

O+F

John Moncure Wetterau

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O + F

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for Rosy

1.

Tall. Dark hair. Nose almost straight. Mouth curving around prominent teeth. Beautiful, Oliver realized as their eyes met perfectly.

"Francesca, sorry I'm late," another woman said, guiding two girls into the next booth.

"I just got here."

"Hi, Mommy." Francesca's smile turned down, traveled around, and turned up independently at each corner.

"Hi, Sweetheart. Turn around, now."

One of the girls was looking tentatively at Oliver, holding the top of the booth with both hands. He waved at her, raised his eyebrows, and bent to his eggs. Toast. Nothing like toast. He wiped up the remaining yolk. Where's the husband? Probably one of those jerks in a Land Rover. A bad golfer. Cheats. Christ. Oliver drank the rest of his coffee and prepared to leave. As he slid sideways across the green plastic seat, he again caught the woman's eyes. They were calm and questioning, brown

with deepening centers the color of the inner heart of black walnut. He stood and nodded in the Japanese manner. No one would have noticed, unless perhaps for her friend.

He buttoned his coat before pushing open the outer door of the diner. The air was damp, tinged with car exhaust and diesel. The first flakes of a northeaster coasted innocently to the ground. Francesca--what a smile! She reminded him of the young Sinatra in _From Here To Eternity_, awkward and graceful at the same time. The friend was heavier and looked unmarried, a career teacher, maybe. Problems on short leashes yapped around her heels. Oliver shrugged, pulled a watch cap over his ears, and walked toward the Old Port.

A car pulled over. "Olive Oil!" George Goodbean shouted. "Want a ride?"

"Taking my life in my hands," Oliver said, getting in.

"It's a good day to die," George said.

"Aren't we romantic."

"Artists live on the edge, Olive Oil. Where the view is." A pickup passed at high speed, hitting a pothole and splattering mud across the windshield. "Moron!" George reached for the wiper switch.

The street reappeared. "Ahh," Oliver said, "now there's a view."

"Why is it, the worse the weather, the worse they drive?" George asked.

"Dunno. It isn't even bad yet."

"Assholes," George said.

"Yeah. I bought some black walnut," Oliver said. "I just saw a woman in Becky's; she had eyes the same color."

"You want I should go back?"

"I'm too short for her," Oliver said.

"You never know. Some of those short people in Hollywood have big reputations."

"They're stars," Oliver said. "I'm just short."

"What are you doing with the wood?"

"Haven't decided--maybe a table."

"I'm getting into casting. You ought to come over; I'm going to try out my furnace."

"Casting what?"

"Bronze. Small pieces."

"Hey, whoa, let me out." Oliver pointed at the ferry terminal, and George stopped.

"Yeah, come on over tomorrow morning, if you're not doing anything."

"O.K., I'll see."

George beeped twice and drove into the thickening snow. Oliver bought a ticket for Peaks Island. The ferry was nearly empty, cheerful with its high snub bow painted yellow, white superstructure, and red roof. It was not as spirited as the red and black tugs that herd tankers to the Montreal pipeline, nothing could match the tugboats--but the ferry was close; it had the human touch, a dory that couldn't stay away from cheesecake, broad in the beam, resolute, proof against the cold rollers of the outer bay. After two long blasts, the ferry churned away from the wharf. A line of gulls on the lee side of a rooftop watched them move into the channel and gather speed.

Twenty minutes later, the ferry slowed, shuddered, and stopped at the Peaks Island landing. Oliver walked uphill to the main street, unsure why he had come. Habit took him around by his former house. No lights were on, no sign of anyone home. He continued around the block, surprised at his disappointment. He hadn't seen Charlotte for six months and had no reason to see her now. He considered this over a cup of coffee at Will's. It was natural to check in sometimes with old friends. I mean, we were married, he told his cup.

Jealousy is a symptom--like the effects of drought. Owl told him that once. They had been standing on the club dock, having one of their rare conversations. He was telling Owl about Kiersten, how she wouldn't take him seriously, her smile always for Gary--star everything. Owl's voice was sympathetic but with a dissatisfied edge, as though he were impatient with or imprisoned by his superiority, his tenure at Brown, his aluminum boat, one of the fastest on the sound.

Oliver never thought to ask for an explanation, and then, sadly, it was too late. It was years before he understood Owl's jealousy pronouncement. He wasn't jealous any longer, certainly not where Kiersten was concerned. God, she'd driven everybody crazy. Territory--now that was different. You want your own territory, your own mate, your house, your space. It still pissed him off to see his old garage surrounded by Mike's messy piles of building materials. But he wasn't jealous. Charlotte was better off without him; she had a child, finally.

The waitress had a tolerant smile. Thank God for waitresses. He left a big tip and got back on the ferry.

Snow was drifting against brick buildings as Oliver walked into the Old Port. He decided to stop for a pint. Deweys was busy; people were packing it in early, finding strength in numbers. "A Guinness," he ordered, "for this fine March day." Sam set a dark glass, overflowing, on the bar in front of him. Oliver bent forward and slurped a mouthful. "You could live on Guinness foam," he said.

"And the occasional piece of cheese," Sam said. Patti Page was singing, "_I remember the night of The Tennessee Waltz . . . _" Her voice, the fiddle, the stately waltz told the old story: "_stole my sweetheart from me . . . _" One way or another, sooner or later, we are all defeated. Oliver felt a swell of sadness and the beginning of liberation.

"God, what a song," he said to Mark Barnes, who had come up beside him.

"Classic. How you doing, guy?"

"Hanging in there." More people came in, stamping snow from their boots. Patti Page gave way to Tom Waits belting out, _Jersey Girl_. "Another classic," Oliver said. Tragedy was just offstage in _Jersey Girl_, momentarily held at bay by sex and love and hope. "All downhill from here, Mark."

"Life is fine, my man."

"What? Must be a new dancer in town. How do you do it, anyway?"

"Innate sensuality," Mark said. "One glance across a crowded room . . ."

"Yeah, right. My rooms are crowded with women in black pants who have eyes only for each other. Although, I did see a beauty in Becky's this morning. Had two little girls with her---and a friend."

"What kind of friend?"

"A lady friend, not a black pantser, I'm pretty sure. Francesca, her name was."

"Francesca? Tall chick? Good looking?"

"I wouldn't call her a chick, exactly. More like a Madonna by Modigliani."

"Yeah, Francesca. She lives in Cape Elizabeth. I was in a yoga class with her once."

"I ought to take yoga," Oliver said.

"The ratio is good, man. Francesca. That was years ago. She married some guy who works for Hannaford's."

"I knew it," Oliver said.

"They can't help it," Mark said. "They have this nesting thing." Dancers came to Portland, walked around the block a couple of times, and met Mark. Six to eighteen months later, they married doctors.

"Did you ever think of settling down?" Oliver asked.

"I'm trying, man. Who do you like in the NCAA's? Duke?"

"No way. Robots," Oliver said. "Smug. Bred to win from birth."

"I got a hundred on them." Mark made money helping executives scale the job ladder. He was amused and ironic about it. They knocked themselves out; he got the dancers--for a time.

"Hey, Richard!"

"Mark . . . Oliver . . . The boss let us out early." Pleased with this statement, Richard O'Grady, who acknowledged no boss but "The Man

Upstairs," shuffled to his customary place at a long table on the other side of the bar. He was bright eyed, slight, and stooped, a survivor of diabetes and severe arthritis.

"Amazing smile!" Oliver said.

"A world authority on blood chemistry," Mark said. "You'd never know it--in here every night drinking scotch."

"Every night but Sunday," Oliver said. "I asked him, one time, where he got that smile. I thought he'd say something like: it was his mother's. He said, 'Don't know.' Then he said, 'Use it!' It was like a command he'd been given."

"Not too many around here that haven't had a drink on Richard," Mark said. "I'm outa here. Duke, man."

"Boo."

"Oliver," Richard called, "Help me with this plowman's lunch." Oliver sat on a wooden bench across the table from Richard.

"I'll have a bite," he said. "What's happening?"

"Oh, the usual," Richard said. "Palace intrigue. Too many chemists in one lab. I shouldn't complain; they do a good job." He bent over the table and lowered his voice. "One of the supervisors is a bit rigid. I hear about it, you know. I've tried to talk to her. It's delicate." He brightened as he straightened. "I'm sending her to a conference in Amsterdam. Maybe something will happen."

"That would be the place," Oliver said, cutting a slab of Stilton.

"How are you doing? Working?"

"In between programming projects at the moment," Oliver said. "Not sure what to do next. Sometimes I wonder what's the point of doing anything."

"Oliver . . ." Richard reminded him, pointing at the smoky ceiling, "you've got to trust The Man Upstairs. It's His plan." This would be too corny to take if it weren't coming from Richard.

"I wish He'd let me in on it." Oliver took a long swallow of stout.

"I'll tell you what I do when I feel bad," Richard said. "I find somebody who's worse off than I am, and I do something to help him out. Or her out. Works every time." He turned toward Sam and held one crippled hand in the air. "Over here, Sam, when you can." Oliver didn't think in terms of other people. He related to them as required, but his focus was inward. He imagined Richard's process: let's see, I feel bad; therefore, it's time to find person X who is worse off than I am and help him out. Or her. He could picture eligible persons, but he stumbled on the help part. What did he have to offer? Was a dollar bill going to make a difference? He felt blocked from the part of himself that might contain helpful things he could pass along.

"I like this chutney," he said, "good with this cheese. What was your father like, Richard?"

"Great guy," Richard said. He sloshed the scotch and ice cubes around in his glass. "I'll tell you a story about my father. He couldn't tell time. Someone gave him a watch, but he didn't want to learn. He was proud of the watch, wore it every day. He used to go to people and say, 'I'm having a little trouble reading this,' and then he'd hold his wrist up." Richard raised his arm proudly out in front of him. "And he'd squint, as if he had eye trouble. 'Oh, it's a quarter to nine,' they'd say." Richard threw back his head and laughed. "My dad was a great guy--could barely read, always singing. He worked on the docks."

"Hi, Richard." A thin woman approached. She had dark eyes and bleached blonde hair pulled into a tight pony tail.

"Hi, Sally. How are you?"

"O.K."

"Do you know Oliver?"

"Seen you around," she said, appraising him. Oliver felt about a four out of ten, maybe a three.

"Sally works at Mercy Hospital. That cigarette isn't doing you any good, you know."

"Nag, nag, nag."

"You got one for me?" Richard lit up the room with his smile.

"Oh, Richard!" Sally felt in her purse with one hand.

"What are you drinking?" Richard asked.

"I'll see you guys," Oliver said, sliding to the end of the bench and standing. Sally took his place. "Thanks for the eats, Richard."

"Stay warm," Richard said.

A plow rumbled by, as Oliver stepped out into the storm. He followed it along the white empty street. He considered stopping at Giobbi's Restaurant, but he turned up Danforth and walked to State Street where he lived in a second floor apartment on the last block before the Million Dollar bridge.

Verdi was waiting. He jumped from the window sill and made a fuss bumping against Oliver's legs. "Hungry, are we?" Oliver bent over and stroked him from head to tail. "Yes, very large and very fierce is Verdi. Very fierce." Verdi was brown and black, heavyset, with a large tomcat's head and yellow eyes. He padded deliberately over to the lengths of walnut leaning upright in one corner of the room and scratched luxuriously, stretching full length, as though he had been waiting to do this for some time. "Aieeee! Swell, Verdi." Oliver hung his coat on a peg and gathered up the boards. For the moment, he laid them on the table. The cat was irritated. "How about some nice pine," Oliver said. "Much better than walnut. I'll get you a nice soft piece of pine. In the meantime . . ." He opened a can of salmon Friskies.

Verdi ate, and Oliver refilled his water dish. The boards were beautiful. He'd been right about the color of Francesca's eyes. There

was an actual black walnut, a large one, at the edge of the parking area behind his building. It shaded his kitchen window during the summer and dropped hundreds of furry green walnuts that were gathered by squirrels each fall. Oliver had planted six walnuts in yogurt containers. He'd let them freeze first, done everything right, but none of them came up. The seeds were finicky for such a powerful tree. Maybe they had to pass through a squirrel. "Biology is complicated," he said to Verdi.

The kitchen had been a master bedroom in the original house. The appliances, counter, and sink were arranged along one wall and part of another, leaving plenty of space for a table in the center. The wall to the adjoining living room had been mostly removed; the two rooms functioned as one. Steps led to a landing and then to an attic bedroom with a view of the harbor. There was a fireplace that he rarely used. In one corner, a small table held a computer system.

Oliver sat at the kitchen table and ran the heels of his hands along the walnut. He enjoyed making things from wood: easy shelves, chests, a cradle once for a wedding present. He had a table saw and a router in the basement, but he kept his tools under a rough workbench that he had built along one wall of the kitchen. A "Workmate" stood in the living room near the door to the hall. Usually it was covered with mail.

The touch of the wood was reassuring. Deep in the grain, in what might be made from the grain, was something iconic and alive, more alive than what could be said about it. Oliver took particular pleasure in finishing a shelf or a chest, hand rubbing the surface and seeing the patterns of the grain shine and deepen. He would have to buy legs if he were going to make a table. Or learn how to use a lathe. He didn't have a lathe. Maybe he could make a small box--to hold something special. He could give it to someone.

Who? A wave of longing swept over him. Who would care? He had an impulse to put his head down on his arms and give up.

"There are no cowards on this ship!" God, he hadn't thought of that for years. His high school English teacher had said it, loudly. It was the punch line of a war story. The teacher had accompanied a couple of his Navy buddies to the bow of their ship; one of them was bragging that he would dive. The captain had come up behind them, asked what they were doing, and then ordered them _all_ to dive. Apparently, it had been a high point of sorts in his teacher's life.

"No cowards on this ship, Verdi," Oliver said, standing. Toast. Tea. When Oliver was upset, he turned to food. He had a high metabolism and ate what he wanted. His body looked chubby on its short square frame, but there was more muscle than fat under his skin; he could move quickly when he wished. He had a wide serious mouth with strong teeth. His eyebrows and hair were black. His eyes were large and dark brown with lids that slanted slightly across the corners. Women looked at him and were puzzled by something that was different. He almost never got into it.

"Oliver Muni Prescott," he had told a few. "Owl Prescott was my stepfather. My father is Japanese--Muni, his name is--I never met him." The toast popped up. Oliver buttered it and laid on marmalade. He put the toast and tea on a tray and carried it upstairs. His mattress was on the floor next to a window set low in the wall, under the eaves. He

lay down, munched toast, and watched the snow falling and blowing. When he turned his head, the window was like a skylight. Mother is coming, he remembered. The image of his mother with her flamboyant blonde hair was replaced immediately by that of Francesca--quiet, natural, and no less forceful.

He finished the toast and held the mug of tea on his chest with both hands. He could see Francesca's eyes in front of him. They were asking something, and he was answering. Her question was more complicated than he had thought at Becky's Diner. Were they the same? Was she beautiful? Was he for real? He relaxed and aligned in her direction. The answer was reassuring. "Yes," he said. He lifted his head and sipped tea. "O.K.," he said.

2.

The sky was bright blue, the wind gusty out of the northwest. Oliver squinted at the fresh snowbanks on his way to Becky's. Sunglasses--should have worn sunglasses. He had oatmeal and a blueberry muffin, drank coffee, and listened to the waitresses chatter about their dates. Francesca did not come in, but her image remained vivid. He waited, not so much for her as for something in his mood to change, to see if it would change. It didn't. He continued to feel slightly excited, as though he had something to look forward to. Francesca had met him in a central place. Was it a place that they made, sheltered between them? Or was it a place inside each of them that was similar, more accessible in each other's company? Wherever it was, Oliver knew that he wanted to go there again.

He walked home, shoveled out his Jeep, started it, and scraped the windows, thinking that he'd see what George was up to. He could have walked, but there wasn't much cat food left. He'd shop, maybe take a drive.

George had a loft in a warehouse at the foot of Danforth Street. "Hey there, Oliver" he said, opening the door. "Big day--Foundry Goodbean!"

"I brought some bagels," Oliver said.

George rubbed his hands together. "Come see."

Near a brick wall, a thirty gallon grease drum stood on a sheet of asbestos-like material. Two copper pipes made a right angle to its base. One came from a propane tank in a corner; one was connected to an air blower driven by an electric motor. "Ta da!" George said, lifting off a thick top that had a hole in its center. Oliver looked down into the drum. "I used a stovepipe for a form--cast refractory cement around it." The drum was solid cement around the space where the stovepipe had been.

"Slick city," Oliver said.

George picked up a small object from a table. "The Flying Lady," he said. He held it between his thumb and forefinger and swooped it through the air. Oliver looked closely at a wax figure of a trapeze

artist. Her brown arms were held out; her back was arched.

"Wonder Woman."

"I've got to make the mold," George said, "burn out the investment."

"Investment?"

"Goopy stuff that packs around The Lady. Then I fire it in a kiln. The wax burns and disappears, leaving a hard ceramic mold."

"Aha," Oliver said, "the lost wax process."

"Me and Cellini," George said. "Here, make something." He handed Oliver a sheet of wax. "Not too big. I'll cast it with The Lady. There's knives and stuff." He pointed at one end of the table. "And other kinds of wax. Use what you want." He began to mix the investment.

Oliver laid the wax on the table. Without thinking, he cut out the shape of a heart. He cut four short pieces from a length of spaghetti shaped wax and made a square letter O. It looked stupid. "Can you bend this stuff?"

"Heat it," George said. "There's an alcohol lamp."

Oliver warmed another piece of spaghetti wax and made an oval O. He stuck it on the heart and added a plus sign and the letter, F. "A valentine," he said.

George made a tree of wax, two inches high with a double trunk. He stuck The Flying Lady on one trunk and the heart, upright, on the other. Using more wax, he planted the tree in a circular rubber base. "Let me have that flask." He pointed at a steel cylinder about six inches long. He slipped the cylinder over the waxes and tightly into the rubber base. "There." He poured creamy investment into the flask until the waxes were well covered and the flask was nearly full. "After it sets, you peel off the base and fire the flask."

They sat in a far corner and had coffee.

"So who's F?" George's eyes gleamed.

"Francesca," Oliver said. "I don't know her, really. She's tall and married."

George shook his head. "Can't live with 'em; can't live without 'em." He took a large bite of bagel to ease the pain.

"You do all right," Oliver said.

"Oh, you know . . ." George threw one arm in the air. "The artist thing. They're curious. They're all curious, Olive Oil."

"What happened to Marcia?"

"Oh, Marcia!" George rolled his eyes and deflated somewhat. "She had allergies, it turned out. Dust. What can I say?"

"She was good looking," Oliver said.

"Oh, yeah, Marcia!" George's voice trailed away. "Look," he said, "it's going to take a while to get the investment ready. Why don't you come back around seven? Then we'll cast."

"Outa sight," Oliver said.

He drove to Shop 'N Save and stacked two dozen cans of salmon Friskies in his shopping cart. He found a box of fancy tea biscuits that he could offer to his mother. She and Paul were stopping in Portland the next night. They always stayed at the Holiday Inn, but she would want to come over and make sure that he wasn't living in filth, had clean towels, and so on. She would sniff around for a female presence, and then she would look at Paul; Paul would suggest that the sun was over the yardarm; and they would go to DiMillo's for dinner.

Oliver turned his shopping cart around the end of an aisle, swerved, and stopped to avoid bumping into Francesca's friend. She was studying the pasta sauces, one hand resting on her cart, one hand on her hip. Her jacket was open. Oliver's eyes lingered on her solid breasts and tight red sweater. She looked at him. He cleared his throat. "Not much choice," he said. "I found a good sauce at Micucci's--the one with a great picture of the owner's grandmother when she was young. It wasn't that expensive, either." He was babbling, starting to blush. Her eyes narrowed and a small smile pushed at the corners of her mouth.

"Yes," she said. "Micucci's."

"Great place," he said, rolling by, pretending to be in a hurry. God, the woman was some kind of menace. But she knew about Francesca . . . And those breasts. He clung to the cart and let his vision blur as the red sweater came back into focus. He blinked and joined a checkout line. A skinny woman in front of him put a gallon jug of vodka on the counter. "Not a bad idea," he said. She looked at him, smiled as though she were on a two second tape delay, and then frowned as she concentrated on paying. Her arms and legs were like sticks. He wondered what she'd had to put up with and if she had anyone to put up with her. He didn't really like vodka, but he ought to get something for George. What do foundrymen drink? Red wine? Ale? The woman picked up energy as she wheeled her cart toward the parking lot. Keep going. Good luck.

He drove home and put away the groceries. He went down to the basement and brought up a piece of pine which Verdi ignored. "Really, it's much better," Oliver argued. The phone rang.

"Oliver? This is Jennifer Lindenthwaite."

"Hi, Jennifer."

"I'm calling for the Wetlands Conservancy."

"Oh, I thought you wanted to take me to Atlantic City."

"Rupert might not like that," she said.

"I suppose not," he said. "Ah, well . . ."

"Can you do some work for us, Oliver? Our mailing list is in hopeless

shape. We bought a computer, but no one knows how to do anything but type letters on it."

"You want me to set up a database?"

"I suppose that _is_ what we need."

"How soon?"

"Umm . . ."

"Yesterday, right?"

"Well, sometime soon, at your convenience."

"As it happens," Oliver said, "I've got time in the next couple of weeks. How about if I come over Tuesday, say--around nine?"

"Thank you, Oliver. You're a sweetheart. See you then." Jennifer hung up, and Oliver looked at the computer. "Can't buy Friskies on my good looks," he said. That was how work came in for him--two weeks here, six months there. He got by, barely.

The day drifted along. He took a nap, watched a basketball game on TV, and cleaned, minimally, for his mother's inspection. At seven, he walked down to George's.

"Foundrymen's Red!" he said, holding up a liter of Merlot. "Foundry workers, I should say."

"Good timing." George rummaged for glasses, found one, and handed it to Oliver. "The guest gets the clean glass." He washed one for himself and filled them both. "Cellini," he toasted.

"Pavarotti," Oliver responded. "And other great Italians. Did you know my mother is Italian?"

"Some people have all the luck."

"Yeah," Oliver said. "She was a singer when she was young."

"Probably cooks, too," George said.

"Yeah."

"Jesus, Olive Oil."

"She's coming through this weekend. She and Paul, her husband. They go to Quebec every year."

"Good eating in Quebec."

"You bet," Oliver said. "She likes to dress up. They have a good time."

"Wow," George said. "I don't think my mom has bought a dress in twenty years. Says she's too old for that foolishness."

"My mom is too old, but it doesn't stop her." He looked at the furnace. "So, what are we doing?"

"We're set," George said. They crossed the loft, and he handed Oliver a propane torch. "I'll turn on the gas at the main tank. You light it. There's the blower valve." He pointed to a round handle mounted between the blower and the pipe that led to the furnace. Oliver lit the torch and knelt by the furnace. George stood by the propane tank. "Hope this works. You ready?"

"Do it."

George opened the line, and Oliver angled the torch tip down into the furnace. Nothing happened for several moments. There was a whooshing sound, and George said, "Holy Mama!" A blue flame, the size of a beach ball, was bouncing under the wooden ceiling joists. Oliver concentrated. Air. He reached back and grabbed the blower valve, twisting it counter-clockwise. Almost immediately, the blue flame lowered. He continued opening the valve. The flame pirouetted irregularly down an invisible column, drawn toward the furnace.

"Air," he shouted. "Not enough air until it got way the hell up there."

"Keep going," George said.

The flame reached the top of the furnace and began to whirl in a tight spiral. It plunged inside, roaring and spinning at high speed. The floor shook. "Jesus," George said.

"It's like a Goddamn bomb," Oliver said.

George put an ingot of bronze into a carbon crucible and gripped the edge of the crucible with long tongs. He lowered the crucible to the bottom of the furnace. "Put the top on," he said. Oliver lifted and pushed the top over the furnace. The roaring became muffled, contained. It felt safer. "Nice going, about the air," George said. "I thought we were going to burn the place down."

"Physics," Oliver said. George looked down through the hole in the top.

"Nothing yet." He stood back. A few minutes later the ingot began to slide toward the bottom of the crucible. "There she goes," George said. "It's working." He opened the door of the kiln, and, using a different set of tongs, extracted the flask. He set the flask, glowing cherry red, upside down in a flat pan of sand. He shut off the gas and unplugged the blower. "The top," he said, handing Oliver a pair of heavy gloves and pointing. Oliver worked the top over one edge of the drum, tipped it down, and rolled it onto three bricks.

George reached into the furnace with the long tongs. He lifted the crucible from the furnace and walked with careful steps to the flask. Holding the lip of the crucible over the flask, he tipped his body to one side. The bronze poured like golden syrup into the hole where the wax had been, quickly filling the mold.

George lowered the crucible back into the furnace. After the roaring, it seemed unusually silent. "Intense," Oliver said. "Now what?" George picked up the hot flask with the second pair of tongs and dropped it into a bucket of water. There was a burst of sizzling and bubbling, and it was quiet again.

"The temperature shock weirds out the investment. It changes state--to a softer stuff that we can get off the bronze." George poured the water into his bathtub and refilled the bucket with cold water. "Still hot," he said.

They drank wine while the flask cooled. When George could hold the flask, he pushed the investment out of the cylinder and chipped at it with a screwdriver. A hip appeared. "The Flying Lady," Oliver said.

"Damn!" George said, chipping and prying. Gobs of oatmeal colored investment fell away. "Not bad!" George held up the Lady and the heart on their bronze tree. "We cut them off and

polish. . ."

An hour later, filled with wine and a sense of accomplishment, Oliver walked up Danforth Street. The bronze heart was solid and heavy in his pocket. He warmed it in his hand, feeling the O, the plus sign, and the F over and over again, a mantra said with the ball of his thumb. When he got home, he placed the heart on one of the walnut boards, fed Verdi, and went to bed.

He lay there remembering the bronze pouring into the heart. A bit of him had poured with it, and an exchange had taken place: something bronze had entered him at the same moment.

3.

"Mythic," Oliver said to Paul Peroni, the next afternoon. They were sitting at the kitchen table with his mother. Paul was weighing the heart in his palm as Oliver described the bronze casting. Oliver's mother took another tea biscuit.

"Never too old for a valentine," she said, seeming to note the absence of a female presence in the apartment.

"Yes . . . No . . ." Paul answered them both. He was medium sized, sinewy, and graying--surprisingly light on his feet for someone who installed slabs of ornamental marble.

"It's so nice to see Verdi again. Kitty, kitty," she called. Verdi stretched and remained in the corner. "Oh well, be that way," she said, straightening. Lip gloss, touches of eye shadow, and her full wavy blonde hair broadcast femaleness like a lighthouse. The good body could be taken for granted. You might as well assume it, the message flashed, cuz you sure as hell weren't going to be lucky enough to find out. She and Paul were well matched. "I knew I was onto something, our first date," she'd told Oliver. "I was cooing about Michelangelo and Paul said, 'yes, but he used shitty marble.' "

She looked pointedly at Paul. "Sun's over the yard arm," he said.

DiMillo's was uncrowded. They sat at a window table, ordered drinks, and talked as boats rocked quietly in the marina and an oil tanker

worked outward around the Spring Point light. Oliver's mother bragged about his niece, Heather, and her latest swimming triumphs. She complained about the long winter and how crowded the Connecticut shore had become. "It may be crowded," Oliver said, "but you get daffodils three weeks before we do."

Oliver sipped his second Glenlivet and looked back from the darkening harbor. "I wish I had known my grandfather," he said to his mother. "I remember when he died. I was eight, I think."

"Yes, you were in third grade," she said. "It was sad. He was living in Paris. When he wrote, I called him at the hospital--but he didn't want me to come. He said that he wanted me to remember him as he was."

"When was the last time you saw him?" Oliver asked.

"Oh . . . I . . ." She looked at Paul. He raised his eyebrows sympathetically. "I guess I never told you that story," she said to Oliver. "It was a long time ago. My sixteenth birthday, in fact." She sighed.

"It was at Nice, on the Riviera. He arranged a party on the beach--wine, great food, fireworks . . . After the fireworks, he gave me a bamboo cage with a white dove inside.

"This is your present, Dior,' he said. 'You must let it go, give it freedom.' I opened the cage, and the dove flew up into the dark. 'Very good,' my father said. He hugged me. Then he said, 'Now, we will say goodbye. You are grown, and I will not be seeing you and your mother any more. Be good to your mother.' He hugged me again and just walked down the beach--into the night."

Oliver watched tears slide down his mother's cheeks.

She lifted a napkin and wiped away her tears. "He was very handsome."

"No need of that shit," Paul said.

They were silent.

"Paul's right," Oliver said.

"My mother packed up and brought us back to New Haven. We lived with her folks for a while."

"Good old New Haven," Paul said.

"Now, _your_ father . . ." She smiled at Paul.

"He liked the ladies," Paul said.

"What did he do?" Oliver asked.

"He was a stone mason, made his own wine, raised hell. Fought with Uncle Tony until the day he died. They were tight, though--don't let anybody else say anything against them. Bocce ball. Jesus." Paul shook his head and held up his glass. "Life," he said.

"Yes, life." Oliver's mother raised her glass.

"Coming at you," Oliver added.

"Us," Paul said.

They touched glasses and got on with a shore dinner of lobsters and clams.

Oliver said goodbye in DiMillo's parking lot. He walked home imagining the sixteen year old Dior Del'Unzio with her mouth open as the white dove flew upward and then with her hand to her mouth as her father walked away. "No need of that shit." He was glad Paul was around to take care of his mother. She was vulnerable under the big smile; Oliver often felt vaguely guilty and responsible for her.

She had done the same thing as her mother: hooked up with an exotic stranger--Muni Nakano, proper son of a proper Japanese family in Honolulu. But, his mother hadn't stuck around for sixteen years. She'd come back from Hawaii to Connecticut, pregnant, and eventually married Owl Prescott. They raised him and Amanda, his half sister. His mother had made a go of it in New England. Only once in awhile would she show signs of her Italian childhood. "Topolino mio," she used to call him when he was little and she'd been partying.

He poured a nightcap and put on a tape--Coltrane and Johnny Hartman. I'm wasting my life, he thought suddenly. What am I going to do? He knew that he needed to change, but it seemed hopeless. He looked at the walnut boards. Maybe a box . . .

He sketched a little chest with a hinged top. He erased the straight bottom lines and drew in long low arches. "That's better." The top should overhang. Should its edges be straight or rounded? Straight was more emphatic; he could always round them afterwards.

He could make each side from a single width of walnut. Dovetailed corners. A small brass hasp and lock. Why not? He could make the whole thing out of one eight foot piece and have two boards left over for something else or for extra if he screwed up the dovetails.

"Here you go," he said to Verdi. He replaced the offending piece of pine with the original scratched walnut. "Nothing but the best for Team Oliver." He looked at the heart. "Team O." Verdi forgave him without moving. "Bedtime," Oliver said.

On Monday, Oliver cut pieces for the sides, top, and bottom of the box. He bought a dovetail saw and made several cardboard templates for the joints. It was a way of thinking about them. They were tricky, had to interlock perfectly, one end male, one end female.

"What have you been up to?" Jennifer Lindenthwaite asked on Tuesday morning.

"Making a box," Oliver said.

"Oh, that's exciting."

"It's harder than it looks--for me, anyway."

Jennifer wanted him to look at her and not at an imagined box. She was a solid blonde, Nordic, with broad cheeks and a big smile. "I worry about Rupert when he does things around the house. Something usually goes wrong."

"Ah . . ." Oliver said. "A minor flaw."

"Rupert is wonderful," she said. "Now, the mailing list. Hi, Jacky." Oliver turned and was astonished to see Francesca's friend in the doorway. "Jacky is one of our volunteers. She does a lot of the mailing list work. I thought you could work together on this. Jacky, this is Oliver Prescott."

Jacky stepped forward. "Jacky Chapelle," she said. She had strong cheekbones and dark blonde hair, cut short and swept back. Her eyes were hazel colored. She had a winged messenger look that lightened her direct, almost blunt, expression and her powerful shoulders.

"Uh, hi." Oliver shook her hand. "Did you find any pasta sauce?"

"Eventually."

"Oh," Jennifer said. "You know each other."

"Not exactly," he said. Jennifer looked at him closely. _Hell is being in one room with two women_, Owl said. Oliver cleared his throat. "Where's the computer?"

"Just down the hall." Jennifer led them to another room. "Let me know if you need anything."

"Well," Oliver said as they were left alone.

"You don't look like a programmer," Jacky said.

"Thank you."

She showed him a box of file cards--the mailing list. "Here is what we have. It would be nice to be able to print mailing labels, and we need to keep track of who has contributed."

"Sure," Oliver said. "And probably some other things."

"Yes," she said. "Some of the members are summer people. We need to know their winter addresses."

"What's winter?"

"Labor Day to the 4th of July," she said.

"The Maine we know and love," Oliver said. "We can keep individual winter start and end dates for each name, use defaults if we don't have the information."

"Right," she said. "Ideally, the list would interact with other programs someday. It has members on it, and people who aren't members but who are interested. Also, media people. And legislators. Sometimes we send special mailings. I suppose we'll need some kind of type code."

"O.K.," Oliver said. They discussed requirements and agreed to meet the following Saturday morning. Jacky left, and Oliver gave a thumbs up sign to Jennifer who was talking on the phone.

Not a bad little job, he thought, driving back to Portland. He'd been itching to ask Jacky about Francesca, but something had stopped him. He wanted to know Jacky better. She was sure of herself and moved comfortably. Her breasts were invading his consciousness; he found it hard to think about Francesca at the same time.

That afternoon, he began cutting the dovetails. It took concentration; hours went by. But when he fit the first two ends together it seemed as though it had been only a few minutes. "All right!" he said, leaving the attached pieces on the table.

Verdi came in looking satisfied. The weather was warmer, much better for prowling. More snow was possible, but the chances were against it. Oliver put away his long johns for the winter. "Probably too early," he said to Verdi, "but so what."

The next morning, as he waited for a seat in Becky's, he saw a familiar figure in a booth. She was facing away from him, but he was fairly sure it was Francesca when she turned her head. She stood and walked toward him, following the man who was with her. Francesca, yes. The man was tall and blonde with a wide forehead and a long triangular face. He had an easy vain expression, as though he had a full day ahead of being admired. Francesca's head was down. She walked carefully. As they passed, her eyes met Oliver's and he realized that she had already recognized him, had known that he was there. Her face was resigned with traces of humor around the edges. He was struck by her calm, so much like his. They shared a moment of this calm--the briefest of moments--but it felt as though it expanded infinitely outward around them. Did she raise her eyebrows? He thought he saw her flush, but she was past him before he could be sure. He remembered the bronze heart, and warmth stirred in him. When he got home, he put it in his pocket and rubbed his thumb over the O, the plus sign, and the F.

By Saturday, he had programmed a prototype design for the mailing list. In the early days of programming, every detail had to be laid out on paper before you sat in front of a computer. It was too slow and expensive to rework code. Now, you could make changes easily. It was more efficient to show a customer a quick design that could be used as a starting point for discussion and improvement.

He tossed a canvas shoulder bag containing notes and diskettes into the Jeep. Verdi took up a position behind the bare forsythia bushes. "Go get 'em," Oliver said. His house was on the south side of the hill overlooking the harbor. The first crocuses were popping up, several days ahead of the ones at the Conservancy. He was early; no one was there.

Ten minutes later, Jacky drove up. She got out of a red Toyota truck and waved one hand. "I've got the key," she said. "Did you get anything done?"

"Yeah, a start," Oliver said. He installed the software while she made a pot of coffee.

"Coffee's on," she said, carrying a cup for herself. "Mugs are in the

cupboard above the sink." Oliver decided against a joke about a woman's role in the office. He walked down the hall and poured his own. He looked at his hiking boots, light colored jeans, and dark plaid shirt. It was Saturday, for God sake. Every day was Saturday for Oliver as far as clothes were concerned. What difference did it make? Jacky was wearing tan jeans and a denim jacket, open over a mahogany colored jersey. She was a big woman. His eyes were at the level of her collarbone. Her jacket would swing back easily. Stop it, he told himself.

She objected to his mailing list screens. "Cluttered," she said. She was right. He explained that he had jammed everything in as a beginning, so that they could see what they were working with. She was

clear about what she wanted. Forty-five minutes later, they were back outside.

"Beautiful day," he said. She smiled enigmatically and turned her ignition key.

"Damn," she said.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing happening." She turned the key several more times.

"Pop the hood," Oliver said. The hood sprang open just as the words left his mouth. He felt for the second latch and leaned his head over the engine. "Try it again." He could hear the solenoid clicking. "How about the lights?" The lights were fine, plenty of juice. "Don't know," he said. "Could be the starter. I don't think a jump will do it."

Jacky called triple A. An older man went through the same procedure and then hoisted the truck behind his wrecker.

"Ride home?" Oliver asked.

"If you don't mind," Jacky said. "South Portland."

"Right in my direction," Oliver said. He drove into the city and pointed out his house as they approached the bridge. "Back soon, Verdi," he called out the window.

"Verdi?"

"My cat." They crossed the bridge, and Jacky directed him to a quiet street in a residential neighborhood. He stopped in her driveway intending to back out and return the way they had come.

"You look hungry," she said.

"I am." He was surprised.

"I have something for you. Come in." She slid out and walked to the front door without waiting for an answer. He followed her into a house which was sunnier and more spacious than it appeared from the front. A long living room opened to a sun porch at the back. "I have a double lot," she said, showing him the porch. Two large willow trees framed the end of the yard. "High bush blueberries," she said, waving at a

stand of bushes that ran along one side. "Salad garden over there. Flowers. Fun."

"Nice," he said.

"I had a craving for rare steak last night. I could only eat half of it, though. It's in the refrigerator." She led him to the kitchen. "There's mayo, mustard, horseradish--if you're feeling wild. Bread's in there." She turned. "Oh, there's ale in the bottom of the refrigerator. I'll have a glass." She left the room.

"Do you want a sandwich?" he called after her.

"No, thanks, I'll just nibble," she said. A door closed.

Oliver opted for horseradish, not a usual choice for him. "Not bad," he said when she came back, "the horseradish." Jacky took a long swallow of ale. She had taken off her jacket and washed her face.

"It's been a good truck," she said.

"Starters go," Oliver said. "Toyotas are fine. Where do you work?"

"I'm a banker," she said. He sat straighter.

"Fooled you," she said.

"I wouldn't have guessed. I thought maybe you were a teacher." When I saw you with Francesca, he almost added.

"Bankers are discreet," she said. She looked at him directly. "Are you--discreet?"

He considered. "Yes." He was apologetic for some reason.

She approved. "You look like someone who keeps things private."

Well, it was true. He confirmed with a nod and took another bite of sandwich.

