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Sweetie and the Wolf, and Other Stories

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SWEETIE AND THE WOLF, AND OTHER STORIES

By

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ABSTRACT

Liminality is a feature of all five stories in this collection; the main characters must engage with a crisis of initiation. The title story is a re-telling of “Little Red Riding Hood,” in which Sweetie, eager for the journey, embraces her initiation and embellishes it. This most overtly metaphorical jaunt contrasts with the turbulence of the other initiation struggles. The other main characters are male, their trials involving an imperative to transcend a state of being which is no longer appropriate, into the next, more useful phase of life. The imperatives involve identity and self-definition, and perception is crucial. Dismemberment is another theme explored, by the literal surrendering and receiving of vital organs, the ingesting of animal organs, or the psychological castration of the male by women, by animals or by other males. Intimacy in some stories is achieved only with animals, and the dynamics of human/animal relationships have an intensity that seems integral to the survival of the humans. All animals are sympathetic, and function in almost spiritual roles as helpers to the humans.

In “Animal Nature,” the potential initiation of a young librarian is into healthy sexuality. He appears to have made a selfless gesture in donating one of his kidneys to the mother of a child library member whom he hardly knows. But for this exemplar of goodness and altruism, obsession is revealed to be the true instrument of decision, a secret obsession with chastity that warps and destroys his relationships. Albion’s life is filled only with women, all of whom he uses in a variety of abusive ways. His perceptions are skewed, his dismemberment psychological, as well as physical.

This dismemberment theme is echoed in “Change of Heart,” in which Frank Miller is the recipient of a donated heart. His ensuing psychic distress also alludes to themes of identity and self-definition. He has been given new life, and his task is that of acceptance, but he has descended into mental chaos. He believes himself to be changing,
taking on an unfamiliar, perhaps undesirable character. He is haunted throughout by the knowledge that the heart is a foreign body that belongs, not to him, but to someone else. His initiation trial is to make the adjustment into a new life.

In “Threshold,” young Michael is also confronted with a tricky new phase of life. By a fluke he gets his first job as an insurance salesman, in which he is on trial. His mother borrows money to help him pay for the car he is driving on approval. On his first day, he calls at the house of Mrs. Porter, a sweet old woman who lives in a house full of antique furniture. Standing against him is Boris, a very large dog, who protects his mistress and monitors Michael’s every move. At the same time, Mrs. Porter is not all she seems to be. Like Albion, Michael is on a turning point of maturation. His task is to make the enormous leap into responsible adulthood. In contrast to Frank Miller, but like Albion, his identity crisis takes place below his own awareness.

While “On The Mountain” deals with a similar pivotal moment of change, the contrasting relationships with animals are more starkly drawn. Sam, an American hostage in his final hours of captivity by tribesmen in Afghanistan, leads an isolated life in the mountains amongst goats. For him the animals become a refuge, for his captors they are chattels. The extremity of his condition causes Sam to reappraise his identity, but the physical and psychological conditions of his existence distort his perceptions: In a weakened state and under armed guard, he measures his strength and masculinity against that of the tribesmen. His initiation dilemma is more sharply focused than those of Albion, Frank and Michael, with conscious, reflective examination of role and selfhood. With all males, the Strong Man of Success myth is absent; instead frailty threatens failure.

In “Sweetie and The Wolf,” the self is ripe for change and the human/animal relationship is symbiotic. In contrast with the other stories, the struggle here appears easy. This ironic retelling of an old fairy story presents an idealized initiation in the context of the uses for, and effects on the community, which in this case includes almost the whole of creation at its most basic level. The story is metaphorical but also literal. Human interaction with a wild animal is the vehicle for an emergent adult identity and self-definition. Female/male archetypes are redefined, along with the old myths of the female victim/initiate, and the initiation-by-ordeal. A more survival-oriented initiation myth is affirmed, and the wolf is presented as a sympathetic and beneficent character who is
crucial to the survival of Sweetie, but who has his own vulnerabilities. Importantly, Sweetie takes notice and returns the favor. By going beyond her happy engagement with the wolf in the forest, Sweetie affirms a new dimension of her own survival myth: the real dragon she must slay is not so much the overtly big bad male beast, but the secretly big bad female grandmother/mother figure who has lurked “innocently” in her bed for centuries. In terms of the other struggles, this concluding story suggests that danger can be a matter of perception and that initiation crises can be fun.
ANIMAL NATURE

Since Albion never took much notice of women, he was never quite sure whether they were avoiding him. It didn’t matter; the reason he was alone had nothing to do with that. It suited him to practice abstinence. That was all. It kept his mind concentrated and made his meditation effective. That was his real work. Tonight he would do penance for the surging violent impulse he had felt this morning toward his mother. He would kneel in prayer for her. That would give him relief.

Sacrifice was the price that had to be paid for purity, and only with chastity could purity be reached. Albion cultivated chastity with vigilance, with vigor, even. He habitually meditated as he worked, and fancied at times that he emanated a serenity that permeated his environment. His hope was that his own peace would have a calming effect on others. Even the idea of having an effect on other people brought him the flush of tranquility he craved for himself, and confirmed his sense of purpose.

The library was his cathedral. Organized religion, with its pomp and hypocrisy, had saddened him. Albion’s religion, if he had one, was to serve others. But he was discreet. Public displays embarrassed him. He couldn’t bear, for example, to see a person wearing a clerical collar, or someone saying a rosary, or even people going in and out of churches, all dressed up. Showiness vulgarized religion, which in his view should be private and intimate, and the idea of being part of a “flock” made him shudder. At the same time, Albion saw people every day who seemed to care only about skateboarding or computer games, about making money, and working out in the gym. Mostly he saw around him people whose priorities were getting sex and drinking alcohol. He forgave them. Their perversions sharpened his awareness of the need for society to return to sacrifice.

He was right; it was true that the world was foundering. He wanted to help. At twenty-seven years old, his most valuable quality, in his estimation, was his compassion.
Sensitive, as his mother might have said, to a fault, he could sense the dissatisfactions and unhappiness of the people who came near him, just as though it was written on their foreheads.

Albion had his problems, he supposed, but he never would have gone as far as to say that his relationship at home with his mother was a problem. Except that her own problem was that she confided too much in her friend, the nun, Sister Benedict. But that was her business. And since he was not in the habit of putting himself first, he did not dwell on his own unhappiness. If ever he had been asked, he would have said, sincerely, that he had no misfortunes. But probably he would not be asked, since he hardly ever had a personal conversation with anyone. Not that he would want one; he kept a distance from people. Anyway, that way he could be of more help. Service that was not performed in secrecy was worthless, he believed, and service that was performed without purity was equally so.

Other people went to work in order to eat; Albion went to work so that he could meditate for the good of others. In the library he could avoid the public at the same time as serving them.

Albion would sooner hurt himself than have other creatures suffer. Conscious of the inequity between rich and poor, and the need to conserve resources, he ate little and had few possessions. Aware of the brutality of animal husbandry, he never touched meat. People avoided him. That was a good thing. He avoided them and their little concerns. He would do penance for them. As he moved about his work in the library, arranging books and files in the basement, he was hardly ever seen, and never heard. Over the years he had developed a knack of evading contact, even with colleagues, and whenever his reclusive figure was glimpsed, it was only from a distance as he bent over his work, still, absorbed, even as night fell and his colleagues reached for their coats and said goodnight.

Late one Friday afternoon a woman walked straight up to his secluded alcove where books were stacked up in towers on his desk, and asked for his help. She couldn’t decipher the catalogue system, she said, and would he find her a book. What alarmed him about this sudden intrusion was the directness of her gaze. Normally his eyes did not meet those of the people who came and went, but this woman had boldly penetrated the dense, yet invisible aura he emitted which warned people to keep away. She had brought
the smell of a heavy summer afternoon in with her, and Albion felt the warmth of it. He had been absorbed in his reading, a book about the persistent persecution of religious sects down the ages, mostly by Christians. He was still in a reverie. He sat back, took off his glasses, and felt his dry bones creak.

It was late. She was in a hurry. She wanted a book on religion, not just any book, she said, a particular book, but she couldn’t find any number for it. She was doing women’s studies at night classes, she said, and needed a short quotation. He wondered about her spiritual condition. Most people heard the prating of clergy from pulpits and took no notice. He had no faith in people, but this one had compassionate eyes and a strong vitality. He felt some affinity with that. No, not an affinity: it was more of a desire, a sudden rush of desire to be like her. She had an easy, companionable way about her. She seemed to be loose, laughing from the inside, and yet entirely self-contained. With her there was no watchfulness. She was probably nearly the same age as his mother. He suddenly felt himself to be old and desiccated, in comparison with the inner liquidity and quick sap he sensed in this woman.

He was still hurting from the row with his mother this morning. It was not a row, exactly, since he never answered her back. She had called him names again, a tirade, merely because he got up, as she had said, too early, after working too late the night before, and had, as usual, refused breakfast. She had said he was weird and that he was strange and that it was no wonder he was still at home with his mother and that no decent girl would have him. At the time he had felt impulses that were distasteful to him as well as unwelcome. He’d experienced again a powerful urge to violence. Later he had successfully transmuted it into a feeling of remorse, an inner sense of brokenness that, oddly, he thought, he would only have described in biblical terms. He’d experienced once again the painful sense of shame that he associated with the Old Testament expression of deep grief known as the rending of garments. His mother was the thorn in his side.

He got up and escorted the woman to the computer desk. He typed in the name she had written down: *Practical Piety: or, the influence of the religion of the heart on the conduct of the life.* He knew the work well. Written about a hundred and seventy years ago by a woman, Hannah More, it was out of print and there were few copies. He had obtained one, and placed it in the rare archive, where it was not to be removed from the
library. He was intrigued by her request for it, particularly as he thought of the book as his own. He knew where it was, but for some reason he did not say so.

“It’s late and you are in a hurry,” he said, offering her a form to fill in. “Let me have your address.”

“But the book is not in circulation,” she said.

“I know,” he said, with confidence. “I will locate it and let you know right away.”

She looked grateful, and he realized as she wrote, that he was transgressing his own code. Again. He had lied. Why? Perhaps he was just tired; anyway, it really was too late to open the restricted files. He watched her write down her address. That she was caring he had no doubt. His mother, he knew, would not understand that the woman was interested, as he was, in the esoteric, mystical nuances of religion. His mother, whose awareness seemed restricted to her horror of the animal nature in humanity, would see only untidiness in this woman’s wavy hair, sense the danger in her long curves, and smell in her energy only the musk of the predator. But she wouldn’t have words to express it.

“I don’t trust that one; you be careful,” was all she would say, and she would mutter her rosary, as though saying it at him in order to repel bad influences and cleanse him. And he would be insulted that his mother had so little insight into people and into him, and he would once again go upstairs and quietly lock his bedroom door against her religious fanaticism.

The woman’s name was Agnes, and she had written her phone number on the form. After everyone except the security guard had left the building, he telephoned to let her know that he had already located the book in the rare archive. When she murmured her thanks, and commented on how kind he was to do it so soon, he told her that she had a soft voice. In turn, she complimented him on his diligence and on his courtesy. She couldn’t come tomorrow. He offered to make photocopies of some pages for her, and send them to her. She was delighted and grateful. At the end, he told her that she was a lady, and she replied that he had old-fashioned charm. Albion had never before had a conversation like it.

Albion walked home through the darkening city, excited that Agnes knew of the mystical work. He carried with him the pages he had copied, because he wanted to write an accompanying note to Agnes before he mailed them in the morning, and for that he
wanted to use his own special pen. As he walked, he wondered what his life would have been like if his mother had been in any way like this person.

He found his mother sitting in the living room waiting for him, fingering her beads with resentful hands. There were several Catholic leaflets on the hall table, left for him, he knew, by Sister Benedict. Above the table, the Sacred Heart of Jesus glowed down above an eternal electric light bulb, the organ crimson and gold in the gaping cavity of the Lord’s open chest. The brown eyes of Jesus looked brokenheartedly up towards heaven, while his fingers pointed delicately towards his shocking wound. With the imaginative assistance of Albion’s mother, this bleeding heart had accused Albion of sin since he was three years old, perhaps two, and even now, he could never look at it without feeling some degree, however vestigial, of distress. He had broken the heart of the Lord, just as he had broken the heart of his mother.

Albion’s father had died when he was five years old, and his mother, afraid, she had said, that her son might also be snatched from her, had repented of every sin, real and imaginary, and filled her life with the church. She never remarried, devoting herself to the raising of her child, and as he grew she made sure that he was good, by the two-pronged process of accusation and denigration. Through frigid lips she remarked often that she dreaded the day when he would leave her. Although she had struggled over the years to convert him, and had enlisted the help of her dear friend from the convent, Albion did not any more believe in her kind of God.

“Go to bed, mother,” he said. “Go and sleep.”

She heaved herself up off the sofa and went upstairs muttering something that Albion deliberately did not hear. He was easily able to shut his ears against her comments that he was too sensitive, too quiet, too pale, that he was a recluse, an oddball, anything but what she expected him to be. But the rosary beads had always made him uneasy, and the accumulated comforters and counselors his mother had gathered around her, mainly, it seemed, so that they could disapprove of him, had always made him feel that he was suffocating. When he was younger his mother had never liked him mixing with girls, and had done her utmost to repel them. Later she had harried him about never having once had a decent girl in his life. He hated the way his mother misused the word, ‘perverse.’
As he moved around in the kitchen, getting his salad out of the refrigerator and grating a little white cheese over it, he thought of this woman, Agnes. She understood him. She had said that he was courteous. He was so glad she had used that word. She also had said he had old-fashioned charm. She did not judge him harshly. She had trusted him to perform a task, and to do it well. She wanted an obscure book that was full of questions and doubts. She could not, in that case, be a religious fanatic like his mother. She was like him. He would have liked a mother that was a kindred spirit. He would have loved her.

A kindred spirit. He savored the idea. The cheese fell like snow into the dish as he grated, covering the green salad with heavy flakes of goodness. He took an apple from the refrigerator and washed it under the tap. His mouth watered at once at the thought of the soft flesh opening and sweet juice running out into his throat, but, remembering that he must do extra penance for his morning wish to do violence against his mother, he put the apple back and ate the salad with a glass of water. He did not put butter on his bread.

Upstairs in his room with the door locked, he sat down at his desk and took out his special pen. His elaborate gothic script evoked an era long gone. “Dear Agnes,” he wrote, with a spidery, curling, “D” and a fine, sweeping “A.” The huge capital letters looked marvelous. “Here are the passages,” he continued. The script, although laborious and time-consuming to do, looked courtly. He added that he had been very glad to meet her. Offering to do anything else she might require, he signed it, “your servant, Albion.”

Thrilled by his attempt at an adventure into a new kind of service, he reached under his narrow bed and took out his most cherished secret possession—tightly wrapped in an old sheet lay an ancient sword in a scabbard that he had found in an antique shop. Drawing the sword and laying it across his knees on top of the sheet, Albion leaned over and breathed a damp mist onto the dull blade. Then he began to polish it with the edge of the sheet in slow, gentle strokes.

Agnes wrote back. Her thanks were effusive. She’d kept the letter, she said, because of the impressive script. He was so clever. Wherever did he learn to do that? It was a question. He’d have to answer. He felt wonderful. He wrote again, giving her a compliment, and he got a short note back, again with another question. Elated, he sent another, in which he offered to perform any research she might wish him to do. He wrote
always in the same calculated script, courtly and charming. He wanted her to like him. This kind woman was better than a good mother; her very distance made him feel safe, and for the first time he began to relax with another person.

Her apparent fascination with everything he wrote made him bold. In the writing he slowly extended himself, drawing her towards him in small, experimental increments. The veiled, spidery script drew attention to itself and away from any nuances of Albion’s monkishness. He would be her assistant, her servant, he offered. A tide of words welled up and spilled out of him, words that he had never before thought of, unknown, forgotten words that had been dammed up in him. In another age, he eventually confided, he most certainly would have been a troubador.

