THE BROKEN HOUSE

A Thesis
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In Partial Fulfillment
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Master of Arts

by
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Date
In my novella, set in 1980, three major characters appear. Most of the action is centered around Margaret and Cedric, the two main characters, and Margaret's sister Elizabeth, a third important character.

I have attempted to explore how people get along--relate to one another--when social rules, especially those that govern the actions and expectations in the most basic relationships between men and women, are in transition.

In the realistic tradition of other contemporary authors, my work registers the hard sense of everyday reality, to show people at critical moments in their lives, and to suggest deeper, even elusive themes. I have also tried to show how individuals create their own reality, by attaching their associated memories, emotions, and attitudes to the everyday objects and actions of the physical world.

Thematically, this work suggests a world in transition: the place--both the city and the house--the characters, and their culture, are all in flux.

The major themes, first of loss and death, and second of rebirth or regeneration, in combination represent the cyclical nature of life. Repeated use of
natural images result, I hope, in cumulative effects which illuminate the overall themes in the novel and provide for the reader an emotional and intellectual response which is satisfying on many levels.

Accepted by: Michelle Bassano, Chair
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When the student is ready the teacher will come. Margaret's teacher appeared one warm March night in a bar, where she had gone to get drunk, to escape the exhilaration, a general joyousness in which she could not partake. She felt the sweet night air, saw people milling and laughing on the streets, heard the traffic, music pulsing out of car windows, convertible tops down.

She had to get her mind off the bright clouded moon, to still her heart, thumping, straining, pumping dizzying aerated blood to her brain. It was spring. Her sap was rising. Had she been in a forest she could have flung herself on the mossy ground and let the cool earth calm her. As it was, she was in the city and everywhere were cars and lights and people moving and laughing and shouting, feeling the night, the unexpected early warmth, the soft air, a lingering touch of pure winter cold.

She went to a bar where she could get drunk cheap and wouldn't have to talk to anybody if she didn't feel like it. Especially not somebody with a story to tell. A barterider herself, Margaret's past three months had been a swirl of regret and desire and disappointment. But day after day and night after night she kept going, trying to
work so hard she couldn't think, couldn't feel. Yet he was always there, behind the kaleidoscope of faces and voices, dimly heard over the uproar in her head. And like the TV in the corner of the bar that was never turned off, they blathered on and on, telling her about their lives, and miseries, as if she cared, as if she could stand anymore, as if any of it mattered.

She had to get drunk. There was no help for it. The bartender shuddered as he poured her drink—schnapps topped with 101 proof bourbon and a Heineken on the side. She gave him a big tip and let him think she was a madwoman. She went to a little patio out back, where she could drink alone in silence, and think, with her back against a spindly tree which grew out of the concrete. Sam, Sam, Sam. She drank to Sam. In honor of their anniversary. Today was the day, she realized with a start, that marked the period of their breakup being equal to the amount of time they were together. Three months. Three months they were together and now three months they weren't together anymore. Her whole life before that, twenty-three years, they weren't together, but then she hadn't felt like anything was missing. Maybe something abstract. But now, still, even though she told herself it was silly to keep dwelling on this obviously lost cause, pathetic to have been counting the days to know that today marked their equinox, she felt his absence keenly, physically, much more so than she remembered his presence.
She pulled on her skunky Heineken and sipped the schnapps and bourbon. As the liquor worked its way into her head, she leaned against the tree, feeling more relaxed, less anxious, and surveyed the few people outside with her. Two couples sat at a table, both men talking, both girls trying to look pretty and composed while downing freely offered foo-foo drinks, the kind with pineapples and cherries sticking out of them: God only knew how long that piña colada mix had been sitting around, she thought with a bartender's sense of professional propriety.

A small dark man sat alone in a corner, nearly sunk into the stone bench by the fence where he sat. He met her gaze, looked into her eyes with interest, as though he were reading a sign. She gave him a thin unfriendly smile and looked away; she sat with her back to the tree, with her back to him.

She sipped her drink and listened to the muffled sounds coming from the bar. The two couples were getting silly, the boys boasting about how drunk they had been the night before and how much one of them had puked before he passed out; the girls were giggling and clutching at each other.

The band took a break and a swarm of bodies invaded the patio, music blared through loudspeakers. The man in the corner seemed to disappear into the shadows behind him. Margaret's tree was soon surrounded so she went inside for another drink, which took a while. She stood at the bar waiting for someone to notice her; the man from outside appeared next to her. She smiled at him, warmly this time, and he
asked her quietly, "How're you doing?" and she answered "Fine." They got their drinks and returned to the patio. He sat down under the tree with her. "Do you mind?" he asked.

She said, "Help yourself." She kind of felt like talking. People were wandering in and out of the bar as though they couldn't decide what to do with themselves, as though they couldn't stand still. The band started up again and the blaring electronic sounds being piped outside stopped abruptly. "Whew," she said, "that's a relief." The patio emptied except for Margaret and the man.

His name was Cedric Asher and he was staying in town with some friends. He hadn't formed any major opinions about the place; he said he was just passing through.

"One of the best pieces of graffiti I ever saw was on the bathroom wall at a gas station in Corbin, Kentucky," she told him. "The first line said 'Just Married' and had some names and dates. The second line said, 'Just friends,' more names and dates, and the third line said, 'just passing through!!!,' no names, no dates."

He said the best piece of graffiti he ever saw was "I like grils," and under that someone had written "you mean girls" and under that someone else had written "what about us grils?"  

When the bar closed they ate breakfast at a coffee and eggs dump and she offered him a ride home. His eyelids drooped heavily, he looked tired. "I'll just walk,
thanks anyway,” he said, and gave her his phone number. “Give me a call sometime.

Maybe we can go someplace quiet and have a drink.”

"Sure," she said, "I will."

By the next week, winter had returned vicious as a slap in the face; Margaret worked very hard at the bar, and when she was off she felt no compulsion to go outside and live a full life, but slept through cold drizzly days warm in her long narrow attic room in her sister’s house, content to watch the gray rain and sleep.

Then she was off work for two days in a row and the rain had not stopped. She couldn’t sleep anymore, she couldn’t read anymore, she was getting bored and depressed; she kind of felt like talking to someone. It was nearly 10 o’clock and everyone else in the house, Margaret’s sister Elizabeth and her two daughters, had already gone to bed. She called the number Cedric Asher had written on a cigarette pack and a woman answered the phone.

Great, thought Margaret, but said, "Is Cedric Asher there?"

"Sure, just a second,” the woman answered, then in a teasing, sing-songy voice called “It’s for you-u.”

"This is Cedric,” came his voice through the receiver.

Margaret cleared her throat, suddenly panicked. “This is Margaret Moore. I don’t know if you remember me . . .”
"Sure," he said. "How’re you doing?"

"Fine, thanks. I hope I’m not calling too late . . ."

"Too late for what?" he asked.

She laughed. "Too late for normal people. I hope I didn’t disturb anyone." She hated talking on the telephone.

"There aren’t any normal people here," he assured her. "Everyone here is disturbed already." She could hear the woman and a man talking in the background.

"Really," he said, "we’re just sitting around trying to get warm."

"I just wondered if you might like to go have a drink with me."

"Sure," he said, "why not?" He gave her directions to the house where he was staying. She hung up gratefully. Her pulse was beating rapidly, and her hand felt clammy clutching the phone.

He was waiting for her inside the front door and ran out through the light cold rain when she pulled up in front of the house. She wondered why she had called him and not one of the people she saw regularly. Maybe that was it, she thought, he was somebody new, somebody different. He shivered slightly as he settled onto the seat beside her, looking monkish in a hooded gray sweatshirt beneath a wool peacoat. The car was half-heartedly warming up, but the damp chill was hard to shake.

"It’s fucking cold out here," he said.
"It's dogwood winter," she said, and he nodded. Margaret drove them to a quiet place she knew, where they could drink and talk. On a cold rainy Tuesday night like this the place would probably be deserted. They sat at the bar while the girl who worked there watched TV and got up to fix them drinks whenever they asked her. They talked steadily for two and a-half hours and he never once got personal with her. He never once made a sexually suggestive comment to her, he never tried to grope her, but once he stroked a callous on her forefinger, and asked how she got it. "From opening beer bottles," she said, and laughed.

He knew all the natural laws and technical names for things. He didn't live anywhere in particular and didn't do anything in particular, but he didn't seem to her one of those lost confused types. He was calm and self-contained, and she liked him very much.

He told her he had lived on the river, that he and his father and his father before him had attended one of the locks which allowed boats to pass through the dammed river, but that the Army Corps of Engineers had abandoned the locks, and the state had declined to assume responsibility for their operation and upkeep, and so the locks were closed.

"What do you do for a living?" she asked.

He pulled a small crumpled classified ad out of his pocket; it read "Ideal Man will show you how to fix everything in your house. $50 includes tools." The ad listed
the same number he had written on the cigarette pack, the number she had called earlier.

Margaret had seen the ad in the paper the week before, and thought it was funny. They had talked about it at work, the concept of an Ideal Man who takes care of everything then leaves.

"You’re the Ideal Man?" she asked. "Do you work on people’s houses?"

“That Ideal Man business is just a scam,” he said.

Margaret was disappointed, “Then you don’t really work on people’s houses?”

Asher replied smoothly that he did not indeed work on people’s houses, but instead showed them how everything worked and where everything was, like the fuse box and the main water valve.

Margaret explained to him that their house, her sister’s house, where she lived, was in a state of disrepair, that her sister and her husband were trying to renovate, but that her sister’s husband had died, and Elizabeth hadn’t been able to get the work finished.

“I can understand your dilemma,” Cedric replied. “Maybe I could come over and take a look and maybe make some suggestions that might help you out.”

“I’ll see what my sister thinks about it and let you know.”

The bartender wanted to close up so they paid and left, taking a 6-pack of beer with them. As she drove in the general direction of his house, the rain started up
again, cold grey sheets that pricked like spikes. He directed her to a big empty parking lot next to a church and they sat there drinking beer and watching the rain until the windows fogged up. Once he looked at her like he was going to say something, and once he seemed like he might be going to touch her, but he didn’t and she was glad. She started the car to let it warm up, and took him home.

The next day Margaret asked Elizabeth what she thought about having someone in to work on the house. “I just hate the thought,” Elizabeth said. She had hired someone once who charged a lot of money and left the place in a mess and was simply annoying and didn’t do things the way she wanted them done. With the trim half painted and the windows half caulked, he left to take another job. Margaret and Elizabeth had finished, climbing on a high ladder that swayed against the eaves and wobbled when they climbed up. Margaret hated that, but she did it.

. Elizabeth and her late husband, Neil, had bought the house fairly cheap. It was an older home in a nice neighborhood, but it needed some work. Neil had all kinds of ideas about innovative things to do to the house. Consequently, every project was major, and where Elizabeth just wanted to paint and put up wallpaper, he had knocked out walls, or ripped up the flooring, or taken down the woodwork to refinish it. After Neil died, the disorder nearly made Elizabeth crazy; but she finally got used to it.
Neil had left most of his assets in trust to their two daughters, with an attorney as executor. The amount of monthly income which Elizabeth received from Social Security was enough to pay the mortgage and live modestly, but did not leave enough for the kind of work the house needed. Elizabeth thought about selling the house, but found that interest rates were so high, and her income so limited, that she would not have been eligible for a mortgage, and could not have afforded the payments. She did not want to take her daughters out of the schools they had attended all their lives, and move them to an apartment from a house which at least offered them a yard to play in and a neighborhood to be part of. They stayed.

Elizabeth knew she needed to get the house business settled, and was considering asking Larry, the lawyer, to free up some money to just fix everything, but the thought of going to him as if asking for a loan was distasteful to her. He was nice enough, but he was nothing if not patronizing, and she always felt as though he wanted to go to bed with her. She thought of hiring her own lawyer, then realized with some discomfort that Larry was supposed to be her lawyer.

Also, she hated the thought of having someone in her house, wanting her to make decisions about things she knew nothing about, wanting the decisions made immediately, spending money she could not afford for work which was not satisfactory. And there was the disorder.
Margaret went on talking about Cedric. "He's a nice guy. I don't know if he
knows anything about this kind of stuff," she indicated the wiring overhead, "but I
think he would tell us if he didn't."

"Ideal Man," Elizabeth mumbled. She was busy collecting laundry and
Margaret followed her from room to room, occasionally picking up a dropped sock,
and opening the laundry chute when she had an armload to drop in.

"He said he would come over and just look," Margaret said.

"How well do you know this guy?" Elizabeth asked. Margaret was way too
open about some things. The man could be a murderer or a pervert and Margaret
would tell him where they lived and that there was no man there and that there were
two little girls he could rape and murder as well. Margaret had no sense sometimes.

"I've talked to him a couple of times," she said. "He was nice." Margaret
shrugged, not that Elizabeth could see her, as she followed her down the stairs to the
washer and dryer in the basement. They sorted clothes and started a load. Margaret
emptied the dryer into a basket and they went back upstairs. The basement was dark
and damp, creepy, except where the washer and dryer stood, next to a door with three
steps leading up to the ground, and a window to see out.

"Okay," Elizabeth agreed reluctantly. She still didn't want the intrusion. "We'll
see."
Margaret called Cedric, but he was not there. She felt oddly disappointed. She left a message for him, somehow doubting that he would call back. But he did, and she invited him over.

At ten o’clock the next morning, Asher walked up the tree-lined street where Margaret and Elizabeth lived. Jonquils and forsythia, dogwoods and lilacs were blooming, trees were in bud, and the sun warmed and shone stronger every day. He breathed deeply and held his face toward the sun, shutting his eyes to feel its gentle energizing effect.

Elizabeth thought it odd that he had arrived on foot rather than in the ubiquitous handy-guy pickup truck. She watched through long windows on either side of the door as he mounted the steps and quietly wiped his feet on the doormat. He knocked, and she opened the door.

"Hello," she said through the screen, still latched. "You must be Cedric."

"Hello," he said, his voice soft and low.

There was a sort of smallness about him, a stillness that Elizabeth found somehow comforting. She was expecting and half-dreading someone who would come into her house creating a bunch of commotion, big loud movements and noises. She smiled at him, a quick pink streak, quickly over. "Margaret is upstairs, she’ll be down in a minute. Won’t you come in?" Margaret, who seemed at all times completely
unaware of any impression she might happen to make, would have met him in her robe, but Elizabeth had asked her to go upstairs and dress.

For his part, Cedric observed the woman who was now welcoming him—with no little reserve—into her home. She did not much resemble Margaret, except that their faces were shaped the same and their height was almost equal. Margaret was robust and noisy. Elizabeth had a delicacy about her. Her hands on the door frame were slender and fine, where Margaret’s were big and square and strong; Elizabeth’s hair was light and straight to her shoulders, Margaret’s was ale-brown and wavy, and it swirled around her head like a cloud. Elizabeth’s face was oval and wide, with a pointed nose and high cheekbones, Margaret’s was the same, but where Margaret’s skin was coppery and freckled, Elizabeth’s was pale and even.

She opened the door for him, and he entered the house, seeing the living room with a stairway going up the left side, a nice hearth straight ahead, and a dining room with a porch off to the right. Hardwood floors, ten-foot ceilings, and plenty of large windows.

"Would you like some coffee?" she asked.

"That would be nice," he said.

She led him through the sunny dining room to a yellow kitchen with a truly awful linoleum floor and all the pipes exposed. He whistled. She nodded. She didn’t want to start talking about the house. Not yet. She handed him a mug of coffee and
directed him to the dining room. Margaret bounded into the room, dressed in jeans and a sweater, the only thing she ever wore besides her work clothes.

"Hey old girl," he greeted her.

"Hi," she fairly beamed. "I see you two have met." Margaret got some fresh coffee and started an inventory of things they wanted him to look at. She stopped abruptly. "Hey," she said, "where's our tool box?"

"Where's my fifty bucks?" he said.

Margaret stuck her tongue out at him, while Elizabeth watched in some amazement. These two acted like they had known each other all their lives. She was glad. Margaret didn't seem to meet many people she actually liked. They seemed to always disappoint her, sooner or later.

Cedric came to work at Elizabeth's house, on retainer between other jobs that paid more or could be finished quickly. Elizabeth paid him $5 an hour, and he did whatever he found that needed doing that he could do. If he needed tools or supplies he told Elizabeth and she went and got them, or together they went.

