind that there's to be no further fooling around that does not lead to an ultimate goal, *the* ultimate goal.

After taking a moment to dig around in his wallet for a condom, one he has carefully swiped from his father's night table and transported back and forth time after time, cautious not to break the seal, he sets the condom aside and slips a gentle hand up her skirt. It's true, she's not wearing any panties. He switches his hand from her thigh to her crotch while she trembles, shakes, and sighs. He feels the wiry hair on her mound, and then proceeds to tickle her external genitals as he has occasionally done before through her clothes: she says nothing, but repositions herself closer to his reach and stretches out next to him on the spacious seat. For once, the drama queen is silent, or confined to moans and whispers.

Meanwhile, she strokes him through his shorts, and rubs her hands across his chest, seemingly undecided exactly where to set up her capitol, and too distracted by his caresses to return them in the same degree. But Jason, several months beyond his sixteenth birthday, is himself too overwrought by his own sexual dreams coming true with her to mind much. He raises up and removes his shorts and underwear to his ankles, the intrusive thought passing momentarily

through his mind that it would be a ludicrous position to be caught in. He looks up for a moment and glances around for any passing cars behind or around them, but only sees other cars filled with indistinct shadows in back and front and lowers himself again, determined to complete his mission before anyone can interfere. Generally not one to take a risk of public humiliation, he is taking a risk now to make a point to himself and the universe: he has a right to lay his girlfriend, as long as they observe "safe sex" rules at least as far as not getting pregnant. They have already played with each other's intimate parts in the recent past, and he had frankly assumed that this was all Deirdre was up for. But now he feels emotional warmth toward her too, because it is becoming obvious that she also has a mission to complete, and one which dovetails with his own. Trying not to go overly fast, he pays some attention to her breasts too, nibbling and sucking as well as he can until the impatient Deirdre wriggles out of her skirt and lies before him nude on top and bottom both, a condition that has never before transpired all at once.

"Unbutton your shirt: I want to feel your chest against mine," she commands. "If anyone comes by, cover yourself with this blanket," he negotiates, pointing to their winter-time friend in the floor, part of which he tucks under her. Then, he unbuttons his shirt and lies on top of her, feeling for the first time her warm female flesh stretched out against his own full length.

After a few more minutes of groping and groaning and licking and kissing her down below as his parents' old tattered sex manual, sneaked out of the den cubbyhole, has advised him, he feels he is ready for entry, and awkwardly puts his first condom on his quivering member, reminding himself swiftly in passing of everything he has read. It seems like a lot to remember, so he just takes a quick dive downward and to his surprise enters her without resistance. As he starts to do

what after all does seem to come fairly naturally, he realizes with another shock that she is not a virgin, and determines that she will never hear from him, if he can help it, that she is his first.

He had been worried that perhaps the condom would make him too insensitive and he would not enjoy what he was doing, but for whatever reason or circumstance, he notices that it seems actually to be beneficial: it is keeping him from climaxing as quickly as he has previously done while fantasizing about what he would like to do to Deirdre. He can only hope that the stamina he shows is enough for her, though he hears her low-throated vocalizations and supposes that she is nearly done. When he can hold on no longer, he gives a few last big pushes and then falls across her, a spent warrior, feeling proud of his first campaign.

Remembering the instruction that he needs to ascertain his partner's level of satisfaction, he glances up into her face as he removes the condom, but since she is smiling at him and her eyes are glinting at him through half-open, drowsy lids, he assumes that he has done his duty and opens his door just enough to drop the condom out. Though he feels some qualms about littering, he knows from what he has seen lying on the ground at the reservoir that this is standard practice, and so accepts tradition in at least this degree. This is Jason, in all his tremulous glory a son alternately of convention and freedom, and after using his handkerchief to clean up first her and then himself, he lies back down across her and rests for a while.

After a wordless time of stroking and murmuring and silly conversation, the two of them slip back into their clothes and share a can of Coke in the front seat.

"I knew that Alice Neally wasn't right about you. I knew it from the first time you and I went out together as a couple, especially from the first time we made out."

Apprehensive, he asks, "What did Alice Neally say?"

"She said you were a virgin, Jas, maybe even a gay virgin. I told her that she's just prejudiced against smart guys. That bonehead she dates has been with everyone who'd go with him about five times already, Alice included."

Trying to sound angrier and less nervous at this turn in the conversation than he feels, Jason bites off, "Alice Neally is a fool." Nevertheless, he is suddenly intrigued by the way in which he has been able to be so close to Deirdre for months now, nearly a year, and to make out with her regularly, without ever having heard this from her before. It is something he marks down mentally for further thought, the manner in which two people can be so close and yet so distant at the same time.

After Jason takes Deirdre home this evening, instead of going home immediately himself, he sits out in front of her house in the car, trying to work up the kind of enthusiasm for what had happened that he felt before. It's not that he does not feel affection for Deirdre, because he does; it's not because he disliked having sex with her, because that's one of his fondest memories, both past and present. It seems rather to be that he had expected more in the way of explosive sensation than he received. Why ever did silly shows on tv cut to scenes of fireworks or other loud noisy situations when people were supposed to be having sex? He puzzles over this and wonders if some highly advertised KY Jelly would have made the difference.

He also muses on the fact that Deirdre had removed his anxiety from the equation by not asking him to swear to love her always, or something else of that kind, something in fact beyond his current lifestyle and capacity, and something which he had wondered if she would ask. He wonders if he even feels a little deflated by the lack of this threat, as if perhaps the tug-of-war he could imagine before he actually penetrated her had robbed him by its absence of a necessary excitement in response. He feels shame at this thought once it is fully in his head, because after

all it would be unfair to ask her to swear to love constantly if he himself is not willing to do so, or at least to attempt the same. "We're young," he finally says to himself by way of excuse, and with that explanation he is able to pull away from the curb and go home, though only to an indifferent night's sleep. He wishes he were able to discuss the matter with his father, but is wary of revealing such a malfeasance regarding himself; he feels that he has otherwise done so much to keep his family together. And there's the matter of the location of aforesaid wrongdoing, his father's car, which he has only been allowed to drive after numerous warnings and promises passing back and forth.

Finally reassuring himself the next day that so up-to-the-mark a man as his father probably had his first sexual experience early too, earlier at least than the man-to-man talk about sexual hygiene "for when you go to college" indicated, Jason is at last able to put the matter to rest. After all, his father had given him the talk when Jason was twelve. He is further lightened of his care in the following few days by the increased frequency of calls from Deirdre, during some of which at least she tries to tempt him out again for another go-round: so she was really impressed by him! He resolves to save a fund from his allowance for condoms, and finds what he thinks is a good hiding place for them as well, in his locked action figure box from when he used to play RPG's more often. No one has ever breached the security of that lock, not even the intrusive and nosy Callie and Hallie, and his folks are secure, he thinks, in the knowledge they imagine they have of him. His responsibility between now and college departure, as he forecasts it to himself, is to make sure that neither Deirdre nor any other girl he may somehow happen to have sex with gets pregnant (supposing that Deirdre's histrionics or some other aspect of the situation parts them and he moves on). Because Jason is determined to go to a good college, resolved to keep his marks up for this goal, and unwilling to stay around Cromeley.

2
College

Jason has cleared the admissions hurdles and broken the tape to enter a prestigious liberal university, Wathywiddles University, two hours away from his home. It is near enough for his parents not to become exhausted on family trips for visitors' weekends, without being near enough to cause the fear that they will descend on him unpredictably when he has a tie on his doorknob and is entertaining a promising candidate for girlfriend. Or sleeping partner, he is not sure which. These days, he feels the bonhomie and good spirits that Deirdre used to show him, with her same apparent indifference to previous rivals and an absence of her penchant for showmanship.

It is not that his intellectual development is suffering, either. It's rather that the intellect is developing rather more slowly than the libido, and is operating in its service. Just now, for instance, he is in an offbeat philosophy seminar studying the works of bizarre American philosophers, among whom one Onslaught Williams has come to monopolize his attention. O. Williams was a self-styled prophet of the California Gold Rush Era, eagerly proselytizing just as eager recipients of his ersatz wisdom, and predicting like a regular oracle, which is to say quizzically and with words like double-edged blades. When asked in class to boil down what Williams had said in one prophetic outburst, Jason had replied, "He seems to be saying, like, 'When you think something means something, it doesn't; and when you think that it doesn't mean anything, it probably does.'"

He had been proud of himself for this insight, but the class had laughed in sympathy with him, and the instructor had replied, looking over his half-spectacles at him sternly (sternly, that is, for a man with a full, bushy beard and mild voice and eyes, whom they all suspected to be an

old "hippie"), "I don't feel you're taking this subject seriously enough, my young friend. Try again."

Helplessly, Jason flipped through a few pages, and his eye fell on another part of the text. "Well, he says a few pages later 'Take care of the small things: the large ones have large and obvious consequences.'"

"Okay. You're cheating a bit by being elliptical, but fair enough: so was he. Tell me, class, what do you get by putting these two passages together?" Jason was so relieved to have the focus of even so gentle a beam shifted from himself to the general class that he relaxed and ceased to listen. But the words returned to him later and he puzzled over the mystery, in a spare moment without female company when he himself was mentally panning desperately for gold amid term papers and attempted seductions that were not working out right. In the wee hours, while imbibing far too much strong espresso straight from the mageneta loaned him by an Italian roommate, he finds himself even seeking to read Onslaught Williams all over again, like an Ouija board almost, as if he might be productive of solutions in general.

Finally, when the dawn birds are chirping outside the window, those of them, that is, who have stuck around for the winter season and are picking the dry seed husks for food or pecking the bark in the trees for the insects hiding there, he has an epiphany. Unlike a Joycean epiphany, which he has become familiar with in English class, it does not depend on beautiful externals but is rather an internal sort of sudden enlightenment which seems indistinguishable from a coffee high if he looks at it just so. And he is naturally suspicious. But now, at least, he has a topic for the philosophy paper he has put off until the last minute. His premise? That Onslaught Williams's theory of inverse importance, the two parts of which Jason had failed to discuss in class adequately enough to pass muster, is actually a clever sleight-of-hand intended to render

absolutely nothing to the listener and give O. Williams a chuckle while doing so. As Jason reasons in his key paragraph, "What, after all, is it to say that what seem to be our moments of supreme importance are actually insignificances, and to follow this up immediately with the idea that the insignificant is in fact what we should be paying attention to? It is in fact to set up a dialectic which cancels itself out like a Mobius strip: if we pay attention to something, that automatically gives it an importance, which is, however, negated by the fact that it means nothing. But if we neglect to pay attention to something, it may be important. But if we decide that it is and turn our attention to it, it disappears like ice melting in the hot sun." (Here he becomes poetic because he has noticed his professor's affection for metaphor and simile.) "And within a few pages—" he continues, "Williams tells us that we should take care of the small things, because the large ones have 'large and obvious consequences' which we cannot miss. But isn't this to say that it is really the small things which are important? Or are the large ones more at issue? Either way, the large and the small, another dichotomy, enter the previous formula and become less and less visible the more we pay attention to them. Or conversely, more and more obvious the less we consent to deal with them. What is this but a not terribly sophisticated form of double talk, intended to bilk money for the prophecy coffers out of gold miners desperate for any word of hope as they hang on and on, perhaps panning less and less out of the river, maybe even giving up their few precious nuggets of the metal to Onslaught in exchange for dicey advice about where to dig next? And perhaps getting less and less out of the bodies of water which actually could have repaid them better." (He knows this last is a sentence fragment, but is trusting the advice he has been given, that such a device can sometimes be effective at a climactic moment in his argument. When the paper comes back, however, it is marked "sentence frag.," the philosophy assistant obviously taking the cautious route and upholding his or her

general obligation to the School of Arts and Sciences to clean up freshman writing. The overall discussion, however, makes its way to the professor, who scribbles in an almost indecipherable hand at the top of the page "Good argument. A-. See me if you are interested in doing an honors thesis in American philosophy in a year or two.")

Jason is justly proud of this victory over prophecy and book-slogging, and feels confident enough in his invulnerability to time and space to take a few running skids across the frozen sidewalk on his way to see the professor. Not that he is overly enthused about doing an honors thesis, but he figures he might as well be polite and keep in good with someone who seems to mean him well. On the third skid, he falls on his butt. Unabashed, he gets up and makes his way across the quad and on into the philosophy building. The professor unintentionally reminds him of his mortality by having forgotten who he is; nevertheless, Jason holds up the paper for him to see, and resolves not to be falsely modest.

Once Professor Alwitz figures out who Jason is from amongst the lecture group of fifty odd or so students, he beams at him, and pats him on the back. He inquires into Jason's previous reading, and carefully but not indecipherably hides the fact that he is a bit disappointed by the young man's affection for things outside the province of American topics. For instance, he grins and shakes his head ruefully when Jason reveals his early addiction to Machiavelli. "No wonder you take the tack you do about our friend Onslaught! Did it ever occur to you that Williams was the fool of his own system? That perhaps he himself really believed in what he said, however loony the logic? Whereas you credit him with full Machiavellian honors of being conniving!"

Jason thinks to inquire as to whether or not there are any Americans whom he could contrive to compare and contrast with Machiavelli. Professor Alwitz responds that it would include doing some sort of background on each philosopher's life history and surroundings. Jason thinks this

sounds boring, but is enjoying himself and so does not let on. It is in fact so comfortable talking to the professor that Jason does something he rarely does—he reveals to the man that he himself applied Machiavelli's logic to the management of his own family when he was younger and, as he is forced to admit, more impressionable.

"Tell me, what do you think about Machiavelli now? Or is he still "unexamined" in your system of swallowing his work whole, as it were, and taking it at face value? Remember that Plato said 'The life which is unexamined is not worth living.' You might also say that 'the text which is unexamined is not worth reading.'"

"Well," Jason ponders seriously when invited to do so, "I can only reason about the text from my own experience. I guess after a while it just began to seem like a never-ending burden, to be so cagey and cautious. I love my family, and I wanted to relax with them instead of trying to psych them out all the time and attribute causes and motives to them in order to prevent bad situations from happening. I never read up on Machiavelli's life, so I don't know if he ever relaxed or had any fun. It didn't sound like much fun from the text of *The Prince*; at least, not to me, after the first few months of feeling powerful and in control of my family's actions."

"Yes, that might work," the professor mused, stroking his regulation beard with a meditative hand. "Forms and sources of power. The apparently prophetic contrasted with the deliberately manipulative. Of course, if you still feel that Onslaught Williams was being intentionally abstruse and confusing, you'd handle your arguments differently. Well, you've got a year or perhaps two before time to start an honors thesis; and of course, you have to keep your other grades up as well. Here, here's a list of things I put together for you which you should probably read before attempting it. You might even want to use some of them for source material."

They talk in a jovial and casual fashion about the weather, the upcoming break, and things happening at Wathywiddles. Jason feels he has made a new friend, and promises to keep in touch about what he is doing with his potential project. Though he has not yet decided whether an honors thesis in something as apparently impractical as philosophy is what he really needs to be doing, he knows now after talking to Professor Alwitz that it is the kind of thing he can imagine himself doing.

* * *

Jason goes home for Christmas at winter break. There have been changes while he has been gone, changes that no one felt it necessary to tell him about in the copious letters he has received from his mother and father, and the sporadic ones he got from Magda. He suspects that Magda was just being secretive until she could spring her news on him in person, but he cannot imagine why the twins did not try to pre-empt her announcement by spoiling the surprise: Magda, his fourteen-year-old sister, has a boyfriend, and is thus a bit younger than he was when he formed what could be called a serious attachment with Deirdre. Deirdre, as his mother seems glad to tell him, though she does not gloat, is married and the mother of two children now, effectively ending her own career at the local vocational school to keep house for her new husband, a welder who is currently stationed in Iraq. And Uncle Theodore, to his father's evident astonishment (though it is politely concealed from Theo and is broached by his father only when Jason and his father are alone) has made a comfy new relationship with Nancy Bellingcote, his editor on the newspaper.

In the face of such matchings and pairings, they naturally all want to know if Jason has acquired a new college girlfriend yet. He murmurs vaguely about dating, and is taken off guard

when his father gives him a knowing wink behind his mother's back; at first, it seems that in his father's mind, Jason is now old and responsible enough to know what he is doing.

That Jason's father expects to be privy to his son's romantic and sexual doings becomes evident by the way Aaron joshes him repeatedly on his supposed prowess when they are alone, or when no one else is paying much attention. Jason hesitates, in part because he wonders if his father is going through a somewhat early male menopause, in part because of his loyalty to both his parents and their marriage. He does not think it would be good for his mother that his father's mind revolve too much around male sexual experiments taking place in a college setting, though again he does not know how to tell his father so. He thus once again finds himself in the rôle of protector of his family, and is often on edge when his father is around. As well, he catches himself avoiding tête-à-têtes with his male parent.

Eventually, when it cannot be avoided any longer, Jason accepts the inevitable and lets his father start the discussion about women which was obviously coming. But his father surprises him by not taking the tack he had expected. The first thing Aaron says is,

"Jesus, Jason, you haven't gotten some girl pregnant, have you? Well, not that we couldn't work that out, but still—you've been so evasive about it. Some of my happiest days were spent in college getting to know your mother. So, is there anyone on the horizon, or are you, you know, alone?" His father's face is lined with concern, and just a bit with age. Looking at him, Jason feels a breath of relief and some compunction about the march of time, though it is not his fault.

"No, Dad, I date; I'm not exactly alone. I just haven't found what you and Mom call 'the one' yet. So, on sort of the same topic, what's happened with Uncle Theo and—Nancy, is that her name? And Magda, for God's sake! She talks about that guy Sam Brooks all the time, but I

haven't seen him since they were both snotty-nosed kids in the sandbox together. Come to think of it, since I've been home, she seems to spend more time on the phone talking about him with her friends than she does out on dates."

"Well," his father responded, "maybe we should all be thankful for small mercies. As to Theo and Nancy, we rarely see them. We babysit for him sometimes when he stays over there, and a friend of hers seems to do the same for her when she stays over here with Theo, and then there are the times when they take all four kids out for dinner or something. It appears to me that they're trying to work the kids in together gradually, so maybe there's some problem they're trying to short circuit, or some they're anticipating."

"Yeah, well, you remember what a madhouse it was around here when Uncle Theo and Hallie and Callie first moved in. Getting used to the other family's rules, or lack of rules, in Uncle Theo's case. So, c'mon, Dad, give! What's this Nancy Bellingcote like? I can't really imagine Uncle Theodore dating someone in a position of authority over him like his editor, given his historic resistance to any form of control."

"Well, she's got long red hair—natural, I think—and bright green eyes, but I imagine that isn't what you meant by asking me what she's like. She's what your out-of-date uncle would call 'laid back,' and she's very, very patient and persuasive with Theo. He has confessed to me that she can get him to observe a publishing deadline better than anyone else, and that's no mean feat. Not only on its own, I mean, but because it's unusual that she has inculcated so much self-knowledge in Theo that he would admit one of his own key faults. You know, procrastinating. And as Theo has pointed out to me before now, she's very professional and keen-minded, so Holly and I have only been able to reason that she really sees something in Theo's work which keeps her enthusiastic for his presence on the paper. I mean, he seems to have avoided a lot of

the pitfalls of dating someone from his work. Come to think of it, and judging by my own colleagues, I've never seen it operate so well before now. But then, as I said, we only see them together when she stays over here. We'll have everyone here for Christmas, though, a regular big crowd. Your mother is looking for some help from you with finding recipes on the Internet for stuffing and gravy, and other incidentals."

"*My* help? Well, Dad, I don't mind helping her, but she's always done that sort of thing herself, and she knows how to operate a computer. What's up with Mom, anyway? She seemed a little subdued when you guys came to pick me up at the train station."

"If you want my guess, it's just that her first-born has been away from home for half a year now, and she's thinking about time passing, and realizing that someday not too long from now, you're going to be on your own. Half of a case of what psychologists call 'empty nest syndrome.' Half of a case, you know, since Magda's still here. I think your mom's just looking for a way to spend some of what's called 'quality time' with you. I hope you'll be available for her and sensitive to her moods."

Mischievously, Jason says, "So now we're admitting that Mom has moods? Wow, the balance of power has shifted! Before, her 'moods' were the dictates of the gods!"

"Jason! Don't be a sexist! Why should I, your father, have to tell you that? And it's not that I'm in power. Quite the reverse. I have my bad times too, particularly when something goes wrong at work. It's just that your mother is thinking of taking up something new, a flower shop or a whole earth fruit stand, or something else to pass her time, and she needs all of our support. With Magda getting about as grown up as she can stand herself, and Hallie and Callie older now too, she doesn't feel she's needed around here as much."

"What a stereotypical thing to be doing for her, though, managing a boutique of some sort!

Stereotypical, I mean, for women of her class and training. You and Mom used to make almost as much fun of that kind of thing as Uncle Theo does. Or does he, still?"

"Whether he does or not, you shouldn't. And what have you been doing to study class and women's education, and the like? You didn't use to make flatfooted remarks like that!"

"Sorry, Dad. I didn't mean to be so impartial about something which must be near to Mom's heart. So, which is she leaning toward, flower shop or fruit stand?"

"Fruit stand, I think. She realizes that flower shop management would require a lot more training in botany than she feels like putting into the effort, and she knows fruit fairly well from having bought it for us all these years. And, something else we forgot to mention so far—sorry, it slipped my mind until we got on this topic specifically—your Aunt Julie, Mom's sister, is coming to town. Mom has asked her to help with whatever the business will eventually be, since she's had training in business and bookkeeping."

"Auntie Julie, the one who sent me books until I was about fifteen?"

"Yeah, is there more than one Auntie Julie? I can remember the day of your last receipt of a book. She sent you *My Friend Flicka*, which you made such a fuss about because you were too old for it and you thought it was a girls' book. I don't know what you said to her over the phone, I wasn't here, but I remember that ever since then, she's sent you a check for your birthday. You swore you weren't rude, but your mother and I to this day remain unconvinced. Auntie Julie is a bit controlling, just between you and me, and I can't imagine her giving up on trying to manipulate your reading material at a distance except for some really big conversational blowout."

"I was tactful, Dad, or at least I thought I was. As tactful as a fifteen-year-old boy can be. I was also direct, though, and I'm sure she got the point. Sounded a bit whiffy on the phone, but I think you guys must've made too much of a holy sepulchre of her opinions; I believe she responded well to frankness. At least, from my angle. Well, for example, I saved up the \$150 she sent me last birthday, and it bought a couple of my textbooks this fall. Is she going to be living here with us?"

"God, no! Even as much as your mom loves her older sister, she couldn't tolerate that! Auntie Julie has to interfere with everything, and your mother and I had a lengthy discussion about limits and boundaries before I would admit that Julie had points that were to our advantage. I'm the silent partner, you see, the grand financier whose bucks are going to set up the place. Things have been going well for me at work, Jason, so just in passing, I should tell you that you really don't have to use your money for textbooks. Save it for something else you need or want, your mom and I can handle school expenses."