The correspondence continued. Her letters began to tease him a little. She was delighted with her new servant, she wrote. Full of questions, she put extra handwritten messages at the bottom of her letters, not about herself, but always about him, responsive, full-blooded, in an urgent hand. He was clever, he was thoughtful, he was even inspired in his thinking. All his tentative confidences were accepted with unconditional approval that seemed at times almost flirtatious. Could he possibly, she asked, be having as much fun in writing as she was? As he read, he felt something dark coiling slowly forwards, winding itself ever more tightly around him, swelling towards him through the wild strokes and gasping `o’s; something that made him feel breathless. After six weeks she telephoned him at work and suggested that they meet for dinner. It was a command. He would obey. They arranged to meet in town and go to an Italian restaurant.

“You won’t come, will you?” he stammered on the phone, suddenly afraid that he would stand waiting in vain, and she had laughed the relieved laugh of one who is taken by surprise, as if she should be the one to fear that he would not come.

“But I invited you,” she said.

In the restaurant they agreed to try the house chianti, of which he intended to drink about half a glass. The waiter brought a huge carafe.

“This is far too much for us,” he said.

“Nonsense,” she laughed, and her voice was husky.

“You are a very unusual man,” she said, suddenly serious after one glass, “and a very intriguing man.”
Was that ironic? No, he was being paranoid. His mother often reminded him that he was paranoid. Perhaps he was, just a little.

“Full marks,” she said, “on the build-up. The tension became unbearable in the end.”

He watched her thickly buttering a hot crisp roll, watched shining, golden flakes of crust fall freely on the starched white tablecloth. He truly had no idea what she meant, but did not want to seem ignorant, so he said nothing. She laughed again, a mocking laugh this time. She seemed to have a lot of saliva glistening in her mouth. Albion was determined not to feel uncomfortable. He swallowed some wine, and then some more. He could smell her across the table. Dark plums, sweat, and some mysterious pungent tang that made him lean forward to inhale it. Her plump body seemed to emanate warmth that resonated with the glow of the wine in his stomach. He began to relax in the dim light. When the spaghetti came, she asked the waiter to bring cream, and laughed as she laced Albion’s thick sauce with it. They took turns asking each other questions as they ate, and he began to laugh with her.

“I wish I were a troubador,” he said, looking straight at her. Nobody else knew that.

She gazed at him and he gazed back. As they waited for dessert he told her that he had never before met anyone who understood him they way she did.

“I’m way over the limit,” he added.

“To us,” she said loudly, licking her lips. He looked around to see if other people were watching them. The loudness of her voice made him suddenly break out in a sweat, but the other diners were not looking at them.

When the dishes were removed and the wine was gone, she ordered large brandies, and again her voice seemed loud. He wanted to get out, and suggested that she might like to come back to his house for coffee. She smiled a slow smile and got to her feet. When they reached the end of his road, he told her to park her car, and they’d walk the rest of the way.

“How romantic you are,” she drawled, catching his arm, swinging comfortably along beside him.
“No, my mother is upstairs sleeping,” he said. “We’ll need to be really quiet.” He fumbled the front door open, ushered her past the faintly glowing lamp of the Sacred Heart into the living room, and switched on one small lamp.

Throwing off her jacket as she moved, Agnes headed for the sofa and flung off her shoes. His mother could come in at any moment. Not that she would, but she seemed to know everything he did, even though usually he was very quiet in his room. He had never before had a social evening of any sort in the living room of his own home, not even the sharing of a cup of coffee. He immediately felt his mother’s presence in the room, though she surely was asleep in bed. Ever since he could remember, she was always appearing in doorways with her rosary in her solid, squat fingers, scrutinizing him, giving advice, chiding him for never having a girlfriend, criticizing him, reminding him again and again that she worried about him spending so much time in his room.

He switched on another of the small lamps. He wasn’t sure how he’d come to bring a woman into the house. Agnes was half-reclining, without shoes, her head relaxed against the back of the sofa. Her toes looked soft and vulnerable against the gleam of dark red varnish at their tips. As she settled her body further into the sofa, her dress slid up her legs. He was suddenly unnerved to find that she was gazing up at him through slit eyes. His palms were sweating. He wiped them on the back of the sofa.

“We’ll have to be very quiet,” he said again, “and we can’t put any more lights on.”

“Fine by me, sweetheart,” she said thickly, taking his hand and drawing him down onto the sofa. “Isn’t this the way you want things? Dark?”

She reached for him, curling her body magically around, and wrapping her legs somehow across his body in one swift movement as he sat down. Facing into him, she started unbuttoning his shirt. She ran her hands over the mat of dark hair on his chest and buried her face in it. He watched from a great distance above her, like a stone Buddha as a beetle crawls across its unblinking face.

“Oh,” she crooned, “you are so lean.” She breathed rank sweetness up into his mouth. Her voluptuousness had been no more than a vague, almost imaginary spectacle to him. He’d never at any point had any intention of making love to Agnes. In fact, he wouldn’t have known how to do that. He would never even have dreamed of it—she was
old enough to be his mother. Here in her hazy embrace, he could feel her heat, feel her softness pressing against his damp body, making him feel suddenly insecure and inert. But it was her groaning and gasping as she kissed him that worried him most.

“Hush,” he said. “My mother.” But desire was filling him like too much wine, which he must have had, and his body moved instinctively against her and against his own will. Agnes had by now managed to take off his shirt as well as her own, and was working with swift fingers on the rest.

“Hang on,” he whispered, “wait - my mother will hear.” But it was too late. This powerful stranger was on top of him, sobbing loud drunken sobs, and for the first time and very much contrary to his wishes, he was overtaken. Yes, she murmured, the tension. It had been unbearable. Oh, yes, she said, the waiting. Yes, now this. She clung to him, calling him beloved, rocking him in her arms as though he were a precious child, taking him up and robbing him utterly at the same time. Her face blotchy, she cried out like an animal, and he put his free hand over her mouth, vowing never to see her again. Then they both passed out on the sofa.

Telling Agnes in her car soon after dawn the next morning that he couldn’t see her again was a most disagreeable act, and her hung-over response had been to sob all over again, with stark cries reminiscent of the night before. He cringed inside. In the hung over, sharp-edged whiteness of the morning sun she looked too vivid, extravagant, messy and she smelled sour. Albion was turning over in his mind a jagged memory that at some point in the evening he had told her about the sword under his bed, and for that indiscretion he was racked with regret. But that was only part of his unease. His sense of violation was so great, and his remorse so profound, that he was exercised utterly with the problem of how to repent on a scale that would restore his purity and his equilibrium.

He had been plundered; he felt drained. Out of politeness he wrote to say that he was deeply sorry for his part in the whole business, and sent a gift with the letter—a bottle of perfume. She sent it back with a curt note saying that she would not accept any gift from him.

The old routines did not hold his interest in quite the same way. He had to work hard to keep thoughts of Agnes away. They were not good thoughts—he remained angry.
His flashbacks of her violating him were too exciting, too polluting. But increased prayer and fasting was not satisfying him as it once did. He hated himself. Where before he would have kept his library stacks up to date at all times, he now sometimes just sat at his desk staring at the passers-by, without seeing them.

One day, as he sat in his alcove, unable to concentrate, a small, fair-haired figure appeared, walking towards him down the long corridor between the stacks in front of his desk. With pale garments and hair haloed against the afternoon sunlight, the figure moved as though towards a golden destiny. It came closer. It was a child. No. Yes. It had a boy’s figure, but it was female. It was neither child nor girl, perhaps a sort of hybrid of both, with as yet more child in it than woman. She was perhaps ten years old, but poised as delicately as a ballet dancer on the cusp of transformation. Watching her, Albion’s soul was overcome with a tremendous sense of innocence. A soft thrill washed over him. She quickly picked out several books without looking at them, and was gone. Romances. He had never seen anyone make a selection with quite so much casual disinterest.

The girl-child came the next Monday when school was out, and followed the same procedure: she hurried to the fiction stacks, picked up three books and left. The next Monday he happened to be at the circulation desk, dropping off some books that had been left downstairs, just as she came to check out her books. He smiled down at her and she pushed the books toward him, but did not look at him. There he found out the name and address on her card. She lived near the library. For some reason this knowledge thrilled him. He was not violating any code; he was not pursuing her. She was a child. Up close, she smelled of fresh air, vanilla and clean linen.

He stamped the books out: Erskine Caldwell, Louis L’Amour, Nora Roberts. She needed guidance on book selection.

It just happened that he came across a few books that would have been more suitable for this girl-child, so naturally, he placed them where he thought she might find them: Ursula Le Guin, a couple by Ransome, and The Old Curiosity Shop. He saw her come in and busied himself nearby to watch her. She ignored the books he had put on the shelf and picked out three different ones. Nora Roberts romance paperbacks.
“Are you Mary?” he asked her next time, having again found himself at the circulation desk when he saw her coming. She met his eyes only briefly and looked away. Her shy glance had a sense of trust in the world that mesmerized him.

“No. That’s my mother’s card,” she replied. When she looked up, she smiled. A secret invitation? Perhaps he could go further. During the week he wondered whether perhaps Chekhov might make better reading for her or her mother; The Dubliners would make a reasonable introduction to Joyce, and maybe Elizabeth Smart? No, too erotic. He picked up The Night Bird Cantata by Donald Rawley, and he placed the books in the stack she visited. She picked up the Rawley.

He felt satisfied that he was performing a service in secret, without reward, and he felt gratified that he was possibly helping this girl-child to remain pure. He picked out a few more for her the next week. After she had gone, he walked along the aisles, inhaling her scent, stimulated by the vanilla memory of her long, golden hair. He realized that with the passage of time his ability to meditate had begun to return, and the next Monday afternoon he made such good progress with his own work that he had time to go up and officially offer to help out at the circulation desk. The two women on the desk went to get coffee.

“Did you like this one?” he asked the girl when they were alone.

“I didn’t read it,” she said, and turned her head away. She was retreating from him; he was losing her. Perhaps she did not want him to serve her.

“That girl who just went out gets those books for her mother, “ said one of the women when she came back. “ Her mother is sick.”

Albion felt mortified that the woman may have overheard his question to the child and without a word he retreated to the basement.

One Monday the child came in with a school friend, a girl who was dressed in a glittery purplish skirt and who giggled and chatted too loudly.

“Elizabeth, come on,” the girl had said in a bored voice.

He was gratified to hear that the girl-child had an ancient, courtly name that she had not allowed her friend to shorten. This was a sign. Her friend was worldly; a danger to a growing girl. His child needed a protector. Her innocence seemed to be helping him back towards his own innocence. He was grateful. Whether she was taking the books for
her mother, or for herself, or both, she was worth protecting. From now on she would be his lady, and he would definitely serve her. It was a vow.

He thought of her a lot as he worked, and of books she might like. He put more and more books at her eye level on the shelves she visited, to increase the chance that she would take the ones he had selected for her. He removed books from the shelves that he did not approve of, so that neither she nor her mother could become corrupted by stories of lust and depravity and sexual perversion and violence. It was his duty. Whether she bothered taking the books or not, Elizabeth had now become his lady, and even if his gestures of service were futile, Albion was privileged to perform them. Thoughts of her kept thoughts of Agnes away, and also, miraculously, purified his thoughts toward his mother.

Albion began to redirect people from around her who might unknowingly offend her. Fat men or people who stank, for example, he would harry away from where they were standing or from where they were headed, guiding them toward distant shelves, arguing with soft authority that the novels they wanted had been moved. Eventually he would intercept anyone who attempted to browse Elizabeth’s shelves when she was present, politely asking them to come back later, since the books, he told them, were currently being audited or catalogued. Usually they obeyed. She didn’t even notice.

Elizabeth stopped coming into the library. Three weeks later she suddenly reappeared only to return overdue books, and went out without taking a book. The women on the desk looked after her in pity.

“Her mother’s dying,” said one, “and there’s no point in the child taking any more books for her.”

“Kidneys gone,” said the other. “She won’t last long.”

There was no appeal for suitable donors, just the resigned common knowledge that Elizabeth’s mother would take her place in the long line of dialysis patients who were hooked up to their last machine, hoping to be blessed with a suitable donor.

Albion went to work doing research for Elizabeth. He spent time on the internet looking for cures, checking out the best specialists, seeking cutting-edge teaching hospitals. He printed page after page of material that he thought might be of interest to
the girl, marking up pages for her in his elaborate script. Assembling the material in a large folder, he waited for her to come back. But she did not come.

He kept on with his research, finding that there were thousands of people whose kidneys had failed, and yet who remained alive only with dialysis machines that did the work of the kidneys. There was a limit to what the machines could do, and without transplants, early death was often inevitable. He found heart-rending stories about people with young families who were desperate for kidney transplants. Apparently there were few donors. Albion carefully summarized each article for his absent lady. All this was a meditation for him.

When Elizabeth did not return the next week, Albion was glad. He’d had time to reflect. He was worried about presenting depressing information to her because he did not want to upset her. An overheard conversation amongst colleagues told him that the word on the street was that girl’s mother was bad, and that she might possibly, God love her, be ready for the terminal wing of the hospital.

When Elizabeth did not show up the next Monday afternoon, he took the following day off work, and presented himself at the hospital to request a blood test. He had heard that a particular young mother was in need of a donor, he said, and wondered whether his blood might match hers. He gave them the name, asking them to look up her records. When he was told after just two days that all tests were complete, and that he would indeed be a suitable organ donor, he was filled with joy. He took it as a sign that he was following his destiny. Greater love hath no man than this. In sacrificing a vital part of his body to another person, Albion could at last truly purify himself. Permanently.

Saturday he was summoned to the hospital. By Sunday evening a nurse dressed in white came into his room near the operating theatre on the third floor and placed a sign at the head of his bed to indicate that her patient was fasting.

“Sorry you can’t have any supper tonight,” she said. “Tomorrow evening I promise we’ll feed you well.”

“It’s no hardship,” he said. “I’ve been fasting all day.”

“Well you shouldn’t have been,” she laughed. “You’ll need your strength. Anyway, you are thin enough.”
A different nurse came in with another bundle of flowers, roses from someone’s garden this time, untidy and overblown.

“No, he’s too thin,” she said to the first nurse as she put the roses on his table, “and far too pale.” He resented this nurse’s bustle, her familiarity. He hadn’t expected fuss. He sank further back into the pillows and drew up his knees under the white blanket. He’d had no idea his gesture would attract attention. Donating a kidney, he figured, wasn’t such a huge event.

“Please give those to someone else,” he said quietly as petals fell.

“Oh,” she said, straightening. “Are you allergic?”

“Yes,” he said. He would have to do penance for that lie, even though she would not have understood the truth – that he could not bear the vividness, the extravagance, the mess. Both nurses smiled down at him. He had donated all his flowers to forgotten old men and women throughout the hospital. One nurse had put several greetings cards on the window ledge, almost all from strangers who had somehow heard about his gesture of self-sacrifice. He planned to take them down as soon as the nurses went off duty for the night. The woman to whom he was donating the kidney had sent a tear-stained card of gratitude that all her children had signed. All except Elizabeth, who had sent a separate card.

“Thanks to the man in the library, for helping a strange family,” it said in blotchy, immature writing. He put her card on his bedside locker. The first nurse came back with news for him. Mary, the sick mother was in, and was about to start getting prepped for the operation, which was to take place very early tomorrow morning. She too was beginning her fast, and had sent the nurse to ask if she might come along to his room to thank him.

Albion was silent. He was angry. The casual ease with which people thought they could invade his privacy because he was donating an organ astonished him. For him it was a private act. And this woman—he had not at any time expressed a desire to meet her, and would resist doing so now. She must know by now, like everyone else involved, including the professionals, that he wanted to do it quietly. She was dying, his kidney would be a suitable match for her remaining shriveled, atrophying organ, and he would prefer to donate it, he had told them all many times, confidentially. Caught out in the
open, without his room to retreat to, and surrounded by professionals who understood nothing of his need for solitude, Albion reacted defensively.