"I like this town," he told her one day as they drove to the hardware store.

"It's pretty and the people are nice enough."

"Maybe," Elizabeth said. "It's getting awfully busy, though."

"I might spend the summer here, if I can find a place to live."
“What’s wrong with where you’re living now?” she asked.

“That wasn’t meant to be permanent,” he said.

“It must get pretty tiresome, moving around all the time,” she said.

“Not really,” he said. “I need to make some money though, for the road.”

Elizabeth moved from the refrigerator to the sink to the stove. She peeled vegetables and cut them on a wooden board, she dropped macaroni shells into a pot of boiling water and checked the time. Asher was on a ladder, smoothing spackling paste into cracks and nailholes in the wall. He had put up drywall to cover the pipes Elizabeth’s late husband Neil had exposed with a sledgehammer, lest she be tempted to wallpaper or paint a wall he had plans for.

Cedric’s talent, if it could be called that, was in doing the least possible amount of work, with the least possible expenditure, to achieve an acceptable product. It was a kind of economy, really. So rather than attempting to carry out Neil’s plan for completely remodeling the kitchen, including relocating lighting and appliances, he simply covered up the holes and put on some new paint. Elizabeth was actually quite pleased, and was even now deciding what kind of window treatment might be nice, and thinking of refinishing the cabinets.

“You sure spend a lot of time in here,” he said.
"I always fix dinner right after lunch," she said. "It’s something I started doing when the girls were small. This way, all I have to do is pop dinner in the oven and so I have some time to spend with them when they come in from school. It’s really just too hectic around here otherwise."

“You’re a good cook.”

She shrugged. "Might as well be good at something."

"A lot of people can’t cook, you know," he told her.

"A lot of people have other things to occupy them. I don’t. I cook and keep house. Period."

"You’ve raised your girls, too,"

"Yes, well, that was hit or miss. I suppose I’ve been lucky."

"They’ve turned out pretty good," he said.

She drained the noodles and dumped them into a big bowl with the vegetables. She put a lid on it and stuck it in the refrigerator. "There," she said, and started cleaning up.

Asher moved the ladder and began working on another patch of wall. "What happened to your old man?" he asked her.

Elizabeth looked at him sideways, quickly, then away. "He died," she said.

"I know that, I’m sorry. I mean how did he die?"

Elizabeth faced him. "He was out jogging. He had a heart attack and he died."
"He must have been very young."

"Yes, he was very young." She remembered vividly the phone call, that stranger's voice, telling her her husband was at the hospital, that she must come. The frantic haste to dress, to find someone to watch her girls. Then her arrival. Too late, they said, he expired. Expired.

"Xanthine oxidase," Asher said.

"What?" Elizabeth cleared her head.

"It's produced by homogenizing milk. It's the stuff that clogs your arteries up."

Elizabeth imagined her dead husband's arteries, choked with milk, his accelerated heart pumping, churning, finally exploding as he collapsed sweating on someone's grassy lawn. Her eyes squeezed shut as tears flowed freely from their corners.

Oh, God, Asher thought, I didn't mean to make her cry. He climbed off the ladder and went to her, holding her against him and letting her cry against his shoulder like a child. He stroked her hair and made soft soothing sounds to her. "It's all right. It's all right."

"I'd never thought of him before," she said, and went into a fresh fit of sobbing. "I'd never thought of him dying, missing our lives. His life," she choked. Asher wiped her face with the tail of his damp shirt. "I've always blamed him for dying and leaving us alone."
Asher led her into the living room. "You can tell me anything you want to," he said.

She told him of her isolation, her fear. Her children had needed her, she said. They were so young, so helpless. How could she sink herself in grief when those two little girls who needed her so had already lost their daddy. "They didn't understand why he didn't come back. They kept asking 'Where's Daddy? When's Daddy coming home? I want Daddy.' And I had no answers for them. I could only love them and take care of them. Finally they stopped asking."

"Do you ever talk about him, to them?" Cedric asked.

"No. I'm afraid I'd fall apart. It would upset them to see me like that, like I was just now."

"They must be curious, though."

"Well, they've spent some time with his parents. I'm sure they've talked about him.

"Have you got any pictures?"

Elizabeth's cloudy gray eyes opened slowly. "Of course," she said quietly. She had never talked about Neil's death with anyone. For a time, she had cried softly in her bed, sometimes she would wake up crying, but she had never told anyone how she felt. She hardly knew Cedric Asher, yet she had told him everything. No one had asked before.
She went into her room and got a box out of the closet. There were plenty of pictures, the usual family album stuff. Elizabeth picked through them, telling Asher the story of each, recalling her life with Neil. Laughing at times, seeing a forgotten comic photograph, she reminisced dry-eyed.

"Is this you?" Cedric asked, and showed Elizabeth the square black-and-white photo he held.

She nodded. "And that's Margaret," she said, pointing to an infant swathed in satiny quilted bunting propped on a couch, with a lanky 10-year-old Elizabeth trying to hug the tiny bundle.

"Look at this one," Elizabeth said, and showed him a family portrait taken at her wedding.

"God, she was crazy already then," he said, looking at Margaret standing stiffly, staring severely to the right, like some Byzantine icon looking for God just outside the photo frame, bizarrely attentive to something no one else could see.

"She read in some magazine that a good photographer never has his subjects look directly into the camera, so that for a while there just about every picture of her looks like that," Elizabeth said. "This is nice. There is so much I've forgotten." At last she put the pictures away, but she didn't hide them in the closet. "I should get a book," she said, "and the girls and I can make a project of it." She and Asher smiled happily at each other, and went back into the kitchen.
"I didn't get the kitchen painted," he said, looking at the spackled walls and the abandoned ladder. He hadn't even opened the paint can.

"Tomorrow," she said, and he cleaned up his mess and went home.

Their whole lives were in that box, or so Cedric thought, walking away from the house. He mourned briefly that no one, no where, had kept any such evidence of his passage on earth.

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Margaret was lean and muscular from her job: running, reaching, scooping, pouring, lifting cases of liquor and kegs of beer, and the heaviest thing of all, the trash can in the corner of the bar, that held a whole Saturday night's worth of beer bottles, cigarette butts, soggy napkins, swizzle sticks, and other trash. She had to stand on tiptoes to get the right leverage to get it out of there, and so she had become tough and strong. Steve, the head bartender said she was like another guy loping around back there; he wanted a lady behind the bar, someone to charm the customers, someone who looked more feminine than Margaret.

But she was more delicate, than she looked. The men she met seemed to expect her to be able to take anything they dished out. They seemed to think because of her size and her strength that she was like them, and would not cry or worry if they said they would call and didn't. To tell the truth, she hadn't had much experience with
men, or boys, for that matter. She wasn't the kind of girl a high school boy wanted to date. She was a little bit of a put-down artist; she had embarrassed too many of them in public to be a safe date.

There was one guy she met in high school, although he was already out. To her he seemed old at the time, although he was only twenty-two. He was in the Navy, and had seen a lot of the world. She sat with him at the drive-in once when he was home on leave, while her best friend had sex with his cousin. She was uneasy, not knowing what he expected of her, but he didn't do anything. He was very nice and polite and her friend apologized later, saying she was sorry to have left her alone with that greaser, but he wasn't a greaser. He kissed her once after they had been in the car for about an hour, talking and making jokes about the movie. She really felt something, as she wasn't really accustomed to that much real kissing. He had put his arm around her and said something to make her look at him, and then he just leaned over to her. It wasn't bad. It was nice. He nuzzled her face after that, and then his cousin showed up and said her friend wanted to leave.

She didn't see him again until three years later, after she started college, and was home for a long boring summer. The only friends of hers who were home were married, and now when she tried to pass the time as before, riding around, going to the drive-in, hanging out, she didn't even know most of the kids out cruising, and the
ones she did know had been doing that same thing all along. There was a whole gang of them, lost boys who never grew up, some of them thirty years old, and still running around with high school kids, drinking beer and driving fast. She didn't want to be one of them.

One day she was taking a short cut home through a parking lot and at the loading dock of a wholesale grocery company, she saw Darrell throwing big sacks into the back of an old black pickup. He was out of the Navy and about twenty-five by then. He looked really good. He was dark and his unbuttoned shirt was flapping in the breeze. She walked over to the truck and said hello to him. He stopped what he was doing and just looked at her for a minute, and she thought she would die of embarrassment. He didn't even remember who she was, and she had thought about that kiss so many times. It didn't mean anything to him. But then he said, "Hello, Margaret, right?" And she nodded. He climbed down onto the tail gate and sat there talking to her. His eyes showed up very blue in his tanned face, and he still joked and laughed a lot. He was helping his cousin with his tobacco crop and living in an old one-room schoolhouse out in the middle of nowhere. He told her how to get there and invited her to come and see him anytime. She thought he probably did not mean it, but was just being polite. She told him she would try to get out there sometime, things being as dull around as they were. Then she thought about how that sounded, and she felt awkward again, but he just laughed.
In a week or so she really had reached the limit of how much boredom she could endure. Her mother was not just getting on her nerves, she was driving her crazy, badgering her about what she was going to do with Her Life, and her dad had long ago zoned out when he was home, so that he was barely even there. She remembered Darrell in the back of that old black pickup and all of a sudden visiting him seemed like a real good idea. It was getting late in the day when she decided to try to find him, and she was not all that familiar with the part of the county where he said he was living. Besides, she thought, he’s probably got somebody with him, but she took a test drive in the direction he had said, just to try to get her bearings. She drove for seventeen miles before she found the first turn, and it had grown dark, so she decided not to take the road, but to go back home and try again the next day.

She thought about him that night, about the kiss he had given her when she was a junior in high school, at the drive-in, how he looked with his tanned face and those laughing blue eyes. Early the next afternoon she got a county road map from the library, the kind the highway department puts out, with even one-lane dirt roads drawn in. She felt better after she got back in her car, like a tourist in her own home town, looking at the map for Cedar Valley, where he said the school house was. She wondered if there would be running water at a place like that, or a refrigerator. She packed a cooler, and told her parents she was going camping. She may have been, after all.
As she drove slowly on the twisting roads, she felt excitement welling up inside her, mixed with a kind of nauseous uncertainty. So many things could go wrong. He could be there with someone. Maybe he hadn't really meant his invitation to visit anytime. He could be there with a bunch of really rowdy guys and she could be in a world of hurt—he had a reputation for being a little wild, but she didn’t think he would let anything bad happen to her. He might not be there at all. He might have just been staying there for a day or two, and then left, and she would be out in the middle of nowhere alone. Shut up, she told herself, and felt her organs fluttering inside her, anticipating she didn’t know what. Twice she stopped for directions, once at a country store, and once when she saw an old man at the ford of a creek, just to make sure she was going the right way.

Gravel roads gave way to dirt, and her little car continued over a low water bridge around a sweeping bend in the road and there in a clearing sat a square sandstone schoolhouse, glittering in the white July sunlight. In a small neat garden grew tomatoes and squash, beans and corn. Margaret pulled in next to the little building, admiring its simplicity and its large windows, thinking this must be the right place, but seeing no sign of anyone. An outhouse stood behind the building and beyond that was a barn near a stand of trees at the edge of the clearing. She got out of her car and stood close by for a moment. “Darrell?” she called, half-hoping he wasn’t there so she could leave, without anyone ever knowing how foolish she was. She
peeked in one of the large windows on the side of the building, and she could see through to the other side. If she angled her view just right, she could see shadowed between shafts of sunlight a bed built like a bunk into a corner, a table with a water jug and dishes near the front door, a woodstove in the center of the room, and a cow skull--she thought it was a cow skull--hanging like one of those parched desert paintings on the wall. She was enchanted by the sight, and was no longer quite so encouraged to leave. She took a cold drink out of the cooler in the trunk of her car and sat on the shady front step to wait. He could be in town, she thought, since that was, after all, where she had seen him. He could be at his cousin’s, helping with the tobacco crop. He could be a lot of places, and if he didn’t come back by six o’clock she would leave, and have plenty of time to get back to the main road before dark.

She saw a cloud of dust rising before she heard the truck, and suddenly she was panicking again. What if it wasn’t even him? She got into her car just in case, but the black pickup pulled in behind her and she saw Darrell’s puzzled face in her rear view mirror. She got out of her car and waved at him, and he smiled broadly when he saw who it was. "So you made it after all," he said, getting out of the truck. "Town’s pretty dead, I guess."

"Hey, come on," she said. "I never meant that."
"I know, I'm just picking on you," he said, and she noticed for the first time that he was really red and sweaty looking. "I was helping some fellows build a barn," he said.

"It's pretty hot," she said.

"It's damn hot," he said. "You want to go for a swim?"

She looked around. "You mean here?" she asked.

He laughed. "Come on," he said, and he led her past the barn and through an opening into the woods. They followed a narrow path under the canopy of giant locust trees and poplars, sweet gums and willows, to a creek with a pebbly beach and big slabs of rocks around a deep pool. "This is great," she said, as she slipped off her shoes and waded into the shallow water by the beach.

"I'm going to get some clean clothes," he said, and left her there, to return in a few minutes carrying a towel, soap, and clean jeans. "Don't look," he said, as he slipped off his work clothes and slid into the cool green water. She sat on one of the large rocks and watched him in the water, envying him. "Come on in," he said. She shook her head. The water looked so good, so cool.

Darrell stood dripping and climbed up the short bank to where he'd left his towel on a flat rock. He picked up the towel and wrapped it around his waist, but he had stood for a moment unashamed of his nakedness. He sat for a few minutes, smoking a cigarette and letting the air dry him a little, then he pulled on his well-worn
jeans and gathered his soap and dirty clothes. "Ready?" he asked, and Margaret waded back through the shallow water to the little crescent beach, dappled in the late afternoon sun, where he waited. He took her hand and led her along the path through the trees up the bank. The earth felt moist and cool on her bare feet. As they entered the clearing the sun glowed gold against the schoolhouse windows and her shadow and Darrell's wavered long and slanted on the ground.

After the sun went down they went again to the creek, to check trot lines, he said. They sat on the bank sharing a beer he took from his pocket while foxfire glowed like cat eyes beside them. Darrell walked along the shore checking his bait while Margaret lay back and looked at the black sky through the overhanging branches. It would be impossible for her to live alone at a place like this. She would be afraid. Margaret lost herself in feeling the thick moist air, smelling the deep green woods, and hearing the night sounds of frogs and crickets and a fish splashing close by. Darrell came back and sat down beside her.

"What are you doing here?" he asked softly.

"I don't know," she said into the dark.

"Do you want to stay?" he asked.

She nodded, but he couldn't see. He slipped an arm around her and drew closer. "Do you?" he asked again.
"Yes," she said.

"Good," he said, and they sat there for a while before he led her back up the bank and into the dark schoolhouse.

He had laughed when they first stepped into the little building earlier in the afternoon. Everything was clean and orderly. "Ship shape," he said, and it actually reminded her of a boat, the way everything was built into the walls, and the way the cabinet doors opened upward and attached to the ceiling with a little hook. She appreciated his tidiness. She was a slob, but she admired neatness in others, especially a bachelor living alone in the woods. There wasn’t much there that she hadn’t seen through the window, except a couple of rugs on the wood floor, and a rocking chair and a stool. The skull was a mule’s, and there was a horseshoe turned upside down next to it, the luck run out. "It was in the barn," he explained, "but I liked it so I brought it up here." He made them a dinner of roast corn and tomatoes and squash, cooked on an hibachi. He didn’t have a refrigerator and he didn’t have electricity and he didn’t have running water, but he had a well, and Margaret carried water for them. There was a lot of ground water contamination, but Cedar Valley was remote enough from mines and farms that the water had remained pure. He chilled his beer in the water. It was that cold.

He lit an oil lamp and carried it over to a shelf beside the bed. Now Margaret felt very awkward, and stood nervously by the rocking chair as he sat on the bed.
“Come here,” he said and she walked over to him and put her hands on his shoulders. He slid his arms around her waist and drew her close to him, looking up into her face. Frogs croaked and fireflies flickered outside while beetles buzzed against the window screens, trying to reach the light inside. He kissed her and she settled against him, feeling as though everything were in slow motion, magnified. He stood up to blow out the lamp, keeping her close with a hand on her side, an arm slung low around her hips, and he pulled her against him and kissed her some more, and they got out of their clothes.