"Have you explored your sexuality, Oliver?" Whoa! His throat closed, and he sat there chewing foolishly.

"I was married," he managed to get out.

"I didn't think you were a virgin. I mean, for instance, have you ever been restrained?" She spoke quietly, but Oliver felt the tension ratchet up a notch.

"Restrained?" Jacky left the kitchen and returned with a pair of handcuffs which she placed on the table.

"Oh," Oliver said. "No."

"It takes a lot of character and trust," she said, matter of factly. "Not many can do it. Would you like to see how they feel?" He hesitated and felt something inside him start to slip, to accede to her. "Hold out your hands," she said. Her eyes were large. He held up his arms without taking his eyes from hers. She smiled and closed the handcuffs

around his wrists. "There," she said. "How do they feel?" She watched him, still smiling.

"Not bad," he said.

"You like them, don't you?" He swallowed. "Come with me," she said. "I'll show you something." He followed her into a large bedroom. She opened a dresser drawer and took out a long belt. Oliver held his hands near his waist feeling foolish and short of breath.

"Are you the sheriff?" he asked.

She laughed and came toward him. "Much better than that," she said. She looped the belt through his arms and pulled him slowly across the room. "Let me know if you are not O.K. about this." He heard it as a challenge. She dragged a chair over without letting go of the belt. "Put your hands over your head." He raised his arms, and she stepped up on the chair. She passed one end of the belt through a heavy eye bolt that was screwed into the ceiling and which he hadn't noticed. She buckled the belt so that his arms were held above him.

"Much better," she repeated, stepping down and placing the chair back against the wall. She studied him. "You look very nice, Oliver. Just a moment." She went out to the kitchen and came back with their ale. She drank some of hers and said, "Let me know if you are thirsty." He nodded. She was happier. Her color was higher. Good looking, actually, he thought.

She read his mind. "Yes--you are feeling new things now." She moved a step closer. She arched her back and slowly rolled her shoulders. "Do you like my body, Oliver?" He reddened and swallowed. "How sweet! You blush," she said. "You are my captive. I can tease you now . . ." She went to the dresser and took another swallow of ale. She tugged at the bottom of her jersey, tightening it against her breasts. She moved closer and swiveled slowly from side to side. "Mmmm," she said. "You do like me!" Oliver's mouth opened and he began to breathe harder. He nodded dumbly.

Jacky stepped back and looked him up and down. "Very nice," she said, "but you have a lot to learn. Would you like to? Learn?"

"Yes," he said.

"Nothing leaves this room," Jacky said. "I don't even tell my girlfriends about this." That was a relief, he registered in a far corner of his mind. She brought over his glass and held it to his lips. "Yes?" He nodded, not trusting his voice. She tipped the glass enough for him to take a small sip of ale. "I am in control," she said, looking down at him. She was close, almost touching. She smelled of honeysuckle. "You will learn to please me, to care only for my pleasure. You will suffer for me. When you are good, you will be rewarded. But you must prove yourself." There was a practiced sound to her words.

To his surprise, he wanted to prove himself. He wanted to please her.

"Well?"

"Yes," he promised.

"You will serve me without question. Then, you will be happy." She freed him. "Come back Friday at six o'clock. Bring a heavy wooden ruler that you have decorated. You are to buy it at an office supply store, saying that it is for your mistress. You may go. Oh, and take the rest of that steak sandwich with you." She went into a bathroom and closed the door.

Oliver drove away shaking his head. What was that all about? He couldn't deny the urge he had to surrender to her, to obey her. It pulled at him like an undertow as he crossed the bridge. He walked down to Deweys.

Mark was holding up one corner of the bar. "Hey Buddy, how's your love life?" Intuitive bastard.

"What love life?" Oliver said and listened to Mark crow about Duke. Mark could probably explain this sexual strangeness, but it was none of his business. After a Guinness, Oliver felt more like himself, but as he walked through the Old Port he passed an office supply store, closed for the weekend, and he remembered the ruler. Decorate? Could you even buy a wooden ruler any more? It was disturbing. Too much. He put the experience in the back of his mind and resumed working on the box and the mailing list program.

On Wednesday, he entered the office store and asked if they sold wooden rulers. An elderly lady with exaggerated make-up showed him a blue box in a far corner of the store. "We sell mostly plastic ones," she said. "But some prefer these. They last." He bought an eighteen inch ruler with an inlaid brass edge. "For my mistress," he said, "yuk, yuk." The woman gave him change without replying.

He sprayed the ruler with black paint he had in the cellar. "I wouldn't call it decorated," he said to Verdi the next day. The dovetail template caught his eye. He took it down to the cellar and found a can of Rustoleum. Using the template as a stencil, he sprayed a pattern of triangles along both sides of the ruler. The reddish brown color on the black background gave it a Navajo look. _If you're going to do something, do it well,_ he reminded himself, pleased. That was another of Owl's sayings; one that Oliver had made his own. Poor Owl. He had not done something well the night he disappeared from his boat. Did he have time to regret that he never won the Bermuda race? Was it a relief or just a stupid accident? Oliver imagined dark water closing over Owl. He shivered and put it out of his mind.

On Friday, Oliver nearly backed out. But the ruler glowed on his kitchen table like a promise. "I don't know," he said. He took a shower, put on clean clothes, and parked tentatively in Jacky's driveway. He rang and waited. When she opened the door, he held the ruler up in both palms. She looked at it and asked him in. Her eyes were bright.

"Wine, Oliver." She pointed to glasses on the kitchen table. He poured Washington State Chardonnay for each of them and held up one glass in a silent toast. "Salud," she said. She turned the ruler over in her hand thoughtfully. "Did you say it was for your mistress?"

"Yes," Oliver said. "The saleslady didn't say anything--probably happens every five minutes."

"Good job," Jacky said, looking at the ruler.

"Kind of raw out," Oliver said.

"An indoor kind of night," she said. "Finish your wine." She spoke gently but firmly. Oliver looked at her and felt the same urge to yield that he had before. He was ready for her to tell him what to do. He wanted her to. "Yes," she said as he put down his glass. She waited. His eyes opened and a little thrill ran through him as he surrendered to her. "Go in the bedroom and strip to your underwear. Kneel on the floor with your hands on the bed."

She sipped her wine. He did as he was told and waited. There was a beige shag carpet under his knees, a pale pink bedspread under his arms. Jacky went into the bathroom and came out a few minutes later wearing a red cotton nightshirt, open in front. She put the cuffs on his wrists and placed a blue rubber ball in his right hand.

"Squeeze this," she said. "And if what I give you is too much, let it go." She weighed the ruler in her hand and cracked him across the ass. His body surged forward against the bed and he grunted. "It was a long week," she said. "A long week." Crack. He grunted more loudly and squeezed the ball. "Yes," she said, hitting him again, harder. To his astonishment, he began getting an erection. She reached underneath him and felt it. "You like it, too, don't you?" He grunted and then made a louder noise of pain as she hit him. Each blow rammed his cock into the mattress. He hung onto the ball as she hit him faster and faster, stopping finally to get her breath.

"Very good," she said after a moment. Pain had spread across his body; his mind reeled. "Stand up." This wasn't so easy. He lost his balance, lurched against the bed, and stood with his feet wide apart. "Over here." She hooked him to the eye bolt and slowly pulled down his shorts. "You please me," she said. Oliver's senses were spinning. "You present yourself well," she said. She put her hands on his chest, feeling his nipples through his T-shirt. "Mmm," she said brushing her fingers down his sides and trailing them over his hips. Her cleavage was close to his mouth. Honeysuckle. She stepped back.

"Watch me," she said. She played with her body, rubbing her breasts slowly and hitching up her nightshirt. She took a vibrator from the dresser and stood directly in front of him. She brought herself toward orgasm, looking into his eyes, making small noises. He began to whimper in sympathy, encouraging her. A broad smile spread slowly across her face. She tipped her head back, closed her eyes, and cried out.

"Oh," Oliver cried out with her. She came back to herself and took several breaths.

"That--makes a girl feel better," she said. She held the vibrator in front of his face. "Clean," she ordered. He touched it with his tongue. She shook her head and put it firmly in his mouth, waiting and smiling while he sucked on it. "Very good," she said, removing it. "You are learning your place." She was pleased, light hearted. "You like this," she said. Oliver felt himself smiling. He nodded helplessly.

"You will come back next Friday for more training. You are to save yourself for me." She cradled his balls with one hand. "Do you

understand?"

"Yes," he said.

"Yes, Mistress."

"Yes, Mistress."

She squeezed him gently. "Good. Now go--and behave yourself."

"I will," he promised. "Mistress," he remembered. She released him.

Oliver dressed and drove home. He was oddly elated. _Save yourself for me._ An order. An implied promise. Another thrill ran through him.

4.

Oliver worked on the mailing list all week. He tried not to think about Jacky, although she came into his mind regularly, especially at night. Her big eyes held him before he fell asleep; her body was just out of reach.

When he wasn't sitting in front of the computer, he worked on the walnut box. He finished the dovetails. Fitting the bottom of the box was a puzzle. He had cut it to rest inside; it had to be supported just above the low bottom arches. He didn't want to put screws through the sides of the box, and if he put supporting ledger strips on the inside, the bottom would be raised too high. He fastened a small block to the lower inside of each corner. The blocks strengthened the feet of the box and supported the bottom just above the arches. He was satisfied with that solution, but when he pushed the bottom down on the blocks it did not fit perfectly flush against all four sides. The cracks bothered him.

By Friday, after much experimenting, he had made tiny moldings to cover the cracks. "Thank God for routers," he said to Jennifer Lindenthwaite. "Took me about five tries, but I did it."

"I wish Rupert had your talent," she sighed.

"It's not talent; it's pig-headedness."

"Pigs are sweet, really," Jennifer said. "They get a bad rap." She stood. "Let's see the program."

She liked what he'd done and asked him whether Jacky had approved it.

"Jacky said that, as long as I included everything that she wanted, you should be the judge--since you would have to use it and train others to use it."

"It looks good to me," Jennifer said. "I'll have Mary mail you a check on Tuesday. We pay bills on Tuesdays."

"Thanks."

"It was good of you to help, Oliver. We may have to call on you again. I think you should be entitled to a member discount. We have some nice trips lined up this summer--day trips, and a canoe trip: Marsh, Myth, and Earth Mother."

"Sounds buggy," he said.

"Oh, Oliver! Tents, silly. No-see-um netting."

"The cry of the loon across the night," Oliver interrupted.

"Right," she said. "Drumming for Gaia is a popular trip. Sometimes I go along--quality control, you know."

"Inspector Jennifer," Oliver said. She reached for his arm, to shove him or to slap him, but she stopped herself.

"Marshmallows," she said.

"Now you're talking. I'll let you know," he said, ducking out.

"We'll put you on the mailing list."

"Great," he called over his shoulder.

He went shopping for hardware. He found brass strap hinges and a hasp and a lock that were well-matched. He would inlay the hinges--a pain in the neck--but the brass would be fine with the walnut.

Oliver made progress on the box. He was pleased that evening as he described it to Jacky. She listened quietly and waited for him to finish. They were sitting on the couch in her living room. She was wearing a black silk blouse that fell loosely over white jeans. She stretched her legs, wiggled her toes in leather huaraches, and looked at him closely.

Oliver felt the moment approach. He had been in a different world all week; it was time to return. Jacky's face was firm and concentrated, her eyebrows raised slightly. He looked into her eyes and felt again the thrill of surrendering. He was hers. He wanted to be hers. He gave himself to her utterly.

That evening and the ones that followed, once or twice a week, continued the pattern. She beat him and humiliated him, bound him to her pleasure, taught him how to massage her after a hot shower and how she wanted oral sex. It was an alternate universe that existed only in her house and only for a few intense hours at a time. His reward was to be allowed to come at her command as she counted slowly to twenty or twenty-five. If he came too soon or not at her number, she whipped him with a riding quirt. "You are not thinking of _me. _ You are doing this for _ME! _" He learned to think only of her as he masturbated, or, less often, as she worked him with her hand. When he dedicated himself completely, she counted him to orgasm at the perfect moment; she was pleased; there was no whipping.

They went out to dinner several times, a normal experience--at least externally. Beneath the conversation, Oliver was well aware of what was coming after dessert. She would encourage him to be assertive and then

she would pull him back, reminding him of his place with a glance or a small smile, a good natured cat and mouse game.

She told him about the two older brothers who had bullied her on the basketball court. She was a power forward in high school but too small for the team at the University of New Hampshire. "Same game, different scale," she said. "I should have been a guard." Oliver was impressed. She had trained to be a referee and still reffed high school games.

"You just like the uniform," he teased. "The black shoes."

"You'd like one of them on the back of your neck," she said. "I know you, Oliver." He was rewarded that night.

Late one afternoon, toward the end of June, Jacky called. "I need you to come over," she said and hung up. This was unusual; their meetings were always planned in advance.

"Oh, oh, Verdi. She's not happy."

Things were going well for a change. The Wetlands Conservancy had asked him to recommend and install an accounting system. They'd gotten a generous donation, Jennifer told him, from a bank. "Did you know that Jacky Chapelle is on the Board?"

"I didn't," he said, surprised.

Jacky smiled when he asked her about it. "Community money," she said.

"Small community," Oliver said.

"Keep it in the family," she laughed.

The marinas were filled with white boats. Bikers and pedestrians were crossing the bridge in both directions. Oliver parked in Jacky's driveway. "Hi, Bubbles," he said. That was a mistake.

"I've had a disappointing day."

"I'm sorry," he said instantly. Her eyes narrowed and she pointed to the bedroom.

"Everything off."

He undressed quickly and knelt by the bed. She gave him the rubber ball and handcuffed him. "Bastards," she said and swung the ruler. Oliver groaned for her. He had learned to wait out the initial blows. When she hit faster, she didn't hit as hard. It seemed that groaning sped her up.

"Don't bullshit me, Goddamn it!" What? She cracked him hard twice, paused for breath, and then hit him twice more. "Bastards," she said again. She took her time, winding up for each swing, not speeding up. Oliver began to groan for real. He squeezed the ball, but he was losing control. He thought of getting up and running away, but he was handcuffed and naked.

"Cry, why don't you?" She cracked him again. She was deliberate. "Cry!" Boys don't. "Cry!" Crack. "Who am I?" Crack.

"Mistress," he managed.

"Damn you." She hit him again. A hot tear squeezed from the corner of his left eye.

"Cry!" Crack.

"Please," he said. Crack. "Please." Tears began to fall.

"Yes," she said. "More." Crack. He fell forward sobbing, helpless, howling each time she struck him. He cried so convulsively, so hard, that he didn't register the moment when she stopped and began to rub his shoulders, comforting him. He hadn't cried like that since he was a baby.

"Get up on the bed and turn over." She took off her jeans and panties, put them on the chair, and came back from the dresser with a condom. Oliver lay on his back, numb and floating, as she teased and rolled the condom into place. Her eyes were huge as she straddled him. "Fifty," she said.

He wiggled into position and gave himself to her voice and the long slow thrusts of her body. At thirty, her voice cracked. By forty, she was whispering and beginning to tremble. At forty-five, she gasped sharply and slumped forward. She caught and braced herself with her hands on his shoulders, crying out with each new number as he strained up into her. At fifty, he exploded; a blind white jet took them drenched and mingled into the universe. He heard her laughing in the nebulae, and then he collapsed. She lowered herself forward. A button dug into his chest. Her hair pressed against his cheek. Awkwardly, he brought his arms over her head and cradled her as best he could.

She was half off when he awoke. She removed the condom and came back wearing a white bathrobe. "You are beautiful," she said, pulling tight the cotton belt of her robe. He felt his cheeks glowing. "Beautiful. Would you like some tea?"

"No, thank you." She nodded and released the handcuffs. He dressed slowly, feeling each movement of his body as though it were for the first time. Jacky watched silently. He always left as soon as he was dressed. "Good night--Mistress." His voice was quiet.

"Behave yourself," she said, looking at him thoughtfully.

He was on the bridge before he realized that he was driving and had better be careful. He was hungry. Alberta's. Why not? He found a parking spot, walked into his favorite restaurant, and got the last open table, in a far corner of the upper level.

"How are we, tonight?" Claudine asked, smiling broadly. She knew perfectly well. Women always do. Oliver imagined a sign over his head, visible only to females: "Spent Male."

"Hungry," he said.

"You've come to the right place. Good halibut tonight, lime and ginger sauce."

"I think it's a red meat night."

"Lamb? Lots of garlic, rosemary and Dijon crust? New potatoes?"

"Sold. I'll have a glass of Kendall Jackson Merlot." Claudine brought him a large glass of wine, extra full. Oliver was a regular. He ate there once a week or so on nights when he wanted to think. They left him alone to make notes and sketches, to stare out the window at the quiet street. He tipped well and felt that everybody was winning in the exchange--so what if he were spending all his money.

Candlelight gleamed from glasses and warmed the walls. The room was formal and cozy at the same time. He ate slowly, feeling calm and unburdened. He ordered espresso and Death By Chocolate, then lingered over Courvoisier. Verdi was aggrieved when Oliver finally got home. Oliver made a great fuss over feeding him and apologized for the unforgivable delay. He climbed the stairs to bed in a warm swirl. The next morning he was very thirsty.

Jacky was called away on business the following week. The week after that, in her kitchen, when the moment came, Oliver looked into her eyes and felt no impulse to surrender. She reacted immediately. "Not tonight," she said. And then, "That's all right. It doesn't have to happen every time." They chatted, and he carried her smile home across the bridge. It was warm, a bit troubled.

The week after that, she asked if he would meet her for dinner. "Oh, boy," he said.

"Let's go to one of _your_ places, for a change," she said. They agreed on Alberta's.

Oliver was early. He sat by a window and sipped a glass of wine. He took a moment to recognize Jacky when she arrived. She was wearing a broad-brimmed straw hat that covered her face, a low-cut magenta summer dress, and leather sandals.

"You look terrific," he said. She took off her hat. There were extra swirls in her hair and a small diamond post in each ear. Lip gloss accented the color of her dress--a pale but deep pink, fresh and elegant, white but tinged with the sadness of departing light; there were babies in it and the silver of moonlight on old barns. "Some dress!" Her breasts moved toward him.

"Would you like something to drink?" Claudine's voice straightened him.

"Can you make a martini?" Jacky asked.

"I'll try." Claudine glanced at Oliver, amused.

"Dry, please. One olive." The door opened and George Goodbean entered. He was thinking about something and didn't notice them until he was passing their table.

"Holy Moly!" he said, looking at Jacky.

Oliver introduced them. "Holy Moly means he wants to paint you," he said to Jacky.

"Really," George said. "Who wouldn't?" He threw his arms in the air.

Claudine dodged around him and set a martini in front of Jacky.

"Perhaps we can talk about it another time," she said, smiling.

"Yes," George said. "Yes." He walked up the stairs to the upper level.

"He's been known to burst into arias," Oliver said.

Jacky sipped her martini. "Ah . . ." She put the glass down carefully. "I like him."

"He's a good guy," Oliver said. "Good painter." He told her about the casting adventure, leaving out the bronze valentine.

Midway through dinner, Jacky reminded him of their last session on her bed. "That was very special," she said. "You please me in so many ways, Oliver." She put down her fork. "I've been transferred. That's why I was in such a bad mood that night. We acquired a bank. I'm supposed to run it, turn it around. I thought I could get out of it, but I couldn't."

"Transferred?"

"Maryland," she said. "It's a promotion, really."

"Oh," Oliver said. He put down his fork. "Damn."

"Come with me." It was part command, part question.

"No--I can't." He knew it was true as soon as he said the words. Am I crazy? he thought, looking at her closely. "It is you who are beautiful," he said.

She tapped the fingers of one hand on the table. "Are you sure, Oliver? Money is no problem." He nodded slowly.

"Oh, Oliver . . ." She brushed away a tear. He had never seen her cry. "Oh." She shook her head. "Who trains who?" she asked the window in a tight voice. Oliver swallowed. He couldn't speak. This was happening too fast.

"Sex," she said, looking back at him. "There's sex and there's love--two different things. Sometimes they overlap. Sometimes, if you're real lucky, they overlap a lot. Most people settle for a little of one or a little of the other." She pushed her chair back. "I love you," she said. She stood up. "Oh, well."

She regained control. "Good night, Oliver." It was a dismissal.

"Good night," he said obediently and bent his head. The mistress word wasn't there any more. He felt terrible--honest, but terrible. He tried to fix the image of her walking away down the sidewalk. He had an urge to run after her, to sink to his knees with his arms around her hips, to make her happy, but a dumb veto held him in his chair. It wasn't right, or it wouldn't have remained right. He stayed seated and finished his dinner. Claudine was tactfully silent.

He paid and climbed the stairs to George's table. "The lady's gone. I've taken the high road," he said gloomily.

"My God, Olive Oil, she was . . ." George's eyes expanded. "I mean, bazumas!"

"Yes," Oliver said. "Bazumas."

"That dress! That color!"

"How about a little Courvoisier, George?"

An hour later, he lurched home and put on *La Traviata*. George had diverted him with a long story about how his father had made his whole family jump through hoops during his last years and then had snuck off to Atlantic City and spent most of his money before he collapsed. "The old goat," George said, annoyed all over again, partially approving.

Sad glorious voices filled the apartment. Oliver began to hate himself. What the hell good was he to anybody? The walnut box caught his eye, shining and complete. It angered him, refuted his mood. He put it on the floor. "Fuck it," he said and lifted his right foot high over the box. Verdi let out a loud warning meow. "What?" Oliver demanded of the cat. "What's the matter with you?" The cat took two steps forward and let out another long low sound of protest.

"Huh?" Oliver bent over and put the box back on the table. "All right, all right." He opened it. The bronze valentine stared up at him. "Shit," he said. Verdi rubbed against his ankle. "Fucking box," Oliver said with a certain amount of pride. He scratched Verdi between the ears. There was nothing to do but go to bed.

The phone rang. He answered, but the person on the other end was silent. He knew it was Jacky. "I'm sorry," he said. She hung up.

5.

Jacky's transfer left a hole in Oliver's life. He tried to explain it to Mark Barnes without getting into details. "I mean, we were going in different directions anyway. She wanted a lot . . ."

"Yeah." Mark laughed. "How it goes."

"But I got used to seeing her. She has a house in South Portland. I used to go over there sometimes on weekends--nice place, garden out back, blueberries, the high bush kind. I pruned them. We'd have a glass of wine, get into it . . . Now, nothing. And the hell of it is: I don't feel like seeing anyone else."

"Used to take me 18 months to get over a relationship," Mark said. "Now it's 18 weeks and dropping. You know what they say about falling off a horse."

"Climb back on--right." Oliver said. "All very well for you. I'm not, like, in demand. I got lucky, was all."

"Come on! Just cuz you're four feet, two . . ."

"Five feet, two," Oliver said. "Don't you forget it."

"Ork. It doesn't mean shit," Mark said. "Do I look like Mr. Studley?"

"How _do_ you do it, anyway?"

"Fabric, man. They're helpless for fabric. You got to buy stuff they want to touch. The ladies have _no_ imagination; if they can't touch it, it doesn't count." Mark drank and smiled. "I spend a fortune on shirts and sweaters. 'Oooh,' they say. I hold out my arm for the feel. 'Yeah, nice--silk and cashmere,' I say. 'Alpaca,' or whatever the hell it is. Next day, I mail it to them. Would look better on you, I tell them."

"I don't have a fortune," Oliver said.

"Shop around," Mark said. "Linen. You got to start somewhere."

"Yeah," Oliver said.

For the hell of it, he checked out Filene's Basement, but he couldn't find anything that didn't have the executive leisurewear look. The next day he was in Freeport and stopped at the Ralph Lauren factory outlet store. He bought a linen bush jacket that was radically marked down. It was dyed a dark sandy color and looked as though it would last. The traditional cut made it seem less trendy. Maybe that was why it had been marked down.

Oliver was lonely, but he continued to feel as though a weight had been lifted from him. The crying fit at Jacky's had liberated him. He wondered why. Why had it felt right, somehow, to be punished by her? He missed the sex, ached for it, but he didn't miss the beatings. He just didn't feel guilty any more.

Guilty. As soon as he thought the word, Oliver knew that he was onto something. He realized that he had felt guilty for as long as he could remember--so long, in fact, that he didn't register it as guilt; it was just the way he was. Why should he feel this way? He couldn't be

sure--this was murky territory--but he suspected that it had to do with his mother. She seemed to hover around the edges when he thought back. He wondered if he hadn't, at a very young age, taken on responsibility for _her_ problems--with Owl, with him, with life. Maybe he had felt that they were his fault, somehow. Whatever it had been, Jacky had beaten it out of him. Probably that was why she picked him in the first place. She had sensed his need, matching hers.

He continued to work at home and at the Conservancy. One afternoon, Jennifer talked him into the "Drumming For Gaia" trip.

"I can't drum anything," he said.

"Oliver, you like music. I know you do." It was true. "We have a teacher--a Master Drummer. A lot of people have never drummed before, and they always have a good time."

"I don't have a drum."

"We sell them--simple ones. I have an extra one. I'll bring it for you." She was enthusiastic and meant well. He couldn't say no.

The morning of the trip was cool and foggy. The group was to meet at the Conservancy and then be bussed to Wolf Neck State Park. Jennifer spotted him as soon as he drove in.

"Morning! I love your jacket." She reached out and felt it between her thumb and first two fingers. That Mark.

"Morning, Jennifer. Yeah, it's nice. Linen," he said, but he was damned if he was going to mail it to her.

"I brought your drum; it's in the car. I'll get it." She skipped over to a white Volvo and took a drum from the back seat. "You're going to love this." He accepted it, feeling foolish. She handed him a wooden striker. "You can hold it any way that is comfortable." She took it back and tucked it between her left arm and side. "Like this, or straight up, if you're sitting."

"O.K., I get it," Oliver said.

"We'll be leaving in about ten minutes." He took a seat near the front of the bus and tried to look relaxed. The drum was shaped like a miniature conga, handmade with a skin head that was lashed tight. He rested it on his lap and watched cars drive in. Twelve or fifteen people got on the bus, most of them his age or younger, mostly women in twos and threes.

Jennifer bounced in and sat beside him. "We'll pick up a few more on the way. There's another group coming down the coast. I hope it doesn't rain. Think positive thoughts, Oliver."

"What are they?"

"Oh, Silly," she slapped him on the arm. "Don't worry; you'll have fun. I am going to have fun!" She passed around a box of name labels and a magic marker. "Aliases permitted," she said.

Forty-five minutes later, they stepped from the bus and gathered around tables standing in a grassy field. Oliver had been there before. The ocean was just out of sight through trees and down a steep bank. Paths wound along a narrow wooded peninsula with views of islands, tiny coves, wetlands, and pine groves. Picnic tables and grills waited in small clearings. It was a popular place in winter for cross-country skiing.

The second bus arrived. People milled about reading each other's name tags. Oliver helped carry folding chairs from the back of the bus. A van drove up. Its horn tooted twice, and a short round man popped out. He was holding a stick adorned with feathers and bells. He stamped it on the ground and shook it. When he had everyone's attention, he said, "Bogdolf's the name; merriment's the game!"

"Good grief," Oliver said.

"Shhh, he's the Lore Keeper," Jennifer explained. She stepped closer and whispered, "He's expensive, but he brings in extra contributions;

he's worth it."

"Good morning, fair folks," Bogdolf said, twinkling. "Good morning, Jennifer. Have we time for a story?"

"Yes," Jennifer said. "Raul will be here at eleven for the drumming. For those of you who don't know," she raised her voice and addressed the group, "this is Bogdolf, Lore Keeper. I've asked him to speak to us this morning." She sat in one of the chairs. Oliver sat next to her. The others made themselves comfortable, and Bogdolf took a position in front of them.

"Drumming For Gaia," Bogdolf said. "Fine. Very fine. I don't often have an orchestra. Oh, we're going to have fun this morning. Ba, ba, boom!" He made a pirouette and stamped his stick playfully. His eye fell on Oliver, and he pointed at him with the stick. "Let me hear it, son." He made striking motions with his stick. "Ba, ba _boom!_ Ba, ba, _boom!_ Let me hear it now." He had twirled his way directly in front of Oliver. His eyes were sharp and blue beneath shaggy gray eyebrows. He smiled happily, letting the group feel his joy. Oliver felt Jennifer's foot on his; he stopped staring and struck his drum three times.

"Yes," Bogdolf said, spreading his arms approvingly. "The power!" He looked upward and staggered back several steps. He looked again at Oliver and made a commanding motion with the stick. Oliver struck the drum three times. "_Gaia, _" Bogdolf said. Oliver felt a pat on his arm.

"A long time ago," Bogdolf began, "in the time of the Water People . . ." He paced back and forth as he told the story. His voice rose and fell. He was on the verge of tears. He laughed. He whispered. Threatened. Trembled. Finally: "And _that_ is how the little drum saved the Water People." He looked at Oliver. Jennifer's foot pressed down. Oliver struck his drum three times, and there was loud clapping.

"Gaia!" someone called. Bogdolf bowed modestly and made his way to the coffee table where he was soon surrounded.

"Whew!" Oliver said.

"I'm sorry," Jennifer said. "I didn't know you were going to be the orchestra." She giggled.

"First time for everything," Oliver said. They took a walk and watched an osprey bring fish back to a nest of sticks high in a tree on an island just offshore. They got down to serious drumming for an hour before lunch and then for several hours afterwards. They warmed up with straightforward Native American rhythms. Oliver found that he could contribute as long as he played the most basic beat.

In the afternoon, they got into a Latin groove. Raul assigned parts and demonstrated the son clave. Oliver, another drummer, and a boy with a triangle were to play just the clave. Thank God for the other drummer. Oliver and the boy followed him through the center of the complications as the group got into synch and began to rock. He felt a duty to do it right, to keep the beat, keep the faith. When they broke up for the day, he felt refreshed. They continued sporadically on the bus, but later, when Oliver was by himself, he couldn't recapture the beat. This irritated him.

"I bought a book," he told Jennifer the following week. "I guess I'm not musical. It just isn't inside me naturally; I need help to hear it. Anyway," he explained, "if you take 16 even beats, numbers 1,4,7,11, and 13 are the son clave beats. So, it is asymmetrical within the 16 beats, but symmetrical outside; the pattern repeats every 16 beats. That's what gives it that rocking quality--the train leans one way and then pulls back and leans the other. Ba, ba, ba--baba. Ba, ba, ba--baba."

"There you go," Jennifer said, "who says you aren't musical?"

Oliver changed the subject. "How's Rupert doing?"

"Rupert . . ." She shrugged, frustrated. "Sometimes I think he doesn't even see me when he looks at me."

"Do you think you'll have kids, someday?" It just popped out of his mouth.

"I hope so. We've been trying."

"This could be the weekend," Oliver said hopefully.

"I don't think so," she said. "Rupert's at a stamp collectors' convention . . . You want to go to a movie Saturday afternoon, maybe have a drink?" Her eyes opened wide. Now she was surprised at herself. Oliver blinked.

"Jesus, Jennifer. That sounds a lot like a date."

"Well--yes! Rupert is always telling me I should go out more, get out of the house."

Oliver liked Jennifer. She was easy to be around. She was earnest in a way that he understood. He found it hard to say no to her, which is why, on Saturday night, he found himself on top of her while she kissed him and pulled at his belt buckle.

He objected weakly, and she said, "I don't care. I don't care, Oliver. I've never done this before. I need you." She clamped her mouth on his and put the matter out of reach. She was as purposeful in bed as she was in the office. She took him inside her and urged him on, as though something might pull him away at any moment. It was fast and satisfying. He barely registered that she was both softer and stronger than he thought before she sighed and rolled him to one side. She had that special full and contented woman's smile.

"That was so good," she said. She put her fingers on his lips. "Shhh. I've got to go, now." She dressed quickly. "Will you be in on Monday?" He nodded. She bent over him and put her hand on his chest, as if to measure his strength while at the same time keeping him in place. She lingered for a second. "Good night, Handsome."

"Good night." And she was gone.

The next day, Oliver stayed around the house wondering what he was getting himself into.

On Monday, when he and Jennifer were alone, she blushed and said, "God!

That was wonderful, Oliver. But--it will just have to be a lost weekend." She lowered and then raised her eyes. "I feel like I took advantage."

"It was terrible," Oliver said. "There ought to be a law against it." She threw her arms around his neck and just as quickly stepped back. She bit her lip.

"I can't get used to you," she whispered.

"I'll be done, Wednesday," Oliver said.

That was that. A month later, he saw her with Rupert at the Maine Mall, on the other side of the Food Court. She looked normally married and involved in what they were doing. Oliver went in a different direction, feeling lonely, remembering how tightly she had held him. He stopped at Deweys. "I got back on," he informed Mark.

"Nice going. Quick work!"

"It was the linen jacket," Oliver said.

"No shit?" Mark was pleased. "There you go. This one's on me."

A few weeks later, Oliver was waiting for a seat in Becky's, standing by the door, when Francesca came in with her two girls. Oliver looked at her and all doubt left him. It was as if they had arranged to meet. "Hi," he said.

"Hi." She was tanned, wearing a large white "Harbor Fish" T-shirt over dark brown cotton pants.

"Mommy, I have to go to the bathroom."

"It's right over there, Elena--the first door." Francesca pointed and put her free hand on the other girl's head. "Stay with me, Maria."

"Takes two hands--motherhood," Oliver said.

"Two aren't enough, really." Her voice was low and easy. An elderly couple passed them on their way out. Oliver waved at their table which was being cleared.

"Why don't you take it?"

"It's crowded, today. Thank you," Francesca said. "Why don't we share?"

"Sure," Oliver said. "Is anyone joining you?"

Francesca tipped her head to one side and ran fingers through her hair. She looked at Oliver and shook her head deliberately. There were no words, or too many, to explain. "My lucky day," Oliver said. She smiled--tribute was tribute, even in Becky's at rush hour. Maria tugged at her hand.

"I'm hungry."

"Let's eat, then," Francesca said, moving toward the table. When she reached the booth, she said, "Mr. . . . is going to eat with us."

"Oliver."

"Mr. Oliver."

"No. Oliver Prescott is my name. Oliver Muni Prescott. But--Oliver, please."

"I see." She laughed. "I am Francesca Malloy. This is Maria. And here is Elena." She held an arm out to Elena who was pleased with her conquest of the bathroom. "Elena, this is Oliver. We are sharing a table, today." Elena stared at him.

"I'm almost as big as you," she said.

Maria leaned toward her. "Stupid--you're supposed to say: 'How do you do.' "

"How do you do, Elena," Oliver said. "You _are_ a big girl. Strong too, I bet."

"Very," she said.

"You have such pretty girls," Oliver said to Francesca.

"I am from Ecuador," Maria said. "Elena is from Colombia." She gave the names their Spanish sounds. Oliver wanted to put his arms around her and keep her from harm forever. "We have two mommies." She concentrated. "We _each_ have two mommies. We are sisters, now."

"Lucky girls," Oliver said.

"Where's _your_ mommy?"

"Connecticut," Oliver said. "Far away."

"Oh." Maria nodded sympathetically. One corner of Francesca's wide mouth curved up; the other curved down. Her eyebrows were raised.

"Lucky everybody," Oliver said, including himself. He felt the rings of calm again, rippling outward from their table.

"Something to drink?" One of the regular waitresses laid down menus.

"Coffee for me," Oliver said.

"Tea. Juice for the girls--orange."

"I want apple," Elena said.

"Please," Francesca said.

"Please."

"One apple, one orange." The waitress swept away.

They talked about how the summer was nearly over. They talked about learning how to swim and how hard it was to eat a lobster. Oliver didn't ask about her husband. She didn't ask about his work. They

stayed with what mattered: themselves, lunch, the girls, the moment. When they said goodbye, there was a lovely quiet between them. They were together in the act of parting.

Oliver was giddy walking home. He looked at the walnut box and the bronze heart. "She's the one," he said to Verdi who was staring at him from the window sill.

6.

If Francesca weren't married, Oliver would have been after her in an instant. He didn't know what to do. He couldn't think of a way to give her the box and the valentine without putting her in an awkward position. He placed them on the mantelpiece in the living room. The walnut and the bronze gave him a warm feeling; they signalled a future or at least a connection with her.

He might have hustled a programming project, but the thought of business meetings sent him across the bridge to Crescent Beach. The air was fresh and salty, softened by the waxy smell of beach roses. Children played. Dogs chased Frisbees. Waves curled and crashed along the sand. In September, in Maine, time has a way of crystallizing and standing still. Oliver soaked up the sunny shortening days. He was rested and tan, increasingly coiled for some kind of action.

He received a postcard from Jacky saying that she was living in a motel but was about to move into a house. Her job was a lot of work but going well. She missed him. He sent a housewarming card to the new address and said that he missed her, too. No harm in that. Besides, it was true.

One afternoon in October, when the leaves were beginning to change color, he came home and heard Jacky's voice on the answering machine. "Oliver, are you there? No? I'm in town. I'm staying at the Regency. I'm wondering if you would join me for dinner. I've got a meeting in ten minutes. Just come to the restaurant in the hotel, if you can, at six." There was a short pause. "I'll understand if you can't make it. I know it's short notice. Bye." Her voice softened on the "bye," and she hung up.

Oliver paced a couple of tight circles and decided to go. He did his laundry and ironed a white linen shirt. At six, he walked into the Regency and said to the hostess, "I'm meeting someone . . ." He looked around for Jacky.

"Are you Oliver?"

"Yes."

"Ms. Chapelle called to say that she would be fifteen minutes late. May I get you a drink?"

"Glenlivet, please. Rocks."

Twenty minutes later Jacky swept in, apologizing.

"No problem," Oliver said. "You look well." She was tanned and buzzing with energy.

"Forgive my banker suit," she said. "No time to change. I talked them into more money."

"Congratulations."

"Dinner's on me. Mmm," she said, opening a menu.

"So, how's Maryland?"

"Crab cakes are great. Weather's warmer. After that--Maine wins." She told him about her job and the house she was buying. "And you?"

"Pretty much the same . . . I found out what a clave beat is." He explained and she applauded. "No, like this," he said, clapping out two bars.

"It's warm in here," she said, taking off her jacket and opening the top two buttons of her tight blouse.

"Yes." As they talked and drank, Oliver settled in his chair, his eyes on the opening in her blouse and the lacy rising edge of her bra. A familiar undertow pulled him down; he wanted to be lower than she was. She watched, opened her blouse farther, and let it happen. They finished dinner and drank the rest of the wine. "I'd forgotten . . ." he started.

"Oliver," she said, "I have something for you. Why don't you come up for a drink?" He nodded, yes. She stood, signed the check, and led him to the elevator. "There's wine in the convenience bar," she said, shutting the door of her room behind them. He poured two glasses and sat on a plushly upholstered love seat, waiting for her to come out of the bathroom.