"Oh, I don't mind helping to pull my own weight, Dad. It's little enough I get to do. I mean, after all, I'm not a work-study student, and I'm able to go to classes full time. That may indirectly help too, because I might get finished faster. Oh, by the way, I've been asked if I want to do an honors thesis."

Aaron is justly proud of this feat of Jason's, and in the ensuing conversation over this bit of information, forgets to ask any more about Jason's womanizing. They also set aside the topics relating to Jason's mother, which brings Jason some relief from something which has been bothering him about subjects relating to women lately: he and his father, during their short conversations about other people since he has been home, have been pirouetting around each other like what one of his socialist professors calls "a couple of liberals doing the I'm-Better-

Than-You-Are Ballet." They have each carefully restrained their worst remarks, which used to bring a laugh to the two of them together, and qualified every sentence, or made rejoinders to the other's franker statements, vying as if to see who could be the more reasonable party. Jason is familiar with the activity from conversations with friends, particularly those sets which include members of some other group which is problematic when telling raunchy or prejudiced jokes, like women or minorities. As a matter of fact, Jason has been brought up well, and taught to be considerate and thoughtful in his remarks about people, so he takes to correcting his friends and setting records straight naturally. He must admit to his inner man, however, that some of his less enlightened friends and acquaintances have other sterling qualities which make them fun to hang out with, though some of them think him a bit of a bore for continually calling them on their prejudices and foibles. It's the sort of issue he can imagine bringing up with his dad for a serious dialogue sometime, though Christmas festivities seem to be all anyone in the household is thinking about. He resolves to try and work in the topic with Aaron, since he and Aaron have in the past privately derided Theo for his own apparent humorlessness when he feels his principles are challenged. Before he can do more than make a firm commitment to his plan, though, something else happens which mocks the carefulness and circumspection of the entire household.

At fourteen, Magda has attained her full adult height of five eleven, taking after Aaron, and has developed an abundant and voluptuous figure, taking after Holly in her own youth. She is only two inches or so shorter than Jason and his father, and Jason notes in the back of his thoughts that his father seems uncomfortable with the subject of how tall his daughter is, as if she were intending to foment a revolution. She is two inches taller than her boyfriend, Sam Brooks, who measures in at a respectable five nine, but this seems, at least, to bother neither of them: on

the brief occasions when Jason sees them together, they have their arms around each other like any other courting couple.

It is in fact Sam Brooks whom Aaron blames, after the fact, for the entire threatening event which puts his, Holly's, and Theo's calculations out when they contemplate the security of their domicile. Sam has persuaded Magda to volunteer with him at a homeless shelter on the other side of town. Because neither of them drive, they take the transit system, and also take the precaution of always going and coming home together. Nevertheless, on one snowy evening three nights before Christmas, when they have been busy preparing Christmas gift baskets from donations given at the door, Sam asks Magda if she feels confident enough to travel home alone on the evening bus, which after all runs from a safer corner one block from the shelter and is regular and dependable. Sam himself is planning to stay overnight and continue helping, as well as to see to toys for the children on the 24th. Magda, though preferring to go home on the bus with Sam, who lives just down the street from her, is a cautious and mature person for her age, and reasoning to herself that she is unlikely to be a target of any adverse attention from denizens of the neighborhood near the shelter due to her size, assents reluctantly.

As she shrugs back into her suede boots, which are still a little damp from the trip there, and shoulders her bag containing her flats, she looks out the front window. There is light-heartedness and laughter in the shelter behind her, an unaccustomed sound in that somber atmosphere. The snow seems to be falling thicker and faster now than when they came; it's fluffy and beautiful to watch, but she knows by watching it that it could materialize into a full-fledged storm, and so she hefts the bag again and ducks out the door, narrowing her shoulders against the cold wind. She is standing at the bus stop checking her watch and frowning, thinking that the bus is surely ten minutes late, unusual even in this weather, when several other people

gather. She politely and noncommittally nods to them, knowing that they have probably seen her going back and forth on the street. Then, as the first person in line, she turns back to the curb and ignores them, following the protocol ever so gently enunciated by one of the workers in the shelter: get a quick and careful look at people for potential problems, then avoid making eye contact unless you know them.

It's not until she is seated up front on the tardy bus that a man from the crowd behind her stumbles past her and against her in what seems like a drunken fog, looking through bleary eyes down at her as he pulls himself erect again and saying disjointedly, "Sorry there, little girl, didn't mean to land in your lap. Whoops, you're not a little girl, are you? Why, how tall do you think you are, anyway? Taller than me." He shifts his gaze from her with abstraction as the driver tells him to be seated, and he stumbles further on and collapses into a seat halfway back, still muttering, "Tall! Tall! How tall is she? How tall? Too tall to talk back. Too tall to talk to." Magda resents this but reasons to herself that the man is more or less out of her way as long as she does not respond to any conversational gestures. As if to provoke her, however, he continues to repeat the word "tall" with various animadversions, and periodically yells aloud to the whole bus, "Ain't she tall, there? Look at her, she won't say nothin'. Unfriendly bitch."

After this remark, the bus driver warns him again to be still if he doesn't want to be put off the bus. The man becomes suddenly contrite, which is just as off-putting in its way, because he insists on becoming louder and apologetic. Magda sits fuming to herself, supported by infrequent warnings from the driver, who is distracted by the weather and is obviously used to such happenings on this part of the route. She sighs and realizes that whereas she usually is glad the bus route runs straight through town and she does not have to change buses to get to a block

near her home, it would on this occasion be beneficial to be able to get onto another bus and away from this harassment.

At last, they reach the stop where Magda usually gets off, and with caution she glances swiftly behind her as she stands up, making sure that the man annoying her is still seated. He seems to be quiescent, and she stumbles off the bus into an inconvenient snowdrift. As she stops for a second to shake the snow from her feet and make quick tracks away from the bus, she hears the brakes behind her screech, the vehicle lunge on, and then, in dismay, the brakes put suddenly on again. Picking up her pace, she pulls her hood closer around her head and bends into the wind, which is whipping large wheeling snowflakes into her face and hair. The bus gives a final groan and lurches off into the night, having set down after a moment at least one other passenger than Magda. She hears all this behind her, but does not turn around, not until uneven footsteps and breathing patterns force her to the conclusion that yes, indeed, someone is trying to catch up with her. She speeds up, and slips and slides on the icy sidewalk—mostly shoveled of recent snow as it is and iced over from the melted remainder. She catches her balance and plods on, still trying to ignore the person behind her. To no avail, however; a moment later, she hears the dreaded drunken voice behind her calling out,

"Hey! Tall drink! Wait up for a pal, can'tcha? I'm an old man! These sidewalks are slippery. Boy, this is a ritzy neighborhood. You live here, do ya'? Shoulda guessed it from the way you won't say anything to a friendly guy like me." All of this is articulated with difficulty as the speaker gasps in his effort to keep up. Magda hears him fall down once, and hastens to get an advantage, wondering if any of the neighbors are home whom she knows and whom she can rely on to let her in and protect her, from what sort of bedevilment she is not sure exactly. It is still another long half block to her house, and yet because so many of the neighbors are away for

Christmas, only the telltale special lighting systems are on at their houses; all the sidewalk below is dark and forbidding.

Guessing that there's no hope for it but to beat him to the door—which is difficult since as unlikely as it seems he sounds as if he is gaining on her gradually from behind—she pulls out her set of keys with the battery-lighted miniature flashlight, drops them once, scoops them off the pavement while still in forward motion, and all but runs up her own walk as she reaches the house.

Her tormentor is at the end of the walk, looking ahead into the gloom there as if he thinks he might have lost her in front of him. Then, hearing the click of the lock as she lets herself in, he turns and swoops forward in an uneven dash toward the porch where she is watching in fascinated loathing, one side of his body seeming to drag the other along behind it. She slams the door and locks it, and punches in the correct numbers for the security code, hearing him throw his weight against it even as the buttons light up in reassurance. For good measure, she calls upstairs and to the kitchen but receives no response, and remembers too late that the rest of the family is out caroling at the local nursing homes. There's nothing for it, she realizes as she hears the man still outside muttering to himself on the porch, but to call the police and have him carted away, probably to spend both Christmas Eve and Christmas itself in jail. She had hoped it would not be that kind of ending, she thinks, as she dials 911 and reports; she had hoped there would be no uncomfortable war of the classes in her term of helping at the shelter. She could hear Sam's patient voice in her imagination now, saying what he had said to her before when she didn't deal with a situation with grace: "You've got to learn how to talk to them, Mags. They're people, just like us, only living in different, harder, circumstances. You've got to learn about their forms of emotional currency, and then you won't make mistakes."

Then something happens that puts everything else out of her mind, and makes her long for the sudden arrival of policemen, as many as necessary: from the hallway where the phone is, she hears a crash and sees the glass of the ornamental panel on the front door smashed in. A rock falls on the floor, out of the groping hand that is reaching in and around and trying to locate the lock. It has taken considerable force to break the glass, because it is very thick and insulated. A more intense form of fear mobilizes Magda now, and she dials 911 again and screams into the phone this time, barely able to answer as to the address, and only half-listening to instructions to go to the closest room with a secure lock and lock herself in, armed with whatever she can find, until the police arrive. From her casual watching of cop shows on tv, she doesn't think this is a usual proceeding for police operators, but this one sounds like a sympathetic young woman of indeterminate class herself, probably a holiday substitute who has not been read all the rules.

Magda follows the instructions, however, following also with her ears the progress of the now seemingly coherent and angry drunk, who has obtained entry to the house, but who is presently heard swearing at the sound of the alarm going off, which of course he does not know how to disarm. She hears him faintly in the kitchen first, talking indistinctly to himself and mouthing words around something he has put between his lips to taste. Soon, however, he is heard smashing bottles in her father's study, where her father seems uncharacteristically to have left his liquor cabinet unlocked. The noise ceases for a few minutes, during which she imagines the man to be drinking various kinds of alcohol; she hopes that he will drink himself into a safe oblivion, enough to allow him to fall asleep or pass out, assuming that the booze will allow him to disregard the noise of the continuing alarm. She looks at her watch: it's been fifteen minutes now, during at least thirteen of which the alarm has been waking up barking dogs at a distance of several blocks away. Where are the police?

Five minutes later, there is a polite peal on the bell, which is followed by a stern male voice saying, "This is the police. Is anyone at home? Hello?"

Since Magda is locked in the living room, which has windows that front on the porch, she opens the sash of one of them, and explains the situation in brief. At the same time, the second officer, a female, points to the broken door. They open it, and while the female officer persuades Magda to unlock the living room door, come out, and shut off the alarm, the male officer goes off in search of the drunk.

Still feeling the charge of adrenalin and panic, Magda asks, "What took you so long? I called twice, and the second time I was told to lock myself in somewhere and arm myself until you arrived!"

"Oh, you called? We were just cruising the neighborhood and heard the alarm." She inspects the alarm face. "Yeah, this is one of the new ones that have caused us a problem all night. If you hadn't put your head out the window and we hadn't seen the broken glass, we would've just waited for the security company to show up to examine it and maybe shut it off. It seems that these alarms have a hair trigger, and anything can do it, like a bad storm or water. Have you ever had trouble with it?"

Magda shakes her head. "Not that I know of. No, I was working at the Beaumont Shelter over on Fifth and Grandin, and he got on the same bus, and followed me home. My family is all out caroling, or maybe things wouldn't have gotten this far. They should be home soon," she says, hoping that it is true. Then, as reason returns and fear and panic recede, she asks, "But if you didn't come in answer to my two calls, what happened? Why hasn't anyone come yet?"

The woman answers, "My God! If you knew the calls that have come in some nights near holidays! My guess is that the dispatcher got snowed under and somehow lost your call in all the

flurry. Don't worry, I'll call from the car and let them know what's happened. Unless you need me to stay here with you or need to talk to a counselor. It *is* odd that no one has called us, though. Just let me use my cell phone. Our car radio is one of the last of its breed, and it's been wonky ever since they worked on the electrical system a week ago. And I'll give the security company a call, too, and let them know we're already here."

The officer goes further into the living room and gets involved in what seems like a heated debate with someone in dispatch. She says reassuring things to Magda and they stay for a few minutes longer while she logs in an official report. In any case, within the next ten minutes, they have their answer, as the male officer is talking the drunk back down the walk and into the waiting police vehicle. Two police cars roar up, sirens blaring, and the drunk springs into sudden action as he is being bent into the police car. He takes the original male officer off-guard, and sprints down the sidewalk, screaming odd old slogans about brutality and obscenities about the police. Two officers from the new cars pursue him and bring him back, now limp and quiescent and pleading, and doing just as quick a change of personality as he had earlier done on the bus, when he switched from offensive to apologetic remarks directed at Magda.

Just before the first officers to arrive on the scene leave, the female officer asks Magda if she has any stout cardboard and duct tape, or electrician's tape. Magda looks at her blankly; then she drags forward a thick cardboard box which had carried Christmas decorations and which is still in the living room. The tape is more of a problem, because she has to search for her father's tool chest in the garage, but eventually she holds up two rolls of silver tape and asks if either of them will do.

"Just what I wanted," the officer says, pulling some kind of cutting tool out of her boot. (The girl has a moment of wondering if it's standard issue or just police bravado that makes her carry it.) Magda watches as the other woman covers up the hole in the glass window of the front door. "That should about do it. Some cold air will still get in, but not as much. With break-ins at a peak this season, your folks should get that repaired real soon. Now, are you sure you're okay? A counselor from the department could probably come out tomorrow, but if you want to see one now, you can come along with me. We'll give you a ride home later, if you need one." When Magda hesitates, trying to think of how to thank her appropriately, the officer reaches out a hand and pats the girl's arm.

Magda feels like crying, but she also wants to be alone, to process what has happened to her this evening. Looking at her watch, she realizes that it's nearly eleven o'clock, and her folks should be home soon. "No, thanks," she quavers. "I mean, I'm pretty sure I'm okay. He just scared me a lot because he followed me all that way successfully, even though he seemed so drunk. He didn't really touch me, or anything. At least, not except for nearly falling over me on the bus."

"Just keep in mind, my dear, that all wounds aren't visible to the eye. If at any time you need to talk to someone, here's the card of a good person we recommend, who has ties to the department. She can access information about your case if you ever need help with this issue, even a long time later. Well, if there's nothing else, we'll roll, then."

Just then, the male officer sticks his head around the living room door and says, "I'm having some trouble keeping this old guy quiet. Wouldn't you know it, Danvers, Cully, and that Peter Jenkins got calls and had to go. Are you coming, or what?"

"Coming right along," the woman officer answers cheerily. "Our girl here is a real trooper. She's going to stay here by herself until her family gets home. And if you want my advice," she turns back to Magda, who is following them to the front door, "don't reset the alarm. It worked correctly tonight because somebody really was breaking in, but this kind is sort of unreliable. Tell your folks what troubles we've had with this kind, and tell them an old standard like Brinks or whatever they call it now is better. Have a good holiday, dear, and try to put this behind you."

"You too," Magda vaguely answers, then locks the door behind them and shivers at the chill she suddenly feels, a chill she did not feel before. After a few minutes, she realizes that her feet are still wet because her inappropriate and dressy boots are soggy; she remembers spraying them with waterproofing solution about two weeks before, but this is the first time she has worn them for any length of time out in the snow and wet, and she recalls stumbling in drifts on the way home as well. Idly, she supposes as she sits there that suede was not the proper choice for the shelter anyway, with many people there unable to afford decent boots at all. This is a topic that revolves around and around in her mind, the notion that she cannot think what she was doing at the shelter anyway, pretending to have the same sensitivity and skill with people as Sam Brooks. She wonders what he will say when she tells him of her misadventure, wonders if he will entirely blame her or will take her side.

When the others come home, laughing and shouting as a group until they see the front door in the porch light, they revolve various questions aloud among themselves, their voices assuming tones of real alarm when they find the actual door alarm unset. Magda has fallen into an active doze. She hears them at a distance, but is prevented, as if by a heavy blanket of snow, from waking and answering them. When her mother finally grasps Magda's shoulder and shakes her awake, all the girl can do is look at her. She tears up, and as water rolls down her face in

rivulets, she holds out the female officer's card to her mother. Seeing that Magda is not in a coherent state, her mother calls the counselor's number, but receives only an answering machine—not surprising, since it is late on the 23rd. She calls the police station directly and talks to a desk sergeant. This occasions yet more questions aimed at Magda when she hangs up, anxious and searching ones. Finally, Magda is able to respond.

"I'm not hurt, Mom. A drunk followed me home on the bus, and broke in. You'd better look into the kitchen and Dad's study, where I heard him making a mess. But I was locked in here." She sighs deeply, then more tears course down her face. "Once he discovered the food and alcohol, I don't think he even thought about me again."

Now her father gets into the act with anger and fury. "And where was that goddamn Sam Brooks, I'd like to know? Isn't he supposed to walk you home?"

"Dad, he had to stay at the shelter and help out overnight. I decided to come home on the bus myself. I've ridden it dozens of times, and nothing's ever happened before." She sighs again, too tired to deal with her father's rage. "Please, don't be mad at Sam. It was just a coincidence."

"Just a coincidence that the one time he isn't with you, you nearly get attacked?" Her father fumes. "I'm going to have a word with that young man when next I see him. How like him to care more for strangers than for friends! All the world's hero, but a loss to his own nearest and dearest! I've met that type before, and I had hoped things were going to work out differently in this case. Just goes to show."

Though weary enough to fall asleep again right away, Magda resents what she regards as unfairness to Sam, and waveringly takes up for him against her father's harsher words. "Goes to show what, Dad? Sam is a very good person."

"Goes to show that I should've followed my instincts and refused to let you work at that shelter with him. It's different for young men and young women, Maggsie."

"I'm fourteen years old, Dad. And I've been lots of places that might not 'consort with our little vanilla world,' as Sam puts it."

"By God, don't quote that immature Karl Marx to me, or I might go over and yank him out of that shelter myself for a little walk around the block and a good talking-to. You need to stop thinking that the sun rises and sets in him, Mags, because there are other and better young men out there just waiting to meet you. Look at how popular you were at the spring dance at the club! What you need to do—"

Holding her hand out to him in a warning gesture, Holly says in a cool and soothing voice, "What she needs now is to grab a bit of something to eat or drink and get to bed, Aaron. Can't you see, she's all in? You can lecture Sam tomorrow if you get the opportunity, but let up on Magda. She knows what loyalty is, which is good enough for right now. C'mon, sweetie, come into the kitchen with me. I'll fix you a little something to take off the chill."

As they go out of the room, Aaron, Jason, Theo, Hallie, and Callie hear Magda say, "I hope he didn't ruin anything you have for us to eat, Mom. He was in the kitchen for a while." They also hear Holly's gentle murmur back, but they cannot hear what she actually is saying. She takes care of Magda's needs and sends her to bed with a turkey sandwich and a hot chocolate, then comes in to get the rest of them for a late snack. One by one, they file into the kitchen in a subdued manner, careful not to make too much noise or to be inappropriate to the seriousness of the occasion. Only Aaron seems to have trouble letting the subject go.

"I hope we're not eating that bastard's leavings," he mutters, lifting the top slice of bread on his turkey sandwich and looking down at it with unconcealed dubiousness.

"Now, Aaron, simmer down," Holly replies. "All the poor soul did in here was tear off a drumstick, and he left it half-eaten on the counter. Nothing else was even uncovered."

"Who wants to share our Christmas dinner with an intruder?"

"Aaron, you know better than that. I always do a ham for Christmas dinner. You know that this is just our snacking turkey. I don't feel good about his making Magda afraid and following her home and breaking in the front door, but it's to his credit that he wasn't really after her at all, in some sense. He was just after a better and a brighter world that he sensed in her, and as soon as he found a warm meal, he went for it instead. Poor man probably lives from meal to meal at shelters like the one Magda was at tonight."

"Well, he obviously lives from bottle to bottle as well, given the mess he made of my liquor cabinet. I'll have to buy a whole new one! He smashed in the front of it with that bronze paperweight you got me when we were first married. And it wasn't even locked! Not to mention that the whole study now smells like a distillery. I don't know, I'm glad Magda wasn't touched, but he profaned our life here by what he did."

The word "profaned" gets Theo's attention. He pats his brother on the arm. "I know how you feel, Aaron, but we aren't the Holy Family, after all. It's not so easy to profane us. We're made of stronger stuff than to regard our lifestyle as sacrosanct. People with lives different from ours are bound to impinge on it from time to time, though not always as abruptly as this."

"Has everyone but me lost his mind, or have you all just come down with a case of sweetness and light? The man's a housebreaker and a public nuisance at the very least."

With this, Holly says to everyone else, "Please, everyone, sit down and help yourselves to a quick meal. Aaron, why don't you lay down your sandwich for a second and come and help me pick out some Christmas music which will be soft enough not to wake Magda." Thus she

deputizes her husband to help her in the time-honored fashion of a wife who has more to say. Those in the kitchen as a body decide to wait for the others to come back before eating any more, though they fill up their plates with all the good turkey trimmings their hostess has provided. As Theo hears Aaron's voice rising in the living room and Holly repeatedly shushing him, and an abortive start once or twice of Christmas music, he says in reassurance to his own two daughters, Nancy Bellingcote and her daughter and son, and Jason,

"I'm glad Magda got by with just a serious scare. Not that I mean to underestimate the danger, but things could be far worse. Though I don't think Sam chose wisely to let Magda come home alone, she's a sensible girl who made the right moves in response to a tough situation. I hope all of you young ones remember what we taught you about how to deal with such things."

When the other two rejoin them, Aaron has obviously been soothed or pacified by something unheard that Holly was able to say to him, though Theo cannot imagine what. He knows his brother to be very temperamental about any threat to his family. As a group, they lightly and casually make merry, enough to mark the season but not enough to act as if they underestimated Magda's misadventure. This, in fact, plays the role of a restraining force on the whole holiday which follows, because Aaron wants to press charges and Holly just wants to forget it happened and let Magda forget, and there is some tension around the subject when the three of them are in the room with the others. Aaron's brow is often furrowed, and there has been at least one call to the family lawyer even though, as Magda has whispered to her father softly more than once, "Dad, let's just let it go," or "Look, Dad, I think Mom is right. The old guy doesn't even know where he was, according to the police. He won't be coming back here."