He had joined the Navy during the Vietnam War, figuring he wasn’t deferral material and that seemed as good a way as any to keep from getting his ass shot off in Southeast Asia. He had spent most of his tour in the Mediterranean. Margaret lay next to him as he talked, enjoying the smell of him, the feel of him.

The next day he went back to help his friends with the barn, and she thought about going with him, but that seemed a little strange. She thought about going home, but that didn’t make too much sense to her right then. Anyway, no one was expecting her back, he seemed pleased for her to stay, so she stayed. She spent the day sunning on the flat rock by the creek and splashing around in the water. She worried briefly about leeches and snakes, but the sight of crawdads scurrying across the pebbly beach and the sun playing on the leafy trees left her too happy to look for bad things to think
about. When Darrell came back she bathed with him in the creek, and they found fish
on the lines he had set, so they had fish for dinner, grilled on the little hibachi.

Margaret went to see him several times that summer. He was always happy to
see her. "Come back anytime," he had said, when she got in her car to leave the
Sunday of her first visit. He never said that he loved her, but he told her once if she
got pregnant not to worry, and that if she wanted to get married he would marry her.
She didn’t want to get married, though. She just knew that nothing else seemed real to
her. She knew she would finish college and there would be other people in her life, but
for this time, everything else seemed far-away or meaningless; Darrell was real,
though.

She thought about him sometimes now, when nothing had quite turned out the
way she had expected it to. She could have married Darrell and lived in that little
schoolhouse and it wouldn’t have made her any less successful in life than she was
now, pulling beers and pouring drinks. She wanted one of those buttons that says,
"For this I went to college?" The last time she had heard about him he had been
driving a coal truck for his cousin. The other thing she heard was that he was growing
a lot of dope, and not just for personal use like he had that summer they were hanging
around together. He had a few plants out in the woods then. But this was different.
Some poor guy just canoeing down the river got shot when someone mistook his
green duffle bag for a bale of marijuana. She didn’t think surprising Darrell would be a good idea anymore. It was too bad. She hated to think of that graceful and fragrant spot ruined. She hated to think of Darrell as hard and mean, with that slit-eyed brutality men who live too much on the defensive seem to develop. She found it hard to picture him any way but grinning.

After Darrell, she couldn’t quite put up with college boys anymore. They seemed loud and stupid and arrogant. They talked too much and they were terrible in bed. But she slogged her way through, and eventually she met Sam.

She met him through Sally, the lady bartender Steve had been looking for. Sally was what Margaret would have been if she could have picked what she wanted to be like. She was small, not obnoxiously so, but not big like Margaret, and she had these delicate features that Margaret would stare at if Sally was working and Margaret was just hanging out there, or vice versa. Her eyebrows reminded Margaret somehow of a butterfly’s wings, feathery and graceful. Sally lived downtown and had a lot of art-farts for friends. She took Margaret to a party one night and introduced her to Sam. He was some kind of an artist, and he made a half-assed living at it; he painted houses and put up drywall the rest of the time. He was very charming and very attractive to her, but Margaret had a vicious early-warning device that was blaring away even as she was tilting her head and moving closer to hear him under the buzz of the party: he can’t possibly be interested in you, don’t even think about it, you’ll live
to regret it. But there he was, smiling at her and keeping her next to him talking to her. He asked her to have a coffee with him, so she did.

He took her walking through the streets downtown, where fine old houses lined the tree-heavy sidewalks. She loved the way he looked at her, smiling into her eyes, and the way he touched the small of her back with his fingertips when they walked, the way he leaned over to whisper to her, and the way he brushed her hair off her temple to see her better. He liked her big hands. He told her they looked like hands that could do things. They couldn’t, though. She was about the most unaccomplished person in the world.

The truth was, she didn’t know what to do. She didn’t know what possibilities existed. Her world had been pretty narrow, and although she had enough imagination to think of lots of things, none of them seemed very realistic. She wanted to be an elephant trainer or a spy or a graphic artist, whatever that was, and not a teacher or a housewife or any of the other things she saw women doing. Other girls she knew seemed to be prepared mostly to find a husband who made the right amount of money to support them. She knew she could never depend on someone else like that.

What she had expected to do in life seemed somehow related to how she had spent her early youth, riding around the county collecting insurance payments with her father, Les Moore, rising early to eat breakfast and drink coffee in the cafe in town
square, joking with the old boys who hung out there before going about their daily business.

Margaret at age ten drank coffee and read newspapers while the smoke from their cigarettes swirled around her head. If she spoke it was as one of them, and if they laughed at her jokes or responded to her questions or comments, they seemed to respond to her seriously. If they were teasing her, just indulging a little girl, or just indulging her father, she never caught on. She had studiously avoided Home Ec, where her friends learned to sew and cook and can, not so much because she didn’t like it, but because she never expected to be doing those things. She took Spanish instead.

So there was Sam, inexplicably admiring her, although she herself had loved people at a glance, taken by a part of them, a lip, an earlobe, a set of perfect teeth, smiling eyes, delicate arching eyebrows. How could she declare that kind of irrational admiration? I love your lips? Your breasts are beautiful? Your smile lightens my heart? No. She kept her mouth shut, but she loved with all her heart and soul. Her love was not less for being foolish. So maybe there was something about her that Sam found fascinating. Once when they were walking in town and she was looking in a shop window, he had said her name, and when she turned to him he drew in his breath sharply and closed his eyes as though just looking at her was more than he could bear.
They walked with their arms around each other, and when they rode in his little truck she sat in the middle next to him with her hand on his thigh, feeling the muscle tighten when he pushed the gas or brake. He would open the door for her and hold her close to him as she got out. She was wild about him, and it seemed to be mutual.

He lived in a huge empty apartment in a big old house. One room was lined with windows and he painted in there, although he said the light was not exactly perfect, but there was more of it than anywhere else. She wandered naked around the three big rooms and took long baths in the huge claw-foot tub. She felt unselfconscious and free.

Her hair was long then, thick and coppery in the afternoon light burning through the western windows. She stood in front of him, her hair pulled up so that just the ends brushed against her bare shoulders, her head held back and to one side, questioning, listening, as he drew her. She was tall and muscular, and he stretched his hand out from time to time to feel a part of her, to know how to draw it. He said she had a perfect Renaissance body.

As the sun lowered, the contrast between highs and lows, peaks and valleys, diminished, and soon all became dim and shadowy. He shook his pen to release a clot of ink, and the ink sprayed and splattered against her bare flank. The skin shrank and...
quivered. "Oh, I like that," Sam said, and he flicked the pen again and again while she held her arms overhead and turned in slow circles before him, allowing him to marble her torso with the cool ink.

When they made love she imprinted his body and his bed with the design they had made.

Margaret never felt any kind of distance between herself and Sam. His skin was speckled like hers, and lying limbs tangled in bed with him, it was hard to tell where he stopped and she started. Their eyes were the same, too. She loved to gaze into his eyes and see herself staring back out; but then maybe that was the problem. Maybe when he looked at her he didn't see anything.

She thought a lot about what the problem was. She could think of a lot of things she had done that may have made him not love her. But he never said anything, never acted any differently toward her. One day he was just gone.

"Get this," Sally said from the bar where she sat reading the newspaper, waiting for her shift to begin. "What do men really like?" she read the headline aloud.
"What?" Margaret was cleaning the stainless steel rails that held the bottles of liquor and mixers. They had had a busy day and everything was sloppy and sticky.

"They like to see women in cheerleader outfits and wet suits and bikinis," Sally summarized.

Margaret shook her head in disgust. "Does it say anything about what women like?"

"Yes. It says women like to see men in tuxedos and blue jeans with white T-shirts or bulky sweaters."

"Well, I guess that says everything I need to know about the difference between men and women," Margaret laughed.

"Oh, there's more," Sally said. "You know what kind of women men like?"

Margaret rolled her eyes. "Sluts?" she guessed.

Sally read: "Men tend to prefer women who are young and innocent-looking. They also like to see bright smiles and big wide-open eyes . . ."

"So these men like their women young and dumb and friendly," Margaret said.

"That's a surprise."

That's what I miss so much, she thought, that's what I loved so much. I loved the us, the couple we made. I loved myself more when I was with him than when I wasn't with him. What a shock to him it must have been, to have thought he found the
love of his life, and have her turn into some goofy aberrant sidekick. Stop it, she said to herself. With Sam, whatever it was that was bad or good, one thing was real was when she was with him: the whole time seemed to have compressed itself into one concentrated moment of joy, pure and potent enough to last a lifetime. It just might have to.

Much to Margaret's surprise, Elizabeth asked Cedric to move into the cellar. There was an old waterbed down there, that Elizabeth used mostly to store folded laundry. She knew he needed to find a place to stay, and she didn't want him to leave town. He was doing such a nice job with the house, covering up all the ugliness she thought she had become accustomed to but now realized had been a weight she had borne every single day. It wasn't just the work, either. It was a kind of attention he paid her.

All of her life, all of her married life, and she supposed before that, she had been expected to take care of everyone else. Like some kind of machine that never needed attention. Her daughters, of course, Leah and Alison, now eight and twelve, didn't need her as much as they once had, but still had enormous expectations of her. And Margaret, who had moved into the attic not at Neil's death but after her own
break-up with Sam, was emotionally and physically dependent upon her, for meals and laundry and unconditional love.

Cedric, though, took a personal interest in her. No one had ever voluntarily, good-naturedly, helped her until Asher came along. That spring when he began working on the house, Elizabeth would make him stop work and eat lunch. Then he would get up and wash dishes, making her sit down and eat, something she rarely did. After he moved into the cellar, he expanded his responsibilities to earn his keep. He mowed the yard and kept the car clean and running well, he washed windows and did the laundry.

Elizabeth’s limbs were long and white and flecked with fine gold hairs. Her skin was cool and though she was a tall woman, she seemed almost weightless, as though you would not notice if she stepped on your toe. She knelt in the garden, wearing a broad straw hat and one of Neil’s old blue workshirts, her sleeves rolled up. She smoothed and patted moist dirt around the tiny plants, broccoli and cauliflower transplanted from the cold frame where she had started seeds in February. Asher raked the soil smooth and she moved another transplant into the row.

"Elizabeth, you seem unhappy," Cedric said.

"Unhappy?" She considered the possibility. "No, I don’t think so." She turned her face and continued her work. She was unhappy, whether she knew it or not; she
had become withdrawn, detached, since Neil's death, but she didn't know it. There was no one to tell her, except Margaret, and to Margaret Elizabeth was always the same: solid, sensible, dependable.

Asher moved closer to her. "How long has it been since you went out?"

"Neil and I used to go out some."

"I mean you. When was the last time you met somebody for a drink or for lunch?"

"Oh, God, years," she said. "Do you think that would cure this unhappiness you think I have?"

"I'm not trying to tell you what to do, or how to feel. I just think everybody needs a little change of scenery now and then. It seems to me you spend all your time here, working, or squiring your daughters around, or attending parent meetings or Girl Scouts or whatever, but what do you do for yourself? For fun?"

Elizabeth sat back to think about it. No one had ever suggested she should do anything for herself, and certainly not for fun. "I sleep," she said. "I dream."

Asher dropped it. He didn't want her to feel like he was trying to run her life. He didn't want to run her life.

"I kind of lost interest in the social life," she said. "I mean, we used to go to a lot of parties and events, but it was all so phony. These were the people Neil worked with, did business with, and I suppose they had those interests in common, plus they
were all sports enthusiasts, like Neil. I guess we women had a lot in common, too, although no one seemed really genuine about what they said and how they treated each other, or maybe what was important to them was not important to me. What was important to them was being just like everyone else only better.” She spaded up a bit of the soft dirt. “Anyway, I don’t have any interest in seeing those people. They’re nice enough, but . . .” she shrugged.

"Maybe you should meet some new people, some different people,” he suggested.

"Maybe,” she said, unconvinced. "Anyway, I met you, you’re different.”

He grinned. To his surprise she continued talking. "Neil always said I lacked ambition, and I would ask him ‘ambition to do what?’ I mean, I had everything I was supposed to get: a husband who made a good living, a nice house—well, potentially anyway—two darling little girls. But he thought I should want more—new furniture, new carpeting, new clothes. Once his boss asked me if I liked to shop and I didn’t really get what he meant. Then he said he liked for his employees’ wives to like to shop because it kept his employees in debt and kept them ‘hungry,’ as he put it. I guess Neil thought I shouldn’t be satisfied with what we had, but I was. A lot of times, I don’t think I met up to his standards. I mean, he was really picky about things.”
"Like what?" Asher had heard from Margaret what a real bastard this Neil had been, but Margaret thought all men were bastards, except maybe him.

"Oh," she thought about it. "Like me. He used to complain about my hair, and my clothes. Once he made me change clothes three or four times because we were going to some very fancy country club for a dinner. He wanted to make just the right impression, and of course I had to be absolutely stunning or it would reflect badly on him. That sort of thing makes you feel kind of stupid, like you don’t have enough sense to dress yourself properly.

"He never really understood that keeping house and taking care of two children was time- and energy-consuming. I don’t know what he thought I did all day, but if he came home and there were toys in the floor or crumbs on the table or the towels in the bathroom were damp or not hanging straight, he’d act all disappointed and pathetic, like the only thing in his life that wasn’t absolutely wonderful was this stupid woman who couldn’t keep the house straight or make herself presentable when that’s all on earth I had to do. I always tried so hard to please him, but he would always find ‘room for improvement,’ that’s what he’d say.” Elizabeth shook her head. She was unaccustomed to talking so much, especially on this subject. She had never said a bad word about Neil to anyone, except her mother, who had told her she had a perfectly good husband who was only trying to do what was best for his family, and Elizabeth must do her very best for him.
"Did you ever try talking to Margaret? Was she around while all this was going on?" Asher asked.

Elizabeth laughed, a sort of nasty snort. "She was just a kid when we got married, but she and Neil hated each other. It was cats and dogs when those two were together. She didn’t hang around much when Neil was likely to be here. I think she understood partly what my life was like, but not completely, since she would never in a million years have married someone like Neil in the first place."

"Are you glad he’s dead?"

"No," she answered without hesitation. "But I’m glad I don’t have to live with him anymore. That’s awful, isn’t it?"

"No, it isn’t awful, but I wonder why you didn’t divorce him."

"Divorce him? I was afraid he would divorce me. I just kept trying to be a better wife so he wouldn’t leave me. So I would be worthy of him," she said.

Asher sat back in the soft dirt. "Jesus," he said. "Jesus Christ."

...<...>

If there was ever a time in her life when Margaret needed some guidance it was now, after losing Sam, after losing the best thing that had ever happened to her, now that she was so disappointed, so sure that everything was the same and would always be the same and that nothing she did would ever matter. She had begun to fear that the
world was somehow set up to function in a way she could not tolerate, much less find happiness or success.

So there was Cedric, fitting the bill, providing an alternative for her, an outlandish point of view, a different slant on everything. He didn't much yammer about philosophy or politics, thank God, but he had his own set of rules and standards, and she recognized that some of them came out of the same subsistence mentality that she herself bore, that it was better to waste your substance in good conversation for instance, than tearing away at a job that ended up eating you alive.

His voice was consistently slow and smooth, practically creamy in the dim cellar, and his every movement was unhurried and deliberate. He had told her he did not want a romantic relationship with her, and she was relieved to be able to be with him without that pressure. She considered that beneath his hooded eyelids lurked a kind of pain, a sorrow that held him at a distance. She would find, when he allowed her to know him, that inside him lay a tragedy, deeper than her own. Hers was a disappointment, even a series of disappointments, that caused her sometimes to doubt the value of her own life, of whether it was worth living, of what exactly was supposed to come of it.

Beneath Cedric's quiet gaze lay a lifetime of regret, of a loss so profound and a guilt so sharp that he could not even come close enough to anyone to take away his pain, for fear of causing their pain or of losing them. Margaret wished she had known
him before whatever had happened to him had happened, or knew now that person he
would be if whatever had happened had never happened at all. She could imagine him
sometimes, wiry, quick, alert. Only twice had she seen something of what he could
have been: once when a car crashed in front of the house, and Cedric sprang to rescue
the occupants, a couple of kids driving too fast on the residential street, who hit a
neighbor backing out of her driveway. Cedric cut his hand trying to straighten out the
bumper so the cars could be separated. He was the only one injured in the accident.
The other time he was playing basketball with some of the kids on the street, and he
and one of the older boys started an intense one-on-one contest. Cedric was a
surprisingly agile player—quick with great hands. She could imagine what he could
have been like. Mostly now, though, he was slow and quiet.