"That's better, isn't it?" she said, sitting beside him and kicking off her shoes. Another button was undone. She sipped wine slowly, in no hurry, enjoying herself. Oliver couldn't stop looking at her breasts.

"Do you know what I have for you?" she teased.

"Yes," he said in a small voice. His heart was beating loudly. He put his glass on the end table and held out his wrists.

"Look at me, Oliver."

He didn't resist. He gave himself to her eyes.

"Sweet," she said. She took the handcuffs from her roll-on bag and closed them on his wrists. "Stand up." She unbuckled his belt and slid his pants and shorts down to his ankles. "How sweet." She reached into the luggage and held up the riding whip.

"You remembered everything," he said helplessly.

"Have you?" She swished the whip, smiling. She didn't have to hit him.

"Please . . ." He sank to his knees, desperate to please her, to be close to her. She took off her blouse and approached with the whip in the air.

"Much better," she said, shrugging her shoulders forward and back. "Don't touch, Oliver. Just look." She leaned over him. "You'd like me to take off my bra, wouldn't you?"

"Yes," he said. "Mistress." His throat was dry.

"I love how you want me," she said. "Can I trust you to--control yourself?"

"Yes, Mistress." She removed her bra slowly, watching him with pleasure. He swallowed.

"You are the sweetest love," she said, laughing. She stripped the rest of the way and guided him to the bed where he devoted himself to her until she was wet and happy, incoherent, thankful . . . From a distance, he heard her say, "Now you."

"Doesn't matter," he mumbled.

She rolled him over and snuggled his head into her lap. "I'm going to give it to you for a change," she said. "Here." She leaned over and placed a breast in his mouth. She stroked him. "Jacky's got you. Suck me, Baby." She pushed her breast deeper into his mouth and brought him steadily along with her hand. "I've got you. It's all right." He opened his mouth wide and drew her in. Love came in with her breast--a strange new feeling that scared him--but she continued, and he accepted and then couldn't get enough. She brought him to the top and cried out with him, "Ohhhh! Yes. More. Oh . . ." His head fell back and he reached for her hip, clutching, clinging to her as if she were a life raft. She put the palm of her hand on his forehead. "Baby," she said, rocking him with her body. "It's all right. I've got you. I've got you." He sighed and pushed deeper against her.

Oliver awoke in the morning with Jacky leaning over him. She was dressed and glowing. "Hey, there," he said.

"No need to get up," she said. "The room is paid for. Just leave when you're ready." She kissed him.

"Mmm, toothpaste," Oliver said. "Where you going?"

"Breakfast at Becky's with my friend, Francesca, and then catch a bird to Baltimore." Oliver sat up straight in the bed. "No, no," she said and pushed him down. "I left a card in your pants pocket. Call me tonight."

"Uh . . . O.K."

"Sweet Oliver," she said and left. The door clicked shut, and Oliver stared at the ceiling. Francesca? Crap! He imagined Jacky describing their evening in full detail. She wouldn't. But she might well mention his name. How many short Olivers were there in Portland? He got out of bed and took a quick shower. Aside from a manageable headache, he felt loose and relaxed. Jacky had seen to that, for sure. He left the hotel by a side door and walked home.

"Verdi? There you are. Good old Verdi. I was bad last night. Very bad. Here you go." He spooned out a whole can of salmon Friskies. "Full breakfast, this morning. None of those little snackies, no." It was important to stay on the right side of Verdi.

He considered shaving. To hell with it. He let Verdi out and walked down to the Victory Deli for a cranberry-blueberry pancake. Jacky. She knew just which buttons to push. He couldn't help himself. He had been feeling helpless enough lately without this demonstration of it. She reveled in his helplessness, rolled in it like Verdi in catnip. I like it, too, he admitted. I do. I do and I don't. He was so independent most of the time that it was a relief, a sweet relief, to give in, to trust her and be controlled by her. But there was also a whiff of something forbidden about the relationship, something to do with his mother again. Jacky was a little like her. It was a powerful mix.

He called her at six o'clock. "Hi, how was breakfast?"

"Hi, Oliver! Fun. Francesca's a good buddy."

"Did you tell her about me?"

"Why--no. You're my secret, Sweet; I'm keeping you to myself. Besides, Francesca's beautiful. Men go gaga over her. She's one of these tall, dark, silent types. Gorgeous eyes, inner fires. I'd go for her myself if I weren't so friggin' straight."

"Hallelujah!" Oliver said with feeling.

"Thank you," she said. "Poor Franny, she has a terrible marriage. Two of the cutest little girls. Oliver, I'm hoping you will come visit. I want to show you the Bay and feed you some proper crab cakes. The weekend after next would be perfect."

"How far are you from Atlantic City?"

"About two hours."

"I've never been to Atlantic City," Oliver said. "I've been wanting to see what it's like. I could drive down on Friday, see you on Saturday? Unless you want to meet me at one of the casinos?"

"You come here," she said. "I went once and it didn't do a thing for me. All those grandmothers lined up at the slot machines . . . Cross over the Delaware Bridge by Wilmington. I'm in northern Maryland, not too far from there." She gave him directions, and they agreed to meet around one o'clock.

"Behave yourself with the working girls," she said. "I'll see you in two weeks."

"Bye," Oliver said.

Jacky hung up, and Oliver turned to Verdi. "I'm in trouble," he said.

At least she hadn't said anything to Francesca. He paced around the room. What was happening? He was sliding into a life with Jacky. She

could keep him going while he looked for work; he could work anywhere. Maybe he would do most of the cooking. What would it be like to wake up next to her every morning? His head spun. What was wrong with this picture? Anything? Something.

Atlantic City. When Oliver was confused, he tended to put himself in a situation and see what happened. He was better at resilience than calculation; he relied on his ability to pick himself up, dust himself off, and learn from experience. When he tried to think about the future, his mind turned off. He needed something more concrete to think about. Casinos.

The next morning, he bought a book on gambling from the bookstore next to the Victory Deli. He had never been crazy about cards. He had played enough poker to know how brutal it was. The smartest and toughest player won. If you were smarter and tougher, you might as well just take the other person's wallet. It was worse than that. Not only did you take his money, but you left him feeling responsible, stupid, and broken. Oliver didn't want to be on either end of that exchange.

As he read about blackjack, he decided against it. He would actually have odds in his favor if he could count cards without being caught and thrown out of the casino. He probably could count cards with practice; he'd been a math major in college; he was comfortable with numbers. But it would be a lot of work. And he didn't like the idea of relating to the dealer as an opponent, an enemy working for the house. The dealer was just trying to make a living.

Roulette was O.K., but it seemed too mechanical and small in scale. The best roulette odds were not as good as the best odds in craps. Craps had a traditional sound to it. Oliver studied craps.

Players stood around an enclosed table and took turns throwing a pair of dice. On the first throw, the player "passed" if a 7 or an 11 came up. A 2, 3, or 12 was a "no pass." Any other number became the "point." The player continued to roll until either the point came up again, a pass, or a 7 was rolled, a no pass. All players could bet on every roll.

Custom required that a player continue rolling until he or she did not pass. The dice were then pushed to the next player in turn around the table. There were many different bets, simple and complicated. You could bet that a player would pass or not pass or that a number would be rolled before a 7. The complicated bets had large payoffs and correspondingly smaller chances of winning. The simplest bet had the best odds, winning just under 50% of the time. If you played only the bets with the best odds, you could consider the house edge as a 2% charge for hosting the game and keeping it honest. You would lose if you played long enough. But you could get ahead and quit. Maybe.

The stakes could be as high as you wanted. This appealed to Oliver. He liked the financial Russian roulette quality: win or die. He withdrew everything but twenty dollars from his bank account.

On his way back from the bank, he stopped at Deweys. It was fun drinking a pint of Guinness with six thousand dollars in his pocket. Mark was there, celebrating another executive placement.

"Chemical sales. Houston, poor bastard."

"You ever go to Atlantic City?"

"Sure, man." Mark snapped his fingers. "_Down on the boardwalk . . . boardwalk._"

"Where did you stay?"

"Bally's, most of the time."

"What was it like?"

"Bally's?"

"No, I mean the whole thing," Oliver said.

"Good time--if you don't get into it too deep. Have a few drinks, check out the ladies. Lot of money flying around. They have these hard-nosed dudes called 'pit bosses' that keep an eye on things, head off trouble . . . I usually go on a travel package for a couple of nights. They're a good deal; the casinos subsidize them. I take all the money I feel like blowing off and one credit card in case I get stuck or something. You going?"

"I was thinking about it," Oliver said. "I've been learning how to play craps."

"Yeah, craps, the best. _Down on the boardwalk_ . . ."

Oliver made a reservation at Bally's and considered what to wear. A plaid shirt and jeans weren't going to do it; there was something significant and ceremonial about this trip. He had a summer linen suit that he'd worn to his sister's wedding, years ago. He bought a mulberry colored T-shirt to wear under the jacket. He wanted to look like a star, a player. When in Rome . . . He stopped short of buying a gold neck chain.

He put the cash in the walnut box and then hid the box behind old sheets in the bedroom closet. The box made a good bank, but he missed seeing it on the mantelpiece.

Verdi. He couldn't just leave food and kitty litter--Verdi needed to prowl around outside. And what if he didn't get back right away, for some reason? Maybe Arlen, downstairs, would look after him. A few minutes after he heard Arlen return from work, he knocked on his door.

"Hello, Oliver."

"Nice shirt, Arlen. Aloha!"

"Aloha, Oliver." White tropical blossoms and blue sky hung from Arlen's thin shoulders. He was wearing faded jeans and cowboy boots.

"I was wondering if you could do me a favor?"

"If I can--of course. Would you like to come in?" Oliver entered an immaculate apartment. Parakeets and finches were hopping back and forth in large cages near the windows.

"I'm going on a short trip--three days, maybe four, next weekend. I

need someone to look after Verdi, feed him, and let him out once a day. I know it's a nuisance . . ."

"But I like Verdi. It will be no trouble. When are you leaving?"

"Friday."

"No problem. Would you like a drink? We don't get to chat often."

"Sure."

"Let me see. I have ale and, of course, the hard stuff."

"You wouldn't have any Glenlivet, by any chance?"

Arlen smiled. "Would Laphroiag do?"

"Damn, Arlen. I'll choke it down. Yes."

Arlen poured two drinks. "Another day, another dollar," he toasted.

"Single malt," Oliver replied, holding his glass high. There was a moment of reverence after the first taste. "God, that's good!" Oliver said. "I have plenty of cat food. I'll leave clean kitty litter. You probably won't have to change it if he goes outside."

"I'd have a cat if it weren't for the birds," Arlen said. "I don't think enemies should live together, do you?"

"No." Arlen was an accountant for one of the big firms. He had a slim orderly face.

"Sometimes I think cats are smarter than people," Arlen said, "but I love to hear the birds. They sing whenever they damn please." He sighed, leaned back on his couch, and crossed his legs. An embossed boot swung prominently in front of him, oddly flamboyant.

"Yeah, Verdi's my buddy," Oliver said. "He likes you, too."

"Birds can be your friends," Arlen said. "People don't realize." He looked out the window. "I had a parakeet once. His name was Tootsie."

"Tootsie," Oliver repeated, sipping whiskey.

"An ordinary parakeet, green and yellow--but Tootsie could sing! A wonderful singer." Arlen looked back at Oliver. "Parakeets are tough, you know. They are little parrots, actually, strong birds."

"Really? Parrots? I didn't know that."

"Yes," Arlen said. "Tootsie belonged to William." His voice lingered on the name, and he looked out the window again. "I was just getting to know William. He asked me to keep Tootsie for him while he was away one summer . . . I suppose he was testing me."

"Ah," Oliver said, vaguely.

"Tootsie and I got along very well. I tried to teach him to say 'William,' but he preferred to sing." Arlen paused to drink.

"I moved in with William that fall." He uncrossed his legs and crossed them again, waving the other boot in the air. "To make a long story short, I moved out three years later. William was away for the night. I was feeling shitty, and I explained the situation to Tootsie. 'I'm leaving in the morning,' I told him. 'It's not your fault; it's not William's fault; it's not anybody's fault. We just didn't quite make it, that's all. Almost, but not quite.' Tootsie listened to me. You know how they do, with their heads cocked to one side. He was in a cage with a fail-safe door; the kind that are hinged at the bottom--if they aren't positively latched shut, they fall open so you'll know to latch them." Arlen swirled the whiskey around in his glass.

"In three years, Tootsie never got out of his cage. The next morning, I got up and went into the living room. 'Goodbye, Toots,' I said. 'Toots?' He wasn't in his cage. I walked over, and there was Tootsie on the table beneath his cage. He was lying on his side, stone dead."

"No way," Oliver said.

"Stone dead. I don't know how he got out. I don't know what happened. All I know is that he died when the relationship did. I think his heart was broken."

"What did you do?"

"I buried him beneath a tree on the Eastern Prom," Arlen said. "I haven't seen William for years. He moved out of town." One of the parakeets burst into song. "There he is now."

"Who?"

"William," Arlen said.

"Oh." They drank in silence. "Guess I'll be going," Oliver said. "Thanks. I'll put a key under the mat when I leave on Friday."

"You're welcome, Oliver. Don't worry about Verdi." Oliver went upstairs glad to have solved the problem but feeling sorry for Arlen. He was a decent guy. Usually alone. You'd think he could find someone to be with.

"Arlen will take care of you," he said to Verdi.

Early Friday morning, Oliver retrieved his stash and placed the walnut box back on the mantel. "So long, Verdi. Don't give Arlen a hard time." He slid a spare key under the mat and took a last look around. He hesitated. The box. The box bothered him. What if I don't come back? he thought. Get hit by a truck, or something.

It seemed stupid, but Oliver was used to following his intuition. He wrote a note: "Francesca, I made these for you. Oliver." He put the note, the bronze heart, the lock, and one key inside the box. He put the other key on his key ring. There was only one Malloy listed in the telephone book. He wrapped the box with paper cut from two grocery bags and addressed it to: Francesca Malloy, Cape Elizabeth, Maine. He put all the stamps he had in a double row across the top. If something happened to him, the package would get to her.

Feeling better, he skipped down the stairs, threw his carry-on bag into

the Jeep, and headed out of town. He stopped for coffee at the first rest area on the turnpike. The sun wasn't even up as he got back in the Jeep. _On the road again,_ he sang, picking up speed and passing a Shop 'N Save truck. "Fuck you, Malloy," he said, leaving the truck behind. Francesca's husband worked for Hannaford Brothers, who owned the grocery chain. _On the road again_ . . .

7.

Traffic was moderate. Oliver hummed along, enjoying the oranges, reds, and yellows of New England in October. He crossed the Hudson on the Tappan Zee Bridge, bypassing New York, glad to be moving again after weeks of inaction. His money and what felt like his entire future was in his pocket.

At five o'clock he cruised slowly through Atlantic City. He found Bally's, parked, and went to his room. He washed his face, changed into his outfit, and went back outside. The boardwalk stretched out of sight along the beach. It was warmer and more humid than in Maine. Lazy waves collapsed on the sand. Beach-goers and gamblers of all ages strolled back and forth--studs with oiled glistening muscles, grandmothers with straw hats and outrageous sunglasses, Afro-Americans, Latinos, Asians. He was too warm in his suit. He returned to the air conditioned hotel and entered the casino.

Loud music. Hellish reds and blacks. The women that Jacky had remembered were seated in front of rows of flashing slot machines. The women pulled long levers mechanically; win or lose, they pulled again. Bells rang as an occasional jackpot cascaded from a machine.

Oliver recognized the crap tables--elongated mahogany figure eights, surrounded by players leaning over the action. Dice rolled, bounced, and tumbled to a stop on the gleaming green felt. People cheered or groaned.

The roulette wheels were in a different section. The blackjack dealers were beyond the roulette wheels. At the far end of the casino, behind bars, cashiers exchanged chips for money or vice versa. Cashing in your chips, for real, Oliver thought. He pushed \$1000 toward a cashier.

"What do you want?" Oliver hesitated. "Hundreds, twenties, tens, fives, what?"

"Give me one hundred dollar chip," Oliver said, "the rest, tens and fives."

"You want to leave some in the cage?"

"Five hundred," Oliver said. The cashier issued him a plastic card with a magnetic strip.

"Give this to the pit boss when you want more."

"I got these complimentary dollars," Oliver said, "when I checked in."

"Over there." The cashier pointed to a barred room within the main room. "Promotions." Oliver walked over to Promotions.

"Could I exchange these for chips, please?" A man with a neat mustache swept up the fake coins. He flicked his wrist and thumb. Oliver's chips fell on the counter in front of him. Oliver counted. "Wasn't there supposed to be thirty-five?"

"Yeah, man. You short?" Oliver pushed the chips toward him. "Sorry, man. Mistake," he said, adding a five dollar chip to the pile without changing expression. Oliver put them in his pocket and walked toward the crap tables. That was a scam, he thought. Get away with that once an hour, your pay would go up--a couple of hundred a week.

He straightened as a feeling shot through him. It was like waking up. It was time. He approached the front craps table and stood with his arms hanging down and his weight evenly balanced. Fifteen feet away, a man shifted sideways so that he was directly in front of Oliver. He was expensively dressed, medium sized with wide shoulders and a dark angular face. He stared at Oliver. I see you, he was telling Oliver. You aren't like the rest of them. I'm watching. He was intense and deadly. Pit boss, Oliver realized. Well, fuck you. Oliver's spirit and body fused as though they had been sleeping in separate rooms. For the first time in years, he felt his whole strength. A slight smile crossed his face.

The pit boss was called away, and Oliver continued to watch the table. _They're not getting my money. _ The resolve came out of nowhere, clear and absolute. A woman left the table. He took her place, bent over, and placed a \$5 chip on the pass line. An older man in a baseball cap threw the dice low and hard. They bounced off the far end of the table and skittered back to the center. A two, snake eyes. Most of the players groaned. Oliver's chip was raked in. He bet again to pass. The next player threw a six. There was a flurry of bets. A four. Another flurry of bets. The player reached down with one hand and arranged the pair of dice so that threes showed on top. He was overweight, red faced with a closely trimmed white beard. He tossed the dice gently up into the air so that they stayed together until they hit the felt. They bounced to a four. "Yes!" Cheers and clapping. The players who had bet that a four would be rolled before a seven had won. No one had lost. The start of a good run. Burl Ives / Colonel Sanders arranged the dice again and threw a six--the point. Uproar. All were winners but those few who had bet "no pass." Oliver had his chips back.

He stepped away. He had won, and he had lost. He wandered over to a roulette table. Two Asian women, middle-aged sisters perhaps, or cousins, or lovers, sat side by side betting large sums on every spin of the wheel. Their hair was long and lustrous, elaborately wound and held by jade. Light disappeared into the blackness of their hair and re-emerged at different points as they tilted their heads toward each other and toward the whirling ball. They bet on lucky numbers, sometimes winning big, often losing all. They were indifferent to loss and satisfied when they won. Their faces were masks--beautiful and timeless.

Oliver bet \$10 on red, a gesture after losing himself in admiration of the women. The steel ball whirled around the rim and bounced down into a red numbered slot. Everybody won. He picked up his winnings and nodded to the pair. They scarcely noticed.

Oliver was ten dollars ahead and hungry. He left the casino and found a coffee shop where he ate a turkey club sandwich and relaxed. So far, so good.

As he neared the crap tables again, a bar hostess with long legs in black mesh stockings asked if he wanted a drink. "Diet Pepsi, please." She came back a few minutes later with the drink. "Thanks." He put a dollar tip on her tray.

He moved to a place at the ten dollar craps table. The man next to him had a name tag on his short sleeved shirt that read, "R. Melnick M.D." He was pale and sweating lightly. His fingers drummed on a stack of black \$100 chips, twenty at least. He placed four chips on the no pass line, won, and added to his stack. He left, irritated, as though the inevitable humiliation was just being postponed.

Oliver bet ten dollars and won. He left his chips on the pass line and won again. He put one chip back in his pocket and won again. He put two more chips in his other pocket and lost the rest on the next roll. Twenty dollars ahead. He kept his original stake in one pocket and his winnings in the other.

When he lost three times in a row, he went over to the roulette tables to change his luck. He put one chip on red and lost. He doubled his bet and won, leaving him one chip ahead. He went back to craps and began betting larger amounts. He stayed with his system. He was \$375 ahead when he lost three times and headed back to the roulette wheel. He lost the first three times he bet on red. He doubled his bet again, eight \$10 chips, his largest bet so far. The ball went around and around and hopped into the double zero slot. Neither red nor black. The house won all bets. Oliver swallowed. What were the odds that he would lose an almost even bet, five times in a row? About one out of thirty-two times. He counted out sixteen chips, \$160. The dealer looked at him with a flicker of interest--one of these guys who would go down with his system? The ball whined around the rim of the wheel a long time before it slowed, fell into the center of the wheel, and bounced to a stop.

Red. Oliver collected his chips, relieved, and put all but one back in his stake pocket. All that risk on the last spin to win a net total of one chip. If he had lost, he would have had to bet \$320 on the next spin to have a net win of one chip. And then \$640. The dealer had seen it all before. Sooner or later, the improbable happened, and a run of losses wiped out the double-or-nothing players.

Oliver put his \$100 chip on pass. He lost. He lost twice more and returned to roulette. This time he won on the second spin. He went back to craps and lost again. His winnings sunk to \$45 and then climbed back to \$120.

"How's your luck tonight?" A young blonde smiled appealingly.

"Not too bad."

"You want to bet a couple for me? You know, have a good time?"

"I'd love to," Oliver said, "but I'm too shot. I'm going to bed."

"I could help with that," she said.

"No thanks, Beautiful--not tonight." She shrugged and moved on. Oliver went up to his room and was asleep in five minutes.

At 4 a.m. he was wide awake. He dressed and returned to the casino. The room was mostly dark and shut down. Only one row of slot machines by the door was active. Overhead lights illuminated a single craps table, a bright mahogany raft floating in the darkness. Old men held on to its edges, playing quietly and grimly. Oliver put himself in their place. Why go to bed? Save themselves for what? They clung to a different kind of life raft than Jacky had been for him, but it was just as real. He watched for ten minutes and left. He found an open cafeteria and took a cup of coffee back to bed. The steam from the cup and the warmth in his hand were comforting.

Oliver woke up late in the morning. He cashed in all but fifty dollars of his chips and ate a large breakfast. He walked along the beach to the Taj Mahal casino and found that it was much the same as Bally's. He returned to the hotel and checked out. Before he left, he placed a fifty dollar bet on pass. He would leave seventy dollars ahead or a hundred and seventy dollars ahead, a winner either way. My kind of bet, he said to himself. He won. Yesterday's pit boss was not there. Oliver imagined himself nodding to him--superior, free, out of there. It didn't matter. He could tell Jacky.

Finding the Delaware Bridge was the next challenge. Two hours later, Oliver was in Maryland easing around a curve on a gravel driveway. Stones crunched under his wheels as he stopped in front of a white colonial. Jacky came out to meet him. She was wearing a Red Sox T-shirt and a wrap-around cotton skirt.

"Well, well," she said looking at his suit and holding her arms open. "What have we here?"

"A player," Oliver said, coming close. Her arms drew him against her. He smelled honeysuckle, and his hands found their familiar places.

"Mmm," she said, "I'll bet you're hungry."

"You win."

Jacky stepped back. "Good. I'm going to show off. I've been practicing my crab cakes."

"Yumm."

"I thought we'd eat home, relax, maybe go out later . . . I'll give you the Bay Tour tomorrow."

"Finest kind," Oliver said. "Nice house. That T-shirt isn't going to make you any friends."

"Just because I'm living in Maryland, doesn't mean I'm a traitor," she said, leading him into the kitchen. "How was Atlantic City?"

"Weird. I won. It wasn't what I was expecting." Jacky took the crab cake mix from the refrigerator. She turned on a burner under a Dutch oven half full of oil. "I thought I might get into a big deal

all-or-nothing scene, a go-down-in-flames kind of thing. I brought all my money." He told her about the pit boss and the icy focus that had come over him and taken control. "I didn't even drink," he said. "It was tiring, but I won."

"Very good," she said. She flicked drops of water into the oil. The drops sizzled and danced. "You're safe now. There's a nice Sauvignon Blanc in the refrigerator. I think it's time."

Oliver responded to her choreography. He uncorked the wine and poured two glasses. "To us," Jacky said. Oliver clinked his glass against hers and sipped.

"Yowzir! You must have gotten a good raise."

"Wait until you taste these," she said, lowering crab cakes into the hot oil.

The crab cakes were delicious. "What's your secret?" Oliver asked.

"Mustard and capers," she said, pleased. The bottle was quickly empty and they opened another. Drinking with Jacky usually made Oliver softer and more open. Today, he began to feel focused again, revved up, not unlike the way he had felt in Atlantic City. Jacky was smiling.

"Oh, this is so much better," she said. Let me show you the rest of the house . . . I could use some of your special attention." She led him through a comfortable living room and up the stairs. Oliver looked at the ceiling in the bedroom.

"No eye bolt," he said.

Jacky giggled. "Funny you should mention that." She opened a drawer and took out a large bolt. "I thought maybe you could help me with this. Maybe tomorrow." She laid the bolt on the dresser. "Take your clothes off, Oliver."

The focus inside him strengthened. He dropped his clothes at his feet without changing expression, kicked off his shoes, took three steps, and pulled her to him. "Aren't we strong, today," she teased. He turned her backwards onto the bed. She fell beneath him and wrapped her legs around him. "My fierce little man."

This was the way it was going to have to be, Oliver realized. Talk wasn't going to do it. A counselor wouldn't work. This was their language.

He pulled up her skirt and curved his right hand between her legs. His left hand reached up under her head and took a fistful of hair. He pulled her head down, immobilizing it, and rubbed slowly with his right hand. Her shoulders strained upward twice in resistance or surprise. Oliver held her head back and continued to rub.

Jacky adjusted quickly. She pushed up against his hand. "Take them off," she said. Oliver rolled sideways without letting go of her hair. He pulled her panties down, and she bent her knees. He slid them over her feet and then moved back on top of her. "Give it to me," she said.

Oliver entered her, slowly and deeply until she was pinned to the bed.

She made a small gurgling noise. He withdrew and then pushed into her again. "Oliver?" He increased the pressure on her hair and went on fucking her silently and slowly. "Oliver?" He didn't trust himself to speak. He was afraid to speak. She would regain control, somehow. "Ohh," she groaned. "Sweet?" The question in her voice was increasing, changing to doubt. His intensity strengthened, feeding on her doubt.

He kept an impersonal rhythm, driving her into the bed with each stroke, holding his grip on her hair. "Baby," she said. "Fuck me." She began to writhe beneath him, meeting him, trying to draw him on. Oliver refused to hurry. "Oliver?" She was pleading, now. Deeply in. Slowly out.

Jacky began to strike him in the back. She made angry sounds. Her fists drummed on his back. I--am--in--control, he said to himself. "Damn you!" she exhaled. She stopped hitting him. "All right. All right." She went limp.

Oliver continued without varying. She gave up. Her hands went to his back and her body molded to his. Her breath began to whistle on each exhale as he drove into her. She came with a sudden release and a series of falling sighs. Her hands fell back on the bed.

Oliver released his grip on her hair and cradled her cheeks in both hands. He kissed her for the first time. Holding her lips softly under his, he began to move faster. Her hands went to his shoulder blades. Her tongue touched lightly in and out of his mouth. In a minute, he was done. She stroked his back.

"Oliver?"

He was off her and dressing.

"Oliver, please . . ." She sat up, uncertain. He saw the little girl in the strong woman. He wanted to comfort her, but he didn't trust himself not to give in. She would control him forever. It wasn't her fault; it was just the way she was. Arlen's words came to him.

"It's not your fault," Oliver said. "It's not anybody's fault. You are wonderful, Jacky. Queen of crab cakes. The greatest fuck in the western world. But--I've changed. It won't work." He shook his head. "I wish it could."

"Why did you come?" She reddened. "Well, go then!" She looked around and picked up a book from the table next to the bed. "Go!" She threw it at him. He ducked sideways and walked downstairs. She followed him, shouting "Go!" As he went out the front door, a glass shattered against a wall. "Get _out_ of here!" The other glass smashed and he heard her begin to cry.

The Jeep started and he was on the road again.

8.

Oliver drove a mile and stopped, ears buzzing from wine and the violent

emotion. He saw Jacky again, sitting up on the bed, one hand across her heart, and he felt a stab of pain and longing. It wasn't too late to turn around. They could put the pieces back together; he could serve her, and she would take care of him. Why not? What else was he going to do? He searched around in the glove compartment and found a Willy Nelson tape. Might as well have the real thing. _On the road again . . . _ Shit. He pounded the steering wheel once and kept going.

Philadelphia. He made it past the city and began to wear down. He didn't need to hurry--Arlen wasn't expecting him home for a couple of days. He turned off the highway and stopped at a motel. He put his bag on a chair and lay down for a moment. Had he done the right thing? Or was he just running away from commitment? He was in a bind. He couldn't stay in a submissive relationship with Jacky, but the more powerful that he felt as an individual, the lonelier he became and the more he wanted her--or someone.

Pie. At least there was pie. Somewhere. He drove down the road until he came to a diner. Two state cops were drinking coffee at one end of the counter. A truck driver and three construction workers sat at the other end. Oliver sat between the two groups and sank further into his feelings. Thirty-five and what did he have to show for it? Six thousand dollars and a cat. An old Jeep.

He finished his apple pie and watched the double doors to the kitchen swing shut behind the waitress. The swinging doors dissolved into dark water. He saw Owl overboard, holding his head above the waves. "Find your father," Owl said. Oliver's eyes opened wide. Owl _had_ said that once. "Someday, you should find your father."

Oliver thought hard. He had to do something. It was good advice. He made up his mind to try.

"More coffee?"

"Uh--yes. Please."

Oliver took a deep breath and peeled the top from a creamer. He poured the liquid into his coffee and watched white swirls turn the black to brown. Owl had done his best for him. He had acknowledged their difference without really talking about it. He hadn't tried to be everything to him. Tears came to Oliver's eyes. He stared straight ahead and let them slide down his cheeks. Wiping them away would have been disrespectful.

No one seemed to notice.

Oliver returned to the motel and slept twelve hours. The next day he considered stopping in New Haven, but he decided to drive straight through to Portland. His mother had not been in contact with his father, Muni, since she had left Hawaii. She wouldn't know any more than what she'd already told him. The Nakano's had owned a small hotel in Honolulu. Muni's brother, Ken, was a teacher. Muni had been a student at the University. That was it. His mother had split soon after she learned that she was pregnant. According to her, Muni had wanted to marry, but she knew it wouldn't work.

Not a lot to go on, but it would have to do.

"Welcome back, Oliver. You're home early," Arlen said.

"Don't get used to it. I'm going to Hawaii." Arlen's jaw dropped.
"Don't worry," Oliver said. "I'm not going to stick you with Verdi. Thanks very much for taking care of him, by the way. We just had a chat. He says you're a nice man and you have some Laphroiaig left."

"You can't tell a cat anything, these days," Arlen said. "It's not quite cocktail hour, but I suppose it's close enough."

"Just a drop," Oliver said.

They sat near the birds. "Perseverance furthers," Oliver toasted.
"That's from the _I Ching._"

"Ninety percent of success is showing up," Arlen answered. "Woody Allen."

"It's true, isn't it," Oliver said. "You just have to keep at it. What was your father like, Arlen, when you were a kid?"

"Very much as he is now," Arlen said. "Early to bed, early to rise. We had a dairy farm near Unity. We didn't have a lot of money, but we always had clothes and whatever we needed for school. If we wanted extra, we had to work for it. He still has the farm, but he sold the herd after Mother died." Arlen's eyebrows raised with the memory, then settled. "He's hung on, doing a little of this and a little of that, getting by with social security. He sold a small piece of land three years ago. He keeps saying he's going to sell out and move to Florida, but he doesn't get around to it."

"Good for him. I never met my father. That's why I'm going to Hawaii--to see if I can find him."

"Oh," Arlen said. "Well. It's a long flight. But there's no place like Hawaii. I usually stay over on the west coast, break the trip in two. The jet lag isn't so bad that way, and the flight isn't such an ordeal."

"Not a bad idea."

"San Francisco is wonderful, of course. Seattle and Portland are nice. There's a marvelous Japanese garden in Portland, high on a hill overlooking the city."

"I'll think about that. I'm not sure when I'll be going or how long I'll be. Depends on when I can get a cheap ticket and what happens."

"I would stay at least a week or two. You might as well make a trip of it while you're at it."

"I'll call one of those professional cat-sitter people--unless you know someone who might want to live here for a couple of weeks?"

Arlen rubbed one of his cowboy boots. "Porter might like that. His situation at the moment is--tenuous."

"Porter?"

"I'll ask him if you like," Arlen said. "He might be up for some peace

and quiet. Porter is trustworthy."

"Any friend of yours . . ."

"I'll ask," Arlen said.

"O.K., thanks." Oliver sipped whiskey. "My stepfather was a good guy. He drowned--nearly twenty years ago."

"I'm sorry. Fathers can be bad, too, you know."

"I guess I'll just have to find out. Bound to learn something, either way."

"A drop more?"

"Sure."

"Fathers, then," Arlen toasted. "I remember when I told mine that I was gay. I was pretty nervous."

"What happened?"

"He rubbed his chin with both hands in a way he had when he was thinking. He said: 'They say people are wired that way or they choose that way. I think you're wired that way.'"

"I am," I said. "But I choose it, too." I didn't want him thinking I was sorry for myself. My father pointed across the valley.

"Louis, over there--he's got six boys been chasing everything in skirts since they were big enough to sit on a tractor. I wouldn't trade you for two of them."

"Two!" I said. "Three, anyway."

"He'd be getting a deal at three," my father said." Arlen smiled and lifted his glass in the general direction of his father.

"All right!" Oliver said.

That week, Oliver bought a round trip ticket to Portland, Oregon and a seven day Hawaiian vacation package that left from Portland. Porter would be glad to stay in the apartment and cat-sit, Arlen informed him. The three met for lunch in the Old Port. Porter was round and jovial, balding with a small spade shaped beard and one gold earring. He was a baker. His fists bunched like hard rolls when he wasn't eating or telling jokes. Oliver was well satisfied with him.

Oliver took to walking on Crescent Beach early in the morning. It was cold, foggy sometimes, but always refreshing. He walked the upper path that led through woods and across a field to a rocky shoreline. From there, the path turned eastward, following the shore to the beach and to the main parking lot, closed at that time of year. One morning he noticed an unusual arrangement of sticks and rocks near the beginning of the beach. The sticks were jammed into the sand at odd angles. Small rocks were piled to suggest barricades. It was like a kid's fort but more sophisticated.

The next morning, the fort had become a small town with a watchtower at its center. Two days later, there was only a low wall protecting a woven matting of driftwood sticks. Oliver imagined an art student practicing, seeing what things looked like as he or she made them.

On Sunday, Oliver had breakfast at six. The park was empty when he arrived. The leaves were damp and thick on the ground except for a few coppery oak leaves, always the last to fall. Tough stuff, oak, Oliver thought. He stopped to look for the latest sculpture. At first, he saw only random driftwood. It was as though a storm at high tide had leveled all traces of beach-goers. It was a loss. He had begun to connect with the anonymous arrangements; he looked forward to seeing them.

His attention was drawn to a protected spot below an eroded bank. Beach grass hung forward over the edge of the bank. A semicircle of thin flat stones stood upright in the sand. Oliver approached. They stood like Easter Island miniatures, thin sides facing the ocean. Oliver's imagination shrunk and stood on the stand looking up at them. Just then, the sun rose. Golden light swept over the ocean, up the beach, caught in the overhanging bank, and leaped on across the continent. The stone people were the first to see it.

"Oliver?"

He jumped. Someone had come along the path. Francesca! "Oh, hi!" he said. "You scared me. Look at this." He motioned her over and pointed. "The Early People--they've been waiting for the sun."

"So have I," Francesca said. She was wearing tan jeans and a long gray sweatshirt. "Brrr."

"Somebody keeps making sculptures here," Oliver said. "I started noticing them this week."

"Do you come here often?" she asked.

"Yeah."

"I try to walk here on Sunday mornings. Conor takes care of the girls, and I get some time to myself."

"It's so beautiful, here. Any time of year," Oliver said. Francesca bent over.

"Cute," she said. "Did you see the little ones?" She put a finger in the sand behind one of the Early People. There were three very much smaller stones imitating their elders.

"Pretty good," Oliver said. "I didn't see them."

Francesca straightened. "Let's walk."

Oliver fell into step beside her.

"I haven't seen you in ages," she said.

"I know. How are the girls?"

"Maria has an earache, but it's getting better. They're fine." She gave him an encouraging look.

"I made something for you--a present."

"Oooo . . ."

"I was going to mail it, but I didn't want to embarrass you."

"It's been a long time since I was embarrassed."

"It's a valentine."

"Now I'm really curious," she said. What am I doing? he asked himself. Too late now. Francesca rubbed the end of her nose with her palm. "You could bring it to me next Sunday."

"Yes. Oh, damn! I'm leaving on Thursday; I won't be here."

"Where are you going?"

"I'm going to Hawaii. I'm going to try and find my father. I've never met him. He's Japanese. I am too, I guess. Half."

"Caramba!" Francesca said.

"So I can't be here, Sunday. I wish . . ."

"Mail it," she said. "I could use a valentine."

"O.K. Will just 'Cape Elizabeth' get to you?"

"Old Toll Road, 420," she said. A lobster boat started its engine in the distance.

"How tall are you?" Oliver asked.

"Six feet, even."

"I'm five, two. Funny thing is--I don't feel short around you. I did when I first saw you in Becky's, but now I don't." A quick smile crossed her face. She turned her head toward the water.

"Careful," she said quietly. He barely heard her. "When will you be back?" she asked more loudly.

"Don't know. Couple of weeks, I think. Maybe I'll see you out here?"

"Until the snow gets too deep," she said.

"I'll see you, then," Oliver said, stopping. "I'll leave you to your peace and quiet."

"Be safe," she said. Oliver waved and walked back the way they had come. The sun was clear of the horizon, promising warmth.

"Yes!" he said. The Early People had an air of being off duty. They had waited for the sun, welcomed it, and were now free to enjoy it.

9.

Oliver changed planes in Chicago and landed in Oregon at one o'clock, Pacific time. "Funny thing," he said to a cab driver. "I always thought Portland was on the ocean. It's a river port."

"The Columbia," the driver said. "Where you from?"

"The other Portland--in Maine."

"Back east. I'm from Worcester, Mass, myself. Long time ago."

"You like it out here?"

"It's all right. Beats shoveling snow."

"It feels a lot milder," Oliver said. "We could get snow anytime in Maine."

"Friggin snow," the driver said. "Here you go."