Finally, on New Year's Eve when they hold a small family party, Sam Brooks drops by. Though he has been warned away by Magda, who knows her father still blames him for what

happened, he is valiant enough to want to drop off Magda's Christmas gift a few days late (it's an eighteen-carat-gold chain with a heart-shaped opal at its center). Luckily for him, Magda sees him coming from where she sits in the living room and lets him in herself. They stand awkwardly in the hallway, kiss and embrace. Then Aaron comes out of the living room and sees Sam standing there, promptly scowling and heading straight for the pair. Sam is wise enough to offer his regrets without excuse for what happened, whereupon Aaron contents himself with saying that Magda will not be allowed to go to the shelter anymore with or without Sam, "or anywhere in that area of town, for that matter." Again Magda is in luck, because Holly comes through the hall and draws Aaron away "to make punch instead of throw a punch," as she whispers to him in the kitchen, smiling and kissing his cheek. He gives her a level look and grumbles a bit, but allows himself to be distracted. This gives Magda the opportunity to go and get Sam's present, a handsome first edition of a socialist author whom he much admires, a book already in its third edition. Uncharacteristically, Sam is collecting it because he hopes it will be worth a great deal in its antiquity, though now its author is more or less shrouded in obscurity. After a short stay in the living room around the tree with the others, Sam leaves, sighing to himself as he steps back out onto the porch: it's clear to him now that Magda is going to be stringently protected by her father, and that he can expect to be frustrated in any further courtship moves. Well, after all, he's only sixteen, two years older than Magda herself, but Sam is of the opinion that he knows what he wants, and hopes Magda does too.

But the odd thing to all of them is, after her gentleness with Sam at Christmas and New Year's, Magda herself seems to pull back. She not only does not challenge her father's supremacy as the rule-maker of her young life, but does not even seem to miss Sam. Holly, a romantic in so many ways, has started to try to surprise Magda grieving over him, so that she can

herself face down Aaron on her daughter's behalf, or soothe away floods of tears, at the very least. But Magda seems to accept being wrapped in cotton wool for a while, and has apparently said goodbye to Sam Brooks for good. As the season wears to its close and colder January weather sets in, the subject is shelved; school starts again for the younger folk, and then towards the end of the month, Jason returns to the august halls of academia, finding the weather conducive to staying inside wrapped up warmly and studying.

It's early one afternoon around 1:30 that his mother calls him and happens to find him on a day when he has no classes before the evening. She asks after his studies and his social life with a preoccupied manner that tells him she has something else on her mind. Breaking as tactfully as he can into her enquiries as they trail off into murmurs, asides, and speculations, he asks, "So what's up, Ma? What did you call me up for in the middle of the afternoon? You usually call at night."

"Well, Jason—I wanted to be sure to call at a time when you were not in class there, and the others were out here." She paused. "It's about Magda."

"Magda?" he asked. It had not been what he was expecting, though when he thought of it in passing later he could not have said what that would have been. His mother was usually not the secretive sort. "So...what's up with Magda?"

"Jas, she still hasn't gotten over that thing at Christmas. She wakes up at night, sitting bolt upright in the bed screaming in short bursts. Or, she cowers in her room for hours on end. I know it sounds bizarre, not like our Maggie at all. She's always been such a sunny, bright little thing."

"She's hardly a 'little thing' anymore, Mom, and I'm not talking about her height."

"Well, neither am I," his mother speaks defensively.

"Have you taken her to the doctor? Maybe something's really wrong with her."

"Oh, Jason, for heaven's sake, between you and your father, I don't know what to think or do."

"Calm down, Mom, okay? Dad was plenty mad at Christmas. And he doesn't get over stuff overnight, either, any more than Mags does. But I, at least, am trying to be soothing, and you bite my head off, too."

"I'm not biting your head off, love, it's just that your dad is for pressing charges and throwing the man in jail at this late date, and you're way too accepting and calm yourself to suit me. I'm caught between extremes, I feel." His mother sighs, and Jason waits for whatever else is to come. "And we have taken her to a doctor, though not a medical one. We saw no point in that, since the man never got close enough to touch her, physically speaking. We took her to see a Dr. Spandriff, a psychologist. He was recommended by the therapist the police station had mentioned, because your father insisted on going private. And much good it did us to do it. The therapist's conclusion was that her 'little world,' as he called it, had been too sheltered and protected to start out with, and that we were at fault somehow for keeping her away from harsh realities. You see, he put the blame back on us instead of on Sam Brooks, or the shelter, or the intruder, or the bus driver, or anyone else."

"Bus driver? What bus driver?"

"The bus driver who let the man get off the bus just steps down the street from Maggie, after the drunk had already made a nuisance of himself on the bus. When your father heard from her how frightened she'd been to hear the man getting off the bus a few steps behind her, he wanted to fight with the bus company, but they totally disclaimed responsibility, and said it's not their job to police patrons once they've left the transit."

"Sheltered, huh?" For a moment, Jason's mind, honed by university dialogues to appreciate ironies, gets distracted by the resemblance between the word for where Magda had been that snowy night in December, the shelter, and the fact that her own life had been otherwise sheltered. Then, considering the point as fairly as possible, he says to his mother, "Well, Mom, I don't want to make you mad, but you and Dad have given us a pretty privileged life. I mean, I had never even seen a bag lady or a tent city until I was in my early teens and I went on the bus to see Grandma and Grampus. The bus station was right in the middle of it, nearly, at least on one side. But the people on long distance bus rides don't generally behave the way people do on some of the city routes, like that drunk did. I mean, there are rules."

"There are always rules, Jason, but all someone has to do is ignore them, and there you are. A situation develops. And I really think that your father is making it worse rather than better by his ardent championing of Magda."

"Mom!" Jason protests, but weakly. He knows what she means. "Look, it's not as if she was—well, was—you know, molested or anything. There was only a small amount of property damage and a bad scare. And Maggie's intelligent enough to grasp the psychologist's point, which is that she leads a tranquil if fairly blameless life. In fact, he almost made it sound as if tranquility wasn't necessarily blameless in an evil and unfair world, and although Mags is really too young to be totally responsible for her lifestyle, she understood what he was saying. And I thought we were perhaps getting somewhere, at least to talking ground, because she began speaking directly to the psychologist's points, saying, for example, that her way of getting out of herself had been going to the shelter in the first place. But then just when they were beginning to meet in the middle a little and have a real discussion, your father blew up with 'Blame the victim!' That led to an angry and vituperative discussion between him and the

doctor, with the doctor saying that he thought it might be better if he saw Magda separately from us, and then your father accusing him of being some weird kind of socialist who only wanted to get Magda alone so that he could sway her and make her feel guilty for what had been done to her. The doctor insisted that he could still see the three of us together as well, and maybe work out something between what he and Maggie did and what the four of us could come up with. But your father insulted him again by hurling abuse about him being awfully eager to line his own pockets, for such a devout socialist, which ended with Mags in tears, your father with his arm around her guiding her away from the doctor, and me helpless to make peace because nobody else was listening to me. I never realized before just how much of a capitalist your father is, though I feel guilty saying it because of Maggie. Whatever happened to that bright-eyed young man I married who wanted the world to be fair for everyone?"

All this time, Jason has listened to his mother, realizing that she mostly needs to talk to him, not to hear him talk, though at various times he has had to restrain himself from attempting to insert words of solace or advice that have flown to his lips. To this last question of his mother's, however, he issues a firm rejoinder. "His life, like yours, Mom, got taken up with responsibilities and protecting specific other people instead of feeling for the masses."

"Yes, maybe," she ponders. "And there's something else. Sam Brooks finally got up the courage to come back to see Maggie again, though the funny thing is that she seems able to take him or leave him alone. I mean, she's friendly with him, but sometimes she looks almost scared of him, especially when he starts talking to her about anything to do with any of his self-appointed missions, however small. Just last week, he was involved in a bottle-and-can drive to help clean up a nearby neighborhood and make some money for one of the schools. He talked to her about it with real enthusiasm, and I think he would've liked her to help out. Your father

didn't nix it exactly, but he grunted and huffed a lot while Sam was talking, and at the end said to him, 'Sam, wouldn't you ever just like to go out for a sundae or something? Or maybe break the rules for your age and have a beer?' I shushed him, but Sam looked at him in a totally bewildered way and after a moment of silence your father left the room and Sam went back to talking."

"Well, Mom, at least they're more or less peacefully co-existing." He couldn't think of anything else to say.

"Yes, but that's still not all. Sam has taken to—oh, I don't know—courting me for my good opinion, I guess. Sort of sucking up to me to stay in well with your father and to appeal to Mags. He has started to remind me of that boy I used to date in high school, Donald Pepper, whom my father referred to as 'that smarmy kissy-face Donald Pepper.' And when Donald was especially nice to my mother, my great-aunt Hattie, who was visiting us—the one from way back in the country upstate—said he was 'stroking the cow to get the calf.' The 'calf' being me. Not that Sam is insincere; just a little over the top with his compliments and expressions of interest whenever I speak. Oh, Jason, call your sister or something, and try to get into her head. Maybe you can help. If you have the time, I'd certainly appreciate it."

Jason talks with her a few minutes more, trying to figure out what he can say to his sister to make any difference at all. He really cannot seem to think of anything specific while talking to his mother, though she vaguely tries to make suggestions, none of which seem helpful to him. With real regret he hangs up, absent-mindedly returning to his studying as a means of helping himself ponder. Later, when he's doing his English assignment—reading an off-the-wall new writer named (or pseudonymed) Peridaxicle Worrish—he thinks he has hit upon something. It seems at the time like an inspiration, so he goes with it, being unable to think of anything else to

do. He dials the family landline and asks to speak to Maggie at a time when he expects her to be in her room after dinner, probably finishing up homework assignments just as he himself is.

"Jason?" her tone is puzzled. "Wait a second, I'll get Mom."

"No, wait, Mags, I don't want to talk to Mom. I called to talk to you."

Now she's uncharacteristically wary. "Oh. What about?"

"Oh, just to catch up. We haven't talked for a while, you know?"

"Yeah. We don't seem to keep in touch very well." She pauses. "So, what did you want to talk about?"

"Oh, you know. I just ran across something here today that I thought you might be interested in."

Disbelief. "At college? What?"

"Have you ever heard of a writer named Peridaxicle Worrish?"

"No, not—wait a second, what was that?"

"Peridaxicle Worrish?"

"Is that a real name?"

"I dunno. It's the only name I know. I guess I could find out, with a little research. Why?"

"Well, I'm not sure, but I think our English teacher last week made a joke about somebody with the name P. Worsh, or maybe Worrish. She said something about us not being old enough to read his parables, but that we reminded her of them sometimes all the same."

"Yep, parables. We're reading a whole book of them in English class. They're short, sort of like Aesop's fables, and some of them are weird and don't make sense at first, and some of them do. Anyways, there's one I thought you might like to hear. I know I could just mail it, but it's

more effective when somebody reads it, and after all, Dad got that special phone rate for us guys here in our dorm room, so I'm not wasting any money. Do you want to hear it?"

"Sure," says Maggie, intrigued and interested now that she's apparently reassured that he does not mean to discuss anything which would make her feel uncomfortable.

"Okay, here goes. 'Once upon a time—'"

"Oh, c'mon. It doesn't start like that, does it?"

"Sure does. 'Once upon a time, there was a kingdom where nothing was quite as it should be, and yet nothing was really badly wrong. It was all mismasures, and happenstances, and accidents of birth. To the king of this kingdom, who prided himself on his fair and equitable rule, there was in time born a litter of kittens—'"

"Did you say 'kittens'?"

"Stop interrupting, Maggie. 'A litter of kittens, three males and a little female with curly blue fur. Now, the king loved his three sons, but he especially loved the little daughter with the blue fur, which reminded him so much of her mother The Blue Heron's wing pinions.'"

"This is stupid."

"Shhh! 'One day, when The Blue Heron, named Katy, was preening her daughter's fur with her beak and trying to teach her daughter to catch fish in the pool by the castle, which wasn't going too well, as you may imagine—the one being equipped with a beak and the other with teeth and claws, and dreading the water besides—a large otter came by and saw them fishing. Now, this otter, WilleWonte, was a real mischief maker, and was in the habit of hiding in the rushes and laughing himself silly at the sight of the two of them trying to catch the quick silver fish that sped below the surface of the pool. Why, it was so easy for him to do, and he had neither a beak nor blue fur to make him special. Like the little princess, he had teeth and claws

(though they were much more formidable than hers), and like the heron, he could catch his own fish when by himself. But he fancied himself superior to them both because they were mother and daughter and yet were so different in nature. So, he decided to take part in the fishing lesson going on in front of him. Perhaps he didn't intend any real evil, but he thought it would be funny to souse the little blue-furred daughter in the thick mud at the edges of the pool, or maybe cause her to have to swim back to shore from far out, just to see how scrawny she was when her fur was all wet. Planning swiftly, he grasped a handful of reeds and broke them off at different lengths, then ducked under the water and swam near, yet not too near, to where the two were. Every time Katy the Blue Heron turned her back to fish for herself, WilleWonte would draw the uneven reeds under the water in front of the little kitten's nose. To her, it looked like the motion of a school of fish, and anxious to make her mother proud, she leapt forward, even a little way into the water, to try and grab at least one. But every time, she floundered, and Katy had to rescue her by dragging her back from the water with her sharp bill. WilleWonte kept this up for a while until he tired of his fun, and then decided to do it one more time just to prove to himself that he was the best fisherman in the whole area. He found a large, round reed and drew it in front of the blue kitten, then beneath her, then behind her, then for good measure he poked her with it a time or two, not so gently. "Mother, mother, the fish is biting me!" the little princess exclaimed. She became hysterical because nothing like this had ever been done to her before: her whole life had been spent in gentleness and love. Katy whirled around and ducked her head under for the fish, and ducked it again, but all she caught hold of in her haste was the little kitten's foot, thrashing in the water. She drew it up high in the air before she saw that it was the blue kitten she had in her beak, and then in her bewilderment, she dropped her daughter back in the water, not understanding what had happened. WilleWonte was everywhere, but he had to

come up in the reeds for air, and when he did, he saw that a crowd had gathered at the pool and it was thrashing the water looking for the culprit. The little kitten was finally drawn from the water by the furious king, who had come rushing down to the pool when he heard all the shouting and commotion. "Who did this?" he cried. "Who nearly drowned my little kitten? Who did this?" Worried now that he was going to be caught, WilleWonte changed his voice and called from the deep reeds, "Katy did! Katy did!" And all the mindless little insects, who were after all only saying their own names, took up the cry and called, "Katydid! Katydid! Katydid!" After a while, the little kitten was clean and warm again, and a bit wiser to the ways of the kingdom and the odd boundaries and behaviors of the creatures of the pool, though the identity of WilleWonte was still only a rumor. But a lingering discord persisted for a long time between the king and his queen The Blue Heron, who could not agree on how to punish the culprit, or what to do to bring their children up with greater safety. And so it often is, that what joins a family together, with a slight turn, can become something which keeps them at odds or even drives them apart. The little blue kitten learned to catch fish, but for once, it was something she had to teach herself."

There was silence on the other end of the line. "Mags?" Jason queried.

"You've got to be kidding me," she responded in a flat and stifled voice.

"That's all she wrote," he said. "Why, don't you like it?"

"I can't believe you just read that to me. I mean, with everything that happened and all."

"Maggie, Mags, you've got to talk about this to me, somehow you've got to get over this sometime. You can't go on worrying Mom and Dad! They're still at sixes and sevens about this, whatever that means, and you've got to pick yourself up and go on." He took a deep breath, then said "Don't be such a wuss! Don't be such a delicate flower! You're making us all worry about you all the time. Mom—"

"So it was Mom who put you up to this, huh? What did you do, get together with your dorm buddies and write that stupid fairy tale?"

"Yes—no, Mom didn't put me up to it. At least, she called me, but I just happened to be reading this stuff, really. A lot of it's great; some of it's peculiar; I guess this one was a weird coincidence. Yeah, I suppose it must seem like a weird coincidence. I read it just after Mom asked me to call and offer you some kind of support, and it seemed sort of like fate, I guess. You'll probably think that's odd, but that's how it seems to me. You *are* the only one who can pull yourself out of this, Mags. For instance, just consider how much worse it could have been, and it wasn't. After all, Maggie," he urges, trying to reach someone whom he hasn't had to reason with since she played with his video games without his permission.

"Don't you think I know that, Jas? And I'm not just torturing Mom and Dad for kicks. I don't know why I'm so bizarre these days, why I scream at night, why I need so much time alone. I don't really think about much these days, just sit in the peace and quiet and wait for Mom to come up after school and ask me if I want some cocoa. And she always does. That's what I'm waiting for. But I know that someday, the weather will change. I'm almost wondering if Mom will come up and ask me if I want some lemonade instead. Or if she'll decide I'm old enough for coffee, maybe with her, downstairs. Or if some day she just won't come, because it's so warm outside. That's it. I'm thinking that when this snow is all gone, when the weather is warm again, maybe things will be okay. I won't feel myself hurrying madly over the snow to get away from something I'm afraid of, some danger I can't predict the amount or degree of. You know, a time or two that night, I thought of stopping to reason with the man, talking him out of his drunk and sending him home with a few dollars. But I knew he would spend it for more booze, so I didn't, and now here you're reasoning with me, and everyone is acting like I'm the boozer, somehow.

That's really it. But thanks, Jas, for being concerned." After this sudden spate of words, her voice is tiny and shaky in tone, but she's clearly stated her position for her family, as far as she has thought of it. Jason is only sorry that his mother could not have overheard it—he doubts his ability to reproduce all the things Maggie said to him in just the way she said them.

"Yes, I am concerned," he says suddenly. "And if you want to have coffee with Mom, why don't you ask her? Or go have your cocoa downstairs with her. It sounds like it's just the routines of life you're trying to reestablish. Make some effort yourself, kid. Okay? And anytime you want to talk, or most anytime, I'm here. Mom's got my class schedule posted on the fridge or somewhere. At least, I sent it to her so that she could. Are you all right now, or have I really fucked up?"

She laughs weakly. "No, Jas, I guess not. At least, it's better to have one of you really address me about it than to talk to doctors, or to each other behind a closed door all the time. And you're not treating me like I suddenly grew three heads. I'll try to work on it, okay? And I'll try not to worry Mom and Dad. And you."

"Yeah, okay. And I imagine that Uncle Theo and his friend Nancy are concerned too, in their own way. The other kids probably have felt that something is wrong without knowing what it is. Yeah, Maggie, get yourself together, okay? I really mean that I'm here if you want to talk."

They hang up. Jason waits a tactful hour or two and then calls his mom on her cell phone and makes a brief report. From her guarded responses which yet do not avoid the repetition of his name, he guesses that his father is there, but that Maggie is upstairs somewhere or elsewhere. It sounds as if his mother and father are watching tv in the den with the rest of the family coming in and going out. After he does his best to reassure his mother without giving away exactly what he and Maggie said on the phone—he feels, for one thing, that his mother might find his solution

odd and off-base—he hangs up and goes back to his work with a sense of accomplishment. While taking a hard cider break halfway through his assignment, he assesses the reasons for his feeling of pride, and comes to the conclusion that it's a result of having brought his new life at university and his old life at home into harmony for a change, something that does not often happen. Too often, he finds himself scorning the level of intellectual development he used to have in high school, and thinking of his high school friends as immature and jejune. His family has been something he usually avoids thinking about to excess, because he is often uncomfortable with the ways in which his place in their group conflicts with his place in his new social setting. In the one, he is a son and brother, and exists only in reference to the group as a whole. He is under the illusion at least that his college friends see him as a developing and maturing individual, a man himself in his own right who takes part in various groups as a sort of monadic unit. This is the first time that he has really been able to share something he has learned with a family member without it being thought that he wants a pat on the back for cleverness or ingenuity (even if he does, in a way). Instead, Maggie tried to communicate with him on his own level, whatever she took that to be, and tried to understand what he wanted to tell her about her own experience. This is heady brew for a freshman in college, and due to this feeling of personal success, he resolves to give more time to his sister when he comes across anything he thinks she might find illuminating. Of course, his plan to do this requires that he think about his sister herself as a monadic unit, which is a bit more difficult, but it's fair to assume, he concludes in a possibly arrogant way, that she will do as she has always done before in their conversations as brother and sister (therefore neither of them really being a lone wolf), and take an interest in whatever interests him. And with this, his work break is over, and he goes back to the books.

* * *

Jason, however, is not the only one in the family who is taking a hand with Magda. Holly herself has been racking her brains about how to come up with an intervention that does not resemble an intervention. She does not really know the actual theory behind any such activity, except that it's what one does with troubled people who seem to have forgotten that other people actually care about them, are concerned, and think they have a right to interfere with what seems to them a downward spiral.

Knowing her daughter as well as she does, she assumes more or less correctly that Magda will shy away from any spotlight being put on her by the family, as she has more or less avoided most attempts to talk made by her mother, father, and even her uncle Theo, politically correct to a fault. Holly remembers that Maggie was starting to talk to the psychologist Dr. Spandriff before her father's verbal eruptions curtailed that encounter. Since Maggie talked to Jason, she has shyly come down to have coffee with her mother in the kitchen once or twice without really explaining why, and this has given Holly the idea of intervening, however tactfully. She comes to the conclusion that the immediate family should be represented only by herself, and that the meeting should be diluted from an overwhelming emotional intensity by the presence of several other women. It's not that men strike her as totally useless, only that she feels certain they are best when confrontations are to be direct and volatile. Holly has interpreted events in the course of her life so far to show that men (even good men like Aaron) have a tendency always to reach through or around the woman or women in the situation and form a testosterone-laden bond, either friendly or hostile in nature, with the other man or men. It means that she has had to deceive Aaron slightly about what she is planning with some other women on a Saturday, during which she has advised him to be out of the house with Theo if he does not want to be uncomfortable. He seems to think, by her vague and unsatisfying hints, that it is a pre-party to

plan a shower and she has seen no reason to disabuse him of that notion, since it seems to be what he most wants to avoid. She thinks about whom to ask, and decides that a coffee klatsch of four women or so, which Magda is flattered into joining as a fifth, would be the best. Further, she first picks Nancy Bellingcote to help her, since Nancy has been quite sympathetic and desirous of helping ever since Maggie's misadventure. Additionally, she hopes Nancy's edict will keep Theo out of the house with Aaron, though she realizes that Theo is ever the unpredictable one in the bunch, surprising and likely to cross lines of gender expectation. For that reason, she has strategically enlisted Aaron's help too, letting him think that he is the one doing the maneuvering to keep Theo out of the way.

Thinking about whom else to ask, she realizes that her circle of friends whom she can trust not to make the situation worse by gossiping is small. There's Aunt Julie Timperson, who has common sense on her side, though some of her remarks are bound to be those of an embittered divorcée. Still, since she has been helping Holly prepare to run the organic fruit and vegetable stand, she has endeared herself to the family by force of her crusty observations and her timely platitudes, which they gently mock when she seems to be in a good mood. To Holly, her own sister Julie is no more immediate family than Nancy Bellingcote is, though in terms of familiarity and actual emotional distance, they are both well-known to Maggie by now. For the fourth member of the quartet of older women, she finally settles on her old teaching friend Fionna Bracey, with whom she hasn't had the chance to get together for several months, and who can be counted on to keep her mouth firmly shut if asked to do so. She sighs. Not that there's really anything to tell. Except, of course, that the oversensitive Magda still hasn't readjusted to ordinary non-cosseted life after the worrisome encounter with the other side of town.