Margaret liked to go down to the cellar after work, Asher was always reading
something and had something interesting to talk about. He also liked to smoke dope
and drink with her.

"Do you realize how hard it is to have an original thought in this day and
time?" she said suddenly one night. "There have been so many people, so many
thoughts. How do I know when I think of something, it hasn’t been thought a
thousand times before?"

"If it’s new to you and you thought of it, it’s original," Asher said.
"How do I know I thought of it? How do I know I didn't read it somewhere or hear somebody say it?"

"You do store a lot of shit in your brain," he said. Margaret was immediately insulted. "Not just you. Everybody." Asher drew on the pipe, passed it to Margaret.

"Maybe I'll have a garage sale, get rid of some of it." Margaret tapped her head with the pipe stem, laughing.

"There you go," Asher said. "I got this globe at a garage sale. Fifty cents." He handed it to her. Margaret spun the globe slowly. She looked at where she lived and places she had been, tracing her routes with a finger. She looked at the rest of the world.

"Look at Thailand," she said. "Siam."

Asher grinned and nodded happily. "Every kid should have a globe that's a few years old. Keep them wondering."

She passed him the globe. She felt sticky from work. "I'm going to change," she told him.

"Don't change too much," he said.

"I'll be back, okay?" she asked.

"I'll load the bowl."

"Okay."

Asher picked up a book. Margaret took long showers.
She felt lighter and younger as she came back downstairs. Asher looked up at her as she wandered over to a window to look up at the ground. "You off tonight?" he asked.

She half-turned slowly, sipping from a mug of coffee. "I worked today, remember?"

"You've been known to go back in," he said.

"Not if I've been drinking," she said.

"That's a good reason," he agreed.

She strolled over to the desk where he sat and stood opposite him so that he had to look up to see her. He looked up: her eyes were glittry bright brown, a smile twitched around her mouth, "Why do you think I drink?" she asked.

"Why do you work?" he responded.

She laughed quietly and sat in the chair opposite him. "I work because it gives me something to do and money to live on." Margaret lit the pipe Asher had placed in front of her. "Sometimes I wish I had a real job. When the money's bad or when I just get tired of the crazy hours and the noise and the mess and the servility of it all, I wish I'd been more humble when I started out, then maybe I could have settled for being on the bottom, working my way up. Instead I've worked my way to the bottom." She drew deeply on the pipe, coughed a little.

"Don't hurt yourself," Asher said.
She exhaled a puff of smoke. "Then I think about having to get up at the crack of dawn and get dressed up, and sit in traffic and run around all day. In high heels, no less. I think maybe I made the right choice. If you could say I chose it."

"Maybe the choice made you."

"Maybe. I'm sure I've evolved differently than I would if I'd done something else. It's funny how casual decisions, trivial decisions, can have life-long effects. I just wish I'd made a few decisions a little more carefully, instead of flitting hither and yon doing whatever popped into my head."

"What would you have done differently?"

"I don't know, looked harder for a job, I guess. I wouldn't have thought I was so smart, that things would be so easy that I'd be discouraged when they weren't. I gave up without really trying. Well, I did try, sort of. I always had too many plans, couldn't decide which way to go."

"So you went for the fun and not the money?"

"I guess. I could have a lot more fun if I made more money, though. Lots of times I consider myself lucky," she said. "There are plenty of people working hard and having to play that success game--the clothes, the cars, the attitude--and I make a lot more money than some of them do. And my life is my own. I am free. Except that I'm not going anywhere. I'm getting tired of pretending they're better than I am."

"Why do you do that?" he asked.
"Because they think they're better than I am. They sure aren't better than anyone else. They have no thoughts, no feelings of their own worth; everything is measured against the people they associate with. They have to wear exactly the right clothes, go to the right places, drink the right drink. If they don't they're sunk, they're no good. The only thing I can't understand is, how can they live like that?"

"Maybe they can't think of any other way to live."

"Maybe. They're boring anyway. I got very depressed once because everyone I knew was like that: I got this job when I first got out of school, working in an office, putting out newsletters and things like that--it was all promotional stuff. Anyway, everybody there was just alike, they dressed alike, they did the same things every night and every week-end. There wasn't one person there who didn't fit this very strict mold. Except me. The only way I got hired was that I knew the girl who'd had the job before me and she recommended me. Otherwise I'd never have been hired. I dressed the part all right, but I'd have said something outrageous or off the wall in the interview, I know. I always do. Anyway, that finally got to be too boring, so I quit. It's a flaw in my character--I get bored very easily. I guess I have a short attention span or something." Not to mention that she had once gone to a company pool party and one of her supervisors got very drunk and followed her around saying he wanted to fuck her brains out. It made her uncomfortable to work with him after that. He did
not ever acknowledge that he had done such a thing. Apparently he expected her not to take it personally.

"You're a hedonist."

"That too," she sighed, unhappy, but less unhappy than she imagined she might be.

"I just wish I could find something I like to do. If you're going to do the same little movement over and over again, you'd better like doing it, or the place you do it in, or the people you do it with. I just can't imagine picking up glasses, scooping in ice, picking up bottles, twisting fruit, grab a straw, grab a napkin, put the straw in the glass, put the glass on the napkin, get the money, keep the change, forever and ever. I can do that without having to keep my mind on it, though, my body does it automatically; sometimes I do concentrate on what I'm doing and then it can be very intense. But I marvel at my body's strength. It will do anything I ask it to."

"Yeah, you're in pretty good shape," Asher said.

"I'm in the right shape for doing what I do and that's why I'm in that shape, from doing it over and over again." Margaret relaxed into the chair and took a sip of her coffee, now cooled.

"You know what I read the other day?" he asked.

She shook her head.
"Some guy died, a scientist, Dr. John King, and in his obituary they said he made headlines several years ago with his theory that the Western habit of driving on the right-hand side of the road was a major cause of tornados. Now I don’t remember seeing any headlines like that, do you?"

"No," she said smiling, "I don’t remember anything like that. I’m going to get some more coffee, you want anything?"

"I’m all right," he said.

She returned with a steaming mug of brown coffee, liberally dosed with Tia Maria. "That stuff will kill you," he warned.

She looked down at him. "If I didn’t drink as much coffee as I do," she assured him, "I think I’d be in a coma. I’ve got some crazy fucked-up synapses or something."

"It’ll catch up with you one of these days."

"I’ll wait," she said, defiant.

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The first time Cedric Asher touched her with his hard flat hand Margaret felt a charge, like a mild electric shock. She felt somehow rearranged, atomically, and for hours, even days, she could feel the exact spot where he had laid his hand, and it tingled as though seared. She looked for a mark but he had left none.
The first time she went to bed with him in the dark cellar, she knew she had been rearranged and he did leave a mark.

One night in the spring she had come in from work very late. She was tired but her body had not slowed down. She went into the yard to stare into the deep night sky and to avoid waking anyone and soon Asher was there beside her. "I’m sorry if I woke you,” she said and he told her there was no help for it, that he slept like a cat. They sat in the back yard, smoking and talking, inhaling the sweet wet air of spring. Margaret was wild inside, and Cedric either knew it and wanted her or didn’t know it and was wild himself. He took her hand and stood up. "Let’s go to bed," he said, and she followed as he led her into the cellar, where wavery light washed in dimly from streetlights high above.

"I haven’t been with a woman in over a year," he whispered as he lowered his face to her shoulder and inhaled deeply.

"Why?" she asked, and he shrugged and put his hand on her neck to lift her hair and nuzzle there.

"There just hasn’t been a woman," he said. He stroked her hair and told her that he loved her and that nothing bad would happen to her while she was with him. At dawn she woke to a slow seeping orgasm and Asher moving inside her. He pressed his forehead against hers and eased himself out of her.

"You should go back upstairs," he said.
Later in the day she stood naked and sore in front of her mirror, trying to see if she had changed. She turned and looked over her shoulder to find Cedric Asher’s handprints red on her buttocks. “Sweet Jesus,” she thought, and tried to remember how they had come to be there, but the only recollection she had of the long night was a sense of leaning over a ship’s rail and gazing into the dark swirling water.

Margaret always said her husband died in Vietnam, which is strange, considering she didn’t really even know anyone who went to Vietnam; but the way she looked at it, there were 58,000 fewer men about her age, and it seemed to her entirely possible that the one man who would have been the love of her life never survived his year of service. The only person she knew who seemed to have been actually close to going to Vietnam was her asshole brother-in-law-to-be Neil, whose mother finagled him a spot in the National Guard, so he could spend six years protecting Madison County or some damn place. The thing was, Neil had this big heartbreaking decision over whether to take the spot in the Guard or take his chances with the draft lottery that was being initiated that year. What they did was, they drew dates out of this big drum thing like they use at bingo games, and whenever your birthday came up, that’s the order you’d be drafted in.
The lottery. It made her think of that story where the whole town goes through this process to select a person to stone to death, and in a way it was the same, if your number came up, you were gone. So Neil went with the National Guard. He was sweating like a pig in basic training in Fort Polk, Louisiana when they conducted the lottery. His number was about 360. Margaret thought it was funny. Served him right.

Cedric told her that Bardstown, Kentucky, had the highest per capita casualty rate of the war. A Guard unit had been called up, and since most of the unit was local people, when they got hit, they had lost seventeen people at one time. She hadn't known that.

When Margaret was in fifth grade, and things were just heating up, she announced that she would go over there and fight in a heart beat. This followed the influence of a neighbor, an ex-Marine who had killed Japs in the Pacific, even had a Jap sword he'd taken from a Jap soldier when he cut off his head, and who talked so badly about the Army that for a long time Margaret thought World War II in the Pacific had been fought between the Marines and the Army.

Her father had spent four years of his young life in Italy and North Africa and had never wanted to leave home since, so they had never so much as taken a vacation out of state. He told her that she would not want to go over there and fight, that war was death and destruction and deprivation. She quietly accepted his word on this, as it was given quietly and sincerely.
From then on, she watched the war with horror on her TV set, and prayed at night for the soldiers, boys they were, serving in Vietnam. She was nearly 20 years old by the time the war ended, or at least by the time American involvement ended. By that time she had sweated through a few more draft lotteries, and had come perilously close to having to watch people she knew and loved go to a place where they could never come back from. Never the same anyway. Over the years, she met a few of them. Mostly in college on the GI Bill. A lot of them were crazy. Wild and crazy, like college kids but older and less frightened of getting in trouble. Some of them were scary, they took drugs they got free at the VA, or had some kind of disability that made them stand out. Most of them had a kind of bravado, but all in all, they were crazy.

So maybe her husband did get killed in Vietnam. A nice kid who went over and never came back. Or came back crazy to die twenty or thirty years later, never having recovered. She wondered whether Vietnam was any more horrible than other wars fought throughout history, and it seemed to her that World War I was probably about as awful as war could get, and she couldn’t even begin to think about what it must have been like to go up against the Roman Legions, column after column, protected by shields, with their killing swords slashing through anyone who got in their path. One thing she thought maybe, was that when she looked at pictures of soldiers in WWI and WWII, they looked older than the soldiers she saw in Vietnam. They were
19, that was the draft age. The lottery was for your nineteenth birthday. They went over for one year, and if they survived, that was their tour of duty. In WWII, she knew from her father, you were in for the duration. So maybe you could get to know your way around a little bit, learn a little more about survival. It seemed to her like the boys who went to Vietnam were fresh meat. Young and untrained. It also seemed that a lot of them learned serious drug and alcohol use while they were there.

Margaret herself was trying to find god in a bottle of Remy Martin right about then. She had thought that if you lived your life in a certain way, were good and virtuous, that good things would happen to you. She had always thought that if she was smart and nice, which she was, she wouldn’t have any trouble making her way in the world. At the age of 23, she was about to discover that these assumptions, things she knew or thought she knew and had always known, which must have been taught to her, or at least suggested to her, these assumptions that she had based her whole life on, were just wrong.

Cedric and Elizabeth stood hip to hip washing light fixtures in the kitchen sink, their hands in sudsy water as hot as they could stand it to get the grimy film off the slippery glass. They worked carefully. Asher was good for that sort of thing, taking
down all the light fixtures and washing them. One day he had moved all the appliances away from the walls and scrubbed and waxed the kitchen floor. He used paste wax.

Cedric rinsed the globes from the porch lights and made room for them among the others to drain on the thick layer of towels they had put on the big dining table. Elizabeth said all the glass reminded her of the penny-pitching booths at her grade school carnivals. Cedric stepped back a pace or two and took some coins from his pocket and tossed them at the fixtures, where they rang and skipped onto the towel.

"You're throwing too hard," Elizabeth said, and she reached into his hand to uncurl his fingers from the coins he held; she had never touched him deliberately. He did not let go of her fingers, but instead grasped them and held them firmly. When she looked into his face to find out what he meant, in his fervent unguarded eyes she saw clearly, as the gentle pressure of his quick strong hand conveyed, that he was eager to touch her, to keep touching her.

Whatever expression crossed her face--dismay, disquiet, uncertainty--stopped him. He had wanted to put both his arms around her waist and pull her close to him. He had wanted, as they stood at the sink together, to put his warm moist hand on her stomach and feel the line of her body through the damp fabric.

"Cedric," she said gently, "it's okay," and he sank to his knees before her, with both arms around her waist, and burrowed his face into her belly, while she stroked his hair and spoke reassuringly to him.
Elizabeth had never been with anyone except Neil—not ever. She had not even kissed a man's lips in more than two years. She realized with some alarm that this sudden unexpected contact with Cedric had made her want to feel his hands on her, his rough face, his breath, his hair, his skin, his long knotted muscles, his angular bones under her hands. She wanted to kiss him until her lips were tender and swollen, inflamed.

Cedric rose apologetic, ashamed of his passion, his betrayal of her trust, his burdening her with his need. She cupped his face in her hands and took his lower lip between her teeth.

"It's okay," she said.

If anyone noticed any difference at dinner that night in how they acted toward one another, how they treated each other, no one mentioned it. Of the three others in the house, only Leah—the baby—had enough sensitivity to other people to be aware of any change. Alison was far too self-absorbed to notice Elizabeth twice shooing Cedric away, when he followed her to the kitchen and tried to kiss her and put his hands on her. Maybe Leah saw the two of them glancing at each other then looking away, and saw her mother fuss with the dinner in uncustomary distraction, or saw Cedric gaze up at her from his bowed head and smile deeply to himself as he lowered his eyes to his plate. Alison would not have noticed these things, and Margaret was not there. She
was late, late getting in—off on a wild carouse—and by the time she arrived dinner was over and Elizabeth was in bed smelling Asher's scent on her shoulders and pillowcase, and Cedric was in the cellar reading the same paragraph over and over while he daydreamed about the reality of Elizabeth.

The next day and the next and for two weeks after that they made love whenever they were alone together. He attended to her as a steward to a treasure, bathing her and anointing her body with oil. Once suppliant she asked him, "Cedric, what are you doing to me?"

"I'm spoiling you," he said.

If Margaret noticed a difference in him, it was only that he seemed sleepy, less willing to talk with her half the night then draw her into erotic adventures where they tried everything they had ever thought of, if only to discover there were some things, quite a lot of things, which were uncomfortable, if not actually physically impossible.

But Margaret didn't notice. Her schedule had gone insane, for one thing. School was out for the college students, and two of the bartenders had left town for the summer, so for a few weeks she was working split shifts and double shifts and overtime and crazy, crazy hours.

Cedric and Elizabeth enjoyed a brief, intense period of intimacy, of privacy. Then school was out and the girls were home, and they weren't alone any more.
“Men are funny,” Margaret said to Asher. “They act like the most important thing in the world is to go to bed with you. Then when you do, you’re a whore. If you enjoy it, you’re a nymphomaniac. So you hold back. You don’t give them everything you’ve got. Do they care? No. They want to be unmoved by sex, and they expect you to be unmoved. Not me, boy. I like my socks knocked off.” She smiled at him.

“What can happen too is that, being moved and all, it might mean more to you than it does to the other person. Then you get hurt. I can’t hang around with people who hurt me. I guess I could still be with Sam sometimes if I could stand that pain, of never being as important to him as he is to me.”