He hefted his black prayer journal higher in front of him and held it against his knees with both hands. The small hospital bed was his only sanctuary, and even that was under threat. He was afraid that Elizabeth might come in with her mother, and that the sight of her, with her innocent hair, and her sweet vanilla smell, would lead him to betray himself in some way. The sacredness of his act was at stake. His voice came out low, and with a slight stammer. The nurse leaned in towards him.

“Would you please tell Mary that I – I really appreciate her thoughtfulness in offering to come, but there’s really no need. Anyway, I’m nervous. I have started praying about tomorrow, and I’d rather not stop. I’ll be praying for her.” He hesitated. “Do you think she’d be offended?”

The nurse, pressing her body against the bed, gazed down at him. She reached out and very gently brushed her hand against his hair. Then she quickly straightened his blankets and left the room.

Albion came to consciousness hearing the nurse’s rising voice saying something over and over. She seemed to be arguing, but her voice faded. He was being handled, rolled and rolled somewhere far away. He awoke again later to find himself strapped up to bottles of blood and a watery substance. Electrolytes, said the nurse, and disappeared again. Then he heard her say that it was all over; everything was fine. He woke again at twilight, and heard birds singing faintly outside. Then it was dark in the room, and the nurse was smiling down at him. He heard arguing again, voices hushed with a muted excitement, and he saw his mother for a moment, sitting in the chair next to the bed.

“Sacred Heart of Jesus,” she said, and her face was a nodding grimace.

The next time he looked she was gone.

Then he knew it was the morning of another day and he knew that there were people in the room, and that they were waiting for him to go somewhere. He understood that he had agreed to go with them, but he had forgotten where it was they wanted him to go. He was tired. The nurse was speaking again; she would speak on his behalf. He
would leave it to her. He was in good hands, she had told him that. The bed was warm and cozy, like the nurturing heat from the body of Agnes. He sank into it.

“But he said no fuss. I’m sure he doesn’t want to go down there.” The raised voice of the nurse sounded protective, alarmed. He opened his eyes for a moment and quickly closed them again. His mother was sitting at his bedside, looking flushed, and sitting with her was Sister Benedict.

“Nonsense,” his mother was saying. “Of course he wants to meet them. He said so himself yesterday, after the operation when I was here in the evening with him. They’ve been waiting downstairs for two hours, haven’t they, Sister?”

The woman in the habit nodded, her hands folded complacently over the rosary in her lap. Her eyes glittered.

“Look. He’s awake,” she murmured in her sharp nun’s undertone. “He’ll be fine.”

Albion’s mother twisted his bathrobe in her fat hands, fumbling with the sleeve openings. The doors were flung open wide, and a man in a green cotton uniform breezed in, pushing a wheelchair. Albion’s mother flung the garment around his shoulders.

“Everyone ready?” the man in green said, his eyes glittering with excitement.

“There is a great buzz downstairs.”

The nurse turned away, wringing her hands. Together Albion’s mother and Sister Benedict hefted Albion into the wheelchair. The nurse hooked up his catheter and blood transfusion apparatus to a stand at the back of the chair and covered him with a blanket. They all went out together.

The television morning news team had been forbidden access to the private rooms and had set up their lights in a foyer near the elevator shaft. They were going out live and had promised to take no more than two or three minutes. Albion’s party emerged from the elevator shaft and the man in green swept ahead with Albion. Mary, similarly hooked up and catheterized, was sitting there in a wheelchair. All five of Mary’s children stood around her. Under instructions from the camera crew, the man in green aligned the two wheelchairs next to each other, leaving a narrow space between them for Elizabeth, who had been instructed to stand in the middle. Two cameramen trained their lenses on the wheelchairs. Albion’s mother, holding onto the arm of Sister Benedict, stood nearby. Red
lights winked, the cameras whirred and an interviewer stepped behind the wheelchairs, holding a microphone and smiling a whitened television smile.

“You gave the gift of life to Mary, to this stranger?” she asked Albion, holding the microphone to his face. He nodded, drained after his operation. His eyes felt like hot coals, his skin dry and brittle under the lights.

“And you risked your own?” He looked down. Blood dripped slowly through a tube attached to a vein in his arm. Iodine stained his arm yellow. He felt too full of blood.

“How do you know this gentleman?” she asked Elizabeth.

“He works in the library,” the child whispered. The woman turned her microphone on Mary.

“And is it true,” she asked, “that you two have never met?”

The child’s mother had color in her face. She smiled, but was unable to speak. Bursting into sudden sobs that resounded throughout the foyer, she reached for Albion’s hand, and pressed it ardently to her breast. Lifting his hand to her face, she kissed it again and again, polluting it with her saliva, defiling it with her tears.
CHANGE OF HEART

The grass was overgrown. Frank Miller sat watching birds skimming from the ground to the ragged branches of the live oak outside the kitchen window. He dreaded Margie coming in to tell him with fake optimism in her smile that nobody could possibly be in a bad mood on such a lovely day. He was not actually in a bad mood. He would have been in a good mood if it weren’t for her monitoring him so closely all the time. The coffee cup quivered in his hands. He stared at the oily film swirling on top of the liquid, and hot steam dampened his unwashed face. He ran a freckled hand through his lengthening bush of red hair and cursed the medical profession. There would be no point in telling his wife that he had the nightmare again last night. She’d give him her stricken look. Margie liked everything to be perfect. The bad dream kicked in again: he saw himself getting up from the operating table, his diseased heart lying in a metal dish, and running down hospital corridors with a gaping hole in his chest that horrified medical staff.

Margie strode in winding her bathrobe tightly, her short hair still wet, her cheeks flushed with anger. He suspected that the sex they’d just had did not fully satisfy her. He didn’t give a damn one way or the other.

“Does this mean you’re not coming with me to visit my mother?” she said. She was breathing heavily, more heavily than she’d breathed as she lay underneath him ten minutes ago. It seemed to him that when he had been weak before his operation, it had always been Margie on top. Now he was trying to get used to dominating her. But was he coming on too strong? Rough? He couldn’t remember.

“I don’t feel well,” he said. It came out in a whine; he felt like a child.

“You’re ill because you were drunk again last night,” she yelled. “It’s been six months, Frank. You should be back at work by now.”

He didn’t feel ready to go back to cutting grass; he didn’t feel ready for anything. Certainly not ready for his wife to be acting up. If she didn’t act up so much he’d at least
be able to get down to the serious business of gearing up for work. God knows he had tried to please her, tried to get back to normal. But what was normal? Being unable to get up the stairs? Having young employees do all the heavy work? Always having sex with Margie on top?

Margie’s harangue brought him back. “You know my mother’s ill, Frank,” she said. “You seem to think you have a monopoly on that!”

His heart was gone, God knows where. Thrown out in the trash, probably. Incinerated, more likely. He remembered the last time he was truly himself, lying on an operating table, waiting to have his heart ripped out and discarded like a lump of raw meat. No, it wasn’t like a lump of raw meat; it was one. He was complicit in his own dissection. He thought of the car-crash victim who had lain, still warm in some emergency room while his well-meaning family signed him over to be dismembered. The mutilated cadaver, Frank reflected, was now lying in some grave without a heart, its chest caved-in, its plundered organ trapped inside Frank Miller as he stumbled into his so-called new life. Frank regretted the horrible pact he had made with the surgeon, to adopt this piece of offal. The shock to Frank’s system must have been tremendous. His body was violated, invaded by a foreign body that was forcibly stitched in and subdued by drugs. This was what he called his life.

“I’ve told you,” he said, knocking over his coffee with the sleeve of his bathrobe. “I’m going to see Lenny.” It was true he felt shaky, but it wasn’t the drink.

“But you’ve just been to see Lenny.”

Had she always been so domineering? He looked dispassionately up into her face. Maybe he should teach this uppity little middle school teacher a lesson. He stood up, ready to tower over her, and felt a surge of nausea, accompanied by a hot prickling rush of blood to his forehead. He buckled forward and leaned on the table.

“Well, I’ve got to go and to see him again,” he said feebly.

“You haven’t got to - you want to. Anyway, it’s Saturday. You can’t.” She pulled her bathrobe tighter, and started yanking paper towels off the roll on the wall.

“I’ll see him on the course,” he said, clumsily sidestepping Margie, stepping into the mess on the floor, wetting his big white socks with coffee and treading it into the kitchen floor as he stumbled.
“So that’s it!” she said, pushing the crumpled bunch of towels towards him. “Golf. You’re going to play golf with Lenny. Well why the hell didn’t you just admit it, for God’s sake, Frank?”

Margie was always mad. He closed his eyes, wallowing in the clear vision that surged into his mind: a smack in the mouth. Slam. Just like that. Shut her right up. He imagined her reeling backwards in slow motion with blood coming from her nose, blood coming from her mouth. He could easily make that happen. He shook his head to purge the thought, the vision, but her voice kept right on going. In the old days she would have cleared up the mess for him. She was punishing him for something. What? In his mind bone splintered; the sound of her jaw breaking? He shook his head. Her mother’s dying, is she? She was dying last week, too, and the week before that. He was sick of Margie and her mother. Her voice droned on. The fights got more trivial. Frank looked down at the clenched fist in which he held the paper towels. Margie had always been the strong one.

“This is exactly what I mean, Frank: you’re not listening; you’ve gone into your weird shell again.”

What was she really like before? He used to think she was so kind. Had she dominated him? He couldn’t remember; his mind was blank. Perhaps there had never been a time when he was completely well. Certainly he’d been ill when he met her. She’d come into his life at a time when he was already weak, and she’d been happy to look after him then. She had even taken care of the hiring and firing of the young students and transients who did the heavy work in his landscape business, while he had driven the lightest machines.

“I don’t know you any more, Frank,” she said, collapsing into the other kitchen chair, her bathrobe coming undone. She sat up. “I thought you were coming to my mother’s?”

“You assumed I was,” he said coldly.

“We usually do, since she’s been ill.”

He stood over her, leaning for support on the table. “That takes all weekend,” he said into her face. “I thought we were going to the graveyard Sunday.”
“You’re mad to do that, you ghoul,” Margie said, clutching at her robe and drawing it close. “And Lenny’s just as crazy for telling you who that donor was.”
“Unlike you, he was trying to help.”
“You pestered him, you mean.”
“Last night you said you’d come with me.” The whine was slight this time, but it was there. He’d had the name in his wallet for weeks. It only just last night occurred to him to visit the cemetery.
“But you were drunk then,” she said. Margie was crying.
Frank’s rage blew up again, a sudden squall. He was shocked to see his wife cringing underneath him.
He heaved his head into his hands to stop himself from banging it on the wall; how could she not see that he was dangerous? In his mind he struck one blow with a jerking, surreal motion. He recoiled from his fantasy and stood back from Margie. He had to get out of this.
“I was wrong about you,” he said. “I thought you were with me.”
“Depression after an operation is one thing, Frank,” she said, “but you are just acting like a ghoul and a stupid drunk now. I’m scared of you.” Her eyes were red.
“Yeah,” he said. “I’m a ghoul and a stupid drunk. Go to your mother’s. I’m back to work Monday, anyway.” Frank threw the paper towels on the floor and walked out.

“No clubs, Frank?” shouted Lenny Kranzki as Frank hailed him on the fairway. Lenny squinted uphill at the distant pennant and flipped a new ball up onto the tee. The doctor was tanned and fit, wearing the palest of expensive sport clothes. His sun-pale hair fell forward into his eyes, making him look, Frank thought, a lot younger than Frank’s forty years, although he was quite a bit older. A couple of showy passes, and Lenny propelled the ball into the air with a sharp thwack. It sailed in an inevitable arc, bouncing flat and true to within just a few elegant inches of the sixteenth.
He grinned towards Frank. “I’m in great form, Francis,” he said, looking down at Frank’s loafers. “Aren’t you staying?”
“I just came to see you.” Frank said, breathing heavily from the uphill walk he took too briskly.
Lenny was Frank’s cardiologist and Frank was Lenny’s landscape gardener. After his operation Frank took up golf, on the recommendation of the surgeon, and started using the doctor’s first name. Frank visited Lenny in his consulting rooms just yesterday and once again confided his fears. He was given another prescription.

“I’m still worried,” Frank said too loudly. “I still can’t sleep. I had that nightmare again last night.”

“Ha!” Lenny changed clubs. “I have nightmares, too. Pepto-Bismol.”

“No, really. I’m not myself.”

“Yeah, right. Neither am I. We could all say that, Frank. What the hell have you got to worry you? Your problem was medical, Frank, and now it’s fixed. You don’t have a problem any more – just a lot more energy. Go find something to do with it. You’re virile; you have a good wife.”

Frank winced. “I wanted to hit her this morning.”

“I want to hit Sylvia every morning.”

“But I nearly did.”

“Yeah, just like me. All Sylvia cares about is getting her hair done. Oh, and spending my money.” Lenny took a couple of steps and flung the bag of clubs into his cart. “Women, right?”

Frank followed him the short distance. “I don’t feel well, Lenny. Maybe this heart is wrong.”

Lenny leaned on the cart. “Look, Frank. I’ve explained all this before. Technically, you are right. Your body will naturally reject the new organ, because strictly, it is a foreign body. So that’s why we give you the anti-rejection drugs. It’s the side-effects of the drugs that are making you feel a bit spaced-out, not the heart.”

“You mean the steroids.”

Lenny squinted away from the gardener, towards the horizon. “I’ve told you all this: with drugs there is always a price. Steroids can make people a bit more, well, aggressive, but so what? The benefits still outweigh the disadvantages. Stop dwelling on it, Frank. Physically, you’re fine.”

Lenny turned to get into the cart and Frank put up a hand. “Lenny,” he blurted, “I still want to know what the alternatives are.”
Lenny turned back, his face a mask of amusement. “Alternatives? Sure. There’s
dying. Want to die?”
“I’m serious. Do steroids affect your performance?”
“Go back to work, Frank.” He was laughing.
“There are worse things than dying. Perhaps nature does know best.”
“Sylvia sure would like to see her lawn cut.” He peered at Frank. “Are you hung
over?”
“I didn’t know it was going to be like this. I just can’t manage with it.”
Lenny’s face turned serious. He looked almost hurt. “I put you to the top of the
list for that heart, and then spent ten hours sewing it into you myself. Is this the thanks I
get for looking after you? Is it?”
“I’m not myself. That’s the point,” said Frank, lifting his shoulders, extending his
palms, and looking around at the trees that fringed the green. “Won’t someone take me
seriously here?”
“The anti-depressants will kick in, Frank. Don’t worry,” Lenny said.
“How would you like to be hooked-up to a body part from a corpse?” Frank
shouted into Lenny’s face, his fists curling. “Hey? How weird is that?”
Lenny shivered in the sunlight. “They should take effect more or less around
now, Frank.”
“I can’t do a damn thing about it,” Frank said. “It’s horrifying. I want it out.
Actually, that’s what I really would like. It’s not mine.”
Lenny shrugged. “Now you’re talking crazy talk, you fool. Why would you want
that? You’re forty years old, you live a decent, sober life, your business is doing well, and
you play a little golf. You are a new man.”

Frank studied the grass. What is a new man? Did this heart now belong to him?
Did the dead person’s relatives give it to him? If so, could he do what he liked with it?
Could he, for instance, give it back and say it wasn’t what he wanted? And what about
his own heart, wherever it was? Did that still belong to him? Could he go now to a court
of law and demand his own organ back, on the grounds that it was biologically his? And
if they refused to give it back to him, could he then sue them for taking it away? People
don’t realize what they are doing when they sign forms for body parts. Were there any
laws at all? OK, so the old heart was diseased. But anyway, what was it that Lenny had just said about leading a sober life?

“I’m drunk most of the time, Lenny,” he wheezed.