"You want to wait a couple of minutes--off the meter? I'll need another ride."

"Where to?"

"There's supposed to be a big Japanese garden up on a hill. . ."

"I'll wait."

"Be right out." Oliver checked in, left his bag in his room, and came out feeling light-footed. He had a map in one pocket of his bush jacket. He unfolded it in the cab. "So--where is it?"

"Washington Park, Kingston Avenue."

"I see it. Great. Let's go." They drove into the city and climbed through a residential district. The driver stopped at the entrance to the garden.

"You can get a bus downtown on that corner over there," he said, pointing.

"Thanks." The cab rolled away down the hill. It was quiet. The neighborhood trees and hedges were lush. A layer of cloud imparted a soft gray tone to the buildings and the streets stretched out below.

Oliver entered the park and strolled along paths that were nearly deserted. He walked up and down through trees, past tiny ponds, mossy rock faces, handmade bamboo fountains, patches of flowers, and unexpected views. The effect was both wild and intensely cultivated. The garden was an homage to nature, a carefully tended frame within which blossoms fell and birds flitted in their own time.

A light drizzle began to fall. Oliver sat on his heels, warm enough in

his jacket and his canvas hat. The live silence of the garden gradually entered him, replacing an inner deafness. When he stood, his knees were stiff, but he had become otherwise more flexible. His plans were not so important--they mattered, but not to the exclusion of what was around him.

He caught a bus downtown and wandered through an area of mixed industry, galleries, and restaurants. He spent time in a leather shop that sold skins and hides. Oliver had never seen an elk hide. He bought a rattlesnake skin, five feet long, that had intricate brown and black diamond-shaped markings. The clerk rolled it in a tight coil and put a rubber band around it.

Oliver ate in a Japanese restaurant. A scroll hung in an illuminated recess at one end of the room. The characters were bold, the brush strokes fresh and immediate. Stringed music twanged of duty, consequence, and the inevitable flow of time. The waitress, middle-aged and respectful, brought him dinner with a minimum of talk. Oliver ate slowly, feeling no need for conversation. He was conversing, he realized, with each move of his chopsticks, each glance around the room.

The cab ride and the hotel seemed loud in comparison. He turned the TV on and turned it off. It was better to lie in bed and revisit the garden. Tomorrow was coming. Another long flight.

In the morning, Oliver's spirits rose as the jet cleared the coast, high above the ocean. "Here we go," he said to the slim woman seated next to him. She smiled and resumed reading what appeared to be a textbook. He had a glass of Chardonnay with lunch, but he was too wide awake to sleep afterwards. The plane passed above slabs of cloud and intermittent vistas of empty ocean. Once, a jet slid by below them, several miles away, flying in the opposite direction.

Hours later, as they descended toward the islands, a general excitement spread through the plane and the student became talkative. "There is tourist Hawaii," she said, "and military Hawaii, and everywhere else--the real Hawaii."

"I'm staying in Waikiki," Oliver said. "I guess that's tourist Hawaii."

"Yes," she said. "But the buses are good. You can get out, go around the island."

"I will. I'm going to try and look up family I've never met."

"Where do they live?" Oliver had found a listing for Kenso Nakano in a phone book at the airport.

"Alewa Heights," he said.

She laughed. "Ah--LEV--Ah . . . That's the real Hawaii."

"Look at that!" The plane was banking over a large crater with a grassy center and steep green sides.

"Diamond Head," she said. She wiped away a tear.

"Diamond Head? I didn't know it was a crater. I never saw a crater before."

"It nice and green, this time year," she said in a different voice, intense and musical. The tires jerked and the plane slowed with a rush of engines. They taxied to the terminal. Passengers unlatched overhead bins and waited in the aisle for the door to open.

"Goodbye," Oliver said to the woman.

"Aloha," she said, "good luck, huh."

"Aloha," Oliver said, for the first time without irony. The word felt good in his mouth.

He stepped through the door into a perfume of flowers and burnt jet fuel. White clouds ballooned over green mountain ridges. Heat waves eddied on the tarmac. The passengers moved quickly into the terminal and dispersed.

A young woman with brown skin and black hair, dressed in shorts and halter top, held a sign that read: Polynesian Paradise Adventures. She put a lei around Oliver's neck and directed him to a bus where he waited half an hour while other vacationers collected their luggage and boarded in small groups. The flowers in his lei were white with yellow centers. They had the same sweet smell that had greeted him at the airplane door. "Plumeria," the hostess told him.

The bus passed through an industrial area and then along the shore by several blocks of downtown business buildings, a marina, a park, and a large shopping mall. They entered an avenue congested with high-rise hotels and condominiums. "Waikiki," the hostess announced. The bus stopped in front of a nondescript hotel, and the hostess wished them a good vacation. "You have your discount coupons," she said.

"Where's the beach?" someone called.

"Over there." She pointed across an avenue choked with cars, taxis, and buses. "Two blocks."

Oliver's room was spare. The walls were made of concrete blocks painted a light aqua color. Sliding glass doors opened on a tiny porch. He went out and sat in a white plastic lawn chair for a moment. He was on the tenth floor, overlooking a side street. There was a building directly in front of him and more buildings in the direction of the beach. In the other direction, he could see a strip of mountain and what appeared to be a canal a few blocks away. It wasn't Paradise, and it wasn't particularly Polynesian, though there were palm trees by the canal.

The map that he had been given showed tourist attractions and how to get to them. He bought a decent map in the lobby and walked over to Kalakaua Avenue and down to the beach. It was a pretty beach, a gentle crescent that curved along a green park. In the other direction, back the way he had come, the sand fronted a strip of hotels. The waves were quiet, though larger than they had been in Atlantic City. Diamond Head guarded the far end of the beach. He felt differently about the postcard view now that he knew its secret. There's a crater in there.

He took off his shoes and socks and walked to the Diamond Head end of the beach, turning back at a small cluster of expensive houses and condominiums. The sand underfoot made him feel like a little kid. He

retraced his steps and stopped by the first hotel that he reached on the beach side of Kalakaua. It was older than the others. A huge tree shaded a polygonal bar and a courtyard paved with stone. He ordered a Glenlivet.

"Some tree! What kind is it?"

"Banyan," the bartender said.

"Oh." Hanging roots, dense green leaves, and thick nearly horizontal branches created an inviting world. Oliver imagined a tree house. He took a table in the shade and looked out over the ocean. Maybe he should just be a tourist and forget the whole thing. He'd gotten along without his father this long; what difference would it make to meet him now? He didn't know. That was the problem. That was why he had to look up Kenso Nakano--Ken--on Alewa Heights. Chances were good that Ken was his uncle.

Oliver rolled the whiskey around in his glass. A very tall man in shorts trudged past on the sand. He was a foot taller than a tall man. Long legs held his upper body high in the air. Like a heron, Oliver thought. Holy shit! Wilt Chamberlain! Wilt looked patient, proud, and tired. A sports king, still holding his head up. He scored a hundred points once. No one could take that away from him. A familiar pang squeezed Oliver. The nothing pang. What have you done? Nothing.

Scotch trickled down Oliver's throat. Wilt kept a steady pace down the beach. Oliver thought of getting a ticket to another world--the Philippines, say--and disappearing. He could go to a village on a remote island and live until he ran out of money. It would be perfect for a while, and then, to hell with it, he would get kidnapped or lost in the jungle; it wouldn't matter.

No use. A force inside him would not let go. His spirit assumed a stone face. Forward.

He awoke the next morning at 4 a.m., out of synch from jet lag. Half an hour later he gave up trying to get back to sleep. He dressed and walked toward the shopping mall, stopping at a Tops Restaurant busy with cab drivers, early risers, and night owls winding down. He had half a papaya, served with a piece of lemon. Delicious. Eggs came with two scoops of rice. Eggs and rice? Not bad. Full daylight came as he finished a second cup of coffee and looked at his map.

Alewa Heights was on the other side of the city. He could find a bus that would get him close, no doubt, but it was early to be visiting. Should he call? No. That was too much of a commitment. He wanted to walk to the address and see how he felt when he got there, leaving open the chance for a last-minute escape.

He decided to wait a day. Look up Kenso Nakano tomorrow, he told himself. He walked back to the hotel by a different route and fell asleep easily.

Later that morning, he walked to Tops again and on to the Ala Moana Shopping Center. Acres of parking lot surrounded two decks of stores--mainland chains and local names. There were fountains and sculptures, a mix of tourists and islanders, and, at one end, a

Japanese department store named, "Shirokya." He spent an hour in Shirokya admiring the packaging and design, listening to Japanese music, and feeling proud of the evident care taken with details. _If you're going to do something, do it well._

He crossed Ala Moana Boulevard to the yacht harbor where rows of large sailboats were moored behind a stone breakwater. "Salty boats," he said to a guy who was smoking at the end of a long dock.

"Better be. It's a mile deep right out there." He looked down at Oliver, amused. Oliver was evidently too short for the Pacific.

He spent the rest of the day poking around Waikiki and considering his visit to Kenso Nakano. The next morning, he caught a bus to the other side of the city.

He walked up Alewa Drive in bright sunshine, enjoying the view of the city and the ocean which grew in immensity as he climbed. The higher he got, the more vast the ocean became and the smaller the island, until he began to sense that he was standing on a happy accident, a green miracle in a marine world. The planes taking off from the airport below him looked puny. It was an added pleasure to turn away from the Pacific to the street, to the plumeria, the bougainvillea, and the different shades of green. Doves called. There was little traffic.

The street bent higher around a switchback curve. A pickup was parked in front of a wall and a gate which bore the number Oliver was seeking. Two heavyset men wearing shorts, T-shirts, and baseball caps were easing a boulder from the truck bed onto an impromptu ramp of two-by-sixes. A woman with trim graying hair and tanned cheeks watched. The planks sagged ominously.

"She hold?"

"Plenty strong."

"Damn--stuck. Excuse me, Mrs. Nakano."

"I've heard worse," she said. Oliver approached and braced one shoulder against the rock.

"What is this?" one man said. "Who you?"

"Superman," Oliver said.

"You shrunk." There was a cracking noise from one of the planks. "Watch it!" The other man got both hands under one edge of the boulder, bent his knees, and heaved. The boulder rocked and began to slide down the planks. They bowed farther but held as the three of them guided the boulder to the street.

"One good moss-rock, Mrs. Nakano. Kind of small, though."

"I know you guys like a challenge," she said.

"Where you want it?"

She pointed through the gate.

"We better do it. This start down the road, it end up in somebody's living room." They walked the boulder through the gate and to one end of a flower bed. It took three of them to move it without using crowbars; Oliver helped until it was in place.

"Hard to find a good moss-rock these days," Mrs. Nakano said. "How about a soda?"

"Too early for anything else," one said. "Sure."

"Thank you so much for helping," she said to Oliver. "Are you thirsty?"

"Yes. I was looking for you. I think. Actually, I'm looking for Muni Nakano who has a brother--Ken?"

"Oh," she said. "Muni is my brother-in-law."

"My name is Oliver, Oliver Prescott."

"How do you do, Oliver. This is Jimmy. This is Kapono." The others nodded, and she went inside.

"Superman without a license--serious offense," Jimmy said.

"Batman worse," Kapono said.

"Still--he pretty strong for a midget."

Oliver grinned and brushed the dirt off his hands. There were times to keep your mouth shut. Mrs. Nakano returned and handed out cans of Pepsi. "This was good of you guys." She turned to Oliver. "I'm sorry. Ken is on a trip. Can I help you?"

"Oh." Oliver thought. "I need to find Muni."

"Ken will be back the day after tomorrow. He is coming in tomorrow night--late."

"I'll call on the phone, then, the day after tomorrow? Maybe around nine in the morning?"

"That will be fine."

"Thanks," Oliver said. He drained his soda and gave the can back to Mrs. Nakano. "Good," he said. He waved and started out the gate.

"You want a ride down the hill?" Jimmy asked.

"No need," Oliver said.

"He fly," Kapono said.

When Oliver got back to Waikiki, he had lunch at the banyan bar and thought about what had happened. Mrs. Nakano was nice. The moss-rock delivery duo had been most respectful. The house was in an upscale neighborhood. Ken Nakano was well established, for sure. You couldn't tell much from the house; like the other houses near it, the side facing the street was simple, almost anonymous. What was individual was out of sight. He was glad that he hadn't given Mrs. Nakano his middle

name. Who knows what Jimmy and Kaponono would have thought? They were pretty sharp.

The following day, he took TheBus around most of the island. That's what it said in big letters on the side: "TheBus." Mountains three thousand feet high separated the leeward and windward sides. The windward side was cooler, breezier, and less touristy. Steep sharp ridges radiated out to a coastal plain. Deep valleys disappeared into mysterious shade, wilder than he would have thought, so close to a city. TheBus returned across a central highland between two mountain groups. They passed a pineapple plantation, long rows of spiky bushes in red dirt, and a military base, Schofield Barracks. Pearl Harbor spread out before them--large, calm, and silver, warships moored at docks, small boats moving about. Then they were back in traffic, back in the city. He got out at the shopping center and walked to Waikiki.

It had been cloudy most of the day. The wind had begun to blow hard. Gusts caught the hair of young women and whipped ebony parabolas three feet over their heads. The women turned their heads like wild mustangs, laughing--counterpoint to their Asian composure and perfect make-up. This is it, Oliver thought. I could die right here. I'll never see anything more beautiful.

He ate dinner in a Thai restaurant. His waitress was another knockout. Across the room, someone who looked like Gomer Pyle was eating and joking. It was Gomer Pyle--Jim Nabors. Wilt. Gomer. Gorgeous women. Oliver began to feel that this was the way things should be, that it was his due. He was Oliver. He had family on Alewa Heights, he was sure of it. Tomorrow would tell.

At nine the next morning, Oliver called the Nakano's number.

"Hello?" A quiet male voice. Island.

"Hello, this is Oliver Prescott. Are you Ken?"

"Yes."

"I'm trying to find Muni."

"Michiko told me you helped with the moss-rock."

"Not much. Those guys were pretty big . . ."

"They my football coaches, phys-ed teachers," Ken said.

"Aha."

"Do you have business with my brother?"

"Not business, exactly. My mother knew him a long time ago. Did he ever mention Dior Del'Unzio?"

"Mmmm . . ." Silence. "That was a long time ago."

"My middle name is Muni. My mother told me that Muni was my father and that he had a brother named Ken. I think you are my uncle." Ken made a sound deep in his throat.

"Mmmm . . . What year were you born? Do you have identification?"

"1958. Yes, I have I.D."

"Mmmm . . . Muni lives in Japan, but he is in California, now. I will try and contact him. I will give him your number."

"Thank you." Oliver gave him the hotel and room number and the name of the hotel in Eugene where he would be staying for a few days the following week. "I live in Maine. He could reach me there, after that." He gave Ken the address.

"I'll see what I can do," Ken said.

"Thank you."

"It may take a while. Muni unpredictable sometimes."

"I'll wait," Oliver said.

"O.K. . . . Maybe we get together sometime."

"I'd like that," Oliver said.

When Ken hung up, Oliver felt truly disconnected. Ken had sounded like a decent guy. Made sense, with a wife like that. My coaches . . . He must be a principal or a superintendent in the school system. Having finally made contact, Oliver wanted more.

But no one called the next day. Or the next. Oliver thought about visiting another island, but he didn't want to be away from the hotel that long. He couldn't sit by the phone for four days, so he explored the city, checking back for messages at least once during the day.

Honolulu was interesting. With the exception of Waikiki and the downtown district, it was a residential city. There were distinctly different neighborhoods in each of the narrow valleys that stretched two and three miles back into the mountains. Other areas, like Alewa Heights, were built on the faces of the ridges; at night their lights reached with sparkling fingers high into the dark. He found formal gardens, temples, and a red light district with hustlers of every race and description. He found a dirt alley with mud puddles, wandering chickens, barefoot children, and a grandmother with two gold teeth. He discovered small factories and, incredibly, in the middle of the city, a watercress farm.

He read The Advertiser every morning in Tops. He got to know the city as well as he could in a few days. But no one called.

At the end of the week, he took a city bus to the airport, preferring not to travel with the vacation group. He was sad when he boarded the plane. He sat next to the small oval window and buckled his seat belt. The buckle clicked together with a finality that seemed to say: that's it; you did what you could.

The tour package had originated in Eugene. Oliver had chosen to return there instead of Portland. The cost was the same, and he could see another part of Oregon. He slept most of the way to the mainland. As he rode to his hotel in a light rain, shivering a bit, he thought, Hawaii

made me soft. Good place, though. "Aloha," he said, thinking of Ken and Michiko.

10.

The hotel registration clerk reached under the counter. "Message for you, Mr. Prescott." He handed Oliver an envelope.

"Thanks." Oliver took his bag to his room and sat on the bed.

Message for: Oliver Prescott

Received by: Jack

Time: 2:15 p.m.

Oliver--I have heard from my brother, Ken. I will be at The Devil's Churn parking area, tomorrow, Monday, at 10:30 in the morning. Route 101 on the coast, 20 miles north of Florence. Muni

Where the hell was that? He would have to rent a car. How far was it? Oliver's heart raced. He went back to the lobby and borrowed a map from the desk clerk. Florence seemed about two hours away.

"Could I drive to here in two hours?" He pointed out the location.

"No problem."

Oliver went back to the airport and rented a car. He could leave early from the hotel, stop for breakfast on the way, and have plenty of time. He was still functioning on Hawaiian time; he stayed up late, watched TV, and wondered about his father. Unpredictable, Ken said.

In the morning, it rained off and on as he drove over the coastal range. The road curved and swooped through steep-sided valleys. Douglas Firs grew straight and pointed on every slope; their branches trembled with moisture; the light was luminous. There was an occasional burst of dazzling sun and then the clouds rolled in again. Logging trucks owned the road. Only a few smaller roads met the highway. What would life be like ten miles to the left or right? A gas station? A tavern? Another world.

The coastal highway was wide open, almost barren in comparison to the lush woods. Rain swept in from the ocean. A TV forecaster in a truck stop spoke of the first winter storm. Lucky Oliver. The windshield wipers worked well, though, and the rain let up as he eased into a parking area on a rocky headland. The Devil's Churn. No one else was there. It was 10:05. He put his head back and closed his eyes. Francesca came into his mind, tall and calm, and he wished she were there so that he could introduce her to his father. He had an urge to start the car, to leave quickly. Francesca looked sorrowful. "O.K.," he said. She was there, in a way. A car much like his turned off the highway.

A short man wearing black pressed pants and a gray windbreaker approached his car. He was wearing a baseball cap that said, "San Francisco Giants." Oliver got out. The man approached and looked at him closely. He was clean-shaven, darker than Oliver, thinner, and more severe. They were the same height.

"You early," his father said.

"You, too." Oliver smiled.

"Come." He turned and motioned with his hand toward a set of wooden steps that led to the rocks below. Oliver followed him to the steps and down. Near the bottom, the steps were damp and slippery. A sign warned them not to go farther: _Danger! Large Waves Come Without Warning!_ His father ignored the sign and walked to the edge of a deep fissure in the dark rock. It was twenty feet wide and thirty yards long, narrowing as it approached a circular grotto eroded into the base of the cliff.

Farther out, a wave broke and raced up the fissure like a suicide express. Water slammed between the rocky edges, wild and frothing, seething, lurching, hissing, and sucking. Gradually, it receded. Oliver's father pointed to the other side and walked to the end of the fissure where they could look down into the round pool that had been scoured into the rock. Shiny polished stones waited in its bottom for the next wave.

His father continued around the pool and then along the opposite edge on a path six inches wide. The rain had started again. Oliver followed across a steep bank of short wet grass. The next train roared in, just a few feet below them. He was terrified. If he slipped, there was nothing to grab. Anyone who fell in would be torn apart in seconds; there was no chance of surviving the furious water. There was a malevolent feeling to the place. Bad things happened here.

His father walked steadily on. Oliver dropped to his hands and knees and crawled to the end of the path, trying not to look to his left. He scrambled down to a rocky shingle near the mouth of the fissure. His father waited, watching him. Oliver stood up, swallowed, and wiped mud off his hands. "Scary place," he said.

"You not scared there, you an idiot," his father said.

"Shit," Oliver said.

"What's the matter?"

"I just realized that we've got to go back the same way."

"How is your mother?"

"She's fine. She gave me your name--Oliver Muni Prescott."

"Ah," Muni said. "I am glad she is well. She was a beautiful woman. Smart, too. Didn't stick around to marry me."

"She married Owl Prescott, an English professor. They had a girl, Amanda. Owl died. Then she married a guy named Paul Peroni from New

Haven, a good guy, a marble worker." Oliver paused. "Ken told me that you live in Japan."

"Near Kamakura. We have a son and a daughter, grown up, not quite your age. You are--35."

"Yes," Oliver said.

"You married?"

"I was. For four years."

"You have children?"

"No."

"Mmmm . . ."

"Large waves come without warning," Oliver said, looking out at the gray ocean.

"Beautiful here," his father said. Oliver nodded. For the first time, a suggestion of a smile crossed his father's face as he waved at the wild shore guarded by The Devil's Churn. "Most don't get this far. What kind of work you do?"

"I program computers. Used to teach math. I like to make things out of wood sometimes." That seemed to sum it up. Not a very big sum, Oliver thought.

"You know George Nakashima? Made furniture?"

"No."

"Mmmm . . . He lived in Pennsylvania, died two, three years ago." His father reached inside his jacket and handed Oliver an envelope. "This yours," he said.

"What is it?"

"Small present. Maybe it help."

Oliver folded the envelope and put it in a safe pocket. "Thank you," he said. "But, you don't need to give me anything."

"You only as rich as what you give away."

They stood, not minding the rain. "What are you doing in the States?" Oliver asked.

"Teaching one seminar at the University of California, Berkeley. I go back, now." He turned toward the path.

"Teach?"

"Architecture. Japanese kind." His father climbed up onto the path and walked along the edge, not hurrying, not hesitating. Oliver went to his hands and knees again. The express exploded past, but he forced himself

to look straight ahead. He was limp when he reached the wooden steps. At the top, his father was waiting as if nothing had happened.

Oliver exhaled and took a deep breath. "Well . . ." He didn't know what to say. His father's eyes were sparkling.

"Maybe you come see us in Kamakura. I will be back there in one month."

Oliver nodded in the Japanese way. His father bowed and walked back to his car. Oliver watched. He waved as his father drove toward the road. His father waved back. Oliver thought he saw a smile, and then his father was gone.

He was getting wet, he realized. He stopped in Florence for a cup of coffee. There was no sign of his father. He drove back to Eugene and took a long hot shower. The envelope lay unopened on top of the table by the TV.

Oliver took a nap and went out for dinner. He sipped Glenlivet, a bit disappointed--he had learned so little about his father. Also, he was depressed because the meeting was over; he had accomplished what he set out to do, and now what? His father was controlled, impressive. Oliver felt good about that. If he hadn't found out many details about his father, he had learned something about himself. There was a sternness in his father--an inner honor--that Oliver recognized immediately. Same as me, he thought. His father helped put a face on it, made it more accessible and more acceptable.

But what did his father think of him? I didn't wimp out or fall in and die, anyway, he told himself. Muni had seemed guardedly approving. Hard to tell. Perhaps Muni had felt himself on trial, as well. He hadn't shown it. An architect--that was interesting. Oliver had a strong visual sense that had never found a satisfactory outlet. His work had always been secondary in some way. Teaching math and programming had kept him going, but he felt unused, wasted. Maybe he should have been an architect. At least, now, he knew where his visual ability came from.

Oliver mused over his drink and avoided opening the envelope in his pocket. He ate a piece of salmon grilled over alder chips and drank a glass of Oregon Sauvignon Blanc. The waiter brought a double espresso. Oliver opened the envelope with misgivings.

There was a check and a note:

Oliver, if I give this to you, it is because you are my son. I can not know until I meet you. I plan to be back home in Kamakura after the first of the year. Maybe you will visit. Years after 50 are extra. Who knows what will happen? My thoughts are with you. Muni

The check was for \$72,000. Oliver stared at the numbers. Seventy-two thousand dollars? A lot more money than he'd ever had before. But the moment that he accepted the amount, he realized that the money was his only in the sense that he had control of it. He had it because his father had saved it. How could he just spend it on himself? The money

wasn't his; it was theirs--his and his father's and probably his father's parents as well. He replaced the envelope carefully in his pocket. A door opened in his heart, and another door closed.

It would take time for these new feelings to sink in, but Oliver knew that something had changed for good. He lingered over the espresso. An awakened sense of time knocked in his ears and made the present moment more intense. University students at a corner table might have been figures on a screen or spread around a vase. It was right now, Eugene, Oregon. He wanted to shout: "It will never be this way again. We're here! We're alive!" He smiled as he imagined a full moon appearing from behind a cloud. Francesca was standing on Crescent Beach, looking up at the moon, her hands clasped behind her. Oliver stood and bowed slightly to the waiter and to the room.

The next morning he called Porter and told him when he'd be back. He took a bus from Eugene to Portland. The Willamette Valley was green and fertile, a nice after-image on the following afternoon as the plane lowered over the brown Maine woods and the steely blue Atlantic. He took a cab to State Street and had a reunion with Verdi. Porter had left the apartment in tidy shape. There was a letter from Francesca. She had received the box and the heart.

11.

Francesca's note was written on a 3X5 card:

O,

Thank you.

F.

Warmth rushed through Oliver as he stared at her writing. Francesca was answering in kind; she had accepted his valentine. "What do you think about that, my friend?" he asked Verdi. "What do you think about that?" Verdi bumped against his ankle, a sign of high satisfaction. It was good to be home.

Oliver looked around the living room. The mantle was empty without the walnut box. He wished that he had a picture of Francesca to take its place. He unrolled the snakeskin and pinned it vertically to the wall by the steps, admiring the silver and ivory colors and the dark diamonds that had curled around the snake.

He went early to bed and spent a long time looking out at the night and remembering the trip: the gardens and the Japanese restaurant in Portland, Michiko standing by her moss-rock, Diamond Head, The Devil's Churn, his father's face--there had been much to see and few words. What was there to say about these things? Owl had cautioned him more than once: "Listen to what people say, but pay more attention to what

they do._" What would he _do_ with the treasures of this trip?

Treasure, literally. One thing he could do was to put his father's money to work. He decided to open a stock brokerage account. He needed to get a programming project, so that he wouldn't start spending the money. And he needed to see Francesca. She was more fun to think about than job interviews; he drifted to sleep remembering her on Crescent Beach.

In the morning, he answered two job advertisements that were in the paper and then ate breakfast at Becky's. The day seemed to have started without him--jet lag. The booth where he had first seen Francesca was empty. He imagined her there and felt better, more centered.

He walked to Monument Square and entered one of the big name brokerages. He left quickly, put off by slick advertisements on the walls and expensively dressed men exuding earnestness. Farther along the Square, he found a local firm staffed by a short man with a tired expression. The top of his head shone. Brown graying hair started just above his ears, swept back, and hung loosely over the back of his shirt collar. He was eating a bagel. A grandfather clock stood in one corner.

"I'm thinking about opening an account," Oliver explained.

The man swallowed and raised his coffee mug. "Why?"

"I like your clock." The man gave him a longer look and sipped coffee.

"I bought it at an auction. Never been sorry. Sometimes, you've got to pay for quality; sometimes you get a deal."

"I like auctions," Oliver said.

"My name is Myron Marsh. I've been called, 'Swampy.' I've been called, 'Mellow.' I prefer, 'Myron.' "

"What! No 'Shorty?' " The corner of Myron's mouth twitched, but he said nothing. "O.K., Myron. I'm Oliver Prescott."

"You live around here, Oliver?"

"State Street, near the bridge."

"You know anything about investing?"

"No."

"What kind of money are you talking about?"

"Seventy-two thousand."

"Not a bad start," Myron said. "We could get some good balance with that." He opened a filing cabinet and handed Oliver a form. "Tell you what," he said. "Why don't you fill this out and come back with a check when you're ready. Then we can talk about where you want to go with this and what we might do."

"Thanks," Oliver said.

"Here's a booklet that explains our fees and general setup."

Oliver went home and read the material. The application provided for joint ownership of the account. An idea formed. He didn't have a will. If he died, his money would go to his mother. She didn't really need it. Why not make Francesca joint owner? Then, if he died, she could use it for herself and her girls. If she needed money for an emergency, it would be there. She wouldn't have to do anything, just sign the form and know that the account existed. She might not like the idea, might be afraid of strings attached. But there weren't any, really--all she had to do was sign the form and forget about it.

The idea made him feel good. He filled out the form with everything but her signature, her mother's maiden name, and her social security number. He called Myron to check about joint ownership. Either owner could control the account, but he would be the primary owner, responsible for taxes. Monthly statements could be sent to each owner. "No need for that," he told Myron, "just one would be enough." They set a time to meet on the following Monday. Oliver was assuming that he would see Francesca Sunday morning on the beach.

On Saturday night, the weather forecast was for light rain and fog. Oliver could barely see the bridge when he woke up. He made a pot of coffee, drank one cup, and saved the rest in a large thermos which he put in his shoulder bag along with two mugs, half a quart of milk, and a manila envelope containing the account application. Forty minutes later, he was sitting on a driftwood log near the spot at the beginning of the beach where he had last met Francesca and where The Early People had waited for the sun.

It was warm for November. The tide was out. The water was gray, stippled and flattened by light rain. The air was fertile and salty. Mist blurred the rocks. A dog barked somewhere beyond the other end of the beach. Francesca appeared suddenly, holding a black umbrella over her head. When Oliver could see her smile, he stood and smiled back.

"You made it," she said coming closer.

"Quite a trip," he said. He wanted to hug her, but jackets and hats and her umbrella made it awkward. "How about some coffee?"

"Coffee? Superb!"

Oliver sat down on the log and poured them each a mug. "Milk?"

"Mmm."

"Say when . . ."

"When."

He handed her the mug. She sat beside him and shifted the umbrella to partially cover him. "I love my valentine."

"Good. My friend, George, is an artist. He showed me how to cast it. What did you do with it? Not that it's any of my business."

"Hid it." Francesca giggled. "Where did you get the box?"

"Made it."

"I wondered," she said. "It's beautiful. Did you find your father?"

"I did." He told her about Hawaii and meeting his father at The Devil's Churn in Oregon.

"Dramatic," she said. Her eyes were soft.

"It was. It was the way he wanted it."

"Did you feel that he was your father?"

"Yes. We're different. I'm American, and he's Japanese-American, more Japanese--he lives in Japan. But we were the same underneath--same kind of seriousness or intensity or something."

"What does he do?"

"He's an architect. He was teaching a class at the University of California, Berkeley, until the end of the year."

"Is he married?"

"Yes. Two children--a boy and a girl, grown."

"Oliver, you have a half brother and a half sister!"

"It's true. I haven't absorbed it yet."

"Did you like him?"

"Yes. He was pretty impressive. Disciplined. Didn't say much. He gave me some money--said you were only as rich as what you give away. What's your mother's maiden name?"

Francesca stared at him. "Boisverte," she said.

"How do you spell it?" She told him and he repeated the letters to make sure that he had them right. "French," he said.

"Mais oui. Maman married Frankie, and here I am."

"They did nice work. You want more coffee?" He refilled their mugs and put away the thermos. "Francesca . . ."

"Yes?"

"You're probably going to think I'm nuts. I hope you won't be mad at me." He took a deep breath. "I'm putting the money my father gave me in a brokerage account. I want you to be joint owner, so that if anything happens to me you'll have the money. Or, if you need some for an emergency--it will be there." Francesca took a swallow of coffee and stared out to sea.

"You're a good one," she said. And then, "I'm married to Conor."

"You wouldn't have to pay any taxes on it. I do that. You wouldn't get statements or anything. It would just be there if you need it. It could

be backup for you and the girls, security . . ."

"Independence?" she teased.

"Well--yes, if you want it." The fat was in the fire.

"Jacky said you were a sweetheart."

Oliver's jaw dropped. Francesca laughed. "She said that she checked you out. She had hopes for you, but she said that the two of you were incompatible for the long run."

"Uh--she's right."

"Don't be embarrassed," Francesca said. "How else were you going to find out? Look, I love Jacky, but I wouldn't want to be married to her."

The image of Jacky attempting to intimidate Francesca with a whip made Oliver burst out laughing. "No," he said, sputtering, "no." Francesca gave him a curious look. "Good looking woman, though," he went on. "Not as beautiful as you."

She accepted this without comment. It was a quality Oliver liked in her. Francesca was beautiful. She knew it and didn't make a fuss about it.

"I want the money to have a purpose outside myself," he said. "Seriously--it would help me. It makes me feel better. I'm going to get some work as soon as I can, so that I don't spend it. I have the form right here." He held his bag under the umbrella and pulled out the form. "If I can keep it from getting soaked . . ." He reached into his pocket for a ballpoint pen. "Can I write on your back? I mean, use your back? 'BOISVERTE.'" He said the letters as he wrote them. "What's your social security number?"

She hesitated and then told him. "A very nice number," he said.

"I've always thought so. It will be especially nice if I make it to retirement age."

"All you have to do is sign," Oliver said. "Here." He handed her the pen and swiveled his body so that she could use his back.

"Yi! What am I doing?" The pen moved firmly across his shoulder blade.

"A good thing, that's what you're doing--what we're doing," Oliver said, putting the application in the bag.

"Cute pen," she said.

"It's a space pen--writes upside down or in zero gravity. NASA uses it."

"My father worked for NASA."

"Oh, yeah? What did he do?"

"He was an engineer, called himself a launch pad maintenance man. He and my mom live near Daytona. He's retired."

"You don't have a southern accent."

"I grew up in Brunswick, just down the road from Bowdoin. My dad worked on the base for years. He's from upstate New York."

"And your mother?"

"Local gal. She's gotten used to Florida. I don't know if I could. I mean, you can get used to just about anything; but . . ."

"Nice in January," Oliver said. "I know what you mean. I grew up in Connecticut." A harder shower passed over them.

"I love the rain," Francesca said.

"Me, too." They sat and finished their coffee, watching the rain and absorbing their conversation.

"Bye, Oliver," Francesca said finally, standing with the umbrella. "You're going to get wet."

"I won't melt." She smiled quickly, understanding it as he meant, that he would be there for her dependably. She walked back the way she had come. Oliver stayed, enjoying the calm. Francesca had that effect on him. When he was with her, he felt that there was nowhere he needed to go. He was already there, at the center. The world spread around them at greater and greater distances.

Jacky! He felt a stir of affection and shook his head. He should have known she would tell Francesca--the big picture, anyway, if not the details. He hoped Jacky would find someone soon. She wasn't bashful. There was bound to be somebody in Maryland who would love to oblige her. Whoever he was, he was going to get a workout--and good crab cakes. Jacky had been straight with him. Oliver appreciated that. And he'd been straight with her. Maybe that was why he had a warm feeling when he thought of her; there was no residue of guilt or things held back.

He stretched and walked to the main road, taking the track along the rocks and then through the woods. He had left the Jeep in the approach area by the gate-house; the park was officially closed. A piece of paper was folded under one windshield wiper. It had a heart on it, drawn in pencil. When he got home, he taped it over the mantel.

Myron read through the application the next day and tapped his desktop slowly. "The co-owner," he said, "will have full privileges."

"Right."

"If she calls and identifies herself and says, 'Myron, sell everything and send me a check,' that's what I'll do."

"Right."

"Very good," Myron said dubiously. "Just making sure." He put the application and the check in a folder. "So, how quick do you want to get rich?"

"That's a trick question, I bet," Oliver said.

Myron appraised him again. "It is and it isn't," he said. "Rewards are what you get for taking risk. If you want a big reward right away, you have to take a big risk. Over a longer period, you can take smaller risks--the smaller rewards add up; the smaller losses don't wipe you out. But there's another consideration." He drew a double headed arrow on the top of a yellow pad. "People have different senses of time."

Myron darkened each arrowhead. "Some live for the future; some live in the moment; some--most--are in the middle. It's a natural thing. As far as risk/reward goes, we can keep a given balance in any time-horizon. We can be risk-adverse, say, short-term or long-term." Myron underlined the arrow.

"What we don't want to do is mix up the two. Short--term and long-term investments are different. Not only are the investments themselves different, but someone who is patient and looks far ahead won't be happy with in-and-out activity. Someone who is action-oriented, who is used to seeing results right away, won't wait years for a company to develop or for interest rates to drop. You see what I'm getting at?"

"I do," Oliver said. "It's interesting. I guess I'm more toward the patient end. Risk? I don't mind risk. But I wouldn't want to lose more than half. It's important to me that half, anyway, always be there." Myron wrote a few words on the pad.

"There are advantages to the patient approach," he said. "Taxes are lower if you hold securities long term. You can buy into promising companies cheaply--if you can give them a few years to grow."

"I like that," Oliver said. Myron made another note.

"How about if I get you started, make the first buys?"

"Sounds good."

"As time goes on and you get into it, you may want to take a more active part in making the decisions. We'll talk as we go along."

"O.K."

"You'll get a monthly statement."

"Just one--to me," Oliver interrupted.

"Yes," Myron added to his notes. "One statement. Call me or drop by any time."

"O.K. Thank you." Oliver prepared to leave. "When do we start making money?"

"Soon as the check clears," Myron said.

Should be interesting, Oliver thought, walking home. Myron was a realist. He didn't seem like someone who would rip you off or make hurried decisions. Porter came out the front door just as Oliver turned in from the sidewalk.

"Hey Porter, thanks for taking care of Verdi. I haven't seen you since I got back."

"No problem. It was a help, actually. And, it gave me a chance to get to know Arlen better." Porter beamed.

Oliver didn't want to hear any confidences. "How's the baking going?"

"Solid." Porter looked amused at Oliver's unease. "Scones are hot this year--can't make enough of them. Later, Slugger." He punched Oliver lightly on the arm and unlocked a sleek black Toyota. Oliver watched him drive away. Porter was like a character in a comic strip; a six foot scone in a thought balloon hovered over his car.

Oliver collected his mail. Gifford Sims of The First Fundamentalist Hospital was interested in talking with him. There were a couple of bills. A Thanksgiving invitation from Amanda. "Mother and Paul are coming. Heather has been asking about you."

12.

Sunday morning was cold and windy. Oliver waited at the beach, walking back and forth in front of the driftwood log. After half an hour, he poured a cup of coffee from the thermos. Steam curled up and was blown away. He had an interview the following day at the Fundamentalist hospital; he ought to iron a shirt. Wear a tie? Francesca appeared, walking with long strides.

"Hi," she said.

"Just in time," he said, holding his cup in the air. "I was going to drink yours. What's the matter?"

"Conor and I are having trouble. God, that smells good!" Oliver handed her a cup. "Mmm--nice and hot."

"I'm sorry," Oliver said.

"I don't want to bother you about it . . ."