“Too much pride,” Asher said.

“What?” She was incredulous. She would have wept at his feet, if he had given her the chance, to try and make him stay.

Margaret knew Sam didn’t love her anymore, finally, when she found him with someone else. To this place where she had previously had full access, as though she lived there, she became an intruder immediately. She knew he was home, his car was there, the door was open. She walked in, not quietly for she was not attempting stealth, and not noisily because that was not her way of entering his place. She walked in not quietly and not noisily, catching the screen door behind her so that it did not slam, and set a sack of groceries and a bottle of wine on the counter.
Something was odd; the place was dim and quiet. Maybe he was out for a walk or a run. Maybe he was taking a shower or a nap, so he’d be rested when she got there, late, after work, all jacked up. He was not expecting her for several hours, but the bar was slow so the closer sent her home as soon as the bar back got there. She was off—a free night. Her plan became to pick up some shrimp or steaks and a bottle of wine and surprise Sam. So here she was, toting salmon steaks and fresh asparagus and a nice little Moselle, in Sam’s dim quiet rooms, and something was odd.

She felt a little let down that he wasn’t there, and wondered whether she should start dinner, since he obviously had not gone far or for long. She wandered into the living room, thinking again of the nap theory. He wasn’t on the couch, but on the table and the floor by the couch she saw several items which made something important inside her—her stomach or heart or something up top to just fall hard until it crashed and burned somewhere around her liver; stereo lights flickered but no music played; cigarette butts filled the ashtray; round wet rings from drinks carried away still shimmered on the wood table. A pair of women’s shoes, fussy sandals the likes of which Margaret would not have been caught dead in, lay on the floor as though dropped, and Margaret could see Sam’s hands taking those shoes off some strange feet and letting them fall.

She did not want to see but could not stop herself from looking. She had to confirm the fact. She walked quietly now purposefully to Sam’s bedroom door and
there she saw the lovers sleeping. In the faint light she could not tell who the woman was, she not even tell which the woman was. She saw only two heads of curly black hair and two broad brown backs and stood there stunned while her mind raced as she connected those shoes with that hair, the casual atmosphere, the early hour and came up with Dina, his downstairs neighbor, married to a traveling man, horny and lonely and bored. Margaret fought the urge to flee and took a good long look at them. Then she turned and left and did not even bother to take her groceries with her.

She thought about the groceries when she got to the car, but she was not going back in. No way. Surely he would see them and know where they came from, and when, and might figure out she had seen them. Let him. Prick. Shit head. She would just lay low and wait for him to call.

Why had this shocked her so much, she wondered. Hadn’t he been a little distant lately, hadn’t he always kept an eye out for other women even when they were white-hot with unconsumed passion, and hadn’t this bitch been just too convenient?

Margaret suffered through the drive to her own stupid apartment, the place where she lived alone before she moved into Elizabeth’s attic, that had none of the charm or fun or magic of Sam’s, slammed her own door behind her, wondering how long they had been doing this. Today was not the first time, she would just bet.

She expected him to call as soon as he got up and discovered she had been there. He would send the woman home and then call her to apologize or to explain
that he couldn’t really help what had happened, that the woman had come to him and
he was doing her some kind of favor. Margaret wanted to take a shower but she could
not afford to miss that phone call.

He never called. Later she reluctantly got into bed, still listening, and every
vehicle that pulled into the parking area outside her window sounded like his, and she
sprang from half-sleep a dozen times to peek through the curtain, expecting to see him
emerge from his car, head down, cautiously approaching her door, looking up at her
window for a clue to her state of mind; but she was disappointed again and again. He
never came.

"This is what I mean about the original thought problem: when Sam was
dumping me for Dina, I kind of cornered him and wanted to know just what was so
great about her. He said he wanted a woman who was like a woman and not like a
man. He said that while I was a great drinking buddy and a 'wit,' there was something
about my attitude that was all wrong. I was too abrupt, too stubborn, the wit could be
cutting, cutting him, I couldn’t be counted on to say and do what he wanted me to say
and do. Dina, on the other hand, was more ‘womanly,’ she ‘respected’ him. I
respected him though; I respected him so much I certainly didn’t expect that kind of
crap from him."

"So what about the original thought?"
"Oh, yeah. He said Dina was very 'sweet and humble'—womanly qualities, I guess—and I said 'she has a lot to be humble about,' which he thought was a cruel, snotty thing to say. Anyway, later I found out Winston Churchill said pretty much the same thing about Clement Atlee, that he was 'a modest man, with much to be modest about.'

"He said she was nice and she was alone a lot, just came up for some company. He also said she hooked her knees over his shoulders and called out his name. He sat me down on the bed and told me our relationship was 'innocuous, so innocuous it was almost insipid.' I just sat there nodding my head. I didn't know what to say. Bastard. God, he was sweet." Margaret shook her head as if to clear it.

"It wasn't just her, though, it was always somebody," she went on. "He never took pains to hide it from me, either. We'd be at a party or a bar or anyplace and he'd find somebody whose looks he liked and he'd engage her in some way. He'd challenge her to a game or he'd ask her to help him with something. Once we were on the dance floor together, and there was this girl. I had joined him at that place, and when I walked in I was looking around for him. I wanted to see his face when he saw me, but I saw him, staring at someone I couldn't see, a look I'd seen before, the look that had drawn me to him. When I got closer I saw her, a very pretty girl, talking with her friend, aware of him, responding with her glance and then she saw me and he followed her gaze and when he saw me his face changed from this wouldn't-you-love-to-get-to-
know-me look to this so-you-caught-me-but-it’s-harmless-after-all expression, and made a show of kissing me and pulling out a chair for me. She ceased to exist for a while, though when she left he watched her walk out the door. I relaxed then, his attention was on me, we ate, we drank, we danced. She appeared on the dance floor with some guy she obviously wasn’t too interested in. In about 10 seconds, Sam had completely abandoned me and was dancing with her. I stood there for a while, then I just sat down. It was humiliating. I was angry, too, but I couldn’t say anything. I had to be a good sport.”

“You’re still in love with him,” Asher suggested.

She shook her head. “He slips up on me sometimes, at night, when I’m trying to get to sleep. In the morning, I’ll wake from a dream and it was of him; in the afternoons, I’ll be at work or in the shower or anywhere and he just appears in my head, coming in to me at night. He had this blue lightbulb in the lamp by his bed. I’d lie naked in his bed, waiting, growing drowsy. I felt like the whole evolutionary history of mankind had come to this, his closing the door behind him, smiling at me across the room, coming over to me.” Margaret closed her eyes tightly; she had never wanted to evoke that image, it had always come to her when she was unable to fight it, near sleep or when she was trying to concentrate on something else.

She was in a full-fledged memory of Sam walking across the room to her, sitting on the edge of the bed. She had propped herself on an elbow as they admired
one another. He pulled the covers off her shoulders, and placed both broad palms flat on her wide chest. She reached a hand out to his pale, fine torso; he was a little ticklish and the skin shrank away.

Asher watched her face change from this creamy dreamy drowsy state where he could almost see her opening her legs for this Sam person, to a clench-jawed realization of where she was and what she was dreaming about. Her eyes flew open. Asher watched again as she ran different phrases through her mind and imagined his responses to them: "Maybe I do still love him," "I don’t love him but I miss him," "I’d like to run over that bastard with a truck." Finally she looked directly at Asher, having rejected all her opening lines. Whether she was looking for sympathy or disgust, what she got was a broad white grin.

"You are certifiable, old girl," Asher said, as he stood and tousled her hair as though she were a young boy.

"What do you mean?" She turned to watch him walk to the back steps and disappear into the yard. She followed him. "What do you mean?" she repeated. His back was to her as he peed in the yard.

"You start thinking and you go off on your Alpha-waves or something and you get these expressions on your face like you’re talking to three people at once about three different, hot, topics. Somebody’s going to catch you at it one of these days and put you away.”
"How can anybody 'put me away' for what I'm thinking?" She wandered back to the cellar, imagining trying to defend herself before a panel of psychologist cynics who found her demand for freedom of thought, expressed without words, aberrant, her defense was itself deviant behavior.

"It's those expressions on your face," he said.

"Well, I just won't think in public, then," she said.

"That's the safest way," he agreed, and Margaret rose to announce she would like to take a shower. "Help yourself," he said, and began to read a magazine that lay open on the desk.

The cellar shower was a nozzle, a curtain, and a drain, but the pressure was good and the cool water was refreshing. Asher heard the water go off and plucked a fresh, warm towel from the dryer. She loved warm towels, he knew that much about her. She beamed at him. Thanks. They folded the rest of the towels and finished their drinks on the stone steps outside. "I think I'll go up now," she rose and touched the top of his head. "Good night."

"Good night, old girl."

She left him sitting on the steps, looking into the night air, waiting. What would come down on Asher's head as he looked into the night: a meteor, a falling star, a spaceship, a giant ball of fire hurtling through the universe, hell-bent for Cedric Asher's back yard? Nothing was in the sky but the soft moist air, full and round,
heavy, not oppressive. Ideas he’d never had before, or things he’d known and
forgotten came to him. Thoughts like comets, concepts, notions, ideas, all burned
through his mind unexpressed, pure perception. He was on fire.

Elizabeth worried over Margaret, watched her make one bad decision after
another, and still never figure out what she was doing wrong. She thought things just
happened to her, without understanding the part she played in her day to day life.
Elizabeth watched her rushing headlong, like a two-year-old running into objects too
big to move, into risky adventures with men, jobs that would never lead anywhere,
impulsive journeys across the country, then bounce back to her, to Elizabeth, needing
to be tended comforted brought back. Like a two-year-old.

Elizabeth knew now that Margaret was going through some deeply troubling,
painful, self-doubting phase, which Elizabeth never remembered having had. She
knew, though, that when she was Margaret's age, she was married with a young child.
She did not have time to think about herself, which is really all Margaret had to think
about.

It amazed Elizabeth now to think about what she thought was important then,
how little things bothered her, how easily she thought she could lose Neil’s love. She
was surprised that marriage and motherhood did not come as easily to her as she had
expected. She had felt tired often, and unable to cope. She was surprised, too, though, that what she had thought would be wonderful about being married was not what had turned out to be wonderful. She had some goofy idea about dressing up and going out to dinner, like marriage was a date that never ended. What surprised her, though, what she found that she liked about being married was that she felt like she belonged somewhere, to someone. She never felt as though she were set adrift, like Margaret seemed to feel, to her terror. That even after those long days alone with the baby, which weren't so bad in retrospect, they took walks, they played little games, she worked and cleaned and the baby followed her around, it just seemed to last so long, the days seemed to last so long. Then when Neil would finally come home, all she wanted to do was to hand him the baby and walk out the front door and be alone and take deep breaths and walk without anyone disrupting her thoughts. Just for ten minutes.

But it never worked out that way. Sometimes he would bathe the baby while she made dinner, and he would bring her out to the kitchen, wrapped in a towel, her baby-curls damp and clinging, her baby-toes moistly pink and steaming. That is what she liked most about being married, being in the warm kitchen with Neil coming in with the baby all pink and moist from her bath. Then they would put the baby to bed, and they would have dinner and talk about the day.
Now the girls were nearly grown, and she was again surprised to find them troubled by Cedric's presence. "When is he leaving?" Alison had asked abruptly after he had been staying in the cellar for two weeks or so. Elizabeth had invited him on impulse, and had not really considered all the implications of the situation. She had warned the girls to make sure they were decent whenever they went to the bathroom, or came down for breakfast. While it sounded like a simple enough adjustment, she realized that his presence had certainly thrown off a sort of level of comfort they in their all-girl household had enjoyed. Alison's reason for asking when he was leaving was practical: her birthday was coming up and she wanted to have a party, and she didn't want him around. One of her friend's parents had come by a few days earlier to drop off their daughter to spend the night, but when they saw Cedric there, after dark sitting on the side porch smoking a cigarette and drinking some gin, they made up a story about how they'd had a change of plans and the girl would not be able to stay, but maybe Alison could sleep over at their house soon. Alison told her mother, furious at Asher for his very existence.

Elizabeth had arranged for Alison to have her party, and Margaret and Cedric spent the night in a motel, watching tv and goofing off. He should have been gone by now. It had been two months, and while he had made a lot of improvements quickly in the beginning, he seemed to be losing steam. Maybe the problem was the things that were left to be done were things he had trouble with. But then when she saw the
insulation bulging from the upstairs wall, she remembered how quickly he had put up drywall in the kitchen. Now everytime she passed that particular spot, she felt a little pang of unease. What was going on?

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Asher sat on the stump in the back yard, smoking, gazing at the clear black sky, watching intently the bright flickering stars, the planets and constellations he knew by sight if not by name. He looked for movement, for signs of life. He wanted to connect with the sky as he was with the earth, his feet on the ground, his backside planted on a stump with deep old roots. Headlights shone briefly on his face as a car pulled into the driveway. Margaret got out of the passenger side, went to the trunk and removed Neil’s bicycle, slamming the lid shut. “Thanks, Mary,” she said, as she wheeled the bike to the garage. “Sure you don’t want to come in for a smoke?” Mary shook her head and backed out onto the road.

“Did you give it up, old girl?” Asher asked softly. She’d seen him, she knew he was there.

“I can’t believe people do that for fun,” she pointed to the bike. “I got about half way there and thought I would die. It’s worse than climbing stairs. I could have walked. I should have walked.”
"I never saw anybody on a 10-speed that looked like they were having a good time," Asher said.

"No kidding," Margaret agreed. She sat on the grass opposite him and helped him watch the sky. "Do you want to go for a walk or something?" she asked.

"OK, sure," he said. He liked walking with her, she was quiet when she walked. They strolled through the neighborhood, under huge leafy branches, still staring into the night sky, trusting their feet to do the right thing. They wandered along the railroad tracks to a high grassy bank near a trestle where they smoked a joint. Margaret leaned back on her elbows; Asher laid a hand on her stomach and stroked the pale skin softly. She lay back on the warm ground smiling to him.

They stayed there until a long loaded freight roared past, its loud moaning whistle trailing away as car after car clacked loudly by them, 10 feet away. Out of the shadows the engineer may have seen one white leg gleaming as he flashed past. As long as it was not something he had hit, he wouldn't worry about what might be lying along the tracks. The last car, with its attendant clatter and racket, disappeared into the distance. The earth ceased its trembling, and Margaret's bodily spasms subsided.

"Jesus Christ," she said. "When is the next train?"

Asher laughed. "At least you can say the earth moved."

"It sure did. I wonder if it comes by here every night at this time."

"Now, don't go getting any ideas, old girl," Asher was zipping himself up.
"Why not?" she asked, groping for her jeans.

"I'm just saying if you knew the train was going to come along and you wanted what just happened to happen, it wouldn't be the same as just having it come on you unexpectedly like that. It just wouldn't be the same."

Margaret flopped back in the grass. "I don't suppose you'd like to carry me home?"

"I'll go get the bicycle for you," he offered.

"Help me up," she raised a hand, and he pulled her to her feet, though they nearly tumbled backward down the steep bank. She ruffled his hair. "You're a madman," she said.

"Takes one to know one," he replied, and they walked silently back to Elizabeth's house.

He said that scrub cedars were like the starfish at Tarpon Springs. He said that the sponge fishermen at Tarpon Springs would haul up nets full of starfish, chop them into pieces, and throw them back into the water, because the starfish ate the sponges. What happened, though, was the chunks of starfish regenerated into whole new animals, increasing the starfish population exponentially.
He said when the cedars were mown down to clear the fields, that the seeds were scattered, and more cedars grew up all over the hillsides. He loved to see those little scrub cedars growing all over the place, thistle too. Every time you tried to remove them by mowing them, you just succeeded in spreading their seeds.

Cedric sat in the yard in an old rocking chair, a book face-down in his lap, dozing in the sun. He was shirtless, wearing a pair of Margaret's old cut-offs. Although it was not yet noon, the sun was hot, and his drink on the ground beside him was beaded with moisture. From time to time his head slumped forward, and as he jerked and started, a scene began to play in his mind. He was eleven years old, he was visiting his grandparents and was out back chopping wood with his grandfather, sweating joyfully in the cold air. "Wood warms you twice," his grandmother had said, and he swung the axe high and exalted in his strength.