Lenny laughed a collapsed, deep-layered laugh and swelled up his chest again. “Now that will affect your performance. I’ve got sick people to look after, Frank. Go home to Margie, and be grateful to be alive on such a beautiful day.”

Had he said anything to Lenny about performance? The old Frank would have laughed to find himself faced with the surgeon’s irreverent spirit; he would have admired the resilience of the popular heart man. But Frank now exploded with rage against the doctor. Prickling surged into his head; he flexed his right arm, preparing to take a swing and slug Lenny hard.

“Whoa, buddy,” said Lenny, laughing, but his eyes were wide. He stumbled backwards, his right arm up in an instinctive block, and felt his way with his left hand along the edge of the golf cart, without taking his eyes off the gardener. Frank kept coming. The alarm in the doctor’s whitened face caused Frank to draw back in confusion. Lenny jumped into the cart, switched it on and took off with a jerk.

“Come see me in the office,” he shouted over his shoulder, adjusting the neck of his jacket with a tanned finger. “Oh, and don’t forget to give Margie my best.” He drove away fast up the rise, leaving Frank alone on the green in his loafers.

“You play God,” Frank yelled after him in a disabled croak, “you get Hell.” He threw himself down on the ground and kicked up the hallowed turf with his heels.

Frank eventually found his way home from the bar, but there was no sign of Margie in the house. There was a note on the kitchen table to say that Paul Swain had called again, looking for work. Margie wasn’t in bed upstairs; gone to her mother’s, probably. He was relieved that he didn’t have to face her.

“Bitch!” he said to himself when he got into the bedroom. “Little bitch.” The old Frank would have stayed pals with Margie. But the new one did not care about the woman who spent whole weekends away at her mother’s instead of looking after him. He
eased himself down on to the bed. Maybe she liked him to be ailing. Maybe she only liked him when he was weak. Yeah, that was it.

He picked up the phone. “You know what I think?” he said to Lenny’s wife. “I think I’m a lost cause; a lost soul. That sound stupid?”

“Is that Frank Miller?” Sylvia murmured. Her voice was husky, faint.

“Sylvia, I need the help of a good woman,” said Frank. No answer. “Sylvia, are you there? Listen, I don’t know why I said that.”

“You know what time it is, buddy?” It was Lenny’s gruff voice all of a sudden. “It’s the middle of the night.”

“Oh. Didn’t realize it was that late. Must have dropped off. Sorry. Listen. Know what?”

“I think I know what’s up with you, bud. You should have told me before.”

“I fucking did tell you,” Frank shouted.

“No you didn’t, Frank. It was depression you had, and we were treating that. Now it looks like you are having panic attacks.”

“No, I feel like I’m two people here, for God’s sake. I’m schizoid, Lenny. What kind of a life is this?”

“It’s called adjustment, Frank, and you are making a real song and dance about it. You are not schizoid, and stop playing the doctor, will ya? You’re having panic attacks. A heart is just a pump, a lump of muscle, Frank, an organ. It does what it’s programmed to do. Come in Monday and I’ll give you something. Oh, and get a grip, will ya?”

Forget-me-nots bloomed in the early mist on grassy undulations all around the graveyard. Frank stepped purposefully along narrow and uneven paths, trying to keep his balance without having to walk on graves, stopping every now and again to peer intently at inscriptions on headstones. He’d done his research at the hospital and he had obtained a name. Now he was looking for a grave.

His wrinkled, open jacket flapped rhythmically behind him in the breeze as he walked. He’d been in the graveyard since dawn, and the early sun had been warming him for the past half hour. He had amused himself by speculating on the odds of finding what he was looking for within the first twenty graves, the first fifty or a hundred graves. But
the paths kept petering out. Lenny thought he was just having an ‘adjustment’ problem? And panic attacks? Those thoughts spooked Frank. He didn’t mean to say to Lenny that he was literally schizoid, whatever that was. He knew his problem was physical. Frank scanned names and dates on graves as he teetered along the rows of stone slabs decorated with crosses and angels.

Nobody understood him. The heart just didn’t sit right in him, yet he was stuck with it if he wanted to go on living, or even if he didn’t. Yeah, what if he didn’t? Say you decide that someone else’s heart isn’t working for you and assist yourself to a death that would have happened anyway, if the medical profession had never interfered with your own perfectly bad heart in the first place. Is that a crime? Surely it’s a basic human right to have your own natural death?

Gravediggers and gardeners began to appear in his peripheral vision as he moved along the narrow paths between the graves. They had doughnuts and sodas in their hands, and were laughing together.

What about reversal? Shouldn’t they promise people something like reversal if the results don’t work? Shouldn’t they keep your own heart on standby or something? He laughed bitterly at the idea of having a young heart transplanted into his ageing body. Didn’t do the sex any good, apparently. The man whose car wrecked was twenty-seven. He put up a hand to his face and was surprised to find a heavy growth of stubble on his chin. He ran his tongue around his unbrushed teeth.

His heart leaped. There it was: the grave of Michael David, age twenty-seven, buried here six months ago, beloved son of Agnes David. He gave a start when he got closer. An older woman was sitting on the low parapet that surrounded the rectangle of white gravel, making little stabbing movements with a stick into an earthenware pot that stood in the center of it, loosening congealed earth, and scooping it out with her hand into a paper bag. A thin plastic bag full of dead leaves lay on the path, next to her pocketbook, rustling in the light morning wind.

On instinct he got out his penknife. “Here,” he said. “This will work better for you.” He wanted her to go away.
She squinted up at him. Her hand flew to her throat when she saw Frank, and she started struggling to get up. He put up a hand to his face; with the other he ineffectually tried to smooth down the front of his rumpled jacket.

“Sorry,” he said. “I’ve been up all night.”

“Oh,” she said, standing to face him. “That’s how I was at first.” She reached for the knife.

“Want some help?”

She sat down again, shaking her head. He stood leaning against the next headstone, watching her work.

“I forgot my little trowel,” she said, “but at least I remembered the plant.”

He nodded and returned her smile, noticing the pale, glossy-leaved privet that lay on the grave, its creamy buds ready to open, its roots wrapped in wet newspaper.

“This is my son,” she said, digging Frank’s knife into cracked earth. “Killed in a car wreck six months ago.”

Frank willed her to look at him. He wanted to see into the eyes of someone who could allow the heart to be cut out of her dead son, and then dump it on another man, a stranger.

She glanced up at him and patte the stone parapet at the edge of Michael’s grave. “You look so tired,” she said. “Why don’t you sit down for a minute?”

Her eyes were gray. They could have been anyone’s eyes. Frank moved closer, lowering himself down onto the edge of the grave, and leaned his back against the edge of the headstone. He had no energy left. He stretched his legs out in front of him and watched the woman holding the privet upright in the plant pot, and sprinkling new earth into the pot with the other hand. She was just an ordinary person. The stone underneath him was cold.

She motioned towards the heap of crumbling stems and tangled brown tubers inside the plastic bag that lay on the path beside the grave.

“Those lilies were too fragile to last long,” she said.

“Oh,” he said.

“It’s unusual to have company up here so early,” she said. “Did someone close to you die?”
“Yeah,” he said, smoothing his hair with his hands. “Yeah. Someone close to me died.”

“I’m really sorry. Was it a child?”

“No. It wasn’t a child.”

“That’s good. You are never the same, you know,” she said, “after you bury a child.”

“Wow,” said Frank.

The woman stopped and took a good look at him, her head on one side.

“You got children?”

“No,” he said. “Not yet.”

She looked up at him sharply. “Funny thing is, you’d do anything to keep them alive,” she said. “Anything.”

“Is that right?” said Frank. “To keep them alive?” He wondered why he and Margie did not have any children. Perhaps they both didn’t want to at first, and he just got busy building up his landscaping business and then he wasn’t well, and Margie had her own job to do. Did she ever say she was ready? He couldn’t remember. Maybe they just didn’t want to take on the responsibility.

“Another funny thing,” the woman said, “I was scared to go on at first, but you do, don’t you? You end up going on.”

“Yeah,” Frank said. “Isn’t it a lovely day?” He felt stupid talking about the weather. He didn’t know why he’d said that.

“Were you scared to go on?” she said.

“What?”

“You know, when that person died. Were you scared?”

Frank stared at her. “Scared to go on? I don’t know. Never thought about it.”

“The doc’ told me that most people are,” she said. “You know, the room is empty without them, and the silence.”

“Yeah,” Frank said. “Yeah, I guess.”

“In this world,” she said, with a dry, short laugh, “nobody wants to hear how you feel about dead people. They expect you to get on with it.”
“Yeah,” he echoed. “Get on with it, eh? Get those plants into their pots.” He rubbed his eyes.

She laughed out loud. “You’re funny.” She got a bottle of drinking water out of her bag.

“It’s not easy, eh?” Frank said, laughing with her.

“But we manage,” she laughed back, sprinkling the water into the pot.

Frank picked up his knife and absently cleaned off the blade on the edge of the parapet. A young woman was walking up the rise toward them. She came on the main path that led straight up the hill. A dark, sturdy woman striding with short, well-muscled legs, her light raincoat tied tightly at the waist; a woman with the bossy, responsible-looking gait of a nurse.

“Oh, look,” Frank said, “Look! Here’s my wife coming up now.”

The older woman sat back on her heels, her mouth open. “This is a strange place to be meeting your wife,” she said. “Is she coming off night duty or something?”

“I guess she is,” Frank said, getting up off the edge of the grave and dusting off his trousers. He stood up straight and waved so that Margie would be able to see him amongst the stone crosses.
No sooner had Michael reached the porch of the old house on Mimosa than a
violent scrabbling erupted somewhere very nearby, a sudden gruff barking, and powerful,
overgrown claws scratched and battered their way towards him. Backing away from the
slightly-open front door, Michael turned to face the animal, which skidded into sight
around the corner of the house and shot straight at him. The brute was black, with the
pointy ears and boxy jaw associated with the most intimidating of breeds. He pulled up in
an ungainly skid, splayed out muscular legs and immediately began barking into
Michael’s face. The oversized teeth and rubbery black lips sprayed foam all over the
creased suit that Michael was wearing for the first time since his father’s funeral two
years ago. The young man took a step backwards along the wall of the house, and as the
dog advanced on him, Michael felt the soft slam of a body colliding against the length of
his back. With a gasp he ricocheted forward again.

“Bad dog, Boris,” rasped a mature female voice close behind Michael’s head. A
woman ducked out from behind him and reached for the dog, which immediately stopped
the racket and gave her a feral grin. “Now be a good boy,” she said, taking his collar and
fumbling in his bear’s fur with the end of a stout leather leash. “You hear me?” She
clipped on the leash and held a warning finger up into the dog’s great face before turning
to look up at the visitor who had crashed backwards into her.

“He’s only a baby,” the woman said, laughing and breathless. “He loves to chase
cats.” Michael, heart still hammering, stooped to pick up his dropped folder from the
dusty wooden floor of the deck. Keeping one eye on the dog, he noticed his own hands
shaking as they gathered up spilled leaflets with charts of figures on them in big print,
and pictures of happy old men and women sailing on white boats. The men and women in
the brochures were tanned, and had white, laughing teeth and sparkling, confident eyes.

“Sorry,” he said, straightening up.
“What have you got to be sorry for?” asked the woman. She was about fifty, perhaps sixty, with striking, pinwheel eyes and gray-brown hair, loosely pinned up. The dog stood now like some swollen black lamb beside her. With an abstracted expression, he lifted his leg against a large clay pot of geraniums next to the front door, and she pulled on his leash.

“I’m from the insurance company,” Michael said.

“Oh,” she said. “I just saw your car pull into the street when I was running after Boris.”

At the sound of his name the dog’s ears pricked up, and Michael’s insides lurched as the massive head swung towards him. The one thing he’d dreaded when taking this job with Church and Home was dogs. And here it was on his very first morning—the worst kind of dog he could imagine.

But if they kept him on in this job he would be able to keep the old Mustang he had been driving on approval all over the weekend. It was a bit beat-up, and he wasn’t all that great at driving it yet, but today it would be his. He had fifteen hundred dollars in his pocket that his mother had borrowed so that she could lend it to him to pay for the car, which he needed to start on this job. Today he would go and sign the papers for the Mustang, and he would have serious wheels at last. With fifteen big notes in his pocket, he also felt kind of important standing there with the old woman.

“I’ve come with the policy you asked for, Mrs. Porter,” he said. He said it politely, the way they’d told him to in the office. She didn’t answer. She was looking at the slightly-open front door of the house with her shrewd black eyes, as if trying to decide whether to invite him in or not. He smiled harmlessly at her. They’d told him a lot of things in the office—too many to remember. This was his first job, and he was on bonus only. That meant no sales, no wages. He wasn’t used to brain work. He was only here because his mother made wedding cakes for the women who worked in Church and Home Insurances, and someone was taking maternity leave. They’d taken him on temporarily as a favor to his mother. He was on trial.

The woman looked up at Michael, as if estimating his market value. She was wearing a light cotton jacket over dungarees, and tennis shoes. Her eyes were as black and as deep as the dog’s fur, plus they seemed almost vengeful, like those of Miss
Sydney, the teacher who had stalked with authoritarian presence through Michael’s bed-wetting, grade school nightmares. He looked away, shuffled the policies in the folder and smiled an inoffensive smile at the woman. “I’ve brought everything you asked for, Mrs. Porter.” He said that inoffensively, too, but his jaw clenched involuntarily.

A look of anxiety seemed to flit across the woman’s face. She looked down at the waiting dog at her side and then cast her eyes around the garden, which was deserted except for the twitter of birdsong and the incessant chasing of a few squirrels among dead leaves under the trees. Michael remembered something his father used to say to him about dogs being more afraid of him than he was of them. He had never been able to incorporate this maxim into his life, but suspected that it really applied to people. Maybe the old woman was afraid of him.

“Let’s go into the house,” she said abruptly and pushed on the door, which gave only an inch or two and then resisted with a grinding crunch.

“Oh, it’s on the chain,” she said, as if making a discovery. Both hands fluttered to her face and then dropped down to her sides. “You do it,” she said. “My hands are not what they used to be.”

Michael pushed his slim wrist through the narrow opening and fumbled with the chain, eventually with the help of his pen managing to slide it off the brass runner. The door slipped free and he stood back while the woman entered, the dog ahead of her, sniffing the ground as though he was in brand new territory.

Michael followed, catching sight of himself in an old gilt mirror that stood in the hall, and quickly smoothing down his hair as he passed. It was true what his mother had said: his shirt collar was too small. He scanned the big room for the dog, which was now sniffing in corners, the leash still attached to its collar. The woman ordered the dog to lie down, and it came over to lie on an oriental rug between an old sofa and an antique circular dining table, resting its sphinx head on oversized paws.

“Sit down for a minute,” the woman said, gesturing towards the sofa.

Dusty velvet cushions tumbled as he sat; springs eased. The room smelled old, musty. An enormous, shiny grand piano stood in silent splendor in the wide bay window alcove opposite to where Michael sat. It was open, and the high, plush stool was pulled
out, as though waiting for a celebrated pianist to arrive. He would get fifty dollars for making this sale.

“Are you new?” she asked, perching on the arm of a worn gold brocade armchair. She seemed nervous, her eyes suspicious.

“Yes,” Michael confessed.

“Well now, tell me. What exactly was it that I asked for?” the woman said, eyeing him. Was she testing him or had she forgotten?

“Well, you want a life insurance policy, don’t you?” said Michael. He took out one of the shiny leaflets and laid the folder down on a side table next to a brass statue of a goddess with a cobra in one hand and a sword in the other. “Here’s how it works,” he said. “We have policies of up to half a million dollars and we always pay out promptly.”

“You’re very young, aren’t you,” she interrupted, in a chirpy tone that seemed to suggest that his spiel was transparent artifice.

First he was new; then he was young. He squirmed, tried to sit up straight among the falling cushions, and kept going with his explanations about the alternatives and benefits. As he talked he kept glancing at the dog, which appeared to be listening. Michael wasn’t sure about some of the details, and the woman’s impatient expression led him to rush, against his will, and to stumble over his words.