"It's no bother."

"Conor didn't get home until very late. I had trouble waking him up to watch the girls. I probably shouldn't have come."

"Do you want to go back? I'll walk with you to the gate-house."

"O.K. Just a second. Let's enjoy this."

Oliver refilled his cup. "Getting nippy," he said.

"Snow anytime," Francesca said. She looked at him and smiled--something to share, their snow. "Conor's not been happy with me. He plays around. It's a mess."

"Oh."

"I don't know what to do. We've been talking about making a change, spending the winter in Costa Rica. He says that his job isn't going anywhere; he wants a break to decide what to do next."

"Oh." Oliver tried for a bright side. "You could practice your Spanish."

"We could argue in Spanish," she said.

"What's his problem? Not that it's any of my business."

"I don't know. Mommy, I suppose. Conor tends to think that the world owes him a living. Conor's world is 95% female. He's cute and needy and out-front about it; there's always some woman ready to give him what he wants."

"Tough life," Oliver said.

"He's not a happy man," she said, "at least, never for long. He uses that, too--the wounded Conor. Well, somebody tried to save him last night."

"Pretty hard on you," Oliver said.

"I married him," she said. "I'd divorce him tomorrow, but it isn't just me I have to think about."

"Damn," Oliver said. "I'd marry you the day after."

"Thank you. Would you promise to make me a cup of coffee like this first thing in the morning--for the rest of my life?"

"Or my life," Oliver said.

"Oh!" There was a tear in Francesca's eye. He thought she was going to hug him, but she turned and looked toward the water. "I've got to finish one thing before I start another," she said. "I don't think there's much point to it, but I've got to try. I'm going to go with him on this trip."

"I'll see you in the spring, then--I hope," Oliver said. "I opened that account, by the way. I don't have the number yet, but you don't need it. If you get stuck for money, call Myron Marsh at Marsh and Cooley and tell him who you are. It would probably take a couple of days, though."

"Myron Marsh . . ."

"He has an office on Monument Square."

"O.K. Let's go," she said.

They walked back side by side. "I like your Jeep," Francesca said when they reached the main road.

"Tried and true," Oliver said. "Room for you and the girls." She did hug him then, squeezing tightly against him. He felt her sob twice. His legs were set like granite posts. He could have held her forever. She

stepped back. "Francesca," he started, but she shook her head, no, and put one hand up to his cheek. Her thumb rested across his lips and then withdrew. She seemed to be memorizing his face.

"Bye," she said.

"Bye." She turned and walked away. Oliver sighed heavily, got into the Jeep, and drove in the other direction. His feelings were careening around, but his mind was clear. He and Francesca were together, even though they were apart. What he wanted, how beautiful she was, what might happen--the rush of his feelings did not alter that fact.

He drove aimlessly, passed the mall, and headed north. In Yarmouth, he stopped for breakfast at the Calendar Islands Motel on Route 1. Two dining rooms were filled with elderly couples and the families of L. L. Bean executives. He signed for a table and waited in line. It was pleasant to stand there as though nothing had just happened. He had gotten up in his restored cape with the large addition, fed his golden retriever, and driven three miles for breakfast the way he did every Sunday. He had a slight hangover and a secure future. He was on board.

It really wouldn't be so bad, he thought--to be on board. What the hell, even a tie . . . The hostess led him to a sunny table. He ate a large plate of blueberry pancakes with a side of bacon, feeling quite the citizen, practically married, a man with responsibilities.

But--you don't know her. This wasn't true, he decided. He knew her where it mattered--in her heart. Boisverte, he knew her maiden name. What difference did it make, where she went to school or what her brother was like? Didn't she say she had a brother? Conor would never change. Why wouldn't she leave him? She would--when she was ready. He, Oliver, would be there. The waitress swished away. Nice legs, he registered. Too young, though. You can't have them all, he told himself as she disappeared into the kitchen.

When he got home, he ironed a blue oxford-cloth shirt and a pair of dress chinos. He washed the dishes and turned on the TV, mostly to avoid the temptation to go to Deweys. The Patriots lost in the fourth quarter.

The next morning Oliver was on the road in time to stop for a bagel. He made an effort to keep crumbs off his shirt and tie. He was confident that he could handle any software needs that the hospital might have; it was the group dynamic that put him on the defensive. He felt false when he made the little gestures required to fit in. He knew how, but he also knew that eventually he would be unmasked and auto-ejected from the group like a splinter from its hand. Maybe the First Fundamentalists wouldn't be so bad. Here I come, he thought. Love your neighbor. Forgive him his independence. Let's get this over with.

Gifford Sims was large. He wore a dark suit made from a lasting synthetic material. His black hair was carefully combed; his face was square and unsmiling. "Come in," he said, indicating a chair where Oliver was to sit. He rubbed his chin once and gazed out his office window at the carefully tended parking lot. He was not in a hurry to speak, but he did not seem put off by Oliver. That was one thing about being short--you didn't threaten people.

"We had someone in Boston doing the work," he said finally. "Expensive."

"Ah," Oliver said.

"She worked about twenty hours a week, sometimes more."

"I see," Oliver said.

"We don't work on Saturdays unless we have to--babies don't always fit into our schedule." Gifford swiveled from the window and watched Oliver. Hard to blame them, Oliver started to say, but he smiled instead, acknowledging the joke. It was a joke, he was pretty sure, although it was hard to tell from Gifford's expression.

"It appears from your experience that you could handle the work. Are these references current?"

"Yes, they are."

"I have no further questions." Silence. Gifford Sims, conversationalist. Oliver stood.

"Thank you for taking the time. Lovely place . . ." He waved his arm, vaguely including the hospital and the parking lot. "Well, goodbye, Mr. Sims."

"Goodbye."

Oliver walked toward the main entrance. A young woman in the hall looked at him seriously. Her hair was blonde, the color of freshly planed maple. She had dark eyes and a compact graceful body. Oliver's stomach tightened; he straightened and nodded as he passed. At the front door, he said, "So long," to the receptionist, a middle-aged redhead.

"Y'all come back, now!" Oliver stopped.

"Where you from?"

"Georgia, honey."

"Good deal," Oliver said, "the sun just came out." The hospital, Gifford Sims notwithstanding, had a light atmosphere. Aside from a large painting of Jesus near the entrance, the tone was functional and non-denominational. A sign announced that two babies had been born overnight. The hospital was known for its high-quality birthing. I could work here, he thought. But he had no idea whether he'd get the job. Gifford Sims hadn't exactly been blown over. On the other hand, there weren't many people around who could step right in and take over. Most good programmers already had jobs or would want full-time work.

Oliver drove home. In the mail, there was a large flat package from a bookstore and a letter from Myron saying that the account was open. He wrote the number on a card and put it in his wallet in case he should see Francesca. He decided not to send her a letter; she had her hands full. If she needed cash, she knew how to get it. The arrangement gave him a warm feeling when he thought about it. He was useful to her, even if she never touched the money.

There was a gift note inside the package: "This is the guy I was

telling you about. Home in one month. Muni." The book was by George Nakashima, _The Soul of a Tree._ Oliver was immediately attracted to the photographs of walnut, cherry, and chestnut tables. The tops were made from wide slabs that had been left in their natural contours. Where the wood had separated as it dried, Nakashima had inlaid butterfly keys to prevent the splits from widening. The keys were made of contrasting woods--rosewood and oak. Their butterfly or bow tie shapes became design elements, quasi-geometric signatures. Oliver was fascinated.

Later, in Deweys, he tried to explain to Mark. "The tables knock me out. I mean, sure, it's hard to go wrong with a great piece of walnut. The guy must have gotten every trophy tree in Pennsylvania. But what I love is the way he treated splits. He repaired them with these butterfly keys." Oliver made a quick drawing and showed it to Mark. "The keys _improve_ the look. They add the human touch, so that it isn't only a beautiful piece of wood--it's a beautiful piece made even better. He turns a flaw into a strength by acknowledging it, working with it instead of trying to hide it."

"Righteous," Mark said. "I want one."

"They're all in collections, now. The guy is famous," Oliver said. "I think that his daughter is carrying on the tradition."

"Must be nice to make something that lasts," Mark said.

"You've got enough money to make things," Oliver said. "You've got an art degree, right?"

"Yeah, I can draw. But there's no money in it."

"Why can't you do both?"

"I try sometimes, but it's hard to get into it. If I make a good drawing or painting, then what--I've got to frame it and beg some gallery owner to sell it for fifty percent of not much? Frig that. It's not like I'm a frustrated genius."

"Just frustrated," Oliver said.

"Look who's talking. Maybe you ought to forget programming and set up a cabinet shop."

"Maybe," Oliver said.

"Speaking of frustrated," Mark said, "how are the ladies?"

"Not bad," Oliver said. "I'm in love."

"Oh, no!"

"It's complicated," Oliver said. "Remember Francesca?"

"Big trouble."

"Yeah, I guess. She's still with her husband, but maybe not for long. He's a jerk."

"A bill-paying jerk."

"He's not right for her."

"And you are?" Mark set his pint on the bar.

"I am--or could be--if she wanted."

"So what are you going to do, put your life on hold?"

"I'm going to work, save some money."

"No indoor sports?"

"Oh, that," Oliver said. "I don't know."

Mark shook his head. "Well, love is one thing, but I'd keep in practice if I were you."

"Maybe I'll buy a new sweater."

"Now you're talking. What was his name again? George . . ."

"Nakashima."

"The man!" Mark drank. "So how did you hear about him?"

"My father sent me the book I was telling you about."

"You never told me about your father." Oliver's explanation took them through another pint.

"Something else," Mark said. "You're lucky. My father was a drunk--took off when I was pretty young. He was hard on my mom."

"Do you ever see him?"

"No. She heard that he died a few years ago."

"Too bad," Oliver said.

"I don't know what his problem was," Mark said. "My mom said that he had a bad time in the Korean War. But . . ."

"How's your mom doing?"

"Fine. She's got a boyfriend with a bike. They tool around Albuquerque, have a good time."

"Love it! Look, I'm out of here."

"See you," Mark said.

Oliver walked home thinking that Mark seemed more vulnerable than usual. Everybody's got a story. Everybody's got some kind of problem. It started raining. He was wet through when he got home.

"Soaked, Verdi," he said. He changed into dry clothes and considered dinner. Instant red beans and rice? The doorbell rang. He went down the

stairs and opened the door to the street. Jennifer Lindenthwaite was standing there, dripping.

"Hi, Oliver."

"Jennifer!"

"Aren't you going to ask me in?"

"Sure. Come in and dry off. I got soaked, too. Just got home." He led her upstairs and into the apartment. "What's happening?"

"Oh, nothing," she said. "Rupert threw me out . . . I'm pregnant."

13.

"Gaaaagh . . . Jennifer, that's terrible! That's great. I mean--here's a towel." Oliver whipped in and out of the bathroom and handed her a maroon towel. "Do you want to take a shower? How about a cup of tea?"

"Tea would be lovely. I _will_ take a shower." She closed the bathroom door behind her, and Oliver rushed to fill the tea kettle. The shower started. Milk? Sugar? Honey?

"Verdi," he called, "Jennifer is here for tea." The words echoed. Verdi was nowhere to be seen; probably he had taken refuge upstairs. Oliver paced back and forth from the stove to the fireplace. Why had she come to him? He felt the future looming, threatening to sweep away the controlled life that he complained about but that suddenly seemed more attractive.

The shower stopped. Jennifer stepped out a few minutes later wearing his Navy blue bathrobe. She was rosy cheeked and much recovered.

"Uh, how do you like your tea?"

"Do you have any chamomile?"

"Umm, no. I should get some herb tea. All I have is English Breakfast."

"Oh, that's fine. Just a little milk, thanks." She sat next to the fireplace and looked around the apartment while Oliver fixed the tea.

"I don't know," he said, handing her a mug. "Whiskey might be a better idea." Jennifer took a sip and sighed.

"That's so good. I forgot how nice your apartment is."

"It's large enough," Oliver said. "Walking distance from Deweys--I like that. So, what happened? You look great."

"I feel great. I'm just starting to show a little--getting into the fifth month." Oliver counted backwards. "What happened is that Rupert freaked out when I told him I was pregnant. He became--I don't

know--_distant._ I thought he was just nervous and would get used to it, but he got more and more uptight. I couldn't take it anymore." She drank her tea and sighed again.

"So today, I . . . I said to him: 'Look, Rupert, _what_ is the matter? We're going to have a baby. What is _wrong_ with you?' I guess I should have been more diplomatic. You know--said something like: 'Rupert, I need your affection; I'm feeling all alone here.' But I didn't _feel_ diplomatic. I was mad as hell, actually."

Owl's words echoed: "_Anger is the outer face of fear._"

"Scared," Oliver said.

Jennifer looked at him. "Maybe so," she said. "I thought we had a family. I thought we were all set to go."

"Well, sure," Oliver said.

"So," Rupert said, 'who's the father?'

"What do you mean?" I said.

"It's not me," Rupert said. I was shocked. Anyway, it came out that he has a very low sperm count. He knew it all the time and never told me. I told him that you and I had a one time thing last summer, and he freaked out.

"I'm not paying for his kid, bla, bla, bla."

"I practically begged: 'Couldn't it be like we adopted him--or her?'

"It's his problem," he said. He called my baby a problem. How could he love me if my baby is a _problem?_"

"Good question," Oliver said. "Jesus, Jennifer."

She put down her tea and held her arms out to him. "Come feel," she said. She loosened the bathrobe and guided Oliver's hand to her belly, warm and taut.

"Amazing!" Oliver said.

"I'm still getting used to it," she said. "I'm over the morning sickness."

Oliver withdrew his hand slowly and straightened. "What are you going to do?"

"Tonight?"

"Well, for starters . . ."

"I don't know. I just wanted to see you, to tell you. You weren't here when I got home. I couldn't find a parking place anywhere close." Her voice trailed off. "I've got a credit card; I can stay at the Holiday Inn."

"No way," Oliver said. "You might as well stay here. Your clothes are

all wet." A relieved smile brightened her face.

"Thank you, Oliver."

"Music," he said. He was hearing hearing strains from La Traviata in his mind. He wanted to play the opera, but he was afraid Jennifer would find it too heavy. He played a tape of Native American flute melodies echoing down a canyon. Soothing stuff.

"Oh, I love this music," she said.

"Carlos Nakai," Oliver said. "Are you hungry?" He was newly concerned. There were two of her. Check that--one of her and one of them, a new one. Jennifer looked pleased.

"I've been so upset, it's hard to tell. I think so, actually."

"I have some red beans and rice mix--no canyon greens, though." She looked puzzled. He explained, "I was thinking of the music--what would go with the rice and beans and the music--veggies from a canyon."

"You're so imaginative, Oliver."

"Frozen peas, best I can do." He waved the bag in the air. They ate and watched the news. Oliver slid a clean pillow case on the extra pillow and put a lamp on the other side of the bed. Seduction scenes were easier. They happened or they didn't in a great rush. Jennifer couldn't find a book that she wanted to read. She took a copy of Wooden Boat Magazine upstairs, and Oliver followed her awkwardly.

They lay side by side while she paged through the magazine. "I like this one." She pointed out a 32 footer at anchor in Penobscot Bay. The builder and his wife were enjoying cocktails. A golden retriever was slumped near the bow, his head between his paws.

"Nice," Oliver said. "I wonder if Verdi would like it. Remember Verdi, my cat? Verdi, where are you anyway?"

"I haven't seen him since I got here," Jennifer said.

"He's hiding. Anti-social. He'll come out when he's hungry."

"I'm not hungry now," Jennifer said, putting down Wooden Boat. "That was a good dinner. Thanks for taking care of me."

"You're welcome." Oliver turned out his light.

"Nighty night," she said and rolled to her side. The comforter went with her. She switched off her light and snuggled back against him. He pulled the comforter back over him and brushed her hip with his hand.

"I'm glad you came," he said.

"Don't be a stranger," she said, settling closer. Her body was warm and self-contained. He patted her in response and said nothing. A baby? He lay there as Jennifer fell asleep. Her breathing was steady and unhurried. There was a lot to figure out. In the morning . . . He'd figure out what to do in the morning.

He awoke to the smell of coffee and the sound of Jennifer climbing the steps. "Here you are, Sleepy." She put a mug and a small glass down near his head. "Milk in here. You don't use sugar, do you? I don't remember you taking sugar."

"Mmmughh. No. Thanks."

"I'll be right back." She returned with another cup and sat beside him, leaning back on a pillow propped against the wall.

"Good," Oliver said, balancing the mug on his chest.

"Do you like it strong?"

"Yes," he said. "I mean--while you're at it. I usually buy a dark roast."

"That's what I like," Jennifer said. "Organic." She drank and put down her mug. "Do you think I'm awful?"

"Huh? No. Why should I?"

"Well, being a loose woman and all that. And then barging in without any warning."

"What else were you going to do?"

"I'm not awful?" She smiled and turned closer.

"Of course not."

"You're not mad at me?" Oliver shook his head. "Well--could I have a little hug?" She moved down and opened her arms. The bathrobe fell open. Oliver put down his mug. He rolled over, partially covering her, his arms around her. "I won't break," she said and drew him closer. "Oh, Oliver . . ." She was deep chested with high flat breasts that were beginning to swell. He fit his face over her shoulder, and she hugged him tightly. "Oh." She moved her hands down his back and under his shorts, pulling him to her. Oliver's thoughts skidded away.

"Jennifer," he breathed in her ear. "Jennifer?"

"God," she said. "Do something." She pushed his shorts down and reached around for his cock. As he entered her, she quivered and pressed against every part of him. "Oh! It's been forever," she said. "Oh!" She wanted him on her. She wanted him to come, to fill her up, to take his due. Oliver became a lord riding his finest horse, his property, his right.

"God," she said an hour later when he woke up again. "Rupert never made love to me like that."

"Yumm," Oliver said. He was in a pleasant haze. "I think . . ."

She waited. "Yes?"

"I think we should have breakfast."

"Definitely."

"I don't have anything--how about Becky's?"

Oliver was first in the bathroom. He was looking out over the street, waiting for Jennifer, when Verdi bumped his ankle. "There you are! Where have you been? Under the couch?" Verdi ran expectantly into the kitchen. "You shall have a mighty breakfast."

Verdi gobbled his food and stood by the door. Oliver let him out. The clouds were low and dark; a three day rain was settling in. Verdi slunk around the corner of the house, and Oliver went back upstairs.

"All dry," Jennifer said, brushing a hand over her skirt.

"Here's a hat, if you want it. Could rain any time. We'd better drive. Hey, you look good in a Mariner's hat."

"I like hockey," she said. "Not the fighting, the skating. They are such great skaters! My father used to take me to Bruins games. My car or yours?"

"Doesn't matter. Mine's closer."

"I love Jeeps," she said, getting in. As they turned down Park Street, Oliver began to be troubled. When he parked at Becky's, he realized that he was worrying about Francesca. He imagined her face, calm and questioning. What if she were there? He took a deep breath, pulled open the front door, and walked in. No Francesca. Good--one problem put off for another time.

He chose a table at the far end of the diner and sat facing the wall. Jennifer made herself comfortable and surveyed the crowd.

"I like it here," she said. "I don't know why I don't come here more often."

"Good place," Oliver said. Jennifer ordered a fruit bowl with granola and yogurt. He asked for bacon and eggs, homefries with green peppers and onions, and Texas toast. "Cruise all day on this," he said when the waitress delivered. He took a bite of bacon. They couldn't put off the conversation forever. "So--my baby, huh?"

Jennifer smiled. "Your baby. You're the man."

"I'll be damned." He found himself grinning.

"You don't look unhappy--to be a daddy." It was a question.

"Well, I'm not." He was getting used to the idea, feeling a bit proud.

"I like this fruit," she said.

"What do you think we should do?" As the words came out of his mouth, Oliver knew that he had crossed a line. The line had been crossed already--she was going to have his, their, baby--but he hadn't admitted it. We.

She looked at him for a moment and dropped her eyes. She poked around in her fruit with her spoon. "We could be happy," she said quietly.

"We'll need a crib or something," Oliver said.

A tear splashed on Jennifer's fruit bowl. "Yes. Yes, a crib. And a baby blanket."

"A car seat," Oliver said solemnly. Jennifer wiped her face clean.

"A car seat." She giggled. "Apple pie. Do you like apple pie?"

"You're kidding," Oliver said. "Of course."

"I make good apple pie," she said.

"What about Rupert?"

"Rupert is history."

"But you're married."

"Not for long, Sweetums. He can't wait to get rid of me and have his precious space back." Oliver thought of his apartment and felt a small pang. "It's not even his house; his parents let him have it when they moved to Hilton Head. Everything in it, practically, was theirs. I couldn't get rid of any of it. God, I hated those chairs."

"My place is big enough," Oliver said.

"Your place is wonderful," she said. "For now, anyway. Is there a washing machine?"

"Around the back--there's a utility room. Damn!"

"What's the matter?"

"Thanksgiving. I'm supposed to go to my sister's."

Jennifer lifted her spoon triumphantly. "No more Hilton Head! That's where Rupert and I were going. Oh, how wonderful!" She lowered her spoon. "The beach is nice, but Rupert's mother--what a trip."

"Wait 'til you meet my sister." Jennifer's face fell. "Just kidding," Oliver said. "To hell with it. Why don't we have our own Thanksgiving?"

"Would they be upset?"

"Not really. I can go another time--maybe over the holidays. We don't get along all that well, but I like her daughter, Heather. I like being 'Uncle Ollie.' "

"Already, I'm a disruptive influence," Jennifer said.

"We could have a good time," Oliver said. "They're going to roast a turkey at Deweys."

"I could make some pies."

"Solid. I'll call Amanda when we get home."

"I'll go get my clothes." She looked at him for confirmation.

Oliver nodded. It was a done deal. "Do you want me to go with you?"

"No. It will be easier if I just go."

"O.K. I'll get some food."

Later, in Shop 'N Save, Oliver marveled at how easy it was to start living with someone. He made reasonable guesses at what Jennifer might like to eat. He remembered chamomile tea. I was married once, he reminded himself. I know how to do this. A baby? That seemed unreal. Yet he had felt it, secure and growing. Probably, Jennifer shouldn't drink too much. He bought a bottle of Merlot and a six pack of ale. He bought organic corn chips made with what he thought was the good kind of fat. She said that she wanted to make pies. Better leave that stuff to her, he thought. We can get baking dishes at The Whip and Spoon on Commercial Street. It would be nice if that programming work came through. He should follow up with Gifford Sims. Jennifer was still working. She could help with the bills.

He made two trips up the stairs with armloads of groceries. Porter's car was parked in front. It had been there often, lately. Oliver wondered if he had moved in. "The house is filling up, Verdi." He put away the food, listening to Van Morrison and The Chieftains. His eye caught the heart that Francesca had drawn--probably not a good idea to leave it there. He peeled the tape from the wall, folded the heart carefully, and put it with the Marsh and Cooley account information in a brown manila envelope. Something told him to keep the account and Francesca to himself. If he could put Francesca in a separate place, keep her from Jennifer, he wouldn't have to choose between them. He was uneasy about this, but he didn't know what else to do. He had a plastic filing box where he kept his income tax information returns. He slid the envelope into the folder for the oldest year, closed the box, and put it in a corner of the closet.

"I'm home, Handsome!" Oliver trotted downstairs and took a load of clothes from Jennifer.

"I'll put them on the couch for now," he said. "I'll make some shelves or something. How did it go?"

"Fantastic. Rupert was just leaving when I got there. I told him I was moving out and he hardly changed expression. I told him I'd have my stuff out by tomorrow night."

"You don't fool around."

"Only with you." Jennifer hugged him and stepped away. "More in the car," she said happily. They made several trips. "This is most of it. The summer clothes are put away; I'll get them tomorrow. And the sheets and towels I bought--I'm damned if Rupert's going to get those."

"Right," Oliver said. "You should park where the Jeep is, behind the house. The next time I go out, I'll park on the street when I come back. There's only one space with the apartment."

"Oh, I'm driving you out."

"No problem. When you get to nine months, you shouldn't be looking around for parking."

"There's my cross country skis and my bike . . ."

"We can put those in the basement. I have a storage area down there."

"It's so cozy here." Jennifer was glowing.

"I bought some chamomile tea."

"Oliver, you're the perfect man--_my_ perfect man--my PM, my Prime Minister."

"Does that mean you want some?"

"It would be wonderful."

Oliver made tea, thinking that Jennifer had a lot of stuff. Shelves were a necessity. There were two bare walls upstairs. He could buy pine and use the two pieces of walnut for the top shelves. Maybe not. Save the walnut for something else.

"Oh God, the books!" Jennifer said.

"Huh?"

"I have a lot of books."

"More shelves," Oliver said. "I'll help you with the books."

"We'll need boxes."

"I'll get some tomorrow at the U-Haul place."

"Rupert will be gone after nine."

"I don't care," Oliver said.

"It just makes things smoother," she said.

By late afternoon the next day, they had carried the last load into the apartment. The living room was full of boxes. They sat at the kitchen table and made plans. Jennifer was going to work in the morning, the day before Thanksgiving. Oliver was going to make shelves and then move his tools down to the basement. They could use his workbench to hold the additional kitchen stuff. Jennifer had a whole set of dishes she had bought, refusing to use the ones that had belonged to Rupert's parents.

Gifford Sims called and asked if Oliver could start the following Monday. Oliver told Gifford that he'd be there bright and early. Jennifer bought a bushel of apples and another baking dish. By noon on Thanksgiving Day, most of the shelves were built and filled. The bed was remade with tan sheets that were bordered with blooming roses. Verdi was calming down, and the rain had stopped. The apartment smelled of pie. Boxes of books were stacked high in one corner of the living room. Not much space left, Oliver thought, but much more homey.

"So--Deweys later?" he asked.

"The pies are ready," Jennifer said. "I hope it won't be too smoky."

"We don't have to stay long," Oliver said.

Jennifer stood. "Nap time," she said. Oliver watched her hips swing easily around the corner of the steps. He thought of laying out the remaining shelves, yawned, and followed her upstairs.

14.

It was cold and crisp, nearly dark. A neon Guinness sign glowed through a window by the door to Deweys. Oliver shifted the box of pies to one arm and hugged Jennifer with the other. He had a momentary desire to go home and keep the news to themselves.

"Here we go," he said, opening the door. Music, warmth and the smell of ale and cigarettes poured out. Jennifer stepped in ahead of him. They stood for a moment, adjusting to the light.

"Olive Oil!"

"Hey, George. Jennifer, this is George."

"Hello, George. What should we do with the pies, Oliver?"

"I'll ask Sam."

The bartender pointed at a table pushed against one wall. "The bird is going over there--any time now." Oliver put three pies on the table and stashed the empty box underneath. He ordered a pint of Guinness for himself and a half for Jennifer.

"Prescribed for young mothers," he said, handing it to her and taking her coat. George stared at Jennifer's stomach.

"Due in April," she said.

"Fatherhood," Oliver said, setting the record straight and sipping his pint.

"Jesus, Oliver . . . I've been making sculptures; you've been making the real thing."

"It sort of makes itself," Jennifer said.

"Boy or girl?"

"Good question," Oliver said.

"We could find out, but I don't really want to," Jennifer said. "Mmmm." She made a face. "This what-do-you-call-it takes a little getting used to."

"Guinness," Oliver said. "Stout."

"Guinness is a kind of stout," George said. "Some stouts are sweeter; some are a little lighter."

"One thing about stout," Oliver said, "it's hard to drink too much of it. You get full first. Looks like most of the regulars are here. Where's Richard?"

"O'Grady? New York. He goes to his sister's every year." George's eyes went back to Jennifer. She was wearing a long sleeved turquoise jersey with a revealing scoop neck. The jersey hugged her breasts and then curved slightly out and back into dark slacks. "Athletic momma," George said.

"That's a title," Oliver said. "You just got sculpted or something."

"Painted," George said.

"What do you know about painting?" Mark Barnes had drifted next to them.

"Hey, Mark," Oliver said. He introduced Jennifer.

"I've seen you somewhere," Jennifer said to Mark.

"Climbing out a bedroom window," George said.

"Was that it?" Jennifer smiled.

"Couldn't have been recently," Mark said.

Sandy staggered into the room, carrying a huge turkey in a roasting pan. She lowered it to the table as the regulars cheered. Sandy had worked in Deweys for years. She was popular--red-cheeked, oversized, hard-drinking, and tolerant. Another woman brought paper plates, plastic utensils, and a carving set. "Go for it," Sandy said.

"_Where's the broccoli? _" someone called. There was a chorus of boos.

Sandy and her helper made another trip to the kitchen, returning with garlic bread and an oversized bowl of salad. The group took turns hacking at the turkey. George and Mark argued about Giacometti.

George maintained that Giacometti was better than Picasso. Mark would have none of it. "All that angst! He never met a color he didn't like--cuz the color was always black. My God! I mean, for an Italian!"

"He was Swiss," Jennifer said.

"That explains it," Mark said.

"I love you," George said.

"I took Modern Art at Bowdoin," Jennifer said. "I did a paper on Alberto Giacometti."

"My God," George said, "Bowdoin? They let you out of the Impressionists?"

"Oh, yes," Jennifer said. "Giacometti was very good. Cute, too."

"I knew it," Mark said. "Cute."

"How about some turkey?" Oliver suggested.

Bringing the pies turned out to be a good idea; they disappeared quickly. Sam presented Jennifer with a pint on the house. She was treated like a queen by many of the regulars--misty-eyed about motherhood as long as they didn't have to deal with it. Two hours later, she began to yawn. Oliver collected the empty pie dishes, and they drove home, fortified against the cold, pleased to have been accepted as a couple for the first time.

"I like your friends," Jennifer said on the way home. She rubbed her eyes. "It _was_ smoky in there."

"We should have left a little sooner, I guess," Oliver said. "How's Junior?"

"No complaints."

"That was our coming-out party," Oliver said.

"Yep--we're an item now," Jennifer said, patting him on the knee.

The next day, Jennifer came home with a booklet on how to get a Maine divorce. "Great news," she said, "two or three months and it's over. I called Rupert. He was feeling guilty and said he'd sign whatever. It's pretty simple, really. We don't own much in common."

"That's how it was with Charlotte. We had the house together, but she got some money from her parents and bought me out. Wasn't all that much equity, anyway."

"Where was your house?"

"Peaks Island."

"Oooh," Jennifer said, "that must have been nice."

"It wasn't bad . . . I like the ferries, but they get to be a pain."

"I think we should stay right here until the baby is born," Jennifer said.

"Uh, yeah." Doing anything else had never crossed Oliver's mind.

"But, afterwards, I think we should be looking for a place with more room--don't you?"

Oliver rubbed his forehead. "I guess," he said. "I hadn't thought that far ahead."

"April 24th, the big day," Jennifer said.

"Spring," Oliver said.

"I should be able to work until then. I get three months maternity leave."

"Money," Oliver said. "We'll see how the hospital gig works out. Hard to tell."

"Oliver, let's not worry about anything. Let's just enjoy it. God, I'm so glad I'm not at Hilton Head!"

"We've got our own beaches," Oliver said and was immediately sorry as he imagined Francesca walking toward him.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing," he said.

"It has happened fast," she said sympathetically. "Let me fix you some tea." It wasn't such a bad thing to be fussed over, he thought.

They stayed around the apartment most of the weekend. On Sunday morning, Oliver woke up before Jennifer. It was snowing lightly. He thought of getting out of bed quietly and taking coffee to Crescent Beach. Would Francesca be there? Would she miss him if he didn't go? If he did go, how could he explain to Jennifer where he'd been? He wanted to share the new developments with Francesca, but he was afraid of hurting her. Maybe it was better to let it be for a while. Maybe Francesca wouldn't be there. Maybe she was already on a warm beach in Costa Rica, not a snowy one in Cape Elizabeth.

He got up, made coffee, and turned on the radio. The public station was playing a Bach cantata. Oliver repressed a feeling of disloyalty as he took the coffee upstairs. "Love the one you're with, " he repeated to himself from The Rolling Stones.

Jennifer hunched herself up on the pillows and accepted a mug with both hands. "Mmmm," she said, sipping. "Have to do it."

"Do what?"

"Call Mother."

"Ah," Oliver said, "me too."

"She'll be fine once she gets used to it."

"You mean, used to me."

"Yes, Silly. She's already excited about the baby."

"Maybe we should drive down."

"Yes, but I'd better go first. Then we'll go together--maybe at Christmas."

"O.K.," Oliver said.

"Daddy won't care; he never liked Rupert."

"Good man."

Oliver took a long shower, standing under hot water, hearing snatches of Jennifer's voice as she talked on the phone. He dried himself with one of her thick white towels and received a vigorous hug when he stepped into the kitchen. "She freaked out when I explained, but the worst is over," Jennifer said. "I'm going to drive down next Saturday, stay the night, get things back on track." Oliver wondered what "on track" meant.

"O.K.," he said. "One down. My mother will be excited, actually."

"It is exciting," Jennifer said. "Go on, get it over with." Oliver called and gave his mother the news, promising to bring Jennifer for a visit during the holidays. "There," Jennifer said, "that wasn't so bad. I want to meet your mom."

"You'll like her," Oliver said. "Want to go down to Becky's? Honeymoon fruit bowl?"

By Monday, they were ready for the working world. Jennifer gave him a goodbye smooch and drove to The Wetlands Conservancy. Oliver stopped for a bagel on his way to the hospital and read the paper like a proper commuter.

Gifford Sims shook his hand and then led him farther down the hall and into another office. "Suzanne," he said, "this is Oliver Prescott. He will be working with us on the computer." He nodded at Oliver and left. A man known far and wide for his small talk, Oliver almost said.

"Gifford is my uncle," Suzanne said neutrally. She was the same tidy chick who had looked him over on his first visit. She wore no make-up or jewelry. Her face had a healthy glow, framed by her soft shoulder-length blonde hair. She smiled quickly, a flash of teeth, an invitation, gone as soon as he took it in. Her mouth settled to a patient hurt expression. "What is your social security number?"

She filled out a form. "We still do payables by hand," she said.

"So, I should give you the bill?"

"Yes. Just leave it on my desk if I'm not here. I'm usually here." The smile again, this time rueful and just as quickly gone. She brushed her hair back with one hand. Oliver noticed lighter streaks in her hair--from the sun, probably. Her eyes were intelligent, a deep chocolate color. "I can mail the check or hold it for you."

"Holding it would be simpler."

"Good," she said. "I'll introduce you to Dan." She rose and moved around him deferentially. My size, he thought. He was used to looking up at women; it was relaxing to be taller for a change, if only by an inch.

"Glad to meet you," Dan said, shaking hands and grinning widely. "We've got plenty to do." Suzanne excused herself. Oliver's eyes lingered on her as she went out the door. "As I was saying, plenty to do."

"Right," Oliver said.

"I'm in charge of billing. That's what we use the computer for, mostly. Let me show you the computer room." He took Oliver into an air-conditioned room where four women were working at terminals. The computer was at the far end of the room, next to an enclosed line printer. "We bought a receivables package years ago, but it has been modified a lot."

"Sure," Oliver said.

"Gifford has asked us to change the late messages. Here's what he wants." Dan pulled a piece of paper from his shirt pocket and unfolded it. "Over 30 days, this; 60 days, this; 90 days, here." He circled the numbers and underlined the messages.

"O.K.," Oliver said. "Where's the documentation?"

"We don't have much," Dan said. "The original stuff is on that shelf over there."

"Ah," Oliver said. He pulled at one ear lobe. "What language are we talking?"

"RPG II."

"O.K." Oliver groaned inwardly. He'd have to get a book. RPG was supposedly the worst language ever devised. First time for everything. "No problem." That was one thing about being a professional; he knew he could do it. "Might take a while to get started . . ."

"Good! Good! We want it done right." Dan rubbed his hands together enthusiastically. He was in his early forties, medium-sized, balding, energetic. "Let me know if you have any questions. We don't work on Saturdays. Did Gifford tell you that?"

"Yes."

"Good! I'll get you a door key in case you have to get in here after hours. We lock the computer room at night."

"Dan, could you come here a moment?"

"Be right there," he called to someone in the corridor. "This is Oliver, everybody." The women had all been watching them. "Ruth, Edna, Lillian, Vi." He pointed to each in turn. Oliver smiled four times. "O.K. gang, let's get to it." Dan walked quickly out of the room, intent on the next problem. Oliver pulled a yellow pad from his bag and wrote names on the final page where they wouldn't be seen: Ruth, short blonde; Edna, happy; Lillian, glasses, bored; Vi, body; Dan; Suzanne. What a pro, he bragged to himself.

He looked through the manuals and tried to make sense of the system. The terminals in the computer room were used for data entry--billing information and payments. Terminals elsewhere in the hospital allowed people to look up information. Medical records were kept by hand in a different department.

The operating system was complicated but not too different from one he had used a few years earlier. There was a job control language that

scheduled daily updates and a weekly billing run. A log kept automatic track of all programs that were executed. This gave him the names of the programs. He found Dan at the other end of the hospital and asked him for a password. Once inside the system, he found the source code for the billing programs. A lot of small programs were run in sequence before the bills were actually produced. He took a guess and printed out the last three to be run; the late messages were probably hard-coded in there somewhere. The code was incomprehensible. He couldn't get anywhere without a book. He said goodbye and drove to the Maine Mall.

There was only one book on RPG II. It was a language from the dawn of computer history, thirty years old. He took the book to the Food Court and began trying to interpret the code listings. Two cups of coffee later, he drove home. He had made some progress, but there was a lot left to figure out.

There was a statement from Myron in the mail. Francesca was listed as joint owner at the top. Her name, next to his, gave him a proud feeling. Together. The feeling of connectedness with Francesca was deep and comforting, as long as he didn't think of Jennifer and the baby at the same time.

Myron had invested most of the money in some kind of fund. There were small amounts of General Electric, Royal Dutch Shell, Pfizer, Microsoft, and Citibank. A note suggested that he stop in. "Keeping powder dry," Myron wrote. "These blue chips will grow with the economy. We'll add to them on dips and as money comes in. Waiting for good entry points on some growth companies." What was Pfizer? He'd ask Jennifer. On the other hand, he thought, maybe it would be best to keep quiet about this account--at least for now. He put the statement in his pocket and walked down to the Old Port.

"What's Pfizer?" he asked Myron.

"Pharmaceutical company. Solid. The long term outlook for the drug industry is good." Oliver inquired about the fund that was listed on the statement. "Right," Myron said. "It's a safe place to park cash--government securities only, decent return."

"I was wondering," Oliver said, "if you could hold my statements here--not send them."

"We can do that. Let me make a note. No problem."

"Thanks," Oliver said. "I'll check in from time to time."

"Or call me," Myron said. "I've got my eye on some companies--domestic natural gas, fiber optics, fuel cell technology."