His little brother, playing in the yard, ran through the wood chips just as the axe head flew off and seemed to circle high in the air before descending with a thud and striking the boy in the temple. He bled so much; they all rushed around trying to stop the blood soaking towel after towel, they jostled furiously down the rutty dirt road, the child lay dying in his grandmother's soft strong arms.

Margaret watched him as his eyes began to twitch beneath their closed lids, and once or twice he shouted, "No, stop, lookout." Then she woke him and with a
guilty sorrowful face, looking into hers as she asked him if he was okay, he said, "I'm okay, I'm fine, really." Then with that memory still fresh in his mind, he forced himself to tell her what had happened, when his life for all the good it was had ended when he was still a kid.

No one blamed Asher. It was an accident. Asher could never forget. He carried the tiny corpse still. Twenty-odd years later, he recalled his pride at swinging the axe with the strength of a man; he tried to imagine how a second's difference might have changed his life, if he hadn't swung the axe precisely when his brother was in that particular part of the yard where the flying wedge had landed. His brother would have been grown now, and probably a great friend. He had caused his mother such sorrow. Asher never realized that half her sorrow was for him, for his loss, for his burden. He never understood that he was no less a part of her than her poor baby; but Asher could not face her, so great was his burden of guilt, and so she mourned for him, the living, lost surely as the dead.

But he was mending. Asher was slowly allowing himself to heal. He accepted his part in the trick fate had played on them, and knew nothing he could have done would have changed what happened. He understood that what he had done, casually swinging an axe, killing his brother, was as great a horror as anyone was likely to encounter. He forgave himself at last, began his recovery, found his brother in so
many people, all the love he had missed giving and getting, one by one he gave to the people who came into his life, and he slowly recovered. He remained cautious, holding no one so close, so dear, that his actions could cause their pain, felt his unnamed terror that he should have a child and lose it, that his heart would break again. He could not bear such a loss. And so he went from place to place, each man his brother, each woman his wife or mother or sister, each child his own, treating them with kindness and acceptance, trying to make up for all the pain he had caused.

"I think I'll start wearing a patch over one eye," Asher said.

"That will be dashing," Margaret said. "Shall we get you an earring and a sidearm, too? Maybe a beanie with a little skull-and-crossbones where the propeller should be." She and Asher were weeding the garden, and she was getting a little nasty in the heat.

"Do you know why pirates wear a patch over one eye?" he asked.

She shrugged. "Saber fights? musket balls? retinal roulette? How the hell should I know?"

Asher was sweating vigorously. That was Margaret’s trouble, she couldn’t sweat; she just got hot and light-headed. "Pirates wear patches over one eye because the first thing they do when they board a ship under attack is to go into the hold to kill
the crew who are hiding down there waiting for them and protecting the cargo. It’s
dark down there, so when they get there, they flip the patch up and they can see who
is down there and where they are because that eye, the one with the patch, is dark-
adapted. The other eye is light-adapted from being out in the daylight."

"Very sensible," Margaret said. "What’s that got to do with you?"

"Because when we get through pulling these fucking weeds, I’m going to go in
there," he pointed to the cellar door, "and mix myself the biggest gin and tonic in
history, and I’m going to be too thirsty to stand around blinking for 10 minutes trying
to figure out where everything is!"

"I thought you did that by smell or something anyway," she said. God, she was
testy.

"Come on," he suggested, "let’s take a break."

"These weeds will probably grow back in before we get back."

"We can finish this later, when it’s cooler."

"Like September," she suggested.

Asher had a plan. The next Wednesday was trash day, so Tuesday evening they
drove over to the nice neighborhoods with huge lawns and picked up a half-dozen
neatly twist-tied bags of grass clippings. They covered every unplanted inch of garden
with damp newspapers and dumped the clippings on top. Some of the grass was
somewhat gamy, having been bagged and sweating since week-end mowing, but it
was a moist, hay-ey odor, and not unpleasant. Margaret hosed herself down and took a drink out of the nozzle. "Low maintenance," she said, "I like it."

Elizabeth had taken the girls to visit their grandparents, Neil’s parents, and was due back anytime. "I’d hate for her to think we had let the place go to pot," Asher laughed, for there was a tiny sprouting cannabis growing beside the high board fence near the first few tentative shoots of corn.

"As long as she doesn’t get arrested and lose her house and have the children taken away from her, she won’t mind," Margaret said.

"How long is she staying, anyway," he asked.

"The briefest decent period, I’m sure. Neil’s parents are not exactly Elizabeth’s favorite people, and vice-versa. They thought he married beneath him, his mother did anyway. She came down to supervise the wedding plans, to make sure my poor hideous family didn’t do anything to embarrass them. She wanted to invite about 200 people, and Elizabeth just wanted a simple wedding in our little church chapel, which might hold 75 people. Mrs. B. suggested if we couldn’t afford a proper extravaganza, she and Mr. Bremner would be happy to chip in. Poor Elizabeth bit her lips for weeks over that old bitch. Now she’s badgering her to send the girls up there to go to school, says it’s a ‘more suitable environment for young ladies.’ She will probably shit when she hears about you. I hope Elizabeth had enough sense to threaten those girls with their lives if they mentioned you."

He took her places, where the bartenders were not sharp young women in bow ties and tuxedo shirts, but were old and tired, wrinkled from too much cigarette smoke, dried out. They all wore the same look, as if their faces had frozen like that, a pinched look around the mouth, slitted eyes, and a scurrying way of moving. Fast, fast.

One night in one joint the woman behind the bar got off and sat next to Margaret. Her husband had come to pick her up, but she was not ready to go. It wasn't as if she was flirting with anyone, but she had just got off her feet for chrissakes and she just wanted to sit down and drink a beer. He was ready to go though, maybe he didn't so much like her working there, or maybe he thought there was something going on between her and one of the pathetic old boys who hung out there; but all she would say was that she was not ready to go, and finally he smacked her twice, right there at the bar, and she left with him.

Then there was always some woman who was maybe divorced, and had raised her children, and was drinking to pass the time. Those were the ones who knew everything, they were incredibly smug. Margaret wondered if they were so smart, what the hell were they doing there?

Another night in another joint Margaret found out the woman who ran the place was from her own hometown. Margaret had been moonlighting, daylighting
actually, waiting tables at the track, and had waited on her one day in the grandstand dining room. Her name was Frankie, like Frankie and Johnny, and she was wearing about $500 worth of clothes that day. She looked good. The thing about Frankie was, she had this dignity about her. She was with a bunch of men, and maybe one or two other women, and in the middle of the crowd, she stood out, looking regal, almost. Frankie was a businesswoman. Whatever else, she was that.

At her bar on the night Margaret went there with Asher, the place was packed. It was on the edge of town, and a lot of the people there were rednecks, and old. There were five or six pool tables, all busy, and the dance floor was full. The place was pretty nice. Frankie had run a couple of other clubs in town, and her son-in-law, who had made some serious money in the coal business, had bought this dump and fixed it up, and gave it to Frankie to run. She came over and sat at the table with Asher and Margaret. She bought them a drink. "I knew your daddy before he was your daddy," Frankie said to her. "I was married to his cousin Shell. Do you know Shell?" Margaret shook her head. "Well, that was a long time ago." Frankie excused herself, to take care of business. "You kids have a good time," she said.

Asher and Margaret talked and drank and watched the crowd, mostly shooting pool, because they were closer to the pool tables than the dance floor. Cedric didn't much care for live music in bars, but a dance floor with a juke box was just as bad. There was a woman there who had stumbled over them two or three times, going back
and forth from the dance floor to the bathroom to the pool tables or wherever else she was staggering around. She was drunk, and fat, and her hair had come down on one side and the other side looked like a cow pie ready to slide off her head. She reeled alongside their table, finally crashing into the people next to them, and pointing to some old drunk she had been dancing with, she yelled, "I know if I was to lay down and screw him I'd have to do all the work."

Margaret looked over at Cedric. He was looking at the vaulted ceilings and talking about flying buttresses. "Hey, let's go," she said.

"Sure, just let me finish this drink," he said, and he downed it in a couple of gulps.

"Ha, look at this!" he shouted. "In Strunk and White’s *Elements of Style* they say 'Avoid foreign languages,' then right in the introduction White calls the book Strunk’s *parvum opus*!" Cedric was pacing around in the cellar. He was having trouble adjusting to his terrestrial life.

"Have you ever noticed on the opening of the old Superman tv series that Superman takes six shots in the chest, then when the bad guy runs out of bullets he throws the gun and Superman ducks? Why would a guy who can take six bullets have to duck? I hate that. Just be consistent, that’s all I ask."
Margaret watched him pacing around, and although she enjoyed his ranting about such trivia, she knew he took it very seriously, and considered that sort of inattention to detail a basic and tragic flaw of the human character.

"Also Jed Clampett," he said. "All through that tv show they talk about what a dead-eye shot Jed is, and what's the whole show based on? '... then one day he was shootin at some food. . . .'' "'... and up through the ground comes a bubbalin crude,'" she finished for him. "So?"

"So he missed!! Jesus, I hate that."

Asher made her cry the night after she went to Sam's house, drunk, hurt, wanting to talk. He wouldn't see her, he wouldn't talk to her, she couldn't take it anymore, so she broke her own rule of acceptable behavior, tossed out her dignity, altogether. Well, she was drunk, too. She got to Sam's house in the middle of the night. Four o'clock in the morning actually. She had worked a double shift and instead of eating and resting, she drank and drank until she was flat fucking drunk and it was late and there was nobody to hang out with and she by God wanted to know what had happened. What had she done that was wrong? She didn't lie or cheat or steal, she didn't make fun of him in public, he liked having sex with her, didn't he?

She drove drunkenly to his house, parked in the alley, looking for signs of life. His car was there, he never locked his damn door, she went up the stairs, trying to be
quiet, but banging against the walls and stumbling. She got to his back door and took
a deep, deep breath, but she was committed to this act, so she went in. She didn’t
need a light, she knew the way, but something overcame her on her way to his
bedroom, not sense probably, but drunkenness, or tiredness; she found her way to a
big soft chair and sank into it. She thought of lying in her own bed in her own room,
the room she had shared with Elizabeth as a child, staring wide-eyed into the night,
afraid of being the only one awake in the dark house, where ghosts flew through the
air and rats played at night in the walls beside her. She had been afraid of going to
sleep and dying, as her grandfather had done.

“He died in his sleep,” they told her, without telling her little girls didn’t
normally do that. She had been afraid of other things, too. That she would do
something bad and God would get mad at her and send a dark angel to get her. Her
eyes had searched the dark for a glimmer of wings, a rustle, a whisper.

To take her mind off her fears she would think of other things. She imagined
herself lying face down on her bed (which was true), then the top of her house and the
trees and the neighbors’ house-tops and then the river, up and up until she saw the
earth spinning on its axis like a top as it floated in ether around the sun. Margaret
would lie perfectly still and feel herself riding the earth, whirling through space,
reeling toward the sun. And now she felt herself spinning, and the room swirling
around her. She thought of the river, of playing beside it and fishing in it and watching
it rise in the springtime, and all that time, Cedric was on the other end of it, while it ran like a vein from her to him, and neither of them knew it. She put a foot on the floor to keep from getting sick, and fell into a deep drunken sleep.

Two hours later, she heard dimly through sleep, a woman’s voice, talking, cooing, to the cat, making her way out the back and down the stairs to her own apartment. Margaret dozed off again, vaguely aware that being there was not a wise thing to do, but not being capable of leaving at the time. Later Sam came into the room, came over to the chair where she slept. In the cold light of the receding dawn, draped across the chair, she looked like Aurora guarding the Medici tomb.

"Oh my God," he said. "What are you doing here?"

"It seemed like a good idea at the time," she replied wearily, as she swung her legs off the chair arm and onto the floor. She bowed her head and massaged her forehead. "I shouldn’t be here," she said.

"There’s the door," he pointed to it.

This was not going well. All she wanted, all she had ever wanted, was for him to take her in his arms and tell her he was sorry, that he hadn’t meant to hurt her. Instead he was telling her they were through, and that he did not want to see her again, ever.
How could what had been between them be over? Just like that. He wanted her
to act like nothing had ever happened between them. He acted like that, like she had
never meant anything to him.

Margaret stood nose to nose with him and called him some ugly names. She
left, banging the door behind her, and sobbing, bereft, she drove fifty miles out of
town just to get away. There was nothing to go to, though, so she ate some breakfast
and drank a lot of coffee and headed home.

That night she went into the cellar. "What's up, old girl?" Cedric asked. "You
seem disturbed."

She paced around and around, while he watched her placidly from the desk
where he sat reading. "I did something really stupid last night," she said, and she told
him what she had done.

"You should have resolved all this by now," he said.

She whined a little. "I just wanted to see him, to talk to him. But, no, he's
there with that bitch what's-her-name, and doesn't even want to act like he knows
who I am."

"Get over it," he said, quietly, gently.

"I can't get over it. He won't see me, he won't even talk to me?"

"Then get used to it," he said.
"I can’t get used to it. I can’t stand it.” She was whipping herself into a real frenzy. Her face was dissolving into a teary mess and she looked like she might be capable of doing some real damage.

"Then blow your brains out.”

The words were like a slap in the face. She took a deep breath and drew herself up straight. "What?” she said, incredulous.

Cedric sat calmly in his chair, looking at her intently, to make sure she was listening. "You’re better than that,” he said. "You don’t have to do shit like that.”

"I’m not,” she said, walking toward him and kneeling beside him. "I’m not better than anything.”

"Settle down some, relax,” he said, and he stroked her head. "You’re trying to make everything be okay, but it isn’t okay. It may not be okay for a long time. But eventually you’ll be all right.”

She lay her head on the desk as tears slipped out of her eyes, squeezed shut against the light and his knowing. He came around the desk and bent over her, rubbing her back with his flat hand. "Why don't you get some sleep,” he said, his voice low, soft and deep. She didn't want to go. "Come on, now,” he said. "You'll feel better in the morning.”
She trusted him. "Okay," she said, dragging herself out of the chair. She left him kneeling by the desk in a halo of harsh lamp light. "Good night," she said, and he smiled and waved to her as she mounted the stairs and climbed away.

Cedric closed his eyes and ground his teeth. Sometimes it took forever for things to be okay. Sometimes they never were.

Asher sat on the porch watching the falling rain, a happy man. Leah was squealing with her friends in the yard, running and sliding on the wet grass. Yesterday had been the hottest day in 29 years, and this was the first rain they had had in eighty days. Alison had taken to her bed, having reached menarche in these dog days.

The unrelieved heat of the past few weeks had enervated Asher, he who loved the sun and the warmth. People had been arrested for watering their lawns; though Asher watered the garden every day, it was not enough. Tomatoes blistered and rotted before they ripened. Squash lay shriveled on the hot dirt. He held his hand out to the slanting sheeting rain. A hot breeze blew, but at least the air was moving.

Elizabeth came to the screen door, wiping her hands on a towel. She smiled at Asher, as she always did, and he smiled in return. They talked quietly about the rain and Elizabeth called Leah to dinner. The girl climbed onto the porch, chattering, excited, very wet. Elizabeth handed her the dish towel and she wiped her face and legs.
without drying them. "Better go change," Elizabeth said. "Hang those wet clothes up," she reminded her as she went dripping into the house.

Margaret was working and Alison had no appetite, so the three of them, Elizabeth, Leah, and Cedric, sat on the porch and ate green beans, cole slaw, sliced tomatoes, and cornbread. Asher expressed his gratitude to Elizabeth for feeding them so well and regularly. He considered each meal a thoughtful gift. For this too Elizabeth loved him.

Leah refused to eat her beans. When Elizabeth went inside Asher scolded the girl for not appreciating the time and trouble her mother took to make the food.

"You don't have to be so prissy about it," she said, as she entered the house, letting the screen door bang shut behind her.

Asher sighed and gazed out over the now-steaming lawn. The respite had ended.

Elizabeth went into the cellar for one of the few times since Cedric had arrived there. She was not angry with him, had never been angry with him, except that once when she found the marijuana in the garden, and that was mostly because she was afraid of losing her home and her children. He was not contrite or remorseful about the few plants. He seemed to think she was overreacting or being hysterical. She didn't need that. She knew how tenuous her security was.
She had decided after taking the girls to visit their grandmother that Cedric would really have to go as soon as the work was done. The progress of the work had become extremely slow, though, and it seemed to her nothing more was being done to the house. He was on maintenance, she supposed. She loved Cedric, as a friend, but he was becoming a problem for her. He was not, and could not be, part of their life.