She interrupted again. “Did you just say that a quarter of a million dollars can be paid out next year or even next month?”

“Yes, it can: the whole amount.”

“Then I’ll have that one,” she said, patting down the silken fringe on a yellow cushion under her arm. “I’ll have the money right away.”

“No, it doesn’t work like that. You don’t know when you are going to die.”

“What? Do I have to know that?” She reached into her hair, groping amongst hairpins.

“No. You just die when you die.”

“What’s dying got to do with it? I thought it was a loan?”

“This is life insurance. It’s paid to your heirs.”

She looked into her lap, her hands finding coarse bumps of threads in her dungarees.
“I haven’t got any of those,” she said, coldly.

“No children, huh?” Michael would be kind to the old woman.

She shook her head. “And I don’t want to think about dying.”

Michael looked at the dog. “You want to have the dog looked after when you die, don’t you? He could be a sort of beneficiary, I think.”

At the mention of the word, “dog,” the brute lifted his head and shifted his weight.

“You could get a trust made up for him,” Michael said, avoiding the word, ‘dog.’

“You could fix it so that he would always be cared for.” He undid the top button of his shirt, settling in. If he was kind to dogs, he figured, perhaps they’d be kind to him. Fifty bucks he was getting for doing this. It was a kick.

She laughed. “Oh, Boris isn’t mine. He just adopts me sometimes and takes me for walks. He really belongs to my neighbor, who is away right now.”

Hearing his name spoken in this tone, almost of dismissal, the dog heaved to his feet, his head brushing the underside of the table and sending an ornate candelabra that stood in the center of the table into a prolonged, brassy vibration. The dog approached the woman and stood before her, unsure, as if waiting for possible confirmation from her that he was at last to be discarded.

“I thought you wanted a policy?” Michael asked.

She reached out and patted the bison-like head. “I do, but I want the money now.”

She stroked the beast’s ears.

“I could give you a polite answer, but I’m sure you’d prefer me to be honest with you,” said Michael. “You are too old for an annuity.”

She looked up at him. The inside lower rims of her eyes sagged, their open, pinkish-yellow channels glistening with wetness. She turned back to the dog, reached out and pulled gently on his head to bring him closer. His hind legs gave stiffly, reluctantly under his awkward rump, but not enough to come forward. He braced them again and turned his eyes with silent accusation toward the stranger, as if seeking answers in a business he knew was far from over. The woman held him now by the leash.

Michael wasn’t exactly sure if the woman was too old for an annuity or not. He scrutinized his brochures but he couldn’t seem to read the words on the page. With the dog and the woman both silently brooding like that, he couldn’t think straight.
The woman withdrew her hands and the dog politely returned to his den, dragging the leash this time a little further underneath the table, where his paws seemed dwarfed by the gleaming claw feet of the base. He began intently sniffing the carpet between his forelegs.

“Wait a minute. You’re not too old, exactly,” Michael said. “It’s just that it costs a lot more in your monthly payments when you’re older. Before looking to see what the woman would have to pay every month, he flipped to his own little chart, written in code, for office use only. The bonus for him on the maximum annuity, female, between sixty and sixty five years old, was a CG2—seventy-five. Seventy-five dollars in his pocket. That was the highest bonus on the list; why hadn’t he seen it before? Probably because nobody of her age would be dumb enough to buy it. Michael was proud of himself for turning to his own chart first. This world was all about looking after number one, his father had said; it was all about putting yourself first. He turned to the scale of monthly payments and scanned the chart for her age group.

“How much can you afford?” he asked, the payments scale in his lap.

“Oh, for goodness sake, be quick,” the woman snapped suddenly. “I’m sick of all this. Boris wants to go out.” The dog gazed placidly at her.

“I have it right here,” Michael said. “It’s just a matter of signing it.”

“When can I have the money?”

“In a few years.” He shouldn’t have said that.

“Can’t wait,” she said. “Too old. Need the money now.”

“You’ve got to be able to pay something.” Michael’s jaw clenched softly.

“Can’t, if I tell the truth. I’ve got my prescriptions to pay for, and I’ve got the dog’s shots.”

Boris furrowed the loose velvet of his brows, looking alternately from the woman to Michael. Then he settled his head on top of his paws, listening intently and apparently deliberating.

Michael racked his brains for what to say or do next. He needed to make sales, otherwise there would be no pay, no job and no car. Mrs. Porter sat staring out of the window. She didn’t move. Michael wanted a drink of water, but she hadn’t offered him anything, and he didn’t ask. He swept up his papers and shut the folder with a calculated
slap. It was loud enough to make her jump, but soft enough to keep the dog lying down under the table. Michael snapped his pen shut, put it in his pocket, and made to get up. She was wasting his time, was the message he wanted to get across, and he was about to get up and leave.

She ignored his movements as though he wasn’t there, and remained sitting on the arm of the gold chair, still staring out of the window. Stalling, he fumbled with his papers a bit more. Then he had a brilliant idea. Taking one form out of the folder, he sat back and crossed his legs. This would clinch it. He was home.

“Listen,” he said. “I can make an exception for you, and let you have two hundred thousand dollars more or less right away.”

“When exactly?” she said promptly, smiling across at him.

“Soon—a couple of months or so. Maybe sooner. Not long, anyway.”

She sat back. “Wonderful,” she murmured. Her hands found smooth little knobs of cotton in her dungarees, and she stroked them over and over.

He got out his pen again, put crosses on the places for her signature, in the brisk, professional manner that someone like an attorney would do it. He placed the form on top of the folder, and held it out to her. Seventy-five bucks in just a few minutes—this was easier than working in MacDonald’s; a lot easier.

She took the form and began reading it. He sat back, waiting for her to sign. Never talk to clients, they had told him in the office, when they are about to sign.

He looked at his watch; it was early yet. At this rate he might be able to afford to take a day off soon, and take the Mustang out for a good long run to the shore. If he played it right maybe he could work just four days a week, or less, even, and he had his own brains to thank for it. His folks had told him that he’d never get a job where he used his brains as such. Well, using his brains, he had suddenly worked it out, sitting there in Mrs. Porter’s living room, that all he had to do to make the big bonus was get her to sign the papers today. It didn’t matter about rates or about payments. It didn’t matter about anything. He would get his bonus, even if she wanted to phone the company and cancel in a couple of weeks. Even if she didn’t cancel, the company would just end up having to void the policy when she didn’t pay. He could do this any number of times. He was on his way.
“And you don’t have to pay anything,” he said. “How about that?” He smirked across at the top of her head. She was still gazing down at the form, as though looking through it. She did not seem to be reading.

Michael knew that she wasn’t going to be able to afford it—the policy for two hundred thousand would involve her paying four hundred and ten dollars a month. He wasn’t going to tell her that, and he wasn’t going to tell her that she wouldn’t be eligible for a payout for years. He was new, what did he know? But still she hadn’t signed the form. He leaned forward to help her.

“Church and Home are very flexible,” he said, pointing to the place where she was meant to sign, “particularly with older people. They might want a small payment from time to time, but only something you can afford. And you’ll have all that money by then, remember.”

She sighed. Her mind seemed to have gone blank. She glanced toward the door. Her hand lay slack on the page, her grip loose on the pen. Then she handed the form and the pen back to Michael, got up and walked over to the table. She was afraid, she confessed, of signing forms. She didn’t understand what it was all about, she said. She was slipping away from him.

“But this is the best offer you’ll ever get,” he said. “Nobody can beat us.”

She knew it, she said, leaning on the table. It was just that she was scared of paperwork. She was sorry, she said, for wasting his time, but she’d changed her mind. She was receding further from him, fading away.

He struggled up from the cocoon of the sofa, and Boris got up, too, the bristles on top of his head flattened against the underside of the dining table. Michael moved towards the woman, ready to lay his papers on the table, but the dog growled, deep and threatening, and came out from under the table, barring his way. The animal’s fur was raised now, giving him a more bear-like appearance. Michael stood still and the dog stopped growling.

“What sort of a dog is that?” Michael asked.

She stroked her hands across the satin surface of the table. “I guess we’ll just have to try to sell this,” she said to the dog. She reached over and took his great head in her hands.
“You’re a big black cross, aren’t you, Sweetie?” she cooed, “and aren’t we very bad to bring this poor young man in here?”

It was hopeless. This woman was not going to sign. Michael took this chance to move towards the door, hoping that the brute wasn’t going to come after him.

“You wouldn’t happen to know anyone,” she asked, “who buys second hand furniture?”

Michael saw his own white face with the raised eyebrows moving towards him in the gilded hall mirror opposite the door. Second hand furniture? This place was crammed with antiques. He turned back. As well as the big round table with the claw feet, there were chairs to go with it. There was the beautiful piano near the window, and a polished writing desk. The mirrors and the shining ornaments alone—brass buddhas and candlesticks—looked as if they were worth a fortune.

“Oh, I know it isn’t worth much,” she said. “It’s just old stuff; not much good, really.” She was apologizing. Boris was growling again. She caught hold of his dangling leash and lifted a finger to his black muzzle. If he didn’t be quiet, she said, in a sudden ferocious undertone, she’d lock him up. Michael went back over to the table and ran his free hand over it. She thought it was oak, she said. Someone just might need it.

“I’m getting rid of all the old stuff,” she explained.

“You mean like the piano and that desk?” he asked. This stuff was worth thousands. The table alone must be worth about fifteen hundred. The piano looked priceless. But he was guessing.

“I’d sell the lot if I could,” she said. “Do you think it’s worth much?”

“Nah,” he said, quickly. “I doubt if you’d get more than a thousand for the lot.”

The yellow lower rims of her eyes sagged wetly again, as though the burden of this sudden news was too much for them. “Oh, is that all?” she said, her voice wavering.

“Maybe less than that,” he said, with a grave expression on his face.

She looked at the oriental rug under her feet.

“What about the rugs?” she said.

“Including the rugs,” Michael said flatly. He hadn’t thought of the rugs before, but the one they stood on was obviously worth a lot of money. Perhaps he’d gone too far.
“I had this one valued at two thousand,” she said, tapping her tennis shoe on the rug.

“Nah,” Michael said. “I doubt if you’d get fifteen hundred for the lot.”

The old woman looked down at the rug, her eyes seeming to burrow into it, as if savoring it for the last time. Her foot caressed the silk, jewel-colored pile.

“If I could get it in cash right this very minute I might even take it,” she said. “I need to get my prescription filled right away, you see. The drugs are expensive.”

Michael resisted the impulse to feel sorry for her. He took out his wallet. Fifteen hundred dollars in one hundred dollar bills. He held the money out to her. The dog stood next to her, waiting.

“I’ll take the lot,” Michael said, “including the statues.” The woman sat down abruptly on the arm of the chair, Boris’s leash still in her hand.

“It’s very old,” he said. “It’s just old stuff.” He couldn’t let himself think about the problem of disposing of the furniture just yet. He’d have plenty of time to think about that if she took the cash. But he didn’t have to wait long for her to make up her mind.

“I guess I just need the money,” she said, getting up and grasping out at the money with a clawlike gesture. She dropped the leash, deftly folded the notes without counting them, and tucked the small bundle down inside the front of her shirt, somewhere close to her body. Then she picked up her end of the leash.

Michael, a pang of admiration for her resilience lodged in his chest, told her he’d pick up the furniture and the rugs and the ornaments tomorrow evening at seven when he could borrow his friend’s big truck. “And will you tie up the dog when we come to collect it?” Michael felt stupid asking this, but he wasn’t going to come in again if the dog was loose by itself at night in the yard.

“Of course,” she said, moving towards the door. She and the dog led him down the garden path and briefly stopped at the gate as he got into the car. “Goodbye,” she said, and before he even started the Mustang they set off for their walk.

The next evening at seven he arrived promptly in Gabe’s truck. Gabe had agreed to ferry the stuff to the upscale auction rooms across town.

“Wait outside for a minute while I check to see if the dog is loose,” said Michael.
Lights were on inside the house. He stood outside the gate for a few moments to make sure there was no sign of the dog.

“Wait there,” he hissed at the truck. His heart beat a little fast. His mouth was dry and his palms were moist. He crossed the yard, went up to the house and tapped on the slightly-open door. He didn’t want to alarm her. Gabe would come when he whistled, and help him to get the antiques out of the house. The porch light blazed into Michael’s eyes and the potted geraniums cast long shadows. The voices of men and women rose and fell inside the house, knives and forks tapped against plates and glasses clinked. Some kind of a party was going on inside. He waited on the deck, idly tapping the toe of his shoe against the geranium pot. The truck seemed smaller than he’d thought. Would the stuff all fit in? And would they be able to lift that piano between them? He knocked again, this time more loudly, and after a few moments the chain rattled and scraped, dropping with a small clank, and a lovely dark woman with full breasts swung open the door.

“I’ve come for the furniture,” he said. She was eating something with full, sensuous lips.

“What furniture?” the woman asked, looking puzzled and amused at the same time. He could smell her perfume. Something very sweet.

“I bought some stuff from Mrs. Porter yesterday,” he said.

“I’m Mrs. Porter,” she said, “and I was out all day yesterday.”

“It was your mother, then,” Michael said. “She was oldish.”

A man’s deep voice broke away from the murmur of conversation and laughter inside. “Are you all right out there, Sylvia?” it asked.

“It’s just someone looking for directions, dear,” the woman called over her shoulder. Her voice was like warm plums. She turned back to Michael, swaying a little. “You have the wrong address,” she said. “I’ve got no mother here, or any old woman.”

“This is the right house,” he said, “328 Mimosa.”

“Then there must be another Mimosa somewhere,” said the woman.

“No. It was here. She has a dog,” said Michael, “and the front door was open a bit, just like it was tonight.”
She turned and looked down the hall towards the hum of voices behind her.
“Well, I’m afraid I do sometimes leave the door on the chain for the cat,” she said, softly, “but we haven’t got a dog.”

Michael stood staring at her. “That plant was right there,” he said, pointing to the blood-dark blooms in their clay pot beside the front door.

She frowned and lifted her chin. “Sorry,” she said, finally, and stepped back away from him into the hall. The door shut, and Michael heard the click of the lock. Through the window he could see the piano.
ON THE MOUNTAIN

Sam woke shivering. Starlight came through chinks in the timber wall of the shed. Lying on a slowly composting litter of dry goat dung mixed with corn stalks, in the chill of seven thousand feet in the mountains of the Hindu Kush, he moved closer to his goat, warming himself against her body. Outside, the horse snuffled against the timber wall, mingling its nocturnal breathing with that of the goats inside. Sam returned the greeting. Footsteps shuffled nearby, a muffled exchange of words, the sound of a stick raking through last night’s ashes, and the sibilant rattle of a man blowing into the fire. The deep sound of water being poured into the cooking pot, more shuffling, and then the thin note of water trickling into the horse’s bowl. A wolf howled from high across the valley, then a sudden silence followed by the patter of drops on tin as the horse lifted his face from the bowl and shook it. A soft nickering, and footsteps went on shuffling their familiar tattoo around the encampment. The women began their distant singing, and Sam wondered, in the last minutes of the darkness, how they knew that the dawn was just about to come.

He had long given up asking himself why, and had stopped counting at forty days, which had been a long time ago. If anyone had been looking for him, which was doubtful, they’d have given up for lost by now. For the last couple of weeks the mountains had rumbled with a new, distant noise. At first Sam had thought that someone was blasting out at the dam, but he had come to believe that the noise was distant gunfire.

Two months ago, or however long ago it was, he had come here on government contract to help develop the Quargah Dam. His goal had been to conserve and disperse the flow of river water, and thus improve the fertility of the hillsides around Kabul. But his engineering skills had not yet been employed. His plane got in during some sort of coup, and there was nobody to meet him at the airport. His taxi was highjacked on the airport road by tribesmen, and Sam was taken by jeep into the mountains. When the road
ran out they traveled on horseback. The labor of studying the language had been in vain; he did not understand a word they spoke.