"I've heard of fuel cells. What are they?"

"They produce electricity directly from a source of hydrogen. You feed them pure hydrogen or a hydrocarbon fuel; you get electricity, heat, and water. No pollution. Very reliable. Cars would be the bonanza market, but there are engineering problems to solve first--to make the cars cheap enough. There are a lot of other applications. Residential power. Industrial power."

"Wowzir!"

"It's a ways off," Myron said. "The people who develop a technology aren't always the ones who make the big money with it. Developing a business takes a different kind of skill." Myron shook his head. "I've been burnt," he said. "You put a winning technology together with winning management--_then_ you've got something."

"It's interesting. Well--do what you think best. I'll start following these companies."

"No statement?" Myron inquired, making sure.

"Save a tree," Oliver confirmed.

"Right." A twinkle quickly disappeared. "Right."

Oliver walked up Congress Street. He saw a rack of postcards in an art supplies store window. I ought to send Muni a card, he thought. There weren't any that he liked, however. Maybe at the Museum. Christmas decorations were already appearing. It was going to be a busy holiday.

Arlen was collecting his mail when Oliver arrived home.

"Hey, Arlen, how are you?"

"Just fine, Oliver."

"Developments, Arlen!"

"I noticed--with a Volvo."

"Jennifer. We must get together soon. She's great. She's going to have a baby. We're going to have a baby."

"Congratulations! I'm happy for you, Oliver. Developments downstairs, as well."

"I wondered," Oliver said.

"Porter," Arlen said simply.

"Excellent! The House of Happy Endings."

"Thank you, Oliver. Let us hope so. When is the baby due?"

"April."

"Oh, my. Definitely we must celebrate. Whoops, there's the phone." He

waved goodbye and let himself into his apartment. Oliver felt something at his feet.

"Verdi! Were you out? Well, well, time to eat isn't it?" He closed the front door behind him, and Verdi ran up the stairs. Oliver followed, seeing a can of coconut milk and a smaller can of Thai curry paste. Basil, a bit of chicken, green beans, rice . . . He was almost out of shoyu, but that wouldn't matter with a curry. Tomorrow he would get shoyu. And more veggies. Jennifer was strong on veggies.

15.

Oliver concentrated on programming. He found and successfully changed the late messages. Dan gave him a list of projects which he put aside until he could finish documenting the system. "You have to understand the data before you can work with it," he explained to Jennifer. "The data is everything. Most people don't know how to lay out a database; they make a mess that just keeps getting worse."

"You did a nice job at The Conservancy," she said.

"At some point, you have to start fresh," Oliver said. "The hospital can get by for awhile--if they don't try to change too much. I don't think they will. I don't think they want to spend the money. I mean, it works--the present system. I'll know what I'm doing in a couple of weeks."

"They're lucky to have you," Jennifer said.

"They're good to work with. You'd think that they would be a little screwy--First Fundamentalists and all that, but they aren't. They're cheerful, mostly. Practical. The women can't wear jewelry."

"Keeps them in their place," Jennifer said.

"Wedding rings are about it," Oliver said.

Jennifer cleared her throat loudly.

"Oh, yeah . . ." Oliver said. "We should do something about that--once you get your divorce."

"Was that a proposal?" She smiled appealingly.

"Sure--you don't mean church and all that?"

"No, Silly."

Oliver was relieved. "City Hall," Jennifer said. "We'll have a nice dinner afterwards. Do something for us."

"F. Parker Reidy's," Oliver said. "Eat teriyaki and watch shoppers on the snowy street."

"Wherever you like, Dear. Speaking of snow, we're lucking out--I shouldn't have any problem getting to Wayland."

"How far is Wayland from Boston?"

"Depends on what time it is--half an hour, usually. I take 495 right around the city, no problem. Umm . . . Sweetums?"

"Yes?"

"I was wondering if you would do something for me. I know I'm being awful, but--well--it's that snakeskin. It gives me a chill when I look at it." She put one hand on her stomach. "It's so--deadly."

Oliver walked over to the steps and pulled out the thumb tacks that held the snakeskin. "Can't have you getting a chill," he said.

"Oh, thank you. I just can't help it--how I feel," she said.

"Of course you can't." Oliver rolled the skin into a coil and put a thick rubber band around it. He hefted it in his palm. "I'll take it down to the basement. He sealed it in a Ziploc bag and stored it in a toolbox.

The next day, Jennifer left at noon to see her parents. Oliver had a pint at Deweys with Richard and went to bed early. He lay there, not used to sleeping alone, and thought about the relationship. It was like living with Charlotte again, but Jennifer was more fun. She was a natural mother--not at all bothered by pregnancy. All in all, the relationship was pretty good, but he avoided comparing Jennifer to Francesca.

In the morning he got up and took coffee to Crescent Beach as though his life hadn't changed during the last two weeks. There was an inch of snow--not enough to keep Francesca away. As he approached the beach he saw a shiny patch on the driftwood log. A Ziploc bag was taped to the log where they usually sat. The bag looked as if it had been there several days.

He bent over and saw a heart drawn on the paper inside. "O+F." He tore the bag from the log and removed the paper. It was folded. Inside, a note read: "Missed you yesterday. Leaving Wednesday. Be back in the spring, I guess. I hope you'll be here."

Oliver folded the note carefully and looked south. "I'll be here," he said. It was an acknowledgement and a promise. He felt a deep conflict in his loyalties, but it was bearable. The promise came from a different place than his attachment to Jennifer and the baby.

He stayed a few minutes savoring the coffee and the cold damp air. Gulls circled and dove at the other end of the beach. The geese were long gone. When he left, he took with him all traces of Francesca's note.

Jennifer arrived home during the early game. "Hi, Sweetheart," she said. "The roads were fine. Mother is withholding judgment until she sees you, but Daddy is on board. Don't worry, she'll love you."

"The Patriots don't look too good," Oliver said. "I'll wow her with my knowledge of RPG II."

"I said we'd come down at Christmas."

"O.K.," Oliver said. "Jesus!"

"What's the matter?"

"He dropped it," Oliver said. "You're back nice and early."

"We had a big breakfast around nine. I left right after. What do you think of 'Emma' as a name?"

"No!" Jennifer's face fell. "Not another one! Get him out of there!"

"Oliver . . ."

"Yes--Emma," he said. "I like it. Why Emma?"

"My grandmother's name was Emma." Jennifer was smiling again.

"Sure," Oliver said, "I like it. What if it's a boy?"

"I don't know," she said. "My father's name is Gene."

"How about Frisco?"

"Frisco? But that's a place, not a person . . ."

"Nakano. Nakano Prescott, now there's a name."

"I don't know." Jennifer's hands went protectively to her belly. "Nak? Naky?"

Oliver raised his voice. "Nakano Prescott stretches, makes the grab, takes a big hit and holds on! The Patriots got something when they signed this guy." He patted her. "Just trying it out--I'm not real strong on Gene."

"Well, we have four months," Jennifer said.

In April, early on the morning of the 26th, two months after they were married in City Hall and had their celebratory dinner at F. Parker Reidy's, Jennifer felt the first serious contraction. Six hours later, Emma Dior Prescott wrinkled her nose, squinted, made two fists--triumphantly, according to Oliver--and went back to sleep, breathing on her own. Jennifer was thrilled and tired. Oliver felt a new kind of pang when he saw Emma. She had dark hair and seemed to be clutching part of his heart with her tiny hands, as though she had moved from one support system to another.

Deweys was barely open when he got there. "One for me and one more for my baby," he said to Sam. "Jenn had a little girl."

"No shit! Congratulations. Hey, the Guinness is on the house, man; you're going to need your strength."

Oliver drank and relaxed. The winter had passed in a blur. Each day had been filled with work and things to do at home; the months had slipped past scarcely noticed. Jennifer's growing weight had defined the season that mattered.

"I have responsibilities," he announced after his second pint. "I must call the grandparents."

He walked home and talked to his mother and to Jennifer's father. Gene was particularly pleased. "I had my order in," he said. "Does she look like Jenny?"

"More like me, actually."

Gene was quick. "Sweet thing! You're a lucky man, Oliver."

Oliver was supposed to say, "Thank you, Sir," or some such. "It was an easy birth," he said. "I'm going to pick them up tomorrow."

"Fine, fine," Gene said, "we can't wait to see her."

"Come on up."

"Fine. Dolly will call, tomorrow or the next day."

Oliver's mother shrieked, sobbed, and made him promise to call the moment that they were ready for a short visit. Oliver agreed and hung up thinking that good news was easy to pass along. He had already written his father and explained the situation, so he needed only to send a birth announcement. "Emma Dior Prescott--April 26th, 1994--7 lbs 6 oz. Looks a little like us," he added beneath.

He walked to the corner and dropped the card in the mailbox. On his way back, he met Arlen and told him the news. "A major event. I'm happy for you," Arlen said. Oliver took a nap and walked down to Deweys for more Guinness and congratulations. He went to bed feeling as though he had made it through a one-way turnstile. Things were different on this side; there was a lot to do.

The next day he brought Jennifer and Emma home from Mercy Hospital. Verdi had gotten used to Jennifer. He sniffed Emma for a moment and then jumped to his place on the living room windowsill, settling down as if to say: one more--what's the difference?

Emma slept and fed. Jennifer spent happy weeks keeping her close and occasionally preparing a meal or cleaning the apartment. Oliver enjoyed holding Emma and being fatherly, although he sensed that his presence was not entirely necessary.

Dior and Paul came for a one night visit. His mother liked Jennifer and gushed endlessly over Emma. He and Paul had drinks in the background and talked about work and the Red Sox. It had been how many years since Carleton Fisk had gone to Chicago? One of the all-time great catchers, a son of New Hampshire--the event still felt like the death of an era, almost the death of New England.

Dolly and Gene were more formal. They were pleased and full of instruction. Gene inquired after Oliver's life insurance.

"No?" He gave Oliver his most forgiving and father-in-law knows best smile, stopping just short of issuing an order. It happens to all of us; you might as well get with the program--that was the message.

Jennifer was satisfied with both visits. Nothing really mattered but Emma, anyway. "Isn't she a doll baby? The most precious doll baby," she would say, answering her own question and thrusting Emma into Oliver's arms.

"Yes, she is. Yes, you are," he would say, holding Emma carefully. She was a good-natured baby. Her hearing was sensitive; she made faces and

sometimes cried at loud noises. She liked music. Oliver had fun twirling her around the living room, keeping her high against his shoulder so that she could see the walls spin by.

One Saturday late in May, he received a note from Francesca saying that she was coming back that week and that the winter had not gone well. Jennifer didn't ask about the letter, perhaps she hadn't noticed it. Oliver said nothing. Later that afternoon, he took a roundabout route shopping and walked out to Crescent Beach. The log had shifted position during the winter, but it was close to the same spot. He left a note in their format: "O+F" in a heart on the outside. Inside, he wrote: "Welcome back. Much to tell you." That was all he could bring himself to say. If Francesca came out in the morning, at least she would have a welcome. Maybe he could get there, maybe not.

Sunday morning, he went out for bagels and a newspaper. On his way home, at the last moment, he kept going down State Street. He crossed the bridge, drove to Cape Elizabeth, and walked quickly to the beach. He didn't know what to say, but he was suddenly glad and hopeful that Francesca might be there. The force of his feeling surprised him. The note was gone. She wasn't around. She got it anyway, he thought as he hurried back. Probably.

That week, when he thought of Francesca, he twisted his wedding ring around and around his finger. He worried about her and about the girls. It occurred to him that Emma would be as large as Maria and Elena in a few years. It didn't seem possible. The following Sunday, he got up early, put on running shoes, and told Jennifer that he would be back with bagels in an hour or so. He bought coffees to go and carried them to the log in a paper bag. The water was cold that early in the season. There was no one on the beach. No note. No sculptures or arrangements. He and Francesca might never have been there.

A figure appeared in the distance, walking with long familiar strides. He balanced the bag on the log and started toward her. She was wearing a gray sweatshirt and jeans. Her hair was shorter than it had been. Her eyes. Her beautiful mouth. They walked into an embrace that became tighter and tighter. There was no time, no weather, no ocean. Getting closer was all that mattered. Francesca was trembling. Oliver dug his feet deeper into the sand and moved one hand slowly across her back. She let out a deep breath and relaxed against him. When they stepped apart, it was like waking up in the morning.

"Hi," he said, stupidly.

"Oliver . . ."

"You look like you've had a hard time. I brought coffee." He pointed back to the log.

"The worst is over," she said. "I've left him. I'm still at the house--but only for a little while. Conor's staying with a friend."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm taking the girls to the West Coast. Seattle, I think. I need a clean break. If I stay here, Conor will keep hanging around and using the girls to keep me down."

"Oh," Oliver said. "Seattle is supposed to be a good place. I like the Northwest. Shit." They sat on the log, and Oliver handed her a cup. "From Mr. Bagel," he said. "There have been changes in my life, too." He paused. "I got married," he blurted out. "I have a daughter, five weeks old." Francesca put her cup down on the sand and took two steps toward the water. She stood with her fingers to her lips in a prayer position. Oliver explained what had happened.

"How wonderful to have a baby," she said in a low voice. "Emma--how wonderful."

"She is," Oliver apologized.

"Are you happy?"

"I guess so," he said.

She turned. "Oh, Oliver!" She opened her arms, and this time it was she who was consoling. A part of him wanted to scream with fury, but a deeper part became calmer as she held him. There were big problems off in the future--impossible problems--but they were their problems.

"God, I love you," he said, stepping back.

"It's a strange time to feel lucky," she said, "but I do." She looked at his wedding ring. "I'm a bad woman now, too--along with everything else."

"Bad to the bone," Oliver said. He reached down for her coffee and handed it to her. "Some bones," he said. He sat on the log and shook his head. "Damn . . ." They were quiet for a minute. "When are you leaving?"

"In three or four weeks. I'm going to drive out, bring as much as I can with me. I've got to get a better car--something that will pull a small U-Haul trailer and hold up."

"The money is there if you need it," Oliver said. "Jennifer wants to buy a house in Cumberland or North Yarmouth. I'm going to use some for a down payment, but there will be plenty left--ten, twenty, thirty thousand--just call Myron and he'll send you a check."

"I have enough to go on. And Conor will pay child support. I can work, you know. Did I tell you I was a registered nurse?"

"No."

"Yeah, I went through a program after I got out of college. I only worked for a year before I met Conor. I'm glad I did, now . . . It's nice to know about the money. I don't know what's going to happen, really. I just know I've got to move." She paused.

"I wish I were moving with you."

"Never leave someone for someone else," Francesca said. "You've got to live through these things."

"That's what Mark says--my friend, Mark. Anyway, take the money if you need it; I know you won't waste it. I wish I could help with the

moving, but I don't think I'd better."

"You _are_ helping, just by being you. Emma's going to need lots of money, you know."

"Not for a while. Listen, how am I going to find you?"

"My folks will know where I am: Richard Boisverte in Edgewater, near Daytona. Conor will know--because of the girls. I'll send you a card when I have an address." She covered one of his hands with one of hers. "You're right--it's probably not a good idea to see each other. I'm a bad woman now; I could be a _very_ bad woman any moment."

"Damn," Oliver said again. They were quiet again.

"I've got to go," he said, standing up.

"I think I'll stay here for a bit," she said. "I want to watch you walk away."

"Be careful," he pleaded.

"Bye, Baby," she said.

He looked at her for a long moment. She smiled for him, the smile that entranced him the first day he saw her in Becky's. Her mouth traveled slowly down, along, and up a complex curve, sexual at its center, sensitive at its corners, wholly alive and in the moment. He nodded in the Japanese manner, the way he had that day. Then he smiled quickly--an American promise laid on top of the Japanese one--and left. He looked back from the top of the bank at the end of the beach. She was watching him, unmoving. He lifted one arm high and walked out of sight. A hundred yards farther, he followed a smaller path to a clearing overlooking the water. He dropped to the ground and lay in a fetal position on his side with his knees drawn up and his hands between his legs. He hurt too much to cry. He just wanted to survive. There was only one level of feeling beneath his love for Francesca; he had to get there. The hard cold ground was anesthetic and numbing. Half an hour later, he brushed himself off, an animal on the earth, needing food and warmth.

"Where have you been?" Jennifer asked.

"I ran into a friend who's moving," he said. "Sorry to be so long."

"Emma's asleep again."

"Cold out there. Bagels," Oliver said, raising the bag. "I'm hungry."

16.

Emma turned over. Emma crawled. Emma made smiling googling noises when Oliver came home and picked her up. Jennifer had three months of maternity leave, and she arranged to work part time for six months after that. Oliver did not get life insurance, but he worked steadily

at the hospital. He took another smaller project to round out the week and to try and get a few bucks ahead.

Francesca did not come into Oliver's mind while he was busy. Sometimes he thought of her when he was extra tired. She was a reassuring presence, even though she was far away. Sunday mornings, when he went out for bagels and a paper, he often wished that he were driving to Crescent Beach to bring her coffee. Instead, he would sit for a minute in his Jeep remembering the calm that they shared. Then he would drive home, play with Emma, and do things around the apartment.

On the Wednesday after Labor Day, Jennifer met him at the door. "I found it, today!"

"Hi, Scrumptious, how's Ms. Perfect?" He held Emma high. "That good, huh? Found what?"

"A house!" Jennifer said. "It's just right. I'm sure you'll like it."

"Oh, yeah? Where?"

"North Yarmouth, about two miles from Gillespie's. It's on a dirt road--off Route 9."

"I like Gillespie's," Oliver said. They sometimes drove out there to buy vegetables and eat donuts at outside tables that overlooked the Royal River.

"It's a real Maine house with an ell and an attached barn, not too big, perfect for a garage and tools and stuff. We could get a doggie for Emma."

"How much?"

"They're asking one-twenty. The house needs painting. There isn't much land with it--four acres."

"Four acres is a lot," Oliver said. "I mean, not in the middle of Kansas, but . . ."

"It's about half field and half woods," Jennifer said.

"I guess we ought to go look."

"Let's go!"

"Now?"

"Of course, now. If we want it, we have to make an offer fast. It just came on the market. My friend Martha who works in real estate called me this morning."

"O.K., let me get an ale. You drive." Oliver put four bottles of ale, bread, and a piece of cheddar in a day pack. "Back later, Verdi."

The house sat up nicely on a stone foundation. Lilac bushes framed the kitchen door. "What do you think?" Jennifer asked after Oliver had walked around the house.

"It looks dry, and it faces south," he said. "One-fifteen. That's as long as there isn't anything major wrong--rotten sills, bad water, or something."

"We can get my friend Steve to inspect it," Jennifer said. "He's got a business inspecting houses. He's very good."

"Where are the owners?"

"Owner. It's a guy. I guess his wife died, and he's moving out of town."

"Too bad," Oliver said. "Looks like he had a good garden in back."

"I saw that," Jennifer said.

"The house seems all right, but you can't be sure from the outside. Heating system could be shot. Septic system might not be any good."

"I'll make an offer contingent on the inspection," she said. "Steve will find anything that's wrong. He does a radon check and all that. Costs about three hundred, I think. Three-fifty, maybe."

"Worth it," Oliver said. "The driveway is pretty rough, but that's no big deal." He looked around. "I like it. What do you think, Princess?" Emma googled. "That does it," Oliver said.

"I knew you'd like it," Jennifer said.

"Let's go down to Gillespie's and buy a pie, sit outside, and finish this ale." They drove slowly away from the house and out to Route 9. Jennifer had good bank connections; she was sure she could get a mortgage for most of the money. Oliver said he had fifteen thousand toward a down payment. Jennifer had another ten thousand.

"Daddy will give us another fifteen. That would leave seventy-five. I know I can get seventy-five out of the bank. We make enough to take care of the rest, fix it up, get furniture and all."

"Maybe we could go easy on the furniture," Oliver said.

"Don't worry, I won't go crazy. We'll have a housewarming!"

"You're right about the place--plenty of room, but not too big. It would be good to get my tools laid out."

Five weeks later, they slid a check across a glass-topped table. A tired balding man with a red face tossed Oliver a set of keys. "Kentucky, here I come," he said.

"We want to wish you the very best of luck," Jennifer said.

"_Weren't for bad luck, I wouldn't have no luck at all_--that's how the song goes. But, thank you." He stood, pulled a baseball cap down on his forehead, and touched the brim in salute. "I'll be getting along." He walked out.

"B.B. King," Oliver said. "Didn't he sing that?"

"Never mind, Oliver; we're bringing the good luck with us."

"Congratulations," Martha said.

"Oh, thank you!" Jennifer jumped up and hugged her. "Come on, Oliver. We've got to move."

A week later, Oliver was sleeping in a new bed, high off the floor. The physical move doesn't take long, he thought; getting used to it takes a while. He missed knowing that Arlen and Porter were downstairs. Porter had made an extravagant cake for Jennifer the week after she had Emma. Driving home from Deweys to North Yarmouth wasn't as easy as walking up the hill to State Street. No five minute walk to Becky's for breakfast, either. On the other hand, he had a good work space in the barn, and it was quiet at night.

Oliver counted his blessings. Verdi had made his first patrols and was adjusting. The leaves were changing color fast. It was beautiful, really. Jennifer loved the new house. Emma had a room with a baby bed and a playpen right next to their bedroom. There were plenty of projects; that was fun. Old storm windows were leaning against the wall in one corner of the barn. He had to clean them and figure out where they went. There was a wooden ladder missing a couple of rungs.

Oliver swung his legs over the edge of the bed and stood up. "I'm going to go buy a decent ladder. I want to put those storm windows in."

Jennifer yawned. "Come back soon."

"I won't be long."

A few minutes later, he was bouncing down the road. There had been a light frost overnight; the air was snappy; it was a good day to get things done. He needed to write to Francesca. Her letter was in the bottom of the toolbox in the back of the Jeep. He knew it by heart. She was renting a house in a section of Seattle called Ballard. Maria was in school. Elena was in pre-school. Francesca was working in a family clinic, lonely, but glad to be starting a life on her terms. It was signed, "Love, F."

He drove to the Yarmouth post office and waited five minutes for it to open. He was going to send her a postcard, but he changed his mind and bought a stamped envelope. He went over to the Calendar Island Motel and wrote her a letter as he ate bacon and eggs and homefries. He described the new house and reported that Emma was crawling and would be walking soon. Work was O.K.; there were nice people at the hospital. He was thinking mainly of Dan and Suzanne, but he didn't go into it. He signed his own love and then added, "I miss you. I wish I could be two places at once." He tore the page out of his notebook and folded it into the envelope. Crap. He really was two places at once, but he didn't want to think about it. Better to get to work.

The morning was warming when he untied the new ladder and carried it from the roof rack. He laid it on the grass and assembled it, tying off the lifting rope. Jennifer put her head out the front door. "Where've you been?"

"Hi, pretty good, huh?" He pointed to the shiny aluminum ladder. "I stopped for breakfast." He pointed to Verdi who was motionless beneath a rose bush by the corner of the house. "I see you. Where's Princess?"

"In her room. Why don't we bring the playpen out here? Will you watch her? I want to go to Gillespie's."

"Sure." They took the playpen apart and put it back together on the lawn. Emma sat in the sun surrounded by rattles, balls, and small stuffed bears. Jennifer left and Oliver set up a window-washing station in front of the house. Should I wash them all first, or one at a time as I put them in? he asked himself. One at a time. He cleaned the first and noticed a small lead disk numbered, 7, nailed to the outside face of the bottom of the sash.

"Aha," he said. "But where is window seven, Emma? Where is window seven?" He walked along the front of the house, checking each window for some kind of number. On the end of the windowsill of the fourth window, he found a disk numbered, 3. That makes a lot of sense, he thought. He continued around the end of the house. There was a two on the next window. It did make sense; the starting point was different, that was all. There were two windows at that end of the first floor. The numbering started at the far corner, came around the end, and continued across the front of the house. The windows that looked into the ell at the other end were not fitted for storms, so number seven was the first one on the back side.

"Looking good," he said to Emma. He took the clean window around to the back of the house and put it in place. The sash fit flush with the outer casing. Metal clips held the window in place. He swiveled them over the sash and tightened them down with a screwdriver. "O.K. Thirteen to go."

He was down to nine when Jennifer returned with a carload of groceries. "I got some cider from Gillespie's. How's Emma?"

"Having a good time," Oliver said. "A couple of bees checked her out. No harm done. I think she likes it outside."

"That's my precious," Jennifer said, lifting her out of the playpen. "Oh, you need changing, oh my precious!" She looked at Oliver accusingly.

"Whoops," he said. He unloaded the car while she changed Emma. "Great stuff, this cider," he said, knocking down a glass.

The afternoons were short in October, but Oliver had the windows in place by four o'clock. Jennifer had cooked a ham and baked two pies. The house smelled good. Emma was asleep. Oliver opened a bottle of Rioja, and they ate, listening to Prairie Home Companion on the public radio station. He would rather have talked about something--Garrison Keillor was too smug for Oliver's taste--but Jennifer loved him. He was funny, sometimes, Oliver admitted. And the music was good.

Later, in bed, Jennifer sighed contentedly. "I love it here," she said. Oliver snuggled closer. "I've been thinking about two weeks from today," she went on.

"Two weeks?" he mumbled.

"For the housewarming."

"Housewarming." He put a hand on her breast.

"Mmmm," she said. "I want to invite _everybody! _"

"O.K." Oliver moved one leg farther up on hers. He put his mouth against her neck. "Everybody," he murmured. A small shiver went through her. She was wifely now in bed, accommodating, easily satisfied. Oliver did his part; she did hers. They fell asleep peacefully and properly. Oliver did not hear her get up to attend to Emma.

In the morning they decided that "everybody" meant everybody but their parents. The holidays were coming; they would see them soon. Besides, the party might be loud and last into the night, not a parents' kind of party. "The telephone man is coming tomorrow," Jennifer said. "I'll call my friends; you call yours."

"O.K.," Oliver said. "I might stop in at Deweys."

At the hospital the following day, he invited Dan to the housewarming. Dan had twin girls in junior high and a devout wife. Oliver didn't expect him to accept, but he liked Dan and wanted to ask.

"Saturday after next? Can't make it," Dan said. "I'm going to see my brother."

"Oh. Where does he live?"

"Upstate New York. He works on a farm." Dan saw Oliver's surprise and continued. "It's a long story. We're twins. And now I have twins--strange. Something happened at birth; my brother was born retarded, mentally challenged." Dan rubbed the back of his neck. "We were given up for adoption. I didn't find out about this until I was grown up."

"No," Oliver said.

"Dale was raised in an institution and eventually got work on this farm where he gets room and board. It took me quite a while to find him. I go see him every three or four months."

"That's too bad," Oliver said.

"He's a worker!" Dan said proudly. "He's strong. He's in a lot better shape than I am."

"Is he happy there?"

"Yeah. We keep asking him to come and live with us, but he wants to stay there. He likes his responsibilities, takes them seriously. He comes over for a week's vacation every year." Dan smiled. "He splits all our wood when he's here. The girls love him."

"Nice family," Oliver said.

"That's what it's all about. Sorry to miss the party, though."

"Well, some other time," Oliver said, raising one hand.

"Lucille," Dan called to a nurse down the hall, walking quickly after her.

"He does the work of two people at least," Oliver said later to Suzanne.

"Kind of a workaholic, really," she said.

"A great guy," Oliver said.

"He is."

"Human," Oliver said. "The other day . . . I shouldn't tell you this."

"I can keep a secret."

"We went out for lunch and Dan had chicken--barbecued chicken. 'I thought you were a vegetarian,' I said to him.

"'I weaken sometimes,' he said, chewing. 'Do you think the Lord will forgive me?'

"'If He doesn't forgive you, there's no hope for me whatsoever,' I said."

Suzanne laughed. "Or me."

"Sinners," Oliver said.

"'Fraid so," she said more softly.

"Can you make it to the housewarming?"

"I don't think so."

"Damn. What are you doing?"

"I've got a book," she said.

"Aha. Romance. A blonde hulk who will carry you away." Oliver was looking levelly into her eyes.

A small smile turned the corners of her mouth down. "I'm waiting for someone my size." They were in her office. Oliver registered that it was very warm. He saw her shudder and give in to a wave of longing. Her lips parted and her breasts lifted. He reached for her in slow motion and stopped himself just before he touched her.

He was shocked. "I . . ."

"I know," she said. She closed her eyes. "God, I know."

"Suzanne . . ." She shook her head and smiled helplessly.

"I'll read my book."

"We've got to talk sometime," he said. She nodded. He took a deep breath and left.

Oliver was trembling as he drove away. What was that all about? He and Suzanne had become more friendly as time had gone by. They often talked, and she was always sympathetic. But he hadn't expected anything like what had just happened. His breathing was still messed up. When she had surrendered to him, he had been jolted by a rush of strength. He felt like Ghengis Khan or something.

Suzanne was sharp. She remembered everything he said about the computer system, repeating things back to him word for word months later. She was very helpful. He depended on her support, he realized. There was something about her that got to him, a lonely bruised quality. She had eloped in high school, run away to Tennessee, and returned eighteen months later. Her family and the church took her back, but . . . She was still living in a shamed shadow.

He decided that he needed a Guinness. He stopped at Deweys, and two pints later he was back in control. Better than that. The last of the warrior-lovers invited the entire bar to the housewarming and went home.

17.

Oliver didn't know what to do about Suzanne. They worked together; he couldn't avoid her. He didn't want to avoid her. She was alive and vital and _for him_, somehow. He turned toward her like a plant toward light. That's the problem, he thought the next morning as he drove into the hospital parking lot. I've been attracted to her all along. I've flirted with her and leaned on her. I'm a creep.

Holding that thought firmly, he marched by Molly, waved good morning, rounded the corner, and went directly to Suzanne's office. She wasn't there. Her light was off. He went back to Molly and asked whether Suzanne had come in.

"She called in sick, Honey."

"Ah. Too bad."

"She said she'd be in tomorrow."

"What's so funny?" Molly was giggling.

"I asked her what was sick, and she said it was her hair. Her hair was sick. I wish _my_ hair was that sick. I hope she doesn't go and do something foolish."

"I like your hair," Oliver said, setting off the flashing "creep" sign. The phone rescued him. "I'd better get to work."

"First Fundamental Hospital," Molly said, her gorgeous drawl following him around the corner.

At least he had another day to think things over. His marriage was going smoothly enough. Dull at times, sure. Weren't all marriages? Jennifer and he didn't have that much in common, as it had turned out. But they were good humored, and they shared a disposition to make the

best of things. He had his responsibilities; she had hers; they avoided confrontation. He was genuinely fond of her. And they had Emma. Emma was a delight, a little like each of them, although she took after him in looks. He should have been on top of the world, compared to most people.

So--why was he reaching for Suzanne? There was something coiled inside him, a force that he wasn't sure he could control. Intuition told Oliver that if he ran from it or pretended it wasn't there, he would be in even bigger trouble.

He was at work before Suzanne arrived the next day. He watched her drive in and walk toward the front entrance. Even at that distance and under a parka, her body radiated a compact grace. Her hair was gathered and held by a red scarf that hung to the nape of her neck. She hadn't done anything drastic. He waited a few minutes and went to her office. His heart was beating fast.

"I'm sorry," he began.

She shook her head. "It's my fault, Oliver. You're married and you have a child. I lost control. I'm--not a good woman."

"You're a wonderful woman."

"I've been praying," she said. "I don't pray like the rest of them, but God hears everyone."

Oliver pulled at one ear lobe, off balance.

"I'm asking Him to take this want out of me." Suzanne's voice trailed off. "I don't think I can do it by myself." Oliver's cheeks grew hot. "I was going to cut my hair practically off, but I couldn't."

"I'm glad you didn't."

She looked at him, helpless again. "What are we going to do?"

"I don't know," Oliver said. "I have the want, too."

Suzanne smiled for the first time. "If you've got it like I do, one of us is going to have to leave the state."

"Maybe there's some other way," he said. "Tell me how much you love disco."

"I hate disco," she said apologetically. "I like old time country music. And jazz. Coltrane."

"Oh swell," Oliver said. "Have you ever been to the Cafe No, in Portland?" Suzanne shook her head. "Terrific place to hear live jazz." He stopped, frustrated.

"I'll leave if you want me to," she said. "I ought to be able to get a job somewhere else."

"Don't do that." He didn't know what else to say. "Don't do that."

"Maybe if we didn't talk," she said. "Only just about work."

"O.K.," Oliver said. "I'll try. I'd hug you but I think something would catch fire."

"Burning already," she said, trying to smile. Oliver closed his eyes and took a deep breath. His feet felt like they were in cement. He dragged them up, one after the other, and left.

He finished a small project but couldn't bring himself to start the next one. He drove into Portland without saying goodbye to Suzanne. This wasn't going to be easy, he thought. He went to Gritty's for party kegs. They brewed ale downstairs and pumped it directly from the bar. He didn't know how many people would come to the housewarming--some would rather drink wine or the hard stuff. Five gallons of ale should be enough. He bought six, to be on the safe side.

He had lunch in Deweys, hoping to calm down. But the more he thought about Suzanne, the more confused he got. Mark came in and Oliver asked him, "What do you do when you've got a strong attraction going that isn't--appropriate?"

"You're asking me?"

"Well," Oliver said, "just an opinion."

"What does she look like?"

"Nice looking. Nothing unusual. My size. Great body." Oliver thought. "I guess what's unusual about her is how connected she is. I mean, her body is in her face. She walks the way she feels. She's all one piece."

"It don't mean a thing, if it ain't got that zing. " Mark said. "Ellington."

"Hmmm," Oliver said.

"If it's inappropriate--whatever that means--and you go ahead with it, you suffer. If you don't go ahead with it, you suffer anyway. You're fucked, man."

"Swell," Oliver said.

"Could be worse," Mark said.

"How?"

"You could be a zombie executive in suburbia."

"North Yarmouth is close," Oliver said. "Speaking of which--are you coming to the housewarming?"

"Saturday, right?"

"Yeah--middle of the day, anytime. Bring a friend."

"Friend? You think you got problems? Later, man." Mark rushed off.

Suffer? Was it the male condition? I guess women suffer, too, Oliver thought. The human condition, then? He resisted this. Why _should_ we suffer? The "we" he had in mind, he realized, was mostly Suzanne. Jacky was in there somewhere, and Francesca, higher and in the distance. Jennifer wasn't there. Jennifer and he did not suffer. She was his partner. He admired her energy, respected her, loved her, even--in a general way. Wasn't that what marriage was all about?

It don't mean a thing, if it ain't got that zing.

You're fucked, man.

Do something.

He drove back to North Yarmouth. "I'm home!"

"Hi, Sweetums. What's the matter? Here." Jennifer thrust Emma into his arms. "Watch Emma for a while, will you? I'm glad you came home early; I've got some things to do at The Conservancy. Oh, good!" She did not wait for an answer. "Tell me later--bad day at work?"

"Nah," Oliver said. "Never mind. How's Precious?"

"Precious had a good nap. See you in a couple of hours."

"Down," Emma said. "Down."

"O.K.," Oliver said. "Down, it is." He put her on her hands and knees in the center of the living room rug. He heard the Volvo start and race down the driveway. Too fast, he thought--hard on the front end. Emma made a laughing sound as she crawled around in a small circle, the way Verdi used to chase his tail. She rolled over, sat up, and looked at him with delight.

"What a show off!" he said. "Very good crawl. Very good. Want to try the toddle? Try the walk?" He got to his knees and closed her hand in his fist. "Try walk?"

"Da Da," she said. He pulled her slowly to her feet. Her other arm went out for balance and she sat back down.

"Very good!" Emma smiled victoriously.

"She almost stood up," he told Jennifer when she got back. "I'll bet she's walking in a couple of months."

"I hope you're not pushing her."

"The Olympic Trials are right around the corner."

"Oh, Oliver. The Germans always win the baby walk."

Oliver laughed. "What's for dinner?"

"Pizza--pesto and chicken."

"God," Oliver said.

"Oh, something good happened at The Conservancy. Jacky Chapelle dropped

by--remember Jacky? She's in town for a week. She said she'd come to the party."

"Ah . . ." Oliver cleared his throat. "I like Jacky."

"I thought you did."

"Surprised she isn't married," he said, "a bit bossy, I guess." He shook his head sadly, reactivating the "creep" sign.

"Well, you're taken."

"Quite so," Oliver said. "Just another hungry breadwinner."

"Half an hour. Oh, Precious, did Daddy make you walk?"

"Mama," Emma said as Oliver retreated to the barn.

It was good that Jacky was coming, Oliver decided; it meant that she had forgiven him or gotten over it or something. Maybe she had a new lover. That was a cheerful thought. He was in a good mood when Jennifer called him in for dinner.

In the following days, Oliver stayed away from Suzanne as much as possible. The few times that they were by themselves were uncomfortable, but at least they could show the hurt they felt, even if they didn't talk about it. Passing in the hallway was harder. Others would notice if they tried to ignore each other; they were forced to be friendly in a phony way, as though they didn't feel the force drawing them together. Suzanne began to look strained. Oliver kept his head down and worked hard.

The day of the party was gray and drizzly, warm for late fall. Oliver stood in the open door of the barn, holding a paper cup of ale and welcoming guests. By mid-afternoon, cars were parked around the first bend of the driveway. Thirty or forty people were milling about in the house giving Jennifer advice and admiring Emma. Jennifer was flushed and pleased. She kept the conversations lively while she brought appetizers in and out of the kitchen. Porter had come through with a quantity of scones, apricot--walnut and cranberry--orange. Oliver took special pleasure in pouring a Glenlivet for Arlen. They stood in amiable silence as rain dripped from the barn roof.

"Couple of cows and I'd be right at home," Arlen said.

"I've been thinking of getting a little John Deere."

"Well--they can come in handy."

"I guess." Oliver's thoughts drifted to Jacky. She appeared, on cue, walking up the drive. He met her with a hug. "Jacky! You look great." She held him tightly and then stepped back, knuckling the top of his head.

"How's married life?"

"Fine," he said. She looked at him closely.

"I'm thinking of trying it myself," she said. "I don't know."

"Uh, Jacky, this is my buddy, Arlen."

"How do you do," Arlen said, extending his hand.

"A pleasure to meet you," Jacky said. "What's that in your glass?"
Arlen held his glass up for inspection. Jacky bent forward and sniffed.
"Sarsaparilla!"

"Quite good on a rainy afternoon," Arlen said.

"Yumm," Jacky said.

"Oliver, sarsaparilla for the lady."

"Right away. Does the lady like water with her sarsaparilla?"

"Half and half."

"Yes," Arlen said approvingly. Oliver prepared her drink and handed it to her.

"To your new family and your beautiful old house," she toasted.