After checking with each of the women and letting Aunt Julie and Fionna into the secret of what is involved—though she feels somewhat disloyal to Maggie doing this without her permission—she approaches Magda. Totally unsuspicious, Maggie agrees to help her mother serve coffee and homemade pecan toffee buns to the other women.

"It's just, you know, Mags, that I haven't had any of my friends over as a group for ever so long, and you're getting to an age now when you can help me host things. I mean, you're a teenager, and we don't have to hide what we say in front of you. You're no longer a child."

"Are Hallie and Callie coming?" Holly feels Maggie's gaze on her, but does not dare look up for fear that her eyes will give her away.

"No, I don't think they are really even as mature as their age might suggest, and they aren't going to be included. I think Nancy has arranged a play date for them with her kids at her mother's, or something."

"So, I'm going to be the only younger person there?" Maggie's tone of voice is careful, and devoid of any apparent suspiciousness, but Holly is more careful still, and responds by saying,

"You don't mind helping me with it, do you Mags? I'm a little nervous, to tell you the truth." This appeal does the trick, based on the truth as it is, which Maggie can apparently sense. What she luckily has not picked up on is why her mother is apprehensive.

"No, not at all. I just wonder if—you know—if I'll fit in. Your friends might think it's a bore to have me there, or feel they can't say something in front of me, even if you think they can. Let me know when you're ready for me to disappear, give me a high sign or something, and I'll go on upstairs. I do have some homework this weekend, anyway."

"Not to worry," her mother says lightly. "I'll let you know. That's how people form connections, you know, Mags, by gradually introducing their children into the rituals of their own society."

"Yes, but I'm only fourteen."

"Well, but people mature emotionally at different ages. Jason, now, he matured early too, once he hit his teenage years. I guess your father and I have two gifted children."

This brings a shy smile to Magda's face, and a gentle rueful shake of the head, but she makes no more objections. Holly sighs inwardly and begins to plan more closely around the next Saturday but one. She would prefer to have the get-together sooner in order to be closer in time to Maggie's misadventure, but Fionna and Aunt Julie Timpson both have commitments elsewhere the next Saturday, and cannot be at the St. Johns's.

When the day finally comes, it is a bright and sunny February morning they look out upon. It is in fact the weekend of Jason's birthday, but Holly has arranged with Jason for them to place the family group call to him on the morrow evening, the actual day of his birthday, even though he hesitates at first and says he has plans with friends that evening. She then has to let him in on the secret of the women's group, and after asking "Does Dad know?" which Holly brushes away with an assurance that she will tell Aaron "later," Jason agrees to be in at 6:00 on Sunday. This is before the time he arranges to go off to dinner with his friends. After all her hard plotting, she almost comes to grief early on the Saturday, when Nancy's car won't start and Nancy therefore doesn't think she will be able to pick up Hallie and Callie and drop them off with her kids at the play date. Fionna Bracey comes through for everyone in her usual style, however, by swinging by early (before Maggie is awake from sleeping in) and picking up the girls, who are eager and willing to leave early. They hold things up only by repeated requests to their father to be

allowed to take along this or that game or toy. Theo seems puzzled as to why Fionna is there to pick them up, and why Nancy isn't asking him to drive them, but a lifetime of being easy-going prevents him from inquiring too closely, especially when Holly and Fionna are both bustling the girls outside and into the car.

By the time Nancy calls Holly again to let her know that she and Fionna are on their way over—after dropping off the girls and Nancy's kids Roger and Sandy at Nancy's mother's—Aaron and Theo are finished with a late breakfast and on their way out the door, promising to stay away until at least dinnertime. They are jovial and jesting about "girls' day in," and generally get underfoot as Holly and a bleary-eyed Maggie are putting in the toffee rolls and brewing the coffee. At the last minute Holly decides to make some party sandwiches too, because their later start on the party means that it will take place around lunchtime. She is flurried and flustered by this addition to the menu, but finally settles for chicken salad and ham salad sandwiches, originally bought to be used for a casual Sunday brunch. Maggie comes up with the idea of cutting up apples and bananas and oranges into a fruit salad, which she treats with lemon juice to keep it fresh, and for a minute Holly is wondering if the whole endeavor is necessary at all. She then notices, however, that when Maggie finishes that chore and is at loose ends again, a slight shadow slips across her features, one Holly has gotten used to seeing since Christmas. She steadies herself with the reflection that it after all cannot do any harm to give Maggie something to do which will take her outside herself, and furthermore give her the viewpoints of older and more mature women. Finally, after hanging around the aromatic kitchen and trying to cadge sandwiches or toffee rolls, the men are out of the house and away, and Holly looks out to see her sister Julie walking up the pavement from her car. The first of the other three adult women has arrived.

Aunt Julie and Holly and Maggie together take the food into the dining room, where everything is already set up at the table for a group of five. While they are positioning the platters of food, the bell rings and Nancy and Fionna come laughing and chattering in through the door; Holly is glad that they are able to carry on as if nothing extraordinary is in the works.

For a while, the women sit and chat, one or the other one of them drawing Maggie into the conversation with interest in her schoolwork, her hobbies, her interests and ambitions. Under this generous treatment, Maggie relaxes and even smiles a few times, and laughs a trifle ruefully once or twice when telling of incidents at school with friends. Then, at a hidden signal from Holly, a lift of the brows directed at Aunt Julie, the conversation suddenly shifts.

"So, Magda, your mother was telling me that you had a sort of minor set-to with a homeless man back at Christmas." Aunt Julie waits after this, then takes a nibble of a sandwich and a tiny sip of coffee and continues. "I used to volunteer at a charity for the poor myself, and I know how some of them can become, particularly the men. Embittered, gnarled, frightening to deal with and fearsome to behold when they are drunk. Is that about what you encountered?"

Maggie hesitates at this forthright statement, but finds no reason not to answer, and is emboldened by the tone of judicious sympathy in Aunt Julie's voice. "Yes, Aunt Julie. That is, he was drunk, and he followed me off the bus, and it was really very frightening, especially when he broke into the house after me."

"Yes, well, that particular shelter has been cited before for carelessness in monitoring its community relations," contributes Nancy Bellingcote. "Our paper covered the story a few years ago."

But Maggie is eager not to let her former boyfriend Sam Brooks be blamed for the incident any more than can be helped, despite his having left her to take the bus by herself through a

questionable part of town. "Well, no, he didn't come from the shelter. He was just a street person who got on the bus after I did. I don't really know where he came from. But Mom said he seemed to be well-known to the police who picked him up that night."

Fionna Bracey smiles a smile of complicity at Holly, then when Maggie happens to look at her and catches this expression in flight, she directs it at Maggie too, as if it were just a sort of party favor she happened to be passing around to all of them and not an adult signal for a chance to speak. "What do you think scared you the most, have you been able to get at that?" she whispers to Magda softly. "Letting the fears go, now that it's over, helps it end even more. At least I think so." She looks to Holly for agreement.

Holly nods swiftly and says, "Yes, I think so too. I myself think it was the invasion of the house, where she's always thought of herself as safe, that did it."

But to all of their surprise, Maggie frowns a moment, then flushes a bright red. "Yes, that may be some of it. I guess so. But—" she hesitates, then blushes again. "It's embarrassing to think that I could be so petty—" They all interrupt her with reassurances, sure that she's about to make a statement about poor people which she feels is unfair, or about unwillingness to go among the homeless further, when she stops and pushes her bangs from her forehead with an impatient gesture. They fall silent.

"It's not just the home invasion part, though I guess that was a big bit of it. It was also that—it was how he went about deciding whom to pick on when we were on the bus. That really bothered me, and made me feel I would never have any success with—with men. Other than boy and girl friendships with people like Sam Brooks, I mean." As a quick explanation to the women other than her mother, she adds, "Sam's—he was my boyfriend, sort of, who works at that shelter

and who got me to go there with him. He's really serious-minded and involved in all sorts of good works, and stuff."

"Religious?" Fionna Bracey nods sympathetically. But to her surprise, Magda giggles and says,

"No, not unless you count socialism as a religion."

Aunt Julie Timperson and Nancy Bellingcote at the same moment ask the question, "Well, then what did the man do—?" in almost the same words.

Maggie mutters something too low to be heard, and they all lean forward and ask her to repeat it, even her mother. "He picked on me for my height. He called me 'tall drink,' and it just embarrassed me, because he kept accusing me of thinking I was too good to have anything to do with him. I mean, he was being totally inappropriate! But it reminded me of how much taller I am than Sam, and how Sam seems a little cool sometimes and more distracted by doing good than by—oh, I don't know, sometimes holding my hand, or—or kissing me." Here, Maggie stopped and blushed again. Then she finished in a rush, "And I just thought of how much taller I am than most of the guys I know, and how it'll always be that way. It seems hopeless." And she draws a deep breath, as if indeed it really has helped her to voice her fear. "And then I started to have nightmares of foul-smelling, drunk old men pawing me and grabbing at me. And they were all shorter than I was, like dwarves, and like—well, like Sam is. It was horrible." She shivers.

The four older women look at each other at this unexpected admission, now that it's been completely articulated. Then all four of them rush into speech at once, with assurances and good wishes and objections, but finally Aunt Julie's voice comes through the strongest and most lasting, with its gravelly undertones.

"Don't be foolish, girl. Do you want a man who cares about your height, even a shorter man? Surely not. There are many more important things about you than that. Worry about whether or not you have the stamina to put up with some of the lies and sheer bull even the best of men will try to pull—"

"Now, Aunt Julie," responds Holly. She gives a warning frown. "Let's not make this all worse than it has to be. Maggie, you know that Aunt Julie is divorced, don't you? Each of us has her own perspective. I'm married to your dad, Aunt Julie is divorced, Nancy is widowed, and Fionna is still single and fancy-free—"

"That's what *you* think! Single, yes; fancy-free, no." But Fionna smiles reassuringly at Magda and moves her own hair out of her eyes from where her low-cut bangs touch her eyebrows. She too is a tall woman, though not as tall as Magda by an inch or two, and she carries herself well and holds herself proudly erect at the table instead of slumping just a little over the plate, as most people do now and then to eat. "We single women have to stick together, Maggie." Spearing a forkful of fruit salad, she chews gracefully, almost like an actress in a food advertisement telling about how good the product is; then, she continues. "It's hard being single, Maggie, and you're just starting out dating. You have years ahead of you yet, though I know that doesn't mean much to you now. Present anxieties are never really dispelled in their entirety by assurances of peace of mind to come. But I like to think that even if I am in my forties, I could still find someone I want to be with for the rest of my life. It's never impossible: people in their seventies and eighties are getting married these days too, you know."

At this remark, Maggie sighs and rolls her eyes. "Who can wait that long?"

Nancy Bellingcote laughs in a soothing alto and responds, "No one said it would be that long, Maggie, Fionna was just giving a 'for instance.'"

With a touch of asperity in her voice, Aunt Julie says, "I'm surprised that you aren't in favor of staying single, Fionna. Well, that is, I mean to say—" but Aunt Julie is suddenly constrained, and shakes her head. She impatiently waves away whatever she was going to say with one raised hand, and eats a little more.

Holly understands that this is her sister's way of referring to Fionna's occasional ventures into relationships with women, which Holly has chatted about with her sister previously. Now it's her turn to blush, but bravely she turns to Maggie and Fionna, and informs them, "I think that Aunt Julie feels—that is, believes—I mean, Maggie, you know that Aunt Fionna sometimes has relationships with women."

Fionna snorts with amusement, at which Maggie grins mischievously, knowing that Aunt Julie, whom she's sometimes been at odds with over small things, feels uncomfortable with Fionna's exploratory sexuality, a subject her mother oriented her to a couple of years ago when she was twelve and started asking why Fionna said some of the mysterious and allusive things she said to Holly in the children's hearing. "Yeah, I know that, Mom. With all due respect, though, I don't think it's for me. I prefer boys."

Fionna cuts in with, "Well, Julie, there's no bar to two women getting married these days. But that's a subject for another time. Right now, as a matter of fact, I'm involved with a man I met at a teachers' conference downstate."

Nancy, who has been silent for a while, hungrily eating her lunch because she had had no chance for breakfast, enters the conversation again suddenly. "Let's not lose sight of what we're supposed to be discussing, ladies." She looks directly at Maggie. "What would make you feel more comfortable right now, Maggie? Is there anything? I think you're surely too young and

sweetly growing to be inconsolable. I don't mean to patronize you by saying that, just pointing out a fact."

"Sweetly growing?" Maggie abruptly hoots with genuine laughter, and the others, glad that this remark doesn't upset her, all join in giggling at the unintentional *faux pas*. "I'd better not 'sweetly grow' any more! That's part of the problem."

"I didn't mean it that way," Nancy sticks to her point, though she too grins at the way she had expressed herself. "I was being a bit poetic, I suppose, to illustrate one of the great things about being younger. You still have time to revise yourself, and change things such as bad habits of mind and behavior and the like that might otherwise become lifelong habits. And no, I don't mean revise yourself 'downward.'" This time they all chortle freely at her; at the light expression of their support, Maggie, on the spur of the moment, feels equally light and free of troubles. She thanks them all for including her in their luncheon and says that she appreciates the effort they have all made to come over and help her to feel better. The way she says it tells them that they have succeeded in large measure, and there is glee and jubilation in the rest of the party. They continue talking on subjects more general, and snacking, and including Maggie in the conversation until about two-thirty in the afternoon. Then Nancy says she has to go pick up her kids by three o'clock, and the little chat session slowly breaks up, each woman offering further talk to Magda any time she feels she needs it, if she does.

When the last of the three women is gone, Holly heaves a great and happy sigh, and pats her daughter on the forearm nearest to her. Though she will not discuss the conversation at any length with Aaron, she will certainly tell him how the day went and why he wasn't invited. She hopes she will be able to avoid preaching at him about why her solution worked and his didn't. She is generous enough to suspect that his overall relief at hearing of some improvement and at

knowing at least the gist of what is bothering his daughter will make up to him for being excluded.

* * *

It's summer; Jason is home for his first summer vacation from college. Today he and his father have just hung up an old-fashioned swing on the front porch of their house on one side, and placed an old rocking chair (painted anew by Holly) on the opposite side. The effect is totally out-of-place on their upscale block of neighborhood houses, but ever since a teenager down the street raised an impressive pot plant in the front ornamental garden of his parents' house without anyone being the wiser (most of them knowledgeable about the finished product rather than about 'homegrown'), the reputation of the Neighborhood Watch has taken a nosedive. And on these blocks, those individuals on the neighborhood organization double as the interfering busybodies of home décor, who tell other people what is and is not acceptable for their friends and neighbors to have on view. Only the local police, cruising the streets "in the pursuance of their duty"—as the report read—caught the flourishing plant as it topped the crest of the neighbor's privacy wall, and hewed it down, accepting with knowing sighs their inability to make the wealthy scion plead to more than "possession" when they would have preferred "intention to distribute."

Jason views the work on the swing with satisfaction, his father having already gone inside for a lemonade, proffered by Holly as they finished up earlier. He sits and looks at the gloomy sky, from which the sultry summer rain is preparing to fall. Lightning—then thunder—then the first huge drops, straight down. He sits down in the swing himself, testing it by rocking gently back and forth: to his satisfaction, it holds. His father has returned his own ladder to the shed, and only Jason's ladder and tools are left on the pristine wooden floor of the porch.

The eldest child of his family is not happy to be home for summer vacation, and if more of his friends had been staying for the summer in Crowell, the university town, then he would've registered for some summer classes as his excuse and stayed as well. After all, it would've been an excellent opportunity to move ahead his graduation schedule, which might've made his parents happy, and it would've relieved him of the summer doldrums of boredom and sameness in his hometown, as various as the possible entertainments there seem to his relatives. For now, he is accepting the excitement of a summer thunderstorm, which he has always liked, as a reward for all his hard work today with his father. His father was equally satisfied before he went back inside the house on this stormy Saturday, because with Jason's help he got the swing up before the rain started. And it has suddenly occurred to Jason, as he sits thinking on the swing, his feet pushing him gently to and fro, just how often his father schedules his own plans by expected weather events. It's not because he's a particularly outdoorsy kind of guy, either, Jason tells himself; his father doesn't necessarily prefer fine weather overmuch, or more than the next person. He just plans events well within the range of acceptable weather conditions. Most people, Jason thinks now, have to allow for an occasional weather mismatch, and shrug it off. Not his father. He plays for keeps. Jason smirks, then asks himself why he's amused. Abruptly, feeling anger at himself for sneering at his father, he dashes off the porch and throws himself down the steps into a whirling dance with the pelting raindrops. That is what he always longs to do when no one is watching. No one *is* watching, as it turns out, because no one happens to be in the front rooms at present. He waltzes around for a while, stands under the tree in the front yard in defiance of common sense, then simply sits down on the concrete walk and lets the rain thoroughly wet him through.

With a flash of startling white light and a cracking sound like the breaking open of all the heavens, lightning strikes first the neighboring lamppost across the street, then before he can blink travels in a blinding fury to the huge oak tree beside it. Jason jumps up, and watches the top of the tree slowly and impossibly lean over the neighbor's yard and its delicate arabesques of flowering plants, all potential small victims to the flailing branches now pendulous above. He is excited by the scene, but knows that he must be ever vigilant, not to appear in the way a fireman who loves fires would appear to his community. So Jason as hero dashes inside, yelling out that the Whites' tree has been hit and is falling very close to their yard and house, and querying of his now rushing family members (who dash about like confused ants in a stirred-up anthill) whether or not the neighbors are known to be home. His father grabs the phone and calls 911, and then, staring at Jason's soaked appearance—in abstraction that slowly becomes incomprehension as he is busy dialing the Whites—says to Jason "What--?" His pointing finger travels up and down as he gestures at Jason's clothes; they are dripping on the waxed wooden floor of the front hallway, leaving huge puddles of moisture behind. Figuring that his father is safely tied up on the phone, Jason shrugs in response and murmurs something which Aaron is free to interpret as he will. Then, Jason wastes not a moment in jumping up the stairs two at a time to change, not really trusting his luck with his father all that far.

As soon as he is clothed in dry underwear, tee shirt, and shorts, Jason gallops back down the stairs to clean up his mess, only to find his trusty mother manning the mop. "Here, I'll take that, Mom," he says, and proceeds to receive both the wooden handle and a grateful smile from her.

The next time I looked out the window into the street, after swishing and pushing the water droplets around until the mop was soaked and of no further use, the sun was making a

reappearance, and I heard a mechanical whirring and grinding noise coming from across the way. Under cover of taking the mop to the front porch to wring it out, I humored my curiosity and went to see what the sound was. Sure enough, it was coming from the front lawn of the Whites' house, where a crew of men had already put in a start on taking down the huge tree top that the lightning had partially felled. A fire truck and a rescue van also stood idly by, but their drivers were not engaged in doing anything particularly, except pointing out parts of the operation to each other and nodding sagely. Two men were up in the bucket of the cherry picker near the power lines, cautiously engaged each in his own direction in sawing off individual limbs which threatened to impede the progress of the whole action. I guessed that soon they would be ready, when all the subsidiary limbs were down, to risk the cutting through and the downing of the main part of the trunk which had been felled. The tree was still quite large and now had a handsome gash in it the color of new wood, which, if they left the tree up and still growing, might sprout smaller branches of its own someday. But knowing the Whites, I somehow doubted that they would leave the tree unassaulted for their own part, once heaven had spoken. Their entire lawn was a platitude of neat beds of plants and flowering bushes as well as flower beds of the unimaginative and average seasonal flowers from spring, summer, and early fall which so many people offered up as their supposedly individual tribute to the changing year. There were some, of course, like daffodils, jonquils, and snowdrops in early spring, or lilies-of-the-valley in the early summer, which had at least the merit of an element of wildness in them. Still, the care and tending which I had seen Mr. White the elder and Mrs. White expend on them told its own tale when it came to persuading nature to give of her more difficult and secretive children: the Whites had no talent for it, and only managed as foster parents to their plants by way of varied and probably expensive nursery and garden supplies. Dad contents himself with neatly pruning

our shrubs around the porch and keeping them a bright or a deep dark green, whichever they're supposed to be, and in our younger days, before he had so much extra time, he also used to make a virtue of necessity by saying that he rather liked not having the time to mow away the dandelions and violets, clover and devil's paintbrush that take over when our lawn is left a while on its own. Even now, he tries to stick me with the mowing job when the lawn creeps up on us; though it's a solid and healthy-looking green from border to border, speaking of someone at sometime who groomed it and fed it, he says—with how much veracity I've never ascertained—that he hates to cut away the little flowers that see fit to decorate its surface and relieve us all from the boredom of an immaculate lawn.

After a while of watching the men wrestle with the tree and drop branches in heaps to the ground, where the leaves and twigs bounced up and down like things brought to life by an independent low-lying wind, I headed back inside. To my surprise, a lively and apparently hilarious debate was going on between Mom, Dad, Theo, and Maggie on the subject of Native American traditions. Even Theo, the eternal liberal, was indulging himself with a dumb show of body bends and gesturings as if we could also hear him whooping and hollering at some implacable deity high in the empyrean. I stood and watched, wondering what had caused such an uproar in my at times predictable and politically careful family, only to notice that as soon as I was myself seen, the amusement seemed to be directed toward me.

"Why are you laughing at me?" I suppose I sounded a little bit irritable through being left out of the original joke and having my dignity challenged at the same time.

"Sonny boy, Mr. and Mrs. Collier from down the block just called."

"So? What are they wanting, another donation to their weirdo church?"

"No, they said you're a heathen, a demon-worshipping heathen, brought up to ungodly ways and beliefs—isn't that what they said, Holly?"

"Something along those lines, yes. When I got the story straight, it seems that they saw Jason 'throwing his body around all over the lawn in the rain.' Then Mrs. Collier asked me if any of us were saved, or if we were like a lot of people, like 'Indians out west,' for instance, who didn't believe in 'the good God above.'"

"Did you tell her that a lot of Native Americans are more devout in the things they believe than she is, with her gossiping and backbiting and condemnatory conduct?" I asked, annoyed at having been seen by anyone, though really half of the fun had been in not caring who saw me; except for my family, that is. It's hard to preserve a disciplined position and maintain a hard-won degree of respect when people find you funny. "Besides," I pointed out, now in argumentative mood, "if I were doing a rain dance, I wouldn't have been just doing it in the rain, I would have been doing it before it rained." I paused; they were still looking at me expectantly, the smiles on their faces not entirely gone. "I just was sweaty and was getting myself cooled down and wet before I came in to change clothes." And with that, I must admit that I rather stalked off upstairs without allowing them another chance to make light of what had been so exhilarating and freedom-inducing for me on a hot summer day.