Elizabeth knew better than anyone that Margaret depended on Cedric for dealing with this anguish of hers that Elizabeth could not understand. Cedric, though, seemed to know just how to treat her, either to talk through whatever was bothering her and help her to see things in a different way, or to talk outside of whatever was bothering her, or to walk it out, or to, well, she figured they were doing other things too.

Elizabeth was slightly annoyed at herself for getting mixed up sexually with him. Not that it wasn’t interesting, but it complicated her life. She was at a turning point, she knew. She had been looking for a job, and thinking about going back to school. Law school, maybe. She needed some stimulation, and some ammunition for dealing with the Larrys. Damn Neil for giving him control over them, anyway. What was he thinking? Probably that he wouldn’t die so young, and Elizabeth would be completely helpless and incompetent. She was even considering the possibility of getting married again. It seemed unlikely that she would be able to meet anyone and
develop any kind of reasonable relationship with someone with this man living in her house.

Cedric sat at the old oak teacher’s desk reading. He looked up in surprise when Elizabeth appeared before him. When he heard the tread on the stairs he assumed Margaret would pop in, and he was not quite prepared to listen to her, yet. This was something else, though, Elizabeth standing there before him, a troubled look on her face.

“To what do I owe this momentous visit?” he asked.

Elizabeth sat in the chair across the desk, where Margaret usually dropped herself, though she rarely just sat there: she lounged or perched or swayed, or propped her feet on the support post next to her and dangled her head off the edge of the chair. Elizabeth just sat there.

“Cedric, I don’t think you should stay here anymore.”

He could hardly have been stunned, but somehow he had eased into the situation so thoroughly that he had not expected her to ask him to leave. “Is there some problem?” he asked.

“No,” she said. She felt guilty for asking him to go. It was her house, though, her home, and if she wanted to reclaim it for herself and her children, she would have to be able to tell someone they couldn’t live there if she didn’t want them to. “There’s nothing left for you to do,” she said. “I can’t explain your presence here.”
"Who do you have to explain my presence to?" he asked.

"Nobody," she said. "Everybody. Look, I know you don’t have any money and I know you don’t have anyplace to go, but you can’t stay here, okay? You just can’t stay here."

"Okay," he said, and that was it.

He left once in the fall to cut tobacco, and returned with a truckload of firewood, his face and arms and chest burned brown from working in the fields, his eyes clear and white against the brown face. Margaret watched him as he directed the unloading of the firewood, his brownness blending into the fence behind him, his celery-colored corduroy shirt, well-worn, matching the tall swaying grass. He looked a part of the scenery.

He had called to ask Elizabeth if he could come back and finish the work. He felt bad, he told her, that he had let her down, had abused her hospitality, and left her house before he could make it the way she wanted it to be.

She hesitated, she should have said no right then; but he continued that he had some money and could bring in some wood, and finally she told him okay but only for a little while, just until he finished the house.
Margaret and Cedric spent the winter rapt in front of the licking flames, talking about snail darters and comparing them to elephants. They talked about the danger of burning wood that had poison ivy on it, and wood that had been painted. They talked about Walt Whitman and Slim Whitman and Slim Pickens.

Margaret was troubled and was fairly certain she’d made everyone around her aware of that.

"Margaret, what’s wrong with you?"

"I wish I knew."

"You know what I think?"

"I don’t give a damn what you think. I’m good and-god-damned sick of men telling me what’s wrong with me."

"I wasn’t going to do that."

"Oh, yeah? What, then?"

"I think you’re a perfectionist."

"I’m a perfectionist all right," she snorted, "I’m just not very good at it."

He laughed. "Seriously, though, I think that can cause a lot of problems. You expect so much out of yourself you can’t help being disappointed."

Cedric didn’t play that humiliation game, and after she knew him, neither did Margaret. One night in a bar with some friends she was picking out records on a juke
box, and a man none of them knew said, "Hey, play E5." They looked and it was a pretty good song, so they played it and that was that.

Later, as she began pulling out of the parking lot in Elizabeth's beat-up old station wagon, the guy appeared next to her. "You didn't play that song!" he shouted.

"Sure I did," Margaret said. He didn't look too drunk, but he kept insisting she hadn't.

"Your problem," he told her, "is you don't know how to behave." Before Asher, she might have started to defend herself, she might have told him she had heard the song, or suggested maybe he wasn't in the building when it came on. Now she just looked at him.

"The reason I'm driving this," he pointed to a shiny new Mercedes 450 SL, "and you're driving that," indicating the station wagon with some distaste, "is that I know how to behave."

Margaret's friend Mary sat wide-eyed and open-mouthed in the passenger seat; other members of their party stood nearby, not quite sure it was safe to leave them.

"Fuck you, Jack," Margaret said. "This isn't even my car."

He went back inside the bar in an offended huff. Pity the poor woman who falls for his Mercedes tonight, Margaret thought, while her friends laughed in relief at his quick exit.
Margaret squatted in front of the fire, knocking ashes off the grate and shovelling them into an old coal bucket. She was the only one home, a rare thing in the daytime. Elizabeth was out shopping, the girls were in school, and Asher was out walking somewhere. She felt numb and sleepy, just barely awake; she moved heavily and clumsily.

She carried the bucket to the back porch, setting it out of the slight wind; she shivered and closed the door hurriedly. Margaret rebuilt the fire and sat down to read the paper, inch by inch, but it would not make much of an impression on her. Nothing was very new about the news: same old thing, different names, different places. Asher was wild about knowing everything that was going on everywhere, what she scornfully called the "current truth" and he called "nowledge." She read the funnies and Dear Abby, Letters to the Editor, the obituaries, the classifieds, the births, the marriages, the lawsuits filed; a sort of subterranean view of the world.

Margaret stacked the newspaper by the chair and went up to dress. The attic was chilly enough to make her quick about it. Downstairs, she stood at the kitchen door, looking out at the bright frosted grass; she pulled on a knit hat and sunglasses and stepped out onto the porch. She carried the bucket to the garden, where dead plant stalks lay broken on the hard ground. Standing with her back to the wind she turned the bucket over, and the ashes swirled in a cloud around her. She returned the
bucket to the porch and sat down on the back step, profoundly bored. She was drinking too much, she knew, forgetting things, fucking up; there was nothing better to do, nothing in her life she could fuck up enough to really cause problems. Last winter she had been so clean, she had stopped smoking, stopped drinking. Her molecules had started flowing freely inside her for a while, and she felt like she had when she was younger, before she had started to drink and smoke. She could not contain herself, she always wanted to do something, to go somewhere, not to lose a moment, not to waste a day.

"I couldn't stand the wholesome life," she told Asher. "It made my blood run too fast." Margaret slowly took up the old habits until the exhilaration subsided; now she sat listless on the back porch in the winter sunlight, thinking she should stop smoking, again, but wanting to smoke all the same.

Asher appeared around the side of the house. "Hey, old girl," he said.

She grunted a greeting.

"You know what just happened?"

She shook her head.

"I went to the bank to cash my check. This girl started giving me twenties and I said 'Fuck, no,' well I didn't say fuck, you can't say fuck in a bank, I said, 'just give me a couple of hundreds,' so she did and then I went to the liquor store and I gave them one of the hundreds and they wanted to see my driver's license. I showed them
on the bill where it says 'legal tender for all debts public and private,' and this guy says 'Yeah, but there's some counterfeits out and we have to be careful.' All I had with me was a library card. I told him, 'You don't think a guy with a library card would try to pass bad money, do you?' but he said he couldn't take it without some kind of I.D."

"What did you do?"

"I gave him my thumbprint."

"Did it work?"

"Here I am. He also took down this address and phone number and my social security number and height and weight and date of birth." Asher shook his head. "For paying motherfucking cash!"

"My friend tried to rent a car once and she was willing to pay cash in advance, but they wouldn't give her the car because she didn't have a credit card. She was pissed," Margaret said.

"No wonder. Why are you sitting out here?"

"Just getting some fresh air."

"Well, I'm going in."

Margaret followed him into the house. He pulled a big green bottle and a carton of smokes out of the bag he was carrying. "How about a drink?" he asked.

She shuddered.
He poured a good shot of gin into a glass and looked in the refrigerator for tonic. The bottle was almost empty. "This is why you should always pour the gin first," he said, as he drizzled the tonic over the ice.

"I can't believe I forgot the tonic," he said, lifting the trash can lid and putting the empty bottle inside. "I worry about myself sometimes." He got a lime out of the refrigerator and squeezed it into his drink. "Anyway, this is going to be a good one. Raskolnikov."

Asher pulled crumpled bills out of his pockets and dropped them on the table. "Want to play liar's poker?" he asked.

"You cheat," she said.

"You're supposed to cheat," he told her. "You try to set the other person up so you can catch them lying."

"Oh. Okay." She sat across the table from him and they played a few rounds. She cheated, and won, but it was his money anyway.

"I wonder what these letters mean," she said, rubbing her finger across a small seal on the left side of the bill.

"What's the letter?" he asked.

"B."

"That means it's from the Federal Reserve Bank in New York. They go from A-L."
"What's A?"

"Boston."

She picked up a bill with a J on it. "What's J?" She was checking up on him now.

"Kansas City."

"How do you know this stuff?"

"I pay attention."

"How can you remember?"

"It's easy. Look. A, B, and C are geographically in line: Boston, New York, Philadelphia. Then you take a hard left and that's D, Cleveland. Edgar Allan Poe used to hang out in Richmond, Virginia..."

"So E is Richmond." She fished around until she found a bill marked F.

"Okay, how is F Atlanta?"

"If you are anywhere in the south, and you want to fly somewhere, you have to go through Atlanta."

"F for fly." She let it sink in. "G?"

"Great Lakes. Chicago. H is a good one. They make a lot of beer in St. Louis, and beer makes you feel heavy."

"No, it makes you get heavy. What about I?"
"IM. Intramuscular, like an insulin injection: Minneapolis. J is Kansas City.

When you think of Kansas City, you think of Ernest Hemingway working on the newspaper there, and when you think of Ernest Hemingway, you think of that one word, Jesus."

"Jesus." She tried it out. "I wonder if I’ll remember this the rest of my life."

"K is for Kennedy. He was shot in Dallas. That’s easy, right?"

"Right." She’d probably remember it the rest of her life. "What’s L?"

"San Francisco."

"Where you left your heart?"

"Something like that," he said. "I wonder if there’s any tonic around here any place." They looked through the cabinets and in the refrigerator.

"Club soda," she said, and he shook his head no. "7-up?"

"Please," he grimaced.

"Well, then, let’s go get some," she suggested, and they piled on warm clothes and went out into the biting cold. "You’ll never get malaria," she commented to Asher, sunk deep in his collar, his shoulders hunched against the wind.

"Fat fucking chance in this weather," he grumbled.

She laughed at him. She did not mind the cold, after the first sharp touch. Her nose began to numb and she felt its tip with an ungloved hand.
"Still there?" he asked. She punched him abruptly in the ribs, but he had side-stepped her. They walked through the neighborhood steadily with long strides.

"I used to have to drink quinine for my tics," she said.

"I thought ticks drank blood."

"T-I-C-S," she said. "No kidding. My face used to twitch like crazy. I called the doctor and he said it was absolutely nothing to worry about and to drink quinine. Boy, that is some nasty shit. I always thought the tonic cut the gin, but it's the other way around."

"That's why you should always pour the gin first." His breath was ragged and sharp. Little huffs of steam blew out of his mouth.

"It made my face itch."

"What? The tonic?"

"Yeah. I couldn't decide which was worse, the itching or the twitching." She giggled foolishly.

"What did you do?"

"I called the doc back. I told him I could not stand to drink that shit straight and besides it made my face itch."

"That's why junkies rub their faces all the time," Asher said. "Heroin is cut with quinine."
"Hmmm." Margaret was watching her toes, and trying not to step on any cracks.

"What did he say?"

"Who?"

"Your physician friend."

"He said to put some gin in it."

"There you go."

They entered the store, bought two bottles of tonic, a plastic juice-filled lime, and a pack of cigarettes for Margaret. "Is that it?" he asked, "cause if it isn’t that’s too fucking bad."

"I don’t need anything else," she said.

They walked quickly and quietly back to the house. Elizabeth was in the kitchen unpacking groceries. "You know," she said, "I wish those nice young people who bag your groceries and wheel them out to the car for you would come home and unload them and put them away for you, too." She handed Asher a bottle of tonic, then another.

"We’re going to need some more gin," he said.

Elizabeth eyed the big green bottle he had bought that morning and looked at him curiously. Margaret flicked her long knitted scarf at him. "We just crossed the
tundra for some tonic because Mr. Purist here couldn’t drink his gin with soda or something,” Margaret explained.

With dignity Asher bent to put the tonic under the sink. “Thank you, Elizabeth,” he said.

Free thinker that she claimed to be, Margaret was shocked when she discovered Asher was having sex with Elizabeth. Margaret was certainly not above jealousy or possessiveness and although she felt a twinge of that, her relationship with Asher was unlike any she had ever had before, and jealousy did not apply there. They did not belong to each other.

She simply could not imagine the virgin Elizabeth in bed with anybody she was not serious about, especially not someone as completely detached from the concept of marriage as Asher.

One day Margaret got off work early and went home. She was tired. Climbing up the back stairs, she saw through Elizabeth's bedroom window the mirrored images of Elizabeth at her dressing table, wearing an undone robe, and Asher standing behind her, naked, combing her wet blond hair. He must have heard a sound or caught a glimpse of her transfixed for an instant on the back step, for first Cedric, then
following his gaze Elizabeth, looked directly into the mirror, into her reflected eyes.

She slipped away as quickly and as quietly as she could.

She was struck by the intimacy of the scene. The shades casually left open, as though they had done this many times before. Lord knows they could find the time alone together since they both stayed there all the time, while Margaret worked or went out and the girls were in school or hanging out with their friends somewhere. It dawned on her that this had probably been going on a long time. She was starting to find the whole thing amusing. So that’s how old Elizabeth stays so mellow and dreamy-eyed all the time. She imagined Asher stroking Elizabeth’s long smooth sides, and talking to her in his soft low voice.

Margaret wondered if Elizabeth knew she and he were also. She could hardly help knowing, but then, they spent hours and hours in the cellar just talking, and it was usually when everyone else had gone to bed.

She had to go home sometime. She wondered if they were done yet. Probably. It was getting close to time for the girls to be home. Jesus, they could have at least closed the shades, she thought.

She stopped for a drink then went back to Elizabeth’s house. The girls were doing their homework, Elizabeth was cooking dinner, and Asher was sitting, quietly, reading in the cellar. She went in the front door, said hi to the girls watching TV and piddling with their books and papers, and went straight up the stairs. She went into the
bathroom and took a nice hot bath, she smoked a joint, she drank some brandy. She went to sleep for a couple of hours then had to go downstairs because she was hungry and her mouth was dry and sticky. She put on jeans and a sweater and went down into the kitchen. Everyone else was in bed.

She took some olives and cheese out of the refrigerator. She got some bread and butter and warmed up some soup. She drank a bunch of warm red wine and finally, taking the bottle with her, tapped on the cellar door to announce herself and went down to have a chat with Asher. She wanted to see what he would tell her about what had happened. She wanted to see how he treated her.

He sat at the desk reading a thick book that looked old and dusty. He glanced at her as she paused at the top of the stairs and waved her on down. He continued reading until he came to a stopping place and slid the book over to a corner of the desk. “What’s going on?” he asked. She sat quietly across from him. He lit a cigarette.

“I saw you and Elizabeth today,” she said.

“We saw you too,” he said.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to intrude.”

“You should have stuck around,” he seemed slightly embarrassed, slightly self-conscious. "We were--ah--finished.”

“I was a little embarrassed,” she said. "I still haven’t seen Elizabeth.” What was the big fucking deal, she wondered, why should she be embarrassed, why should
Asher be embarrassed, why should anything change between them, or between Margaret and Elizabeth? It had nothing to do with them. She dropped the subject and drank some more wine.

"How long have you two been at it?" she asked.

"Long time," he said.

"I had no idea," she said.

Asher shrugged. Margaret was trying to adjust to the idea that nothing was different except that she knew.