His bladder was full and the diarrhea was ready to come. He was tired. One of the goats had come into estrus in the night, and while the others had been silent, she had spent the night hours bleating blindly at the timber wall, her engorged vulva slowly dripping as she stretched her neck in the direction of the hut a few hundred yards up the mountain, from where she had caught the scent of the males.

He had a little time yet. The goat he lay against sat chewing softly, her back to him. Reaching across her body, he took hold of both hind legs and turned her over. She greeted him, her nose against his, smelling of milk and mountain herbs. He gave her his breath in return, shifted his position on the ground until her swollen udder was near his face in the straw, and brought his mouth down to her teat. She lifted her leg to accommodate him; heat rose from her belly and warmed him. With his tongue he moistened the dry dung and grit that had accumulated on her dug, taking the flaking pieces into his mouth as he salivated, and rasping his tongue over the teat until it was clean. Milk dripped onto the ground from the puckered openings at the ends of both her nipples. Lowering his head, he spat into the straw.

The goat stopped chewing. Sam took one teat fully into his mouth, rested an arm across her coarse white hide, and began to suck, caressing at the same time the yellowing hairs on her back. The lice that crawled and fed on her body also crawled on his. They crawled and fed on the rest of the goats in the shed, as well as on the kids who now butted and fastened onto them, and on the two tribesmen who murmured at the fire outside, fresh from their baths in the river, rifles across thick thighs, noisily sucking their morning glasses of black tea through sugar cubes clamped between their front teeth.

Bread was heating on the stones outside. Soon the men would come and open the door. Sam felt the first relaxing of the udder, and stopped. Switching to the other teat, he cleaned it by swilling milk from his mouth around it and spitting out the grit. She began to strain against him, but he held her down and kept sucking.

Last night he dreamed of his wife again. They were at home in South Georgia, before the divorce, and afternoon sunlight flooded the room through glass doors that stood open. Outside, the sprinklers were on, spraying rainbows, and mockingbirds called
from blooming oleanders at the edge of the lawn. She leaned against him, and scents of sage and spearmint from the herb garden mingled with the dampness of her body. She was embracing him lightly, very lightly, as though their love was new and precious, and there was nostalgia between them, some regret, something difficult to negotiate. He had come back from somewhere, but he did not know from where. When he reached out to touch her she receded for a moment and then came back again. His erection was high and proud, as it had been when they were first together. Her eyes flickered away from his. Then she spoke his name and the sound came in waves like a bell that resounded throughout his body. He could feel the sound vibrating against him. She was calling him into her, she said, giving him a sound to follow. Then she smiled, an ancient smile he’d never seen before, and enveloped him in the plunging swing of the bell. There was no trace of recrimination, no hatred or estrangement. Nothing had ever gone wrong between them. Ecstasy was mutual, grounded. The bell was plangent, purifying, a mullah, calling lovers to peace. He was welded to it, home again, ebbing into the straw.

The goat’s bag softened on the underside. He let go of her and she got to her feet, pushing her muzzle against his neck. The other goats had already lifted their hind legs against their kids, who stood replete and unsteady, white foam dribbling from the sides of their muzzles. The men’s voices came nearer. Sam cleaned off his lengthening beard with one hand, brushing out the grit and dung and leaves, all wet with milk and saliva, and stood up.

The door of the shed shuddered and groaned as the primitive wooden bolt on the other side was lifted, and the cold scent of clean bodies and thin air rushed in. The older of the tribesmen stood in the doorway. He was perhaps forty, with a splendid physique and a wiry black beard that did not soften his hard expression. He wore traditional clothes, with loose drawstring trousers, a long shirt and homespun wool waistcoat, and a long scarf twisted into a kind of turban. Around his shoulders he wore a fine wool blanket. A knife with a large curved blade hung from his belt, and he held his rifle loosely in one hand, its barrel pointing to the ground. On his feet he wore heavy leather sandals. He grinned his contemptuous grin at Sam and grunted. Sam did not meet his eyes. Instead he watched the mouth, fringed with black hair, utter through mocking big teeth some words of greeting. The goats pushed past him out of the shed and away down
the mountain. Sam’s goat was reluctant to leave without him, but the man let out a sudden sharp bark and clapped his hands to startle the animal, and she bolted. The man picked up a small stone and threw it into the bushes behind her. She plunged away with renewed vigor and disappeared. Head down, Sam came towards the man, and emerged from the shed.

The sun had not yet risen over the mountains. It was colder today; winter was coming. The other man set off along the path they had trodden through the trees towards the river. He was younger, strong and loose, and perhaps half the big one’s age, with dark eyes that seemed softer, even if they were not. The older man let out a sharp bark and clapped his hands, and Sam started forward, following behind the leading man. Sam almost wished that the men had tied his hands, at least some of the time. It embarrassed him that at no time did they fear him enough to take even this simple precaution. He was under guard, but treated casually, as though he was nothing more than one of the goats. The path was hard going for Sam’s soft, bare feet, and from time to time the older man whistled behind him, making him move faster. The contempt in the shrill, brief note of the whistle filled Sam with shame.

The hot stench of goat semen and piss set Sam’s stomach churning. They were passing near the two huts where the male goats were housed. Hooves hammered against the walls of the sheds in perpetual outrage. The alpha male was quartered well away from the herd of females and kids, so that he would not impregnate females that were too young, and kill the young bucks. He had a thorn in one of his fore hooves that had become septic, and his banging had become anguished with cries of pain, but sporadic. Soon he would have his throat slit with the steel knives the men kept hanging down over their bellies in the folds of their trousers, and his blood would be caught in a bowl. His place as head of the herd would be taken by the sleek young buck that now danced, eager to stud, in the hut alongside his.

The female who had come into oestrus in the night had run, not with the herd, but with a stronger instinct toward the scent of the males and now stood trembling with anticipation outside their sheds while the males crashed thundering hooves against their doors with renewed urgency. The men ignored the animals, and kept on walking.
When they got to the latrine a little further away from camp, Sam squatted over the deep pit covered with logs that he had helped the men to dig, and found to his relief that the diarrhea was better today. When they had first arrived here, the men had intended that he would dig the pit by himself, but at the end of the first hour they had realized that he was far too slow, and that the job would take too long, so they had joined in the digging with powerful, sinewy arms, taking it in turns to raise great scoops of yellow earth from around ancient tree roots, dislodging boulders and hefting them out of the hole, occasionally stopping to share a joke, obviously about his undeveloped shoulders and his puny efforts alongside them. Even then, before the diarrhea, he was a lot weaker than the tribesmen. But in his mind he had an excuse. At first he’d thought that he was digging his own grave, and fear had disabled him, dissolving his strength.

The trees gave way to a wide, fast-flowing river. Sam began to stretch. The men allowed this. For them, morning bathing rituals had religious significance and they allowed him his own bathing routines. Stretching heated his muscles, and helped him to prepare for the chill impact of the river. He was afraid to plunge into cold water as they did, and they knew it. Breathing deeply, he held his stretches and then took off his clothes. Boulders at the edge of the river and forming its bed were smooth underfoot, like giant pebbles, but cold as ice. Sam lowered himself into the clear water and gasped. He swam downstream a few yards, turned and swam back up again. He trod water, looking up, tasting the scent of pine needles. The stars were gone from the sky now; it was day. He drank, and finally ducked his head under the water, rubbing his hands in his hair and beard, trying to dislodge lice. Then he came up out of the river. The men stood with their backs to him, rifles slung across shirts bulked with lean muscle, talking, scanning horizons and appearing to ignore him. That they would relax and turn their backs to him made him squirm inside. His belly was concave. His thighs were stringy. But he had started doing press-ups and he was lasting well. Standing on a boulder, he scrubbed himself all over with the scarf they had given him when they had first brought him here, and put on his shirt, drawstring trousers and waistcoat. He quickly rinsed out the scarf in the water and laid it on a dry boulder. He wrapped his thin blanket around his back, drew one end across his chest and over the other shoulder. The men headed back in single file, with Sam between them.
Two kids were butting each other nearby. They were about three months old. Blood trickled from the horn bud of one, down into its eye, and the other stood dazed, legs splayed, watching for the next onslaught. Sam willed them to stop fighting. Male kids were usually castrated early. If they were not gelded very early the males would fight each other to the death, even at a few months old. Infant males could fracture each other’s skulls with continuous butting. They could keep on fighting, sick and dizzy and even brain-damaged. But gelded, they became docile, and a few months after castration the young geldings were killed for meat. The younger man strolled over and, putting his rifle down, he took a piece of twine from his pocket and tied the bleeding kid to a sapling. The dazed goat he tied to another.

The casualness of animal husbandry here struck Sam with some sort of revelation about nature. Everything brutal seemed to happen as though fate had willed it. In the wild, these nimble, four-footed mountain creatures would be impossible to catch. But in this context it seemed that their own ways worked against them, and that their capture and death were inevitable. The tribesmen never seemed to have to chase them or wrestle with them; always they waited until the animals themselves, in one instinctual way or another, walked into capture. The men never led a female to stud; they let her find her own way. A lame goat would be unable to keep up with the herd, and would be easy to catch; only then would the men casually cull. Except for the easy, early castration of infant males and the perpetual confinement of dangerous stud bucks, prevention and cure seemed a low priority here. But the increasing virility of these two injured kids had gone unnoticed. Crazed by their own violence, it was late for them to be castrated, too late now. Sam knew that the kids would be slaughtered before the day was out, their hides stretched out to dry in the sun. Perhaps that was what fate was: simply the inevitable happening when the time was right.

The men seemed relaxed as they walked in the mornings. Sam wondered once again whether this would be a good time to make a break for it. He could run, but could he outrun them and stay in cover? He understood that he could easily be brought down before he reached safety, and understood the futility of suddenly blundering off into the hills with armed tribesmen after him who knew the terrain so much better than he did. Yet he couldn’t stop himself from thinking about it. That his engineering work had given
him an intuitive feel for the geography of a place, and a facility for orienting himself, gave him hope.

With one man ahead of Sam and one behind, they strode back along the path through the pines. Between them, Sam hated himself for automatically speeding up whenever a stone was thrown from behind him into a nearby bush, and hated himself more for not realizing that he had been walking too slowly. There was a bend coming up and for about three seconds the younger man would be out of sight of the other. Would Sam have time here to jump the first man, wrenching the rifle away from him, and then turn and shoot the big one, a few paces behind? Could he shoot a man at close range who was walking towards him? His stomach tightened as he padded along between the two men. Even if it were possible, which he knew it was not, he did not want to kill.

His father had been an active, military man of imposing bearing, who had never understood why God had sent him a single male child of inadequate physique who was no good at sport and who had a cowardly aversion to violence, and even to healthy male aggression. His mother had been intimidated into leaving her son to the mercy of her husband. Sam’s distaste for war was instinctive, and not grounded in belief or political science. He intuited rather than thought, that violence and power play were brutish. The price he’d paid for it throughout his life was guilt at his father’s steadfast disappointment and apparent hatred of him, hatred that his father had carried with obdurate pride to his grave. When Sam was a kid his father had taken him out hunting deer, and in the woods had placed his big, capable hands on top of Sam’s on the stock of his prized Enfield, showing him how to hold it, how to handle the kick, how to avoid muzzle jump, how to reload the magazine; hissing down his ear that he had to be fast, fast, faster than that. Sam’s frightened small hands had become limp on the heavy rifle, and his father had snatched the firearm from him without a word. His father had turned away from him early, and this abandonment had left Sammy full of doubt.

Later, his wife’s dismay that he was “too obedient,” as she put it, and “too predictable,” both surprised and embarrassed him. He didn’t think he was either of those things, but her derisive attitude towards him reminded him painfully of his father’s, and he had remained stung. When intimacy with her became an ordeal, he had withdrawn himself from her. The divorce had further eroded his sense of worth, and coming here to
a place where nobody knew him had been a delayed part of his response. He had also come because he felt shame that, even though he was an adequate engineer, he had never really been able to prove his manhood in terms that made any sense in his own society. He had come here to get away from doubt and shame, and yet here he was confronted daily with humiliating affronts and challenges to his adequacy.

If there was any chance of escaping, how much of a chance was it? He’d wondered this every time he walked the path to the stream. Perhaps he was getting less fit. There wasn’t much food, and it wasn’t agreeing with him, although the milk was helping. These men were surefooted and had leather sandals; he was barefoot, and afraid of stumbling on loose rocks, on tree roots. It would be foolish to try; there would be little chance of its working. Perhaps he should try to stay strong and alert, and over time befriend one of the men when the other was away. Then he’d outwit him in some way, catch him off guard. Maybe the younger man would be easier.

At the sheds of the two males the older man put his rifle on the ground. Ignoring the hut of the alpha animal, he opened the other door. The young buck erupted, steaming and stinking, skidded into a turn and rushed at the shed wall where the female cringed in apparent terror. His ragged coat was streaked and garlanded all over with copious, thick shimmers of semen: fresh, shining, recent layers on top of older, dried white mats, all encrusted in a great malodorous weight from the head and heavy shoulders to the silvered flanks. Approaching the female, the buck bit viciously into her neck and reared. She cried out in pain, stiffening her hind legs and presenting her hindquarters. He bit her again, and held her in his teeth. Eyes wild, she screamed again. He pawed at her back, his penis shining in a flurry of dust. She arched her neck and stood tense and quivering. He mounted her quickly, hooves clamped, thrusting with vigour as her eyes rolled back under his hunched shoulders. The older man strolled over and stood behind the mating animals, chewing on a straw. He caught hold of a horn as the buck dismounted, quickly ran him back into the shed and slammed the door. The female ambled away down the mountain, stinking, dishevelled, neck pink with blood and saliva, eyes at peace.

Back in camp the big one rubbed down the horse with a handful of rough grass, his black eyes glittering with pride in the animal. A felt saddle, well dried of yesterday’s
sweat and softened by repeated flexing, lay warming by the fire. Since they had settled at this camp they had one horse because only one of them was absent at any time. The big man would be extremely difficult to overpower, but when he was grooming the animal he did not carry the rifle. He turned back to the fire to get the saddle while the other was busy with breakfast. He turned to the left. Sam could spring to his feet while he was turning, move to the right of him and make for the horse. Sam would then become a moving target, and the chances were that neither of the men would risk killing the animal. Sam could lie along the length of its back as he rode. But the horse was still tied when the big man turned; Sam would need time to release it, time that he did not have. Every day he’d watched big man’s routine of untying the horse after breakfast, and every day he concluded that he did not have the time, did not have the strength. He sat watching a cluster of ants dragging a dead spider along the ground.

The younger man was cooking breakfast, pushing twigs in between blackened stones, bringing a pot of water to the boil. He threw in a few pinches of black tea and lifted the vessel off the fire. Tin bowls of gruel stood at the fireside, and a mash for the horse steamed. He passed Sam a bowl of gruel and did not return his smile. Then he went over and put the mash in front of the horse. There was black tea and bread, and for the tribesmen, sugar cubes. They ate quickly and in silence.

The big man mounted the horse, did a grinning, stylish turn and set off with two or three rolled hides tied to the saddle. There were no roads leading in here and these people had no need of them. Sam had been brought in here on the back of a mule, following, sometimes in terror, as the men negotiated three-in-one gradients up and down deep gullies without disturbing any one of a thousand loose yellow rocks that threatened constantly to avalanche, and on the same gradients turned the horses on narrow paths less than one pace wide. Snarling and goading, with rifles above their heads, they had crossed swift and muddy rivers that in midstream submerged almost the whole of the bodies of the horses and brought distress to their eyes. And when they came to an open plain, they had galloped in fierce competition with each other, shouting and laughing, straining as lustily as though they were the last free people on earth. From elevated, panoramic vantage points they had stood, demon gods with garments fluttering in the wind,
revealing themselves for a golden moment before suddenly plunging away out of sight. Escarpments that would take a man days to negotiate on foot, these men, these horses climbed in minutes. All this Sam had witnessed from way behind, under guard in a slow mule train that kept to safer, circuitous paths and bridges. He had become full of admiration for their spectacular horsemanship, for their black beards, for their tribal head-dresses and flowing robes, for their huge vigor, for their courage, for their flashing big teeth. He admired them also for their physical beauty, for their ability to plunge into cold mountain rivers and come up laughing, fresh and virile.