* * *

I really could have accomplished more this summer by staying at school, and getting my biology requirements out of the way. As it turns out Dad is going off with Magda to a father-daughter softball camp this week (for two weeks), and when her fruit store business isn't keeping her busy, Mom is left mooning around the house aimlessly, looking for something to do that will involve me and occupy her. I really want to tell her that she doesn't have to feel obliged to fill

the opposite side of the equation and come up with a mother-son activity, but I don't want to hurt her feelings in case that's really what she wants to do.

On top of that Hallie and Callie are giggling, gaggling nuisances of twelve when they're around, which for some reason seems to be most of the time, and I've not kept touch with anyone here much except Anna Marie Doherty, who writes lots of letters. I'd expected to keep in touch with Eliot and Jack and Bill too, but Eliot never wrote any of us when he went to college almost three years ago now, and I didn't want to keep it up in case he thought of us as too young to keep contact with. Foolish pride, maybe. As to Jack and Bill, they're both at some dinky little college way out West, and I guess they were better friends together than I was with either of them, because I never got a letter beyond the first one or two from them, which they wrote together as some kind of tremendous—but not really funny—joke. Maybe girls just write more than guys do. Anna Marie is even talking about transferring to Wathywiddles for the early education program, which she is toying with taking a minor in. It will be good to see her during the year too instead of only at holidays, but I can't help but wonder how serious she is about a career. Somehow, early education seems to me like training to be a babysitter: why waste a university education on it? But then, babies don't really hold my attention. And anyway, her major is in a serious subject, chemistry, so she's prepared to work hard too, I guess.

Finally, Nancy Bellingcote and her two kids are away visiting relatives this month in Colorado, with the result that Uncle Theo is also at loose ends, and has been very chatty with me on a regular basis. Last week, he asked me, "Have you ever given any more thought to those talks we used to have about you travelling or living abroad for a few years? I know you've started off your university education well, your father has told me. Just don't let time get away from you; we get old, and then we've lost our steam and enthusiasm and usually our money to

other commitments, and can't get away. Get away while you're still young, that's what I say. It'll give you something good to look back upon. Like a junior year abroad, for example. They must have that sort of program at Wathywiddles, surely." Rather weakly, perhaps, I answered, "Well, I'm thinking of doing an honors thesis this year and probably won't want to travel. This will only be my second year." "An honors thesis! Ah, yes, to have an early thorn in your backside! C'mon, Jason, you won't like all that dry academic stuff! Live a little! Loosen up! I hate to utter platitudes, but you're only young once. Think of what a challenge it is to go abroad and live in another culture with a different language and other points of reference." It's sort of funny that Uncle Theo didn't seem to recognize that if he felt he had to tell me to "Loosen up," I must already have a talent for all that "dry academic stuff," as he sees it from his point of view. I just answered with a quibble, which was ill-advised, because it kept him busy thinking up so-called rational arguments against it all day: "Look, Uncle Theo, these days there's so much similarity between the modern European cultures and our own that we live in a truly global society with them, and the rest of the world is fast becoming a part of it, too. I doubt if there's much to 'culture shock' these days."

He just enthused about this even more: "So go to Africa! Go to Asia! Go to some tiny little village a few days away from everywhere where they don't have Internet and barely have running water! I'll help look after things here, if that's what you're worried about. Why, you aren't around for that even away at college. Just think, Jason, you might think up something like, oh, I don't know, the world's first alternative multicorporation."

"There have already been several things that started out that way, actually probably tons of them, and they all either go under or sell out, according at least to a number of their original supporters. We studied some of them in Econ 105. Never mind, Uncle Theo, I've got plenty to

keep me busy. And I have to go upstairs now and work a little on a summer project. I'll talk to you later, okay?" But he found reasons to interrupt me the rest of the day, from waylaying my mom's lemonade on its way up to me and delivering it himself to helping me chop the dinner vegetables for her; in each of these encounters, he offered up vague advice and vaguer ambitions of his own on the pyre of avuncular affection. I just kept pointing out the flaw of each plan, which after all wasn't that hard to do, considering that his illogic is often in direct proportion to his enthusiasm. What I didn't initially realize was that it was actually in my best interests to keep him vague.

Five days later, he came in uninvited (though it's true, my bedroom door was open a crack) and tossed three glossy pamphlets on my desk where I sat writing an e-mail to Anna Marie. I felt defensive and turned the computer around so that he could not see the page, though to do him justice, he showed less than no interest in it.

"What now, Uncle Theo?" I intoned wearily, hoping that he would pick up something from the timbre of my voice which might give him pause. But it was useless.

"Jas, here are three especially good projects I took the trouble to order for you. And they don't even necessitate going out of your own country, since you seem to be averse to foreign travel. By these you may be able to see that even within your own country the culture shock you derided as no longer possible in a global world community still sometimes exists. And frankly, I think it would be good for you to get out of your upper middle class existence for a while and go where things are different."

In the time since he had last plagued me about this sort of thing, I'd had time to consider what to do about the problem. First of all, I assumed after a day or two that he'd forgotten all about it or just given up, because until he slung the pamphlets on my desk that day, he'd said not a word

more about it. But just in case, I'd thought of something to answer this charge, that I was somehow living in the lap of luxury and needed to see how the other half, etc.

"Uncle Theo," I said accordingly, sneaking up on him rhetorically, "are you happy here?"

"Me? Sure, why?"

"No, I mean, with staying in our basement with your two girls and stuff, and working with Nancy, and all the rest of it. Are you thinking of leaving this and moving in with Nancy or anything? Or are you pretty much set here for a while? Everything okay between you and my parents?"

He looked confused. Theo is one of the falsely philosophical who never seem to be able to resist a conversation about their own feelings, however minuscule any portion of adverse or positive emotion might be, so right away he fell into my trap. He shrugged. "Well, frankly, Jason, there are times when things could be better. We *are* a bit crowded downstairs. But no, Nancy and I aren't ready to move in together yet; we've talked about it, of course, but we both feel that we should settle on marriage before throwing all four of our kids together in one household. Anyway, your parents and I have our moments of tension and disagreement, but we've basically adjusted pretty well to being here together as parts of one large household. And I guess I contribute my share financially." He looked at me sideways. "Why do you ask?"

"Maybe because I want to know, if this atmosphere isn't right for me, then why is it all right for you and your daughters? Aren't you worried that they may be affected too by the demon Mammon? Aren't you afraid of selling out yourself?"

He got huffy, and scowled at me. "I suppose one or both of your parents are hinting something and you've overheard them. Well, I've done my share to make this world a better place, while your father was slaving his soul away at his career and pandering to that Mammon

you so boldly mention without even understanding it. It's just a word to you, a fancy word you've learned at university. And your mother gave up her career to raise you kids, living a life of ease off her husband's proceeds. That's prostitution, if you like."

I hadn't realized he was so touchy about things, but this made me angry too. "Look, your wife didn't work, before she died, she braided string necklaces and beads, and probably sold virtually none of them, and made groat cakes or something. Disgusting stuff to eat, anyway. You don't have to be poor to live a good life." I turned my back on him, and prepared to sit that way until he left. But he wasn't done. He seemed to have realized, though, that attacking my parents and our style of living, of which he was a current partaker, was useless. He wasn't stupid, after all. He affected an amused tone, and lilted at me,

"It's easier to live a harmless life if you're poor. Remember that old saying, ""It's easier to thread a camel through a needle than to live a virtuous life if you're rich.""

"We aren't rich, and anyway, you're misquoting from the Bible, which you have often professed disapproval of. Something about a rich man finding it difficult to go to heaven." I loaded my cannon for one last, telling volley. "One might almost think you were envious, Uncle Theo." I knew how much he hated anyone using the indefinite, neutral pronoun "one."

"That's it. Help yourself." He strode majestically out and slammed my door behind him.

Preparatory to sweeping the three pamphlets into the garbage can at the left-hand side of my desk, I glanced at the deliriously happy faces on their front panels. One was for a farming commune in Arkansas. From what I had heard of Arkansas, I reckoned that the general population there might not exactly be receptive to a lot of outsiders coming in to show them how to do things they already knew how to do by tradition, though I wasn't ignoring the fact that scientists might have something to say about droughts and floods and improved growing

conditions. But Uncle Theo's brochure didn't seem to mention that aspect of things at all. Nor was it like a Peace Corps pamphlet or anything else reputable I'd heard of.

The second pamphlet advertised an internship of indefinite variety on a whale-sighting boat, for which an unspecified amount of money was to be forthcoming from said interns. As well, it stated boldly and enthusiastically that the participants would live only on what they could harvest from the sea, since the ship was to be self-sufficient once it had loaded initial stores. Ugh, I thought. Smelly and boring, looking at the ocean all day every day from the deep waters, and living on fish and seaweed. Fish was fine, and I'd even eaten sushi with seaweed in it, which I rather liked, but the brawny woman in the photo was stirring up something with tongs in a wooden bowl which looked suspiciously like the raw vegetable product.

The third specimen of Theo's bounty held my attention a little longer, and looked slightly more reputable, though perhaps that was only because it was a cityscape and seemed to have more polish about it. It was a project in a brownstone apartment complex in Nortonville, upstate from Crowell, the college town I lived in to attend Wathywiddles. The complex was described as a series of units which, as I deconstructed the language I encountered, I figured was currently under gentrification. The units were to be cleaned and improved and furthermore lived in by volunteers, who regardless of income would receive free rent in exchange for this work. Of course, some actual experience with cleaning and/or home improvements was required, though it also sounded as if some volunteers might teach others what they knew. This was the pamphlet I saved, since it held some hope of a place to stay other than at home next summer. I mean, surely one wasn't conscripted or anything. If I wanted to leave at the end of the summer, surely I could. I would just have to be careful about signing any rental or work agreements for long-term. I looked at the front again. In huge custard yellow letters, the main caption read, "Find A New

Home at Golden Fleece Enterprises." I speculated for a wry moment as to whether the "fleece" so described was likely to be a "fleecing" of the participants, or something legitimate. Goodness knew Uncle Theo was no expert at divining ulterior motives. In place of researching the offer online or really thinking hard about the option one way or another, I did what I often do, and stored the pamphlet in my file. And there it stayed, until that day in the spring of my junior year, when, having finished my four-year program in three years with honors, I was casting about for something to do for a year or two while I tried to make my mind up about whether to go on to graduate school in English or not (English having eventually become my final major, with a minor in pioneer-culture Philosophy).

* * *

The room was a mess. Jason had filled nearly four boxes with papers to be shredded on his handy paper shredder, and then taken out to the dormitory dump. As he was emptying the last drawer of his own personal file cabinet, wherein all his precious term and honors papers lay, something slick and at the same time tattered fell out. It was a brochure, or pamphlet. The one from "Golden Fleece Enterprises," which his uncle had foisted on him along with the two other discarded ones nearly two years before. Impatiently, he flung it onto the desk with some last minute files. An hour or more of steady shredding passed. Finally, he had four black plastic bags filled with tiny strips of shredded paper. He stuck his head out the window. Luckily, he happened to see Lazy Otto the runner passing below.

"Psst! Hey, Lazy! Can you take a minute to hoist a few bags of old paper to the dumpster? It's just back in the alley you passed."

Lazy Otto, so named for the lackadaisical stride with which he nevertheless nearly always came in first in marathons and dashes alike, grimaced back up at him. "Ah, man! Why now? I just started twenty minutes ago!"

"C'mon, dude, be a bro—it's only about five bags, and they're all light. I'll just drop them out the window to you, okay? It won't take you more than five minutes tops, and you can keep running in place." Without waiting for a response, he thrust the first bag out the window, holding onto it until the last conceivable minute and inch of reach, and then dropped it down, where it barely missed Lazy Otto's head.

"Damn it all, I knew I should've run earlier!" complained his friend, but waited patiently until all five bags were out the window before he shouldered two at once and headed around to the dumpster, his feet still in slow motion. Within a minute, he was back. He tried to pick up the remaining three bags at once, but couldn't do it. Finally, he shrugged up at Jason, picked up two, and disappeared around the corner again. But before he could come back, a campus policeman approached from the other direction, his head craned up at Jason, his left hand shielding his eyes from the early morning sun.

"Have you boys been dropping things out of the windows again?" he asked, apparently unmindful of which boys he might be talking to exactly, since Jason did not remember ever putting anything out of the window before.

"Just some shredded paper, officer. My bud will be back directly to take it to the dumpster." "No, I think I'd prefer that you come down and get it yourself. We don't drop trash out of windows for other people to be responsible for, my friend. You come downstairs right now and take it to the bin. And you," he pointed an accusatory finger at Lazy Otto, who had just come into view again but who was holding back at a safe distance, "if you're just passing by, then keep

on passing. Don't hump other people's burdens for them. We've all got our own worries," he finished sourly, while he waited for Jason to leave the window and come downstairs. The last Jason saw of Lazy Otto was when he turned his face cheerily upward and said, "Yeah, Jas, I guess I'll see you later at the Keg Rally. I've got my own worries." Then he dashed off to the right, with the policeman looking sharply after him as if wondering whether or not he had been sassed.

Jason sighed, then went down to carry the last load himself. After porting it to the garbage, and listening respectfully while the policeman made up for not being on the state or city force by the length and breadth of his sermon on the subject of littering, Jason was free to go. He went back upstairs and started shuffling the remaining papers, the ones to be kept, with some exasperation. Once again, the brochure his uncle had given him caught his eye. He had visited Nortonville, the city which housed Golden Fleece Enterprises, several times before. Wathywiddles male undergraduates and graduate students alike often preferred to date the girls from Nortonville Community College rather than the presumably more jaded and sophisticated girls of their own college, and so he had done, without any "business" resulting, as P. G. Woodhouse would have phrased it. Nortonville was in size somewhere between his larger hometown of Cromeley and the smaller town of Crowell which had spawned Wathywiddles. His brow furrowed. There were things to be said for Nortonville as a potential residential city for a year or two. It had more than its share of coffeehouses, diners, restaurants, and cafés. It had easy bus and train services to both his hometown and his former college town. And more than that, his hometown friend Anna Marie Doherty had transferred to the community college there after finding her first year of Wathywiddles (his second year) too tough. That meant he knew at least one person there already, and though Anna Marie was a little too naïve and sweet and

innocuous to understand his worst points well (and more and more he had come to appreciate those who liked him in spite of his faults and not in obliviousness to them), she was both easy-going and easy on the eyes. They might become better friends yet, he thought, because it seemed likely that as she grew more used to him as an adult, she would be less inclined to point out the times when he fell short of her expectations, something most women seemed to do, even Anna Marie and his mother, both gentle judges.

A few days later, his college possessions were in storage and the brouhaha and celebration of his graduation was all over with (though the glory of having graduated early still remained in his mother's indulgent smile and the frequency with which his father ruffled his hair or found an excuse to punch his shoulder or slap his back). He sat at his desk at home with the Golden Fleece brochure squarely in front of him. He was thankfully saved from the pressure of dealing with his Uncle Theo's expectations because Theo and Nancy were taking a trip out West to the Grand Canyon to try and work the marriage issue out. This meant Jason was able vaguely to mention to his parents that he'd like to try living in Nortonville for a while, and to show them the brochure without mentioning its secondary source. While they didn't really seem to understand the need to take time off if he thought he did plan to go to graduate school in either English or Philosophy (or both, they seemed to suggest), they were quite happy with him for having finished his undergraduate program early with honors, and did not resist the suggestion. In the meantime, he was helping his mother and Aunt Julie Timperson by doing odd jobs at their moderately thriving fruit and vegetable emporium (Piccalilli Circus). He tried especially to engage with any jobs or skills that seemed likely to be of significance to repair work at Golden Fleece Enterprises. His father had taught him and worked with him a lot over the years, but plumbing and electricity were both among his minor talents, so Jason paid especial attention to

any repair jobs anywhere on the block of stores that had to do with these things. His mother and Aunt Julie were understanding about his occasional absences when, for example, he followed a plumbing crew around as they repaired a series of pipes that had rusted and broken free from the back alley of the block, and he himself had to practice a lot of patience and persistence to get the chatty workmen to focus on their jobs and explain to him what they were doing. Then Aunt Julie suggested on one of their breaks, when Jason made a trip back to the store for his own lunch, that he explain to them his interest in helping out in a housing development, and once they had been more effectively flattered by his interest, the plumbers responded with an overwhelming amount of information and perspective.

His acquaintance with the principles of the electricians' work was more tenuous, as there was little opportunity during the summer to learn, especially since there had been no malfunction or disaster which affected the store. But he knew his way around older model circuit and fuse boxes due to having helped his father renovate their garage; that experience, true, was only partially useful due to his father having had to run back and forth to the fence where his providentially supplied neighbor of a few years ago, an electrician, had been gardening on his side. The neighbor, who had since moved, had come across when he'd finished watering his flowers to see what progress was being made, and had come up with a few suggestions. Again, the experience only partly helped, since Jason had been bored at the time and had wanted to get back to his computer. But he thought he could still carry on a reasonably intelligent conversation with an electrician who might theoretically be called in at Golden Fleece Enterprises, and perhaps help keep down costs that way, asking perceptive questions about procedures and prices that might keep the G.F.E. from being cheated or bilked. Thus, even though the pamphlet was a little out-of-date and he had not yet been accepted, nor even heard from his initial inquiry to the

stated manager of the estate, Argonoticus T. King, he already thought of his prospective dwelling area fondly as the G.F.E., and wondered whether such a venture could possibly still be in business.

3
Fate

On the day when he finally did receive an e-mail message, it was somewhat obscure and seemed confused in intent. A. T. King must be less businesslike than his company's still being in business would otherwise indicate, thought Jason, as he read the cautiously stated response. The gist seemed to be that while Mr. King was naturally suspicious of a young man (supposedly from an honorable home and educational background) who desired to live in Nortonville as a sort of glorified handyman and cleaner instead of in Cromeley or Crowell, he was willing to give him a trial for three months to be increased indefinitely if he succeeded. His main chores, however (by contrast with those the pamphlet mentioned) would be what was most useful at the time, which just now involved both laboring in and superintending the labor of others in the central quad of the block of buildings. Without being terribly specific, the manager gave the impression that the quad (which must be large, Jason thought) supported both a neighborhood petting zoo and an organic fruit, vegetable, and flower garden. As well, he might be asked to participate in organizing a small group of officers from a security company which the housing units had found it increasingly necessary to employ. As if to supply a note of color where so much detail was otherwise missing or glossed over, the manager mentioned that the two or three steers lately introduced seemed a little off their feed and crotchety, and the gardeners were having a few problems with the snapdragons and cornflowers. Not to be outdone in equivocation, Jason extolled his virtues as the original repairman he had intended to be, and then mentioned specifically having worked in his mother's and aunt's fruit and vegetable store, and noted that he

had an affection for pets of most kinds; no sense in being more specific. After all, they couldn't expect him to handle animals that five years olds couldn't handle. Why, young children were the major clientele of petting zoos. Must be a weird sort of place, though, he thought to himself that night. Must've changed a lot in philosophy and mission, since it seemed at first glance to be a place intended to supply cheap housing in exchange for aid in gentrifying the buildings, probably then to be sold (unfortunately, he supposed) out from under the original tenants. That was the way it usually worked, according to all the newspaper articles he had read.

It was a week or so before he heard from A. T. King again. As if reluctant, somehow, Mr. King offered him a personal interview with himself and a few of the current residents, who seemed to be included in the decision about his candidacy (though Jason found it a bit difficult to believe this, based on King's having conducted all the business himself heretofore, and having been prominently featured in the brochure). Accordingly, Jason made the trip on a Thursday of the next week, resolved if at all possible to be moved in and getting settled before another week was finished. He needed time doing unfamiliar things, he thought, time in which he could think and write in his spare time and simply live a life like "ordinary people" did.

Looking back on the whole thing a year or two later, he was amazed that he had been so maneuvered and so little in charge of himself, when he had always prided himself on being in control. First he met a few of the other tenants, whose mannerisms seemed lackluster, though one and all they extolled the excellences of their living arrangements. After this, he met a potential roommate, surprisingly enough a young woman who, after meeting him and talking with him a little, looked him over with a glance which was at once both penetrating and mysterious, inflamed with some (to him) indefinable emotion. She said breathlessly almost, "You'll do, I suppose." A. T. King shuffled his feet and looked angry and uncomfortable, saying,

"We don't encourage mixed roommates. I mean, mixed apartments. I mean, we won't stop them, but we don't want to seem—you know, to seem—well, the hippie-ish element around here isn't my idea. It's the inhabitants. They have the vote," he finally snarled. "Besides," he added in a milder tone, after what seemed like a hostile glance from the woman, "Meddie is my stepdaughter, and I figure she knows what's what. Any trouble from you, young man, and you'll be out on your bucket." What "bucket" referred to exactly Jason was left to guess, and he was equally blank on what kind of trouble was suggested. But the young woman held out a firm, slim, yet somehow flirtatious flipper of a hand, and said some longer name he didn't quite catch, explaining that her mother had remarried after her father died. She rolled her eyes at A. T. King's retreating back as if there was something else to say, but without overtly completing the thought. He grasped her hand and pumped it up and down a few times, finding it amazingly light and hot. Something in his head made him feel faint, and much later he was to look back on this moment almost superstitiously, as if taking her hand had been a ritual introduction into something best avoided, like the infernal regions, or a secret coven. But for the moment, he was a bit dazed at finding himself so quickly in possession of a female roommate, when before Mr. King had seemed hesitant to respond to him. Evidently this family, or at least the reconstituted portion of it, consisting of the mother, stepfather, and stepdaughter, was ruled by the distaff branch.

As it turned out, though, she also had a half-brother, whom later she introduced as "my brother, Abner." Abner was about fourteen, and came whizzing by on his skateboard just as they were going inside to look at the loft apartment which she and Jason would be sharing. Jason was duly introduced to the laconic male scion of the family, whom he gave a piercing glance which seemed to make the younger man uncomfortable; this was all to the good. The ironic tone he

had affected reminded Jason too much of himself at that age, and knowing how he himself had looked at people, he thought that yet another "hero of his own life" could be dismissed with a grain of salt.