"Jacky! How nice!" Jennifer swept in and gave Jacky one of those lengthy woman to woman hugs, timed to the microsecond to communicate eternal devotion, unceasing turf vigilance, equality before the Great Sister, and other messages beyond Oliver's understanding. Arlen exuded calm; the two women might have been cows rubbing shoulders. "Come and see Emma." Jennifer led Jacky into the house.

Arlen and Oliver resumed their positions in the doorway. "I don't want to intrude, Oliver, but wasn't she the one . . ."

"Yup," Oliver interrupted. "She was."

"Interesting," Arlen said. "Very attractive."

"What do you think makes someone attractive?" Oliver asked.

"Hmmm. Physical health. Energy. Integrity is most important, I think."

"Integrity," Oliver imagined Jacky and then Suzanne.

"Of course, it's different for everybody. We all have our weaknesses. Little things. Porter's forearms, for instance--the way they swell up from his wrist. As soon as I saw them, I thought, oh, oh . . ."

"Lucky Porter," Oliver said.

"Olive Oil!" George bounced in from the ell. "Hi, Arlen, how're you doing?"

"Just fine, George."

"Bazumas, Olive Oil! My God! I thought I'd never see her again. I asked if I could paint her. She said yes but I'd have to drive to Maryland." George hung his head. "It's a curse--art."

"Maryland's just down the way," Arlen said.

"Arlen, my car!" George threw one arm in the air. "I'm lucky it starts. _Maryland?_"

"Life is hard," Oliver said.

"Food," Arlen said, heading for the kitchen.

"Yes," George said, following him. Oliver looked down the driveway and focused on a man walking slowly toward the house. The man smiled when he was closer.

"You must be Oliver. Ah, yes."

"I am. I remember you from somewhere."

"Ba, ba, boom," the man said and twirled around.

"Bogdolf!"

"Eric Hallston, actually. I'm an old friend of Jennifer's."

"You look so much younger," Oliver said.

"The miracle of make-up. When I do a Bogdolf, I use a lot of gray. People like an older Bogdolf."

"I'll be damned," Oliver said. "Well, come on in. What are you drinking? Mead?"

"Mead? Very funny. Horrible stuff. Scotch would be nice, but that ale I see would be fine."

"Glenlivet, right there." Oliver pointed to the table that was inside the barn. "Help yourself. Jennifer's in the house." Bogdolf Eric poured himself a stiff one.

"I have a surprise in here," he said, waving a manila envelope. "You don't have to like it. You don't have to accept. I'm sure Jennifer will, but you are Lord of your Keep."

"Bogdolf, what are you talking about?"

"Eric, please."

"Eric." Oliver watched him extract an eight by ten glossy photograph from the envelope. He handed it to Oliver.

"Last one left." A puppy with big paws and big ears stared up at Oliver. "She has her shots and everything."

"Cute," Oliver said. "What kind is she?"

"Mother is a golden. Father is a lab. Total retriever."

"Could bring me my paper," Oliver said, starting to slip.

"Might be nice for your daughter."

"Emma," Oliver said, brightening. "Come see her." He took Eric through the ell and into the kitchen. "Here we are," he said.

"Eric!" Jennifer hugged him warmly.

"Eric has a puppy for us."

"A puppy?" Jennifer looked at the photograph.

"Oh, how cute! How cute! Oh, Oliver, wouldn't it be just perfect for Emma?"

"Mmm." It was hard for Oliver to disagree.

"I can bring her any time you'd like. Sooner would be better--you know--bonding and all that." Jennifer nodded wisely and took Eric to see Emma who was in her playpen in the living room. Oliver went back to the barn. Christ, he said to himself. It was beginning to get dark, a relief.

"Gotta go, Handsome." Jacky appeared at his elbow.

"So soon?"

"Long day tomorrow. Driving back."

"I'll walk you down," Oliver said.

"Where's your coat? You'll get wet."

"I don't need one," he said. They walked down the driveway in comfortable silence. The light rain had gradually wet things through. Branches and leaves were dripping, and the drive was muddy in patches.

"You don't look so great," she said.

"I'm O.K."

"Terrific kid."

"She is. I don't know . . . It's the sex thing."

"I thought so," Jacky said. She was surprisingly sympathetic for someone who had been throwing wine glasses at him the last time he'd seen her.

"How's your love life?"

"Improving," Jacky said. "I found a real nice guy. He works on Capitol Hill, actually."

"I'm glad," Oliver said. "You look mellower."

"I've been working my way through some of this sexual stuff," she said. "I'm not so different. I mean--I still like my equipment." Oliver put his arm around her shoulders and hugged her. "But it's not so important. There are other kinds of bonds." She paused. "I think maybe

you have some work to do in that area. But--leave it in the bedroom, Oliver." They walked on.

"I'm trying," he said.

"I think you have a little dom in you," Jacky said. Oliver realized that he was having a talk that actually meant something. He filled with gratitude.

"I love you," he said. "I can't live with you, but I love you." They reached her car.

"Thank you," she said. "That's sweet." She got in the car, started it, and rolled down her window. Oliver put both hands on the window and leaned over. "Be true," she said. "That's the main thing." He straightened.

"Take care," he said. He didn't kiss her; his mind was going too fast. Be true? To what? He fought for understanding.

"Bye, Oliver," she said. She backed out and continued backwards down the driveway at a good clip. Coordinated, he conceded.

"Bye, Jacky," he said, waving as she disappeared around the corner. The rain came a little harder. Drops washed down his face like tears. No wonder things can grow, he thought. The rain forgives them.

18.

Bogdolf Eric delivered the puppy two days later while Oliver was at work. Emma loved her and vice versa. As soon as Bogdolf's presence faded, Oliver loved her too. They tried "Jesse" for a name, then "Jesse Woofwoof." "Woof" was what stuck. She was good--natured and full of energy, forever trying to get Verdi to play. Verdi would tolerate her briefly and then swipe her in the nose. Woof would yelp and jump back, feelings hurt. Verdi would leap to a windowsill and ignore her.

Oliver stayed away from Suzanne, although he badly wanted to talk to her. He could have gotten out of the hospital Christmas party if he had made an effort. He didn't.

When the day of the party came, Jennifer was happy to stay home with Emma, Woof, and Verdi. Oliver put on a warm jacket and drove to the hospital where he passed a slow two hours exchanging glances with Suzanne. Various employees made speeches, and her uncle presented awards. Dan's daughters were a hit playing a fiddle and accordion medley of dance tunes and Christmas carols. Suzanne was wearing a caramel-colored cashmere sweater over a tight red skirt. She made an effort to be cheerful, but she seemed tense. Without either of them making an obvious effort, they moved next to each other.

"I've got to talk to you," he said quietly.

"Not here," she said.

"O.K."

A minute later she turned toward him and said, "Follow me when I leave." Her lips barely moved. He nodded.

When the party ended, she exited the parking lot, turned right, and drove slowly until he came up behind her. She led him seven or eight miles away from the coast and into the country before turning into a narrow driveway. They climbed between pines to the top of a short rise where a small house faced away from the driveway. Suzanne parked in the carport and got out as Oliver stopped. She waved for him to follow her and walked around to the front of the house. A screened porch looked out on a two acre field, a tangle of browns and yellows in the weak December sun. A rectangle of field near the porch had been made into a lawn. A flower border separated the lawn from the field.

"Isn't this pretty," Oliver said.

"I guess it'd be easier to live in a condo," she said, "but I like it out here." The way she said "I" and "out here" was instantly familiar to Oliver. She was comfortable with being alone, in the company of the trees and the field. A chickadee flitted to a large bird feeder and flew back toward the woods. The quiet hammered in Oliver's ears. He took a deep breath. Suzanne was looking at him in a concerned way. She was concerned about him, he realized--not their future, not their work, not their child--him.

His knees began to shake. She felt it and moved closer. "I need to sit down," he said. Suzanne looked at the porch. Oliver went to his knees on the hard ground. She bent over and put a hand on his shoulder.

"I can fix us some tea," she said. Oliver closed his hand on her wrist and pulled her slowly to the ground beside him. She rolled gracefully to her back, her eyes wide open on his. Her other hand was on his arm, lightly holding him to her. Time slowed.

He brought his mouth down on hers. She softened and opened. He pressed harder, flattening her lips against her teeth. He could feel the ground through her head as he rocked in each direction. Her hand went to the back of his head, pulling him closer. Oliver's mind began to spin from not breathing. He started to pull away. Suzanne's head came up with his. She made a pleading sound and drew him back to the ground. His hand went to her hip. Heat spread across his upper chest and into his arms. He put one hand on each side of her head and held her down as he raised his body and gasped for air.

Suzanne's eyes were closed. She was breathing rapidly through her mouth. Oliver got to his knees, took off his jacket, and spread it next to her. She did not resist as he lifted her hips and moved her onto the jacket. He lay next to her and put the fingers of one hand across her mouth. She kissed his fingers. He pushed up her skirt and reached between her legs with his other hand. Her knees fell open, and her mouth opened under his fingers. She tilted her pelvis, pushed against his hand, and helped him to remove her warm underwear.

He took off his pants and put his fingers back on her mouth as he lowered himself over her. As he slid into her, she took the heel of his hand between her teeth. When he withdrew, she bit harder. He came in

deeper, and she lifted against him. Her arms were flung out wide, palms up. He was cradled in her hips. With each stroke, he felt the ground beneath her, felt closer and closer to home. Suzanne strained up, jerked twice convulsively, and sent a clear cry across the field. She wrapped him with both arms and urged him, helped him through the door. He fell headfirst, grateful, filling her as he fell, filling her for good and all.

He lay collapsed and quiet while his breathing straightened out. Suzanne giggled. "What?" he mumbled.

"I'm hot on top and getting cold below," she said.

He pictured them from above. "Ummm," he said, "spy satellites . . ."

"It's your ass going to be saved for intelligence," Suzanne said.

Oliver raised himself from her. "Enough to make a man put his pants on."

"I've got a shower big enough for two," she said.

Minutes later, they were trading places under a stream of hot water, soaping each other and rinsing off bits of grass and dirt. "Great breasts," Oliver said, rubbing each one respectfully.

"The Lord was in a good mood," she said, pushing against him.

"Oh, oh," Oliver remembered. "What about babies?"

"I'm on the pill," she said. "Have been ever since Donny."

"Donny?"

"He's the one I ran away with."

"Oh. Good about the pill."

"I wouldn't mess you up," she said. "Or me, either. I could never have an abortion. How about that tea?"

"Yes," Oliver said.

"You're a much better fuck than Donny," she said. Oliver was embarrassed and pleased. "Well look at you blush! Come on, Lover--here's a clean towel."

He dried himself and dressed. As he waited for tea, he thought about going home. Impossible. "We're in big trouble," he said.

"I knew that the first time I saw you," she said. "If my uncle finds out, I'm a goner. Milk and honey?"

"Sounds good."

Suzanne handed him a steaming mug. "I just don't get it," she said. "How can anything that feels that right be wrong?"

"I don't know," Oliver said. "How old are you?"

"Twenty-seven."

"I'm thirty-six."

"Perfect," Suzanne said. Oliver sipped his tea. The room was comfortable--clean and furnished simply.

"Leaving isn't going to get any easier," he said, a few minutes later.

Suzanne got to her feet quickly. "I know." Oliver took another swallow of tea and put his mug down slowly. He stood. Suzanne came into his arms, tucking her head against his shoulder. He buried his face in her hair, breathed deeply, and squeezed her. Her hair smelled of mint.

"Don't worry," she said. "I'll do whatever you want." He squeezed her again in response and left, not trusting himself to look back.

He couldn't go home. He drove into the city and had a Guinness at Deweys. He called Jennifer and said that he needed strong drink after the non-alcoholic Christmas party and that he'd be back soon with a pizza.

Richard came in, and Oliver ordered another pint. "What's your definition of home?" Oliver asked him.

"Home is where you're most yourself," Richard said without hesitating. He looked comfortably around the bar.

"Ah," Oliver said. "Not necessarily where you sleep, then."

Richard raised his eyebrows. "Not necessarily. I have two homes--at the lab and right here."

"Lucky dog," Oliver said. Richard flashed his smile. Be yourself and you are home anywhere. Oliver drank up. "Well, I've got to be going."

"Have a good holiday, Oliver."

"You, too."

"You smell like Deweys," Jennifer said, when he walked into the kitchen. She took the pizza from his hands.

"Good old Deweys," Oliver said. "How's Precious?"

"Sound asleep. Oooh, it's getting chilly."

"I'll get some wood," Oliver said quickly. "Come on, Woof." They had a couple of cords stacked in the barn, cut to two foot lengths. He turned on the light and found the maul leaning against the corner where he had left it. He swung the maul and tossed the wood and pretended that Suzanne wasn't sitting in her quiet living room, pretended that nothing had happened. Woof sat attentively in the doorway. There was only the splitting, the thunk of the maul into the chopping block, the klokking sound of pieces thrown on the pile . . .

"Pizza's ready. My goodness, Sweetums, what a pile!" Oliver gathered up an armful.

"Should hold us for awhile," he said. Woof bounded into the house, wagging her tail. "You know," Oliver said, "we really ought to get a decent wood stove. More efficient. And if we have furnace trouble, it would be good to have something besides the fireplace."

"Maybe we could get the kind with glass doors, so we can see the fire," Jennifer said.

"They make good ones now," Oliver said.

"Let's go tomorrow."

"Solid," he said. Little by little, normality was returning, but he had to work at it. Luckily, he didn't have to go to the hospital until Monday.

19.

Saturday morning, Oliver and Jennifer bought a stove and brought it home in the Jeep. Mark came out and helped move the stove from the Jeep to the living room in front of the fireplace. It would go in the corner when they put a chimney up for it, but, for now, they could use the old chimney. A hole for the stovepipe was waiting, covered by a decorated pie plate.

Sunday afternoon, Emma lay contentedly in her playpen near the new stove while a fire burned and Oliver watched the Patriots lose another one. Jennifer had driven in to The Conservancy for a couple of hours. Woof was outside. Verdi was curled by a window. The stove had cost a bundle, but it was worth it, Oliver thought. They charged it on one of Jennifer's credit cards.

"Da Da."

"Yes, Emma." He lifted her and held her in the crook of his arm. She looked up at him steadily as he walked back and forth across the living room. Muffled snapping sounds came from the stove. He heard the wind outside and saw bare branches moving in the trees across the lawn. The sky was gray and darkening. "Here comes the storm, Emma," he said. "Here it comes." He put her down in the playpen, turned off the TV, and played *La Traviata*.

Pavarotti's voice swelled through the house. "Listen to that, Emma!" He stroked Verdi and watched the lowering clouds.

Jennifer came home full of enthusiasm and plans. "Eric is having a party!"

"Hot diggety."

"It will be fun! And lots of Conservancy people will be there. I really *have* to go. And I think it's good for Emma."

"Well, it's that time of year," Oliver said, giving in.

"We won't stay long."

"We'll stay as long as you want," he said.

They went to bed early that night. When Jennifer reached for Oliver, he followed her lead, waited for her, and tried to stay close. He floated away and brought himself back. She was uncomplicated sexually. Thank goodness.

She rubbed his back. "Oooh, that was nice," she said. "You worked so hard on the stove. You're tired. Poor Sweetums."

"Mmmm," he said, nuzzling and hiding his face on her shoulder. "Sweetums sleep now."

The storm dumped eight inches overnight, the first real snow of the winter. It was blustery and clearing when Oliver went outside in the morning. The Volvo was in the barn. Jennifer was staying home until the road was plowed. He cleared off the Jeep and crunched slowly down the hill. As the clouds shifted, the light changed from gray to white and back to gray. The Jeep slid around a little, not much. He had concrete blocks in the back, three by each wheel. The heater threw out a blast of hot air. Four wheel drive is great, he told the world. People were brushing snow from their cars and shoveling walks. Several waved as he passed. The first snow was always a relief.

He couldn't stop thinking about Suzanne. It would be best not to see her. When he walked into his office, the first thing that he saw was an envelope on his desk. It looked like the ones that his paycheck came in. "Oliver," was written on the front. He opened it and took out a note.

Hi. I'll understand if you don't want to see me. But if you do--I get off at noon Friday. I can go straight home and do the shopping Saturday. If you can't make it, next Friday would be good too. But if you don't want to, I'll understand. (I said that already.) Missing you. S.

P.S. Eat this note.

Oliver folded the note into a small square and buried it in his pocket. Suzanne looked up when he put his head in her door. She was dressed plainly in a white blouse. Her hair was pulled back. Her eyes were soft. "Saturday's a good day for shopping," he said.

She lowered her eyes for a moment. The corners of her mouth moved down and back, the beginning of her smile. "If you go early," she said. She was tender and proud, so compact that Oliver wanted to sweep her into his arms and keep her inside his shirt. He smiled helplessly and went back to his office. Didn't mean to do that, he said to himself. But he knew he couldn't run from her; it would be like running from himself. This thing was going to destroy him if he didn't come to grips with it, if he didn't understand what was going on.

It was a relief to sit at his desk. One thing about computer work, he thought. You can't do it and do anything else at the same time. Auditors were coming from national headquarters, and the trial balance was off by \$185,000. Dan was hoping to find the problem before they arrived. It was a lot of money. Oliver wondered if it had been stolen. Was there a First Fundamentalist embezzler? He concentrated until lunch time, leaving his office only once. Suzanne drove out at noon, and he left five minutes later. He wasn't sure he could take seeing her again that day.

He drove into Portland and had lunch at Becky's, glad to be back. He stared at the booth where he first saw Francesca. It occurred to him that he hadn't checked on his brokerage account for months. He ate the last of his homefries and slid the plate across the counter.

"Had enough?" The waitress paused.

"No, but. . ."

"We've got good pie, today. Dutch apple? Banana cream?"

"Can't help myself," he said. "Dutch apple."

"Warm that up," she said, stretching behind her for a coffee pot and filling his cup with one motion. "You want that pie heated?"

"Sure." He added creamer to the coffee, relaxed, and looked at a large photograph hanging on the wall behind the counter. A wave was washing completely over the bow of a tanker. Both the ocean and the ship were muddy shades of gray. It was a gray stormy day. There were no people in sight—just the deck, battened down, waiting to rise through a crushing weight of water. A simple black frame. No caption necessary, not in a waterfront diner.

He remembered eating lunch with Maria and Elena. That was fun. Cute kids. Walking the beach with Francesca. The memories eased his mind. But this is now, he reminded himself. He set his mug down with a clunk to emphasize the point. Now. He left a big tip and walked to the brokerage office.

"Hello, Oliver."

"Myron."

"Bet you want to see your statement?"

"Only if there's anything left." Myron searched in a filing cabinet.

"Ah, here we are." He glanced over it. "Yes. Not bad." He handed it to Oliver. The balance was quite a bit lower than the last time Oliver had checked, although still higher than when they began. He looked at the detail. There were two withdrawals of four thousand dollars each. He put his finger next to them and pivoted the paper so that Myron could read where he pointed. "Yes," Myron said. "Francesca called twice. I had ten thousand in a money market fund, so we didn't have to sell any shares to meet her request."

"Good," Oliver said.

"An attractive woman, Francesca," Myron said.

"You've got that right," Oliver looked at Myron. "Do you know her?"

"I do. I grew up in Brunswick. I was three years ahead of her in high school."

"I'll be damned. How is she doing? Did she say?"

"We didn't really get into it. She sounded fine. I sent the checks to an address in Seattle."

"Well done. Thanks, Myron."

"Marriages . . ." Myron said, raising his eyebrows. "Some work out and some don't."

"Yeah," Oliver said. He looked at Myron's wedding ring. "I hope yours does."

"So far, so good," Myron said.

"Nice going with the account. If she needs any more, you know what to do."

"I'll keep some powder dry," Myron said. "See you."

Oliver stepped outside. Greenery had been wound around the lamp posts. Holiday lights were strung overhead. The sidewalks were filled with shoppers crowded between store windows and low snowbanks piled along the curb. Someone had brushed the snow from the bronze lobsterman kneeling on his pedestal outside the bank buildings.

Oliver liked The Swiss Time Shop, run by a Swiss watchmaker. He bought a ship's clock set in a handsome maple case, a present for the house.

"He says 'Ja!' and everything," Oliver told George in Deweys. "Great guy. He actually knows how to _do_ something."

"Nice face," George said, looking at the clock.

"So, what's new with you, George?"

"Jesus, Olive Oil, the gallery owners . . ." George groaned and held his head with both hands. "They're all the same. They treat you like dirt. I just came from one--he kept me waiting for twenty minutes and then he had another appointment. This guy wouldn't know a painting from a Christmas card. I was big in California, Olive Oil, big. Why did I ever come back to this place?"

"How about the art school? Maybe teach a course or two?"

George looked at him in disbelief. "Theory, that's all they want. All the _Top Bullshitters_ are there now, Olive Oil, _talking_ about art. That's what they want." He shook his head. "Paint? It's no use. It's no use."

"The Top Bullshitters!" Oliver bent over laughing. "You're right. It's no use. What are you going to do?"

George threw up his arms. "I don't know. Fuck 'em. Paint."

"Let me get this one," Oliver said.

"It's no use." George pushed his empty glass across the bar. "That was a great party at your place. Eats. Bazumas."

"Jacky," Oliver said.

"And that Martha chick--the real estate chick--she wants to look at my paintings. Maybe she'll buy one."

"She's got the money," Oliver said. "Sell her a big one and go down and paint Jacky."

"I'd like to," George said. "Something about her . . ."

"Yeah," Oliver said. "Those were the days." Oliver had thought life was complicated when he used to drive over the bridge to Jacky's. "Bazumas!" he toasted.

"The finest," George said.

A pint later, Oliver reached in his pocket for tip money and felt a small thick square. On his way back to the parking garage he dropped Suzanne's note carefully into a city trash container.

20.

On Friday, Oliver left the hospital fifteen minutes after Suzanne drove out of the parking lot. It had been a tense week. He wasn't any closer to the missing \$185,000, and he didn't understand what was happening to him personally. He had avoided Suzanne, although at least once a day he put his head in her door and they exchanged smiles, a moment that was a relief to both of them.

When he got out of the Jeep, Suzanne was standing in her doorway. "You remembered how to get here. Come on in." She shut the door behind him and came into his arms. "Hi, Stranger," she said.

He breathed in the familiar minty smell of her hair which was brushed out fully and freely to her shoulders. "God, you smell good." She squeezed him and stepped back.

"Let's get that coat off you." She had changed into dark brown cotton pants, a cream colored T-shirt, and a red plaid flannel shirt, unbuttoned. She hung his jacket on a peg by the door.

"You look great," Oliver said. It was the truest thing he had said all week.

"Thank you." She stopped a moment, pleased. "I put the water on. Want some tea? Some lunch?"

"Tea would be good. I'm not too hungry--maybe a piece of toast?" He followed her to the kitchen. "I've got a headache."

"I thought you looked tense. Well, you just let me fix you right up." She pointed to a chair, and he sat down. She knelt by his feet. "Boots," she said, untying the laces, "here we go." She pulled them off and led him into her bedroom. "Lie down there; I'll be right back." Oliver stretched out. He heard water running. Suzanne came in with a washcloth that she doubled and placed across his forehead and eyes. It was cool and moist. "There," she said. He felt her hands on his ankles and then his socks were drawn off. She loosened his belt and fluttered a light cover over his knees and bare feet. "There," she said again, satisfied.

Oliver was rarely sick. It was odd but comforting to be treated like a patient. He relaxed into the coolness of the washcloth as sounds floated in and out of consciousness. Suzanne moved around the house. A jazz combo started up quietly in the living room.

"Feeling better?"

"Yes."

"I'll bring the tea." She returned with mugs and two toasted English muffins on a plate. She put them on a bedside table, went around to the other side of the bed, and lay next to him, her head propped up on pillows.

They sipped tea and munched on muffins. "I like it here," Oliver said.

"It's cozy," Suzanne said.

"It's hard not talking to you at work," he said.

"I hate it," she said. She put down her mug. "We don't need to think about that now."

"No," he said, closing his eyes. She placed her hand on his chest and rubbed slow circles. Oliver sighed and surrendered to the palm of her hand and her fingertips.

"Much better," she said. Her hand moved slowly across his chest and then down over his stomach. Her fingers reached under the top of his pants and paused. He sighed again and rolled a little closer. Her hair brushed across his face, and her fingers worked downwards, quietly circling and pressing. "Oooh," she said. "We have lift-off."

Oliver took a deep breath. Impulses swirled. He reached down in slow motion and undid his pants. Then he rolled over onto his knees above her and opened his eyes. Suzanne watched him as he yanked off her pants. A knowing smile twitched at the corners of her mouth while concern and a plea for forgiveness showed in her eyes. She was wet and ready. She held nothing back, let him drive her crazy, begged him for it, and then gave a series of wondering cries as releases rippled through her body, one after another.

He withdrew, still hard, and kissed her. He lay back and stretched his arms toward the ceiling. His headache was gone. Suzanne lifted one hand a few inches and let it fall back on the bed. "Oliver?" He moved his

head closer so that he could hear her. "You hungry yet?"

"After awhile," he said. He ran a finger lightly down the top of her thigh.

"Gardenburger," she murmured.

He rested his whole hand on her leg. "Gardenburger," he agreed. She smiled slightly. The devil and the angels were gone from her face. She might have been a sunset or an early morning lake. They lay quietly for a minute.

"I love it when you just _take me_ like that."

"Mmm," Oliver said.

"All week, I don't know who I am. I get a hint, like, when you smile at me--but when you fuck me, I know." Her hand lifted again and fell over against his stomach. He patted her hand. She sighed contentedly and slid her hand down. "Oh," she said, "we've got work to do." She rolled to his side and put her open mouth on his chest. She stroked him steadily and then rolled to her back pulling him over on her. "Come on, Lover. Give it to me." She was urgent, calling repeatedly. The need built deeply and quickly, leaping into her, turning him inside out and helpless in her arms.

It was an hour later when he opened his eyes. "I was going to wake you at three," Suzanne said.

"Make that two gardenburgers," he said. "I'd better take a shower."

Suzanne cut up an onion and fried it with the burgers.

"Damn," Oliver said, emerging from the steamy bathroom, "onions!" He was still waking up. Suzanne was dressed again. Oliver sat at the kitchen table to eat, but he couldn't take his eyes from her breasts. They were just right, hanging and swelling under her T-shirt; they were perfect for his mouth, like pears, but so much better. "God!" He shook his head. "You are too much."

Suzanne flushed. "Is that going to hold you?"

"Terrific," he said. He ate quickly and stood. "I've got to go."

"Hold on." She came close and picked a blonde hair from his shirt. "Don't want you getting caught."

"No," Oliver said.

"Will you come back?" she asked softly.

"Are you kidding? As soon as I can."

She hugged him as though he were breakable. "I'll be waiting." It was almost an apology.

He ran one hand down her hair and the compound curve of her back. "Save that kiss for next time," he said.

"That one and a couple more."

He left with difficulty and drove home. Jennifer was on a day trip to see her mother; she wouldn't be back with Emma until six or so. Woof met him at the door, sniffing at his clothes with extra interest. "Just between us," Oliver said, rubbing her ears. He changed clothes immediately. By the time Jennifer and Emma got home, he had baked an acorn squash, started a fire, done two loads of laundry, and split more wood. Celtic music was playing.

"Mother says hi. Precious was very good, weren't you Precious?" Oliver took Emma. "Doesn't it smell good in here!"

"Dinner's all ready."

"Oh, and a fire. How nice to be home. Let's turn that music down a little."

"Da Da."

Oliver pushed Suzanne to the back of his mind, struggling for time to understand or to outlive what was happening. Early the next morning, he cut a Christmas tree in the woods behind the house. He bought lights and a tree stand at K-Mart. By noon, they were hanging tinsel on the tree, and Jennifer was telling him that she could finally get some really nice decorations. Rupert had never wanted to bother with a tree.

At one-thirty, they walked across a graveled driveway in Falmouth and knocked on Bogdolf Eric's door. Oliver was carrying Emma; Jennifer held a canvas bag containing a fat beeswax candle and two bottles of wine, a Chardonnay and a Merlot.

"Ah, Jennifer!"

"Eric," she said, handing him the bag and accepting his hug at the same time.

"And here we have Oliver and Miss Emma," he said, disengaging.

"Merry Christmas, Bogdolf."

"Oh dear, I'm afraid--no Bogdolf today. The Lore Keeper is--in the field." He laughed heartily. "You'll just have to put up with plain old Eric. Come in. Come in."

"Woofy is just wonderful," Jennifer said. "She's the nicest dog I ever had."

"Oofy," Emma said.

"Isn't she, Precious? Yes, she is."

"A great dog--Eric," Oliver said.

"Yes." Eric nodded wisely. He looked into the bag. "Now, what have we here?"

"For immediate consumption," Oliver said.

"Good!" Eric said.

He's a jerk, Oliver thought, but he's a friendly jerk. Several of Jennifer's friends were already there. In an hour the house was full of people Oliver hadn't met. Jennifer moved happily from group to group. There were many children under ten years old, and there was much discussion of Montessori and Suzuki methods. The men talked about business and boats. Oliver wasn't put off by boat talk; he liked boats, had grown up around them, but he had never needed to own one, had never wanted to pay for one. These skippers were all cruising in the same direction: bigger is better. The business they talked was really about people. No one seemed interested in how to do anything--just in who said what to whom during the endless reshuffling of executive ranks.

Oliver knocked down as much of the Merlot, a good bottle, as he decently could. There was a sharp cheddar, Havarti, Brie, a salsa, an avocado dip, baby carrots, and various kinds of chips. As he ate and drank, the conversations around him blurred together, so that he caught the intent but not the detail, a more relaxing state. He had a small Dewars and refrained from asking Eric to release the Laphroig from its hiding place. He began to see large wind-up keys protruding from the backs of the guests. I must have one too, he thought, but set for a different kind of motion. These guys would march back and forth in front of the yacht club, six steps one way and six steps the other, until they wound down.

He stepped outside and explained his key theory to a woman who was smoking in front of the garage. She was thin with large dark eyes and a high-strung manner. "I'm more of an all-terrain guy. Take it slow; keep going until your hat floats."

"I got the other woman key," she said in a surprising husky voice. "I go in a straight line and turn around and no one's there. After awhile, I do it again in a different direction."

"Shit," Oliver said sympathetically.

"It has its moments," she said, flicking ash from the end of her cigarette.

"What's your name?"

"Marguerite."

"I'm Oliver."

"I know."

"You do? How?"

"Everyone does. You're the short one who married Jennifer and saved her from Rupert. Cute kid, by the way."

"Aha," Oliver said. That explained the identical looks of comprehension he received when Jennifer introduced him to her women friends. He is short, they were thinking. "Emma. Yes," he said to Marguerite. "Thanks. What's it like--being the other woman?"

"Well, you do the heavy support work, and she gets the house."

"Damn," Oliver said. Marguerite finished her cigarette.

"Do you smoke, Oliver?"

"I try to stick to drinking," he said, finishing his whiskey.

"Guess we better go inside and reload," she said. She turned her back to him and bent over. "Wind me up, would you?" Oliver laughed and put his fist on her back. He rubbed five vigorous circles.

"There you go," he said. "My turn." Marguerite cranked him up, and they went laughing back inside the house.

Oliver was getting a pretty good buzz. Lots of water, he instructed himself as he poured another drink. Jennifer was sitting in an armchair with Emma in her lap. Oliver drifted to one side of the room and looked at books--Joseph Campbell, Robert Bly, biographies of lesser known New Age gurus. A voice caught his attention and he glanced at a tall man telling a boat story. It was Conor. A well padded blonde stood by his elbow and patted his arm when he said, "It wasn't my graveyard." Conor scanned the horizon for approval. Oliver had just time to go neutral and stop staring. He was startled. It was as though Francesca might be right around the corner. He went over to Jennifer who suggested that they think about leaving--Emma was tired. Oliver agreed and then edged up to the group where Conor was comparing investments with another handsome salesman type.

There was a pause in the conversation, and Oliver asked, "Do you know Myron Marsh?"

"Marshmallow? Sure," Conor said. "I used to have resources with him. Too conservative for me. You've got to step up to the plate--uh . . . Have we met? I'm Conor."

"Oliver."

"Up to the plate, Oliver." He looked down, charming, sorry for Oliver who was too short to hit it out of the park.

"Ah," Oliver said.

"Myron's a good man," Conor said, "known him for years."

"Good man," the other guy echoed.

"I like him," Oliver said. "I guess I'm conservative."

"Nothing wrong with that." Conor swept his arm expansively, making room for conservatives.

"The next generation's asleep," Oliver said, pointing to Emma. "Got to pull anchor, head for port. Nice talking with you."

"Standing clear," Conor said. Oliver felt a rush of relief that Francesca had left the guy. Marguerite caught his eye. She raised her eyebrows, amused. Complicated, Oliver thought, easier to go home.

Jennifer made an effortless series of goodbyes, impressing Oliver with her skill once again. "Farewell, Eric," he said to the host.

"Merry Christmas, Oliver."

It was dark and much colder as they settled into the Volvo and drove home. "What a great party," Jennifer said. "You know, I was talking to Mary. If you're tired of bouncing around, I think you could get a good position at Tom's bank. She said he was looking for someone to come in and learn the ropes, take over as MIS officer."

"Do I look like the officer type?"

"If you don't, no one does. It doesn't have anything to do with height. You were having fun with Marguerite."

"Yeah, I like her. What's her story?"

"Poor Marguerite, she's had--unfortunate affairs. I really don't know what men see in her. She's awfully skinny."

"Well," Oliver said, "she's sympathetic."

"Too sympathetic," Jennifer said. "She ought to pick some nice guy and get on with it." Get it on, Oliver started to say, but didn't. "It was so nice to see all the children playing," Jennifer continued. "Wouldn't it be wonderful for Emma to have a little brother to play with?" She reached over and rubbed his leg.

"Get on with it, you mean?"

"Oh Sweetums! Of course not! Not like that. But it would be nice, wouldn't it?" She kept her hand on his leg.

"Yes," Oliver said. "Seems like yesterday that Emma was born."

"It does," Jennifer said enthusiastically.

Oliver took one hand from the steering wheel and rested it on top of Jennifer's. "Merry Christmas," he said. "Merry Christmas, Emma." He looked over his shoulder at Emma, buckled into her car seat, serene, half asleep. "I love Emma."

"And me?"

"And you," he said. It was true, but why did his heart sink after he said it? There were loves and there were loves. He patted her hand and corrected a small skid.

21.

Oliver enjoyed Christmas in the new house. He talked to his mother and his sister on the phone, took pictures of Emma in front of the tree, and made another bookshelf for the living room. Jennifer eased up on

the little brother plan, accepting his suggestion that she might not want to be heavily pregnant in July. "A little pregnant would be fine," she said. Oliver agreed--a three or four month delay. He tried not to think of Suzanne. He decided to skip the coming Friday visit.

Tuesday, at work, he handed Dan a picture of Emma. "Pride of the Prescott's," he said.

"Chip off the old block. Does she program yet? A cutie! She'll keep you busy."

"She will. How was your holiday?"

"Fine. My brother came for a couple of nights. Lots of music, good eats." Dan patted his stomach. "Have to work it off. Any luck with the trial balance?"

"Not so far."

"Well, if you can't find it, you can't find it. Month to month, we're doing fine; the numbers aren't getting worse. I've got to find Vi." He raced away at Dan speed.

Oliver took a deep breath and walked down the hall to Suzanne's office. She looked at him, glad and appealing. "Friday . . ." he started. She blushed.

"I've got something to show you at the house," she said.

"Good," he heard himself say. He stood there, grinning, amazed at himself. "Friday," he confirmed. He went back to the computer--happy but frightened. He couldn't make excuses; he had to see her. Don't panic, he told himself. Just stay for a couple of hours and go to Deweys for a Friday night drink with the boys. Go home smelling of Guinness and cigarettes . . . He was skidding, losing control. He plunged into the hunt for the missing money with renewed determination.

Computer programs evolve and become more complicated over time. This accounting package had been in place for eight years. Many new versions had been installed and much had been changed to suit this particular hospital. It would take too long to set up a parallel test system, and it probably wouldn't help, anyway. The best hope for fixing programming problems is to catch them when they happen, when there are clues to help in the search. The monthly trial balance is off--why? What changed last month? A weird data situation? A new program? Modifications to an old program? But in this case, the accounts had drifted out of balance over a six-month period, nearly two years earlier. The imbalance had remained constant since then. Either the problem had been fixed, or it was still there and might or might not happen again.

Naturally, the previous programmer hadn't bothered to keep a log or make comments in the programs. Typical. Oliver was used to cleaning up after other programmers. In fact, their mistakes were the source of half his work. Still, it annoyed him that they didn't take time to do the job right; comments made life easier for everyone.

On Friday, he told Dan that he didn't think he could find the problem. "Not unless it starts happening again."

"It's not worth spending any more time on it," Dan said.

"What will the auditors do?"

"I don't know. Fudge it, probably. Create some kind of miscellaneous adjustment account. We'll see. Oh, we got a package from IBM--looks like another operating system release."

"No sweat," Oliver said. "I'll install it after the month-end run--midnight, the 31st."

"I'll put it in the cabinet in the computer room," Dan said.

Oliver took care of loose ends until noon and waited for Suzanne to drive away. Half an hour later, she met him at her door. They clung to each other silently and then stepped inside. Oliver hung up his coat.

"So, what are you going to show me?"

She pointed to the living room. "Come see."

He followed her into the room where a quilt in the making was spread out on the rug. A roll of white cotton batting leaned against the couch. Rectangles of brown and faded gold were stitched to a neutral backing--some were small, some large, some nearly square, others long and thin. Short irregularly curved stems cut from cloth--mostly black, a few reddish brown--were sewn randomly over the rectangles, crossing over and under each other, separate, yet interlocking. He saw it suddenly. "The field! Looking down."

"Bingo!" Suzanne said. "I make a different quilt every year for the hospital benefit auction."

"Wow, I love it. What goes on the bottom?"

"I've got a piece of dark brown material."

Oliver's eyes moved around the quilt. The patterns were unpredictable, but they had a sense of purpose, a natural order. "You could live in there," he said.

"That's the idea. Want some tea?" Oliver nodded while his eyes lingered on the quilt. He went into the kitchen and watched Suzanne make tea. She was wearing faded white jeans and a long mustard colored sweatshirt that clung to her curves. So compact and modest. Where did that superb quilt come from?

"It's so good to see you," she said, putting his tea in front of him.

He looked at her intently. "God, you're beautiful!"

She sat down, considering. "My teeth are too big. I look like a bulldog." She raised her eyes to his. "I guess I'm all right from the neck down."

"You're so--_connected, _" he said. "Your face is like your body. Your hand is like your face."

"I'm feeling bad about this," Suzanne said. She got up suddenly and

knelt by his chair. "Oliver . . ." He pushed back from the table. She buried her face in his lap, and he stroked her hair as she rocked her head back and forth.