Sammy started work, grateful for the exercise. He looked up often and smiled at the man as he collected the sticks, and occasionally the man smiled back. Otherwise the man was unresponsive. As Sam worked, he picked woodland flowers and herbs and laid them on the ground. When he got enough of them to make a bundle, he tied them up with grass into a small posy for his goat to eat in the shed later. He consoled himself in the knowledge that all this bending and snapping of branches would make him fitter, while the younger man would be getting softer and more friendly every day.

When the sun began to drop, the man got to his feet, motioning and barking that it was time to go back up the mountain. Sam obeyed. He understood that he would now be required to accompany them up to the place where they did target practice. He moved noisily ahead, two bundles on his back, cradling broken stalks of woodland plants that he’d picked for his goat.

A sharp odor of male goat mingled with the cooling mist and the rising acid smell of the women’s cooking fires in the valley. He caught the odor of fresh blood that hung in the trees close to camp. The uneasiness of distant bleating told Sam that the older man had returned and was slaughtering. The man was sitting on a low rock near the fire with the body of the alpha male between his knees. Using the curved, heavy-bladed knife that usually hung from his belt, he was working on the carcass. The swollen hoof stuck out, blackened and huge, as if pointing straight at Sam. He stood still as with one quick movement the man sliced off the wrinkled scrotal sac, shaking the contents into his palm. The testicles, fat opals pink with blood, glistened wetly. The man grinned towards his returning comrade and dropped the testicles into the pot in front of him. Sam understood
that the scrotal sac came off first to facilitate a clean flaying, and that the gonads of the goat were a delicacy.

The older man had already slit the belly and disemboweled the animal. The liver shone on a lattice of twigs at his feet, along with the heart and kidneys. He sliced into the hide around each hoof, and inserted his hands between the hide and the rump, loosening the skin all around. With one quick movement he pulled the pelt away from the hind legs. The hide gaped, thick with fat. The man took the blood-flecked edge of the hide between his teeth, flexing his jaws for grip, and trapped each of the rear hooves between his own big bare toes, one hoof locked by the toes of each foot. He leaned back, crossing his feet and stretching them out in front of him. The carcass became taut, and with a soft, tearing sound, the hide came off clean. The empty hide crumpled down onto the ground, and the man threw the carcass onto a pile of kindling. Reaching into the pot with the point of his knife, he lifted out one of the blanched testicles and with a grin held it out to Sam. The delicacy.

Sam put down his bundles. The posy, now wilting, that he’d picked for his goat was still in his right hand. Hunger gnawed at him. The men, just as they knew he was squeamish, knew that his fingers could not stand heat. Their hands were tough. They would laugh if he refused. He laid the flowers on top of his bundles and received the fragment of meat in the apron of his shirt. The men laughed. He picked up the posy and went into the shed, laying it down where he knew the goat would look for it when she came in. Then he sat down with his back to the wall and with an image of the blackened, swollen fore hoof at the front of his mind, he ate the blanched gonad that was yet soft on the inside.

Hot flesh, soft as butter slid easily down his throat. He was going to die in here. He saw it with immense clarity. Clearer still to him was the revelation that he was going to let it happen. He had resigned his spirit to the mercy of these two men, and he had done it purely because they possessed guns. That he was already their prisoner and that they gave him insufficient food was enough indication that his welfare was of little concern to them. And yet he was compliant and conciliatory to them, in the futile, instinctive hope of influencing their behavior.
Sitting in the doorway of the goat shed, it became clear to Sam that the whole of his previous life had taken exactly this form; all that had happened in his life had “happened” to him, and he had been just as much passive spectator of it, as he was a spectator of his own life right here in this shed. Where was his rage against these men? Where was his sense of autonomy? Why did he not hate and oppose them, or at least try to live as he would if he were not captive? Even the smallest goats lived out their instinctive lives before they were killed, but at least they always seemed to die with a kind of inevitable dignity. The buck would try to smash down the walls of his hut for as long as he lived. Why for Sam only the docile, fearful comings and goings of his days and his nights with these men?

And where was his rage against the father who had misjudged and even ridiculed his views and feelings over decades? He realized with shock that he had never in his life opposed his father. Instead he had allowed himself to be denigrated, undermined and eventually disinherited for no good reason. His wife—he had accepted her unfaithfulness and eventual departure as though it had been inevitable. He saw now that he was complicit in that as surely as if he had provided her with the lover as well as the opportunity. He had stood still while his divorce and the dismantling of his married life had taken place, and he had not even raised his voice. The ultimate, jarring truth was that, always acted upon, he had never taken action in his life. His fate had been simply a matter of the inevitable happening when the time was right.

A shout of command called him outside. The men were ready to go up and do their target practice and wanted him to walk ahead. The horse was tethered and grazing. The heart and the liver of the old male steamed slowly in the pot. The smell was both appetizing and sickening. Sam knew that its meat would be tough as well as strong, and that he would eat it. As they walked, Sam could hear the hammering, unappeased dance of the young buck; he could hear the muted voices of women in the wooded valley below as they sang. He could hear their laughter, and, he fancied, the swish of their dresses as they went about their work collecting water, rattling pots and slapping children. He could hear the snapping of twigs as goats browsed, and the gentle commotion of small hooves as kids raced and butted against their dams. The air was rare. He breathed evenly as he walked. He could hear the faint sound of the bell calling him up the mountain. Perhaps
the men could hear it too. Behind him, they seemed to be praying, their moustached mouths moving in unison. He had no need of prayer. He wondered when they were going to slit his throat with the bone-handled steel knives that hung against their bellies.

The bell tolled. They were out in the open now and the wind was getting up. His pace lengthened, putting a little distance between himself and the men, and then a little more. The crest of the hill was about a hundred yards away and they were driving him along its flank. He tasted adrenaline on his tongue. He walked quietly, evenly, ascending as he went, his stride seeming to get longer on the mountain. Still the men walked. Now the crest was fifty yards away. The afternoon light seemed brighter than usual. The path narrowed. The men did not seem to notice the distance Sam had put between them. The bell tolled. Ten yards between him and the men. Fifteen.

A shot cracked, cutting chaotic sound into bright rocks over acres of parched red scrub. A flock of migrant birds ricocheted into furious life and fluttered upwards in a fountain of mottled wings. Doves mourned amongst unsettled foliage below. In the valley, vultures flapped their noisy blackness and adjusted their grips on fallen stone walls. Nocturnal creatures briefly woke and wondered. The song and laughter of women stopped and they straightened their backs for a moment of relief, looking up towards the mountain. Then, jewellery clinking, they bent their heads again, twisting back stray wisps of hair and tying up bundles of twigs for their cooking fires. The male goat stopped its banging and pawing to listen briefly to the broken silence. The females and the kids, tearing at young leaves, lifted their heads in alarm, their eyes alert as they chewed green sap.

Sam stopped. He had gone too far; they were warning him, calling him back. He turned and dropped the few paces back to the site they had chosen. As usual, the older man motioned for him to sit on the big boulder, and they folded their blankets and laid them down on nearby large rocks, where they took up positions, aiming at rocks and bushes towards the horizon above.

After the first bursts of fire the older man stopped. He snapped in a new magazine, cocked his rifle, and then suddenly raised a hand to his eye, into which the wind had blown a piece of earth or a small stone or a fragment of leaf. Stepping around his rock, still with a hand to his eye, he stumbled, lost his balance, and fell heavily, his
rifle skittering and sliding across loose yellow stones, and coming to a jolting stop with its butt resting against Sam’s boulder.

Supine, but still in charge, the man held out his hand to Sam for the gun, his eyes hard and threatening. Sam picked it up. It exploded in his hands, throwing Sam backwards and blowing a hole in the man’s belly. In a jagged swirl of movement, the other turned, interrupted in the act of reloading, and swung his rifle around. The blood spurted high in the air from his chest, a dark, mysterious plume climbing against the sky. Sam’s body was slammed against the boulder by the second recoil and he could tell from the pumping that the younger man must have been hit in the heart.

Sudden stillness again, the smell of cordite, and the swirl of yellow dust as it settled into a new silence. Then the renewed tinkle of native jewelry, and soft, distant bleating. The vultures were already risen, clumsy and inevitable with necks hung low.
SWEETIE AND THE WOLF

On Saturday morning Sweetie made her lonesome way across uncharted forests, thickets, bogs and swamps towards her grandmother’s cottage, her tote bag bulging with a loaf of bread, a carton of milk, a big bag of fudge, and a stack of instant chicken dinners. She also carried a large pink blouse that she had exchanged at Sears in place of the smaller one the old woman had bought the previous week. Sweetie shouldn’t have brought the fudge, because grandmother was pounds overweight, but since the old woman was bent over with osteoporosis, and spent a good deal of time in bed, Sweetie felt sorry for her. Besides, Grannie would sulk if Sweetie didn’t bring fudge. Being a good girl, Sweetie did her jobs willingly for the short-sighted old recluse, even though she was greeted with a reproachful smile every week when she entered her grandmother’s house.

Sweetie had her own concerns. She was fascinated with the way her legs were lengthening, and with the way her ordinary face seemed to be getting pretty. She was even more fascinated with her swelling breasts and their protruding bits. Her favourite pastime was to let her hair down and stand naked in front of the big mirror in her bedroom, imagining herself just like that, astride a white horse, touching its warm flanks ever so gently with bare heels, getting it to gallop madly across tracts of land so vast that she rode for hours and hours, clinging only to the horse’s mane, until eventually she became nothing but a beautiful speck burning in the distance like the core of the sun.

But sometimes on Saturdays as she tramped the distance to Grannie’s, her developing mind – and body – began to strain, mostly against her own will, towards imagining some kind of catastrophic event that would carry her right off and away out of Grandmother’s house in an instant. First she imagined that a hurricane would lift the house up into the air and it would vanish, and that she would be taken up too, and land in some scary faraway place, from which she would spend the rest of her life trying to find her way back and never finding it. Then she fantasized that she’d suddenly fall right into
a hole in the ground and disappear forever, finding a whole new life down there. When
she got tired on her long walk, she imagined being so weary that she simply went to sleep
for the whole of eternity and never woke up. All the way through these bad thoughts,
Sweetie penitently picked a lot of bluebells and other woodland plants for the old woman.

Her grandmother, had she known all this, would probably have said that Sweetie
was a danger to herself, and possibly would have tried to lock the girl away, or at least
kept an eye on her. But she didn’t suspect a bit of it, so she let Sweetie wander alone,
dreaming her own dreams through any number of treacherous thickets when she came to
stay over on weekends.

As Sweetie emerged from the swamp and walked through the final stretch of
uninhabited forest that led to her grandmother’s house, she braced herself for the coming
workload. She had barely stumbled at the thought of it all when suddenly there he was, a
wolf, standing right in front of her on the path, his amber eyes watching her with an
intensity that made her jump, and made all the hairs on her body rise up at once. He was
not exactly barring her way; he was just standing right there, a few short feet away, as
though he just happened to have been crossing the road when she happened to come by.
His shaggy, speckled coat stood out in a stiff ruff around his great head, which was
turned to face her, but she could tell by his stillness that he had been standing there for a
very long time. As Sweetie came to this unexpected halt, the whole forest was shocked
into silence. Of course she might have suspected, if she had bothered to think about it,
that there was a wolf somewhere out there in the forest, but her mind couldn’t imagine
what it would be like to meet one, or why on earth that might happen. Sweetie gasped
and let the heaving of her chest subside slowly so that the wolf would not see her moving.
She knew to keep very still, just as still as he was.

“Well, here we are!” growled the wolf.

Had he spoken? Surely not. Sweetie was enveloped by an intoxicating smell. The
wolf was hardly near enough to breathe on her, but she must have been downwind of
him. The aroma was apple pie, woodsmoke, long corridors full of old Rembrandts,
musty, first-edition books, beeswax, steaming hot tea, the warm, dry wool of well-worn
tweed jackets, freshly-brewed coffee, cream and more apple pie. She knew enough to
know that any animal with any sense would have put himself downwind of her so that she
wouldn’t catch his scent, but so that he could catch hers. This particular animal, then, in flaunting his scent, must have wanted her to inhale it. The rich stink of him took her breath away, and she gasped again. She smiled an adventurous smile, and once again let her chest fall slowly, so as not to spook the beast. She wasn’t sure whether she wanted to get a closer look at him, and a more powerful sniff, or whether it would be more prudent to edge away.

“Yes, I did speak,” he said with a growl that unnerved her. “You might at least answer.”

“Oh,” was all she could manage. She felt rooted to the ground.

“Then let’s play!” he snapped.

Play? Play? Sweetie’s head cocked to one side. That wasn’t something she knew very well how to do. Nobody around these parts had ever invited her to play before. She came to Grannie’s to work, and she certainly wasn’t used to playing in the woods. In fact, normally she wouldn’t even dream of it. The wolf stood absolutely still, his unblinking gaze fastened on her. Play. Did she want to play with the wolf?

“Yes!” she said, with an eagerness she didn’t at all intend. There was no time to cloak her response in fine speech; the word just came out, for better or worse. It came out of her in a bit of a shout, far too loud for the circumstance. From deep in the trees all around, owls, mice and other nocturnal creatures rustled out a dozen complaints at her.

“Yes, let’s play,” she blurted again, more softly this time. She wanted to play. Her eyes widened at her own mad thoughts. Her right hand automatically found its way down to the big Swiss army knife she carried at all times in her pocket. Just in case.

“OK, then. Close your eyes.”

Trembling, Sweetie closed her eyes, and went dizzy right away, and so just as fast, she opened them again. The wolf was now a few more feet away. She blinked, and the wolf was suddenly further away from her.

“That was a trick,” she said. “How is it that I have no idea what you are going to do next in this game?” No answer. She blinked again to find the wolf now far away from her, half-obliterated by trees, standing quite still and gazing fixedly back towards her. She craned her eyes to see into the trees and vines and brambles, but he had gone, just as silently as he had come, just exactly as a wolf would, leaving a thrill of excitement.
pulsating madly inside her. Along with that, she felt the poignant disappointment that any nature lover would experience when the rare wild soul they have unexpectedly sighted eludes them and disappears once more into its secret habitat. However, Sweetie wasn’t all that much of a naturalist, and no more went through life trying to spot wildlife than she had any real intention of getting up naked onto the white horse of her imagination and galloping off into some distant horizon. But still she felt let down; he had been so near. Had he been so near? She shook her head and came back to herself in a forest that now seemed sharp-edged and crackly and brittle in the sunlight.

Sweetie bounced along the narrow path towards her chores, glitter-eyed with adrenaline, every nerve-end alive, half-afraid at every step that she might meet the wolf again, or one of his brothers. She gripped her bluebells tightly, and sang to keep her spirits up, hoping she’d never again set eyes on a wolf and vowing just in case, to get the rusty old rifle out from under the bed and load it up with buckshot.

Naturally, she said nothing to her grandmother when she got to the cottage with the heavy bags and the half-wilted flowers, but something was gnawing at Sweetie, and at once the old woman’s eyes grew wide.

“Who are you?” asked the old woman from the bed, unnerving the girl all over again. “Do I know you?”

“It’s just your eyes, Grandma,” said Sweetie.