All in all, it was an astounding and various day. He toured the loft, which had more than enough divided off private room for him to be comfortable. Then Meddie (he for the life of him could not recall the longer name she had given him, being as how he had never heard it properly and hated to ask again) took him for a tour of the petting zoo and gardens, which according to her had been the result of a long battle with the city council in order to obtain licenses and permits. It really seemed like a very idyllic place, excepting always the smell of manure and compost. There were llamas, rabbits, the aforementioned steers, which he eyed askance as if asking whether they intended to butt or gore anyone. Two does and one horse were next, along with a smaller caged-in area containing some aquarium pets like black snakes and harmless lizards and salamanders, which needed to be kept separate from the guinea pigs and hamsters, also in nearby cages. Finally, there were a few not particularly impressive chickens and guinea hens, who were clustering, clucking, squawking noisily, and pecking at grain which a patient parent was trying to encourage a three- or four-year-old to throw to them. The plants were all still in rows of low-growing, green, leafy stalks and stems, some with a few inchoate buds at the top. People were employed both in tasks in the livestock and garden areas, and in milling about and watching; he caught sight of a inked stamp on the backs of some of their hands, which told him that they were visitors and not residents. Looking up finally towards the back of the property, he saw a solid new wooden fence, behind which crowded equally new-looking buildings, outhouses, and a greenhouse. He was a little surprised, because he hadn't realized that the G.F.E. area was so large. Meddie gave a running commentary on what was going on, and

answered such occasional questions as he tried to ask in order to seem cognizant and informed. He made an effort to touch the animals as fearlessly as he could, but desisted somewhat when he got to the hooved animals, which earned him a quizzical glance from his new roommate, almost a knowing one, he thought.

At last, the day was over. When she had escorted him to the front door of what was to be their building, GF1, which opened onto a pleasant tree-lined street, he waited until she had gone back inside to take a deep breath; he was relieved. He had felt on trial the whole time, even after A. T. King had disappeared, as if the real test was still to come, as of course it was. He knew now that he would have to borrow or buy books on gardening and livestock, or at least do a lot of reading up and blogging on the Internet, in order to pass muster. The whole project was apparently succeeding, though he couldn't see how, if in fact there was still as much to be organized by him as Mr. King had led him to believe. He glanced at his watch and walked on down the street towards the train station; he had about two hours to go before his train ran. Turning into a café he had observed on the way up the street, he ordered a latte and a chocolate croissant, something he rarely indulged in because he simply didn't like chocolate the way he knew women (like his mother) did. But after being around the evidence of so much down-hominess all day long, if "down-hominess" was a word, he needed to feel French and loved and coddled and cosseted. Who knew, the French probably fertilized their crops with snails or something, a snail or some truffle oil planted in each little hill in the rows of potatoes or corn.

On impulse, he used his cell phone to contact Anna Marie Doherty, and told her briefly but with a great deal of retaliatory irony about his day. The retaliation was intended to defend himself from the moral earnestness of all those he had met about him, their lackluster quality having been supplemented by their having had what seemed to him no sense of humor at all.

Except, of course, for the odd young woman Meddie. Her he could imagine guilty of almost any infamy of remorseless satire, probably concerning him. Yet he trusted her also to pick her audience, strangely enough, knowing well that she would neither rhapsodize nor ironize about him to A. T. King, who was after all at least the nominal manager. She would save it for some audience "fit, though few."

"Oh, yes, we've all heard around here about the gardens and petting zoo," said Anna Marie enthusiastically. "So you've thrown in your lot with the urban farmers, have you?" She mused, "Now that doesn't sound like you. What's up, Jason? Work going badly?" she sympathized.

"I wanted a change, and it looks like I'm going to have it," he answered shortly. "But now, about you—how's your work going? You have another year to go, right? What are you up to this summer?"

"Oh, my work's going great! Good marks, good internships, doing well in chemistry, the whole lot. Why, do you need someone to help you move?" That was Anna Marie all right, always lending herself to be taken advantage of by other people's selfishness.

"God, Anna Marie, no—I mean, at least that's not why I called you. I'm not moving a lot of stuff in, anyway, mostly books and clothes. I do have a lot of books, but that's just humping boxes on board a truck, getting my boards and bricks set up, stuff like that. Oh, I mean, you're welcome to help if you really want to, and I'll take you out for dinner somewhere. You'll have to pick the place, I don't even have a map of this city yet, just had to ask my way around until I got here from the station. But don't feel obliged."

"Don't be silly. I'll help you gladly. You can get a good map at the kiosk at the train station. The ones of the bus routes are available there too, but the overall city map is usually sold out at the bus station, so I hope you came in by train and can get them all at once. It's not a big city,

anyway. You'll figure it out soon enough. Call me when you get home, okay? I've got to dash. I'm training two younger daycare workers today, and I've got to leave. 'Bye."

At home that evening, Jason told everyone about his day as effusively as possible, since he was aware of his mother (and to a lesser degree, his father) watching him anxiously. He knew she would pick up on any reservations he seemed to have and probably though not certainly try to turn it into an argument for him to stay at home for the summer and find a job closer at hand. And without Uncle Theodore around bullying him about what he intended to do, he was in fact freer to choose to do something which he would never have heard about *except* for Uncle Theo. On his own at last, in bed late at night listening to his MP3 player, he admitted to himself that this new venture might be just what he needed to help him get his head straight; it might in fact be the making of him, of his personal characteristics if not of his intellect, which he secretly thought might be getting a little overdeveloped.

The spring day is one that only the most optimistic of persons could refer to as bright or mellow or gorgeous or golden. It is not only growing gradually dark in the sky, dark with rain and hail to come—hail when the temperature drops, as it is scheduled to. It is also one of those days when Jason and Medulla—he no longer calls her Meddie—find themselves at odds over every little issue, he heroically silent for the most part, she analytical of his faults and attempting to lure him into a discussion of them. It is a good thing, she often says, that they are only roommates in a downtown loft and not lovers or husband and wife.

Jason, for his part, is peering out at the lowering sky and wondering if he can possibly steal away from the impending inner storm to go out for a drink with Melodie, another of Medulla's

criticisms (she doesn't think they are right together, thinks Melodie is a slob on the nights she stays over with Jason). He is thus inviting the actual rain to fall on his hapless but happy head.

"Got to go by Weavill's," he says, ducking quickly into his dumpy overcoat and shoving his feet into loafers trodden down at the heels. That's what he says, but Medulla short-circuits his attempt at escape by saying, "Good. Bring me two loaves of bread from there, and while you're out, get me some soda. Make sure you get the right kind. It's the Maryland Honeydew Delight. It's going to rain soon, you know. Why don't you take an empty zip bag with you?" She holds out an approximate amount of money.

Jason thinks to himself that for a man with no girlfriend and supposedly no responsibilities, he has somehow accumulated the worst of both. Medulla thinks that Jason is like a child who must be taught all over again how to do some things that his first instructors have taught him wrongly: stumbling, doing things inappropriately and catching himself and starting again, apologetic. She really wishes he would get it right himself without her prompting him, but can't help offering good advice, just as her mother and immigrated aunts have done with her. She suffers under a weight of good advice from her childhood, and can only sometimes relieve the burden by sharing it with others.

Just as Jason is heading out and Medulla is standing at the door behind him, eagerly anticipating a rainy afternoon spent inside with a good book, Anna Marie approaches, and runs up the steps toward them both, overly cheery and good-natured and officious. Anna Marie has remained that same Anna Marie, the friend from Jason's adolescence in Cromeley, and as such is quietly waiting inside herself for the real Jason she knows from the past to resurface. She has undergone no interesting transformations of character, but followed a predictable trajectory, in spite of being nearly graduated from her last year of college. She knows that Melodie is just a

bed buddie, and that there is some big upcoming drama with Medulla, whether romance or utter defiance and the moving out of Jason or Medulla she does not know. Still, she is aware that the submerged portion of Jason which used to scheme and plan things, and even upon occasion to discuss these things with her, his best female friend, is a real part of him and not to be repressed forever. She cannot understand Medulla's apparent domination of him. Not that the feminist side of her minds, particularly; but Jason is a friend from the past with whom she has kept in fairly frequent touch. Medulla is a temperamental witch of a stranger, or bitch, as the moderate Anna Marie calls her to herself in bitterest moods (though not to Jason). Anna Marie sees her and tries to be friendly when she goes to visit Jason; the closer connection between Anna Marie and Medulla seems not to be on the cards, however. So after a moment's polite conversation, Anna Marie accompanies Jason out the door again, determined to lure him off for a drink before they come back. He sighs, but realizes that his opportunity to go for a drink with Melodie alone is forfeit; it will in fact be many days before he gets to see her again, and then he is met with the news that she may in fact be moving away.

For her part, Medulla has taken great care to keep Jason in line and respectful of both her and her forebears. She started by emphasizing to him that her name, Medulla Obbligata, is not the Italian of Italy originally, but is an adopted name, able to claim not one but two European cultures as its source. Her father, she explained, was originally French, with the cognomen Obligé (as in *noblesse oblige*, she haughtily said); after fifteen years spent as a doctor resident in Italy, he changed his name to Obbligata to please his father-in-law, who was rather small-town and provincial and altogether suspicious of anything outside of his own tiny village, reversing the sense of ultramontane entirely with his diatribes about France and the French to his long-suffering daughter. Relief lay in leaving for the United States, which the nuclear family of

Obbligata soon did, including Medulla and Obbligata's wife Chlesm  —who in return for her husband's gesture had renamed herself in the French fashion from her original Italiano-Greco name Chlesmia (which Chlesmia's father vowed he knew not the meaning of, but had heard exclaimed during his youth, at a Greek festival whose exuberance had stayed with him forever. His youth, before he was bound in his so-insular ties to his village. Hurrah!). But Medulla is her father's daughter, and has visited relatives in both France and Italy, and is clearly more impressed with her father than Jason is with his, much though he loves him. Indeed, it is her father who gave her her unusual first name, (almost) to complete her last name as if it were "oblongata," not only as a favorite part of his medical studies, but also in the sense that the medulla oblongata of the brain is responsible for such bodily functions as circulation and respiration, things we are naturally "obliged" to do while we are alive. These inevitabilities and so naming his own daughter relieved in a positive way his feelings of the negative inevitability of death, which in the final analysis he as a physician could do nothing about.

Thus, armed with this respectable pedigree, Medulla lords it over the plain St. John family name, which conveys nothing to Jason of any sort of cultural milieu other than the W.A.S.P.-y and (what seems to him now) milquetoast one in which he grew up—maybe his Uncle Theo had been right. And more than that, Medulla is as smart as Jason in a crafty sort of way, which makes him wonder what her own nascent reading experiences were, and whether or not she was likewise conversant early with Macchiavelli. His own juvenile activities make him a bit restive now, a little uncomfortable as he remembers how he used to manipulate his family almost effortlessly, less because of his genius, though it was certainly there, than because they did not suspect him of cunning. When he is at his most rebellious around her, he goes to his area of the loft muttering things like "Oh, sure! *Noblesse oblige!* You'd think more *noblesse* than *oblige*,

the way she goes on ordering other people around!" and "I thought *noblesse oblige* meant the 'better off' people had to assume the greater burden!—not so very far away from that old 'From each according to his means, to each according to his needs,' when you take it in the abstract." Or, making his own play on words, "Ah, if only I had an *oubliette* to keep my obligate parasite Ms. Obbligata in!" (For in fact it does seem that she is of that species of parasite which can only survive in a certain environment, one of constant and undeviating obedience to her will). There are times when Jason wonders if she was a spoiled child growing up; she seems to think she has some arcane force which will bend others to her fancy. Then he reflects that he himself is not guilt-free in this respect. Maybe, he thinks, it is only his chickens coming home to roost, an expression his Aunt Julie often uses.

But sometimes it seems there is more to it than that: he had had a relatively trouble-free childhood, true; mostly average in every respect except that of his intelligence. He, however, is not nearly as high-handed and sure of himself with pulling startling realities out of inchoate shadows as she is. Her name has even begun to haunt him by force of a strange kind of synchronicity. Why, just the other day when he was singing with Melodie in the shower, she, a former music major manqué, ceased with the aria she had been teaching him when she heard from a distance Ms. Obbligata storming in and slamming the front door. "I guess we didn't sing that *obbligato* enough for her. But then, I'm a human with faults and feelings, not a blasted viola *obbligata*." She grinned at him as if this were a particularly pertinent thrust, but not being well up on classical music, Jason had to have the jokes explained, which caused all the previous pleasure of vocalizing with a naked woman under a cloud of water and steam to evaporate more swiftly than the steam itself.

Lately his effort has been to forget all the defensive detail of Medulla's naming circumstances and those of her birth, because he has begun to realize that these surreal conversations take place between them only when he has offended her or made her angry. Another thing he has begun to notice, however, is that she stays mad at or at least irritated with him a lot of the time. It's as if he's a masterpiece of hers, one which is not cooperating with her creative genius, and she must nudge and caress him (though most roughly) and persuade him (though not gently) into shape. He's seen this behavior between married or affianced women and their chosen mates before, but never before in a situation in which the two parties are only cohabiting and not entreating forth the castigating demon of female revisionism with sex and affectionate displays.

If the truth be known, he has an instinct, carefully suppressed, to respond to her corrections of him with the same gently condescending endearments he has at times heard his father use to his mother, so different a woman from Medulla. He suspects that if he slips up sometime and actually employs these terms with her, something interesting might happen. Interesting, but he's not sure he's ready for that much of a challenge from life itself. So he waits. As it turns out, he only has to wait until Melodie moves away to her aunt's in Texas before he actually finds himself missing what he more and more has begun to suspect that Medulla wants to supply. Oh, he tells himself, he's not vain; but from the moment Melodie is gone from the scene, Medulla seems not only to find him easier to tolerate as he is, but also seems to prefer his company when she could be socializing in larger groups of people with her stepfather's other tenant-employees. Her look becomes almost teasing, loving; her vocal range assumes more of the dovelike note and less of the eagle's screech. If nothing else, he reasons, she seems to like him better, and this certainly makes his life easier. He is able now to cast about him mentally and take more time for his intellectual hobbies without fearing that he is always just about to be interrupted with some

demand for attention to his roommate's issues with their living arrangements. Her frown now seems to be called forth more infrequently, when either Anna Marie or one of their other acquaintances or friends drops by (and he must suppose from the repetition of this occurrence among some of those at the Golden Fleece that they were at least social friends of Medulla's before he came along).

Of course, Anna Marie is someone whom Medulla barely tolerates, but because Anna Marie isn't a sexual threat to Medulla (he suspects), the toleration is of an entirely different nature than that with which Medulla bore up under the presence of Melodie. In point of fact, however, Anna Marie, under her demure sweaters and plaid skirts, is just as nubile as Melodie ever was, which he realizes when looking at her objectively. It's just that she's busy, and her manner, though adoring of Jason in the way that the girl-next-door adores a potential romantic development of the boy-next-door, is not of the smoky, sulphurous, sexual variety of Medulla's. He tells himself that Anna Marie is like the clean sherbet one uses to cleanse one's palate after a lavishly prepared dish (Medulla), and reasons that he cannot have the latter without the former, if only for comparison. Ignoring the sexist implications of the food metaphor, and calculating that he really only means to stay at Golden Fleece Enterprises for a year, he figures to himself that if he seriously wants to get a leg over on Medulla he'd better hurry—and for some time he pictures himself as being like the hero sitting astride a fire-breathing dragon, barely harnessed and held in control, which was the subject of a ceiling poster his sister Magda had once bought him. (Magda had told him that his namesake Jason the Greek hero had had something to do with a dragon, and at the time he'd pointed out that "Jason had slain a dragon, or put it to sleep or something," not ridden one. Magda, indifferent to exactitude, had responded, "Oh well, Jas, I knew a dragon was in the story somewhere.") The cold, saturnine part of his nature, which even he shivers at and

wonders at sometimes when he meets it, suggests to him that he doesn't want to take Medulla with him when he leaves, and so dictates that he doesn't have much time for the rising action, climax, falling action, and denouement of the affair, and had better start soon.

* * *

Before Jason can really settle down into all the chores A. T. King has planned for him to do as a way of "breaking in the new boy," however, and thus win Medulla's praise and approval, which he regards as a sure way of gaining her trust and affection, he finds that King himself has already found chores so onerous for one never having dealt with livestock and the management of workers before that Jason's plans are in danger of being preempted. He works a hard 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. day, with 1 1/2 hours for lunch (during which time, sandwich in hand, he is expected to deal with the complaints and confrontations of the other workers with each other; he wonders how they functioned before he got there). He also gets a fifteen minute break in the morning and one in the afternoon, neither of which is realistically long enough to get to a bathroom and get a cup of coffee both. Jason is finally making contact with the milder end of the experience of the American worker.

When he points out to A. T. King that even with his best efforts, he was not trained in labor relations, and thinks to score points by asking for tips, the big boss just smiles maliciously and says, "Oh, carry on. You're the one with the great college degree, you figure it out. I'm sure whatever compromise you come up with will suit everyone just fine."

On a bright spring day which would be bright to Jason too if only its sprightly promise were not contradicted by the entanglements with the workers which he perceives himself to be in, he has finally had enough (if only there were a union for them, he would just be another member of it, and someone else would be monitoring their disputes!). He leaves the field where he has been

trying to get the steers into a pen before a curious audience, and puts another man in charge. Then, when a distraught worker comes up to him with a tale of a section supervisor who won't budge in a salary dispute, he encourages him to take it up again tomorrow. Whether he plans to leave on the morrow, admit himself licked or not, he's not really sure. All he's sure of is that he needs to get back to his own quarters and lie down for a while, rest his aching muscles and perhaps have a much needed nap.

To his great surprise, when he gets there, the entire apartment is filled with vases and pitchers full of sprigs of some shining yellow flowers with foliage. The picture rests his eyes at the same time as it challenges the darkness of the deep interior full of shades, shadows, and slanting sunbeams, having the soothing effect on his vision that blue usually has, oddly enough. As if in shyness, Medulla steps forth from one of the interior rooms into the main room of the loft and says, "Well, what do you think?" He notices that she also has some incense sticks burning here and there in the room, but they don't smell spicy and heavy; instead, as he puts his face to the flowers, he finds that the incense and the flower musk are blending in together in a light though pervasive odor that he cannot identify: he's sure he's never smelled it before.

She puts her hand gently on his shoulder and starts to ask "What's wrong?" but when he winces at her touch, she says sympathetically, "Shoulder sore?"

Suspicious for a moment at the unexpected note of understanding, Jason decides he is too tired to figure it out, and throws himself down on the long couch in the darkest corner of the room to try to sleep. "Everything's sore," he finally answers by way of explanation.

His eyes closed, he hears her moving softly around in the foreground closer to the sun, but falls asleep in the dense atmosphere. When he wakes, he sees something that does not at first make sense, but when he gets the energy to ask, "What are you doing?" she tells him of the

waist-high table and the fluffy white towel thrown across it, "I'm going to give you a rubdown. A good one. No, don't protest, just take your things off and put the towel over your bum." She grins at him. "Though I may get to that, too."

He wonders to himself, "Do I dare? This woman is somehow—somehow—a—an"; though "anomaly" is the word his brain is searching for, "mystery" is what he comes up with, the scent of the room still interfering with his clarity of mind. He thinks briefly of all the past times when Medulla was impatient or rude to him, and cannot quite figure the conundrum out. At last, he decides not to try, says "Yeah, okay, sure, thanks," and while holding the towel over his midsection, sits down on the couch and removes his clothing.

The moment she touches his back and starts to rub, he feels a deep sigh of contentment welling up from within him, so strong that he is astonished not to find his back still aching. Experimentally, he waits until her hands are away from him rubbing oil between them, and moves his back: yes, without her it is still painful. With no other apparent or desirable option, he sinks gratefully into the table again and lets her rub his shoulders, neck, back, leg muscles, and even finally his bum, in repeated visits to each part, and in no apparent order that he can fathom. When she says, "Okay, flip," he doesn't even at first make sense of her words, and then it seems like a request that is in as much excess of what he wants to do as if she had asked him to lift a ten ton weight with one hand.

When the request, or really the command, percolates to his wandering and half-dazed attention, he groans in protest, but with the towel still positioned over his mid-section he flips over awkwardly on the massage table, nearly upsetting the works. Right away, he notices a difference in his response to her touch, or is it her touch that is different? Is he more ticklish or sensitive on his front side, or is the lingering, caressing movement of her hands new? He finds it

hard to keep his eyes shut without putting a carefully blank expression on his face, but when his eyes fly open, as they keep doing, he finds her stare unnerving: she's always looking right into his eyes, and he has to look away, as if he is guilty of something.

Whatever he is or is not guilty of, she apparently does not care, because sooner rather than later it becomes apparent what the final target she is concentrating upon is. When she has massaged everything that can decently be massaged under that aegis, he opens his eyes one last time to find that she is now clothed only from the waist down, and is rapidly shedding that garb too. He props himself up, not quite sure of whether or not this is some further sort of care she is bestowing upon him or whether it is what it looks like, only to find her putting some music on the CD player, some odd sort of folk music which he is totally unfamiliar with, but which causes the word "barbarian" to pop into his mind unbidden. With sprigs of flower passed back and forth between one hand and the other, she begins a sinuous, writhing dance close around him, ululating softly in the back of her throat, and thrusting her breasts and hips out at him in turn. She pulls him up from his reclining position, whisking away his protective towel which until now has successfully been hiding the fact (he had hoped) that at least one member of his anatomy knows exactly what to think of it all. Of course, it's bad enough to be exposed, but then she flicks him on the sensitive spot with the spray of flowers in her nearest hand, and the light touch causes a budding agony of desire to flood through him.

By the time she pulls him down onto the woven blanket on the floor and mounts him, Jason has forgotten about A. T. King, the workers, the steers, the planting, and everything else to do with Golden Fleece Enterprises. In fact, when she has accomplished with him what her immediate plans, at least, seem to be, he falls asleep again, soft female flesh pressed again him and the day passing on, while the time within the room stands still.

When two days have passed, and Jason has more or less become accustomed to Medulla's apparent new scheme for him in her life and the concurrent necessity to continue on the old footing around A. T. King (which earlier would have seemed like a further strain, but didn't now, for some reason), he stretches in front of the window, letting the bright sun play across his bare chest. He is thinking of the things, many things, that Medulla proposed to him as strategies for coping with his position at Golden Fleece Enterprises, nebulous and untitled as it is. The truth of the matter is, A. T. King, while giving him much responsibility, did not accord him much authority with which to compass his goals, nor is the living allowance distributed to each worker for extra expenses an adequate compensation for all the extra trouble. Yet now, he has begun to feel energized, as if he has not only successfully learned to manage the unfamiliar animals and plants, and to stop the contests and quarrels between the workers and their equally contentious seeking him out with one sudden, stony edict which prevents them all from seeking him out anymore. He also feels as if A. T. King is a sitting hen out from under whom he has stolen something valuable, not only his stepdaughter, but some kind of auriferous, transforming experience which was, after all, what he came for. And now that his year is nearly over, he begins to think of leaving.