"What?" he asked.

"Help me."

"Of course, of course I will."

"I've been so bad," she said. "I keep thinking of your little girl." She rose on her knees. Her face was lost and pleading. She reached down and undid her jeans. She pushed her jeans and underwear down over her hips and put her hands on his legs. She swallowed. "I know it's crazy." Her voice trembled. "Would you spank me, Oliver? Please?" He didn't say anything, and she placed herself across his lap. He felt foolish. He raised his hand and slapped her lightly. "Harder," she said. "Please." He slapped her harder and felt her sigh. She lifted and waited for the next blow. Soon she was whimpering and breathing harder, crying out when he struck. As he spanked her, the cries became more intense. He began to want them; he felt as though they were his--or theirs. When she collapsed, weeping, he stopped and lifted her from his knees. He stood and carried her to the bedroom. He lowered her to the bed and lay next to her, caressing her slowly.

Her face became calm. "So good to me," she said without opening her

eyes. He took off his clothes and hovered over her. Her mouth was partly open, expectant. He couldn't think any more. He plunged down and into her. She quivered and took him, let him fuck her as hard as he wanted, arched under his bite, and held him while he made her his.

"Are you all right?" Oliver asked, ten minutes later.

"Does the Pope wear funny hats?"

"Suzanne?"

She rolled against him, her breasts soft on his upper arm. "Yes?"

"God, Suzanne. That was different." She put her hand on his chest and rubbed slow circles, the way she'd done when he'd had a headache. "I've been on the receiving end--a while back. But I never dished it out like that."

"How did it feel?"

"Kind of strange, at first. Then it felt good."

"I knew we were in trouble," she said. "What happened?"

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"To that relationship, when you were--receiving."

"Oh," he said. "I changed. Yi! What time is it?"

"Getting on for three."

"Baby, I've got to run. I hate to." He was already dressing.

"I know," she said.

He was gaining speed. Deweys was his only hope. He had to get there and get Suzanne to the back of his mind before he could go home. The quilt stopped him.

"Suzanne." She came naked into the living room. "This quilt is special." He thought. "It's because you are . . . And I don't mean just because you're twenty-seven and gorgeous. How did you do it?"

"I follow my heart, that's all." She looked at the quilt. "It needs a lot of work."

"I've really got to go. Damn!"

She blew him a wistful kiss. "Bye, Baby."

Oliver fled. He drove fast, hoping that speed would force him into the present, that driving would require all of his attention, but images of Jacky and Suzanne kept replacing each other in front of him. Suzanne surrendered to him the way he had surrendered to Jacky. Suzanne gave herself to him totally. Her trusting eyes put him in a powerful place. But as he swelled with strength, something else happened--a little voice whispered: _take care of her; she's yours._ He never felt that with Jacky or with Jennifer. They took care of themselves.

The quilt had shocked him. Suzanne was gifted. She was so sexy, so physical, so loving--how could she not have children? She deserved a good husband and family, not a misfit for a lover, too old for her, and married besides. Her breasts. God. Oliver drove faster.

"Pint of the finest," he said to Sam. His favorite spot was empty at the end of the bar. He leaned against the wall and listened to Taj Mahal playing the blues, keeping precise and honest time. He slid the empty glass toward Sam. "Let's do that again." Women. Halfway through the second pint, he said it out loud, "Women," and let go a deep breath. Deweys at that hour was securely masculine. It was understood that women were a source of difficulty, desirable though they were. Oliver glanced around the room. The man didn't exist, in Deweys, at that hour, who didn't have the scars to prove it.

He raised his glass to Mark who had just come in. "What are you going to do?" he said.

"About what?"

"Women."

"Ah, marriage," Mark said.

"It's not so bad," Oliver said. Better than the first time. Love the kid. But, Jennifer's working less and spending more. She wants to have another baby and be a full time momma. She wants to add on to the house."

"You just got the house."

"I know. What she wants to do makes sense, but it's a lot of money. Most of her friends have boats. They _all_ have boats. Wouldn't it be nice to go sailing with Emma?" Oliver lifted his hands in a helpless gesture. "She's even got me lined up for a good job at a bank."

"Where the money is," Mark said.

"I mean, it's not bad. It's just . . ." Oliver shook his head negatively. "Gathering clouds," he said.

"Sounds like a stripper," Mark said. "Wasn't there a famous stripper--Tempest Storm?"

"I don't need a stripper," Oliver said, suddenly pleased with himself.

"Tempest Storm," Richard O'Grady said, shuffling to the bar, bright eyed. "Volcanic!"

"Hey, Richard. What's happening?"

"Nothing volcanic--but I found a '55 T-Bird. It's a little rough. My mechanic and I are putting it in shape."

"Nice," Mark said. "It will appreciate."

"Right," Richard said. "If it survives my niece. It's going to be a present for her eighteenth birthday."

"Would you be my uncle?" Oliver asked.

"Since she's not quite seventeen, that means I'll have to drive it for a year." Richard illuminated the universe with one of his smiles.

"Well, you want to test it out," Mark said. Oliver laughed and drank more Guinness. The room filled with the Friday crowd. He would be home an hour late. So be it. Jennifer would forgive him. Emma would give him a big smile. Woof. Verdi.

In the following months, Oliver slipped further.

Suzanne took days off, left early for the dentist, and called in sick when they couldn't stand to be apart any longer. No one seemed to notice that they were often absent from the hospital at the same time, although Molly began smiling at Oliver in a shrewd and tolerant way. "What are _you_ smiling at?" Oliver asked her as he was leaving one afternoon.

"Mama didn't raise no fools," she said.

"I like your mama--she make biscuits, by any chance?"

"Melt in your mouth," Molly said. "Almost as good as mine."

"I want to die and wake up in Georgia," Oliver said. Molly was warning him. If she had figured it out, the rest would too.

Suzanne gave herself to him utterly. She hoped that he would make love to her when he came over, but if he wanted only to hold her or to have his back rubbed, that was fine, too. He learned about her religious

beliefs. She went to church every Saturday with the Fundamentalists and did her part in their community which included a school as well as the hospital. She was good-natured about her uncle and didn't take the rules too literally. How could she and carry on with Oliver? She believed in prayer. "Every night I ask forgiveness. I ask the Lord to show me the way. I need a lot of forgiving," she said.

"You're so sweet," Oliver said.

"I can be a bitch," she said. "I just don't feel that way around you." She lifted her face, lips parted for a kiss, and he pulled her to him.

She told him about her father, a long-distance trucker who drove away for good when she was eight. He had a drinking problem and was abusive. He lived in California somewhere, she thought, or at least he had once. Her mother remarried when Suzanne was in high school. Suzanne didn't like her new stepfather. When her mother moved out of town, Suzanne stayed behind for her last year of high school, living with her uncle and aunt. That was when she ran away with Donny, a sax player, and got a taste for jazz. She left him when she realized that his love for drugs was a lot stronger than his love for her.

She told him funny stories about Harley, who ran the local U-Haul franchise and was forever hitting on her for a date. She liked Harley. "He can fix anything." He was a Fundamentalist in good standing. "If they can put up with Harley, they can put up with me," she said.

Their relationship remained intensely physical. Oliver spanked her a few more times, but it quickly became a ritual, not a punishment. Suzanne didn't want him to hurt her. She wanted him to control her, a different matter. He felt increasingly responsible for her. He did whatever he wanted with her, sexually. She molded to his needs and became more beautiful by the week.

One afternoon, as Oliver was leaving the hospital, Gifford called him into his office. "What can I do for you?" Oliver asked.

"Nothing special," Gifford said. "I wanted to check in with you. We are pleased with your work."

"Thank you. I've had a lot of cooperation from Dan and--Suzanne."

"Yes. Suzanne said that you were attentive to detail." Gifford rubbed his chin. "She's my niece, you know."

"Yes," Oliver said.

"She's had troubles in the past, but she's overcome them with hard work and the Lord's help," Gifford said. "She'll make someone a fine wife."

"He'll be a lucky guy," Oliver said.

Gifford agreed. "And how is your family?"

"Fine," Oliver said. "Fine. Emma will be walking any day."

Oliver began drinking wine every night at home, taking refuge in a jovial family life that was drifting toward the rocks. He looked stressed when he wasn't drinking. Jennifer worried about him and urged

him to dump the hospital job.

"Well," Oliver said to her one evening, pouring a large glass of Chianti Classico, "you're going to like this--_they_ are dumping _me_."

Jennifer applauded. "I'll have a glass of that. What happened?"

"They were ordered to. The auditors did a solid job--took them weeks, remember?"

"I do," Jennifer said. "There, Precious."

"Dan was right about the missing money. They didn't think anything of it, said it was well within reasonable limits. Can you imagine, \$185,000? They treated it like fifty cents. What do you think happens at General Motors? My God, millions must get screwed up every month." He clinked glasses with Jennifer. "Here's to the miscellaneous adjustment. I still don't know whether it was stolen. I doubt it, somehow."

Oliver cut off a piece of cheddar. "Anyway, they took the books back to headquarters, and today they ordered us to switch to a different software package, one that will be standard at all their hospitals. Centralized control. No more local programming. Bye, bye, Oliver." He waved his glass.

"Bye, bye," Emma said. Jennifer hugged her.

"I'm about done now, really. A couple of reports, one more operating system revision . . . I'm a little sad about it. It's surprising how you get to _like_ people. I mean, the Fundamentalists are nutso with all their rules, but they do a lot of good. If you're an overweight single parent with three children, no education, and no job, they'll find a place for you. They work hard, and they help each other. Dan is a really nice guy. And . . ." he stopped. "I just remembered--I have a present; it's in the Jeep. I was going to surprise you."

Oliver returned from outside carrying Suzanne's quilt. "I couldn't resist," he said. He unfolded it and held it up. "It was on display for a month at the hospital, one of the items for their benefit auction. It's handmade. I kept seeing Emma sleeping under it, so I made a bid and got it."

"Oooh," Jennifer said. "Ooooh, Precious, look what Daddy got for you!"

"Do you like it?" Oliver asked.

"It's beautiful," Jennifer said.

"That's what I thought."

"Who made it?"

"Suzanne--you know, the woman I told you about who has been so helpful. See? Look down here." He pointed out a tangle of stems in one corner where "SUZANNE" had been stitched in a way that made the letters look like part of the growth. "See there?"

"Oh, I see it. How clever!"

"It's a field," Oliver said.

"How much did you bid?"

"You don't want to know."

"That much? Oh well, I suppose it's for a good cause."

"Right," Oliver said. "Emma." He scratched his head and drank more Chianti. "Money. What was that guy's name? The bank guy?"

"Tom. I'll call Mary tomorrow and check it out."

Oliver felt his insides contract. "Guess it can't hurt," he said. He folded the quilt.

"Da Da," Emma said.

"It's a quilt for you, Special One."

"Sweetums, next weekend . . ."

"Yes?"

"It's Daddy's birthday and Mother is having a major party, Saturday night."

"That's nice," Oliver said dutifully. "Can't make it though."

"How come?"

"Saturday is the 31st, month-end. It's the only time I can install those damn operating system changes--after the monthly reports and backups and before any new transactions."

"Oh dear."

"It's my last responsibility, the last round-up."

"Well, Daddy will understand. I'll take Precious down Saturday morning and come back Sunday afternoon. I hope the roads aren't bad."

"Don't go if they are."

"We'll see. Time for nighty-night, Precious. Da Da got you a lovely quilt."

22.

Oliver adjusted his tie. The blue blazer that Jennifer had bought fit well. "You look wonderful," she said, brushing non-existent dust from his shoulder, her face happy behind him in the mirror. The oxford-cloth shirt was soft and expansive. His gray wool slacks were tightly creased. His shoes gleamed. Her creation. "Now don't be late."

Oliver turned and saluted. "Aye, aye . . . Jennifer, I don't know about this."

"You'll like Tom. He's a dear."

"I'll probably stop in for a pint, after. I'll be back by seven."

"We'll eat late. You look just right."

Oliver drove into Portland and parked in the Temple Street garage. The downtown high-rise buildings were all banks now. The highest points in the city used to be church steeples, Oliver thought. Now, all you see up there are bank signs.

He entered the dark and ornate lobby of Pilgrim's Atlantic. Money was taken seriously here. He looked for the elevator. "Topside," Tom had said.

When the elevator doors opened at the top floor, Oliver was disoriented by the orange carpet, the color-coordinated flowery wallpaper, and the sunny windows. A well-built maternal receptionist smiled from behind an antique table. Where was he? He returned her smile. Two silver-haired executives approached and passed each other in the center of the large room. They had magnificent chests and sun-bronzed features. They nodded antlers and continued on their separate paths to polished doors.

Oliver stared, entranced. A red-haired assistant wearing a tight skirt and a close-fitting white blouse came from behind a corner and followed one of the executives into his office. In front of her, she held a silver tray. There was a glass of milk on it and a small plate of cookies. Nursery school, he thought, and started to laugh. The power floor is a nursery school!

"Do you have an appointment?"

"Yes, ha. Yes. Tom Alden. Three o'clock."

"You must be Mr. Prescott."

"Oliver."

"Please make yourself comfortable. Mr. Alden will be with you in just a moment. May I get you a refreshment?"

"Ah, that's very nice of you. Let's see." Take your blouse off. Laphroiaig. A ticket to anywhere . . . "Coffee--cream, no sugar, if you would." The woman pressed a button and spoke softly. Oliver sat on the edge of a love-seat and considered the reading matter on a coffee table: _Fortune, The Rolls Royce, _ and a copy of _The Economist._ The redhead appeared at his side, bending fetchingly as she set down a cup and saucer. "Thank you," Oliver said sincerely.

"Oliver? How good of you to come." Tom, a slimmer darker trophy elk, smiled winningly and shook hands. "How's that coffee? It's Pilgrim's blend; we have it roasted to our specs. Margaret, we'll be tied up for awhile. If Jack Dillon calls, tell him I'll get to him by four. Thanks. Come on in, Oliver." He patted Oliver warmly on the shoulder. "How's Jennifer?"

"Fine. She sends her best, by the way."

"Good. Good." Tom opened one of the polished doors and ushered Oliver into his office. The harbor spread out before them. A ferry was halfway to Peaks Island.

"Nice view," Oliver said. "I love the look of those ferries."

"One of the better perks," Tom admitted. "The town is growing fast. I hope we aren't overstressing the harbor."

"Often a subject of discussion at our house," Oliver said.

"Jennifer does good work with The Wetlands Conservancy. We do what we can to help. Jacky Chapelle, one of ours, used to be on their board. You know Jacky?"

Oliver felt his room to maneuver slipping away. "Yes," he said innocently.

"One of our best, Jacky. We took her on at a lower position and made quite a career for her. We take care of our own at Pilgrim." Tom swiveled around to face Oliver more directly. "Why do you want to come aboard, Oliver?"

"Pilgrim has an excellent reputation," Oliver said.

"We're the can-do bank," Tom said, smiling. "Didn't Mary tell me you guys have added to the crew?"

"Yes," Oliver said. "Emma. She just had her first birthday." He shook his head, letting Tom see that he appreciated the gravity and the wonder of it.

"Mary and I have twins. The future becomes--more important," Tom said. Daddy would love this guy.

"You want to do your part," Oliver said.

"I'll be honest with you," Tom said, leaning forward, "we're looking for a good man for our MIS position. We need someone who can handle challenge, take on responsibility. Technology is changing fast, Oliver; Pilgrim must change with it. We're a large organization, but we keep a small turning radius. That's how we stay in front of the competition. Teamwork. You know--in the last analysis--business is all about people." He stopped to gauge Oliver's enthusiasm. Underneath all the nautical bullshit, Oliver sensed a fairly sharp guy, hard-working anyway.

"I can do the work," he said. "But it would take me six months to get up to speed."

"We've got four," Tom said.

"What are weekends for?" Oliver asked. That got him the job. That and the Jennifer connection and some boat talk.

He walked to Deweys and was greeted loudly by George. "Olive Oil, my God!" George waved at Oliver's blazer, slacks, and shiny shoes. "What have you done?"

"Pilgrim Atlantic is taking me aboard," Oliver said.

"My God . . . Is the money that good?" George's eyes gleamed.

"Money's good. It gets better if you keep your mouth shut and work sixty hours a week. I haven't actually started. I just came from the interview, but it's a pretty sure thing. I'll buy." Sam set two pints in front of them.

"Maybe it won't be too bad," George said. "Lot of women in there."

"All very well for you, George. I am a man with responsibilities."

"I see them going in. They look like they're going to jail. I want to save them, carry them away on a white horse." George shook his head sadly. "I can't afford a horse."

"There aren't any white horses left," Oliver said. "_Silver_ was it." He raised his glass to the impossibility of it all. "How's the painting?"

"I'm taking a break from painting, working on a sculpture. I'm doing a golden cockroach." George's face changed when he talked about his projects. His big smile and round eyes were upstaged by his prominent forehead and the bones in his cheeks. His mouth went from boyish to disciplined. "Intelligent," he said. "Indomitable. King of the cockroaches."

"Too much. What's the King doing?"

"He's poised, feeling with his antennae, sensing his direction."

"I like it," Oliver said.

"Yeah, come over and see it."

"We talked about Friendship sloops," Oliver said, after a swallow of Guinness. "They're big on boats at Pilgrim Atlantic."

"Boats!" George shook his head wonderingly.

"Actually, I like them," Oliver said, "I wouldn't mind trying to make one some day. There was a dinghy that belonged to a neighbor of ours where I grew up. It was very light on the water. Light--but curved and strong--like a winter oak leaf that had drifted down. Herreschoff. It was a Herreschoff dinghy. He was the Mozart of boat designers."

"Like to see that," George said.

"It was white," Oliver said. "Always seemed freshly painted. Owl, my stepfather, liked boats. He died in one, or--off one. _Graceful things are stronger than they look._ He told me that once. It's almost a definition."

"Easy to see. Hard to make," George said.

Two pints later, Oliver slapped George on the back and walked to the parking garage. It occurred to him, as he drove home, that he had forgotten Pilgrim Atlantic for a whole hour.

In the morning, Jennifer was up early. Oliver carried Emma out to the Volvo and secured her in the car seat. "Be careful," he said to Jennifer. She kissed him quickly and lowered herself behind the wheel. "Regards to all," Oliver said. "Wish your father a happy birthday for me."

"I will." Her eyes lingered on his face. "Go back to bed," she said, worried. "You've got a long day ahead."

"Last one at the hospital," Oliver said.

"See you."

"See you. Bye, Emma." Emma smiled for him, and Jennifer took off down the driveway, too fast, as usual. Oliver went back to bed for an hour.

He stayed around the house, split wood, and organized his tools. He watched a basketball game and took a nap. His plan was to start the day over again around eight in the evening, eat breakfast at a diner, and be at the hospital in time to make sure that everything was ready at midnight for the operating system revision. With luck, he could be at Suzanne's by one or one-thirty in the morning. "I know you need to be good on Saturdays," he had said to her. "But it will be Sunday. I can actually stay all night, for once." Suzanne thought for a second.

"If I'm in bed, the door will be open," she said. Oliver felt a jolt of electricity, remembering.

He looked around the house and ruffled Woof's ears. "See you tomorrow. So long Verdi--wherever you are." He drove away in the dark and began collecting himself for computer work.

His schedule was perfect. The reports ran correctly. He made an extra set of backups and had time to clean out his desk before midnight. The operating system went in without a hitch. Shortly after one, he eased up Suzanne's driveway.

Her lights were on.

"Hi, there," he called softly as he stepped inside. She came immediately to the door and held open her arms. "Mmmm, you look sleepy," Oliver said.

"I've been reading, mostly, waiting for you. I took a nap after church. Are you very tired?"

"Not really. I took a nap, too."

"Want some tea? I have one strawberry jam left from last summer."

"Love some." He stepped back and looked at her white bathrobe. "Does this come off?"

"Pull here," she said, offering him one end of the cotton belt.

"Later," he said. "I was just curious what was underneath."

"_I_ am underneath," she said. They had tea and toast in the kitchen.

"Your quilt is a big hit."

"Oliver, you spent too much."

"I had to have it for Emma."

"The church will find good use for the money."

Emma. The church. They fell silent. It was late and still. There were no distractions. Suzanne turned toward Oliver. Her face was rueful and sweet and helpless. He slapped her hard, turning her head sideways. It was like a snake striking.

She turned her face slowly back to him. A tear welled up in each eye. Oliver's mouth was open in shock. "Suzanne . . ." he said, horrified.

"It's all right, Baby," she said. The tears slid down her cheek. "You can hit me again, if you want to. It would only help me remember you."

"_No, no!_ I never want to hit anybody again, let alone you. I don't know what happened."

"It's the strain of what we're doing. I feel it, too." She was speaking the truth for both of them. She was braver than he was. "We have to stop," she said.

"It's true," Oliver said. "Suzanne," the words came in a rush, "you would be such a wonderful mother. You are so special. You deserve better." A bitter wind was tugging at his heart. "You're right--we have to stop." He stood up. "This is hard. Better to get it over with."

"You have been so good to me," she said, standing slowly. "Maybe the Lord's going to let me get away with one." She came to him, and their mouths met--a long gentle meeting. As they pulled apart, Oliver realized that they were separating as equals. He felt a ripping in his chest. He walked quickly to the door and took his coat from the peg. Suzanne stood in the center of the room. She was crying, but her face was clean and shining.

"Bye, Oliver," she said. "Don't feel bad."

He couldn't speak, could only acknowledge her and try to thank her with a helpless wave. He went out the door without putting on his coat and drove away without looking back.

The wind in his chest began to howl. He gripped the steering wheel tighter. Suzanne was right. She was right. He turned south on the main road. He was right, too, to go--before they got caught, before she was seriously hurt. She would get over him. She had a lot going for her.

The wind howled louder. It was like a dark angel blowing through him. He had never hit a woman before. He hadn't known he was capable of it. The dark angel was telling the truth, blowing him down the road. He had to set Suzanne free. She was better off without him in the long run.

She sensed that, too, although they hadn't talked about it directly. They were a perfect match physically, and he loved her, but they were just too different. He banged the wheel with one fist and hung on as the angel blew harder.

Enormously harder. _Jennifer._ He had to leave her, too. Free everybody. Oh, no! _Emma. Emma._ He hit the wheel again and shook his head, but the angel wouldn't let him alone. "Do it now," he told himself. "Do it now. While you can." Could he?

Yes--if he kept going. The truth kept blowing through him. He couldn't have continued, otherwise. He bounced to a stop in front of his house, went inside, turned on all the lights, and played _La Traviata_ at top volume. He put his toolboxes in the Jeep and covered them with a tarp. He dumped his clothes in piles on the back seat, shoes and boots on the floor. He filled a cartridge box with cassettes and put it in the front seat with the George Nakashima book. He gathered bathroom stuff together and remembered his briefcase and the file box where he kept his credit card information, the brokerage agreement, bank statements, and his passport. He put these in the front of the Jeep and took another look around the house. He added a flashlight and a picture of Emma to the pile in front. Woof and Verdi watched uneasily.

He made a mug of black tea and sat at the kitchen table with a pen and a pad of paper.

"Jennifer, I have to leave. I just realized it. It's better to do it now while you're away. I don't think I could if Emma were here. I can't give you the life you want and that you should have. It will be better for Emma, too, in the long run. I am very sorry to cause you this pain. You have been nothing but sweet to me, and you deserve better. I don't know where I'm going, but it won't be anywhere around here--so you don't have to wonder if I'm going to come driving in. Take care of Emma. I couldn't do this if I didn't know it was best for everybody.

"Here is enough to keep you going for three months. I'll send more as soon as I can. You can have the house and everything else. I just took my tools and clothes. I'm sorry. Oliver"

He wrote a check and left it on top of the note. He washed the mug and left it on the dish rack. Woof made a whimpering sound. Oliver patted her. "Take care of everybody," he said.

Verdi sniffed at the door. "You want to come with me?" Oliver asked, suddenly hopeful. He opened the door and watched Verdi stalk around the end of the house. "No. You're better off, here." He turned out the lights and drove down the hill. "So long," he said.

A band of gray was lightening in the east. The wind was still blowing through his chest but without the angriest gusts. He thought of stopping at Becky's in Portland, but he couldn't face leaving another familiar place. It was better to drive. Drive where? South. That's where people go when they leave Maine. Down the turnpike. He pulled off at the first rest stop and nodded at a trucker who was walking back to the parking lot. Take a leak, a cup of coffee. Go.

Oliver stopped for breakfast in Chelmsford and then made it south of Worcester before his adrenaline burned down. Massive numbness lay ahead like a fog bank. Stop, he told himself. He found a motel and asked for a room. "Sure thing," the desk clerk said. "That'll be six hundred bucks."

"What!"

"April Fool." The clerk fell over the counter, laughing.

"That's me," Oliver said.

He slept all afternoon, ate at a Burger King across the road, watched the news, and fell asleep again without ever really waking up.

The next morning, he stared over a cup of coffee and tried to get organized. It was Monday. Jennifer and Emma were home. The damage was done. Suzanne. What a peach she was. He wrote to her, thanking her for being wonderful. It wasn't just you, he told her. He had to leave Jennifer, too. Suzanne would understand that intuitively. He wrote that he didn't know where he was going, but that he wouldn't be back anytime soon. He asked her to send his last check to Jacksonville, Florida, care of General Delivery. He signed it "Love, Oliver." Spring was a good time of year to go down the coast. He wanted to get far from Maine.

He called Myron and asked him to send a check for ten thousand dollars to the same address. "No problem," Myron said with admirable restraint. "Do it this afternoon."

"Thanks." Oliver paused. "Any word from Francesca, lately?"

"Not since those two withdrawals."

"I guess that's good," Oliver said. "I'll be in touch."

"I'll be here," Myron said. Oliver hung up, relieved. He had no plan; he was still numb. Might as well change the oil in the Jeep, he thought. Get something done.

While he waited for the car, he wrote to his mother, telling her that the marriage was over. Nobody's fault, he assured her with Arlen's words. He didn't want her to be surprised by the news if she happened to call Jennifer. Nor did he want to stop in Connecticut and explain in person. He needed to be alone and somewhere else. His mother would understand, although she would be upset. She acted on her feelings; she knew what it was like, the necessity of it. She must have once written a note to Muni that was similar to the one he had left for Jennifer. He felt more sympathy for each of them.

He stayed another night in the motel. The desk clerk directed him to a Chinese restaurant down the road where he ate silently and noticed that he had no desire to drink. He was still numb. Eating and breathing and sleeping seemed all he could manage.

By mid-afternoon the next day, Oliver was in Jacky country. The light was different in Maryland--flatter and more open. It was full spring.

As he approached the turnoff to the town where Jacky lived, he admitted to himself that he was not going to stop. It was comforting to think of her. Their passionate relationship had run its course, served its purpose, and, in the end, had left no bad feelings. She was his friend. Be true, she had told him at the housewarming. Well, he had been. For better or worse. Now he needed to be alone. "Be true!" he called out the window as he passed the turn. Leaving Jacky's, he thought--it must be time for Willy Nelson. _On the road again . . . _

Oliver drove steadily, stopping early, and taking walks at the end of each day. His mind remained knotted in Maine. He went over and over conversations with Jennifer. She had been consistent, always herself--cheerfully ambitious, social, not right for him. He tried not to think about Emma.

Three mornings later he found the Jacksonville Post Office. Myron's check was there; Suzanne's was not. He endorsed the brokerage check for deposit and mailed it to his bank. What to do next?

He was feeling more rested. He'd gotten into the rhythm of traveling and didn't want to wait around for the other check. He bought a road atlas and flipped through the maps over a cup of coffee. Key West looked interesting. Oliver had never been all the way down the coast. But then what? He pictured himself doing a u-turn and driving back up the length of Florida. I think I'll hang a right, he decided. Arizona. Tucson. That ought to be different.

He left a forwarding card at the Post Office and turned west. As he settled into the drive to Tallahassee, he let out a sigh and relaxed. He'd made the right decision, although he didn't know why.

The lush green South eventually gave way to the Texas plains and then the dry highlands of New Mexico. There was something elemental and down home about New Mexico that was similar to Maine, Oliver found. The Indians were impressive--silent and aware, not unlike the Japanese in that respect. New Mexico wouldn't be a bad place to live.

Tucson was a small city in a basin rimmed by desert mountains. The University of Arizona was a modern oasis in the center. Suzanne's letter was waiting at the Post Office--a check and a note:

Oliver,

Everything is the same except you're not here. I miss you. Don't worry about me--I'll be O.K. in a couple of months. There will always be a place in my heart for you. Please be careful. All my love,

Suzanne

His heart twisted. He was recovered enough to feel bad. That was better than feeling nothing, he supposed. Oliver mailed the check to his bank and considered what to do. He was far enough from Maine and had been gone long enough so that he was beginning to realize that he didn't live there any more. He rented a motel room and decided to eat in a real Mexican restaurant, if he could find one. He asked around and was told to drive out East Speedway and look on the left. Fairly far out along a strip of gas stations, discount stores, and used car lots, he

spotted a substantial wooden building with a restaurant sign.

He parked and walked inside to another sense of time and space. The dining room was cool and dark, purposefully shaded from the sun by old timbers and thick walls. It was quiet. It might have been 1800 or 1600. The awareness of time stretched further back than anything he had felt in New England.

He ordered carne secca, beef flavored with intense dry spices that he hadn't before tasted. He drank tequila and wine. A stern guitar embraced the silence. At the end of the meal, Oliver had a final tequila. To his astonishment, he began to cry. Tears ran down his cheeks while he sat still, occasionally sipping his drink. When the tears stopped, he dried his face with a cloth napkin and shook his head. Much of the numbness was gone. He hurt.

For the first time since he had left Maine, Oliver wanted comfort. "Francesca," he said. He wasn't all that far from the West Coast. He could probably get to Seattle in four or five days. He had been heading there all the time but hadn't known it. He collected himself and drove back to the motel. He was in pain, but he had a plan--get to Francesca.

Three long days of driving later, he pulled into the parking lot of the hotel in Eugene where he had stayed when he had met his father. Seattle was only six hours away. The next morning, he bought a bright red shirt and a bottle of Laphroig.

As he drove north on I5, he thought about Francesca and what to say to her. He forgot it all as soon as he found a parking place, late in the afternoon, several blocks from her address in Ballard. The city was attractive, bustling, built on hills overlooking Puget Sound. It had been hot in Tucson. Here, it was cool again, although Seattle was milder than Maine.

He locked the Jeep and walked nervously along a sidewalk. He crossed a street and passed several houses surrounded by large hedges. Children called. He stopped. Francesca was standing at the edge of an elevated lawn in front of the next house. Her back was to him. A tall man stood next to her, his arm around her shoulders. Beyond them, Maria and Elena were kicking a soccer ball. They looked older and bigger. Francesca and the guy were comfortable together, familiar. Oliver was shocked, although he shouldn't have been. Francesca was a beautiful woman.

He turned slowly and walked away, trying to get out of sight and catch his breath at the same time. He felt as though he'd been kicked in the stomach. Francesca! He'd been counting on her in the back of his mind and deep in his heart. He turned the Jeep around and drove toward the water until he reached a street that was lined with art galleries and bars. He saw a parking spot and stopped.

Oliver got out of the Jeep and walked into the nearest bar. Two pints of local ale later, he was able to stretch his legs and try to face the situation. There wasn't much to it, really. He had driven five thousand miles to get away from Maine, and he'd discovered a happy Francesca. That, at least, was good. But he was in trouble. He kept drinking.

When the bar closed, Oliver walked out and swayed on the sidewalk. He went to the Jeep and thought about rearranging things so that he could put the back seat down and sleep inside. Later, he thought. Deep need

pulled him towards Francesca's house. He walked back up the hill. When he got to her house, the lights were out. He stood there, half out of his mind. He walked into the dark carport and stopped by a set of wooden steps that led to a side door. There was a doormat on the concrete floor by the steps. Oliver looked at the door, kneeled, curled on the mat, and passed out in his new red shirt.

He woke up just before dawn. The house was quiet. My God, he thought, what am I doing? He got stiffly to his feet and left as quietly as he could. He was still drunk, but he was able to drive out of the city and find a truck stop where he slept in the Jeep for three more hours.

He awoke with a bad hangover and ate breakfast shakily. Shaving wasn't worth it. He drove aimlessly south, back the way he had come. When he reached Portland, he turned toward the coast and drove with more purpose. The Devil's Churn wasn't that far from Portland.

24.

The hurt that Oliver had felt since Tucson was much worse. Being true had taken him far from everyone, had torn his connections to everything outside himself. He had always been a bit remote, distant from others, an observer; now he was completely alone. He felt an intense pain, a kind that he had never known, a gnawing and ripping internal pain from which he couldn't escape. He was being torn apart. When he reached the parking area at The Devil's Churn, he opened the Laphroig and took two long swallows. He put the bottle on the front seat and got out of the Jeep.

The sun was setting behind a layer of low dark clouds. Oliver walked slowly down the wooden steps--slippery from spray at the bottom. The surf was high. Waves exploded up the fissure in the rocks, roaring and seething. The violent water matched his internal state perfectly. For a moment, he was suspended in an eerie calm between the two madnesses. He understood for the first time why people committed suicide. The pain hurt too much. End it.

He moved closer to the edge of the rocks. Large Waves Come Without Warning. So what? Owl disappeared in the Atlantic. One in each ocean, Oliver thought. Another wave bore in. He walked gallantly to the edge and turned to look back. His father was standing on the steps--stoic, concerned, non-judgmental. Come what may, he was with Oliver. A loud whistling sound came from the wave. Oliver took a deep breath, paused, exhaled, and followed his father up the steps.

At the top, he waved goodbye again as he had the last time Muni drove away. "So," Oliver said. He shivered and shook himself like a dog. "So." He didn't know what was ahead, but he knew that he wasn't going to kill himself. He was his father's son; he had the same tenacity; he was going to go the distance. The knowledge came from a deeper place than the pain. It gave him secure footing, a place where he could stand and bear the hurt. His father had given him life twice. He stared out at the sea and sky, wondering at the cold dark beauty of it all and feeling deeply sorry for all those who had put guns to their heads or swallowed too many pills or jumped from bridges.

It began to rain. Oliver drove back toward Portland and stopped at the first motel. The woman on duty looked at him suspiciously. He remembered that he hadn't shaved and that he'd slept in his clothes. It seemed a long time ago. "I'm all right," he said. "It's been a long trip, that's all."

When Oliver awoke the next morning, he was sober and hungry. The intense pain was gone. Only a residual ache reminded him of the storm that had almost gotten him. He took a long hot shower and dressed. Once again he had no plan, but he had something much more precious--time. He ate a large breakfast in a café and thought things over.

It was better, he decided, to stay away from Maine for a while. Let things settle down. He could help support Emma. He could see her when she was a little older--be at least a small part in her life. Jennifer would be up for that. He didn't have to work in a bank, for God's sake. He could find a part-time job or a project with some smaller group. Maybe he could set up a wood shop and make a few things. Thanks to Myron's investing, he still had most of his original stake. It was there for Emma and for Francesca, if she should need it.

Oliver paged through his atlas. He liked New Mexico. Portland, Oregon was pleasant. Seattle seemed more interesting. Honolulu? Maybe even Japan . . . But, here he was in the Northwest. He wasn't ready to see his father or his uncle. He needed to get settled first. He needed to work, to make some money. Maybe even have some sort of relationship, although he was in no rush. Sex was great, but it wasn't going to rule him any more. Sex got the job done, got the babies made. Aside from that, it mirrored the relationship--whatever the relationship was. He didn't think there would be any big surprises there. He'd been around that barn.

"Where you headed?" the waitress asked.

"Seattle," Oliver said. At least he'd have one friend there. He smiled broadly, pleased with his decision, and left a large tip by his plate.

"What'cha doing up there?"

"Starting over."

"I done that once or twice." She swept up her tip. "You're young enough. Good luck to you."

"Thanks," Oliver said. "Thanks a lot."

He stopped on the outskirts of Seattle and called Francesca.

She answered, "Hello?"

"Hi, Francesca."

"Oliver?"

"Yup, how're you doing?"

"Oliver! What a surprise! I'm fine."

"I'm in Seattle."

"No!"

"Yeah. I wondered if you wanted to have coffee or something. I don't want to be in the way or anything, but I'd love to see you. Lots to tell you."

"Oliver, of course. How could you possibly be in the way?"

"I have a confession. Actually, I came to see you a couple of days ago. It was late in the afternoon. You were standing outside your house, with your guy, and I turned around and left. I'm O.K. about it now."

"Oliver, that was my brother!"

"What?" His mind reeled.

"Yes, my brother, Giles."

Oliver vaguely remembered Francesca telling him about a brother. "Oh yeah, Giles," he said.

"He's a pilot for Delta. He comes by sometimes when he has a layover. Can you come over now?"

"Uh, sure--be about half an hour, I guess."

"I can't believe it!" Francesca said.

"Me neither. Great! See you." Oliver walked quickly to the Jeep and drove to Ballard, struggling to adjust.

Francesca was waiting in front of the house. They had a long wordless hug. Oliver felt immediately the familiar calm that radiated outward from them, only now he seemed to take a more active part in generating it.

"You've changed," she said, stepping back and looking at him closely.

"I've caught up, I think."

"It's so good to see you."

"How are the girls?"

"Just fine. They're in school. They'll be back soon." She led him inside and gave him a tour of the house. He sat at a kitchen table and explained his situation while she made tea. Francesca didn't say anything until he finished.

"Jacky called me after your housewarming. She was worried about you."

"I like Jacky," Oliver said.

"She said Emma was a doll."

"Quite true," Oliver said.

"Oliver, where are you staying tonight?"

"I hadn't got that far yet." Oliver considered. "I don't know."

"Well, I do," Francesca said. "You're staying right here." She extended a long arm and pointed over his shoulder. Oliver turned and saw the bronze heart on a shelf, leaning against the wall. He could feel his thumb stroking the letters.

"O plus F," Francesca said softly.

"O plus F," he repeated, turning back.

He looked into her eyes--patient and amused, mysterious, the color of the inner heart of black walnut--and knew that he was home.

EPILOGUE

Eight years later, at this writing:

Emma speaks schoolgirl Spanish and has a half brother named Kenso.

Maria and Elena are blooming.

Oliver, Francesca, and the children go to Hawaii or to Kamakura every other year. It has been five years since they moved back to Maine. They are often seen walking on Crescent Beach, early Sunday mornings.

Jennifer is married to Bogdolf.

Jacky married a lawyer and has a stepson. They live in Maryland.

Richard O'Grady is just the same.

Mark is richer, and George is more appreciated.

Conor lives in North Carolina.

Arlen left the CPA firm. He owns and runs a bakery with Porter.

Suzanne married Harley and moved to Vermont. They have two girls and a boy.

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