She bent to kiss her grandmother, who reached with osteoarthritic fingers to clutch at Sweetie’s shoulders. The girl struggled free of her embrace as impatiently as though it was the kiss of death, and went into the kitchen to put on her apron. As usual she started by washing her grandmother’s hair. Then she took down the big scissors from the hook in the kitchen and trimmed the uneven ends of the old woman’s hair. The trouble with this was that Grannie had twenty-four hours a day to imagine that stray ends were sticking out, and Sweetie could never quite track them all down with the shears. This caused the corners of grandmother’s mouth to turn down, and her sour expression lasted throughout the putting in of the rollers, which Sweetie also never could get quite right. The old woman hated hair dryers, believing that they had dried out her hair into frizz, so Sweetie waited while the white wisps dried naturally, and while she waited she cleaned the house from top to bottom, including the front doorstep.
Under grandmother’s orders, the portraits all had to be taken down and cleaned, and while Sweetie was at it, grandmother said, the picture rails would have to be dusted and the walls vacuumed before the pictures could be put back. The house was always very dusty because grandmother kept a roaring fire going all the time, which steadily ate up the forest around her house, and covered everything in the place with a fine layer of ash. The dust from the rugs filled up a whole bag every time Sweetie used the vacuum cleaner. She didn’t bother trying to have the radio on or a CD playing while she worked, since grandmother had the television blaring in her bedroom and her hearing aid wouldn’t tolerate the mix of sound.

Since grandmother was a little deaf, she never heard the knocks that came on the back door from a weekend assortment of black-clad, intinerant piano teachers, dancing masters, jugglers, burly handymen and passing beggars looking for customers, pupils, odd jobs, or food and drink. It fell to Sweetie to drive them off, which she usually did with the stout broom in her hands, and without bothering her grandmother about it. She kept a knitting needle and a steel baseball bat hidden behind the door just in case she might ever need to stab anyone in the eye or whack them across the shins, but so far she had never needed to use these, because unwelcome visitors, when bidden, had so far all gone away like lambs. On this particular day, Sweetie found herself looking out of the window now and then, just in case anything might be out there waiting for her.

As the day wore on and she devoured her mountain of chores, her thoughts took shape. Nothing exciting had ever happened in her life, and now that she had met a wolf she was restless. Sweetie felt cheated, as though she had just been given a big dish of crystallized ginger and then had it snatched away before she could reach for a piece and take a bite. Not that she had any appetite today. But more than that, she was bored. She suddenly saw her life as incredibly dull. She sat down in the kitchen and rested her head on the table.

“Sweetie, there is no more wood for the fire,” called grandmother’s thin voice from her bed.

The girl was fed up with doing grandmother’s hair, bored with feeding her and fattening her up for no good reason, and she’d had it with chopping wood and sending jugglers away from the back door. She felt impatient with her whole life.
Jumping up in a fresh burst of energy, Sweetie pulled on her boots and stamped out into the yard. Apologizing first to the birds, owls, bats and voles whose habitat she knew she was destroying on her grandmother’s behalf, she cut down one of the fir trees with the chainsaw. Then she chopped up the week’s wood with the axe, hacked at the briars in the hedges with a scythe, pruned the rose bushes with the secateurs, tied the wisteria back with wire, and mowed the lawn with the John Deere tractor. After all that she collected the eggs, came back in to peel the potatoes with the very sharp knife, and clipped the coupons out of the newspaper with the nail scissors. Then she polished her grandmother’s shoes, set the table for the old woman’s dinner in the evening, fed the cat and emptied the trash, all before twilight.

She washed her hands, changed her apron, poached a good-sized piece of salmon for the grandmother’s dinner, beat up a hollandaise sauce to go with it, using two fresh eggs she’d just taken from under the hen, stuffed a large mushroom with butter and wild garlic, and took in the dinner tray to her grandmother. She stayed in the bedroom to make sure that a fishbone did not lodge in the old woman’s throat while she ate, and stood looking out of the window while Grannie ate the strawberry shortcake she had begged Sweetie to make. Sweetie never should have made up any desserts, not just because grandmother was too fat, but because she also had a very high cholesterol level.

When the old woman, weakened by rich food and drowsy to the point of crossing her eyes, slumped in her overstuffed recliner, Sweetie stood behind her in the peace of the dusk and combed out the thinning strands of hair, supervised by her grandmother’s ill-focused gaze in the hand mirror. Eventually the mirror dropped into the lap, and the sound of snoring rose from the recliner. Sweetie put down the comb, and heaved the hinged wooden shutters across the windows of the little cabin, to keep out the cold, and anything else that might try to get in.

She felt utterly alone, worse than alone, because her grandmother’s sleeping presence now seemed more unsettling to Sweetie than if she had been in the room with a corpse. Yes, being here in this room with this old sleeping woman was like being with a dead person. She sat for a while. The silence was relieved only by the occasional sighing of the fire as it dropped lower in the hearth. It was late, but Sweetie was wide awake. Reaching down to the hearth, she took a small log from the wood basket, and with a twist
of her arm, sent it crashing down onto the dying brands in a flurry of hot sparks.

Grandmother didn’t stir, so the girl slipped straight out of the back door, leaving a single lamp burning in the cottage.

As soon as she got outside, the forest began whispering to her. Sweetie wondered quite why she was out there surrounded by darkness, but her legs seemed to know the answer to that. They carried her off so smoothly towards the forest that Sweetie felt she was gliding along on skates. Stars lit her way as she glissandoed swiftly towards the trees. Sweetie had confidence of a sort, since she could use the implements she kept stashed behind the front door. She was therefore reasonably sure that she was familiar enough with the ways of shears, sharp knives, secateurs, knitting needles, baseball bats, chainsaws, nail scissors, scythes and axes to take care of any kind of emergency situation that may arise.

“Oh, I can’t find my Swiss army knife,” she said aloud to herself, to keep her spirits up, “and I wonder if I might have left it out here.”

“Ha! You are lying,” growled the familiar voice of the wolf from somewhere very near. “It’s right there in your pocket.”

“Oh, it’s you again,” she said, as cool as anything. During the day there had been plenty of time for Sweetie to collect her thoughts. On this particular night, after the adrenaline had been speeding all day around her body, Sweetie wasn’t afraid of the dark, nor of the yellow eyes she now saw coming through the trees towards her. She screwed up her eyes, damping down the unbidden thought that every warrior must kill the dragon. Fingering her knife, she looked back and could just make out a faint light shining from the cottage in the far distance.

“You were thinking something bad,” he said, nearer now. The yellow eyes had turned into little red points in the darkness.

Sweetie took her hand out of her pocket and shook her head, her glossy mane waving like white corn under the moon.

“Let me look at you,” he said, and stepped out of the shadows. The eyes went yellow again.

He stared into her with those terrible eyes. It was as though a long, long belt had been wound slowly round and round her, tightened many times about her waist, and the
end of it tucked away irretrievably in the fat folds of her constricted belly. It felt far too
tight ever to unwind. Suddenly, without warning, Sweetie became exquisitely afraid. She
wondered whether he might have ideas of killing her and eating her right there in the
woods. She felt bare as well as cold. Chills struck at the soles of her feet, along her back,
inside her mouth. Her skin shrank back into points of gooseflesh.

His gaze flashed with red points, and his body swayed from side to side,
hypnotizing her. A great veil of mist rose from his nostrils, and from the shiny black flesh
that rippled at the sides of his mouth. His breath came in shallow pants. Every now and
again, his panting momentarily stopped and the slack jaw snapped shut with a small click.
The silence seemed to go on forever.

“Are you ready?” he said eventually, moving closer and breathing his beeswax,
Rembrandt, musty apple pie smell all over her.

“To play, yes,” she answered, grateful for the aroma, for the noise of his growl,
for the promise of action. “Yes, I’m ready.”

“Then let us lie down on this bed of leaves and look up at the sky.”

Sweetie sat down on the thick mulch of the forest floor, just as readily as though
she was in a loft full of hay with the boy next door in broad daylight. The wolf began to
move in circles, each smaller than the last, and finally lay down heavily beside her. Now
his scent was rancid and overpowering and she could see the flash of his teeth in the
moonlight. Were these teeth brown and worn, or was it just how white teeth seem in
moonlight? Were these fangs as long and sharp as they seemed? Sweetie lay down
amongst the nocturnal creatures on the decomposing vegetation and abandoned herself to
the certainty that her hair was going to get studded with any amount of leaves and spurs
and insects.

“Look,” he said, “look at the stars.”

Like everyone else, Sweetie had been aware of the stars all along, but she now felt
that she had never really seen them. Flat on her back, she looked up at the night sky, as if
for the first time, as if she had all the time in the world. It seemed like all the time in the
world that she lay gazing, and as if she was quite alone. The dome above them was
blacker than Sweetie had ever seen it, and the stars were more numerous and brighter.
“There are whole worlds out there,” she said, and a star shot, followed by another. In the vastness above, bats moved soundlessly in darting arcs of blackness, and all around her the earth rustled with unseen life.

“Look at the moon,” said the wolf.

The rising moon loomed huge. An owl moaned.

“Something is moving underneath me,” whispered Sweetie.

“A frog, probably,” said the wolf. “It only wants to get away.”

In shifting her weight to let the frog out, she turned to the wolf, who had drawn close. She smiled into his eyes, opening her mouth wide and moving further towards the damp breath that warmed her face and made her mouth and throat tingle. Drawing into her nostrils the scent of wild animal, she filled her lungs with his essence and held it inside her until her blood pounded up to her ears and down to her toes. Then with a great laugh she let go.

“You wouldn’t take advantage of me, would you?” asked the wolf.

“Of course I would,” answered Sweetie, shocked at her own honesty. “It’s all we ever do,” she continued, heady with frankness and at the same time thinking of supple wolf pelts hanging from the roof beams of trading posts.

“I was afraid of that,” said the wolf.

“But weren’t you the one who was going to hurt me?” she countered.

“Oh, that. What we really want is to be left alone,” said the wolf with resignation. “After all, we are just about extinct.” He laid his head on his paws and sat watching insects travel through her hair, puckering his eyebrows into mobile frowns.

“Well,” said Sweetie, warmed with power, “I’m not going to exactly hurt you.”

“I am at your mercy,” said the wolf, “but still you must fight me.” He suddenly sprang up with bared teeth, and leaped on top of her. Pinning her down with his weight, he laid his great paws on her chest and drew back his lips, black and shiny and terrible.

“Get your gritty paws off my breasts!” commanded Sweetie, and as the startled wolf shifted his weight, Sweetie seized her advantage to topple him off and wrestle her way on top of him. Twining her arms under his shoulders, so that his forepaws stuck out harmlessly behind her, she buried her face in his apple-pie ruff and tamed his hindquarters by clamping her legs right around him. Hanging on for dear life, Sweetie
began to rock. Then she rode. Sweetie rode the wolf exactly as she rode the white horse of her dreams—naked, hair flying and free. She rode for what seemed like hours, on and on through blurry stars and a bobbing great moon, on and on into a long, wild journey—on and on until there was nothing left in the universe but a single beautiful speck of power burning like the core of a living sun on the horizon, burning like the red point in the yellow eye of a wolf in the dark.

When Sweetie let the wolf go, he got to his feet in a daze. “Now that you have taken advantage of me,” he said, “will you do something for me?”

“Oh, I’ll do anything for you,” laughed Sweetie, plucking bugs out of her hair. “Anything.”

“Then tell your grandmother to leave us alone,” snapped the wolf.

* * *

Next morning Grannie lay in the bed waiting for Sweetie to bring in the breakfast tray, but there was no sign of the girl, even though her distant singing had been going on for a long time. Eventually grandmother struggled up out of her sick bed and tottered towards the girl’s room. She found her granddaughter busy packing her bag. Holding on to the dresser for support, she drew close and peered up into Sweetie’s face.

“Your eyes,” she said in a suspicious voice, “they seem a lot brighter than usual. What has happened to you?”

“Oh, nothing,” laughed Sweetie, bending to kiss the old woman.

“Aha!” said Grandmother, moving away, “Your mouth! It seems a lot bigger than before, and fuller, somehow.”

“Oh, really?” said Sweetie, glancing out of the window. “I had no idea.”

Grandmother looked around the ordinary room for evidence and saw nothing but a neatly made-up twin bed. “What is it,” she persisted, “that makes you so happy at this time in the morning?”

Sweetie ran into the bathroom to get her toothbrush, and could no longer hear her grandmother.
“I must run, Grannie, dear,” she called. “I’ve got a life to live, and so have you.” She came back only to zip up her bag. “You know what?” she said, her eyes brighter than ever. “From now on I’m going to leave you to your own devices.”

The old woman’s jaw dropped. “But what am I going to do?” she wailed.

“You might leave the bats and frogs alone for a start,” said Sweetie, her laughing mouth bigger than ever. “And the wolves,” she shouted as she set off. In two seconds she was away at the end of the path, striding towards the swamp. She didn’t even look back.

“What’ll I do for fudge?” mused the bewildered crone, on her way back to bed.

If the old woman hadn’t had to feed the cat that evening, she probably would never have got up out of the bed and might have frozen to death. As it was, the creature mewed and pawed at her, and once she was outside getting the cat’s bowl, the squawk of the hens called her over to collect the eggs. After that she decided that she might as well roll up her sleeves and fill up the wood basket. She picked up the axe to chop down the nearest tree, but the nearest tree was half a mile away across the clearing. She made for the pines, the axe over her shoulder, and at every step she saw new wispy saplings trying to come up through the turf.

“Where have all the trees gone?” she said to herself. “Sweetie had no business chopping them down.”

She sat down to catch her breath, and found herself entranced with the serenity of the forest. The tree she was planning to hack down was so beautiful that she couldn’t bear to cut it down. She ran her hands along the trunk.

“Bats,” she muttered, “Squirrels. They live in those trees.” She turned and headed home, the redundant axe hanging over her shoulder.

All the activity had made her feel hot, so she didn’t bother putting any wood on the fire. Later, when it got cool, she was too tired to make up a fire, and pulled on a sweater instead. Next day, mainly for something to do to because she was nervous about being left alone, she made a herb garden near the house. The same night a tribe of frogs crept into it and sang as they ate the slugs off the sage.

Grannie started doing her own shopping and walking the two miles back, weighed down with two heavy bags. Every time she went shopping she forgot the fudge. Of
course the weights increased her bone mass and strengthened her back. The walking stripped pounds off her and sent her cholesterol plummeting. By the time the new trees had grown to five feet tall, her back had straightened up again. And like any animal when it is alone, grandmother became alert, observant, and her hearing sharpened to the noises and rhythms of the forest.

Sweetie came back for a brief visit now and then, mainly to pick up a few of Grannie’s fresh eggs and some herbs from the frog habitat to take back home with her. Purely out of habit on these occasional strolls through the forest, the only thing Sweetie carried was the Swiss army knife in her pocket. But she never picked wildflowers for her grandmother anymore, since some of them, like wolves, were nearly extinct.
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Sandra MacLiammoir is the eldest daughter of a Liverpool factory worker and a Belfast marine engineer. She abandoned grammar school in Liverpool at sixteen, to work as a clerk and as a barmaid. After marriage at twenty, she spent four years of the 1960s in India, during which time she spent a year in Bhutan working in a Himalayan palace as a private tutor to a member of the royal family. Her first son was born in Bhutan, without medical attention, and her first daughter in Kashmir, under the same circumstances. In a primitive mission hospital on an ancient Kashmiri pilgrimage route, she observed the work of a missionary obstetrician and was persuaded to pursue journalism. Back in Liverpool, she had two more babies and took college courses. Two years were spent in Scotland, on a Hebridean island. Emigrating to a remote, semi-derelict cottage in the South West of Ireland, she home-schooled the children, built up the house, kept goats, had her hysterectomy and studied journalism. For fifteen years she worked from her home in West Cork, Ireland, as a newspaper columnist and feature writer. Her first book, *The Secret Life of Joan Denise Moriarty*, a biography, was published in 1995 by Blackwater Press, Dublin. In 1998 she divorced, and with the children all grown up and gone to Dublin, she traveled to America to go to college. In 2001 she gained a first class B.A. with Honors in English and Psychology at La Salle University in Philadelphia, and in 2003 completed her M.A. in English at Florida State University.