The developments of his relationship with Medulla are on his mind this day while he sips his morning coffee. She is out at the co-op dairy trading some of the produce from her herb garden for their weekly goods; though vaguely Jason is pondering the fact that someone told him bartering had to be reported to be legal, he is also aware, equally vaguely, that probably no one at the co-op does so. From there, his mind has passed to the subject of wondering what he and Medulla are bartering with each other for. He is getting copious free sex and a seemingly enchanted life in harmony with his surroundings to the point where it seems that even in

response to A. T. King he can do little wrong. But what is Medulla getting? He thinks of how her upper lip gets dewy over her pearly teeth sometimes in the warm air when she wiggles around under him, and unbidden except for this image, Robert Graves's poem "Down, Wanton, Down" springs into his mind. Does she love him, or is she just making use of him? For that matter, does he love her? She certainly is showing him her milder side now, with little of the testiness and spirit of contention she showed at first, when other women came around more often. Yes, when other women were around. Could it be that she, Medulla the Confident, had been uncertain and jealous? He warns himself not to be too complacent, but this thought seems to make sense, and he asks himself if he wants her to be. In brief, does he now want to take her with him? All he knows is that she seems more and more to become necessary to his happiness and equilibrium.

* * *

I've given myself to him, and now he is mine.

* * *

All this time, Jason had been keeping (or trying to keep) himself free of various problems with A. T. King, the other workers, and Medulla. But now, he has begun to perceive that he is going to have a problem with a most (and perhaps the most) unlikely source, Abner King. Who or what is Abner King, the average reader may ask. To which of course the reader blessed with a copious and not particularly selective memory might answer, "Why, Medulla's kid brother, the teenager, don't you remember?" And indeed, there is nothing much to remember, because Abner has not been introduced properly yet. As a not especially clinging half-brother, Abner has been in and out of Jason's and Medulla's surroundings, coming over from the main house where he and A. T. King live to borrow clam juice once and another time to return a CD of Medulla's

which she had generously allowed him to copy. While he calls Medulla "Sis," and addresses her with an offhand, casual tone, he has been careful around the two of them, the more so as it has obviously become clear to him that Jason is implicated in his sister's romantic life. While Jason has not noticed a drop in the slightly satirical tone addressed to himself by Abner, it's never been strong enough to challenge. If he didn't know better, he might almost assume that Abner is treating him to an unspoken Greek choral chant of "Here's another one. He's a bigger ass than the rest have been. I wonder how long Meddie plans on having him around. It's for sure that once she gets tired of him, he'll be out of here." So, when it was a matter of mutual toleration because of Medulla's role in both their lives, Jason and Abner grunted "hellos" at each other in her presence, and Jason tried to pretend concern in things to do with Abner, little though he felt aware or interested in what they really were.

Now, however, it's a different matter. Jason is now about ready to leave G.F.E. for wider fields, and has written to yet another developmental community whose pamphlet has been secretly circulated at Golden Fleece Enterprises. The new one is a community with its own workers' association for labor rights, and one which needs a "new, energetic, and highly motivated" manager—they don't say "young," but all their added other vocabulary, "up-to-date with the latest agricultural-cum-communal issues and techniques," and so forth, seems to suggest it. Jason figures that just as he came prepared to learn at G.F.E., he can make something of the expertise he has mastered and go on from there, and it has occurred to him that he wants Medulla with him, not only because her own credentials are more persuasive of his own, but because he has against all his own expectations grown fond of her; more than that, he has grown enamored of her in a manner and degree that almost shames him as the man-of-the-world that he has previously assumed he was becoming.

He even has had the confidence to mention his plans for going away to her, confident as well in her acceptance of them, which he has developed not only because she seems genuinely attached to him, but because she has made many a remark about not wanting to remain around A. T. King her whole life. Nevertheless, he does not welcome, two weeks before they are ready to give notice and leave, her revelation to Abner that they are going. This is true the more so as Abner takes it as a personal affront, and an imposition on him of all the duty to assume a more central position in A. T. King's rival community here. He is sworn to secrecy, yet on the day when they finally are packed up and ready to go, Abner is ready to go too, and not to put too fine a point on it, stows away in the back of the small van when they aren't looking. They discover him only once they are on the road to Fitztown, the community on the other side of Nortonville, because of a thumping and a loud cry coming from the back of the van itself, where a heavy chest of drawers has turned over on Abner during the ride.

Despite his best efforts to remain sanguine, Jason is outraged at this behavior from Abner, who has only been passingly polite to him. Though they have to take Abner to an emergency room nearby to have a twisted ankle and a bloody arm patched up, Jason insists on sending him back on the next bus to Nortonville. What surprises him is that even though Medulla has her brother's blood on her clothes where she and Jason helped him out of the truck, she is sanguine in both senses, and concurs entirely in what Jason (a little guilty after the fact) feels is his demand to be rid of Abner. While driving, Jason tries to make his way through the tangle of emotions that warns him of a woman bloody-minded enough not to make some objection on behalf of her own kin, in favor of a man whom she has only known for a year, but can come to no easy conclusion, since it's on his own behalf that she has acted. And Jason is selfish.

Finally, they arrive at Fitztown United Cooperative, affectionately known as "F.-C.KERS' United" by its domiciled citizens, a joke which three of them feel called upon to pass along verbally to Jason and Medulla while showing them to their own berth, not a loft this time but a roomy first-floor apartment in one of the buildings shaded by trees on the front and right side, a small walkway running between it and the neighboring buildings on the left.

They then meet the head selectman of the cooperative, Moran Jan Morgan, whose middle name, by which he goes, is pronounced "Yahn." Jan has been waiting for them to arrive the whole day, a bright day in June, and in fact already has letters from Jason's father and Uncle Theo to hand him. Medulla knows something, by now, of Jason's family life and his mature view of things, such as his growing awareness that his Uncle Theo is more of a moocher than an especially insightful man, in spite of the fact that he had given Jason the original brochure to A. T. King's commune. Jason has come to regard this as inspired guesswork, with perhaps (in the back of Theo's mind, way back, beyond the reach of conscious deliberation) the desire to get one other person out of the house in order to further secure his own foothold. After all, he and his daughters are still in the basement, though Nancy Bellingcote has been vociferous in her appeal that they should think of finding a place together. Jason pockets the letters for later, and after he and Medulla park their van outside their apartment to be unloaded, they follow Jan around. (The co-op/commune has a service at low cost which they have availed themselves of, a group of trusted residents to move possessions in and out of apartments on-site). They look at the fields of produce, the livestock, and the other appurtenances of the community, which is by first calculation at least half again as large as G. F. E.

For one thing, the outbuildings are newer in appearance than those of their former dwelling area, and the whole seems to be smartly kept up. For another, the various residents they come

across seem to be in cheerier mood, with an incredible number of them being apple-cheeked by the sun, and neater in their various farming attire than those at the former farm-cum-petting zoo. They seem contented workers, well-fed without being fat, happy without being bilious with effervescence. Jan, apparently the king of all he surveys, for the time of his election at least, finally turns to them when they have seen everything and asks,

"And what are your special areas of interest in terms of participating in our humbler chores? Oh, I don't mean what are you experts in; we've already exchanged correspondence about that. I think you, Jason, said you'd done some of the gardening and livestock tending; and you, Medulla—may I call you 'Peg?'—said you were involved in the preparation of meals and herbal medicines for the community. I mean, in terms of the other things, in which no one has a specialty, what do you feel you could take up?"

Medulla, answering first, said, "Actually, I'd rather you didn't call me 'Peg.' I'm not sure why you asked. My preferred nickname is Meddie. Well, in terms of simpler chores, I'm involved in composting and recycling. Yes, those are my babies."

Said Jan, "Oh, I see. Very useful skills. Are you better at one than the other?"

Medulla shrugged. "No, not really. I like them both alike, but in different ways."

Jason too starts to shrug, then realizing that's what Medulla had just done to indicate her proficiency in a general way, he represses it and frowning responsibly answers, "I used to get landed with odd jobs; handyman sorts of jobs, repairing simple electricity problems, building things, you know." They wait a bit anxiously, but Jan has already turned from them and is answering one of the workers, who has come up to him with a problem. After a minute, he turns back around and says,

"Let's see, there's something I'm forgetting. Oh, yes, we have our own nursing and daycare unit, only three people, actually, but they do take on their own share of homey odd jobs too, sewing on buttons and repairing hems and the like, for maladepts like me." He grinned. "C'mon, I'll introduce you."

They approach a one-story building with bright birds, flowers, and a sickly grinning sun painted on its sides in bright nursery school colors, and a plastic jungle gym, swings, and a slide in the yard. When they enter, the hall is cool and inviting after the hot sun outside. Jan leads them up to a door on the right, which bears the legend, "Alice Adams, R.N., Nurse." He opens the door and ducks his head in, calling out, "Alice? Allie-allie-in-free! Are you here?" When no one answers, he turns and says, "I guess she's on her lunch hour. Yep, it's 12:30. Well, you can meet her later. Back here—" he goes next to two doors, side by side, on the left hand side of the hall—"is the nursery and the playschool for toddlers. Right now, the infants—all three of them—appear to be having their nap. Joseph Wanderiddler is their attendant. Let's look in at the playschool, shall we?" He peeks through the glass in the upper half of the door. "Ah, yes, they're having lunch at their wee tables!" He looks back at his new residents, but evidently picking up on their feeling that he is being overly cute, he drops the delighted cooing, and opens the door. "Annie, can we come in?" he asks.

"Of course, Jan. We're just having our lunch snack. What's—who're—Jason? Medulla? What are you doing here?" And half-standing up from the grownup desk in the front of the room is Anna Marie Doherty.

Jan all but claps his hands with glee, while Jason feels guilty about not having kept in touch with Anna Marie in the last few months. "I'm *delighted* that you already know my cousin Annie. She's really the princess of the playground, she is." He circles around the three who are

gradually moving closer together to shake hands in a far more formal way than they ever have before, almost as if he is getting ready to dance around them. His face continues to pantomime his sheer joy in introducing people who already know each other a trifle better than any of them know him.

"You didn't say—I didn't know—" Anna Marie says in confusion to Jason, her countenance blushing a becoming rosy color.

"We weren't sure—but I didn't hear from you, either—" answers Jason, while Medulla smiles a wary smile and wraps her hand through his arm in a proprietary way, telegraphing a certain change in circumstances to Anna Marie. But there's no way she can accuse Jason of knowing Anna Marie was here beforehand, because she helped him pick out the Fitztown United Cooperative organization from several which he had been reviewing while still at G. F. E. They visit Anna Marie for a while, making stilted conversation and making nice over the kindergarteners, and then it's time to go home to their new surroundings. They've agreed to start putting things together slowly there, and not to rush into unpacking the first night.

After they've unearthed the candles and had a romantic picnic of crackers, sardines, red wine, and ripe peaches, Jason notices that there's still something in the pocket of his shirt: the two letters from home, one from his father and one from his uncle. Assuming that his uncle's letter may take more patience than he has in store to read right away, he opens his father's first, and reads it aloud to Medulla, wanting to share his father's voice with her, to bridge again one of the gaps between his new life and his old at home. Medulla has enjoyed hearing him read his father's letters aloud before, and he sees no reason to hesitate now.

"Dear Son," (the letter read),

"Your father is exhausted and feeling very old. The greatest aggravations in my life have become almost insupportable, while the small have increased in size to fill the former place of the largest. If this is not clear, let me just tell you what set me off the other day: I found that I no longer had the patience or the desire to be nice to people who don't matter. When one is being nice (and hypocritical), one quibbles about this, and says 'After all, doesn't everyone matter?' But in truth in every person's life there are a host of people who can make one miserable or at least can inconvenience one considerably, but who smooth one's way if one is nice (that despised word!) to them. But now, I find myself becoming surly and inconvenient and unwilling to cooperate, in spirit if not in fact. I grimace, I feel, rather than smile when, after I've already told the service station attendant twice that I want a full tank, he meaninglessly repeats back at me with an idiot's grin, 'Fill 'er up, then?' I think this is because I'm getting old, feeling old; my psychological sinews and stamina are becoming as stiff and crotchety as my physical ones occasionally are, only a lot more frequently.

"Don't think that this isn't a disease, because I think it is, to be held in remission as long as possible. Not only does it spread from less important person to less important person, but the other night I found myself feeling really, really angry at your mother and sister for reasons that were after all, quite minor. Theo and the girls were staying over at Nancy's (at least if I had to have a more personal and important target, it should've been Theo! He and Nancy have been making plans for ages now for him to move in with her, or get married or something, I forget what the latest scheme is, and he's still stalling. Or maybe Nancy is, who knows?). So, our little family should've been all complete except for you, and at the beginning of dinner I even had plans to call you afterwards and find out how you like your new place, what you're up to. Your mother and sister started teasing me about this at first; not that they didn't want to hear from you

too, just that they teased me about being outnumbered by women and wanting to have either Theo or you *in absentia* around for male companionship. I think I gave as good as I got, and felt fairly good about it, too. Then they went on and on, from one topic to another, until they hit on my gray hairs.

"What a minor thing, really, considering how many other ridiculous things they'd already said. But after a few minutes of playful and arch animadversions on male aging, I felt very raw and sensitive, and barked at them both. They looked silly, then a trifle scared, then and only then apologetic; I went off and sulked in my study and drank myself into oblivion. When Theo appeared back unexpectedly (Nancy had to go on a sudden trip to see her mother, who fell that night and hurt her leg, and Theo came with all four kids in tow—Hallie and Callie and Nancy's boy and girl), I was in my study sound asleep and snoring, and your mother got really vexed because she couldn't wake me to help by putting up extra sleeping space in your old room for the boy. I didn't hear the end of it for several days. And since I was in the wrong for being drunk and uselessly asleep, I had no real justification for protesting, except to object that I was tired of hearing it. Eventually, I just had to wait it out.

"I am feeling old, though, and I do notice the gray more. And Theo doesn't make things any better by a weird sort of old-guys'-comraderie he assumes, comparing his few gray hair to mine and saying all sorts of things he's no doubt gleaned from self-help books. I know he reads such drivel because I've seen it in his car and round about the house, where he leaves it lying all the time. Anyway, someday maybe you'll understand what I feel now, except I hope you understand it only by a knowledge of other persons and not from your own experience. I could wish better than that for you. Don't worry too much about me, there's nothing really wrong, I don't guess. I'm in good health except for these moods. Write when you get a chance, or even better, give us

a call sometime and let us know how it's going there at Fitztown. Or come home some weekend and bring Medulla, is it? If you're going to stay with her, she should spend some time amongst our merry number.

Love,

Dad"

Medulla smiles, a wide, even smile. "Your father wants to meet me, does he? And bring yet another woman into the fold? Well, I owe him a favor for that generous fault. Come to think of it, I know just the thing."

Jason is truly curious. "What?"

"Don't think about it right now, I'll tell you later. Now, what's on Uncle Theo's mind? Or do you not want me to hear that one?"

Jason guffaws. "Actually, it may be the only way of getting through it. Okay, here goes—"

He reads Theo's letter aloud, but is distracted from it from moment to moment by the changing expressions on Medulla's face as she listens. She listens in a minor key, then in a major key; she shouts with laughter, then she furrows her brow. All of this reaction seems to be to the ways, which he is noticing too, that Theo's letter is a weak and derivative copy of his father's complaint. He too complains of gray hairs, but somehow sounds lacrimose and insincere, wanting to be grouped with Aaron but not wanting to pay full fare to ride in the boat, as it were. He is years younger, after all, and has not shouldered as many responsibilities.

When Jason finishes the letter, which is more repetitive than his father's and reasons in circles if it reasons at all, he makes a wry face, and said "That's it."

"Oh, that's it, is it?" Medulla echoes softly. "Yes, I've got just the thing. Something for both of them."

"Now, what are you up to?" Jason queries. "Let me in on it, too. They're my letters, after all."

"Well, let me see if I can get a few things together first for a care package, and then I'll tell you. No point in spoiling the surprise if I can't." And for several days, that is all she will say, although she does ask to see photos of Aaron and Theo, which Jason obliges her with, though he is still very curious.

Finally, after coming back several days from orientation rounds about his new duties to an apartment that is full of funny smells and odd odors, Jason can contain himself no more, and insists upon knowing what is in the big package that Medulla has nearly ready to ship to his family.

It is all humid and sticky outside, presaging a summer storm by the rising hot winds and the darkening clouds in the sky. Meanwhile, Medulla is tucking mysteriously wrapped odds and ends in the package, some of them having letters appended, others having only names on the tops with no explanations. Just as he is reaching out a hand to touch the package, a bolt of lightning flashes by the open window, followed by an ominous crack and growl of thunder very close by.

Medulla, whose irritated expression is lit up for one second as she slaps his hand away, snaps "Don't touch that! I've got it all packed now. I'll tell you what's in it once I've had a chance to send it out. Where's my raincoat, anyway? I've only got thirty minutes to get to the post office."

"In this weather? Can't it wait until tomorrow morning? I'll take it down then, I've got to meet a couple of people at the coffee shop downtown anyway."

"That's okay; I've got that carry-all bag with a closed top. The package won't get wet."

He trails behind her to the door, disposed to argue. "Yeah, but you will; and you might get struck by lightning or walk under falling limbs or something."

She smirks at him oddly and says, "Not very likely, now, is it?"

"It could be..."

"I like walking in the rain. And I promise when I get back I'll tell you about everything in the package."

He has to be content with this, and watches her go down the walk, one hand on the clutch straps of the bag, one hand holding the lapels of her raincoat together, her face turned upward in what seems to him a sort of unholy rapture as the rain courses down first in large drops, and then in sheets. As he cranes his head out the window to watch her run across the wet and shining street at the right-hand intersection, another crash of lightning and thunder, just above him this time, causes him to draw his head in quickly, bumping it on the raised sill and swearing. "Damn woman!" he says, and goes from place to place in the apartment turning off anything that might channel in electricity unnaturally.

When she finally gets back about an hour later, not only is her seal brown curly hair in ringlets all over her head and shoulders, but she is dripping wet as she steps in the front door. The storm has come and gone otherwise, her wetness the only remaining traces of it; even the sidewalk has begun to dry out some, due to the early evening glistening heat.

"All right, now," Jason challenges. "Are you going to solve the mystery for me? What's in the box?"

"All sorts of things—family gifts all around," she remarks with airy condescension. "Such as? It's taken long enough for us to get together a package gift, for all the ones we've received, and I didn't even get to participate."

"That's okay; it's a sort of thing that women do more often than men, anyway. The fact that the letters from home came to you recently will sort of let them know about your part in things."

"I didn't *have* a part in things! Name one thing in there that was from me."

"Well, in light of the fact that you've shared so much about your family with me, the information leading to the gifts came from you." He just glares at her. She waves her hands around in the air and says, "Okay, okay. For your Aunt Julie and your mom, I sent a couple of those knee-length aprons that the co-op here makes, which thus not only advertizes us here, but gives them something to work in at the store. Your mom, if you remember, was saying that she couldn't find sturdy aprons anywhere in town. And I wrote them a letter each, detailing the wholesale costs of our organic fruits and veggies here, which just might give them a bit better price than where they buy from now, being as it's closer. For Nancy Bellingcote, I put in a copy of that new book called *Tricks to Running Your Own Small Press*, because you'd said she and Theo were bemoaning the costs and restrictions of trying to get longer stuff they'd written published through her newspaper press. It's a long shot, but they may be interested. For the twins and Nancy's boy and girl, I put in a couple of new board games, ones which are not only educational but fun, at least according to the reviews. I sent Magda a copy of *Secrets of Nature's Sorcery*, a book about organic gardening." She pauses and smiles at him triumphantly. She seems more or less ready to leave the topic, but he persists.

"Yeah? And what was it that you were brewing up for all those days? What did you send my dad and Uncle Theo? It stunk; at least, it certainly didn't smell like a batch of cookies!"

"Well, that was a special surprise. I told your dad to use his first, and then if he likes it, to pass along the second container to your uncle. You might call them chemical indexes of character."

"No, I might call them whatever they actually are, assuming that I ever get to find that out. What *were* they?"

"Why don't you wait and find out? Or better yet, put the clues together and figure it out.

One: your father sincerely and your uncle as a feat of mimicry are feeling older. They both are complaining of gray hairs, although to judge from their pictures, only your father actually shows any gray. It's fairly well-kept, too. But people feel the way they do about themselves, and there's no changing that. Or is there?"

"And?"

She expels a gust of breath with impatience. "Oh, piss off, Jason! Why do you have to take the fun out of everything? If you must know, I sent your father an organic hair dye that I made, suited to his particular shade of auburn hair, and intended to cover gray. And I offered to make it for him indefinitely, if he likes it."

"Oh, really? But Theo's hair isn't auburn, it's strawberry blond, or at least it's mostly that."

"That's why I didn't send him exactly the same thing." And she comes to a dead stop, goes to hang up her coat in the hall, and to remove her wet shoes on the hall rug.

When she doesn't say anything more, but when he's notices a certain smug air of victory about her, he watches her more closely. There is something she isn't telling him. "I feel that there's more to it than that, somehow. Is my dad's dye really going to work the way it's supposed to? I mean, have you done this before?"

She sighs. "Of course I have! I wouldn't try out something on your *father's* head that I hadn't tried before."

He looks at her. There's something about her still, something not quite right. "Is my mom going to like it, too?"

"I'm sure she will. For one thing, he'll probably be prancing around her like a frisky stallion. People get like that when they suddenly feel younger."

For the rest of the evening, Jason alternately scowls at her and tries to pick the seams out of what he is beginning to feel is some seamless lie she's telling him, but he can't quite figure her out. She humors him to a certain degree, but gently and firmly retreats to sleep by herself on the couch when he fusses and keeps her awake at night. He gets up early the next morning after a bad night's sleep, only to find that she has already eaten and gone out to handle the two farm chores she'd called her "babies," the recycling bin and the composting field. He finally gives up on challenging her, and decides to wait until he hears from his father about the package. Good chances were that his father wouldn't use the stuff anyway, but would either be embarrassed and annoyed, or thankful but embarrassed, or simply mistrustful of Medulla's expertise. He's in for a shock, however, two weeks later, when his mother calls up to talk to him on the telephone.

His mother initiates the conversation strangely, by asking him if Medulla is around. When he replies "No, she's in the cornfield doing her turn at weeding," Holly laughs with a certain nervous strain evident in her tone. "Well, your dad and Theo have used their hair products, and I'm happy to report that your dad, at least, is satisfied with his. He wants to know if there's any commercial brand he could easily get that would have nearly the same effects as Medulla's." She pauses.

Now Jason feels relieved, but not for long. "Well, that's great! And of course Theo is grousing. He never can be satisfied, even with a good thing."

His mother hesitates for a few seconds, just long enough to allow Jason to get the wind up. "Well—" she says, "that's the thing." She stops.

"What's the thing? Theo cutting up rough about his age being known or something?" "No, it's just that...her formula didn't work the same way on him. Instead of being reddish-blond, the way his hair's always been—?"

"So? A little too bright, what?"

"Now his hair is gray, and he swears it's starting to fall out."