"Does Elizabeth know that you and I?" she asked.

"I don’t know," he said. He hadn’t asked.

Margaret felt a grin spreading through her shoulders and pretty soon it popped out all over her face. "You are a sly motherfucker," she told him. "I think I’ll go to bed," she said, and rose, taking her jug of wine and climbing the steps and away.

Margaret was happy her new knowledge had not triggered any old emotions. Like increased desire. Like feeling she had to compete. It had been going on all along. What he did with Elizabeth in the day time had nothing to do with what he and Margaret did in the night time.

Margaret awoke at two in the afternoon. She did not have to be at work until six, so she turned on the radio and did some slow exercises. She felt a little tense and
her head was aching. She wasn’t sure she wanted to see Elizabeth, but she had to go downstairs for some aspirin. Margaret had no talent for ignoring pain.

Asher sat tending the fire. "Hey, old girl," he said, and she waved at him. She was no good for conversation in the morning, even if it was the afternoon. "You just wake up?" She nodded and stumbled into the bathroom, took three extra-strength pain relievers and went into the kitchen. She asked him if he wanted some coffee. He didn’t, so she made four cups for herself and possibly Elizabeth. She wandered into the living room and slumped into a soft chair by the fire. "Where’s Elizabeth?" she asked, and he told her she’d gone to stock up on groceries just in case a big anticipated snowstorm hit them. "Oh," she replied, gazing dully at the fire. She drained her mug of coffee.

"I’ve never seen anybody get down that first cup of coffee as fast as you do. Isn’t it hot?"

"I can’t feel a thing," she said, and went back for another cup. She was beginning to feel better already. The morning paper lay on the kitchen table so she sat down to read it. Elizabeth’s car came crunching up the snowy driveway and she tooted the horn. "I guess she needs some help," Asher said, and put his coat and shoes on. Margaret went upstairs to dress, but all the bags were in by the time she got back down to the kitchen.
Elizabeth chattered about how much traffic was out and how everybody was hoarding food for the big storm. It was four o’clock. The girls came in shouting and fussing. Elizabeth gave them a snack. Asher retired to the cellar and Margaret went to get ready for work. It was starting to snow.

Inside the restaurant was warm and smelled of coffee and good things cooking. A small happy hour crowd of regulars sat around the bar, but few other customers were there. It was going to be a long slow night. Margaret checked out the daytime bartender—how much beer was stocked, how much fruit was cut, were they running low on any mixers, was the crushed ice machine working? She doubted it would matter that night, but you never could tell, sometimes snowstorms drove people to drink, and plenty of employees would be getting off early. They were her best customers, the waiters and waitresses, cooks and bussers who got off before closing time. She might have a good night after all. They were big tippers, and liked to have a good time.

It was nearly three a.m. when she got home. Roads were icy and snow was blowing fiercely. No one else was out, but plenty of cars sat abandoned on the streets. It was treacherous. She drove at a crawl, sliding through stop lights and praying just to get home. She parked her car on the curb in front of the house, hoping a snow plow
would not come along and bury it. The kitchen light was on so she went in the back
way. Asher sat at the table reading the World Almanac. "Well, hi," she said, surprised
to see him.

"I waited up for you," he said. "It's pretty bad out, isn't it?"

"Solid ice. It's a mess. Thanks for staying up. It's nice to know somebody
cares about you."

"You know I care about you. I wanted to make sure you made it home okay."

"How about a drink?" She was stone cold sober.

"Sure," he said.
She fished around in a cabinet and came out with a bottle of cognac and
poured them each a double. "Cheers," she said.

"Raskolnikov," he answered. She tossed the drink back and the liquor burned
her belly.

"You know what I think?" she said.

He raised his eyebrows and looked at her warily. "What?"

"I think Raskolnikov was innocent, I think he dreamed the whole thing up, like
maybe he would like to murder somebody, and could fantasize in great detail what
might happen if he actually did it. That he didn't really kill anybody, he just dreamed
the whole thing up."
"Raskolnikov didn't kill anybody, but Dostoyevsky's the one who dreamed it up."

"This is true," she said, and poured herself another big shot of cognac.

Asher was reading a road map, tracing the highways with a finger, looking for a place to go. "Looking for some warm," he said, and she remembered a night in a bar and some big, ugly, foul-mouthed women playing pool. Asher watched them and Margaret said "cute girls," and he looked at her and said "They're all warm" in a way that made her feel ashamed of being so snotty about things.

Asher was looking for some warm in the Rand-McNally Road Atlas. "You're really leaving, aren't you?" she asked softly. He nodded, without looking up.

They drove along narrow curving roads that dropped sheer to the river far below. As they neared the dam the land levelled and small farms lined the road on both sides. A man plowing a field waved at them, and his dog raced barking after Margaret's car. Soon the road ended at an 8-ft chain link fence marked KEEP OUT US GOVT PROPERTY NO TRESPASSING. He led her along the fence toward the river a few feet, grumbling that he always had to walk point. The chain link ended at a rusting wire fence; Asher stepped over it and held it for Margaret. A boarded-up white
house sat on the bank, high above the water rushing over the dam and swirling through the wormy-looking unused lock.

Asher heard the water and felt like a child again; he remembered shouting to be heard over its roar; waking at night fiercely needing to relieve himself, the moving water urging him; he remembered brown water surging toward their doorstep in the spring floods, and the Clorox bottles and bright tattered flotsam left littering the trees when the water receded, or rushed on to wherever it was going, the Gulf of Mexico no doubt. Asher saw a mass of rubble roiling along in the foamy water below the dam. Clorox bottles. Now there were also milk jugs, coke containers, and disposable diapers. He unzipped his pants and took a long arching pee over the side of the lock, grinning in primitive satisfaction.

Margaret walked toward the little house on the bank above the dam. "Can we get in?" she asked.

"There's nothing in there."

"There're floorboards you've walked on and ceilings you've stared at, aren't there? There're doorknobs you've turned and counters you've knocked things off of, I'll bet. You probably had some of your best early ideas over there. Maybe there are some thought waves lurking around somewhere."

"Thought waves?"
"Sure," she said, "like sound waves that travel thousands of miles through the Pacific Ocean so whales can talk to each other, or light waves that last billions of years and finally get to earth."

"I don't think any thought waves I might have emitted would have stayed around that long," he said.

"Maybe we'll stir up a few. Come on," she left him at the lock. "Ooh, what's this?" She veered off to the right, having noticed a stone obelisk twelve feet tall and nearly obscured by the shadow of a giant leafing tree. Arrow-slit windows made it look like a turret or a gun-tower.

Asher came up behind her. "This is the Geological Survey testing station." He mounted a narrow steel walkway which sloped up from the bank to the door, and crossed slowly.

Margaret followed. "Testing what?" she asked, trying to peek over his shoulder to what lay ahead, trying to see the future through the closed door.

"Stream flow," he said, and he tried the door, but it wouldn't budge. He gave a good hard kick and a wash of cold stale air hit them as the door creaked open. "There was never a lock for it," he said. The narrow building was dark, having only the few slits high in the walls to let in the light. "Careful," he said, "there isn't much room in here." Margaret stood absolutely still until her eyes adjusted to the dark.
Inside the room smelled of the far corner of the cellar, where a crack in the wall sometimes caused a dampness, a mustiness. She felt him move beside her and thought of the night the year before when he led her down the stairs and took her to his bed. The only light had come through the high basement windows from a street lamp far above, so there had been no sight and no sound, and nothing to apprehend but the watery smell of rock walls and the feel of Asher.

She heard him fumble along the wall until he found a latch and opened a window overlooking the dam. She climbed on a stone step and looked out over the lock and the slabs of rock laid on the bank, with Roman numerals chiseled into the upper right corners to mark the elevation of the water.

"Can we open the lock?" she asked.

"They're welded shut," he said. "No one's been maintaining them for a few years." He squinted through a slotted window to the bright river outside. The lock was made of wood, and its years against the water had weakened it. He wondered what would happen if the state and the Army Corps of Engineers could not decide who was responsible for the system of locks and dams that stretched along the river, built in the last century to provide deep pools for commercial shipping, but now abandoned. In the past loggers to the east had waited for the spring tides to float their huge rafts to markets in Frankfort, and the early settlers had used the river to open this first American frontier. He knew still others had used the river before them, and he gazed
past the dam to the beach on the bank where he once found hatchet heads and scraping tools and other artifacts of previous passage. "Let’s go look at the house,” he said. She followed him up the bank to the steps which led to the house. “Eighty-five steps,” he said, "and on the back side there are 255 that go down to the river.” Asher stroked a tree that stood in the wide weed-filled yard. “I fell out of this old bastard more than once. I used to go way up top and look for ships coming over the horizon, like Christopher Columbus.”

Margaret wandered over to the little boarded-up house. There was a padlock on the front door, and no place to look in. Asher walked around to the back and found the door hanging on one hinge. "Hey old girl,” he shouted, “come here.” She followed him and they entered the house. "Somebody’s been here,” Asher indicated a pile of beer cans, chip bags, fried chicken buckets, styrofoam containers, and some other assorted garbage. "It sure is smaller than it used to be,” he said, as they walked carefully through the lifeless house. "Too bad the windows are boarded up,” he said. He would have liked to see out, to see the river and the trees, and the coming greenness.

"Yeah, too bad.” Margaret was thinking about rats and snakes, and wishing they were outside, but would not walk back alone through the two rooms they had come in by.
Asher stood quietly, listening to the river, the wind rustling through the trees. "Do you want to spend the night here?" he asked. She shook her head. "Let's go, then," and they walked back down the eighty-five steps and across the lock wall to the waiting car.

"I can't do this shit very often," he said, staring at the floorboard and letting his clasped hands dangle. "It isn't worth it. The memories are a kid's memories, and that kid doesn't exist anymore."

"Sure he does, he's you, he's part of you, anyway."

Asher said, "I miss him. I miss them." He pointed back toward the house. "A couple of years ago I went to my grandparents' old place. It is completely deserted now. The house is falling down—it's broken. The porch is caving in, the windows are gone. I thought of my grandmother, how she wore herself out keeping that place clean; how my grandfather taught me everything I know about carpentry and plumbing and fixing things with my own two hands. I wanted to go to that house and put it back together. I thought about how they would have felt if they had seen it like that."

"Cedric, why didn't you?" she asked.

"What? Fix up the house and live there?" She nodded. "Because we don't own it anymore. Somebody bought the property and run cattle around there now. They store hay and stuff in the house."
Margaret was crying; for him, for his grandmother, for the house that cattle used without minding the floors. "Jesus, I made you cry," he said.

"You always make me cry," she said.

He scowled out the window, uncomfortable knowing she was crying if not because of him, at least in his behalf.

He squeezed her shoulder. "You'll be all right," he told her, and they rode in the car, looking ahead, saying nothing, until they reached the main road and she asked him which way to go. "South," he said, and she knew their journey was nearly over.

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It was splendid, all the rundown tourist attractions, Abner's Snake Farm Snow Cones Dairy Delle Hot Dogs, signs broken down, scaling paint, nobody home. They drove south on the old U.S. Highway, every 100 miles the temperature rose ten degrees and spring became more pronounced. They stopped at a motel in Tennessee where the Pakistani owners grew vegetables in the flower beds. They crossed Georgia to the coast, people waving at them from pickup trucks, Cedric and Margaret waving back. They saw things that made them laugh, they made silly jokes, they passed a restaurant with a big sign out front that said "If you can't stop, smile as you drive by" and he said "I'm a-smilin" and she said "and I'm a-drivin by." They stopped from time to time for a cold beer and finally they just faded into the road. Silence. Margaret
drove with the center skips flying at her, disappearing under the spinning wheels, while Asher sank into his jacket and watched the trees go by. They crossed into Florida without knowing it and stopped at a motel in the woods for the night. They ate a sandwich in the coffee shop and strolled around the little town for about an hour. Back at the motel Asher lifted Margaret onto the sink counter outside the bathroom and started taking off her clothes. She squirmed and pushed him away. "I want to take a shower," she said, "I'm dirty."

"I like you dirty," Asher said. She leaned back against the cold mirror, her knee brushing Asher's hairy cheek. She squeezed his face between her kneecaps. "Come on," she said, "let me up."

Margaret awoke to Asher standing in the doorway, looking mournfully into the gray morning, smoking, drinking coffee from a styrofoam cup. "What time is it?" she asked, raised on an elbow from the crumpled covers.

"A little after six," he said, and she let the elbow go out from under her and sank back into the bed for a few more minutes. She was a little stiff from so much driving and a little sore from too much last-chance sex with Asher. Neither of them knew when to quit.

The night before as they lay coupled in the cool dark room, she wrapped around him, trying to draw him in, trying to make that membrane between them disappear completely, he had said, "You need somebody to stay with you all the time."
She had snorted in her bitter, good-humored way, sad, tired, empty after all. "You think I don’t know that, you think I don’t know?" Then she started to cry, and said, "Anyway, you can’t make somebody do what you want them to, you just have to wait until you find somebody who wants to do the same thing you want to do."

"That’s true," he said, and stroked her hair. "You’ll be all right," he told her, and she stopped thinking about being alone and not having anyone to talk to who knew what she was talking about when she said something, and fell asleep.

Asher considered moving to the other bed but drowsily decided against leaving this warm smelly nest for the North Florida night air and the cold sheets on the other side. He reached out to the shadowy lump that was her head and shoulder but drew his hand back before he touched her. "No," he told himself, then he lay still until sleep filtered like black sand through his conscious mind and his racing thoughts settled into another part of his brain. He dreamed of dogs chasing butterflies, with the butterflies flittering crazily then abruptly whirling and barking back.

Asher sat on a picnic table at a sandy waterside public park just off State Road 520. A sweet, sickly diesel smell wafted across the river to them, borne on salty air. Someone had carved "Ralph G. eats hors" into the table. They conspired to add ‘d’oeuvre,’ but neither of them knew how to spell it, or believed in defacing public property anyway.
Margaret cut his hair carefully and trimmed his beard. The wind kept shifting and blowing his hair all around his head and the tiny snips flew away; he said she put the part in the wrong place. They ate fried chicken out of boxes and threw the skin and bones to the wheeling shrieking gulls. "Fucking canibals!" Margaret shouted. Asher walked to a grocery store and bought a 6-pack of beer. They sat on the picnic table, Asher wondering aloud whether an aircraft breaking the speed of light would streak across the sky the same way one exceeding the speed of sound causes a sonic boom, and drank the beer until the sun went down and they grew uncomfortably cool. They returned to their motel room and watched TV over their shoe-tops from separate beds. Margaret fell asleep and Asher watched her as she burrowed deeper and deeper into the covers, and finally disappeared altogether.

The next morning they toddled off to breakfast, drinking lots of coffee and eating pancakes and eggs and ham. They were in good spirits, although Margaret did not know what she would do with herself now, only that she had come to depend on him for company and balance and perspective and pleasure. She wouldn't think about not seeing him again, but chances were slight she would.

"You better ease up on that coffee, old girl, you'll have to stop every 10 minutes."

"I have to stay awake," she told him, knowing this trip that had taken them three days on back roads with plenty of beer stops and pulling off places to walk
around and look around would take her 20 straight hours of interstate driving, and she would not stop to spend the night alone at a motel unless she was really ragged out, and she would not take an old road and stop at little cafes and weird museums because Asher was not with her.

She left him finally, sitting in a booth, reading a newspaper and drinking more coffee, after once more ruffling her hair and telling her she would be all right. He even kissed her forehead and told her to take care of herself. She just kept thinking the whole thing was all wrong, that she should stick around with him, that everything would be all right; but she climbed into her car and headed out, checking the road map for the way to go, looking out for signs directing her to the interstate.

Asher drank his coffee and turned the pages of his newspaper, and wondered when he should call the people he knew in that town. He thought about Margaret and sincerely wished her well.

She cried northbound through two states, fighting the feeling she was going the wrong way after heading south for so long. Spring receded to the bud stage, and finally turned back into winter as she neared home. Though an icy rain fell, her heart lightened as she thought of the sweet warm weather to come. She thought of things she might do and places she might go and people she might meet. Cedric had shown her a whole new realm of possibilities, and while she knew she didn't want to live like
Cedric, alone and on the move, she knew there were other ways of living, ways she hadn't discovered yet. The possibilities, she thought, were endless.