"Are you sure?" Jason feels his heart thump heavily. But he suspects already that this is what Medulla has been hiding from him. He feels guilty, as if he never should've told her about his feelings of being annoyed with his uncle, about Theo's inconveniencing his family so much.

"Oh, I'm sure. We listen to him morning, night, and afternoon. As to whether it's falling out or not, I don't know that. But he has no reason to lie."

Weakly, Jason says, "He is very imaginative sometimes."

"Well, his girls helped him put it on, so there's that to consider. But he and your father are going rounds about it. Your father keeps insisting to Theo that it's just the luck of the draw, that hair care products don't work the same on everyone. And Theo keeps attacking your father by saying that he has a vested interest in claiming that, because his worked. They're driving me and everyone else batty. They had a real showdown the other night when your father suggested that maybe the gray hair looked good, made Theo look more his age, or wondered if he'd been rinsing it a light copper all along. He was actually starting to interrogate Theo about what might already be on his hair that could affect an organic dye, when Theo up and stormed out in a high dudgeon, if I may use so antiquated an expression. It's so descriptive, isn't it?" His mother seems momentarily distracted by her own choice of words, which he takes to mean (correctly, as it turns out) that she's had more than enough of the subject of hair dye, and doesn't take the matter to be her particular business anymore, now that she's passed the subject on to him, apparently so that he can deal with it and Medulla.

They chat for another few minutes, and then his mother has to go to take his sister out clothes shopping. Jason gets off the phone a little unwillingly, trying to avoid his own conflicting

feelings of concern for Theo, amusement at Theo's predicament (which Jason feels Theo's been asking for all along), and dread at having to face Medulla with the topic.

One topic for his consideration that emerges from regarding his current partner in a critical light is the way it makes him feel about his own life saga, as it were. Before he moved to Medulla's stepfather's community a year ago, he would never have considered that he himself had anything as dramatic as a "life saga." His life, in his view of it, had been ordinary and boring enough, or if not boring to him, at least unlikely to excite remark in anyone else. Professor Allwitz at college had selected him out of the crowd, but that must've happened dozens of times with myriad students; he was still just one of a crowd. Yet since coming to live at G. F. E. and now at F. U. C., he has begun to feel, in rather a paranoid way—and one which causes him to warn himself about delusions of any kind, including those of grandeur—that he belongs in a story, that his fate is somehow wrapping him round, that he has little chance of escape from something that is infinitely bigger than his individual life. And for reasons he can't begin to fathom, Medulla seems an integral part of things cast in this light.

When he finally does get around to telling Medulla about what has happened to his father and his uncle, she doesn't appear to be at all distressed or even mildly apologetic about Theo's plight.

"Sometimes, organic products just reveal what's actually there, you know?" She says this quite assertively, yet at the same time with a lack of concern that exasperates Jason.

"Oh, stop it, you sound like some sort of old gypsy casting fortunes, or something!"

"Romany people are often very wise," she intones mysteriously.

"Well, just don't do *me* any chemical favors, okay? I've got enough on my plate dealing with day-to-day stuff, never mind the astral plane."

Medulla just smiles at him and pats him on the arm with forbearance and a certain measure of what he would swear is condescension.

The more he thinks about the strange qualities Medulla has shown gradually since the time he first met her, the more he feels the need to talk to someone more "normal," though he's not sure that's exactly the word he's looking for. He wonders to himself if he has enough experience of women really to know what's normal and what's too unusual to put up with, but he feels that he would like to consult with another person (not his mother or father, since he doesn't want to worry them, and not a psychologist, because he doesn't want to worry himself). Finally, he decides to go to his friend Anna Marie, who's known him for so long and who is *more* normal than the word "normal" itself: she wrote the book on the concept, he decides in grim jest to himself.

He goes to the daycare unit one day, at a time when he figures the children may be eating or having their afternoon naps, so that he can talk to her without attracting Medulla's attention to his presence there. The gods seem kind, seem to smile on his enterprise, because it's a free day for Anna Marie, the children having been taken with their respective parents on an outing. She blushes again to see him, so that he feels suddenly awkward; still, he knows he has no one else to discuss this with, so he sticks to his resolve.

"Anna Marie," he says, in a questioning tone.

"What's up, Jas? I certainly didn't expect to see you today. Don't worry about those reports. Just move them to another chair; I'm stuck doing book work today, but I could sure use a break."

He feels his way into the conversation slowly. "Well, it's delicate. It's about Medulla."

She looks at him with concern. "Is she ill? Have you two had a fight? I'm afraid I'm not much good with issues between adults. I mean, unless you're yelling 'And you're another one, bigger than I am,' or throwing green beans into each other's hair."

Ruefully, he grins. "Well, no, it's not gotten to that yet, though I can see that happening. And that's especially if she knows I've been talking to someone else about it." Upon the instant, he wants to be closer to his old friend, and he places his hands on her shoulders and plants a friendly kiss on her cheek. Her face turns several shades of pink darker than he's ever seen it before.

"Then," she asks with solemn intensity, "do you think you should be telling me?"

He waves a helpless hand. "I've no one else to talk to, Anna Marie. My mom and dad have enough worries; so does Magda; Theo is a screwball; and everyone else is too far outside my situation."

"Okay, what is it? I warn you, though, if I feel that you're being disloyal and getting me involved in something that's too big for friendly advice to handle, I'm going to tell you." Still, she redds again, and when he moves his chair closer to her in order to speak in a lower tone and takes her hand in his, she doesn't stop him.

Little by little, he goes through his doubts about Medulla with her, highlighting some of the odder things about their relationship and allowing this relation of facts (as dry as he can make them) to culminate in the "dye job caper," as he has begun to think of it privately. That Anna Marie is concerned to a greater and greater degree, he can clearly tell; what he can't be sure of is what her advice may be. She seems to be struck speechless, mainly by two things: the way Medulla treated her younger brother when he followed them as a stowaway, and the destructive job she did on Theo's hair.

"Maybe—well, you know, Jason—there are lots of women out there romanticizing female witchcraft these days. They think it's sexy, or liberating, or—something like that."

"Well, I can tolerate that idea to some extent: I mean, there's nothing wrong with being liberated, or sexy—she is kinda sexy with it, I guess—but there's too much of a good thing. And the problem is, I don't think it's exactly a good thing, in her case. I mean being seduced is swell, but worrying about what might appear in the soup at dinner if you don't toe the line is something else again. From my point of view, I mean."

"Yeah, I got that." She says this wryly, as if perhaps he had annoyed her with the mention of Medulla's sexual qualities and "come hither" style.

"So?" He looks at her, noticing how attractive she is, how healthy looking, color like a rosy red apple on her cheeks, and with a naturally tawny tone to her skin elsewhere. He finds himself speculating whether she suntans or wears makeup, but he doesn't see how she has time to be in the sun, being inside all day, and he perceives only the faintest touch of eye makeup on her lids and lashes. "Why," he asks himself, "did I not take all this into account before? Anna Marie is an intelligent, well-educated woman—within her area of specialty—and loving, and normal."

That word again.

They exchange an intimate glance, he looks at her intently again; then, almost without volition, he finds himself kissing her lips very gently, as if licking and caressing the outside of the glowing apple skin, smooth and shining as it is.

"Jason," she softly objects, "If you don't want to get in just the kind of trouble with Medulla that you're worried about, then I think before this goes any further, you ought to set things straight with her, however you want them to be. I don't want to get involved in hurting someone

else, moreover someone who seems to be inclined to deal out a rough justice of her own devising."

He looks deep into her eyes. He calculates whether he's just responding to Anna Marie's known warmth and friendliness, or whether he's truly had an epiphany about the kind of woman he wants in his life. He decides that fate has been kind to him to show him this side of an old friend, someone whom he can trust and delight in at the same time.

"Okay." He says. "But will you be free—I mean, are you already—involved? I hate to ask you to wait until I disentangle myself from her, but—"

Anna Marie pales, then blushes again, as if by a regular beacon signal like that of a lighthouse. "I'll wait for you," she says in a soft tone. Then as if driven to confession by this new kind of closeness, she says "After all, I use to—well, I mean when we were teenagers, I hoped—but you had other girls on your mind."

He sighs and hugs her. "I was an idiot. Okay, so I think the best thing I can do is wait for some day when she's busy elsewhere, and just move my stuff out, all of it. Do you have any storage space? I mean, I don't know how you feel about—I won't look to moving in, at least not right away. I think that would make her suspicious and angry. But I'll need some place to put my stuff, and from what I hear the individual storage units are full up."

"Yes, I have a little attic space up above my apartment, and it's still not anywhere near full. And—I don't mind you moving in eventually—" again the crimson cheeks—"but I think in order to avoid her anger, we ought to seem to be apart, at least at first. Maybe you'll need some alone time, too, to get reorganized in your thoughts. I'm not sexy or a witch," but she giggles.

"You may not be a witch, but you underestimate yourself otherwise," he states firmly and with affection. He kisses her again. Has it really all been this easy?

Upon the instant, just as they are moving apart, they hear a noise of someone stirring in the hall. Jason gets to the door as quickly as he can, but only sees a shadow of someone exiting from the long hallway back into the burning sun outside; the outside door slams to behind him or her, whoever it is. As he is standing there, Anna Marie dashes out behind him and stands, one anxious hand on his nearer forearm. She prods his arm gently. "Who was that? Was it my cousin Jan?"

"I don't know for sure. Whoever it was, they were very quiet in the hall—I guess they might have been...listening." He looks down at Anna Marie. It seems to him very odd that the idea should pass through his head, the idea that her essence is contained somehow in her brilliantly fluctuating complexion, as if she is some simple flower which opens in the morning and flushes in the bright sunshine, and then folds up into a soft, wilted paleness at evening, only to go through the same routine the next day. He sees, though, that if that's all she is, it might easily become routine to someone else, too, someone who might be led to take advantage of her; someone like him. This makes him determined to protect her from himself, somehow; maybe he can protect her from both Medulla and himself by keeping his distance for a while, as hard as that may prove to be, now that he's discovered her vulnerability to him and her difference from the overpowering and—from his current perspective—power-hungry Medulla.

They say their goodbyes for the time being, each offering insecure reassurances, she that she won't tell Jan or anyone else, he that he won't tell Medulla or anyone else. Then they part, Jason vowing that when the time is right, he'll let her know he needs to move his things in on the spur of the moment, she in her turn promising to be ready to receive him.

Later that same week though, Jan contacts Jason on the telephone while Medulla is in the living room watering the flowers in the planter boxes just outside the windows. It's an

uncomfortable conversation, because it turns out that it was Jan who overheard Jason and Anna Marie in their private conversation at the dayschool, and Jan is nothing if not an interfering gossip. It turns out that Jan has confronted his gentle cousin and gotten the rest of the story out of her. Trying to think of a way to say "Don't tell anyone what we've got planned, least of all Medulla" without taking the phone into the bedroom and thus being obvious, Jason finally settles for "I don't plan to make that offer for more land overt, Jan, and neither should you. I don't think it should be discussed with anyone until the final details are all arranged." He congratulates himself that he has been quite clear, and Jan hems and coughs and makes other embarrassed noises and then agrees with him, a further sign, he thinks, that things are copacetic.

Only then, of course, Medulla has overheard a weird conversation, and wonders what it's all about. She gets quiet and grave, looking at Jason carefully, a wrinkle between her eyebrows as she scowls at him. "What was that all about?" she asks. "I wasn't aware that you were in charge of any land acquisitions. I thought that was all done by special committee."

Jason thinks fast. "Well, this is just for Jan; a flower garden he wants. It really doesn't have to go through the committee. In fact, the committee might even be opposed to it if it were their decision," he finishes wildly, wondering if he will end up contradicting himself or exposing the lies he's telling, or if Medulla will just accept what he says at face value, for once.

She gives him a long, withering stare. She looks around the room. She looks at him again. Finally, she shrugs and says, "If you want to let Moran Jan Morgan be your master, that fool of an imbecile of a wretched dolt, then it's up to you. I just never would have thought it of you."

He leaves the room to go to get a shower; he's covered with sweat, and not just from the heat. "You've no idea what I have put up with in the way of a master or mistress," he mutters to himself as he leaves the room.

"What was that?" she asks, taken with curiosity at the crusty, irritated sound of his voice, not all of whose words she seems to have caught.

"Nothing; I'm getting a shower." Before she can ask again, Jason switches on the water full force and shuts and locks the door, throwing his clothes off and himself under the cooling spray in a fit of exasperation. Why does his life have to be so hard, all of a sudden? Another man would no doubt just confront the woman with her past misdeeds and tell her off, and say he was moving out. He would leave her to form her own conclusions about other women when and if she saw them together later. I can't do that because—because I'm afraid of her and her potions and physical prowess and stratagems and ruses and deceipts and—he stops. She *is* a witch, and not the good kind! Yes, he tells himself, there really is no such thing, at least there's no such thing as real magic. Yet Medulla has powers he can't explain, and to be afraid of her is only sensible. But he may still outthink her, may he not? As he soaps up, he tries to think of ways out of his problems, but unlike his body, his mind feels dry and parched.

* * *

Medulla waits. She is like an octopus in the way that her rage and sense of injury seethe around her, tentacles stroking through the water. She *will* get even with Jason and Anna Marie. And that dolt Jan, too, who seems to be favoring their relationship. So, she waits; she positions herself near the dumpsters where the recycling is kept. Shading her eyes with one hand, the rake for paper in her other, she peers at the door of the outbuilding where she expects to see Anna Marie and Jan exit in about five minutes. They are slow. But then, Medulla's patience has been long before now; she can afford to wait.

Did Jason really expect that no one would tell her what Jan had gossiped about to his own friends? Medulla has made friends of her own, after all, and in recent days it has seemed like a

sheer chorus of voices has risen around her informing her that Jason is drifting away from her and into the orbit of his childhood friend Anna Marie. So, Medulla has done the clever thing, the hard thing, and come up with a foolproof plan for punishing them. All she had to do was make sure that the next rotation day on the schedule when Anna Marie wasn't working at the dayschool came on the same day when she herself got to requisition help from the pool of workers for the attendance to her own "babies," her revamped recycling and compost programs; she let her own friends think that she just plans to "talk things out" with Anna Marie, and so skilled is she at her rhetoric that they believe her, and think that they can trust her, more, can trust the situation to work out well. Medulla has never gotten over being surprised at how malleable people become in response to an ingenious deceit. Yet for her, it has happened again.

In execution, her plan is simple, though in working out the details, she's been the complex thinker she usually is. If she can get Anna Marie and Jan to cut themselves on the extra sharp metal fragments she's taken in from an outside source—a contributory source which the cooperative members firmly vetoed before Medulla came along and persuaded them that if done carefully, accepting and being responsible for outside donations was a way to increase revenue—then her job will be done once at least: Medulla has taken care, late at night, under the full light of the moon but quite as silently as she was able, to tip those sharp edges from end to end with something which will, she knows, make her enemies think twice about annoying her, when it is too late. Of course, she doesn't plan for anyone to know it was deliberately done, which is at first a bit of a drawback; but then, maybe the two wrongdoers themselves will suspect. Suspect that it's bad luck to cross her certainly, if nothing else. For Medulla doesn't plan to stay around and haggle about responsibilities after the deed is done.

And just in case they don't manage to cut themselves handling the many sharp edges, she has poisoned the compost with something that will cause serious burning and irritability to the skin; at that point, she may herself pretend to be clumsy, and stick a surreptitious foot out to trip up Anna Marie at least, carefully apologizing all the while. If nothing else, she can always double cross Jan on the invoices for the recycling later. It won't be as satisfying as getting them both in trouble bodily, but she's willing to make do with whatever havoc she can wreak and still get away, perhaps to tour the Aegean islands she's always wanted to see. A little invisibility for a while never hurt any plans or schemes of hers.

* * *

"So, what are we going to do? With Jan out of the running, we're going to have to elect a new head selectman or something. We'll need representation at the bi-yearly review board, you know, that committee thing he participates in to make sure we keep our license."

"Well, maybe we can just have a selectman's meeting and elect a new head, instead of broadcasting our hard luck abroad by involving the whole community."

"The whole community is already involved, anyway. And what's worse, there are some really peculiar rumors flying around about what happened to him. Stuff like, oh, I don't know, AIDS syringes in the recycling, bee swarms in the compost, stuff like that."

"So what exactly did happen, anyway? I never really got that straight."

"Jan said he cut himself on some old metal. His cuts got infected, and now he's in danger."

"In danger of what? I mean, losing his life, or what?"

"I'm not sure. All I know is that the last time I went to see him, he was in the ICU, and they would only let me talk to him for a minute."

"And Anna Marie?"

"She's sicker than he is, if anything, though she's not in the ICU unit. She tripped and fell in the compost, and got burns all over her body. But the doctors placed her in the psych ward because she was so overwrought that she was making herself sicker. She kept blaming Meddie for what happened and saying she must've done it deliberately. She's come out with some garbled story about Meddie regularly poisoning people and hurting Jason, and all sorts of stuff. It seems that she's really delusional. Her whole family is wealthy, so they were able to pay specialists and the hospital to set her up in a special room in the psych ward where she can also be treated for burns. The last I knew, she kept trying to rip her bandages off and show people what Meddie had supposedly done."

"Well—what was in the compost anyway that caused her to have burns? I've tromped all around in it on my days to work it, and got it on my hands, and never had a burn."

"We've had it tested, but so far all they've found is some unknown but apparently organic materials. In a way, I guess, it is Meddie's fault, because something must've been wrong with the way she was storing the compost or mixing it or something, or it couldn't have happened. And as to the use of outside imported recycling, that motion was carried only over some fierce objections when it went through committee. She was in charge of both."

"Well, maybe, but I think it's more Jan's fault and the committee's, though I hate to say it, for entrusting a relative newcomer with nearly full management of those two rather essential components of our work. She just came in with papers which supported her claims to have been raised in an alternative community like ours, and she seemed to take to it like the proverbial duck to water, so everyone gave her a lot of authority. I know conservatism is politically wicked, but I do think we could have benefited here from being a little more conservative in our enthusiasms."

"Yeah, I agree. And meanwhile, everything's in a state of total disorder. Jason is mooning around not doing any profitable work and dividing his time between his apartment and the hospital. He and Anna Marie are apparently old friends, but his enthusiasm for her company seems to be waning. Instead, he seems to be obsessed with tracking down Meddie, because even he doesn't know exactly where she went when she left. But she left in one swell car, I can tell you that: it was a Skywarrior 400, one of those new racing models with all the room in the trunk. She was certainly encumbered with a lot of stuff when she left; it was in a trailer, what she couldn't fit into the car. Who knew that it was possible to get a trailer hitch for a sports car? I saw her loading it up; there was nearly enough room for a couple of dead bodies in there!"

"God, you're morbid! Yeah, I heard that Meddie left her former cooperative as her mailing address, but when someone tried to reach her there to settle a few incidental expenses remaining from her share of the apartment rent, all they got was her stepfather."

"Did he remit the money?"

"He did, but not without a lot of complaining."

"Well, I guess we're well shut of the whole experience. Let Jason go away wherever he wants, the guy's bad luck to us. And we can certainly do without Meddie's apparent incompetence. Let Jason chase her for the rest of his life if he wants to: they deserve each other."

* * *

I should've known better—but how? I go over this again and again in my mind; how was I supposed to know that Medulla would turn out the way she did? And it was no good to follow her to Athens: after all this time, she's been thrown out by her ex-husband there for trying to get him to disinherit his son in favor of hers. I've grown old watching her exploits from across the

world. I ask myself why I haven't gone on with my own life; after all, she's not only been away from me since we broke up at Fitztown (though it was more like a death than a breakup, with what happened to Anna Marie). If Anna Marie had made it, maybe I would've repaired the mistakes of my life and gone on. But with Anna Marie now firmly put away, what else is there to do? I can't seem to get past it all. And it doesn't help that Medulla keeps track of me in a funny sort of way by sending me snail mail about where she is and what she's doing. I guess it's her way of being triumphant, but there's some poisonous quality about her messages that really disturbs my sleep (as usual, why didn't I see it from the beginning?). Here am I, an old man living now in my father's former house, and still unable to shake the memory of the witching of my life. But probably that's melodramatic. The weird thing is, some Greek prince of industry or something (according at least to Medulla's self-adulating "memoirs") tried to get it on with her, and she refused. And this was already when she was at loose ends after breaking up with her ex. She says (though I find this a little hard to believe: most women hate her) that the magnate's wife was so grateful that she put Medulla in a collection of "Women of the World" snapshots she was taking for her hobby, to get it published as a who's who book in Greece. I guess if it's true (or even has a remote element of truth, sometimes the most one can hope for from Medulla) I'll know soon enough: Medulla promises to send me a copy. She's apparently living somewhere in Asia now, though I can't quite make out the address—maybe when she dies she'll finally be happy in hell; just her sort of place. I can't think why she keeps writing me—after all, she can't even be sure I'm still here, or still alive; I never answer her. But then, I never mark "Return to Sender" on her letters either, or turn them away at the post office.

Man, it looks like it's going to rain. It's been looking sulky and lowering all morning, which probably has helped bring on my bad mood. I should weed around the trees and bushes in the front yard before it gets any darker—we need the rain, but I don't like how it looks outside.

Jason bent down at the base of the big tree in the front yard, but at first, his mind wasn't on his weeding. His mind as he sat back on his haunches, meditatively clutching a fist-full of green clumps and holding the weeder in his other hand, was on a time long ago, when his family had discovered him dancing in the front yard, and had made fun of him. Where had gone his love of storms and sky descants to the falling rain? He'd always loved to see the skies angry, and now as he applied the weeder and then used his hand to pull up the stubborn stalks that were too far nestled up in the gigantic tree's roots to get without scraping the wood with the weeder's blades, he heard the sway of branches in the wind as the wind lifted. There was a grumble of thunder, but for some reason he felt threatened and apprehensive at this sound; probably, he thought, he was just out-of-sorts at Medulla's letter. Why he read and kept them, he couldn't say—it was some sort of compulsion.

Abruptly, he saw a bright whitish-blue streak of light between him and the fence to the right side of the yard, and then heard a crack of thunder just after it; the thunder continued to rumble and looking up at the sky, he saw black clouds scuttling and settling around the whole neighborhood in every direction. On the next flash of lightning, the front and second pickets of the fence jumped up into the air and splintered into thousands of little toothpicks; one of them hit him just under the right eye, and he dropped the weeder and reached for his face. There was blood on his cheek. Dropping the grass fragments he held in his left hand, he half-rose, getting ready to huddle over and dart for the house in the already pummeling rain. Just as he stood,

bowed over and preparing to run, he heard a blast high overhead, mingled in his mind indistinguishably with a skyburst of light, and he looked up with instinctive awe.

What was that up there? No, I think it's a limb, one of the big—it's falling—I—